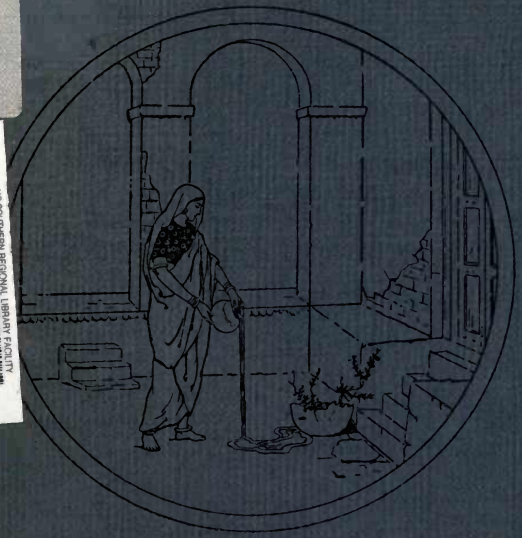

Shubala—
A Child-Mother.

A little pamphlet entitled "Shubala—A Child Mother" has been written by Miss Cornelia Sorabji with the object of helping the infant welfare work in aid of which the Exhibition at Delhi, opened by Lady Chelmsford on Saturday, has been organised. If anything were needed to arouse the sympathy of the reader for the objects of this exhibition, and of the League which Lady Chelmsford is initiating, it might be found in the poignant pathos of the stories told in this pamphlet—stories evidently founded on fact. The pity of them is enough to cause physical pain. Volumes of statistics or dry-as-dust reports would fail to produce such an impression. The pamphlet is being sold at the Delhi Exhibition, and it can be had in Calcutta on application to the Court of Wards Office in Writers Buildings, Block IV. The price is one rupee, and all proceeds will go to the funds of the League for Maternal and Child Welfare.

Shubala—
A Child-Mother.

BY

CORNELIA SORABJI

CALCUTTA
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1920

By the same Author

SUN BABIES.
JOHN MURRAY.

BETWEEN THE TWILIGHTS.
HARPER & BROTHERS.

INDIAN TALES OF THE GREAT ONES.
BLACKIE & SON, LD.

THE PURDAHNASHIN.
THACKER, SPINK & CO.

MORE SUN BABIES.
BLACKIE & SON, LD.

Dedicated

To

HER EXCELLENCY

Lady Chelmsford

In gratitude for her thought of good
towards the women and children
of India.

SHUBALA—A CHILD-MOTHER.

Shubala was ten years old when the tragedy happened, and you also would call it a tragedy, if you had known Shubala as I had done since she was a baby; and had tried as I had done to make for her something of the happy childhood of play which is the lot of my English Baby-friends across the Seas.

The tragedy was *marriage*—which, said her mother, could not really, no not even for love of me, be postponed a minute longer.

"But for love of you," she explained, "Shubala would have been married at 4 years of age. Yes, *as I myself was married.*" And the statement was, I found, alas true indeed. Shubala's mother had been married when she was four, had been married and taken to her husband's home, whence there was no

return to the home of her parents, no joyful "*Baper Bari*" (Father's house) visiting: for such was the custom in this family.

At this point of her story the Rani got reminiscent, and told of how the English Manager of her husband's Estate would carry the four-year-old about on his shoulder, and let her sit on his office-table when he was at work.

"And that was a great kindness in my husband, and in my father-in-law," she added, "for should not a wife in her husband's home have been in purdah, yes even at 4 years of age. Perhaps, for that they broke that rule was I widowed thus early. And yet, Miss Sahib, for love and friendship we have once again in the name of our Shubala forgotten the rules which should bind. No longer must we break the custom-rules of our race. The Miss Sahib knows the Hindu Shastras. For a child married after eleven years of age, both her dead father and I would

be condemned to the lowest re-birth which is possible to human beings: and what punishment Shubala herself would get, I know not."

There was no use arguing: we had to submit, and boy after boy candidate was interviewed—Rani peeping at him through a hole in the door of an adjoining room: and later on when the selection was made, whispering to me the questions which she wished asked of the new son-in-law.

These questions related mostly to the women-folk in his household and to his relationship to the Calcutta University. To the women-folk because her little Shubala would be but one more inmate of a Zenana which included the wives of all the sons of the family, together with aunts and possibly cousins, living under the rule of an unknown mother-in-law.

Questions under the second count were less explicable. "Was he B.A., M.A.?" No. "Then Inter?" No. "Mat-ric

perhaps?" Not even that—and for the first time she halted in her choice. "But his uncle was a Maharajah, and would give him an allowance." And that turned the scale.

The marriage was a gorgeous affair, a combination of old-time custom and modern innovation. Marvellous illustrations of a 2nd century picture-book, prehistoric animals, gods and goddesses, followed by reproductions of boats and carrying chairs, of flowers and fruits and house properties, all most cleverly made out of Sun-hat pith—came in a long procession from the Bridegroom's house to the house in which the marriage was to be celebrated.

The procession included the usual Orthodox Hindu Bridal throne, carried aloft under a canopy, a two-seater. But it set forth and returned empty, for Shubala's Bridegroom fetched her away in a Rolls-Royce Car decorated with strings of pink roses and yellow marigolds.

The gay uniforms of the lamp-bearers, the many coloured lights, and the drums and fifes and wonderful clothes of the music-men, added their own peculiar punctuation to this "sending-to-fetch-her-away" ceremony of modern Hinduism.

As an "Aunt-Mother" I was kindly allowed inside the innermost circle of feasting and blessing: but that is a story for another telling.

The Bridegroom wore a pyramid of flowers on his head, and ropes of flowers hiding his face: and my Shubala had only what glimpse of her lord that flower barrier afforded, peeping as she also must, from behind her own defences of finely woven blood-red silk, before that incongruous and magnificent Rolls-Royce bore her to the Mother-in-law Zenana.

It was a year before I saw her again. She was back once more in her mother's house for the coming of her Baby: and I made the Baby-Budget with no little

anxiety at my heart, for my Baby Shubala.

They had the Doctor and Nurse of their choice, for they were very Orthodox indeed: and the Father-in-law house was most particular—the Rolls-Royce notwithstanding—that Shubala's surroundings and arrangements should be those which the oldest living generation could remember as having been used for its grandmother.

On the night of the birth, Shubala's Father-in-law sat outside Shubala's shut door, and read aloud instructions from an ancient vernacular script for the guidance of an old-fashioned Bengali *dai*; while the school-boy Bridegroom stood by watching the agony. "If he does not see now what women suffer, who will show him?" was their logic. He had chance enough then, God wot, Shubala's cries—the cries not of "a woman in travail," but of a child in torture and in preventable agony—pierced to one's heart.

At midnight I got a message. Shubala was dying, would I come and bring what Doctors and Nurses I thought necessary. We were soon at the house, and a properly qualified Doctor and Nurse saw my poor little Shubala through the worst of her troubles. The Doctor said Shubala would live, but that her mother did not deserve that bounty.

As the Nurse was English, I stayed on to see things through, keeping watch with my Shubala's Mother and Grandmother in their empty Pooja-Ghar; empty because at the time of a birth God may be approached direct, and apart from images.

The Father-in-law had resumed his instructions translated into English this time, for the Memsahib Nurse: and presently I heard, "Now it is time to light a fire on the top of the Mother."

Nurse bustled out to seek my help in protesting. This was the ancient way of dealing with the fear of collapse; and

Rani explained that it was part of the ritual attending child-birth—live coals are placed upon the Mother, "and if it is her fate to live, she will live, though there will be a burn: if it is not her fate to live, she will die."

We got past the difficulty that night, by the grace of my Rani, using hot Ganges water in bottles, an oblation to Mother Ganga, on Shubala's poor little body; and burning the coals, our oblation to Fire, on a tin-plate in the window.

And Shubala lived—without the burn. But it was very nearly otherwise.

And the Baby? Even in this household where love and comparative enlightenment greeted the child, itsearliest days were inset in one long neglect.

It was unclean, and for 40 days the mother might not touch it, nor the grandmother or great-grandmother.

It was left to servants who were untrained and unlearned in aught but magic lore. That the evil eye should not fall

upon it was their chief concern, so they plastered great heavy daubs of lamp-black beneath the eyes. Incidentally they soaked it in mustard oil. I had to plead hard to get it a bath. Their way of attending to certain necessary surgical duties demanded by a one-day's infant, is too terrible to describe.

Nor when the days of purification were over, did better chance of life await the child.

And the thing to remember is *that there was no lack of love*, nor was there lacking Mother instinct and intelligence.

But these things were of little avail, when set against the fact that both ignorance and custom had bandaged the eyes, and tied the hands of the women. Even should a Mother feel "I might do so and so," in the houses of the most Orthodox, there would always be some one to say, "You shall not: that is not the custom."

Shubala was absolutely ignorant about

what diet was good for her baby as it grew older, or how much milk it should have, or how often.

It had no proper hours for sleep or food.

It was feeding at its mother's breast, even when it was running about and playing: and was imperious in greedy demand.

Of how to treat its Baby ailments, she had no ghost of an idea. That it lived at all, is to me a miracle.

Baby followed after Baby also, as the years passed. There are six children now, and Shubala is 18 years old; and her health is absolutely ruined.

This is not an isolated instance of what might happen in India. This is a cared-for illustration of an incident that is repeated in worse circumstances in thousands of Indian homes, not only among the poor and destitute, but among landed proprietors.

And the damage done is to the expectant Mother as well as to the Baby, when it comes.

The women do not know how to treat themselves before their time is upon them. They have no loving habits of preparation and looking forward, not because there is no mother love or longing at their hearts; but because "to take the baby for granted," would be unlucky. Often their whole life's happiness depends upon whether the baby will come, upon whether it will be a son, and they do not know that their very fear and anxiety and depression may be spoiling their chances; they are ignorant of the way their thoughts can help their longings, and yet the success with which any suggestion of this kind is met, proves how simple a remedy is lying at their feet for the taking; and makes the neglect of offering that remedy all the greater.

The saddest face I have seen in all the world was that of a poor child-wife whose longing for a baby, coupled with her

ignorance of how to treat or help herself, and the incompetence of such help as was available, had destroyed her reason. The torture in her eyes haunted one. Nothing would appeal to the poor distraught creature till some impulse made me take her a life-sized baby doll. For five years she had not spoken. "Oh, it has come at last" was the cry with which she greeted it. And thereafter for "the child" she controlled and helped herself past fits of violence. "For the child" she recaptured the few glimmerings of intelligence which her sad fate had not completely overlaid: it was pathetic to see how she checked the poor insane drivelling habit, or the untidy, indecent ways which had grown with her condition. With the child in her lap, she was safe—safe and even happy.

But if only we had known in time, she need never at all have had that ghastly experience. If only we can help in time now, this minute, hundreds of thousands of women can be saved from the like.

The things they suffer in silence—who shall ever know the sum of these!

But to go back again now to our typical Baby. Opportunities for neglect march side by side with the years.

I recall one lonely Estate in a district in Eastern Bengal. I had reached it by river sitting in the boat known as a 'dug-out,' after long Railway and Steamer journeys.

The country was lovely, bamboos grew in feathery groups down to the river's edge: the vegetation was dank, the region malarious. At night the fireflies were like myriads of stars alight on every leaf of the dew-wet trees.

At my Rajbari I heard that the demons were paying a visit to the children. There were three girls aged 5, 8, 11. These were not to be found in the house. The fever-fiend had clutched them so tightly, that the mother and grandmother and great-aunt, *who loved them* (it is necessary to remember that fact), had

said, "Neglect is the only treatment, the gods are jealous: the demons have come to dwell in them: we must not attend to them, lest we entertain demons, and lest the gods be jealous." So an old maid-servant carried out some filthy bedding to the edge of a cesspool, and there the three children, adorable little people beautifully made, and with the loveliest eyes and deep fringes of eyelash, were left to their fate.

The maid-servant confessed to me that contrary to orders she had crept out to give them water from time to time, as they thirsted.

But the water was from the drain itself.

Here again, was it not the God of little children alone, who kept them alive at all through such an experience? When I found them the littlest one was all but gone, all three had ceased to cry even for water. They were terribly still, having passed also the delirium of the raging fever which held them . . .

Or here is another memory from a

journey to the Sonthal Parganahs. Black smallpox was raging in the District, and my little family living remote from the line of rail was reached by palanquin, one hot noon-day hour.

The family was much thinned, all were ill; a child of 7, pealing after smallpox, was being carried about the women's court-yard on the hip of an ancient man-servant. It was the only movement, I found, in that house of death.

"The demon who visits us," they said, "takes us away very quickly. If she leaves us, it is with holes in our faces." That they should not recognize so common a disease, seemed to me astounding. But they are a peculiarly backward people.

"This is not the visit of a demon," one said, "this is a visit of your goddess Kali" ..... for in that part of the country smallpox bears her name.

"Oh then," said the women, "Kali wants a sacrifice of blood." "Yes, but this time only a very little blood is asked

for: and I will make the sacrifice with you."

Thus was the way clear for vaccination. But only alas! after the heaviest toll had already been taken.

A danger which is difficult to combat, is the belief that magic can cure the simplest as the most complicated disease.

A child has fallen into the fire. Its burns are left to become gangrenous: but an old house-wife is making spells in the next room in an agony of love and pity.

Another lies covered with flies and midgets, and festering itch. They tie amulets round his neck, and in some parts of the country, get in a Chumar (worker-in-leather), to weave a spell for his recovery: but mustard-oil, and indigestible food shared probably by the flies before the child can eat it, is all of treatment independently of magic, which occurs to those responsible.

And the fly reminds one that of its

habits thay have no knowledge, of its deathly propaganda no conception whatever. As little do they know about pure water, or about a clean milk and butter supply, though the cow is sacred and "our mother," in the majority of homes to which I have access.

Or here is another scene, a victim of cholera carried for cure into a temple damp and still under construction, and placed in an angle near the niche which will presently hold the idol. The priest prescribes a diet of green mangoes. Even Faith will not vanquish ignorance, where ignorance is culpable. And is it possible to avoid the conclusion that ignorance is regarded as culpable, when those who know are in contact with those who do not know, and when they do nothing definite, determined, and immediate, to remove that ignorance?

Our responsibility widens, does it not, with every tale that is told.

And I must reiterate that I am not

now talking of the instances where children are unloved and wilfully neglected. I am talking of the loved and cared-for.

I am not talking of the cases of the baby-girl victim of supposed ill-luck, placed in premature death at the cross-roads for jackals to carry away.

> "Go away, little sister.
> Come not back, but send a brother."

Or of the babies whose heads and bodies are battered to produce stunted idiocy, that they might be vowed to a certain idol for whose shrine these "little mice" are perpetual beggars.

I am not talking of the cases of intrigue where, as in one household of my acquaintance, baby after baby was destroyed at its birth, one smothered in tobacco fumes, one plunged in boiling water, one .... but what need to enumerate? because the lady its mother, the gift-bearer of sons, was supposed to have bewitched her co-wife, the bearer of daughters only.

I am not talking of these cases, or of those which the law of necessity accounts crimes.

I am talking of natural every-day events, of helpable, preventable ills in the homes of the strictly Orthodox, and of the illiterate, of those (the majority of Indians), who do not come in contact in their homes, with the enlightenment and practice and teaching of the West, or of educated Indians, in these matters.

Nor are my facts true of one part of India alone. Instances could be multiplied in every quarter of the country showing similar miscredits and misdebits in our current accounts with life, and health, and sanitation.

Lady Chelmsford's League for Maternal and Child Welfare in India has ascertained that "the death rate in India among mothers at the time of child-birth is infinitely greater than that in any European country. The mortality among infants is twice as high as in England. Each

year India loses two million babies, and many others only survive to grow up weakly and feeble owing to inattention and bad hygienic surroundings during their infant days."

What are you and I going to do about this?

We cannot, any of us, escape responsibility, once we know the condition of things.

I speak to you Englishwomen—Mothers and wives who love your homes and your children, who are able to give them all that modern knowledge and skill and science can devise.

What are you going to do about this?

I speak to you first, because you best can guage the harm which is being done to children and to child-mothers, and because there is in your hearts—whether born of intelligence and civic persuasion, or of religion—the conviction that we are indeed "the keepers" of every other member of the human family.

I speak to you, Indian women, who are enlightened and educated past the demands of custom, you who have cut yourselves free from the chains that bound, and have claimed the education and the freedom which the West has brought here, to our very doors in our Indian homes. I speak to you. For already there is stirring in you the feeling that you are responsible for the health of those who are dependent upon you; and more, that you are responsible for the wider family of race, and of what we hope in time to count an Indian nation.

What are you going to do about this?

What are *we* going to do about this? For I am with you. And with you, together with the debt I owe to England, and to what England has had to teach me, I owe this *to India*, as part of that English debt of mine.

You and I are trustees, are we not pledged to our knowledge of what neglect

of the laws of health can do to women and children in our Indian homes ?

What are we going to do about this ?

We are on the threshold of the greatest experiment ever recorded. Can thinking persons really believe that it has any chance of success in existing conditions ? I refer specially now to our ignorance about the rules of life and health, and of things pertaining to the body, civic and social.

Some Indian women have lately been urging their right to the franchise. We know that in England, in imitation of of which country this desire originated, women were moved to demand a vote because, *while working for their kind*, they came upon disabilities which they believed the possession of a vote would help them to cure. They sought the right of citizens in order to serve: they came upon the desire and the need in the course of service.

That has not, so far, been the history of the agitation in India.

I would commend this thought to the reflection both of those who desire a vote, and of those who think the demand premature.

Here, at any rate, is a trysting place for us both—here, in the service of the needs of women and children.

What are you going to do about it all?

I speak to those who call themselves Patriots. What can be more emphatically the concern of the patriot than a sturdier, happier, less badly-housed population than we see around us!

I speak to the budding Politician and the expectant Member of our new Government.

There is no programme which gains more votes to the candidate at an English election, than that which contains promises about the welfare and better-housing of the less fortunate. There is no item

in any programme, which can be of more intrinsic value.

Look at it what way you will. *It pays to help this particular need.*

And the beautiful thing is that there is a place and there is work for us all—for men and women with influence and long purses; for women with a woman's heart genuinely stirred by the sight of helpable ills; for the enthusiasts of modern science and reform: for the level-headed who feel that true progress cannot exclude from its sphere the problems surrounding maternity, and the care of children, and the prevention of disease.

The League for Maternal and Child Welfare makes it easy for us to translate our sympathies, this very minute, into help and action, according to our ability. It tells us, that we can serve by helping to collect the funds without which organized and continued work in these directions cannot be undertaken. There

is no fear that such funds would be misapplied. Her Excellency Lady Chelmsford's name is guarantee for that, and for the scheme which is to hold out mother arms of help to the defenceless, to bring hands of healing to the neglected, and swift feet of prevention barring the way to danger.

The idea is to make and endow welfare work for the whole of India. It is a scheme worthy of our new opportunities, and of the patronage of those who are able to give royally, and whose generosity has never failed the real needs of the past.

Teachers of mothercraft, and organizers of health propaganda, are to be found for 150 million Indian women.

Health supervisors will go to the houses which accept their services, and will watch over and care for the women and children, or will work at Health Centres to which women can themselves come before their confinement, or later on, with their babies, for help and advice.

Milk will be distributed free of charge to the poor and needy; *dais* can be supplied with boxes containing what is needed for their work, and for the women in their confinements.

It is hoped that there will be available at each Health Centre, trained midwives, paid by the State, who can be sent to attend the poor free of charge.

It is a scheme, you see, which is in need of funds, and which can be helped by the largest and the smallest contributions in money.

And again, it is a scheme which can be helped by the largest and the smallest contributions of service.

Apart from those who are prepared to be trained for whole-time work in this direction, there is need for helpers in the great propaganda work which must make the opportunity for the trained helper.

Women have to be taught about the need for help, and have to be persuaded to desire help. They have to be persuaded without affront to religious prejudice, without accusation of the past. Pamphlets must be translated into the vernacular, facts must be collected as to unhygienic conditions and dangerous custom, all the country over.

Among the English-speaking, the Brahmo or progressive Hindu communities, there is surely work also to be done. For neither schools nor municipalities have, in the past, given adequate thought to these matters.

Work for these persons may take the form of persuading to attendance at Health Centres, or to the ministrations in their homes, of the health supervisor.

Many other ways will be indicated by Lady Chelmsford's League which has its Headquarters at Viceregal Lodge, Delhi.

THE words to be written on our hearts are:—

5,000 Babies die every day in India.

What can I do to prevent this?