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Obsessed by Roerich

By B.V.K. Sastry

NEARLY 20 years back, a young man was wandering in New York. He seemed to be in need of peace of mind and enlightenment. In his quest he roamed the corridors of the temples of knowledge and learning, browsed over innumerable books in libraries, looked at and contemplated paintings in art galleries.

One day he found a book "Flaming Chalice" in a library which had a profound effect on him. Immediately afterwards he saw some paintings of Prof. Nicholas Roerich in a gallery. The paintings seemed to strike a hidden chord. He was not merely fascinated but almost immersed himself in their study and contemplation. "I was even obsessed. The paintings seemed to suggest that at last I had found a master and guide," exclaimed Michael Breen, the young man.

He was in town following in the footsteps of the master. His lantern slide lecture at the Chitrakala Parishat on the Paintings of Roerich was moving and illuminating. He impressed one by the variety and range and also the intensive study of the subject. Above all, it revealed the deep involvement and also the devotion to Prof. Roerich and his works. In fact, Breen is a Roerichologist.

In many respects Michael Breen reminds one of another such wanderer straight from the pages of Somerset Maugham's *Razors Edge*—that is Larry Darrell. Breen seems to suffer from similar inner compulsions. And, surprisingly, their background in a way is similar. Darrell was a product of the First World War while Breen is of the Second. Each faced some real tragedy and shock which gave an entirely new turn to their lives. Darrell had his Patsy and Breen his mother.

SHAPE

"I adored my mother very much," said Breen referring to that tragedy. "She was dying before my very eyes suffering from leukaemia. And when I was utterly helpless either to prevent it or provide some solace to her, I automatically realised the transient nature and the futility of life and its activities. It also diverted my attention to those worlds beyond and created an



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eagerness to know more about them." Inevitably he was engrossed in metaphysics, mysticism and yoga. He also became a theosophist. His deep study of this literature stimulated Breen to visit other lands and especially India, the birthplace of great sages and thinkers.

"The paintings of Roerich definitely increased such desire because they gave a cohesive shape to many of my longings, thoughts and even dreams," averred Breen. Continuing he said the one thought in his mind was about those great mountains, that is the Himalayas whose physical and ethereal beauty had been so tellingly captured by the master in his paintings.

The Himalayas have been a perennial source of inspiration to sages, thinkers, artists and poets. Starting from the Kumarasambhavan of Kalidasa, numerous works have vividly extolled the physical and spiritual grandeur of those mountains. Millions have been drawn to them as though by a magnet. But Breen has made it like a pilgrimage to enjoy in reality, the sacred beauty

of the Himalayas as seen in the canvases of Roerich. In fact, he looks like a character coming out of those canvases with features similar to a Tibetan.

Michael Breen has travelled all over India "not as an affluent hurrying tourist" but as a common man mixing with people. "What a great land!" exclaims Breen. What variety of life, culture, artistry, crafts and above all the innate humanism of the people." In the West according to him, the technological age has resulted in gross dehumanisation. "It is turning us into automatons. That is why the younger generation in the West is turning away from all those grand products and benefits of this technological civilisation. They are taking to the simple way of life which avails fully the human mind and body so that it may bring back the human factor into life. "I am surprised", he added with some animation I cannot understand the craze for the west in India especially for its degenerate materials and turning away from your more ancient human values.

VISIONARIES

"Nicholas Roerich was a great soul," continued Breen. Both the Roerichs—husband and wife—were visionaries who could communicate mystical experiences. Thus his works are not mere reproductions of the subjects but have a deeper meaning and message. You might have observed the varied contrasting forms and seemingly exotic hues of those mountain ranges. It is said that those colours and forms were not exact reproductions but something beyond. They have a celestial aura. In fact I may say they are a reflection of Shambhala, the Shangri La of many books, which is believed to exist in some inaccessible corner of those mountains. Roerich has had the experience of Shambhala and I may even say that he was the Shambhala himself."

As a consequence Michael Breen is haunted by Tibet and is nursing a desire to visit that land. His future plans?

"I am travelling in the footsteps of the master or rather following the tracks of his nearly 7000 paintings. They are distributed throughout the world with a greater concentration in Russia. I want to look at them and incidentally return to the spots and engage in their contemplation close to nature and their source."