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SHORT STORIES



Mrs. GHOSAL
(Srimati Svarna Kumari Devi).

SHORT STORIES

BY

MRS. GHOSAL

(SRIMATI SWARNA KUMARI DEVI)

AUTHOR OF

'THE FATAL GARLAND,'
'AN UNFINISHED SONG,' ETC.

PRICE RS. 2

1937

GANESH & CO. MADRAS

THE CAMBRIDGE PRESS, MADRAS

DEDICATION
TO THE BRAVE

Soldier and hero, O my Countryman !
In admiration of thee stands the world,
And I, though little, become great in thee,
My brother, and in thy proud state. forget
Myself the sorrows of my servitude.

Even as stars of burning beauty seem
Merely to shoot and in the ethereal vast
To loose themselves, and none perceives the heat
Of dreadful fire intense that in their being.

Through every particle and atom breathes :
Even so thy sacrifice, but more splendid still
This death espoused, not for thyself, nor even
For Country, but for duty's sake alone :

Thy selfless death-pyre, holy warrior !
So long as bursts not yet the flood of doom,
And sun and moon within their orbits run,
Over her vesture thy great deeds shall earth
Blazan, thy glory's hymn proudly proclaim.

How shall we praise when speech to praise thee
fails ?

Thee, hope of Gods in this tremendous war !
I know not with what offering, I shall greet
Thee, in whose name, O hero, thy own land
Glories, and foreign lands feel blest indeed.

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PREFACE

All the stories in this volume were written some time ago in Bengali, and first came out in the pages of my magazine the 'Bharati.'

Human nature in its primary constituents, is, I think, essentially much the same all the world over. Yet it assumes vastly different guises under the varying influences of culture, habit, manners, and customs, which mould the individual no less than the national character. Hence it is possible for certain ideals, nay, even the entire civilisation of one nation to remain unappreciated by another, more especially if a superficial glance is all that is bestowed upon it.

The people of the West have very little real opportunity of getting to know us Indians, particularly Hindus, in our true "inwardness." Our domestic and social life generally is to all intents and purposes, a sealed book to them. Our customs do not permit of foreigners entering within the inner circle of our life; and even if this were not so, even if they were admitted within that pale they would only with very great difficulty find it possible to identify themselves with us, for the Hindu is born not made.

In a sense the civilisations of the East and the West are directly opposed to each other. One tends towards materialism: the other aims at the cultivation of the spiritual life. Hence certain traits are to be found in the Hindu nature that are distinctly different from those developed by Western people. In all his actions, be they good or evil, the Hindu instinctively relies upon a Higher Power. His fundamental goodness and sense of justice, as also his ardent faith, sometimes endow him with wonderful power in this direction. The story, 'The Gift of the Goddess Kali,' is intended to portray an instance of this.

Again, a Hindu woman is a complete mystery to the foreigner, is she not? Her nature, like her person, is always a veiled wonder to him. Yet those who know her can realise how sweet and noble she is. Her timidity only enhances her simple grace, like that of the gentle gazelle. Her modesty and simplicity, her intense devotion to her husband and his people, her self-effacement and self-sacrifice, and her constant reliance on a Higher Power,—all these rare virtues, as found in her, are too genuine to be imitated by women of other nations. Of course there are exceptions, but they only serve to prove the general rule.

If in presenting these few sketches of different phases of Indian life, I succeed in making my Western reader understand, were it only a little of the life that pulsates in the quiet East, and enable him to enter in some small measure into the true spirit of our national character, then I shall deem myself fortunate and feel richly rewarded.

Most of these translated stories have already appeared in various English magazines in India, and it is an agreeable surprise to me to find that yet another has lately been published in the pages of 'Verden Og Vi,' a magazine of the far West.

To conclude: I offer through the medium of this book my sincere thanks to my friends, Miss A. C. Albers and brother Silacara (the latter an Englishman by birth and Buddhist Bhikshu by religion) who have kindly taken the trouble to revise it carefully; and I also heartily thank the literary public of the West, whose appreciation of my other two books—"An Unfinished Song" and "The Fatal Garland"—has given me sufficient encouragement and stimulus to continue my literary efforts in this direction.

THE AUTHOR.

SHORT STORIES

THE SORROWS OF A LIFE

I

NO, I was not in love with her. It is impossible. A man who has loved once,—can he love again? I may have been fond of Menaka Devi. I liked to see her, to speak with her, to hear her voice. But that is all easily explained. I loved her with the love that one bears to a friend. My reader may misjudge me after hearing my tale, and I myself have had some suspicions about my own feelings. But no! I come ever to the same conclusion. A heart that has once known love, can never know it again,—never!

I am a physician and I met the lady in my professional capacity and by a strange co-incident. Travelling in the interior, I had come upon one of those little villages, so numerous in Bengal, which consist mainly of a dozen mud huts and two or three houses that serve as country residences for the wealthier people.

I was weary, and was resting by the river side alone, when a servant came to me, and to my great surprise, asked:—

“Are you a doctor, Sir? My mistress is ill and requires your services.”

And so we met, and in a short time became friends.

But stranger still it seemed to me that, from the very beginning, the touch of her hand, her voice, her smile should fill me with fond sensations! Yet let no one suspect that this was due to any serious cause. She recalled strangely to my mind one whom I had once known. When the light of her eyes was upon me, I saw the look of another,—one I had known in days gone by. I heard the sound of another’s voice in hers: the touch of her hand was that of another hand. It was owing to these things that I found myself enraptured while gazing at her, while holding her hand in mine.

Now my fair reader is smiling suspiciously. “Yes, yes: men will find themselves in that perplexity.” I hear you say. “Men never tire of the fragrance of the flower of love, but make it suit their convenience: and if need be, resort to analysis. ‘Is this a bud or a full-blown rose?’ they ask.”

It may be as you say, my fair critic, none the

less I know the difference between a bud and a full-blown rose. And because I know, I say that this feeling of mine was not love but friendship, a delicate, tender, yet firmly-rooted friendship,—a boon rarely granted to mortal by the gods. A friendship such as this, is possible only between man and woman: between man and man it could not exist. Could a man unlock his heart and disclose its saddest and most tender secrets? Could he lift the veil from his soul and open the deepest chapters of his life before another man, and expect a tear of sympathy in return? This would seem ridiculous. No, it requires the tender sympathy of a woman to do all this. Was it then possible for me to refrain from telling her everything?

It was at the hour of twilight. We were alone: the room was dimly lighted. The gaze of her beautiful eyes was on my face, and with a sigh she asked:—

“Whither are your thoughts wandering? I see the shadow of a great sorrow on your face. It would seem that there is anguish in your heart.”

I do not know whether another could have resisted this pleading voice, but it was impossible for me to do so. I felt my eyes filling with tears as I cried out, “May God never ordain that such

suffering as mine should enter any other human soul!"

Through the mist of my tears, I beheld the slender form beside me. (Ah! if there were the spirit of early youth in this gravity, if the sadness of her eyes were replaced by that bright gay look, if her cheek had been less wan, her form a little more girlish, how beautiful she would have been! She would then no more have seemed like a mere counterpart of her whose memory I cherished, but herself indeed.)

I heard a sigh escape those tender lips. The sound roused me from my reverie. "Have my words pained you?" I asked.

She made no reply. The dusk did not permit me to see her face clearly, but I thought I saw tears on her eyelashes. "What is it that troubles you?"

Still Menaka did not speak.

I urged her to explain. "Are you ill! You are so strangely silent."

"I had thought that I was not such an utter stranger to you." Her voice was low and oh! so sad.

The cause of her anxiety made me smile. "Is this all that troubles you? And why have you come to this conclusion?"

"Because I see that you are unable to trust me."

“Unable to trust you? What other friend have I whom I can trust so well?”

“And still you refuse to make me the sharer in your sorrow?”

Her words made me reflect. I could not answer her immediately. “Sister,”—my heart was heavy as I spoke—“you wrong me with your suspicion, I have none other in the world whom I could take into the secrets of my heart. And if I hesitate to tell you all, it is because I wish to spare you pain. Remember the story of my life is sad, very sad.” And now I addressed her with the familiar “thou,” and called her “dearest sister.” It seemed so natural. I but followed the dictates of my heart.

“And if it caused me pain” replied the same sweet voice, “would not that pain find its compensation in the consciousness of being worthy of the confidence of a friend! What greater happiness is there than that of being trusted, all in all!”

“Sister, you have spoken well. You follow the dictates of a true heart. Your impulse is noble and has led you aright. If I have doubted, if in my mind I have not trusted you entirely, it is because I did not turn my thoughts in the right direction, because I did not listen to the voice of the soul. Yes, if I could have trusted,

could have laid bare this heart of mine to one who could understand, I might have found relief for this great pain ere this. Listen, then, sister, and you shall hear the story of my great sorrow, since to her who should have heard it, I can tell it no more. And by telling all to you I may expiate a shameful deed—that I could not confess to her for every shame—if indeed expiation be possible. Hear me then, and you will know how undeserving of your confidence is this wretched man: and still, how implicitly he trusts you.

II

On my return from England ten years ago I spent a few days in my native place with friends and relatives, and then returned to Calcutta. Only a few weeks were left before I was to join my post as Indian Medical Surgeon under Government, and these I spent in the house of a friend of my own caste, between whose family and mine there existed a friendship of many years standing. He was a pleader in the High Court and had amassed great wealth. But his life was lonely, his wife was dead: and there was no one to enjoy his fortune but his daughter, his only child, who was the joy of his heart.

Mr. Pran Krishna Gupta had never been abroad: still, his habits were not conservative.

His daughter had received a superior education, and had not as yet been given in marriage.

I had heard that Mayabini was ill. She was subject to a strange disease, an hysteria peculiar to herself. She would fall into fainting fits, which however, were not attended by struggles or any other violent symptoms. Still, she would remain apparently unconscious for twenty-four hours. At such times she seemed like one in a dead sleep but from what she told me later on, it soon became clear that she heard and felt all that went on around her : but her eyes being closed, she could not see. After lying thus for twenty-four hours, she gradually came to consciousness but it was usually three or four days before she recovered her normal health and strength.

The disease exhibited one strange symptom in that it appeared without any warning. Apparently the patient was unable to explain what brought on these attacks, but it was my opinion that she knew and did not wish to tell.

She had had one of these fainting fits a few days before my arrival in the house. When, therefore, I saw her for the first time, she was still an invalid. Her father spoke to me of his daughter's ailment and wished me to see her. I then called to mind the picture of a little girl, slender, romping with dishevelled tresses, careless dress,

a restless eye, seldom quiet on her feet for a minute, and a never-tiring, chattering tongue.

According to his wish, I accompanied him to Maya's room, still expecting to see the mischievous, romping girl I had left five years ago. How great was my surprise when on entering the chamber I saw Mayabini as she was then!

Half-reclining on a sofa lay a young lady, daintily dressed in a white robe, curls falling on her brow, her hair twisted in a knot and revealing a beautiful neck. She was at that exquisite age when girlhood and womanhood meet. Her unconstrained, youthful manner, her frank, cheerful and ever tender smile,—these things linger in my memory still and will remain there for ever. The unexpected vision of loveliness awed me. Was this the patient. There was not a sign of disease visible save the soft pallor of the face, which only heightened its charm. She held a half-blown rose in her hand, of which she was inhaling the fragrance. She was calm and self-possessed, and greeted me smilingly while she put the flower on a table beside her.

“I am very pleased to see you, Dr. Das,” she said. “You have not altered at all. But for the change in your dress, you look as you did five years ago,” and she extended her hand in welcome.

THE SORROWS OF A LIFE.



Half reclining on a sofa lay a young lady daintily dressed in a white robe, curls falling

The faint tremor in her voice enhanced her delicate charm. I could not reply. I could not trust my eyes. Was this Maya, the girl, or was it a Maya, a delusion? Her father drew a chair near her and asked me to be seated, while he took a seat near the window and commenced reading the newspaper. I had not as yet said a word, and now began to feel that I must appear awkward in the young lady's eyes. "You seem to be still weak, Miss Gupta," I ventured to remark after brief reflection.

A smile passed over her sweet young face. So I have grown to be 'Miss Gupta' in these few years! You are evidently affected by English-etiquette!"

Her curt remark put me out somewhat, and I said:—"You were such a tiny mite when I went away that I cannot quite realize that you are the same little girl."

"But I had not forgotten you. I see that a short memory is characteristic of men."

Her voice was very low. Perhaps she did not wish that her father should hear her, but the gentleman was so absorbed in the latest news that he seemed not to be aware of us.

Her words pleased me: they touched my heart. "Maya you are still as mischievous as ever, or worse, if possible. Who can withstand your

invincible tongue? If I recall the little girl of five years ago, is not that a sufficient proof that I have not forgotten you?"

"I am very glad to receive this proof of your remembering me. But now tell me some of your experiences in England."

"There will be time enough for that presently. First, let me hear about your illness. I understand that even at the moment of one of these attacks, you cannot tell that it is coming on."

"No."

"Nor are you able to understand the cause that brings it about, whether it is irregularity in diet, too much talking or reading, or whatever else it may be?"

I was not permitted to ask any further questions. Maya broke in abruptly: "You are a physician, it is for you to find out all this. I cannot be expected to know what brings on attacks of illness. Don't waste time in idle questions, but tell me of England. It will entertain me, and I shall feel better."

From this I concluded that she wished to evade being questioned. I might probe the matter later on; I thought. Meanwhile it would be best to leave it alone. So I complied with her request. England? It is a paradise. Once there, one does not wish to go away again."

“It is a pity, then, that you have had to come back. I suppose you left half of yourself behind?”

“I should have had no objection to leave the whole man there, but that no one cared to encumber herself with the burden.”

* * * *

So far Menaka had listened to my narrative without interruption, but now she broke her silence.

“That was very generous indeed!” she suddenly exclaimed.

How strange her words sounded! They were the very same words as Maya had said on the day of our first conversation. I became confused, and looked in surprise at Menaka’s face.

“And what happened next?” was all she calmly asked.

There was little more for me to say. I had lost the thread of my discourse. I replied:—

“Nothing of any consequence. By that time Maya’s father had finished his paper, and he and I left the room.”

“Leaving, of course, your heart behind you!” said Menaka.

“I do not believe in love at first sight, or I should say Yes.”

“But it does not appear that you required a long experience to make you believe it.”

“I cannot deny it. I now feel ashamed of it. But I did not at the time feel ashamed to ask Maya’s hand in marriage of her father. This I did ere a week had elapsed. But oh! the horror of that day! With the curse of it on my head, with the fire of lost hope burning within me, must I thus spend the remainder of my life? I learnt that day that Maya could never be mine, that she had been promised to another, and that her marriage had been postponed only on account of her illness. I received my reply and was overcome by despair. But the pain that now gnaws at the core of my being was not caused then. There are among men many who have to overcome the pangs of a lost love: those wounds may heal: a man will brace himself up in time and forget. The suffering of life——”

I could speak no further. Menaka tenderly took my hand in hers and drooped her lashes. I felt her tears on my hand. “Sister, let my story end here, you will not be able to hear more,” was all I could falter. Her voice trembled as she softly replied, “Go on, please. I am strong enough to hear the end. Only prove that you trust me.”

“Well, listen then. The house of my host was a comfortable two-storied dwelling. There was a large drawing room in the centre of the

upper-storey : the side rooms were occupied by Mayabini and her father. The dining room and the guest chambers were on the ground-floor. And now recall the sad time when my offer to marry Maya was rejected. I did not see her the whole of that day. I should have entered her room for a while, perhaps, in the afternoon, but I learnt that her fiance was with her. I had only that day found out that she was betrothed to Mr. Sen, although I had met the young gentleman several times in the house. That evening, Maya did not come downstairs to join us at dinner. This was not unusual, however, since frequently she had her dinner served in her own room.

After retiring to the drawing room, our host soon made himself comfortable on a couch and fell into a doze with the long stem of the Gurguri in his mouth. Mr. Sen did not accompany us upstairs. I had noticed that he looked very sad at the table, and this I could not understand at the time, for he seemed to me to be the most fortunate of men. From his room downstairs came the first notes of his violin. I heard them as I stood by the drawing-room window and gazed on the moonlight scene outside. Oh the solemn beauty of that bewitching night ! Winter was just over, and the young year had come

with all its delicate charms. The trees, the shadows, even the moonlight itself, seemed to tremble. And then, was it the voice of magic that called from the palpitating bosom of the night? With a heart-rending wail the violin sent forth its music until the quiet night seemed moved by a deep emotion. I had not been so agitated, even at the moment that morning, when I had heard the fatal verdict, for then I had felt like one struck dumb, my sense of feeling had seemed to be partially paralysed. But now the sounds of that violin woke the torment of despair in every fibre of my being. My heart sobbed with each note, as they wailed their doleful message to the world. "She is not mine, she is not mine," echoed back my bleeding heart. Life is a desert, a long cold death."

I was like one distracted. I could endure that wail no longer, and hastily left the room. Passing Maya's chamber, I saw the door ajar. Mad with anguish I rushed inside and found her lying on a couch near the window. I stood beside her. How beautiful it was, that sleeping face, as the moonlight cast its halo around it! I gazed and forgot everything. I no longer realized that she was not mine. Overcome by her beauty, and by the madness of sorrow,—a madness only reinforced by the overdose of wine which I took at

the dinner table with the object of dulling it, I embraced that sleeping form, and kissed her again and again with passionate fondness."

Menaka became suddenly excited—"Like a thief, you then—." Her voice choked.

"Yes, it was I who committed so shameful a deed. Hate me, if you must. But remember that I am after all but a frail mortal. Perhaps I might do so again, if similarly placed, who knows. But lo! the punishment, at which even the most unforgiving heart would melt. Believe me I have suffered for my sin."

"Well," was all her weeping voice replied.

The next morning Maya's father told me that his daughter had again been in a deep faint since evening. Oh! the shame and the remorse I felt at my conduct! But shame and remorse alike were vain. I could never have the courage to confess and ask her forgiveness. She got well in the course of three or four days, and then I determined to go away.

Meanwhile I noticed, a change in her father. The gentleman seemed worried. He looked like one who had something on his mind, and of which it was difficult to speak. However, I was not long left in the dark. On the afternoon of my departure, while we were alone, he suddenly broke the ice.

“Are you still prepared to marry Maya?” He put the question somewhat abruptly.

You may well imagine my surprise.

“But Mr. Sen?” I asked eagerly.

Mr. Gupta looked annoyed. There was an angry ring in his voice as he replied:—

“Shashi tells me that so far he had not consulted his parents about the marriage. Having done so now, he finds that they object. He is therefore unwilling to marry Maya.”

I need hardly say that I felt the joy of the elect in heaven. A few days more, and Mayabini and I were married.

III

I stopped in my narrative. But Menaka was evidently impatient.

“What happened next?” she questioned eagerly.

“What happened next? How true it is that there is no happiness, in this world. I now had her whom I so deeply longed to possess, whose presence had seemed to me the greatest thing under the sun, and yet I was not happy.”

Only a week remained until I was to join my post. We were spending those days in a garden-house on the banks of the Ganges. Nature was beautiful in this place. But the beauties of

nature have no delight for the heart that knows not happiness. Maya had lost her cheerfulness: she was always sad. My caresses might banish her sad moods for a time, but only to have them return with greater intensity. I often saw her eyes filled with tears, while she silently turned from me. When she noticed that this pained me, she endeavoured to speak, but seemed unable to tell me what was in her head. What could I think but that she still loved Shashi? I suffered the torments of hell.

It was a beautiful, moonlight night when we were seated together by the river bank. The full moon illumined the sky and reflected its trembling image in the waters below. How enchanting was the scene! A thousand moonbeams sparkled on the waters which flowed along like a mass of molten silver, deepening the shadow on either side. It seemed, however, as though the darkness that dwelt in our hearts assumed a deeper tinge by contrast with this scene. Suddenly there came the sound of a violin from the bosom of the still stream. Maya started and turned her head away, her voice betrayed profound emotion as she said:—"That evening, I heard the same tune. It is he!"

"It is who?"

"Shashi. That tune overpowered me. I could

not help it, I fell into a swoon. I have endeavoured many times to tell you this, but could not. Forgive me."

Then I knew to what she referred. Remorse overpowered me, and yet I could not prevail upon myself to tell her that the villain who had committed the deed was not Shashi, but I. Shame sealed my lips. She spoke again, "That afternoon I had told Shashi that I could not marry him, because I loved you. He left me without a word, I felt sorry for him. I cursed myself and wept. Then when the wail of his violin expressed the sadness of his heart, I felt as if my own heart would break. Soon afterwards I fainted. I had wept bitter tears for him, but in return the shameless man touched me, while I lay in a helpless state. Forgive me, for you see it was no fault of mine. It is you whom I love."

My heart was touched to its very depths. I tried to gather courage with all the strength I possessed at that moment, and taking her hand in mine, I was ready to utter these words, "That villain was not Shashi but I." But those words, remained unsaid forever: Maya suddenly fainted and fell into the water at my feet. For a minute I stood like one struck dumb and then plunged in after her.

Menaka who was weeping by my side asked in a faint whisper "Do you not know me?" Oh why did you not say these words then, as you are saying them now?"

And then I realised all. The veil fell from my eyes. "Maya, my dearest darling wife! It is you yourself and I did not know it all this time."

Clasped in each others arms we shed tears of joy.

The dark past was forgotten at last.

THE LOST KEY

It was Sunday morning.

Sukumar Chakraburty was to be married on the night of the following Sunday, so the ceremonies of taking the auspicious bath and the blessed rice—the necessary preliminaries of a Hindu marriage had to be performed to-day—a day of festivity in the house of the Chakraburty family and of the village of Bonagram.

Ever since Sukumar had come home after his B.A. examination he had looked forward to this happy event, the event that with great pomp and show proclaim him a hero and the husband of a pretty little girl.

How happy and delighted he looked !

Is it not a great thing to marry young; when life, being without bitter experiences and sad responsibilities, is full only of joy and excitement? It is impossible then for a man to see anything beyond the narrow flight of youthful imagination, so he enters upon the voyage of matrimony as if it were only a pleasure trip. And it was thus with our hero, who had not as yet tasted of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.

He was simple and inexperienced and might well be called "a mere boy," for he was only seventeen. And sweet, too, was his disposition, also sanguine and imaginative. So he felt very excited and joyful over the inaugural festivities heralding his marriage.

With his highly strung imagination and excitable brain he had lain awake almost the whole of the previous night, till, at last, he knew not when sleep had come upon him, slowly and silently, and he had closed his eyes for a short time.

And then he had dreamt that he had lost his Key.

It was a strange dream, indeed, but not altogether disconnected with reality, for to it was attached a long-forgotten tale. Almost ten years before when Sukumar was a little boy of seven he had lost his key. It was the key of a Japanese toy-box which he had received from his uncle on his previous birthday. It acted like magic on his imagination and he was charmed with it. The key of the box was silvery white, and keeping it always hidden in his pocket, he would allow no one even to touch it. That, of course, did not prevent him from opening the box himself. On the contrary, a thousand times a day he would take out the key and open and re-

open the box with keen pleasure, and every time afterwards he would put the key carefully back in its hiding place, and the inevitable consequence was that one day, he found, to his great dismay, that the key of the box was missing.

Alas ! Poor boy ! The key was as precious to him as the fabled gem worth seven kings' kingdoms. His grief was great and inconsolable. Even the box itself lost its charm in his eyes without the key. His mother, who was then living, had another box exactly like the first one brought for him all the way from Calcutta. But the new box did not please or comfort him much.

At first he liked it a little, but soon he became tired of it indeed disgusted with it. It had so many faults ! It was not so nice and small, or may-be it was a little smaller than the first box. And the key was not so silvery white, or perhaps it was a little more or less glossy than the lost key. Thousands of small discoveries like these made him hate this new toy, and soon he found a means to dispose of it.

He had a playmate whose name was also Sukumar, and he made a gift of this box to his friend, who was a few months older than himself. In Bengal it is customary to call elder brothers and intimate friends "Dada," so Sukumar called

his friend Sukda. And in order to distinguish the one from the other, we too will call the elder Sukumar by the name of Suk.

Suk accepted the present with pleasure and to show his gratitude, (took the lost key out of his pocket and presented it to Sukumar.) At the sight of this Sukumar's face brightened with delight. But a moment later he felt angry and indignant:—

“My lost key, indeed!” he exclaimed with disgust. “And so it is you who took it and have kept it hidden all this time! Surely you are not returning it to me!”

“But here it is” said Suk, with the air of a superior person. “Take it. You would not have got it even now if I had not chosen to give it to you.”

This was very true. And it was certainly very generous of his friend to offer it to him now! So the boy thought, and he felt happy and grateful when he took the key from his darling Sukda.

Strange indeed that this sad incident of his childhood, which had slipped from his memory for so long, should appear to him in the form of a vision on the dawn of this auspicious day! Of course the dream was a little different from the reality, as every dream must be. The lost key was silvery white, and the key of his dream was of a

golden colour. And he had received the lost key back again, while in the midst of his search for his dream-key, he had been awakened by the sweet music of the Rasanchowky.

Sukumar awoke and was glad to know that it was only a dream. Nevertheless he felt sad. The sweet Sahana Ragini blending in harmony and gradation, rose fuller and richer and touched his inmost heart. Tears gathered slowly in his eyes—he know not why—and rolled down his cheeks.

But who was that?—Who was standing before his dreamy eyes? It was no other than the dearest friend of his childhood ----his Sukda. Like darkness disappearing before the sun, the gloom of his heart melted into delight at the sight of his beloved friend. He sprang from the bed and ran to him, crying:—

“Halloa! Sukda! This is indeed a happy morning!”

He took his friend's hand and shook it with boyish delight and making a captive of it, went back to his bed, drawing Sukda after him. Thus the morning dawned for our hero with a sad dream and a pleasant reality.

Was it a good or a bad omen ?

II

My readers are aware that Sukumar had already passed the great ordeal of the B. A. examination, and very bravely and successfully, too. He was expecting before long to receive the degree of honour, the coveted distinction of so many big students. It was indeed very creditable for one so young and it showed the fine intellectual stuff he was made of.

But would this world of ours be induced by these facts to give him a seat on the same bench with its so-called Wise men? Was he not too artless and simple to obtain this honour? Was it not natural that he should be looked upon with suspicion by the wise men and with pleasure by the foolish ones? In the eyes of the latter he was, indeed, goodness incarnate. And they were not wrong.

The purity of his thoughts and the simplicity and goodness of his heart were stamped upon his whole bearing. His motto was:—

“God is true, beautiful and good.” And this simple faith of his heart was exhibited in his pleasant face, sweet smile and sanguine conversation as in a flawless mirror. To put it figuratively, he appeared like a lotus, a hundred petals blooming in the beauty of his soul.

But to resume the story.

For more than five years now the two friends had been separated, Sukumar having been sent to Krishnagore School—the nearest place to their native village, Bonagram, and Suk having been taken by his father to Calcutta, and placed in a School there. Occasionally they had met during the vacations, but their letters to one another had been few and far between. If it had depended on Sukumar alone, things would have been very different. At the beginning of their separation, he had been prolific of letters to his friend. He had written to Suk daily and had felt thankful when favoured with a few lines in return once a week, or even once a month. But happy are those who expect nothing from their friends, be it but a small letter, for then they will not meet with disappointment. At any rate it was so with Sukumar. He had to wait for weeks, before he received an answer to many closely-written pages, and as one-sided nothing lasts forever, even his letters stopped, at last. But this did not mean that he had forgotten his friend. On the contrary, although he felt neglected, he clung to the memory of his early days—the time when he had thought that Suk returned his affection—and he remained as fond of his friend as ever. Before the invitation letters could be

issued by his father for his wedding he himself sent the happy news to Suk and entreated him to come and take part in the marriage ceremonies. And this time he had not been disappointed. Yes, indeed, it was none other than Suk whom he saw first thing on the morning of the auspicious day. His joy knew no bounds.

Seated on the cot beside Suk, he looked intently at his friend's face, with the pleasure of a lover, and laughed heartily. The laughter seemed to keep time with the festive music, and to fill the room with merriment. But to Suk all this seemed very foolish, and he exclaimed:—

“Just as childish and frivolous as ever! I have never met with such a sentimental fool as you are Sukumar in all my life!”

“Really!”

“Really and truly. Who else would have gone mad over his wedding?”

But neither the uncalled for rebuke nor the untimely remark could curb the joyous spirit of Sukumar. On the contrary, he laughed only the louder, and Suk could not help laughing, too. But suddenly he stopped and asked, gravely:—

“Have you seen the girl?”

“Oh! yes, of course. And you have seen her, too. Don't you remember Satiabala?”

“Satiabala; indeed!” exclaimed Suk, with evident disgust.

“That little girl of seven who used to sit on the landing place of Chowdhury’s tank, with a wooden doll in her hands and burst out crying if anyone dared to touch her darling! By RAMA! Do you really mean to marry her, Sukumar?”

Sukumar, who was much amused by this description, burst out laughing again. Then, when somewhat quieter, he said:—

“You would not swear by Rama if you saw her now. Instead of doing so, you would feel tempted to exclaim “SITA DEVI!”

“Incorrigible fool! Drowned deep, heel over head, without any hope of salvation, I should think.”

“You can think anything you like. Man is a free animal, isn’t he Sukda? You may think and I laugh.”

“Shameless man! Playing the hero in anything and everything. I remember how ludicrously you used to quarrel with me on her account. It seemed as if you had been lovers in a previous birth, like Layla and Majnu. If anyone dared to look at her, you would at once throw down the gauntlet.”

“My dear fellow, why do you forget that”—

“I beg your pardon. I forget nothing. I remember vividly still how she would scream at the sight of me, fearing that that beauty of a doll of hers would be snatched from her. And what did you do then? You would appear on the scene like a prince in disguise and fight with me, pity her, console her, and say ‘*aha uhu*’ in the greatest sympathy, and thus deliver her from the devouring mouth of a Rakshasa (giant) like me. The scene used to be ridiculously pathetic.”

Sukumar laughed all the time and said, after his friend had finished:—

“Did n’t you tease the life out of her, poor little thing? How could I help pitying and consoling her?”

“And now that ‘cry-baby’ is going to be your wife?”

“She is no longer a ‘baby,’ my dear fellow, she is quite a young lady now. You will find out the truth when you see her yourself.”

“I am afraid that I shall have to forego that pleasure. I must be off immediately the breakfast is over.”

“Why? I thought that you were going to spend the whole of this week with me. I won’t let you go, Sukda. You must stay here till the wedding day.”

“Impossible! I must catch the down train at three o’clock.”

Poor Sukumar! He felt so sad and dejected! It was like a gust of north wind suddenly chilling his high spirits to freezing point.

In an endeavour to persuade his friend to stay, Sukumar, after a while said, in a pleading voice:—

“It is the summer vacation now. I don’t see any reason why you should hurry away. Do stay——I pray of you not to go away now.”

But Suk was a man of his word. The prayers of Sukumar poured into his ears, but in vain. His resolution to leave was built on a rock, and he said in his most petulant manner:—

“Do you think that marrying or being present at a marriage *tamasha* which I think comes to the same thing, is the whole aim and occupation of my life? I am engaged in a far more noble cause than that.”

“And what is that, pray?”

“I am working for the cause of my country.”

“Oh! Then you are a Swadeshi?”

“Yes, if you like to call me so.”

“I, also, am a Swadeshi, Sukda.”

“It is of no use to be a Swadeshi only in name. You must merit the name by your work.”

“That is true, and I intend to devote myself

to Swadeshism after my Law examination is over. My place in the movement is already worked out in my imagination."

"Good God ! Save me from your imagination ! We don't want imagination, or intention, my good fellow, or any of that big talk. What we want is real work."

"And that is precisely what I intend to do. As soon as I am free from the yoke of the University, I shall start an industrial school for the peasants and——"

"Shut up ! I can't listen to your nonsense. It makes me lose my temper. Where will you get the money from to start your school, pray ?"

"Why I shall earn it to begin with, and ask assistance from others, too, and——and——well you know I have a small ancestral property of my own which——"

"Which combined with your earnings will no doubt save our Motherland " said Suk sarcastically " But as regards the contributions of others you are counting on, you may rest assured that no such help will be given to you. Those who are willing to give and are interested in such work, will not dare to assist you for fear of offending the Government. The only course left open to you therefore is to take to dacoity. Is not the Government actually doing the same

thing? And why should not you follow the example set by the Government? What says our Sage Chanakia?:—“You must follow in the footsteps of great men.”

But Sukumar's whole nature shrank from these words and he could not believe what he heard.

“You are surely joking, Sukda! I can't believe that you are in earnest.”

“You are wrong there again. I say what I really mean.”

“And do you mean to say that crimes like those committed in dacoity could bring salvation to us? This world is certainly not directed by the spirit of Satan. Oppression and injustice will surely lead us to be traitors to our country, that is to say to our own people, as well as to ourselves, but they won't lead us to patriotism. On the contrary, such deeds would make the people hate us and curse Swadeshism. To make a nation of the people you must begin by educating them, and by moulding their character in such a way as to enable them to discriminate between real good and petty advantage. They must not cultivate cruelty and oppression. They must be imbued with the spirit of love and justice. Then, and only then, can you hope to unite them into a nation.”

“Bravo! Sir orator! I am sorry there is no pulpit here. But never mind. I dare say those cheap precepts of yours will do very well for a half-penny book. But if I may venture to quote the Shastric doctrines, then I will point out that there are no such things as justice or injustice, duty or unity, in the abstract. These are only relative terms, are they not? Does not your English philosophy teach you the same doctrine? The real value of these things depends on the circumstances of each case. When great Partha was unwilling to make war against his relations, did not Sri Krishna, the Lord, urge him to do it, saying :—

“Yield not to unmanliness, son of Kunti, it becomes thee not.” So saying Suk took out of his shirt-pocket a small copy of Gita—the great Hindu religious book—and gave it to Sukumar to read.

At this moment a servant entered the room, and said, respectfully :—“Sir, it is getting late. Will you not rise and prepare for the auspicious bath?”

“Is it really getting late?” Sukumar said, in an apologetic tone “Please go and tell my aunt that I am coming in a few minutes.”

The man went away, and Sukumar, taking the book from his friend said, politely :—

He was welcomed with the blowing of couch and cries of Ulu-Ulu.

He entered with a pleasant smile on his lips and looked as bright as the morning sun, and when asked to stand on the wooden seat, he did so, laughing. And then one lady placed the bridal helmet on his head and another put some turmeric paste on his forehead. And then, Oh! horror! What did the mischievous boy bridegroom do? He took off the helmet and put it on his friend's head, and—laughing all the time—he besmeared Suk's forehead with some of the holy turmeric paste, which was meant for the bridegroom and the bride only. Unfortunately this fun caused much consternation. Suk became very angry and threw the helmet on the ground and wiped his forehead with looks of disgust. The ladies were quite bewildered for this folly on the part of the bridegroom was certainly not a good omen. Some screamed, some uttered reproaches, and amid this unusual tumult, Sukumar's aunt—the lady of the house—taking up the fallen helmet, replaced it on the head of the bridegroom, saying:—

“Don't do such a foolish thing again, my dear boy.”

Peace being thus restored, the ceremony was carried out smoothly in all its details, and after-

wards Sukumar went with his friend to the river to take the customary bath and to prepare for the grander ceremony at noon, when he would have to sit with all the guests at the great feast and take the blessed breakfast, which meant for him long life and a happy future.

III

The ceremonies, including the feast, were over, and Suk had gone away.

Sukumar, dressed in red silk and having a garland of flowers round his neck, came to his room to take a little rest. Seated on his bed, in a reclining position, he took the Gita under his pillow and opened it carelessly. The first stanza that caught his eyes was:—

“ He who is fixed in devotion, pure in soul,
“ who is master of himself and subdues
“ the senses, who identifies himself with
“ everything that exists, is not defiled,
“ even though he works.”

Sukumar read these lines over and over again, and said to himself:—“ How very beautiful the teachings of the Gita are! And what rubbish Sukda was explaining to me !”

Suddenly he was roused from his admiration by an unusual noise outside. He listened silently for a few minutes, then, leaving the book on the

bed, he hurried out to the verandah. And what did he see there? The small outer court-yard was filled with policemen.

One of the Inspectors came to him and asked, politely :—

“ Is your name Sukumar ? ”

“ Why ? Yes. ”

It was as if the last Day of Judgment depended on this confession. Immediately policemen ran to every part of the house, and prosecuted a search with the greatest zeal and energy. They went from room to room, broke open boxes and almiras, seized every bit of paper they could find, destroyed the framed pictures of Swadeshi leaders, such as Tilak and Surendra-nath Bannerjee, and turned everything upside down. Consternation and fear prevailed in the house, the men trembling, and entreating again and again that the sanctity of the inner apartments might not be violated, the woman fleeing from place to place, like hunted deer.

The two policemen who entered Sukumar's room were lucky indeed ! Seeing a book on the bed, one of them took it up, and cried out :—

“ The Gita ! The Gita ! It is the Gita indeed ! ”
The other one leant over it with extreme eagerness and found to his great satisfaction that it

was really a copy of the famous Bhagavad Gita.

In the few Anarchist trials that have made so much sensation lately, it has been found that at the time of their arrest each of the Anarchist boys had a copy of the Gita in his possession, and on this fact an ingenious theory has been founded, namely that Anarchism and the Gita are synonymous in India and that wherever the Gita is found, there Anarchism will be discovered behind it. And this grand theory has led some people to believe that the Gita is the pledge and sign of the Anarchist boys' so-called secret and sacred brotherhood.

Overjoyed with their success, the two policemen sat comfortably on the bed and turned over the leaves of the book to see if anything had been written in the margin. Of course there were remarks there, and of course these were full of hidden meaning. Whatever they were unable to see with the eye was made up for by clairvoyance, and in order to convey knowledge to the world, they did not hesitate to use their pencils neatly. And so even the date of the dacoity was made clear to everyone. Then, exulting over their good fortune, they went to the Inspectors, who were still standing near Sukumar, and trying to entangle him with

questions in every possible way. When, however, the Gita was brought to them, they gave up their elaborate cross-examination, for now the proof against him was quite positive and conclusive. The order was given for Sukumar to be seized, and he was arrested like a common criminal. Lucky for him that he had no mother living to see this humiliation! His old father almost went mad over the sudden disaster. Crying piteously he asked :—

“ Why are you binding him, Sirs ? What are his faults ? He has certainly done no wrong. Is it the reign of the oppressive ‘ Mogs ’ (The Aracans) or are we living under the rule of a great British King ? You must not take him away, Sirs—I beg and pray of you not to do so.”

And he came and tried to seize Sukumar from the clutches of the police devils.

But in vain.

Sukumar, who was in tears, tried to soothe him, saying :—

“ Father, be calm and reasonable. Let them do their duty. Have faith in God and in the justice of the British Government. Doubt not that I shall be back with you in a few days time.”

Amidst all this panic, there appeared suddenly

on the scene a venerable old man, the grandfather of Satiabala, the bride. He was most indignant over the unjust action of the police, and cried out in anger, Like the Sage Durbasa of the Hindu Mythology. "What are you doing, my children? Have you no fear of God? Are you not afraid of the curse of the Brahmins? It is utterly irreligious and sinful to act like this. If you don't wish the curse of God and man to fall on you, be good enough to release the boy. Don't you know that the holy turmeric ceremony has been performed to-day and that he is going to be married to my grand-daughter next Sunday?"

The Chief Police Inspector nodded, showing that he understood.

"Oh! God" exclaimed the old man, in horror "This is *Kaliyuga* indeed! No one has the slightest regard for the Shastras now-a-days. Being a Hindu yourself, how can you behave like this? It is beyond my understanding. Have pity on us and let the boy remain here at least until the wedding is over."

One of the younger Inspectors, whose heart had not as yet been hardened by the Police service, felt great pity for them, and his eyes were moist with tears. But the Chief Inspector——the man

of curved lip and gentle smile—said, with suppressed irony:—

“You need not fear, my friends. I being a Hindu by birth and a Kayastha by caste, do I not fear the curse of a Brahmin? You may rest assured that the boy will come back in due time.”

So saying, he ordered the policemen to take Sukumar away.

The father intervened again saying:—

“Unless you kill me first I won't let you take him from me.”

The policemen did not know what to do. They were so perplexed that they stood still in spite of the orders of the Inspector.

Sukumar came to their rescue. He entreated his father, and said again:—

“Father, for my sake be reasonable, and let me go. Don't be so impatient and rash. As I am innocent and God is just and merciful, doubt not that I shall come back again in a short time.”

“Yes, if he is innocent you need certainly have no misgivings on his account,” said the Inspector, in a sarcastic voice “And if the case turns out otherwise, then bear in mind that it is certainly not I that am to blame nor should the curse fall on *my* head.”

Thus amidst many protestations on both sides poor Sukumar was taken away by the police and the gay and festive day was suddenly changed into a day of mourning.

IV

Satiabala had lost her father in her infancy, but in her devoted grandfather she had found one who was more than father to her. The trouble about Sukumar almost broke the old man's heart, and he passed his days and nights in a state of extreme anxiety and painful expectation. All day he stood outside the house, in the compound, praying, beads in hand and intently watching the trains that ran close to his home. The mother of Satiabala was also very unhappy, but she dared not express her sorrow fearing to grieve her father-in-law yet more. So she suffered silently and patiently, depending entirely on the mercy of God. The real mistress of the house, the old man's widowed daughter, believed however that it does not pay to be silent and to endure patiently, and she probed her father's wound by urging him to look for another bride-groom. And the relations, who were staying in the house, as wedding guests, sided with her and were equally importunate. But Mr Bhattacharjea turned a deaf ear

to their entreaties, for he felt sure that Sukumar would come back in time for the wedding.

However, Sunday came, and with it arrived no news to cheer and soothe the sorrowing family. In spite of Mr. Bhattacharjea's strong faith and earnest hope Sukumar did not return, nor did any news come from him or from his father, who had gone with him to Calcutta in the hope of obtaining his release before the wedding day.

There was a big pipul tree in the compound of Mr. Bhattacharjea's house, with nice stones all round, and here, seated on mats, spread on the pavement, some of the wedding guests had assembled on Sunday morning to while away the time by playing cards and throwing dice, others watched the players with more enthusiasm than they themselves displayed, and yet more smoked and discussed the troubles of the bride's family. And where was the master of the house and what was he doing at this late hour of the morning?

He was, as usual, standing aloof, and watching the trains, with eager expectation in his heart, and praying for the return of the bridegroom.

Suddenly his daughter broke in upon him and said :—

“Father, there is absolutely no time to be wasted. So be reasonable. We must give up Sukumar and try to find another bridegroom. Think! If Satiabala is not married to-day, what will our position be in society?”

The prayer beads moved rapidly in the hand of the old man and he said, in a broken voice:—

“Dear daughter, where shall we find an eligible (*nice*) bridegroom all in a minute? Let us at least wait until evening. I am sure Sukumar will be here by then. He is as innocent as the Gods themselves. Such sterling goodness as his is a rare thing now-a-days.”

Babu Nidhuram Goswami, who was watching the hand of one of the card players, turning round to place the hooka in the *baithak* saw the father and daughter talking, and caught the last words of Mr. Bhattacharjea. To watch the game to the end was a great pleasure, but to give advice gratis was a greater pleasure still. He could no longer resist the temptation, so he came and took up the thread of the conversation, saying:—

“But, Sir, is it not a fact that good people are easily duped by wicked men, and thus become as bad as the people who have duped them?”

Mr. Bhattacharjea had read a little Logic

in his youth, but had forgotten it all, and what Mr. Nidhuram said seemed to him very foolish.

“How can good ever be turned into bad?” he asked. “No! no,” he continued, “it is impossible for Sukumar to do anything bad. He is goodness itself.”

Mr. Nidhuram’s combativeness was stirred by this to its highest pitch.

“Don’t rely too much on him, Sir” he said, in a prophetic tone, “It is impossible to know now-a-days who is guilty and who is not. The boys—good and bad alike—all think in the same way. They believe that they can commit all sorts of crimes in the name of their country. It is the fashion of the day, Sir.”

But this sort of argument had no effect upon the simple-hearted good, old man. He only shook his head and repeated “Sukumar is a very good boy. I have known him from his infancy. He must be honest.”

“But you must admit another thing, Sir,” said Mr. Nidhuram with animation “He may be guilty or not guilty, but he has been in jail, and he has taken food there. You can’t ignore that fact, Sir, can you? So he must be out-casted when he comes back. Have you thought of that?”

He had at last touched a vulnerable point.

The old man saw the truth of his words and groaned almost aloud. At last he said, in utter despondency :—

“ You can do as you think best. But how can a proper match be arranged in so short a time ?”

“ That you need not trouble about ” said his daughter, who was now much relieved in her mind “ We have already settled with Srikanta. He’s a nice man, is not he Mr. Goswami ? He understands our difficult position and is willing to save us.”

“ Srikanta ! Are you going to murder the poor child ?” cried the grandfather, in great anguish “ Why Srikanta has a grand-daughter as old as Satia herself.”

“ Oh God !” he cried “ be merciful ! Have you snatched away my dear son and kept me alone so that you might take the sacrifice of this child from my hand ? My daughter, don’t be so cruel as to ask me to give my consent to this heinous act.”

“ But father do be reasonable. Be calm and think a little. You married me to quite a young man, and could you make me happy by that marriage ? If happiness is written on your grand-daughter’s forehead, then it won’t matter

a bit that she is married to Srikanta. What do you say Mr. Goswamy ?

Mr. Nidhuram was of the daughter's opinion.

"Yes," he said, nodding his head approvingly "What she says is quite true. Happiness really depends upon one's own good luck."

"And the young wife always gets her way with an old husband" continued the daughter. "Our Satia will be able to turn him any way she likes! That is a great thing. Is not it so, father? Were you not going to say the same thing, Goswami MAHASHAYA?"

"Yes, certainly" replied Mr. Nidhuram, nodding his head with approbation. "And moreover there is very little time now left to try for a better match. Unless you are prepared, Sir, to violate immutable custom and be damned eternally in this life and hereafter, then you must marry Satia to some one this evening."

Bitter tears ran down the cheeks of the old man. He hated this idea from the very bottom of his heart, yet he knew that he was helpless. However much he might abhor this marriage, he must consent to it. Still he hoped against hope. The sound of a distant train had been heard for some time, and now a shrill whistle announced its speedy arrival. Mr. Bhattacharjea looked in the direction of the train with eager

expectation as it came in view, like a huge elephant, with a slow motion, and at last stopped beside the open platform, where the scene changed all of a sudden and the deserted place became like a busy town. Great noise arose. Hawkers of all sorts suddenly appeared. The railway servants gathered together and a ticket collector checked the tickets of the many third class passengers with great energy. There was a rush everywhere on the platform, some people leaving and others entering the carriages, and all calling to one another in loud voices. The third class passengers, who had been waiting a long time outside the station, were nervously afraid that they would miss the train, and they ran quickly to secure seats, the men carrying bags and the women children. Some country women carrying both children and baggage—the children being tied to their breast and the luggage being placed on their head—looked stately and picturesque. The train did not stop long. The allotted five minutes were soon over, and the bell having rung once, twice and three times, the train started, and the platform became quiet again.

All of a sudden the pale anxious face of Mr. Bhattacharjea brightened. He saw someone coming toward the house. But alas! when the

figure came nearer the ray of hope was quickly extinguished.

“You! Suk” he said, in accents of despair. “Do you know where our Sukumar is? and when he is coming?”

But Suk was also puzzled.

“Is he not here?” he asked “I thought it was his wedding day.”

And when the truth was told him he stood dumb-founded and looked like a mummy.

And then a great idea came into the head of Mr. Nidhuram.

“Now listen Suk” he said abruptly.

“It is you and you alone who can save this family from utter ruin. You know the preliminary ceremony of the wedding was performed a week ago and Satiabala must be married to-night——no matter to whom——whether he be old or young, rich or poor. So if you marry her all the troubles and anxieties of the family will be over.”

Suk felt as if he had been suddenly pushed into an unfathomable sea. Taking a deep breath, as if in a struggle, he said, with a great effort:—

“But Sukumar is my friend.”

“That is all the more reason that you should

“marry Satiabala” said Nidhuram, the self-appointed counsellor of the family.

“Thereby you would do him a really friendly act—don’t you see that? He ought to have been here to marry her himself, but he is not, and if you do not marry the girl, then she will be married to Srikanta. They cannot wait for your friend forever,—don’t you see.”

A thrill of pity went through the heart of the young man. Emboldened by his silence, Mr. Bhattacharjea said, in a beseeching voice.

“Oh! save us—save us from this difficulty, and God will bless you. Be generous, be gracious. Give your consent and I will settle everything with your uncle, who is present here.”

The luck was on Mr. Bhattacharjea’s side this time. Suk’s uncle, who had just checkmated his opponent at chess, came on the scene in a good humour. Mr. Bhattacharjea’s entreaties touched him deeply and he agreed to the proposal.

“He would be lacking in his duty to God and man if he failed to do this for his friend Mr. Bhattacharjea, in the time of his difficulty” the uncle said.

So the marriage was arranged, and Suk was

booked as the bridegroom, willingly or unwillingly, who can tell?

It was one of the brilliant nights of the month of May (Baysakh). The sky was clear and beautiful, and the moon, which was almost full, floated in the dark blue heaven. As though bathed in the moonlight, and drunk with it, the summer birds—Kokila and Papia—sang in ecstasy, thrilling the whole village with joy. There was joy everywhere—inside the wedding house and outside as well, joy seemed to overflow, like the spray of a gushing fountain. At this auspicious moment the bridegroom arrived with a small retinue and was welcomed and taken by the bride's family to the room that had been prepared for the wedding reception.

And the bridegroom was also Sukumar—yet he was the wrong man.

He who can catch the right time is lucky; and for the man who comes late there is no sympathy, however much he may deserve it.

Alas! Time waits for no one. It did not even deign to wait for the unlucky right Sukumar, and no one thought of him or sighed for him. The auspicious conch was blown and “*Ulu Ulu*” was uttered with as much fervour as if the right bridegroom had been there.

The *Shahana ragini* was played all the time,

THE LOST KEY.



Sukumar, pale as death, stood like a ghost behind a pillar

and right merrily, and the new bridegroom was received with all the excitement and glee befitting the occasion. Happiest of all was Mr. Bhattacharjea, the grand-father of the bride. Relieved of all anxiety, he gave the hand of his darling Satiabala to the young bridegroom.

When the wedding was over and the priest had finished chanting the mantras, the bride and bridegroom rose to depart for the inner apartments.

Then whispers were heard in a corner of the reception room.

“Is it really you, Sukumar?”

“Have you come, at last?”

“But it is too late—now.”

Yes, indeed it was too late now.

Sukumar, pale as death, stood like a ghost behind a pillar, while the bride and bridegroom, made one, the corners of their flowing garments tied together in a knot, passed slowly out of the room hand in hand all unwitting of his presence.

With a tremendous effort Sukumar kept himself erect. Then with a deep sigh he murmured:—

“Is it a dream or a reality? Have I really lost my key again?”

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IMMORTElLES FROM A DARING HAND

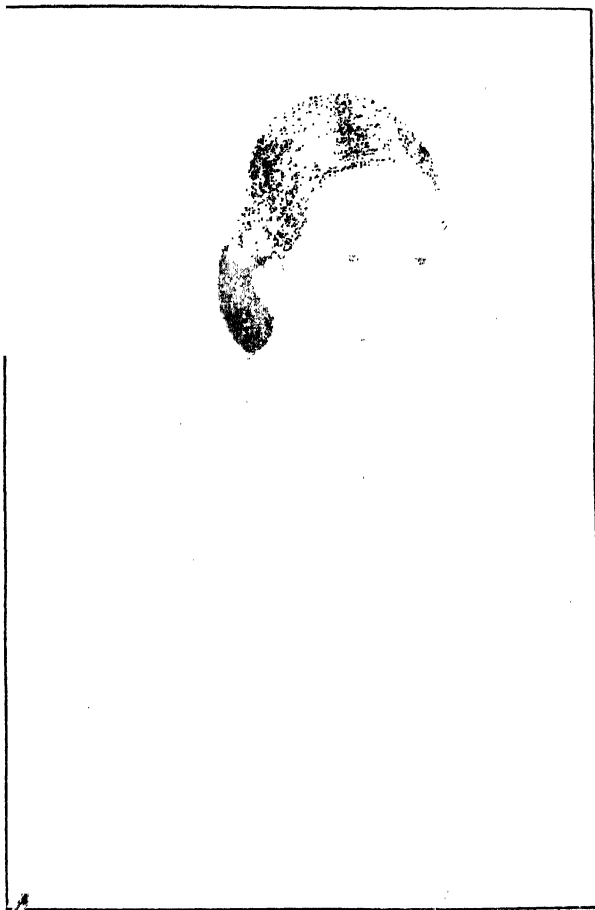
A widow since my childhood !

Scarcely had I put off my bridal robes when, as a child of twelve, it was my lot to be shrouded in a widow's white clinging garments.

Since then I have ruled as mistress in my father's house, where my word is law and all my wishes are fulfilled even before they are spoken. My parents shower their love on me in a thousand streams. They could not bear to see me bereft of all my ornaments, or to let me dress all in white—the garb of death, the shroud—without a coloured border or a ribbon, to relieve the deadliness. But when I grew up and realized my sad lot, I followed strictly the rules and privations of widowhood. Even to please my parents I would not wear then such simple ornaments even as bangles, or change my white robe for coloured garments except black ones, sometimes. And I can understand why widows wear that sombre hue in western lands, for it is the symbol of despair. And I have lost all hope of earthly happiness.

The husband whom I mourn, for whom I send my prayers heavenwards, has faded from my

IMMORTELLE FROM A DARING HAND.



A widow since my childhood.

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mind, and my marriage seems now a dream. But I must cherish his memory, and worship it. To think of another in his place, if only for a minute, would be a sin. And I have one link with the past, one sacred relic that binds me to the days that might have been, and that is my husband's faded photograph. I keep it in a sandal-wood box, and that box is always with me, and when my heart becomes faint, and faith in the justice of God grows dim, when life itself is an agony and the future seems all darkness, all gloom, then I bring out the faded photograph and gaze long and intently on it, for it has a powerful magic. It sends strength back to my heart, revives hope, promises a happier future and fills me with strange joy.

“Never was night so dark but it saw a brighter dawn” whispers the faded photograph. After all, a single life is but a small chapter in the Book of Time! a tiny volume in the Library of Eternity. Can the great God banish joy from the heart of one of His creatures forever? No, no. Only hope, poor soul, and peace will be given you.

Once and only once did I put into the sandal-wood box something besides the faded photograph—a bunch of Immortelles, gathered from a mountain peak by the daring hand of one who

desired to give me pleasure. I was seventeen then, and staying at Nainital with my only brother, who was an Indian Civil Servant. He had adopted the English style of living while abroad and had kept to it after his return to India, and while on a holiday with him, I did not observe the rules of the zenana very closely. I did not dine with English people, but I received them in my brother's house, and I kept my purdah only with people of my own race.

It was a Sunday morning, and we were sitting on the verandah. My brother was lying back in an easy chair, smoking his gurguri, and holding in his hand an illustrated paper. And I was sitting on a cushion at his feet, and watching the tiny clouds of smoke that rose from his pipe. Presently a servant brought a visitor's card to my brother, who, looking at it, exclaimed, joyfully :—

“Why it's my old friend ‘the Angel!’ Show the gentleman here, Sepoy.”

“Mr. Chatterjee!” I said, for I had often heard my brother speak of this friend, nicknamed “the Angel.” And I rose to go away.

But my brother stopped me, saying :—“That will never do. Chatterjee is sure to hear that you receive English people here, and as he is a

great friend of mine, he will be offended if you are not introduced to him."

So I stayed.

II

Mr. Chatterjee was our guest for a week. We met often, and although we did not talk much, before long he began to occupy all my thoughts. He was a handsome man, and he seemed to me to be like a star that outshone everyone else. Strange and unknown feelings came over me, and I seemed to live in a new world and I experienced intense happiness. But I could not lift my eyes from the ground when Mr. Chatterjee was present. If, by any chance, our eyes met, I felt strangely shy, and drooped my eyelids, and all the little speeches I had prepared remained unspoken. I would say something next time, I thought, but when I heard Mr. Chatterjee's foot steps, then my heart beat so fast that I became dumb. I could not understand myself, and all our visitor saw of me was a shy little girl, with downcast eyes and flushed cheeks. Thus a week passed, a week so happy, so full of new experience that the days seemed hours, and the hours were like minutes.

And during that week—I confess it now with sorrow and remorse—I did not once open the sandal-wood box to look at the faded photograph.

All too soon came the last day of Mr. Chatterjee's visit. But that day was still ours, and my brother planned for it a quiet picnic on the highest peak at Nainital—Tiger Hill.

How beautiful the air felt that day! How laden it was with fragrance, light and happiness! Never in all my life shall I forget it.

My brother and his friend were on horse back, and I followed in a dandy, sometimes being close to them and at other hidden by a winding of the path. Yet I felt his presence all the time, just as I received the scent of the wild roses from the distance.

Oh! that beautiful summer morning. The mountains were covered with foliage and the delicate hues of wild roses, mixing with the green, made the scenery enchanting. The air was filled with delicious perfumes, and I felt giddy with joy and excitement.

I wanted to gather the roses and hold them in my hands. But the dandy men did not live in my rose-garden, and all they cared for was to reach their destination and get rid of their burden. I could pick roses in abundance at the top of the mountain they told me, and they trudged on rapidly to the summit of Tiger Hill.

What a magnificent and splendid scene! The mountains, as if touched by the wand of magic,

lay beneath our feet, and Tiger Hill—the loftiest peak of all—afforded us a vision into the outstretched world of space that made my heart leap. Here the glorious snowy range was revealed to us in all its magnificence, and I stood like one in a dream. But alas! I knew that the dream would vanish too soon.

The servants had pitched a small tent for us, and after taking some refreshment, I went to search for flowers. But flowers there were none at that altitude, only patches of sickly-looking grass grew on the mountain's summit. Great was my disappointment, and I blamed the troublesome dandy men, who had prevented me from picking roses on the way up the mountain. And that was not the only annoyance they caused me, for at four in the afternoon, while the sun was still high in the heavens, those obstinate hill people insisted on going down the mountain saying that the descent would be dangerous after sunset. I was happy, I was young, and I could not understand danger, but I was afraid to express my feelings, so I timidly suggested that we should walk part of the way down. And this my brother agreed to, and we started for home, the dandy men and the syces following us.

We had not gone far when I saw, to my joy,

some flowers growing in a cluster amongst the ranges of the hills nearby. Oh! how beautiful those flowers! I cried, with childish glee "I wish I could get them, but they are out of reach."

"No, they are not out of reach" said Mr. Chatterjee, and in a moment he had gone to fetch them, leaving me trembling with delight and astonishment.

The flowers seemed near enough, but loose boulders were scattered on the mountain peak, and no path led to it. The attempt was rash and full of danger, yet on he went, now precipitating down rapidly, now climbing with a firm step, now steadying himself, now jumping from rock to rock. My brother cheered him and chided me, and I stood speechless. Strange and inexplicable feelings came over me while I watched Mr. Chatterjee. I was delighted with his daring. I admired his courage. For the first time in my life I felt the woman's power in me, and with that feeling a new and delightful world opened before me. I felt no fear for Mr. Chatterjee, I watched him with a strange fascination while he leapt from rock to rock, but when he gained in safety, this side of the hill where we were waiting a sigh of relief escaped my lips.

My brother hurried me into the dandy, for the sun was nearing the horizon, and the hardly won offering was not brought to me then.

It was late when we reached our bungalow. The light of the full moon seemed unusually bright and beautiful and I looked up at the moon once and then I hurried inside. Mr. Chatterjee followed me to the drawing-room, with flowers in his hand, and asked :—

“ Will you accept these flowers? They are not roses, but Immortelles.”

He looked so happy, so brave and handsome, that I thought a revelation of the Divinity was in his face. I took the flowers, and our hands met. I trembled then, and I could not utter a word of thanks. We looked into each other's eyes in silence, for a moment. But the spell was soon broken, for my brother came into the room. Together we went to dinner, and I sat silently at the table, for, being a widow, I could not join in the meal. My brother carried on the greater part of the conversation, for Mr. Chatterjee spoke scarcely at all, and directly the meal was over, he wished us good-night and went to his own room.

The following day he went away.

.Of my sorrow I cannot write even now very coherently. But in the dead silence of that

night a flood of tears came to me, and then I took out of the sandal-wood box the faded photograph. I placed it before me, I prostrated myself before the holy relic as we do before the image of the god Krishna. I confessed, I asked for forgiveness.

Did consolation come to me? Yes, in time; but as the river must travel its whole length before reaching the sea, and as a tree must grow for many years before bearing fruit, so a human sorrow must fulfil its cycle before peace can follow it. When at last, I replaced the faded photograph in the box, I laid with it the Immortelles,—my heart's offering to my holy relic.

III

I met Mr. Chatterjee only once again, and that was six months after the mountain picnic. We were returning home for my brother's wedding, and at the Bankipore Station we saw Mr. Chatterjee standing on a platform, waiting for a train. He was not alone then. His bride was with him. Having some minutes to wait, they came into our compartment, where the conversation was light and pleasant. My brother complained that he had not been invited to his friend's wedding, and said, jokingly, that he had been done out of a good dinner.

Mrs. Chatterjee assented, and said :—

“I have a similar complaint to make Mr. Ganguli! I have been done out of a wedding present.”

While they were passing a severe sentence on Mr. Chatterjee, I took out of the sandal-wood box the bunch of Immortelles, and said to Mrs. Chatterjee :—

“Here is a wedding present, if you will accept it.”

She took the flowers with a smile.

“O, thank you so much,” she said, “How real they look!”

“They are real” I told her.

She seemed surprised, and said :—

“I thought they were imitation. What are they called? I have never seen such flowers before.”

“They grow on high mountains,” I told her “and they are called Immortelles.”

“When did you gather them?”

“Six months ago.”

“And they are fresh still! Look!” she added, turning to her husband. “Are they not wonderful?”

Mr. Chatterjee looked at the flowers and answered “Yes,” but his voice was almost inaudible. Then the bell rang for our train to

depart, and Mr. and Mrs. Chatterjee wished us good-bye and hurried away.

That night I had a beautiful dream. An angel came to me and led me away from earth. We soared high, higher, higher, and at last we reached the abode of the Gods—the holy mountain Kailash. There a soft but glorious light surrounded us, and the face of my angel guide shone with celestial radiance; and lo! I recognised in him the original of the faded photograph, and I knew that I was with my husband. Unknown bliss came upon me, heavenly joy filled my heart, and when I awoke, tears were heavy, on my eyelashes—tears of sorrow—or tears of happiness.

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LAJJAVATI
OR
(THE SENSITIVE PLANT)

I

Her real name was not Lajjavati. But she was so frail, so sensitive, that the least rebuke caused her to shrink. Merely a harsh word from one she loved, and her fair face flushed with shame and pain, and tears filled her beautiful eyes, making her look like some sweet flower bathed in dew. Attempting to laugh and thus to conceal her feelings, she often displayed a strange, delicate beauty, did this little girl; so they called her Lajjavati—the Sensitive Plant.

Her parents worshipped her, for they knew full well that all this sensitiveness was the expression of a heart filled with deep and loving emotions. And who could not help loving Lajjavati, who shed so much joy around her? So, amidst sunshine and dew, the happy days of her childhood were passed.

Then came the great change—the change that must come in the life of every Hindu girl;

relations who were of inferior position. Like every one belonging to an ancient aristocratic family of antequarian type, he thought that to allow such a thing would lower the dignity of the house and that if her own people wished to see her they must conform to etiquette and come over to her husband's house to meet her.

In consequence, poor Fulcoomari had not been allowed to re-enter the home of her childhood. But now the time had come for the stern father-in-law to lay down his earthly burden, and the restrictions he had imposed being removed, Fulcoomari was to enter the house of her birth for the first time after fourteen years absence.

Lajjavati was not allowed to reflect long, however, on what was about to happen, for her mother-in-law began to give orders. Who was to cook that day? The elder sister-in-law? Well, let them remember that Fulcoomari was the wife of a rich man, and this was her first visit home after many years absence. Let them see that nothing was wanting and that her daughter received due attention.

With these words the stern mother-in-law departed, and Lajjavati had time to reflect on the approaching visit. She had never seen Fulcoomari, but she had heard much about her

sister-in-law. The day on which Fulcoomari would arrive had dawned auspiciously. Must she not be the embodiment of bliss, since her coming foreshadowed so much happiness? The gloom of the domestic surroundings in which Lajjavati dwelt, had often seemed to her unbearable; but now the darkness was illumined by a light that had not shone before in that cold atmosphere. Her meek little soul became uplifted by a great joy, a joy, she had not known before in the house of her husband's parents.

II

Never is there greater happiness in a Hindu home than when a daughter returns there for a visit. Fulcoomari had been away for many years. Moreover she was the wife of a very rich man, and that fact no doubt added to the importance of her visit.

The Chowdhury's home was soon filled with noise and bustle. The daughters-in-law and the maid-servants—busy with their respective task—were all eagerness and excitement. The mistress of the house superintended and gave orders. And the children ran about, joyfully discussing the coming of a great event. When, in the midst of all this confusion, a sonorous voice suddenly announced that the expected

visitor was arriving, the excitement reached its climax. The servants went to take up their stand in the garden, and the mother hurried downstairs to receive her daughter.

Lajjavati could bear the strain no longer, and, in spite of a rebuke from her elder sister-in-law, she, too, hastened to the scene. She dared not, of course, go boldly forward, but a door having been left ajar, she peeped shyly through the crevice.

And Oh! the splendour of it!

Her little timid heart almost stopped beating when a palanquin, covered with a rich cloth, and having four male attendants in livery—two in front and two behind—and on either side a maid servant wearing a silk sari and a gold necklace, was brought to the entrance.

What then must she be whom the palanquin screened from view?

How wretched, how miserable her own little life then appeared to Lajjavati! A wall of gold seemed to separate her from this woman, a wall that friendship could never cross over.

But, little Sensitive Plant, this time you are not to be disappointed, for the supreme moment of your life has now come. See! The door of the palanquin opens, and outsteps a lady—plainly dressed, smiling, dignified, and with a

face that bears the stamp of a noble and generous heart, a heart that draws towards itself all who come within its radius.

And so, the little lady who had hidden herself behind the door suddenly felt her whole being filled with a strange happiness, and thought she saw a new life opening before her. She returned to the kitchen a changed creature. Once more her frolicsome childlike ways returned, and, taking a handful of rice, she scattered it over her sister-in-law. But the latter turned angrily on her, telling her to put aside unseemly jests and attend to her duties. And when she still laughed, the elder woman reminded her that she was in the house of her father-in-law. Such things might do for her own father's house, but they were quite out of place here.

Then Lajjavati's little timid heart was touched to the quick. She laughed still, but the inevitable tears came into her eyes. Poor child! Once more the nature of her childhood had come upon her, once again had come that sweet mingling of smiles and tears.

Fulcoomari had gone upstairs with her mother; but when the time came for the meal, she came down, and then the sisters-in-law vied one with another in showing her the necessary attention. A sumptuous meal had been pre-

pared and all that their culinary art could produce was now placed before the visitor.

With the elder sister-in-law, Fulcoomari was already acquainted, and after greeting her cordially, rebuked her gently for preparing such an elaborate meal.

“Am I the wife of your preceptor that you should do all this for me?” she asked jokingly.

“It would almost seem so, otherwise you would not have been away so long,” came the soft reply from behind a half-lowered veil “Please sit down and do justice to the meal. That is the greatest boon you can bestow upon us.”

Then Fulcoomari noticed for the first time the veiled figure of her younger sister-in-law, and asked :—

“Who is she?”

“Why, don’t you know her? She is younger brother’s wife” replied her mother. “Well, no, how could you?”

And then the old lady gave vent to torrent of abuse against the “black-faced” father-in-law who had prevented her from seeing her child for so many years.

“He would not even send you to Hem’s wedding” she continued “Oh! Ful, had I but

LAJJAVATI or SENSITIVE PLANT.



She lifted Lajjavati's veil.

known all this I would never have married into that house."

But Fulcoomari paid no heed to her mother's angry words. She was attracted by the little white figure that stood shyly aside, and going to Lajjavati, she asked :—

" May I see your face ?"

She lifted Lajjavati's veil, and looking at the charming face on which a pure, sweet heart had left its imprint, exclaimed delight :—

" You are a good girl, indeed ! I am glad my brother has brought home a beautiful wife."

A flood of sunlight entered Lajjavati's timid little heart. She quickly lowered her veil and busied herself with the dishes, placing them before her sister-in-law.

III

Lajjavati had attended to her duties cheerfully, and for many days they had not seemed to her so light. And now she was going upstairs, where she hoped to see Fulcoomari again. O ! that cheerful face ! Those tender looks and affectionate words lingered in her heart, and like a newly married girl she could scarcely steady her hasty steps and keep a serious countenance as she hurried up the staircase. But on the landing she met her little daughter who was but lately

married, a girl about ten years old and still called by her pet name Punturani, which means baby queen. Sometimes when a match is considered a very good one, parents marry their daughters even before twelve. But in that case the girl doesn't go to their husband's house until of a suitable age.

Punturani asked :—

“Mama, will you let me have my hairpins, ribbons and ornaments? Auntie is going to braid my hair.”

Lajjavati felt as if she had dropped from the clouds.

“Your hair ornaments, child?” she said, in a frightened voice, “I have not seen them.”

“But don't you remember, Mama? I left them with you while you were preparing the vegetable.”

Lajjavati remembered nothing.

“Did you tell me that you had left them with me?” she asked.

“I left them with you” cried the child nervously, knowing that she had dropped the ornaments carelessly and had then gone away, and being afraid of her grandmother. “O! Mama, do give them to me.”

Poor Lajjavati! She thought it only could be her fault: she did not understand that someone

else might be to blame. So she gave no reply to the child, but went downstairs to look for the ornaments.

Meanwhile a maidservant, who was preparing the guest chamber, informed the mistress of the house that everything was ready except the bed quilt and as no suitable quilt was available, she was told to fetch a new quilt that had recently been placed in Lajjavati's room.

"Hem is going up-country this evening," said the mistress to the maid-servant. "Go and ask for the new quilt from his room. And then come back quickly and I will give you an older one to put in its place."

The maid servant returned with the quilt, and said :—

"Oh! that careless, little mistress! I have never seen anyone like her. Just to think of it! Punturani left ornaments with her and she has lost them. She is looking for them now. I had to fetch the quilt for the DIDIMONI'S bed myself, for she could not attend to it."

"Ornaments!" cried her mistress "What ornaments?"

"Hair flowers, Ma, gold hair flowers. And I suppose we shall be accused of having taken them. She loses everything. But please see, Ma, that we poor servants do not suffer for it."

The matron became furious. Was not this the day of her daughter's home-coming, the most eventful day she had seen for many a year, and was it to be made inauspicious by the loss of ornaments?

She hastened to the room of her elder daughter-in-law, and there she gave vent to her feelings.

"Have you heard" she said "that the Choto Bau has lost ornaments? Only the other day she lost a silk sari, and to-day she has lost ornaments. She is such a careless girl!"

"But she must have lost them by accident," said Fulcoomari, who happened to be present. "She could not have done it on purpose."

"This mild rebuke from her daughter only increased the wrath of the irate lady, and she cried:—

"O! child, you do not know her. If you did, you would speak differently. A few days more, and then you will understand her better. She may have a fair face, but her heart is black enough. As for me, I am quite sure that she has done all this with full intention. Little indeed is this loss to her. The loss is ours, for we shall have to replace the ornaments. This being the day of your home-coming, she would, of course, do something to make it inauspicious."

The elder sister-in-law remained silent: but Fulcoomari, who was not at all convinced, said:—

“At any rate, let us go and investigate.”

So the trio went in search of the culprit, and they had not far to go, for Lajjavati had come up the staircase after a fruitless search for the missing things, and was now on the balcony.

“What ornaments have you lost again?” her mother-in-law demanded.

Poor Lajjavati! She had never lost an ornament in her life.

“LAKSHMI will surely cease to live in this house, if these things continue,” cried the angry lady. “Moreover, how can we send the girl to her father-in-law’s house without hair ornaments? Her relations will question her about them, and will it not be a disgrace to us if we have to admit that she has none?”

For once Lajjavati ventured to reply. From behind the half drawn veil, she said, timidly:—

“They did not belong to Punturani. My father gave them to me, and I had only lent them, to her.”

Poor child! She would have done better to have remained silent.

“Indeed!” cried her mother-in-law “Then we

must certainly ask your pardon. Are we to endure all your foolish acts in silence? If by chance a word slips out of me unguardedly in a most exasperating moment must you immediately throw your father's house in my teeth! Just listen, Ful, to the way she insults your mother."

The elder sister-in-law championed the mother's cause, saying that the trinkets might be the gift of Lajjavati's father, but that did not alter the matter, the loss being all the same. The mother-in-law maintained her attitude unaltered. "Never mind!" she said, "let everything be lost." She would not open her mouth again. Indeed, were she not the daughter of Hari Mohan Ghose, she would never be able to manage a household with such a girl as Lajjavati in it.

"Come away, child, and have no more to do with this affair," she said, and taking the arm of Fulcoomari, she led her daughter away. Then she walked through the house telling everyone about the dreadful thing that had happened, sure to find sympathy there, because no one dared to gain say her.

And when Lajjavati's husband returned home to prepare for his journey up country, she needs must consult him about various matters, and

then shift the conversation to the subject that was uppermost in her mind.

“Dear son,” she said to him, “you are now a householder. Would it not be better for you to send me to Benares, and let me spend the remainder of my life in peace in the holy city? Really the insults I receive in this house are becoming unbearable.”

And then she poured forth a volley of accusations against Lajjavati.

She was sure to win the day, for no Hindu dare prefer his wife to his mother. Hem soon felt much annoyed at the conduct of his wife, and doubly vexed because the loss of the ornaments boded ill for his journey. So when he entered Lajjavati's room a little later, he was in anything but a pleasant mood. He reproved her severely, in fact, his anger overstepped all limits. If these disturbances were to continue, he told her, then it would be best for him to go away and never return again.

Lajjavati remained silent, the picture of despair, but unable to find words with which to explain things to her husband. Sensitiveness and timidity made her speechless; and yet if only she could have spoken all might have been well, so he left her without a word of farewell, a word of forgiveness, and when he was gone, her

little weak heart gave way. Bathed in a flood of tears, the only solace this frail little woman could find for her troubles, her heart seemed to break. And all this for hair ornaments! But, alas! how many women's souls are crushed by the little things of every day existence!

IV

And Fulcoomari, was she glad to be under the paternal roof once more? Fourteen years had elapsed since the day when she had been taken, a timid little child-wife, to her father-in-law's house. Time had wrought many changes in the home that she had left as a happy child. Her mother, once beautiful and cheerful, had become old, and oh! so stern. The sister-in-law, to whom she had bidden farewell as a girl, had grown to be a woman, yes, a woman like herself. Her brothers, whom she had left as half-grown youths, had become men. And then the many children, whom she had never seen before! All seemed so new, so strange to her! And strangest of all was this sweet-faced girl, Lajjavati. And oh! the conduct of the family towards Lajjavati! Was this indeed the home in which her sunny childhood had been spent, the home she had so longed to see again? Fulcoomari's heart grew heavy while she thought of it.

She had tried to plead her little sister-in-law's case with her mother; but she had only made matters worse. Now she would go to Lajjavati, for she could at least give the poor child a few words of comfort. She met her brother leaving the room, his face bearing the imprint of what had happened. She stopped him and began to explain, and she found him more yielding than her mother. He was ready to admit that Lajjavati might not be to blame for the loss of the ornaments, but that was not the point, he said. How dared she speak to his mother as she had done? Fulcoomari, gently persuading, explained it all to him. Lajjavati had not spoken harshly to the mother, she had only attempted to clear matters up. But the mother, being old and irritable, had misconstrued her words. And now he, too, had turned upon the poor little sensitive girl. Just think how intensely grieved she must be! And that on the very day when he was leaving her to go on a journey!

"Now brother, do you really think that she is at fault?" Fulcoomari asked.

"No" he answered, and he returned to his wife's room.

Lajjavati lay prostrate with grief, and going near, he sat down beside her.

“Lajjavati!” there was a tender cadence in his voice. And then he explained to her gently that he knew all, and that he would henceforth try to understand her better. If she would forgive him now, then he would never scold her again.

And here let us draw the curtain, for the Gods may understand the happiness of that moment, but a cold world never will. After twelve long years the little Sensitive Plant saw the cloud that had hung between her husband and herself disappear, and for the first time she received his sympathy and affection to her heart’s content.

The hours of the night were far advanced. A calm stillness rested on the house. But Lajjavati could not sleep. Her little, love-starved soul had, at last found its own. The great prize she had won to-day seemed to her almost too precious, and, like a miser counting his coin, she went over the moments that had passed, hugging them more closely to her heart with every recurring thought. “But how had this sudden change come about? Who could have told him?” These things were a puzzle to her. Suddenly she was started by a slight noise, and looking up, she saw Fulcoomari standing beside her.

“Sister, have you not retired yet?”

Retired? No, how could she think of it? She had accompanied her husband to the outer door on his departure, and had then returning and laid down on the carpet. Her emotions had stirred her very soul. How could she think of retiring? "But I see that you have not retired yet, either, sister," she said.

"I lay down, but could not sleep. I came to see you, Lajjavati. Come now, let me fetch a lamp, I cannot see your face clearly."

"Fulcoomari brought the lamp and then looked long and tenderly into the sweet child-like face that she had learned to love so dearly.

"Is it really twelve years since you were married, Lajjavati? Tell me were you still younger then, than you are now? You look so like a little girl, one would think you were a young bride."

Lajjavati laughed the silvery laugh of a child.

"Tell me, sister, how came you to be of this strange type?"

"What type?" asked Lajjavati looking surprised.

"You are so calm, so gentle. Even when you are accused, you cannot vindicate yourself."

There was a touch of sadness in the younger woman's voice as she replied:—

"I cannot. Whenever I attempt to explain

matters, they become more complicated. I cannot find the right words. It seems to me that everybody misunderstands me."

"Even my brother? But he understood everything this evening after I had explained to him what happened."

So it was Fulcoomari who had done all this! It was to her kind intercession that she owed her husband's love! Her heart overflowed with gratitude, and her beautiful eyes soon filled with tears.

"Whenever your brother reproaches me, I can only weep," she replied.

"But that is because you cannot make him understand you."

"How can I? When he is vexed with me, he does not even ask me to explain."

"Poor, sensitive child! How can any one ever be vexed with you?"

"Ah! Sister, a few days more and you, too, will change towards me. It seems that nobody can help getting angry with me."

"Never, little Sister, never!"

"But when you see my faults?"

Fulcoomari smiled at this childlike argument.

"No, little girl, not even then. I shall always love you, no matter what others may do."

Lajjavati pressed Fulcoomari's hand, Oh ! how she loved her.

“ Is this possible ? ” she said pensively.

Fulcoomari's noble heart was deeply touched and when she left the room her eyes were moist.

Lajjavati went to her bed, but she could not sleep. This night had brought so much to her ! Her husband's affection, his sister's tender words ; these things had come into her life so suddenly that it all seemed like a dream ; she could not believe that it was really true. So when the sun rose, she was still awake. She attempted to rise, but felt her head reeling and lay down again.

Presently Fulcoomari came to her room. Lifting the curtain gently, she peeped in. Lajjavati made another attempt to rise, but the pallor of her face betrayed her.

“ You are ill, sister, tell me what ails you ? ” Fulcoomari said anxiously.

No, Lajjavati would not admit it.

“ But you are shivering, you must be cold. Do cover yourself.”

But where was the quilt ? Now that cold night was spent, Lajjavati noticed that she had had no bed cover. Where was it indeed ? The maid-servant had taken it away, and careless woman that she was, had neglected to replace

it by the one given to her by her mistress for that purpose.

“Lajjavati, have you spent the night without a bed-cover?” asked Fulcoomari whose anxiety had now heightened. “How came all this about? Where is your quilt?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps the maid took it out for an airing and forgot to bring it in again,” said Lajjavati and she left the bed.

Fulcoomari touched her forehead.

“Listen, sister, you are ill, your forehead is hot. Do lie down again.”

“But I have my household duties to attend to. It is only a slight headache. A bath will cure it.”

Fulcoomari, however, knew better.

“I believe you have to cook to-day,” she said “Please, don’t bother about them. I myself will take your place in the kitchen.”

If a thunderbolt had suddenly fallen down before her, Lajjavati could not have more astonished.

“Have you gone mad, THAKURJI? You go into the kitchen to cook? Believe me, I am quite well.”

But she was obliged to sit down again.

Fulcoomari was still pleading with her to lie down and rest, when lo! the maid-servant

appeared with the missing quilt.

“ Here is the quilt,” she boldly announced, “ I forgot to bring it yesterday. Fuel is being wasted in the stove Bau-didi. Are you not going to cook to-day ?”

Lajjavati told the maid to go on with her work, and that she would be down soon.

Fulcoomari still tried to dissuade her from going.

“ Will you not listen to me, sister ?”

Poor Lajjavati became nervous. Her sister-in-law's affection touched her deeply. “ How could I allow you to go into the kitchen, Thakurji ?” she replied sadly.

“ But why not, child ? Am I then a stranger in this house ? Why do you not deal frankly with me ?”

Fulcoomari became vexed with the persistent little girl, and was about to leave the room.

But now Lajjavati explained.

“ Don't you understand, THAKURJI ? Don't you see that mother will get angry with me if I allow you to do my work ?”

“ But I shall settle everything with mother.”

Lajjavati became silent. She reflected for a while. In her little world there was naught save the daily routine, and to have that broken seemed to her a great occurrence. Besides, the

severe treatment to which she was subjected had made her too timid to accept any new proposal, and then there was the inevitable thought coming uppermost again, that she might cause pain to another. This made her little face flush. "Oh! Thakurji" she cried, "No, no, this cannot be."

"Is this your final decision? Good then, do as you think best. But remember, I shall not eat the food you cook."

And now half angry Fulcoomari left the room. Lajjavati called her back, but she did not return. The inevitable had come. The sister-in-law whom she loved so dearly, she, too, had grown angry with her, and yet not a day had passed since her arrival. Lajjavati was disconsolate. Meanwhile her head was throbbing, and she felt excited and feverish. It was Fulcoomari's great love for her that had caused her to grow angry. Lajjavati felt that. And yet it pierced her heart. And now the foolish little girl wept and wept. The world seemed so dreary, so lonely to her. "Would that I could die," she sobbed, "for even Thakurji has grown angry with me."

VI

She could not remain in her room long, however, for duty called, and she must be up and

doing. What should she see, however, when she arrived in the kitchen, but Fulcoomari already busy at the stove. Poor Ful! She acted awkwardly and it required no expert to guess that she was but a tyro in this branch of domestic work. She needed instructions from the elder daughter-in-law, which the latter laughingly gave, while she busied herself with the vegetables. With a DEKCHI of *dal* on one side and a pan of boiling oil on the other, Fulcoomari had her hands full.

“What am I to do now, the oil is boiling?” And again:—“how the *dal* has commenced to boil; see, it already overflows the kettle, what is to be done?” Rescue came too late, a little of the boiling *dal* dropped on Fulcoomari’s bare foot. Just then Lajjavati arrived on the scene. Oh! the dread that overpowered her and the pain! Her little pale face turned paler still. How quickly she attended to the burn! She felt the pain more than Fulcoomari did herself. What would she not have given if she could have borne all the pain for her beloved sister-in-law.

But, poor little girl, the stars are against you, for in the door-way already has appeared the form you dread so much. There was a moment of eloquent silence, and then, came the flood of

angry words that all who knew her feared. Her daughter cooking? By whose orders was this done? And the misfortune of it, for she had burnt her foot. Well, what wonder, for was it not all the work of the princesses over there? They must be satisfied now that they had succeeded in burning their sister-in-law. And yet her daughter was home on a short visit only; and so forth and so on.

The elder sister-in-law pleaded her own case. She had told Fulcoomari not to enter the kitchen, but if the latter insisted, what could she do? If Lajjavati was ill, she was perfectly willing to take her place at the stove, but who had asked Ful to come and cook?

"Oh that's it, is it?" retorted the angry lady. "The princesses is pleading illness, and therefore my daughter must do her work. Hear me, Ful, daughter, come away, or I swear by the soul of my mother I shall strike my head against the ground. There never was another such a daughter-in-law."

Fulcoomari cast a glance of reproof at her elder sister-in-law "I have come here of my own accord," she explained. "Just let me finish this dish, mother, and then I shall come."

But it was wasting words, for the old lady would have her own way. "It would be a nice

thing to you to do the cooking," she said "and that girl to sit by idle! Do listen to me, or you will spoil her entirely, for believe me, the like of her I have never seen before." So saying, she took hold of her daughter's hand and pulled her bodily away; and the remainder of the morning was spent by her in watching Fulcoomari so closely, that the latter could not escape from her presence.

VII

Lajjavati stepped quietly up to the stove and attended to her duties in silence. She finished her work, but at the end of it, she found her strength gone, she retired to her room and lay down. It was left to the elder daughter-in-law to see that the guest received proper attention while eating that day. Little Punturani called her *Pishima* (paternal aunt) to come and dine. Fulcoomari came, accompanied by her mother, who noticed immediately the absence of her younger daughter-in-law. "Where is her ladyship" she enquired sharply "Does she consider it beneath her dignity to come here?"

Little Punturani replied "Mama is quite ill, she is lying down."

"This is all pretence!" said the mother-in-law. "She always falls ill when there is any work to be done."

But Fulcoomari grew very anxious, knowing that if Lajjavati were not seriously ill, she would not fail to be present during the meal.

"She has been ill since morning," she explained to her mother, "and the work she has done in the kitchen has not improved her condition either. I only pray that her illness may not take a serious turn."

"You speak strangely, Fulcoomari, Why do you forebode ill, and at this time, too? She may have a slight headache, but why should she lie down on that account? Such things may do all very well in a rich house, but people, in our circumstances cannot afford to cultivate such habits."

Fulcoomari remained silent. But after breakfast she went to Lajjavati's room, and her mother, involuntarily, followed her.

"Her forehead is as hot as fire," she said, placing her hand tenderly on Lajjavati's brow, "and she is shivering with cold. Where is her quilt again? Last night she had none at all. She was exposed to the cold the entire night, and that has probably caused her to fall ill."

"The lady of the house began to see that Lajjavati was really ill, but still she was unrelenting.

"The daughter of the prince Khanja Khan

returned the quilt I gave her!" She said ironically. "Could she not pass a single night with it? Just because her quilt was exchanged for another one, must that put her on a sick-bed?"

Poor Lajjavati had not heard a word of the arrangement about the quilts, and when, while arranging her bed in the morning, she had seen a quilt that did not belong to her room, she naturally concluded that the maid had made a mistake, and had returned it by Punturani.

Fulcoomari wished to hear no more on this subject.

"Let the matter drop," she said calmly, "only see that the missing article is replaced."

Her mother left the room, and the two sisters-in-law were left alone. Fulcoomari looked at the sweet pale face on the pillow, and the sight of it made heart ache. "Why did I not insist on cooking?" she said; "Perhaps then you might not have fallen ill."

Lajjavati's beautiful eyes grew moist. "No, sister, no," she answered, "that has not caused my illness. Only tell me that you are no longer angry with me. I cannot bear the thought of that, I cannot."

Fulcoomari's arms were around the little frail form, whose cheeks she moistened with her tears. "Never, sister, never. How could I ever

be angry with you? Only tell me, my little girl, that I have not really grieved you."

Lajjavati spoke no more. She placed her hand on Fulcoomari's breast and wept as she had never wept before. Yes, weep poor child, weep to your heart's content! Many tears have you shed in your short life, but never before on a heart so true. Weep so now, for after this you will weep no more.

What her husband and Fulcoomari had promised her came to pass. Lajjavati was never scolded again. A few days later a small cold form was carried from the house to find its resting place on the funeral pyre; and the world knew the little Sensitive Plant no more.

And the heartless mother-in-law, was she touched at last? Who knows? She gave way to loud lamentations, of course, but she still blamed the dead girl. No the burden of her song was ever the same.

"She lost her life through her own fault. In an angry mood she refused to use the quilt, and when she fell ill, she was too stubborn to tell anyone."

This sentiment was echoed by her—now—only daughter-in-law, and by the servants of the house, who, entering into the lamentations themselves, repeated the mother-in-laws words.

(It is not always politic to go contrary to the ruling head of an establishment).

And Fulcoomari? Ah! little Sensitive Plant, life has granted you one boon. For if those who leave this world still find comfort in the sincere tears of grief that are shed for them, then Lajjavati's life had its compensation, because for her a woman wept the tears that only a truly devoted heart can shed. Fulcoomari did not join in the loud lamentations, her grief was too great for that, she wished but to be alone.

"Oh! why, why?" called out her heart, in anguish, "Why did I not insist? Why did I allow the sick girl to go on and work? Oh! could I but clasp the little frail form to my heart once more, if only to ask her to forgive me, if only for a last caress,—that little love-starved soul, who loved so much and received so little in return!"

And this was Fulcoomari's home-coming, which had filled Lajjavati's heart with ecstasy and had brought eternal peace to a silently suffering soul—the home-coming, which alas! ended so sadly and the grief of which would follow Fulcoomari to the end of her days.

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THE NEW BANGLES

Mr. Behari Lal Sen was a man of gentle birth and independent spirits. His ancestors had seen better days ; but force of circumstance had compelled him to accept the humble position of a clerk, which to a man of his high birth and developed intellect was humiliating servitude. He felt this degradation so keenly that life itself seemed almost a burden to him. He had but one desire and ambition now and that was to prepare for his son Nalin a higher position, a more dignified place in life, a future worthy of his race. With this end in view he had send Nalin to England, to study for the Indian Civil Service, which is a stepping-stone to the highest and most honourable positions in the land. But this was a costly undertaking ; and Mr. Sen staked everything upon it. All his savings had been spent in this project, and now it had become necessary to send a further sum of one thousand rupees. After that if Nalin proved successful, all the father's troubles and anxieties would be fully recompensed ; if not, well then, he must resign himself to the Will of Providence.

And now the poor man had been trudging from house to house for several days, pleading with friends to assist him in raising a loan. In this way he had scraped together five hundred rupees. But where the remainder was to come from, he could not imagine. The family dwelling-place had already been mortgaged, and the family ornaments, too. He had been fortunate enough to get five hundred rupees, but where the remaining five hundred were to be found was a problem to which he saw no answer.

It was late in the evening when he returned, dis-heartened, to his home, where his wife awaited him with anxious countenance.

"Our Hema's fever has not yet left her," she said; "ought we not to call a doctor?"

Now this would mean more expense, and there was no money to meet it. He grew pensive, and after a pause replied:—

"Give her a dose of aconite. It is only a slight attack of fever. We need not call a doctor just yet. Let us wait a few days and see."

The poor woman knew what was in her husband's mind. She sighed, and said no more on the subject. But she had cheerful news for him, as well.

"I had a letter to-day from Manick," she

said. "He sent me five hundred rupees. Here it is."

So saying, she untied a knot in the corner of her SARI and brought out a letter which she handed her husband.

Mr. Sen read :—

"After many salutations, DIDI.

"You must have gone crazy in your old age. Why you sent your son to England is more than I can understand, since you have not sufficient means of your own and have to depend on the charity of others. I have my own wife and children to look after, and I may as well tell you plainly, and once for all, that it is impossible for me to provide for your family also. However, as Mr. Sen has educated me at his own expense, I am in duty bound to repay this debt. Therefore I am sending five hundred rupees. More than this I am neither willing, nor able, nor obliged to pay. So don't worry me every day with requests for money.

Your humble servant,
Sree Manik Lal Das."

Manick was his wife's younger brother and Mr. Sen had brought him up in his own house like a son, had educated him, and got him

married ; and it was only a few years since he had begun to earn his own living. He had never volunteered to help Mr. Sen ; the latter, moreover, had never before mentioned such a thing to his brother-in-law. It was only now, when reduced to utter helplessness, that the sister had asked her brother for a loan of one thousand rupees.

Mr. Sen was more than a little mortified as he read this unkind letter. Such gross ingratitude on the part of one for whom he had done so much ! What an insult, not only to himself, but to his wife as well ; for a life-time of care and devotion had been bestowed on this boy ! His pride had had to endure many a rebuff ere this ; he had suffered much and he was willing to suffer more ; but he could not bring himself to endure calmly such humiliation from one connected with him by the ties of kinship and affection.

“ Send back the money ” he said angrily and indignantly ; “ I don't want it.”

But his wife dissuaded him. She took a less gloomy view of the matter.

“ Why should we ? ” she calmly enquired. “ Would you spoil our son's whole future for such a trifle ? We have helped him so far on his way ; we must now face the end. Let Manik

speak rudely. When times are hard people must bear in silence. You know we *must* send the money by this Mail."

The husband yielded. He knew his wife was right. It was hard indeed to swallow this bitter pill, still, bear it he must for his son's sake. His wife's optimistic nature cheered him, "If Nalin passes," she continued hopefully, "then, thanks to the help of God, our troubles will be over. Be cheerful, my husband, and bear up a little longer."

This was a ray of hope to his despondent heart, although to him the prospect so far seemed very dark indeed. And after all, his wife's prophetic words proved true. A few days later came the welcome news that Nalin had passed the Civil Service Examination, and the gloom that had filled the house for so long gave place to rejoicing.

Mr. Sen's heart swelled with proud delight at the glad tidings, and when he went to his office that morning, he felt like one treading on air. His wife was beyond herself with delight; and, acting on the impulse of the moment, rushed into her sick daughter's room, crying:—

"Hema! Hema! Your *Dada* has passed."

Poor Hemaprabha, a girl of thirteen, was lying on her bed partly unconscious from the

stupor of fever, when the excited woman took her by the arm and shook her nervously, ejaculating :—

“Your *Dada* has passed! Your *Dada* has passed!”

The girl started; then, fixing her wandering gaze on her mother, her face brightened.

“When will DADA be home?” she asked, in feeble tones.

“Soon,” was the nervous reply.

“Shall I be able to see him?”

How sad and tired the poor child’s voice sounded!

In the first ecstasy of delight, the mother had forgotten her daughter’s illness; but these last words of the sick girl brought the fact back to her mind.

“Do not give way to evil forebodings, my child. God willing, you will certainly see your brother,” she replied as she stroked Hema’s hot brow.

But this time the mother’s prayers remained unanswered. Little Hemaprabha never saw her brother again. Before the good news had had time to grow old, Hema’s young life had ended. Thus, in the midst of their rejoicing, the poor parents were stricken with grief. The mother was utterly prostrated. God had given her two

children, one of whom He had called home. There was now but one remaining—her son, her only hope. Distracted with grief at the death of her daughter, she thought but of the day that would bring her son back to her. This was her one and only consolation. She could neither think nor speak of anything else. She now planned his marriage, and dwelt in fond imagination on the time when she would see him a prosperous householder. She would die amid her grand-children, leaving them all happy and contented.

Her friends came to comfort her, to weep with her, and to them she repeated daily anew the story of her sorrow and her hopes for her son's future. Among them were Bhabini and her mother. Bhabini had been the little friend and playmate of Hemaprabha while the latter was alive. The two girls, of about the same age, had been often together. At the sight of this child the mother's grief reached its height. She wept aloud as she embraced Bhabini and pressed her tenderly to her heart.

“Ah! my child,” she cried out in her agony, “she whom you have come to see is gone. She has left us. We shall never see her again.”

Bhabini, too, began to weep. But Nalin's

mother folded her in her arms in sorrow and fondness, crying, passionately :—

“Come to my heart, dearest child. You are the comfort of my days of sorrow. You are my daughter now. I will marry you to Nalin.”

The mothers had been friends for many years, and they had called each other “BEHAN” for a long time ; yet, until now, that expression had been for them only a term of endearment, of pretended relationship. They had not, so far, broached to each other the subject of their children’s marriage. Bhabini’s parents had been seeking far and wide for a son-in-law but had not as yet found one to their liking ; and so Bhabini was still unmarried.

They were by no means rich, and, moreover, they were somewhat fastidious in their choice of a bridegroom. These two circumstances made it rather difficult for them to find a suitable match for their daughter. When therefore Mrs. Sen, of her own accord, expressed a wish to make Bhabini her daughter-in-law, the parents gladly assented to the proposal. To have a Civilian for a son-in-law was indeed a rare piece of good fortune.

But Mr. Sen had his misgivings regarding the matter. He thought that Nalin should be consulted before any arrangement regarding his

future was made, and he spoke to his wife accordingly.

“It is just possible,” he remarked, “that our son may not be willing to enter into this marriage when he comes back. I think we ought not to proceed with the matter until after his return.”

But these words were wasted on his wife. Her darling was too dutiful a son to disobey his parents. Moreover she had quite made up her mind that Nalin would fall in love with Bhabini at first sight. And then, she argued, would the girl be kept unmarried for their sakes? It was not likely. There would certainly be no lack of suitors for such a pretty girl; and they would only end by losing her.

The master of the house has, as a rule, but little to say in the matrimonial arrangements of the family; it is for him to give his consent merely. So Mr. Sen soon accepted his wife's view of the matter, more especially as it was a time of mourning and he knew by his own feelings how distressed she must be. He had no wish to add to her troubles by going against her wishes; so he fell in with her arrangements.

Thus Bhabini became engaged to Nalin; and so great was the affection of Nalin's mother for her, that she became, as it were, one of the

family before her marriage. The girl and her mother were often invited to the house, and when they came, the former was not allowed to return for several days. In Bhabini's presence, the poor mother forgot her daughter's death and her son's absence. She made Bhabini the object of her tenderest care and devotion. When her future daughter-in-law was not there, she was not satisfied unless she was busy for her in some way, ever making plans for the future. The bangle-man, the toy-seller, the sari-woman, none of these people went away empty-handed from the house. Whenever she saw a pretty thing, she wished to buy it, and if unable to do so, she would heave a sigh of disappointment. Any novelty in dress attracted her attention as it had never done before ; a new sari or bodice, a new ornament,—Oh ! these might look well on Bhabini. It was more than her husband could do to meet her ever-varying orders, so she kept her neighbours busy too, securing all the novelties she demanded for her future daughter-in-law.

One day a friend visited her with her little daughter. The latter had her hair done up into a fashionable knot. Ah ! this was the very thing for Bhabini.

“Sister,” she said, “you must come over

to-morrow with your daughter. Bhabini will be here then, and you must teach me to do her hair like your daughter's—with a net. My son is coming straight from England, and you see our old-fashioned style of hair-dressing will hardly do then, so I must learn some new styles. I shall have to dress Bhabini nicely when he comes, you know."

The son's turn would, no doubt, come in time ; but for the present it was for the satisfaction of the mother that little Bhabini should be decked out in a new fashion each day. Gladly the lady friend accepted the invitation to come and teach the fashionable coiffure.

"Certainly," she said, "I shall be delighted to come."

"And be sure to bring one of those nets with you—now don't forget. I shall give you the money for it before you go."

When Bhabini was not in the house, no choice spices were put into the betel leaves, no tasty Rahu-heads or fresh Hilsa fish ever came to the house. And if the maid, disregarding orders, brought home some particularly nice fish from the market, she had to hurry off immediately to Bhabini's house with an invitation.

"Oh Mistress! you must send over BOUMA to-day. The mother has everything ready and

waiting for her. She will not take any food until she has seen her eat first."

After this, how could Bhabini's mother help sending her?

Kindness and love win all hearts. Bhabini also liked to go to her future mother-in-law's house. She began, in fact, to look on it as her own home, and on Nalin's mother as her own mother. She was no longer quite a child. Two years had elapsed since Hemaprabha's death, and Bhabini was now fifteen years old. Her girl friends were all married. And when she heard them talk of their husbands, telling each other their love tales, then Bhabini's thoughts wandered to Nalin. When she read of lovers in a novel, it seemed to her that she was reading her own life. When the book was finished, her mind would dwell on the memories of old days when she was a child and met Nalin. How nicely he used to talk to her! How kindly he used to show her pictures! One day he had brought a rose and fastened it carefully in her hair. And another time, when there was a great fête in honour of the Prince of Wales' visit, and Bhabini had come to watch the procession from Nalin's house, how eagerly he had pointed out everything to her!

As she recalled these incidents, a strange

gladness filled her heart. And along with this another idea now suggested itself shyly and timidly to her mind—this Nalin-da was to be her husband. The very thought of it made her cheeks burn. “How shall I go to him when he comes?” she asked herself. Perhaps he would show his affection for her as in the days of old. No, no, that would make her feel so shy! She hid her face in her hands for very shame, yet eagerly counted the days till Nalin’s return.

II

At last the counting is over. The two years necessary for further study after passing the Civil Service Examination, are now ended. To-day Nalin is coming home. Mr. Sen has gone to fetch him from the steamer. His wife, having finished Bhabini’s toilet, is busy in the kitchen preparing sweetmeats. Bhabini, standing before a mirror, is turning her head from side to side to see how her hair has been done, and while thus examining herself—who can tell what shy-unspoken thoughts make the blood rush to her face? Who knows why her heart throbs every now and again at the sound of fancied footsteps, and why she looks round, trembling? Once she started and hastily moved to the window behind the mirror, but she found

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Who knows why her heart throbs every now and again at the fancied footsteps, and why she looks round trembling. PAGE 108.

that her fears had been groundless. Then she calmly leaned her head out of the window and watched the scene before her eyes.

Right in front was Mitter's field, in which the trees were glittering in the rays of the setting sun, the lovely fresh green grass was waving, and the leaves stirring in the gentle evening breeze. It seemed to her that she had never looked on a scene so beautiful before. The very sunlight was vibrating with delight and the air palpitating with joy.

Suddenly her Dada Rama Prasad came into the room, and called out to her:—

“Bhabini, what are you doing here? Nalin has arrived. Come along. You are wanted downstairs.”

Beads of perspiration broke out on the girl's forehead, and she did not move. Rama Prasad came near, and, looking into her face, smiled a little. Bhabini turned red with bashfulness; she felt quite sure that her Dada was laughing at her finery. Rama Prasad, smiling still, took the hand of his little sister, and led her to the room where the others were sitting.

Nalin's mother took notice of her at once, and in proud delight called out:—

“Do you know her, Nalin? She was only a

little girl when you went away, and now see how she has grown !”

But Nalin did not remember her. He looked at her, and asked hesitatingly :—

“ Who is she ?”

It was her brother who replied :—

“ Why, Nalin, it is Bhabini.”

Nalin did recognise her now. He came to her, holding out his hand, and said, in English :—

“ Hulloo ! Bhabini. How you have grown ! How are you ?”

Now Bhabini’s knowledge of English was very slight indeed. She had not been wanting in zeal to learn the language ever since her engagement to Nalin, but who was there to teach her ? In spite of all her entreaties and persuasions, she had not been able to make her Dada go even through the First Book with her. She thought that Nalin was making fun of her because she did not know English, and she felt overcome with shame and turned all her wrath upon her Dada. If he had taught her properly, then she felt quite certain that she would have mastered the language by this time. Bashfulness and hesitation added a new charm to her face that Nalin’s mother did not fail to appreciate, and without further ceremony Mrs. Sen introduced her cherished project.

“My son,” she said, “did you see such a pretty girl in England? You will marry her first, and then join your appointment.”

Nalin smiled and coughed gently once or twice.

His mother spoke again,

“The arrangements for the wedding are all complete. It only remains to fix the day and send out the invitations. I think we had better have the ‘GAYE-HALUD’ next Sunday.”

At the outset Nalin had not thought that his mother was speaking seriously. But now he grasped the situation, and suddenly became confused. He remembered that his mother had written to him several times about some such an arrangement, but he had thought that she was only trying to sound him, and he had kept quiet. Now he understood that his silence had unfortunately been taken for consent.

Mr. Sen, who noticed his son’s uneasiness, said :—

“Suppose we don’t hurry the matter so much.”

“Indeed!” cried his wife angrily. “That won’t do at all. We must have it soon. But listen, Nalin, you must not take her away as soon as you are married. Then let us have the

ceremonial bath next Sunday. What do you say, my son?"

Nalin said nothing. He only coughed huskily, for something seemed to choke back the words he would utter. So his mother looked at her husband and said:—

"Then you had better make arrangements to have the ceremonial bath on Sunday."

All at once Nalin faltered out in a half-stifled voice:—

"No, mother, but—but—don't have it now."

Seeing his reluctance, Rama Prasad said, jestingly:—

"Why so many 'Noes' and 'buts?' so much humming and hawing? Have you a wife already, Nalinda?"

Nalin's pale face became suffused with colour.

"What sort of a joke is that, child?" said his mother reproachfully to Rama Prasad; "you should not say things like that."

And turning to Nalin, she continued:—"You see, my son, now that you have come home, all my ornaments will be redeemed and they will do nicely for the bride. Several new styles have come into fashion and I hear that her parents will give her all these. Still it would not look well for us not to give any new ones, so I borrowed three hundred rupees from Kadi's

mother, and I have had two bangles made with a leaf pattern. They look lovely. Wait and see! I will bring them to you."

She rose and went to fetch the ornaments with a buoyant heart.

But Mr. Sen, depressed by his son's hesitation asked :—

"Don't you wish to be married now, Nalin?"

Nalin coughed once or twice, looked this way and that and stammered out, "No."

Rama Prasad laughed and said again to Nalin, —this time in a low voice: "Nalin Dada, have you returned home married?"

Nalin nudged him and whispered softly: "For heaven's sake keep quiet now."

Mr. Sen, who was sitting a little distance away, did not catch the whispered words, but he turned round quickly when Rama Prasad, instead of keeping quiet, burst out, in amazement :—

"Then you are really married! When? Where? With whom? Not with an English girl surely?"

The blood suddenly surged through the father's heart, and he looked speechlessly at his son's face, waiting in fear and trembling for the answer to come.

Nalin, scarcely knowing what he did, nodded mechanically, and remained silent.

Mr. Sen rested his head on the back of the sofa, and the house of joy in a moment was turned into a house of mourning.

And just then the mother entered the room, with a smiling face and a joyful heart.

“See here, my son,” she said, placing the two bangles in Nalin’s hand, “Do you like these new ornaments? Clasp them on my daughter’s wrists and let me see how they suit her.”

With these words she looked round for Bhabini.

But, alas! the girl had disappeared—

Why?

Where?

Of course, to hide her bitter shame and disappointment in a lonely corner of the house. And the bangles? They were shut up in a drawer where for a time they lay, until Bhabini was married to the son of a Zamindar, when they were sent her as a wedding present. Thus, so far as Bhabini and the bangles were concerned all went well in the end.

But what about the poor parents of our young Civilian? Let us draw a veil over their blighted

hopes. An English wife can never be a daughter in an Indian Home. A Hindu is born : he or she cannot be made.

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THE REASON WHY ? A STRANGE TALE

This is a tale of a woman's simple life, a life of small events, only a tiny link in the great chain that makes humanity, and yet a heart that sends its pulsations heavenward. A Hindu woman's world is narrow, but she has an aspiration, an aim, an object, a heart-throb running through this little world of hers that glorifies it, that makes it a temple of holy feelings. Her life is one great love. From the time that she joins her husband as a timid girl, to the day when the pyre claims her, there is this great love to fill her heart, to fill her whole being until she knows naught else. And when this love is returned in the abundance in which it is given, then Heaven alone can fathom the happiness; but when this fails,—the woman's world is empty; the only thing that life has to give her is gone, and naught can replace it.

I am a Hindu woman—and I was sad and lonely. My mother-in-law? She loved me tenderly, her one aim was to see me happy. Was I childless? No, the gods had given me a child, a boy bright and beautiful. But the soul

of my being was gone, for my husband was turning from me with cold neglect, and the grief that gnawed at my heart knew no dying. Mother saw my sadness, and took my part. Often I heard her remonstrating with him, reproving him severely, as again and again she tried to move him to pity for me. But alas! all remained as it was, or even grew worse. Mother's angry words caused him to absent himself from home. At times I saw nothing of him for days, and this made life so lonely!—so hopeless! He might be cold towards me, but if only I saw him, my heart had some compensation. Oh! the anguish of the heart, the loneliness of those days when I did not once see his face! I felt as though I were going mad, and would gladly have submitted to bad treatment, if only I could have seen him just once. This was infatuation without reason, I was told. Was I then an opium-eater who requires his accustomed dose, they asked. I know not—but this I know—I did not thank my mother-in-law for a sympathy she gave me; my heart grew bitter, and I wished that she would leave him unapproached.

It was nearly a fortnight since he had gone away and not once had I seen him. Messengers were sent to him, but the sad reply was ever

the same,—“He is not there; the house is locked.”

His mother's anxiety knew no bounds, and I?—I knew neither food nor sleep. There was my child, I pressed him to my heart in agony. I invoked the name of God. My sorrow seemed too great for one frail heart to hold.

Still, the gods watch over mortals, and in their pity they give solace to those who weep.

It was nearly day break. I had wept through the long hours of the night, when Nature claimed her own and I fell asleep. Then I dreamt a dream, strange and wondrous. I saw the sky illuminated with a light of transcendent glory, and in this light appeared a woman. She waved her hand and lotus was wafted towards me.

“Take that, my child,” she said softly, “wear it in your hair, and your lord will love you.” I took the flower and awoke. It was scarcely dawn yet, but I rose hastily, and hastening to my mother-in-law, told her what I had seen.

“Have you the flower?”

“No, I saw the flower in my dream.”

“Dear child,” she said, “go to the temple of Kali; get a flower and wear it. Make haste! No time should be lost.”

II

We live at Bhowanipore, and the temple of Kali is not far from our home. I had been there before and had unlocked my sorrow-stricken heart to the goddess. But this time as I passed the stream of sacrificial blood on my way to the threshold of the Sanctuary, I felt dizzy, my head reeled.

“ How hideous that form of Kali ! ” I hear the unbeliever exclaim. But he knows not that to the Hindu devotee Kali is sublime, having been made fair by faith. As to the trusting child the mother is always beautiful, be she ever so plain in the eyes of others, so the simple, trusting mind of a worshipping people sees in Kali only the indwelling, benign-grace of the Divinity. But I saw her to-day in her cruel aspect. For the first time in my life I realised how terrible she is, having before my physical eyes the stream of blood that ever flows from the animal sacrifice, and with my mind beholding still the vision of celestial beauty that had come to me in the night. It was this contrast that made me see Kali as I had never seen her before. Her tongue protrudes from her mouth ; she holds a weapon in one hand and a bleeding human head in another. And although I had been taught that

Kali blesses with her other two hands, and I myself, had often felt the power of her blessing, to-day I saw her only in her relentless mood. I saw the external Kali only. Was this the reflection of that vision of beauty that I had seen in my dream? I shrank back in fright at beholding her; but when I recalled the apparition of my sleep, my heart became filled with new hope. Overpowered by my mingled emotions, at the door of the Sanctuary my strength left me and I fell to the ground.

In fright, Umi, the maid who accompanied me, called out for help. The officiating priest who knew me, brought holy water from the Sanctuary and sprinkled it over me. I heard him advising my maid to take her mistress out of the crowd. He pointed to a tree: "Take her there," he said, "she may rest there."

To the shadow of that tree I was taken, and there I lay in a semi-conscious state. There was another woman there, too.

It did not take long for Umi to make the stranger's acquaintance. She unburdened her heart, and told the story of my life without loss of time.

"I am in a nice fix!" she said aloud; "MY BOUMA has fainted. But where do you live, my good lady?"

“ I live far away,” came the soft reply. “ You don’t know me. But where do you live good woman ?”

“ We live at Bhowanipore. Have you not heard of GOPAL BABU ? Ah ! he was a respectable gentleman once ; but now, alas !” and here Umi heaved a sigh and began to gesticulate.

“ What is that lady to him ?” asked the same soft voice.

“ What is she ? His wife, his better half, none other.” Umi became eloquent. “ Oh ! my heart breaks when I think of it all. A lotus thrown away into the gutter, and the lawful wife’s place taken by an outcast. Now, look at her, what a jewel of a woman she is ! And still he cares nothing for her ! But she, poor thing, has grieved until her health is gone.”

And now Umi became excited. Losing what little dignity she had, she poured forth a flood of angry words. If she could but get that creature into her clutches, well—she would do something. She began to use hard expressions. A wretch without a spark of humanity in her ; had cast a Madonna from her throne. And yet this creature was said to be of good family, well-born ! Could she help cursing her ?

I recovered my consciousness sufficiently to speak, and tried to remonstrate with the

prattling woman. "Umi, why do you speak so ill of him? If it is written on my forehead that I am not to be happy, is he to blame?"

The stranger stepped up to me gently. I saw her looking at me, and there was soft pity in her eyes.

"You sweet young creature!"—there was a tremor in her voice. "You are slighted by your husband? This is a pity, indeed."

"Only slighted,"—Umi had not yet finished her tale—"only slighted? Is that were all! She has been robbed of her jewels into the bargain. He may not waste any thoughts of affection on her, but he can remember her very nicely when he needs ornaments. And haven't we dinned it into her ears not to give him any more? Why the man is totally lost; it is a sin to give him gold. But he can work his way very nicely. He knows too well that she loses her wits when he coaxes her a little, and so he tells her some foolish tale of his distress, and then he has her in his hands. It is of no use to waste words on her. But didn't his mother scold him the other day when he walked off with some more of her jewelry? He has not shown his face since, and now she is going half mad and is ready to die for him."

The woman's prattle began to annoy me, "Stop your nonsensical talk, Umi ; you vex me."

"But the girl is right." It was the stranger who spoke. "I, for one, would never allow such a husband to come into my presence. Have hope, sweet lady," she continued, "fortune will smile upon you again. The gods will never allow such as you suffer long."

Her eyes became radiant with kindness as she spoke. And now, as she held my hand, there was a dreamy look in her eyes.

"You are a gift of the gods. Woe unto the one who offends you."

She paused, looking sad and pensive.

"Sweet lady, let the sorrows of your life be mine. May Kali, the goddess, grant your prayer."

These were the last words that she spoke, and as she rose to depart, I saw a divine light shining from her being. Was she then the woman I had seen in my dream ?

III

Several days had passed since then. It was about noon, when an old woman, quite a stranger, came into the house. She did not stop to introduce herself, but called out, rather unceremoniously :—"Good ladies, here are your

ornaments. The *Babu* paid off his debts, and told me to bring these things to you. Now please look over them and see that they are all right."

Mother stood as one struck dumb. But the never-perplexed Umi found her tongue; "O! Mother of the world" she exclaimed:—"The *Babu* has come to his old self again!" Then she turned towards me and informed me of the fact that my gold ornaments had come back.

My mind was not on jewels, I left it to my mother-in-law to take charge of them. I was thinking of my husband. When had this woman seen him last? My poor heart throbbed restlessly, I must hear something.

"When did the *Babu* pay you off?" I asked, to get into conversation with her.

"About a week ago. I could not come sooner; I had other work to do. The ornaments have been lying with me all these days."

"Can you tell me when my son will come home?"—this was mother's anxious query.

"How can I tell you that, my good lady? Well, you have your ornaments back; and now PRANAM to you both." With these words the strange woman bowed low to the earth and departed as abruptly as she had come.

I would have detained her, for I wanted to

hear about him, and she might have told me. But she had gone before I had a chance to say more to her.

I was not left to mourn long, however; for, on the evening of that day, he—the idol of my heart, returned. He received a cordial welcome; the house was in raptures.

It was while dining that mother ventured to speak to him on the subject. "I am glad, my son, that you have sent back all the jewelry, but I am far more happy over the fact that the Giver of all good has touched your heart and brought you home to us."

My husband looked up at her in astonishment; it seemed he did not understand what she was talking about.

"What ornaments? What do you mean, mother?"

"The ornaments on which you had borrowed money from that old woman. She came herself at noon to-day to return them. She told us you had paid off your debts."

He acted like one overcome by surprise. "I see," was all he replied; but he could not conceal his agitation.

He came to our own private apartment later in the evening and asked me to show him the returned gold ornaments. I placed them before

him, and he looked at each piece carefully. There was a gloomy expression on his features. I could not understand my husband, his conduct puzzled me. Perhaps he wanted to make use of the jewels again. I spoke to him accordingly and offered them to him.

“No,” he refused, but his voice trembled.

It was not unusual to see him leave the house again a short time after his arrival. His sad countenance haunted me. I lay down on my bed listlessly and took my child in my arms. The gods were kind; and soon I fell into a sleep such as I had not known for many nights. My child's sweet babbling awoke me at day-break. “Papa! Papa!” and the little one worked his tiny feet and hands gleefully.

Was this an apparition? Surely I must be still dreaming. I rubbed my eyes to see more clearly, and lo! I beheld the lord of my soul standing before me. His eyes were upon me—upon me and his child. But his face was pale and sorrow-stricken, and he looked like one who had come through a terrible struggle of soul.

“Is this you, my lord?” I said, for I could hardly believe my eyes. “But what ails you? you are so pale.”

He spoke not, but took up the little child

and pressed it to his heart. Tears rolled down his cheeks. Never before had I seen him thus. The sight of his suffering overpowered me.

“Oh let me take this sorrow from you, my lord, my husband! Let me see you happy once again, even though I were to pay for it with my life!”

He drew me to his heart.

“Forgive me, if you can.” I still hear that whisper ringing in my ears, his voice sounding strange and faint.

Of the next moments I know nothing. The great change that then came into my life overpowered my senses, and I fell fainting at his feet. Only this I know. I felt myself floating in a sea of happiness, such as it is granted to few mortals to enjoy. There are rare moments, they say, when the gods open the gates of their celestial abode and send forth a ray of their joy to mortals. Ah! my reader, it was granted me in those blessed moments to bathe in that heavenly light.

My husband was a changed man. He no longer remained away from home; his life belonged henceforth to his child and to me. But for me the mystery of it all has never yet been solved. My husband is as silent as a sphinx on the subject; he will not allude to it. Once only

I ventured to question him, but he replied by saying that he did not wish to be reminded of the past. But still it agitates my mind. I often sit and ponder over it all. How did it all come about? Yet the mystery deepens the more that I try to probe it. But perhaps there is among my readers one who could tell me of this strange tale, "THE REASON WHY."

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THE GIFT OF GODDESS KALI

He was a mere lad, barely fourteen years old,
—Kali Prosad they called him.

But why are you alone in the cold, dark night, poor child, with hunger and fatigue as your only companions? Hunger and fatigue! He felt them not. Within his young heart a fire was burning that absorbed all else.

The night was cold and dark; a drizzling rain had fallen, for hours. The black clouds overhead heralded a storm, and not a star shone down to cheer the path of the wanderer. The Ganges looked cold and melancholy, the whole scene was weird and ghostly in the extreme. Kali-prosad stood absorbed in his thoughts; where was he to go? This cold world had no shelter for him. Involuntarily he stepped under a tree. Over yonder, at the burning place, shone a light. Ah! but it was the flame of death, of a funeral pyre, consuming the mortal remain of one who had gone hence. The light of death shone, too, in his face. Unfortunate child, who are you? Rage, despair, and the passion of revenge marked on a face so young!

Dreadful visions of the past rushed into his

memory. His years were few, but his sorrows had been many. He saw with his mind's eye his father's hopeless struggle, unable to relieve the chronic starvation of the family. Then came the black day that took the head of the family away, for ever. Like a dismal echo came ringing in his ears the injunction of those dying lips; and oblivious of all his sufferings—hunger, cold and pain—he stamped his foot upon the ground in wild anger, and reiterated the words of death:—"Vengeance! Vengeance!"

The clouds answered his mad cry and poured forth their fury upon the earth. Crash upon crash of thunder, flash after flash of lightning, making the night more gruesome still; torrents of rain rushing down like a stream; these were the answers they sent down to this weird cry. One must have seen them, these Indian storms, in order to understand their violence.

But, Oh! the storm without but heightened the fury that raged in this young heart. The rain that subdued the flame of the funeral pyre, but quickened the fire that burnt in the soul of this boy. Again his voice called hoarsely out into the night:—"Vengeance! Vengeance! Retribution upon him who brought destruction upon my house."

In the distance he saw a light, and instinc-

tively walked towards it. It came from the inner apartment of a temple which was closed from within. Shivering from the cold of the night, his garments still dripping from the rain, the tired child sat down on the temple steps. The voice of hate within was raving still, but nature silently overpowered it, and the boy fell asleep. And sleeping on the steps of the temple he dreamt a dream. He thought that his father appeared before him; now no more sorrow-stricken and filled with revenge, but smiling and cheerful. He put his hand upon his boy's head and said, "Rise, my son, God himself is the friend of the helpless, and Vengeance is His: therefore fear not."

The boy awoke, but the phantom still pursued him. "Vengeance! Vengeance!" these words came from his lips before he was fully awake. And then standing before him, he saw a stranger, who placed a hand upon his head. Had then his father come to him from the dead?

The stranger held a lantern in his hand, the light of which shone on Kaliprosad's face. He looked at the boy scrutinisingly, yet gently: his countenance was so benign that he seemed like him whom Kaliprosad had seen in a vision.

"Son, who are you?" His voice was kind and sympathetic.

“ A Brahmin boy.”

“ And why are you out in the storm alone, my child ?”

“ I have no one to keep me. I am an orphan.”

The stranger sighed. It was not long since he had lost a boy. Had then the Gods sent him this orphan to fill the place left vacant in his heart by him whom they had taken ?

“ What is your name, my boy ?”

“ Kaliprosad.”

“ Kaliprosad ? This temple is the shrine of Kali the Goddess. Her blessings are upon you, my son. I am the priest of this temple. Henceforth you shall be fatherless no more.”

II

That night changed sorrow into prosperity. The boy knew no further hardships. Debi-prasanna took him to his home. And here watched over by a kind, Brahmin mother, the boy's noble nature soon developed and made itself felt. The priest and his wife loved him as their son, and their children—a boy and a girl—soon learned to love him as their own brother, treating him always with fond affection. And as time went on, Meghamala, the maiden, became his promised wife.

Kaliprosad had a kind heart ; his many virtues

won for him many friends. Never before had the charities of the temple been so amply bestowed upon the distressed, the helpless, the poor. No more were the temple gates closed on the belated wanderer, but when the storm raged, in the dark of night, the way-farer found the postern of the house of worship open to receive him and to grant him shelter within. And they of the village had never before found such ready sympathy and counsel. It soon became known that the influence of the new son was doing all this; and villager, friend, and stranger, all blessed Kaliprosad's name and loved him.

These things did much to make him happy. But alas for you unfortunate boy! and alas for those who have taken you unto themselves! The serpent that had gnawed at the heart of Kaliprosad in the days of his misery, still wrought its evil work, until it had eaten its way deep into his being. In the dead of the night it haunted him, this creation of his mind. And when all was still, when sleep rested on the inmates of the house, and they thought that the boy was in his chamber, silently a dark form would steal away to the temple, still pursuing the work of death. And there, alone with the dread Goddess, Kaliprosad repeated powerful

Mantras—invoking the aid of unseen forces in his work of revenge.

Strange indeed are the workings of the human heart. Who can fathom its depth, when the passions are stirred up and left unbridled? Man is controlled more by his passions than by his virtues, or else why should he sin to gratify them? The world lauds him who in prosperity opens his hand and sends forth the blessings of charity. But the stars will sing their music to him, who, thrust from his lawful place, thrown upon the world as an outcast and wanderer, is still ready to bless and forgive.

III

Sorrow had come to the house of Debiprasanna. His only boy lay ill, and great indeed was the grief of the parents. They had had many children, but one by one their sons and daughters had been taken away from them until only two were left, this boy and a girl. And, as the illness increased, their fear and anxiety grew until they walked about, heedless of their surroundings. Where were they to go for redress? Ah! to Kaliprosad, the favourite of the Goddess! Happy indeed were they to have him in their house. His must be the task of propitiating Kali, and then succour would be sure to come.

Kaliprosad performed the HOMA rite in the court yard before the temple. He consigned the sacrificial presents to the fire, chanting Mantras all the while. The sacrifice was accepted by the Goddess, for it burnt with more than usual brightness. Fed anew, it sent its flames to the sky and reddened the atmosphere with its light. Kaliprosad, carried away by the hymns he chanted, stood plunged in deep meditation. But the thought that he had nourished for so long, now took control of him; and forgetting the sick boy at home, forgetting the object of his sacrifice, his heart aglow with zeal for the rite he was performing, involuntarily Kaliprosad cried out, instead of the customary words, the dreadful formula that was ever in his thoughts "Vengeance! Vengeance!" The temple walls reverberated with the cry, and the fire sent up its surging flame with a last, bright light, as if to say "Amen" and then went out.

The boy was dead. The father was mad with grief, and the mother's wild cries rent the air. Kaliprosad passed his days in the agony of remorse. Now that it was too late, he realized what he had done the voice of conscience gave him no rest. His was the blame, his alone. Had he but invoked the Goddess with all his heart, had he but concentrated his mind fully

on the boy, she might have had compassion and have let him live. But it was now too late, and Kaliprosad's sorrow knew no end.

And the little sister Meghamala? The smile withered on her lips on the day that saw her brother die. Melancholy and dejection claimed her as their own, until her tender frame broke down and the child became ill and was confined to her bed.

IV

It was a dark and stormy day. Thunder, lightning and torrents of rain, those three powerful companions, came rushing down upon the earth with unabated fury. This ill-starred day saw Kaliprosad once more at the temple gate, piteously praying, and this time with a trembling voice. He sent anxious glances towards the cottage, towards the window of the chamber where lay Meghamala, the maiden, his promised wife.

Suddenly he caught the sound of a distant wail. He turned back, terrified, when lo! he saw the priest, Debiprasanna, running madly into the storm. He darted after him with lightning speed, he grasped the old man's hand "Meghamala?" was all that his terrified soul could groan.

The priest tried to release himself, crying
“Leave me, let me go, I have seen a vision.”

The youth now saw that he was facing a
maniac, and he tightened his grip.

“A vision! What vision?” he asked.

“Let me go,” called out the mad man “Let me
go! I am searching.”

“Searching? For what? For whom?”

“For those upon whom I have brought
misery.”

“But who are they? What misery have you
wrought?”

“I am searching for the owners of this temple,
whom I ruined and drove out into the world,
homeless husband, wife, and infant boy. Let
me go and search for them. Let me go. Where
did they find shelter in the nights of cold and
storm? I have not seen them since that day; let
me go, let me go.”

“Be calm. Where would you search for
them?”

“Alas! the vengeance of heaven has come
upon me, my home is desolate, they are all gone,
gone. There is no one left, no one but
Meghamala, the girl. Let me go, I must find
them to-night.”

“You will not find them, they are dead.”

“Dead, dead? No they are not dead. Has not

the Goddess Herself sent me on this mission? I must find him, that infant boy. His curse is on my head. Let him take away that curse, and my girl, my little Megha, will live."

The priest wrenched away his hand and ran. But the boy pursued him.

Debiprasanna halted.

"Who are you?" was his weird cry.

"I? I am that infant boy you are seeking. Your search is ended."

"You are that boy?" The mad man's voice grew hoarse; unspeakable agony rang through his words. "It is you, then, whose curses have made my hearth desolate?" Debiprasanna fell fainting to the ground.

"Oh! Goddess, Goddess, save us!" It was the cry of a terror-stricken soul that rang through the storm. "Oh! what have I done? Take away my life and lift the curse from this house!"

From afar arose the death-wail. Meghamala was no more.

The youth, frantic with grief, rushed madly into the temple. He took the sharp sword that was in the hand of the Goddess, cut off the head of the image, and wildly cried, "Stony-hearted, blood-thirsty one. With this last offering let thy craving for blood be appeased!"

He plunged the gleaming blade into his bosom, and fell lifeless at the feet of the deity whose avenging power he had invoked.

Thus from Goddess Kali did he win the boon he had sought. But alas! in its deadly, devouring flame it consumed even him who had summoned it forth.

THE SANNYASINI

A ROMANCE

I

What woman is that, yonder, clad in modest yellow garb? Her hair is dishevelled, and on her face—a face of surpassing sweetness—is a shade of unfathomable sorrow. She sits beside the ashes of a funeral pyre, on the banks of the river. Is she a Sannyasini? She seems heart-broken, the very life crushed out of her; and the spirit within her burnt and charred beyond the touch of human joy or sorrow, like the dead ashes of the funeral pyre. It is as though she had quenched its burning flames with her very life blood. She lives, yet is as one dead. Alas! who could have foreseen that this young heart which had barely budded, thus blighted should share the fate of the dead leaves of autumn? Who could have foreseen such a change in so short a time?

Not very long ago, blooming like a flower in all the glory of her beauty, little Nalini sat with her young playmate Kumar, on the same river bank, holding his hand, talking and listening, and bubbling over all the while with merry

laughter. At times she would throw flowers into the stream and pushing them off with her tiny feet, she would make them dance with the ripples. Or perhaps she herself would jump into the water and have a swimming match with her playmate. Kumar then sat beside Nalini, drawing fancy pictures of their future, day-dreams so bright and so life-like as to set on fire the girl's imagination. To share that future with him! What supreme bliss! Could Nalini ever have dreamt then that a day would soon come when she would wear a Sannyasini's garb, and would live on the banks of the same river, in the place sacred to the dead, set apart for their cremation?

It was yet another lovely spring morning. The rays of the sun, gilding the ever-restless breast of the rippling river, rose and fell with the gentle undulations of the waves, as though at play with them. On the bank was a mango tree in blossom, and on one of its branches sat a Papia bird, singing in notes of rhythmical pitch, that rose gradually higher and higher. Nalini sat with Kumar in the shade of the tree. Now she was sad and dejected. The smile had died from her lips, and her eyes were full of tears. He had just told her that the Mewar forces, under the command of Ajoy Sing, would

soon march through their valley to arrest the progress of the Mogul leader Mahboobh Khan, and that he would have to join in the campaign. This had cast a deep gloom over her. From their childhood they had grown up together like twin flowers on one stem, and she was inconsolable at the thought of the impending separation.

Kumar tenderly wiped Nalini's tears and tried to comfort her. He assured her over and over again that he would soon be back to take his old place by her side. Nalini said nothing, but in silent sorrow she fixed her tearful eyes on Kumar's face. To this mute but eloquent appeal Kumar replied :—

“My gem, my life, forget the present and think of the future. It is no distant future either, when I shall return victorious, the enemy crushed, and thousands of tongues speaking of my prowess and singing my praises. Think, Nalini! Thousands of hands shall strew flowers in my path and rain wreaths and garlands upon me; and I, unmindful of all, thinking only of you, shall rush back to your side to lay my crown of glory at your feet and share my triumph with you. Think how proud and happy you will feel then! Our separation will be short, and its pangs will be as nothing in

comparison with the joy that will then be our lot.”

As he went on in this strain, his face beamed, his eyes, though they had been tearful a moment before, sparkled ; he seemed to realise, in an instant, his life-long dream of glory, and to feel as if the living, glowing picture he had conjured up, had turned to reality.

Nalini said nothing : she seemed to have lost the power of speech. With eyes full of tears and a sad smile playing on her lips, she tenderly seized Kumar's hands, and, placing them between her own, gazed at him with loving, wistful eyes, feeling sad and happy at the same time.

Who knows how long they would have sat thus, with their hands entwined, silently and sorrowfully looking at each other, if suddenly there had not arisen a great uproar. The noise of troops marching and the clamour and hum of many voices, were heard with the clatter of horses hoofs, and the sounds of drum and bugle. Kumar woke as though from a trance, and cried :—“ Come Nalini ! Come and see the soldiers marching from the Capital.”

They rose and walked to the road-side.

II

A vast crowd had collected. The bustle was great, but the noise was greater still. In all its existence the little, happy valley had never before had its ears deafened and its peace disturbed by such an uproar. The troops were fast filling the valley,—smartly dressed mounted soldiers were riding along in regular ranks, their burnished lances glittering in the rays of the sun. All the village folk, young and old men and boys, maids and matrons, some of these carrying sleeping infants in their arms rushed out of their huts to see the imposing sight. The suddenness of the event, the sight of the troops, the moving crowd, the whole spectacle bewildered Nalini. She stood by Kumar's side half-dazed, and she did not perceive that they had been separated. Suddenly a look of fear came into her eyes, her delicate body trembled like a creeper. A riderless horse came galloping madly towards her, dispersing the crowd as it wildly rushed on. She stood stupefied, unable to move for terror. Another minute, another mad leap forward, and inevitably she would have fallen under the horse's hoofs and been trampled to death. An involuntary, piercing scream came from her lips as she fell senseless. In the same moment a rider

leapt from his horse, raised her inanimate form, and carried her away as tenderly and lightly as if she had been a sleeping child. When she recovered her sense, she found herself lying on a couch in her father's house. A handsome stranger was sitting by her side, tending her with the greatest care and watching her with deep anxiety.

III

Kumar is sitting under the Bakul tree by the river-side. The ground below is covered with flowers, falling from the trees, and Nalini is expected to come and make a wreath of the flowers; but she has not as yet made her appearance. Kumar is alone, Nalini no longer comes daily to gather flowers as before. Even when she comes, she seems constrained in his presence, and does not pay him the playful, caressing attentions of old, or take the least notice of his attempts to win a smile. She is utterly changed now.

Being a distant cousin and an orphan, Kumar was like a foster-son to Nalini's parents and the two children had been brought up together from their childhood. Though they were never formally betrothed, there being no need to do so, the wish of Nalini's dying mother made it a settled fact, and every one knew that Nalini

and Kumar were meant for each other. But in his own mind Nalini's father had grave misgivings about the matter. Their Horoscopes had predicted a sad fate ! Still he hoped against hope, desiring only that the omenous time should be past before actually linking them together. So they remained unmarried. Kumar also, in his turn was waiting for a favourable time. He was ambitious and sought an opportunity to distinguish himself before formally demanding Nalini's hand of her father. At last his opportunity had come. The way was to have given him his chance ; and when it was over, he would have laid his laurels at Nalini's feet and have taken the marriage garland from her as his reward. That his dreams had been ruthlessly shattered, he sadly felt while he waited at their old, favourite, river-side meeting-place. Nalini was no longer his, she had given her heart to another,—to Ajoy Sing, and they were engaged. Her father had considered that it would conduce to her happiness, and Kumar was sacrificed.

Absorbed in these bitter reflections, Kumar sat, anxiously awaiting Nalini. He wanted to have one last interview with her before his departure for the war. If he could forget his love for her, then he would return home after the war was over. If not, he would bid her final

adieu and never again return. Albeit his greatest hope had been slain, he still had his ambition to live for. When he heard tales of Moslem tyranny and oppression, he burned with eagerness to join in over-throwing the invader. He longed to be a warrior, and to win renown as his father had done. His ambition had been strengthened by his love for Nalini; he had considered it a stepping-stone to her heart. Hitherto love and glory had been inseparable in his mind. Separated now, his love and hope lay crushed and bleeding; but glory remained for him still. Nalini was irretrievably lost to him. She had been betrothed to Ajoy Sing, who, after the war, would make her his bride.

Kumar sat alone, gazing at the rippling river, with the sunlight playing on it, and the shadow of the trees falling across the sun-beams. Suddenly another shadow fell on the water. Kumar looked up with a beating heart. Nalini had come, at last. The rays of the western sun lit up her tearful face. Kumar had never been able to bear unmoved the sight of her weeping. Seeing her tears, he forgot all his own sorrows and, turning to her gently, asked :—

“Why are you weeping, Nalini?”

Nalini forgot that Kumar had loved her and still loved her, that she had rejected his love and

given her heart to another. She thought of him only as a tried and faithful friend and sobbing she told him :—

“Kumar, Ajoy is going to the war; we may never meet again.”

Curbing his own feelings, Kumar answered gently :—

“Why not, Nalini? You must not give way to despondency. You will meet him again when the war is over.”

And he comforted her with loving words.

IV

The battle was nearly lost. Ajoy Sing could no longer keep back the enemy. The troops were panic-stricken, and he could hardly manage them. At last, in despair, he was about to surrender, and the Moslems would have triumphed. Suddenly help came to him. Kumar Sing had routed the enemy, and had come to Ajoy's assistance. The panic-stricken troops, now recovering their courage, the combined forces steadily pressed back the enemy. The Mahomedan chief, Mahboobh Khan, left the field; his troops fled in disorder, while Kumar went after them in hot pursuit. He over-took Mahboobh, took him prisoner, and turned back to his own camp.

Half-way there, under a tree, he came upon Ajoy all alone, wounded and helpless. A Mahomedan soldier was in the very act of casting his spear at him when Kumar flung himself in between and received the stroke intended for Ajoy. As he fell, sorely wounded, a vision of Nalini as he had last seen her rose before the eye of his mind.

V

Ajoy and Kumar had returned to Mewar with the troops. Kumar still lived, but his life hung in the balance. Kumar had really won the day, but the credit had fallen to Ajoy. Even Kumar's soldiers had not dared to make known the true facts of the case. So Ajoy had grown high in favour, while Kumar lay ill and forgotten.

Mewar was all excitement. The Rana was going to reward the General with his own hands. All classes of people had assembled to witness the ceremony. The Rana stood up and drawing his diamond-hilted sword said, "Well done, Ajoy Sing! Thanks to you, we are rid of the enemy. This is a very small recompense for your heroic deeds."

Loud cheers arose; but in the midst of them an old trooper came forward and said, "Maha-

raja, the man whom you have rewarded does not merit reward. He did not win the victory, but nearly lost the battle. He was about to surrender, and had it not been for Kumar Sing, we should have been utterly defeated."

The crowd was thunder-struck. The Rana turned to Ajoy and said, "Is there any truth in this?" Ajoy turned pale. Being a Rajput he dared not tell a lie; and yet, how could he yield up the coveted fame and glory? He put on a bold face and said, "Let the man who spoke, verify his statement, otherwise, his words are valueless."

The crowd cheered and the Rana, turning to the old man, said, "Well, what evidence have you to support your statement?"

"The proof of my word, sire, the word of a Rajput."

"True; but Ajoy is also a Rajput, and he does not confirm you. Then, if what you say is true, he is a thief."

"Worse than a thief, Maharaja, for he is stealing the reputation of one who saved his life."

"Silence, fellow!" The king exclaimed, "No insolence! Remember this is the Raj Darbar. If you can prove your words, do so. If not, leave the assembly."

“The two thousand soldiers who followed Kumar are my witnesses,” replied the old man.

“Two will suffice” said the Maharaja, “call them and let me hear their version and judge.”

A sentry was ordered to summon two men out of the number, but they were not forthcoming. The soldiers had heard that they were to be punished for the rumours thus circulated; they did not know that the Rana was trying to find out the truth, and none came forward to give evidence in favour of Kumar. The old man was silenced; but only with difficulty controlled his indignation.

The Maharaja gave him yet another chance, “Have you any other evidence?” he asked, kindly.

“Let Kumar speak for himself,” falteringly answered the poor fellow.

Ajoy interposed hastily, “Impossible! Kumar is lying dangerously ill. It might cost him his life to be brought here.”

“His honour is dearer to him than his life,” returned the veteran “let him be called.”

IV

The Rana ordered Kumar to be brought in a palanquin. The old man, Ranjit Sing, went with a palanquin to Kumar and told him all that had

passed and begged him to come and vindicate his honour in person, without further delay. Kumar was dumb-founded. He could hardly believe that Ajoy could be guilty of such treachery. Not satisfied with having stolen Nalini's affections, he was now stealing the fame due to Kumar. He sprang up, but the excitement was too much for him, the wound burst out afresh and he was compelled to lie down again. After a time he said, weakly, "Bring the palanquin, Ranjit, I am ready to go." All eyes turned to the wounded hero as he was carried into the assembly, but Kumar saw none save Ajoy, at whom he cast piercing glances of anger. The Rana now turned to Kumar and said:—"Kumar Sing, you have nothing to fear. Speak the truth boldly, which of you deserves to be crowned victor? Ajoy, or yourself? Remember, you are at the door of death."

Kumar hesitated. He remembered Nalini. He knew how much she would suffer if the truth were known. If Ajoy were proved a traitor, her father would never consent to their marriage, and her life would be wrecked. Even if the truth leaked out after she became Ajoy's wife, then she would know no happiness. Her tearful face seemed to rise before him. He determined not to denounce Ajoy; and turning

to the Rana, he said :—"Sire, do not press me to answer you, the temptation is too much for me."

"Do you feel the temptation to be greater than the truth itself? asked the Maharaja.

"Yes, Sire," answered Kumar steadfastly.

The Maharaja turned away.

"Proclaim Ajoy Sing the victor, and present him with the sword of honour; we are satisfied that he is deserving of it," he said.

Ajoy Sing's name resounded on all sides. Kumar remained dumb. He felt that his one hope was gone, that his life-long ambition was dashed to the ground. The palanquin was carried out of the assembly in silence, only the faithful Ranjit Sing following it with tears in his eyes. Lying in the palanquin, in extreme suffering, Kumar silently thought of Nalini.

Turning to Ajoy the Maharaja said, "We cannot reward you sufficiently for all you have done. This sword is nothing. I show my appreciation by bestowing on you the hand of my only daughter."

That same day, Ajoy's wedding with the princess Mayavati was solemnized with great rejoicing.

VII

At first Nalini sat joyously awaiting the return of Ajoy. His fame had spread through the land. The war was over, and she daily expected that he would come and claim her as his bride. But the days became months and the months stretched to a year and more still no Ajoy came. Broken hearted and crushed with grief her father passed away finding in death sure ease of his sorrow. Unhappily and alone the daughter now began to droop like a fading lily, her hopes grew fainter and fainter ; yet she would go daily to the tree by the river, and at every sound of a horse's hoofs, her heart beating with renewed hope, she would imagine that Ajoy Sing was coming. But every evening she would return home heart-sick and disappointed. One day she thought that her dreams were realised. She saw a party of soldiers escorting a gaily-decked palanquin, bearing, as she thought, Ajoy Sing, dressed as a bridegroom.

The Palki was put down under a tree. She stood by, watching eagerly. She saw Ranjit open the door, and wondered why Ajoy had brought him for she knew him to be Kumar's servant. Unable to stay still any longer, she ran to the palanquin, opened the door on the further

side, and eagerly looked in. In alarm she started back for it was not Ajoy Sing whom she saw, but Kumar, lying stiff and motionless, the stamp of death on his face.

Ranjit told the unhappy girl in a few words all that had occurred—Ajoy's treachery and Kumar's self-sacrifice. Nalini heard him, yet knew not what he said. She was dazed and bewildered. An agony of fierce remorse stung her to the quick. She gazed and gazed on the beautiful calm face of one who had sacrificed his noble self for her, the worthless, unfaithful wretch that she was; and her childhood's love for him rushed into her heart in a thousand streams and chocked and overwhelmed her with its overflow. Suddenly, like a maniac, she started to her feet, and ran off with a scream of agony that rang through the silent wood, piercing the heart of Ranjit to the core. She came back again almost immediately, just as Ranjit had taken the body out of the planquin and placed it on the ground, decorated with some vermilion on her parting hair an emblem of marriage—and bidding the servants stand afar, sat down beside Kumar, placed his head on her lap, and caressed him with ecstasy like a newly married bride. When the weeping Ranjit came back and touched the dead body for the purpose of

removing it, Nalini fell over the lifeless form in a dead swoon.

She is now a devotee at the river-side, by the burning place of the dead. The only relics of the past are the ashes of Kumar which she collected from the funeral pyre and cherishes with unfading affection and reverence.

THE RAJPUT PRINCE AND HIS STEED

(A TALE FROM INDIAN HISTORY)

Asaf Khan, a Minister of the Emperor Secunder Lodi, had been to Bundi on business. During his stay there, he had chanced to see the Maharaja Devi Singh's horse, "Pathan," and had been spell-bound by its unequalled beauty.

On his return to Delhi, in an unlucky moment he extolled to the Emperor the beauty and the virtues of the noble steed, and in a burst of admiration exclaimed:—"A peerless steed, Sire! It is of such mettle that it could cross a stream without wetting its hoofs. There is not a horse, even in your Imperial Majesty's stables, that can compare with it."

The Emperor, who was passionately fond of good horses, and grudged neither pains nor expense to stock his stables, with the finest animals, naturally thought that this was impossible, and was filled with anger at the idea. He demanded proof of Asaf Khan's extravagant assertions, and immediately deputed Mahomed Khan, a nobleman of the Court, to go to Bundi and invite the Maharaja to come to Delhi with his horse "Pathan."

Surrounded by his Ministers, Secunder Lodi

was seated in Durbar on his golden throne. Around him were slaves waving CHOWRIES, bards chanting songs in praise of the deeds of heroes, courtiers endeavouring to outdo one another in the most fulsome flatteries, when the return of Mahomed Khan was announced. Respectfully he approached the Emperor and after due reverences, stood beside the throne.

“ Well, what news of Bundi Raj ? ” inquired the Emperor.

“ The Maharaja is delighted, and feels highly honoured by the presents your Majesty has been graciously pleased to send him, and in obedience to your Majesty’s commands, he will soon present himself before you. ”

“ Well, Asaf, ” said the Emperor, turning to Asaf Khan, “ we shall soon see this wonderful horse you so highly praise. Are you still of the same opinion ? ”

Asaf humbly bent his head as he replied : “ Your Majesty will pardon me : I am ready to forfeit my life if my words prove false. I still maintain that the horse has no peer in the Imperial stables. ”

“ Not even my horse ‘ Nawab ’ ? ”

“ No, Sire, not even he. ”

“ Have you seen the horse lately given to me by the Shah of Persia ? ”

“I have, Sire: but even that does not equal ‘Pathan.’”

“Well, we shall soon be able to judge for ourselves: but remember, if your words prove false, your life is the forfeit.”

“As your Majesty pleases,” was the quiet reply.

II

The Maharaja of Bundi had been in Delhi two days. He came as the guest of the Emperor, and was entertained with all the attention due to his high rank. One or other of the Emperor’s high officials waited upon him and looked after his comfort. On the third day a visit from the Minister Asaf Khan was announced to the Maharaja, and, the necessary permission having been given, Asaf entered and saluted the Royal guest.

“I have been deputed by the Emperor,” said Asaf, “to wait upon your Highness and see if your wishes have been attended to in every way.”

“It is very kind of the Emperor to show me so much graciousness, and I am greatly obliged and honoured,” replied the Maharaja.

Presently Asaf Khan turned the conversation to the subject of horses and remarked, in an apparently casual way, that the Emperor was

charmed with the horse "Pathan." This praise of the noble animal which was his pride and delight, greatly pleased the Maharaja, and he said, "This is another proof of the Emperor's condescension."

"He has taken a great fancy to the horse," added Asaf Khan, thinking that this would be a sufficiently broad hint, and lead the Maharaja to offer the animal as a present to the Emperor. But evidently the remark was wasted, for the Raja of Bundi merely replied, "It takes a jeweller to appreciate a fine gem."

Finding that his hint had not had the desired effect, and at a loss what next to do, Asaf Khan was considerably embarrassed. At last he decided to speak out plainly. "The Emperor wishes to buy your horse," he said. "May I ask what price your Highness puts upon it?"

The Maharaja was much annoyed at this audacious proposal, and indignantly answered, "I have no intention of selling 'Pathan'."

"Consider your position," was Asaf's reply. "Is it wise to send such a message to the Emperor? If you do not give up the horse willingly, he might take it by force. In that case what would you do?"

The Rajput's blood was roused by this insulting suggestion, and he angrily replied, "Tell

your Emperor that as long as I have a drop of blood left in my veins, he shall never take 'Pathan' from me. Does he not know that death has no terror for a Rajput Chief?"

Asaf smiled coldly and answered, "I quite believe that you will not part with 'Pathan' as long as life is in your body. But have you considered how long your life will be spared? You are in the lion's den: you cannot escape. Consider the matter seriously, and then send what message you will." The Maharaja felt the full force as well as the justice of these observations, and remained absorbed in thought at a loss how to reply. After a while, Asaf gently reminded him that he was awaiting his answer, saying that he wished to know what message he was to take to the Emperor. At last the Raja of Bundi spoke:—"Tell his Majesty that I will present myself, with my horse, before him within a fortnight." But these words were merely a device to gain time.

III

After Asaf Khan's departure, the Rana sat thinking with a heavy heart. How could he ever escape from the perilous position in which he was placed? He could not bear to part with

‘Pathan,’ who was dearer to him than his own life: and yet, how could he possibly save the horse since Asaf Khan had said that if he did not give it up willingly, it would be taken from him by force? He was absolutely at the mercy of the Emperor, and there seemed to be no means of escape. He could have run away secretly with ‘Pathan,’ but he had pledged his word to appear before the Badshah: and as a Rajput, the idea of breaking his word could not even occur to him. Besides what then would become of his son Samarsi and of his troops? Would the Emperor, in his wrath, spare them? He had sought this respite of a fortnight hoping in the interval to light upon some means of escape for himself and those attendants who had accompanied him to Delhi. Unfortunately no solution of his difficulty presented itself to him, and his mind was torn with anxiety.

At this juncture Samarsi came to him, saying, “The Emperor’s son is leaving shortly for his wedding and wishes me to accompany him.” This unexpected news opened to the Maharaja a possible loop-hole of escape, and he eagerly asked:—“When does the marriage procession start? When have you to go?”

“The wedding ceremony will take place a month hence,” said Samarsi, “but we have to

start for the house of the bride's father within a fortnight."

The Maharaja's face lit up with joy and hope at these words. Now he saw his way to safety and freedom. Bidding his son be seated, he told him all that had passed between Asaf Khan and himself, and of the Emperor's hateful proposal, adding:—"Child, I see the hand of Providence in this request of the Emperor's son that you should join his wedding procession. Otherwise we could not have escaped. Take with you the greater part of our troops. Let the rest disguise themselves as Mahomedans and join the recruits of the bridal party. After you have all departed, I shall keep my word to the Emperor and present myself, with 'Pathan,' before him. I have no fear for myself, I shall escape with my horse and follow you."

IV

In due course, the bridal party left and with it went the Prince of Bundi and all the Bundi troop. The Maharaja stayed on in order to fulfil his promise. On the morning of the fifteenth day, mounting 'Pathan,' he proudly rode to the palace gates where he bade the attendants announce his arrival to the Emperor. The latter was impatiently awaiting him, for ever since he

had set eyes on 'Pathan,' he had acknowledged the truth of Asaf's remarks, and the more he thought of the matchless perfection of the horse, the more he desired to possess it. He had hardly been able to wait a fortnight, and since the previous day had been in a fever of restlessness.

As soon as the Raja of Bundi was announced, he rushed out to see him. Saluting him with due courtesy, the Raja said, "I have come, Sire, to fulfil my promise."

Full of covetous delight, the Emperor replied, "I am greatly pleased with your present. You shall have the rich reward you deserve. I create you the Ruler of all Rajputana."

Paying not the least heed to the Emperor's words, the Maharaja cried out in accents of scorn, "Oh Badshah! bear in mind what I say! Three things are dear to a Rajput: never covet these,—his women-folk, his horse, and his sword." So saying, he touched his noble animal with the spur, and in a moment, before any present could do ought to hinder, horse and rider both had disappeared in the distance.

THE OATH OF KUMAR BHIM SING

(A TALE FROM INDIAN HISTORY)

Raja Sing, the Rana (Maharaja) of Mewar, late one evening, was lying down in the solitude of his private chamber. At his bidding all the lights, had been extinguished, save one, and the room gleamed in its soft and mellow light. The Raja's mind had not been easy, but the quiet atmosphere had its soothing effect on him, and his agitated thoughts soon gave place to pleasant reveries.

The day fixed for the coronation of his son Jay Sing was near at hand. The Rana, no longer troubled by dark forebodings as to how his subjects would view the approaching event, dwelt upon the pleasure it would bring Jay Sing's mother, and the great happiness it would give to Jay Sing himself.

His day-dreams were however suddenly interrupted. A slight sound made him lift his eyes and before him stood a tall graceful figure, his chief queen, still beautiful and noble of mien, gazing silently at him. The Rana felt surprised and hastily coming to a sitting posture on the couch and beckoning her to sit by him,

he exclaimed courteously "What brings you to the outer apartments at this hour—MAHISHI? (queen)."

"Necessity my lord knows no law—of place or time" replied the Maharani with a sad dignity. "Have not my repeated appeals been disregarded by you? So what could I do, but come here in person and disturb you in your happy dreams!"

"True" murmured the Rana, quailing before her haughty glance,—“I had quite forgotten you. I have been much engaged!"

The Maharani's lips curled in a little ironical smile. She was indeed forgotten, she thought to herself: such had been her fate for years: but aloud she only said:—"Maharaja, am I be permitted to ask one question? Is the report I hear true?"

"What report?" said the Maharaja evasively.

"That while you are still alive, Jay Sing is to mount the throne. Can this be true? If so, it is as though the Mogul Empire were still supreme."

The Rana winced at this cut, but answered gently, "You have not heard correctly: Jay Sing is not usurping my throne. I am abdicating in his favour."

The *Mahishi* gave a short bitter laugh.

“ Really ? You are abdicating voluntarily ! Why —so soon ? Surely the time has not yet arrived for you to give up the world and retire to the forest ! ”

With a strong effort the Maharaja mastered his rising wrath, and said, “ *Mahishi*, there is nothing in this to laugh at. One who has the responsibility of a Raja must act with great circumspection and forethought, for he has to guard against present complications and future contingencies. Upon him and his actions depend the well being and happiness of thousands of families. Should I depart this life before settling as to who should ascend the throne, the brothers would be sure to fight over the succession and bring disaster and ruin upon the kingdom. ”

“ But it seems to me, ” said the *Mahishi*, “ that in seeking to promote peace between the brothers, you are sowing the seeds of dissension : and in providing for the safety of the kingdom, you are hastening its destruction. If you think it advisable to instal a son upon the throne during your life time, why not instal the elder ? Why unjustly rob him of his legal rights by placing the younger on the throne ? ”

These remarks were perfectly just, but the Maharaja did not relish them—perhaps for that very reason. Truth is often unpalatable.

Irritably he rejoined: "The difference of age between them is so very slight, that Bhim Sing cannot lay claim to the throne on the ground of being the elder. They were both born on the same day: and it would be no exaggeration to say, at the same moment. Therefore the worthier has the higher claim, and I consider Jay Sing to be the worthier."

With a scornful laugh, the Rani countered: "To suit your purpose you wish to subvert the sequence of events. Otherwise, why should you place the one who is really the younger on a similar footing with one who is really the elder? But fortunately Time's laws will not be broken at your behest. To say nothing of a minute, seniority even by a second secures to the elder his birth right. * Lava and Kusha were twins, yet Kusha succeeded to his royal Father's throne because he saw light a second before his twin brother. And as to Jay Sing's greater worth, let me ask you, Maharaja, in what respect is he worthier than Bhim Sing? Have not Bhim Sing's courage and manly bearing secured for him the loyal devotion of the people? Have not his frankness, straightforwardness and courtesy

* The twin Lava and Kusha are the sons of our great legendary hero King Rama. The Kings of Mewar trace their descent from the same dynasty.

won for him the love and esteem of the nobility? Whom do the people wish to acclaim as their King? Ask all and you will hear who is the worthier? But Bhim Sing's great misfortune is that he is the child of her who has long ceased to be your favourite. If Jay Sing is deemed worthier because he is the son of your best loved Rani, then, of course, there is nothing more to be said."

This bitter taunt, delivered in a tone of withering scorn, by one, who at one time had held absolute sway over his heart, and whose feelings had been justly roused by the purposed slight to her son, stung the Maharaja to the quick, and he angrily answered, "well, if you will have it so, let it be so."

Angrily the *Mahishi* answered him back again:—"Why not then acknowledge the truth instead of putting forward all sorts of false and frivolous excuses?"

"Who dares to ask me to explain my conduct that I should be afraid?" broke in the King.

"Do you remember the day the boys were born?" resumed the Queen,—but she was unable to continue: emotion overpowered her. In memory she saw herself as she was twenty years ago,—not the mature neglected woman, but the innocent beloved girl-bride of the past.

She remembered with what eager joy she had awaited her husband with her new-born babe in her arms, but she had waited in vain: and her joy had turned to bitter grief as the time dragged on and still he did not come. At last an attendant came and told her that the Raja was with the Rani Chanchal Kumari who had just given birth to a boy, and that the King was fastening the immortal amulet to the child's foot: as soon as he was free, he would be with her.

According to the custom of the royal family, the sacred amulet was always fastened to the foot of the first born son, signifying that he was the heir. At the news of this injustice, she was overcome with grief: and the certainty that she was no longer first in the king's heart, dawned upon her. When at last the king came she remained dumb, her heart pierced with sorrow. Afterwards she came to learn that the king had been falsely informed about the birth of the children and hence the mistake: but knowing that his love was no longer hers, she never broached the subject to him. It was only a mother's love that had led her to overcome her wounded feelings and plead for the rights of her boy.

“Why did you pretend that the amulet was

fastened on him by mistake?" she asked bitterly.

"It was no mistake but done deliberately."

"I do not hold myself accountable to any one for my actions, neither do I fear public opinions," haughtily returned the Raja. "I shall do as I please, and appoint whom I like, my heir. My kingdom is my own to do with as I choose."

"No," interrupted the Queen, "You have certainly no power to dispose of the kingdom as you please. You cannot break the law or act unjustly, for then you are no king, but a tyrant, a malefactor. My son will only take what is his by right, even if he has to use force to do so: he will never take what is due to him as a favour at your hands. When by your injustice there is war and bloodshed throughout the land, when the stain of fratricide taints your royal race, do not seek to blame any one but yourself, for your injustice will have caused this. You trace your descent from Dasaratha who for the sake of truth and justice banished his son Rama to the forest. You have disgraced your dynasty to-day: but truth and justice can never be subdued. They will triumph in the end."

With these words, uttered in tones that expressed without disguise all the contempt she

felt, the Mahishi swept haughtily from the room. She did not send for Bhim Sing that night, but made up her mind to tell him everything next day.

II

Long after she had left the room, the Queen's stinging reproaches still rang in the king's ears. Intolerable shame overcame him: the scales fell from his eyes: and he perceived the frightful injustice, which, blinded by his feelings he had been about to commit. All night long he kept pacing to and fro in his room with stinging remorse in his heart: and as soon as dawn broke, calling the sentry, he said, "Go and ask *Yuvaraj* Bhim Sing to come here."

"Yuvaraj Bhim Sing!" The man was astounded: everyone thought Jay Sing to be the Yuvaraj. Then, promptly remembering himself, he saluted and left the room to obey the King's orders. On receiving the message, Bhim Sing was equally astonished. Never before had he been summoned to his father's presence, and anger rose within him as he recalled that father's partiality for his brother. He thought perhaps the king wished to degrade him further by making him swear to serve his brother, and he determined never to surrender his just rights so

long as a breath of life remained in his body. He determined to go to the King and tell him all he felt. But when he stood before him and saw the unusually sad expression on his father's face, all anger, all feeling of revenge vanished, and in his heart were left only pain and sorrow. The king, who had expected to find cold resentment in his son's attitude towards him, was astounded to find only loving pity and filial devotion. Repentance still more keen was kindled in the Rama's heart. Filled with shame and remorse he could not look his son in the face, but said in a low tone, "Bhim Sing, my dear son." Bhim Sing started on hearing such unexpected words of love and affection from the King: he had never met with anything but neglect from him. As a child he had often sobbed bitterly in his mother's lap at his father's coldness. His father's constant neglect and injustice had led him to believe that the king had no affection for him: and as he now heard himself addressed in such loving tones, his heart was stirred and in a voice charged with emotion, he responded: "Father." Never before had he so addressed him: always he had addressed him simply, "Maharaja." The king looked sadly at him and said, "My son, I have done you great wrong: forgive me." Tears

flowed from the noble hearted boy's eyes: at last he had gained his father's love.

“It is I who am wrong to have doubted your love, Father: forgive me!” he said inwardly: but overflowing emotion hindered this utterance of the words. Finding him silent, the king continued, “Even if you do not forgive me, I must yet atone for my sin. You are my eldest son, and you shall have your due. You must wear the crown, but there is one difficulty. I have led Jay Sing to expect that he will be my heir. If he is suddenly disappointed, he may not give in easily. There will be bloodshed in the country. There is only one way out: take this sword.” As he spoke, he drew his sword from its scabbard, and proffered it to his son. “Take this sword and plunge it into your brother's heart. Let the blood of one be offered up for the saving of thousands and so let right triumph. Go and gain a peaceful victory. Do not shudder, my child! Father and mother, brother and sister, wife and child, love and affection,—all are of no account when stern duty calls.”

The Rana trembled; at last he recognised the truth of these words. Bhim Sing stood motionless. He saw clearly that his father was

sacrificing more than life itself for the sake of duty, and the nobleness stirred all his filial devotion to the depths. In an instant he had made up his mind to use the sword on himself rather than on his brother: but outwardly, he only said in a voice broken with emotion: "Father, you are a saint."

Seeing him motionless, the Rana said, "Do not hesitate, my son! There is no sin in this act, but only what truth and justice demand. If any sin there be, it is mine not yours. I command you to do this." Recovering himself, Bhim Sing took the sword from his Father's hand, and laying it at his feet, said, "Father, take back your sword. I do not need it. You have more than atoned for your wrong to me, and have done your duty to the utmost. Now I shall do mine. Not a drop of blood shall be shed for my sake, and Jay Sing shall reign in peace from this time onward. The kingdom is his by right. Lest in some weak moment I may be overcome by the greed of power, I shall leave Mewar for good. The love you have shown me, and the noble example you have set me to-day, are rare treasures which I shall ever cherish in my heart. I leave my motherland this very day. If I fail to do this, I am no son of yours." Before his thunderstruck father could prevent

him, Bhim Sing had sworn this by his father's feet and hastened out of his presence.

That very day, with his own hands Bhim Sing crowned Jay Sing, and accompanied by his favourite troops and followers, left his native land—never to return.

THE GENIUS OF THE PLACE

We were on tour—my son and I. He was then Assistant Collector in the Colaba District of the Bombay Presidency and his head-quarters were at Allibagh—a small place at the sea-side, about an hour's journey from Bombay, by steamer. Those who have never been "on tour" in India cannot possibly have any idea of the life we led. We wandered from village to village, pitching our tents sometimes in a grove of trees, or in a field, sometimes on the slope of a little hill, or on the bank of a river. We led in fact, the life of gypsies, the only difference being that our camp life was as comfortable as it could possibly be. Wherever we went, our tents, sepoy and servants preceded us, turning the solitary field or desolate hill-side into a noisy little town, as if by magic.

The Camp was composed of several tents, and one of these served the purpose of a temporary Court House, being constantly besieged by complainants and applicants from all the neighbouring villages. From morning till nearly sunset, the dumb show of anger and revenge of the complainants, and the anxious suspense of the

accused, the noisy speeches of the pleaders and *muktears*, and the calling of the names of the witnesses for each side three times,—these things set the quiet of the peaceful jungle a-quiver with pity and disgust. Happily this lasted only for a few days. Then wonted tranquility would be restored, and the disturbed country-side enjoy its solitary peace again for another long interval while we, breaking up our camp, would go rushing on in an uncomfortable *tonga* a long rough ways, across fields and plains, up and down rocky tracks, now crossing the waters of a shallow river, anon passing through the stony bed of a dried-up stream.

This is what is called “touring” or “Camp-life.” But such a life has a charm of its own, the daily change of scenes giving to one’s surroundings an attractive grace not usually to be found in ordinary humdrum life. And the nomadic existence lends a special enjoyment to the short periods of rest, when the tour for a time is over. Thus the Assistant Collector has to pass seven months of the year in touring, inspecting, and administrating justice (or injustice—does it matter which ?) to the poor villagers. The other five months of the year include the rainy season, and this time is passed at head-quarters.

We had come all the way from Calcutta and

after a long, tiresome railway journey had alighted, at last, at Karjut station, which was our destination. A nice, little dog-cart, with a beautiful roan mare, was waiting for us, and in a few minutes we were driven to a grove of mango trees, under which our tents had been pitched. The Camp was by no means a small one, for it included the office, the quarters for the Court servants, sepoys, and the personal servants, the bath, the kitchen, and two bed-rooms for ourselves. It had been pitched in a grove near the bank of the river, the little village of Karjut being on the opposite side. In the distance a range of hills could be seen, forming a pretty back-ground. When we reached our tents it was almost evening, and the twittering of birds welcomed us to our new abode, where the charming scenery filled me with pleasure.

It was all new to me, being my first experience of camp life. My tent was very small and pitched at a little distance from the others, each tent being under a separate shady tree. Being the month of May, the weather was rather hot, and I had to keep the entrance door of the tent open at night. Suddenly awaking from sleep, a strange feeling would come over me, for in place of thick walls and doors and electric light, green grass and shining trees, bathed in soft moonlight,

were to be seen through the open door ; and instead of noisy traffic, reigned absolute silence. The solitude bewildered me, at first, and for a time I feared that some wild animal might come in, but strange to say, I did not even hear the howl of a jackal during the few nights that we stayed at Karjut.

From Karjut we went to different villages, and our last halting-place was Penn. Here the scenery was extremely picturesque. The fields, the river, the hills, the scattered huts on the river bank,—these things gave to Penn the look of an enchanted spot. The only thing that seemed to be lacking was a lovely, living form.

Often I wandered about, gazing at the lonely huts, and wondering if some sleeping beauty lay in one of them, waiting lonely for the touch of love.

One day, when I was sitting with a note book in my hand and trying to put down a few thoughts, a Maharatta girl, dressed in a pretty, pale yellow *sari* appeared in sight. Approaching our Camp, she stopped to say a few words to one of the sepoy's, and then came on to my tent with a graceful, light step ; on seeing me, she paused for a second at the door, then entered, and after making me a salaam, offered me a lovely bouquet, with a faint smile, laying another

THE GENIUS OF THE PLACE.



Offered me a lovely bouquet

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upon the table. This, I presumed, must be meant for my son, but still some flowers remained in her hands, and she was quite silent. She was young and pretty, and seemed quite different from the common people around. Her manners, which were shy and modest, gave a peculiar charm to her pretty face. I fancied that a disappointed look came into her eyes while she put the flowers into my hands, but I took them with exceedingly good grace, and thanking her said :—

“What lovely flowers ! Are they from your own garden ?”

“Yes, Madam Sahib.”

“Where do you live ?”

“In the village.”

“But I have not seen roses and jasmine in any of the villages about here.”

“We do not live here, Sahib. Our village is in another direction.”

So saying, she salaamed me respectfully and went away.

When the Assistant Collector Sahib returned from his Court, I said to him. “A pretty Maharatta girl has been here with some nice presents. See, she has left this for you.” So saying I took the bouquet from a vase and gave it to him. He seemed to be delighted and said :—

“ Splendid ! If she comes again, don't forget, dear mother, to thank her for me.”

“ I have done that already. Does it not look like a bridal bouquet, dear ?”

“ It tempts one to go through the ceremony immediately.”

“ A good omen indeed ! I should think that ‘ thereby hangs a tale.’ ”

“ Good. I can see that you are already in the first chapter of your romance.”

“ Dont laugh, dear. I am sure the bouquet was not meant for me. The girl looked so disappointed when she gave it to me.”

“ Really !”

“ Really and truly. Now tell me, dear, do you know who she is and why she brings flowers from such a distance to us—to strangers ?”

“ As regards your first question, I plead entire ignorance. But I will tell you in a whisper why she brings flowers here, although I should like you to guess the secret yourself.”

“ Do you insinuate that she is a flower girl and comes here to sell flowers ? I can't and wont believe that for anything. Such dignified, modest beauty—never, never.”

“ Very well. Then, perhaps, in a former birth she used to supply Collector Sahib with flowers.”

“And she supplies Assistant Collector Sahibs like yourself in this birth! Fine promotion, that!”

“Well, you see, I happened to be a guest of the Collector Sahib the last time he was here, and she gave me bouquet then too.”

“Really! I see she is a prudent girl, always keeping extra flowers for any contingency. To-day, also, she carried some flowers back again.”

“Never mind what she did, it was her own concern. But if the girl comes again, do give her, mother, a new *sari* or some other little present.”

And he went away, laughing, robbing me of my romance and making me feel quite annoyed with myself for being misled by my imagination.

So when she came again the following day her attraction had vanished and she seemed to me like any other ordinary village girl who wanted to earn a few pice. However I said politely:—

“It is very good of you to bring me such nice presents every day. I suppose you are very fond of gardening.”

“We have a garden.”

“Who looks after its work?”

“My mother.”

“Whom else have you at home?”

"No one else, the others live far away."

"I hope that you make enough by selling flowers."

"We do not sell flowers."

She gave me an indignant look, as much as to say that selling flowers was beneath her dignity, and I said apologetically:—

"Why then, my child, do you bring flowers to us from such a distance?"

"My mother does not know it" she replied bashfully, keeping her eyes on the ground.

"Then you come secretly, Why?"

She looked at me in silence, and with timid hesitation! so I said in a reassuring tone:—

"Tell me, my child, don't be afraid."

Then in a low voice she murmured:—

"I come in the hope that I may see *him*."

"Whom?"

"The Assistant Collector Sahib."

What impertinence! Though I had joked with and teased my son about the girl, I felt indignant. Evidently she read my thoughts, for she said quickly:—

"Not this Assistant Collector Sahib—another one."

"Who is he?"

"My sister's husband."

"I suppose he is a Maharatta Civilian."

“No, he is an Englishman.”

An Englishman! I remained silent. Some time before I had heard from a Parsee friend of ours of two or three cases of Englishmen marrying Indian girls in these parts. My curiosity was roused and I said :—

“So your brother-in-law is an Englishman and you are a Hindu!”

“No, I am a Mahomedan, and I belong to the Nawab of Bijapur’s family.”

In Bengal I should have known by her dress whether she was a Mahomedan or a Hindu, but here the dress of both was similar, which was a new thing to me. In this Presidency even the middle-class women of the Jewish community dress like Maharatta girls.

“How did the Englishman come to know your sister?” I asked.

“My father, who was a Sepoy in his service, on his death-bed entrusted us to his care.”

“How old was your sister then?”

“Sixteen. He placed her in a school in Poona and he married her a year later. Then he brought her here in his camp, I remember it quite well.”

“How old were you then?”

“Seven. Mother took me to him and said, “Sahib, through you we are looked down upon

by our community. You have married her sister; take her too, Sahib, and let me die happy and contented placing them in your safe custody and knowing them to be happy as your wives."

He drew me to him, and laying his hand gently on my head, said "She is quite a child now. It is quite ridiculous to think about her marriage yet."

I had some flowers in my hand, and I gave them to him and asked "Will you marry me when I am big?"

He smiled and kissed me and said:—

"Yes, darling, if your sister will allow me—ask her." My sister who had been busy with her household duties entered the room at this moment and laughed and petted me and said, "certainly and we shall be co-wives and always live together. What a happy idea?"

The girl paused and sighed. The large drops rolled slowly down her cheeks. Wondering and puzzled I asked "I suppose you are very fond of your sister? Have you seen them since?"

"No, for ten years I have waited for them, and whenever I see a tent here, I come in the hope of seeing them."

"So the flowers you bring are for them?"

“Yes, I bring flowers for them—and I go back disappointed, after giving them to others.”

“Why then do you offer them to others?” I asked.

“Otherwise I should have no excuse for coming here,” she replied. “But the flowers that I bring for him—those I carry back again.”

“And what do you do with them?”

“I put them on my father’s grave.”

I remained silent, and she said:—

“Every time I come, I hope that I shall see him.”

I noticed that she had begun to speak of “him” and not of “them.” “How old are you?” I asked.

“Seventeen.”

“Are you married?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

She looked at me with wistful wonder and asked:—

“How can I be married when he has not come yet?”

At last the mystery was clear. A great pity and wonder took hold of me at the thought of the simple faith of this trusting girl, and I said kindly:—

"You do not know, perhaps, that an Englishman cannot have two wives."

"He is a Mahomedan. He became one in order to marry my sister."

I wondered if the Ceylon Civilian who had lately been dismissed from the Government service on a charge of bigamy was this girl's brother-in-law, for a Mahomedan and an English girl had been concerned in the case, but it would have been cruel to tell her this, so I asked instead:—

"Did your brother-in-law go to Ceylon?"

"Where is that? I don't know."

"What is his name?"

The name that she gave did not correspond with that of the Ceylon Civilian, and I was silently thinking over the matter when she suddenly said:—

"Madam-Sahib, I have a favour to ask."

"What is it?"

"The Assistant Collector Sahib takes photographs, does he not?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps he has got *his* photograph."

"This Assistant Collector Sahib has only been here a short time" I told her, "and it is ten years since your brother-in-law came to this place—so you say."

“Yes, but he may have met him somewhere.”

“Very well, I will try to find out this evening.”

I was watching her sweet young face and its changing expression when a new light came into her eyes, and she asked eagerly :—

“Sahib, will you show me the Assistant Collector Sahib’s collection of photographs?”

There were some albums lying on the table, and I pointed to them, and without waiting for further permission, she hastened to the books and examined them carefully. Presently she exclaimed with delight :—

“Here he is!”

I was curious, too, and rose and went to look and I saw then an old and faded photograph in an album that had belonged to our Parsee friend.

“Let me have this photograph, madam-Sahib” she pleaded.

“But it is not mine” I explained. The album was left with us. I will however write to the owner, and if he permits me to do so, then I will give you the likeness.”

“When shall I come, Sahib?”

“To-day is Saturday, come on Tuesday. I shall probably have the answer by then.”

With a sigh, the girl laid down the album,

placing upon it the flowers that remained in her hand. Then, in silence, and without even remembering to salaam me, she went away.

On the fourth day I received the permission of my friend to give the photograph to the girl, and I waited for her eagerly, feeling curious to know what would happen. She came at the appointed time, with two lovely bouquets in her hands, and after presenting me with one of them, she asked in a low, soft voice:— .

“ Has the letter come, Sahib ? ”

“ The photograph is yours ” I said, taking it out of the album and placing it in her hand. A look of great joy lit up her sweet face, the radiance of which seemed to fill the whole tent sending a thrill of pleasure through me. At the same time there surged up in my heart a wave of pity for this young girl, who was offering up her youth and beauty, her pure unchanging love and the worship of her faithful heart to an empty love and a faded photograph.

But the girl was happy beyond words. In silence she received the treasure and passed out of the tent with quick and graceful steps the edge of her veil trembling with the fulness of her heartfelt joy. As she disappeared like a wood-nymph into the wood-land scene, the trees, the river and the hills all seemed to me to

have acquired a new charm and I thought to myself that at last I had discovered the sleeping beauty of this lonely place, the spirit animating this deserted village, that I had been looking for all along.

ONLY A CHAPTER

I

It was Malina's birthday, and the house was in festivity, her relations from far and near having come to celebrate the happy day, to bring presents and offer good wishes.

He—Janardan—was among the guests, for ties of friendship had united his family with that of Malina for many years and Malina's parents looked on him as their own son. They had known him from his infancy, and he had spent many days in their house.

Perhaps, reader, you have already guessed Janardan's secret. If not, then I will confide it to you. He loved Malina. And did she love him? Let us see.

Janardan had not been born rich, nevertheless he had much in his favour, for he was not only highly connected, but, also, naturally intelligent. He had passed the inevitable B. A. examination with Honours, and now he was attending the lectures of the Law Classes. The hopes of his parents were centred in him, and they intended to send him to Europe, where he would, no doubt, make a name for himself. Owing to

these things Malina's father and mother looked on Janardan with favour and were willing to accept him as their son-in-law.

Now Janardan was very ardent in his attentions to Malina, as a lover will often be to a charming young lady. And Malina objected very visibly to his attentions, as a young lady will sometimes do when a lover is very persistent.

If Malina was picking flowers, suddenly Janardan would appear before her and offer the choicest flower in the garden for her acceptance. Supposing Malina were practising on the piano, whom should she see in a corner of the room but Janardan, listening with heart and soul, and evidently thinking the most tiresome and tedious of her finger exercises superior to a composition by Mozart.

Still, at times, Janardan came in handy enough. When that inevitable hour arrived for looking up words in the dictionary for the next day's lessons, then Janardan was not altogether shunned ; for Malina found that her troublesome task was finished much the sooner when Janardan gave her his assistance. But was she grateful to Janardan for this ? No, not she. If he was so anxious to serve her, was it not enough that she should accept his services ? To

offer is human to accept is divine! O cruel Malina!

Still Malina might have forgiven Janardan many of his shortcomings if only he had had a prettier name. Janardan! Now, who has ever heard of a respectable gentleman being called Janardan? If he had been called "Lalit," or "Mohan," or by some other such sweet name, it would have been a different thing. But Janardan!

How dreadfully plebeian the name sounded! And, if she married him, what would her name be? Why, Mrs. Janardan, of course "Mrs. Janardan!" she would say; and Oh! what a disgusted face she would make then. If all the notes of her piano had been out of tune and struck together at the same time, they could not have produced in her ears a greater discord. Why, her father's gardener was named Janardan; and if she were to be called "Mrs. Janardan," they might as well call her "Mrs. Gardener" and have done with it.

"What's in a name?" sings the poet. Evidently he had not met a Malina when he expressed that sentiment. Little had Janardan's father thought, when he gave that name to his son, of the trouble he was laying up in store for an ardent lover!

Probably Janardan himself was ignorant of his chief offence in the eyes of Malina; and knew nothing of this great stumbling-block to his wishes and hopes when he placed a beautiful pearl brooch on the table among her birthday presents. Her mother noticed it, at once, and expressed her admiration while fastening it to the shoulder knot of her daughter's *sari*. After that, Malina wore the pearl brooch every day; and, looking at it, Janardan felt himself transported to a heaven of bliss, his heart expanding with pride and delight.

II

Malina appeared for the Entrance examination; and afterwards went for a trip into the interior with her father. The trip came to an end, as all trips will do. And she returned home. On the way from the railway station to the house, her father said that he must see a gentleman on business; and he sent her on alone in the carriage, giving his orders to the coachman who was an old family servant.

It was spring, beautiful spring: The wind blew softly, birds sang, the flower-trees were in bloom, fragrance filled the air. Malina smiled, and felt as gay as the spring morning. In the country she had met Shishir Coomar, and oh!

he was so interesting. And Oh! he had such a pretty name. She was still thinking of him, and all smiles and inward delight, when the carriage reached the house.

Then whom should she see standing on the doorstep but the inevitable Janardan!

At the sight of his familiar face all her beautiful visions suddenly faded away—Shishir Coomar, trip into the interior, railway journey, spring breezes, singing birds, sweet scented flowers—all, all vanished.

“How are you, Malina?” Janardan asked, smiling at her adoringly and offering to help her out of the carriage.

“Oh! I’m all right” she replied carelessly, and she jumped out of the carriage and ran into the house.

Poor Janardan!

A lover’s keen eyes will detect so much!

Where was the pearl brooch?

“Why are you not wearing my brooch, Malina?” he asked.

“I’ve lost it,” she replied indifferently, and, with a toss of her head, hurried up the staircase.

Now Janardan had laboured for a whole year; and a whole year’s earnings had been spent on that pearl brooch and on nothing else. His eyes filled with tears—angry tears—for he

MALINA AND JANARDAN.



Only a chapter—Malina and Janardan—the one smiling and the other frowning. PAGE 197.

felt that he had been insulted. The results of his long labours seemed to him to have tumbled together like a pack of cards. Nevertheless he choked down his anger and tears, and with a determined step followed Malina up the staircase.

Did he seek her in order to say good-bye for ever ?

Did he tell her that he would never enter the house again ?

Not so.

Janardan was no faint-hearted lover, no coward. So in the next scene we see Janardan and Malina standing side by side, as they had so often done before—the one smiling and the other frowning.

And here we will close the chapter, hoping that in time everything will come right for poor Janardan.

TALISMAN

Ranbeer a Panjabi was Colonel Tod's orderly. In name a servant, in reality he was a saviour to the Colonel in every danger and difficulty.

The Sahib never was pleased unless his motor was driven as swift as an arrow. Seated in his car, he would fancy himself flying in an aeroplane. The master drove, and the servant Ranbeer graced the seat by his side. Whether it was due to Ranbeer's expert hints or in virtue of some occult science, we cannot pretend to say ; but the fact remained that Colonel Tod never had an accident or attracted the unwelcome attentions of the vigilant police sergeant even in Chowringhee or at crossings, albeit he drove at such a high, indeed dangerous speed.

One day, however, it happened that Ranbeer was absent from his usual place by the side of his master ; and on that same day a man was run over by the motor at the very first turning after leaving the house.

The Mem-sahib enjoyed but little popularity with the servantry. They considered that she deprived them of their rightful perquisites in marketing, while depriving herself of nothing

whether proper or improper. What interpretation was given in their lexicon to the word proper and what they meant by improper, these salt-eating servants of the Mem-sahib never openly declared. But in some casual way her love of smoking came to be known and duly commented on, all through the bazar.

On a certain mail-day, the lady, cigarette in mouth, was busily engaged in writing. When and how a spark from the glowing end of her cigarette fell down on the carpet and there smoldered into smoking, she never noticed. Suddenly experiencing a sensation of heat about her feet she looked down and saw that the edge of her gown had caught fire. Had not Ranbeer come running in on the instant and beaten out the flames, as she sprang to her feet with a scream, it was quite possible that her beautiful figure would have been badly burnt and disfigured. For a long time after, whenever she stood before her mirror to dress and adorn herself, the bare thought of what she had escaped filled her mind with a shock of fear and sent a violent shiver through all her frame.

Tim Baba was their only son. On his birthday, along with a party of children, they went for a picnic to the Zoological Gardens. Some of the children ran to see the monkey's young ones. One

group went to the place where the reptiles and alligators were. Others, fearlessly approaching the cages, began to poke with sticks at the lions and tigers in order to have the pleasure of hearing them roar. But as soon as they did roar, they started back in fear as far away from the cage as they could get.

Each party of children was accompanied by one or two Sahibs or Mem-sahibs ; or else by a servant. Some of the boys went out boating on the lake, Baba Tim himself taking the helm. Ranbeer had a mind to take the post of helmsman himself, and steer the boys across the Company's lake. But Master Tim was the only child of his parents. When in obstinate mood, he tried and generally succeeded in making even the creator God BRAHMA acknowledge defeat. And Ranbeer was but a servant. Abandoning the helm, the poor fellow retired to the bank with a melancholy face and not without an uneasy mind. And alas ! what he feared came to pass. The children had not rowed far before the boat capsized. Had not Ranbeer jumped into the water and with both hands thrown the boys on to the bank, much as a washerman throws ashore the clothes he has rinsed, it would have been surprising if this day of rejoicing had not been turned to a day of mourning. Hence it was that the orderly

Ranbeer, albeit a servant, was yet the saviour of his master by land and by water, so that the Colonel fondly bestowed on him the pet name of Talisman.

II

When the Colonel Sahib went home on three years furlough, Ranbeer did not take service anywhere else. There was no need, since his master's kindness had enabled him to accumulate a goodly sum of money. He began cultivating the few acres of land he owned, and became a householder, living contentedly with his wife and child. He had been married in very early boyhood.

Ranbeer was a Brahmin by caste. Though not a Pundit, he could read and write tolerably well. His presence of mind was admirable. He never turned his face away from doing good to others. The result was that he became an important and respected personage in the village. Whenever a letter was to be read, a dispute to be settled, advice to be taken in cases of litigation, the village people would come to him for his counsel. So much so that the people even ceased going to the astrologer to ascertain the precise auspicious moment for entering upon any serious undertaking. The name of his village was Bamnia, being so called because it was a Brahmansthan

or place of Brahmins. Thus enjoying the good will and regard of the village people, and the love and care of wife and child, Ranbeer's days passed very happily in his little homeland, when in the year of grace 1914, in the month of August, the trumpet call was sounded in Europe.

It was then the month of Ashwin, which is the latter half of September and the first half of October. On every land the glory of autumn filled the air and sky, wood and grove. Nature herself was clothed in beauty and colour almost like that of the early spring. Beneath the deep resplendent blue of the sky, the ears of corn showed in the fields, and catkins flourished and gleamed spotless white in bunches, layer upon layer, on the dry grassy space near the borders of the dense forest. Who shall say to what secret trysting place, mornings and evenings, the rare sweet fragrance of the weeping *Nyctanthes* floats on, imbuing the heart of the ethereal light with a frenzying fascination and transmuting it into a thousand-fold medley of colour !

This year the condition of the fields was very good indeed. The joy of the peasant family was unbounded. The paddy field all over the autumnal harvest would be high, and preparations for it were now being made.

After supervising the work in the field

Ranbeer was returning home in the afternoon. No sooner had the sun set, than Venus made her smiling appearance in the Western sky. In the centre of the heavenly vault the half moon of the ninth day floated in beauty and splendour. With the close of summer, the fine breeze of early winter wafted abroad almost as much freshness and cheerfulness as that which comes with the end of winter.

The mellow light of the open air, the loveliness of the green field, the thrill of the vibrant atmosphere, all overwhelmed Ranbeer with a sort of rapture such as he had never before experienced. In an ecstasy of perfect joy, he heaved a long sigh and for a while stood motionless with upturned face. In the fullness of his heart he made obeisance again and again to Him whose beauty shines upon this variegated world, Him whose glory is the celestial sphere, of whose creating is this little creature of happiness and sorrow, man,—Him the Supreme Cause, the Ruler of the Universe, who passeth all understanding of the humble man; and then resumed his homeward way.

In the middle of the neat mud-plastered court-yard attached to Ranbeer's leaf thatched clay house, there stood a little temple to Shiva, built of stone. The good wife Parbati, having lit

the evening light even before the ringing of the bells in the village for the evening offering, was now waiting for her husband. On returning home, Ranbeer had no sooner begun to recite his songs of praise to the Almighty, ringing the bell and chanting. "Victory to Mahadeb ! Victory, victory to the Lord of the Universe !" than Seeta, Satee, Rukmini, Bhabani, and some other women, along with a few children, boys and girls, appeared on the scene. Of these, some were dependents of Ranbeer ; some had come to visit their relatives for a few days ; and some were neighbours. These latter had come to see them for an hour or so, but had spent the entire afternoon here, and now were waiting for the evening offering. Was it right to go out of doors during the inauspicious evening hours without first having prayer ?

Up to this hour of prayer there was much singing going on in the open verandah of the kitchen. There, taking up the harmony of the revolving millstone worked with two hands, the united voices of the assembled women rose in full chorus, in—as it were—a whirling rhythm. When all had arrived, they unitedly finished, their offering, and making their obeisance to the deity, all left, each departing to her own house.

Parbati, like any ordinary Hindu woman, was

a good housekeeper and a devoted wife. When Pujah was ended, she washed her husband's feet, put on his sandals for him, and then went to bring him his tea. For long Ranbeer had been so accustomed to drinking tea that although he could pass an entire day without tasting food, if he had to go without tea in the morning and the evening, he would have felt as if his soul was on his lip's end and on the point of forsaking his body.

Meanwhile, seated on a mat before an oil lamp, and taking a paper, the "Hindustan" out of his pocket, he began to read. In a little time his wife set a big bowl of warm tea before him; whereupon he laid down his paper, and taking up the bowl with both hands, emptied it at a draught, returned it to Parbati, and resumed his reading.

Then Parbati, having brought Ranbeer a small albola, a metal huble-bubble with a long reed pipe, sat down to fill the chillum, the earthen bowl. *Gul*-fire was all ready in a small pot on one side of the verandah, Sitting down then, and lighting a tikia, a thin cake of coagulated charcoal dust, she laid it on the tobacco in the chillum, and began to blow it with her mouth. This she did with such skill that in a very short time the tobacco was alight.

Then she placed the chillum on the top of the albola, and handed the pipe to her husband, who immediately began to puff at it, without once stopping his reading. His little son Kissen Das, who had spent the entire afternoon in busy play with the other children, upon the approach of evening fell asleep on a charpoy on the verandah. Being roused from his sleep by the bubbling sound of the Albola, he jumped down from the charpoy, and approaching his father from behind, flung his arms about his neck, calling fondly; "Babuji, pitaji!" But to-day the father was so entirely absorbed in his reading that he forgot to meet the expressions of his son's love with the return that was his daily due: he did not even turn to give him a look or a smile.

Ranbeer was reading that Colonel Tod was going to fight in France as commander of the 21st Punjabis, and that in consequence, recruiting of new soldiers was going on throughout the whole of the Punjab, and that day was the last day for recruiting in his village. This news set him thinking deeply. The question was—if he were not with the Sahib, who would save him? It was he who was the Colonel's talisman, his sure protecting charm. England would suffer if he were not saved.

None but himself knew that the Colonel Sahib was the one officer upon whose life or death depended the victory or defeat of the whole empire! Ranbeer's mind was tossed to and fro with such distressing questions as: "what ought I to do?" "Ought I to go or stay?" What is my duty?

Again and again the little boy clinging to his father cried: "Pitaji, Babuji!" and finding himself still neglected, stood up sobbing, and finally screaming. Then Ranbeer flung the paper down on the mat, and drawing the child to his bosom, kissed him over and over again. One or two tear-drops fell on the child's face.

"What is the news about the war, Patiji?" (my esteemed husband) Parbati asked.

"Nothing, nothing," was Ranbeer's reply, his eyes fixed on the child.

III

"I say, is brother Ranbeer at home?" Thus next day at noon, his kinsman Mahabeer, giving a loud call, came and stood in the court-yard of the house. There must have been some very strong reason to induce Mahabeer, a man notorious in his village for his slothfulness, to come at such an untimely hour and under a blazing sun, instead of remaining at home and

sleeping at his ease. There was such a reason. His wife, who was approaching the hour of her confinement, had been taken with fainting fits. His folk were advising him to resort to mantras or charms to procure her recovery. Could Ranbeer undertake to do this work? There would then be no need to go in search of another ojha or exorcist. And the burden on his head would be removed.

Up to this time Parbati had been sitting in a shady corner of the court-yard chopping straw. She had finished her task and had just left the BONTI leaning against the side of the verandah, and begun to fill a bag with the chopped fodder. This is done so that there may be no delay in giving the cows and oxen their daily ration of the same when they are brought home by the herdsman. Now, at the coming of Mahabeer, she rose and said: "Brother, he is not at home. What is the news?"

Having briefly explained that the news was not good, Mahabeer went away in quest of an exorcist, this time with a disappointed heart, but specially requesting Parbati that she would send Ranbeer to his place immediately on his return. For he would have to be present at the time, even if he did not actually perform the exorcism.

Parbati was much grieved at the news, and not a little anxious. She finished the filling of her bag considering in her mind that when she had got through with her work she would spend the evening at Mahabeer's house. Then having swept the court-yard clean, she passed into her sleeping apartment. That day the whole family with the exception of herself, had gone to her brother's house to listen to a recital of the story of Sivanarayan. Her brother himself had come and taken them away. Parbati excused herself from going on the pretext that she had to look after the work at home. But the real fact was, that with her going Ranbeer would have been put to inconvenience. Parbati, however, made her brother promise to bring Kissen Das back to her that same day. She could not pass a night without her child.

Even then it seemed a long, long time to the sunset hour. To Parbati, this day in the month of Ashwin, in the absence of Kissen Das seemed as long as one in the month of Asharh, which runs from the middle of June to the middle of July. She had no mind for her work. When Kissen Das was at home, he reigned supreme, and kept the house in a perpetual bustle. He ran about, played, and swung on his swing; and in going to the help of his mother only

proved a hindrance in every piece of work ; and yet, how quickly the whole work was done ! This day, having finished making her bed early, his mother went to the kitchen while yet there was some daylight, and after lighting the oven fire and dressing the vegetables for the evening meal, prepared the curry that was to be taken with the chapatti. On her husband's return she would only prepare and give him some fresh-baked chapattis ; and, his meal over, they would go together and see Mahabeer's wife. Taking the curry from the oven, she put water for the tea on the fire, and then just as she was getting ready to take the pots to the well, Ranbeer's friend and neighbour, Nihal Singh, appeared at the door. He came to invite Ranbeer with his family on the occasion of his younger brother's marriage. With manifold gestures and imposing mien, by word and explanation, reason and argument, and in half a hundred other ways, he demonstrated to her beyond all possibility of dispute that if they did not go, the work could not be done in the proper manner. Then, having extorted from Parbati a promise that next day without fail she would come to his home accompanied by Ranbeer and the child, he took leave of her precisely in the auspicious hour of the twilight.

As soon as Parbati heard the lowing of the kine in the byre, she went thither and called each cow and ox by its name and patted them one after another. She looked to see that a sufficiency of fodder had been put in each manger. The herdsman went to get water, leaving a few of the mangers still empty. Before he returned, Parbati had filled the mangers with chopped straw husks, and other fodder. The bells for the evening offering in the village had begun to ring when with a light in her hand she came and stood in the court-yard after censuring the byre. She did not know that she was so late in coming out. She looked up at the sky and saw that the day light was wholly gone. In the clear blue sky just over head, the big moon was shining in all her smiling beauty and brightness. The light in her hand showed pale beside that luminary over head. It was so late and yet there was no sign of Ranbeer. The offering was being delayed.

On the one hand, her mind was not in its proper mood on account of the absence of her child. On the other, a mysterious burden seemed to be weighing on her spirit through the news she had received concerning Mahabeer's wife. When she saw that her husband did not return, a strange pulse of fear, of vague anxiety passed

through her mind like a flash. At that very moment a lizard chirped, tick—tick—tick, in the corner of one of her apartments. A bat flew over her head with a flapping of dark wings. What did these bode? Were these omens auspicious or inauspicious?

But to-day she had but little time to bestow on such questions. The evening was rapidly passing. Dismissing from her mind all her cares and troubles and anxieties, she finished her evening worship by herself. This was the first occasion on which Ranbeer had been absent at such an hour since he had given up service and returned home. At the conclusion of her worship, after having made her obeisance to the deity, to the accompaniment of prayer for the welfare of husband and child, she arose and looked expectantly towards the door. She thought she heard at a distance the sound of *nagra* shoes, the Indian shoes generally worn by up-countrymen. The sound came nearer and nearer. "At last, after so long, he is coming," said Parbati to herself. A thrill of joy ran through her whole frame. The door was closed but not bolted. At the touch of the comer's hand, it opened. But who—think you—entered the courtyard? Not Ranbeer but Ranjit, the son of her husband's brother. Parbati heaved a deep sigh of

disappointment, and asked : “ What is the news, son ? ”

With some hesitation, Ranjit replied : “ The regiment has gone.”

“ Let it go, son. Victory, victory to Sirkarji ! ” said Parbati.

“ Uncle has gone too,” said Ranjit.

“ Where ? ”

“ With the regiment.”

“ With the regiment ! Why ? ”

“ To fight.”

“ To fight ! ” exclaimed poor Parbati. “ Gone, making my son fatherless ! O God ! ”

She fell to the ground, rolling there, and giving vent to heart-rending cries of most distressing lamentation.

IV

It is surprising that the unprecedented welcome the Indian Army received on its arrival in France, did not altogether turn the men’s heads. We learn from the detailed descriptions published in the newspapers of the day that the men and women of France did not confine themselves to loud “ Hurras ! ” and the showering of heaps of flowers on the Sepoy Regiments, but aged and younger women alike, honoured them even with kisses of blessing. It

can easily be imagined that the bright-faced, well-formed, handsome Ranbeer received a full share of these greetings. But the burden of such appreciation so expressed confounded and distressed him almost as though he had been a shy, timid woman. When in the midst of the joy and exultation of their coming to the help of France, the company of Sepoys arrived at their destination, their joyous, merry laugh melted away in the darkness of the trenches.

“Where is the fighting? With whom are we fighting. Where do the shells and bullets come from? Whom do the cannon aim at? Who sounds the trumpet?” From whom do the battle-calls and signals come? Who is our commander?” These and similar questions were on every one’s lips. Ranbeer is a Sepoy in Colonel Tod’s regiment, but except on rare occasions he has hardly even met him face to face. What kind of demoniacal warfare is this?

Despite all, however, it did not take the men very long to adapt themselves to this new kind of warfare. In fact they made a good name for themselves from the very beginning of the war. The Indian Army arrived in Europe at the beginning of winter, early in October. At the close of the month, in the battle of the 31st October, Artillery Sepoy Khuddad earned

the highest decoration for valour, the Victoria Cross. When every man of his company had been killed or wounded, and there was none left to help or support him, still in the midst of death and destruction, Khuddad remained at his post alone, like a second Casabianca, and fearlessly and faithfully did his duty. Not for a moment did it occur to him to leave his gun and run away.

The year 1914 has passed unnoticed away amid the soul-destroying sound of roaring guns. The year 1915 has also advanced to the month of March. Where are the Germans now? At the very outset of the war, after laying it waste, they had taken possession of Belgium, but having failed to enter Paris notwithstanding their keen desire and vigorous attempt to do so, they were obliged to remain at a distance of sixty miles from it, on the banks of the Aisne.

The allied Armies having compelled the enemy to retreat after a few minor engagements, were obliged to reserve all their forces for their preparation to crush the Germans. In fact, the first British attack on the Germans was in the battle of Neuve Chapelle, on the 22nd of March, eight months after the war had begun. The extraordinary courage and unprecedented prowess shown by the sepoys will remain a thing

of glory in history for ever. Sepoy Ganbeer Singh became one who earned the Victoria Cross, but he had not the good fortune to receive it in his lifetime. The King-Emperor honoured the memory of the dead hero with this decoration of glory.

As soon as ordered, this valiant hero, with bayonet in hand, accompanied by only a few companions and followers was the first to enter the German's main trench, attacking section after section with such brilliant prowess and skill, that the enemy was obliged to surrender on the instant. Ranbeer was the chief of the few Indian sepoy's with whose help Ganbeer defeated the Germans.

After this came the battle of Hill 60. The lot of Ranbeer, the hero of this short story, is bound up with event.

V

On the banks of the Yser, both parties, the Allies and the enemy, were fighting from their respective trenches. The Germans were making constant efforts to advance, and the Allies were repelling them. There would have been a great disaster if at some unlucky hour the enemy could have seized Hill 60. And on the other hand, if the Allies could get to it first, their position would be safe. In the attempt to occupy

it, no means, fair or foul, were left untried by either party.

The aeroplanes from above were collecting information concerning the encampment, and observing the position of the guns. The enemy, disguised in the uniform of the Allies, were doing their best to hoodwink them. The Allies were advancing under cover of a forest. Battle-grounds in the village paths, suddenly in a night, were turned into forests. Subterranean passages filled with explosives were got ready. By remaining hidden in the trenches, although it was in the neighbourhood of the enemy, it was on one hand easy to get protection for oneself; and on the other, one had the great advantage of being able to fire at the enemy through the loop-holes. A great variety of guns were kept concealed in the flanks of the trenches on both sides. Of these the German howitzer was the most destructive. This monstrous engine of war can drop its shell into a narrow trench, which the projectile of a gun will miss. Nevertheless, the skilled battalions avoid- ing what seemed certain death, were advancing.

The trench-homes of each side faced one another. They were so near that in some places the distance between was not even fifty yards. The enemies, hiding in their trenches, fired at each other by guess-work it almost seemed, and

yet with mathematical precision. Piles of sand-bags on the parapets and a perfect net-work of barbed wire protected them. Hence it was no easy matter to pass through them to the enemy's territory behind.

Three soldiers were engaged together in making a subterranean passage. One of them was an Englishman ; another was a Frenchman ; and the third a Hindu Sepoy. The position in life of the three men was almost identical. Each of them had a home, plenty of corn, a beautiful wife, and a lovely child. All three of them, leaving behind such happy homes, had come of their own accord to embrace death. Here upon this field of action all distinctions of caste and colour were wiped out. The three were sincere friends,—such sincere friends as only those who share a common danger can become. For Ran-beer, the other two had the highest regard, and placed in him a boundless confidence. How often had his presence of mind, his natural tact in the business of war, saved them from the jaws of impending death !

When at work they did not preserve total silence. As they chatted together, the Frenchman said that it was for his country's sake that he had come here, sacrificing all comfort and happiness. The Englishman said his reason was

that his nation might be saved, since the national glory, honour, and existence were at stake. As they thus spoke, both looked at their Hindu fellow-worker. They did not expressly ask him any question, but the unspoken query in their eyes rung plainly in Ranbeer's ears : " Why did you come ?" What answer could he give to the question ? Why, indeed, had he come ? He had not come to save his country nor yet his nation ; nor even fulfilment of his duty as a soldier since he was not a soldier. His duty was to protect his wife and bring up his child. He had abandoned this duty and come and sacrificed himself,—Why ? and for what ? What answers could he make ? He was going to say : " I do not know why I came. I only know that I came to give my life."

But before he had time to utter the words, a bugle-call rang out. This was the signal to prepare for an attack. All three got up and with hasty steps went to join the lines of soldiers who stood waiting.

The enemies began to greet one another with a continuous discharge of shells and bullets. In other words, a bombardment had begun.

VI

Shots and shells fell without intermission.

Shells falling in one place, burst into a thousand pieces. And spreading all over, mangled the bodies of men with wounds and scars innumerable. Limbs and bodies of men were burnt with the flow of liquid fire pumped out from long metal containers. Men were robbed of breath with poisonous gases. Yet regardless of all these infinite tortures, no sooner had the word of command been given, than the sepoys went forward, undauntedly rushing at the enemy with fixed bayonets in what is called the bayonet charge. Numbers of soldiers fell dead or wounded, and were replaced by numbers more from the rear. But the shells from the German howitzers in a very short time could level to the ground a wall of iron : how long then could a wall of living flesh and blood expect to stand ? The only way to success at this critical juncture, was to stop the batteries. Shortly before, an aeroplane had brought information regarding the position of the German batteries.

The Commander of the 21st Punjabis advanced and put the question to his men : “ Which of my men are willing to sacrifice themselves in performing this brave deed ? Who will destroy the enemy’s guns and be honoured with victory ? Come forward, all those who by saving us, will

bind the allied armies of England and France in the bonds of gratitude ! Come, my brave soldiers, come forward and help us !”

Thus inciting and encouraging them, the commanders of the various regiments began to invite the men of their respective regiments to come forward. From each regiment a few brave men stepped out before their commanders, Ranbeer stepping forward before anyone else. Before this Ranbeer from time to time had seen his commander, his master Colonel Tod, occasionally at the drill hour, and sometimes before engaging in an action. Many a time, looking toward him, he had saluted in silence from his post in the line ; but never before he heard the sound of his voice from so near.

The moment Ranbeer came forward and stood saluting him, the Colonel recognised his old servant as if for the first time ; and in an encouraged tone, said : “ You, Talisman, my brave follower,—you are in this war ! Then I have no more fear of the result : our victory is sure !”

Ranbeer’s heart and soul were filled on the instant with such delight as he had never experienced before. He felt as if his body was filled as by some divine power, with a new and boundless energy. Could he possibly reap more joy from being decorated with the honours of

victory ? Would that be more real satisfaction ? In return for his precious words, Ranbeer saluted his master once more with his silent, cheerful smile. It was his way of showing his full heart's gratitude.

VII

By valiant effort impossibility was made actuality. The enemy's artillery men were captured, and the batteries destroyed. But only a few of the soldiers who undertook this operation remained alive, and of these almost all were wounded. When after killing the last artilleryman, Ranbeer drew forth the bloodstained bayonet from his breast, suddenly the weapon fell from his hand. He made an attempt to pick it up, but found himself unable to do so. An atrocious pain ran from shoulder-blade to armpit. Blood was flowing freely, staining his uniform and accoutrements. Still, taking up the bayonet in his left hand, he went on with steady steps. In the meantime the daring Ambulance Corps, entering the battle field, were taking up into their car the dead, the unconscious, and those wounded in the legs. Ranbeer made endeavour to walk by the side of the car, but could not : the car went far too fast for him.

It was then midday ; but where was the sun ? Somewhere in the sky it was hiding, but where

none could say. The sky was completely overcast with cloud, and the roads deep in mud. Since the night before it had drizzled continuously. When it was going to cease, nobody knew. On this occasion the Germans were defeated. His own trench was not far away, yet the way to it was unsafe for Ranbeer. At any moment a German might run up and kill him with a bayonet, or shoot him from a distance with his rifle. Ranbeer was now incapable of anything. He could neither run away nor defend himself. By the exercise of some skill, he managed to make his way into a woodland path, and for a short time rested himself under a tree. He looked up at the dreary sky and pictured to himself by contrast, the bright face of the sun of his home-land. Would he ever again see the cloudless, deep blue sky of his dear native country, lit up by sun and moon? And where were they now,—the faithful wife, and darling son, dearer both to him than his own life? He heaved a deep sigh and started walking again, since before night fell, he must reach the trench.

Just as he was about to reach it, he saw Colonel Tod wounded and bleeding, somehow or other had dragged himself into the wood and so saved himself. How was he to get, from this

place to the trench, and safety? None of his regiments know of whereabouts. Suddenly, at the sight of Ranbeer approaching him, he became speechless with joy and surprise. Truly Ranbeer was his talisman. Ranbeer had no strength in his right arm at all, yet inspired with divine force, with his left hand he helped the Colonel up on his back, and slowly crawled on.

Up to this moment his lungs were partly choked with poisonous gas, and he breathed with difficulty; part of his face was burnt and disfigured with liquid fire; blood was flowing from his arm-pit; but he took no heed of all his bodily pain. His one distressing thought was:— he might fail to reach the hospital with Colonel Tod.

But he reached it: indeed, he did reach it! When the attendants there took Tod down from his back just as he arrived at the base of the hospital building, only then and not before did Ranbeer drop, rolling over on the ground. In heart-felt gratitude, before entering, Tod, held Ranbeer's hand in both his own. But Ranbeer's work was done. With his hand between his master's hands, the brave, world-renouncing Hindu hero, the ideal performer of duty, a true observer of the Bhagavad Gita's teaching, smiled a joyous smile, and expired. For one brief

moment the parting soul hovered over his beloved country and on the clear horizon beheld that peaceful dawn light looked forward to with so much eagerness by all the nations, then in glory and bliss it was wafted heaven-ward to pass on to the realm of Supreme Nirvana.

When, after he had recovered, Colonel Tod was decorated with the coveted honour of the Victoria Cross, the King-Emperor himself pinning the decoration on his breast, the Sahib's eyes were full of tears.

Was he then entirely absorbed in the glorious present, oblivious of all else? Or did any shadow be-cloud his happy dream, any sad memory hover obscurely in his mind, darkening, if only for a moment, the background of his bright vision?

MUTINY

(A TRUE STORY)

We—my son and I—were staying by the sea at Alibag, in the Bombay Presidency, and dining at the house of Mrs. A, when this true story was related by our hostess. The gentlemen lingered, in English fashion over their wine, while we ladies chatted on the verandah of the bungalow.

It was a beautiful night. Silvery moon-beams danced on the dark sea that stretched in front of us. The mighty water, swelling and heaving with the rising tide, seemed to be unable to contain its deep emotions and to strive, passionately, to flood the whole world. After washing the Fort of Kolaba near by, and overflowing the far-reaching expanse of white sand, the sea ran up to a mass of black rock near the bungalow, just in front of which stood two pillars, dedicated to two SATIS. Here, at the foot of the pillars, the foaming, heaving water for a moment seemed to come to a sudden stand still. It was as though at the sacred touch of the pillars, its boldness vanished, and it sank back in wonder and awe, after paying its repeated homage to the Satis, and singing them a hundred hymns of praise.

Far away, in the west, the dark forms of the two island Forts of Andhari and Kandari were dimly discernable in the moon-light. Not so very long ago, only in the eighteenth century, the famous pirate chieftain Kanhoji Angray is said to have kept his captives imprisoned on one of these islands. The reader will remember that this notorious Mahratta was in his time the terror by land and sea of English, Portuguese and Moguls alike. Europeans called him "pirate," and such in truth he was; but in the days when might was right, what chief, or ruler, or founder of a dynasty was not a robber or a pirate? With success, piracy only receives another name. Angray had many noble qualities, and his soldiers worshipped him like a Napoleon. His power extended far and wide, and Balaji, the Maharatta ruler of that time, was obliged to make him the Raja of the provinces that he had brought under his control. Angray's descendants, though bereft of most of their ancestral possessions, still hold the title of Raja. The two forts stand out proudly towards the sea, and tell their own story of the glory of the past. The incessant washing of the waves has not broken away one stone. None could subdue the indomitable spirit of Angray but Death. And the Island Forts—his monuments

—still stand erect and strong defying the waves of the ocean. Andari is now a complete desert, and Kandhari has been converted into a light-house. And a light-house keeper, with one servant for a companion, tends the revolving light on the Kandari Fort which flashed before our eyes as we sat on the verandah and talked, then gradually grew dim and for a moment disappeared altogether, like the intermittent glow of a firefly.

With such a scene in front of us, we talked about the great war that is now convulsing the world.

Conversation turned on the topic of national courage, and our hostess proudly declared that one French man is equal to five Germans, and one Englishman the equal of three Frenchmen.

Proud words these, and true, perhaps! I, too, felt a glow of pride, as at the praise of a dear friend; for are not the English the most intimately related to us? And have we not cast in our lot with them as the sharers of their destiny? Do we not pray for the victory of the English as fervently as they do themselves and feel proud to sacrifice our men and money to save the honour of England?

In this connection, I, too, could have remarked with pride that our sepoys are in no degree

inferior to the soldiers of other nations,—that, led by good officers, they show exceptional courage and bravery on the battle field; and that they are the first to march forward fearlessly into the jaws of death. But if I dressed my views would they be appreciated? Most probably not. Now is a time of misunderstanding and is not mere suspicion positive proof against life-long loyalty? Then who knows what next—indictment, or internment? So one has to think twice even before giving utterance to the simplest truth.

Moreover, however proud we may feel at the bravery of our sepoy, can we call it a national pride? Alas! have we not lost the privilege of calling ourselves a nation? What nation do we belong to? Our Rulers are of the West and we are not a bit less loyal for it—possibly more. For it is the English who have made modern India, for which we are supremely grateful. But still the shoe pinches some-where. Our King is not one but many. The merest boy even if he be a half caste, thinks himself a King in India, demands our allegiance and arrogates to himself privileges which are denied to us. Of these thousands of Kings we must be the lawful and loyal subjects. But even the simple rights which loyal citizens expect do not belong to us.

We are not treated as equals, nor do we receive the affection that according to our own national ideas, rulers should show to their subjects. If one among so many millions of us shows a disloyal spirit, then we are all considered to be deserving of the gallows. And lest one or two should go wrong we are deprived of the privilege of carrying fire-arms with which to defend ourselves even from wild beasts !

Of what nation are we then ? Certainly we are not one with our rulers. We have not the rights of children of the soil that belong to us. Surely our fore-fathers, asleep in heaven, would be disturbed by the very idea, and curse us for our degeneracy ! Was it not in this ancient land that science, literature and the arts flourished at the dawn of time ? Our very posterity, also, will rise up in anger against so preposterous a nation, since at this very moment are we not renowned among the nations, in the things of the mind. We are, then, in the position of our mythological hero Harischandra's father Trisangu who could find no place either in heaven or on earth, and remained suspended in vacant space. So it is natural that occidentals should look upon our courage as reflected glory, and our loyalty and self-sacrifice as cringing, dog-like virtues !

And I kept silence.

Never before had I been made to feel my racial inequality in my intercourse with English people. I had always been treated as one of themselves. But this deference and friendliness had been paid to me individually, as being due to my social position. To-day, these expressions of a woman belonging to a free nation, made me feel myself an utter stranger among English people. Humbled and mortified, I called to mind our past Aryan glory, and with a suppressed sigh, I asked rather abruptly :—

“ Are not those Sati pillars yonder in memory of Raja Angray’s wives ?”

Mrs. B—, another guest, replied : “So they say. What a terrible custom !”

“ What terrible courage !” said I.

Mrs. B—was silent, but her curling lip seemed to say :

“ Courage indeed ! To allow oneself to be burnt alive and not to have the power to utter a word ! That is your courage ! To be trodden under the heel of subjugation and feel it to be the happiness of virtue. This is indeed natural for a brave people like you.”

If she had really spoken these words, what could I have said in reply ? Could ever faith, love and devotion stand the test of argument ? They are part and parcel of the divinity and a

thing apart from human logic. Fortunately I was not put to such a test. Said Mrs. A—: “Are not those two islands, Raja Angray’s prisons? How daring he must have been!”

“And how horrid!” exclaimed Mrs. B—“For he was only a pirate.”

(True enough! What is bravery in a victorious nation, is contemptible courage and barbarism in the conquered).

Miss C—who was staying with Mrs. A—and who had just come out from England, thought we were talking about the Mutiny and exclaimed:—

“Oh! How dreadful! Were you here during the Mutiny?”

“No, I was not” laughed Mrs. A—“and for the good reason that I was not born at the time. But my father was in India then.”

Scotch people are said by their English neighbours to be wanting in humour, so we all looked at Miss C—while she asked, quite simply: “Had your father any experiences of the Mutiny?”

“No,” replied Mrs. A,—“he was not a soldier, but I went through a Mutiny once.”

“How awful!” exclaimed Miss C—

“Really?” said Mrs. B—“But was there ever a mutiny in this part of India?”

We were all eager to hear the story, and begged Mrs. A—to tell it to us. And when it was finished, I did not know whether to laugh or to cry.

MRS. A—'S STORY

I had just come out to India after my marriage. Years before, when I was quite a child, I had once been in Bengal—but I was too young at that time to remember anything, and this was, in fact, my first experience of this country and the people in it. My husband was an Assistant Collector in Sukkar, and we settled down in our new home quite comfortably. When my husband went “on tour” I always accompanied him, and after knocking about for a few days in Camp, we were always glad to return to our cosy little bungalow and thoroughly enjoyed the rest and quiet of home-life. Only once I stayed at home alone. My husband had to go to a small village for two or three days, and I decided not to go with him. The house was full of servants and sepoys, so I felt that I should be quite safe during my husband’s absence. But my friends in the Station thought differently. They were filled with anxiety on my account, and the Superintendent of Police offered to let me have a guard of his own sepoys. I thanked him for his kindness, but refused, saying it would show want

of confidence in our own men. Before coming to India, I had had the impression that the servants of this country are cruel and treacherous. Horrible accounts of the mutiny had given me this idea, but my actual experience after coming to India had proved quite different, and I had found the servants and the sepoys docile, and very faithful and intelligent. I trusted our own sepoys and felt that I should be quite safe in their care, and I thought the Police Sahib's proposal quite unnecessary and even ventured to tell him so. My husband laughed at my enthusiasm; but the Police Sahib seemed annoyed and tried to make me change my mind. But I declined to do so, and I thought the matter had ended there.

My husband had gone away, and I had retired for the night, feeling quite safe and happy. Little did I think that I was to pay so heavily and so soon for my independence! My Ayah was the sole attendant in my room, and when I fell asleep, she was lying on the floor beside my bed. At about midnight, I awoke, hearing a noise outside the house. I was startled and only half conscious, and I heard cries, and the sound of fire arms. A horrible feeling of fear overcame me. The thought of the Mutiny of 1857 came to my mind, and I remembered that rumour of a disturbance in the interior had

reached us. That this was another mutiny I felt certain.

“ Oh ! God, save me ” I cried.

Like a drowning man who clutches at a straw, I called out “ Ayah, Ayah ! ”

But she was not in the room. Had she, too, joined the mutineers ? Ah ! why had I been so sanguine, why had I not listened to those who knew the people of the land ?

Stricken with utter terror, I lay in bed, motionless, in a halfconscious state and inwardly praying. Just then the Ayah returned.

“ Madam Sahib ! ” she said ; and her voice was respectful and natural as usual.

Thus reassured and finding a friend near me, I recovered from my state of stupor, and confidence in our own men returned. But still I thought that the sepoys of the Sukkar Fort had rebelled, and an attack had been made on the bungalow and that our few men had been fighting to save me.

All this flashed through my mind, and I asked in a trembling voice :—

“ What is this noise, ayah ? What has happened ? Where are our men ? ”

The ayah in reply said many things, but I had not learnt the language well enough to understand more than that “ Police ” “ Sepoy ” “ Fighting ”.

So I was right. I had heard that there were a great many soldiers kept in secret in the Fort of Sukkar. A mutiny must have broken out among them. (I did not know then the difference between a court sepoy and a soldier sepoy) I cried out wildly. "Fighting! Mutiny! Are they going to kill me? Oh! help, help, help!"

The ayah, although she did not understand English, could see that I was very much frightened, and she said "No, no, Madam Sahib, no, no." But I thought there was no help for me. The noise of arms and the cries seemed to come nearer and to grow louder. Frantic with terror, I tried to rise, but unable to do so, fell back unconscious. Oh! what a dreadful night!"

Mrs. A—paused, and Miss C—gave vent to her feelings.

"Dreadful is not the word for it" she said, "But go on. What happened then?"

"I was not killed, that's certain," said Mrs. A—laughing, "for I have lived to tell you the tale."

"But what was the end? Was it really a mutiny?"

"No, I am afraid it was not. It was only a storm in a tea-pot. On returning to consciousness, I found that it was morning and the ayah was standing beside me. All was quite outside.

It could not have been a dream, a nightmare. So I asked my ayah :—

“ I think I heard a noise outside during the night. Has anything happened ?”

“ No, Madam Sahib,” she said, “ Go, sleep.”

But I could not sleep then, for the sun was up, and I asked again :—

“ Ayah, I thought I heard a noise outside last night. What was it ?”

She began to talk volubly, but I could not understand what she said. So I sent her for a Sepoy who could speak a little English and he told me the whole truth. The Police Sahib had been at the bottom of it all. In spite of my declining to have his Sepoys, he had sent a guard to the bungalow at night. My men had been angry and had told them to go away; and at last, it had come to blows. The Police Sahib, however, as I learnt later on, had not been solely to blame. The God of Love had had something to do with it. Since my ayah was sought in marriage by one of our Sepoys, and a young Sepoy of the Police force was also in love with her, the two rivals had found it a good opportunity to fight out their quarrel, and the noise of their fighting, in the silence of the night, had been exaggerated a hundredfold by my wild imagination and fears. I felt very angry

at the Police Sahib's well-meant interference, which had terrified me out of my senses and nearly killed me with alarm. But when my husband returned, I said very little about it, for I think I was a little ashamed of myself."

At this juncture the gentlemen came into the verandah, and one of them said to us:—

"A cable had just arrived saying that Indian troops have been safely landed in Europe, and the French people have covered them with flowers."

"And England feels proud to have them!" exclaimed our host, "Brave warriors of an ancient civilization, to fight side by side with English soldiers against the common enemy."

Since then, "les Hindues" as the Indian troops are called by the French, have gone to the Front, have thrown themselves into the thick of the fight and have saved the "Izzat" of their mother-land and earned the highest praises of their King and commanders by their whole-hearted cameraderie and brilliant achievements. The bravery of the Indian troops is on every tongue in England; and the English soldiers desire that they should share with them the Victoria Cross and other coveted military honours. And the Government? It too, has been touched by this enthusiastic self-sacrifice, and it

is believed that after the war is over, India will receive her just demands.

All honour to our brave country-men, and to the foreigners who appreciate their gallant efforts.



GLOSSARY

- AHA-UHU**—Ejaculations—expressive of sympathy.
- BOUMA**—A term of affection and respect applied to the daughters-in-law. Bou meaning bride and Ma mother.
- BABU**—A term of respect used in addressing gentlemen. It is put after the name when used with the first name only, but is placed before the full name.
- BRAHMA**—God, the Creator, one of the Hindu Trinity, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva—the creator, the preserver and the destroyer.
- BAITHAK**—A metallic hookah-stand.
- BEHAN**—The name by which the mothers of the bride and bride-groom call each other.
- BONTI**—A straw cutting implement.
- CHOTO BOU**—Youngest daughter-in-law.
- CHOWRY**—A kind of fan.
- DADA AND DIDI**—Elder brother and sister. These terms of respect are also applied to elder cousins and intimate friends.
- DIDIMONI**—An endearing term by which a daughter of the house is addressed.
- DEKCHI**—Cooking utensil.
- GAYI-HALUD**—Turmeric ceremony which usually takes place two or three days before the wedding.
- GUL**—A small ball of charcoal powder.

- HOMA**—The fire sacrifice, one of the most important Hindu ceremonies consisting of giving oblations to the fire with recitations of mantras by the priests.
- HOOKAH**—Hubble bubble pipe for smoking tobacco.
- KALI**—The dread Mother, a goddess representing the terrible forces of nature.
- KALIYUGA**—The iron age one of the four yugas or ages of Hindu mythology, in which all sin and sorrow will prevail until the 10th Avatar Kalki is incarnated and a new yuga dawns with him.
- LUCKMI**—The goddess of fortune.
- MANTRA**—Sacred texts uttered during worship or invocation.
- MAHASHAYA**—A term of respect affixed after the name corresponding to 'Sir'.
- MUKTEARS**—Law agents.
- PRANAM**—An obeisance made to one's elders and betters by bowing low to the ground.
- RAMA**—The great King of the golden age, who is considered to have been an incarnation of Vishnu.
- SARI**—Dress worn by Hindu women.
- SATI**—A wife who dedicates herself to her husband by being cremated with him on the same pyre.
- SAHANA RAGINI**—The wedding tune.
- SANNYASINI**—A female devotee.
- SITA**—Rama's queen in the epic of Ramayana.

TAMASHA—An entertaining performance.

THAKURJI—Sister-in-law, father-in-law's daughter.

ULU—An onomatopoeitic 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.

YUVARAJ—Heir apparent to the throne.

