

disciple, and himself as an already aged lama, both on that very road, returning from a pilgrimage to the holy places of Tibet and going home to the monastery on the hillock.

He reminded the lama of all these things, giving minute details regarding their journey, their lives in the distant monastery and many other particulars.

Now the aim of the Mongolians' journey was precisely to beg advice from the Dalai Lama as to the best way of discovering the *tulku* head of their monastery, whose seat had been unoccupied for more than twenty years, in spite of persevering efforts to find his reincarnation.

These superstitious people were ready to believe that the Dalai Lama, through his supernormal power, had detected their intention and out of kindness had caused their meeting with their reincarnated lord.

The Ngari wanderer complied immediately with the usual test, picking out without hesitation or mistake, among a number of similar objects, those that had belonged to the late lama.

No doubt subsisted in the mind of the Mongolians. On the morrow, I saw the caravan retracing its steps, moving away to the slow pace of the big camels and disappearing on the skyline into the Gobi solitudes. The new *tulku* was going to meet his fate.

CHAPTER IV

DEALING WITH GHOSTS AND DEMONS

The Lugubrious Communion

A RATHER large number of Tibetan occultists seem to delight in lugubrious musing and practices in which corpses play a prominent part. Vulgar sorcerers only seek by this means to acquire magic powers, but a number of more enlightened men affirm that esoteric teachings and a special kind of spiritual training is thus hidden under the veil of symbols and conventional language.

I need not say that this repugnant mysticism has nothing at all in common with Buddhism. It is also foreign to true Lamaism, though a few lamas secretly yield to its bizarre attraction. Its origin must be sought in the light of Tantric Hinduism and the doctrines of the ancient Bönpo shamanists.

The following story will be sufficient to illustrate this dark side of Tibetan occultism. It was told me at Cherku only a few years after the death of those concerned and by a man who had known them personally.

The lama who plays the principal part was the abbot of Miniagpar Lhakhang near Tachienlu, known by the name of Chogs Tsang. He is the author of a number of prophecies regarding events which are to take place in Tibet, China and the world at large. He was regarded as having supernormal powers, among others of being able to cause death.

Chogs Tsang used to behave in a strange, often quite incomprehensible way, and was addicted to

drinking. He lived for some time with the Tibetan chieftain of Tachienlu who bears the title of *gyalpo* (king).

Once, while talking and drinking with his host, the lama asked for the sister of the master of horse as his wife. This official, who happened to be present, refused his consent. The lama was so enraged that he violently threw the precious jade cup in which he had drunk on the ground, breaking it into pieces, and cursed the equerry, declaring that after two days he would die.

The *gyalpo* did not approve of the lama's request for his officer's sister and had no faith in the power of his curse. The equerry was young and healthy, he argued. Still the lama maintained that he would die and, indeed, two days later the man passed away.

Then the *gyalpo* and the parents of the young maid became frightened and hastened to bring the girl to the lama. But he refused to take her.

"She would have been useful," he said, "for obtaining an object which would have benefited a large number of beings; but the opportunity has passed, and I do not care for a wife."

This story resembles that of Dugpa Kunlegs, mentioned in the first chapter. It is a common theme of Tibetan tales.

Now one evening this same Chogs Tsang unexpectedly called up one of his *trapas*.

"Saddle two horses, we are going," he ordered him.

The monk remonstrated with the Lama, saying that it was already late and that it would be better to wait the next morning.

"Do not answer back," said Chogs Tsang laconically. "Let us go."

They start, ride in the night and arrive at some spot near a river. There they alight from their horses and walk towards the river bank.

Though the sky is completely dark a spot on the water is "lighted by sun rays," and in that illuminated place a corpse is floating up-stream, moving against the current. After a while it comes within reach of the two men.

"Take your knife, cut a piece of the flesh and eat it," commands Chogs Tsang to his companion. And he adds:

"I have a friend in India who sends me a meal every year at this date."

Then he himself begins to cut and to eat.

The attendant is struck with terror, he endeavours to imitate his master but does not dare to put the morsel into his mouth and hides it in his *ambag*.¹

Both return to the monastery where they arrive at dawn.

The lama says to the monk:

"I wished you to share the favour and the most excellent fruits of this mystic meal, but you are not worthy of it. That is why you have not dared to eat the piece which you have cut off and hidden under your dress."

Hearing these words the monk repents of his lack of courage and puts his hand into his *ambag* to take his share of the corpse, but the piece of flesh is no longer there.

This fantastic story accords with certain information given me with great reserve by some anchorites belonging to the Dzogschen sect.

There exist, so they said, certain human beings who have attained such a high degree of spiritual perfection, that the original material substance of their bodies has become transmuted into a more subtle one which possesses special qualities.

Few people can discern the change which has come

¹ The breast pocket formed by the wide Tibetan robe tied with a belt.

over these exceptional men. A morsel of their transformed flesh, when eaten, will produce a special kind of ecstasy and bestow knowledge and supernormal powers upon the person partaking of it.

A hermit told me that when a *naljorpa*, through his clairvoyance, has discovered one of these wonderful beings, he sometimes begs from him the favour of being informed of his death in order that he may obtain a small portion of his precious body.

Might fervent candidates for this gruesome communion not sometimes grow too impatient and refuse to wait for the natural death of the holy one?—Might they not hurry it forward?—

One of those who disclosed this secret rite to me, almost seemed to confess that the thing had happened. However, he was careful to mention the attenuating circumstance that the victim consented to the sacrifice.

The Corpse Who Dances

Another mysterious rite is called *rolang* (the corpse who stands up). Traditions and ancient chronicles relate that, before the introduction of Buddhism into Tibet, it was practised by the Bönpo shamans during the funeral ceremony. However, the brief movement made by a dead body in such circumstances cannot be compared with what happens in the course of the horrible and grotesque *tête-à-tête* that Tibetan occultists depict.

There exist several kinds of *rolang*. These must not be mistaken for the *trong jug*¹ rite which causes the "spirit" of another being to pass into a corpse and apparently resuscitate it, though the corpse is not animated by its original occupant.

One of these lugubrious *rolang* was described to me as follows by a *ngagspa* who said he had practised it himself.

¹ Written *grong hjug*.

The celebrant is shut up alone with a corpse in a dark room. To animate the body, he lies on it, mouth to mouth, and while holding it in his arms, he must continually repeat mentally the same magic formula,¹ excluding all other thoughts.

After a certain time the corpse begins to move. It stands up and tries to escape; the sorcerer, firmly clinging to it, prevents it from freeing itself. Now the body struggles more fiercely. It leaps and bounds to extraordinary heights, dragging with it the man who must hold on, keeping his lips upon the mouth of the monster, and continue mentally repeating the magic words.

At last the tongue of the corpse protrudes from its mouth. The critical moment has arrived. The sorcerer seizes the tongue with his teeth and bites it off. The corpse at once collapses.

Failure in controlling the body after having awaked it, means certain death for the sorcerer.

The tongue carefully dried becomes a powerful magic weapon which is treasured by the triumphant *ngagspa*.

The Tibetan who gave me these details described most vividly the gradual awakening of the corpse: the first conscious look which brightened its glazed eyes and its feeble movements slowly growing in strength until he became unable to prevent the agitation of the jumping monster and needed all his strength to hold it. He described his sensations when he could feel the tongue issuing from the mouth of the corpse and touching his own lips, and realized that the terrible moment had come when, if he failed to conquer it, the horrible being would kill him.

Had that fantastic struggle not been purely subjective? Had it not taken place during one of these trances which are frequently experienced by Tibetan *naljorpas*, which they also voluntarily cultivate? I

¹ This differs according to the masters.

doubted and asked to see "*the tongue*." The sorcerer showed me a desiccated blackish object which might have been "a tongue," but it was not sufficient to prove the origin of the hideous relic.

Be that as it may, numbers of Tibetans believe that the *rolang* rite really takes place.

Beside corpses being revived by special rites, Tibetans believe also that any corpse is liable to rise suddenly and harm the living. It is for this reason that dead bodies are continually watched by some one who recites the liturgic words which prevent that sham resurrection.

A *trapa* from Sepogön in the vicinity of the Salween told me the following story.

While still a boy novice, he had accompanied three lamas of his monastery to a house where a man had died. There the lamas were to perform the daily rite for the dead till the day appointed to carry the corpse to the cemetery. At night they had retired to sleep in a corner of the large room where the body was kept, tied up in a seated posture with many scarves and swathed in clothes.

"The charge of reciting the magic formulas had been entrusted to me. In the middle of the night I was overcome with the continuous wearisome repetition and may have dozed a few minutes. A small noise awakened me! a black cat passed by the corpse and went out of the room. Then I heard a kind of cracking noise like tearing cloth, and to my horror, I saw the dead body moving and freeing himself from his bands. Mad with fright, I ran out of the house, but before I had escaped from the room I saw the ghost stretching out one hand and creeping upon the sleeping men.

"In the morning the three men were found dead; the corpse had returned to his place but the scarves were torn and the clothes lay on the floor around him."

Tibetans have great faith in such stories.

The touch of the *rolang* is mortal and the mischievous ghost does not fail to lay his hand on all who are within his reach: only the lamas who perform the rites of the dead are said to know magic words and gestures which avert that danger, by controlling the corpse and causing it to sit back if it attempts to move.

We are also told of *rolangs* which escape from the house where they have revived and roam about the country. Again, others are said to disappear without leaving any trace.

One could fill numbers of books with the stories one hears about *rolangs* among the good people of Tibet.

The Enchanted Dagger

It is needless to say that "tongues of the jumping corpse," if they exist at all, are exceptional implements of sorcery. The ritual weapons—called *phurba*—generally used by lamaist magicians are made of bronze, wood or even ivory, shaped to resemble a dagger and often beautifully chiselled or carved.

A true initiate in the Tibetan secret lore, however, would scoff at the sorcerer and his repugnant practices. The power of the magic weapon does not, he thinks, depend on the substance of which it is made but is communicated to it by the magician himself.

Yet, as time goes on, a certain portion of this energy remains attached to the *phurba*. Its strength increases with the repeated use which is made of it in magic rites. The inert object becomes "possessed" just as an animated being could be.

We shall read, in a following chapter, of the process employed by the *ngagspas* who hold this belief.

On the other hand, it is said that the ritual implements which have served in coercion rites should not be kept in the house of a layman or of an uninitiated monk, for fear that the dangerous entities subdued

by their means might use them to take revenge upon the possessor, if he does not know how to protect himself.

To that belief I owe a few interesting objects which those who had inherited them begged me to carry away.

One day a windfall of this kind came my way so strangely that the story is worth telling. During a journey in Northern Tibet I met a small caravan of lamas, and talking with them according to the custom along these trails where travellers are scarce, I learned that they were transporting a *phurba* which had become a source of calamity.

This ritualistic implement had belonged to a lama, their master, who had recently died. The dagger had started to work harm in the monastery itself. Two of the three monks who had touched it, had died, and the other one broke his leg by falling from a horse. Then the pole that held the banner of benediction, which was planted in the courtyard of the monastery, broke, and this is considered a very bad omen.

Frightened, yet not daring to destroy the *phurba* for fear of greater misfortunes, the monks had closed it up in a box. Soon after this, strange noises had been heard proceeding from the box.

They had finally decided to place the baleful object in an isolated cavern consecrated to a deity, but the cowherds living in that region threatened armed opposition. They recalled the story of a *phurba* that had moved through the air, wounding and killing numbers of men and animals. No one knew where nor when these wonders had taken place, but such details are of little importance to superstitious minds. The cowherds did not want the *phurba* in their neighbourhood.

The unfortunate *trapas* who carried the enchanted dagger wrapped in many papers printed with charms

and sealed in a casket, did not know how to get rid of it. Their dejected countenances prevented me from laughing at their credulity. I was also curious to look at the miraculous weapon.

"Let me see the *phurba*," I said, "perhaps I shall find some way of helping you."

They did not dare to take it out of the box, but after long parleys, they allowed me to do so myself.

The *phurba* was a fine piece of ancient Tibetan art. and I was seized with a desire to possess it, but I knew that the *trapas* would not sell it for anything in the world.

"Camp with us for the night," I said to them, "and leave the *phurba* with me. I will think it over."

My words promised nothing, but the bait of a good supper and of chatting with my men decided the travellers to accept.

At nightfall, I went some distance from the camp ostensibly carrying the dagger which, freed from its box, would have terrified the credulous Tibetans had I left it with them.

When I thought I was far enough away, I stuck the enchanted weapon into the ground and sat down on a blanket to think out a way of persuading the monks to let me have it.

I had been there for several hours when I seemed to see the form of a lama appearing near the spot where I had planted the *phurba*. He moved forward, bending cautiously. From beneath the toga in which his rather indistinct body was wrapped, a hand came out slowly and advanced to seize the magic dagger.

Jumping up, I grabbed it before the thief had been able to touch it.

So, I have not been the only one tempted. This man, less superstitious than his companions, had recognized the value of the *phurba* and very likely hoped to sell it secretly. He thought that I was asleep and

should notice nothing. The next day, the disappearance of the enchanted dagger would be attributed to some new occult intervention and one more story of magic would be circulated among the faithful. Too bad that such a clever scheme had not succeeded, but I kept the enchanted weapon; I even grasped it so tightly that my nerves, excited by the adventure or by the pressure of the bronze carved handle on my flesh, gave me the impression that the dagger was feebly moving in my hand.

And now for the thief!

All around me the barren plain was empty. He must have made off when I was stooping down to pull the dagger out of the ground.

I ran to the camp. The man who had just returned or who came back after me must be the culprit.

I found every one sitting up and reciting religious texts for protection against the evil powers. I called Yongden into my tent.

"Which of the monks has been missing?" I asked him.

"No one," he answered. "They are half dead with fright. They did not even dare to go far enough away from the tents to perform the necessities of nature. I had to scold them."

Good! I must have been "seeing things"; but perhaps this would stand me in good stead.

"Listen," I said to the *trapas*, "this is what has happened." And I told them quite frankly about my illusion and the doubts I had conceived of their honesty.

"Surely that was our Grand Lama!" they exclaimed. "He wanted to take back his *phurba* and perhaps he would have killed you if he had succeeded. Oh! Jetsunma, you are a true *gomchenma*, although certain people call you a *philing*.¹ Our *tsawai* lama (spiritual father) was a powerful magician; yet he could not

¹ Foreigner.

take his *phurba* away from you. Keep it now, keep it and it will no longer do harm to anyone."

They all spoke together, excited and terrified to think that their lama magician—more to be feared than ever, since he belonged to another world—had passed so close to them, and delighted, at the same time, to get rid of the enchanted dagger.

I shared in their joy but for a different reason: the *phurba* was mine. However, it was only honest not to take advantage of their confused state of mind.

"Think it over," I said. "A shadow may have deceived me. I may have gone to sleep while sitting there and been troubled by a dream."

They would have nothing of this. The lama had come, I had seen him and he had not been able to seize the *phurba*; so I, by my superior power, became its legitimate owner.

I confess that I allowed myself to be easily convinced. . . .

Practices to acquire Fearlessness—Challenging Demonic Beings

There is hardly any country which can vie with Tibet as to the riches, variety and picturesqueness of its folklore regarding ghosts and demons. If we were to rely on popular beliefs, we should conclude that evil spirits greatly outnumber the human population of the "Land of Snow."

Assuming thousands of different shapes, these malignant beings are said to dwell in trees, rocks, valleys, lakes, springs, and many other places. Always bent on mischief they hunt men and animals to steal their vital breath and feed upon it. They wander for pure pleasure across forests and high barren hills and every traveller risks being confronted by one of them at any turning of the road.

Official lamaist magicians undertake to convert, or

to subdue, these dangerous neighbours in order to stop their undesirable activity and transform them into useful obedient servants. Sorcerers compete with them in this art, but, nearly always, practise it with a view to using the power of the malevolent beings which they have tamed for their own, no less evil, purposes.

As for Tibetan mystics, they patronize a certain kind of commerce with demons that is connected with psychic training. This consists in meetings deliberately sought by the disciple, either to challenge demoniac beings or to give them alms. These rites are very different from those which have been described at the beginning of this chapter. Though they, too, may sometimes appear ridiculous or even repugnant, according to our ideas, their purpose is useful or lofty, such as liberating from fear, awakening feelings of boundless practical compassion leading to complete detachment and, finally, to spiritual illumination.

It happens, not infrequently, that credulous men who firmly believe in the strictly objective existence of thousands of demons, betake themselves to a mystic lama and, desirous of leading a religious life, beg to be accepted as his disciples.

All these simpletons are not turned away and sent back to their village with good advice regarding morality and the practice of good will towards every one. Some among them, who appear capable of progressing towards enlightenment, may well be favoured with more extended teaching.

If the lama is a true adept of the "Short Path," his first care will be to provide the new disciple with opportunities of *liberating himself* from his terror of the various demons. Lengthy explanations and demonstrations of truth and error are not part of mystic teachers' methods. They simply place their disciples in the conditions required to experience events and sensations that will awaken their reflection and allow

them to acquire knowledge. The extent of the profit derived from such experiences depends on the pupil's intelligence.

A young man of my acquaintance was sent by his master—a lama from Amdo—to a solitary gloomy ravine which was supposed to be haunted by evil non-human beings. There he was told to tie himself to a tree or to a rock and at night, calling on the ferocious *Towos*, which Tibetan painters show eating the brains of men, he was to challenge them.

However terrified he might feel, he was commanded to resist the temptation of untying himself and running away. He must remain, bound to his post, until sunrise.

This is nearly a classic practice. It is enjoined on many Tibetan novices as a first step on the mystic path.

Sometimes the disciples must remain bound for three days and three nights, or for even a longer period, fasting, sleepless, experiencing the conditions of utter weariness and starvation that so easily bring hallucinations.

Such exercises naturally at times have tragic consequences. Yongden was told a story that illustrates this by an old lama of Tsarong, when I was travelling *incognito* to Lhasa. Seated in a corner of the room, the "insignificant mamma" whom I personified at that time did not miss one word of the story.

In their youth, this lama and his younger brother, called Lodö, had left their monastery to follow a wandering ascetic of another region who had established himself for a time as hermit on a hill called Phagri—a well-known place of pilgrimage situated not far from Dayul.

The anchorite commanded the young brother to tie himself by the neck to a tree, in a woody place which was said to be haunted by Thags yang, a demon

who generally appears under the shape of a tiger, to whom the ferocious instincts of that animal are ascribed.

Once bound as a victim to the sacrificial post, the man was to imagine that he was a cow which had been led there as a propitiating offering to Thags yang. Keeping his thoughts concentrated on that idea and lowing now and then to identify himself more completely with the beast, he would—if the concentration was strong enough—reach a state of trance in which, having entirely lost the consciousness of his own personality, he would experience the anguish of a cow in danger of being devoured.

The exercise was to last for three consecutive days and nights. Four days went by and the novice did not return to his matter. On the morning of the fifth day, the latter said to the eldest of his disciples:

"I had a strange dream last night. Go and fetch your brother."

The monk obeyed.

An appalling sight awaited him in the forest. The corpse of Lodö, torn and half devoured, remained partly fastened to a tree, while bloody pieces lay scattered among the surrounding bushes.

The terrified man collected the ghastly remains in his monastic toga and hastened back to his *guru*.

When he reached the hut in which the latter lived with his two disciples, he found it empty. The lama had left, taking with him all his belongings, two religious books, a few ritualistic implements and his travelling stick with a trident at the top.

"I felt that I was becoming mad," said the old Tibetan. "That sudden departure frightened me even more than the discovery of my brother's mangled body."

"What had our teacher dreamt? Did he know the awful fate of his disciple? Why had he gone? . . ."

Without actually knowing any better than the afflicted monk what reasons had led the lama to run away, I nevertheless thought that when he saw that his disciple had not returned, he might have feared some accident had befallen the young man in the forest haunted by wild beasts. Perhaps he had really received some kind of mysterious information in a dream about the tragic event, and thought it prudent to escape the anger and revenge of the victim's family.

As for the novice's death, it could be explained quite naturally. Panthers are frequently found in that region, some leopards roam also in the woods. I had met two myself a few days before hearing the story.¹ One of these animals, which the monk himself had perhaps attracted by his lowing, might have killed him before he had time to break his bonds and defend himself.

But a very different interpretation was given to the sad story by the man who told it and those seated around him. According to them the demon-tiger had seized upon the offering imprudently presented to him.

The young disciple, they said, ignored the magic words and gestures which would have protected him. And in this matter the fault of his teacher was very great, for he ought never to have sent him to challenge the demon-tiger without arming him with the teachings and ritualistic formula which are efficacious weapons in such cases.

But in the utmost depth of his soul the monk, wounded in his brotherly love, had a more terrible idea which he expressed in a low and trembling voice.

"Who knows," he said, "if that strange lama was not the demon-tiger himself who had taken on a human form to attract a victim? He could not have killed my poor brother while in human form, but at night

¹ See *My Journey to Lhasa*.

when I was asleep, resuming his tiger shape he ran to the forest and satisfied his ferocious craving."

The last words of the old man met with profound silence. He had probably told this terrifying episode of his long-lost youth many times. But his audience was once more deeply impressed.

Might it not still happen any day? Thags yang and so many other kindred beings continue to prowl around the villages and to follow the travellers, seeking to prey upon those who are unsufficiently protected. Every one there believed it.

In the large kitchen dimly lighted by the flames leaping now and then from the hearth, a woman lifted her eyes instinctively towards the protective charms pasted on the walls, as if she wanted to ascertain that they were still there. The grandfather went into the next room where the evening offering lamps burnt on the family altar, and the sweet fragrance of incense sticks he had lighted floated in to soothe our nerves.

Although one may suppose that a number of accidents, apparently of occult origin, do actually happen during the performance of these rites, yet they can only be exceptional. So it seems only logical that, after spending a certain amount of time sitting in haunted places and challenging evil spirits, the disciple should come to doubt the existence of beings which never appear.

I have questioned several lamas on this subject.

"Incredulity comes sometimes," answered a *Geshes* from Derge.¹ "Indeed, it is one of the ultimate objects of the mystic masters, but if the disciple reaches this state of mind before the proper time he misses something which these exercises are designed to develop, that is fearlessness.

"Moreover, the teachers do not approve of simple incredulity, they deem it contrary to truth. The

¹ A *Geshes* is a graduate, a kind of LL.D. and Ph.D. Derge is a town in the province of Kham, in Eastern Tibet.

disciple must understand that gods and demons do really exist for those who believe in their existence, and that they are possessed with the power of benefiting or harming those who worship or fear them.

"However, very few reach incredulity in the early part of their training. Most novices actually see frightful apparitions."

I shall not venture to contradict this latter opinion, a number of instances have proved to me that it is well grounded. Darkness, the peculiarly wild aspect of the places chosen for meeting the dreaded evil beings, the power that Orientals possess to a high degree of visualizing their thoughts, are sufficient to produce hallucinations. But must we classify all phenomena witnessed by the celebrants of these curious rites as hallucination? Tibetans affirm that we must not.

I had the opportunity of talking with a *gomchen* of Ga (Eastern Tibet) called Kushog Wanchen about sudden deaths which occurred while calling up demons.

This lama did not appear inclined towards superstition and I thought he would agree with my opinion on this matter.

"Those who died were killed by fear. Their visions were the creation of their own imagination. He who does not believe in demons would never be killed by them."

I was much astonished when the anchorites replied in a peculiar tone of voice.

"According to that it must also follow that a man who does not believe in the existence of tigers may feel confident that none of them would ever hurt him even if he were confronted by such a beast." . . .

And he continued:

"Visualizing mental formations, either voluntarily or not, is a most mysterious process. What becomes of these creations? May it not be that like children born of our flesh, these children of our mind separate

their lives from ours, escape our control, and play parts of their own? . . .¹

"Must we not also consider that we are not the only ones capable of creating such formations? And if such entities exist in the world, are we not liable to come into touch with them, either by the will of their maker or from some other cause? Could one of these causes not be that, through our mind or through our material deeds, we bring about the conditions in which these entities are capable of manifesting some kind of activity?"

"I will give you an illustration," he continued. "If you are living on a dry spot of ground at some distance from the banks of a river, fishes will never approach you. But cut a channel between the river and your dwelling-place and dig a pond in the dry spot of ground. Then, as the water runs in it, fishes will come from the river and you will see them moving before your eyes."

"It is only prudent to beware of opening channels without due consideration. Few, indeed, suspect what the great store-house of the world which they tap unconsciously, contains." And in lighter vein he concluded: "One must know how to protect oneself against the tigers to which one has given birth, as well as against those that have been begotten by others."

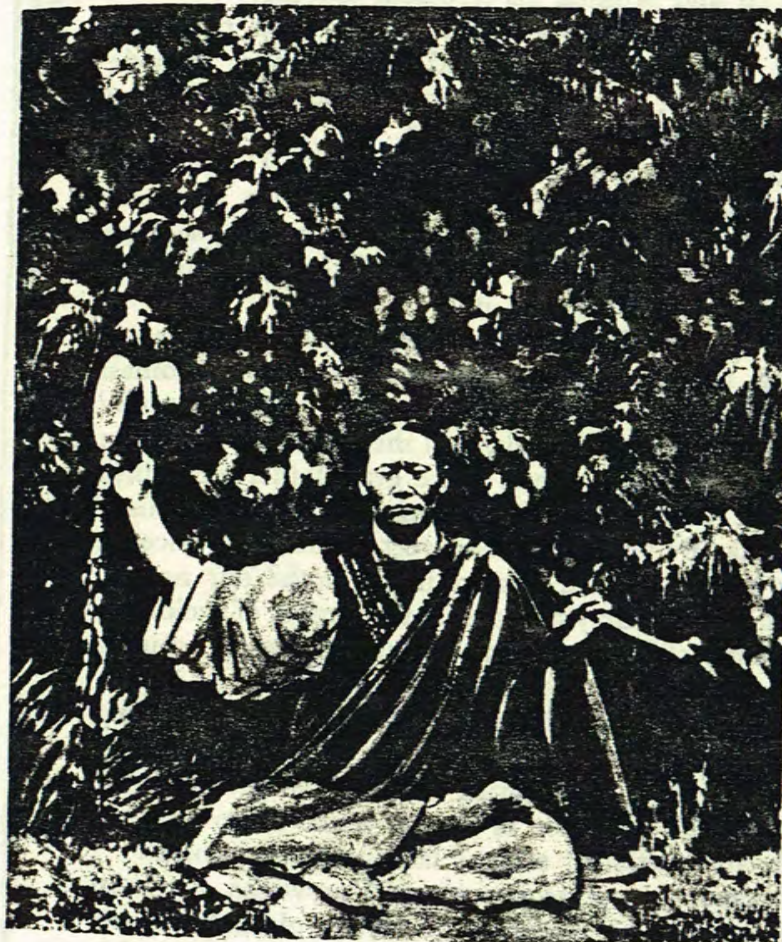
The Dreadful Mystic Banquet

It is these theories and others akin to them which have determined the choice of the places deemed proper as exercise grounds for mental wrestling with occult adversaries, as well as the peculiar form of the rites to be practised on these occasions.

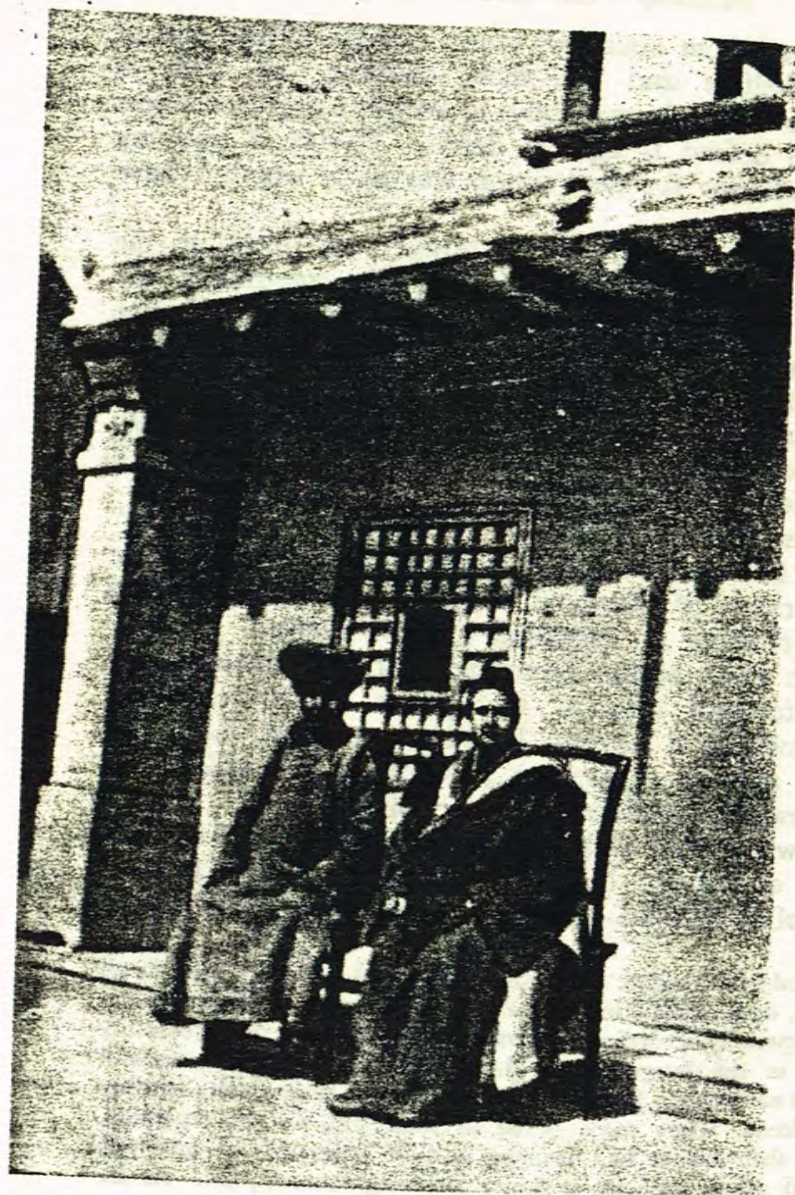
The most fantastic of them is called *chöd*² (cutting off). It is a kind of "Mystery" played by one actor

¹ See also in Chapter VIII what is said about *tulpas*.

² Written *ghod*.



A "NALJÖRPA" PERFORMING THE RITE OF "CHÖD" IN A FOREST SAID TO BE HAUNTED BY EVIL SPIRITS
IN ONE HAND HE IS HOLDING A "DAMARU," IN THE OTHER HAND THE "KONGLING" TRUMPET MADE OF A HUMAN FEMUR



THE AUTHOR SHARING THE HERMITAGE OF AN ERUDITE
LADY LAMA WHO TEACHES CHÖD AND OTHER MYSTIC
PRACTICES TO NUNS DISCIPLES

only, the celebrant ; and it has been so cleverly devised to terrify the novices that one hears of men who have suddenly gone mad or died while engaged in its performance.

A cemetery, or any wild site whose physical aspect awakens feelings of terror, is considered to be an appropriate spot. However, the place is thought even more suitable if it is associated with a terrible legend or if a tragic event has actually happened there quite recently.

The reason of this preference is that the effect of *chöd*, or kindred rites, does not depend solely on the feelings aroused in the mind of the celebrant by the stern words of the liturgy, nor upon the awe-inspiring surroundings. It is also designed to stir up the occult forces, or the conscious beings which—according to Tibetans—may exist in such places, having been generated either by actual deeds or by the concentration of many people's thoughts on imaginary events.

It follows that, during the performance of *chöd*, which I have compared to a drama enacted by a single actor, the latter may happen to see himself suddenly surrounded by players of the occult worlds who begin to play unexpected rôles. Whatever part auto-suggestion and visualization may have in the production of these phenomena, they are deemed excellent for the good result of the training ; but the test proves too hard for the nerves of some apprentice *naljorpas* and it is then that the accidents that I have mentioned occur : of madness or death.

Like any other actor, the man who wants to perform *chöd* must first learn his rôle by heart. Then he must practise the ritual dance, his steps forming geometrical figures, and also turning on one foot, stamping and leaping while keeping time with the liturgic recitation. Finally, he must learn to handle, according to rule, the bell, the *dorjee*, and the magic dagger (*phurba*),

to beat rhythmically a kind of small drum (*damaru*) and to blow a trumpet made of a human femur (*kangling*).

The task is not easy; I lost my breath more than once during my apprenticeship.

The lama teacher who directs the drill must be a kind of ballet master. But around him are to be seen no smiling dancing girls in pink tights. The dancers are young ascetics emaciated by austerities, clad in ragged robes, their unwashed faces lighted by ecstatic, hard, resolute eyes. They are preparing themselves, as they think, for a perilous undertaking, and the thought of the dreadful banquet at which they must offer their bodies to be devoured by the hungry demons haunts their minds.

In such conditions this "rehearsal," which might be comical, becomes rather lugubrious.

Lack of place prevents me from giving a translation of the text of *chöd*, in *extenso*. It includes long mystic preliminaries during which the celebrant *naljorpa* "tramples down" all passions and crucifies his selfishness. However, the essential part of the rite consists in a banquet which may be briefly described as follows.

The celebrant blows his bone trumpet, calling the hungry demons to the feast he intends to lay before them. He imagines that a feminine deity, which esoterically personifies his own will, springs from the top of his head and stands before him, sword in hand.

With one stroke she cuts off the head of the *naljorpa*. Then, while troops of ghouls crowd round for the feast, the goddess severs his limbs, skins him and rips open his belly. The bowels fall out, the blood flows like a river, and the hideous guests bite here and there, masticate noisily, while the celebrant excites and urges them with the liturgic words of unreserved surrender:

"For ages, in the course of renewed births I have

borrowed from countless living beings—at the cost of their welfare and life—food, clothing, all kinds of services to sustain my body, to keep it joyful in comfort and to defend it against death. To-day, I pay my debt, offering for destruction this body which I have held so dear.

"I give my flesh to the hungry, my blood to the thirsty, my skin to clothe those who are naked, my bones as fuel to those who suffer from cold. I give my happiness to the unhappy ones. I give my breath to bring back the dying to life.

"Shame on me if I shrink from giving my *self*! Shame on you, wretched and demoniac beings,¹ if you do not dare to prey upon it. . . ."

This act of the "Mystery" is called the "red meal." It is followed by the "black meal," whose mystic signification is disclosed only to those disciples who have received an initiation of high degree.

The vision of the demoniacal banquet vanishes, the laughter and cries of the ghouls die away. Utter loneliness in a gloomy landscape succeeds the weird orgy, and the exaltation aroused in the *naljorpa* by his dramatic sacrifice gradually subsides.

Now he must imagine that he has become a small heap of charred human bones that emerges from a lake of black mud—the mud of misery, of moral defile-

¹ Buddhists extend their compassion and brotherly love to all beings, demons included. One must note that according to them, and especially according to lamaists, a demon does not necessarily dwell in the purgatories. The inhabitants of these sorrowful worlds are beings who have been led there by their cruelty or other evil deeds. They may, while in their present sad condition, reject their former bad feelings, and be animated by good will toward others, or with a desire for enlightenment, etc. As for so-called "demons," they are beings who habitually harbour hatred and ill will, who rejoice in unrighteousness and cruelty. And these may—as a result of former deeds—have been born as men, demi-gods or any other kind of beings.

ment, and of harmful deeds to which he has co-operated during the course of numberless lives, whose origin is lost in the night of time. He must realize that the very idea of sacrifice is but an illusion, an offshoot of blind, groundless pride. In fact, he *has nothing* to give away, because he *is nothing*. These useless bones, symbolizing the destruction of his phantom "I," may sink into the muddy lake, it will not matter.

That silent renunciation of the ascetic who realizes that he holds nothing that he can renounce, and who utterly relinquishes the elation springing from the idea of sacrifice, closes the rite.

Some lamas undertake tours to perform *chöd* near a hundred and eight lakes, and a hundred and eight cemeteries. They devote years to this exercise, wandering not only over Tibet, but also in India, Nepal and China. Others only retire to solitary places for the daily celebration of *chöd* for a longer or shorter time.

Chöd has a fascinating aspect which cannot be conveyed by a dry account read in surroundings totally different from those in which this rite is celebrated. Like many others, I have yielded to the peculiar attraction of its austere symbolism and been impressed by the fantastic natural background of the Tibetan wilds.

The first time that I started alone for one of these strange peregrinations, I stopped near a clear lake set between stony shores. The surrounding landscape, completely barren and impassive, excluded all feelings of fear or of security, of joy or of sadness. There one felt oneself sinking into a bottomless abyss of indifference.

Evening darkened the bright mirror of the lake while I mused on the strange mind of the race that has invented *chöd* and so many other grim practices.

The fantastic procession of clouds lighted by the moon marched along the neighbouring summits and descended towards the valleys surrounding me with a

troop of nebulous phantoms. One of them came forward walking alone over a path of light, suddenly spread out on the dark water, like a carpet before his steps.

The transparent giant, whose eyes were two stars, made a gesture with his long arm emerging from a floating robe. Did he call me? Did he drive me away? . . . I could not tell.

Then he approached still nearer, looking so real, so life-like, that I closed my eyes to dispel the hallucination. I felt myself wrapped in the folds of a soft cold cloak whose subtle substance penetrated me, causing me to shiver. . . .

What strange visions must the sons of these haunted wilds behold, these novices brought up in superstition, sent by their spiritual fathers through the night all alone, their imagination excited by the maddening rites. How many times, in the storm sweeping across the high tablelands, they must hear their challenge answered and shudder with terror in their tiny tent, miles and miles away from all human beings.

I very well understood the fear experienced by some celebrants of *chöd*. Yet I thought there was much exaggeration in the stories circulated about the tragic effects of this rite and I treated them with considerable scepticism. However, as the years went by, I gathered together a few facts which compelled me to have more faith in these tales.

There is one that I will relate.

At that time I was camping in Northern Tibet, in the desert or grassland. I had established myself in the vicinity of three black tents inhabited by herdsmen who spent the summer with their cattle, in a large pasture *thang*.¹

Chance, which is but an easy word to designate

¹ *Thang*. A tableland of level ground between hill ranges or a very wide valley.

unknown causes, had led me there while hunting for butter, of which I had run short. These few cowherds happened to be good men. My presence near them as a lady-lama and also as a purchaser from whom silver might be obtained, did not displease them in the least. They offered to keep my horses and mules with their own, which would save my servants a good deal of work, and I decided to let men and beasts enjoy a week of rest.

Two hours after my arrival, I already knew all about the neighbouring region. Truly, there was not much to be said about it.

The void immensity of the grassy solitudes extended towards the four quarters, broken only by streams and solitary hill ranges, while over all lay the great sky, luminous and void.

Yet there was an object of interest in that desert; I learnt that a lama, whose seat was somewhere north among Mongolian tribes, had chosen a cave near my camp for practising meditation during the summer months.

With him—the cowherd said—were two *trapas*, his disciples, who lived in a small tent below their master's ascetic lodging. Beside boiling tea, these two had no work to do and they spent most of the time in religious exercises. They often wandered out at night, and no doubt I should sometimes hear the sounds of the *damarus*, *kanglings* and bells accompanying the celebration of nocturnal offices, here or there, on the hills.

As for the lama, whose name was Rabjoms Gyatso, he had not left his cave since his arrival, three months ago.

From this information I guessed that the lama was engaged in the performance of a *dubthab* or some other magic practice.

The following day, at dawn, I started for the lama's cave. I wanted to reach it while the *trapas* were busy

in their tent with their morning devotions. I hoped, if I was not seen by them, to be able to approach their master unexpectedly and have a look at what he was doing. This is not at all "etiquette," but being well acquainted with the customs of Tibetan lamas, I feared that Rabjoms Gyatso would refuse to see me if I asked permission to pay him a visit.

Guided by the directions which the cowherds had given me, I easily found the cave on a slope dominating a glen in which flowed a purling brook. A low wall built of stones, sods and turf and a curtain of rough yak hair had been added to the prehistoric dwelling to provide the lama with some sort of comfort and to hide him from passers-by.

My stratagem met with failure. As I climbed towards the cave, I met a sickly looking, matted-haired fellow dressed in ragged ascetic garb who stopped me. I had difficulty in persuading him to go to his master and beg for me the favour of an interview. The answer which he brought was polite but negative. The lama said that he could not see me but that if I would come again in a fortnight he would receive me.

As I had already planned to stay where I was for another week and, indeed, was not in a hurry to continue my journey, there was no special reason against some further delay. But, on the other hand, I did not know whether it was worth while waiting for the lama. I merely told the *trapa* that I might return, but would not engage to do so.

Twice a day, one or the other of the lama's disciples passed by my tent to fetch milk from the cowherds. The lean young man who had stopped me near the lama's cave attracted my attention by his wretched appearance. I thought that I might help him with some medicine and made up my mind to have a talk with him.

At my first words about medical treatment, he denied that he was suffering from any kind of illness, and as I pressed him with questions about the cause of his skeleton-like appearance, an expression of intense terror appeared in his wild eyes. It was impossible to obtain any explanation from him. I told my servants to try and learn something about the matter from his companion, but he too evaded all questions. Unlike the majority of Tibetans, who are rather talkative folk, these men were both uncommonly silent. After my inquiries, they went to the *dokpas*'s tents by a roundabout way to avoid my camp, and as it was clear that they did not want me to interfere, even in order to help them, I let them alone.

I had been staying there for seven days, when I was informed that a man had died among a group of herdsmen established about a mile away, in the middle of the *thang*, and this decided me to postpone my departure to witness the rustic funeral.

In great haste, two riders set off for a lama's camp, or as *dokpas*¹ call it, a *banag gumpa*—that is to say a monastery composed of an agglomeration of black tents—situated two days' journey from their home. They were to request the service of two monks to perform the rite for the dead. Only the ecclesiastics belonging to the monastery with which a layman is connected, as spiritual son or supporter, are rightly entitled to attend his *post-mortem* needs. But, in the meantime, the disciples of the foreign lama, our neighbour, went each in turn to read religious books over the dead man.

Some friends of the deceased, who had learnt the sad news, arrived from different directions, bringing presents to console the family in its bereavement, and the riders returned with the two monks and a few lay acquaintances. Then the chanting, ringing bells,

¹ Cowherds, herdsmen.

beating of drums and cymbals by the *trapas*, and the copious eating and drinking by all concerned, continued as usual in these circumstances in front of the decaying corpse tied in many wrappings and seated in a big cauldron. At last, when all was over, the dead body was carried to a small tableland on the mountains, cut into pieces and abandoned there, as supreme alms to the vultures.

To edify the *dokpas* in complying with a time-honoured custom of their *naljorpas*, whose costume I was wearing, I wrapped myself in a thick "zen"¹ at nightfall and walked to the place where the corpse had been carried, to spend the night there in meditation.

The moon was nearly full and beautifully lit up the immense plain extending from the foot of the hills which I skirted to other distant ranges. Nocturnal tramps in these solitudes have a peculiar charm. I could have walked for joy the whole night, but the cemetery, my goal, was less than an hour's march from my camp.

As I neared it I suddenly heard a strange sound, at the same time hoarse and piercing, that broke the perfect stillness of the desert. It was repeated several times, rending, it seemed, the calm atmosphere in which the sleeping steppes lay. Then the rhythmic beating of a *damaru* followed.

This language was clear enough to me. Some one—no doubt one of the lama's disciples—had gone to the place and performed *chöd* near the corpse.

The configuration of the land allowed me to reach unnoticed a small hillock and to hide myself in a cleft sheltered from the moonlight. From there I could perfectly observe the celebrant of *chöd*. He was the lean, sickly looking *trapa* to whom I had offered medicine. He wore his usual ragged *naljorpa* dress, a garnet-coloured pleated skirt, a yellow chemise with wide

¹ Zen. The toga worn by Buddhist monks and nuns.

sleeves and a red sleeveless waistcoat of a Chinese shape. But now the monastic toga was thrown over it and though as shabby as the rest of the clothes, its folds imparted a dignified and impressive mien to the tall emaciated monk.

When I arrived, the young ascetic recited the mantra of praise to the Prajñāpāramitā.

"O Wisdom that is gone, gone,
gone to the beyond, and beyond the beyond: svāhā! . . ."

The monotonous *dong, dong* of the deep-voiced drum became slower and finally ceased, the young ascetic seemed sunk in meditation. After a while he wrapped himself more tightly in his *zen*. The *kangling* in his left hand, the *damaru* lifted high in the right and beating an aggressive staccato, the man stood in a challenging attitude, as if defying some invisible enemy.

"I, the fearless *naljorpa*," he exclaimed, "I trample down the *self*, the gods, and the demons."

His voice sounded still louder!

"Ye lamas, spiritual teachers, Heros, Khadomas, by thousands, come join me in the dance!"

Then he began the ritualistic dance, turning successively towards the four quarters, reciting "I trample down the demon of pride, the demon of anger, the demon of lust, the demon of stupidity."

Each exclamation "I trample down" was accompanied by actual stamping and ritual vociferations of "*tsem shes tsem!*" which grew louder and louder, till the last ones were thundered out in truly deafening tones.

He rearranged his toga, which trailed on the ground, and having put aside his *damaru* and the bone trumpet, he spread the tent, seized a peg in one hand, a stone in the other one, and drove home the pegs while chanting the liturgy.

The tent stood there now, a puny thing made of a thin cotton fabric that had once been white and appeared greyish under the moonlight. It was ornamented with the words *Aum*, *A*, *Hum*, cut out in blue and red material and sewn on its three closed sides. Several frills of the five mystic colours—red, blue, green, yellow and white—hung from the little roof. The whole thing was faded and shabby.

Apparently agitated by disturbing thoughts, the lean ascetic looked at the pieces of the corpse scattered on the ground and then turned his head as if inspecting the surroundings. He seemed hesitating and, heaving a deep sigh, he passed his hand twice or thrice over his forehead. Then, shaking himself as if summoning up his courage, he seized his *kangling*, blew loudly a number of times, first slowly, then accelerating the rhythm as if for an exasperated summons, and entered his tent.

The nocturnal landscape that had been animated by the performance recovered its serenity.

What was I to do? The *naljorpa*, I knew, would not leave his tent before daybreak. Nothing more was to be seen. I was not in a meditative mood, I might as well go away. But there was no hurry. I continued to listen.

At intervals, I heard a few words of the ritual, then low indistinct muttering and moaning.

It was useless to remain there any longer. I moved cautiously out of my hiding-place. Then, as I took a few steps forward, I heard a low growl. An animal quickly passed in front of me. It was a wolf. The noise made by the *naljorpa* had kept it away and now, since all was silent, it had ventured to approach the feast laid there for those of its kind.

As I began to round the hillock, and climb down, a sudden exclamation stopped me.

"I pay my debts!" shouted the *naljorpa*. "As I

have been feeding on you so feed upon me in your turn!

"Come, ye hungry ones, and you that ungratified desires torment!

"In this banquet offered by my compassion, my flesh will transform itself into the very object of your craving.

"Here, I give you fertile fields, green forests, flowery gardens, both white and red food, clothes, healing medicines! . . . Eat! eat! . . ."

The excited ascetic blew furiously his *kangling*, uttered an awful cry and jumped on his feet so hastily that his head knocked against the low roof of the tent, and the latter fell in on him. He struggled a while under the cloth, and emerged with the grim, distorted face of a madman, howling convulsively with gestures betokening intense physical pain.

Now I could understand what *chöd* means for those who work themselves up until they are absolutely hypnotized by its ritual. No doubt that the man felt the teeth of some invisible ghouls in his body.

He looked around him in all directions and addressed unseen bystanders as if he had been surrounded by a host of beings from other worlds. Most likely he beheld some kind of ghastly vision.

The sight was deeply interesting. But I could not look at it with complete indifference. This poor fellow would kill himself with his dreadful ritual. I had discovered the secret of his sickly appearance and why he had deemed my medicines of no avail in his case.

I felt most anxious to awaken him from his nightmare. Yet I hesitated because I knew that my intervention would go against the established rule. Those who have engaged in such training must fight it out unaided.

As I remained undecided, I heard the wolf growling

again. It had stopped on the top of the hillock. From there, as if petrified, and in an attitude of intense terror, the animal looked fixedly in the direction of the tumble-down tent as if it, too, beheld some appalling sight.

The *naljorpa* continued to groan in agony.

I could not bear it any longer. I rushed towards the poor mad fellow. But, as soon as he caught sight of me, he called to me with a vehement gesture, shouting:

"Come, angry one, feed on my flesh . . . drink my blood! . . ."

This was too absurd indeed! He took me for a ghost! . . . In spite of the pity which I felt, I nearly laughed.

"Do be quiet," I said. "There are no demons here. I am the reverend lady-lama whom you know."

He did not appear even to hear my voice but continued to address me in the words of the ritual.

I thought that the toga in which I was wrapped gave me, perhaps, a somewhat ghost-like aspect. So throwing it on the ground I spoke again.

"Now, do recognize me!"

It was of no use. The poor novice was utterly out of his mind. He stretched his arms towards my innocent *zen* and addressed it as if it were a new-comer among the troop of phantoms.

Why had I not let him alone and gone away without interfering with his performance! I had only made things worse. As I pondered over the matter the young man, who was staggering round his tent, stumbled on one of the pegs and fell heavily to the ground. He remained immobile as if he had fainted, and I watched him to see if he would get up, but I did not dare to approach, for fear I should frighten him even more. After a while he moved and I deemed it better to withdraw before he looked at me again.

I decided to inform the lama of what was happening to his disciple. Though I guessed that the latter often