

A SCANDAL AT TASHILHUNPO

—H. E. RICHARDSON

In 1946, while I was at Lhasa, when Tibetan guests were looking with me at illustrations in various books on Tibet we came across the photograph in Younghusband's *India and Tibet* (1910) of "the Shigatse Abbot" who visited him at Kampa Dzong in 1903. He was identified by my guests as the Skyabs-dbyings, the highest-ranking monastic official of Tashilhunpo and the equivalent of the Spyi-khab Mkhan-po of the Lhasa administration. Someone remarked that he had been dismissed from his post after his visit to Younghusband; and supposing that to have been due to the failure of his mission, I thought no more of it until, many years later, I came across the inside story in the papers of Sir Charles Bell, now in the India Office Records, where he relates the account given him in 1914 by the famous Lonchen Shatra (Bshad-sgra) of a notorious scandal at Tashilhunpo early in the present century. With the permission of the Director of the India Office Library and Records I have used that note as the basis of this article.

Some time before the British Mission to Lhasa it was reported to the Dalai Lama's government that the Panchen Lama's father had been murdered and that the Skyabs-dbyings was engaged in sorcery against the Lhasa administration and was also trying to usurp the authority of the Panchen Lama. The Panchen on being asked about this replied that he wanted a thorough enquiry to be made; and accordingly a party of officials headed by Gsar-byung Shappe was sent from Lhasa for that purpose. It was discovered that the Panchen Lama's father had had an affair with the wife of another prominent Tashilhunpo official, the Gnyer-tshang Chen-po. The woman attempted to poison the Panchen Lama's mother who, as David Macdonald records in *Twenty Years in Tibet*, was a deaf mute so that she could marry the father. But the plot miscarried and it was the Panchen's father and some of his servants who ate the poisoned food. They were saved only by the skill of a doctor known as Badu Amchi who, as I learnt somewhere (perhaps in another note by Bell) had accompanied the Skyabs-dbyings on his visit to Younghusband at Kampa Dzong. A dog which ate some of the poisoned food was less fortunate. It died. The Gnyer-tshang Chen-po's wife tried to put the blame on her daughter but was found guilty and was banished and heavily fined. The record does not say so but she was probably flogged as well. The Panchen's father, who must at least have been innocent of the poisoning attempt, was fined and imprisoned in Phuntsholing Dzong. These proceedings were presumably carried out by the Panchen Lama's ministers headed by the Skyabs-dbying; but Gnyer-tshang Chen-po, who was even more influential than the Skyabs-dbyings, wanted further vengeance and persuaded the Skyabs-dbying to send orders to the Phuntsholing Dzongpon to have the Panchen Lama's father killed, which was done by clubbing him to death. In addition to this grave offence of which he was found guilty by Gsar-byung Shappe and his colleagues the Skyabs-dbying was shown to have sought to bring the Dalai Lama's government under his influence by means of written magical charms which he kept beneath his seat and also of attempting to usurp the authority of the Panchen Lama. He and the Gnyer-tshang Chen-po were heavily fined and degraded. There were probably other lesser figures who received

similar punishment. All the fines were made over to the Panchen Lama.

The official enquiry must have taken place sometime between November 1903 and July 1904. The "Shigatse Abbot's" visit to Younghusband lasted from July to October 1903. Younghusband to whom the Tibetan mind and Tibetan ways were a new experience describes him as courteous, kindly innocent-minded and lacking in intellect. That judgement seems to underestimate the Tibetan ability to conceal shrewdness and strength of mind beneath a genuine calm and self-control and an assumed air of simplicity. Incidentally, W. D. Shakabpa states in his *Tibet* that the Shigatse delegation's visit to Younghusband was made on the instruction of the Lhasa government. Shakabpa's history also shows that Gsar-byung Tshe-brtan dbang-phyug rdo-rje was appointed Shappe towards the end of 1903. In July 1904 he left Lhasa with the Dalai Lama in flight to Mongolia and, later, China. There is no indication how long before the enquiry the various crimes had taken place.

A possible sequel to those events may be seen in Macdonald's *Twenty Years in Tibet* where he mentions two dismissed officials of the Panchen Lama who took service under the Lhasa government and were responsible for a great deal of the trouble between the Dalai and Panchen Lamas.

So far as I know, Bell's is the only account of the affair but examination of Chinese records might find some trace of it.

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