WANG WEI, THE POET-PAINTER (697-759 A.D.)

BY

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It is a great thing for the world when two eyes open upon it which are destined to see more of its beauty than the million eyes that have looked at it before. And when to such eyes are added lips that know how to give utterance to the beauty which the eyes have discovered, and hands which know how to give it shape, then the world is enriched indeed, for she has found a new lover, and the fruit of their communion will be the happiness of uncounted generations.

The eyes of the small child who was born to the Wang family over a thousand years ago in Tai Yuan Fu (Shansi) were of this rare quality. It may be that they at first winced a little at the unwonted glare upon which they were suddenly opened, but they soon learnt to laugh back at it, for it was given to them to love brightness and to see things clearly, deep down into their inmost heart, though they loved the twilight also, the twilight with its whispers, dream faces and shadows, of which imagination could make what it pleased.

It must have been a happy world that shone into those newly
opened eyes. A devoted mother would let the glitter of her golden jewels dangle in front of them to make them smile, and her own eyes would gaze into them in mute worship of the budding soul within. Must it not be told how great a love was keeping guard over the fragile body which held its separate life on earth? It was a love that never failed: the little child with those deep seeing eyes was a grown man when this good mother died. It was that of a widow, therefore, no doubt, clinging all the more fondly to her first born son. When she died he mourned her loss intensely, so intensely that he injured his health. Nor did the remembrance of her love ever leave him. As a memorial to her, he dedicated his country seat at Wang Ch'uan to Buddha, the Lord of Mercy and Compassion, and it was near her grave, placed close by, that he desired to be laid to rest.

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A great and lasting love also united him to his brother, Ch'in, like himself gifted for art and poetry, though on a very much humbler scale. The favourite pastime of this brother was the writing of inscriptions for tombstones, which he did so successfully that it brought him fame and money. Some verses of his about one of these partings from Wang Ch'uan which grieved them so much, have slipped into the collection of his, Wang Wei's, poems. They are worth reproducing:
The mountain moon glows still
In evening skies,
The forest wind blows chill
With twilight sighs,
Mournfully as if theirs too a feeling vibrant heart
That aches like ours, when weeping grievously we part.

It was Wang Ch'in, who helped to induce the Emperor Su Tsung to pardon his brother for having allowed the rebel, An Lu Shan, to foist the office of Censor on him during his brief but formidable triumph. It was to him that Wang Wei turned his dying thoughts, sending him a last letter of farewell and exhortation to remain faithful to the law of Buddha, to which they both were equally devoted. It was he who, at the bidding of the following Emperor, Tai Tsung gathered what was left of Wang Wei's poems. His official career was even more successful than that of his celebrated brother, the Emperor raising him to no less a post than that of first Minister. But otherwise his name only shines with reflected glory, and perhaps his greatest gift was his loyal and understanding heart, with which he may often have helped Wang Wei in those hours of doubt and darkness, which come to all seekers of eternal Harmony, the price they have to pay for the rapture of their moments of unclouded vision.

The love of a mother, the comradeship of a brother, a childhood that has these cannot but be a sunny one. The father seems to have been a less enduring influence, and to have died when his children were still too young to trouble
much who came and went. He held an official post, first in Fen Chou, Shansi, and later in Pu Chen, in the southern part of the same province, becoming, as the chronicle says, a man east of the River.

On the whole the times were prosperous. The crookedness and violence that went on behind the scenes in the capital, where men contended for power, troubled the mass of the governed even less than the scramble for places and portfolios among modern politicians disturbs the wonted routine of ordinary citizens to-day. The government was carried on in a firm and enlightened way by the Empress Wu, then at the height of her power. That she had committed dreadful crimes to obtain it, and never hesitated to commit yet others in order to keep it, was probably scarcely known outside the small circle personally affected by them. As long as

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the external menace to the security of the people --- the greed of the seething masses of barbarians on the border --- was kept at bay, and neither the tag collector nor the recruiting sergeant were too exacting in their demands, above all, as long as the earth was bountiful and produced her harvests in due season and abundance, it really mattered very little to the country at large by whom it was officially held to be governed.
A minor official in Shansi in possession of independent means, married to a loving wife and the proud father of two gifted boys, could live his life in perfect ease, and seeing that no bitterness, no anger ever seem to have darkened Wang Wei's view of the world, it is safe to assume that his father was a kind, contented man, giving his children a home full of love and laughter and a refined and cultured atmosphere.

Most probably it was a house with a sunny court, where the little ones could play in safety and where wistarias made a lilac loveliness of spring, and lotuses lifted their rose-hued buds out of deep tanks in summer. In winter, when night came earlier than sleep, and there were no flowers left on earth, the stars unfolded their silver blossoms in the sky, drawing the children's eyes up to them in their radiant heights.

In the town there were schools, with books bound in blue, and beautiful characters, which, in some mysterious manner, contrived to make the great voices of remote antiquity speak aloud through all the hubbub of the day. And there were temples full of the glimmer of gold and bronze, the brightness of processions, and fairs with intoxicating toys, sweets and acrobats.

But even more wonderful, outside the walls, beyond the fields and villages, were the mountains dazzling in the white of snows or blue and dreamy in the haze of summer heat.
At dawn they beckoned a vision of the far beyond, at close of day they towered a mausoleum of granite and dark lazuli for the glories of the setting sun. It was at them the future artist's eyes would look most, and with such earnest adoration that their grandeur sank into his soul and stayed with it and grew with it and fashioned it to their own size.

The mountains, then the stars, the trees, the rivers and deep valleys, and only in the shelter and shadow of all these the dwellings and the doings of men, were the elements from which Wang Wei instinctively drew his spiritual sustenance. Further sources of inspiration were the beautiful songs and legends echoing out of the past, the radiant peace of Buddhist blessedness in the dreamland of the future, and in the present, close at hand, the emotions of a tender heart.

His gift for sympathy and friendship was very great. Much of the joy and sorrow they brought him turned to imagery, poetry and music, when brought into contact with the creative fervour of his mind. He was happy in his friends. Famous poets like Li Po, Meng Hao Jan and Ho Chih Chang were among them, also Ssu Ch'eng Chen the historian, Lu Tsang Yung the essayist, Chang Yin the landscape painter, calligraphist

and critic. Similarity of interests, if not necessarily of views,
a common devotion to the beauty of nature and to the skill that knew how to reshape it in words, in brushwork and in song made their friendship as fruitful an event as that of Goethe's circle at Weimar or of the pre-Rafaelite school in England. A delightful alternation of solemn loneliness, strenuous work and simple but jovial conviviality brightened and enlarged their days. They painted each other's portraits, they criticised each other's verses, they drank each other's wine. Many a good picture, many a beautiful poem owes its origin to this stimulating intercourse. One tradition about a famous picture representing seven talented scholars passing Lan Tien Kuan on their way to the Dragon Gate Monastery after a snowstorm, and painted by an artist calling himself the old Scholar of the Crescent moon, identifies them with this brilliant group. Among them all Meng Hao Jan, with his independent spirit, his retired life, seems to have been the one for whom Wang Wei felt the warmest attachment. His farewell to him is one of the immortal jewels in that crown of sorrow which separation and bereavement have woven out of human tears.

He has written several other poignant pieces on departures and the bidding of good-bye. The note of sadness, the sense of something irrevocably gone and ended, from which even the least important farewell is not wholly free, affected him profoundly. He voiced it in his poems, he spoke of it in his pictures, as, for instance, in his scroll of a river after a snow storm (as reproduced by Yen Wen Kui), which opens up with stately trees, well kept homesteads
and fortified gates proudly guarding the pass in the mountains, and closes in a drift of shoreless waters with only one empty view pavilion left on the last edge of some vague bank from which memory can gaze back on what will never be again.

Parting from those he loved through exile, death and other cruelties of fate, was the bitterest experience of his life. He lost his father while still a child, his wife when he was only thirty one, and he never married again. His great friend, Meng Hao Jan, went into self-chosen banishment, disappointed in his ambitions, disillusioned about life among the many, and died nineteen years before Wang Wei. At the close of his days, after the hideous upheaval of An Lu Shan's rebellion, the same weariness of the ways of the world, the same desire for the holiness of solitude drove Wang Wei also into self-imposed exile, separating him from all his friends except the few who had the leisure and opportunity of visiting him in his country home. Such visits were red letter days, worthy to be celebrated with wine and song. But their brightness was marred by the parting which inevitably brought them to an end.

Otherwise his life seems to have been a happy one. Poverty did not hinder, nor undeserved neglect embitter it, above all no fog of inner weakness, no shadow of failing powers of body, mind or soul ever blighted or bewildered it. The period into which it fell was so favourable to the
imaginative temperament that a later scholar said of it that it produced a poet in every village.

It is hard to say what void his consciousness found in the world of reality which he turned to Buddhism to fill. One can only gauge its depth by the greatness of the fervour with which he listened to that soothing voice of hope and explanation. Perhaps it was this constant sense of impermanence, of transitoriness wherewith the shadow of the inevitable end haunted all earthly happiness for him, that made him look for the calm of unending changelessness, the absorption of the separate in the universal, which Buddha had promised his disciples.

But perhaps also it was not his own seeking that brought him to the Indian prophet. His mother may have found the way before the music of the solemn litanies to which she took her children. The golden peacefulness of the great altars, at which she offered up her prayers and her incense, may have taught them almost unconsciously to look on the temple, which gave such beautiful things, as a place of rest and holiness, a centre of stability and strength in the midst of the tempestuous restlessness of human miseries and joys. Both the brothers were sincere Buddhists. While living in the capital they together provided the daily food of about a dozen monks, and no doubt did a good work thereby. For the Buddhism of the Middle Kingdom of those days was a
stimulating interest, opening up fresh horizons both on the physical and the mental plane, providing a medium of expression which could be understood and spoken by all the races and nations dwelling between the Pacific and the Indian Oceans, fusing the hardness of their idiosyncracies with a warm current of solidarity and union.

To artists and poets, those servants and masters of imagination, this tropical religion with its wealth of legend and history, of heavens and hells, opened up a rich source of inspiring subjects. Wang Wei dipped into it too. It is said that one of his most ambitious pictures was that of Pratyeka Buddha, and, just as the old Flemish masters were to do seven centuries later, he gave his own features to the attendant saint, gazing in rapt adoration at his great Redeemer.

Many of his poems are so deeply steeped in Buddhism that they only yield their full meaning to those conversant with its metaphysics. But notwithstanding the fervour with which he studied these in later life, that which always endured as the framework and foundation of his mind was the marvel of the mountains on the far horizon of his childhood, and the voices out of the past of his own race, as they spoke to him through those beautiful characters, which he had been made to practise so diligently and which he learnt to shape so well.

Altogether he did great credit to his teachers. Already at
twenty-two he was fully qualified to enter for the Shin Chili degree. The Standard of that examination was high, the competition severe. A quaint story is related about the manner in which he succeeded to obtain the greatly coveted first place. At that time he was so ambitious that he declared he would not enter for the examination at all, unless he could out-distance all the other candidates. But gossip whispered that the first place was sure to be given to Chang Chin Kao, whose qualifications were backed by the patronage of an influential princess.

Wang Wei enjoyed princely patronage too, that of Prince Ch'i, but apparently in this case that of the princess carried more weight. The outlook appeared gloomy. In his distress, Wang Wei implored Prince Ch'i to help him, and this man of the world, experienced in the hearts of princesses, devised the following plan. First he made Wang Wei learn several of his own poems by heart and a few of the songs which he played so enchantingly on the lute. Then he dressed him up in the brightly embroidered clothes of a minstrel and took him to the residence of the great lady, the day she was giving some sumptuous entertainment. As was customary, poetic and musical recitals and pantomimic performances enlivened the feast. The performers entered into the presence of the audience in succession, each giving his turn, Wang Wei among them,
but, so distinguished looking and handsome that he immediately caught the eye of the Princess. The impression was deepened when he began to play and sing a piece of his own composition. So the handsome youth was more than a musician, he was a scholar as well! His poems were asked for. He had some with him, elegantly written in his most perfect calligraphy. Delighted, the great lady bade him exchange his minstrel's livery for the dress of a gentleman, and take his place among the honourable guests. She had never met so much talent and scholarship in so young and attractive a person, whereupon wily Prince Ch'i, seeing his chance, remarked as it were casually: "If the presiding magistrate could give this youth the first place in the coming examination, what a glorious thing it would be for our city." The princess warmly assenting, he deplored the fact that there was no chance of it, since the young man in question would not enter for the examination unless he felt sure of a chance of obtaining the first place, which unluckily had already been promised to another, Chang Chin Kao, for the reason that the princess herself had favoured him. This she had done on someone else's recommendation. She grew thoughtful. Chang Chin Kao may have been a plain, elderly scholar. Wang Wei was a scholar too, but neither elderly nor plain. In fact he looked well, he sang well, he talked well, his poems were beautiful, his voice enchanting, his wit delightful, what could a merely human princess do, but use her utmost efforts to further his interests? So Wang Wei entered for the examination and got the first place, out-distancing all his competitors,
including poor Chang Chin Kao, who must have been a sorely disappointed man the day the results were made public.

It is a bright story, showing us Wang Wei in the hey day of youth, his Buddhist desire to eliminate all desire still a long way off, the untried

world just flushing open before him in all the glamour of the longed for, all the lure of the unexplored.

But the story has its graver side also. It arouses the suspicion that the chronic disease of all state institutions --- favouritism, back-stairs influence, nepotism, log-rolling, or by whatever name it happens to be called, had infected the very fountain head of government employment, the public examinations, supposed to be conducted with absolute impartiality in order to enlist talent, and nothing but real talent, wherever found, in the service of the state. This may help to explain the disasters which thirty-five years later brought Hsuan Tsung's throne crashing to the ground.

In this particular instance, however, favouritism had advanced genuine merit, even more, conspicuous merit. For this good-looking youth, who had sung his way into the heart of a princess, proved to possess one of the master minds of his day, rich though these were in gifted men, and
this amounts to saying that his place is in the foremost ranks of the master-minds of the whole world. Whatever he did, he did well. The blessed magic of beauty flowed from his sympathetic hands. His official career, encouraged in its first hesitant start by the smiles of a princess, continued to win those of Dame Fortune, the approval of the powerful and the satisfaction of the people.

Beginning with a post in the Censorate, continuing in a higher office, he was made Vice minister (Yu Ch'eng) on the civil side of the administration, when his period of mourning for his mother had come to an end. Therefore he is often referred to as Wang Yu Ch'eng instead of Wang Wei.

During the Tien Pao period (742-756) he was a palace official, and so got caught in the deluge of panic, flight and violence which An Lu Shan's rebellion let loose. As soon as it had ebbed away and his new imperial master, Su Tsung, had ceased to frown on him for having yielded to compulsion and accepted office under the usurper, he was restored to more than former favour and created Chancellor and Companion of the crown prince.

Even in his grave, according to the beautiful custom of ancient China of remembering the dead, the title of Mi Shu Tien, Secretary-in-chief, was bestowed upon him. Great care was also taken to preserve that to which he owed these honours, the lovely creations of his mind and brush.
His pictures were eagerly purchased and came to be ranked among the most coveted treasures of the best collections. Among his prose writings, of which there were four volumes, his "Secrets of the Art of Landscape Painting" was often reprinted, and his poems, diligently searched for by order of the Emperor Tai Tsung, were gathered into book form to save them from further loss, for, unluckily, of the 100,000 sheets they had filled, the troubles of 756 only suffered four hundred to survive.

They would well repay an exhaustive study, carrying as they do the fragrance of one of the most perfect spring times that ever delighted the heart of the world, vibrating with the music of a soul as close to the divine in nature as it is ever given morals to attain. Only a few fragments of Wang Wei's abundance are given here, some golden sparks from his great fire, but it is to be feared that the trials of translation have turned these into lifeless ashes.

AUTUMN GLEAMS IN MY MOUNTAIN HERMITAGE.

In mountain fastness after fresh rain,  
Evening sky and deepening fall,  
Moonbeams glitter 'mong pine trees tall,  
Gurgling wells over boulders flow,
And as fishermen down stream row,
Lotus leaves bend;
As maids from their washing homewards wend,
Bamboo fronds sway.
Though fragrance of spring time has long passed away,
Loved one of Nature, wilt thou not stay?

BIRD CRY NEAR MOUNTAIN BROOK.

O falling of soft cassia blossoms on the soil,
Spring mountain loneliness, surcease of toil!
The moon shines forth startling a bird in sheltered hillside nook
To utter one long cry that mingles with the gurgling of the brook.

THE LINGERING PARTING FROM TSUI HSING TSUNG.

We rein in our horses farewell to say,
By the moat of the palace in crisp cold of the day,
Mountains tower ahead a magnificent view,
But my soul is bowed down, for I go without you.
THE SOUTHERN MOUNTAIN SUMMITS.

Upwards it rises the glorious Ta I, 
Lesser mountains linked together drop down to the edge of the sea, 
White clouds the distance encircle and close, 
Blue haze of the hills on approaching, invisible grows; 
Scanned from each towering summit's star dedicate height, 
Vales are transformed, steeped in dark shadow or kindled with light, 
But echoes of a woodcutter's axe float across the ravine.

PARTING.

No more among the great hills may I walk with you; 
The sun goes down, the wicket-gate I close --- 
Next year all the flowers and leaves will spring forth anew, 
But will you too come again, you whom friendship chose?

FAREWELL.
We dismount and drink our last cup of wine ---
"O why must thou go ?" I ask, " dear comrade mine,
"And whither wilt wander, canst thou not say ? "
"Ask me no further --- in the South far away
 "Where forever over slumbering mountains the white clouds roll,
"There will I seek to solace my wounded soul! "