

Magic & Mystery in Tibet

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Extract

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Chapter 1

Tibet and the Lamas

'Well, then, it is understood. I leave Dawasandup with you as interpreter. He will accompany you to Gangtok.'

Is it a man who is speaking to me? This short yellow-skinned being clad in a robe of orange brocade, a diamond star sparkling on his hat, is he not, rather, a genie come down from the neighbouring mountains?

They say he is an 'incarnated lama' and heir prince of a Himalayan throne, but I doubt his reality. Probably he will vanish like a mirage, with his caparisoned little steed and his party of followers, dressed in all the colours of the rainbow. He is a part of the enchantment in which I have lived these last 15 days. This new episode is of the stuff that dreams are made of. In a few minutes, I shall wake up in a real bed, in some country not haunted by genii nor by 'incarnated Lamas' wrapped in shimmering silk. A country where men wear ugly dark coats and the horses do not carry silver inlaid saddles on golden-yellow cloths.

The sound of a kettle-drum makes me start, two hautboys intone a melancholy minor tune. The youthful genie straddles his diminutive courser, knights and squires jump into their saddles.

'I shall expect you,' the lama-prince says, smiling graciously at me.

I hear myself, as if I were listening to some other person, promising him that I will start the next day for his capital, and the little troop, headed by the musicians, disappears.

As the last murmurs of the plaintive melody die away in the distance, the enchantment that has held me spellbound dissipates.

I have not been dreaming, all this is real. I am at Kalimpong, in the Himalayas, and the interpreter given me when I arrived stands at my side.

I have already related¹ the circumstances which had brought me to the Himalayas. Political reasons had, at that time, led the Dalai Lama to seek refuge in British territory. It had seemed to me a unique opportunity, while he was stopping at the Indian frontier, of obtaining an interview and getting information from him about the special type of Buddhism that prevails in Tibet.

Very few strangers have ever approached the monk-king hidden in his sacred city, in the Land of Snows. Even in exile, he saw no one. Up to the time of my visit, he had obstinately refused an audience to any woman except Tibetans and I believe, even to this day, that I am the only exception to this rule.

As I left Darjeeling, in the early rosy dawn of a cool spring morning, I little guessed the far-reaching consequences of my request.

I thought of a short excursion, of an interesting but brief interview; while, actually, I became involved in wanderings that kept me in Asia for full 14 years.

At the beginning of that long series of journeys, the Dalai Lama figures, in my diaries, as an obliging host who, seeing a stranger without the walls, invites him to see over his domain.

This the Dalai Lama did in a few words: 'Learn the Tibetan language,' he told me.

If one could believe his subjects who call him the 'Omniscient,'² the sovereign of Tibet, when giving me this advice, foresaw its consequences, and consciously directed me, not only towards Lhasa, his forbidden capital, but towards the mystic masters and unknown magicians, yet more closely hidden in his wonderland.

At Kalimpong, the lama-king lived in a large house belonging to the minister of the Rajah of Bhutan. To give the place a more majestic appearance, two rows of tall bamboo poles had been planted in the form of an avenue. Flags flew from every pole, with the inscription *Aum mani padme hum!*, or the 'horse of the air', surrounded by magic formulas.

The retinue of the exiled sovereign was numerous and included more than 100 servants. They were for the most part engaged in

1. In a previous book, *My Journey to Lhasa*.
2. *Thamstched mkyenpa*.

interminable gossip, and quiet reigned round the habitation. But on fête days, or when visitors of rank were to be received, a crowd of busy officials and domestics poured out from all sides, peering at one from every window, crossing and recrossing the large plot of ground in front of the house, hurrying, screaming, agitated, and all so remarkably alike in their dirty, greasy robes that a stranger could easily make awkward mistakes about their rank.

The splendour, decorum and etiquette of the Potala were absent in that land of exile. Those who saw this road-side camp, where the head of the Tibetan theocracy waited for his subjects to reconquer his throne, could not imagine what the court at Lhasa was like.

The British expedition penetrating into the forbidden territory and parading his capital, in spite of the sorcery of the most famous magicians, had probably led the Dalai Lama to understand that foreign barbarians were masters in a material sense, by right of force. The inventions that he noticed during his trip through India must also have convinced him of their ability to enslave and mould the material elements of nature. But his conviction that the white race is mentally inferior remained unshaken. And, in this, he only shared the opinion of all Asiatics – from Sri Lanka to the northern confines of Mongolia.

A Western woman acquainted with Buddhist doctrines seemed to him an inconceivable phenomenon.

If I had vanished into space while talking to him, he would have been less astonished. My reality surprised him most; but, when finally convinced, he politely inquired after my 'master', assuming that I could only have learned of Buddha from an Asiatic. It was not easy to convince him that the Tibetan text of one of the most esteemed Buddhist books³ had been translated into French before I was born. 'Ah well,' he murmured at last, 'if a few strangers have really learned our language and read our sacred books, they must have missed the meaning of them.'

This was my chance. I hastened to seize it.

'It is precisely because I suspect that certain religious doctrines of Tibet have been misunderstood that I have come to you to be enlightened,' I said.

3. The *Gyacher rolpa*, translated by Ed. Foucaux, Professor at the Collège de France.

My reply pleased the Dalai Lama. He readily answered any questions I put to him and a little later gave me a long written explanation of the various subjects we had discussed.

The prince of Sikkim and his escort having disappeared, it only remained for me to keep my promise and make ready to start for Gangtok. But there was something to be seen before moving on.

The evening before, I had witnessed the benediction of the pilgrims by the Dalai Lama, a widely different scene from the Pontifical benediction at Rome. For the Pope in a single gesture blesses the multitude, while the Tibetans are far more exacting and each expects an individual blessing.

Among Lamaists again the manner of the blessing varies with the social rank of the blessed. The lama places both hands on the heads of those he most respects. In other cases only one hand, two fingers or even only one finger. Lastly comes the blessing given by slightly touching the head with coloured ribbons, attached to a short stick.

In every case, however, there is contact, direct or indirect, between the lama and the devotee. This contact, according to Lamaists, is indispensable because the benediction, whether of people or of things, is not meant to call down upon them the benediction of God, but to infuse into them some beneficial power that emanates from the lama.

The large number of people who came to Kalimpong to be touched by the Dalai Lama gave me some idea of his widespread prestige.

The procession took several hours to pass before him, and I noticed that not only Lamaists but many people from Nepal and from Bengal, belonging to Hindu sects, had joined the crowd.

I saw some, who had come only to look on, suddenly seized by an occult fervour, hurrying to join the pious flock.

As I was watching this scene, my eyes fell on a man seated on the ground, a little to one side. His matted hair was wound around his head like a turban, in the style common to Hindu ascetics. Yet his features were not those of an Indian and he was wearing dirty and much-torn Lamaist monastic garments.

This tramp had placed a small bag beside him and seemed to observe the crowd with a cynical expression.

I pointed him out to Dawasandup, asking him if he had any idea who this Himalayan Diogenes might be.

'It must be a travelling *naljorpa*,' he answered; and, seeing my curiosity, my obliging interpreter went to the man and entered into conversation with him.

He returned to me with a serious face and said: 'This lama is a peripatetic ascetic from Bhutan. He lives here and there in caves, empty houses or under the trees. He has been stopping for several days in a small monastery near here.'

My thoughts returned to the vagabond when the prince and his escort had disappeared. I had no definite plan for the afternoon; why should I not go to the *gompa* (monastery) where he was staying and persuade him to talk? Was he really mocking, as he seemed to be, the Dalai Lama and the faithful? And if so, why? There might be interesting reasons.

I communicated my desire to Dawasandup, who agreed to accompany me.

We went on horseback and soon reached the *gompa*, which was only a large-sized country house.

In the *lha khang* (the room containing the holy images) we found the *naljorpa* seated upon a cushion in front of a low table, finishing his meal. Cushions were brought and we were offered tea.

It was difficult to begin a conversation with the ascetic, as his mouth appeared to be full of rice; he had only answered our polite greetings by a kind of grunt.

I was trying to find a phrase to break the ice when the strange fellow began to laugh and muttered a few words. Dawasandup seemed embarrassed.

'What does he say?' I asked.

'Excuse me,' answered the interpreter, 'these *naljorpas* sometimes speak roughly. I do not know if I should translate.'

'Please do,' I replied. 'I am here to take notes, especially of anything at all curious and original.'

'Well, then - excuse me - he said, "What is this idiot here for?"'

Such rudeness did not greatly astonish me as, in India also, certain *yogins* make a habit of insulting anyone who approaches them.

4. *Naljorpa* (written *mal hbyorpa*), literally: 'He who has attained perfect serenity', but usually interpreted as an ascetic possessing magic powers.

'Tell him I have come to ask why he mocked at the crowd seeking the benediction of the Dalai Lama.'

'Puffed up with a sense of their own importance and the importance of what they are doing. Insects fluttering in the dung,' muttered the *naljorpa* between his teeth.

This was vague, but the kind of language one expects from such men.

'And you,' I replied, 'are you free from all defilement?'

He laughed noisily.

'He who tries to get out only sinks in deeper. I roll in it like a pig. I digest it and turn it into golden dust, into a brook of pure water. To fashion stars out of dog dung, that is the Great Work!'

Evidently my friend was enjoying himself. This was his way of posing as a superman.

'Are these pilgrims not right to profit by the presence of the Dalai Lama and obtain his blessing? They are simple folk incapable of aspiring to the knowledge of the higher doctrines—'

But the *naljorpa* interrupted me.

'For a blessing to be efficacious, he who gives it must possess the power that he professes to communicate.

'Would the Precious Protector [the Dalai Lama] need soldiers to fight the Chinese or other enemies if he possessed such a power? Could he not drive anyone he liked out of the country and surround Tibet with an invisible barrier that none could pass?

'The *guru* who is born in a lotus' had such a power and his blessing still reaches those who worship him, even though he lives in the distant land of the Rakshasas. I am only a humble disciple, and yet—'

It appeared to me that the 'humble disciple' was maybe a little mad and certainly very conceited, for his 'and yet' had been accompanied by a glance that suggested many things.

My interpreter meanwhile was visibly uneasy. He profoundly respected the Dalai Lama and disliked to hear him criticized. On the other hand, the man who could 'create stars out of dog dung' inspired him with a superstitious fear.

I proposed to leave, but as I understood that the lama was going away the next morning, I handed Dawasandup a few rupees for the traveller to help him on his way.

This present displeased the *naljorpa*. He refused it, saying he had already received more provisions than he could carry.

Dawasandup thought it right to insist. He took a few steps forward, intending to place the money on a table near the lama. Then I saw him stagger, fall backward and strike his back against the wall as if he had been violently pushed. He uttered a cry and clutched at his stomach. The *naljorpa* got up and, sneering, let the room.

'I feel as if I had received a terrible blow,' said Dawasandup. 'The lama is irritated. How shall we appease him?'

'Let us go,' I answered. 'The lama has probably nothing to do with it. You, perhaps, have heart trouble and had better consult a doctor.'

Pale and troubled, the interpreter answered nothing. Indeed, there was nothing to be said. We returned, but I was not able to reassure him.

The next day Dawasandup and I left for Gangtok.

The mule path that we followed dives right into the Himalayas, the sacred land which ancient Indian traditions people with famous sages, stern magicians, ascetics and deities.

The summer resorts established by foreigners on the border of these impressive highlands have not yet modified their aspect. A few miles away from the hotels where the Western world enjoys dancing and jazz bands, the primeval forest reigns.

Shrouded in the moving fogs, a fantastic army of trees, draped in livid green moss, seems to keep watch along the narrow tracks, warning or threatening the traveller with enigmatic gestures. From the low valleys buried under the exuberant jungle to the mountain summits covered with eternal snow, the whole country is bathed in occult influences.

In such scenery it is fitting that sorcery should hold sway. The so-called Buddhist population is practically shamanist and a large number of mediums: *Bônpos*, *pawos*, *Bunting* and *Yabas* of both sexes, even in the smallest hamlets, transmit the messages of gods, demons and the dead.

I slept on the way at Pakyong, and the next day I reached Gangtok.