Pearl S. Buck

OTHER GODS

AN AMERICAN LEGEND

The John Day Company

NEW YORK

Second Impression

A shorter version of this book appeared in serial form in Good Housekeeping Magazine *under the title,* An American Legend.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

THIS BOOK is dedicated in true humility to all those hapless human beings whom their fellow creatures, by one accident or another, for a moment or for eternity, have made into gods. A few have been great enough to endure godhead; most of them have not. It has not mattered whether they could endure it because they themselves have been of no importance to those who chose them for worship. They were made symbols and when they were compelled to this unearthly shape by that most powerful force on earth, the desire of men for a god, they were lost. No one will ever know such a one as he was meant to be, any more than anyone will ever know as a human being the Dalai Lama in Tibet, yesterday an old man, today a child. What he might have been as a man, a husband, a father, the citizen of a state, he will never be. His life as an ordinary man among men has been taken from him and the loss to him, as to all other gods, is irreparable.

In the pages to come he is called, for convenience, Bert Holm. The name does as well as any. Readers may say he is like this one or that one of those they know. He is none. In so far as he is like one he is like all, as the woman who tries to be his wife is the type of all sensitive, true women who marry gods unaware. For such gods are alike. If they had differences in the beginning the differences are soon obliterated, as in some countries the faces of stone images, which people set up for worship, are worn smooth and similar by the touch upon them of millions of adoring, pleading hands. And this resemblance is not only in the faces of gods. In their hearts is a common bitterness, whether the hour of their godhead was long or short and whether they loved or despised it.

OTHER GODS

I

Among the ranges of the Himalayan mountains there stands a certain lofty peak well known to mountain climbers but long unexplored. As lofty as others more famous, it presented a repellent face to those men who are urged, by what they do not know, to leave the lower surfaces of earth where people live, to ascend to peaks where people cannot live because they pierce too high a heaven. Therat, though not as high as Everest, yet was far too high for pleasure climbing. Mountain climbers looked at its high shouldered shape, fortressed with cliffs, and then said, "If we are going to climb Therat we might as well try for Everest," and because Therat thus fell between Everest and other peaks a little lower, it remained unconquered until a certain afternoon in July, in a year now well remembered, when Bert Holm, a young American, climbed the icy crag which was Therat's crest and reached its top alone.

That this feat might have anything to do with glory did not occur to him, partly because his imagination never carried him beyond the moment and partly because once he had reached the top and was coming down again, he grew alarmed at what Sir Alfred Fessaday, the head of the British Meteorological Expedition to Therat, might say about it.

This alarm grew acute toward the end of what had in the morning promised to be one of those Himalayan days which seem to have no end, so early is the sunrise, so late the sunset. It was that promise which had given him the impulse to desert the others and climb alone when it appeared that the expedition could not go on.

Bert Holm had no business to be on the mountain at all. He was nothing but the mechanic whom Sir Alfred had brought along to manage the two specially built American caterpillar trucks and he ought properly to have stayed with those trucks when they stopped in the foothills. But he had known since the beginning that when the time came he was not going to stay with them. When the expedition started up the mountain he appeared before Sir Alfred, his greasy cap in his hand, and upon his young and extremely handsome face a grin which Sir Alfred found, in the kindness of his secretly soft English heart, an argument not to be easily denied.

"Ah, Bert Holm," he remarked with reserve. Whenever he felt this softening under his ribs he guarded himself.

"Could I speak to you, Sir Alfred?" Bert inquired.

"You may," Sir Alfred returned.

"Please, sir, could I go up the mountain with you?"

Sir Alfred was amazed. A mechanic, a youth who had never climbed, jeopardize the success of this venture, whose important members, except the meteorologist, Nevil Lane, were all trained Himalayan climbers and officers of the British Himalayan Club?

"Certainly not," he said, looking away from the young man's face and over the bleakly beautiful Tibetan countryside beyond his tent door.

"I've climbed a lot at home," Bert said earnestly. "I climbed everything in New York State that was higher than a hill and then one summer I ran away from home and climbed in the Rockies. Another year I climbed Pike's Peak and Rainier."

"This is a scientific expedition and not merely a climbing party," Sir Alfred returned. "Besides, you were brought along to look after machinery."

"I know what you brought me for, but it ain't exactly what I come for," Bert retorted with a trace of stubbornness.

Sir Alfred looked at the young man again. So far as he knew

he had not heard Bert say anything on the whole journey. He gave way to a slight curiosity.

"Why did you come?" he inquired.

"To climb," Bert replied simply.

Sir Alfred was silent. He was something more than a scientist and he knew it. A mere scientist would not at this moment be in a tent pitched outside a filthy Tibetan village. He would have been in a comfortable laboratory in England. Sir Alfred was first of all a lover of mountains, and because he thoroughly distrusted love in any form he justified its indulgence only by something as practical as science. That was why he had brought Nevil Lane, although his better judgment had told him that Lane was not fit for mountains. "You like climbing, do you?" he asked, pulling the lobe of his right ear as he always did when in doubt.

"I'd rather climb than eat," Bert replied, and added with a fresh grin, "And I'd rather eat than anything else."

There was an extraordinary charm in this chap, it occurred to Sir Alfred. He had not noticed it before except to approve the tirelessness of Bert's tall square-shouldered frame. But now the charm could not escape notice. It poured from him, a compound of youth, extreme and obvious beauty, health and simplicity, all totally uneducated, of course, and yet somehow needing no education in its unconscious self-sufficiency. "The chap seems at home anywhere," Sir Alfred thought, and liked him. He coughed and blew his nose tremendously. Two dirty little Tibetan children who had been peeping from the door fled.

"You won't ask any special favors?" he said sternly to Bert.

"No, sir," Bert replied promptly. So the old man was going to let him go!

Sir Alfred gave up to his heart. It was a fortunate thing he had no sons, he told himself; he'd have spoiled them.

"Very well," he said shortly, turning to his papers. "Only mind you, I don't want to hear anything from you—don't want to know you're on the mountain."

"No, sir," Bert said joyfully and disappeared.

He had known so little that Bert was along that when a week later, eight hundred feet from the top of Therat, Nevil Lane developed pneumonia, so that the expedition had to turn back, he had not missed Bert Holm until they set up camp that night. It had been a wretched camping place, but Lane had been too ill to make the further one. The Tibetan porters had fumbled over the tents and wept with the cold and moaned about the danger from the Mirka, the fantastic Snowmen who they believed inhabited the mountains.

"Where's Holm?" Sir Alfred shouted.

It appeared that Holm was nowhere. No one had seen him all day. And Sir Alfred himself, exhausted with anxiety over the responsibilities of the moment, lost his temper and shouted:

"Trust the Americans not to be there when you want them——"

But Holm did not appear even to deny this, and there was nothing for Sir Alfred except to go out himself and threaten the porters into obedience, while secretly he pitied their terrors. Therat was more terrifying by night than ever, and the enormous solemn moon, rising over the snowy ranges, only added the terror of pale cold light. He went into the sick man's hut and between his attentions worried himself to nausea about Bert Holm, lost undoubtedly upon some slope of Therat's icy breast. That he was also irritated did not lessen his worry.

At a little after midnight he heard someone at the flap of the tent and he went out. There in the unearthly brilliance of the sinking moon he saw Bert Holm. He could have wept with relief, for Lane was certainly worse, and so he grew intensely angry.

"Where have you been, sir?" he roared at Bert.

"To the top," Bert replied.

"Nonsense!" Sir Alfred cried.

"Yes, I was there," Bert said.

Sir Alfred stared at him. The chap was shaking with exhaustion. His face, even in the moonlight, looked burnt to a crust with snowlight. But he knew the look in the eyes. It was the right look, and his heart quivered.

"You may consider yourself dismissed for insubordination the moment you get back to the machines," he said. "You will be responsible for yourself and not return with me to England."

"All right, if you say so, Sir Alfred." Bert returned Sir Alfred's haughty stare with peaceable mildness. Nothing could happen now to make him care one way or the other.

"I guess I'll go home by myself then, Sir Alfred," he remarked, "now that I've done what I wanted to do."

That was how Bert Holm came to go back by way of China.

Everybody in America knew, in a few weeks, what Bert Holm had done. People drank the story of it into their thirsty souls. For what he had done in that peculiarly dispiriting year took on a passionate symbolism for them far beyond its actual meaning. People were disillusioned, and frightened because they were disillusioned. Something had been lost, they said, out of life, something good and young and full of hope. The world was terrifying in its confusion. At least nothing was clearly right or wrong in the good old simple way.

Then across the miasma of general hopelessness had come the story of Bert Holm. Thousands of people lifted up their heads. A hero? There was a short hesitation over this. Some asked could one be a hero at mountain climbing? Others answered why not? The poles were discovered, the oceans were flown, and man had not yet devised the means of exploring the stars. The great peaks of the Himalayas were all that was left unattained upon the earth, and Bert Holm had climbed one of the greatest, for only Everest and Pangbat were higher than Therat, and Bert was a hero. He had defied glacier and crevasse and the dangers of avalanche, and alone in his own way he had done what

a seasoned expedition had not been able to do. Even if pneumonia had been the cause for its failure, that did not change the fact of Bert Holm's success. To succeed was proof. He was an American. The old spirit was not dead after all, though it had been too long since there had been a hero in a nation that must have heroes. They had made many heroes—heroes in pioneering, heroes in war, heroes in exploring and in aviation. Here was the latest hero—a new sort, a hero of the mountains. In the old days he would have planted the American flag upon the top of Therat. In their imagination Americans saw it there now.

Who was he? With quickened millions of people clamoring to know, Bert Holm, taken by surprise by reporters at Singapore and Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Peking, said shyly that he wasn't anybody.

How did they know about him, he asked himself suspiciously. "Say, what's your game?" he demanded. They roared with laughter, not believing in his innocence. When they perceived he was not pretending they explained that Sir Alfred Fessaday had mentioned something in Calcutta, and an American reporter, catching it up, had cabled a story to New York immediately; and newspapers, quick to feel the popular pulse, had demanded by cable full details of Bert Holm's past, that they might know what were the materials from which this hero was to be made.

The materials were good. His father was a farmer, he said, near the town of Misty Falls in upstate New York, but he himself didn't like the farm much. After he finished high school, he found a job in a garage for a while. But he never liked it. More than anything else he liked climbing. He had planned if he had not come on this trip to climb down Niagara Falls some day, underneath the falls somehow, maybe in winter when the water was frozen. Misty Falls itself was near deep gorges and he used to climb around the cliffs a lot.

Over and over he had told the same quiet story, never adding to it or changing it. He hadn't, he said, really done anything any-

way to make a fuss over—it was only that having come so far to climb a mountain, he didn't like to go home without doing it.

But a fire, long prepared and ready for any flame, caught this, and America began to worship Bert Holm. When Sir Alfred said it was extremely dangerous to go alone like that to the top of Therat, Americans reading their newspapers snorted and said of course it was dangerous, but so had the American Revolution been dangerous! Besides, Bert Holm had done it, hadn't he, and come down safely again. It was crazy, but that was American too.

And Bert Holm said yes, it was crazy, he guessed, but then he had always done what he wanted to do without asking if it were crazy, or not, if it was what he wanted to do.

And millions of people cried out that this was American, this youth, this simplicity and courage and modesty. He gave them back their hope in themselves and they began to believe all they wished to believe about him. There was always someone to tell a new story about Bert Holm and the story flew from mouth to mouth, and there was no one to ask whether it were true or not, because no one in his heart wanted to know the truth. Truth was sad and without romance; truth made them face the fact that theirs was not a good world or a perfect country and that they themselves were therefore insecure. They thrust truth aside and did not want to know it. Instead they clamored to know what he believed, and out of what he said they made their new commandments.

"Bert Holm Says Japs Want To Fight U.S.A.," the newspaper headlines told them; "Bert Holm Declares National Defenses Weak," "Bert Holm Considers Airplanes Dangerous," "Bert Holm Believes World Needs Religion." Whatever he did, whatever he said, people took it and wove it upon the loom that made magic garments for Bert Holm.

Thus every small thing about Bert Holm was their material. He was not married. The first thing the reporters had asked him

was, "Are you married, Mr. Holm?" To which Bert Holm had answered shortly, after a scarcely noticed pause, "No, I'm not." And then he had gone on to say he hadn't had time for girls—much. And this added to the people's worship. He was pure, in a time when people were beginning to sicken of their own impurity and to be afraid of their own wickedness, having still some buried remembrance in them that once they had been taught that there were those things, now outworn, called sin and hell.

They clamored for Bert Holm to come home where they could see him, though the papers were full of his photographs. He was tall and blond and good-looking in the way they loved best. His blue eyes looked out of a face naturally grave until a child's smile changed it completely, and his fair hair was always tumbled. His picture was taken in Shanghai in his climbing outfit, against an artificial background, and out of such Himalayan snows he looked at the millions who looked at him at breakfast tables and on subways and in offices and trains and homes. And in the rooms of many lonely women, old and young, he looked at them out of cheap frames they bought for the pictures they cut out of newspapers. "He's sweet!" they murmured, each to her own heart, dreaming.

He was due home in September. He wasn't going to hurry, he said. Everybody told him he ought to see Peking as long as he was in China. And people, reading, restrained themselves, and smiled. He was not going to be spoiled, then, as sometimes their heroes had been. They could safely pour out their worship and they gloried in the way he went on being simply the honest mechanic. Their warmth overflowed into organizing Bert Holm clubs everywhere to collect money for the hero, to welcome him home, until the president of the American Alpine Club, alarmed at the possibilities of Bert Holm's not getting all that was given, organized a central bureau for collection and announced that when Bert came home he would find himself a rich man.

And of course no one cared anything more about what Sir Alfred Fessaday had to say. It remained for Sir Alfred only to declare the expedition officially closed. Later, he announced, he would attack the mountain again with his properly accredited scientists, since the purpose of the trip was purely scientific. Sometimes in a small group Sir Alfred went further to say that it had been of no scientific value that young Holm had rushed to the top alone, and that there was no definite proof that the chap had ever really reached the top, though he did not doubt he had. There was no reason to believe he was dishonest. And except for the cold and the altitude, the roughest climbing was over where they had encamped when Lane was taken so ill. From there on the climb was gradual, at least until the last hundred feet. Weather conditions were, of course, frightful, and in mountain climbing he had never felt he could take responsibility when it was obviously dangerous for his men to go on. He preferred to stop and do it more safely and slowly, since his were scientific expeditions and not stunt trips. Besides, when so valuable a man as Nevil Lane was threatened with pneumonia it was his duty to bring him down. Undoubtedly his life had been saved by the decision.

But publicly Sir Alfred said nothing like this. He merely smiled and agreed when he was called upon for enthusiasm about Bert Holm. Bert was a good mechanic, and one had to say he put on no side whatever about what he had done—had run like a hare, in fact, from the reporters and photographers in Calcutta, at least. Undoubtedly the chap had had no idea what was waiting for him in America. When they asked Bert Holm what he was going to do when he got home, he said he didn't know.

The day was hot in Peking. Over the city there hung a vague moist cloud, unusual to that city even in August, and as noon drew on it sank slowly of its own weight into courtyards and alleyways. It penetrated even the foreign quarter where the hotels

were, and carried its faint stench into the large comfortable room where Mr. and Mrs. Tallant and their daughter Kit sat in silence, dressed in the thinnest possible garb. The silence was partly exhaustion after a morning of sight-seeing, but partly, too, it was a family understanding that when one was absorbed, one was not interrupted.

Mr. Tallant, however, was restless. He rose and roamed about the room, smoking a cigar and glancing now and then at his wife. She had the newspaper he wanted to read and he was impatiently waiting for her to get through with the society news in order that he might examine the really important financial columns. He had somehow to make up his mind how to cable his bank directors in New York on the matter of a Chinese loan, when silver was dropping every day like a weighted parachute under the threat of Japanese invasion. He pulled at his already open collar.

"I do believe even the climate is worse here in Peking than it used to be!" he said.

Mrs. Tallant did not hear, but Kit looked at him with her slow slight smile that seemed always to come from such a depth in her that when it reached the surface of her dark eyes and soft full lips, it brimmed but scarcely stirred them. Kit was sitting at the small Chinese table which served as a desk, writing in her book. She looked cool in her lounging pajamas of clear yellow silk, but then she always looked cool on the outside. Her father knew her well enough to know it was merely external, though he pretended to no great knowledge of women, being fixed in the common conviction of men that women were not to be understood by rational beings. Nevertheless, though he disliked women in general, he was fond of his own wife and his daughters without feeling any necessity or indeed desire to understand them. He was too busy a man for that sort of thing.

"Aren't you about through with that paper, Dot?" he asked Mrs. Tallant in a voice that was mild by habit.

Mrs. Tallant apparently did not hear this, but she suddenly looked over the top of the paper at her daughter.

"Bert Holm is in Peking, Kit!" she exclaimed.

Kit Tallant did not answer. She was listening to something that neither of her parents heard. Out of the confusion of street noises beneath the open window her ear had plucked a wiry thread of tantalizing melody played upon a two-stringed Chinese violin. She stopped writing and drew a few hasty lines and bars and jotted down notes. Then the unseen musician turned a corner or entered a door and took his melody with him. She listened, thinking, "Now I'll never know the end!"

"Kit, did you hear me say Bert Holm is here?" her mother inquired.

"Yes, I did, Mother," she said. She put down her pen and lit a cigarette. Listless as she felt, it was no use pretending she had not heard the name of Bert Holm. She was gently interested to find that now, though she was too modern to believe in eternities, even a slight curiosity stirred in her. Not for a long time, months at least, had she felt that small curiosity about any man's name. She was still in love with Norman and saw no hope of not being in love with him except that she knew anything ended, of course, if one could only weather it to that point of its conclusion.

"Did you know Bert Holm was coming to Peking?" Mrs. Tallant inquired now.

"No, I didn't, Mother," she replied.

Mrs. Tallant yawned and tapped her mouth with her hand. No one could possibly have mistaken her nationality. Her fresh good looks, though she was not really pretty, the energetic lines of her body even in repose, and her pleasant but slightly domineering air announced her American by birth and long breeding. "I'm crazy to see him after all the fuss he's made," she said laughing a little at herself. She yawned again and handed the newspaper to her husband, smiling with wifely tolerance. "Al-

ways the good old business man," she said cheerfully. She reached to a small table near her for a cigarette and an old magazine. "Well, don't let me bother anybody, but it's awfully hot, isn't it!"

"Broiling," Kit agreed, and turned back to her book. In the silence she tried to finish what she was doing, a "silly poem" she would have called it, careful never to take herself seriously any more. But she could not go on. The melody had driven her own lines out of her head, as though the blind musician, walking away, had drawn all melody with him. She felt hot and a little fretful and restlessly she began drawing heads of nobody on the page. She was so empty that in her idleness she began actually to wonder about Bert Holm and mountain climbing and all the remoteness of his adventures. Everybody knew about him even a month ago when they had left home. Blind and deaf and dumb as she had been then in her own first sorrow, still she could not keep from hearing his name and seeing headlines and knowing a little of what he had done.

So now, though with her own heart mocking her, she listened to what her mother said. There was so little to do when the heart refused its interest in anything. Even Peking could then become sad, and palaces merely the ruins of dreams unfulfilled. Mrs. Tallant had taken the paper back again in a moment when Mr. Tallant laid it down to put together some figures, and she began to read aloud in her quick crisp way what it said to the last detail about Bert Holm.

"Mr. Holm is no longer with the Fessaday expedition. Sir Alfred was called back to England, but Mr. Holm is returning homeward by way of China. The American Consul will entertain Mr. Holm at luncheon today at the consulate——"

Mrs. Tallant broke off. "Why, Kit, we'll meet him today then!"

There was mild excitement but no triumph in Mrs. Tallant's voice. She came of an old American family and so did Mr. Tallant and she had met too many important people to show excitement over anyone like Bert Holm, who after all, came of what