



A NOCTURNE

There is dancing tonight at Angkor Vat.

All day there has been unusual activity along the road which runs beside the flowered waters of the moat, an activity vivid though soft and noiseless.

Chattering groups of little women pass, speaking their Cambodian tongue gently as always, and guests at the Bungalow look up to see them come along the way from Siem Reap and vanish under trees near the terrace which is the splendid approach to the causeway of Angkor Vat. Occasionally one bears a nude brown baby astride her hip, and even he is keen, alert. Some are old and very thin, and these are revived with what is coming.

Boys go by, full of importance, keeping to the road after the manner of men, nor once running to the stone coping which edges the moat where frogs and turtles swim fascinatingly. The boys, too, feel the thrill of belonging to an ancient tradition, of sharing the stirring duties it imposes.

Even the bullock-carts are deployed from stone carrying, and the men who drive them have a holiday look of jaunty swagger.

The carts, the bullocks, the half-nude workers make pictures which have been repeated from generation to generation throughout unfathomable centuries, The ancient artists so chiselled them twelve centuries ago, and time finds them still unchanged.

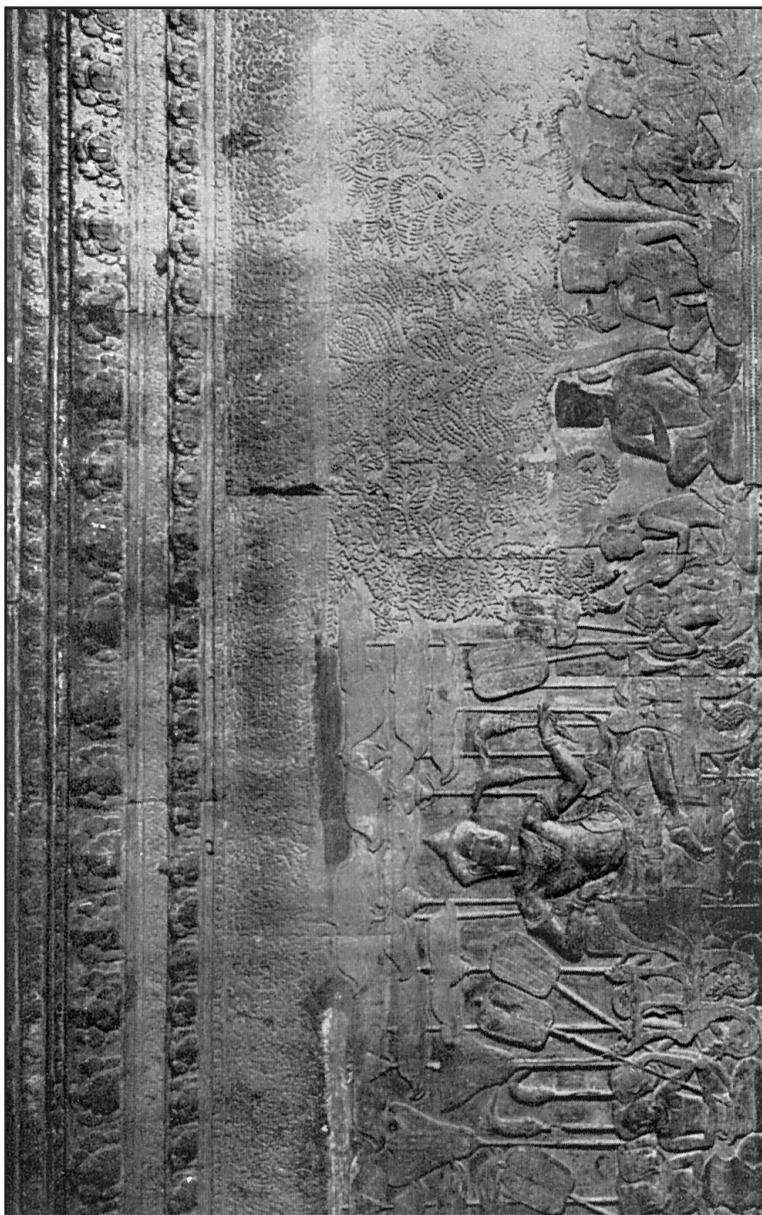
This time the carts bear unusual freight, not stones, not upturned earth for temple restorations, but a burden of long, green cylinders, torches confectioned with subtle skill from forest treasures of spicy odours and wrapped with fragrant leaves. Such candles as these not only light a scene but send out clouds of incense smoke most grateful to the Spirits of the Air.

Then there are village girls, moonfaced, shy, extremely young, perhaps fifteen, perhaps seventeen. Among these are the dancers. But not now distinguishable from their freer friends who will soon be taken as brides by splendid young boatmen who scull the sampans on the Tonlé Sap.

Dancers from the King's corps are there. The superb brown Buddha disguised as hotel porter brings news to the Bungalow that the village is arranging a dance; and he is full of quiet delight. Two of his sisters are numbered among the dancers of the King and are making the village the yearly visit accorded them by their royal master. They are taking the leading parts tonight, they are setting the standard of perfection for the village troupe to follow.

Seven years ago when they were but eight years old they were taken to the palace at Phnom Penh by father and mother and offered as gifts to the King. By bullock cart and sampans they made the journey with this most precious freight, the prettiest among their offspring. Even thus had their ancestors offered their loveliest little maids, not only at the palace, but also at the great temples, that they might be trained for the service and delight of the monarch and of the gods.

The parents return to their village proud in the acceptance of their



The Figure is That of Vishnuloka the King — He is seated on a throne above his generals to whom he is giving orders for one of the great Khmer conflicts.

sacrifice, but the little maid remains to endure the long-extended training which shall fit her to dance before the King when her time of maturity arrives. The tradition of generations is being carried on; she submits to it with the quiet patience of all who have gone before, inspired by the hope that is in the heart of every little maid of the palace, to find favour before the King, favour above that of her fellows who are many. Do we not read that the Khmer monarchs of centuries ago had thousands of women in the palace enclosure? Even the late king, Norodom, was pleased to see about him as many as five hundred; but the present one, Sisovath, finds the palace fully furnished with seventy.

Trainers of the dance are old *premières*, women who themselves were trained and know all the necessities of grace. Classic poses make strange requirements of the articulations. The little hands must be made to turn back at the wrist with shorter curves, and taper fingers must easily take the lines of reversing that they may look like petals of the open lotus.

The dancer must be able to stand balanced on immovable foot for minutes at a time while she undulates in wondrous rhythm the entire body, the shoulders, arms, fingers, with the softness of flowing waters; joints are unjointed, articulations are nil, in attaining such plasticity and grace.

But the little maids under the relentless trainers know the anguish of fingers snapped at being turned backward, of elbows cracking in their disjuncting and of sitting long hours daily in the heat at these and other trying exercises, pale, though upheld by the inward spirit, a pride of legend.

For years the training continues, the little girl may not see her parents nor her home, but lives the life of palace attendant. Then comes a glorious time when she is called nearer the person of the King, perhaps to sit among the women who surround him in hours of ease, and wave a silken flybrush or a feathered fan. And by that time she is put among the troupe of those who dance in the King's pavilion.

A preparation for an appearance is the dressing, that marvellous dressing of the old tradition wherein the magnificent past is continued. This, too, is in the hands of the old women who adhere inexorably to the old form. If the girl to be dressed is among the *premières*, her face is whitened, blanched with powder mixed in oil, for white means purity and the race of kings. The childish face is shadowless as a moonlit disc, the monotonous life of petty trial having not yet traced its evidence. The full lips are held for a dash of red pigment, the placid front is presented for a delicate penciling of the brows.

The dress for her who takes the post of a princess is a silken *sampot* pleated in classic folds and held with a jewel in front, its length falling to the ankles. The heavy hand-made *sampot* of the old convention is hard to get now, and imported silks are used instead. Over chest and shoulders is hung a narrow drapery falling square and flat down the back in a long line of grace. Jewels without limit are then loaded on the childish dignity until the young maid is all a-sparkle with scintillant colour.

Tradition demands a wide collar of gems, over which are many chains of gold. Arms are circled with bracelets both above the elbows and at the wrists. Ankles also have their weight of ornament. The fingers, curving in semblance of flower petals, sparkle as with dew in sunlight.

But the headdress works magic. Poised on top the young head, the whole figure takes on a greater beauty, a deeper meaning. Maids dressed like this have ever been fair to look upon, and artists wrought their images into the walls of the highest temples, and called them sacred dancers, or better, divine wives.

To the audience, the girls before them are the heroines of old tales loved and never too often told. The dress of the chief dancer reveals the character she plays and each dance has its special roles. The audience seeks no innovation; it knows in advance each movement of the coming dance on the appearance of the principals. Its delight is not in surprise of novelty, but in living again the old tradition, in happily musing on the

spirit of the ages animate in their own people.

The dance is always a drama, always the portrayal of a plot. The centuries pass without alteration of plot or costume, and therein lies the calm delight of the women ruminatingly chewing betel and gazing on the actors.

At the Bungalow is less excitement than among the audience already gathered at the Cruciform Terrace far within the park of Angkor Vat. The foreigners cannot know what is before them.

Under the bright lights, people are sitting at little tables slowly sipping coffee, although the boy who passes the bottles of liqueurs knows the sweet impatience that is being excited down the road.

Someone at last arises, says it is time to see the dance that "has been arranged for us, just as it was arranged for General Joffre when he visited Angkor," and with amiable complaisance all arise and drift out upon the road. Steps quicken on seeing lights down the way and twinkling flashes crossing the causeway over the moat.

An army bearing torches, an army of little brown boys, some with cotton jackets, some without, all crowding the steps and the platform. Their soft chatter is like that of birds, but their prankishness like that of boys. On seeing the foreigners arrive each boy dresses his figure, makes serious his face, for he too has a part in the great tradition, a responsibility.

Each boy grasps his burning torch with greater tension, the mass resolves itself into two flaming rows, and progresses slowly over the concourse, following the line of *Naga's* long stone body, keeping their eyes on the feet of those strange beings who wear shoes and must in consequence be infirm of step and needing light lest they fall.

On either side of the causeway the lake-like waters; above, the tropic heavens with strange-placed constellations; before, the dominating outline of Angkor Vat. Sounding over the murmur of the eager little torch-bearers rings the cry of night-birds and the whistling call of little



The Head of the Serpent is Like *Naga's*, Polycephalous, and the Giant Who Holds It Is Also Many Headed

monkeys in distant trees. And clouding deliciously the evening air is the pungent savour of the incense-yielding torches.

Steps are reached, the steps which mount to the passage which pierces the great enclosing wall. The chivalrous boys run softly ahead to light the danger, tapping each step with torches which marvellously drop thereon discs of flame, a fire of illumination, that the foot of the stranger may not fail.

Up the perilous steps slanted by centuries of passing feet, through the bat-haunted gallery, and down steps again to the open. A quarter mile more across the park for acquaintance with the illumined night, *Naga* trailing like a balustrade on either side the long concourse and thrusting upward his many-headed fan.

The Cruciform Terrace is already filled with a quiet audience vibrating expectancy, yet room is rapidly made in the choicest place that visitors may have the best. The right arm of the cross contains the orchestra of fine-singing strings and time-beating tom-toms; the left arm is completely filled with women standing and crowding to shield the dancers who have been dressed and ready for hours. The centre is cleared, and the brown torch-bearers are seated in an arc of lights as an entourage. Above, scarce seen, like a shadowy cloud in the heavens, the dominating protection of the great Khmer temple.

A hush, the sound of tinkling bells and strings, more insistent beatings of the drums, then an arresting stir among the crowd of women and a distant glistening of jewel-dressed heads moving with decision.

Eight dancers advance through the retiring crowd of women to the centre of the terrace, four princes, four princesses. They come with high rhythmic tread, a dramatic pause between each step, a pose almost, as each lifted foot throws the weight. And the magic feet are bare and rest flexile on the pavement, strong to keep faith with balance. Heads are high and steady, arms and body undulate and sparkling eyes tell of nerves alert, though the faces are the serious moon-like faces of children.

The *première* princess is gorgeous in silks and jewels and high,

pointed headdress. A tassel woven with fragrant jasmine flowers adds piquancy as it falls beside the rounded cheek. She is buoyant with knowledge of her beauty and skill. She leads her line to the front. She plants firmly an able foot tinkling with bangles; she poises and sways her supple body and waving arms, she sets firmly the head and poses as the *Tevadas* danced before the Khmer kings ten centuries ago. She is the dancer of the bas-reliefs made flesh, the carving made alive, repeating the incredible postures with the plasticity of life.

In her face rest sobriety and aloofness as she looks far out into the dark as to some high, impalpable audience for whom she dances.

Equally beautiful with her lovely head are her marvellous hands. Rounded and firm are the arms like waving branches or swaying like *Naga* himself; but the hands of the Cambodian dancer are like no others. The fingers bend backward like long white petals of the lotus separated by the evening breeze and turn in strange and eloquent grace. Raised high, posed low, or undulating on the level of the shoulder, hands and arms ever sway as the wind of dawn sways the orchids hanging in the trees of the jungle.

No less elegant is the leader of the line of princes. Only in dress does he differ from the princess, but in the progress of the drama his role is apparent. With play and interplay the two lines of dancers hold the happy attention of the wide-eyed torchbearers, of the crowd of men around the musicians, and the beaming women.

Then on the stage appears a new figure, one which thrills deliciously even those who know him well. He is the King of the Giants and his coming means an interference with the love-story of Prince and Princess which has progressed with grace. There is a hush as the Giant advances. At sight of his terrifying mask the torch-bearers grip tight the lights. He comes slowly, with measured step, but elastic, a malignant presence, puissant, magnetic. He throws his head quickly as though looking where to strike, he moves in flashes with cruelty present in every nervous movement. He stands a moment with knees bent outward and heels

off the ground, and defies the world — evil made flesh yet beautiful as a god.

If his entrance seems a challenge, the *pas seul** which follows justifies his confidence. Thrills of cruel joy pass over his body. He is animated by spasms of wicked triumph and his muscles stiffen as by repeated electric shocks. With no word spoken, with no aids of the theatre, this lone dancer in the jungle night strikes deep into human emotions.

The other dancers resume and the thread of drama continues. The Giant steps aside and glowers. At a lovely moment when the Prince is claiming his Princess from her swaying companions, the evil one thrusts forward an agile arm and seizes her, possesses her.

He thrills with the triumph of it and with the humiliation of the Prince. From that moment he dances with increased inspiration. Holding the captive lady with one hand he places his steeled body between her and her lover, and in a series of thrusts and parryings defends his stolen quarry. Almost the audience can see blue flames around the magnetic figure. For long he is victor while a huddling crowd of lesser princes and princesses look on confounded.

The Prince is vested with the virtues; he is bound to win. After long aggression and tireless thrusts, he catches the King of the Giants in a weak moment and draws from him the tender prey.

The Giant is vanquished, yes, but he scorns his failure until it appears as a triumph. Pride and insolence animate his step and bearing. Thus holding himself he first dominates the audience, then passes proudly out of sight.

The reunited lovers end the dance by leading in a joyful series the swaying lines of slender maids. It is incomparably beautiful. And the setting for so simple a drama before so simple a people is of a grandeur indescribable.

The dance ends. The weird orchestra stops its tinklings, the fifty brown torchères fly down the long way to brighten the path for the foreigners who are the first to troop away.

* A French term for a dance presentation for one person.

In the sweet-scented dark the causeway is animate with the village audience making no sound louder than the sibilant whisper of bare feet slipping over the smooth stone paving. Under the heavy trees by the roadside the bullock carts wait to carry home the humble dancers.

And over all brood the terrifying, inspiring towers of the Sanctuary.

