

THE HERMIT OF TA-YUL GOMPA

BY MANOHAR SINGH GILL



The hermit of Ta-Yul with the author's wife.

girl could be so serious and could live even the long, lonely Lahaul winters in a cave, high above Keylong, but Paljor was emphatic: "She often spent the entire winter in the cave, after stocking supplies, for which

she comes down to Keylong occasionally in the summer. She has made a little wooden door to the hut, and in the mornings sometimes in the fresh untouched snow she sees footmarks of the snow-leopard, the snow

cock or ibex. Occasionally, she leaves the valley to go down to the plain for a short while. She has learnt much and sometimes, when there is a drought, the villagers go to her to beg her to pray for a snow fall. Such is their faith in her. But of course, she keeps herself aloof from the general doings of the lamas and the people.

I was anxious to meet her and asked Paljor if it was possible. He said she came to the village sometimes to collect letters and supplies and he would find out if she did. As the afternoon sun was waning we walked down the slopes to Keylong. Paljor went ahead. As we reached the village street, he came running to tell me that, as luck would have it, he had met her and she had agreed to visit us in the resthouse.

WINTER IN CAVE

After sometime she arrived. She was no longer shy or unsure, as she had been 13 years ago. She was extremely friendly and seemed to enjoy the company of our children, who pestered her with all sorts of questions. They wanted to know about the panthers and the fears of a lonely cave. She enjoyed laughing and chatting with them.

She was modest about her lonely life and penance. She had picked up an interest in Buddhism in the Oriental School in London. I asked about her parents. Only the mother was alive, and she too had turned a Buddhist. Therefore, she understood the ways of her daughter, who went occasionally to visit her but felt so out of place in the Western world that now she preferred to stay in Lahaul most of the time.

I watched her closely and wondered at the spiritual pow-

ers that she must have accumulated during her long, lonely years up on the mountain top. She had a ready smile, but her eyes also had a cold, icy, controlled look, which betrayed immense self-discipline and perhaps power. She reminded me of the Ancient Mariner, who held the wedding guest with his "glittering eye". Perhaps I was even a little afraid.

I wanted to satisfy my doubts about the powers of levitation. When I was in Lahaul in 1962, Tshering Dorje had dismissed my query with a simple shrug and suggested that this was routine stuff. Dorje was after all an Oriental. I asked her. Casually she confirmed the capacity. Coming from a university trained Western girl, it was more believable.

For a while, we talked of her Dalhousie guru who had died recently. She was sad but had the Buddhist understanding of the wheel of life. She felt his powers to be available, though he had left this particular body. Gauri asked her if she would come and visit us in Chandigarh. Tinzin Palmo — the name she has taken — answered yes. Again to test her, I asked if Gauri ever thought sincerely of her before going to bed she would meet her in her dreams, for such ascetics had the power to so communicate. Tinzin laughed, but I could see that her affirmation of this capacity was serious.

She lingered with us till night had come on. I supposed she enjoyed this company, which was such a rarity in her self-imposed lonely life. She promised to see us in Chandigarh, and then shouldering her rucksack full of supplies she walked away up the valley road, planning to spend the night in Tshering Dorje's house, below Ta-Yul Gompa.

pictures.

After some time, we said goodbye and came down the mountain. We were amused by the effort of these girls to become Buddhist nuns, and I had a feeling that this was a passing interest. They would soon go back to the easy life of London.

I forgot about them, and years passed till in September last, we decided once again to go back to Lahaul. It was pleasant autumn weather and we enjoyed going about the valley. One morning we decided to get up to Sha-Shur monastery set on the slope, high above Keylong. Lama Paljor, the head, whom I had known for long, received us there and showed us the Gompas' ancient treasures. We enjoyed sitting under the pine trees, looking out over the snowy ridges on every side of the valley.

Suddenly I remembered the English girls and asked Paljor what had happened to them. The giggling one, he said, had gone back, though she came occasionally for short visits, but the tall one had stayed the last 13 years, doing penance and learning the teachings of the Buddha. He pointed up the valley, to a small white building, perched on a ridge: "That is Ta-Yul Gompa. She moved there some years back, as she favoured its smaller size and quiet. Then she even left Ta-Yul and moved still higher up to a cave in the forest, which she enclosed with some stones. She has lived there for the last eight or nine years, all alone, studying the Buddhist way and practising the teachings of her Dalhousie guru".

I was astonished. I could hardly believe that this London

IN the summer of 1967 my wife and I went for a visit to Lahaul. We thought those high remote valleys, with their perfect sunny weather and carpets of alpine grass, studded with wild roses of every hue and colour, were the ideal place for a short rest.

We spent a few days in Keylong and, as always, took a day off to visit Karding monastery, situated high up on the Rangcha face above the river Bhaga. It was a pleasant walk down to the river and up the flower-studded slopes on the opposite side. In Karding village, as always it was pleasant to share some 'chhang' with Kalzan, the hospitable sarpanch.

The monastery was set in lonely splendour, high above the village, overlooking the entire valley. We spent a happy hour with the monks, sipping tea and going over their collection of thankas. I was surprised to find two young English girls, among the nuns. They wore the maroon Buddhist gowns, and had close cropped hair.

PASSING PHASE

We talked to them. They were from the London School of Oriental Studies, and pupils of professor Snellgrove. One was short and cheerful, constantly overtaken by little fits of giggling. The other was tall and slim, much more composed and with a serious demeanour. They had taken orders from a Tibetan Lama in Dalhousie, who had sent them to this remote valley to do "tapasya" and learn the teachings of the Buddha. So serious was the tall girl that she hesitated even to pose for