

## CHAPTER IV

### AN INTERLUDE AND A NARROW ESCAPE

IT was in the second month (April) of 1263, that Nichiren was released from his banishment in Izu. The reason for the release is unknown, but his return was a triumph for Nichiren. By the rising of the mob, and during his exile, his abode had been devastated, his disciples ill-treated, and some of his lay followers threatened with confiscation of their properties. Yet they remained faithful to the prophet and his instructions; and when the master came back to Kamakura, they flocked to him, and welcomed him with tears of joy. It seems that some of them wished to see their master mitigate his trenchant attacks upon other Buddhists, believing that the true religion could be propagated without antagonizing others. This is reflected in Nichiren's strong insistence, in an essay written immediately after his return,<sup>1</sup> on the proposition that an exclusive devotion to the unique truth of the Lotus is the necessary condition to salvation. It was impossible for him to modify his attitude, for he was a man who had passed through perils and was thereby strengthened in the conviction of his own mission and destiny. He now preached in a manner more intransigent than before, and drew a strong contrast and a sharp line of demarcation between his gospel and Amita-Buddhism as well as Shingon mysticism. The forcible arguments and

<sup>1</sup> The essay entitled "*Ji-Hokke Mondō-shō*", or "A Catechism on the Method of Holding the Lotus of Truth", written in 1263. *Works*, pp. 465-476. Further reference to this writing is made below.

vehement invectives, directed especially against these two schools, exhibit the method of Nichiren's proselyting, which he now stated explicitly and systematically.

Irreconcilably pugnacious toward his opponents, yet tenderly persuasive toward his followers, Nichiren almost always combined these two sides of his propaganda; but the writings produced within a few years after the first exile show, decidedly more than the earlier ones, a wonderful combination of the two. The delicate sentiment shown in his tender persuasions is now remarkably united with admonitions to honest faith and pure heart. The essay referred to above, written in the form of a catechism, is an example of this. After affirming the necessity of an exclusive devotion to the Lotus, it proceeds to emphasize the efficacy of simple-hearted faith:<sup>1</sup>

If you desire to attain Buddhahood immediately, lay down the banner of pride, cast away the club of resentment, and trust yourselves to the unique Truth. Fame and profit are nothing more than vanity of this life; pride and obstinacy are simply fetters to the coming life. . . . When you fall into an abyss and some one has lowered a rope to pull you out, should you hesitate to grasp the rope because you doubt the power of the helper? Has not Buddha declared, "I alone am the protector and savior"?<sup>2</sup> There is the power! Is it not taught that faith is the only entrance (to salvation)? There is the rope! One who hesitates to seize it, and will not utter the Sacred Truth, will never be able to climb the precipice of Bodhi (Enlightenment). . . . Our hearts ache and our sleeves are wet (with tears), until we see face to face the tender figure of the One, who says to us, "I am thy Father."<sup>3</sup> At this thought our hearts beat, even as when we behold the brilliant clouds in the evening sky or the pale moonlight of the fast-falling night. . . . Should any season be passed without thinking of the compassionate promise, "Constantly I am thinking of you"?<sup>4</sup> Should any month or day be spent without

<sup>1</sup> *Works*, pp. 469-476.

<sup>2</sup> *Yam.*, p. 139; see below, p. 70.

<sup>3</sup> *Yam.*, p. 473; *Text*, p. 326, line 7; *SBE.*, p. 309.

<sup>4</sup> *Yam.*, p. 473; *Text*, p. 326, line 11; *SBE.*, p. 310.

revering the teaching that there is none who cannot attain Buddhahood? . . . Devote yourself whole-heartedly to the "Adoration to the Lotus of the Perfect Truth," and utter it yourself as well as admonish others to do the same. Such is your task in this human life.

It must not be ignored, however, that even this writing contains a sharp argument against the opponents of the Lotus.

Another instance of tenderness is shown in a letter<sup>1</sup> written to a lady who had asked about the rules to be observed during her monthly period. This was regarded by Japanese custom as a pollution, and women in this state were forbidden to approach Shinto sanctuaries. Her question, therefore, was, what she should do about the Scripture during that time. Nichiren deems it unnecessary to observe any precaution in that respect, and admonishes her to recite the Scripture as usual. Yet he adds that, if, because of the habit and custom, she has scruples about doing so, she need not hold the rolls of the Scripture; it will suffice to pronounce the Sacred Title. Delicate consideration and counsel of this kind are by no means rare in Nichiren's instructions, but they become more frequent after his return from exile. In general, we see how exile and residence among the simple country folk had tempered Nichiren's spirit, making him more gracious and sympathetic. His close contact with the people of Izu, especially the fisherman and his wife who sheltered him there, led him to give his instruction a more popular form and to take a deeper personal interest in his followers.

In the autumn of the following year (1264), while Nichiren was thus carrying on his propaganda, both polemic and persuasive, the illness of his mother called him to his native

<sup>1</sup> *Works*, pp. 477-485, dated the seventeenth of the fourth month (May 15) 1264.

place. When he arrived at home, his mother was seemingly dead. The pious son was, however, not disheartened, but went on to pray that her life might be restored. His prayer was heard, or his supernormal power proved efficacious, and gradually the aged mother recovered her health. Not only was his mother's restored health a great joy to Nichiren, but the demonstration of his miraculous powers led him at once to take a step toward the fulfilment of a pious desire long since cherished by him, the conversion of his old master Dōzen, the abbot of Kiyozumi, who still remained a believer in Amita and practised Shingon mysteries. The three objects of reverence and gratitude in Nichiren's religious ethics, as we shall see later, were a man's parents, ruler, and master. Nichiren's parents had long since been converted to his faith — the father had died six years before; but his efforts to convert the rulers were still unsuccessful, and his old master had never been subject to his influence, from the day of the first sermon in the assembly hall of Kiyozumi eleven years before. Nichiren now visited the abbot at a monastery in the country, explained his own conviction, expressed his pious desire for his master's conversion, exposed the old man's error, tenderly persuaded him to enter on the true way. But, alas! the man was now too old and weak to abandon the religious practices to which he had long been accustomed and become his former pupil's convert. He appreciated Nichiren's kindly intention, thanked him for his zeal, and wept with conflicting emotions; but the meeting was, after all, a failure. This remained a great regret to Nichiren throughout his life.<sup>1</sup>

This visit to his native place was an interlude in the perilous life of Nichiren; affectionate reminiscences of his

<sup>1</sup> After the old man's death, Nichiren, in 1276, still tried to mitigate this sorrow, by dedicating to the dead master a writing of spiritual admonition.

childhood were associated with a pious desire to perpetuate these early relationships to eternity. But the interlude was destined to be interrupted; wherever Nichiren, the apostle of the Truth, went, the shadow of danger attended him. The shadow now was embodied in the person of the local chief who had tried to kill him immediately after the assembly at Kiyozumi. When Nichiren parted from the abbot and left the village convent where they had met, his adversary was waiting for him. It was early in the evening on an autumn day<sup>1</sup> that Nichiren, accompanied by a few disciples from among the monks and some believing warriors, was making his way through the gloom of a pine forest. The pursuer, with hundreds of his troops cut off the way. The danger was imminent. "Shooting arrows flew like rain drops," Nichiren narrates,<sup>2</sup> "and the sparks from clashing swords were like lightning. One of my disciples was instantly killed, two others severely wounded, and I myself received a blow (on the forehead). There seemed to be no hope of escape, but I was saved — how, I cannot explain. Thus my gratitude toward the Lotus of Truth has ever since grown deeper." The wound on his forehead was left to remind him of his narrow escape. The orphan boy of the warrior disciple who had died in his defence became Nichiren's favorite disciple, and served the prophet with an inherited devotion.

Although the attack seems to have been prompted by diverse motives, Nichiren saw in it a plot organized by the Amita-Buddhists. It had the effect of confirming his conviction of the falsity of Amita-Buddhism, and the truth of his own religion; and, what was far more important, of

<sup>1</sup> The eleventh of the eleventh month, that is, December 1, 1264.

<sup>2</sup> *Works*, p. 524; in an epistle addressed to Lord Nanjō, about a month after the event. He refers to the incident in later writings in similar words.

strengthening the faith of Nichiren and his followers that he was a man sent and protected by the Lord Śākya-muni, and by his Truth. The belief in his mission which had been growing since his days in Izu reached a stage in which the self-consciousness of the prophet is more explicitly proclaimed. After having told of the incident, in the letter above cited, and quoting the same passages of the Scripture he cited in his writings in Izu, Nichiren tells more of himself.

There are many in Japan who read and study the Lotus of Truth; there are, again, many who are attacked because they have conspired against others; but there is none who is abused because of (his revering) the Lotus of Truth. Thus, none of the men in Japan who hold to the Scripture have yet realized what is stated in the Scripture (since every one who really holds to it must encounter perils on that account); the one who really reads it is none other than I, Nichiren, who put in practice the text, "We shall not care for bodily life, but do our best for the sake of the incomparable Way." Then I, Nichiren, am the one, supreme one, the pioneer of the Lotus of Truth.<sup>1</sup>

Another interval, lasting nearly four years, followed the peril at the Pine Forest, and it was a fruitful period in Nichiren's harvest of converts! During these years Nichiren went on missionary journeys in the eastern provinces, and succeeded in converting many local lords. The first thing which strikes us in the results of his propaganda is that there were only a few among his disciples who had been Buddhist monks, and that most of his followers were recruited from among the warriors and feudal lords. Most of the warriors converted by him remained laymen and became the "outside" supporters of Nichiren; but they dedicated to the religion their brothers or sons who, after the years of their novitiate, were ordained, and worked under the master in disseminating his doctrine. The first converts made by

<sup>1</sup> A letter sent to Lord Nanjō, dated the thirteenth of the twelfth month (January 1, 1265). *Works*, p. 524.

Nichiren, as we mentioned, were his parents, who were given the Buddhist names Myōnichi and Myōren respectively, meaning "Perfection-Sun" and "Perfection-Lotus." The first monk disciple was Nisshō, who had been the master's fellow-student on Hiei, and had followed him to Kamakura. After this comes a list of converts from the warrior class, or their sons and brothers. During the four years of which we are now speaking, there was a notable increase in numbers, and it was in the years before and after Nichiren's exile to Izu that his religion was planted in the provinces of Awa and Kazusa, which have been its stronghold down to the present time.

This chapter may properly conclude with quotations from poems ascribed to the prophet on these missionary journeys.

Outside pours the rain, and its drops strike the windows.  
Surely, it is not thy own nature, O rain, that makes thee fall aslant,<sup>1</sup>  
But the wind that causes thee to beat so noisily on the sliding screens.

My body is all wet with the rain drops —  
Nay, by my own tears, shed over calamities and perils;  
And yet, under the "Umbrella-Forest" I am sheltered,  
Now, even on this dreary evening.

These poems reflect the hardships he encountered everywhere, and make us vividly imagine a poor monk, clad in simple gray robes, with a little bag in his hands and a straw umbrella-hat on his head, passing stormy nights in cottages or deserted shrines. The latter of the poems cited is said to have been written in a shrine dedicated to Kwannon, at Kasa-mori, or "Umbrella-Forest," which stands today marking the site.

<sup>1</sup> The word rendered "nature" also means "conscience," and "aslant, oblique," means "crooked, vicious." Thus the didactic purpose of the verse is clear.

## CHAPTER V

### THE THREATENING MONGOL INVASION AND THE SENTENCE OF DEATH

WHILE Nichiren was warning the nation of the possible calamity of a foreign invasion, the Mongol conquerors of the Asiatic continent were preparing for an expedition to the eastern islands. The Korean peninsula had already been subjugated, but the Hōjō government did not yet fully realize the situation, although they must have had some knowledge of it. It is a question whether Nichiren had had any definite information when he wrote the warning essay in 1257-60.<sup>1</sup> At any rate, a panic was caused when, in 1268, an envoy from Kublai, the Mongol emperor, was reported to be proceeding to Japan by way of Korea. This embassy had not reached Japan; but it was a triumph for Nichiren, when, in 1268, another envoy urged a definite answer to the Khan's demand for the payment of tribute, and the government and the people realized the gravity of the situation. Nichiren now went back to Kamakura and renewed his appeal to the government. "Recall my prophetic warning given eight years ago! Is it not now being realized? Is there any man beside Nichiren who can repel this national danger? Only the one who knows the real cause of the situation can command it." Thus he argued.

<sup>1</sup> One theory is that Nichiren must have known the situation on the continent well enough, even early in the fifties, because while he was in Hiei, he had most probably made investigations about the feasibility of going to China as he desired. On the other hand, we know that the Chinese, Dōryū, Nichiren's bitterest opponent, came to Japan in 1246, and another Chinese in 1260.



As this appeal remained unanswered, the prophet determined to take more radical measures. After two months, he sent letters to the high officials of the government and to the abbots of the great monasteries, urging them to abandon their former faith and practices, and to adopt Nichiren's religion. There are eleven of these letters, each carrying its own special warning.

At the same time he sent a circular to his followers, in which he says: <sup>1</sup>

In consequence of the arrival of the Mongol envoy, I have sent eleven letters to various officials and prelates. Prosecution will surely overtake Nichiren and his followers, and either exile or death will be the sentence. You must not be at all surprised. Strong remonstrances have intentionally been made, simply for the purpose of awakening the people. All is awaited by Nichiren with composure. Do not think of your wives and children and households; do not be fearful before the authorities! Make this your opportunity to sever the fetters of births and deaths, and to attain the fruit of Buddhahood! etc.

All these letters are dated the eleventh of the tenth month (November 16), 1268, eight months after the arrival of the Mongol envoy. We know nothing about the effect of the remonstrances, but there are indications that the government authorities summoned some of Nichiren's warrior followers, and examined their connection with Nichiren's propaganda. Meanwhile, Nichiren himself is believed to have left Kamakura, and to have been on missionary journeys, during about two years after this event. This silence and retirement, if they are real, seem to have been a period of preparation for another and decisive step, which he contemplated for the purpose of remonstrance and combat; and the psychological condition of Nichiren during this period may perhaps be compared to the retirement of Christ to Galilee before his last entry into Jerusalem. At any rate,

<sup>1</sup> *Works*, pp. 617-618.

toward the end of 1270, we again see Nichiren in Kamakura, and in a letter dated the twenty-eighth of the eleventh month (January 11, 1271), we read his resolution, as he was maturing his plans for the ensuing combat. It says: "I was once exiled on account of my cause, the Lotus of Truth. Something seems still to be lacking until I shall be executed. Wishing that this might happen, I sent strong remonstrances to various authorities. Now, my life has reached the fiftieth year. Why should I expect to live very much longer? Let me dedicate this life, with you, to the unique truth of the Lotus — the bodily life which is destined once finally to be abandoned in an uncultivated field."<sup>1</sup> In the following summer of 1271, we find him engaged in a contest with other Buddhists in a ritual against a drought. After this, events moved rapidly, leading to a sentence of death pronounced upon the aggressive prophet.

When Nichiren reappeared in Kamakura, the hatred of the rival Buddhists toward him was implacable. Especially Ryōkwan, the abbot of Gokuraku-ji and the greatest philanthropist of the time,<sup>2</sup> being incensed by Nichiren's fierce proclamation, charged him with disturbing the public order, and demanded a retraction from him. Nichiren defended himself against the charges, and challenged his opponent to a public debate. Ryōkwan was revered by the nobility and the people as the greatest teacher of Buddhist discipline, and was regarded as an incarnation of the Buddha Bhaisājya-guru, or Medicine-master,<sup>3</sup> because of his care for the sick and infirm; and a man of such high position as the

<sup>1</sup> *Works*, p. 635.

<sup>2</sup> This man was the chief figure among those in whom Nichiren thought he found an embodiment of the opponents of the third category. See above, p. 41.

<sup>3</sup> A special manifestation of Buddha.

abbot of a monastery endowed by the government was deemed to be too dignified to enter a public debate with a beggar-like monk. Then in the summer the country suffered from a long drought, and when Ryōkwan's mystic ritual seemed to be fruitless to bring a rainfall, Nichiren vehemently accused the former of being a vain hypocrite. Intrigue against Nichiren was going on behind the scene among the court ladies of the Hōjō, who were all admirers of Ryōkwan. Public accusations were also made from various sides. At last, on the tenth of the ninth month (October 15, 1271), Nichiren was called into court to explain himself. He declared that his accusers were great liars, and repeated his warning about the imminent Mongol invasion, to the same effect as in his previous utterances. The man who was most offended and irritated was Hei no Saemon, the major-domo of the Hōjō, a fervent believer in Amita-Buddhism. Two days later, while the question was still pending in the court, Nichiren sent to him the essay, *Risshō Ankoku Ron*, together with a letter almost amounting to an ultimatum. The breach was too wide to be closed; the critical moment was at hand.

On the morning of the same day, the twelfth, probably while Nichiren's ultimatum was still on the way, a body of troops, led by the major-domo himself, surrounded Nichiren's hut. Nichiren stood on the veranda with the rolls of the Scripture in his hands. The soldiers hesitated to attack him, but he made no resistance. When the soldiers finally seized him, he loudly exclaimed, "Behold, the Pillar of Japan is now falling." He was tried before the Supreme Court on the charge of high treason. The judgment was immediately pronounced, and it seems to have been a sentence of banishment; but his life was left to the mercy of the custodian, Nichiren's opponent himself, Hei no Saemon — a

method of disposing of cases not unusual in that age. In the evening, the prisoner was carried around on horseback in the city, and late in the night he was carried to Tatsu-nokuchi, the Dragon's Mouth, the execution ground, about two miles from Kamakura. As he passed the Red Bridge in the middle of the town, he commanded the guard to stop. While the amazed soldiers obeyed and the crowd were wondering what was going to happen, the giant monk dismounted from the horse and stood facing north, toward the sanctuary of Hachiman. Hachiman, or the Eight-Banners Deity, was the patron god of the Minamotos, and a magnificent temple dedicated to him was erected at Kamakura when it was the seat of the Dictatorial government. It ever remained the holiest sanctuary of the military headquarters and the Dictator's residence. The Red Bridge was on the great avenue running through the middle of the city,<sup>1</sup> from the front of the Hachiman temple to the seashore. There the prisoner monk stood, and fixing his gaze on the seat of worship, spoke thus:

O Hachiman! Art thou really a divine being? When the Great Master Dengyō gave lectures on the Lotus of Truth, thou didst honor him by offering a purple robe. Now, I, Nichiren, am the one, the supreme one, who lives the life of the Lotus of Truth.<sup>2</sup> There is no fault in me, but I am proclaiming the Truth, simply in order to save all the people of this country from falling down to the nethermost hells because of their degrading the Lotus of Truth. Should the Mongols subjugate this country, wouldst thou, O Hachiman, together with the Sun-Goddess, alone be safe? Moreover, when our Lord Śākya-muni revealed the Lotus of Truth, all the Buddhas came together from the ten quarters; and when innumerable hosts, including the deities and saints of India, China, and Japan, were present in the congregation,

<sup>1</sup> Even today the temple and the avenue remain, almost as they were in the thirteenth century. The site of the Red Bridge is near the place where the railway viaduct crosses the central avenue of the city.

<sup>2</sup> This expression, "*Nippon dai-ichi no Hokke-kyō no gyōja*," in the original, has appeared before, and is used more frequently from this time on.

each of you took oath to guard those who should work to perpetuate the Truth. Now thou oughtest to come here and fulfil thy oath, and why dost thou not do it ? . . . When, tonight, I, Nichiren, shall be beheaded and go to the Paradise of Vulture Peak, I shall declare before our Lord Śākya-muni that thou, Hachiman, and the Sun-Goddess have not fulfilled your oaths. Art thou not afraid of that ?<sup>1</sup>

Then Nichiren mounted his horse and rode dignifiedly on. The soldiers and the crowd were amazed, and every one was questioning with himself, "Is he mad, or is he really a superman?" Superstitious awe was mingled with high admiration; pity and sympathy were displaced by the thought, "What extraordinary audacity! The sign of a supernatural power!"

Along the road on which Nichiren's guard proceeded many of his believers wept and cried, some of them daring even to approach him. He took farewell of them, either in silence or with a word of consolation. The faithful warrior, Kingo, together with his brothers, accompanied his master to the execution ground, and Nichiren later expressed his high appreciation of their fidelity unto death. Most of Nichiren's monk disciples had been arrested and imprisoned; and to them, after his miraculous escape from death, he wrote consoling letters.

It was some time past midnight when Nichiren arrived at Tatsu-no-kuchi. Everything was ready for his execution; soldiers surrounded the place; the official witness, Hei no Saemon, was sitting in a chair, the executioner standing behind. Nichiren sat down on a straw mat, joined his hands in worship, uttered the Sacred Title, and, stretching out his neck, awaited the stroke of the sword. Suddenly, and miraculously, as he himself and others believed, the sky was ablaze with light. "Something bright, like a ball of

<sup>1</sup> *Works*, pp. 1392-1393; written five years later, in 1276.

fire, flew from the southeast to the northwest, and every one's face was clearly visible in its light. The executioner became dizzy, and fell; soldiers were panic-stricken, some running away, others prostrate even on horseback."<sup>1</sup> Everything was in confusion, and the execution was no longer possible.

This narrow escape, more unexpected and miraculous than in any preceding cases, impressed Nichiren so deeply that he regarded his life thereafter as a second life—the life after a resurrection. In a later writing he expressed this thought as follows:<sup>2</sup>

A man called Nichiren was beheaded at Tatsu-no-kuchi, a little after midnight of the twelfth day of the ninth month last year. His soul remained, and came here to the island of Sado; it wrote this, in the midst of snow, in the second month of the year following, and leaves it to posterity.

Another letter,<sup>3</sup> written in 1277 to his beloved warrior disciple Kingo, shows how gravely he regarded the crisis:

Over and over I recall to mind that you came following me when I was going to be beheaded, and that you cried and wept, holding the bridle of my horse. How can I forget that as long as I may live? If you should fall to the hells because of your grave sins (accumulated in the past), I would not follow the call of my Lord Śākya, howsoever he might invite me to Buddhahood, but I would surely be in the hell where you are. If I and you are in the hells, Śākya Buddha and the Scripture will surely be there together with us.

Another letter addressed to the same warrior, written while the crisis was still fresh in his memory, says:<sup>4</sup>

Tatsu-no-kuchi is the place where Nichiren renounced his life. The place is therefore comparable to a paradise; because all has taken

<sup>1</sup> *Works*, p. 1394.

<sup>2</sup> In the "Opening the Eyes." (*Works*, p. 804), written in 1272.

<sup>3</sup> *Works*, p. 1644; cp. p. 1812.

<sup>4</sup> Seven days after the event (*Works*, p. 690).

place for the sake of the Lotus of Truth. . . . Indeed every place where Nichiren encounters perils is Buddha's land. . . . Surely when I shall be on Vulture Peak, I shall inform our Lord of your fidelity shown in your readiness to follow me to death.

The authorities were perplexed what to do. When the day dawned, it was decided that the prisoner should be sent to Echi, a village fifteen miles inland from Tatsu-no-kuchi. When, at noon, he arrived there, he was received very reverently into the mansion of the local chief, and the soldiers of the guard began to listen to what the wonderful man said and preached. Meanwhile, it seems, the government circle were much disturbed by the failure of the execution, and a faction among the officials seems to have raised its voice against those who had urged that Nichiren should be put to death. Late in the following night a special messenger came from Kamakura, ordering that good care be taken of the prisoner. Finally, he was sentenced to exile, and, nearly a month later, he left Echi for the Island of Sado, which was designated as his place of banishment.