

Translation of Karin Michaëlis' introduction to Kun en Kvinde,
the Danish version of Agnes Smedley's autobiography, published
by Fremad in 1933 in Copenhagen. Introduction translated by
H. B. Miller.

Agnes Smedley.

Certainly no one would have thought that Agnes Smedley's book, Kun en Kvinde, would become a world-wide success. Least of all she. She wrote the book because she had to write it -- she carried it in her as a burden which became heavier from day to day. The book is a clash between a human being and her surroundings, between her family and her personal views, between her bewilderment and her hopes.

Agnes is one of the most uncompromising persons I have met -- and one of the most loving and self-sacrificing. Her childhood and her youth were one long Calvary. She sought only one thing: knowledge. In her innocence, she thought that knowledge was the magic word "sesame" which would open all doors in life, the "Open Sesame!" which would lead her into the holy, shining land of happiness. She accumulated knowledge -- At what cost! With what privation! And with what suffering! And as she gradually achieved understanding in many fields of knowledge, she realized that the little bit of knowledge she had gathered in her bewildered girl's mind was still nothing; and when she noticed that besides knowledge there was also something called culture -- something harder to acquire; then she suddenly gave up.

Or maybe what happened was quite different. Maybe it was simply inevitable, that through her own and her family's bitter, confused struggle and their fortunes, Agnes realized that her place was on the barricades for freedom and equality, and assumed her rightful post.

By chance she sprang into the fight of the Indian Nationalists against mighty England. It was her intention to go to India, learn the language, and give her life to this struggle. But the door to India had been locked. She was informed that as soon as she

set foot on Indian soil, she would be imprisoned, or sent back to Europe with the next ship. The journey was too costly to risk this. So she went to China, and that is where she is now. She travels around the country, gives fiery speeches, and is well on her way to reading and writing Chinese. -- After reading her book, one need not wonder whether she seeks her friends among the influential, or among the oppressed and wronged. I have before me a letter from her, in which she describes her first day in Peking: An Englishman sits in his rickshaw, pulled by a barefoot coolie. The coolie slips on a banana peel, and the Englishman is shoved forward a bit as the ~~man~~ carriage suddenly stops. The Englishman jumps out and, with his cane, proceeds to beat the skinny, worn-out coolie until the latter lies bleeding in the dirt of the road. It is the time of day when society promenades. European gentlemen and ladies stroll by, clothed in silk and holding elegant parasols. Not one thinks to intervene. Against a coolie, an Englishman has the right to commit any brutality.

As for Agnes, she assumes that in China she will end her days in prison or on the scaffold. A later letter from her contains snapshots of executions in the streets. One sees about twenty short, headless men lying strewed around; scattered among them are their heads, lying where they happened to roll. In the same pictures one sees gentlemen and ladies who walk around the dead without taking notice of them, except that they take care not to step in the puddles of ~~human~~ blood.

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I became acquainted with Agnes Smedley, a woman no one who has ever met her forgets, in Berlin in 1925. At that time she was married to one of the leaders of the Indian Nationalist movement. This alliance lasted seven years. She esteemed him greatly and still does, but not even this great love was enough to bridge the difference between East and West. She once confided to me that after seven

years' marriage to him, she knew no more about her husband than she knew after having talked to him a couple of times. The break was painful for both parties. Nevertheless, she again considered tying her fate to a young Indian, one who had received doctors' degrees in Europe from no less than three different universities. But when it came to a decision, she was afraid that she would spoil his ~~■~~ career, and broke off the relationship. Though young in years, she has renounced everything: fame, personal happiness, comfort, safety, for one thing: complete dedication to a great cause. -- Agnes is neither Communist nor Anarchist. She would never consider becoming a member of any political party which laid down rules for her. She lives her life, and she fights her fight, as ~~■~~ she finds just and fair. She is a lonely bird of tremendous wingspread, a bird that will never build a nest...

And yet -- with this obstinate defiance peculiar to her, which no one and nothing can make her give up -- she is nevertheless the tenderest and most loving being that exists. Watch her touch a flower, watch her pat a neglected little child on the head, listen to her tell about her childhood... Her heart has shed its last drops of blood. Now ~~■~~ she is hardened.

In this, her only book so far, written during a stay with me, she more or less portrays her own life. Out of consideration for particular persons she has disguised some events, but by and large one can describe the book as an autobiography. Among other things, she describes how she was treated in New York in the course of an illegal detention. One is tempted to believe that such inhuman brutality could not have taken place against a young woman. But I know, from thorough acquaintance with the story, that actually she has softened the description rather than exaggerating it.

Agnes has friends everywhere, but makes little use of them. One gets the feeling that she does not want regular correspondence with them for fear of misusing time and strength which could be better used in other ways.

I'm sure that I will never see Agnes again, but my encounter with her and our time together, which stretched over several months, have enriched my life and warmed my heart.

Thurs, June 1933.

Karin Michaelis.