

# THE LOTUS OF THE LAW

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MANLY P. HALL



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LETTER

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LU, the ancient one, had spent the day gathering wood. The shadows were falling in the valleys, the sun hung like a globe of blazing copper upon the peaks of the Jade mountains.

Lu bent his back to a great bundle of fagots and, leaning heavily upon a crooked stick, prepared to descend the narrow path that led downward into the gorge below.

A long, slanting amber beam from the setting sun streaked like a golden road across the sky, gilding with its glow a verdant hillock where a rushing stream from

the mountain fell in cascades to a pool below. A sweet song sounded from the peaks, to be echoed and reechoed from the depths. The song seemed to come from the sun, and as Lu gazed into the copper light he saw the figure of a man walking slowly down the road of light. As the figure came closer Lu perceived it to be a Buddhist monk with flowing robes and shaven head. The monk carried in his hands a small musical instrument resembling a lute and Lu heard the words of an ancient Buddhist chant drifting to him on the breath of the evening.

Down the pathway of the sunbeam moved the monk in his yellow robes until at last he placed his foot upon the grassy hillock by the side of the waterfall. Seating himself upon the carpet of short green grass the monk gathered his robes about him and with the lute across his knees chanted the slokas of the ancient Law.

Lu hastened down the mountain, his bundle of faggots forgotten. He prostrated himself before the elder of the village. The elder told his prince, and it was thus that the Emperor came to know.



**A** colorful procession moved slowly along the narrow path which wound through the depths of the gloomy gorge. First came gaily comparisoned knights in bamboo armor, their small shaggy horses trapped with purple and gold brocade. Then followed yeomen, armed with long bows and wearing corslets of elephant hide studded with gilded bosses. Behind them marched in solemn step princes of the state in flowing robes of green and saffron, each with a tablet of ivory, and gold threads braided in his queue. Next came twelve youths, musicians of the court, playing soft sweet music upon amber flutes and tinkling little bells of jade.

In the midst of this proud company moved a glorious palanquin of scarlet lacquer, borne by long handles upon the shoulders of twenty pages who marched in rhythm to the jadestone bells. The palanquin was hung with countless curtains of the sheerest and most diaphanous silk. In the midst of these gauzy billows, upon a throne of jewels, bearing a scepter of purest lapis lazuli, sat the Emperor of China, Son of Heaven, the living glory of the ages.

Behind his serene augustness walked the privy councillors, the ministers extraordinary, the mandarins, and a great body of the powerful and the learned wearing black hats with coral buttons. Lastly there were more yeomen and more knights and a concourse of peoples from the countryside who followed at a respectful distance.

Pomp had come forth to meet a prophet. Word had reached the imperial ear that a man of great wisdom had come down from the sky on a ray of the setting sun and had established his hermitage in the shadows of the ancient gorge by the edge of the mountain stream. For many days the song of the Lohan had greeted the dawn and the voice of the sweet singer of the Law had mingled with the voice of the lushing waters.

The Emperor had traveled for many hours and now, as the afternoon sun hung upon the ragged peaks of the Jade mountains, the ravine widened and the path led into a pleasant glade fringed with gnarled trees and great boulders that in some remote age had crashed from the cliffs above. The procession halted, the musicians ceased their playing—the journey was ended.

A thin waterfall descended from a great height over fantastic rocks and scattered a mist upon the small pool below. In the shallows of the pool played carp of brilliant hue, and over its cool surface hung purple dragonflies. Beside the pool, on a cushion of soft grass which grew on an outjutting of disintegrating rock, sat an ancient man wrapped in the folds of a voluminous cloak. His knees were drawn up before him and his chin rested on his folded hands. Two great dark eyes seemed to glower out from under the folds of the cape which formed a covering for his head. Before the Lohan was a narrow shelf of rock upon which stood a rare and delicate vase of white crackleware. Beside the Arhat lay his lute and his begging bowl.

The palanquin was lowered to the ground, to rest on dragon's claws of teak, and the Son of Heaven stepped from his high seat and came towards the weird figure on the rock who neither moved nor spoke. His supreme augustness knelt upon the path and, striking the hard earth three times with his forehead, addressed the Lohan with these words:



“Oh most exalted father; most exquisite sage, the earth with all its treasures pays homage to the Eternal! I salute the Law, I salute the Buddha, I salute the Three Jewels, I salute the Eight Priceless Truths, I salute one who practices perfectly the Six Paramitas. Oh, most excellent and exalted Arhat, I salute the embodiment of the virtues and crave that I may receive from you the substance of the Blessed Truth. Reveal to me, oh sage, the very reality of the Law. Impart to me the everlasting Reality by which I may accomplish the Nirvana!”

Deep and thundering, yet most strangely sweet and melodious was the voice of the Lohan, and these were his words:

“The Law may not be spoken. The Truth may not be enclosed in words. If you desire enlightenment, therefore, oh Emperor of China, go to the edge of yonder pool where grows the white lotus. Pluck from the water a blossom, a bud, and a leaf. Bring them to me.”

As the Lohan spoke ten mandarins stepped forward to serve the Emperor, but the Son of Heaven waved them all aside,



and rising went himself to the edge of the pool. With his gold-encrusted fingers he plucked from the surface of the waters a blossom, a bud, and a leaf. Returning, he made profound obeisance and laid them at the feet of the Lohan. For the first time the sage moved. With slow and rythmic gesture he turned back the edge of his robe, extended one long and graceful hand, and taking slowly the blossom he placed it in the vase of crackleware. With the greatest care he placed it, giving profound attention to the task.

"This," he said "is the supreme and radiant Self. And this bud—," he picked it up and placed it in the vase, "is your own most inward nature, oh Emperor. And this—" picking up the leaf, "is the earth which is given to your rulership. I have arranged these three—the blossom, the bud, and the leaf—according to the perfection of wisdom. Therefore behold in this vase with its contents the full mystery of the Law, for I have arranged these three that they might bear witness to the ageless Truth and the everlasting Reality. Meditate upon this, oh Emperor, for if you perceive not the mystery which I have prepared before you, you are

not worthy to receive the Law."

The Lohan gathered the cloak once more about him, nor did he speak again, but sat like some graven image, gazing at the porcelain vase. The Emperor gazed also but he saw only a flower, a bud, and a leaf. He understood not the mystery of the Law. In the dark of evening, lit by torches, the Emperor and his retinue returned to the vermillion city. The Arhat still sat gazing upon the blossom, the bud, and the leaf.

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A thousand years passed. Two mendicants in white garments, with peaked straw hats, were walking along the narrow path that led into the deep gray gorge of the jadestone mountains. They came on a pilgrimage to a most holy shrine that had been built on a little hillock by a waterfall. The pilgrims had come a great distance, they were weary and footsore, and the dust of the road was heavy upon them. At last they reached the place where the ravine widened out and before them rose an ancient shrine. Old doors, guarded by grave-faced images—steps worn deep by the feet of the faithful. By the side of the shrine, upon the back of

a great stone turtle, stood a tablet, deep etched with ancient Chinese characters. One of the pilgrims read the tablet aloud:

"Erected by his most serene augustness, the Emperor of China, to mark his meeting with an Arhat of the Eternal Law. Upon this place the Law was revealed but the eyes of the Emperor were unworthy to perceive it. Therefore has this shrine been erected that the Law may be preserved, even if not comprehended."

As the pilgrims turned from the tablet they beheld a drowsy priest seated in the warm sunshine. The second pilgrim addressed him. "Oh father, we have come to pay our most humble respects at this most noble and sacred shrine. I pray you permit us to enter the sanctuary and present for our inspection the most holy relic which it contains."

The priest rose and, followed by the pilgrims, ascended the rutted steps, moved a long beam in its grooves, and swung open the temple door. Within was a misty twilight, faintly lighted by little oil lamps, the flickering flame reflected from numerous



gilded objects. In the midst of the temple was a small marble pagoda, and in the very center of the pagoda a golden box. This the priest opened. The box had no bottom but rested upon a narrow shelf of rock. Within the box was a vase of white porcelain, and in the vase a blossom, a bud and a leaf of the lotus. The priest, kneeling before a small low table, unrolled a brocaded scroll and read to the pilgrims:

"The most sacred relic of this shrine is the blossom, the bud, and the leaf of the lotus which you here see in the porcelain vase. They were placed thus a thousand years ago by an unknown Arhat who has been called the Singing Lohan. When placing these three parts of the lotus in this vase the Arhat declared that the Law was revealed. His words were most startlingly fulfilled, for, although ten centuries have passed and no man has touched this vase, the flowers have neither wilted or in any way changed. They were placed in the Law, by the Law they are sustained. But if they be touched or moved in any way they will immediately fade and die."