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ASOKA, EMPEROR OF INDIA

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AN APPRECIATION

by

HILDA SELIGMAN

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This is a moment in the history of the world when the experiment of the great Indian Emperor, Asoka Moriya, should be of the greatest service to mankind. In the third century B.C. it was he, who, in a world resounding with war drums, had the courage to disarm his troops and rule by moral force alone. The Parthians and Bactrians, his warlike neighbours, were on the march, and in the west Pyrrhus had just died, and Hannibal and Scipio were in the ascendant.

What courage !

What an experiment !

The ancestors of this man who had the vision and daring to trust the security of his empire to moral force, sprang from the Moriyas, the Peacock Clan, peopling the hills of Himavanta—hills crowned in spring with the crimson blossoms of the rhododendron. Here stood the fortress of the Moriya chieftains, shielded from the outer world by a horseshoe of mighty snow-peaks—Kinchinjunga, Tresul, Nanda Devi and Numpa—the home of Brahma, Vishnu, Siva and his snow queen Parvati, gods who had been the inspiration of Ind from the beginning of time. The name Moriya was taken from the "mors," peacocks, that inhabited the forests.

In the year 345 B.C., some forty years or so before Asoka was born, a mountain call from hilltop to hilltop made known that the Peacock chieftain had been slain in battle. By the time the wailing died down, Mura, his consort, had fled with their unborn child to the banks of the Ganges, where her parents lived as peacock tamers. There she gave birth to

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Seeing nothing but a life of exile ahead, Mura decided to offer her baby to the gods. Clad in the cherry-red skirt of her own peasants, she carried him back to his father's hills beneath the sacred snows. There she left him in a disused cattle-trough, all garlanded with flowers as for a festival.

And so it happened that Asoka's grandfather began life amongst the shepherds of the hills. They named him Chandra after the moon. Hermits, with whom the boy sheltered from the storms, taught him the Vedas in return for a handful of forest fruit, nuts, or some eggs from the water-fowl or honey from the wild bees. Astronomers visiting these heights for the view they afforded of the heavens, and travellers passing through the hills, all gathered round the shepherds' fires of juniper—and Chandra sat wide-eyed amongst them. It was in this way that he met Kautilya, the hunchback adviser of kings, who engaged Chandra to guide him through the mountains, on a mission to Alexander of Macedon who had invaded India in the north-west. As they wandered down through the sal forests and up to where the moonal pheasants flash and call, Kautilya filled the boy's vivid imagination with tales of valour and revolt, fostering an innate spark of kingship in Chandra.

Later this Peacock Prince with Kautilya as Counsellor at his side, walked on to the stage which Alexander the Great vacated when his troops mutinied and demanded to be taken back to Greece.

In the course of time petty kings and small republics began to send their messengers to Chandra's court, asking for his leadership. Finally, the shepherd prince created a mighty empire and, as Chandragupta, became the first Emperor of India.

In the year 304 B.C. ringers beat upon the great gold gongs of Pataliputra (Patna) to announce the birth of his grandson. Every kind of minstrel, from citar and vena players to woodland pipers, foregathered outside

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the palace, and poets inspired by the occasion brought verses to be set to music.

Chandragupta returning from the North-West where he had been stemming a second Greek invasion,\* approached the Capital enthroned on his state barge, escorted by the Moriyān Navy; three masted vessels painted white, two masted yellow, and those with one mast blue, tacking to and fro, up and down the Ganges, added to the splendour of the scene.

The Emperor looked with a fresh eye on the City of Scarlet Flowers—the golden gates—and the wooden palisade adorned with elaborate carvings, weathered to the colour of a grey goose feather; for Pataliputra would now go down to history as the birthplace of this grandson, who, according to the soothsayers, was to be a “Chakravartin,” a universal monarch, destined to free mankind from sorrow. Therefore was he to be called “Asoka,” which means “without sorrow.”

As Chandragupta stepped on to the quay, his son, Bindusara, dressed in a “seamless robe of pure ethereal weave and earrings of new gold,” drove up in a golden chariot, bringing a garland of five different coloured flowers with which to welcome his father. Invitations had been carried by the bards to the vassal kings, who now arrived laden with gifts. Merriment was afoot in the land—for as Megasthenes, the Greek Ambassador to the Court of Chandragupta, leaves on record, “There are none so gay and laughter-loving as the people of Ind.” The heir-apparent then conducted his father to the Royal Birth House in the palace grounds, where they circled round and round, until the sound of hymns from within signalled to them to enter.

\* At the sight of Chandragupta's 9,000 war elephants Selencos Nicator, one of Alexander's former generals, surrendered without a fight, ceding Afghanistan, and, as a mark of goodwill, he offered the Emperor of Ind the hand of his daughter in marriage. Chandragupta sent Selencos 500 elephants as a gift of courtesy. It is interesting to note that some 23 years later, Pyrrhus, cousin of Alexander the Great of Macedon, surprised Europe by using war elephants and attributed the success of his attack on Rome to the use of this new weapon.

Chandragupta watched the "high-born maidens take their golden pitchers down to the Ganges to fetch the sacred water for the first bath." He thought of the contrast between the disused cattle-trough which legend held had been his cradle, and the Court he had created to receive his grandson.

\* \* \*

Almost from babyhood Asoka spent three hours of the day with the sages, listening to tales similar to those Æsop told. The young prince learnt to recite the Vedas and, as he grew older, the wisdom of former kings was explained to him, kings such as Janaka, whose philosophies are handed down in the Upanishads.

Following the ancient custom of the kings of Ind, Chandragupta, still in the prime of life, abdicated in favour of his son, Bindusara. Famine was threatening the land, so the ex-Emperor encouraged the people to leave the north-east and migrate to other parts of the Empire, where food was more abundant. He himself, in company with his Guru, a Jain saint, led the way, thus making the movement popular. At Sravanabelgula in Southern Mysore, Chandragupta retired to a monastery to spend the rest of his days preparing for the next world. Here Asoka sometimes visited his grandfather, and listened to his memories of boyhood among the shepherds of the hills, where the hermits had taught him to recite the Vedas ; of his meeting with Alexander the Great ; and of his loyal friend and councillor, Kautilya, author of the "Arthashastra," a book of advice on every detail of a king's life ; from how much wood to allow for cooking a peacock, to the most intricate affairs of state. In this book is written "Slavery is a custom that could only exist among savages," whilst in the West Aristotle sought to justify slavery.

At the age of seventeen, Asoka, eager to put his own ideas into practice, went to the relief of his brother Sumana, Viceroy of Taxila, whose subjects were turning against him. He did not wait for the permission of his

unimaginative father, but legend has it that the earth divided and disgorged armed men, who readily followed Asoka. Whatever the truth may be, the young prince left for Taxila and proved so successful in handling the revolt, that Bindusara recalled his elder son, appointing Asoka as Viceroy in his place.

In this university town, at the gates of India on the North-West frontier, an atmosphere of complete tolerance to all schools of thought had, for centuries, attracted students from afar. They came unarmed over the passes to study the arts and sciences, in particular the decimal system, algebra, and geometrical theories evolved by the Hindus in building their sacrificial altars, in the days long before Pythagorus or Euclid were born. India also led in the science of medicine, by virtue of the world-famous herbs, barks, roots and gums growing in her forests.

Here the young Viceroy met and held wise men of many lands in debate, amongst them Dionysius from Greece, with whom he began a lifelong friendship.

After two productive years in Taxila, Asoka was transferred to Ujjain, with its port on the Indian Ocean, where a babel of many tongues was heard on the quay. A royal welcome awaited the Viceroy in Ujjain, the City of Golden Spires on the plateau of Malwa, through which the prime meridian ran, the very heart of Indian culture; the home of poets, astronomers and mathematicians. But there Asoka found he was expected to give his attention to learning commerce, deemed an all-important subject in preparing a prince for kingship. At the port he watched the Moriyān dhows set sail for distant lands laden with spices, silks and precious stones, peacocks and monkeys; but perhaps the young Viceroy was even more interested in listening to the meetings of the Panchayat, a committee of five, that directed the life of the town.

In Vedisa (Bilsha) a village of ivory carvers nearby, Asoka met and loved the beautiful Devi, daughter of a

merchant of the Sakya race, the race to which Gautama Buddha belonged. Devi eventually became the mother of Mahendra and Sanghamitra, who grew up to be their father's most trusted missionaries, carrying his ideas of tolerance and non-violence as far south as Ceylon.

In the year 272 B.C. Bindusara died, and a knightage of Amatyas (chosen for their incorruptibility to be the new King's most intimate companions) came to conduct Asoka to his capital. On the outskirts of the city the new Emperor mounted his grandfather's giant elephant and moved through the golden gates into Pataliputra, amidst all the pageantry and colour of the East. His Amatyas followed in chariots scattering largesse to the crowds.

During the early part of his reign Asoka lived the life of luxury, it may even have been one of self-indulgence, customary to Hindu kings of those days.

When the time came round for testing the loyalty of petty kings, a stallion was chosen, which, according to tradition, was let loose to wander at will, as a challenge to any ruler through whose territory the noble animal chanced to roam. The Court began to prepare for a pleasure tour. Masseurs brought a thousand scented oils and polished the royal skin till it shone. Spear in hand, Asoka mounted his giant elephant, looking like Indra, god of Thunder and Lightning. Surrounded by Amazons on horseback, he passed over the plain towards the Tarai, the home of the man-eating tiger, there to enjoy his favourite amusement, the chase.

Wherever the stallion led, the petty kings vied with one another in the generosity and magnificence of their hospitality. After several months of triumphal progress, the Moriyen armies reached the wooded country of Kalinga, skirting the Bay of Bengal. Here, Asoka's supremacy was for the first time challenged.

In order to propitiate the gods before battle, the garlanded stallion was led into the grove for the



Asvamedha horse-sacrifice. There an altar had been built in the shape of an eagle. Brahmins, arrayed in pure white, threw clarified butter on to the fire and perfumed the flames with sandalwood. Peacocks stepped sedately from the undergrowth with all the air of votaries, and a goat, the symbol of a demon, was tethered with coloured ribbons to a consecrated post, ready to suffer with the charger. The vassal kings gathered round the young Emperor under the interlacing branches of an asoka tree, which made a canopy of blossom above them. The roasted flesh, it was thought, gave to those who participated in the feast, fleetness and all the noble qualities of the horse.

Two years of devastating warfare followed, bringing untold suffering to the people of Kalinga, and disillusioning experiences led to an awakening in the mind of this pleasure-loving Emperor. Until now he had only seen a royal welcome spreading out before him, and looked with pride on his growing armies, unconscious of the misery and dislocation to the normal life of the people it brought in its train. Asoka's moral values began to change and humanitarian ideas formed in his mind.

One day he chanced to hear words of wisdom spoken by his seven-year-old nephew, Nigroda. This incident led to summoning Upagupta, the boy's preceptor, from a Buddhist monastery in Nepal to debate with the young Emperor. Out of this meeting grew Asoka's interest in the teaching of Gautama Buddha.

The words of the soothsayers began to come true and by studying Asoka's autobiography, which still stands graven on pillar and rock throughout India, we can see how, without arms, by winning the minds and hearts of men, Asoka conquered the world.\*

\* Asoka retrieved Gautama Buddha's words from the lips of a dwindling sect of monks and nuns living amongst the foothills of Nepal and spread his own interpretation to every corner of the world (as it was known to the people of the third century B.C.). He did this by means of edicts written in the Pali tongue, on rocks, and on pillars erected all over India. For centuries these edicts lay dumb—until by the labours of James Princep, 1834-38, who deciphered Asoka's alphabet, they came to life and can still be read in the original to this day.



On the rocks of Kalinga were graven, under Asoka's direction, the following words : "The Kalingas were conquered by His Sacred and Gracious Majesty when he had been consecrated eight years. 150,000 persons were then carried away captive, 100,000 were then slain, and many times that number perished. Thus arose his Sacred Majesty's remorse for having conquered the Kalingas, because the conquest of a country, previously unconquered, involves the slaughter, death and carrying away captive of the people. That is a matter of profound sorrow and regret to His Sacred Majesty. . . . If to such people, in such a country, befalls violence or slaughter, or separation from their loved ones, or misfortune befalls the friends, acquaintances, comrades and relatives of those who are themselves well protected, while their affection is undiminished, for them also, that is a mode of violence. All these several happenings to men are a matter of regret to His Most Sacred Majesty . . . thus all the people who were slain, done to death, or carried away captive in the Kalingas, if the hundredth or the thousandth part were to suffer the same fate, it would now be a matter of regret to His Sacred Majesty. . . .

"His Gracious Majesty desires that all animate beings should have security, self-control, peace of mind and joyousness.

"The conquest by moral force is the chief conquest in the opinion of His Sacred Majesty and that it is that he has won both in his own Dominions and in all the neighbouring realms, as far as 600 leagues, where the Greek King Antiochus dwells, and north of that Antiochus, to where dwell the four kings severally named Ptolemy, Antigonus, Magas and Alexander, and in the south the realms of Cholas and Pandyas, with Ceylon. Among the Yonas and Kambojas, among the people of Nabhaka, among the Bhojas and Pitikikas, among the Unhras and Pulindas—everywhere men have followed His Sacred Majesty's instruction in Dharma, the law of compassion. Even where his envoys

do not penetrate, there also men hearing his ordinance based on Dharma, and his instruction in that law, practice and will practice the law of non-violence. . . . Conquest thereby won is everywhere a conquest full of delight, and for this purpose has this pious edict been written that my sons, and grandsons, who may be, shall not regard it as their duty to conquer anew. . . for the only true conquest is the conquest won by moral force. . . .”

All the world knew of the riches of Ind, for ever since Asoka's grandfather Chandragupta built the trunk road linking up Paliputra with the markets of Babylon, Palmyra and the ports of the Mediterranean, Moriyān caravans had carried gold, sugar, cotton (tree-wool the Greeks called it, and the Germans do still), cinnamon, pearls, rubies and, not least in demand, the far-famed medicinal herbs of the forests. The Moriyān heralds and envoys had also announced to the world that the only fortifications guarding all this treasure, the only weapons that could make an enemy pause, were Asoka's words graven on the rocks of the frontiers. Yet, while he lived, neither greed nor lust for power brought hostile armies to his gates. On the contrary, princes came from over the frontier to enquire into this novel idea of ruling an Empire without arms. Ambassadors brought invitations from foreign courts, asking the Emperor of Ind to send his wise men to proclaim the new order and, although Asoka had disbanded his armies and now depended entirely upon the strength and efficacy of moral force, his commands were obeyed as far away as the Hindu Kush, and the Bay of Bengal, and from Kotan to Mysore.

In sending out his envoys the Emperor exhorted them to tolerance and told them to enter into debate with men of all schools of thought as they travelled along “so that the essence (the truth) may grow.” In the sarais he looked forward to their being able to debate with fellow travellers of many lands. At the courts, too, Asoka impressed upon them that “a man

must not do reverence to his own sect, while disparaging that of another man, without reason—because the sects of other people all deserve reverence for one reason or another. By acting contrariwise, a man is doing disservice to the sects of others and hurts his own sect.” These sentiments are characteristic of Asoka’s liberal, sensitive and original mind.

“Everywhere in the dominions of his Sacred and Gracious Majesty as well as amongst his neighbours Cholas, Pandyas, Santiyaputra, Katalaputra, Ceylon, Antiochus, the Greek King and likewise the kings near to that Antiochus, everywhere has His Sacred and Gracious Majesty built hospitals for man and beast.\* Medicinal herbs both for man and beast have everywhere been planted. Wherever they were lacking, they have been imported and planted. Along the roads, wells have been dug and mango trees have been planted to give refreshment to man and beast . . .” “Formerly in the palace kitchen, hundreds of thousands of live creatures were slaughtered for savoury meats, but now that this pious edict is written, there are to be slaughtered only three living creatures, two peacocks and one antelope . . . even these shall not be slaughtered in time to come,” and so Asoka gradually led his people to vegetarianism.

Another edict graven on the rocks describes the Emperor’s plan for ensuring the welfare of his people. “The Rajukas (Commissioners) have been placed by me over many hundred thousand lives. Their administration of the law of justice has been made by me subject to their own authority, so that the Rajukas assured and without being afraid, may set about their tasks, distribute the good and happiness of the country people, and bestow favours. They shall acquaint themselves with what causes happiness or misery. . . . Just as a man, having entrusted his child to a skilled nurse, rests assured with the thought ‘the skilled nurse will be able

\* One of these existed in Surat for centuries, and possibly still exists.

keep my child well,' even so the Rajukas were created by me for the good and happiness of the country people."

Every five years Asoka sent forth on circuit "Mahamatras, men of incorruptible principle and temperate disposition, regardful of the sanctity of life," to visit the Rajukas at their work, and to make sure that the spirit of his law was being maintained, and not abused by the Rajukas.

Again and again with pens of iron the Moriyans wrote at Asoka's commands: "These edicts have been inscribed, in medium or expanded form. Nor were they executed or suitable everywhere. Vast is the conquered country, much is already written and much will still be written. Some are voiced again and again for the honeyed sweetness of the words." On other rocks is written: "You must make my people understand 'the King is to us even as a father, he loves us even as he loves himself; we are to the King even as his own children.' All men are my children and, just as I desire for my children that they may enjoy every kind of prosperity and happiness, both in this world and the next, so also I desire the same for all men."

With regard to the unsubdued borders, the King's answer is "they should not be afraid of me, they should trust me, for they will receive from me happiness, not sorrow. Moreover, they should grasp the truth, that the King will bear patiently with them, so long as it is possible to bear with them. Furthermore, they should follow Dharma, the law of compassion, and so gain both this world and the next."

There is no record that Devi accompanied Asoka to the Court, but the most beautiful of his monuments still stands at Sanchi, built on a hill within view of Vedisa (Bilsha) where he and Devi lived together and where their children were born. Beside this Stupa lie the ruins of the nunnery which he built for Devi,

shewing that she remained an influence in his life to the end.

Asoka was the first king to build in stone, and it is interesting to remember that it was during his reign that the wood and ivory carvers of India learnt to use stone as a medium for their art.

In spite of all this well-doing, as Asoka grew older, a certain deterioration appears in his system of ruling, which may, of course, have been the result of over zeal for, to quote Vincent Smith : " The interference with personal liberty must have been great and it is not surprising that when Asoka died, a reaction occurred and his system disappeared."

Nevertheless Asoka's words, engraved on pillar and rock from one end of India to the other, even if there is no reference to a personal God in these edicts, are not of Time, but for Eternity.

Read afresh after lying undeciphered for more than 2,000 years, his recognition of moral obligations, not only to human beings but to animals as well, make Asoka's words come with a clarion call to the ears of the twentieth century ; exhorting us to tolerance and to " work for the welfare of all."

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