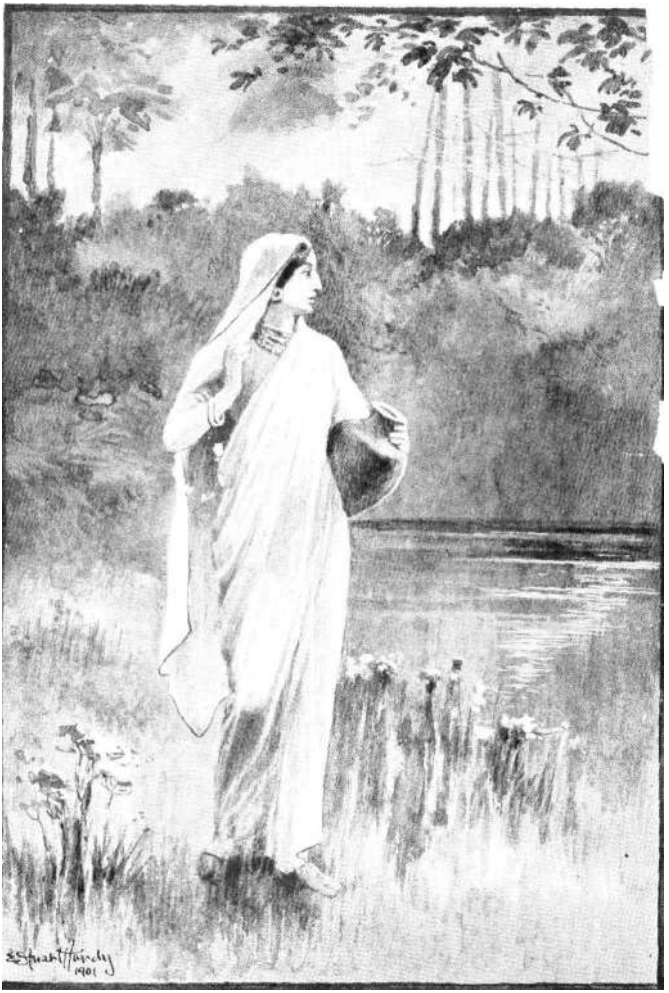
THE LAKE OF PALMS



"She stood musing on the banks of the lake when a gentle rustle reached her ears." Book IV. Chap. viii.

THE
LAKE OF PALMS

A STORY OF INDIAN DOMESTIC LIFE

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"MAHABHARATA CONDENSED INTO ENGLISH VERSE,"
"RAMAYANA CONDENSED INTO ENGLISH VERSE,"
"CIVILISATION IN ANCIENT INDIA,"
ETC., ETC.

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PREFATORY NOTE.

A SIMPLE story of Bengal village-life appeared in Calcutta, under the title of "Sansar," in 1885. It is now offered to English readers in an English garb, with some necessary alterations, as a slight effort towards the lifting of that curtain which veils the inner life of the people of India from the West.

Benares rises beside the Ganges in all the splendour of her temple-stairs, Delhi lifts mosque and minar amidst the relics of three thousand years, Jaipur is proud of its gay edifices, Jodpur of its castled rock. These things, and others like them, the ordinary visitor is content to call by the name of India. Yet surely a finer curiosity would lead him to ask of the life which is lived in the brown villages nestling under the tall palms—would awaken desire to know the thoughts of those silent women who, now and again pass closely veiled—would surprise in him some question all reverence, some reverence all question, as he gazed, merely, maybe, from the windows of a railway carriage, on the peasant going forth to the ploughed fields at dawn.

The great painter of "The Angelus" declared that "the cry of the Earth" was for ever in his ears. It is the cry of the Indian Earth, with all her fruitage of labour, of ancient ideals and of new aspirations, which must be for ever in the ears of him who would interpret Indian life.

LONDON, *January* 1902.

CONTENTS

BOOK I.

THE VILLAGE.

BOOK II.

THE TOWN.

BOOK III.

THE TEMPLE.

BOOK IV.

THE LAKE.

BOOK I

THE VILLAGE

I

THE ORPHANS

ON the wide plains of Bengal, some few miles from the nearest market-town, stands the little village of Talpookhar—*The Lake of Palms*. Hard by, amidst long stretches of rice-fields, is the palm-girdled lake from which the name is taken.

Shrouded always in the darkness of its high banks, except at that brief hour when the sun is vertical, its waters take towards the moment of sunset a hue of densest darkness. Here, on an April evening, within the thick belt of the palms, will break one of those heavy Nor'-Westers which, after the sunny months of Winter, bring in the Indian Spring. As yet, the promise of the coming storm is seen only in the gathering clouds—a light breeze still whispers weirdly in the palm-trees, a few stars appear overhead, and a few lights glitter in the distant village. As we draw near, it is no hard task, even in the darkness, to see a woman who stands waist-deep in the water, while on the steps above, a girl of nine sits holding a younger sister in her arms. The mother, tempted less perhaps by the thought of duty than by the coolness of the lake, is performing the evening rite of ablution. Near by is the large earthenware vessel

which is presently to be filled with water and carried home.

The place and scene are typical of the country. The sound of strange footsteps approaching through the gloaming carries no hint of disturbance to any one of the little group. The fifty or so peasants who live within reach are trusted neighbours, and the few families of Brahmins and gentlefolk in the village are all, each to the other, as himself. For this is one of those small shady hamlets which cover the green plains of Bengal, where life is simple, rural, full of repose; and the story of this poor widow and her o girls is likewise both brief and plain—easily told.

The daughter of a good but poor Kayest family, she had been married to a Kayest of humble circumstances, Haridas Mullik. He had five or six acres of land; but as a Kayest does not hold the plough, he employed men to do the tillage and grow the rice. He saved but little after paying the workmen's wages and the landlord's rent, and that little barely sufficed to find the family in their daily rice, and he had to eke out his income from other sources to provide the household expenditure. A poor family of good bir father and mother and children, often live in Ind on sixpence a day, but Haridas, when all was to found it difficult to scrape together even as much this. He had a cousin, Tarini Mullik, who was em ployed in an office in Burdwan town, but it is vain in these days to look for help from a cousin—even a brother is seldom of much use to one. Yet in times of difficulty, when Haridas implored his cousin for help, Tarini would lend him five or ten rupees;[1] and when Haridas repaid the debt, his cousin would excuse the interest. Thus his life was a life of penury, but he was content.

Fifteen or sixteen years after his marriage, Haridas was blessed with a daughter, his first-born, whom he called Bindu. A child of their mature years, Bindu became her parents' great joy. But parents' love

[1] A rupee is 1s. 4d. in English money.

cannot supersede the needs of life, and Bindu, child of the poor cottage, received little more. When her uncle, Tarini, came to the village in the Puja holidays, he would bring for his own daughter, Uma, muslin Sarees of Dacca, gold bangles for her arms, and silver anklets for her feet. Poor Bindu's parents saw this, and with much difficulty made a pair of light gold bangles for her arms and silver anklets for her feet. They got into debt for this, and were unable to pay it off for a long time; but, after all, it was an investment for the family. Gold trinkets are often the only savings of an Indian family; for money comes and goes, but a woman's ornaments are preserved with sacred care and handed down from mother to daughter.

Little Bindu often went to play with her rich cousin Uma, for they were of the same age; and as Bindu was meek and gentle, and never spoke in anger, Uma liked and patronised her. When the rich cousin had her usual allowance of sweets and delicacies, she would give a little portion to Bindu, who stood by, hungry and meek-eyed and silent; and when her people brought toys and trinkets for her from the village market, she would hand over a penny pith-doll to Bindu. Poor Bindu's joy would then know no bounds, and she would come home and show her new toy to her mother with pride. Bindu's mother would kiss her child, and wipe a tear from her own eye.

Four years after Bindu's birth came a little sister. The elder girl was somewhat dark-skinned, but the new baby had the complexion of a fairy, eyes like the sparkling and restless bee of the language of Indian poets, lips like the ripe Bimba fruit dimpled with a nectar smile. The poor parents kissed this priceless gift, and named her Sudha, or Nectar. But her parents' kisses were all that little Sudha got, and the expenses of the household increased with this addition to the family. The little girl must have some milk, the fairy child must have bangles for

her arms; and when she was taken to neighbours' houses, how was she to be shown to admiring gossips and matrons unless she was clad in a little Dacca Saree? These natural wishes welled up in the parental bosom, but how were they to be gratified? O the fond desires that spring in a father's heart! O the unsatisfied longings of a loving mother!

In penury and anxiety, Bindu's father worked from day to day and managed the household, while Bindu's mother spared herself no toil or hardship in tending her husband and bringing up her girls, reckoning her cares a joy. In the early dawn, long before sunrise, Bindu's mother had risen, cleaned and washed the brass plates and utensils, swept the rooms and court-yard, fed her girls with milk, and cooked for her husband. When his meal was over, she went to the lake and had her daily bath, fetching water for the use of the household. About midday she had her own breakfast and laid herself down on the ground, under the shadow of the trees, to sleep with her little girls. In the afternoon she was up again, and began her cooking and her household duties, which were not over till supper was done, and her husband and children retired for the night. She then supped in turn, washed and cleaned the dishes, locked the doors, and went noiselessly to seek rest beside her husband. Domestic love was her one treasure, and few on this earth were happier than Bindu's mother in her penury and peace. Was she poor?—she was but one among millions, and she was blessed with a husband—good, gentle, and even as a god unto her—two children, dear as a jewel on her bosom; and after the day's work was over, she had peace and rest in her poverty. A poor woman hopes for no more than this.

But this happiness did not last her long. Cruel fate willed it: four years after Sudha was born her father died. Then Sudha's mother smote her forehead and breast with her hands, rent the quiet village with her bitter wail, and fell prostrate and fainting to the earth. Why should God take away the stay and

support of this poor woman's home and heart? Why should He quench the lamp which lighted the poor woman's cottage home? Villagers gathered round her, and wept to see the widow crying in her agony; the tiller and the labourer, when they went to the fields, stopped for a moment at her door and brushed away a tear.

A year had passed since. Haridas's cousin, Tarini, now tilled his land, and what he gave to the widow was scarcely enough for her support, and that of her children. She could not put a new fence round her house; she could not re-thatch the huts which were sorely in need of repair. So Bindu's mother at last sold her ruined dwelling, and went to live with her husband's cousin, Tarini, according to that immemorial custom of the East which imposes on every capable man the duty of helping his poorer relatives. She cooked for the family, and performed all the menial duties of the household; she put aside her own Bindu and Sudha and carried Tarini's daughter on her breast; she fetched water, cleaned the plates, and swept the rooms. A poor dependant has much to bear, but Bindu's mother never opened her lips, and made no reply to reproaches. And sometimes when her heart was heavy with grief, she wiped away a quiet tear and whispered a silent prayer:—"God of the poor and the lowly, help my Bindu and Sudha, write weal and happiness on their foreheads, bring them up with Thy loving care! This is all I ask. May I see Bindu and Sudha married and happy before I die; that is all the happiness I long for on this earth."

Such was the tale of the orphans and their mother.

Presently the mother rose from the water. Filling her pot and lifting it, she said: "Bindu, my love, let us go home now. Can you carry Sudha? Her tender limbs, poor child, are tired with her walk. How could she walk far, poor dear thing? Is she fallen asleep?"

"Yes, mother, she has fallen asleep; let me carry her."

"Nay, but she is heavy in her sleep, child, and you cannot carry her. Help her to my arms, my love, and you hold the skirt of my Saree and follow me. It is very dark, and clouds are gathering; we shall have rain to-night."

"Oh, but let me carry Sudha, mother," persisted the loving Bindu; "why, the other night I carried her all the way to sister Kalee's house; can I not take her this little way?"

"Take her then, my child," said the mother, "but carry her carefully, for it is dark, and see that you do not slip. Do you remember how poor Uma fell the other night on her way back from the fair? unhappy one, she had a deep cut on her forehead."

"Which fair did she go to, mother? I saw the nice toys she brought. How fine they were! Where did she get them from, mother?"

"Why, do you not know, my love? They went to the great gathering at Agradip, where a great fair is held every year, and thousands of people come from all the country round, and from across the river. Vaishnavs are fed under the trees, and there is music and singing, and men are gathered in crowds."

"Have you ever been there, mother?"

"Yes, my love, when I was a little girl like you; my parents and all of us went to the fair, and we remained there three or four days, living and sleeping under the trees."

"Under the trees, mother? Why, are there no houses?"

"Houses, my love? Why, fifty thousand people gather there. Where would they find houses for all? No, my child, every one lives and sleeps under the trees. There is an immense mango-grove, and the fair is held in its shade. Traders and shopkeepers come too, and goods from all parts are displayed and sold in their booths."

"Let me go there, mother, one day! I want to see a great fair like that."

"Have I other people's luck, my darling child, that

I shall take you to the fair? Why, it is a great expense, my love."

"Oh, but, mother, I must go there next year. Uma and Kalee have both been there, why should I not go?"

"Nay, but you are a good child, my sweet, and must not be unreasonable. Uma's father is a rich man, and so is Kalee's father, and they can go where they like. You, my dears, are children of poverty, and how can you think of having fancies? If the Great Dispenser of mercies had recorded weal and happiness on your foreheads, would you have to bear all this privation for your daily rice? Should my dear darlings, bright images of pure gold, have stood in the doors of others for their bread? Merciful God! Thy will be done!"

The gloom of the night fell heavy and thick on all sides, and black clouds gathered in the western sky. The gleam of lightning was seen from time to time, and a fitful night wind moaned in the leaves of the trees. All the village was wrapped in silence, save for the distant howl of jackals. In the utter darkness one or two dim stars were still visible, or the lamps of a distant village glimmered against the foliage of its trees. Through that deep darkness Bindu walked by the village path under the arching boughs, holding to the skirt of her mother's Saree. She could not see in the dark a quiet tear trickling down the pensive face of that silent and much-suffering widow of the Lake of Palms.

II

THE SISTERS

A NEAT little cottage stands under the shadow of thick trees in the village of the Lake of Palms. It is midday, and the fields around are shimmering

under the hot sun of an Indian summer. Tillers have done their morning's work, and wend from the fields into the village with plough and cattle. A few, perhaps too tired to return, have laid themselves down under some tree in the fields, and their mid-day meal of rice is taken to them by wife, mother, or sister, from home. The shaded village is a cool spot in the midst of the surrounding glare. Clumps of bamboos grow everywhere, graceful and bending like ostrich feathers, with their tender leaves trembling in the breeze. The huge jack fruit, often thirty pounds in weight, the palm and the cocoa-nut, grow in every homestead, and by each cottage. Plantains hang in huge bunches amidst glossy leaves a yard in length; the Mandar and Manasa and other prickly trees choke the road-sides; and the under-growth of wild plants covers half the village. A mango-grove, covering two or three acres of land, forms a soft scene of coolness and shade. The sun sends its straight, white bars of light through the leaves on the glistening grass beneath, and the birds are voiceless in the heat, all but one dove, whose soft cooing passes incessantly through the grove.

A neat little dwelling stands under the trees, its outer hut sheltered by a few cocoa-nuts, behind which cluster the inner courtyard and buildings, careful to share the same grateful shade. On one side of this inner court a vigorous Nau creeper climbs and clings with its fresh tendrils over a rough bamboo trellis, and covers it with broad leaves—fruit, leaf, and stalk alike serving the household for fresh vegetables. Facing the courtyard is a commodious thatched hut, which is at once the sleeping-room and principal chamber of the homestead. In front runs a verandah, carefully cleaned and swept. A smaller hut on the one side serves as a kitchen, and the cow-house has only one cow in it. The family have finished their midday meal, the fire in the fire-place has been put out, a few clothes are hung on the fences to dry. Behind the sleeping-room is a pond, and the brass

plates and utensils of the house are left in the water, and have not yet been cleaned. By the pond grows a thorny plum-tree and a few plantains. The rest is jungle.

The mat door of the bedroom is closed, and inside all is dark. The mistress of the house is pacing the room in the dark. She has laid a little girl of two on a mat on the earthen floor; and she has a boy of six months, whom she is trying to put to sleep by carrying him up and down. She strokes the child gently on the back, now and then singing a lullaby in soft, musical tones.

The mother is barely twenty years of age. Her limbs are slender and weak, her face is soft and somewhat pale, her eyes are large and deep black, gentle and thoughtful. She has little of the freshness of the girl of twenty in northern countries. For in India at this age a woman is a wife, and often a mother: the cares and anxieties of a household lie heavy upon her youth.

The boy was now fast asleep, and she too placed her head on her arm and lay down to rest. The world was still and voiceless in the noon-day heat; the room was silent; and the girl-mother slept in silence by her sleeping children. Household anxieties left her awhile, and in the peace of sleep the lines of care and thought faded slowly from her pale face and brow.

She had slept for an hour when a slight noise roused her: her opening eyes saw a beautiful young girl, who, with smiling lips and bright eyes, was sitting by her and playing with a kitten. The kitten was trying to get at a toy in the girl's hand, and she tempted and checked it by turns. There was no thought or care on the fair young forehead under its clusters of dark curls, shaken back every moment. The girl's eyes gleamed with joy, her lips quivered with a smile, her graceful and rounded arms moved like a flower-laden creeper moved by the wind, as Indian poets love to fancy. The girl was sixteen years of age, and her cheerful face and smiling eyes were those of her girlhood.

"How long have you been here, Sudha?"

"Pretty long," answered the girl; "but you were asleep, sister, and I did not wake you. And look, sister, this kitten will follow me wherever I go. I closed the kitchen and went to the pond to wash the plates, and the kitten followed me there."

"Have you cleaned the plates, and put them back in the room?"

"Yes, sister. And then I shut up this kitten in the cow-shed, but she crept out under the mat-wall and followed me here. She wants to have this toy. But she shan't have it, though!"

"Why not lie down awhile now? You did not sleep well last night. Why not have a little rest, child?"

"No, sister, I cannot sleep by day. And I slept well last night, only I got up once when your baby was crying. How is the baby to-day?"

"He is well enough now, but his skin gets hot at night when the fever returns. His father will bring some medicine to-day from Katwa, which will keep the fever down, and also put him to sleep."

"When is Hem coming back from Katwa, sister?"

"He said he would be back in the evening. Why?"

"Because," said the laughing girl, "I am going to have some fun. I won't tell you what; you will see it when he comes. He threw some pink powder on me on the Holi festival day and made me all pink. I am going to have my revenge!"

"Tell me what you are going to do."

"No, but you will tell him."

"No, really, I won't."

"Really?"

"Really."

Then Sudha produced something from the skirt of her Saree. The thing was about eighteen inches long.

"What on earth is this, my dear?" asked Bindu in surprise.

"Can't you see?"

"Yes, I see it. It is jute, is it not?"

"Yes, it is jute; but see how I have painted it red with Kusum flower!" proudly replied Sudha.

"And what on earth will you do with the coloured jute?"

"Guess!"

"How can I guess?"

"Can't you guess it? When Hem will sleep to-night, I will tie it up to his chin. And when he gets up, won't I have a laugh, and call him a long-bearded Sanyasi! Won't it be fun!" said the merry girl, and her laughter filled the silent place once more.

Bindu could not suppress a smile, and then she gazed thoughtfully on her sister. "Sudha," she said, speaking to herself, "your laughter sweetens this world! You scarcely know, poor child, that your fate is sealed, your life is wrecked! How could cruel Fate record such dire disaster on your young brow, and make you a widow at this age?"

It is scarcely necessary to tell our readers that a period of eleven years has passed since the evening when we first met the two sisters with their mother by the Lake of Palms. How things have changed with these years will appear from the scene we have just depicted.

Bindu's mother had lived in the house of her relative and brought up her girls. There was no happiness for her on earth—she knew it well—after the death of her husband; but, like a Hindu mother, she longed to see her two girls married before she died. To see every girl married is not only the fond wish of a Hindu parent, but also an inviolable religious obligation, and Bindu's mother began to seek a match for Bindu when the child was only ten. The Hindu girl is generally married when ten or twelve years old, but this marriage is little more than betrothal. The bride afterwards lives for years in her father's house, paying occasional visits to her husband's family, until

she attains maturity, when she passes finally into her husband's home.

It is not easy to find a suitable match for a poor girl of genteel birth. In towns, the parents of the bridegroom insist on a handsome dowry, and though this custom has not yet crept into villages to the same extent, yet every father feels a natural desire to see his son married into a family of rank and wealth, and not among people dependent upon their relations. Bindu's uncle and relatives did not trouble themselves overmuch about her marriage; nor was she a girl of striking beauty. One after another proposals came and were discussed, only to be broken off.

The aunt, Tarini's wife, used often to sit of an afternoon on the verandah of her inner house; and while Bindu's mother assiduously helped her in the elaborate operation of doing her hair, she would graciously smile on her humble dependant and feed her with hopes.

"But why are you anxious about it, sister? One need not be anxious about marrying the girls of our house. Our family, our rank, the position and the employment of my husband in Burdwan,—who does not know all this? Much penance indeed must one perform before he can win a bride from such a family as ours! Don't you be anxious about Bindu, my dear; let my husband come home for the autumn Puja and I will arrange a suitable match for darling Bindu, and marry her into a family worthy of our own. Why, my dear, Uma is also ten, and proposals for her hand are coming from every direction! They would carry her away on their heads if I only consented to her being married now, but I scarcely listen to such proposals yet. When I marry my darling Uma, it will be into a family worthy of our own! But then, my Uma has a clear, fresh complexion, and Bindu is somewhat dark, my dear. And you have no money, sister; you know your husband was a plain, simple, good soul, and saved nothing,

and that makes a difference. But don't be anxious, sister, don't be anxious. When I have once set my hand to the task, there need be no more cause for anxiety!" To these words of encouragement and hope, accompanied by the frequent and eloquent movements of braceletted arms, the mother of Bindu listened with joy, and she fondly hoped for the best.

The autumn Puja came, and Tarini returned. He had brought Puja clothes and trinkets and articles for his better-half, and she, dear soul, was out of her senses with joy. Dresses, clothes, and shoes came also for every one in the house, and Dacca Sarees and silver hairpins for Uma. The news ran through the village, telling how the Nazir of Burdwan had come home. The people flocked to see him, and the soothing voice of flattery was poured out both morning and evening. Some came to borrow a few rupees on this Puja occasion; others for advice and help in difficulties. One hoped for an appointment for his son or nephew; another came without any special object, but merely to fawn on the great man of the village according to immemorial custom. Who could think of poor Bindu in the midst of this bustle and joy? The Puja festivities were over, the fortnight's holidays soon passed, the Nazir returned to Burdwan, and nothing was arranged about the girl's marriage.

Often did Bindu's mother meet her gossips and neighbours, and often did she solicit the matrons of the village for help. And they too, kindly folk, responded with eagerness.

"Of course, child, we will help you and find a match for your daughter; whom should we help if we are not to help you? But the marriage of girls, you must know, is a matter of difficulty in these days. And then, you can't afford any suitable dowry, my dear; Bindu's father was not a man of wisdom and sense; and, poor man, he saved nothing. If he had only saved something like your brother-in-law, there would have been no difficulty about Bindu's marriage at all. Often did we advise him on this subject in

those days, my child, but he would not listen then, and you would not listen then, and now you feel the consequences, my dear. The poor man's advice improves by keeping, and you feel that now, my child. But to be sure, to be sure, we will arrange a match for your dear girl; how can we refuse our help to sweet little Bindu, my love?"

Hope deferred maketh the heart sick, and at last Bindu's mother carried her prayers to some of the elders of the village,—men of age and influence. And whenever she met them in the village footpath or by the shady lake, she would entreat them to keep the poor woman's request in their minds. And they too would respond kindly, not without a due sense of their own importance.

"And why have you not told us of it so long, mother? How can those things be done until we are asked? Don't you know how Kalee's mother sought in vain for a match for Kalee, until last month she sent for me and spoke to me about it? And then the thing was done! Kalee is of the same age as your daughter, being only ten; and look at the match we have arranged for her! The Roys of Burdwan are an old family, wealthy like Kuvera, and with every possession that heart can desire. The bridegroom is a widower, and not quite young, but look at his position and wealth! He lives in Burdwan, and is held in high respect and honour by every one. Why, mother, he gives big dinners there to the English officials, keeps carriages for their use, and lives as a Zemindar should live. Do you think such matches can be arranged until we take the business into our own hands? And you have been strolling up and down the village and never spoken a word about it to us? People are so independent in these days, good lady, and they like to do things for themselves; but do you think things can be done in that way? And so you have thought of us and remembered us after all this time? Well, mother, that is something!"

The widow acknowledged her past negligence with tears in her eyes, and felt how unwise she had been in not coming to such helpers betimes. The wise men of the village would then be softened by her entreaties and tears, and graciously respond:

"You need not be anxious any longer, mother; now that you have mentioned the thing to us, there is no need for anxiety. It is as good as done!"

Bindu's mother felt as if the moon had descended from the skies into her hands, and forgot her food and sleep in her hope and exultation! Days and months went by, two years passed away, but the poor woman's daughter remained unmarried.

Bindu's father had had an intimate friend in the Lake of Palms who had a son named Hem Chandra Bose. Hem had been educated with care, and after passing his Matriculation from a Burdwan school had joined the University of Calcutta. But on his father's death he was compelled to give up his studies, and he returned to his village and lived on the humble property which had been left to him.

Hem had known little Bindu from her infancy. It was perhaps owing to his natural want of good sense —so the wise men of the village surmised—that he made up his mind to marry the penniless girl of his father's friend. The village turned up its nose on hearing of this folly, and the old friends of Hem's family remonstrated against an act which might lower the reputation of his family. But Hem was an obstinate lad, and he settled matters with Bindu's mother. And the village gossips whispered to each other that this bold, bad youth often sought opportunities for seeing his girl-bride, and even dared to speak to her, when sometimes they met as she returned from the Lake of Palms on silent, lonely evenings.

Bindu's aunt was pleased with the turn of events. She had not foregone her rest and sleep to secure a match for Bindu, but when she heard that Bindu was

to be married, she rejoiced in her simple heart. The priests fixed an auspicious day, and the aunt gave her away.

Happy as she was at Bindu's marriage, she was still more gratified when proposals came for the hand of her own daughter, Uma, from one of the richest and most famous houses of the county. The poor lady was beside herself with joy; and thus Bindu and Uma were married in the same year, when they were only twelve.

Another two years passed away. Bindu was now fourteen, Sudha ten, and their mother longed to see her other daughter married also before she died. "The one cherished hope of my life will not be gratified," said the poor woman, "if I die without seeing my Sudha married." To such pleadings of obstinate love there came an answer when Sudha was given to a boy not much older than herself.

Then was the mother truly happy for the first time since her husband's death, and, as she took the two married girls on her knee, deemed herself the most fortunate woman on earth. So, but a few months after Sudha's marriage, she went—meek and uncomplaining in life, happy in death!

The married life of Hem and Bindu was what married life often is in India. Hem took a girl of twelve to his bosom, tended her, instructed her, was kind to her, until the girl bloomed into womanhood, and her veneration for him warmed itself into the devoted, whole-souled love which is only seen in the East. Grown woman, she knew no other man, loved no other man, spoke her thoughts to no other man. Her husband was all the world to her, and occupied all her mind, her heart, her soul. Her love for him was the love of the East—a woman's affection, mingled with a woman's worship of man, which the English poet described when he sang:—

"He for God only, she for God in him."

Poor Sudha's tale was different. She became a

wife at ten and a widow at twelve. "Wife" and "widow" were mere words to her; she heard them, but did not comprehend what they meant. Child-widow, she came to her married sister's house, and threw aside the veil and wifely decorations to take again her toys and play with her kitten as beseemed the child that she was.

These things were four years since. Bindu is now twenty, and the mother of two children; Uma and Kalee live with their husbands, and sometimes come on a visit to the Lake of Palms. All three women are of the same age, and, despite the cares and anxieties of their married life, have not forgotten the love of their childhood.

III

THE WIFE

THE village of the Lake of Palms slept at midnight under long rows of lofty palms, whose feathery crowns, gleaming in a flood of silver light, formed a weird picture against the blue canvas of the cloudless sky. In the myriad leaves of the bamboo the moonbeams caught and slept; they danced on the ripples of the lake, and fell like a white mantle upon bush and jungle. In the apt simile of the East, they lay like a bed of jasmine over the whole village. Most of the inhabitants had finished their evening meal, closed their doors, and gone to sleep. Here and there an old man still sat sleepless on the outer verandah of his cottage, smoking his pipe; or some young housewife was still busily at work by the neighbouring pond, her day's task not yet ended. Occasionally the voice of a husbandman singing in the distant field was borne on the soft midnight air. All else was still.

Bindu had finished her household work, but was sitting on the verandah of her sleeping-room, as her husband had not returned home yet. The soft moonlight fell on her white Saree, and on her thoughtful face. Sudha, too, would not go to bed, fain as she was to make a Sanyasi of her brother-in-law. But the poor child was tired, and she no sooner lay down by her sister than she was fast asleep. The red lips of the sleeping girl parted as in a smile, or as if some happy dream had descended on her with the light of the moon.

Bindu sat alone and watchful, until there came the step at the outer door for which she waited. She ran out to open, and Hem Chandra came in.

He was a young man of about twenty-four. His forehead was high and open, his face handsome, and his eyes full of repose. He looked tired after his long walk, and his shoes were covered with dust. Bindu placed a wooden seat for him, and fetched some water, and Hem washed his face, his hands, and his feet.

"You are late, my husband," said Bindu, lovingly and anxiously. "You have not had your supper yet!"

"I started early enough," he answered, "but I met an old friend at Katwa, and he took me to his house, and made me stay for some refreshments. I hope you have had your supper?"

"Sudha has had her supper and has gone to sleep; I will have mine later on," said Bindu, who, like a true Hindu wife, would not touch her food till her husband had taken his. "Let me bring your rice for you."

"I am not over hungry, my Bindu, but it is late, and I may as well sup now."

Bindu sprinkled some water on the verandah, spread the carpet, and then brought a plate of food from the kitchen. The food was simple enough—rice, lentils, fish served in gravy, and some vegetables grown in the cottage courtyard. She had gathered limes from the trees, and cut them and kept them ready, and she had cooled a cocoa-nut, also obtained from her own garden. The milk of the cow kept in the house had been boiled

and sweetened. Hem sat down, and his wife waited by his side.

"I have brought medicine for the baby," he began, "but don't give it to him now. If he is restless at night it will put him to sleep. As to the other business for which I went to Katwa, nothing has been done."

"And why?"

"Well, I went to a lawyer at Katwa whom I have known for years, and spoke to him about the fields which your father owned."

"And what did he say?"

"He said there was no way to recover them except by going to court."

"Fie! My husband! How can I go to court against my uncle? Why, he brought me up after my father's death, he gave me in marriage to you, and my dear aunt loves me as her daughter, and often sends me presents. Shall we go to law against them?"

Hem smiled a gentle smile, and said: "I do not think I am very much indebted to your uncle, my love, for winning my bride! But you were a child then, and cannot remember all that, nor is there any need for you to know. Anyhow, I have no heart to go to law against your uncle; but can I help it?"

"But will it look well to sue my uncle in court? And we are poor—how can we go to law? If we can but support ourselves in our humble circumstances, and have our food morning and night, and bring up the two children whom God has given us, we should be thankful and grateful. You have lands, my husband, and they will produce gold for us. And this homestead which your father has left to you—it is as a kingdom of seven kings to us."

A shadow passed over Hem's face, and his voice trembled a little as he said: "I did not think, my sweet wife, when I married you that we should live in poverty for ever. You are patient and resigned, good and trustful, and you have never opened your lips to utter a complaint; but my man's heart is pained to see you thus."

Bindu could not bear to see her husband in this pensive mood; she smiled, and said: "And do you call this poverty, my husband—this comfortable homestead and cottage, teeming with good things which a king might envy? Let me fetch you something fit for the royal table!"

"Well, let us see this royal delicacy, my queen," said Hem with a smile, and Bindu went into the kitchen. She had picked some green mangoes from their tree that morning and cooked a delicious dish. She placed it in a white stone bowl before her husband. "Will His Majesty then please to taste this?"

Hem mixed the contents of the bowl with rice and tasted. Then with a smile of satisfaction, he said: "It is indeed a dish fit for the royal table; but I much suspect we owe it not so much to our domains as to the skill of our accomplished queen."

After the acid comes the sweet in Indian meals, and Hem Chandra finished his supper with a little rice mixed with sweetened milk, and praised the milk of the cow, with the hand which had sweetened it. He then rose and washed his hands and face, took a betel leaf which his wife affectionately held up to him, and again sat down to resume the discussion.

"Don't you think," asked Bindu in her own persuasive way, "it would be best to make up this matter amicably with my uncle? Surely there are just and righteous men in the village who can mediate!"

"I have tried that too, my love, and in vain. Your uncle insists that the farm is his. He says he has held it and paid rent for it for ten years, that he has improved it and entered his name in the landlord's books as tenant, and that he will not give it up. But as you and Sudha are to him like his own children, he is willing to give you something as a present—not the real value of the land, nor even one quarter—but a mere pittance. He knows we are poor, and he treats us accordingly."

"I am only a woman," said Bindu gently and

sweetly, "and do not understand these matters as well as you. But it seems to me it would be better to accept from him whatever he offers. He is a near and elder relation, and he has brought us up; and if we do surrender our ancestral farm for an inadequate sum, what harm? Litigation is expensive, my husband; we shall have to borrow money to fight our cause, and how shall we ever repay it? and if we do win we must sell the land again to repay the debt, and there will be a lasting unpleasantness between us and my uncle. If, again, we lose the case, we lose both the property and the borrowed money. He offers us too little perhaps, but let us accept it, and so end the matter. I am but a woman, my husband, and do not understand law, and am afraid of litigation. You are wiser, and a man: think over what I have said, and decide as you judge best."

Hem remained thoughtful and silent for a while; then he spoke slowly and tenderly:

"Yes, my love, you are a woman, and he who has such a woman for his friend and counsellor in life is happy on this earth. I was a fool to go to a lawyer instead of consulting you and taking your advice. You have spoken well, my Bindu, and I will act accordingly. Your uncle has come home; I will see him to-morrow and settle the matter amicably. And when next I am in need of advice, I will take it from the sage lawyer and counsellor who presides over my home."

Bindu prepared Hem's bed, gave him another betel leaf, and sat long by her husband, talking of various domestic matters. The loving and unending converse went on beyond the silent hours of midnight, until Hem held his wife to his heart, kissed her affectionately, and said: "Go, my love, it is very late, and you have not had your supper yet. Go, sweet wife, and take your food."

Bindu felt herself the happiest woman on earth as she extricated herself, blushing, from his embrace, and went into the kitchen to eat her supper in the early hours of the morning.

IV

SHADOW OF THE FUTURE

The next evening Hem walked over to Tarini's house. In the outer enclosure there were two or three barns for storing grain, a large cow-house with cows and bullocks, a thatched hall for the performance of Pujas, and a large open shed for theatrical Jatras at times of festival. Rich men delight in giving such performances once or twice in the year, and the whole village gathers, men and women alike sitting on the floor, chewing betel, listening to religious songs, and witnessing the performances which continue through the night and far into next morning. It is a favourite institution in India, an occasion for joyous gatherings and for the exchange of kindly services and good feeling. Scenes from the epics and the sacred literature of ancient India are thus enacted from year to year, and remain engraven in the hearts of the masses from generation to generation. Two years ago Tarini had constructed a brick-built room in the outer house for receiving his friends. An oil lamp was now burning in this outer room, and a cotton mattress was spread over a spacious wooden platform, where Tarini was reclining and smoking his pipe. A few of the neighbours had come to see and entertain him with pleasant conversation. Tarini accosted Hem kindly, and asked a boy to take him into the inner apartments.

The inner apartments were screened off by a mat fence. There was a large sleeping hut on a raised earthen plinth, and on both sides of it were other raised huts in due order, completely enclosing the inner courtyard. The plinths were mud-plastered and scrupulously clean, the courtyard swept, and the kitchen orderly and neat. There was a large pond

behind the house, surrounded by an orchard of mangoes, cocoa-nuts, and other fruit trees.

Hem Chandra came into the inner house, and touched the ground with his head before his aunt to salute her. She, too, accosted him with many kind words and blessings, and bade him rise and take his seat. She was about forty, with a gracious smiling face, and plump, round arms. If she was somewhat short in stature, she did not want in dignity of deportment and manner. Thick gold bangles adorned her arms, and heavy silver anklets tinkled on her feet. Rich ornament became her well, and the slow, measured steps, gentle smile and weighty words, proclaimed a rich man's wife. Yet she was good-natured and simple, and her words were always courteous, if sometimes coloured by a pardonable vanity. Accosting Hem kindly, she spoke with a smile:

"Our houses almost adjoin each other, my child, and still you have never thought of stepping this way for ever so long! Never enquired, my son, if this old woman were alive or dead."

"Not so, aunt! We receive intelligence of you daily and hourly. But we are humble and poor, and have no servants, and are engaged all day in looking after our household and our children."

"Nice excuse that, my child! And my darling Bindu, whom I have brought up with these hands, and given to you in marriage—even my dear Bindu now scarcely thinks of enquiring about her poor old aunt!"

"Nay, but she is always asking about you, aunt! And since Uma has come she is constantly thinking of coming over to see her. But she has to do all the housework, and our baby is ill, so that she could not leave home. If Uma could step over to our house one day, she would see her cousin and also our dear little ones."

"Ah! But that may not be! Dear Uma is married into a family of rank and wealth, and they

do not wish her to go about visiting people. They are a wealthy old family of Dhanpur; for have you not heard of Dhaneswar the Dewan of the old Nawabs? The family is descended from him, and there is none like them in these parts."

"I know that, aunt."

"Of course you know it. Who has not heard of Dewan Dhaneswar's house? In religious and social functions, as in charity and gifts, the fame of their deeds equals their rank. A daughter of their house was married in Burdwan—the same place where my husband holds his employment—and fifty thousand rupees[1] were expended on the occasion. Do they ever reckon what they spend? Not they!"

"But that is extravagance, aunt!" cried the young man, educated in an English College and trained in modern ideas of economy.

"Extravagance do you call it, my son? Why, the money is spent in gifts of cloth and rice to the poor, and in feeding and feasting the whole countryside. It is charity, my son, and it acquires merit. It is spent in gifts to holy and learned Brahmans who spend their lifetime in cultivating the religious learning of our forefathers."

Hem reflected, and felt, not for the first time, that his new-fangled notions were wrong, and that the instincts of the nation to which this simple and pompous woman was giving expression were in the main right.

"And it is not often that they will let Uma come to me," resumed Uma's mother. "Once in the year only, at the autumn Puja, they allow her to come—no more. This time my husband is on short leave in summer, and we sent messengers time after time for dear Uma, before she was permitted to come. And they have strictly enjoined that she is not to stay here over fourteen days; and so, after fourteen days, she returns. We have sent men to Burdwan

[1] Over three thousand pounds.

for clothes and sweets and fine mangoes, for, when Uma goes, we must send some presents with her."

"Well, aunt, if Uma cannot come to our house, shall I send my wife with the children to see her?"

"Certainly, my child. Bindu is like my own daughter, and must come to see me as often as she can."

"So she shall, my aunt," said Hem. "And how many days more will Uma be staying here?"

"Stay? She can't stay a bit! As soon as our people come back from Burdwan with the mangoes and sweets she must go. We can't let her go without some presents, can we? And then the festival of Sastibata is near, and a good deal will have to be spent on that occasion, I reckon."

"To be sure, aunt."

"To be sure, my child, for, on the sixth day of the vernal moon, the son-in-law shall be honoured with presents, according to ancient custom. And how are your two little ones?"

"The baby has had slight fever for the last five or six days. I am giving him some medicine which I got from Katwa, and he is better."

"You have done well. Why, poor Bindu was also a sickly child, and often used to have fever. Oh! but she is only a child of yesterday, and she was always so quiet and gentle in her ways, and never opened her lips to ask for a thing. Poor, dear thing! she never said, 'Aunt, I am hungry,' till I sent for her and made her eat. And she never said, 'Aunt, I am thirsty,' till I made her drink. . . . And her aunt was her life. After her father's death her poor mother was stricken with grief, and could not look after the children, and Bindu and Sudha were not fed till I gave them to eat, and were not clad till I clothed them. Dear Bindu is to me as my own Uma. Tell her to come and see me."

"Certainly, aunt, she will come and see you."

"At the last Puja Bindu came to see us and went away the same day. But she must not do that this

year. Why, she is a daughter of this house; she must stay here the whole week and work with us. And such press of work! Why, all the people of all the villages within a radius of six or eight miles come to our house to see the image of the goddess. You come to the outer house, and go away from the outer house—how are you to know the press of work on such occasions? The cooking vessels are on the fire by three o'clock in the morning, and the cooking goes on, and the fire burns in the oven, till three in the afternoon, and yet the feeding is not over! And what crowds of people, and what profusion of food!—is it possible to reckon?"

"Why, have I not seen that, aunt? Do I not see it every year? Who does not know the profuse feasting in this house at Puja time?"

"Ay, my child; for do you not know the ancestral usage must be maintained, and who but my husband shall keep it? It is not every one who performs Puja; you, for instance, do not have any, and the people do not blame you. But he has a name and position, and how can we help keeping up the old usage of the Mullik house?"

How long this unending history of the Mullik house, of the Dhanpur house, of Pujas and presents, of wealth and opulence went on, we do not know. Poor Hem's eyes were gradually closing with sleep, and sometimes he was so rude as to indulge in a scarcely concealed yawn in the midst of the vigorous old dame's description. But he struggled bravely, and fed her with occasional expressions of assent—expressions which gave a fresh fillip to the indefatigable aunt who nibbled on like a tireless horse. It was past ten o'clock when, luckily for the sleepy guest, the sound of silver anklets was heard at the door of the hut, and the perennial streams at last slackened in their flow. Uma, decked in the gold and diamonds of the family of Dewan Dhaneswar of Dhanpur, entered the hut, and moved with a proud grace to accost her cousin's husband.

Twenty, of a bright and fair complexion, in the ripe beauty of her young Indian womanhood, she had no rival in the village. Her raven locks were tied up in a graceful knot, a diamond Siti sparkled on her fair forehead, and a diamond butterfly quivered in her hair. Gold and jewelled bracelets in curious variety encircled her arms, and a gold chain took the place of a girdle. A collar set with diamonds graced her neck, and a necklace of five rows of pearls hung on her bosom.

What wasteful ostentation! Hem thought within himself, repeating to himself one of those half-truths which Indian boys learn so glibly in the new schools. It did not strike him that jewellery and ornaments are the Savings Bank of the women of India. Not in ostentation do they thus deck themselves, but because in this form alone is investment safe for them, as the only kind of property which is never touched by landlord or moneylender, by the Civil Court or the creditor, even when the possessor is both friendless and helpless, a widow and a dependant. Among the agricultural population of Bengal, the sale of the silver jewellery of their women has averted many a local famine in the bad years, and in rich families the gold and diamond jewellery has descended from generation to generation, long after lands and estates have been wasted and sold.

"This is luck indeed, my brother!" said the radiant and lively Uma. "What good fortune, to have the pleasure of meeting you! What auspicious face must I have seen when I woke in the morning to have been blest with such happiness in the evening!"

"The luck is mine," replied Hem. "Is it possible for such as we are to meet people like you without good luck?"

"Ay, ay, my brother, that is all very fine! Why, I have been here these ten days, and you have never thought of coming to see me once. But I hope you are well. And sister Bindu? Is she well?"

"Yes, we are well. And are you quite well, Uma?"

"Yes, by your favour, and it is really very kind of you to enquire. What unfathomed depths of kindness must have inspired you to grant us this gracious visit to-night? And so sister Bindu has let you come at last! See that you don't stay long, or she may be getting jealous!"

Custom allows such repartee to the Indian sister-in-law, and poor Hem found himself at a disadvantage in defending himself against the onslaughts of his vivacious cousin. Men generally come out second best in such encounters, for women in India are unmatched for their science in words. Hem hastily unfurled the white flag, and replied submissively:

"Your sister Bindu will herself be glad to come and see you as soon as she can, Uma. She has been talking of it daily, and trying to find the opportunity. She will bring our children to-morrow, and you will like to see them."

Hem had touched her weak point. "Yes," said his cousin eagerly, "let her come to-morrow then. Oh! I long to see the dear children!"

"To-morrow she shall come. Believe me, Uma, she is most anxious to see you. She often enquires about you when you are in your father-in-law's house."

"Yes, I know it," said Uma, with an outburst of real affection. "Sister Bindu has loved me dearly since we played together as children, and were never happy in each other's absence. Yes, in those days of childhood, we used to think we should always be together and meet each other every day. But we part from those nearest and dearest to us as we grow up, and happy we are if we can still cherish in our hearts the love of our childhood! Do send sister Bindu to-morrow, and send your dear little ones too!"

"I shall certainly do so, Uma."

She was sincerely happy. For the reader will have

perceived that neither her father's hankering after rank and position, nor her mother's guileless vanity, nor the wealth and fame of her father-in-law's house, had stilled in the girl's heart those generous instincts of affection which she had cherished in her childhood. The first sight of the proud daughter-in-law of the Dhanpur house, flowing in beauty and diamonds, had filled Hem with distrust and suspicion, but the fear was removed when the natural goodness of her heart broke through all her pride of wealth and rank. The world would have been richer and happier if wealth and rank did not often smother the natural affection of childhood.

"And since you have been pleased, brother," she concluded gaily, "to favour our house with the dust of your feet, do us the further favour of accepting our poor and humble hospitality! Some light refreshments are ready."

She led the way, her silver anklets tinkling as she moved, and Hem Chandra humbly followed to the hut reserved for eating. Two chandeliers were burning in front, a silver plate held some light flour-cakes and sweets, and various curries and preparations of milk were arranged round it in silver bowls. Such ostentation is allowed on occasions when fathers invite their sons-in-law, but ordinarily the people of India are simple to the verge of plainness. Poor Hem seldom had the good fortune of being asked to such repasts at once so rich and thus sumptuously served; the price of this profusion of silver would have met his household expenses for a twelvemonth!

"Sit down then," cried Uma, according to custom; "and if we have failed in any way in our humble endeavour to welcome you, take our intention for the deed and pardon the shortcomings."

Hem sat down on a square carpet on the floor, and Uma sat by him as he ate. She was a beautiful woman, and it was this which brought her brilliant marriage, since the son of the Dhanpur Zemindar had declared that he would marry a beauty, and his

father had selected her, hearing the fame of her loveliness far beyond the Lake of Palms. For indeed the position of Uma's father, though he was a man of substance, was nothing like that of the Dhanpur Zemindar; and both Tarini and his good-souled but pompous wife felt themselves higher in social dignity after this alliance with so great a house.

Uma knew the felicity which wealth can bring. Whether she was altogether happy we know not yet; when we meet the young Zemindar of Dhanpur in the course of this story we may be able to judge. But a rumour had begun to spread that the passion for beauty was growing on the young Zemindar as he passed from boyhood to be a man, and that the thirst for pleasure had deepened and widened as the years rolled on. Such stories, however, about the rich and the great do not concern us now, who tell of the poor villagers of the Lake of Palms.

Long and entertaining was the talk which Hem held with Uma, and the conversation turned from merry chaff to more serious matters relating to her husband's home. In such matters he found her generally grave and proudly reserved, and a faint suspicion sometimes crossed his mind which caused him uneasiness. Could it be that she, whom all the village extolled as the fairest, the richest, and the happiest woman of the Lake of Palms, could have cares and troubles already concealed in her young bosom? Hem looked again and again on the fair face of his cousin until misgiving and doubt rose in his mind. He saw, or he imagined that he saw, the shadow of untimely care on the jewelled forehead under the diamonds, and the glint of unshed tears in the corners of the young eyes. Was this the sign of concealed woe, or only the effect of the flickering candle? Or did the future of Uma's life cast its pale shadow over that proud and beauteous young brow?

V

PULSATIONS OF NEW LIFE

WHEN Hem had eaten, nearly an hour passed in settling his little business with Tarini, and it was midnight before he returned home. Bindu, watching at the gate, saw him far down the village path, and at the sight her face grew cheerful, and her eyes brightened with a sweet smile.

"So you have come at last! I was fearing you had lost your way. Or perhaps that you could not resist the sweet blandishments of dear Uma, and did not know how time flew."

"Why this soft reproach, my love? Is it very late?"

"Not very; it is only midnight. And a friend has been waiting for you here all the evening."

"And who is he? Who can he be?"

"Come and see," said Bindu, and led the way.

When he entered the inner house, a young man of fair complexion and handsome features came forward. Hem could not recognise him for a while, and Bindu's face was dimpled with smiles. A moment passed, and then Hem knew his guest.

"Why, is it Sarat? When did you come down from Calcutta? But you have changed! Why, I saw you last at the marriage of your sister Kalee, ten years ago. You were then a boy reading in Burdwan. You are a tall young man now, and have grown whiskers! How could I know you again?"

"Yes," said Sarat; "shortly after my sister's marriage, father died, and mother came and lived with me in Burdwan. So I was never home since. But after matriculation I went from Burdwan to Calcutta to join the College, and mother came to live in this village. We have summer holidays now,

and I have come home to see her. Is it surprising, Hem, that you should see some change in me after ten years? Do I not also observe change in you all? Sister Bindu is only a year older than I, and as boy and girl we were great friends and always played together. I used to go to the Mullik's house, or sister Bindu used to come to our house with little Sudha in her arms. And did she not steal the guavas from the guava-tree with a stick—naughty girl! And now she is grown up to be mistress of a household and the mother of two children!"

"Nay, don't call me naughty," said Bindu, laughing; "just you speak for yourself! Why, the mango-trees of the village were bare of mangoes through your depredations! And now you are a fine college lad, one of the best of your class, they say. In those days you used to be the best of tree-climbers and orchard-robbers!"

"Nay, but tell the whole truth, sister Bindu—were not these things done at the bidding of my fair companion? Your aunt told you not to eat the green mangoes, so that in the dark evenings I had to creep under the fence of your house, and slip the mangoes into your hands in the kitchen, don't you remember?"

"Enough!" said Hem, laughing. "Why divulge these time-honoured secrets? I can quite imagine what a nice pair you were! I too used to go to your house, Sarat, do you remember? And I used to see Bindu and Sudha there now and then; little Sudha was only six. Sudha, do you remember you used to go to the Ghose's house with your sister? Do you remember your sister taking you there, and your meeting Sarat in those days?"

"Oh yes," said Sudha, with a faint blush, as she looked on the kindly and handsome face of the young man who had been the playmate of her childhood.

"And have you, Sarat, had your supper?" asked Hem.

"Yes," said Sarat; "and I never tasted nicer green mangoes than the dish which sister Bindu gave me to-night."

"Not even when you climbed from tree to tree in younger days?" enquired Bindu archly.

"Ah yes; I tasted many a delicious green mango then, but not so nicely cooked as I had this evening."

"Or perhaps you could hardly wait to have them cooked?"

"And has Sudha had her supper too?" enquired Hem. "And have you also had yours?"

"Sudha has had her supper," said Bindu, "and I am going to have mine now. Are you sure you won't have anything?"

"Quite sure," said Hem; "I had a hearty supper at your uncle's."

Bindu went into the kitchen to take her food. Sudha had only been waiting for Hem's return, and she now spread her mat on the verandah and lay down at once. No cares disturbed the girl's mind, and, lying in the cool breeze of the night under the bright moonlight, she fell asleep in a moment. The whole village of the Lake of Palms was silent, and slept in the bright and beautiful light of an Indian moon.

Sarat Chandra Ghose sat with Hem on the verandah, and their conversation knew no end. The Boses and Ghoses of the village had been allied by marriages in the old days, and Hem and Sarat had known and loved each other from early childhood. As he talked with his friend, he felt and appreciated all the noble instincts of the generous youth. He was drawn towards him as towards a younger brother; and Sarat too looked up to Hem as to an elder. Their long conversation was not yet ended when Bindu, having taken her supper, came and sat down beside them. Sudha had no pillow under her head, and Bindu took her head on her lap, and stroked the hair of the sleeping girl.

"And now you are reading for your degree?" said Hem to Sarat. "The B.A. examination takes place

in six or seven months, and I have no doubt you will pass in the first grade. Have you thought what you will do after that?"

"I have not thought of that yet. But my mother wants to go to Benares at once, so she wishes me to come and look after our property in this village immediately after I have taken my degree. But that, you know, is small, and does not bring in more than six or seven hundred rupees[1] in the year. I should prefer to try for some suitable appointment, and then mother could live in comfort in Benares, where she wishes to pass the last years of her life. You know I have made all arrangements to take her there before I return to Calcutta."

"Well, I think you are right. Take her to Benares where she longs to go, and then return to your studies in Calcutta. Work hard for your examination—it is pretty stiff—and pass it with as much distinction as you obtained at your matriculation and your first examination in Arts."

"I will try. I shall go back to Calcutta with all haste. And I sometimes think that you too might come there. Will you pass the whole of your life in this village? Ten years ago you went to college for a short time only, and sister Bindu has never been there—why not both of you come on a visit? The ploughing and sowing are almost over; you might come to Calcutta now and stay with me. Then, if you wished it, you could return here for the harvest in the autumn."

"It is very good of you to make this proposal, Sarat, but what am I to do in Calcutta? You have your aims, you are studying for your examination, you will pass it with distinction, and probably secure a good appointment. What am I to do there?"

"And could you not also try and rise in the world if you wished to do so? Do you wish to pass the whole of your life in this obscure village? I know you have read much since you left college, and that

[1] About £40 or £50.

you have acquired a solid knowledge which few of our B.A.'s of the Calcutta University can boast of. With your acquirements, your steadiness, and your industry, is it not possible to make headway in this world?"

"My acquirements are small indeed, Sarat; and if now and then I turn over the pages of a book it is because I find in it a pleasant companion. In a large place like Calcutta there are thousands of men, better instructed and better qualified than I, who are struggling to get a footing in the world, and cannot. A man with high abilities finds it hard to make his way where the competition is so severe and the chances so small. For a man with no acquirements, like myself, such efforts were futile. And I would have to return to this quiet village again after a few months' vain and useless struggle."

"And should it be so," urged Sarat, "where was the harm? You would honour me by being my guests, and your expenses therefore in Calcutta would be next to nothing. You would have the satisfaction of making one good effort to obtain a position there. It is my belief that even in that sea of humanity your ability and industry will be recognised and rewarded. If it turns out otherwise, return to your village after some months, and you will be no loser by the visit."

Hem reflected for a while, and then said: "It is very kind of you, Sarat, to ask us to be your guests; but if we do go to Calcutta, we think we must have lodgings of our own, and not be an interruption to your studies. However, it is not a matter which we need settle this night. My wife's uncle wants me to go to Burdwan, and you want me to go to Calcutta. I too am half inclined to think that I might be going somewhere for a change. I will think about it, Sarat, and consult you again before deciding."

"And you, sister Bindu—what are your wishes? Would you not like to see a great place like Calcutta?" said Sarat.

"I should like to go, Sarat, but could we afford it?

It is an expensive place, I have heard, and we are poor. How are we to meet the expenses of living there?"

"If you wish to throw away money, sister Bindu, you can do so, of course, otherwise you have no expenses to incur. I can assure you your stay in my lodgings would not be the least interruption to my studies. Often and often I feel tired over my books in my lonely house, and your company and conversation would refresh me and help me in my work."

"Or, perhaps, when you should be minding your books, you would be stealing now and then into the kitchen, and telling us stories of our childhood about the robbing of orchards," rejoined Bindu.

"Or, perhaps, sister Bindu may be tempting me there with green mangoes, dressed and cooked as she alone can do it. The gain is altogether on my side."

"Ay, ay, you are in luck now, Sarat," said Bindu, with an arch smile. "And if all I hear be true, some one is shortly coming to prepare dear, delicious dishes for you."

"And who may that be?"

"As if you knew nothing about it, you most innocent of creatures! Why, is not your mother arranging to get a sweet little wife for you?"

"Don't talk of that, sister Bindu," said Sarat, a little abashed; "that's all nonsense."

"Ay, but it is a fact, I much suspect!" added Bindu, still laughing; "your mother wishes a careful little wife to look after her son when she is at Benares."

"Mother does not insist on it much," said Sarat; "her heart is fixed on a life of penance and devotion. It is my sister who wishes to see me married at once. She is trying to arrange a match for me with some family in Burdwan, and since she came to this village she has been urging my mother to it. But I have told them both that I have no intention of marrying

till I have taken my degree and secured some suitable income to support a family."

"Dear Kalee!" said Bindu; "what a long time since I saw her! In our childhood, Kalee, Uma and I were always together, now we scarcely meet each other once in six months. To-morrow I must go and see them both."

"My sister is going to see Uma to-morrow, so if you go to her house, you will see them together."

"So I will, Sarat; I long to see your sister. Poor Kalee! She comes so seldom to the village; I suppose because her husband's family is so large, and he is poor in health. Why, he must be forty now, and they say is ageing rapidly. Why did your mother give Kalee in marriage to a bridegroom twenty years her senior, and a widower?"

"Don't ask me, sister Bindu. Mother did not like the match at all, but the family is pure Kulin, and Brahmans and priests recommended it so strongly. Poor, dear sister! Meek and content with her lot—the most uncomplaining of women—the most devoted of wives!"

The conversation turned to other subjects, and it was long past midnight when Sarat rose. "Sister Bindu, it is late now, and I must take leave. I shall see you again to-morrow; and as long as I am here I will come daily to have a taste of your green mango dishes! Why, I shall feed and live like a prince if you decide to come to Calcutta!"

"We can settle about that later on," she retorted, smiling. "But I shall see your sister to-morrow, and arrange with her for the hand of a princess, adept in the mysteries of green mango dishes, so that our dear prince may not languish for want of delicacies."

Sarat laughed, and took his leave. Sudha was still asleep, and the bright and copious beams of the midnight fell in a flood of light on her fair young face, sweet and fragrant as a full-blown night flower. Soft smiles played on her lips, as she rested her head on the lap of her sister, and slept the sleep of the blest.

Sarat left the house, and walked slowly homewards, fixing his eyes on the clear blue sky, while various thoughts struggled in his young heart. "I have visited many great houses and opulent families both in Burdwan and in Calcutta," he mused within himself, "but I have seldom seen so much of truth and confiding love as in this humble cottage! What manly candour and brotherly love in Hem, what womanly tenderness and truth in Bindu, what sweet simplicity in child-like Sudha! May I live to imbibe from them a little of human affection in my loveless heart! May I turn from the dreary and joyless closet of the student into the warm precincts of this human home, throbbing with pulsations of life and love!"

VI

FRIENDS IN POVERTY

DAWN, radiant as a bride decorated by her mother, so the Vedic poets sing; Dawn, young and white-robed Daughter of the Sky, dissipated the darkness of night and waked all creatures to new life. The ruddy sun pursued her in his car drawn by the seven steeds, whose seven colours mingle in the solar prism. But in vain he followed, for the blushing maid had disappeared! It is the older Indian version of the story of Apollo and Daphne, and the names of the Dawn-goddess too are the same in the Sanscrit as in the Greek. Eos is Ushas, Daphne is Dahana, and Athene is Ahana in the Veda. The fathers of the Aryan nations carried with them from their primitive home the same legends and the same names for those "Bright Gods" to whom they loved to offer their adoration and their hymns.

The Dawn, described in the Veda as a blushing

bride, is seldom seen in northern latitudes. It is not the grey light immediately preceding the sunrise, but a bright crimson which lights up the eastern sky, perhaps an hour before the rising of the sun, and is as transient as it is bright. Far from towns, camped among the undulating hills or the limitless fields of Northern India, the traveller has often leaped out of his bed seeing the eastern sky momentarily aflame with the rosy sheet. And before he has half gazed on this wonderful phenomenon it is gone, the dull grey light of the morning succeeded!

It is this striking phenomenon which called forth the finest lyrics of ancient India and of ancient Greece.

Bindu rose in the morning, swept the rooms and the courtyard, and then went to the pond behind the house, and cleaned the dishes used on the previous night. While she was still engaged thus, some one knocked at the outer door. Hem and Sudha were not up yet, so Bindu left the brass things in the pond and went to open the door. It was the wife of Sonaton the husbandman, a Kaibarta by caste. Bindu, when a child, used to call her her Kaibarta Sister, and she still addressed her by that endearing title.

"What brings my Kaibarta Sister so early in the morning? What has she got in her hand?" asked Bindu.

"Oh, it is nothing, sister; it is but a trifle. I thought I would come and see you this morning, and as Sudha is so fond of them, I made this jar of sweet curds overnight, and brought it for her. Is she up?"

"No, she is not up yet. But why, sister, should you be always making such presents to us? You are poor people, my dear, and must not go on like this."

"Oh, it is but a trifle, sister! The milk is of our own cow, and where was the harm if I fetched a little of it for you? Why, the cow is yours, and our house

and home all belong to you; we live by tilling your land, and all we have is yours. To whom should I bring these things now and then but to you?"

"Be it so, sister; let me have it, and I will put it by in the kitchen. And when we have our rice, we shall take the curd with it. You really make it very nicely, my Kaibarta Sister, and Sudha always likes what you do. But what is it, sister? Why, your eyes are wet! Are you crying?"

Sonaton's wife was, in fact, weeping silently, and now burst out into a cry. She tried to wipe away the drops with the skirt of her Saree, but the fountain overflowed.

"What is it that makes you cry?" enquired Bindu, in some anxiety. "Surely Sonaton is quite well, is he not?"

"Oh yes, *he* is well enough; what ever happens to him?" said the loving partner.

"And your child—is the child quite well?"

"Yes, by your blessings, sister, my child is quite well."

"Then what makes you shed tears like this in the early morning? What on earth is the matter?"

"I went to the Ghose's house this morning, sister, and there, there—O my bad luck!"

"What happened there? Did any one insult you or abuse you?"

"Who would insult me, sister?" enquired the woman in quite a different tone. "To whom am I indebted that I should suffer insult? No, sister, my husband, luckless man though he is, can feed me and support me by his honest toil; and though we be humble and poor, we have our proper pride, sister, and brook no insults!"

Bindu smiled at the woman's loving reference to her husband, and asked again: "Then why this lamentation? Has Sonaton been unkind to you?"

"*He*, the worthless loon, *he* abuse me? Who keeps his house, who manages his household? To what funeral pyre would he have gone by this time but for me? *He* abuse me? Not *he*, if he loves his life."

Bindu again suppressed a smile, and spoke with

some sternness. "Then what makes you shed useless tears in the early morning? What on earth has come over you, woman?"

"Nothing, sister, nothing," humbly replied the other; "only at the Ghose's house, where I went early this morning, I heard, I heard—O my bad luck!"

"Go on crying then," said Bindu in her annoyance; "I can't stand by and watch. I have not done cleaning the dishes yet, and have to light the fire and boil the milk. The children will ask for milk as soon as they are up."

In the meantime, Sudha, with a face fresh as the lotus blown in the morning, came out of her sleeping-room and stood by her sister.

"You are up quite early, my Sudha," said her sister. "Come here, my dear; our Kaibarta Sister has brought you a jar of sweet curds, and you will have it with your rice. Let me go and light the fire; the children will be up in a moment."

The girl shook her raven hair, and took away the curd, hanging it by a net in the kitchen. Then she ran towards the pond, where she knew the dishes were still left to be cleaned. Bindu was slowly turning towards the kitchen when Sonatan's wife dried her eyes once more, cleared her throat, and asked: "Is it true, sister—the news I heard?"

"And what is the news?"

"Why, what I heard at the Ghose's house!"

"And what have you heard?"

"Oh! then it must be true! And this was my luck, after all those years! Alas! alas! My heart breaks if I do not see dear child Sudha's young face for a single day!" No more words escaped her lips, but a loud wail arose, and the ample form of the gushing woman was convulsed with sorrow. Hem was sleeping in his room, but heard a turmoil, as of a distant earthquake. And when the woman's voice of lament reached his ears, further sleep was impossible.

Hurrying out of the room, and seeing Bindu, he asked her what was the cause of the lamentation.

"Oh, it is nothing," said Bindu. "Sonaton's wife is here; she has heard some bad news, and is crying about it."

Hem asked the woman what had happened, and if any illness or misfortune had befallen her house. Sonaton's wife suppressed her cries and her tears, put the skirt of her cloth on her head as a veil, lowered her head to the ground in salutation, and having cleared her throat and dried her eyes, said in a low voice: "No misfortune, honoured sir; but I have heard some news, and came to my sister to enquire about it."

"And what that news is," said Bindu, "I have not been able to get out of her this half hour. Try and get it from her if you can."

"Women understand each other best," said Hem, with a smile; "we men never half understand them. I am going to see Sarat to settle our plans." And he quietly walked out of the house.

"There! there!" screamed Sonaton's wife; "then what I have heard must be true!"

"Has anything possessed you, woman, this morning?" asked Bindu, in unfeigned anger. "Why are you behaving like that? If you have heard any news, why can't you speak out?"

"Why, sister, I went to the Ghose's house this morning, and heard the news there."

"What news?"

"I will tell you, dear sister, but don't take offence at a poor woman's foolish words. That luckless servant at the Ghose's house told me— may the funeral fire be lighted on his mouth!—his words gave me such a shock, my heart is beating violently still; feel it, sister, feel it."

"I have no time to feel your heart, woman; I have my cooking to attend to," and Bindu turned away towards the kitchen.

"Nay, nay, don't be angry with me, sister," rejoined the woman, holding the skirt of Bindu's Saree; "my heart feels for you, and so I came to enquire. Would

I have done this for others? My heart bleeds if I don't see Sudha for a day." Bindu turned away. "Nay, nay, I was saying that luckless loon of a servant at the Ghose's house—may the funeral fire touch his mouth, and his son's mouth, and his daughter-in-law's mouth, and may the dove make its haunt on his deserted homestead!" Bindu walked away towards the kitchen. "Nay, nay, I was saying that that man informed me—does anybody bring such luckless words on his lips? Is it possible? Surely you have love and feeling in your bosom." Bindu entered the cook-room, the woman following. "Nay, nay, I was saying that the ill-fated, burnt-faced servant told me—Oh, sister, can it be true?—that you are going to leave us all, to live in Calcutta? Why, sister, I nursed you with these hands, and shall I not see you again? Dear Sudha who loves me so much, and my sweet curds too—where, oh where, are you taking her away?"

Bindu had been annoyed with the woman, but could not suppress a smile, now that the news was told. "And did you, my Kaibarta Sister, take all this time to speak out this news? But why do you cry, poor woman? Why, nothing has been settled yet. Sarat proposed last night that we should go to Calcutta for a time, but can we go? The expenses in Calcutta are ruinous, and we are poor."

"Fie, sister!" resumed the woman. "Do good and honest folk ever go there? I have heard that you can't observe caste-rules there, that there is no discrimination, that no distinction is made there between Hindus and Christians! Your household here is pure as gold: stay here in happiness and peace! As for Master Sarat—why, what does *he* care? He has no wife or child, and he reads in a college, and they say when he leaves college he will cross the seas and go to Europe. Merciful heavens! Why, men who do that could take a knife to the throats of living men! Where is Europe, sister? Has one to go beyond Ganga-Sagor (the mouths of the Ganges). Has one to go beyond Lanka (Ceylon)?"

"Yes, woman; one has to cross many seas before one reaches Europe. One has to go a long way beyond Ganga-Sagor and Lanka."

"Merciful heavens! the terrible waves at Ganga-Sagor—can mortal man cross them and survive? And does ever living man come back from Lanka? They must come back as monsters—they can eat up living men! Ay, ay, Sarat may go to Europe after his college studies; what does *he* care? He has no wife or children. You are the goddess of this homestead: preside over it, sister, in peace, and leave not your own village."

"Come again," said Bindu, as the woman rose to leave, for a Hindu never uses the word "go" at parting.

"And tell me how you like the curd, sister; and tell me what Sudha says when she tastes it."

"I will, sister."

"And mind," said Sonatan's wife, retreating and turning again, "mind the poor woman's prayer. Wherefore go elsewhere? Be the goddess of this home for ever!"

"We will consider that, sister. Nothing has been settled about our going elsewhere, and if we do go, it will be only for a few months; we shall come back at the harvest season. Where should we live away from our own dear village?" The Kaibarta woman was reassured, and slowly walked away.

Later on, on the same day, poor Harimati, an old woman of the cowherd caste, came with her widowed daughter-in-law to see Bindu. So long as Harimati's son was alive, they had some land as well as a number of cows at home, and they earned a fair income from the sale of milk. But her son had died early, and poor Harimati and her widowed daughter-in-law let the land to others, being unable to manage it themselves. The rent they obtained from the sub-tenant was small and inadequate, and the cows were sold one after another, until they had only one or two left. Both these poor women used to come to Bindu's house and do all the work in the house when her

children were ill, or for any cause she could not work. She could not help them to any considerable extent, but nevertheless when the rice was harvested she did not forget her poor neighbours. In the cold season she would save the old clothes for Harimati and her daughter; and when one of them was ill, she would not forget to send sago, crystallised sugar, and occasionally some common medicines. The old woman was touched by these simple acts of kindness, and still more by Bindu's sympathy, and became grateful and attached to her, as poor people do for every little attention. She also had now heard that Bindu was about to leave the village for Calcutta, and she came and sat beside her and wept. Bindu consoled her, gave her daughter-in-law an old Saree, and sent them home.

After Harimati had left, the wife of the village weaver came. This woman was hard-featured, and her husband was not fond of her; she was weak and unfit for work, and his mother often rebuked her. In the last cold season she had had a pain in her spine, and could not fetch water from the pond, so her mother-in-law had struck her. Not knowing where she could go for help, she had wept and come to Bindu. Bindu was too poor to supply her with proper medicines, but she made her sit in the sun, and rubbed her on the back with some cheap embrocation day after day, until she felt relieved. The poor weaver woman never forgot this kindness, so she too made lamentation on hearing that her benefactress was about to leave the village.

She had not been long gone before Hira of the Bauri caste came. The Bauris are an aboriginal caste, and, unlike Hindus and Musalmans, are addicted to drink. Hira's husband carried palanquins and earned a decent sum of money, most of which he spent on liquor, and then he came home and beat his wife. Bindu had heard of this and spoken to Hem about it, and Hem had sent for Hira's husband and rebuked and threatened him. The man spared

his wife after that, and poor Hira was grateful to Bindu. She also had heard of the proposed departure, and so she had dressed up her little child with a new piece of cloth and brought him to take leave. "Mother," she said, "by your kindness we have saved a few rupees this time out of my husband's income. Our hut has been re-thatched after many years, and I have bought this cloth for the child. Bless us, mother, bless us before you leave." Bindu blessed the child and the mother.

Then Shashi, a Brahman woman, Bama, a Sadgop woman, Shyama, an Aguri woman, Mohamaya, a washerwoman, and many other humble friends, came to Bindu's house, and raised their voices because she was about to leave them. Poor Bindu had much to do to console them and send them away. Many people in the village were richer in income than this humble gentlewoman, but few were richer in the love and regard of their less fortunate neighbours. A little kindness, consideration, and sympathy go a long way in sweetening the relations of life all over the world, and nowhere more than among the grateful people of India.

VII

FRIENDS OF CHILDHOOD

In the evening Bindu went to her aunt's house and embraced Kalee and Uma, the companions of her childhood. The three who had been girls together were now mistresses of homes, but the love of those days was not yet effaced from their hearts. And being met once more after long separation they passed the evening in talk of their younger days, of their households, and of the many trials and troubles of their domestic life.

Kalee was dark in complexion. Her face was pretty, but cares and troubles had even thus early in life told on her features. Her eyes were a little sunk, two gold bangles hung on her lean arms, and a golden Maduli necklet graced her slender throat. Her Saree was plain, the hair on her head was thin, and was tied in a simple knot behind. Kalee was good-natured and simple as a child. She did her housework, took her meals morning and evening, and bore her trials in life with meek and uncomplaining patience.

"It is after such a long time, Kalee," said Bindu, "that I see you."

"And how should we meet oftener, sister Bindu? I have lived in Burdwan since my marriage, and am seldom permitted to come to my father's house."

"But why not?" enquired Uma. "I always come every year at the Puja time."

"Oh, but your case is quite different, Uma! You have many servants at Dhanpur, and have not to do any household work; you get into your palanquin and come here. It is not the same with us. We are a large family; my husband and his brothers all live together, and we have a great deal to do. If I come away, sister, how is the work to be done? On the present occasion, I begged my husband's sister to look after the work during my absence, and she has kindly consented. She will do it for a few days, but how can I expect her to do it long?"

"But you have lands and estates, I hear, and a considerable income, sister Kalee," said Bindu, "and your husband keeps carriages. Why does he not keep enough servants in the house?"

"Ah, that may not be, sister Bindu! It is not the custom of our family to keep them. Our people are so orthodox, they would not let servants touch their food. Men wait on my husband, and serve in the outer house; but inside, the daughters-in-law are busy from sunrise to sunset, and perform their own housework. And our income is not very consider-

able, sister Bindu. Our expenses are heavy, and we are getting into debt, so I am told; but I remain in the inner house, and only occasionally hear of these matters."

"But your husband gives big dinners to English officials in Burdwan," said Bindu, "and spends much money on such occasions, so we have heard. If you are getting into debt, sister Kalee, would it not be wiser to limit your expenditure? Can't you advise him so?"

"How could I think of advising him in such matters?—I, a poor daughter-in-law of the house, and he the head of our family? How could I be so bold, sister Bindu, as to speak to him of such things? I have heard his aunts often remonstrate with him, but they remonstrate in vain."

"And what does he say?"

"He says the family has a name and reputation in the country, not only for its orthodox purity but for its state and hospitality, and that must be kept up. And you know, sister Bindu, that the English officials of the station are very fond of him, so that he is a Member of every Committee, as I think they call it in Burdwan. And he goes to see them morning and evening, and votes in every matter as they wish him to vote, and so they call him a true type of the old Indian nobility."

"But who looks after the house," asked Bindu, "if your husband spends morning and evening with the officials, and in receiving their compliments?"

"Why, my husband's mother, of course. She is a venerable old lady of seventy, but still stately and erect as the palm, and as active in superintending her affairs as any younger member of the family. She is our honoured head, sister; her wishes rule the household, her word is law. Even my husband's aunts, strong-minded as they are, bow to the mistress of the house; we daughters-in-law worship her; and everything in the vast household moves with the regularity of clock-work. Early in the morning, an hour before

dawn, summer and winter, the old lady is up, and performs her ablutions and puts on her silken Saree for her devotions. All the women of the place know their work, and are busy by sunrise in the kitchen and storeroom, well-side and courtyard, when my mother-in-law enters the Puja room and spends two hours in her devotions. Then she is out again, sees the children fed, sees the men fed, sees all the daughters and daughters-in-law fed, and, last of all, takes her own spare meals after midday, and retires for a short rest. In the afternoon she is up and busy again; and not until the great work of the day is done, and every inmate has retired, does the old lady at last repair to her bed at the close of her labours. The whole house looks up to her as its head and mistress; my husband bows to her commands and carries out her wishes; and every social and religious ceremony, every domestic and household affair, is arranged and settled by her."

"Wonderful lady she must be," said Bindu, "if she can do all this at seventy."

"Ay, sister Bindu, you may well say so, and there are not many in the country like her. She is the type of the old Hindu housewives who regulated and managed their large joint families when all Hindu homes were more or less like this. But now, my sister, every man who has some employment leaves the ancestral roof-tree and starts a little household of his own, after the fashion of the English, and there are few good old joint families like ours left in the land."

"But how do your husband's aunts bear the sway of your mother-in-law?" asked Uma.

"They have to, sister Uma, for how could the work be done unless there was *one* head? The eldest aunt is good-natured, and does not often interfere in the domestic arrangements; the other two sometimes fret, but they have to obey. The youngest aunt has a special temper, and the daughters-in-law of the house dread her more than the mother."

Uma said nothing in reply, but she felt in her proud

heart that she would be half-suffocated in a place like Kalee's household! Accustomed to her husband's separate home, and permeated by those modern ideas which have crept even into the domestic life of India, Uma, Hindu woman as she was, heard with some degree of pity of the more orthodox arrangements of Kalee's family, where scores of members lived and fed under a common roof and acknowledged a common head. But if Uma could have thought out the great problem somewhat more in the spirit of older generations, she might have seen some reason in a system which imposed on the ablest and most fortunate of a family the inevitable duty of supporting the weak and the unfortunate, and which found for every miserable creature on earth a home somewhat better and somewhat dearer than the shelter of the street or the charity of the workhouse.

For a moment all were silent. Kalee then resumed the conversation, and asked Uma if her husband had gone to Calcutta.

"Yes," she replied, after a pause; "he has been there these last twelve months, and has sent word to his mother that he wishes to take me to Calcutta also."

"Ay," said Kalee; "I heard from my brother Sarat that your husband had taken a large house in a fine street in Calcutta, and furnished it at great expense. He keeps dark and grey horses, Sarat says, and it is not many Rajas who drive such fine pairs as your husband. I hear, too, that he intends purchasing a garden house in the suburbs, with flowers and fruit-trees and ornamental waters, and rooms floored with white marble. How happy you will be, my Uma!"

A thin smile trembled on the lips of Uma, and a shadow came into her dark eyes. She said slowly: "If a grey pair and a dark pair, if marble halls and beautiful gardens can make a woman happy, your sister will surely lead a happy life yet! But who can tell what is recorded by fate on our foreheads?" A sigh escaped her, and Bindu noticed it.

"And why should anything but happiness have been recorded on your forehead, Uma?" asked Bindu.

"Sister Bindu," replied Uma, "do you remember a soothsayer who visited this village when we were little girls? Do you remember, he looked at our hands and told our fortunes?"

"No, I don't remember it."

"Sister Kalee, do you recollect?"

"Not at all."

"Perhaps then," said Uma, "his words made more impression on my mind, and therefore linger in my memory. It is just twelve years ago, in this very month, we were playing about on this spot one evening. It was dark, with a faint glimmer of moonlight, when a fortune-teller, with thick, heavy locks, came out of yonder jungle and approached us. We trembled with fear, but the man sat down and told us not to be alarmed, to bring some copper and he would read our fortunes. Kalee gave him a pice,[1] and showed him her hand; and he said Kalee would be married to a family of great purity and distinction."

"And what did his sanctity prophesy for me?" asked Bindu.

"I was coming to that," said Uma. "Your mother had gone to the lake, and poor, dear aunt, she never had much money with her anyway. So you, sister Bindu, came and showed your hand to the soothsayer without paying anything. He turned on you, and said: 'My little mother, you will be wedded neither to wealth nor to distinction. You will sweep a poor man's house, and eat the rice of penury.' So spake the soothsayer twelve years ago!"

"Why, that is good!" said Bindu, smiling; "I am content with the fate which he foretold me! And what did he say of you, Uma?"

"I will tell you, sister. I had got four pice from mother that day, and gave it all to the soothsayer. He looked on my face and at my hand for a long time in silence. And then he drew me nearer, and

[1] A farthing

spoke in a whisper: 'You will be a rich man's wife, pretty child, and if riches can make one happy, you may be happy. *But beware of your evil star!*' He then turned and went away. I stood rooted to the ground in awe and fear." As she repeated the words a shudder went through the speaker's frame.

"What is it, Uma?" asked Bindu, anxiously and tenderly. "Does the remembrance of idle words uttered years ago really frighten you, and do you believe in an evil star? Why should you apprehend sorrows and misfortunes? And if you complain of a life of woe with your rank and riches, what should we do, my sister Uma?"

"I complain of nothing," said the proud and reserved Uma as she dried her tears; "nor do I believe the idle tale of a wandering fortune-teller about my evil star. But somehow vague apprehensions have haunted me for days past at the thought of going to Calcutta. But you too, Bindu, are coming there, and Kalee is at Burdwan, which is only three or four hours away. We lived like three sisters in our childhood, and we shall live so all through life. Should any unknown misfortunes overtake any one of us, may we at least never miss the consolation of our mutual love."

There was something in the tone of Uma's voice which spoke of sorrows hidden, and of anxieties unuttered. Bindu and Kalee did not press her. They dried her eyes with the skirts of their Sarees, and consoled Uma with the assurances of their unchanging love. The three women were of the same age, and had grown up together in the Lake of Palms. As they parted when the night was far advanced a shadow of unknown troubles clouded their hearts.

VIII

MOTHER AND SON

THE mail train for Bombay, leaving Calcutta in the evening, arrived at Mogul Sarai Station in the afternoon of the following day, and streams of passengers bound for Benares changed for the branch line which took them to the riverside. The railway bridge over the Ganges had not been constructed at the date of this story; and passengers alighted from the train to cross over to the holy city by steamer or by boats. It was a gathering of races such as can be seen only in India. Tall and hardy pilgrims from Behar came with their staffs and their bundles—men inured to hardship and to labour, sparing in diet, passing days on parched rice and fried grain, and thinking it no discomfort. Marwari traders, hailing from Rajputana, and known as the most enterprising itinerant merchants in all India, came with huge packages of Lancashire piece goods and Japanese silks, Bombay cloths and Madras chintz, bound for rich houses in the crowded streets of Benares. Hardy men also, of a shorter stature, crowded from the uplands of Chota Nagpur to the city which is sacred to all Hindus of all races. And groups of women from the towns and hamlets of Bengal threaded their way timidly through the crowds, casting many a pious look across the river, thirsting for a first view of the towers and temples of that holy city which it was the dream of their life to visit.

Evening closed before Sarat could take his mother to a humble Hindu shop and give her some refreshments after her fast of the whole day. Sarat and his mother, attended by a female servant, had caught the mail train at Burdwan the night before, had changed at Mogul Sarai, and had come by the

branch to the riverside. And as an orthodox Hindu woman never touches food or water during a railway journey, she had fasted during twenty hours. Humble mat-built shops have often a spare room serving as an inn for Hindu travellers; and to one of these he took her, deposited her few articles of personal luggage, and arranged for meals and a bed. The sky was cloudy, and lurid with frequent lightnings, and he thought it best to wait till the next morning before crossing the river.

Long before the first streaks of dawn had lighted the eastern sky, the pious widow had left her bed, and spent two hours in devotion. Then they left their inn, and walked to the banks of the river just as the rising sun of an Indian summer threw its golden mantle over the long line of temples, towers, and bathing Ghats of that great and ancient city, rising out of the waters of the majestic Ganges.

Few places on earth have a more imposing appearance than Benares as seen from the opposite side of the river. High up in lengthy panorama temples lift their curved spires to the sky; below, crowds of people from all parts pour down the flights of stairs which line the water-side; and the waters of the broad-bosomed river sweep past the structures and edifices of the mighty city, to crown a picture which, once seen, is never forgotten. The sound of bells and conch-shells came floating across the river from many a temple, and white and red banners and umbrellas gleamed in the morning sun.

To Sarat's mother, who had never before seen such a place, the sight was one beyond her wildest dreams —ravishing, bewildering, overpowering. And to a Hindu widow, who had at last broken away from all ties and come to pass the evening of her life in acts of devotion and piety in this holiest of holy cities, the prospect had indeed a fascination which no mere earthly scene can present. The simple woman shaded her eyes as she stood in rapt contemplation on the river brink; her whole soul fled onwards to

that scene of sanctity and devotion; and tears of grateful joy fell on her faded bosom in silent thanks to God for this greatest of all His mercies.

Sarat too, though a student of an English College, was not unmoved when he thus saw Benares for the first time. Gazing on the ancient seat of Hindu art, its learning and religion, it seemed that the golden wings of their three thousand years beat above its temples. Thirty centuries ago, when Northern India was the seat of the warlike Bharatas and the Panchalas, the cultured Kosalas and the Videhas, whose fame has been handed down in the Indian Epics, the Kasis of Benares were among the most advanced and cultured nations of India. Ancient Upanishads still speak of the old kings of the Kasis; Buddhist Scriptures tell us of the sacred Deer-Park where the Buddha first proclaimed his lofty faith and precepts; and the chronicles of the Puranas narrate the story of this ancient city which never lost its pre-eminence. The Moslem rule of six centuries might sweep over this hoary town—ay, and demolish its towers and temples—but the faith of a nation lies not between the hands of an Iconoclast, and the Benares of to-day is quick as when thirty centuries ago its building crowned the triumph of Hindu religion and learning. Modern chiefs and princesses have vied with each other in adding to its endowments and its buildings; princes of Nepal, and chiefs of the Deccan, Queen Ahalya Bai of Indore, and grim Ranjit Sing of the Punjab, have contributed to its newer beauty. Ancient empires and ancient nations have passed away; and the antiquarian and the explorer trace their remains in Egypt and in Babylon. In India alone there is continuity between the past and the present, and the past with all its glory and splendour lives in the hearts and in the lives of the modern nation.

A small boat ferried them over Ganga, and Sarat and his mother stepped on the Ghats of Benares while the bells of Bisweswar Temple yet summoned

the faithful and the pious to the morning Puja. Sarat would have taken his mother to the lodgings which he had already secured, but the widow was wrapt in a trance of holy thought. She scarcely heard the words spoken to her, scarcely saw anything but the temple which lifted its spire before her entranced eyes. Thrice she prostrated herself at its gate, and then reverently entering its sacred precincts, the world passed from her soul.

In the inside dark, a few oil lamps scarcely served to dispel the surrounding gloom. A priest was chanting the appointed prayer in Sanscrit, bells sounded from above, and worshippers of many races crowded about the sacred image. The smoke of incense rose slowly and filled the dark temple, blinding the worshippers, and passing out through the doorway to the open sky. The flowers which each had brought were placed before the image; the holy water of Ganga was sprinkled upon them, and when at last the long prayer was ended and the bells had tolled their last, each worshipper bent his head in silent adoration to Bisweswar, Lord of the Universe.

Sarat, under-graduate of an English College, had not entered the temple, nor offered worship to a graven image. He waited for his mother outside; but, as the chanting of the ancient Mantra struck his ear, and the silent prostrations of the pious caught his eye, his heart too was moved to a silent prayer. The teachings of the missionary and the schoolmaster during the early years of the nineteenth century unsettled the mind of the educated youth of India, and produced a reaction against the prevailing forms of worship. But a deeper education is teaching the later generations to enter beyond the mere forms of ceremonial, and to seek for light and religious consolation in those ancient scriptures which are the undying heritage of their nation. Greek and Persian, Hun and Scythian, Moslem and Christian, have battled in vain against that ancient and deep-seated faith, that worship of the One Universal Soul, which

is the creed of the modern Hindu, as it was the creed of the ancient Upanishads and the Vedanta. And every passing year of thought and study only brings the millions of Hindus closer to this cardinal faith of their forefathers.

Sarat's mother would not think of going to her lodgings till she had visited the temple of Annapurna and the other famous shrines of Benares. Like a dutiful son, Sarat accompanied her from temple to temple, through the dark streets with their crowds of pilgrims. High edifices rose on both sides of the lanes, their balconies filled with men and women wearing various garments and speaking different languages. Shopkeepers displayed their baskets of rice and grain, of lentils and vegetables, and sacred bulls threaded their way amongst the people, occasionally helping themselves to a mouthful of corn from the roadside shops, undeterred by any, and injuring none. Mahratta women with red silk garments tucked up behind, Bengal women in more flowing Sarees, and the women of Northern India with sweeping petticoats, wandered about in friendly groups, offering flowers and copper coins at the many shrines and images which lined the streets or nestled in the shade of trees. Ashen-clad ascetics and devotees, with sandal marks on their foreheads, claimed the respect, and occasionally the gifts, of passing wayfarers. And in the midst of all these the city carried on its great business and trade; shops and warehouses displayed the products of Europe and Asia; commercial houses, with branches all over India, issued their orders and their bills of exchange; silks and cotton fabrics, gold and silver jewellery, pearls of the finest shape, and diamonds of the purest water, enamels from Jaipur, inlaid work from Upper India, and the celebrated brass ware of Benares, stocked the dark chambers in many an obscure street and tortuous alley of this wonderful city. The modern traveller, who visits a few celebrated temples and feeds a troop of monkeys, carries away with him the im-

pression of a curious old town with strange superstitions and uncouth rites. The thoughtful enquirer sees in Benares a microcosm of the old Hindu world —with its ancient faith, its antique learning, its quaint methods of business—a strange survival of an old-world picture. And as he stands by the cloisters of some temple where the Vedic Hymns are still chanted, or visits some old Swami who still teaches the lessons of the Vedanta, glimpses of times like the early days of Greece come back to him for a moment amidst all the hurry and bustle of a steam-worked, railway-girdled modern world. Men, living in humble huts amid squalid surroundings, still hand down to generations of modern Hindus those venerable systems of philosophy, faith and learning, to which Socrates might have given an utterance, and Alcibiades have listened.

Long after midday Sarat and his mother, having completed the round of their visits, directed their steps once more towards the river to perform their ablutions. The flights which rose from the waters were swarming with thousands of women who had come to bathe in holy Ganga. Priests and Pandas accompanied rich pilgrims to the most sacred Ghats; Brahmans held up their threads and uttered their prayers as they stood waist-deep in water: and the steps of the Mani-karnika or the Dasaswamedha Ghat were worn by the tread of crowds of fair bathers, seeking to cleanse themselves from the sins of life by ablutions, fasts, and prayers. Late in the afternoon Sarat and his mother came to their lodgings and had their simple meal, and the pious widow felt a happier woman than she had ever done since her husband's death. To retire from the world to a life of devotion and prayer in this holy city she had looked from that day forth, and now, after years of waiting and watching, the pious dream of her life was realised.

For three days and three nights Sarat lived with his mother in Benares. A Panda, to whom he had written from his village, had engaged rooms in the

upper story of a brick-built house on the riverside; and every morning his mother was up before dawn, and passed the hours in devotion, till the eastern sun flooded her rooms with its crimson light. The Panda also accompanied her to different temples, helped her in all her needs, and acted the part of guide, philosopher and friend. Hundreds of Pandas in every holy city in India accost pilgrims as they arrive from day to day, and render such needful services for a small remuneration; and in their chronicles, which they hand down from generation to generation, may be traced the names and parentage of all noted pilgrims who have visited the shrines of Benares, or Allahabad, Mathura or Brindaban.

A Brahman woman, whom the Panda had engaged for Sarat's mother as her cook, found herself rather a companion and a friend, for the widow insisted on cooking her own food, and, like many such, took only one meal in the day. The third day and the third night passed; Sarat's mother performed her morning devotions, and then with a heavy heart prepared to part from her son. They walked together to the precincts of the temple of Bisweswar, and as the well-known bells summoned the faithful to the morning service, and crowds of men and women entered the porch with their flowers and offerings, she stood silent and agitated, and tears streamed down her worn face:

"How hard it is, O Lord of the Universe, to tear ourselves from the ties of earth! Help a lonely woman to devote herself to Thy service, and may Thy blessings follow her only son in all his troubles and trials here!"

Sarat bent his head before his mother, and she placed her hands on it and blessed him. "Go, my son, walk in the footsteps of your revered father, tend with care your poor sister, be a brother and a friend to Hem and Bindu and Sudha, and to all your dear ones. Go, my son, acquire the learning of these ages and prosper in life, and reverence the great God who

alone can help us in our endeavours. Leave your poor mother in this holy city, Sarat—leave her to pass her last years in the rites and penances which our holy men and holy Sastras teach. And a mother's blessings shall ever follow you wherever you be."

The poor widow could say no more. Tears choked her voice; and Sarat, young and strong as he was, was sobbing at the feet of his mother, unable to find a word in reply.

The bells tolled again. The chant of the priests of Bisweswar rose in the morning air, and filled the heart of the mother and son with a feeling of pious devotion. The widow dried her tears.

"Leave me, my son; the hour of prayer is passing by, and I must go into the temple. Be brave in your duty, my son, be generous and good. Be true to the faith of your fathers, and be true in all your aims and endeavours."

"Your wishes, mother," said Sarat at last, "will be my guide in life. When I learn to act against your sacred wishes, may I cease to live."

He then touched the feet of his mother at parting, and went to the boat which was waiting for him on the river. The boat was unfastened, and flew bounding over the water to the opposite shore.

The bells of the temple sounded again, and the chant rose in solemn cadence on the morning air. But the voice of music rose in vain; for once in her life the mother of Sarat forgot her devotions. The aching and tear-dimmed eyes of the poor widow watched the little speck of a boat over the broad bosom of the Ganges, and her thoughts left her to follow the last pledge of her earthly joy and happiness.

The morning sun shone over temples and spires; the bells pealed their last; and the voice of sacred Mantras rose, fell, and ceased. There was a void in the heart of the lonely woman as she entered the temple and prayed a long, silent prayer to Bisweswar, Lord of the Universe.

BOOK II

THE TOWN

I

THE VOICE IN THE SLEEPING EAR

"SUDHA, my sister, will you step this way for a moment?"

"Are you calling me?"

"Yes; I have washed that Saree, and want you to spread it out on the roof to dry. I am going to have my bath at this well, and then light the fire, for the milk-woman will be coming directly. But I don't like bathing at a well, Sudha; our village lake is ever so much better. One can get down into a lake and bathe in comfort."

Sudha smiled, and said: "You seem to dislike everything in Calcutta! Why, I am charmed with this place. It is such a fine big town, with shops and bazaars, grand houses and never-ending sights, such crowds of people, and such horses and carriages! Is there anything like this at the Lake of Palms?"

"Never mind the houses and shops, Sudha; our poor village homestead is Paradise to us. One can move about there, and get a little fresh air and sunlight. And we have creepers and vegetables and mangoes in the garden—where can you find all that in this Calcutta house? Horses and carriages are for those who have them, and of what earthly use to us is a

brick-built house like this? There is no ventilation in the rooms, scarcely any sunlight in this little courtyard, and one can never step out to visit one's neighbours except in covered palanquins! Why, it is like keeping a bird in a cage!"

"But think of what you see when you do go out, sister! Hem took us in a carriage the other day, right along the spacious Maidan, to the Museum with its wonderful collection. And then we drove to the Zoological Gardens and saw such strange animals and beautiful birds. Whenever you drive out, you see something new."

"But I don't like to be always driving out, Sudha; in our village there was no need for driving out at all. Every morning we could walk out to have our bath in the lake, and we knew every one and saw every one, and every one came to see us. Who knows anybody else in this wilderness of a city?"

"But, sister, if you stop here for some time you will know the people. Devi Prosonno's servant came to us the other day and asked us to visit his wife. And Chandra Nath kindly sent us some presents and sweets yesterday."

"Of course, my dear Sudha, we shall know a few people if we stay here. But they are rich and we are poor, so how can we ever be intimate with them? If they treat us well, and speak to us kindly, it is condescension on their part."

"But Sarat comes to our house every evening, sister, and tells us of so many things and about so many people. And he reads from his books too, and I so love to hear him."

"You will not find many young men, Sudha, so good and kind as our Sarat. He has to study for his examination the whole day, but never fails to see us in the evening; and I am sure that he only stays so long with us because he thinks we must be lonely in this great city. While we were staying with him, he almost put aside his books to look after our comfort. He is not proud of his money nor of his education,

and his heart is full of tenderness. Ah, you will not find many young men like him in these days!"

"There is the milk-woman, sister, coming with the milk."

"And have you brought some decent milk to-day?" Bindu asked the woman; "or is it half-water, as it was yesterday? There is no want of filtered water in Calcutta, and so there is no want of the supply of your milk. It is milk in colour only, and not always that, I fancy!"

"Nay, mother," said the woman, "could I supply this house with such milk? If you taste it, you will know the good from the bad."

"Yes, yes, child, I know it. Why, in our village our cow gave us a quart and a half daily, and that was more than enough for the children. Here you bring us two quarts and they are still hungry. And when I pour it out into the saucepan to boil, it is like pouring water and not milk!"

"But, mother, how can you get the same quality here as you did in your village? There the cows go out to pasture and feed well, and give good milk. Here we have to feed them in the stall, and they don't give us the same kind of milk."

"And what about the curd I ordered yesterday? Have you brought any curd?"

"Yes, here it is," said the woman, and produced a small earthen pot about the size of a man's fist.

"Oh dear me! Is that curd worth four pice!"

"But how much do you expect for four pice? Tell your servant to go and enquire in the bazaar, and if she gets more for four pice you need not pay me at all. Why, mother, we depend upon your kind custom, and do you think we can cheat you in these things?"

"Come here, Sudha dear, come and see the four-pice curd of your glorious Calcutta! Mix it with a little water, my sister, or it will not suffice for your rice. Who is that? Is it our servant?"

"Yes, mother," said the woman-servant, as she came to her mistress.

"Well, child, go to the bazaar a little early, for my husband wants to go out at ten to-day, and breakfast must be ready before that. And what fish will you bring, child! Can you get good Koi?"

"Why not, mother? But they are dear. A good Koi costs two or three or four pice."

"What! Do the people of Calcutta then eat nothing, but simply drive about the streets in their carriages?"

"And why should they not eat, mother? They eat as they spend. We get only four pice worth of fish daily, and that does for both morning and evening."

"Well, but Magur?"

"Don't mention Magur! Such a fish costs four or six or eight pice. Why, mother, the Calcutta bazaar is like lighted fire, you cannot touch the things! We too have lived in villages, and bought fish in village markets—could we get the same things for the same price in Calcutta? Could we poor people live in Calcutta? You feed us, morning and evening, and we live in the shadow of your kindness; otherwise, how could poor people like us live in this town?"

"Well, well, child, go and get what fish you can—Tengra or Parsea, or whatever you find best. And get some small Mourala fish for one pice; I will prepare an acid dish for my husband. And get a pice worth of herbs—Natea, or Palain, or Nau—whatever you can get. Why, in our dear village the Nau creeper grew in our courtyard, and we had more of it than we could eat! Potatoes are very dear, my child; don't get many, but get some Baigun or Uchcha or Jinga, or any other vegetable that you can. And buy some tender plantain-marrow and some plantain-flower. Cruel fate! that one should have to spend money for plantain-marrow and plantain-flower! Why, they grew almost wild in our village homestead!"

Bindu took the milk and curd from the milk-woman, gave money to the servant for bazaar purchases, boiled the milk, and took it upstairs. Her

two children were up; she fed them, and then made the beds and swept the rooms. It was not very long before the servant came back from the bazaar with her purchases, and her mistress entrusted the children to her and went into the kitchen. Sudha was the store-keeper of the house, and with girlish pride gave out salt, oil, spices, and other articles from the store-room, washed the rice before boiling, cut and dressed the vegetables and fish, and prepared the condiments. Bindu began the cooking.

The reader will have perceived that Hem had at last come to Calcutta from his village, and after a short stay in Sarat's lodgings had removed to a small two-storied house. Sarat had protested against this needless waste of money, and begged Hem and his family to stay with him; but they were afraid to interfere with his studies, and would not consent. So he had at last rented this house for them at Bhowanipur at fifteen shillings a month.

Sarat knew many people in the neighbourhood, and Hem came to know them also. Some were pleaders in the Calcutta High Court, some were clerks or *employés* in Government offices or big European trading firms, some had property of their own, some had shops in the China Bazaar or Bara Bazaar, and many were those who struggled to make a poor living in that vast city of effort and empty hope.

The rich people of Bhowanipur received the humble and well-behaved stranger from the country with the kindliness of their race: condescended to ask him to their spacious and well-furnished rooms, and spoke to him with cordiality and sympathy. A few asked him to dinner, and he gradually formed a small circle of acquaintances.

Like his wife, however, Hem still sighed for the freedom and repose of his village home. The closeness of Calcutta was uncongenial to him, and he longed for the companions and occupations of the country. He appreciated the kindness of his new friends, but kept his distance from the rich and the

great in the City of Palaces. With an admiration not unmixed with amusement, he watched from his obscure corner the exciting race for honours and titles and distinctions which goes on eternally in the metropolis of India. Dinners and garden-parties to the great men of the Indian world, dances and drawing-room meetings, subscriptions and addresses which are pleasing to the high and the mighty—what an exciting pursuit, what an unending occupation! And titles and distinctions, hunted with assiduity, came at last, as surely as the deer comes down under the bullet of the patient and assiduous hunter! Poor Hem stepped aside from the path of these august sportsmen, and marked with wonder their skill and success. If his experience had been wider, he might have known that this exciting pursuit is a world-wide occupation, and that earnest and quiet workers in all countries of the world step aside from that racecourse as naturally as he himself.

The rains began about the middle of June as usual. Atmospheric changes in India are as striking as in any part of the world. The cold months, November to February, pass under a clear blue sky and in weather which is bracing and almost frosty. Then the great wheat and winter rice crops are harvested, and the people rejoice in their many religious ceremonies, gatherings, and pilgrimages. But in March the hot weather begins, for there is scarcely any spring. Up in the North and West the dry air parches the land, and day after day the sun casts a flaming radiance over panting villages and towns, accompanied by hot winds from the western deserts which seem to wither all life. Weary workman, sleepy shopkeeper, and panting husbandman alike live in a state of suspended animation when the sun burns up plains and villages, and the temperature is 115 or 120 degrees in the shade. In Bengal the heat is less, but perhaps more trying and more prostrating, because damp. Next, in the middle of June, comes the monsoon, when the country over

which it passes is deluged with rains for three or four months—up to the middle of October. Thousands of square miles in Bengal are under water, and villages stand out like islands with their homesteads and trees and cattlesheds. Lakes and the village ponds are filled once more, rivers overflow their banks, the interminable groves which shelter every village assume a deeper tone; the early rice, in sparkling, velvety green, springs up over the vast stretches of rolling fields, a grateful sight indeed to its teeming, dependent myriads.

The rains are no pleasant time in town, and Hem's prospects darkened with the darkening sky of June and July. As he had himself feared, his endeavours to find a footing in this busy metropolis were futile; and in the midst of thousands of fellow-mortals, striving and struggling, pushing and jostling each other, he felt himself alone and unheeded.

He would come home in the evening after his day's quest and visits, and the quiet, patient, and ever gentle Bindu had always some refreshment waiting for him: sugar-cane peeled, cut and washed, succulent water-nuts, soaked Moog, and a tumbler of cool water sweetened with crystallised sugar and limes. Hem would partake of these dainties, and, as he listened to Bindu's cheerful talk, would forget his day's labours and disappointments. In the cool of the evening his wife would sit with him on the roof of the house, her two children playing beside her, and would talk of her native village, contrasting its quiet rural shades with the continuous stream of people ebbing and flowing in the streets of the town. She seemed a little more slender than she was in the village, and the bloom on her face had somewhat paled in the close confinement of Calcutta life.

But the faithful Sarat would come to visit them almost every evening. Then Bindu would leave her duties in the kitchen, and lighting the oil lamp and spreading the mat on the floor of their sitting-room, they would pass the evening in pleasant talk. Sarat

was something of an enthusiast. He would never tire in talking of his college life, and of that western literature and western science which are taught in the English schools and colleges, and which make a deep and lasting impression on the young Indian mind. He would speak also of Calcutta and its institutions, of its riches and its poverty, of its luxury and its distress; and his voice quavered with something like eloquence as he spoke of the endeavours made and the triumphs achieved by his great countrymen. He spoke of the venerable Vidyasagar, who had devoted his life to social reforms and literary culture in Bengal, and of the earnest Akhay Kumar, who had sacrificed his health and manhood in the same noble cause. He spoke of Dayanand Saraswati, who had preached pure Hindu theism in Northern India, as Ram Mohan Roy had done in Bengal. He spoke of Madhu Sudan and Bankim Chandra, who had elevated the thoughts and the literature of their country, and of Ram Gopal and Harish Chandra, who had laboured to secure for their countrymen some of those rights which ennobled other British subjects in other parts of the world.

Sarat talked of younger men also, who trod in the footsteps of their fathers, striving to obtain some representation of Indian opinion in the Councils of the Empire. And he spoke with a glow of gratitude of the reigning Viceroy, the Marquis of Ripon, who had accepted the co-operation of the people themselves in the great work of administration.

Hem listened with the joy of an elder brother to the fervour of this generous young man's ideas and thoughts. And Bindu, who had known Sarat as a little village urchin, fond of stealing mangoes and guavas, marked with a sister's pride and partiality the proud earnestness of the manly youth.

There was yet one more listener in that dimly-lighted room: the little Sudha forgot her food and her sleep as she sat in her dark corner and gazed on the glowing face of the young enthusiast. She

listened as in a trance to the flow of his musical voice, with its throb of appreciation for the labours of those who had served their country, strengthened by his evident resolve to devote his own life to the same great purpose.

The hand of the clock sometimes pointed to the hour of midnight, and the flame sometimes flickered in the exhausted lamp, before Sarat closed his never-ending tale to take leave with many apologies, and silently walk home under the bright stillness of the starlit night. Hem and Bindu then had their supper, cold and dry with long keeping, and Sudha went to bed with a joy unreasoning as that of intoxication. And always in her sleeping ears the music of a man's clear voice rang through the dark and silent watches of the night.

II

THE LIGHTED GARDEN

As the months passed on, a new life dawned for Sarat.

Young students in India, living away from their village homes in large University towns like Calcutta, often lead a hard, cheerless, monotonous life. Removed early from the comforts of home life, they do not come under the healthy influences of residential colleges, and having but few games and pastimes devote the whole of their day to preparation for those examinations, success in which is now the possible passport to every career in life. There is no social communion between teachers and students, no personal sympathy and watchful guidance, no Union Club or play-ground for friendly intercourse. English professors meet their men only in the class-room, after which

the young students retire to their solitary lodgings in narrow lanes and squalid bazaars, pore over their books into the silent hours of morning, and devote all thought and all energy to that preparation on which the future depends. Many succumb to the hard and cheerless struggle; many force themselves through the examinations, only to find a career in some humble governmental post. A few, of strong character and high intellect, draw inspiration from the very solitude of their hard life, nurse a noble ambition in the midst of humble surroundings, and live to win the applause of their country by a useful and distinguished work in life. Such men have left their impress on the history of their land.

Sarat was an extreme instance of the Indian student. Solitude had brought to him strength and a singleness of purpose—but it had made him a silent, almost a morose man. Few among the thousands of his fellow-students in Calcutta worked harder or with a higher resolve than this exile from the Lake of Palms; but few of them lived a more cheerless, lightless life. Gloom seemed to be congenial to his nature; and often in the evening, before the lamps were lighted, he would pace his dark chamber, declaiming inspiring lines from some favourite English poet—writers nowhere read with more appreciation than in India. Thus he lived in a world of his own, devoted to hard study, nursing his secret ambitions.

Suddenly a change came over his dreams, and a new light into his life, when, after years of separation, he once more found his life bound up as of old with Hem and Bindu and Sudha. To no man does the fascination of a woman's grace appeal more strongly than to one of strong impulse, long curbed to the uses of solitude. A word spoken with womanly kindness penetrates his soul, an act of womanly courtesy fills him with unknown joy. The sweet, good nature of Bindu, her loving sympathy, above all, her appreciation of his own high purpose and character, drew Sarat towards her as he had never been drawn towards a

woman before. Her gentleness flung a new light into his soul, her cheerful home attracted him from his dark closet as the lamp of the evening attracts the moth. For days and months Sarat lived in this new world of light and of gladness; and for the first time in his life he basked in the warm sunshine which a true woman sheds on all around her—on none more than on the ardent recluse whose soul hungers and thirsts for affection.

Hem, himself an exile in Calcutta, greeted his young friend and co-villager with all the candid love of a brother. And Sudha too, in her own quiet way, and with her simple, child-like smile, ever welcomed the young enthusiast.

Thus insensibly there stole into his heart a deeper and a softer feeling. Her image stood before him through the solitary morning in his dark study and obliterated the pages of learned books and portly volumes. Warm pulsations of life throbbed in his veins as he tried to follow the dry details of ancient history, or the drier doctrines of modern philosophy. A soft voice rang in his ears as he walked, alone and unobserved, in the college grounds. And something deeper than a wish to visit his village friends stirred his heart, as the shades of each closing day found him entering the portals of the well-known house, which was the nest of all his hopes, his affections, his love.

How often do we delude ourselves that we perform a high duty, when we do but yield to a secret and selfish impulse! Evening after evening, as Sarat laid aside his studies and hastened to the charmed circle, he still persuaded himself that he was doing the part of a disinterested friend towards his fellow-villagers, strangers in a strange city. And as the silent hours of midnight saw him returning through deserted streets to his own lodgings, self-satisfaction congratulated itself upon another sacrifice of studies for the sake of those who needed his help and his company. At such time the least incident may well

change the whole course of a life, as the young man was soon to learn.

In the deep blue Indian sky stars throbbed with gem-like brilliance; gentle breezes stirred in the leaves of the roadside trees, and the coolness of the night was refreshing after the heat of the day. Where darkness is swift to follow on the heels of day, the last glimmer of sunset had long disappeared into the glorious summer night which is only seen in the East.

Uton had not come home yet. Bindu had gone to the kitchen, leaving her sister alone with Sarat, as with a brother, upon the terrace of the house. In the utter calm of the night Sudha grew silent, looking up with glistening eyes to the unnumbered radiance of the stars. *Her* hair almost touched Sarat's face, and intoxication filled his soul.

Often before had they spoken of their brilliance, and already under his guidance Sudha had learned the names of the principal constellations and some of those groups along the path of the moon, which Indian watchers of the sky saw and named three thousand years ago, long before they had observed the Solar Zodiac. He had told her of the nebulæ and of yet unrevealed stars, of the Milky Way flung gloriously across the sky—a source of endless tales and traditions of ancient India. He had spoken of the countless worlds with their unknown beings, revolving silently in their orbits under the Eternal Law, which is God.

A new world was revealed to Sudha in these discourses; she read a new story in the stars; and she was drawn closer to that friend who seemed so learned, great, and tender.

"But to-night you are not speaking of the stars, Sarat, and I love to hear you speak of them."

Sarat awoke from a dream. "I—I was not thinking of the stars to-night," he faltered, as he still bent his ardent gaze into Sudha's soft eyes glistening in the light of the stars.

"What then are you thinking of, Sarat?" gently asked Sudha, in her native innocence.

"I was thinking of the earth — of a home on earth."

"And what dearer home could you have, Sarat, than your village home in the Lake of Palms—the dear home of your mother and sister Kalee?"

"That place is dear to me, Sudha, but not yet a home. A man wants other happiness on earth besides the affections of his childhood."

A pause ensued.

"I understand what you mean, Sarat," said the still unsuspecting Sudha. "But yours will be a bright destiny and a happy home yet. For you will marry before long, my brother, and we will often, often, come to see your wife, who will be the happiest woman on earth."

He turned his face away, not trusting himself to answer, but he set his hand on hers. "Why are your hands cold, Sarat, and why don't you speak?" questioned the girl. "Have I offended you, Sarat? Is there then any care or thought which you conceal from me?"

Hour, place, and the spirit of night seemed in conspiracy against the man. Long-pent-up feelings surged in his heart, and a yet unspoken word struggled for utterance. Upon the very utterance he suddenly stopped and listened. A footstep sounded upon the stairs!

Hem had returned home late, and now came with Bindu to the terrace. Bindu laughed, and said to her husband: "Why, these young people have forgotten their supper in keeping their watch on the stars!"

Sarat silently retreated like a guilty creature to the other end of the terrace and looked up to the stars. His heart beat violently, and his strong limbs trembled, but he thanked God that the word which had risen to his lips was unspoken. He had stood upon the very brink of a precipice, and Providence had saved him—near to betraying a sacred trust, and Heaven had shielded him. A silent prayer rose from his

relieved heart. Mastering himself, he turned slowly and spoke to Bindu with every appearance of calm.

"Yes, sister Bindu, I have wasted much time in watching the stars and in other follies, and I must mend my ways. My examination is near, and I must work hard if I wish to pass. You are comfortable in this house now, but if you need anything, sister Bindu, will you let me know? I shall not be able to visit you every evening—perhaps scarcely once in a week."

"Right there, Sarat!" replied Hem; "and I have often feared we are taking too much of your time. Trust me, we will send a message to you every day, and we will seek your help in every matter in which you can be of service. Rest assured of our brotherly affection, Sarat, and devote your whole time to your studies. You have a great future: be true to yourself."

They parted at once, but the young enthusiast stole one more glance at Sudha, as without another word he plunged into the darkness of the empty streets.

"Sarat is perhaps offended with us, sister," said Sudha, a little troubled.

And Bindu answered with equal innocence: "No; he is only anxious about his examination."

An hour after, Hem had finished his supper; and as the moon had now risen, he went out for a little stroll in the beautiful night, as was his custom. Bindu and Sudha had gone to bed; and filled with his own thoughts, Hem continued his walk for an hour or more.

A bright moon lit the noiseless streets of the Calcutta suburbs, and Hem walked till he had left Bhowanipur far behind. Turning into Baliganj his thoughts were interrupted by sounds as of a heavy carriage coming up from behind. He turned round and saw the flaring lamps of a spacious landau drawn by a pair of spirited greys. Hem stood aside; the landau swept by and soon entered the gates of a splendidly-lighted garden house. A moment after and another landau came up; the pair was dark and

glossy, and the carriage passed by Hem and entered the same gate. The silvery laughter of fair women struck Hem's ears as the last carriage disappeared under the portico.

Becoming curious, he approached, and found a stalwart gatekeeper walking up and down before the gateway. Inside were spacious gardens beautifully laid out with walks, and decorated with shrubs and marble figures and ornamental waters. The lofty building blazed with light from every window.

Softly and timidly he enquired of the gatekeeper: "Whose garden house may this be, Durwan-jee?"

The gatekeeper stroked his beard and moustache before vouchsafing a reply: "And you don't know, friend, whose garden house this is? Why, all the great men in the town know this residence and share its hospitality. You must be a new arrival, I am thinking."

"Yes, Durwan-jee; I have come to town recently, and have never been in this direction."

"That must be so, for all the residents in the locality know this house. And all the titled Calcutta gentry, Zemindars, lawyers, and merchants know their way inside these gates, my friend!"

"I quite believe that. But being but a poor man myself, I don't know much about the garden or its owner."

"Not likely that its owner should ask one like you, friend," said the pompous gatekeeper, with a smile. "And there is a great dance here to-night, and many friends of my master are assembling. The celebrated actress B——, of S.—— Theatre, will grace the dance to-night by her presence; there are few in Calcutta who do not covet a smile from such as she!"

"But who is your master? Who is the owner of this garden house?"

"And you really don't know it?" said the gatekeeper, with a pitying smile; "why, it is Squire Dhananjay of Dhanpur!"

A bolt from the blue seemed to have crushed Hem to the ground. He staggered to a roadside seat, and

held his head on both his arms. Moments passed like ages, and slow tears of agony fell on the ground. A sob at last burst from him as he said: "Sweet, innocent Uma! If wealth and palaces, a grey pair and a dark pair, could make one happy, your young life would not have been so sad and overcast!"

For half an hour Hem remained overwhelmed with speechless sorrow. At last a sudden resolve stirred him. He had known Dhananjay from boyhood. Dhananjay often used to come to the Lake of Palms after his marriage and was always civil to Hem. He would try his influence yet to wean him from his evil ways. Hem would see Dhananjay this very night in the midst of the festive gathering!

"What is it you want?" asked the pompous gatekeeper when Hem came up to him again. "You have been loitering here all this evening for no purpose that I can see."

"I desire, friend, to see your master. Is it possible to admit me?"

"But you have not been invited to this feast, as I understand. Men like you are not likely to be asked on such occasions; and my master, I much fear, will have little desire for your company to-night, my friend!"

"Tell him that my name is Hem, and I come from the Lake of Palms. Your master will surely grant me an interview."

"Many a villager comes from the Palm-lakes and Tal-jungles to see my master. The Squire has no time for such as they in this great city."

"Durwan-jee, your master was married in the Lake of Palms, and will not refuse to see one who has known him from boyhood."

The gatekeeper was a little taken aback. His first impulse was to show this persistent intruder the door at once. But he hesitated. "If he belongs to my lady's father's house," he thought, "my master may take it amiss that I treated him unceremoniously." Offering Hem a seat he went in to report.

Hem had waited half an hour before the gate-keeper at last returned, and with great respect asked the visitor to walk in. He led the way up a spacious flight of stairs, and entered the great reception-hall.

Dhananjay, the present head of the Dhaneswar house of Dhanpur, was seated in the room, surrounded by his convivial friends. An Indian seldom forgets his manners, however high his station, and however debased his character, and Dhananjay rose and accosted the husband of his wife's cousin with courtesy, and seated him on a velvet-covered sofa. Hem was much gratified.

For a time he was struck speechless by the splendour of the room. He had often looked from the street on the palatial European houses of Chowringhee. He had seen the lion gates of the Viceroy's palace, but had never ventured inside. He had occasionally peeped into the gaily-appointed European shops which line Dalhousie Square and Old Court House Street. But it had never been his fortune to enter a hall so royally furnished as this of the young Zemindar of Dhanpur!

A few of the rich man's friends—men known for their wit and talents—had already come. To the right of Dhananjay sat Sumati, a handsome youth with a smile on his face, and wearing the finest black-bordered Dhoti and a black-bordered scarf. Of no known profession he was generally seen at the right hand of the rich and titled men of Calcutta. He gathered honey like the bee from many a rich man's home to fill his own hive, and his carriage and pair were well known in the town. Whispers went round that he was a past master in the trade of advancing money to the select on bonds and notes of hand, and that his advice and assistance were not unwelcome to minors expecting large estates. But these dark rumours circulated in whispers; there was no question as to Sumati's wit, his graces and his accomplishments.

His neighbour was Jadu Nath, unequalled for the

versatility and copiousness of his conversation. A lawyer by profession, he had assumed European ways and habits, and was the final referee in all questions relating to a dinner or an evening entertainment. His judgment upon champagne or hock was held final, and his word was law upon all issues of cards and invitations. He had a good turn too for oratory, and his great speech on Indian nationality and the excellence of national customs had drawn forth cheers from thousands assembled in the Town Hall of Calcutta. It was his fate to be at once the cynosure of aspiring young men, the desired friend and companion of wealthy fathers, the quarry for which every matchmaker in Calcutta angled in vain.

Behind him in native modesty sat the orthodox Hari Sankar in his orthodox dress—a white coat with short sleeves, and a thick gold chain dangling from the pocket. Hari Sankar was a man of the old days, and still affected old-fashioned conservatism. His knowledge of English was not very deep, but his cleverness was beyond question, and many a youth of parts looked with despair at the astute Hari's success in the race of life. He went to his office with white muslin wound round and round his head, and he spoke English with the accent of an old class Hindu. He was therefore the favourite of his European superiors in office, who regarded him as a type of the "genuine unspoiled Hindu of the old school"; they considered him as the stay and support of the orthodox faith; they pointed him out as a model and an example to the younger men with their curt and conceited manners. Hari Sankar was wise, and he clung to the golden appearance of orthodoxy, and was rewarded by rapid success since his English masters marked their appreciation by promoting him over the heads of far abler and better educated officials. That evening the stay and support of orthodox Hinduism smiled as he came home to tell the tale with great gusto among his select friends, while the glass went round in the dark room

amid the congratulations of his convivial and admiring companions.

By Hari Sankar sat the apostle of Western culture, Mr Karmakar. He had been to Europe, and had brought back the last results of European civilisation in his faultless coat and necktie, his eyeglass of the latest fashion, and a weakness for the newest drinks. His English pronunciation was perfect, his English ways were wonderful; he was more English than the English. His manners and gesticulation were the admiration of less cultured friends, and his refinement shed the light of Western culture on the gloomy darkness of a backward land. Admiring youths and boys watched and imitated his short and affected speech, and thought they were rapidly advancing in the scale of civilisation.

On the other side of Hari Sankar sat Digambar and Biswambhar, chief men of the neighbourhood and agents of rich trading-houses. A row of plump and well-nourished men in white muslin coats and scarfs formed the rear of this select assembly. As bees gather above a bed of flowers rich in scent and honey, men of wealth and style gathered round the lavish board of the rich young spendthrift of Dhanpur. It was a scene which the visitor might have witnessed in other parts of the world if he had travelled further from his village home.

What could poor Hem say to Dhananjay in the way of admonition or advice in such an assembly? He began the conversation with a few remarks on the splendid garden house; all the friends praised and admired the new purchase; and Dhananjay himself courteously asked him to stay and witness the dance about to begin. Hem endeavoured to say something about the Lake of Palms and Uma's father; the Squire did not relish the allusion to his poor connections, and his cultured friends seemed not to have heard Hem's remarks. Time flew, and signs of impatience were visible. The merry laughter of girls dressing for the occasion was heard from the next

room. One of the company handled a stringed instrument, another cast longing glances on the decanters, a third looked at the clock. Hem understood the hint, and took his leave of Dhananjay, a sadder if a wiser man.

He came home when it was long past midnight, and went to bed without speaking to his wife. His agony was too deep for utterance.

III

THE DARKENED HOME

MORNING brought a recognition of the uselessness of his last night's action. "Women alone can help women in distress and difficulty," he reflected. "I will disclose to my wife all that I have learnt, and she will do what is best."

She, good woman, had no sooner seen him than she recognised the shadow of trouble on his face, and asked if there was ill news. He repeated all that he had seen and learnt, winding up with a grave face: "Dhananjay is young, foolish, and misguided, and is surrounded by the choicest cheats of Calcutta; and I apprehend his property will scarcely last long. His wife, I much fear, is dying of a broken heart and of her lonely and cheerless life."

Bindu wept bitter tears as her husband concluded his mournful story, but then she dried her eyes with the skirt of her Saree, and said: "I knew this was coming. And poor Unni knew it too."

"How could she know it before she came to Calcutta?"

"That I cannot tell. It is possible she got some news of her husband's ways of life before she came here, but she is proud and reserved, as you know,

and does not often disclose her troubles. Only when she was leaving the Lake of Palms it must have been that she had some dim notion of the future, for she wept at parting as only the broken-hearted can weep."

"But what can we do? From all I hear and see, Dhananjay will run through his fortune and his health in two years, and then Uma will just have to beg, for all her youth and beauty."

"You speak of two years hence, my husband; I am more concerned about the present suffering. How can a proud woman like her bear a husband's scorn and neglect? She is used to live amidst throngs of relations at Dhanpur: how can she suffer the lonely cheerlessness of a Calcutta residence? She has no children to attend to, no relations to turn to, no friends to whom she can open her mind. Why did you not go and see her in their town house?"

"I did not venture to go there after what I had seen in the garden. You go, Bindu, and help her as you can; and then, may God be her aid and stay!"

The same day, after her midday meal, Bindu left the children with Sudha, and went in a covered palanquin to see the rich man's wife. Sudha too longed to go and see dear Uma, but her sister said: "Not to-day. If I can arrange it, I will take you the next time."

The palanquin entered through the gate and went right into the inner house. It is thus that Indian ladies visit each other in towns, at least in Northern India, where the rule of the Moslems lasted for centuries, and the custom of the absolute seclusion of women has been more thoroughly adopted by the Hindus than in Southern India. Bindu, stepping out of the palanquin, went up a flight of stairs, and entered Uma's large and spacious bedroom, where she was alone, doing her hair. Bindu shuddered as she saw her friend. Was this Uma,

who was known for her beauty in her native village and all the country round?

Her complexion now was pale and sickly, a ring of black surrounded her lustreless eyes, her shoulders were bony, her youthful and superb figure had been reduced to mere skin and bone. Four months since she was the embodiment of youth and beauty; she seemed now like a sickly woman of forty. The gold necklace hung loose on her neck, the bangles were loose on her thin and wasted arms.

Uma looked up when she heard the step of a visitor, and seeing Bindu, rose with a pale gleam of joy and coldly embraced the friend of her childhood. "So you have come at last, dear sister Bindu! How often and often have I thought of you these months! And are you well? And are your two children quite well?"

Bindu read the history of Uma's Calcutta life from her features and from her slowly-uttered, pensive words. She suppressed her anguish, and answered quietly: "Yes, sister, we are well. And how are you, Uma? And why do you look so thin?"

"That is nothing, sister. I was a little upset on first coming to Calcutta, but am better now. I have a troublesome cough yet; perhaps the climate of the city does not suit me. The fresh air of Dhanpur was much sweeter."

"Don't you wish to return to Dhanpur or to our village, Uma? We are going back at the autumn Puja; will you not come?"

"How can I say, sister Bindu? Will my husband permit me to go?"

"Then who is to look after you here, my dear Uma? We live at a long distance, nor can I often manage to get away from home, leaving my children. You have a bad cough, and you are thin and pale. Who takes care of you, Uma?"

"My husband has called in a doctor, who sees me every day, and I take the medicine he prescribes."

"That may be, sister, but it is necessary that some

friend or relation should attend on you in your present state. Why don't you write to your mother? She would come from the village and stay with you here a few weeks. And when you are a little stronger, she would take you with her to the Lake of Palms, and you could stay there for a change."

"But why trouble my mother? The doctor is treating me for my illness, and the servants are attentive; I am in need of nothing that I can think of. Why send for her and make her anxious?"

"Servants you have, my Uma, and physicians also. But a mother's kind nursing goes a far way, and, dear sister, you need it. Does your husband not look after you?"

Uma answered in a quiet, repressed voice: "Yes, he supplies all I need, sister Bindu."

The visitor perceived the struggle in Uma's heart —the effort to conceal her inward anguish from the world, even from her dearest friend. How was she to break down this reserve, to get at her secret, to relieve and comfort her? Her sisterly love was persevering, and she went on:

"Listen to me, Uma. I do think it would be better if aunt came and lived with you for some time. We are all of us subject to sorrow and sickness, and at times the love of our own relations heals and comforts us. You are looking quite ill, my Uma. I do not like that frequent cough; you must take care of yourself. Write to aunt to-day, or let me write to her when I go home. Dear sister, I saw you quite different a few months ago. Oh! how you are changed, my sweet Uma!" And Bindu lovingly passed her hand over her cousin's forehead and drew her closer to her bosom.

Women know the best and shortest way to conquer reserve, and poor Uma felt this affectionate appeal. It was long since she had heard such tender words from any one; they filled her heart, and her eyes were moist. "You have loved me but too well from my earliest days, dear sister Bindu." This was all

she could say, and she dried her eyes with the skirt of her Saree.

"And have you not loved me too, Uma dear? And do you not love me still?"

"I do, sister Bindu, and I will do so as long as I live."

"Then why, my Uma, this vain attempt to conceal your thoughts from one who loves you, and whom you love? Do I not see the anguish of your heart? Do I not know that your hopes on earth are gone for ever, and that your very life is chilled with despair? Do you remember those earlier years when you were rich in your husband's love, when you whispered to me of his affection, and how it overflowed your heart? Do I not perceive, my suffering Uma, that that joy is now ended, and will you still endeavour to conceal your agony from me? Sister of my heart, if you and I become thus estranged, who will remain near and dear to us?"

Uma could bear no more; reserve broke before this tender appeal, and she hid her face on Bindu's bosom, weeping the tears of the broken-hearted.

Then she lifted her face, and said: "Sister Bindu, I have never concealed anything from you before, nor shall I do so now. But spare me to-day; I will tell you all another time."

"You shall tell me all this day, my Uma. Trouble and sorrow eat into our heart if we conceal them; it is a relief to tell the bitter tale to a true friend."

"I will conceal nothing, sister Bindu. There is nothing to conceal from you."

"I ask you, Uma, if your husband still tends you and looks after you as he should do in your present weak state of health?"

"He supplies me with all I want; he has engaged a doctor for my proper treatment."

"Do you take me for a man, my Uma, that you seek to put me off with such words as these? Rice and clothing and medical treatment—is this all that we women expect from our husbands? I did not ask

you of this, Uma; I asked you if your husband is still the same to you as he was the years after your marriage? Need a woman speak more plainly to a woman? The love of a husband, which is the greatest wealth of the wealthy, the greatest solace of the poor, the life and joy of all women—is that yours still?"

No words escaped the lips of the silent Uma. She silently shook her head, and concealed it in Bindu's bosom.

Her cousin looked grave, and spoke in slow and solemn words: "But it will not do, my Uma, to lose that. Did you do all that a woman can do to keep him as your own?"

"God in Heaven knows, sister Bindu, I have not ceased to love him yet; I hunger and thirst after a sight of him! But he—he perhaps is tired of me!" There was an unutterable bitterness in the last words.

"Protest not your love, Uma; I know it but too well. I know your young heart, and I know it cannot change while life lasts. But love alone is not all that is wanted in a woman, my Uma, nor all that a man has a right to expect. Let me speak to you as a woman to a woman, or a sister to a sister. A woman has other duties to perform, other arts to learn, to please her husband and keep his allegiance."

"Speak, sister Bindu, I listen."

"I can speak nothing but what you know, my dear Uma; all women know it by instinct. We have to learn to keep the home cheerful and sunny and bright for him who is our companion and friend for life. We have to learn patience under irritation, forgiveness under provocation, a loving meekness to smooth down the daily unpleasantnesses of life. If we learn these little virtues we make a home bright, else our days become embittered. Dear Uma, I have perhaps seen a little more of the world in my poverty than you have from your high station. I have seen men of unblemished character and women of unsullied

purity—both loving and true to each other—yet making their married life a failure, a scene of bitterness and suffering. I have seen their homes become void and cheerless, a funeral-ground strewn with the ashes of their departed joys and hopes! A little mutual forbearance brightens and sweetens life, the want of it makes it dark and dreary. And too late—when the dearest hopes of life have been untimely dead and buried—the man and the woman perceive the error, and cast regretful glances on days and years which might have been happy with a little tact and patience. But the occasion has passed by, and life is not a game which we can play again after we have once played and lost!"

"You speak the bitter truth, sister Bindu; many a home on this earth is a funeral-ground darkened by the shadows of departed hopes and loves! In our childhood we hear of the loves of Rama and Sita, of Satyavan and Savitri; and we fondly dream that married life is one continuous scene of mutual devotion in joy and in sorrow. As we grow older, as we see deeper into the realities of life—how our dreams vanish and our eyes are opened! We shudder to see an unending strife where we hoped to find peace and joy; we sicken at the sight of men and women eternally struggling for mastery, for vanities, for pleasures. We meet the cold-hearted feasting on the devotion of the loving; we find the selfish draining the life-blood of the unselfish. And this eternal strife grows thicker and darker as years pass on, until it closes at last when the funeral fire is lighted on the sad remains of one of the victims! Then there is wailing and lamentation, and high-sounding praises are sung over the departed, who would have been grateful for a little human charity and affection when living! Sad picture of life this, sister Bindu, but our ancient bards speak not of such, nor our modern novelists. Perhaps the real picture is too unlovely to be painted."

"You speak strangely, my loved Uma, and much

misapprehend what I said. There is unpleasantness in many households, and in some houses it almost quenches the peace and joys of life. But surely these are the exceptions, not the rule. Men and women are not perfect, my dear, but nevertheless they were meant to be helpmates through life; and in spite of many imperfections they strive by mutual forbearance to fulfil their destiny. You have suffered greatly, my dearest Uma, and have gained a gloomy view of life. I shudder to hear you talk thus; I am not sure that I quite comprehend you."

"May the time never come, sister Bindu, when you will comprehend me! How can you, the devoted wife of a generous-hearted man, comprehend the darker realities of life? Your cottage home in the Lake of Palms is a nest of sweet affections—may it ever remain so! A different lot is mine, dear friend. I was not born a dutcous and devoted slave, and my lord is not—a saint. Probe not farther into our life, dear sister Bindu; we have played our game on this earth and—lost!"

"But you have *not* lost, sister Uma!" rejoined Bindu, with a warm gush of affection. "I will not have it that a young woman of twenty, at the very threshold of a rich, prosperous, and happy life, should falter and despair because her husband has erred. There is no evil, Uma, which cannot be remedied, no erring man who cannot be reclaimed, no home which a woman cannot make happy by her unfailing devotion, her unyielding love."

"So our masters, the men, tell us, in order that they may sometimes smile approvingly on our endearments as they smile on their faithful dogs, and sometimes take a pleasure in kicking us while we are kissing their lordly feet!"

The iron had entered deep into the young soul of Uma, and every word she spoke had a ring of bitterness. Poor Bindu was almost sorry that she had forced her cousin to speak of her wrongs; for Uma, proud and reserved as she was by nature, seldom cared

to complain, even to her dearest friends. Bindu was speechless for a moment; but her faith was strong and her love was abiding, and she would not leave the dear companion of her childhood, and the dearest friend of her life, in this wilderness of despair. She came closer to Uma, held her in her bosom, passed her hands through Uma's hair, and spoke softly. Uma felt this gentle appeal; she rested her head on her cousin's bosom, like a tired, cross child who has had its cry and sinks to rest.

"Speak not thus, my ever-loved sister," said Bindu, "for it pains me to hear you talk thus. Sorrows and sufferings come to all of us, and it should be our endeavour to face them, and triumph over them, under all conditions of life. In the olden days we lived in community; each young man brought his earnings to the father of the family; each young wife did the household work assigned by her mother-in-law, and the family was one indissoluble unit under the regulation of the old parents. Now we are all seeking to have separate homes; husband and wife separate from their parents as soon as they can after marriage; married brothers separate from each other. This may be all for good; but in setting up separate houses, men have new responsibilities to undertake, and women have new lessons to learn, and this we do not often study. Hence we often find disorder where there should be affection, dissensions where there should be peace. Believe me, we owe the bitterness of life more to our own indiscretions than to real misfortunes."

"I often think, sister Bindu," answered Uma, now calmly and softly, "that our old system of life was safer and better. Young men were kept in order, young wives knew their work."

"We are but women, dear Uma, and cannot judge of these things. My husband says that all over the world the old life has broken or breaks up, and that the individual man and woman feel their responsibilities more under the modern system, and are

stronger and better fitted for the battle of life. And there are those in our country who sever themselves altogether from all family ties, and devote themselves singly to their great work in life, or to the worship and contemplation of God."

"Happy are they, sister Bindu, who devote their lives to the service of the Eternal. Our Holy Scriptures speak of them as living in serene joy, wandering over the earth free from all ties, doing good to men and to women, laying down their lives peacefully when their mission is done. I have sometimes seen such holy men and women who visited my husband's home at Dhanpur in their yellow robes —have honoured them and fed them, and have listened through the still hours of the night to their accounts of the many shrines and temples they have visited. Surely our wise forefathers meant that state of life for those who are heavy-laden and weary. I would give much to find such rest!"

"Their's is a noble life, my loved Uma, but it is not given to all of us to pursue it. We too have a humble mission in our everyday work in this world; and we worship the Eternal Being not the less truly if we perform these duties in our homes, faithfully and well. Believe me, the great Bhagaban records our little acts, as He records the great doings of His saints and apostles. And when a life of toil and endeavour is ended, we can look back with pride on years spent in faithful performance in a lowly sphere, and therefore not all in vain before the eyes of Him who sees all."

"Speak on, sister Bindu," said Uma, raising her eyes, moist with grateful tears; "your words are a balm to my troubled soul. As a child I used to listen to your words with a child's joy, as a woman I still feel the need of your support and consolation. I am but a foolish, irate child, sister Bindu; make me worthy of my work, and make me worthy of your love, oh, dear, true-hearted woman!"

"Nay, Uma, you know not yourself, if you speak

so. Few in your station in life, with your riches and rank, bear the love which you bear for the humbler and poorer companions of your childhood. And the heart that is so instinct with truth and love will yet triumph over all trials in life. Strive against present evils, persevere with a woman's forbearance and faith, and you will live yet to be a happy wife and a happy mother."

A faint, bitter smile appeared once more on the thin lips of Uma, but she made no reply. A sound of a carriage was heard at the outer door, and the rush of gatekeepers and servants. Uma knew by cruel experience what it meant. She then looked up to her cousin and spoke in a soft voice, but tremulous with the feelings which surged within her heart. "Look, sister Bindu, through yonder Venetian window, and you will know something of our happy home"

Bindu's heart almost failed her at what she witnessed. Dhananjay had returned from his garden. His dress was all in disorder, and his servants took an insensible form from the carriage and carried him upstairs to sleep off the drink in bed.

With streaming eyes, Bindu came back to Uma, held her in her breast, and said: "God knows, my Uma, you have suffered all the anguish, all the sorrow, all the agony that woman's heart can bear. You have changed within a few short months, and you are pale and thin. Do not fret, my sister, do not be angry, do not give vent to your passions. Bear your troubles silently, seek still to please and to persuade, endeavour to lead him to better and happier ways. I have known men, victims of the worst vices, leave their wretched ways at last, and seek the purer joy which domestic love and virtue alone can bestow. I will pray to the Great Dispenser of mercies that He may wipe away the sorrows and afflictions which have clouded your life and darkened your home. He alone can do it."

"Or Death!" whispered Uma to herself, with a bitter smile, as Bindu took leave with many tears, and left her in her living grave.

IV

THE AUTUMN FESTIVAL

THE great autumn Puja is at hand, and there is rejoicing in all the land. Men and women with troops of happy children prepare a stock of new dresses and shoes; schools and colleges close; theatrical Tatras are ordered for houses where there is Puja, and images of the martial goddess Durga riding the Lion grow hourly under the hands of expert potters and decorators.

Matron and housewife are busy making sumptuous preparations. Mothers of married daughters prepare large presents of sweets and cloths for their sons-in-law. Young wives whose husbands are employed in distant places count the days, expecting them home on this great annual festival. "Will my husband obtain leave to come?" is the anxious thought of many a loving young heart. "Will his European chief permit him to come? Do they not themselves sometimes feel sad in thinking of their distant wives beyond the seas?"

Among the rich and gay this is the time for pleasure. Green boats are hired for taking out sumptuous but questionable parties on river tours; arrangements are made for dance and music and theatricals. Into any other possible equipments there is no need to enquire. "Why," says the Indian proverb, "should a ginger vendor ask for shipping intelligence?"

The joy is perhaps more universal in villages than in towns. Kind earth has yielded her autumn rice, and the tillers have reaped the harvest, paid their rents, repaid their loans to money-lenders, and stocked their own houses with grain. Young wives of rejoicing cultivators secretly remove a little of

this abundant produce to the neighbouring shop or market, and exchange it for shell bangles, glass beads, or bordered Sarees. Men and women celebrate simple harvest festivals in their own frugal way; there is not on the whole earth a more frugal and contented race of peasantry.

The rains have ceased. Rivers and streams which overflowed their banks and covered hundreds of square miles narrow down into their beds, and the fresh earth looks greener as after a sacred ablution. The autumn moon with its bright radiance — a radiance unknown in northern latitudes — spreads its mantle of silver over field and hamlet, village and town; the air has lost its summer heat and is cooler and more enjoyable; and everything betokens the season of festivity and joy. Threshing and husking proceed from day to day in every village home; and poor cotters re-thatch their huts with the rice-straw. The autumn Puja is but a glorified harvest festival, and the Virgin coming after the Lion in the Solar Zodiac suggested the image of the Goddess riding on a Lion which is worshipped on the occasion.

But even this glad season did not bring gladness to Una. In the pride of her reserve, the neglect of her husband and the disappointment of her early hopes sank deep into her heart. Dhananjay could never meet the glance of his high-souled wife without a feeling of humiliation and shame; and be it said in justice to that misguided prodigal that he tried for a while to get rid of his repulsive vices, and to maintain at least an outward show of decorum. But he was feeble and pliable; the habits of years had grown upon him; and the tempters, who fed and feasted on his riches and on his very life-blood, did not fail to entice him anew. Deeply and more deep he plunged for the momentary stay, but at least he abstained from entrance to the inner house at all, thereby hoping, perhaps with some faint relic of a better feeling, to avoid paining his wife.

Ominously enough, Una blamed no one and com-

plained of her fortune to none. Even when Bindu sobbed over her sorrows, or hung weeping on her breast, Uma smiled a peculiar, faint smile and tried to console her cousin. She did her daily house-keeping without any fail, and chatted quietly and sometimes even pleasantly with Bindu. More than this, she prepared various dishes with her own hand day after day, and sent them to the outer apartments for that lord whose love was for ever gone.

Sarat avoided coming to Hem's house, though Bindu frequently sent messages for him. Every afternoon Bindu's servant took a few simple things to him—some sweet cooling drink, a little Moog soaked in water, sugar-cane or papeya peeled and cut in pieces, pineapple, or the moistened water-nut. It was not long before he found out from the servant that these simple but dainty things were specially prepared for him by Sudha. He told the servant not to bring them again, "For why should the ladies take so much trouble for one like me?" But as the sweetened drink was taken with apparent relish, and all the articles disappeared from the plate soon after they came, the servant guessed the young man's thoughts, and the afternoon dishes continued to come day by day.

A few weeks passed thus, and at last the Puja arrived. There were great festivities in the house of Debi Prosonno, a prosperous man in Bhowanipur; a large image of the Goddess Durga was worshipped; there was music day and night, and throngs of people came to witness the theatrical Jatras. Debi Prosonno's wife kept up three nights from eve to dewy dawn to witness the Jatras, seating herself in the verandah behind a screen. A bevy of stately ladies from surrounding houses sat by her and enjoyed the performance and singing. The pieces were adopted from the stories of Krishna and Radha, and the songs were select and most captivating. The ladies brought their children with them, and sat up all night, taking the prepared betel leaf, and listening with unflagging

interest. And when love-sick Radha on the stage sang to the fair messenger Bideshini of her sorrows in the absence of the loved but faithless Krishna, the fair audience wept aloud.

Bindu could not decline the invitation of Debi Prosonno's wife; she left her two children with Sudha one night and went and witnessed the Jatra of Krishna and Radha. It was morning when she came back and spoke to her husband.

"The piece was really good, especially where Krishna assuages the wrath of his offended mistress Radha. Why don't you go over one night and see it?"

"No," said Hem; "I have had enough to do to appease my own Radha in the earlier days of our married life—shouldn't like to have the experience again!"

"Don't tell stories," said Bindu, stopping her husband's mouth with her hand. "Don't libel me, you naughty man; it is a sin!"

The Puja was concluded on the tenth day of the waxing moon, and it was a day of great festivities. In houses and in public roads, in crowded squares and on the riverside, the sound of music was heard, and there was a continuous stream of men and women in their gayest dress ebbing and flowing through the streets. The poorest of the poor wore a new garment, the rich displayed their wealth by munificence and gifts. The images were paraded through the streets with loud and continuous music, and as darkness set in, torches and red and green lights accompanied the processions, until every image had been cast into the river. And then followed a ceremony peculiar to India, one of the pleasantest customs known in the East. Friends and relations, parents and children, brothers and sisters, met on this festive night—some after a separation of a twelvemonth—and accosted each other with love and affection. Young wives came out veiled from their rooms and bowed to their

husbands and all the elders of the family. Groups of children went from house to house to meet and do obeisance to all relations wherever they lived, and elderly ladies received them and wished them long life with tears in their eyes. "May you live as many years as I have hairs on my head; may the goddess of wealth and the goddess of learning remain chained to your house; may you wield a pen of gold and be famous in the world; and may you live to see your children and your children's children!" Such were the effusive blessings bestowed by grey-haired women on the gaily-dressed youths who came and bowed to their feet; and many a secret feeling of jealousy, envy, and anger was wiped out in the impulse of the moment. Instances are known of reconciliations on such nights among friends or relations who had remained parted for years—ay, of sons returned penitent and obedient to the parents from whom they had gone forth in anger. And if such recollections be sometimes short-lived, and the universal flow of good feeling be temporary, even so they have their use. A day of universal good-will reconciles many differences, heals many sores, and discloses to men and women glimpses of a brighter and a higher possibility.

It was nearly eleven o'clock at night before Bindu finished her evening meal. The children were asleep, and Sudha had taken her food and gone to bed. Hem too had retired, and the mistress of the house, as is the custom in Hindu homes, took her supper alone. The woman-servant had gone home after the day's work, and now Bindu closed the door of the kitchen, put up the chain, and was preparing to go upstairs when she heard a gentle knock.

"Who could have come at this hour of the night?" thought Bindu, and hesitated. The knock was repeated.

"Who is that? Who knocks at the door?"

No answer came.

Once she thought of waking Hem, as it might be

some visitor for him. But he had gone to bed tired, and she did not wish to disturb him until she knew who the visitor was. Timidly she stepped to the door and unbolted it. A man entered.

Bindu did not know him in the dark. The next moment she recognised Sarat—but how changed!

His hair was long and in disorder, and fell on his forehead; his eyes shone with unusual lustre; his face was pale; and his whole frame was thin and wasted. He had a scarf about his shoulders, not over clean.

"Sister Bindu, pardon me for not having come to see you so very long. It is the tenth night of the autumn moon, and I come, sister, to make my salutations."

"Live long, Sarat, be happily married, and may I see you in the midst of a family before I die! What more blessings can a sister wish a brother?"

Sarat made no reply. He bent himself down to Bindu's feet, and saluted her. She blessed him again, raising him.

"We do not complain, Sarat, that you have not visited us so long, for we heard from you every day, and we knew if we were in any difficulty you would not be slow to come to our help. But why ruin your health thus by continuous study? Are books of greater moment than health? Your eyes are sunk and your face is pale; you must have been keeping late nights with your work. You have always been a sensible young man, Sarat; is it necessary that I should tell you all this? Listen to a sister's advice: sleep at night, take your food and exercise regularly; a youth of your intelligence and acquirements need not be afraid of examinations."

A faint smile lighted Sarat's drawn lips, as he said slowly: "Sister Bindu, does passing an examination make life happy? Hem has not passed many examinations, but how many people are there on this earth who know the peace and happiness which are his?"

"If you know this, then why ruin your health by this anxiety about your examination?"

"I have had no anxiety about my examination, sister."

"Then what makes you anxious and distressed? What is it that has changed you thus?"

Sarat made no reply. He gently seated Bindu on the raised plinth, and, sinking by her side, took her two hands in his and bent his head.

"What is this, Sarat? Are you shedding tears? Have you any secret sorrow in your heart that you would conceal from me? We have grown up like brother and sister, and there was never a secret in my mind which I concealed from you even from our childhood, nor was there a thought in your heart which you kept from me. And will you forget your friendship, your long intimacy, your affection of years, and learn to regard your sister Bindu as a stranger?"

"There is none in this world, sister, whom I shall call my own when I learn to regard you as a stranger. I have come, not to conceal, but to speak my thoughts to you. But I am a miserable man—a bad man."

Sarat was trembling a little, and there was a strange lustre in his eyes. Bindu became anxious, and spoke gently: "Speak your thoughts to your sister, Sarat, and fear not."

"Can I speak them? But my heart is full of blackness! I have been a traitor in the house of friendship, and have returned a sister's love with ingratitude. How can I disclose even to you my heart, which is black as night?"

Sarat held Bindu's hands so tightly that his fingers made crimson marks on them. He was still trembling, and his eyes were like live coals.

Bindu had never seen him in such a state as this. Was it possible that this young man, whom she had always loved with a sister's love, had harboured impure thoughts? That was beyond her conception. But as she looked on the wild and excited youth, the helpless woman owned a feeling of alarm. She tried to conquer the suspicion, but she spoke with reserve:

"I have treated you, Sarat, as my younger brother

since our childhood, and you have treated me as your elder sister. Speak without fear and without hesitation what a brother can say to a sister."

"Oh! the thoughts that I harboured! How can I speak them to a sister?"

"Then speak not!" said Bindu, with rising distrust and anger; "and do not hold the hands of a woman thus. Learn the respect due to a sister!"

Sarat let go her arms, and again bent his head. Bindu was perplexed. This young man, so generous and true, so gentle and penitent,—was it possible that his heart was impure? She cast out all unworthy doubts from her mind, and spoke boldly:

"There can be nothing in your mind, Sarat, which I am not fit to hear. Speak your thoughts freely and I will listen."

"God bless you with every joy on earth for this kindness. But give me one more assurance before I proceed. Give me your word, sister Bindu, if my hopes are dashed to the ground, that they shall ever be buried in you, and not revealed to a living soul. It may be my lot to live a life of prolonged bitterness and disappointment, but I care not that the world should speak lightly of one worthier and purer than I."

"You have my assurance, Sarat; I promise you secrecy."

Sarat then pressed his hands on his heart as if to suppress the tumult within, took Bindu's hands imploringly, bent his head to conceal his face, and said in an indistinct whisper: "Your sister, the widowed and pure-hearted Sudha, is an angel on earth. Grant that she be my wife!"

Bindu now understood the tempest of passion in Sarat's heart; she understood the history of the past six months. The marriage of a Hindu widow is sin —public scandal, a madness beyond thought.

But he went on with the eloquence of wayward passion: "Listen to me, sister Bindu, listen to him who has betrayed your trust, listen to him who has

sinned against your hospitality. It is six months since I saw Sudha, a widow in your house in the Lake of Palms, and I felt the pulsation of a new life in me! Before that I was a solitary student; I had no friends except my books, no occupation except my study. I had read of love in books; I thought of lovers as actors on the stage. But when I saw this young, innocent, tender-hearted girl, dowered with Heaven's own sweetness and beauty, unconscious of her sad fate as a widow, I felt an earthly feeling which I had never known before. I hoped and trusted that time would obliterate it, that my studies and occupations would wipe it out. But when I came to Calcutta, and when I saw her day after day, the poison worked in me. Sister Bindu, you have with a sister's welcome received me from day to day in your home, Hem has treated me as an elder brother treats a younger, but I entered this virtuous home with a fire in my heart, with a lie on my lips! Day after day I drank of that forbidden love, as I gazed on the form of—to me—more than human beauty. Many a long evening I sat beside Sudha till the stars shone from the sky, and a feeling stirred within me which shook my inner self! Oh! forgive, if you can, the fancies of a madman, the thoughts of one who was trusted and turned a betrayer!"

Sarat paused, and his tearless eyes shone and sparkled. He resumed in a calmer voice:

"One evening my eyes were suddenly opened. I perceived the abyss into which I had nearly fallen. I was maddened with the fear lest I had troubled Sudha too; but I trusted God had saved her from my folly and my sin, and I resolved that the sweet girl should know nothing of the torture which I had prepared for myself. From that day I left this home and have not crossed this threshold. Forgetfulness was a vain hope for me: there are some feelings which can be wiped out only with life. I have made efforts during these two months, even as a child attempts with his baby hands to turn the course of a stream. I have

tried to fix my mind on books; I have tried to divert my thoughts by going to theatres; I have mixed with my college friends in their pleasures and pastimes; I have attended parties where there were music and song; but I have not found forgetfulness for a day, not for an hour.

"I will not tire you with the history of these two months; the poor homeless sufferer in the streets has not suffered as I have.

"You have permitted me, sister Bindu, to speak my mind, and I have spoken. Do not turn away from me your love as from a betrayer, do not withhold from me your affection. I have sinned deeply,—God knows I have deceived you; but if you look on me with scorn, where shall I find sympathy in this wide world?

"I thought myself strong at one time, but I am weaker than a child. Help me, sister Bindu, and visit me not with your scorn."

What answer could gentle Bindu make? To think of a Hindu widow's marriage was madness; the Hindu world would turn against such a act as an outrage worse than crime. But how could Bindu explain that to Sarat at this moment? Disappointment would drive the young man to some violent act, or, in any case, would chill his heart and his life with that despair which prolongs from day to day the exquisite bitterness of death!

But a woman, and with all a woman's tact and art, she assumed the calmness which she did not feel, and spoke with kindly sympathy:

"Afflict yourself not, Sarat; do not accuse yourself of sin or crime. Can I scorn you, whom I have loved from childhood like a brother? God gave me no brother of my own, and shall I withdraw that love, and shall I learn to scorn you now? No, that I cannot do, nor have you deserved the scorn of any honest man or woman. But the marriage of widows is prohibited by Hindu custom, though reformers have tried in recent years to permit it. It is a grave proposal you have made, Sarat; and I must speak to my

husband, who is wiser than I, and ask him to decide. Do not afflict yourself, Sarat: whether my husband consents to your proposal or not, you will ever remain the same in our esteem, our affection, and our love, as long as we live."

"Holy flowers sanctify your lips, sister, for the kind words you have spoken! I shall never, never forget that on the dark day on which I confessed my sins, my sister extended her love to me, and did not turn away her face in wrath."

"And may this life end when I turn away my face from you in wrath, Sarat, after all the love you have borne us, and all the kindness you have showered upon us. But let that matter pass to-night, and now talk of other things. You have not had your dinner, it seems to me; will you have something? I prepared some light flour-cakes for my husband, and some of them are left. Wash yourself, Sarat, and have some cakes and sweets before you go home."

"Pardon me, sister, I have no inclination for any food. It would make me ill. I will go home now, for I need rest."

"Then come to-morrow morning and consult my husband. Plead your cause before him, and let him decide."

"I leave you, sister Bindu, to plead my cause before Hem, for I dare not meet him until this question is decided."

"Probably my husband will take a little time to consider so novel an idea. In the meantime, come to us now and then as you used to do."

"Pardon me again, sister Bindu; I will see neither Hem nor Sudha until this question is decided. But do not let the faintest whisper of this subject reach her ears. I may be doomed to disappointment and to misery, but there is no reason why she should share the suffering."

"Very well, then; I will write and tell you how my husband decides, if you really won't come and see us."

"No, don't write. I will come again to you and learn my fate in private. Tell me when I may come again, and when I can hear your decision."

"How can I say, Sarat? It is not a matter which can be decided in a day or two. It requires careful consideration, and I know my husband will take time. Will you come after two or three weeks?"

"Be it so. That will be the night of the new moon, the dark night of the Festival of Lamps!"

V

WHAT THE WOMEN-FOLK SAID

As Sarat left the house a woman-servant from Debi Prosonno's entered with sweets for Bindu from the Puja offerings.

"My mistress has sent these presents from the offerings to you," she said, "with her kindest regards to all. I have been to many other houses, mother, and so there has been some delay in reaching you."

"Leave them on the plate, my child; I shall send them back to-morrow."

The woman did as she was told, and then drawing the cloth over her head, turned her face a little and smiled a significant smile.

"What are you smiling at?" asked Bindu. "Any more fun or entertainment in your house, this Puja time?"

"None in my mistress's house, mother, that I know of. And so this must be fun," she added, speaking to herself, but intending to be heard. "When genteel folk do such things, it is fun; if poor people like us did so, the world would make remarks."

"What are you talking about? What is the fun?"

"Nay, mother; we are poor people and live on our wages, what right have we to talk about genteel people?"

"And what is it, my child? Can't you explain yourself?"

The woman drew aside her veil once more and smiled a malicious smile. "Nothing, nothing, mother. But who was that youth who has just left you? Was it some friend coming to see you at this hour?"

Bindu was a little alarmed. The outer door was open all this time. Could this woman have heard all that passed between her and Sarat? She replied with some excitement: "Have you lost your eyes, woman? Could you not recognise Sarat, or do you pretend ignorance?

"Oh no, mother! I have not lost my sight yet; I thought it was Master Sarat. But do young men of good birth conduct themselves thus? I do not know the customs of your village, mother, but I have served in Calcutta for twenty-nine years and have never seen anything like it. But what business have we with the ways of genteel people? We serve on wages and two meals a day, and so long as we have our food morning and evening, what right have we to see or hear what passes round us?"

Bindu knew that the servants of Debi Prosonno's house was insolent to a degree, but she was quite unprepared for such malice as this. Still she knew that she might make the case worse by losing her temper, and therefore answered with a smile: "Don't you know Sarat's wild ways, my child? He is a young man, not yet married, and has almost lost his head with his solitary life and hard studies. We need not mind what he says or does."

"He may be wild, mother, but why behave like this? If he is mad after marriage, let him go and marry; but why does he come and rave like this before you? I suppose, mother, he does not want to marry you."

"Fie! you burnt-faced woman! Are you not

ashamed of yourself? No, child; Sarat has seen a pretty girl and wishes to marry her. He cannot mention it to his mother who is at Benares, so came to tell me about it."

"And who is that girl, mother?"

"You will know it, child. Let the match be arranged and you will know it."

"What need of concealment, mother, as if we had neither eyes nor ears! We are not so old as all that yet! Did I not hear him crying for Sudha as if his heart would break? Ay, ay, conceal it: will people ever reveal such scandal? Marriage of a widow! if such a proposal were made in a poor man's house, he would be put out of his caste. Marriage of a widow! who ever has heard of such a thing even in the house of a Bagdi or a Bauri?"

For the first time, Bindu was alarmed. So long as this ill-mannered woman was speaking of Sarat's rude behaviour towards herself she did not mind. Her virtuous life was too well known to fear any stain from the talk of an insolent woman. But Sudha was a young widow, and the slightest breath of scandal might stain her fair fame for ever. Bindu knew in her heart that Sarat's proposal was madness, and the marriage could never take place; but the faintest rumour connecting their names would spread like wildfire, and would ruin the innocent girl and her reputation.

A moment of the acutest pain passed silently by. Never losing her presence of mind, Bindu opened her box and took out a coin. It is customary to pay to a servant who brings presents a trifling sum equal to two or three pence. To-night Bindu placed a silver rupee in the woman's hand. "You are an old servant of Debi Prosonno's house, and have served them long and faithfully. Accept this rupee from me on this Puja night, and buy a new cloth for yourself. And what you have seen of Sarat you will not repeat. Wise women do not heed twice of a madman's wayward talk; and the thing could never come to happen.

Who has heard of a widow being married? We have a name and station among our caste-people; my husband is respected by friends and neighbours; Sarat's mother is honoured for her saintly life in Benares; Sarat's sister is married to a family known for its orthodox purity. Is it possible that we should break through all duty and decorum, and permit such an alliance? The wise do not hear the words of a madman, and you will not speak of his wildness to a living soul."

The servant-woman looked at the bright silver rupee and was appeased. She replied with every sign of respect and courtesy: "You speak truly, mother; who ever minds the words of a wild young man? Master Sarat may have taken a little Siddhi to-night—and, indeed, custom enjoins it. And what do the young men of our house do? Why, they get bottles of European liquor secretly at night, and of their conduct and behaviour what shall I say? Young men do not obey their parents, and are not abashed in the presence of relations and elders. The times are bad, mother, and the young forget their duty and go astray. Why should I blame Master Sarat, and why should I tell tales about his behaviour? Trust me, mother, and have no anxiety in your mind!"

She left the house much gratified, but as restless with her secret as a hen about to lay its egg. Bindu might have known better and saved her rupee; for to trust a secret to a woman servant is the safest way to ensure its publication. The electric wire does not flash public news more quickly or more surely through different parts of the world than such gossiping servants in Calcutta spread the secrets of their employers.

Debi Prosonno's wife sat on her mattress the next morning talking to two elderly widows, and the scandal, dear to her woman's soul, was the theme of unending comment and conversation.

"It was only what I expected, sisters; I knew this was coming! For where is the distinction in these

days between the well-born and the low? Any one comes from a village and calls herself a Kayest, and forthwith mixes with the Kayest community. Are these people respectable Kayests? Have they within fourteen generations ever formed alliances with respectable Kayests? And to mix with such people! Fie upon it! Only wait till my husband comes back from his office this evening, he will hear of it from me! Why, sisters, does he not know his own station, his rank and position in life, his connections and his reputation, that he must needs go and keep company with such people as these? Ay, ay; I knew this thing would happen! When they came to live in Bhowanipur, and had not time to call on us, I knew what manner of Kayests they were. And do you know, my dears, that young widow puts on a bordered Saree and dresses like a married wife! Ay, ay; I knew all this was coming, for manners are not learnt, my sisters, but come with birth. Don't they say that Musalman and Christian widows marry again? It is just the same, sisters, just the same, for wherein are they better than Musalmans and Christians?"

"To be sure, sister, to be sure," replied Syami's mother. "Why, that young widow never fasts on the eleventh day of the moon as all true and honest widows should. And she takes fish too, my dear, like married women! For shame! This is the eleventh day of the moon, sister, and can any one say that we touch food or water for thirty-six hours, from one night to the next, on this day of the moon?"

"And do you know," said Bami's mother, "they take that young widow for drives in carriages; they actually took her to see the Museum and the Zoological Gardens! It is shame and scandal!"

Pleased with this zealous assent, Debi Prosonno's lady burst forth again: "Shame indeed—shame to the girl and to the mother who bore her! Why, that giddy girl actually talks to Hem with her head uncovered—ay, prepares dishes and sends sweet drinks

for Sarat! How can we blame Sarat, my sisters? He is but a man, and he is yet unmarried, and when two scheming sisters go after him like this, is it a wonder that the poor youth should be caught in their meshes? Never shall those sisters cross my threshold again!"

The sound of this animated conversation was heard at the distant well-side, where the wives and daughters of the house generally assembled for the gossip and scandal dear to their young bosoms.

"What is all this about, sister? What is all this storm and fury about?" asked one of them.

"Why, have you not heard it? Oh dear me, what have you heard, then?" replied another.

"Oh, do tell me, there is a good girl."

"I will, sister, I will. Have you heard of Hem, who has come from some village, and is living in Bhowanipur? Have you heard of his wife and his sister-in-law? Well, that sister-in-law of his is a widow, and that widow is going to marry Sarat!"

"Nay, don't be telling stories, my sister! Don't think I will believe that! Why, is that possible? Can a widow ever marry again?"

"And why not, sister? Have you not heard of the great Pundit Vidyasagar? Only the other day you were reading his great work, 'The Exile of Sita.' Well, the same Vidyasagar has decided that Hindu widows may marry again. And he has himself officiated at some such marriages; nay, his own son has married a widow!"

"Sure, my sister, he must be a Pandit of deep wit and wisdom who procures fresh husbands for young widows! I suppose, then, old widows too may marry?"

"Why not?—if they only find men eager for their ancient charms!"

"Well, then, there is a chance for Syami's mother and Bami's mother! Poor dear women, they groan under the hardships and privations of a widow's life, and occasionally relieve the monotony of their widow-

hood with forbidden food and fish! Sure, my dear, friend Vidyasagar might come to their rescue, and make them comfortable married women again!"

"Don't you be talking like that! Let the widows but hear a word of it, and they will not leave you with a whole skin, my dear! But about Sarat—why, we have heard he is a promising student, and a well-behaved lad. Why should he disgrace himself by such a scandalous marriage?"

"They say, my dear, when a man is smitten with love both his wit and wisdom disappear. Poor Sarat has been smitten by the merry eyes of the fresh young widow, and there is an end of him!"

"And how old is that young widow?"

"About sixteen, they say; and she is bright and pretty, and accosts Sarat with smiles, and sends sweet drinks for him, and maybe other drugs too, who knows? What can poor Sarat do? He is but a man after all, and the arch young widow is too much for him, so he has lost his heart and soul to her!"

"Then they must have known some time ago?"

"Of course, my dear. Don't you see, they have known each other since they were in their village together; what may have taken place there I do not know, and I would not, for the world, say a word against them which might be untrue. But what has taken place, since they have come to Calcutta, is but too well known. Why, Sarat took that young widow with him and put her up in his own house, along with her sister and Hem. Hem perhaps had his suspicions, my dear, and he rented another house and removed there with his wife and her sister. But, oh dear, dear, how shall I tell you all? Do you not know how Radha languished and sighed in the absence of Krishna? Even so this sweet young widow fell ill in the absence of Sarat, and up came Sarat to her and tended her, and sat up by her, and consoled her day and night! Oh! it is a long story, sister; can I tell you all? Have you not heard of these ardent lovers, Bidya and Sundar,—how they could not be kept

apart, and how Sundar found his way into Bidya's room through a subterranean passage? It is the same thing over again. Young men of the day are all up to Sundar's tricks—take care, my dear!"

The scandal ran its course from the well-side to the servants' quarters, and they were like a hive of disturbed bees, humming and whispering and restless.

"And it is really true, my sister?" said one; "and is the widow really going to be married?"

"Do you still doubt it? Why, the betrothal is over, all arrangements have been made, and Hem has ordered wedding garments for his sister-in-law, and you still ask, like a silly creature, if the news be true?"

"Then if widows of genteel families can marry again, widows among the poor people will also do the same."

"And why not? There is a chance for you, my dear! That young Kaibarta lad—I have often marked you go and speak with him at the bazaar—won't he do for you, my dear, if he will accept a vigorous young widow?"

"For shame, luckless woman, for shame! Don't you speak to me like that! Don't I know you well, my sister? Isn't there that Baniya of your caste, who keeps a shop of spices, and has lately lost his wife? And there is not a soul to do housekeeping for him, poor man, and to cook his rice for him! And have I not seen you, my dear, often go into his shop, under the pretence of buying spices, and whisper to him for half an hour at a time? Don't you think he might take a strong and capable widow like you to do his house-keeping for him?"

"The funeral fire be lighted on your face, you wicked woman!"

The news travelled to poor Uma's mother, who was still in the Lake of Palms. And Uma's mother wept many tears in silence, and wrote to her niece Bindu not to perpetrate a deed of shame, and stain the fair fame of the Mullik family. "If your father had been alive, my dear, would he have permitted his widowed

daughter to be married again? If your mother had been alive, my love, would she have consented to this deed of disgrace? Poor Sudha is but a child; you, Bindu, are a father and a mother to her! Do not add to her sufferings on this earth; do not add to her misfortunes by casting on her widowed life the stain of sin!"

The news travelled to Burdwan, where Kalee was attending to her husband now confined to his bed. "My husband," she wrote in her distress to Bindu, "is bedridden now, and I am day and night at his bed-side. Physicians have advised a change to the bracing climate of Raniganj during the approaching cold weather, and we have secured a house there, and shall be removing there within a week. My dearest wishes for you and for Sudha, wherever I may be.

"What is this news, sister Bindu, that I hear about Sudha? Will my brother Sarat bring disgrace to our pure and unstained family?

"You are wise, my Bindu, and you are virtuous. If my brother has become mad, turn him out of your house. Do not consent to a deed of shame: do not permit the marriage of a widow. If you do, the people in my father-in-law's family will not see my face again—you will not see Kalee any more."

Bindu showed these letters to her husband, and wept in silence. Rumour, trumpet-tongued, had spread and exaggerated the secret which Bindu had wished to conceal—the name of her poor innocent sister was spoken in scorn!

Meanwhile, every possible care was taken by Hem and his wife to keep Sarat's proposal secret from Sudha until the matter should be settled one way or another. It would add to the agony of a widow's cheerless life to speak to her of the love of one who might never be hers; and it would inflict on her nameless suffering to tell her of the scandal with which people connected her name.

For a time they succeeded in their endeavours. But it was impossible to conceal from her altogether, simple and unsuspecting as she was, that some difficulty had arisen, that some grave question occupied their minds. Sudha marked the thoughtful face and the silent demeanour of her sister, and did not venture to ask the cause. She saw Hem receiving numerous visits from friends, writing letters in the morning, and sitting up with Bindu late at night. She saw the milk-woman whispering for a good half-hour to the servant of the house, and fancied she heard her own name and that of Sarat frequently mentioned. The barber-woman, who called on the house weekly, smiled a significant smile as she did Sudha's toilet, and blurted out in spite o' herself that she hoped to see her yet the mistress of the house. And the laundress, in spite of the strictest injunctions of secrecy, whispered her hope that she might have her custom and Master Sarat's too!

What did these women mean? Were they only insulting a poor widow with veiled innuendoes? Sudha could not conceive such a thing! She had never given offence to any one, and no one had ever been rude to the poor and inoffensive girl. What then was the significance of these remarks? Sudha pressed to know, but the barber-woman was silent and would not say a word, and the laundress only said surely Master Sarat must marry some one sooner or later, and that the poor woman would like to have the custom of the new family.

It is hard to guess if Sudha suspected the real truth, but the most unsuspecting of women sees farther and more clearly into such matters than we generally suppose. Though the whole story never revealed itself to her, it would be hard to say that her woman's wit, struggling against a veil of darkness, did not catch a ray of light. She listened more attentively to casual words heedlessly uttered, and noted more closely slight tokens which would not ordinarily arrest attention. And her woman's soul

struggled against the dark mystery which seemed to conceal her fate and her future! She asked no questions and sought for no information, but her pale face and the light in her eyes spoke of a silent thought and an anxious doubt within her bosom.

At last the whole truth flashed upon her. One evening, as she was retiring to bed, she saw a crumpled piece of paper on the floor. She picked it up, and found it was in her aunt's handwriting. Suspecting no secret, and anxious to know what her aunt had written to her sister, she took the letter near the oil-lamp. It was a letter which was written to Bindu, and which Bindu had carelessly thrown aside. Sudha's hand trembled and her heart beat violently as she read its contents. The paper dropped from her hand, and she staggered back to her bed, dazed and bewildered.

Her first emotions were the shame and the agony of a Hindu widow. Why had Sarat, so good and generous, so wise and learned, proposed such a deed of shame? Why had he asked for her as his wife, and disgraced her in the eyes of the world? Her aunt knew of it; and Sarat's sister knew of it; and all the world knew of it: how could she show her face again to her friends and relations? A deep sense of shame, a consciousness of something unholy and impure, overwhelmed the girl. She hid her face in the pillow and wept unseen tears.

The struggle of painful thoughts tore the poor child's heart as she lay sleepless and restless through the dark, silent night. She was overwhelmed with shame, and, like the heroine of the "Ramayana," which she had often read, she prayed that the earth would part in twain and receive her into its dark bosom, and hide her for ever from living beings. Hours passed, and the gloom of the midnight softened into the faint light of the early dawn, but no relief came. How show her face when the morning dawned even to her nearest and dearest friends, even to her sister?

The grey light of the morning saw her steal noiselessly from her bed, as if afraid to look her sister in

the face, and speed down the steps to her domestic work. She scoured and cleaned the utensils, swept the courtyard, drew water from the well, and busied herself as if to forget. She trembled when the door opened and the servant entered the house; she ran into the kitchen to light the fire when the milk-woman came with the daily supply of milk.

Days passed in silent agitation. A deep feeling of shame oppressed her, and there was a burden on her young bosom. But Sudha was no true woman if a secret gleam of hope did not mingle in her bewilderment and confusion. The brave young Sarat, disregarding the opinion of the world, had cherished the love of her in his generous bosom, had thought of her while he kept away from the house, had dared to ask for her as his wife! She trembled with a secret joy as these thoughts stole upon her. She felt it was an impure and unholy joy; but she would have been less or more than a woman if it had not flooded with a glow of sunshine the darkest recesses of her young and expanding heart.

One afternoon Bindu came into the bedroom, and found Sudha sitting by the window with a book in her hand. Sudha closed the book as soon as she saw her sister.

"What is that book, sister, that you are reading?" asked Bindu, with some curiosity.

"It is a book by Bankim Chandra," said Sudha, bashfully dropping her eyes.

"And what is the name of the book?"

"It is called 'The Poison Tree.'"

Bindu looked grave, and she said a little sternly: "Let me have that book, sister; don't read it."

Sudha placed the book in her sister's hand, and softly enquired: "Is it a bad book, sister?"

"No, Sudha; it is the best novel in the Bengali language. But you are young, my sister, and need not read it yet."

"Tell me the story then, sister. I long to know how it ends."

"The story is short," said Bindu. "A young widow marries the hero of the novel, but is unhappy in her marriage, and at last dies by poison."

Sudha's face was bloodless as she silently left the room.

VI

THE FESTIVAL OF LAMPS

Of all the quaint festivals for which India is famous, and they are many, none is more quaint or more striking than the Festival of Lamps, which takes place upon the moonless night of the autumn Puja. Town, village, and hamlet, from one end of the country to the other, are bright with innumerable lamps and gay with fireworks. The dark night fades before their blaze, and the stars of the sky pale in the lustre of the earth. Rich men's mansions are illuminated with outlines in jets of gaslight or in rows of lamps, and the poorest Hindu woman spends her hard-earned copper on a single oil-lamp to be religiously placed before her cottage door.

Calcutta flamed as usual on this festive night. Showers of gold poured forth their volume of sparks from street and house-top, like a town-hall orator spending his fiery energy in sparkle, sound and smoke. Rockets shot up like young ambition soaring to the skies, to fall headlong when the short spell of energy was ended. Bombs and crackers startled men with a great noise, and, like many a young poet of the day, were heard of no more. Catherine wheels moved in brilliant circles and ended in charred sticks. In the streets, in the courtyards, and upon the house-tops, children congregated, and burned sulphur or red and green lights; some made huge illuminations with bonfires of dry jute sticks.

Sarat passed unnoting by the lamps and the illuminations, the lights and the fireworks, the images of the dread goddess Kali, whom men worship in every pious home this night. With a beating heart and noiseless step he threaded his way through the narrow lanes of Bhowanipur until he reached Hem's residence. He had expected to find Bindu according to appointment, but Hem himself waited at the door. He took Sarat by the hand and led the way into his outer room, whither the poor fellow entered with head bent and a heart struggling blindly between hope and fear.

Hem trimmed the lamp, and said: "Sarat, I have heard of your proposal from my wife."

"If I have been too bold," said Sarat, finding his utterance with some difficulty, "if I have abused your goodness and your trust, you will forgive the presumption of one whom you have loved from childhood."

"You have done nothing that is wrong, Sarat, and there is nothing to forgive. The whole world may blame you, but my respect and affection for you remain unchanged."

No words came to Sarat's lips in reply, but his eyes showed their silent gratitude. Hem saw and continued:

"My wife, too, has loved you like a brother since you were children together, and she will never cease to regard you with tender affection. We respect you for the proposal you have made, and the generosity and the courage which led you to make it."

"Your kindness, and that of sister Bindu, I shall not forget while I live," said Sarat. But his heart sank within him at the formal tone of Hem's conversation, which boded little good.

"Have you considered the matter carefully," asked Hem, "before making the proposal? Have you not been swayed by an impulse of the moment?"

"Believe me, Hem, I have considered it long and carefully before I ventured to make the proposal. And I believe I have acted for the best."

"You are better instructed, Sarat, than I am. But yet you are young in years, and you will let me suggest one or two things which may not have occurred to you. You know the proposed marriage is execrated by the orthodox community."

"I do not attach much weight, Hem, to the opinion of those who are blinded by absolute prejudice. I have borne such execration before without a pang; and I will bear it with a light heart to win the happiness of a life."

"And do you know, Sarat, you will be outcasted for this?"

"If it pleases our orthodox friends to outcaste me, they are welcome."

"Do you know that it will be held a stain on your much-esteemed family?"

"It will cast no stain on us, Hem, if the act be not sinful. If you consider the act sinful and unholy, command me to desist, and your words shall be a law unto me."

"There can be nothing sinful in a widow marrying again. Our ancient laws and customs permitted it; it is in modern ages that a strong feeling has grown up against such marriages."

"If that be all, need such prejudice hinder us from that in which there can be no wrong and may be much good? Fifty years ago there was a strong feeling against Hindus crossing the sea, but at the present day hundreds of men and women go every week to Orissa and Burma, to Madras and Ceylon, by the sea. This is progress; utter absence of all change is stagnation and national death."

"Listen, Sarat. You are sensible and thoughtful, and I will put the matter plainly before you. The impulses of our nature do not retain their strength all through life. I know you love Sudha with the intensity and generous passion of youth, but it is possible, nay probable, your love will not be so strong in after years. Nay, do not interrupt me, permit me to explain myself, and listen to me. I do not question

your true and ardent love for Sudha, but it is still possible that the feeling may wane, and an act hastily committed may prove the cause of life-long regret. You will be outcasted; the orthodox community will shun alliances with your family; your daughters will not find husbands; your sons will have no place in the gatherings of their people. You may then come to think that if you had avoided one hasty act in your early youth, if you had not needlessly courted the disapprobation of your nearest and dearest friends, the evening of your life would have known peace and rest instead of hostility and bitterness, and the children of your love might have been honoured and respected instead of being shunned and avoided. You are young enough yet to look around; there are girls prettier than Sudha in many a Kayest home in Calcutta; and there is not a Kayest father who would not be gratified to have a son-in-law like you. Pause and consider before you decide; think of the long years that you may hope to live, and lay up a happy old age by a wise act in youth."

Sarat listened patiently, and answered meekly: "Trust me, Hem; believe me when I tell you that I have not acted under a sudden impulse or a blind passion; I have hoped to secure happiness in life, not to cast it away. You have spoken of the remorse and pain which I may bring upon myself in old age. Look around you, Hem, among the honoured leaders of our nation: can you find one among them who has brought remorse on himself by acting boldly and honourably in his youth? Many are those who have been outcasted for preaching religious truths in India; many for travelling to Europe to win honour and learning, position and power; many for inaugurating social reforms and introducing them in their own houses and their own families. Is there one among them—these pioneers of a healthier social life—who suffers from remorse or pain for his courageous conduct in early life? Outcasted? Why, Hem, outcasting has lost its ancient terrors; there is

not even the consolation of a martyr now in being outcasted, and that orthodox old weapon is falling into disuse, even like bows and arrows after the invention of gunpowder! There is scarcely a distinguished family left in Calcutta which does not now send its young men to be educated in Europe. Who outcasts them? And how much of worth and intelligence would be left if all the best and the truest were excluded? And are those men who lead us and instruct us and strive for us—who work for social reforms or endeavour for political advancement—are they really excluded from the Hindu Society? Why, Hem, they are the very leaders and pioneers whose work advances our national cause, whose example supports us, and encourages us, and impels us in the path of progress. The venerable Vidyasagar, the talented Madhu Sudan, the enthusiastic Keshab Chandra, the patriotic Surendranath,—these have all been nominally outcasted in our days, but who thinks of the Hindu community without thinking of these leaders? And where is the Hindu who is not proud to name these as the greatest and best of modern Hindus? Pardon my foolish talk, Hem, and pardon my naming these immortal workers in this connection. I am neither reformer nor leader, merely a poor student, a selfish seeker of his own happiness. But I want to show you that outcasting in these days is a mere bugbear, and that no man is the worse in life because in his youth he dared an act neither unrighteous nor yet dishonourable."

"You have pleaded well and ably, Sarat," said Hem; "and I rejoice to have your assurance that you have not acted hastily, or under the impulse of a blinding passion. Believe me, we bring more misfortunes on ourselves by our own follies and hasty acts than the world ever prepares for us."

"I know, Hem; and as far as it is possible for me to judge calmly, I have sought to bring on myself not misfortunes, but a life-long happiness. I have watched her day after day and month after month,

and if she blesses my affection, she will make me happy in life as no man has been made in this world. In innocence and in faith, in tenderness and in devotion, in her truth and in her purity, I have loved her; and he whose heart and life she shall bless with her love will be sanctified by Heaven's own bliss. I would speak calmly and dispassionately, Hem, for I do not tell you of the impulses which have torn my heart during these last two months, and which work like a madness in my brain. But I will tell you this, that if I be disappointed in this hope the endeavours and the ambitions of my life are at an end. There is nothing that I can strive after, nothing worth the struggle of a joyless and aimless existence."

"Shame, Sarat! Surely a strong young man like you would not give up the endeavours and ambitions of his life because he failed to win the hand of a girl whom he loved! You would not, with your intellect and your power, your ardent hopes and your high ambitions, give up the work of a life-time because, forsooth, Sudha could not be yours?"

"And is that your decision, Hem? You forget that the strongest heart requires some support and some hope to nourish it for its life-task. Man lives on hope, and does not work like a galley-slave chained to his oar. But if you have decided, my reasoning is perhaps useless, and since it may not be, forget the wrong I have done you and sister Bindu, forget the presumption of a foolish man who has knowingly done no harm, and remember me sometimes with the love which you have never withheld since I was a little boy in our village."

Sarat turned his face to hide his swimming eyes, and rose. Hem gently laid his hand on him. "Pardon me, Sarat, if I have given you pain. I thought it fair to Sudha, and to you also, to find out if you had acted hastily and on the impulse of the moment. If after mature thought you still consider it a wise act, Sarat, you have my esteem for your courage, my admiration for your generosity, and my

cordial consent to your proposal. My wife is waiting upstairs to tell you with her own lips that you have her consent also. If God has in His mercy desired to fill the life of poor Sudha with joy and happiness and love, shall I and my wife dare stand in the way? May He crown you both with every blessing and every joy!"

Sarat could not reply, but the tears which he had hitherto restrained with difficulty fell upon Hem's hand, as he silently pointed the way upstairs.

Bindu had lighted an oil-lamp, and was sitting on a mat spread on the floor when Sarat entered the room, agitated and flushed. He touched Bindu's feet as a mark of respect and of gratitude.

"What return can I ever make, sister Bindu, for your loving affection which has sent a flood of sunshine into my lonely life?"

Custom accords a certain license of speech to Indian women when speaking to their sisters' husbands. Bindu already considered Sarat as her sister's husband, and her ready wit did not fail. "Nay, leave me alone, Sarat, and do not touch my feet. Maybe there is some one else whom it may befit thee to entreat thus, and ask for favour. That is not I, I am sure."

Sarat recovered himself, adding with warm gratitude: "You have pleaded my cause, sister Bindu, to your husband, and you have won his consent. How shall I repay this debt of a life's happiness?"

"Nay, nay; our consent was superfluous, my brother, when the bridegroom had offered his heart to the bride, and the bride had already beamed on him the approving glance!"

"Dear sister Bindu, cease teasing for one moment, and bless us with the full assurance of your consent, which I value above all earthly blessing. Sudha is still little more than a girl; how can she consent except by the wishes of her sister?"

"Nay, but she isn't quite a girl any longer. Maybe she understands these matters better than any one

of us; and, dear me, she reads novels, and knows the ways of love!"

"I beg of you and entreat you, sister Bindu, to be serious for a moment."

"Entreat me not like this, my brother Sarat, for Sudha may be getting jealous! I am sure I do not wish to offend my sister, nor contest her undoubted rights."

"I am fairly beaten! I had thought that I would take this solemn occasion to seek your advice, sister Bindu, and to settle everything. But, cruel sister, you are proof against entreaty!"

"Settle everything? Why, I thought everything had been settled, my brother, secretly and satisfactorily, between the bride and the bridegroom! It remains only to call in a priest to perform the ceremony; or do the young men of our colleges dispense with his services also, and perform it themselves? And the 'women's rites'—shall we have to perform them, or will Sudha manage it for herself? Shall I call Sudha now to do it all?"

Sarat rose in despair, for it was hopeless to move Bindu from her humour to-night. He made one more appeal, and took her hands. "I will go now, since you are so cruel and relentless. But, before I go, speak one word in kindness and love, and bless our union with your best wishes. There is none in this world, sister Bindu, whose blessings I value and cherish more than yours."

Bindu felt the appeal, and relented. "Sarat," she said, "when the merciful God willed to bless my sister with a happy wedded life, should I stand as an obstacle? May He who lifts up the lowly and nourishes the poor make my dear sister happy; and may He bestow upon you in rank and in fame the prosperity worthy of a strong heart and a generous nature. And for Sudha—may she be to you an obedient and a true wife, and for ever love you with a woman's whole-hearted love."

There was no man more happy than Sarat when

he took leave of Bindu late that night. He slowly descended to the courtyard below. He heard a noise, and stood still: it was Sudha locking up the store-room, and carrying a lamp in her hand. Sarat had not seen that face and that figure for well-nigh two months, and he stood transfixed, gazing upon this dream of innocence, sweetness, and love. Thoughts too deep for words filled his soul with a sweet intoxication as he stood there speechless.

Sudha put up the chain of the door, locked it, and then turned. She saw Sarat standing near her, and gazing on her, speechless and motionless. Her fair face flushed; she bent her head in bashfulness; for the first time she drew her veil over her eyes to hide them from Sarat. Her frame trembled as she stood, and the warm blood crimsoned her face, even to the lids of her closed eyes. She blew out the lamp, and disappeared to hide her shame and her blushes.

This was all the courtship of an Indian lover winning his bride!

VII

MOTHER'S MANDATE

MIDNIGHT was passed, and the lamps and illuminations of the festive night extinguished. The crowds of joyous men and women were gone, and it was through silent and deserted streets that Sarat walked to his lonely lodgings. His heart beat within him as he thought of the events of the evening. Was he destined for this supreme felicity, or would his fair hopes yet disappear and leave him in deeper darkness, even like the lights and illumination of that festive night?

He entered his house with noiseless steps, and

trembled when a servant came and placed a letter in his hands. There was no light on the stairs, and as he slowly ascended, the overpowering fear of an unknown danger fell upon him. The strain on his nerves during the last few weeks had told, and his hands shook as he came into the upper room and opened the letter near a light. He shuddered when he saw that it had the postmark of Benares.

It was from his mother, and ran thus:

"My child Sarat! That you may ever live in peace and good health, that your hopes and endeavours may succeed, and that your life may be filled with joy, is the constant prayer of your poor and doting mother to Bhubaneswar, Lord of the Universe.

"My child! An evil rumour has reached me and pained me. But you are a good son to me, Sarat, and you love your mother, and I will not believe any evil against you. I know you will not give pain to your bereaved, widowed mother.

"My child! People say here that you wish to marry Sudha, who is a widow. It is an impious act, my son: bringing shame upon the name of your father, and grief to your mother's heart. You will not pain your mother, for you are a loving and obedient son.

"My child! I have suffered much in this world. Your father left me in sorrow and tears, and you know what grief I have suffered for your poor sister. You are the treasure of my heart and the stay of my life; I have placed all my hopes in you alone. You will not afflict me in my old age, when I have not many years to live.

"My Sarat! May you live as many years as I have hairs on my head. May the God of mercies shower blessings on your life and incline your heart to purity and virtue. What other blessings can a poor mother wish? I hasten to Calcutta to see my dear son once more."

Sarat read the letter through; he did so again, and yet once more. Then the letter dropped from his

nerveless grasp, his frame shook, a dimness came over his eyes, and he dropped senseless on the floor.

When he regained consciousness he never knew. He rose and opened a window, and sat silently looking out into the darkness. And then the thought of agony came throbbing into his brain, and a shadow as of death fell upon him, as he sat tearless and speechless.

His own personal disappointment was the least part of his pain. He could abandon the hope of happiness in life and live for ever after, joyless and cheerless, without aims and without endeavours. But with the thought of Hem and of Bindu, and of the innocent and trusting Sudha, his heart failed within him. He knew of the rumour which had spread wide and far, and he knew that the derision and the scorn of society would fall on the stainless family if he now withdrew from his plighted word. Should he cause this disgrace to that affectionate home which had nourished him with ungrudging love and had warmed his cheerless life? Should he make this return to Bindu who had been more than a sister to him, and to Hem who had loved him more than a brother loves a brother? Would he, after all that had passed, leave their home ruined and desolate like the Indian cobra which creeps out of a cottage after stinging the inmates to death? "Forgive me one act of disobedience, mother!" Sarat cried aloud; "I cannot, cannot be false to them."

And then he thought of Sudha—the innocent, pure-souled, trusting Sudha! Six months ago she was but a simple-hearted girl. He had unconsciously instilled into her a new thought and a new life; he had filled her young bosom with a new gladness and joy. Should he desert her now?—make her wretched and unhappy for life, an object of scorn? For they would point the finger of scorn at her as at a rejected woman; they would speak her name in whispers, as a name not to be uttered by women of virtue. And the poor deserted girl would sicken under this con-

timely, and perhaps sink untimely, as many a sufferer in this world has done, under the load of silent sorrow. His brain reeled; he put his head out at the window, that the soft dews of the night might bring him some relief. All the world slept, darkness covered the earth; and the countless stars of an Indian autumn looked silently on the hushed universe.

Gradually the faint streaks of the morning lighted up the East. He thought of his mother—of that dear creature who had nursed him in her bereavement and woe, who had not perhaps many years to live, who looked up to him for comfort and solace during the remaining years of her widowed life. "Shall I be disobedient to thee, my mother? Shall I cause thee pain, and make thy last days on earth bitter to thee? Shall I fill thy aged heart with fresh sorrows and perhaps shorten thy life? When I learn to disobey my mother, may I cease to live!"

Unconsciously the head rested on the window, and a soft slumber fell on the weary watcher in the cool of the morning. So he slept thus until, as he awoke, the red beams of the rising sun streamed into the room, and a pale, silent woman stood beside him with looks of tenderness and love.

"My child, Sarat," said his mother, who had arrived in the early dawn, "you look pale and haggard, and your face is bloodless. Why are you sitting up all night, my son? Come to your bed, my child, and have a little rest in the morning."

A balm fell on the man's heart as he heard his mother's voice. He rose from his chair, slid down at her feet, and spoke in a voice choked with tears:

"If I have given you pain, mother, forgive your foolish boy. I will not disobey you, mother, as long as I live."

So spake Sarat, moved by the feelings of a son towards a mother, feelings which a Hindu cherishes more than all other feelings on earth.

"Son," said his mother, as her old eyes blinded with the tears, "I knew you would not cause your old

mother pain. You have never disobeyed me in life, my son, and God will yet make you happy in life."

A week after this a solitary young man was crossing the Hugli Bridge on his way to the Howra Railway Station. Crowds of passengers passed by him, carriages followed in unending succession, and the noise of many voices was all about, but the youth walked on alone. The lights that lit the bridge flared and trembled on the waters below, and the unceasing traffic from the busiest railway station in India flowed with clatter and noise into the mighty city. But Sarat heeded not, his mind full of sad thoughts, and his steps slow.

He had lived a week of agony in Calcutta after the Festival of Lamps. He had abstained from visiting friends, and had confined himself to his room, but not for study. His books lay unopened; no occupation gave pleasure, for life had become a blank—cheerless and dark. He had made a sacrifice to the wishes of his mother; that sacrifice had cost him all his happiness, and, what is more, all his aims and purposes in life.

A letter came from his sister Kalee that she had gone to Raniganj with her husband, and that he was very ill. Sarat read this letter again and again, and a new thought crossed his brain. He would go to Raniganj and tend his brother-in-law in his sickness; he would then live in some place away from her he had loved; he would be a self-exiled wanderer on earth. He would live in some distant part of India, forgotten in the place of his birth, forgotten by his friends and relations. Such solitude would be a release to him from the torture of his daily life in Calcutta; it would be a solace to him who had no other joy on earth!

"Let me go," said Sarat to his mother, "for poor Kalee is distressed, and there is not a soul in that great household who can arrange for the proper treatment of her husband."

"But how can you leave me here, alone in Calcutta,

my son? How shall I live in this vast city, away from holy Benares, away from my son, alone and cheerless?"

"You will not be alone, mother. Hem will be a son to you in my absence, and sister Bindu will tend you with her affection."

"But how can you leave your studies, Sarat? Your examination is very near."

"If I do not appear this year, mother, I can appear next year. If poor Kalee's husband is not looked after properly, we may have to regret the neglect all through life."

There was no answer to this, and Sarat's mother consented. She would herself stay in Calcutta for a few weeks till she received better news from Raniganj, and then she would go to Benares once more.

Thus it was that Sarat wended his way one evening to the Howra Station to catch the mail train. He had not even paid a parting visit to Hem and his wife, but he knew they would understand the reason of the omission, and in their charity pity the miseries of a disappointed and wretched man rather than resent his fault.

Sarat hoped to get into his train without meeting any one that he knew, and so steal away unperceived from the scene of his sufferings. He was particularly anxious to avoid Hem, as a meeting with him would be painful in the extreme. He was mistaken: the first man he met on the platform was Hem.

"Why have you avoided me, Sarat?" asked Hem, grasping Sarat's reluctant hand in his. "Why have you not seen your dearest friend? Have we many true friends on earth that we can afford to break this bond so lightly?"

"You know the reasons, Hem; do not ask me, do not remind me of my meanness, my—cowardice."

"Accuse not yourself lightly because the world accuses you, Sarat. You used to be a strong man, and may find some strength in yourself yet if you feel you have done nothing wrong. Do you think it would have been dutiful of you to have married Sudha

against the wishes of your aged, venerable mother? Do you think we could have consented to an act which would have broken her heart, and perhaps brought her to an early grave? If you have done your duty, Sarat, be afraid of no man on earth, and never forget that you have one friend who esteems and loves you with a brother's love, even if he cannot be so in name."

The last bell sounded, Sarat had neither the time nor the power to make a reply. "More than a brother to me! I shall never, never forget your generous love and forgiveness, wherever I may live. Give my salutations to my mother, remember me to sister Bindu, remember me to ——" with a shrill whistle the train slid from the platform, and the last word remained unspoken.

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VIII

HUSBAND'S TEARS

HEM'S house was now silent and cheerless, and he longed to return to the Lake of Palms. The departure of Sarat left a void in the household which all felt, but equally none noted. Hem felt the absence of a friend whom he had come to regard as more than a brother. In the long winter evenings the thoughts of Bindu turned to that generous youth whose high aspirations she had regarded with pride, and whose animated conversation she had listened to with joy. A silence as of death fell on the house after the recent events, and the separation from this true friend came like a bereavement.

Sudha never opened her lips. She tended her sister's children morning and evening, and was busy with the housework all day long. If any thought of

the past dwelt in her breast, they found no utterance. Her eyes had lost somewhat of their glow; the liveliness of a girl had given place to the calm resignation of a woman; and her face, still beautiful, wore the shadow of silent thought.

The visit to Calcutta had borne bitter fruit, and preparations were made for an early return to the more congenial solitude of the Lake of Palms. One evening when Bindu was sitting alone and tired in her room, resting her face on her hand, a letter came to her. The address was in the handwriting of Uma.

Uma had improved in health in the genial weather of an Indian winter, and Bindu had received news of her recovery. But there were signs of trouble in her eye as she opened the letter, and her heart beat with an unknown fear. The letter was short, and ran thus:

"Sister Bindu, I have a longing to see you this evening; will you come?

"Strange fancies have filled my head for weeks past, a strange determination stirs my heart. You will know of this some day—not now. This evening I wish to embrace you with all that sisterly love which I have borne to you from childhood.

"I think of my present life, and feel sometimes that I shall go mad. I think of our childhood in the Lake of Palms, and solace comes to me. He who has made us can also make us happy, or can give us rest. Do you not think so, sister Bindu?

"Your love has been the consolation of my life; my own dear mother cannot love me as you do. That is why I long so much to see you, sister Bindu, this evening. Will you come?"

Strange fears filled the heart of Bindu as she read this letter again and again. Its sudden and incoherent style alarmed her. Uma, so proud, so reserved, so uncomplaining in her sufferings—how came she to write this? What were the strange fancies and the determination which had arisen in her? What was the rest she sought at the hand of her Maker?

Bindu shuddered as a dark foreboding crossed her mind.

She rose and called her sister. "Sudha, my love, will you look after the children and feed them and put them to bed to-night? Poor Uma is suffering greatly in mind, and I must go to see her. Will you tell my husband when he comes not to wait for me, nor to be anxious if I am late in coming back? My mind misgives me much that Uma is in sore distress."

Their cousin had sent a palanquin with the letter, and Bindu stepped into it and went to her at once.

Her heart beat violently as she entered the house, but she was somewhat relieved when she saw her cousin. Uma was quietly arranging her garments, and when Bindu appeared, she turned with a smile and embraced her. There were no signs of suffering or distress or madness about her. She was only a little pale from recent illness, and there was an unnatural sparkle in her eyes. Bindu clasped her long and cordially, and then spoke in her quiet and persuasive manner.

"I was a little alarmed when I received your letter, my dear Uma; but it was entirely my own fault. I should have come to you more often, and not left you alone so long to indulge in strange fancies. But we too have had our troubles, and have been sadly distressed. Forgive me, Uma, if I have caused you anxiety by not coming to see you! My love for you will never, never know any change."

"I know your love for me, Bindu, and I know your troubles too. But I so longed to see you to-night that I thought I would write to you. And I knew you would come, you are always so good. How is poor Sudha, and has Sarat left you all and Calcutta?"

"Not that, my Uma—it freshens my sorrows. I feel a cruel throb in my head when I think of Sudha's joyless life; and Sarat is a homeless wanderer on earth!"

"And does not Sarat's mother know all this?

Will she consent to make her son unhappy for life in obedience to an old, senseless custom?"

"But how can we blame Sarat's mother, my Uma? There is no more saintly woman on earth than she; but her whole religion is against the proposed marriage, and her heart would break to see her son do what she thinks is irreligious. It is all our fault, Uma; we have acted hastily—and suffered."

"Nay, you acted for the best, Bindu; but there are sorrows in this earth which human foresight cannot prevent. Heaven knows, there is suffering enough, and more than enough, for us poor mortals to bear."

"Well, tell me, dear Uma, something about your unhappiness. You have had more than your share of this common burden, and you have borne it as few women could do!"

"Nay, but my sorrows are nothing, sister, and I think I shall conquer them."

"Are you quite recovered from your recent illness, and are you feeling a little stronger?"

"Strong as a fiend," said Uma; "and I sometimes think I could be as wicked too!" A faint smile appeared on her lips, and an uncertain gleam of light quivered again in her eyes.

"Speak not so," replied Bindu, "for your voice alarms me. Do not indulge in strange fancies; life was not made for these, but for the patient bearing of burdens, my beloved Uma."

"But I have read, sister Bindu, that sometimes the strongest man has cast aside the burden which he could not bear; and sometimes the galley-slave has laughed in his despair, under the very lashes of his master!"

"You talk wildly, my dear Uma; you do not speak as is your wont. And how shall I blame you who have loved as never woman loved before, and suffered as never woman suffered? But your own heart will tell you that through love and through suffering we must still proceed onwards in the path of our duty; there is no turning back, and there is no

casting aside our burden. And even when the trials and troubles of life seem almost too agonising for poor suffering womanhood to bear, even then we must struggle onwards with our last faltering steps; ay, fall and perish on the roadside, solaced by the thought of having done our part in the life which has been ordained for us! These are lessons which we Hindu women imbibe with our mother's milk, and these are truths which my poor suffering Uma will cherish for ever."

"You are always right, sister Bindu," said Uma, after a long pause, "and you are always good. You taught me these lessons when we were children together, and you have practised them in your life. But somehow my weak head misses their sense to-night; talk to me therefore of other things, my sister; I feel a void in my heart and am restless."

"I know it, dear Uma; I saw it from your letter. But why do you not try a change from these dreary surroundings?"

"Where could I go, sister Bindu?"

"Why, to your mother, of course. I wanted to ask her to come here, but you would not let me. Now that you are recovered, go to the Lake of Palms. The village is fresh and joyous in this glorious winter time."

"But my mother cannot keep me long there, sister Bindu, as you know. A married woman does not stay long in her father's house; and the village people will blame my parents if I thus separate myself from my husband for any length of time."

"Then go to your husband's ancestral house at Dhanpur. There you have his relations and friends, and your life will be less solitary and less cheerless than in Calcutta."

"It will be more so, sister Bindu! The great halls and echoing rooms of Dhanpur will sound the dirge of our departed love! Spare me that, my sister; I should be afraid to revisit that house—alone and deserted."

"Poor, suffering sister, how can I help you? Will you come to our home for a few days, until we leave for our village? Surely your husband will let you pass a few days with your nearest and dearest friends."

"Nay, let me not add to your troubles, sister Bindu. There is peace in your home wherever you are, and I would not cloud it with my sorrows and sufferings. No, sister Bindu, I have thought of all this till my poor brain is tired and my head is giddy, and I have found no remedy. But I think I shall conquer my sorrows yet; there is refuge and shelter for a forlorn woman if she can only find it."

Again the unnatural light flashed in Uma's eyes, and her lips smiled.

"But you have not told me yet what is in your mind, my dear Uma," urged Bindu. "Am I not the same to you as I have ever been, and can you not trust the friend of your childhood?"

"I have nothing settled in my mind, sister Bindu; thoughts chase each other wildly, and my head is giddy. Solace me with your kindness and love this evening, for I need it much. You will know all—all that my heart can cherish or my thoughts can compass—before long."

"Be it so, Uma; it will not be long before I come to see you again, and I will not part from you again till you have told me your thoughts. It is near midnight now, so I must leave. May Heaven keep you safe and give you refuge!"

"Ay! Heaven has refuge for us all!" were the last words of Uma.

The palanquin and bearers waited below, and she accompanied her cousin down the steps. There they clasped each other once more, and Uma hid her face in Bindu's bosom. All the sorrow which she had locked up in her heart so long welled up in spite of her, and the flood-gates of her tears were opened. For a long time she sobbed convulsively without uttering a word, and her young bosom heaved with

sighs as if her heart would break. She hugged the loving, sympathising, silent woman closer and closer to her breast, and then she tore herself away suddenly and fled into her rooms.

"Weep, poor child, weep," said the crying Bindu; "Heaven hath given thee good cause for weeping!"

An hour after, Uma was silently adjusting her garments and putting up her jewellery. She took off the necklace from her graceful neck, the golden bangles from her fair arms, and the silver anklets from her feet. She took off her bordered Saree and put on a borderless cloth, such as widows wear. She put out the light in her room, and slowly walked out on tiptoe.

The large house was dark and silent. The servants had retired to rest, and all the lights in the courtyards were extinguished. Uma passed them silently one by one, crossed the outer courtyard, and noiselessly unbolted the outer door. A gust of winter wind came into the passage as she opened the door, and the lights of the street flashed in her eyes as she came out of the darkness. For one moment her heart almost failed her, for one moment she stood on the threshold and looked behind. The moment passed, and the young woman of twenty, the wife of a great and wealthy squire, flung herself into the outer world, walking alone along the streets in that dark winter midnight.

Half an hour's walk tired her. She stood beside a roadside tree, and shivered in the cold wind. Her heart once more misgave her. There was time yet to retrace her steps. She knew the way back, and the gate of her house was still unbolted. She could return to her old life, and the world would know nothing of her temporary madness. Bindu's virtuous admonitions still sounded in her ears, and a small, still voice spoke in her heart of the duty of a woman. Uma paused and hesitated, as the cold night wind swept past her. Her home might still be hers, the world outside was a blank.

A sumptuous landau drawn by dark horses whirled past her with its flashing lights, and the sound of woman's laughter was heard. Another carriage drawn by a grey pair drove still closer, and its glaring lights fell full on her face. She started, and hid herself behind the tree.

A man in the carriage started also when he saw that face in the momentary flash of the carriage-lamp. His companion marked this, and looked at the woman hiding behind the tree.

"A pretty woman that," said his companion; "with as beautiful a pair of eyes as I have ever seen!"

"I was not thinking of her beauty," drily replied the other. "But her pale face reminded me for a moment of—of a lady I know and I have not seen for some time. Curious coincidence, I suppose."

The carriages whirled away. Uma stepped out from the shelter of the tree, and her eyes gleamed unnaturally once more as she looked at the retreating lights.

"Thank you, my husband. You have nerved my fainting heart, and I shall know now what to do."

There was a cry of alarm and a voice of lamentation in Dhananjay's house the next morning. The waiting-woman had not found her mistress in her bed, and the servants could not find her by the well-side, nor yet in the courtyard. The sweeper-woman picked up her old shawl in the outer court, and the gatekeepers found the gate unbolted. A long search was made, but in vain—the mistress of the house had disappeared!

Messengers were sent all over the town, and to the house of every friend and relation in Calcutta. They came back one by one without any news. The messenger to Bindu brought back news that Uma had been at home till the preceding midnight.

Men were sent to Burdwan, to Dhanpur, and to the Lake of Palms. They returned the same evening with no news of their mistress.

Information was given to the police in Calcutta. Money stimulates police enquiries, and money was not spared. But the enquiries were fruitless: no clue was obtained.

Dark suspicions arose in the minds of all. Wells and tanks were searched, but in vain. Men were sent to the Morgue, but Uma was not among the dead.

Despair reigned in Dhananjay's house. The voice of wailing was hushed, and there was a silence as of death. The short winter day departed, and the shades of evening fell on the desolate home. All enquiries had been fruitless, all the messengers had returned, and nothing was known. Nothing had been seen and no news heard.

Late in the evening the laundress who served the house came in with the washing. The sorrowing people gathered about her, for she had news to tell. But her tale was short and sad.

Early that morning, before the hour when the women of Calcutta go to bathe in the Hugli River, the laundress had seen her mistress alone by the river-side. The lady had come to bathe at this early hour, she thought, in order to return home before the town was up. She had exchanged a word or two with her mistress and then passed on, and had seen her no more.

A silence fell on the listeners as this tale was told. They all knew the life which their lady had lived in Calcutta, and the thoughts which she must have harboured in her heart. And soon a cry of lamentation rose as the idea flashed on them that their poor, suffering young mistress had sought in the bosom of the holy river, not her morning bath, but her final rest from life's agony and suffering.

Dhananjay had driven out of Calcutta on the preceding night with his merry companions, and it was very late before he returned. The flush of wine was still on his face, and his steps were unsteady, when he alighted from his carriage. The servants helped him to his room upstairs, and then slowly revealed to him

the news that his wife was gone. The shock was sudden and terrible; the young man, still reeling from the effects of the wine, staggered under the blow.

That night Dhananjay bolted himself into his wife's bedroom, and walked up and down in the dim light of the lamp from midnight to early dawn. His wretched life had not stamped out all feeling from his once generous heart, and the fumes of wine were dissipated by the agonies of thought. She had come to him bright and beautiful, tender and true, as ever bride came to the arms of her lord. All her womanly affection, all her sweet daintiness, all her cherished thoughts, all her secret impulses were his, for she knew no other man and loved none else. Night after night she had sat beside him, rested her bosom on his breast, and whispered to his ears all her hopes and joys and thoughts of tenderness. She had blossomed from a girl to a woman under his eye, she had clung to his love as a creeper clings to a tree, and to the last days of her life she had looked up to him with her meek eyes, uncomplaining and mute. One silent tear after another coursed down his flushed cheeks as he looked round the empty room and thought of her who had loved and trusted him, and whom he had driven to—perhaps even this!

The pale face which he had seen in the street as the carriage-lamp flashed upon it came back to his mind. Signs of recent illness had shown on the shaded brow, but the marks of agony and despair flung darker shadows. For one moment her eyes had rested on his—one moment of love, perhaps of faint hope. But they had met with no response, and had closed now for ever.

Dhananjay silently arranged the Sarees which the broken-hearted woman had left behind her. He took out the jewellery which she had worn during eight years of married life, and had then restored to him with his love. The diamond tiara which had graced her fair forehead, the pearl necklace which had hung

on her young bosom, the jewelled bangles which he had given to her on their marriage night, the glittering butterfly which he had settled in her hair as he kissed her lips—all these he took out one by one, and arranged before him. Every one of them brought with it a past recollection and a remembered dream; thoughts which had forsaken him for months and years came thronging into his mind; memories of scenes and incidents which had sweetened and sanctified his earlier life came into his desolate heart.

He had run a royal course—disgracing his father's memory and disregarding his mother's tender admonitions: he had wasted his ancestral wealth; he had herded with men and women filthier than the very toads in the gutter, and he had cast aside the love of that true friend who had come to him with a woman's whole-hearted affection! He had violated every loving claim, outraged every human feeling, debased every noble impulse, and driven his own trusting, loving wife through days and months of the bitterest agony to a violent death! The drunkard and the profligate shook with remorse as he thought of the ruin he had caused. And as his eye fell once more on the garments and jewellery which were all that remained of her, and on the dark walls of the empty chamber, one long wail of agony and of despair escaped him and echoed through the house.

The first streaks of a grey morning pierced the room and fell on the haggard face and dazed eyes of the wretched husband. And it fell on something white under the folds of his wife's Saree. Dhananjay pushed back his dishevelled hair, and took up the letter, written with a trembling hand and blotted with many tears.

"My Husband,—Permit me to call you by that sweet name on the eve of my departure, though I have ceased to be a wife in your eyes.

"I have lived under your roof, and eaten of your bread, and shared your love for eight years. Let me not part from you now with a word of wrath on my lips or a thought of anger in my heart. I will think of

you lovingly till my last moment; try to remember with some compassion the woman whom once you loved.

"Let me die with the memory of younger days when I was not unpleasing in your eyes. Let me think of those long nights when I sat at your feet and looked up to your tender eyes, and feasted on your loving words. Let me still recall those moments when you came back from work or from travel to those embraces, and I thought Heaven had no happier place for me than your loving arms.

"I had hoped that those joys would last. But fate willed otherwise, and I do not complain. My heart has ached, and my head has reeled, and in my loneliness I have called upon God, because the earth was dark and cheerless.

"I have tried in all my sufferings to do my duty; but if I failed in anything, forgive me, my husband! If I spoke angry words in the bitterness of my heart, if I turned away my face from you in moments of suffering, forgive me, my husband! This is my last request in life; I make it with tears in my eyes: I shall not live to make any other.

"Be happy when I am gone. You are born of a high family, and your name is honoured all over the country. Forget, if you can, the madness of your past life; forsake the companions who are dragging you to ruin and be yourself again. You have a noble heart: be true to yourself.

"And turn your thoughts to Him who can help us in our need. There is a holy spot in Burdwan where there are one hundred and eight temples built side by side, dedicated to as many images. Come sometimes to those temples and render your worship to Him whom we vainly seek to represent in images. Strive to be good and great, be happy in your life, and sometimes remember the poor unhappy woman who loved you to the end of her unfortunate life."

The letter fell from his nerveless hands, and the wretched man reeled forwards a few steps, stretched out his arms, and fell senseless to the floor.

BOOK III

THE TEMPLE

I

THE DREAM

THE duteous Kalee nursed her husband, Jagat Kisor Roy, at Raniganj. It is a station about one hundred and twenty miles up the rail from Calcutta, and has grown in importance within the last fifty years on account of its coal-mines. British Companies employ large numbers of labourers in the mines, and turn out great quantities of coal to meet the growing demand of the country. Enterprising Indian capitalists, too, have started mining on their own account, and many of the smaller mines are worked with Indian capital. The output from the mines not only meets the demands of railways and steamers in India, but has also replaced firewood for domestic use in Calcutta and other large towns.

Like most mining places, Raniganj is a dirty town, and the air is thick with coal-dust. Nevertheless, the country is undulating and high, and the climate bracing, while away from the immediate neighbourhood of mines there are pretty villas which are pleasant in the winter. Many people from Calcutta and Burdwan come up to these places for their health; and a large villa had been rented for Jagat Kisor.

Unfortunately for the patient, his entire family—including his old mother, his three aunts, and a troop of children—came with him. This was due to a tender solicitude, and all the ladies of the house laboured with his wife to minister to his needs. Jagat Kisor appreciated this kindness, but the bustle of a large household sometimes worried him as he lay on his sick-bed, and his recent relapse caused much anxiety, and even alarm.

The English doctor of the station was assiduous in his attendance. But the women of the house not seldom consulted Hindu Kabirajes and Sanyasis and spiritual advisers: and old wives would come to see Jagat Kisor's mother, and tell her of marvellous cures which had been effected at holy shrines.

"Ay, ay, mother," said one, "the doctor of Raniganj is skilful in surgery, and English treatment is sometimes good in sudden cases, but what do English physicians know of the chronic diseases of our country? Trust me, mother, our old Kabirajes, who adopt a slow and mild treatment, understand these ailments better, and effect a more lasting, if a slower cure. Quinine and arsenic, quinine and arsenic—that is what the English doctors prescribed for my poor boy who was suffering from the malarial fever of Burdwan for months. And quinine stopped the fever for a time, but effected no radical cure. At last I sent my son to the old Hindu Kabiraj of Sonatonbatee, whose cures are marvellous, and whose name is known all over the country. And he kept my son for six weeks in his house, regulated his diet from day to day, and gave him drugs. My poor boy came back healthy and strong—he never was stronger and healthier in his life. Consult some old Kabiraj, mother; they understand our chronic diseases, and will heal your son; and may the Great Disposer of events lengthen his days and increase his prosperity!"

"Nay, but what can physicians do?" enquired another ancient gossip, who had also come to make enquiries. "Life and death are in the hands of the

Lord, and He can cure us as He can afflict us. Did I not suffer for years and years from a colic pain, and try every treatment in vain? At last, mother, a Sanyasi advised me to make a pilgrimage to the holy shrine of Tarakeswar, and I went there on foot, and did my penance, and shaved my hair. And on the third night the Lord Tarakeswar sent me a dream, and an unseen hand dropped me some food, which was better than all medicines. I remained a week in Tarakeswar, and returned a different woman, having known no pain since. The Lord can heal us, mother, when His mercy moves Him. May the Lord cure your good son, who is the support and helper of many!"

"Ay, ay," said a third visitor, who had come with her two children to pay her visit, "it is true, mother, that the Lord alone can give as the Lord alone can take away. Do you think I would have had these dear darlings but for the grace of Jagannath? Why, mother, for years after my marriage every child that I bore sickened and died in the first or second year, and the home was a desert to us and life was cheerless. And then a Panda from the temple of Jagannath came and visited us in our house. And when he heard of my misfortune he blessed me, and told me that Jagannath alone could save. And he advised me to make a pilgrimage to the temple at Puri. Oh, it is a long way, mother, for I went by rail to Calcutta, and a steamer took us across the black waters of the ocean, and the sea was high and the waves dashed into our cabins. Oh! when I saw the ocean heaving on all sides, I never hoped to see land again; but I fixed my hopes on Jagannath and uttered His holy name all through the night; and in the morning we reached port safely. Then for seven days and seven nights I performed my ablutions in the holy tanks, and witnessed the great Car Festival; and on the seventh night Jagannath sent me a dream. Then I came back to my village, and lived to be a happy mother and to see the faces of these darlings, who are seven and five years of age. Bless them, mother,

bless them, for you are a holy woman, and the Lord will listen to your prayers, and keep my sons to be the joy of their father and the stay of the family."

It was late when the visitors left the old lady. Days of attendance on the sick-bed and nights of watching had told little on this venerable woman, to whom, as to many Hindu widows, ministration to the comfort of others is life itself. Late as it was, she entered the sick-room and found the patient asleep, with his wife sleeping at his feet. She passed on to her room, and in the first hours of the morning retired to rest.

In the early dawn a dream came to her which was as balm to her anxious heart. She dreamt she was in a wilderness, and the night was dark and gloomy. She was following her son through the woods and the jungle, wild animals peered with their large lustrous eyes through the brake, and jackals yelled from a distance. And they marched on and on, tired and footsore, but could not find their way. In her distress she wept aloud, and cried on Jagannath for help. And lo! a streak of light appeared in the east, and a hand beckoned to her in the distance. Then she felt reassured, and they walked onwards till the forest was passed, and daylight shone on fields and villages. Then her son walked homewards strong and happy, but she sat down and worshipped the divine hand. And then a voice spake to her: "*I am He who dwell by the sea, and I am thy abode, O woman of many years!*" The voice still lingered in her ears when she opened her eyes and saw the daylight streaming into her room through the window.

There was a great stir in the house that day. The dream was repeated to many anxious enquirers, and many an old gossip wept tears of joy and prophesied an early cure for Jagat Kisor. And priests and Pandas who were consulted gave their opinion that Jagannath would cure the patient, if he would perform a pilgrimage to the temple of Puri. The dream meant more than this to Jagat's mother, but she spoke her thoughts to none.

Sarat arrived from Calcutta the following day, and he was alarmed when his sister Kalee told him everything. "It is a sign, my brother; it is a mandate vouchsafed by Jagannath; help us to carry out the wish."

"But it is madness, sister, to take your husband in this weak state on a pilgrimage. It is a long journey, and he can never survive it."

"Nay, but Jagannath can help if He so chooses. And mother wishes this pilgrimage, and my aunts wish it, and my husband has made up his mind. Help us, brother; you are the only strong man among us; enable us to make this holy pilgrimage."

Sarat was stunned. He had come in the hope of seeing to the proper treatment of the patient, of doing what he could to save him. And here was a project *on foot to throw away his life in obedience to an idle* dream of an old lady!

He knew himself powerless to stop the pilgrimage; but he also felt it his duty to do all he could to oppose it as long as possible, and to postpone the journey to Puri till his brother-in-law was fit to undertake it.

In the afternoon he went to see the English doctor of the station. He had heard of his care and attention to the patient, and he thanked him with all his heart.

"Don't mention it," said the doctor in his quiet way; "we have to do what we can, and I hope your brother-in-law, who is not an old man, will recover yet."

"I am sure, doctor, you would bring him round yet with your skill and your care. But—but——" Sarat could speak no more.

"Has there been a relapse since I saw him in the morning?" asked the doctor, with a sign of trouble in his eye.

"Worse than that, doctor. Medical skill can heal sickness, but not the injury caused by wilful folly."

"Has the patient been careless again and made himself worse?"

"The patient thinks a pilgrimage to Puri will cure him, because his old mother has dreamt a dream!"

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their arts and literature have figured in history during many centuries of civilisation; to the west lie the uplands of Chota Nagpur and the Tributary States of Orissa with their primitive populations still wedded to half-barbarous ways and customs. As elsewhere in India, so in Bengal, the tide of Aryan civilisation has flowed into fertile and level plains, leaving the barren highlands to the descendants of aboriginal races still practising aboriginal ways of life. And the traveller or pilgrim who proceeds from Raniganj to Puri marches along the line of demarcation between the plains and the highlands, between the country of the cultured Hindus and Mahomedans, and that of the less tutored primitive races.

Early on a December morning Jagat Kisor and his party left Raniganj by this road. One palanquin, carefully covered and fitted up with all that can make a sick man comfortable, was for the invalid himself; another carried the two ladies, his mother and his wife. Sarat himself preferred to ride, not a horse of high mettle, but one of those hardy country ponies which do their thirty miles a day at a gentle trot without turning a hair. Two bullock carts carried a few servants and the cooking vessels, always going ahead by night to have things ready in time at each successive stage of the journey. Such was the mode of travelling adopted by rich men in India before railways were opened; and the practice still continues along routes not yet traversed by the rail. Poorer pilgrims and wayfarers march on foot, halting noon and night at well-known wayside shops, which afford shelter and food and all that they require for something under threepence a day.

Less than two miles from Raniganj, the party came to the shores of the Damodar, one of those great rivers rising in the uplands of the west, and flowing east and south to join the Hugli River near the Bay of Bengal. In the rainy season the Damodar overflows miles of country, and the eye wanders over the vast expanse of waters where villages and trees stand out like

islands in an inland sea. A line of embankments on the northern side protects great towns like Burdwan; but all endeavours to keep up a similar line of embankments on the south were given up after the river had frequently burst through such restraints. And thus the waters spread to the south in the rainy months of July, August, and September, sweeping past many a populous village, and spreading their fertilising silt over miles of rice-bearing fields. And as a curious but natural result, the southern country is gradually raised by this annual deposit of silt, while the northern bank of the river with all its large towns remains in a malarious hollow. Among the many problems which puzzle modern engineers and administrators in India, not the least difficult are those of dealing with the wayward rivers, vast and resistless in the rains, and shrinking again into thin lines of water trickling through beds of dry sand in December.

In this cold month, therefore, Jagat Kisor and his party had no difficulty in crossing the Damodar. A ferry-boat carried the palanquins and the pony over the portion which was deep; the rest was only dry sand, or silver threads of transparent water scarcely more than two feet in depth. The river being crossed, the march began once more under the bright sun of an Indian winter.

The fresh air and the warm rays of the sun were welcome to the patient after long days and nights passed in the sick-room, and he seemed to be already stronger for this change of scene. To Kalee and his mother, too, the journey was one of hope and joy. Every object which met their eye was new; the river with its sand-banks, the great stretches of forest or scrub jungle, and the undulating country stretching far to the west, were refreshing to their eye. But, above all, the prospect of visiting the holy temple of Puri raised their spirits and gladdened their hearts.

It is doubtful, however, if this journey was a greater

relief to any one of the party, even to the patient himself, than it was to Sarat, whose horse trotted gently behind his brother's palanquin. The soul of so ardent an impulsivist is capable of strong effort, but it can also receive deep impressions, and the shock of the disappointment under which he suffered was not to be effaced. But here, at least, he was away from those scenes which had made his life a torture in Calcutta; he could brood over his sorrow in solitude, and nurse his despair in silence. A great gulf separated him from the past with its strenuous endeavours; life seemed a blank, and his future purposeless! Hour after hour memory conjured up a sweet face; but that face was now no more than a sacred image and an undying thought to him, who, like many a pious enthusiast, would henceforth wander through the earth cherishing, hiding it in his heart for ever.

Fifteen miles from Ranigauj is the little village Gangajal-Ghatee, and the party halted there for the day. Sarat dismounted and helped Jagat Kisor from the palanquin, and Kalee made his bed and remained with him the whole evening.

Late in the evening he fell asleep, and, his mother being busy in the kitchen, Kalee found herself alone with her brother.

"Is it true, brother," she asked, "that there was a proposal for you to marry Sudha? She is a widow, poor thing, and how could you marry a widow? It would bring a stain on our father's family."

"So mother said," calmly answered Sarat, "and the engagement has been broken off. You will not love your brother less, Kalee, for his waywardness and folly?"

"How can I ever love you less, brother? Are you not my father's son, and has not mother borne you as she has borne me? Can a brother be other than dear to his sister?"

These were the only words between the brother and sister on the painful subject; Kalee never touched it again.

The second morning broke fresh and bright as the first, and the dew was on the grass and on the trees. When the early mists had rolled away, and the sun was warm, Jagat Kisor and his party left Gangajal-Ghatee. The road passed over an undulating country, and the scene was varied and pleasant to the eye. Level stretches of lowland were carefully cultivated, and the yellow rice drooped with the morning dew, and was ready for the scythe. Elsewhere the soil was rocky, and the eye wandered over miles of wood and jungle in which buffaloes and cows pastured, tinkling their wooden bells behind the thick screens of foliage. Huts and scattered villages appeared here and there with their patches of cultivated fields, and a few shops stood on the wayside at long intervals, supplying the simple needs of pilgrims and travellers. Far in the west the graceful peak of Susunia Hill could be seen at a distance of fifteen miles; while beyond it the higher ranges and peaks of Pachet and Manbhoom bounded the horizon.

A journey of three hours brought them to the Darkeswar river, another of the streams rising in the western highlands, and flowing east and south to mingle their waters with the Hugli. It was a narrower stream than the Damodar, and was soon crossed, when the party found themselves in Bankura, the principal town in the district of that name. A comfortable brick-built house had been lent by its owner for the accommodation of Jagat Kisor and his family; and the party halted there for the day.

III

THE HIGHLAND GIRL

THE name of Jagat Kisor, Zemindar of Burdwan, was known in Bankura; and when the day's work was done, and the evening lamps were lighted, many respectable ladies of the town came, one by one, to pay a visit to his mother.

"You have done well, mother," one of them said, to take your son to Puri. The Lord Jagannath can heal when human remedies fail, and many are the sufferers on whom He has had mercy."

"Bless us, my child," replied Jagat's mother, "bless us that He in His mercy may heal my son. He is the only stay and support of our family. He has suffered long, and been treated by many physicians to no purpose, until the Blessed One sent us His mandate."

"Ay, ay, mother, we have heard of the dream that you dreamt. You are fortunate in receiving such mercy; and you are doubly fortunate in being able to carry out the mandate. It is not every one who has the good fortune to visit the temple of Puri; we have longed to do so often, but we are poor, and the journey is long and expensive."

"Yes, it is a long journey, and I was anxious about it. But by Bhagaban's mercy we have commenced it, and my son is all the better so far; my daughter-in-law, poor thing, has known no sleep by night nor rest by day during a month past. She is devoted to my son, obedient and dutiful to me; such daughters are rare indeed in these days. She is pale and weak with continual watching."

"But how can a mother like you have a daughter other than she is? She too comes from a good stock; and her brother has left his studies, I hear, to accompany you in this time of trouble."

"Ah, yes; Sarat is a good obedient child, such as one does not often find. But the times are bad, and one never knows what our boys may learn in colleges." A shade fell over the speaker's face as certain rumours came to her recollection. But it passed away, and she continued: "Ay, Sarat is a generous boy, and he has avoided all the temptations of a town life. He waits on my son as his own brother could not have done. Happy is the mother who has borne such a son as that. Tears fill my aged eyes as I see Sarat's loving tendance on my poor suffering son."

"And that tendance shall not be in vain, mother. Your son will improve day by day, and will return a hale and hearty man from Puri by Jagannath's mercy; and you will live to see his sons yet, mother!"

"The Lord bless you for your kind wishes, child! But I am an old woman, and when my son is restored to health, his wife must take her place in the household. Let me pass the remaining years of my life at the feet of Jagannath!"

"How long will you be staying in Bankura, mother? We hope we shall come and see you again to-morrow."

"Nay, but we cannot stay. It is a long journey to Puri, and we can only travel by easy stages in the present state of my son's health. They say it will take us a fortnight to reach Puri, and how can we delay on the way when bound on such a pilgrimage?"

So the unending talk went until far into the night, when one by one the visitors rose to leave, and Jagat's mother went to the kitchen. One, however, still waited,—a Bauri girl of about fourteen or fifteen; and as she was of low caste, she had not stepped inside the room, but was sitting on the verandah outside the doorstep. She too had heard that an august family from Burdwan was passing through the town on pilgrimage, and she had come to pay her humble salutations.

Jagat Kisor was now fast asleep, and Kalee, seeing a girl sitting at the door, left the bedside, and with her natural kindness came and spoke to her.

"I am but a poor Bauri woman," said the girl, in reply to Kalee's enquiries; "I heard you were come from Burdwan, and were passing through this town on a pilgrimage to Puri, and I thought, mother, I would come and see you. My husband works in Burdwan, and I am poor and alone and long to go to him."

"Tell me your story, child. We have all our sufferings in life, and I would like to help you if I can."

"You are very good, mother, to speak thus to a poor Bauri woman. We were well off at one time, and my father lived far in the west. You can see Susunia Hill from this town, mother; it was there we lived in a little hamlet, and my father tilled his lands, and I remember, when I was but a child, my mother took me with her, and worked in the fields."

"But how could your mother work in the fields, child? She was but a woman!"

"Oh, but don't you know, mother, we Bauri women always work in the fields. We are not like Hindu women, we help on the farms. Our men do the ploughing and the harder work; and then, when the rains come, and it is time for transplanting rice seedlings, they leave it to us, and there are few men who can transplant rice as Bauri women do, standing knee-deep in water, in rain or shine, morning and evening."

"So I have heard, indeed. And there are a great many Bauris in Bankura?"

"Yes, of course, for the district is the home of the Bauris, and there are more of us than of any other caste here. But my father was one of the best of them; he was the head of our village, and he tilled his land and paid his rent. But we have lost it all, mother, we have lost it all!"

"And how was that?"

"Why, mother, about ten years ago no rain fell from the sky, and there came a famine in the land. My father was in distress, and he left his village to get some relief or to find some work. A week passed and then a month, but we heard nothing from him, and starved at home. Then an old man brought us news that he was no more, but had died in a relief-camp somewhere north."

"And so you became an orphan even as a child?"

"Yes, I was then only five. And my mother begged from door to door, and pawned our lands, and for months we subsisted on what we could get. And often we went to the jungle to pick up roots and vegetables to pass our days. But the bad season went by, and Bhadu gave us a good harvest at last."

"And who is this Bhadu whom you worship, child?"

"Why, mother, He is the Being who gives us our autumnal harvest, who feeds and clothes us, and looks after us as His children. And our women sing to Him day after day at the harvest-time, and many are the ceremonies we perform."

"Ay, ay, child. And the Being who gives you the harvest, and feeds and clothes you, will listen to you by whatever name you may call Him?"

"He will, mother, for He has a kind heart; but we, His creatures, are sinful, and cause our own troubles. In the harvest-time all our men get drunk, and waste their substance and the produce of their fields in drink. We shall never be as good as the Hindus are, mother, till our men give up drinking spirits."

"And is it spirits that they drink?"

"Yes, mother; that is what ruins them and kills them. In the olden days, so my father used to say, the Bauris used to brew their own Pachwi ale from rice in their villages, and that was not so bad. It exhilarated the men, but it nourished them also, for Pachwi ale is food. But in these days there is a spirit-shop every five or ten miles, and our men have

desire for the stronger drink. And spirit is not food, mother; it is poison, and it kills us."

"You are right, my child, and the sooner your people leave off drink the better for them. Look at the Hindu and the Musalman peasants and labourers; they do not drink, and can save. You aboriginal people must learn to do as they do."

"So my poor mother often told me when she was alive. And she lived to give me in marriage; but my husband left our village soon after the marriage, and I have not seen him since, and even my poor mother is dead now, and I am alone on earth." The poor girl hid her face in her Saree and wept.

"But why do you weep, child? Surely your husband is alive, and you will see him again?"

"He is alive, mother, and is in Burdwan, so I have heard from people who came from Burdwan. But he has settled down there, and has perhaps forgotten me. You will return to Burdwan, mother, and if a poor woman's sorrows remain in your memory, you may perhaps help me."

"So I shall, my child, if I can; and will you come to Burdwan if your husband wishes you to come."

"I will, mother, for I have no one to look after me in my village. And I walked all the way to Bankura, but cannot go further, because I am poor, and because I do not know if my husband will know me. If you can think of a poor Bauri woman after your return to Burdwan, she will never cease to pray for your happiness."

"God bless you for your kind wishes! The prayer of the poor reaches the throne of the Almighty, my child, sooner than hymns from temples. Take this rupee, my child, and support yourself till we come back from Puri, and I will not forget my poor Bauri friend."

IV

THE FORT IN THE JUNGLE

A LONG journey of five hours brought the party on the third day to Vishnupur, long the capital of a little kingdom, now no more than a petty village with a fort almost buried in jungle. The surrounding moat is choked with weeds and vegetation, the ancient temples and palaces fall in decay, and the proud ramparts and gateways tower in silent grandeur in the midst of desolation. India is studded with such remains of feudal days, recalling long centuries of feudal wars, and few of those remains are more striking and more imposing than the ruins of Vishnupur.

A Hindu Sub-Magistrate held his Court in this quiet village. He had known Jagat Kisor in Burdwan in former years, and when he heard that he was proceeding on a pilgrimage to Puri with his family he welcomed them to his house and strove to make them comfortable. He assigned one room to the ladies and another to the patient himself; and he invited Sarat to share his own room for the night.

In the cool of the afternoon the Magistrate strolled out with Sarat, and showed him the remains of the ancient fort. It was a great city at one time, and was fortified by a seven-mile line of curtain and bastion, with small circular ravelines covering many of the curtains. Within this outer line of fortifications lay the citadel itself, the site of which is marked by a pile of brick buildings surrounded by ruins. Numerous old temples, all more or less in ruins, still stand within the citadel, and are covered with jungles and the remains of extensive granaries can still be seen by the curious explorer. Away in the jungles is one immense piece of ordnance twelve feet five

and a half inches in length, with a regular bore of eleven and a quarter inches. This piece is half buried in sands, but two centuries of exposure to rain and wind have not rusted the metal nor injured its make.

Wandering through the jungly paths, and under the stalwart gateway which led to the inner citadel, Sarat met the humble resident of the place, a descendant of that ancient house which had ruled the state for centuries. Shades of his fathers must have looked with compassion on this poor relic of a once mighty house, dwelling alone among the ruins of their ancient capital! The territory and lands of Vishnupur had passed into other hands, and the poor survivor of a forgotten dynasty knew the pangs of penury and want. The British Government had conferred on him a humble office, and the son of crowned kings sat in his office from morning to eve performing his duty, and thankful for this compassionate act of the present rulers.

Sarat was touched at the sight of this poor official, and the Magistrate kindly asked him to supper in the evening. Jagat Kisor was much improved by his three days' journey, and he was sitting on an easy-chair when his host entered the room with his invited guest.

"I am not strong enough," said Jagat Kisor, "to explore these old fortifications, but I feel deeply interested in their history. There are few houses in Bengal which can boast of such noble remains."

"It is kind of you to say so, but all our structures are in ruins and our temples are in decay," said the descendant of kings.

"Ay, but these ruins preserve the memory of the greatness of your house. I have heard that two hundred years ago the families of Burdwan, Birbhum and Vishnupur were the most powerful territorial nobles under the Nawab of Bengal, and that Vishnupur was not the least powerful among them."

"You may well say so, sir; but Burdwan and

Birbhum were but of yesterday compared with our ancient house."

"Is your house really so old, then? I long to hear something of its story from your lips, for you must know, and can tell us of its past glory."

"It is a long story, sir, and it ill becomes me to narrate the history of our own house."

"Nay, but I would hear it from you. It is long since I have been able to sit. Indulge a poor invalid's fancies, then, and narrate to me this ancient story. It will while away an hour pleasantly, until your supper is ready, and it is time for me to retire."

The descendant of kings was nothing loth to tell the story of his house, perhaps for the hundredth time, and Jagat Kisor reclined on his chair to listen. Sarat, who had just explored the magnificent ruins, listened to the old tale with all the ardour of a student, and Jagat's mother and wife also sat in the next room behind a screen to hear the history of bygone times.

"The origin of our house," began the narrator, "is mixed up with fables: but I will narrate it as it is told in our records, and you will be able to sift true from false.

"Several hundred years ago a king of Upper India from some state near Mathura is said to have come on a visit to the sacred temple of Puri. And on his return, his queen was lost in these forests, alone and unattended, and she gave birth to a boy in the jungle.

"The mother died, no one knows in what manner. But the infant was rescued by a cultivator called Kasmetia Bagdi, and reared as his own. The child grew up to be a boy, and a Brahman who lived in these parts took him into his service, and employed him as a cowherd

"The young cowherd played with the Bagdi boys of the country, and one day lost his way in the forest, and, being tired, lay down and slept. A ray of sunlight fell through the leaves on his face, and when his friends at last discovered him, they found that a cobra had held up his many-coloured hood to shade

him from the sun. Thus, by this sign of future royalty, the people knew that the boy was destined to be king.

"The boy was Raghunath Singh. When the old king of this country died, his obsequies were celebrated with great pomp, and crowds of people came to witness them. Raghunath was among the assembled people. The royal elephant appeared amidst the crowd, and what was the surprise of the people when the huge beast seized Raghunath by its trunk and placed him on the empty throne! The whole place rung with acclamation, and the chiefs and ministers elected him king. He was crowned under the name of Adi Malla."

The tale continued through the long evening. The narrator talked of the succeeding kings of the dynasty, how they waged wars, conquered their neighbours, and extended the limits of the kingdom. The whole of the wild country with its many aboriginal races and its primeval forests had owned the supremacy of the kings of Vishnupur.

Century followed century, but the power of the house remained undiminished. The Afghan rulers of Bengal scarcely knew of this frontier state, and the flag of the Pathans never penetrated to Vishnupur. The more extensive and organised power of the Moghuls was felt all over Northern India, and when Akbar the Great ruled the empire in the sixteenth century, the kings of Vishnupur paid a nominal tribute to his representative in Bengal. But as the Moghul power declined, the frontier kingdom once more enjoyed its complete independence.

"Then came our turn in the eighteenth century," resumed the narrator; "for when the Mahrattas rose in the Deccan, Raghuji Bhonsla of Nagpur sent his hordes of horsemen through these wild passes to conquer the rich plains of Bengal. We stood our ground, we fought our battles, and we appointed keepers of passes whom we called Ghatwals. Those were the days when, as the old men tell, the forests rang year after year with the note of war, and many

a skirmish was fought in dark defiles and by the wooded shores of the Cossye.

"It is said that Bhaskar Pandit, the great general of Raghuji Bhonsla, appeared at last before the gates of Vishnupur. We closed our gates, manned our ramparts, and loaded our guns. One piece of ordnance lies half-buried in the jungles yet; it is said that the Mahratta general, Bhaskar Pandit, was killed by a shot from that cannon. And who shall say otherwise?

"But the Mahrattas were a terrible foe to fight. For their horsemen were fleet and light, they knew every pass and defile like ourselves, and they appeared and disappeared like the passing hurricane. Still we held our own, for our ramparts were strong and our gunners true, but the Mahrattas were not our only foe. We had fought many wars with the rival house of Burdwan; and when the Mahrattas invaded us, the Raja of Burdwan found his opportunity and leagued with them for our destruction. And thus between two foes, the house of Vishnupur fell after a rule of many centuries; and our vast estates were added to Burdwan, or were parcelled out among various chiefs. The power of our house is gone now; and the ruins of our citadel and fortifications tell of the glory which is passed away."

Sarat listened with the deepest interest, but the tale of the descendant of kings had lulled Jagat Kisor into a profound sleep.

V

THE HALF-WAY HOUSE

Two days' journey brought the party to Midnapur, the chief town of the district of that name. And as the palanquins approached the town, with that loud

and monotonous cry with which bearers relieve themselves in their toil, and startle the people of roadside villages, half a dozen stalwart men running up from a neighbouring shop stood before them and ordered a halt. In less peaceful times they might have been highwaymen, to judge from their fierce appearance and their Herculean stalks. But they were only the porters of Bipin Bihari Dutt, the leading citizen of Midnapur.

Jagat Kisor of Burdwan and Bipin Bihari of Midnapur were known to each other by name; and as they both belonged to the same Kayest clan, they believed themselves related in some way or other. Sarat had written to Bipin, announcing the day of Jagat Kisor's arrival, and requesting that suitable lodgings might be secured for the party at Midnapur. And the porters of Bipin had been deputed to wait for the welcome guests, and to lead them to Bipin's spacious and hospitable home.

Bipin himself waited at the door to help Jagat Kisor to the bed prepared for him, and he told his woman-servants to take the ladies to the rooms made ready for them. When they were rested and had taken some light refreshments, the evening lamps were lighted, and he came to greet them with that cordiality which was a part of his nature.

"I am happy indeed, mother," said he, addressing Jagat's mother, "that you have graced our town with your presence on your pilgrimage to Puri. I have heard much of your son, who holds such a high position in Burdwan, and have often longed to see him. Fortune has brought him in my way; and I hope you will make a long stay in Midnapur and consider this house your own."

"You are very good to us, son," replied Jagat's mother, veiling herself, "but we did not wish to put you to such trouble. We had hoped you would be able to secure some lodgings for us near your house for the one night which we propose to pass in Midnapur."

"Lodgings, mother? Do you think a hired house a suitable place for my mother when she is travelling

through our town? My house would be disgraced for ever in the eyes of men if Jagat Kisor and his mother stayed elsewhere, while I have a roof of my own to give them shelter and a morsel of rice to share with them."

"Be it so," replied Jagat's mother; "you have been as good as a son to me; bless us that Jagat Kisor be soon restored to perfect health by the grace of Jagannath."

"And that he will, mother. He will return to Burdwan in good health, and will rise to a higher position than he has yet earned. And young Sarat who accompanies him is a noble youth, and is destined for a great career. Why, mother, when I see Sarat I think of my younger brother, Khirod, who is of the same age, and of the same generous and ardent nature. I believe they knew each other in Calcutta."

"Heaven bless them both!" said the old lady. "Sarat is as generous a boy as I have ever seen, and he has been as good to me during this journey as my own son could be. But Calcutta is a perilous place for young men, my son, and our college students do not know what they do. Why, your brother has gone to Europe, has he not? And he will lose his caste when he returns, will he not? Bhagaban help us! a poor old woman like me will not live long, and cannot guess what is going to happen in the future!"

"Be not sad, my mother, and be not anxious; young men will be young men, and will have their own way. But Heaven will help them if they are true and good. Trust me, mother, you will live to see Sarat the pride of his country; and my father, I trust, will yet live to see Khirod one of the first men in these parts. Bless them both, mother, in spite of their wild ways; the blessings of the righteous are not uttered in vain."

"I bless them with all my heart and all my soul. May Jagannath, the Lord of the Earth, bestow long life on Sarat and on your brother, and may they be prosperous and happy!"

"And you will stay with us a few days, mother," rejoined Bipin. "You have travelled far from Raniganj, and it is a longer way yet to Puri."

"Ay, son, we have been travelling five days. But we thought of hurrying on, and starting again to-morrow morning."

"But that may not be, mother. Your son requires some rest after five days' journey; and Midnapur has temples which pilgrims do not pass without some offerings. Rest two days at least, and visit the temples and shrines of this town. I will show Sarat something of the place within these two days, and your son will be all the better able to continue his journey after a little rest."

This was arranged accordingly, and on the next morning Bipin took Sarat out in his dog-cart for a drive. No town in Bengal has finer drives than Midnapur, for half the district is gravel soil, and the roads are therefore good. Far to the west the road went up and down over the undulating ground, and the scenery was wild. A ruined castle built on a rock by some unknown chief in the turbulent old times frowned its desolate grandeur; and the river Cossye glistened far below on its bed of rock and sand.

Bipin was the leading citizen of the town, and the wise Government of the Marquis of Ripon had imposed new duties and responsibilities on the children of the soil who were capable and deserving of such trust. Among his many duties, therefore, Bipin was the Chairman of Midnapur Municipality; and on their return from the drive, he stopped at the Municipal Office.

The European Magistrate of the district was returning from his morning ride, when Bipin saw and accosted him. The Magistrate, who liked and respected Bipin, dismounted, and came into the office, to inspect it and to have a quiet chat.

"Well, Bipin, I see in the papers they have had great doings in every part of India of late."

"Yes, sir," said Bipin. "The people of India are a grateful nation, and can honour an administrator who labours for their good. No Viceroy in this generation has endeared himself to the people like the Marquis of Ripon, and they are anxious to show him their gratitude on the eve of his departure from India."

"Oh, of course, I forgot you were a Riponite yourself!" said the Magistrate, laughing.

"I am afraid, sir, I am but a lukewarm Riponite. For there were great celebrations in Calcutta lately, and I could not go to witness them. But I sent my children, and you would be amused to hear them talk of the street decorations and the processions, the illumination and the fireworks they saw, such as Calcutta never had before."

"And do your children understand the cause of these rejoicings?"

"I asked a little girl of seven what they were for, and she said without hesitation: 'Because Lord Ripon has been kind and just to the people.' I do not think there is a man, woman, or child who has witnessed these celebrations who does not in his simple way understand this reason. And I believe, sir, that these simple words of a child will prove to be the verdict of History."

"Well, the Marquis must feel a proud man to-day! He has certainly done me some good in giving me an able Municipal Chairman for this town. If the other towns in India, which have been empowered by Lord Ripon to elect their own Chairman, have found such men as Bipin Bihari Dutt, Lord Ripon's scheme of Municipal self-government may yet succeed!"

"It is very kind of you to say so; I can only do my humble best. But the people of India have never been wanting either in intelligence or in capacity for work in the past; and we must have sunk very low indeed if, after we have been educated for three generations in English schools and colleges, we are not fit to take some real share in our own administrations."

"I think you are partly right there. I think the more duties we entrust to you the better work we get out of you. I certainly find the Members of the District Board, who are now elected under Lord Ripon's scheme, very useful men, and very willing to work."

"More than that, sir, such a liberal policy removes discontent, and strengthens the British rule in India. Human nature is much the same everywhere; if you impose duties upon us, you make us loyal sharers in the work of administration; if you exclude us from all control you make us hostile critics and disloyal subjects. In the history of the British Empire discontent and disloyalty have always followed an exclusive policy; content and loyalty have always resulted from letting the people have a share in the management of their own affairs."

"You would make a capital orator on a radical platform in England, Bipin, I am thinking!"

"I am not an orator, sir, and I have never been to England. But we feel that there can be no good government in any civilised country without some degree of self-government; that the concerns of a great people cannot be successfully managed unless the people themselves are permitted a share in the control of the administration."

"An excellent maxim, my friend, which I have no doubt you have picked up from some excellent Liberal text-book! But coming to facts, perhaps you can inform me what kind of self-governing institutions your country had when the Mahratta and the Moghul contended for the mastery of India, and the Old Pindaree, in the words of the Anglo-Indian poet, '*asked no leave from Chief or King as he swept through Hindustan!*'"

"We do not look back with pleasure to the events of the eighteenth century, sir, when India was no better, and perhaps not worse, than many states in Europe. If things are better in Europe in the nineteenth century, it is because most nations have secured

a constitutional Government, and we in India expect something of the same sort, and not a decayed benevolent despotism."

"You are a very clever lawyer, Bipin, and as a Government Pleader you have given me valuable help in my work. But you are a cleverer man than I took you for if you can show that your country had any germs of self-government under the Moghul and the Mahratta, such as most European nations had in the worst times."

"We never had Parliament, sir, or Representative Assemblies, or even District Boards. But all the great military and civil commands were shared by Hindu and Mahommedan leaders; Zemindars were *de facto* rulers of their estates; and Village Communities managed village concerns. The Emperor ruled wisely or foolishly in his Court, and his representatives ruled in great towns; but the village population, which was virtually the nation, governed itself."

"Ah! you speak of Village Communities. Well, I do sometimes think it is a pity they have so nearly disappeared under our rule."

"That was no doubt a rude system, sir, but it was equally undoubtedly a form of self-government, more ancient than any other known among the peoples on the face of the earth. It has perished under the influence of modern demands, and we naturally desire something to take its place under which the people may share in the control of their own affairs. We would like to consider the British Government as our own national institution: you persist in keeping it up as an alien, exclusive Government, and this does not add to the strength of British rule in India."

"And you don't think that British rulers represent your wishes and opinions in any way?"

"They cannot do so, because Englishmen in India do not live with the people, but in a little English world of their own, as you have often told me yourself. Indeed with their frequent furloughs, and their

rapid journeys to Europe, they live less among the people of India, know less of them, sympathise less with them, and reflect less of their opinions, than English administrators of former times, like Munro and Malcolm and Elphinstone."

"I admit we are more birds of passage now than we were in the olden days."

"And therefore it is still more necessary now than it was in former days that we should have some place in the Executive Councils of the Empire, and some share in the control of the administration. We have accepted British rule; we have thrown in our lot with our British rulers; and hence we desire that the administration should be national, and not an alien rule."

"You have stated your case well, Bipin, and I have no doubt you express the sentiments of the best classes of educated Indians. For my part, I believe that men like yourself have identified themselves with British rule, and they know and feel that they have everything to gain by a continuance of that rule. But you know as well as I, Bipin, that there are wild and ignorant spirits in India who may not be equally friendly to us."

"And you are simply playing into the hands of these ignorant and disaffected classes by excluding the people from the higher services, and from all control of the administration. You are now at the parting of the ways. You may, by placing trust and confidence in the people, encourage the moderate and the best intentioned classes, accept their help and co-operation, and make British rule in India popular, strong, and abiding. Or you may, by pursuing a policy of exclusion and mistrust, discredit and humiliate the moderate and loyal classes, play the very game of the discontented and disaffected classes, and create a danger for yourselves of a kind which has never yet risen. You may choose the better course, or you may choose the worse, but the time is at hand when the choice has to be made."

The Magistrate paused for a moment, and then

spoke slowly and thoughtfully: "I am not sure that you are not right, Bipin. Englishmen do not look back when they have once put their hand to the plough, and India is bound to have her self-government and her representation in course of time. And now good-bye, Bipin; it is late, and I cannot stop to inspect your office. You are such a charming man to talk to—you never will let me do any business!"

VI

THE TRIBUTARY RAJA

Two days' march brought the party from Midnapur to the river Subarna-rekha, literally "the Streak of Gold," which sharply divides Bengal Proper from Orissa. North of this river the people speak Bengali, and to the south Uriya, another daughter of the ancient Sanscrit language of India. The country to the north submitted to the Afghan rulers in the thirteenth century, but that to the south was ruled by Hindu dynasties down to the close of the sixteenth century. The Moslems then conquered Orissa, but their rule was brief, for the Mahrattas brought back that province to Hindu administration in the eighteenth century, and the British succeeded in the nineteenth. This borderland has thus witnessed stirring scenes within the last four centuries—struggles between the Uriya and the Moslem, the Moslem and the Mahratta, the Mahratta and the British; but those days of border warfare are now past. And the waters of the "Golden Streak" roll silently to the sea as if since time was born they

> "Had ever heard the shepherd's reed,
> Ne'er started at the bugle horn!"

The morning sun fell on the glittering waters of the Subarna-rekha as Jagat Kisor's party crossed that river. Numbers of pilgrims, wending their way to the distant temple of Jagannath, increased as the distance became less. Hardy men from Behar and Northern India, groups of women from the hamlets and towns of Bengal, and pilgrims from the remotest portions of the Hindu world, came trooping to the far-famed temple by the sea. Anchorites in whose one arm, uplifted for weeks and months, the bone was become rigid and immovable; suffering patients who measured their length along the route of hundreds of miles, lying down on the road, and rising up only to lie down till morning came to night and night brought rest. There were ash-covered hermits also with matted locks, who muttered their beads and spoke to none, sustaining themselves by alms which they obtained without asking.

All the wonderful feats of faith and endurance, all the rigid submission to vows and penances, which were witnessed in Europe in the Middle Ages, are seen in India at this present day. Sufferers from long and chronic ailments, people bereaved by the death of dear or near relations, weary and aged men in the last stages of life, delicate girls and young wives with fond desires hidden in their bosoms, flock to this distant shrine in hope of relief from pain, or for the fulfilment of long-cherished objects. Philosophy smiles at the simple faith of the unreasoning, but it is faith and not philosophy which has held together large populations through centuries of distress and disaster, and has often enabled them to combine and work for those results which form the brightest chapters in the records of the past.

It was bright, bracing weather, and Jagat Kisor's party crossed the Subarna-rekha, and continued their journey all through the day with only a brief halt for rest at noon. When the red sun glimmered on the western hills, they entered Balasore, the first great town in Orissa on the way to Puri. The town is not

many miles from the Bay of Bengal, and the salubrious sea air makes it a healthy place of residence for people coming for a change from the malarial districts of Bengal.

A hospitable Zemindar of Balasore received the distinguished pilgrims into his own house, the ladies of which busied themselves in those endless acts of courtesy and kindness which ancient custom imposes on the Hindu hostess. These ladies understood Bengali, though they spoke their own Uriya tongue; and Jagat Kisor's mother and wife understood Uriya; so that a mixed conversation was kept up in the inner apartments of the house till a late hour in the evening, when a sumptuous feast was spread with all the kindly ostentation of Uriya hospitality.

In the outer apartments the Balasore Zemindar was entertaining Jagat Kisor and Sarat, and, at the same time, receiving a visit from another distinguished guest, the Tributary Raja of an Orissa state. Orissa is divided into two tracts of country, distinguished by their natural features. The level plains in the east, lying along the Bay of Bengal, are inhabited by a cultured people, and come directly under British administration. The more hilly jungle tracts in the west are inhabited by less advanced tribes, who are ruled by their own hereditary Rajas under British superintendence. One of these hill Rajas had come to pay a visit to the European Magistrate of Balasore, and was spending the evening in a quiet chat with the Zemindar, and with Jagat Kisor and Sarat.

He was furnished with all the splendour of Oriental dress, and the high turban on his head was richly worked in gold. Dark of complexion, but open and manly in his features, he still possessed a strong physique and commanding presence although of an advanced age. His two boys sat on either side, robed in gold-embroidered garments. Outside the room a number of select attendants stood with silver maces in their hands, and with the conscious pride of the bodyguard of a ruling prince. And down in the court-

yard were the gorgeous palanquins with silver-tipped handles and red trappings, surrounded by a troop of retainers. Soldiers of a primitive type waited with their swords and bucklers; holders of the red umbrella and the regal fan stood on their dignity; link boys prepared their torches for the return journey; and a little army of bearers smoked as they talked or sprawled upon the ground.

"And are your subjects, Raja, like the people of British Orissa, and do they speak the Uriya language?" asked Jagat Kisor, much interested in the august visitor.

"Yes," he replied; "many of them are Uriyas and speak the Uriya language, and live by tilling their land like the people of British Orissa. But away in the remoter hills and forests there are still the descendants of wilder tribes who speak their own languages and live their old forest life. Their villages are clusters of rude huts in the midst of the woods, and their ways of life are primitive. A great portion of my state in my father's time was inhabited by these aboriginal tribes, but now, as elsewhere, they are growing thinner, or retreating further and further with the gradual advance of the more civilised Uriya population."

"And is your administration much the same as in British territory?"

"Well, we copy British administration, and there is a Court of Justice and an Office, a jail and a hospital in my capital. But we generally leave the people to themselves, and never interfere with their village affairs so long as they live in peace. They manage their own concerns best if we interfere little with them. And, on the whole, they are peaceful and loyal to their Raja."

"But I heard that there was a rising among the people in your state some years ago."

"Yes, but that was partly the fault of my own officers. By old custom they pay us a little revenue in corn and cattle from each village; and my officers

wished to replace this by a survey and assessment of their cultivated lands. This the primitive people did not understand, and they rose with their bows and arrows, poor fellows! But the rising was, of course, soon quelled."

"Have you then given up the idea of the survey?"

"No; we have them in the advanced tracts; but it is best to leave the more backward people to their own ways. Modern methods gradually introduce themselves; but I do not believe in introducing them too fast."

"I think you are right; and I hear the Magistrate of Balasore supports you in this view. Does he often visit your state?"

"Oh, perhaps once or twice a year. He is a sympathetic administrator, and I am always glad to receive him in my palace, and to show him my court-house, my jail and my schools. And then, perhaps, we spend some days in hunting, for he is a good shot and a keen sportsman."

"What do you generally shoot?"

"We have almost every kind of wild animal in the jungle. Tigers are becoming rare, but leopards are common, and bears we frequently meet. We sometimes go after wild game on foot; but oftener we conceal ourselves in trees, and hundreds of the wild jungle people form a wide circle and beat the jungle, driving the game before them, so that we can take each animal as he crosses our way. The Magistrate brought down a fine bear last year, and he keeps the cubs in his house."

"Your eldest boy is a good marksman too, I hear."

"Yes; he holds his rifle pretty well, and will soon make his mark. But I wish him to learn a little English also; in these days that helps us a great deal in our administration, and gives us some insight into the laws and rules of the British territory which we naturally copy."

"But they say English education sometimes spoils the Rajas of these Tributary States."

"It is not English education which spoils them—

it is keeping them aloof from their subjects. Minor Rajas are educated in Cuttack, and are for years absent from their own states. They do not live among their people, and are not in touch with them, and so when they come of age and return to their homes, they are comparative strangers among their own people, which is a pity. Give them the best English education you can, the more the better, but let them be often among their people; let them live and move among them, and always learn to know them as their subjects, and to feel for them. That is what makes a successful administrator and a popular Raja; the wildest tribes will respond to kindness."

"And do you think most of the Rajas do deal kindly with their subjects?"

"I think so. There are some twenty Tributary States in Orissa, and, from what I hear, most of the Rajas are loved by their subjects. Princes are often indolent and backward in adopting reforms; but, as I said before, that is not seldom a virtue. Newfangled rules and methods puzzle and alarm our primitive people. It is all very well for you in British territory to go ahead, you have a modern education and culture, and an ancient civilisation of thousands of years. We are more primitive, and move slowly. But it is getting late, and my host will now permit me to retire."

Jagat Kisor's party resumed their journey on the following morning, and a march of two days along the unending pilgrim route brought them to the sacred river of Baitarani which mingles its waters with the Brahmani, and inundates one half of Orissa in years of heavy rainfall. Rising in the western hills and uplands, the sister streams roll their waters on the level plains of the east, and form by their union a deep and spacious river flowing past the port of Chandbali to the Bay of Bengal. In the winter these streams shrink into their channels in the midst of a waste of sand-banks. But when the monsoon breaks in July, and freshets bring their annual supply to the

sources, the rivers often change their whole nature in the course of twenty-four hours, and miles of the country which were green fields the day before become a vast inland sea. Villages and hamlets are submerged in years of heavy rains, and the unfortunate people live with women and children on mounds of earth here and there, sustaining themselves with uncooked rice, until the waters subside, and their homes and huts again become habitable. The freaks of nature are mighty and often disastrous on this eastern coast; a year of drought will rob half a province of its annual food supply; in the next year an excessive rainfall will lay their fields and homesteads under water for weeks.

Jagat Kisor's party crossed the Baitarani river at a point before its junction with the Brahmani, and left the main road for a while to pay a visit to Jajpur, one of the old capitals of Orissa. Some old relics dating from a thousand years back, still attest the ancient glory of this city, and Jagat's mother prostrated herself reverently before the wonderful monolith images of INDRANI, the Queen of Heaven, of VARAHINI, the Goddess of the Earth, and of KALI, the Mother of Destruction. Even Sarat stood long in contemplation before these memorials of a past and forgotten empire, while the light of the silent stars fell on the huts and cottages of the now obscure village of Jajpur.

VII

MONASTERIES AND TEMPLES

NEXT day saw Jagat Kisor once more upon the road from Jajpur and crossing the Brahmani river, and a long day's march at length brought them to the mighty Mahanadi, the greatest of the Orissa rivers.

Issuing from the western hills, and rolling down its waters through gloomy gorges and rock-bound passes, the Mahanadi spreads itself far and wide as it reaches the level plains where it divides into two broad channels. In the island formed by these channels, some ancient Hindu king built an impregnable fort in the tenth century, and called it his "Cuttack" or encampment; this "Cuttack" has since become the capital of Orissa. A high stone embankment, rising twenty feet or more from the winter level of the river, girdles the great town on all sides, and saves it from inundations when the river rises in the rains. This great work, erected by the old Hindu kings and Mahratta administrators, has been carefully preserved by British officers, for it is the salvation of the town. And often in the rainy season engineers watch the rapid rise of the river from day to day with fear and trembling, since in some years the waters come to within two feet of the top of the embankment. Days are then passed in anxiety and nights in watching; for a further rise of the waters would convert the great town into a vast lake! But the calculations of the old kings, based on the experience of centuries, were exact; the highest inundations in the worst year never reach up to the last two feet; the city is never submerged. For a few days the citizens remain in a state of suspense, and the waters stretching to the ends of the horizon sweep past the embanked town both north and south, carrying in their wild fury large trees torn by the root, or posts and thatches of huts swept away from many a village and town. Then the river falls as quickly as it rose, and one fine morning the people rejoice to find that the danger is over—the town saved!

Now the mighty and erratic river rolled silently on its quiet bed of sands in the winter evening, and Jagat Kisor's party crossed unhindered to the southern shore. Hari Ballabh Bose, the leading citizen of Cuttack, known no less for his boundless hospitality than for his wealth and influence, was of the same caste as

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and in nursing his disappointment all through his solitary journey. He now rode for hours, alone and silent, and the undulating hills, dark jungles, and solitary wastes were congenial to his thoughts. Often, during a long and dreamy day, scenes which he had left behind him rose in his mind, images of the old glad days rose again before his eyes, and the voices which had sent the warm blood tingling through his veins thrilled once more in his ear. The loving conversation of Hem, the silvery accents of sister Bindu, and the bashful silence of innocent Sudha were inseparable from his lonely wanderings through the hills and wilds of Orissa.

It was during his stay in Cuttack that he received the sad news of poor Uma's death; and he forgot his own disappointment, shedding silent tears for one whom he had loved as a sister. Uma and Bindu had been the companions of his sister Kalee since their earliest days, and Sarat loved them all with an equal love. Uma was the beauty and the joy of the village; and often had the bright-eyed girl strolled with Sarat, when he played truant, through the groves by the silent lake, storing his mind with the wealth of ancient folklore, in which every Indian village abounds. Years passed, and Uma became a bride and a wife. Then the whole village flocked to her father's house whenever word went about that she was home on a visit from Dhanpur. And now that bright soul had vanished, that lamp was quenched, and the path of life was darker!

Often on his solitary rides among the hills of western Orissa he would pass by the huts of the forest-folk living in their own primitive way. He went through dark bamboo forests which wild beasts still haunted by night, and scaled lofty hills, from the top of which he could look down on the level places of Orissa with its woods and towns and rolling rivers spread out like a map before him.

Scenes like these were congenial to him, and he left Cuttack for days together to go farther and

farther into the western Highlands. He penetrated to Dhenkenal State, and as he stood on an elevation and surveyed the amphitheatre of wooded hills and green valleys and yellow patches of corn-fields all round, he felt a repose and almost a joy to which his heart had been a stranger for weeks. Nay, more —right through the woods and hills of Hindol and Narsingpur States he went, even to the historic pass of Barmul, which is one of the most striking places in India. All the way from Tikarpara to the pass of Barmul the Mahanadi flows through a rocky gorge, and the wooded hills rise perpendicularly from the stream on both sides. Peacocks haunt the jungles, elephants and other wild animals roam the trackless woods, and scarcely a human voice is heard, or a human form disturbs the silence of the rock-bound and limpid Mahanadi. At Barmul the hills recede and the river expands. A laughing stream, appropriately called Khalkhala, runs down into the Mahanadi at this point, and it was here that the Mahrattas fought their last battle with the British in 1804, when they lost Orissa for ever.

But the most interesting spot in the land, one indeed notable throughout all India, is the hill of Khandgiri, with its ancient Buddhist monasteries, and the adjoining Hindu temples of Bhubaneswar. Jagat's mother wished to visit these temples, and so Hari Ballabh arranged for a visit to the place, which is some fifteen miles to the south of Cuttack. Over two thousand years ago, Asoka, Emperor of all Northern India, annexed Bengal to his extensive empire, and Buddhist monks and missionaries penetrated to Orissa, and built the caves and monasteries which still exist. Here the "Tiger Cave" and other small excavations in the rock, once dwellings of the solitary anchorite, stand side by side with such larger caves as the Ganesha Gumpha, at once meeting-places and houses of worship for the community. A two-storied monastery called Rani Nur, with its many rooms and verandahs and sculptured figures over the doors,

stands near by to attest the skill of Indian architects and the sculptors of ancient times. For a long time Sarat strolled among these Buddhist ruins, until called away by the ladies to the Hindu temples of Bhubaneswar.

Here dwelt the Lion Kings, and hence they ruled Orissa from the fifth to the twelfth century; and Bhubaneswar, their capital, was perhaps the proudest city of all India in those days. The Great Temple dates from the seventh century, and a hundred other temples, many of them still in a good state of preservation, attest to the power and the greatness of the royal worshippers. The modern pilgrim and traveller gazes in amazement on this city in its ruins, and stands speechless before the ancient edifices constructed of hewn stones, carved and sculptured with infinite labour and skill, and roofed with enormous single slabs raised to a height of a hundred or two hundred feet.

The ladies entered the enclosure of the Great Temple where worship is still offered to Bhubaneswar, the Lord of the Earth. The grand tower of the Vimana rises to a great height and is covered with elaborate sculpture. Every stone has a pattern carved upon it, while there is no image among its tracery of muslin carved in stone but attests the infinite labour bestowed on this great work. For the Hindu indeed "planned as a Titan and worked as a jeweller."

"This is a city of temples, it seems to me," said Jagat's mother to Sarat; "surely they were gods who could build like this. We have not many stone temples like this in Bengal."

"They had indeed more than human skill and human fervour, mother, in the ancient days, to have covered this ancient city with such structures. They had an aim and purpose in life, mother; we live listless and aimless in these days."

"Ay, my son, you speak truly. Those who have faith can do much, and the gods assisted the kings who reared these temples of old. Strive, my children,

ye who are young and strong, strive with faith and with a purpose, and ye too shall achieve something for your country, even in these days."

VIII

THE VOW

THE cloudless sun of an Indian winter shone brightly on the busy streets and bazaars of Cuttack as Jagat Kisor's party left that city on the last stage of their journey to Puri. They crossed the southern branch of the Mahanadi, which had a few months before deluged and swept over the country, but now trickled in narrow channels, scarcely two feet deep, through a waste of sand. The palanquins and pony crossed the stream without a ferry-boat, and then prepared for the journey of fifty odd miles which lay between them and the far-famed temple. Relays of bearers were placed every eight or ten miles, according to custom; and, allowing for a halt on the wayside at midday, the party expected to arrive at their destination before nightfall.

The groups of pilgrims hailing from all parts of India increased in number with each step nearer to the sacred temple. In the rainy season, when the great Car Festival takes place at Puri, thousands traverse this route daily, and the gathering at the Festival in auspicious years swells to two or three hundred thousand. The number is less at other seasons, but throughout the twelve months, and especially in the pleasant winter-time, the stream of pilgrims never entirely ceases. Men and women from distant provinces, the sick and the halt, the mendicant and the anchorite, wend their weary journey of months to the far-famed shrine, which it is

the pious hope of their lives to visit once before their death. The faith of the Middle Ages is not yet dead in India, and many a cherished rite and custom, chronicled by mediæval monks in Europe, yet lives in this wonderful eastern land. Travel and change, and the seeing of new places and new sights—all of which are secularised in modern Europe—still wear the mantle of religion and of pious duty in India. The old Canterbury pilgrims, could they live again, would witness with wonder no less interesting groups of pilgrims performing similar journeys to Puri in this latter day; and he who yet summons faith to aid at Lourdes would see in the eastern brother or sister a pilgrim no less devoted, perhaps more trusting, more enthusiastic.

A short halt was called at midday for rest and breakfast. Jagat Kisor and his people took shelter in a wayside shop; but the poorer pilgrims needed no such accommodation. Their fire needed but the lighting under a shady tree, and in less than half an hour the brass or earthen pots placed on the embers yielded rice and vegetables enough for the scanty need of a Bengal pilgrim. Hardier men from the north-west scarcely heeded cooking at all, gram—wheaten flour—mixed with curd or milk, or water, being all they asked. The whole encampment broke up within the hour, the earthen pots were pitched aside, and before the fire of the ovens was yet dulled, the pilgrim had once more shouldered staff and bundle, counting little of food or rest beside the last march, which should bring them before the very shrine.

Nor was it long before the spire of the temple of Jagannath broke upon expectant eyes, while yet some miles away. Then, indeed, the pious band halted where they stood, and as they shaded their eyes in the first view of that sacred steeple, up rose the cry of joy and triumph:

"Jagannath Ji Ki Jai!"

"Glory to the Lord of the Earth!" From every side it rose; women added their feeble voices to swell

the sound, and Jagat's mother and wife forgot modesty even to lean out of their palanquin and view that spire and whisper the prayer! Men who, long weeks and months, had travelled hundreds of miles from Bengal or Northern India, felt that the consummation of their hopes and prayers had come. For the Lord whom they had sought in heart was there in his distant spire, to bless long toil and weary travel!

"Jagannath Ji Ki Jai!"

"Glory to the Lord of the Earth!" Again and again rose the cry, until Sarat himself reined in his horse and stood among the gladdened pilgrims. The temples and shrines of India, he thought within himself, had not been reared in vain, if they had kept untold millions together as one nation with one faith; if they had sent into their hearts obscure glimpses of that Immortal Light, which all living beings seek.

"Jagannath Ji Ki Jai!"

"Glory to the Lord of the Earth!" The cry became thenceforth a burden to which the pilgrims marched throughout the remainder of the journey, yielding only to a universal shout of triumph as they crossed the wooden bridge at last, and the shades of evening closed around them as they entered the sacred town of Puri in one wild chorus of joy and jubilation.

Jagat Kisor's party had been accosted by a troop of Pandas or temple priests before they had even arrived at Puri. Thousands of Pandas loiter about the great temple of Jagannath, often travelling long distances to take charge of pilgrims, and contending for the custom of the wealthy. This happened in the case of Jagat Kisor, and the contest was decided in the usual manner. One of the disputants succeeded in producing from his archives the name of some ancestor of Jagat Kisor's who had visited the temple in the past generation; he recounted Jagat's genealogy, mentioned the names of all his relations who

had ever visited Puri, gave a correct account of his family connections, and, having thus established his superior claim, forthwith took charge of the party during their stay in the holy city.

Ordinary pilgrims are taken by their chosen Pandas to the lodging-houses licensed under an Act of the Government, but in the case of this rich Zemindar a spacious residence had been lent by a citizen of the place; and the Panda slept there all night to be quite sure that no brother should enter in and dispute his lawful claims.

But there was no sleep for Jagat's mother. "Tell me," said the venerable old lady to Sarat, as they sat up with Kalee by the midnight lamp, "tell me, my son—for you know of the past—when this great temple was built, and why the great Jagannath made his abode on this distant sea-shore. I sleep not to-night, and you too sleep little, I fear, my son. Indulge an old woman's fancies, and tell me all concerning the Lord of the Earth."

"Nay, I know but little of the legends, mother," said Sarat. "But you have seen the older temples of Bhubaneswar which were built by the Lion Kings of Orissa, who worshipped Siva under that name. History says that they were succeeded by another line of kings called the Gangetic dynasty, who preferred the deity Vishnu. One of the first of that line built this great temple."

"And when was that, my son, and what was the name of that high-starred king who raised this temple?"

"His name, our records say, was Ananga Bhima, and he ascended the throne seven hundred years ago. Legends have it, mother, that Vishnu or Jagannath appeared to him in a dream, and commanded him to travel southward from the ancient capital of Orissa to the sands of Puri, and to build a temple there in his name. And Ananga Bhima obeyed the summons and built this temple. The old capital and the worship of Siva have declined; the newer temple and the worship of Jagannath endure to this day."

"Ay, but these are but names, my son, as Brahmacharins have often told me, and the Blessed One will receive our worship by whatever name we call Him. In the holy city of Benares, where your mother wishes to pass her days, the worship of Siva still prevails, and the temples are dedicated to Him. Here in Puri, it is the worship of Vishnu, and the temple is dedicated to Him under the name of Jagannath. I am but a poor ignorant woman, my son, but religious men have told me that Vishnu is the same as Siva, and that He is but the One whom all invoke by various names."

"And religious men have spoken truly, mother," replied Sarat. "There is but One whom all nations invoke, though in their little wisdom they have often shed each other's blood for differences in names."

"Ay," resumed the old lady, after a short pause. "Ay, my son, your saintly mother has fixed her heart on Benares, and will pass her last days in that holy city. It is this that our Holy Scriptures enjoin us to do, when we have well-nigh lived the span of human life, and are fit to retire from human cares. May Jagannath restore my son to health! may He make my dutcous Kalee a happy mother and the mistress of a happy household! My task on earth is done, and Jagannath will accept a votaress if she devotes her remaining days to Him, and seeks to do His will."

There was a strange tremor in the last few words, and Kalee shuddered to think what they might mean.

The sun shone brightly from the eastern sky on the following morning when the gates of the Great Temple were opened, and a stream of pilgrims poured into the sacred enclosure. It is a spacious square, six hundred and fifty by six hundred and thirty feet, and is full of small shrines and temples. In the midst of them rises the Great Temple with its Bhoga Mandir for offerings, its Nata Mandir for songs and music, its Jagat Mohan for the assembling of pilgrims, and its lofty Vimana or Sanctuary containing the sacred images.

Once in the year, at the time of the Car Festival,

these images leave the Sanctuary and are conveyed to the Summer Shrine. Three great cars are then constructed of timber supplied by the Tributary Rajas of Orissa, and decked with cloth of gold, the offering of the rich devout. The three images of Jagannath, Balabhadra, and Subhadra are placed on the three cars; thousands of pilgrims hold the ropes; and the spacious road, the tops of temples, and the roofs of houses, become one sea of human heads! Shouts of joy rend the skies as the cars begin to move, drum and trumpet lend their voice, and the procession presents a scene which is seldom paralleled even in the gorgeous East.

Day after day the cars proceed a short distance, and the pilgrims return with renewed ardour every succeeding day to their pious labour. Thus the procession continues until the images have been conveyed to the Summer Shrine—perhaps a week or more. Throughout this time the pilgrims visit all the holy shrines in the city, they bathe in the holy tanks or in the sea, and they live on the sacred food, Maha-Prasad, supplied from the kitchen of the temple. Thirty or forty thousand bathers brave the surf of the ocean in a day to perform their holy ablutions, a hundred thousand receive their food from the temple. And so holy is this food that it is distributed to all without distinction of caste or colour, and the high caste Brahman sits beside the lowest-born to take the Maha-Prasad! It is a concession which the believers of caste make on no other occasion, and in no other place in India.

A great many pilgrims leave the town after this procession; but the more devout remain to help in the return journey to their temple. Altogether, the journey and the return occupy three or four weeks, and these three weeks of the rainy season are the holiest in the year at Puri.

Pilgrims in smaller numbers visit the town throughout the year, and there was a fair gathering on the day on which Jagat Kisor and his party came. Long before sunrise, his mother and wife had sallied forth

under the guidance of the Panda. The great tanks called Markanda and Swetganga and Indradumna are considered sacred places here. In one of these the ladies made their ablutions before the sun was up; then they put on silken garments befitting the day, and walked through the town, visiting the different shrines. The temples of Kapal Lochan, of Jambeswar and of Lokenath were visited, as well as the holy monasteries beyond the temple enclosure. Jagat's mother forgot weariness or pain as she walked from shrine to temple, and from street to street; and Kalee also felt all the strength and fervour of a pilgrim.

The sun was high in the heavens before the two ladies returned. There was no cooking in the house, as the temple supplied the Maha-Prasad to the pilgrims. Wealthy pilgrims consider it an act of merit to contribute to this Maha-Prasad; and thousands of rupees are sometimes spent in a day to prepare fifty-six different dishes in vast quantities, which are offered to the gods, and then distributed in the neighbouring villages. Jagat Kisor's Panda did not fail to draw from him a handsome contribution.

It was nearly ten when Jagat Kisor, supported by Sarat, entered the gates of the temple enclosure, followed by his mother and his wife. The two ladies made their gifts at all the smaller shrines, and then the party approached the Great Temple. They passed the Bhoga Mandir or the place of offerings, and the Nata Mandir or the place of music, and stood in the Jagat Mohan with a crowd of other pilgrims.

Before them, and within the Sanctuary, at a distance of about fifteen yards, was the holy Ratna Bedi, the Jewelled Altar on which stood the Three Images. And as the Sanctuary burst upon the sight of the crowd of pilgrims, a cry of pious rapture rose from their lips, while murmured prayers and thanksgivings welled from devout hearts. With eager and longing looks they looked on the dark chamber and gazed on the scene as in a trance. Hopes cherished during weeks

and months of painful pilgrimage were fulfilled, thoughts and wishes concealed in pious bosoms found expression in whispered words, and tears streamed down the faces of fair worshippers as they bent in silent adoration.

At last the appointed hour came. The chief priest made the sign, and a nearer approach was permitted. The silent pilgrims stepped down in awe and reverence to the foot of the Jewelled Altar. There was a hush in the darkened Sanctuary, and the worshippers held their breath in suspense. Pale lamps threw their dim radiance on the shrine, and the smoke of incense rose in clouds. Trembling, and with unsteady steps, fair worshippers were led by the Paudas nearer and nearer to the Holy Seat. Scarcely conscious of the way they were led, scarcely seeing the pillared chamber and the darkened walls, they only felt themselves in a holy presence. One long glance they threw on the images as they prostrated themselves in speechless prayer.

And then each worshipper produced his humble offering and placed it at the foot of the Altar. The poor labourer from Behar or Northern India produced his few copper coins from the folds of his Dhoti. The merchant's wife placed the brocaded cloth, and the humble trader the flowered Saree at the Altar. Jewelled bangles and necklets were offered by rich ladies, and the Gold Mohur by noblemen. Gifts of all kinds from all conditions of people attested their devotion.

Jagat Kisor's mother was the last to leave the scene; and as she rose with tears in her eyes, she touched the heads of her son and daughter, and spoke the vow she had cherished in her heart: "Grant, O Jagannath, Lord of the Earth, health and prosperity to my son! Grant that my daughter be the mistress of a large household and the mother of many children! For seventy years I have lived in the world, and my task is done. From this day I dedicate myself to

Thy service only in this holy city. *For thou art He who dwellest by the sea, and Thou art the abode of this woman of many years!*"

A shiver ran through all as they heard this vow. Jagat and his wife had not known that this was the secret resolve of their aged mother. They would have given all they possessed on earth to have taken her back to the home which she had managed so long, and which without her would be so cheerless. They felt a void in their hearts as they thought of returning home without her who was dearer to them than life. But the words had been spoken!

"But we may not return to Burdwan without you, mother," said weeping Kalee. "What were our home to us without its mistress?"

"Be you the mistress of the home, my daughter, for your time is now come. Be the mother of happy children, for Jagannath has heard my prayers. Few are the years remaining to me on earth, and our holy Sastras enjoin devotion and preparation for a future world. My duty in this world is done, and my words have been spoken!"

BOOK IV

THE LAKE

I

REMORSE

THE days which Sarat's mother passed in Calcutta were both anxious and joyless. She had fondly hoped to spend her remaining years in acts of piety and devotion in the holy city of Benares, but the ties of earth had dragged her once more into a life of cares and troubles, and she longed to escape them again, and to return to Benares. Favourable news came to her from time to time of Jagat Kisor and his wife, and she prayed night and morning that they might return to Burdwan safe, and that she might be freed from those bonds which held her back from the last duties of her life.

A letter from Puri told her that Jagat Kisor's mother had decided to remain in that sacred town to end her days. "Happy is my sister," she said to herself; "she has done her life's duty as few women can do it, she has seen her son and daughter take her place in her great household, and she devotes herself to religion. Such a noble life has a righteous close. If I have striven to do thy bidding, O blessed One, Bhagaban! help my poor son in his distress, and accept me for Thy service!"

The recollection of her son always brought a shade to the poor widow's face. She knew the sacrifice that Sarat had made at her bidding, and she had perceived also what it had cost him. Sarat's letters

were few and short; he wrote of his sister and her husband, but never of himself, and he never spoke of returning to Calcutta and resuming his work. Sarat's mother pored over the brief missives by the light of the evening lamp, when there was no one else beside her, and there was a void in her heart, and a great apprehension filled her mind. The poor widow spoke her thoughts to none, but nursed them and brooded over them day after day, and a trembling fear seized her that her pride, her worldliness, had for ever darkened the career of her brave and generous boy.

Poor Uma's mother had come to Calcutta on hearing of her daughter's disappearance, so she often came to visit Sarat's mother, and long was the converse which they held day after day. With a mother's abiding sorrow she spoke of the child who had been taken away from her, though the memory of her only brought fresh grief to her heart and fresh tears to her eyes.

"But why blame Bhagaban?" she asked for the hundredth time; "I have but reaped as I have sown. Dark must have been my deeds in my former birth to have brought me to such sorrow in this life! And if I had not been tempted by the lust of wealth to give away my darling to a youth who was going astray, my Uma had still lived, some poor man's wife, to be her mother's consolation and stay in her old age."

"Nay, blame not yourself, my sister," replied Sarat's mother; "Bhagaban shapes our ends, and we are but the instruments in His hands. Blame not yourself, sister, for when dear Uma was married, her husband was neither spoilt nor was he going astray; he was as good and promising a youth as these eyes have ever seen. Do you not remember, sister, how he used to come to the Lake of Palms, and go round to offer his salutations to all the elders of the village, though he was rich enough to buy us all? Ay, I recall those days well. Dhananjay never came to the village but he came to see me also; and he used to call me

aunt, because poor Uma called me by that loving name. Bless my old eyes, your son-in-law was as good a boy in those days as I have ever seen."

"Ah!" said Uma's mother, "recall not those scenes, or they will break my heart. True, my sister, my Dhananjay was ever a generous boy, and even now he has a generous heart, but he was sadly and woefully entrapped, and my Uma has been sacrificed."

"Weep not, sister, for Uma's trials and troubles are over. When I think of that sweet child, who sat on my lap and played by me, and called me aunt only the other day in the Lake of Palms, I sometimes think my brain will turn, and I could weep blood, not tears. But she is at rest now, and we are left to suffer! May Bhagaban help my son, and let me retire from a world which is full of trouble and sorrow!"

"Nay, the Blessed One will help your son, my sister, for these eyes have never rested on a boy so good and generous as Sarat. He has been more than a brother to Bindu and Hem, and he has left his studies to attend on your son-in-law in his pilgrimage. He will return soon, my sister, and live to be the joy and the pride of your old age."

A sigh escaped Sarat's mother, as she faintly said: "Much I fear there is a load on his heart, and his life is darkened."

"Ah! But you are thinking of that proposal for the hand of the poor Sudha! Speak not of that, sister; may that episode be forgotten between us! Hem and Bindu are young, and did a thoughtless act in listening to a thoughtless proposal. Poor Bindu is sorry for what has happened; she never alludes to it now by any chance. The scandal will not hurt your son, my sister; such things hurt us women, not men. Poor Bindu will never hear the last of it, and Sudha is shamed for life. Sudha is not the same girl that she was before, sister; she is greatly reduced; her face is bloodless, and her eyes are sunk. She speaks little, and occupies herself with work the whole day long. Sweet, tender child, how ever will she survive this shame?"

"Dear, tender child!" exclaimed Sarat's mother. "When I think of Sudha, I forget my own sufferings! A widow while she was a child, she is doubly a widow now, after this incident. But how is she to blame, poor thing? Nay, whom can we blame? Bindu meant no harm when she consented to my son's proposal. There have been several marriages of Hindu widows in recent years in Calcutta, and learned men say that our Scriptures sanction such doings. So poor Bindu thought there was no harm in the marriage, and if her sister and Sarat were happy, what mattered it if others disapproved? Ay, sister, Bindu did it for the best, and I blame her not. Tell her to come to me with Sudha some day; I long to see them again. It soothes my heart to see their sweet and gentle faces."

"I do tell them to come and see you, sister, but they are busy all day long. I am old myself, and cannot help them much. I cannot set my hand to any work without thinking of Uma who is gone, and tears blind my eyes. When I dress the vegetables, I think of Uma who was so fond of doing it, and when I put the rice on the fire, I recollect Uma who helped me in cooking. I am but useless now! May Bhagaban spare my Bindu and Sudha who are all that are left to me!"

"They are as dear to me as my own Sarat and Kalee. I must go and see them, for my heart yearns for them yet. Tell Bindu and Sudha that my days are not many on earth, and that I cannot cast off in my old age those whom I have cherished from their infancy."

On the following evening Sarat's mother came on a visit to Bindu. It was the first time she had seen the family since the proposal for Sudha's hand had been broken off, and Hem received the venerable old lady with more than usual respect and cordiality. He helped her out of her palanquin, and took her up to Bindu's room. Bindu herself came forward and reverently touched her feet in salutation, and then led her to a seat. Sudha too marked the old lady as she

came, but silently stole away from the room like a poor guilty creature who had no claim to her love and affection.

"And why have you not come to see me, my child Bindu, so long? Have you forgotten the old woman whom you used to call your aunt?"

"No indeed, aunt! that I shall never do. But we have had sickness and troubles in Calcutta, as you know, and we long to return to the Lake of Palms, where poor people like ourselves are more free and happier."

"True, true, my Bindu; this great city is for those who have money and occupations. I too feel lonely and cheerless here, and long to return to Benares. The ties of earth are hard to break, but my duty is done, and pious rites and devotion best suit one of my age."

"Happy you are, aunt, to have done the duties of life, and to have done them thus. Your life has been one long devotion, and your closing years in Benares will befit the past. We are still in the very thick of life's struggle; may your example lead us safe through all evil! Have you received good news from Kalee?"

"Yes, Bindu, Bhagaban be praised! My son-in-law, Jagat Kisor, has been restored to health by the favour of Jagannath, and they are coming back to Burdwan. My son writes to me also, but not often, but he says nothing of returning to Calcutta."

Bindu was silent.

"I am thinking, Bindu, my love, that I cannot wait in Calcutta till my son's return. The Lord will guide him in his wisdom. Sarat is now a grown-up man, and scarcely needs a mother's help. My place is Benares—not here; and my meddling can do him no good, and may, perhaps, have done him harm."

Bindu gave no answer.

"In any case, I have decided to return to Benares without delay; and I came, Bindu, to bless you and to bless Sudha before leaving you perhaps for ever. I have loved you, dear motherless children, like your

own mother, and may Heaven help me to make you happy!"

Bindu wept at these loving words, but still she did not speak.

"And where is dear, gentle Sudha? Call her, and let me once more hold her in my bosom and bless her before I go."

Sudha was sent for, and came. She had grown taller since Sarat's mother had seen her in the Lake of Palms, and considerably thinner. Her soft cheeks were pale, there were shadows in her eyes, and her arms were long and slender. The smiles of childhood had fled from her lips, the cares of womanhood—perhaps of early grief—had imprinted their mark on her brow. Sarat's mother shuddered when she saw this change, and when Sudha bent her head to the ground and touched the old lady's feet, tears of sorrow, perhaps of remorse, trickled down from her eyes and fell on the girl's hair.

"Come, my child, to my bosom," said the weeping woman, "and let me bless you with all my heart and all my soul. How you have changed, my Sudha, within these few months! Ay, you have suffered, and too early in life. Your smiling young face was not made for sorrow, and your sweet eyes were not made for tears."

As the night advanced Bindu left her sister with their guest and went to put her children to bed. The light flickered in the oilless lamp, and Sudha sat silent and meek beside the aged lady, nestling in her bosom as she had often done when a child in the Lake of Palms. Unconsciously the mother of Sarat drew the tender girl nearer and nearer to her heart, as her memory wandered back to past times and past scenes. She remembered Sudha's poor widowed mother who used to bring the infant child to her house, and how the lisping baby came to her arms in that unfailing instinct by which a child knows who loves it. She remembered Sudha as an orphan in her tender years, still seeking hope and joy and consola-

tion in her love, after she had lost her mother. She remembered her again as a child-widow, unconscious of her misfortune, and brightening her home and heart with her childlike gaiety and affection. And she recalled to mind the day when Sudha clung weeping to her feet as she departed for Benares. The tender motherless child had fed on her affection and grown on her love. Even now, forgetting the terrible incidents which had chilled her young hopes and blasted her young life, she still clung to her instinctively, in childlike, confiding, unchanging love. Something smote the bosom of the old woman, and a great anguish swelled in her heart. She clasped the child closer, and a silent prayer rose to her lips: "Not mine the hand, O Bhagaban, that should strike down the child I have reared! I have sinned deeply in my little wisdom; forgive me, O my God, for I need Thy mercy!"

II

CONSOLATION

In the southern suburbs of Calcutta stands the far-famed temple of Kalighat, on the banks of the Adi-Ganga. It is said that in past centuries the main stream of the Ganges flowed into the sea by this channel, and the temple was reared on the shore of the holy river. The Ganges has changed his course, and the Adi-Ganga is almost silted up; but the spot is still considered sacred as of old. And the name of the modern town of Calcutta is only a corruption of the word Kalighat—the landing-place sacred to the Goddess Kali.

Many are the worshippers who send their offerings to this ancient temple, and women from Calcutta throng its narrow streets and bazaars on festive days. They still perform their ablutions in the almost

stagnant waters of the sacred river, deck themselves in holy silken garments, and crowd to the temple with offerings and prayers. And when the religious rites are done, they spend their savings in feeding the hungry and helping the poor, who congregate in large numbers in the precincts of the sacred place.

A palanquin brought Sarat's mother to this holy place one fine winter morning. Before the sun was yet high in the heavens she had performed her ablutions and made her devotions. Then, with the help of an old Panda whom she took as her guide she walked far from the temple and the crowded bazaar to a humble hut, nestled among trees and shaded by lofty palms. There she stopped at the gate, and the Panda went inside the house.

An aged Brahman came out of the hut. Seventy winters had bent his once lofty and handsome frame, and left deep wrinkles on his spacious forehead. His hair was grey, and the correct tuft hung behind. A scarf printed with the names of gods covered his person, and a stick supported his frame. He was the Guru or Spiritual Director of the Ghose family of the Lake of Palms.

With him came a younger man, not yet past middle age, and with a face which betokened sanctity and religious fervour. He was dressed in yellow cloth, like religious men from the north-west; his frame was strong and well-proportioned, his eyes had a wonderful lustre, and his locks were matted and ruddy. He was a Brahmacharin or Monastic Novice from Benares.

Sarat's mother fell prostrate before her Guru, and then before the Brahmacharin, and they raised her with blessings and took her into the hut.

"Is my father in peace and good health?" she asked.

"Yes, my daughter, by the grace of God I am well. Is my dear daughter well too? Are her children well? And is her home in peace?"

"The merciful God has been pleased to prolong my

life, father; but peace of mind is known to few upon this earth. I am alone in Calcutta, and long to return to Benares where there is peace. My son and daughter have gone to Puri on pilgrimage with her husband."

"They have done well, my daughter, and Jagannath will bless them with health and happiness. Trust in Bhagaban, my daughter; He alone can grant you peace and consolation in your old age."

"My trust in Him, father, is my only hope in life; but a woman's heart falters at times, and a woman's wisdom misleads. You, father, will help me in my trouble, and the holy Brahmacharin will lend his advice and assistance."

"That I will, sister," replied the Brahmacharin. "I have seen you in Benares, though you saw me not, and I am not a stranger in the Lake of Palms. Ay, I knew Kalee and Bindu and Uma as little children, before they were married."

"One of them—Bindu—is a happy wife, and the mother of two children. Poor Uma is no more."

"Uma no more? Why, she was the pride of the village, the beauty of the country-side, the joy of her friends! Is it possible that that sweet little child—how well I remember her sparkling eyes and bright face!—is it possible that that young creature has passed away so soon? How and when did she die, sister?"

"She disappeared from her house scarcely a month ago. She was unhappy in marriage and brooded on her anguish, and they say that she flung herself into the sacred river to end her agony."

"Nay, I believe that not, sister, since no eyes have seen it. Heaven perhaps conceals her from the eyes of men in some sacred shrine till her sorrows are ended, and the clouds that shaded her young life have passed away."

"May your words prove true, O Brahmacharin, and Uma's poor mother will bless your name!"

"And Bindu, you said, is the mother of two

children," resumed the anchorite. "May she be happy! How well I remember that meek and humble girl, the sweetest and gentlest child of the Lake of Palms. And she had a younger sister, too, who was almost an infant when I saw her."

"Her fate too is sad, brother. She became a widow when she was yet a child."

"Sad indeed, sister! Who would wish to live in a world where sorrows come so thick and fast? Poor child of a poor mother, and a widow before she was a woman! But God can bless her too in His wisdom!"

"May your words prove true once more, brother! It is about this poor child that I would ask some advice of you and of my holy father. My heart is troubled and I am in distress, and I have come to ask your help and counsel."

"Speak, child," responded the Guru, "and we shall do our best, though you know well that I have retired from the world and my counsel is of little value. There are holy Brahmans in Nabadwip, versed in our sacred Scriptures, who offer counsel and opinions in all worldly affairs; and to them all men go who wish to know the right from the wrong in the concerns of daily life. My days on earth are nearly done; and I desire to pass the evening of my life in seeking for that peace which is not of this earth."

"If it had been only a concern of daily life, father, I would scarcely have come to disturb your rest. It is consolation in my distress which I seek. You were the Guru of our family, the friend of my husband's father, and the pastor of my husband. Whither should I turn, father, but to you, when I need comfort and help?"

"Nay, weep not, daughter; I will do my best for you. And my young friend from Benares, who is deeply versed in the Scriptures, and who has known you and yours from early days, though you knew him not—he too will render you such help as he can. Speak, daughter, for deep trouble is in your heart to move you thus."

"Deep indeed is my trouble, and I know not how I shall narrate it. The holy Brahmacharin has spoken of Bindu's younger sister who became a widow while she was yet a child. She is now grown up to womanhood, and my son Sarat has fixed his heart on her, and seeks her hand. Permit this marriage, and you render them happy in life; forbid it, and their life on earth will not be long!"

The old man was stupefied by this question. He had known Sarat's mother from the date of her marriage, and had known her profound respect for Hindu customs and institutions. Great surprise came upon him to hear her speak thus of her son's marriage with a widow.

"Do you not know, daughter, that the marriage of widows is interdicted by Hindu custom? Brahmans and Pandits will tell you this, and surely, my daughter, you know this too?"

"If I had sought to know the custom of the day, father, I would not have come to you. There are moments in life when we dare go against custom and opinion, so be that the path is not unholy; and I came to learn from your sacred lips if the act is unholy in the eye of religion and of God. Listen, father, to a woman's tale of sorrow and distress."

And she narrated with many tears all that had taken place. She spoke of her own household and of Sarat, she spoke of Uma's mother and of Uma, and she spoke also of Hem and Bindu and Sudha. She narrated how Bindu and Sudha had come to Calcutta, how Sarat had looked after their comforts and attended on them daily, and how his heart was moved towards her. She told with many tears the story of the disgrace which had fallen on Sudha, and the despair which had clouded the heart of Sarat, and she implored that in the darkness which was closing round her last days on earth, her Spiritual Directors would give her help and ghostly counsel, and cheer her with a ray of hope and of consolation.

"For in past days," she added, "we acted according

to our little wisdom, and the ways of the world are not always the ways of truth. Uma's mother gave her only daughter in marriage to one of the richest men in Burdwan, and now she sits and weeps by me, morn and eve, at the bereavement which has fallen like a flail on her mother's heart. I too was led by vanity and pride, and have been chastised. The world is cheerless to me and dark, and all my hope is centred in Sarat and Kalee, and in Bindu and Sudha, whom their mother left to my care on her death-bed. I broke off the engagement between Sarat and Sudha, but let not a woman's hasty act cast a shadow over their young lives! Speak, father, what religion counsels, and what my duty as a mother bids me do."

The kind-hearted Guru dropped tears of sympathy as the mother finished her tale of sorrow; and a light flashed from the Brahmacharin's eyes when he heard of the reproach and shame which had fallen on poor suffering Sudha. Both remained silent for a moment.

"Speak, my son," at last said the Guru to his younger companion. "You have perused the holy lore in the temples of Benares, and have received instruction from the sacred lips of Sadhus and Anchorites, you from whose eyes our ancient Scriptures hide nothing, and on whom the Goddess of Learning has bestowed gifts rare in these days—speak to your suffering sister in kindness and love, for you can voice our thoughts better than I."

"And what would you know, gentle sister? Wherein can I help you?"

"I seek to know if this love of the young hearts is unholy, and if the Almighty has placed His mandate against the re-marriage of widows?"

"We can but faintly guess the mandates of the Almighty by His works, sister, and our Scriptures are a distant echo of that voice by which all nature declares His will."

"Be it so, brother; tell me what the holy books declare."

"They recommend married women to be faithful to the memory of their lords after their deaths, but do not prohibit their marrying again if they be so inclined. For one like Sudha, who became a widow while she was yet a child, the Scriptures distinctly sanction re-marriage. Divine mercy prohibits not the marriage of such; it is human folly which adds to the afflictions of a world already full of woe."

"May thy lips be touched by holy flowers for saying this, my brother! There are times when custom and opinion fail to restrain us if duty bids us move."

"Ay, sister, and you have heard that custom and opinion have failed to restrain those whose ways are those of truth. You have heard of the venerable Vidyasagar, the most learned among the learned, the most generous among the generous, the purest among the pure in these days. He has proclaimed that our holy Scriptures do not prescribe the cruel custom of perpetual widowhood; and the wise rulers of our land, foreigners though they be, have passed a righteous law making the re-marriage of Hindu widows legal. You have heard, sister, that many Hindu widows have married again within the present generation, and live in wedded joy and virtue. Let your son wed his chosen; the Great Dispenser of mercies will bless the union of the innocent and the pure!"

"The Brahmacharin speaks well, my daughter," said the Guru. "Go and do his bidding. The world may talk as it likes; the time is almost come when you and I might disregard such idle talk. Do your duty to your son and to poor Sudha; the God of mercies wishes not that His daughters on earth should suffer needless woe when He Himself opens out to them the path of consolation and of joy."

"I feel refreshed, father, by your consoling words, and what the Brahmacharin has said. Trust me, a mother will know how to do her duty strengthened by such holy counsel. I have not long to live, and my last prayers shall be for the happiness of my Sarat and Sudha in their wedded life!"

III

A TERRITORIAL HOUSE

A CLOUD hangs over the fair town of Burdwan. The Raja of the great Burdwan estate, the representative of one of the greatest territorial houses in Bengal, is lying on his death-bed, and leaves no heir. In the bazaar and in the court-house, in secret chambers and in large conclaves, one question agitates all men's minds—Who will be the next Raja whom the Raja's wife shall adopt as her son after his death? Will the Raja's mother countenance such adoption?

Such questions disturb the minds of the people of India whenever a great territorial lord dies without leaving an heir. By an ancient custom, sanctioned by those explicit laws of the Hindus which have prevailed for over two thousand years, the widow of a deceased man can adopt an heir, if there be no son left by him. The son so adopted is the valid heir in the eye of custom and of law; he is taken into the family of the adoptive mother—he is trained in the traditions of the house—and inherits all its possessions. By this convenient arrangement many an ancient line has been perpetuated through centuries, and, what is still more important, much trouble and litigation and bloodshed have been prevented. The family represents in India, as it did in ancient Rome, the unit in society. The head of the house descends to his grave, it may be without a son, but he is consoled in his dying moments by the thought that the house survives under a new head whom he has adopted, or whom his widow may adopt. Religion itself sanctions this useful custom, for the manes of him who dies without an heir, natural or adopted, receives no offerings, and goes cheerless and joyless into the next world.

The British Government has wisely sanctioned this ancient custom of the Hindus. One self-willed ruler of India ignored the custom of adoption in the case of ruling princes, in order to annex to the British Empire the States they left without heirs. And this deliberate injustice was the chief cause of the great Mutiny of 1857. After that terrible catastrophe, the Queen of England assumed the direct government of India, and by her Proclamation of 1858 assured to all ruling princes and chiefs their ancient and customary right of adoption to perpetuate their houses.

The Rajas of Burdwan had repeatedly exercised this right of adoption on failure of issue, and thus it was no new question which agitated the minds of the citizens of Burdwan once more when the young Raja lay on his death-bed without an heir.

One afternoon there was a consultation on this subject, in a quiet chamber, among three of the foremost men in the town.

The Commissioner of Burdwan was a high official who presided over the administration of Burdwan and five other districts, containing a population of eight or ten millions. Living in Burdwan, he made an annual visitation of the other districts, and was responsible for their proper and peaceful administration. He kept in close touch with all, and every important question came up to him for decision in the piles of official correspondence which daily engaged his attention. And being in immediate touch with the central Government in Calcutta, he passed on the orders and instructions of the Government to his several districts, and was careful to see that they were carried out. Worried by the unending work of a busy day, he came down to his drawing-room, late in the afternoon, to see his guests who came by appointment, and to discuss the question of the Burdwan estate over afternoon tea.

The chief of the pair was Ban Bihari, the ablest and strongest man among the many relations and connections of the Raja's family. Ban Bihari was a

character. None in the district sat on his saddle with firmer grace, none pursued the wild game with keener joy, none drove his four-in-hand over perilous paths and under narrow arches with truer skill. A sportsman by instinct, he shone equally at dinners and in the ball-room, and the European ladies of the station applauded the inborn dignity of this accomplished Kshatriya. To these social virtues he added an aptitude for work and a capacity for official business which amazed veteran officials, and which marked him out as the rising man in the vast household of the Burdwan Raj. He had already secured an important position in the management of the estate, and no official decision relating to the estate was held perfect without consulting Ban Bihari.

His fellow was a quiet, thoughtful, retiring man, weak in physique and prematurely grey. Satya Charan was the soundest lawyer in Burdwan, and one of the best in Bengal. He spoke little, except in reply to questions, and then thoughtfully, and with a slow enunciation. He was not a society man, scarcely figured in meetings and entertainments, and lived almost entirely in his own work. But in that work he had no superior and few equals. The biggest officials of the station scarcely ventured on any action in matters of law without his advice, and the highest legal authorities in Bengal knew and respected Satya Charan.

After the servants had removed the tea things, conversation began.

"We are in a nice fix again," began the Commissioner, "and the Burdwan Raj will pass through some eventful days, I fancy!"

"Ay, sir, so it seems," answered Ban Bihari. "The whole history of the Raj has been eventful—like a romance."

"So it has indeed! It is a history of over two hundred years, is it not?"

"Yes. The great Abu Rai came from the Punjab, settled down in Burdwan, and founded this house in

1657, exactly a hundred years before Clive won the battle of Plassey. But it was Abu Rai's great-grandson, Krishna Ram, who added vastly to the estate, and obtained Letters Patent from the Great Moghul of Delhi. And you know the story of the rebellion of his time, because it is connected with British history."

"Not quite, my friend. We are more familiar with our daily correspondence than even with our own history of India."

"Why, it was one Subha Singh who raised the standard of rebellion and slew Krishna Ram in battle. It was during this rebellion that the British were permitted to fortify their factory in Calcutta. And the story of the rebel ends in a romance, for they say that he was fascinated by the beauty of Krishna Ram's daughter, and attempted to force her to his embraces. But the Kshatriya girl shrank from her father's enemy, and stabbed him on the spot!"

"That indeed would make a most interesting novel! Why don't you write a story about it, Ban Bihari?"

"Writing is not exactly my line, sir," replied Ban Bihari, with a smile. "I leave that to others more skilful in the art."

"And you are right. You are a born worker, and not a writer, and there is work enough for you at the present moment. But tell me what became of this Raj after Krishna Ram and Subha Singh had both disappeared from the scene?"

"It was Krishna Ram's grandson, Kirti Chand, who was the real architect of the great house. He annexed large slices of territory in the north and east; and if all they say be true, the old Raja of Vishnupur in his jungle fort in the west had a bad time of it too. But Kirti Chand stood for his country as well as for his own house, and he helped the Moslem ruler of Bengal in many an engagement with the Mahratta invaders. When Kirti Chand died in 1740, Burdwan was already the first house in Bengal."

"And then?"

"To make a long story short," resumed Ban Bihari,

"It was Tej Chand, the third in succession from Kirti Chand, who came to power when the British had become virtual masters of Bengal. And poor Tej Chand found the Revenue Collectors of Warren Hastings more formidable than his ancestors had found the hordes of Mahrattas! You know the story of Warren Hastings and his putting the territorial lords of Bengal in prison for default of punctual payment?"

"Ay, ay; Warren Hastings had a hard time of it himself, and he was hard on landlords. But his successor, Lord Cornwallis, made a more benevolent Governor-General, and reformed the administration."

"And Lord Cornwallis saved the old houses of Bengal by making a Permanent Settlement of the land revenues in 1793. Now all increase from the produce of the soil goes to the people, and Bengal is the most prosperous among all the provinces of India."

The Commissioner smiled. "Of course you landlords like this Permanent Settlement of 1793; but we look at it from a different point of view. Don't you think such a permanent limit to the Government demand stops a source of the public revenue, and is therefore a wanton sacrifice of the Government's rights? Probably you, as a landlord, cannot see it in this light. But what does a lawyer like Satya Charan think?"

Satya Charan had been a silent listener all this time; and when the Commissioner asked his opinion, he opened his lips for the first time, and quietly answered: "The Government, sir, is for the good of the people, and can have no rights inconsistent with the good of the people."

"Granted. But don't you think in the interests of the people it is wise to allow a steady increase in the public revenue with the increase of cultivation?"

"No, sir, not in India. In India our weaving and other industries have declined, our trade is mostly in the hands of European merchants, our mines are worked mainly by European capitalists, and the produce of the soil is virtually the sole remaining

means of the nation's subsistence. Four-fifths of the population of India live on the produce of the soil. Place a permanent limit to the Government demand on that produce, and the people can look forward to some increase in the one remaining source of their wealth. You have done so in Bengal, and Bengal is comparatively prosperous. You have not done so in Madras and Bombay and Northern India, and those provinces are in a state of chronic poverty."

"How do you make that out, Satya Charan?" asked the Commissioner.

"The history of famines makes it out," replied the lawyer. "In Permanently Settled Bengal we have had few famines, and there has been none within a hundred years attended with loss of life. In the other provinces famines are frequent, and the loss enormous. Five millions of people perished in Madras in the famine of 1877."

"But I don't see how a limitation of the Government demand in Bengal helps the people. It helps landlords like my friend Ban Bihari, and they hoard their increasing rents, or spend it unwisely. But how are the people generally benefited?"

"The landlords of Bengal, sir, get very little of the increase of the produce; it is the people generally who get most of it, and thrive on it. Even the middle and lower classes of people in Bengal invest their savings in land; all retain a portion of the increasing profits. The benevolent act of Lord Cornwallis is far-reaching, and secures the happiness of the million in Bengal, not of the few. The greatest Viceroys we have ever had were Lord Canning and Lord Lawrence: and both of them advocated a Permanent Settlement of the land revenue in all provinces of India. If that had been effected, you would not have heard of famines so often."

"To a certain extent you may be right, Satya Charan. I do not know the circumstances of the different classes of the people as you do, but I am willing to accept your statement that all classes,

from the highest to the lowest, share among them the increasing profits from the soil. But is there any reason why the Government should not also receive its share in the increase? You have said yourself that the Government is for the good of the people, and represents the people. What the Government would get would be used for the good of the people, would flow back to the people in one form or another, and so fructify their trade and industries."

"Unfortunately, sir, this does not happen in India. A sum reckoned at twenty millions of English money, and equal to half of the nett revenues of India, is remitted annually from India to England without a direct equivalent. One half of what we pay as taxes goes out of the country, and does not come back to the people. No country on earth suffers like this at the present day; and no country on earth could bear such an annual drain without increasing impoverishment and repeated famines. You denounce ancient Rome for impoverishing Gaul and Egypt, Sicily and Palestine, to enrich herself. You denounce Spain for robbing the New World and the Netherlands to amass wealth. England scarcely perceives that she is following the same practice in India, and that the gold she withdraws will do her no more good than it did ancient Rome or modern Spain, while it is converting India into a land of poverty and famines. Pardon me, sir, for stating my opinions, but the matter is serious for both parties alike."

"You have spoken your view honestly, Satya Charan, and I admire you for it. You do not expect me to agree with you, but in some respects you may be right. I have myself always advocated economy, and do not like the annual drain from India. But let us turn to our business; Ban Bihari was telling us something about the times of Raja Tej Chand, when Lord Cornwallis made a Permanent Settlement of the land revenues of Bengal."

"Yes, sir, and I have little to add. On the death of Tej Chand in 1832, a pretender appeared, and

there was a sensational law-suit, more interesting than the late Tichborne case in England. But the pretender failed, and the adopted son, Mahtab Chand, succeeded. How ably he performed his duties as a great landlord of a great estate, how loyally he helped the British Government during the Sontal rebellion of 1855 and the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, and how at last he was honoured by the Government with a seat in the Viceroy's Council in 1864—all this you know. And when his long and distinguished career closed, he was succeeded by the present Raja, alas! so unlike his predecessor. During his short tenure of power, he has wantonly wasted his powers until he now lies on his death-bed at an early age—the victim of his vices."

"It is sad indeed, Ban Bihari, and we all regret it. The British Government desires to see the great landlords of Bengal as wise and good as was Mahtab Chand, and we wish that the boy who will now be adopted may have proper training during his early years. Have you any idea who is to be adopted?" And the Commissioner fixed his keen, searching glance on Ban Bihari.

But the placid and inscrutable face of the handsome Kshatriya told no tale. He only replied: "That depends on the young Ranee's wishes, or rather on the wishes of the Dowager Ranee perhaps. She has a will of her own, and her daughter-in-law naturally bows to her opinion."

"And is the Dowager Ranee likely to make a good selection?"

"I believe so, sir. She is a high-minded lady, worthy of her late revered husband, Mahtab Chand. She knew me as a boy, when I was but a dependant on the family, and she always treated me with kindness. And even if her regard for me may somewhat alter in course of time, I shall never be guilty of an undutiful act, and no word of disrespect towards her shall escape my lips."

"That is only what I expect of one like you, Ban Bihari. But let us come to the point at once. You

have a fine handsome boy, as quick and intelligent as any in Burdwan. You are of the same caste and clan with the present Raja, and rumour has it that the Ranee may cast her eyes on your boy and adopt him as her son. He would still be educated and trained under your eyes, and live to be as great a lord in the country as the late Mahtab Chand. Is there anything very improbable in the surmise?" And the Commissioner again fixed his eyes on his visitor.

But Ban Bihari's face was inscrutable as before, and betrayed no thoughts. "I scarcely think," said he, "the Dowager Ranee will view my son with favour. She might even oppose the adoption in the law court, if the young Ranee consented to adopt my boy."

"But cannot money smooth the way? The vaults of the Raj family are full of gold, I hear, and surely the Dowager Ranee may reward her favourite boys if she has any, with money, and permit your son to be adopted."

"The Dowager Ranee is a noble-minded lady, and considers money as the dust of her feet. If all the gold in the Raj vaults were offered to her, she would probably give it away to her brother, or some other relation. She is a pious old lady, and needs no gold; money has no influence with her."

The conversation continued for an hour longer, but nothing was settled. All Burdwan awaited with breathless suspense the adoption of a boy by the young Ranee, and the chances of all the available boys were discussed in secret chambers and in the dark offices of lawyers. The whole town was divided in their hopes and expectations into two parties, and both awaited the momentous decision of the young Ranee.

The Commissioner, too, awaited that decision. "But whoever is selected," he said to Ban Bihari and Satya Charan as they parted that evening, "we will take good care that he receives a proper training for his duties in life. The British Government manages a minor's estate till he comes of age, and the Govern-

ment will see that the minor receives a proper education, so that he may enter upon his responsible duties with all the qualifications required in a great territorial lord."

IV

AN EVENING ENTERTAINMENT

TAKING his leave of the Commissioner, Ban Bihari drove to the house of Jagat Kisor, who had asked him and a few friends to an evening entertainment. Jagat Kisor had returned from Puri an altered man. He was greatly improved in health, and felt both younger and stronger. His aunts and brothers and many relations still lived in his vast ancestral house, but Jagat Kisor himself now lived with his wife in a small garden house in an open part of the town. His doctor at Raniganj had advised this, and he had thought it wise to follow the advice.

A great change had come over the relations of Jagat Kisor and his wife. His heart had been moved by her patient care and attention during the months of his illness, and he was drawn nearer to that duteous and devoted woman than he had ever been before. He had seen her sitting by his bedside in the long evenings, preparing light milk dishes for him, and speaking to him in gentle, loving whispers until he fell asleep, her hand still holding his. He had seen her, when he awoke at night, still watching his nightly rest, or curling herself up in a corner of the bed to have a few hours' repose. And in the morning she was still feeding and nursing him, and looking after his needs and comforts before she thought of her own. A great yearning arose in the heart of the husband, and a tender love for the young wife who was so devoted and true.

And now, as a young woman of twenty, she had become mistress of the little house where they dwelt together. He saw her often, consulted her in all his affairs, and delighted to hear her loving talk through the long winter evenings. And they came to know each other as they had never done before, and their hearts were drawn together. It is thus that love springs in India after the marriage, when the young bride blooms into womanhood and becomes the mistress of the household, and when to all the devotion of a dutiful girl she adds the more tender and deeper love of a woman. The love so born lasts through life. The wife never forgets the duty she learnt in her tender years towards her lord, and the husband cherishes her who came to him as a girl, whose life he shaped to his until she bloomed, a loving woman, in his arms.

Kalee was surrounded by many ladies who had come to congratulate her on her happy pilgrimage when Jagat Kisor was receiving his august friends in the outer apartments. To Ban Bihari, a man of rising influence and power, he gave a cordial and a respectful welcome; and to all other friends who dropped in, one after another, Jagat was equally courteous and hospitable.

The sound of music and song rose in the well-lighted and spacious room when he sat by Ban Bihari in a corner, and spoke to him with cordial greetings.

"I am glad indeed, Lala Sahib" (it was by that title that Ban Bihari was generally addressed by his friends), "to have the pleasure of seeing you again. When I left Burdwan I scarcely hoped to come back alive."

"Nay, the pleasure is ours, Jagat Kisor, to see you so well again. But you are scarcely forty yet, and have a great many years to live, we hope. Change and travel have done you good, and you look a younger man now than before."

"Yes, Lala Sahib, the trip has done me good. I am sure our ancient sages meant something more

than the performance of a religious duty when they recommended pilgrimages to a people who otherwise seldom left their homes. It means change and travel, and the seeing of new sights, and it restores our health and adds to our life."

"I am sure of that. But I hear your venerable mother has decided to remain in Puri."

"Ay, and we miss her every day. But it is better, I think, that she should spend her last years in quiet and peace, for the care of a large household was already telling on her health. She will live longer and happier at Puri, and we shall constantly hear from her."

"Ay, that is so. And I understand your good lady too has enjoyed this pilgrimage. But where did she pick up that blooming Highland girl whom she has brought with her? She is a Bauri girl, is she not? But she has the fair face of a well-born Hindu, and I am not sure your good lady could have picked out a sweeter girl from any caste to wait upon her."

"Yes, she is a young Bauri woman, and came with my wife from Bankura. And she has a history of her own. She is a deserted and forlorn woman, who has come in quest of her forgetful swain!"

"Indeed? And who may be the heartless swain who forgot so sweet a shepherdess?"

"That is precisely what I wanted to tell you, Lala Sahib. We have discovered that it is Madhu Bauri, a gardener in the Raj house, who is the faithless man. And you must exert your baronial influence to make your vassal take back his bride."

"Little influence is needed, I am sure! That fellow Madhu will be a happy man when he meets his wife again. And now I remember he has always been talking of going to Bankura to fetch the little wife he left at home. But you know these aboriginal people; they are careless vagabonds, and the attractions of the liquor-shop are stronger with them, I am afraid, than those of a wife far away."

"Ay, and in that matter too we have pledged our word to the bride. The man must be looked after,

and must not waste his wages in drinking, when he has a wife to support."

"I think we might safely leave that to the young wife herself. Many a sweet young face, I can tell you, conceals a strong and determined will, and many a delicate little hand rules a big burly loon of a husband with a rod of iron, and makes him cry for mercy! I am no judge of faces, Jagat Kisor, if the little Bauri woman does not prove to be a keen assertor of woman's rights in her own household. She has come all the way from Baukura to catch her erring husband, and having caught him she will know how to deal with him. Heaven help Madhu Bauri if he is seen in the liquor-shop again!"

"And now, Lala Sahib, I have only to thank you for your kindness in taking my friend, Hem Chandra, as an agent under the Raj estate. He is an honest and worthy but a retiring man, and during a stay of six months or more in Calcutta could find no suitable work. You have helped him, and placed your trust in him, and Hem will not be undeserving of the trust, for I know him well."

"It is I who have to thank you, Jagat Kisor, for recommending such a worthy man to me. I have done some work in the Raj estate, and have some skill in judging men, and I doubt if ever I made a happier selection than in this Hem Chandra. Why, the whole of the Pergana, which was in disorder, is quiet under his management; and the tenants have more faith in his spoken word than in bonds sealed by the seal of the estate. I often think the landlords and their men are to blame for all disturbances in their estates; there is not a quieter and a more loyal race of cultivators on earth than the Indian peasants if they are treated with kindness and justice."

"And you will find no man more kind or just, though you search far and wide, than this new agent. His house in the Lake of Palms is now like a Court of Justice; he settles all differences among the peasantry; and few of your tenants in that Pergana

have need to go to law. Hem's wife also is well known to us, for there is no sweeter or more sensible woman in the country. Often, when foolish tenants are fighting about a boundary or a pasture-field, she sends for their wives and speaks to them as she alone can do, and the dispute is settled off-hand, while the stupid loons wonder what they were fighting about."

"They are indeed a worthy couple; long may they enjoy the confidence of the Burdwan Raja's officials! But that reminds me of Hem's young friend, your brother-in-law, Sarat. What have you done with him?"

"Why, he went with us to Puri; and a Tributary Raja of Orissa, who met us at Balasore, took a great fancy to him, and has taken him to his State. He is an energetic young man, and delights in new scenes and new work. They say he has already removed many abuses, and vastly improved the Raja's administration. He visits every hill and valley in the State; loves to roam through jungles and wild solitary passes; and there is not a wild hunter or a half-savage chief in the State who does not love him as a comrade, confide in him as a friend, and trust him as an administrator."

"That surely speaks well of Sarat! We want men of energy and character who have the courage to open out new walks in life. But are you sure, Jagat Kisor, that it is the charm of a wild life that has kept away Sarat from his old home and friends, and the company of your good lady, his sister? If rumour speaks truly, surely there is a love affair at the bottom, and all Sarat's wanderings the fruit of disappointed love."

"Ha! And have you heard of that, Lala Sahib? I sometimes wonder where you get your information, and the power of your memory!"

"You see, friend, my position is not free from peril, and there are many among my courteous and smiling friends who would not be sorry to see Ban Bihari down to-morrow! So I have need to keep my eyes

and ears open, and many a story comes to me from sources which you can little guess."

"It must be so. Well, with regard to my brother-in-law, it is true he fell in love with a young girl in Calcutta, and that girl is the sister of Hem's wife. But she is a widow, and our custom forbids a widow marrying again."

"But surely Hindu widows have married in our days. The greatest Pandits say that it is sanctioned by our sacred Scriptures, and parents of child-widows have not seldom acted on such sanction. If Sarat is bent upon the marriage, why not let him have his way? It would be a pity to see a young man's life wasted for ever through a sentimental disappointment."

"You speak like a reformer, Lala Sahib!"

"No, I speak like a man of the world, Jagat Kisor. No man has a higher regard for our sacred Scriptures than I, but they were meant to guide and not to enchain us. And in these days, when all the world is moving onwards, we must move too. Trust me, Jagat Kisor, we Hindus are a practical nation in spite of all that has been said against us. We are not inert, but silently and cautiously progressive; and few nations on earth have dared to remodel their customs according to the needs of these modern times as we have done, since the time of Ram Mohan Roy. We are Progressive Conservatives, if I may coin a phrase, in social matters."

"All that you say is true, Lala Sahib; but many whose opinions are entitled to respect still look with disfavour on the marriage of widows."

"Who objects to Sarat's choice? Is it your mother?"

"No, she does not concern herself any more in earthly matters. Her heart and soul are devoted to the worship of God in the sacred shrine of Jagannath."

"Then is it Sarat's mother who objects?"

"Yes; it was my mother-in-law who came down from Benares and broke off the engagement. But

she saw the suffering she had caused, and her dear old heart relented. She took the advice of holy men, and she has now sent her special mandate to us that the marriage should take place immediately, and that her son should take his bride to Benares to receive her blessing—for the old lady has left Calcutta and returned to Benares."

"Where is the objection then? It is your good lady who objects to her brother's accepting the hand of a widow? I am much mistaken in your kind and gentle wife if she can wish to see her brother a disappointed and wretched man all his life."

"No; my wife has no opinion save her mother's. And meek and gentle as she is, she is willing to face all obloquy to see her brother happy. But my courage fails me, and I hesitate."

"Fie, my friend! Be a man, Jagat Kisor, and sweep away all those idle fears which the ladies themselves have dared to conquer. I have seen Sarat, and am myself a pretty good judge of men; he is meant to be a worker among us, and a faithful servant of his country—not to waste his young years over a needless disappointment. Give me your hand and your consent, Jagat Kisor, and I will wire to Balasore to-night, and the Tributary Raja, whom I know well, will part with his young friend for my sake. I much mistake an ardent young man's feelings if Sarat is not in Burdwan within two days of my message, or as soon as steamer and railway can bring him here from Balasore."

"Your advice is worthy of you, Lala Sahib, and encourages a weak, timid man like me. You have boldly stepped on your way to greatness, and I am much mistaken if a higher position is not in store for you yet. I shall live to see the day when your boy is Raja of Burdwan, and yourself decorated with the title of Raja by the British Government. I accept your advice, and here is the hand of a humble friend who will always be true and grateful to you."

V

THE RETURNED PRODIGAL

The voice of song is hushed, for the guests are going, and now the lights in the reception-hall are extinguished. Jagat Kisor sits by his wife in the inner apartments speaking in whispers of the proposed message to Sarat, and gentle Kalee is nestling closer to her husband's bosom in the gratitude of her heart. Her eyes swim with tears as she thinks of her dear banished brother returning to a life of love and gladness, of the poor bereaved Sudha blooming into a joyous and loving wife, of a happy household filled with every bliss which Heaven can bestow on earth. A woman's fancy will wander far, and Kalee's wicked little heart conjures up the cherub faces of her brother's unborn babies, lisping the name of their aunt, and covering her with kisses and with dust. Bindu, too, appears on the imaginary scene, but a shade of sadness comes over the dreamer as the thought of Bindu brings to her mind poor departed Uma. The three had grown up from infancy together, and the memory of Uma was still green in the hearts of her surviving friends.

The midnight hour had passed, the light flickered in the lamp, and the husband and wife were still whispering to each other their thoughts of joy or of sadness, when a gentle knock was heard at the outer door. Jagat Kisor listened, and the knock was repeated.

"Who can it be at this late hour?" said Jagat. "The servants have all gone to bed. I will go and open the door." And he walked out, his wife following him on tiptoe, drawn on by a vague and unknown hope.

A stranger came in. Jagat did not recognise him in the dim light. Kalee stepped back into the next room, and watched the stranger from her place of concealment.

"Who are you, sir?" asked Jagat; "and what is it that you seek at this late hour of the night?"

"I was a friend of yours, Jagat Kisor, at one time, though I am now scarcely worthy of the name," replied the stranger. "For the sake of our old friendship I seek a night's shelter, and will then proceed on my journey."

The voice could not be mistaken. Jagat started when he saw the great and powerful Squire Dhananjay in this plight. His face was haggard, his eyes were sunk, his hair was dishevelled and unkempt and fell on his forehead, and a shadow as of death dwelt on his countenance. A feeling of aversion seized Jagat as he thought of this man's history and of Uma. But inborn courtesy conquered the feeling, and he spoke kindly.

"Why, Dhananjay, it is a long time since we met. And have you been reduced to this state? You were one of the greatest and the best in this land a few short months ago, and there was no man in the town, whatever his rank might be, who would not court a visit from you as an honour! Has it come to this, that you are now a homeless wanderer? But you have large estates, and a palatial residence at Dhanpur; who looks after them, and why are you wandering about thus?"

"My father's faithful manager still looks after the estates, which will descend to my nephews; they are not for such as me. I have sinned deeply, and have suffered heavily; I seek for rest, and find none on earth. A few friends I had in my earlier days, and your wife was one of the gentlest and truest of them. She was more than a sister to my wife who is now in Heaven, and she met me often when I visited the Lake of Palms. In her gentleness and love, she may perhaps bless me yet with a word of kindness to-night, as I come to her a guest. I depart to-morrow, and I shall not trouble her again."

Kalee could bear no more. With eyes which streamed under her veil she stepped into the room, and, taking Dhananjay by the hand, as she had often

done in past years, led him to a seat in the inner apartments. Then she spoke in whispers to her husband.

"The shade of my dear Uma must not see her husband returning from this house unhonoured. Whatever may have been his life, he was still my Uma's husband. Sit by him and console him, and I will prepare some refreshment for him quickly, for I can see he needs it much."

Kalee went into the kitchen, and Jagat sat by his guest, who told his sad tale which the reader knows already.

"It is not the loss of wealth," he added, "that grieves me; for, though I have lost heavily in money, my estates remain. Nor is it the loss of friends; for though the best among them now point the finger of scorn at me, and mention my name in whispers, I could bear even that in my solitude. But there is that within me which turns my life into torture: it is the undying thought that a woman, pure and true as was ever born, loved me and trusted me, and I have brought her to death by the slowest and most cruel tortures! Her pale, bloodless countenance haunts me by day and night, and in my dreams I see a white face with fixed, open eyes floating down the midnight stream, and I awake with a shriek and a start! The guilt of murder is on me; it turns me mad. I cannot bear this long!"

"You must pull yourself together, Dhananjay. You have sinned deeply, for our holy Scriptures say that where women are made to grieve and to suffer, the family perishes by the wrath of Heaven. But there is no sin, however deep, which cannot be expiated, and your expiation has been terrible and long. Heaven may yet give you peace if you seek His grace."

Dhananjay scarcely listened to these words, but continued speaking to himself rather than to his host: "Once I was in the Lake of Palms in her father's house, and it was a moonlight night. And when the whole village slept, she and I went out for a walk in the moonlight, and sat beside the silent lake and

looked on the waters. And our hearts beat in unison as she rested her trusting bosom on mine, and I lifted her moon-lit face and kissed her lips. I looked up to the skies, and called Heaven to witness that I would love that dear, trusting girl to the end of my life. Methinks I see that moon-lit face yet—thinner, paler, but still the same; and she points with her pale, white finger to the starry skies. For I took an oath, and am a perjured man in the eye of Heaven."

"Do not call up these memories—they will turn you mad."

"Once she came from her father's house to Dhanpur when I was lying ill. And the doctor who attended me looked grave, and spoke in whispers, and my mother often went out of the room to shed tears, for she would not alarm me with her fears. But Uma's young heart was full of hope, and she sat by me night and day, and said to me in soft whispers that God would not take me from her, till I caught a ray of hope from her, and grew stronger by her love. The scene comes back to my mind, and I see the patient, tireless wife still sitting at the bedside of her husband in that hushed and darkened chamber. The husband was saved—to kill his wife."

"In the name of Heaven, Dhananjay, do not go on like that!"

"Last scene of all was that terrible one in Calcutta. I saw a poor faint woman, shivering in the cold by the roadside tree, when a carriage rolled by. I saw the light of the lamp flash upon her face, and her eyes were turned on me in silent supplication, but her lips never opened. The carriage swept by, leaving her in darkness. A famous actress of Calcutta, filthy as she was fair, was seated by me in the carriage; my wronged wife stood cold and abandoned in the streets, and perished."

Kalee had been waiting half an hour with some refreshments, listening to these ravings till her heart almost burst. She threw back her veil, forgot her usual silence, and spoke in a voice quivering with agitation:

"And that wronged woman demands your expiation now in a life of penance and virtue. Uma in Heaven will forgive you if you respect her memory, and live as she would have wished you to live."

Dhananjay was startled by her earnest tone and voice, and woke from his ravings. "Do you think so, sister Kalee?" he asked in a soft, hushed, gentle voice. "Do you think she who is now in Heaven will forgive me?"

"That she will," replied Kalee, bursting into tears, "if you live to be a good and a true man. God knows, Uma suffered deeply in life, but I knew her well, and proud as she was, she never bore a thought of anger against a living soul, least of all against you. Pure, saintly Uma will forget her wrongs, and will help you still, if you seek for her guidance and help."

Balm fell on the troubled heart of Dhananjay as he listened to these words, and a deep silence followed. He followed Kalee like a child, took some refreshment at her bidding, and silently retired to rest.

A stream of tears relieved his heart as he lay down to rest, and that night the repentant sinner slept in peace as he had never slept since Uma had left him.

VI

THE QUEST

EARLY next morning Dhananjay showed Jagat the last letter which Uma had left, before she disappeared so strangely. Jagat took it to his wife, and she read it between her tears.

Suddenly a faint ray of hope began to dawn on her mind. "Uma," she said, "was proud and reserved, and of a deeply religious frame of mind: would she lightly cast away her life like any other unfortunate woman? The Brahmacharin of Kalighat told my mother that Uma probably lives yet in some sacred

shrine to forget her sorrows and devote herself to religion: may not the words of the holy man be true? This letter speaks of the one hundred and eight temples near Burdwan—is it possible that Dhananjay may yet find his wife living there, and that the burden of a great crime may be lifted off his soul?"

The day was devoted to speculation upon this hope. In the evening Jagat and his wife took Dhananjay to the shrines. They had been built by Raja Mahtab Chand, and stood in rows, side by side, lifting their graceful spires round the sacred courtyard. Mahtab Chand often used to come there and prostrate himself before every one of them, till his limbs ached, and a healthy perspiration beaded his brow. The Dowager Ranee still visited them, for they were maintained from the funds of the estate, and crowds of pious worshippers who came to Burdwan paid visits to these monuments of the religious zeal of the ruling family.

Long and pious was the worship which Jagat and his wife rendered to the images, and Dhananjay once more found relief in tears. He thought of his wife's last injunction to wipe out the guilt of a wasted life by religious devotions, and he obeyed the command as if it were a mandate from Heaven.

Late in the evening Kalee visited the hoary-headed priest of the shrines in his humble cottage. And she bowed before him and received his blessings.

"Long has your life been spent, father," she said, "in the service of these images, and many are the pious worshippers whom you have blessed."

"Ay, daughter, you may say so. It was Raja Mahtab Chand who placed me in charge of these edifices, and many a time I have led the venerable old Raja from temple to temple. He was a truly great man, and our rulers knew his worth, and honoured him, for his heart was fixed on religion. Seldom a day passed in his old age that he did not come here for his devotions. But he is gone, and the young Raja who succeeded him is leaving us."

"But it is not the Rajas only who perform their worship here, father?" asked Kalee.

"Nay, nay; the temples of Siva are ever open to all worshippers, high and low, who come with a pious heart."

"And have you, father, seen and blessed many who came here laden with sorrow, and sought in religion the solace which they could not find in life?"

"Indeed, I have met such from time to time, for where can the unfortunate go for comfort but to the bosom of Mahadeva?"

"Do you call to mind the case of one of them, young in years and fair in face, who may have come and spoken a sad story to you, and asked for your ghostly help not many weeks ago?"

"Many such come. But I do remember one young woman who was of such striking beauty, and so sad in her face, that I looked at her again and again and enquired about her sorrows. She was a young widow, and cried bitterly as if her heart was broken."

"It is not of her I enquire, father, but of a married woman who had left her husband, for she had suffered deeper afflictions than any widow ever knew. And I thought she too might have come to you in her distress."

"Now that you speak to me, daughter," said the priest, after a pause, "I think it was a married woman I am speaking of, and not a widow. She had a widow's borderless Saree, and her arms and ankles and neck were bare of ornaments. But when she raised her hands to hide her streaming eyes, I saw the iron bracelet which a wife wears to the last day of her life, and which a widow casts away when she loses her lord. Ay, ay, that young sufferer must have been a wife whose husband still lived, though from her appearance and dress I took her to be a widow."

"May Bhagaban bless you, father, for saying these words, and make the close of your life as happy as it is holy! Did this woman tell you of her sufferings? Speak, for my ears are eager to listen, and my heart swells with dawning hope!"

"I will speak, daughter, all that I know, but this woman had no story to tell."

"Not that she came from the Lake of Palms or from Dhanpur?"

"She never said whence she came."

"Not that she had left a life of wretchedness in Calcutta, alone and friendless?"

"She spoke of no wretchedness except by her tears."

"Not that she would return to these temples when her husband came to seek her?"

"She spoke of no husband, nor of coming back."

"And did she not say where she was going, or where she would be found?"

"She was going, as wandering pilgrims do, to various shrines on the banks of sacred rivers."

"And do you know nothing more of her, father? Speak, if you can remember anything—any sign given, or casual word uttered—for the happiness, the hope, the life of her husband depends on your words."

"Not a word or a sign she gave me, daughter; she came and worshipped and wept, and she left the next morning."

Kalee came with a throbbing heart to her husband, and told him what little she had learnt. With an anxious mind Jagat continued the enquiry, and questioned every temple priest and menial servant. But it was little that he learned. They had all seen the fair young woman in a widow's dress who had taken shelter there for one night, and had then proceeded on her pilgrimage. "Poor thing!" said a woman, "she had only lately lost her husband, for the red mark of vermilion was still on her forehead."

But who were the other pilgrims who went with her? Were there any people from Burdwan? "No," said a little boy, who lived in the temple premises and had joined the group, "no, they were all strangers, except Govind's mother of Goipur village, who was of the party; and she has returned to her village."

It was midnight when Kalee went back in her palanquin to her house in Burdwan. But Jagat would not return; he accompanied Dhananjay to

Goipur village. The night was dark, the footpaths across the fields were narrow and wet with winter dew, and the silent stars twinkled from the sky on the anxious wanderers.

Long before dawn, Govind's mother was waked from her sleep by the importunate enquirers, and was telling with many tears the story of the fair young pilgrim who had come and wept by her side, but spoken of her misfortunes to none.

"Ay, she was a sweet young creature; but Bhagaban had afflicted her, and she was a widow. And we went many a long day's journey by rail and on foot, and visited many shrines. And she often mixed with a party of holy women in yellow robes who were visiting the shrines, and wished to be one like them, and to assume the yellow robe. And when we sat by the roadside, and she was cooking her simple food under the tree, I asked her of her sad fate, but she was silent and wept. She only said her parents lived in the Lake of Palms, and that she had been married in Dhanpur."

Another gleam of hope fell on the hearts of the questioners as these two names were uttered, for they made it almost certain that this was the unhappy Uma.

"But where did you last see her, woman?" asked Dhananjay, "and where did you part with her? Speak, and if your words are auspicious, the wealth of Dhanpur will be poured at your feet, and a husband's blessings will follow you through life!"

"And has she then a husband—poor, weeping wanderer!—and is she not a widow then? I thought so, for she was so bashful and retiring, and the red mark was still on her head. But she said nothing of her husband, though we travelled together many a long day."

"That may well be," uttered Dhananjay, with a throb in his heart. "But tell me where you parted with her, where you saw her last?"

"We did not part at all, for we came back to Burdwan together with the other pilgrims; and she came with me to this village and lived here for a few

days in a neighbouring hut, cooking her own food. But people began to ask questions about her, and she was troubled. And so she left the village only two days ago with some women who were going to Gaya. She said she was going to join the holy women in yellow robes who are now at Gaya."

Dhananjay then said: "Friend Jagat, your task is ended here. Let me now pursue the enquiry alone, for I have no other object in life. Your wife received me kindly when I came to your house a homeless wanderer, and you helped me when I deserved no honest man's help. A great burden is lifted off my heart, and a crime is wiped away from my soul, for, since I know now that my wife still lives, I feel a stronger man, and will proceed with this enquiry till I find her, or perish in the quest."

It is a long night's journey by rail from Burdwan to Bankipur, and from Bankipur a branch line takes passengers to the holy city of Gaya. It is a city full of temples; and numbers of Hindu pilgrims come to this place daily to make offerings to deceased ancestors and relations. The Falgu river is lined with bathing Ghats, where morning and evening groups of bereaved relatives and pious sons make sad offering to the shades of those who are no more. No people on earth have greater reverence for the deceased than the Hindus, and no act of their religion has a deeper significance than the pious rites performed at Gaya.

In such a place, where groups of pilgrims arrive daily and leave no trace behind them when they depart again by quick trains, it is an almost hopeless endeavour to obtain clue of a woman who mentioned her name to none, and who must have left as suddenly as she came. But Dhananjay never lost heart; the quest had become the object of his life and the needful expiation of his crime.

All through the sultry afternoon Dhananjay walked the dusty streets of Gaya. He enquired at every shop, he questioned the vendors of those stone cups and plates for which Gaya is famous, he sought informa-

tion from men and women who sold brass images in the narrow alleys beside the temples. He loitered in dark corners, looked at every group of pilgrims as they issued out of sacred shrines, and he wandered along the banks of the stream, accosting priests and belated travellers.

Evening melted into night, but the quest went on. He took parched rice at a wayside shop, drank from the Falgu river, and sat down on the steps for a short rest. The bells of the Great Temple tolled the evening service, the soft evening breeze came down the course of the river, and Dhananjay, tired and footsore, weary at heart, reclined against a stone pillar and fell asleep.

It was a dark and moonless night, and the place was silent. The night wind blew cold, and the voices in temple and bazaar were hushed, when the weary wanderer was waked by a gentle touch. He looked up and saw an old priest standing by him on the steps.

"Who are you, my son, and why are you alone on these steps at this hour of night when all pilgrims have retired?"

"I come from Burdwan, father, in search of a party who came to Gaya two days ago. A young woman came with that party, and her husband is anxious that she should return."

"And do you know the names of the people of that party?"

Yes; Dhananjay had informed himself of the names at Goipur.

"Then you need not seek long. Come with me."

The priest took him to the Great Temple. Hundreds of Pandas lived within its confines. They all assembled when they heard of the enquiry and of the rich reward offered, and they turned up the pages of their wonderful records to find out the names wanted. No pilgrim came to Gaya but had his name entered in these priestly chronicles!

"I have it!" said one Panda at last, as he lighted on the names. "It was a party of five; the father and mother were accompanied by their two married

daughters, and with them came a young widow who had joined the party."

"And what is the name of that woman?" anxiously enquired Dhananjay.

"That my record does not tell, for she mentioned no names. But she was born in the Lake of Palms and was married in Banpur."

"Dhanpur, you mean!"

"Maybe so, but the writing is indistinct and blurred."

"And where is the party now?"

"Why, I think they are still in Gaya. I escorted them, and showed them all the temples. In the evening they made their gifts, and parted from me to sleep in the shop where they were stopping."

"And which shop is it?"

"It is the shop of Gopal the confectioner."

"Haste, haste, my friend, and you shall not go unrewarded if we can find the party yet."

Gopal the confectioner was turned out of his bed at midnight, and came rubbing his eyes and grumbling. "And why is it, sirs, that you disturb poor honest people in their bed at this time of the night? Are you of the police, and has there been a murder in the town?"

A bright, glistening rupee soon pacified the awakened sleeper.

"I only want to have a talk with the party who are sleeping in your shop to-night," said Dhananjay. "I will not keep you long."

"And which party is that?"

"Why, the party of one man and four women who came from Burdwan and have been stopping here for two days."

"Why, bless you, sir, they left this shop immediately after their evening meal—it is three hours since."

"And where did they go to, my good friend?"

"That I cannot tell, for I am not of the police, and do not make enquiries of gentlefolk." And Gopal put down the mats to close the shop in the face of the intruders.

"Stop one moment!" said Dhananjay. "How did they leave your shop?"

"Why, they hired Harnam's bullock-cart, and the four ladies went into the cart. The man walked beside it as it left my shop."

The mats were down, and Gopal had retired to rest, nothing displeased with the rupee so easily earned.

"Is there anything else we can do, friend?" asked the Panda. "Return from your fruitless quest; the erring wife will go back to her lord when she is tired of her wanderings. Who can cage the moving wind, or the woman who chooses to wander?"

"You can keep your reflections to yourself, friend," said Dhananjay, somewhat piqued. "Our task is not yet done; let us find out the house of Harnam the carrier."

The waggoner's house was found, and his poor wife waked from her bed after much shouting and noise. She opened the door with fear and trembling, taking the intruders to be men of the Sarkar or the Government, with orders for immediate arrest of her husband for unpaid taxes. "But he is not at home, sir," she kept crying, as she rubbed her eyes.

"Your husband, good woman, has taken a fare to some place to-night, has he not?" asked Dhananjay,

"Ay, that he has," said the trembling woman. "But I am sure he is an honest man, and would not defraud the Sarkar of its dues."

"This has nothing to do with the Sarkar's dues, woman. We are come in quest of a woman who is missing."

"Merciful Heavens! What will become of my poor husband? I am sure, sir, he has not knowingly concealed any man's wife or daughter, and I would not give shelter to such a woman in this honest house of mine. We are poor but honest subjects of the Maharanee, the Great Queen, and would not thwart her wishes."

"That we know, my good woman," said Dhananjay, as he slipped a rupee into her hand. Nor is your husband charged with any offence. But the husband of the missing woman has sent for her, and wishes to

know which way she has gone in Harnam's cart to-night."

"That I cannot tell," said the woman, much reassured. "I did not even see the people my husband took to-night. He took his cart to Gopal's shop at eight o'clock in the evening, and the passengers got into the cart there."

"And what time do you expect him back?" asked the Panda. "Surely he told you how far he was going, and when he was likely to return?"

"Ay, he told me to keep his food ready for him by midday, and that he would return from Buddha-Gaya in the afternoon."

"Enough!" said Dhananjay, as he dragged the Panda with him on the road to Buddha-Gaya. "It is not many miles from here and the cart has only three hours' start of us. Courage, Pandajee! We may reach Buddha-Gaya before the morning, or even catch the cart on the way if we make haste."

"That we will," said the Panda with alacrity, for he had already been heavily fee'd for his trouble, and expected a handsome largesse in case of success. "Our trade would be a great deal more remunerative," he said to himself, "if a few runaway wives were now and then thrown in our way."

The Panda was a stalwart man, like most Gaya men, and Dhananjay was strong in his determination. They passed mile after mile in the dark hours of the night, and often stumbled on the uneven road, but spoke seldom. They accosted one or two bullock-carts which they met on the way, but without success. Every man and woman on the roadside was questioned, but still they heard nothing of the Burdwan party.

The first blush of the crimson dawn mantled the eastern sky as with a glow of fire when the weary travellers reached Buddha-Gaya. They had no difficulty in finding out the place where the pilgrim carts halted and the bullocks were fed. And after some enquiry, they found Harnam the cartman by a fire, quietly smoking his pipe after the night's journey.

"Friend Harnam," said the Panda, "you have had a good fare for the night's journey from Gaya to Buddha-Gaya, I am thinking."

"No indeed, Pandajee! Pilgrims pay not in these days as they used to do, nor are they as many as before. We poor cartmen have a bad time of it, but it is our fathers' trade, and how can we give it up? I bear in mind my little debt to you, Pandajee, and will not fail to repay it with interest before the year is out. But to-day my earnings are small, and my wife starves at home."

"Your good woman is not starving, friend, but will keep a substantial dinner ready for you this afternoon. Nor have I come to recover my loan, but to give you a reward which this generous pilgrim offers to you. You can buy your wife a new Saree with this rupee, if you will only tell us of the people you brought here to-night."

The cartman's eyes glistened with joy and eagerness. "Heaven reward you, Pandajee, and my wife and children will bless your name, for you have ever been kind to us! But I know little of the people I brought to-night. There were four ladies in my cart, and a man walked all the way."

"Ay, ay, we know that, friend. But tell us from what place your party came, and what the ladies were like."

"They were dressed like well-born women from Bengal. One was elderly, and was the mother of two young married women, as I could judge from their dress and ornaments. The fourth sat alone and silent, and her arms and ankles were bare. Many are the young widows who come to these holy places, Pandajee."

"And how long is it since they arrived here, and whither have they gone? Are they going back to Gaya in your cart?"

"Nay, Pandajee; they have paid me my fare and dismissed me; so they will be stopping a day or two in this place, I am thinking. We arrived only an hour ago. Buddha-Gaya is not a large place,

and you cannot miss the party if you search for them."

"Pandajee, your task is ended," said Dhananjay; "and here are a few rupees for your night's work. Leave the rest to me, and may God, who has helped me so far, speed me in my quest!"

The Panda returned to Gaya in Harnam's cart, and Dhananjay continued his search. From early dawn to sunrise he continued his enquiries in every shop and every place where the pilgrims congregated, and at last he discovered the Burdwan party. His heart beat with hope as he addressed the man.

"Salutation to you, my friend from Burdwan, for I too come from that place. You have brought these ladies on a visit to this holy place, and may Heaven fulfil the dearest wishes of their hearts! But your Panda told me there was another young woman in your company, and her I do not see here. Where could she have gone?"

"Salutation to you, honoured sir, and if my old eyes do not deceive me, I see the Squire of Dhanpur in whose estates we live. It is my auspicious luck which brings about this happy meeting. Bow, bow, my wife and daughters, to the Zemindar of Dhanpur!"

The women bowed, and the wife spoke something in a whisper to her husband. "My wife says," said the man aloud, "that she has grieved much to hear of your lady's death in Calcutta. And she prays to Heaven you may be happily married again, and live to see sons and grandsons, worthy heirs to your great estate."

"The devil take the babbling woman and her good wishes!" thought Dhananjay within himself. But he spoke fair, and said: "Give my salutations to your good lady, and my thanks for her kind wishes. But tell me what you know of the young woman who came with you."

"Little can I tell you, sir, of her," he said, as he looked suspiciously at the young Zemindar. He had heard something of the Squire's doings in Calcutta, and did not like his enquiries after a young woman who had run away to Gaya. "She was a young

widow who joined our party for making a holy pilgrimage, we thought, and so we brought her here. But Heaven will deal with her if she came with other intentions! We are honest folk, and like not travelling with such, and little do we care to know why she has left us now, or where she may have gone!"

Dhananjay bit his lip in rage and disappointment. His heart swelled within him, and his head reeled. He left the party, and slowly walked to the famous Buddha-Gaya temple, and sat on the steps of the temple, dizzy and faint.

A villager's daughter was carrying milk from a neighbouring cow-shed to her humble hut. Her eyes fell on the young man, pale and suffering, and she stood and lifted her veil. With a woman's compassion she read traces of grief on the handsome face, and saw that he was hungry and foot-worn.

"I am a Brahman girl," she said meekly, "and you can drink out of my bowl." And she sat beside the weary wanderer and held up the bowl to his lips.

He drank, and fell asleep on the steps.

VII

THE FAIR DEVOTEE

No one of the many sacred places in India is consecrated by holier work than Buddha-Gaya. Five hundred years before Christ, a weary wanderer on earth sat in the same place where Dhananjay lay unconscious, contemplating the sorrows and sufferings of men, and seeking with aching heart a way to salvation. The wanderer was Gautama, the Buddha, and the religion he preached was Buddhism, which is now the faith of a fourth of all the human race. A sinless life, kindness to all living creatures, forgiveness to those who smite and persecute us, love to those who hate us, were the lessons he taught his fellow-Hindus and fellow-men. The lessons were heard by the poor

and the lowly in India; they were accepted in China and in Japan, in Burma and in Ceylon, and they were spread through the remote regions of Tartary and Siberia.

The great Asoka, Emperor of India, embraced the Buddhist religion in the third century before Christ, and sent Buddhist missionaries to spread the teachings of that faith to the ends of the then known world. These missionaries excavated cells and monasteries in the hills of Orissa, carried the religion to the people of Ceylon, and preached the Buddhist faith in the five western kingdoms, Syria and Egypt, Macedon, Cyrene, and Epirus. And Buddhist communities were living and preaching their moral precepts of forgiveness and love in Palestine when Jesus Christ was born.

Centuries after the time of Asoka the Great, a great and patriotic Hindu built the famous temple at Buddha-Gaya, on the spot where Gautama, the Lord Buddha, first conceived his religion of love. That great temple fell into disrepair and decay, but shortly before the date of the present story the British Government had restored it, in veneration of the great past. On the steps of the temple poor Dhananjay lost the anguish of his heart in sleep.

The rising sun lit the lofty tower of the temple, and flung its radiance all round. Buddhist images and statues, discovered from time to time, were collected and preserved in the neighbourhood of the temple. A few Buddhist pilgrims, who had come from Ceylon or from Burma to this holy land, were led by a monk in yellow robes from place to place. Groups of Hindu pilgrims also wandered here and there, or lighted their fires to cook the morning food under shade of the trees. A few shops displayed their stores, or those curious images and articles which are dear to pilgrims. The quiet village of Buddha-Gaya, with its trees and buildings and thatched cottages, lay all round.

On the steps of the temple a woman sat beside the sleeping Dhananjay. Although dressed in yellow

robes she was not a Buddhist, but a Hindu Sanyasini or devotee. Her hair had been tied up in a yellow scarf, a portion of which fell on her face and shoulders and served as a veil. A flowing yellow garb was gathered round her waist by a cloth girdle of the same colour. She had the staff of a Sanyasini, and her feet were bare. Often she looked on the unconscious weary sleeper, and as often her eyes were dim with tears.

The sun was high up when the sleeper opened his eyes. He started when he saw the eyes which were looking into his, and he closed them again. And then he held up his hands to the sky, and a prayer passed his lips: "God of mercy! if this be a dream, let me not be awakened to life again!"

"Why have you followed me here, my lord of Dhanpur—me, a homeless wanderer on earth?" The words from the devotee's lips greeted the listener's ears like a remembered song which recalls past scenes and past times.

"Has God wiped out the dark crime from my soul, and do I find you living, my Uma, my wife?"

"Your Uma and your wife no longer," calmly replied the woman. "These yellow robes will tell you, O lord of Dhanpur, that I have ceased to be the wife of any living man, and have humbly devoted a poor woman's heart and life to God."

A pause ensued. "Lay your hands on mine, Uma!" said Dhananjay at last. "Let me feel that you are living, and not the vision of my disordered brain!"

Uma gently laid her hand on his, and trembled a little at the well-known touch. She withdrew it quickly.

"Nay, let me touch your feet, Uma, let me ask your forgiveness; for many are the sorrows that I heaped on your young life, till I drove you from my bosom and my home to be a wanderer on earth!"

Uma struggled to release her feet from the grasp of the trembling man, who was bathing them with his tears. She stood aside as she spoke again in a calm voice.

"Recall not the past, my lord of Dhanpur, for the

past is dead and buried between us. And ask forgiveness from Him who alone can wipe out our sins."

"Ay! may He forgive my sins, for I have much need of His mercy. And you would forgive me too, Uma, if you knew how I have suffered. The past has come to me by day and by night in all its black horror till my head has ached, and my eyes have forgotten their function. The degradation of my life has choked me, and I have cried for mercy and have found none. The shadow of a dark crime, a horrible death, oppressed me ceaselessly, till my blood curdled within me, and my heart ceased to beat."

"Alas! alas! you have suffered greatly; but merciful Heaven has solace for the sorrow-stricken."

"Visions of a midnight crime, and of one floating on the dark waters, came before me nightly, till I started from my terrible dream in alarm. And then I thought of the sweet life I had wasted, of the young heart I had crushed; and I cried aloud, but there was none to hear me or pity me."

"Speak not so, alas! O lord of Dhanpur! Nor should a devotee's ears listen to the joys and sorrows of a life which she has relinquished for ever."

"Ay; you have relinquished the joys and sorrows of life for the consolations of religion! But for me, every familiar object, every token which you left me, Uma, pierced my eyes like so many needles, till I left the lonely, detested home in Calcutta, and ran along the streets, to find some kind of shelter. I ran to sister Bindu's house; for if there is peace on earth, it is in that poor woman's heart and home. She loved you in earlier days as no child loved another; and she loves your memory yet as no woman cherishes the memory of a friend. She would forgive me and solace me, I thought, if I craved her mercy."

Uma's eyes were dim, and under the yellow robe her bosom heaved at the thought of the dear companion of her childhood, whom she had left for ever.

"I ran to her house, but she had left Calcutta and gone back to the Lake of Palms, and there I dared not show my face. I then thought of Kalee. I

walked day and night from Dhanpur to Burdwan, taking shelter in the huts of villagers at night, and sleeping on beds of straw. Late one night I reached Burdwan, and with a trembling hand I knocked at the door. They have returned from a pilgrimage to Puri, and in their kindness they gave me shelter. Kalee listened to my sorrows, and her ever tender heart bled within her. She took me by the hand, as she had often done as a child, led me into her room, and told me that you, Uma, would forgive me, if I revered your memory and served your will. Those words fell as a balm on my troubled heart, and for the first time I slept in peace in the house of sweet sister Kalee. Heaven repay her kindness and love!"

Dhananjay paused, and two silent tears rolled down his haggard cheeks. He resumed his tale more calmly.

"Your letter, Uma, which you left as the last token of your love, is always in my bosom. That letter led me to the hundred and eight temples, and Kalee and her husband accompanied me there. They knew nothing of you, but sent me to Goipur, and at Goipur I heard that you had come to Gaya. I came to Gaya yesterday, and have sought for you in the bazaar and the temple and have dreamt of you by the river. Need I tell more? God has given me back my Uma, my soul, my life!"

The woman heart throbbed again under the saintly garb, and the woman eyes were moist. With a voice somewhat tremulous, the devotee spoke.

"It is not given to a mortal, my lord of Dhanpur, to forgive, for the Blessed One alone can cleanse our life. But if a woman's prayers are of any avail, they will rise night and morning to the altar of the Holiest for you. You have suffered long and suffered terribly; you have fearfully expiated the errors of the past; and God be my witness, this heart of mine shall bear no thought of anger against you as long as I live."

"Bless your sweet lips, Uma, for those kindly words! I shall remember to the end of my days that I sinned against you and you forgave me; I came back to you black with my crimes, and you lifted up your prayers

for me. And now tell me your own sad tale, Uma, and tell me why you are wandering alone?"

"Nay, my tale is not a sad one, my lord of Dhanpur, for the Blessed One has consolations for those who make Him their refuge. There are women in this land who join the Holy Order, and pass their lives in pilgrimages and acts of piety. I have met some of them who have travelled far and wide, and visited sacred spots which men's eyes have seldom seen. Ay, they have seen the glaciers of Gomukha from which the holy Ganges takes its rise; they have visited the shrines hid in the icy mountains of Kashmir; they have wandered southwards to the Godavary where Rama and Sita lived of old; and they have visited the ancient temples by the Krishna and the Kavery. To worship the Great Being in His many shrines, and to tend and succour His creatures in sorrow and sickness, is their holy mission, and saintly is the life they lead. They have promised their blessings and their help to this poor wanderer; and in their company I shall forget the cares and troubles of the world. I have assumed their holy dress, and shall endeavour to live their holy lives, for in such holiness, it is written, there is joy."

"Your purpose, my Uma, is indeed noble and befitting the pure life you have ever lived. But think you that the Blessed One only receives the worship of those who visit His shrines? Think you, He cares naught for those who, living in the world, help their weaker brothers and sisters, tend the poor and the lowly, and strive after righteousness amidst the temptations of life?"

"Nay, it is writ also that those who, living in the world, follow the paths of truth, perform a holier sacrifice to God than is known in His temples and altars. It is the weaker brothers and sisters, unfit for the duties of life, who seek for rest in the life of a devotee. I am one of the weak, my lord of Dhanpur, who have failed in my duties, and seek expiation as a Sanyasini."

"But you have *not* failed, my Uma. I have known

no devotee or anchorite who has done harder penance in forests and solitudes, or who has borne his afflictions more bravely and meekly. It is I who failed, Uma, and whose heart turned to things that are unclean. It is I who am weak and need support and help; will you not stay by an erring husband and help him to live a purer life?"

"Do not tempt, my lord of Dhanpur, for a woman's heart is weak, and a woman's step often falters."

"Will you not stay by your poor broken-down mother, who has no child but yourself, none else to solace her old age, nor close her dying eyes? She nursed you on her breast, Uma: will you not shed a gleam of sunshine on her failing hours?"

"My lord," she answered again, "will you not spare me, knowing I cannot come?"

"And why can you not come back to the embraces of Bindu who loved you, and still loves you, as never sister loved a sister? Why can you not take in your arms Bindu's little children, who still ask for their aunt with their infant lips? Will you not be a friend and sister once more to dear Kalee, and tend and console the bereaved Sudha? Do you think, Uma, that the duties of a Sanyasini are higher and holier than these which await you at home?"

"But I have no home any longer," said Uma, bursting into sobs as these recollections thronged her mind.

"But you have a home, my loved, my cherished Uma, in the bosom of your repentant husband," said Dhananjay. "Recall our early days, Uma, and remember how dear you were to these eyes. I have been sorely tempted; I have fallen; I have deeply sinned; but trust me, Uma, I have never forgotten your love. You are sweeter to these eyes to-day than when you came to me as a young bride; you are dearer to this aching heart than when you grew up to be a woman in my arms. Help me, Uma, to be true to you in the future, as I shall strive to be faithful to the Being who has saved me from my crime."

A tremor passed over Uma's frame, and her voice choked with tears. Every passion of the human heart

may be subdued and quelled, every memory may be effaced, but a true woman never forgets the love of him whom she has once loved with all her heart and all her soul. The fair devotee struggled to check the rising impulses of a woman's heart, and she spoke in a voice which scarcely concealed her weakness.

"Spare a poor weak woman, O lord of Dhanpur, for you—you—know her weakness. We have met, noble sir, and we have parted—it were better that we should each pursue the path we have chosen. For me there are consolations in the service of the Blessed One which I have not found in the world; for you, O lord of Dhanpur, noble endeavours in life—to help your poor tenants, to serve your country and your nation as befits your position, to worship your God who has called you back to noble duties. These are nobler aspirations than the love of a woman; fulfil se duties, my lord, and leave a poor afflicted man to the quiet and peaceful life she has chosen. were better thus; and when we meet again in after rs, when the hair is grey on my head, we shall haps be able to meet as friends in life, without king to renew that closer relation in which we led."

"I have failed, my sweet Uma, but God help , I shall yet succeed, if you stand by me once re. I have wronged you, Uma, and pursued the ths of evil; help me, sweet Uma, to return. Let kneel before you, Uma—I who have almost gotten to kneel before my God; help me to be rthy of you, my ministering angel!"

"Rise, rise, my husband," cried out Uma, in nvulsive sobs. "Rise and hear a woman's con- ssion that she has not ceased to be a woman; cept a wife's assurance that she shall never, never ase to regard herself as your wife. Ay, my sband, I shall bear your love in my bosom as long I live and wander on this earth; and the Almighty o has made me a woman will suffer me to bear a man's cherished feelings in my heart, while I dicate my life to His service. Permit me, my

husband, after this confession to follow the pa said have chosen, knowing that your image will her remain fresh in my heart, and your name will m in my prayers to Him who sees into our thoughts one's cannot return to the world after having assumed the yellow robe."

"Nay, dearest and saintliest of women, if till heart is still true to your womanly duties, this yel is robe will not forbid you. That iron bracelet on your arm, which you assumed on the wedding night, rds not yet been cast off; by that blessed sign I kn that you are only a novice, and have not yet joined the Holy Order. It is permitted to a novice to return to her home, and by that blessed ring I claim you yet as my own. Return then to the home and the bosom of one who has never ceased to love, and who will strive to be worthy of the noblest, the pure the sweetest woman on earth!"

The bright sun of the Indian winter shone on to and temple, and fell in a golden shower over her loved as a woman and forgave as a woman. And the morning bells sounded from the adjoining temp one wandering soul was reclaimed by repentance, erring mortal was saved by a Woman's Love.

VIII

THE LAKE OF PALMS

THE Spring has returned to the Lake of Pal The young bamboo has a softer green, and the lo peepul has changed its withered foliage for tend ruddy leaves. The mangoes are in blossom, and whole country-side is scented with the fragrance their flower. The jasmine stars the village shrubs w its white scented buds, and the lotus, so admired India, blossoms in every village tank.

Hem and Bindu have returned to their villa

and breathe in comfort once more after their
house residence in Calcutta. Hem has his
full now, and an outer room which he has con-
ed is swarmed by tenants, morning and evening.
u visits all her friends and neighbours without
restraint which city life imposes on women in
nern India. She goes to the lake for her morn-
ablutions before the sun is up; and many a long
rnoon, when her husband is busy with the tenants,
visits her aunt, and sheds tears of joy in speaking
Uma restored to life and to the love of her husband.
idu's little children prattle round their old grand-
ther, and kiss her and pluck her hair, and fill her
ing heart with joy.

Sarat came with his bride to his village home, and
young hearts which had remained true to each
ier through days and months of silent agony and
pair felt the warm impulses of a strong, ardent love.
ha's dark eyes sparkled again, and her cheeks wore
resh tinge of gladness and health. The child who
run about with her kittens in her sister's house
y the previous summer was now a lovely and loving
man, and her heart throbbed with a secret joy which
vainly struggled to hide. She minded her own
usehold, swept the rooms, and prepared her husband's
als; and when Sarat came to the house after his
y's work, she ran away blushing into her room to
id (or was it to court?) his warm and loving kiss.

The people of the village looked askance at a Hindu
low who had married again, and even Sonaton's
e often came to Bindu of an afternoon and lamented
innovations of the times.

told you then, sister," said the weeping woman,
you cannot go to Calcutta and keep your caste.
, sister Sudha, who was so fond of my sweet curds,
never spoke to me without a smile on her sweet
who could have thought that she, a widow from
hildhood, would marry again? Ay, ay, I told
sister, I told you then that young men of our
es are up to anything; they can cut the throats
ng men."

"But Sarat has not cut my sister's throat y
Bindu, laughing. "He has married her, and m
happy for life."

"Ay, but is not that worse than cutting
throat?" asked the woman, naïvely. "Hear wh
villagers say, sister."

"The villagers may talk, my Kaibarta Sister,
they are tired, and we shall not mind it. Ther
not a truer man in our village than Sarat, nor a t
wife than my Sudha, and the Great God who rewa
the faithful will make them happy."

"Ay, ay, sister; poor Sudha is a good wom
true, and I will never say nay to that. And sh
my sweet curds still, and calls me her Kaibarta
too. May Bhagaban be kind to the sweet
heart!" And the milk-woman wiped away a
she left the house.

It was the same with other neighbours.
talked of the degeneracy of the times, and t
wardness of young men and women, but they
not resist the goodness and kindliness of Sara
his wife. The barber-woman, who had stopped
visits for a time, came quietly to Sudha after
fall and wept at her feet; and the laundry-wom
once more continued to work for the house. Wom
of good birth and family dared not ask her to th
feasts and social ceremonies, but they came quie
to visit the gentle and loving woman who was k
to them all, and bore a grudge against none. Soc
boycotting has lost its horrors in India; the peo
are more practical, if still faithful to old forms.

"It is no use," said old Tarini, when he came
more to the village from Burdwan on a holida
is no use resisting the times! And you, Sara
a determined man, and would have your own
But the long and the short of it is, that the Bral
must have a good feed, and a feed let them
There was feasting in Tarini's house such as the
of Palms had seldom witnessed, and the oppo
lost much of its bitterness.

Uma too came on a long visit to her fa

house. She had doffed her yellow robe, and shone once more in her pearls and diamonds, as she bowed once more to her mother, and embraced her dearly-loved Bindu. And when she came to Sudha's house and saw the bashful young wife with a gold chain on her graceful neck, and gold bangles on her fair arms, she burst into tears in her joy. "May Heaven bless you, my sweet sister!" she sobbed, as she pressed the child to her bosom. And Uma took a necklace of five rows of pearls from her own neck and hung it on the bosom of her young friend. "Wear this for me, sister Sudha, for I have loved you as a child; I have prayed to see you a widow before you were a woman, and I rejoice to see you a loving and true wife again. This necklace was one of the first gifts of my husband's love to me,—the merciful God has restored him to me." Uma could speak no more; and the tears which she shed as she silently pressed Sudha to her breast were the tears of the truest, the purest, the tenderest sympathy that a woman who has suffered ever felt for a sister who has also suffered.

Kalee too was dying to see Sudha again as her brother's wife. But she was not permitted to travel at the present; and Jagat Kisor's aunts wrote to Sudha's mother with many expressions of joy that the pilgrimage and prayers of Jagat's mother had borne fruit, and that the advent of a long-wished-for stranger was expected in Jagat's house before many months were over. The English doctor of Raniganj had been sent for time after time, and had been soundly rated by the old ladies because the good-for-nothing man could not assure them that the stranger would be a son and heir, and not a girl!

Weeks passed like so many days. One evening *Sudha went to the Lake of Palms when the moonless* sky was dark. The palms lifted their feathery tops to the sky, and a gentle breeze rustled through the leaves. The light of the stars fell on the rippling waters, and from a distant bush the Kokil poured forth its liquid voice in the silence of the night. Sudha's veil had fallen from her head; her dark

glossy hair clustered round her sweet young
fell on her bosom; her Saree fluttered in the
breeze. Sh stood musing on the banks of
e rustle reached her ears.
l stately figure of her husband a
a bush. Sudha set down the wa ot
, and, with the first impulse of a id
er face.
my bashful wife, where there is no
ere? I came to remind you, love, th a
duty yet unfulfilled. To-morrow
s village for Benares, to see my moth
r blessings."
husband, and the sooner the better.
o see mother ever since our marriag
ther never loved me more tenderly
w old scenes and old times cor
mind, sometimes quite suddenly; an
this summer evening, I cannot he
days when as a child I used to co
with my mother, twelve years ago!
lost her while yet a child. But Heaven has gi
me a mother, as loving, as tender, as good. Ta
me to Benares, dear husband, that I may wash h
feet with my tears, and receive her blessings. T
blessings of such as she help us in life."

"Yes, my Sudha, you speak truly; a saint
mother's blessings will help us in life. And y
too shall stand by me, Sudha—you, who came l
a new light on the horizon of my life, you who are
a joy, a support, a consolation to me, you who are
now my own!"

And Sarat flung his arm round the bashful girl, sweet as a flowering jasmine, and sealed on her quivering lips a long, ardent, passionate kiss of love. The struggling young wife shivered under the touch, and her brow was flushed, and her bosom th as she fled through the woods to hide her joy.

And the night was hushed and silent, and t of the stars fell on the Lake of Palms.

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