

By MRS GHOSAL
(Srimati Svarna Kumari Devi)

"AN UNFINISHED SONG"

Crown 8vo, cloth, 3s. 6d.

Second Edition

PRESS NOTICES

Morning Post—Special interest must be felt by English readers in "An Unfinished Song," the first novel presented to them by Mrs Ghosal (or Srimati Svarna Kumari Devi), the most famous advanced woman of our Indian Empire. We are told that though Mrs Ghosal has done so much for the emancipation of her sex, she still "keeps purdah" among her old-fashioned relatives; and this is just what we should expect from the tone of her work. "An Unfinished Song" breathes the spirit of humility and retirement. Its charming heroine is in every essential, save habit, a true woman of the East. She accepts the inevitable; she approaches God through man. Her one idea in life is the happiness of love, whether towards parent, or friend, or husband.

Aberdeen Free Press—Mrs Ghosal is a sister of Rabindra Nath Tagore, to whom the Nobel Prize was recently awarded. If the poet's merits are great, those of his sister are scarcely less, and both East and West will agree that it is a charming revelation of the workings of a woman's heart. In its sweet simplicity and delicacy of touch, jaded readers will experience something of a new sensation.

Globe—The book's interest lies in its unusual atmosphere, and it has all the charm of the unexpected. The story touches upon the life among the Reformed Party of Bengal, and shows the changes that an intimate contact with Europe has wrought upon the people of India. Mrs Ghosal

PRESS NOTICES—Continued.

writes with simplicity, and her story is embroidered with the poetic and mystical threads of Eastern thought and imagination.

The Dundee Advertiser—One reads it with a sense of contact with the new life that is stirring in India. Beyond that, one is impressed by its gracious literary charm, deriving from the character and mental mood of a woman of a rare order.

Literary Monthly—Written in English, it is the love story of an Indian girl, who developing in an extraordinary manner, holds out eager hands for freedom. The beauty of expression in the work is striking and the poetic and musical vein running throughout gives to the whole a peculiar charm.

In talking of love in song or prose, the wonderful power of expression possessed by the Oriental altogether eclipses that of the English, who, by comparison, are dull and lukewarm.

Popular Science Siftings—The book is interesting because it gives insight into the Hindu nature, and one side of Hindu society, whilst it coincides with the birth of the desire for freedom which feminine India can no longer stifle. Were the story not charming in itself, it would be worth reading if only for its purity of diction.

New York Herald.—Mrs Ghosal has contrived in an absorbing narrative to convey to the Western reader a valuable insight into the Hindu nature.

Westminster Gazette.—Mrs Ghosal, as one of the pioneers of the woman movement in Bengal, and fortunate in her own up-bringing, is well qualified to give this picture of a Hindu maiden's development.

Clarion.—Remarkable for the pictures of Hindu life, the story is overshadowed by the personality of the authoress, one of the foremost Bengali writers of to-day.

THE
FATAL
GARLAND





“ But suddenly there appeared the divine form of
Bhagavati, seated on a lotus.”

THE FATAL GARLAND

BY
MRS GHOSAL
(Srimati Svarna Kumari Devi)

Author of
"AN UNFINISHED
SONG"

SECOND EDITION

Published at 8 Essex Street, London, W.C.

By T. WERNER LAURIE, Ltd.

DEAR FRIEND,
I wove a flowery chain
Which on my heart has lain
Hidden, for many a day.

I hold it in your sight
To-day, but sad its plight
Of crumpled disarray.

Wilt thou take it from me,
Coldly, or lovingly,
Wilt thou accept it, say ?

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NOTE

By ABANINDRA NATH TAGORE, C.I.E.

BEING a near relative of Srimati Svarna Kumari Devi, the authoress of the present work, I feel somewhat handicapped in my task of supplementing the introduction already so kindly and ably written by an English lady for her recently published English translation, "An Unfinished Song." I shall, therefore, confine myself to a few general remarks and let the readers judge for themselves.

The authoress, my aunt, is the first lady-writer in Modern Bengal, and is very well known here through her numerous literary activities. While yet in her teens, she commenced her literary career, which she has pursued throughout her life with unflagging zeal and devotion. The following Press comments of the time upon some of her earliest productions will speak for themselves.

The *Calcutta Review* of 1880 said about her first novel, "Dipnirvan":

"We have no hesitation in pronouncing this book to be by far the best that has yet

been written by a Bengali lady, and we should no more hesitate to call it one of the ablest in the whole literature of Bengal.”

The extract given below appeared in the *Hindu of Madras* later on :

“Never before in Bengal did a lady-writer of such real power and ability appear and shed such a lustre on the literature of her country.”

These are only two out of numerous equally favourable notices, and will serve to show with what a feeling of sincere admiration the Indian literary public greeted her first efforts. Since then some of her works have been translated into various Indian languages, and I am glad that they are now appearing in English.

It is difficult for us foreigners to judge of the merits of the translation, but I sincerely trust that the spirit of the original has been preserved in this book.

PREFACE

It is now thirty-eight years since the publication of my first novel "Dipnirvan," and thirty since I took over the editorship of the *Bharati*. At that time the well-known monthly magazine, the *Bangadarshan*, under the guidance of that brilliant writer and novelist, the late Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, had passed away, after inaugurating a new era in Bengali literature; and the *Bharati*, which had been edited for seven years by my eldest brother, Dwijendra Nath Tagore, one of the eminent literary men of Bengal, was also about to retire from the field when I took over the editorship. It is difficult now to imagine the courage then required for a young and inexperienced woman to undertake such an arduous task, and how many difficulties I had to overcome. The literary talent of our Bengali women was at that time almost latent; and if, by any chance, any one among them showed any ability, the public was astonished.

It was my loving and revered father, Maharshi Devendra Nath Tagore, who had prepared me for my life's career by giving me an educa-

tion unusual for Hindu girls of those days. Still, but for the help and encouragement given to me by my beloved husband, I do not think that it would have been possible for me to venture so far. It was he who moulded and shaped me in the fashion that the outside world knows to-day, and under his loving guidance I passed through the stormy waves of literary life as easily and pleasantly as a good swimmer through a rough sea. And though he is not present with me in the body to-day, yet his benign spirit still works in me and through me, and I feel his helping hand in every struggle and hear his prompting voice in each good resolution. The deep love of literature that he fostered in me urged me to accept the responsibility of editing one of the most intellectual magazines of the day; and the joy of the mental freedom that he enabled me to taste gave an impetus to my desire to share with and spread among my countrymen and countrywomen the ever-growing development and enlightenment of our progressive age.

The literary world of Bengal is now full of activity, in which women play no inconspicuous part; and if I have contributed my mite toward this awakening, I am amply rewarded.

But my ambition does not rest satisfied here. The same love of our own literature and people that inspired my first efforts and sustained me through the trials and difficulties of my literary life, now prompts me to go further and trans-

late my works into English. One of our great artists has said that "Art is the outward expression of the urgent need that the soul feels for the affinity of other souls." And, indeed, the human heart finds its widest expression and greatest sympathy in the field of literature, for here there is no distinction of caste or creed; those who are blind are made to see, and those who hate are taught to love. From one end of the world to the other people are made one by literature.

The East and West are daily coming more and more into contact, it is true, and yet they know but little of one another. They live as neighbours—but their lives still run in separate grooves. The *Adelaide Register* (South Australia) remarked in a review of my book, "An Unfinished Song," that it was curious to find in a book showing such evident traces of English influence on Indian Society, no mention of the English people who reside in India. That newspaper does not know, perhaps, that while Indian and English people live side by side in India, they have really very little social intercourse. In rare cases they make strong and lasting friendships, but the governed and the governing races form, for the most part, only formal and official relationships. And if this is true to-day, how much more so was it the case twenty years ago, when that book was written in my own tongue? Moreover, the civilisations of the East and West are appa-

rently so different that even a careful study does not enable Indians and Europeans to know one another intimately. Yet we feel to-day that it is of the greatest importance that Europe—and more especially England—should understand India. And this understanding can, I think, only be brought about by a study of our literature.

There is an Italian saying to the effect that a translator is a traitor; and it is true that to translate the word is only too often to traduce the thought. This is the case with translations made from one European language into another, and infinitely more so when works in Indian literature are translated into English. European nations have more or less the same traditions and ideas, and also a common religion. Their modes of life and thought are very much alike. A literal translation from one European language into another conveys often not only the denotation, but also the connotation of words. But it is very different when an Indian language is translated into English. Then the connotation of words is often different, and associations of ideas are sometimes actually opposed. Hence the necessity for encyclopædic footnotes, and even these often fail to convey the actual meaning of a word, and to conjure up the thoughts and sentiments that give to it vitality and importance. For instance, the name "Ruth" brings with it a host of pictures to the European mind,

but the significance of the name of our adored "Sita" could not, in all probability, be brought home to one mind in ten thousand in Europe.

I wrote the present book in Bengali with all the joy of an artist in creation, but, on account of my limited knowledge of the English language, I had to seek help in the translation.

Under these circumstances, if it wins its way to the hearts of English readers and awakens their sympathy for my beloved country, I shall consider that I have received sufficient encouragement to translate and publish some more social and historical novels of mine.

I take this opportunity to thank all my friends, both Indian and English, who have given me encouragement and assistance, especially Miss A. C. Albers, the author of "The Palms and Temple Bells," and Professor M. Ghose, the author of "The Poplar, the Beach, and the Weeping Willow," to whom, with sincere gratitude, I dedicate "The Fatal Garland."

S. GHOSAL.

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Indian words mentioned in the text.***

INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER

ABOUT the middle of the fourteenth century A.D. Shams-ud-din Elias Shah, the Mohammedan Governor of Bengal, proclaimed himself to be independent.

The Emperor of Delhi marched against the rebel, and war ensued.

Mohammedan rule had not been at that time established sufficiently long or firmly in Bengal to bring the whole of the country under such domination, nor into such a state of helpless apathy, that in a war between the rebel Governor and his Sovereign the help or the opposition of local Chiefs could be disregarded.

It was, consequently, a time when petty local Chiefs could rise to positions of power and influence.

Instead of being contemptuously treated as conquered subjects, vassals, or tributaries, they were to be reckoned with as powerful allies on the one side or the other.

Many a bold chieftain carved out a name for himself and a position for his descendants. Previously, individual units in a group of

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nominal Chiefs, insignificant owing to want of co-operation, and indifference or open hostility to one another, the Mohammedan conquerors and rulers of Bengal had paid little heed to them. But when the Provincial Governor had raised the standard of rebellion, and had to meet his Emperor on the battlefield, and therefore had to seek all the support that he could obtain, then came the opportunity of these petty chieftains. They could, by throwing in their lot with the Provincial Governor, beat back the Emperor, who had moved an army from Delhi to crush the rebellion, or, by siding with the Emperor, they could destroy the rebel.

It is not for the novelist, the teller of a simple tale, to discuss the wisdom of the course pursued.

The Chiefs of Bengal thought it best to side with the rebellious Governor, who was thus enabled to beat back the Emperor and to assume, with great pomp in A.D. 1357, the proud title of Sultan of Bengal.

But that rule could hardly be despotic, at least so far as the Chiefs were concerned. Those who had helped the Governor to establish his independence had to be conciliated, whether out of gratitude or fear, after he became *Badshah*.

Thus arose most of the aristocracy of Bengal, who obtained power and became virtually reigning princes, their help being sought for and their opposition dreaded.

INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER 21

One of such princes was the Chief of Dinajpur: a sovereign prince in all but name—acknowledging only the suzerainty of the Mohammedan titular ruler of all Bengal, and exercising the powers and attributes of sovereignty within his own jurisdiction.

Sekandar Shah, the son of Elias Shah, was on the Imperial throne of Bengal in A.D. 1403 when our tale begins; and Raja Suryadeb was then the Chief of Dinajpur.

THE FATAL GARLAND

CHAPTER I

THROUGH a thick avenue of tall trees two girls advanced along a shady path towards Lake Mahipal. The shadow of bakul trees lay on the water, and in the shade a small boat, tied by a rope to a tree, swayed and tossed restlessly, having at heart a futile desire to float away, but bound by relentless fate—like a woman who must be content to peep at the world through jealousies, to move to and fro within a small, confined area.

It was a typically beautiful afternoon in *Bysakh*,¹ the month of luxuriant foliage, of fruits and flowers. Spring was ripening into summer; and where but recently tender young leaves and pale mango blossoms had seemed to fill the eye, were now masses of varying shades of green, with tiny little mangoes and larger ripening fruits peeping through, also a profusion of flowers, the bright red clusters of Spring's

¹ The meaning of the italicised words will be found in the Index.

special messengers—the asoka and the gulmor, seeming to send forth a trumpet note of joyous victory, the homely bakul, the golden champak, with its heavy, intoxicating perfume, the fragile kamini, the bold bela, the modest chameli, and the coy malati.

Still blew the pleasant spring breezes, but the note was a little harsher. At morning and evening their touch was now that of a soft, cool hand on a fevered brow; and after, towards sunset, the furies of a storm would come with sudden fierce wind and rain and hail, and thunder and lightning from the north-west (like the hordes of Tamurlane and others) to vent for a short while their blind, mad, jealous rage, to devastate and destroy, and then to pass away as quickly as they had come, leaving the world to repair the mischief done as best as it could, and to resume its former peaceful, love-replete, tranquil, smiling life.

It was the month of *Bysakh*—spring turning into summer, the boy on the threshold of manhood, and the girl on the verge of womanhood. All nature was one vast orchestra, playing the grand symphony of life in colour, perfume, and sound.

The two girls stood beneath the bakul trees and glanced sadly at the empty boat. Then one of them said:

“The *Rajkumar* has not come, *Didi*.”

It was Nirupama who spoke—a delicate, fragile little thing of eleven years, with simple,

sweet, lispng speech, much admired by her friends. Shaktimai alone did not like it. Whenever Nirupama spoke, Shakti laughed at her, and mocked and mimicked her. So Nirupama was never at ease in Shakti's company, and never really liked to be with her. Nevertheless, wherever Shakti was seen there was Nirupama too. Like light and shade, the girls were inseparable. No one came so early to the garden by the lake as Shakti. No one returned from it so late. And Nirupama followed her instinctively, for both were moved by the same desire—the desire to see the young Prince who came there every day. The garden belonged to the Raja, and was set apart as a playground for the children of the aristocracy.

Nirupama had spoken on the impulse of the moment; and now she stood abashed and half afraid of the ridicule that was sure to follow.

But Shakti seemed not to have heard her. "Come, let us go into the water and pick lotus flowers," was all that she said.

Go into the water! Nirupama was timid and dared not do that. "I shall fall," she stammered nervously. "I will sit here and make a bakul chain."

Shakti was not accustomed to have her requests refused by Nirupama. She knit her arched eyebrows and said authoritatively, "You must come."

She was only one year older than her playmate, nevertheless Nirupama was terribly

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afraid of her ; so much so, indeed, that she had never before had the courage to disobey her. Now she feebly echoed her former refusal, "I will not go."

This reply was unexpected. Shakti angrily stamped her foot, and putting on the air of an insulted queen, asked sharply, "You will not go?"

"No," faltered Nirupama.

"No? But you shall go." And with these words Shakti seized the hand of the frightened girl and dragged her toward the water.

Nirupama grew desperate, and screaming "I will not go," struggled to free herself; and just then two more girls appeared from behind the trees.

"Shakti, where are you dragging Nirupama?" they exclaimed. "What is the matter?"

Shakti then let go Nirupama's hand and said, with disgust, "Just fancy! I want her to come with me to pick lotus flowers, and she will not come."

Nirupama, who was the picture of despair, looked at her two friends piteously and stammered, "I shall fall down."

"Poor little baby! She will be drowned!" laughed Shakti.

"She is only a wee mite," replied Kusum, one of the new-comers. "Leave her alone; I will go with you to get the flowers." As she spoke, she took the *orna* from her head, and

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leaving it with Kamini, she joined Shakti in the excursion. And soon among the floating lotus swam the two lily-like forms, their kindred loveliness enhancing each the beauty of the other, and the lake laughing in silvery ripples.

CHAPTER II

THEY were fit companions for a prince, these daughters of the old Hindu aristocracy. Nor were they inferior in caste to the Raja himself. The fine dignity of race and blood was seen in their features, in their stately, slender forms, their bearing and manners.

Kamini wiped the tears from Nirupama's frightened face and said soothingly, "How lovely the ground looks covered with all the fallen bakul flowers! Come, let us pick them up."

And now, before the tears were fully dried, there was a smile on Nirupama's face, and opening her left hand, she said triumphantly:

"See! I have brought a ball of thread, I will make a bakul wreath and give it to the Rajkumar."

Through the trees Kamini and Nirupama wound their way, gathering the luxuriant and fresh blossoms of young summer, and filling the folds of their *saris*. Then they sat down beside the lake and began leisurely to weave the flowers into garlands. Meanwhile Shakti and Kusum, with wet, clinging garments and

dripping hair, and holding the long, slender stalks of white lotus flowers in their hands, emerged like fairies from the lake and stood before them.

“I will take a lotus and give it to the Rajkumar,” said Nirupama eagerly.

“Indeed!” retorted Shakti, in anger. “Are we to go into the water and gather lotus flowers, while you give them to the Rajkumar? The audacity of it! Never!”

Nirupama looked crestfallen.

“Don’t show your temper, Shakti,” said Kusum, patting her shoulder. “You look so beautiful at this moment. It seems as if the Goddess Lakshmi herself had come out of the water and was once more upon earth. Let me put on your head the crown that Kamini has woven, and the flower bracelets on your wrists. Now then, you look perfect!” As she spoke she finished decorating Shakti.

Shakti showed her appreciation in her eyes, which shone with innocent pleasure; then she turned and kissed her companion, smiling.

Kamini’s mind, however, was on another subject.

“Girls,” she said, “you have picked too many flowers. The Rani may not have enough for her *pujah* to-morrow; then what will happen?”

“She will never know who picked the flowers,” interrupted Shakti indifferently.

Kamini did not heed her, but asked: “Is it true that a wife can make a slave of her husband

by offering a hundred lotus flowers to Shiva every day?"

Kusum and Kamini were both married, and in their early teens.

Kusum said to Kamini, who was one year her elder, "My mother tells me that the Rani won her husband's love by offering one hundred lotus flowers daily at the shrine of Shiva. He did not love her until some years ago, but since she commenced the lotus-offering she has twined him round her little finger. I understand that your sister's husband is not pleased because she is remaining in her father's house at present. Why does she not make some offerings to *Mahadeva*. Her husband will then consent to all that she wishes."

"How could she get one hundred lotus flowers daily?" asked Kamini. "But my mother says that that is not the real reason for the Rani's daily flower-offering. The astrologers have foretold danger for the Prince, and to avert this the Rani performs her daily worship in this way. It is owing to this prediction that the Prince has not been married yet. The danger will be over this year, I believe."

The girls did not, however, worry long over an evil augury.

"What fun it will be when we get a new Rani!" Kusum exclaimed gaily. "I wonder what she will be like!"

"Won't it be delightful if she is like our Nirupama?" laughed Kamini.

Nirupama's sweet young face became radiant ; the bakul wreath fell from her hand.

"Yes, *Didi*, I will be the Rani," she exclaimed with childlike eagerness.

Kamini kissed her, laughing.

"Very well then, you shall be the Rani. Come, let us play at 'King and Queen.' You shall be queen, darling, I will be queen-mother, Kusum shall be maid-of-honour, and——"

"And what am I to be?" Shakti broke in impatiently.

"You shall be maid-servant," was Kamini's laughing reply.

Shakti's beautiful eyes flashed sparks of fire. She tossed her proud young head and retorted: "No, indeed! I will be queen, and Nirupama may be maid-servant."

Nirupama was just going to say, "I will not be maid-servant," when from the lake came the music of an approaching flute, and she exclaimed joyfully, "Here comes the Rajkumar."

Kusum said: "She whom the Rajkumar chooses shall be the Rani."

"That is the best plan," replied Kamini.

And then all the girls, stirred by one impulse, joined hands and danced to the tune of the flute, and singing the song of *Krishna* and *Radhica*, welcomed with delight the Rajkumar.

"My heart is filled with many a lay,
Ah! tell me, friend, what shall I do?
I try to sing the livelong day
In rapt'rous melodies anew

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Of that great beauty *sans* compare
In heaven above, on earth below.
My heart would sing of beauty rare,
But lo! my flute has turned my foe.
Fain would I with the flute's sweet strain
Arouse compassion in her heart.
But my desires are all in vain,
Vain are my efforts, vain my art.
My flute betrays me
When I play
Naught does it say
But "Radha!" "Radha!" all the day.
When I would sing of beauty's fame
My flute sings naught but Radha's name.'"

The music ceased; the girls stopped singing.
A stately, handsome youth of eighteen stepped
from the boat and came towards them.

Kamini did not wait for him to speak.

"Now, Rajkumar, will you say who is to be
the queen, Shakti or Nirupama?" she asked.
"We are going to play at 'King and Queen.' I
will be the queen-mother, Kusum the maid-of-
honour, and Nirupama——"

"Stop!" interrupted Kusum. "Rajkumar,
you must say who is to be the queen."

"Whose queen?" demanded the young
Prince; "and who is to be the king?"

"Why you, of course," both the girls said,
laughing.

The Prince laughed also and said, "I am to
be the king, and you wish me to choose my
queen?" As he spoke he picked up the fallen
bakul wreath that Nirupama had woven with
so much anxious care, and put it round

Shakti's neck, exclaiming, "Well, then, behold her!"

Shakti's beautiful young face lit up with proud pleasure.

And now the girls playfully performed the marriage rite, not forgetting the auspicious accompaniment of the cries of "Uloo! Uloo!" and other accordant ceremonies. They walked round the bride and bridegroom, in a procession, in which Nirupama sadly joined.

It was the hour of twilight—that mellow light between dusk and darkness. The sun was hidden below the horizon, but spread its mysterious crimson radiance like a wedding canopy over the sky. From afar came, ringing through the woods, the sweet notes of the papia bird, like bridal music, to make the scene perfect.

When Nirupama saw that the marriage was over, and that not she but Shakti was the bride, she came, with tears in her eyes, before the Prince and said: "Well then, I will be the Rajkumar's maid-servant."

A sudden summer storm rose in the sky and swept down with dust and rain, blotting out the pleasant landscape.

C

CHAPTER III

IN joyful commemoration of Bengal's triumph over Delhi, an annual fête was held in the capital—Pandua. On this occasion feats of arms formed the principal entertainment, and the winner of the chief event of the tournament was honoured and rewarded by the Sultan himself.

Six years had passed since the young Prince of Dinajpur had been wedded in childish play to Shakti; and now, to-day, the tournament was being held in Pandua. The Castle courtyard was gaily decorated, and beneath its many-coloured awning a great crowd of people had assembled. Elias Shah, the first Sultan of Bengal, was no longer living. To-day his son, Sekandar Shah, sat on a raised throne, beneath a brocaded canopy that shone with gold and silver and was supported by sandalwood pillars, beautifully decorated with leaves and flower garlands. Around him were seated, according to their rank, his tributaries, rajas, chiefs, zemindars and gentry—who had gathered here from all parts of Bengal in response to the royal invitation. In front of the throne the shouts of

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wrestlers, the clashing of swords, the music of jugglers, and the cheers of spectators combined to make a thunderous noise which seemed to shake the courtyard to its very foundation. The cannon on the rampart, which roared forth at intervals, only succeeded in drowning the tumult for a few moments.

On all sides, under gold-embroidered banners which glistened in the sun, were gaily decked stalls of every description. Craftsmen and artisans from different parts of India had assembled here to exhibit their wonderful wares. The art galleries were filled with fine collections of pictures and images of ancient times, as well as of the modern Mogul period. Costly silks, lovely embroideries, famous muslins—many yards of which could be passed through a finger ring—and beautiful Kashmir shawls of rich, soft texture were to be seen in profusion. Jewellers offered finely wrought ornaments in gold and silver; jewel-studded arms and weapons were displayed; flower-stalls shed their fragrance afar; and provision-vendors tempted the most fastidious appetites.

Why then should the dealers of destiny, those inevitable individuals in the East, forego their gains? They, too, had opened stalls, and many, in exchange for hard-earned coin, carried away a load of prophesied misfortune. One of these foretellers of the future was more eagerly sought after than the others. Customer after customer came to him, and the prophet, overwhelmed by

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his good fortune, and unable to satisfy all demands, became exasperated, and was ready to throw his profits to the winds and fly, when suddenly an unusual figure appeared before him. It was that of a young and beautiful woman. She stepped forward and gently offered her hand for inspection. Great is the appealing power of beauty! The astrologer could not refuse her. He took her left hand in his and looked at it for a moment, and then he gazed at the queenly face with amazement. The bystanders were equally impressed by her beauty and the dignity of her bearing, and murmurs ran through the crowd.

“Who is she?”

“Have you ever seen such beauty before?”

“She is *Lakshmi* herself.”

“*Thakur*,” called out someone jestingly, “can you read her fate in her face? Look at her hand if you want to see her future.”

“Master astrologer is not such a fool! Will he look at anyone’s hand before his own is crossed with silver?” put in another onlooker.

The new-comer offered money to the fortune-teller, but he refused to take it. “Mother,” he said, “you are destined to become a great queen. From you I will take no money. Accept this prophecy as a humble offering from me.”

Just then the Prince of Dinajpur—now Raja Ganesh Dev (his father being dead)—passed on horseback through the crowd. His glance fell on the woman, and, suddenly stopping his horse,

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he looked at her with amazement. This beautiful stranger was none other than our heroine Shaktimai, but the Raja did not recognise her. Such dazzling beauty he had never seen before. Like the forgotten memory of a former life, her face flashed upon him as something vaguely familiar. He knew it and yet he knew it not. Charmed and spellbound, unconscious of the passing minutes, he kept gazing on her. The noisy crowd melted away from his vision. By force of some overpowering memory, the present scene was blotted out and he saw in his mind's eye the shores of a tranquil lake, a summer afternoon in the fragrant woods; a hand laid in his, a girl, with dripping hair and wet garments, crowned with flowers, standing before him, her companions, full of playful glee, giving her to him in marriage.

Suddenly his horse raised its head impatiently and neighed. The Prince's dream was harshly broken. From the field of the tournament came the sound of the herald's trumpet, calling the competitors. He heard it, and regained his self-possession; and smiling to himself at his day-dream, he rode in the direction of the trumpet's summons.

CHAPTER IV

THE tournament was partly over. All the games, including wrestling, lance and sword play, etc., were finished. There now remained only the feat of archery. Sultan Sekandar Shah himself came forth to act as umpire. His horse was ready, and he descended from his lofty seat to mount it. The courtiers and the guests arranged themselves, waiting respectfully behind him on either side.

At a short distance stood the target—a marble female figure in the act of kissing a wooden bird, which she held up in her hand. The eye of the bird was to be pierced, and this required great skill in archery. Being the most difficult feat, it had been placed last, and the crowds of spectators now eagerly welcomed it.

The royal officer in charge gave the signal, and the herald stepped forward, announcing three times, in a loud voice:

“Whoever desires to distinguish himself at this feat of archery is commanded by His Majesty, Sultan Sekandar Shah, to step forward.”

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Deafening shouts from the spectators greeted the announcement.

Suddenly a spirited black horse appeared, neighing while holding high its proudly arched neck. On it sat a handsome youth of dignified bearing, with bow and arrow in hand.

The shouts of the spectators ceased suddenly, and there was deep silence. It seemed as if all held their breath while gazing in eager expectation.

The youth approached the Sultan and offered the threefold salutation.¹ Then came the moment for which the excited crowds had waited anxiously and so long. The archer stepped to the place assigned to the marksmen and shot his arrow, which went onward and was seen no more.

From all sides crowds rushed to the statue, which was quickly surrounded by eager people, and when it was seen that the arrow had pierced the eye of the bird, a loud shout rent the air.

The prize of archery was won. Ganesh Dev, Chief of Dinajpur, had hit the mark. Prolonged cheering greeted this triumph, and a rain of flowers fell upon the Prince as he walked towards the Sultan to receive his trophy. The Sultan dismounted and presented the youth with the prize of archery—a costly sword. With his own hands he girded it on the Prince,

¹ A form of salutation paid to Mohammedan royalties by touching with the right hand, while bending low, one's forehead three times.

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on whom he then bestowed the proud title of Maharaja Bahadur. The Chiefs of Dinajpur had been Maharaja to their people all along, but until that time the title had not been confirmed by the new rulers of Bengal.

Shouts rang out again, and the hero of the day was garlanded by the gentries from all sides.

At a distance stood Shakti. After she had seen the splendid feat of archery performed, she took a withered garland from her neck and, winding it round a small stone, threw it at the Prince. But alas! the garland missed its goal and touched not the Prince, but the Sultan, and then fell to the ground. This was while His Majesty was girding the sword on the winner of the prize. He was interrupted. Vexed and astonished, he raised his head. The nobility and the courtiers ceased to throw the flowers and looked in alarm at their Sovereign. But the young Crown-Prince, Nawab Gaias-ud-din, picked up the faded wreath and said smilingly, "Ganesh, who is it that congratulates you with a faded wreath?"

The fear and consternation of the courtiers was removed by this timely remark. The Sultan himself laughed and finished his task. The air filled anew with the shouts of the multitude, and again the rain of flowers was poured upon him from all sides.

Just then Shakti, garbed as a devotee, stepped forward. She saluted the Crown-

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Prince and said, "Be pleased, Nawab Shah, to give me back my wreath." The Sultan, the princes, and the courtiers gazed at her in amazement, while the Crown-Prince granted her request. The beautiful stranger took the garland, looked at Ganesh Dev for a minute, then, saluting the Sultan and his son, departed with the same fearless dignity with which she had come.

CHAPTER V

THE sun was sinking behind the western horizon. Its golden light trembled upon the gently murmuring waves of the Ganges, and playing upon the tree-tops of the farther shore, it sank lower and lower.

Raja Ganesh Dev was riding slowly homeward by the river-side. But the beauties of the evening scene he did not see, nor was his mind occupied with the victory and its reward of honour which had been his that day. He was thinking only of the poorly clad young woman : her proud and radiant beauty, and fearless self-possession ; her look and smile at him—a mere stranger ; and the way in which she had thrown the faded wreath into the tournament ground and had afterwards demanded it back again from the Sultan's son ! Deeply stirred by all these amazing events, he was lost in thought.

Her dress, her behaviour, even her look and gait were a riddle ! The proud manners of a princess, the yellow garb of the *Sanyasini*—a strange combination indeed ! And yet she could

not be a devotee. Her hair was not matted, nor was her head uncovered. No trident nor rosary was in her hand. No ashes smeared her forehead. Through the thin *orna* could be seen a loose, carelessly twisted knot of luxuriant hair, resting on a beautiful neck. In front beneath the *orna* lay black silky waves of hair, and a few stray curls fell over the brow, heightening the charm of an exquisite face.

Was she a widow on pilgrimage to holy shrines? How could that be? Gold bracelets were still on her wrists. Perhaps she was a child-widow, and her parents had not the heart to take these simple ornaments from her. Probably that was the case. If her husband were still living, then certainly she would not be going about alone, as she did now. That she might be still unmarried was a possibility that did not enter his mind. Who would think that a Hindu woman in the fullness of youth was still unmarried? So he decided that she must be a widow on pilgrimage. She was certainly high-born, for every step proclaimed her dignified grace, her proud purity; yet why those glances of sweet intimacy to a stranger? He did not know her, he had never seen her before. What could that look mean? Everything about the young beauty was mystery and riddle. Lost in thought, the reins held loosely, the Prince rode on, at a slow pace. Suddenly he stopped. Marvellous adventure! That beautiful woman of his thoughts! Did he really

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see her before him, standing under a tree, smiling at him, gently? Was it all a dream, and had he been dreaming the whole day?

He was, however, not left to marvel long. The woman advanced, still smiling, and addressed him in silvery tones: "Do you not know me, Rajkumar?"

The Prince stood silent and astonished.

She continued: "Have you forgotten the playmate of your childhood? Have you forgotten the garden by the lake?"

"Is it you, my boyhood's friend, Shakti?"

He spoke like one still dreaming.

"It seems you have to be reminded, and yet I knew you at a glance," Shakti said, smiling.

A quick emotion stirred the man's heart, but it left him as swiftly as it had come.

Yes, he was Ganesh Dev, and she was Shakti, but there was a gulf between them now. She was his boyhood's dearest friend. He had loved her once with a youth's first love; but she now belonged to another. The natural delight of meeting a companion of early days conflicted with the chivalrous feeling of distant respect due to another man's wife. He did not even know how to address her under these circumstances.

Shakti spoke again with the same friendly familiarity, and with a touch of raillery in her voice. "Won't you dismount, Rajkumar? All have honoured you with their garlands, may not I, also, have the same privilege? Because

my wreath is faded, will you therefore refuse to accept it?"

The Prince regained his self-possession and replied smilingly:

"I suppose it was to congratulate me that you——"

"Yes, that was my intention; but that it might not hit you never entered my head, and now I have got it back crushed and torn."

The Raja dismounted, and, smiling still, said:

"But this present of a dead garland of yours seemed more like a taunt than an honour, Shakti."

The girl heeded not his words, but continued:

"Over there is a quiet place where we can sit and talk. Come! You can tie your horse to a tree."

She led the way, and he followed her, bridle in hand.

CHAPTER VI

THEY entered a dense tamarind grove near the river-side. A tree that had been hewn down by wood-cutters lay half in the water and half on the land, and on the trunk of this tree the girl took her seat. The Raja had secured his horse and now he stood near her, resting his hand on his bow. The sun had set, but the grey shades of evening had not come. Still lingered in the west those crimson clouds—the afterglow of sunset casting a ruddy glow over the earth. Reflected in the river's rippling waves like glittering gold, they kissed with crimson hue the maiden seated on the tamarind tree.

And fair indeed she was with the glow of twilight upon her! Hers was not the golden colour, the tint of the champak flower seen so often in the beautiful women of Bengal, but a complexion radiant, fresh and rosy, like that of a Persian beauty. Her figure was stately and queenlike, her brow broad and intellectual, the nose aquiline, the lips most delicately curved, the chin small and dimpled. Her dark, mys-

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terious eyes of unfathomable depth were shaded by long, thick lashes, and black, arched eyebrows made them appear deeper still. She had indeed a striking appearance, this maiden of old Khsatria descent. There was an eager brightness in her face. A happy smile played on her young lips. Soft ringlets wreathed her brow, and the high-born pride and dignity of her bearing stood out in startling contrast to the saffron-coloured garb she wore.

The Raja gazed and thought of fair Sakuntala in her lovely woodland dwelling. Involuntarily he repeated to himself those words of Sakuntala's lover :

““ The lotus, though encircled by mosses, is beautiful. The moon, when pale, holds much beauty. This girl, though garbed only in bark, is more beautiful than either. What better ornament is there than the sweet beauty of form? ””¹

Gazing on the fair young figure before him, Ganesh Dev forgot his scruples, forgot that there was a gulf between him and this maiden. The woodland by the river-side was changed into the playground of his childhood, where he, in early days, had played with Shaktimai, the queen of his young life. Unconsciously drawn towards her, he seated himself beside her on the fallen tree.

¹ Translated from Kalidasa's great Sanskrit drama.

“Do you still play the flute as of old, Rajkumar?”

The sound of her voice broke the spell. He suddenly came to himself, and sighed. Yet, though moving away a little, he could not but remain seated near her.

“Where is your flute, Rajkumar?” the girl asked again. “Do you not play now as in your early days?”

“As in my early days? Does the time that is gone ever return? A dream does not continue when the night is passed.”

“But the night returns.”

“Not to bring back a vanished dream.”

Shakti’s heart swelled with delight at these words.

The maiden’s soul soon grasped the truth. It was Radha’s absence that made *Brindaban* dreary and the flute of *Krishna* dumb. Yes, he had suffered in her absence as much as she had longed for him. Alas! before the heart is poisoned by the bitter experience of the world our faith in love is infinite.

“But if the will be strong enough, can it not bring back old dreams? Have you already outgrown the delights of youth?” asked Shaktimai, smiling still.

“If not all, at least many of them,” he replied with a serious air. “I am getting old, you know; I have a State to rule. Am I to look to the well-being of my subjects, or childishly to spend my time in idle sports and play the flute?”

Ganesh Dev was twenty-two and still a boy at heart, but he delighted in assuming the gravity of age whenever the opportunity arose.

“Ganesh Dev may no longer care for his flute, but Shakti still desires to hear it. How could you, Rajkumar, ever abandon it? I could sooner imagine Cupid without his bow, or *Krishna* without his pipe, than Ganesh Dev without his flute.”

“If that be so, I see that my flute and I must never part,” was the laughing reply; and, as he spoke, the Prince drew from the folds of his darbar garment the separate pieces of a small wooden flute and began to fit them together.

“The same old flute!” exclaimed Shakti with delight.

“Yes, the same flute still.”

Once, when a little girl, Shakti had taken this flute to the Rajkumar. She had wanted to learn to play it, and she had asked the Prince to teach her. But soon she had grown tired of learning, as girls often do. But the Prince had kept the flute. And though it was but a common reed, its notes were sweet, far sweeter than those of his own gold-mounted instrument.

And now Ganesh Dev played—played the sweet tune of the old familiar song, and Shakti listened with her whole heart, and drank in every note, as the parched plain absorbs the falling dew.

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“ Over the silver wave
Softly we glide,
Rocking to and fro
On the laughing tide.
The moon shines in the vaulted sky,
While gently on we float.
The riches of the world are mine
Within my little boat.
What more can I desire
Since she is mine?
Swiftly we glide upon
The foaming brine.”

CHAPTER VII

AH! the enchantment of that song! He had sung it in those days of peaceful happiness, when in a boat with his young girl friends he had glided over the shining waves of Mahipal Lake. She knew it now. He loved her still. Her heart laughed with inward delight; and merrily she said:

“Is a reed flute fit for the hands of a Maharaja? I would like to take it from you and throw it into the river.”

The Prince touched his jewelled sword, the prize of the day's victory.

“Shakti,” he said, and his voice sounded full and manly, “behold this sword! It is a costly thing, and yet I would fling it from me sooner than part with this flute of mine, the one fond relic of the past. Life itself is not dearer to me than this flute.”

Shakti threw back her *orna* and touched the withered garland round her neck. “Raj-kumar, I, too, hold a relic of the past,” she said. “Do you recall that afternoon when you placed a wreath round the neck of your boyhood's

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friend? I have kept it since that day and I prize it dearer than my life. That is why I threw it to you when I saw you the winner of the chief trophy of the tournament. Now tell me, was this faded wreath an honour or a taunt?"

A thrill went through the young man's heart, but it lasted only for a moment, and in an instant his joyful face became clouded. He could not free his mind from the teachings of custom, the rooted ideas and influences of ages. It is true that he loved Shakti, but in that he wronged no one—whatever suffering there was, was his alone. He was a man, and a man may be married to more than one; a man may love more than one without sinning. And he had loved Shakti long ago, before anyone had claimed her. The Shakti he had loved was not she who sat by him, but the Shakti of his childhood. But Shakti herself, being a woman and a wife, could commit no greater sin than to harbour the thought of another in her heart. That would be fatal to her, both in this world and in the world to come.

Shakti saw how grave he was, and she, too, became serious. She had taken the garland from her own neck to put it on his, but now it remained in her hand.

"Is this the old play garland?" asked the Raja sadly. "Shakti, it is your duty to forget childhood's fancies. Why do you harbour them still?"

“Have you forgotten?” and Shakti looked like one who had been touched to the quick.

“I have not forgotten, that is my sorrow. Shakti, why did you leave us so suddenly?”

Ganesh Dev had tried to point out the path of duty, but he had only betrayed his own love. Shakti saw this and she forgot her wounded feelings.

“I never learned the reason for our hasty departure,” she said. “One morning my father informed me that he was going on a pilgrimage and that I must accompany him. I wished to go to the Palace to bid you farewell, but my father would not wait, we had to leave at once. Since then, for six long years we have wandered. Daily anew I asked him to return to the old home, but the reply was ever the same, ‘We must finish our pilgrimage.’ For some time now I have been in Pandua, and here, lately, my father passed away. Since then I have longed more than ever to return to the old home at Dinajpur. I had only just finished the mourning ceremony when I heard of your arrival in the capital. God alone knows what I have suffered all these years. This faded wreath has been my only——”

“I thought you were another’s wife,” interrupted Ganesh in great surprise. “Is it possible that you are still unmarried?”

“Does a woman wed twice?”

How beautiful she looked with the light of her great love shining forth from her radiant

face! The Raja bent his head; remorse stung his heart, he understood. Shakti loved and had remained true. She thought him faithful and refused her hand to another. But alas for her great passion and her faith! Ganesh Dev had found his bride and was happy in the love that she gave him; yet in the midst of all these mingled emotions that crowded upon him, he felt a thrill of joy that no man had yet claimed Shaktimai.

"The Prince is married, perhaps?" was Shakti's anxious query.

He answered not.

The minutes passed in heavy silence.

"And why did you go away so suddenly?" asked the Prince, breaking the spell at last.

It was enough. Shakti's maidenly instinct read the answer in that question. "And Ganesh Dev forgot?" Her voice sounded strangely sad as she spoke.

"No, Shakti, not that." The man's voice betrayed the strong emotion that filled his breast. "My mother told me that you had been taken away to be married. I believed you to be the wife of another."

Shakti's ancestral home was not at Dinajpur, but in Devcote, a village at some distance from the former place. It being a general custom in India for parents to take their children to their old homestead in order to give them in marriage, no one had doubted the story that Ganesh Dev's mother had given out.

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It was the great, sad moment of Shakti's life, and only a strong nature like hers could have borne it as bravely as she did. The tears mounted to her eyes, but they were quickly pressed back again.

“Who is the Rani?”

The question came as if the winds wafted it through the evening air.

“Nirupama.”

CHAPTER VIII

UNFORTUNATE girl! Her young life tasted now love's bitterest fruit, for jealousy took hold of her with all its terrible force. She had spent her days in anguish for his sake; her life had been bereft of all comfort. This she had not heeded, for in her heart had burnt brightly the ideal of her youthful love. But oh the irony of it! He around whom her young life's passion had twined itself, for whom she had gone through so much suffering, he had easily forgotten her and had married another.

Oh God! why hast Thou made the lot of man and woman so unequal? Must man's smile be watered even with woman's tears? Must the one quench his thirst for life always with the heart-blood of the other?

The Raja shuddered as he looked at Shakti's face; for she was a woman of strong emotions, and whatever moved her came from the depths of a powerful nature. He did not know her spirit, and he would fain have touched on the sweeter chords of her nature only. Was this the Shakti of his boyhood's dream, the Shakti



“Who is the Rani?”
“Nirupama.”

he had vainly tried to forget? Could such wild passions rage in a form so fair?

Then Shakti spoke. Her tormented soul found words at last. There was concentrated bitterness in her tone when she said, "Ah! yes, you have played your part very well, the part I suppose you men always play. We trust, and you deceive. We pine in silence in our love for you, while you flit gaily from flower to flower and sip the nectar of life. We fall in worship at your feet, and you march on and trample us—your sport being our death."

The Prince sat speechless. It was as though he had suddenly seen a serpent coiled beneath a blooming flower. From the face before him, no longer beautiful but distorted with rage and jealousy, his thoughts wandered to the gentle, tender, trusting one, that even at that very minute was silently awaiting his home-coming, to the face of Nirupama, his wedded wife. All this time he had forgotten her.

He had never been able to give his whole heart to her whom he called his wife, because his early love had lingered in his mind; yet the passion of his bygone days had been but a dreamy chord of memory, and in Nirupama's presence he had been happy. As the image of God in the mind of the worshipper, so Shakti had reigned in his memory as a vision only; he had never thought of her as being either good or bad. He had worshipped Shakti as an exalted ideal, as something beyond the reach

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of longing and desire. And for Nirupama, his wedded wife, the mother of his child, the sharer of his joys and sorrows, his devotion had not been lacking in respect, tenderness, and affection; yet he had not felt for her the love that fills a man's whole being. So far his wife's tender nature and her great devotion to himself had satisfied him; but to-day, when the goddess of his dreams stood before him, when his soul's ideal assumed tangible form, he suddenly became conscious of a great emptiness in his life. For a time he forgot himself, forgot the world, forgot even Nirupama, giving himself up wholly to the beauty and the fascination of the woman before him. But when Shakti's enchanting features became darkened by jealousy, he was roused from the spell that bound him, and he tried to cast it aside as a terrible delusion. No, this was not the Shakti of his dreams, not the divinity, the ideal beauty that had hovered round his aspirations! Her soul was unlovely; he saw it now. How pure was Nirupama in comparison with her! Would he for a moment slight the duty he owed to his wife—that delicate twining plant? Would he repay the boundless love that she gave him by bringing into her young life a rival, and force her to share his heart with another? His soul was touched at the thought of the suffering he would thus cause to Nirupama, and he remained silent.

CHAPTER IX

SHAKTI'S bitter reproaches, the forthpouring of her great sorrow, did not seem to touch the Prince. He remained unmoved. But life has strange paradoxes, and haughty and imperious natures are, under adverse circumstances, often more easily subdued than those that are naturally patient and humble. The strong woman broke down, chilled by the relentless coldness of the man she loved, and the rising moon saw Shakti weeping the tears of a heart now crushed and subdued.

“Do not forsake me, Rajkumar,” she pleaded at last. “You are a man. Custom permits you to marry many times. Why do you cast aside an unfortunate one? Before the Eternal I am your lawful wife. I am alone in the world. Remember my father, too, is gone. If you forsake me, if I am forced to wed another, my marriage will be an unholy bond, and for that sinful act Ganesh Dev will have to answer.”

The change from anger to sadness brought back tender beauty to her face.

Shakti's voice had ceased, and in the woods

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there was now no sound. And the Prince? The Prince knew naught save that in the silvery evening light he saw a moonlit face, tear-stained and sad, a face glorified now by a divine emotion that shone forth from its exquisite features. The face distorted by passion was forgotten, all was forgotten, even the tender wife at home. He only knew that in the silent woodland he was alone with the maiden he loved; he was conscious only of remorse for having wounded her. Instinctively he moved nearer. The lovelight shone from his deep black eyes while he gazed at her and tenderly held her slender hand in his. And now his heart would speak—speak those words of passionate devotion, of longing and aspiration, of a soul's mad desires, words that are old and yet ever new, that have been whispered since the dawn of time, and that youth and moonlight alone can record.

The words of passion hovered on his lips, when close to him, and harshly jarring on the moonlight stillness, came a stern voice breaking like thunder on his ear.

“Thou blot on a noble race! Touch not another's wife.”

The Prince turned his face, overwhelmed with shame, towards the angry countenance above him. It was his mother who had spoken. Returning from evening worship by the Ganges bank, on her way home, she had thus come upon them. She had caught her son in a for-

bidden act, and now he rose and stood before her like a shamefaced boy, not daring to lift his eyes from the ground.

But Shaktimai's strong soul asserted itself. She stood up fearlessly and faced the angry woman.

"Mother," she said, and her voice was clear and steady, "I am not another's wife. I am the true wife of the Prince. We were married in the sight of God while we were children."

The angry woman became yet more furious. Her voice trembled with passion as she spoke. "Ganesh, who is this woman? Is she not the daughter of Banowari Lal? Remember, son, if you take her to wife, the race of Pratap Roy Dev will become the lowest of the low. Banowari Lal's sister brought dishonour on her family, and for that very shame he left Dinajpur. Is this man's daughter to be my son's wife, the Rani of Dinajpur? Never, while I have breath left in my body. Take her to live with you, if you will, but your lawful wife she shall never be. Shame on your name, Ganesh, to harbour such a thought."

Shakti's nature was roused to its full height; anger, scorn, and insulted dignity spoke from her every feature as she threw back her proud head and looked at the woman before her.

"Maharani," she said, in a voice trembling with passion, "you may have spoken as one of your lofty race should speak; but though it may not please you to hear it, the law of *Karma*

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knows neither rich nor poor. And if a God still exists, as sure as my love for your son is pure, so surely will He judge between you and me. And the day will come when your proud race will bend its knee before the humble descendant of the despised Banowari Lal, whom to-day you cast adrift with scorn. If this fails to come true, then know that divine justice is no more."

She seemed like a creature from another world while she spoke. And then she turned, and like a shadow glided amongst the trees and was seen no more.

But the curse remained, and she who had called it forth, the Maharani of Dinajpur, stood as if struck dumb by those terrible words.

CHAPTER X

As a meteor flashing through space gives one bright light and is then consumed by its own heat, so a human being, when carried to a supreme height by a strong emotion, soon becomes weak and exhausted. The light of the soul cannot shine long on this dust-clad star, and the strong nature that soars to its full height must pay the penalty. Shaktimai, wounded and weary, felt like one left in a maze at dead of night. An immense darkness hung before her eyes, everything seemed to whirl around her, the very ground beneath her feet giving way, and she had to summon all her strength in order to find refuge under a tree. She caught hold of a hanging branch for support, but her hands slackened and she fell prostrate to the ground. For the first time in her life she lost consciousness, and alone, at that late hour of the night, the poor child lay helpless and forsaken. No sorrow, before this, however great, could break Shakti's spirit. To-night it seemed as if the whole universe were gazing on her, struck dumb with wonder

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at her plight. But youth and a strong constitution reasserted themselves, and gradually she came to herself again. Around her were the weird shadows of the forest trees, and above their branches the crescent of the pale moon had appeared. She glanced from heaven to earth, and the beauty of the night was reflected in her glorious eyes. But she saw it not. The moon had no lustre for her, the forest loneliness held no fear. The cry of despair was in her heart, and this was all that she knew.

Raising herself to a sitting position and leaning against the trunk of a tree, she gazed at her right hand, and burning tears fell on it, for it held still the faded wreath with which she would have adorned the Prince. It was now a faded wreath and nothing more; for the love, the faith, the hope that had clung to it so long were dead for ever. And as she gazed the pain in her heart grew deeper and deeper, until the tears dried in her eyes and the very blood seemed to burn in her veins. She thought of the cruel words the Maharani of Dinajpur had spoken. She felt their poison, but they did not crush her; rather did they fill her heart once more with strength. She pressed her teeth into her beautiful lips, and then, as if killing the last thing that was dear to her on earth, she unstrung the wreath, and taking the faded flowers in her hand, she tore them with her strong fingers and flung them on the ground. Then she rose and trampled them under foot. Ah!

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strong and much-tried soul, what did you not suffer at that moment while, crushed at your feet and in the dust, lay the fairest flowers of your heart, a life's great love, faith, and hope! She stood still staring at the flowers with lips firmly pressed and vacant look. Who knows that they too had not felt as intensely as she did at that moment?

Now the bitterness gave way to tears, her pale lips trembled with the pain of despair, and throwing her fair form down on the lost hope of her life, she writhed like one in pain, and, weeping like a child, she cried out:

“O Rajkumar! Rajkumar! Behold your work!”

And then, rising up, she struck her chest with her clenched fist, and like one mad she called out aloud:

“Away with foolish fancies! I want revenge! O my God! give me revenge, revenge!”

She shuddered at the sound of her own voice, and throwing herself again on the ground, she remained speechless, motionless, well-nigh lifeless, while the still woods echoed her cry, “Revenge, revenge!”

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CHAPTER XI

AND while she lay prostrate, she felt the touch of a hand. Startled, she sprang up and asked, "Who are you?"

"A Mussulman," replied the man.

It required the courage of a girl like Shakti not to be frightened at that advanced hour of the night, faced by a stranger, in the woods, alone; but she had a strong heart, this storm-tossed maiden, and force of circumstances had trained her to rely upon herself. She was not alarmed at the sight of the stranger, but vexed at the thought that a Mussulman dared to put his hand on her. She recoiled from his touch and said with anger, "Wretch, how dare you touch me?"

The man wore the fakir's garb of white and a string of beads round his neck, and he said gently: "I thought you had fainted."

"And if I had fainted," came Shakti's proud reply, "what is that to you? Why should you touch me?"

The stranger seated himself at the foot of the tree near her. He took off his turban, and,

while winding it carefully round his head again, he asked calmly:

“What harm is there in my touching you? There is but one Creator, and all men are fashioned of the same clay. We are the children of one Father, you, and I, and all who live. Why do you hold yourself so proudly aloof?”

“You are a man, I am a woman; you are a Mohammedan, I am a Hindu. You are of a low race, your creed is low; my race, my religion are the loftiest on earth. The same God may have fashioned you and me, but not in the same mould. Between you and me there can be no equality.”

The man laughed and there was a tone of mockery in his voice when he asked:

“Has the great God made different laws for us? There is but one Eternal Consciousness, and that governs rich and poor alike and knows neither Hindu nor Mussulman. Omnipotent justice governs all, and before the Creator no difference exists.”

How strange his words sounded! Were they not the same words as she herself had uttered only an hour ago? They seemed like an echo of the curse she had spoken with her own lips. Who was this mysterious intruder, who seemed to read her very heart? At first she had taken him for one of those itinerant impostors who swarm on the highroads of India and claim to be holy men, but now she believed him to be among the few who have attained to enlightenment.

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His words disconcerted her. She thought for a while and then replied:

“If that be true, O Sage, then why have we this sense of inequality?”

“Because of ignorance, illusion.”

“And why all this illusion? If the Creator be omnipotent, why does He not remove this ignorance from suffering mankind?”

“For the preservation of His creation, for the accomplishment of His designs, illusion must exist. The world would cease to be were it removed.”

“Then the Creator wills that man shall suffer! This seems like cruelty. Why then speak of His great mercy?”

“Have patience. The Creator is all in all. Both cruelty and mercy are of His essence. Live in accordance with the law, and mercy will be yours; oppose it, and your lot is woe.”

Shakti could not grasp all that the stranger said. The pain in her heart burned deeply still, and following the impulse that moved her, she thought aloud when she exclaimed:

“Does then the Creator will vengeance, too? If so, why is vengeance such a deadly sin?”

“If it were so very sinful, would the Eternal give this feeling to mankind?” the fakir said. “Were there no retribution for injustice, then the Creator Himself would cease to be just. Revenge is the retribution of injustice.”

“Revenge! O my God, revenge!” The girl uttered these words involuntarily. “It is revenge I want; but does this world know a retribution for faithlessness, for broken hearts?”

“Yes, to shed the traitor’s blood,” said the fakir in a deep and solemn voice. “May God help you in its accomplishment!”

Shakti’s noble nature revolted at these words. The gory picture that the Mussulman held up before her made her shudder.

“No,” she cried in horror, “I do not want his death, I want his heart, his love. I want to see the day when Ganesh Dev will be ready to sacrifice all for me—mother, State, family, and wealth. I want to see him ready to face hell for my sake. That is the revenge I desire—that and that alone.”

The Mussulman laughed. “The woman who might trample under foot the hearts of a hundred men, who might have emperors at her feet, pleads humbly for this lowly boon!”

Emperors at her feet! Once more that oft-repeated prophecy! Astrologers with one accord predicted a great destiny for Shakti. In her horoscope it was written that in her eighteenth year the daughter of Banowari Lal would become a great queen. Her father had not doubted that this prophecy would be fulfilled, and therefore he had left her unmarried so long.

Though Banowari Lal had not been a great

minister nor a great general like the fathers of Kamini and Nirupama, nevertheless he had held his head as high as any of the nobility, and had considered himself to be, by right of birth, in no way inferior to his master, the Raja himself; for he claimed in his veins the royal blood of the ancient Pal dynasty. Though he had been obliged to leave Dinajpur—through the intrigues of the Maharani—yet he had felt certain that one day he would be restored to favour; and as the children of the two houses had intermarried before, so he firmly believed that his daughter, whose horoscope predicted a royal destiny, would be married in due time to the young Prince of Dinajpur.

Until now Shakti had believed it, too; but the events of the last few hours had shattered her faith. Therefore, when once more she heard the prediction, her heart grew angry and she said bitterly:

“Enough of that! I desire to hear no more. Those mocking words do not befit a holy man. The woman who has failed to win the heart of him whom she loves will never triumph over hundreds!”

“I do not mock. The great God gave you life that you should mete out joy and sorrow to many.”

Shakti laughed, but in her laughter there was a ring of despair. “I thought once,” she said coldly, “that I was destined for great things, but to-night I see how vain my thoughts have been.

How could poor, humble Shaktimai become a queen?"

"How did *Matsyagandha* become a queen?" asked the fakir.

She was surprised to hear from a Mohammedan so much knowledge of ancient Hindu lore, and her faith in him grew stronger.

He continued: "The eye of my spirit has been opened, and I see this land of Bengal from end to end, and I see Shaktimai reigning as its Empress."

The fakir spoke as one who knew, and in her eagerness she forgot her sorrow.

"Shaktimai, Empress of Bengal? Fakir, no. Such hopes I may not harbour. My ambition was less high than that, and even it has seen its doom to-day."

"It was destroyed but to give way to a higher destiny. The stars are calling you to greater things than a common love. The Sultan's son has seen and learned to love you. He desires that you should be his queen. I am a messenger from him to you."

So far Shakti had not understood the stranger. Her mind being engrossed with the thought of Ganesh Dev, it had not occurred to her he could mean any other king. Now that she saw he meant another—the son of the Sultan, the Crown-Prince of Bengal—she mistrusted him no longer. Suddenly she saw a kingdom at her feet, she saw herself no longer the despised daughter of Banowari Lal, slighted by the Raja

of Dinajpur and insulted by his mother, but the ruler of the destinies of those who had cast her adrift; and the thought of this filled her with greater emotion than that of being an empress.

Two passions had reigned in Shakti's heart from her early days: her great love for the Prince and her desire for high estate; and she had nourished these two dreams with her heart's blood. One of these boons had been cruelly snatched from her for ever. Ganesh Dev was hers no more, she had lost him beyond hope of recovery, but the hand of power stretched out to her a welcome greeting; should she accept or refuse it?

She remained silent for a time, thinking deeply, and at last replied:

"He is a Mussulman; I am a Hindu."

"That is a delusion only. God is one, and Hindu and Mussulman alike worship Him, but under different names and in various forms. To avoid another on that account is a great sin, a want of true religion."

Shakti did not hear him. She thought still of the man she loved. What was high estate, what was power without him? And the voice came from her heart when she said softly:

"Ganesh Dev, I want him."

"He will never be yours."

"Never?"

"Never."

"You know it?"

"Ganesh Dev will never marry you. Now

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choose. An empire awaits you. Will you be the Sultana, the Empress of all Bengal, or——”

He could not finish. The girl had risen to depart and interrupted him. “That is enough. I must go now. To-morrow I will give you my answer,” she said.

CHAPTER XII

SHAKTI was on the forest path alone, and around her reigned dreadful terrors. From the vast gloom of space weird shadows seemed to spring upon her, to pursue her, and with soundless, mocking laughter repeat those words of destiny :

“He will never be yours! Never, never!”

Shakti's strong heart shuddered ; she hastened on with a quickened step. Through the branches shone a distant light, and towards it she bent her way.

At the edge of the forest stood a temple, old and crumbling, dedicated to the goddess *Kali*. She had reached it now, and finding the door unlocked she entered the building. But there was no image in this room ; the dim lamplight revealed only the form of a woman, seated on a deerskin. She wore the ascetic garb, and her face was calm and benignant. She was the priestess of the temple. She saw Shakti and spoke to her in tender reproach.

“Child, I have been anxious on your account. Where have you been so late? I did not know

that you were so self-willed when I promised to keep you with me."

Shakti's father had died in this temple, and before passing away he had left Shakti in the care of the priestess.

The girl took the reproof calmly and made no attempt to defend herself. "The Rajkumar was here," was all she said.

The priestess understood the cause of her delay and guessed whom she meant by the Rajkumar. Still she asked:

"Who is the Rajkumar?"

"A friend of my childhood—Ganesh Dev, the present Raja of Dinajpur."

"Then Surya Dev is dead?"

Shakti replied in the affirmative, and the priestess murmured, "Peace be unto him, *Om*," and fell into deep meditation.

"Did you know him, Mother?" asked Shakti, interrupting her reverie.

The priestess remained silent still, but later on she said: "Shakti, you are now a woman. Although the Prince was your playmate in your childhood, it is not fitting that you should meet him now."

"We are married," came the girl's reply.

"Married!" exclaimed the priestess. "Your father did not tell me that you were married!"

"My father did not know it. Ours was a *Gandharba marriage*. He chose me and I chose him, and he put the garland round my neck."

And now Shakti related the little scene of her childhood, when she had married the Prince at play in the garden by the lake.

The priestess smiled compassionately. "Poor child!" she said, "who would blame you for your fancy, for what is the world but a playground? Our Lord *Krishna* was himself at play; and you are but a child, simple and innocent, as yet untouched by the world and all its woe. But what says the Prince to all this? Would he take the bride he won in his boyish merriment as the consort of his life?"

Unfortunate girl! How lonely she felt! Was there then no one who understood her? Even the priestess doubted that the Prince was hers, and yet she knew nothing of this evening's occurrence. Was there then indeed no hope? Would all re-echo those cruel words, "He will never be yours! Never, never!"

She remained silent for a while to control the passion that raged within. Then she spoke again, almost calmly:

"*Devi Mother*, I will tell you all. I have been rejected and abandoned. My heart now desires nothing but revenge. I want Ganesh Dev, I want to see him at my feet, and if I do not gain him, I shall——"

"Peace, child, peace. The desire for vengeance does not befit a woman. The world, my child, was not created to fulfil ~~all~~ the desires of mortals. Can you move the earth with a touch of your hand? Did Providence give you a

pledge before you were born that all obstructions should be removed from your path, that the rose of life should have no thorn for you? Your anger, child, is vain. The marriage of your childhood's play does not bind the Prince to you for life. And they who suffer, suffer of themselves. Man's own *Karma* brings him woe or joy. You are a beggar for the Prince's love, but has a beggar any rights? Before heaven he has not wronged you. If you would but understand it, you are making an unjust claim upon him."

"An unjust claim!" Shakti reiterated these words and threw back her head in proud defiance as she said:

"I have the highest claim on him, for mine is the claim of love, of faith, of the heart. It is a sin to turn a beggar from the door when he relies in faith upon the giver's kindness; how much greater is the sin when one rejects the maiden who has given her heart, her soul? And, Mother, though you say I know not right and wrong as the world knows them, yet I know the dictates of the heart, I know the voice of God to which my soul responds; I know what justice and sin are in the eye of the Eternal. The man who broke his faith with me has sinned against the highest law, the purest creed the gods have given to us, against the religion of the heart, against the highest duty due to love."

"My child, you reason wrongly," said the priestess. "It is a lofty creed which the young heart dictates to itself, I do not gainsay that, but

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know, my child, that if your love stands alone, if it is not reciprocated by him on whom it is bestowed, then your law is powerless, your theory vanishes. True, when two people love and one breaks faith, then the pure creed of the heart of faithfulness and of duty is violated. I may go further still. If a man inspires false hopes in a woman by pretence of loving, even then he is faithless and responsible for the suffering that he causes. But, my child, let not your fancies carry you too far. Imagine not that the Prince is tied to you by a marriage made in childish play. One-sided love can make no claim; it becomes a humble petitioner for favour. And one who makes an unjust claim must not lament, nor blame, if refusal is met with."

"Why did he then daily behave as if he loved me? Why did he put the garland round my neck and make me his queen?"

"That was but a boy's fancy and a boy's play."

"And I? Was I not a mere girl, too? I loved him and I love him still; and must his oath be only child's play?"

"Be calm, my child. Listen! I doubt not that your sentiments are noble; but remember love is the sentiment of youth, especially in man. You have not met since childhood, and the Prince's love for you had no chance to grow. Nor did he choose you for his wife as a bridegroom chooses. So he has not wronged you,

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either before the world or in the heart. If your mind were calm you would soon see this."

"No, Mother, there you are wrong. Even to-day each word, each glance revealed his hidden love. But he is weak, he is a coward; he fears his mother's anger, and therefore he discards the maiden of his heart. He heeds false accusations! 'Banowari Lal's sister has disgraced her race!' That is what she said. Wicked woman! Your words are false. God's hand be on you for the evil you have wrought!"

CHAPTER XIII

SHAKTI stood silent, panting with the excitement that had carried her beyond herself. The priestess, too, paused before speaking again. Presently she said:

“Blame not fate too much, my child, but see the hand of God behind the law. He gives us sorrow for our good. If the Prince loves you and yet rejects you, he heeds the voice of duty and of conscience, he sacrifices his own life's happiness with yours. If he abandons you while loving you, can life hold joy for him? Seek not to wreak vengeance on the man, but honour him and pray for him. What course did the divine Ram Chandra take? If the Prince fears that by marrying you he will disgrace his race, he chooses wisely.”

“Yes, I should pray, for he chooses wisely,” said Shakti, laughing in scorn. “What greater duty has a man than that of love? Ram Chandra gave no sign of greatness when he banished Sita from his court. His people honoured him for it, but women know what

Sita must have suffered, and they cannot call his action a noble one. That great injustice has stained his name. Sita was Ram's wife. She was his subject also. He cast her off, knowing that she was pure. He feared his people's displeasure. He failed in his duty as a king, as a just man, and as a husband. He sinned against both God and man."

"But——" interrupted the priestess.

"No, Mother, there can be no 'but,'" cried Shakti. "The Prince, through fear of evil calumny, refuses her who gave her heart to him. He is my wedded husband, even now. Love, life, devotion, soul—my all I gave to him, and these he has cast ruthlessly to the winds; and you say that he sins not against himself and me, and that I should honour him! He is a coward, unmanly, unjust, wicked! One of my race, my aunt, the Maharani said, disgraced her name. Disgraced her name! She has gone hence, and heaven itself is the purer for her presence. It is a lie, a base and wicked lie!"

The sound of Shakti's angry voice jarred harshly on the night's sacred stillness. The *Yogini* spoke as calmly as before.

"Peace, child, for God alone knows the whole truth. Behold I am she whom they have cursed. Whether I shall find my home in heaven or in hell I know not, but I am still on earth."

Shakti was amazed and looked at her aunt in silent awe., •

"Listen, my child," continued the *Yogini*;

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“hear my sad tale and learn a lesson from it. I once thought, as you think now, that the heart’s law is the highest, the only law, in fact. The idol of my soul was like a god to me. Whatever God’s world holds of beauty, truth, goodness, and purity I wove into his name, and I worshipped him; his word was truth to me, his deeds were to me pure righteousness. He stood for me above all other men. I thought him divine, and I believed that no evil taint could touch him. But, alas! I saw my idol crumble at my feet. My faith had been in vain. If the great God Himself should come in human form and live on earth, He too would have to conform to its conditions. Learn to regulate the law of the heart by the laws of the world, and its purity and nobility is preserved; but defy the great moral and social law, and the law that governs your heart can never assert itself.”

“But it is the woman alone, the pure, the loving, the simple-hearted, who suffers, who loses joy and peace,” cried Shakti. “They who sin, the demigods of this earth, they make a pastime of life by destroying the happiness of the innocent who trusted in them. Mother, I see now what has wrought your doom. As Ganesh has done to me, so his father did to you. And still you pray for him.”

Shakti had abruptly interrupted her aunt, for she could no longer listen in silence. And now she continued as before:

“Revenge! Revenge, I say, not once but

one thousandfold. Oh God! is then Thy justice dead? Thou hast created woman as she is, tender, loving, and trusting. And why? Only that man should trample on her, Thy weaker creature!"

"Reproach not thy Creator, child," the priestess said, "but know that they whom He dooms to suffer are by His mercy chosen. The animal resorts to force when tyranny attempts to fetter it; but man was made for higher ends. It is divine indeed to suffer tyranny and still to bless. Pray for the happiness of him who caused you woe, and the divinity in you will then assert itself. Violence is earth's inheritance, but love leads to the gods, and is a heavenly boon. Its strength is great, immeasurable. It bears the woe of others gladly, and sorrow cannot overcome it. This is the great Creator's boon to man. To man He granted this priceless blessing."

"Let them forbear who find happiness in forbearance. Oppression and injustice are for me unbearable," cried Shakti.

"Child, be calm. Vengeance is His; the great God will avenge. Weak mortals cannot judge between good and evil, right and wrong. A woman's nature is devotion, and true love knows not vengeance. Child, you have suffered much; the pain of unrequited love burns deeply in your heart. If you would gain peace, conquer the cry for vengeance in your soul, and try to bless where evil has been meted out to you.

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Strive to obtain this peace; you will require nothing more."

"But," Shakti said, "if God had meant all this for me, He would have made my nature such that I could attain to it. See the difference in the flower and the thorn, and yet both are the children of one plant, both are needed for the same design. When you were born, the stars prepared your path so that you might conquer sin by righteousness and noble deeds; but I was born to suppress sin by sin itself. I do not know by what law of *Karma* the Creator should bestow on me a fate so cruel, so unfortunate; but I must carry out His purpose. If the Prince becomes my own, then his evil deeds shall be forgotten and condoned. If not, then by the divine thunderbolts embodied in *Kali* I will reject my religion. I will not follow a faith that does not regard the punishment of injustice as divine. I will now go to the goddess, and if she grants me my heart's desire, then shall the Hindu faith be mine; otherwise—may God have mercy on me!"

CHAPTER XIV

SHAKTI did not wait for a reply, but left the room. At the back of the building, partitioned off by a closed wooden door, was the sanctuary that held the image of *Kali*—the dread goddess. Walking through the garden, she reached the front door of the temple, which was not bolted, and yielded to her touch. It was midnight. The moon had set by this time, and the stars above sent through the open door a faint glimmer, making the darkness visible. The gruesome terror that seemed to slumber here was now roused into action, and Shakti stood with eyes transfixed before the starlit, awful face of *Kali*. The red, protruding tongue of the image seemed to writhe for destruction. Each tongueless, gory skull of her weird necklace appeared to drop one by one and to dance round her, crying:

“Vengeance, vengeance!”

Shakti stood like one possessed by those evil spirits, losing her own personality, and becoming dazed and only half conscious. The echo of the

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words ran through her whole being. She knew no more the world in which she lived, she knew only the force that moved her soul, and madly she called out:

“Yes, revenge! I want revenge! But not his blood nor his death. I want his love. Grant me this boon! Oh, goddess *Kali*, grant that he may be mine!”

“He will never be yours—never—never,” whispered a ghostly voice in her ear.

With trembling lips and dilated eyes Shakti stood motionless. Cold fright sent shudders through her frame. She saw nothing beyond the grim image, fixed and inert; but while she stared she thought that the red tongue of *Kali* quivered and that the dreadful eyes of the goddess became filled with flame.

Then in the awesome silence the same voice spoke again, and said:

“Yes, you will be revenged. The goddess wishes it. You shall be the instrument used to bring destruction upon him.”

The hot, proud blood surged like fire through Shakti's veins, and she spoke fearlessly, and with bold defiance ringing through her voice.

“Who are you? Speak, for this is not the voice of the goddess.”

From behind the image came a man. Her eyes, now accustomed to the partial darkness, scanned him closely. He was a devotee of *Kali*, of the *Kapali* sect. His garment was of reddish

hue, his hair was wreathed with crimson hibiscus ; red sandal marks were upon his brow, and round his neck was the fearful garland of human skulls. But Shakti feared him not. She gazed at him a while and then she asked again :

“ Who are you ? ”

“ I am the servant of the goddess, and I have come hither at her bidding. I have a message to deliver to you, and I speak at her command. I see a black cloud threatening to obscure the bright sky of your destiny. A demon is casting a shadow on the bright moon of your future, and unless you are delivered from his grasp, your stars bode ill. If you desire your own well-being, if but a spark of *Kali's* spirit moves your soul, then worship now the goddess with fixed purpose, pray to her for the destruction of the man to whom your heart so foolishly clings ; but if you wish only to obtain his favour, the favour of a man who has broken your heart, lacerated your tenderest impulses, and left you bleeding on the ground, then go your way. Insult not the great goddess by pouring out to her foolish prayers, but wend your way to him, fall at his feet and plead, and if he gives not love, accept then his contempt. He may not take you as his wife ; but you may be his——”

“ Stop ! Say no more.”

The girl's pride shone from her lofty brow ; she thought of the day's insult, and it stung her deeply.

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“Who are you?” she asked. “Are you a *Sanyasi* or a demon? I do not want him now. My heart revolts at the very thought.” -

“And if you do want the Prince, you will never have him,” continued the stranger. “He will never be yours, he will never take you for his lawful wife. Now answer me. What will you be? The slave of the destroyer of your soul——”

“Or my queen?”

Another voice was speaking now, in low and gentle tones, and from behind the image stepped a youth, whom Shakti recognised as the Sultan’s son, Gaias-ud-din.

The grey light of morning had come, chasing away the horrors of darkness, and as a herald of dawn, the Crown-Prince came to her and took her hand in his.

“Tell me, beautiful one, will you become the Queen of Bengal? My kingdom and my wealth are worthless to me without you.”

Astonished and abashed, she hesitated for a moment. She stood at the parting of the ways. On the one hand were love, honour, and power; on the other, scorn, degradation, and insult. One man was ready to give his all for her; the other, for whom she would gladly sacrifice her life, had gone from her for ever, beyond hope of recall. She felt like a deer at bay. Her woman’s heart rebelled, and yet her pale lips replied:

“*Jahanpana*, I will be yours.”

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The Prince took from his neck a diamond chain, placed it round her white throat, and smiled. But lo! Shakti's dauntless heart grew weak, her face turned deadly pale, and her closed lips quivered like the wind-blown petals of a lotus.

CHAPTER XV

THE priestess did not notice that Shakti had left her, so absorbed was she in her own ideas ; and still pursuing the course of her thoughts, she said :

“ Child ! *Kali* is not the satisfier of a revengeful spirit, but the avenging goddess of all evil done. If you worship the gods in order to obtain vengeance, then your creed is fiendish. The shastras do not teach revenge. The Hindu religion is divine.”

Presently she became aware that she was alone.

The door of the room was open, and a gust of wind extinguished the flame of the little oil lamp. Looking through the open door, she saw the starlit sky stretched as a mighty canopy. She looked northwards, and above the background of the trees, she saw the Seven Sages (the northern constellation) shining in proud splendour, pointing to the pale light of the Polar Star. The *Yogini* gazed and marvelled. God's mighty handiwork revealed itself to her like a great volume of mysterious lore, and her reli-

gious soul, trained by meditation, read many a wondrous message in those stars, and felt itself uplifted to the Divine.

“Oh! God of Gods,” she said. “Oh! Lord of the universe, with meek and reverent heart let me behold Thy mighty work. How weak we are who tread this dusty earth! Have we then no control over our deeds, our passions, and our fate? Are we, like wind-tossed clouds, mere puppets in Thy hand, to come and go like weary pilgrims, to act or cease to act, to cry or to be still, according to Thy will? Good and evil, joy and sorrow, fortune and poverty—have they all but one end, one aim: the preservation of Thy creation through diversity? And if they have no other purpose, then why, oh Lord, why punishments and rewards that seem to be so disproportionate to man’s weak will and to the deeds that he performs? Whether they be good or evil, our actions are like the expanding air. We may not mean them to be this or that, but once set in motion they overpower us, and we know not where and what may be their end. A father’s sin falls on his children. Must one then suffer for the sin of others? Why must this innocent girl suffer for my *Karma*? Perhaps by doing so she is working out her own destiny. Perhaps the chain that binds her to me was wrought by fate itself, so that she might be purified of deeds done in the past.”

Now her thoughts ceased. She closed her eyes and sat absorbed in abstract meditation.

The light of a thousand stars flooded her soul, and in that light the profound mystery of God's creation was revealed to her. A peaceful joy filled her heart, and now again she spoke.

"Oh God I see, I feel the truth. In Thy creation nothing is purposeless. From the greatest intelligence to the smallest atom, all things have the same aim and purpose, all have the same sphere of action. There is nothing either great or small before Thee in the universe. Thou art in the slightest grain of dust and in the largest world that rolls through space. The spark that dwells within the dust grows and expands as ages pass, until a higher form of life is reached, unto the utmost ends of all that rules Thy Divine purpose. Progress is the fundamental law of Thy creation; and the end of *Karma* is the blending of all into Thee, Who art the universal consciousness. From the material atom to the spiritual essence, all moves and whirls restlessly in the world's wheel¹ towards its eternal goal; through many births and deaths we pass, and through a thousand lives, to find peace and to work out our own salvation and the purpose of the world.² And in this voyage over the sea of being, sin and piety, passion and renunciation, joy and sorrow, all do their work, leading the bark into the distant harbour. Our sight is limited; we see but a small distance,

¹ The cycles of existence through which the world must pass according to the Hindu religion.

² Hindu theory of evolution

therefore our fear of storm and danger. But Thou art the pilot at the helm, and he who once knows Thee is safe. Thou causes righteousness to spring from sin, renunciation from desire. As the sunlight gilds the threatening clouds, so shines Thy mercy through the thunderbolts of fate. Only he to whom Thou givest understanding can conceive Thee dimly. Why hast Thou kept me in this world? Since thou hast blessed this life of mine with mercy from Thy hand, tell me, oh Lord, what task of mine remains still incomplete?"

The *Yogini's* meditation was interrupted by the sound of a horse's hoofs, and the grey morning light showed the figure of a turbaned Mussulman, on horseback, near the door.

"Salutation unto you, Mother," said the rider. "Will you come outside? I have come to announce to you the favour of the *Badshah*."

The *Mataji* went to the door, and at a distance she saw beneath a tree a richly decorated palanquin, near which stood officers and servants. She was astonished and asked the rider at the door for an explanation.

"For whom is that palanquin?" she demanded.

"For our *Begum*," replied the Mussulman officer. "Our lord, the Sultan, desires to marry the beautiful maiden who resides with you. Be good enough to bring her here."

The usual calm of the priestess deserted her.

"Does not the *Badshah* know the maiden is a

Hindu?" she asked angrily. "There can be no union between her and him."

"A Mussulman may wed a Hindu maiden," replied the officer. "Our faith is noble. The Prophet's religion is the religion of the world. To the Moslem faith all may be won."

"But how can you expect her to abandon her own religion?"

The man laughed and replied:

"No woman ever was so foolish as not to give up her creed in order to wed a Sultan. All I ask is that you will bring the maiden here. The rest will be arranged in due time."

"That cannot be," was the *Yogini's* firm reply. "Her father left her in my charge, and I will yield the girl up to no one."

"You disobey the *Badshah's* orders? If you refuse to give up the maiden, then I shall enter the temple."

"It is a ruler's duty to protect his subjects, not to tyrannise over them. I shall refuse to give her up," said the priestess.

"If you value your own welfare, then give up the maiden. If not, I shall arrest you as a rebel."

With these words the officer alighted.

The priestess darted towards the room where *Kali's* image stood.

As she approached, Shakti came forward, and with her was a youth who clasped her hand in his. The *Sanyasini* could not believe her eyes. She stood stupefied.

“ Shakti, who is this?” she asked.

“ The Crown-Prince Gaias-ud-din, my future husband,” replied Shakti.

Amazement overpowered the priestess. She stood rooted to the spot. Meanwhile the Prince and Shakti passed into the woods and disappeared from view.

The sun was rising. The priestess stood with head erect and gazed upon the fiery orb of light which slowly rose in the eastern sky. Once more her soul spoke forth:

“ Oh Lord of Hosts, I comprehend the purpose of my life. I am to free my country from this yoke of despotism and oppression. Nor is this task to be mine alone. She, too, is chosen as Thy instrument, this girl Shakti. Thou callest both of us, oh Will Divine, one by desire, the other by renunciation. Oh Thou Eternal One! Thou art the Creator, the creation Thou; Thou art knowledge, Thou art illusion, Thou art the stimulator and the repressor. Thou art *Karma*, Thou art its fruit. Enlighten my mind, oh All-powerful One, with Thy wisdom; give me strength to fulfil Thy design.
Om!”

CHAPTER XVI

AND who was that intriguing fakir who played such an important part after the feat of archery had been performed and Shakti had thrown as a greeting to the Prince the withered garland—the garland fraught with fate and disaster? Woven in play and childish sport, it had kindled in Shakti's heart the great hope and love of her life, only to crush them at last; and now it was to prove thrice fatal to kings and princes, causing their hearts to flame with mad passion, and drowning the land in a sea of blood.

Sultan Sekandar Shah had been deeply impressed by the beauty of Shakti. From the moment that he had seen her he had had but one thought, and that was to gain possession of her. Immediately after the tournament he had summoned Azim Khan into his presence, and secretly, under cover of darkness, in a solitary spot of the palace gardens, he had disclosed his intentions.

“Azim Khan,” he said, “you have seen the houri who offered the flower garland? Please search her out for me. I am resolved to make

her my Sultana. I am convinced that the garland was thrown to me. Is it not a Hindu custom for maidens thus to choose their husbands? Such an honour must be acknowledged."

On withdrawing from the Sultan's presence, Azim Khan passed the Crown-Prince, without noticing him. The Prince had come to make his salutations to his father before returning to his own quarters. Overhearing the Sultan's resolution, he stood thunderstruck. He himself was in love with Shakti. His own father was now his rival! What should he do? Withdraw from the terrible risk? He knew that power, wealth, kingdom, and even life were at stake, if he dared to enter into rivalry with his father for the hand of this maiden. Should he go forward or withdraw?

He heard a voice within him, the voice of a dear friend, his own evil passion, and it said, "Shame! Gaias-ud-din. Die rather than withdraw." Gaias-ud-din had never disobeyed that voice, nor did he do so now. With eyes wide open he went straight forward on the path towards certain destruction. Without going to pay his respects to his father, he retired to his own quarters and prepared to go to Suvarnagram, the capital of the Presidency where he resided and ruled supreme, the very currency being struck in his name. The Sultan had gladly granted him these rights. Since Gaias-ud-din would succeed to the throne, the Sultan

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saw no harm in allowing his son to exercise these powers as heir-apparent. What harm was to ensue he soon found out to his cost.

That very night the Nawab Shah's household and a certain portion of his troops were dispatched. The remainder were to accompany him. He now waited for the coming of Kutab-ud-din.

And who was Kutab? Another dear friend, besides the one within him, whose advice he was now following. Kutab's task was to carry out all the whims that the inner monitor suggested to the Prince. The one was, as it were, the hands of his life's clock; the other wound it up. He could not do without either of these friends, because his whole nature craved to have all its wishes gratified. Kutab not only helped to fulfil his desires, but also prompted them.

No sooner had the friend within suggested to Gaias-ud-din to have Shakti as his new *Begum*, than Kutab, the friend without, was busy in tracing her out as a prize for his master. That he would return with his task accomplished the Crown-Prince did not doubt for a minute; for when had Kutab ever failed to carry out a plan that he undertook? So he sat in eager expectation, and counted the minutes till his counsellor's return. His only thought now was to reach his own Presidency safely with his prey. Once there, his position would be more secure. It was nearly midnight when Kutab at last arrived with the welcome tidings that the bird

was in the net. There was no need for further anxiety, he said, "they had only now to go and take their prey."

After greatly rejoicing over the news thus conveyed, Gaias-ud-din related to Kutab his father's intentions regarding Shakti, and his own plans for frustrating them. Kutab greatly admired his master's schemes, and praised him accordingly. Sure now of having Shakti in his power, the Prince sought his friend's counsel further. He wished, before his flight from Pandua, to have the marriage solemnised in a safe and lovely place, with all the rites due to a Prince. But there was a great difficulty in the way. War would be declared against him by his father in the morning, and then they would be hunted by soldiers everywhere in Pandua. He knew that perfectly well. Where then could he safely install Shakti as his *Begum*, before going into battle? A sword hung suspended over the Prince's head, and to remain under it was certain death. But ignoring this sure and eminent danger, he eagerly pursued his passion and his pleasure. Such is the madness of hungry desire and its hankering for gratification. Strange! but not uncommon!

Kutab was as usual equal to the occasion. His father, the Prime Minister, had a summer palace exactly suited for the purpose. It was situated in a quiet spot outside the town. He at once dispatched messengers to the caretaker to have all in readiness. The Commander of

Gaias-ud-din's troops, Hossein Khan, was sent on this errand. He was accompanied by all of the Prince's soldiers who still remained in Pandua, also by two palanquins with female attendants.

That being done, in the stillness of night, the Nawab Shah and his adviser, with an empty palanquin and half a dozen soldiers, went to fetch their prey. As they approached the temple, the soldiers and the palanquin bearers received orders from Kutab to hide in the woods. Then the two friends surreptitiously entered the shrine under the cover of darkness. Kutab had previously made himself acquainted with the temple. He had worn the disguise of a Mohammedan dervish while in the woods. He now saw fit to don another garb. After entering the house of *Kali*, he divested himself of his Mussulman robes, and removing his turban, he wound it round his body as a loin-cloth. Taking from *Kali's* throat some wreaths of red hibiscus, he twined them round his head. He did not shrink from appropriating a hideous garland of skulls which hung on the wall, and adorning himself with it. With the red sandal paste, kept in a sacred vessel in front of the image, he made marks on his forehead and on his body. He now appeared like a Hindu kapalic, a member of the most cruel of the many sects that worship *Kali*, the goddess.

"Now, Your Highness," he exclaimed, "we shall see what is to be done next!"

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After looking through a hole in the wall into the *Yogini's* apartment, he whispered cautiously: "Nawab Shah, the girl is coming here." They hid behind the goddess, and when the time came, Kutab, in a feigned voice, responded to Shakti's words. The rest is known to the reader.

CHAPTER XVII

ON the same afternoon that the tournament was held in the Sultan's courtyard, the gardens of the young Raja's residence at Pandua saw another and a far different scene.

It was the month of March—messenger of spring. The winter was just over with its cold north wind from the Himalayas; fanning breezes from the south coast were whispering through the quickening leafage. The asoka, silk-cotton, gold mohurs, and other trees were covered with crimson flowers. With this predominance of red in the landscape, the woodlands glowed with such beauty as newly married women have when decked with vermilion powder on parted hair and forehead. The fragrance of blossoming mangoes filled the air with an exquisite perfume. As though drunk with it, the birds broke into ecstasies of song. The ladies of the Dinajpur Court assembled in this delightful place to celebrate the spring festival. Young, beautiful, and gay, themselves the flowers of the spring of life, they made the woodlands ring with their merry laughter.

Our India is the land of legends. Each tree has its own tale. The fragrance of the mango blossom is one of the seven arrows of the Hindu Cupid. Under the kadamba's cooling branches *Krishna* wooed *Radhica*. The asoka tree cannot bring forth its blossoms unless touched by a maiden's foot. But alas! in this unromantic age the poor asoka tree has to produce its flowers unaided. In this festival it was left untouched, the legend notwithstanding. Young life wants enjoyment, and the guava tree was more inviting. Its lower branches quivered with delight under a pair of dainty crimson-stained feet, for a frolicsome girl had mounted it and had dexterously climbed from branch to branch. A number of her companions stood around the tree, some straining their necks and gazing at her in admiration, while others, incited to bravery by her daring, tried to follow in her footsteps. But their every attempt proved a failure, and they found themselves back in the lap of mother earth again, to the great amusement of the onlookers.

There were among them a few whose strict sense of decorum was shocked by this tomboyish behaviour, and they exhorted the bold climber to come down in tones of reproach mixed with gentle entreaty. But the adventurer only received new impetus therefrom, and aspired to more and bolder deeds of heroism. She laughed and shook down a shower of fruit upon their heads.

From another tree a rain of plums fell. Its boughs were low, and one of the gay throng shook it while standing on the ground. The plum tree was not blessed with the touch of maiden's feet. A pair of tender hands sufficed to make it yield its treasures, which fell in profusion unending, like *Draupadi's rice*. Nor was the scattered spoil left long on the ground, for lovely hands picked it up with eagerness, amid a chorus of merry voices.

To some, however, this pastime seemed unromantic. Newly married girls, in the bloom of young love, gathered flowers to be woven into wreaths for those whom even in this hour of merrymaking they could not banish from their thoughts. Yet others were tempted by neither fruit nor flowers. They were moved perhaps by the thought of the prey, chained by the beauty of their black eyes and caught in the meshes of their youthful charms. Their prey was now absent at the tournament, and as one who cannot get milk must satisfy his hunger with whey,¹ they sat by the lake and baited for fish.

In some places the swing formed the centre of merriment. The ladies engaged in this pastime dashed their lovely feet against the waves of ether with many a graceful motion, and laughed gaily and sang the songs they were to sing at the musical soiree.

¹ A Bengali proverb.

Kamini and Kusum were seated apart on a marble slab in the mango grove. They wove their flowers into ornaments and whispered softly, telling one another those tender secrets that stir the heart in youth. Suddenly, from the distance, came the sound of a sweet voice, which made the mango grove vibrate with song. It was Rangini who sang—a girl in the bloom of youth, married to the Court poet, a sentimental old man more than twice her age, who claimed to be ever young at heart, and who poured forth his love for his young wife in foolish, jovial verse. It was one of these silly little love-songs that she was merrily singing as she came along.

This interrupted the weaving of flowers. The girls looked up eagerly, and one of them exclaimed:

“Here comes that dear, silly, old Rangini!”

Rangini Sundari, still singing, entered the mango grove.

“Go away!” laughed Kusum. “We don’t want to hear your old husband’s love-songs.”

Rangini, coming closer, answered gaily, “Very well, my dear, then you shall be my young husband.” She kissed Kusum and continued her song:

“ ‘Oh! moon-faced maiden hear my tale,
I am like clay in your white hands.
Leave me, and my lips turn pale,
You are my wealth, you are my lands,

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My silk and shawls. And night and day
My heart pines for you. Oft I fear
Someone may snatch my love away.
What shall I do when you're not near?
You are my cream, you are my rice,
My cloak, my cooling drink, my grain,
My betel leaf, sweetmeat and spice,
And my umbrella in the rain.
You are the Veda's ancient lore,
You are my religious rite,
The dawn that comes the day before,
My sacrifice, my light.
You keep me bound where'er I go,
You chastise evil with your broom;
Your smile rids me of all my woe,
You are my bliss, you are my doom.' ”

“Your old husband knows how to make love certainly,” laughed Kamini.

“Better than your young husband. I have never heard a single witty word from his lips. If I had such a husband, I would renounce the world and go into the woods.”¹

“Kamini's husband is very sly,” said Kusum; “he does all his love-making on the quiet. Do sing something more.”

“Would you like to hear the answer to that song?” asked Rangini. “As soon as he sang it I gave him tit for tat.”

“Oh! then you have become a poet as well as your husband!” said Kamini mockingly.

“Very well, let us have your song.”

“As you please, my lady,” retorted Rangini.

¹ An expression for renouncing the world.

“ ‘ Oh! my dear life!
 You are my household care,
 My cooking-pot, my paring knife,
 Millstone and earthenware.
 My curry-stone and frying-pan,
 My ornaments and jewelled fan,
 My ladle, fork, and kitchen broom,
 My money-bag and weaving-loom,
 You are my *Krishna's* flute and song,
 And your wives quarrel all day long! ’ ”

Just then the Rani Nirupama came quietly among them.

“ Rangini does sing beautifully,” she said.

Seeing her, the girls rose to their feet and saluted her.

“ Her music sounds like *Krishna's* flute,” added Kamini.

“ You must sing this song to the Rajkumar to-day,” said Nirupama. Ganesh Dev was now Raja, but Nirupama called him Rajkumar still, through force of habit.

“ No, *Bou Rani*, why should I sing?” said Rangini. “ It is you who ought to welcome him with a song, his reward for winning the first prize in the tournament.”

Nirupama smiled. Her young heart filled with joy and pride, and she shyly replied:

“ You girls must welcome him with song, and I will garland him with flowers.”

“ Let us garland you first,” cried Kusum, “ and then you may take it off from your neck and garland your husband.”

They decked the Princess with the flower

ornaments they had been weaving, putting bracelets on her wrists, a necklace round her throat, a crown on her head, and anklets on her feet. Kusum and Kamini then sang the words of *Krishna*, the great mythological lover:

“ ‘ Ah! thou my soul, friend of my heart,
Without thee life is sad and cold.’ ”

To this, Nirupama, impersonating *Radhica*, replied:

“ ‘ Sweet are thy words, mellow thy art,
My cunning *Krishna*. Ah! behold
Fair Chandrabali’s laughing eyes,
While the sad Radha weeps and sighs.’ ”

Kusum and Kamini then sang in answer:

“ ‘ Ah! speak not thus, thy own heart knows,
My Radha, that thy fears are vain.
Behold, my heart, like ocean flows
My love. Why cause such bitter pain?
Ah, that thy lotus feet might be
Two vessels on these silver waves
Of love, which draws my soul to thee,
My heart would find all that it craves.’ ”

When the song was finished Nirupama suddenly said:

“ This garland will not do. I must make one myself and give it to him. There are flowers in plenty, let me string them into a wreath.”

Seating herself on the marble slab, she began to weave her garland. A shadow crossed her fair young face. The memory of a time long past flashed into her mind. She thought still

with anguish of the day when Ganesh Dev had taken the garland that she had woven and had placed it on the neck of Shakti. She looked round now as if she felt Shakti's presence. Not seeing her rival, she gave a sigh of relief and went on with her task. Then from the distance came the mellow sound of flute-notes. All listened.

"Hark!" said Kamini, "it is the same old tune. It brings back the days of childhood. I have not heard it since. Do you remember, *Bou Rani*, the happy days at Dinajpur? Do you recall the time when in the garden by Lake Mahipal we once played at 'Raja and Rani'?"

Did she not remember! Alas! poor Nirupama! She remembered all too well, and to this day the memory cast a shadow over the fullness of her joy. She did not raise her eyes while her friend spoke, but softly sighing, said: "How is it that the Rajkumar has not come yet? The tournament must be over by this time. Can it be he who is playing the flute?"

Yes, it was the Rajkumar. The ladies frolicked in the woods, weaving their wreaths to welcome him, and Nirupama anxiously waited to congratulate him on his success. And Ganesh Dev? He was, at that very moment, seated by the silent river bank with the play-queen of his boyhood, drinking in with his eyes Shakti's intoxicating beauty, losing his whole being in hers, while he sang, with a renovation of delight, the old love song. He was once

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more the boy Ganesh Dev, with his girl-friend Shakti seated by his side. For him all else in this world had ceased to be. Alas! poor Nirupama. Did the winds waft you a message of the scene by yonder river's bank?

CHAPTER XVIII

THAT was no day for the Raja to join in the merriment of the ladies. Returning to the Palace late in the evening, he heard the sound of music in the garden, wherein the soft light of the crescent moon, talk, laughter, and gaiety reigned supreme. He knew that the Rani was there; but he did not go to her. Seeking solitude, he stole to a distant balcony, and sat there, gazing up at the moonlit sky. The moon, low in the west, shed its last radiance on the terrace and then sank beneath the horizon. Still the Raja remained alone in the dim starlight.

One recurring thought coursed madly through his brain, giving a painful sting to his conscience. His heart was crushed with sorrow. "What have I done," he cried; "and yet what other course was there for me to take? Great God! what has been my sin that Thou shouldst have made me the instrument to cause her this suffering? Is this my return for all her love? What is this that I have done, oh my God!"

Ganesh. Dev suddenly felt two small hands placed over his eyes. It was Nirupama who

stood behind him. She had felt anxious and disappointed on account of her husband's long absence. Returning from the merriment to this lonely place, she had thus playfully come upon him.

The Raja was startled and called out, "Is it you, Shakti?" He meant to greet his wife, but inadvertently he uttered the name that absorbed his mind. His wife's heart throbbed violently. Surprised and pained, she answered:

"It is I, Nirupama."

Her husband looked at her with embarrassment, and asked her to be seated near him. Yet his strange manner betrayed the change he had undergone. He did not speak in his usual warm, affectionate manner. Her eyes filled with tears, and she remained standing. She was seventeen now, yet she had all the trusting simplicity of a child. With the strength of her young, passionate love was mingled a self-effacing timidity, a tender freshness and innocence that gave her a peculiar charm. Ganesh Dev was silent for a few moments. He saw that she remained standing. Being of a highly chivalrous nature, and feeling full of remorse for the pain he had given her, he took her by the hand and drew her down beside him on the marble couch. Nirupama rested her head against her husband's shoulder, and burying her face in the folds of his garment, quietly wept.

Seeing his young wife in tears, Ganesh Dev

banished his own sorrows, and putting his arm round her, asked tenderly: "Why does my Nirupama weep?"

Nirupama did not answer, but when he lovingly repeated his question, she fixed her tearful eyes on him and said: "Rajkumar, say that you love me."

Caressingly he played with a stray curl of her hair, and said gently: "I have said it a thousand times. Is not that enough, beloved?"

"If you, if you——" she stammered. But when her husband fondly kissed her quivering lips, she put her arms round his neck and said, "If Shaktimai were here, then, I fear, you would forget me."

The Prince looked silently at her innocent, tear-stained face.

"Say you will not forget me; tell me you are mine," she pleaded.

"If not yours, then whose am I?" he answered evasively.

"I do not know, but I feel miserable," she whispered, and hiding her sweet face once more against his breast, the poor child wept bitterly.

This was a trying hour for the Prince. His tender, loving wife wept tears of misgiving, a vague jealousy possessed her, yet she still trusted him and clung to him. His thoughts were dazed. If he married Shaktimai and brought her home, Nirupama's tender heart would be broken. But if he forsook Shakti, he would lead her to commit a great sin, for she

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would be forced then to marry another, while in her heart she called him her husband.

The night that followed brought no sleep to him; his thoughts disturbed his rest, and before daybreak he rose from his couch, stole noiselessly away from his sleeping wife, and left the house. He now sought Shakti in order to have a final understanding with her. Crossing the woods he heard the sound of a drum, and on the highroad he saw mounted officers and foot soldiers surrounded by a crowd of curious townspeople. A soldier beat upon a drum the following proclamation, "Nawab Gaias-ud-din has rebelled against the Sultan. The *Badshah* has declared war against him. Let all come forth who will fight for the *Badshah*."

Ganesh Dev approached one of the mounted officers and asked: "What offence has the Nawab committed?"

The officer replied: "The Sultan wished to marry a Hindu maiden whom he saw yesterday at the tournament, but the Nawab, anticipating his father's wishes, has married her himself."

The Prince stood as if struck by a thunderbolt.

CHAPTER XIX

JUST then the Prince heard his name called, and this roused him from his stupor. It was a woman's voice and it rang with despair and reproachful indignation.

"Is it Maharaja Ganesh Dev that I see there? Ganesh Dev, you stand unconcerned while a woman is insulted in your presence? You are unmoved by the sight of oppression and injustice! Shame on your honour, Maharaja! Are you a true descendant of those heroes, your fathers, that once made our motherland so great? No wonder then our unfortunate country should come to this state of degradation."

Glancing in astonishment in the direction of the voice, the Prince saw standing near by a holy *Sanyasini*, with hands bound together, and surrounded by soldiers. Astonished at the sight, he hastily drew near and asked the guards:

"Who is this woman, and why is she bound?"

The soldiers saluted him, and one replied, "*Selam Huzoor*. The *Faujdar Sahib* informed the Sultan that the Crown-Prince had stolen the *Begum* from the *Mataji's* house. The

Sultan demanded her arrest. We have but carried out his orders."

The *Sanyasini* smiled scornfully and replied: "One man commits a theft, and another is hanged for it. A noble form of justice indeed!"

Ganesh Dev stepped forward. He unsheathed his sword, and holding it high in his right hand, he cried out to the guards: "Stand aside and make a path for me, if you value your lives."

The soldiers understood his purpose, and one said: "For God's sake, Maharaja, do not set her free. Otherwise we poor fellows will lose our heads. The *Faujdar Sahib* will fall upon us."

Yet they retreated before his flashing sword while entreating, and the Prince, after severing the *Mataji's* bonds, addressed the frightened men and said:

"Fear not! I will myself tell the General that you are not to blame. If he still insists on punishment, then come to me, and I will enrol you in my regiment. Where is the General?"

"After issuing his orders to us he went to Your Highness's palace."

The drum ceased. The curious crowd thronged round the soldiers. With a wave of the hand Ganesh Dev cleared the way, and said to the now liberated priestess: "Come with me, Mother; none of these men will dare to harm you."

The *Mataji* replied: "I know, my son, that while I am with you I need fear nothing. But

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let me lead the way ; do you follow. The roads around Pandua are well known to me."

The astonished crowd stood motionless, and the soldiers uttered not a word as the Maharaja and the priestess disappeared in the forest.

CHAPTER XX

THEY went a short distance, then the *Sanyasini* stopped and said, "Take the road to the right, and you will reach the boundary of your garden. Go home now, and I will join you presently."

On nearing his palace, the Rajkumar met Azim Khan, the Commander-in-Chief of the army, who addressed him saying: "Maharaja, I have come to you on an important errand. War has been declared between father and son. Prepare yourself to join the Sultan."

Ganesh Dev did not answer, but he asked: "General, what does this mean? Why have you arrested a harmless *Sanyasini*?"

"I was obliged to do so, Maharaja; I only carried out the *Badshah's* orders. He wants this woman in place of the other one. If a man can't get the rose, then let him be content with the carnation." He added this as a joke, hoping that the Maharaja would see the matter in the light of jest and drop the subject.

But to Ganesh this vulgar speech was revolting.

"Azim Khan," he replied in vexation, "speak

not slightly of a woman. Let whoever ordered the arrest of the *Sanyasini* know that I have set her free."

"Set free the *Sanyasini*? What do you mean, Maharaja?"

"I severed her bonds."

"That is not so bad. But you have not let her go altogether?"

"Of course I have. Otherwise why should I have cut her bonds?"

"Maharaja, do you mean to say you have set the woman free? - Surely you have not allowed her to escape?"

"I have. For what other purpose should I release her?"

"You must be jesting. How could she escape? I left her guarded by a troop of soldiers."

"The soldiers did their duty; do not blame them. I set her free by force, and took her with me to a place of safety."

The General stood aghast.

"What have you done? The *Badshah* wished to hear the story from her lips. But tell me, Maharaja, where she is? Give up the woman now, without delay, or you will be arrested as a rebel."

"If the *Badshah* passes an unjust order, I cannot be considered a rebel for disobeying it. If it please him to call me so, however, tell him from me that for the service rendered by my grandfather to his father, I humbly beg for this

woman's liberty, and her freedom from all further molestation."

The General laughed.

"Maharaja, you are young, you do not know the world. If you wish to make an enemy of a man, remind him of a service rendered to him. Unless you wish to incur the Sultan's displeasure, give up the *Sanyasini*."

"Never! You are a man, General. Tell me honestly, would you have acted otherwise in my place? If a helpless, innocent woman had sought your protection, would you not then have braved the Sultan's anger?"

"It is useless for us to argue, Maharaja; but bear in mind one thing—I shall return shortly to take you prisoner. The devil has entered into the Sultan. This is not the time to remind him of past benefits and to argue with him."

"And let the Sultan be in mind the fact that unless he abstains from molesting unprotected women, I shall cease to be his feudatory Chief."

The General withdrew. He knew that he ought to arrest Ganesh Dev on the spot, but he had still some of the traits of manhood in him, and his better nature prompted him to give the young man a chance to save himself. He hoped still that the *Badshah* might be amenable to reason.

No sooner had the General gone away than the *Sanyasini* stepped up to the Prince.

"We must stay here no longer," she said. "If we delay, the enemy will seize us. I have

told your Captain to prepare the troops of your retinue. Bring the inmates of your house, and with your family follow me at once. Battle is imminent, and you must prepare your camp immediately in a safe place."

An hour later Ganesh Dev and the members of his household left the Palace at Pandua which they had occupied during their sojourn there. When later on Azim Khan returned with orders to arrest the Maharaja of Dinajpur, he found the Palace deserted.

CHAPTER XXI

THE flame of war was now kindled in Bengal. Foiled in his wishes and angered by the treachery of his son, the Sultan became still more enraged at the news of the *Sanyasini's* release. Being infuriated, he exclaimed: "This is adding insult to injury! First the knave releases the woman, and then he makes bold to petition for her release! Does he think that he can play with me? You should have arrested the fool-hardy boy before coming here. General, you have failed to do your duty."

Shocked at this reproach, Azim Khan replied: "Protector of the World, your humble servant admits that he is to blame; but circumstances are against us. We are at war with Nawab Shah, and if we arrest the Maharaja of Dinajpur, we shall have to fight him as well. It will be no easy task to take him a prisoner, and if we do, then it will mean a loss of strength that may prove fatal at the present moment. Dinajpur has strong forces, and if we win him to our side, then we can defeat the enemy without difficulty."

But the Sultan was in no mood to listen to reason. His anger was roused all the more by Azim Khan's explanations, and he replied in frenzy: "Azim Khan! do you mean to imply that without that stripling's help I cannot overcome my foe? Do you think I am calmly going to take such an insult from that boy?"

Azim Khan knew his master too well to say more on the subject. "No, Your Majesty," he stammered, "I did not mean that. I only await my lord's orders."

"My orders are already given. Go! Arrest this insolent scoundrel and bring him before me."

The General went, but only to find that Ganesh was gone. On his return from the deserted Palace, he met Gaias-ud-din's General with his troops. A fight ensued. There was some loss on either side, and then, as evening fell, the enemy disappeared in the forest. The next day, by order of the *Badshah*, troops were sent to explore the woods. Ganesh Dev was encamped there. His troops gained daily in strength, new recruits coming in from Dinajpur and other places in large numbers. The Sultan had to contend now with two foes: the forces of his son and also those of Ganesh Dev.

CHAPTER XXII

SHAKTIMAI was in the Prime Minister's garden house, a splendid and luxurious palace. The scene of grandeur affected her, however, only for a moment. A passing glance, and then it no longer dazzled. Her imagination, living always in her proud destiny, had familiarised her with grandeur. Born to be a queen, a queen she had become. Was not such magnificence her due?

The walls of the splendid apartment that she entered were lined on all sides with beautiful mirrors. Carved sandalwood divans were placed here and there, and these were spread with soft Kashmir shawls of the costliest make. Embroidered silk cushions lay on the couches, and on the ground floor were stretched the choicest Persian carpets. Flowers—the most fragrant of the season—were scattered profusely on all sides. Here and there were marble fountains, decked with flowers and creepers. Rosewater, falling in sprays, mingled its scent with the fragrance of the blossoms, thus filling the room with voluptuous perfumes. The whole apartment appeared like some enchanted garden

when Shakti, attended by many handsome, richly robed young women, entered and looked round. It seemed as if she were surrounded by hundreds of fairies in lovely gardens without number. She was startled. Had paradise been let down from heaven to welcome her? In merriment she let her eyes wander round, and in the midst of this magnificence she saw a poorly dressed maiden one hundred times reflected. She smiled, for this poor maiden was herself. Now a sense of proud gratification came over her. All this extravagant splendour was for her. She, the poor girl, who had walked the highroads as a pilgrim from shrine to shrine, knowing neither home nor rest, now swayed the destinies of thousands of men and women, who, at the lifting of a finger, would not hesitate to sacrifice their lives.

Her maids led her to the bath. Four attendants spread before her four regal robes of four different colours, set with pearls, diamonds, and other precious stones.

“*Begum Sahiba*,” they said, “which of these shall be your bridal dress?”

Shakti looked at them one by one and then said, with scorn upon her lips: “How ugly! Have you nothing better?”

The women were struck dumb by this reply. At length one took heart and said:

“*Begum Sahiba*, for these very robes three *Begums* quarrelled and are now enemies, and yet Your Highness says that they are ugly!”

"These are the dresses," said another, "of the mother of the Nawab Shah, the late Sultana Sahiba. Since her death three *Begums* have been rivals to obtain them; but the Nawab Shah gave them to none, but put them by. He has now sent them to adorn Your Highness for the bridal."

"I do not want them," Shakti said smilingly. "Send three of them to the three *Begums* as a present from the new *Begum*."

"And the fourth robe?"

"The fourth? Which of the *Begums* has been the favourite of the Nawab Shah hitherto?"

"Motia Jan."

"Then send this robe to Motia Jan."

"As Your Highness orders," was the girl's reply. "But what then will our new *Begum* wear?"

"Have you no *sari*? A *sari* and a veil are all that I require."

The maid opened a chest and took out *saris* richly embroidered and of various colours, also veils and *orna* of many kinds. From these Shakti selected a white *sari* studded with diamonds and a white veil embroidered with pearls.

Then came the bath. That being finished, Shakti donned her costly garments, and now, adorned in bridal attire, she lay half-reclining on a cushioned divan in the bedchamber. The maids were busy with their mistress. One dried

her glossy hair, another fanned her gently, a third stained her feet with henna, while others sprinkled her with attar and rosewater. Two maids brought out a box of jewels and placed it before her; they were ornaments of unparalleled brilliance, rich in variety, marvels of delicate workmanship. Gold, rubies, emeralds, turquoises, diamonds, and pearls shone with a lustre that dazzled the eye. The diamonds were of the purest water, and when the maid held up before her a diamond necklace of a hundred rows, and a tiara thickly studded with starry gems like the Milky Way, it seemed as if a thousand sunbeams were playing there. Shakti had seen jewels in the Palace of Dinajpur, but never any so superbly beautiful and magnificent.

At last she chose from the glittering heap before her some diamond ornaments. Her toilet being now completed, she went back to the hall of mirrors to receive the Nawab Shah. There she saw herself reflected no longer as a simple maiden but a great queen! She was astonished at her own form, and could scarcely recognise herself. What superb beauty! What exquisite loveliness! But who was there to see it? For whom had she thus adorned herself! Slowly the tears gathered in her eyes. Alas! was this her bridal day, the day her heart had longed for? Wealth, power, state—all these things were now hers, but was there any joy in them? What is life to a woman when her love lies slain?

Ganesh Dev would never be hers. Was she

not selling soul and body to obtain the opportunity for revenge? Was she not losing all that is dear to the soul—self-respect, honour, purity? On whom now did this vengeance fall? The blow she had intended for another had crushed herself—a suicidal blow! It had murdered her true, finer self. The dignity of womanhood was polluted. Could she still claim to be of human-kind? Alas! no. She was a ghost, a demon masked in this brilliant dress. She had lost all connection with the people of her own race—she, as the wife of a Mussulman, would be regarded by them with horror! Her very memory would fill them with loathing. And above all, Ganesh, what would he think of her? If he had never loved her, still he had revered her, revered her name, but now? Alas! had she not remained a homeless wanderer, had she become a *Sanyasini* like her aunt? But repentance had come too late.

A maid came in and broke her reverie.
 “The Nawab Shah awaits your Highness’s pleasure. Shall I send word that Begum Sahiba is ready?”

“Yes, ask him to come in.”

Then Shakti left the room, and the maid said, “Where are the garments you wore? Bring them here.” Stripping of her ornaments and the regal robes, she gave them to the maid.

The girl became frightened and said, “But, Begum Sahiba, what will you say?”

"That concerns me only. Go, bring me my things at once."

The woman silently obeyed. Shakti now donned her pilgrim's garb and then returned to the hall of mirrors, where the young Crown-Prince stood awaiting her. Seeing his bride still in her old attire, he exclaimed, in great astonishment, "What does this mean? Is that dress fit for the Queen of Bengal?"

"I am not yet the Queen of Bengal. While the war continues I shall wear this dress."

Hearing these words, Gaias-ud-din felt a deep misgiving. He tried to persuade her, speaking gently. "Beloved, for your sake I have staked wealth, prosperity, and kingdom. Your bright smiling looks should support me in danger. What is this?" And he advanced towards

and girl retreated, saying, "Protector of the world, do not touch me. My vow is made. As long as this war continues I cannot be—"

The Crown-Prince stood amazed. His eyes flashed as he had finished speaking. "I will act according to your bidding, not I will give you, my own property,

was roused. Scorn at the glory of her eyes. She replied: "Then I want to know that I am

I

not your wife and never shall be. Allow me to depart, or else I shall——”

Before she could finish, a maid entered and said hastily, “Protector of the World, Kutab Sahib requests that you will see him immediately. He waits outside. Great danger is impending.”

The Nawab yielded to Shakti’s superior mental strength and humbly replied, “Forgive me, dearest, I will be your slave. I am going into battle. I do not know whether I shall ever return alive. Shall I not have one embrace from her for whose sake I am going to death? Grant this, beloved, and I shall die happy.”

The maiden stood unmoved and resolute.

“Protector of the World, I must remain true to my vow. As long as this war lasts I cannot be your wife. If you do not wish to bring sorrow on both of us, abstain from further entreaties, else you will learn that not a hundred bodyguards will keep me a prisoner in your harem.” Shakti said this only to gain time. In her heart she had resolved never to be his bride.

Terrible shouts were heard outside. Kutab rushed in, exclaiming: “Be quick, my lord, be quick! If you delay we shall be taken prisoners. The maids are already in palanquins. Let the *Begum* Sahiba be placed in another. There is no time to be lost. We must escape through the forest.”

Where were now the joy, the endearments, the rapture of a bridal? The Prince had staked

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his all. What had he received in return? A cold reply from the maiden he adored. With this bitter memory in his mind, and the desire of his heart for once unsatisfied, Gaias-ud-din, dejected and morose, set out upon his path of danger.

CHAPTER XXIII

"HIM whom the gods wish to destroy, they first make mad." Such was the case with the *Badshah*. He was working out his own destruction by obstinacy and want of judgment. He had made enemies all round, both at home and abroad, and he had no fixed policy or purpose. His military advisers were worried to death by a succession of contradictory orders. Naturally the results were only too often unfavourable, and in such cases those who had executed the Sultan's orders were subject to severe reprimands. When, however, good results were obtained, the *Badshah* withheld the due credit from those who deserved it. This caused an undercurrent of discontent in the Council. The army was demoralised and dispirited. Food was scarce in the land. The able-bodied peasants had been taken from the fields to bear the Sultan's arms, and the work of cultivation had fallen upon the women and children. The famine-stricken country was unable to supply the army with proper rations. It had become difficult for the soldiers to secure two meals a day,

and now, to reach the climax of their adversity, the fortune of war was against them. If by any chance they beat the enemy once, they were defeated thrice in return. The war could not much longer continue at this rate. More than a year had passed since its beginning. Again and again the Council had advised the Sultan to make peace with the Raja of Dinajpur, and with his help to overpower the Crown-Prince. So far the Sultan had stubbornly neglected this advice; but the time had come when he could do so no longer. Gaias-ud-din, whose forces had increased enormously, was rapidly advancing upon the capital with a large army. The successful man draws a following. When people saw that the Crown-Prince had the advantage over his father, they flocked to his Standard in large numbers. The other seven sons of the Sultan, having vainly tried to check their brother's course, were clamouring for more troops; and the Council, with one accord, urged the Sultan to make peace with Ganesh Dev, who was encamped not far from the capital, and who defeated the Sultan's men wherever he met them. If the Imperial forces were united with those of Dinajpur, then they could oppose the Nawab Shah with greater strength. This was the only way to escape from the dilemma. The Sultan fully recognised the truth of this, but he was disgusted with what he had brought upon himself. He fumed against the fate that compelled him, the all-powerful Sultan, to seek aid from

the puny Raja of Dinajpur, who by right should cringe at his feet.

Yet though he cursed his fate, he was helpless, and the more he realised this the more his irritation increased.

A general meeting of the Council was convened. The Commander-in-Chief himself had left his camp in order to be present and to give the Sultan an exact idea of the critical position. His explanation, however, was received with a rebuke.

“Has not that wretched little Dinajpur been brought to subjection yet?” asked the angry *Badshah*. “General, you are good for nothing. You are slow in carrying out my orders. On every side I see signs of negligence.”

The Council remained silent. At last the General replied:

“Ruler of the Universe, had we only been allowed to keep our troops two days longer at Dinajpur, we should have beaten the Raja. But by Your Majesty’s orders we were obliged to give up the attack and to march immediately towards Subarnagram.”

Then the aged Minister, Azim Khan’s father, spoke up and said: “Prince Sharif-ud-din, whom Your Majesty has made Crown-Prince, surrounded Gaias-ud-din on the road to Banagram and sent to ask for more troops, but——”

“My belief is that Sharif-ud-din was deceived by false news,” interrupted the *Badshah*.

“Your Majesty has been misinformed,”

replied the Minister. "For want of sufficient troops it was impossible to blockade Banagram properly either by land or water. If Azim Khan could have arrived there one day earlier, Gaias-ud-din would certainly have been captured."

"What is this that I hear, Azim Khan? If you had been a day earlier, victory would have been ours? Why were you late?"

"Your Majesty, how was it possible for me to be at Banagram when I was fighting Ganesh in Dinajpur? Prince Farid Shah was ordered to join the Nawab Sahib Sharif-ud-din."

"But my orders were that you, too, should join Sharif-ud-din, leaving Nawab Shams-ud-din in your place."

"That order came later. When it reached us we could not get to Banagram in time. We were delayed in the first place by the strong current of the Purnabhanga River, swollen to excess during the rains. Next, the heavy rains and the bad condition of the roads made rapid transport impossible. When we reached the scene of action, we found that we were too late."

"Impossible! Never before did I hear such an explanation from the mouth of a Commander-in-Chief. I see my mistake now in having made you General."

The General remained silent, not daring to give vent to his just anger. But the Minister replied: "It will do us no good to dwell upon the past. We are wasting time. Every minute Gaias-ud-din is gaining strength. If he

is not defeated soon, it will be difficult to save the kingdom. It must be decided at once whether or not an alliance is to be made with Dinajpur."

Necessity compelled the Sultan to give in. He yielded, at last, with a very bad grace, and said, addressing the Minister, "Very well, you may propose an alliance, but take care that we do not have to suffer the indignity of a refusal."

Azim Khan had already sounded Ganesh Dev. The *Sanyasini* being the cause of the dispute, Ganesh Dev's conditions were that she should be exempt from any further punishment, and that he should obtain remission of tribute to compensate him for losses incurred in the war. The *Badshah* consented to these terms, and the Maharaja of Dinajpur was invited to a royal Durbar to be held the following day, so that both parties might sign the treaty. As a proof of good faith, the Sultan sent his grandson, Saheb-ud-din, and suite to remain as hostages in the Dinajpur camp.

CHAPTER XXIV

GANESH DEV, after entering the Durbar, saluted the *Badshah* and stood erect and unbending. He showed in his countenance and whole bearing such indomitable pride that the *Badshah* lost his self-control. That he, the great *Badshah*, had failed all these months to bring down by one inch the haughty spirit of the young Raja, had stung him to the quick, and in his resentment he forgot himself so far as not even to ask the Raja to take a seat. The Assembly, aghast at this insult, were in consternation. A dead silence ensued. All felt that a storm was coming. This menacing hush was broken by the Emperor, who, speaking in a stern voice, asked: "Ganesh Dev, what do you want?"

The Raja saw that no good was pending, yet he said calmly and respectfully: "What I want I have already stated, and Your Majesty having assented to my proposals, I have come hither to sign the treaty. But if Your Majesty wishes to raise the question anew, in compliance with your desire, I declare that I want the acquittal

of the *Sanyasini*, and that the losses I have sustained should be made good by the remission of the tribute money for Dinajpur."

The Sultan knit his brow and said, "But how am I to be recompensed for the losses I have sustained through your rebellion?"

"I will help Your Majesty in the war against the Crown-Prince."

"That a feudatory Chief is bound to do, whether he wishes it or not. By refusing to help me in war against an enemy, you render yourself liable to punishment. What is to be the punishment for your rebellion?"

"That should have been decided before I came here. By pledging your good faith you brought me into your power. To harbour any thoughts of punishment now would be a breach of that good faith."

"To meet cunning with cunning is no breach of good faith. There is no other way of keeping the peace. Azim Khan, arrest this man."

No one had thought the Sultan capable of such mad conduct. Azim Khan stood as if rooted to the spot and stared at the Emperor in amazement. It was he who had negotiated with Ganesh Dev and had brought him to the Durbar, relying on the Sultan's word. Thus, unwittingly, he had been his master's agent in treachery. His whole nature revolted against this injustice. Unable to keep silent any longer, he spoke and said, "The Maharaja has

come hither trusting in Your Majesty's word of honour. If faith is thus broken, the Emperor's fair name will be tarnished, and in future no one will place confidence in him."

"Silence! You are insolent! Karim-ud-din, from to-day you are my General. Arrest these two men, this insolent Azim Khan, and this rebel of Dinajpur. This punishment should have been inflicted on them long ago."

"Protector of the World," said the newly chosen General, "the escorts of the rebel of Dinajpur are at the gate. What is to be done with them?"

"Arrest them also."

The *Badshah's* orders were obeyed. Azim Khan and Ganesh Dev were led away in the custody of Karim-ud-din. When the aged Minister of State saw this, he struck his forehead with the palm of his hand and exclaimed loudly, "Sultan, Sultan! what have you done? You have left us no means of defence. You have arrested the leader of the army, and that for no fault of his."

"For no fault of his!" roared the enraged *Badshah*. "I kept him in his post so long simply because he is your son. I now see that he is at the bottom of all this mischief."

"And since Your Majesty has arrested the ruler of Dinajpur, war must continue with both parties. God alone knows where all this will end."

"With both parties? You must be out of

your senses. If Ganesh Dev is imprisoned, who will fight me?"

"His army. Does Your Majesty think that his mother will bear his arrest quietly? As long as a single able-bodied man remains in Dinajpur he will fight for the Maharaja."

"But if he is put to death—what then?"

"It seems Your Majesty has forgotten the fact that Prince Saheb-ud-din is kept as a hostage in the enemy's camp. If the rumour of the Maharaja's arrest gets abroad, the young Prince's life will be in danger."

"The soldiers who came with Ganesh Dev are also prisoners. The news will not reach the enemy's camp very quickly. Make the most of this opportunity, and get Saheb-ud-din released."

"Your Majesty," replied the Minister in despair, "who will carry out your orders? Listen to the advice of one whose hair has grown white with age and experience. Release Azim Khan and make friends with Dinajpur. Otherwise we shall be ruined. Satan seems to have entered into you."

"You are my Satan!" exclaimed the Sultan angrily. "Do you know that your son Kutab is Gaias-ud-din's adviser? Hence all this trouble."

"On that very account I have turned him off."

"But that does not benefit me; I verily believe that Azim Khan is also secretly plotting

with Gaias-ud-din for my destruction. How else can you explain the fact that the enemy has not yet been defeated?"

This was too much for the aged Minister. He lost his patience. The insult stung him keenly, and he cried out indignantly, "For shame, Your Majesty, for shame! Such suspicion is unworthy of a king! I fully now expect the charge that I myself belong to Gaias-ud-din's party."

Sultan Sekandar Shah was beside himself with rage. He seemed to have gone mad, and he went so far as to say, "I have my misgivings as to that also. Guilt is always anxious to prove its own innocence."

It was a terrible thing for the austere and saintly old man, in his dervish garb, to hear these cruel words from the lips of his master, that royal master whom he had served with the purest faith and loyalty for so many years. He was perfectly silent for a moment; then he broke out and said: "Sultan, I quit your service. God is against you, or such mad folly would not have possessed you. Take this prophecy from me before I go. You are on the path to ruin. Nothing can save you now."

The Assembly were inwardly so exasperated by the Sultan's unjust conduct that they did not attempt to stop the departing Minister of State with even a sign. As a wave of light is silently felt by the eye, so Sekandar Shah perceived this hushed resentment. He knew it, yet did

not change his course. The Assembly then adjourned, feeling even more dispirited than before.

On the following morning the Council of War met again. It had been raining the whole night, and the dark, threatening aspect of the sky added gloom to the melancholy looks of the courtiers. Silence pervaded the Durbar hall, like a lull before a storm. And the storm was not long in coming.

Two guards rushed in, trembling with haste and fear, and cried aloud, "Your Majesty! the Nawab Shah Gaias-ud-din is approaching. Nawab Jelal-ud-din is unable to check his progress. The enemy will soon be upon us."

The Sultan turned pale and cried out, "Azim Khan! Where is Azim Khan?"

"He is a prisoner by Your Majesty's orders."

It was Karim-ud-din who spoke.

The Sultan's eyes flamed with excitement.

"Go, take your troops and help Jelal-ud-din," he said. "Give orders for the release of Azim Khan and bring him here."

Karim-ud-din departed, but returning quickly said: "Azim Khan is gone. The few regiments we have here are being accoutred, and I shall lead them to the fight by Your Majesty's orders."

"And Azim Khan, where is he?"

"He has fled."

"Fled?"

"Yes."

“Whither?”

“I hear that he had gone to join the Nawab Shah Gaias-ud-din.”

The great *Badshah* could not grasp the truth. The room, the house, the people—all seemed to swim round him in mad confusion.

“Bring Ganesh Dev,” he cried.

“He, too, has fled.”

“Ganesh Dev has also fled? Oh! my Minister, my Minister, what shall we do?”

“The Minister has departed as well; I hear it rumoured he, too, is joining Gaias-ud-din.”

When the Sultan heard that the Minister had deserted him, desperation made him rise to the height of energy. Half-frantic with despair, in vehement tones he shouted, “All are gone! all have deserted me! Well then, I myself will be your Commander.”

This created a reaction. The Sultan’s enthusiasm was infectious. In the face of danger everything was now forgotten. They rose to their feet as one man and shouted, “Victory to the *Badshah!*”

It being a time of war, troops were ready to be called to action, and in an hour they were on the march, Sultan Sekandar Shah himself leading his army. The two hosts met close to Pandua. The battle raged between father and son for three days.

The end of this war is well known, being recorded in the ancient annals of Bengal. On the third day Sekandar Shah was killed. His

lacerated body was laid to rest in the silent tomb of the immense "Adina Masjid," prepared years before to receive the mortal remains of the great Sultan. His son, the rebel Gaias-ud-din, succeeded his father on the throne.

CHAPTER XXV

GANESH DEV had pitched his camp on some raised ground in a forest-clearing close to Bungshiharipur, not far from Pandua. Just below the camp stood a small piece of water which was clear as crystal. This lake had a legend attached to it.

Why should it not? Has not every brook, every tree, nay, almost every stone a legend to its credit in this mystic land of dreams and poetry? Then why deprive a crystal lake of that privilege? It was rumoured that it came there through mysterious and supernatural agency.

Readers are aware that at the beginning of the war, when the Maharaja of Dinajpur had been declared a rebel, Azim Khan, under the Sultan's orders, was pursuing him. Owing to the small number of his troops, Ganesh Dev could not engage in a pitched battle. Tired out by constant pursuit, overcome by thirst and faint for want of food and rest, the soldiers had reached this spot. Not a drop of water was

seen to be anywhere. In despair, the Raja was on the point of surrender, when the *Sanyasini*, who had gone in quest of food, suddenly appeared with a foraging party laden with provisions. She saw that the men were parched with thirst. "Have you looked over there under the peepul tree?" she asked.

"We have searched everywhere," replied the Prince.

"But let us look again."

Confident of success, the priestess went in the direction indicated, followed by the soldiers, and soon, hidden by trees and bushes, a pure sheet of water trembled in the breeze before their thirsty eyes. They raised a shout of joy, and after, with grateful reverence, prostrating themselves before the *Sanyasini*, they rushed to the lake to quench their thirst.

Soon after this the enemy came upon them, and were driven back in headlong flight. So great is the wonder-working power of faith! The crystal lake created by miracle had itself wrought a miracle. It was called ever after the Lake of Life.

They did not remain there long at that time, because the enemy was pursuing them. They retired to Dinajpur to strengthen their forces. But the fortunes of war turned in their favour, and gradually they succeeded in defeating the foe and advancing upon the capital. When again they came near Pandua, by this lake they

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pitched their camp. This they did a week before their Raja was inveigled into the Sultan's power, from which, as we have already seen, he had had the good fortune to escape.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE heavy August rain had ceased, but the sky was still cloudy. The autumn afternoon was not brightened by the golden rays of the declining sun. The raindrops fell from shining leaves, and a mild breeze stirred the smooth stillness of the lake.

In the wet grass, close to the water, invisible frogs were croaking their delight. Deep in the woods the crickets had begun their monotonous chant, as though under that densely clouded sky it were already evening. The regular tread of the stalwart sentries kept time with the universal, solemn music.

Some of the followers of the Maharaja's household were seated on the newly made stone embankment of the lake. Although not trained soldiers, it being war time, they were fully armed for battle—dagger girded on, spear in hand, and helmet on head. The Bengalis of those days were not the Bengalis of to-day. Fighting was not for them like a faint memory from some previous birth. To be able to fight

was at that time a necessity of their existence. All had a soldierlike appearance, with one single exception, and that was Nabin Adhikari, Court poet and prominent actor in the mystery plays of the life of *Krishna*. He was the husband of the gay Rangini, whom we already know.

The Raja was very fond of Adhikari's songs, and the poet was held in high esteem at Court. His famous play on the subject of *Krishna's* wooing of *Radhica* was on the lips of young and old. He was forty-five years of age, and had been married four times. His fourth wife, the pretty Rangini, had come into his life through a romantic incident. A cousin of his had deputed him to see the girl, and to obtain her for him. But Nabin Adhikari, ever young in love and wooing, could not let so precious an opportunity escape, and, stealing a march upon his unsuspecting cousin, he had wound up the bargain by marrying the girl himself.

Thus his life had been spent in continuous courtship. Fame and fortune alike had smiled on him. Suddenly, however, this aggravating war had changed everything. The young Rani had followed her husband into the camp, and Rangini, refusing to be parted from her mistress, had gone there too. And the Brahmin minstrel, loath to be severed from his young wife, had no course left to him but to follow her. Instead of the fire of his love-songs, he had now

to busy himself with the fire of the cooking-pot. What fitter work could be found for a Brahmin in the war camp? ¹ This was not a whit more to his taste than fighting; but it was less dangerous. He loathed putting on his soldier's clothes, and so he went out of the camp as little as possible. Not that he had any aversion to dressing up. As an actor he was used to the impersonation of characters, and for one female part he was famous in the mystery plays, namely that of Brinda, the messenger of *Radhica*. But oh, the difference! That rôle and this! To think of it made him sigh; and he was all the more loath to put on his uniform.

It was the rainy season—the glorious Indian monsoon, the poet's inspiration. On this cloudy day the love melancholy of *Krishna's* lyrics fluttered on his poetical lips, and eager to give vent to them, he must needs go forth to some shady, romantic spot. But instead of Brinda, he had to impersonate a soldier. So with spear in the one hand and sarang in the other he sallied forth and sat down by the side of the lake. Throwing down his spear, he took off his helmet that pressed heavily on his head, and placed it beside him. The hair tuft of a Brahmin was now visible, contrasting ludicrously with his soldier's dress.

He played a soft tune on the sarang, and with

¹ People of all castes can eat food cooked by a Brahmin; hence the convenience of having Brahmin cooks.

closed eyes, nodding his head at each interval, with true musical fervour, he sang :

“ ‘ The *Sravan* month has come, the month of rain,
The clouds are dense, like evening is the day.
The rivers overflow; the rustling leaves complain,
The raindrops fall with melancholy play.’ ”

But alas! the poor minstrel's song fell flat that day. Not only was his audience unappreciative, but his ears were deafened by loud talk and laughter. And his annoyance did not stop there; for before he had well begun his second stanza, he was nudged by somebody near him, and brusquely asked, “ What do you say to it, *Thakur* ? ”

The Brahmin, thus rudely interrupted, replied angrily : “ What do I say to it? That the whole of the rains you may be separated by lonely absence from your sweetheart, and that heaven may preserve me from such dull company as yours. If you trouble me any more, I am off.”

Srikanta Paramanick, the barber, replied, “ Moonshi Mahashoy, let the *Thakur* sing and listen to him quietly. Go on, *Thakur*, I am love-sick, and your song cools my fevered heart.”

The Brahmin was pleased and continued :

“ ‘ The winds blow madly on with icy breath,
And ever and anon the lightnings flash——’ ”

“ Bravo! *Thakur*,” interrupted Paramanick,

"bravo! I am only sorry I have no coin to shower on you."

The *Thakur* felt delighted and went on singing. But the unpoetical spirit of the audience manifested itself again. Paramanick, who had been interrupted in the narration of a strange dream, was now besought by all to resume it.

"Well, after that, tell us the rest of the dream," said the Moonshi, the Raja's Persian tutor.

"Yes, Paramanick is famous for his dreams," the Bhandari (steward) cried. "Go on with it, friend."

"I thought I saw the southern sky turn red," continued Paramanick.

"And from it blood poured down—did you not say?—and flooded the earth," said Shyam Sardar, the wrestling master.

"Yes—and oh! such streams of blood," continued the barber. "It was a sea of blood, flowing all round, with waves rising high upon it as in a storm. Then these waves turned into men. And oh! horror! I was one of them. I then began a loud lament. But suddenly there appeared the divine form of *Bhagavati* seated on a lotus, and gently said, 'Fear not, my child, fear not,' and then I awoke."

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" cried the listeners in a chorus. "Whom did the figure resemble?"

"The *Sanyasini*."

"It must have been her," replied the learned Moonshi. "She saved us once, and now, by her power, we shall be victorious in the war. This is an auspicious dream indeed."

The Court physician, Nikunja Sen, who, being absorbed in his own thoughts, had kept quiet all this while, now remarked somewhat abruptly: "May it come true! May the Mussulman's pride be humbled, and with it the vanity and the nonsense of the Hakims. Fraud, fraud, the whole system is a fraud. I should like to see how Hakim Nazir Ali would feel then?" The learned doctor relapsed into silence, becoming as grave as before, and looked in another direction as if he had not spoken at all. He usually kept aloof from the crowd.

Shyam Sardar took up the thread of the conversation, and said, "A quarrel with the *Badshah* is no trifling matter."

"Why? Is our Maharaja in any way inferior to the Sultan?" asked the barber.

And the Moonshi added, "Especially when the divine *Sanyasini* is on our side?"

"That is true," replied the wrestler; "but it is a long while since we left our homes. All must be in confusion there. What has become of our families heaven only knows!"

"Can you tell me," said another, "why the Raja's mother is so much against the *Sanyasini*? The very mention of her name angers her. She declares that the priestess is the cause of this war, that she is an impostor, and that it

will go badly with the Maharaja as long as she is with us."

"The Maharani fears that this war will have serious results some day," put in the Bhandari. "She therefore desires to see it abandoned, and to make peace with the *Badshah*."

"What she says is true," answered the Sardar. "I hope peace will be made"

"Go and be hanged! It is not true at all," vehemently asserted the barber. "If our Maharaja humbled himself before the Sultan, the tail of his pride would swell so large¹ that no amount of subjection would suffice it. He would not stop until he had made the whole country read the Koran. But this is an opportunity for our Raja. If victorious, he may become Sultan. We shall then have the days of Ram's golden reign again. Then there will be no more oppression in the land. Just fancy what a happy time we shall have then!"

This glowing picture consoled the Sardar. "That is true," he said.

"What a pity Ganapati is not here. He is a great astrologer. He would soon interpret Paramanick's dream for us," said the Moonshi, who was interested in dreams.

The Sardar suggested, "Perhaps the *Thakur* can help us. He is a Brahmin, he must know the shastras. *Thakur*, listen, did you hear

¹ A Bengali proverb.

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that dream? Tell us who will win. Will our Maharaja become Sultan or not?"

The Sardar became excited as he spoke, and gave the Brahmin a push that almost dislodged him from his seat. The poor minstrel became still more annoyed.

"The devil take you and your dreams!" he said gruffly. "I am off. I see I cannot stay here in peace." With these words he took up his sarang and trudged away.

"Stay, *Thakur*," called the Sardar, "don't go away without explaining that dream to us."

"You have forgotten your turban, *Thakur*," shouted the barber. "Come back and fetch it."

The steward said: "*Thakur*, you have left your spear; go, if you like, but don't leave that behind you."

But the witty Moonshi topped all these remarks.

"*Thakur*," he called out, "come and take your helmet, pray. If anyone strikes you on the head there will be nothing to ward off the blow. That little tuft of hair of yours won't protect you much, you know."

All laughed and continued to pass jokes at the expense of the poor musician, excepting the physician, who only honoured the departing figure with a glance, then closed his eyes again and went on with his meditation. The *Thakur* took no notice of them, but went doggedly on till he was out of sight; then seating himself on

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the forked trunk of a tree, he played his sarang
and sang to himself undisturbed :

“ “ The *Sravan* month has come, the month of rain,
The clouds are dense, like evening is the day.
The rivers overflow, the rustling leaves complain,
The raindrops fall with melancholy play.
The winds blow madly on with icy breath,
And ever and anon the lightnings flash,
And silver rain showers glisten all around,
When lo! the thunder roars with dreadful
crash,
The way-worn traveller trembles in despair.
And youth and beauty, full of glad delight,
Are linked and linger in love's fond embrace.
But I in lonely sorrow spent the night,
I dreamt of lovers' meetings, raptures sweet,
When up I started and with weeping eyes
Beheld myself alone upon my couch.
The distant thunder roared, deep were my sighs,
Alas! alas! my love is far away.' ”

CHAPTER XXVII

His song ended, the Brahmin, resting his instrument on his knees, began to hum another tune. Suddenly he saw, right before him, behind a *sefalika* tree, two bright eyes, and, as he looked, a woman approached, and saluting him said:

“What a beautiful song!”

The Brahmin, in great surprise, stopped singing. Who was this wood-nymph who had shown such appreciation of his music? He could not find a word of reply.

“Do not stop, *Thakur*,” said the fairy. “Do let me hear another song.”

The simple-hearted poet felt flattered, and clearing his throat said: “I obey your command. But who may you be, my lady?”

“Could you not tell by my dress?” Shakti answered with a smile. “I am a beggar woman.”

The Brahmin dropped his sarang, joined his hands in salutation, and said: “Do not deceive me, you are the goddess of the forest.”

He prepared to prostrate himself before her, but she became distressed and stopped him,

saying: "*Thakur*, it is not fitting that you, a Brahmin, should make obeisance to me thus, for I am a Kshatriya by caste. But I have no one belonging to me in the world, I am a beggar indeed."

The Brahmin replied, his voice still ringing with amazement, "I have seen many a beggar woman, but not one like you, my lady."

Shakti thought it time to change the conversation, so she said quickly, "*Thakur*, won't you let me hear another song?"

"I shall be delighted if it pleases you," said the Brahmin, bewildered still, "but what shall I sing?"

"What will you sing? Another song of love and absence, of course. I am very fond of Nabin Adhikari's love songs. Was not the one that you were singing his?"

The Brahmin was in ecstasies. He felt as if his musical genius had now, at last, met with its full reward. He could not conceal his delight, and said:

"I am Nabin Adhikari."

The forest fairy had recognised him at once; but he did not know her. She had changed so much in these few years—ripening from girlhood into womanhood.

"Are you that great mán Nabin Adhikari?" she said with fervour. "So far I have only heard your praise as poet and musician, which has spread far and wide. To-day, however, sight and ear are wedded in one delight. How

great is my good fortune! Will you sing one more song?"

The Brahmin sang:

“ Ah! does his soul still pine as mine for him?
 And do his tears make the bright moonlight dim?
 Does his fond heart still ache? Do those twin
 stars,
 That seem lost in each other, hear him breathe
 Of absent love, like bird 'mid prison bars?
 Has he *it* still, that fragrant floral wreath
 I gave him, faded now and old?
 Does he still fondle it with tear and sigh,
 And press it to his lips with joy untold,
 Like happy mem'ries of fond days gone by?
 Those bitter pangs of parting, do they rend
 His heart with anguish as in days of yore?
 My heart responds, " Ah! no, not so, my friend,
 All is forgetfulness upon that dreamy shore.
 There plays the flute in cadence ever new;
 The charm is gone, he thinks no more of
 you." ” ” ”

The Brahmin sang on, prolonging the theme with many variations. Shakti listened with her whole soul, for this was the song that touched her most. It was now evening. There was not a trace of cloud left and the atmosphere was clear. The moon had risen in the beautiful autumn sky. The moonlight fell through the foliage and cast melancholy, trembling shadows on the forest ground. The singer's fine voice, rolling in powerful waves, seemed to hush the trembling moonlight.

When it stopped with the usual suddenness of an Indian song, the listener, suppressing her deep emotion, said softly, with a stifled sigh:

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“There is a song I love dearly. Is it one of yours, too? ‘Oh, beauteous night, with moonlight sweetly shining, if only he were here.’ I heard it from a mendicant the other day.”

“Yes, that too is mine. You seem so fond of music! Do you not sing yourself?”

“We who live on alms have to sing sometimes.”

“Will you not let me hear you?” asked the *Thakur*. “You need not be shy before me, my child, I am old enough to be your father.”

“That is very true,” said Shakti, smiling. “Would it not be rather presumptuous on my part to sing to you? Very well, since you ask me, I shall sing.”

Shakti began softly, but gradually put forth the full power of her voice.

“‘Oh! beauteous night with moonlight sweetly shining,

If only he were here.

With untold longing my poor heart is pining,

Ah! that his love were mine, who is so dear.

The spring is fair and mirth with beauty crowned,

The gay earth blooms and rings with merry sound,

My youth is fresh while all its charms abound,

Ah! that he might behold it!

Ye gods, ye are all false, the world is vain,

Why give this beauty which he may not see?

Since honeyed love is full of bitter pain,

Why all these sighs, this thirst that fetters me?’”

What it is to hear a song of one's own compo-

sition sung excellently by a beautiful voice, only a poet knows. The musician's heart swelled with joy like a sea flooded with moonlight. He felt himself transported to a heaven of beauty, where beings live in song divine. He surely owed some gratitude to the giver of his bliss.

"Mother, what can I do?" In the fullness of his heart he could not say more than that. But Shakti fully understood him.

"I have renounced the world—I am a mendicant. What will you do for me, *Thakur*? Yes, you can do me one service. I want to see the Raja or the Rani. I have some secret news to give them of the war."

The musician reflected for a moment, and then said, "The Maharani has given the strictest orders that no *sanyasini* or mendicant is to see her son. Can you not trust me with the message?"

"No, I cannot," she said, "or I should have done so in the beginning."

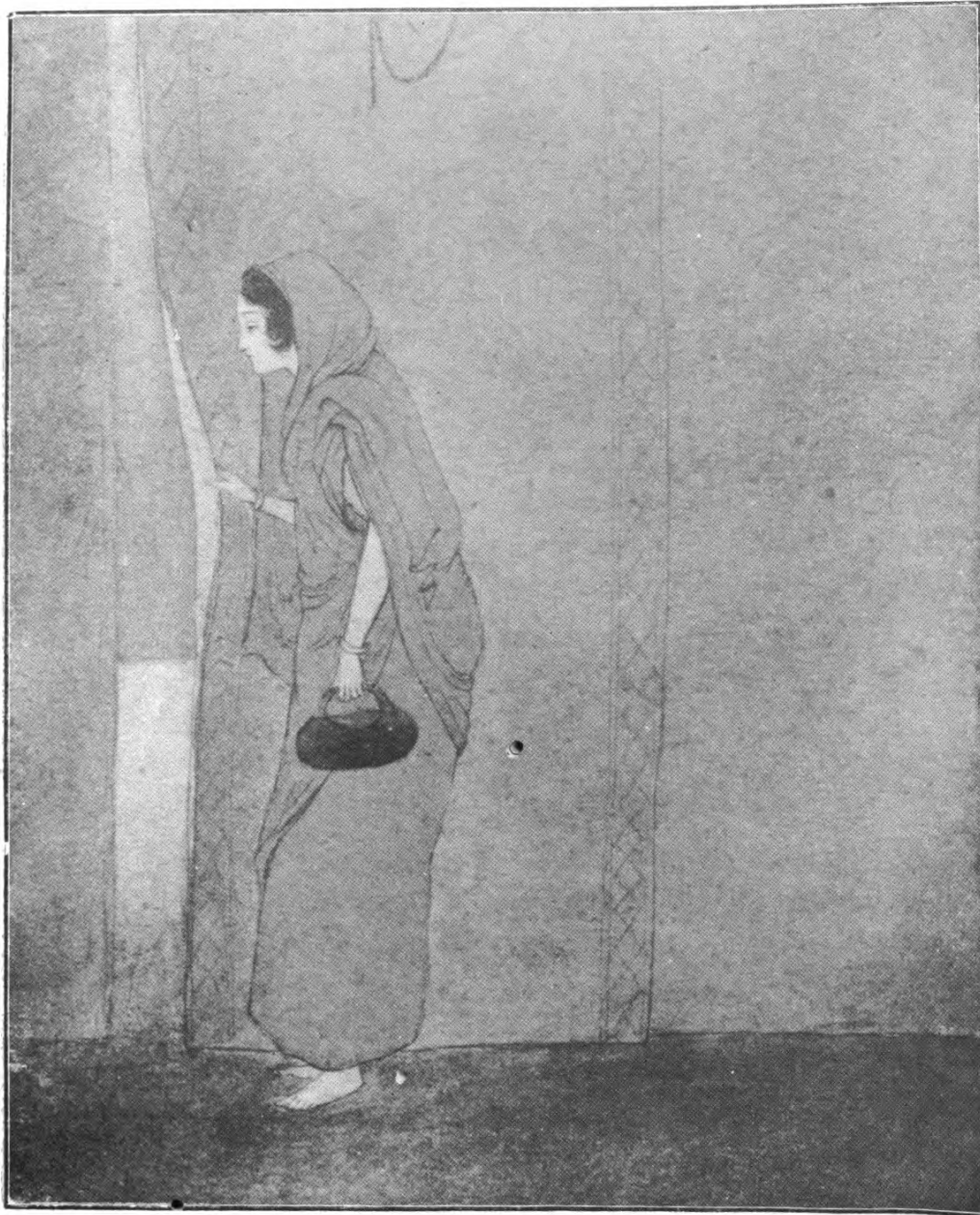
The Brahmin mused a while and then replied: "Very well, I have only to speak to my wife. She will do what is needful. Please come with me."

CHAPTER XXVIII

SHAKTI had no desire to see Nirupama. But conscience makes cowards of us all. Supposing she mentioned only the name of Ganesh Dev, then might she not rouse suspicion in the Brahmin's mind? So in uttering the Raja's name she added that of the Rani.

In a royal tent a two-year-old boy lay fast asleep in a cot. The Raja, reclining on a cushion near by, gazed upon his sleeping son, and tenderly, from time to time, kissed him. Nirupama, standing by, let her slender fingers play fondly with the Raja's hair and, looking into his face, she asked him all about the war. Just then Rangini came to the open door of the tent with the Bhikarini, and telling her to wait, entered.

Shakti, approaching nearer, looked in. This was the first time that she had seen Ganesh Dev with his Rani. She had not known before that a son had been born to them. In what a heaven of peace and joy Nirupama was living! What a fortunate lot was hers! Blessed with the endear-



Shakti, approaching nearer, looked in.

ments of her husband, the joy of a mother's love, and the whole-hearted worship and respect of her people, her life was passing in a dream of happiness. What a contrast! Shakti's life, too, was like a dream. Loveless, without peace, without happiness, a nightmare of horrors, lashed by terrible waves of despair. Just God, for what sin of hers in this or a past existence was such a dreadful fate meted out to her? Like the oil-fed flame of the funeral pyre, Shakti's soul burned up in a passion of jealousy. Each fond caress that she witnessed gave one more wound to her lacerated heart, each smile dripped poison into those wounds.

Rangini now came out of the tent and found the Bhikarini no longer at the door. She had moved to a little distance.

"The Raja is ready to receive you," she said.

"I must deliver my message to the Raja alone," Shakti replied. "Ask him please to come to me."

Rangini entered the tent again, and presently the Raja came out.

"I hear you have secret news about the war. You may speak safely here."

"I cannot speak here," answered Shakti, disguising her voice. "Will you come to the lake?" Not waiting for his answer, she moved on and the Raja followed her.

Arriving at the lake, she threw back her veil and the moon revealed her face. But if that moon had suddenly dropped at his feet, Ganesh

Dev would not have been more astounded. He stood transfixed. Then recovering himself, he stepped back scornfully, and said: "Mussulmani, why are you here?"

These cruel words pierced the heart of the girl. She felt her degradation as she had not done before. Yes, it was true! She deserved to be called a Mussulmani. How then could she dare to come near Ganesh Dev? But long-suffering had given her strength and courage. She bore this terrible scorn unflinchingly, and said, "I am only in name a Mussulmani. I am still free from their polluting touch. Yours I am, Rajkumar, heart, soul, and body—wholly yours; but if you save me not, my purity will be lost. If you do not uplift me, I have no choice but to leap into the hell I abhor."

How different was this meeting from the last! Then, in the quiet woods alone with Shakti, the Prince had lost his whole nature in his love. Then he had had no thought of right or wrong. Enthralled and self-forgetful, whatever he had said then had brimmed over with the all-mastering passion that he felt for her. But to-day, calm and self-possessed, he spoke as a stern and inflexible judge, unmoved by emotion.

"You have lived in the harem of a Mussulman. How can you be my wife? I have not the power to undo what you have done." He was silent for a few moments, then continued, "That day is gone; that day I could have made you my wife, but you left me. I sought you the

following morning only to learn that you had become the *Begum* of Gaias-ud-din."

"Would you have made me your wife in defiance of your mother?"

"Yes."

Too late! Shakti saw that she had laid the axe to her own feet. Full of revenge, anger, and senseless pride, lost to her true self, she had quitted the firm ground of happiness and leaped into this ocean of misery.

Realising her dreadful fate, and wrung with anguish, she cried in despair: "Is there no way out of this, Rajkumar?"

The Raja replied calmly, "Yes, there is. Go to him whom you have chosen as your lawful guardian. There is no other road left open to you now."

To hear these words from the lips of the man for whose sake she had lost peace and happiness and was on the road to her ruin, pierced the girl's heart with a pang more bitter than death. Bankrupt in all save the pride of self-respect, even that now forsook her. In the stormy night the sailor had lost both chart and compass. Robbed of the pride that had sustained her in all calamities, the strong-willed Shakti said, weeping, "How can I surrender myself to a man to whom I cannot give my heart? Rajkumar, do not abandon me to such a shameful fate."

At these agonised words, wrung from the girl's heart, Ganesh Dev's manly nature was

touched and stirred to its depths. For a few moments he remained speechless. At last, controlling his emotion, he said gently, "Listen, Shakti. Did I wish a thousand times to do so I could not now give you a home. Even if I sacrificed my life, I could not make you mine now."

She stood motionless and speechless and in utter despair. Yes, who now could rescue her? If the Raja attempted it, he himself would sink with her. Not even the gods had now power to undo the curse that she had drawn down upon herself.

The Raja continued: "You are now another's wife. How can I tear you from his possession? It would be wrong, unjust, and sinful."

At these words hope awoke in her despairing heart, and the girl pleaded: "But I am not married, I am not his wife yet. Spurn me not. If you cannot marry me, at least give me your protection. I would rather brave calumny for the sake of the man I love than be the wife of the Emperor I cannot love. Rajkumar, let society say what it will, in the eyes of God it will not be a sin, you will not be lowered. Save me, oh Rajkumar! Do not force me into a life of shame."

Ganesh Dev felt deeply, yet he replied firmly: "Try to be calm, Shakti. Listen to reason. Though you may not yet be married to him, in the eyes of the world you are his. There is no other course left for you but to marry him. To

the man whom you have as good as married, devote yourself with the whole strength of your heart. The husband is to a woman her all—her priest, religion, and God. May God help you in your virtuous endeavour!”

Shakti would hear no more. The Raja's advice and the good spirit in which it was spoken, she could not and would not understand. Every word smote her—cruel, loveless, and scorching like a thunderbolt.

Bleeding with the wounds of insult, she regained her lost pride. She was stung to the quick by the thought that the Raja spurned with loathing and as something impure, the sacrifice of her life, prompted by the deepest and purest love. A woman can bear all except that.

She spoke with her usual pride, gravely and with tearless eyes. “Ganesh Dev, I am not an unchaste woman. It was to preserve my chastity that I sought your protection. I did not come to sell my body to you. But since the world has no regard for my ideas of love and morality, and you are guided by the world's opinion, so be it. I will cast to the winds the religion of the heart, and do what you call right and what the world calls honourable. But bear in mind that if there is sin in this, it is not my sin, but that of him who forced me into it.”

With these words she turned, and, as on that other day of parting, she disappeared with the swiftness of a storm.

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Ganesh Dev stood for a long time beside the still water of the moonlit lake, lost in thought, and motionless.

Gaias-ud-din, returning victor from the field, made ready to receive his bride. She awaited him, now no longer poorly dressed as a devotee. Decked in her bridal robes, bejewelled like a queen, she greeted him. The Sultan laid his crown at her feet and said: "Beloved, here is the crown of Bengal. Deign to wear this and receive your slave."

The woman's heart still bled, but yielding to the man's embrace, with pale, faltering lips she said: "I am yours."

That very evening the rite was performed that made Shaktimai the Sultan's bride.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE State of Dinajpur was at peace. With the death of Sultan Sekandar Shah, the rebellion came to an end. The Raja of Dinajpur formed a friendly alliance with the new Sultan. He was now at leisure to see to the well-being of his subjects. Whatever the war had destroyed was renewed. New forts, new buildings, and new gardens came into existence. The Raja himself made good the losses sustained by the people during the war, and soon all was so far restored that there were only the dead left to mourn for. The year and a half of war seemed like a far-off, bad dream. What was terrible in the danger was forgotten. There only remained the pleasure of telling tales about that fearsome past. If there is a thornless happiness in life, it lies in that.

A new garden had been laid out near the Palace by the river-side, and through it the people passed on their way to bathe in the river. It was a bright summer morning. The Palace musicians were playing a Bhairabee¹ tune,

¹ A tune played in the morning.

and a gardener hummed it as he went on with his work. A young fakir, dressed in red, plucked flowers from a tree near-by. He seemed to be listening to the sound of a drum in the distance. One of the passers-by noticed him and said, "Look at the dervish! He is just like a saint. Let me go to the holy man. My child is ailing, and nothing cures him."

Another, looking at the fakir, shook his head significantly.

The first man, noticing this, said eagerly: "You seem to know the fakir. Do take me to him, I beseech you. I have made vows to five *pirs* and offered a goat to *Kali*, but my child is not yet well."

A third broke in suddenly, "How the drums are beating! Is it new moon to-day, and are we having *Kali-Pujah*?¹ I have never heard a drum beat without my heart trembling since we were called to arms against the *Badshah*. Oh! how the drums beat that day," sighed the speaker.

"What glorious times!" replied a fourth. "Blood was then as cheap as water! One would have died a hundred deaths just to kill a single enemy. What a wild-goose chase we led those fellows."

"Yes," said another, "and if they had held out a few days longer things would have been reversed. It was lucky that they left of their own accord. We had no rations, and could not

¹ Annual festival in honour of *Kali*.

have held out much longer. But how loudly the drums are beating!"

The first speaker, addressing the second, said: "Why did you shake your head so mysteriously when you saw the fakir? Tell me what you know about him."

"You won't repeat? On your honour, promise."

"I promise."

"That is no fakir," he then said in a low whisper, "that is Prince Saheb-ud-din."

The listener became excited and the pledge of secrecy (on his honour) was quite forgotten. "Saheb-ud-din! Our Sultan's nephew!" he cried aloud.

The secret was out. One said: "Has he not been killed by his uncle?"

"No," came the reply from another who knew, "the seven brothers have been slain, and now the new Sultan is seeking this lad in order that he may kill him, too. But he escaped and is taking refuge with our Raja."

"How do you know all this?"

"My wife serves Adhikari Thakur's wife, as a maid, and she heard it from her; so it must be true."

"Then it is all up with us. Those drums mean nothing but a call to arms. Kanai Sardar, you wished for a fight. Well, it has come. We'll see blood flowing again."

"But," replied the man, whose mind was on his sick child at home, "who will fight? I

have lost one son, and his mother followed him broken-hearted. My other boy is dying. Who is left to fight?"

"You must be mad. Can't the Raja fight without your wife and sons? Are there not men enough left in the land without your two boys?"

"Well, do you fight away, if you like. But we will go to the Maharaja and give him our advice. Thousands of men cannot be sacrificed to save the life of one. Let him give up Saheb-ud-din to the Sultan."

"You think yourself very wise. Do you think the Raja will heed your advice?"

"If not, we will speak to the Rani-mother. When she comes to the river to perform her *pujah* we will fall at her feet and say, 'Save us, Mother, save us; or else put your foot on us and kill us now!'"

"This is certain: if the *Badshah* once gets hold of the lad, he will put him to death. He will have no mercy on the poor boy."

"And our Maharaja is mercy itself, a very *Yudhishthir*."

Thus talking, they arrived at the ghat.

CHAPTER XXX

THE people were right in their surmises. Ganesh Dev had given shelter to Prince Saheb-ud-din, and the matter had been kept as quiet as possible. Gaias-ud-din had got wind of it, however, and had sent Kutab to Dinajpur to search for the fugitive. It was the drum of Kutab's troops, marching towards the capital of Dinajpur, that these men had heard on their way to the river. Now Ganesh Dev found himself in great peril. Either he must give up a friend to whom he owed the deepest gratitude, or involve himself in a war which would mean ruin to his State. The *Sanyasini's* advice was this. If war comes, let it come. To protect the suppliant and to crush injustice is the true religion of princes. In vindicating this religion a prince must hazard all.

The command of the Rani-mother to her son was the exact opposite. She told him that to protect Saheb-ud-din would not be a right thing for him to do. Not only was it bad policy, but to save one life at the cost of thousands of his own subjects would be the violation of a prince's

duty. Prince Saheb-ud-din must be given up at once.

Ganesh Dev did not share his mother's views. To save one life at the cost of thousands! That is what always happens when justice and honour have to be defended. To remove one thorn how many beautiful leaves have to be cut away! To save one fruit how many branches must be pruned! Great or small, one's own or another's, these considerations must be sunk in the principle of justice itself.

Prince Saheb-ud-din had rescued him when he was imprisoned by Sultan Sekandar Shah. Was he not in honour bound to give the prince his protection now? Regarding the policy of it, he thought that to weigh first what loss and gain would result, considering how little man knows of the future, was not possible. In that case justice, nobility of conduct, honour, and even religion itself would have no meaning. The gain that comes from the manly virtues is uncertain; the suffering is sure. In the attempt to save a drowning man one may lose his own life; but is that any reason why we should shrink from playing a manly part? Man is not all-knowing. We can only act in the light of the belief that a good action cannot but be followed ultimately by good results.

He had never yet forgotten Shakti's sad fate, and his heart told him that he was not entirely free from responsibility in the matter. There was a voice within him that said he had let the

world's opinion guide him when this forsaken woman had pleaded for his protection. And if war came, as come it must, if he persisted in his course, this perhaps was the retribution that heaven had brought upon him for abandoning a lonely woman to a fate she loathed. He would not commit wrong twice. He must try to save Saheb-ud-din. If he perished in the attempt, he might perhaps expiate the crime he had committed against Shaktimai. But now he heard in his heart the cry of an innocent people, suffering from their ruler's sin. The man of sensitive conscience knew not which way to turn. He therefore assembled the leading men of his Raj and laid the case before them.

At the Durbar he informed them of the impending danger. He rose to his feet, and as he did so the whole assembly rose and remained standing while he spoke.

"My children," he said, "we have been delivered from our past calamities, but now another confronts us. The Sultan does not feel secure although he has slain his seven brothers. He now wants the life of his unhappy nephew. This lad sought refuge in my house, and I gave it. If I give him up, I shall outrage the law laid down in our Shastras, which enjoins us to shelter those who seek our protection; if I continue to protect him, war is imminent, and in that case my people will suffer. Advise me; I know not which course to choose."

From the assembly rose the unanimous cry,

“ We shall bow to the decision of our Maharaja. He is our father, our protector. Are we not his children and humble servants? Whatever he deems best and commands us to do, that we will do.”

When these loud vows of loyalty had subsided, one of the nobles of the land came forward and said in calm, clear accents: “ Maharaja, since you encourage us to speak freely, let me say on behalf of my brethren and myself what we think. Prince Saheb-ud-din, forsaken and destitute, sought refuge with Your Highness, and it is your duty to protect him. But there is another duty and a higher one: the duty to protect your children. The country is suffering still from the effects of the last war. The question is, would it be right to overwhelm the land again with grief, to kill thousands of your people for the sake of one stranger? ”

The whole assembly shouted, “ Long live our Maharaja! May he protect his children. Let them not be sacrificed for the sake of one foreigner.”

In this view the whole assembly seemed to agree. “ May prosperity be yours, Maharaja! For you we would quit life a thousand times; but why should we die for a Mussulman? ”

Another said: “ May the Maharaja be victorious! I gave four sons in the last war and have but one left now to support me, and I am old and blind. However, if Your Highness says so, he too shall go and fight, and I will gladly remain

childless in my old age. But would you to protect one stranger bring death on thousands of your sons?"

When all who wished had spoken, the Raja spoke once more and said: "Listen, my sons! You are right, a father must think of the welfare of his children before everything else; but their material well-being is not his only care. To teach them duty and virtue, and how to lead a noble life, should be his highest aim. If I abandon a friend who once helped me when I needed help, your honour and my own will be stained. Not only shall we break the Shastric law of giving refuge to the helpless, but repay a great service with base ingratitude. You all know that when the late Sultan Sekandar Shah sought an alliance with me and called me to his council, Prince Saheb-ud-din was left as hostage for my safety. But when the Sultan broke his faith and imprisoned me, General Azim Khan, by two of our soldiers, managed to send the news to our camp. It was Prince Saheb-ud-din who hastened to the Court and liberated us. If in the face of this we abandon him to his fate, shall we be acting as men of honour should do? If my own blood sufficed to ensure your happiness, your honour and your virtue, how gladly would I not give it for you! My only sorrow is that I must sacrifice your lives with mine. Still it is not for me in reality that you will fight, but for a just cause. It is no question of a foreigner, a Mussulman. It is a question solely of honour. This war will be

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a holy war, for it will aid the weak and the innocent. It will repay friendship with friendship. It will show gratitude for service rendered. Death in this war will mean a noble precedent to posterity, and be a harbinger of peace in the world to come. We all must die, that is the law; then why shrink from yielding up this transient life for a just cause?"

The Raja's noble precepts inflamed the hearts of those present.

"*Jai! jai* to our Maharaja! He is King *Yudhishtir* reincarnated."

"We will fight for him."

"We will die in this holy war."

"Long life to our Maharaja!"

Such were the exclamations that rose from the assembly, amid waves of applause. When the excitement had subsided, the Raja spoke again. "Listen, my sons. Not a hair of your heads shall be hurt in vain. I will first speak to the Sultan and try to obtain Prince Saheb-ud-din's pardon. I will offer myself to the Sultan as security that the prince will do no harm, and I shall ask for him a governorship in a remote province. If the Sultan refuses to accede to these proposals, then only shall we fight, and not until then."

The question next arose as to what would happen if the young prince were to break faith. To this Ganesh replied: "I know Prince Saheb-ud-din to be an honourable man. He fears to do wrong. I am certain he will not break faith,

that he will not at any time rebel against the *Badshah*. But if after the Sultan's death he should aspire to the throne, I shall certainly help him, if I live."

The assembly were satisfied and signified their assent. That very afternoon the Raja of Dinajpur laid his proposals before Kutab, who grew furious and characterised the conduct of the young Raja as audacious. He threatened him with destruction, to which the latter calmly replied:

"Be it so. But you will have to kill me before you take the Sultan's nephew. You will never get him as long as I am alive."

CHAPTER XXXI

GANESH DEV firmly believed that in protecting the young prince he was doing right. He was not sorry for the prospects of war. His only thought was to overcome despotic oppression, and he believed that if blood were shed in such a cause, it would be well shed.

After the debate in the assembly and the resolution that war should take place, he went into the inner apartments. Though his excited brain had cooled down a little, his thoughts were still full of these matters. Nirupama greeted him and then informed him that his mother was displeased because refuge was still granted to the Prince Saheb-ud-din.

“What do you think of the matter?” he asked in reply. “Have I done right or wrong in giving him shelter?”

“You have done right,” the young wife said enthusiastically. “If a Raja should cease to protect the helpless and to subdue oppression, what would then be the fate of the country? You have acted as your noble and generous heart prompted you to do.”

He raised her hand to his lips and said, "Beloved, you have spoken like a true woman."

Nirupama's tender heart was filled with delight. To hide her joy, she said abruptly: "Have you heard what is being said? You remember Shakti, of course. She has become Gaias-ud-din's *Begum*."

"Really?"

"Had you not heard it before? The report comes from Kutab's tent, and so it cannot be false. Shame on her! How horrible to become a Mussulmani for the sake of wealth!"

This contemptuous allusion stung Ganesh deeply. Shakti was not really low-minded. Her only misfortune was to love him. He was the cause of her having taken such a course. This sad young life had entered the Mussulman's harem as a burning sacrifice, and now the world's unrelenting censure was added to her lot! The Raja said: "How do you know that it was for the sake of wealth she became a Mussulmani? And why should we think that to be a Mussulman is a despicable thing? Are not Hindus and Mussulmans the sons of one motherland? The only difference is in our creed. Why should we consider ourselves to be so very superior?"

"I cannot say why it is," Nirupama replied, "but I despise Mussulmans. I would not become a Mussulmani even to gain heaven."

"You are wrong in cherishing such a feeling," replied her husband gravely. "If we

entertain such sentiments, can we be surprised that they, in their turn, despise us? The true glory of our Hindu faith has always been its spirit of toleration. You pride yourself on being a Hindu, but you ignore the keynote of the Hindu teaching, which enjoins us to condemn no creed, but to treat all creeds with respect."

The little Rani was convinced of the truth implied in her husband's words. She became confused, and shyly answered, "Be that as it may, if Shakti came here I could not meet her on equal terms."

"It would be condescension on her part to meet you as her equal. She is the Sultana of Bengal, and you are only one of her many subject Ranis."

Nirupama was deeply mortified. Her old jealousy for the beautiful companion of her childhood revived. "Jealousy always hears a great deal more than is really said. True, Nirupama could not be Shakti's equal. The Raja had given the garland to Shakti, not to her. Wounded at heart, she could only express her hurt pride by saying, "Of course I was never her equal."

And that moment someone knocked at the door. It was Rangini, who informed the Raja that the holy *Sanyasini* wished to see His Highness. The Raja himself rose to admit her, and the priestess entered. She had sad news to tell. "Your mother," she said to the

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Raja, "has given information to Kutab concerning Prince Saheb-ud-din's whereabouts. I fear that he is a prisoner by this time. See what can be done. Make haste. There should be no delay."

Ganesh Dev was deeply distressed and said, "I thank you for the information, holy Mother. You may tell the captain of the guard to bring troops to my assistance as soon as possible. In the meantime I will take as many of the Palace guards as are with me and march forward."

He delayed not a minute, but set out with as many of the soldiers as he could muster at the moment. If he could check Kutab till reinforcements came, all would be well. He was a high-spirited youth, this young Raja of Dinajpur, and the inspiration of defending justice gave him great strength and dauntless courage. But his attempts were futile. He could not save the young fugitive to whom he had granted protection. That very night Ganesh Dev and Prince Saheb-ud-din were taken prisoners by Kutab's soldiers.

CHAPTER XXXII

SHAKTI was not in the *Badshah's* Palace in Pandua. She lived apart in a garden-house by the river-side. Here the rippling waves of the Ganges gently kissed the green banks in front of the garden, and within, a serpentine ornamental lake covered with lotus and other water-lilies wound its way. Here and there in the garden fountains played, throwing jets of water in silvery sprays. Flowers of all kinds filled the beds, and statues of gods and goddesses, heroes and heroines of Hindu legend, gave to the place charm and significance. Here the graceful *Radhica* stood close by *Krishna*, who was playing on his flute. There, under the shade of a champak tree, was Sarasvati, the goddess of learning, vina in hand. Lakshmi, the goddess of beauty and wealth, sat on a lotus seat in the centre of a lonely island. The beautiful Sakuntala, the immortal heroine of the immortal Kalidasa, our sixth-century poet, stood near a spraying fountain robed in bark, holding an earthen pitcher in the one hand and fondling a young fawn with the other. And

Ratnavali, the love-stricken, stood with bent head before King Udayan, her lover.

On a marble balustrade a peacock strutted, with proud head erect, the shining feathers of its sweeping tail touching the bow of Cupid. And in the silver lake two snow-white swans glided dreamily among the lotus, their arched backs and gracefully curved necks looking like carved marble. Gold-fish disported in silver basins, flitting here and there like glittering sunbeams. Snow-white doves preened their feathers in the grass. Above, the tall palms rustled with mysterious sounds that seemed like whispers from an unseen world. Parrots, with brilliant plumage, bound by golden chains, sat talking in the branches of trees. Wood-doves, caged, as it were, in the thick foliage of bushes, cooed softly at times, entering into a musical contest. Tame bulbuls and maynas, in silver cages, whistled and warbled in melancholy captivity. And from the wood close by came the clear farewell notes of a stray papia—the last bird of the spring—filling the air with a sense of joyous freedom.

In this place of beauty sat the Sultana Shaktimai, now Empress of Bengal. She lived apart from all the other *Begums*, the Sultan, her husband, having allowed her to follow her own inclinations. But was the Empress happy? She was still beautiful; her form was slender, and her queenly face looked as fair and youthful as ever. But sadness lingered in her midnight

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eyes; the very smile upon her lips breathed sorrow. The young fawn came and softly put its nose into her hand; it was accustomed to take food from her. She smiled and stroked its neck. She loved to linger amid the flowers and the waving trees, for they brought some solace to her aching heart. Yet, while around her all was beauty, her soul was weary. The great pain of her life still lingered in her spirit. She courted loneliness, and often sat for hours alone, gazing at the scene around.

Evening came and the pale moon rose slowly in the vault of heaven. The wind whispered through the branches, and the silver ripples of the lake murmured at her feet. The flowers called the "fragrance of the night" filled the air with their haunting sweetness, and they seemed to tell her own life story—a childhood bright and happy, followed by love and love's bitter sorrow. They whispered, too, of a garland crushed and forsaken. The Sultana sighed.

It was the beginning of the winter season, when the days are pleasant but the nights are cold. Shakti retired to a spacious hall attached to the Palace, which was so profusely adorned with foliage and flowers, and decorated with fountains and statuary, that it looked like another garden. A figure was seen approaching; her dream was interrupted. It was the Sultan Gaias-ud-din. A shade of vexation came over her face.

The Sultan was surprised to find her so soon this evening. As a rule he had to wait a long time when he came to see her, for this was the hour when her little girl was being put to rest for the night and she spent her time then with the child. Had she begun to appreciate him? Had she so graciously come here to listen to his oft-repeated vows of love? Alas! it was not so. The reason why Shakti desired to see the Sultan to-night was that she had heard a rumour of the imprisonment of his nephew, and she wanted to hear from his own lips whether this was true or not.

She did not even return his greeting. "What is this I hear?" she exclaimed angrily. "Prince Saheb-ud-din has been made prisoner and is to be put to death? Shame on me to have married a man so cruel!"

Seating himself on the soft couch beside her, he replied, "A cruel man! Am I more cruel than you are, dearest? Life and soul I have laid at your feet, yet I cannot propitiate you."

Shakti could have endured ill-treatment from her husband, but his caresses filled her with repulsion. She said coldly: "You are slaying an innocent boy simply because you fear that he may be dangerous to you at some future time. Is this the heroism of a Mussulman? The blood of your seven brothers already cries out against you, and not satisfied with slaying them, you must needs put to death your helpless nephew. This proves you to be a coward."

“Probably your Hindu heroes did not know the jewel they lost in you, otherwise why did they allow a coward to win you? It seems that cowardice won, while heroism failed.”

Her husband occasionally revenged himself with a taunt of this kind. Shakti's face flushed with anger because she felt that his words were true. She could not give an answer. This insult from her husband revived in her the old wound. Burning with humiliation, she cursed from the bottom of her heart Ganesh Dev, who had been the cause of all her humiliation. Meanwhile the fountains played amid the leaves, and flowers filled the room with fragrance; and Shakti knew it not. Her eyes cast looks of scorn, and biting her lips and with a frowning brow she plucked a flower from a branch near her, crushed it in her fingers, and threw it away.

The bright light of a chandelier shone full upon her face, and the Sultan gazed on her voluptuously and exclaimed, “Dearest, I shall die scorched like a moth in the flame of your beauty! Yet I have not the power to leave you.” Saying this he kissed her passionately.

Shakti had been the Sultan's wife now for five years, but she avoided his caresses as much as she could. In her present state of mind they seemed to her more loathsome than ever. She shuddered and the blood curdled in her veins. She said to herself, “Ganesh Dev, it is you—you who have done this. Life is bearable only to punish you.”

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A maid appeared, carrying a little girl who was crying violently.

"I cannot keep the Princess quiet, Your Majesty," the woman explained, "so I have brought her here."

The child ran to her mother, and still sobbing said, "I want to stay with you. I will not go away again."

Shakti dismissed the maid, and taking the child on her lap kissed her little face, but the child scrambled down, saying, "You naughty mama, you left me. I shall go to papa," and she climbed upon her father's knee.

Shakti's bitter mood now gave way to motherly tenderness, and her anger changed to pitiful despair. The man for whom she cared so little was after all the father of her child. She could not, however hard she might try, destroy this bond. How terrible was her fate!

The father plucked some flowers and gave them to the child. The little one played with them and then threw them into the basin of a fountain. Seeing the petals dancing on the water, she brimmed over with merriment. Weary of laughter, with parted lips like two rose petals, her little face was a lovely picture. Shakti's sad gaze lingered on the happy child. Her heart burned with agony.

The father kissed the little one and then turned to the mother, saying, "Dearest, do you think it is for my selfish interest only that I

slay my enemies? Just fancy if I were dead and my kingdom in the hands of foes! What would then be the fate of our little flower-bud?"

Shakti retorted: "Just fancy if a thunderbolt fell on us what would happen! Will you lose your kingdom if you do not shed the blood of a helpless boy. Shame on you, Sultan!"

"His very helplessness is his strength. Many will flock round him on that account; and the kingdom will never be at rest."

"And for that reason the innocent must be sacrificed? That is indeed justice befitting a king! If you would crush a rebellion and save your kingdom, punish the guilty. Saheb-uddin is not to blame. The poor boy was hiding in fear of his life. But the man who gave him shelter against your commands, what have you done to him? If anyone is to be punished it is he, not Saheb-ud-din."

The Sultan was amazed. He knew that his wife loved Ganesh Dev still. He could not understand her. He knew not the dividing line between woman's love and her desire for revenge. Her speech, however, pleased him, and he replied, "Ganesh Dev is a prisoner."

"A prisoner?"

"Yes, for more than a month."

The child heard this, and in her sweet, babbling voice called out, "Ganesh I had. Sundar Lal gave it to me, but it was so ugly."

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Sweet, innocent child, how little she knew
what moved her mother's heart! The gardener
had given her a clay image of Ganesh, the
elephant-headed god, but it did not please her,
and she had broken it.

CHAPTER XXXIII

PRINCE SAHEB-UD-DIN was a prisoner, and his fate was discussed in the assembly. The Sultan himself was not present. Kutab was in favour of having the young prince killed, for this alone, he argued, would procure the peace of the empire. The other members of the Council were not of his opinion. They requested him to intercede for the boy with the Sultan, since, with the exception of the Sultana, the *Badshah* listened to none so readily as to Kutab. He, however, put on a piteous air and persuaded his fellow-counsellors that he was no longer in the Sultan's favour. Azim Khan, who was a just and sincere man, and a hater of tyranny, and who was, moreover, indebted to Prince Saheb-ud-din for his life, was incensed at Kutab's attitude. Impatient and angry, he exclaimed: "It was we who rebelled against the late Sultan and placed Gaias-ud-din on the throne. Should this tyranny continue and the prince not be released, there will be war again. If no one else fights, I will take up arms myself for this just cause. Did we rebel against Sekandar Shah and

place Gaias-ud-din on the throne only to be the victim of his whimsical caprices? ”

To this Kutab replied, in tones of despair: “ How would that help matters? Whatever we may do, we cannot save the prince’s life. If we rebel we may add our own to his. The country no longer belongs to the *Badshah*; it is governed by that she-devil, the Sultana.”

The assembly agreed with him. All cursed the Queen as the promoter of the Sultan’s evil deeds. Kutab had won his point; this was what he had wanted in order to justify his own actions. He hated Shaktimai for the influence she had gained over her husband. He thought that she had supplanted him in the Emperor’s favour. As a matter of fact, Shakti never troubled herself about affairs of State; but if the Sultan at any time differed from Kutab, then woe betide the poor Sultana, for Kutab laid all the blame on her and cursed her inwardly.

A few days previously he had arrested several wayfarers and had had them mercilessly flogged in the compound of the Palace because they had not saluted him properly on the road. The little Princess, Gul Bahar, had witnessed this and, running weeping to her mother, had related what she had seen. Shakti had had the matter investigated, but could not get at the truth. She had been told that their offence lay in trying to enter the royal Palace the previous night, while intoxicated. The Empress, however, had succeeded in having them pardoned, and had even

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had one of them, Sundar Lal, installed as one of the gardeners in her Palace garden. Kutab had been infuriated, but he had concealed his feelings and had praised the Sultana's kindness of heart to the Sultan; while to the courtiers he had represented himself as having saved the poor men from the Sultana's ill-treatment.

He feared that the child might work him further harm by her innocent disclosures, so one day he advised the Emperor to keep the Princess confined in the Zenana, since now she was growing up. The Sultan agreed, and yet no change ensued. He knew that this was due to her mother's influence, but he was powerless to act further in the matter and he had to keep quiet; but when he came to imagine that the Sultana was making her influence felt even in State affairs, his powers of endurance came to an end. He resolved to check her. He was surprised to see that the Sultan, who had first wanted to see the young prince killed, had now changed his mind. He saw the Queen's hand in this. He therefore impressed on the *Badshah* all the more urgently the necessity for removing Saheb-ud-din from his path, pointing out how dangerous the prince might become if he were allowed to live. On the other hand he agreed with the *Badshah* in making peace with the Maharaja of Dinajpur and in keeping on friendly terms with him. This, too, was done to spite the Sultana, because he knew that she had no good feeling towards Ganesh Dev. He assured

the King that Ganesh Dev could be relied upon if he once gave his word.

“But the question is,” put in the Sultan, “what will happen if he refuses to give his word. In that case I shall be obliged to have him put to death. Saheb-ud-din will be helpless without his support. He can be left free if once the Maharaja is dead.”

At any other time Kutab would have agreed with this view, but thinking that the counsel came from the Sultana, and blinded by rage, he insisted on Saheb-ud-din's death. The fire of jealous hatred blazed out. He could no longer be satisfied with slandering the Sultana in secret. He resolved to crush her altogether, and as luck would have it, he saw a chance to overthrow the Queen's influence and to establish his own.

Shakespeare, in the world of his imagination, has painted one Iago out of many such in this actual world of ours.

Unconscious of Kutab's evil deeds and feelings, the Queen still imagined him to be her friend. He had helped her on the occasion when she had seen Ganesh Dev in his tent, and she had trusted him implicitly ever since. But his motives were then as wicked as now. He had hoped that she would not return, or that if she did, then by this act of hers he could have her in his power. Ever since she had come back and had become Queen, he had planned to disclose the secret to her husband. Only the fear of becoming implicated himself had so far

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prevented him from doing so. But now another opportunity offered itself.

The unsuspecting Sultana sent for Kutab, and told him she wished to visit Ganesh Dev in his cell. His heart beat high with fiendish delight when he heard this. He bowed his obeisance to her, declaring his loyalty anew. What she asked of him was a mere trifling service! He would gladly give his life for her, he said.

CHAPTER XXXIV

SHAKTI dressed herself ; but not now in the garb of a devotee. She decked herself in magnificent, queenly attire. She was going to show herself, her beauty, wealth, and power, to Ganesh Dev. To which Ganesh Dev? Not to that dearest friend of her early years, but to her now hated enemy. That love of her girlhood was now a thing to be ashamed of, a thing insulting to her rank and position, a thing to be thrown from her in disdain and burnt to ashes in the fire of her revenge.

He had done well indeed to spurn and reject her! Instead of being the wife of a petty feudatory prince, she had, through his refusal, become the all-powerful Sultana. She, who had once been a beggar for his pity, a poor, helpless dependent for all upon him, was now the mistress of his fate. She had come to make him feel this. It was his turn now to ask for favours and hers to give life or death.

Ganesh Dev lay in his cell, on the hard prison floor, looking up through a slit in the wall at the starlit sky. That evening a messenger had

brought to him from the King proposals that alone might set him free. On no account must he at any time take up arms against the Sultan. He must support his King at any call, and not question whether the cause were right or wrong. To these conditions he must give his oath. The man of noble blood refused. And now the doom must fall. Still death was better than a life of servitude. His whole nature rebelled at the mere thought that such proposals should have been made to him. It is well to die in a righteous cause, and he did not fear death; but his heart was heavy with the thought of those whom he must leave behind. He thought of his wife and child who were now at the mercy of a cruel foe, and of his faithful subjects, who would soon be scattered and oppressed. This was perhaps the last hour of his life; yet there was no one near, no friend to speak to, no one to whom he could confide his last wishes.

Yet he could not realise that death was so near. The more hopeless his case seemed to be, the more did he revolt from the death that stared him in the face as something unbelievable, the more did his faith in God's justice strengthen and increase. Some miracle, he thought, would save him yet for those who needed him so much. Impatiently he struck his hand against the wall; but the hard stone did not give way or even tremble. The pain in his hand told him that he was in bondage still. He smiled at his own folly. Then he thought of the *Sanyasini*.

Would she not come to help him? Surely she was working for his freedom now? He fought for a just cause; could then the just God let him die, leaving helpless all those who leaned on him for protection and support? And now into his mental vision came Shaktimai; he heard her pleading voice, the cry for pity that had rent her bosom. Had she not pleaded for protection in a just cause? No, no, his doom was sealed; he had worked his own destruction on that night when so coldly he had refused to shelter her from harm. His heart was rent with remorse. All his hopes vanished. He saw death staring him in the face.

What with the excitement of hope and the exhaustion of despair, sleep at last fell on his weary eyelids, and as he slept he dreamed. The four walls of his prison chamber vanished in his dream, and in the open field, under the starry sky, appeared a goddess. Joy filled his soul, he was about to worship at her feet, when he woke up disturbed by a slight noise. Was it then reality? Had a goddess appeared to give him freedom? Opening wide his eyes he saw before him a fair woman robed in jewelled raiment whose radiance lit up his dreary cell. He did not know whether he was dreaming still. Dream and reality so mingled together that his heart was filled with amazement and hope.

CHAPTER XXXV

WHEN Shakti entered the prison she was conscious of nothing but impenetrable darkness. "Bring a light," she said to the warder who had accompanied her from the entrance. Standing at the door, she closed her eyes; and when presently she opened them again, she found the darkness less intense. A dim light, falling through the opening in the wall, enabled her to see a dark figure prostrate on the ground.

She advanced towards it. The prisoner started up in wild surprise.

"Shakti!" he exclaimed. He had recognised her voice

"Not Shakti, but the Sultana."

So sharp and cruel rang her tones that it seemed as if every particle of the stone wall trembled to its core, reverberating those pitiless words. And the man to whom they were addressed sat motionless and silent.

The Empress, too, was silent. She tried to pierce through the gloom and see the Raja's face. She wished to see the effect her words had had on him. But the darkness was merciful; she did not see the woe that showed in his features.

The warder entered with a lamp, and retired, leaving it behind and shutting the door after him. She could see the prisoner distinctly now; and she saw neither the handsome youth whom she had played with in her childhood, nor the proud and stately Raja, dressed in royal robes, to whom men bowed wherever he appeared. She beheld only a sad-looking prisoner, clad in rags, his hair dishevelled, and his face pale, worn and sorrow-stricken. Only in his deep, sunken eyes remained the old fire and pride.

Shakti stood motionless, looking at Ganesh Dev. Not a muscle of her face quivered; her whole figure was so perfectly still and statuesque that not the shrewdest reader of faces could have told whether she felt joy or sorrow at the sight of the Raja's miserable plight. In a few moments this rigid pose relaxed. Her colour changed. Her eyes filled with tears, and her lips trembled. The rigid and lifeless statue had suddenly warmed into a woman.

Did this reanimation of life in her betoken pleasure at the sight of gratified revenge? Did the tears in her eyes gush from an excess of vindictive joy? No, that was not so; Shakti at that moment was lost to every thought of self, drowned in a flood of pity and love. Through the hard rock had burst the fountain of compassion. What Ganesh Dev, in all his wealth, had not been able to do, Ganesh Dev, poor and helpless, had accomplished.

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The full blossoming of love lies in the giving of oneself. Shakti had never had the opportunity for this before. That was why the princely Ganesh Dev, in all his power, though he had awakened love in her heart, yet could not cleanse it from the stain of selfishness. To-day, being in danger, the captive Ganesh Dev had awakened in Shakti's heart that great love in which a woman's whole soul can find its realisation. She had passed out beyond jealousy and revenge.

Yes, now she understood what the *Yogini* had told her, and her being was reclaimed. This was indeed her hour of triumph, for she had gained her higher self again. At last she said: "Rise, Rajkumar." Now her tones were mellow, compassionate, and tender.

Ganesh Dev was astounded at the change. How could he, a mere man, fathom the depth of a woman's heart when even the gods have failed to do so?

Shakti spoke again:

"Rise, Rajkumar, the time is passing. Take these garments and cover yourself with them."

Ganesh understood: Shakti had come to set him free. Had then his dream come true? Again the vision of freedom rose before him: he found himself unfettered, moving amid those he loved. Mechanically he stood up and asked blankly, "Where shall I go?"

Shakti extinguished the dim light and hastily tore off a part of her voluminous *sari*, and

the gold-embroidered long shawl with which her head was covered. These she gave to the prisoner and said, "Take these garments, Rajkumar, cover yourself well, and knock at the door; the warder will open. Then go out and accompany him in silence. When outside the prison give the guard this ring. He will take it and leave you unmolested, and you can go wherever you please."

The Raja, as if dreaming still, replied: "And you?"

"Do not concern yourself about me," replied the Sultana hurriedly. "All has been arranged; Kutab will come for me at the appointed time."

"But the guard will tell Kutab that you have already left the prison."

"The man who goes with you will be relieved by another man who will know nothing of what has happened."

"His companion will tell him."

"No; believe me, everything has been arranged. Make haste, do not delay, or all will fail."

Was everything arranged indeed? Noble, fearless woman, may God forgive you for this single falsehood! She thought only of him; the dangers that awaited her, the mortal risk that she ran at that moment—these things found no place in her mind.

The Raja believed that Shakti was in no danger. Taking the shawl and robe from her hand, his free-born spirit exulted in the pros-

pects of liberty. He saw that he was no more a helpless prisoner; he was once again a man, strong to fight against tyranny. A thrill of joy passed through his whole being; but like one who is dreaming and is suddenly roused from his dream, he came to himself and the light of hope and freedom vanished. He was dumb for a moment, then said firmly: "No, Sultana, I will not escape. Take back your garments and the ring."

Shakti, wounded and astonished, asked: "Why not, Maharaja?"

"I have no right to take the gift you offer me. I cannot take my freedom from your hand."

His voice was firm and resolute.

Shakti knew that his decision was made. Her face turned ghastly pale; her last hope fled. She leaned against a wall to save herself from falling; and then slowly groped her way out of the cell, the door closing after her.

While this was going on within the prison, Kutab sought the Sultan, and worked on his fierce jealousy. He whispered into the King's ear all that by his false vows of loyalty he had been able to learn.

The *Badshah* became mad with rage. "Kutab, this cannot be. This is too much. You are speaking falsely."

The unfortunate man was like one whose reason had forsaken him.

But Kutab answered complacently: "Your Majesty may perhaps trust the evidence of your own eyes. If you will come, I will soon prove to you that what I say is true."

"That I cannot do. If what you say is true, go at once and bring me that head."

"Whose head, Your Majesty?"

"Whose head? That of the villain Ganesh Dev."

"And what shall I say to the Sultana?"

"You have nothing to say to her; that is my concern."

Kutab was crushed; he had hoped to see the Sultana either killed or banished, but his game was lost.

He was departing despondently to carry out the order, when he was recalled.

"If the Sultana has not left the prison, the prisoner is not to be killed now, you understand?"

"As Your Majesty commands," said Kutab, and he turned dejectedly away.

CHAPTER XXXVI

SHAKTI was dazed. Her hope lay broken again at her feet. Never before in her sad life had she been pained as she was now by Ganesh Dev's refusal to escape. She had never found happiness. All her life she had been doomed to see her hopes blighted; but to-night she had tried to give happiness to another and had met with disappointment. Her great and unselfish sympathy, given from the fullness of her heart, had been spurned and rejected. The anguish she felt was such as is seldom found even in this world of sorrow. It was not like the pain of that other rejection, supportable because anger and revenge, mingling with it, had made it seem lighter. This time, free from any selfish thought, it was solid and unmixed; and prostrated beneath its great weight, she felt as though her whole soul had been crushed out of her. Her very identity seemed lost. Her despair was abysmal. Like a planet isolated from the solar system, she seemed to have lost all connection with the universe.

Coming into the prison-yard, she stood silent

and motionless as in a trance, then dropped down wearily on the ground and sat leaning against the trunk of a tree. She could not grasp the reality of her surroundings. Her own existence seemed blank and unreal, and closing her eyes she fancied herself to be the dark, unfathomable night itself.

The soldier on guard, who was following her at a respectful distance, seeing her sit down, thought she was afraid to go on in the darkness. He came near and offered to bring her a light. His voice startled her and brought her back to herself.

Rising slowly, she with difficulty replied: "There is no need. Let me be gone."

The *jemadar*, Golam Ali Khan, sat smoking on a wooden seat outside the gateway of the prison-yard. In front of him two sentries were pacing. The guard, opening the inner lock of the huge entrance door, knocked, the *jemadar* opened from without, and Shakti came out. The sound of the opening of the door had roused the sentries, and one called out, "Who goes there?"

"Never mind, brother," the *jemadar* said. "Go on with your duty."

The sentries went on pacing as before. Golam Ali Khan, after shutting the door, found that Shakti had walked some distance. He ran after her and said humbly: "The ring?"

Kutab had given Shakti a ring, by showing which she had been permitted to enter the

prisoner's cell. It had been agreed that Kutab should wait for her at the guard-house near by, and that on leaving the prison she should send him the ring, and that then he should come to her and take her back to the Palace in safety.

In the meantime, although Kutab was not wasting his time in the guard-house, he had not neglected to make arrangements whereby he might know when Shakti quitted the prison. He had left one of his servants with Golam Ali Khan, instructing the latter to send the man to him with the ring immediately after she had left the prison, in case he himself could not return in time. He fully intended to be back before the Sultana left the cell, but it was possible that there might be some delay since the Sultan had to be roused from his bed before the news could be imparted to him. Considering the matter on all sides, Kutab had taken this precaution. He had, however, concealed the fact that the lady was the Sultana.

"There is no ring to give," replied Shakti to the *jemadar's* demand. But the man insisted on having Kutab's orders carried out; and Shakti then replied in a firm and commanding voice, "Step back from my path. It is the Sultana who commands."

Frightened and abashed, the man stepped aside, and the Empress passed unhindered. Her shadowy form melted into the darkness. Golam Ali returned to his seat before the gate-

way door, and striking a spark with a flint, re-lighted his hookah.

"H'm! The Sultana Saheba?" he muttered to himself. "I thought she might be Ganesh Dev's wife coming to see her husband. We should certainly get some baksheesh! However, such is my luck. Bravo, Kutab Saheb! You have got both Sultan and Sultana under your thumb. I say, brother, will you get up or not?"

Phateh Khan, ignoring both his master's orders and the cold night, under the folds of a thick blanket in Golam Ali's cot, was snoring loudly. At the sergeant's call, he answered, "Coming, coming!" and then fell fast asleep again.

Golam Ali Khan said to himself that as long as there was no ring to send, he might as well have another smoke in peace.

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CHAPTER XXXVII

It was midnight, but Shakti wandered on fearlessly. She was accustomed to midnight walks, for had she not often during those six years of her pilgrimage wandered about alone at late hours of the night? She crossed the woods she knew so well. The trees seemed to extend their branches like welcoming arms. They greeted her as an old friend. Soon she reached the river-side, and there she saw the tamarind tree on which they—Ganesh and herself—had sat on that eventful night long years ago when the turning-point in her life had come. Its branches were all gone now; only the gnarled trunk remained. Was it not thus, too, with her own life? All beauty gone, only grim reality facing her.

Now she came to that memorable spot where she had undergone her great soul-trial. There stood the peepul tree where she had crushed the wreath that she loved so well. She stopped there a moment. Each grain of dust there was holy, for with it now were mingled those faded blossoms, the crushed hopes of her life. She stooped, and taking up a handful of the earth, tied it in a corner of her royal *sari*, then resumed her walk towards the half-ruined

temple, where her aunt, the holy *Mataji*, was still priestess. Shakti saw with her mind's eye the *Sanyasini* as she used to see her, seated on the ground before a brass lamp, praying. But on coming nearer she saw a rather different scene. The doors piercing the temple on both sides were thrown wide open, and in the portico in front of the shrine a bright light was burning. It was not the light of an oil lamp but a sacrificial fire that sent its flames on high, and the red glow fell on *Kali's* image. The priestess stood close to the fire praying with eyes closed. Shakti came and stood by her in silence.

The *Sanyasini*, who did not notice her, recited *mantras* with measured breath, and fed the fire anew with oblations, until the surging flames soared up and touched the ceiling. They seemed to Shakti like a fountain of blood, soaring upward and falling back again like severed human heads. Then the flames became more subdued, and now it seemed as if the heads were ranging themselves into a square, and that upon this square rose a throne of light. Whose image was seated on that brilliant throne? The Sultana tried to identify the face. Then the *Yogini* spoke again.

“O Thou Omnipotent One, Thou Fountain of Life, be propitious. Thou has created all that is, Thou preservest by Thy mercy or destroyest by Thine anger. And in Thine anger Thou hast brought woe on our motherland. But now let Thy compassion speak, O

Thou Infinite Mercy; remove this sorrow from our heads and liberate him who now lies fettered, the son of the old heroes of our land. Oh touch his manly heart with Thy great Spirit that he may rise and lift oppression from his race."

The woman who stood by the door felt inspiration throbbing through her being. Moved by a voice that came from higher spheres, she spoke. "Then be it so. The great God sent me hither to accomplish it."

The priestess opened her eyes. "Is it you?" she said. "Shakti, Sultana, will you liberate him?"

"I would already have done so, but he would not take freedom from my hand. Come with me, holy Mother; he will accept liberty if you offer it. This ring will admit us, and you can take him with you and escape with him."

The *Mataji* rose to go, but Shakti stopped her, saying, "Wait, Mother; give me another dress."

The *Sanyasini* brought out one of her ochre-coloured robes, and Shakti put it on and rubbed on her body some of the sacred earth that she had brought with her. She put half of her jewelled *sari* over the devotee's dress that she now wore; she cut her long shawl into halves, wound one part round herself, and gave the other to her companion as a disguise, together with that part of her jewel-embroidered *sari* that she had torn off while in the prison cell to give to Ganesh Dev. Then she directed the



The Priestess stood close to the fire, praying, with eyes closed.

By G. Tagore.]

Sanyasini, saying, "Put this shawl over your head, holy Mother, and wear this *sari*. On entering the prison I will give you the *sari* and the shawl I am wearing. Direct Ganesh to put them on as I wore them, and see that his head is well covered. Then you will appear to be the person who entered, and the prison guards will not suspect what has happened."

"And you, my child?" asked the *Yogini* calmly.

"I will remain behind; Kutab will come to my aid later on."

The *Sanyasini* understood the risk that Shaktimai ran, but she made no effort to dissuade her. She only smiled; for what is death to the devotee who has faced the Infinite? This mortal life is not the highest gift that man possesses, and death as a sacrifice in a just cause is a great boon. She rejoiced to think of such a happy and glorious lot for Shakti.

"One thing remains," said the Sultana; "cut off my hair."

The devotee complied with her request, and Shaktimai gave her those long, black, silky locks and said, "If Gul Bahar becomes motherless, give her these as a last token from me, and remember that from to-night she is your child."

The priestess laid the hair under *Kali's* feet and murmured a prayer. Shakti had already left the temple. The two women now stepped out into the darkness.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

"MAHARAJA, Maharaja!" called the *Sanyasini*.

Ganesh Dev started from his sleep and exclaimed, "No, Shakti, no! I will not leave the cell; tempt me no more."

"Child, it is I. I have come to set you free."

Ganesh Dev recognised the voice of the priestess. The blood rushed to his heart with joy and hope. Yes, from the devotee he could accept his freedom. In silence he obeyed her and dressed himself as she directed.

The *Mataji* then knocked at the door of the cell, which was opened, and together they went out. The heavy door closed again. The Sultana was in the prison cell alone. She had entered with the *Yogini* and had hidden herself in a corner, where she had remained cold and trembling with fear lest the Raja should discover her. But there was no ground for such a fear, for when she entered he was asleep, and after he awoke, he was so much absorbed in the thought of his escape that he noticed

nothing. The cell, too, was enveloped in darkness.

When he was gone she breathed a deep sigh of relief. Her work was done; Ganesh was free. This was the revenge of Shaktimai, the great-souled woman.

It had often seemed to her that not even one wish that her life had known had ever been fulfilled; but at last the gods had taken compassion on her, and her supreme desire had been gratified at the end. And this fulfilment was so dear, so soul-satisfying, that it compensated her for all blighted hopes in the past, and filled her being to overflowing with a boundless bliss. She thanked the great God for this mercy, and now she grasped the mysterious ways of Providence. The sorrows of her life seemed all so little now, for she saw in them the gateway to a higher purpose.

Inspired by holy awe, she neared the spot where he had slept, a prisoner; and on the hard prison floor of cold stone, the fair form of the Sultana found rest at last. She wrapped herself in the worn prison blanket which had covered the Rajkumar during the dreadful nights he had spent in the cell, the only relic left to her; and the sweet peace that she in vain had sought while resting on her regal couch, now filled her soul as moonlight floods the air. Her heart grew calm. She turned to her Creator, and her grateful soul breathed a soft prayer.

“Oh All Compassionate One, Thou art ever gracious to all Thy creatures, and even those who serve Thee not receive Thy blessing. I murmured against Thee, but Thou, in Thy great mercy, hast had compassion on me. The sorrows I have seen, the tears I have shed, these were stored by Thee drop by drop, and by Thy mercy, O Thou great Creator, have been changed into this ocean of supreme happiness. And since the hand of Thy blessing is on this unworthy one, grant her still one more prayer. Let her go hence ere this sweet calm be broken. Send death to her while in this ecstasy.”

Then slowly, very slowly, her heavy lashes closed for very happiness, and gentle slumber came upon her. In this dreamy state the sublime happiness, the bliss, the calm remained. She heard the flute notes softly playing, and from afar vibrated the sweet melody, the inspiration of her childhood:

“What more do I desire,
Since she is mine?
Swiftly we glide upon
The foaming brine.”

Once more she wandered in the garden by Lake Mahipal, and over the silvery waves glided a boat. And now the young Rajkumar appeared as her childhood's playmate and her life's great love. She saw a garland of fresh bakul flowers round his neck, while nearer, ever

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nearer, came the soft tune floating through space, till all seemed melody around her.

“Over the laughing wave,
Softly we glide,
Rocking to and fro
On the rippling tide.
The moon shines in the vaulted sky
While gently on we float.
The riches of the world are mine
Within my little boat.”

The silver moon flooded the air with trembling light, and southern breezes wafted sweet fragrance of champak blossoms. Softly rang the bulbul's notes, and anon the flute's vibrating sound rang through the air.

“On yonder distant shore
The people sigh,
'A boatman out so late!
A storm is nigh.'
My heart laughs loud to see their fear
While gently on I float.
The minutes glide on silver wings
Within my little boat.
What more do I desire,
Since she is mine?
Swiftly we glide upon
The foaming brine.”

But there was no one near now to mar her happiness. Only the Rajkumar was with her, and their strong souls soared upward together to those regions where ecstasy and life are blended and eternal peace holds sway. And

from afar rang a choir as of angels' voices, singing the song she loved so well.

“The bliss of life is mine
 As on we fly.
 The stars laugh as we go
 My boat and I.
 All my desires are reached. My song
 Resounds from rock and cave.
 This boat of beauty is my own
 Upon the dancing wave.
 What more do I desire,
 Since she is mine?
 Swiftly we glide upon
 The foaming brine.”

Her soul was merged in the Infinite, and thus, at last, she sank into deep sleep.

But hark! what mean those weird and ghostly voices outside the prison door? Two black figures are entering the cell. “The prisoner sleeps soundly,” mutters one.

“So much the better,” comes the hoarse reply. “The man has muscles. If we overpower him in his sleep, we shall not have to struggle with him.”

“Your lordship may leave the lantern outside and stand by the door,” came the ghastly whisper of the first speaker. “I will finish the work in the dark.”

It was Kutab to whom these words were addressed and who waited without until the gruesome deed was done.

Suddenly the Sultan appeared upon the scene.



—Only the Rajkumar was with her and their strong souls soared upward together to those regions where ecstasy and life are blended and eternal peace holds sway.

He acted like a maniac. He had waited for Kutab until he could endure the suspense no longer; and at last, forgetting his royal dignity, he had followed his deadly messenger to the prison door. "Kutab," he shrieked, "you have not carried out my orders. Where is the head of Ganesh Dev? Where is the Sultana?"

The dreadful work was done. A man emerged from the black prison cell carrying something in a cloth. Kutab took charge of it, removed the cloth, and handed the gory trophy to the Sultan.

"Here is the head Your Majesty wanted," he said with diabolical calmness.

The light of the lantern fell on the bleeding face. Divine happiness shone from the features. But of that the Sultan saw nothing. He shouted like a mad man:

"Devil, what have you done? Whose head is this?" And then he fell raving to the ground.

CONCLUSION

GAIAS-UD-DIN lost his reason completely on finding that Shaktimai had been killed. Kutab, Saheb-ud-din, the prison guards—one and all were put to death. People were slain indiscriminately, and all went in fear of their lives. Many joined the Maharaja of Dinajpur—some secretly, others openly—with whom Gaias-ud-din was now at war, and after several battles the unfortunate Sultan was defeated and slain. Hindus and Mussulmans united in putting Ganesh Dev on the throne. In the history of Bengal an unparalleled event occurred—a Hindu Raja sat on a Mussulman throne.

Nirupama, whose life had been ever enriched by Shakti's losses, now occupied the throne that her rival had by death vacated. She was now Empress of the land. In Shakti's garden the same flowers bloomed, the same birds sang, the same evening winds whispered their mysterious sounds.

But Shaktimai, the stately Sultana, graced with her queenly presence this place of beauty no longer. The little Empress Nirupama sat there on moonlight nights, accompanied by the

husband to whom, as ever, she clung with childlike tenderness.

The young Prince, Jadav Dev, came to his mother. He held a little girl by the hand and she was fretful and restless. The boy said, "Mother, when I am big I will marry the Princess Gul Bahar." Then he caressed the little Princess and whispered coaxingly, "Do not weep, you are my queen; I will bring you some flowers."

Nirupama became vexed on hearing what her boy said, and answered, "My son, you must not speak in that way. Don't you know that she is a Mussulmani?"

The *Sanyasini*, who was standing near, replied, "Do not despise the child, but remember that her mother gave her life to save you all."

Ganesh Dev sighed. He took the little one on his knee and kissed her tenderly. But Nirupama looked on the playful scene with misgiving and fear. Jadav Dev had received a garland of flowers from the gardener, and this he put round the little girl's neck, saying, "Princess, you are my queen; I marry you."

The time came when Nirupama's fears were realised. The boy redeemed his childish promise. Shakti's curse was fulfilled. Jadav Dev in his youth became a Mussulman and married Gul Bahar, the descendant of Banowari Lal.

He is known in history as Jelal-ud-din, Sultan of Bengal.

INDEX OF WORDS

- Badshah*—Mohammedan Emperor.
- Begum*—Mohammedan Queen.
- Bou Rani*—Princess or young queen as opposed to the Rani or queen mother.
- Bhagavati*—A goddess of Hindu Mythology, representing the maternal aspect of Nature.
- Brindaban*—A sacred place of pilgrimage, famous as the scene of *Krishna's* youthful love-adventures.
- Bysakh*—The first month of the Bengali New Year which begins in the middle of April.
- Devi Mother*—Reverend mother. *Devi* literally means goddess.
- Didi*—Elder sister, a term of affection also applied to elder friends in Bengal.
- Draupadi's rice*—A story in the Mahabharata. *Krishna* as a special favour to *Draupadi* granted her prayer that her rice-pot should never be empty.
- Faujdar Sahib*—Commander-in-Chief.
- Gandharba marriage*—The *Gandharba* form of marriage by exchange of garlands, though now obsolete, was recognised and legitimate in olden times.
- Huzoor*—His Lordship.
- Jahanpana*—Protector of the World.

- Jai*—Victory.
- Jemadar*—Head Constable.
- Kali*—The dread mother goddess, representing the terrible energy of Nature.
- Kapali*—A fearful sect that propitiates *Kali* with terrible rites. It is now nearly extinct.
- Karma*—The law of moral retribution by which a good *karma* (act, word, or thought) is followed by moral good, in endless succession, and similarly a bad act by evil consequences—like the waves of the sea.
- Krishna*—The Saviour, incarnation of Vishnu, the God or preserver of the universe.
- Lakshmi*—Goddess of wealth and beauty.
- Mahadeva*—Another name of Shiva, the God of destruction.
- Mataji*—Holy mother.
- Matsyagandha*—One of the female characters in the Mahabharata.
- Mantra*—Sacred texts uttered during worship or invocation.
- Om*—The mystical name and symbol of the Almighty, used at the beginning and end of a prayer.
- Orna*—A head-covering like a mantilla for all but quite young and unmarried girls, which is also used as a veil to cover the face when occasion arises.
- Pir*—Mohammedan Saint to whom the lower class of the Hindus of Bengal make offerings, as well as the Mohammedans.
- Pujah*—Worship.
- Radnica*—The beloved of *Krishna*. Their love represents the desire of the human soul to merge itself in the divine soul of the universe.

Rajkumar—Son of a Raja.

Sanyasi—A male devotee.

Sanyasini—A female devotee.

Selam—Salutation.

Sari—The dress of the Indian woman.

Sravan—The month of *Sravan* begins from the middle of July.

Sefalika—An Indian plant which flowers in autumn, having small, white, sweet-scented blossoms.

Thakur—Title of respect applied to Brahmins in Bengal.

Uloo—An onomatopœic sound, expressive of joy and welcome, made by women on ceremonial auspicious occasions. It is produced by moving the tongue rapidly from side to side while uttering the words with a musical intonation, which is very pleasing to the ear when done by experts, most often to the accompaniment of conch-blowing.

Yogini—Female devotee.

Yudhishtir—A king of ancient India noted for truthfulness and rectitude.

THE NORTHUMBERLAND PRESS, THORNTON STREET, NEWCASTLE-UPON-TYNE

