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THE PASSING OF THE DRAGON

THE STORY OF THE SHENSI
REVOLUTION AND RELIEF EXPEDITION

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WITH NUMEROUS ILLUSTRATIONS

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CHAPTER IV

THE KO LAO HUI

No proper understanding of the recent course of events in North-west China can be arrived at without taking into consideration the secret society known as the Ko Lao Hui, The Society of the Elder Brethren. The Ke Ming Tang was a society of the educated classes whose propagation was by means of the pamphlet and lecture, whose agents sought posts in the Government, the army, the colleges. The Ko Lao Hui, on the other hand, drew its strength from, and made its appeal to, the peasant, to the artisan, *and to the common soldier*. Its members were mostly illiterate, even its leaders had little education. Its historical appeal, its propaganda, its unifying force, were all on different lines from those of the Ke Ming Tang. Only in objective did they meet, and in that objective only on the one point, that of the "Hsing Han mie Ching" or "Fu Han mie Man," the restoration of the Han (Chinese), and the destruction of the Bannermen, or Manchu. To an illiterate peasantry, whose knowledge of history was confined to such expressions of it as were to be found in plays, ballads, folk-lore and loose tradition, who had no knowledge of any country outside their own, revolutionary principles as such had no meaning, the French Revolution was a word without content. "Liberty" was too cold an abstraction to rouse them; amongst them the pamphlet a poor means of winning converts; the lecture which appealed to the Ke Ming

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Tang was above the heads of the average Ko Lao Hui. The appeal and method were far more primitive, yet wonderfully effective up to a certain point.

For the origin of their society they were taken back to historical incidents; how far idealized it is difficult to say. Where abstract principles would have failed the concrete instance succeeded. The historical appeal and present propaganda were both emphasized by, and embodied in, an elaborate ritual; a mutual aid benefit supplied the unifying force, a strict order of precedence, arrived at by initiation into differing grades, made for discipline, whilst the restoration of the Chinese, and the ousting of foreigners (whether Manchu or others) gave an objective to the whole.

The motto of the society was drawn from three famous instances of friendship, the brief mention of which may have value as showing the nature of the appeal which met with so wide a response. The keynote of all three is the same; that of brotherhood. But in its analysis of brotherhood it reveals a surprising divergence from the superficial idea of brotherhood so largely held by the westerner of vague "republican" ideals who has never taken the trouble to formulate such ideals clearly for himself. Briefly stated, the Ko Lao Hui, working from its experience of human affairs and human nature, makes no bones

about declaring that whilst brotherhood is possible, equality is not. Twins are the exception, the elder and correlative younger brother the rule. Liberty is to be attained by the proper adjustment of responsibility and privilege within this relationship; abstract liberty of the individual would seem to the Ko Lao Hui as useless as it is unattainable. Liberty to carry out his filial, fraternal, and marital obligations loyally, to play his part faithfully in the commune, this he desires. But

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a liberty "to live his own life," would be to him no attraction, the man who desired it something less than sane.

The Ko Lao Hui motto is "Shan, Shwei, Hsiang-t'ang "; literally, " mountain, water, and incense-hall." The two first stand roughly for Nature and the balance, or adjustment, therein ; the last is a reminder that " there is a spirit in man."

SHAN.—The Shan refers to an old story illustrative of patriotism. Yang Chio Ai, and Tso Pei Tao, in the days of the "Various Kingdoms " had sworn eternal friendship, "blood brotherhood." They were both wretchedly poor, the time was hard winter. But though poor, they were not ignorant. Tso in particular had great hopes of serving his country in some position of trust and authority if he could but make his way to the capital, and satisfy the court as to his attainments. But the wardrobe of neither alone would suffice for such an enterprise. Whereupon Yang, as being the "elder brother"—for true to their knowledge of nature and experience they had entered not into a theoretic and unreal brotherhood of equality, but into the relation of elder and younger brother—took off his robe and placed it on Tso his "younger brother," who made his way to court, obtained the appointment, and served his country. Yang, who thus exposed to bitter winter froze to death, also had served his country, by giving to it his "younger brother." Here we have exemplified the idea that privilege involves responsibility, that the higher the rank, the greater the obligation to nourish the lower, which is one of the main tenets of the Ko Lao Hui of to-day.

The society to-day regards the word Shan (mountain) as referring to the loftiness of the sentiment in " patriotic friendship " (" Ih chi-ti peng-yu ").

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SHWEI (Water).—Tsong Tzu Chi and Pei Ya were two intimate friends. Tsung was a skilled performer on the five-stringed lute, Pei was that rarer mortal, the intelligent, appreciative listener. So perfect was the sympathy between them that when Tsung played, Pei "understood the idea hidden in the music." Pei died and was buried, whereupon Tsung took his lute to his friend's grave and there destroyed it. He would play no more since there was no longer the perfect sympathizer. Here we have the ideal of personal, as distinct from patriotic, friendship, the "chih ih ti peng-yu," the friend who knows our meaning, the friendship of the heart. This flowing sympathy is referred to by the "shwei " (water) of the motto.

HSIANG-T`ANG (Hall of Incense).—This part of the motto refers to the famous "peach

garden oath " where Liu Pei, the prince, with his two generals, Kwan Ti and Chang Fei, swore to be faithful to one another until death, sealing the oath by drinking blood drawn from one another's arms. The actual terms of the oath, " ih tsai, san tsai ; ih wang, san wang " (if one lives the three live; if one dies the three die), were scarcely likely to be literally kept, and as a matter of fact Liu Pei's army suffered a great defeat through trying to avenge the death of Kwan Ti. But the oath is famous in Chinese story, and Kwan Ti in particular, deified now as God of War, is remembered with affection for his valour, his disinterested patriotism, and for his great loyalty to his friends, by all classes of Chinese society. Here we have a brotherhood of righteousness.

The three words of the motto, Shan, Shwei, Hsiang-T`ang, are thus used as key words to the three ideas of the friendship of patriotism, the friendship of sympathy, and the friendship of righteousness. The heroes of the three stories from being exemplars, from

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objects of veneration, have become to the Ko Lao Hui objects of worship. The ritual of the worship has become a visible bond of union amongst the devotees.

This society quite early in its existence was divided into an eastern and a western branch. Thus in works of reference the home of the society is sometimes given as the Central provinces. But the real stronghold has been in the west ; Szuchuen, Kansu, and Shensi. The western branch flourished. Soon it was necessary for a member of the eastern branch to address one of the western as "grandfather," or at least as "uncle," to mark the superiority. Scattered as it is throughout the country, it is, however, only formidable in the north-west and west.

Members are enrolled in one of the eight guilds. The guild of filial piety, fraternal subordination, sincerity, faithfulness, ceremonial observance, rectitude, frugality, and sense-of-shame; virtues so glibly run over by the Chinese tongue, which occur *sine termino* in the classics. The members of the Hsiao, or filial piety, guild are all, *ipso facto*, Ta Ko (elder brethren). Of the other guilds, those of "sincerity" and "rectitude" are the most popular.

The society has its own regalia, symbols, secret signs. All the machinery of this Chinese freemasonry is highly developed ; ceremonies of initiation, of further initiation into higher grades, ornaments of ritual, signs for mutual recognition, and so on. The intellectuals of the Ke Ming Tang found it easier to dismiss all this with a sneer, as being but mummery, before they were rudely awakened to a realization of the immense membership, the effective organization, the staunch loyalty the society contained. For the illiterate, slow-moving, heavy-burdened peasantry of the north-west, the Ke Ming Tang was too cold, too abstract, too intellectual.

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But the colour, the warmth, the sense of the dramatic which it failed to give, had been for centuries supplied by the Ko Lao Hui, and the former party found that the nearest approach to an informed political enthusiasm in the province, which might with care be

used as a friendly ally, which might be easily converted into an antagonism, but which in no case could be ignored, was this same Ko Lao Hui.

One difficulty in following the history of these Chinese secret societies, is the change of names, if not of the main society at least of the branch ; also the over-shadowing of the main society by some vigorous branch. The Ko Lao Hui claims to be centuries old; its present incarnation, however, began with the fall of the last Chinese dynasty, the Ming. "When the Ming ended and the Ta Ch'ing began" (Ming wu, Ch'ing chu) is often given as the date of the society's birth. Its old home was in Szuchuen, whence via Hanchungfu it came across the Ts'ing Ling mountains into Shensi and Kansu. The society has been active all through the Manchu dynasty which it indifferently terms Man (Manchu) or Yang (foreign). In any previous outbreak against foreigners the Ko Lao Hui has been willing to do its share. Whatever might have been the case with a few leaders, to the majority of the members there would have been little difficulty last year (1911) in classing foreigners with Manchus, as an evil to be swept from the land. The revolution of thought, which had occurred in the coast provinces in this respect, had left the north-west almost untouched.

The embarrassment of the Manchu Government gave impetus to the society in Sianfu. So strong was its membership, so good its organization, so leagued up with the banditti of the hills, that shopkeepers were reluctantly forced to join it as an insurance against

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looting should an outbreak occur. The head of the Shensi lodges was a pseudo-Taoist priest named Li Ming Shan, one of the most prominent leaders of the society in the Empire. The shan (mountain) from which he took his name—the leaders each had a Ko Lao Hui name taken from one of the famous mountains or rivers—was the famous sacred Tai Pei Shan. This man had over ten thousand members under his ultimate direction. To anticipate somewhat, as showing the embarrassment caused to the Ke Ming Tang leaders by the society, this man had subsequently to be given a lucrative post by the new Tutu (governor) of the province. He was appointed commissioner for raising revenue in the Sanyuan district. Here, happily for the province, his rapacity and brutality were such that the exasperated peasantry turned on him and killed him.

Whilst the returned students from Japan and the coast had been winning for the Ke Ming Tang the local students, and such army officers as had been educated in the province, the soldiers whom these latter commanded were being steadily won, by the mutual aid, the gorgeous ritual, the easily understood orders of precedence, the brotherhood, and the savage vows of vengeance, to the vigorous Ko Lao Hui. And thus it came about that soon, at the end of the second day's fighting (when the city was taken and they paused to consider that next necessary step, the appointing of new authorities) the Ke Ming Tang leaders were rudely confronted with an unforeseen situation, and realized that there must be an adjustment of their own forces with those of the Ko Lao Hui ; that the leaders of that society must be admitted, if not into the civil, at least into the military administration of the province.

Let it be frankly acknowledged that the above

sketch is of the Ko Lao Hui in its best aspect, its ideal rather than its actual state. Under the article of "Secret Societies" it is referred to by a recent and excellent Encyclopædia in the following unflattering terms : " The Society of the Elder Brethren, which is, generally speaking, a combination of the most lawless elements of the population in the central provinces (Honan to Hunan), proclaims a fanatical hatred to all foreigners, including the Manchus." By the year 1900 A.D. it had become an instrument for the ambition and an opening for the predatory instincts of the turbulent classes. In the north of Shensi it was indistinguishable from bandit hordes. In the early days of the Revolution all excesses, all outrage, were accounted for by the fact that the Ko Lao Hui were in the ascendant. The terms " Ko Lao Hui " and " t'u fei " (local villains) were regarded as interchangeable. But such a view will not cover all the facts; the course of the Chinese Revolution in the north-west remains confused on such a reading. That the indictment quoted above is substantially true the westerner most friendly to the Ko Lao Hui is bound to admit. How debased it had become is witnessed by the atrocities in the Manchu city, the brutal attacks on the English in the East Suburb, the murder of the Americans and Swedes in the South Suburb, the campaign in the Hanchungfu district, and the utter anarchy in the north of the province. * And yet there remained a core in which the old ideals and some of the old discipline lived. It was due to this still sound core, the best men of which saw that there must be a constructive policy for the future as well as a glutting of revenge in the present, that the Ke Ming Tang leaders were not swept aside utterly. It was these few men who threw themselves into the work of restoring

*See *Caught in the Chinese Revolution*, by E. F. Borst-Smith.

order, who in spite of a hundred mutual antipathies worked with the Ke Ming Tang whom they considered intellectual snobs, cowardly doctrinaires. It was these few men who largely eased the strain of the army medical corps in Shensi. Its members showed on occasion both generosity and courage. And having helped to restore order in the province, they finally gave the truest proof of their patriotism by recognizing that the work for which the society had been formed, or revived, was over. The Ta Ch'ing dynasty was ended; there remained villainy which still sought to shelter itself under the aegis of the Ko Lao Hui. But to-day the best men of the society have set their hand to its disbanding, and they have largely succeeded. The enormous membership of the lodge presided over by the man Li Ming Shan, who had held semi-regal state in the great "Ch'eng Hwang Miao," the chief temple of the city, the lodge of the " Chung I " hall, of the " Hung Chü " water, and the "T'ai Peh" mountain, was dispersed; over ten thousand membership certificates were burnt. This success of theirs in disbanding the Society is the best proof which its best men have offered and can offer of their own sincerity both as regards their attitude to the society's professed ideals, and of their regret for the many blunders, the

wild excesses, and the undeniable crimes, which have so stained the history of the Ko Lao Hui.