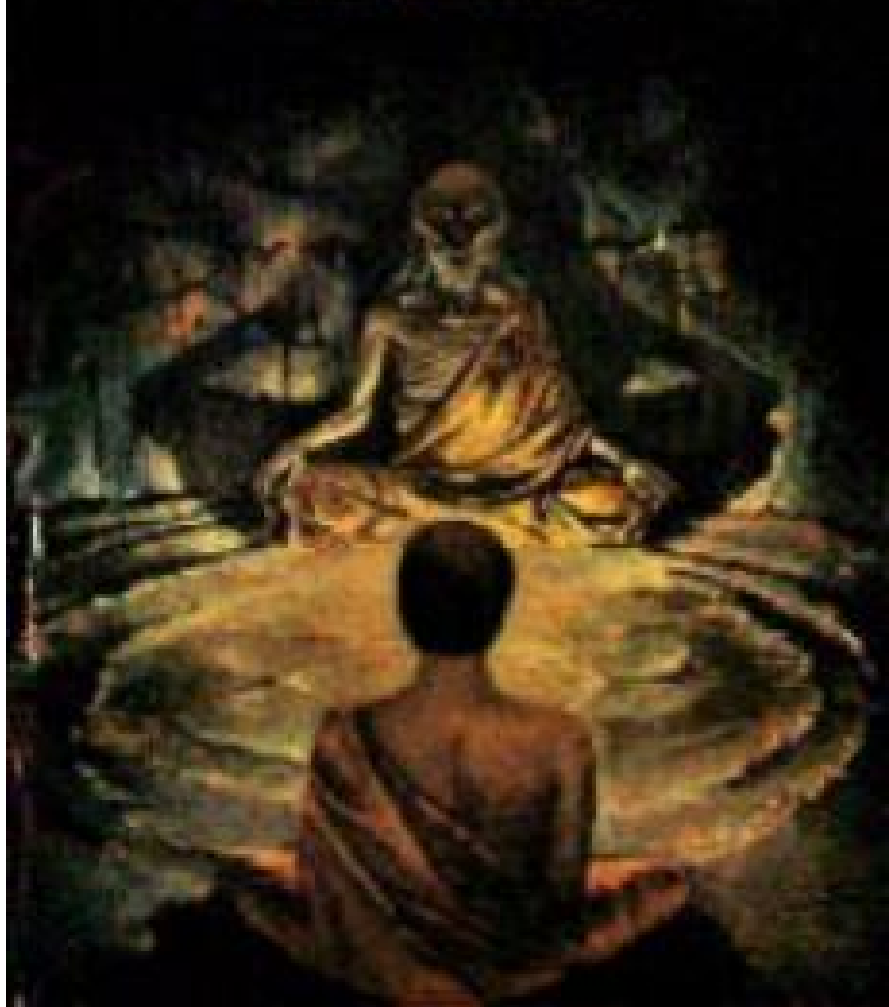


LOBSANG RAMPA

THE HERMIT



CHAPTER ONE

OUTSIDE the sun was shining. Vividly it illumined the trees, threw black shadows behind the jutting rocks, and sent a myriad glinting points from the blue, blue lake. Here, though, in the cool recesses of the old hermit's cave, the light was filtered by overhanging fronds and came greenly, soothingly, to tired eyes strained by exposure to the glaring sun.

The young man bowed respectfully to the thin hermit sitting erect on a time-smoothed boulder. 'I have come to you for instruction, Venerable One,' he said in a low voice.

'Be seated,' commanded the elder. The young monk in the brick-red robe bowed again and sat cross-legged on the hard-packed earth a few feet from his senior.

The old hermit kept silent, seemingly gazing into an infinity of pasts through eyeless sockets. Long long years before, as a young lama, he had been set upon by Chinese officials in Lhasa and cruelly blinded for not revealing State secrets which he did not possess. Tortured, maimed and blinded, he had wandered embittered and disillusioned away from the city. Moving by night he walked on, almost insane with pain and shock he avoided human company. Thinking, always thinking.

Climbing ever upwards, living on the sparse grass or any herbs he could find, led to water for drinking by the tinkle of mountain streams, he kept a tenuous hold on the spark of life. Slowly his worst hurts healed, his eyeless sockets no longer dripped. But ever he climbed upwards, away from mankind which tortured insanely and without reason. The air became thin. No longer were there tree branches which could be peeled and eaten for food. No longer could he just reach out and pluck grasses. Now he had to crawl on hands and knees,

reeling, stretching, hoping to get enough to stave off the worst pangs of starvation.

The air became colder, the bite of the wind keener, but still he plodded on, upwards, ever upwards as if driven by some inner compulsion. Weeks before, at the outset of his journey, he had found a stout branch which he had used as a stave with which to pick his path. Now, his questing stick struck solidly against a barrier and his probing could find no way through it.

The young monk looked intently at the old man. No sign of movement. Was he all right, the young man wondered, and then consoled himself with the thought that the 'Ancient Venerables' lived in the world of the past and never hurried for anyone. He gazed curiously around the bare cave. Bare indeed it was. At one side a yellowed pile of straw — his bed. Close to it a bowl. Over a projecting finger of rock a tattered saffron robe drooped mournfully as if conscious of its sun-bleached state. And nothing more. Nothing.

The ancient man reflected on his past, thought of the pain of being tortured, maimed, and blinded. When HE was as young as the young man sitting before him.

In a frenzy of frustration his staff struck out at the strange barrier before him. Vainly he strove to see through eyeless sockets. At last, exhausted by the intensity of his emotions, he collapsed at the foot of the mysterious barrier. The thin air seeped through his solitary garment, slowly robbing the starved body of heat and life.

Long moments passed. Then came the clatter of shod feet striding across the rocky ground. Muttered words in an incomprehensible tongue, and the limp body was lifted and carried away. There came a metallic clang! and a waiting vulture, feeling cheated of his meal, soared into clumsy flight.

The old man started; all THAT was long ago. Now he had to give instruction to the young fellow before him so like HE had been oh, how many years was it? Sixty? Seventy? Or more? No matter, that was behind, lost in the mists of time. What were the years of a man's life when he knew of the years of the world?

Time seemed to stand still. Even the faint wind which had been rustling through the leaves ceased its whisper. There was an air of almost eerie expectancy as the young monk waited for the old hermit to speak. At last, when the strain was becoming almost unbearable to the younger man, the Venerable One spoke.

‘You have been sent to me,’ he said, ‘because you have a great task in Life and I have to acquaint you with my own knowledge so that you are in some measure made aware of your destiny’ He faced in the direction of the young monk who squirmed with embarrassment. It was difficult, he thought, dealing with blind people; they ‘look’ without seeing but one had the feeling that they saw all! A most difficult state of affairs.

The dry, scarce-used voice resumed: ‘When I was young I had many experiences, painful experiences. I left our great city of Lhasa and wandered blind in the wilderness. Starving, ill, and unconscious, I was taken I know not where and instructed in preparation for this day. When my knowledge has been passed to you my life's work is ended and I can go in peace to the Heavenly Fields’ So saying, a beatific glow suffused the sunken, parchment-like cheeks and he unconsciously twirled his Prayer Wheel the faster.

Outside, the slow shadows crawled across the ground. The wind grew in strength and twisted bone-dry dust into little swirls. Somewhere a bird called an urgent warning. Almost imperceptibly the light of day waned as the shadows grew even longer. In the cave, now decidedly dark, the young monk tightly clasped his body in the hope of staving off the rumbles of increasing hunger. Hunger. Learning and hunger, he thought, they always go together. Hunger and learning. A fleeting smile crossed the hermit's face. ‘Ah!’ he exclaimed, ‘so the information is correct. The Young Man is hungry. The Young Man rattles like an empty drum. My informant told me it would be so. AND provided the cure.’ Slowly, painfully, and creaking with age, he rose to his feet and tottered to a so-far unseen part of the cave. Re-appearing, he handed the young monk a small package. ‘From your Honourable Guide’, he explained, ‘he said it would make your studies the sweeter.’

Sweetcakes, sweetcakes from India as a relief from the eternal barley or tsampa. And a little goats' milk as a change from water and more water. 'No, no!' exclaimed the old hermit as he was invited to partake of the food. 'I appreciate the needs of the young — and especially of one what will be going out into the wide world beyond the mountains. Eat, and enjoy it. I, an unworthy person, try in my humble way to follow the gracious Lord Buddha and live on the metaphorical grain of mustard seed. But you, eat and sleep, for I feel the night is upon us.' So saying he turned and moved into the well-concealed inner portion of the cave.

The young man moved to the mouth of the cave, now a greyish oval against the blackness of the interior. The high mountain peaks were hard black cut-outs against the purpling of space beyond. Suddenly there was a growing silvery effulgence of light as the full moon was displayed by the passing of a solitary black cloud, displayed as though the hand of a god had drawn back the curtains of night that laboring mankind should see the 'Queen of the Sky'. But the young monk did not stay long, his repast was meager indeed and would have been wholly unacceptable to a Western youth. Soon he returned to the cave and, scraping a depression in the soft sand for his hip, fell soundly asleep.

The first faint streaks of light found him stirring uneasily. Awakening with a rush he leaped to his feet and gazed guiltily around. At that moment the old hermit walked feebly into the main part of the cave. 'Oh, Venerable One,' exclaimed the young monk nervously, 'I overslept and did not attend the midnight service!' Then he felt foolish as he realized where he was. 'Have no fear, young man,' smiled the hermit, 'we have no services here. Man, when evolved, can have his "service" within himself, anywhere, at any time, without having to be herded and congregate like mindless yaks. But make your tsampa, have your meal, for today I have much to tell you and you must remember all.' So saying, he wandered slowly out into the lightening day.

An hour later the young man was sitting before the elder, listening to a story that was as enthralling as it was strange. A

story that was the foundation of all religions, all fairy tales, and all legends upon the World. A story that has been suppressed by power-jealous priests and 'scientists' since the first tribal days.

Probing fingers of the sun filtered gently through the foliage at the mouth of the cave and glinted brightly from the metallic ores embedded in the rock. The air warmed slightly and a faint haze appeared on the surface of the lake. A few birds chattered noisily as they set about their never-ending task of finding enough food in the sparse land. High overhead a solitary vulture soared on a rising current of air, rising and falling with outspread, motionless wings as his sharp sharp eyes stretched the barren terrain in search of the dead or dying. Satisfied that there was nothing for him here he swooped sideways with a cross squawk and set off for more profitable sites.

The old hermit sat erect and motionless, his emaciated figure barely covered by the remnants of the golden robe. 'Golden' no longer, but sunbleached to a wretched tan with yellow bands where the folds had in part diminished the fading by the sunlight. The skin was taut across his high, sharp cheekbones, and of that waxen, whitish pallor so common to the unsighted. His feet were bare and his possessions few indeed, a bowl, a Prayer Wheel, and just a spare robe as tattered as the other. Nothing more, nothing more in the whole world.

The young monk sitting before him pondered the matter. The more a man's spirituality the less his worldly possessions. The great Abbots with their Cloth of Gold, their riches and their ample food, THEY were always fighting for political power and living for the moment while giving lip-service to the Scriptures.

'Young man,' the old voice broke in, 'my time is almost at an end. I have to pass on my knowledge to you and then my spirit will be free to go to the Heavenly Fields. You are he who will pass on this knowledge to others, so listen and store the whole within your memory and FAIL NOT.'

'Learn this, study that!' thought the young monk 'life is nothing but hard work now. No kites, no stilts, no—' But the hermit went on, 'You know how I was treated by the Chinese,

you know I wandered in the wilderness and came at last to a great wonder. A miracle befell me for an inner compulsion led me until I fell unconscious at the very portals of the Shrine of Wisdom. I will tell you. My knowledge shall be yours even as it was shown to me, for, sightless, I saw all.'

The young monk nodded his head, forgetting that the old man could not see him, then, remembering, he said, 'I am listening, Venerable Master, and I have been trained to remember all.' So saying, he bowed and then sat back, waiting.

The old man smiled his satisfaction and continued, 'The first thing I remember was of lying very comfortably on a soft bed. Of course, I was young then, much like you are now, and I thought I had been transported to the Heavenly Fields. But I could not see and I knew that if this had been the other side of Life, sight would have been mine again. So I lay there and waited. Before long very quiet footsteps approached and stopped by my side. I lay still, not knowing what to expect. "Ah!" said a voice which seemed to be in some way different from our voices. "Ah! So you have regained consciousness. Do you feel well?"

'What a stupid question, I thought, how can I feel well as I am starving to death. Starving? But I no longer felt hungry. I DID feel well, VERY well. Cautiously I moved my fingers, felt my arms and they were not sticks any longer. I had filled out and was normal again except that I still had no eyes. "Yes, yes I DO feel well, thank you for asking," I replied. The Voice said "We would have restored your sight, but your eyes were removed so we could not do so. Rest awhile and we will talk with you in detail."

'I rested; I had no choice. Soon I dropped off to sleep. How long I slept I have no way of knowing, but sweet chimes eventually aroused me, chimes sweeter and more mellow than the finest gongs, better than the most ancient silver bells, more sonorous than temple trumpets. I sat up and stared round as if I could force sight into my eyeless sockets. A gentle arm slid around my shoulders and a voice said, "Rise and come with me. I will lead you." '

The young monk sat fascinated, wondering why things like

that did not happen to him, little knowing that eventually they WOULD! 'Please continue, Venerable Master, please continue,' he cried. The old hermit smiled his gratification at his listener's interest and went on.

'I was led into what was evidently a large room and in which there were a number of people — I could hear the murmur of their breath and the rustle of their garments. My Guide said, "Sit here," and a strange device was pushed under me. Expecting to sit on the ground as all sensible persons do, I nearly knocked one end through to the other.'

The old hermit paused for a moment and a dry chuckle escaped him as he recalled that bygone scene. 'I felt it carefully,' he continued, 'and it seemed soft yet firm. It was supported on four legs and at the rear there was an obstruction which held my back. At first my conclusion was that they deemed me too weak to sit up unaided, then I detected signs of suppressed amusement, so it appeared that this was the manner of seating for these people. I felt strange and most unsafe sitting up in such a fashion, and I freely confess that I hung on grimly to the padded platform.'

The young monk tried to imagine a sitting platform. Why should there be such things? Why did people have to invent useless items? No, he decided, the ground was good enough for him; safer, no risk of falling, and who was so weak that he had to have his back supported? But the old man was speaking again — his lungs were certainly working well, thought the young man!

'"You wonder about us" the Voice said to me, you wonder who we are, why you feel so well. Sit more easily for we have much to tell you and much to show you.'

'"Most Illustrious One," I expostulated, "I am blind, my eyes were removed, yet you say you have much to show me, how can this be?" "Rest at peace," said the Voice, "for all will become clear to you with time and patience" The backs of my legs were beginning to ache, dangling in such a strange position, so I drew them up and tried to sit in the Lotus position on that little wooden platform supported on the four legs and with the strange obstructing thing at

the back. So seated I felt more at ease, although there was certainly the fear that, not seeing, I might topple off to I knew not where.

‘ “We are the Gardeners of the Earth,” said the Voice. “We travel in universes putting people and animals on many different worlds. You Earthlings have your legends about us, you refer to us as the Gods of the Sky, you talk of our flaming chariots. Now we are to give you information as to the origin of Life on Earth so that you can pass on the knowledge to one who shall come after and shall go into the world and write of these things, for it is time that people knew the Truth of their Gods before we initiate the second stage.”

‘ “But there is some mistake,” I cried in great dismay, “I am but a poor monk who climbed to this high place I know not why.”

‘ “We, by our science, sent for you,” murmured the Voice, you have been chosen for this because of your exceptional memory which we shall even strengthen. We know all about you and that is why you are here.” ’

Outside the cave, in the now brilliant light of day, a bird's note rose sharply and shrilly in sudden alarm. A shriek of avian outrage, and the clucking diminished as the bird fled the spot precipitately. The ancient hermit raised his head a moment and said, ‘It is nothing, probably a high-flying bird scored a hit!’ The young monk found it painful to be distracted from this tale of a bygone age, an age which, strangely enough, he found not difficult to visualize. By the placid waters of the lake the willows nodded in somnolence disturbed only by vagrant breezes which stirred the leaves and made them mutter in protest at the invasion of their rest. By now the early shafts of sunlight had left the entrance of the cave and here it was cool, with green-tinted light. The old hermit stirred slightly, rearranged his tattered robe and continued.

‘I was frightened, very frightened. What did I know of these Gardeners of the Earth? I was not a gardener. I knew nothing of plants — or universes either. I wanted no part of it. So thinking I put my legs over the edge of the platform—seat and rose to my feet. Gentle but very firm hands pushed me back so that I

was again sitting in that foolish manner with my legs hanging straight down and my back pressed against something behind me. “The plant does not dictate to the Gardner,” murmured a voice. “Here you have been brought and here you will learn.”

‘Around me, as I sat dazed but resentful, there commenced a considerable discussion in an unknown tongue. Voices. Voices. Some high and thin as though coming from the throats of dwarfs. Some deep, resonant, sonorous, or like unto the bull of the yak at mating time bellowing forth across a landscape. Whatever they were, I thought, they boded ill for me, a reluctant subject, an unwilling captive. I listened in some awe as the incomprehensible discussion went on. Thin pipings, deep roaring like a trumpet blast in a canyon. What manner of people were these, I wondered, could human throats have such a range of tones, overtones and semitones? Where was I? Perhaps I was worse off than even in the hands of the Chinese. Oh! For sight. For eyes to see that which now was denied me. Would the mystery vanish under the light of sight? But no, as I was to find later, the mystery would deepen. So I sat reluctant and very afraid. The tortures I had undergone in Chinese hands had rather unmanned me, made me feel that I could bear no more, no more at all. Better the Nine Dragons should come and consume me now than that I should have to endure the Unknown. So — I sat, for there was naught else to do.

‘Raised voices made me fear for my safety. Had I sight I would have made a desperate effort to escape, but one without eyes is particularly helpless, one is completely at the mercy of others at the mercy of EVERYTHING. The stone that trips, the closed door, the unknown looms ever before one, menacing, oppressive and ever fearsome. The uproar rose to a crescendo. Voices shrilled in the highest registers, voices roared like the booming of fighting bulls. I feared violence, blows which would come to me through my eternal darkness. Tightly I gripped the edge of my seat, then hastily released my hold as it occurred to me that a blow could knock me off with little harm if I gave to it, yet if I held on the impact would be the greater.

‘Fear not, said the now-familiar Voice, “this is just a

Council Meeting. No harm will come to you. We are just discussing how best to indoctrinate you.”

“Exalted One,” I replied in some confusion, “I am surprised indeed to find that such Great Ones bandy words even as the lowest yak herders in our hills!” An amused chuckle greeted my comment. My audience, it appeared, was not ill-pleased with my perhaps foolish forthrightness.

“Always remember this,” he replied, “No matter how high one goes, there is always argument, disagreement. Always one has an opinion which differs from the one held by others. One has to discuss, to argue, and to forcefully uphold one's own opinion or one becomes a mere slave, an automaton, ever-ready to accept the dictates of another. Free discussion is always regarded by the non-comprehending onlooker as the prelude to physical violence.” He patted my shoulder reassuringly and continued, “Here we have people from not merely many races, but from many worlds. Some are from your own solar system, some are from galaxies far beyond. Some, to you, would appear as thin dwarfs while others are truly giants of more than six times the stature of the smallest.” I heard his footsteps receding as he moved to join the main group.

‘Other galaxies? What was all this? What WERE “other galaxies”?’ Giants, well, like most people I had heard of them in fairy tales. Dwarfs, now some of those had appeared in side shows from time to time. I shook my head, it was all beyond me. He had said that I would not be harmed, that it was merely a discussion. But not even the Indian traders who came to the City of Lhasa made such hootings and trumpeting and roarings. I decided to sit still and await developments. After all, there was nothing else I could do!’

In the cool dimness of the hermit's cave the young monk sat absorbed, enthralled by this tale of strange beings. But not so enthralled that internal rumblings had gone unnoticed. Food, urgent food, that was the important matter now. The old hermit suddenly ceased to speak and murmured, ‘Yes, we must have a break. Prepare your meal. I will return.’ So saying he rose to his feet and slowly moved to his inner recess.

The young monk hurried out into the open. For a moment he

stood staring out across the landscape, then made his way to the lakeside where the fine sand, as brown as earth, gleamed invitingly. From the front of his robe he took his wooden bowl and dipped it into the water. A swirl and a flick and it was washed. Taking a little bag of ground barley from his robe he poured a meager amount into the bowl and judiciously poured in lake water from his cupped hand. Gloomily he contemplated the mess. No butter here, no tea either. Ground barley mixed into a stiff paste with water. Food! Into the bowl he dipped his finger and stirred and stirred until the consistency was just right, then, with two fingers from his right hand, he spooned out the mess and slowly and unenthusiastically ate it.

Finished at last, he rinsed the bowl in the lake water and then took a handful of fine sand. Energetically he scoured the bowl inside and out before rinsing it again and returning it — still wet — to the front of his robe. Kneeling on the ground, he spread the lower half of his robe and scooped sand on to it until he could lift no more. Lurching to his feet, he staggered back to the cave. Just inside he dumped the sand and returned to the open for a fallen branch with many small twigs. In the cave he carefully swept the hard-packed sandy earth floor before sprinkling over it a thick layer of fresh sand. One load was not sufficient; seven loads it took before he was satisfied and could sit with a clear conscience on his rolled and tattered yak-wool blanket.

He was no fashion plate for any country. His red robe was his solitary garment. Threadbare and thin in places almost to transparency it was no protection against the bitter winds. No sandals, no underwear. Nothing but the solitary robe which was doffed at night when he rolled himself in his one blanket. Of equipment he had but the bowl, the minute barley bag, and an old and battered Charm Box, long since discarded by another, in which he kept a simple talisman. He did not own a Prayer Wheel. That was for the more affluent; he and others like him had to make do with the public ones in the temples. His skull was shaven and scarred by the Marks of Manhood, burn marks where he had endured the candles of incense burning down on his head to test his devotion meditation wherein he should have been immune to pain and to the smell of burning flesh.

Now, having been chosen for a special task, he had traveled far to the Cave of the Hermit. But the day was wearing on with the Lengthening shadows and the fast chilling of the air. He sat and waited for the appearance of the old hermit.

At last there came the shuffling footsteps, the tapping of the Long staff and the stertorous breathing of that ancient man. The young monk gazed at him with new respect; what experiences he had had. What suffering he had endured, How wise he seemed! The old man shuffled round and sat down. On the instant a blood-freezing shout rent the air and an immense and shaggy creature bounded into the cave entrance. The young monk leaped to his feet and prepared to meet his death in trying to protect the old hermit. Grabbing two handfuls of the sandy soil he was about to throw it in the eyes of the intruder when he was stopped and reassured by the voice of the newcomer.

‘Greetings, Greetings, Holy Hermit!’ he bellowed as if shouting to one a mile away. ‘Your blessing I ask, your blessing on the journey, your blessing for the night as we camp by the lakeside. Here,’ he bawled, ‘I have brought you tea and barley. Your blessing, Holy Hermit. Your blessing.’ Jumping into action again, much to the renewed alarm of the young monk, he rushed before the hermit and sprawled in the freshly strewn sand before him. ‘Tea, barley, here – take them.’ Thrusting out he placed two bags beside the hermit.

‘Trader, Trader,’ expostulated the hermit mildly, ‘you alarm an old and ailing man with your violence. Peace be with you. May the Blessings of Gautama be upon you and dwell within you. May your journey be safe and swift and may your business prosper.’

‘And who are you, young gamecock?’ boomed the trader. ‘Ah!’ he exclaimed suddenly, ‘my apologies, young holy father, in the gloom of this cave I did not see at first that you are one of the Cloth.’

‘And what news have you, Trader?’ asked the hermit in his dry and cracked voice.

‘What news?’ mused the trader. ‘The Indian moneylender was beaten up and robbed and when he went crying to the

proctors he got beaten up again for calling them foul names. The price of yaks has dropped, the price of butter has gone up. The priests at the Gate are increasing their toll. The Inmost One has journeyed to the Jewel Palace. Oh, Holy hermit, there is no news. Tonight we camp by the lake and tomorrow we continue on our journey to Kalimpong. The weather is good. Buddha has looked after us and the Devils have left us alone. And do you need water carried, or a supply of fresh dry sand for your floor or is this young holy father looking after you well?’

While the shadows traveled for on their journey towards the blackness of night, the hermit and the trader talked and exchanged news of Lhasa, of Tibet, and of India far beyond the Himalayas. At last the trader jumped to his feet and peered fearfully at the growing darkness. ‘Ow! Young holy father, I cannot go alone in the darkness – DEVILS will get me. Will you lead me back to my camp?’ he implored.

‘I am under the instruction of the Venerable Hermit,’ replied the young man, ‘I will go if he will permit. My priestly robe will protect me from the perils of the night.’ The old hermit chuckled as he gave the permission. The thin young monk led the way out of the cave. The towering giant of a trader followed, reeking of yak wool and worse. Just by the entrance he chance to brush against a leafy branch. There was a squawk as a frightened bird was dislodged from its perch. The trader uttered a terrified screech – and fell fainting at the feet of the young monk.

‘Ow! Young holy father,’ sobbed the trader, ‘I thought the Devils had got me at last. I almost, but not quite, decided to give back the money I took from the Indian moneylenders. You Saved me, you beat off the Devils. Get me safe to my camp and I will give you a half-brick of tea and a whole bag of tsampa.’ This was an offer too good to miss, so the young monk put on a special show by reciting the Prayers to the Dead, the Exhortation to Unrestful spirits, and a Chant to the Guardians of the Way. The resulting uproar – for the young monk was very unmusical – scared away all the creatures who roamed by night whatever it did to any chance devils.

At last they reached the camp fire where others of the

trader's party were singing and playing musical instruments while the women were grinding up tea bricks and dropping the results into a bubbling cauldron of water. A whole bag of finely ground barley was stirred in and then one old woman reached a claw-like hand into a bag and withdrew it holding a fistful of yak butter. Into the cauldron it went, another, and yet another until the fat oozed and frothed on the surface.

The glow of the firelight was inviting, the pleasure of the trading party infectious. The young monk folded his robe decorously around him and sedately sat on the ground. An aged crone, with chin almost touching nose, hospitably held out her hand, the young monk self-consciously proffered his bowl and a generous helping of tea and tsampa was ladled in. In the thin mountain air 'boiling' was not a hundred degrees centigrade, nor two hundred and twelve Fahrenheit, but bearable to the mouth. The whole party set-to with gusto and soon there was a procession to the lake waters so that the bowl could be washed and scoured afresh in the fine river sand. The river feeding the lake brought the finest sand from higher in the mountain range, sand which frequently was flecked with gold.

The party was merry. The stories of the traders many, and their music and songs brought colour to the young man's rather dull existence. But the moon climbed higher, lighting the barren landscape with her silvery glow and casting shadows with stark reality. The sparks from the fire no longer rose in clouds, the flames died low. Reluctantly the young monk rose to his feet and with many bows of thanks accepted the gifts thrust upon him by the trader, who was SURE the young man had saved him from perdition!

At last, laden with little packages, he stumbled along by the lake, to the right through the small grove of willows and on to where the mouth of the cave glowered black and forbidding. He stopped beside the entrance for a moment and looked up at the sky. Far far above, as if approaching the Door of the Gods, a bright flame sailed silently across the sky. A Chariot of the Gods, or what? The young monk wondered briefly, and entered the cave.

CHAPTER TWO

THE lowing of yaks and excited shouts from men and women roused the young monk. Sleepily rising to his feet he drew his robe around him and made for the entrance to the cave, determined not to miss any excitement. By the lake men were milling, trying to harness yaks which stood in the water and could not be persuaded to come out. At last, losing his patience, a young trader dashed into the water and tripped over a submerged root. Arms aflail he fell face down with a resounding smack. Great gouts of water splashed up and the yaks, now frightened, lumbered ashore. The young trader, covered in slimy mud and looking extremely foolish, scrambled ashore to the hoots of laughter from his friends.

Soon the tents were rolled up, the cooking utensils, well bur-nished by sand, packed and the whole trading caravan moved slowly off to the monotonous creaking of harness and the shouts of men in vain trying to urge more speed from the ponderous animals. Sadly the young monk stood with hands shading his eyes from the rising sun's glare. Sadly he stood and stared into the distance long after the noise had ceased. Oh why, he thought, could not he have been a trader and travel to far-off places? Why did HE always have to study things which no one else seemed to have to study. HE wanted to be a trader, or a boatman on the Happy River. HE wanted to move round, go places and see things. Little did he know then that he WOULD 'go places and see things' until his body craved peace and his soul ached for rest. Little did he think then that he would wander the face of the earth and suffer unbelievable torments. Now he just wanted to be a trader, or a boatman — anything but what he was. Slowly, with downcast head, he picked up the

betwigged branch and re-entered the cave to sweep the floor and strew fresh sand.

The old hermit slowly appeared. Even to the inexperienced gaze of the younger man he was visibly failing. With a gasp he settled himself and croaked, 'My time is approaching, but I cannot leave until I have given you all the knowledge that is mine. Here are special and very potent herbal drops given to me by your very famous Guide for just such an occasion; should I collapse, and you fear for my life, force six drops into my mouth and I shall revive. I am forbidden to leave my body until I have finished my task.' He fumbled in his robes and produced a little stone bottle which the younger monk took with the greatest care. 'Now we will continue,' said the old man. 'You can eat when I am tired and have to rest awhile. Now — LISTEN, and take the greatest care to remember. Let not your attention wander for this is worth more than my life and worth more than yours. It is knowledge to be preserved and passed on when the time is ripe.'

After resting for some moments he appeared to regain strength, and a little colour crept back to his cheeks. Settling himself rather more comfortably, he said, 'You will have remembered all I have told you so far. Let us, then, continue. The discussion was prolonged and — in my opinion — very heated, but eventually the babble of conversation ended. There was much shuffling of many feet, then footsteps, small light footsteps like that of a bird tripping along to a grub. Heavy footsteps, ponderous as the lumbering walk of a heavily-laden yak. Footsteps which puzzled me profoundly for some of them seemed to be not made by humans such as I knew. But my thoughts on the matter of footsteps were suddenly ended. A hand grasped me by the arm and a voice said, "Come with us" Another hand grasped my other arm and I was led up a path which to my bare feet felt as though it were metal. The blind develop other senses; I sensed that we were traversing some sort of metal tube, although how that could be I could not possibly imagine.'

The old man stopped as though to picture again in his mind that unforgettable experience, then he continued, 'Soon we

reached a more spacious area as I could determine by the changed echoes. There was a metallic sliding sound in front of me, and one of the men leading me spoke in a very respectful voice to someone obviously very superior to him. What was said I have no means of knowing, for it was said in a peculiar language, a language of pipings and chirps. In answer to what was evidently an order, I was pushed forward and the metallic substance slid shut with a soft thump behind me. I stood there feeling the gaze of someone staring hard. There was a rustle of fabric and the creak of what I imagined to be a seat similar to that which had seated me. Then a thin and bony hand took my right hand and led me forward.'

The hermit paused briefly and chuckled. 'Can you imagine my feelings? I was in a living miracle, I knew not what was before me and had to trust without hesitation those who led me. This person at last spoke to me in my own language. "Sit here," he said, at the same time pushing me gently down. I gasped with horror and fright, I felt as though falling into a bed of feathers. Then the seat, or whatever it was, gripped me most intimately where I was not used to being gripped. At the sides there were struts, or arms, presumably designed to prevent one from falling off if one slept through the strange softness. The person facing me seemed most amused at my reactions; I could tell from an ill-suppressed laugh, but many people seem to derive amusement from the plight of those who cannot see.

' "You feel strange and afraid," said the voice of the person opposite me. That definitely was an understatement! "Be not alarmed," he continued, "for you will not be harmed in any way. Our tests show that you have a most eidetic memory, so you are going to have information — which you will never forget — and which you will much later pass on to another who will come your way." It all seemed mysterious and very frightening in spite of the assurances. I said nothing but sat quietly and waited for the next remarks, which were not long in coming.

"You are going to see," continued the voice, "all the past, the birth of your world, the origin of gods, and why chariots flame across the sky to your great concern." "Respected Sir!" I exclaimed, "you used the word 'see', but my eyes have been

removed, I am blind, I have no sight at all.” There was a muttered exclamation indicative of exasperation and the rejoinder with some asperity. “We know all about you, more than you will ever know. Your eyes have been removed, but the optic nerve is still there. With our science we can connect to the optic nerve and you will see what we want you to see.”

“Will that mean that I shall permanently have sight again?” I asked.

“No, it will not,” came the reply. “We are using you for a purpose. To permanently give you sight would be to let you loose upon this world with a device far in advance of this world's science and that is not permitted. Now, enough talk, I will summon my assistants.”

‘Soon there came a respectful knock followed by the metallic sliding noise. There was a conversation; evidently two people had entered. I felt my seat moving and tried to jump up. To my horror I felt that I was completely restrained. I could not move, not even so much as a finger. Fully conscious I was moved along in this strange seat which appeared to slide easily in any direction. We moved along passageways where the echoes gave me many strange impressions. Eventually there came a sharp turn to the seat and most remarkable odors assailed my twitching nostrils. We stopped at a muttered command and hands grasped me by the legs and under the shoulders. Easily I was lifted straight up, to the side, and down. I was alarmed, terrified would be a more correct word. That terror increased when a tight band was placed around my right arm just above the elbow. The pressure increased so that it felt as though my arm was swelling. Then came a prick to my left ankle and a most extraordinary sensation as if something was being slid inside me. A further command was given and at my temples I felt two ice-cold discs. There was a buzz as of a bee droning in the distance, and I felt my consciousness fading away.

‘Bright flashes of flame flickered across my vision. Streaks of green, red, purple, all colours. Then I screamed; I had no vision, I must therefore be in the Land of the Devils and they were preparing torments for me. A sharp stab of pain — just a pinprick, really — and my terror subsided. I just did not care

any more! A voice spoke to me in my own language, saying, “Be not afraid, we are not going to hurt you. We are now adjusting so that you will see. What colour do you see now?” So I forgot my fear while I said when I saw red, when I saw green, and all other colours. Then I yelled with astonishment; I could see, but that which I could see was so strange that I could scarce comprehend any of it.

‘But how does one describe the indescribable? How does one endeavor to picture a scene to another when in one’s language there are no words which are appropriate, when there are no concepts which might fit the case? Here in our Tibet we are well provided with words and phrases devoted to gods and devils, but when one comes to dealing with the works of gods or devils, I don’t know which, what can one do, what can one say, how can one picture? I can only say that I saw. But my sight was not in the location of my body, and with my sight I could see myself. It was a most unnerving experience, an experience which I never want to repeat: But let me start at the beginning.

‘One of the voices had asked me to say when I saw red, to say when I saw green and other colours, and then there was this terrific experience, this white, stupendous flash, and I found that I was gazing, for that is the only word which seems appropriate, at a scene entirely alien to everything I had known. I was reclining, half lying, half sitting, propped up on what seemed to be a metallic platform. It seemed to be supported on one solitary pillar, and I was for a moment very afraid that the whole device would topple over, and me with it. The general atmosphere was of such cleanliness that I had never known. The walls, of some shiny material, were spotless, they were a greenish tinge, very pleasant, very soothing. About this strange room, which was a very large room indeed according to my standards, there were massive pieces of equipment which I just cannot tell you about because there are no words which would in any way convey their strangeness to you.

‘But the people in that room — ah, that gave me a stupendous shock, that gave me a shock that almost set me off raving and screaming, and then I thought perhaps this is just a distortion

caused by some trick of this artificial vision which they had given — no, lent — to me. There was a man standing by the side of some machine. I judged that he was about twice the height of our biggest proctors. I should say he was about fourteen feet high, and he had the most extraordinary conical shaped head, a head which went up almost like the small end of an egg. He was completely hairless, and he was immense. He seemed to be clad in some kind of greenish robe — they were all covered in green cloth, by the way — which reached from his neck right down to his ankles, and, extraordinary thought, covered the arms as far as the wrists. I was horrified to look at the hands and find that there was a sort of skin over them. As I gazed from one to the other, they all had this strange coating on the hands, and I wondered what the religious significance of that could be, or did they think that I was unclean and they might catch something from me?

‘My gaze wandered from this giant; there were two whom I should judge by their contours to be female. One was very dark, and one was very light. One had a type of kinky hair, while the other had a straight sort of white hair. But I never have been experienced in the matter of females, and so that is a subject which we should not discuss, nor should it interest you.

‘The two females were gazing at me, and then one moved her hand in the direction at which I had not yet looked. There I saw a most extraordinary thing, a dwarf, a gnome, a very very small body, a body like that of a five-year-old child, I thought. But the head, ah, the head was immense, a great dome of a skull, hairless, too, not a trace of hair anywhere in sight on this one. The chin was small, very small indeed, and the mouth was not a mouth the same as we have, but seemed to be more of a triangular orifice. The nose was slight, not a protuberance so much as a ridge. This was obviously the most important person because the others looked with such deferential respect in his, direction.

‘But then this female moved her hand again, and a voice from a person whom I had not before noticed spoke in my own language saying, “Look forward, do you see yourself?” With that the speaker came into my range of vision, he seemed to be

the most normal, he seemed to be — well, I should say that dressed up he could appear as a trader, perhaps an Indian trader, so you know how normal he was. He walked forward and pointed to some very shiny substance. I gazed at it, at least I suppose I did, but my sight was outside of my body. I had no eyes, so where had they put the thing which was seeing for me? And then I saw, on a little platform attached to this strange metal bench on which I reclined, I saw a form of box. I was on the point of wondering how I could see the thing if it was that with which I was seeing, when it occurred to me that the thing in front, the shiny thing, was some form of reflector; the most normal man moved that reflector slightly, altered its angle or tilt, and then I did shout with horror and consternation because I saw myself lying upon the platform. I had seen myself before my eyes were taken from me. At times when I had gone to the water's edge and gone to drink I had seen my reflection in the placid stream, and so I could recognize myself. But here, in this reflecting surface, I saw an emaciated figure looking almost at the point of death. There was a band around an arm, and a band around an ankle. Strange tubes came from those bands to where I saw not. But a tube protruded from a nostril, and that went to some transparent bottle, tied to a metal rod beside me.

‘But the head, the head! That I can hardly recollect and stay calm. From the head just above the forehead, protruded a number of pieces of metal with what seemed to be strings coming from those protrusions. The strings led mainly to the box which I had seen on the small metal platform beside me. I imagined that it was an extension of my optic nerve going to that black box, but I looked with increasing horror, and went to tear the things from me, and found I still could not move, I could not move at all, not a finger. I could just lie there and gaze at this strange thing that was happening to me.

‘The normal looking man put his hand out towards the black box, and had I been able to move I would have flinched violently. I thought he was poking his fingers in my sight, the illusion was so complete, but instead he moved the box a little and I had a different view. I could see around the back of the

platform on which I rested, I could see two other people there. They looked fairly normal; one was white, the other was yellow, as yellow as a Mongolian. They were just standing looking at me, not winking, not taking any notice of me. They seemed rather bored with the whole affair, and I remember thinking then that if they were in my place they certainly would not have been bored. The voice spoke again, saying, "Well, this, for a short time, is your sight. These tubes will feed you, there are other tubes which will drain you and attend to other functions. For the present you will not be able to move for we fear that if we do permit you to move you may, in frenzy, injure yourself. For your own protection you are immobilized. But fear not, no ill will befall you. When we have finished you will be returned to some other part of Tibet with your health improved, and you will be normal except that still you will have no eyes. You will understand that you could not go about carrying this black box." He smiled slightly in my direction, and stepped backwards out of the range of my vision.

'People moved about, checking various things. There were a number of strange circular things like little windows covered with the finest glass. But behind the glass there seemed to be nothing of importance except a little pointer which moved or pointed at certain strange marks. It all meant nothing to me. I gave it a cursory-glance, but it was so completely beyond my comprehension that I dismissed the affair as something beyond my understanding.

'Time passed, and I lay there feeling neither refreshed nor tired, but almost in a state of stasis, rather without feeling. Certainly I was not suffering, certainly I was not so worried now. I seemed to feel a subtle change in my body chemistry, and then at the fringe of vision of this black box I saw that one person was turning various protrusions which came from a lot of glass tubings all fitted to a metal frame. As the person turned these protrusions the little things behind the small glass windows made different pointings. The smallest man, whom I had regarded as a dwarf, but who, it seemed, was the one in charge, said something. And then into my range of vision came the one who spoke to me in my own language, telling me

that now they would put me to sleep for a time so that I should be refreshed, and when I had had nourishment and sleep they would show me what it was that they had to show me.

‘Barely had he finished speaking when my consciousness went again, as though switched off. Later I was to find that that indeed was the case; they had a device whereby instant and harmless unconsciousness could be induced at the flick of a finger.

‘How long I slept, or was unconscious, I have no means of knowing, it could have been an hour, or even a day. My waking was as instantaneous as had been my sleeping; one instant I was unconscious, the next instant I was wide awake. To my profound regret my new sight was not in operation. I was as blind as before. Strange sounds assailed my ears, the clink of metal against metal, the tinkle of glass then swift footsteps receding. Came the sliding, metallic sound and all was quiet for a few moments. I lay there thinking, marveling at the strange events which had brought such turmoil to my life. Just as apprehension and anxiety were welling strongly within me, there came a distraction.

‘Clackety footsteps, short and staccato, came to my hearing. Two sets of them accompanied by the distant murmur of voices. The sound increased, and turned into my room. Again the metallic sliding, and the two females, for thus I determined them to be, came towards me still talking in their high nervous tones — both talking at the same time, or so it appeared to me. They stopped one on each side of me, then horror of horrors, they whipped away my solitary covering. There was not a thing I could do about it. Powerless, motionless I lay there at the mercy of these females. Naked, naked as the day when I was born. Naked before the gaze of these unknown women. Me, a monk who knew nothing of women, who (let me confess it freely) was terrified of women.’

The old hermit stopped. The young monk stared at him in horror thinking of the terrible indignity of such an event. Upon the hermit's forehead a film of perspiration bedewed the tight skin as he relived the ghastly time. With shaking hands he

reached out for his bowl which contained water. Taking a few sips, he set the bowl carefully back beside him.

‘But worse was to follow,’ he faltered hesitatingly, ‘the young females rolled me on my side and forced a tube into an unmentionable portion of my body. Liquid entered me and I felt I would burst. Then, without any ceremony at all I was lifted and a very cold container was placed below my nether regions. I must in modesty refrain from describing what happened next in front of those females. But that was merely a start; they washed my naked body all over and showed a most shameless familiarity with the private parts of the male body. I grew hot all over and was covered with the utmost confusion. Sharp rods of metal were pushed into me and the tube from my nostrils was snatched out and a fresh one forced roughly in. Then a cloth was drawn over me from my neck to below my feet. Still they were not finished; there came a painful tearing at my scalp and many inexplicable things happened before a very sticky, irritating substance was plastered on. All the while the young females chattered away and giggled as though devils had stolen their brains.

‘After much time there came again the metallic slither and heavier footsteps approached, whereat the chatter of the females ceased. The Voice in my own language greeted me; “And how are you now,?”

‘ “Terrible!” I replied with feeling. “Your females stripped me naked and abused my body in a manner too shocking to credit.” He appeared to derive intense amusement from my remarks. In fact, to be quite candid, he HOOTED with laughter which did nothing to soothe my feelings.

‘ “We had to have you washed,” he said, “we had to have your body cleaned of waste and we had to feed you by the same method. Then the various tubes and electric connections had to be replaced with sterilized ones. The incision in your skull had to be inspected and re-dressed. There will be only faint scars when you leave here.” ’

The old hermit bent forward towards the young monk. ‘See’ he said, ‘here upon my head there are the five scars.’ The young monk rose to his feet and gazed with profound interest at the

hermit's skull. Yes, the marks were there, each about two inches long, each still showing as a dead-white depression. How fearsome, the young man thought, to have to undergo such an experience at the hands of females. Involuntarily he shuddered, and sat down abruptly as though fearing an attack from the rear!

The hermit continued, 'I was not mollified by such an assurance, instead, I asked, "But why was I so abused by females? Are there no men if such treatment was imperative?"

'My captor, for so I regarded him, laughed anew and replied, "My dear man, do not be so stupidly prudish. Your nude body — as such — meant nothing to them. Here we all go naked most of the time when we are off duty. The body is the Temple of the Overself and so is pure. Those who are prudish have prurient thoughts. As for the women attending to you, that was their duty, they are nurses and have been trained in such work."

' "But why cannot I move?" I asked, "and why am I not permitted to see? This is TORTURE!"

' "You cannot move," he said, "because you might pull out the electrodes and injure yourself. Or you might injure our equipment. We are not permitting you to become too accustomed to sight again because when you leave here you will once more be blind and the more you use sight here the more you will forget the senses, tactile senses, which the blind develop. It would be torture if we gave you sight until you left, for then you would be helpless. You are here not for your pleasure, but to hear and see and be a repository of knowledge for another who will come along and who will take that knowledge from you. Normally this knowledge would be written, but we fear to start another of those 'Sacred Book or Writings' furors. From the knowledge you absorb, and later pass on, this WILL be written. In the meantime, remember you are here for our purpose, not yours." '

In the cave all was still; the old hermit paused before saying, 'Let me pause for the nonce. I must rest awhile. You must draw water and clean the cave. Barley has to be ground.'

‘Shall I clean your inner cave first, Venerable One?’ asked the young monk.

‘No, I will do that myself after I have rested, but do you fetch extra sand for me and leave it here.’ He rummaged idly in a small recess in one of the stone walls. ‘After eating tsampa and nothing but tsampa for more than eighty years,’ he said somewhat wistfully, ‘I feel a strange longing to taste other food even once before passing on to where I shall not need any.’ He shook his white old head and added, ‘Probably the shock of different food would kill me.’ With that he wandered into his private section of the eave, a section which the young monk had not entered.

The young monk fetched a stout splintered branch from the entrance to the cave, and vigorously set-to to loosen the impacted floor of the cave. Scraping away the hardened surface, he swept the whole mass out into the open and scattered it well away so as not to obstruct the entrance with the discarded material. Warily he trudged and trudged again and again from lakeside to cave carrying in his upturned robe as much sand as he could lift. Carefully he strewed the floor with the fresh sand and stamped it down. Six more trips to the shore and he had enough sand for the old hermit.

At the inner end of the cave was a smooth topped rock with a water-worn depression formed aeons ago. Into the depression he ladled two handfuls of barley. The heavy, rounded stone nearby was the obvious tool kept for the purpose. Raising it with some effort the young monk wondered how so ancient a man as the hermit, blind and enfeebled by deprivation, could manage it. But the barley — already roasted — had to be ground. Bringing the stone down with a resounding THUD he gave it a half-rotation and back before raising the stone for another blow. Monotonously he went on, pounding the barley, rotating the stone to crush the grains finer, scooping the pulverized flour out and replacing it with more grain. THUD! THUD! THUD! At last, with arms and back aching, he was satisfied with the amount. Wiping the rock and stone with sand to remove clinging grain, he carefully put the ground material in the old box kept for that purpose, and moved tiredly to the entrance to the cave.

The late afternoon sun still shone warmly. The young monk lay on a rock and idly stirred his tsampa with a forefinger to mix it. On a branch a small bird perched, head to one side, watching everything with cheeky confidence. From the still waters of the lake a large fish leaped in a successful attempt to catch a low-flying insect. Nearby, at the base of a tree, some rodent was busily burrowing quite oblivious of the presence of the young monk. A cloud obscured the warmth of the sun's rays and the young man shivered at the sudden chill. Jumping to his feet he swilled his bowl clear and polished it with sand. The bird flew off chirping in alarm, and the rodent scurried around the tree trunk and watched events with a bright and beady eye. Stuffing the bowl in the front of his robe, the young monk hurried off to the cave.

In the cave the old hermit was sitting, no longer erect, but with his back against a wall. 'I would like to feel the warmth of a fire upon me once again,' he said, 'for I have not been able to prepare a fire for myself during the past sixty years and more. Will you light one for me and we will sit by the cave mouth?' 'Most certainly,' replied the young monk, 'do you have flint or tinder?'

'No, I have nothing but my bowl, my barley box and my two robes. I do not even possess a blanket.' So the young monk placed his own tattered blanket around the shoulders of the older man, and went out into the open.

A short distance from the cave an old rock fall had littered the ground with debris. Here the young monk carefully selected two round flints which fitted comfortably in his palm. Experimentally he struck them together with a scraping motion and was gratified to obtain a thin stream of sparks at the first attempt. Putting the two flints in the front of his robe he made his way to a dead and hollow tree which obviously had been struck by lightning and killed a long time ago. In the hollow interior he probed and scratched and eventually tore off handfuls of white bone-dry wood, rotten and powdery. Carefully he put it inside his robe, then picked up dry and brittle branches which were scattered all around the tree. Laden so that his strength was sorely taxed, he made his slow way back to the

cave and thankfully dumped his load by the outer side of the entrance away from the prevailing wind so that later the cave should not be filled with smoke.

In the sandy soil he scooped a shallow depression and with his two flints beside him and the dry sticks broken into lengths he first laid a criss-cross of small twigs and covered them with the rotten wood which he rolled and twisted between his hands until it was reduced almost to the consistency of flour. Grimly he bent over, and grasping the two flints, one in each hand, he struck them sideways together so that the poor little stream of sparks should land in the tinder wood. Again and again he tried until at last a minute particle of flame appeared. Lowering himself so that his chest was on the ground, he carefully — oh so carefully — blew towards the precious spark. Slowly it grew brighter. Slowly the minute spot grew until the young man was able to stretch out his hand and place small dry twigs around the area with some bridging the space. He blew and blew and eventually had the satisfaction of seeing actual flame grow and move along the twigs.

No mother devoted more care to her firstborn than the young man devoted to the baby fire. Gradually it grew and became brighter. At last, triumphantly, he placed larger and larger sticks on the fire which began to blaze eagerly. Into the cave he went to the old hermit. ‘Venerable One,’ the young monk said, ‘your fire is ready, may I assist you?’ Into the old man's hand he placed a stout staff, and helping him slowly to his feet he put an arm around the thin body and helped him carefully to a place beside the fire and away from the smoke. ‘I will go and collect more wood for the night,’ said the young monk, ‘but first I will place these flints and the tinder in the cave so that they will remain dry.’ So saying, he readjusted the blanket around his senior's shoulders, placed water beside him, and took the flints and the tinder into the cave to a place beside the barley box.

Leaving the cave the young monk piled more wood on the fire and made sure the old man was safe from any chance flame, then setting off he headed for the camp site which the traders had used. They might have left some wood, he thought. But no, they had left no wood at all. Better than wood, though, they had

overlooked a metal container. Obviously it had fallen unnoticed when the yaks were loaded, or when they were moving off. Perhaps another yak had bumped this container free and it had fallen behind a rock. Now, to the young monk, it was treasure indeed. Now water could be heated! A stout spike lay beneath the can, what its purpose was the young monk could not even guess, but it WOULD be useful for something, he was sure.

Industriously poking around in the grove of trees, he soon had a very satisfactory pile of wood. Journey after journey he made back to the cave dragging branches, carrying sticks. Not yet did he tell the old hermit of his finds, he wanted to be able to stay then and savour the full pleasure of the old man's satisfaction at having some hot water. Tea he had, for the trader had provided some, yet there had been no means of heating water until now.

The last load of wood was too light, it would have been a wasted journey. The young monk wandered around looking for a suitable branch. By a thicket near the water's edge he suddenly saw a pile of old rags. How they got there he could not say. Astonishment gave way to desire. He moved forward to pick up the rags and jumped a foot in the air when they groaned! Bending down he saw that the 'rags' was a man, a man thin beyond belief. Around his neck he wore a cangue, a slab of wood each side of which was about two and a half feet long. It was divided into two halves held together at one side by a hinge, and at the opposite side by a hasp and padlock. The centre of the wood was shaped to fit round the neck of the wearer. The man was a living skeleton.

The young monk dropped to his knees and pushed aside fronds of the thicket, then rising to his feet he hurried to the water and filled his bowl. Quickly he returned to the fallen man and dripped water into the slightly open mouth. The man stirred and opened his eyes. He sighed with contentment at the sight of the monk bending over him. 'I tried to drink,' he mumbled, 'and fell in. With this board I floated and nearly drowned. I was in the water for days and just recently was able to climb out.' He paused, exhausted. The young monk gave him more water and then water well mixed with barley flour. 'Can

you get this thing off?’ the man asked. ‘If you hit this lock sideways between two stones it will spring open.’

The young monk rose to this feat and went to the lakeside for two substantial stones. Returning, he placed the larger stone beneath one edge of the rock and gave it a hearty THWACK with the other. ‘Try the other edge,’ said the man, ‘and hit it where that pin goes through. Then pull it down HARD.’ Carefully the young monk turned the lock edge for edge and gave it a hearty BONK where advised. Pulling it downwards after, he was rewarded by a rusty creak — and the lock came apart. Gently he opened the slab of wood and released the man's neck, which was chafed so deeply that the blood was oozing.

‘We will burn this,’ said the young monk, ‘pity to waste it.’

CHAPTER THREE

FOR some time the young monk sat on the ground cradling the sick man's head and trying to feed him small amounts of tsampa. At last he stood up and said, 'I shall have to carry you to the cave of the hermit.' So saying, he lifted up the man and managed to get him over one shoulder, face down, and folded like a rolled-up blanket. Staggering under the weight, he made his way out of the little grove of trees and set out upon the stony path to the cave. At last, after what seemed to be an endless journey, he reached the fire side. Gently he allowed the man to slide to the ground. 'Venerable One,' he said, 'I found this man in a thicket beside the lake. He had a cangue around his neck and he is very sick. I removed the cangue and have brought him here.'

With a branch the young monk stirred the fire so that the sparks rose upwards and the air was filled with the pleasant scent of burning wood. Pausing only to pile on more wood, he turned back to the old hermit. 'The cangue, eh?' said the latter. 'That means he is a convict, but what is a convict doing here? No matter what he has done, if he is sick we must do what we can. Perhaps the man can speak?'

'Yes, Venerable One,' muttered the man in a weak voice. 'I am too far gone to be helped physically, I need help spiritually so that I may die in peace. May I talk to you?'

'Most certainly,' replied the old hermit. 'Speak, and we will listen.'

The sick man moistened his lips with water passed to him by the young monk, cleared his throat, and said, 'I was a successful silversmith in the City of Lhasa. Business was good, even from the lamaseries came work. Then, oh blights of blights,

Indian traders came and made available cheap goods from the bazaars of India. Things they called “mass-produced”. Inferior, shoddy. Stuff I would not touch. My business fell off. Money became short. My wife could not face adversity so she went to the bed of another. To the bed of a rich trader who had coveted her before I married her. A trader who as yet was not touched by the Indian competitors. I had no one to help me. No one to care. And no one for whom I could care.’

He stopped, overcome by his bitter thoughts. The old hermit and the young monk kept silent, waiting for him to recover. At last he continued: ‘Competition increased, there came a man from China bringing even cheaper goods by the yak load. My business ceased. I had nothing but my meager supplies which no one wanted. At last an Indian trader came to me and offered an insultingly low price for my home and all that was in it. I refused, and he jeered at me saying that soon he would have it for nothing. Being hungry and sick at heart, I lost my temper and threw him out of my house. He landed on his head in the roadway and cracked his temple on a chance stone.’

Again the sick man stopped, overcome by his thoughts. Again the others kept silent while they waited for him to continue. ‘I was surrounded by throngs,’ he went on, ‘some blaming me and some speaking out in favour. Soon I was dragged before a magistrate and the tale was told. Some spoke to the magistrate for me, some spoke against me. He deliberated but a short time before sentencing me to wear the cangue for a year. The device was fetched and locked around my neck. With it on I could not feed myself, nor give myself drink, but was always dependent upon the good offices of others. I could not work and had to wander begging for, not merely food, but for someone to feed me. I could not lie down, but had always to stand or sit.’

He turned even paler, and appeared to be at the point of collapse. The young monk said, ‘Venerable One, I found a container at the site of the trader camp. I will fetch it and then can make tea.’ Rising to his feet he hurried off down the path to where he had left the container, the spike and the cangue. Casting about and delving into the undergrowth springing up

around the former camp, he found a hook that evidently belonged to the container. Filling the container with water, after scrubbing it with sand, he set off back along the path, carrying the can of water, hook, spike and cangue. Soon he was back and with great glee tossed the heavy cangue straight on the fire. Sparks shot up and clouds of smoke billowed out, while from the neck-hole in the centre of the cangue a solid column of flame funneled out.

The young monk rushed into the cave and brought out the bundles given him by the trader so recently. Brick tea. A large and very solid cake of yak butter, dusty, quite a bit rancid, but still recognizable as butter. A rare treat, a small sack of brown sugar. Outside, by the fire, he carefully slid a smooth stick through the handle of the can and placed it in the centre of the bright fire. Sliding out the stick he placed it carefully to one side. The tea brick was already broken in places so he selected some of the smaller lumps and dropped them in the water which was now beginning to get hot. A quarter of the hard butter was hacked off with the aid of a sharp flat stone. Into the now-bubbling water it went, to melt and spread a thick yellow film over the surface. A small lump of borax, part of a larger lump in the tea bag, went next in order to improve the flavor, and then, oh, wonderful treat, a whole handful of brown sugar. Seizing a freshly peeled stick the young monk stirred the mess vigorously. Now the whole surface was obscured by steam so he slid the stick under the handle and lifted out the can.

The old hermit had been following the proceedings with great interest. By sounds he had been alert to each stage of the matter. Now, without being asked, he held out his bowl. The young monk took it, and skimming the scum of dirt, sticks and froth from the concoction, half filled the old man's bowl before carefully returning it to him. The convict whispered that he had a bowl in his rags. Bringing it out, he was offered a full bowl of tea in the knowledge that he, having sight, would not spill any. The young monk filled his own bowl and sank back to drink it with the sigh of satisfaction that comes to those who have worked hard for anything. For a time all was quiet as each sat engrossed with his own thoughts. From time to time the

young monk rose to fill the bowls of his companions or his own.

The evening grew dark, a chill wind sighed through the trees making leaves whisper in protest. The waters of the lake grew, rippled, and waves souged and sighed among the pebbles of the foreshore. Gently the young monk took the old hermit by the hand and led him back into the now dark interior of the cave, then returned for the sick man. He roused from his sleep as the young monk lifted him. 'I must talk,' he said, 'for there is little life left within me.' The young monk carried him inside the cave and scooped a depression for his hip bone and made a mound for his head. A journey outside to heap sandy soil around the fire to damp it down and keep it as moulder throughout the night. By the morrow the ashes would still be red and it would be easy to re-ignite into vigorous flame.

With the three men, one ancient, one middle aged, and one just approaching manhood, sitting or lying close together, the convict spoke again, 'My time grows short,' he said, 'I feel that my ancestors are ready to greet me and welcome me home. For a year I have suffered and starved. For a year I have wandered from Lhasa to Phari and back seeking food, seeking aid. Seeking. I have seen great lamas who spurned me and others who were kind. I have seen the lowly give to me when they had to go hungry for it. For a year I have wandered even as the most lowly nomad. I have fought with dogs for their scraps — and then found I could not reach my mouth.' He stopped and took a drink of the cold tea which stood beside him, now thick with congealed butter.

'But how did you reach us?' asked the old hermit in his quavery voice.

'I bent to the water at the very far end of the lake to drink, and the cangue overbalanced me so that I fell in. A strong wind blew me far across the water so that I saw the night and the day and the night which followed and the day after. Birds perched upon the cangue and tried to peck my eyes, but I shouted and frightened them off. Still I drifted at a fast rate until I lost consciousness and knew no more how long I drifted. Earlier today my feet touched the bottom of the lake and roused me.

Overhead a vulture was circling so I struggled and crawled ashore to fall head first into the thicket where the young father found me. I am overtaxed, my strength is gone and soon I shall be in the Heavenly Fields.'

'Rest for the night,' said the old hermit. 'The Spirits of the Night are astir. We must do our astral journeys ere it be too late.' With the aid of his stout staff he climbed to his feet and hobbled to the inner portion of the cave. The young monk gave a little tsampa to the sick man, settled him more comfortably, and then lay down to think over the events of the day and so to fall asleep. The moon rose to her full height and majestically moved to the other side of the sky. The noises of the night changed from hour to hour. Here insects droned and whirred, while from afar came the frightened shriek of a night bird. The mountain range crackled as the rocks cooled and contracted in the night air. Nearby a Rockwell lent thunder to the night as rocks and mountain debris came tumbling down to pound a tattoo on the hard-packed earth. A night rodent called urgently to its mate, and unknown things rustled and murmured in the whispering sands. Gradually the stars paled and the first shafts heralding a new day shot across the sky.

Suddenly, as though electrified, the young monk sat bolt upright. Wide awake he sat, staring vainly, trying to pierce the intense darkness of the cave. Holding his breath he concentrated on listening. No robbers would come here, he thought, everyone knew that the old hermit had nothing. The old hermit; was he ill, the young monk wondered. Rising to his feet he felt a cautious way to the end of the cave. 'Venerable One! Are you all right?' he called.

The sounds of the old man stirring, 'Yes, is it our guest, maybe?' The young monk felt foolish, having completely forgotten the convict. Turning he hurried to where the entrance of the cave showed as a dim grey blur. Yes, the well-protected fire was still alive. Grasping a stick the young monk thrust it into the heart of the red and blew steadily. Flame appeared and he piled more sticks upon the awakening blaze. By now the first stick was well alight at the end. Seizing it, he turned and hurried into the cave.

The burning brand sent weird shadows dancing crazily on the walls. The young monk jumped as a figure loomed into the feeble torchlight. It was the old hermit. At the young monk's feet the convict lay huddled, legs drawn up to his chest. The torch reflected in his wide-open eyes giving them the impression of winking. The mouth drooped open and a thin line of dried blood wandered from the corners down his cheeks and formed a turgid pool by his ears. Suddenly there came a rattling gurgle and the body twitched spasmodically, heaved up into a taut bow and relaxed with a violent and final exhalation of breath. The body creaked and there was the gurgle of fluids. The limbs became limp and the features flaccid.

The old hermit and the young monk together intoned the Service for the Release of Departing Spirits and gave telepathic directions for his passage to the Heavenly Fields. Outside the cave the light became brighter. Birds began to sing as a fresh day was born, but here there was death.

'You will have to remove the body,' said the old hermit. 'You must dismember it and remove the entrails so that the vultures can ensure a proper air burial.'

'We have no knife, Venerable One,' protested the young monk.

'I have a knife,' replied the hermit, 'I am keeping it that my own death may be properly conducted. Here it is. Do your duty and return the knife to me.'

Reluctantly the young monk picked up the dead body and carried it out of the cave. Near the rockfall there was a large flat slab of stone. With much effort he lifted the body on to the level surface and removed the soiled and tattered rags. High overhead there sounded the beating of heavy wings, the first vultures had appeared at the odour of death. Shuddering, the young monk plunged the point of the knife into the thin abdomen and drew it down. From the gaping wound the intestines came bulging out. Quickly he grasped the slimy coils and pulled them out. On the rock he spread the heart, liver, kidneys and stomach. Hacking and twisting he cut off the arms and legs. With naked body covered with blood he hurried from the dreadful scene and rushed to the lake. Into the water he rushed

and scrubbed and scrubbed himself with handfuls of fine wet sand. Carefully he washed the old hermit's knife and scoured it clean with sand.

Now he was shivering with cold and shock. The wind blew icy upon his nude body. The water trickling down felt almost as though the fingers of death were drawing lines upon his shuddering skin. Quickly he leapt out of the water and shook himself like a dog. Running, he drove a little warmth back into his body. By the cave mouth he picked up and donned his robe, previously discarded so that it would not be soiled by contact with the dismembered dead. Just as he was about to enter the cave he remembered his task was not completed; slowly he retraced his steps to the stone where vultures still fought over the choicest morsels. The young man was amazed at how little was left of the body. Some vultures sat contentedly on nearby rocks and placidly preened their feathers, others pecked hopefully among the exposed ribs of the corpse. Already they had removed all the skin from the head leaving the skull bare.

Picking up a heavy rock, the young monk brought it down with shattering force on the skeletal skull, cracking it like an eggshell and — as intended — exposing the brains for the ever hungry vultures. Then, grabbing the rags and bowl of the dead man, he rushed back to the fire and tossed rags and bowl into the blazing centre. To one side, still red hot, there lay the metal parts of the cangue, the last and only remnants of what had once been a wealthy craftsman with a wife, houses, and high skills. Pondering the matter, the young monk turned about and entered the cave.

The old hermit was sitting in meditation but roused as his junior approached. 'Man is temporary, Man is frail,' he said, 'Life on Earth is but illusion and the Greater Reality lies beyond. We will break our fast and then continue the transfer of Knowledge, for until I have told you ALL I cannot leave my body and I then want you to do for me what you have just done for our friend the convict. Now, though, let us eat, for we must maintain our strength as best we can. Do you fetch water and heat it. Now with my end so near, I can afford to indulge my body to that small extent.'

The young monk picked up the can and walked out of the cave and down to the lakeside, fastidiously avoiding the place where he had washed off the dead man's blood. Carefully he scoured the can inside and out. Carefully he scoured the old hermit's bowl as well as his own. Filling the can with water he carried it in his left hand and dragged along a very substantial branch with his right. A solitary vulture came swooping down to see what was happening. Landing heavily, it hopped a few steps then flapped into the air again with a shriek of anger at having been fooled. Further up to the left an over-gorged vulture was vainly trying to get into the air. It ran, leaped, and energetically beat the air with flailing wings, but it had eaten too much. Finally giving up, it tucked its head beneath a wing in shame and went to sleep while waiting for Nature to reduce its weight. The young monk chuckled to think that even vultures could eat too much, and he wondered wistfully what it would be like to have even the opportunity of eating too much. He had never had enough, like most monks, he always felt hungry to some degree.

But the tea had to be made, Time did not stand still. Putting the can in the fire to heat the water, he passed into the cave to get the tea, the butter, borax and sugar. The old hermit sat waiting expectantly.

But — one cannot sit drinking tea for too long when the fires of life are burning low and when an aged man's vitality slowly ebbs. Soon the old hermit settled himself anew while the young monk was tending the fire, the 'Old One's' precious fire after more than sixty years without, years of cold, years of utter self-denial, years of hunger and privation, which only Death could end. Years when the otherwise complete futility of existence as a hermit was softened by the knowledge that there was, after all, a TASK! The young monk came back into the cave smelling of fresh wood smoke. Quickly he seated himself before his senior.

'In that far-off Place so long ago, I was resting on the strange metal platform. The man, my captor was making clear to me that I was there not for my pleasure but for theirs, to be a Repository of Knowledge,' said the old man. 'I said, "but how

can I take an intelligent interest if I am merely held captive, an unwilling un-co-operative captive who has not the vaguest idea of what it is all about or where he is? How CAN I take an interest when you regard me as less than the dust? I have been handled worse than we handle a dead body which is to be fed to the vultures. We show respect to the dead and to the living; you treat me as excreta which has to be thrown on a field with as little ceremony as possible. And yet you claim to be civilized, whatever that means!"

'The man was obviously shaken, and not a little impressed by my outburst. I heard him pacing the room. Forward, a scrape of feet as he turned around. Backwards and then forwards again. Suddenly he stopped beside me and said: "I will consult my superior." Rapidly he moved away and obviously picked up some hard object. It went whirr whirr whirr, and then hrrr hrrr. A sharp metallic click and a staccato sound came from it. Speech, I judged. The man with me spoke at length, making the same sort of peculiar sounds. Clearly there was a discussion which went on for some few minutes. Click, clang, came from the machine, and the man came back to me.

' "First I am going to show you this room," he said, "I am going to tell you about us, what we are, what we are doing, and I am going to attempt to enlist your aid by understanding. First, here is sight."

'Light came to me, sight came to me. A most peculiar sight too; I was looking up at the underside of the man's chin, looking up his nostrils. The sight of the hairs in the nostrils amused me greatly for some reason, and I began to laugh. He bent down and one of his eyes filled the whole of my vision. "Oh!" he exclaimed, "someone has tipped up the box." The world whirled about me, my stomach churned and I felt nausea and vertigo. "Oh! Sorry," said the man, "I should have switched off before rotating the box. Never mind, you will feel better in a moment or so. These things happen!"

'Now I could see myself. A horrid experience it was to see my body lying so pale and wan and with so many tubes and attachments coming from it. It was a shock indeed to see myself and see that my eyelids were tight-closed. I was lying on

what appeared to be a thin sheet of metal supported on just one pillar. Attached to the pillar foot were a number of pedals, while standing by me was a rod which held glass bottles filled with coloured fluids. These were in some way connected to me. The man said, "You are upon an operating table. With these pedals" — he touched them — "we can put you in any desired position." He stepped on one and the table swung around. He touched another and the table tilted until I feared that I might fall. Another, and the table rose until I could see right under it. A most uncanny experience which caused the strangest sensations in my stomach.

'The walls obviously were of metal of a most pleasant green colour. Never before had I seen such fine material, smooth, without blemish and clearly some special form of joining must have been employed for there was no sign even of where walls, floor and ceiling ended or commenced. The walls "flowed", as one might say, into the floor or into the ceiling. No sharp corners, not a single sharp edge. Then a section of the wall slid aside with that metallic rumble I had come to know. A strange head poked through, looked around briefly and as abruptly withdrew. The wall slid shut.

'On the wall in front of me there was an array of little windows, some of them about the size of a large man's palm. Behind them pointers stood at certain red or black marks. Some larger rectangular windows attracted my interest; an almost mystical blue glow emanated from them. Strange spots of light jiggled and danced in some incomprehensible pattern, while at yet another window a brown-red line wavered up and down in strangely rhythmical forms, almost like the dance of a serpent, I thought. The man — I will call him my Captor — smiled at my interest. "All these instruments indicate YOU," he said, "and here are indicated nine waves from your brain. Nine separate sine waves with the output from your brain electricity superimposed upon them. They show you are of superior mentality. They show you have truly remarkable ability to memorize, hence your suitability for this task."

'Very gently turning the sight-box, he pointed to some strange glassware which previously had been beyond my range

of vision. “These,” he explained, “continually feed you through your veins and drain off waste from your blood. These others drain off other waste products from your body. We are now in the process of improving your general health so that you will be fit enough to withstand the undeniable shock of all that we are going to show you. Shock there will be, because no matter that you consider yourself to be an educated priest, compared to us you are the lowest and most ignorant savage, and what to us is commonplace, to you it will be miracles beyond belief almost, and a first introduction to our science causes severe psychic shock. Yet this must be risked and there is a risk although we make every effort to minimize it.”

‘He laughed, and said, “In your temple services you make much ado about the sounds of the body — oh yes! I know all about your services — but have you REALLY heard body sounds? Listen!” Turning, he moved to the wall and pressed a shining white knob. Immediately from a lot of small holes came sounds which I recognized as the body sounds. Smiling, he twisted another knob, and the sounds increased and filled the whole room. Throb, throb, went the heart sounds in such volume that the glassware behind me rattled in sympathy. A touch of the knob again, and the heart sounds went, and there came the gurgle of fluids in the body, but as loud as a mountain stream rushing across a stony bed in its anxiety to get to the sea so very far away. There came the sigh of gases like a storm rushing through leaves and branches of mighty trees. Plops and splashes as though great boulders were being toppled into some deep deep lake. “Your body,” he said. “Your body sounds. We know EVERYTHING about your body.”

‘ “But, Unhonoured Captor,” I said, “THIS is no marvel, THIS is no miracle. We poor ignorant savages here in Tibet can do as well as that. We too can magnify sound, not so vastly, agreed, but we can still do it. We can also release the soul from the body — and bring it back.”

‘ “Can you?” He looked at me with a quizzical expression on his face, and said, “You do not scare easily, eh? You think of us as enemies, as captors, eh?”

‘ “Sir!” I replied, “you have shown me no friendship yet, you

have shown me no reason why I should trust you or co-operate with you. You keep me a paralyzed captive as some wasps keep their captives. There are those among you who appear to me to be devils; we have pictures of such and we revile them as nightmare creatures from some hellish world. Yet here they are consorts of yours “

‘ “Appearances can be misleading,” he replied. “Some of these are the kindest of people. Others, with saintly mien, would stoop to any low act that occurred to their perverted minds. Yet you, you — like all savage people, are led astray by the outward appearances of a person.”

‘ “Sir!” was my response, “I have yet to decide upon which side your interests lie, good or evil. If they be good, and I be convinced, then and then only will I co-operate. Otherwise I will use any means I can to circumvent your aims, no matter the cost to me “

‘ “But surely,” was his somewhat cross rejoinder, “you will agree that we saved your life when you were starving and ill?”

‘I put on my gloomiest expression as I answered, “Saved my life — for WHAT? I was on my way to the Heavenly Fields, you dragged me back. Nothing you can do now will be so unkind. What is life to a blind man? How can one who is blind study? Food, how shall I get food now? No! There was no kindness in prolonging my life; you even stated before that I am not here for my pleasure but for YOUR purpose. Where is the kindness in that? You have me trussed up here and I have been the sport of your females. Good? And where is all this good you mention?”

‘He stood looking at me, hands on his hips. “Yes,” he said at last, “from your point we have not been kind, have we? Perhaps I can convince you, though, and then you WILL be useful Indeed.” He turned and walked to the wall. This time I saw what he did. He stood facing a square filled with small holes and then pushed a black dot. A light shone above the holed-square and grew into a luminous mist. There, to my stupefaction, a face and head formed in living colours. My captor spoke at length in that strange, outlandish tongue and then stopped.

To my petrified amazement, the head swiveled in my direction, and bushy eyebrows were raised. Then a small grim smile appeared at the corners of the mouth. There was a barked terse sentence, and the light faded. The mist swirled and seemed to be sucked into the wall. My captor turned to me with every sign of satisfaction on his face. "Right, my friend," he said, "you have proved that you are a strong character, a very tough man with whom to deal. Now I have permission to show you that which no other member of your world has seen."

'He turned to the wall again and stabbed the black spot. The mist formed again with this time the head of a young female. My captor spoke to her, obviously giving orders. She nodded her head, stared curiously in my direction, and faded away.

' "Now we will have to wait a few moments," said my captor. "I am having a special device brought in and I am going to show you places on your world. Cities of the world. Have you any choice where you would like to see?"

' "I have no knowledge of the world," I replied. "I have not traveled."

' "Yes, but surely you have heard of SOME city," he extrapolated.

' "Well, yes," was my answer, "I have heard of kalimpong."

' "Kalimpong, eh? A small Indian border settlement; can't you think of some better place? How about Berlin, London, Paris, or Cairo? Surely you want to see something better than Kalimpong?"

' "But, sir," I replied, "I have no interest in those places you mentioned. The names convey nothing to me except that I have heard traders discuss such places, but it means nothing to me, nor am I interested. Nor if I saw pictures of these places could I say if it were true or not. If this wonderful contraption of yours can do what you say it can do — then show me Lhasa. Show me Phari. Show me the Western Gate, the Cathedral, the Potala. I know those and will be aware if your device is true or some clever trick "

'He looked at me with a most peculiar expression on his face; he appeared to be in a state of stupefaction. Then he pulled

himself together with a visible jerk and exclaimed: "Taught my business by an unlettered savage, eh? And the fellow is right too. There is something in this native cunning after all. Of COURSE he has to have a frame of reference otherwise he will be not at all impressed. Well! Well!"

'The sliding panel was abruptly jerked aside and four men appeared guiding a very large box which seemed to be floating on air. The box must have been of considerable weight because although it appeared to float without weight it took much effort to start it moving, or to change its direction, or to stop it. Gradually the box was edged into the room where I lay. For a time I was fearful that they were going to upset my table as they pushed and pulled. One man bumped into the eye box and the resulting gyrations left me for a time sick and dizzy. But at last, after much discussion, the box was placed against a wall directly in line with my sight. Three of the men withdrew and shut the panel behind them.

'The fourth man and my captor engaged in animated discussion with much waving of hands and gesticulations. At last my captor turned to me and said, "He says that we cannot bring in Lhasa because it is too close, we have to be further away so that we can focus."

'I said nothing, took no notice at all, and after a short wait my captor said, "Would you like to see Berlin? Bombay? Calcutta?"

'My reply was, "No, I would not, they are too far away for me!"

'He turned back to the other man and a quite acrimonious argument followed. The other man looked as if he wanted to weep; he waved his hands in utter frustration and in desperation dropped to his knees in front of the box. The front slid off and I saw what appeared to be just a large window — and nothing more. Then the man took some bits of metal from his clothing and crawled to the back of the strange box. Strange lights shone in the window, swirls of meaningless colours formed. The picture wavered, flowed, and eddied. There was an instant when shadows formed which MIGHT have been the Potala, but again, it might equally have been smoke.

‘The man crawled out from the rear of the bog, mumbled something, and hurried from the room. My captor, looking very displeased, said, “We are so close to Lhasa that we cannot focus. It is like trying to see through a telescope when one is closer than that instrument will focus. It works well at a distance, but close up No telescope will focus. We have the same trouble here. Is that clear to you?”

‘ “Sir.” I replied, “you talk of things I do not understand. What is this telescope you mention? I have never seen one. You say that Lhasa is too close; I say it is a very long walk for a very long time. How can it be too close?”

‘An agonized expression shone on my captor's face; he clutched his hair and for a moment I thought he would dance on the floor. Then he calmed himself with an effort and said, "When you had your eyes, did you ever bring something so that your eyes could not focus? THAT is what I mean, WE CANNOT FOCUS AT THIS SHORT RANGE!!!"

CHAPTER FOUR

‘I LOOKED at him, or at least felt as though I looked at him, because it is a most difficult experience that a man can undergo to have his head in one place and his sight many feet away, coming from a distant place. Anyway, I looked at him and I thought, what marvel can this be? The man says that he can show me cities on the other side of the world yet he cannot show me my own country. So I said to him, “Sir, will you put something in front of the sight box so that I may judge of this matter of focus for myself?”

‘He nodded his head in instant agreement, and cast round for a moment as though wondering what to do. Then he took from the bottom of my table a translucent sheet of something upon which there were very strange markings, markings such as I had never seen before. Obviously it was meant to be writing, but he turned over what appeared to be a few sheets and then he came to something which apparently satisfied him immensely because he gave a pleased smile. He held the thing behind his back as he approached my sight box.

‘“Well now my friend!” he exclaimed, “let us see what we can do to convince you.” He slid something in front of my sight box, very close it was and to my astonishment all I could see were blurs, nothing was clear. There was a difference, part was a white blur, part was a black blur, but it meant nothing to me, nothing at all. He smiled at my expression — I could not see him smile but I could “hear” him smile; when one is blind one has different senses. I could hear his face and muscles creak, and as he had smiled often before I knew that those creaks meant that he was smiling now.

‘“Ah, “ he said, “getting home to you at last, am I? Now,

watch carefully. Tell me when you can see what this is.” Very slowly he pulled the obscuring sheet backwards, gradually it came clear to me, and I saw with considerable astonishment that it was a picture of me. I do not profess to know how this picture was produced, but it actually showed me lying on the table looking at the men who were carrying in the black box. My jaw dropped open in profound amazement. I must have looked like a real country yokel, certainly I felt one, I felt the heat rising and my cheeks were burning with embarrassment. There I was, done up with all those things sticking out of me, there I was watching the four men maneuver that box, and the look of astonishment on my face in the picture really did get home to me.

“All right,” said, my captor, “obviously you get the point. To drive it home let us go through it again.” Slowly he held the picture so that I could see it, and moved it closer to the eye box. Slowly it got unclear until I could see a whitish blackish blur, and nothing more. He whipped it away and then I could see the rest of the room again. He stood back a few paces and said, “You cannot read this, of course, but look. Here are printed words. You can see them clearly?”

“I can see them clearly, sir,” I responded, “I can see them very clearly indeed.”

So then he brought the thing closer to my eye box and again there was that blurring of vision. “Now,” he said, “you will appreciate our problem. We have a machine or device, call it what you will, which is a very much greater counterpart of this eye box we are using on you, but the principle would be utterly beyond you. It is such, however, that we can with it see all around this world but we cannot see anything which is fifty miles away. Fifty miles away is too close just the same as when I brought this a few inches from your eye box you could not see it. I will show you Kalimpong.” With that he turned aside and did something to some knobs which were upon the wall.

The lights in the room dimmed, they were not extinguished, but they dimmed so that the light was akin to that which follows immediately the setting of the sun beyond the Himalayas. A cool dimness where the Moon has not yet risen, and

where the Sun has not yet withdrawn all its light. He turned to the back of the big box and his hands moved over something that I could not see. Immediately lights glowed in the box. Quite slowly scenery formed. The high peaks of the Himalayas, and upon a trail a caravan of traders. They crossed a little wooden bridge beneath which a rushing torrent threatened to engulf them should they but slip. They reached the other side and they followed a trail through rough pasture land.

‘For some minutes we watched them, and the view was that which a bird would obtain, a view as though one of the Gods of the Sky were holding the eye box and gently floating across the still barren terrain. My captor moved his hands again and there was an absolute blur of motion, something came into sight and went by. My captor moved his hands in the opposite direction, the picture steadied, but — no, it was not a picture, it was the actual thing. This was not a picture, this was reality, this was truth. This was looking down through a hole in the sky.

‘Below I saw the houses of Kalimpong, I saw the streets thronged with traders, I saw lamaseries with yellow robed lamas and red robed monks wandering about. It was all very strange. I had some difficulty in locating places because I had been to Kalimpong only once, and that was when a young boy, and I had seen Kalimpong from foot level, from the level of a small boy standing. Now I was seeing it — well, I suppose I was seeing it from the air as the birds see it.

‘My captor was watching me intently. He moved certain things and the image or landscape, or whatever one is to call such a marvelous thing, blurred into speed and steadied again. “Here,” said the man, “is the Ganges which, as you know, is the Sacred River of India.”

‘I knew a lot about the Ganges. Sometimes traders from India would bring magazines with pictures in them. We could not read a single word of writing in those magazines but the pictures — ah! That was different. Here before me, unmistakably, was the actual River Ganges. Then to my quite stupefied surprise it dawned on me that I was hearing as well as seeing. I could hear the Hindus chanting, and then I saw why. They had a body laid out on a terrace by the water's edge and

they were sprinkling the body with the Holy Water of the River Ganges before conveying it to the burning ghats.

‘The river was crowded, it seemed absolutely amazing that there could be so many people in the world, let alone in a river. Females were disrobing in a most shameless manner on the banks, but so were the men. I felt myself going hot all over at such a display. But then I thought of their Temples, the terraced Temples, the Grottos, and the Colonnades, and I looked and I was amazed. This was reality indeed, and I began to be confused.

‘My captor — for I must still remember, he was my captor — my captor, then, moved something and there was a blur of motion. He peered into that window intently, and then the blurring stopped with quite a jerk. “Berlin,” he said. Well, I knew Berlin was a city somewhere in the Western world, but all this was so strange that really it didn't convey much to me. I looked down and thought that perhaps it was the novel viewpoint which was distorting everything. Here there were tall buildings, remarkably uniform in size and shape. I had never seen so much glass in my life, there were glass windows everywhere. And then on what seemed to be a very hard roadway there were two metal rods set into the road itself. They were shiny and they were absolutely uniform in their distance apart. I just could not understand it.

‘Around a corner and into my range of vision walked two horses, one behind the other, and, I hardly expect you to believe this, but they were drawing what appeared to be a metal box on wheels. The horses walked between the metal bars and the wheels of the metal box actually rode along those bars. The box had windows, windows all the way around, and peering in I could see people, people inside the box, people being drawn along. Right in front of my sight (I almost said “right in front of my eyes” so accustomed was I now to this sight box) the device drew to a halt. People got out of the box and others got in. A man went to the front, in front of the first horse, and poked about in the ground with another rod. Then he got back into the metal box and drove off, and the box then turned to the left, off the main set of rods on to another.

‘I was so amazed at this that I couldn't look at anything else, I had no time for anything else. Just this strange metal box on wheels carrying people. But then I looked at the sides of the road where there were people. Men were there in remarkably tight clothing. They had garments on their legs which seemed very very narrow, and outlined the exact contours of the legs. And on the head of each man there appeared the most remarkable bowl shaped thing, upside down, and with a narrow rim around it. It caused me some amusement because they did look peculiar, but then I looked at the females.

‘I had never seen anything like it. Some of these females were almost uncovered at the top of their body, but the lower part of the body was absolutely wrapped in what seemed to be a black tent. They seemed to have no legs, one could not even see their feet. With one hand they clutched the side of this black tent thing, apparently in an effort to keep the bottom from dragging in the dust.

‘I looked some more, I looked at the buildings, and some of those buildings were truly noble edifices. Down the street, a very wide street, came a body of men. They had music coming from the first lot of men. There was much shiny, and I wondered if it was gold and silver instruments they had, but as they came nearer I saw that the instruments were of brass and some were just metal. These were all big men with red faces, and they were all dressed in some martial uniform. I burst out laughing at the strutting way in which they were walking. They were bringing their knees right up so the upper limb was quite horizontal.

‘My captor smiled at me and said, “Yes, it's a very strange march indeed but that is the German goosestep which the German army use on ceremonial occasions.” My captor moved his hands again, once more there was this blurring, once more the things behind the window of the box dissolved into forming mist, then stopped and solidified. “Russia,” said my captor, “the Land of the Czars. Moscow.”

‘I looked, and snow was upon the land. Here, to, they had strange vehicles, vehicles such as I had never imagined. There was a horse harnessed to what appeared to be a large platform

fitted with seats. That large platform was raised several inches from the ground by things which looked like flat metal strips. The horse drew this contraption along, and as it moved it left depressions in the snow.

‘Everyone was wearing fur and their breath was coming like frozen steam from their mouths and nostrils. They looked quite blue with the cold. But I looked about at some of the buildings, thinking how different they were from the ones I had seen before. They were strange, they were great walls standing up, and beyond the walls rooftops were bulbous, almost like onions upside down with their roots projecting up into the sky. “The Palace of the Czar,” said my captor.

‘A glint of water caught my sight, and I thought of our own Happy River which I had not seen for so long. “That is the Moscow River,” said my captor. “It is a very important river indeed.” Upon it there rode strange vessels made of wood and with great sails hanging from poles. There was little wind about so the sails were hanging flaccid, and men had other poles with flattened ends which they moved so that the flat ends dipped in the river, and so propelled the craft.

‘But all this — well, I did not see the point of it, so I said to the man, “Sir, I have seen undoubted marvels, no doubt it would interest many, but what is the point of it, what are you trying to prove to me?”

A sudden thought occurred to me. Something had been nagging at the back of my mind for the last several hours, something which now leaped into my consciousness with insistent clarity. “Sir, captor!” I exclaimed. Who are you? Are you God?”

‘He looked at me rather pensively as if he were nonplussed by what was obviously an unexpected question. He fingered his chin, ruffled his hair, and shrugged his shoulders slightly. Then he replied, “You would not understand. There are some things which cannot be comprehended unless one has reached a certain stage. Let me answer you by asking you a question. If you were in a lamasery and one of your duties was to look after a herd of yaks, would you answer a yak who asked you what you were?”

‘I thought about it, and then I said, “Well, sir, certainly I

should not expect a yak to ask me such a question, but if he did ask me such a question I should regard it as proof that he was an intelligent yak, and I should go to some trouble to try to explain to him what I was. You ask me, sir, what I would do about a yak who asked me a question, and I reply to you that I would answer that yak to the best of my ability. In the conditions which you mention I would say that I was a monk and that I had been appointed to look after those yaks, and that I was doing my best for those yaks, and I regarded them as my brothers and my sisters although we were in different forms. I would explain to the yak that we monks believed in re-incarnation, I would explain that we each came down to this Earth to do our appointed task and to learn our appointed lessons so that in the Heavenly Fields we could prepare to journey on to even higher things.”

“Well spoken, monk, well spoken,” said my captor. “I regret exceedingly that it takes one of the lower orders to give me a sense of perspective. Yes, you are right, you have amazed me greatly, monk, by the perception you have shown and, I must say, by your intransigence because you have been rather firmer than I should be if I should be so unfortunate as to be placed in comparable circumstances.”

‘I felt bold now, so I said, “You refer to me as one of the lower orders. Before that you referred to me as a savage, uncivilized, uncultured, knowing nothing. You laughed at me when I admitted the truth that I knew nothing of great cities in this world. But, sir, I told you the truth, I told you the truth, I admitted my ignorance, but I am seeking to lighten that ignorance and you are not helping me. I ask you again, sir; you have made me captive entirely against my will, you have engaged in great liberties with my body, the Temple of my Soul, you have indulged in some most remarkable events, apparently designed to impress me. I might be more impressed, sir, if you answered my question, because I know what I want to know. I ask you again — who are you?’

‘For some time he just stood there, looking embarrassed. And then he said, "In your terminology there are no words, no concepts which would enable me to explain the position. Before

a subject can be discussed a first requisite is that both sides, both parties, shall understand the same terms, shall be able to agree on certain precepts. For the moment let me just tell you that I am one who can be likened to the medical lamas of your Chakpori. I am charged with the responsibility of looking after your physical body and preparing you so that you can be filled with knowledge, when I am satisfied that you are ready to receive that knowledge. Until you are filled with this knowledge, then any discussion on who I am or what I am would be pointless. Just accept for the moment that what we are doing is for the good of others, and that although you may be highly incensed at what you consider to be liberties we are taking with you, yet after, when you know our purpose, when you know what we are, and you know what you and your people are, you will change your opinion.” With that he switched off my sight and I heard him leave the room. I was again in the dark night of blindness, and again alone with my thoughts.

‘The dark night of blindness is a dark night indeed. When I had been blinded, when my eyes had been gouged out, gouged out by the filthy fingers of the Chinese, I had known agony, and even with my eyes removed I had seen, or seemed to see, bright flashes, swirling lights without shape or form. That had subsided throughout subsequent days, but now I had been told that a device had been tapped in to my optic nerve and I could indeed believe it, I had every reason to believe it. My captor had switched off my sight, but an after-memory of it remained. Again I was experiencing that peculiar contradictory sensation of numbness and tingling in the head. It might seem absurd to talk of feeling numb and tingling at the same time, but that is how I felt, and I was left with my numb-tingling, and all the swirling lights.

‘For a time I lay there considering all that had happened to me. The thought occurred to me that perhaps I was dead, or mad and all these things were but a figment of a mind leaving the conscious world. My training as a priest came to my rescue. I used age-old discipline to re-orientate my thoughts. I — STOPPED REASON and so permitted my Overself to take over. No imagination this, this was the REAL thing; I was being used

by Higher Powers for Higher Purposes. My fright and panic subsided. Composure returned to me and for some time I ticked over in my mind in rhythm to the beating of my heart. Could I have behaved differently, I wondered. Had I exercised all caution in my approach to new concepts? Would the Great Thirteenth have acted otherwise if He had been in a similar position? My conscience was clear. My duty was plain. I must continue to act as a good Tibetan Priest and all would be well. Peace suffused me, a feeling of well-being enveloped me like a warm yak-wool blanket protecting against the cold. Somehow, sometime, I drifted off into a dreamless, untroubled sleep.

‘The world was shifting. Everything seemed to be rising and falling. A strong sensation of motion and then a metallic CLANG woke me abruptly from my slumber. I was moving, my table was moving. There came the musical chink and tinkle of all the glassware being moved as well. As I remembered, all those things had been attached to the table. Now everything was on the move. Voices surrounded me. High voices, low voices. Discussing me, I feared. But what strange voices, so different from anything I had known. There was movement of my table, but silent movement. No sliding, no grating. Merely a floating. This, I thought, must be how a feather feels when it is blown upon the wind. Then the table motion changed direction. Obviously I was being guided down a corridor. Soon we entered what was clearly a large hall. The echoes gave a resonance of distance, considerable distance. A final rather sickening swaying sweep, and my table clanged down upon what my experience told me was a ROCK floor, but how could this be? How could I suddenly be in what my senses told me was a cave? My curiosity was soon set at rest, or was it whetted? I have never been sure.

‘There was a continual babble of talk, all in a language quite unknown to me. With the clanging of my metal table upon the rock floor, a hand touched my shoulder and the voice of my captor said, “Now we will give you sight, you should be sufficiently rested by now.” There was a scraping and a click. Colours whirled around me, lights flashed, grew dim, and

settled down to a pattern. Not a pattern that I understood, not a pattern that conveyed anything to me. I lay there wondering what it was all about. There was an expectant silence. I could FEEL people looking at me. Then a short, sharp, barked question. My captor's footsteps coming swiftly towards me. "Can you not see?" he asked.

"I see a curious pattern," I replied, "I see that which has no meaning for me, a pattern of wavy lines, of swaying colours and flashing lights. That is all I see." He muttered something and hurried away. There was a muted talk and the sound of metallic objects being touched together. Lights flickered and colours flared. Everything whirled in a mad ecstasy of alien patterns, steadied, and I saw.

'Here was a vast cavern some two hundred or more feet high. Its length and breadth were beyond my computation for they faded into dim darkness far beyond my range of vision. The place was huge and it contained what I could only liken to an amphitheater, the seats of which were filled by — what shall I call them? — creatures which could only have come from a catalogue of gods and devils. Yet strange as these things were, an even stranger object hung poised in the centre of the arena. A globe which I perceived to be the world hung before me, slowly rotating while from afar a light shone upon it as the light from the sun shone upon this Earth.

'There was now a hushed silence. The strange creatures stared at me. I stared back at them although I felt small and wholly insignificant before this mighty throng. Here were small men and women, seemingly perfect in every detail and of god-like mien. Radiating an aura of purity and calm. Others there were who also were man-like but with a curious, quite incredible bird head complete with scales or feathers (I could not at all distinguish which) and with hands which, although human in shape, still had astounding scales and claws. Also there were giants. Immense creatures who loomed like statues and overshadowed their more diminutive companions. These were undeniably human, yet of such size as to overwhelm one's comprehension. Men and women, or male and female. And others who could have been either, or neither. They sat and

stared at me until I grew uncomfortable under their steady gaze.

‘To one side sat a god-like creature stern visaged and erect. In gorgeous, living colours he sat calmly regal like a god in his heaven. Then he spoke, again in an unknown tongue. My captor hurried forward and bent over me. “I shall put these things in your ears,” he said, “and then you will understand every word which is said here. Do not be afraid.” He grasped the upper edge of my right ear and pulled it upwards with one hand. With the other he inserted some small device into the ear orifice. Then he leaned over further and did the same to my left ear. He twisted a small knob attached to a box beside my neck and I heard sound. It dawned upon me that I could understand the strange tongue which formerly had been incomprehensible. There was no time to wonder at this marvel, I had perforce to listen to the voices around me, voices which I now understood.

‘Voices which I now understood, a language which I now understood. Yes, but the grandeur of the concepts was far above my limited imagination. I was a poor priest from what had been described as “the terrain of savages” and my comprehension was not sufficient to enable me to perceive the meaning of that which I now heard and had thought to be intelligible. My captor observed that I was having difficulties and hastened again towards me. “What is it?” he whispered.

‘“I am too ill-educated to understand the meanings of any except the simpler words,” I whispered back. “The things which I heard have no meaning at all for me; I cannot COMPREHEND such lofty thoughts.” With a very worried expression on his face, he hesitantly walked to a large official — clad in gorgeous clothes — who stood near the Throne of the Great One. There was a whispered conversation, then the two walked slowly towards me.

‘I tried to follow the talk going on about me, but succeeded not at all. My captor leaned over me and whispered; “Explain to the Adjutant your difficulty.”

‘“Adjutant?” I said to him, “I do not even know what the word means.” Never before had I felt so inadequate, so ignor-

ant, so utterly frustrated. Never before had I felt so out of my depth. The Adjutant person smiled down at me and said, "Do you understand what I am saying to you?"

“I do indeed, Sir,” was my reply, “but I am utterly ignorant of the whole matter of the Great One's talk. I cannot COMPREHEND the subject, the CONCEPTS are beyond me.” He nodded his head and replied: “Our automatic translator obviously is to blame, it is not fitted to your metabolism nor to your brain pattern. No matter, the Surgeon-General, whom we believe you refer to as your captor, will deal with the matter and will prepare you for the next session. This is a trifling delay and I will explain it to the Admiral.”

‘He nodded amiably to me and strode off to the Great One. Admiral? What was an Admiral, I wondered. What was an Adjutant? The terms had no meaning at all for me. I composed myself to await developments. The one referred to as the Adjutant reached the Great One and spoke quietly to him. It all appeared very unhurried, very tranquil. The Great One nodded his head, and the Adjutant beckoned to the one who was called Surgeon-General, or my captor. He went forward, and there was an animated discussion. At last my captor put his right hand to his head in the strange gesture which I had noticed, turned towards me, and walked briskly to me at the same time making motions apparently to someone beyond my range of vision.

‘The talk continued. There had been no interruption. A large man was on his feet and I had the impression that he was discussing something about food supplies. A strange female jumped to her feet and made some sort of answer. It appeared to be a strong protest at something which the man had said. Then with face red — with anger? — she sat down abruptly. The man continued unperturbed. My captor reached me and muttered, “You have disgraced me, I SAID you were an ignorant savage.” Crossly he wrenched the things from my ears: With a quick sweep of his hand he did something which instantly deprived me of sight again. There was the rising sensation, and I felt my table moving away from that huge cave. Not at all carefully my table and equipment was pushed along a

corridor, there came metallic squeaks and clangs, a sudden change of direction, and an unpleasant feeling of falling. With quite a bang my table hit the floor and I guessed that I was again in the metal room from whence I came. Curt voices, the rustle of cloth and the shuffle of feet. The slither of the sliding metal door, and I was left alone again with my thoughts. What was it all about.? WHO was the Admiral? WHAT was the Adjutant? And WHY was my captor called Surgeon-General? What WAS this place? The whole thing was far, far beyond me. I lay there with burning cheeks, feeling hot all over. I was mortified almost beyond endurance that I had comprehended so very very little. Quite definitely I had acted like an ignorant savage — they must have thought as I would have thought if I had regarded a yak as a sentient person and had so addressed him but without result. Perspiration broke out all over me as I contemplated how I had brought shame to my priestly caste by my sheer inability to understand; I felt TERRIBLE!

‘There I lay, enmeshed in my misery, prey to the darkest and most ignoble thoughts, full of the deep suspicion that we all were savages to these unknown people. I lay there — and sweated.

‘The door screeched open and giggling and chattering uproar filled the room. Those unmentionable females again. With great elan they ripped off my single sheet once again leaving me as naked as a new-born baby. Without ceremony I was rolled on to my side, a cold sheet of something clammy was slid under my length, and violently I was rolled back to the other side. There was a sharp YANK as the edge of the sheet was pulled further under me — for a moment I feared that I would be precipitated off the table. Female hands grasped me and urgently scoured me with sharp, stinging solutions. Roughly I was rubbed dry with what felt to be old sacking. The most intimate portions of my body were prodded and poked and strange implements were introduced.

‘Time dragged on; I was goaded almost beyond endurance but there was naught that I could do. Most thoroughly had I been immobilized against just such a contingency. But then began such an assault upon me that at first I feared I was being

tortured. Females gripped my arms and legs and twisted them and bent them at all angles. Hard hands dug into the muscles of my body and kneaded me as though I were but a mass of dough. Knuckles made depressions in my organs and I was left gasping for air. My legs were wrenched far apart and the unceasingly chattering females drew long woolen sleeves over my feet, up my legs, and near unto my thighs. I was lifted by the back of my neck so that I was bent forward from the waist, some form of garment was thrust around my upper body and appeared to be tied over my chest and abdomen.

‘A strange, evil-smelling foam impinged upon my scalp and instantly a rattling buzz sounded. The source of the buzz touched me and made even my teeth rattle — the few I had remaining after the Chinese had knocked most of them out. There was a shearing sensation that reminded me of yaks being shorn of their wool. A rough wipe, so rough that I felt the skin must surely peel, and another form of mist landed upon my defenseless head. The door slithered again, and there came the sound of male voices. One I recognized, that of my captor. He came to me, and using my own language, said, “We are going to expose your brain, there is nothing to worry about. We are going to put electrodes right into your—” The words had no meaning for me except to indicate that I was in for another bad time and that I could do nothing at all about it.

‘Strange odours pervaded the air. The chattering females fell silent. All talk ceased. Metal clanged against metal. There came the gurgle of fluids and I felt a sudden sharp prick in my upper left arm. Violently my nose was grasped and some strange tubular device was rammed up my nostrils, and down my throat. Around my skull I felt a succession of sharp pricks which instantly gave way to numbness. There came a high-pitched whine and a most horrid machine touched my skull and crawled all around it. It was sawing off the top of my head! The terrible, grinding pulsation penetrated every atom of my being; I had the impression that every bone in my whole body was vibrating in protest. At last, as I could well feel, the whole of the top of my head was cut off with the exception of a small flap of flesh which left my skull hinged at that point. By now I

was in a state of terror, a strange form of terror, because although I was terrified, yet I determined that death itself would not make me murmur.

‘Indescribable sensations now assailed me. Without any obvious reason I suddenly uttered a long-drawn out, “Ah-hhhahhhhahhhh.” Then my fingers began violently to twitch. A stinging in my nostrils made it imperative that I sneeze violently — but I could not sneeze. But worse was to follow. Suddenly there stood before me my maternal grandfather. He was clad in the dress of a government official. He was speaking to me with a kind smile on his face. I looked at him — then the impact came to me; I did NOT look at him. I had no eyes! What magic was this? At my amazed exclamation, during which the apparition of my grandfather vanished, my captor moved to my side. “What is it?” he queried. I told him. “Oh, that’s NOTHING!” he exclaimed. “We are merely stimulating certain centres of your brain that you may comprehend the more easily. We see that you have ability, but you have been sunk in the sloth and stupor of superstition and will not permit yourself to open your mind. We are doing it for you.”

‘A female screwed the small ear devices into my ear orifices and for her roughness she might well have been screwing tent pegs into hard soil. There was a click and I could understand the outlandish language. I could COMPREHEND too. Words like cortex, medulla oblongata, psychosomatic, and other terms were now clear to me in their meanings and implications. My basic intelligence quotient was being enhanced — and I knew what it all meant. But it was an ordeal. It was exhausting. Time seemed to stand still. People appeared to walk round endlessly. Their idle chatter was unceasing. The whole affair became entirely boring. I longed to be out and away, out from this place of strange odours, from this place where the top of my head had been cut off like the top of a hard boiled egg. Not that I had ever seen a hard boiled egg, that was for the traders and those who had money, not for poor priests who lived on tsampa.

‘From time to time people would address remarks to me, questions, how was I? Did I have pain? Did I think I saw something? What colour did I imagine I saw? My captor stood

beside me awhile and told me that various centres were being stimulated and that I should, during the course of the treatment, experience sensation which could frighten me. Frighten me? I had been frightened the whole time, I told him. He laughed at that and casually remarked that as a result of the treatment I was now having I should have to live as a solitary hermit the whole of a long life because of the increased perceptions I should have. Never would anyone live with me, he said, until almost at the end of my life a young man would come to take all the knowledge I had and to carry it on and eventually place it before an unbelieving world.

‘At last, after what appeared to be an eternity, my bony skull cap was replaced. Strange metal clips were pushed in to join the two halves together. A strip of cloth was wound round and round my head, and all departed save one female who sat beside me. From the rustle of paper it was evident that she was reading instead of paying attention to her duties. There came the soft plop of a book falling and then rhythmic snores from the female. I decided that I too would sleep!’

CHAPTER FIVE

IN the cave the old hermit suddenly ceased to speak, and placed his hands with fingers outspread on the sandy earth beside him. Lightly those sensitive fingers made contact with the soil. For a moment he concentrated, then said: 'Shortly we shall receive a visitor.' The young monk looked at him in a dumbfounded manner. Visitor? What visitor would be coming here? And how was HE so sure? There had been no sound, no change in the voices of nature beyond the cave. For perhaps ten minutes they sat thus, erect, expectant.

Suddenly the bright-limned oval that was the entrance to the cave dimmed and became a black blur. 'Are you there, Hermit?' yelled a high-pitched voice. 'Faugh! Why do hermits live in such dark and inaccessible places?' Into the cave waddled a short, very fat monk with a sack over his shoulder. 'I've brought you some tea and barley,' he said. 'It was for the Hermitage of Far Beyond, but THEY won't want it anymore and I'm not carrying this lot back.' With a gasp of satisfaction he swung the sack from his shoulder and let it fall to the ground. Like a tired man he sank to the ground too and sat with his back propped up against a wall. How slovenly, thought the young monk, why does he not sit correctly as we do? Then the answer came to him; the other monk was too fat to sit crossed legged with any degree of comfort!

The old hermit spoke mildly, 'Well, what news, Messenger? Is the Great Outside this working?' The Messenger Monk groaned and wheezed; 'I wish you would give me something for this fat,' he said. 'They tell me at Chakpori that I have glandular trouble, but they do not give me anything to make it better.' His eyes, now adjusted to the deep gloom of the cave

after leaving the bright sunlight, glanced around. 'Oh! I see you have the Young Man here,' he said, 'I heard he was coming to you. How is he making out? As bright as they say?'

Without waiting for an answer he went on, 'Rockfall up higher a few days ago. Keeper of the Hermitage at Far Beyond got caught by a boulder and fell over the cliff. Vulture stuffing now, eh?' He went off into peals of laughter at the thought. 'Hermit in the cave died of thirst,' he went on, 'there was only the Keeper and the Perpetual Hermit and he was walled up. No water — no life, eh?'

The young monk sat silent, thinking of the solitary hermits. Strange men who had 'a call' to retire from all and every contact with the world of Man. With a monk volunteer such a 'solitary' would journey up the mountain side and find a hermitage which had been abandoned. Here he would enter an inner room which had no window. His volunteer 'Keeper' would build a wall so that the hermit would never again be able to leave the room. In the wall would be just one small opening large enough to take a bowl. Through this opening, once every two days, would be passed a bowl of water from a nearby mountain spring, and just a handful of grain. Not a single chink of light would ever enter the hermit's room so long as he lived. Never again would he speak or be spoken to. Here, for as long as he lived, he would remain in contemplation, freeing the astral body from the physical and journeying far in the astral planes.

No illness, no change of mind would secure his release. Only death would do that. Outside the sealed room the Keeper would live and have his own existence, always being sure that no sound reached the immured hermit. Should the Keeper fall ill and die, or should he fall over the cliff, then the hermit must die too, usually of thirst. In that very small room, unheated no matter how severe the winter, the hermit would have his being. A bowl of cold water every two days. Cold water, never warmed, no tea, just the coldest of cold water from the spring which ran direct from the icy mountain slopes. No hot food. One handful of barley every two days. At first the pangs of hunger would be terrible as the stomach shrank. The pangs of

thirst would be worse. The body would become dehydrated, almost brittle. Muscles would waste away through lack of food, water, and exercise. The normal body functions would almost cease as less water and less food were taken. But the hermit would never leave the room, all that had to be done, all that Nature COMPELLED him to do, would have to be done in one corner of the room where time and cold would reduce waste to frozen dust.

Sight would go. At first there would be vain strainings against the perpetual blackness. Imagination would in the early stages supply strange 'lights', almost authentic well-lit 'scenes.' The pupils would dilate and the eye-muscles atrophy so that should an avalanche destroy the roof, the sunlight would burn out the hermit's sight as surely as though he had been struck by lightning.

Hearing would become abnormally acute. Imaginary sounds would appear to float in to torment the hermit. Snatches of conversation would seem to originate in thin air and be cut off as soon as he attempted to listen. The balance would go next. He would find that he toppled over sideways, or frontways, or backwards. Soon he would hear his approach to a wall. The slightest disturbance of the air by raising an arm would sound as a wind storm. Before long he would hear his heart-beat like a mighty engine throbbing away. There would come the loud gurgling of fluids within the body, the exhalation of organs disgorging their secretions and, as his hearing became even more acute, the faint slithering of muscle tissue on muscle tissue.

The mind would play strange tricks on the body. Erotic pictures would plague the glands. The walls of the black room would seem to crowd in; the hermit would have the strongest sensation of being crushed. Breathing would become hard, labored, as the air became stale. Only every two days was the stone removed from the small gap in the inner wall so that a bowl of water, a handful of barley, and life-giving air could enter. Then it would be blocked up again.

When the body was mastered, when all the emotions had been conquered, the astral vehicle would float free like smoke

rising from a bonfire. The material body would lie supine on the littered floor and only the Silver Cord would unite the two. Through the stone walls would pass the astral. Down the precipitous paths it would wander while it savored the joys of being free from the chains of the flesh. Into lamaseries it would creep and telepathic and clairvoyant lamas would converse with it. Neither night nor day, or heat or cold could impede it, nor the stoutest doors provide an obstacle. The council chambers of the world were ever available and there was no sight nor experience which the astral travelers could not witness.

The young monk pondered on these things and then thought of the hermit lying dead in the old hermitage two thousand feet above. The fat monk was talking: 'We shall have to break down the wall and haul him out. I entered the hermitage and went to call at his food door. Faugh! The stench. He was VERY dead indeed. We cannot leave him there. I am away to Drepung to get help. Oh well, the vultures will be glad when we get him out, they LIKE their meat high and they are perching all over the hermitage screeching to get at him. Ah me, I must get on my old horse and chunter along back; I haven't the figure for these mountain jaunts.'

The fat monk waved a hand vaguely in the air and wandered off towards the cave entrance. The young monk rose stiffly to his feet, a leg injury causing him to mutter 'words' beneath his breath. Curiously he followed the departing monk out into the open. A horse was cropping leisurely at the sparse vegetation. The fat monk waddled over to him and with quite an effort got a leg over the horse's back. Slowly they moved off towards the lake where other men on horses were waiting. The young monk stood gazing at them until the whole party moved out of sight. Sighing wistfully he turned and looked up the sheer cliff towering toward the heavens. Far above the walls of the Hermitage Far Beyond gleamed white and red in the sunlight.

For a whole year, in the days of long ago, a hermit and his helper had labored mightily to build the hermitage from the stones scattered around. Levering them into place, cementing stone upon stone, and building an inner room so that no light at

all could ever enter the inmost space. For the entire year they labored until they were satisfied with the basic structure. Then came the making of limewash from local stones and applying it in a dazzling white coat. Next came the grinding of ochre and mixing it with water from the bounding nearby stream. Painting it on walls which projected over the two thousand foot precipice. Decorating it so that it would be a lasting monument to a man's piety. And all the time the hermit and his helper exchanged not a word. There came the day when the new hermitage was finished and consecrated. The hermit stood looking out over the plain of Lhasa, looking out for the last time over the world of Man. He turned slowly to enter the hermitage — and fell dead at the feet of his helper.

Throughout the years others had been hermit there. Lived there walled into the inner room, died there and been dug out of the stone room and fed to the ever-ready vultures. Now another had died there. Of thirst. Helpless. With helper gone there was no hope, no way to get vital water, nothing to do but to lie down and die. The young monk turned his gaze down from the hermitage, following the path made by the mountain rockfall. Bright grazes down the mountain side. A scar scraped right through the lichen and small scrub and gouged into the rock itself. Down where the mountain flank met the ground there was a fresh pile of rocks. Beneath the rocks a body.

Thoughtfully the young man entered the cave, picked up the can and strode off down to the lake to get fresh water. With the can freshly scoured, and filled with water, he was ready for another task. Peering around, he frowned with dismay. There were no fallen branches in sight. No more easy-to-reach twigs. He would have to go further afield in search of fuel. Into the copse he wandered. Small animals stopped their never-ending search for food to stand on hind legs and stare curiously at the invader of their domain, Here there was no fear, here animals did not fear Man for here Man lived in harmony, in sympathy, with the animals.

At last the young monk reached an area where a small tree had fallen. Breaking off the biggest branches that his young strength would permit, he turned again and dragged them one

by one back to the entrance of the cave. Fetching the can of water, he soon had tea and tsampa ready once again. The old man sipped gratefully at the hot tea. The young monk was fascinated at his manner of drinking. In Tibet all food containers such as cups and bowls are held with two hands in order that respect may be shown to the food that nourishes. The old hermit, through long practice, held the bowl with two hands so that a finger of each hand overlapped the inner edge. Should there be any danger of spilling, through not being able to see the angle of the liquid, a finger on one side would get wet and so would warn the old man. Now he sat there contentedly, greatly appreciating hot tea after decades of cold water.

‘It is strange,’ he said, ‘that after more than sixty years of sheer austerity, I now crave hot tea. I crave also the warm comforting glow brought by the fire — have you noticed how it warms the air of our cave?’

The young monk looked at him in compassion. Such little desires, so little comfort. ‘Do you never get out, Venerable One?’ he asked.

‘No, never,’ replied the hermit. ‘Here I know every stone. Here loss of sight does not trouble me greatly, but to venture outside where there are boulders and precipices — THAT is another matter! I could even walk off the bank and fall into the lake; I could leave this cave and be unable to retrace my steps.’

‘Venerable One,’ said the young monk diffidently, ‘how did you get to this remote, inaccessible cave, did you find it by chance?’

‘No, I did not,’ answered the old man. ‘When the Men from Another World finished with me they brought me here. They **MADE THIS CAVE SPECIALLY FOR ME!**’ He sat back with a satisfied smile, well knowing what an effect that would have on his listener. The young monk rocked and almost tipped over backwards, so great was his amazement. ‘MADE it for you?’ he stuttered, ‘but how could they cut such a hole as this in the mountain?’

The old man chuckled with glee. ‘Two men brought me here,’ he said, ‘they brought me on a platform that flew through

the air even as the birds fly. It was noiseless — more noiseless than the birds, because they creak; I can hear their pinions squeak as they beat the air. I can hear their feathers as the wind rustles through. THIS thing in which I came was as silent as a shadow. It rose in the air without effort, there was no draft, no sensation of speed. The two men made it alight here.’

‘But why HERE, Venerable One?’ queried the young monk.

‘Why?’ responded the old man. ‘Why? Well think of the advantages. It is a few hundred yards off the trade route and so traders come to me for advice or blessings and they pay me by providing barley. It is near the trails leading to two small lamaseries and seven hermitages. I need not starve here. I get news. Lamas call upon me, they know my mission — and they know YOURS!’

‘But, Sir,’ persisted the young monk, ‘surely it made an awful commotion when passers-by found a deep cave here where none had been before.’

‘Young man,’ chortled the hermit; ‘YOU have been about here, did you notice any caves between here and By Waters? No? There are no less than nine. You were not interested in caves and so you did not notice them.’

‘But how was this cave made by two men, it must have taken months!’ The young man was bewildered.

‘By the magic of what they called atomic science,’ answered the old hermit patiently; ‘One man sat on the flying platform and looked about in case there should be onlookers. The other held a small device in his hand, there was a roaring like hungry devils, and — so I was told — all the rock vaporized leaving this as two chambers. In my inner chamber there is a very small trickle of water which fills my bowl twice a day. Ample for my requirements, and it was so arranged as I could not visit the lake for water. If I have no barley — as has happened from time to time, I eat the lichen which grows in the inner cave. It is not pleasant, but it sustains life until I again have barley.’

The young monk rose to his feet and walked to the cave wall nearest the light of day. Yes, the rock DID look peculiar, akin to the tunnels of extinct volcanoes he had seen in the Chang Tang highlands. The rock looked as though it had been melted,

dripped, and cooled into a glass-hard surface without roughness or projections. The surface seemed transparent and through its clarity could be seen the striations of the natural rock with here and there gleaming veins of gold. At one point, he saw, the gold had melted and had started to flow down the wall as a thick syrup, then it had cooled and had been covered by the glass formed when the silicon dioxide layer had failed to crystallize during that cooling. So the cave had natural glass walls!

But there were household duties to be done; not all time was for talk. The floor had to be cleaned, water fetched, and firewood to be broken into suitable sizes. The young monk seized the sweeping branch and set to without marked enthusiasm. Housework was a bore! Carefully he swept over his sleeping place, carefully he moved toward the entrance, still sweeping. His sweeping branch struck a small mound in the floor, dislodged it, and there uncovered lay a brownish-green object. Crossly the young monk stooped to remove the intruding stone, wondering how THAT got there. He grasped the object and jumped back with an exclamation; this was not a stone, this was — what? Cautiously he peered at the thing and prodded it with a stick. It rolled over, chinking. He picked it up and hurried to the old hermit with it. ‘Venerable One!’ he called, ‘I have discovered a strange object beneath where the convict lay.’

The old man stumbled out from his inner chamber. ‘Describe it to me,’ he commanded.

‘Well,’ said the young monk, ‘it appears to be a bag as large as my two clenched fists. It is of leather or some kind of animal skin.’ He fumbled at it. ‘And there is a string round its neck. I will get a sharp stone.’ He hurried out of the cave and picked up a sharp-edged flint. Returning, he sawed at the thing around the neck of the bag. ‘Very tough,’ he commented. ‘The whole thing is slimy with damp and is covered with mildew, still, ah! I’ve cut it.’ Carefully he opened the bag and tumbled the contents on the skirt of his robe. ‘Gold coins,’ he said, ‘I have never seen money before, only pictures of it. Shiny bits of coloured glass. Wonder what THEY are for? And here are five gold rings with bits of glass stuck in them.’

‘Let me feel them,’ ordered the hermit. The young monk lifted his robe and guided his superior's hand to the little pile. ‘Diamonds,’ said the hermit. ‘Rubies — I can tell by the vibration — and. . .’ the old man fell silent as he slowly fingered the stones, the rings and the coins. At last he drew a deep breath and remarked, ‘Our convict must have stolen these things, I feel that they are Indian coins. I feel EVIL in them. They are worth a very great sum of money.’ He mused in silence for a moment and then said very abruptly, ‘Take them, take them and throw them as far as you can into the deepest part of the lake. They will bring ill if we keep them here. There is lust, murder and misery in them. Take them, Quickly!’ So saying, he turned and slowly crept back into the inner chamber. The young monk piled the things back in the leather bag and walked out of the cave towards the lake. At the water's edge he spread the things on a flat rock and examined them curiously, then taking a gold coin he held it between finger and thumb and threw it forcefully so that it skipped from wavelet to wavelet until with a final plop it sank beneath the water. Coin after coin followed. Then the rings, and the stones, until none were left.

Rinsing his hands, he turned and smiled with amusement, a large fish-eating bird had flown off with the empty bag and two other birds were following in hot pursuit. Humming a verse from the Chant to the Dead, the young monk turned about and made his way back to the cave — and housework.

But housework does not last for ever. There came the time when the young monk could put aside the well-worn twiggy branch which he used as a broom. There came the time when he could look about him appreciatively and see clean sand on the floor, a pile of wood by the low fire, the can full of water and when he could rub his hands together as a sign that HOUSEWORK for the day was finished. Now came the time when young, alert memory cells were ready to receive and store information.

The old hermit came shuffling out of the inner chamber. Even to the inexperienced gaze of the young monk the old man was visibly failing. Slowly the hermit settled himself on the ground and adjusted his lobe around him. The younger man

took the proffered bowl and filled it with cold water. Carefully he placed it beside the old one and guided his hand to the edge so that he would know the exact location. Then he too sat on the ground and waited for his senior to speak.

For a time there was no sound as the ancient man sat and marshaled his thoughts in an orderly manner. Then, after much hawking and clearing of his throat, he commenced. 'The female slept, and then I slept. But I did not sleep for long. She was snoring horribly and my head was throbbing. It felt as though my brain was swelling and trying to push off the top of my skull. There came a pounding in the blood vessels of my neck and I felt upon the verge of collapse. There came a change in the tempo of snores, the sound of a foot shuffling, and abruptly, with a remarkable exclamation, the female leaped to her feet and rushed to my side. There came the sound of tinkles and clinks and a different rhythm in the rushing of the fluids circling within me. In a moment or two the pulsing in my brain ceased. The pressure in my neck ended and the cut bone edges jarred and thrummed no longer.

'The female bustled about moving things, making glass clink against glass and metal against metal. I heard her creak as she bent to pick up the fallen book. Some article of furniture squealed as it was pushed along the floor to a new position. Then she moved to the wall and I heard the slither and slight clang as the door was slid shut behind her. There came the sound of her footsteps diminishing down the corridor. I lay there and thought of all that had happened to me. I HAD to lie there, because I could not move! Definitely something had been done to my brain; I was more alert. I could think more clearly. Previously there had been many woolly thoughts which, because I had been unable to bring them into sharp focus, I had pushed to somewhere in the obscure background of my mind. Now, ALL thoughts were as clear as the waters of a mountain stream.

'I remembered being born. My first sight of the world into which I had then been precipitated. The face of my mother. The wizened face of the old woman helping at the birth. Later, my father handling me, the new-born baby, as though he were

afraid of me — the first new-born baby he had seen. I remembered his alarmed expression and his concern at the sight of such a red and wrinkled face. Then scenes of early childhood came to me. Always it had been my parents' desire to have a son who would become a priest and bring honour to the family. School, and a whole crowd of us sitting upon the floor practising writing upon slabs of slate. The monk-teacher going from one to another giving praise or reprimands and to me saying that as I did well I should stay longer so that I might learn more than my companions.

‘My memory was complete. I could recall with ease pictures which had appeared in magazines brought by the Indian traders, and pictures which I did not even know that I had seen. But memory is a two-edged instrument; I recalled in all detail torture at the hands of the Chinese. Because I had been seen carrying papers from the Potala the Chinese had assumed that they were State secrets and so had kidnapped me and tortured me to make me reveal them. Me, just a humble priest whose most secret knowledge was of how much the lamas ate!

‘The door slid open with metallic sibilance. Immersed in my thoughts I had not noticed approaching footsteps along the corridor. A voice asked, “How are you now?” and I felt my captor standing by my side. As he spoke he busied himself with the strange applets to which I was connected. “How are you now?” he asked again.

‘“Fair,” I replied, “but unhappy at all the strange things which have happened to me. I feel like a sick yak in the market square!” He laughed and turned away to a far side of the room. I could hear the rustle of paper, the unmistakable sound of pages being turned.

‘“Sir!” I said, ‘what is an Admiral? I am greatly puzzled. And what is an Adjutant?’”

‘He set down a heavy book, or at least it sounded like a book, and came over to me. “Yes,” he replied, with compassion in his voice, “I suppose from your point of view we HAVE treated you rather badly.” He moved, and I heard him draw up one of those strange metal seats. As he sat upon it it creaked alarmingly. “An Admiral,” he said amusingly. “Well, it is quite an ex-

planation and one which you will have later, but let us assuage your immediate curiosity. You are on a vessel which travels through space, the SEA of space we call it, because at the speed at which we travel the sparse matter in space is encountered so rapidly that it feels like a sea of water. Do you follow?" he asked.

'I thought about it and — yes — I followed by thinking of our Happy River and the skin boats which traversed it. "Yes, I do," I responded. "Well then," he continued, "our ship is one of a group. This is the most important of them. Each ship — including this — has a captain, but an Admiral is, let us say, a captain of all the captains. Our term for that is 'Admiral'. Now, in addition to our space sailors, we have soldiers aboard and it is usual to have a very senior soldier-officer to act as 'assistant' to the Admiral. We call such an assistant an Adjutant. To refer it to your own terms, an abbot has a chaplain, one who does all the general work while leaving the great decisions to his senior.'

"That was clear enough for me; I was just pondering the matter when my captor bent lower and WHISPERED: "And PLEASE do not refer to me so much as your CAPTOR. I am the senior surgeon of this ship. Again, in your own terms of reference — I am akin to the senior medical lama of Chakpori. You call me Doctor, not Captor!" It really amused me to know that even such great men had their foibles. A man such as he being distressed that an ignorant savage (as he had termed me) called him "Captor". I resolved to humour him, so I replied meekly, "Yes, Doctor." My reward was that of a most gratified look and a pleasant nod of his head.

'For some time he was intent upon certain instruments which appeared to be connected to my head. Many adjustments were made, fluid flows varied, and strange things which left a tingling to my scalp. After some time he said, "You will rest for three days. By that time the bones will have knit and forced-healing will be well under way. Then, provided you are as well as we hope, we shall take you back to the Council Chamber and show you many things. I do not know if the Admiral will want to speak to you, if he does, fear not. Just speak to him as you

would to me.” As an afterthought, he added, ruefully, “Or rather more politely!” He gave me a light pat on the shoulder, and left the room.

‘I lay there, immobile, thinking of my future. Future? What future was there for a blind man? What should I do if I ever left this place alive, or did I even WANT to leave alive? Should I have to beg for my living like the beggars who swarmed at the Western Gate? Most of them were fakes, anyway. I wondered where I would live, where I should obtain food. Ours was a hard climate and was no place for a man who had no home – nowhere to rest his head. I worried and exhausted by all the events and the worries, I fell into a fitful sleep. From time to time I sensed the sliding door open and the presence of people who came maybe to see that I was yet alive. Clicks and tinkles failed to more than rouse me from the threshold of sleep. There was no way in which I could compute the passage of time. In normal conditions we used our heartbeats to mark the elapsing of minutes, but this was hours, and hours during which I was not conscious.

‘After what seemed to be a long interval, during which I appeared to hover between the world of material and spirit, I was rudely roused to a state of quick awareness. Those fearful females had again descended upon me like vultures upon a corpse. Their giggling chatter offended me. Their lewd liberties with my defenseless body offended me more. Yet I could not speak their language, I could not even move. A marvel it was to me that females such as these, members of the so-called weaker sex, could have such hard hands and harder emotions. I was emaciated, frail, and in remarkably poor condition, yet these females moved me around as callously as though I were a block of stone. Lotions were daubed upon me, foul smelling unguents were rubbed into my shrinking skin, and tubes were snatched from my nostrils and other locations and were as roughly replaced. I shuddered in spirit and wondered anew what devilish stroke of fate had decreed that I should endure such humiliations. . . .

‘With the departure of the offensive females peace came upon me for but a short time. Then the door slid open again

and my captor, no, I must remember to say, “the doctor”, entered and closed the door after him. “Good morning, you are awake, I see,” he said pleasantly.

“Yes, Sir Doctor,” I replied somewhat grumpily, “there is no possibility of sleep when those chattering females descend upon me like a plague!” That seemed to amuse him greatly. By now, presumably because he was beginning to know me better, he was treating me more like a human, although a half-witted human. “We have to use those nurses,” he said, “so that you will be looked after, kept clean, and smelling sweetly beautiful. You have been powdered, perfumed, and prepared for another day of rest.”

‘Rest! REST! I wanted no rest, I wanted to get out. But where was there for me to go? As the doctor stood there examining the site of the operation on my skull, I thought anew of all that he had told me, when was it? Yesterday? Or the day before that? I did not know. I DID know that one thing puzzled me very greatly. “Sir Doctor,” I said, “you told me that I was on a vessel of space. Is my understanding correct?”

“Of course it is,” he replied. “You are aboard the flagship of this supervisory fleet. Now we are resting upon a mountainous plateau in the Highlands of Tibet. Why?”

“Sir!” I answered, “when I was in that chamber before all those astonishing people, I saw that we were in a vast STONE chamber; how can a STONE chamber be on this vessel?”

‘He laughed as though I had made the greatest joke. Recovering, he said, amid chuckles, “You are alert, very alert. And you are correct. This rocky plateau upon which this vessel rests was formerly a volcano. There are deep passages and immense chambers through which, in ages long gone, molten lava flowed and spewed forth. We use those passages, and we have increased the volume of those chambers for our own purposes. We use this site extensively — different ships use it from time to time. You were taken from the ship and into a rock chamber.”

‘Taken from the ship into a rock chamber! That accounted for the strange impression I had received, an impression of leaving a metal corridor for a rock chamber. “Sir Doctor,” I

exclaimed, "I know of tunnels and rock chambers; there is a large concealed chamber within Potala Mountain, it has a lake as well."

' "Yes," he remarked, "our geophysical photographs have shown it to us. We did not know that you Tibetans had discovered it, though!" He went on with his fiddling — I was very aware that he was making changes to the fluids coursing through the tubes and into my body. An alteration in my body temperature became apparent and without my conscious volition my breathing became slower and deeper; I was being manipulated like a puppet in the market place.

' "Sir Doctor!" I remarked eagerly, "your vessels of space are known to us, we term them The Chariots of the Gods. Why do you not make contact with our leaders? Why do you not declare your presence openly? Why do you have surreptitiously to abduct such as I?"

'There was a sharp indrawing of breath and a pause before he finally replied, "Well, ah, er, I mean to say," he stammered, "if I tell you the reason it will merely evoke in you those most caustic remarks which are good for neither of us.'

' "No, Sir Doctor," I replied, "I am your prisoner even as I was the prisoner of the Chinese, I cannot afford to provoke you. I am trying in my uncivilized way to understand things — which presumably is also your desire."

'He shuffled around with his feet and clearly was deciding what was best to do. Coming to a decision, he said, "We are the Gardeners of the Earth, and, of course, of many other inhabited worlds. A gardener does not discuss his identity or plans with his flowers. Or, to elevate matters a little, if a yak-herder finds a yak who appears brighter than average the herder still does not go up to him and command, 'take me to your Leader.' Nor does the herder discuss with the intelligent yak matters which clearly are beyond the yak's comprehension. It is not our policy to fraternize with the natives of any of the worlds we supervise. We did that in eons past and it brought disaster to all and gave rise to fantastic legends in your own world."

'I sniffed in anger and disdain; 'First you say I am an uncivilized savage, and now you call me, or liken me, to a yak.' I

expostulated. “Then if I am so low — WHY DO YOU KEEP ME PRISONER HERE?” His reply was sharp: “Because we are making use of you. Because you have a fantastic memory which we are increasing. Because you are going merely to be a repository of knowledge for one who will come to you almost at the end of your life. Now sleep!” I heard, or sensed, a click, and then a wave of black unconsciousness fell softly upon me.

CHAPTER SIX

‘THE endless hours dragged wearily by. I lay in a stupor, a daze in which reality was not and in which the past, the present, and the future were rolled into one. My past life, my impotent state wherein I could neither move nor see, and my dreadful fear for my future after I got out of “here” — if indeed I did. From time to time females came and did quite amazing things to me. My limbs were twisted and flexed, my head was rotated and all portions of my anatomy were squeezed, pinched, pummelled and kneaded. From time to time groups of men came in and stood around me while they discussed me. I could not understand them, of course, but the inference was clear, Then too, they would stick things in me but I denied them the satisfaction of seeing me wince at the sharp prick. I drifted, drifted.

‘There came the time when I was alert once more. I had been drowsing, somnolent as for unknown hours before. Although aware of the sliding open of the door of the room, I was not disturbed by it. I was withdrawn, feeling as though embedded in layers of wool and not caring what happened to anyone, not even to myself. Suddenly there came a series of sharp tearing pains all around my skull. I was prodded and poked and a voice said in my own language, “Ah well, let us revive him!” A subdued buzz of which I was conscious only when it ceased, was terminated with a faint click. Immediately I felt alert, alive, and tried to sit up. Again I was frustrated, my most violent efforts produced no movement at all in my limbs. “He is with us again,” said a voice. “Hey! Can you hear us?” asked another.

‘“Yes, I can,” I replied, “but how is it that you are speaking

Tibetan? I thought that only Sir Doctor could communicate with me.” There was a subdued laugh; “you are using OUR language,” was the reply. “You will now understand everything that is said to you.”

‘Another voice broke in, in an aside, “What do you call him?” One whom I recognized to be the doctor answered, “Call him? OH! We have no name for him, I just say ‘you’.”

‘ “The Admiral requires that he have a name,” asserted another, “decide how he is to be addressed.” A quite animated discussion took place during which many names were suggested. Some of them were VERY insulting and indicated that to these men I enjoyed less status than that which we afforded yaks, or the vultures which fed upon the dead. Eventually, when the comments were becoming too ribald, the doctor stated: “Let us end this, the man is a monk. Let us therefore refer to him as that and call him ‘Monk’.” There was a moment of silence, and then spontaneous noises made with the hands and which I rightly took to be applause. “Very well,” said a voice which I had not previously heard, “carried unanimously; henceforth he shall bear the cognomen of Monk. Let it be so recorded.”

‘A desultory discussion followed, one in which I had no interest as it appeared that these men were discussing the virtues and lack of virtues of various of the females and appraising the degree of ease with which they could be had. Certain of their anatomical allusions were completely beyond my comprehension, so I made no attempt to follow the trend of discussion but contented myself with visualizing in my mind their probable appearance. Some of the men were small and some of them were very large. Now that was a very strange thing and one which puzzled me exceedingly for as far as I knew there were no peoples on Earth who possessed features and size ranges such as these men possessed.

‘I was jerked back to the present by a sudden shuffling of feet and by what appeared to be the sliding back of those strange seats. The men stood up and one by one left the room. At last there was one only remaining, the doctor. “Later,” he said, “we shall take you again to the Council Chamber, the one inside the

mountain. Do not be nervous, there is nothing to fear, Monk, it will be strange to you, but you will not be harmed.” So saying, he too left the room and I was alone with my thoughts again. For some extraordinary reason one particular scene kept presenting itself to my shuddering memory. I was tied spread-eagle fashion against a wall. One of the Chinese torturers approached me with a fiendish smile and said, “One last chance to tell us what we want, or I will pluck out your eyes.”

‘I replied, “I am a poor, simple monk, and I have nothing to tell.” With that the Chinese torturer thrust a finger and thumb hard into the corners of my left eye and the eye popped out like the stone from a plum. It hung dangling on my cheek. The pain of the distorted vision was terrible; the right eye, as yet intact, looked straight ahead, the left eye, swaying and dangling on my cheek, looked straight down. The mental impressions were terrible. Then, with a quick jerk, the Chinaman tore the eye free and threw it in my face before giving the same treatment to the right.

‘I remembered how at last satiated with their orgy of torture, they had thrown me out on a garbage heap. But I was not dead, as they believed, the coolness of the night had revived me and I had wandered off, blindly, stumbling, until at last some "sense" had led me from the Chinese Mission grounds, and eventually out of the City of Lhasa. With such thoughts I lost all track of time, and it was somewhat of a relief when at last men came to my room. Now I could understand what was said. A special lifting device, something with the strange name of Antigravity, was positioned over my table and “switched on”. The table rose into the air and men guided it through the doorway and into the corridor beyond. It seemed that although the table now had no apparent weight, it still had inertia and momentum, although that meant nothing to me! Care was still needed that no damage should take place. That DID matter to me.

‘Carefully the table and associated equipment was towed or pushed down the metal corridor with its distorted echoes and out of the vessel of space. We came into the great rock chamber again and there was about me the sounds of a great concourse of people reminding me of the forecourt of the Cathedral of Lhasa

in happier days. My table was moved along and at last was swung about and lowered the few inches to the floor. To my side came a person who whispered, "The Surgeon-General will be with you in a moment."

'I spoke back: "Are you not going to give me sight?" But he had gone and my request went unheeded. I lay there trying to picture in my mind all that was happening. I had just the memory of the brief glimpse I had had previously, but I greatly desired that the artificial sight would be provided.

'Familiar footsteps echoed on the rocky floor. "Ah! They have brought you safely. Do you feel all right?" asked the doctor — the Surgeon-General.

' "Sir Doctor," I replied, "I would feel much better if you would permit me to see."

' "But you are BLIND and you must get used to being blind, you will have to live a very long life in that state."

' "But, Sir Doctor!" I said in some considerable exasperation, "HOW am I to learn and memorize all these wonders which you promised I would SEE if you will not provide me with that artificial sight?"

' "Leave it to us," he answered, "WE will ask the questions and give the orders, YOU just do as you are told."

'There now came upon the crowd around me a hush, not a silence, for there cannot be a silence where people are congregated. In the hush I could distinguish very sharp footsteps which ceased abruptly. "Be seated!" commanded a curt, military voice. There was a relaxed rustling, the rustling of stiff cloth, the creak of leather, and the shuffling of many feet. A scraping sound as though one of those strange seats had been pushed back. The sound of a man rising to his feet. A tense, expectant hush pervaded the place for a second or so and then the voice spoke.

' "Ladies and Gentlemen," carefully enunciated this deep, mature Voice, "our Surgeon-General considers that this native is now sufficiently recovered in health, and indoctrinated, so that he may without undue risk be prepared with the Knowledge of the Past. There is a risk, of course, but we must face it. If the creature dies, then we must again resume the

tedious search for another. This native is in poor condition physically; let us therefore hope that his will is strong and his hold on life firm.” I felt my flesh creep at this callous disregard of MY feelings, but the Voice went on:

‘ “There are those among us who consider that we should use only written Records revealed to some Messiah or Saint whom we have placed upon this world for that purpose, but I say that these Records have in the past been given a superstitious reverence which has nullified their benefits because they have so often been misconstrued, misinterpreted. The natives have not sought the meaning contained within the writings but have taken their face value alone, and often falsely interpreted face value at that. Frequently it has harmed their development and has set up an artificial caste system under which certain of the natives assume that THEY have been chosen by Higher Powers to teach and preach that which was NOT written.

‘ “They have no real conception of us of outer space. Our patrol ships, when sighted, are deemed to be various natural celestial objects or mere hallucination on the part of the beholders who are therefore mocked and their sanity is frequently questioned. They believe that Man is made in the image of God and therefore there cannot be life greater than Man. They have the firm conviction that this puny world is the ONLY source of life, not knowing that the inhabited worlds are greater in number than the grains of sand upon this whole world, and that their world is one of the smallest and most insignificant.

‘ “They believe that THEY are the Masters of Creation and all the animals of the world are theirs to prey upon. Yet their own life-span is but the twinkling of an eye. Compared to us, they are as the insect which lives for but a day and has to be born, grow to adulthood, mate, and mate again, and die all within hours. Our average life-span is five thousand years, theirs a few decades. And all this, ladies and gentlemen, has been brought about by their peculiar beliefs and by their tragic misconceptions. For this reason they have been ignored by us in the past, but now our Wise Ones say that in the span of half a century these natives will discover some of the secrets of the atom. They may thereby blow up their little world. Dangerous

radiations may escape into space and constitute a threat of pollution.

‘ “As most of you know, the Wise Ones have decreed that a suitable native be caught — we have caught this one — and his brain be treated whereby he may remember all we are going to teach him. He will be so conditioned that he can reveal this ONLY to one whom we shall in due time place upon this world with the task of telling all who will listen to the facts and not the fancies of others in worlds beyond this small universe. This native, a male, has been specially prepared and will be the recipient of the message which has to be transmitted later to another. The strain will be very great, he may not live through it, so let us all think strength to him for if his life ends upon this table, then we have again to commence our search for another, and that, as we have found, is tedious.

‘ “A crewmember has protested that we should take a native from a more developed country, one who enjoys high standing among his fellows, but we believe that that would be a false move; to indoctrinate such a native and let him loose among his fellows would be to ensure his immediate discreditment among others of his kind, and would seriously delay our programme. You, all of you who are here, are going to be permitted to witness this recall of the Past. It is rare indeed, so remember you are being favoured above others.”

‘No sooner had this Great One ceased to speak before there came a strange strange rustling and creaking. And then a Voice but WHAT a Voice! It sounded unhuman, it sounded neither male nor female. Hearing it I felt my hair rise and little pimples form on my flesh. “As Senior Biologist, responsible neither to the navy nor the army,” rasped this most unpleasant Voice, “I desire to put on record my disapproval of these proceedings. My full report will be forwarded to Headquarters in due course. I now demand to be heard here.” There seemed to be a sort of resigned gasp from all those assembled. There was for a moment much fidgeting and then the first speaker rose to his feet. “As Admiral of this fleet,” he remarked drily, “I am in charge of this supervisory expedition no matter what specious arguments emanate from our disgruntled senior biologist.

However, let us hear once again the arguments of the opposition. You may continue, Biologist!"

'Without a word of thanks, without the usual formal salutation, the drawling rasping voice continued: "I protest at the waste of time. I protest that we should use any more endeavours on these faulty creatures. In the past, when a race of them were unsatisfactory — they were exterminated and the planet re-seeded. Let us save time and work and exterminate them now before they pollute space."

'The Admiral broke in, "And have you any specific suggestion as to WHY they are faulty, Biologist?"

' "Yes, I have," the Biologist remarked angrily. "The females of the species are faulty. Their fertility mechanism is at fault, their auras do not conform to that which was planned. We caught one recently from what is referred to as one of the better areas of this world. She screeched and fought when we removed the clothing with which she was swathed. And when we inserted a probe into her body to analyze her secretions — she became first hysterical and then unconscious. Later, conscious again, she saw some of my assistants and the sight deprived her of her sanity, or such of it as she possessed. We had to destroy her and all our days of work were lost." '

The old hermit ceased to speak and took a sip of water. The young monk sat almost stupefied with horror at the strange things he had heard, at the strange things which had happened to his superior. Some of the descriptions were in a strange way FAMILIAR. He could not say how, but the hermit's remarks evoked strange stirrings, stirrings as though suppressed memories were being revived. As though the hermit's remarks were indeed a catalyst. Carefully, without spilling a drop, the ancient man set his bowl of water by his side, folded his hands together, and resumed . . .

'I was upon that table, I heard and understood every word. All fear, all uncertainty left me. I would show these people how a priest of Tibet could live, or die. My natural rashness constrained me to utter, loudly, "See, Sir Admiral, your Biologist is less civilized than we, for WE do not kill even those who might be termed inferior animals. WE are the civilized ones!" For a moment the whole of Time stood still. Even the breath-

ing of those about me seemed to stop. Then, to my profound amazement and indeed shock, there came spontaneous applause and not a few laughs. People smacked their hands together which I understood was a sign of approval among them. People uttered cries of delight, and some technician near me bent and muttered, “Good for you, Monk, good for you. Now say no more, do not chance your luck!”

‘The Admiral spoke, saying, “The native Monk has spoken. He has demonstrated to my satisfaction that he is indeed a sentient creature and fully capable of completing the task allotted to him. And, er, I fully endorse his remarks and will embody them in my own report to the Wise Ones.” The Biologist snapped out sharply: “I will withdraw from the experiment.” With that, the creature — he, she, or it — made a very noisy withdrawal from the rock chamber. There was a collective sigh of relief; obviously the Senior Biologist was not a person in great favour. The murmur died down in response to some manual admonition which I could not see. There came a slight shuffling of feet and the rustling of paper. The air of expectancy was almost tangible.

‘“Ladies and gentlemen,” came the voice of the Admiral, “now that we have disposed of objections and interruptions I propose to say a few words for the benefit of those of you who are fresh to this Supervisory Station. Some of you have heard rumours, but rumours are never reliable. I am going to tell you what will happen, what it is all about, that you may the better appreciate the events in which you will soon participate.

‘“The people of this world are developing a technology which, unless checked, may well destroy them. In the process they will so contaminate space that other infant worlds in this group could adversely be affected. We must prevent that. As you well know, this world and others in this group are our testing grounds for different types of creatures. As with plants, that which is not cultivated is a weed; in the animal world one can have thoroughbreds or scrubs. The humans of this world are becoming of the latter category. We, who seeded this world with humanoid stock, must now ensure that our other stock on other worlds is not endangered.

‘“We have before us here a native of this world. He is from a

sub-division of a country which is named Tibet. It is a theocracy, that is, it is ruled by a leader who places greater importance in the adherence to a religion than he does to politics. In this country there is no aggression. No one fights for the lands of another. Animal life is not taken except by the lower orders who almost always without exception are native of other countries. Although their religion appears fantastic to us, yet they live it completely and do not molest others, nor do they force their beliefs on others. They are most peaceful and require a very great amount of provocation before they will resort to violence. It was therefore thought that here we could find a native with a phenomenal memory which we could even increase. A native in whom we could implant knowledge which has to be passed on to another whom we shall later place upon this world.

‘ “Some of you may wonder why we cannot tell our representative direct. We cannot do it with complete satisfaction as it leads to omissions and aberrations. It has been tried on a number of occasions but never has it been as we wished it to be. As you will later see, we tried it with fair success with a man whom the earthlings named Moses. But even with him it was not COMPLETE and errors and misunderstandings were prevalent. Now, in spite of our respected Senior Biologist, we are going to try this system which has been worked out by the Wise Ones.

‘ “Just as their superb scientific skill millions of earth-years ago perfected the faster than light drive, so have they also perfected a method whereby the Akashic Record itself can be tapped. In this system the person who is within the special apparatus will see all that happened in the past. So far as his impressions will tell him, he will actually LIVE all those experiences; he will SEE and HEAR precisely as though he were living in those long bygone days. To him HE WILL BE THERE! A special extension direct from his brain will enable each one of us vicariously to participate. He — you — or should I say ‘we’ — shall to all intents and purposes cease to exist in this time and will, so far as our feelings, sight, hearing and emotions are concerned, be transferred to those ages past whose actual life

and happenings we shall be experiencing just as here, now, we have been experiencing ship-board life, or life aboard small patrol ships, or working in this world far below the surface in our subterranean laboratories.

‘“I do not pretend to understand fully the principles involved. Some of you here know far more of the subject than I, that is why you are here. Others, with different duties will know less than I and it is to them to whom I have been addressing these remarks. Let us remember that we too have some regard for the sanctity of life. Some of you may regard this native of Earth as just another laboratory animal, but as he has demonstrated, he has his feelings. He has intelligence and — remember this well — to us at present, he is the most valuable creature upon this world. That is why he is here. Some have queried, ‘But how will stuffing this creature with knowledge save the world?’ The answer is that it will not.”

‘The Admiral made a dramatic pause. I could not see him, naturally, but I assumed that others also experienced the tension which was overwhelming me. Then he continued, “This world is very sick. WE know it is sick. We do not know why. We are trying to find out why. Our task is first to recognize that a state of sickness exists. Second, we must convince the humans here that they are sick. Third, we must induce in them a desire to be cured. Fourth, we must discover precisely what is the nature of the illness. Fifth, we must evolve a curative agent, and six, we must persuade the humans to do that which will effect the cure. The sickness is connected with the aura. Yet we cannot discover why. Another must come, must be not of this world — for can a blind man see the ailment of his fellows when he too is blind?”

‘That remark gave me quite a jolt. It seemed to me to be contradictory; I was blind, yet I was being chosen for this work. But no, no, I was not; I was merely to be the repository of certain knowledge. Knowledge which would enable another to function according to pre-arranged plan. But the Admiral was again speaking.

‘“Our native, when he is prepared by us, when we have finished with him, will be taken to a place where he can live out

the days of a (to him) very long life. He will not be able to die until he has passed on his knowledge. For his years of blindness and solitude he will have inner peace and the knowledge that he will be doing much for his world. But now we will have a final check on the native's condition and then we will commence."

'Now there was considerable, but ordered, bustle. I sensed people moving swiftly about. My table was grasped, raised, and moved forward. There came the by now familiar tinkle and chink as glassware and metal came into contact. The Surgeon-General came to me and whispered: "How are you now?"

'I hardly knew HOW I was or WHERE I was, so I merely responded by saying, "That which I have heard has not made me feel any better. But do I still have no sight? How am I to experience these wonders if you will not give me sight once again?"

' "Just relax," he whispered soothingly, "everything will be all right. You will see in the best possible way at the right moment."

'He paused a moment while some other person came and addressed a remark to him, then continued, "This is what will happen. We shall draw upon your head that which to you will appear to be a hat made of wire mesh. It will appear cold until you become accustomed to it. Then we shall put upon your feet articles which you may interpret as wire sandals. We already have wires going to your arms. You will first experience some strange and quite possibly uncomfortable tingling, but that will soon pass and you will have no further physical discomfort. Rest assured that we will take every possible care of you. This means a very great deal to all of us. We all want it to be a great success; there is too much to lose for it to be a failure."

' "Yes," I muttered, "I stand to lose more than any, I stand to lose my life!"

'The Surgeon-General stood up and turned away from me. "Sir!" he said in a very official tone of voice, "the native has been examined and is now ready. Permission requested to proceed."

' "Permission granted," replied the grave voice of the

Admiral. "Proceed!" There came a sharp click and a muttered exclamation. Hands grasped me behind the neck and raised my head. Other hands pulled what seemed to be a metal bag of soft wire over my head, over my face and then they fumbled beneath my chin. There were three strange pops and the metal bag was tightly over me and fastened around my neck. The hands moved away. Other hands meanwhile were at my feet. Some strange, greasy evil-smelling lotion was rubbed in and then two metal bags were pulled around my feet. I was not at all used to having my feet thus constrained and it was truly most unpleasant. Yet there was nothing I could do. The air of expectancy, of tenseness, was growing.'

In the cave the old hermit suddenly toppled over backwards. For a long moment the young monk sat in petrified horror, then galvanized into action by the emergency, he jumped to his feet and scabbled beneath a rock for the special medicine placed there in preparation for just such an occurrence. Wrenching out the stopper with hands which shook somewhat, he dropped to his knees beside the old man and forced a few drops of the liquid between his slack lips. Very carefully, so as not to spill a single drop, he replaced the stopper and laid aside the container. Cradling the hermit's head on his lap he gently stroked the old man's temples.

Gradually a faint trace of colour returned. Gradually there came signs that he was recovering. At last, quaveringly, the old hermit put out his hand and said, 'Ah! You are doing very well, my boy, you are doing very well. I must rest awhile.'

'Venerable One,' said the young monk, 'just rest here, I will make you some hot tea, we have a little sugar and butter left.' Tenderly he placed his folded blanket under the old man's head and rose to his feet. 'I will put the water on to boil,' he said, reaching for the can which was yet half full of water.

It was strange, out in the cold air, to reflect upon the marvellous things he had heard. Strange, because so much of it was . . . FAMILIAR. Familiar, but forgotten. It was like waking from a dream, he thought, only this time memories were flooding back instead of fading away as does a dream. The fire was aglow. Quickly he tossed on handfuls of small twigs. Dense

blue clouds rose and billowed in the air. A vagrant breeze swirling around the mountainside twisted a tendril of smoke over the young monk and sent him back reeling and coughing and with eyes streaming. Recovered, he carefully placed the can in the heart of the now bright fire. Turning, he re-entered the cave to make sure that the hermit was recovering.

The old man was lying on his side, obviously very much better in health. 'We will have some tea and a little barley,' he said, 'and then we shall rest until the morrow, for I must conserve my waning strength lest I fail and leave my task uncompleted.' The young monk dropped to his knees beside his elder and looked down at the thin, wasted form.

'It shall be as you say, Venerable One,' he remarked, 'I came in to make sure that you were all right, now I will fetch the barley and see about making the tea.' He rose swiftly and moved to the end of the cave to get the sparse supplies. Gloomily he looked at the small amount of sugar left in the bottom of the bag. Even more gloomily he examined the remnants of the butter block. Of tea there was an adequate supply, it had merely to be knocked off the brick and the worst of the twigs and leaves picked out. The barley, too, was in sufficient supply. The young monk resolved to do without sugar and without butter so that the Old One should have enough.

Outside the cave the water was bubbling merrily in the can. The young monk dropped in the tea and stirred it vigorously and then added a small lump of borax to make it taste better. By now the light of day was fading, the sun was setting fast. There was much work to be done yet, though. More firewood had to be fetched, more water, and he had not been out all day for any exercise. Turning, he hastened back into the dimming cave. The old hermit was sitting up and waiting for his tea. Sparingly he sprinkled a little barley in his bowl, dropped in a small pat of butter, and then held out the bowl for the young monk to fill it up with tea. 'This is more luxury than I have had in more than sixty years,' he exclaimed. 'I think I can be forgiven for having something hot after all these years. I could never manage a fire alone, tried it just once and set my robe on fire. Yes, I have a few scars on my body from those flames, but

they healed. Took many weeks, but they healed. Oh well, that comes of trying to pamper oneself!' He sighed heavily, and sipped the tea.

'You have one advantage, Venerable One,' laughed the young monk. 'Light and dark mean nothing to you. In this darkness I have just upset my tea through not being able to see it.'

'Oh !' exclaimed the old man, 'here — have mine.'

'No, no, Venerable One,' replied the young man affectionately, 'we have plenty. I will just pour myself some more.' For a time they sat in companionable silence until the tea was all gone, then the young monk rose to his feet and said 'I will now go and get more water and firewood, may I take your bowl that I may clean it?' Into the now empty water-can went the two bowls as the younger man made his way out of the cave. The old hermit sat erect, waiting, just waiting as he had waited for many decades past.

The sun had now set. Only the upper peaks of the mountains were still bathed in golden light, light which turned to purple even as the young monk watched. Deep in the shadowed flanks of the mountain range small specks of light appeared one by one. The butter lamps of far distant lamaseries gleaming through the cold clear air of the Plain of Lhasa. The shadowed outline of Drepung Lamasery loomed like a walled city lower down the valley. Here, on the mountain side itself the young man could look out over the City, the lamaseries, and watch the gleaming Happy River. Far away on the other side the Potala and Iron Mountain were still imposing in spite of the apparent diminution of size through the great distance.

But there was no time to waste! The young monk scolded himself in shocked surprise at his dilatoriness and hastened off along the darkening path to the edge of the lake. Quickly he washed and scoured the two bowls and the water-can. Hastily he scooped the can full of clean water and set off along the path back, dragging with him the large branch which previously he had been too laden to handle. Stopping for a moment to regain his breath, for the branch was very large and heavy, he looked back towards the mountain pass leading to India. There glowed

afar the flickering light which must denote a caravan of traders encamped for the night. No trader ever traveled by night. The young man's heart leaped, tomorrow the traders would wend their slow way along the mountain trail and would no doubt make their camp at the lakeside before going on to Lhasa the day after. Tea! Butter! The young man grinned to himself and took up his burden renewed.

'Venerable One!' he called as he entered the cave with the water. 'There are traders on the pass. Tomorrow we may have butter, sugar. I will keep close watch for them.'

The old man chuckled as he remarked, 'Yes, but for now – we sleep.' The young man helped him to his feet and placed his hand on the wall. Shakily he went off to the inner compartment.

The young monk lay down and scooped the depression for his hip bone. For some time he lay there thinking of all that he had heard. Was it TRUE that humans were weeds? Just experimental animals? No, he thought, some of us are doing our best in very difficult circumstances and our hardships were to encourage us—to do better and climb upwards, for there is always room at the top! So thinking, he fell into a sound sleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE young monk turned over and shivered. Sleepily he rubbed his eyes and sat up. The entrance to the cave was a dim grey blur against the blackness of the interior. There was a sharp sting to the air. Quickly the young man put his robe about him and hastened to the entrance. Here the air was cold indeed, with the wind moaning through the trees and making the leaves rustle. Small birds nestled close to the trunks on the lee side. The surface of the lake was roiled and turbulent, with wind-driven waves pounding against the banks and making the reeds bow down in protest against the force.

The new-born day was grey and troubled. Sweeping black clouds billowed over the mountain ridge and swept down the slopes like sheep being hounded along by the dogs of heaven. The mountain passes became hidden in clouds as black as the rock itself. Still the clouds came swooping down, obliterating the countryside, drowning the Plain of Lhasa in a sea of rolling fog. A sudden gust of wind, and the cloud formation swept over the young monk. So thick it was that he could no longer see the cave entrance. Nor could he see his hand placed before his face. Slightly to the left of where he stood the fire hissed and spat-tered as the moisture drops fell upon it.

Hastily he broke sticks and piled them upon the still-glowing fire and blew that the sticks would the more easily ignite. The damp wood spat and smoked and was long in waking to flame. The moaning of the wind rose to a shriek. The cloud became thicker and the violent pounding of hailstones drove the young monk to cover. The fire hissed and slowly died. Before it was quite extinguished, the young man dashed out and seized a branch which was still aflame. Quickly he dragged it to the

mouth of the cave where it was sheltered from the worst of the storm. Unhappily he dashed out again to rescue as much of the firewood as possible, firewood that now was streaming with water.

For a time he stood panting after his efforts, then removing his robe he wrung it out, expelling most of the water. Now the fog was invading the cave and the young man had to feel his way in by holding on to the rock wall. Cautiously he made his way further in until at last he collided with the great rock beneath which he was wont to sleep.

‘What is it?’ queried the voice of the old hermit.

‘Do not worry, Venerable One,’ replied the young man soothingly, ‘the clouds have descended and our fire is all but extinguished.’

‘Never mind,’ said the old man philosophically, ‘there was water before there was tea, let us therefore drink water and postpone tea and tsampa until the fire permits.’

‘Yes, Venerable One,’ responded the younger man, ‘I will see if I can rekindle a fire beneath the overhanging rock, I saved a burning branch for that purpose.’

He made his way out to the entrance. Hailstones were falling in torrents, the whole ground was covered with ice pebbles and the gloom was even more intense. There came a whip-like crack followed by the deep rumble of thunder, a rumble which echoed and re-echoed around the wide valley. From nearby came the slithering of falling rocks and the ground shook as they made their impact upon the mountain base. One of the frequent rockfalls started by the vibration of the thunder or perhaps a great rock had been split by the lightning. The young man wondered if any other hermitage had been swept aside like a feather in a gale. For a time he stood there listening, wondering if he would hear a call for help. At last he turned away and stooped over the glowing branch. Carefully he broke small pieces of twig and fed the flames anew. Dense clouds of smoke arose and were blown valley-wards by the storm, but the flames, sheltered by the rocky outcrop, grew apace.

In the cave the old hermit was shivering as the chill, wet air seeped through his thin and tattered robe. The young monk felt

his blanket, and that too was saturated. Taking the old man by the hand he led him slowly to the cave entrance and bade him sit. The younger man carefully pulled the flaming branches closer so that the Old One could feel the heat and be cheered. 'I will make some tea,' he said, 'we now have enough fire.' So saying, he hurried back into the cave for the water-can, and soon returned with it and the barley. 'I will tip out half the water,' he said, 'then we shall not have so long to wait and anyway the fire is a little small for a full can.' Side by side they sat, protected from the worst onslaughts of the elements by the rocky overhang and by the side outcropping. The cloud was thick and no bird sang nor moved.

'There will be a very hard winter,' exclaimed the old hermit.

'I am fortunate that I shall not have to endure it. When I have given all my knowledge to you I can lay down my life and shall be free to depart to the Heavenly Fields where once again I shall be able to see' He mused in silence for a moment while the young monk watched the slow steam form on the surface of the water, then he continued, 'It is hard indeed to wait all these years in total blackness, with no man to call "friend", to live alone in such poverty that even warm water seems a luxury. The ages have dragged by and I have spent a long life here in this cave, journeying no further from it than I have now journeyed to this fire. For so long have I been silent that even my voice comes forth in a veritable croak. Until you came I have had no fire, no warmth, no companionship during the storms when the thunder shook the mountains and the rocks came tumbling down, threatening to wall me in.'

The young man rose and wrapped the fire-dried blanket around his elder's thin shoulders and then turned back to the water-can, the contents of which were now bubbling merrily. Into the can went a generous lump of tea-brick. The bubbling ceased as the cold particles brought the water below the boiling point. Soon the steam rose again and into the water went the borax and the last of the sugar. The newly peeled stick was brought into energetic use, and a flat piece served as a scoop to remove the worst of the twigs and debris from the surface. Tibetan tea — China Tea — is the very cheapest form of tea

consisting of FLOOR SWEEPINGS from the better grades. It is the residue left after the women have picked the plants of all the choice leaves and thrown aside the dust. The whole is compressed into blocks, or bricks, and carried over the mountain passes to Tibet where Tibetans, who can afford nothing better, obtain the bricks by barter and use it as one of the staples of their hard existence. Borax is a necessary additive as the raw tea is so crude and rough that stomach cramps are frequent. A definite part of the ritual of tea making consists of scraping the surface clear of debris!

‘Venerable One,’ asked the young monk, ‘have you never been to the lake? Never wandered up to that large stone slab to the right of this cave?’

‘No,’ replied the hermit, ‘since I was brought into this cave by the Men from Space I have never been further away from it than this point where we now sit. Why should I? I cannot see what there is about me, I cannot travel with safety to the lake, for I might fall in. After the long years in the cave, in darkness, I find that the rays of the sun are troublesome to my flesh. When first I came here I used to feel my way to this point and be warmed by the sunlight, but now for many a long year I have remained inside. What is the weather like now?’

‘Bad, Venerable One,’ replied the young monk. ‘I can see our fire, I can see the faintest outline of a rock beyond. All else is blanketed by this greasy grey fog. The storm clouds from the mountain, a storm from India.’

Idly he examined his nails, very long they were. Uncomfortably so. Casting about he found a strip of rotten stone, burned rock flung out of the mountain by some volcanic upheaval ages ago. Energetically he rubbed the slip of rock against the nail of each finger until it was worn down to a suitable length. Toenails too, they were thick and hard. But far too long. Resignedly he hoisted up one foot and then the other until at last he had all his nails trimmed to his satisfaction.

‘You cannot see any pass?’ queried the old man. ‘Are the traders fogbound in the mountains?’

‘They most certainly are!’ exclaimed the young man. ‘They will be telling their beads. in the hope of keeping the devils

away. We shall not see the traders this day — or night — until the fog lifts. And even then the ground is covered with frozen hail It's THICK here.'

'Well, then,' answered the Old One, 'we should get on with our talk. Is there any more tea?'

'Yes, there is,' replied the young monk. 'I will fill your bowl but you must drink it quickly, for it is cooling rapidly. Here it is. I will put on some more wood.' He paused to place the bowl in the old man's outstretched hands, and rose to throw more wood on the cheering fire. 'I will fetch some more of the wood from out of the rain,' he called moving into the thick fog. Soon he returned dragging branches and twigs which he placed around the perimeter of the fire. Proximity to that heat would soon cause the steam to rise and the wood to dry. 'Well, Venerable One,' he said, seating himself near the old man, 'I'm ready to listen when you are ready to speak.'

For some minutes the old man remained silent, probably re-living in his mind those long-past days. 'It is strange,' he remarked eventually, 'to sit here as the poorest of the poor, as one poor even among the poor, and to contemplate the wonders which I have witnessed. I have experienced much, seen much, and been promised much. The Keeper of the Heavenly Fields is almost ready to welcome me in. One thing I HAVE learned — and you will do well to remember it in the years ahead, is this — THIS life is the shadow life. If we do our tasks in THIS life we shall go to the REAL life hereafter. I know that for I have seen it. But now let us continue with that which I am charged to tell you. Where was I?'

He hesitated and stopped for a moment. The young monk took the opportunity to throw more wood on the fire, Then the hermit spoke again; 'Yes, the air of tension in that rock chamber grew and grew and I was the most tense of all. Reasonably so, for all the risk was to ME! At last, when the tension had reached an almost unbearable point, the Admiral uttered a cult command. There was a movement of some technician near my head and a sudden click. Immediately I felt all the pains of Hell surge through my body; it seemed that I was swelling and was about to burst. Jagged lightning flashed across my brain, and

my empty eye-sockets felt as though filled with glowing coals. There was an intolerable wrenching, a sharp, painful snap, and I went spinning and whirling through (I felt) all eternity. Crashes, bangs, and horrendous noises accompanied me.

‘Down and down I fell, spinning and tumbling head over heels. Then I felt as though I were in a long black tube of woolly, clinging material and at the top of the tube there appeared a blood-red glow. Now the spinning ceased, and I began a slow slow ascent towards the glow. Sometimes I slid back, sometimes I halted, but always a terrible, inexorable pressure drove me on again, painfully, hesitantly, but always upward. At last I reached the source of the blood-red glow and could go no further. A skin, or membrane, or SOMETHING obstructed my passage forward. Again and again I was forced against the obstacle. Again and again I was prevented from proceeding. The pain and the terror increased. A violent surge of pain and a terrific force behind me slammed me again and again against the barrier; there was a screaming, ripping sound, and I was propelled at vast velocity through the crumbling barrier.

‘Upwards I sped until my consciousness dimmed and was extinguished by the appalling shock. There was a fading impression of falling, falling. In my brain a Voice was dinning, “Get up, get up!” Wave after wave of nausea engulfed me. Ever that forceful Voice exhorted “get up, get up!” At last, in sheer desperation, I forced open my eyes and stumbled to my feet. But no, no, I HAD no body; I was a disembodied spirit free to roam anywhere on this world. This world? What was this world? I looked about me and the strangeness of the scene grew upon me. The colours were all wrong. The grass was red and the rocks were yellow. The sky was of a greenish cast and – there were two suns! One was blue-white and the other orange. The shadows! There is no way in which to describe the shadows cast by two suns. But worse, stars were showing in the sky. In daylight. There were stars of all colours. Reds, blues, greens, amber, and even white. Nor were they scattered as were the stars to which I was accustomed; here the sky was covered with these stars as the ground is covered with stones.

‘From afar Came — NOISE, SOUNDS. By no stretch of im-

agination could I call those sounds music, yet I had no doubt that it was music. The Voice came again, cold and implacable, “MOVE, WILL yourself where you want to go.” So I thought of floating to the spot from whence there came the sounds — and I was there. On a level patch of red grass, with the purple and orange trees fringing the edge, there danced a group of young people. Some were clad in garments of startling hues, others were not clad at all. Yet these latter excited no comment. Off to one side others sat on seats on legs and played instruments which it is quite beyond my ability to describe. The noise they made is even more impossible of description! All the tones seemed to be wrong, and the beat had no meaning to me. “Go among them” commanded the Voice.

‘It suddenly occurred to me that I was floating above them, so I willed myself to a clear patch of grass and thought myself upon it. It was hot to the touch and I feared that my feet would scorch, until I remembered that I had none and was but a disembodied spirit. The latter was soon made apparent to me; a naked young female chasing a garishly-clad young man ran right through me and neither of us felt a thing. The young female caught her man and linking her arms with his, led him off behind the purple trees from the locality of which there came many screams and shouts of joy. The users of musical instruments went on misusing them, and everyone seemed to be remarkably content.

‘I rose upon the air quite without my own volition. I was directed as is a kite directed by the boy who holds the string. Higher and higher I rose until afar I could discern the glint of water — or was it water? The colour was a pale lavender which gave off flashes of gold from wave crests. The experiment had killed me, I decided, I am in Limbo, in the Land of the Forgotten People. No world could have such colours, such strange strange things. “No!” muttered that inexorable Voice in my brain, “the experiment was a success. You will have a commentary now on all that happens that you may be the better informed. It is VITAL. that you comprehend all that is shown you. Pay great attention.” Pay great attention Could I do aught else? I wondered ruefully.

‘I rose higher and higher. From afar came the glitter of burning gleams upon the skyline. Strange and fearsome Shapes stood there, like Devils at the Portals of Hell. Faintly I could discern bright spots which dipped and rose and shot from Shape to Shape. And all around there were vast roadways which radiated away from those Shapes as the petals of a flower radiate away from its centre. All this was a mystery to me; I could not imagine the nature of that which I saw and could but float there amazed.

‘Abruptly I found myself jerked into motion again and with increasing speed. My altitude lessened. I descended, quite involuntarily, to a point where I could discern individual homes dotted along each of the radiating roadways. Each home seemed to me to be at least the size of those of the highest nobles of Lhasa, each contained within a quite sizeable plot of ground. Strange metal things lumbered across the fields doing those things which only a farmer could describe. But then, as I was brought much lower, I discovered a very large estate which consisted mainly of shallow water in which there were perforated benches. Wondrous plants were resting upon the benches, and their roots trailed in the water. The beauty and size of these plants were immeasurably greater than those growing in the soil. I gazed, and wondered at these marvels.

‘Again I was lofted to whence I could see far ahead. The Shapes which had so intrigued me from afar were now much closer but my bemused brain was not able to comprehend that which I saw, it was too stupendous, too utterly incredible. I was a poor native of Tibet, just a humble priest who had never been further abroad than one short visit to Kalimpong. Yet here before my astonished eyes — DID I have eyes? — loomed a great city, a fabulous city. Immense spires soared perhaps eighteen hundred feet into the air. Each spire, or tower, was beringed with a spiral balcony from each of which radiated slender, unsupported roadways joining the whole into a web more intricate than that spun by spiders. The roadways were thronged with speeding traffic. Above and below fluttered mechanical birds laden with people, each avoiding all others with a skill which filled me with the utmost admiration. A speeding mechanical

bird came upon me. I saw a man in the front staring but seeing me not. My whole body contracted and writhed with fear at thought of the impending collision, yet the contraption sped on, through me, and I felt it not. What was I? Yes, I remembered, I was now a disembodied spirit, but I wished someone would tell my brain that for I experienced every emotion, and principally fear, that a normal complete body would have experienced.

‘I loitered among those spires and dangled over the roadway. And I discovered new marvels; certain high levels had stupendous hanging gardens. Incredible playgrounds for what were obviously nobles. But the colours were all wrong. The people were all wrong. Some were vast giants and others were dwarfs. Some were definitely human and others very definitely were not. Some, indeed, were a strange mixture of humanoid and avian, with the body seemingly of human construction, yet possessing a definitely birdlike head. Some were white, some were black. Some were red, while other were green. There were all colours, not merely hues and tints, but definite, primary colours. Some had four fingers and a thumb on each hand, yet others had nine fingers and two thumbs on each hand. And one group had three fingers, horns extending from the temples and — tail! My nerve broke at the latter sight and I willed myself UP — fast.

‘From my new altitude the city clearly covered an immense area, it extended as far as I could see, but at one distant side there appeared a clearing which was free of tall buildings. Here the air traffic was intense. Shining dots, for so they appeared from this distance, soared with eye-baffling velocity in a horizontal plane. I found myself drifting towards that district. As I approached, I discovered that the whole area seemed to be made of glass, and upon its surface there were strange metal craft. Some were spherical in form and seemed from their direction of travel to journey beyond the confines of this world. Others, like two metal bowls stuck rim to rim also appeared to be for out of world travel. Yet others were like the spear that is thrown, and I observed that these, after rising to a pre-determined height, then became horizontal and journeyed to an unknown place upon the surface. There was stupendous

movement and I could scarce believe that all these people could be contained within one city. All the inhabitants of a world were congregated here, I thought. BUT WHERE WAS I? I felt panic rise.

‘The Voice answered me saying, “You must understand that the Earth is a small place, the Earth is as one of the smallest grains of sand upon the banks of the Happy River. The other worlds of this Universe in which your Earth is located are as numerous and as diverse as the sand, the stones, and the rocks which line the banks of the Happy River. But this is just one Universe. There are universes beyond number just as there are blades of grass beyond number. Time upon Earth is just a flickering in the consciousness of cosmic time. Distances upon Earth are of no moment, they are insignificant and do not exist compared to the greater distances in Space. Now you are upon a world in a far, far different Universe, a Universe so remote from the Earth which you know that it would be beyond your comprehension. The time will come when the greatest scientists of your world will have to admit that there are other worlds inhabited, and that Earth is not, as they now believe, the centre of creation. You are now upon the chief world of a group numbering more than a thousand. Each of those worlds is inhabited, each of those worlds owe allegiance to the Master of the world where you now are. Each world is entirely self-governing although they all follow a common policy, a policy aimed at removing the worst injustices under which people live. A policy devoted to improving conditions of all who have life.

‘“Each world has a different sort of person upon it. Some are small as you have seen, some are large as you have also seen. Some, by your standards, are grotesque and fantastic, others are beautiful, angelic you might say. One should never be deceived by outward appearances, for the intention of all is good. These people owe allegiance to the Master of the world upon which you now are. It would be useless and a strain to your intelligence to try to give to you names because the names would have no meaning in your own tongue, in your own comprehension, and would merely serve to confuse you. These people owe allegiance, as I have said, to the Great Master of that world, One

who has no territorial desires whatever, One whose main interest is in the preservation of peace, peace so that all Man no matter his shape, his size or his colour may live out the days allotted to him and devote himself to good instead of the destruction which will ensue whenever a person has to defend himself. Here there are no great armies, there are no battling hordes. There are scientists, traders, and of course priests, and there are also explorers, those who go out to remote worlds ever increasing the number of those who join this mighty fellowship. But none are invited to join. Those who join this federation do so at their own request and only when they have destroyed weapons.

‘ “The world upon which you now are is the centre of this particular Universe. It is the centre of culture, the centre of knowledge and there is none greater. A special form of travel has been discovered and developed. Here again to explain such methods would be to overtax the brains of the greatest scientists of the Earth, they have not yet reached the stage of thinking in four and five dimensional concepts, and such a discussion would be gibberish to them until they can rid their minds of all those beliefs which have so long held them captive.

‘ “The scenes you now see are the leading world as it is today. We want you to travel its surface to see its mighty civilization, a civilization so advanced, so glorious that you may not be able to comprehend. The colours you see here are different to those to which you are accustomed on Earth, but Earth is not the centre of civilization. Colours are different on each world and depend upon the circumstances and requirements of each of those worlds. You will look about this world, and my voice will accompany you, and when you have seen enough of this world to make its greatness apparent you will travel into the past and then you shall see how worlds are discovered, how worlds are born, and how we try to help those who are willing to help themselves. Remember this always; we of space are not perfect for perfection cannot exist when one is in the material state of being in any portion of any universe, but we try, we do the best we can. There are some in the past, as you will agree, who have been very good, and some who to our

sorrow have been very bad. But we do not desire your world, the Earth, we desire instead that you should develop it, that you should live there, but we must ensure that the works of Man do not pollute Space and endanger the people of other worlds. But now you will see more of this, the leading world.”

‘I mused upon all these worlds,’ said the old hermit, ‘I pondered deeply on the portent behind the remarks because it seemed to me that all this talk of brotherly love was but a sham. My own case, I thought, is one which shows up the fallacy of this argument. Here am I, admittedly a poor and ignorant native of a very poor, arid, underdeveloped country, and absolutely against my wishes I was captured, operated upon, and so far as I knew forced out of my body. Here I was — where? The talk of doing so much for the good of humanity seemed rather hollow to me.

‘The Voice broke in upon my disturbed thoughts saying, “Monk, your thoughts are vocalized to us by our instruments, and your thoughts are not correct thoughts, your thoughts, indeed, are the fallacies. We are the Gardeners and a gardener has to remove dead wood, he has to pluck unwanted weeds. But when there is a better shoot then sometimes the gardener has to take away the shoot from the parent plant and even graft elsewhere, that it may develop as a new species, or even develop more greatly as its own species. According to your own beliefs you have been rather roughly treated. According to our beliefs you are being given a signal honour, an honour reserved for very very few people of the world species, an honour reserved.” The Voice hesitated and then went on, “Our history goes back billions of years of Earth time, billions and billions of years, but let us suppose that the whole life of your planet which you call Earth was represented by the height of the Potala, then the lifetime of Man upon the Earth could be likened to the thickness of one coat of paint upon the ceiling of one room. Thus it is, you see, Man is so new upon the Earth that no human has the right to even attempt to judge what we do.

‘ “Later your own scientists will discover that their own laws of mathematical probabilities will indicate clearly that there is evidence of the existence of extra-terrestrials. It will also indi-

cate that for real evidence of extra-terrestrials they must look beyond the far reaches of their own island universe and out into other universes beyond that which contains your world. But this is neither the time nor the place to indulge in a discussion of this nature. Accept the assurance that you are doing good work and that we know best in this. You wonder where you are, and I will tell you that your disembodied spirit, only temporarily detached from your body, has journeyed beyond the furthest reaches of your own universe and has gone right to the centre of another universe, to the centre city of the chief planet. We have much to show you and your journey, your experiences, are just beginning. Be assured, however, that what you are seeing is that world as it is now, as it is at this moment, because in the spirit time and distance mean nothing.

‘“Now we want you to look about to familiarize yourself with that world upon which you now dwell so that you may the more easily credit the evidence of your senses when we come to much more important things because soon we shall send you into the past, into the past through the Akashic Record where you will see the birth of your own planet, Earth.”

‘The Voice ceased,’ said the old hermit, and he stopped for a few moments while he took a sip of his tea which was now quite cold. Reflectively he set aside his bowl and clasped his hands together, after rearranging his robe. The young monk rose and put more wood upon the fire and pulled the blanket more tightly round the old hermit's shoulders.

‘Now,’ continued the old man, ‘I was telling you that I was in a state of panic; yes indeed I was in a state of panic, and then as I dangled there over this immensity I found myself dropping, I found myself passing various levels or bridges between great towers, I found myself dropping down to what appeared to be a very pleasant park raised on a platform, or so it seemed so supported to me. There was the red grass, and then to my astonishment at one side I found green grass. There was a pond in the red grass which had blue water and another pond in the patch of green grass which had heliotrope water. About the two were congregated an amazing assortment of peoples. By now I was beginning to distinguish somewhat which were

natives of this world and which were visitors from afar. There was something subtle in the bearing and comportment of those who were native here. They appeared the superior species, and fully aware of that status.

‘About the pools there were those who appeared possessed of great masculine virility and those who were extremely feminine. A third group of people who were obviously epicene. I was interested to observe that all the people here were quite naked except that the females wore things in their hair. I could not distinguish what they were but they seemed to be some type of metal ornament. I willed myself away from that spot because some of the sport of these naked people was not at all to my liking having been brought up from my very earliest days in a lamasery, and so in an entirely male environment. I but dimly understood the purport of some of the gestures which the females were indulging in. I willed myself up and away.

‘I sped across the remainder of the city and came to the outskirts where the habitation was sparse. But all the fields and plantations were marvelously cultivated and many large estates were, I perceived, devoted to hydroponic farming. But that would be of little interest other than to those studying agronomy.

‘I rose higher and cast about for some objective to which I might direct myself, and I saw a marvelous saffron sea. There were vast rocks fringing the coastline, rocks of yellow, rocks of purple, rocks of all hues and tints, but the sea itself was saffron. This I could not understand. Previously the water looked a different colour. Gazing upwards I perceived the reason. One sun had set, and another was rising which made three suns! And with the increasing ascension of the third sun and the descent of one other the colours were changing, even the air appeared of a different tint. My bemused gaze beheld the grass land blurred by, land, a broad river, a spit of land, and again changing its colour, from red it turned to purple, from purple it turned to a yellow, and then the sea itself gradually changed colour too. It reminded me of the manner in which at eventide when the sun was setting low over the high ranging mountains of the Himalayas colours would sometimes change, and how instead of the bright shining of day in the valleys a purple

twilight would form and even the high snows would lose their pure white and appear to be blue or crimson. And so, as I contemplated the matter, this was no great strain upon my comprehension. I surmised that the colours were always changing on this planet.

‘But I did not want to go over water never having seen much before. I had an instinctive dread of it and a fear that some mishap might occur, that I might fall in. So I directed my thoughts inwards, inland; at this my disembodied spirit wheeled around and I sped for a few miles over rocky coastline and small farm areas. And then to my ineffable delight I found that I was over terrain which was somewhat familiar, it reminded me of moorlands. I swooped low and saw the little plants nestling together on the face of that world. Now with the difference in sunlight they appeared to be little violet coloured flowers with brown stems, akin to heather. Further along there was a bank of that which, under this lighting, resembled gorse, yellow gorse, but here the plant had no thorns to it.

‘I rose a few hundred feet and gently drifted along over this the most pleasant sight which I had seen on this strange world. To these people, no doubt this would be a very desolate area. There was no sign of habitation, no sign of roads. In a pleasantly wooded dell I found a small lake and a little stream trickling over a high cliff tumbled into it and fed it. I lingered awhile, watching the changing shadows, and their vari-hued fingers of light permeating through the branches above my head. But there was this continuous urging that I should keep on the move. I had the impression that I was not here for my own amusement, my own pleasure, my recreation; I was here that others could see through me. I was lifted again and flung high in the air, and prodded into extreme speed. Beneath me the sea. Against my will I was propelled over that sea until I came to what was no doubt another land, another country. Here the cities were smaller but entirely vast. Accustomed, as I was now, to size they were small but much, much larger than anything I would ever hope to see upon the Earth which I had now left.

‘My motion was checked rather abruptly and I went into a steep spiral swirling around. And then I looked down. Below me was a most wonderful estate, it appeared to be an ancient castle set in the midst of woods. The castle was absolutely immaculate and I marveled at the turrets and battlements which surely had no place in a civilization such as this. As I was pondering upon the matter, the Voice broke in, “This is the home of the Master. This is a very ancient place indeed, the most ancient building in this ancient world. This is a shrine to which all peacelovers come that they may stand outside the walls and give their thanks in thought for peace, for the peace that encompasses all who live under the light of this empire. A light where there is never darkness, for here there are five suns and there is no dark. Our metabolism is different from that of your world. We do not need the hours of darkness to enjoy our sleep. We are arranged differently.” ’

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE old hermit stirred restlessly and shivered beneath the thin blanket. 'I will enter the cave again,' he said, 'I am not used to being out in the open so much.'

The young monk, contemplating that amazing tale of a bygone age, came to alertness with a jerk. 'Oh!' he exclaimed, 'the clouds are rising. Soon we shall be able to see.' Carefully he took the old man by the hand and led him clear of the fire and into the cave which now was clear of fog. 'I must fetch fresh water and wood,' said the young man. 'When I return we will have some tea, but I may be rather longer than usual as I have to wander further abroad in search of wood. We have used up all that which was near,' he said ruefully. Leaving the cave he piled the rest of the wood on the fire and scooped up the water-can before setting off down the path.

The clouds were lifting rapidly. A fresh wind was blowing and even as the young monk looked the clouds rose high and revealed the mountain pass. So far he could not see the small black dots which would be the traders. Nor could he distinguish fire smoke from drifting clouds. The traders were still resting, he thought, taking advantage of the enforced stop in order to catch up on sleep. No man could traverse the mountain passes during cloud falls, the dangers were too great. A false step would send man or beast thousands of feet down to rocky pinnacles far below. The young man thought of a quite recent accident when he was visiting a small lamasery at the foot of a cliff. The clouds were low, just above the lamasery roof. Suddenly there had come a slither of falling stones and a hoarse scream. There had come a shriek and a squishy thud — like a bag of wet barley being tossed on the ground. The young man

had looked up to see a man's intestines looped over a rock some twelve feet above and still connected to the man lying dying on the ground. Another poor trader, or traveler, who was journeying when journeying should not be, he thought.

The lake was still covered in fog and the tops of the trees loomed ghostly and silver as the young man made his way forward. Ah! A GREAT find, a whole tree branch had been ripped from the trunk by the storm. He peered through the thinning haze and decided that the tree had been struck by lightning during the storm. Branches were all around, and the tree trunk itself was split wide open. So near to the cave, too, he thought. Gleefully he grasped the largest branch he could manage and slowly dragged it back to the cave mouth. Journey after journey he made until he was so exhausted that he could manage no more. Warily filling the can with water, he made his way back to the cave. Stopping only to put the water on to boil, he went in and spoke to the hermit.

‘A whole tree, Venerable One! I have put the water on to boil and after we have had tea and tsampa I will fetch much more wood before the traders come and burn the lot.’

The old hermit sadly replied, ‘There will be no tsampa, being unable to see, and trying to help, I slipped and spilled all the barley. It now rests among the earth of our floor.’ With a gasp of dismay the young monk leaped to his feet and hurried to where he had left the barley. None was left. Falling to his hands and knees he scabbled around at the base of the flat rock. Earth, sand and barley were inextricably mixed. Nothing could be salvaged. Here was disaster. Slowly he rose to his feet and moved towards the hermit. A sudden thought sent him scurrying back; the tea brick — was THAT safe? Scattered lumps lay on the ground on the far side. The old man had knocked the brick over and then trodden it into the ground except for these few lumps.

Sadly the young monk walked across to the older man. ‘There is no more food, Venerable One, and we have tea for this time only. We must hope that the traders come today or we shall hunger.’

‘Hunger?’ replied the Old One. ‘Often I am without food for

a week or more. We can still drink hot water; to one who has had nothing to drink but cold water during more than sixty years, hot water is a luxury.' He was silent for a few moments, and then added, 'Learn to endure hunger now. Learn fortitude now. Learn always to have a positive approach NOW, for during your life you will know hunger and suffering; they will be your constant companions. There are many who will harm you, many who will attempt to drag you down to their level. Only by a positive mind — always positive — will you survive and surmount all those trials and tribulations which inexorably will be yours. NOW is the time to learn. ALWAYS is the time to practice what you learn NOW. So long as you have faith, so long as you are POSITIVE, then you can endure anything, and can emerge triumphant over the worst assaults of the enemy.'

The young monk almost fainted with fright; all these illusions of impending calamity. All these forecasts of near-doom to come. All these warnings and exhortations. Was NOTHING happy and bright in the life he had to live? But then he remembered his Teachings; This is the World of Illusion. All life on this world is illusion. Here our Great Overself sends its puppets that Knowledge may be gained, that imagined difficulties may be overcome. The more precious the material the more stringent the tests and only faulty material fails. This is the World of Illusion where Man himself is but a shadow, an extension in thought of the Great Overself which dwells elsewhere. Still, he thought glumly, they could be a bit more cheerful. But then, it is said that no man is given more than he can bear, and Man himself chooses what tasks he shall perform, what tests he shall undergo. 'I must be mad,' he said to himself, 'if I arranged THIS load of trouble for myself!'

The old hermit said, 'You have fresh bark on the branches you brought?'

'Yes, Venerable One, the tree was struck by lightning. Yesterday it was intact,' replied the younger man.

'Then peel off the bark, strip the white lining from the dark outer skin, discard the latter, and place the white fibres in the boiling water. It makes a most nourishing food although the

taste is not ideal. Do we have any salt, or borax, or sugar left?’

‘No, Sir, we have nothing except sufficient tea for this one drink.’

‘Then throw the tea in the can as well. But cheer up, we shall not starve. Three or four days without food will merely increase your mental clarity. If things should become bad you can easily go to the nearest hermitage for food.’

Glumly the young monk set about the task of separating the layers of bark. The dark outer skin, coarse and rugged helped to feed the flames. The smooth, greenish-white under layer to be torn into shreds and stuffed into the now-boiling water. Gloomily he tossed in the last lump of tea and jumped high as a splash of boiling water scalded his wrist. Grasping a newly peeled stick he prodded and stirred the mess in the can. With considerable apprehension he withdrew the stick and tasted the end to which a few drops of the concoction adhered; his worst fears were speedily realized. The stuff tasted like hot nothingness. Flavored with weak tea!

The old hermit held out his bowl. ‘I can eat this, when I first came here there was nothing else for me to eat. In those days there were small trees right up to the entrance. I ate them! Eventually people became aware of my presence, and most times since I have had a supply of food. But I never worry if I have to remain without for a week or ten days. There is always water. What more can a man want?’

Sitting in the gloom of the cave at the feet of the Venerable One, with the daylight growing stronger and stronger outside, the young monk thought that he had been sitting thus for a whole eternity. Learning, always learning. Fondly his thoughts turned to the flickering butter-lamps of Lhasa, now in his mind almost a thing of the past. How long he had to remain was a matter of conjecture — until the old man had nothing more to tell him, he supposed. Until the old man had died and HE had to dispose of the body. The thought sent a shiver of apprehension through him. How macabre, he thought, to be talking to a man and then, just an hour or so after, to be unraveling his intestines for the vultures, or pounding up his bones that no

fragment should be left unreturned to the earth. But the old man was ready. He cleared his throat, took a sip of water and composed his limbs.

‘I was as a disembodied spirit spiraling down to the great castle which housed the Master of this Supreme World,’ commenced the old hermit. ‘I was longing to see what manner of man commanded the respect and love of some of the most powerful worlds in existence. I was avid to determine what manner of man — and woman — could endure throughout the centuries. The Master and his Wife. But it was not to be. I was jerked as a small boy might jerk the cord of his kite. I was jerked away backwards. “This is sacred ground,” said the Voice very dourly, “this is not for ignorant natives, you are to see other things.” And so it came about that I was towed many miles and then turned about and set upon a different path.

‘Beneath me the features of that world diminished and the cities became even as the grains of sand upon a river bank. I rose into the air and out of the air; I traveled where air was not. Eventually there came in range of my vision a strange structure the like of which I had never seen. The purpose of which I could not comprehend. Here, in the airless void, where I could not exist save as a disembodied spirit, there floated a city of metal kept aloft by some mysterious method quite beyond my power to discern. As I approached, the details became clearer and I perceived that the city rested upon a land of metal and covering its upper portions there was a material which was clearer than glass yet was not glass. Beneath that transparent sheen I could observe people in the streets of the city, a city larger than the city of Lhasa.

‘There were strange protuberances on some of the buildings and it was to one of the larger of the edifices that I found myself directed. “Here is a great observatory,” said the Voice within my brain. “An observatory from whence the birth of your world was witnessed. Not by optical means, but by special rays which are beyond your comprehension. Within a few years the people of your world will discover the science of Radio. Radio, in its highest development, will be as the brain power of a lowly worm compared to the brain power of the most intelligent

human. What we use here is far far beyond even this. Here the secrets of universes are probed, the surface of distant worlds watched even as you now watch the surface of this Satellite. And no distance, no matter how great, is a bar. We can look into temples, into places of play, and into homes.”

‘I approached yet more closely and feared for my safety as that clear barrier loomed large before me. I feared to crash into it and suffer lacerations, but then, before panic set in, I recollected that I was now as one of the spirits to whom even the most substantial walls were as shadows to be crossed at will. Slowly I sank through this glass-like substance and came upon the surface of that world which the Voice had termed “Satellite”. For a time I drifted hither and thither, trying to settle the turbulent thoughts within me. It was a shocking experience for “an ignorant native of an undeveloped country in a backward world” to endure — and remain fairly sane.

‘Softly, like a cloud drifting over a mountain range, or a moonbeam flitting silently over a lake, I began to drift sideways, away from the idle movements in which I had previously indulged. I moved sideways and filtered through strange walls of a material quite unknown to me. Even though I was even then as a spirit, yet there was some slight opposition to my passage for I endured a tingling of my whole being and — for a time — a sensation that I was stuck in a tenacious bog. With a curious wrenching which seemed to shred my whole being, I left the constraining wall. As I did so I had the strong impression of the Voice saying, “He's got through! I thought for a time he wouldn't make it.”

‘But now I was through the wall and into an immense covered space, it was too large to be demeaned by the term “room”. Quite fantastic machines and apparatus stood about. Things completely beyond my understanding. Yet the strangest things by far were the inhabitants of the enclosure. Very very small humanoids busied themselves with things which I dimly understood to be instruments, while giants moved heavy packages from place to place and did the hard work for those who were too weak. “Here,” said the Voice in my brain, “we have a very great system. Small people make delicate adjustments and build small items. Large people do things more in keeping with

their size and strength. Now, move on.” That imponderable force propelled me once again so that I encountered, and overcame, yet another barrier to my progress. This was even harder to enter and leave.

‘“That wall,” murmured the Voice, “is a Death Barrier. No one can enter or leave while in the flesh. Here is a very secret place. Here we look at all the worlds and we detect immediately any warlike preparations. Look!” I looked around me. For moments that which was before me had no meaning. Then I got a grip on my reeling senses and concentrated. The walls around me were divided into rectangles about six feet long by about five feet high. Each was a living picture beneath which were strange symbols which I took to be writing. The pictures were amazing. Here was one in which a world was depicted as though seen from space. It was blue-green, with strange white patches. With a great shock I perceived that this was my own world, the world of my birth. A change in an adjacent picture drew my immediate attention. There was a deplorable sensation of falling as I gazed and I saw that I was watching a picture of MY world as though I were falling on to it.

‘The clouds cleared, and I saw the whole outline of India and Tibet. No one told me that this was so, yet I knew it by instinct. The picture grew larger and larger. I saw Lhasa. I saw the Highlands, and then I saw the volcanic crater— “But you are not here to see that!” exclaimed the Voice. “Look elsewhere!” I looked about me and marveled anew at that which I saw. Here, on this picture, was the interior of a council chamber. Very important-looking individuals were in animated discussion. Voices were raised, and hands too. Papers were thrown about with a shocking disregard for decorum. On a raised dais a man with a purple face was speaking frantically. Applause and condemnation in about equal measure greeted his remarks. It all reminded me of a meeting of Lord Abbots!

‘I turned about. Everywhere were these living pictures. Everywhere these strange scenes, some in the most improbable colours. My body moved on, on into yet another room. Here were pictures of strange metal objects moving across the blackness of space. “Blackness” is not the word to use, for space here was speckled with points of light of many colours, many of

those colours previously quite unknown to me. "Space ships in transit," said the Voice. "We keep careful track of our traffic." Amazingly a man's face leaped into life on a portion of the wall. He spoke, but I did not understand his words. He nodded his head and gestured as though he were talking face to face with a person. With a smile and gesture of farewell the face vanished and the wall frame was again a smooth grey sheet.

'Immediately it was replaced by a view as seen by a high-flying bird. A view of the World I had just left, the World which was the centre of this vast empire. I looked down upon the great city, seeing it in utter realism, seeing the whole immense spread of it. The picture moved rapidly so that I was again looking down on that district wherein was the residence of the Master of this great civilization. I saw the great walls, and the strange, exotic gardens in which the building was set. Saw too a beautiful lake with an island at its centre. But the picture moved, cast hither and thither, sweeping the landscape as does a bird in search of prey. The picture halted. Grew larger and focussed on a metal object which was describing lazy circles and sinking towards the ground. The picture swelled so that only the metal object was shown. A man's face appeared and he was speaking, replying to unknown questions. A wave of greeting, and the picture went blank.

'I moved not of my own volition. My directed mind left that strange room and entered another. Stranger! Here, at nine of these picture screens sat nine old men. For a moment I stared in stupefied amazement, then I began to chuckle almost with hysteria. Here were nine old men, all bearded, all very similar in appearance, all of the gravest mien. In my poor brain the angry Voice thundered: "SILENCE, sacrilegious one. Here are the Wise Ones who control your destiny. Silence, I say, and show respect." But the old wise men took no notice — yet they were aware of my presence, for upon one screen there was a picture of me on Earth, a picture of me surrounded by wires and tubes. Yet another picture showed me HERE! A most unnerving experience indeed.

' "Here," continued the Voice in a most equable tone, "are the Wise Ones who have called for your presence. They are our

wisest men who for centuries have devoted themselves to the good of others. They work under the direction of the Master Himself, who has lived even longer. Our purpose is to save your world: To save it from what threatens to be suicide. To save it from the utter pollution which follows a nuc— but no matter, these are terms which have no meaning for you; terms which as yet have not been invented on your world. Your world is about to have a fairly intense change. New things will be discovered, new weapons will be invented. Man will enter space within the next hundred years. Thus it is that we are interested.”

‘One of the Wise Ones did things with his hands, and the pictures changed, world after world flitted across the screens. People after people made their brief debut and vanished to be replaced by others. Strange glass bottles became luminous and wriggling lines undulated across their exposed bottoms. Machines clattered and ejected long paper tapes which curled into baskets placed near. Paper tapes covered with remarkable symbols. The whole affair was so far beyond my understanding that even now, after all these years of thinking about it, I still cannot discern the meaning of all I saw. And ever the Old Wise Ones made notes on strips of paper or spoke into discs held near their mouths. And in response there would come a disembodied voice which spoke even as a man speaks, but the source of which I could not detect.

‘At last, when my senses were reeling under the impact of such strange events, the Voice in my brain said, “Of this you have seen sufficient. Now we will show you the past. To prepare you, I will tell you what you will experience, then you will not be frightened.” FRIGHTENED? I thought to myself; if he but knew I AM ABSOLUTELY TERRIFIED “First,” resumed the Voice, “you will experience blackness and some spinning. Then you will see what you think is this room. Actually it will be as this room was millions of years ago by YOUR time, but which is not so long by ours. Then you will see how, first, your universe was created, and then, later, how your world was born, how it was stocked with creatures among them those we call Man.” The Voice faded, and my consciousness with it.

‘It is a disturbing sensation to be so summarily deprived of

one's consciousness, to be robbed of a portion of one's life-span and not even know for how long one has been unconscious. I became aware of swirling grey fog which sent tendrils right into my brain. Intermittent glimpses Of SOMETHING tantalized me and added to my general frustration. Gradually, like a morning mist dissipating before the rays of the rising sun, my awareness, my lucidity, returned. Before me the world became light, no, it was not the world, but the room in which I floated betwixt floor and ceiling like a lazy puff-ball rising and falling in tranquil air. Like the incense clouds billowing in a temple I lingered aloft and contemplated that which was before me.

‘Nine old men. Bearded. Grave. Intent upon their tasks. WERE they the same? No, they were not, the room was different. The screens and instruments were different. And the pictures were different. For a time there was no word spoken, no explanation of what all this portended. At last one old man reached out and turned a knob. A screen lit up and showed stars the pattern of which I had not seen before. The screen expanded until it filled the whole of my vision, until it appeared that I had a window on space. The illusion was so great that I had the feeling that I was in space without even a window. I stared at the cold, motionless stars shining with such an unfriendly, hard glare.

‘“We will speed it up a millionfold,” said the Voice, “or you will not perceive anything in your lifetime.” The stars began a rhythmic swinging, about each other, about some unseen centre. From an outer edge of the picture there came speeding a vast comet with its flaming tail pointing toward that unseen, dark centre. Across the picture the comet flew, drawing together behind it other worlds. At last the comet collided with the cold, dead world which had been the centre of that galaxy. Other worlds, drawn out of their predestined orbits by the increased gravity, laced on a collision course. On the instant when comet and dead world collided the whole universe seemed to burst into flame. Whirling vortices of incandescent matter were flung across space. Flaming gases engulfed nearby worlds. The whole universe, as seen in the screen before me, became a mass of brilliant, violent flaming gas.

‘Slowly the intense brightness pervading the whole of space subsided. At last there was a central flaming mass surrounded by smaller flaming masses. Gobbets of incandescent material were flung out as the great central mass vibrated and convulsed in the agony of the new conflagration. The Voice broke into my chaotic thought, “You are seeing in minutes that which took millions of years to evolve. We will change the picture.” My whole vision was limited to the extent of the screen and that which I now perceived was of the star system receding so that I appeared to gaze from afar. The brightness of the central sun dimmed, yet it was still exceedingly bright. Worlds nearby still glowed red as they twisted and spun on their new orbits. At the speeded-up rate at which I was being shown, the whole universe seemed to be in whirling motion so that my very senses became bedazzled.

‘Now the picture changed. Before me lay a great plain speckled with immense buildings some of which had strange projections spouting forth from their tops. Projections which seemed to me to be made of metal bent into curious shapes — the reason for this was quite beyond my intellect to understand. Swarms of people of widely diverging shapes and sizes converged upon a truly remarkable object located at the centre of the plain. It appeared to be a metallic tube of unimaginable size. The ends of the tube were less than the main girth and tapered rather to a point at one end and terminated in a rounded blob at the other. Protuberances extended at intervals from the main body and as I stared intently I could discern that these were transparent. Moving dots were inside and my observation led me to believe that they were people. I judged that the whole building was about a mile in length, or rather more. Its purpose was quite unknown to me. I could not understand why a building should have such a remarkable shape.

‘As I watched intent on missing nothing, there swam into the picture a most remarkable vehicle drawing behind it many platforms laden with boxes and bales sufficient, was my idle thought, to stock all the market places of India. Yet — how could this be? — all were floating in the air as fish float and propel themselves in water. The strange device drew alongside

the great tube which was a building and one after another all the bales and boxes were drawn inside so that the strange machine pulled away again with empty platforms following. The stream of people entering the tube diminished to a trickle and then ceased. Sliding doors slid, and the tube was closed. Ah! I thought, it is a temple, they are showing me that they have a religion and temples. Satisfied with my own explanation I let my attention flag.

‘No words could describe my emotion as my gaze was jerked back to the picture. This great tubular building, about a mile long and about a sixth of a mile thick, suddenly ROSE INTO THE AIR! It rose to about the height of our highest mountain, lingered there for a few seconds and then - vanished! One instant it was there, a sliver of silver hanging in the sky with coloured lights of two or three suns playing upon it. Then, without even a flash it was not there. I looked about me, looked at adjacent screens and then I saw it. Here, upon a very long screen perhaps twenty five feet long, stars were whirling by so that they appeared merely as streaks of coloured light. Apparently stationary in the centre of the screen was the building which had just left this strange world. The speed of the passing stars increased until they formed an almost hypnotic blur. I turned away.

‘A glare of light attracted my attention and I looked again at the long screen. At the far edge a light was appearing forecasting the advent of a greater light just as the sun sent rays over the mountain edge to foretell its approach. Quickly the light grew until it was intolerably bright. A hand stretched out and twisted a knob. The light was reduced while leaving the picture clear. The great tube, a mere insignificant speck in the immensity of space, drew near the bright orb. It circled round and then I was moved to another screen. For a moment I lost my orientation. I stared blankly at the picture before me. A picture of a large room wherein men and women dressed in what I now knew to be uniforms had their being. Some were sitting with hands on levers and knobs, others were watching screens even as I watched.

‘One who was more gorgeously attired than the others paced

around with his hands clasped behind his back. Frequently he would stop his pacing and peer over another person's shoulder while he looked at some written notes, or studied the wriggling lines which were manifested behind circles of glass. Then, with a nod, he would resume his pacing. At last I chanced to do likewise. I glanced at a screen as the Gorgeous One did. Here were flaming worlds, how many I could not count because the light dazzled me and the unaccustomed motion bewildered me. So far as I could guess, and guess alone, it was, there were about fifteen flaming gobbets encircling the great central mass which had given them birth.

‘The tube-building, which I now knew to be a spaceship, stopped, and much activity took place. Then from the bottom of the ship there appeared a great number of small ships circular in shape. They scattered hither and thither, and with their departure life aboard the great vessel resumed the even tenor of a well-ordered existence. Time passed, and eventually all the small discs returned to their parent ship and were taken aboard. Slowly the massive tube turned and sped like an affrighted animal through the reeling heavens.

‘In the fullness of time, how long I could not say as all the travel was speeded up, the metal tube returned to its base. Men and women left it and entered buildings on the perimeter. Before me the screen went grey.

‘The shadowed room with the ever-moving screens upon the wall fascinated me beyond measure. Previously I had been too intent upon one or two screens, now, with those lying dead, inert before me I had time to look about. Here were men of approximately my own size, the size that I should imply when I used the word “human”. They were of all colours, white, black, green, red, and yellow and brown. Perhaps a hundred sat in strange form-fitting seats which swayed and tipped with every movement. In rows they sat at instruments ranged along the far wall. The Nine Wise Ones sat at a special table in the centre of the room. Curiously I looked about me, but the instruments and other appliances were so far removed from anything previous in my experience that I have no way in which they could be described. Flickering tubes containing a ghastly green light,

pulsing tubes of amber light, walls which WERE walls, although they radiated the same colour light as that out in the open. Glass circles behind which points fluttered wildly or held rock-steady at one point — would THAT convey anything to you?

‘One section of wall swung out suddenly to reveal a stupendous mass of wires and tubes. Climbing up and down those wires were small people about eighteen inches high, small people festooned with belts containing shining implements which were tools of some kind. A giant came in carrying a large heavy box. He held it in place for moments while the small ones fastened the box at the back of the wall. Then the wall was swung shut and the small ones went out with the giant. Here there was silence. Silence save for a routine clicking and the shussh-shussh as the tape moved endlessly from a machine orifice to a special receptacle.

‘Here, upon this screen, a strange strange thing was depicted. At first I thought to gaze upon a rock rough-hewed into human shape. Then, to my intense horror, I saw the Thing move. A crude arm-shape lifted and I saw that it held a large sheet of some unknown material upon which was inscribed writing-shapes. One could not say “writing” and let it go at that. It was so obviously alien that a special form of speech would have to be invented that it could be described. My gaze passed on; this was so far above me that it held no appeal or interest for me. I experienced only horror as I looked upon this travesty of humanity.

‘But my wandering gaze stopped abruptly. HERE were Spirits, winged Spirits! I became so fascinated that almost I crashed into the screen as I moved closer with the hope of seeing more. It was a picture of a wonderful garden in which winged creatures disported. Human in shape, both male and female, they wove an intricate aerial pattern in the golden sky above their garden. The Voice broke in on my thoughts. “Ah! So you are fascinated, eh? These are the — (an unwriteable name) and they are able to fly only because they live in a world where the pull of gravity is very very low. They cannot leave their own planet for they are too fragile. Yet they have mighty and un-

surpassed intelligence. But look about you at other screens. Soon you will see more of your own world's history.”

‘The scene changed before me. Changed deliberately I suspected so that I should see that which it was desired for me to see. First there was the deep purple of space and then an entirely blue world moved across from one edge until it occupied the centre of the screen. The image grew larger until it filled the view completely. It grew larger still and again I had the horrid impression of falling head-first out of space. A most distressing experience. Beneath me blue waves leaped and rolled. The world turned. Water, water, everywhere water. But one speck projected above the eternal waves. On the whole world there was a plateau about the size of the Valley of Lhasa. On it strange buildings loomed on the shore. Human figures flopped on the shore with their legs in the water. Other figures sat on rocks nearby. It was all mysterious and none of it made sense to me. “Our forcing shed,” said the Voice, “where we raise the seed of a new race.” ’

CHAPTER NINE

THE day was wearing on dragging weary hour after weary hour. The young monk gazed — as he had gazed most of the day up to the notch in the mountain range wherein was sheltered the Pass between India and Tibet. Suddenly he uttered a whoop of joy and turned on his heel before dashing into the cave. ‘Venerable One!’ he cried, ‘they are starting down the path. Soon we shall have food.’ Not waiting for an answer, he spun round and rushed out into the open. In the clear, cold air of Tibet minute details can be seen over long distances, there is no air pollution to mask one's sight. Over the rocky ridge came pouring black dots: The young man smiled with satisfaction. Food! Soon there would be barley, and tea.

Quickly he dashed down to the edge of the lake and filled the water-can so that it was even slopping over. Carefully and slowly he carried it back to the cave so that water would be available when the food was. Down the slope he hurried again that he might gather the last of the branches from the storm-blasted tree. A considerable pile of firewood was now stacked beside the glowing fire. Impatiently the young man climbed up the rock face above the cave. Shielding his eyes from the glare he stared out and upwards. A long line of animals moved away from the lake. Horses, not yaks. Indians, not Tibetans. Numbly the young monk stood there dwelling upon that awful thing.

Slowly, heavily, he descended to ground level and re-entered the cave. ‘Venerable One,’ he said sadly, ‘the men are Indians, they are not coming our way and we have no food.’

‘Worry not,’ said the old hermit soothingly, ‘for an empty stomach makes a clear blain. We shall manage, we must have patience.’

A sudden thought struck the younger man. Grasping the water-can he hurried to the rock where all the barley had been spilled: Carefully he sank to his knees and scrabbled in the sandy soil. Here was barley — and sand. Sand will sink in water, he thought, while barley will float. Carefully he dropped handful after handful of soil in the water-can and tapped the side. The sand sank and the barley floated. Little lumps of tea brick floated too.

Time after time he scooped the barley and tea lumps from the surface of the water and placed them in his bowl. Soon he had to obtain the old hermit's bowl and at last, when the evening shadows were again creeping across the countryside, both bowls were full. Tiredly the young monk rose to his feet, hefted the sand-filled water-can and left the cave. Outside he lost no time in tipping out the useless contents of the can then, gloomily, he made his way down the path to the lake.

Night birds were coming awake, and the full moon was peeping over the mountain edge as he scoured the can and filled it with water. Wearily he washed his knees free of embedded sand and barley grains before lifting the can again and wending his way back to the cave. With a thump of resignation he dropped the can into the heart of the fire and sat by the flames while impatiently waiting for the water to boil. At last the first wisps of steam arose and mingled with the smoke of the fire. The young monk rose too and fetched the two bowls with the barley and tea — and quite a bit of earth! — mixture. Carefully he dumped the whole lot into the water.

Soon the steam was rising again. Soon after the water was bubbling energetically, stirring up the brown mess. With a flat piece of bark the young monk scooped off the worst of the floating debris. Unable to wait longer, he hooked a stick under the handle of the can and lifted it from the fire. First he dipped the old hermit's bowl in the can and scooped out a generous helping of the porridgey contents. Wiping his fingers on his already grubby robe, he hurried in to the old man with the unexpected and rather unsavory supper. Then he returned for his own food. It was eatable — just!

With the pangs of hunger but barely assuaged they lay down

upon the hard and cheerless sandy soil for yet another night of sleep. Beyond the cave the moon rose high, and sailed in majestic decline beyond the far mountain range. Creatures of the night went about their lawful occasion, and the night wind rustled gently through the gaunt branches of the stunted trees. In far lamaseries the night proctors pursued their ceaseless vigil while in the back streets of the city those of ill-repute sat and plotted how they might secure the advantage over their more trusting fellows.

The morning was cheerless. The remnants of the sodden barley and tea leaves made but poor fare, but as the sole means of sustenance available it just had to be forced down. With the morning light growing and the newly fed fire sending out sputtering showers of sparks from surface-dried wood, the old hermit said, 'Let us continue the passing of knowledge. It may help us to forget our hunger.' Together the old man and the young entered the cave and sat in their accustomed positions.

'I drifted awhile,' said the hermit, 'like the thoughts of an idle man, without direction, without purpose. Vacillating, flitting from screen to screen as the fancy took me. Then the Voice intruded upon me, saying, "We must tell you more." As the Voice spoke I found that I was being turned and directed to the screens which I had first studied. Now again they were active. Upon one screen was depicted the universe containing what we now know to be the Solar System.

'The Voice resumed, "For centuries most careful watch was kept in case there should be any radiation hazard from the new System now in formation. Millions of years went by, but in the life of a universe a million years is as minutes in the lifetime of a human. At last another expedition set out from this, the heart of our empire. An expedition equipped with the most modern apparatus with which to determine the planning of new worlds which we should seed." The Voice ceased, and I looked again at the screens.

'The stars glittered cold and remote in the stupendous distances of space. Hard and brittle they shone with more colours than that of the rainbow. The picture grew larger and larger until a world was shown which seemed to be just a ball of cloud.

Turbulent clouds slashed through and through with the most fearsome lightning. “It is not possible,” said the Voice, “to make a TRUE analysis of a distant world by remote probes. At one time we believed otherwise, but experience has taught us our error. Now, for millions of years, we have sent expeditions. Look!”

‘The universe was swept aside as one draws aside a curtain. Again I saw a plain stretching out to what seemed to be infinity. The buildings were different, now they were long and low. The great vessel which stood there ready was different too. Something like two platters was this vessel, the lower half a platter standing as a platter should stand, while the upper rested upon the lower but inverted. It shone bright even as the full moon. Hundreds of round holes with glass behind them encircled the circumference. Upon the utmost elevation there rested a dome-shaped transparent room possibly some fifty feet across. The gigantic girth of the vessel entirely dwarfed the toiling machines which labored at its base to supply it.

‘In groups there loitered men and women, all in strange uniform dress, all with a number of boxes reposing at their feet upon the ground. The talk seemed to be merry, the humour good. More ornately attired individuals strutted unapproachably backwards and forwards as though deliberating upon the fate of a world — as indeed they may have been. A sudden signal made them all bend quickly, seize their packages, and scurry to the waiting vessel. Metallic doors like the iris of an eye closed tightly behind them.

‘Slowly the immense metal creation rose some hundred feet in the air. It hovered for a moment of time — and then just vanished leaving no trail of any kind to mark that it had ever existed. The Voice said, “It travels at a speed unthinkably faster than the speed of light. It is a self-contained world and when one is in these ships one is QUITE unaffected by any outside influences. There is no sensation of speed, no feeling of falling, not even on the sharpest turns. Space,” continued the Voice, “is NOT the empty void that your own worldians believe. Space is an area of reduced density. There is an atmosphere of hydrogen molecules. The separate molecules may be hundreds

of miles apart admittedly, but at the speed generated by our vessels that atmosphere seems almost as dense as the sea. One hears the molecules rushing against the side of the ship and we had to take special measures to overcome the problem of heating through molecular friction. But look —!”

‘On an adjacent screen the disc-shaped vessel was tearing along leaving an almost intangible trail of faint blue light behind it. The speed was so great that as the picture moved to keep the ship centered, the stars appeared as solid lines of light. The Voice murmured, “We will omit the needless travel sequences and keep to the items which matter. Look at the other screen.” I did so, and witnessed the vessel, now travelling very much more slowly, circling around the sun, OUR sun. But a sun very very different from what it is now. It was larger, brighter, and vast streamers of flame reached out far beyond its girth. The ship circled round, orbiting first one world and then another.

‘At last it drew close to the world which somehow I knew to be the Earth. Completely enshrouded in clouds it rolled beneath the ship. Several orbits were made and then the vessel slowed even more. The picture changed and I was shown inside. A small group of men and women were walking down a long metal corridor. At the end they debouched into an enclosure wherein there were small replicas of the large vessel. Men and women walked up a ramp and entered one of these smaller ships. All other people left that area. Behind a transparent wall a man watched, his hands upon strange coloured buttons, with flashing lights before him. A light glowed green, and the man pressed several buttons simultaneously.

‘A section of the floor retreated equally from the small ship, and opened as the iris of an eye opens. The ship fell through and entered into space. Lower and lower it glided until it was lost to our view in the clouds which encompassed the Earth. Then the picture before me changed again and I saw as from the small craft itself. Here were the swirling, billowing clouds, appearing first as impenetrable barriers, but melting away at the touch of the spaceship. Down down we went through miles of the cloud until at last we merged in to a dull, sullen day.

Grey sea rolled and surged and in the distance seemed to merge with the grey clouds, clouds upon which were reflected ruddy glares from some unknown source.

‘The spaceship leveled off and flew between cloud and sea. The miles passed, miles of endless, surging sea. Upon the skyline a dark mass appeared, a dark mass shot through by intermittent goutts of flame. The ship moved on. Soon below us there loomed a great mass of mountainous land. Vast volcanoes reared their ugly heads high towards the clouds. Tremendous flames shot forth and molten lava came tumbling down the mountain sides to plunge into the sea with a hissing roar. Although it had been a grey blur in the distance, close to the land appeared as a very dull red.

‘The ship moved on and circumnavigated the world for a number of times. There was but one immense land mass surrounded by the tossing sea which, from the lower altitude, seemed to be steaming. At last it rose, entered space, and returned to the parent ship. The screen faded as that vessel sped again back to the Empire world.

‘The Voice, now so accustomed to speaking in my brain, commented, “No! I am not merely speaking to you, I am also addressing those who are participating in this experience. Because you are so receptive you are aware of all my remarks by what we term acoustic feed-back. But pay attention. This applies to you also.

‘ “The Second Expedition returned to — ” (here there was a name, but it is beyond my power to pronounce it so I will transpose and say “our empire”). “Scientists studied the reports submitted by the crews. Assessments were made of the probable number of centuries before the world was fit for stocking with living creatures. Biologists and geneticists worked together to formulate plans for the best types of creatures to be made. When a new world is to be stocked, and when that world is the offspring of a nova, ponderous animals and heavy foliage is first required. All soil consists of powdered rock, with lava dust and certain trace elements. Such soil will support only coarse-feeding plants. Then those plants decay, and the animals die and decay and mix with the rock dust. In the course

of millenniums 'soil' is formed. As the soil becomes more and more remote from the original rock, finer types of plants can be grown. In time, on any planet, the soil is really the cells of decayed animals and plants and the excreta of the former for aeons past."

'I had the impression that the Owner of the Voice paused while he surveyed his audience. Then he continued, "The atmosphere of a new planet is not at all breathable by humans. The effluvia from the belching volcanoes contains sulfur and many noxious and lethal gases. Suitable vegetation will overcome this by absorbing the toxins and returning them as harmless minerals to the soil. The vegetation will take the poisonous fumes and convert them to the oxygen and nitrogen which humanoids require. So, the scientists of many branches worked together for centuries preparing the basic stock. These were then placed upon a nearby world of similar conditions so that they could mature, so that we could ensure that they were entirely satisfactory. If necessary they could then be modified.

' "So, for ages the new planetary system was left to its own devices. Left while wind and waves eroded the sharp rock pinnacles. For millions of years tempests beat upon that rocky land. Powdered rock spilled forth from high peaks, heavy stones fell and rolled under the storms, grinding the rock-powder ever finer. The giant waves beat in fury on the land, breaking off spurs, bumping them together, reducing them to smaller and smaller particles. The lava that flowed white-hot into the waters fumed and foamed and split into millions of particles to become the sand of the sea. The waves flung the sand back on the land, and the continual scouring wore down the mountains from their miles-high altitude to merely tens of thousands of feet.

' "Endless centuries of Earth-time passed. The blazing sun blazed not so fiercely. No longer did flaming gobbets become spewed out to engulf and incinerate adjacent objects. Now the sun burned fairly regularly. The nearby worlds too cooled. Their orbits steadied. Every so often little lumps of rock collided with other masses and the whole plunged into the sun, making a temporary increase in its flaming intensity. But the

System was steadying down. The world called Earth was becoming ready to receive its first life.

“At the Empire base a vast ship was being prepared to travel to the Earth and the members of what would be the Third Expedition were being trained in all matters relating to their coming task. Men and women were being selected for compatibility and for the absence of neurosis. Each space ship is a self-contained world in which the air is manufactured by plants and water is obtained from excess air and hydrogen — the cheapest thing in the whole universe. Instruments were loaded, general supplies, the new stock were carefully frozen ready to be re-animated at the appointed time. At long last, for there was no hurry, the Third Expedition was ready.”

‘I watched the vessel slide through the Empire universe, cross yet another, and enter that which contained at its distant edge the new Earth. There were many worlds circling around the bright sun. These were ignored; all attention was given to the one planet. The great vessel decelerated and swung in an orbit such that it was stationary relative to one point on the Earth. Aboard the ship a small craft was made ready. Six men and women entered and again an opening appeared in the floor of the parent ship through which the survey vessel dropped. Again on the screen I watched as it fell through the thick cloud and emerged a few thousand feet above the water. Moving in a horizontal plane it soon came to where the rock land projected above the water.

‘The volcanic eruptions, although most violent, were yet less intense than previously. The shower of rock debris was less profuse. Carefully, very very carefully, the small ship sank lower and lower. Keen eyes searched the surface for the most suitable landing place and at last, with that location decided upon, it made landfall. Here, resting upon the hard surface, the crew made what appeared to be routine tests. Satisfied, four members of the crew donned strange garments which covered them from neck to feet. Upon their head each person placed a round transparent globe which connected in some way with the neck-piece of the garment already donned.

‘Each picked up a case and entered a small room the door of

which was carefully closed and fastened behind them. A light opposite another door glowed red. The black pointer on a circular dial commenced to move, and as it came to rest over an "O" the red light turned to green and the outer door swung open. A strange metal ladder, as though imbued with life of its own, rattled across the floor and extended down to the ground some fifteen feet below. One man carefully descended the ladder and stamped about as he reached the surface. From the case he drew a long rod which he thrust into the ground. Bending, he minutely examined the markings upon the surface of that rod and — rising to his feet — beckoned to the others that they should join him.

'The little party moved around seemingly at random, doing things which had no meaning for me. Save that I knew these to be intelligent adults I would have put down their antics to that of children playing games. Some picked up little stones and put them in a bag. Some hit the ground with hammers, or stuck in what appeared to be metal rods. Yet another, a female, I observed, wandered around waving little strips of sticky glass and then hastily inserted them in bottles. All these things were quite incomprehensible to me. At last they returned to their vessel and entered the first compartment. They stood still like cattle in a market place while remarkable coloured lights shone and moved over the entire surface of each. A light glowed green, and the other coloured lights were extinguished. The party removed their protective garments and entered the main body of the ship.

'Soon there was a great to-do. The female with the sticky glass strips rushed to put each one in a metallic device. Putting her face to it so that she looked through two tubes, she turned knobs, making comment to others the while. The man with the little pebbles tipped them into a machine which emitted a great whirr and suddenly ejected the pebbles which were now reduced to a very fine powder. Many tests were made. Many conversations were held with the great parent ship.

'Other of these vessels appeared, while the first one withdrew and returned to the greater vessel. Those which remained circled the whole of the world and from them there dropped

articles which fell on to the land and others of a different type fell into the sea. Satisfied with their work, all the small craft drew close and formed a line after which they rose up and left the atmosphere of the Earth. One by one each re-entered the mother ship, and when the last had so done the great vessel sped from that orbit and traveled to other worlds in that system. Thus it was that many, many years of Earth time was occupied.

‘Many centuries passed on the Earth. In the time of a ship travelling through space it was but weeks, for the two times are different in some manner difficult to comprehend, but it IS so. Many centuries passed, and rough, coarse vegetation flourished on the land and under the waters. Vast ferns towered skywards, with immense, thick leaves absorbing the poisonous gases and breathing out oxygen by day and nitrogen by night. At long last an Ark of Space descended through the clouds and landed upon a sandy shore. Great hatches were opened and from out of the mile-long vessel lumbering, nightmare creatures came, so ponderous that the Earth shook to their tread. Horrendous creatures flapped heavily into the air on creaking leathern wings.

‘The great Ark — the first of many to come throughout the ages — rose into the air and glided gently over the seas. At predetermined areas the Ark rested upon the surface of the water and strange creatures flopped into the ocean depths. The immense vessel rose and vanished into the remotest recesses of space. Upon the Earth incredible creatures lived and fought, bred and died. The atmosphere changed. The foliage changed, and the creatures evolved. The eons passed and from the Observatory of the Wise Ones, universes distant, watch was kept.

‘The Earth was wobbling in its orbit; a dangerous degree of eccentricity was developing. From the heart of the Empire there came a special ship. The scientists decided that one land mass was insufficient to prevent the seas from surging and unbalancing the world. From the great vessel hovering miles above the surface a thin beam of light shot out. The exposed continent of the Earth shivered and cracked apart into smaller masses. Violent earthquakes took place. And in the fullness of

time the land masses drifted apart forming ramparts against which the sea, now divided into SEAS, beat in vain. The Earth settled into stable orbit.

‘Millions of years crawled on. Millions of years of EARTH time. Again an expedition approached from the Empire. This time it brought the first humanoids to the world. Strange purple creatures were unloaded, the women having eight breasts, and men and women having a head set square on the shoulders so that to see at the side the whole body had to be turned. The legs were short and the arms were long, descending to below the knees. They knew naught of fire or weapons and yet they were ever aquarrel. They lived in caves and in the branches of mighty trees. For food they had berries and grasses and the insects which crawled the earth. But the Watchers were not satisfied, for these were but mindless creatures who could not fend for themselves and who showed no signs of evolving.

‘By now vessels of that Empire were on constant patrol through the universe which held the solar system. Other worlds here too were being developed. That of another planet was proceeding much more quickly than the Earth. A ship of the patrol was detached to go to the Earth where it landed. A few of the purple natives were captured and examined and it was decided that the whole race should be exterminated just as a gardener exterminates weeds. A pestilence fell upon the Earth, and all the humanoids were killed. The Voice broke in, saying, “In years to come your own Earth people will use this system to kill off a plague of rabbits, but your people will use a pestilence which will kill the rabbits in agony; WE do it painlessly.”

‘From the skies there came another Ark bringing different animals and very different humanoids. Throughout the lands they were distributed, a different type and perhaps a different colour chosen to suit the conditions of that area. The Earth still roared and rumbled. Volcanoes belched forth flames and fumes and the molten lava came pouring down the mountain sides. The seas were cooling and the life therein was changing to meet the altering conditions. At the two poles the waters were cold and the first ice on Earth was beginning to form.

‘The Ages went by. The atmosphere of Earth changed. Giant fern-like growths gave way to orthodox trees. Life-forms became stabilized. A mighty civilization flourished. Around the world flew the Gardeners of the Earth visiting city after city. But some of them became too familiar with their human charges, or the women thereof. An evil priest of the human race persuaded a beautiful woman to seduce one of the Gardeners and to inveigle him so that he betrayed forbidden secrets. Soon the woman was in possession of certain weapons formerly in the man's care. Within the hour the priest had them.

‘By treachery certain of the priestly caste manufactured atomic weapons, using the stolen one as pattern. A plot was hatched whereby certain of the Gardeners were invited to a temple for celebrations and thanksgiving. Here, in the sacred grounds, the Gardeners were poisoned. Their equipment was stolen. A great assault was made on the other Gardeners. In the battle the atomic pile of a grounded spacecraft was exploded by a priest. The whole world shook. The great continent of Atlantis sank beneath the waves. In far-off lands tornadoes rent the mountains and tore humans apart. Great waves stormed in from the seas, and the world became almost barren of human life. Barren save for a few who cowered whimpering with terror in remote caves.

‘For years the Earth shook and shivered with the effects of the atomic blast. For years no Gardener came to inspect the world. Radiation was strong, and the scared remnants of humanity brought forth mutated progeny. Plant life was affected, and the atmosphere became debased. The sun was obscured by lowering red clouds. At long last the Wise Ones decreed that yet another expedition should travel to Earth and to take new stock to their desecrated “garden”. The great Ark of humans, animals and plants set forth through the far reaches of space.’

The old hermit fell over with a gasp. The young monk leaped in the air with the shock and then hurried over to the fallen ancient. The little bottle of precious drops was at hand, and soon the old man was lying on his side breathing normally. ‘You need food, Venerable One,’ exclaimed the younger man. ‘I

will place water beside you and then I will climb to the Solemn Contemplation Hermitage to obtain tea and barley. I will hurry.' The hermit nodded weakly and relaxed as the young monk placed a bowl of water beside him, and put the full water-can within easy reach. 'I will go by way of the cliff side,' he said as he hurried out of the cave.

Along the mountain foot he ran, gazing upwards for signs of the faint trail which led to the wider path far above. Here, two thousand feet higher, and six miles away, there was the hermitage wherein many dwelt. Food would be available for the asking, but the way was hard and the daylight even now was beginning to fail. Grimly the young monk lengthened his stride. Acutely he stared at the rock face until at last he discerned the faint marks where once before he had climbed the mountain face. By the twisted, scrubby bush he turned sharp right and immediately encountered the cruel, knife-like stones which discouraged so many others and led them to take a path which increased the six miles to more than twenty, so devious was the way.

Slowly he struggled upwards, seeking handholds where none seemed possible. Foot by foot he ascended. The sun sank below the far mountain range and he rested awhile sitting astride a boulder. Soon the first silver rays of the rising moon peeped over the mountain range. Soon the cliff face above was illumined sufficiently to make further travel possible. Clawing and digging in fingers and toes he inched his way perilously upwards. Below him the valley was in deep shadow. With a gasp of relief he reached up and tumbled on to the narrow track leading to the hermitage. Half running, breath coming in sobs, and aching in every limb, he made his way the remaining miles.

Feebly gleaming in the distance, the flickering butter lamp shone as a beacon of hope to the benighted traveler. Gasping for breath, and faint with the need for food, the young man stumbled the last few yards to the hermitage door. From inside came the mumbling chant of an aged man clearly praying entirely by rote. Here is no religious devotee whom I might disturb, thought the young monk as he called out loudly,

‘Caretaker of hermits, I am in need!’ The low, reiterated mumbling ceased. There was the creak of aged bones moving more quickly, and then the door slowly opened. Blackly outlined against a solitary butter lamp which flared and sputtered in the sudden draft, the old priest-caretaker with high-raised voice demanded, ‘Who is there? Who are you that calls at this hour of the night?’ Slowly the young monk moved so that he could be seen. The caretaker relaxed at the sight of the red robe. ‘Come, enter,’ he bade.

The young man stepped hesitantly forward. Reaction set in and he was tired. ‘Fellow priest,’ he said, ‘the Venerable Hermit with whom I am staying is ill and we have no food. We had none today, nor yesterday. No trader has come to us. We have only the lake water. Can you give us food?’

The priest-caretaker clucked with sympathy. ‘Food? Yes, of a surety I can give you food. Barley — already well ground. A brick of tea. Butter and sugar, yes, but you must rest tonight, you CANNOT traverse the mountain path tonight.’

‘I must, fellow priest,’ exclaimed the young monk. ‘The Venerable One starves. The Buddha will protect me.’

‘Then stay awhile and eat a little and drink tea — it is all ready. Eat and drink, and I will pack a shoulder bag for you. I have plenty.’

So it was that the young man sat in the lotus position and gave prostrations in thanks for the welcome so sincerely given. He sat and ate tsampa and drank strong tea, while the old caretaker babbled all the gossip and news which the well-served hermitage had heard. The Inmost One was a travel. The great Lord Abbot of Drepung had made disparaging remarks about another. The College of Proctors were giving thanks to a Guardian Cat who had located a persistent thief among certain traders. A Chinese had been waylaid on a mountain pass and in trying to escape — so it was said — had slipped over the edge to fall some two thousand feet (the body was all broken up and ready for the vultures without any further human aid).

But time was not standing still. At last, reluctantly, the young monk stood and took the proffered bag. With words of thanks and farewell he strode out of the hermitage and made

his cautious way down the path. The moon was now high. The light was silvery and brilliant. The path was clear, but the shadows were of the intense blackness known only to those who dwell in high places. Soon he came to the edge where he must leave the more secure way and clamber down the precipice. Cautiously, slowly, he lowered himself over the edge. With infinite care, somewhat handicapped by the weight on his shoulders, he crept downwards, inch by inch, foot by foot. Carefully holding with his hands while he felt for a secure hold with his feet. Transferring his weight from his hands to his feet—from his feet to his hands. At last, with the moon declining overhead, he reached the darkened floor of the valley. Feeling his way from rock to rock he progressed slowly until before him he saw the red glow of the fire before the cave entrance. Stopping only to put on a few more branches, he tottered inside and sank down at the feet of the old hermit whom he could just see by the light of the fire reflecting into the cave entrance.

CHAPTER TEN

THE old hermit improved visibly under the influence of hot tea, with a pat of butter and a good helping of sugar. The barley was finely ground, and well roasted. The flames from the fire shone cheerily through the entrance to the cave. But the hour was still that between dusk and dawn, with the birds asleep in the branches and naught but the night creatures astir. The moon had sailed across the sky and was now lowering herself beyond the farthest range. From time to time the chill wind of the night came rustling through the leaves to send the sparks a-flying from the brightened fire.

The ancient man rose warily on stiffened limbs and tottered off into the inner chamber. The young monk rolled over and fell into a sound sleep before his head touched the hard-packed sand. The world about was silent. The night became darker with the darkness that foretells of the dawn soon to come. From above a solitary stone came rattling down to shatter on the boulders beneath, then all was silent again.

The sun was well advanced when the young monk awakened to a world of aches. Stiff limbs, tired muscles, and HUNGER! Muttering forbidden words under his breath he clambered to his feet, grabbed the empty water-can and lurched out of the cave. The fire was a pleasant glow of red ashes. Hastily he tossed on small twigs and laid larger branches on top. Ruefully he surveyed the fast-diminishing supply of wood. Gloomily he contemplated the difficulty of obtaining fresh supplies from ever and ever further afield. Glancing up at the rock face he shuddered involuntarily, as he contemplated his climb of the night. Then — off to the lake for water.

‘We must talk long today,’ said the old hermit as they

finished their meager breakfast, 'for I feel the Heavenly Fields calling upon me to hurry. There is a limit to what flesh can endure and I have far outlived man's allotted span.'

The young man looked sad, he had developed a deep affection and respect for the old one and considered that his suffering had been far too great. 'I am ready when you are, Venerable One,' he said, 'let me just fill your bowl with water first.' Rising, he swilled out the bowl and refilled it with fresh water.

The old hermit commenced, 'The Ark appeared in the screen before me vast and cumbersome. A vessel which would have engulfed the Potala and the whole of the City of Lhasa complete with Sera and Drepung Lamaseries. It bulked so huge that the humans streaming from it were by comparison as small as the ants which work in the sand. Vast animals were unloaded, and crowds of new humans. All appeared dazed, doped, presumably so that they should not fight. Men with strange things on their shoulders flew about as the birds fly, herding the animals and men, prodding them with rods made of metal.

'Around the world the ship flew, landing at many points to leave behind animals of different types. Humans who were white, those who were black, and some were yellow. Short humans, tall humans. Humans with black hair and those whose hair was white. Animals with stripes, animals with long necks, some with no necks, never had I known there could be such a range of colours, sizes, and different types of living creatures. Some of the sea creatures were so utterly immense that I could not for a time comprehend how they could move, yet in the sea they appeared as agile as the fishes in our lakes.

'Constantly through the air there flew small vessels which had in them people who were keeping check on the new inhabitants of Earth. On their forays they dispersed large herds and made sure that animals and humans were spread over the globe. The centuries passed and Man still was not able to light a fire nor even to shape crude implements of stone. The Wise Ones held conferences and decided that the "stock" must be improved by introducing some humanoids who were more intelligent, who knew how to light fires and work flint. So the centuries

went on with the Gardeners of the Earth introducing fresh, viril specimens to improve the human stock. Gradually mankind progressed from the flint-chipping stage to the fire-light-in level. Gradually houses were built and towns formed. Always the Gardeners moved among the human creatures and the humans looked upon them as gods upon the Earth.

‘The Voice broke in, saying “No useful purpose would be served in merely following the endless troubles which beset this new colony of Earth. I will tell you of the salient features for the sake of your own instruction. While I speak we will have before us suitably phased pictures so that you may also see any point of note.

‘ “The Empire was great, but there came from another universe violent people who tried to wrest our possessions from us. These people were humanoid and upon their head they had horny growths projecting from the area of the temples. They also had a tail. These people were of a surpassingly warlike nature, it was their sport as well as their work. In black ships they poured into this universe and laid waste to worlds which we had so recently seeded. In space cataclysmic battles took place. Worlds were laid desolate, worlds erupted into gouts of smoke and flame and their debris clutters the spaceways as the Asteroid Belt even to this day. Previously fertile worlds had their atmosphere blasted away and all that lived there perished: A world struck another world a glancing blow and threw it against the Earth. The Earth juddered and shook and was pushed into another orbit which made the Earth-day longer.

‘ “During the near-collision giant electric discharges leaped from the two worlds. The skies flamed anew. Many of the Earth-humans perished. Great floods swept the surface of the world and compassionate Gardeners hurried around in their Arks trying to load aboard humans and animals that they should be safely conveyed to higher ground and safety. In later years,” said the Voice, “this would give rise to incorrect legends throughout all Earth lands. But in space the battle was won. The forces of the Empire defeated the evil invaders and made many of them captive.

‘ “The Prince of the Invaders, Prince Satan, pled for his life,

saying that he had much to teach the peoples of the Empire. Saying that He would at all times work for the good of others. His life and that of some of his leading men was spared. After a period of captivity he expressed himself as anxious to co-operate in the rebuilding of the solar system which he had so desecrated. Being men of good will, the Empire admirals and generals could not imagine treachery and evil intent in others. They accepted the offer and set the Prince Satan and his officers tasks under the supervision of Empire men.

‘ “On the Earth the natives were crazed by the experiences they had undergone. They had been decimated by the inundation and by the flames from the clouds. Fresh stock was brought from outlying planets where some humans had survived. The lands were now different, the seas were different. Through the complete change in orbit the climate had altered. Now there was a hot equatorial belt and ice formed very heavily on the polar areas. Icebergs broke away from the main masses and floated in the seas. Huge animals died in the sudden cold. Forests collapsed when their living conditions changed so drastically.

‘ “Very slowly conditions became stabilized. Once again Man started to build a form of civilization. But Man was now excessively warlike and persecuted all those who were weaker. Routinely the Gardeners introduced fresh specimens that the basic stock should be improved. The evolution of Man progressed and a better type of creature slowly emerged. But the Gardeners were not satisfied. It was decided that more Gardeners should live upon the Earth. Gardeners, and their families. For convenience mountain tops or high places were used as bases. Over an eastern land a man and a woman descended in their space ship and made their base on a pleasant mountain rise. Izanagi and Izanami became the protectors and founders of the Japanese race and” — the Voice sounded both rueful and cross at the same time — “once again false legends were woven; because these two, Izanagi and Izanami, appeared from the direction of the sun, the natives believed they were the sun god and goddess come to live among them.”

‘On the screen before me I saw the blood red sun shining full

in the sky. As from it there descended a shining vessel colored red by the reflected rays of the setting sun. The ship descended further, hovered and then lazily circled around. At last, as red rays from the evening sun were reflected on the snow-covered mountain top the ship descended on to a level slope high on the mountain side. The last beams of sunlight lit up the man and woman who descended from the ship to look about them, and then to re-enter. The yellow skinned natives lying prostrate before the ship, overawed by the glory of the sight, waited in respectful silence and then melted away in the darkness of the night.

‘The picture changed and I saw another mountain in a far-off land. Where, I knew not, but that information was soon to be given to me. From the sky there came spaceships which circled about and then slowly descended in a regular formation until they too occupied a mountain slope. “The Gods of Olympus!” said the Voice in a sarcastic tone. “The so-called Gods who brought much trial and tribulation to this young world. These people, with the former Prince Satan among them, came to settle upon the Earth, but the Centre of the Empire was far away. Ennui and the promptings of Satan led astray these young men and women who had been given this Earth assignment that they could gain experience.

‘ “Zeus, Apollo, Theseus, Aphrodite, the daughters of Cadmus, and many others, formed these crews. The messenger Mercury sped from ship to ship throughout the world carrying messages — and scandals. Men became overwhelmed with desire for the wives of others. Women set themselves to trap men they desired. Across the skies of the world there were mad chases in speeding craft as woman chased man or husband chased eloping wives. And the ignorant natives of the world, watching the sex antics of those whom they deemed to be gods, thought that THIS was the way in which THEY should live. So there began an era of debauchery in which all the laws of decency were flouted.

‘ “Various wily natives, more alert than the average, set themselves up as priests and pretended to be the Voice of the Gods. The ‘Gods’ were too busy with their orgies to even know.

But these orgies led to other excesses, led to murders so numerous that at long last news of them filtered back to the Empire. But the native-priests, those who pretended to be the representatives of the Gods, wrote down all that happened and altered sayings that their own powers might be increased. Ever it has been thus in the history of the world, that some of the natives wrote down not what happened, but that which would enhance their own power and prestige. Most of the legends are not even an approximation of that which really took place.”

‘I was moved to another screen. Here were another group of Gardeners, or “Gods”. Horus, Osirus, Annubis, Isis, and many others. Here too orgies were occurring. Here too a former lieutenant of Prince Satan was at work trying to sabotage all efforts to produce good for this little world. Here too were the inevitable priests writing their endless and inaccurate legends: Some there were who had wormed their way into the confidence of the Gods and had so obtained knowledge normally forbidden to the natives for their own good. These natives formed a secret society designed to steal more forbidden knowledge and to usurp the power of the Gardeners. But the Voice continued to speak. “We had much trouble with certain of the natives and had to introduce measures which were repressive. Certain of the native priests, having stolen equipment from the Gardeners, could not control them; they loosed plagues upon the Earth. Vast numbers of the people died. Crops were affected.

‘ “But certain of the Gardeners, under the control of Prince Satan, had established a Capital of Sin in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Cities in which any form of vice or perversion or depravity was considered as virtue. The Master of the Empire solemnly warned Satan to desist and leave, but he scoffed. Certain of the better inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah were advised to leave, and then, at the appointed time, a solitary craft sped through the air and dropped a small package: The cities were erased in flame and smoke. Great mushroom-shaped clouds ascended into the quaking sky, and upon the ground there was naught but devastation, rubble of stones, melted rocks, and the incredible debris of human habitation in

decay. By night the area shone with a sickly purple radiance Very few escaped the holocaust.

‘ “Following this salutary warning, it was decided to withdraw all the Gardeners from the face of the Earth and to have no more contact with the natives but to treat them as specimens from afar. Patrols would still enter the atmosphere. The world and its natives still would be supervised. But no official contact. Instead it was decided to have upon the Earth natives who had been specially trained and who could be ‘planted’ where suitable people could find them. The man who later became known as Moses was an example. A suitable native woman was removed from the Earth and impregnated with the seed having the necessary characteristics. The unborn child was telepathically trained and given great — for a native — knowledge. He was hypnotically conditioned not to reveal the knowledge until an appointed time.

‘ “In due course the baby was born and further training and conditioning was given. Later the baby was placed in a suitable container and under cover of darkness was deposited securely in a bed of reeds where he would speedily be found. As he grew to manhood he was in frequent touch with us. When necessary a small ship would come to a mountain and be concealed by the natural clouds or even by those which we made ourselves. The man Moses would then ascend the mountain and come aboard, leaving after with a Wand of Power or specially compiled Tablets of the Commandments which we had prepared for him.

‘ “But this still was not enough. We had to go through a similar procedure in other countries. In that land which now is known as India we specially controlled and trained the male child of a most powerful Prince. We considered that his power and prestige would induce the natives to follow him and adhere to a special form of discipline which we had formulated that there should be an improvement in the spiritual state of the natives. Gautama had his own ideas, however, and rather than discard him we allowed him to produce his own form of spiritual discipline. Once again we found that the disciples, or priests — usually for their own gain — distorted the teachings in

their writings. Thus it ever was upon the Earth; a coterie of men, self-styled priests, would edit or re-write scriptures that their own powers and wealth should be enhanced.

‘ “There were others who founded new branches of religion, such as Mohammed, Confucius — the names are too many to mention. But each of these men was under our control, or trained by us with the basic intention that a world belief should be established, the leaders of that religion would then lead their followers into GOOD ways of life. We intended that each human should behave to others as he himself would wish others to behave towards him. We tried to establish a state of universal harmony such as existed in our own Empire, but this new humanity was not yet sufficiently advanced to put aside Self and to work for the good of others.

‘ “The Wise Ones were very dissatisfied with progress. As a result of their cerebration a new scheme was propounded. One of the Wise Ones had remarked that all those sent to Earth so far had been introduced to the wealthier type of family. As he correctly stated, many of the lower classes would reject automatically the words of such a higher-class person. Thus it was that search was made, first using the Akashic Record, for a suitable woman to bear a son. A suitable woman from a suitable lower-class family and in a country wherein it was considered that a new religion or doctrine might be expected to flourish. Researchers assiduously devoted themselves to the task. A fair number of possibilities were presented. Three men and three women were secretly landed upon the Earth in order that they could pursue their investigations so that the most suitable family should be selected.

‘ “The consensus of opinion favoured a young woman who was childless and married to a practitioner of the oldest trade on Earth, the trade of carpenter. The Wise Ones reasoned that the majority of people were of this class and they may be more willing to follow the words of one of their own. So, the woman was visited by one of us whom she took to be an angel and told that she was to have a great honour. That she was to bear a male child who was to found a new religion. In the fullness of time the woman became pregnant but then occurred one of

those events so common in that part of the world; the woman and her husband had to flee their home because of the persecution of a local king.

‘ “They made their slow way to a middle eastern city and there the woman found that her time was full upon her. There was no place to go except in a stable of a hostelry. There the baby was born. We had followed the flight, prepared to take all necessary action. Three members of the crew of the vigilant vessel descended to the surface of the Earth and made their way to the stable. To their dismay they learned that their ship had been seen and was described as a Star in the East.

‘ “The baby grew into boyhood, and through the special indoctrination he constantly received by telepathy, he showed great promise. As a youth he would dispute with his elders and regrettably he antagonized the local priesthood. In early manhood he withdrew from those he knew and traveled to many other lands in the middle and far east. We directed him to travel to Tibet, and he crossed the mountain range and sojourned for a time in the Cathedral of Lhasa, where even now prints of his hands are preserved. Here he received advice and assistance in the formulation of a religion suitable for western peoples.

‘ “During his stay in Lhasa he underwent special treatment in which the astral body of the Earth-human was freed and taken away to another existence. In its place was inserted the astral body of one of our choosing. This was a person with very great experience in spiritual matters — far greater experience than could be obtained under any Earth conditions. This system of transmigration is one we frequently employ when dealing with backward races. At last everything was ready, and he made the long journey back to his homeland. Arrived there, he was successful in recruiting certain acquaintances who would assist with the dissemination of the new religion.

‘ “Unfortunately, the first occupant of the body had antagonized the priests. Now they remembered the fact and carefully arranged an incident under which the man could be arrested. Having control of the judge who tried the matter the result was a foregone conclusion. We considered effecting a rescue, but

came to the conclusion that the overall result would be bad for the general population and for the new religion.

‘ “The new form of spiritual discipline spread. But once again there were those who subverted it to their own ends. About sixty years after its inception a large convention was held in the middle east city of Constantinople. Here many priests foregathered. Many of them perverted men who had depraved sexual desires and who looked upon heterosexuality as unclean. Under their majority vote the real Teachings were altered and made women appear unclean. They now taught – quite erroneously — that all children are born in sin. They decided to publish a book about the events of sixty years before.

‘ “Writers were hired to compile books on the same lines using as far as possible the tales and legends which had been passed down (with all their inaccuracies) from person to person. For year after year various committees sat to edit, delete and alter passages which did not please them. Eventually a book was written which did NOT teach the real Belief, but which was in effect advertising material to enhance the power of the priesthood. Throughout the centuries which followed, the priests — who SHOULD have been assisting the development of Mankind — actively hindered it. False legends have been propagated, facts have been distorted. Unless the people of the Earth, and particularly the evil priests, change their ways, we, the People of the Empire, will have to take over the Earth world. Meantime, except in such extreme cases as this, we have orders not to converse with Man, and to make no overtures to any government on Earth.”

‘The Voice ceased to speak. I floated numbly before those ever-changing screens watching the pictures as they brought to my vision all that had happened in those days of long ago. I saw, too, much of the probable future, for the future CAN be predicted fairly accurately for a world or even for a country. I saw my own dear land being invaded by the hated Chinese. I saw the rise — and fall — of an evil political regime which seemed to have a name like communism, but this meant nothing to me. At last I felt extreme exhaustion. I felt that even

my astral body was wilting under the strain which had been placed upon it. The screens, hitherto so full of living color, turned grey. My vision blurred and I fell into a state of unconsciousness.

‘A horrid rocking motion awakened me from my sleep, or from the state of unconsciousness. I opened my eyes — but I HAD no eyes! Although I still could not move I was in some way aware that I was again in my physical body. The rocking was the table which bore me being carried back along the space vessel corridor. An unemotional voice flatly stated “he is conscious”. A grunt of acknowledgement followed and there was silence again except for the shuffling of feet and the faint scraping of metal as at times my table was bumped against a wall.

‘I lay alone in that metal room. The men had deposited my table and silently withdrawn. I lay pondering the marvels that had befallen me yet feeling a little resentful. The constant tirade about priests; I was a priest and they were glad enough to make use of my unwilling services. As I rested broodingly I heard the metal panel slide aside. A man entered and slid shut the door behind him.

‘ “Well, Monk,” exclaimed the voice of the doctor, “you have done well. We are very proud of you. While you lay unconscious we examined again your brain and our instruments tell us that you have all the knowledge locked inside your brain cells. You have taught our young men and women much. Soon you will be released. Does that make you happy?”

‘ “Happy, Sir Doctor?” I queried. “What have I to be happy about? You capture me, you cut off the top of my head, you force my spirit out of my body, you insult me as a member of the priesthood, and now — having used me — you are going to discard me like a man casting off his tattered body at death. Happy? What have I to be happy about? Are you going to restore my eyes? Are you going to provide a living for me? How am I going to exist otherwise?” I almost SNARLED the latter!

‘ “One of the main troubles of the world, Monk,” mused the doctor, “is that most of your people are negative. No one could

say that you are negative. You positively say what you mean. If people would always think POSITIVELY there would be no trouble with the world, for the negative condition comes naturally to people here, although it actually takes more effort to be negative.”

“But Sir Doctor!” I exclaimed, “I asked what you were going to DO for me. How shall I live? What shall I DO? Do I just have to retain this knowledge until someone comes along who says HE is the man, and then babble everything like an old woman in the market place? And WHY do you think I will do my alleged tasks, thinking as you do about priests?”

“Monk!” said the doctor, “we shall place you in a comfortable cave, with a nice stone floor. It will have a very small trickle of water which will supply your needs in that direction. As for food, your priestly state will ensure that people BRING you food. Again, there are priests AND priests; your priests of Tibet are mainly good and we have no quarrel with them. Did you not observe that we have previously used the priests of Tibet? And you ask about him to whom you shall give your knowledge; remember this — you will KNOW when the person comes. Give your knowledge to him and to none other.”

“So I lay there entirely at their mercy. But after many hours the doctor came in to my room again, saying, “Now you shall be restored to movement. First — we have a new robe for you and also a new bowl.” Hands were busy by me. Strange things were plucked out of me. My sheet was removed and the new robe — a NEW one, the first NEW robe I had ever had — was placed about me. Then movement returned to me. Some male attendant placed an arm around my shoulders and eased me over the edge of the table. For the first time in an unknown number of days I again stood upon my feet.

“That night I rested more content, wrapped in a blanket which also had been given to me. And on the morrow I was taken, as I have already told you, and deposited in the cave where I have lived alone for more than sixty years. But now, before we rest for the night, let us have a little tea, for my task is at an end.’

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE young monk sat up abruptly, the nape of his neck bristling with fright. SOMETHING had brushed by him. SOMETHING had trailed icy fingers across his forehead. For long moments, he sat bolt upright straining his ears for even the slightest sign of a sound. Wide eyed and staring he strove in vain to pierce the utter blackness around him. Nothing moved. No vestige of noise made the slightest ripple on his consciousness. The entrance to the cave was a mere lighter-blackness vaguely etched on the entire lack of light engulfing the cave.

He held his breath, listening until he could hear the pounding of his own heart, and the faint creakings and wheezes from his own organs. No rustle of sound from wind-disturbed leaves cheered him. No creature of the night called. Silence. The absolute lack of noise which is known to but few, and to none in populated communities. Again light tendrils wandered across his head. With a squeak of fright, he leaped high into the air, his legs running even before he hit the ground.

Dashing out of the cave, perspiring with fright, he stooped hastily over the well-banked fire. Throwing aside the enclosing earth and sand he uncovered the red glow. Quickly he thrust in a well-dried branch and blew on the embers until it seemed his blood-vessels must burst under the strain. At last the wood burst into flame. Grasping it in one hand he hastily inserted another stick and waited for it too to flare into light. At last, with a burning brand in each hand he slowly re-entered the cave. The flickering flames leaped and danced to his movements. His shadows were thrown grotesque and huge on either side of him.

Nervously he peered about. Anxiously he searched in the

hope that it had been a spider's web trailing across him, but of that there was no sign. Then he thought of the old hermit and he berated himself for not thinking of him before. 'Venerable One!' he called tremulously, 'are you all right?' With straining ears he listened, but there was no reply, not even an echo. Dubiously he made his slow, frightened way forward, with the two flaring branches thrust well before him. At the end of the cave he turned right, where he had not before entered, and uttered a pent-up gasp of relief as he saw the old man sitting in the lotus position at the far end of a smaller cave.

A strange flash — flash — flash caught his attention as he was about to silently withdraw. Staring hard he saw that water was emerging from a rocky protrusion as drop — drop — drop. Now the young monk was calmer. 'I am sorry I intruded, Venerable One,' he said, 'I feared you were ill. I will leave you.' But there was no reply. No movement. The old man sat as still as a stone statue. Apprehensively the young man advanced and then stood for a moment studying the motionless figure. At last, fearfully, he extended his arm and touched the old one on the shoulder. The spirit had withdrawn. Previously bedazzled by the flickering flames he had not thought about the aura. Now he perceived that that too had faded, gone out.

Sadly the young man sat cross-legged in front of the corpse and recited the age-old ritual for the dead. Giving instructions for the journeyings of the Spirit on the way to the Heavenly Fields. Warning of possible dangers laid before him in his confused state of mind by mischievous entities. At last, his religious obligations fulfilled, he slowly rose to his feet, bowed to the dead figure, and — the torches having long burned out — felt his way out of the cave.

The pre-dawn wind was just rising and began moaning eerily through the trees. A wild keening came from a rocky fissure across which the wind was blowing and making a high organ note of dismal sound. Slowly the first faint streaks of light appeared in the morning sky and the far edge of the mountain range could now be distinguished. The young monk crouched miserably beside the fire, wondering what to do next, thinking of the grisly task before him. Time seemed to stand still. But at

last, after what seemed to be an infinity of ages, the sun advanced and there was daylight. The young monk thrust a branch into the fire and waited patiently until the end burst into flames then, reluctantly he grasped the flaming brand and advanced with trembling legs into the cave and into the inner chamber.

The body of the old hermit was sitting as though he were still alive. Apprehensively the young monk bent and lifted the old body. Without much effort he raised it and draped it across his shoulders. Staggering a little he made his way out of the cave and along the side of the mountain where the big flat stone was waiting. The vultures were waiting too. Slowly the young man removed the robe from the wasted body and felt instant compassion at the sight of the skeleton-thin frame with the skin so tightly stretched. Shuddering with revulsion he jabbed the sharp-edged flint into the lower abdomen and pulled up hard. The tearing gristle and fibrous muscle made a dreadful sound which alerted the vultures and brought them hopping nearer.

With the body exposed and the body cavity gaping open the young man raised a heavy rock and brought it down upon the skull so that the brains came tumbling out. Then, with the tears streaming down his cheeks, he picked up the old hermit's robe and bowl and trudged back to the cave, leaving the vultures quarrelling and fighting behind him. Into the fire he tossed the robe and bowl, watching as the flames so quickly consumed them.

Sadly, with tears plopping down to the thirsty earth, he turned away and trudged slowly down the path towards another phase of life.