

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 1257-60.¹ 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.

¹ 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: ¹

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,

¹ *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."¹ 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,² 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,³ because of his care for the sick and infirm; and a man of such high position as the

¹ *Works*, p. 635.

² 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.

³ 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,¹ 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.² 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,

¹ 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.

² 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 ?¹

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

¹ *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."¹ 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:²

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,³ 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:⁴

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

¹ *Works*, p. 1394.

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

³ *Works*, p. 1644; cp. p. 1812.

⁴ 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.