A SCANDAL AT TASHILHUNPO

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In 1946, while I was at Lhasa, when Tibetan guestes were looking with me at illustrations in various books on Tibet we came across the photograph in Youngusband’s India and Tibet (1910) of “the Shugden Abbot”, who visited him at Kanya Dzong in 1903. He was identified by my guests at the Skyabs-dbyings, the highest-ranking monastic official of Tashilhunpo and the equi-valent of the Spur-khab Mikhan-po of the Lhasa administration. Someone remarked that he had been dismissed from his post after his visit to Youngbus-band; 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 Lochen Shatra (Bhish- spra) 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 ad-ministration 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 inquiry to be made; and accordingly a party of officials headed by Giar-bying Shapse 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 Geyer-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 Bada Anchi who, as I learnt somewhere perhaps in another note by Bell) had accompanied the Skyabs-dbyings on his visit to Youngusband at Kampa Dzong. A dog which ate some of the poisoned food was less fortunate. It died. The Geyer-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 flaged as well. The Panchen’s father, who must at least have been innocent of the poisoning at- tempt, was fined and impoverished in Phuntsoling Dzong. These proceedings were presumably carried out by the Panchen Lama’s ministers headed by the Skyabs-dbyings; but Geyer-tshang Chen-po, who was even more influential than the Skyabs-dbyings, wanted further vengeance and presided the Skyabs-dbyings to send orders to the Phuntsoling Dzonggon 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 Giar-bying Shapse and his colleagues the Skyabs-dbyings 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 Geyer-tshang Chen-po were heavily fined and degraded. There were probably other lesser figures who received

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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 emotional showmanship 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 these 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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