

PETER GOULLART

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Land  
of the Lamas

*Adventures in Secret Tibet*



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ALICE



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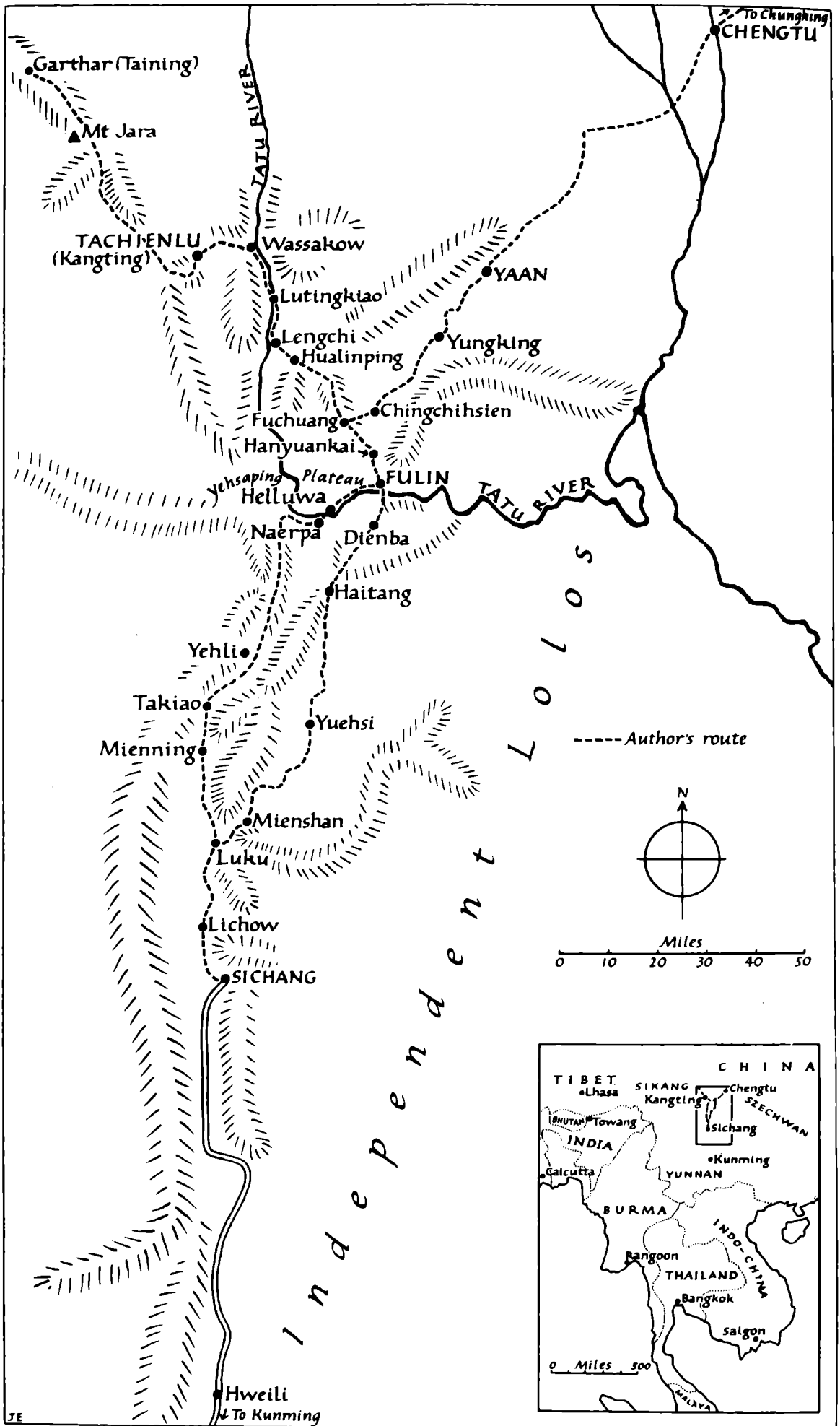
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*\* By courtesy of Dr. H. Breitkreuz.*

*The other illustrations are from photographs by the author.*





## *Preface*

THE Sino-Japanese undeclared war was in full swing. Sitting at my office desk in Shanghai, I was becoming more and more despondent and depressed. North China was completely occupied and the Japanese armies were rolling towards the West, with Hankow already in their grasp. More than half of Shanghai, badly shattered and demoralized, was under Japanese control. The fighting which had been ravaging the great city for many months had stopped, but the memory of harrowing days and nights was still fresh. Sleeping in my apartment close to Soochow Creek, the dividing line between free and Japanese-occupied Shanghai, I was still troubled by the nightmare of criss-cross bombardment which had gone on for months between Chinese batteries outside the city and the heavy guns of the Japanese men-of-war in the river. Shrapnel from anti-aircraft guns peppered our roof and a three-inch shell passed through a neighbouring apartment.

Soon everything was quiet, and ringed by Japanese troops, the city became a huge concentration camp which we left at our own risk with the grace of the Japanese military authorities. Trips to such beauty spots as Soochow and Hangchow, where I used to retire for spiritual refreshment at esoteric Taoist temples, were impossible. Cooped up among millions of human beings, residents of the city and refugees, I was suffocating and stagnating in this fetid and cramped international beehive.

A great desire to get out into the fresh air, into the free and unspoilt China of the West had taken possession of me and soon merged into a firm intention. I knew there was great suffering there, too, for waves of refugees inundated that peaceful paradise, but already there was the promise of a new and, perhaps, better life there.

Barring fatal mishaps on the way, I knew I would not be lost

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once I had reached the 'Western Regions' as the Chinese called the outermost confines of their colossal country, a land of mystery and enchantment even to themselves. Since my arrival in China in 1919 I had learned the language sufficiently well and acquired a deep understanding of the people and their basic character. I had taken great pains to assimilate Chinese etiquette which I found even more useful than language in establishing friendly and enduring relations. I had studied Buddhism and spent a number of years at some of the esoteric Taoist monasteries, finally becoming a practising Taoist. This ancient and authentic philosophy of China seemed to be the answer to my spiritual quest and a key to the riddle of superb Chinese civilization and culture.

I realized that my intended departure from Shanghai and abandonment of long familiar activities and connections would be a new and severe test in my life, but I was determined to undergo it for better or for worse. So, not losing time, I wrote a long letter to my friend Alice who was now in Hongkong, as confidential secretary to one of the most powerful women in China, Madame H. H. Kung. I requested her to do her utmost to secure me an appointment in Free China.

It was a wonderful surprise to receive a few weeks later a letter from her in which she told me that certain 'exalted quarters' were interested in offering me a position with the Chinese Industrial Co-operatives in the newly-created Province of Sikang, the eastern portion of the huge Tibetan province of Kham, annexed by China. I was to make my headquarters at its capital city of Tachienlu, now renamed Kangting. My official title was Depot Master and I had to find an office and prepare it for a formal opening of the C.I.C. branch as soon as I had received authorisation from Chungking. Then I had to devote myself to organising industrial co-operatives among the local Chinese, Khamba Tibetans and other tribal people.

It was a matter of great jubilation for me as not only was I going to West China but to Tibet, of all places, of which I dreamed all my life. I was eagerly looking forward to meeting Tibetans and staying at lamaseries, and making side trips to mysterious lands

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such as the Kingdom of Muli and, perhaps, into the domains of the Independent Lolos, those fierce tribesmen who for centuries defied the might of the Chinese Empire and were immortalized in Chinese literature as the most ferocious and ruthless warriors in the world.

When I was able to leave Shanghai in October 1939, I made myself useful to the University of Nanking, then made the journey to Chengtu, capital of Szechuan, by taking a large shipment of their scientific apparatus with me. As direct overland and river routes to West China had been blocked by war, it was a long detour by boat to Hong Kong and Haiphong, and thence by rail to Kunming, capital of Yunnan. This was a familiar trip and I completed it without mishap. The road from Kunming to Chungking was new to me, and made more hazardous by the daily raids of Japanese bombers. It took me weeks to travel it in an ancient and creaky bus, chartered by the University to transport its cases of instruments. I found Chungking in a feverish excitement and frenzied activity as bombs fell with frightening punctuality. After an intensive briefing, I was allowed to proceed to Chengtu with my precious cargo in the same old bus. The Union University campus at the great capital of Szechuan was a haven of peace and order, and gave me a brief and enjoyable respite. Soon some missionaries were leaving by their own truck for Sikang and I was allowed to join them. We arrived safely, despite several accidents on the way, at Yaan.

Now while in London, the great centre of civilized thought, vibrant with modern life and energy, I often think of my Lolo and Tibetan friends. Their countries are now behind the Bamboo Curtain. While some news seeps regularly into the Western Press about Tibet, especially since the start of the Khamba revolt there and the spectacular escape of the Dalai Lama to India, the information about the Lolos is scarce indeed. This is because Communist China is as loath to admit that a large hunk of its territory is independent as was the Imperial China. One thing emerges clearly from the infrequent pieces of news clandestinely brought out by refugees and other informants: the Lolos are still there and

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their position seems to be as strong as ever. The fight for survival by these virile, brave and crafty people is waged on two fronts. On the one hand they had chosen a king to lead them, and fortified and strengthened their defences. On the other hand, many of them, who had received military training in the modern Chinese army, are able to exercise a considerable political influence. It must not be forgotten that two former Governors of Yunnan, who are Lolos by birth, are members of the Government in Peking and their voices carry considerable weight in State Councils. Thus buttressed, it may be presumed that the Lolos are enjoying a *modus vivendi* which provides them with some measure of security, at least for the time being.

However, the recent uprising in Tibet, led by the Khambas, must have affected the Lolos to a considerable degree. Their territory as well as that of their brothers, the Black Lissu, adjoins and interpenetrates the lands where the Khambas dwell, and moreover they are blood relations, being of the same racial stock and linguistic group. Both have suffered much during the past centuries at the hands of the Chinese. It is clear where the Lolos' sympathies lie. Being crafty and circumspect they may not have thrown their lot openly with the Khambas but it may be taken for granted that they assist them in every way from clandestine supply of arms and ammunition to well-organized intelligence at which they are adepts. In my considered opinion it will be a long and bitter struggle in these inaccessible and cold mountain regions as other tribal groups will gradually be drawn in. A total independence perhaps may not be achieved but the Chinese, harassed and wearied by the attrition and hit-and-run tactics of an elusive foe, may eventually agree to leave all these proud and intractable peoples alone as it has happened during many campaigns in the past.

# I

## *Road to Tachienlu*

AT YAAN I put up with a family of Canadian Baptist missionaries. This kindly couple helped me to secure porters for my baggage. There was no motor road up-country, and people travelled either by sedan chair or on foot. I decided to walk. I took only my most important baggage, leaving the rest in the hands of a transportation firm which promised to send it in a week. I always regretted this imprudent decision as it took months for my suitcases to reach me and, on arrival, they were found to be half-empty. But I was a greenhorn in these parts and had to learn by painful experience.

Wearing tennis shoes and armed with a walking stick I trotted out one sunny morning towards the towering hills with porters carrying my baggage behind. The 'main road' to Tachienlu was a narrow path paved with stone slabs worn to an ice-like smoothness by innumerable feet that trod it daily, with steps cut out of living rock when crossing the mountains.

I was elated to leave behind the dusty roads and trucks and chronic bombing raids together with the other disagreeable concomitants of civilization, and to watch the unfolding beauties of peaceful valleys and green mountains. It was neither too hot nor cold and the fields were as green as jade, merging now and then into patches of forest ablaze with the golden tints of autumn. Persimmons shone among dark glossy leaves and tangerines hung like little lanterns glowing bright gambodge. Smoke curled up from peasant huts, dogs barked and buffaloes lowed as we passed the villages.

At midday we stopped at a wayside hamlet for lunch, giving an opportunity to the porters to smoke their usual pipe of opium without which they were unable to continue the trip. The farther

## *Road to Tachienlu*

we proceeded the more beautiful the countryside became. As the sun was setting we crossed a long suspension bridge and entered Yungking, a small town which was still bustling with activity for it was a market day. After settling at an inn, I went out to watch the shopping crowds and the great variety of locally made articles—cast iron convex boilers for cooking rice, copper kettles, knives and agricultural implements, pottery and many other things, making a mental note what a desirable place this was for my future industrial co-operatives. I was immediately struck by the series of brawls that were going on in the busy street. Groups of men gesticulated and shouted, now and then coming to blows; women went at each other with sticks and some sobbed bitterly, yelling at each other obscene invectives. Later on, when I revisited this place, it was explained to me that this town was the most quarrelsome in the province, the reason being that there was 'something' in the local water which made people extremely sensitive and irritable. I retired early after dinner; my legs were terribly sore and my body numb with fatigue after walking thirty miles, since I was not used to such distances then.

We started early next morning and this time, almost imperceptibly, we began to ascend. The air became cooler and when we reached a next night stop it was already evening and the air crisp with a tinge of frost.

I was wakened at dawn as this was to be, the porters told me, a difficult day for we had to cross the first great range of mountains through a pass called Tahsiangling. High stone steps, hewn out of rock, led up and up the brush-clad slopes and we walked slowly, pausing every five minutes to gather breath. On and on for hours until we reached a cluster of smoke-begrimed huts where only some beancurd and a few eggs were available. The porters, utterly exhausted, smoked their pipe for a longer time than usual, so long indeed that I got tired of waiting and began walking on my own. In some places the stone steps ascended in a huge spiral and I had a sensation of climbing a stupendous ziggurat. It was getting colder and colder as I went up and it became more difficult to breathe. At last, quite exhausted, I struck a comparatively level

## *Descent to the City of Green Chicken*

path which ran along a precipice. It was heavily covered with snow and everything was frozen. At the end of the path I saw, many miles down, the other valley for which we were bound.

I sat on a rock waiting for the porters. The sun was brilliant and the air clear. In front of me beyond the valley was visible the next big range, Wuyaoling. But what caught my eyes and made my heart flutter was the vision of the great snow peaks beyond. In a vast group like the ramparts of a fantastic fortress, they were floating in the air far above all other mountains and seemingly without bases, glowing gold and pink and mauve in the setting sun. It was a lovely, never-to-be forgotten sight; still more than a hundred miles away they were already pulling me like magnets with their mystery and awful aloofness, holding in their embrace that strange, fascinating city I was bound for—Tachienlu.

The descent to Chinchih sien, the city of Green Chicken, visible below, was precipitously steep and it was a relief to reach the uncomfortable and dingy inn. The following morning we had to ascend the red clay slopes of what appeared to be a comparatively low mountain. It proved to be not so low as I had expected and the tedious climb took many hours. There was another valley beyond with a lively village called Fuchuang where I had lunch. This valley was extremely attractive with its green fields and fruit trees, and it was a joy to walk alongside the crystal brook that ran by the stone path. Our night stop was at Nitung, a charming little town near which was a big Taoist temple where I went immediately and was received most courteously by the priest in charge. We talked for a long time and he explained how suitable these mountains were for hermitages.

From Nitung the path ascended steadily through the densely forested slopes of the Wuyaoling mountains, over 10,000 feet in height, until we reached the village of Hwalinping early in the afternoon. It was bitterly cold there at night and I was glad to start early in the morning descending, almost falling, into a dark, sinister gorge. Once out of it, the path ran along a precipice, skirting the beautiful, blue Tatu River which sparkled a thousand feet below. For me it was a rather terrifying experience as precipices

## *Road to Tachienlu*

make me giddy. Fortunately we soon reached a beautiful flat valley and the attractive village of Lengchi. A Catholic church was established there and, as I was to learn later, all the lands in the valley belonged to the Catholic Mission. It was warmer here, with roses blooming in profusion amid the hum of bees. Lunch was taken at Luting, a small village, but important in its significance for here was the geographical and ethnographical frontier between China Proper and Tibet. The long suspension bridge over the Tatu, with a few planks in the middle, swayed terrifyingly as we started crossing it, the deep green river hissing ominously underneath. Now we were in Tibet and I immediately knew it. Rugged grey and brown mountains shut off the horizon and dropped vertically to the boiling river below. The 'main road', cut in the side of the cliffs, zigzagged crazily, climbing ever higher and higher. There were no trees or shrubs between the sheer wall of stone on the left and a giddy drop into the raging torrent on the right below, except occasional clumps of giant opuntia cactus with its red pears glowing in the sun. Particularly terrifying were the turns of the path. Up and up it would go ending on a tiny jutting platform beyond which, it seemed to me from below, there was nothing but a dreadful plunge into the river. I suffered several attacks of vertigo and was glad when we reached at last the tiny hamlet of Wassakou where the last night of the journey should be spent.

This poor village was situated in a kind of funnel, dark and forbidding, where the Dartsendo river, on which Tachienlu was situated, joined the mighty Tatu River. Right across that river was a chain of mountains which rose almost perpendicularly and yet there was visible a path climbing to the top. It was another 'main road' into China, I was told, and was shorter; it was preferred by tea carriers, but was really too precipitous for gentler travellers. There was little land in Wassakou but what was available was planted with all kinds of fruit trees and vegetables, between the huge boulders. The cruel Tibetan winter did not penetrate here and these things could grow.

Directly at the back of the village the gorge closed in like a monstrous dark corridor with only a ribbon of blue sky visible.



## *The Tea Carriers*

And into it we stepped in the morning; the distance to Tachienlu was not great, under twenty miles, but it was a continuous ascent over a rocky path. There were few spectacular drops into the torrent and the path was wider, but the fury of the stream awed and fascinated me. Its tremendous roar, reverberating from the sheer walls of the gorge was magnified many times and was deafening; even human shouts could not be heard. The earth shook as the waters raced down madly in cataracts and waterfalls, hissing and pushing big boulders with a grating, screeching sound; the spray fell over us like gentle drops of rain. In some places small gorges bisected the mountain walls to reveal magnificent snow peaks towering into the sky. Here and there would be a small recess among the cliffs and a tiny plot of ground, planted with a few fruit trees and the mean hut of some peasant. The road was crowded with tea carriers who proceeded upwards one after another, forming a long, snake-like procession. They were all Szechuanese Chinese delivering brick tea to Tachienlu from Yaan where it had been brought by trucks from tea-exporting centres in Szechuan. This tea has been the main export from China to Tibet for ages as the Tibetans prefer to drink China tea. Coarse tea leaves with small branches and twigs and tea dust are pressed into a small bowl shape and then packed into long wicker containers which are tied to a wooden carrying frame one upon the other to form a tall but flat package slightly curving over the porter's head. As they were paid by weight these poor men sometimes carried a pile of these containers weighing as much as 180 lbs. When walking they carried a short stout stick, usually iron-tipped, with a small cross bar instead of the handle. Owing both to the great weight of their burden and the rarefied air of the mountain region, they rested every few minutes, propping their load against a jutting rock or on a pile of stones specially placed for the purpose at certain intervals. On and on they struggled, their sticks making a characteristic clack-clack as they dug them into the stones for balance. They were strange creatures, very pitiful and almost sub-human in appearance—clad in mere rags through which portions of their body were visible, without

## *Road to Tachienlu*

regard for decency, with bluish-yellow wizened faces, unseeing eyes and emaciated bodies, like walking corpses. All their energy for this Sisyphean work came from opium without which they could not live. As soon as they reached a regular stopping place—a dingy, dirty eating shop, they ate their meal—a bowl of thin soup of cabbage or turnip with beancurd and plenty of red chillies and then retired into a backroom where, lying on dirty mats, they produced or borrowed a pipe. I always heard this constant sucking sound coming from the dark rooms of inns accompanied by a sweetish resinous odour. Then they lay relaxed in oblivion, their parchment-like faces gleaming in the darkness. And then on they went, even at night if there was moonlight, their clack-clacks resounding up and down in the still air. There were hundreds of them, perhaps thousands, between Yaan and Tachienlu, ever moving along in columns, day in and day out, in rain and shine and, as they went higher, in snow and frost. And if their time to die had come, they just lay down by the roadside and died, and nobody cared, nobody wept as the procession went on. Too tired and exhausted they did not talk amongst themselves when at rest and there was nothing on the way that was of interest to them; they walked like automatons shuffling with a mechanical step from one stone slab to another. They were a race apart and could not be either comforted or helped; they seemed to be past all human emotions—even more mute than horses or mules; their rasping breathing was the only sound that came from them as they walked with their burdens. The sight of this intolerable misery always pursued me when I was in Tachienlu filling me with gloom and unutterable helplessness.

In addition to these professional tea carriers, the road was filled with peasants, both men and women, carrying all kinds of things for the barren highlands which lay beyond Tachienlu—vegetables and fruit in baskets, pigs transported on poles or comfortably riding in baskets on the back of some women, only their snouts and bright little eyes visible; chickens, hams and chunks of salt pork; matches, brown sugar in cones and other merchandise for the market of the provincial capital. There were also horses and

## *'A Vision of a City'*

mules—painfully struggling up the slippery stone steps worn out by generations of men and animals.

Up and up we struggled too. As we neared Tachienlu it became colder and colder. It was already afternoon when at one point the gorge opened up and there in front of me, high up in the distance against the tremendous mountains I saw a vision of a city, with pagodas and temples, as if floating on air. Framed by the flanks of the gorge Tachienlu seemed like a stage set in which a fabulous castle was shown; it made me think of the Apocalyptic Heavenly Jerusalem; that is how it would be presented to men at the end of the cycle. A turn of the road and the vision disappeared forever. It was hours before we actually reached the city, ever following the thundering torrent. First we passed a grim round tower, a sort of Customs point, called the East Gate, and walking up a little we entered the main street. The city was really quite small and had only two streets, one on the left bank of the river and another on the right, with several bridges across. Crossing one of them, we turned into a narrow street to the left and there I was deposited at the gates of the China Inland Mission in the good care of the Rev. and Mrs. Robert Cunningham.

## II

### *Tachienlu*

THE Cunninghams, this charming elderly couple, accepted me like a son of the house and I became very fond of them. The life of the mission centred on the large dining-room at the back of the house, with a vast bay window which commanded a beautiful view of the southern part of the town. Near the door stood a cast-iron stove always radiating pleasant warmth. Groups of Tibetan children, some tiny tots, always played in front of this stove, and from time to time Mrs. Cunningham gave them something to eat—a piece of cake, a home-made candy or a drink of tea with sugar and milk. This lonely Scottish couple, without children of their own, poured out all their love on these poor waifs. They were affectionate and orderly children, never quarrelling or fighting while at the mission, although merely street urchins—the unwanted fruit of a fleeting liaison between Tibetan mothers and Chinese soldiers. Few of them could say who were their fathers nor even perhaps their mothers who had gone off with their new paramours. All day long they roamed the streets of Tachienlu, like stray dogs, playing and fighting, snatching bits of food or begging for some scraps. Their only experience of family life was at the Cunninghams, where they went for a little affection, a bite of something and the luxury of sitting on a rug before a blazing stove on freezing, wintry days.

I explained at length to Mr. Cunningham the purpose of my mission to Sikang, my problems and hopes, and invoked his kind assistance and co-operation in this strange place where I knew nobody. He readily agreed to guide and advise me provided I kept my mouth shut for fear of involving his mission.

To enable me to move freely among the Tibetans Mr.

## 'The Confluence of Dar and Tsen'

Cunningham attached to me a young Tibetan named Namka who spoke English, Chinese and several Tibetan dialects. He was a charming happy-go-lucky fellow and a Jack-of-all trades. His favourite vocation was travelling with visiting foreigners and Chinese Government officials from Chungking who always felt lost in this 'barbarous' place.

My debut in Tachienlu started with the survey of the town and surrounding landmarks. It was indeed a small place, the total population being, I was told, not more than 40,000. There was no possible room for expansion in any direction except perhaps towards the north. Precipitous mountains shut in the town on all sides forming not a valley but a sort of oblong depression or a slightly widened gorge through which the river Dar thundered from the south and met, at the lower end, the onrushing waters of the river Tsen issuing from the slightly wider northern gorge. This gave the city its Tibetan name Dartsendo (Tachienlu in Chinese) which literally meant 'The confluence of Dar and Tsen'. There was room only for two main streets each following the contours of the Dar and there was a wide road branching off to the north along the Tsen. Four or five bridges spanned the furious torrent which shook the near-by houses and whose roar filled the whole town. One of the bridges was covered and there were small restaurants abutting on it, where delicious dumplings and *pak a tsieu*, a fiery liquor made of maize, could be bought. There were several narrow side streets, like miniature labyrinths, which came to a premature end, striking the almost perpendicular walls of the mountains.

The houses were of massive construction, Tibetan style, with a wide foundation and thick walls made of undressed stone, and there were several lamaseries in the town of which the most famous was the South Bridge lamasery. The shopping district was on the right of the river. The main street on the left ended in a cul-de-sac, and on the right continued past the gubernatorial mansion through the South Gate and past the Catholic Mission to a big lamasery called Dorjedra (Lightning Bolt Rock) and then on into the Tibetan highlands. In front of Dorjedra there

## Tachienlu

was a vast expanse of immense boulders and rocks, in the shape of a mammoth scree, the tail end of which disappeared in a grim lifeless gorge which led into the bowels of high, forbidding mountains. This desolate agglomeration of boulders was, in fact, the field of death. The original Tachienlu, said to have been a much more prosperous and bigger town, was located here about a hundred years ago. One rainy night, when the peaceful citizens were slumbering after their day's work, an earthquake shook the town, an occurrence by no means rare in those parts. A great thunderous roar was heard in the mountains and before the unfortunates had time to realize what was happening the whole town was totally obliterated by thousands of tons of water and rocks cascading and falling from a deep lake whose banks had crumbled during the shock. Nothing could be excavated or recovered, and the dead city remains there to this day under its burden of rocks. The present Tachienlu is therefore a new town when judged by the standards of time.

I felt I had no right to stay too long at a mission as I was not in any way connected with the propagation of the Christian faith, but to find accommodation for myself and my projected office, which could serve as a *pied à terre* for my travels into the interior, was not as easy as I had imagined.

Again the good Mr. Cunningham was able to help me. He announced one day that a Tibetan friend had a small house to let but only to me. I was asked to keep the matter a secret as, should anybody know about it in the government, the house would be requisitioned right away. I liked the place and moved there, on my friends' advice, with great stealth one evening so as to present the provincial authorities with a *fait accompli* the next day.

The house stood in a small courtyard protected on both sides by a stone wall with a gate. In the rear it leaned against a cliff and to the right of it rose a high limestone rock with miniature caves and stalactites and stalagmites, and a small cascade of warm water fell with a gentle splashing into a little square pond in which watercress grew. There were two or three tall fruit trees projecting prettily between the rock and the house. It was this weird

## *Lao Wong*

rock, the warm spring and the trees which made the place attractive for me, besides the fact that I could have it almost to myself. I advisedly say almost as the terms of the lease included a clause permitting an old Chinese, the landlord's father, to live in a shack somewhere behind the house on the left. The old man undertook to act as caretaker, in company with his pet, a big, fluffy ginger watch dog.

The furniture was partly borrowed from the mission or bought in local shops. The caretaker was too old to go up to clean my rooms so I turned my attention to obtaining a servant. That was not as easy as I had expected; the Chinese did not want to work as servants at comparatively small wages and preferred either to do small business by going down to the warm valleys for produce or to pan gold in the highlands to earn enough to satisfy their craving for opium, or became, as a last resort, tea carriers. Tibetans, too, had other interests, more lucrative than menial employment. Mr. Cunningham, however, induced one of the Tibetan waifs to come in the morning and clean my rooms. He worked for a few days and left to be succeeded by an endless procession of others. They were lazy boys who sincerely detested all forms of work, greatly preferring their free beggars' life in the streets, roaming about, brawling and playing and eating here and there, with a little thieving on the side. So when I received a tearful letter from my old servant, Lao Wong, that he was starving in Shanghai, I wrote to him offering him his job back and sending him some money for the long journey across the Japanese lines to Free China and Tachienlu. He arrived months later. In the meantime I boarded with the kind Cunninghams.

My house was in that cul-de-sac where the main street, passing the mission, ended. Beyond there was a rushing stream, a deviation of the Dar River, on which the Tachienly power house stood consisting of an old generator revolved by a crude water wheel. However, the city was very proud of this modernity and all the houses, including mine, and the shops were amply provided with lamps. But there were frequent breakdowns and, due to a gross overloading of the small unit, the lights usually

## *Tachienlu*

started with a bright blaze in the evening, gradually diminishing to a dull red glow as the night progressed. Then, when there was a wholesale retreat to bed after the shops, restaurants and theatres had closed, the lights suddenly blazed forth again popping many a bulb. At this hour many people could be seen in their homes rushing to exchange their multi-powered bulbs for weak ones.

Possessing a pleasant, luke-warm pond in my courtyard I was fully prepared to use it for my bath, but the landlord pointed out that I should not do so. There were some households on higher levels where pigs were bred. The animals were washed in the warm rivulet which fell in the shape of such a picturesque cascade into our pond, and indeed, upon closer examination, I found bristles brought down with the water and something else much less pleasant. Moreover, in accordance with our lease, the landlord, a tea packer by profession, had reserved the right to soak raw hides in the pond, to be used for packaging tea for caravans. Every time a shipment of tea was being prepared, the pond was full to the brim with these loathsome, smelly hides.

However, the bathing problem was easily solved by semi-weekly excursions to the big hot water spring outside the North Gate. I used to go there in the morning when the water was still fresh and there were not so many people. The way to the springs, about two miles distant, led along the caravan road and passed a forgotten cemetery with the grave of the British General Pereira, a world-famous explorer who, sick and exhausted from his difficult travels, had collapsed and died in Tachienlu and was buried here. Further up, there were green fields and some fruit trees planted in the clearings, amidst mounds of collected stones and boulders; there were also a couple of hamlets where shopkeepers sold fruit, noodles and paku wine. The Tsen River, not so turbulent in this gorge, gurgled and hissed by the roadside. The bathing establishment consisted of a long barn-like building just by the river, and several neat cabins. The latter were available to the public whenever privacy was desired and on certain days were reserved for the governor and his party who proceeded



## *The Common Pool*

there in state. I always walked, ignoring the few dilapidated rickshas which were utilized by the weak or the rich.

Disregarding my friends' advice about the indignity of washing in a common pool, I always went to the big barn-like structure. A large rectangular pool was surrounded by benches on which men undressed and left their clothes; they then descended a few stone steps into the pool at the farthest end of which was a submerged plank or bench on which we sat with the water reaching up to our necks. The bottom of the pool was somewhat rocky with fine sand between the stones. The hot water gushed out in many jets and I enjoyed sitting over one of them, with large tickly bubbles rushing up to the top and filling the barn with a strong sulphurous odour.

There were the shopkeepers from the town, government employees, farmers who had brought produce from the plains below, army officers, policemen, fruit vendors, Chiang tribesmen from Tampa and the Tibetans who constantly travelled over this important road. At first there was considerable embarrassment when I took my seat amongst them but, hearing me speak Chinese, they soon relaxed. I swam and dived remaining under water for a while, and this filled them with wonder and admiration because none of them knew how to swim. Very soon I acquired a considerable number of friends in all walks of life, both Chinese and Tibetan, a very profitable beginning, I thought, to my career as a co-operative organizer. On my return journey back to town I sometimes had a bowl of noodles with friends I had met at the baths, and in this way my ties with Tachienlu began to grow.

There were other hot springs in Tachienlu, but not all were suitable for bathing. They bubbled out of the mountains, in or behind the houses, in the streets and squares. The Dar River was so impregnated with sulphur and other chemicals that its water was practically undrinkable. All fresh water in town was more or less polluted by sulphur and mineral salts, and the people suffered constantly from stomach disorders.

The realization that my physical ego had successfully followed

## *Tachienlu*

the flight of my dreams, overcoming all obstacles and difficulties, and bringing me at last to mysterious Tibet, filled me with wonder and exaltation. All day long I roamed the streets and market places, alone or in the company of my mentor and new friend, Namka, gazing at the dizzy snow peaks with their glaciers, glittering miles above my head, or listening to the mighty roar of the turbulent Dar. Then my attention was absorbed in the spectacle of crowds milling through the streets, some people dressed in fantastic clothes and some in mere rags. I could easily spot the Tibetans, tall and picturesque in their distinctive attire, and the Chinese, but there were also the tribal people who were absolutely new to me and who excited my particular interest. I deluged poor Namka with questions about all these people and afterwards, going to the mission, never failed to overwhelm Mr. Cunningham with my enthusiastic descriptions of the strange types of humanity I had met.

It appeared that the population consisted mostly of Tibetans belonging to the Khamba tribes, i.e. the inhabitants of the Tibetan Province of Kahm, of which Tachienlu was an integral part in spite of the Chinese administration which had taken over the annexed portion of the province some decades earlier. As Tachienlu was a great trading centre with Lhasa and other parts of Tibet, there were, in addition, a large number of visiting Tibetans, merchants and lamas, from Tibet proper. There was much intermarriage, both legalized and otherwise, between the Tibetans and Chinese, resulting in many half-breeds, who were considered Tibetans or Chinese provided they wore the appropriate dress and pursued either the Tibetan or Chinese mode of life.

The Chinese population was composed almost entirely of Szechuanese, some of whom had adopted Tachienlu as a permanent residence, and others who fluctuated between it and China doing business or engaging in such itinerant occupation as panning gold in the highlands or carrying tea and other loads.

The tea brought by the porters to Tachienlu was delivered to a large building not far from our Mission and deposited there with the government authorities, who collected their taxes which

## *A Cargo down to Yaan*

formed the largest slice of the revenue. Tea was practically a monopoly of the provincial warlords like several other principal items of export and import.

After getting their pay the tea carriers staggered uncertainly to their favourite eating shops by the bridge to consume their poor fare at leisure, and then to retire to the beloved pipe on the mats behind. Refreshed by their smoke, some of them walked aimlessly, with dull faces, through the market street in the hope of being called by some shopkeeper or merchant to carry his cargo down to Yaan. Not all of them were lucky enough to secure such return loads, and left on their long trek with the empty racks swinging to and fro on their backs. Fortified by the pipe and free of their terrible burden I never failed to notice how fast they walked back, almost at a run, jumping from step to step like mountain goats. In spite of their sullen, lifeless looks they were not so stupid as I had thought them to be at first and possessed a keen business sense. Failing to obtain a load for the return journey, their favourite piece of business was to purchase a little musk or some gold sand, in the strictest confidence, from the shopkeepers or brokers they knew, to sell at a profit farther down. This was very dangerous, but they were ready to risk their lives for the luxury of more smokes and, perhaps, a little capital for their families somewhere down on the plain. The road was by no means safe and there were desperadoes, poorer than themselves, who preyed on them. Many a porter, seemingly so poor and penniless, was found with his throat slit in some lonely place. A favourite method of disposing of a person, even in the town itself, was to lure him to a bridge, when the river was high after the rains, and push him over. No cry could be heard in the roar of the mighty stream and the victim was dashed to pieces against sharp rocks and carried down almost in a flash. Life was cheap in Tachienlu and everybody knew it; it was not a safe place for anyone who had incurred a grudge to take an evening stroll across the river.

The packages of tea, delivered daily by the gasping porters, were not permitted to accumulate at the government depôt

## *Tachienlu*

indefinitely. The great Tibetan merchants, therefore, made arrangements for their transportation to Chiamdo, capital of the Tibetan Kham Province, or direct to Lhasa. Yaks were used for caravans from Tachienlu. The climate was favourable for them and they were cheaper than mules and horses. The town was at an elevation of 9,400 feet and farther westwards they did not have to travel lower than 12,000 feet. The tea was re-packed into two convenient packages of about 25 catties each, making a load of about 50 catties,<sup>1</sup> as no self-respecting yak would carry more. They were sewn by professional Tibetan packers into wet hides which, after drying, were compressed into desirable shapes and made impervious to scratching by rocks and bushes. Then they were marked and made ready for the journey.

In the meantime a message had been sent to the caravan men, who rounded up the yaks, driving them from their high alpine pastures to the gates of Tachienlu. The yaks were not permitted inside the city and had to wait for their cargoes either at South Gate or North Gate; it was immaterial as both roads to Tibet converged once the plateau had been reached. Munching straw, these hairy beasts lay placidly outside the gate waiting for their burdens. The duty of carrying the re-packed tea to the yaks devolved on the Tibetan women of Tachienlu and they jealously guarded this lucrative privilege, having banded themselves into a kind of union. For this work they wore a rough skin jerkin, sleeveless and with fur on the inside over their usual dress. Two or three packages were piled on each woman's back, bent low and supporting the burden with a wide band across her forehead. On arrival outside the gate they set the packages into a neat pile. The job of placing them on to the yaks was left to the caravan owners and drivers, who tied the packages to small wooden saddles on the yaks' backs. Everything was done remarkably quickly and soon the black animals were flowing along the rocky trail northwards like a splash of black lava.

With their pay in their pockets the happy women returned to town to celebrate. First of all they proceeded to wine shops and

<sup>1</sup> Catty—1.33 lb.

## Market Day

rested there for a long time drinking the fiery paku liquor. Then with a bowl of wine in her hand a leading woman would rise up shouting 'Girls, let us get men!' and out they would spill into the street grabbing passing Tibetans and drawing them back into the wine shops with them. The narrow streets resounded with songs and laughter of carousing men and women until the evening, when it was time to gather for dancing at one of the 'kochwangs', the rich caravanserais, of which there were sixteen in town, where Tibetan produce was brought for sale to the local merchants for re-export to Free China and Hong Kong. Each establishment was presided over by a Tibetan woman who, in addition to being the owner, also acted as a broker and sometimes as a merchant in her own right. These kochwangs were large structures with an ample courtyard for the mules and horses, and one or two wings for the storage of goods and the accomodation of accompanying Tibetan merchants, the rest of the house being occupied by the proprietress and her family.

The other tribesmen, who could be seen in town on market days, when they brought their fruit, honey and game for sale, were quite distinct from the Tibetans and Chinese. They were dressed in hempen trousers and tunics, tied with a red or white sash, and wore either black or blue turbans. They were generally shorter than the Tibetans and their skin was of a golden hue. They lived, for the most part, along the Tatu River in almost inaccessible villages perched on precipitous slopes or in the small bowls formed by encircling mountains. There were a number of these little-known tribes called the Tampa, Badi, Bawang, Yuetungs and Lifans extending all the way to Sungpan in the north. I later learned that they all belonged to a sub-race of the Burma-Tibetan stock called Chiang whose other tribes extended down as far as North Yunnan, reaching into Tibet at that end. As described in my *Forgotten Kingdom*, it was two years later that I met up with the Chiangs again in Likiang, Yunnan, where they were known as the Nakhi. The Chiang group of tribes had a perceptible unity in their dialects, dress, appearance and, above all, in their religious rites. All of them performed the annual harvest

## Tachienlu

ceremony, called Muanpeu, which consisted in sacrificing sheep, pigs and grain in sacred groves before an altar on which had been placed a triangular white stone, surrounded by incense sticks, symbolizing the holy Mt. Somero, the Centre of the Universe and habitat of the Gods. Certain missionaries, jumping to conclusions, claimed the discovery of the Lost Tribes of Israel in the shape of these tribes who, they averred, were definitely the descendants of Abraham and Jacob and proved it by the mode of their sacrifices.

With these tribes and Tibetans on my list, I at last believed that my knowledge of Sikang populations was complete and said so to Mr. Cunningham one evening. His eyes twinkled as he took a long sip of tea.

‘No, it isn’t,’ he said with an air of finality, put down his empty cup and drew me to a large wall map which decorated the living-room. ‘There beyond these mountains and farther south live the Lolos—the most powerful and enigmatic race.’ He sighed. ‘Even I was unable to visit them. They have no traffic with the Chinese or other strangers and to go there may mean a cruel death or abject slavery.’ I was genuinely astonished.

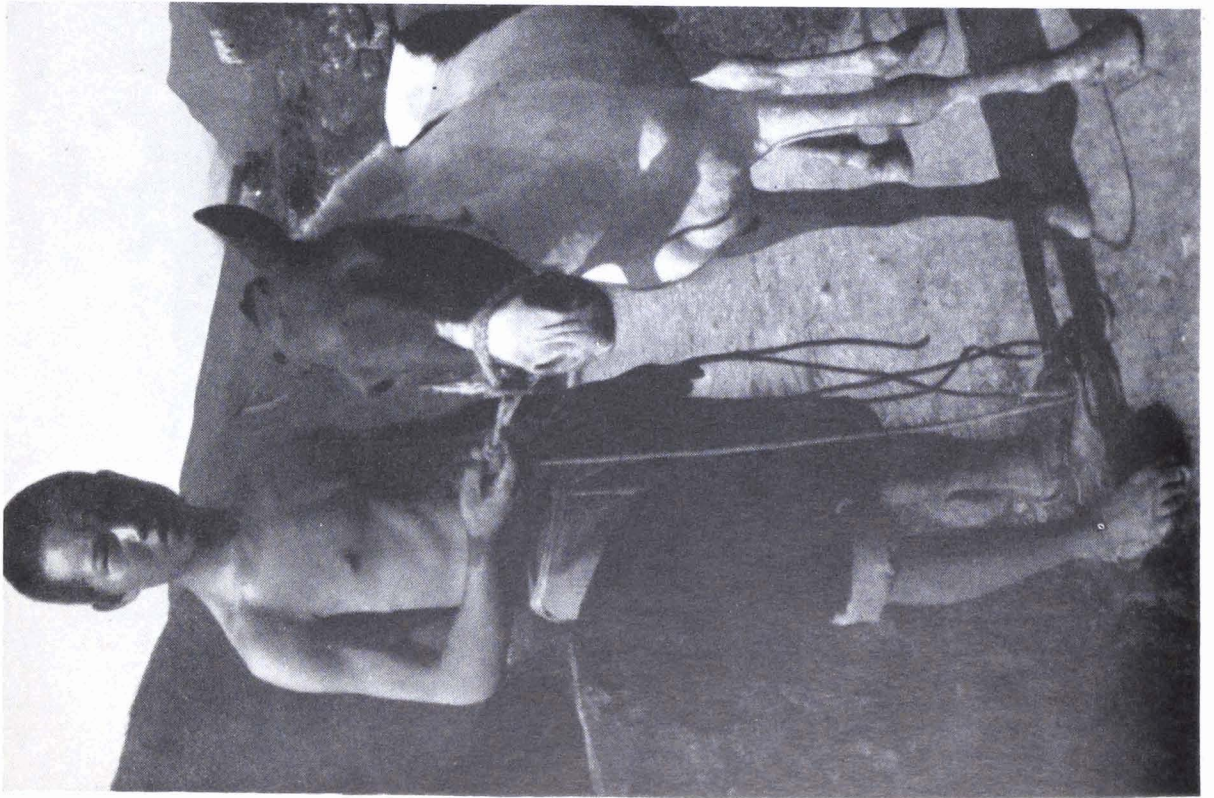
‘The Lolos!’ I exclaimed. ‘But, of course, I read about them in the *Story of Three Kingdoms* and some historical books on West China. I did not realize, however, they were so near.’ Mr. Cunningham chuckled and settled down in his armchair by the warm stove.

‘Not so far as you think,’ he continued. ‘They do come up to Tachienlu sometimes and, if you are lucky, you can see them on a big market day. They are tall and swarthy, in big turbans, hempen sandals and they wear a peculiar fringed cloak woven of pure sheep’s wool by their women folk.’

A wild idea at once leapt into my mind. Here was a really mysterious and unknown land which very few people succeeded in penetrating. Tibet had been visited by many explorers, much was known about its government, lamaseries and people and dozens of books have been written on the subject. Supposing I succeeded in passing through the Lolo domains, what a glory



THE AUTHOR WITH HIS QUASI-LOLO FRIEND



A CARAVAN'S LEADING HORSE



LOUCHING AND THE AUTHOR'S PONY, HWAMA



## *The Lolos*

would be mine ! Perhaps I might discover a real Shangri-La there instead of seeking for it in Tibet. And how wonderful it would be if I made friends with some of these ferocious and enigmatic people. My cheeks burned with excitement as I turned to Mr. Cunningham.

‘But can I . . . can I try to go there?’ I stammered. He became pensive, but soon his kindly smile appeared again.

‘It is premature to talk of such a trip,’ he said simply. ‘Since the Chinese Government has no authority over the Lolos, Chinese officials will do their utmost to stop you from going there. On the other hand, if they don’t, the Lolos may kill you, thinking you are a spy for the Chinese.’ He became silent again then continued. ‘The Lolos are divided into two castes—the Black Lolos who rule the land and the White Lolos who are their serfs or slaves. If you scrape acquaintance with a Lolo and he guarantees you, you could risk going to his place. Or, else, you must arrange to obtain a powerful introduction from someone to one of the Black Lolo princes or chieftains. Don’t be in a hurry, look around, learn the set-up here and then your chance may come.’ And on this he indicated that the subject was closed for the time being.

But my imagination was fired. I began to think and dream of finding the Lolos and going to their fabulous stronghold rather than trying to worm my way into the arid wastes of Tibet proper.

### III

## *Tibetan Friends*

SHORTLY after my arrival Mr. Cunningham made a point of introducing me to Madame Wassachab, the owner of the most splendid kochwang in Tachienlu. She was the *grande dame* of the town. First of all she was aristocratic, being the niece of the last King of Chala. Tachienlu was formerly the capital of the small Tibetan Kingdom of Chala whose independence came to an end when the Chinese annexed this section of the Kham province. The king had been first put in prison and then induced to escape only to be shot down and thrown into the raging torrent. Thus Madame Wassachab had a right to be addressed as Wangmo—the Powerful Woman, i.e. Duchess. In addition to this distinction she was a widow owning many landed properties, still considerable, which passed to her and her husband after the king's tragic death, and she had two sons who were the Incarnations. One was animated by a rather important yidam<sup>1</sup> and, therefore, was in Lhasa at the Court of the Dalai Lama and the other, still a young boy, was an incarnation of a local saint and lived at a beautiful lamasery on a mountain overhanging the city. A mother of two incarnations was in Tibet much better than being a mere duchess.

Escorted by Namka, I found Madame in her palatial drawing-room on the first floor of her great caravanserai. She was a middle-aged woman, rather short and plump, slightly pock-marked, but this defect was artfully concealed by a generous application of paint and powder; her dark eyes were well made-up and her lips rouged in moderation. She wore the scent of 'Narcisse Noir' and her hair was braided and coiled around her head, adorned with red silk ribbons. Her dimpled hands were covered with gold rings.

<sup>1</sup> A patron deity not of human origin.

## *The Powerful Woman*

She was surrounded by a male secretary, a lady companion and several servants and, after the introductions had been made, she asked me to sit opposite her near the brightly polished brazier filled with glowing charcoal which spread a pleasant warmth during the wintry days. Immediately she issued orders to a servant and soon a beautifully decorated copper kettle was brought with steaming butter tea. Seeing how I enjoyed it, her attitude towards me relaxed and became less formal. I told her about myself and my aims in Tachienlu and she listened with interest. She said she had taken me for another missionary. When I assured her that I was not, a strange light came into her eyes. She gave another order and several silver plates appeared, with kanbar (dried yak meat), barley pretzels, Tibetan sauerkraut, and a jug of aromatic clear liquor similar to English gin. She offered me a silver goblet. I sipped and ate the appetizers. I filled a glass and offered it to her. She sighed and said that she really did not drink but, since I was not a missionary, she would not mind taking a sip or two. Namka who had brought me, was very respectful, hardly daring to sit down, but soon we all relaxed and were chatting for over an hour. When I said good-bye the great lady asked me to come back soon and talk to her.

Mr. Cunningham was on tenterhooks waiting for my return and to hear of my call on so important a personage. He was speechless when I recounted the particulars of her hospitality and about the prospect of future invitations. He said this was all unprecedented as the great lady kept rather aloof from local missionaries and never entertained them longer than courtesy demanded.

My appetite for learning the Tibetan language was appeased by the introduction to me, again through Mr. Cunningham's kind offices, of two tutors. One was a Mr. Sherab, a middle-aged Tibetan, profoundly learned and full of the dignity that was appropriate to his post of Government Interpreter. He spoke good English and Chinese and always wore Western clothes. Also he was the author of a book called *A Tibetan about Tibet*. Actually he did not have much time to spare for me and I went to his house, next to the South Bridge Lamasery, four times a week. The other

## *Tibetan Friends*

teacher was Mr. Tuden, a youngish man in his thirties. He was quite debonair in his Tibetan dress and very jolly and frank. Although a small merchant in his own right, he preferred to act as a broker. As he had been to Lhasa several times, where he had a brother who was a lama in the Sera monastery, he spoke the correct Tibetan and was fluent also in Chinese. We became close friends and, after he had learnt that I was not a missionary, he looked on me as a sort of father confessor, relating to me his troubles, hopes and plans. It appeared that in addition to being a broker and a teacher, he was many other things. Amongst these, he claimed to be a Don Juan but unfortunately, he added, he was not very popular among the local husky ladies, not being blessed with much virility despite the consumption of many love pills and elixirs. He said that he was a convert to Christianity and, as such, was in great favour with the China Inland Mission. However, he confided that he did not get much material advantage from that comparatively poor mission, so now he was going to a certain American mission which was rich and offered all kinds of inducements for joining up with them; they would be particularly generous if he brought new converts. He was very fond of a cheering cup, which we occasionally shared, but asked me not to mention this fact to the missionaries. He added that he kept it a secret from the Tibetan community that he was a Christian, as he would otherwise get short shrift from the jealous and powerful lamas.

Both Sherab and Tuden grew very fond of me and, as a gratuitous addition to the lessons, took me now and then to introduce me to some important Tibetans. One of the first I visited with Sherab was the Incarnation and Prince of Litang whose domain was a huge lamasery, 16,000 feet above sea level, some ten or twelve days' march to the west of Tachienlu. The great lama was on a protracted visit to the provincial capital, ostensibly to confer with the Governor but some sly tongues averred that he was practically an honoured prisoner of His Excellency's. He occupied a luxurious apartment at the South Gate lamasery, the wealthiest in town. Of all the Incarnations in Sikang he was the

## *The Prince of Litang*

highest, the next being one at Derge. It appeared that when the Bodhisatva Chenrezig, whose incarnation the Dalai Lama was, had decided to become incarnate in the human form, there was, to put it in plain words, too much of his divinity to go into one man, i.e. into the Dalai Lama, and thus the overflow, about one third, went into the form of the Prince of Litang. Thus, in a metaphysical sense, the Incarnation in Potala, i.e. the Dalai Lama and the one in Litang, were one and the same Bodhisatva, although of different degrees of puissance.

I found the great lama sitting cross-legged on rich rugs spread on a bed in a large, bright room with the sun rays streaming in through red pelargoniums which stood in pots on the window sills. It was a signal honour to me when he got up to receive me; such exalted incarnations do not have to render such courtesies to ordinary mortals except to the Governor himself. He stood before me smiling, a huge figure, tall and athletic, clad in a rusty red toga with one arm bare. His eyes, large and magnetic, bored into mine. I bowed deeply, proffering with both hands the white scarf—khata—which he immediately accepted and then I presented him with a few packets of costly incense which, it was explained to me, was one of the most acceptable gifts in Tibet signifying the profoundest respect and admiration for a person, especially if he were of a priestly or official rank.

We were asked to sit down, and strange and mystic things followed which made an unforgettable impression on me. He said that he did not have to ask Mr. Sherab much about myself, as he knew all about me, my heart, my thoughts and my aspirations. I was related to him spiritually, he added, and there was no need for us even to talk as, being perfectly attuned to each other, we could speak without words. Indeed, looking into his forceful, compelling eyes I felt a strong, warm tide of affinity, and understanding was welling up in me, filling me with a mysterious exaltation. I felt drawn to him irresistibly as if he were my long-lost brother and the whole atmosphere around became homely and intimate as if I had lived there for years. Butter tea was brought in a richly ornamented copper pitcher and he offered me

## *Tibetan Friends*

a bowl of it with his own hands. It was delicious and nowhere again did I have such butter tea to drink. It was made with the best yak butter, rose bark, finely ground walnuts, hazel nuts and other spices and tasted like the finest cocoa. As I was leaving, acting on an impulse, he gave me a very special blessing and presented me with a return scarf.

This spontaneous and warm friendship continued until I left Sikang and I always looked forward, while in Tachienlu, to visiting the great lama and having the comfort of his warm goodwill and affection. I was to meet later many grand lamas, but none could compare with the royal bearing and friendly attitude of this Prince. Years later I heard that he had died in mysterious circumstances.

Next on the list of the grand lamas present in town was the Incarnation of the Dranggo lamasery which was far north near the thriving Tibetan town of Kanze, the capital of the Kanze Principality ruled by the twenty-eight-year-old Grand Duchess Detchin Wangmo, who had just divorced her twenty-fifth husband. The Dranggo grand lama was a young man, in his twenties, also of a very refined appearance. He looked strangely European with his creamy white face and grecian nose. He was staying with his relations, wealthy merchants who had a fine house. He was extremely courteous and kind, and after my visit he sent me a present of yak butter, packed and sewn in skins and forming a big rounded package of some 25 lb. which lasted me for months. Then his relatives invited me to dinner served in purely Tibetan style. Alas, this dinner, sumptuous to Tibetan eyes, was the beginning of my disappointment in the Tibetan cuisine. In appearance it was more like an English meal, with chunks of yak beef fried like beefsteaks. They were so tough that no knife could tackle them, and etiquette forbade me to ask for a wood-chopper or axe. The meat was so liberally salted that anchovies seemed mild in comparison. Then there was soup, a dirty mixture of some pieces of meat, intestines and half-boiled potatoes, with a horrible taste. There were other dishes, too, either undercooked or too tough, or with too much salt or not enough. I ate what I

## *The Incarnation of the Minya Konkka Lamasery*

could for politeness' sake, but had frightful colic afterwards during the night. My subsequent experiences with purely Tibetan gastronomy were just as grievous, but I am glad to say that most Tibetans have realized this apparently ineradicable flaw in their culinary talents, and have adopted a liking for Chinese food, at least, on ceremonial occasions.

One day my other teacher, Tuden, excitedly drew me to Madame Wassachab's house where he was *persona grata*, as he often acted as a broker in connection with her huge business ramifications. Entering her splendid drawing-room, with its tall cupboards full of burnished copper and brass vessels and plate, I was met by Madame, more sumptuously arrayed than ever, and presented to a middle-aged lama who was sitting in the place of honour. He was extremely fat and his stomach seemed to overflow over his crossed legs. It appeared that he was her uncle and was the Incarnation of the Minya Konkka lamasery situated right at the foot of the famous peak. He was an intelligent man and we had an interesting conversation over a bowl of butter tea and cakes. I saw him again several times. The last time I met him was years later in Likiang in Yunnan, where ceremonies and lama dances were being organized in his honour. There he was treated like a very powerful prince of the Lamaist Church, in contrast to his comparatively modest status in Tachienlu where he was eclipsed by much more brilliant and puissant prelates such as the Incarnations of Litang and Dranggo. To add to his dignity and prestige, he brought with him a handsome Chinese girl who spoke perfect Tibetan, Chinese, English and some French. She said she was a Buddhist devotee and acted as his secretary and interpreter. She was fashionably dressed à la Goddess Kwanyin in a wine-red flowing robe with an appropriate hood which was specially designed for her, she said, in Paris. Thanks to her good manners and looks and efficient stage management, the tour was highly successful both spiritually and financially.

Not to be outdone in putting me at my ease amongst the glittering crowd of Tibetan hierarchs, my versatile Namka took me to see his uncle, the notorious Soong Lama. He had no lamasery of

## *Tibetan Friends*

his own and he was no Incarnation, but lived in a spacious house on a hill-side near the Governor's mansion. He was a middle-aged man, pock-marked and obese, his keen porcine eyes gleaming slyly out of his moon-like yellow face. He was immensely wealthy, powerful and unscrupulous, and possessed an importance out of all proportion to his real status in the councils of state. He was like an Augur in the ancient Roman Senate, an unofficial Soothsayer-in-Chief to the Governor and local authorities. In his pride he considered himself to be as important an oracle to Sikang as the famed Oracle of Nechung was to the Lhasa Government. The superstitious and backward Governor and his officials would not take a step without recourse to his powers of divining future events. Quite shamelessly he predicted the advances and retreats of the Japanese at the front, political changes in Chungking, the dangers and successes in official undertakings, fixing dates and hours of battles, assassinations and Japanese air raids on Tachienlu. Always for a consideration, he revealed the portents of the current positions of heavenly bodies, eclipses of the sun and of the moon and the incidence of hail, snow and rain prescribing infallible remedies and dispensing talismans to prevent the three latter calamities, of which hail was the most feared. I always suspected that he belonged to the dreaded Bonist Church of Tibet, but this he had never avowed directly although all his magic and hocus-pocus smelt of that sect. He was clever and very dangerous to cross, and I took due care to make correct obeisance to him, although, personally to me, he appeared repulsive.

The mercantile aspects of this curious 'inland port' had not been neglected either by my sedulous teachers and in a short time I was fully initiated into the secrets of how the wheels of commerce in Tachienlu revolved. It was the Tibetan women who did all the business through their kochwangs. They were too shy and ignorant to travel to Hong Kong or elsewhere abroad to extend their trade but, firmly planted on familiar ground, they knew exactly what to do. They sold the goods imported from India via Tibet to the Chinese merchants and it was they who shipped the imported tea and other merchandise to Tibet, in every



## *Happy Families*

case striking excellent bargains. It was they who also financed all these transactions, their husbands being merely the agents, supervising the caravans to Lhasa and delivering the merchandise to the equally competent ladies at that point. There was no disruption of family life as the husband, upon arrival in Lhasa and during his long stay there, found himself hospitably entertained, in all respects, by a lady friend, perhaps the one to whom he had entrusted the disposal of his wife's caravan. As regards the lonely wife at Tachienlu she was solaced, as often as not, by the husband of the Lhasa lady who had brought her goods to sell in Tachienlu. Unlike the proverbial sailor, who had a wife in every port, a wise Tibetan merchant had the wives only at terminal points and spent a happy year with one family there and another year with a family here. There were no recriminations and the children of both families were happy for, having reached the travelling age, they were taken for a visit from one mamma to another, getting a warm welcome.

One of such contented women was the rich Madame Aja Pentso (Princess Aja) who belonged to a noble family. She was very pretty but looked fragile and helpless, being so slim and delicate with her powdered face and rouged lips. She always walked through the streets, swaying slightly on her high-heeled Western shoes and supported by her maiden friends, mostly husky girls who carried burdens. Thanks to her wealth, beauty and charm she did a roaring business, sometimes cornering the market in saffron or in dry rhubarb brought from the highlands by some boisterous Tibetans, who would rather sell their goods slightly cheaper to a beauty than at a higher price to a less attractive woman like the poor pock-marked Madame Wassachab. It was rumoured that they always had their reward for so wise a decision. The burden-carrying girls were all in the grip of business fever just as much as Madame Aja Pentso. 'Make money fast, make money at all cost!' appeared to be the motto of Tachienlu women. The girls, when not engaged in tea carrying outside the gates, always loafed around on the look-out for an arriving stranger, especially from the highlands. Having spotted one, they

## *Tibetan Friends*

asked him in a whisper whether he had gold dust, musk or saffron to dispose of. He usually accepted the offer not knowing himself where to go or at what price to sell. A bargain was usually struck over a cup of wine, and the proceeds of the sale duly delivered in the evening at the appointed place. The man was happy over the successful sale and the girl was happy over her little commission and, since both were so happy, there might be more drinks, then a dance at a *kochwang* by the moonlight, more drinks and, perchance, a little love-making. To the credit of all these both high-class and humble girl brokers, it must be said that there were no dirty deals, no disappearances with the entrusted goods—everything was always on the level. Such little deals were too microscopic for the great lady merchants and brokers, who were accustomed to thinking in thousands of dollars, but they brought a not inconsiderable income to clever poor girls and laid the foundation of bigger business in the future; at least they all had reasonable hopes of rivalling some day their more fortunate sisters. A little beauty and a keen business brain were no mean assets among the poor Tibetan girls.

## IV

### *Assignment in Garthar*

WHILE making myself familiar with Tachienlu and its inhabitants, I paid the usual number of official calls. The Governor was away and the Chief Secretary did not receive me until much later. In spite of repeated requests, while I was in Chungking, my Headquarters failed to supply me with letters of introduction to high Sikang officials, arming me only with a travel document that gave my name, rank and the purpose of my visit to the province. This was hardly enough in the prevailing atmosphere of suspicion and distrust and, naturally enough, my reception was chilly. The only hearing I got was from the local Commissioner, Mr. Lee, who acted as Financial Secretary and concurrently was the Head of the Co-operative Department and the Co-operative Treasury. He was an uncle of the Governor's third wife, who was as influential with her husband as the Marquise de Pompadour with Louis XV. Mr. Lee was, therefore, rather a power in his own way too. He wanted to know all about my plans and I told him that I desired to make survey tours in the province to determine what types of industrial co-operatives could be formed in different localities. He appeared to be satisfied and promised me his assistance.

With a long signboard over the gate proclaiming that my house was the Sikang Depot of the Chinese Industrial Co-operatives, and with everything ready to start my work, I sent my report to Chungking and patiently awaited their official blessing in the shape of an order opening the depot, a seal of office, rubber chops and stationery. Later I sent a telegram, but there was still no reply.

It was while I was wrapped in this uncertainty that Commissioner Lee summoned me and asked me to go up to Garthar, a trading post also known as Taining, in the highlands,

## *Assignment in Garthar*

where the government owned and operated a cattle farm, to try to establish a modern creamery. I was pleased and flattered to receive this official assignment and hoped that during my work up there I would make a contact with the Lolos or, at least, gather more information about them as Garthar was a shopping centre for many tribes along the Tatu river.

The start was made one morning early in December. My meagre baggage had been repacked in hide-bound boxes to preserve it from sharp rocks and tree branches, and carried out to the North Gate by the women where it was placed on the yaks together with supplies of salted pork, vegetables, sugar and matches. I was accompanied, in addition to the Tibetan yak drivers, by the Manager of the farm, a sly-looking Szechuanese and his assistant, also a local Chinese. Each of us had a horse, although I noticed at once that mine was a particularly old, bony mare. We slowly passed the hot spring bathing establishment and entered a dark, picturesque gorge at the end of which was a cosy-looking village with fruit trees. The sun was bright and warm and there was no snow. We plodded along till evening when we came to a tiny hamlet where we were to spend the night.

Crossing a stream we entered a small courtyard and were at once attacked by an enormous molossus. Of all the Tibetan mastiffs I had so far seen it seemed to me to be the largest. He looked like a lion with his huge head with long hair and his paws of enormous size and strength. Luckily the owner, a Chinese settler, was standing by the gate and prevented us from being severely mauled. He shortened the beast's chain and made him stay in the corner. While his Tibetan wife was preparing the inevitable butter tea and cooking the evening meal from the supplies of food we had brought, I sat on a log watching the dog and a colossal old pig which lay in another corner. The old sow was intelligent and cunning. As soon as she saw the dog dozing off, she got up quietly, sauntered to his corner and quickly grabbed a bunch of straw from his well-padded bed. Quickly she carried the straw to her own comparatively bare sleeping place and spread it there grunting apologetically. Seeing the dog's anger she then pretended to

## 'I'll Walk'

be fast asleep yet always watching him out of the corner of an eye. As soon as the dog dozed off again she repeated the operation until almost all the straw was transferred to her corner. Then she spread herself on it contentedly looking at me with a knowing eye, as if expecting my approbation, and grunting and whining conversationally.

Next morning we had a continuous but gradual climb and towards noon it began to snow. Immediately the visibility became very poor. As the depth of the snow increased my poor horse walked more and more slowly, then she suddenly collapsed. In a few minutes she had recovered, but was too weak to be used so I had to walk until we came to another night stop-over. Getting up at dawn we discovered that my horse had died, evidently overcome by age and altitude. It was then that my companions showed their true face and filled me with forebodings for my future safety and comfort. They did not offer me one of their own horses to ride as they should have done, for I was a guest of their Government and an officer of senior rank. Nor did they propose to turn back. I was cornered and I knew it. I could have walked back alone but then I would have lost my baggage and, as surely as not, my 'face' in addition. But yet I was also in doubt about walking the rest of the way through the snow and over a 15,000-foot-high pass which already loomed in the distance and which, Mr. Cunningham assured me, was quite the *piece de resistance* of the whole trip. He had graphically described to me how the yaks and horses had nearly burst their lungs in crossing it and how prone people were to fainting near the top, overcome by the altitude and fatigue of the ascent. I think it must have been my inborn tenacity and pride which overcame my hesitation and fears.

'I'll walk,' I said curtly and started out. Fortunately, the sun was shining brightly again and the sight of the majestic glittering peaks and emerald-green forests of rhododendrons and scrub oak made me forget my frailties. The air was like champagne and, walking steadily along a well-defined trail made by passing yak caravans, I soon left my sullen companions and their yaks far behind. Looking ahead I saw a great yak caravan pouring down the

## *Assignment in Garthar*

snowy valley, like a solid stream of black lava; the distant cries of their drivers; the cracking of the whips and a rumble of unshod hooves were already drifting down the still air. I confess I panicked considerably because I realized that it meant annihilation to be caught in the midst of such an animal juggernaut. All around me were scores of rhododendron trees scarred and twisted by these animated tanks. Being silly cattle they did not go in single file, like horse or camel caravans, but ran in a wide herd pushing and banging against each other. Knowing that my companions would be delayed by this implacable onrush, if only for the sake of their two horses which they would try to get out of the way as yaks detested all the horses they met and always tried to disembowel them, I hurriedly made my way into the forest as far as I could get and sat down there on a stump waiting for the caravan to pass. Soon they came thundering over the frozen ground, churning the powdery snow high up into the air. They were passing at an incredible speed, almost running, spreading in a wide mass and disregarding all obstacles, I clearly heard the ominous screeching and scraping of their cargoes as they tried to squeeze between rocks and trees, and the curses of their drivers who pelted them with stones and frozen mud.

I was sitting very still trying not to attract the attention of the fierce and jealous yak bulls who were only too eager to gore an unwary stranger. More than twenty minutes passed and there seemed no end to that thundering river of black and white animals. Soon, my eyes now accustomed to the diffused gloom of the snow-carpeted forest, noticed a strange movement in its depths accompanied by equally mysterious clucking sounds. I sat frozen, still not daring to breathe. A great flock of maki—Tibetan eared pheasants—was approaching. They did not see me, probably taking me for a tree stump. The birds walked noiselessly on their bright red legs, proudly carrying their snow white bodies with a broad black tail. They were of huge size, appearing to me like a flock of sheep. They surrounded me completely, gazing here and there with their shining beady eyes and gently clucking. They reminded me strongly of décolleté ladies of the gay eighties in

## The Mani Pile

white evening gowns with black trains. I chuckled at this comparison, and they melted away in a flash, as if by magic, without a sound. It was uncanny. Seeing that the yak caravan had passed I resumed my walk.

My companions came up shortly and complained that they had been delayed by the caravan.

'We must hurry up to reach the pass by noon,' they said. 'In the afternoon it is suicidal to ascend owing to high winds.'

We were already very high and our progress was becoming slower as both we and the animals began to lack breath. Up and up we toiled scrambling from one boulder to another; each effort left us breathless and panting. The poor loaded beasts suffered most. They walked up for a minute or two and then stood still for some minutes with their sides blown up like balloons; they panted loudly and painfully, their lungs clearly about to burst. A passing cloud enveloped us plunging us into gloom and producing a shower of needle-like crystals of dry snow. I outdistanced my companions, but did not know where I was going; anyway I thought it should be upwards, and slowly climbed from rock to rock clutching at razor-sharp edges with my frozen hands in spite of the thick gloves. At last I reached a perfectly flat, windswept top and to my right lay the fateful mani pile with several tattered prayer flags stuck there on poles. '*Aum mani padme hum*', proclaimed the roughly carved stone slabs, and '*Aum mani padme hum!*' I muttered knowing that at last I was safe. Deep down on the other side there gleamed a heavenly blue lake, like a sapphire, set in dark-green, almost black, fir trees. And to this lake we began to descend, caressed by the bright and warm sun again. It was a very deep lake, as I found out when we had got there, with a pebbly beach. Now I remembered what they had told me about it in Tachienlu. There was a great battle around it some centuries ago and a considerable number of soldiers had been pushed into the water and drowned. Now and then people managed to fish out shields, armour and chain mail.

Turning into a narrow valley to the right of the lake we now came to such scenery as to take my breath away. I just could not

## *Assignment in Garthar*

move, standing and staring in front of me. I forgot all my fatigue and the pain in my legs, bruised and scratched by the rocks and boulders, and all my disappointments and grouses. Framed in primeval dark fir forests, slightly to the left, rose a fabulous peak. It was shaped exactly like a diadem with several prongs, equidistant and uniformly sharp, and glittering and scintillating like stupendous diamonds. The glaciers were descending like blue veils between dazzlingly white snows touched here and there by purple shadows. A roaring stream, bluish-green, foamed and thundered in front of the forests down the valley. I was told by Mr. Cunningham to expect to see this wonderful peak, but the reality was greater than my imagination. It was the famous Mt. Jara, the unclimbable glory which stood all alone by itself, not joined to any of the other high peaks which floated in the purple sky farther away. It was first discovered and described by a Hungarian count who had travelled in these parts. He gave its height as 19,000 feet, but later, I read in a scientific review, his findings were disputed and another explorer averred that it was not less than 24,000 feet. Afterwards I saw many other peaks, but to me Mt. Jara will always remain unique in its unsurpassed majesty and beauty.

We followed the roaring stream down, gingerly stepping from one mossy stone to another. It was very slow progress, but I was so fortified by the glorious vistas that I felt like floating on air. At last we turned left into a broad flat valley and I realized that we had reached the famed Tibetan plateau—the Roof of the World. Now our progress was child's play. A vast, undulating country, framed in snow ranges, stretched far away and merged into the horizon. There were no misty outlines or pastel shades of a Chinese landscape; everything was visible, clear and sharp like a knife's edge and the objects appeared much nearer than they really were. The lamasery of Garthar, its dingy village and an agglomeration of low buildings on a prominence, which was the government cattle farm, appeared to be almost a stone's throw away and yet it took us hours to reach there.



## V

### *High Altitudes*

MY new abode was a rambling log house covered with a wooden-plank roof on which huge boulders lay anchored to prevent it from being blown off. I was allocated one of the best rooms but in no respect did it correspond to the bright, well-heated room I was led to expect. It was on the first floor, very small and there was only one tiny window covered with a translucent yak bladder. There was a crude bedstead opposite heaped with barley straw and a small table and a chair. Like my house in Tachienlu, it had no ceiling and there was an open space of several inches between the roof and the wall; the interstices between the logs were packed with moss. Low partitions separated it from the adjoining rooms which were filled with stores of barley, wheat, corn, yak butter in skins and cakes, brown sugar, rock salt, cooking oil, potatoes and some salted pork hanging in big chunks under the roof. The ground floor was entirely occupied by several prize cows and bulls and an imported stud boar; there were also cubicles for Tibetan labourers, both men and women, and a big, dark kitchen which served as a dining-room.

I spread my bedding on the straw as a Tibetan woman servant entered. She looked doubtfully at my blankets and disappeared, returning later with two thick yak-wool mats which she spread over the bed; they were very heavy and it was my turn to doubt if I could stand them. Then we had butter tea and flat wheaten bread, some fried potatoes and dried yak beef called *kanbar*. As evening was falling there was a distant thundering and the inevitable wind came. The blasts were so powerful and vicious that I thought the whole house would collapse. The temperature dropped sharply far below freezing point. They brought me an

## *High Altitudes*

oil lamp, but it was blown out in an instant. With my teeth chattering from the intense cold I undressed and buried myself under the blankets and mats. It was getting colder and colder and the wind was getting stronger. Thin needles of ice were hurting my face and I burrowed under the coverings entirely. There were squeaks all over the place and huge rats ran over my rugs seemingly in droves. Getting up in the morning I found the mats on my bed covered with ice crystals an inch deep, mixed with fine dust.

After washing my face in the kitchen, I went out to explore the farm. There were about two hundred yaks in the corral behind and a couple of sickly-looking Holstein bulls which had been brought from Chengtu for breeding purposes. There were sheep, too, and everywhere I saw pigs wandering around. Most of them were of a rusty-brown colour, shaggy and lean—clearly a product of inter-breeding between the Chinese black pig and the wild pig. They were large and aggressive animals and, after an early morning feed, were let out into the countryside to fend for themselves, returning in the evening when they were fed again. There was more to be learnt about these wandering pigs and my lesson came that very afternoon.

The idea of privies was totally foreign to the Tibetans and other tribal people and, therefore, people relieved themselves whenever and wherever the urge caught them. In Tachienlu it was dangerous to venture at night or early in the morning into the narrow alleyways leading off the main streets for fear of stepping on to something left by careless Tibetans, and the police had a perpetual headache trying to inculcate at least a modicum of hygiene and propriety. Here, in these great open spaces, no such problems arose; people just squatted everywhere. The favourite retreat for this purpose near our farm was the bank of a small stream which passed near by. Naturally I followed suit. There was a crunching of gravel behind me, when I was most occupied, and a loud snort. Before I realized what was happening, I had received a violent blow in the small of my back and found myself precipitated into the icy waters of the brook. It was shallow and I quickly scrambled out to see a large pig glaring at me disappointedly from the bank.

## Lily

After I had returned to the house, dripping and shivering, I was told, amid bursts of laughter, how lucky I was. A week ago a Tibetan labourer was similarly surprised during his reverie behind a hillock and, there being no brook to fall in, his anus was badly mangled by the beast at the most critical moment. I was advised to be more circumspect next time as the pigs were very hungry in the afternoon and fought for any piece of filth they could find; a number of infants left by careless mothers to crawl on the floor had been attacked and eagerly consumed by these monsters, who were very cunning and observant. Later I watched some fierce triangular fights between dogs, pigs and vultures for the enjoyment of carcasses of domestic animals.

I complained bitterly to the manager about the rats which, of all animals, I detested most. He promised to remedy the matter and the very next day a Tibetan woman from Garthar village brought a middle-sized Tibetan cat and put it in my room.

'*Lily chi trè, trè yamou rè!* (This cat is very, very nice!)', she said smilingly. Lily was the word for cat in the local Tibetan dialect. She was a curious creature with her striped greyish-brown fur and emerald-green eyes; her tail was a fluffy puff at the base and then perfectly naked to the tip, looking just like a rat's tail. I bent down and stroked her. She crouched and her eyes looked threateningly as if she was ready to jump at my throat. 'Lily!' I called to her softly, '*Lily ngai chung-chung!* (My little cat!)', I added. She looked at me long and enigmatically and then leisurely strolled out of the room sniffing. All that evening there were terrific engagements between the cat and the rats with continuous piercing squeaks and growls in the store-room. I was almost asleep when I heard scratching on my mats; it gradually came to where my head was and then the flaps were pulled up one by one, uncovering my face. I did not know what to think. Then came a cat's paw touching my cheek and a gentle mew, and the cat nosed herself down under the covers. I was lying on my back and she nestled in the crook of my left arm lying there also on her back with her paws daintily folded on her little breast. 'Lily!' I whispered and she tilted her head backwards looking at me

## *High Altitudes*

mysteriously with her green eyes in the moonlight which filtered through the bladder window. Then, very deliberately, she stretched a paw and touched my nose with a claw. 'Good Heavens!' I thought. 'What shall I do if she goes for my eyes?' But she withdrew the paw, lying and purring contentedly, mew-ing gently now and then as if asking me for something. I could not sleep in that position for long and started rolling on my right side. She mewed, bit me on my back rather strongly and put all her claws into my skin, pulling me over again. I did so and she snuggled again happily. A rat ran over my feet and she jumped out stealthily, but as quick as an arrow. There was a minute of terrific struggle and then silence. Lily returned into the crook of my arm and did not leave me until dawn. It was a strange friendship, this cat monopolizing me every evening and never permitting me to turn my back on her.

Later I learned how loyal and jealous of their masters these Tibetan cats are. Some of them were huge and a real menace to strangers who entered Tibetan homes unannounced, going straight for their eyes. Tibetans trusted them more to protect the interior of their homes than house dogs.

About the same time yet another pet adopted me in the shape of a big black stud boar. He was a well-fed, active and intelligent animal. I scratched his head and sides several times with my stick to his unbounded delight. This unexpected attention from a human being evidently touched some hidden chords in his little heart and filled him with admiration and affection. As soon as he heard me coming downstairs he ran on his short legs as fast as he could grunting softly and rubbing his snout against my coat. However, his favourite trick was to espy me coming back and run between my legs. He succeeded in toppling me several times and tried to lick my face whilst I lay prostrate. This I did not permit him to do, for his snout was too dirty for that. He always looked longingly as I disappeared up the stairway. By a long and painstaking observation he must have decided that now he knew how the stairs could be used. Returning one afternoon I was in a hurry to get up as it was dinner time, and did not stop to pet him.

## Tibetan Cooking

Up he rushed after me and successfully reached the last step. However, his great weight and enormous belly prevented him from negotiating that and he paused there for an instant helplessly waving his short front legs; then his hind legs slipped from the lower step and, with a terrific squeal, he crashed down backwards just as the Tibetan woman servant was bringing our dinner. The soup was spilled and the wooden container and bowls shattered to smithereens and the woman herself was rather seriously bruised by the heavy body of the animal.

I always felt hungry because the food at the farm was almost uneatable. The Szechuanese only had two meals during the day. One was at about ten o'clock in the morning and another roughly at about five in the afternoon. During breakfast, which was also called lunch, we had butter tea and *momos* with some salted turnips or cabbage and a little kanbar. *Momos* were lozenge-shaped baps made of roughly milled Indian corn. They were baked right in the stove before the yak-dung fire and were always mixed with ashes by the time they were ready. If they had been fully baked, they were as hard as bricks; if they were underdone, they were unpleasantly soggy inside. During the afternoon meal we had the same kind of *momos* and a soup which was brought in a small wooden tub. It was usually made of dried peas or chick-peas and, infrequently, of turnips, rutabagas or potatoes, the only vegetables that could grow at this altitude, with an addition of sliced pig intestines or a piece of old salted pork. Although the Tibetan women started cooking this evening meal soon after breakfast, nothing was properly boiled or stewed when dinner time came. Of course, it was not their fault; at this altitude the water appeared to boil quickly, but it was not really very hot and a hand could be put into it without being scalded. It took many hours to boil anything and even eggs required something like ten minutes to get them soft-boiled. Thus we sat down to a meal of these sodden *momos*, and soup in which the peas, still as hard as stones, lay on the bottom of the bowl. The intestines, only half-washed and improperly cleaned, were loathsome in the extreme. Remembering what the pigs ate, I could not control a feeling of nausea when

## *High Altitudes*

such food was served. The soup with other ingredients was no better, the potatoes, turnips or rutabagas being half-raw floating together in a greasy, murky liquid with unsavoury pieces of salt pork which was unpalatable and stringy. However, I had to eat at least something to keep myself alive. But this diet effectively ruined my stomach and left its mark on my digestion for many years. I believe I would have died if it had not been for a bowl of rich yak milk which I wangled as my daily due from the unrelenting farm manager, who was clearly enjoying my discomfort. I always suspected that he and his assistant had their own stores and ate much better on the sly.

I made occasional visits to Garthar village to buy some food or eat at one of the restaurants there. On the Tibetan plateau all travel was done between early morning and early afternoon. After approximately three o'clock nobody ventured out. This was due, of course, to the cruel winds which invariably sprung up as the sun was setting behind the high mountains. In accordance with this ingrained custom I also made my trips to Garthar in the morning. The sun was very bright and, in spite of it being mid-winter, very hot, so hot indeed that none dared to venture under its burning rays without a hat. But it did not make the air warm; whenever a breeze blew it was as cold as ice. The snow and ice melted almost at once when touched by the rays of the sun, but in the shade of the gullies and hills the snow and ice lay thick on the frozen ground.

The road to Garthar was only two miles long, but a part of it was the big caravan route from North to Tachienlu and was interesting for the many travellers I met. There were some humble Tibetan peasants returning from the market to their farms and they always greeted me respectfully, putting out their tongue as far as possible. It was a salutation from the low rank people to those of high rank and I did not have to respond in the same manner. Then there were merchants riding beautiful, well-fed mules or broad shaggy ponies. Tibetans loved their animals and always kept them in first-class condition. All were friendly folk and it was enough to greet them with the word '*Aro!* (Hello

## Garthar

friend!)' to make them smile warmly. They usually asked me 'Konan ndro? (Where are you going?)' and I would answer 'Gartha la (To Garthar).'

The village of Garthar was a row of dingy houses which also served as shops and restaurants. It was peopled for the most part by the Szechuanese Chinese with their Tibetan wives. At the restaurants we could have bowls of grey, wheaten noodles with fat pork or yak beef and drink chang or Tibetan beer out of beautifully wrought brass or copper dippers. Chang was a yellowish, translucent, sour liquid, resembling whey. It did not seem strong but on the first occasion, after half a dipper, I felt its effects sharply by hardly being able to get up from the table.

On some mornings, after breakfast, I took long walks to a range of lonely mountains which loomed so near and actually was a few miles' walk. There was a defile between the mountains, and the ground in it was flooded from dozens of hot springs which bubbled all over the place issuing a reddish water, impregnated with sulphur and iron oxide, and leaving large red patches resembling blood. In this sheltered corner, stimulated by warm water, a sort of perpetual spring reigned, with the grasses still green and the flowers blooming despite the terrific frosts which fell at night. One of the mountains was covered with dark fir forest. As the plateau was already so high, it was not impressive, but it was very steep. I used to climb to the top, panting from lack of air, and sat there for hours not moving and observing the landscape around me. It was very still in that thick wood and every sound, however small, was sharp. The sun, an orange ball, moved in a dark, purple sky, its undiffused light illuminating with painful intensity the sharp rocks and golden meadows while the shadows, as deep as night, lurked in the valleys and crannies away from its rays. Now and then there was a strident cry and some maki would stroll into a clearing or an Amherst's pheasant would swish its long tail right in the bushes next to me. The yaks on sunlit slopes of distant mountains looked like black beetles and now and then the guttural bark of the *molossi* who guarded them, or a plaintive song of a Tibetan herdsman was wafted through the still air.

## *High Altitudes*

It was peaceful here beyond imagination, but still, I thought, it was rather like a peace of the grave and not the peace of the Shangri-La I was seeking. My thoughts drifted to the cruelties of existence of the gold diggers and the greed of the dealers in Garthar and scattered villages. Everybody was bent on obtaining gold by hook or by crook, on making a fortune by any means whatsoever; crime was the rule in these parts and not an exception. Every man here was predatory and nobody could be trusted; it was a battle of wits to stay alive among these people, much less enjoy living.

I returned home following the course of deep gullies, stopping now and then to chat to the lonely gold diggers who sat over their sieves. They were so much more miserable than myself, and this perverse thought gave me a certain comfort. Alluvial gold was to be found in Garthar, as almost everywhere in Sikang highlands, and so were these gold panners, mostly Szechuanese Chinese. They were everywhere—in small groups of two or three and singly. Going for a walk to some lonely hill or through a dark gully, where normally I would not expect to meet a human being, I was startled every time I came on a crouching figure sitting by a trickling stream and stirring mud in an excavated hole. Then the man would plunge a wire sieve into the mud, bring it up and place it into the current which slowly washed off the mud leaving revealed, perhaps, a small reward in the shape of one or two tiny nuggets not bigger than chick-peas. It might take him a day or two of back-breaking work, from early morning till sunset, to recoup himself in this modest manner. If he netted a nugget as big as a hazel nut, there was cause for real jubilation, and he might go to Garthar for a drinking spree, and a really good meal of wheaten noodles and fat pork. But usually he managed to accumulate only pinchfuls of gold dust which was deposited, along with the nuggets, into a small bag of chamois leather hung around the neck. These gold diggers were a ragged lot, just like their tea-carrying brothers, out of whose ranks they themselves came. They were for the most part, thin and emaciated with feverishly burning eyes—the eyes of inveterate gamblers. And gamblers they were,



## The Gold Panners

the stake being their very life against crafty, secretive nature which tried to withhold its fortune. The rigours of such a life threatened starvation, illness and death-dealing frosts, and the last, most formidable danger of all, was that of being murdered by covetous fellow men. It was indeed a cruel irony of Fate when, having been rewarded for their privations, and perseverance with a small fortune, they had their throats cut at the very gates of Tachienlu, the Paris of their dreams, where they hoped to have at least a glimpse again of the life they craved.

They lived where they worked, finding a small cave under the ledge of a rock or excavating themselves a fox-hole in the perpendicular banks of a stream or erecting a crude shack if they could get some wood from a near-by forest. Their staple food was the eternal *momo* which they baked in the ashes of their fires, or Tibetan *tsamba*, poor butter tea or a soup with those hard peas and old salt pork of which they used only a small slice, for economy's sake, once a day. Their bedding was a coarse mat of yak hair and their only companion a small oil lamp for cooking opium and a pipe. Being so poor, they could not afford even the proper lamp with a glass chimney, using instead an empty egg-shell as a chimney.

If they were lucky and accumulated a number of nuggets or a quantity of gold dust, they had to be very careful in keeping the secret; many a man lost his life by blabbing his good fortune to what he thought was his dearest friend. In the misery of their life and with their brain numbed by continuous opium-smoking, many of them had lost all normal standards of humanity, becoming more heartless and cunning than the savage beasts or those blood-thirsty demons with which the Tibetans loved to associate all gloomy and lonely spots in the mountains. So long as the poor gold panner kept his success to himself and his fortune buried in some secret place, he was fairly safe where he worked. Any undue display of lavishness when he came to Garthar or some other village already made him a marked man. But the greatest trial of his life came when he at last decided to quit digging and bring his newly gained fortune to Tachienlu, to sell his gold there for

## High Altitudes

Chinese currency or buy with it some legitimate merchandise so as to return to Szechuan as a small merchant of means. The most dangerous step was the first one—to travel with his gold from the spot where he was digging to Garthar. Somehow, when a man left his home, though only a mere foxhole, he became conspicuous; he carried too many things which normally he should not have brought at all if it was a mere visit for provisions; so the watchful bad men pricked their ears. Why should he abandon his digging unless he had struck it rich there? The onus lay on the digger to prove that there was no gold in that spot. He did his best to prove the point by being clad poorer than ever, his body gleaming through his rags, and walking slowly as if utterly exhausted by the futile work and starvation. He did have his little pouch tied to his neck, but it had in it a mere smear of gold dust, so little indeed that few would bother about it. But gold was heavy, even in small amounts. There were many ruses, the most popular being to tie the well-filled pouch to the genitals and stuff the rest into the colon. Although the practice was widely known, it worked well. A number of gold diggers told me this themselves, as they trusted me both as a foreigner and a discreet friend. And later some Tibetans told me how they smuggled in some Brownings and other small pistols similarly tied to their secret parts. The local women, especially those married to their gold-dealing husbands, were also given to transporting small fortunes. The Chinese, even when they were most depraved in all other respects, possessed a certain modicum of ingrained decency when it came to searching a man's person. Having thus reached Garthar safely, the man could dispose of his find to one of the merchants who were specializing in such deals. But he would sell at a discount and, in addition, if he brought with him Chinese currency or even musk or other goods to Tachienlu, he might be robbed on the way as well. The poor *nouveau riche*, simple as he was, knew well enough that local merchants were utterly unscrupulous and, knowing his inexperience in commerce, would sell him adulterated musk at an exorbitant price, which he was bound to re-sell at a heavy loss to equally cunning big merchants in Tachienlu.

## *Yak Milk*

Usually he decided to wait for a caravan going down and, having distributed his gold among the saddle bags with horse feed, he was fairly sure of reaching his destination unmolested.

In spite of all these precautions, many simple souls perished in the attempt. Bodies of murdered gold diggers were constantly found on lonely trails and passes. No one knew who they were and no one cared much. Nobody carried passports or identification cards in the China or Tibet of those days and it was easier to kill a stranger, especially if he looked poor and homeless, than somebody's yak or dog. There were no investigations and usually no witnesses, and there was no police force except in the big towns. And why should there be any fuss, the authorities reasoned, about a nameless corpse whom nobody claimed; anyway, the man had been engaged in gold-digging; he knew what it meant and it was just too bad that Fate had caught up with him.

In accordance with my instructions, I went into the problems of making Western-style butter on the farm. There were several hundred yaks, and many cows gave good milk. The yak milk was very rich and sweet, almost like pure cream and its fat content was very high. Of course, it was still winter and the yield was small, but, anyway, there was enough milk for demonstration purposes. However, the enormity of my task became apparent all at once. The first process, the milking, as it was done on the farm and, for that reason, all over Tibet, appalled me. A dirty copper pail, merely rinsed in the ice-cold muddy water of the brook, was thrust by a Tibetan man or woman under the filthy, woolly fur of the yak, hanging almost to the ground, and the milk was led from its udder on to a piece of rough yak-wool mat spread over the pail, serving as a strainer. By the time the product has been delivered to the farm, it was already cold. The only cream separator, although they were inordinately proud of it, was a mere toy capable of producing, perhaps, one pound of butter an hour. They had never operated it before and I found it all rusty and dirty and almost beyond hope of repair. Of course, it could not operate with cold milk. So the milk was warmed in the kitchen over a yak-dung

## *High Altitudes*

fire and, naturally, by the time it had been heated, it smelled, like other cooked food, of the dung. Then there was no proper churn except the long, barrel-like churns used in making Tibetan-style butter. They were too big for the amount of cream obtained by hours of separation through the small machine; they were also too filthy and begrimed by months of use. The Tibetans made their yak butter in their own way. They simply collected the newly produced milk, without straining it once more, and poured it into these big churns. Then several persons, men and women, took their turn in churning, moving the handle up and down all day long until a large lump of butter had been produced; the lump was fished out, pressed into convenient cakes of about two cattiees each and wrapped in birch bark. It had a cheesy flavour and contained plenty of yak hair among other impurities; in warm weather it became quickly rancid. Rancidness was considered rather desirable by the Tibetans as they liked their butter with a kick just as many people prefer Gorgonzola cheese to milder varieties.

With the wind howling through the crevices and spraying everything with fine yellowish dust, the butter I had prepared with the aid of the tiny separator, was hardly better than that made in Tibetan style; it was greyish in colour both on account of the dust and of the impure rock salt which was the only salt available, and it had a piquant aftertaste of yak-dung smoke which was not present in the Tibetan butter. Having seen the excellent butter produced by Russian settlers in Manchuria, who had no separators, I decided to follow their method and set out the milk in shallow dishes to produce the cream. To provide the necessary warm temperature, the room specially allocated for the purpose, was fitted with several charcoal braziers. However, the icy wind defeated my purpose and the next morning we found the thin layer of cream nicely powdered with dust and all but frozen. So we had to give that up. The management of the farm during all these operations was not only non-co-operative, but frankly sceptical and hostile. Their attitude was that they knew perfectly well how butter should be produced and that their Tibetan 'technicians' did their job well. It was quite good enough for local

## *Butter Making*

consumption and for export. And, if those finicky foreigners in Chungking and Kunming could not use it, then it was their own fault in failing to appreciate what was good for them. It was their bounden duty to condition their taste to the Garthar butter and not the duty of the producers to try to introduce any new-fangled ideas which, it was only too clear, were useless and unnecessary. Having thus satisfied themselves that I was no magician in the butter-making craft, they tried to forget my very presence on the farm treating me as a superfluous parasite and, I suspect, as a sort of spy sent by the Central Government to pry into the secrets of their butter business and many other less respectable operations which they were carrying on under cover to supplement their income.

In addition to my depression over my failure of doing anything of the slightest use in this God-forsaken place and over the hostility and non-co-operation of my Szechuanese companions, I now felt how my health was slowly ebbing away due to lack of proper diet, discomfort and sleeplessness. At this altitude of over 13,000 feet sleep came with difficulty, and the raging wind in the evening made the atmosphere more rarefied, causing me to sit up in bed and gasp for breath at an hour when sleep should be the deepest. I felt weaker as the days passed and the prospect of remaining in this unfriendly place till spring was too much even to think about. The worst thing was not to be able to work, not to be able to do a thing. I felt cornered and utterly helpless as I had no reason to go back to Tachienlu as the expected letters from my Headquarters so far failed to materialize.

## VI

### *Flight from Garthar*

THE news that there was a Tibetan uprising somewhere near Kanze came as a bombshell to shatter the monotony of our life on the farm. What was the real trouble we never found out. Some people alleged it was due to the matrimonial entanglements of the ruling Grand Duchess of Kanze, Detchin Wangmo, who had got rid of her twenty-fifth husband, it was rumoured, by shooting him herself as she was a crack shot. She was now casting her eyes on a handsome young Tibetan from another tribe and, it appeared, that the Provincial Government desired to prevent this new marriage, as it was afraid of the Duchess becoming too powerful through such an alliance. A more likely version, however, was that it was due to one of the sporadic forays by the fierce and untameable Hsiangchen tribesmen irritated by the exactions and repressions of the rapacious Szechuanese soldiers belonging to local garrisons. Whatever the reason, the situation was rapidly becoming ominous. Some refugees had already reached Garthar village and, with their tales of cruelties and pillage, they succeeded in creating a mild panic among the Chinese settlers and merchants. People were hurriedly packing their goods and other prized possessions, and with their caravans set out for the safety of Tachienlu to weather the impending storm in freedom from danger. There was excitement on our farm too, but my Chinese companions still lingered, hoping that somehow the trouble would be localized.

However, in a few days' time fresh hordes of fleeing merchants arrived from Dawu, only some three days' march away where there was a large lamasery notorious for its fierce and intractable lamas. They said that the rebels were only a day's walk from the

## *Mt. Jara*

lamasery and the lamas were already restive, their hands itching to join the desperadoes and take part in the plunder. Cold fear gripped the farm and we started frantically to pack. There were no horses available and none could be procured on Garthar market as they all had been snatched up by rich merchants and shopkeepers. Whatever was of value, including my meagre baggage, was piled on to yaks and I was told that we should leave next morning at dawn and travel to Tachienlu by the shortest route on foot.

It was bitterly cold in the morning, but the air was crisp and invigorating. Walking over the smooth rolling plain with its short dry grass was a pleasure. Instead of turning into the gorge with its thundering torrent behind Mt. Jara, we headed towards the dry bed of a moraine lake high up among the glittering peaks of other ranges. There was a dense fog when we entered it and a soft layer of snow muffled our steps. Huge boulders lay all over the place, left by the retreating glacier, and I had difficulty in following our scattered caravan. At last I had an unpleasant sensation in the pit of my stomach that I had lost it altogether. Fortunately the fog lifted and the pale rays of the sun lit the landscape. All around me were snow peaks and behind on the left I saw Mt. Jara. Its incomparable diadem sparkled blindingly in the crystal clear air. The elevation was very considerable, well above 15,000 feet, and I felt quite breathless. The boulders were much taller than a man's height and, though I could not see my companions, I managed to follow their tracks left in the powdery snow. The stillness was absolute and I felt humbled and intimidated by the utter isolation of the scenery. There was nothing but these cold, scintillating summits around me and the expanse of these huge, impersonal boulders. It was a world not meant for human beings, and not even for any other living creatures. There were no birds and no trees, only a mantle of snow on the ground, dazzlingly white and glaring and the diamond-like sparkle of eternal ice on the proud peaks. The horror of utter loneliness and the possibility of being never found again was intensified when I came on the scattered skeletons of yaks. Once I thought I had even stumbled

## *Flight from Garthar*

on a human skull. Who were these people and how did they die in this unearthly place? Were they overcome by a blizzard or were they murdered? Would it also be my fate to leave my bleached skull here unless my indifferent and cowardly companions deigned to return to search for me? I felt panic creeping on me and made a desperate effort to resist it. After all I still had their tracks to follow and the caravan could not have gone so far ahead. Then I came to a spot where hot springs spread their warm water far and wide creating a nasty morass around the boulders. Now the tracks had disappeared altogether. But the plateau was beginning to slope gently downwards. I climbed on to a rock and looked ahead. The slope fell into a shallow valley a mile or so away and far on the other side of it I saw some slowly creeping black dots. Undoubtedly they were our yaks. But how could I get there? The boulders became smaller and were strewn more thickly together, with a thick covering of snow between them. It took me over an hour to jump from boulder to boulder, sometimes falling through the soft snow between them. At last I caught up with the caravan. There was no comment on my misadventure and the glances were hostile. They said they had not even noticed my absence. What a dreadful lie! I was now sure they had meant me to get lost; it would have been such a convenient death to report to the authorities.

We did not stop for lunch as we had to make for a Tibetan hamlet, the only dwelling place on this route, before nightfall. We had no camping equipment and at this altitude we would be frozen to death if we attempted to sleep in the open. The sun was now high up in the cloudless sky and its heat was scorching, relieved only by an icy breeze from the snow peaks. The frozen ground became melted in large patches and in many spots we waded ankle deep in slush. But the real nuisance were the hidden hot springs which created vast areas of bogs which we had to skirt carefully, sometimes sinking into soft peaty ground up to our knees. Exhausted as I was from malnutrition on the farm and walking on an empty stomach, these struggles with marshes made me weaker still and gasping for breath. Climbing up and down





CHYMAGON LAMASERY

LEE CHIZAU'S VILLAGE



THE INCARNATION OF MINYA KONKKA GOMPA

DUKE KOUCHIÉ, HUSBAND OF THE DUCHESS

## *'This Mighty House'*

low hills was much easier as the ground there was at least dry.

Before sunset the plateau began sloping down into a narrow but flat valley at the end of which a castle-like structure was visible. It took hours before we came to it. It was indeed a castle, at least from the outside; five stories high, each story being of a proportionally smaller size towards the top. The massive stone building was crowned by a tall watch-tower with embrasures over which prayer flags on poles fluttered. The windows were small and of the usual Tibetan style, being triangular with the apex cut off. This mighty house, dark brown in colour and situated in this gloomy lifeless valley appeared to me uncanny and forbidding. A high wall constructed of boulders and clay encircled the building which had a sturdy wooden gate through which we presently passed inside. It was a small courtyard littered with straw on which dozens of yaks stood. The ground floor was entirely devoted to domestic animals—in one corner there were stalls and drinking troughs for horses and mules, at another there was a pen for pigs and the rest was allocated to more yaks. The first floor loomed high above me, but there was no staircase. Instead there was a long, steeply inclined log of wood with notches leading into a sort of trap door. Tibetan men and women were unconcernedly going up and down this precarious pole and my companions likewise ascended it without difficulty. I tried my luck and half way up lost my balance and fell heavily on the soft layer of horse dung between two fluffy yaks which paid no attention to me whatsoever. I tried again with the same result. At last I was rescued by two kindly Tibetan women, one walking ahead and leading me by the arm whilst the other propped me from behind. Once upstairs I found the place strangely cosy and comfortable. It was one immense pillared room with its floor entirely covered by thick matting of dark yak wool. Each group of travellers sat in their allotted space on bright Tibetan rugs or on small benches by low tables next to which brightly glowing brass braziers spread pleasant warmth. In the corners there were small altars on which tiny gods sat in front of gaily painted tankas

## *Flight from Garthar*

(Tibetan icons) before some of which butter lamps burned with their golden flame. A polished brass kettle with butter tea gently simmered on each brazier, as the soft light of the setting sun filtered through the bladder windows. The air was impregnated with the odour of butter and burning juniper. We were given a corner of our own by a window and two Tibetan women, evidently the owners of the castle, with kindly smiles and soothing words helped me to spread my bedding for the night. Then one of them brought me butter tea and the other offered me a drink of potent *ara*, the fiery white wine. A male servant brought a copper basin of hot water to wash my tired feet. I felt relaxed, drowsy and happy that the long marching day of some forty miles had ended so felicitously. The food was cooked on a brazier in a copper pot suspended from a hook attached to the ceiling. There was a series of these hooks, attached to long wooden rods, throughout the room; they could be pulled up or down a little to regulate the heat under the pot or kettle. Evening came and with it the terrible blasts of icy wind which shook the castle. Whilst the meal was being cooked the hostesses fetched small branches of juniper and burned them before the gods and on the roof, murmuring their '*Aum mani padme hum*'. This was done in Tibet in every household in the morning and in the evening to honour the gods. It was a pleasant odour and afterwards became for me synonymous with Tibet.

Dinner consisted of soup with salt pork and turnips, as always, half-cooked, and the *piece de resistance* of fried potatoes with pieces of yak beef which to me, being as hungry as a wolf, appeared heavenly. After the meal there was general talk among the guests and after some singing, everybody slept.

We left on our way almost before dawn and I was warned that we had to cover over fifty miles to reach the next inhabited place, Cheto village, which I already knew. I was worried as to whether I could do such a long walk in my weakened condition. My American army boots, which I had brought with me from Shanghai and thought to be indestructible, were being cut up and tattered; I shuddered at the thought of what

## *To Cheto Village*

would happen to me if they failed on this long and arduous march.

It was a difficult walk over sharp rocks and through marshes. We had to cross two shallow wide streams, with our boots on to save time, but it was fatal to my footwear. Soon the soles of my shoes parted from the tops at the toes; I tied them on with bits of string.

The ground was slowly rising all the time and towards sunset we crossed a pass after which there was a steep descent into a narrow valley flanked by high mountains. I recognized the valley as I had been there before; at the end of it, turning to the left, was Cheto village with its hot spring. I felt quite exhausted after marching for forty miles without food and the prospect of walking ten miles more, the rest of it in darkness perhaps, filled me with dread. Could I make it? It was not really too bad travelling in the sun with its rays so warm and exhilarating, but now we had stepped into the late afternoon gloom of the defile into which little sunshine was able to penetrate even during day-time. There was snow all around us and it was almost impossible to walk over the trail which was coated with frozen water from snow previously melted by the hot sun. Both I and my companions fell repeatedly, slipping on the glassy surface. But in many places the ice was rough and as cutting as a knife, especially when it had congealed around small pebbles or fragments of rock. My shoes were definitely going, the soles being all but completely detached and with holes gaping around my toes. Fortunately I was wearing long stockings made of thick, rough wool. Down and down we clambered in the gathering darkness. At last we came to the bottom of the valley where I knew there was a roaring stream. Now it was encased in a solid sheet of ice thickly covered with snow. The yaks barged forwards and fell through with a crash; however, it did not bother them and they continued on their way as if nothing had happened. We cautiously tried to cross a little higher upstream. Alas, we also fell through up to our thighs; it was not deep, but the current was very swift and it threw us against the jagged edges of the ice bruising and wounding us a little. Somebody assisted me to get out, minus my shoe soles, and all dripping.

## *Flight from Garthar*

It was already quite dark, but I could make out the road easily, due to the light from snow. At first I was dreadfully cold in my nether parts, but soon the intense frost dried up my trousers by freezing them like cardboard. I was walking in my stockinged feet over the snow and ice; they had become numb in the frost and I did not feel much pain. A kind of cloud had descended on my brain from fatigue and shock, and I was walking as if in my sleep. I was only conscious of the ice and snow-covered trail before me and that I must move my legs; yes, like that . . . one, two, one, two. If I stopped, I thought, the end would come soon. But the tiredness was great. I heard a seductive voice inside me whispering, 'What does it matter? Sit down, lie down, rest, nothing matters, nothing matters. . . .' Then the idea of letting myself down within a few miles of the village which was just there, around the corner, made me straighten up and continue my mechanistic, insensible motion whispering with frozen lips, 'One, two, one, two. . . .'

I clearly remember how we staggered into the village with its unutterably mean, black and smoke-begrimed huts. I was pushed into one of them to find a bright blaze of log fire on the ground, a kettle whistling merrily and a crowd of Tibetans and Szechuanese, probably gold diggers, sitting around the fire on low benches. My face was probably very terrifying, looking like that of a dead man, because they all glanced at me in alarm which quickly changed into sympathy. I was pulled to the fire and given a bowl of paku wine followed afterwards by butter tea. A hot bath was suggested to me and I was led to a cubicle assigned to us where, by the fire of a charcoal brazier, I undressed entirely and threw my sheepskin coat around me. The moon was rising and I stepped out walking towards the hot spring a few yards away. The oblong pool was steaming thickly against the carpet of snow around. My brain was confused and numb and my eyes blurred and, when I drew near, I noticed something like inflated balloons floating on the hot water. However, bursts of laughter and cries soon told me that there were several Tibetan men and women in the spring, and then I realized that the balloons were

## *Return to the Mission*

female breasts. 'Come on, come on!' came a chorus from the water. I was too weak and dazed to know what to do and the world began to revolve slowly around me indicating the onset of vertigo; I started swaying. I remember that a couple of nude women and a man rushed towards me out of the pool, pulled off my coat and plunged me into the near-boiling water of the spring. They pushed me around and talked all at once, but I was past caring; a lump came to my throat and my head was about to burst. Afterwards they must have realized the state I was in, for they helped me to get out and somebody led me back to the hut where I collapsed on the bed in a semi-faint.

In the morning I could just crawl along, my feet hurting cruelly; they were blue and black. However, I reached the Cunninghams' house and just collapsed on the front porch. Mrs. Cunningham, coming out to meet me, gave one look at my face and ordered me to be carried in. They afterwards told me that they really thought I was dying. But my nature and constitution evidently were strong enough, for I recovered in the gentle, peaceful atmosphere of the mission, buttressed by good food and a long rest.

## VII

### *Among the Peaks*

THE days after my perilous return from Garthar appeared to me bleak enough. To my frustration over the unsuccessful assignment was added the disappointment at not meeting any Lolos in the highlands. No one seemed to know anything about them at Garthar village except my Szechuanese companions on the farm. They spared no invectives when talking about this strange tribe, calling them wild dogs and bloodthirsty monsters until I grew tired of all this abuse and decided that they themselves had no first-hand knowledge of the Lolos and merely repeated the stories they heard from others or read in old Chinese novels.

My gloom further deepened when I had learned in a round-about way about the Provincial Government's hostile attitude towards me. This disturbing confidential information came to me through Mr. Ling, a high-ranking official at the Secretariat, to whom I had been introduced at one of Mr. Cunningham's informal tea-parties. He was exceptionally well versed in Government matters and possessed an unsurpassed knowledge of how 'the wheels within the wheels' worked in relation to local conditions. Evidently moved by my sincerity and desire to be useful and realizing my utter helplessness in the bewildering welter of intrigues in Tachienlu and my lack of experience in moving among the government officials, Mr. Ling undertook to enlighten me on how to act, what to do and what not to do, when to talk and when to keep silent, when to use my eyes and when to pretend that I was conveniently blind.

Encouraged by Mr. Ling's sympathetic interest in my affairs and his obvious desire to assist me, I explained to him my situation with complete frankness. His opinion about the unbroken



## *The Provincial Government's Attitude*

silence of my Headquarters in Chungking, despite my frantic appeals for money and permission to open, was that I had taken too much for granted when accepting my appointment. My job, as it was, came to me through Madame Kung's intervention and, therefore, a position had to be found for me somewhere. The Headquarters did push me into Sikang, to Tachienlu of all places, which was the least favourable for co-operative development. Now that I was in Tachienlu, a suitable report had probably been presented to Dr. Kung that the depot had been duly established, co-operatives created and I was working happily. He would not know and would not care anyway; he could never visit Sikang in person. As to myself, I was of no account to those people at Headquarters. They did not ask for me, they did not want me especially as I was a foreigner. Let me ask, let me write—a thing like that worried them not at all as I was safely out of their preserve in Chungking.

Mr. Ling's confidential revelations concerning the Provincial Government's attitude frankly scared the wits out of me. It appeared that they talked a lot about me in government offices. They did not like the idea of my being sent here by the Central Government, much less through Dr. Kung's wish, however indirect it was. They thought that already too many eyes from the Central Government were watching them as they were skimming the cream from the riches of the new province. Mine were one pair too many and they were apprehensive. There were frank consultations in camera how to get rid of me, if possible in a 'nice' and unobtrusive manner. I literally froze with horror when Mr. Ling whispered to me that he thought the accidents and discomforts I met with during my trip and stay in Garthar on the farm were pre-arranged. They did not dare to 'bump me off' openly, but they would have been delighted if I had died from exhaustion on my trip there, or from starvation diet on the farm or by being lost on my way back. Now, Mr. Ling assured me, they were hatching some other plots against me. What these were and how would they be put into effect only the future would reveal.

## *Among the Peaks*

I pointed out to my new friend how innocent I was of any political intrigues, and how earnestly I desired to begin my work. Mr. Ling said that my innocence did not matter at all. The provincial 'big bosses' were intriguing against the 'big shots' sent by the Central Government. It was a grim and silent fight and it was no less terrifying that the opponents never came into the open; nobody even knew who they were. The news of 'big moves' and secret campaigns were circulated among friends in whispers and in great secrecy. It was these secret opponents, powerful men and utterly ruthless, who saw the value of using me, as Mr. Ling explained, as a 'ball' to throw at each other. This was an old Chinese political game; that the 'ball' might get smashed in this merry game was not of the slightest concern to both parties.

'But then what shall I do?' I cried in my anguish hearing of all these terrors surrounding me. Mr. Ling merely smiled.

'You can't do much. The main thing is to pretend that you know nothing of these cross currents or animosities involving you. Remain serene and maintain your usual air of innocence. But be careful, very careful!' he added after a while. Then he continued.

'You cannot go back to Chungking. That is a defeat and Dr. Kung will not like it. On the other hand I don't think you can do much here really. The best advice I give you—try to keep out of Tachienlu with its intrigues, political dirt and dangers. *Travel!* Travel most the time—arrange inspections of the province, write reports, do anything—but don't stay here for long periods.'

An opportunity to carry out Mr. Ling's injunctions luckily came soon. A young American missionary, Mr. Johnson, proposed that I should join his small party on a trip to Minyag country south-west of Tachienlu. I accepted the invitation with alacrity. I felt I was now an old hand at travelling in Tibet and fitted myself out in a more practical manner, contributing my share of provisions and selecting a really reliable Tibetan pony.

We started early on a bright sunny morning slowly wending

## The Tibetan Plateau

our way to the familiar Cheto Pass. As it was one of the main routes into Tibet Proper there were many other travellers going up. On the top of the pass, just by the traditional mani pile with its coloured pennants and flat stones carved with 'Aum mani padme hum', we came on a pitiful little drama. An old Chinese, evidently a merchant, accompanied by his son, was being carried in a *hwakan*. But his old heart had failed at this altitude of nearly 15,000 feet, and there he was expiring by the roadside while his tearful son held his hand.

The wide expanse of the Tibetan plateau opened before us. Low rounded hills covered with dry grass, like huge golden domes, followed one another with shallow valleys running in all directions. It was still winter, but the sun was so hot that not a vestige of snow remained in the open and where there were hot springs the grass was jade green. The air was clear, sharp and intoxicating in its purity. My pony was powerful and broad-backed, and I had the illusion of sitting in a comfortable arm-chair gently rocking to and fro. Lulled by this rhythmic motion and the warmth of the sun I fell into a light dream state which was very pleasant. All my cares and anxieties left me and the intrigues and dangers of Tachienlu appeared remote and inconsequential. Here was the freedom and peace if only one could go on and on without stopping and without arriving anywhere.

It was only when the sun was setting that we turned into a shallow opening between the hills and I found myself in front of a small but exquisitely decorated lamasery called Chiliku. According to an unwritten tradition it would have been bad form to seek admittance into a lamasery on the very first day of arrival so we found a cosy nook not far from the building and our Tibetans, supervised by Tuden, started pitching our tents. We had not eaten anything since morning and, therefore, our main concern was to gather enough wood for a fire. When this was done we sat around the blaze warming ourselves while a delicious stew was simmering in a pressure cooker.

In the morning we visited the lamasery, but it was almost deserted as the festival season was over and many lamas took the

## *Among the Peaks*

opportunity to make a trip to Tachienlu or other lamaseries where they had friends.

The climb to Cheruhanya Pass was so gentle as to be almost imperceptible, but the aspect of the country began to change. There appeared outcroppings of massive grey rocks around which many kinds of shrubs and small trees grew in dense thickets, many of them still bearing burdens of white and red berries. Farther up we came on alpine meadows entirely covered with creeping rhododendrons whose branches and leaves were so closely interwoven that they formed one vast carpet. In summer, when their mauve flowers were in bloom, they looked like veritable thick-pile Tientsin rugs.

The pass itself was low and unimpressive and on the other side peat marshes stretched interminably. How I detested these cheerless, featureless and treacherous bogs! Many hours were spent in tramping through their frozen black mud, bumping into peat mounds or looking for vanished trails. It was a relief to leave these messy places behind and come out on to a clean slope of the range. The Laneeba Pass, our next objective, looked deceptively near in the crystal-clear air, but a broad snow field had to be crossed first. Its surface appeared to be well-packed and firm, and the going was good for a few dozen yards; then it would suddenly give way and down we crashed through the drift up to our neck in powdery snow. The worst sufferers were our horses and yaks as they had great difficulty in extricating their heavy bodies and were soon quite exhausted.

At last we stood on the Pass at an altitude of over 15,000 feet, and looked at the breath-taking panorama of the deep and broad Yulongshi Valley and a mighty chain of dazzling snow peaks which flanked it on the far side. We added our tribute of small stones, in gratitude to the mountain *yidams* for the fine weather and safe crossing, to the mani pile next to a small chorten and then moved down into the valley to escape the cruel blasts of icy wind. The famed Mt. Minya Konkka was only a few miles down the valley and was clearly visible from our camp. There was a path winding between the foothills that led to the Minya

## *To Find the Lolos*

Konkka gompa which was the seat of the Incarnation whom I had met at Mme Wassachab's house. It was a pity that this genial grand lama was still in Tachienlu otherwise we could have visited this lamasery.

Three or four caravan trails converged on the valley and merged into a single wide ribbon of yak and mule hoof imprints not far from our tents. The route led south and Tuden, who had travelled over it up and down several times, supplied much interesting information.

'You can go to Muli and Yunnan this way,' he volunteered.

'Can we reach the Lolos if we go down?' I asked. He smiled indulgently and smoothed his embryo moustache with a finger.

'You and your Lolos!' he chuckled. 'Of course you can. They live east of Muli and one must go to Baurong and Kiulung to be in their midst.'

'Can we go there now?' I persisted in my innocence. Both Tuden and Mr. Johnson burst into laughter.

'Not with the tiny party like ours,' Tuden said at last. 'We must make proper preparations and join a large, well-armed caravan. The road passes through the Hsiangchen territory where all Tibetans are ruthless brigands by vocation. They hide in the Konkaling Mountains and no one may pass through their ring without paying a tribute or, else, being robbed and murdered. Then we must secure permission from the King of Muli to pass through his domain and an introduction from him to the Lolos themselves. It is all very complicated and costly as it involves valuable presents to all concerned.' He became silent, thinking. Then he added:

'If you are really so anxious to find the Lolos, your best bet is to go from Tachienlu southwards the other way behind this snow range. At least you won't have to contend with Tibetan robbers and the haughty King of Muli.'

The following morning we started our ascent to the last pass, Yushi-La. It was not far but the climb was very steep and we suffered from shortness of breath due to the high altitude. Reaching the top in the afternoon, we found a huge cavern which was

## *Among the Peaks*

used by travellers for generations. Its floor and the ground around were covered with the black spots of dead camp-fires and smoke-begrimed stones on which tea-kettles had been placed. There were a few low shrubs around and a trickle of water from the glaciers. These long marches in frosty, fresh air gave us enormous appetites and we could hardly wait to start frying flapjacks while the pressure cooker was boiling a stew, installed over three stones with a yak-dung fire underneath. There was plenty of this dung under the thin layer of snow and my duty was to collect it whilst Tuden and others were putting up the tent in the lee of the cave, to protect us from the usual howling wind that came after sunset.

When the night had fallen and the dreadful wind had subsided, the full majesty of this remote corner filled me with exaltation. The stars here seemed much nearer and they shone with unusual brilliance bathing the scene with light as if from a full moon. Right in front of me, behind a row of smaller peaks, rose the beautiful, smooth pyramid of Reddomain Solo, over 21,000 feet high, bearing several other names which here seemed utterly irrelevant and pointless, such as Mt. Grosvenor, Mt. Sun Yat Sen, and now probably renamed again Mt. Karl Marx or Mt. Mao Tsetung. Primordial and uncreated by human hands the sublime peak scintillated high up into the starry sky unmindful and unconscious of the human race with a purpose of its own, perhaps, as the Tibetans believed, to serve as a throne for vaster beings of other dimensions known to them as Yidams. Hypnotized by the utter isolation in the purity of these unsullied mountains, I had little desire for sleep tired though I was, but, when I had dozed off towards midnight, I was suddenly awakened by lack of breath. My heart seemed to stop and I jumped up like an uncoiled spring almost hitting the roof of the tent. It was all due to this altitude (over 16,000 feet) and these attacks of sudden loss of breath continued till early dawn.

While the preparations for our departure were in progress in the morning I went up the slope looking at plants and found many primroses sheltering among the shrubs waiting for the

## *Primula Glacialis*

summer sun to revive them and bring forth their beautiful blooms. I was told by an eminent botanist that high up the slope of Minya Konkka, shooting through the snow, grew a remarkable primrose, called *Primula glacialis*, one of the very rarest flowers in the world, discovered by a Catholic father. It rivalled the sky in the purity of its blue colour and delicacy of its contours. After I had travelled so much in some of the highest mountains of Asia, I became baffled by the hidden mystery of flowers. Why did the most beautiful, most enchanting and delicate blossoms on the planet grow so high and under such impossibly hard conditions, braving frost, hail, landslides and cruel winds, out of reach of humanity? Were they there by an accident of creation or were they there to please with their unsurpassed beauty eyes other than those of men? Surely man had no business to be where they grew, in places mostly inaccessible to him. Did the *Primula glacialis* perhaps display its sublime flowers for a divinity whose spirit alone brooded in such lofty desolation?

The trail down passed at the foot of Chiburongi Konkka, its glittering summit seemingly so near, inviting a climb. The going was hard, however, among the myriad stones of a dry morain lake between which frozen ground quickly changed to black mud under the burning rays of the sun. Then came a descent from a dizzily high rocky escarpment into a lower valley covered with a forest of stately firs and larches where the crisp air was fragrant with rosin. Pheasants darted from bushes across the trail and once, going ahead, I heard some clucking in a thicket; in a little while a mass of little chicks poured out on to the meadow escorted by their mother, a guinea hen, only to disappear again when the rest of the party came up. I did not tell them for I feared for the safety of the chicks. At last we found a lovely alpine meadow by the stream and had a peaceful night lulled to sleep by the roar of the torrent.

Next day we proceeded slowly along the banks of this raging glacier stream. Its waters, hissing and tumbling, appeared strangely blue against the red granite boulders of its rocky bed. Firs and larches gave way to magnificent rhododendron forests

## *Among the Peaks*

with their large dark green oily leaves. As we neared Yilingkung, the first inhabited place on the road to Tachienlu, the ravages done by the wood cutters became more and more evident until nothing but stumps remained on the mountain slopes where once beautiful forests had stood. The environs of Tachienlu, for many miles around had been denuded of all trees and shrubs by the ever-growing hunger for fuel. Armies of ragged and emaciated wood cutters and charcoal burners penetrated farther and farther into a natural and glorious garden, pitilessly cutting and sawing down every tree and shrub, with a particular eye for rhododendrons. Even their roots were excavated for they provided specially prized, long-burning charcoal euphemistically called 'gold and diamond coal'. Magnificent forests had formerly come down right to the fringes of the city's streets. Now it was a wilderness of bare mountains as far as the eye could see. Excelling in agriculture and many other virtues, the Chinese were inveterate enemies of the forest and all trees in general, looking at every piece of wood only as a potential source of income, even if it was only worth a few cents. My heart always bled on seeing this destruction of one of the most beautiful corners of the world as yet untouched.

At Yilinkung we stopped with a wealthy Chinese-Tibetan who had a comfortable house and made a delicious Chinese feast for us. There was a large pool in his courtyard fed by a hot spring and we luxuriated for hours in the steaming water. My idyll among the peaks was over. I did not find the Lolos but, at least, I now knew more definitely where to look for them.



## VIII

### *A Quasi-Lolo Friend*

SHORTLY after my trip to the peaks and passes I had a pleasant surprise in the shape of a remittance from Chungking, but it was not accompanied by any instructions or the expected order to open the depot. Returning from town one afternoon I found my old cook, Lao Wong, sitting in the sun in the courtyard, waiting for me. His greetings were most effusive, and to make our reunion more dramatic, he burst into tears; he always had been a superb actor. His pock-marked face was darkened and lined by the rigours of a long journey overland from Shanghai and his tall figure looked gaunt. He introduced to me a round-faced young man, named Sze, a radio-telegraphist by profession, who had joined him in Chekiang.

Lao Wong possessed an uncanny ability of making friends with high and low, and in a couple of weeks my courtyard was crowded with Chiang tribesmen and Chinese farmers whom he lured under the pretext of buying their oranges or venison or chickens. He plied them with tea and cigarettes, talking all the while without stopping, until they were firmly persuaded that my house was not only a good place to dispose of some of their wares, but also a desirable social resort where they could relax and rest after their arduous travel and even enjoy a bowl of noodles and tea, at no extra cost. Soon these simple folk began to look upon us as old and firm friends. Some of them would set aside a fruit or a couple of big potatoes or brought a bunch of wild flowers as a token of their friendship and appreciation. They were so wretchedly poor that even a few potatoes was a precious sacrifice.

I was well pleased with these developments because I felt we were accumulating good material for the formation of my future

## *A Quasi-Lolo Friend*

co-operatives and, at the same time, I had never lost hope of finding a Lolo among these heterogeneous people. It seemed the Fates were favourable to me and my persistent vigilance was rewarded one sunny day, when I was walking in front of the butchers' and poulterers' shops. I spotted a man carrying a couple of chickens by their feet. He was tall and dark and wore a blue woollen cloak with fringes, a white turban and sandals made of hempen cord with little gay, red pompons. 'A Lolo at last!' I cried exultantly to myself, remembering the description given me by Mr. Cunningham, and followed him. He offered the chickens for sale and I noticed he spoke Chinese to prospective customers. I asked him the price of his chickens and little by little we started a conversation which was unfortunately interrupted by somebody buying his fowls and asking him to follow to his house to deliver them. I was quite sorry to lose such a contact with a Lolo, and, to console myself, went after lunch to the hot spring outside the North Gate.

Soaking myself in the hot water, whom should I see enter the bath but my Lolo friend. He undressed and joined me in the pool, giving me a smile of recognition. 'Are you a Lolo?' I asked him point blank, but he neither confirmed nor denied it. I continued my questioning about the Lolos and he gave me quite intelligent answers describing Lolo life and customs. We walked back to town and I invited him to a meal. 'What is your name?' I asked him. 'Lee Chizau,' he said. 'But that is not a Lolo name,' I countered. 'But who said I was a Lolo?' he chuckled looking at me quizzically. 'I am a Chinese,' he added. Somehow I felt very disappointed. 'I was sure you were a Lolo,' I said mournfully. 'This turban, this cloak and sandals. . . .' Then he explained, to my joy, that he lived in a valley near Fuchuang and that he and his father were life-long friends with a Lolo tribe living on an almost inaccessible plateau, called Yehsaping, just across the mountain range from their farm. The cloak and sandals were indeed bought from these Lolos and the chickens he sold had been entrusted to him for disposal also by these friends. After the meal I took him to my house and urged him to stay with me. This he declined, as

## *To Lee Chizau's*

he was with other friends and they were returning home next day. Then he invited me to go to his house. This was the very thing I wanted and I could hardly conceal my jubilation. However, it was not good form in China to jump at invitations at once so I preserved my dignity by saying that I would certainly come to his place next time. 'That's fine!' exclaimed Lee Chizau smiling warmly. 'I am coming back in about a fortnight and then I will show you not only my house but also the Lolos if you are not afraid to go there.' Mr. Cunningham's reaction to my projected trip was entirely favourable.

'Go by all means,' he said smiling over his cup of tea. 'I will give you a letter to Commander Yang, a powerful warlord in Fulin in case you have to pass through that town. He is an old friend of mine.' He leaned back in his armchair thinking. 'Do not bother him though without need, but, if you should get into trouble, he would help you. He is a fine old man and quite pro-Lolo. He may even arrange some contacts for you with those people.'

It was still winter in Tachienlu when I started for Lee Chizau's. The ground was frozen and the trees stood leafless and grey against the gaunt mountains. The arrangements for the trip were most economical. Lee Chizau had sold the vegetables which he had brought and his empty basket was filled with my blanket, a pillow, a couple of bedsheets and some clothing, including a pair of shoes to be worn on ceremonial occasions if these occurred.

Lightly clad we marched out of town shivering from the blasts of cold wind and with the snowflakes gently floating down on us. But not far away in Wassakou the beauty of early spring awaited us. Peach and apricot trees were in bloom. There were flowers everywhere and the singing of birds mingled with the humming of bees. Instead of following the precipitous cliff path we passed through some tiny hamlets nestling by the river. There were big clumps of huge opuntia cacti on the rocky banks of the Tatu and village children sold us their red prickly pears, juicy and sweet, which we ate greedily. It took us hours afterwards to extract the tiny spines from our fingers.

It was in this pleasant atmosphere, as if on a holiday excursion,

## *A Quasi-Lolo Friend*

that we reached the swinging bridge of Luting. Instead of crossing, we climbed to the upper story of a small temple and sat there resting and looking at the river and steep mountains opposite. This was still Tibet and just across the swirling green waters was China. It was here that the Tibetan women said their last good-bye to their Chinese husbands or sweethearts when the time came to return to their native Szechuan. Few Tibetans could stand living for any length of time on the plains with their steamy summer heat and damp, misty days in winter. Tuberculosis awaited those who defied the warnings. They all knew it and even the mysterious draw of love was powerless to defeat their ingrained fear of premature death. As we descended from the shrine, a couple emerged from an eating shop on the Luting side and, holding hands, sadly made their way once more across the bridge. She was a red-cheeked Tibetan girl, husky and flamboyant in her pink blouse and with red ribbons woven into her hair. He was dressed in a poor uniform, a soldier or non-commissioned officer discharged from the Provincial Army. On one arm she carried a bundle. After escorting her across the bridge he paused to look at her fondly. We could not hear very clearly, but it was plain that he was saying 'Good-bye'. She was smiling, but his face was sad and I felt there were tears in his voice. He pleaded with her for some time, making gestures as if inviting her to return with him, but she was firm, shaking her head. He took hold of her sleeve as if to detain her, but with a quick movement she freed herself and retreated from him. She said something and her voice had a ring of finality. She looked at him with tenderness, then picked up her bundle and resolutely strode off up the stony path. With a bowed head the soldier re-crossed the bridge to return in deep melancholy to his dingy dive in the village. No one else paid attention to this little drama which must have been enacted here daily.

It was afternoon, but the larks were still singing in the warm air and sweet, honeyed odour came from the dazzlingly yellow fields covered with flowering mustard plants. We reached Lengchi and decided to call it a day. After early dinner we strolled up to the cliff with the Tatu River boiling below. As the road turned

## *Fertility Rites*

away from the river, Lee Chizau pointed to a curious rock by the roadside which I had not noticed on my first trip. It was a strange, suggestive piece of stone shaped by nature in the form of a woman's lower torso. I looked at Lee Chizau inquiringly.

'Do you know the significance of this rock?' he asked me. I shook my head.

'Men lacking virility or children come here at night for miles around to copulate with the stone,' he told me without batting an eyelash. I stared at him incredulously.

'I simply cannot believe it,' I said. He shrugged his shoulders. 'I'll take you here at night,' and he did. The caravan drivers we had seen that very afternoon at Lengchi and some peasants from neighbouring villages were there. I could hardly believe my eyes that such fertility rites could be carried out so near the village and so shamelessly.

Next morning we walked leisurely up to the Wuyaoling Pass and, after a snack in the cold, windy village, continued to Nitung where we spent the night. We reached Fuchuang on the following day about ten o'clock, we had lunch; then we did some shopping, buying a piece of pork, some sugar, matches and other things which could serve as useful gifts from a stranger arriving for the first time.

The walk to my friend's hamlet started down the beautiful valley which joined, in the blue distance, the famed Kienchang Valley, the most prosperous and thickly-settled of all Sikang plains. We kept towards the towering mountains on the right. I wondered where they lived as there were no villages visible anywhere at the foot of the wooded hills. After an hour's marching we came to a broad, half-dry stream bed strewn with boulders, which issued from a narrow, gorge-like valley.

This, Lee Chizau said, was where he lived. The path started to ascend higher and higher along the mountain-side, the gorge opened up and we came to a beautiful prominence on which an old temple stood in the midst of flowering plots of mustard plants and small squares of winter wheat. At the left on the steep sides of the hills were massive houses with curving tiled roofs and ornately

## *A Quasi-Lolo Friend*

carved and lacquered doorways. He explained that all the people in these houses were his kinsfolk and that we should visit them sometime later. We continued walking along a narrow path, on one side of which was a very deep ditch lined with stone in which crystal-clear water was gurgling and splashing. On the other the hill-side sloped sharply down to the bottom of the valley where the stream ran. In about twenty minutes we came to a rambling farmhouse with pig pens, chicken coops and all kinds of outbuildings. We stepped into this house as big dogs rushed out at us barking and snarling. A middle-aged woman with a blue apron came out smiling kindly and Lee Chizau introduced me to his mother. I bowed and she urged me to sit down, pouring some tea for me into a pottery cup. Whilst I was resting and washing my feet in a copper basin, children of all ages crowded in looking at me with curiosity and some apprehension. Lee Chizau explained that they were his brothers, cousins, nephews, nieces and even uncles. Lee Chizau's father came in later, a pleasant middle-aged man with an incipient beard and weather-beaten face due to his rugged existence in these wild mountains.

Lee Chizau showed me round the farm. As always, I became immediately interested in the animals. First to attract my attention were the great, proud cocks promenading with their devoted hens along the water ditch. One of the cocks was really a beauty, sparkling with all the hues of the rainbow and haughtily carrying his blood-red comb and a long curving tail.

'These are the Lolo cocks and this one is considered my best,' Lee Chizau said affectionately, caressing the huge bird which seemed quite unafraid of him. 'He was given to me personally by my Lolo friends who visited us during the New Year three years ago; we will never kill him.'

Walking farther afield we met an old sow with her litter. So colossal was the pig and so savage-looking that I involuntarily retreated several steps and this was not too soon, for she lifted her snout exposing long, cruel tusks and started for me with a roar. Lee Chizau had difficulty in stopping her in time. He coaxed her back to the farm and locked her into an open pen where she lay

## *Ceremonial Visits*

down grunting tenderly as her numerous offspring lined themselves at her teats. I spoke to her respectfully calling her '*Lao Tai Tai* (Old Lady)', trying to win her goodwill, but she would have none of it, getting up suddenly and trying to attack me through the wooden bars. There was much laughter and merriment back in the house, when they heard I had tried to call the sow '*Old Lady*'.

It was decided that, since they had little space suitable for a guest, I should occupy the elder brother's room as he was away. His wife was moved to Lee Chizau's mother's room. It was a tiny cubicle, half dark, with a broad curtained bed. There was a small dresser without a mirror and the only aid to beauty culture was a piece of cheap broken looking-glass which hung on a wall. There were two glass vases with faded paper roses, and some unrelated containers, one with pomade, another with dried chillies and another with crushed rock salt. Next to two chests of garments stood a basket with some specially selected big heads of garlic. A string of small dried onions was tied to a post behind. I found big slabs of rock salt under the bed with a small tub filled with buckwheat honey. I had my suspicions about the bed although it was bedecked with beautiful Tibetan rugs.

'Are there any bed-bugs?' I asked Lee Chizau frankly. He shrugged his shoulders. 'I don't know; let us have a look,' he said lifting the lower mat. There they were filling the crevices. I had luckily bought some artemisia powder in Fuchuang which was immediately applied to the bugs with advantage.

In the morning Lee Chizau tactfully suggested that I should spruce myself up a little by putting on my other suit and proper shoes. He hinted that we would be going on a round of ceremonial visits. It started with the temple on the prominence, a nice roomy place with gods and a primary school tucked in in the wings where the life-like clay idols of the deified scholars of by-gone ages looked impassively but benevolently on the new generation.

From the temple we went up the stone steps to the largest of the houses which stood on a stone-buttressed terrace cut into a hill-side. At the black-lacquered gates I was received by a pleasant-looking sturdy young man whom Lee Chizau introduced as his

## *A Quasi-Lolo Friend*

cousin Louching. We were led into a roomy guest hall where a dignified old woman rose stiffly from her chair to welcome us. She was formally dressed in black satin trousers tied at the ankle and a sky-blue cotton tunic with a conservative black head-dress concealing her temples. She had very tiny 'lily feet' encased in satin slippers. Soon another old lady drifted in and little by little some men. One was Louching's father and others were neighbours. We all sat on straight-backed chairs exchanging polite sentences and sipping green tea. After an appropriate period of time I whispered to Lee Chizau that it was time to go. He whispered back that we could not possibly leave as a luncheon had been prepared specially in my honour. Hearing our conversation Louching's father came up and said that they were extremely happy to welcome me both as a friend of Lee Chizau and as a high-ranking officer of the Central Government, and that they would be happy if I joined them at a meal, poor and unworthy as it was. I protested in classical terms at the trouble I was causing but permitted myself to be persuaded to remain on condition that the luncheon should be treated as a family affair and that the old ladies, who had made a move to leave, would be asked to join us. The old women glanced at me gratefully. A big round table was set up and we all took seats. Cold dishes appeared first and our cups were filled with the potent white wine which, they said, was home-made. Knowing that the old ladies would not take the initiative in drinking for fear of a reflection on their dignity and lest they might be thought too frivolous by their guest, I went over to them, filled up their cups and gave them a toast. They promptly drank a little and did not object when their cups were refilled. It was a refined, cultured meal full of subtle courtesies and attentions. I especially admired their delicacy, so inborn in rural Chinese, when a dish of roast eels was served. I had casually mentioned to Lee Chizau in Fuchuang that I preferred roast eels above all other Chinese dishes and he must have persuaded his relatives to make this subtle gesture to please me.

After lunch Louching showed me his mules and horses, saying that he and his father ran caravans to Sichang, information which



## *The Leopards*

I was careful to note. In the evening other neighbours invited me to dinner and this entertainment continued for several days, a lunch here and a dinner there. But I was becoming restless with nothing to do on the farm, even though I was content to remain in this lovely valley with its blossoming peaches and plum trees.

'You promised to take me to the Lolos,' I gently reminded Lee Chizau. 'Let us go there; it cannot be very far.'

'No, it is not far,' he agreed. 'There they are,' and he pointed towards a very high mountain, beyond the foothills. It looked very steep and forbidding with its cliff covered with dark forest.

'There! You see that gap near the summit,' he continued, 'the Yehsaping plateau is just beyond that.'

'Well, it looks close enough. I think we can get there in the afternoon if we leave early.'

'Not that close,' chuckled Lee Chizau. 'It takes two full days and the night has to be spent in the forest on bare ground in that depression over there above that cliff.' Then he became pensive. 'I am really delaying this trip because I am not sure you can make it. You see it is spring and we have to cross a big and very swift stream; then there are savage animals higher up and also precipices of which I know you are afraid.'

'Well, if you have made it before I am sure I can, too,' I protested in my ignorance.

He said nothing for a long while and then suggested going down to the stream below to hunt for mudfish which lived under the stones. We were quite close to the opposite hill when we reached the stream.

'What is it moving there between the trees?' I asked innocently. 'Looking at this hill for the last few days, I am always seeing the movements of some animals. Are they dogs?'

Lee Chizau doubled with laughter. 'Ha! Ha!' he guffawed. 'Dogs, indeed! These are leopards; the forest teems with them.' I was surprised and concentrated on the moving shapes. Now that my attention had been drawn to them, I could see them clearly.

'But then it is dangerous to walk here,' I said. Lee Chizau continued laughing in enjoyment of my fears. 'Of course it is,' he

## *A Quasi-Lolo Friend*

chuckled and then relented. 'No, not really. You must always bear in mind that leopards seldom attack adult men. They are after young animals and children. But occasionally they attack horses when they pasture singly and they would attack a man, if he were to threaten them.' And with this lecture we returned home.

Early next morning we made our dramatic attempt to get to Yehsaping by the short cut, and it nearly ended in a tragedy. The big stream, of which Lee Chizau had warned me, was deep and savage, almost like that at Tachienlu. I was carried away at once, dashed on the rocks and was fished out by Lee Chizau with great difficulty. We gave up the foolish business and returned home wet and bleeding, and considerably abashed by our failure. Lee Chizau's father, who was away and knew nothing of our fool-hardy plans, could not refrain from scolding both of us.

'Don't you know that the stream is impassable in spring?' he shouted at his son. 'You are both lucky,' he added, leading us to the fire and giving us cups of wine. 'My son is a fool to take you up this way,' he continued standing before me. 'The only way for you to go up there is from Helluwa.' It was decided that I should stay at the farm for a few days more to recuperate from the shock and give time for my bruises and scratches to heal.

'You take him to Fulin,' Lee Chizau's father was saying slowly to his son during the lunch on the last day of my stay. 'Let him stay there for a day or two. . . . No, make it three,' he continued. 'Then I will go in the meantime to Helluwa and warn my friends there.' He stopped, looking at me doubtfully. Then he spoke to me.

'Helluwa is a very dangerous place,' he explained. 'They know my son there but not too well,' he paused as if in some difficulty. 'You do not understand the situation here. . . . You see: I have some power. . . . I am well-known because I am . . . ' He checked himself abruptly, evidently being on the point of blabbing some secret to me. He looked at his son warningly to keep silent, too. What the secret was I only learnt much later.

## IX

### *The Fulin Potentate*

THE progress to Fulin was child's play and pure delight. Ten miles down the road we stopped at Hanyuankai, a pretty busy village submerged in the blossoms of flowering fruit trees. We stayed with Lee Chizau's grand-aunt who had a spacious house, which lives in my memory for the marvellous dinner she prepared and the very crowded bedroom in which at least twenty people played mah-jong all night long. I was squeezed into an immense bed with several other guests and children, and got up next morning with a pain in my ribs from all the kicks I had received during the night.

I was surprised by the beauty of Fulin as we entered it from the north. It was situated on the slope of a green mountain rising gently towards an immense cave out of which loomed statues of gods. The neat houses peeped out of the dark foliage of the tangerine trees for which the place was famous, and lower down there were silvery patches of sugar cane. In front of the town ran a stream crossing a small plain beyond which towered blue mountains. On the south side the stream joined the Tatu River which, like a dark green serpent, emerged from one gorge only to fall into another, by-passing the town.

The main street, paved with polished stone blocks, was lined with low shops and shady trees and was a medley of colour and movement. But, enclosed by mountains on all sides and with so much water around, Fulin was hot and damp even at this time of the year. I was told that the heat in summer was quite insupportable.

It was afternoon and we were in no hurry to settle. We deposited our baggage in a tea shop and, while I was sipping tea, Lee

## *The Fulin Potentate*

Chizau went to look for an hotel and soon found one. The room we engaged looked clean and comfortable as country inns go, though somewhat gloomy. Of course it had bed-bugs and I went out to buy some artemisia powder. Afterwards we walked through the main street along which the daily market was in progress and, finding an eating shop, had a leisurely meal. Discussing our plans for the trip to Hellsuwa, we were interrupted by a young army officer who approached me. My heart sank: probably some trouble or official inquisition in store, I thought. Not that I was afraid of such things, but it was annoying to answer so many questions some of which were plainly silly. However, I courteously invited the officer to take a seat with us offering him a cup of tea, but he declined and preferred to remain standing.

‘Commander Yang has instructed me to welcome you to his mansion,’ he said bowing. I was dumbfounded. In reply to my questions he stated that, learning my identity from the visiting card, which I had left at the inn for registration purposes, the authorities reported the matter to the Commander. He had given instructions that I should not be allowed to suffer the indignity of staying in a small and dirty inn.

‘But what about my friend?’ I asked pointing at Lee Chizau.

‘He will come with us,’ said the officer. I felt very flattered, but still apprehensive.

‘All right,’ I said, ‘I am really very grateful to the Commander,’ and I suggested that we all went to the inn to pick up our things.

‘It’s not necessary,’ replied the officer. ‘Your baggage has already been taken to the mansion.’ So we proceeded there. Shallow broad stone steps led upwards right from the main street, lined with baskets of produce brought by the peasants. We passed across a wide stone bridge over an irrigation ditch and arrived in front of a stone terrace on which the mansion stood. With its high walls inlaid with grey tiles and gothic windows it looked like a medieval castle. We entered the gate and stepped into a small courtyard beyond which another black-lacquered gate led into the interior. This gate was lined with huge unpainted coffins

## *A Gallery of Coffins*

standing on their broad ends and leaning against the wall. A gallery leading to the left was also full of coffins and some carpenters, naked to the waist, were busy sawing and planing wood boards. We passed into a spacious ante-room sparsely filled with furniture and big opium couches on which some bedding was spread. Reaching another small courtyard we turned left and entered the wide gallery I had seen from below which was also filled with coffins in all stages of construction. At the end of it I was shown a comfortable room where we found our baggage neatly laid out on another coffin covered with Tibetan rugs and evidently intended to be used as a couch or divan. We washed and changed and I turned to the officer.

'Could I now call on the Commander to express my thanks?' I asked. He rose from the coffin on which he was sitting.

'It is not really necessary,' he said slowly. 'He is singing an opera just now.' Seeing a look of bewilderment on my face he continued: 'He is an amateur opera singer and always goes to a certain tea shop in the late afternoon to practise with his cronies. He will be back in the evening and then you can meet him.'

By now I had recovered from the initial shock. 'But why could we not go now and see him there?' I said. The officer brightened up. 'Oh, if you like Szechuanese opera, he will be delighted to see you there,' and off we went.

As we were proceeding up the main street with its leafy trees I heard the booming of a great gong and the strident notes of a Chinese aria. The tea shop was spacious and clean, and the first thing I observed was an immense gong suspended from the ceiling in the middle. A giant of a man, in a long dark-grey gown and black satin shoes stood in front of several men, singing powerfully with considerable feeling. We sat down on a vacant bench by the wall. He was in no hurry to finish when he saw us enter, and his aria ended five minutes later. Someone struck the gong and its incredibly deep sonorous notes filled the room with a velvety golden sound. Seeing the giant making his way to me I rose, advanced and bowed. He greeted me warmly and sat on a chair opposite, giving a smile of recognition to Lee Chizau.

## *The Fulin Potentate*

Commander Yang Jengan was an old man, in his late sixties, and was slightly stooped. His powerful face was shaven, but a small grey stubble was noticeable on his chin. His eyes were large, kindly but shrewd; his body had no trace of fat or flabbiness and he looked a born athlete. On his head he wore a Chinese cap of black satin with a black silk knot instead of the traditional button. He was a man of few words and when I let myself go with courteous protests that I was unworthy of his hospitality, he merely waved away my verbosity with a gesture of his hand.

'You and your friend can stay as long as you like,' he said gruffly, and soon turned away to join his companions in a new composition. One man sang the heroine's part in a falsetto voice imitating her passionate screams and cries to the deep accompaniment of the gong with such realism and gusto that I thought, from the way she was raving, that the poor girl was being raped. Commander Yang, as the hero, replied with a room-shaking aria.

At last we all returned home about eight o'clock. We had missed dinner at the mansion, but were not hungry having eaten in the market and were ready to retire. But a servant entered and respectfully announced that the Commander and his family were awaiting us in the reception hall. It was across the courtyard and we entered the spacious room lit only with a few vegetable oil lamps. It had a vari-coloured tile floor and fine carved blackwood furniture. Many stands and tables by the walls supported a magnificent collection of bronze and porcelain antiques, gleaming in the uneven light, and old swords, shields and helmets hung on the walls together with rare Chinese scrolls.

Commander Yang bade us seat ourselves at a large marble-topped table and presently his favourite wife, who was number three, entered. She was a middle-aged woman, tall and rather statuesque in her severe long black gown. She wore a velvet beret with a triangular top, probably *le dernier cri* of Szechuan fashion I thought. She had a heavy black cane topped with a gold knob, as long as a bishop's crook, and carried it with great distinction, reminding me of Louis XIV days when such canes were carried by the *grandes dames* and *chevaliers* of the French Court.

## At Commander Yang's

Her face was distinguished, if not particularly beautiful, forceful and serene. She spoke to me pleasantly, after I had been introduced, and took her place at the table. I explained the purpose of my visit. The Commander said that I ought to rest well before attempting so hazardous a trip and he insisted that I stay with them at least three days more.

'This is our *hsiaoyeh* (supper),' Madame Yang explained as several rich dishes were placed before us. There was roast duck and mushrooms, sliced ham, fungus soup and a large fish from the Tatu River stewed in thick bean cream. The last dish was particularly delicious as I had not tasted it before. Then came rice congee made with this rich bean milk. It was an excellent meal and, as long as I stayed, the Commander made it a point to invite me to these evening repasts sometimes as late as ten o'clock.

We retired to bed late. At night I had to get up and cautiously went out into the gallery. As I did so, the lids of some coffins slid down and white-clad figures slowly rose from out of them. A man, unprepared for such a sight, might have died from fright. These were the carpenters who preferred to sleep in the warm interiors of their coffins rather than on the stone floor. Hearing me come they had got up to assist me in my search.

The dignity and unhurried tempo of life in this medieval place fascinated me. There were no raucous noises of passing cars, acrid smoke from factories or screeching of radios. People moved slowly fully alive to all that passed around them and, if something caught their interest, they paused and frankly stared, making their comments. I liked to watch Madame Yang's daily emergence into the market street. She issued from the house supported by one of her companions and was followed by several housemaids, holding a beaded bag in which her pocket money was kept. In her sombre, classical gown and velvet cap, and with a long staff with its gold knob, which glowed in the sunshine, she proceeded through the crowd, as people stepped aside and bowed. It was like a tableau from the Renaissance in which a reigning *marchesa* strolled with her retinue through the market place of Mantua to

## *The Fulin Potentate*

the cathedral. It was a poignant, never-to-be-forgotten joy, to witness this glorious spectacle of the past, not artificially reproduced in Hollywood for an historical film, but a real, living one.

The second morning was the weekly market day in Fulin and it was so interesting that I spent the whole day watching it, only returning for lunch and dinner. Some dark-turbaned men in *tsarwas*<sup>1</sup> came bringing sandals, homespun cloth, mushrooms, piglings nestling in their arms, chickens and many other things. 'These are the Lolos,' whispered Lee Chizau as I looked at some of them closely. They stared back at me. Probably I was the first European they had seen at close range. Most of them led medium-sized ponies, well-fed frisky animals with gaily-painted wooden saddles placed on bright Tibetan rugs or coloured wool mats. Besides a saddle each of them carried leather saddle-bags with brightly-polished silver or brass clasps. The Lolos in Fulin were not numerous and their tall figures and elegant horses and mules forced other people to make way for them whenever they passed, one hand on a sheathed curved dagger. When I became too inquisitive, and stared at them too obviously, Lee Chizau quietly took me by the arm and led me off the street to a tent-like structure where people sat at low tables drinking clear wine. He made me sit down and ordered a small pot of wine for us.

'Don't stare at them like that!' he said to me. 'And never jostle against them.' I felt like a reprimanded schoolboy.

'But why?' I asked him still not understanding. He shrugged his shoulders. 'You will be stabbed or run through with a sword,' he answered looking apprehensively behind him. 'You must remember,' he continued, 'that they are wild, lawless men and more fierce than tigers.' At this very moment an exceptionally tall Lolo appeared down the street leading a lovely, dappled pony. He was clad in a short velvet jacket with a mother-of-pearl studded belt and a pair of immense flowing trousers. They were of soft green silk and joined together somewhere near the ankles. On his head was a black turban and a lock of hair tightly tied with a black string which rose from the top of his head like

<sup>1</sup> A Lolo woollen cloak with fringes.



## *First lesson about the Lolos*

a small palm tree. As he reached our wine shop his black, eagle-like eyes noticed me, and he abruptly stopped, looking at me with interest, his mouth slightly open showing his dazzlingly white teeth and a smile on his swarthy face. Forgetting all that Lee Chizau had told me, I quickly filled another cup from our pot and offered it to him with both hands. He did not stab me but accepted my offer with a look of astonishment and delight lighting his dusky face. Holding his pony by the rein (one only, I noticed, on the right) he slowly sat down sipping the wine. He said something, but I could not understand. 'He says thank you!' intervened Lee Chizau. That meant another cup and I filled it. After four cups he was gone.

'Well, he did not stab me.' Lee Chizau was smiling. 'Why should he? You behaved perfectly and the Lolos appreciate friendly gestures more than any other people. But the main thing was that you did not touch him. That would have caused much trouble,' he added gravely. This was my first lesson about the Lolos.

I felt lazy after the extra cups of wine I had taken with my Lolo guest, and we continued sitting at the wayside shop whilst the market place seethed with people and animals. Cows were led through to be sold or slaughtered. Pigs were carried in crates or on poles and there was a noisy commotion as caravans passed through with their burden of rock salt or cast-iron boilers or baskets of brown sugar in round cakes bound from Sichang to Tachienlu. A movement arose among the crowd as men appeared with coffins which they were carrying from Commander Yang's house on poles. The coffins were very heavy and the men were swaying rhythmically, sweat glistening on their naked backs. 'Oh Ho and Ay Hey!' they intoned as they turned up the road to Kiating.

'Now, Lee Chizau,' I said, 'please do tell me all about the Commander Yang and his coffins as I still do not understand many things about local affairs.' He sipped more wine reflectively and then unfolded his tale.

'Commander Yang was a trusted lieutenant of the old

## *The Fulin Potentate*

Governor. He has tribal blood in his veins as his surname suggests. The Chinese character for this, Yang, means Ram and this is a very unusual surname among families of pure Chinese descent. He is extremely pro-Lolo, and has always treated them with consideration and justice, thereby retaining their affection and respect. When the Province of Sikang was detached from Szechuan and General Liu Wenhui became the Governor, there was a campaign against the Lolos and Prince Len, one of their chiefs, was killed. Commander Yang was against all the pillage and cruelties committed by the Provincial troops and, as a form of protest, he adopted the slain chief's son. The Governor sought ways and means to get rid of him and several times his life was in danger. It is for this reason that Commander Yang never goes to Tachienlu, disregarding even the most urgent summons and it is partially for this reason that the Governor does not dare make trips south to Sichang as he has to travel through these parts which are staunchly pro-Yang. Many people here think that it is Commander Yang who should have been elevated to the post of Governor instead of that blood-sucking man. In spite of his being old-fashioned and conservative, Commander Yang is not so provincial and much more pan-Chinese. Therefore, he covertly assists and favours the Central Government with its modernizing influence. He likes the Lolos being gradually educated and civilized and to this end he encourages contacts between them and the representatives of the Chungking Government. That is the reason for the modern health centre in Fulin which administers free medical treatment to the Lolos and for the establishment of a primary school for the Lolos at Dienba. His adopted son, a Lolo prince, was sent by him to the Central Military Academy in Nanking to be properly educated together with his cousin, Prince Koumou Tsangyao.

'As you know, the warlords here do not get any salary from the Provincial Government and have to support themselves and their soldiers the best they can by monopolizing some lucrative line of business. With some it is opium, with others it is gold mining or tea exports. Commander Yang's business is the export

## 'The House of Ten Thousand Ages'

of coffins to Szechuan. The mountains around here contain age-old trees of great size and of inestimable value as material for coffins because, as you know, the dream of every wealthy Chinese is to be buried in a heavy and substantial coffin as his last home—The House of Ten Thousand Ages. There are huge oaks in the forests here. They are cut down by Yang's trusted men and floated down the Tatu and the rest you have seen for yourself. The demand is such that Commander Yang has never been able to work off a big backlog of orders. Some coffins, of particularly good variety, such as those made of Fragrant Wood,<sup>1</sup> cost thousands of silver dollars.' He paused and took another sip from his cup.

'My cousin Louching's mother, has bought hers already from Commander Yang, and now I am saving money to pay the first instalment to him on my father's.'

<sup>1</sup> *Persea Nanmu.*

## X

### *Road to Helluwa*

ON the morning of our departure I distributed my largess among the numerous servants of Commander Yang's household. After staying at such a wealthy mansion, it would have been an impossible insult to offer to pay for board and lodging, but custom required an extremely generous tip for the servants to preserve the 'face' of their master and mistress. What I had to give them was in fact more than what I might have spent at an inn and the best restaurants. But *noblesse oblige*. . . .

The parting from the Commander and his wife was very friendly, almost affectionate. He took me aside for a short private talk before I left.

'Treat this as your own home and come back again,' he said, and I knew that he meant it. 'I know from Mr. Cunningham's letter you had brought how much you are interested in the Lolos,' and his eyes twinkled sympathetically. 'And I will try to arrange for you to meet some of their chiefs. It is a pity my adopted son is not here. You must meet him next time. . . .' And on this he let me go.

It was still early and we crossed unhurriedly the shallow stream in front of Fulin and headed across uneven ground to the west where the great mountains loomed. Soon we came to the Tatu River rushing out of the gorge. There were a few huts on the bank and a couple of shallow boats which we boarded. Whilst two men struggled with their oars, the flimsy boat shot downstream like an express train and we landed several hundred feet below. A stony path lay ahead and we began to walk up it. It was not bad going, though I stubbed my toes several times and fell once or twice as I could hardly tear my eyes away from the breath-

## *The Tatu River*

taking beauty of the scenery. The mountains around us opened and closed revealing purple, mauve and golden contours with the blue sky high above. I clearly remember one mountain of rich gamboge colour with the golden dappings of blossoming shrubs. There were narrow shady gorges full of dark trees and with thundering cascades falling into the river; strident cries of pheasants issued from thickets and were answered by the gentle cooing of wild turtle doves. There was no road or dwellings on the other side, but along our path we came now and again to tiny coves where the mountains split allowing room for two or three farm cottages with miniature plots of ground under the shadow of century-old oaks and amidst the pink and white blossoming fruit trees. We always sat down for a few minutes at such happy oases enjoying a cup of tea or just talking to the people.

The air was filled with the fragrance of flowers and the hum of bees as butterflies flitted from blossom to blossom or sat in colourful flocks on moist spots in the ground. Farther on the gorge became narrower as the mountains closed in. The river gurgled and hissed, growling noises came from the whirlpools among the rocks and there was a hooting sound as the current struggled in submerged caverns. Nowhere else have I seen a river so marvellous, so alive and so personal. It was truly a living being with a will and a mode of existence all of its own. This impression, first created when I met the river at Luting, never left me afterwards. I had a mystic impulse to contemplate this river forever, to sit by it and even to talk to it. My spirit longed to befriend this terrible beauty, to commune with her spirit and to seek her protection and benevolence in the mortal dangers I might meet whilst travelling along her precipitous banks. I even dropped flowers sometimes in homage to her. . . . And, after a while, I had a strange and mysterious conviction that whatever might happen whilst I was in the grip of this strange river, she would never harm me, would never betray or destroy me.

If the Yangtze River is the empress of all the rivers of China, surely the Tatu is the glorious princess—beautiful beyond words,

## Road to Helluwa

enigmatic, wilful and cruel to her enemies like Princess Turandot in Puccini's immortal opera. She passed unchallenged through mysterious lands where the stray traveller may have wandered, but which still remained as much undiscovered and unexplored as the upper reaches of the Amazon.

There was a sharp turn in the path as the mountains on the left opened up and we were walking away from the river and through a sea of yellow mustard flowers with their sensuous odour. There was a village at the end of this plain where we had our modest lunch. Then there was a long, long climb till we reached another hamlet on the top of the mountain. It was already late afternoon. I looked at Lee Chizau questioningly.

'No,' he said, 'People do not usually stay here overnight. We must go on to another village,' and he led the way past the huts to the top of the mountain.

'*Ahwei, O Ahwei!*' came a desperate call from a grove of trees near-by. '*O Ahwei! Ahwei! Come back! Come back!*' The voice was urgent and there were tears in it and infinite longing. A middle-aged woman and a girl stepped out of the grove and mounted a small knoll. '*Ahwei!*' cried the woman wringing her hands. '*Ahwei, come back, come back!*' shrilled the girl sadly.

'What a pitiful scene,' I commented to Lee Chizau. He seemed surprised. 'Do you know what it is?' he asked me. 'Of course,' I replied. 'The woman's child is probably very ill, perhaps dying, and is unconscious. They are calling his soul back.' My friend looked at me in wonderment and nodded, as we passed by.

When we reached the top I gasped at the terrific drop to the Tatu River, perhaps three thousand feet or more, and at the path which climbed down, down in great zigzags. Lee Chizau explained it was quite broad and had steps cut in the rock which were used by horse caravans. It took us hours to come to the river level. Then there was a comparatively short walk, again a turn to the left and we reached a village as dusk fell.

Very early next morning Lee Chizau insisted on us buying a

## *'Never Again!'*

small pot of wine to take with us. 'What is that for?' I asked him. 'Aren't there any villages between here and Hellsuwa?' He looked a little embarrassed.

'There is a small hamlet half-way,' he said, 'But I thought this wine would be useful to strengthen you when we cross the defile.' However, the path, to begin with, seemed quite all right and I was walking with confidence enjoying the morning. Then it started climbing higher and higher, and yet higher, seemingly away from the boiling river below. Then, quite suddenly, it petered out and there were just a few rocks and a cliff side, very uneven and overgrown with some low bushes.

'We must climb that,' Lee Chizau ordered and proceeded to scramble up foot by foot. 'You just hold this end of my stick and crawl slowly after me.' I hoisted myself up to the top of the cliff and saw a terrific sight. . . . There was the swirling river more than a thousand feet below me and nothing but a sloping rock and a few small bushes between me and the awful precipice. I was paralysed by the onset of giddiness. Lee Chizau crawled closer to me speaking soothingly. 'It's nothing. Just a few feet more.' I knew that I could not turn back. He produced the pot out of his basket, filled a cup. 'Drink!' he ordered. I did, one cup and then another. My senses became numbed and indifference slowly descended on me. I began to crawl briskly after him neither looking left nor right, just counting the bushes in front of me. Soon we were scrambling downwards and then the river receded. It was still steep but no longer precipitous. In a few minutes we reached a safe descent and a village appeared ahead across a wide, rapidly flowing stream. We were taken across in a funny cable car, sitting back to back with other passengers, which was pulled jerkily by a rope from the other bank. I was jubilant that the real danger had been left behind. Now I learnt what 'crossing the defile' meant. 'Never again!' I said to myself not yet realizing that I had perhaps to return this way, or that something equally terrifying lay ahead of me.

It was a mean village and its location was not at all picturesque. After a poor meal, I saw Lee Chizau refilling the wine pot again

## *Road to Helluwa*

and I at once had a premonition that my troubles were by no means over.

Again the path led along the river now in a semi-dark and threatening gorge. There were no trees or shrubs; only mere walls of cliffs stark and forbidding, with the river hissing below ominously. The higher the path climbed the narrower it became. But I managed to walk bravely with Lee Chizau by my side and was heartened by the presence of a couple of men behind who, judging by their dress, were Lolos. At last the path narrowed so that only one man could walk single file just hugging the stone wall with the river roaring perhaps two thousand feet below. I felt trapped as vertigo attacked me again, an unfortunate result of my astigmatic eyes, and could not even turn back without Lee Chizau going ahead of me. Fortunately we reached a small perch, a mere niche, hewn by water perhaps, in the face of the cliff. The Lolos came up and Lee Chizau talked to them whilst I sat on a stone. Again Lee Chizau spoke to me re-assuringly.

‘Here, drink again!’ He extended the pot to me. ‘These men wish to assist you. They will take your arms one going ahead and one behind, with your face to the wall. They are Lolos and sure-footed for they know this path intimately. It’s not too far now,’ and he started walking ahead. The two men assisted me to rise, stood me with my face to the cliff and each grabbed my elbow in a vice of steel with their muscular hands. Although I exerted my will not to look down at the river below, I was irresistibly drawn to do so. Lee Chizau was whistling, singing and talking unceasingly, probably to cheer me up, and at one point he stopped.

‘It was at this spot last year that twenty soldiers slipped and fell on those rocks below,’ he shouted. ‘You can see their bones right there on the stones.’ A superhuman power seemed to turn my head downwards where I caught sight of some skeletons on the projecting rocks high above the river. The Lolos stopped to let me have a better view. Yes, there they were, perhaps two hundred feet only below the path. My head swirled at this grim reminder as Lee Chizau continued shouting.

‘Yes, it was during rain that they lost their footing. They could



## *Helluwa at last*

not haul them up or get down to them as there are no paths below. They were severely injured, and were left there moaning to die.' I was now past caring and just shuffled along watching how pebbles rolled from under my feet into the abyss. After what seemed to be hours, but was in fact only half an hour, the path suddenly widened as a narrow but smiling valley opened before me. I sat down exhausted on the grass. My friend took the almost full pot and handed it to the Lolos for their services and they passed on smiling gratefully.

Farther up the valley a group of buildings became visible in a hollow of the towering mountains.

'That's Helluwa !' said Lee Chizau.

'Ah, Helluwa ! Really Helluwa !' I repeated loudly and, released from the tension of our trip, I burst into resounding laughter.

'What is so funny?' inquired my friend. I told him what the word meant in English and he started guffawing, too.

'It is the Chinese rendering of the Lolo name "Herrwa",' he added. We boarded a boat and were quickly rowed across; I had time to notice how crystal clear the water in the river was, and although fathoms deep, every pebble and stone on the bottom was visible.

## XI

### *The Robber Baron*

THE village consisted of a spacious, well-trodden square with a row of substantial log houses around. It was crowded with ponies, horses and mules held by ferocious-looking men all of whom at first I took to be Lolos, later, realizing that some were Chinese dressed in turbans and tsarwas. There was a stir as they saw us enter and soon a crowd gathered around us. They were a desperate-looking lot, some with deeply-scarred faces and an ugly leer. They were plainly hostile, not a smile on their faces, and their hands resting on their daggers or short swords. Lee Chizau circulated from man to man whispering something, and they reluctantly opened a way as he led me into an adjoining tea-house where we ordered some tea.

'Sit here and under no circumstances go out,' he ordered. 'I must go and find my father,' and he disappeared. In five minutes he returned with his father, both talking excitedly and urgently. I ordered a small pot of wine.

'It is best that you do not stay here overnight,' said the father. I looked at him inquiringly. 'This is market day and there are a lot of rough men around,' he added looking behind him apprehensively. 'Some of them may want to kidnap you and others may even try to stab you,' he said lowering his voice. 'My son will take you to Siao Makai, just about five *li* up the river on the other side; you will be safer there.'

Back we went by boat and started walking through some more incredibly beautiful scenery. I questioned Lee Chizau.

'Please tell me what is the trouble and why we can't stay at Hellsuwa?' Seeing that no one was following us he pulled me to a rock and we sat down. His face was troubled.

## *The Elders' Brotherhood*

'I must tell you everything frankly, but you must keep it a secret for your own sake and for mine,' he said looking at me earnestly. I reassured him, reminding him that I was a newcomer, a member of the Central Government and had no interest in local politics and entanglements beyond my self-preservation.

'All these people you saw are big highway robbers,' he began. 'Helluwa is their headquarters and the market today is a sort of rendezvous. Their chief is Hwang Takou (Big Brother Hwang) who stays at Siao-Makai. We must seek his protection first as he is my father's good friend.' Not being quite a greenhorn I understood the situation at once and nodded. 'Of course, you have heard of the Koulaohui (Elders' Brotherhood)', he continued. 'It is a very powerful secret society operating in Szechuan and Sikang. Its aim is to protect its members from the depredations of rapacious officials and to take back their treasure sucked from the people.' I listened with a rapt attention. 'They rob only the right people as they have a marvellous intelligence network and know when to strike.' Then he stopped.

'But then Big Brother Hwang . . .?' I began

'Yes, he is the local leader of the Society and his sway extends to both Wuyaoling and Tahsiangling passes; his men watch there day and night.' He was ready to go on.

'Wait, Lee Chizau,' I whispered. 'And your father?' He looked me straight in the eyes and slowly nodded. I patted him on the shoulder and said. 'You can trust me, my friend, I have heard nothing and I know nothing.' He smiled appreciatively.

The Tatu made a sharp sweep to the right around a forest-clad mountain forming a lovely snow-white sand beach on our side, which gleamed like a luminous crescent, and a jade-green cove, at the farther end of which stood several brown towers with embrasures and a fortified stockade. There were some low buildings outside on the fringe of a forest. Two fierce-looking guards offered no objection when we stepped into the stockade, to find more armed men there. One disappeared inside a tower and came out immediately beckoning us to follow him inside.

## *The Robber Baron*

There was an ample square room with a mat-covered floor. The late afternoon light streamed in through several small square windows made in the massive stone wall just below the ceiling. A staircase in one of the corners led through a trapdoor to the upper story. Under it there were two or three wide wooden couches thickly overlaid with woollen mats and Tibetan rugs and a charcoal brazier glowed under a large kettle. After my eyes had become accustomed to the semi-gloom I saw a middle-aged, massive man in a long gown rise from the couch and advance towards me. He wore a white knitted woollen cap with a pompon and his weathered face bore a terrible scar right across one of the cheeks almost touching his eye. His burning eyes bored into mine. Lee Chizau and I bowed deeply and I offered my card.

‘Sit down, sit down,’ said the robber baron kindly, greeting us and pointing to one of the couches. There was an exchange of courtesies and then a somewhat lengthy explanation by Lee Chizau as to who I was and how he came to know me.

‘Well, well,’ said the robber baron, ‘If he is your father’s friend he is mine also,’ he added in his deep sonorous voice. ‘I am glad that he knows Commander Yang,’ and he looked at Lee Chizau meaningly. A couple of men entered and whispered something into his ear. He rose making a sign. They disappeared upstairs returning with a couple of rifles.

‘Please be at home,’ said Hwang Takou pleasantly. ‘Go and see our village here, but don’t stray too far away. There are too many leopards around,’ and he winked at me. ‘Supper will be ready after sunset and, if you want to have a drink, the wine jar is there in the corner and my men will attend to you.’ And with these words he left us alone.

We strolled out for it was very stuffy inside. Enclosed by high mountains, this little valley was also very warm and humid. On three sides snow ranges rose in the distance, their glaciers sparkling in the setting sun. The river silently slithered, like a green serpent, out of a gloomy gorge. Beyond there were visible sharp crags silhouetted against the orange conflagration of the sunset like the monstrous teeth of a stupendous dragon jaw.

## *'Just mention my name'*

'Is there a path along the river up to Moshimuen?' I asked Lee Chizau.

'Yes,' he replied, 'but one has to cross the defile just along those crags. It is very difficult even for us and we seldom use it.' The very mention of 'crossing the defile' sent a shiver down my spine. 'No, not for me,' I murmured.

A spotted shape leapt out of the thicket on the opposite bank. 'A leopard! A leopard!' came the cry from the armed men and two shots rang out. The shape disappeared in the tall grass. Two men shot across the river in a boat and returned in a few minutes bringing a beautiful young animal. It was dead and they dragged it triumphantly inside a tower.

Dinner at Hwang Takou's place consisted of kanbar (dried yak beef), stewed leg of venison and a fat, tender chicken. Lee Chizau's father and other friends came over from Hellsuwa to join us. They were all lusty drinkers, but even so were careful not to talk too much of their 'business' before a stranger. Being very tired we retired early to another tower where beds had been prepared for us.

Getting up very early we were entertained by the robber baron to an enormous breakfast. He was much amused when I asked him to pose for a snapshot and then we talked a little. He enjoined me to be careful and not talk up there in Tachienlu about my visit here.

'It won't do you any good,' he warned me. 'And it may be embarrassing for us,' he added. 'Just say that you spent the time at Fulin and at Lee Chizau's house.' I promised and he appeared to be satisfied. Then I remembered a request I wanted to make.

'Hwang Takou!' I said, 'I have to travel so much and the passes are so unsafe. May I ask for your protection?' He was not in the least surprised and replied.

'Of course, just mention my name when you are in trouble. Say that you are a friend of mine. Anyway, I will warn my men. . . .'

After breakfast was over, we bade good-bye to our generous host and Lee Chizau told his father, who stayed behind, that we would be back next day.

## XII

### *First Lolo Friends*

WE crossed to Helluwa and in five minutes were well above the village. It was a funny mountain, just like a dome, pretty steep but not precipitous and covered with grass and small bushes. The path went up in spirals and long zigzags and the slope all the time curved upwards. Just as I thought we were nearing the top there was another long steep curve upward. After three or four hours of this onerous climbing we emerged on a sort of long broad platform, called Ngakopa, the rear end of which was lined with substantial log houses with tall wooden racks for drying grain. There were fruit trees and many pigs lolling about on the soft grass. The terraced fields were planted with Indian corn, potatoes, cabbages, and other vegetables. We entered a house which also served as a shop as there were jars of paku wine by the walls, great discs of rock salt and some brown sugar in cakes in a basket. The elderly man who met us was, I thought, a Chinese, but Lee Chizau whispered that all the people here were White Lolos, acting as trading intermediaries between the Black Lolos, who lived on the plateau, and the Chinese merchants at Helluwa. It was already quite cold, and when we turned the corner on our way up the blasts of icy wind made us shiver. But the wonderful view of great snow ranges and the bottomless valleys and gorges below compensated for the rigours of this hard trip upwards.

As we approached the summit a gentle gap opened up and we passed on to the plateau overgrown with lush grass. It was an immense shallow bowl or, rather, a soup plate with low rims beyond which the jagged spires of snow peaks, scintillating and shining, shot up into the sky like some mammoth stage scenery with their castle and cathedral-like shapes. At first glance the

## *Lee Chizau's Best Friend*

Yehsaping plateau appeared bleak and desolate, but soon I saw some black houses and fenced fields with crops dotting the landscape here and there. There were few trees and only low bushes to break the monotony. Skirting the extensive meadow, we came to some smoke-begrimed shanties to be greeted, to the accompaniment of furious dog barking, by a Lolo in black tsarwa. He invited us inside and we sat down by a low table. Before I had left Fulin, and acting on Lee Chizau's advice, I had bought a small stock of matches, needles, sewing thread and silk thread of many colours for embroidering. These were, according to him, the most acceptable gifts to the Lolos. I proceeded to present the man with two match boxes which he received most gratefully, accepting them with both hands.

Presently a middle-aged woman entered accompanied by two girls. She wore a pleated black skirt, a blue silk tunic and a black satin bonnet and a pair of long earrings falling down to her shoulders, made of mother-of-pearl discs. The girls were similarly clad except that they were without bonnets, and wore a kind of blue cloth head coverings tied on with their own pigtails. All were barefooted. I bowed to the lady and offered her several packets of needles, a couple of spools of sewing thread and several selections of the coloured silk thread. She was enchanted and her gratitude knew no bounds. 'But how lovely!' She was saying. 'How generous of you to make me such a nice gift!' and she disappeared inside bearing the articles with both hands as if they were an offering to the gods. Five minutes later she returned with a sizeable earthen crock full of the best honey and handed it to me. I was embarrassed, but she pressed me to accept. 'It's nothing, it's nothing,' she repeated. We had to take it. We called on two or three other houses making similar gifts and collecting, in return, a bag of potatoes here or a pot of honey there. Finally Lee Chizau led me to a large log house which was one of the last.

'This house belongs to my best friend,' he said. 'And I can only hope that he is at home,' he added.

'And what will happen if he is not?' I asked anxiously.

'Never mind,' he shrugged his shoulders. 'Then we shall have

## *First Lolo Friends*

to fall on the hospitality of the people we have just seen. That's why I insisted on calling on them first as a precaution.'

There was a fearful racket as several dogs went for us. A man in a black turban rushed out trying to stop them and, seeing Lee Chizau, became so enthusiastic that he nearly fell on his neck. Then he took me by the arm and almost forcibly pulled me into his house. He had been sitting alone consoling himself with a big jar of wine which stood on a low table with a bowl beside it. A brisk fire burned on the stone hearth sunk into the earthen floor in the middle of the room on which a large copper cauldron, suspended from the ceiling, was on the boil, issuing clouds of steam into the cold air.

I sat on a low bench by the hearth looking at my first Lolo friend. Lee Chizau called him Kolei. He was a man in his thirties, not very tall, but well-built, with muscular arms and legs. His dark face was ruggedly virile, with sparkling black eyes. It looked open and kind when he smiled exposing his perfect white teeth. He wore wide black trousers and a black jacket and on his feet were the traditional hempen sandals, but without the pompons. With a deliberate, lithe movement he filled two Chinese rice bowls with white paku liquor and gracefully offered one to me and another to Lee Chizau, afterwards re-filling his own. He smiled at Lee Chizau and then turned to me, speaking in Chinese with some difficulty.

'I am very sorry,' he began. 'My wife is away on a visit to her relatives; my children have gone with her, too.' For a moment he looked dejected. 'I am all alone, my poor hut is dirty and in disorder. How can I welcome such good friends with nothing to offer them?' It was not a mere form of politeness, as he really appeared to be in distress. We assured him that we were quite comfortable, sitting here by the fire and with plenty of wine to warm us up. His face brightened up and he squatted by the hearth asking us questions about Lee Chizau's family and about my affairs. His queries were intelligent, direct and to the point. I could see plainly that he took my answers at their face value as I intended them to be and was not trying to read into them all sorts of mean-



## Lolo Hospitality

ings as was my experience with so many Chinese in Sikang. He saw nothing unusual in my desire to travel and learn more about strange tribes of this remote corner, especially the Lolos. The more he heard from me the friendlier he became. At last, as if remembering something, he got up suddenly on his feet and became agitated.

'What am I doing sitting here like that? I have you as my guests and I must cook a meal.' And he ran out yelling at the top of his voice. He was away for about half an hour and then returned with two other Lolos, one of them carrying a hunk of venison. He himself brought a fat chicken by the legs and the third man a jar of wine, some vegetables and a dozen eggs in a basket.

It was a glorious party which continued till the small hours of the next morning. I confess I have only a hazy memory of it for I was only just learning the meaning of Lolo entertainment. I recollect there was venison fried with potatoes, a kind of omelette *aux fines herbes à la Yehsaping*, with the chicken stew as a culinary chef d'oeuvre. I was forced to drink until I lost count of the cups and, finally, lost consciousness, waking up next morning with an almighty hangover lying on a mat in a dark corner of the hut.

In the early afternoon, Lee Chizau suggested returning to Helluwa to pick up his father and go back to Fulin next day. Slowly the awful truth penetrated my befuddled brain.

'Do you mean that I have to walk over that narrow path and cross the defile?' I exclaimed.

'There is no other way out unless you wish to go up the river along those crags,' he said. 'But they are infinitely more dangerous.' Filled with a sense of dread at the prospect I became almost physically ill. At this moment Lee Chizau went outside and soon returned with a friend.

'My friend says there is another way out after all,' he began. 'But it is very dangerous as it is through deep, dark forest down to the Tatu River on the other side.' I already felt relieved.

'Do I have to cross the defile again?' I asked. He turned to his friend who shook his head emphatically. 'No,' he continued, 'there are no precipices at all, but there is real danger from all the

## *First Lolo Friends*

wild beasts which infest that great forest.' I rose to my feet in triumph.

'The beasts may or may not eat me, but never shall I be able to return home over the old road!' I exclaimed. The two of them started a long talk together and went out again. When they came back, I knew everything was well.

'The old man knows the way and he has agreed to take you down to the main road and carry your bedding,' Lee Chizau said, and then looked at me apologetically. 'But I think I cannot go down with you as my father is waiting for me.' He blushed shamefacedly, thinking he had betrayed me. I told him not to worry as I trusted his friends.

'Very well then,' he agreed. 'The old man says it is a long walk and you must start well before dawn. When you reach the road below do not give him any money, but buy him a jar of wine. He would prefer that. I will stay the night here with you and go down to Hellsuwa at dawn.'

It was still pitch dark when our Lolo host awakened Lee Chizau and myself. It was intensely cold when I scrambled out from under the wool mats and washed my face in warm water from the kettle whilst Lee Chizau packed the basket with my clothing, leaving the pots of honey outside. 'I'll bring them to you next week,' he remarked. We hurriedly drank some tea and the old Lolo guide came in carrying a bunch of burning pine splinters. He hoisted the basket on his back and I took leave of my kind host and Lee Chizau.

## XIII

### *The Mountain Paradise*

THE frost at 12,000 feet was heavy, but it was very still, the stars shining like bright lamps. We skirted the rim of the plateau as dogs barked furiously in the distance. The dark wall of a forest loomed ahead. We entered it as the east imperceptibly lighted with a silvery radiance, the first signs of approaching dawn. Inside was hard going by the light of the flickering splinters as the path was very indistinct and crossed by roots and creepers. I was constantly tripping and stubbing my toes in my light Lolo sandals. After our pine splinters had given out we had a long rest sitting on a fallen tree trunk. There were no sounds except for the mysterious crunching of dry branches or twigs somewhere in the distance. Slowly a faint light suffused the forest and we began to walk. It was a mixed forest, with great trees interspersed with smaller ones whose trunks were grey with branches bearing glossy, elongated leaves. They were rhododendrons of a size I had never seen before. The ground sloped downwards all the time, and soon we reached a section of the forest where moss hung in immense garlands between the trees and fell down in long strands from the branches like greenish-white icicles. It gave an uncanny impression of great antiquity, of nature having gone to sleep ages ago with all life paralysed under the giant cobwebs of moss.

As the morning advanced the visibility improved and I walked ahead confidently in the greenish shade of the trees. There was little undergrowth in this primeval forest and only occasionally I came across some low hazelnut shrubs or currant or raspberry bushes. Stepping lightly ahead of my guide I could surprise and observe the wild life which abounded, weasels, martens, pheasants and other birds. The old Lolo sat down to rest and I wandered off

## *The Mountain Paradise*

the path examining some plants and fungi. Seeing me move off he waved me back.

‘Don’t go off the path too far,’ he begged. ‘There might be pits around,’ he added.

‘What pits?’ I exclaimed.

‘The hunters’ pits,’ he explained, ‘We Yi-jen (Lolos) dig a pit and cover it with branches and leaves to trap big game,’ he concluded and graphically demonstrated with his hands and his stick what would happen to me if I fell on a sharp-edged pole fixed in the centre to impale the animal. ‘Good Heavens!’ I thought bitterly, ‘Even the Garden of Eden has its pitfalls.’

At another resting point I left him sitting and moved off down the path. Though my eyesight was rather poor, I had a good ear and heard the crunching of some twigs as something heavy approached. I froze in my tracks peering anxiously into the green gloom. A leopard was crossing my way hardly five yards away. My heart went into my mouth, but I remembered what Lee Chizau and his father had hammered into me about meeting big wild beasts ‘No panic and no movement’. My only defence was a light walking stick so I had little alternative left but to obey the advice. It was a huge cat and he stopped, looking at me. I could not help admiring his beauty—the wonderful amber eyes, pink jaw with its white fangs and well-fed supple body with golden spots. He continued looking at me, without anger; perhaps with curiosity. Then he moved off stepping slowly and carelessly. The old man came down. ‘*Paotze Kou* (leopard)!’ I said in a whisper and pointed to the direction in which the animal had disappeared. He was not surprised and merely grinned. From then on I decided not to leave my old guide too far behind.

I am sure it was due to my Lolo sandals that it was possible to come on all these animals unnoticed. These clever mountain and forest people, steeped for ages in the traditions of hunting, had evolved this remarkable footwear—so light, so noiseless, and yet possessing an acme of comfort and endurance with which no western sports shoes could compare.

Soon we heard something else coming in front; the steps were

## Takin

heavy and elephantine as dead wood crackled and split. I looked at my companion. He was transformed, his face expressing anxiety and fear. With lightning speed he clamped his grimy hand over my mouth, to prevent me from uttering a sound, and silently dragged me behind a big tree where we froze into immobility. The hazelnut thickets ahead parted and a shape emerged into a clearing. At first I thought it was a white yak, but it was much more massive. Its bovine head was crowned with lyre-like sharp horns which grew not out of the sides of the skull but from a short sturdy stalk in the centre and it had a long, flowing beard, like an old man's; its glossy cream-coloured fur hung in silken strands almost down to the ground, barely revealing its enormously thick hooved feet. Its cow-like eyes were hot and threatening in their pink-rimmed sockets. The animal stood for a while sniffing, but not seeing us, passed on. The old Lolo held me in a grip of steel not saying a word. It was only after fifteen or twenty minutes, when he was sure that the beast was far away, that we began to walk again.

'What was that?' I demanded.

'*Yeh niu* (Takin)', he answered and then explained that of all forest animals it was the most feared and respected. It was aggressive and irascible and attacked people and animals on sight, moving with incredible speed and crushing them under its hooves. Even tigers, the old man assured me, thought twice before attacking a takin for fear of being crushed by its fantastic weight when it rolled over them in the struggle. It could only be killed by falling into a prepared trap.

There was no more excitement with wild animals and we soon descended to a pretty alpine meadow for a long rest and a drink of wine, the Lolo chewing a dry buckwheat pancake which he had produced out of his skin bag. I looked around as the whole panorama of the country lay at my feet. Right in front of me stretched the dazzling chain of snow peaks of Yajagkan, 20,000 feet high, beyond which Tachienlu lay. Silvery clouds, mere puffs of vapour, slowly drifted below them like the chariots of mountain spirits. Below was piled range upon range of forest-clad

## *The Mountain Paradise*

foothills like the mammoth waves of a dark green sea dappled with patches of jade and purple, rent now and then by narrow gorges out of which foamed blue torrents into the abysmal valley where, I knew, the beautiful Tatu struggled and fought on its endless course towards her distant lover, the Min. The bright hot sunshine had melted the rosin of larches and pines and the crisp air was heavy with their exhilarating and balmy odour. Birds sang and flitted whilst the first flowers of spring were already opening in sunny glades.

‘Was there any other conception of an earthly paradise which could rival this?’ I wondered. I was overcome and prostrated by the vision of this splendour, tears gathering in my eyes at the revelation of God’s magic of creation. How could puny human art be compared to the transcendent flight of Divine phantasy? Here was the key to Jesus seeking beauty in the lilies of the field rather than in the sumptuous palaces of Herod in Tiberias.

Gradually more mundane thoughts came to me. ‘What a site for an hotel!’ I ruminated. ‘No other place in the world could offer such concentrated beauty of scenery.’ I was not intolerant of civilization and the amenities it had provided for mankind. I myself, as much as anyone else, would have enjoyed a bottle of champagne and a good meal against the background of good music, while drinking in the magic of this scenery. . . . But, to enjoy the gifts of civilization, one must be truly civilized. . . . And how many people have this true touch of civilization? What would have happened if a de luxe hotel had, by some magic, been erected on this spot? As sure as not a general cry ‘Kill! Kill!’ would have gone up, as guests picked up their shotguns and big-game rifles to decimate the rarest species of animals which here found their last refuge. To these agents of civilization the sambur’s horns were more beautiful on the wall of a gloomy library than on the living, proud body of their animal owner.

The old Lolo must have noticed my admiration of the view. He slowly got up and stood by me. ‘We love our mountains and forests and never want to live in cities,’ he said simply. I looked at him and nodded my silent agreement.

## *The Pagoda on the Rock*

We began to descend again and at last stood on a really well-trodden, broad path running along the rocky bank of the Tatu. From now on it was plain sailing. At one spot, rounding a grove of camphor trees, we came to a big, black rock jutting out into the river. I looked up and gasped. Precariously balanced on the edge of the rock, a half of it above the swirling current, was a big lozenge-shaped boulder and a small Burmese-style pagoda was perched on top. It had a door and an altar inside before which a gilded image of Buddha was sitting. Incense curled from a burner, evidently lit each day by a monk who ascended by a light ladder which stood by the boulder. The old man, as agile as a cat, went up the ladder and the boulder started swaying as he stepped in front of the pagoda. He told me that even the wind rocked the boulder, but it nevertheless was still there.

Soon we came to a hamlet in which there was a shop selling wine, matches and other necessities. We sat down by a table conveniently placed under a shady tree and I ordered wine for my companion. He emptied a cup and looked at me for some time. Then he spoke.

'I cannot go any farther. They will catch me and may even kill me as I have no money.' I understood and nodded, for it was as unhealthy for a Lolo to venture alone into big Chinese settlements as it was for the Chinese to intrude into Lolo territory. I went into the shop and pointed to a large jar of paku wine. 'Where is your container?' the man asked. 'Never mind,' I said, 'I will pay for the jar, too.' I produced the money and presented the jar to the old man, together with a few boxes of matches, some tobacco and a dozen cakes of brown sugar. He was overjoyed as he tucked them away into his skin bag and took the jar into his arms like a baby. 'I hope to reach home before nightfall' he said as we bade each other farewell.

I continued sitting under the tree and then saw two farmers come up and stop before the shop. One carried behind his back a basket filled with turnips and the other a basket with some chickens. 'It would be safer if I followed them at least a part of the way,' I thought adjusting my baggage. They turned around

## *The Mountain Paradise*

laughing. 'What is the idea?' one of them chuckled. '*Mei yu ban fa* (There is no help for it)' I said smiling. 'My friend has gone back and I have to carry this myself.' An idea suddenly flashed into my mind.

'Where are you going?' I asked them. 'To Lengchi,' they replied. I said I would pay them well if they carried my basket, and they readily agreed. Most of the turnips were transferred to the chickens and my basket was squeezed in among the turnips. I looked at my watch; it was noon.

'How far is it to Lengchi?' I asked and was told that it was over seventy *li*. 'Hm,' I muttered to myself, 'Quite a good walk for one day.' I had already covered eighty *li* and now seventy more would make it 150 *li*, about fifty English miles. But the road was good and the scenery still supremely beautiful. We arrived at Lengchi just before nightfall. 'Home at last,' I mumbled to myself. The rest of the way to Tachienlu was a well-beaten track and I could travel leisurely.



## XIV

### *Return to the Lolos*

THERE was still no news from my Headquarters in Chungking and Mr. Ling continued urging me not to stay in Tachienlu too long. He also pointed out that, if any trips were to be made, they should be undertaken forthwith because of the rainy season which would start in August. Remembering Commander Yang's promise to introduce me to Lolo nobles, I was casting about for a legitimate pretext to make another trip south. Then a most amazing thing happened to me which, overnight, gave shape and substance to all my plans and hopes. General Chang Talun, the Director of the Generalissimo's Headquarters for Sikang, suddenly arrived on a state visit to Tachienlu and I immediately called on him, presenting to him a letter of introduction from his old teacher and boss, the famous General Lee Kunyuen. General Lee had been Prime Minister of China under President Li Yuanhung and now was one of the most venerated elder statesmen and a celebrated calligraphist. I had met General Lee and his son on the train, going on a pilgrimage to the Taoist monasteries on Mt. Taishan and the Tomb of Confucius at Koufou in 1930 and ever since we had remained fast friends.

The Provincial Government elders were quite taken aback when they saw General Chang, after reverently reading the message from his venerable master, open his arms to me. There was a grand feast arranged for the General and, to my surprise and delight, I was invited too. On arrival I was greeted by the Chief Secretary and General Den, Head of the Provincial Army, who acted as hosts and, again to my great surprise, I was conducted to the table at which the distinguished visitor sat. This was an additional and no mean honour as there was a number of other tables in the spacious room.

## *Return to the Lolos*

General Chang, a tall, burly man with a high-pitched voice, beamed on me and spoke to me quite often during the dinner, asking me about my work and plans. At the end of the banquet he formally invited me to visit Sichang, where his headquarters were located. I blessed him in my heart for this most providential invitation which would permit me to leave Tachienlu for a long period of time for a perfectly valid reason.

I lost no time in approaching the Provincial Government for permission to conduct an industrial survey between Tachienlu and Sichang. I particularly dwelt on Sichang's importance as the second largest city in the Sikang Province and the capital of its southern part. This time the official 'wheels within the wheels' had turned with surprising rapidity. The approval had been given and I was armed with a *chengmingshu*, a pass with the Governor's big seal, which conferred on me official status in the province and entitled me to an escort of ten soldiers. Commissioner Lee supplied me with another certificate which proclaimed that I was the Adviser to the Provincial Co-operative Department. The latter title, though honorary, carried with it some travel expenses.

I had summoned Lee Chizau and by the time he arrived, everything was ready for my departure. However, an unexpected but short delay occurred. Miss Sydney, secretary and companion to the famous explorer and writer, Madame Alexandra David Neel, who was living in Tachienlu, had to return to England. She would have left earlier but for the prevalence of bandit activity on the passes which made her jittery to venture out. I gallantly offered to escort her through the dangerous territory, although I was not too happy about it myself, and she eagerly clung to the proposition, imploring me to wait a couple of days until she got ready.

When we started for Wassakou I felt like Sir Galahad escorting a helpless damsel through a dragon's maw. Miss Sydney was an indefatigable walker in a truly English tradition, a keen admirer of the natural beauties of the country, and she never complained of the poor food or accommodation at the inns.

At Hualinping we took an escort of local soldiers, to which I as an official was entitled, and slowly descended into the Nitung

## *Escort to Miss Sidney*

valley in brilliant sunshine. Nature herself was smiling, but a great uneasiness gripped my heart as we approached the most dangerous spot where caravan after caravan had recently been plundered. My escort, consisting of eight poor ragged fellows, went unconcernedly ahead with the usual excuse 'to clear the way' and I walked with Lee Chizau ahead of the sedan chair in which Miss Sydney rode followed by her baggage porters. The densely wooded foothills sloped into deep ravines between which the path weaved, its polished stone slabs gleaming dully in the morning sun, like a serpent's scales.

Seemingly from nowhere six armed figures appeared and barred our way. The cunning porters stopped at a distance. Lee Chizau, undismayed, came up to them, drew them aside and talked to them urgently in a whisper. I slowly came up. They grinned in a friendly way whilst my friend introduced me in a half-whisper.

'Hwang Takou's good friend,' he said, and I handed one of them my card.

'It's quite all right! It's quite all right!' they exclaimed softly in unison. 'Go on!' they smiled waving to us, and disappearing among the bushes. Miss Sydney came up anxiously.

'What is it? What is it?' she began asking nervously. 'Are they bandits?' she added almost hysterically. I and Lee Chizau exchanged quick glances.

'No, Madame!' I answered as light-heartedly as I could. 'But hush—don't say that word.' As she was still so excited I added, 'Merely home guards from a near-by village patrolling the road.' And both of us started to walk nonchalantly. It was only at Nitung, where we stopped for the night, that I told her the truth.

When we reached Fuchuang it was agreed that Lee Chizau would go home together with my baggage and I would continue with Miss Sydney to Chinchih sien, staying there overnight and escorting her across the Tahsiangling pass next morning, returning to Fuchuang in the evening.

After preparing for the night at the dingy inn at Chinchih sien

## *Return to the Lolos*

we went to an eating shop and sat by a small table near the window. I ordered a simple dinner. Suddenly four men entered and sat at a table opposite. They wore dark turbans and Lolo cloaks, although it was clear they were Szechuanese. They looked at us curiously and after a while a man came up to me with a cup of wine in his hand. 'Remember me?' he whispered. I looked at him intently and was about to exclaim in surprise, but he stopped me. 'Hush!' he said softly. 'Yes,' I whispered. 'At Helluwa. . . . No, no! At Siaomakai,' I corrected myself. They nodded. Then refilling their cups they asked me to sit down at their table, inquiring about my trip. I told them that I was escorting an English lady. I was careful to add innocently that she had no money on her and that her baggage consisted of old clothing and other trifles. Then an idea came to my mind.

'Is it safe for her to cross the Tahsiangling?' I asked. They assured me that it would be. 'Could you kindly protect her?' They nodded unanimously. 'Then,' I mused as if to myself, 'there is really no need for me to see her across.' They nodded affirmatively. 'None whatsoever,' they agreed.

Seeing that Miss Sydney was becoming nervous, I went and drew her to our table. 'Please meet my good friends,' I chattered cheerfully. 'They were so helpful to me once.' She sat down and I ordered more wine and whatever food the poor restaurant had in stock. It became a hilarious party as we all ate and drank and exchanged jokes.

Back at the hotel Miss Sydney deluged me with questions.

'Who were those men?' she asked. 'They were perfectly charming,' she added without waiting for my answer. 'And why did you urge me to be particularly nice to them?' she pursued her queries. Again she did not give me time to reply. 'You have been very extravagant on them with all this food and wine. Why?'

'Have a good rest, Madame,' I said. 'Everything is fine and could not be better. And tomorrow I will tell you who these men were. . . .'

There were other travellers next morning going to Yaan from

*'I Always Wanted to Meet a Real Bandit'*

Hanyuankai and Sichang and I did not object to climbing up to the Tahsiangling pass where in the lee of a cliff lay a small hamlet where we had an early lunch. While the porters smoked their inevitable pipes, I went for a last stroll with Miss Sydney.

'I wish to say good-bye to you,' I began. 'You will have a perfectly safe trip now,' I added. She looked at me inquiringly. 'The men with whom we had such a party last night were bandit leaders from the Tahsiangling and they have guaranteed that you will have no trouble right down to Yaan.' She was speechless. 'Those charming men bandits?' she exclaimed. I nodded. 'Why didn't you tell me at the time?' she turned on me fiercely. 'I always wanted to meet a real bandit.'

'Well, you have,' I said coolly. 'And if you knew who they were you might have spoiled the whole game and would have put all of us in danger,' I explained. 'And, what is more, please not a word to anybody in Yaan, Chengtu or even Chungking. It will cause a lot of trouble not only to myself but also to Madame David Neel. Don't forget that she will have to travel this way too.' And on this we parted.

When I arrived in Fulin I presented Madame Yang with a bottle of good French perfume which I had unexpectedly found in one of Tachienlu's 'exclusive' shops.

'To the Queen of Fulin!' I exclaimed grandiloquently, bowing deeply before the lady. Everybody burst out laughing, but she was nevertheless flattered and somehow the soubriquet stuck to her.

Commander Yang was visibly pleased to see me again and his face expanded into a broad grin when I showed him the array of my official documents.

'You are just in time,' he roared. 'Go and see all the Lolos coming to Fulin. There will be a big horse fair tomorrow and horse-racing.' Then he winked at me. 'My adopted son is due tomorrow evening. This is the man you must meet.' I felt there was a special meaning in his last sentence, I bowed to the old man and walked out into Main Street.

## *Return to the Lolos*

All afternoon tall dark men in tsarwas, black or blue turbans and wide trousers streamed from the Tatu River leading ponies and mules. Towards the evening Fulin became crowded with strangers. There were wealthy merchants from Hanyuankai and Chihhsien and a number of Provincial Army officers; some of the latter I met afterwards at dinner, and this was followed by a mammoth mah-jongg party lasting till the small hours of the next day.

There was an oval meadow outside the town, surrounded by low hills, where we all repaired next day as the sun was declining. Commander Yang was there surrounded by merchants, the military and the Lolos leading in their mounts. As soon as they had been brought in and lined in a loose semicircle, we all strolled around inspecting them. It was the first time that I had seen such a collection of Lolo-bred animals. What a glorious sight! The ponies were small but compact, muscular, with elegantly trimmed manes and so glossy that they shone brilliantly in the slanting rays of the sun; they were frisky and their bright eyes sparkled with intelligence and mischief as they watched us. The mules were huge, most of them being coal black; and towered over us nervously prancing and biting their bits. I greeted every Lolo brave and they smiled back seeing me in the company of Commander Yang. Although I was a foreigner, there was a complete absence of curiosity in their eyes, and they behaved with great dignity.

At a signal from Commander Yang the contest started. The Lolos galloped madly about standing or lying flat on horseback, mounting and dismounting in full motion and picking up objects from the ground, reminding me of circus performances by the famous Cossack riders; if not better, at least they were just as versatile. At last the show was over and again the personages crowded around the panting animals. Now some hard bargaining ensued and I was amazed at the prices paid for the mules and ponies. One black mule fetched 400 silver dollars and some ponies went as high as 200 dollars, a lot of money by local standards. But some particularly beautiful ponies had been brought for show only and their owners would not part with them at any price.

## *The King of the Lolos at Dienba*

Returning together with Lee Chizau home for dinner we found the ante-room filled with Lolos and with all manner of baggage, mats and baskets and a number of rifles stacked in the corner. The couches had more pillows and rugs on them. In one wing of the hall, separated by a partition, I noticed a smartly dressed Chinese officer sitting at the desk and writing by the light of an oil lamp. Afterwards when I entered the reception hall for evening meal, I found this young officer sitting next to Commander Yang.

'Meet my adopted son, Lin Kuangtien !' boomed the old man smiling. We both rose and bowed stiffly, as prescribed by Chinese etiquette.

'He is the King of the Lolos at Dienba,' interjected Madame Yang raising her glass. We all emptied ours in honour of our new acquaintance. A few polite sentences were exchanged and, before we left the table, it was agreed that I should call on the Prince in the morning.

## XV

### *A Prince of the Black Bone*

PROMPTLY at eight o'clock in the morning I stepped into Prince Lin Kuangtien's room. He was already up and sitting at his desk reading a Chinese newspaper. He rose to meet me and motioned me to sit down on his bed covered with rich Tibetan rugs and a magnificent leopard skin. A Lolo man-at-arms entered and he ordered him to bring a pot of tea. For a few moments we remained silent, studying each other.

The prince was above medium height and wore, like the previous night, Chinese military uniform of pure wool khaki material and of elegant cut, a big Mauser hanging from his brightly-polished belt. His feet and legs were encased in shining black top-boots; his hair was short, cropped in military style. But there his resemblance to a Chinese army officer stopped. He was of that wiry, athletic build which I now came to associate with the Lolos. In his early thirties, he was very good-looking. His face was not swarthy but of a pleasant *chocolat-au-lait* tint, with somewhat square jaws which conveyed a sense of strength and ruthlessness. He had a sensitive mouth, very white perfect teeth and large and dark eyes, liquid and flashing in great contrast to the almond-shaped, inscrutable Chinese eyes.

A charming smile lit his face and his eyes softened as he leaned forward and spoke to me, to my immense surprise, in good English. Of course, he wanted to hear first of all about myself and why I was here in Fulin.

I produced my visiting card and spread before him my travel credentials. I felt this was a crucial time to put to the test my plans for visiting the Lololand. If the prince believed me and became my friend, all would be well and good. If, on the other hand, he



## *Prince Lin Kuangtien*

thought me a suspicious character, the ambitious dream must be abandoned, perhaps forever. I decided to be entirely frank with him, firstly because frankness was natural to me and, secondly, because the Lolos, I thought, were very much like the Tibetans who disliked flowery speech and cunning approach so dear to the heart of Sikang Chinese. They were much impressed by sincerity and were equally sincere in telling a man whether they believed him or not. After all, the Lolos belonged to the same stock as the Tibetans. As neither of us was in a hurry, I then related the story of my life in Shanghai and how I arrived in Tachienlu. I told the prince in confidence about the shabby treatment I had received in Garthar, and of my plans to visit Sichang and General Chang Talun. He nodded approvingly. I purposely did not mention to him my intention to pass through the Lolo territory, leaving this to the last when the prince had had the time to think over what I had told him and to talk over the matter with his adopted father.

We continued our conversation in the afternoon after he had attended to his business engagements and interviewed a number of callers. I felt it was now my turn to ask him questions and, naturally, I wanted to know as much as possible about the Lolos. I noticed that every time I used the word 'Lolo', a shadow of distaste flitted across his sensitive face, and I felt that I was saying something wrong. At last he stopped me and looked straight at me.

'Since we are now friends,' he began, 'I may speak to you frankly, and hope you will not take my advice amiss,' he added and I nodded understandingly, inwardly rejoicing that he had already called me his friend.

'Although the Chinese call my people the Lolos, we dislike it intensely as it is a derogatory appellation and even its Chinese character carries an indicator which means "beast"; we may be savages, but nobody likes that to be said to his face,' he said with a wry smile and paused sipping his tea and looking at me with his brilliant eyes. 'The proper name for us which we use is Yi and next time you refer to the Lolos or when you speak to them, you

## *A Prince of the Black Bone*

had better call us "Yi-jen," i.e. Loloman just as you say Frenchman or Englishman.'

Then I learned that he was known to his own people as Nzemo Molin, i.e. Prince Molin, and that his capital was at Dienba some forty miles south of Fulin in the Taliangshan Mountains, i.e. 'The Great Cold Mountains' which were entirely inhabited by the Lolos, the whole place being known as the Independent Lolo Territory.

He was one of the Len clan, the most powerful in this locality, from which his surname Len was derived, translated into Chinese as Lin. For convenience's sake he also adopted a Chinese name of Kuangtien which really meant 'Electric Light'. He told me he chose such a name really in jest to show that he was not Chinese. His father was quite progressive and, encouraged by Commander Yang, had embarked on a programme of education of Lolo youths, himself translating some textbooks into the Lolo language. Prince Molin assured me that he was his late father's ardent follower and it was for this reason that he had entered the Central Military Academy in Nanking, together with his cousin, Prince Koumou Tsangyao who was a scion of the important Koumou clan farther south. His eyes had been opened and he thought that the Lolo race must modernize itself to survive these uncertain, changing times. Like his father, he welcomed modern medicine, school education for the Lolo children and, above all, modern military training and equipment for the Lolo youths to protect themselves from the encroachment of the provincial authorities. I noticed a look of black hatred appear in his eyes as he spoke of them. He did not care to conceal his contempt for them saying that their only ideal in life was gold, opium and plunder. Almost every provincial militarist's dream, however high or low in rank, was to organize an expedition to hunt the Lolos, as if they were beasts of prey, in the hope of enriching themselves on their gold and silver.

As I was so interested in the origin of his people, he told me that, according to some genealogical records in the possession of old noble families, the Lolos' original home was in what are now

## *The Black Bone Aristocracy*

the Chinese provinces of Kweichow and Yunnan, but the Chinese military expeditions against them, in the eighteenth century, utterly destroyed their old habitat, forcing those who had survived to flee to the inaccessible and at that time, uninhabited mountain fastnesses of the west.

The real Lolos, Prince Molin enlightened me, were the Noble Lolos or, as they styled themselves, the Black Bone aristocracy, analogous to the Blue Blood of English aristocracy. The set-up in Lololand was feudal. At the top of the social pyramid were the nzemos who were like princes. They controlled several clans and were rich and active; below them were the nobles, equivalent to dukes, who controlled only one or two clans. There were also independent but powerful families with extensive land holdings and local influence who might be termed marquises and barons. The princes, whose domains directly adjoined Chinese-controlled territories usually had their titles confirmed by the Chinese Government as 'tousze', which means ruling prince or paramount chief, and they were supplied with appropriate seals of office. It was an eminently face-saving device to the Chinese who thus maintained the fiction that somehow they were in control of large parts of the Lolo territory, although the fact that they could not enter, except by very special permission from the nzemo, was sedulously concealed, especially from foreigners. Prince Molin was in the category of a prince, and he was frankly pleased with the arrangements. No Chinese could enter his vast territory without an explicit invitation, a Lolo passport which carried the prince's guarantee for the person's safety. On the other hand, Prince Molin could travel all over China as he wished, perhaps without much pomp but, at least, with marked deference from the Chinese authorities. He had a much greater opportunity of securing arms and other vital supplies for his vassals and serfs than some other nzemo cooped up in his mountain lair. The usual Chinese requirement for such Lolo princes was to maintain a separate yamen on Chinese soil and reside there from time to time, the idea being, of course, that the prince could be seized as a hostage in times of trouble. Prince Molin, as we have seen, was a

## *A Prince of the Black Bone*

frequent guest at Commander Yang's mansion and thus the arrangement worked perfectly. However, not all Lolo princes enjoyed such safety and, as will be seen later, tragic events did happen.

There has always been bad blood between the Lolos and the Chinese, the latter evidently not being able to forgive them for occupying so large a territory. In 1868 the famous Chinese warrior, General Chao, led a great expedition against the Lolos. The Chinese were utterly defeated in battle and had to abandon to the Lolos considerable portions of what was considered Chinese soil. The Chinese were then forced to recognize Lolo independence. They nevertheless made several more unsuccessful attempts to subjugate the Lolos and their last effort in 1905 ended in disaster for the Chinese expeditionary force.

While telling me all these facts, Prince Molin's face was glowing. 'You see,' he continued, 'we are not growing weaker, we are growing stronger as time passes. We will yet play a great rôle in the world of the future;' his eyes flashed as he stopped, sipping tea.

He went on to explain that recognition of the territory occupied by the Lolos was not to be confused with diplomatic recognition of a separate state. It was only, at best, a moratorium on the war with the Lolos. The Black Bone Lolos did not make up a nation, like Burma or Siam; there was no king and central authority, and many clans warred with each other. There were no cities and no points which could be termed the capital with a central government. A great assembly of all the Noble Lolos was usually gathered during a dire emergency when the survival of the whole race was at stake and this was the only semblance of a central authority. During such crises it was possible for the nobles to elect a temporary king to guide them.

I was very happy to garner all this interesting information and finally asked Prince Molin what type of the Lolos I had met during my recent trip to Yehsaping plateau as Lee Chizau did not know himself, and was very vague about the whole thing. He explained that some were the White Lolos and a few were, like

## *The White Lolos*

Kolei, emigré Noble Lolos from the Taliangshan who had left the Independent Territory perhaps due to some trouble in their clan. Then he proceeded with his description of Noble and White Lolos.

The Noble Lolos were born warriors and essentially a pastoral people, given to breeding all kinds of domestic animals. But agricultural labour and all kinds of menial tasks were not considered a fit occupation for the aristocracy, and so they had serfs and slaves to perform these duties for them. These subject classes had their own strata and collectively were known as White Lolos.

In no case were they related to the Black Bone Lolos, who always remained a race apart, like the Brahmin caste of India, intermarrying only within their own circle. The White Lolos had always been recruited from the surrounding Chinese and Chiang tribes by the simple expedient of conquest and kidnapping. As they were strictly forbidden to talk their own dialect while in Lolo captivity, in a generation or two they became true Lolos in everything but blood. The hard-working and loyal slaves were elevated to serfs after several generations and many were given complete freedom, while enjoying their lord's protection and assistance. As the nobles despised trade, they were invaluable intermediaries between the Noble Lolos and the Chinese in obtaining supplies of necessities, having unrestricted entrée both to Chinese territory and to their former master's castle. Lolos who were defeated in battles with other clans sometimes migrated to faraway mountain ranges and sometimes the serfs, freed altogether, by the extinction of their lord's family, also moved to new territories to lead a separate existence. Yehsaping Plateau was one of these Lolo 'colonies', tied to the Taliangshan Lolos by a bond of loyalty, but otherwise independent.

Next afternoon, when I called again on Prince Molin, he was looking at a photograph of a beautiful woman. His face was sad and his eyes misty.

'This is my first wife,' he said, and then added. 'She is dead.' There was a slight tremor in his voice. He told me how much in love he was with her and how heartbroken when she died in

## *A Prince of the Black Bone*

childbirth a year before. Now he was married to a young Black Lissu princess. The Black Lissu, who lived on the inaccessible mountain tops of Western Yunnan, were closely related to the Black Lolos and were also divided into Black and White Lissu, on the lines of the Lolo social hierarchy. Last month the young bride had returned to her parents on a prolonged visit and later he would go to bring her back. Both the Noble Lolos' and the Black Lissu's women were proud and independent. Sometimes they decided not to come back to their spouses and their parents could do nothing about it. Thus the husband had to exercise both diplomacy and charm to induce his young wife to return with him; his coming excursion was both a fresh courtship and a new honeymoon.

Every day at meal time Commander Yang watched me and Prince Molin. When he had decided that our friendship was ripe enough, he broached the subject of my proposed trip to Sichang through the Independent Lolo territory in his usual brusque manner.

'I have an idea,' he said, turning to Prince Molin, 'that it would be possible for you to arrange this matter.' Smilingly Prince Molin nodded his head. I was instantly filled with exultation. The trip offered novel vistas of thrilling adventures and a new orientation for my plans.

## XVI

### *Road to Dienba*

WHEN I called in the morning at Prince Molin's office he was waiting for me and, without any preliminaries, told me that he was making arrangements for me to leave for Dienba, his capital, the following morning. On his advice, I and Lee Chizau went into the market street and returned loaded with boxes of matches, silk embroidering thread and other utility articles similar to what I had bought for my Yehsaping trip. These were gifts for distribution on the way as Lolos placed no value on Chinese paper money. I carried only a little money with me as the wise Commissioner Lee had arranged for me to draw cash from the branches of his Co-operative Treasury at all big towns *en route*.

The rest of the afternoon Prince Molin spent in writing a letter to his majordomo at Dienba and a 'passport' for his vassals and friends in the Taliangshan. The Lolo script flowed from under his capable hand. It was nothing like Chinese ideographs, but a succession of circles and half-circles, crescents, swastika-like images, and cones. Then he made a recapitulation of his admonitions to me.

'I am uneasy about your going there,' he began, with his eyes averted. 'There are great dangers on the way; you must remember it is not a high road but only a small trail,' he continued. 'I have done all I could but, still, my people are sometimes unpredictable; they dislike all intruders.' He sighed. 'Be polite as usual, and do not show any superiority. Dress properly when visiting Lolo homes, poor though they may be. And never, *never* touch people, paw them or greet them with a slap on their back,' he said. 'To touch a Lolo's hair means certain death, for their knot of hair is sacred. We believe that the Divine Spirit communicates

## *Road to Dienba*

with man through it.' He became silent, looking at me anxiously. I felt very sad. Here was an excellent man and a true friend, and presently I must part from him, perhaps forever. We clasped each other's hand.

When I returned to my room, I found Lee Chizau sitting on the coffin with a troubled look on his face. I asked him what was the matter.

'If you went to Sichang using the big highway, I would have gone with you,' he said. 'But now that you have decided to go through Lolo places, you must count me out.' He became silent, and then added a purely Chinese face-saving device. 'There is much work on my farm and I cannot spare the time.' I was surprised, and then tried to persuade him to accompany me.

'Never! Never!' he exclaimed. 'No Chinese will go with you. Nobody wants to be kidnapped or killed.' I understood. This was the Independent Lolo territory and he had no connections there. Prince Molin's passport did not include him. Then we agreed that he and his cousin Louching would come down with a caravan to Sichang in about a month's time and wait for me there. With this matter settled, he was ready to return home.

On the day of my departure, Prince Molin came early to my room and introduced to me two of his men-at-arms. In my presence he explained to them their duties about escorting me to his capital and on to Sichang. One of the soldiers was called Alamaz and another Akazak. I looked at them with interest. Both were short and stocky, Alamaz being rather plump. They wore black turbans, black velour jackets and enormous trousers joined somewhere below the knee so that the seat hung down like a deflated balloon. Their belts around the waist and shoulders were decorated with mother-of-pearl buttons and they carried a quiver of arrows and a big bow, also similarly adorned. On their sandals were the usual red pompons. I tried to make friends with them at once and succeeded in winning some recognition from the fat Alamaz, but Akazak looked at me distrustfully and morosely with his large black eyes.

'They speak some Chinese,' Prince Molin assured me. 'That is



## *The Elegantly Dressed Ladies*

why I am sending them.' My baggage consisted of a suitcase, a bed-roll and a basket with sundries and provisions, for there were no eating shops on the way. Alamaz took the suitcase with some show of reluctance and Akazak looked at me malevolently as he lifted the bed-roll and basket. I had a presentiment of trouble and looked at Prince Molin.

'I am sorry,' he said. 'Even I am not in a position to command the men-at-arms to carry burdens. Only slaves will do this menial task, and these men are not slaves. They nevertheless promised me to carry all this at least as far as Dienba. From that point you must have horses.' And we left.

It was only a short trip to the Tatu River. 'Hello, my old friend the Tatu!' I exclaimed, dipping my hand into the rushing waters as we sat in the boat. The mighty current tore at us and almost literally threw us to the other bank. The path there was very pretty, passing through a wood full of green and gold shadows with sharp jagged mountains looming in the background. Our progress was slow as the little soldiers were indeed unaccustomed to carrying heavy burdens and sat down to rest every ten minutes. Swinging my walking-stick I nonchalantly went ahead and found another path ahead crossing mine. There was a movement of colour among the sun-drenched trees and in a moment I found myself confronting a bevy of elegantly dressed ladies at the cross-roads. They were tall and graceful in their ample petunia skirts of dark blue colour and wine-hued, pale pink and green coats with broad-brimmed black silk hats with black ribbons falling down to their shoulders. On their necks were carved silver collars and they wore long ear-rings made of mother-of-pearl ovals and silver bracelets. They were very handsome with their dark delicate faces, aquiline noses and large lustrous eyes. They stopped and looked at me with great dignity and haughtiness. To me they appeared like Italian princesses of bygone days. The tension was mounting in me as I stood staring at them and then my caution took the upper hand. 'Mesdames!' I said softly stepping aside and bowing. They smiled, nodded their heads and walked on as silently as they had come in their sandals of hempen string, and

## *Road to Dienba*

only the trilling of their silvery laughter came faintly from the distance. I turned to my companions who had come up.

‘Who were those women?’ I asked. They were badly frightened and their teeth almost chattered as they replied.

‘Black Lolos,’ they gasped. ‘Very bad, very dangerous,’ they added looking around. ‘Don’t look! Walk! Don’t talk!’ they implored me accelerating their pace. ‘Forest civilization!’ I exclaimed to myself, wondering why it was so dangerous to encounter such cultured and noble ladies. Only afterwards I heard the solution to the riddle. The little soldiers believed these ladies belonged to an enemy clan and, had they been escorted by their men, we might have encountered serious trouble.

Our intolerably slow march ended at dusk when we entered a gloomy, lifeless defile with stupendous crags closing all about us, half concealed in a dense semi-tropical jungle. As the moon was rising I saw a strange structure hidden at the foot of a mighty cliff. It was a sort of lean-to out of which dense smoke issued. We came to find a bleary-eyed old Chinese fanning a fire on the ground and two or three other men, ragged and disreputable-looking. My soldiers seemed to know them and put their burden down in a corner. They appeared to be relieved.

‘Here we sleep tonight,’ they declared taking out the eatables and a jar of wine thoughtfully supplied by the generous ‘Queen of Fulin’. We had a good meal and plenty to drink and I stretched contentedly on some planks in a corner. The smoke from the brightly-burning fire bothered me but it made the hovel quite warm. I asked the old man to douse the flames. ‘No, no!’ he exclaimed excitedly, looking out apprehensively. ‘Tigers! Plenty of them,’ he added.

I could not sleep well. There were strange noises in the jungle, the hooting of great owls, screeches and the sound of breaking branches. Then came a roar such as I had never heard in my life.

‘What was that?’ I asked excitedly shaking Akazak.

‘A tiger,’ he murmured turning over to the other side. The roar was repeated near and far, then it died away and, just as I was about to close my eyes, the trumpeting of a big deer came

## *Alamaz and Akazak*

through, sounding like a cock's crow. Soon it was time to get up again.

The path now wound through the defile in deep jungle. It was still dark as we started, but daylight was gaining rapidly. The forest was filled with what seemed to be human calls and laughter and I was wondering how all those women and children came to be out so early. I asked my little soldiers if there was a village near by.

'No. Those are not women and children,' they laughed. 'They are big monkeys.' As the light grew better I saw hundreds of them climbing up and down the trees and rocks at the foot of great crags.

There were no human beings anywhere and it was only about noon that we reached a miserable little hamlet with a few wizened Szechuanese and White Lolos. They surrounded us, looking incredulously at the foreigner with two Lolo soldiers. Akazak threw down my baggage vehemently on the ground under a huge old tree.

'I and Alamaz have had enough of carrying your baggage,' he told me belligerently strolling away. I was dumbfounded. 'What a filthy low-down trick!' I ejaculated to myself feeling quite lost, 'And in such a hole!' In a little while they both returned. I tried to be firm with them, alternately threatening them with their king's displeasure—for wasn't I his good friend—and then promising a rich reward when we got to Dienba. It had no effect. They sat near by sullenly drinking tea.

'Akazak is ill,' at last ventured Alamaz who, as I had noticed before, was more kindly disposed towards me. I came up to Akazak, and realized that his face was indeed an unhealthy yellow. I asked him to follow me into a hut near by.

'What is the matter, Akazak?' I asked him. He looked at me glumly and then lowered his trousers. I was appalled at what was such a neglected case of gonorrhoea. All my anger was gone. I put some money in his hand and thanked him.

'Shall we go back to Fulin?' I asked as we settled down to a conference, free of any animosity. This was a final test of their

## *Road to Dienba*

loyalty and they looked at each other in confusion. Their bravado collapsed at the prospect of an irate reception from their lord. They talked among themselves for a long time, got up and disappeared in the village to return later with an old Chinese.

‘We persuaded this man to carry your things to Dienba,’ they announced. I pretended that nothing had happened and, after a hurried meal, we rose to go with poor Akazak remaining behind.

The hamlet was in a bowl, the only place where the implacable cliffs moved away from each other to give space to a few lush fields of corn and vegetables, there was pasture for horses and pigs. The path slowly ascended amidst tall grass and shrubs towards another gorge gaping above. There were warning shouts from the fields and we stopped. The soldier listened attentively and then, full of agitation, ran towards me.

‘A big tiger is prowling around here,’ he said breathlessly. ‘It was seen several times this morning,’ he added. I surveyed my ‘armed forces’—a small fat soldier with a bow and some arrows, myself with a walking-stick and a poor opium smoker bending under his load. ‘To be or not to be?’ I chuckled to myself and we cautiously went on, not daring to talk. The path came to a spring with beautiful forget-me-nots, the first I had seen since leaving Europe—a lucky omen perhaps. In the mud around were depressions, still fresh, as if somebody had pressed rice bowls down into the earth. My companions stopped petrified and pointed out. ‘Good Heavens!’ I exclaimed involuntarily as the full import of these holes broke in on me; they were a tiger’s pug marks, leading up the path, still clearly visible. In our panic we climbed up the right slope, stepping gingerly among trees and shrubs and avoiding the path. A towering rock finally made us descend again . . . the pug marks were still there, so freshly impressed that the tiger must have passed less than an hour ago. Not daring to breathe we tiptoed on, with the tall grass around us. It was a very unpleasant sensation to feel that now, any moment, the monster might jump on one of us. We did not dare even to look aside, proceeding like automatons. At last the marks disappeared but we still continued to shuffle along silently. On the left, on the

## *Dienba*

other side, was a steep forested hill-side and a brook bubbling along the stony bed. At last we were able to rest on a little meadow, all drenched in sweat. The Chinese pointed with his finger at the cliffs.

‘Dienba is beyond this mountain range,’ he said. ‘But we won’t reach it till late in the afternoon,’ he added. We took a long swig from the jar and felt better.

‘Any more terrors?’ I asked jocularly as we plodded along. The man turned around.

‘No,’ he said. ‘It is quite safe now—only those leopards,’ he added in a matter of fact tone. It was my turn to get shocked.

‘Where?’ I demanded sharply. ‘There,’ he replied waving his hand towards the long cliff. I nearly collapsed with astonishment. The limestone cliff was pock-marked with caves and projections on which shrubs and small trees were growing. In and out of the caves and between the shrubs walked leopards, dozens of them, unhurriedly and unabashedly. Some looked at us before disappearing into their holes, while others indulged in a game of hide-and-seek, circling around rocks. As we drew nearer to Dienba more of them seemed to disport themselves on the rocks above. My heart beat fast and I wondered whether it was their custom to attack in packs. As if divining my thoughts Alamaz spoke.

‘They do not attack grown-up men walking together,’ he said, ‘They are after foals, piglings, calves and children,’ he explained. ‘But if you or I were alone, we would probably be eaten up,’ he comforted me.

As the sun was setting and long shadows began to fill the vermin-infested gorge, we rounded a corner, crossed a swift stream on a log and I was told that Dienba, the capital of Prince Molin, lay before us. However, I could not see any town but only two round hills, or rather eminences, in front of me. On the nearer and smaller one stood a huge, squat Chinese temple with a tall curving roof and vermilion walls, with a number of buildings around it, and on another—a dolmenic arrangement of white stones, surrounded by a balustrade, with curious flags attached to a high pole in the centre.

## XVII

### *The Capital of Prince Molin*

‘WHAT kind of temple is that?’ I asked the Chinese as we made our way slowly towards it.

‘That is no temple at all,’ he answered. ‘It is his king’s palace,’ and he winked at the little soldier who straightened up and preened himself before entering such an important edifice.

I felt rather disappointed when, instead of proceeding to the palace, where I expected to stay, we entered a long school building, and I was deposited in a small but clean room in an annex occupied by the teacher and his wife. I paid off the Chinese and Alamaz disappeared into the palace which was connected to the annex by a short corridor. In a few minutes my hosts arrived. Mr. and Mrs. Wang were a young, gentle and well-mannered couple, war refugees from one of the central provinces of China.

‘I apologize for the intrusion,’ I greeted them. ‘I thought I should be put up at Prince Molin’s palace.’ They exchanged glances and smiled.

‘No, you are welcome here,’ said Mr. Wang. ‘Prince Molin has written to ask us to accommodate you whilst you are here,’ he added. ‘You can see the palace tomorrow,’ and they left me to unpack.

Mrs. Wang prepared a delicious dinner of stewed beef and potatoes, almost a real Irish stew, chicken soup and some cold dishes. I ate voraciously.

‘You eat very well here,’ I observed wiping my mouth with a hot towel. Again they exchanged glances as if there existed a secret which I did not yet know. I noticed right at the start how pleased they were to see me, a stranger coming from their beloved places

## *Mr. and Mrs. Wang*

in China, a new face to dispel the monotony of their lonely existence in this forgotten and isolated place where they lived practically alone among the dreaded Lolos. Presently their reserve went and they vied with one another to pour out their burdened hearts.

'You do not understand . . .' began Mrs. Wang. 'It is because of your coming that we eat so well today,' and she paused glancing again at her husband. 'It is very difficult to get any provisions here because few Lolos care to sell anything. They prefer to consume what they grow or breed themselves as they do not want Chinese currency.' She sighed. 'We depend entirely on Prince Molin's household to provide us with eatables and can only occasionally buy a chicken or a piece of pork at the market.' She stopped as her husband took up the conversation.

'Yes,' he said, 'while you are here they will continue to supply us well because they have orders from the prince.' He smiled, 'And we must take this chance for a little feasting.'

They told me that they had met Prince Molin for the first time in Chungking. They had a very hard time there arriving penniless, with all their things lost and with no decent place to live and little work to do. The war capital was overcrowded with refugee intelligentsia; full of death and confusion owing to daily bombing raids and an atmosphere of despair and helplessness. At first they thought Prince Molin was a real Chinese when he offered both of them a job with decent pay and quarters at Dienba. They gladly accepted, having little idea of the remoteness of the place and the savage conditions of life among the barbaric tribes. They did not regret their coming here, but, they confessed, they were still frightened and unable to get rid of a gnawing, debilitating dread of the Lolos which poisoned their otherwise peaceful and uneventful lives. They both taught and she did a little nursing and clinical work at the school for the Lolo children.

The school was founded and financed by the liberal-minded Prince Molin, who believed so much in the value of modern education for his fierce and intractable race. At first the idea of educating the Lolos in Chinese appeared rather incongruous to

## *The Capital of Prince Molin*

me but, upon reflection, I could hardly see any alternative. Anything modern for which the Lolos craved, came to them from China or through China and, however powerful and brave they were, they could not ignore the fact that their territory was but a piece of mosaic in the colossal territorial pattern of China. Even if they were to attain real nationhood in the future, their State would still be separated by many hundreds of miles from other independent nations of Asia. While the existence of several tiny European states, like San Marino or Andorra, was guaranteed by proper treaties and the pressure of international opinion, the Independent Lolos could attain recognition as a proper state, under suzerainty of China, only through force of arms. But these arms could be obtained only from China. Therefore, loss of pride or no, they had to extend their connections with China and that could not be done without the knowledge of Chinese; and the value of recent technological developments in warfare, the subject dearest to their hearts, could only be learnt through the medium of Chinese publications.

‘Prince Molin is a good, kind man,’ interjected Mrs. Wang after a while, and my heart warmed at hearing another testimony to the sterling character of my good friend.

‘But,’ continued her husband, ‘even he has great difficulties in controlling certain conservative and unruly elements among his vassals and liegemen, and actually he has little influence among other independent princes and lords in the Taliangshan,’ he said, pointing to the towering blue range in the east. ‘Supposing something happens to him or if there is a raid by enemy clans . . .’ and he shuddered at the nameless terrors which would then be their lot.

I got up late next morning wakened by a hubbub of children’s voices at the school, laughing, screaming and intoning Chinese characters all at once. After washing and shaving, I strolled into the classroom to find Mrs. Wang presiding over a hundred Lolo boys, of all ages up to twelve or thirteen. At her signal they stopped and rose to greet me. They were all barefoot and clad in blue pants and shirts over which a stiff bell-shaped cloak, made of



*'Oh my little mushrooms'*

black wool matting, was thrown and tied at the chin. The sacred locks of hair, like little palm trees or tails, grew from the crowns of their shaven heads. Each carried in a small bag a thick buckwheat pancake and a small pot of honey which, Mrs. Wang explained, was their lunch. They were frightened when I strolled among them and were ready to make a dash for the door. I smiled and patted one or two on the arm and sat down. They then brightened up and surrounded me. They looked incredibly comical with their little tails and cloaks reminding me of mushrooms or turnips. I kissed two or three of them in Chinese style by rubbing my nose over their cheeks. There was a whoop of surprise and delight as they all pressed around me to be kissed on their unwashed faces. Afterwards I had to scrub my blackened nose with a wet towel. Then they became serious and business-like as each child came up to me, pulled the pancake out of his bag, broke off a piece and gave it to me, also offering a sip of honey out of the pot. As I was unable to consume all these offerings, Mrs. Wang fetched a jar, each boy pouring a little honey into it until it was full to overflowing.

'Oh my little mushrooms!' I exclaimed happily in English, overcome with paternal tenderness as they rushed at me to be kissed again before departing for home.

Walking back to my room I noticed little Almaz, resplendent in enormous silk trousers of a grass-green colour. I brought him into Mr. Wang's office and together we proceeded to the palace through the corridor. It was a ceilingless hall of majestic proportions, like a big temple, but so begrimed by smoke from a huge stone hearth sunk into the floor in the centre, that it looked like a coal-dealer's barn. One wall was decorated with hanging leather shields, spears, swords in scabbards, bows, quivers and some sam-bur horns, whilst a couple of long Chinese scrolls, almost defaced by smoke and a layer of dust, hung on another. Below this display of armour was a low wooden dais on which Prince Molin's throne stood, a massive carved armchair on which a leopard skin was negligently thrown. A huge sooty cauldron hung over the cold hearth. Otherwise there was nothing else in the hall—no chairs,

## *The Capital of Prince Molin*

benches or tables; the floor was of mud, quite uneven and rarely swept and heavy cobwebs shrouded the gloomy corners. Now I knew the wisdom of my being put up at the school.

A huge, bulky Lolo came to meet us, with cold, cunning eyes shining from a bloated, pock-marked face. Mr. Wang introduced me to the Chief of Prince Molin's household, in other words his 'Prime Minister'. He greeted me politely but, as there was nothing to sit on but the dusty floor, we remained standing. He said that he had a letter from the Prince commanding him to present me, on his behalf, with a pony and to render courtesies and assistance. He had, therefore, placed me in a comfortable room at the school providing me with victuals. He regretted he was unable to entertain me at the palace as the new queen had gone on a prolonged visit to her parents. He enjoined me to rest for a few days as the horses had not yet arrived from up-country, and on this I bowed myself out.

On the third morning I was determined to explore Dienba. No Lolo at the palace would go with me, proffering one pretext or another, probably on account of language difficulties, and Alamaz declared that he was 'resting', which meant that he was sitting all day long on his haunches before the fire, with his unseeing eyes directed at one point, undoubtedly dreaming of future battles. Mr. and Mrs. Wang would not go out for anything, and they were up in arms at the idea of my solitary excursion.

'They are wild and reckless and will either shoot or stab you,' they prophesied, henceforth referring to the Lolos as 'they'. Finally I got tired of their arguments and went out, with my faithful walking-stick, and began to climb the eminence with the flags. It was not so easy as I had imagined. First of all it was much higher than it appeared from the palace. Moreover, it consisted of concentric rings of steep terraces, faced with uncut stones, with deep wide irrigation ditches passing at the foot of each terrace. The terraces themselves were beautifully cultivated plots of land on which grew luxuriant crops of sweet potatoes and other vegetables. They would have killed me if I had tried to walk over

## *View from the Top*

their crops, so I had to keep to the stone edges, miniature precipices which overlooked the deep ditches.

At last I got to the top to find a broad round lawn with a stupendous stone balustrade hieratically arranged around the tall pole with flags. It was clearly a place of sacrifice. I did not dare to go into the circle for fear of trespassing on sacred ground. The view was magnificent. There were isolated farms here and there and to the south a group of buildings, and a street which was the Dienba's market-place. Interspersed with groves of trees and fringed by forested hills the country was cultivated with a great variety of crops forming multi-coloured patches with irrigation trenches running in geometrical patterns. Watched by Lolo youths and guarded by sturdy dogs, there were herds of fat, well-fed cattle on lush meadows, with sleek horses and mules. It was a surprise to find such a high local standard of prosperity and development in agriculture and animal husbandry.

I remained for some time on top of the hill held by the beauty of the dark forests, climbing up the mountain slopes with wide patches of softly gleaming pink which were fields of flowering buckwheat. The white cliffs of the range we had followed to Dienba towered over this gentle valley and I could again see the leopards weaving in and out of their caves among the shrubs.

I descended, again with the utmost difficulty, to the market-place, walking along a broad path which connected it with the palace. The houses were solidly constructed, with spacious verandas and well-filled shops. Here a small colony of Chinese merchants lived and carried on their business, despite an ingrained terror of the Lolos. The position was altogether anomalous. The Lolos could go anywhere on Chinese soil, unmolested, provided they deposited their firearms at a police station or some such government agency for the duration of their stay, but the Chinese could not enter Lololand unless they had a special passport from one of the princes. Even then they could only reside within his domain and, if they ventured elsewhere, they could be kidnapped and enslaved by enemy clans. The Chinese merchants at Dienba had such passports from Prince Molin and, in fairness to the Lolos,

## *The Capital of Prince Molin*

they were strictly respected. If the Chinese were peaceful citizens and stuck to their legitimate trade, they had nothing to fear.

I was invited to one of the shops and, over a cup of wine, I had a long conversation with the merchant. His attitude amused me. It was a strange mixture of traditional Chinese contempt for the 'savage barbarians' and all their works and at the same time, there was reflected an equally traditional and profound respect for their bravery and ruthlessness. In the privacy of his inner room he reviled the Lolos as if they were mangy curs which could be kicked with his boot any time. But, by contrast, one would see him cringing and slobbering when a Lolo entered his shop.

Business was good, I gathered, as there was bees' wax, copper, leopard skins and other furs, buffalo and deer hides and honey for export to Fulin. Of course, his most important line was wax which formed a prized item of commerce with Szechuan. It appeared that the insect lived in Lololand on a kind of privet bush, but produced the wax only in the milder climate of Szechuan by pricking a particular kind of tree. Knowing that the Lolos would not take Chinese paper money, business was done on a barter basis. The shops at Dienba had matches, rock salt, sugar, sewing thread and a few other indispensable items, but, to my practised eye, that was not enough for real barter. All Lolos were hell-bent on obtaining arms, and these merchants knew about this desire; but that was not a fit subject for conversation between strangers.

The mystery of Prince Molin's palace being in the style of a Chinese temple or official yamen, which subconsciously bothered me for some time, soon resolved itself. There was a similar structure, which I was to see later. Before the Lolo Independence wars, Dienba, Kaokiao and other small towns in Lololand had indeed been purely Chinese settlements and were incorporated into the Independent territory at the Peace settlement. This also explained the substantial Chinese shops. The Lolos, contrary to expectation, did not kill or enslave bona fide residents, but let them live and trade under special guarantee from the ruler.

Several horses and one mule were offered for my selection next

## *A Gift from Prince Molin*

day by the pock-marked Prime Minister. I ruled the mule out at once, and of the ponies I chose one with red-brown splotches on creamy white, called Hwama—Flowery Horse. It was a friendly and gentle stallion, still quite young. I could hardly believe my ears when I was told that the animal was a gift from Prince Molin. Could a king do more? Alamaz, however, pointed out that we needed yet another horse to carry our things. We chose a tiny mouse-grey filly for which I paid ninety silver dollars; it was not a wise bargain as I later learnt to my cost, for it was too small even to carry any baggage. I had no saddle and was persuaded to accept one used by the Lolos, made of wood and lacquered black with silver designs and covered with a wool mat and a Tibetan rug.

One morning Alamaz appeared and warned me not to go out as Prince Zjegha, whose Chinese name was Lin Ponching and who was a cousin of Prince Molin, would like to see me. I could not make out whether he was coming to call, or whether I should go there. After lunch I put on my best suit and sat waiting.

About three o'clock in the afternoon a Lolo of superb physique and mien galloped to the school on a black mule with a silver saddle, bringing another saddled mule with him. He was so regal-looking, that I was sure it was the Prince and rushed to Mr. Wang.

'No, it's not him,' he said. 'It's his Chief Minister. I think you must go with him.'

The knight dismounted, saluted and told Alamaz to assist me into the saddle. He wanted to gallop back, but I persuaded him to desist as I was not too sure of the huge fiery beast I was riding. Thus we proceeded in state, the poor little soldier trotting behind us on his short legs, his immense green trousers billowing in the breeze like sails.

Passing Dienba market we went up the narrow valley and stopped before some ornate gates. We entered a spacious square courtyard around which ran cloister-like buildings, constructed in Chinese style, with red pillars—a typical arrangement of a Chinese yamen.

The Chief Minister conducted me into a commodious room,

## *The Capital of Prince Molin*

full of Lolo gentlemen, and introduced me to a thin, narrow-shouldered man in his thirties, clad, to my astonishment, in a Chinese long gown.

'Nzemo Zjegha!' he said curtly as he bowed slightly and stepped aside. I was surprised to see that he was a lean, rather weary-looking man, for he was ruler of these Husky Lolos.

I made a deep bow and was received with effusive cordiality. He led me to an adjoining hall, where there were benches and chairs grouped around a small dais against one of the walls on which stood a chair of state covered with a tiger skin. Many articles of armour hung on the wall above it. Prince Zjegha introduced me to his vassals and councillors who formed a splendid group. They were mostly elderly men, some with grey moustaches, and dressed in dark embroidered tunics and wide, skirt-like trousers. Most of them were tall and some had sword-scarred faces, framed in black and blue turbans. They were all tough-looking and dignified, with a slight touch of arrogance, collectively creating an atmosphere of power and ruthlessness. I was wondering who ruled whom and came to a secret conclusion that Nzemo Zjegha could not do much without their consent and approval.

Each noble was attended by a page, probably a favourite serf. They were young men in white turbans with black veloux jackets and immense silk trousers of striking colours—poison green, cerise, blue and lemon-yellow. They were attentive and polite, but, otherwise singularly free and cheerful as they went about distributing porcelain bowls of wine brought into the room in a large jar. They did not treat their masters with obsequiousness but behaved rather like sons who had to watch over their tippling fathers, lending them a supporting hand in case of need.

The prince took a bowl of wine and offered it to me himself.

'*Zhi wua!*' he cried out. 'It means "drink wine" in our language.' I tried it. It was cherry-coloured, hissing with golden bubbles. It tasted like pink champagne, quite sweet and exceedingly palatable, its bubbles pleasantly tickling my throat. I wondered what it was. The nobles watched me as I drank.

## Toasts

'How do you like our wine?' they asked me in unison.

'It's wonderful!' I replied, 'Just like Veuve Cliquot,' I added in my enthusiasm, explaining its similarity to French champagne. They were very pleased.

'It is made of red buckwheat and honey,' they told me. '*Zhi wua! Zhi wua!*' came repeated toasts as we emptied bowl after bowl. We were becoming merrier and merrier with all formality thrown to the wind.

In the meantime the courtyard filled with more young men in their short jackets and immense trousers of all colours, their hair sticking out of their turbans in picturesque knots while their silver, gold and amber ear-rings dangled from an ear. They began to arrange low tables and benches in orderly rows over the well-swept mud floor.

When the sun had set behind the mountains Prince Zjegha made a sign for all of us to come out and take seats at the tables. Then the ladies took over, issuing from the dark recesses in the rear. Attired in blue petunia skirts, pleated and flounced, and with wine-red, purple and black jackets and in black bonnets, each *grande dame* was followed by a serving woman in a more modest dress and barefoot, carrying a tray of food. A large bowl was placed in the centre of each table, together with spoons and earthen bowls for wine. These large bowls were beautifully carved out of wood, resembling huge, rather deep champagne glasses on short stems; they were gilt on the outside with red lacquered rims and floral designs. The spoons were also of wood, similarly decorated, with long handles, their only difference from western spoons being their handles which joined the spoons at the side. A wooden tray with thick green buckwheat pancakes was also placed on the table. They were freshly baked, and had an appetizing bready, if somewhat bitter, taste. Toasting each other in pink *zhi* we started to consume the food. The entire bowl was filled with chilled *zhi* which was heavily loaded with cubes of cold venison, chicken, mutton and some diced vegetables. The ladies settled down to eat by themselves at other tables, rising from time to time to see that the big bowls were refilled with more

## *The Capital of Prince Molin*

food, while the young men hovered about bringing more wine. There then followed whole roast chickens, legs of venison and mutton which we ate breaking the pieces off with our hands or with the aid of sharp daggers, which each Lolo carried at his belt.

Darkness fell imperceptibly as lampions were brought in and Chinese paper lanterns hung in the galleries. The bright gamboge disc of the full moon slowly pushed itself up from behind the shadowy contours of the Taliangshan, flooding the valley and the courtyard with soft radiance. The rich food was still on the table, and the bowls half full of *zhi*, but we all felt too replete to eat or drink. The young men brought mandolines and flutes, softly breaking out into nostalgic tunes. Then they began to sing and soon, warmed with too much food and wine, they were whirling about in a dance, their immense trousers puffing up like coloured balloons.

It was quite late when I thought it was time for me to leave this fantastic feast. With so many bowls of *zhi* inside me, I was not up to riding the big mule and insisted on walking home, accompanied by the faithful Alamaz and other members of Prince Molin's household. They were tipsy themselves, but at least they knew the way. Other inebriated and happy Lolos spilled into the road leading to the market where some shops were still open. But the cautious merchants began putting up shutters, seeing the approach of such a boisterous crowd. I was stopped by a group of gay young Lolos who squatted before a shop, sharing a large jar of fiery white wine. They pulled me in with them insisting that I drink again. I flatly declined, feeling that I already had had more than enough. Unfortunately, they appeared to take ill my refusal to keep them company, their expressions changing from friendly smiles into ugly leers. Seeing my difficulties a Chinese shopkeeper came down and started delivering a lecture to me on Lolo manners, explaining how the 'cultivated' Lolos behaved and what the 'raw' Lolos were like. Perhaps his description was not intelligible to the Lolos, who knew no Chinese, but his gestures were eloquent enough. A Lolo suddenly sprang up and rushed at him with a dagger. He was restrained just in time, while the



### *Some Unfriendly Lolos*

Chinese had an opportunity to disappear. But his unwise remarks had aroused their animosity towards me and they all started fingering their daggers looking at me with ill-concealed malevolence. I was saved, however, by Prince Molin's major-domo who had come up on his way home. He snapped at them and they fell back, while I continued on my way without further incident.

## XVIII

### *The Great Cold Mountains*

WE left early next morning, slowly passing Dienba market and climbed a rocky path across a hill. Then we stepped into a new, unknown country, the true land of princes and lords of the Black Bone.

I had expected to march through a continuous forest, with wild animals, encountering perhaps here and there a Lolo hut, but the opening vista shattered my delusion. Our way led along the top of a ridge which appeared low against the Taliangshan. The latter, veiled in blue shadows, lay immediately to the left and another range ran along, parallel to it. Although late spring reigned at our altitude of some seven thousand feet, the crests of both ranges, over 12,000 feet high, were tipped with a light layer of snow which sparkled in the morning sunshine. Forests climbed almost to the summit of the ranges interrupted by alpine meadows and clearings which sometimes glowed with that gentle pink colour from flowering buckwheat. Our path wound among small meadows overgrown with wild flowers whose scent filled the crisp morning air, dry and invigorating after the close and somewhat sticky warmth of the hill-enclosed Dienba and so different from the steamy heat of the gorge where I had met the monkeys and leopards. The slopes of our ridge fell in gentle folds into rocky ravines, where streams gushed and whispered among boulders, to climb again up the eminences and the still higher foothills leading to the other ranges. Now and then we came to some dark and mysterious thickets of firs interlaced with other trees, concealed in deep depressions, where flocks of gaily feathered parrots chattered at our approach interspersed with the strident screeching cries of pheasants who, unafraid, leisurely trotted across our path.

## *'A Black Lolo Castle'*

A great stillness otherwise reigned in this vast land and I felt an unimaginable peace stealing over me. There was not a single human being visible anywhere. As the sun rose higher it became warmer and little Alamaz, who this time wore a brown stiff mushroom-shaped cloak, took it off. Giving him my rein I dismounted from Hwama and began walking to enjoy the beauty of this unspoilt landscape, undisturbed by the hazards of riding.

Soon I noticed some buildings on the far-away hill-tops, surrounded by tall, thick-walled stockades, from which smoke was curling upwards to disappear in the vault of the cloudless sky.

'What are those houses?' I asked Alamaz.

'A Black Lolo castle,' he answered, and I noticed a troubled look come into his black eyes. The farther we progressed the more nervous he became. He urged me in a whisper not to talk so loudly, and to march unobtrusively so as not to attract attention. Soon two men approached us from the opposite direction. Alamaz visibly cringed, looking at them apprehensively. 'Don't talk to them!' he whispered. They were two stately Lolo gentlemen in black tsarwas leisurely trotting along on their sleek ponies. Rifles were slung over their shoulders and the sun gleamed on their silver-sheathed daggers. There was genuine astonishment on their aquiline faces as they saw me and my little caravan. I greeted them with a light bow to which they replied with a smile and passed on, still turning their heads now and then to look at us.

We came to a turn in the road and below us on a broad, cupola-shaped hill stood one of the 'castles'. As it was quite near, I could observe its arrangements in detail. It was a well-levelled, beaten mud platform which contained a row of two or three long buildings, mere huts covered with shingles, and a few smaller structures; there were some horses and cattle inside, and the whole ensemble was surrounded by a stockade made of stout sharpened wood poles reinforced with boulders and earth. Around it were fields of wheat or barley and some vegetable plots. People were coming in and out of the buildings.

'Alamaz!' I called. 'Could we go down and visit them!' A

## *The Great Cold Mountains*

shadow of panic flitted across his face as he began to implore me again not to look and talk. He was genuinely distressed over my proposition to visit the castle, although I had uttered it half in jest.

'But why not?' I pursued the subject. He shuddered.

'We shall be seized and made slaves.' He said in a low voice pulling Hwama's rein and accelerating his pace.

'But we are carrying a passport from Prince Molin,' I continued. He shook his head.

'It may not work. It is often disregarded. It is not addressed to the head of this family personally,' he spoke hurriedly. 'These are Black Bone Lolos. They are of princely rank themselves and my king hardly means anything to them.'

I was on the point of mildly chiding Alamaz for his lack of enterprise, but luckily had a sudden realization of our position. Alamaz knew his country and his people, and I did not. What to me seemed legitimate curiosity was to him an unwarranted risk which he could not afford to take, because I had been entrusted to his charge by his lord and also because he did not want to jeopardize his own safety. He had to deliver me to Sichang and he was doing the right thing according to his lights. I had to remind myself that we were not a heavily-armed and well-manned expedition and that our safety entirely depended on a small piece of paper which could be ignored or torn to bits like a proverbial international treaty. Capture and enslavement was not a hypothesis, but a grim possibility which we must face during the whole duration of our trip. In spite of the smiling scenery and peace around us, we were in a dangerous, lawless country, many miles away from any town or village where Chinese authorities existed. Our disappearance would not be noticed quickly, and who would then dare to go into these wild mountains to rescue us?

Hwama's nostrils trembled as the smell of other horses was wafted to him and he whinnied triumphantly and longingly. Alamaz tried to stop him, and we quickly marched away out of the sight of the castle.

The country opened up into lush little meadows and low hills,

## *Two Ladies on Horseback*

forming a broad luxuriant valley still protected by the mighty ranges on the left and right. A low ridge on the left was covered with magnificent old oaks, giving way sometimes to tall chestnut and plane trees. It was like a picture of old Europe. Flowers became taller and more numerous, with fragrant cascades of wild roses adding more colour to an already incredibly beautiful landscape. As the sun rose higher more Lolos began to travel and the sound of the flute playing and songs came from distant dwellings.

Another party appeared from behind a bend. Again Alamaz cringed in alarm while Hwama, sensing horses, started neighing cheerfully. This time it was two ladies on horseback accompanied by a gentleman on a mule. Three or four outrunners, armed with bows and arrows, just like Alamaz, followed the party. As they came near the ladies stared at me incredulously whilst their escort grasped his rifle as a precaution. Sizing up my little group they all relaxed. One woman was middle-aged and the other still young. Both were dressed like those I had met in a forest near Fulin, with lovely silk jackets of faded pastel colours, black hats and mother-of-pearl ear-rings. The man, in his thirties, wore a fringed black tsarwa, wide blue trousers and, in addition to a silver-sheathed short sword and rifle, had a pistol on his belt encased in a silver-chased holster. All their saddles were decorated with silver and mother-of-pearl. The women were very handsome, with their chiseled faces, aquiline noses and flashing dark eyes. The man was wiry and tall with intelligent eyes burning in his rugged dark countenance. With great leisurely dignity they stopped, their curiosity overcoming them; the man dismounted and came up to me and asked the trembling Alamaz something. The little soldier halted and explained, probably saying who we were and where we were going. Satisfied he turned to me, and the ladies, still in their saddles, smiled charmingly. I bowed. And on they went riding slowly. Afterwards we met more men and women, all riding and sometimes accompanied by their retainers or children who always trailed behind on foot. In spite of Alamaz's warning and entreaties not to speak, I always greeted them with a smile and a

## *The Great Cold Mountains*

slight bow. They also smiled back, sometimes stopping to inquire where we were bound.

One of my most charming experiences occurred when we reached a small lake in front of a low hill overgrown with majestic oaks. It was a placid, blue oval of water with white and blue irises growing in profusion on its shores. We sat down for a rest not far from the roadside. Out of the shadows of the forest came the sound of horse hooves and a middle-aged Lolo emerged on a dappled-grey pony accompanied by several running men-at-arms. He made straight for us and dismounted a few paces away, coming up to me. He wore a tight black turban out of which the sacred lock of hair curved towards his neck. His dove-grey tsarwa was of exquisite workmanship and material. He was of medium build with a face that arrested me. . . . It was classically Roman, though dark, with most penetrating eyes. Refined though the other knights had been, whom we had met on the way, this man looked a patrician to his finger-tips. We bowed to each other and he asked Alamaz about me. When the soldier had finished speaking, he turned to me smilingly, showing his perfect teeth.

'The lord wishes to know whether he can be of assistance to you,' chirped in Alamaz standing before the man in a most deferential position whilst his retainers watched from a distance. I shook my head and thanked him. He looked again over our little caravan with some doubt, probably finding it too pathetic for words and, bowing to me, jumped into his saddle. He waved again to me as I stood still looking at him and his splendid horse. Alamaz was quite excited.

'A big nzemo!' he exclaimed. 'A great lord indeed!' he repeated, as we resumed our walk.

I became reassured after this encounter. Was it really so, or was it a wishful fulfilment of pre-conceived expectations that all the Lolos here were very different from those I had met before at Dienba and Fulin. The men appeared more handsome and the women more beautiful. I felt that I was among highly intelligent, well-bred and honourable people. They looked so fine and aristocratic and their attitude was so correct and friendly. I believed that

## *Animosity Between Chinese and Lolos*

this favourable impression was based on reality, for the real Black Bone Lolos detest leaving their country except for short visits to Dienba or other frontier points on some important business. So this was the master race of the forbidden 'Great Cold Mountains' ! I now refused to believe that they would attack a helpless, weak party like ours; an innocuous-looking, bespectacled European, who carried only a walking stick, and a small, almost childish, Lolo soldier with his ridiculous big bow. *Noblesse oblige*. . . .

They were painted black by the provincial Chinese who detested them and were detested in turn, but were they really so infamous? The animosity existing between the Chinese and the Lolos was due to the desire of the first to subdue the latter, to impose on them their officials and their civilization, open up their rich lands to Chinese cultivators and drain off whatever wealth they possessed without giving them any voice in their own government. Unfortunately, the Lolos had their own ideas and their own civilization, however crude it was to Chinese eyes, and they were born fighters and by no means stupid or unintelligent. Their mode of life did appear primitive and archaic, but they themselves, it was now clear to me, were not primitive. They loved nature and understood it and wished to live simply and frugally, eschewing all the luxuries of city life which they felt would lead them down to the corruption of flesh and spirit and end up in the debilitation and ruin of their race. Closely related to the Tibetans they wanted to live, like them, undisturbed and unmolested in their own territory satisfied with their own way of doing things and requiring but few items from the outside world. They were like many other closely-knit communities in Asia and Europe which, though imbedded in the body of great states, nevertheless did not want to merge their identity or surrender their freedom to govern themselves unless they received very substantial guarantees of their autonomy or were accorded full participation in the central government.

While such thoughts were passing through my head, our slow progress brought us to a rolling stretch of country and my ears

## *The Great Cold Mountains*

caught a sound of singing in a stockaded farm divided from us by a ravine. As we neared it the range, volume and the golden sweetness of the voice staggered me. Strumming a guitar or something similar, the invisible tenor poured forth notes like another Caruso. Every tribe has its own manner of singing, its own leitmotif. This singing immediately suggested to myself the chorus in Borodin's *Dances of the Polovtsi* in reverse. In the *Polovtsi* the male chorus, in passionate waves, reaches a crescendo together with the drum. The Lolo singer started with a magnificent crescendo, like a great blow on a big silver bell, gradually descending the scale like beats on chromatic bells. That was the Lolo way of singing. The power with which this glorious voice spread over the countryside, its velvet tone and diamond-like clarity and purity, without any hint of a tremolo, was incredible. And with what passion he sang! I was too hypnotized by this marvellous singing to proceed and sank on the ground. Alamaz ran to me.

'Are you ill?' he inquired solicitously whilst Hwama looked at me with his soft eyes.

'No,' I said pointing with my finger at the farm house. 'What a wonderful singer,' I added. Alamaz listened, his face emotionless.

'Let us go,' he prodded me. 'Don't look. Don't talk please,' came his only too familiar refrain. I sat where I was.

'We must go and see him,' I muttered getting up. 'He is a second Caruso,' I said audibly but to myself. Alamaz became really frightened.

'Go! Go! Let us go!' and I saw a blind, unreasoning panic gripping him. He clenched at his dagger and I was afraid he might go mad, stab me and run away with my horses. Very reluctantly I yielded and we slowly walked away, stopping every minute to listen to that haunting voice. It pursues me to this day and I honestly think I made a great musical discovery.

Afternoon shadows began to cross the countryside lending it additional enchantment and mystery. Sublimated by the singing interlude, I walked as if in a dream, waiting for the appearance of more Lolo knights and ladies on their beautiful mounts. My brain was clear and my perception acute, as I exerted my faculties to



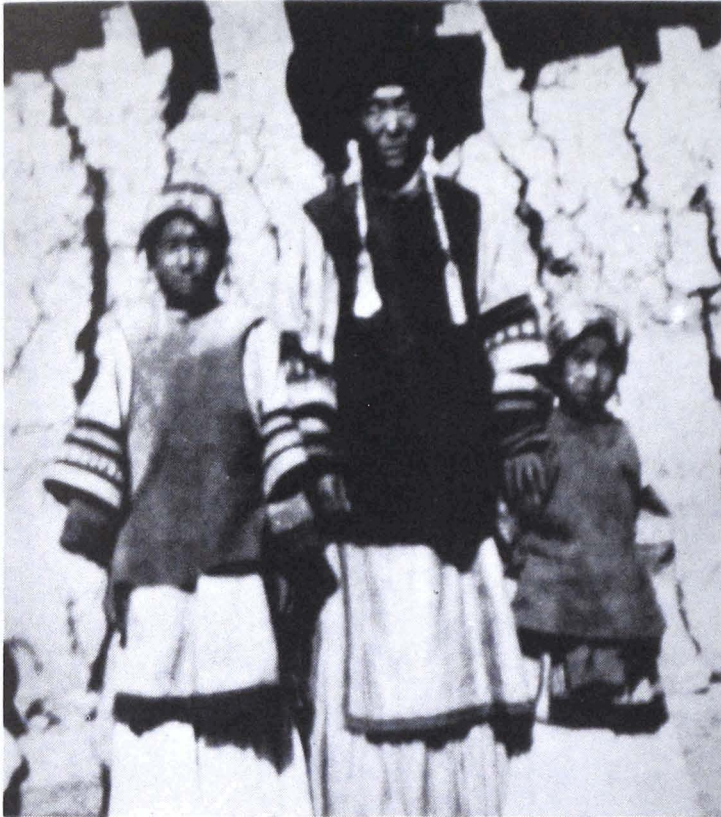
## *'The Lost Land of Cytherea'*

carry away with me a remembrance of all the loveliness and fascination of this unforgettable journey. It must have been a sort of mystical experience, for suddenly I realized that what mattered so much was not the beauty of the scenery—there were many splendid places yet left on this planet—but the time; I felt that a curtain had lifted and I was contemplating life as it was lived many centuries ago. This oak-forested broad valley was the England of King Arthur's time and the France of the days when Queen Eleanor left Aquitania to beget Richard the Lion-hearted. The discrepancy in the structure of strongholds or in the fashion of dress did not matter; the countryside there had been exactly the same, and the same type of barons rode on horseback from castle to castle, and beautiful proud ladies were escorted by armed knights and outrunners with bows and arrows. Manners and customs were alike and there was even the same suspicion on meeting strangers. Such representations of bygone glories were done for the delectation of mankind in the cinema studios of the world, but they were artificial and lacked conviction while here the life of those splendid romantic ages was true, its very reality attested by a mysterious warp of time. In a historical film a member of the audience was only a spectator and could never hope to take part in the unfolding drama. Here I was a participant in my own flesh. Who was I and what was my place in it? I was a humble messenger from a strange, outer and incomprehensible world, a world of the future, yet to come, and I was travelling from a powerful baron's castle, escorted by his armed serf only, too insignificant to command a company of armed knights and a swarm of retainers; like a humble friar who carried a gospel from prince to prince. It was a living *Midsummer Night's Dream* and I was playing a small part in it. My heart ached at the thought that I must abandon it so soon. If only I could stay for ever in its uncharted regions where all the people I met were individuals, where there were no nameless, grey and faceless crowds. Honour, love, fidelity, austerity and valour and true friendship ruled here. The people appeared cold, haughty and cruel on first glance and were withal filled with the fire of life within. I now knew that. I wanted to cry out to the

## *The Great Cold Mountains*

world, to share my discovery of the lost land of Cytherea, to call to my friends to partake of my joy and happiness in finding the realm where romance and adventure still lived.

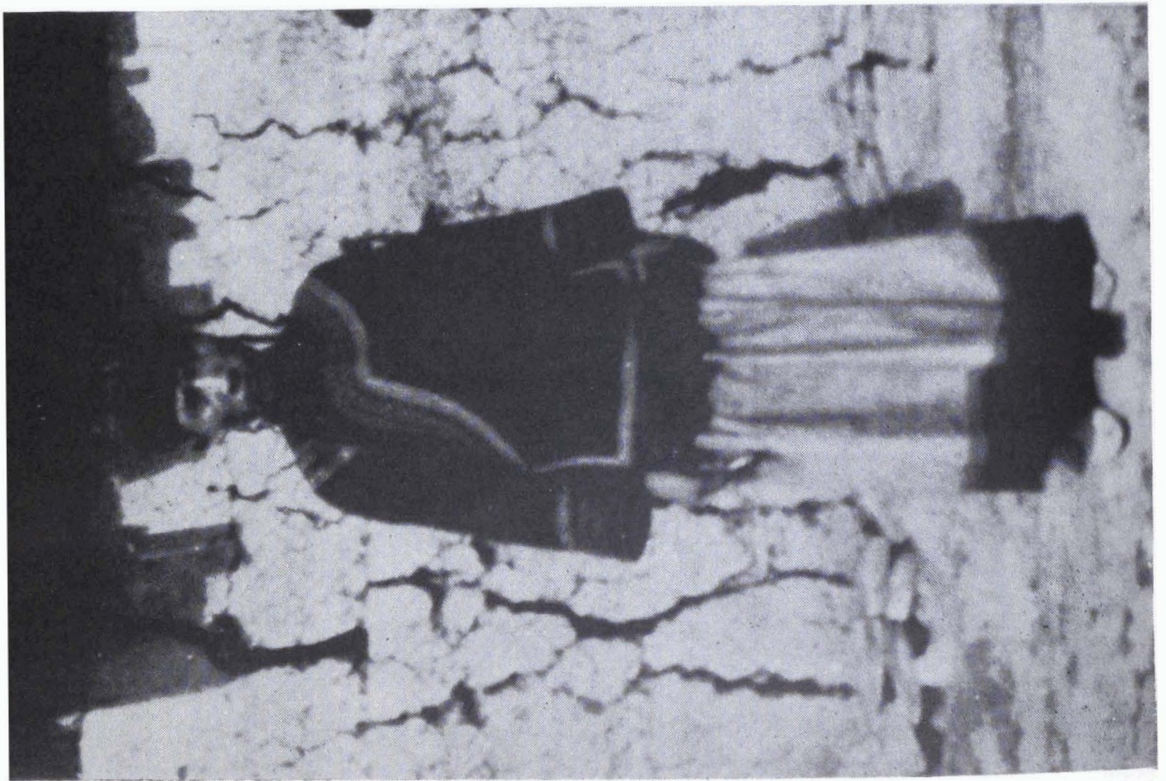
As day was declining our passage through the enigmatic land was ending. We had passed through only a segment of the Independent territory, but I felt intoxicated with the experience. Theoretically I could have gone on to Sichang along the main range of the Taliangshan which still followed us on the left, but I was not a great explorer, equipped with tents, pack animals, servants and stores of provisions. It takes many months, if not years, to organize such expeditions which cost a lot of money. Consent must be secured from the Chinese authorities to enter the Independent territory and then negotiations have to be taken up with many Lolo princes to secure their sponsorship and passports, with a preliminary distribution of considerable largesse in the form of presents. Such a grandiose undertaking was not for me. I had to be satisfied with sneaking through a portion of the country with my slender resources, and to thank the Fates if I had arrived at my destination safe and sound. I was lucky it was the beginning of summer when everything appeared paradisaical. It was warm, but the name 'Great Cold Mountains' was not earned for nothing; in winter they were covered with snow and ice, and it would have been a foolhardy trip in driving sleet and a howling icy wind. Although I found the Noble Lolos a civilized people after their own fashion, there was nothing to attest to it in the form of the monuments of the past or in any buildings or temples. There was nothing but mean huts. So the explanation that they were newcomers in the Taliangshan had to be accepted and, if they had any tradition of a well-developed architecture, it was either forgotten or not used because of constant warfare between their clans. They only built these temporary makeshift buildings, whose destruction in a raid was no loss as they were replaced within a day.



DUCHESS KOUCHIÉ  
WITH HER  
FAVOURITE  
GRANDDAUGHTERS



THE DUCHESS  
WITH HER FAMILY



PRINCE KOUMO TSANGYAO IN FORMAL NATIVE DRESS,  
AND WITH BLACK LOLO LORDS

## XIX

### *The Imperial Road*

IT was dusk when we emerged from a defile and found ourselves at Haitang, a small trading post where some Chinese lived. Before we settled for the night at a dingy inn, Alamaz watered the ponies and tied bags with broad beans under their muzzles, which they munched with relish, tossing them high up to catch the remaining pieces. I bought a couple of thin cakes of brown sugar, which I liked to eat while consuming pot after pot of weak tea, Hwama came up to me neighing gently and looking at me with his big, almost human eyes.

'My dear Hwama,' I petted him. Then I gave him a piece of sugar which he took with his velvet lips. Thinking it was a piece of stone he spat it out, but then, tasting the sweetness, changed his mind and began to look for it. Giving it to him again, it was pathetic to see how he enjoyed it. He wanted more and more, nibbling at my jacket and trousers until the whole cake was gone. Afterwards he demanded sugar at each stop and would not go unless he got some.

Next day I rode all day long. Hwama had only one rein attached on the right and Alamaz told me that, since he now knew me, it was not necessary to use a whip or indicate turns with the rein. 'Just speak to him,' he said, 'and he will obey. Indicate the direction by touching the side of his head.' So clever was this Lolo pony that he seemed to understand at once every wish or mood of mine. Sometimes, seeing a flat grassy road ahead he would go at a fast trot or gallop, stopping afterwards to wait for Alamaz and looking at me for my approval.

It was a very narrow valley between two steep and parallel mountain ranges. As we were due south, the range on the left

## *The Imperial Road*

paralleled the Taliangshan and beyond the right was the town of Mienning in the Kienchang valley. We followed a path of worn stone slabs, like the one I traversed on the way to Tachienlu. Despite its modest width, this was the famous Imperial Road which linked Kunming and Sichang with Chengtu and Peking on the one hand and with Tibet on the other. From Haitang it went straight to Fulin and, if it were not for Prince Molin's permission to cross Independent Lolo territory, I should have normally followed it right down from Fulin. Since ancient times great caravans passed to and fro along this narrow highway, messengers galloped with Imperial edicts, splendid embassies moved majestically bringing tribute to the Son of Heaven from countries whose existence now is but a memory, and countless armies trod up and down its length, going to battles, reinforcing isolated fortresses and garrisons or simply maintaining the Pax Sinica in these far-flung outposts of the mighty empire.

The Lolos were still with us in the mountains on either side. The road cut right through their domain, a fantastic link reminding me of the equally fantastic Polish Corridor, fruit of World War I.

In the evening we reached a little village called Paoanying. The word 'ying' means both 'fort' and 'garrison' and most of the subsequent hamlets bore this addition to their names. There was nothing warlike about it; it was a single street with low Chinese shops and a temple and it was submerged in pear blossoms, looking picturesque against the sombre background of towering mountains. There were only a few soldiers around and I did not notice any fortifications. The days of the Imperial Road as a thoroughfare of the Empire between Fulin and Sichang were numbered, and it was largely for this reason that the military did not want to waste their forces in guarding it. The work on a modern motor road was progressing with great speed and only a comparatively short section between Mienning and Fulin had yet to be completed. This strategic highway was being built along the course of the Kienchang valley, thus avoiding this mountain section, prone to attacks from the Lolos who lived on either side.

## Yuehsi

On the following day the gorge-like valley expanded, and the mighty Taliangshan came into view again on the left. I yearned to catch a glimpse of Mt. Chonolevo or, as the Chinese call it, Lungtoushan—Dragon Head Mountain, but it was too far south-east towards Leipoting, an important town on the Lolo border. Mt. Chonolevo is about 16,250 feet high with three aspects, all very beautiful and inspiring reverence in the Lolos.

We met more Lolos on horseback, riding singly and in groups. Soon a Chinese village appeared on a small but fertile plain. It consisted almost entirely of tall square towers, made of boulders and bricks, with tiny windows near the roof. People at night barricaded themselves there in readiness for possible Lolo raids.

Twenty *li* more and we reached Yuehsi, the great garrison city and the frontier capital of the Tang dynasty (A.D. 618–906) which had commanded a large portion of what are now the Yunnan and Sikang provinces, the fabulous Western Regions, with their bewildering medley of tribal populations. I was thrilled as I stood before the gates of this famous venerable city. I had always been deeply impressed by the great walls and towers of Peking and Sian, formerly Changan, the glorious capital of the Tang dynasty, but I never expected to find the walls of this remote town both higher and thicker. The gate towers were colossal with stupendous battlements crowning the walls, still glowing with the faded vermilion of Imperial days. A long, dark tunnel swallowed us as we entered the heavy, iron-knobbed gates guarded by a dozen soldiers in khaki uniforms.

The city inside was quite small and did not seem to match the grandeur of its walls and fortifications. But it was a pleasant place, with wide streets and low but well-built shops and residences. Every house had a garden with all kinds of fruit trees, some still in bloom, and there were flower-beds tucked in here and there, ablaze with colour. But the magistrate's yamen and temples were dilapidated, a melancholy reminder of departed splendour.

I stayed at the Co-operative Treasury, with its new and comfortable house, and found the officials and their wives friendly and jolly. It was a joy to share a pot of tea with them at sunset,

## *The Imperial Road*

sitting on the veranda over their little garden full of roses and pelargoniums while the shopping crowds were slowly ebbing away from the market-place. They told me that Yuehsi was one of the most comfortable and cheapest places to live in. There was a rich vein of excellent anthracite just outside the gate and everybody could help himself, just for the trouble of gathering it. The people had evolved a curious type of stone stove, in which it burned with a strong blue flame all day long, ever ready to boil a kettle of tea or cook a dinner. Trout and other fish teemed in the river and streams near by and were sold every morning on the market for a few coppers. Chickens, pigs and poultry abounded and there were varied vegetables and fruits. It was neither too warm in summer and never too cold in winter, and there were few cases of disease. In addition to all these blessings, there was much copper, iron and silver in the mountains around, and the Lolos brought down a lot of sheep's wool to sell on the local market. It appeared that the ancient geomancers were no fools in siting this city at so felicitous a spot.

However, as I soon found out, life in Yuehsi was not so sweet and carefree, despite its cheap food and good climate. The town and its satellite villages were much too near the Taliangshan and so offered a great temptation to the Lolos to procure slaves. Not even behind the great walls of the city or in their towers did the Chinese ever feel quite safe.

I explored the market-place of Yuehsi with great interest. In the afternoon, when business was at its zenith, the Lolos appeared in groups, bringing baskets with produce, chickens, jars of honey and other things. Leaving their mountain retreats early in the morning it took them several hours to reach the town. They were White Lolos and not so prepossessing in appearance. They filled the market, sitting on their haunches before their potatoes, turnips and grain gathered in little mounds before them. The Chinese timidly circulated among them making offers; the payment was in Chinese money, which the Lolos did not take back with them to their mountains but immediately reinvested on the spot into commodities they wanted to acquire. These Lolos looked with a



## *Meeting with Prince Koumou*

certain interest at some sturdy Chinese young men, probably marking them as likely candidates for kidnapping at some future date. The atmosphere in the town was tense, whenever they gathered *en masse*. Both merchants and the ordinary people were jittery to the point of being neurotic. People talked of nothing but their safety and morbidly dwelt on raids, massacres and kidnappings committed by the 'barbarians' from the mountains.

After a round of luncheons and dinners given in my honour by hospitable local officials, I thought it was time to find Prince Molin's cousin, Nzemo Koumou Tsangyao, to whom he had given me a letter. I was led into a side street and ushered into a stately-looking Chinese mansion with a very formal reception hall with a blackwood opium couch, large mirrors, straight-backed chairs and brightly polished spittoons. Like Prince Molin's, the appearance of Prince Koumou, when he entered the room, was a vast surprise to me, shattering all my expectations. Before me stood a young man in his early thirties, well-groomed, debonair and cultivated, and wearing a western suit of the latest cut with an expensive shirt and a tie. He cordially greeted me in excellent English and then began to talk in French, using now one language and then the other. He introduced me to his relatives, three elderly men, one of whom was dressed in a Chinese gown, while a servant brought tea. The only hint to me that I was dealing with a Noble Lolo lay in the Prince's wiry physique, his aquiline face and burning, large eyes. I explained to him the object of my travel and my intense desire to see more of the Lolo people.

'Nothing easier,' he affably chuckled. 'My cousin, Nzemo Molin, wrote to me to say what a good friend of his you are,' he continued. 'His friend is my friend,' and he shook my hand. 'Now let me see,' he mused.

'Let us do it the day after tomorrow as we need some preparations. I must get horses and send a note in advance of our coming.' He looked at me. 'I will take you to an aunt of mine. Hers is a great Noble Lolo clan and her husband is its chief.' He paused looking at me mischievously.

*'C'est une vraie duchesse, si vous voulez . . . La Duchesse Kouchié,'*

## *The Imperial Road*

he relapsed into French. '*Une vieille grande dame,*' he added. 'I have not been there for months. . . .' And on this we parted.

We met again next day at lunch to which he had invited me. I presented him with a costly and elegant American silk necktie which I had brought as a special gift whenever the occasion arose. He was delighted.

'Now, what do we need to bring as presents for your aunt and her relatives?' I asked enumerating the stock-in-trade I carried with me.

'That is all right,' he answered, 'I am sure she will be pleased, but . . .' And he began to ponder.

'She will make a feast for us, I am sure, and we may have to stay there a day or two . . .' And then he suddenly got up.

'We need wine, plenty of wine, jars of wine,' and he turned to me. 'Don't worry I'll get it.'

'Prince Koumou Tsangyao,' I said, 'I want it to be my "love offering". As we are friends I hope you will not be offended . . .' and I counted off enough money for several big jars of wine. He protested, but finally I persuaded him to accept; and so the trip was fixed.

## XX

### *A Princess of the Black Bone*

PRINCE KOUMOU TSANGYAO, dressed in an immaculate white shirt, necktie, khaki jodhpurs, brightly-polished military top-boots and a hat, sat on a sleek black mule and was accompanied by a cortege of Lolo retainers, who followed him with several ponies loaded with big wine jars in baskets carefully strapped to the saddles. I wore my most presentable European clothes, and, riding my Hwama, brought up the rear, with the faithful Alamaz trailing behind with his bow and arrows. Thus we passed slowly through the streets of Yuehsi early in the morning in an impressive procession as nervous people parted right and left to clear the way for us. Leaving the gate we turned straight into a nearby valley on the right, heading for the mountains.

It was a long and unhurried ride as the valley wound higher and higher, imperceptibly merging into a shallow wooded gorge. There were no people on the narrow path and no hint of any hamlet or other habitation. Then quite suddenly, as we turned to the right, we came on to a Lolo settlement concealed behind a grove of young trees. There was a challenge answered by the Prince's men who had rushed ahead, and we entered the stockade.

It was exactly like one of the Black Lolo 'castles' I had seen on that memorable first day out of Dienba, with rows of long, shingle-covered huts arranged in geometrically correct pattern on a smoothly-stamped platform. Old and young Lolo men and some children sat before the front building on their haunches sunning themselves. They got up as we approached and some rushed inside. Presently, a tall old woman, plainly dressed in a faded blue skirt and tunic and wearing a black bonnet, slowly

## *A Princess of the Black Bone*

came out as the Prince advanced to greet her. She was obviously pleased to see him and her face was wreathed in smiles. Turning to me he gently pushed me forward and I bowed respectfully.

'*C'est ma tante, Madame la Duchesse Kouchié,*' said the Prince explaining to her who I was and why he had brought me. I bowed again and she reciprocated, rather formally I thought, but her kindly smile deepened. I was thrilled to stand before this chieftainess, so dignified and handsome, and although she was bare-foot and so plainly clad, she possessed an authoritative and truly regal air. She spoke in a sweet, sonorous voice, my friend interpreting.

'Welcome to our poor place,' she said. 'I am sorry nothing has been arranged for your visit and the place is dirty, but all that we have is at your disposal.' I told her how honoured I felt even to be received by her. With considerable grace she swept into the building and invited us to follow. A crowd of men and women poured in. Very erect and stately and standing in the middle of the room she began introducing me.

'This is my eldest son,' she said, pointing to a good-looking man. He bowed stiffly and I extended my hand.

'This is my second son,' she continued, 'and this is my nephew,' she went on, both of us bowing to each other and exchanging a handshake. She went on and on, passing to ladies. I did not attempt to shake the ladies' hands, so we just bowed to each other. A tall shadow fell across the door.

'Ah!' cried the Duchess. 'This is my old man!' And she pulled him by the sleeve laughingly. He greeted me warmly, too. The formal introductions over, her face became stern and granite-like.

'Ah me!' she exclaimed. 'I must stop talking now. We have honoured guests and we must attend to them.' She clapped her hands and a swarm of menials rushed in from outside. She gave them rapid orders. In the meantime, our outrunners started bringing in the jars of wine, followed by the admiring glances of the crowd. I unpacked my bag and offered the best pieces of silk thread, spools of cotton yarn and toilet soap to the great lady. She was immensely pleased, all the time repeating, 'But so much! But

## The Duchess

how kind ! I am only an old woman, this is too fine for me.' Then I presented the rest to other important ladies around her and the pretty young princesses.

'Madame !' I addressed the Duchess. 'Would you and your family mind if I took a few snapshots whilst the bright morning sunshine lasts?' After the import of my words had sunk into her and the rest of the party, great confusion was aroused. She leaned towards Prince Koumou in agitation, speaking rapidly. He told me that neither she nor anybody else would permit themselves to be photographed in so unpresentable a dress; it would be an affront to us and he could not imagine what people elsewhere would think if they saw her and her family in such a *deshabillé*. I must wait, they all said, and the room suddenly became empty.

I strolled out, passing between the huts and bright-eyed girls and children peeping at me with curiosity, but full of an indefinable dignity and grace and without a trace of fear or resentment. A hubbub below attracted my attention and we walked down the slope where outside the fence a great execution was taking place. A bullock, a black sheep, a fat pig and scores of chickens were being slaughtered and dismembered.

'Good Heavens !' I exclaimed. 'What is this butchery for?' My companion smiled.

'This is for our feast,' he answered.

'I am sorry,' I rejoined. 'We have caused a lot of trouble and expense to these poor people.' He straightened up. 'This is our custom when honoured guests arrive.' He said firmly. 'And, though their dwellings are poor, this is one of the wealthiest Black Lolo clans.' And with this we turned around and retraced our steps to the enclosure. When we had entered the hall, we found the Duchess and her entourage transformed. She wore a new black hat and was bedecked in jewellery, a silver collar clasped around her neck, long mother-of-pearl ear-rings in her ears, bright tassels hanging from her bonnet—a profusion of bracelets on her wrists and rings on her hands while a purple tunic fell just above her knees. Her pleated skirt was white with an embroidered hem and a pair of sandals was on her feet. The men

## *A Princess of the Black Bone*

had changed into wide trousers hanging down like skirts, with dark blue embroidered hems and loose jackets of dark colours, also with embroidered borders. Most of them wore one ear-ring consisting of an apple-like piece of amber surmounted by a coral cherry. The Duchess grouped her children and grandchildren around herself, standing in front of the cracked wall of the hut. With my old and decrepit camera I took several photographs of the family. Then Prince Koumou Tsangyao and I were left to our devices as the ladies retired to do their household duties, presumably connected with the forthcoming feast. The elder men disappeared too. I wanted to see so much, to walk around observing the life of this noble clan, but I knew that it would be unseemly for a stranger, a European at that, to appear a nosy busybody on the very first day of his arrival. So I had curbed my impulses and sat down on a bench outside, enjoying the warm sun and drinking in the beauty of the mountain scenery. I was soon joined by Prince Koumou Tsangyao and the Duchess's favourite nephew, Kou Matu. He was a very handsome young man in his black jacket and blue trousers, his sacred lock of hair growing out of his dark turban and snaking down to touch his left temple. A large amber and coral ear-ring dangled from his right ear. He looked exotically aristocratic, resembling a prince from an oriental opera. His body exuded strength and agility; he was like a panther ready to spring at any moment. Yet the expression on his face was not ferocious and his large black eyes looked at me with friendliness and respect. Although fiercely proud, he was humble where the duties of hospitality were concerned, going himself to fetch a pot of tea for us. I tried to visualize what he would look like if transplanted to Europe and dressed in Western clothes, and decided that he would resemble a young Spanish nobleman both in appearance and deportment. He spoke pleasantly, asking me questions about myself and my doings. He was neither too inquisitive nor prying, and I mentally chalked another point in his favour.

'I wish I could go to Europe for a while,' he sighed.

'What would you do there?' I was curious.

## To the Dining-Hall

'I would enter a famous military school,' he said with firm determination and his eyes shone with a purpose.

'Alas, I have a wife and a child,' he added. 'And it would be difficult to leave them alone in these critical times.' His smile was apologetic. The warrior race indeed, I mused, and all their thoughts are always of military accomplishments.

Engrossed in our conversation we hardly noticed how the time had passed. It was already well past the noon hour and the Duchess emerged to call us to move inside, leading us to another hut which evidently served as a reception- and dining-hall.

It was almost bare with a smoke-blackened roof and the familiar sunken hearth of coarsely cut stone. There were some old Chinese tables, chairs and benches covered with leopard skins. A crude cupboard stood in a corner together with a few sturdy chests. It was a very makeshift structure plastered with mud outside and with so many cracks that the light freely streamed in as if through windows. But it was scrupulously clean, especially the well-trodden, immaculately swept mud floor on which a pin could have been easily spotted. Some of us sat around a table, and I sat next to the *grande dame*. Others sat in a circle on the floor and presently a large jar of wine was placed in the centre. A smaller jar and earthen bowls were put on our table, probably as a concession. A few dishes with sauerkraut, kanbar (dried meat) and other things were brought to nibble at, as we awaited the festal courses.

The atmosphere soon dissolved into an easy informality and the conversation became sparkling and interesting. I was fortunate in having Prince Koumou Tsangyao with me and could now learn more about his mysterious people whilst giving him such information about the life in the West as these people wished to hear. So far I had been virtually tongue-tied with little Alamaz to whom I could communicate only in monosyllables.

The old Duchess looked with interest at my dress for, she confessed that I was the first European she had ever seen. She praised especially my wine-coloured heavy silk necktie, and asked why such a small piece of cloth was worn on the neck. I explained that, when properly dressed, all foreigners wore it and, for my part, I

## *A Princess of the Black Bone*

would not have presumed to call on her unless my clothes were right for the occasion. She was exceedingly flattered by this admission, nodding her head several times in approval.

'I understand,' she said. 'I quite understand now,' she repeated, extending her hand towards her nephew opposite.

'You see this large amber ear-ring he wears,' she continued. 'A Noble Yi, however fine his clothes may be, is not properly attired without such an ear-ring,' she chuckled. 'It is the equivalent of your tie.' We had another sip of wine.

'Madame,' I turned to the old lady again raising another point which greatly interested me. 'Your people certainly excel in agriculture and cattle-breeding. I saw such vegetables and wonderful animals . . .' I paused before embarking on the critical question. 'Do you all work in the fields or is the work only done by the young people?' An indignant sparkle appeared in her large eyes, which she quickly suppressed. She replied in an even voice, emphasizing the point with her beringed hand.

'No. We are the Lords of the Black Bone. We do not till the fields ourselves. Our serfs and slaves, the White Lolos, yonder . . .' and she pointed to some distant huts in one corner of the enclosure. 'They do all our work. My husband and all these young men here,' and she swept the room with her hand, 'they are warriors; their business is fighting with the enemy.' And her eyes sparkled proudly. 'From an early age we teach them to ride, to shoot, to conduct warfare with arms and by stratagem.' And she took a sip of wine with satisfaction, looking tenderly at the splendid men, young and old, who surrounded her. Her husband, with his fine aquiline features, the skin of his face still taut though seamed by age, sat like the statue of an athlete. He only spoke a little. Surreptitiously, so as not to offend them, I was studying all of them. The men were splendid physical specimens, good-looking in that dark, southern way which in Europe is associated with Basques, Corsicans and some of the North African tribes. The barefoot young princesses, their head coverings held in place with their pigtails, went about in a stately, unhurried manner with sombre faces and only smiling when addressed by their elders.



## *The Formal Feast*

As the sun was setting behind the hills across the valley, the formal feast began. A huge roast chicken appeared on a wooden platter to be cut up by the host with his dagger and distributed to all of us, while similar portions went to the squatting Lolos. The mode of imbibing liquor from the big jar on the floor was in classical Lolo style. Thin bamboo pipes led from the neck of the vessel to each diner's mouth, both ladies and gentlemen, and they sucked the fiery liquid to their hearts' content interrupted by mouthfuls of food. When the level in the jar had become too low, a man poured some more wine from another container. The dishes came at considerable intervals to emphasize the leisurely nature of the entertainment. Indeed, there was no hurry at all as we had all the time in the world to ourselves; there was no tomorrow with busy engagements in town, no particular business to transact, no office hours. It was the eternal present without watches or clocks to count passing hours or minutes. The banquet was set to continue indefinitely, provided there was enough food and wine to last. A dish of fat, tender mutton fried in butter with brown crisp potatoes followed, then succulent beef stewed with cabbage, turnips and other vegetables. It was as good as the best Russian bortsch without the sour cream. There was no rice, but thick pancakes instead made of green or pink buckwheat. Everything was well-cooked, with forest roots and herbs to add a delicate and unusual flavour, without any resemblance to Chinese dishes. It was closer to the simple peasant cooking of Central Europe. When the old lady had explained what was their daily diet, it became clear to me why they all looked so healthy. Watching through the open door outside I noticed that similar platters and bowls of food were being taken to the White Lolo huts in the corner. Divining my thoughts the old lady spoke again.

'It is true the White Lolos are our serfs and have to work, because they are not noble like ourselves, but they eat what we eat and live like we live,' she said involuntarily sweeping the dingy room with her eyes. A question rose to my lips, but she had forestalled me.

## *A Princess of the Black Bone*

'We detest every form of luxury and we forbid everything that would make our body soft and our spirit indolent.' She paused straightening up.

'We live in nature and with it and do nothing to isolate ourselves from it,' she continued. 'We wage a constant struggle with the elements and with our enemies, and this keeps us strong and alert. Without being strong, fit and ever ready to encounter dangers and perils face to face we should lose our independence and our land.' Her eyes blazed.

'We would rather die than be slaves!' she concluded passionately. Her husband rose and went out, returning with a long pipe which he solemnly offered to her. She took a few deep puffs, whilst he continued the discussion.

'Our custom is to build houses that can be put up in a single day,' he said musingly. 'We are surrounded by enemies within and without and a sudden attack is more likely than not,' he continued taking a sip from his bowl. 'We can easily withdraw into the mountains with our few goods and flocks, leaving the useless huts to the invader,' he chuckled. 'There are plenty of likely spots in our land to make another temporary home.'

The evening shadows began to gather in deep translucent pools as a fragrant breeze from the woods filled the room through the open door and the cracks in the wattle walls. The higher slopes of the mighty range, touched here and there by the creamy white puffs of stray clouds, became mauve with blue columns of smoke to mark other hidden Lolo habitations. The dusk mellowed and concealed the dingy, unpretentious surroundings, leaving in relief only the brightly costumed ladies and knights with their eager, flushed faces and brilliant, inscrutable eyes. The old uncanny feeling of receding through space and time into unexplored depths of bygone ages gripped me again. Only the strangely incongruous figure of Prince Koumou Tsangyao in his Western clothes kept reminding me of that other remote world. The slow-working fires of flowing wine had battered down the aristocratic reserve and aloofness of these strange people, welding us into a friendly, companionable crowd of which I was accepted

## *Marriage Customs*

as a fully-fledged member, with all suspicion and distrust gone.

There was laughter and chatter among the girls and men in the large group on the floor as sounds of singing reached us from the compound.

'Please tell me something about your marriage customs,' I begged turning to Prince Koumou. He again interpreted my question to the general laughter at our table. He took upon himself the burden of replying, nobody feeling the least abashed.

'Our women,' he said, 'are our equals and jointly share all responsibilities.' He became serious. 'They do not take part in ordinary warfare, but in the hour of supreme danger they, too, can fight by our side.' He stopped as a proud look came into his eyes. 'They can fight well and they can die bravely rather than face enslavement.' Then he relaxed. 'Any girl can fall in love with any boy she likes; it's up to them to marry or not to marry in the end.' He smiled, looking at his wife knowingly. 'But . . .' And he paused. 'No Yi of the Black Bone may marry outside his caste. It's certain death to both of them,' he concluded with his face like a mask of stone.

More dishes continued to arrive from time to time and more wine was added to the central jar and into our bowls. The stars twinkled merrily outside and a glow of bonfires became visible on the far slopes. Pine splinters and a couple of oil lamps were lighted in the hall. Surfeited with food and drink the young braves went out to fetch some musical instruments, resembling mandolins and guitars, and several kinds of flutes and pipes and a small drum. At first they strummed, later breaking into those lovely songs with bell-like cadences. The men had fine voices, but nothing like that unknown Caruso I had heard on the way from Dienba. Some princesses joined in, their sopranos blending prettily into the rhythm. The music and singing were so Western in motive and key that I could hardly believe my ears. The old Duchess's eyes sparkled as she leaned towards me.

'You seem to like our music,' she said in a low tone. I nodded enthusiastically.

## *A Princess of the Black Bone*

'Hungarian!' I exclaimed spontaneously. 'Positively Hungarian,' leaving to my friend to explain where Hungary was. She was highly pleased.

'How odd!' she exclaimed. 'That you find our music and our food so similar to Europe.' We continued our talk about singing and music while the haunting and nostalgic melodies came pouring forth. I marvelled that she was able to discuss all these interesting items so quietly and intelligently, like any Western educated woman, delighting more in discovering the points of contact between the two remote civilizations than remarking on the insurmountable differences or contemptuously dismissing what she could not understand.

A great bonfire had been built in the open space in the compound and, after a few more pulls at their bamboo tubes, the young men and girls poured out and spread around the fire where they were joined by the White Lolos, their men wearing those immense multi-coloured trousers and short jackets. Preparations for a dance were being made. Armed with gleaming short swords and hide shields the braves gyrated, at first slowly, then faster and faster around the blazing wood, executing intricate steps and jumps. Heated by liquor and rich food and stimulated by the lilt-ing music of guitars and flutes, they entangled in a passionate combat, their shields clashing with a dull thud and flashing their swords only to part again for a fresh assault. With the old Duchess and her husband seated on leopard skin covered chairs, like majestic statues, with their Court of princesses and children, it was like a scene from an Oriental ballet as the colourful warriors pranced and whirled whilst singing at the top of their voices, the grotesque shadows from the flames now enveloping them and now revealing their ecstatic virile faces. The splendour of the scene was further enhanced when the moon floated up from behind the range, flooding the courtyard with its silvery light.

It was unbelievably beautiful, and I shared the ecstasy of the dancers and the magic of my incredible surroundings. With the last clash of their swords and the last trill of their sonorous singing the warriors disappeared into the shadows. I rose as if from a dream to

### *Prince Koumou's Saddle for a Pillow*

be conducted once more into the dining-hall where more food had been placed on the table and on the ground and more wine had been poured out. I was too overcome with the spectacle and the hospitality and could only indicate how much I enjoyed everything.

It was past midnight when these hardy people's exuberance began to give out. The level in the big jar had sunk low and, instead of wine, pure water was now being added. The table and chairs were removed and blazing charcoal filled the sunken hearth in the floor. The air became sharp and cold. Without much ado the Duchess and her husband, the princes and princesses wrapped themselves in their soft tsarwas and lay down on the floor in a circle with their heads nearest to the fire. We followed suit and, as a concession, I got Prince Koumou Tsangyao's foreign saddle for a pillow. Sentries closed the stockade and began their night vigil, as we prepared for sleep within.

## XXI

### *A Lolo Idyll*

WE were aroused at dawn by the barking of dogs, grunting and squealing of pigs and the lowing of the cattle. Morning ablutions were done in a running brook. Like their cousins, the Tibetans, the Lolos never washed their body, but unlike them they did not anoint it with butter. Again the climate was favourable to this unhygienic habit as it was never too hot or stuffy at the altitude of 7,000 to 10,000 feet at which they lived. The only scent they exuded was that of pine smoke which ate into and which permeated their skins from their chimneyless hearths.

As soon as we were dressed, the first meal of the morning appeared, consisting of bowls of boiling water with honey stirred in and two poached eggs inside. I went out and sat on a low bench surveying the morning activities of this prosperous and happy household. The cattle were driven off to alpine pastures by carefree boys; horses were watered; slops carried out in wooden buckets to whining pigs and corn scattered among greedy chickens. The ladies sat outside engaged in their aristocratic work of embroidering garments and only the Duchess appeared free. She joined us and fell into a long and earnest discussion.

'My aunt,' said Prince Koumou Tsangyao turning to me, 'wishes us to stay here for a few days. What would you say?'

'*Noblesse oblige . . .*' I thought; her pride and graciousness are ready for further sacrifices on the altar of hospitality . . . but I had already noticed that the gargantuan mound of food prepared for the previous day had all been consumed by us and the White Lolos. It was an incredibly lavish entertainment which, viewed in its proper perspective, was worthy of an American millionaire or an English duke. A further imposition by us somehow went

## The Duchess's Hospitality

against my inherent sense of proportion ; it would be in poor taste. We must also demonstrate the dictum '*Noblesse oblige. . . .*'

'*Non, mon ami, c'est vraiment de trop. . . .*' And I tried to convince him of my point of view. A look of embarrassment and indecision appeared on his face.

'Please tell her,' I said, 'how happy and overwhelmed I am, but we must leave as I have to resume my travel to Sichang. He talked to her, I could feel, in a most diplomatic manner. The old *grande dame* became flustered.

'Why talk about my mean and poor entertainment?' she protested. 'It's nothing, absolutely nothing,' and she paused looking at me. 'You have brought us so many and such wonderful gifts. We feel so grateful and so happy to have you here.' She straightened up and her eyes became rather stern. 'But you will stay at least a day more, won't you?' she said firmly. That was a queen's command, and I knew better than to argue with this powerful woman when her mind had been made up. I simply bowed and a grateful smile appeared on my friend's face. Inwardly I was very pleased to have even a single day more in this happy household.

She went in and we walked out of the stockade bent on the exploration of the Kou clan's domains. My new friend, Kou Matu, the Duchess's nephew, and several other young men followed us to be joined a little later by an imposing middle-aged man, with a keen and intelligent face whom, they told me, was a *pimo*, i.e. a sort of lay priest.

We were in an alpine meadow with small hillocks and promontories on the highest of which the stockade was situated. All around were pleasantly wooded foothills of the great range in the lee of which this little Arcadia lay. Beautifully laid out plots with vegetable and grain crops rose in tiers irrigated by well-constructed and stone-lined ditches. There were several kinds of fruit trees planted, pears and peaches and some tung-oil trees with a cargo of their poisonous nuts hanging in profusion. I could not conceal my admiration for the cattle which browsed on the slopes higher up. The red and brown bulls and cows were big, massive

## A Lolo Idyll

and well-cared-for animals their hides glossy with a particular greenish sheen which later I always came to associate with Lolo cattle. And, of course, scattered among them, were some incomparable black mules and ponies so sleek and happy that they were good enough to go straight to a horse show. Dusky boys in their immense baggy trousers watched the cattle and horses, sitting under trees and playing on their reed flutes. Their pigs grunted and wallowed in the lower reaches of the stream, but what astonished me were the Lolo chickens almost as big as turkeys. The variegated cocks with magnificent red combs and great tails, their plumage changing from colour to colour, were true aristocrats of the poultry world. A few Lolo dogs attached themselves to our party—black, lean animals with intelligent faces and quick brown eyes. Prince Koumou Tsangyao explained their value as peerless hunting dogs, who at night guarded their houses, and were much in demand by the Chinese.

At one spot there was a small grove of age-old oaks and other trees and a broad altar constructed of unhewn stones on which stood a polished triangle of black stone. I now remembered what the Chinese had told me about Lolos worshipping a magic Black Stone which, they averred, was their chief deity. I questioned the *pimo* and he laughed. When Prince Koumou Tsangyao had interpreted what he said, I understood how erroneous the concept was. This black stone, black because it was used by the Black Bone Lolos, whose colour symbol was black, was connected with the sacrifices to the Divine Spirit.

When the harvesting had been completed, on a chosen day, the male head of each family, after fasting and other ritual preparations, proceeded to this spot for a thanksgiving ceremony. A bullock, a sheep, a pig and a chicken were killed and their flesh offered on the altar, and all kinds of grain were also spread before the black stone, together with bowls of *zhi* or home-made wine. Candles were lit and incense sticks burned all around the altar. The representative of the family ceremoniously prostrated himself a number of times thanking Heaven for its bounties during the past year and invoking similar blessings for the next. The black



## Lolo Lore

stone in this ceremony represented the holy Mount Somero, the mystical, extra-dimensional and extra-temporal abode of the Divine Spirit and his faithful lieutenants, the Gods who, in their conception, were equivalent to our archangels and angels. In itself the stone had no magical or supernatural properties, merely being a sacred symbol which was not to be profaned, just as the sacred vessels of the Holy Communion in Christian churches were not profaned by laymen. After the ceremony the whole family partook of a feast, consuming the flesh of the sacrificial animals.

Also I learned that the Lolos believed in one God, i.e. the Divine Spirit who ruled the visible and invisible Universe with its seasons and elements and from whom all life issued. They had no temples and no priesthood. They also believed in the spirits of nature and in demons. The latter were malignant beings directed by a central evil intelligence similar to our conception of Satan. Most diseases were attributed to demoniac possessions or influences. However, they were not bound by their tradition too much to ignore the progress in the outer world, especially in the medical field, and readily availed themselves of modern drugs whenever they could get hold of them.

The *pimo*, as he himself explained, was not a priest, but rather a keeper of Lolo lore. The Lolos were not an illiterate people; they had their own written language, literature and genealogical records and one of the *pimo's* duties was to act as a teacher to princes and princesses of his clan. He was versed in Lolo customs and sacrificial ceremonies. He was always present at the annual thanksgiving sacrifices, but he was not an officiant himself, merely advising the head of the family in the matters of correct ceremonial procedure.

Naturally the *pimo* was also deeply versed in religious and magical matters and, as such, he was called upon to diagnose diseases. If it was, in his opinion, a matter of diabolical possession, he undertook the ceremony of exorcism. He was a specialist in propitiating the spirits of nature in control of good and bad harvests, good health and pestilence and happiness and disorder in the family life. He also possessed the knowledge of medicinal herbs and poisons.

## *A Lolo Idyll*

It may be surmised he knew the composition of the mysterious Lolo 'yellow poison', but it was not a fit subject for me to broach. It was a highly secret preparation which the Lolos used in warfare. It could be put into streams and wells. Pegs with their sharp ends previously dipped in this poison, were planted along the paths and in the meadows, over which an enemy was to pass, and nothing could save the unfortunates who had their feet pricked or scratched in this manner.

During our slow walk back we met a number of White Lolos working in the clearings, where vegetables grew. Kou Matu explained that they were slaves. Actually, the only difference between the serfs and slaves was that the former could go down to Chinese towns and villages to sell produce and buy necessities while the latter were never permitted to leave their master's 'castle'. Both serfs and slaves were a cheerful lot and my impression was that, instead of hating their masters, they admired them as great warriors and their natural protectors.

As I again observed all the wealth of this household, with the rows of beehives and sheaves of grain still on the racks and packed in tight stacks behind the huts, the prosperity, plenty and contentment of this Lolo community fired my imagination and produced a great desire in me to remain here forever, cut off from all the troubles and struggles of the unfriendly outside world. I felt that I had discovered the meaning of the Lolos' stubborn aloofness from all other peoples and civilizations. Why seek strange and unknown ways of life elsewhere when they had everything here? Could they obtain greater happiness and better health if they moved to the crowded towns or the hot plains? Could they find a deeper peace in noisy and dusty streets? I felt a new respect growing in me for this sturdy race. They were neither so savage nor so primitive; they had good minds which had evolved a philosophy of their own. That it was a sound philosophy, though perhaps incomprehensible to the refined and civilized Chinese and busy Westerners, was proved by the fact that they had survived thousands of years, while innumerable other tribes had floundered and all but disappeared when touched by the uncongenial and

*'I wish I could stay here for ever'*

often poisonous traits of outer civilizations whose inner message they could not grasp.

'I wish I could stay here for ever,' I confided to my friend who promptly conveyed my words to his companions. They all thought it was one of the best jokes they had ever heard, but they took it kindly, cordially inviting me to remain.

'You are not a warrior,' guffawed Prince Koumou Tsangyao. 'And you cannot disgrace them by working on the land like a slave.' I knew that he was right; Shangri-La though it was, it was not for me.

The rest of the day I spent in the stockade observing my hosts' uncomplicated activities. The festive air was gone and ordinary home tasks were resumed. I watched the Duchess and her ladies as they sat at their embroidery. Now and then one of their men-folk would pass, exchanging with them a kind word or merely a smile. The White Lolos acted in a similar manner; I did not notice any cringing or servility in their demeanour. It was one large and happy family, each member of which was a model of loyalty and kindness.

The following day we also got up very early and again the Duchess and her husband tried to make us postpone our departure. However, this time Prince Koumou Tsangyao was very firm, promising to return soon for a longer visit with his aunt.

'Anyway, I cannot let you go without a proper morning meal,' she said, rising from the bench and disappearing behind the hut. In a few hours we were eating again. The Duchess sat next to us and I felt inexpressibly sad to be leaving these peaceful and beautiful surroundings and this kind and hospitable people to whom I had become strangely attached.

'I am leaving my heart here,' I said, turning to her and lifting my bowl. She smiled warmly raising hers.

'Come back again,' she invited and I bowed.

Our departure was most moving, its poignancy augmented by an unexpected presentation by the Duchess and her husband of a live fattened black sheep and two enormous cocks. I protested rather violently.

## *A Lolo Idyll*

'We are so poor. It's just a trifle; really nothing,' she assured me as the sheep's lead was handed to Alamaz and the cocks put into a basket. I wanted to resist again, but Prince Koumou Tsangyao stopped me sharply, whispering:

'Don't do that! You will offend them mortally.' And so I thanked them. They all stood for a long time on the slope watching us ride away.

## XXII

### *Last of the Taliangshan*

NEXT morning at Yuehsi was devoted to farewell calls and in the afternoon I was entertained to an intimate dinner by Prince Koumou Tsangyao to whom I had given my chickens and sheep. After my remarkable experience, for which I was so indebted to him, I wanted to gather a little more information about the Lolos who now fired my imagination.

'I still do not understand,' I began, slowly sipping a cup of wine, 'either yours or Prince Molin's role among the Lolos, not to speak of that intelligent and charming Lolo Princess Ko, who visited Shanghai before the war, attracting much attention and publicity.' He looked at me quizzically.

'I also do not understand what you are driving at,' he rejoined. 'Please make it clearer.'

'I will try. From what I have seen now, the Noble Lolos are firmly against any Chinese penetration into their land. Then how is it possible that they let you, Prince Molin and that girl, and perhaps others go to China, receive an excellent education and all the trappings of Western civilization, and then permit you to circulate freely between their strongholds and Chinese centres?' His brow puckered as he sat pondering an answer to my outspoken inquiry.

'It is a complicated matter,' he began slowly. 'Many factors and changes, which have occurred since the Chinese Revolution are involved, but I will do my best to explain.' And we sat over our meal till late at night while he talked. It became clear to me that the ruling Lolos, those of the Black Bone caste, were much more than they were reputed to be—ignorant, cruel and unprincipled savages. During centuries of their brooding isolation in the wild mountains of West China, their minds had not remained stagnant

## *Last of the Taliangshan*

and empty, but had evolved along their own patterns culminating in the production of men and women astute in judgement, adroit in action, impervious to hardships, disciplined in warfare, bound to each other by unwavering loyalty when threatened, and animated by an iron will to preserve the independence of their race and the freedom of their own way of life. Once their thinking had coalesced in this direction they pursued their course carefully, unhurriedly and determinedly resorting to cunning and stratagems where more direct action would have placed them at a disadvantage. Unlike the feebler tribes who indiscriminately flailed their arms at the advantages and horrors of encroaching civilization, without understanding the evolution of the outer world, the Lolos carefully watched political changes in China, which surrounded them on all sides, and were not oblivious to Western advances in the mode of warfare, the only field in which they were interested or concerned. They read the portents and were alarmed for their future. They realized early enough that to disregard the achievements of the West, as represented to them by the modern armies of Central China, to 'bury their heads in sand' would only hasten the ultimate disaster, which might result in the dispersal or extinction of their people. It was for this reason that they did not object when some clans sent their children to be educated by the nearest missionaries or even in military schools at Nanking or Pao-ting. It was only through education, they correctly surmised, that they could hold their own in a rapidly modernized and militarized China.

Their relations with the provincial authorities in Sikang were too exacerbated to rely on any encouragement or aid from that quarter, but they were now heartened by the Central Government's attitude which was very friendly and liberal towards them. Individual Lolos and batches of Lolo youths trickled all the time to Chengtu and Chungking to enter schools or undergo army training, a fact which I was able to verify for myself later. Clinical facilities were also welcomed by the Lolos on the fringe of the Taliangshan and were provided, under the Central Government auspices, in Fulin, Sichang and other points. There was no bad

## *Prince Koumou Tsangyao*

blood between the officials of the Central Government and the Lolos and, generally speaking, the Lolos were friendly to foreigners considering them neutral and innocuous; however, they did not stand on ceremony with them if they proved to be rude, offensive or possessing of a superiority complex.

Provincial authorities disliked this hob-nobbing with the Lolos by the members of the Central Government or Army, but they could not do much about it. They positively hated the educated Lolos, like Princes Molin and Koumou Tsangyao, whom they considered interlopers undermining their authority and power in favour of the Central Government. Telling me this Prince Koumou Tsangyao smiled wryly.

'Frankly I sometimes feel like a marked man,' he confessed. 'But I do not think they can do much to me,' he added.

Our parting was full of regret and I wondered whether I should ever have the opportunity of meeting him again. Three months later I heard that he had been lured by a Provincial Army commander near Luku and poisoned at a banquet, possibly on account of his anti-Provincial activities.

The following morning our little caravan was on the road again as we filed out of the gates before sunrise. We had not passed out of Lolo territory yet and the Taliangshan ridge moved closer again. The gorge-like valley was still attractive but much drier and with fewer trees.

The only excitement we had was an attempt at robbery by a tall Lolo who appeared on horseback over the bank of a wide stream along the dry bed of which the trail led.

'Money! Money!' he shouted levelling his rifle. But when I showed him the few bank-notes I carried, he spat angrily and galloped off.

The conclusion of our journey to Luku was as picturesque as it was unexpected. We had spent the night at Tenghsiangying, a hamlet on the site of an ancient fort at an elevation of 8,000 feet, and arrived about noon at Mienshan, an attractive village with many fruit orchards, where we stopped for lunch. Resuming our

## *Last of the Taliangshan*

walk we heard the sound of horses' hooves on the rocky path behind us. Turning around I saw a magnificent spectacle. An elderly Lolo woman, in a beautiful jacket of faded wine-coloured silk and the usual black bonnet, rode on a sleek black mule with several outrunners armed with old rifles and bows, marching on each side of her while in the rear a retinue of more than a dozen barefoot girls followed.

'What a great lady!' I exclaimed turning to Alamaz. 'Let us step aside to allow them to pass,' I added as his face registered his old fears. He looked at me frantically, still unsettled by the encounter on the previous day with a prospective Lolo robber. As she was passing the lady gazed at us with curiosity and suddenly shouted a staccato order to her people to stop, reining up her mule. She beckoned to Alamaz, who advanced tremblingly, and rapidly spoke to him for a while. I came up to her as she was still talking.

'This powerful woman has asked me where we have come from and where we are going,' Alamaz informed me.

'To Luku, Madame,' I said promptly and bowed slightly. She understood the word 'Luku' quite well and began to talk to Alamaz again glancing meaningly at me. Alamaz looked ill at ease.

'She says it is dangerous around here and she wishes to escort us to Luku, where she is going herself,' he said. I thought it was an eminently kind and reasonable offer and bowed in gratitude. She said something to one of her men and he opened a saddle-bag, producing a beautifully lacquered and painted bamboo flask and a silver-rimmed horn. She told him to fill it and offered it to me. It was that delicious sweet and sparkling *zhi* which I had enjoyed at Prince Zjegha's palace. Now it was my turn to surprise the *grande dame* whom I had already thought of to myself as the marquise.

'*Zhi wua!*' I exclaimed, toasting her. She all but collapsed hearing my Lolo and began to roar with laughter and delight, rocking in her saddle.

'Ha! Ha!' she guffawed, wiping her eyes. '*Zhi wua! Zhi wua!*' she repeated as I handed back the horn and she had it filled for herself. In such a friendly atmosphere we slowly travelled throughout the afternoon, stopping now and then for a few minutes as the



## *In China Again*

lady decided to have more drinks together with me. The river along which our path led grew bigger and deeper, and climbing up a cliff we came to an ancient Chinese shrine carved in sheer rock, with an attractive terrace overlooking the blue river below. I knew that we were now quitting the enigmatic tribal country and were in China again. Turning the corner a vast plain unfolded itself before our eyes with two broad, placid rivers joining together near a small town. We crossed a covered bridge and I said good-bye to the 'marquise' as she went right and we turned left to an inn across the other river.

In an hour or so one of her men-at-arms came to ask for what he called a 'fee' for escorting us. Uncertain as I was about Lolo etiquette I gave him a couple of dollars with which he seemed very pleased. Although it was done in the name of the old lady, I have no doubt that she knew nothing about this little 'squeeze'.

Luku was hot, dirty, crowded and a place to avoid, for it was the headquarters of the Southern Provincial Army which guarded this vast and fertile plain from Lolo incursions. This was the official explanation, but they were really there to protect a vast opium traffic from Yunnan, and they engaged in forays into Lolo territory in the hope of finding their caches of gold and silver. Everybody in Luku was scrutinized and watched and I expected trouble for myself. However, my documents protected me, but I was nevertheless glad when we took to the road again next day.

I was unhappy to see the great mountain ranges slowly recede to the east and west as the monotonous flatness of the valley rolled out before us with a wide dusty ribbon of road running straight into the distant horizon. It was the famed Szechuan-Sikang highway which had been begun by the Central Government two years ago and was still under construction between Mienning and Fulin.

Numerous caravans passed us going in both directions. Our little party looked pathetic amidst the vast riches of transported goods and the groups of opulent-looking military officers trotting on their prize mules. We became good friends—Alamaz, Hwama and myself—travelling when we liked and stopping where we liked, without any schedule or the discipline of a large expedition

## *Last of the Taliangshan*

or caravan. I now realized how idyllically happy we were in the seclusion of the unsophisticated and unspoilt Taliangshan mountains. It was like a dream and now I hated the idea of arriving in Sichang and still worse, in Tachienlu. I wished we could go on, like this, for ever and for ever from one beautiful valley into another, stopping over-night in intimate, peaceful and friendly hamlets, or from one Lolo castle to another, caressed by the gentle and fragrant air of mountain summer.

Lush green fields and frequent villages with their clumps of fruit trees slowly flowed past us as we trudged along at a slow pace. In the hedges were myriads of field mice who made little sounds which resembled tiny silver whistles. This, I thought, was sure proof that mice did really sing. Trying to catch a glimpse of these elusive animals I cautiously approached a hedge only to scream with pain as my left heel was pierced almost to the bone by a thorn that penetrated the thick sole of my Lolo sandal. We had to stop for a while as I packed the wound with cotton wool. I forgot all about it when we reached Lichou, a large and prosperous town which was in the centre of some fine pear orchards.

Next morning my heel was so sore that I could walk only on tiptoe. My eyes, undistracted by the perils of a rocky or twisting trail in the mountains or by interesting landscape, grew tired and contributed their share of premature weariness. For this reason I felt half dead when at last we approached the much-talked-about capital of Southern Sikang. According to calculations we should have glimpsed the city long ago, but I saw nothing ahead except the dusty road climbing a low ridge of yellow clay hills. It was only when we had reached the top that I saw Sichang sprawling in a deep broad hollow of surrounding mountains, on the shores of a beautiful blue lake.

## XXIII

### *Sichang*

NEITHER I nor Alamaz knew anything about hotels in this strange town and at whatever inn we called we found it, to our dismay, absolutely crowded. Only at one were we offered sleeping place in a room, already occupied by several suspicious-looking men. Exhausted and overheated by the long march and, with a growing pain in my foot, I had to lie down at night by the side of an opium smoker who said he had come to peddle his goods from Hanyuankai.

In the morning I made my calls on the Co-operative Treasury and other officials, producing my credentials, and in the afternoon the Pacification Commissioner, General Chang Talun, whose correct title was Director of the Generalissimo's Headquarters for Sikang, received me. They all asked me where I stayed. Evidently concerned by my plight, I was invited to move into the palatial building of the Hsiling Company in one of the main streets.

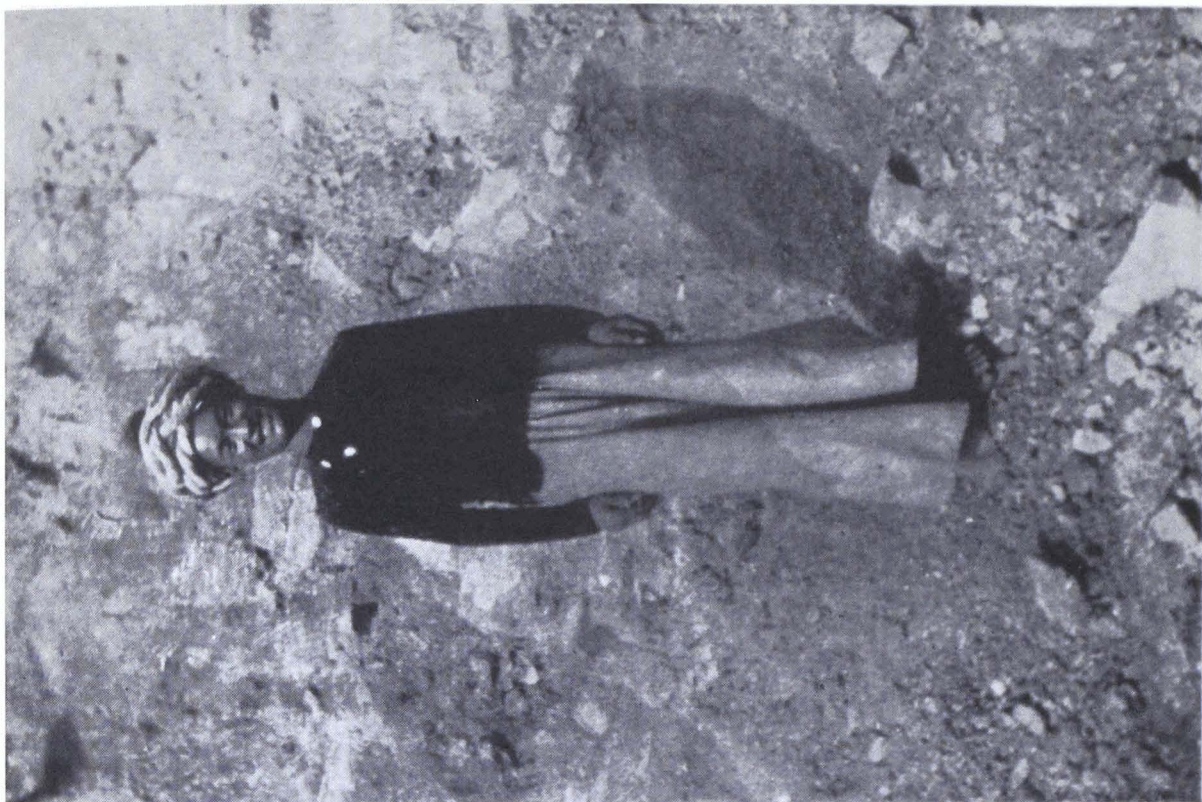
Then a series of banquets followed in my honour, the first to be organized was by a Mr. Liu, general manager of the company. I had never heard before of the Hsiling Company and made immediate investigations. To my surprise I discovered that it was a mammoth organization which, figuratively speaking, had all Sichang in the hollow of its hand. The import and export of wool, from Tibet and Lolo territories, was controlled entirely by it as well as wholesale tea trading, salt distribution, hides, sugar, matches and mining concessions. Wherever I turned I found this huge syndicate's finger in every pie. It was planning leather tanneries, iron works and all kinds of factories. I say 'planning' advisedly because, despite a comprehensive list of such productive plants, nothing had been started yet. The directorate of the company, I

## *Sichang*

was told, contained all the top men in Sikang, including the governor; a perfect 'family' affair, as they were all more or less related. It was a replica of their military dictatorship of the province, but confined to the economic field. But, since the masters were the same, the army could be conveniently used to forward many business transactions at little cost such as escorting valuable shipments and constructing warehouses. With this information in my head, I deduced that the 'main business' of the province, 'black gold' and real gold and gun-running was also an important, if not the most important, item in the company's ramifications. I could not elicit any direct confirmation of my suspicions, but had plenty of covert hints. That General Chang had a share in the firm I was unable to find out but it would have been perhaps un-Chinese if he had not. After all he controlled the liaison with Chungking which was the fountain-head of supplies of machinery and technicians and the entrepôt for produce brought from the interior.

I must pay an unreserved tribute to these Sichang big-wigs for their magnificent hospitality. Feast followed feast at which I never failed to explain in detail my mission and the benefits of industrial co-operation, especially during war-time. General Chang was consistently benedictory to my intentions whilst the others encouraged me in every way to see more of what could be done in Sichang, promising and really giving me all facilities for my inspections. It was only later that I realized how crafty these men had been. They hoped to find out from me new avenues for an extension of their business, perhaps the discovery of some additional lines of trade and industry which they had overlooked, on the principle that one pair of eyes is good, but two pairs are better.

I became a familiar sight in the streets of the town, hobbling along from shop to shop surveying what they sold and what they made of locally available materials. There were many little works scattered around where men and boys, sitting on the ground, studiously beat copper, mined and smelted in the hills near by, into crude but picturesque and eminently useful tea-kettles, saucepans,



NOBLE LOLO MAIDENS

WHITE LOLO SERF



THE ROBBER BARON

YOUNG TIBETAN FROM A ROBBER TRIBE

## *Alamaz*

hukous and other shapes which, when burnished, glowed like red gold. A few small factories, with a loom or two, wove wool cloth and rolled mats from the sheep's wool brought to the market by the White Lolos. There was some silk weaving too, iron works and saddlery shops where attractive saddle-bags and other accoutrements of horse traffic were made from crudely tanned leather of several colours. There was pottery and woodwork and several other light industries of little value to the outside world, but indispensable to the farmer in this goods-starved province.

In spite of ministrations at a local clinic my heel did not get better. A huge boil had ripened and burst shortly after my arrival but, instead of healing, a deep and stubborn ulcer remained defying all treatment. It did not bother me too much when I walked, but whenever I stepped on a sharp stone I saw all the stars of heaven.

As the days passed I became restless and apprehensive as Lec Chizau had not yet appeared as promised. Alamaz grew more and more despondent in the unfamiliar surroundings of a large town where he had no friends and which he detested as the local Chinese treated him with condescension and disdain. It was true that there were many Lolos in the market-place, selling and buying, but they never stayed overnight, always returning to their mountain fastnesses in the evening. At last his homesickness overcame him. He asked me to let him go pointing out that my horses were well cared for at Hsiling Company. I could not very well detain him any longer as I realized that he had faithfully and conscientiously carried out his king's orders, being such a good companion and an excellent groom to my little horses. I gave him a generous tip which he spent on a few simple things to carry home.

All alone, I was invited to spend a couple of days in the Western Hills, a famed pilgrimage from Sichang. These hills were pyramid-shaped, rising from the lake opposite the city, their rather steep sides being covered with tiers upon tiers of temples prettily peeping out, with bright curved roofs, from the dense forest in which they were concealed. It was a veritable Western Heaven in conception as we climbed from a Buddhist to a Taoist temple

## Sichang

through intervening groves of tall shady trees. Each monastery was a self-contained unit built on a massive stone terrace with a breath-taking view of the sapphire lake below and the city beyond. In each there was a beautiful prayer hall with a Buddha or a Jade Emperor and a row of airy, clean and well-furnished guest-rooms with a kitchen behind. Each had a few monks in it, Buddhist or Taoist, as the case might be. We explored them all, gradually reaching the summit whence there was a glorious view all around, with the Taliangshan veiled in blue mist to the far east.

Many temples had already been occupied by other pleasure seekers from town, lolling on long chairs on the shady terraces in front or playing mah-jongg whilst cooking went on in the kitchens with the delicious smell of roasting chickens or stewing fish in the air, and jars of wine visible on the tables. We put up at a Taoist monastery, which my companions always patronized, whose friendly monks at once made us feel at home filling our cups with *huangtsieu* (yellow wine), a famed product of Sichang tasting like sweet sherry. I spent the afternoon rambling all over the cool mountain in company with a Taoist monk while my hosts engaged in a game of poker.

In the evening we had a long feast on the lantern-lit terrace, featuring several kinds of lake fish.

‘Talking about fish’ one of my friends remarked as we plunged our chopsticks into a fat catfish, ‘have you ever tried Baby Fish?’ he asked me.

‘No,’ I replied in astonishment. ‘What is it?’ They all laughed at my ignorance.

‘It’s funny that you have not tried it, coming from Fulin, which is the place to eat it,’ my neighbour continued. ‘It is a fairly big black fish, with two small hands and feet. It cries “Wa! Wa!” just like babies do; hence the name.’

‘I’ll be sure to try it when I get to Fulin,’ I said, not to be outdone.

We returned to Sichang next afternoon. Walking home through Main Street, I espied Lee Chizau in his dark blue *tsarwa* and white turban, staring at a shop window. I tiptoed from be-



## Lee Chizau Again

hind and slapped him resoundingly on the shoulder. When his first surprise was over, he berated me.

'Where were you?' he exclaimed. 'I have been searching for you all over the town. I thought you had gone back without waiting for me,' he concluded reproachfully. I pulled him into the nearest wineshop and over several bowls of yellow wine I told him about my trip to the Western Hills. He told me he was staying at an inn and he had two horses with him. I took him to my place and showed him Hwama and Siaoma. He was much impressed by the first, but sneered at the other little horse.

'What is the use of such a tiny beast?' he chortled.

'Never mind,' I chuckled. 'Some day she will grow up.'

We decided to leave in three days as he had some business in town. That evening I was invited again to a banquet at the Co-operative Treasury given in honour of the visiting Magistrate of Yenyuan, a town far west of Sichang on the trail to the Kingdom of Muli. He related such wonders about that almost unknown realm hidden in high and savage mountains and so fired my imagination that next morning, after consultation with Lee Chizau, who shared my enthusiasm, I rushed to General Chang to seek his blessing on our trip to Muli.

'No!' the great man exclaimed after carefully listening to me. 'I cannot approve such a trip.' Seeing how crestfallen I was, he continued. 'The road there passes for days and days through wild mountains covered with dense and almost impenetrable forests and there is nothing to eat on the way. You cannot obtain any supplies, not even in Yenyuan which is a real hole of a place.' He paused sipping some tea which his *aide* had brought. 'You will be robbed and killed by the Lolos before you reach Muli,' he concluded.

'But, General,' I interposed, 'I have just passed safely through Taliangshan here. . . .' he shook his head.

'The Siaoliangshan mountains there are different. The Lolos there are not the same. They are outcasts from the Taliangshan and are lawless, cruel and murderous,' he leaned back in his chair and indicated that he would like to close the interview. However,

## *Sichang*

in my foolishness, I continued to importune him and at last he became thoroughly fed up with me.

'You won't go!' he cried, exasperated by my obstinacy. 'I'll stop you!' he shouted in such a high squeaky voice that I cringed before his anger. Then he relaxed and smiled.

'You must be reasonable, Peter,' he said gently. 'I cannot let you go easily to your death. You do not know those places and the people there. Even if you reach Muli, they will either throw you out or heap indignities on you.' He paused. 'They are accustomed there to treat with people arriving by regular caravan, with a proper escort and rich presents for the King.' He became silent, pondering.

'I shall be going there myself some time next year. Keep in touch with me and I will take you with me.' I bowed.

## XXIV

### *The New Road*

WE had intended originally to go back to Fulin along the old Imperial route via Yuehsi and Haitang where the road gave a wide berth to the Taliangshan by skirting it on the left, but many people said it would be better to follow the newly-constructed highway. I also thought it would be interesting to see some new places.

It was the same old trudge to Luku over the dusty road and from there to Mianning, a singularly dirty and unattractive town. So antagonistic were the people there to strangers that no inn-keeper would take us in in spite of my documents. There was no Co-operative Treasury and finally we were kindly put up at a Chinese doctor's house. He worked in a newly-established clinic set up in connection with the construction of the new road. The dusty streets were filled with White Lolos who came to be treated for trachoma and other diseases.

It was the end of July and the rainy season was on. Already grey clouds enveloped the mountains and the sun became obscured for long periods during the day. I silently prayed that we could get to Fulin before the elements had swung into their full rage. As we were approaching our next stop, Takiao, the mists came lower and lower and a fine drizzle set in. As always in the case of high altitudes, as soon as the sun had disappeared, it became intensely cold.

Takiao was the place where, for the time being, the construction of the southern section of the highway terminated. Beyond stretched the unknown mountains and forests inhabited by the Lolos. We knew that we should hit the northern section somewhere before Fulin where they were working on the road, too.

## *The New Road*

Of course, the highway was all there on the surveyor's map, but that was poor consolation for us; to cross over very many miles of uncharted and wild country was no joke. We had plenty of time to ponder this, sitting in a log cabin with several road engineers and drinking wine to warm ourselves. They were cheerful young men from Central China, well-educated, courageous and unaffected by that insidious Lolophobia which possessed local Chinese. As a matter of fact, I noticed for the first time that there were a number of White Lolos in the construction gang.

'Frankly, I wonder what fool advised you to go up to Fulin this way?' said one of these engineers surveying our little caravan.

'I decided myself,' I confessed sheepishly. 'Now what shall we do?' I asked. 'It would be terrible to go all the way back to Luku,' I added ruefully. My faithful Lee Chizau came to my rescue.

'We must go on,' he said. 'I am not afraid of the Lolos; I can speak a little of their dialect,' he continued. 'Of course, it would be disastrous to have our horses stolen,' he added with a wry smile.

In the morning we were directed to follow a path through the forest at the end of which we would find another gang in a clearing and, perhaps, they would tell us how to get to another inhabited place. We crossed a long log bridge and disappeared among the giant trees. It was not a bad walk as the path was well-marked. It was still drizzling and gloomy under the green vault, but not much rain penetrated through the thick leafy canopy. We had an unhurried lunch by a brook and late in the evening reached another log cabin where we were received with equal hospitality. They made a real feast for us in the evening and I had a twinge of conscience consuming so much food and wine when we had but little to contribute. We were told now to continue up by another path that would take us to a village which was the headquarters of a Lolo prince, Nzemo Wang Kehming. I started silently at the name as that was a relative of Prince Koumou Tsangyao's to whom I carried an introduction, but I kept it to myself, not wishing to advertise my Lolo connections.

## *Prince Wang*

On the way there we met a number of Lolos in the forest. They looked at us suspiciously, but when Lee Chizau said that we were on the way to Nzemo Wang Kehming they smiled and stepped aside to let us pass. It was early in the afternoon that we reached the village, called Tsawo. I was surprised that it was so big considering that it was almost lost in these wooded mountains. Its wide street was crowded with Lolos, some carrying leather bags with corn, others leading horses and others in groups with rifles and bows. It looked more like a busy camp than a peaceful hamlet. We were taken to a large hut where a man in a long gown advanced to meet me.

'I am Wang Kehming,' he said taking the proffered letter from his cousin. Whilst food was being prepared for us, we talked. I asked him what all the hustle and bustle was about.

'I am acting as a recruiting contractor for the building of the highway,' he said. 'I am getting all White Lolos to do the work,' he added and swept his hand around the room which was crammed with leather bags with corn, chunks of salt pork, salt slabs, with some old rifles stacked in the corner.

'This is a sensible arrangement because they bring their own food as their homes are near whilst, if we had brought Chinese from outside, the problem of supplies would have been onerous, and, as you know,' he continued, 'they would be scared out of their wits to work in this wild Lolo country.'

'But how do you pay them?' I was curious. He smiled.

'This is easy,' he said as a Lolo pushed through the door bent under the heavy leather bag he was carrying. 'We give them the luxuries they lack, such as sugar, salt, matches, tobacco and cloth,' and he pointed to a store-room behind, which looked like a shop.

'And you?' I pursued my questioning, looking at him meaningly. I felt myself well-established now among the Noble Lolos and knew that he would be frank with me.

'What do you get out of it?' I repeated. He looked around cautiously, but there were only a few Lolos sitting patiently on the floor smoking their long pipes.

'I get paid in cash,' he said and pointed out with his eyes at the

## *The New Road*

rifles. 'And they supply me with these for protection.' He paused. 'They are old, but still serviceable, and with cash I can buy more,' he chuckled.

'Hush!' he whispered a warning putting a finger to his lips as two Chinese supervisors made their way to the door of his house.

The Prince lived in Chinese style and at night I shared his broad bed adding some bedclothes from my roll whilst Lee Chizau stayed with the Chinese foremen. Prince Wang awakened me early in the morning.

'You have a difficult stretch of road before you,' he warned me. 'I doubt if you will find any dwellings on the way; it is all forest and mountains for at least two days' march,' he explained. 'You may have to stay overnight under some trees.' I laughed nervously.

'If you meet any Lolos, be careful,' he admonished me. 'They are a rough, uncouth lot here, nothing like those you met in our home country across that range over there,' he added as we were eating a hurried breakfast. 'Anyway, mention my name.' He turned to Lee Chizau.

'Do we pass Yehli?' I asked him.

'No. You had better bypass the place. The less people here know about your movements the better.' His voice became earnest. 'By the time they bestir themselves, you will be gone,' and with these words he dismissed us, but not before adding to our supplies of provisions some hard-boiled eggs, a pot of paku wine, a chunk of cold venison and boiled potatoes together with a few momos.

The rain had stopped but leaden sulphurous-looking clouds blanketed the mountains whose tops were visible like dark, floating islands. Trees still dripped and in some marshy places we slushed through mud as the path climbed up and down through the cathedral-like stillness of the primeval forest. By noon we knew we were passing Yehli, somewhere on the left, behind a low range the top of which was a tangled mass of bamboo and shrubs. Perhaps we were treading along the very trail over which the famous Kelley-Roosevelt-Field Museum Expedition, conducted

## Primeval Forest

by Kermit and Theodore Roosevelt, had passed in 1929 bagging a giant panda. The bamboos indicated a possible habitat of these rare animals. The expedition had visited Yehli and it was somewhere there that the Roosevelts met the Black Lolos for the first time.

Late in the afternoon we climbed a low pass and the trail fell sharply into a rocky gorge at the bottom of which a stream roared dully. It was no longer a path but mossy, slippery rocks all the way down. I wanted to dismount and try to climb down, on the seat of my pants if necessary, but Hwama protested violently, whinnying and dancing as I tried to stop him with my ineffectual single rein. Lee Chizau, always placid and imperturbable on his broad Tibetan horse, advised me to desist. I prayed silently and produced a piece of sugar which Hwama seized greedily, saliva drooling from his mouth as he slowly enjoyed the treat. 'Dear Hwama,' I addressed him, 'please be careful,' and I tied the useless rein to the saddle holding on to it for dear life. Encouraged by my confidence the little horse now decided to vindicate it to the full. He carefully slid down the first rock and seeing a small platform below jumped down from the second and so on until we reached the bottom where a fairly deep, but beautifully clear stream was speeding down. Before I could do anything the plucky animal plunged into the water with a triumphant whinny. Half-walking and half-swimming he brought me to the other bank wet to my waist. My saddle-bags were flooded, much to Hwama's profit and delight as I had to give him almost all the sugar I kept there.

Shivering from cold I dismounted and began to walk briskly to warm myself. The forest became less dense and my discomfort was quickly forgotten when we encountered meadows and clearings full of lilies. I can never forget this paradisaical scene as rusty speckled blooms of one species competed with the pure white of another. Some were sulphur yellow and others dark red on the outside. But to top them all were the glorious flowers of the *cardio-crinum* species,<sup>1</sup> their trumpets attached to the stalks higher than a man and their powerful fragrance filling the air around with heavy sweetness.

<sup>1</sup>*Lilium giganteum*.

## The New Road

As the dusk fell I began to look for a likely spot where we should camp, but Lee Chizau urged me on and on. When it was becoming dark we saw a light among the trees and, emerging into a clearing, we were attacked by several Lolo dogs. There were two mean huts under the trees and a Lolo woman came out as two men followed her, armed with old rifles. We purposely permitted them to scrutinize us to their heart's content and then Lee Chizau spoke the magic words 'Wang Kehming'. Their features relaxed and they invited us in. They were very poor indeed, the clearing planted with pink and green buckwheat was their entire fortune. I do not think they were particularly impressed by us, all wet and muddy, but they looked covetously at our animals. We were not very happy about staying overnight as we were unarmed and absolutely at their mercy, but to have shown our apprehensions openly would have been fatal. We shared our food with them and they were mollified by the paku wine we plied them with. We slept fitfully on a heap of dry leaves in the corner, expecting our throats to be slit any moment should some fancy enter these wild men's head.

It was only at the end of next day that, emerging from the forested valleys and gorges, we crossed a man-made bridge over a chasm and stood on the banks of our old friend, the Tatu River. We were safe and sound, if somewhat battered, and now I thought everything would be plain sailing to Fulin as we marched into a village, called Naerpa, for our slumbers. We were on familiar ground as the trail was that we had taken to Helluwa in spring.

All my *joie de vivre* had returned in spite of a growing pain in my old wound, irritated and re-infected by the long march through the mud. I could have almost sung and danced as we progressed in bright sunshine next day along the beloved banks of the beautiful river. Again it was sheer joy to stop at friendly hamlets for a bowl of tea or a cup of wine or to give broad beans to the horses. All went well till we reached the ferry and crossed the river. Road construction along the other bank was in full swing, and its worst feature was that while the old trail had been destroyed by blasting, the new roadway was



## *Commander Yang's Again*

only in embryo. As we neared Fulin the clouds gathered again and it started to drizzle. Exhausted by climbing over dislodged rocks into pits and craters, cut up and bruised and sometimes descending almost into the swirling water to find a detour to some toppled rock, we encountered a new obstacle to our progress. We had moved into a section where actual blasting operations were being conducted. Our only warning was the booming of a distant gong or waving of a red flag which was not always clearly visible in the drizzle. They seemed not to care a hoot about people that may have been coming from our end, concentrating only on their own safety. Suddenly a whole mountain-side would crumble down with the thunder of exploding charges of dynamite, boulders and rocks falling in a shower, some but a few feet from us. And then we had to make our way through the debris with the stones still tumbling down. At one spot somebody must have forgotten the warning altogether. As we rode past, they were extricating two of their own workmen crushed by fallen rocks. Human life was cheap and expendable in this haphazard and amateurish construction.

We at last reached the creek that separated us from Fulin and then landed up at Commander Yang's mansion. Prince Molin had left two days ago for Dienba to meet his queen who had returned. This was a pity, as I wanted so much to see him to thank him for the success of my hard trip to his people.

The Yangs were as kind as ever and I was glad to rest a few days while a young doctor at the clinic treated my foot ulcer. It was while relaxing in the peaceful atmosphere of prosperous Fulin, hobbling now and then to the market or to the clinic, where I was invited to watch all sorts of minor operations, or sipping tea in the cave temple above the town, I became an object of most mystifying proceedings at the mansion. First of all, a nurse appeared together with Madame Yang, holding a child in her arms and asking me to examine it. The boy, about two years old, was very weak and emaciated, covered with terrible scabs of scrofula or some similar disease. I told them I had no medicine with me. They said that that was not the point and went away. Then the nurse and some other women of the household accosted Lee Chizau, pulling

## *The New Road*

him into a corner and whispering mysteriously. Evidently up to his ears in the intrigue, my friend afterwards pulled me by the arm into an orange grove behind the house where we sat down on a stone bench enjoying the view of the town. Seeing that nobody was around he unfolded a rather fantastic proposition.

'The sick child you saw is Madame Yang's favourite grandson,' he began. 'He has been ill since birth and no physician could help him,' and he looked at me, relishing the effect of his further revelations. However, the light broke in on me; I did not spend over twenty years in China for nothing.

'Wait! Wait!' I cried laughing. 'I will finish the story for you,' I continued. 'Madame Yang wants me to give the child a new name!' He nodded.

'She believes that it will cure him,' and I looked at him triumphantly.

'Well!' he exclaimed, disarmed. 'Since you know all about it there is little else to tell you. To work effectively the thing must be done spontaneously and it is for this reason that it must be conveyed to you indirectly by someone else, in hints and parables,' and we rose agreeing on how it should be done so that he could forewarn the interested party also indirectly and in utmost secrecy.

Next morning I went for a long walk along the north road by the stream where there was a small shrine surrounded by trees and bushes. At about the right time I concealed myself in a grove of trees, waiting. Although I knew that all this was a pre-arranged comedy, nevertheless it dealt with a matter of faith and prayer, things which I myself took seriously. I did not believe that a mere change of name would do the trick, but I secretly prayed that at least the child could become better.

Madame Yang appeared on the dusty road with her nurse carrying the boy. They were marvellous actresses proceeding nonchalantly and unhurriedly, as if on an ordinary constitutional stroll. As they were passing by, with a whoop I jumped out of the bushes, rushed to the nurse, snatched the child in my arms crying, 'Tao Kuang (Light of Tao)! My dear Tao Kuang!' They beamed on me and I carried the boy to the little shrine and, still holding

## *Renaming the Sick Child*

him, wrote with a brush on red paper (which was there also by accident?) the characters for his new name, afterwards tucking the paper under his shirt, presenting him with a new silver coin and pronouncing a blessing in which I expressed assurance in his future good health and prosperity. Then we returned home with the ladies in the highest spirits. Commander Yang looked optimistic, but did not comment.

Day by day the child grew better and better and, at the end of the week, was an ordinary, healthy boy able to walk and play, with all his dreadful scabs gone. I myself would not like to comment on why and how the improvement came but the miracle was there for all to see.

I became the family hero, treated as an important blood relation. Commander Yang, in the best tradition of Chinese delicacy, offered me, again indirectly and in a roundabout way, a tidy sum in silver sycee or gold dust, or any other valuable gift I might covet. In my impecuniousness, I confess, I was sorely tempted to accept. Then I started to think it over. . . . That the child had been cured there was not the slightest doubt. If it was really through me then I was but a channel for the grace of God. Could I take money for that? Commander and Madame Yang had treated me with such kindness, and what a generous hospitality! Was that not enough? *Noblesse oblige*. . . . I thought; if I had accepted the payment I knew I would lose all self-respect; I would act against all those Taoistic principles which had sustained me for so long. . . . No! No! And I bowed myself gracefully and with a light heart out of the false situation.

Although they wanted me to stay on, I knew it could not last for ever. I fixed a date for my departure, promising to return again. Madame Yang said she wanted to make a special feast. I protested long and vociferously according to etiquette but finally gave in. At dinner that night we talked again about fish.

'Madame,' I said. 'I was told so much in Sichang about a Baby Fish which, when caught, joins its little hands in supplication and kowtows crying 'Nanmu Amitabha'. They roared with laughter, but she said nothing. Then on the day of the farewell feast she

## The New Road

beckoned me mysteriously to follow her into the kitchen. There in a big vat of water I saw a terrifying creature, black as coal, with a long fat tail and small, hand-like paws, and an enormous gape with cruel teeth, like a tyrannosaurus. The cook stirred the water and the creature tried to climb out crying 'Wa! Wa!' That was the Baby Fish, a kind of salamander, living in the underwater caverns of the Tatu. When stewed that evening, it tasted wonderful.

Next day the front room of the mansion was crowded with Lolo youths clad in blue jackets and pants, with their rough mushroom-like cloaks, black turbans and leather food bags.

'These youths,' Commander Yang explained to me, 'are going to school in Chengtu, as arranged by Prince Molin.'

So the Lolo movement for education moved on.

Before we left Commander Yang had a long talk with me. I poured out to him my difficulties in Tachienlu and my apprehensions. He was thinking long and hard, his powerful face serious and his shrewd eyes looking at me searchingly.

'Difficult place. Very difficult place,' he commented, rubbing his stubbled chin. 'I understand how you feel,' he said leaning towards me. 'Try to move your office to Sichang,' he advised. 'General Chang is there; he is your friend and he would protect you. You could try to work among the Lolos and you are welcome here, in Dienba and at Yuehsi. We all know you now and you will be safe. Don't touch Luku and Mienning; that would do you no good,' and he leaned back still looking at me.

'Yes,' I rejoined. 'I do now like the Lolos', I added and waited for his reaction. He straightened up.

'Not so bad, eh?' he chuckled. 'Not the wholesale bandits and savages they are painted to be. It is because of the bad blood between us for centuries that has created this reputation. If our people, instead of attempting to conquer and despoil them of their lands and wealth had learnt to live peacefully alongside with them and respect their peculiar status and customs, the situation here might have been much happier.' He paused as his *aide* poured out more tea into our cups.

## *'Friends unto Death'*

'They are fine and honourable people, if you know how to deal with them and . . .' he moved his chair nearer, as his eyes became dreamy, 'they can be the best friends a man can have . . . friends unto death.' His eyes assumed a faraway look as if he were scanning the distant horizon.

'Of course, they have many bad eggs among them. What nation does not? And some of them are real raw, lawless Lolos bent on plunder and murder . . . but it is only the outcome of some of our people's stupid action against them. Any pup of a young officer in the local army may fancy to gather some soldiers and launch an expedition into a Lolo enclave to gather imaginary loot . . . and then what happens? Next time there is a retaliatory foray by the Lolos on a village or a hamlet; houses are burned, innocent folk killed or enslaved . . .' and he sighed.

Then, remembering that I was leaving the next day, his manner changed. He went into my troubles in great detail and afterwards sighed again, his face becoming old and tired.

'I am sorry you do not get on with them up there in Tachienlu,' he said slowly. 'You are too honest and straightforward for them, and that is why they hate you.' His voice became low. 'If you could only be more pliable and see eye to eye with them! They may yet let you do your work.'

## XXV

### *The Yajagkan Pass*

WITH my foot cured, I felt filled with new energy. On the way back, I stopped off for a few days at Lee Chizau's village where I abandoned my tiny grey pony and gave it to Lee Chizau's parents. With Hwama and another horse carrying the baggage, we then slowly proceeded up to Lengchi. Here I changed my plans as I wanted to return to Tachienlu by way of Moshimien town and thence across the Yajagkan Pass.

Lee Chizau had never been to Moshimien before, but the people at Lengchi assured me that it was not too far and the road was good. So it was agreed that Lee Chizau would go up to Tachienlu with my baggage, along the regular road and, I would proceed to Moshimien alone. But he then met a friend, who kept me company and whom he persuaded to look after my horse during the trip.

Next morning it took a long time to get over an improvised ferry to the other bank of the Tatu River along which the trail to Moshimien led. The sun was already high when we actually reached the path on the other side. We consoled ourselves with the thought that it was quite near, only fifty or sixty *li* somebody had said, but when the sun was setting we were still trudging along the stony path, after covering seventy *li*. We met a peasant who told us that it was still twenty *li* more. It was already dusk when the air began to be shaken by the distant thunder of rushing water, and night had fallen when we reached the foaming torrent which lay between us and Moshimien, surrounded by two raging streams. They joined together at the end of Moshimien, and plunged into the Tatu with a deafening roar that could be heard for miles. Since we were on a caravan trail used by farmers, I was

## *Hwama on the Bridge*

sure there was a solid bridge across this cataract. My companion, a stupid know-all, egged me on upstream until we reached a flimsy suspension bridge with a couple of thin, narrow planks in the middle. I was sure that it was only a foot-bridge not meant for animals, but he protested vehemently that this was not so. I crossed first, wet with spray and deafened by the thunder of the phosphorescent water under me, which leapt in a stupendous jet, shaking the banks. He followed leading the horse. There was a wild scream from the frantic Hwama as he slipped and fell through between the planks. My heart stood still as I realized his loss in so cruel and senseless way. But no, it was only his legs that had gone through the network of bamboo cables, flailing helplessly in a cloud of spray. I raced up the bluff, straight into the Catholic Mission a few dozen yards away. The brothers there knew me well enough, but even they were surprised at the violence of my dash into their room at this comparatively late hour. I begged and promised anything for help. A number of peasants went down with lanterns. I do not know how they did it, but the screaming horse, his eyes rolling dreadfully and his legs scratched, was extricated and led away.

‘What an idiotic thing to do!’ they all commented. ‘Why did not you use the big stone bridge a hundred yards below?’ I gave them quite a generous tip, and comforted Hwama with lots of sugar and beans.

In the morning I was seized with such loathing for Lee Chizau’s friend that I felt I could not go on with him. I gave him some money and he returned the way he came, aware, I am sure, of his own stupidity. I was in no particular hurry so I ambled lazily, Hwama following me docilely behind, to the vast leprosarium situated farther up this beautiful but accursed valley, avoided like the plague by all outside Chinese and Tibetans. Almost every family here had at least one leper in their midst.

The hospital was a cheerful, flower-filled garden in which various buildings were scattered at a discreet distance from each other. My friend here, Mother Superior Marie des Anges, was always glad to see me and offered me refreshment while we talked,

## *The Yajagkan Pass*

as monastic etiquette required, in the reception-room in the presence of two rosy-cheeked nuns. She was a tall, handsome elderly woman of refined and aristocratic bearing. People asserted that she came from an aristocratic English family. She was cheerful and very outspoken as we talked about her work and the outside world. Although venerated by everyone who knew her as a living saint, she was neither prim nor stuffy and had a keen sense of humour enjoying a good joke. She once told me, *à propos* of something I had related to her of certain small-minded missionaries I knew, that after living for twenty-five years with saints she now realized why Jesus preferred the company of sinners. She showed me the grounds of the leprosarium, whilst lovingly pointing out all the flowers and vegetables she had introduced into this extensive garden. There were over 250 lepers under treatment, mostly local Chinese, with a sprinkling of Tibetans and Lolos. They always sought the latest drugs and methods to combat and arrest this disfiguring affliction.

The trail led up and up and soon I left the cultivated tracts of the valley, entering the shady, fragrant woods of higher altitudes. As we climbed the seasons began to change in reverse. The hot, humid summer of Moshimien merged into the benign coolness of spring, with many kinds of flowers just opening. I rode a little and walked a little. We must have reached 10,000 feet or more when the deciduous woods began to merge into a forest of dark firs and larches, and I found a brook, its sparkling, leaping waters appearing oddly blue when they foamed between the rocks of pink granite. Pretty clearings by the banks were studded with flowers, with blossoming creepers cascading from tall trees. Walking ahead slowly to drink in this sun-drenched beauty, I was arrested by the vision of the incomparable *cardiocrinum* which I had met earlier in the forests of Yehli. Here they were much taller, more gigantic, fantastically towering against the background of dark tree trunks. I wanted to get to them this time, but a movement across a patch of sunlight made me stop dead, holding Hwama's bridle. Then I advanced tiptoeing softly only to find that I was standing in front of a huge black snake coiled on the path. It was too late to retreat.



## · *The Desolate Scene*

The reptile lifted its head about two feet, looking at me with the sun playing on the softly green iridescence of its black skin faintly marked with diamond designs. It gently waved its head to and fro whilst I stood frozen, and then very deliberately started to withdraw into the bushes, coil after coil straightening into a large black ribbon. It was the biggest snake I had seen in my life until, years later, I encountered some pythons in Malaya. When the rustling of its huge body had died in the distance, I dug up some bulbs of the giant lilies to take with me.

At 14,000 feet it was cold and the forest was gradually falling behind. Icy mountain streams were overgrown with *cynissium*, with its great, lotus-like leaves and yellow composite flowers. In the marshy patches, some large rhubarb was visible with reddish-yellow spikes of blossoms glowing like candles. As we reached the top, over 15,000 feet, the ground flattened out into a desolate expanse of bogs with rounded bunches of grass sticking out like dead, black heads with fuzzy greenish hair, studded now and then with beautiful tall gentians of sky-blue colour which only grew next to glaciers. Clouds enveloped us with their thick, murky fog and it began to rain. Wind-driven vapours, assuming phantom shapes, chased each other in an endless procession. After an hour's march, the bog gave way to enormous scattered boulders which loomed through the gloom like the outlines of huts and shanties. The utter desolation of the scenery was enhanced by the eerie, mournful yowls of some birds which blended with the sounds of whistling wind. Tired and wet and lacking in breath in this rarefied atmosphere, I found a nook in the lee of a rock and sat down to rest. A massive dark shape, magnified but unrevealed by the fog appeared from behind a boulder noiselessly approaching us to resolve soon into a huge, rock-grey running bird, the snow pheasant, with bright red-rimmed eyes. It paused before us for a moment and, when Hwama swished his tail, silently melted away.

Proceeding slowly step by step, not to lose the trail, it was always a shock to meet men with baskets of goods on their backs, suddenly and unexpectedly materializing from the murky depths of the all-pervading clouds. At one point, passing a boulder,

## *The Yajagkan Pass*

Hwama shied suddenly, nearly knocking me over, and as I peered behind I could see the cause of his alarm, a ragged figure lying on his back. The poor man was already dead with an old, overturned basket by his side. Overcome by cold and fatigue, his strained heart had given way.

As the terrain began to slope down, a rambling log house appeared where I knew we could find shelter for the night. Tying Hwama in a rough stable together with a couple of other horses, and taking the saddle and bedding with me, I entered the mean, smoke-filled room where a number of shivering, ragged porters sat around a log fire in the middle, cooking their simple meal of beancurd and cabbage.

‘Hey!’ I shouted. ‘One of your friends has died up there.’ They were neither surprised nor excited, looking up at me with their dull bleary eyes, red and smarting from the smoke. A couple of them rose slowly and disappeared into the gathering dusk. I spent a restless, uncomfortable night, half-sitting and half-reclining by the fire as the frosty night wind howled through the ceilingless hut.

It was a breathless descent next morning, the trail sharply twisting down, without let-up as the magnificent panorama of snow peaks unfolded on the left, with Chiburongi Konkka quite near, Reddomain Solo next and a tip of Minya Konkka just visible behind. On the right were the ice-bound summits of the Yajagkan we had crossed, with a blue lake below.

At the foot of the trail was the hamlet of Yilingkung with its celebrated hot spring. After a bath and a snack of fried kanbar and butter tea, the remainder of the trip, only a few miles, was child’s play.

## XXVI

### *The Last Lamasery*

As soon as I had stepped into my courtyard I found a sense of gloom and trouble pervading the household. Lee Chizau had already arrived and my cook was talking to him in a low, moaning voice, occasionally wiping his tears. 'Now what am I in for?' I wondered as they rose to meet me. When Lao Wong was excited I could never understand his gibberish and only in the evening, when Sze had returned from the telegraph office, where he was working, did the situation become clear. During my absence the bad-tempered cook had picked a quarrel with a certain government official's servant, a very trivial matter indeed, which could have been settled without much ado there and then. However, the foolish Lao Wong was stupid enough to threaten him with all sorts of reprisals after I had returned, describing my 'influence and puissance' in the most exaggerated and fantastic terms. He shouted at the man, Sze told me, saying that I was not so humble as I appeared, that in Chungking I occupied a place in the highest Council of State, lunched almost daily with Dr. Kung and had free entree to the Generalissimo himself. This talk, crazy, as it was, did not fail to excite the suspicious and antagonistic members of the local Government. Now they really believed that there was something more to my mission in Tachienlu than met the eye. The cook was jailed and a mild third degree administered to him until he had piled up more and still crazier stories about myself; he was released only three days before my arrival.

My wise friend, Mr. Ling, knew all about this trouble and tried to minimize it, but even he could not conceal from me what an injury the stupid man had done to me and my cause. However, everything remained calm outwardly in the provincial capital and

## *The Last Lamasery*

I was greeted ceremoniously if not cordially when I met the elders on their dignified progress towards the government offices. Some stopped me, politely inquiring about my recent trip.

I had written a long report, listing the material resources of South Sikang and recommending the establishment of a Co-operative depot in Sichang, which I forwarded to Chungking, with a copy to the local Government, requesting that consideration be given to moving me south where the political climate was more congenial and where there was more scope for my work. After this I leaned back, figuratively speaking, in my chair, waiting.

It was about this time that I met a very important official of the Central Government, who was in charge of communications in the province, which included the construction of the Yaan-Kangting (Tachienlu) highway. He was a suave, well-mannered gentleman, always clad in well-cut Western garb, and he spoke fluent English. I did not realize how dangerous this seemingly cordial and soft-spoken man was until I had a whispered hint from my friend, Mr. Ling. He visited my house and was particularly interested in my victrola, professing a great liking for classical music. One day he sent his aide requesting the loan of the machine and some records. Much as I hated lending it, I had to yield as it would have been folly to offend so highly placed a man. In a fortnight I received the victrola back. It had been unscrewed and put back again in not too careful a way.

'He cares for music as much as a pig cares for pearls,' chortled Mr. Ling when we were alone.

'He was sure it was a camouflaged radio transmitter; that is why he had it unscrewed,' he concluded looking at me meaningly.

However, appearances were still maintained and I was officially invited to attend special services and a lama dance arranged by the cunning and diplomatic Tibetan lamas in honour of the Governor's birthday at Dorjedra Lamasery outside the South Gate, with an eye to forestalling a polite plundering of their wealthy lamaseries by the insatiable and covetous provincial authorities. Of

## *No News from Headquarters*

course, everybody of note had been invited. It was a grand affair watched by us from reserved boxes in the courtyard of the lamasery. The climax of the ceremony was the blessing of the Governor and his wife by a Grand Lama who sprinkled them with holy water and presented a sizeable statuette of Buddha in solid gold. How the big man's eyes sparkled when he clasped in his hand this large lump of coveted metal.

Days stretched into weeks and still there was nothing, absolutely nothing from my Headquarters. If only they had written or cabled 'Yes' or 'No', I would have known that they continued to acknowledge my existence but, as the matters stood, I felt that I was utterly disregarded, written off and cut adrift. It was a terrifying thought and cold fear was creeping on me. Had I received something from Chungking—a cable, a short note, I could perhaps appease a little the Provincial Government's suspicions, but now, logically speaking, I felt they had real ground to suspect me. My protestations that I came for a specific purpose, that all my surveys were connected with Co-operative Movement, indeed appeared to them as so much hot air since I had little to substantiate them without active support from the C.I.C. Headquarters. At last my tension had reached such a point that I could not stay at home any longer; I felt I had to get out, at least for a time, somewhere again, even if it was my last trip. And very fortunately, the same missionary, Mr. Johnson, offered to take me again to the Tibetan Plateau, but in a different direction. He was going with Tuden to distribute tracts among the nomadic Tibetans who would be coming to certain lamaseries during the forthcoming festival season.

It was late autumn and the days were golden with warm sunshine and blue skies. I started on the trip in a mood of wild abandon, bent on enjoying myself to the hilt. I knew I was cornered and had a presentiment of troubles ahead but why worry about them now? This time I did not even pretend that I was going on any tour connected with the co-operatives.

Again we went up the Cheto Pass but, crossing it, we turned this time to the right, where a series of low hills delineated a very

## *The Last Lamasery*

wide, flat valley. Gangs of Chinese and Tibetan labourers were busily levelling an air strip, the future airport of Tachienlu.

A few miles farther we crossed a broad, shallow river and encamped by the stream behind a grim and gloomy lamasery, Hlakon gompa. It was late in the afternoon and, obeying the old tradition, we did not attempt to enter it until next morning. The lamas in it were not particularly friendly because they knew at once ours was a missionary party, their competitors, but they let me wander with Tuden all over the place, afterwards treating us to butter tea and tsamba. I spent a long time watching their preparation of oil paints and the process of painting the tankas, famed Tibetan icons, at a special studio set aside for the purpose. This lamasery was noted for its religious art. To obtain each particular pigment semi-precious stones of that colour—lapis lazuli for deep blue, turquoise for sky-blue, coral for scarlet and malachite for green—were pounded into tiny fragments in stone mortars with a smooth, stone pistil, afterwards a little oil was added and a slow grinding ensued, day after day, week after week, until an absolute smoothness and purity of the desired colour was achieved. It was strange to see how the colour of each stone progressively changed from one hue into another as this merciless, meticulous grinding proceeded until the final, true tint had been fixed. No wonder that such expensive colours prepared with such infinite diligence and devotion had survived centuries in their pristine freshness and beauty. Finger-tips were used by trained young lamas, chosen for their artistic skill, in outlining the deities and saints, the paint being rubbed hard and evenly into the canvas.

We stayed near the lamasery for about three days, but it was very uncomfortable because the meadow on which our tent had been pitched was infested with big horseflies whose bites were extremely painful and irritating. Regularly every afternoon a bell was rung at the lamasery and a flock of vultures gathered to be fed. They were huge, loathsome birds, but very intelligent after their own manner. They seemed to know when a funeral was to take place and eagerly watched the proceedings suspended motionless in the blue vault of the sky. When the last rites had been pro-

## *With the Missionary Party*

nounced by a mumbling lama the corpse was taken aside and chopped up by special assistants. A bell was rung again by the lamas, there was a whoosh of powerful wings and in a moment nothing remained of the dead body. The Tibetans believed in three modes of burial, determined by the deceased's horoscope; in the air, in water or in fire. If the burial was to be in water, the corpse was also chopped up and thrown to the fishes. For this reason the Tibetans disliked eating fish although they were plentiful in lakes and rivers.

Our delay in leaving Hlakon was due to the arrival of a group of wealthy Tibetans who had pitched their tents farther up the valley. The two brothers who headed the family were well known to my missionary companion and he told me that they were of princely blood and quite influential among their tribe. They were certainly well dressed men with huge gold and turquoise ear-rings and their tents were lavishly decorated inside with precious rugs and exquisite copperware encrusted with semiprecious stones. They brought some of their womenfolk for medical treatment, one having a diseased breast and the other suffering from a case of bad cold, they said. Even a cursory examination revealed that it was a case of the affliction which invariably accompanied all love adventures in Tibet. So prevalent were venereal diseases in that country that, as one of the measures for protection against infection, each person carried his own bowl. It was for this reason that Tibet had a declining rate of population; the number of surviving children in families was small, and not to be compared with the prolific Chinese. The problem of treating the woman with injections was a difficult one as so many villagers and their children crowded around us. Everyone tried to lift a flap of the tent to have a look, being quite sure that something extremely wicked and delicious was going on inside the tent.

From Hlakon we moved on to Tungngoloh, a very large straggling village occupying a broad, shallow and exceedingly fertile valley, 12,500 feet high, through which a river meandered. The people here were prosperous through agriculture and cattle breeding, and commodious double-storied, log and stone, houses stood

## *The Last Lamasery*

far apart surrounded and divided by acres of fields planted over with rutabaga and turnips, peas, potatoes and grain crops, all well-watered and green. Peace and contentment seemed to brood over this happy place as women thrashed corn on flat roofs, singing and joking, whilst flocks of yaks and some mules grazed on near-by hill slopes.

We did not have to pitch tents in this village as Tuden knew a family with whom we could stay. It was a solid house with the usual space on the ground floor for domestic animals whilst a notched pole led into the living-rooms upstairs. They were very comfortable, these middle-class Tibetan houses, with their matted floor, low tables and warmly glowing charcoal braziers with Gods painted on tankas or enshrined in small silver and brass portable shrines, sitting in the corner with white khatas (scarves) draped around and small bowls of pure water and butter lamps in front of them.

The high elevation with its frosty nights, even in summer, was not a benign climate for bed-bugs and mosquitoes, but there were lice, lurking both in people's clothing and even in the cracks of chairs and couches. They simply swarmed in the voluminous sheepskin coats or *shoubas* of the nomad Tibetans, and those of a lower status in life who wore them. Some had so many that I was sure that, if thrown on the ground, the sheepskins would crawl away. Some of these poor people sat by the wall in the sunshine busily hunting for these little insects and, when caught, cracking them on their teeth like water-melon seeds in a Chinese restaurant. Some travellers suffered tortures from such infestations, but such martyrdom was unnecessary. When artemisia powder and other locally-made or imported insecticides were used there was instant relief and I always carried them by the pound, bought in Tachienlu or other shopping centres. It was true that their religion prohibited them taking life, but the Tibetans were not that fanatical, as they were often described, and they had a keen sense of humour. If I had openly started killing flies, hornets or lice, especially in the presence of a lama, I would have incurred violent disapprobation and a rebuke, but if I had clandestinely spread the



## *Function of the Lamaseries*

deadly powder in strategic places resulting in a number of little corpses strewn around afterwards, it would have been taken in good grace as an unanticipated and unexplainable calamity. It was the visible act of killing some living thing with one's own hands that was so repugnant to these people, and it was for this reason that the lamaseries avoided butchering their yaks or sheep, but preferred to manoeuvre them over a cliff with a soul-consoling fiction, when they gathered their carcasses, that they had died of their own free will.

There was a steep hill-side by the village over which the trail to Tibet proper passed. It was covered with birches and hazelnut trees and wild asters, white and mauve, still bloomed in its pleasant meadows. I often went there just to sit in the sunshine and enjoy the beauty of peaceful scenery. There was a tall flagpole near by decorated with a curious contraption of paper streamers, flags and mysterious symbols. It was a device to preserve the valley from the visitations of hail, the greatest calamity in the life of a Tibetan farmer. Hailstorms were unpredictable and occurred frequently throughout the length and breadth of the country. A little leaden cloud might suddenly appear from nowhere in the middle of a lovely summer day and in a flash a shower of ice lumps, sometimes as big as eggs, bombarded the earth beating the crops down into the mud, killing livestock and even people if it caught them in an unprotected place. The main function of the lamaseries was to protect the people by prayers, charms and conjuration from such tragedies. The hail usually struck only a very limited acreage, so that one field might be totally destroyed whilst a neighbouring one remained unaffected.

Our next destination was Chumagon, a small but renowned lamasery situated on a hill-top at 14,500 feet, where an annual fiesta was held for the nomads, including a lama dance and fair. It took us several days to get there. It was stimulating to rise at dawn, emerging from the tent on the grassy expanse of the plateau covered with hoar frost, every little plant and flower sparkling with tiny brilliants in the first rays of the sun. Warmed by flapjacks and strong coffee we mounted our horses and slowly

## *The Last Lamasery*

rode seemingly nowhere, without trails or roads, over dome-like hills and gentle valleys covered with short, yellow grass which imparted a golden appearance to the rolling country stretching without end and without limit to the far horizon. Sometimes we met herds of yaks, like black beetles crawling over the slopes. When we approached them, the suspicious bulls always made a bee line for us emitting small, funny sounds like the grunting of pigs. Sometimes they were reinforced by giant woolly mastiffs and many times we were in danger of being gored or torn to pieces while lazy shepherds bestirred themselves to stop the animals. We had no lunch *en route*, but, like all Tibetans on the road, we made our stages short, managing to camp by some hamlet in the late afternoon. As the tent was being put up we strolled into the squat houses of the villagers foraging for whatever provisions they could supply. It might have been a chunk of freshly-killed yak, a piece of kanbar (dried meat) or even a sackful of potatoes or fodder for the horses. Usually they told us to sit down and wait, sipping butter tea, as the yaks were driven home for the night; then rich, creamy milk was brought, still warm, in copper pails which we either drank on the spot or reserved for our coffee on the morrow.

Once we came on a nomad family which had settled temporarily in a secluded valley, their yaks and horses browsing on lush grass by a stream. The nomads were easily identified by the large tents of black yak hair and their dress was different from other Tibetans. It was they who all the time wore the thick sheepskins I have just mentioned. During the day they pulled them down to the waist, both men and women, walking about seemingly unmindful of the burning sunshine or the biting, icy wind. They were careful, suspicious people, accustomed to sudden dangers and bandit depredations. It was only after much signalling by us that they reluctantly agreed to restrain their numerous dogs who guarded their encampment. But once in and seeing that we meant no harm, they became warmly hospitable, offering us butter tea right from churns and tsamba out of leather bags gaily patched with saffian of several colours.

## *Black and White Tents*

The undulating golden vista was not wholly treeless. Sometimes a patch bisected a low range of hills, dark as night, which on closer approach resolved itself into a gloomy, thick forest of firs, filled with screeching pheasants and other animals. Following the bottom of a narrow ravine through which an icy stream rushed, we entered one of these typical forests. Step by step we moved up almost all day long admiring the flowers which still gleamed in this sheltered nook, to emerge in the afternoon on to a vast slope at the upper end of which stood a massive, two-storied lamasery of Chumagon with its lama quarters behind. We selected a piece of ground on the left, not too far from the stream and pitched our white tent, pegging it down securely against raging late afternoon winds. It was very quiet here, the only sound being the tinkling of a bell at the lamasery and the gurgling of the brook below which spread wide among the stones to create a mossy bog carpeted with tall blue gentians among which yellow and purple mecanopses, the beautiful perennial poppies of high altitudes, stood with their drooping flowers shaped like lampshades. Unprotected by mountains or forest a terrific frost descended at night.

The next day visitors began to arrive. From early morning till late evening they streamed, some riding on horseback, others leading their mules loaded with tents and goods. In no time at all a town of black and white tents had sprung up and a short street between them blossomed forth with temporary shops where the Tachienlu merchants of Tibetan descent, put up all kinds of merchandise, with large jars of fiery ara predominating. Those who had no tents or friends who were willing to share theirs, invaded the lamasery and its living quarters. The hubbub of voices, milling crowds of people and the neighing of horses turned the holy precincts into a busy market-place. After meal-time had arrived, with the sun setting behind the mountains, fires were lit everywhere, the smoke billowing in the wind and bringing an aroma of frying beef and baking *momos*. Wine began to flow freely among carousing men and women with some bravos attempting to sing a discordant medley of motives. Just as we were prowling in our tent looking for pots and pans to cook our evening meal, shooting

## *The Last Lamasery*

broke out all over the camp. We lay on the ground hardly daring to move as bullets whizzed by some striking the pegs of our tent. There were shouts and curses of enraged men and screams of frightened women as the crazy fusillade continued until heavily-armed dopdops, the lamasery police, rushed out led by a tough Lama Commandant, who subdued the drunken culprits with rifle butts and heavy staves, unceremoniously dragging them away afterwards into a guard-room to think things over.

In the morning the atmosphere was hushed and devout as more nomads arrived with their womenfolk attired in their best. They wore dark brown woollen *kaftans* with sleeves rolled up to show their nether garments and caught up in the middle by a sash. Many of them had their hair plaited into many queues spread over a broad leather or thick woollen band, to which rows of heavy silver or thick brass discs were attached, the silver ones being comparatively small, but the brass ones as large as tea saucers. The weight of such ponderous and onerous ornamentation sometimes reached more than a hundred pounds and represented a woman's fortune to be turned into cash or goods in case of dire need. No wonder these slaves to nomadic fashion walked so slowly and unhurriedly, unable to move or shake their heads. To cap this display of sumptuous affluence they had on their heads a sizeable apple of pure amber with a coral cherry on top in addition to heavy copper and silver bangles on their wrists, their fingers being adorned with silver rings with huge chunks of turquoise and coral.

As the rhythmic beating of a big drum began in the lamasery, accompanied by the tinkling of prayer bells and wail of conch-shells, a wave of piety visibly swept the assemblage, especially the nomads. All turned their footsteps towards the sacred building where in the dimly-lit vast hall the lamas conducted a solemn liturgy, seated cross-legged in rows on low benches reciting sutras punctuated by the sounding of an appropriate musical instrument. We all passed through into a spacious courtyard on the right side of the temple, fenced off by a low and massive stone wall. As the crowd milled about in happy disorder, suddenly a batch of young

## *At the Lamasery of Chumagon*

trapas leapt in from a side door, dressed as the minions of Hell, in red tunics with hideous and mischievous masks, long tails and armed with suitable infernal weapons such as tridents, lances, swords and long horse whips. With a whoop and blood-curdling yells they began to clear the ground pushing the people towards the walls. Enjoying their short-lived authority they stabbed at men and women, irrespective of their rank or importance, with tridents and lances and threatened to strike off the head of those who were too slow to move, viciously cracked their whips over children, provoking screams and uproarious laughter as if it was a game. I received a whack with a baton on my shoulder from an impudent little devil who showed me his tongue and shouted obscenities. When a spacious oval ring had been cleared, they patrolled the perimeter punching those who tried to overstep the line.

With a fanfare of small trumpets two grotesque and extremely funny masks appeared from the lamasery. One was an enormous head of a European in a black top hat and another of a very fat man with a bland smile on his mammoth moon-like visage adorned by a purple bulbous nose. The masks were very well made, with intelligent humour and understanding, and the men who wore them were real artists as they cavorted around approaching the people with indecent jests and frightening little children out of their wits. But soon they disappeared and a reverent hush enveloped the place as with great dignity and stern faces the hierarch lamas issued from the hall, some carrying their musical instruments with them and forming an orchestra at the far end of the courtyard. The grand lamas wore vestments of gold cloth and mitre-like head-dress, supporting themselves with long staffs surmounted by golden discs of sacred symbols. One of them was a tall, portly man in his fifties, of very imposing presence and severe mien who carried a curious vermilion staff, very broad with four fillets tapering downwards, surmounted by a sort of small shrine, out of which projected a tall spike with a golden medallion on top. He stood motionless in the centre as great, ten-foot-long trumpets blared forth and a drum boomed. The dancing lamas, in their rusty-red togas and red woollen top-boots filed out

## *The Last Lamasery*

and stood in a circle. There was another blast from the trumpets, their enormous sound shaking us, and other instruments took up with the muffled beat of the giant drum. The lama with the big staff made a sign and the dance began. Standing on one leg each dancer turned and carefully put down the other leg in a prescribed position. The old lama was the dance master and, watching with an eagle's eye, did not stand for any sloppiness or nonsense. He slowly and carefully indicated the time, observing each dancer, and the slightest deviation or a wrong pass was corrected as he pointed his staff at the offending lama.

It was a monotonous but extremely absorbing performance. To have a better view some nomads pulled me up to sit with them on the wall. The pulsating, measured beat of the drum and melancholy wail of the conch-shells, the subdued clashing of cymbals and periodical blasts of mammoth trumpets, with a circle of red-robed silent lamas gyrating and turning in perfect unison with the music, was extremely hypnotizing. Instead of a sleepy sensation it produced a mounting sense of exaltation, a feeling of being carried away somewhere beyond space and time, of a unity between the spectators and the dancers, an influx of joy tinged with sweet sadness.

I was not alone in my feelings as, overcome by religious emotion, some nomad women softly cried to themselves murmuring '*Chenrezig Rimpoche!*' whilst their menfolk gazed with starry eyes mumbling '*Aum mani padme hum!*' counting the rosaries wound around their wrist. Many women crossed themselves fervently prostrating every time the lama dance director paused before them. The crossing consisted of putting two palms together, touching the forehead, then the breast and the stomach. It went on and on for hours until there was an interval for a rest and meal. In the afternoon the same dance was repeated with the lamas wearing beautiful brocade robes of many colours, a gift of the Tachienlu community specially delivered for the occasion, and various animal masks. I had never seen such a frenzy of religious feeling or so much manifestation of the simple, pure faith as at the lamasery of Chumagon.

## *The Missionary's Shangri-La*

On the way towards Tachienlu my missionary friend said that he would like to take us to his Shangri-La, but declined to specify whether it was another lamasery or some unusually beautiful valley. We left the magnificent Mt. Jara on our left and went up the northern range of mountains pausing at the pass covered with blue and golden meadows. It was when we made a turn on our descent that I knew he had not exaggerated. An oval, fairly large lake sparkled like a blue diamond in a frame of primeval firs and larches with not a single human being visible anywhere around. We pitched our tents at the lower end of the lake in the shade of the trees at a place where the overflow, dammed by a huge rock, fell down in the form of a huge cascade with a muffled roar, disappearing in a dark precipitous cleft. Our stay of over a week was a sheer idyll enjoyed by both men and beasts. We lay for hours on the mossy banks as soft as a foam mattress or gathered into our kettles big, juicy wild strawberries which we consumed in the evening with rich yak milk gathered by a servant who made a daily expedition to the upper alpine pastures where there was an encampment of nomad Tibetans. We encountered pheasants and other forest birds which roamed unafraid as the Tibetans forebore hunting and especially killing just for fun. In the evening we sat on the shore by the fire, its glow reflected from the placid waters. The lake was bottomless, being the crater of a volcano extinct in prehistorical times. Rare flowers still bloomed in the protective tangle of the bushes unafraid of the hoar frost which covered the grass in the morning. This lake, Tsorika, was surely a paradise for quiet happiness and utter relaxation. We longed to remain for ever, isolated from the unfriendly world. But our provisions were running low and we had to leave.

As we were descending, a group of ragged men emerged from below carrying axes and saws. They said they were going to start cutting the forest near the lake as the Provincial Government had decided to utilize its timber reserves. I was overcome by an upsurge of blind, unreasoning hatred for those insatiable elders in Tachienlu who, although gorged with opium and gold and the proceeds of their rapacious taxes, now had to extend their claws

## *The Last Lamasery*

to destroy the glorious beauty of this unforgettable lake in order to put more money into their bottomless purses. There was no law or order in this beautiful corner of the world and no public opinion which dared to rebel against the outrage.

Very depressed I raced ahead of my companions, leaving my horse behind, and jumping from stone to stone like a goat. The forest had been left behind and the trail passed bushes and occasional trees. A wonderful vista of mountains and gorges unfolded before me and I stopped to admire it. There was a crackling sound behind me and a whirr of wings and I just turned in time to see a fluffy ball of fire iridescent with tints of diamonds, rubies, emeralds, silver and gold, flying through the air. Caught by surprise and admiration I waited as it landed but a few yards from me to reveal the Diamond pheasant, which to me is the most glorious creature on earth. There the bird stood still glowing and sparkling with the rainbow colours of precious metals and stones nervously trailing its long tail. Then it disappeared noiselessly into the bushes. It was the only time I ever saw one alive; an unforgettable sight.

The road led down all the time and we emerged a few miles above the Hot Spring reaching Tachienlu the same evening.



## XXVII

### *Epilogue*

AFTER my return from the Chumagon lamasery Mr. Ling told me in great confidence that my report on South Sikang had been read by the Provincial Government and snorted at by the elder officials who declared that it was sheer impudence on my part to recommend that the Provincial national resources should be exploited by the common people on the industrial co-operative principle. They themselves knew much better how to utilize them.

‘The feeling against you is unfavourable,’ said Mr. Ling. ‘Something is cooking up,’ he continued. ‘Well, I shall warn you if any trouble comes,’ he added philosophically but I thought his smile was forced.

Then things began happening fast. One morning I saw a squad of Provincial soldiers turning from the street towards our gate. Their officer approached me and declared that I was under house arrest and must not leave the premises. In the meantime the soldiers made themselves at home on the ground floor unceremoniously throwing their kit on the desk and squatting on chairs. About noon two local officials came, accompanied by police, and turned my house upside down searching, prowling and peering into every crevice and hole hoping to find a hidden hoard of gold. They carried away every scrap of paper I had, including my official and private correspondence, all my photographs, and even a carton of vegetable seeds recently sent by a well-wisher from America. Then they led away my cook interrogating him till nightfall. He returned much sobered and whispered that he had not ‘betrayed’ me in any manner. Whatever that meant I could never find out, but he talked no more nonsense about my ‘intimate’ relations with the heads of the Central Government.

## *Epilogue*

Proceedings next day opened with a visit from a high Provincial official, whom I had met before, accompanied by a foxy-looking individual who was his interpreter. He point blank accused me of being a spy for the Japanese on the grounds that I had some Japanese prints and postcards among my papers. Moreover, I had certain types of explosives in my possession as was proved by the round pellet seeds that went by the name of turnips, cabbages and rutabagas. Finally I had tried to encompass the destruction of Tachienlu by predicting and producing a violent earthquake by means yet to be determined.

I wanted to burst out laughing, so incredible were the accusations but I remembered in time how ignorant, superstitious and prejudiced these opium smokers were, entirely dominated by their dream-inflamed fantasies. Very coldly I rejected his contentions telling him where I had got the Japanese pictures and what they were; as regards the deadly nature of the seeds I defied him to plant them and see how they would sprout. No explosive could do that. As for the earthquake, I said I could easily predict it by the increased temperature and volume of hot springs which indicated a rising volcanic and possibly tectonic activity.

The following day he was succeeded by a colleague whose line of attack was that I acted as a paid agent of Stalin because the Chungking Post Office had returned to them a letter of mine in Russian. I read the letter they had handed me explaining that it was written to a lady friend of mine in San Francisco, in frivolous terms and about nothing in particular and I pointed out that, whatever my origin had been, I was now a loyal Chinese citizen.

I thought these tiring interrogations were over until a third man appeared the next morning. He could not bluntly say that I was the Central Government's agent, but contended that my purpose in coming to Sikang was to create disturbances and raise up the mob. This was clear from the multitude of villagers who visited my house daily; I was also ferreting out, he continued, all the gold and silver in the Province on behalf of a person or persons unknown. He concluded by expressing his conviction that I had not been sent by the Central Government at all but had sneaked into

## *Under Suspicion*

Tachienlu under false pretences, with faked documents and for certain nefarious purposes of my own. In reply I offered him a telegram I had prepared and asked him to send it to Chungking forthwith. He accepted it with a smirk on his wolfish face as his interpreter read to him the message addressed to Dr. Kung, informing him of my plight.

In the evening our faithful Sze called and I told him of my troubles. He told me in confidence that my telegram to Chungking had been suppressed by special orders of the Provincial Government. This filled me with grave forebodings. Sze asked me to give him a copy of the message and then left me without saying a word.

On the following morning the terms of my house confinement were relaxed. I was permitted to visit the Cunninghams, sitting there as long as I cared, whilst the soldiers who escorted me loafed idly outside. I could also go to the Hot Springs under escort. I used all these privileges with gusto and proceeded through the streets as shopkeepers stared and passers-by turned around to see a foreigner surrounded by so many armed soldiers like an arch-criminal. But I saw no hatred or derision on the faces of Tachienlu citizens; they began to cheer me as I passed and many made me stop for a drink.

In the meantime my cook, who had regained his complete liberty, regaled me with outside news picked up from friends on the market and from Mr. Ling, who purposely kept his distance so as not to get involved in the sorry affair. The beautiful house, where I had been entertained by the Dranggo Incarnation, had been also searched, ostensibly because of the people there being so friendly to me, but actually to use it as a pretext for plunder as, according to rumours, they held a fortune in gold. So thorough was the search, my cook related, that even the contents of the privies had been most carefully examined. They eventually carried away a large number of gold nuggets and gold and silver Buddhas. All the poor tribesmen who used to bring us chickens, oranges, potatoes and charcoal had been rounded up and had suffered a mild third degree inquisition to make them admit that I had been

## *Epilogue*

inciting them to civil disobedience and other crimes against the established government. To their great honour they stoutly maintained their innocence throughout and did not fall even for the rewards which had been offered to anyone who would turn a false witness against me. Returning one evening from the Hot Springs I found our ginger dog missing and my cook in tears.

'Where is Ginger?' I asked him. Still sobbing, he pointed to the soldiers who were eating their evening meal squatting in the courtyard.

'In that big pot,' he mumbled between sobs. 'They killed him as soon as you stepped out.' It was imprudent to complain as they had hinted to the cook that if I did, they would put a bullet through me.

A week of this tragi-comedy passed. Suddenly, excitement gripped the whole town as two telegrams arrived signed by Dr. Kung himself, one to the Provincial Government ordering my immediate release and the second to me instructing me to proceed to Chungking to make a full report. The wily manœuvres of the local officials to save at least some of their face followed after a hurried conference among them. Although the whole town knew that the wires had come through, the delivery of the one addressed to me was delayed for another twenty-four hours. In the meantime a high official called on me to announce that the Provincial Government had found me innocent and had ordered my release and the immediate return of my papers. Of course, I played the game in accordance with Chinese etiquette, not moving an eyelash to betray the fact that I knew about the telegrams, and thanking him for so 'spontaneous' and kind a decision of his Government. Thus with 'face' saved all around I stepped out of the house into the streets to receive warm congratulations on every corner both from friends and strangers.

My stay in Sikang, I knew, had come to an end. I had won the first round, but not the battle. Their next move would soon follow, if I remained against their wishes, and they would eventually get me. There were many ways of disposing of an unwanted man in this Province, run by a tightly-knit clique of gangsters.

## *I Leave Sikang*

Apart from these considerations, I had to admit that from the practical point of view of promoting industrial co-operatives, my two years in Sikang had been wasted. Even if I could persuade my Headquarters to send me back, it would only lead to another fiasco, as the Sikang Provincial Government had made it quite clear they did not want any co-operatives in and around Tachienlu, unless created by themselves and unless they had complete control of all funds that might be allocated by Chungking. If appointed to Sichang, I would have to contend with the powerful Hsiling Company whose intention was similar to that of the Tachienlu authorities, although expressed in more diplomatic terms. Even if political conditions were favourable to my work, I could never be sent to Lhasa or Chiamdo as those cities were under the control of the feudal Tibetan Government. Moreover, I had observed during my travels on the Tibetan plateau, that the Tibetans and Chinese of Kham preferred trade and quick profits to co-operatives. The Chinese paper dollar had no currency and what bank would care to advance silver rupees at a small interest, when they could make thousands overnight in Tibetan trade and opium?

But I simply could not bring myself to be torn away from Sikang. I loved my Lolo friends and wanted to see more of them. I had touched only a fringe of their mysterious land and met too few of them. I was drawn irresistibly to make other trips there, to stay with them a long, long time and drink again of the sweetness of their hospitality and friendship. Neither, I felt, could I leave Tibet with its lovable people, strange lamaseries and its glittering snow peaks.

Yet I had to go. Lao Wong and I embarked on our trip down on a bitterly cold November morning with the snow falling around in thick flakes. My faithful Hwama was carrying our meagre baggage. Over and over again I turned round to have a glimpse of the beloved peaks, with tears in my eyes.