



Bodleian Libraries

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

This book is part of the collection held by the Bodleian Libraries and scanned by Google, Inc. for the Google Books Library Project.


For more information see:

<http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/dbooks>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.0 UK: England & Wales (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) licence.





25613

c. 4883



INDIAN SCENE

Copyright
All rights reserved
Collected Edition first published, 1933



Made and Printed in Great Britain by
Butler & Tanner Ltd., Frome and London



CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION	7
IN A CITRON GARDEN	15
SURÂBHI	23
THE PERFUME OF THE ROSE	37
FIRE AND ICE	54
THE KEEPER OF THE PASS	68
THE HALL OF AUDIENCE	84
THE DOLL-MAKER	98
THE REFORMER'S WIFE	111
A BAD-CHARACTER SUIT	122
IN THE PERMANENT WAY	142
A DANGER SIGNAL	160
THE WINGS OF A DOVE	177
SHUB'RÂT	198
A BIT OF LAND	228
YOUNG LOCHINVAR	242
GLORY-OF-WOMAN	258
UMA HIMÂVUTEE	275
ON THE SECOND STORY	292
THE SORROWFUL HOUR	327
AT HER BECK AND CALL	343
AT THE GREAT DURBAR	351
HARVEST	374

INTRODUCTION

	PAGE
LÂL	393
HABITUAL CRIMINALS	403
FEROZA	419
THE VILLAGE LEGACY	450
FAIZULLAH	466
RÂMCHUNDERJI	483
MUSSUMÂT KIRPO'S DOLL	501
THE FOOTSTEP OF DEATH	511
AN APPRECIATED RUPEE	531
THE FLATTERER FOR GAIN	539
THE FOOTSTEPS OF A DOG	554
THE GIFT OF BATTLE	570
THE VALUE OF A VOTE	586
SALT DUTY	594
A MAIDEN'S PRAYER	621

INTRODUCTION

IN the spring of 1929 my mother, then eighty-two years of age, had nearly finished her autobiography, was at work on a book 'The Gates of Pearl,' and was planning a collected volume of her Indian stories. The tale of 'The Gates of Pearl' will never be told; in her 'Garden of Fidelity' can best be found that of her whole life and work, of what has been called the 'unquenchable vitality which enformed her character and achieved her career.'

Here I can only give a brief account of the personality and the experience that lie behind this *Indian Scene* which contains, I think, what she herself would wish to have put into it.

Flora Annie Steel came to India at the age of twenty as the wife of an Indian Civilian posted to the Punjab.

Intensely active in body, mind, and spirit, she set herself to work—as indeed she would have done sixty years later—to learn everything she could about this new and strange environment, and to establish friendly and vivid contacts with every living thing she came across. It was not possible for her either then or at any time to be uninterested in any moment of her life, neither have I ever seen her in any company East or

INTRODUCTION

West in which she was not a magnetic centre, giving of her best and drawing from others what they had to give.

She learned to speak, read, and write the various Indian languages and dialects which came her way, and was equally at home with the speech of the peasants and with the polished ceremonial periods of the talk to be heard in the tall houses of the towns where the high-born women live secluded. Then, with knowledge, there came to my mother the desire and the power to help. She began to give simple remedies to the women and children who flocked to her. Unsecluded women these, daughters of the soil. 'If the Mother of Mercy has no time to give a medicine to-day—seeing there are so many of us—will she write her name on a piece of paper and I will give it to my child instead,' said one woman to her.

Behind the *purdah* it was more difficult to make headway. The only direct sketch from life in this volume, 'The Reformer's Wife,' shows how difficult this was. Yet from that very town, three years later, the women in seclusion gave each some part of a jewel constantly worn to be made up into a keepsake for the beloved *mem-sahib* to wear as a 'Token of friendship.'

And once a hundred stalwart peasants asked her to take up 30,000 acres of the land newly opened up by the Chenâb irrigation scheme. 'We will move there with our wives and families, oxen, sheep, ploughs. We will build our own village and you and the *sahib* a fine house, and you shall be our Begum, and we

INTRODUCTION

promise never to go to law but to refer all disputes to you.' This offer, however, the wife of the District Officer had, regretfully, to refuse.

Then my mother interested herself in education. She started girls' schools in several places, and finally became the first Inspectress of all the girls' schools in the Punjab, having first persuaded the authorities that one was required. Soon after this she was engaged in fighting an intricate system of corruption in the University examinations, and found herself in conflict both with its authors and with those in high places who wished to avoid a scandal. In order to give what help they could, four hundred scholars and teachers of her own schools 'set a watch' for her, sitting up all night to spin cotton for a 'robe of protection' which they afterwards dyed, wove and embroidered for her. The fight, I may add, ended in a complete victory for straightforward justice.

I give these instances of the way my mother was regarded by her Indian friends in order that it may be realized on what is based her claim as an interpreter of the East to the West.

One special point should be noted. No man can know the intimate life of the Indian peoples. He cannot even enter the heart of India—the women's quarters—much less gain the confidence and affection of their inmates. At different times my mother lived in the houses of her Indian women friends—some of whom wanted to take her disguised as a fair Kashmiri woman on a pilgrimage with them to Benares. In

INTRODUCTION

Indian dress she would have looked the part, and her quick intuitions and mimetic powers would, I daresay, have carried her through.

As a young girl I was with my father and mother in their camping tours in the districts. My mother was then collecting folk tales from the lips of the people, and round our camp fire at night wonderful tales were told, many of them come down from the early Aryan wanderers, and told to this day in nearly the same form along the Baltic coasts. It was then, I think, that began my mother's love for that mysterious India of the past, glimpses of which are only to be seen by those who have eyes to see.

During the twenty-two years of my mother's time in India she was too busy with life to write books. She was gifted with an extraordinarily vivid and accurate pictorial memory, and all that she had seen she could recall at will, and describe, or even draw or paint, down to the smallest detail. For her hands were infinitely clever at all crafts, and she loved using their skill and quick response to eye and brain.

But when she came to England, she felt the need of expression and started to write and to re-create her Indian experiences, or rather to use them to corroborate her own creative imaginings. Then the desire came to her to interpret that tragedy of East and West, that breathing 'On the Face of the Waters' that was the Great Mutiny; and she went out East again to collect the definite, accurate, historical knowledge that is the basis of that book. Of all the verdicts passed on it my

INTRODUCTION

mother most prized one letter that she had. It was from a man who wrote: 'My wife died in the Mutiny. After forty years you have taught me to forgive.'

Readers in this *Indian Scene* of 'Shub'rât' and 'The Perfume of the Rose' may understand why.

The stories in this collection were written at different times over a number of years—all after my mother had left India. She kept, however, constantly in touch with things Indian; the clash of old and new and its problems are reflected in many of the tales. Much has changed in India, but the springs of life that my mother knew so well remain the same. And in the villages and behind the purdah even the externals of life are little changed.

In 1929 when the Simon Commission was touring India—which was 'seething with excitement and resentment' we were told—one of those who have done more for the welfare of India than all the politicians East and West put together, rode in the ordinary course of his work, through the same South Punjab country and halted in the same villages as my father had done when my mother and I toured with him. Those who would like to know about Rural India to-day should read the book he has written.¹ No one seemed to have heard of the Simon Commission nor to care a jot about politics. The old customs remained, the old clash between moneylender and peasant, the women grinding at the millstone, the well with its turning

¹ *Rusticus Loquitur*, by M. Lyall Darling, I.C.S.

INTRODUCTION

oxen ; all the old sights and sounds. Peasant women in the fields, and in the enclosed high walls still the secluded women.

And it is this India that gets perhaps too little attention to-day.

I should like to end this introduction to the *Indian Scene* with some words of my mother's addressed to would-be travellers Eastwards.

'India is multitudinous as the sands of the sea. Look down into the depths as you approach her shores. What are those snaky restless brown forms, seen—half seen—turning, intertwining, through which each traveller has to forge his way? To the practical scientific eye it is the zone of seaweed set in motion by microscopic animalculæ. To the old navigators and to the eye of faith nowadays it is the zone of sea serpents, the zone of sea guardians between the outside world and enchanted India. And those who can see nothing but seaweed will never find India, they will only find their own imported ideas. But those who can see in that clear-obscure something which appeals to the imagination, which tells of hidden treasures, half-forgotten secrets, may go on. For them the gates are open. They will find and love India as I do.'

MABEL WEBSTER.

INDIAN SCENE

INDIAN SCENE

IN A CITRON GARDEN

THIS is the record of five minutes in a citron garden. Not a terraced patch set like a puzzle with toy trees, such as one sees on the Riviera, but a vast scented shade, unpruned by greed of gain, where sweet limes, mandarins, shaddocks, and blood-oranges blended flower and fruit and leaf into one all-sufficing shelter from the sun. There are many such gardens in India, lingering round the ruined palaces or tombs of bygone kings. This particular one hid in its perfumed heart a white marble mausoleum, where the red and green parrots inlaid themselves like mosaic among the tracery. For they are decorative birds, and, being untrammelled by prejudice regarding the position of their heads, lend themselves to many a graceful, topsyturvy pattern. Girding the garden was a wall twenty feet high, bastioned like a fort, but despite its thickness, crumbling here and there from sheer old age; invisible, too, for all its height from within, by reason of the tall thickets of wild lemon on its inner edge. Four broad alleys, sentinelled by broken fountains, converged to the mausoleum, high above a marble

IN A CITRON GARDEN

reservoir where the water still lingered, hiding its stagnation beneath a carpet of lotus-leaves. From these, again, narrower paths mapped the garden into squares, each concealed by dense foliage from the next. It was a maze of shadowy ways edged by little runnels of water and bordered by roses and jasmine, with here and there a huge white drecæna usurping the path. Day and night the water ran clear and cool, to flood each square in turn, till it showed a shining lake, wherein the roof of fruit and blossom lay reflected as in a mirror.

A Garden of Eden ; like it, tenanted by a woman and a snake ; famous, also, for its forbidden fruit.

Nowhere did shaddocks grow so regardless of possible danger to the world. The green-gold globes weighed the branches to the ground ; the massive flowers burdened the air with perfume. For all their solid, somewhat stolid look, they are fragile flowers. Gather a spray as gently as you can, and only the buds remain ; the perfect flower has fallen. So, in a citron garden it is well to purge the soul from ' *karma*,' or desire, in order to reach the ' *nirvana* ' of content in which—so say the Buddhists—lies the full perfection of possession.

Naraini, the gardener's granddaughter, had different views. She stood, at the beginning of the five minutes, beneath a citron-tree. One dimpled hand held the branch above her, and, as she swayed her body to and fro leisurely, the flowers dropped into her stretched veil. She was not unlike a citron-blossom herself. Like them, arrayed boldly in saffron and white ; like them, looking the world in the face with calm

IN A CITRON GARDEN

consciousness that she was worth a look in return. Finally, her world was theirs—that is to say, these few acres of scented shade. As yet Naraini knew no other, though the next day she was to leave it and her childhood in order to follow the unknown bridegroom to whom she had been married for twelve years.

The incessant throbbing of a tom-tom, the occasional blare of a horrible horn in the ruined arcade which was all that remained of a royal rest-house, proclaimed that the marriage festivities were even now going on beyond the crumbling walls. From all this Naraini being necessarily excluded, she had spent the morning in receiving the female visitors with simulated tears, in order to impress them with her admirable culture ; thereinafter relapsing, with them, to shrill-voiced feminine chatter until the heat of noon stilled even the women's tongues. Then, driven by an odd unrest, she had slipped away to the cool alleys she knew so well ; even there busying herself with preparations, since the flowers she gathered would be needed to strew the bridal bed. It was no new task. Every year an old distiller came, in blossom-time, to set up his still beside the well. Then, in the dewy dawns, she and the old grandmother beat down the blossoms, and when sunset brought respite from the heat Naraini used to watch while the flowers were crushed into the pan, and luted down with clay as if into a grave. And a grave it was to beauty. The first time she saw the yellow mash which was left after the sweetness had trickled into the odd assortment of bottles the old distiller

IN A CITRON GARDEN

brought with him, she had cried bitterly. But a whole bottle of orange-flower water as her very own had been consoling, and the fact that the label proclaimed her treasure to be '*Genuine, Old, Unsweetened Gin*' did not disturb her ignorance.

Every year afterwards the old man had given her another bottle, and as she had always chosen a fresh label, she had quite an assortment of them in the shed which served her as a play-room. And now, being nearly sixteen, she was about to leave other things besides that row of bottles labelled '*Encore,*' '*Dry Monopole,*' '*Heidsiecker,*' and '*Chloric Ether Bitters.*'

She was not alarmed. She had taken a peep at her future husband that morning and satisfied herself that he had the requisite number of eyes, legs, and arms. For the rest, men were kind to pretty girls, and she knew herself to be a very pretty girl.

As she stood swaying in the shadow, someone came down the alley. She recognized him at once. It was the bridegroom ; and the demon of mischief, which enters into Eastern girlhood as causelessly as it does into Western, suggested that she had him at an advantage. He had not seen her since she was three years old—could not possibly recognize her. Besides, what brought him there ? An intolerable curiosity, mingled with a pleasant conviction, made her stand her ground. Perhaps she knew that the spot occupied by her was the only one visible from the roof of the arcade, and drew her own conclusions. Perhaps she did not. It was true, nevertheless, and the bridegroom, having

IN A CITRON GARDEN

caught a glimpse of something attractive, had taken advantage of the general sleepiness to climb over the ruined wall for a closer view ; for he was of those who are very kind indeed to pretty faces. He, it must be remembered, had caught no consolatory glimpse of his bride. People told him she was beautiful, but that was always said : but here was undoubted good looks ; so, despite his wedding-day on the morrow, he slipped into the citron garden intent on a lark. No more refined word expresses his mood so clearly.

Naraini, however, neither shrieked nor giggled at the sight of a stranger. She simply drew her veil closer, and went on gathering citron-blossoms. He paused, uncertain of everything save her entrancing grace. Was she only a servant, or did he run risks in venturing closer ? Naraini, meanwhile, behind her veil, gurgled with soft laughter, pleased at being able to test the value of her beauty on the man she meant to rule by it. So they stood—she in the shadow at one end of the alley, he in the shadow at the other ; between them the scented path bordered by the runnels of water slipping by to bring a deluge to some portion of that little world. Some might have called it a pretty scene, instinct with the joy of youth ; others might have turned their heads away, praying to be delivered from the world, the flesh and the devil. Naraini thought of nothing save her own laughter.

The garden seemed asleep save for those two, as, with the cruelty of a chase waking in him, as in a cat stalking a mouse, the cruelty of success waking in her as in a

IN A CITRON GARDEN

snake charming a bird, the distance between them lessened.

Suddenly, with a burst of high, childish laughter, the veil-full of citron-blossoms was flung in his face, and Naraini was off down the alleys, while he, with anger added to admiration, was after her.

The walls echoed to the soft thud of their flying feet—down one path, up another, round by the tomb, scaring the parrots to a screaming wheel. Confident in her superior knowledge, she paused on the topmost step, ere scudding across the causeway, to fling back a handful of flowers lingering in a fold. He set his teeth hard. If she tried short cuts, so could he; and he was round the next square so fast, that she gave a little shriek and dived into the thickest part of the garden, whither the water was flowing, and where the beasts and birds and creeping things innumerable found a cool, damp refuge. The flutter of her saffron skirt at the opposite side of a square made him try strategy. He crept into the thickest undergrowth and waited.

Something else waited, not a footfall off, but he did not see it. His eyes were on that saffron flutter, pausing, advancing, retreating, pausing again. Naraini had lost the bearings of her pursuer, and, like a child playing 'I spy,' was on the alert for a surprise.

Suddenly came a cry as she caught sight of him, a shout as he bounded out; both lost in a yell arresting her flight and his, as if it had turned them to stone. He stood with the wide nostrils and fixed eyes of ghastly fear, clinging for support to the branch above

IN A CITRON GARDEN

him, whence the flowers fell pattering to the ground. On his ankle two spots of blood, bright against the brown skin. Across the path a big, black rope of a thing, curving swiftly to the roses beyond.

‘Snake! snake!’

Her cry echoed his, as she ran back to him; but he struck at her with clenched hand.

‘Go, woman—she-devil! Thou hast killed me. Curse thee! oh, curse thee for beguiling me! It has bitten me. Holy Gunga, I am dead! and I was the bridegroom. ’Tis thy fault. I was the bridegroom.’ He had sunk to the ground clasping his ankle, and rocked himself backward and forward, moaning and shuddering in impotent fear. Naraini stood by him. There was no hope: the big, black rope of a thing did its work well; yet, even so, anger was her first thought.

‘It is a lie! ’Tis not my fault! Why didst come? Why didst follow? And if thou art the bridegroom, was not I the bride?’ Then something leaped to memory. She threw her hands above her head and beat them wildly in passionate despair and horror.

‘He is dead! he is dead! And I am the bride.’

The words rang through the garden, and pierced even his grovelling fear. As she turned to fly, he clutched at her skirts, and dragged himself to her fiercely.

‘The bride? Then the widow! my widow! Thou hast killed me, but thou canst not escape me. A widow! a widow! a widow!’

His face was terrible in its fear, its regret, its revenge.

IN A CITRON GARDEN

She fought against him desperately, but his hands held fast, shifting to her waist, till he forced her down to the dust beside him, where she crouched silent, like a young animal terrified into acquiescence.

'Thou shalt see me die—'tis thy fault—thou shalt see me die!'

So they sat side by side in the grip of death, his head on her bosom, his hands bruising her wrists, his eyes, full of despair and regret, on her face.

The sun-flecks shifted over them, the citron-flowers fell upon them as the afternoon breeze stirred the branches. And even when the swift poison loosed his clasp, Naraini was still a prisoner to the dead body, lying with its face of desire and disgust hidden in her lap.

She was a widow. The citron-blossom had fallen.

SURÂBHI

A FAMINE TALE

SHE was only a cow, but she was all things, wife and child, earth and heaven, to old Gopâl, the brahmin who owned her.

And, apart from his estimation, she had value. Connoisseurs in the village, as they looked over the low mud wall which separated the slip of open courtyard, ten feet by six, where there was just room for a crazy four-legged string bed between Surâbhi's manger and the door, would nod and say she must have been a good cow when young ; but when that was only God knew !

Whereupon Gopâl would raise his shaven head with its faint frosting of silver hair from Surâbhi's silver flank, as he squatted holding a brass pot in one hand, milking with the other, and smile scornfully.

' Old or young, she is the best milker in the village, and the best-looking one and the best bred,' he would say. ' And wherefore not ? Is she not Surâbhi the Great Milk-Mother, whom even the gods worship ? Since without her where would the little godlings be ? ' And then he would pop down the pot and cease milking for a moment, so that both hands might be free for a reverential *salaam* to the old cow who, at the cessation, would turn her mild white face—the real

SURÂBHI

brahmini zebu face with its wide dewy black nostril, wide dewy black eyes, and long lopping ears—to see what had come to old Gopi ; and, as often as not, would give his round frosted black poll a lick round with her black frosted tongue, by way of encouragement to go on, as if he had been a calf !

But the connoisseurs over the wall would snigger, and touch their foreheads, and say that Gopâl Das was getting quite childish and mixed up things. Though, no doubt, the great Surâbhi must have been just such another cow, since the old man said right. There was not her like in the village. No ! not even now that Govinda had brought home the brown cow with five teats, which had taken the prize at the *Huzoor's* big show. It was younger, of course, but Surâbhi would outlast the old man, and what more could *he* want ? Then who, before these latter days, had ever heard tell of a brown cow ? And as for the five teats, they might portend more milk, but were they lawful ?

So long-limbed, whole-hearted, dull-headed, the villagers went doubtfully about their business scarcely less confused than old Gopi between facts and fancies, realities and unrealities ; tied and bound, as their like are in hamlet and village, by the allegories of a faith whose inner teaching has been forgotten.

But old Gopâl stayed with Surâbhi. His life was bounded by her. How he lived was one of the many mysteries of Indian village life. He did nothing but look after his cow, but he must have inherited some fractional share of the village land from his fathers, or

SURÂBHI

been entitled, by reason of his race, to some ancestral dues, for twice a year at harvest time he would come back to the courtyard, like a squirrel to its nest, with so many handfuls of this grain and so many handfuls of that, so many bundles of wheat straw, millet stalks, or pea stems. And on these, and the milk she gave, he and Surâbhi lived contentedly. He was very old ; if he had had wife and children in the past he had quite forgotten them. Yet it was typical of village life that no one forgot old Gopi or his rights. Whatever was due to him from well or unwatered land, even if it were only so many leaves of tobacco or chilli pods, came to the courtyard as regularly as the sunshine.

And, regularly as the sunshine, too, the old man, after he had milked Surâbhi in the early dawn, would go with his solitary blanket and a little spud and spend the whole day till sunset in gathering succulent weeds for the great Milk-Mother's supper. It was his religion. And under the broad blue sky, edging a planti-grade path over the parched plain, leaving, like a locust, not a green leaf behind him, old Gopi's mind would be full of confused piety and mystical meanings.

This was the highest service of man, this was Faith and Hope and Charity all combined ; since every one knew that Surâbhi was the World-Mother, and without her——

Here the old brahmin's memory of words would fail him, and he would fall back on deeds, by digging at the biggest weed within reach.

From year's end to year's end he seldom fingered a

SURÂBHI

coin, and if he did, it was Surâbhi who brought it to him. Her last calf had long since become an ox, and drifted away from the village to fill a gap in the great company of the ploughers and martyrs who give the coffer of the Empire all its gold and die in thousands—long before famine touches humanity—without a penny piece from that coffer being spent to save them from starvation. Yet she still, after the fashion of her race, gave milk and to spare. The latter went, as a rule, to folk poorer still than the old brahmin, especially to children; but when he sold it, part of the money was always spent on a new charm for Surâbhi's neck. And it might be noted that whenever, by looking over the low mud walls which separated the village courtyards one from the other, he found that Govinda's brown cow had a fresh bell or disposition of cowries round her neck, there was always enough milk over and above Gopi's wants next day to procure a similar adornment for the white one with its heavy dewlap.

The rivalry grew, by degrees, into a definite challenge between their owners, so that when, after a time, Govinda's beast fell off in her milk, Gopi's delight was palpable, and he scouted all reasonable explanations of the fact.

The cow, he said, was underbred. You could see by her hoofs that she had been accustomed to wander about and pick up her own living like low-caste folk; while Surâbhi bore token of her lifelong seclusion in every polished ring of her long-pointed black toes.

SURÂBHĪ

But before the question at issue could be decided, that came about which dried up every cow in the village, and made even old Gopi's brass pot cease to brim.

There was no rain. Even in December and January, though the skies were dappled as the partridge's breast, the clouds carried their moisture elsewhere. Where, did not affect the villagers. It was not here, and that was all they knew. The autumn crop, which means fodder, had been a scant one, the cattle were thrown entirely on the still scantier growth of grass in the waste land ; and when that failed, custom did not fail. The herds were driven forth from the thorn enclosures every morning to the wilderness and taken back from it at eve, just as if that wilderness were still a grazing-ground. What else could be done, seeing that when cattle starve it is not a famine ? *That* is a time when help is given by the new master. God knows why, since the old masters never gave any.

Such time of help must come, of course, ere long, if the clouds remained dry ; but meanwhile the flocks and herds went out to graze on mud, and if some failed to return in the evening, what else was to be expected ?

So the long dry days dragged on. That spring-harvest old Gopâl's share of garnered grain was scarcely worth the bringing home. The squirrel's hoard in the little courtyard was scanty indeed, and very soon he had to stint his own share, and rise an hour earlier to go weed-grubbing, and return an hour

SURÂBHI

later, so that Surâbhi should not low her discontent at short commons. For that would be shame unutterable, even though the brown cow had long since been driven from high-class seclusion to fend for herself with the common herd from dawn till eve.

Thus old Gopâl's lank anatomy was appreciably more lank, more skeleton-like, when one day the headman of the village, as he smoked his pipe in front of the house of faith where strangers were lodged, announced that the famine had really come at last. Over in Chotia Aluwala there were piles of baskets and spades. Some *Huzoors* were there in white tents, so doubtless ere long, God knows why, they would begin digging earth from one place and putting it in another, so that a distribution of grain could be made in the evening.

That was the headman's idea of relief-works, and his hearers had no other.

Now Chotia Aluwala was ten miles at least from Surâbhi's stall, but of late Gopi had scarce found a weed within twice that distance.

So the very next day, when, backed by a pile of forlorn-looking earth on one side and a not much smaller pile of baskets with which the earth had, during the day's toil, been conveyed to its present resting-place, one hungry face after another came up in file to the distribution of food, old Gopi's frosted head was among the number. But he was bitterly disappointed at his dole of cooked dough-cake. He had expected grain. Though more than enough for his old appetite,

SURÂBHI

what would Surâbhi, with her seven stomachs, say to such concentrated food?

After his long trudge home he passed a miserable night seeking, by every means in his power, to supply the bulk necessary for the satisfying of those clamorous stomachs. He even chopped up the grass twine of his string bed and tempted the old cow to chew it by soaking the fibre in some of her own milk.

Thus, once more, he came off second best, for the milk should have been his share. So he could scarcely manage to stagger along with his basket next day. Not that this mattered, for already the Englishmen who, in their *khaki* clothes and huge pith helmets were supervising the work, were saying tentatively, with a glance at the totterers, that it might have been better to start relief a little sooner. And down in one hollow Gopi saw a woman being carried away, while the babe which had been at her breast yelled feebly in an orderly's arms.

The sight did not affect Gopi in the least. He had thought out a plan which filled his confused old soul with a heavenly joy. So when his two dough-cakes were given him that evening he hurried off with them to the contractor in the background, through whom the *Huzoors* had arranged for this supply, and exchanged them—at a loss, inevitably—for the coarse husks, the bran, the sweepings, the absolute waste which could not be used even in famine bread.

The arrangement suited both parties, the contractor and old Gopi, who day after day trudged home, hungry,

SURÂBHI

with a bulky bundle of fodder for Surâbhi. It was a fair exchange all round, even with the old cow, who turned the fodder into milk. Not much, it is true, since the bundle was not overlarge, but enough to keep Gopi's soul and body together.

And the soul grew if the body wasted. How could it be otherwise, when one was permitted to be the babe and suckling, as it were, of the Great Milk-Mother? The Great World-Mother, whose sacred work it was to nourish all things, even the little godlings?

The old brahmin's eyes grew softer, more trustful, more like the eyes of a child, as the days went by; and as he milked her, Surâbhi's black frothed tongue often licked more than his shaven poll, as if she were concerned at the bones which showed through the skin of her calf.

Gopâl himself, however, took this licking as a mark of Divine favour; and, as for the thinness, were not all the babes and sucklings growing thin?

That was true. The Englishman in head charge of the Chotia Aluwala relief-work canal had that thinness on his conscience. But what could man do in a wilderness, without mothers, without milk?

He had it on his heart too, because he was a father; and because, despite a mother and milk, doctors and skilled care, it was not two months since he had seen his first-born waste away mysteriously to death, as children will waste.

So his mind was full of it, when, for the sake of

SUR Â B H I

seeing a lonely wife and mother, he rode forty miles after nightfall to the little bungalow so empty of a child's voice.

'I've got quite a nursery of 'em now,' he said grimly, 'but they beat me. I can't get the men in charge to mix that tin-milk stuff right, you know, and the little beggars won't look at a teaspoon.'

Perhaps it was his ride that had tired him. Anyhow, he crossed his hands on the table, and laid his head on them wearily.

He roused, however, at her touch on his shoulder.

'Let me come,' she said; 'I've—I've nothing to do here.'

He looked at her for a moment, then turned his eyes away. 'Will you?' he said in an odd voice; 'that—that will be awfully jolly.'

So in a day or two, armed with the dead baby's bottles, feeding-cups, God knows what, and such mother's lore as the dead child had taught her, she was at work in a white tent set in the shade of the only tree at Chotia Aluwala.

'I must have more milk,' she said decidedly, and there was a new light in her eyes, a new tone in her voice, when they brought her yet another whimpering brown baby. 'That is the end of it; by hook or by crook I *must* have more milk. There *must* be some, somewhere. Send out and see!'

So, because when a woman is standing between death and children, her orders are the orders of 'She-who-must-be-obeyed,' they sent. And, of course, one

SURÂBHI

of the first discoveries made by the Indian underling to whom the inquiry was entrusted, was Surâbhi. In other words, that an old brahmin, in receipt actually of relief, was the possessor of a remarkably fine cow, if not in full milk, yet capable of supporting an infant or two. It needs the vicious *flair* of an underpaid orderly to find such chances for tyranny and extortion at the first throw off. But this one was found, and when Gopi returned that evening to the little courtyard, an official with a brass pot was waiting for milk. It would be paid for, of course, by and by. Gopi could keep an account, and the *Sirkar* no doubt would pay, provided the *proper official* certified it by a countersign.

The old man was too confused, too tired to be ready with protest at a moment's notice. So that night he went supperless to bed. But in the white tent over at Chotia Aluwala, an Englishwoman's pale face had quite a colour in it.

'Fancy!' she said, 'two whole quarts of the most beautiful, rich milk! I would reward that man if I were you, dear. I am to have the same every day. It—it means two lives at least!'

Possibly, for a baby takes less to keep it alive than an old man.

Small tragedies of this sort are common enough in India, but it is difficult to give all their fineness of detail to English eyes.

Old Gopâl was at once cunning as a fox, guileless as a child; and through both the guile and the innocence

SUR Â B H I

ran that bewildered belief in Surâbhi as something beyond ordinary cows. He tried to escape the *impasse* by not milking her dry, so as to leave some for himself; but though Surâbhi resented any other hand finishing the task, it was impossible for an experienced onlooker to be deceived. The result of that, therefore, was abuse and blows. Then he tried keeping back one dough-cake from his daily dole for himself, and only exchanging the other for fodder. That reduced the milk in reality, but it also reduced Surâbhi to lowing; and his sense of sin, in consequence, became so acute that he was forced into going back to the old plan. But these tactics had, by this time, roused the petty official's ire. The *mem-sabiba* had spoken sharply to him because the milk had fallen off in quantity and quality; for he had not scrupled, despite old Gopi's tears and distracted prayers, to take away the Milk-Mother's character by filling up the measure with water.

And so he lost patience. Thus one day he avenged himself and attained his object by first reporting that Gopi, brahmin, was wrongfully and fraudulently obtaining relief, seeing that he was, amongst other things, possessor of a remarkably fine cow, whose milk he was selling to the *Huzoors*, and then seizing Surâbhi, on the ground that Gopi, having no means of supporting her, was not fit to take care of so valuable an animal!

These two blows, followed by the sight of Surâbhi being walked off on her dainty toes into the rough,

SURÂBHI

outside world, quite upset the frail balance of the old man's mind.

He crouched shivering all night in the empty stall, feeling himself accursed. He was not worthy. Surâbhi had gone.

How long he remained there speechless, famine-stricken, yet not hungry, he did not know. It was early afternoon when the white garment and brass badge of authority showed again at the door in the low wall, and a voice said sullenly—

'Thou must come. Thy cursed cow is a devil for kicking, and the *mem* is a fiend for temper. My badge is gone if thou come not. My pony will carry two.'

The sun was showing red behind the great piles of earth which in that wide level plain rose like a range of hills, when the oddly assorted pair rode into the shade of the Chotia Aluwala tree. There was no need to announce the arrivals. Surâbhi declared who one was, almost ere he stumbled to the ground, stiff, dazed, bewildered. All the more bewildered for that vision of something undreamt of, unseen hitherto in Gopâl Das' ignorant village life—a woman fair as milk herself, smiling at him gladly, calling with quaint, strange accent: 'Quick—quick! we wait, we are hungry—are we not, babies?'

There were dark toddlers round the white dress, a dark head on the white bosom, and old Gopi muttered something about the Milk-Mother, the World-Mother, as, with a brass vessel someone thrust into his hand, he squatted down beside Surâbhi.

SURÂBHI

He scarcely needed to milk her ; perhaps that was as well, for he was very tired. But the pot brimmed, and another had to be called for, while Surâbhi's black frosted tongue licked the black frosted head between her ' *moos* ' of satisfaction.

And beyond, in the shadiest part of the shade, there was more satisfaction and to spare.

After a while old Gopi crept stiffly to watch it, squatting in the dust with dry, bright, wistful eyes fixed on the bottles, the babies ; above all on the milk-white face full of smiles.

Until suddenly he gave a little cry.

' Me too, Mother of mercy ! Great Milk-Mother of the world, me too ! ' he said, like any child, and so fell forward insensible with outstretched, petitioning hands.

But that was the end of his troubles.

When he came to himself, the Great Milk-Mother was feeding him with a teaspoon. Nor when he recovered his strength would she let him out of the nursery, for by that time the whole story had been told, with the curious calm acquiescence of villagers in such pitiful tales of mistake and wrong. Everyone had known the truth, of course, but what then ? The *Huzoors* wanted the milk for the babies, and Gopi was old——

' He is only a baby himself,' interrupted a woman's voice indignantly when this explanation was being given ; ' why, this morning I made him as happy as a king by letting him suck one of the bottles ! He said

S U R Â B H I

that there was nothing left now to be desired, nothing wanting, except——'

'Except what?' asked the man's voice.

'That he could see no little godlings like—like me.'

Then there was silence.

THE PERFUME OF THE ROSE

'I THINK we ought to be going back to the others,' said the girl.

She was a pretty, fair English girl, fresh as a rose in her dainty pink muslin dress, flounced as they wore them in the Mutiny year—in three full flounces to the waist, like the corolla of a flower. And the lace sunshade she held tilted over her shoulder as a protection against the slanting rays of the afternoon sun added to her rose-likeness by its calyx of pale green lining.

'Ought we?' said the young Englishman who walked beside her, his hand clasping hers. They were a good-looking pair, pleasant to behold. 'What a bore ; it is so jolly here.'

The epithet was not happy, save as an expression of the speaker's frame of mind. For the garden into which these engaged lovers had wandered away from the gay party of English men and women who had taken possession of the marble summer-house in its centre for a picnic, was something more than jolly.

It was beautiful, this garden of a dead dynasty of Kings past and gone like last year's roses.

But there were roses and to spare still within its high four-square walls that were hidden from each other by

THE PERFUME OF THE ROSE

the tall forest-trees fringing its cross of wide marble aqueducts bordered by wide paths.

Such blossoming trees ! The *kachnar* flinging its bare branches, set thick with its geranium flowers, against the creamy feathers waving among the dense dark foliage of the *mangos*, the *bakayun* drooping its long lilac tassels beside the great gold ones of the *umultâs*, and, here and there, its whole vitality lavished on a huge flower or two, white, curved, solid, as if cut in cold marble yet with a warm fragrance at its heart, a hill magnolia challenged the scent of the roses below.

Ineffectually, at least here in this square of the garden ; for that cross of wide, empty aqueducts divided it into squares.

And this one was a square of roses—roses everywhere, even in the lower level of what in the old kingly days had been a marble-edged waterway, which now, half-filled with soil, held more roses.

But they were all of one kind—the pink Persian rose, whose outer petals pale in the sunlight, whose rose of roses heart is full of an almost piercing perfume.

And the scent of them filled the whole square of garden, where the air, still warm from the past noon, lay prisoned in that fringe of blossoming trees.

It seemed to fill the brain, also, with the quintessence of gladness, beauty, life, and love.

So His arm sought Her waist and their eyes met.

But only for a second ; the next, Her blush matching Her flounces, She had drawn back, and He with

THE PERFUME OF THE ROSE

an angry frown was glaring in the direction of the voice which had interrupted them.

It was a high, clear voice full of little trills and bubblings like a bird's, and it chanted incessantly, as if to give those two time to recover from their confusion. And as it sang, the Persian vowels seemed as piercingly sweet as the perfume into which they echoed.

'The rose-root takes earth's kisses for its meat,
The rose-leaf makes its blush from the sun's heat,
The rose-scent wakes—who knows from what thing sweet?
Who knows
The secret of the perfume of the rose?'

As the song ended, a head showed above the tufted bushes. It was rather a fine head; bare of covering, its long grizzled hair parted in the middle lying in a smooth outward curve on the high narrow forehead, then sweeping in an equal inside curve between the ear and throat. So much, no more, was to be seen above the roses, save, for a moment, a long-fingered, delicate brown hand hiding the face in its *salaam*.

'Who in Satan's name are you?' asked the young man fiercely in Hindustani.

The head and hand met in a second *salaam*, then the face showed; rather a fine face, preternaturally grave, but with a cunning comprehension in its gravity.

'I am Hushmut the essence-maker, *Huzoor*,' was the reply. 'I belong to the garden, and, being hidden from the noble people in my occupation of plucking roses for my still, I sang to let them know.'

THE PERFUME OF THE ROSE

The young Englishman gave a half-embarrassed laugh.

'What does he say?' asked the girl. She had only been two months in India, and these had been spent in falling in love.

'He thought we might like to know he was there, that's all—a joke, isn't it?' answered her lover. She smiled, and so holding each other's hands boldly they stood facing that head above the roses.

It nodded cheerfully.

'The *Huzoors* are doubtless about-to-marry persons,' came the voice. 'It is not always so, even with the *Huzoors*. But this being different, if they require essences for the bridal let them come to Hushmut. Rose, jasmine, orange, sandal, lemon grass. I make them all in their season. Yea, even "wylet"¹ which the *mems* love. It is not really *banafsha*, *Huzoor*; they grow not in the plains. I make it from the *babul* blossom, and none could tell the difference. Mayhap there is none, since He who makes the perfume of the flowers in His still, may send the same to many blossoms, as I send my essences to many lovers; even the noble people!'

There was distinct raillery in the last words, and the young Englishman's smile vanished.

'We people hold not with essences,' he said curtly; adding to the girl, 'Come, dear, I think we really ought to go back, your father will be wanting to go home—he has a lot of work, I know——'

¹ Violet.

THE PERFUME OF THE ROSE

A shuffle in the bushes made the lovers pause, a curious shuffle such as a wounded bird makes in its efforts to escape.

'If the most noble will tarry, this slave will at least make the luck-offering to the bride,' came the voice again, and to point its meaning the delicate brown hand held up a circular shallow basket heaped with rose-petals. Heaped so lightly, that the hand held it level, and it seemed to glide on the top of the bushes, heralding the grizzled head which slid after it with a faintly undulating movement.

The cause of this became clear when the limit of the roses was reached.

Hushmut the essence-maker must have been a cripple from birth. The loose blue cloth, such as gardeners wear knotted round their loins like a petticoat, hid, however, all deformity, even when he clambered up the marble edge of the old waterway, and shuffled with sidelong jerks along the path to the pink muslin flounces.

The wearer's eyes grew soft suddenly. The mystery of such births came home to the woman who was so soon to be a wife, perhaps a mother.

She gave him a mother's look anyhow; the look of almost passionate pity a woman gives to a child's deformity.

Perhaps he saw it. Anyhow he paused; then, with his bold black eyes twinkling, held out the basket.

'A handful, *Huzoor*, for luck!' he cried.

THE PERFUME OF THE ROSE

' A rose ungathered is but a rose,
Pluck it, lover, don't mind a thorn ;
Tuck it away in your bosom-clothes,
And drink its beauty from night to morn.'

The voice trilled and bubbled quite decorously, but the young Englishman intercepted a deliberate wink, and felt inclined to kick Hushmut to lower levels, till he remembered that the girl could not understand.

' Take a handful,' he said, ' and let's get rid of him.' The girl obeyed, but, by mere chance, the little white hand with his ring on it did tuck its handful of pink rose-leaves away in the loose pink ruffles on her breast. Whereat Hushmut's approval became so unmistakable that the young Englishman felt that the only thing was to escape from it.

Yet as he hurried the girl back to the summer-house he turned to listen to the essence-maker's voice as he went on with his song, and his rose-picking.

' Dig, gardener ! deep ; till the Earth-lips cling tight.
Prune, gardener ! keep those blushes to the light.
Then, gardener, sleep ! he brings the scent by night.
Who knows
The secret of the perfume of the rose ?'

There was nothing to be seen now but the stunted grey-green bushes half-hidden in blossom ; even the head had disappeared. They were a queer people, thought the young man, very difficult to understand. Then the refrain returned to him—

' Who knows
The secret of the perfume of the rose ?'

THE PERFUME OF THE ROSE

'Hushmut?' answered an older man who lounged smoking in one of the marble-fretted balconies of the dead King's pleasure-house. 'Oh yes! he is quite a character. A scoundrel, I believe; at least he knows all the worst lots in the city. They come to the garden at night, you see, and the bazaar women get all their essences from him. So I expect he knows at any rate of all the devilry that's going on. I wish I did.' The speaker's face looked a trifle harassed.

'Is it true, sir, what they say?' asked another voice, 'that Hushmut is really the King's son. That his mother was a Brahmin girl they kidnapped, who cried herself to death in one of these rooms. Then, when the child was a cripple, the King—by Jove, he was a brute—disowned it.'

'Is that about Hushmut?' asked the girl, who had joined the group in time to hear the last words.

The men looked at each other, and the older one said, 'Yes, my dear; they say he was deserted by his parents because he was a cripple. Rather rough on him. Now I think I'll go and get your mother to come home. It's getting late. You two will follow, I suppose?'

So, by degrees, the pleasure-seekers left the garden of dead Kings to the scent of the roses. Left it cheerfully, calling back to their friends times and places where they were to meet again, as English men and women did on those fatal evenings in May '57.

Only the girl in the pink frock and her lover lin-

THE PERFUME OF THE ROSE

gered ; while the dogcart in which he was to drive her home waited under the blossoming trees.

And as they stood talking, as lovers will, Hushmut the essence-maker, thinking the coast was clear, came shuffling down the scented shadow of the path—for the sun had left the garden—pushing his basket of rose-leaves before him, dragging his crippledom behind him.

‘ Do you think he would show us his still ? ’ said the girl suddenly. ‘ I’ve never seen one. Ask him, will you ? ’

Hushmut’s big, bold black eyes twinkled. Certainly the *Miss-sahiba* might see. There was no secret in his work. He took the scent as he found it, as wise men took love. Again there was that faint suspicion of raillery only to be pardoned by the girl’s ignorance, and also by a conviction that Hushmut counted on that ignorance, and meant the remark only for the young Englishman. And so, oddly, the latter became conscious of a distinct antagonism between himself and the crippled essence-maker. It was absurd, ludicrous ; but it existed, nevertheless.

There was not much to see in those vaults under the plinth of the pleasure-palace in which Hushmut had set up his distillery. They were very low, very dark, the only light coming through the open door, and from the row of rose-shaped air-holes pierced at intervals in the plinth. Viewed from outside, these formed part of its raised and pierced marble decoration. From within they looked quaint and flower-like, set as they were in the dim shadowy vault ; for Hushmut had

THE PERFUME OF THE ROSE

pasted pink paper over them, to keep out the bees and wasps, he explained, which otherwise, led by the scent of the flowers, came in troublesome numbers.

The rude still, like a huge cooking-pot, stood in one corner, and all about it lay trays on trays of fading rose-leaves.

'*Pab!* How sickly sweet! Let's get outside,' said the young man after a brief glance round. But the girl stood looking curiously at a brownish-yellow mass piled beside the still.

'What is that?' she asked. Hushmut shuffled to the pile and held out a sample for her to see. She bent to look at it.

'Rose-leaves!' she said. 'Oh! I see—after scent has been taken out of them. Poor things! What a shame!'

Hushmut said something rapidly in Hindustani, and the girl turned to her companion for explanation.

'He says,' translated the latter, with a curiously grudging note in his voice, 'that they have their use. He dries them in the sun and burns them in the furnace of his still.'

She shook her head and smiled. 'That's poor compensation!' Then she bent closer and sniffed regretfully at what Hushmut held.

'All gone!' she said, so like a child that her lover laughed at her tenderly.

'What else did you expect, you goose!

"Only the actions of the just,
Smell sweet and blossom in the dust!"

THE PERFUME OF THE ROSE

So come ; we really must be off ; it's getting late.'

He felt in his pocket, and held out a coin to Hushmut ; but the latter shook his head, and once more said something rapidly in Hindustani. It had a note of petition in it, but the request was apparently not to the hearer's taste. That was to be seen from his face.

'What does he want?' asked the girl curiously.

'Nothing he is going to get,' replied her lover, moving off ; 'the cheek of the man!'

But the pink muslin stood its ground. 'What is it?' she persisted ; 'I want to know. He doesn't look to me as if he meant to be rude, and—and'—her face softened—'if it is anything we can do, I'd—I'd like to do it. Tell me, please.'

The young fellow shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

'Oh! only fooling! He wants you to give him back some of the rose-leaves he gave you, that he may put them in his new brew, to—to make it sweeter ; says the luck-gift of a bride always does——'

The girl blushed and smiled all over.

'Well, why not? It is a pretty idea, anyhow.' She drew out the handful of rose-leaves as she spoke, then paused with a faint wonder, for the warmth of their shelter had made their perfume almost bewildering.

'How—how sweet they are!' she murmured. Then, still smiling, but with the blush faded almost to paleness, she dropped the rose-leaves into the delicate, long-fingered hand.

THE PERFUME OF THE ROSE

'I hope it will be the sweetest essence you ever made,' she said with a laugh, and Hushmut seemed to understand, for he smiled back and *salaamed* as he, in his turn, tucked the charm into his bosom for use when the still should be ready for closing, and as he did so, he said in his high, suave voice—

'May He who knows the secret of the rose protect the bride.' He said it without the least suspicion of reality; simply as a dignified piece of courtesy.

A minute afterwards the wheels of that last dog-cart, as it drove out of the garden, disturbed the birds which had already begun to choose their resting-places for the night, since they too looked for the usual rest and peace in that fatal May-time.

And for a space the peace, the rest settled on the garden. Only Hushmut's voice, as he busied himself in packing the pink petals into his still, told of any life in it beyond the birds, the flowers, the bees.

One of these, belated, drifted into the vault through the open door, and hummed a background to the high, trilling voice.

'Pale, pale are the rose-lips, sweet!
Red is the heart of the rose,
But red are the lips mine meet,
And your heart white as the snows.'

Then a faint, almost noiseless patter of bare running feet paused at the door, and someone looked in to say breathlessly—

'It hath begun, they say. But who knows? I am off to the city to see.'

THE PERFUME OF THE ROSE

Hushmut looked up, startled, from his rose-leaves ; startled, nothing more.

‘ Begun !—so soon—wherefore ? ’

‘ God knows ! ’ came the breathless voice. ‘ Mayhap it is a lie. Some thought it would not come at all. I will return and tell thee the news.’

The faint, almost noiseless patter of bare feet died away, and there was peace and rest in the garden for another space. Only Hushmut shuffled to the door, looked out curiously, then shuffled back to his work, for that must be finished before dark, else the roses would spoil, squandering their sweetness. There was another pile of brownish, yellow residuum ready dried for the furnace, and as he filled a basket with it, his hands among the scentless stuff, a sudden remembrance of his own impotence came to him. Perhaps he had seen a hint of the pity in the English girl’s face.

He smiled half-cynically and muttered—

‘ Only the dust of the rose remains for the perfume-seller.’

He paused almost before the bit of treasured wisdom was ended. There was a sound of wheels ; of a galloping horse’s feet.

Someone was coming back to the garden. The next instant, through the open door, he saw two figures running ; an Englishman, an English girl in a pink dress. The man’s arm was round her as he ran ; he looked back fearfully, then seemed to whisper something in her ear, and she gave answer back.

THE PERFUME OF THE ROSE

What was it they were saying to each other? Hushmut knew by instinct.

He was thinking of the roof of the palace pleasure-house, of the winding stair that led to it, down which it would at least be possible to fling a foe, before the end came; and she was thinking of the marble plinth below, where, when that end came, a woman might find safety from men's hands in death.

So they came on through the growing shadows.

Hushmut shuffled to the door and watched the figures calmly, indifferently, as they neared him; for the way to the winding stair lay up the steps which rose just beyond the low door of his distillery in the plinth.

Perhaps the dusk hid him from those two; perhaps even in broad daylight they would not, in their fierce desire to reach not safety but resistance, have seen him.

They did not, anyhow; but as they passed the door the girl's muslin flounce caught hard on its lintel hasp, and as in frantic haste she stooped to rip it free, the scent of those rose-leaves Hushmut had given her, still lingering in the ruffles at her breast, seemed to pass straight back into those same rose-leaves in his own.

That was all, nothing more. But it brought back his last words to her: 'May He who knows the secret of the rose protect the bride.'

Strange!

The same instant his long-fingered brown hand was on her white one as she tugged at her dress.

'This way, *Huzoor!*' he cried in a loud voice, for the

THE PERFUME OF THE ROSE

man to hear. 'There is a secret passage here ; it leads to safety.'

Safety ! That word, better than resistance, not to the man himself, but as sole guardian to the girl, arrested him in a second, tempted him.

He looked, hesitated, then dragged his charge on—dragged her from anything with a dark skin to it.

But her white one touching this dark one, found something in it to give confidence ; or perhaps that fragrance of the flower from His still which 'He sends to many blossoms,' had passed from Hushmut's breast to hers, as hers had to Hushmut's. He knows, who knows the secret of the perfume of the rose.

Anyhow she hung back, and she called pitifully, clamorously—

'No ! No ! Let us trust him—let us take the chance.'

There was no time for remonstrance.

The next second they were in the cool, scented darkness of the vault, with those pink air-holes showing like shadowy roses among the low arches, the squat pillars.

'At the farther end,' came Hushmut's voice, amid his shuffling, till the latter ceased in the rasping of a chain unhasped. 'Here, *Huzoor*, it leads to the Summer Palace beyond the garden wall. So by the mango groves to the Residency. May He who knows the secret of the perfume of the rose protect the bride.'

His voice sounded hollow in their ears as they ran down the vaulted passage which opened before them, lit at intervals by those cunning air-holes hidden

THE PERFUME OF THE ROSE

flowerfully in the scrollwork of one of the marble-edged aqueducts, and the closing door behind them blew a breath of the rose scent from the vault after their retreating figures.

* * * * *

Two years had passed. Nine long months spent in keeping a foe at bay ; three in following that spent and broken foe to the bitter end ; and then a year of English skies and English faces to dull the memory of that long strain to mind and body.

And then once more a young Englishman, with a girl in a pink dress, drove into that garden of dead Kings. But the four-square wall was in ruins. It had been a rallying-point of that spent and broken foe.

The garden itself was neglected, the roses unpruned.

'I'm afraid he must have thought us awfully ungrateful,' said the man regretfully. 'But it couldn't be helped at first ; then afterwards one had to move on. But I did write, you know, more than once about him, after we got a grip on the place again ; so I hope they have done something.'

'They will have to now, at any rate,' said the wearer of the pink dress firmly.

The sight of the garden, changed, neglected as it was, had brought back the very picture of that grizzled head with the curved hair, slipping through the rose-bushes, the delicate dark hand holding the tray of rose-leaves, as it slid over the bushes with its luck-offering for the bride.

They went to the rose square first, but Hushmut

THE PERFUME OF THE ROSE

was not there. Then, seeing by the lack of blossom that the time of roses was not yet, they went on to the orange groves.

No one was there. So, doubtfully, they passed to the jasmine, to the lemon grass.

But no one was to be seen. Nothing was to be heard but the lazy yet insistent cry of someone scaring the birds from the pomegranates.

'Let us ask him. He may know,' suggested the wearer of the pink dress. So they called him and he came—an old man, wizened, careworn.

Yes, he said, he knew. Wherefore not, when he had guarded fruit in that garden since he was a boy? There was not much to guard now, owing to past evils. Hushmut the essence-maker—Hushmut was dead. No one made essences any more. How did he die? Very simply. He had seen it with his own eyes when he was guarding fruit. The *Huzoors* had doubtless heard of the evil times, even though, as the coachman had told him, they had just come from *wilayet*. Well, it began quite suddenly one evening in May. It was the peaches he was guarding then. There had been a 'fool's dinner' in the garden, and afterwards a young *sahib* and a miss in a pink dress had come running in to take refuge from the troopers. He had seen them, but what could he do? But Hushmut had shown them the secret passage, no doubt. Anyhow he had come out alone and closed the door, and sate beside it singing when the troopers rode up.

And doubtless they would have believed him, seeing

THE PERFUME OF THE ROSE

that he was friends with all the bad walkers in the city through the selling of his essences, but for a bit of the *Miss-sabiba's* dress which had caught in the door hasp. So they knew what he had done, and being enraged, had killed him there, by the door. It was quite simple.

Quite. So simple that those two said nothing. Only their hands sought each other as they turned back to the summer-house.

'I should like to see the place again,' said the wearer of the pink dress in a hard, even voice. 'I wonder if the door is open?'

It was ; for no one made essences now. So they entered.

The still stood in the corner as before. The pile of that strange fuel lay between it and the trays of rose-leaves. But there was no difference between them now. Both were yellow, scentless ; and though the pink paper which Hushmut had pasted over the rose-shaped air-holes was all broken and torn by birds and winds and weather, the bees did not drift in.

For there was no scent to lead them on. None.

The winds of two long years had swept it away absolutely. What else was to be expected?

Yet a vague disappointment showed in the woman's face as it had in the girl's.

But this time the man's voice trembled as he answered her look with the words—

'Only the actions of the just,
Smell sweet and blossom in the dust.'

FIRE AND ICE

IT was in a little lath-and-plaster house down by the river that it all happened. The veriest confection of a house, looking for all the world as if it were a Neapolitan ice. Strawberry and vanilla in alternate stripes, with shuttered windows of coffee, and a furled wafer of an awning over the filigree chocolate balcony. And it rested, so to speak, against a platter of green plantain-leaves, bright as any emerald. No doubt the trees belonging to the leaves grew somewhere to the back or the side of it, but from the wide street in front you could see nothing but the green-leaves surrounding the ice-cream.

For the rest it was a three-storied house outwardly ; inwardly a two-storied one ; or to be strictly accurate, it consisted of a story and a half, since the farther half of the ground floor and the whole of the middle story belonged to a different house, having a different entrance in a different street, which lay in a different quarter. A very respectable quarter indeed, whereas the less said about the morals of the wide street down by the river the better. They were so bad that the modesty of the middle story did not permit of a single window whence they could be seen. And this gave the house a queer, half-hearted look, for the top

FIRE AND ICE

story, and that half of the lowest one which belonged to it, were full of windows and doors opening on to the broad path leading to destruction. There were five, with fretted wooden architraves filling up the whole of the ground floor, so that you could see straight into the long, shallow hall whence there was no exit save by a narrow slit in the middle, showing a dim, steep staircase. It was always empty, this hall, though it was carpeted with striped carpets, and painted elaborately in flowery arabesques of a dull, pale pink and flaming crimson ; an odd mixture reminding you vaguely of bloodstains on a rose-leaf. And there was a red lamp over the centre door, which sent a rosy redness into the growing dusk ; for it was lit early.

So was that palest of green lights which you could see swinging from the roof on the top story when the coffee-ice shutters were thrown back as the evening breeze came down the river. It was pale, yet bright like the first star at sunset.

And sometimes, but not often, if you watched in the early dusk you might see the owner of the ice-cream house flit across the open window. She was like a sugar-drop herself, rose or saffron decked with silver leaf, a slender scrap of a creature who tinkled as she walked and gave out a perfume of heavy scented flowers. But this was seldom ; more often you only heard the tinkle either of silver or laughter, since Burfâni—for that was her name—was of those who barter the one for the other. It was in truth her hereditary trade, though neither her father nor her

FIRE AND ICE

mother had practised it ; their rôle in life having been that of pater- and mater-familias. A very necessary one if the race is to survive, and so in this generation, also, her brother had undertaken the duty by marrying his first cousin. The young couple being now, in the privacy and propriety of the second story, engaged in bringing up a fine family of girls to succeed to the top story when Burfâni's age should drive her to a lower place in life. In the meantime, however, she allowed them so much a month ; enough to enable idle Zulfkar to fight quail in the bazaars and keep his wife Lâzîzan in the very strictest seclusion—as befitted one filched from the profession of bartering smiles in order to fulfil the first duty of a woman—the rearing of babes.

Thus, in more ways than one, the house was conglomerate. On the side overlooking the broad path there was the stained rose-leaf hall, empty, swept, and garnished, and the dark stair leading up and up to the wandering star of a lamp twinkling out into the sunset amid the sound of laughter and money. On the side giving upon narrow respectability a hall full of household gear and dirt where the little girls played and a dark stair leading to a darker room where Lâzîzan sat day after day bewailing her sad fate ; for, of course, life would have been much gayer over the way, since she was a beautiful woman. Far more beautiful in a lavish, somewhat loud fashion, than the lady belonging to the ice-cream house with her delicate, small face ; but that was the very reason why she

FIRE AND ICE

had been chosen out from many to carry on the race as it ought to be carried on. Burfâni, of course, was clever, and that counted for much, but it never did in their profession to rely on brains above looks. Nevertheless Lâzîzan, when in a bad temper, was in the habit of telling herself that if she had been taught to sing and dance, as the little lady had been taught, she could have made the ice-cream house a more paying concern than it was—to judge by the pittance they received from it! And this angry complaint grew with her years until, as she sat suckling her fourth child, she felt sometimes as if she could strangle it, even though it was a boy, and though as a rule she was an affectionate mother. In truth the sheer animal instinct natural to so finely developed a creature lasted out the two or three years during which her children were hers alone; after that, when they began crawling downstairs and playing in the hall where she might never go, she became jealous and then forgot all about them.

Nevertheless, the boy being only some nine months old when he was suddenly carried off by one of those mysterious diseases common to Indian children, she wept profusely, and told Burfâni—who, as in duty bound, came round decently swathed in a *burka* to offer condolence on hearing of the sad event—that some childless one had doubtless cast a shadow on him for his beauty's sake, seeing that—thank Heaven!—all her children were beautiful. There was always a militant flavour underlying the politeness of these two,

FIRE AND ICE

and even the presence of the quaint little overdressed dead baby awaiting its bier on the bed did not prevent attack and defence.

‘They favour thee, sister,’ replied Burfâni suavely. ‘In mind also, to judge from what I see. Therefore I shall await God’s will in the future ere I choose one to educate.’

Lâzîzan tittered sarcastically, despite her half-dried tears.

‘’Tis my choice first, nevertheless. The best of this bunch in looks—ay, in brains too, perchance—marries my brother’s son, according to custom. Sure my mother chose thus, and I must do the same, sister.’

She spoke evenly, though for the moment the longing to strangle something had transferred itself to the saffron-coloured sugar-drop all spangled with silver which had emerged from its chrysalis of a *burka*. What business had the poor thin creature with such garments when *her* beauty was hidden by mere rags?

Burfâni laughed in her turn; an easy, indifferent laugh, and stretched out her slim henna-dyed palm with the usual friendly offering of cardamoms.

‘Take one, sister,’ she said soothingly, ‘they are good for spleen and excessive grief. *Hai! Hai!* thou wilt be forlorn, indeed, now thy occupation is gone.’

Lâzîzan, with her mouth full of spices, tittered again more artificially than ever. ‘I can do other things, perchance, beside suckle babes. Maybe I weary of it, and am glad of a change.’

The saffron-coloured sugar-drop, seated on a low

FIRE AND ICE

stool in front of the white-sheeted bed with its solemn little gaily dressed burden, looked at its companion distastefully through its long lashes, and the slender henna-dyed hand catching some loops of the jasmine chaplets it wore, held them like a bouquet close to the crimson-tinted lips.

‘It is a virtuous task, my sister,’ quoth Burfâni, gravely sniffing away at the heavy perfume, as if she needed something to make her environment less objectionable. ‘Besides, it is ever a mistake to forsake the profession of one’s birth——’

‘And wherefore should I?’ interrupted Lâzîzan, seizing her opportunity recklessly. ‘Hast thou forsaken it, and are we not sisters?’

Again a cold, critical look of dislike came from the long, narrow eyes with their drowsy lids.

‘Such words are idle, sister. Forget them. Thou wouldst not find it easier——’

‘How canst tell?’ interrupted Lâzîzan once more. ‘As well say that thou couldst put up with my life.’

The saffron-and-silver daintiness shifted its look towards the bed, and the henna-dyed hand straightened a wrinkle in the sheet softly.

‘God knows!’ she said with a sudden smile. ‘Anyhow, sister, ’tis not wise to change one’s profession as one grows old.’

As one grows old! This parting shot rankled long after the decent *burka* had slipped like a shadow through the swept and garnished hall, and so up the dark stairs to the wandering starlight shining feebly

FIRE AND ICE

out into the sunset ; long after the preacher and the bier and the family friends had carried the gaily dressed baby to its grave, leaving the mother to the select and secluded tears of her neighbours ; long after the little girls, wearied out with excitement, had fallen asleep cuddled together peacefully, innocent of that choice in the future ; long after Zulfkar, full of liquor, tears, and curses, due to a surplusage in the funeral expenses allowed by Burfâni, to parental grief, and to bad luck at cards, came home, desirous of sympathy. He got none, for Lâzîzan, despite her seclusion, had never lost the empire which he felt she deserved as the handsomest woman he knew. 'Twas his own fault, she said curtly ; he could marry another wife, have more liquor, and gamble as much as he liked if he chose. It was but a question of money, and if he were content to put up with beggarly alms from his sister, that ended the matter.

Whereupon, being in the maudlin stage of drink, he wept still more.

It must have been fully three months after the baby's funeral procession had gone down the respectable street, and so by a side alley found its way into the broad path leading alike to destruction and the graveyard, that Burfâni went round to her sister-in-law's again. This time she was in pink and silver, like a rose-water ice, and her words were cold as her looks.

' Say what thou wilt, Lâzîzan, the youth lingers. Have I not windows to my house ? Have I not eyes ?

FIRE AND ICE

And such things shall not be bringing disgrace to respectable families.'

Lâzîzan tittered as usual : ' Lo ! what a coil, because an idle stranger lingers at the back instead of the front. 'Tis for thy sake doubtless, sister, though thou art unkind. I wonder at it, seeing he is not ill-favoured.'

' So thou *hast* seen him ! So be it. See him no more, or I tell Zulfkar.'

' Tell him what ? That thou hast cast eyes on a handsome stranger, and because he comes not to thy call wouldst fasten the quarrel upon me ? Zulfkar is no fool, sister, he will not listen !'

' If he listen not, he can leave my house—for 'tis mine. And mark my words, Lâzîzan Bibi, no scandal comes nigh it.'

Cæsar's wife could not have spoken with greater unction, and in good sooth she meant her words, since in no class is seclusion bound to be more virtuous than in that to which Burfâni belonged.

So, as the motes in the sunbeam of life danced along the broad path in front of the ice-cream house, and drifted up its dark stair, the painted and perfumed little lady under the pale green lamp kept an eye upon the virtue of her family. Thus ere long it came to be Zulfkar's turn to listen to his sister's warning, and as he listened he sucked fiercely, confusedly, at the inlaid hookah which stood for the use of approved visitors ; for in good sooth there had been more money to spend of late, and Lâzîzan was discreet enough save to those watchful, experienced eyes. The sound of his hub-

FIRE AND ICE

blings and bubblings therefore was his only answer, and they filled the wide, low, white-plastered upper story, frescoed round each coffee-shuttered window with flowery devices, until Burfâni lost patience, and began coldly :

‘Hast been taking lessons of a camel, brother?’ she asked, rustling the tinsel-decked fan she held; and then suddenly she seemed to grasp something, and the contemptuous indifference of her bearing changed to passionate anger. Her silver-set feet clashed as they touched the floor, and she rose first to a sitting posture, finally to stand before the culprit, the very personification of righteous wrath.

‘So! thou hast taken gold! This is why thou canst ruffle with the best at Gulâbun’s—base-born upstart who takes to the life out of wickedness—as *she* hath done, bringing disgrace to the screened house where thy mother dwelt in decency. But thou dwellest there no longer—thou eatest no bread of mine—I will choose my pupil from another brood.’

‘Nay, sister, ’tis not proved,’ stammered Zulfkar.

‘Not proved!’ she went on still more passionately. ‘Nay, ’tis not proved to thy neighbours maybe, but to me? Mine eyes have seen—I know the trick—and out thou goest. I will have no such doings in my house, and so I warned her months ago. But there! what need for railing? Live on her gold an thou willest, it shall not chink beside mine.’

She sank back upon the silk coverlet again, and with a bitter laugh began to rustle the tinsel fan once more.

FIRE AND ICE

And Zulfkar, after unavailing protests, slunk down the dark stairs, and so along the street to a certain house over the liquor-seller's shop, about which a noisy crowd gathered all day long.

And that night screams and blows came from the second story, and unavailing curses on the mischief-maker. But if the latter heard them she gave no sign to the approved visitors drinking sherbets in the cool upper story with the windows set wide to the stars.

It was Zulfkar beating his wife of course, because she was so handsome primarily ; secondly, because she had been foolish enough to be found out ; thirdly, because even in liquor he was sharp enough to recognize that Burfâni would keep her word.

And she did. The supplies stopped from that day. Within a week the second story lay empty, while Lâzîzan wept tears of pain and spite in a miserable little lodging in the very heart of the city. It is difficult even to hint at the impotent rage the woman felt towards her sister-in-law. Even Zulfkar's blows were forgotten in the one mad longing to revenge herself upon the pink-and-saffron daintiness which would not spare one crumb from a full table. For so to Lâzîzan's coarse, passionate nature the matter presented itself, bringing with it a fierce delight at the perfections of her own lover. He had deserted her for the time, it is true, but that was the way of lovers when husbands were angry ; by and by he would come back, and there would be peace, since Zulfkar must have gold.

FIRE AND ICE

So ran her calculations ; but she reckoned without a certain fierce intolerance which the latter shared with his sister ; also, somewhat prematurely, on an immediate emptying of his pockets. But luck was not all against him ; the cards favoured him. And so, when a few days after the flitting from the second story, she, being sick to death of dullness, thought the time had come for self-assertion, she found herself mistaken. Zulfkar, still full of Dutch courage, fell upon her again, and beat her most unmercifully, finishing up with an intimidatory slash at her nose. It was not much, not half so serious as the beating, but the very thought of possible disfigurement drove her mad, and the madness drove her to a corner where she could plan revenge while Zulfkar slept heavily—for he was more than half-drunk. And *this* too was the fault of the saffron-and-rose devil in the upper story, who had her amusement and spied upon other women's ways. And *this* meant days more ere she, Lâzîzan, would be presentable, even if she did not carry the mark to her grave, and all because that she-devil was jealous—jealous of *her* lover !

Oh for revenge ! And why not ? The door was unlatched, since Zulfkar had forgotten it in his anger ; the streets were deserted. Even the broad path down by the river would be asleep, the green light gone from above, only the red lamp swinging over the outer door, sending a glow. . . . Fire ! The thought leapt to her brain like a flame itself. Why not ? Zulfkar had purposely kept—all unbeknown to the she-devil—a second

FIRE AND ICE

key to that empty second floor, and he was in a drunken sleep. If she stole it—if she took the bottle of paraffin—if she set fire to the wooden partition separating the stairs—if she broke the red lamp and pretended that was it—

She did not stop to think. She had begun the task almost before she had thought out the details, and was fumbling in Zulfkar's pockets as he lay. And there were two bottles of paraffin in the corner; that was because he had brought one home, and the market-woman another by mistake. So much the better, so much the bigger blaze. Then out into the street, not forgetting a box of safety matches—strange companions to such a task. She knew her way well, having wandered free enough as a child before the lot was drawn, the die cast which sent her to suckle babes. Yet, being a woman beset by a thousand superstitious fears, it needed all her courage ere she found herself face to face with the thin wooden partition surrounding the steep stair leading upwards. How many times had she not listened to feet ascending those unseen stairs, and heard the tinkle of laughter as the unseen door above opened?

Well, it would blaze finely, and cut off at once all means of escape. A devilish plan indeed, and the leaping flames, ere she left them to their task, showed the face of a fiend incarnate.

And so to wait for the few minutes before the whole world must know that the saffron and the rose daintiness was doomed. No more laughter—no more lovers

FIRE AND ICE

—that would be for her, Lâzîzan, not for the other with her cold sneers.

A licking tongue of flame showed for an instant and made her pray Heaven none might see it too soon. Then a crackle, a puff of smoke, next a cry of fire, but, thank Heaven, only from the broad path. And what good were the running feet, what good the shouts of the crowd in which her shrouded figure passed unnoticed, unless the upper story had wings? For the stairs must be gone—hopelessly gone—by this time.

More than the stairs, for with one sudden blaze the lath-and-plaster house seemed to melt like ice itself before the sheet of flame which the soft night wind bent riverwards.

And still the top story slept, or was it suffocated? No! there was someone at the window—someone gesticulating wildly. A man—not a woman.

‘Throw yourself down!’ cried an authoritative foreign voice, ‘’tis your only chance.’

Surely, since the ice melted visibly during the sudden hush which fell upon the jostling crowd.

‘Throw yourself down!’ came the order again; ‘we’ll catch you if we can. Stand back, good people.’

‘Quick! it’s your last chance,’ came the inexorable voice once more. Then there was a leap, a scream—a crash, as in his despair the man overleapt the mark and fell among the parting crowd. Fell right at Lâzîzan’s feet face uppermost.

And it was the face of the handsome stranger—of her lover.

FIRE AND ICE

Her shriek echoed his as she flung herself beside him. And at the sound something white and ghost-like slipped back from the window with a tinkle of laughter.

‘Burfâni! Burfâni!’ shouted the crowd. ‘Drop gently—we’ll save you! Burfâni! Burfâni!’

But there was no answer; and the next moment with a roar and a crash Vice fell upon Virtue, and both together upon the swept and garnished hall and the hall where the little girls had played.

The ice-cream house had become a blazing pile of fire.

THE KEEPER OF THE PASS

THE low hills, as they lay baking in the sunshine of noon, showed in scallops of glare against the light-bleached sky. A fine dust, reddish but for that same bleaching of light, hid every green thing far and near, making them match the straggling camel-thorns, the stunted wormwood, the tufts of chamomile, and many another nameless aromatic herb which in these low hills come into the world ready dressed in dust, as it were, against the long rainless months.

Yet it was not hot here in the uplands, and so the district officer's tent was opened at one side and propped up by bamboos more for the convenience of its occupant holding an open-air audience than from any quest after coolness. The upward tilt gave the tent a quaintly lopsided look, as if it were some gigantic bird flapping one wing in its attempt to rise and fly away from the little hollow in which it stood.

It was a motley crowd, indeed, which awaited the fiat of the Dispenser of Justice in these fastnesses of the central hills of India; those climbing, rolling upward sweeps of sandstone where the ripple mark of the tides that built them remains to tell of the vanished sea which had once covered this dry and

THE KEEPER OF THE PASS

thirsty land, where no water is for nine long months of the year.

It was a curious crowd also. It could not fail of being that, since it struck the two extremes of that vast Indian scale of so-called culture, so-called civilization. For a land case involving several miles of country was in dispute, and the semi-Europeanized, wholly clothed lawyers engaged on it stood cheek by jowl with the semi-clothed wholly aboriginal witnesses in it, representatives for the most part of the wild tribes belonging to these waste lands and forests. Rude iron-smelters, almost touching the bronze age in absolute savagery, or wandering fowlers, barbaric even to the extent of eating their poor, old, undesirable relations !

In one group, however, consisting of an old man and a young one, a quick observer might have noticed a palpable discrepancy between the dress (or the lack of it) and the address of the wearers. A discrepancy which made the magistrate of the district look up with a smile.

'Hullo ! Nâgdeo !' he said. 'On the war-path after a tiger ?' The old man *salaamed* down to the ground. His skin was very dark, so that his white moustache and thin white whiskers, brushed out to stand, each hair singly, in a forward curve, like the whiskers of a cat, seemed to glisten against it. For the rest, he was small, slight, but extremely muscular, and he carried himself with no little dignity and importance.

THE KEEPER OF THE PASS

'Not so, *Huzoor*,' he replied, and his speech rose higher in that scale of culture and civilization than his dress, which was no more than a waistcloth, a string of tiger claws, and a tasselled spear—'I come to put another foot on it. This is my grandson, *Huzoor*.'

The dignity, the importance grew fifty-fold as he turned to the lad by his side. A good head taller, fairer of skin, infinitely better looking, there was yet something about the figure which made the eye turn back to the smaller, older one, as it stood before authority with a certain authority of its own.

He was, as all knew, explained Nâgdeo, the keeper of one of the wildest passes in that wild country, as his father and his father's father had been. Who could deny it? Was not their very caste name, to distinguish them from others, *Ghâtwâl*, or pass-keeping ones?

He had had to keep his a long time, because the Old God had decreed that his son should be defeated by a tigress and her cubs; which might happen to the best of pass-keeping ones, since those things feminine were untrustworthy. Consequently he (Nâgdeo) had had to go on beyond the years of greatest activity until his grandson reached them.

But here the boy was now. Of age, twenty; than most, taller; as any, learned in jungle law; with the spear, nimble; to keep the pass, ready; to be enrolled, present, the Old God before—

With his subject the old man's words had returned to the idiom of a wilder tongue, and he drew out of

THE KEEPER OF THE PASS

his waistcloth a little iron image of a tiger, not three inches long, to which he *salaamed* reverently.

For this was the 'Old God.'

'What is your grandson's name?' asked the district officer.

It was Bagh la (tiger cub), said N gdeo.

It had seemed a suitable name for one born six months after his father had been found lying dead on the top of a dead tigress, his dead lips close to the teats that would suckle her dead whelps no more.

That had been a misfortune, deplorable yet without shame and due—possibly—to the dead youth's over-soon marriage to a thing feminine; such things being notoriously untrustworthy! Therefore he had refrained from entangling *this* one with such things feminine, the more so because there were already sufficient of them in the house, what with Bagh la's mother and grandmother. Briefly, the worship of two female things was sufficient for any lad without adding to the adulation by a third!

So, in the evening, when the magistrate's legal work was over, the old man and the young one came up to the tilted tent again, and, after a curious little oath of fealty to the Old God—in the shape of the three-inch tiger—and a vow of war till death against live things that mimicked his shape had been taken from his grandfather's dictation by Bagh la, the latter's name was duly enrolled as hereditary guardian of the J dusa Pass, and the two struck a bee-line towards home over the low jungle as if it belonged to them.

THE KEEPER OF THE PASS

As indeed it did, since few travellers, save the keepers of the passes, ventured to brave the tigers dreaming in their lairs, or pacing the trackless wastes hungrily, after dark.

But old Nâgdeo was jubilant over the mere chance of coming across one ; not that it was likely, since what tiger ever was whelped which would dare to face him and his grandson ? ‘ Men ’—here he gave a side-long glance of pure adoration at Baghêla’s height—‘ who had no backs ; who, if they failed, as even pass-keepers must sometimes, were found face up to the sky, face up to the claws, face up to the teeth ! ’

Of course, sometimes, the accursed brutes who assumed the shape of the Blessed Budhal Pen—the Old God of Gods—would, out of sheer spite, roll a dead man over and claw at his back ; but that also was without shame, since dead men had no choice.

So the old man babbled on garrulously, and the young one listened, till they reached the little village at the foot of the pass. The moon had risen by this time, and showed the upright slabs of sandstone clustering under the wide-spreading tamarind trees on its outskirts. Slabs marking the graves of dead and gone inhabitants.

‘ I am ready now for the young girls to break their pitchers and cover my emptiness with the shards,’ said the old man, pausing for a second beside a cluster of these stones. Then he raised his hand and spoke to the unseen : ‘ Fear not, Slumberers ! He who comes to join you hath no scratch upon his back.’

THE KEEPER OF THE PASS

That was his *Nunc Dimittis*. After which he made his way to a low, shingled, stone hut, covered with gourds, which stood on some rising ground outside the hamlet towards the pass ; drank to excess—from pure joy—of a nauseous spirit made by the untrustworthy feminine out of wild berries, and then slept as sound as if he were indeed with the Slumberers.

For this question of the due keeping of the pass had been on the old man's nerves for months. The rains would be due ere long, bringing, no doubt, those twinges of lumbago to a grandfather's back which had of late made it difficult, indeed, to keep the pass open for travellers ; since to do that a man must give the beasts no rest. He must harry their lairs when they were absent, scare them from the road with strange noises and ringing of bells, and, if they were obdurate, face claws and teeth.

But now there was someone to do all this. Someone of the true race, yet by the fiat of the Old God bigger than most. Ay ! and with more personal enmity than most towards the evil ones who stole the Old God's likeness. For must not those six unborn months of wrong, of loss, of grief and anger, count for something ?

Yes ! Baghéla would be a Keeper of the Pass, indeed ! That was the old man's thought as he fell asleep, his dream as he lay sound as the Slumberers themselves. And Baghéla slept too, the badge of his new office, a necklace of tiger claws, round his neck, a tasselled spear, hung with jingling bells, beside him. But the untrustworthy feminine, the mother, the

THE KEEPER OF THE PASS

grandmother, still sate by the embers of the fire whispering fearfully ; for *they* knew that those six unborn months, translated in *their* way, might mean something very different.

Bagh la himself, however, had no suspicion of the possibility. He set about his new duties with an immense amount of swagger. The least hint of a marauding intruder about the winding path which led to the fertile valleys towards the south, would send him through the village with boastful jinglings of his bells. And, as luck would have it, that jingling seemed all powerful for a time towards the keeping of the pass.

N gdeo, who, now that the necessity for presenting a youthful appearance was over, permitted himself a seat amongst the village elders, and a certain stiffness of carriage generally, used to boast of this peace dogmatically. Such a thing as no *news*, even, of intruders, so far on in the season, was unheard of. He himself, in his palmiest days, had never been so fear-compelling. It was those six unborn months of hereditary hatred which did it, no doubt.

And Bagh la thought so too, as long as the rain was slight, as long as the flocks and herds kept to the uplands, and only the shepherds and herdsmen had tales to tell of loss. Then, one day, the clouds broke in slanting shafts of almost solid rain, and the water ran over the rippled sand-hills as if it had been a tide once more. Then the sun shone for another day, and at dusk everything but a yard or two of shadow round

THE KEEPER OF THE PASS

Bagh la as he patrolled the path was a blank nothingness, blotting out even the darkness with wet, impenetrable vapour, dulling even the sound of the bells, deadening all scent.

So neither he nor the tiger had an instant's warning. They were face to face in a moment.

Then Bagh la knew what those unborn months had wrought in him. Terror, absolute, uncontrollable, seized on all his young strength ; he knew nothing save the desire to escape. The next instant he felt a hot vapour on his back, heard the husky angry cough that sent it there, and all that young strength of his spent itself in a cry like that of the untrustworthy thing feminine, when they had told it of a young husband's death.

Into the mist he fled, feeling the cold vapour in his face, the hot behind ; until, suddenly desperate, every atom of him leaped forward from what lay behind, and he fell.

None too soon ; for even as he shot downward a shadow shot over him in the mist, and something ripped his bare back lightly, as, with greater impetus than his, that shadow plunged into the void.

A second afterwards a long-drawn howl of rage and spite rose upward through the mist to meet Bagh la's whimpers as he lay, caught above the sheer precipice by a bush.

After a while he rose and crept carefully up to the verge ; then sate and shivered at himself ; at this inheritance of fear. And more than once his hand sought

THE KEEPER OF THE PASS

that faint scratch upon his back. It was not much ; not more than a kitten might have made in play, but he felt it like a brand.

By degrees, however, he began to think. The tiger must be lying dead, or at least helpless, below the rocks. He must get down to it, leave the marks of his spear in it ; the mark of its claws . . .

A surge of shame swept through him. No ! he must go back unscathed ; no one must have the chance, in dressing wounds, of seeing that faint mark behind.

So the next morning, old Nâgdeo could scarcely contain himself for pride, as he sate among the village elders. The boy had killed his first tiger without a scratch. Had brought home its skin, the biggest seen for years. True, the lad himself had found the fight too hard, and was even now shivering and shaking with ague ; but that only proved how hard the fight had been. And the untrustworthy feminine were dosing him, so he would be afoot again in a day or two. Then the village would see that, ere a month was over, a naked child might go through the pass alone in safety.

But it was not so !

Baghêla, it is true, was well enough by day, but as the dusk came on, his strong young limbs always fell a-shivering and a-shaking. ' There is more room for quaking, see you, in him than in me,' old Nâgdeo would explain elaborately to his cronies, as he held out an arm, which with the inaction, the sudden cessation of imperious efforts, began to show its age clearly ;

THE KEEPER OF THE PASS

'but one must pay for size and strength, and courage; and there is no harm done as yet. The mimicking devils had their lesson when he killed their champion without a scratch.'

But the harm came in time. A party of salt-carriers, taking advantage of a break in the rains, arrived at the village carrying an extra load; the body of a man killed by a tiger, half-eaten by jackals.

'Ague or no ague, sonling,' said old Nâgdeo almost coaxingly to the lad half an hour after the appearance of this grim visitor, 'thy bells must be heard in the pass to-night. They will be all-sufficient, considering the lesson thou hast taught the beasts. And thou art strong enough for the ringing of bells. Thou canst return afterwards to shiver and shake, sonling, since thou art not of those to do that in the pass. No! no!'

The old man's chuckle at his little joke was tenderly triumphant; but, when he had gone, and the untrustworthy feminine alone remained, Baghêla turned with a sob to his mother, who crouched beside him, and hid his face in her clothes, as if he had been a hurt child.

'Mother!' he cried, 'I got it from thee!'

'Yes! heart of my heart,' she answered passionately, 'and from thy murdered father too. Have I not told thee so, often? As for this old man! See you! Since *this* has come upon us, and the shivering is no longer refuge—go! There is no need to ring the bells—no need to go farther than the little caves. And the

THE KEEPER OF THE PASS

old man fails fast. He will not live long. Then, when he is dead, the old tale will be told, and we can tell a new one, like other folk. Why, even now, see you, there is no need for travellers to cross the pass. Let them take the "rail" which the *Huzoors* have made! All this old-world talk is foolishness—yesterday's bread has been eaten, its water drunk; 'tis time for a new dinner!

It was more than a month after this that someone, sitting on the village dais underneath the tamarind trees in sight of the Slumberers, in trying to use a betel-cutter, said carelessly, '*It hath grown rusty, like Baghela's bells!*'

Nâgdeo turned on the speaker like lightning. That month had left him curiously aged, with a wistful, anxious expectancy on his old face. Though when, more than once, folk had commented on his changed looks, and asked what ailed him, he had only replied, almost apologetically, 'Death lingers; 'tis time I was with the Slumberers, since Baghela keeps the pass as his fathers did.'

But now his old voice rose haughtily, 'Like thy wits rather! Canst not see that the youth hath been over-brave? The mimicking devils will not face the bells. And who can kill a foe that keeps his distance? And if the bells ring not, is it not in hopes to lure the cowards close—to take them unawares?'

The arguments came swiftly, as if they had been rehearsed before; rehearsed without audience; and yet when old Nâgdeo moved off as if in displeasure,

THE KEEPER OF THE PASS

his hands crept out towards the stones which marked the Slumberers, his eyes sought them almost pitifully.

And that night, after Bagh la had gone on his rounds, after the untrustworthy feminine had slothfully sought its bed, the old Keeper of the Pass crept out in the rear of the young one, spear in hand ; yet without the jingles, since what need was there for two sets ?

Two ! But where was the one ?

The old man's face grew more feline in its watchful anxiety, as he prowled among the bushes in the half-moonlit darkness, listening for the challenge. And none came, though more than once in the denser shadow of thick jungle he saw two spots of green light telling that someone was *waiting* to be challenged. But where was the challenger ?

The night was far spent ere he was found, fast asleep on a bed of dry leaves in the little cave.

The sight seemed to take the finder back, not to his more immediate ancestors, the purely savage hunters of those low hills, but to something older still, to the barbarians who had swept down on them to found principalities and powers ; for all the calm dignity of the Indo-Scythic sculptures was in N gdeo's pose as he pricked the sleeper with his spear.

'Rise up, Keeper of the Pass ; they wait for thee without.'

Bagh la was on his feet in a second. He knew the time had come, and something of the old racial courage in him held that new fear in check.

THE KEEPER OF THE PASS

Until, not a hundred yards without the cave, in the faint grey light of the now coming dawn, a paler shadow showed in the darker shadows, long, low, sinuous ; and something moved across their path with no sound of footfall ; only a crackle of dry twigs, a sudden, soft, short wheeze, and then silence.

‘ Ring the bells, Keeper of the Pass,’ came the old man’s voice. ‘ There is no fear. Has not the tale of thy prowess spread among the tiger people ? ’

His prowess ! The sting of that slight scratch was as fire on the lad’s back ; he paused. But a spear from behind reached to his, struck it sideways, and the next instant the challenge echoed through the pass.

And was accepted.

The shadow grew short, showed paler ; till two green lights flashed out, and with a roar that rolled among the rocks, the tiger faced them, crouched and sprang.

Old Nâgdeo, his vanished youth returning for a space, sprang too, watching that other spring ; so, spear in hand, found himself close to the striped skin of the base usurper of the Old God’s shape, into which, with all the force he possessed, he drove his weapon’s point. But Baghêla, with no thought but flight, felt the full force of those mighty claws on his back, and fell. Perhaps his neck was broken ; anyhow, he lay still, heedless of the piteous cry that followed—

‘ Face him, Keeper of the Pass ! Face the teeth, face the claws, ere thou seekest the Slumberers ! ’

Yet the entreaty was not utterly disregarded ; since

THE KEEPER OF THE PASS

—Baghélia dead—that Keepership passed again to one whose face faced the old enemy bravely.

That face, however, had no triumph of victory in it, when Nâgdeo stooped over his grandson's body, and turned its scored back to be hidden by Mother Earth. There was no mark anywhere else—not a scratch. That, at any rate, must not be. That must be remedied before the villagers saw it; before even the sun saw it. For was not Budhal Pen, the Old God, the Sun-god also?

So he drew the lad's body deliberately within reach of the mighty claws, and used them, slack as they were in newly-come death, for his purpose.

Then he sat down beside the two dead bodies, and looked at his own for scratch or hurt. There was not one; not even a bruise, not a spot of blood. So none need know. The girls might weep as they broke their pitchers over Baghélia, bewailing his dead courage.

The courage which had died before he did, though none should know of it. Yet it had died. And who was to blame?

Nâgdeo sat gazing stupidly at his grandson's long length, at his fairer beauty; then suddenly he stood up.

That was it, of course!

And if that were so, then it were best to settle it before dawn, when folk might come prying. He bent curiously over the dead lad, then laid his hand on the dead heart.

'Go! Keeper of the Pass, to the Slumberers without fear. I, Nâgdeo, will punish the intruder.'

THE KEEPER OF THE PASS

Half an hour after, he stood silently in his hut beside his still sleeping wife. The old woman, blind, deaf, near her end as it was, scarcely stirred as he drove his spear through her heart.

'I doubt thee not, Naolé,' he said inwardly, 'unless a devil wronged thee; but thy son's son must be avenged. He must take no stranger's blood to the Slumberers.'

But Herdâsi, the lad's mother, was awake, and screamed.

'Hold thy peace, fool!' said the old man fiercely, 'if thou wouldst not proclaim thyself harlot. Thy son is dead—face downwards. It came not from me, nor from my son; so that of us which goes to join the Slumberers must be avenged on the vile spirit that took form within thee. Come out from under the bed, woman! if thou wouldst prove he got it not with thy knowledge. Oh! untrustworthy feminine!'

And after a pause the untrustworthy feminine did come out with a curious dignity.

'He got it not from me but from my love. Yet what matter if he be dead!' said Herdâsi, and so died with her face to the foe to save her son's name. Since, if it was a devil's doing, none could blame the lad.

They found the old man sitting beside the two dead women when they came to tell him that the Keeper of the Pass had given his life for its safety.

'Yea, I know it,' replied Nâgdeo quietly. 'I went and found him before dawn when he returned not.'

THE KEEPER OF THE PASS

So I came home and slew these useless ones. Since he was dead, and I am nigh death, and there was none to keep the untrustworthy feminine from wandering.'

He adhered to this story steadfastly in the district magistrate's court, and when he was condemned to death made but one request—that he might be allowed to face it with the insignia of his office about him. So on the eve of his execution they gave the old man back his necklace of tiger claws, and told him he would be allowed to jingle his bells on his way to the scaffold. But when they came to rouse him in the morning he was lying dead, face upward; his arms, his chest, his throat all rent and ripped by those same tiger claws.

But there was not even a scratch upon the back of the last Keeper of the Pass.

THE HALL OF AUDIENCE

‘THIS, gentlemen and respected sirs,’ said the blatant specimen of new India whom my friend Robbins had insisted on having as a guide to a ruined Rajput town, ‘is Hall of Common Audience, in more colloquial phrase, Court of Justice, built two ought six before Christ B.C. by Great Asoka, mighty monarch of then united Hindustan, full of Manu wisdoms, and sacred Veda occultations——’

Then I gave in. ‘For God’s sake, Robbins,’ I said, ‘take away that fool or I shall kill him. A man who be-plasters even the Deity with university degrees is intolerable here.’

I had some excuse for threatening to kill the guide. For the Hall of Audience to which we had just climbed was, briefly, one of those places which make some of us remember the warning given long ago to an eager reformer to take the shoes from off his feet, since the ground whereon he stood had already been made holy by other hands than his. Yet it was plain almost to bareness. Devoid utterly of any of that ornamentation telling of human hopes and fears, likings, dislikings, and ideals, which men all over the world strive wistfully, hopelessly, to make permanent by carving them in stone. But it was a miracle of light and shade,

THE HALL OF AUDIENCE

with its triple ranks of square stone columns—rose-coloured in the sunshine about their feet, blood red in the gloom of arches about their heads—standing like sentinels round a Holy of Holies which was roofed only by the open sky, and floored level to the marble pavement surrounding the still pool, with clear, cool water. And through the outer arches, on all sides, showed that indefinite glare, and dust, and haze, faintly yellow, faintly purple—that burden and heat of the Eastern day in which millions are born, and toil, and die—which seems to swallow up the real India and hide so much of it from Western eyes.

I had just got so far in my appreciation of the indefinable charm of the place, when Robbins returned to stand beside me and look down on the brimming water.

‘Curious!’ he said, ‘at the top of a hill like this. I wonder what’s the reason of it?’

‘Those of uncultivated mind, sirs,’ replied New India promptly, ‘hold it by reason of Grace-of-God. We who through merciful master’s aid have acquired hydraulics prefer system of secret syphons; though the latter belief is optional.’

‘If that man remains here,’ I remarked aside to Robbins, ‘I refuse to be held responsible for my actions. Take him away and see the rest of the ruins. I am going to stop here—this is enough for me.’

They went off together, the guide babbling of modern equity. The last words I heard were a quota-

THE HALL OF AUDIENCE

tion : 'Boots not to say, O Justice ! what asperities have not been committed in Thy name !'

Perhaps. No doubt dreadful things had been done even in this Hall of Audience, though it lay very still now, very silent in the sunshine.

I sat down on the base of a sentinel column and looked at the sky, mirrored at my feet, wondering what other things the water had seen.

So by degrees the question seemed to clamour at me. What had been done there ? What gave the place its charm for me ?

I gave an impatient shrug of my shoulders at the sound of footsteps. But it was not Robbins. It was an old man with a shaven head, and a very clean saffron-coloured cloth, coming through the pillared ranks with a brass *poojah* basket like a big cruet-stand in his hand. My mind misgave me instantly. He was far too clean for a real ascetic. In addition, he came straight towards me, and squatting down by the edge, within reach absolutely of my contaminating shadow, began to mutter prayers.

I rose disgusted ; but my first movement showed me I was at any rate partly mistaken, for he turned his head, startled at the sound. Then I saw he was blind. I saw also that the basket which he had set down contained nothing but the star-like flowers of the wild jasmine.

'Whom are you going to worship ?' I asked instantly, for I was a connoisseur in ceremonies, having spent years of study over the ancient cults of India.

THE HALL OF AUDIENCE

He stood up instantly and *salaamed*, recognizing the accent of the master. 'No one, *Huzoor*,' he replied. 'I am only going to make Mother Atma her crown.'

'Atma!' I echoed. 'Who was she?'

A half-puzzled, half-cunning look came to his face. 'It is a long story, *Huzoor*; but if the Cherisher of the Poor will give his slave a rupee——'

Returning to my first impression of him, I was about to move away, when he added plaintively: 'I tell it better than the *babu*, *Huzoor*, but nowadays he comes with the *sahibs*; so my stomach is often empty. May God silence his tongue!'

The desire pleased me. It matched my own. And as I paused, I noticed that the old man, who had squatted down again, had begun to thread the jasmine flowers on some link which was invisible from where I stood.

'What are you using to thread the flowers?' I asked curiously.

'A woman's hair, *Huzoor*. It is always the hair of a woman who has died, but whose child has lived, that is used for Mai Atma's crown. Shall I tell the story, *Huzoor*?'

'Was she beautiful?' I asked irrelevantly, why I know not.

'I do not know, *Huzoor*,' he replied. 'Am I not blind?'

The answer struck me as irrelevant also, but I went on idly, feeling, in truth, but small interest in what I was convinced must be some hackneyed tale I had

THE HALL OF AUDIENCE

heard a hundred times before, since I was given to the hearing of tales.

‘Is it about this place?’ I asked.

He shook his head again. ‘I do not know, *Huzoor*. It is about Mai Atma. Shall I tell the story?’

‘You seem to know very little about the story, I must say. How do you know it is about Atma?’

He smiled broadly. ‘It is about Mai Atma, sure enough. The *Huzoor* will see that if he lets me tell the tale.’

I clinked a rupee down among the jasmine flowers and bid him fire away.

He began instantly, plunging without any preface into a curiously rhythmical chant, the very first line of which gave pathetic answer to my irrelevant question, and at the same time showed the cause of the old man’s ignorance. It ran thus :

‘O world which she has left, forget not she was fair.’

Vain appeal when made in the oldest-known form of Arya-Pali—the dialect in which the edicts of Asoka are carved—and of which not one man in ten million, even in India, knows the very existence. I happened to be one of the few, and though at the time I could naturally only gather the general outline of the chant, I subsequently took it down word for word from the old man’s lips. Some passages still remain obscure ; there are yawning gaps in the narrative, but taking it all in all, it is a singularly clear bit of tradition, preserved, as it were, by the complete ignorance of

THE HALL OF AUDIENCE

those who passed the words from lip to lip. Roughly translated, it runs thus :

' O world she left, forget not she was fair ; so very fair. Her small kind face so kind. Straight to the eyes it looked, then smiled or frowned. About her slender throat were gold-blue stones. Gold at her wrists ; the gold hem of her gown slid like a snake along the marble floor, coiled like a snake upon the water's edge.

' By night she asked the stars, by day the sun, what they would have her do.

' I was her servant sitting at her door,
Watching her small feet kiss the marble floor ;
Reading the water-mirror's heaven-learnt lore.

' O world she left, remember she was Queen !

' For Atma ruled a queen ere she was born, her widowed mother wasting nine long months to give her life ere following the King.

' O Atma mata ! strike thy servant blind,
He and his sons for ever, lest they find
Thy face within the crown their fingers bind.

' Hark ! how her voice comes echoing through the Hall, " Who hath a claim to-day 'gainst me or mine ? " (There was a dainty jewel at her breast, kept time in sparkles to her lightest word.)

' " Who hath a claim "—her small kind face so wise !

' O Atma mata ! strike thy servant blind,
He and his sons for ever !

.

THE HALL OF AUDIENCE

' See ! how her soft feet kiss the marble floor !
Atma, the girl-queen, dancing to herself, close to the
pool ; the jasmine in her hair falling to fit the
rhythm of her feet, and scent their warm life with
the scent of death, or sail away upon the water's breast
like mirrored stars. Oh, bind from them a crown ; a
crown for Atma mata, who is kind—for Atma, who
hath struck her servant blind.

.
' Hark ! How her voice comes whispering in my
ear. " I see naught but my *own* face in the deep. No
other face but this—my face alone. And there are
always stars about my head, or else the sun. Read
me the riddle quick." (There was a tremor in her
perfumed hair which matched the tremor of her per-
fumed breath.) " Atma is queen," I said ; " the
stars, the sun, weave crowns as I do. Wear them.
Oh ! my queen."

' O Atma mata ! rightly am I blind,
Blind was I then in heart and soul and mind.

.
' Hark ! how her voice comes echoing through the
Hall. (The cold blue stones about her slender waist
clipped all her purple robe to long straight folds.)
" Go tell your masters, Atma needs no King. She is
the Queen, her son shall be the King, and not the son
to Kings of other lands. So if they seek for beauty,
seek not mine—it is not mine to give—it is my son's !
My son the gods will send me ere I die."

THE HALL OF AUDIENCE

' O Atma mata ! strike thy servant blind,
He and his sons for ever, lest they find
Thy face within the crown their fingers bind.

· · · · ·
' See ! how her slim hand grasps the marble throne .
See ! how her firm feet grip the marble step ! Hark
how her voice rings clear with angry scorn. (There
was a loose gold circlet on her wrist, slid to soft resting
as she raised her arm.) " Oh ! shame to brawl like
dogs about a bone ! Cowards to kill because a woman's
fair. Can they not take the promise of a Queen ?
Go ! bid your masters breed fair sons in peace. Atma
will choose a father for her King—she needs no lover."

' O Atma mata ! strike thy servant dead.

· · · · ·
' " Hush ! "—just a whisper on the water's edge, a
faint glow from the sacred censer's fire. " What dost
thou see, my friend, down in the deep ? There in the
circle of the sacred flowers ? " (The incense cloud rose
white upon the dark, and hid us from each other, hid
all things—save water and our hands—her hands in
mine clasped in the cold clear pool.) " Naught, O
my Queen ! Naught but thy face—thy face—beside
mine own." (Cold was the water, cold her little hand,
cold was her voice.) " Nay ! more than that," she
said, " thou dost forget the stars about my head."

' O Atma mata ! strike thy servant blind,
For being blind in heart and soul and mind.

· · · · ·
' Hark ! how her voice goes echoing through the Hall.

THE HALL OF AUDIENCE

“Go, bid your masters sheathe their swords at once, nor spill men’s blood because a woman’s fair. For I have chosen. I will wed with none, but since God sends the children to the world and asks no questions how they come or why, I will take him as father to my King. The law allows adoption; be it so. From out God’s children I have bought a son to be your King and mine. Lo! here he stands.” (Her arm about the sturdy, dimpled limbs drew the child closer to the cold blue stones clipping her purple robe to long, straight folds.) “Some woman bore him—fair and strong and bold—bore him by God’s decree to be a son. That is enough for me who am your Queen. Go, tell the brawlers, Atma hath her King.” (So, stooping, whispered softly to the boy, who straightway leaped to order parrot-wise.) “Who hath a claim to-day ’gainst me or mine? Who hath a claim?” And as of old came answer: “None, O King.”

‘None said they all, and so I held my tongue.
O Atma mata! shall I ever find
Thy kind, wise face? Oh! wherefore am I blind?

.
Hark! how her voice breaks in upon the child’s.

‘A claim at last.

‘So they—these kings—have dared
To kill my people—nay! not mine, my son’s!
Have they no shame—no pity for the poor?

‘The gold hem round her robe’s straight virgin folds
coiled like a snake asleep upon the floor, the sparkling

THE HALL OF AUDIENCE

jewel fastened on her breast shone bright and steady as a distant star.

' There was no tremor in her perfumed hair, there was no quiver in her perfumed breath ; the cold blue stones about her throat and waist, the loose gold circlet on her slender wrist, the jasmine-blossom chaplet in her hair looked as though carved in stone, so still she stood before the dead man on the marble floor.

' His red blood crept in curves to find her feet and clasp them in a claim for vengeance due, while those around cried : " Justice from the King ! "

' Until she smiled—her small, kind face so wise, and her clear voice came echoing through the Hall. " Vengeance is mine," she said, " and not the King's. Send forth no army, spill no blood for me. Search not the water-mirror for a sign. I know the answer of the sun and stars. So send our heralds out, and bid these Kings come as Kings should, and not as murderers to plead their cause before the King, my son. Come with all state as to a wedding feast, come with all hope as bridegrooms to the bride. My son shall choose my lover, so prepare all things in order—music, feasting, flowers." (Then turned to where I stood, and said aside : " Forget not thou to make a jasmine crown.")

' O Atma mata ! wherefore was I blind ?
Did I not know how wise thou were, how kind,
How cold thy hand, how warm the heart behind.

' Fair, strong, and bold he stood, the little King ;
the noonday sun above the child's bare head scarce

THE HALL OF AUDIENCE

cast a shadow on his small, bare feet, standing so straight beside the water's edge, where, half-a-float upon the clear, still depths, a small round raft of jasmine heaped so high, so piled with little scented stars, that I—her servant with the crown she had bespoke—stood wondering what need there was of all. And round about the mirror-pool in rank sat Atma's lovers waiting the decree.

'Till suddenly the baby raised his hand. (There was a loose gold circlet on his wrist, which smote him on the breast as it fell back, making him wince, so all too large it was.) But the child bit his lip and took no heed, knowing his kingly part right royally; so, parrot-wise, he lisped the ordered words: "My mother Atma hath no need for love; since she hath mine. She hath no need, my lords, for you as lovers, but she sends by me, as sister sends her brothers, that which sure should heal the strife and make you brothers too."

'So at the last he stooped, and with a push sent the flower-raft afloat upon the pool, dipping and dancing on the waves it made, so that the loose, white blossoms of the pile floated to drift like stars upon the depths, leaving what lay beneath them clear and cold.

'O Atma mata! why was I not blind?
Thy face, thy face was there in flowers enshrined!
Thy cold dead face, with cold dead flowers entwined.

*O world she left! to bring it peace not war.
Oh! world she left, forget not she was fair,
So very fair. The jasmine in her hair*

THE HALL OF AUDIENCE

*And round her kind, wise face ; about her throat
The cold blue stones, and for her queenly crown
The sunlight in the water—like the stars.*

O Atma mata ! strike thy servant blind,
He and his sons for ever, lest they find
Thy face within the wreath their fingers bind.'

The old man's song ceased, but he went on without a pause. 'The *Huzoor* will hear that it is all about Atma. Her name is there always.'

He had finished stringing the flowers also, and now with a deft hand set the fragile garland—strung like a daisy chain upon a dead woman's hair and then tied to a circle—afloat upon the water, where it drifted idly, each separate flower separate, and keeping its appointed place.

A crown of scented stars !

I roused myself to answer. 'Undoubtedly it is all about Atma ; but you have not told me why you weave the crown ?'

'It is always woven, *Huzoor*,' he replied. 'Our family belongs to the place, and as one son is always blind, he stays at home—since he cannot earn money at other trades, *Huzoor*—and makes Mai Atma's crown as his fathers did.'

'One son is always blind ?' I echoed curiously.

'Always, *Huzoor*. It is ever so. One is blind in each generation, so he makes Mai Atma's crown.'

He and his sons for ever ! a strange coincidence truly.

'Then no one has ever seen her face " within the

THE HALL OF AUDIENCE

wreath their fingers twine ”?’ I asked, quoting the words involuntarily and forgetting that he could not understand them. He answered the first part of the sentence.

‘ How could that be, *Huzoor*, seeing we are always blind?’

True. But if one was not blind? My thought was interrupted by Robbins’s voice from behind.

‘ Hope you haven’t found it long, old chap ; but the *babu* really knows a lot about Asoka. Fine old beggar he must have been. And then he has got a chant about some female called Atma who had a lot of lovers, don’t you know.’ Robbins then brought the *babu* up to me and, declaring and protesting that it was just the sort of unintelligible gibberish which interested me, bade him give me a specimen.

Before I could stop him, the brute had got well into the first line ; but even in my wrath I was relieved to find that it was indeed absolutely unintelligible. New India evidently did not understand the old.

Did I? I asked myself that question over and over again, until in the dead of the night I could ask it no longer. The desire for an answer grew too strong.

It was still night when I stood once more beside the water’s edge. The moon had paled the red ranks of the sentinel pillars, the dust and heat and burden of the day was gone. All things were clear and flooded with cool, quiet, passionless light. And on the water lay the crown of starry flowers. It had drifted close to the edge, at the extreme end of the pool, beside a

THE HALL OF AUDIENCE

square projection in the marble floor, whence you could look clear into the depths. No doubt the place of divination. I went over to it, moved by an irresistible impulse, and, kneeling down, thrust my hand into the cool water.

Was it fancy, or did I feel a cold, soft hand in mine? Was it a passing dizziness, or did a white, scented vapour close round me like a cloud, hiding all things save the water framed in that crown of jasmine?

Atma! Mai Atma!!

There was no need so far as I am concerned for the appeal—

‘Forget not she was fair.’

I have never forgotten it, and I am still waiting for a woman who does not want a lover.



THE DOLL-MAKER

‘CHRISTMAS EVE!’ echoed Mrs. Langford. ‘Yes! I suppose it is; but I had forgotten—there isn’t much to remind one of it in India—is there?’

As she paused half-way up the verandah steps she glanced back at the creeper-hung porch where the high dogcart, in which she had come home from the club, waited for its owner to return to the box-seat. He seemed in no hurry to do so, and his glance followed hers as he stood on the step below her. He was a tall man, so his face was on a level with hers, and the two showed young, handsome—hers a trifle pale, his a trifle red.

There was a stretch of garden visible beyond the creepers. It was not flowerful, since Christmas, even in India, comes when the tide of sap, the flow of life, is at its lowest; yet, in the growing dusk, the great scarlet hands of the poinsettias could be seen thrusting themselves out wickedly from the leafy shadows as if to clutch the faint white stars of the oleanders blossoming above them; and there was a bunch of Maréchal Niel roses in the silver belt of the woman’s white tennis dress, which told of sweeter, more home-like blossom.

THE DOLL-MAKER

'And it is just as well,' she continued, with a bitter little laugh, 'that there isn't, for it's a deadly, dreary time——'

'All times are dreary,' assented the tall man in a low voice, rapidly, passionately, "when there is no one who cares——'

'There is my husband,' she interrupted, this time with a nervous laugh. The answer fitted doubly, for she turned to a figure which at that moment came out of the soft rose-tinted light of the room within, and said in a faintly fretful tone, 'You don't mean to say, George, surely, that you've been working till now?'

'Working!' echoed George Langford absently. 'Yes! why not? Ah! is that you, Campbell? Brought the missus home, like a good chap. Sorry I couldn't come, my dear; but there was a beastly report overdue, so now I must just get out for a bit before dinner. By the way, Laura, you'd better send off your home letter without mine. I really haven't had time to write to the boys this mail.'

He was busy now, in the same absent, preoccupied, yet energetic way, in seeing to the bicycle, which a red-coated servant held for him; but he looked up quickly at his wife's reply—

'I haven't written either.'

'Haven't you? That's a pity,' he began, then paused, with a vaguely unquiet look at her and her tall companion, which merged, however, into a good-natured smile. 'Well, they won't know it was Christmas mail anyhow. 'Pon my soul, I'd forgotten it

THE DOLL-MAKER

myself, Campbell, or I'd have made a point . . . But there's the devil of a crush of work just now, though I shall clear some of the arrears off to-morrow. That's about the only good of a holiday to me!' He was off as he spoke—a shadow gliding into the shadows, where the red hands of the poinsettias and the white stars of the oleanders showed fainter as the dusk deepened.

But he left a pair of covetous, entreating hands and a white face behind him in the verandah, between the rosy light of comfort from within and the grey gloom of the world without.

'It cannot go on—this sort of thing—for ever,' said the man, still in that low, passionate voice. 'It will kill——'

'Kill him? Do you think so?' she interrupted, still with that little half-nervous, half-bitter laugh. 'I don't; he's awfully strong and awfully clever, you know.'

The owner of the dogcart turned to it impatiently.

'You will come to-morrow at eleven, anyhow,' he said, bringing the patience back to his voice with an effort, for it seemed to him—as it so often seems to a man—that the woman did not know what she would be at. 'It will be a jolly drive; and, as they are sending out a mess tent, we need not come back till late. Your husband said he was to be busy all day.'

He waited, reins in hand, for an answer. It came after a pause; came decidedly.

THE DOLL-MAKER

'Yes ; at eleven, please. It will be better anyhow than stopping here. There isn't even tennis on Christmas Day, you know ; and the house is—is so deadly quiet.' She turned to it slowly as she spoke, passed into the rose light, and stood listening to the sound of the dogcart wheels growing fainter and fainter. When it had gone an intense stillness seemed to settle over the wide, empty house—that stillness and emptiness which must perforce settle round many an Englishwoman in India ; the stillness and emptiness of a house where children have been, and are not.

It made her shiver slightly as she stood alone, thinking of the dogcart wheels.

Yet just at the back of the screen of poinsettias and oleanders which hid the servants' quarters from the creeper-hung porch there were children and to spare. Dozens of them, all ages, all sizes, belonging to the posse of followers which hangs to the skirts of bureaucracy in India.

Here, as the lights of the dogcart flashed by, they lit up for an instant a quaint little group gathered round a rushlight set on the ground. It consisted of a very old man, almost naked, with a grey frost of beard on his withered cheeks, and of a semicircle of wide-eyed, solemn-faced, brown babies—toddlers of two and three, with a sprinkling of demure little maidens of four and five.

The centre of the group lay beside the rushlight. It was a rudimentary attempt at a rag doll ; so rudimentary indeed that as the passing flash of the lamps

THE DOLL-MAKER

disclosed its proportions, or rather the lack of them, a titter rose from the darkness behind, where some older folk were lounging.

The old doll-maker, who was attempting to thread a big packing-needle by the faint flicker, turned towards the sound in mild reproof: 'Lo! brothers and sisters,' he said, 'have patience awhile. Even the Creator takes time to make His puppets, and this of mine will be as dolls are always when it is done. And a doll is a doll ever, nothing more, nothing less.'

'Yet thou art sadly behind the world in them,' put in a pale young man, with a pen-box under his arm, who had paused on his way to the cook-room, whither he was going to write up the daily account for the butler; since a man must live even if he has a University degree, and, if Government service be not forthcoming, must earn a penny or two as best he can. 'That sort of image did for the dark ages of ignorance, but now the mind must have more reality; glass eyes and such-like. The world changes.'

The old man's face took an almost cunning expression by reason of its self-complacent wisdom. 'But not the puppets which play in it, my son. The Final One makes *them* in the same mould ever; as I do my dolls, as my fathers made theirs. Aye! and thine too, *baboo-jee!* As for eyes, they come with the sight that sees them, since all things are illusion. For the rest'—here he shot a glance of fiery disdain at the titters—'I make not dolls for these scoffers, but for their betters. This is for the little masters on their

THE DOLL-MAKER

Big Day. To-morrow I will present it to the *sahib* and the *mem*, since the little *sahibs* themselves are away over the Black Water. For old Premoo knows what is due. This dust-like one, lame of a leg and blind of an eye, has not always been a garden coolie—a mere picker of weeds, a gatherer of dried leaves, saved from starvation by such trivial tasks. In his youth Premoo hath carried young masters in his bosom, and guarded them night and day after the manner of bearers. And hath found amusement for them also; even to the making of dolls as this one. Aye! it is true,' he went on, led to garrulous indignation by renewed sounds of mirth from behind; 'dolls which gave them delight, for they were not as some folk, black of face, but *sahib logue* who, by God's grace, grew to be *ginerâls* and *jedges*, and commissioners, and—and even *Lât-sahibs*.'

The old voice, though it rose in pitch with each rise in rank, was not strong enough to overbear the titter, and the doll-maker paused in startled doubt to look at his own creation.

'I can see naught amiss,' he muttered to himself; 'it is as I used to make them, for sure.' His anxious critical eye lingered almost wistfully over the bald head, the pin-cushion body, the sausage limbs of his creature, yet found no flaw in it; since fingers and toes were a mere detail, and as for hair, a tuft of wool would settle that point. What more could folk want, sensible folk, who knew that a doll must be always a doll—nothing more, nothing less?

THE DOLL-MAKER

Suddenly a thought came to make him put doubt to the test, and he turned to the nearest of the solemn-faced, wide-eyed semicircle of babies.

'Thou canst dandle it whilst I thread the needle, Gungi,' he said pompously, 'but have a care not to injure the child, and let not the others touch it.'

The solemnity left one chubby brown face, and one pair of chubby brown hands closed in glad possession round the despised rag doll. Old Premoo heaved a sigh of relief.

'Said I not so, brothers and sisters?' he cried exultingly. 'My hand has not lost its art with the years. A doll is a doll ever to a child, as a child is a child ever to the man and the woman. As for glass eyes, they are illusion—they perish!'

'Nevertheless, thou wilt put clothes to it, for sure, brother,' remonstrated the fat butler, who had joined the group, 'ere giving it to the Presences. 'Tis like a skinned fowl now, and bare decent.'

Premoo shook his head mournfully. 'Lo! *khânjee*, my rags, as thou seest, scarce run to a big enough body and legs! And the *Huzoor's* tailor would give no scraps to Premoo the garden-coolie; though in the old days, when the little masters lay in these arms, and there was favour to be carried by the dressing of dolls, such as he were ready to make them, male and female, kings and queens, fairies and heroes, *mem-sahibs* and *Lât-sahibs* after their kind. But it matters not in the end, *khânjee*, it matters not! The doll is a doll ever to a child, as a child is a child ever to the man and the

THE DOLL-MAKER

woman, though they know not whether it will wear a crown or a shroud.'

So as Christmas Eve passed into Christmas night, Premoo stitched away contentedly as he sat under the stars. There was no Christmas message in them for the old man. The master's Big Day meant nothing to him save an occasion for the giving of gifts, notably rag dolls! There was no vision for him in the velvet darkness of the spangled sky of angels proclaiming the glad tidings of birth; and yet in a way his old heart, wise with the dim wisdom which long life brings, held the answer to the great Problem, as in vague self-consolation for the titterings he murmured to himself now and again: 'It is so always; naught matters but the children, and the children's children.'

And when his task was over, he laid the result for safety on the basket of withered leaves which he had swept up from the path that evening, and wrapping himself in his thin cotton shawl, lay down to sleep in the shelter of the poinsettia and oleander hedge.

So the Christmas sun peering through the morning mists shone upon a quaint *crèche* indeed—on the veriest simulacrum of a child lying on a heap of faded red hand-like leaves and white starlike blossoms. Perhaps it smiled at the sight. Humanity did, anyhow, as it passed and repassed from the servants' quarters to its work in the house. For in truth old Premoo's creation looked even more comical in the daylight than it had by the faint flicker of the lamp. There was

THE DOLL-MAKER

something about it productive of sheer mirth, yet of mirth that was tender. Even the fat butler, on his way to set breakfast, stopped to giggle foolishly in its face.

‘God knows what it is like,’ he said finally. ‘I deemed it was a skinned fowl last night, but ’tis not that. It might be anything.’

‘Aye!’ assented the bearer, who had come out, duster in hand. ‘That is just where it comes. A body cannot say what it might or might not be. Bala Krishna himself, for aught I know.’ Whereupon he *salaamed*; and others passing followed suit, in jest at first, afterwards with a suspicion of gravity in their mirth, since, when all was said and done, who knew what anything was really in this illusory world?

So the rag doll held its levée that Christmas morning, and when the time came for its presentation to the *Huzoors* there were curious eyes watching the old man as he sat with his offering on the lowest step of the silent, empty house, waiting for the master and mistress to come out into the verandah. Premoo had covered the doll’s bed of withered flowers with some fresh ones, so it lay in pomp in its basket, amid royal scarlet and white and gold; nevertheless he waited till the very last, until the smallest platter of sugar and oranges and almonds had been ranged at the master’s feet, ere he crept up the steps, *salaaming* humbly, yet with a vague confidence on his old face.

‘It is for the child-people,’ he said, in his cracked old voice. ‘This dust-like one has nothing else, but a

THE DOLL-MAKER

doll is always a doll to them, as a child is a child to the man and the woman.'

Then for an instant the rag doll lay, as it were, in state, surrounded by offerings. But not for long. Someone laughed, then another, till even old Premoo joined doubtfully in the general mirth.

'The devil is in it,' chuckled the fat butler apologetically; 'but the twelve *Imâms* themselves would not keep grave over it during the requiem!'

'By Jove, Laura,' cried George Langford, 'we must really send that home to the kids. It's too absurd!'

'Yes,' she assented, a trifle absently, 'we must indeed.' She stopped to take the quaint travesty from its basket, and as she did so one of the red hands of the poinsettias clung to its sausage legs. She brushed the flower aside with a smile which broadened to a laugh; for in truth the thing was more ludicrously comical than ever seen thus, held in mid-air. George Langford found it so, anyhow, and exploded into a fresh guffaw.

She flushed suddenly, and gathered the unshapen thing in her arms as if to hide it from his laughter.

'Don't, George,' she said, 'it—it seems unkind. Thank you, Premoo, very much. We will certainly send it home to the little masters; and they, I am sure——' Here her eyes fell upon the doll again, and mirth got the better of her gravity once more.

Half an hour afterwards, however, as she stood alone in the drawing-room, ready dressed for her drive, the gravity had returned as she looked down on the quaint

THE DOLL-MAKER

monstrosity spread out on the table, where on the evening before the rose-shaded lamp had been. It was ridiculous, certainly, but beneath that there was something else. What was it? What had the old man said: 'A doll is always a doll.' . . . He had said that and something more: 'As the child is always a child to the man and the woman.' It ought to be—but was it? Was not that tie forgotten, lost sight of in others . . . sometimes?

Half-mechanically she took the rag doll, and sitting down on a rocking-chair laid the caricature on her lap among the dainty frills and laces of her pretty gown. And this was Christmas Day—the children's day—she thought vaguely, dreamily, as she rocked herself backwards and forwards slowly. But the house was empty save for this—this idea, like nothing really in heaven or earth; yet for all that giving the Christmas message, the message of peace and goodwill which the birth of a child into the world should give to the man and the woman:

'Unto us a child is born.'

She smiled faintly—the thing on her lap seemed so far from such a memory—and then, with that sudden half-remorseful pity, she once more gathered the rag doll closer in her arms, as if to shield it from her own laughter.

And as she sat so, her face soft and kind, her husband, coming into the room behind her, paused at what he saw. And something that was not laughter surged up in him; for he understood in a flash, understood

THE DOLL-MAKER

once and for all, how empty his house had been to her, how empty her arms, how empty her life.

He crossed to her quickly, but she was on her feet almost defiantly at the first sight of him. 'Ridiculous monster!' she exclaimed, gaily tossing the doll back on the table. 'But it has an uncanny look about it which fascinates one. Gracious! Where are my gloves? I must have left them in my room, and I promised to be ready at eleven!'

When she had gone to look for them, George Langford took up the rag doll in his turn—took it up gingerly, as men take their babies—and stared at it almost fiercely. And he stood there, stern, square, silent, staring at it until his wife came back. Then he walked up to her deliberately and laid his hands on hers.

'I'm going to pack this thing up at once, my dear,' he said, 'and take it over this morning to little Mrs. Greville. She starts this afternoon, you know, to catch the Messageries steamer. She'll take it home for us; and so the boys could have it by the Christmas mail, which I forgot.'

The words were commonplace, but there was a world of meaning in the tone.

'I—I thought you were busy,' she said indistinctly, after a pause in which the one thing in the world seemed to her that tightening hold upon her hand. 'If you are—I—I could go. . . .'

There was another pause—a longer one.

'I thought you were going out,' he said at last, and his voice, though distinct, was not quite steady; 'but

THE DOLL-MAKER

if you aren't, we might go together. My work can easily stand over, and—and Campbell can drive you out some other day when I can't.'

She gave an odd little sound between a laugh and a sob.

'That would be best, perhaps,' she said. 'I'd like the boys to have this'—she laid her other hand tenderly on the rag doll—'by the Christmas mail I had forgotten.'

Old Premoo was sweeping up the withered leaves and flowers from the poinsettia and oleander hedge, when first one and then another high dogcart drove past him. And when the second one had disappeared, he turned to the general audience on the other side of the hedge, and said with great pride and pomp—

'Look you! The scoffers mocked at my doll, but the *Huzoors* understand. The *sabib* himself has taken it to send to the little *sabibs*, and the *mem* packed it up herself and went with him, instead of going in the Captain-*sabib's* dogcart. That is because a doll is always a doll; as for glass eyes and such like, they perish.'

And with that he crushed a handful of withered red poinsettias into the rubbish basket triumphantly.

THE REFORMER'S WIFE

A SKETCH FROM LIFE

HE was a dreamer of dreams, with the look in his large dark eyes which Botticelli put into the eyes of his Moses ; that Moses in doublet and hose, whose figure, isolated from its surroundings, reminds one irresistibly of Christopher Columbus, or Vasco da Gama—of those, in fact, who dream of a Promised Land.

And this man dreamt as wild a dream as any. He hoped, before he died, to change the social customs of India.

He used to sit in my drawing-room, talking to me by the hour of the Prophet and his blessed Fâtma—for he was a Mahomedan—and bewailing the sad degeneracy of these present days, when caste had crept into and defiled the Faith. I shall never forget the face of martyred enthusiasm with which he received my first invitation to dinner. He accepted it, as he would have accepted the stake, with fervour, and indeed to his ignorance the ordeal was supreme. However, he appeared punctual to the moment on the appointed day, and greatly relieved my mind by partaking twice of plum-pudding, which he declared to be a surpassingly cool and most digestible form of

THE REFORMER'S WIFE

nourishment, calculated to soothe both body and mind. Though this is hardly the character usually assigned to it, I did not contradict him, for not even his eager self-sacrifice had sufficed for the soup, the fish, or the joint, and he might otherwise have left the table in a starving condition. As it was, he firmly set aside my invitation to drink water after the meal was over, with the modest remark that he had not eaten enough to warrant the indulgence.

The event caused quite a stir in that far-away little town, set out among the ruins of a great city, on the high bank of one of the Punjab rivers ; for the scene of this sketch lay out of the beaten track, beyond the reach of *babus* and barristers, patent-leather shoes and progress. Beyond the pale of civilization altogether, among a quaint little colony of fighting Pathans who still pointed with pride to an old gate or two which had withstood siege after siege, in those old fighting days when the river had flowed beneath the walls of the city. Since then the water had ebbed seven miles to the south-east, taking with it the prestige of the stronghold, which only remained a picturesque survival ; a cluster of four-storied purple-brick houses surrounded by an intermittent purple-brick wall, bastioned and loop-holed. A formidable defence, while it lasted. But it had a trick of dissolving meekly into a sort of mud hedge, in order to gain the next stately fragment, or maybe to effect an alliance with one of the frowning gateways which had defied assault. This condition of things was a source of sincere delight to

THE REFORMER'S WIFE

my Reformer Futteh Deen (Victory of Faith) who revelled in similes. It was typical of the irrational, illogical position of the inhabitants in regard to a thousand religious and social questions, and just as one brave man could break through these sham fortifications, so one resolute example would suffice to capture the citadel of prejudice, and plant the banner of abstract Truth on its topmost pinnacle.

For he dreamt excellently well, and as he sate declaiming his Persian and Arabic periods in the drawing-room with his eyes half-shut, like one in presence of some dazzling light, I used to feel as if something might indeed be done to make the Mill of God grind a little faster.

In the matter of dining out, indeed, it seemed as if he was right. For within a week of his desperate plunge, I received an invitation to break bread with the municipal committee in the upper story of the Vice-President's house. The request, which was emblazoned in gold, engrossed on silk paper in red and black, and enclosed in a brocade envelope, was signed by the eleven members and the Reformer, who, by the way, edited a ridiculous little magazine to which the committee subscribed a few rupees a month. Solely for the purpose of being able to send copies to their friends at Court, and show that they were in the van of progress. For a man must be that, who is patron of a 'Society for the General Good of All Men in All Countries.' I was, I confess it, surprised, even though a casual remark that now perhaps his Honour

THE REFORMER'S WIFE

the Lieutenant-Governor would no longer suspect his slaves of disloyalty, showed me that philanthropy had begun at home. For the little colony bore a doubtful character, being largely leavened by the new Puritanism, which Government, for reasons best known to itself, chooses to confound with Wahabeeism.

The entertainment given on the roof amid starshine and catherine-wheels proved a magnificent success, its great feature being an enormous plum-pudding which I was gravely told had been prepared by my own cook. At what cost, I shudder to think ; but the rascal's grinning face as he placed it on the table convinced me that he had seized the opportunity for some almost inconceivable extortion. But there was no regret in those twelve grave, bearded faces, as one by one they tasted and approved. All this happened long before a miserable, exotic imitation of an English vestry replaced the old patrician committees, and these men were representatives of the bluest blood in the neighbourhood, many of them descendants of those who in past times had held high offices of state, and had transmitted courtly manners to their children. So the epithets bestowed on the plum-pudding were many-syllabled ; but the consensus of opinion was indubitably towards its coolness, its digestibility, and its evident property of soothing the body and the mind. Again I did not deny it. How could I, out on the roof under the eternal stars, with those twelve foreign faces showing, for once, a common bond of union with the Feringhee ? I should have felt like

THE REFORMER'S WIFE

Judas Iscariot if I had struck the thirteenth chord of denial.

The Reformer made a speech afterwards, I remember, in which, being wonderfully well read, he alluded to love-feasts and sacraments, and a coming millennium, when all nations of the world should meet at one table, and—well! not exactly eat plum-pudding together, but something very like it. Then we all shook hands, and a native musician played something on the *siringhi* which they informed me was 'God Save the Queen.' It may have been. I only know that the Reformer's thin face beamed with almost pitiful delight, as he told me triumphantly that this was only the beginning.

He was right. From that time forth the plum-pudding feast became a recognized function. Not a week passed without one. Generally—for my gorge rose at the idea of my cook's extortion—in the summer-house in my garden, where I could have an excuse for providing the delicacy at my own expense. And I am bound to say that this increased intimacy bore other fruits than that contained in the pudding. For the matter of that it has continued to bear fruit, since I can truthfully date the beginning of my friendship for the people of India from the days when we ate plum-pudding together under the starshine.

The Reformer was radiant. He formed himself and his eleven into committees and sub-committees for every philanthropical object under the sun, and many an afternoon have I spent under the trees with my work

THE REFORMER'S WIFE

watching one deputation after another retire behind the oleander hedge in order to permutate itself by deft rearrangement of members, secretaries, and vice-presidents into some fresh body bent on the regeneration of mankind. For life was leisureful, lingering and lagging along in the little town where there was neither doctor nor parson, policeman nor canal officer, nor in fact any white face save my own and my husband's. Still we went far and fast in a cheerful, unreal sort of way. We started schools and debating societies, public libraries and technical art classes. Finally we met enthusiastically over an extra-sized plum-pudding, and bound ourselves over to reduce the marriage expenditure of our daughters.

The Reformer grew more radiant than ever, and began in the drawing-room—where it appeared to me he hatched all his most daring schemes—to talk big about infant marriage, enforced widowhood, and the seclusion of women. The latter I considered to be the key to the whole position, and therefore I felt surprised at the evident reluctance with which he met my suggestion, that he should begin his struggle by bringing his wife to visit me. He had but one, although she was childless. This was partly, no doubt, in deference to his advanced theories; but also, at least so I judged from his conversation, because of his unbounded admiration for one who by his description was a pearl among women. In fact this unseen partner had from the first been held up to me as a refutation of all my strictures on the degradation

THE REFORMER'S WIFE

of seclusion. So, to tell truth, I was quite anxious to see this paragon, and vexed at the constant ailments and absences which prevented our becoming acquainted. The more so because this shadow of hidden virtue fettered me in argument, for Futteh Deen was an eager patriot, full of enthusiasms for India and the Indians. Once the sham fortifications were scaled, he assured me that Hindustan, and above all its women, would come to the front and put the universe to shame. Yet, despite his successes, he looked haggard and anxious ; at the time I thought it was too much progress and plum-pudding combined, but afterwards I came to the conclusion that his conscience was ill at ease, even then.

So the heat grew apace. The fly-catchers came to dart among the *sirus* flowers and skim round the massive dome of the old tomb in which we lived. The melons began to ripen, first by ones and twos, then in thousands—gold, and green, and russet. The corners of the streets were piled with them, and every man, woman, and child carried a crescent moon of melon at which they munched contentedly all day long. Now, even with the future good of humanity in view, I could not believe in the safety of a mixed diet of melon and plum-pudding, especially when cholera was flying about. Therefore, on the next committee-day I had a light and wholesome refectation of sponge-cakes and jelly prepared for the philanthropists. They partook of it courteously, but sparingly. It was, they said, super-excellent, but of too heating and stimulating a

THE REFORMER'S WIFE

nature to be consumed in quantities. In vain I assured them that it could be digested by the most delicate stomach ; that it was, in short, a recognized food for convalescents. This only confirmed them in their view, for, according to the Yunâni system, an invalid diet must be heating, strengthening, stimulating. Somehow in the middle of their upside-down arguments I caught myself looking pitifully at the Reformer, and wondering at his temerity in tilting at the great mysterious mass of Eastern wisdom.

And that day, in deference to my Western zeal, he was to tilt wildly at the *zenâna* system.

His address fell flat, and for the first time I noticed a distinctly personal flavour in the discussion. Hitherto we had resolved and recorded gaily, as if we ourselves were disinterested spectators. However, the Vice-President apologized for the general tone, with a side slash at exciting causes in the jelly and sponge-cake, whereat the other ten wagged their heads sagely, remarking that it was marvellous, stupendous, to feel the blood running riot in their veins after those few mouthfuls. Verily such food partook of magic. Only the Reformer dissented, and ate a whole sponge-cake defiantly.

Even so the final Resolution ran thus : ' That this committee views with alarm any attempt to force the natural growth of female freedom, which it holds to be strictly a matter for the individual wishes of the man.' Indeed it was with difficulty that I, as secretary, avoided the disgrace of having to record the spiteful

THE REFORMER'S WIFE

rider, 'And that if any member wanted to unveil the ladies he could begin on his own wife.'

I was young then in knowledge of Eastern ways, and consequently indignant. The Reformer, on the other hand, was strangely humble, and tried afterwards to evade the major point by eating another sponge-cake, and making a facetious remark about experiments and vile bodies; for he was a mine of quotations, especially from the Bible, which he used to wield to my great discomfiture.

But on the point at issue I knew he could scarcely go against his own convictions, so I pressed home his duty of taking the initiative. He agreed, gently. By and by, perhaps, when his wife was more fit for the ordeal. And it was natural, even the *mem-sahiba* must allow, for unaccustomed modesty to shrink. She was to the full as devoted as he to the good cause, but at the same time—— Finally, the *mem-sahiba* must remember that women were women all over the world—even though occasionally one was to be found like the *mem-sahiba* capable of acting as secretary to innumerable committees without a blush. There was something so wistful in his eager blending of flattery and excuse that I yielded for the time, though determined in the end to carry my point.

With this purpose I reverted to plum-puddings once more, and, I fear, to gross bribery of all kinds in the shape of private interviews and soft words. Finally I succeeded in getting half the members to consent to sending their wives to an after-dark at-home in my

THE REFORMER'S WIFE

drawing-room, provided always that Mir Futteh Deen, the Reformer, would set a good example.

He looked troubled when I told him, and pointed out that the responsibility for success or failure now lay virtually with him, yet he did not deny it.

I took elaborate precautions to ensure the most modest seclusion on the appointed evening, even to sending my husband up a ladder to the gallery at the very top of the dome to smoke his after-dinner cigar. I remember thinking how odd it must have looked to him perched up there to see the twinkling lights of the distant city over the soft shadows of the *ferash* trees, and at his feet the glimmer of the white screens set up to form a conventional *zenán-khâna*. But I waited in vain—in my best dress, by the way. No one came, though my ayah assured me that several jealously guarded *dhoolies* arrived at the garden-gate and went away again when Mrs. Futteh Deen never turned up.

I was virtuously indignant with the offender, and the next time he came to see me sent out a message that I was otherwise engaged. I felt a little remorseful at having done so, however, when, committee-day coming round, the Reformer was reported on the sick-list. And there he remained until after the first rain had fallen, bringing with it the real Indian spring—the spring full of roses and jasmines, of which the poets and the bul-buls sing. By this time the novelty had worn off philanthropy and plum-pudding, so that often we had a difficulty in getting a quorum together to resolve anything ; and I, personally, had begun to

THE REFORMER'S WIFE

weary for the dazzled eyes and the eager voice so full of sanguine hope.

Therefore it gave me a pang to learn from the Vice-President, who, being a Government official, was a model of punctuality, that in all probability I should never hear or see either one or the other again. Futteh Deen was dying of the rapid decline which comes so often to the Indian student.

A recurrence of a vague remorse made me put my pride in my pocket and go unmasked to the Reformer's house, but my decision came too late. He had died the morning of my visit, and I think I was glad of it.

For the paragon of beauty and virtue, of education and refinement, was a very ordinary woman, years older than my poor Reformer, marked with the small-pox, and blind of one eye. Then I understood.

A BAD-CHARACTER SUIT

A FLOOD of blistering, yellow sunshine was pouring down on to the prostrate body of Private George Afford as he lay on his back, drunk, in an odd little corner between two cook-room walls in the barrack square ; and a stream of tepid water from a skin bag was falling on his head as Peroo the *bhisti* stood over him, directing the crystal curve now on his forehead, now scientifically on his ears. The only result, however, was that Private George Afford tried unavailingly to scratch them, then swore unintelligibly.

Peroo twisted the nozzle of the *mussuck* to dryness, and knelt down beside the slack strength in the dust. So kneeling, his glistening curved brown body got mixed up with the glistening curved brown waterbag he carried, until at first sight, he seemed a monstrous spider preying on a victim, for his arms and legs were skinny.

' *Sabib !* ' he said, touching his master on the sleeve. It was a very white sleeve, and the buttons and belts and buckles all glistened white or gold in the searching sunlight, for Peroo saw to them, as he saw to most things about Private Afford's body and soul ; why, God knows, except that George Afford had once—for his own amusement—whacked a man who, for his, was

A B A D - C H A R A C T E R S U I T

whacking Peroo. He happened to be one of the best bruisers in the regiment, and George Afford, who was in a sober bout, wanted to beat him ; which he did.

There was no one in sight ; nothing in fact save the walls, and an offensively cheerful castor-oil bush which grew, greener than any bay-tree, in one angle, sending splay fingers of shadow close to Private Afford's head as if it wished to aid in the cooling process. But despite the solitude, Peroo's touch on the white sleeve was decorous, his voice deference itself.

' *Sabib !* ' he repeated. ' If the *Huzoor* does not get up soon, the Captain will find the master on the ground when he passes to rations. And that is unnecessary.'

He might as well have spoken to the dead. George Afford's face, relieved of the douche treatment, settled down to placid, contented sleep. It was not a bad face ; and indeed, considering the habits of the man, it was singularly fine and clear cut ; but then in youth it had evidently been a superlatively handsome one also.

Peroo waited a minute or two, then undid the nozzle of his skin bag once more, and drenched the slack body and the dust around it.

' What a tyranny is here ! ' he muttered to himself, the wrinkles on his forehead giving him the perplexed look of a baby monkey ; ' yet the master will die of sunstroke if he be not removed. *Hai ! Hai !* What it is to eat forbidden fruit and find it a turnip.'

With which remark he limped off methodically to the quarter guard and gave notice that Private George

A B A D - C H A R A C T E R S U I T

Afford was lying dead drunk between cook-rooms No. 7 and 8 ; after which he limped on as methodically about his regular duty of filling the regimental waterpots. What else was there to be done? The special master whom he had elected to serve between whiles would not want his services for a month or two at least. For Private George Afford was a habitual offender.

Such a very habitual offender, indeed, that Evan Griffiths, the second major, had not a word to say when the Adjutant and the Colonel conferred over this last offence, though he had stood Afford's friend many a time ; to the extent even of getting him re-enlisted in India—a most unusual favour—when, after an interval of discharge, he turned up at his ex-captain's bungalow begging to be taken on ; averring, even, that he had served his way out to India before the mast in that hope, since enlistment at the Depôt might take him to the other battalion. The story, so the Adjutant had said, was palpably false ; but the silent little Major had got the Colonel to consent ; so Private George Afford—an ideal soldier to look at—had given the master tailor no end of trouble about the fit of his uniform, for he was a bit of a dandy when he was sober. But now even Major Griffiths felt the limit of forbearance was past ; nor could a court-martial be expected to take into consideration the fact that though when he was sober George Afford was a dandy, when he was drunk—or rather in the stage which precedes actual drunkenness—he was a gentle-

A BAD-CHARACTER SUIT

man. Vulgarity of speech slipped from him then ; and even when he was passing into the condition in which there is no speech he would excuse his own lapses from strict decorum with almost pathetic apologies. ' It is no excuse, I know, sir,' he would say with a charming, regretful dignity, ' but I have had a very chequered career—a very chequered career indeed.'

That was true ; and one of the black squares of the chessboard of life was his now, for the court-martial which sentenced Private George Afford to but a short punishment added the rider that he was to be thereafter dismissed from Her Majesty's Service.

' He is quite incorrigible,' said the Colonel, ' and as we are pretty certain of going up to punish those scoundrels on the frontier as soon as the weather cools, we had better get rid of him. The regiment mustn't have a speck anywhere, and his sort spoils the youngsters.'

The Major nodded.

So Private George Afford got his dismissal, also the bad-character suit of mufti which is the Queen's last gift even to such as he.

* * * * *

It was full six weeks after he had stood beside that prostrate figure between cook-rooms Nos. 7 and 8 that Peroo was once more engaged in the same task, though not in the same place.

And this time the thin stream of water falling on George Afford's face found it grimed and dirty, and

A BAD-CHARACTER SUIT

left it showing all too clearly the traces of a fortnight's debauch. For Peroo, being of a philosophic mind, had told himself, as he had limped away from the quarter guard after his report, that now, while his self-constituted master would have no need of his services, was the time for him to take that leave home which he had deferred so long. Therefore, two or three days after this event he had turned up at the Quartermaster's office with the curious Indian institution, 'the changeling,' and preferred his request for a holiday. It was granted, of course; there is no reason why leave should not be granted when a double, willing even to answer to the same name, stands ready to step into the original's shoes, without payment; that remaining a bargain between the doubles.

'Here,' said Peroo, 'is my brother. He is even as myself. His character is mine. We are all water-carriers, and he has done the work for two days. I will also leave him my skin bag, so that the Presence may be sure it is clean. He is a Peroo also.'

He might have been *the* Peroo so far as the Quartermaster's requirements went. So the original went home and the copy took his place; but not for the two months. The order for active service of which the Colonel had spoken came sooner than was expected, and Peroo, hearing of it, started back at once for the regiment. A 'changeling' could pass muster in peace, but war required the reality; besides, the master would, no doubt, be released. He was surely too good fighting material to be left behind, Peroo told himself;

A BAD-CHARACTER SUIT

yet there his hero was, lying in the dust of a bye-alley in the bazaar in a ragged bad-character suit, while the barrack squares were alive with men, not half so good to look at, talking, as the mules were laden, of the deeds they were to do!

The wrinkles on Peroo's forehead grew more like those of a monkey in arms than ever. This was indeed a tyranny! but at least the Presence could be moved out of the burning sun this time without, of necessity, getting him into more trouble. So a few friends were called, and together they carried George Afford into the windowless slip of a room which Peroo locked at four o'clock in the morning and unlocked at ten at night, but which, nevertheless, served him as a home. There was nothing in it save a string bed and a drinking-vessel; for Peroo, after his kind, ate his food in the bazaar; but that for the present was all the Englishman required either. So there Peroo left him in the darkness and the cool, safe for the day.

But after that? The problem went with Peroo as he limped about filling the cook-room waterpots, for on the morrow he must be filling them on the first camping-ground, fifteen miles away from that slip of a room where the master lay. What would become of him then?

The sandy stretches in which the barracks stood were full of mules, camels, carts, and men of all arms belonging to the small picked force which was to march with the one solid regiment at dawn on their mission of punishment.

A BAD-CHARACTER SUIT

'*Pâni* (water),' shouted a perspiring artilleryman, grappling with a peculiarly obstinate mule, as Peroo went past with his skin bag. '*Pâni*, and bring a real *jildi* (quickness) along with it. W'ot! you ain't the drinkin'-water, ain't yer? W'ot's that to me? I ain't one o' yer bloomin' Brahmins; but I'll take it outside instead o' in, because of them black-silly's o' the doctor's. So turn on the hose, Johnnie; I'll show you how.'

'E knows all about it, you bet,' put in one of the regiment cheerfully. 'W'y, 'e's bin hydraulic engineer and waterworks combined to that pore chap as got the sack the other day—George Afford—'

'Sure it was a thriflin' mistake wid the prepositions his godfathers made when they named him; for it was on and not off-erd he was six days out of sivin,' remarked a tall Irishman.

'You hold your jaw, Pat,' interrupted another voice. 'E was a better chap nor most, w'en 'e wasn't on the lap; and, Lordy! 'e could fight when 'e 'ad the chanst—couldn't 'e, Waterworks? Just turn that hose o' yours my way a bit, will yer?'

'*Huzoor*,' assented Peroo deferentially; he understood enough to make the thought pass through his brain that it was a pity the master had not the chance. Perhaps the curve of water conveyed this to that other brain beneath the close, fair curls, whence the drops flew sparkling in the sunlight. At any rate, their owner went on in a softer tone—

'Yes, 'e fit—like fits. Looked, too, as if 'e was born

A B A D - C H A R A C T E R S U I T

ter die on the field o' glory, and not in a bad-character suit ; but, as the parson says, " Beauty is vain. I will repay, saith the Lord." '

The confused morality of this passed Peroo by ; and yet something not altogether dissimilar lay behind his wrinkled forehead when, work over, he returned to the slip of a room and found Afford vaguely roused by his entrance.

' I—I am aware it is no possible excuse, sir,' came his voice, curiously refined, curiously pathetic, ' but I really have had a very chequered life, I have indeed.'

' *Huzoor,*' acquiesced Peroo briefly ; but even that was sufficient to bring the hearer closer to realities. He sat up on the string bed, looked about him stupidly, then sank back again.

' Get away ! you d——d black devil,' he muttered, with a sort of listless anger. ' Can't you let me die in peace, you fool ? Can't you let me die in the gutter, die in a bad-character suit ? It's all I'm fit for—all I'm fit for.' Voice, anger, listlessness, all tailed away to silence. He turned away with a sort of sob, and straightway fell asleep, for he was still far from sober.

Peroo lit a cresset lamp and stood looking at him. Beauty was certainly vain here, and if the Lord was going to repay, it was time He began. Time someone began, at any rate, if the man who had fought for him, Peroo, was not to carry out his desire of dying in the gutter—dying in a bad-character suit ! The latter misfortune could, however, be avoided. Things were going cheap in the bazaar that evening, as was only

A BAD-CHARACTER SUIT

natural when it was to be deserted for six months at least, so it ought not to be hard to get the master an exchange for something more suitable to his beauty, if not to his death.

Five minutes afterwards George Afford, too much accustomed to such ministrations to be disturbed by the process of undressing, was still asleep, his chin resting peacefully on Peroo's best white cotton shawl, and the bad-character suit was on its way to the pawnshop round the corner. It was nigh on an hour, however, before Peroo, having concluded his bargain, came back with it, and by the light of the cresset set to work appraising his success or failure. A success certainly. The uniform was old, no doubt, but it was a corporal's; and what is more, it had three good-conduct stripes on the arm. That ought to give dignity, even to a death in the gutter.

Peroo brought out some pipeclay and pumice-stone from a crevice, and set to work cheerfully on the buttons and belts, thinking as he worked that he had indeed made a good bargain. With a judicious smear of cinnabar here and there, the tunic would be almost as good as the master's old one—*plus* the good-conduct stripes, of course, which he could never have gained in the regiment.

But out of it? If, for instance, the Lord were really to repay Private George Afford for that good deed in defending a poor lame man?—a good deed which no bad one could alter for the worse! Peroo on this point would have been a match for a whole college of

A BAD-CHARACTER SUIT

Jesuits in casuistry, as he laid on the pipeclay with lavish hand, and burnished the buttons till they shone like gold.

It was grey dawn when George Afford woke, feeling a deferential touch on his shoulder.

'*Huzoor!*' came a familiar voice, 'the first bugle has gone. The *Huzoor* will find his uniform—a corporal's with three good-conduct stripes—is ready. The absence of a rifle is to be regretted; but that shall be amended if the *Huzoor* will lend a gracious ear to the plan of his slave. In the meantime a gifting of the *Huzoor's* feet for the putting on of stockings might be ordered.'

George Afford thrust out a foot mechanically, and sate on the edge of the string bed staring stupidly at the three good-conduct stripes on the tunic, which was neatly folded beside him.

'It is quite simple,' went on the deferential voice. 'The *Huzoor* is going to march with the colours, but he will be twelve hours behind them; that is all. He will get the fighting, and by and by, when the killing comes and men are wanted, the Colonel-*sahib* may give a place; but, in any case, there will always be the fighting. For the rest, I, the *Huzoor's* slave, will manage; and as there will, of necessity, be no canteen, there can be no tyranny. Besides, since there is not a cawrie in the master's jacket, what else is he to do?'

The last argument was unanswerable. George Afford thrust out his other foot to be shod for this

A BAD-CHARACTER SUIT

new path, and stared harder than ever at the good-conduct stripes.

That night, despite the fatigues of a first day in camp, Peroo trudged back along the hard white road to meet someone whom he expected ; for this was the first step, and he had, perforce, been obliged to leave his charge to his own devices for twelve hours amid the distractions of the bazaar. Still, without a cowrie in his pocket—Peroo had carefully extracted the few annas he had found in one—a man was more or less helpless, even for evil.

Despite this fact, there was a lilt in the lagging step which, just as Peroo had begun to give up hope of playing Providence, came slowly down the road. It belonged to George Afford, in the gentlemanly stage of drink. He had had a chequered life, he said almost tearfully, but there were some things a man of honour could not do. He could not break his promise to an inferior—a superior was another matter. In that case he paid for it honestly. But he had promised Peroo—his inferior—to come. So here he was ; and that was an end of it.

It seemed more than once during the next few hours as if the end had, indeed, come. But somehow Peroo's deferential hand and voice extricated those tired uncertain feet, the weary sodden brain, from ditches and despair ; still it was a very sorry figure which Peroo's own hasty footsteps left behind, safely quartered for the day in a shady bit of jungle, while he ran on to overtake the rearguard if he could. The start, how-

ever, had been too much for his lameness, and he was a full hour late at his work ; which, of course, necessitated his putting in an excuse. He chose drunkenness, as being nearest the truth, was fined a day's wages, and paid it cheerfully, thinking with more certainty of the sleeping figure he had left in the jungle.

The afternoon sun was slanting through the trees before it stirred, and George Afford woke from the sleep of fatigue superadded to his usual sedative. He felt strangely refreshed, and lay on his back staring at the little squirrels yawning after their midday snooze in the branches above him. And then he laughed suddenly, sate up and looked about him half confusedly. Not a trace of humanity was to be seen ; nothing but the squirrels, a few green pigeons, and down in the mirror-like pool behind the trees—a pool edged by the percolating moisture from the water with faint spikes of sprouting grass—a couple of egrets were fishing lazily. Beyond lay a bare sandy plain, backed by faint blue hills—the hills where fighting was to be had. Close at hand were those three good-conduct stripes.

That night Peroo had not nearly so far to go back along the broad white road ; yet the step which came echoing down it, if steadier, lagged more. Nor was Peroo's task much easier, for George Afford—in the abject depression which comes to the tippler from total abstinence—sate down in the dust more than once, and swore he would not go another step without a dram. Still, about an hour after dawn, he was once

A B A D - C H A R A C T E R S U I T

more dozing in a shady retreat with a pot of water and some dough cakes beside him, while Peroo, in luck, was getting a lift to the third camping-ground.

But even at the second, where the sleeping figure remained, the country was wilder, almost touching the 'skirts of the hills,' and so, when George Afford roused himself—as the animals rouse themselves to meet the coming cool of evening—a ravine deer was standing within easy shot, looking at him with head thrown back and wide, startled nostrils, scenting the unknown.

The sight stirred something in the man which had slept the sleep of the dead for years ; that keen delight of the natural man, not so much in the kill as in the chase ; not so much in the mere chase itself as in its efforts—its freedom. He rose, stretching his long arms in what was half a yawn, half a vague inclination to shake himself free of some unseen burden.

But that night he swore at Peroo for leading him a fool's dance ; he threatened to go back. He was not so helpless as all that. He was not a slave ; he would have his tot of rum like any other soldier as——

' *Huzoor*,' interrupted Peroo deferentially, ' this slave is aware that many things necessary to the *Huzoor's* outfit as a soldier remain to be produced. But with patience all may be attained. Here, by God's grace, is the rifle. One of us—Smith-*sahib* of G Company, *Huzoor*—found freedom to-day. He was reconnoitring with Griffiths, Major-*sahib*, when one of these hell-doomed *Sheeahs*—whom Heaven destroy—shot him from behind a rock——'

A BAD-CHARACTER SUIT

Private George Afford seemed to find his feet suddenly. 'Smith of G Company?' he echoed in a different voice.

'*Huzoor!*—the *sabib* whom the *Huzoor* thrashed for thrashing this slave——'

'Poor chap!' went on George Afford, as if he had not heard. 'So they've nicked him—but we'll pay 'em out—we——' His fingers closed mechanically on the rifle Peroo was holding out to him.

* * * * *

It was a fortnight after this, and the camp lay clustered closely in the mouth of a narrow defile down which rushed a torrent swollen from the snows above; a defile which meant decisive victory or defeat to the little force which had to push their way through it to the heights above. Yet, though death, maybe, lay close to each man, the whole camp was in an uproar because Major Griffiths' second pair of puttees had gone astray. The other officers had been content with one set of these woollen bandages which in hill-marching serve as gaiters, and help so much to lessen fatigue; but the Major, being methodical, had provided against emergencies. And now, when, with that possibility of death before him, his soul craved an extreme order in all things, his clean pair had disappeared. Now the Major, though silent, always managed to say what he meant. So it ran through the camp that they had been stolen, and men compared notes over the fact in the mess-tent and in the canteen.

In the former, the Adjutant with a frown admitted that of late there had been a series of inexplicable petty thefts in camp, which had begun with the disappearance of Private Smith's rifle. That might perhaps be explained in an enemy's country, but what the deuce anybody could want with a pair of bone shirt-studs——

'And a shirt,' put in a mournful voice.

'*Item* a cake of scented soap,' said another.

'And a comb,' began a third.

The Colonel, who had till then preserved a discreet silence, here broke in with great heat to the Adjutant.

'Upon my soul, sir, it's a disgrace to the staff, and I must insist on a stringent inquiry the instant we've licked these hill-men. I—I didn't mean to say anything about it—but I haven't been able to find my tooth-brush for a week.'

Whereupon there was a general exodus into the crisp, cold air outside, where the darkness would hide inconvenient smiles, for the Colonel was one of those men who have a different towel for their face and hands.

The stars were shining in the cleft behind the tall, shadowy cliffs which rose up on either side, vague masses of shadow on which—seen like stars upon a darker sky—the watch-fires of the enemy sparkled here and there. The enemy powerful, vigilant; and yet beside the camp-fires close at hand the men had forgotten the danger of the morrow in the trivial loss of the moment, and were discussing the Major's puttees.

A B A D - C H A R A C T E R S U I T

'It's w'ot I say all along,' reiterated the romancer of G Company. 'It begun ever since Joey Smith was took from us at Number Two camp. It's 'is ghost—that's w'ot it is. 'Is ghost layin' in a *trew-so*. Jest you look 'ere! They bury 'im, didn't they? as 'e was—decent like in coat and pants—no more. Well! since then 'e's took 'is rifle off us, an' a greatcoat off D Company, and a knapsack off A.'

'Don't be lavin' out thim blankets he tuk from the store, man,' interrupted the tall Irishman. 'Sure it's a testhimony to the pore bhoy's character annyhow that he shud be wantin' thim where he is.'

'It is not laughing at all at such things I would be, whatever,' put in another voice seriously, 'for it is knowing of such things we are in the Highlands—'

'Hold your second sight, Mac,' broke in a third; 'we don't want none o' your shivers to-night. You're as bad as they blamed niggers, and they swear they seen Joey more nor once in a red coat dodging about our rear.'

'Well! they won't see 'im no more, then,' remarked a fourth philosophically, 'for 'e change 'is tailor. Leastways, 'e got a service khaki off Sergeant Jones the night afore last; the sergeant took his Bible oath to 'ave it off Joey Smith's ghost, w'en 'e got time to tackle 'im, if 'e 'ave ter go to 'ell for it.'

Major Griffiths meantime was having a similar say as he stood, eye-glass in eye, at the door of the mess-tent. 'Whoever the thief is,' he admitted, with the justice common to him, 'he appears to have the

instincts of a gentleman ; but, by Gad, sir, if I find him he shall know what it is to take a field officer's gaiters.'

Whereupon he gave a dissatisfied look at his own legs, a more contented one at the glimmering stars of the enemy's watch-fires, and then turned in to get a few hours' rest before the dawn.

But someone a few miles farther down the valley looked both at his legs and at the stars with equal satisfaction. Someone, tall, square, straight, smoking a pipe—someone else's pipe, no doubt—beside the hole in the ground where, on the preceding night, the camp flagstaff had stood. That fortnight had done more for George Afford than give his outward man a trousseau ; it had clothed him with a certain righteousness, despite the inward conviction that Peroo must be a magnificent liar in protesting that the *Huzoor's* outfit had either been gifted to him or bought honestly.

In fact, as he stood looking down at his legs complacently, he murmured to himself, ' I believe they're the Major's, poor chap ; look like him somehow.' Then he glanced at the sergeant's coatee he wore and walked up and down thoughtfully—up and down beside the hole in the ground where the flagstaff had stood.

So to him from the dim shadows came a limping figure.

' Well ? ' he called sharply.

' The orders are for dawn, *Huzoor*, and here are some more cartridges.'

A BAD-CHARACTER SUIT

George Afford laughed ; an odd, low little laugh of sheer satisfaction.

* * * * *

It was past dawn by an hour or two, but the heights were still unwon.

'Send someone—anyone!' gasped the Colonel breathlessly, as he pressed on with a forlorn hope of veterans to take a knoll of rocks whence a galling fire had been decimating every attack. 'Griffiths! for God's sake, go or get someone ahead of those youngsters on the right or they'll break—and then——'

Break! What more likely? A weak company, full of recruits, a company with its officers shot down, and before them a task for veterans—for that indifference to whizzing bullets which only custom brings. Major Griffiths, as he ran forward, saw all this, saw also the ominous waver. God! would he be in time to check it—to get ahead? that was what was wanted, someone ahead—no more than that—someone ahead!

There was someone. A tall figure ahead of the wavering boys.

'Come on! Come on, my lads! follow me!' rang out a confident voice, and the Major, as he ran, half-blinded by the mists of his own haste, felt it was as a voice from heaven.

'Come on! come on!—give it 'em straight. Hip, hip, hurray!'

An answering cheer broke from the boys behind, and

A BAD-CHARACTER SUIT

with a rush the weakest company in the regiment followed someone to victory.

* * * * *

‘ I don’t understand what the dickens it means,’ said the Colonel almost fretfully that same evening, when, safe over the pass, the little force was bivouacking in a willow-set valley on the other side of the hills. Before it lay what it had come to gain, behind it danger past. ‘ Someone in my regiment,’ he went on, ‘ does a deuced plucky thing—between ourselves, saves the position : I want naturally to find out who it was, and am met by a cock and bull story about someone’s ghost. What the devil does it mean, Major ? ’

The Major shook his head. ‘ I couldn’t swear to the figure, sir, though it reminded me a bit—but that’s impossible. However, as I have by your orders to ride back to the top, sir, and see what can be done to hold it, I’ll dip over a bit to where the rush was made, and see if there is any clue.’

He had not to go so far. For in one of those tiny hollows in the level plateau of pass, whence the snow melts early, leaving a carpet of blue forget-me-nots and alpine primroses behind it, he, Sergeant Jones, and the small party going to make security still more secure, came upon Peroo, the water-carrier, trying to perform a tearful travesty of the burial service over the body of George Afford.

It was dressed in Sergeant Jones’s tunic and Major Griffiths’ puttees, but the Sergeant knelt down beside

A BAD-CHARACTER SUIT

it, and smoothed the stripes upon the cuff with a half-mechanical, half-caressing touch, and the Major interrupted Peroo's protestations with an odd tremor in his voice.

'What the devil does it matter,' he said sharply, 'what he took besides the pass? Stand aside, man; this is my work, not yours. Sergeant! form up your men for the salute—ball cartridge.'

The Major's recollection of the service for the burial of the dead was not accurate, but it was comprehensive. So he committed the mortal remains of his brother soldier to the dust, confessing confusedly that there is a natural body and a spiritual body—a man that is of the earth earthy, and one that is the Lord from heaven. So following on a petition to be saved from temptation and delivered from evil, the salute startled the echoes, and they left George Afford in the keeping of the pass, and the pass in his keeping. And as the Major rode campwards, he wondered vaguely if someone before the great white throne wore a bad-character suit, or whether wisdom understood the plea, 'I've had a very chequered life, I have indeed.'

But Peroo had no such thoughts; needed no such excuse. It was sufficient for him that the *Huzoor* had once been the protector of the poor.

IN THE PERMANENT WAY

I HEARD this story in a rail-trolley on the Pind-Dadur line, so I always think of it with a running accompaniment, a rhythmic whir of wheels in which, despite its steadiness, you feel the propelling impulse of the unseen coolies behind, then the swift skimming as they set their feet on the trolley for the brief rest which merges at the first hint of lessened speed into the old racing measure. Whir and slide, racing and resting!—while the wheels spin like bobbins and the brick rubble in the permanent way slips under your feet giddily, until you could almost fancy yourself sitting on a stationary engine, engaged in winding up an endless red ribbon. A ribbon edged, as if with tinsel, by steel rails stretching away in ever-narrowing lines to the level horizon. Stretching straight as a die across a sandy desert, rippled and waved by wrinkled sand-hills into the semblance of a sandy sea.

And that, from its size, must be a seventh wave. I was just thinking this when the buzz of the brake jarred me through to the marrow of my bones.

‘What’s up? A train?’ I asked of my companion, who was giving me a lift across his section of the desert.

IN THE PERMANENT WAY

‘No!’ he replied laconically. ‘Now, then! hurry up, men.’

Nothing in the wide world comes to pieces in the hand like a trolley. It was dismembered and off the line in a moment; only, however, much to my surprise, to be replaced upon the rails some half a dozen yards farther along them. I was opening my lips for one question when something I saw at my feet among the brick rubble made me change it for another.

‘Hullo! what the dickens is that?’

To the carnal eye it was two small squares of smooth stucco, the one with an oval black stone set in it perpendicularly, the other with a round purplish one—curiously ringed with darker circles—set in it horizontally. On the stucco of one were a few dried *tulsi*¹ leaves and grains of rice; on the other suspicious-looking splashes of dark red.

‘What’s what?’ echoed my friend, climbing up to his seat again.

‘Why, man, that thing!—that thing in the permanent way!’ I replied, nettled at his manner.

He gave an odd little laugh, just audible above the first whir of the wheels as we started again.

‘That’s about it. In the permanent way—considerably.’ He paused, and I thought he was going to relapse into the silence for which he was famous; but he suddenly seemed to change his mind.

‘Look here,’ he said, ‘it’s a fifteen-mile run to the

¹ Marjoram.

IN THE PERMANENT WAY

first curve, and no trains due, so if you like I'll tell you why we left the track.'

And he did.

* * * * *

When they were aligning this section I was put on to it—preliminary survey work under an R.E. man who wore boiled shirts in the wilderness, and was great on 'Departmental Discipline.' He is in Simla now, of course. Well, we were driving a straight line through the whole solar system and planting it out with little red flags, when one afternoon, just behind that big wave of a sand-hill, we came upon something in the way. It was a man. For further description I should say it was a thin man. There is nothing more to be said. He may have been old, he may have been young, he may have been tall, he may have been short, he may have been halt and maimed, he may have been blind, deaf, or dumb, or any or all of these. The only thing I know for *certain* is that he was thin. The *kalassies*¹ said he was some kind of a Hindu saint, and they fell at his feet promptly. I shall never forget the R.E.'s face as he stood trying to classify the creature according to Wilson's *Hindu Sects*, or his indignation at the *kalassies*' ignorant worship of a man who, for all they knew, might be a follower of Shiva, while they were bound to Vishnu, or *vice versa*. He was very learned over the *Vaishnavas* and the *Saivas*; and all the time that bronze image with its hands on its knees squatted

¹ Tent-pitchers—men employed in measuring land.

in the sand staring into space perfectly unmoved. Perhaps the man saw us, perhaps he didn't. I don't know ; as I said before, he was thin.

So after a time we stuck a little red flag in the ground close to the small of his back, and went on our way rejoicing until we came to our camp, a mile farther on. It doesn't look like it, but there is a brackish well and a sort of a village away there to the right, and of course we always took advantage of water when we could.

It must have been a week later, just as we came to the edge of the sand-hills, and could see a landmark or two, that I noticed the R.E. come up from his prismatic compass looking rather pale. Then he fussed over to me at the plane table.

'We're out,' he said, 'there is a want of Departmental Discipline in this party, and we are out.' I forget how many fractions he said, but some infinitesimal curve would have been required to bring us plumb on the next station, and as that would have ruined the R.E.'s professional reputation, we harked back to rectify the error. We found the bronze image still sitting on the sand with its hands on its knees ; but apparently it had shifted its position some three feet or so to the right, for the flag was fully that distance to the left of it. That night the R.E. came to my tent with his hands full of maps and his mind of suspicions.

'It seems incredible,' he said, 'but I am almost convinced that *byragi* or *jogi*, or *gosain* or *sunyasi*, whichever

he may be, has had the unparalleled effrontery to move my flag. I can't be sure, but if I were, I would have him arrested on the spot.'

I suggested he was that already ; but it is sometimes difficult to make an R.E. see a civilian's joke, especially when he is your superior officer. This remark was received with cold disfavour. So we did that bit over again. As it happened, my chief was laid up with sun fever when we came to the bronze image, and I had charge of the party. I don't know why, exactly, but it seemed to me rough on the thin man to stick a red flag at the small of his back, as a threat that we meant to annex the only atom of things earthly to which he still clung ; time enough for that when the line was actually under construction. So I told the *kalassies* to let him do duty as a survey mark ; for, from what I had heard, I knew that once a man of that sort fixes on a place in which to gain immortality by penance, he sticks to it till the mortality, at any rate, comes to an end. And this one, I found out from the villagers, had been there for ten years. Of course they said he never ate, nor drank, nor moved, but that, equally of course, was absurd.

A year after this I came along again in charge of a construction party, with an overseer called Craddock, a big yellow-headed Saxon who couldn't keep off the drink, and who had in consequence been going down steadily in one department or another for years. As good a fellow as ever stepped when he was sober. Well, we came right on the thin one again, plump in

the very middle of the permanent way. We dug round him and levelled up to him for some time, and then one day Craddock gave a nod at me and walked over to where that image squatted staring into space. I can see the two now, Craddock in his navy's dress, his blue eyes keen yet kind in the red face shaded by the dirty pith hat, and the thin man without a rag of any sort to hide his bronze anatomy.

'Look here, sonny,' said Craddock, stooping over the other, 'you're in the way—in the permanent way.'

Then he just lifted him right up, gently, as if he had been a child, and set him down about four feet to the left. It was to be a metre gauge, so that was enough for safety. There he sat after we had propped him up again with his *byraga* or cleft stick under the left arm, as if he were quite satisfied with the change. But next day he was in the old place. It was no use arguing with him. The only thing to be done was to move him out of the way when we wanted it. Of course when the earthwork was finished there was the plate-laying and ballasting and what not to be done, so it came to be part of the big Saxon's regular business to say in his Oxfordshire drawl—

'Sonny, yo're in the waiy—in the permanent waiy.'

Craddock, it must be mentioned, was in a peculiarly sober, virtuous mood, owing, no doubt, to the desolation of the desert; in which, by the way, I found him quite a godsend as a companion, for when he was on the talk the quaintness of his ideas was infinitely amusing, and his knowledge of the natives, picked up as a

loafer in many a bazaar and *serai*, was surprisingly wide, if appallingly inaccurate.

'There is something, savin' yo're presence, sir, blamed wrong in the whole blamed business,' he said to me, with a mild remonstrance in his blue eyes, one evening after he had removed the obstruction to progress. 'That pore fellar, sir, 'e's a-meditatin' on the word *Hom—Hommipuddenhome*¹ it is, sir, I've bin told—an' doin' 'is little level to make the spiritooal man subdoo 'is fleshly hinstinckts. And I, Nathaniel James Craddock, so called in Holy Baptism, I do assure you, a-eatin' and a-drinkin' 'earty, catches 'im right up like a babby, and sets 'im on one side, as if I was born to it. And so I will—an' willin', too—so as to keep 'im from 'arm's way; for 'eathin or Christian, sir, 'e's an egg-sample to the spiritooal part of me which, savin' your presence, sir, is mostways drink!'

Poor Craddock! He went on the spree hopelessly the day after we returned to civilization, and it was with the greatest difficulty that I succeeded in getting him a trial as driver to the material train which commenced running up and down the section. The first time I went with it on business I had an inspection carriage tacked on behind the truck-loads of coolies and ballast, so that I could not make out why on earth we let loose a danger whistle and slowed down to full stop in the very middle of the desert until I jumped down and ran forward. Even then I was only in time

¹ *Om mi pudmi bum.* The Buddhist invocation.

to see Craddock coming back to his engine with a redder face than ever.

'It's only old Meditations, sir,' he said apologetically, as I climbed in beside him. 'It don't take a minute; no longer nor a cow, and them's in the reg'lations. You see, sir, I wouldn't 'ave 'arm come to the pore soul afore 'is spiritooal nater 'ad the straight tip hoäm. Neither would none of us, sir, coolie nor driver, sir, on the section. We all likes old *Hommipuddenhome*; 'e sticks to it so stiddy, that's where it is.'

'Do you mean to say that you always have to get out and lift him off the line?' I asked, wondering rather at the patience required for the task.

'That's so, sir,' he replied slowly, in the same apologetic tones. 'It don't take no time you see, sir, that's where it is. P'r'aps you may 'ave thought, like as I did first time, that 'e'd save 'is bacon when the engine come along. Lordy! the cold sweat broke out on me that time. I brought 'er up, sir, with the buffers at the back of 'is 'ed like them things the photographers jiminy you straight with. But 'e ain't that sort, ain't Meditations.' Here Craddock asked leave to light his pipe, and in the interval I looked ahead along the narrowing red ribbon with its tinsel edge, thinking how odd it must have been to see it barred by that bronze image.

'No! that ain't 'is sort,' continued Craddock meditatively, 'though w'ot 'is sort may be, sir, is not my part to say. I've arst, and arst, and arst them

IN THE PERMANENT WAY

pundits, but there ain't one of them can really tell, sir, 'cos 'e ain't got any marks about 'im. You see, sir, it's by their marks, like cattle, as you tell 'em. Some says 'e worships bloody *Shivers* ¹—'im 'oos wife you know, sir, they calls *Martba Davy* ²—a Christian sort o' name, ain't it, sir, for a 'eathin idol?—and some says 'e worships *Wishnyou Lucksmi* ³ an' that lot, an' *Holy* ⁴ too, though, savin' your presence, sir, it ain't much 'oliness I see at them times, but mostly drink. It makes me feel quite 'omesick, I do assure you, sir, more as if they was humans like me, likewise.'

'And which belief do you incline to?' I asked, for the sake of prolonging the conversation.

He drew his rough hand over his corn-coloured beard, and quite a grave look came to the blue eyes. 'I inclines to *Shiver*,' he said decisively, 'and I'll tell you why, sir. *Shiver*'s bloody; but 'e's dead on death. They calls 'im the Destroyer. 'E don't care a damn for the body; 'e's all for the spiritooal nater, like old Meditations there. Now *Wishnyou Lucksmi* an' that lot is the Preservers. They eats an' drinks 'earty, like me. So it stands to reason, sir, don't it? that 'e's a *Shiver*, and I'm a *Wishnyou Lucksmi*.' He stood up under pretence of giving a wipe round a valve with the oily rag he held, and looked out to the horizon where the sun was setting, like a huge red signal right on the narrowing line. 'So,' he went on after a pause, 'that's why I wouldn't 'ave 'arm come to old Meditations.'

¹ *Shiva*.

² *Mata devi*.

³ *Vishnu Luksbmi*.

⁴ *Holi*, the Indian Saturnalia.

'E's a *Shiver*, I'm a *Wishnyou Lucksmi*. That's what I am.'

His meaning was quite clear, and I am not ashamed to say that it touched me.

'Look here,' I said, 'take care you don't run over that old chap some day when you are drunk, that's all.'

He bent over another valve, burnishing it. 'I 'ope to God I don't,' he said in a low voice. 'That'd about finish me altogether, I expect.'

We returned the next morning before daybreak ; but I went on the engine, being determined to see how that bronze image looked on the permanent way when you were steaming up to it.

'You ketch sight of 'im clear this side,' said Craddock, 'a good two mile or more ; ef you had a telescope ten for that matter. It ain't so easy t' other side with the sun a-shining bang inter the eyes. And there ain't no big wave as a signal over there. But Lordy ! there ain't no fear of my missin' old Meditations.'

Certainly, none that morning. He showed clear, first against the rosy flush of dawn, afterwards like a dark stain on the red ribbon.

'I'll run up close to 'im to-day, sir,' said Craddock, 'so as you shall see w'ot 'e's made of.'

The whistle rang shrill over the desert of sand, which lay empty of all save that streak of red with the dark stain upon it ; but the stain never moved, never stirred, though the snorting demon from the west came racing up to it full speed.

'Have a care, man ! Have a care !' I shouted ; but

IN THE PERMANENT WAY

my words were almost lost in the jar of the brake put on to the utmost. Even then I could only crane round the cab with my eyes fixed on that bronze image straight ahead of us. Could we stop in time—would it move? Yes! no! yes! Slower and slower—how many turns of the fly-wheel to so many yards?—I felt as if I were working the sum frantically in my head, when, with a little backward shiver, the great circle of steel stopped dead, and Craddock's voice came in cheerful triumph—

'There! didn't I tell you, sir? Ain't 'e stiddy? Ain't 'e a-subdooin' of mortality beautiful?' The next instant he was out, and as he stooped to his task he flung me back a look.

'Now, sonny, you'll 'ave to move. You're in the way—the permanent way, my dear.'

That was the last I saw of him for some time, for I fell sick and went home. When I returned to work I found, much to my surprise, that Craddock was in the same appointment; in fact, he had been promoted to drive the solitary passenger train which now ran daily across the desert. He had not been on the spree once, I was told; indeed, the R.E., who was of the Methodist division of that gallant regiment, took great pride in a reformation which, he informed me, was largely due to his religious teaching combined with Departmental Discipline.

'And how is Meditations?' I asked, when the great rough hand had shaken mine vehemently.

Craddock's face seemed to me to grow redder than

ever. 'E's very well, sir, thanking you kindly. There's a native driver on the Goods now. 'E's a *Shiver-Martha Davy* lot, so I pays 'im five rupee a month to nip out sharp with the stoker an' shovel 'is old saint to one side. I'm gettin' good pay now, you know, sir.'

I told him there was no reason to apologize for the fact, and that I hoped it might long continue ; whereat he gave a sheepish kind of laugh, and said he hoped so too.

Christmas came and went uneventfully without an outbreak, and I could not refrain from congratulating Craddock on one temptation safely over.

He smiled broadly.

'Lor' bless you, sir,' he said, 'you didn't never think, did you, that Nathaniel James Craddock, which 'is name was given to 'im in Holy Baptism, I do assure you, was going to knuckle down that way to old *Hommipuddenhome* ? 'Twouldn't be fair on Christmas noways, sir, and though I don't set the store 'e does on 'is spiritooal nater, I was born and bred in a Christyan country, I do assure you.'

I congratulated him warmly on his sentiments, and hoped again that they would last ; to which he replied as before that he hoped so too.

And then *Holi*-time came round, and, as luck would have it, the place was full of riff-raff low whites going on to look for work in a farther section. I had to drive through the bazaar on my way to the railway station, and it beat anything I had ever seen in various vice. East and West were outbidding each other in iniquity,

and to make matters worse, an electrical dust-storm was blowing hard. You never saw such a scene ; it was pandemonium, background and all. I thought I caught a glimpse of a corn-coloured beard and a pair of blue eyes in a wooden balcony among tinkling *sutáras* and jasmine chaplets, but I wasn't sure. However, as I was stepping into the inspection carriage, which, as usual, was the last in the train, I saw Craddock crossing the platform to his engine. His white coat was all splashed with the red dye they had been throwing at each other, *Holi* fashion, in the bazaar ; his walk, to my eyes, had a lilt in it, and finally, the neck of a black bottle showed from one pocket.

Obedient to one of those sudden impulses which come, Heaven knows why, I took my foot off the step and followed him to the engine.

'Comin' aboard, sir,' he said quite collectedly. 'You'd be better be'ind to-night, for it's blowin' grit fit to make me a walkin' sandpaper inside and out.' And before I could stop him the black bottle was at his mouth. This decided me. Perhaps my face showed my thoughts, for as I climbed into the cab he gave an uneasy laugh. 'Don't be afraid, sir : it's black as pitch, but I knows where old Meditations comes by instinck, I do assure you. One hour an' seventeen minutes from the distance signal with pressure as it oughter be. Hillo ! there's the whistle and the baboo a-waving. Off we goes !'

As we flashed past a red light I looked at my watch.

'Don't you be afraid, sir,' he said, again looking at his. 'It's ten past ten now, and in one 'our an' seventeen minutes on goes the brake. That's the ticket for *Shivers* and *Martha Davy*; though I *am* a *Wishnyou Lucksmi*.' He paused a moment, and as he stood put his hand on a stanchion to steady himself.

'Very much of a *Wishnyou Lucksmi*,' he went on with a shake of the head. 'I've 'ad a drop too much, and I know it; but it ain't fair on a fellar like me, 'avin' so many names to them, when they 're all the same—a eatin' an' drinkin' lot like me. There's Christen¹—you'd 'ave thought 'e'd 'ave been a decent chap by 'is name, but 'e went on orful with them *Gopis*—that's Hindu for milkmaids, sir. And Harry²—well, 'e wasn't no better than some other Harry I've 'eard on. And Canyer,³ I expect 'e could just about. To say nothin' of *Gopi-naughty*⁴; and naughty 'e were, as no doubt you've 'eard tell, sir. There's too many on them for a pore fellar who don't set store by 'is spiritooal nater; especially when they mixes themselves up with *Angcore*⁵ whisky, an' ginger ale.'

His blue eyes had a far-away look in them, and his words were fast losing independence, but I understood what he meant perfectly. In that brief glimpse of the big bazaar I had seen the rows of Western bottles standing cheek by jowl with the bowls of *dolee* dye, the sour curds and sweetmeats of *Holi-tide*.

¹ *Kristna*. ² *Hari*. ³ *Kaniya*. ⁴ *Gopi-nath*. These are all names of Vishnu in his various Avatars.

⁵ *Encore*.

' You had better sit down, Craddock,' I said severely, for I saw that the fresh air was having its usual effect. ' Perhaps if you sleep a bit you'll be more fit for work. I'll look out and wake you when you're wanted.'

He gave a silly laugh, let go the stanchion, and drew out his watch.

' Don't you be afraid, sir ! One 'our and seventeen minutes from the distance signal. I'll keep 'im out o' 'arm's way, an' willin', to the end of the chapter.'

He gave a lurch forward to the seat, stumbled, and the watch dropped from his hand. For a moment I thought he might go overboard, and I clutched at him frantically ; but with another lurch and an indistinct admonition to me not to be afraid, he sank into the corner of the bench and was asleep in a second. Then I stooped to pick up the watch, and, rather to my surprise, found it uninjured and still going.

Craddock's words, ' ten minutes past ten,' recurred to me. Then it would be twenty-seven minutes past eleven before he was wanted. I sat down to wait, bidding the native stoker keep up the fire as usual. The wind was simply shrieking round us, and the sand drifted thick on Craddock's still, upturned face. More than once I wiped it off, feeling he might suffocate. It was the noisiest, and at the same time the most silent journey I ever undertook. Pandemonium, with seventy times seven of its devils let loose outside the cab ; inside Craddock asleep, or dead—he might have been the latter from his stillness. It became oppressive after a time, as I remembered that other still

figure, miles down the track, which was so strangely bound to this one beside me. The minutes seemed hours, and I felt a distinct relief when the watch, which I had held in my hand most of the time, told me it was seventeen minutes past eleven. Only ten minutes before the brake should be put on ; and Craddock would require all that time to get his senses about him.

I might as well have tried to awaken a corpse, and it was three minutes to the twenty-seven when I gave up the idea as hopeless. Not that it mattered, since I could drive an engine as well as he ; still the sense of responsibility weighed heavily upon me. My hand on the brake valve trembled visibly as I stood watching the minute-hand of the watch. Thirty seconds before the time I put the brake on hard, determining to be on the safe side. And then when I had taken this precaution a perfectly unreasoning anxiety seized on me. I stepped on to the footboard and craned forward into the darkness which, even without the wind and the driving dust, was blinding. The lights in front shot slantways, showing an angle of red ballast, barred by gleaming steel ; beyond that a formless void of sand. But the centre of the permanent way, where that figure would be sitting, was dark as death itself. What a fool I was, when the great circle of the fly-wheel was slackening, slackening, every second ! And yet the fear grew lest I should have been too late, lest I should have made some mistake. To appease my own folly I drew out my watch in

IN THE PERMANENT WAY

confirmation of the time. Great God! a difference of two minutes!—two whole minutes!—yet the watches had been the same at the distance signal?—the fall, of course! the fall!!

I seemed unable to do anything but watch that slackening wheel, even though I became conscious of a hand on my shoulder, of someone standing beside me on the footboard. No! not standing, swaying, lurching—

‘Don’t!’ I cried. ‘Don’t! it’s madness!’ But that someone was out in the darkness. Then I saw a big white figure dash across the angle of light with outspread arms.

‘Now then, sonny! yo’re in the way—the permanent way.’

* * * * *

The inspector paused, and I seemed to come back to the sliding whir of the trolley wheels. In the distance a semaphore was dropping its red arm, and a pointsman, like a speck on the ribbon, was at work shunting us into a siding.

‘Well?’ I asked.

‘There isn’t anything more. When a whole train goes over two men who are locked in each other’s arms it is hard—hard to tell—well, which is *Shivers-Martha Davy*, and which is *Wishnyou Lucksmi*. It was right out in the desert in the hot weather, no parsons or people to object; so I buried them there in the permanent way.’

' And those are tombstones, I suppose ? '

He laughed. ' No ; altars. The workers on the line put them up to their saint. The oval black upright stone is Shiva, the Destroyer's *lingam* ; those splashes are blood. The flat one, decorated with flowers, is the *salagrama*,¹ sacred to Vishnu the Preserver. You see nobody really knew whether old Meditations was a *Saiva* or a *Vaishnava* ; so I suggested this arrangement as the men were making a sectarian quarrel out of the question.' He paused again and added—

' You see it does for both of them.'

The jar of the points prevented me from replying.

¹ A fossil ammonite.

A DANGER SIGNAL

THEY were an odd couple. The very trains as they sped past level-crossing number 57 gave a low whistle as if the oddities struck them afresh each time, and Craddock always went to the side of the cab, whence he could see those two motionless figures on either side of the regulation barrier which stood so causelessly in the middle of the sandy waste.

There must have been a road somewhere, of course, else there would have been no level crossing, but it was not visible to the passing eye. Perhaps the drifting sand had covered it up; perhaps no traffic ever did come that way, and there really was no need for old Dhunnu and his granddaughter to stand like ill-matched heraldic supporters displaying a safety signal. But they did.

They had done so ever since Dhunni—for the name had descended to her in the feminine gender—was steady enough on her feet to stand alone, and before that, even, she had given 'line clear' from her grandfather's arms. For it was always 'line clear.' No train ever stopped at level crossing number 57 of the desert section. Why should they? There was nothing to be seen far or near save sand, and the little square concrete-roofed, red-hot furnace of a place,

A D A N G E R S I G N A L

suggestive of a crematorium, which happened on that particular railway to be the approved pattern for a gatekeeper's shelter.

It was very hot in summer, very cold in winter, and that was perhaps the reason why old Dhunnu suffered so much from malarial fever in the autumn months ; those months which might otherwise have been so pleasant in the returning cool of their nights, and their promise of another harvest. The old man used to resent this fever in a dull sort of way, because it was so unnecessary in that rainless tract. To quiver and shake in a quartian ague when the battalions of maize are pluming themselves on their own growth, and the millet-seeds, tired of cuddling close to each other, are beginning to start on lengthening stemlets to see the world, was legitimate ; but it was quite another thing to find a difficulty in keeping a signal steady when there was not a drop of moisture for miles and miles, save in the little round well which had been dug for the gatekeeper's use.

Dhunnu, however, had served the *Sirkar* for long years in the malarial tracts under the hills before he came as a pensioner to level crossing 57, and when once the marsh-monarch lays firm hold of a man he claims him as a subject for all time. It was this difficulty, no doubt, in keeping a signal steady which, joined to the intense pleasure it gave to the child, had first led to little Dhunni holding the green flag, while Dhunnu on the other side of the gate kept the furled red one in his shaking hand ready for emergencies.

A D A N G E R S I G N A L

Then the train would sweep past like a great caterpillar with red and green eyes, and red and green lights in its tail, and Craddock would look out of the cab, and say to himself that time must be passing, since the child was shooting up into a girl. And still it was always the green flag ; always 'line clear.'

It became monotonous even to Dhunni who had been brought up to it, and while her chubby hand clutched the bâton firmly she would look resentfully across at the furred red flag in her grandfather's shaking hand.

'Lo ! grandad,' she said spitefully, 'some day it will shake so that the cloth will shake itself out, and then——'

He interrupted her with dignity, but in the tone in which a titmouse might reproach a tiger-cat ; for Dhunni, as he knew to his cost, had a temper.

'By God's blessing, O Dhun Devi, that will never be, since east and west is there no cause sufficient to check progress ; and as *that* is by order the green flag, so the green flag it will be.'

Dhunni made no reply in words. She simply flung the safety signal in the dust and danced on it with a certain pompous vigour which made the whitey-brown rag of a petticoat she wore as sole garment cease even its pretensions to be called a covering. For they were very poor these two ; that was evident from the lack of colour in their clothing, which made them mere dusty brown shadows on the background of brownish dust.

A D A N G E R S I G N A L

‘ It shall be the red one some day, grandad ! Yea ! some day it shall be the red flag, and then the train will stop, and then—and then——’ She gave one vindictive stamp to clinch the matter and walked off with her head in the air. The old man watched her retreating figure with shocked admiration, then picked up the dishonoured flag, dusted it, and rolled it up laboriously.

‘ Lo ! ’ he muttered as a half-gratified smile claimed his haggard face, ‘ she is of the very worst sort of woman that the Lord makes. A virtuous man need be prepared for such as she, so ’tis well she is betrothed to a decent house. Meanwhile in the wilderness she can come to no harm.’

So far as the displaying of danger signals went, Dhunni herself was forced to admit the truth of this proposition, for even when the old man lay quivering and quaking, he kept the key of the box in which the red flag was locked safely stowed away in his waist-cloth. Once she tried to steal it, and when discovered in the act, took advantage of his prostration to argue the matter out at length ; her position being that the train itself must be as tired of going on as she was of watching it. Whereupon he explained to her with feverish vividness the terrible consequences which followed on the unrighteous stopping of trains, to all of which she acquiesced with the greatest zest, even suggesting additional horrors, until it became a sort of game of brag between them as to whose imagination would go the farthest.

Finally, as she brought him a cup of water from the

A D A N G E R S I G N A L

well, she consoled both herself and him with the reflection that some day he must die of the fever, and then of course it would not matter to him if the train stopped or not, while she could satisfy herself as to whether those funny white people who looked out of the windows were real, or only stuffed dolls.

‘ Oh, graceless one ! ’ he whimpered as he lay prostrate and perspiring. ‘ Have I not told thee dozens of times they are *sahib logues* ? have I not seen them ? have I——’

‘ *Trra,*’ replied Dhunni derisively, ‘ that may be. I have not, but I mean to some day.’

Then the old man, adding tears of weakness to the general dissolution, begged her, if a train must be stopped, to stop a ‘ goods,’ or even a ‘ mixed.’ She argued this point also at length, till the fever-fiend leaving him, Dhunnu resumed his authority and threatened to beat her, whereupon she ran away, like a wild thing, into the desert.

It was a certain method of escape from the slow retribution of the old man, but as often as not she would return ere his anger had evaporated sooner than miss any one of the four caterpillars with the red and green eyes and the green and red lights in their tails. They had a fascination for her which she could not resist, so she would take her whacking and then stand, bruised and sore, but brimful of curiosity, to give ‘ line clear,’ as it were, to a whole world of which she knew nothing. Even that was better than having nothing to do with it at all.

A D A N G E R S I G N A L

And then, as her grandfather grew older and feebler, and required a longer time to fetch the week's supply from the distant hamlet far over the edge of the sandy horizon, there came at last a day when she stood all alone in the very centre of the closed gate holding out the green flag and *salaaming* obsequiously, for that was what grandfather had done on one or two occasions when, owing to inconceivable wickedness, she had been made to watch the passing of civilization while tied to a distant bed leg.

Craddock from his cab noticed the grave mimicry and smiled, whereupon Dhunni smiled back brilliantly. And then something happened which curiously enough changed her whole estimate of civilization, and left her with such an expression on her face that when her grandfather returned half an hour afterwards, his first thought was for the red flag. The key was safe in his waistcloth, yet still he began hurriedly—

‘Thou didst not——’

‘Nay,’ she burst out in fury, ‘I did nought. But they!—grandad, I hate them! I hate them!’

Then it turned out that the white dolls had flung a stone at her—a hard stone—yes, the pink and white child-dolls had flung a stone at her just because she had smiled. So with hands trembling with rage she produced in evidence a large chunk of chocolate.

Dhunnu looked at it in superior wisdom, for there had been white children sometimes in that surveying camp below the hills.

‘’Tis no stone,’ he said; ‘’tis a foreign sweetmeat.

A D A N G E R S I G N A L

They meant well, being ignorant that we eat not such things. When they first come across the black water they will even fling bread.'

As he spoke he threw the offending morsel into the desert and spat piously. Dhunni looked after it with doubt and regret in her eyes.

'I deemed it a stone,' she said at last. 'Think you it would have been sweet, like our sweetmeats?'

'Oh, graceless one!' cried the old man again. 'Lakshmi be praised thou didst take bread for a stone, else wouldst thou have eaten it and have been a lost soul.'

'I would have tried if I liked it, anyhow,' said Dhunni shamelessly. And that night, while her grandfather slept in the red-hot furnace to avoid the chillness of dawn, the moon found something else on the wide waste of sand, beside the crematorium and the regulation barrier, to yield her the tribute of a shadow. It was Dhunni on all fours seeking high and low for the chunk of chocolate, and when she found it she sat up with it in her little brown paws and nibbled away at it for all the world like a squirrel; the result of which experiment being that she smiled brilliantly at every train from that time forth, perhaps in hopes of more chocolate, perhaps from gratitude for past chocolate, perhaps because she really was beginning to be more sensible.

'It is being born to her in lavish manner,' said old Dhunnu boastfully to an emissary of the future mother-in-law, who came as far as the village to in-

A D A N G E R S I G N A L

quire of the future bride's growth and health. 'Go, tell them she gives "line clear" as well as I do, but that she is not yet of an age for the married state.'

In his heart of hearts, however, he knew very well that the time could not be far distant when he could no longer delay parting with the girl, who was fast shooting up into a tall slip of a thing. And then what should he do, for the fever-fiend had a fast grip on him now—a firmer hold than he had upon life. Sometimes for days and days he could scarcely creep to the gate when the mail train passed, while, as for the 'goods' and 'mixed,' these low-caste trains he left entirely to Dhunni's mercy; and safely, since the desire for the danger signal seemed to have passed with the possession of responsibility—and chocolate!

Thus Dhunni, far from the eyes of the world, which would have sent her remorselessly into the slavery of mother-in-law, grew tall and slender, and even in her old dust-coloured skirt and bodice caused Craddock the engine-driver, as he sped by, an occasional pang of regret as he remembered another tall girl with velvety eyes.

So time passed until, as luck would have it, a wedding-party from the village where the future mother-in-law resided chose to try a short cut over the desert, and actually crossed the line at level crossing number 57; the result being that Dhunni's readiness for the married state became known, and a fortnight or so afterwards she sat looking at the new suit of clothes and some jewels which had been sent to her, with

A D A N G E R S I G N A L

an intimation that the bridal procession would come for her in a week's time.

The presents were poor enough in themselves, but then Dhunni had never seen anything so bright before ; except of course the red flag. And though the little round mirror set in the bridal thumb-ring does not allow of much being seen at a time, Dhunni saw enough to make her eyes still more velvety, her smile still more bewitching.

'Favour is deceitful and beauty is vain,' grumbled her grandfather in equivalent Hindi, but it had no effect on the girl. All that day she went about with an odd, half-dazed look on her face, and when the women who had brought the presents left in the afternoon, she went and sat down by the gate feeling vaguely that it was someone else and not the old Dhunni who was sitting there. The mail train had passed an hour before, and the 'goods' was not due till midnight, so there was no chance of anything to interrupt the level monotony she knew so well ; and yet as she sat leaning against the gate-post with the green flag beside her, she was waiting for something—for what, she did not know. But the certainty that life held something new was thrilling to her very finger-tips.

It was a yellow sunset full of light and peace. Then out of it came suddenly a faint roll as of distant thunder. She was on her feet in an instant, listening, waiting. Ah ! this was new, certainly. This she had never seen before. An engine with a single carriage

A D A N G E R S I G N A L

coming full speed out of the golden West. Was she to give 'line clear' to this? or——

The sound of a girl's laugh rang out into the light, and a scarlet veil, deftly twisted round a bâton, hung clear into the line.

'What in the world's the matter?' asked an English boy, as Craddock and the Westinghouse brake combined brought the final quiver to the great shining fly-wheel. He was a tall boy, fair-haired, blue-eyed, imperious. The girl had given a little gasp at the look on his face as he had leapt from the still-moving train to come towards her, though she now stood looking at him boldly, the improvised signal still in her hand.

'What is it, Craddock? Ask her. You understand their lingo, I don't.'

Craddock, leaning over the side of the cab, surveyed the picture with a magisterial air. 'Sorry I brought 'er up, sir, tho' seein' a red rag it's kind o' second natur' when your 'and's within reach o' a brake, sir. And then she never done it before—not all these years.'

'But what is it? I don't understand——'

'Saving your presence, sir,' replied Craddock cheerfully, 'there ain't no reason you shouldn't, for it don't take any knowledge o' the lingo, sir; no more o' any kind o' knowledge but what you're up to, sir, being, as the sayin' is, born o' Adam—o' Adam *an'* Eve. It's mischief, sir, that's what it is—mischief, and there ain't much difference in the colour o' that, so far as I see, sir.'

The boy's face showed nothing but angry, almost

A D A N G E R S I G N A L

incredulous, surprise for an instant, then something else crept into it, softening it. 'By George! Craddock,' he said argumentatively, 'I'd no notion they could look—er—like that. She is really quite a pretty girl.' He could not help a smile somehow; whereat, to his surprise, she smiled affectionately back at him, the deliberately bewitching smile born of that chunk of chocolate. It recalled him to a sense of injured importance.

'This is most annoying, and when so much depends on my catching up the mail,' he continued. 'She will be stopping the next train, too, I suppose; but it can't be allowed, and she ought to be punished. I'll take her along and leave her at the first station for inquiry, they can easily send another signaller by the down train. Tell her, Craddock.'

'Better *pukro 'er 'ath*,¹ sir,' remarked the latter sagely as he prepared to descend, 'else she might 'oof it into the wilderness like one of them ravine deer. Just you *pukro 'er 'ath*, sir, while I *samjhaó*² her.'

Dhunni, however, did not attempt to run; she only shrank a little when the boy's white hand closed on hers. After that she stood listening to Craddock's violent recriminations quite calmly. In truth she expected them, for in those old games of brag with grandad they had gone further than words—up to hanging, in fact. Yet still not so far as this queer tremor of half-fearful, half-joyful expectation. That was new, but pleasant, and filled her eyes with such light

¹ Take her hand.

² Explain to.

A D A N G E R S I G N A L

that Craddock stroked his corn-coloured beard and shook his head mournfully.

'She's a deal 'arder than I took 'er for, seein' 'er, always as it were, sir, from a different sp'eer. A deal worse. If I'd a pair o' bracelets ready they might give 'er a turn, but I've told 'er she'll go to 'ell in every lingo I know, for fear she mightn't understand, and I'm blest if she care a hang!'

The boy gave a resentful laugh.

'I'll make her care before I've done with her. There! you there!—what's your name?—stick her with you into the cook-room. No; shove her into my carriage and I'll do *chowkidar*¹ till I can hand her over. Now, Craddock, on with the steam, or I shall miss my connection. Confound the girl!'

It was easy to confound her in the abstract; easy also to glower at the offender crouched in the off corner before you threw yourself into the arm-chair in the other and began to read the last number of a magazine by the waning light. But what was to be done when it was gradually being borne in on you that a pair of velvety eyes, wild as a young deer's, were watching you fearlessly. She was a good plucked one, at any rate. Craddock had said she was as hard as nails and a bad lot. Well, he ought to know; but she did not look bad, not at all. The eyes were good eyes, full of straightforward curiosity, nothing more. There she was, bending down to try the texture of the carpet with her finger, as if nothing had occurred—the little mon-

¹ Watchman.

key ; and what white teeth she had when she met his involuntary smile with another.

After that, under cover of his book, he watched her furtively. It was what is called an inspection carriage, a regular room on wheels, and the boy, new to the honour and glory of such a thing, had hung pictures on its walls, curtains to its windows. There was even a vase of flowers beside the newly lit lamp on the centre table. The lamp had a pink shade too, which threw a rosy light on everything, above all on that slender figure crouching in the far corner. And outside the golden sunset was fast fading into cold greys.

' You want to know what *that* is,' he said suddenly, in English, laying down his book and pointing in the direction where her eyes had been fixed. An expectant look came to them, and he stood for a moment irresolute. Then he rose with an impatient shrug of his shoulders, crossed to the small harmonium which lay open, set his foot to the pedal and struck a single note. She drew back from the sound, just, he thought, as she had drawn back from his hand, and then looked at him as she had looked at him then. By Jove ! she had eyes !

Still looking at her he sat down to the instrument and played a chord or two out of sheer curiosity. Her finger went up to her lip, she leaned forward, a picture of glad surprise. And then a sudden fancy seized him. He had a tenor voice, and there was a song upon the desk. Singing in a train, even in a single carriage on a smooth line, was a poor performance, but it would be fun to try.

A D A N G E R S I G N A L

'The Devout Lover,' of all songs in the world! The humour, the bitter irony of it struck him keenly and decided him. And as he sang he felt with a certain anger that he had never sung it better—might never sing it so well again.

When he turned to her again it struck him that she recognized this also, for she was leaning forward half on her knees, her hands stretched out over the seat. No one could have listened more eagerly.

In sudden petulance he rose and went to the window. There was only a bar of gold now on the horizon, and, thank Heaven! they had come faster than he thought—or he wasted more time in tomfoolery—for they were already entering the broken ground. That must be the first ravine, dark as a ditch; so ere long he would be able to get rid of those curious eyes. Powers above! Was fate against him? Was he never to arrive at his destination? And what did Craddock mean by putting the brake hard on again when they were miles away even from a level crossing? He was out on the footboard as they slackened, shouting angry inquiries long before Craddock's voice could possibly come back to him through the lessening rattle.

'Danger signal comin' down the line. On a trolly, I think, sir. Somethin's wrong.'

Apparently there was, and yet the English voice which sang out of the darkness had a joyful ring of triumph in it, and the friendly hand which followed the voice, after a minute or two, shook the boy's hand amid warm congratulations on the narrowest escape;

A D A N G E R S I G N A L

for no one had thought it could possibly be done—that warning could possibly be given in time. It was the veriest piece of luck. Briefly, just after the mail had passed, a big culvert had given not two miles farther down the line. They had telegraphed the information both ways of course, though, as no train was due for hours, there was plenty of time for repairs. Then had come the return wire, telling of the boy's start to overtake the mail on urgent business. Everyone had said it was too late; and, after all, it had been a matter of five minutes or less. The veriest luck indeed! If they had been five minutes earlier . . . !

The boy looked solemnly at Craddock, and the light of the red lamp, dim as it was, showed a certain emotion in both faces.

'That's about it, sir,' said Craddock, a trifle huskily. 'An' I tellin' 'er she'd go to 'ell! Lordy! ain't it like a woman to 'ave the last word?'

He said no more then, but when it had been decided to return the way they had come, and take a branch line farther down, and when the trolley with its red signal had slipped back silently into the night, he came and stood at the carriage door for a moment. And as he looked at the figure crouching contentedly in the corner, he stroked his beard thoughtfully again, and went on as if no interval had come between his last words and his present ones.

'But she saved our lives, sir, by stoppin' us, that's what she done, sure as my name's Nathaniel James, and when a girl done that, a man's got nothin' left but,

A D A N G E R S I G N A L

as the sayin' is, to act fair an' square by 'er—fair an' square.'

'Just so, Craddock,' replied the boy, with a queer stiffness in his voice. 'We'll drop her at the gate again, and—and it shall be just—just as if it—as if it hadn't happened.' Then he added in a lower voice, 'Spin along as fast as you can, man, and let's have done with it.'

'I won't leave 'er a bounce for a whistle, sir,' said Craddock laconically.

So the carriage with the rosy light streaming through the windows shot forth into the darkness in front, and the sparks from the engine drifted into the darkness behind, and the roar and the rush drowned all other sounds. Perhaps Craddock whistled in the cab to make up for not being able to whistle on his engine. Perhaps the boy sang songs again in the carriage because he could not speak to the girl. Anyhow, they were both silent when the fly-wheel quivered into rest once more beside level crossing number 57.

'Stop a bit,' said a rather unsteady voice as a girl's figure paused against the rosy light of the open door. 'It's too long a step. I'll lift you down.'

Craddock, looking over the side, turned away and gave a sympathizing little cough as if to cover some slighter sound. Perhaps he knew what would have happened if he had been in the boy's place.

The next instant, someone sprang into the cab and turned the steam hard on, someone with a half-pained, half-glad look on his face.

A D A N G E R S I G N A L

‘ Now then, Craddock, right we are ! ’

And Craddock, as he bent to look at the indicator, answered, ‘ Right it is, sir ; fair and square. Full pressure and no mischief come of it.’

‘ I hope not,’ said the boy softly ; ‘ but it is a bit hard to know—to know what is fair and square—with—with some people.’

Perhaps he was right ; for Dhunni stood gazing after the red and green lights with a dazed look on her face. The danger signal had come into her life—the train had stopped, and then—and——?

THE WINGS OF A DOVE

I

A TALL lanky boy of about seventeen sat half-way down the great flight of steps at the eastern entrance of the Jumma Mosque at Delhi, looking anxiously at a cage full of avitovats, twinkling little brown birds with a suspicion of red amid their brown ; flitting, slender, silent little birds, never still for a second. He looked at them half-satisfied, half-doubtful, and as he looked he turned a four-anna bit over and over in his brown fingers. For though he was dressed as a European his complexion was as dark as that of most high-caste Indians, and darker by a good bit than that of a girl some one or two years his junior, who sat fondling a pigeon on a higher step, and looking askance, also, at the avitovats.

'The *Huzoor* can have them for five annas if he chooses,' said the evil-looking birdcatcher who was squatting among his wares. Though he used the honorific title, his manner was absolutely devoid of courtesy, and he turned without the least change in it to address a friend in the parrot line, who sat with his cages on the step above. For this particular flight of steps is set apart to the selling of birds, especially after prayer-time on Fridays, when the pigeon-racers and

THE WINGS OF A DOVE

quail-fighters buy and bet in the wide portico of roys stone and pale marble. The avitovats—having no value to the sportsman—commanded but a slack sale, so the boy had plenty of time in which to make up his mind ; to judge by appearances a difficult task, for his face was undeniably weak, though handsome, kindly, and soft. He wore a white drill suit, clean, but sadly frayed ; and his grey wideawake was many sizes too large for his small head. Perhaps it was the knowledge of this, combined with a vague suspicion that the hat knew quite as much about bird-fancying as the head within it, which made him, in his perplexity, take it off, place it on his slack knees, and drop the four-anna piece into it, as if it had better decide the question. Sitting so, with bare head, he looked handsomer than ever, for its shape was that of a young Adonis. It was, in fact, the only thing about him, or his life, which corresponded with his name, Agamemnon Menelaus. The surname, Gibbs, used after those eight resounding syllables to come as a shock to the various chaplains who at various times had undertaken to look after young Gibbs's spiritual welfare. Some of them, the more experienced ones, acquiesced in that and many another anomaly after their first glance at his soft, gentle face, for it was typical of that class of Eurasian which makes the soul of a chaplain sink within him. Others reached the same conclusion after a reference to the mother, Mrs. Gibbs. She was a very dark, pious woman, tearfully uncertain of all things save that she, being a widow, must be supported by

THE WINGS OF A DOVE

charity ; by the offertory for preference. She, however, made the problem of his name less intrusive by calling him Aggie, as if he had been a girl.

‘ They are young birds, as the *Huzoor* could see for himself if he had eyes,’ went on the birdcatcher, with a yawn. ‘ Next moulting they will be as red as a *rutti* seed. But it is five annas, not four.’

Aggie had no lack of eyes outwardly ; they were large and soft as velvet, and, as they looked down at the *avitovats*, showed a thick fringe of curling lashes. But there was an almost pathetic guilelessness in them, and one brown hand hesitated about his breast-pocket. He had another *anna* there, part of a monthly stipend of one rupee for attending the choir, which he had intended to spend on sweets—preserved pumpkins for choice ; but the *avitovats*, with their promise of scarlet plumage, cozened his indolent, colour-loving eyes almost as much as the thought of the sweets did his palate. Should he, should he not ? The mere sight of the birds was a strong point in their favour, and his hand had sought the inside of his pocket when a whisper met his ear.

‘ Hens ! ’

It was unmistakable, and he turned to look at the girl behind him. She was sitting on her heels, crunched up chin and knees, holding her pigeon close to her face as if to hide it. And as he turned she sidled farther away along the step with the curious gliding shuffle peculiar to native girls and pigeons. ‘ *Ka-boo-tri, ka-boo-tri, ka-boo-tri,*’ gurgled the pigeon, as

THE WINGS OF A DOVE

if pleased at the motion. It was a blue-rock, showing a purple and green iridescence on the breast, and the girl's dress matched its colourings exactly; for her ragged cotton skirt had washed and worn to a dark neutral tint, and the shot-silk bodice, tattered and torn, with tarnished gold embroidery on its front, took gleams of a past glory from the sunlight. Her veil had faded in its folds to a sort of cinnamon brown, touched with blue, and both it and the bodice were many sizes too large for her slight, childish figure.

'If the *Huzoor* is not to buy let him give place to those who will,' suggested the birdcatcher cavalierly. He had been too far to catch the whisper, and thought to clinch the bargain by a threat.

Agamemnon Menelaus looked at him nervously. 'Are you sure they are young birds?' he suggested timidly. 'They might—they might be hens, you know.' There was a half-perceptible quiver of his handsome head as if to watch the girl. The birdcatcher broke out into violent asseverations, and Aggie's hand, out of sheer trepidation, went into his pocket again.

'Hens!'

This time there was a ring almost of command in the tone, and Agamemnon obeyed it instinctively by rising to go. '*Ka-boo-tri, ka-boo-tri,*' came the gurgle of the pigeon; or was it partly a chuckle from the girl as she sidled still farther along the step?

'So! that is good riddance,' said the birdcatcher to the parrot-seller angrily. 'God made the rainbow, but

THE WINGS OF A DOVE

the devil made the dye-pot ! Yet I thought I had sold them at last. He looked not so sharp as that.'

The parrot-seller yawned. ' 'Twas Kabootri did it,' he remarked, with bland indifference. ' She said " hens." '

The birdcatcher stared at him incredulously, then passed the look on to the girl, who still sat with the crooning pigeon held close to her face.

' Kabootri ? ' he echoed, with an uneasy laugh. ' Nay, neighbour, 'twas she who told me but an hour ago that if I sold not something this Friday she would kill herself. 'Tis a trick of words she hath learned of her trade,' he went on, with a curious mixture of anger and approbation. ' But it means something to a man who hath cursed luck and a daughter who has a rare knack of getting her own way.'

The parrot-seller gave a pull at a bulbul-seller's pipe as if it were his own. ' Thou wilt be disgraced if thou give it her much longer, friend,' he said calmly. ' 'Tis time she were limed and netted. And with no mother either to beat her ! '

The uneasy laugh came again. ' If the Nawab's pigeon wins we may see to a son-in-law ; but she is a child still, neighbour, and a good daughter too, helping her father more than he helps her.' There was a touch of real pride in his tone.

' She said " hens," ' retorted the parrot-seller. ' Ask her if she did not.'

' Kabootri ! Kabootri ! '

The call was a trifle tremulous, but the girl rose with

THE WINGS OF A DOVE

alacrity, throwing the pigeon into the air with the deft hand of a practised racer as she did so. The bird was practised also, and without a flutter flew off into the blue like an arrow from a bow ; then, as if confused by finding itself without a rival, wheeled circling round the rose-red pile till it settled on one of the marble cupolas.

‘ What is’t, father ? ’ she asked, standing on the upper steps and looking down on the two men. She was wonderfully fair, with a little pointed chin, and a wide, firm mouth curiously at variance with it, as were the big, broad, black eyebrows with the liquid softness of her eyes.

‘ Why didst say “ hens,” Kabootri ? ’ replied her father, assuming the fact as the best way of discovering the truth, since her anger at unjust suspicion was always prompt.

‘ Why ? ’ she echoed absently. ‘ Why ? ’ Then suddenly she smiled. ‘ I don’t know, father ; but I did ! ’

The birdcatcher broke out into useless oaths. His daughter had the dove’s name, but was no better than a peacock, a peacock in a thief’s house ; she had lost him five annas for nothing.

Kabootri’s eyebrows looked ominous. ‘ Five annas ! Fret not for five annas ! ’ she echoed scornfully, turning on her heels towards the gateway ; and flinging out her arms she began the pigeon’s note—the pigeon’s name and her own—‘ *Ka-boo-tri, ka-boo-tri, ka-boo-tri !* ’ It was as if a bird were calling to its mate, and the answer came quickly in the soft whir of many wings

THE WINGS OF A DOVE

as the blue-rocks, which live among the rose-red battlements and marble cupolas, wheeled down in lessening circles.

‘ Lo ! there is Kabootri calling the pigeons,’ remarked an old gentleman, who was crossing citywards from the Fort ; a stoutish gentleman, clothed immaculately in filmy white muslin with a pale pink inner turban folded across his forehead and showing triangularly beneath the white outer one. He was one of the richest bankers in Delhi ; by religion a Jain, the sect to whom the destruction of life is the one unpardonable sin, and he gave a nervous glance at the distant figure on the steps.

‘ Nay ! partner, she was in our street last week,’ put in his companion, who was dressed in similar fashion ; ‘ and Kabootri is not as the boys, who are ever at one, with sparrows, for a pice or two. She hath business in her, and a right feeling. She takes once and hath done with it till the value is paid. The gift of the old bodice and shawl which my house gave her, kept us free for six months. Still, if thou art afraid, we can go round a bit.’

Kabootri from her coign of vantage saw them sneaking off the main road, and smiled at their caution contemptuously ; but what they had said was true, she had business in her, and right feeling. It was not their turn to pay ; so, cuddling a captured pigeon to her breast, she set off in an opposite direction, threading the bazaars and alleys unerringly, and every now and again, crooning her own name softly to the bird,

THE WINGS OF A DOVE

which, without a struggle, watched her with its onyx eyes, and called to her again.

'There is Kabootri with a pigeon,' remarked the drug-seller at the corner to his clients, the leisurely folk with ailments who sit and suggest sherbets to each other, and go away finally to consult a soothsayer for a suitable day on which to take their little screw or phial of medicine. 'She will be going to Sri Parasnâth's. It is a while since she was there, and Kabootri is just, for a bird-slayer.'

Apparently he was right as to her purpose ; for at the turn leading to Sri Parasnâth's place of business she sat down on a step, and after a preliminary caress fastened a string deftly to one of the pigeon's feet. Then she caressed it again, stroking its head and crooning to it. Finally, with a bound she started to her feet, flung it from her to flutter forlornly in the air, her level black eyebrows bent themselves downwards into a portentous frown, and her young voice rang out shrilly, almost savagely, '*Yabee, choori-yâb-mâr. Aibee, choori-yâb-mâr !*' ('Hillo ! the bird-slayer ! Hullo, the bird-slayer !')

'Look out, brother,' said a fat old merchant in spectacles, who was poring over a ledger in the wooden balcony of an old house. 'Look out and see who 'tis. If 'tis Kabootri, thou canst take eight annas from the box. She will not loose the bird for less ; but if 'tis a boy with sparrows, wait and bargain.'

It was Kabootri, no doubt. Who else but she came like a young tiger-cat down the lane, startling the shadowy silence with strange savage threats ? Who but

THE WINGS OF A DOVE

she came like a young Bacchante, dancing with fury, showing her small white teeth, and, apparently, dragging her poor victim by one leg, or whirling it cruelly round her on a string, so that its fluttering wings seemed like her fluttering veil? 'Give! *Ai*, followers of Rishâba, give, or I kill! *Ai*, Jain people, give, or I take life!'

Sri Parasnâth put his turbanless bald head with its odd little tuft of a pigtail over the balcony, and concealing his certainty under a very creditable show of dismay, called down curses solemnly on her head. He would send for the police; he would have her locked up and fined. She might take the bird and kill it before his very eyes if she chose, but he would not pay a *pice* for its freedom. To all of which Kabootri replied with a fresh method of doing the victim to death. She played her part with infinite spirit, but her antagonist was in a hurry to get some orders for Manchester goods off in time for the English mail, so his performance was but half-hearted, and ere she had well begun her list of horrors, the eight-anna bit came clinking down on the brick pavement, and she, as in duty bound, had to squat beside it and loosen the string from the pigeon's leg. As usual she had to drive it from settling on her head or shoulders by wild antics, until it fluttered to a neighbouring roof, where it sidled along the copings with bright eyes watching her and with soft cooings, of '*ka-boo-tri, ka-boo-tri!*'

Once beyond Jain eyes, she always gave back the call so as to assure herself that no harm had been done.

THE WINGS OF A DOVE

This time by some mischance there happened to be a broken feather in the wing, and her lips set themselves over the task of pulling it out, that being a necessity to even flight. After which, came renewed caresses with a passion in them beyond the occasion; for indeed the passion in Kabootri was altogether beyond the necessities of her life—as yet. True, it was not always such plain sailing as it had been with Sri Paras-nâth. New-comers there were, even old customers striving in modern fashion to shake themselves free from such deliberate blackmailing, who needed to be reminded of her methods—methods ending in passionate tears over her own cruelty in the first quiet spot she could reach. But of late years she had grown cunning in the avoidance of irretrievable injury. A dexterous slipping of the cord would leave her captive free, and she herself at liberty to go round to some poultry-seller and borrow a poor fowl under sentence of death, with which she would return to unflinching execution. These things had to be, and her young face would be like a Medea's as she did the deed. But even this was of the past, since folk had begun to recognize the uselessness of driving the girl to extremities. Thus her threat, 'I will kill, I will kill!' brought at most but a broken feather in a dove's wing, and a passionate cuddling of the victim to her breast.

This one was interrupted brusquely by a question—
'Why did you say "hens"?''

It was Aggie. He happened to live close by in a tumble-down tenement with two square yards of

THE WINGS OF A DOVE

verandah, which were the mainstay of Mrs. Gibbs's position. They, and the necessity for blacking Agamemnon Menelaus's boots when he went to the choir, separated her effectually and irrevocably from her native neighbours. He did not sing now—his voice had begun to crack—but he looked well in a surplice, and the Chaplain knew he would have to pay the monthly stipend in any case. So, this being Friday, Aggie was on his way to evensong, polished boots and all; they were really the strongest barrier between him and the tall girl with her pretty bare feet who stood up to face him, with a soft, perplexed look in the eyes which were so like his in all but expression; and even that merged into his in its softness and perplexity.

'Because—because they *were* hens,' she said with an odd little tremble in her voice.

So the two young things stood looking at each other, while the pigeon gurgled and cooed: '*Ka-boo-tri, ka-boo-tri, ka-boo-tri!*'

II

'So, seest thou, Kabootri, thou wilt turn Christian, and then I will marry thee.' Aggie's outlook on the future went so far, and left the rest to Providence; the girl's went farther.

'*Trra!*' she commented. 'That is fool's talk. I am a bird-slayer: how could we live without the pigeons and the mosque? Thou hast no money.'

They were sitting on the flight of steps once more, with a cage full of scarlet avitovats between them, so

THE WINGS OF A DOVE

that the passers-by could not see the hands that were locked in each other behind the cage.

'Then I will marry thee, and become a heathen,' amended Agamemnon, giving a squeeze to what he held. She smiled, and the soft curves of her chin seemed to melt into those of her long throat, as she hung her head and looked at him as if he were the most beautiful thing in her world. 'That is wiser,' she said, 'and if thou dost not marry me I will kill myself. So that is settled.' He gave another squeeze to her hand, and she smiled again. Then they sat gazing at each other across the avitovats, hand in hand like a couple of children; for there was guilelessness in his eyes and innocence in hers.

'Lo!' she said suddenly. 'I know not now why I said "hens." ' She paused, failing to find her own meaning, and so came back to more practical matters. 'Thou hadst best be buying the birds, Aga-Meean,¹ [for so, to suit her estimate of him, she had chosen to amend his name], or folk will wonder. And if thou wilt leave them in the old place in the Queen's Gardens I will fetch them away, and thou canst buy them of me again next Friday.'

There was no cunning in her manner, only a solid grasp on the exigencies of the position. Had he not a mother living in a house with a verandah, and was not her father a bird-seller? Was he not at that moment betting on the Nawab's coming pigeon-race on the platform above them? Despite these exigencies, how-

¹ *Aga*, noble; *Meean*, prince.

THE WINGS OF A DOVE

ever, the past three weeks had been pleasant ; if Aggie was still rather hazy as to the difference between young cocks and old hens, it was from no lack of experience in the buying of avitovats. Kabootri used to give him the money wherewith to buy them, and leave it again in the hiding-place where she found the birds ; so it was not an expensive amusement to either of them. And if Agamemnon Menelaus had not grasped the determination which underlay the girl's threats of taking life, it was from no lack of hearing them, ay, and of shivering at them. The savage, reckless young figure, startling the sunshine and shadow of the narrow lanes with its shrill cry, ' I will kill, I will kill, yea, I will take life ! ' had filled him with a sort of proud bewilderment, a sacred admiration. And other things had brought the same dizzy content with them. That same figure, sidling along the rose-red copings like any pigeon, to gain the marble cupolas where the young birds were to be found—those young birds which must be taught betimes to play her game of Life and Death, as all her world must be taught to play it—was fascinating. It was disturbing when it sat close to him in the Queen's Gardens, eating rose comfits bought out of the blood-money, and cooing to him like any dove, while the pigeons in the trees above it called ' *Ka-boo-tri, ka-boo-tri!* ' as if they were jealous.

The outcome of it all, however, was, as yet, no more than the discarding of boots in favour of native shoes, and the supplanting of the grey wideawake by a white-and-gold saucer-cap which only cost four annas, and

THE WINGS OF A DOVE

lay on the dark waves of the lad's small head as if it had been made for it. Kabootri clasped her hands tight in sheer admiration as she watched him go down the steps with the cage of scarlet avitovats ; but Mrs. Gibbs, while admitting the superlative beauty of the combination, burst into floods of lamentation at the sight, for it was a symptom she had seen often in lads of Aggie's age. His elder brother had begun that way ; that elder brother who was now a thorn in the side of every chaplain from Peshawur to Calcutta by reason of his disconcerting desire to live as a heathen and be saved as a Christian.

So, when Aggie, with a spark of unusual spirit, had refused to put on the boots which she had made the servant (for, of course, there had to be a servant in a house with a verandah) black with the greatest care, in other words, when he had refused to go to church, since Indian shoes and a Delhi cap are manifestly incompatible with a surplice, she went over to a bosom friend and wept again. But Mrs. Rosario was of a different type altogether. She seldom wept, taking life with a pure philosophy, and making her living out of her handsome daughters by marrying them off to the first comer on the chance of his doing well.

'There is no-need-to cry,' she said comfortably in the curious half-*staccato*, half-*legato* intonation of her race. 'Your boy is-no-worse than all boys. If they do not get-on-a place or get married they fall-into mischief. God made them-so, and we must bow to His will, as we are Christians and not heathen. And

THE WINGS OF A DOVE

girls are-like-that too. If they-do-not-get-married they will give trouble. So, if you ask my advice, I say that if-you-cannot-get-your poor boy on a place you had better get-him-a-wife, or the bad black woman in the bazaar will-lead-him-to bad ways ; for he is a handsome boy, almost as handsome as my Lily. He is too young, perhaps, and she-is-too-young-too, but if you like he can beau my Lily. You can ask some-one-for clothes, and then he can beau Lily to the choir. And give a little hop in your place, Mrs. Gibbs. When my girls try me I give hops. It makes them all-right, and your boy-will-be-all-right too. You live too quiet, Mrs. Gibbs, for young folk ; they will have some pleasure. So get your son nice new clothes, and I-will-give-a-hop at my place, and send my cook to help yours.'

This solid sense caused Mrs. Gibbs to lie in wait for the Chaplain in his verandah, armed with a coarse cotton handkerchief soaked in patchouli, and an assertion that Aggie's absence from the choir was due to unsuitable clothes. And both tears and scent being unbearable, she went back with quite a large bundle of garments which had belonged to a merry English boy who had come out to join his parents, only to die of enteric fever. 'Give them away in charity, my dear,' the father had said in a hard voice, 'the boy would have liked that best himself.' So the mother, with hopeless tears over the scarce-worn things, had sent them over to the Chaplain for his poor.

THE WINGS OF A DOVE

Thus it happened that before Kabootri had recovered from her intense delight at the cap, Mrs. Gibbs was laying out a beautiful suit, cut to the latest fashion, to await Aggie's return from one of those absences which had become so alarmingly frequent. There was a brand-new red tie, also a pair of white gloves, striped socks, and patent-leather pumps. To crown all, there was a note on highly scented paper with an L on it in lilies of the valley, in which Mrs. Rosario and her daughters requested the pleasure of Mr. Agamemnon Menelaus Gibbs's company at a hop that evening. What more could a young man like Aggie want for his regeneration? Nothing apparently: it was impossible, for instance, to think of sitting on the steps with Kabootri in a suit made by an English tailor, a tall hat, and a pair of white kid gloves. Yet the fine feathers had to be worn when, in obedience to the R.S.V.P. in the corner of the scented note, he had to take over a reply in which Mr. Agamemnon Menelaus Gibbs accepted with pleasure, etc., etc.

'O mamma!' said Miss Lily, who received the note in person, with a giggle of admiration. 'I do like him; he is quite the gentleman.' The remark, being made before its object had left the tiny courtyard, which the Rosarios dignified by the name of compound, was quite audible, and a shy smile of conscious vanity overspread the lad's handsome face.

About the same time, that is to say when the sinking sun, still gloriously bright, had hidden itself behind the vast pile of the mosque, so that it stood out in pale

THE WINGS OF A DOVE

purple shadow against a background of sheer sunlight, Kabootri was curled up on a cornice with her back to one of the carven pilasters of a cupola, dreaming idly of Aga-Meean in his white-and-gold cap. He had not been to the steps that day, so from her airy perch she was keeping a watch for him ; and as she watched, her clasp on the pigeon she was caressing tightened unconsciously, till with a croon and a flutter it struggled for freedom. The sound brought other wings to wheel round the girl expectantly, for it was near the time for the birds' evening meal. Sharâfat-Nissa, the old canoness who lived on the roof below the marble cupolas, had charge of the store of grain set apart for the purpose by the guardians of the mosque ; but as a rule Kabootri fed the pigeons. She did many such an odd job for the queer little cripple, half pensioner, half saint, who kept a Koran class for poor girls and combined it with a sort of matrimonial agency ; for the due providing of suitable husbands to girls who have no relations to see after such things is a meritorious act of piety ; a lucrative one also, when, as in Sharâfat-Nissa's case, you belong to a good family, and have a large connection in houses where a good-looking maiden is always in request as an extra wife. So, as she taught the Holy Book, her keen little eyes were always on the alert for a possible bride. They had been on Kabootri for a long time ; hitherto, however, that idle, disreputable father downstairs had managed to evade the old canoness. But now that the great pigeon-race of the year was being decided on the grassy plain between

THE WINGS OF A DOVE

the mosque and the Fort, his last excuse would be gone ; for he had all but promised that, if he lost, Sharâfat-Nissa should arrange the sale of the girl into some rich house, while if he won, he had promised himself to give Kabootri, who in his way he really liked, a strapping young husband fit to please any girl ; one who would allow her the freedom which she loved even as the birds loved it.

She, however, knew nothing of this compact. So when the great shout telling of victory went up from the packed multitude on the plain, she only wondered with a smile if her father would be swaggering about with money to jingle in his pocket, or if she would have to cry, ' I will kill, I will kill,' a little oftener than usual. Sharâfat-Nissa heard the shout also, and, as she rocked backwards and forwards over her evening chant of the Holy Book, gave a covetous upward glance at the slender figure she could just see among the wings of the doves. Downstairs among the packed multitudes, the shout which told him of defeat made the birdcatcher also, reprobate as he was, look up swiftly to the great gateway which was fast deepening to purple as the sun behind it dipped closer to the horizon ; for one could always tell where Kabootri was by the wheeling wings.

' Have a care ! ' he said fiercely to the discreetly veiled figure that evening as it sat behind the narrow slit of a door blocking the narrow stair, which Kabootri trod so often on her way to and from the roof. ' Have a care, sister ! She is not easily limed or netted.' A

THE WINGS OF A DOVE

sort of giggle came from the veil. 'Yea, brother! Girls are all so, but if the cage is gilt——'

It was just a week after this, and the sunlight behind the shadow of the mosque was revelling in sheeny iridescence of her tattered silk bodice, that Kabootri's figure showed clear and defiant against the sky, as she stood on the uppermost, outermost coping of the gateway. There was a sheer fall beneath her to the platform below. She had just escaped from the room where she had been caged like any bird for three whole days, and the canoness on the roof below was looking up at her prisoner helplessly.

'Listen, my pigeon, my beloved!' she wheedled breathlessly. 'Come down, and let us talk it over together.'

'Open the door, I say,' came the shrill young voice. 'Open, or I kill myself! Open, or I kill!'

'Heart's blood! Listen! He shall be a young man, a handsome man.'

Handsome, young! Was not Aga-Meean young? Was he not handsome? The thought made her voice shriller, clearer. 'Open the door, or I kill! Open, or I take life!' The words were the words of the young tiger-cat that had been wont to startle the sunshine and the shadow, making Sri Parasnâth seek his cash-box incontinently; but there was a new note of appeal in their determination; for if it was but three days since she had been caged, it was six since she had seen Aga-Meean. What had become of him? Had he sought and missed her? Had he not?

THE WINGS OF A DOVE

‘Listen, my bird,’ came the wheedling voice; ‘come down and listen. Kabootri! I swear that if thou likest not this one I will let thee go and seek another. I swear it, child.’

The sidling feet edged nearer along the coping, for this respite would at least give time. ‘Swear it on the Holy Book. So—in thy right hand and in thy left. Let me see it.’ She stretched her own hands out over the depths, and at the sight the expectant pigeons came wheeling round her.

‘I swear by God and His prophet,’ began the old canoness, gabbling as fast as she could over the oath; but above her breathless mumble came a little shriek, a little giggle, and a girl’s voice from below. ‘Ah, Mr. Gibbs! You are so naughty, so very naughty!’

Kabootri could not understand the words, but the giggle belongs to all tongues, and it jarred upon her passion, her despair. She looked down, and saw a well-known figure, changed utterly by a familiar, yet unfamiliar, dress. She saw two girls about her own age, with slim waists, huge sleeves, and hats. It was Aga-Meean, escorting the two Miss Rosarios, who had expressed a desire to see the mosque. ‘And she saw something else; she saw the look which the prettiest of the two girls gave to Aga-Meean; she saw the look he gave in return. Her sidling feet paused; she swayed giddily.

‘Kabootri! Kabootri!’ called the woman on the roof eagerly, anxiously, ‘I have sworn it. Come down,

THE WINGS OF A DOVE

my pigeon, come down, my dove! It makes me dizzy.'

So that was Aga-Meean! The mistress said sooth; the wings made one dizzy, the wings—the wings of a dove!

She had them! For the wind caught the wide folds of her veil, and claimed a place in the wide, fluttering sheen of her bodice, as she fell, and fell, and fell, down from the marble cupolas, past the purple shadow of the great gateway, to the wide platform where the doves are bought and sold. And some of the pigeons followed her, and some sat sidling on the coping, calling '*Ka-boo-tri, ka-boo-tri!*' But those of them who knew her best fled affrighted into the golden halo of sunshine behind the rose-red pile.



SHUB'RÂT

A NIGHT OF RECORD

I

THE church gong hung from the level branch of a spreading sirus tree, whence the slight breeze of dawn, rustling the dry pods of a past summer and stirring the large soft puff-blossoms of the present, seemed to gather up a faint whisper and a fainter perfume to be upborne into space—farther and farther and farther—by the swelling sound-waves of the gong as it vibrated to old Deen Mahomed's skilful stroke.

More like a funeral knell, this, calling the dead to forgetfulness, than a cheerful summons of the living to give thanks for life, for creation and preservation. You could hear each mellow note quiver into silence, before—loud and full with a sort of hollow boom—the great disc of bronze shook once more to its own resounding noise ; seeming in its agitation to feel the strangeness of the task more than the striker ; though, to say sooth, few things in earth or heaven were more incongruous than this church chime and the man who rang it. For Deen Mahomed, as his name implies, was of the faith of Islâm ; fierce-featured, hawk-eyed, with the nameless look of his race ; a look suiting the

S H U B ' R Â T

curved sword he wore, in virtue of his office as watchman, better than the brass badge slung over his shoulder proclaiming him to be a member of the Indian Church Establishment—that alien Church in an alien land.

And yet the old man's figure fitted close with the building he guarded ; for despite the new title of St. John's-in-the-Wilderness, the church remained outwardly what it had been built to be—a Mahomedan tomb. Its white dome and corner cupolas rose familiarly into the blue sky beyond the sirus trees, where, even at this early hour, a hint of coming heat was to be seen in a certain pallidness and hardness. Within, beneath that central dome, encircled now by pious Christian texts, lay buried a champion of another God, whose name, interlaced into a thousand delicate trceries, still formed the decoration of each architrave, each screen ; lay buried, let us hope, beyond sight or sound of what went on above his helplessness.

How this change had come about is of no moment to the story. Such things have been, nay, are, in India, seeming in truth more fantastic when set down in pen and ink than they do when seen in the warm clasp of that Indian sunlight which shines down indifferently on so many a strange anomaly of caste, and creed, and custom. Most likely when the wave of evangelical fervour reached the East to prepare the way for the Great Sacrifice of purification by blood and fire which came to native and alien alike in the horrors and wonders of ' Fifty-seven,' some pious bureaucrat had felt a certain militant satisfaction in handing over a

S H U B ' R Â T

heathen edifice to Christian uses. Such things have their sentimental side ; and this tomb had been—like many another—Crown property, and so had become ours by right of conquest. No one else, at any rate, had laid claim to it, except, in some vague mysterious way, old Deen Mahomed, and he only to its guardianship as being ‘ the dust of the feet of the descendants of *Huzrut-Ameer-ulla-moomeereen-ulli-Moortáza*, the Holy’—in other words, an inheritor of the saints in light.

Now this sort of title is one not likely to find favour in alien eyes. Despite this, Deen Mahomed remained guardian of the Church of St. John’s-in-the-Wilderness, thanks to that ineradicable sense—one may almost say common sense—of justice which dies hard in the Englishman of all creeds. The only difference to the old man—at least so the authorities assumed—being that he wore a sword, a badge, chimed the church gong, and received the munificent sum of five rupees a month for performing these trivial duties ; which latter fact naturally put the very idea of discontent beyond the pale of practical politics. Apparently Deen Mahomed was of this opinion also ; at least he never hinted at objection.

Even now, as he stood unmovable save for one slowly swinging arm, there was neither dislike nor approval on the fierce yet indifferent face looking out at the white glare of the tomb beyond the sirus shade, at the worshippers—laden with Bibles and Prayer-books—passing up the steps, crossing the plinth, and so disappearing within, and at the long line of vehicles—from the

SHUB'RÂT

Commissioner's barouche to the clerk's *palki*—seeking the shade to await their owners' return when the service should be over. Not so wearisome a task as might be imagined, since the big bazaar was near for refreshment or recreation ; so near, in fact, that any solemn pause was apt to give prominence to the twanging of unmentionable *sutaras* or bursts of unmistakable laughter. For, as ill-luck would have it, not only the bazaar, but the very worst quarter of it, lay just behind the fringe of date palms which gave such local colour to the sketches of the church which the Chaplain's wife drew for their friends at home. And yet, in a way, this close propinquity to the atrocious evils of heathendom had its charm for the little colony of the elect who lived beside the Chaplain. In the still evenings, when the scent of the oranges which were blossoming madly in the watered gardens round the houses filled the air, the inhabitants would sit out among the fast-fading English flowers, and shake their heads in sorrowful yet satisfied sympathy with their own position as exiles in that invisible Sodom and Gomorrah. Invisible, because St. John's-in-the-Wilderness rose between them and it, shutting out everything save the impartial sky, whence the sunshine poured down alike on Christian and heathen, just and unjust. Thus the visible church was to them as the invisible one ; a veil between them and the people.

It was a square building recessed and buttressed to a hexagon. The Chaplain, however, preferred to call it a St. Andrew's cross, and perhaps he was right. Per-

S H U B ' R Â T

haps again Deen Mahomed and his cult had really had as little to say to its form as the Chaplain ; such responsibility being reserved to the primeval *sraddha*, or four-pointed death-offering. Be that as it may, there was a coolness between the new parson and his watchman, owing to the former declaring it to be a scandal that the latter should hold such office in a Christian place of worship, when he was not even an inquirer ! Certainly he was not. He neither inquired of others nor tolerated inquiry from them. He slept on the plinth of nights, chimed the gong by day, and kept the rest of his life to himself. That was all.

Not one of the congregation filing into the church that morning knew more of him than this. So he stood indifferently waiting for the first note of the harmonium to tell him his task was over ; listening for it to pulsate out into the sunshine, and, blending with the last note of the gong, go forth upon the endless waves of ether. Go forth hand in hand, plaintiff and defendant—a quaint couple seeking extinction or, perhaps, the Great White Throne against which the ripple of life beats in vain.

The note came this morning as on other mornings, and Deen Mahomed turned, indifferent as ever, to his house. It was a mud-and-thatch hovel clinging to one side of a miniature tomb, half in ruins, which some follower of the saint had built within the shadow of his master's grave. It stood just opposite the flight of steps up which a late worshipper or two was hurrying, glad, even at that early hour, to escape from the glare

S H U B ' R Â T

of sunlight. Yet on the warm dust before the hovel a child of four or five sat contentedly making a garden, while the coachman of a smart barouche and pair drawn up close by looked down with interest on the process. 'Twas God Almighty, says Bacon, who first planted a garden; but ever since the task has had a strange charm for man, and even Deen Mahomed paused with a smile for the little water plots and pretended paths.

'Thou hast encroached on thy neighbour's land to-day, Rahmut,' he said, 'and gone into the roadway. Lo! the *Sirkar* will make thee pay revenue, little robber.'

'Trust them for that,' put in the coachman quickly; then he chuckled. 'But the boy grows; yea! he grows to take *his father's place*.'

The old man frowned, yet laid his hand gently on the child's head, as he said evasively, 'Have a care, Rahmut, whilst I am gone, and water thy rose, or 'twill die in this heat.'

He pointed to a drooping white rosebud which the little boy had stuck in his centre bed.

'Ay,' replied the coachman, ''tis hot indeed for the time of year.'

'As hot a *Shub'rât* as I remember. God send the night be cool and bring peace.'

'God send it may,' echoed the coachman piously, his evil-looking face showing the worse for his unction. 'God send all get their deserts on this the great Night of Record.'

He made the remark without a quiver, oblivious, apparently, of a long series of petty thefts against his

S H U B ' R Â T

master's grain, and many another peccadillo of the past year. But then, though every faithful Mahomedan believes that on *Shub'rât* God comes to earth with all the saints in glory, there, in the presence of the Dead, to write his Record for the coming year upon the foreheads of the Living, things had a knack of going on after this judgment much as they did before ; especially in regard to such trivial offences as the theft of grain from a horse.

' God send they may,' re-echoed the old man, suddenly, fiercely. The words seemed to cut like a knife ; yet once more he laid his hand upon the child's head almost in caress.

' Have a care, child, for thyself and thy rose. Thou didst not pick it, sure, from the *sahib's* garden ? ' he added hastily.

Rahmut threw up a handful of dry dust and spread his little skinny arms in gay denial.

' Lo ! *nâna* ! what a thought ! I begged it of the *padre's baba*. He comes ever to the assemblage with flowers, and the white *mem*, his mother, bade him give it to me, and that too—she brought it in her bag of books.'

He pointed with pride to some strips of torn white paper stuck in the sand as walls to the garden. Then his tone changed to tears. ' O *nâna* ! *nâna* ! thou hast spoilt it !—thou hast spoilt it ! ' For the old man in sudden fury had swept the remains of the offending tract from their foundations, crushed them to a ball, and flung it across the sunshiny roadway to the plinth,

S H U B ' R Â T

where it skimmed along the smooth surface to roll finally to the very door of the church.

'No tears, child—no tears, I say,' came in a fierce order. 'If thou wouldst not have me beat thee, no tears. Thou shalt not even play with such things, thou shalt not touch them. I, the dust from the feet of the saints, say it.'

So, leaving the child whimpering, he turned to the hovel, muttering to himself. Rujjub, the coachman, nodded to the next on the rank.

'The elephant escaped through the door and his tail stuck in the keyhole,' he said, with a sneer. '*Meean fakeer-ji* (the holy man) will not have his grandson touch the Evangel, and chimes the church gong himself. But, in truth, he loves the old tomb—God smite those who defile it—as he loves the boy. God smite those who sent the boy's father over the Black Water to fight the infidel in China. Lo! even holy war is accursed with such leaders.'

'Bah! Rujjub,' retorted his fellow cheerfully. ''Tis so sometimes without fault. "He climbed the camel to get out of the way, and still the dog bit him," say the wise. The old man is half-crazed; all know that. And as for thee! Did thy master pay as fair as mine we should have less zeal from some folk, should we not, brothers? A fist full of rupees brings peace, since there is no clapping with one palm!'

A chuckle ran round the squatting grooms at this home-thrust at Rujjub the grumbler—Rujjub the agitator. The sweet high voices of English women

S H U B ' R Â T

singing a missionary hymn came floating out through the open doors: A hovering kite, far in the blue, swooped suddenly, startling the green-and-gold parrots—inlaid like a mosaic pattern on the white dome—to screaming flight for shelter towards the sirus trees. Little Rahmut, forgetting his tears, built fresh walls of sand to his garden, and watered the fading rosebud anew.

Then a sort of murmurous silence, born of the measured cadence of one voice from within and the lazy, listless gossiping without, settled down over the glare and the shade. Only from the hut came no sound at all. No sound even from the little tomb where the old watchman knelt, his hands on his knees in the attitude of prayer, his keen eyes staring straight into the soft darkness—for the only entrance was so small that the crouching figure blocked out the day. But darkness or light were alike to Deen Mahomed, lost as he was to the present in a dull memory and hope. Perhaps when, years before, he had first begun to hold his service in defiance of that other worship, he may have put up some definite petition. Now there was none. Only the cry so seldom heard by human ears, yet whose echoes so often resound like thunder through the world—

How long, O Lord! how long?

So he knelt, paralysed by the very perplexity of his own prayer, until a louder burst from the harmonium and a sudden hubbub among the carriages warned him that

S H U B ' R Â T

the service was over. He rose indifferently, and came out into the sunlight. It lay now like a yellow glaze over the white stucco of St. John's-in-the-Wilderness, over the gaily dressed congregation hurrying to escape from it in their cool homes, over Rujjub whipping his horses viciously, obedient to a sharp order from the Englishman who had just handed a delicate woman into the carriage, over Rahmut's garden with its white rosebud. And then——!

The whole thing was past in a moment. A plunge—a swerve! a little naked imp making a dive before those prancing feet with an eager, childish cry; then a shriek from the pale-faced lady standing up in the barouche, a small figure, crushed and bleeding, in an old man's arms, and a shout seeming to fill the air.

'Rahmut! Ah, mercy of the most High! Justice! Justice!'

'Don't look, my dear,' said an English voice; 'please remember that you—you had better drive home. It was the child's own fault. Doctor, hadn't we better drive home?'

'Yes, yes. Drive home, dear lady!' said another English voice in hurried approach to the scene. 'You are not fit. Now then, good people, stand back, please. I must see the boy.'

It was easy enough to ensure compliance so far as the pale faces, made paler by shocked sympathy, went; easier still to enforce it from the darker ones accustomed to obey orders given in that foreign accent. But how about the old man standing like a stag at

S H U B ' R Â T

bay, clutching the child to his breast, and backing towards his hut with a loud, fierce cry?

' Touch him not ! Touch him not ! Touch him not ! '

' We are only driving him crazy,' said the Doctor aside, ' and I doubt if it is much good. I saw the wheel pass right over the chest. Let him be——'

' But it seems so cruel, so unchristian,' protested the Parson.

The Doctor smiled oddly.

' That doesn't alter the fact. You're no good here ; no more am I. Here, you orderly ! Run like the devil to the dispensary and tell Faiz Khân he's wanted. If he is out, one of the Mahomedan dressers—a Mahomedan, mind you—and he is to report to me. Come along, Parson. The kindest thing we can do is to go away. It's humiliating, but true.'

Apparently it was so, for a sort of passive resignation came to the straining arms as the dark faces crowded round once more with plain, unhesitating, unvarnished comments.

' Lo ! he is dead for sure. Well, it is the Lord's will, and he hath found freedom. See you, he wanted his flower, the foolish one.'

' 'Twas the horses did it,' said another. ' They are evil-begotten beasts. Rujjub hath said so often.'

' Ai ! *burri bāt* ! All things are ill-begotten to one ill-begot, and Rujjub's beasts know he stints their stomachs-full,' put in a third. ' When I drove them in Tytler *sahib's* stable they were true-born (*i.e.* gentle)

S H U B ' R Â T

as the *sabib* was himself. Then he took pension and went home to *Wilâyet*, and I have a new master who only keeps a *phitton* (phaeton). It is undignified ; but, there, 'tis fate, nought else.'

But Deen Mahomed, sitting with the dead child in his arms, was not thinking of Rujjub or his horses, of *phittons* or barouches, not even of chariots of fire—in a way not even of Rahmut himself—but simply of a tract and a child's tears—those last tears which were to be a last memory for ever and ever. Yet even this thought brought no definite emotion, only a dull wonder why such things should be. A wonder so vague, so dull that when Faiz Deen arrived to give the verdict of death, the old man, yielding readily to the inevitable, echoed the truism that it was God's will.

What else, indeed, could it be to the fierce old fanatic with his creed of *kismet* ?

That same evening he lingered awhile in the big bazaar on his way homewards from the sandy stretch of desertland beyond the city walls, where he had left a new ant-hill of a grave among the cluster belonging to his people ; lingered not for pleasure but for business, since the events of the day had made it necessary that he should spend yet a few more annas from the five rupees he gained by wearing a sword, a badge, and chiming the church gong. For it was *Shub'rât* ; the night—the one night of all the long year—when the souls of the dead are permitted to visit the ancestral home. Therefore little Rahmut, so lately numbered

S H U B ' R Â T

amongst the cloud of witnesses, must not be neglected ; he must find his portion like the others—a Benjamin's portion of good things such as children love.

It was already dark, but even there in the bazaar the little lamps of the dead shone from many a house, giving an unwonted radiance to the big brass platters of the sweetstuff shop where the old man paused to haggle over full weight and measure ; since even in feasting the dead, the living must look after themselves. A strange sight this. The noisy bazaar, more full of stir than usual, since many a thrifty soul had put off marketing till the last. Overhead, the myriad-hued stars which, in these foggy climes, come back to memory as an integral part of the Indian night, and, beneath them, the little twinkling lamps set out in rows. Thousands of them—so much was certain from the pale suffused light showing like a dim aurora above the piled shadow of the city. On every side the same soft radiance, save towards St. John's-in-the-Wilderness rising dark beyond the fringe of palm-trees. This Feast of All Souls was not for it, and to the crass ignorance of those who lived in the garden-circled houses behind it the twinkling lights set for the dead were but a sign of some new wickedness in Sodom and Gomorrah, or, at best, of some heathen rite over which to shake the head regretfully.

So in front of the cavernous shop, visible by the glow, the old watchman fumbled beneath his badge with reluctant hand for a few pence, listening the while to Rujjub's account of the morning's tragedy

given in the balcony above, where the latter was lounging away his leisure among heavy perfumes and tinkling jewels. One of the hearers looked down over the wooden railing, and nodded cheerfully at the chief mourner.

'It is God's will, father; no one was to blame.'

'To blame,' echoed Rujjub, with a thick laugh, for he was in the first loquacity of semi-intoxication and still full of resentment. 'The *sabibs* say I was to blame. It is their way. But they will learn better. It is our blame if we do this and that. My brother's blame that he would not fight over the seas and get killed like Rahmut's father. 'Tis our blame for everything except for our rupees and our women—the *sabibs* can stomach them.'

Someone laughed, a gay laugh chiming to the tinkle of jewels.

'*Wâb!* thou mayest laugh now, Nargeeza!' continued the man's voice savagely; 'thou knowest not what virtue means——'

'“*Ari*, brother, thou hast a hole in thy tail, said the sieve to the needle,”' quoted the other voice amid a louder titter and tinkle. Rujjub swore under his breath.

'So be it, sister! but a day of reckoning will come, and thou be damned for thy dalliance with the infidel. Yea, it will come; it will surely come.'

The words echoed through Deen Mahomed's heart and brain as, leaving the shrill squabble with its running accompaniment of titters and tinkles and broad

S H U B ' R Â T

masculine guffaws behind him, he made his way back to his empty hovel.

' Yea, it will come ; it will surely come ! ' What else was possible when God, a justly offended God, was above all ? We in the West have not a monopoly in the Tower of Siloam ; that belongs to every religion, to none more rightfully than to the Faith of Islâm, which leaves all things in the hand of Providence.

The belief brought a certain fierce patience to the old man as he finished his preparations for the ghostly guests who, on that night alone, could partake of the hospitality of the living. The lamps, mere wicks and oil in little shells of baked clay, were ready luted to their places by mud, outlining the interior of the tomb where Deen Mahomed performed all the rites of his religion ; outlining it so strangely, that when they were lit, the old man, kneeling before the white cloth spread upon the floor, looked as if prisoned in a cage of light. There was no darkness then, only that soft radiance reflected from the newly whitewashed walls upon that fair white sheet on which, with calm ceremony, he laid the little earthen platters of food one by one, designating their owners by name.

' This to my grandson, Rahmut, who has found freedom.'

That was the last dedication, and the old voice trembled a little, ever so little, as it went on into the formula of faith in one God, speaking through the mouths of his Prophets. Not one prophet to-night but many, for were they not all on earth—Moses and

S H U B ' R Â T

Elias, Jesus and Mahomed—taking part in the Great Assize where those dead ancestors would plead for the living who had inherited their sins, their failures ?

Before such a tribunal as that there must be justice—justice for all things just and unjust.

So, half-kneeling, half-sitting, the old Mahomedan waited for the finger of God to write his fate for the coming year upon his forehead—waited, resting against the wall, for the spirits of the dead to come silently, invisibly, to the feast prepared for them. And Rahmut had a Benjamin's portion to console him for those tears—those last tears !

II

The church gong was chiming again, and again it was *Shub' rât*. Not for the first time since Deen Mahomed had put little Rahmut's platter of sweets among the Feast of the Dead, for the years had passed since the child had sat in the sunlight planting gardens. How many the old man did not consider ; in point of fact it did not matter to his patience. In the end God's club must fall on the unjust ; so much was sure to the eye of faith. Something more also, if the signs of the times spoke true. When the bolt fell it would not be from the blue ; the mutterings of the storm were loud enough, surely, to be heard even by those alien ears. And yet Deen Mahomed, fanatic and church-chimer, standing on that hot summer evening beneath the sirus blossoms smiting the voice from the quavering disc of metal, knew no more than this—that the time

S H U B ' R Â T

was at hand. Whether it was always so, or whether the great Revolt was always pre-arranged, can scarcely at this distance of time be determined. Certain it is that many, like old Deen Mahomed, were simply waiting ; waiting for the sign of God to slay and spare not.

Clang !

The mellow note went out into the darkening heat ; for the sun was almost at its setting. St. John's-in-the-Wilderness showed all the whiter against the deepening shadows of the sky.

Clang !

Out into the stillness, the silence, as it had gone all these restless, waiting years.

Clang !

Yet again ! How long, O Lord, how long ?

* * * * *

God and his Prophet ! what was that ?

A clamour, and above it—familiar beyond mistake—one word, '*Deen! Deen!*' ('The Faith! The Faith!').

Deen ? Yes, Deen Mahomed !—A hot breath of wind from the east rustled the dry pods and stirred the perfumed puff-blossoms—a scorching wind from the east whirled the clamour and the cry into the old man's ears—through his brain—through his heart.

'Deen ! Deen ! Deen !'

The disc of metal, unstruck, hung quivering ; slower and slower, fainter and fainter, till, like the breath of one who dies in his sleep, the vibration ceased. But

S H U B ' R Â T

the note went alone into eternity, seeking judgment ;
for the harmonium was mute.

' *Deen ! Deen ! Deen !* '

The cruellest cry that men have made for themselves !

* * * * *

It had been long dark ere the old man returned ; to what he scarcely knew. As he stumbled from sheer fatigue on the steps, and sat down to rest a space, he remembered nothing save that the call had come and that he had obeyed it. He had smitten more than metal, and had smitten remorselessly. A terrible figure this ; his old hands trembling with their work ; his fierce old eyes ablaze ; his garments stained and bloody. Beyond the white pile of the tomb the red flare of burning roof-trees told their tale, and every now and again an uproarious outburst of horrid menace, and still more horrid laughter, came to hint that the work was not all complete. Yet overhead the stars shone peacefully as ever ; and, above the city, the pale radiance of the death-feasts showed serene.

The remembrance of the Festival and its duties came to the old man's mind in a great pulse of satisfied revenge. The tomb was his again ; nay, not his, but the saints, of whose feet he was the dust—those saints who would visit the world that night.

He sat for an instant staring over the way towards his own hovel, then rose slowly, showing in every movement the fatigue of unusual exertion. Well, he had done his part ; he had slain, and spared not at

SHUB' RÂT

all. The others might linger for the sake of greed ; as for him, his work was done.

With a fierce sigh of relief he turned and limped towards the church. It was darkness itself within the deep doorway ; but the lamps were there, and he had flint and steel. So one by one the lights shone out, revealing the sacrilegious accessories of that past worship. And yet it was not light enough for *Shub'rât*, not even when he had lit the candles on the altar. Still, that was soon remedied. A journey or two backwards and forwards to his own hovel, and a ring of flickering oil cressets encircled the table where it was his turn, at last, to spread the feast of the dead. So large a feast that there was not room enough for all, and he had to set a square of lights round a white cloth laid upon the floor.

' This to my grandson Rahmut, on whom be peace for ever and ever.'

That, once more, was the last offering ; and as the old man's voice merged into the sonorous Arabic formula of faith it trembled not at all, but echoed up into the dome in savage, almost insane triumph and satisfaction.

This was *Shub'rât* indeed—a Night of Record. And there was room and to spare beneath those architraves, which displayed the Great Name again and again in every scrap of tracery, for all the saints in heaven to stand and judge between him and his forefathers for the sin that had been done, the blood that had been spilt—those forefathers who had ridden through the

S H U B ' R Â T

land with that cry of '*Deen ! Deen !*' on their lips, and had conquered. As they, the descendants, would conquer now ! Yea ! let them judge ; even Huzrut Isa ¹ himself and the blessed Miriam his mother ; for there were times when even motherhood must be forgotten. His trembling old hands rested now on his bent knees ; his head was thrown backward against the lectern on which the Bible lay open at the lesson for the day ; his face, stern, even in its satisfaction, gazed at the twinkling death-lights, among which little Rahmut's platter of sweets showed conspicuous. Yea ! let them come and judge ; let them write his fate upon his forehead.

Fatigue, content, the very religious exaltation raising him above the actual reality of what was, and had been, all conspired to bring about a sort of trance, a paralysis, not of action deferred, as in the past, but of deeds accomplished. And so, after a time, with his head still against the lectern, he slept the sleep of exhaustion. Yet even in his dreams the old familiar war-cry fell more than once, like a sigh, from his lips,

' Deen ! Deen ! '

From without came a faint reflection of the blood-red glare of fire in the sky, a faint echo of the drunken shouts and beast-like cries of those who had taken advantage of the times to return to their old evil-doings. Within, there was nothing save the pale radiance of the twinkling lamps set round the Death-Feast, the old man asleep against the lectern, and silence.

¹ Jesus.

S H U B ' R Â T

Until, with a whispering, kissing sound, a child's bare feet fell upon the bare stones—a tiny child, still doubtful of its balance, with golden hair shining in the light. A scarlet flush of sleep showed on its cheeks, a stain of deeper scarlet showed on the little white night-gown it wore. Perhaps it had slept through the horrors of the night, perhaps slept on, even when snatched up by mother or nurse in the last wild flight for safety towards a sanctuary. Who knows? Who will ever know half the story of the great Mutiny? But there it was, sleep still lingering in the wide blue eyes attracted by the flickering lights. On and on, unsteadily, it came, past the old man dreaming of *Jehâd*, past the lights themselves—happily unhurt—to stretch greedy little hands on Rahmut's sweeties. So, with a crow of delight, playing, sucking, playing, in high havoc upon the fair white cloth.

* * * * *

Was it the passing of the spirits coming to judgment which set the candle flames on the altar a-swaying towards the cressets below them, or was it only the rising breeze of midnight? Was it the Finger of Fate, or only the fluttering marker hanging from the Bible above which touched the old man's forehead?

Who knows? Who dares to hazard 'Yea' or 'Nay' before such a scene as this? Surely, with that blood-red flare in the sky, those blood-red stains on earth, the passion and the pity, the strain and stress of it all need a more impartial judgment than the living can give.

SHUB' RÂT

So let the child and the old man remain among the lights flickering and flaring before the unseen wind heralding a new day, or the unseen Wisdom beginning a new Future.

* * * * *

Deen Mahomed woke suddenly, the beads of perspiration on his brow, and looked round him fearfully as men do when roused, by God knows what, from a strange dream. Then, to his bewilderment, came a child's laugh.

Saints in heaven and earth! Was that Rahmut? Had he come back for his own in that guise? Did the *padre-sahibs* speak true when they said the angels had golden hair and pale faces? He crouched forward on his hands like a wild beast about to spring, his eyes fixed in a stupid stare. There, within the ring of holy lights, on the fair white cloth, was a child with outstretched hands full of Rahmut's sweets and a little gurgle of delight in the cry which echoed up into the dome.

'Nanna, *dekho!* (see)—*dekho*, nanna.'

It was calling to its nurse, not to the old man; yet, though he had begun to grasp the truth, his heart thrilled strangely to the once familiar sound.

*Nâna!*¹ And it had chosen Rahmut's portion, had claimed the child's place—the child's own place!

What was that? A step behind him—a half-drunken laugh—the dull red flash of a sabre which

¹ Grandfather.

had already done its work—Rujjub, with a savage yell of satisfaction, steering straight as his legs would carry him to a new victim. But he had reckoned without that unseen figure crouching in the shadow by the lectern ; reckoned without the confused clashing and clamour of emotion vibrating in the old man's bosom beneath the stroke of a strange chance ; reckoned, it may be, without the Fate written upon the high narrow forehead which held its beliefs fast prisoners.

There was no time for aught save impulse. The devilish face, full of the lust of blood, had passed already. Then came a cry, echoing up into the dome—
' *Deen ! Deen ! God is great !* '

The old watchman stood, still, with that stupid stare, gazing down at the huddled figure on its face which lay before him, so close that the warm blood gurgling from it horridly already touched his bare feet.

What had he done ? Why had he done it ? To save the child who had claimed the child's place ?—To keep faith ?—Well, it was done ! and those were voices outside—men coming to pillage the church, no doubt. There was silver in the chest, he knew—*that*, of course, had been Rujjub's errand, and his comrades would not be far behind—they would find him, and then ?—Yea ! the die was cast, and, after all, it had been Rahmut's platter ! With these thoughts clashing and echoing through heart and soul Deen Mahomed sprang forward, seized the child, stifling its cries with his hand, and disappeared into the darkness. None too soon, for the yell of rage greeting the discovery of the murdered

S H U B ' R Â T

comrade reached him ere he had gained the shelter of the trees. Whither now? Not to his house, for they would search there; search everywhere for those survivors whose work remained as witness to the existence of some foe. Alone he could have faced the pillagers, secure in his past; but with the child—the child struggling so madly? And the last time he had held one in his arms it had lain so still. O Rahmut! Rahmut! mercy of the Most High! Rahmut! Rahmut!

The words fell from his lips in a hoarse whisper as he ran, clinging to the darkest places, conscious of nothing save the one fierce desire to get away to some spot where the child's cries would not be heard—where he would have time to think—some spot where the work had been done already—where nothing remained for lustful hands!

The thought made him double back into the cool watered gardens about the little group of houses beyond the church. The flames were almost out now, and in one roof only a few sparks lingered on the remaining rafters. Here would be peace; besides, even if the cries were heard, they might be set down to some wounded thing dreeing its deadly debt of suffering. A minute afterwards he stood in a room, unroofed and reeking yet with the smell of fire, but scarcely disturbed otherwise in its peaceful, orderly arrangements—a room with pictures pasted to the walls and faintly visible by the glare with toys upon the floor, and a swinging cot whence a child had been

S H U B ' R Â T

snatched. This child, perhaps—who knows? Anyhow it cuddled down from Deen Mahomed's arms into the pillows as if they were familiar.

'Nanna! Nanna!' it sobbed pitifully. 'Swing, swing, sleep has come.'

'Lo! I swing. Sleep, my child,' replied the old man quietly, as his bloodstained hand began its task. The wonder of such task had passed utterly, and had any come to interrupt it he would have given his life calmly for its fulfilment. Why, he did not know. It was Fate. So the old voice, gasping still for breath, settled into a time-honoured lullaby, which has soothed the cradle of most bairns in India, no matter of what race or colour.

'O crow! Go crow!

Ripe plums are so many.

Baby wants to sleep, you know.

They're two pounds for a penny.'

So over and over in a low croon, mechanically he chanted, till the child, losing its fear in the familiar darkness, fell asleep. And then? In a sort of dull way the question had been in Deen Mahomed's mind from the beginning without an answer, for he had gone so far along the road, simply by following close on the Finger of Fate; and now there was no possibility of turning back. For woe or weal he had taken the child's part, he had accepted the responsibility for its life, even to the length of death in others. Not that he cared much for the consequences of the swinging blow he had dealt to Rujjub—he was no true man.

S H U B ' R Â T

What then ? There was no chance of concealing the child. It slept now, but ere long it would waken again, and cry for 'Nanna, Nanna.' That must be prevented for a time at any rate. The chubby hands still clasped one of Rahmut's sweeties, and the old man stooped to break off a corner, crumble it up with something he took from an inner pocket, and then place it gently within the child's moist, parted lips, which closed upon it instinctively. He gave a sigh of relief. That was better ; that would settle the cries for some hours, and before then he must have made over the child to other hands. Yes, that was it. He must somehow run the gauntlet of his comrades, and reach the entrenched position which the infidels—curse them !—had defended against odds such as no man had dreamed of before. It was seven miles to the north, that cantonment, which would have been destroyed but for those renegades from the Faith who had stood by their masters, and that handful of British troops which had refused to accept defeat. Seven miles of jungle and open country, alive with armed and reckless mutineers to whom a man in mufti was fair game, no matter what his colour or his race, lay between him and that goal, and Deen Mahomed's grim face grew grimmer as he raised the sleeping child, pillows and all, wrapped them in a quilt, and slung the bundle on his back—slung it carefully, so as to give air to the child and freedom to his arms. He might need it if they tried to stop him. He gave a questioning glance at the sky as he came out into the garden where the scent of the

SHUB'RÂT

orange-blossoms drifted with the lingering spirals of smoke. Not more than an hour or two remained before the dawn would be upon them. He must risk detection, then, by the short cut through the bazaar ; better that than the certainty of discovery later on in the daylight by those ready for renewed assault upon the entrenchment.

' *Whok'umdar,*' challenged the sentry, ceremoniously set, as in peaceful times, at the city gate.

' God is great, and Mahomed his prophet,' replied the old man, without a quiver. That was true ; he was for God and his Prophet when all was said and done. But *this* was little Rahmut's guest—*this*. He passed his hand over his forehead in a dazed sort of way.

' Look at his *loot,*' hiccoughed one of a group in the street ; ' before God, he hath more than his share in the bundle. Stop, friend, and pay toll.'

' What my sword hath won my sword keeps,' retorted Deen Mahomed fiercely. ' Better for thee in Paradise, Allah Buksh, if thou hadst smitten more and drunk less.'

' Let be ; let be !' interrupted another. ' 'Tis Deen Mahomed, the crazy watchman. I'll go bail, he hath no more than he deserves for this day's work. And he is a devil with that sword of his when he is angry. Lo ! I saw him at the corner, mind you, where the *sahibs*——'

But Deen Mahomed had passed from earshot. Passed on and on, through dark streets and light ones,

S H U B ' R Â T

challenged jestingly, or in earnest ; and through it all a growing doggedness, a growing determination came to him to do this thing, yet still remain, as ever, a guardian of the Faith. This for Rahmut's sake, the other for the sake of the Tomb, because he was the dust of the footsteps of the saints in light.

Out in the open now, with the paling light of dawn behind him and a drunken Hindu trooper riding at him with a cry of '*Râm ! Râm !*' So they dared to give an idolatrous cry, those Hindu dogs whose aid had been sought to throw off the yoke—who would soon find it on their own shoulders. A step back, a mighty slash as the horse sped by, maddened by bit and spur, a stumble, a crash, and an old man, with a strange bundle at his back, was hacking insanely at his prostrate foe. No more, '*Râm, Râm*' for him ; that last cry had served as the death-farewell of his race and creed.

On again, with a fiercer fire in the eyes, through the great tufts of tiger-grass isolating each poor square of God's earth from the next, and making it impossible to see one's way. On and on swiftly, forcing a path through the swaying stems, whose silvery tasselled spikes above began to glitter in the level beams of the rising sun.

Then suddenly, without a word of warning, came an open sandy space, a brief command.

'Halt !'

So soon ! It was nearer by a mile than he had expected, and there was no chance of flight ; not unless

S H U B ' R Â T

you made that burden on your back a target for pursuing bullets. A fair mark, in truth, for the half-dozen or more of rifles ready in the hands of the cursed infidels.

'Who goes there?' came the challenge in the cursed foreign tongue. He gave one sharp glance towards the picket, and bitter hatred flared up within him; for there was not even an officer there who might, perchance, understand. Yet there was no doubt, no doubt at all, even to his confused turmoil of feeling, as to 'who came there.' A foe! a foe to the death when this was over! So with a shout came his creed—

'God is great, and Mahomed his prophet.'

Then in a sort of gurgle, as he fell forward on his face, it finished in '*Deen! Deen! Deen!*'

* * * * *

'Nicked 'im, by gum! Nicked the ole beast neat as a ninepin,' said one of the picket.

'Wonder wot he come on for like that?' said another.

'B——y ole Ghazi, that's wot he was,' put in a third. 'They gets the drink aboard, an' don't care for nothing but religion—rummy start, ain't it? Hello! wot's that?—a babby, by the Lord!'

For the shock of Deen Mahomed's fall had awakened the child.

As they drew it from the blanket, the sun tipped over the tiger-grass, and fell on its golden curls.

S H U B ' R Â T

Shub'rât was over.

'I wonder wot 'e were a-goin' to do with it?' remarked the inquirer, turning the dead body over with his foot, and looking thoughtfully at the face, fierce even in death. But no one hazarded a theory, and the Finger of Fate had left no mark on the high, narrow forehead. But the Night of Record was over for it also.

A BIT OF LAND

HE stood in the hot, yellow sunshine, his air of modest importance forming a halo round his old, rickety figure, as with one hand he clung to a plane-table, old and rickety as himself, and with the other to one of those large-eyed, keen-faced Indian boys who seem to have been sent into the world in order to take scholarships. The old man, on the contrary, was of the monkey type of his race, small, bandy-legged, and inconceivably wrinkled, with a three days' growth of grey beard frosting his brown cheeks ; only the wide-set brown eyes had a certain wistful beauty in them.

In front of those appealing eyes sat a ruddy-faced Englishman backed by the white wings of an office tent, and deep in the calf-bound books and red-taped files on the table before him. On either side, discreetly drawn apart so as to allow the central group its full picturesque value, were tall figures, massive in beards and wide turbans, in falling folds of dingy white and indigo blue ; massive also in broad, capable features, made broader still by capable approving smiles over the old man, the boy, and the plane-table. So standing, they were a typical group of Jât peasantry appealing with confidence to English justice for the observance of Indian custom.

A BIT OF LAND

‘ Then the head-men are satisfied with this *ad interim* arrangement ? ’ asked the palpably foreign voice. The semicircle of writers and subordinate officials on the striped carpet beyond the table moved their heads like clockwork figures to the circle of peasants, as if giving it permission to speak, and a chorus of guttural voices rose in assent ; then, after village fashion, one voice prolonged itself in representative explanation. ‘ It will be but for three years or so, and the Shelter-of-the-World is aware that the fields cannot run away. And old Tulsi knows how to make the Three-Legged-One work ; thus there is no fear.’ The speaker thrust a declamatory hand in the direction of the plane-table, and the chorus of assent rose once more.

So the matter was settled ; the matter being, briefly, the appointment of a new *putwari*, in other words the official who measures the fields, and prepares the yearly harvest-map, showing the area under cultivation on which the Land Revenue has to be paid ; in other words again, the man who stands between India and bankruptcy. In this particular case the recently defunct incumbent had left a son who was as yet over young for the hereditary office, and the head-men had proposed putting in the boy’s maternal grandfather as a substitute, until the former could pass through the necessary modern training in the Accountants’ College at headquarters. The proposition was fair enough, seeing that Gurditta was sure to pass, as he was already head of the queer little village school which the elders

viewed with incredulous tolerance. And, to tell the truth, their doubts were not without some reason ; for on that very day when the Englishman was inspecting, the first class had bungled over a simple revenue sum, which anyone could do in his head with the aid, of course, of the ten God-given fingers without which the usurer would indeed be king. The master had explained the mistake by saying that it was no fault of the rules, and only arose because the boys had forgotten which was the bigger of two numbers ; but that in itself was something over which to chuckle under their breaths and nudge each other on the sly. The lads would be forgetting next which end of the plough to hold, the share or the handle ! But *Purmesbwar*¹ be praised ! only upon their slates could they forget it, since a true-born Jât's hand could never lose such knowledge.

So, underlying the manifest convenience of not allowing a stranger's finger in their pie, the elders of the village had a secondary consideration in pleading for old Tulsi Râm's appointment ; a desire, namely, to show the world at large, and the Presence in particular, that there had been *putwaries* before he came to cast his mantle of protection over the poor. Besides, old Tulsi, though he looked like a monkey, might be Sri Hunumân² himself in the wisdom necessary for settling the thousand petty disputes, without which the village would be so dull. Then he was a real saint to boot, all the more saintly because he was willing to forgo

¹ The Universal God.

² The Monkey-god.

his preparation for another world in order to keep a place warm for his grandson in this.

And after all it was only for three years ! They, and Tulsi, and the Three-Legged-One could surely manage the maps for so long. If not, well, it was no great matter, since the fields could not possibly run away. So they went off contentedly in procession, Tulsi Râm clinging ostentatiously to the plane-table, which, by reason of its straighter, longer legs, looked for all the world as if it were taking charge of him, and not he of it.

It looked still more in possession as it stood decently draped beside the old man as he worked away at the long columns of figures ; for the mapping-season was over, and nothing remained but addition, subtraction, and division, at all of which old Tulsi was an adept. Had he not indeed dipped far into *Euclidus* in his salad-days, when he was the favourite disciple of the renowned anchorite at Janakpur ?

Gurditta by this time was away at college, and Kishnu, his widowed mother, as she cooked the millet-cakes in the other corner of the courtyard, wept salt tears at the thought of the unknown dangers he was running. Deadly dangers they were, for had not his father been quite healthy until the Government had insisted on his using the Three-Legged-One ? And then, had he not gone down and wrestled with it on the low, misty levels of newly reclaimed land by the river-side, and caught the chills of which he had eventually died ? Thus when the rainy season came on, and the

A BIT OF LAND

plane-table, still decently draped, was set aside for shelter in the darkest corner of the hovel, it looked to poor Kishnu like some malevolent demon ready to spring out upon the little household. And so, naturally enough, when Tulsi went to fetch it out for his first field-measurements, he found it garlanded with yellow marigolds, and set out with little platters of curds and butter. Kishnu had been propitiating it with offerings.

The old man looked at her in mild, superior reproof. 'Thou art an ignorant woman, daughter,' he said. 'This is no devil, but a device of the learned, of much use to such as I who make maps. Thou shouldest have known that the true Gods are angered by false worship ; therefore I counsel thee to remember great Mahadeo this day, lest evil befall.'

So he passed out into the sunlight, bearing the plane-table in debonair fashion, leaving the abashed Kishnu to gather up the marigolds. *Baba-ji*, she told herself, was brave, but he had not to bustle about the house all day with that shrouded thing glowering from the corner. However, since for Gurdit's sake it was wise to propitiate everything, she took the platters of curds and butter over to Mahadeo's red stone under the big banyan tree.

Nevertheless, she felt triumphant that evening when old Tulsi came in from the fields dispirited, and professing no appetite for his supper. He had in fact discovered that studying text-books and making practical field-measurements were very different things,

especially in a treeless, formless plain, where the only landmarks are the mud boundary-cones you are set to verify, and which therefore cannot, or ought not to be, considered fixed points.

However, he managed at last to draw two imaginary lines through the village, thanks to *Purm-eshwar* and the big green dome of Mahadeo's banyan tree swelling up into the blue horizon. Indeed he felt so grateful to the latter for showing clear, even over a plane-table, that he sneaked out when Kishnu's back was turned with a platter of curds of his own for the great, many-armed trunk ; but this, of course, was very different from making oblation to a trivial plane-table. And that evening he spent all the lingering light in decorating the borders of the map (which was yet to come) with the finest flourishes, just, as he told Kishnu, to show the Protector-of-the-Poor that he had not committed the *putwari*-ship to unworthy hands.

Yet two days afterwards he replied captiously to his daughter's anxious inquiries as to what was the matter. There was nought wrong ; only one of the three legs had no sense of duty, and he must get the carpenter to put a nail to it. Despite the nail, however, the anxiety grew on his face, and when nobody was looking he took to tramping over the ploughs, surreptitiously dragging the primeval chain-measure after him ; in which occupation he looked like a monkey who had escaped from its owner the plane-table, which, with the old man's mantle draped over it, and his turban placed on the top, had a very dignified appearance in

the corner of the field ; for it was hot work dragging the heavy chain about, and old Tulsi, who was too proud to ask for aid and so disclose the fact that he had had to fall back on ancient methods, discarded all the clothing he could.

And after all he had to give in. ‘Gurdit’s father did it field by field,’ said the head-man carelessly when he sought their advice. ‘Fret not thyself, *Baba-ji*. ’Twill come right ; thou art a better scholar than ever he was.’

‘Field by field !’ echoed Tulsi, aghast. ‘But the book prohibits it, seeing that there is not verification, since none can know if the boundaries be right.’

A broad chuckle ran round the circle of elders. ‘Is that all, Sri Tulsi ?’ cried the head-man. ‘That is soon settled. A Jât knows his own land, I warrant ; and each man of us will verify his fields, seeing that never before have we had such a settling-day as thine. Not an error, not an injustice ! *Purm-eshwar* send Gurdit to be as good a *putwari* when he comes !’

‘Nay, ’tis Gurdit who is *putwari* already,’ replied Tulsi uneasily ; ‘and therefore must there be no mistake. So I will do field by field ; peradventure when they are drawn on paper it may seem more like the book where things do not move. Then I can begin again by rule.’

There was quite a pleasurable excitement over the attested measurement of the fields, and old Munnia, the parcher of corn, said it was almost as good as a fair to her trade. Each man clanked the chain round his

A BIT OF LAND

own boundary, while his neighbours stood in the now sprouting wheat to see fair play and talk over the past history of the claim ; Tulsi Râm meanwhile squatting on the ground and drawing away as for dear life. Even the children went forth to see the show, munching popped corn and sidling gingerly past the Three-Legged-One which, to say sooth, looked gigantic with half the spare clothes of the community piled on to it ; indeed the village women, peeping from afar, declared Kishnu to have been quite right, and urged a further secret oblation as prudent, if not absolutely necessary.

So she took to hanging the marigolds again, taking care to remove them ere the old man rose in the morning. And the result was eminently satisfactory, for as he put one field-plan after another away in the portfolio Tulsi Râm's face cleared. They were so beautifully green, far greener than those in the book ; so surely there could be no mistake. But alas ! when he came to try and fit them together as they should be on the map, they resolutely refused to do anything of the kind. It was a judgment, he felt, for having disobeyed the text-book ; and so the next morning he rose at the peep of day determined to have it out legitimately with the Three-Legged-One. And lo ! it was garlanded with marigolds and set out once more with platters of curds and butter.

' Thou hast undone me, ignorant woman ! ' he said with a mixture of anger and relief. ' Now is it clear ! The true Gods, in despite of thy false worship, have

A BIT OF LAND

sent a devil into this thing to destroy me.' So despite Kishnu's terror and tears he threw the offerings into the fire, and dragged the plane-table out into the fields with ignominy.

But even this protestation failed, and poor old Tulsi, one vast wrinkle of perplexity, was obliged once more to refer to the circle of head-men.

'Gurdit's father managed, and thou hast twice his mettle,' they replied, vaguely interested. 'Sure the devil must indeed be in it, seeing that the land cannot run away of itself.'

'It hath not run away,' said Tulsi dejectedly. 'There is not too little, but too much of it.'

Too much land! The idea was at first bewildering to these Jât peasants, and then sent them into open laughter. Here was a mistake indeed! and yet the lust of land, so typical of their race, showed in their eyes as they crowded round the map which Tulsi Râm spread on the ground. It was a model of neatness: the fields were greener than the greenest wheat; but right in the middle of them was a white patch of no-man's-land.

'*Irra!*' rolled the broadest of the party after an instant's stupefaction. 'That settles it. 'Tis a mistake, for look you, 'tis next my fields, and if 'twere there my plough would have been in it long ago.' A sigh of conviction and relief passed through the circle, for the mere suggestion had been disturbing. Nevertheless, since Gurdit's father's map had never indulged in white spots, Tulsi's must be purged from them also.

A BIT OF LAND

'Look you,' said one of the youngest; 'tis as when the children make a puzzle of torn leaves. He has fitted them askew, so let each cut his own field out of the paper and set it aright.'

Then ensued an hour of sheer puzzledom, since if the white spot were driven from one place it reappeared differently shaped in another. The devil was in it, they said at last, somewhat alarmed; since he who brought land might be reasonably suspected of the power of taking it away. They would offer a scape-goat; and meanwhile old Tulsi need not talk of calling in the aid of the new *putwari* in the next village, for he was one of the new-fangled sort, an empty drum making a big noise, and, as likely as not, would make them pay double, if there really was extra land, because it had not come into the schedule before. No! they would ask the schoolmaster first, since he had experience in finding excuse for mistakes. Nor was their trust unfounded, for the master not only had an excuse in something he called 'a reasonable margin of error,' but also a remedy which, he declared, the late *putwari* had always adopted—briefly, a snip here, a bulge there, and a general fudging with the old settlement-maps.

The elders clapped old Tulsi on the back with fresh laughter bidding him not try to be cleverer than others, and so sent him back to his drawing-board. But long after the dusk had fallen that evening, the old man sat staring stupidly at the great sheet of blank paper on which he had not drawn a line. It was no business of his what Gurdit's father had done, seeing

A BIT OF LAND

that he too was of the old school inwardly, if not outwardly ; but Gurdit himself, when he returned, would allow of no such dishonesties, and he, Tulsi, was in the boy's place. There was time yet, a month at least before inspection, in which to have it out with the plane-table. So when the wild geese from the mud-banks came with the first streak of dawn to feed on the wheat, they found old Tulsi and his attendant demon there already, at work on the dewy fields ; and when sunset warned the grey crane that it was time to wing their flight riverwards, they left Tulsi and the Three-Legged-One still struggling with the margin of error.

Then he would sit up of nights plotting and planning till a dim, dazed look came into his bright old eyes, and he had to borrow a pair of horn spectacles from the widow of a dead friend. He was getting old, he told Kishnu (who was in despair), as men must get old, no matter how many marigolds ignorant women wasted on false gods ; for she had taken boldly, and unchecked, to the oblations again.

But in the end inspection-day found that white bit of land white as ever, nay, whiter against the dark finger which pointed at it accusingly, since, as ill-luck would have it, what only the people themselves may call a Black Judge was the inspecting officer. A most admirable young Bachelor of Arts from the Calcutta University, full to the brim of solid virtue, and utterly devoid of any sneaking, sentimental sympathy with the quips and cranks of poor humanity—those lichens of life which make its rough rocks and water-worn

boulders so beautiful to the seeing eye. 'This must not occur,' he said, speaking, after the manner of his kind, in English to his clerk in order to enhance his dignity. 'It is gross negligence of common orders. Write as warning that if better map be not forthcoming, *locum tenens* loses appointment with adverse influence on hereditary claims.'

Adverse influence on hereditary claims! The words translated brutally, as only clerks can translate, sent poor old Tulsi into an agony of remorse and resolve.

A month afterwards Kishnu spoke to the headmen. 'The Three-Legged-One hath driven the *putwari* crazy,' she said. 'Remove it from him or he will die. Justice! Justice!'

So it was removed and hidden away with obloquy in an outhouse; whereupon he sat and cried that he had ruined Gurdit—Gurdit, the light of his eyes!

'Heed not the Bengali,' they said at last in sheer despair. 'He is a fool. Thou shalt come with us to the big *sahib*. He will understand, seeing that he is more of our race than the other.'

That is how it came to pass that Tulsi Râm sat on the stucco steps of an Englishman's house, pointing with a trembling but truthful finger at a white spot among the green, while a circle of bearded Jâts informed the Presence that Sri Hunumân himself was not wiser nor better than their *putwari*.

'And how do *you* account for it? I mean, what do *you* think it is?' asked the foreign voice curiously.

The wrinkles on Tulsi's forehead grew deeper, his

bright yet dim eyes looked wistfully at the master of his fate. ' 'Tis an over-large margin of error, *Huzoor*, owing to lack of control over the plane-table. That is what the book says ; that is what Gurdit will say.'

' But what do *you* say ? How do *you* think that bit of land came into your village ?'

Tulsi hesitated, gained confidence somehow from the blue eyes : ' Unless *Purm-eshwar* sent a bit of another world ?' he suggested meekly.

The Englishman stood for a moment looking down on the wizened, monkey-like face, the truthful finger, the accusing white spot. ' I think he has,' he said at last. ' Go home, Tulsi, and colour it blue. I'll pass it as a bit of Paradise.'

So that year there was a blue patch, like a tank, where no tank should be, upon the village map, and the old *putwari's* conscience found peace in the correct total of the columns of figures which he added together ; while the Three-Legged-One, released from durance vile at his special request, stood in the corner garlanded with the marigolds of thanksgiving. Perhaps that was the reason why, next mapping season, the patch of Paradise had shrunk to half its original size ; or perhaps it was that he really had more control over the plane-table. At any rate he treated it more as a friend by spreading its legs very wide apart, covering it with his white cotton shawl, and so using it as a tent when the sun was over-hot.

And yet when, on Gurdit's return from college with a first-class surveyor's certificate, Paradise became

A BIT OF LAND

absorbed in a legitimate margin of error, there was a certain wistful regret in old Tulsi's pride, and he said that, being an ignorant old man, it was time he returned to find Paradise in another way.

'But thou shalt not leave us for the wilderness as before,' swore the Jâts in council. 'Lo! Gurdit is young and hasty, and thou wilt be needed to settle the disputes; so we will give thee a saintly sitting of thy very own in our village.'

But Tulsi objected. The fields were the fields, he said, and the houses were the houses; it only led to difficulties to put odd bits of land into a map, and he would be quite satisfied to sit anywhere. In the end, however, he had to give in, for when he died, after many years spent in settling disputes, someone suggested that he really had been Sri Hunumân himself; at any rate he was a saint. So the white spot marking a shrine reappeared in the map to show whence the old man had passed to the Better Land.

YOUNG LOCHINVAR

YOUNG LOCHINVAR, in the original story, came out of the West. In this tale he came out of the East, and the most match-making mamma might be disposed to forgive him ; partly on account of his youth, partly because he really was not a free agent.

They were cousins of course. In the finest race of the Punjab—possibly of the world—cousins have a right to cousins provided the relationship lie through the mother's brother or the father's sister, the converse, for some mysterious reason, being *anathema maranatha*.

But Nânuk's mother, wife of big Suchêt Singh, headman of Aluwallah village, was sister to Dhyân Singh, the armourer, who plied his trade in the little courtyard hidden right in the heart of the big city. A big man too, high-featured and handsome ; high-tempered also as the steel which he inlaid so craftily with gold. For all that, round, podgy Mai Gunga, his wife, ruled him by virtue of a smartness unknown to his slower, gentler nature. Not so gentle, however, but that he mourned the degeneracy of these latter piping days of peace. They and the Arms Act had driven him from the manufacture of sword-hilts and helmets, shields and corselets, to that of plaques and inkstands, candlesticks and ash-trays—from the means of resist-

Y O U N G L O C H I N V A R

ance to the decoration of victorious drawing-rooms. Not that he nourished ill-feeling against those victors. They were a brave lot, and since then his people had helped them bravely to keep their winnings. Only it was dull work ; so every now and again Dhyân Singh revenged himself by making a paper-knife in the form of some blood-thirsty lethal weapon, and put his best work on it, just to keep his hand in.

Little Pertâbi, his daughter, used to sit and watch her father at the tiny forge set in the central sunshine of the yard. It was funny to see the shaving of sheer steel curl up from the graver guided in its flowing curves by nothing but that skilled eye and hand ; funnier still to watch the gold wire nestle down so obediently into the groove ; funniest of all to blow the bellows when the time came to put that iridescent blue temper to the finished work.

Then, naked to the waist, the soft brown hair on her forehead plaited in tiniest plaits into a looped fringe, a little gold filigree cup poised on the top of her head, a long betasselled pigtail hanging down behind, Pertâbi would set her short red-trousered legs very far apart, and puff and blow and laugh, and then blow again, to her own and her father's intense delight ; for Dhyân having a couple of strapping sons to satisfy Mai Gunga's heart felt himself free to adore this child of his later years.

But even when there was blowing to be done, Pertâbi did not find life in the city half as amusing as life out in the village at her aunt's with cousin Nânuk as a

Y O U N G L O C H I N V A R

playfellow—Nânuk, to whom she was to be married by and by. That had been settled when she was a baby in arms, for in those days, and for many years after, Suchêt Singh's wife and Mai Gunga had been as friendly as sister-in-laws can well be. That is to say, there were visits to the village for change of air, especially at sugar-baking time, while those who wished for shopping or society came as a matter of course to the armourer's house. The world wags in the same fashion East and West ; especially among the women-folk.

' They will make a fine pair ! God keep them to the auspicious day,' the deep-chested country-women would say piously ; then Mai Gunga would giggle a bit, and remark that if Nânuk grew so fast she would have to leave Pertâbi at home next time. Whereupon the boy's mother would flare up, and sniff, as country folk do, at town ideas. In her family such talk had never been necessary ; the lads and lasses grew up together, and mothers were in no hurry to bring age and thought upon them. Perhaps that was the reason why men and women alike were of goodly stature and strength ; for even Mai Gunga must admit that Dhyân was at least a fine figure of a man. So there would be words to while away the hours before the men returned from the fields. And outside, under the bushy mulberry trees, Pertâbi and Nânuk would be fighting and making it up again in the cosmopolitan fashion of healthy children. Of the two, Pertâbi, perhaps, hit the hardest ; she certainly howled the loudest,

Y O U N G L O C H I N V A R

being a wilful young person. Nânuk used to implore her not to tease the sacred peacocks, when they came sedately by companies to drink at the village tank, as the sun set red over the limitless plane of young green corn, and she would squat down suddenly on her red-trousered heels with her hands tight clasped behind her back, and promise to be as still as a grey crane if she might only look. Then some vainglorious cock was sure to show off his tail ; every tail was to Pertâbi's eager eyes the *most* beautiful one in the world, and she must needs have a feather—just one little feather—from it as a keepsake—just a little keepsake. Now, what Pertâbi desired she got, at any rate if Nânuk had aught to say towards the possibility. So the little tyrant would play with the feather for five minutes, then fling it away. But Nânuk, serious, conscientious Nânuk, would set aside half his supper of curds on the sly, and sneak out with it after sundown as an oblation to the mysterious village god, who lived in a red-splashed stone under the peepul tree. Else the peacocks, being angry, might not cry for rain, and then what would become of the green corn ? Nânuk was a born cultivator, true in most things, above all to Mother Earth. Despite the peacocks' feathers, however, not without a will of his own ; for when, on one of his visits to the city, Pertâbi insisted on handling the little squirrel he brought with him housed in his high turban, and it bit her, he laughed, saying he had told her so ; nay, more, when she chased the frightened little creature savagely, howling for vengeance, he fell

Y O U N G L O C H I N V A R

upon her and boxed her ears soundly, much to Mai Gunga's displeasure. A rough village lout, and her darling the daintiest little morsel of flesh.

'I don't care,' sobbed Pertâbi, 'I'll bite him hard next time. Yes! I will, Nâno; you'll see if I don't.'

Mai Gunga, however, was right in one thing. Pertâbi was an extremely pretty child. The gossips coming in of an afternoon to discuss births, marriages, and deaths took to shaking their heads and saying that she might have made a better match than Nânuke, who, everyone thought, would limp for life in consequence of that fall from the topmost branch of the strisham tree where the squirrels built their nests. Not much of a limp, perhaps, but who did not know that under the bone-setter's care a broken leg often came out a bit shorter than the other, even if it was as strong as ever? Mai Gunga's plump, pert face hardened, but she said nothing; not even when a new acquaintance, the wife of a rich contractor on the look out for a bride of good family, openly bewailed the prior claim on Pertâbi.

Nevertheless, the next time that the sister-in-law came to town, and, on leaving it laden with endless bundles wrapped in Manchester handkerchiefs, spoke confidently of the meeting at sugar-time, Mai Gunga threw difficulties in the way. She was too busy to come herself; Nânuke, still a semi-invalid, must be quite sufficient charge for her sister-in-law. Still, seeing that Pertâbi touched the eights, she thought it time for village customs to give way to greater decorum.

YOUNG LOCHINVAR

Briefly, despite the peculiar virtue of some people's families, she did not choose that her daughter should be out of her sight. The two women, as might be supposed, parted with ceremony and effusion, but Suchêt Singh's wife had barely arrived in the wide village courtyards ere she burst forth.

'Mark my words!' she said, even as she disposed her bundles about her. 'That town-bred woman means mischief. I was a fool to give in to you and Dhyân instead of having the barber, as to a stranger. Not that I want the little hussy above other brides, but I would not have Nânuk slighted.'

Suchêt Singh laughed.

'Twenty mile of an *ekka* hath shook thy brains out, wife. What talk is this? There are two halves of one pea. As friend Elahi Buksh saith, "*Do dil razi to kia kare kazi?*" ("When two are heart to heart, where's the priest's part?").'

'Tra! That's neither in three nor thirteen,' retorted his wife. 'Give me the barber¹ for certainty.'

Meanwhile Pertâbi was howling in the little courtyard, much to big, soft-hearted Dhyân's distress.

'Let her go, but this once,' he pleaded aside, 'truly thou art over-anxious, and she but seven for all her spirit.'

'Seventy or seven, God knows thee for a baby,' snapped Mai Gunga. 'Would I had never listened to thee and thy sister, though, for sure, the children were pretty as marionettes. It was a play to think of

¹ The barber is always employed in regular betrothals.

Y O U N G L O C H I N V A R

it. But a mother knows her daughter better than the father, though it seems thou wilt be ordering the wedding garments next. So be it, but till then Pertâbi goes not to Nânuk ; 'tis not seemly.'

'I—I don't want Nânuk,' howled Pertâbi. 'I—I want the fresh molasses—I do—I do.'

Want, however, was her master, since her own obstinacy was but inherited from her mother. So she sat sulkily in the sunshine, refusing the armourer's big caresses or the charms of bellows-blowing, while she pictured to herself, with all the vividness of rage, Nânuk going down—going down *alone*—to watch the great shallow pans of foamy, frothy, fragrant juice shrink and shrink in the dark low hut, where one could scarcely see save for the flame of the furnaces. What joy to feed those flames with the dry crushed refuse of the cane and leaves ! What bliss to thrust a tentative twig, on the sly, into the seething, darkening molasses and then escape deftly to that shadowy hiding-place by the well, and gravely consider the question as to whether it was nearly boiled enough. Toffee-making all over the world has a mysterious fascination for children, and this was toffee-making on a gigantic scale. The legitimate bairn's part of scraping from each brew never tasted half so sweet as those stolen morsels ; if only because, when you threw away the sucked twigs, the squirrels would come shyly from the peepul tree where the green pigeons cooed all day long, and fight for your leavings. Pertâbi could see the whole scene when she closed her eyes. The level plain,

Y O U N G L O C H I N V A R

the shadow of the trees blotting out the sunshine, the trickle of running water from the well, the creaking of the presses, the babel of busy voices, and over all, through all, that lovely, lovely smell of toffee! Yes! sugar-baking time in the village was heavenly and Nânuk was greedy—greedy as a grey crow to keep it all to himself!

When spring brought big Suchêt to pay the village revenue into the office, he and the armourer met, as ever, on the best of terms; nevertheless their subsequent interviews with their womenkind were less satisfactory.

‘Thou art worse than a peacock which cries even after rain has fallen,’ finished the big villager testily. ‘What is it to me if women come or go? Dhyân is a man of mettle and word.’

Yet in his heart he knew well that the armourer had no more to say to such matters in the narrow city court, than he had in the wide village yard, where the kine stood in rows, and Nânuk’s tumbler pigeons never lacked a grain of corn at which to peck.

As for Mai Gunga, her wrath became finally voluble at the hint thrown out by big Dhyân, that if she went no more to the village, folk might talk of Pertâbi being slighted. Slighted, indeed, with half the eligible mothers agog with envy! Slighted, when but for this cripple,—yea! Dhyân need not make four eyes at her—she said cripple, and meant it. He had a broken leg, and that to a man of sense was sufficient excuse for breach of betrothals—if, indeed, there ever had

YOUNG LOCHINVAR

been such a thing as a betrothal, which for her part she denied.

Dhyân Singh swore many big oaths, vowed many mighty vows that he would have nought to do with such woman's work. Not even if it became clear that, as his wife hinted, his little Pertâbi would not be welcome in his sister's house. Yet he scowled over the idea, twisted his beard tighter over his ears, as became a man, and looked very fierce. And when a month or two later Suchêt Singh's wife met his halting apology for Mai Gunga's absence with a distinct sniff and a cool remark that she really did not care—Nânuk could no doubt do better in brides—he came home in a towering passion to his anvil and made a paper knife fit for a brigand. To have such a thing said to him, even in jest, when he, for his sister's sake, had been willing to waive the fact of Nânuk being a cripple!

'Cripple indeed!' shrieked the boy's mother when Suchêt came back from the city one day with Dhyân's remark enlarged and illustrated by friendly gossip. 'Lo, husband! That is an end. Whose fault if he limps?—only in running, mind, not in walking. Whose indeed! Whose but that immodest, wicked, ill-brought-up hussy's. Was it not to get her another squirrel, because she cried so for his, that he climbed? Let her have her girl; we will have damages.'

So when sugar-baking time came round again Suchêt and Dhyân, rather to their own surprise, found themselves claimant and defendant in a breach of betrothal

Y O U N G L O C H I N V A R

case for the recovery of fifteen hundred rupees spent in preliminary expenses. Yet, despite their surprise, they were both beside themselves with rage. Dhyân because of the unscrupulous claim when not one penny had been spent, Suchêt because of the slur cast on his boy's straight limbs by the secondary plea in defence ; that even if there had been a betrothal and not a family understanding, the crippled condition of the bridegroom was sufficient excuse for the breach of contract : the actual point of the betrothal being so effectually overlaid by these lies as to be obscured even from the litigant's own eyes.

It was one gorgeous blue day in December that Suchêt rode into the city on his pink-nosed mare with Nânuk on the crupper to bear witness in court to his own perfections. A handsome, soft-eyed lad of ten, glad enough of the ride, sorry for the separation, even for one day, from the village toffee-making ; but with a great lump of raw sugar stowed away in his turban as partial consolation. For the rest he had a childish and yet grave acquiescence. Pertâbi apparently had been a naughty girl, and Mammi Gunga had never been nice. Yet the ' *jey-sahib* ' ¹ might say they were married ; since after all he, Nânuk, could run as fast as ever. *Tchu !* he would like to show Pertâbi that it was so.

The court-house compound was full of suitors and flies, the case of Suchêt *versus* Dhyân Singh late in the list, so the former bade his son tie the mare in the

¹ Judge.

YOUNG LOCHINVAR

farthest corner behind the wall, in the shade of a spreading tree, and keep watch while he went about from group to group in order to discuss his wrongs with various old friends ; that being half the joy of going to law. Grave groups of reverend, bearded faces round a central pipe, grave, slow voices rising in wise saws from the close-set circles of huge turbans and massive blue and white draperies.

Meanwhile Nânuk ate sugar till it began to taste sickly, and then he sat looking at the remaining lump and thinking, not without a certain malice, how Pertâbi would have enjoyed it. Then suddenly, from behind, a small brown hand reached out and snatched it. '*One two, that's for you ; two three, that's for me ; three four, sugar galore ; the Rajab begs, with a broken leg—*' The singing voice paused ; the little figure munching as it sang, with vindictive eyes upon the boy, paused too in its tantalizing dance.

'Did it hurt much, Nâno ? I'm so sorry. And mother wouldn't let me keep the squirrel, Nâno ; but I howled, I howled like—like a *bhut* (devil).'

The abstract truth of the description seemed to bring back the past, and Nânuk's face relaxed.

'Father's at court, and mother's gone to see the woman who wants me to marry her son,' explained Pertâbi between the munchings, 'but I won't. I won't marry anybody but you, Nâno. I like you, Nâno.'

Nâno's face relaxed still more.

'You have got sugar-presses, Nâno, and the other

YOUNG LOCHINVAR

boy has none. He lives in the city, and I hate the city. Is there much sugar this year, Nâno ?'

'More than last,' replied the boy proudly. 'We have the best fields in——'

'Then give me another bit,' interrupted Pertâbi.

'That is all I brought.' There was a trace of anxiety in Nânuke's voice, and he looked deprecatingly at the little figure now cuddled up beside him.

'O you silly ! but it doesn't matter. We can go and fetch some more. That's why I ran away. I knew uncle would bring you, so we can go to the village early. Come, Nâno.'

'Go to the village, Pertâbi ! Oh, what a tale !' It is easy to be virtuously indignant at the first proposition of evil, but what is to be done when you are at the mercy of a small person who hesitates at nothing ? Wheedlings, pinchings, kissings, tears, and promises were all one to Pertâbi. At least a ride on the pink-nosed mare for the sake of old times ! They could slip away easily without being seen ; yonder lay the road villagewards—there would be plenty of time to go a mile, perhaps twain, and get back before uncle could possibly finish with his friends. She could get off at the corner, and then even if uncle had discovered their absence Nâno could say he had taken the mare for water, or that the flies were troublesome. Excuses were easy.

Ten minutes after, his feet barely reaching the big shovel stirrups, young Lochinvar ambled out of the courthouse compound with his bride behind him.

Y O U N G L O C H I N V A R

' We must come back at the turn, Pertâbi,' he said, to bolster up his own resolution.

' Of course we must come back,' replied Pertâbi, digging her small heels into the old grey mare. ' Can't you make the stupid go faster, Nâno? We may as well have all the fun we can.'

So the old mare went faster down the high-arched avenue of flickering light and shade, and Pertâbi's little red legs flounced about in a way suggestive of falling off. But she shrieked with laughter and held tight to her cavalier.

' Don't let us go back yet, Nâno!' she pleaded; ' the old thing is all out of breath, and uncle will find out you've been galloping her, and beat you. I shouldn't like you to be beaten, Nâno dear, and it is so lovely.'

It *was* lovely. They were in the open now among the level stretches of young green corn, and there were the fallen battalions of red and gold canes, and from that clump of trees came the familiar creak of the press. Nay, more! wafted on the soft breeze the delicious, the irresistible smell of sugar-boiling. Other people's sugar-boiling.

' It's time we were going back,' remarked Nânuk boldly.

' *Tchu!*' cried Pertâbi from behind, ' we are not going back any more. See! I've tied your shawl to my veil. When I do that to my dolls, then they are married; so that settles it. Go on, Nâno! it's all right. Besides it is no *use* going back now, they would only

YOUNG LOCHINVAR

beat us for getting married. Go on, Nâno—or I'll pinch.'

Perhaps it really was fear of the pinching, perhaps it was the conviction that they had gone too far to recede, which finally induced young Lochinvar to give the old mare her head towards home. But even then he showed none of the alacrity displayed beneath him and behind him by the female aiders and abettors. His face grew graver and graver, longer and longer.

'We can't be married until we've taken the seven steps,' he said at length. 'Look! they have been burning weeds in the field. Let's get down and do it, or the gods will be angry.'

Pertâbi clapped her hands. 'It will be fun, anyhow, so come along, Nâno.'

They tied the old mare to a tree, while, hand tight clasped in hand, just as they had seen it done a hundred times, they circumambulated the sacred fire.

'That's better,' sighed Nâno. 'Now, I believe, we really are married.'

'*Tchu!*' cried Pertâbi in superior wisdom, 'I can tell you heaps and heaps of things. Our dolls do them when we've time; we are always marrying our dolls in the city. But we can ride a bit farther first, and when we get tired of Pinky-nose we can just get down and be married another way. That'll rest us.'

So through the lengthening shadows, they rode on and got married, rode on and got married, until Pertâbi's braided head began to nod against Nânu's back, and she said sleepily—

YOUNG LOCHINVAR

'We'll keep the sugar-throwing till to-morrow, Nâno; that'll be fun.'

But when, in the deep dusk, the pink-nosed mare drew up of her own accord at the gate of the wide village-yard, and drowsy Nânuk just remembered enough of past events to lift his bride across the threshold, and murmur with an awful qualm, 'This is my wife,' Pertâbi woke up suddenly to plant her little red-trousered legs firmly on the ground, and say, with a nod—

'Yes! and we've been married every way we could think of, haven't we, Nâno? except the sugar-throwing, because we hadn't any; but—we'll—have—plenty—now; won't we, Nâno?' The pauses being filled up by yawns.

It was midnight before Suchêt Singh and Dhyân, forgetful of their enmity in overmastering anxiety, arrived on the scene. The culprits were then fast asleep, and the deep-chested countrywoman, having recovered from the shock, was beginning to find a difficulty in telling the tale without smiles. A difficulty which, by degrees, extended itself to her hearers.

'Ho! ho! ho!' exploded Suchêt suddenly; 'and so they didn't even forget the forehead mark. I'll be bound that was Nânuk—the rogue.'

'Ho! ho! ho!' echoed the armourer; 'as like as not it was Pertâbi. The sharpest little marionette.'

'Well, 'tis done, anyhow,' said the woman decisively. 'We can't have it said in our family, Dhyân, that the vermilion on a girl's head came save from her husband's

YOUNG LOCHINVAR

fingers. He! he! he! Couldst but have seen them. "This is my wife," quoth he. "And we've been married every way we could think of," pipes she. "Haven't we, Nâno?" The prettiest pair—Lord! I shall laugh for ever.'

'And—and Gunga?' faltered the armourer.

'Gunga's brain is not addled,' retorted her sister-in-law sharply. 'Who bruises a plum before taking it to market? What's done is done. We must cook the wedding-feast without delay, have in the barber, and keep a still tongue.'

So, ere many days were over, Pertâbi and Nânuke, as bride and bridegroom, watched the fire-balloons go up into the cloudless depths of purple sky: the boy watching them shyly, yet with absorbing interest; for did not their course denote the favour or disfavour of the gods?

'The omens are auspicious,' he said contentedly; but Pertâbi was in a hurry for the sugar-throwing, in which she aided her bridesmaids with such vigour that Nânuke had a black eye for several days.

'If you were to ask me, and ask me, and ask me to lift you on old Pinky-nose again, I'd *never* do it—*never*!' he declared vindictively.

'Oh yes! you would, Nâno,' replied his wife with the utmost confidence, 'you would if I asked you; besides you really wanted to be married, you know you did. And then there was the fresh molasses.'

GLORY-OF-WOMAN

THIS is the story of a backwater—one of those still nooks sheltered by sedges whither the sere and yellow leaves drift and rest, while the current beyond slips by swift as ever. Why this particular backwater should have called itself a Technical School of Art Needlework has nothing to do with the story. Briefly, it was a sort of almshouse where twelve old Mahomedan ladies drew a poor monthly pittance of some few rupees, and sat contentedly enough year after year twining gold thread on to fine net. What became of the work when it was done has also nothing to do with the story. Perhaps it was sold to eke out the funds of a charity which did its fair share of solacing sorrow in keeping twelve pairs of small, soft, high-bred hands from the grinding-mill—that last resource of the poor in India now, as it was when the Great Mogul refused to allow the importation of Western machinery, on the ground that God's best gift to the poor was the millstone about their necks.

It was in this odd little courtyard, packed away decorously in the very heart of the loose-living, gambling, gold-workers' quarter, that Glory-of-Woman found shelter after many years of patient, peaceful privation ; for Fakr un-nissa (that was how her name

ran in the soft, courtly tongue of the most brutal of cities) was a *Syyedani*—a descendant of the Prophet, of the poorest and proudest, too poor to bring a dowry to a husband of her own rank, too generous to take one without it, too proud to stoop to a partner beneath her—or rather, too gentle, too conservative. There are hundreds such women in Delhi, and Fakr-un-nissa had been more fortunate than most, seeing that, being learned in the Korân, she had kept body and soul together by recitations at fast and festival in the *zenanas*, and so been spared hard labour. Perhaps it was this which made her look younger than her fifty and odd years ; at all events there was scarcely a wrinkle on her small, oval face, and her tall, slender figure showed no sign of age.

She was the youngest of the scholars, and every evening when the gold thread and the filmy net had been locked away in a queer little carven coffer, she was the last to slip her small feet into one of those twelve pairs of curly shoes which all day long had been ranged against the slip of wall doing duty as a screen at the door, and the last to use the rickety *dhoolie* which the charity provided for the modest conveyance of the fair ones to their homes. It provided a chaperone too, in the shape of a big lump of a girl about twenty, who sat on the steps all day chattering to the passers-by, giggling at their jokes, and chewing *pân*. It was a queer arrangement, seeing that Khâdjiya Khânum, the eldest of the scholars, was past eighty ; but then age had nothing to do with the fact that she was a *Syyedani*,

and Juntu only a gadabout. There was another pair of shoes, however, placed in a corner apart from the rest ; for it had come to be a recognized custom in the back-water that there should always be a thirteenth pair of feet ready to slip into any vacancy made by the sure decay which comes alike to rest as to unrest. And so, five years before, when Fakr-un-nissa had stepped into the last pair of shoes left by a deserted wife who had gone down into the grave leaving one forlorn daughter behind her, the old ladies had cast about to choose a suitable aspirant. Not that they really had the right to appoint anyone, but because experience showed them that the claims of a gratuitous worker were seldom overlooked when opportunity came for urging them. This time the choice fell, naturally enough, on the daughter of the dead scholar. Just in her 'teens, she was hopelessly alone in the world ; for her mother, after estranging her own people by a marriage with a Mahomedan Râjpoot, had quarrelled with her husband's family ; but not before little Yâsmin had been married, and had, according to the Rânghar custom, become a widow for life by the death of her childish bridegroom. For race is stronger than religion, and the old Râjpoot ideas have survived conversion. So Yâsmin in her turn waited for a vacancy in the shoes ; or rather Noor-bânu waited, since the old ladies would have nothing to do with the flowery, half-heathen name, and set themselves diligently to transform her into a ' Lady-of-light.' It was not altogether a successful attempt, for the girl's wild Râjpoot blood waxed

GLORY - OF - WOMAN

rebellious sometimes ; but as a rule Fakr-un-nissa's soft voice, with its polished periods and careful intonation, would bring her back to obedience.

'Lo ! thou shouldst mind me, Heart's Delight,' Glory-of-Woman would say with a smile. 'Do I not stand in thy mother's shoes ? Thou art young now, Yâsmin ; so was I once ; yet thou wilt be as I am, some day.'

And Yâsmin would make a face. 'Well ! that is better than being like Khâdjiya Khânum, or Maimâna Begum with her little eyes.'

So the years passed, bringing no blank to the roll of high-sounding names, no break in the row of shoes, no vacant place in the semicircle of old women which chased the sunshine round the court during the cold months, and the shade during the hot ones. For they felt the stress of the seasons in their old bones. Otherwise winter and summer were alike to them ; as was the green leaf and the sere, since they had never seen either. But Yâsmin felt the spring-time in her blood, and began to weary of being at everyone's beck and call.

'She is a Rânghar ! Bury a dog's tail for twelve years, and it will still be crooked,' said Maimâna Begum. She was full to the brim of proverbial wisdom, and had a little clique of her own in that semicircle of flimsy net, glittering gold thread, and withered hands. Mumtâza Mahul's head, and those of half a dozen Lights, or Desires, or Ornaments of the Palace, the World or of Woman, wagged in assent to her words. It was easy to change a name, but not a

G L O R Y - O F - W O M A N

nature ; and had everyone heard that someone had seen Noor-bânu talking to a woman with whom she ought not to have been talking ?

Glory-of-Woman's thin face grew eager. ' 'Tis a cousin, Mai Khâdjiya. The girl told me of it, and I have inquired. A cousin of the father's, married—yea ! married, indeed, to a trooper, like he is, serving the *Sirkar* somewhere. Such folks lose hold on old ways, yet mean no harm. We must not judge them as ourselves.'

' *Wâh*, Fakr-un-nissa ! Wouldst say the Devil meant no harm next ? Thy heart spoils thy faith. I marvel at thee, thou who dost fast and pray more than is needful.'

The ring of bitterness in old Khâdjiya's tones was explained by the fact that it was nigh the end of the first ten days' fast of Mohurrum-tide, and she had not chosen that any, despite her age, should exceed her in the observance thereof. And Fakr-un-nissa's zeal had raised the price of self-complacency beyond reason.

' More than is needful ! ' echoed Maimâna Begum with a like tartness. ' Art not rash to say so, Mai Khâdjiya ? Sure the virtue of some folk is situate as the tongue among thirty-two teeth. It needs care to preserve itself.'

The white shrouded figures chuckled. They were not really ill-humoured, or evilly disposed towards Glory-of-Woman ; it was simply that her excellent example had made all their old bodies rather fretful. ' And as for the girl,' continued the acrid voice, ' she

is a cat on the wall. God only knows on which side she will jump down.'

Fakr-un-nissa's eyes flashed, and her fingers entangled themselves in the gold thread. 'Then, for sure, it is our part to make the right side more pleasant than the wrong; not to be always finding fault because she is young. Yea, 'tis so; for look you, it seems ever to me that we are to blame—that we are in her place. Five long years is it since she hath waited.'

Khâdjiya Khânum's hands dropped from her work and flew out in vehement crackings of every joint against ill-luck. '*Tobah, Tobah!* (For shame, for shame!) Mistress Fakr-un-nissa. Die if thou wilt, to make room for the hussy. As for me, I wait on the will of the Lord.'

A murmur of assent ran through the semicircle once more.

'Nay, nay! I meant not so,' protested Fakr-un-nissa hastily. 'Lo, death comes to all, and goeth not by age. I meant but this—sure 'tis hard to put it to words—that the old should make room for the young, or make the waiting bearable.'

'*Tchu!* If the heart be set on a frog, what doth it care for a fairy?' insisted the hoarder of other folk's wisdom. 'Dost mean to hint that in this place the girl hath not had virtue set constantly before her—ay, and preached too? It seems to me that we have it almost to satiety. Is it not so, sisters?'

Once more the chuckle ran round the circle, and

GLORY - OF - WOMAN

Glory-of-Woman sat still more upright. 'Amongst thy other proverbs, canst not recollect the one which says, "Between the two priests the fowl killed for dinner became unlawful to eat"?' Then the temper died from her face and she went on in a softer tone: 'I find no harm in the girl, and what wrong hath she done this day more than another?'

'No more, for sure,' put in Mumtâza Mahul, 'since she is late at work every day; that is no new thing, is it, sisters?'

'Yet she finishes her task as quick as any—as I, anyhow,' persisted Yâsmin's advocate, who having come to the gold thread late in life found it apt to knot.

'*Wâb-illâh!* What a fuss about a wilful girl,' put in a new voice. 'She is no worse than others, and needs restraint no more. She hath grown saucy since we gave her money instead of broken victuals. Put her back to the old footing, say I, when she had nought of her own.'

Khâdjiya Khânum's veiled head nodded sagely. 'Thou hast it, Humeda-bânu. Lo, I, for one, know not why the girl was ever given such freedom, save indeed that it tallies with Fakr-un-nissa's indecent hastening of Providence. I am for the old plan.'

'And I,'—'And I,'—'And I,'—assented a chorus of set, certain voices.

Glory-of-Woman's fingers flew faster. 'Then will ye drive the girl from us altogether. I know it, I feel it. Yea, I, Fakr-un-nissa, singer of the Korân till my tone failed me, remember it;—those days when some

G L O R Y - O F - W O M A N

other song seemed better and one must needs sing it ! Think, sisters, remember ! The eyes of the body are two ; the eye of the soul is one.' The work had dropped from her hands, which were stretched out in eager entreaty. ' 'Tis but patience for a year or two. Then, since there is no harm in her, she will settle down as—as I—as I did. 'Tis but the youth in her veins, and God knows that is soon past for a woman ; yet one's glory remains.' Her voice regaining some of its past strength, recollecting all its old skill, under the stimulus of both memory and hope, filled the little courtyard—and availed nothing.

Half an hour afterwards, struck dumb, as sensitive natures are, by the stress of passion around her, she was watching with stupid inaction Yâsmin's final vengeance on that decorous row of curly shoes behind the screening wall. To right and left, to this corner and that, they sped before the reckless young feet, while the reckless young voice rose in mockery : ' Lo, I wait no longer for old women's shoes. I will have new ones of my own. Khujju, and Mujju, and the rest of ye can sort them for yourselves, or go down to the grave one foot at a time, as seemeth to ye best. I care not ; I wait no longer.'

One pair flew full in Maimâna Begum's face, and then came a pause before the last pair, an odd sound between a laugh and a sob, a sudden sweep of the net veil over the shoulder, and a half-defiant nod to the old white figures. ' These shall stay, because they were my mother's, and because——'

GLORY - OF - WOMAN

The next moment she was gone, leaving the twelve old women sitting in the sunshine, breathless, silenced by her youth, her unreason, her fire. Even Fakr-un-nissa had no word of defence. But after a time, when Juntu, full of smiles and winks, came from the steps to aid the cackle which arose as the silencing effect of the shock wore away, Glory-of-Woman began to feel the old pain at her heart once more. 'Because they were my mother's, and because——' She could fill up the pause in two ways: 'Because they are yours, and you have been kinder than the others'; 'Because they should by rights be mine.' Both answers were disturbing. She leaned back against the wall, pressing her thin hands to the thin breast which had known so little of a woman's life, save only that craving for another song.

'Towards the bazaar, sayest thou?' came Khâd-jiya's wrathfully satisfied voice. 'To the bazaar, and in Mohurrum-tide, too! That means the worst, and we were none too soon in getting rid of her, Heaven be praised!'

'The cousin lives close to the *Chowk*,' put in Fakr-un-nissa faintly. 'Mayhap the girl goes there.'

Juntu laughed. 'The cousin is a bad one; no better.'

Whereat Maimâna Begum remarked sagely that whether the knife fell on the melon or the melon on the knife was all one; the melon suffered. Yâsmin's reputation was hopelessly hurt by that going bazaar-wards.

'For a *Syyedani* perchance,' retorted Juntu, with some acerbity. 'Yet this I say: there is no harm in

GLORY - OF - WOMAN

the girl, though she be younger than some folk who need *dhoolies* to their virtue.' She hated the proverb-monger, who never from year's end to year's end gave her a *cowrie*, or so much even as a word of thanks. And then, being Mohurrum-tide, when in all pious houses the Assemblage of Mourning must be held, the work was folded away in the old carved coffer, the desecrated shoes sorted into pairs, and one by one the old ladies were smuggled into the curtained *dhoolie* and trotted away to their homes, with buxom Juntu chattering and laughing alongside.

'Dost recite the *Mursiâh*¹ at the Nawâb's this year, Fakr-un-nissa?' asked Humeda-bânu, wrapping herself carefully in a thick white veil.

Glory-of-Woman shook her head. 'They have a new one. Last Mohurrum I grew hoarse. Perhaps 'twas the fever; it had held me for days.'

'Fever!' echoed the other. 'Say rather the fasting. Thou hast a dead look in the face even now, and as for me, God knows whether I feel hungry or sick. Thou shouldst remember that thou art growing old.'

'I do remember it,' said Fakr-un-nissa, half to herself.

In truth she did. As she sat awaiting her turn for the curtained *dhoolie*, she felt very cold, very helpless. Yâsmin, whom she had loved, had broken loose from all tradition and gone bazaar-wards. The very idea was terrifying. The brain behind that high narrow forehead of Fakr-un-nissa's could barely grasp the situa-

¹ The dirge in honour of the martyred Hussain and Hussain.

GLORY - OF - WOMAN

tion. For fifty years it had circled round the one central duty of pious seclusion, and Yâsmin's choice seemed almost incredible. For there was no harm in the girl ; she had always been responsive to kind words. If she, Fakr-un-nissa, could only have had speech with her alone ! The thought made her restless, and sent her to the door to peep, closely veiled, round the screen and watch the *dboolie* containing Humeda-bânu disappear from the steps. Yet she had done her best, giving the girl in secret what she could spare of the pittance ; and this year there would be no recitation-fees to eke out the remainder. Perhaps the others were right, and this generosity of hers had fostered the girl's independence. Khâdjiya and Maimâna would say so, for sure, if they knew. Then was she to blame ?—she who loved the girl, who had taken the mother's shoes. The mere possibility was a terror to the conscience where the womanhood that was in her had found its only chance of blossoming. It is the same East and West. Glory-of-Woman, as she stood, tall and thin, leaning against the dull brick screen, had as much claim to saintship as any in the canonized calendar ; and wherefore not ? Had not she spent nearly fifty years in learning the lives of the saints by heart, and chanting the dirge of martyred virtue ? It came back to her dimly as she stood there. The sombre dresses of the mourning assemblage, the glittering *Imâm-bârah* ¹

¹ A model of the martyrs' shrine ; a permanent erection, whereas the *tâzzias* used for the procession are afterwards burned. There is a celebrated *Imâm-bârah* at Lucknow, imported from England.

GLORY - OF - WOMAN

dressed with such care by reverent hands ; and then her own voice above the answering chorus of moaning and sobbing. She had power then, she was helpless now ; helpless and old, yet not old enough apparently to die ; though when all was said and done, it was not *her* turn, but Khâdjiya Khânum's. Yet she had taken the mother's shoes, and had sat there silent when perhaps a word from her might have saved that awful journey to the bazaar. Then the thought came to her that the saints were never helpless—not even the blessed Fâtima herself. Glory-of-Woman had fasted and prayed for long days and nights ; she felt miserably ill in soul and body, in the very mood therefore to slip her feet into the pair of shoes Yâsmin's recklessness had spared, and, almost as recklessly, pass without a pause to the doorstep. The next instant she was back again in shelter, breathless, palpitating. Yet might it not be the voice of God ? And no one would know ; she might be back ere Juntu returned ; and even if she were not, the gadabout had a kind heart. Besides, another rupee from the pittance would silence her in any case.

East and West nothing is impossible to such religious exaltation as changed the slow current in Fakr-un-nissa's veins to a stream of fire scorching and shrivelling every thought save the one—that she stood in the mother's shoes, yet had said no word. She wrapped her thick shroud of a veil tighter round her and stepped deliberately into the alley. The glory of woman, its motherhood, was hers indeed in that in-

GLORY - OF - WOMAN

stant, though she did not realize it, though the thin breast heaving with her quickened breath had never felt the lip-clasp of a child.

It was a long, low room, opening by arches to a wooden balcony without, into which, half-fainting with pure physical fatigue, she stumbled, after Heaven knows what trivial—yet to her sheer ignorance almost awful—difficulties by the way. Yet she was not afraid; indeed, as she had passed through the crowded streets it had been wonder which had come to her. That this should be a time of fasting and mourning, and yet none seem to care! Had the world no time to bewail dead virtue? Had it forgotten the Faith? And this, too, was no mourning assemblage, though in some of the faces of the lounging men she recognized the features of her own race, the race of the Prophet himself. Had they forgotten also? She shrank back an instant, until—beside a flaunting woman whose profession was writ large enough for even fifty years of pious seclusion to decipher it instinctively—she saw a slender figure crouching half-sullen, half-defiant. The face was still veiled, but she knew it.

‘Yâsmin!’ she cried breathlessly. ‘Come back! Come back to us!’

The girl sprang to her feet with a fierce cry, and was beside the tall white form in an instant, screening it with swift arms that strove to force it back. ‘Go! I say go! Why art thou here? Thou shouldst not have come hither! Go! See, I will come also if thou wilt not go without me.’

G L O R Y - O F - W O M A N

'Not so fast, my pigeon,' tittered the flaunting woman, answering the half-surprised looks of the men with nods and winks. 'Thou art in my charge now, since thou hast left the saints. Who is this woman? Let her speak her claim.'

Yâsmin's hand flew to Fakr-un-nissa's mouth. 'Not a word, *Amma*,¹ not a word. See, I will go; quick, let us go.'

The surprise had lessened, and a man's voice rose with a laugh. 'What, let thee go for nothing, with an unknown? Nay, Mistress Chambelé, that were unwise. She is thy cousin; the claims of kinship must be considered.'

'The claims of numbers, too,' put in another. 'Let the veiled one unveil, since she has come among us.'

'Nay, brothers,' interrupted a third hastily in a lower voice, 'mayhap she is one of the saintly women, and——'

A laugh checked the speech. 'So much the better. What doth a saint here?'

Someone had barred the doorway with thrust-out arm, and half a dozen others with jeering faces lounged against the wall crying languidly, 'Unveil, unveil.' But Yâsmin's arms clasped close. 'I will go,' she panted. 'I will go with her. She—she is my mother.'

Chambelé's titter rang high and shrill. '*Wâb!* That is a tale! See you, friends; her mother hath been dead five years. Enough of this, little fool!

¹ A pet name for mother or nurse.

G L O R Y - O F - W O M A N

Thou hast made thy choice already ; there is no place for thee yonder with the saints.'

' She had her mother's,' cried Fakr-un-nissa, freeing herself from Yâsmin's hold with new strength, born of the girl's words. ' Lo, she speaks truth, my sister ! I stand in her mother's shoes. Let her go in peace, and she shall have them surely.'

Something in the urbane polish of her speech awoke memory in the men, and one, older than the rest, said with a frown, ' Yea, 'tis enough, Chambelé ; let the woman go, and the child also if she wish it. She will come back another day if she be of this sort ; if not, there are others.'

' But not without a ransom,' interrupted one with an evil face and evil eyes which had seen enough of Yâsmin's figure beneath the veil to think her presence gave unwonted piquancy to the business.

' Yea, a ransom, a ransom for coming here, and spoiling pleasure ! Let the saint pay the price of the sinner. Unveil ! unveil !' cried half a dozen jeering voices.

The sunshine without streamed through the arches in broad bands upon the floor, but Fakr-un-nissa's tall, muffled figure stood in shadow by the door. A fighting quail was calling boastfully from a shrouded cage over the way ; the cries of the noisy bazaar floated up to the balcony, a harmonious background to Chambelé's noisier laugh. Then, suddenly, came a step forward into the sunlight, and the heavy white veil fell in billowy curves like a cloud about Fakr-un-nissa's feet. For the first time in her life Glory-of-Woman stood un-

GLORY-OF-WOMAN

sheltered from the gaze of men's eyes. And those eyes saw something worth seeing, despite her fifty and odd years : a woman beautiful in her age, graceful as ever in the sweeping white draperies of the graceful Delhi dress ; but a woman forgetful utterly of the womanhood, even of the motherhood in her, as with one swift outspreading of the arms she broke into the opening lines of the *Mursiâb*, that dirge of martyred virtue which is as closely interwoven with all that is best in the life of a Mussulman as ' Hark, the herald angels sing ! ' is with the Christian's tender memories of home—a dirge sacred to the day and the hour—a dirge forgotten by this new world. Fakr-un-nissa remembered nothing else. Many and many a time listless, indifferent hearts had responded to the fervour of her declamation ; women's hearts, it is true, and that was a woman's derisive laugh ! But above it rose a man's swift curse commanding silence for all save that skilful voice ; and not silence only—for that was a sigh ! So the cadences rang truer and stronger out into the sunlight, making the passers-by pause to listen.

' An Assemblage at Chambelé's house ! ' sneered someone. ' That is a sinner's ransom indeed.'

But Glory-of-Woman heard nothing save those responsive sighs, saw nothing but the orthodox beatings of the breast with which one or two of the elder men gave in to custom.

The last *ameen* left her still blind, still deaf. Then came a laugh. ' With half her years I'd take the saint before the sinner,' said the man with the evil face.

GLORY - OF - WOMAN

Glory-of-Woman stood for a second as if turned to stone. Then she threw up her hands with a cry, and sank in a huddled heap upon the white curves of her fallen veil.

‘ God smite your soul to eternal damnation ! ’ cried a man’s voice.

But Glory-of-Woman was to hear no man’s voice again. She had kept her promise, and the last pair of curly shoes behind the screen was vacant. In due time Noor-bânu slipped into them, for the eleven old ladies and Juntu made peace with her for the sake of Fakr-un-nissa.

‘ Lo ! the ways of Providence are not our ways,’ said Khâdjiya Khânum piously over her horn spectacles. ‘ And she was ever in a hurry. For my part I wait on the will of the Lord.’

Maimâna Begum cackled under her breath. ‘ Hair-oil is wasted on a bald head,’ she said in a whisper to Humeda-bânu. ‘ Her time is near, hurry or no hurry. Who comes, must go.’

UMA HIMĀVUTEE

I

UMA-DEVI was sitting on a heap of yellow wheat, which showed golden against the silvery surface of her husband's threshing-floor. She was a tall woman, of about five-and-twenty, with a fair, fine-cut face, set in a perfect oval above the massive column of her throat. She was a Brâhmani of the Suruswutee tribe—in other words, a member of perhaps the most ancient Aryan colony in India, which long ages back settled down to cultivate the Hurreana, or 'green country'; so called, no doubt, before its sacred river, the Suruswutee, lost itself in the dry deserts west of Delhi; a member, therefore, of a community older than Brâhmanism itself, which clings oddly to older faiths, older ways, and older gods. So Uma-devi, who was on the rack of that jealousy which comes to most women, whether they be ignorant or cultured, had the advantage over most of the latter: she could look back through the ages to a more inspiring and stimulating progenitrix than Mother Eve. For, despite the pharisaical little hymn of Western infancy bidding us thank goodness for our birth and inheritance of knowledge, one can scarcely be grateful for a typical woman simpering over an apple, or subsequently sighing over

UMA HIMĀVUTEĒ

the difficulties of dress. The fact being that our story of Creation only begins when humanity, fairly started on the Rake's Progress, felt the necessity for bolstering up its self-respect by the theory of original sin.

But this woman could dimly, through the numb pain of her heart, feel the influence of a nobler Earth-mother in Uma Himāvutee—Uma her namesake—Uma of the Himalayas, birthplace of all sacred things—Uma of the sunny yet snowy peaks, emblem at once of perfect wifehood, motherhood, and that mystical virginity which, in Eve-ridden faiths, finds its worship in Mariolatry.

That she could even dimly recognize the beauty of this conception came, partly from the simple yet ascetic teachings of her race, partly because there are some natures, East and West, which turn instinctively to Uma Himāvutee, and this woman among yellow corn was of that goodly company.

Yet a sharp throb of sheer animal jealousy—the jealousy which in most civilized communities is considered a virtue when sanctified by the bonds of matrimony—seemed to tear her heart as her hands paused in her patient darning of gold-coloured silk on dull madder-red stuff, and her eyes sought the figure of a man outlined against the dull red horizon.

It was Shiv-deo, her husband, returning from his work in the fields.

She folded up her work methodically, leaving the needle with its pennant of floss still twined deftly in and out of the threads as a mark to show where to take

up the appointed pattern once more. For Uma-devi's work was quaintly illustrative of her life, being done from the back of the stuff and going on laboriously, conscientiously, trustfully, without reference to the unseen golden diaper slowly growing to beauty on the other side of the cloth. That remained as a reward to tired eyes and fingers when the toil was over, and the time came to piece the whole web into a garment—a wedding veil, perchance, for her daughter, had she had one. But Uma was childless.

Yet there was no reproach, no discontent in her husband's fine beardless face as he came up to her ; for he happened—despite the barbarous marriage customs of his race—to love his wife as she loved him.

They were a handsome pair truly, much of an age, tall, strong, yet of a type as refined-looking as any in the world. At their feet lay the heaps of wheat ; beyond them, around them, that limitless plain which once seen holds the imagination captive for ever, whether the recollection be of a sea of corn, or, as now, of stretches of brown earth bare of all save the dead sources of a gathered harvest. To one side, a mile or so away, the piled mud village was girdled by a golden haze of dust which sprang from the feet of the homing cattle.

' I saw one with thee but now,' he said, as, half-mechanically, he stooped to gather up a handful of the wheat and test it between finger and thumb. ' Gossip Rādha by her bulk—and by thy face, wife. What new crime hath the village committed ? what new calamity

befallen the part-owners? Sure, even her tongue could say nought against the harvest!’

‘Nought! thanks be to the Lord!’ replied Uma briefly. ‘Now, since thou hast come to watch, I will go bring the water and see *Baba-jee* hath his dinner. I will return ere long and set thee free.’

‘Thou hast a busy life,’ he said suddenly, as if the fact struck him newly. ‘There are too few of us for the work.’

The woman turned from him suddenly to look out to the horizon beyond the level fields.

‘Ay! there are too few of us,’ she echoed with an effort, ‘but I will be back ere the light goes.’

Too few! Yes, too few. She had known that for some time; and if it were so in their youth and strength, what would it be in the old age which must come upon them as it had upon the *Baba-jee*, who, as she passed into the wide courtyard in order to fetch the big brazen water-vessel, nodded kindly, asking where his son had lingered.

‘He watches the corn-heaps till I return. It must be so, since there are so few of us.’

The nod changed to a shake, and the cheerful old voice trembled a little over the echo.

‘Ay! there are few of us.’

All the way down to the shallow tank, set, as it were, in a crackle-edge of a sun-baked mud, the phrase re-echoed again and again in Uma-devi’s brain till it seemed written large through her own eyes in the faces of the village women passing to and fro with their

water-pots. They knew it also ; they said it to themselves, though as yet none had dared—save Mai Râdha, with her cowardly hints—to say to *her* that the time had come when the few ought to be made more. Ah ! if Shiv-deo's younger brother had not died before his child-wife was of age to be brought home, this need not have been. Though, even then, a virtuous woman for her husband's sake ought—

Uma-devi, down by the water-edge, as if to escape from her own thoughts, turned hastily to spread the corner of her veil over the wide mouth of the brazen pot, and with a smaller cup began to ladle the muddy water on to the strainer. But the thought was passionate, insistent. Ought ? What was the use of prating about ought ? She could not, she would not let Shivo take another woman by the hand. How could they ask her, still young, still beautiful, still beloved, to give him another bride ? Why, it would be her part to lift the veil from the new beauty, as she lifted it from the now brimming water-pot—so—

Uma Himāvutee ! what did she see ? Her own face reflected in the brass-ringed water, as in a mirror set in a golden frame ! Clear as in any mirror her own beauty—the lips Shivo had kissed—the eyes which held him so dear ; all, all unchanged. Ah ! but it was impossible ! That was what the pious old folk preached—what the pious young folk pretended. She poised the brazen vessel on her head, telling herself passionately it was impossible. Yet the sight of the wide courtyard, empty save for *Baba-jee* creeping about

UMA HIMĀVUTĒE

to feed the milch kine and do what he could of woman's work, revived that refrain of self-reproach, 'There are too few of us.' Shivo himself had said it—for the first time, it is true, but would it be the last? Wherefore? since it was true. She set down the water-pot and began to rekindle the ashes on the hearth, thinking stupidly of that reflection of her own face. But water was like a man's heart; it could hold more faces than one.

'*Ari, hai!* sister,' called Mai Rādha, pausing at the open doorway to look in and see the house-mistress clapping unleavened bread between her palms with the hot haste of one hard pressed for time. 'Thou hast no rest; but one woman is lost in these courts. I mind when thy mother-in-law lived and there were young things growing up in each corner. That is as it should be.'

A slow flush darkened Uma's face. 'Young things come quick enough when folks will,' she retorted passionately. 'Give me but a year's grace, gossip, and I, Uma-devi, will fill the yard too—if I wish it filled. Ay! and without asking thy help either.'

It was intolerable that this woman with her yearly, endless babies should come and crow over the childless hearth. Yet she was right; and again the old sickening sense of failure replaced the flash of indignant forgetfulness.

'Heed not my food, daughter,' came the cheerful, contented old voice. 'I can cook mine own, and Shivo must need his after the day's toil. If thou take it to

him at the threshing-floor 'twill save time ; when hands are few the minutes are as jewels, and it grows dark already. Thou wilt need a cresset for safety from the snakes.'

Once more the woman winced. That was true also ; yet had she been doing her duty and bringing sons to the hearth it would not have been so, for the glory of coming motherhood would have driven the serpents from her path.¹

She paused at the doorstep to give a backward glance, to see the old man already at his woman's work, and her heart smote her again. Was it seemly work for the most learned man in the village who had taught his son to be so good, so kind ? Yet Shivo of himself would never say the word, neither would the old man. That was the worst of it ; for it would have been easier to have kicked against the pricks.

She passed swiftly to the fields, the brass platter—glittering under the flicker of the cresset and piled with dough cakes and a green leaf of curds—poised gracefully on her right palm, the brass *lotab* of drinking-water hanging from her left hand, the heavy folds of her gold and madder draperies swaying as she walked. It was not yet quite dark. A streak of red light lingered in the horizon, though overhead the stars began to twinkle, matched in the dim stretch of shadowy plain by the twinkling lights showing one by one from the threshing-floors. But Shiv-deo's was still dark, because there had been no one to bring him a

¹ A common belief in India.

lamp. She gave an angry laugh, set her teeth and stepped quicker. If it came to that, she had better speak at once ; speak now—to-night—before Mai Rādha or someone else had a chance—speak out in the open where there were no spies to see—to hear !

It was a clear night, she thought, for sure, and, despite the red warning, giving promise of a clear dawn. One of those dawns, maybe, when, like a pearl-edged cloud, the far-distant Himalayas would hang on the northern horizon during the brief twilight and vanish before the glare of day. *Ai !* Mai Uma must be cold up there in the snows !

And Shivo must be hungry by this time ; watching, perhaps, the twinkling light she carried come nearer and nearer.

The thought pleased her, soothing her simple heart, and the placid routine of her life came to aid her as she set the platter before her husband reverently with the signs of worship she would have yielded a god. Were they not, she and Shivo, indissolubly joined together for this world and the next ? Was not a good woman redemption's source to her husband ? *Baba-jee* had read that many times from his old books. So she felt no degradation as she set the water silently by Shivo's right hand, scooped a hollow in the yellow wheat for the flickering cresset, and then drew apart into the shadows, leaving the man alone to perform the ritual in that little circle of light. He was her husband ; that was enough.

With her chin upon both her hands she crouched on

another pile of corn and watched him with sad eyes. Far and near all was soft, silent darkness save for those twinkling stars shining in heaven and matched on earth. Far and near familiar peace, familiar certainty. Even that pain at her heart. Had not others felt it and set it aside? The calm endurance of her world, its disregard of pain, seemed to change her own smart to a dull ache, as her eyes followed every movement of the man who loved her.

‘Thou art silent, wife,’ he said, kind wonder in his tone, when, the need for silence being over, she still sat without a word.

That roused her. Silent! yea! silent for too long. She rose suddenly and stood before him, tall and straight in the circle of light. Then her voice came clear without a tremble—

‘There are too few of us in the house, husband. We must have more. We must have young hands when ours are old.’

He stood up in his turn stretching his hands towards her.

‘Uma! say not so,’ he faltered, ‘I want no more.’ She shook her head.

‘The fields want them; and even thou——’ Then her calm broke, dissolved, disappeared, like a child’s sand barrier before the tide. She flung her arms skyward and her voice came like a cry—

‘Ask her—ask thy sister—let her do all. I cannot. And she—*she* must come from afar, Shivo, from far! Not from here—lest Mai Râdha——’

UMA HIMĀVUTEĒ

She broke off, turned and flung herself face down in the corn silently, clutching at it with her hand.

Shiv-deo stood looking out over the shadowy fields.

'They need them surely,' he said softly after a time, 'and my father has a right——'

He paused, stooped, and laid a timid touch on the woman's shoulder.

'Yea! she shall come from far, wife, from far.'

Then there was silence, far and near.

II

There was no lack of life now in the wide courtyards, though the year claimed by Uma's pride had scarcely gone by. And there was more to come ere the sunset, if the gossips said sooth as they passed in and out, setting the iron knife (suspended on a string above the inner door) a-swinging as they elbowed it aside. From within came a babel of voices, striving to speak softly, and so sinking into a sort of sibilant hiss, broken by one querulous cry of intermittent complaint. Without, in the bigger courtyard, was a cackle and clamour, joyfully excited, round a platter of sugar-drops set for due refreshment of the neighbours. It would be a boy, for sure, they said, the omens being all propitious and *Purm-eshwar*¹ well aware of the worthiness of the household. But, good lack! what ways foreign women had! There was the girl's mother, disregarding *this* old custom, performing *that* new mummery as if there were no canon of right and wrong; yet they were—

¹ The Universal God.

UMA HIMĀVUTĒE

those town women—of the race, doubtless of the same race! It was passing strange; nevertheless Uma herself did bravely, having always been of the wise sort. She had given the word back keenly but now to Mai Râdha, who, as usual, had her pestle in the mortar, and must needs join in the strange woman's hints that the first wife was better away from the sufferer's sight. *Puramesh!* what an idea! She had spoken sharp and fair, as was right, seeing that it was hard above the common on Uma—so young, so handsome, so well-beloved! Many a pious one in her place, with no mother-in-law to deal with—only two soft-hearted, soft-tongued men—would have closed the door on another wedding yet a while, and bided on Providence longer. Small blame either. It was not ten years since those two had come together; while as for affection—

The rush of words slackened as the object of it set the swinging knife aside, and came forward to see that nought was lacking to the hospitality of the house. With those strange women within, lording it over all by virtue of their relationship to the expectant mother, it behoved her honour to see that there was no possible ground for complaint. It was a year since Uma had flung herself face down upon the wheat, and now the yellow corn once more lay in heaps upon the white threshing-floor. Another harvest had been sown and watered and reaped; but Uma was waiting for hers. And her mind was in a tumult of jealous fear. Shivo, with all his goodness, his kindness to her, could scarcely help loving the mother of his child better than

the woman who had failed to bring him one. How could she take that other woman's son in her arms and hold it up for the father's first look? Yet that would be her part.

The strain of the thought showed in her face as she moved about seeing to this and that, speaking to those other women serenely, cheerfully. Her pride ensured so much.

Within, the coming grandmother heaved a very purposeful sigh of relief at her absence. The patient would be better now that those glowering eyes were away. Whereat Mai Râdha, the time-server, nodded her head sagely; but the girlish voice from the bed, set round with lamps and flowers, rose in fretful denial.

'Hold thy peace, mother. Thou canst not understand, being of the town. It is different here in the village.'

The mother giggled, nudging her neighbour. 'Nine to credit, ten to debit! That's true of a first wife, town and country. But think as thou wilt, honey! Trust me to see she throws no evil eye on thee or the child. She shall not even see it till the fateful days be over.'

The village midwife, an old crone sitting smoking a pipe at the foot of the bed, laughed.

'Thou art out there, mother! 'Tis her part, her right, to show the babe to its father. That is old fashion, and we hold to it.'

'Show it to its father! Good luck! Heard one

ever the like,' shrilled the indignant grandmother-to-be. 'Why, with us he must not see it for days. Is it not so, friends?'

The town-bred contingent clamoured shocked assent; the midwife and her cronies stood firm. Uma, appealed to by a deputation, met the quarrel coldly.

'I care not,' she said; 'settle it as you please. I am ready to hold the child or not.'

So a compromise was effected between the disputants within, before the beating of brass trays announced the happy birth of a son, and they came trooping into the outer court full of words and explanations. But Uma heard nothing and saw nothing except the crying frog-like morsel of humanity they thrust into her unwilling arms. So that was Shivo's child! How ugly, and what an ill-tempered little thing! Suddenly the gurgling cry ceased, as instinctively she folded her veil about the struggling, naked limbs.

'So! So!' cried the gossips, pushing and pulling joyfully, excitedly. 'Yonder is the master! All is ready.'

She set her teeth for the ordeal and let herself be thrust towards Shivo, who was seated by the door, his back towards her. She had not seen him since the advent of the gossips at dawn had driven the men-kind from the homestead. And now the sun was setting redly as on that evening a year ago when she had told him they were too few for the house. Well, there were more now. And this was the worst. Now she was to

see love grow to his face for the child which was not hers, knowing that love for its mother must grow also unseen in his heart.

‘ So ! So ! ’ cried the busy, unsympathetic voices intent on their own plans. ‘ Hold the child so, sister, above his shoulders, and bid him take his first look at a son.’

The old dogged determination to leave nothing undone which should be done strengthened her to raise the baby as she was bid, stoop with it over Shivo’s shoulder and say, almost coldly—

‘ I bring thee thy son, husband. Look on it, and take its image to thine heart.’

Then she gave a quick, incredulous cry ; for, as she stooped, she saw her own face reflected in the brass-ringed mirror formed by the wide mouth of the brimming water-pot, which was set on the floor before Shiv-deo !

‘ Higher, sister ! higher ! ’ cried the groups, ‘ let him see the babe in the water for luck’s sake. So ! *Ari* ! father, is not that a son indeed ! *Wâb* ! the sweetest doll.’

Sweet enough, in truth, looked the reflection of that tiny face where her own had been. She let it stay there for a second or two ; then a sudden curiosity came to her and she drew aside almost roughly, still keeping her eyes on the water-mirror. Ah ! there was her husband’s face now, with a look in it that she had never seen before—the look of fatherhood.

Without a word she thrust her burden back into

other arms, asking impatiently if that were all, or if they needed more of her services.

'More indeed,' muttered the grandmother tartly as she disappeared again, intent on sugar and spices, behind the swinging knife. 'Sure some folk had small labour or pains over this day's good work. Lucky for the master that there be other women in the world.'

Uma looked after her silently, beset by a great impatience of the noise and the congratulations. She wanted to get away from it all, from those whispers and giggles heard from within, and interrupted every now and then by that new gurgling cry. The excitement was over, the gossips were departing one by one, Shivo and his father were being dragged off to the village square for a pipe of peace and thanksgiving. No one wanted her now ; her part in the house was done, and out yonder in the gathering twilight the heaps of corn were alone, as she was. She could at least see to their safety for a while and have time to remember those faces—hers, and the child's, and Shivo's.

Well ! it was all over now. No wonder they did not need her any more since she had done all—yea ! she had done her duty to the uttermost !

A sort of passionate resentment at her own virtue filled her mind as, wearied out with the physical strain, she lay down to rest upon the yielding yellow wheat. How soft it was, how cool ! She nestled into it, head, hands, feet, gaining a certain consolation from the mere comfort to her tired body. And as she looked

UMA HIMĀVUTĒE

ut over her husband's fields, the very knowledge that the harvest had been reaped and gathered soothed her ; besides, in the years to come there would be other lands for other harvests. That was also as it should be. And yet? She turned her face down into the heat.

' Shivo ! Shivo ! ' she sobbed into the fruits of the harvest which she had helped to sow and gather. Shivo ! Shivo ! '

But to her creed marriage had for its object the reservation of the hearth fire, not the fire of passion, and the jealousy which is a virtue to the civilized was a crime to this barbarian.

So, as she lay half hidden in the harvested corn, the thought of the baby's face, and hers, and Shivo's—all, all in the water-mirror—brought her in a confused half-comprehending way a certain comfort from their very companionship. So, by degrees, the strain passed from mind and body, leaving her asleep, with slackened nerves, upon the heap of corn. Asleep peacefully until a hand touched her shoulder gently, and in the soft grey dawn she saw her husband standing beside her.

She rose slowly, drawing her veil closer with a shiver, for the air was chill.

' I have been seeking thee since nightfall, wife,' he said in gentle reproach, with a ring of relief in his voice ; ' I feared—I know not what—that thou hadst thought me churlish, perhaps, because I did not thank thee for—for thy son.'

His hand sought hers and found it, as they stood side

U M A H I M Ā V U T E E

by side looking out over the fields with the eyes of those whose lives are spent in sowing and reaping, looking out over the wide sweep of bare earth and beyond it, on the northern horizon, the dim dawn-lit peaks of the Himalayas.

‘He favours her in the face, husband,’ she said quietly, ‘but he hath thy form. That is as it should be, for thou art strong and she is fair.’

So, as they went homeward through the lightning fields—she a dutiful step behind the man—the printing-presses over at the other side of the world were busy, amid flaring gas-jets and the clamour of marvellous machinery, in discussing in a thousand ways the dreary old problems of whether marriage is a failure or not.

It was not so to Uma-devi.

ON THE SECOND STORY

I

IT was a three-storied house in reality, though time had given it the semblance of a fourth in the mud platform which led up to its only entrance. For the passing feet of generations had worn down the levels of the alley outside, and the toiling hands of generations had added to the level of the rooms within, until those who wished to pass from one to the other had to climb the connecting steps ere they could reach the door.

The door itself was broad as it was high, and had a strangely deformed look, since nearly half of its two carven stone jambs were, of necessity, hidden behind the platform. These stone jambs, square-hewn, roughly carven, were the only sign of antiquity visible in the house from the alley ; the rest being the usual straight-up-and-down almost windowless wall built of small purplish bricks set in a mortar of mud. It stood, however, a little farther back in the alley than its neighbours, so giving room for the mud platform ; but that was its only distinction.

The alley in its turn differed in no way from the generality of such alleys in the walled towns where the houses—like trees in a crowded plantation—shoot up shoulder to shoulder, as if trying to escape skywards

ON THE SECOND STORY

from the yearly increasing pressure of humanity. It was, briefly, a deep, dark, irregular drain of a place, shadowful utterly save for the one brief half-hour or so during which the sun showed in the notched ribbon of the sky which was visible between the uneven turretings of the roof.

Yet the very sunlessness and airlessness had its advantages. In hot weather it brought relief from the scorching glare, and in the cold, such air as there was remained warm even beneath a frosty sky. So that the mud platform, with its possibilities of unhustled rest, was a favourite gossiping-place of the neighbourhood. All the more so because, between it and the next house, diving down through the *débris* of countless generations and green with the slime of countless ages, lay one of those wells to which the natives cling so fondly in defiance of modern sanitation and water-works. But there was a third reason why the platform was so much frequented ; on the second story of the house to which it belonged stood the oldest Hindu shrine in the city. How it came to be there no one could say clearly. The Brahmins who tended it from the lower story told tales of a plinthed temple built in the heroic age of Prithi Râj ; but only this much was certain, that it was very old, and that the steep stone ladder of a stair which led up to the arched alcoves of the ante-shrine was of very different date to the ordinary brick one which led thence to the third story, where, among other lodgers, Ramanund, B.A., lived with his widowed mother.

ON THE SECOND STORY

He was a mathematical master in a mission school, and twice a day on his way to and from the exact sciences he had to pass up and down the brick ladder and the stone stair. And sometimes he had to stand aside on the three-cornered landing where the brick and stone met, in order that the women coming to worship might pass with their platters of curds, their trays of cressets, and chaplets of flowers into the dim ante-shrine where the light from a stone lattice glistened faintly on the damp, oil-smearred pavement. But that being necessarily when he was on his way downstairs, and deep in preparation for the day's work, he did not mind a minute or so of delay for further study ; and he would go on with his elementary treatise on logarithms until the tinkle of the anklets merged into the giggle which generally followed when, in the comparative seclusion of the ante-shrine, the veils could be lifted for a peep at the handsome young man. But Ramanund, albeit a lineal descendant of the original Brahmin priests of the temple, had read Herbert Spencer and John Stuart Mill ; so he would go on his way careless alike of the unseen women and the unseen shrine—of the mysteries of sex and religion as presented in his natural environment. There are dozens of young men in India nowadays in this position ; who stand figuratively, as he did actually, giving the go-by to one-half of life alternately, and letting the cressets and the chaplets and the unseen women pass unchallenged into the alcove, where the speckled light of the lattice bejewelled their gay garments, and a blue

ON THE SECOND STORY

cloud of incense floated sideways among the dim arches.

And Ramanund was as good a specimen of this new India as could be found, north or south. Not of robust physique—that was scarcely to be expected after generations of in and in breeding—but of most acute intelligence, and, by virtue of inherited spiritual distinction, singularly free from the sensual, passive acquiescence in the limitations of life which brings content to the most of humanity. He was, by birth, as it were, a specialized speculative machine working at full pressure with a pure virtue escapement. As President of a Debating Club affiliated with the 'Society for the General Improvement of the People of India,' he was perhaps needlessly lavish of vague expressions such as 'the individual rights of man'; but then he, in common with his kind, had only lately become acquainted with the ideas such phrases are supposed to express, and had not as yet learned their exact use—that being an art which history tells needs centuries of national and individual struggle for its attainment.

Be that as it may, even in the strict atmosphere of the mission school Ramanund's only fault was that he had assimilated its morality and rejected its dogma. In the orthodox Hindu household upstairs, over which his widowed mother ruled severely, his only crime was that he refused to replace a wife, deceased of the measles at the age of six, by another of the good lady's choosing. For that other matter of slighting the shrine downstairs

ON THE SECOND STORY

is too common nowadays in India to excite any re-
crimination, its only effect being to make the women
regard the rule which forbids their eating with the men-
folks, as a patent of purity, instead of a sign of in-
feriority ; since it is a safeguard against contamination
from those who, when beyond the watch of secluded
eyes, may have defiled themselves in a thousand
Western ways.

Regarding the wife, however, Ramanund was firm,
despite the prayers that his mother offered before the
Goddess downstairs for his deliverance from obstinacy.
He used to accompany her sometimes on this errand so
far as the three-cornered landing, and then with a smile
proceed on his way to the exact sciences. Even the
clang of the great bell which hung in front of the idol
within tiptoe touch of the worshipper, as it used to
come pealing after him down the stairs, proclaiming
that the Goddess's attention had been called to a new
petitioner, did not bring a comprehension of facts to his
singularly clear brain. Those facts being that, rightly
or wrongly, the flamboyant image of the Goddess Kâli
—which his ancestors had tended faithfully—was being
besieged by as fervent a mother-prayer as had been laid
before any divinity.

In truth Ramanund had no special desire to marry at
all ; or even to fall in love. He was too busy with the
exact sciences to experimentalize on the suspension of
the critical faculty in man ; besides, he had definitely
made up his mind to marry a widow when he did
marry. For he was as great on the widow question as

ON THE SECOND STORY

he was on all others which appealed to his kindly moral nature. He and his friends of the same stamp—pleaders, clerks, and such like living in the alley—used to sit on the mud steps after working-hours, and discuss such topics before adjourning to the Debating Club ; but they always left one of the flights of steps free. This was for the worshippers to pass upwards to the shrine as soon as the blare of the conches, the beating of drums, and the ringing of bells should announce that the dread Goddess having been washed and put to bed like a good little girl, her bath water was available to those who wished to drink it as a charm against the powers of darkness.

That was with the waning light ; but as it was a charm also against the dangers of day, the dawn in its turn would be disturbed by clashings and brayings to tell of *Kâli devi's* uprisal. Then, in the growing light, the house-mothers, fresh from their grindstones, would come shuffling through the alleys with a pinch or two of new-ground flour, and the neighbouring Brahmins—hurriedly devotional after the manner of priesthoods—would speed up the stair (muttering prayers as they sped) to join for half a minute in the sevenfold circling of the sacred lamps, while, divided between sleep and greed, the fat traders on their way to their shops would begin business by a bid for divine favour, and yawn petitions as they waddled, that the supply of holy water would hold out till they arrived at the shrine.

But at this time in the morning Ramanund would

ON THE SECOND STORY

be sleeping the sleep of the just upstairs, after sitting up past midnight over his pupils' exercises ; for one of the first effects of civilization is to make men prefer a lamp to the sun.

Now, one September when the rains, coming late and ceasing early, had turned the pestilential drain in the city into a patent germ propagator, the worshippers at Kâli *devi's* shrine were more numerous than ever. Indeed, one or two half-hearted freethinker hangers-on to the fringe of Progress and Debating Clubs began to hedge cautiously by allowing their womenfolk to make offerings in their names, since when cholera is choosing its victims haphazard up and down the alleys, it is as well to insure your life in every office that will accept you as a client.

Ramanund, of course, and his immediate friends were above such mean trucklings. *They* exerted themselves to keep the alley clean, they actually subscribed to pay an extra sweeper, they distributed cholera pills and the very soundest advice to their neighbours—especially to those who persisted in using the old well. Ramanund, indeed, went so far as to circulate a pamphlet, imploring those who, from mistaken religious scruples, would not drink from the hydrants, to filter their water ; in support of which *thesis* he quoted learned Sanskrit texts.

'*Jai Kâli ma !*'¹ said the populace to each other where they read it. 'Such talk is pure blasphemy. If She wishes blood, shall She not drink it ? Our fathers

¹ 'Victory to Mother Kali !'

ON THE SECOND STORY

messed not with filters. Such things bring Her wrath on the righteous ; even as now in this sickness.'

Yet they spoke calmly, acquiescing in the inevitable from their side of the question, just as Ramanund and his like did from theirs ; for this passivity is characteristic of the race, which yet needs only a casual match to make it flare into fanaticism.

So time passed until one day, the moon being at the full, and the alley lying mysterious utterly by reason of the white shining of its turreted roofs set, as it were, upon the solid darkness of the narrow lane below, a new voice broke in on the reading of a paper regarding the ' Sanitation of the Vedic Ages,' which Ramanund was declaiming to some chosen friends.

' *Jai Kâli ma !* ' said this voice also, but the tone was different, and the words rang fiercely. ' Is Her arm shortened that it cannot save ? Is it straightened that it cannot slay. Wait, ye fools, till the dark moon brings Her night and ye shall see.'

It came from a man with an evil hemp-sodden face, and a body naked save for a saffron-coloured rag, who, smeared from head to foot with cowdung ashes, was squatting on the threshold, daubing it with cowdung and water ; for the evening worshippers had passed, and he was at work betimes purifying the sacred spot against the morrow's festival.

The listeners turned with a start to look at the strange yet familiar figure, and Ramanund, cut short in his eloquence, frowned ; but he resumed his paper, which was in English, without a pause, being quick

ON THE SECOND STORY

to do battle in words after the manner of New India.

‘ These men, base pretenders to the holiness of the *sunnyâsi*, are the curse of the country ! Mean tricksters and rogues, wandering like locusts through the land to pray on the timid fears of our modest countrywomen. Men who outrage the common sense in a thousand methods ; who——’

The man behind him laughed shortly, ‘ Curse on, master *jee* ! ’ he said, ‘ for curses they are by the sound, though I know not the tongue for sure. Yea ! curse if thou likest, and praise the new wisdom ; yet thou—Ramanund, Brahmin, son of those who tend Her—has not forgotten the old. Forget it ! How can a man forget what he learned in his mother’s womb, what he hath learned in his second birth ? ’

Long years after prayer has passed from a man’s life, the sound of the ‘ Our Father ’ may bring him back in thought to his mother’s knee. So it was with Ramanund, as, in the silence which followed, he watched (by the flickering light of the cresset set on the ground between them) his adversary’s lips moving in the secret verse which none but the twice-born may repeat. It brought back to him, as if it had been yesterday, the time when, half-frightened, half-important, he had heard it whispered in his ear for the first time. When for the first time also he had felt the encircling thread of the twice-born castes on his soft young body. That thread which girdled him from the common herd, which happed and wrapped him round

ON THE SECOND STORY

with a righteousness not his own, but imputed to him by divine law. Despite logarithms, despite pure morality, something thrilled in him, half in exultation, half in fear. It was unforgettable, and yet, in a way, he had forgotten!—Forgotten what? The question was troublesome, so he gave it the go-by quickly.

‘I have not forgotten the old wisdom, *Jôgi jee*,’ he said. ‘I hold more of it than thou, with all thy trickery. But remember this: We of the Sacred Land ¹ will not stand down-country cheating, and if thou art caught at it here, ’tis the lock-up.’

‘If I am caught,’ echoed the man as he drew a small earthen pot closer to him and began to stir its contents with his hand, every now and again testing their consistency by letting a few drops fall from his lifted fingers back into the pot. They were thick and red, showing in the dim light like blood. ‘It is not we, servants of dread Kâli, who are caught, ’tis ye faithless ones who have wandered from Her. Ye who pretend to know——’

‘A scoundrel when we see one,’ broke in the school-master, his high thin tones rising. ‘And I do know *one* at least. What is more, I will have thee watched by the police.’

‘Don’t,’ put in one of the others in English. ‘What use to rouse anger needlessly. Such men are dangerous.’

‘Dangerous!’ echoed Ramanund. ‘Their day is past——’

‘The people believe in them still,’ persisted another,

¹ The first Aryan settlements were in the Punjab.

ON THE SECOND STORY

looking uneasily at the *jôgi*'s scowl, which, in truth, was not pleasant.

'And such language is, in my poor opinion, descriptive of that calculated to cause a breach of peace,' remarked a rotund little pleader, 'thus contrary to *mores publicos*. In moderation lies safety.'

'And cowardice,' retorted Ramanund, returning purposely to Hindustani and keeping his eager face full on the *jôgi*. 'It is because the people, illiterate and ignorant, believe in them, that I advocate resistance. Let us purge the old, pure faith of our fathers from the defilements which have crept in! Let us, by the light of new wisdom revealing the old, sweep from our land the nameless horrors which deface it. Let us teach our illiterate brothers and sisters to treat these priests of Kâli as they deserve, and to cease worshipping that outrage on the very name of womanhood upstairs—that devil drunk with blood, unsexed, obscene——'

He was proceeding after his wont, stringing adjectives on a single thread of meaning, when a triumphant yell startled him into a pause.

'*Jai Kâli ma! Jai Kâli ma!*'

It seemed to fill the alley with harsh echoes, blending into a guttural, cruel laugh. 'So be it, brother! Let it be Kâli, the Eternal Woman against thee, Ramanund the Scholar! I tell thee She will stretch out Her left hand so'—here his own left hand, reddened with the pigment he had been preparing for the purpose, printed itself upon one lintel of the door—'and her right hand so'—here his right did the same for the

ON THE SECOND STORY

other lintel, and he paused, obviously to give effect to the situation. Indeed his manner throughout had been intensely theatrical, and this deft blending of the ordinary process of marking the threshold, with a mysterious threat suitable to the occasion, betrayed the habitual trafficker in superstitious fear.

‘And then, *Jôgi jee*,’ sneered Ramanund imperturbably.

‘And then, master *jee*?’ cried his adversary, his anger growing at his own impotence to impress, as he clenched his reddened hands and stooped forward to bring his scowl closer to the calm contempt. ‘Why, then She will draw fools to Her bosom, bloody though they deem it.’

‘And if they will not be drawn?’

The words scarcely disturbed the stillness of the alley, which was deserted save for that strange group, outlined by the flicker of the cresset. On the one side, backed by the cavernous darkness of the low, wide door, was the naked, savage-looking figure, with its hands dripping still in heavy red drops, stretched out in menace over the lamp. On the other was Ramanund, backed by his friends, decent, civilized, in their Western-cut white clothing.

‘Damn you—you—you brute!’

The schoolmaster seldom swore; when he did, he used English oaths. Possibly because they seemed more alien to his own virtue. On this occasion several came fluently as he fumbled for his pocket handkerchief; for the *jôgi* in answer to his taunt had reached

ON THE SECOND STORY

out one of his red hands and drawn three curving fingers down the centre of Ramanund's immaculate forehead. The emblem of his discarded faith, the bloody trident of Siva, showed there distinctly ere the modern hemstitched handkerchief wiped it away petulantly. It was gone in a second ; yet Ramanund, even as he assured himself of the fact by persistent rubbing, felt that it had somehow sunk more than skin deep. The knowledge made him swear the harder, and struggle vehemently against his comrades' restraining hands.

'It is a case for police, and binding over to keep peace,' protested the pleader soothingly. 'I will conduct same even on appeals to highest court without further charge.'

'In addition, it is *infra dig.* to disciples of the law and order thus to behave as the illiterate,' put in another ; while a third, with less theory and more practice, remarked that to use violence to a priest of Kâli on the threshold of Her temple during Her sacred month was as much as their lives were worth, since God only knew how many a silent believer within earshot needed but one cry to come to the rescue of Her servant, especially now when the sickness was making men sensitive to Her honour.

So, in the end, outraged civilization contented itself by laying a formal charge of assault in the neighbouring police station against a certain religious mendicant, name unknown, supposed to have come from Benares, who, in the public thoroughfare, had infringed the

ON THE SECOND STORY

liberty of one of Her Imperial Majesty's liege subjects by imprinting the symbol of a decadent faith on his forehead. And thereafter it repaired to the Debating Club, where Ramanund recovered his self-respect in a more than usually perfervid outburst of eloquence. So fervid, indeed, that one of the most forward lights in the province, who happened to look in, swore eternal friendship on the spot ; the result being that the two young men discussed every burning question under the sun, as, with arms interclasped, Ramanund saw his new acquaintance home to his lodgings.

Thus it was past midnight ere he returned to his own, and then he was so excited, so intoxicated, as it were, by his own strong words, that he strode down the narrow alley as if he were marching to victory. And yet the alley itself was peace personified. It was dark no longer, for the great silver shield of the moon hung on the notched ribbon of pale sky between the roofs, and its light—with the nameless message of peace which seems inherent in it—lay thick and white down to the very pavement. There was scarcely a shadow anywhere save the odd foreshortened image of himself which kept pace behind Ramanund's swift steps, like a demon driving him to his doom.

The low wide door, however, showed like a cavern, and the narrow stone stair struck chill after the heat outside. Perhaps that was why the young man shivered as he groped his way upwards amid the lingering scent of past incense, the perfume of fallen flowers, and the faint odour suggestive of the gay garments which had

ON THE SECOND STORY

fluttered past not so long before. Or, perhaps, the twin passions of Love and Worship, which even Logarithms cannot destroy, were roused in him by the memory of these things. Whatever it was, something made him pause to hold his breath and listen on that three-cornered landing where the brick and the stone met. A speckled bar of moonlight glistened on the damp floor of the ante-shrine and showed a dim arch or two—then darkness. And all around him was that penetrating odour telling of things unseen, almost unknown, and yet strangely familiar to his inherited body and soul.

There was not a sound. That was as it should be when gods slept like men.

When gods slept . . . !

There was a sound now—the sound of his own contemptuous laugh as he remembered his defiance of such divinities—the sound of his own steps as he passed suddenly, impulsively, into the ante-shrine, feeling it was time for such as he to worship while She slept, helpless as humanity itself.

It was almost dark in the low-arched corridors with their massive pillars surrounding the central chamber on all sides. But there, in the Holy of Holies, two smoking, swinging lamps threw a yellow glare on the carved stone canopy which reached up into the shadows of the vaulted roof. And by their light the hideous figure of the idol could be half-seen, half-imagined through the fretted panels of the iron doors fast-locked on Her sleep ; fretted panels giving glimpses, no more,

ON THE SECOND STORY

of flamboyant arms crimson as blood, and hung with faded flowers. Blood and flowers, blood and flowers, blending strangely with that lingering perfume of Womanhood and Worship with which the air was heavy.

Hark ! what was that ? A step ? Impossible, surely, at that hour of the night when even gods sleep ! And yet he drew back hastily into the farther shadows, forgetful of everything save sheer annoyance at the chance of being discovered in Kâli's shrine. He of all men in the city !

Yes ! it was a step in the ante-shrine. A light step ; and there, emerging from the darkness of the corridors, was a figure. A woman's figure—or was it a child's ?—draped from head to foot in white. Ramanund felt a throb of philanthropic pity thrill through heart and brain even in his relief ; for this was some poor widow, no doubt, come on the sly to offer her ill-omened ¹ prayers, and though he might rely on her rapt devotion allowing him to steal round the corridors unobserved, the thought of the reason why she had come alone filled him with compassion—partly because he was in truth a kindly soul, partly because he was, as it were, pledged to such compassion.

A widow certainly ; and yet surely little more than a child ! So slender, so small was she that even on tiptoe her outstretched hand could not reach the clapper of the big bell which hung above her head. Once, twice, thrice, she tried ; standing full in the flare of the lamp,

¹ A widow brings ill-luck with her.

ON THE SECOND STORY

her veil falling back from the dark head, close-cropped like a boy's, and roughened almost into curls. Something in the sight made Ramanund hold his breath again as he watched the disappointment grow to the small, passionate face.

'She will not listen—She will not hear! No one ever listens—no one . . .'

It was not a cry; it was only a girl's whisper with a note of girlish fear rising above its pain, but it echoed like a *reveille* to something which had till then been asleep in Ramanund. Not listen! Was he not there in the dark listening? Was he not ready to help?—God! how young and slender she was down there on her knees thrusting the chaplets she had brought through the fretwork fiercely . . .

'*Mai Kâli! Mai!* Listen! Listen!' The clear, sharp voice rang passionately now, echoing through the arches. 'What have I done, Mother, to be accursed? Why didst Thou take him from me—my beautiful young husband—for they tell me he was young and beautiful. And now they say that Thou sendest the other for my lover—thy priest! But I will not, Mother, if they kill me for it. Thou wouldst not give thyself to such as he, Kâli, ugly as Thou art—and I am pretty. Far prettier than the other girls who have husbands. *Mai Kâli!* listen this once—this once only! Kill me now when Thou art killing so many, and give me a husband in the next life; or let me go—let me be free—free to choose my own way—my own lover. Mother! Mother! if Thou wouldst only wake!—if

ON THE SECOND STORY

Thou wouldst only listen!—if Thou wouldst only look and see how pretty I am!—'

Her voice died away amid that mingled perfume of love and worship, of sex and religion, which seemed to lie heavy on the breath, making it come short. . . .

Truly the gods might sleep, but man waked! There, in the shadow, a man looked and listened till pity and passion set his brain and heart on fire.

The girl had risen to her feet again in her last hopeless appeal, and now stood once more looking upwards at the silent bell, her hands, empty of their chaplets, clenched in angry despair, and a world of baffled life and youth in her childish face.

'She will not listen! She will not wake!' The whisper, with its note of fear in it, ended in a booming clang which forced a vibrating response from the dim arches as Ramanund's nervous hand smote the big bell full and fair. She turned with a low cry, then stood silent till a slow smile came to her face.

Mai Kâli had wakened indeed! She had listened also, and the lover had come. . . .

II

The moonlit nights which had so often shown two ghostlike figures amid the shadows of Kâli's shrine had given place to dark ones. And now, save for a whisper, there was no sign of life beneath the dim arches, since, as a rule, those two—Ramanund, and the woman Fate had sent him—shunned the smoky flare of the lamps, and the half-seen watchfulness of that hideous figure



ON THE SECOND STORY

within the closed fretwork doors. Yet sometimes little Anunda would insist on their sitting right in the very threshold of the Mother who, she said, would be angry if they distrusted Her. But at other times she would meet her lover, finger to lip, and lead him hastily to the darkest corner, lest he should wake the Goddess to direful anger at this desecration of Her holy place. Then again, she would laugh recklessly, hang the chaplets she had brought with her round his neck, cense him with sweet matches, and tell him, truthfully, that he was the only god she feared.

Altogether, as he sat with his arm round her, Ramnund used often to wonder helplessly if it were not all a dream. If so, it was not the calm, controlled dream he had cherished as the love-story suitable to a professor of mathematics. The heroine of that was to have been wise, perhaps a little sad, and Anunda was—well! it was difficult to say what she was, save absolutely entrancing in her every mood. She was like a firefly on a dark night, flashing here and there, brilliantly, lucidly, yet giving no clue to her own self except this—that she did not match with the exact sciences. Nor, for the matter of that, with the situation; for there were grave dangers in these nightly assignations.

In addition, their surroundings were anything but cheerful, anything but suitable to dreams. Cholera had the whole city in its grip now, and as those two had whispered of Love and Life, many a soul, within ear-shot of a man's raised voice, had passed out of both into the grave. But Anunda never seemed to think of

ON THE SECOND STORY

these things. She was the bravest and yet the timidest child alive ; at least so Ramanund used to tell her fondly when she laughed at discovery, and yet trembled at the very idea of marriage.

Honestly, she would have been quite satisfied to have him as her lover only, but for the impossibility of keeping him on those terms. An impossibility because— as she told him with tears—she was only on a visit to the Brahmins downstairs, and would have to return homewards when the dark month of Kâli-worship was over. And here followed one of those tales—scarcely credible to English ears—of the cold-blooded profligacy to which widows have to yield as the only means of making their lives bearable. Whereat Ramanund set his teeth and swore he would have revenge some day. Meanwhile it made him all the more determined to save her, and at the same time realize his cherished dream of defying his world by marrying a widow. Yet his boldness only had the effect of making little Anunda more timid and cautious.

‘What need for names, my lord,’ she would say evasively when he pressed her for particulars of her past. ‘Is it not enough that I am of pure Brahmin race. Before Kâli, my lord need have no fears for that, and I have found favour in my lord’s eyes. What, then, are the others to my lord? Let the wicked ones go.’

‘But if people do such things they should be punished by the law,’ fumed Ramanund, who, even with her arms round him, and a chaplet of *chumpak* blossom encircling his neck, could not quite forget that

ON THE SECOND STORY

he was a schoolmaster. 'You forget that we live in a new age, or perhaps you do not know it. That is one of the things I must teach you, sweetheart, when we are married.'

The slender bit of a hand which lay in his gave a queer little clasp of denial, and the close-cropped head on his shoulder stirred in a shake of incredulity.

'We cannot marry. I am a widow. It would be better—so——' and the 'so' was made doubly eloquent by the quiver of content with which, yielding to the pressure of his arm, she nestled closer to him. Ramanund's brain whirled, as she had a knack of making it whirl, but he stuck to his point manfully.

'Silly child! Of course we can marry. The law does not forbid it, and that is all we have to think of. It is legal, and no one has a right to interfere. Besides, as I told you, it is quite easy. To-morrow, the darkest night of Kâli's month, is our opportunity. Everyone will be wearied out by excitement'—here his face hardened and his voice rose. 'Excitement! I tell you it is disgraceful that these sacrifices should be permitted. I admit they are nothing here to what they are down-country, but we of the Sacred Land should set an example. The law should interfere to stop such demoralizing, brutalizing scenes. If we, the educated, were only allowed a voice in such matters, if we were not gagged and blindfolded from engaging in the amelioration of our native land——' He paused, and pulled himself up by bending down to kiss her in Western fashion, whereat she hid her face in quick

ON THE SECOND STORY

shame, for modesty is as much a matter of custom as anything else. 'But I will teach you all this when we are married. To-morrow, then, in the hour before dawn, when the worshippers will be drunk with wine and blood, you will meet me on the landing—not here, child, this will be no sight for you or me then. Ah! it is horrible even to think of it; the blood, the needless, reckless——' Again he pulled himself up and went on: 'I shall have a hired carriage at the end of the alley in which we will drive to the railway station; and then, Anunda, it will only be two tickets—two railway tickets.'

'Two railway tickets,' echoed Anunda in muffled tones from his shoulder; 'I came up in the railway from——' She paused, then added quickly: 'They put me in a cage, and I cried.'

'You will not be put in a cage this time,' replied Ramanund with a superior smile; 'you will come with me, and we will go to Benares.'

Her face came up to his this time anxiously. 'Benares? Why Benares?'

'Because good and evil come alike from Benares,' he answered exultantly. 'Mayhap you have been there, Anunda, and seen the evil, the superstition. But it is in Benares also that the true faith lives still. My friend has written to his friends there, and they will receive us with open arms; virtuous women will shelter you till the marriage arrangements are complete.'

She shook her head faintly. 'We cannot be married—I am a widow,' she repeated obstinately; 'but I will

ON THE SECOND STORY

go with you all the same.' Then, seeing a certain reproach in his face, she frowned. 'Dost think I am wicked, my lord? I am not wicked at all; but *Mai Kâli* gave me a lover, not a husband.' Here the frown relaxed into a brilliant smile. 'My husband is dead, and I do not care for dead men. I care for you, my lord, my god.'

Ramanund's brain whirled again, but he clung to the first part of her speech as a safeguard.

'You are foolish to say we cannot be married. If you read the newspapers you would see that widows—child-widows such as you are, heart's delight—are married, regularly married by priests of our religion. Those old days of persecution are over, Anunda. The law has legalized such unions, and no one dare say a word.'

A comical look came to her brilliant little face. 'And my lord's mother—will she say nothing?'

The question pierced even Ramanund's coat of culture. He fully intended telling his revered parent of his approaching marriage, and the thought of doing so, even in the general way which he proposed to himself, was fraught with sheer terror. What then would it be when he had to present her with this daughter-in-law in the concrete? He took refuge from realities by giving a lecture on the individual rights of man, while Anunda played like a child with the *chumpak* garland with which she had adorned him.

And so with a grey glimmer the rapid dawn began to dispute possession of those dim arches with the smoky

ON THE SECOND STORY

flare of the lamps, making those two rise reluctantly and steal with echoing footsteps past the malignant, half-seen figure behind the closed fretwork doors. The blood-red glint of those outstretched arms, with their suggestion of clasping and closing on all within their reach, must have roused a reminiscence of that past defiance in the young schoolmaster's brain; for he paused before the shrine, his arm still round Anunda, to say triumphantly—

‘ Good-bye, *Kâli mai!* Good-bye for ever.’

The girl, clinging to him fearfully, looked round into the shadows on either side. ‘ Hush, my lord; who knows whether She really sleeps? and She is in dangerous mood. *They* say so.’ Her light foot marked her meaning by a tap on the echoey floor.

‘ What, reckless one!’ said her lover, in fond jest. ‘ Hast grown so full of courage that thou wouldst signal them to come? Art not afraid what they might do?’

The panic on her face startled him. ‘ Ramu,’ she whispered, ‘ for my sake say it once—‘ *Jai Kâli ma!* ’’ Say it; it will not hurt.’

‘ Nothing will hurt, Anunda,’ he answered sharply. ‘ Nothing *can* hurt.’

‘ Can it not? Sometimes I have fancied, downstairs, that they suspect, Ramu!—if——’

‘ If they do, what then? To-morrow will see us far away. I tell you the times are changed. Why, there is a police station within hail almost. Nay, sweetheart! I will not say it. Come, the dawn breaks.’

ON THE SECOND STORY

'For my sake, Ramu, for my sake,' she pleaded, even as he drew her with him, reluctant yet willing.

And now, on the landing where the brick and the stone met, he paused again, his pulses throbbing with passion, to think that this was their last parting.

'Take heart, beloved,' he whispered. 'Sure I am Ram, and thou art Anunda. Who can hinder God's happiness when He gives it?'¹

The conceit upon the meaning of their names brought a faint smile to her face, and yet once more she whispered doubtfully; 'But this *is* happiness. Ah, Ramu! it would be better—so——'

'It *will* be better,' he corrected. 'It is quite easy, heart's beloved. A hired carriage and two railway tickets, that is all! As for *Mai Kâli*—I defy her!'

Suddenly through the darkness, which seemed to hold them closer to each other, came a sound making them start asunder. It was the clang of the bell which hung before the shrine.

'*Kâli ma! Kâli ma!*' Anunda's pitiful little sobbing cry blent with the clang as she fled downstairs, and the mingled sound sent a strange thrill of fear to Ramanund's heart. *Kâli* herself could not have heard; but if there had been others beside themselves amid the shadows?

He climbed to his lodging on the roof full of vague anxiety and honest relief that the strain and the stress and the passion of the last fortnight was so nearly at an end. It was lucky, he told himself, that it had hap-

¹ Ram anund: *Ram*, God; *anund*, happiness.

ON THE SECOND STORY

pened during holiday-time, or the exact sciences must have suffered—for of course the idea of Anunda's yielding to *them* was preposterous—Anunda, who had made him forget everything save that he was her lover. He fell asleep thinking of her, and slept even through the wailing which arose ere long in the next lodging. The wailing of a household over an only son reft from it by *Kâli ma*.

'The wrath of the gods is on the house,' said Ramanund's widowed mother when he came down late next morning. 'And I wonder not when children disobey their parents. But I will hear thy excuses no longer, Ramo. God knows but my slackness hitherto hath been the cause of that poor boy's death. The holy man downstairs holds that She is angry for our want of faith, and many folks believe him, and vow some sacrifice of purification. So shall I, Ramanund. This very day I will speak to my cousin Gungo of her daughter.'

'Thou wilt do nothing of the kind, mother,' replied Ramanund quietly. 'I have made my own arrangements. I am going to marry a widow, a young and virtuous widow.'

He felt dimly surprised at his own courage, perhaps a little elated, seeing how severe the qualms of anticipation had been; so he looked his mother in the face fairly as, startled out of all senses save sight, she stared at him as if he had been a ghost. Then suddenly she threw her arms above her head and beat her palms together fiercely.

'*Mai Kâli! Mai Kâli!* justly art Thou incensed.

ON THE SECOND STORY

Ai ! Kirpo ! Ai ! Bishun ! listen, hear. This is the cause. My son, the light of mine eyes, the son of my prayers, has done this thing. He is the cursed one ! He would bring a widow to a Brahmin hearth. *Jai Kâli ma ! Jai Kâli ma !*

' Mother ! mother ! for God's sake,' pleaded Ramnund, aghast at the prospect of having the secret of his heart made bazaar property. ' Think ; give me time.'

' Time !' she echoed wildly. ' What time is there when folks die every minute for thy sin ? O Ramo, son of my prayer, repent—do atonement. Lo ! come with me even now and humble thyself before Her feet. I will ask no more but that to-day—no more.' She thrust her hands feverishly into his, as if to drag him to the shrine. ' For my sake, Ramo, for the sake of many a poor mother, remember whose son thou art, and forsake not thy fathers utterly.'

' Mother !' he faltered, ' mother !' And then silence fell between them. For what words could bridge the gulf which the rapid flood of another nation's learning had torn between these two ? A gulf not worn away by generations of culture, but reft recklessly through solid earth. Simply, there was nothing, he felt, to be said, as, with a heart aching at the utter impossibility of their ever understanding each other, he did his best to sooth her superstitious fears.

But here he was met by a conviction, an obstinacy which surprised him ; for he had been too much occupied during the last fortnight to observe the signs of the times around him, and knew nothing of the religious

ON THE SECOND STORY

terror which, carefully fomented by the priests as a means of extortion, had seized upon the neighbourhood. When, however, it did dawn upon him that the general consensus of opinion lay towards a signal expression of the Goddess's anger, which needed signal propitiation by more numerous sacrifices, his indignation knew no bounds, and carried him beyond the personal question into general condemnation, so that, ere many minutes were over, she was attempting to soothe him in her turn. That God was above all was, however, their one bond of unity ; in that they both agreed. The truth would be made manifest by the sickness being stayed or increased by the sacrifices. Meanwhile the very thought of these latter, while it roused his anger, horrified his refinement into a certain silence, and kept him prisoner to the roof all day for fear of meeting some struggling victim on its way upstairs to the second story. This did not matter so much, however, since all his arrangements were made, and he had even taken the precaution to secure his railway tickets through a branch of Cook's agency which had been lately opened in the city. He took them out of his pocket sometimes, and looked at them, feeling a vague comfort in their smug civilized appearance. Fate must needs be commonplace and secure surely, with such vouchers for safe conduct as these !

So the long hot day dragged its slow length along. Every now and again the death-wail, near or distant, would rise in even, discordant rhythm on the hot air ;

ON THE SECOND STORY

and as the sun set it began, loudly imperative, under his very roof. The only son was being carried out to the burning-ground, and the cries and sobs utterly overwhelmed the shouts and shufflings of feet, the moans and murmur of voices, which all day long had come from the second story. It was a relief that it should be so ; that the ear might no longer be all unwillingly on the strain to catch some sound that would tell of a death-struggle in the slaughter-house downstairs. And yet the scene being enacted, perchance, on that three-cornered landing, which, for once, visualized itself to Ramanund's clear brain, was not one in which to find much consolation. The crowds of mourners edging the bier down the narrow stairs, the crowd of worshippers dragging the victims up. He wondered which stood aside to give place to the other—the Living or the Dead, the flower-decked corpse or the flower-decked victim ? Flowers and blood ! Blood and flowers for a Demon of Death who was satisfied with neither ! Ramanund, excited, overstrained, wearied by many a sleepless night of happiness, covered his face with his hands to shut out the sight even of the book which he tried to read.

So, as the sun sank red in the western haze, leaving the roof cooler, he fell asleep and slept soundly.

When he woke it was dark ; and yet, as he stood up stretching himself, a faint paling of the horizon warned him that there was light beneath it—light that was coming to the world. The moon ? Confused as he was by sleep, the thought came to him, only to be set

ON THE SECOND STORY

aside by memory. There was no moon, for this was the dark night of Kâli.

The dark night ! Then that must be the dawn when he had promised to meet Anunda on the threshold ! Was it possible that he had slept so long ? Yet not too long, since the dawn had not yet come, and he was ready. Hurriedly feeling for the safety of those precious tickets, and taking up a Gladstone bag which he had already packed, he stole down from the roof cautiously, and from thence to the landing. There was a new odour now blending with the perfumes of the flowers, and the incense, and the women, an odour which sickened him as he stood waiting and watching in the now deserted threshold. It was the odour of the shambles, an odour which seemed also to lie heavy on the breath, and shorten it.

So by quick strides the grey glimmer through the stone lattice grew and grew to whiteness. Yet no one came, and there was no light step on the staircase below to tell of a late-comer.

' Anunda ! Anunda ! ' he whispered more than once, even his low tones seeming to stir the heavy atmosphere into waves of sweet sickening perfume. Was it possible that she was waiting for him within—in the old place ?

That must be it, surely, or else something had happened. What ?

With a beating heart he moved on into the antechamber, picking his steps in an almost morbid terror of what he might be treading upon.

ON THE SECOND STORY

' Anunda ! Anunda ! '

There was no answer save, heavier than before, that sort of scented wave coming back from his own words.

She was not there, and something must have happened. . . . Not there ! Impossible, with those tickets in his pocket, that hired carriage waiting at the end of the alley, that police station round the corner ! . . .

He strode forward with renewed courage, heedless of the damp clamminess at his feet ; strode recklessly right into the yellow flare of the lamps. Save for that ghastly crimson upon the floor, the walls, the canopy, the place lay unchanged, and quiet as the grave. No ! there was a change—the iron doors were open, and there, upon the low stone slab before those clutching arms, lay something. . . .

God in heaven ! what was it ?

A head—a small dark—

Ramanund's scream caught in the big bell which hung above him, and the last thing he heard, as he fell forward on that crimson floor, was its faint booming echo of his own cry.

* * * * *

When he came to himself again, six weeks had passed by. The heat was over, the cholera had gone, and he lay in one of the new wards of a new hospital whither his anxious friends had had him conveyed when they found how ill he was. The very strangeness of his environment held him silent for the first few

ON THE SECOND STORY

moments of consciousness ; then with a rush it all came back upon him, and, weak as he was, he sat up in bed wildly.

‘ Anunda ! Anunda ! My God ! the shrine !—the blood ! ’

‘ It is a bad sign,’ remarked the doctor to one of his friends significantly when they had persuaded him to lie down again quietly, more from inability to sit up than from obedience. ‘ It is a bad sign when the delusions remain after the fever has left the brain. However, it is early days yet, and we must hope for the best.’

‘ You should rid your mind of such things,’ said the pleader a week or two afterwards, when, despite Ramanund’s growing strength of body, he still reverted again and again to that terrible dark night of Kâli, imploring them to search out the criminals and have them brought to justice. ‘ There is, pardon me, not a tittle of evidence for truth of your story ; but circumstantial proof to the contrary, as I will state categorically. *First*, known dislike to and hatred for Kâli and such like, leading to language in my hearing calculated to break the peace. *Second*, known excitement consequent perhaps on general sickness, stress of examinations before holiday-times, and such like, leading to general look of fatigue and absent-mindedness noticeable to friends, as myself. *Third*, known physical horror of blood, leading to much recrimination of sacrifices, and such like ; even to extent of shutting yourself up all day, as per mother’s evidence, from fear of disagree-

ON THE SECOND STORY

ables. *Finally*, profound feverish sleep, watched by same mother with dubiousity several times, ending in sleep-walk to the reeking shrine, where you are found by Brahmins after dawn unconscious. What can be closer chain of convincing proof?'

'We have made every inquiry,' said his other friends soothingly, 'short of informing the police; and we can find no trace of what you assert. Human sacrifices in times of great sickness may sometimes, doubtless, be on the *tapis*, but this one we believe is but figment of a still clouded brain. You must have patience. All will come clear in time.'

And when he asked for his new friend, the friend in whom he had partly confided his love-story, they shook their heads sadly. 'He was almost the last victim to cholera,' they said; 'the cause has lost a shining light. All the more need, Ramanund, why thou shouldst shake off these idle fancies, and be our leader to perfect freedom of thought and action.'

Perfect freedom of thought and action! Ramanund, as he lay slowly recovering of his brain fever, wondered if he would ever have the heart to believe in such a thing again—wondered if he would ever again dare to call himself a representative of India—that India which had killed Anunda. For that the horrible sight he had seen on the slab of stone beneath Kâli's clutching arms was no dream or delusion, but a reality, he never for an instant doubted. Why they had done her to death was the only uncertainty which tortured him as he lay hopelessly silent—silent because there was no use in words

ON THE SECOND STORY

when none believed them. Had it been simply a religious sacrifice to stay the plague—a sacrifice known to thousands, who would guard the secret as a divine obligation, the choice falling, naturally enough, on one who was a stranger, and utterly helpless in the hands of her priestly relations? Or was it merely the *jôgi's* revenge for his challenge? Or was it jealousy? Had they discovered the intrigue, and was the man who had drawn the trident of Siva on his forehead also the man of whom poor little Anunda had spoken with such terror? Yet what did it matter, since she was dead? What did anything matter beside the memory of that piteous whisper, 'O Ramu! it would be better—so——'

Ah! why had he tried to interfere with the old ways?—why had he sought for more—why had he not let her be happy while she could, in her own way?

When he left the hospital he found his mother installed in a new lodging. It would not be good for him, his friends had said, to return to the old environment while his mind was still clouded by delusions, so she had performed the utmost act of self-denial of which a Hindu woman is capable, and removed herself and her belongings from the house where she had lived her life. But she would have done anything for Ramanund at any time; how much more so now, when the Goddess had shown that She still held him as her faithful servant by signs and wonders. Had She not drawn him in his sleep to Her very feet, on Her dark night?—he who would never cross Her threshold!

ON THE SECOND STORY

And had he not been found there prostrate amid the blood of sacrifices, with one of Her garlands round his neck?—he who would never wear a flower!

‘A garland,’ faltered Ramanund when she told him this exultantly. Ay! a garland which she would cherish as her dearest possession, since the Goddess Herself must have thrown it around him—a garland which she should show him—if—if he ever again talked foolishness as he had talked that day when he had frightened her so, not knowing that he was already in a fever.

‘Show it me now, mother,’ he said quietly.

So she showed it to him. The *chumpak* blossoms were but yellow shreds upon a string, scentless, unrecognizable, here and there clogged black with the blood of sacrifice which had stained them as he fell.

‘Take it away!’ he cried fiercely, thrusting it from him. ‘Take it away! Oh! curses on the cruelty—curses on the——’

‘*Jai Kâli ma!*’ interrupted his mother as she laid the relic back in the little casket whence she had taken it. ‘*Jai Kâli ma!* for She stayed the sickness.’

Ramanund looked at her in dull, dazed wonder. But it was true what she said. The cholera had slackened from that very time when he had been found lying at the Goddess’s feet.

THE SORROWFUL HOUR

IT was one of those blue days which come to the plains of Upper India when the rains of early September have ceased, leaving the heat-weary, dust-soiled world regenerate by baptism.

A light breeze sent westering ripples along the pools of water filling each shallow depression, and stirred the fine fretwork of an acacia set thick with little odorous puffs, sweet as a violet. Despite the ruddy glow of the sinking sun, the shadows, far and near, still kept their marvellous blue—a clear porcelain blue, showing the purity of the rain-washed air. A painter need have used but three colours in reproducing the scene—red and blue and yellow in the sky ; russet and blue and gold in the tall battalions of maize and millet half-conquered by the sickle, which stood in shadowed squares or lay in sunlit reaches, right away to the level horizon.

Russet and blue and gold, also, in the dress of a woman who was crouching against the palisade of plaited tiger-grass, which formed two sides of the well-homestead. Seen upon this dull gold diaper, her madder-red veil and blue petticoat, with their corn-coloured embroideries, seemed to blend and be lost in the harvest scene beyond, even the pools of water find-

THE SORROWFUL HOUR

ing counterpart in the bits of looking-glass gleaming here and there among her ample drapery. She was a woman who in other countries would have been accounted in the prime of life ; in India, past it. Yet, as she crouched—her whole body tense in the effort of listening—every line of her strong face and form showed that she was not past the prime of passion.

‘ *Ari!* Heart’s delight! See, O father! Yon is his fifth step, and still he totters not. What! wouldst crawl again? Oh! fie upon such laziness.’ The high, girlish voice from within the palisade paused in a gurgle of girlish laughter. ‘ Say, O father! looks he not, thus poised hands and feet, for all the world like the monkey people in Gopal’s shop when they would be at the sweets? *Ai!* my brother! what hast found in the dust? Cry not, heart’s life. Mother will give it back to Chujju again. So, that is good! Holy Ganeshji! Nought but a grain of corn! Art so hungry as all that, my little pecking pigeon, my little bird from heaven?’

‘ Little glutton, thou meanest,’ chuckled a bass voice. ‘ Still, of a truth, O Maya, the boy grows.’

‘ Grows? I tell thee he hath grown. See you not this two-year-old hath turned farmer already? He comes to bargain with thee, having his corn in his hand. Give him a good price, to handsel his luck, O Gurditta Lumberdar.’¹

‘ I will pay thee for him, O wife! Sure, hast thou not given me the boy, and shall I not pay my debt? Nay, I am not foolish, as thou sayest. What!

¹ Head-man of village.

THE SORROWFUL HOUR

Wouldst have me kiss thee also, little rogue? So! Yet do I love mother best—best of all.'

The woman behind the palisade stood up suddenly. Tall as she was, the feathery tops of the tiger-grass rose taller; so she could stand, even as she had crouched, unseen. Unseeing also. Other women might have lent eyes to aid their ears, but Saraswati was no spy—no eavesdropper by intent, either. The lacquered spinning-wheel, the wheat-straw basket piled with downy cotton cards, which lay on the ground beside her, testified to what her occupation had been, till something—Heaven knows what, for she heard such light-hearted babble every day—in those careless voices roused her pent-up jealousy beyond the dead level of patience. She was not jealous of the child. Ah, no! not of the child. Was it not for the sake of such a one that three years before she had given Maya, his mother, a dignified welcome to the childless home? But Maya? Ah! well was she called Maya—the woman prolific of deceit and illusion, of whom the pundits spoke; woman, not content with being the child-bringer, but seeking—Saraswati's large, capable hands closed in upon themselves tightly. She did not need to peer through the plaited chinks to know the scene within. She saw it burnt in upon her slow, constant brain. The tall bearded man of her own age—her own type—her kinsman—the patient, kindly husband of her youth; the child—his naked brown limbs dimpled still more by silver circlets on wrists and ankles; those curving, dimpling limbs, which, some-

THE SORROWFUL HOUR

how, made her heart glad ; and between them, degrading them both, Maya, with her petty, pretty face, her petty, pretty ways.

Suddenly, as it had come, the passion passed—passed into that curious resignation, that impassive acquiescence, which does more to separate East from West than all the seas which lie between England and India.

‘ Old Dhunnu said sooth,’ she muttered, stooping to gather up her wheel and bobbins methodically. ‘ ’Tis the child which makes him love her, and I have been a fool to doubt it. I will delay no longer.’

Behind the low mud-houses, angled so as to form two sides of the square, four or five jujube trees clustered thickly, and beneath them the dark green whips of the jasmine bushes curved to the ground like a fountain set with blossoms. Hence, and from the straggling rose hard by, the women in the early dawn gathered flowers for the chaplets used in the worship of the gods. There were so many occasions requiring such offerings ; sorrowful hours and joyful hours, whether they were of birth, or marriage, or death. Who could say, till the end came, whether they were one or the other ? Only this was certain, flowers were needed for them all.

Towards this thicket Saraswati, still with the same impassive face, made her way, pausing an instant before the long, low, mud manger where her favourite milch cow stood tethered, to stroke its soft muzzle and give it a few tall stalks of millet from a sheaf resting against the well-wheel. And once more the scene was red and blue and gold, as the broad yellow leaves and blood-

THE SORROWFUL HOUR

streaked stems blent with her dress. There was not a change in her face, as, parting the branches, she disappeared into the thicket, scattering the loose blossoms as she went ; not a change, when, after a minute or two, she reappeared, carrying a little basket with a domed cover, securely fastened by many strands of raw cotton thread, such as she had been spinning—a basket of wheaten straw festooned with cowries, and tufted with parti-coloured tassels, such as the Jâtni women make for the safe keeping of feminine trifles—an innocent-looking basket, suggestive of beads and trinkets. She paused a moment, holding it to her ear, and then for the first time a faint smile flickered about her mouth as she caught a curious rasping noise, half purr, half rustle.

‘ Death hath a long life,’ she murmured, as she hid the basket in the voluminous folds of her veil and walked over to the homestead. As she entered by a wide gap in the plaited palisade, the scene within was even as she had imagined it ; but the barb had struck home before, and the actual sight did not enhance her resentment.

‘ It grows late, O Maya,’ she said coldly. ‘ Leave playing with the child and see to the fire for the cooking of our lord’s food. Thou hast scarce left an ember aglow beneath the lentils while I was yonder spinning.’

The reproof was no more than what might come with dignity from an elder wife ; but Gurditta, lounging his long length in well-earned rest on a string-bed, rose, murmuring something of seeing to the plough oxen ere

THE SORROWFUL HOUR

supper-time. The big man was dimly dissatisfied with affairs ; he felt a vague desire to behave better towards the woman who had been his faithful companion for so many years. But for her, he knew well, things would go but ill in the little homestead by the well. Yet Maya was so pretty. What man, still undulled by age, would not do as he did? For all that, the little capricious thing might be more friendly with Saraswati ; there was no need for her to snatch Chujju in her arms whenever the latter looked at the child. But then women—and Maya was a thorough woman—were always so fearful of the evil eye. Fancy her calling that straight-limbed, utterly desirable son, Chujju,¹ as if anyone would cast such a gift away in the sweeper's pan ! As if the gods themselves, far off as they were, could be deceived by such a palpable fraud, or even by that ridiculous smudge of charcoal on the boy's face which only enhanced instead of detracting from its beauty ! Gurditta laughed a deep, broad laugh as he strewed the long manger with corn cobs and green stuff cut from the fodder field by the well.

Meanwhile, within the house yard, Maya was sullenly blowing away at the embers held in the semi-circular mud fireplaces ranged along one of the walls. A grass thatch, supported by two forked sticks, protected this, the kitchen of the house, from possible rain and certain sun, while on the other wall a similar screen did like duty to a triple row of niches or pigeon-

¹ From *chujj*, a sweeper's basket. One of the many opprobrious names given to avert the envious, and therefore evil, eye.

THE SORROWFUL HOUR

holes, wherein the household stores in immediate use were kept out of harm's way. For the rest was a clean-swept expanse of beaten earth set round, after the fashion in a farmer's house, with implements and hive-like stores of grain. Between the one thatch and the other Saraswati moved restlessly, bringing pickles and spices as they were wanted. And still the basket lay tucked away in the folds of her veil.

'The raw sugar is nigh done,' she said, stooping with her back towards Maya to reach the lowest row of niches.

'We must use the candy to-night, till I can open the big store. Luckily I bought some when we took the Diwali¹ sweets from Gopal.' Then, ere she replaced the cloth in which the sweetmeats were tied, she held out a sugar horse to the child, who was playing by his mother. 'Here, Chujju, wilt have one?'

Maya was on her feet at once, indignant, vehement.

'Thou shouldst not offer him such things. He shall not take them from thee. I will not have it. Nay, nay, my bird—my heart's delight! Mother will give thee sweets enough. Kick not so, life of my life! Ganesh! how he cries! He will burst: and 'tis thy fault. Hush, hush! See, here is mother's milk. *Ai!* wicked one! wouldst bite? Ye gods, but 'tis a veritable *Toork* for temper.'

Hushing the child in her arms, she walked up and down, followed by Saraswati's calm, big black eyes.

¹ For the most part, sugar animals, such as are sold at English fairs.

THE SORROWFUL HOUR

'Thou art a fool, Maya,' she said slowly, putting down the sugar horse. 'Gopal's sweets would not have hurt the child so much as thy spitefulness.' Then she turned to her work again among the niches. When she rose the basket was in her hand, the threads were broken, and the cover tilted as if something slender and supple had been allowed to slip out. Perhaps it had, for behind the sugar horse, standing in the lowermost niche, two specks of fire gleamed from the shadow. It was growing dark now, but the harvest moon riding high in the heavens and the now flaming fire aided the daylight, and a curious radiance, backed by velvety shadows, lay on everything.

'I must sweep out the niches thoroughly to-morrow,' she said indifferently. 'Methought just now I heard the rustle as of a *jelabi*.¹ They love to hide in such places, and therefore I bid thee but yesterday see to their cleansing. But, sure, what work is done in this house mine must be the hand to do it. See to your lentils, sister; methinks they burn at the bottom.'

Maya, with a petulant shrug of her shoulders, set down the child.

'Such work spoils my hands, and—and—folk like them pretty.'

Even she, town born and town bred, did not dare before this grave-eyed peasant woman to name her

¹ *Echis carinata*, the Indian viper. It lies coiled in a true-lovers' knot, rustling its scales one against the other. It is the most vicious and irritable of all Indian snakes.

THE SORROWFUL HOUR

husband's name in such a connection,¹ but Saraswati understood the allusion, and the simple, straightforward naturalism drawn from ages of rural life which was her heritage, rose up in arms against such depravity. But even as she lashed herself to revenge by the thought, everything that was stable seemed to shift, all that moved to stand still. Her heart ceased beating, the walls span round, the moon quivered, the flames grew rigid. Ah, no ! one thing that moved would not pause. Chujju had caught sight of the sugar horse, and was creeping towards it, now on his little fat hands, now tottering on his little fat feet, his glistening eyes fixed on the niche which held those gleaming specks of fire.

No ! nothing was too bad for Maya ; and Dhunnu, the wise woman, had been right when she said that the charm lay in the child. It must be so—and death was nought. There ! he was close now, one little hand stretched out, the dimples showing the—Ah !

A cry, fierce, almost imperative, and Saraswati had him in her arms, while something slim and grey fell from the niche in its spring, and wriggled behind a pile of brushwood.

' I saw its eyes,' she gasped, still straining the child to her ample bosom, when Gurditta, brought thither by Maya's screams of ' Snake ! snake ! ' stood beside her, his breath coming fast, his manliness stirred to its depths.

Maya saw the danger swiftly. ' Give him to me,'

¹ A husband's name should never be mentioned by a wife, especially in matters referring to herself.

THE SORROWFUL HOUR

she clamoured. 'O husband, make her give him to me. She would kill him if she could. She put it there—I saw her put it there—I swear it.'

Saraswati turned on her in calm contempt. 'Thou liest, O Maya ; since Time began, spirit of deceit and mother of illusion. Thou didst *not* see me put it there.'

Then, with the same dignity, she turned to the man.

'Master ! Take the child. He is safe. This much is true, I saved him.'

That night, when the moon still shone in the cloudless sky, Saraswati, her veil wrapped closely round her, stole softly from the homestead. Past the resting oxen, out among the serried battalions of maize and millet, where the tall sheaves, lying prone on the ground, looked like the bodies of those who had fallen in the day's fight ; down on the sun-cracked borders of the tank, whence the water was sinking swiftly, now the rain had ceased ; by the ghostly peepul trees, shorn of their branches which the camels love, and looking weird and human with great arms stretched skywards ; so on to the burning-ground beyond, with its little cones of mud marking the spot of each funeral pyre, and the twinkling lights set here and there by pious survivors. Saraswati drew her veil tighter and sped faster as she passed through the more recent ashes, as yet uncovered, but swept into little heaps ; and there—horrible sight !—still scattered, with the uncalcined bones gleaming in the moonlight, and a faint line of smoke still circling upwards, lay the most recent of all. That must be old

THE SORROWFUL HOUR

Anant Ram, the merchant who had died that morning—an evil man, come to his end.

She was trembling ere she reached the hut where Dhun Devi, the wise woman, kept watch and ward over the ashes. It was a miserable shanty, where she found the old woman asleep before a large iron pot, supported on a trivet. Beneath it some cowdung cakes smouldered slowly, yet not so slowly but that every now and again a blood-red bubble showed on the contents of the pot. A flaring oil-lamp, filched, doubtless, from those outside, stood in a smoke-blackened niche, and by its light you could see festoons of dank, blood-red drapery clinging to a rope, while, with a drip, drip, drip, something fell upon the floor—something which ran in rills right out to the moonlight, and, sinking into the sand, stained it blood-red; a ghastly setting to the wise woman's crouching figure, even though Saraswati knew that Mai Dhunnu was engaged in no more nefarious occupation than dyeing the webs of her ignorant neighbours with madder.

The old crone stood up hastily, then sank to her low stool again when she had peered into her visitor's face. 'Thou wilt not tell,' she whispered in a hoarse croak, which, coming in reality from a throat affection, vastly enhanced her claims to wisdom in the eyes of the villagers. 'Thou art of the old style; not like these apes of to-day, with their dog-eared books and their dyes which fade before a January sun.' The chuckle she gave suited her surroundings well; so did the claw-like hand she laid suddenly on Saraswati's firm

THE SORROWFUL HOUR

arm. 'Well, daughter! Hast plucked up courage? Hast learned to trust the wisdom of old Dhun Devi?'

Saraswati shook her head. 'Thou must find other wisdom for me, mother,' she said briefly. 'Such is not for me.'

'Obstinate! I tell thee 'tis the glamour of the child.'

' 'Tis not the child, though the gods know the poison hath bit deeper somehow since he came. Lo! I have tried it, and 'tis not my way. Nor would I kill her. That were too trivial, seeing she is not worth life. I want but my share. It is empty here, emptier than ever, somehow, since the boy was born.'

She clasped her strong hands above her heart. The glow of the fire, spreading as the old woman fanned it with the tremulous breath of age, lit up the big black brows knit above the puzzled black eyes.

Dhun Devi straightened her bent back, and looked at her companion critically.

'Life is more than the shadow of a passing bird to such as thou, O Saraswati! 'Tis not wise. For death is nought, and life is nought. The soul of man circles ever, like the potter's wheel, upon its pivot. Have I not seen it? Have I not known it? Did I not go through the night of a thousand dangers myself, and bring five stalwart sons into the day? Where are they? Have they not passed into the dark again? Have not my hands piloted many through the Sorrowful Hour and sent many from it? Lo! the snake would not have harmed the child.'

THE SORROWFUL HOUR

‘ I care not if thou speakest truth or not, O mother, though thou art learned above women in such thoughts, I know,’ muttered Saraswati sullenly, with drooping head. ‘ Only this I know, that way is not mine. There must be others. See ! I have brought thee my golden armlet. *Dhun*¹ was ever as a sign-post to Dhun Devi. Is’t not so ? ’

The old dame’s fingers closed greedily on the bribe, careless of the open sneer which accompanied it. ‘ Ways ? ’ she echoed. ‘ Of a surety there are ways, but none so simple as death.’

‘ Ay,’ said Saraswati quietly, ‘ I have thought of that. The well is deep, and the little feathery ferns in the crannies look kind. But they would say Saraswati, the Jâtni, had been ousted from her own well-land by a stranger, and that is not so. I heed not the girl ; deceit is her portion. ’Tis something here.’ Again she laid her hand on her heart with a puzzled look. ‘ Nor do I want *him* only. Couldst thou not turn the child’s mind to me, so that, seeing his love, Gurditta would hold me dearer also ? ’

Dhun Devi shook her head, but her keen, bright old eyes were on the other’s face.

‘ There is a way,’ she whispered, after a pause, ‘ but death lurks in it often with such as thou.’

‘ Whose death ? ’

‘ Thine own. Do not all women know how the Sorrowful Hour——’

Saraswati caught the withered wrist in a fierce clasp.

¹ Worldly wealth.

THE SORROWFUL HOUR

'*Mai!*' she panted; 'Mai Dhunnu! Dost speak of the Sorrowful Hour to me—to me—after all these years! Is there hope—hope even yet?'

'If thou art not afraid——'

'Afraid!'

* * * * *

It was sunrise in the homestead, and a new harvest was waiting in battalions for the sickle. The jasmine fountain showered its green stems to the ground, but it was bare of blossoms. They hung in chaplets from the thatch screen beneath which, on that stifling August night, a woman had been passing through her Sorrowful Hour. In the dim dawn the little oil-lamps set about the bed flickered uncertainly in the breeze which heralds the day, and glinted now and again on the lucky knife suspended by the twist of lucky threads above the pillow. In a brazier hard by some pungent spices scattered upon charcoal sent up a clear blue line, like the last faint smoke from a funeral pyre. All that she could do Dhun Devi had done, but a dead girl-baby lay between Saraswati and the harvest visible through the gap in the plaited palisade. The midwife shook her head as she peered into the unconscious face on the pillow.

'Only a girl, after all the fuss,' came Maya's high; clear voice, as she sat cuddling Chujju in her soft round arms—Chujju, whom the gods had spared. 'To die for a girl—for a dead girl, too—what foolishness! But 'twas her own fault. 'Tis bad enough for us young

THE SORROWFUL HOUR

ones, and dear payment, after all, for the fun ; and she had escaped all these years——’

Dhun Devi’s claw-like fingers stopped the liquid flow of words.

‘ Go, infamous ! ’ she whispered fiercely. ‘ Such as thou are not mothers. Thou art Maya, the desire of the flesh. Go, lest I curse the child for thy sake.’

With a little shriek of dismay, half-real, half-pretended, the girl gathered the sleeping child in her arms and disappeared into the huts.

‘ The wheel slackens on its pivot,’ muttered the old woman, stooping again over the still form on the bed. ‘ I must get her to Mother Earth, as a seed to the soil, ere it stops.’

She stood at the gap and called. The fine fretwork of the acacia branches showed against the growing blue of the sky. The little golden puffs sent their violet perfume into the air. A bird sat among them, chirruping to its mate.

‘ Come,’ she said, and the tall bearded man followed her meekly. Together—he at the head, she at the feet—they laid Saraswati on the ground with the dead child, half-hidden in her veil, still between her and the great stretch of harvest beyond.

Suddenly, roused by the movement, she stirred slightly, and the big black eyes opened. Dhun Devi gripped the man’s hand as if to detain him.

‘ The child—is it well with the child ? ’ came in a faint voice.

THE SORROWFUL HOUR

Dhun Devi's clasp gripped firmer ; a look recalling long past years came to her face.

' Yea, mother, it is well ; thy son sleeps in thine arms.'

Then, craning up from her crooked old age to reach his ear, she whispered swiftly—

' Say 'tis so if thou art a man, and bid her God-speed on her journey.'

So, with her husband's hand in hers, a child in her arms, and a smile on her face, came the end of Saraswati's Sorrowful Hour.

AT HER BECK AND CALL

‘WHAT is your name?’ I asked.

‘Phooli-jân, *Huzoor*,’ she answered, with a brilliant, dazzling smile.

I sat looking at her, wondering if a more appropriate name could have been found for that figure among the anemones and celandines, the primulas, pansies, and pinks—the thousand-and-one blossoms which, glowing against their groundwork of forget-me-not, formed a jewel-mosaic right to the foot of the snows above us. *Flowerful life!* Truly that was hers. She had a great bunch of scarlet rhododendron stuck behind her ear, matching the cloth cap perched jauntily on her head, and as she sat herding her buffaloes on the upland she had threaded chaplet on chaplet of ox-eyed daisies, and hung them about her wherever they could be hung. The result was distinctly flowerful; her face also was distinctly pretty, distinctly clean for a Kashmiri girl’s. But coquette, flirt, minx, was written in every line of it, and accounted for a most unusual neatness and brightness.

She caught my eye and smiled again, broadly, innocently.

‘The *Huzoor* would like to paint my picture, wouldn’t he?’ she went on, in a tone of certainty.

'The *sahib* who came last year gave me five rupees. I will take six this year. Food is dear, and those base-born contractors of the Maharajah seize everything—one walnut in ten, one chicken in ten.'

But I was not going to be beguiled into the old complaints I could hear any and every day from the hags of the village. Up here, on the *murg*, within a stone's-throw of the first patch of snow picketing the outskirts of the great glacier of Gwashbrari, I liked, if possible, to forget how vile man could be in the little shingle huts clustering below by the river. I will not describe the place. To begin with, it defies description, and next, could I even hint at its surpassing beauty, the globe-trotter would come and defile it. It is sufficient to say that a *murg* is an upland meadow or alp, and that this one, with its forget-me-nots and sparkling glaciers, was like a turquoise set in diamonds. I had seated myself on a projecting spur, whence I could sketch a frowning defile northwards, down which the emerald-green river was dashing madly among huge rocks crowned by pine-trees.

'I will give five rupees also ; that is plenty,' I remarked suavely, and Phooli-jân smiled again.

'It must do, for I like being painted. Only a few *sahibs* come, very few ; but whenever they see me they want to paint me and the flowers, and it makes the other girls in the village angry. Then Goloo and Chuchchu——' Here she went off into a perfect cascade of smiles, and began to pull the eyelashes off the daisies deliberately. There seems a peculiar tempta-

AT HER BECK AND CALL

tion in girlhood for cruelty towards flowers all over the world, and Phooli-jân was pre-eminently girlish. She looked eighteen, but I doubt if she was really more than sixteen. Even so, it was odd to find her unappropriated, so I inquired if Goloo or Chuchchu was the happy man.

'My mother is a widow,' she replied, without the least hesitation. 'It depends which will pay the most, for we are poor. There are others, too, so there is no hurry. They are at my beck and call.'

She crooked her forefinger and nodded her head as if beckoning to someone. For sheer light-hearted, innocent enjoyment of her own attraction I never saw the equal of that face. I should have made my fortune if I could have painted it there in the blazing sunlight, framed in flowers; but it was too much for me. Therefore, I asked her to move to the right, farther along the promontory, so that I could put her in the foreground of the picture I had already begun.

'There, by that first clump of iris,' I said, pointing to a patch of green sword-leaves, where the white and lilac blossoms were beginning to show.

She gave a perceptible shudder.

'What? Sit on a grave! Not I. Does not the *Huzoor* know that those are graves? It is true. All our people are buried here. We plant the iris over them always. If you ask why, I know not. It is the flower of death.'

A sudden determination to paint her, the Flowerful Life against the Flowerful Death, completely obliterated

ated the knowledge of my own incompetence ; but I urged and bribed in vain. Phooli-jân would not stir. She would not even let me pick a handful of the flowers for her to hold. It was unlucky ; besides, one never knew what one might find in the thickets of leaves—bones and horrid things. Had I never heard that dead people got tired of their graves and tried to get out. Even if they only wanted something in their graves they would stretch forth a hand to get it. That was one reason why people covered them up with flowers—just to make them more contented.

The idea of stooping to cull a flower and shaking hands with a corpse was distinctly unpleasant, even in the sunlight ; so I gave up the point and began to sketch the girl as she sat. Rather a difficult task, for she chattered incessantly. Did I see that thin blue thread of smoke in the dark pall of pine-trees covering the bottom of the valley ? That was Goloo's fire. He was drying orris root for the Maharajah. There, on the opposite *murg*, where the buffaloes showed dark among the flowers, was Chuchchu's hut. Undoubtedly, Chuchchu was the richer, but Goloo could climb like an ibex. It was he whom the *Huzoor* was going to take as a guide to the peak. He could dance, too. The *Huzoor* should see him dance the circle dance round the fire—no one turned so slowly as Goloo. He would not frighten a young lamb, except when he was angry—well, jealous, if the *Huzoor* thought that a better word.

By the time she had done chattering there was not a

petal left on the ox-eyed daisies, and I was divided between pity and envy towards Goloo and Chuchchu.

That evening, as usual, I set my painting to dry on the easel at the door of the tent. As I lounged by the camp-fire, smoking my pipe, a big young man, coming in with a jar of buffalo milk on his shoulder and a big bunch of red rhododendron behind his ear, stopped and grinned at my caricature of Phooli-jân. Five minutes after, down by the servants' encampment, I heard a free fight going on, and strolled over to see what was the matter. After the manner of Kashmiri quarrels, it had ended almost as it began, for the race love peace. That it had so ended was not, however, I saw at a glance, the fault of the smaller of the antagonists, who was being forcibly held back by my *shikari*.

'Chuchchu, that man there, wanted to charge Goloo, this man here, the same price for milk as he does your honour,' explained the *shikari* elaborately. 'That was extortionate, even though Goloo, being the *Huzoor's* guide for to-morrow, may be said to be your honour's servant for the time. I have settled the matter justly, the *Huzoor* need not give thought to it.'

I looked at the two recipients of Phooli-jân's favour with interest—for that the bunches of red rhododendron they both wore were her gift I did not doubt. They were both fine young men, but Goloo was distinctly the better-looking of the two, if a trifle sinister.

Despite the recommendation of my *shikari* to cast thought aside, the incident lingered in my memory, and I mentioned it to Phooli-jân when, on returning to

finish my sketch, I found her waiting for me among the flowers. Her smile was more brilliant than ever.

‘ They will not hurt each other,’ she said. ‘ Chuchchu knows that Goloo is more active, and Goloo knows that Chuchchu is stronger. It is like the dogs in our village.’

‘ I was not thinking of them,’ I replied ; ‘ I was thinking of you. Supposing they were to quarrel with you ? ’

She laughed. ‘ They will not quarrel. In summer-time there are plenty of flowers for everybody.’

I thought of those red rhododendrons, and could not repress a smile at her barefaced wisdom of the serpent.

‘ And in the winter-time ? ’

‘ Then I will marry one of them, or someone. I have only to choose. That is all. They are at my beck and call.’

Three years passed before recurring leave enabled me to pay another visit to the *murg*. The rhododendrons were once more on the uplands, and as I turned the last corner of the pine-set path which threaded its way through the defile I saw the meadow before me, with its mosaic of flowers bright as ever. The memory of Phooli-jân came back to me as she had sat in the sunshine nodding and beckoning.

‘ Phooli-jân ? ’ echoed the old patriarch who came out to welcome me as I crossed the plank bridge to the village. ‘ Phooli-jân, the herd-girl ? *Huzoor*, she is dead ; she died from picking flowers. A vain thing.

It was at the turn beyond the *murg*, *Huzoor*, half-way between Chuchchu's hut and Goloo's drying-stage. There is a big rhododendron tree hanging over the cliff, and she must have fallen down. It is three years gone.'

Three years ; then it must have happened almost immediately after I left the valley. The idea upset me ; I knew not why. The *murg* without that Flowerful Life nodding and beckoning felt empty, and I found myself wondering if indeed the girl had fallen down, or if she had played with flowers too recklessly and one of her lovers, perhaps both—— It was an idea which dimmed the sunshine, and I was glad that I had arranged not to remain for the night, but to push on to another meadow, some six miles farther up the river. To do so, however, I required a fresh relay of coolies, and while my *shikari* was arranging for this in the village I made my way by a cross-cut to the promontory, with its patches of iris.

Deaths are rare in these small communities, and there were but two or three new graves—all but one too recent to be poor Phooli-jân's. That, then, must be hers, with its still clearly defined oblong of iris, already a mass of pale purple and white.

I sat down on a rock and began, unromantically, to eat my lunch, finishing up with a pull at my flask, and thus providentially fortified, I stooped, ere leaving, to pick one or two of the blossoms from the grave, intending to paint them round the sketch of the girl's head which I had with me.

Great heavens ! what was that ?

AT HER BECK AND CALL

I turned positively sick with horror and doubt. Was it a hand? It was some time before I could force myself to set aside the sheathing leaves and settle the point. Something it was, something which, even as I parted the stems, fell to pieces, as the skeleton of a beckoning hand might have done. I did not stay to see more; I let the flowers close over it—whatever it was—and made my way back to the village. My baggage, having changed shoulders, was streaming out over the plank bridge again, and in the two first bearers, carrying my cook-room pots and pans, I recognized Goloo and Chuchchu. They had both grown stouter, and wore huge bunches of red rhododendron behind their ears. I found out, on inquiry, that they were both married, and had become bosom friends.

I have not seen the turquoise set in diamonds since, but I often think of it, and wonder what it was I saw among the iris. And then I seem to see Phooli-jân sitting among the flowers, nodding her head and saying, 'They are at my beck and call.'

If I were Goloo or Chuchchu, I would be buried somewhere else.

AT THE GREAT DURBAR

HE sat, cuddled up in a cream-coloured cotton blanket, edged with crimson, shoo-ing away the brown rats from the curved cobs of Indian corn. The soft mists of a northern November hung over the landscape in varying density : heavy over the dank sugarcane patch by the well, lighter on the green fodder crop, dewy among the moisture-loving leaves of the sprouting vetches, and here, in the field of ripening maize, scarcely visible between the sparse stems. He was an old man with a thin white beard tucked away behind his ears, and a kindly look on his high-featured face. Every now and then he took up a little clod of earth from the dry, crumbling ridge of soil which divided the field he was watching from the surrounding ones, and threw it carefully among the maize, saying in a gentle, grumbling voice, ' *Ari*, brothers ! Does no shame come to you ? '

It had no perceptible effect on the rats, who, owing to the extreme sparsity of the crop, could be seen every here and there deliberately climbing up a swaying stem to seat themselves on a cob and begin breakfast systematically. In the calm, windless silence you could almost hear the rustle and rasp of their sharp white teeth. But Nânuk Singh—as might have been

predicted from his seventy and odd years of life in the fields—was somewhat hard of hearing, somewhat near of vision also. For when so many years have been spent watching the present furrow cling to the curves of the past one, in sure and certain hope of similar furrows in the future, or in listening to the endless lamentations of a water-wheel ceasing not by day or night to proclaim an eternity of toil and harvest, both eyes and ears are apt to grow dull towards new sights and sounds. Nânuk's had, at any rate, even though the old familiar ones no longer occupied them, fate having decreed that in his old age the peasant farmer should have neither furrows nor water-wheel of his own. How this had come about needs a whole statute-book of Western laws to understand. Nânuk himself never attempted the task. To him it was, briefly, the will of God. His district-officer, however, when the case fell under his notice by reason of the transfer of the land, thought differently; and having a few minutes' leisure from office drudgery to spare for really important work, made yet one more representation regarding the scandalous rates of interest, the cruelty of time-foreclosures, and the general injustice of applying the maxim '*caveat emptor*' to transactions in which one party is practically a child and the other a Jew. A futile representation, of course, since the Government, so experts affirm, is not strong enough to attack the Frankenstein monster of Law which it has created.

In a measure, nevertheless, old Nânuk was right in attributing his ruin to fate, since it had followed natur-

AT THE GREAT DURBAR

ally from the death of his three sons : one, the eldest, dying of malarial fever in the prime of life, leaving, alas ! a young family of girls ; another, the youngest, swept off by cholera just as his hand began to close firmly round his dead brother's plough-handle ; the third, when on the eve of getting his discharge from a frontier regiment in order to take his brothers' places by his father's side, being struck down ingloriously in one of the petty border raids of which our Punjab peasant soldiers have always to bear the brunt.

And this loss of able hands led inevitably to the loss of ill-kept oxen ; while from the lack of well-cattle came that gradual shrinkage of the irrigated area where some crop is certain—rain or no rain—which means a less gradual sinking further and further into debt, until, as had been the case with Nânuk, the owner loses all right in the land save the doubtful one of toil. Even this had passed from the old man's slackening hold after his wife died, and the daughters-in-law, with starvation staring them in the face, had drifted away back to their own homes, leaving him to live as best he could on the acre or so of unirrigated land lent to him out of sheer charity. For public opinion still has some power over the usurer in a village of strong men, and all his fellows respected old Nânuk, who stood six feet two, barefoot, and had tales to tell of the gentle art of singlestick as applied to the equitable settling of accounts in the old days, before Western laws had taken the job out of the creditor's hands.

Strangely enough, however, Nânuk, as he sat coping

AT THE GREAT DURBAR

inadequately with the brown rats, felt less resentment against the usurer who had robbed him, or the law which permitted the robbery, than he did against the weather. The former had made no pretence of favouring him ; the latter, year after year, had tempted his farmer's soul to lavish sowings by copious rain at seed-time, and thereafter withheld the moisture necessary for a bare return of measure for measure. Briefly, he had gambled in grain, and he had lost. Lost hopelessly in this last harvest of maize, since, when the sound cobs should be separated from those which the wanton teeth had spoilt, they would not yield the amount of Government revenue which the old man had to pay ; certainly would not do so if the cobs became scarcer day by day and the rats more throng. In fact, the necessity for action ere matters grew worse appeared to strike Nânuk, making him, after a time, draw out a small sickle and begin to harvest the remaining stalks one by one.

' *Bullab!* neighbour Nânuk,' cried the new man, who, better equipped for the task with sons and cattle, was driving the wheel and curving the furrows for the usurer, ' I would, for thy sake, the task was harder. And as if the crop were not poor enough, the dissolute rats must needs play the wanton with the half of it. But, 'tis the same all over the land, and between them and the revenue we poor folk of the plough will have no share.'

Nânuk stood looking meditatively at a very fine cob out of which a pair of sharp white teeth were taking a

last nibble, while a pair of wicked black eyes watched him fearlessly.

'They are God's creatures also, and have a right to live on the soil as we others,' he said slowly.

'Then they should pay the revenue,' grumbled Dittu. 'Why should *you*, who have no crop whereon to pay? Oh, infamous one!' he added sharply to one of the oxen he was driving to their work, 'sleepest thou? and the well silent! Dost want to bring me to Nânuk's plight?'

So, with a prod of the goad, he passed on, leaving old Nânuk still looking at the brown rat on the corn-cob. Why, indeed, should he have to pay for God's other creatures? In the old days justice would have been meted out to such as he. The crop would have been divided into heaps, so many for the owner of the soil, so many for the tiller, so many for the State. Then, if *Purmêshwar*¹ sent rats instead of rain, the heaps were smaller. That was all. And if the equity of this had been patent to those older rulers, who had scarcely given a thought in other ways to the good of their subjects, why should it not be patent to those new ones who—God keep them!—gave justice without respect of persons, so far as in them lay? There must be a mistake somewhere; the facts could not have been properly placed before the *Lât-sabib*—that vice-regent of God upon earth. This conviction came home slowly to the old man as he finished his harvesting; slowly but surely, so that when he had spread the cobs out to

¹ The Great God.

dry on his cotton blanket he walked over to the well, and, between the whiffs of the general pipe, hinted that he thought of laying the matter before the authorities. 'I will take the produce of my field,' he said, 'in my hand—it will not be more than five *seers* when the good is sifted from the bad—and I will say to the *Lât-sabib*, "This is because *Purmêshwar* sent rats instead of rain. Take your share, and ask no more."'

Dittu, the new man, laughed scornfully. 'Better take a rat also, since all parties to the case must be present by the law.'

He intended it as a joke, but Nânuk took it quite seriously. 'That is true,' he assented; 'I will take a rat also; then there can be no mistake.'

That evening, when he sat with his cronies on the mud dais beneath the peepul tree, where he was welcome to a pull out of anybody's pipe, he spoke again of his intention. The younger folk laughed, but the seniors thought that it could at least do no harm. Nânuk's case was a hard one; it was quite clear he could not pay the revenue, and it was better to go to the fountain-head in such matters, since underlings could do nothing but take fees. So, while the stars came out in the evening sky, they sat and told tales of Nausherwân, and many another worthy whose memory lingers in native minds by reason of perfectly irrational acts of despotic clemency, such as even Socialists do not dream of nowadays. The corn-cobs then being harvested, dried, and shelled, he set to work with the utmost solemnity on rat-traps; but here at once he realized

his mistake. By harvesting his own crop he had driven the little raiders farther afield; and though he could easily have caught one in his neighbour's patch, a desire to deal perfectly fairly with those who, in his experience, dealt perfectly fairly with facts, made him stipulate for a rat out of his own.

This necessitated the baiting of his property with some of the corn in order to attract the wanton creatures again; and even then, though he sat for hours holding the cord by which an earthen dish was to be made to fall upon the unsuspecting intruder, he was unsuccessful.

'Trra! not catch rats!' cried a most venerable old pantaloon to whom he applied for advice, remembering him in his boyhood as one almost god-like in his supreme knowledge of such things. 'Wait awhile; 'tis a trick—a mere trick—but when you once know it you cannot forget it.' All that day the old men sat together in the sunshine, profoundly busy, and towards evening they went forth together to the field, chattering and laughing like a couple of schoolboys. It was long after dusk ere they returned, full of mutual recrimination. The one had coughed too much, the other had wheezed perpetually; there was no catching of rats possible under such circumstances. Then the old pantaloon went a-hunting by himself, full of confidence, only to return dejected; then Nânuk, full of determination, sat up all one moonlight night in the field where—now that he had no crop to benefit by it—the night-dew gathered heavily on every leaf and blade

AT THE GREAT DURBAR

—on Nânuk, too, as he sat crouched up in his cotton blanket, thinking of what he should say to the *Lât-sahib* when the rat was caught, which it was not. Finally, with angry misgivings as to the capabilities of the present generation of boys, the old pantaloons suggested the offering of one whole anna for the first rat captured in Nânuk's maize-field. Before the day was over a score or two of the village lads, long-limbed, bright-eyed, were vociferously maintaining the prior claims of as many brown rats, safely confined in little earthen pipkins with a rag tied round the top. They stood in a row, like an offering of sweets to some deity, round Nânuk's bed, for—as was not to be wondered at after his night-watch—he was down with an attack of the chills. That was nothing new. He had had them every autumn since he was born; but he was not accustomed to be surrounded on such occasions by brown rats appealing to him for justice. It ended in his giving, with feverish hands, one anna to each of the boys, and reserving his selection until he was in a more judicial frame of mind. Still, it would not do to starve God's creatures, so every morning while the fever lingered—for it had got a grip on him somehow—he went round the pipkins and fed the rats with some of the maize. And every morning, rather to his relief, there were fewer of them to feed, since they nibbled their way out once they discovered that the top of their prison was but cloth. So as he lay, sometimes hot, sometimes cold, the idea came to him foolishly enough, that this was a process of divine selection, and

AT THE GREAT DURBAR

that if he only waited the day when but one rat should remain, his mission would bear the seal of success. An idea like this only needs presentation to a mind, or lack of mind, like old Nânuk's. So what with the harvesting and the rat-catching, and the fever and the omen-awaiting, it was close on the new year when, with a brown rat, now quite tame, tied up in a pipkin, some five *seers* of good grain tied up in the corner of his cotton blanket, and Heaven knows what a curious conglomeration of thought bound up in his still feverish brain, the old man set out from his village to find the *Lât-sahib*. Such things are still done in India, such figures are still to be seen, making some civilized people stand out of the road bare-headed, as they do to a man on his way to the grave—a man who has lived his life, whose day is past.

Owing also to the fever and the paying for rats, etc., old Nânuk's pockets were ill-provided for the journey, but that mattered little in a country where a pilgrimage on foot is in itself presumptive evidence of saintship. Besides, the brown rat—to which Nânuk had attached a string lest one of the parties to the suit might escape him on the road—was a perpetual joy to the village children, who scarcely knew if it were greater fun to peep at it in its pipkin, or see it peeping out of the old man's cotton blanket, when in the evenings it nibbled away at its share of Nânuk's dinner. They used to ask endless questions as to why he carried it about, and what he was going to do with it, until, half in jest, half in earnest, he told them he was the *mudâ-ee* (plaintiff)

AT THE GREAT DURBAR

and the rat the *mudee-âla* (defendant) in a case they were going to lay before the *Lât-sabib* ; an explanation perfectly intelligible to even the babes and sucklings, who in a Punjabi village nowadays lisp in numbers of petitions and pleaders.

So the *mudâ-ee* and *mudee-âla* tramped along together amicably, sometimes by curving wheel-tracks among the furrows—ancient rights-of-way over the wide fields, as transient yet immutable as the furrows themselves ; and there, with the farmer's eye-heritage of generations, he noted each change of tint in the growing wheat, from the faintest yellowing to the solid dark green with its promise of a full ear to come. Sometimes by broad lanes, telling yet once more the strange old Indian tale of transience and permanence, of death and renewed birth, in the deep grass-set ruts through which the traffic of centuries had passed rarely, yet inevitably. And here with the same knowledgeable eye he would mark the homing herds of village cattle, and infer from their condition what the unseen harvest had been which gave them their fodder. Finally, out upon the hard, white high-road, so different from the others in its self-sufficient straightness, its squared heaps of nodular limestone ready for repairs, its elaborate arrangements for growing trees where they never grew before, and where even Western orders will not make them grow. And here Nânuk's eyes still found something familiar in the great wains creaking along in files to add their quota of corn sacks to the mountain of wheat cumbering the railway platforms all along the line. Yet even

AT THE GREAT DURBAR

this was in its essence new, provoking the wonder in his slow brain how it could be that the increased demand for wheat and its enhanced price should have gone hand-in-hand with the financial ruin of the grower.

To say sooth, however, such problems as these flitted but vaguely through the old man's thought, and even his own spoliation was half forgotten in the one great object of that long journey which, despite his cheerful patience, had sapped his strength sadly. To find the *Lât-sahib*, to make his *salaam*, and bid the *mudee-âla-jee* do so likewise, to lay the produce of the field at the *sahib's* feet, and say that *Purmêshwar* had sent rats instead of rain—that in itself was sufficient for the old man as he trudged along doggedly, his eyes becoming more and more dazed by unfamiliar sights, as he neared the big city.

'*Bullab!*' said the woman of whom he begged a night's lodging. 'If we were to house and feed the wanderers on this road, we should have to starve ourselves. And thou art a Sikh. Go to thine own people. 'Tis each for each in this world.' That was a new world to Nânuk.

'Doth thy rat do tricks?' asked the children critically. 'What, none? *Trrra!* we can see rats of that mettle any day in the drains, and there was a man here yesterday whose rat cooked bread and drew water. *Ay!* and his goat played the drum. That was a show worth seeing.'

So Nânuk trudged on.

AT THE GREAT DURBAR

' See the *Lât-sabib*,' sneered the yellow-legged police constable when, after much wandering through bewildering crowds, the old Sikh found himself at a meeting of roads, each one of which was barred by a baton. ' Which *Lât-sabib*—the big one or the little ?'

' The big one,' replied Nânuk stoutly. There was no good in underlings ; *that* he knew.

Police Constable number Seventy-five called over to his crony, number Ninety-six, on the next road.

' Ho, brother ! Here is another *durbari*. Canst let him in on thy beat ? I have no room on mine.' And then they both laughed, whereat old Nânuk, taking courage, moved on a step, only to be caught and dragged back, hustled, and abused. What ! was the Great Durbar for the like of him—the Great Durbar on which lakhs and crores had been spent—the Great Durbar all India had been thinking of for months ? *Wâb!* Whence had he come if he had not heard of the Great Durbar, and what had he thought was the meaning of the Venetian masts and triumphal arches, the flags and the watered roads ? Did he think such things were always ? If it came to such ignorance as that, mayhap he would not know what *this* was coming along the road.

It was a disciplined tramp of feet, an even glitter of bayonets, a straight line of brown faces, a swing and a sweep, as a company of the Guides came past in their *khaki* and crimson uniform. Old Nânuk looked at it wistfully.

AT THE GREAT DURBAR

'Nay, brother,' he said, 'I know that. 'Twas my son's regiment, God rest him!'

'Thou shouldst sit down, old man,' said a bystander kindly. 'Of a truth thou canst go no farther till the show is over. Hark! there are the guns again. 'Twill be Bairânpore likely, since Hurriâna has gone past. *Wâh!* it is a show—a rare show!'

So down the watered road, planted out in miserable attempts at decoration with barbers' poles unworthy of a slum in the East End, came a bevy of Australian horses, wedged at a trot between huge kettledrums, which were being whacked barbarically by men who rose in their stirrups with the conscientious precision of a newly imported competition-*wallah*. Then more Australian horses again in an *orfeverie* barouche lined with silver, where, despite the glow of colour, the blinding flash of diamonds in an Indian sun, despite even the dull wheat-green glitter of the huge emerald tiara about the turban, the eye forgot these things to fix itself upon the face which owned them all; a face haggard, sodden, superlatively handsome even in its soddenness; indifferent, but with an odd consciousness of the English boy who—dressed as for a flower show—sat silently beside his charge. Behind them with a clatter and flutter of pennons came a great trail of wild horsemen, showing, as they swept past, dark, lowering faces among the sharp spear-points.

And the guns beat on their appointed tale, till, with the last, a certain satisfaction came to that sodden face,

AT THE GREAT DURBAR

since there were none short in the salute—as yet. The measure of his misdoings was not full as yet.¹

The crowd ebbed and flowed irregularly to border the straight white roads, where at intervals the great tributary chiefs went backwards and forwards to pay their State visits, but Nânuk and his rat—the plaintiff and the defendant—waited persistently for their turn to pass on. It was long in coming; for even when the last flash and dash of barbaric splendour had disappeared, the roar of cannon began louder, nearer, regular to a second in its even beat.

‘That is the *Lât*-salute,’ said one man to another in the crowd. ‘Let us wait and see the *Lât*, brother, ere we go.’

Nânuk overheard the words, and looked along the road anxiously, then stood feeling more puzzled than ever; for there was nothing to see here but a plain closed carriage with a thin red and gold trail of the body-guard behind it and before. The sun was near to its setting, and sent a red, angry flare upon a bank of clouds which had risen in the east, and the dust of many feet swept past in whirls before a rising wind.

‘It will rain ere nightfall,’ declared the crowd contentedly, as it melted away citywards. ‘And the crops will be good, praise to God.’

Once more Nânuk overheard, and this time a glad recognition seemed to rouse him from a dream. Yes! the crops would be good. Down by the well, on the

¹ A reduction in the number of guns is the first punishment for bad administration.

land he and his had ploughed for so many years, the wheat would be green—green as those emeralds above that sodden face.

‘The *Lât* has gone out,’ joked Constable Seventy-five as he went off duty; ‘but there are plenty of other things worth seeing to such an ignoramus as thou.’

True; only by this time Nânuk was almost past seeing aught save that all things were unfamiliar in those miles and miles of regiments and rajahs, electric lights and newly macadamized roads, tents and make-believe gardens, all pivoted, as it were, round the Royal Standard of England, which was planted out in the centre of the Viceroy’s camp. As he wandered aimlessly about the vast canvas city, hustled here, sent back there, the galloping orderlies, the shuffling elephants, the carriages full of English ladies, the subalterns cracking their tandem whips, and the native outriders had but one word for him.

‘*Hut! Hut!*’ (‘Stand back!—stand back!’)

A heavy drop of rain came as a welcome excuse to his dogged perseverance for sheltering awhile under a thorn bush. He was more tired than hungry, though he had not tasted food that day; and it needed a sharp nip from the defendant’s teeth, as it sought for something eatable in the folds of his blanket, to remind him that others of God’s creatures had a better appetite than he. But what was he to give? There was the five *seers* of grain still, of course; but who was to apportion the shares? Who was to say, ‘This much for the plaintiff, this much for the defendant, this much for

AT THE GREAT DURBAR

the State' ? The familiar idea seemed to give him support in the bewildering inrush of new impressions, and he held to it as a drowning man in a waste of unknown waters clutches at a straw.

Nevertheless, the parties to the suit must not be allowed to starve meanwhile, and if they took equal shares surely that would be just.

The rain now fell in torrents, and the bush scarcely gave him any shelter as, with a faint smile, he sat watching the brown rat at work upon the corn, and counting the number of grains the wanton teeth appropriated as their portion. For so much, and no more, would be his also. It was not a sumptuous repast, but uncooked maize requires mastication, and that took up time. So that it was dark ere he stood up, soaked through to the skin, and looked perplexedly at the long lines of twinkling lights which had sprung up around him. And hark ! what was that ? It was the dinner bugle at a mess close by, followed, as by an echo, by another and another and another—quite a chorus of cheerful invitations to dinner. But Nânuk knew nothing of such feasts as were spread there in the wilderness. He had lived all his life on wheat and lentils, though, being a Sikh, he would eat wild boar or deer if it could be got, or take a tot of country spirits on occasion to make life seem less dreary. He stood listening, shivering a little with the cold, and then went on his way, since the *Lât-sahib* must be found, the case decided, before this numbing forgetfulness crept over everything.

AT THE GREAT DURBAR

Sometimes he inquired of those he met. More often he did not, but wandered on aimlessly through the maze of light, driven and hustled as he had been by day. And as he wandered the bands of the various camps were playing, say, the march in 'Tannhäuser,' or 'Linger longer, Loo.' But sooner or later they all paused to break suddenly into a stave or two of another tune, as the colonel gave 'The Queen' to his officers.

Of all this, again, Nânuk knew nothing. Even at the best of times, he had been ignorant as a babe unborn of anything beyond his fields, and now he remembered nothing save that he and the brown rat were suitors in a case against *Purmêsbwar* and the State.

So the night passed. It was well on into the chilliest time before the dawn, when the slumber which comes to all the world for that last dead hour of darkness having rid him of all barriers, he found himself beneath what had been the goal of his hopes ever since he had first seen its strange white rays piercing the night—the great ball of electric light which crowned the flag-staff whereon the Standard of England hung dank and heavy; for the wind had dropped, the rain had ceased, and a thick white mist clung close even to the round bole of the mast, which was set in the centre of a stand of chrysanthemums. The colours of the blossoms were faintly visible in the downward gleam of the light spreading in a small circle through the mist.

So far good. This was the '*Standard of Sovereignty*,' no doubt—the '*Lamp of Safety*'—the guide by day and night to faithful subjects seeking justice before the

king. This Nânuk understood ; this he had heard of in those tales of Nausherwân and his like, told beneath the village peepul tree.

Here, then, he would stay—he and the defendant—till the dawn brought a hearing. He sat down, his back to the flowers, his head buried in his knees. And as he sat, immovable, the mist gathered upon him as it had gathered in the field. But he was not thinking now what he should say to the *Lât-sahib*. He was past that.

He did not hear the jingle and clash of arms which, after a time, came through the fog, or the voice which said cheerfully—

‘ ‘Appy Noo Year to you, mate ! ’

‘ Same to you, Tommy, and many of ’em ; but it’s rather you nor I, for it’s chillin’ to the vitals.’

They were changing guards on this New Year’s morning, and Private Smith, as he took his first turn under the long strip of canvas stretched as a sun-shelter between the two sentry-boxes, acknowledged the truth of his comrade’s remark by beating his arms upon his breast like any cabman. Yet he was hot enough in his head, for he had been singing ‘ Auld Lang Syne ’ and drinking rum for the greater part of the night, and, though sufficiently sober to pass muster on New Year’s Eve, was drunk enough to be intensely patriotic. So, as he walked up and down, there was a little lilt in his step which attempted to keep time to the stave of ‘ God Save our Gracious Queen ’ which he was whistling horribly out of tune. On the morrow—or, rather, to-day, since the dawn was at hand—there was to be

AT THE GREAT DURBAR

the biggest review in which he had ever taken part : six-and-twenty thousand troops marching up to the Royal Standard and saluting ! They had been practising it for weeks, and the thrill of it, the pride and power of it, had somehow got into Private Smith's head—with the rum. It made him take a turn beyond that strip of canvas, round the flagstaff he was supposed to guard.

' 'Alt ! 'oo goes there ? '

The challenge rang loudly, rousing Nânuk from a dream which was scarcely less unreal than the past twelve hours of waking had been to his ignorance. He stumbled up stiffly—a head taller than the sentry—and essayed a *salaam*.

' 'Ullo ! What the devil are you doin' here ? *Hut*, you ! Goramighty ! wot's that ? '

It was the defendant, which Nânuk had brought out to *salaam* also, and which, alarmed at the sudden introduction, began darting about wildly at the end of its string. Private Smith fell back a step, and then pulled himself together with a violent effort, uncertain if the rat were real ; but the cold night air was against him.

' Wash'er-mean ?—Wash'er doin'-'ere ?—Wash'er-got ? ' he asked conglomerately ; and Nânuk, understanding nothing, went down on his knees the better to untie the knot in the corner of his blanket. ' *Poggle*,¹ commented Private Smith, recovering himself as he looked down at the heap of maize, the defendant, and the old man talking about *Purmêshwar*.

¹ *Pagul* = mad.

AT THE GREAT DURBAR

Then, being in a benevolent mood, he wagged his head sympathetically. 'Pore old Johnny! wot's 'e want, with 'is rat and 'is popcorn? Fine lookin' old chap, though—but we licked them Sickies, and, by gum! we'll lick 'em again, if need be!'

The thought made him begin to whistle once more as he bent unsteadily to look at something which glittered faintly as the old man laid it on the top of the pile of corn.

It was his son's only medal.

'Hillo!' said Private Smith, bringing himself up with a lurch, 'so that is it, eh, mate? Gor-save-a-Queen! Now wot's up, sonny? 'Orse Guards been a-doing wot they didn't ought to 'ave done? Well, that ain't no noos, is it, comrade? But we'll drink the old Lady's 'elth all the same. Lordy! if you've bin doin' extra dooty on the rag all night you won't mind a lick o' the lap—eh? Lor' bless you!—I don't want it. I've 'ad as mush as me and Lee-Metford can carry 'ome without takin' a day-tour by orderly room—Woy! you won't, won't yer? Come now, Johnny, don't be a fool—it's rum, I tell yer, and you Sickies ain't afraid o' rum. Wot! you won't drink 'er 'elth, you mutin-eering nigger? Then I'll make yer. Feel that—now then, "'Ere's a 'elth unto'w her Majesty.''

Perhaps it was the unmistakable prick of a bayonet in his stomach, perhaps it was the equally unmistakable smell of the liquor arousing a craving for comfort in the old man, but he suddenly seized the flask which Private Smith had dragged from his pocket, and, throw-

AT THE GREAT DURBAR

ing his head back, poured the contents down his throat, the action—due to his desire not to touch the bottle with his lips—giving him an almost ludicrous air of eagerness.

Private Smith burst into a roar of laughter.

‘Gor-save-the-Queen!’ And as he spoke the first gun of the hundred and one which are fired at daybreak on the anniversary of her Most Gracious Majesty’s assumption of the title *Kaiser-i-Hind* boomed out sullenly through the fog.

But Nânuk did not hear it. He had stumbled to his feet and fallen sideways to the ground.

* * * * *

‘I gather, then,’ remarked the surgeon-captain precisely, ‘that before gun-fire this morning you found the old man in a state of collapse below the flagstaff—is this so?’

Private Smith, sober to smartness and smart to stiffness, saluted; but there was an odd trepidation on his face. ‘Yes, sir—I done my best for ’im, sir. I put ’im in the box, sir, and give ’im my greatcoat, and I rub ’is ’ands and feet, sir. I done my level best for ’im, not being able, you see, sir, to go off guard. I couldn’t do no more.’

‘You did very well, my man; but if you had happened to have some stimulant—any alcohol, for instance.’

Private Smith’s very smartness seemed to leave him in a sudden slackness of relief. ‘Which it were a tot

AT THE GREAT DURBAR

of rum, sir, as I 'appened to 'ave in my greatcoat pocket. It done 'im no 'arm, sir, did it?'

The surgeon-captain smiled furtively. 'It saved his life, probably; but you might have mentioned it before. How much did he take?'

'About 'arf a pint, sir—more nor less.' Private Smith spoke under his breath with an attempt at regret; then he became loquacious. 'Beggin' your pardon, sir, but I was a bit on myself, and 'e just poured it down like as it was milk, an' then 'e tumbled over and I thought 'e was dead, and it sobered me like. So I done my level best for 'im all through.'

Perhaps he had; for old Nânuk Singh found a comfortable spot in which to spend his remaining days when the regimental doolie carried him that New Year's morning from the flagstaff to the hospital. He lay ill of rheumatic fever for weeks, and when he recovered it was to find himself and his rat quite an institution among the gaunt, listless convalescents waiting for strength in their long dressing-gowns. The story of how the old Sikh had drunk the Queen's health had assumed gigantic proportions under Private Smith's care, and something in the humour and the pathos of it tickled the fancy of his hearers, who, when the unfailing phrase, 'An' so I done my level best for him, I did,' came to close the recital, would turn to the old man and say—

'Pore old Johnny—an' Gord knows what 'e wanted with 'is rat and 'is popcorn!'

That was true, since Nânuk Singh did not remember

AT THE GREAT DURBAR

even the name of his own village ; and, though he still talked about the plaintiff and the defendant, *Purméshwar* and the State, he was apparently content to await his chance of a hearing at another and greater durbar.

HARVEST

‘*A* I! Daughter of thy grandmother,’ muttered old Jaimul gently, as one of his yoke wavered, making the handle waver also. The offender was a barren buffalo doomed temporarily to the plough, in the hopes of inducing her to look more favourably on the first duty of the female sex, so she started beneath the unaccustomed goad.

‘*Ari!* sister, fret not,’ muttered Jaimul again, turning from obscure abuse to palpable flattery, as being more likely to gain his object; and once more the tilted soil glided between his feet, traced straight by his steady hand. In that vast expanse of bare brown field left by or waiting for the plough, each new furrow seemed a fresh diameter of the earth-circle which lay set in the bare blue horizon—a circle centring always on Jaimul and his plough. A brown dot for the buffalo, a white dot for the ox, a brown and white dot for the old peasant with his lanky brown limbs and straight white drapery, his brown face, and long white beard. Brown, and white, and blue, with the promise of harvest sometime if the blue was kind. That was all Jaimul knew or cared. The empire beyond, hanging on the hope of harvest, lay far from his simple imaginings; and yet he, the old peasant with his steady

H A R V E S T

hand of patient control, held the reins of government over how many million square miles? That is the province of the Blue Book, and Jaimul's blue book was the sky.

' Bitter blue sky with no fleck of a cloud,
Ho ! brother ox ! make the plough speed.
[Pig that you are ! straight, I say !]
'Tis the usurers' bellies wax fat and proud
When poor folk are in need.'

The rude guttural chant following these silent, earth-deadened footsteps was the only sound breaking the stillness of the wide plain.

' Sky dappled grey like a partridge's breast,
Ho ! brother ox ! drive the plough deep.
[Steady, my sister, steady !]
The peasants work, but the usurers rest
Till harvest's ripe to reap.'

So on and on interminably, the chant and the furrow, the furrow and the chant, both bringing the same refrain of flattery and abuse, the same antithesis—the peasant and the usurer face to face in conflict, and above them both the fateful sky, changeless or changeful as it chooses.

The sun climbed up and up till the blue hardened into brass, and the mere thought of rain seemed lost in the blaze of light. Yet Jaimul, as he finally unhitched his plough, chanted away in serene confidence—

H A R V E S T

' Merry drops slanting from west to east,
Ho ! brother ox ! drive home the wain ;
'Tis the usurer's belly that gets the least
When Râm sends poor folk rain.'

The home whither he drove the lagging yoke was but a whitish-brown mound on the bare earth-circle, not far removed from an ant-hill to alien eyes ; for all that, home to the uttermost. Civilization, education, culture could produce none better. A home bright with the welcome of women, the laughter of children. Old Kishnu, mother of them all, wielding a relentless despotism tempered by profound affection over everyone save her aged husband. Pertâbi, widow of the eldest son, but saved from degradation in this life and damnation in the next by the tall lad whose grasp had already closed on his grandfather's plough-handle. Târadevi, whose soldier-husband was away guarding some scientific or unscientific frontier, while she reared up, in the ancestral home, a tribe of sturdy youngsters to follow in his footsteps. Fighting and ploughing, ploughing and fighting ; here was life epitomized for these long-limbed, grave-eyed peasants.

The home itself lay bare for the most part to the blue sky ; only a few shallow outhouses, half room, half verandah, giving shelter from noonday heat or winter frosts. The rest was courtyard, serving amply for all the needs of the household. In one corner a pile of golden chaff, ready for the milch kine which came in to be fed from the mud mangers ranged against the wall ; in another a heap of fuel, and the tall, beehive-like mud

H A R V E S T

receptacles for grain. On every side stores of something brought into existence by the plough—corn-cobs for husking, millet-stalks for the cattle, cotton awaiting deft fingers and the lacquered spinning-wheels which stand, cocked on end, against the wall. Târa-devi sits on the white sheet spread beneath the mill, while her eldest daughter, a girl about ten years of age, lends slight aid to the revolving stones whence the coarse flour falls ready for the midday meal. Pertâbi, down by the grain-bunkers, rakes more wheat from the funnel-like opening into her flat basket, and as she rises flings a handful to the pigeons sidling on the wall. A fluttering of white wings, a glint of sunlight on opaline necks, while the children cease playing to watch their favourites tumble and strut over the feast. Even old Kishnu looks up from her preparation of curds without a word of warning against waste ; for to be short of grain is beyond her experience. Wherefore was the usurer brought into the world save to supply grain in advance when the blue sky sided with capital against labour for a dry year or two ?

‘ The land is ready,’ said old Jaimul over his pipe. ‘ ’Tis time for the seed, therefore I will seek Anunt Râm at sunset and set my seal to the paper.’

That was how the transaction presented itself to his accustomed eyes. Seed grain in exchange for yet another seal to be set in the long row which he and his forbears had planted regularly, year by year, in the usurer’s field of accounts. As for the harvests of such

H A R V E S T

sowings? Bah! there never were any. A real crop of solid, hard, red wheat was worth them all, and that came sometimes—might come any time if the blue sky was kind. He knew nothing of Statutes of Limitation or judgments of the Chief Court, and his inherited wisdom drew a broad line of demarcation between paper and plain facts.

Anunt Râm, the usurer, however, was of another school. A comparatively young man, he had brought into his father's ancestral business the modern selfishness which laughs to scorn all considerations save that for Number One. He and his forbears had made much out of Jaimul and his fellows; but was that any reason against making more, if more was to be made?

And more *was* indubitably to be made if Jaimul and his kind were reduced to the level of labourers. That handful of grain, for instance, thrown so recklessly to the pigeons—that might be the usurer's, and so might the plenty which went to build up the long, strong limbs of Târadevi's tribe of young soldiers—idle young scamps who thrashed the usurer's boys as diligently during play-time as they were beaten by those clever, weedy lads during school-hours.

'Seed grain,' he echoed sulkily to the old peasant's calm demand. 'Sure last harvest I left thee more wheat than most men in my place would have done; for the account grows, O Jaimul! and the land is mortgaged to the uttermost.'

'Mayhap! but it must be sown for all that, else

H A R V E S T

thou wilt suffer as much as I. So quit idle words, and give the seed as thou hast since time began. What do I know of accounts who can neither read nor write? 'Tis thy business, not mine.'

' 'Tis not my business to give aught for nought——'

'For nought,' broke in Jaimul, with the hoarse chuckle of the peasant availing himself of a time-worn joke. 'Thou canst add that nought to thy figures, O *bunniab-ji* !¹ So bring the paper and have done with words. If Râm sends rain—and the omens are auspicious—thou canst take all but food and jewels for the women.'

'Report saith thy house is rich enough in them already,' suggested the usurer after a pause.

Jaimul's big white eyebrows met over his broad nose. 'What then, *bunniab-ji*?' he asked haughtily.

Anunt Râm made haste to change the subject, whereat Jaimul, smiling softly, told the usurer that maybe more jewels would be needed with next seed grain, since if the auguries were once more propitious, the women purposed bringing home his grandson's bride ere another year had sped. The usurer smiled an evil smile.

'Set thy seal to this also,' he said, when the seed grain had been measured: 'the rules demand it. A plague, say I, on all these new-fangled papers the *sahibs* ask of us. Look you! how I have to pay for the stamps and fees; and then you old ones say we new

¹ *Bunniab*, a merchant. *Bunniab-ji* signifies, as Shakespeare would have said, Sir Merchant.

H A R V E S T

ones are extortionate. We must live, O *zemindar-ji* !¹ even as thou livest.'

'Live!' retorted the old man with another chuckle. 'Wherefore not! The land is good enough for you and for me. There is no fault in the land!'

'Ay! it is good enough for me and for you,' echoed the usurer slowly. He inverted the pronouns—that was all.

So Jaimul, as he had done ever since he could remember, walked over the bare plain with noiseless feet, and watched the sun flash on the golden grain as it flew from his thin brown fingers. And once again the guttural chant kept time to his silent steps.

'Wheat grains grow to wheat,
And the seed of a tare to tare;
Who knows if man's soul will meet
Man's body to wear.

Great Râm, grant me life
From the grain of a golden deed;
Sink not my soul in the strife
To wake as a weed.'

After that his work in the fields was over. Only at sunrise and sunset his tall, gaunt figure stood out against the circling sky as he wandered through the sprouting wheat waiting for the rain which never came. Not for the first time in his long life of waiting, so he took the want calmly, soberly.

'It is a bad year,' he said, 'the next will be better. For the sake of the boy's marriage I would it had been

¹ *Zemindar-ji*, Sir Squire.

H A R V E S T

otherwise ; but Anunt Râm must advance the money. It is his business.'

Whereat Jodha, the youngest son, better versed than his father in new ways, shook his head doubtfully. 'Have a care of Anunt, O *baba-ji*,'¹ he suggested with diffidence. 'Folk say he is sharper than ever his father was.'

' 'Tis a trick sons have, or think they have, nowadays,' retorted old Jaimul wrathfully. 'Anunt can wait for payment as his fathers waited. God knows the interest is enough to stand a dry season or two.'

In truth fifty per cent, and payment in kind at the lowest harvest rates, with a free hand in regard to the cooking of accounts, should have satisfied even a usurer's soul. But Anunt Râm wanted that handful of grain for the pigeons and the youngsters' mess of pottage. He wanted the land, in fact, and so the long row of dibbled-in seals dotting the unending scroll of accounts began to sprout and bear fruit. Drought gave them life, while it brought death to many a better seed.

'Not give the money for the boy's wedding!' shrilled old Kishnu six months after in high displeasure. 'Is the man mad? When the fields are the best in all the countryside.'

'True enough, O wife! but he says the value under these new rules the *sabibs* make is gone already. That he must wait another harvest, or have a new seal of me.'

¹ *Baba*, as a term of familiarity, is applied indifferently to young and old.

H A R V E S T

'Is that all, O Jaimul Singh! and thou causing my liver to melt with fear? A seal—what is a seal or two more against the son of thy son's marriage?'

''Tis a new seal,' muttered Jaimul uneasily, 'and I like not new things. Perhaps 'twere better to wait the harvest.'

'Wait the harvest and lose the auspicious time the *purohit*¹ hath found written in the stars? *Ai*, *Târadevi*! *Ai*! *Pertâbi*! there is to be no marriage, hark you! The boy's strength is to go for nought, and the bride is to languish alone because the father of his father is afraid of a usurer! *Haè*, *Haè*!'

The women wept the easy tears of their race, mingled with half-real, half-pretended fears lest the Great Ones might resent such disregard of their good omens—the old man sitting silent meanwhile, for there is no tyranny like the tyranny of those we love. Despite all this his native shrewdness held his tenderness in check. They would get over it, he told himself, and a good harvest would do wonders—ay! even the wonders which the *purohit* was always finding in the skies. Trust a good fee for that! So he hardened his heart, went back to Anunt Râm, and told him that he had decided on postponing the marriage. The usurer's face fell. To be so near the seal which would make it possible for him to foreclose the mortgages, and yet to fail! He had counted on this marriage for years; the blue

¹ *Purohit*, a spiritual teacher, a sage, answering in some respects to the Red Indian's medicine-man.

H A R V E S T

sky itself had fought for him so far, and now—what if the coming harvest were a bumper?

‘But I will seal for the seed grain,’ said old Jaimul; ‘I have done that before, and I will do it again—we know that bargain of old.’

Anunt Râm closed his pen-tray with a snap. ‘There is no seed grain for you, *baba-ji*, this year either,’ he replied calmly.

Ten days afterwards, Kishnu, Pertâbi, and Târadevi were bustling about the courtyard with the untiring energy which fills the Indian woman over the mere thought of a wedding, and Jaimul, out in the fields, was chanting as he scattered the grain into the furrows—

‘Wrinkles and seams and sears
On the face of our mother earth;
There are ever sorrows and tears
At the gates of birth.’

The mere thought of the land lying fallow had been too much for him; so safe in the usurer’s strong-box lay a deed with the old man’s seal sitting cheek by jowl beside Anunt Râm’s brand-new English signature. And Jaimul knew, in a vague, unrestful way, that this harvest differed from other harvests, in that more depended upon it. So he wandered oftener than ever over the brown expanse of field where a flush of green showed that Mother Earth had done her part, and was waiting for Heaven to take up the task.

The wedding fire-balloons rose from the courtyard, and drifted away to form constellations in the cloudless

H A R V E S T

sky ; the sound of wedding drums and pipes disturbed the stillness of the starlit nights, and still day by day the green shoots grew lighter and lighter in colour because the rain came not. Then suddenly, like a man's hand, a little cloud ! ' Merry drops slanting from west to the east ' ; merrier by far to Jaimul's ears than all the marriage music was that low rumble from the canopy of purple cloud, and the discordant scream of the peacock telling of the storm to come. Then in the evening, when the setting sun could only send a bar of pale primrose light between the solid purple and the solid brown, what joy to pick a dry-shod way along the boundary ridges and see the promise of harvest doubled by the reflection of each tender green spikelet in the flooded fields ! The night settled down dark, heavenly dark, with a fine spray of steady rain in the old, weather-beaten face, as it set itself towards home.

The blue sky was on the side of labour this time, and, during the next month or so, Târadevi's young soldiers made mud-pies, and crowed more lustily than ever over the *bunniab's* boys.

Then the silvery beard began to show in the wheat, and old Jaimul laughed aloud in the fullness of his heart.

' That is an end of the new seal,' he said boastfully, as he smoked his pipe in the village square. ' It is a poor man's harvest, and no mistake.'

But Anunt Râm was silent. The April sun had given some of its sunshine to the yellowing crops before he spoke.

H A R V E S T

‘ I can wait no longer for my money, O *baba-ji* ! ’ he said ; ‘ the three years are nigh over, and I must defend myself.’

‘ What three years ? ’ asked Jaimul, in perplexity.

‘ The three years during which I can claim my own according to the *sahib-logue*’s rule. You must pay, or I must sue.’

‘ Pay before harvest ! What are these fool’s words ? Of course I will pay in due time ; hath not great Râm sent me rain to wash out the old writing ? ’

‘ But what of the new one, *baba-ji* ?—the cash lent on permission to foreclose the mortgages ? ’

‘ If the harvest failed—if it failed,’ protested Jaimul quickly. ‘ And I knew it could not fail. The stars said so, and great Râm would not have it so.’

‘ That is old-world talk ! ’ sneered Anunt. ‘ We do not put that sort of thing in the bond. You sealed it, and I must sue.’

‘ What good to sue ere harvest ? What money have I ? But I will pay good grain when it comes, and the paper can grow as before.’

Anunt Râm sniggered.

‘ What good, O *baba-ji* ? Why, the land will be mine, and I can take, not what you give me, but what I choose. For the labourer his hire, and the rest for me.’

‘ Thou art mad ! ’ cried Jaimul, but he went back to his fields with a great fear at his heart—a fear which sent him again to the usurer’s ere many days were over.

‘ Here are my house’s jewels,’ he said briefly, ‘ and

H A R V E S T

the mare thou hast coveted these two years. Take them, and write off my debt till harvest.'

Anunt Râm smiled again.

'It shall be part payment of the acknowledged claim,' he said; 'let the Courts decide on the rest.'

'After the harvest?'

'Ay, after the harvest; in consideration of the jewels.'

Anunt Râm kept his word, and the fields were shorn of their crop ere the summons to attend the District Court was brought to the old peasant.

'By the Great Spirit who judges all it is a lie!' That was all he could say as the long, carefully-woven tissue of fraud and cunning blinded even the eyes of a justice biassed in his favour. The records of our Indian law-courts teem with such cases—cases where even equity can do nothing against the evidence of pen and paper. No need to detail the strands which formed the net. The long array of seals had borne fruit at last, fiftyfold, sixtyfold, a hundredfold—a goodly harvest for the usurer.

'Look not so glum, friend,' smiled Anunt Râm, as they pushed old Jaimul from the Court at last, dazed, but still vehemently protesting. 'Thou and Jodha thy son shall till the land as ever, seeing thou art skilled in such work, but there shall be no idlers; and the land, mark you, is *mine*, not thine.'

A sudden gleam of furious hate sprang to the strong old face, but died away as quickly as it came.

'Thou liest,' said Jaimul; 'I will appeal. The

H A R V E S T

land is mine. It hath been mine and my fathers' under the king's pleasure since time began. Kings, ay, and queens, for that matter, are not fools, to give good land to the *bunniab's* belly. Can a *bunniab* plough?'

Yet as he sat all day about the court-house steps awaiting some legal detail or other, doubt even of his own incredulity came over him. He had often heard of similar misfortunes to his fellows, but somehow the possibility of such evil appearing in his own life had never entered his brain. And what would Kishnu say—after all these years, these long years of content?

The moon gathering light as the sun set shone full on the road, as the old man, with downcast head, made his way across the level plain to the mud hovel which had been a true home to him and his for centuries. His empty hands hung at his sides, and the fingers twitched nervously as if seeking something. On either side the bare stubble, stretching away from the track which led deviously to the scarce discernible hamlets here and there. Not a soul in sight, but every now and again a glimmer of light showing where someone was watching the heaps of new threshed grain upon the threshing-floors.

And then a straighter thread of path leading right upon his own fields and the village beyond. What was that? A man riding before him. The blood leapt through the old veins, and the old hands gripped in upon themselves. So he—that liar riding ahead—was to have the land, was he? Riding the mare too,

H A R V E S T

while he, Jaimul, came behind afoot—yet for all that gaining steadily with long, swinging stride on the figure ahead. A white figure on a white horse like death; or was the avenger behind beneath the lank folds of drapery which fluttered round the walker?

The land! No! He should never have the land. How could he? The very idea was absurd. Jaimul, thinking thus, held his head erect and his hands relaxed their grip. He was close on the rider now; and just before him, clear in the moonlight, rose the boundary mark of his fields—a loose pile of sunbaked clods, hardened by many a dry year of famine to the endurance of stone. Beside it, the shallow whence they had been dug, showing a gleam of water still held in the stiff clay. The mare paused, straining at the bridle for a drink, and Jaimul almost at her heels paused also, involuntarily, mechanically. For a moment they stood thus, a silent white group in the moonlight; then the figure on the horse slipped to the ground and moved a step forward. Only one step, but that was within the boundary. Then, above the even wheeze of the thirsty beast, rose a low chuckle as the usurer stooped for a handful of soil and let it glide through his fingers.

‘It is good ground! Ay, ay—none better.’

They were his last words. In fierce passion of love, hate, jealousy, and protection, old Jaimul closed on his enemy, and found something to grip with his steady old hands. Not the plough-handle this time, but a throat, a warm, living throat where you could feel the blood swelling in the veins beneath your fingers.

H A R V E S T

Down almost without a struggle, the old face above the young one, the lank knee upon the broad body. And now, quick! for something to slay withal, ere age tired in its contest with youth and strength. There, ready since all time, stood the landmark, and one clod after another snatched from it fell on the upturned face with a dull thud. Fell again and again, crashed and broke to crumbling soil. Good soil! Ay! none better! Wheat might grow in it and give increase fortyfold, sixtyfold, ay, a hundredfold. Again, again, and yet again, with dull insistence till there was a shuddering sigh, and then silence. Jaimul stood up quivering from the task and looked over his fields. They were at least free from that *thing* at his feet; for what part in this world's harvest could belong to the ghastly figure with its face beaten to a jelly, which lay staring up into the over-arching sky? So far, at any rate, the business was settled for ever, and in so short a time that the mare had scarcely slaked her thirst, and still stood with head down, the water dripping from her muzzle. The *thing* would never ride her again either. Half-involuntarily he stepped to her side and loosened the girth.

'*Ari!* sister,' he said aloud, 'thou hast had enough. Go home.'

The docile beast obeyed his well-known voice, and as her echoing amble died away Jaimul looked at his blood-stained hands and then at the formless face at his feet. There was no home for him, and yet he was not sorry, or ashamed, or frightened—only dazed at the

H A R V E S T

hurry of his own act. Such things had to be done sometimes when folk were unjust. They would hang him for it, of course, but he had at least made his protest, and done his deed as good men and true should do when the time came. So he left the horror staring up into the sky and made his way to the threshing-floor, which lay right in the middle of his fields. How white the great heaps of yellow corn showed in the moonlight, and how large ! His heart leapt with a fierce joy at the sight. Here was harvest indeed ! Someone lay asleep upon the biggest pile ; and his stern old face relaxed into a smile as, stooping over the careless sentinel, he found it was his grandson. The boy would watch better as he grew older, thought Jaimul, as he drew his cotton plaid gently over the smooth round limbs outlined among the yielding grain, lest the envious moon might covet their promise of beauty.

‘ Son of my son ! Son of my son ! ’ he murmured over and over again, as he sat down to watch out the night beside his corn for the last time. Yes, for the last time. At dawn the deed would be discovered ; they would take him and he would not deny his own handiwork. Why should he ? The midnight-air of May was hot as a furnace, and as he wiped the sweat from his forehead it mingled with the dust and blood upon his hands. He looked at them with a curious smile before he lay back among the corn. Many a night he had watched the slow stars wheeling to meet the morn, but never by a fairer harvest than this.

H A R V E S T

The boy at his side stirred in his sleep. 'Son of my son! Son of my son!' came the low murmur again. Ay! and his son after him again, if the woman said true. It had always been so. Father and son, father and son, father—and son—for ever—and ever—and ever.

So, lulled by the familiar thought, the old man fell asleep beside the boy, and the whole bare expanse of earth and sky seemed empty save for them. No! there was something else surely. Down on the hard white threshing-floor—was that a branch or a fragment of rope? Neither, for it moved deviously hither and thither, raising a hooded head now and again as if seeking something; for all its twists and turns bearing steadily towards the sleepers; past the boy, making him shift uneasily as the cold coil touched his arms; swifter now as it drew nearer the scent, till it found what it sought upon the old man's hands.¹

'*Ari*, sister! straight, I say, straight!' murmured the old ploughman in his sleep, as his grip strengthened over something that wavered in his steady clasp. Was that the prick of the goad? Sure if it bit so deep upon the sister's hide no wonder she started. He must keep his grip for men's throats when sleep was over—when this great sleep was over.

The slow stars wheeled, and when the morn brought Justice, it found old Jaimul dead among his corn and left him there. But the women washed the stains of

¹ Snakes are said to be attracted by the scent of blood as they are undoubtedly by that of milk.

H A R V E S T

blood and sweat mingled with soil and seed grains from his hands before the wreath of smoke from his funeral pyre rose up to make a white cloud no bigger than a man's hand upon the bitter blue sky—a cloud that brought gladness to no heart.

The usurer's boys, it is true, forced the utmost from the land, and sent all save bare sustenance across the seas ; but the home guided by Jaimul's unswerving hand was gone, and Târadevi's tribe of budding soldiers drifted away to learn the lawlessness born of change. Perhaps the yellow English gold which came into the country in return for the red Indian wheat more than paid for these trivial losses. Perhaps it did not. That is a question which the next Mutiny must settle.



LÂL

WH^O was Lâl? What was he? This was a question I asked many times; and though it was duly answered, Lâl remained, and remains still; an unknown quantity—an abstraction, a name, and nothing more. L Â L. The same backwards and forwards, self-contained, self-sufficing.

The first time I heard of Lâl was on a bright spring morning, one of those mornings when the plains of Northern India glitter with dew-drops; when a purple haze of cloud-mountain bounds the pale wheat-fields to the north, and a golden glow strikes skywards from the sand-hills in the south. I was in a tamarisk jungle on the banks of the Indus, engaged in the decorous record of all the thefts and restitutions made during the year by that most grasping and generous of rivers. For year after year, armed by the majesty of law and bucklered by foot-rules and maps, the Government of India, in the person of one of its officers, came gravely and altered the proportion of land and water on the surface of the globe, while the river gurgled and dimpled as if it were laughing in its sleeve.

Strange work, but pleasant too, with a charm of its own wrought by infinite variety and sudden surprise. Sometimes watching the stream sapping at a wheat-

field, where the tender green spikes fringed the edges of each crack and fissure in the fast-drying soil. A promise of harvest—and then, sheer down, the turbid water gnawing hungrily. Every now and again a splash, telling that another inch or two of solid earth had yielded. Sometimes standing on a mud bank where the ever-watchful villagers had sown a trial crop of coarse vetch ; thus, as it were, casting their bread on the water in hopes of finding it again some day. But when ? Would it be there at harvest-time ? Grey-bearded patriarchs from the village would wag their heads sagely over the problem, and younger voices protest that it was not worth while to enter such a flotsam-jetsam as a field. But the ruthless iron chain would come into requisition, and another green spot be daubed on the revenue map, for Governments ignore chance. And still the river dimpled and gurgled with inward mirth ; for if it gave the vetch, had it not taken the wheat ?

So from one scene of loss or gain to another, while the sun shone in the cloudless sky overhead. Past pools of shining water where red-billed cranes stood huddled up on one leg, as if they felt cold in the crisp morning air. Out on the bare stretches of sand where glittering streams and flocks of white egrets combined to form a silver embroidery on the brown expanse. Over the shallow ford where the bottle-nosed alligators slipped silently into the stream, or lay still as shadows on the sun-baked sand. Down by the big river, where the swirling water parted right and left, and

where the grey-beards set their earthen pots a-swimming to decide which of the two streams would prove its strength by bearing away the greater number—a weighty question, not lightly to be decided, since the land to the west of the big stream belonged to one village, and the land eastward to another. Back again to higher ground through thickets of tamarisk dripping with dew. The bushes sparse below with their thin brown stems, so thick above where the feathery pink-spiked branches interlaced. Riding through it, the hands had to defend the face from the sharp switch of the rosy flowers as they swung back disentangled; such tiny flowers, too, no bigger than a mustard seed, and leaving a pink powder of pollen behind them.

It was after forcing my way through one of these tamarisk jungles that I came out on an open patch of rudely ploughed land, where a mixed crop of pulse and barley grew sturdily, outlining an irregular oval with a pale green carpet glistening with dew. In the centre a shallow pool of water still testified to past floods, and from it a purple heron winged its flight, lazily craning its painted neck against the sky.

The whole *posse comitatus* of the village following me broke by twos and threes through the jungle, and gathered round me as I paused watching the bird's flight.

'Take the bridle from his honour's pony,' cried a venerable pantaloon breathlessly. 'Let the steed of the Lord of the Universe eat his fill. Is not this the field of Lâl?'

Twenty hands stretched out to do the old headman's bidding ; twenty voices re-echoed the sentiment in varying words. A minute more, and my pony's nose was well down on the wet, sweet tufts of vetch, and I was asking for the first time, ' Who is Lâl ? '

Lâl, came the answer, why, Lâl was—Lâl. This was his field. Why should not the pony of the Protector of the Poor have a bellyful ? Was it not more honourable than the parrot people and the squirrel people, and the pig people who batted on the field of Lâl ?

It was early days yet for the flocks of green parrots to frequent the crops, and the dainty squirrels were, I knew, still snugly a-bed waiting for the sun to dry the dew ; but at my feet sundry furrows and scratches told that the pig had already been at work.

' Is Lâl here ? ' I asked.

A smile, such as greets a child's innocent ignorance, came to the good-humoured faces around me.

Lâl, they explained, came when the crop was ripe, when the parrot, the squirrel, and the pig people—and his honour's pony too—had had their fill. Lâl was a good man, one who walked straight, and laboured truly.

' But where is he ? ' I insisted.

Face looked at face half-puzzled, half-amused. Who could tell where Lâl was ? He might be miles away, or in the next jungle. Someone had seen him at Sukkhur a week ago, but that was no reason why he should not be at Bhukkur now, for Lâl followed the river, and like it was here to-day, gone to-morrow.

Balked in my curiosity, I took refuge in business by

inquiring what revenue Lâl paid on his field. This was too much for the polite gravity of my hearers. The idea of Lâl's paying revenue was evidently irresistibly comic, and the venerable pantaloon actually choked himself between a cough and a laugh, requiring to be held up and patted on the back.

'But someone must pay the revenue,' I remarked a little testily.

Certainly ! the Lord of the Universe was right. The village community paid it. It was the village which lent Lâl the field, and the bullocks, and the plough. It was the village which gave him the few handfuls of seed grain to scatter broadcast over the roughly tilled soil. So much they lent to Lâl. The sun and the good God gave him the rest. All, that is to say, that was not wanted for the parrot, the pig, and the squirrel people, and, of course, for the pony of the Lord of the Universe.

There are so many mysteries in Indian peasant life, safe hidden from alien eyes, that I was lazily content to let Lâl and his field slip into the limbo of things not thoroughly understood, and so, ere long, I forgot all about him. Spring passed, ripening the crops ; summer came, bringing fresh floods to the river ; and autumn watched the earth once more make way against the water ; but Lâl was to me as though he had not been.

It was only when another year found me once more in the strange land which lies, as the people say, 'in the stomach of the river,' that memory awoke with the

words, 'This is the field of Lâl.' There was, however, no suggestion made about loosening my pony's bridle as on the former occasion, the reason for such reticence being palpable. Lâl had either been less fortunate in his original choice of a field this year, or else the sun and the good God had been less diligent caretakers. A large portion of the land, too, bore marks of an over-recent flood in a thick deposit of fine glistening white sand. A favourite trick of the mischievous Indus, by which she disappoints hope raised by previous gifts of rich alluvial soil—a trick which has given her a bad name, the worst a woman can bear, because she gives and destroys with one hand. Here and there, in patches, the sparse crop showed green; but for the most part the ground lay bare, cracking into large fissures under the noonday sun, and peeling at the top into shiny brown scales.

'A bad lookout for Lâl,' I remarked.

Bad, they said, for the squirrel people and the parrot people, no doubt; but for Lâl—that was another matter. Lâl did not live by bread alone. The river gave, the river took away; but to Lâl at any rate it gave more than it stole.

'What does it give?' I asked.

It gave crocodiles. Of all things in the world crocodiles! Not a welcome gift to many, but Lâl, it seemed, was a hunter of crocodiles. Not a mere slayer of alligators, like the men of the half-savage tribes who frequent the river land; who array themselves in a plethora of blue beads, and live by the creeks and

jbeels on what they can catch or steal ; who track the cumbersome beasts to their nightly lair in some narrow inlet, and, after barring escape by a stealthy earthwork, fall on the helpless creature at dawn with spears and arrows. Lâl was not of these ; he was of another temper. He hunted the crocodile in its native element, stalked it through the quicksands, knife in hand, dived with it into the swift stream, sped like a fish to the soft belly beneath, and struck upwards with unerring hand, once, twice, thrice, while the turbid orange water glowed crimson with the spouting blood.

I heard this tale curiously, but incredulously. Why, I asked, should Lâl run such risks ? What good were crocodiles to him when they were slain ? There was not so much risk, after all, they replied, for it was only the bottle-nosed ones that he hunted, and though, of course, the snub-nosed ones lived in the river also—God destroy the horrid monsters !—still they did not interfere in the fight. And Lâl was careful, all the more careful because he had but two possessions to guard, his skin and his knife. As to what Lâl did with the crocodiles, why, he ate them, of course. Not all ; he spared some for his friends, for those who were good to him, and gave him something in return. Had the Presence never heard that the poor ate crocodile flesh ? They themselves, of course, did not touch the unclean animal ; and their gifts to Lâl were purely disinterested. He was a straight-walking, a labourful man, and that was the only reason why they lent him a field. Even the Presence would acknowledge that

crocodile flesh without bread would be uninteresting diet ; but as a rule the pig, the parrots, the squirrels left enough for Lâl to eat with his jerked meat. The village lent him the sickle, of course, and the flail, and the mill, sometimes even the girdle on which to bake the unleavened bread ; but all for love, only for love. Yet if the Presence desired it they could show him the jerked meat, some that Lâl had left for the poor. It was dry ? Oh, yes ! Lâl cut the great beasts into strips, and laid them in the sun on the dry sand, sitting beside them to scare away the carrion birds. Sometimes there would be a crowd of vultures, and Lâl with his knife sitting in the midst. ' He will have to sell some of his jerked crocodile to pay his revenue this year,' I remarked, just to amuse them. Again the idea was comic ; evidently Lâl and money were incompatible, and the very idea of his owning any caused them to chuckle unrestrainedly amongst themselves. Then, growing grave, they explained at length how Lâl had nothing in the world but his knife. All the rest—the sun, the river, the crocodiles, the field, the bullocks, the plough, and the seed grain—were lent to him by them and the good God ; lent to him and to the other people who ate of the field of Lâl.

As I rode away a brace of black partridges rose from one of the green patches, and close to the tamarisk shelter a brown rat sat balancing a half-dried stalk of barley. The river gleamed in the distance, a wedge-shaped flight of *coolin* cleft the sky. All that day, when the shadow-like crocodiles slipped into the

L Â L

sliding water, I thought of Lâl and his knife. Was it a crocodile, after all ; or was it a man, stealthy, swift and silent ? Who could tell, when there was nothing but a shadow, a slip, and then a few air bubbles on the sliding river ? Or was that Lâl yonder where the vultures ringed a sand-bank far on the western side ? Why not ? None knew whence he came or whither he went, what he hoped, or what he feared ; only his field bare witness to one human frailty—hunger ; and that he shared with the pig, and the parrot, and the squirrel people. But though my thoughts were full of Lâl for a day or two, the memory of him passed as I left the river land, and once more spring, summer, and autumn brought forgetfulness.

There were busy times for all the revenue officers next year. The fitful river had chosen to desert its eastern bank altogether, and concentrate its force upon the western ; so while yard after yard of ancestral land was giving way before the fierce stream, amidst much wringing of hands on the one side, there was joy on the other over long rich stretches ready for the plough and the red tape of measurement. In the press of work even the sight of the river land failed to awake any memory of Lâl. It was not until I was re-entering the outskirts of the village at sundown that something jogged my brain, making me turn to the *posse comitatus* behind me and ask—

‘ And where, this year, is the field of Lâl ? ’

We were passing over an open space baked almost to whiteness by the constant sun—a hard resonant place

set round with gnarled *jhand* trees, and dotted over with innumerable little mud mounds.

‘ There,’ wheezed the venerable pantaloon, pressing forward and pointing to one newer than the rest. ‘ That is the field of Lâl.’

Then I saw that we were in the village burial-ground. I looked up inquiringly.

‘ *Huzoor!*’ repeated a younger man, ‘ that is Lâl’s field. It is his own this time ; but for all that the Sirkâr will not charge him revenue.’ The grim joke, and the idea of Lâl’s having six feet of earth of his own at last, once more roused their sense of humour.

‘ And the other people who ate of the field of Lâl ?’ I asked, half in earnest, for somehow my heart was sad.

‘ The good God will look after them, as He has after the crocodiles.’

Since then, strangely enough, the memory of Lâl has remained with me, and I often ask myself if he really existed, and if he really died. Does he still slip silently into the stream, knife in hand ? Does he still come back to his field under the broad harvest moon, to glean his scanty share after the other people have had their fill ? I cannot say ; but whenever I see a particularly fat squirrel I say to myself, ‘ It has been feeding in the field of Lâl.’

HABITUAL CRIMINALS

THE very *mise-en-scène* was indeterminate. A straight horizon meeting the blue sky evenly, though not an inch of level ground lay far or near in the pathless waste of yellow sand. Pathless, yet full of tracks. Looking down at your feet, which, breaking through the rippling crust of wind-waves on the surface, sank softly into the warm shifting sand beneath, you could see the tracks crossing and re-crossing each other, tracing a network over the world, each distinct, self-reliant, self-contained. Yet such tiny tracks for the most part ! That firm zigzag, regular as a Gothic moulding, is printed by a partridge's foot ; yonder fine graving is the track of a jerboa rat ; and there, side by side for a space, the striated lines of a big beetle and the endless curvings of a snake. A certain wistful admiration comes to the seeing eye with the thought that, here in the wilderness, life is free to go and come as it chooses, untrammelled by the fetters of custom, free from the necessity for doing as your neighbours do, being as your neighbours are. Something of this was in my thoughts one day when, as I rode at a foot's-pace across the sand-sea to my tents, I suddenly came upon a boy. He must have been ten years old, at least, by his size ; any age, judging by his face ; stark

HABITUAL CRIMINALS

naked save for a string and a scrap of cloth. His head would have been an admirable advertisement to any hair restorer, for it was thick and curly in patches, bald as a coot's in others; briefly, like a well-kept poodle's. For the rest he was of unusually dark complexion. He was sitting listless, yet alert, beside some small holes in the sand, and when he saw me he smiled broadly, showing a great gleam of white teeth. I asked him cheerfully who he was, and he replied in the same tone.

'*Huzoor! main Bowriah bone.*' (I am a Bowriah.) It gave me a chill somehow. So the lad was a Bowriah; in other words, one of that criminal class which Western discipline keeps in walled villages, registered and roll-called by day and by night. Not much freedom there to strike out a line of life for yourself, unless you began before the time when you were solemnly set down in black and white as an adult bad character. The boy, however, seemed to have no misgivings, for he smiled still more broadly when I asked him what he was doing.

'Catching lizards, *Huzoor!* They are fat at this time.'

My chill changed its cause incontinently. 'You don't mean to say you eat lizards?'

He looked at me more gravely. 'Wherefore not, *Huzoor?* The Bowriahs eat everything, except cats. Cats are heating to the blood, especially in spring-time.'

His air of well-defined wisdom tickled me; per-

HABITUAL CRIMINALS

haps it touched me also, for, ere riding off, I asked him his name, thinking I might inquire more of him ; for the sole reason of my tents being a few miles farther in this sandy wilderness was the due inspection of a Bowriah village, which had been planted there, out of harm's way, by the authorities.

' Mungal, *Huzoor*,' he replied. So I left him watching for the fat lizards, and cantered on over the desert.

Suddenly I drew rein with a jerk. There he was again in front of me, sitting before another group of holes.

' Hullo ! ' I cried, ' how on earth did you manage to get here, Mungal ? '

The boy smiled his broad, white smile, ' The *Huzoor* mistakes. I am Bungal. Mungal is my brother over yonder.' He stretched a thin dark arm into the desert whence I had come. Mungal and Bungal ! Twins, of course ! Even so the likeness was almost incredible. My memory could find no dissimilarity of any sort or kind—no outward dissimilarity, at any rate. The thought suggested an experiment, and I asked him what he was.

' *Huzoor ! main Bowriah bone*,' came instantly.

' And what are you doing ? ' I continued.

' Catching lizards, *Huzoor !* They are fat at this time.'

Positively my chill returned, making me say quite naturally, ' What ! do you eat lizards ? '

' Wherefore not, *Huzoor ?* The Bowriahs eat every-

HABITUAL CRIMINALS

thing, except cats. Cats are heating to the blood, especially in spring-time.'

Identical so far. The quaintness of the idea prevented me from disturbing it by further inquiry, so I rode on, dimly expectant of finding a third habitual criminal—say Jungal this time—watching for fat lizards at other holes. But I did not. They were twins only; Mungal and Bungal. Out of sheer curiosity I sent for them that evening, when I had finished my work of inspecting the adult males and females, listening to their complaints, and generally setting the odd little village on the path of virtue for the next three months. By no means a disagreeable occupation, for the Bowriahs have always a broad smile for a sportsman. Indeed, several of the most suspicious characters had promised me the best of *shikar* on the morrow; and what is more, they kept their promise faithfully.

As for Mungal and Bungal, even when seen together it was absolutely impossible for me to detect any difference of any kind between the two boys. Even their heads were shaven in the same tufts, and as they invariably repeated each other, there was no differentiating them by their words.

Only their works remained as a means of knowledge, and with a view to this I questioned the Deputy Inspector of Police, who was out with me, as to the lads.

'*Huzoor!*' he said, 'they are of the Bowriah race. Their father and mother are dead, but in life these

HABITUAL CRIMINALS

were Bowriahs also. The boys, however, not being adult, are not as yet on the Register ; but they will be. For the rest they are as Bowriahs. They eat jackals, wolves, and such unclean things.'

I felt myself on the point of adding, ' But not cats—cats, etc. ' ; however I stopped myself in time, and asked instead if the boys stole, or lied, or——

The Deputy Inspector interrupted me respectfully, yet firmly. '*Huzoor!* not being adult they are not on the Register. Therefore the police have no cognizance of them—as yet.'

' Then why do they make for the village now they hear the roll beginning ? ' I persisted somewhat testily, as I saw Mungal and Bungal racing along to the gateway in company with a number of boys about their own age.

' They do it to please themselves. It gives them dignity. Besides, in youth one learns habits easily. Thus it is better, since the boys will surely be on the Register if God spares them to adult age.'

I looked at the man sharply ; there was positively not one atom of expression of any kind whatever on his face. It is a great art.

On the morrow Mungal and Bungal turned up again as part of the shooting excursion, for even among their tribe of hunters they had already made themselves a sporting reputation ; perhaps because, being orphans, they lived chiefly on their wits. It certainly was remarkable to see them on a trail, turning and twisting and doubling on traces invisible to my eyes ; or some-

HABITUAL CRIMINALS

times, like a couple of Bassett-hound puppies, on all fours, nose down, creeping round some higher undulation to see what lay behind it. We had stalked a ravine deer which another party of Bowriahs had stealthily driven—all unconsciously—into a suitable spot, and I was just crawling on my stomach to the shelter of a low bush whence I intended to fire, when a small dark hand clutched mine from behind, and another pointed to something within an inch of where I had been about to place my fingers. By everything unpleasant! a viper coiled in a true lover's knot! 'T—Tss—ss,' came a sibilant whisper checking my start; 'the buck is there, *Huzoor*; the buck is there still.'

And he remained there, for my bullet went clean through his heart. It was after the excitement of success was over that I turned to the boys, and, somewhat thoughtlessly, held out a rupee.

'Which of you two pointed out that *jelaibee*?' I asked.

'*Huzoor*! I did,' came both voices simultaneously. At first they refused to budge from this simple statement, reserving the remainder of their vocabulary for indignant abuse of each other. Nor could I from their expression or tone glean the slightest corroborative evidence for or against the truth of either. The greed in their beady black eyes, their scorn at the dastardly attempt at cheating them out of their due were identical. Finally, to my intense bewilderment they suddenly, without even a wink that I could see,

HABITUAL CRIMINALS

made a *demi-volte* towards a new position, and declared in one breath that they both did it, and therefore that they both deserved a rupee. Certainly there had been two hands, the one to clutch, the other to point, but I felt morally certain that they had belonged to one body. However, to settle the matter I gave each of the boys eight annas, and went back to my tents convinced that either Mungal or Bungal was a liar. The question was—which?

That evening, when I was awaiting the appearance of my dinner with the comfortable sense of a good appetite, I heard trouble in the cook-room tent. It was followed by the violent irruption into mine of the whole posse of servants gathered round my old head butler who, breathless but triumphant, held Mungal and Bungal each by one ear.

'It was the *esh-starffit*¹ quails, *Huzoor*, that I had prepared for the Protector of the Poor; two for his Honour, seeing that he loves the dish, and one for *Barker sahib*,² should God send a guest, so that the dignity of the table be upheld even in the wilderness. And, lo! as I sat decorating the dish, my mind occupied in desires to please, I saw him—the infamous Bowriah boy—make off with one. Aged as I am I fled after him, then remembering boys' ways, ran back round the tent in time to see him, from fear, replacing it. Finally, with hue and cry,

¹ Stuffed.

² Literally *bákee*, or extra; but *Barker sahib* is a perennial jest with both master and man, answering to the English Mr. Manners.

HABITUAL CRIMINALS

we caught both escaping into the darkness of the desert.'

'Both of them!' I echoed; 'but you said there was only one.'

'The *Huzoor* mistakes,' retorted the butler quite huffily. 'Perchance there was one who stole, and one who gave back. This slave had no time for trivial observation, these being undoubtedly the thieves.' He emphasized his words by dragging Mungal and Bungal forward by the ears, and knocking their heads together; his following meanwhile testifying its assent by undertoned remarks, that being Bowriahs the boys were necessarily thieves, and that in addition it was superfluous, if not impious, to draw invidious distinctions where it had pleased Providence to make none.

But my curiosity had been aroused. 'Mungal and Bungal,' I said solemnly, addressing the culprits who, with hands folded in front of them like infant Samuels, stood cheerfully stolid, just as the adult members of their tribe invariably did when brought before me as habitual criminals, 'do you by chance know what telling the truth means?'

As they assured me fervently that they did, I went on to explain that my only desire in this case was to have the truth; that no one should suffer by it; that contrariwise the tellers should receive *bucksheesh*. Here their beady eyes wandered in confident familiarity to the rotund person of the Deputy Inspector, who had rushed to the scene in mufti on hearing of the crime,

HABITUAL CRIMINALS

and I knew instinctively that they were discounting my words by inherited experience of similar promises. So it was with a prescience of what would follow that I put the least formidable question—

‘ Which of you replaced the quail ? ’

The answer came double-barrelled, unhesitating, ‘ I did, *Huzoor!* ’

‘ Let me give the boys five stripes each with the bamboo, *Huzoor!* ’ suggested the Deputy Inspector with a stifled yawn, when I had wasted much time and more unction, ‘ it is good for boys at all times, and these are but boys—as yet. ’

It would have been the wisest plan, but I could not make up my mind to it, so I went to bed that night certain of but one thing—either Mungal or Bungal was a thief. The question was—which ?

It kept me awake until I made up my mind that somehow, by hook or by crook, I would find out. Twenty-four hours was after all too short a time for a character study ; but I was to be on tour for six weeks at least, and if I took the boys with me I should have ample opportunity of settling the question. Besides, they would be invaluable as trackers.

They proved themselves useful in many ways, and even the old butler grudgingly admitted their skill in the capture of chickens. The spectacle of a half-plucked fowl defying all the resources of the camp became a thing of the past, for Mungal or Bungal had it fast by the leg in a trice.

‘ *Sobhan ullab!* ’ (Power of the Lord) the old man

HABITUAL CRIMINALS

would say piously. 'But there! they were made for such work from the beginning. We all have our uses.'

My first desire was naturally to distinguish Mungal from Bungal. The camp, it is true, had no such ambition. It was content to speak of them as 'Yeb' or 'Dusra' (This or the Other), to which they answered alternately. Thinking to effect my purpose, I gave one a necklace of blue, the other a necklace of red beads; but they were evidently suspicious of some plot, for I caught them exchanging decorations several times. Evidently no reliance was to be placed on beads, so I had a brass bangle riveted on the arm of one, and an iron bangle on the arm of the other. That succeeded for a week. At least so I thought, till I discovered that they had utilized my English files to cut through the metal so that they could slip their flexible hands in and out quite easily. Then I became annoyed, and pierced the ears of one boy. Next day the other had his pierced also. So I got the two alone by themselves, and asked them why they objected to the manifest convenience of individuality. It took me some time to worm the idea out of their small brains, but when I did, it touched me. Briefly, no one had ever made a difference between them before, not even the mysterious Creator, and in the village no one had cared. Personally, they never thought if Mungal was really Mungal or Bungal. It was a joint-stock company doing business under the name of Mungal-Bungal. As they said this they stood, as usual when

HABITUAL CRIMINALS

before me, in the attitude of the praying Samuel, but I noticed their shoulders seemed glued to each other, and that the whole balance of their lithe brown bodies was towards each other. In truth the tie between them was strong indeed. By day they and my big dog hunted together, and by night the trio slept in each other's arms, like puppies of one litter. When they pilfered, they pilfered in pairs, and when they lied, they lied in pairs; still, through it all, the idea clung to me that perhaps only one lied and stole. But punishment of some sort being imperative, I gave in to the impartial bamboo—for which, to say sooth, neither of them seemed to care very much.

In fact, the experiment appeared so successful, the boys so happy, that the demon of self-complacency entered into me on my return to headquarters, and I determined to send Mungal and Bungal to school, and so differentiate them by their intellects. It was a disastrous experiment, both to the clothes in which I had to dress them, and to the peace of the compound; but it proved one thing, that neither Mungal nor Bungal had any aptitude for learning the alphabet. Then, as the recognized way of reclaiming the predatory tribes is to make them tillers of the soil, I set my boys to work weeding in the garden. It was a large garden, full of blossoming shrubs and shady fruiting trees, where the squirrels loved to chatter, the birds to sing, and I to watch them both. Within a fortnight neither fur nor

HABITUAL CRIMINALS

feather was to be seen anywhere. On the other hand, Mungal-Bungal and Co. had killed five cobras, two iguanas, and some dozens of cockroaches, rats, and mice—all of which they had eaten. It was when, failing other game, a pet parrot of the head butler's house disappeared, that I solemnly thrashed both boys myself, after giving them a moral lecture on cruelty to animals. The next morning the bird's cage contained a new and most highly educated parrot—which must have been stolen from someone—and when I went out into the verandah, I found a whole family of young squirrels, and two bul-buls with their wings cut, dotted about the flower stands. One of the culprits was evidently bent on restitution and amendment. Perhaps both ; that was the worst of it. One never could tell ; for in speech they both clung to virtue and disclaimed vice. My Commissioner's wife, who lived next door, and was a very philanthropic woman, told me she thought they needed female influence to soften and subdue their wild nature ; so they used to be sent over to her twice a week. She found them quite affable, until the servants accused one of them of sampling the lunch which had been set down on the verandah steps on its way to the cook-room. Then, instead of beating them, she locked them up without food for twenty-four hours, and begged me to continue the like discipline whenever the offence was repeated. Hunger, she said, had a gentle and humanizing influence on all wild animals, who might thus be brought to eat from the

HABITUAL CRIMINALS

hand of authority. So it seemed ; for one night the lady's pet Persian kitten disappeared mysteriously from her room. I tried to persuade myself it could not be the boys, because ' cat is heating to the blood,' etc., etc. ; but I knew they had been hungry, and that game was scarce in both gardens. And, sure enough, the police in searching their hut found some gnawed bones, poor pussy's white skin neatly stretched on a board to dry, and, of course, both the boys. They always were found together. This time they attempted excuse, the one for the other. Mungal or Bungal had been hungry ; must have been hungry, or he would not have eaten cat, seeing that cat, etc., etc. So they were sentenced judicially to so many stripes apiece, and I resolved on sending them back to the walled village as incurable.

' It is a good word, indeed,' said the old butler pompously. ' Thus the *Huzoor's* compound will be free from all kinds of vermin ; for, as I live, the boy hath killed a snake in his Honour's hen-house every night, save the last ; and that, methinks, is because there are no more to kill.'

' The boy ? which boy ?' I asked, suddenly curious. Then it came out that everyone in the place knew that either ' *Yeb* ' or ' *Dusra* ' had been locked up in the hen-house from dusk till dawn every night for a week or more, because some vermin was carrying off the chickens. Locked up from daylight to daylight ! without a possibility of cat-killing. The fact revived all my old curiosity, all my old deter-

HABITUAL CRIMINALS

mination to differentiate these boys. I shall not easily forget the Deputy Inspector's face of incredulous horror when I told him that Mungal-Bungal was to remain for another trial. Even the Commissioner's wife told me she thought it conceited on my part, seeing that female influence had failed so signally.

And, as a matter of fact, I gained nothing in the end by my perseverance.

The nights were growing warm, so I slept with the doors open; secure, however, so I deemed, from fear of any kind by reason of the mastiff which was chained in the verandah—a most ferocious beast to all save his friends. They were moonless nights, too, dark as pitch in the central room, where I slept in order to enjoy the full current of air. Hopelessly dark for the eyes as I woke one night to the touch of a small flexible hand on mine.

'Hullo! who are you?' I cried in the half-drowsy alertness which comes with a sudden decisive awakening.

'Huzoor, main Bowriah hone.'

I seem to hear the answer as I write—confident, contented, cheerful. And then my attention shifted absolutely to a streak of light glimmering under the closed door of my office. Thieves! thieves in the house! I was among them in an instant, getting a glimpse of dark figures at my cash box before the light was put out. One oily body slipped from my hold, another fled past me. But my shouts had roused the

HABITUAL CRIMINALS

sleeping servants, and, as the cressets came flickering up like stars from the huts, I heard the well-known cry, ' *Bowriah logue ! Bowriah logue.*' And then, of course, in the centre of the posse of indignant retainers I saw Mungal-Bungal led by the ears, caught in the very act of running away in the rear of those adult members of their tribe whose accomplices they had been ; for the mastiff was dead—brutally, skilfully strangled by some fiend of a friend whom the poor dog had trusted to slip a noose round his neck.

One of those two, of course ; who else could it have been ?

But then that small warning hand on mine ! That answer I knew so well :

' *Huzoor ! main Bowriah hone.*'

Great God ! what a tragedy lay in these words !

I was too sick at heart to question those infant Samuels again ; I knew the double-barrelled denial too well. However, as I had been roused in time to prevent actual theft, I managed to hush the matter up by promising the Deputy Inspector to send the boys back to their village without further delay, there to await due registration as adult male members of a predatory tribe, and thus gain the privilege of being within the cognizance of the police. I think my decision gave satisfaction to everyone concerned, except myself, for as I watched Mungal-Bungal go from my gate in charge of the constable who was to conduct it back to the hereditary place in life to which it had,

HABITUAL CRIMINALS

apparently, pleased God to call the firm, I knew that if one half was already a habitual criminal, the other half was an embryo saint.

The question remains—which ?

FEROZA

TWO hen sparrows quarrelling over a feather, while a girl watched them listlessly ; for the rest, sunshine imprisoned by blank walls, save where at one end a row of scalloped arches gave on two shallow, shadowy verandah-rooms, and at the other a low doorway led to the world beyond. But even this was veiled by a brick screen, forced by the light into unison with the brick building behind. The girl sat with her back against the wall, her knees drawn up to her chin, and her little, bare, brown feet moulding themselves in the warm, sun-steeped dust of the courtyard. In the hands clasped round her green trousers she held an unopened letter from which the London postmark stared up into the brazen Indian sky. She was waiting to have it read to her—waiting with a dull, almost sullen patience, for the afternoon was still young. It was old enough, however, to make a sheeted figure in the shadow sit up on its string bed and yawn because siesta time was past.

‘ Still thinking of thy letter, Feroz ? *Bismillah !* I’m glad my man doesn’t live in a country where the women go about half naked.’

‘ Who told thee so, Karima ? The Mir *sahib* said naught.’

A light laugh seemed prisoned in the echoing walls. 'Wab! How canst tell? 'Tis father-in-law reads thy letters. Inaiyut saith so. He saw them at Delhi dancing like bad ones with——'

'Peace, Karima! Hast no decency?'

'Enough for my years, whilst thou art more like a grandam than a scarce-wed girl. Why should not Inaiyut be a man? A husband is none the worse for knowing a pretty woman when he sees one.'

She settled the veil on her sleek black head and laughed again. Feroza Begum's small brown face hardened into scorn. 'Inaiyut hath experience and practice in the art doubtless, as he hath in cock-fighting and dicing.'

'Now, don't gibe at him for that. Sure 'tis the younger son's portion amongst us Moguls. Do I sneer at thy Mir amusing himself over the black water amongst the *mems*?'

'The Mir is not amusing himself. He is learning to be a barrister.'

Karima swung her legs to the ground with another giggle. 'Wab! Men are men all the world over, and so are women. Yea! 'tis true.' She looked like some gay butterfly as she flashed out into the sunlight, and began with outstretched arms and floating veil to imitate the sidelong graces of a dancing girl.

'Hai! Hai! Bad one!' cried a quavering voice behind her, as an old woman clutching for scant covering at a dirty white sheet shambled forward. 'Can I not close an eye but thou must bring iniquity to

F E R O Z A

respectable houses? 'Tis all thy scapegrace husband; for when I brought thee hither thou wast meek-spirited and——'

'Deck me not out with lies, nurse,' laughed Karima. 'Sure I was ever to behaviour as a babe to walking—unsteady on its legs. So wast thou as a bride; so are all women.' She seized the withered old arms as she spoke, and threw them up in an attitude. 'Dance, Mytâben! dance! 'Tis the best way.'

The forced frown faded hopelessly before the young, dimpling face. 'Karima! Why will'st not be decent like little Feroz yonder?'

'Why? Because my man thinks I'm pretty! Because I've fine clothes! Feroza hath old green trousers and her man is learning to be "wise," forsooth! amongst the *mems*. So she is jealous——'

'I'm not jealous,' interrupted the other hotly.

'Peace, peace, little doves!' expostulated the old nurse. 'Feroz is no fool to be jealous of a *mem*. Holy Prophet, Karima, hadst thou seen them at Delhi as I have——'

'Inaiyut hath seen them too. He saith they are as *houris* in silk and satins with bare breasts and arms——'

Mytâben's bony fingers crackled in a shake of horrified denial. 'Silence! shameless one! I tell thee they have no beauty, no clothes——'

'There! I said they had no clothes,' pouted Karima.

The duenna folded her sheet round her with great

dignity. 'Thy wit is sharp, Karima! 'Tis as well; for thou wilt need it to protect thy nose! The *mems* have many clothes; God knows how many, or how they bear them when even the skin He gives is too hot. They are sad-coloured, these *mems*, with green spectacles serving as veils. Not that they need them, for they are virtuous and keep their eyes from men truck. Not like bad bold hussies who dance——'

' 'Tis not true,' cried Karima shrilly. 'Thou sayest it to please Feroza. Inaiyut holds they are *houris* for beauty, and he knows.'

In the wrangle which ensued the London postmark revolved between earth and heaven as the letter turned over and over in Feroza's listless fingers.

'I wish I knew,' she muttered with a frown puckering her forehead. 'He saith they are so wise, and yet——'

Mytâben paused in the war of words and laid her wrinkled old fingers on the girl's head. 'Plague on newfangled ways!' she grumbled half to herself. 'Have no fear, heart's life! they are uncomely. But for all that, 'tis a shame of the Mir to leave thee pining.'

A hand was on her mouth. 'Hush, Mytâben! 'Tis a wife's duty to wait her lord's pleasure to stay or come.'

There is a dignity in submission, but Karima laughed again, and even old Mytâb looked at the girl compassionately. 'For all that, heart's life, 'tis well to be sure. Certainty soothes the liver more than hope.'

F E R O Z A

So thou shalt see a *mem*. For lo ! the book-readers have come to this town, and one passeth the door every eve at sundown.'

' Oh, Mytâb ! why didn't you tell us before ? ' cried both the girls in a breath.

' Because 'tis enough as it is, to keep two married girls straight, with never a mother-in-law to make them dance to her tune,' grumbled the nurse evasively. ' Hai, Karima ! I will tell thy father-in-law the Moulvi ¹ and then 'twill be bread and water.'

' Bread and water is not good for brides,' retorted Karima with a giggle. ' And I will see the *mems* too, or I will cry, and then——' She nodded her head maliciously.

That evening at sundown the two girls sat huddled up by the latticed window of the outer vestibule, while Mytâb watched at the door of the men's court which, with that of the women's apartments, opened into this shadowy entrance. By putting their eyes close to the fretwork they could see up and down a narrow alley where a central drain, full of black sewage, usurped the larger half of the rough brick pavement.

' Look, Feroza ! look ! ' cried Karima in a choked voice. A white umbrella lined with green, a huge pith hat tied round with a blue veil, a gingham dress, a bag of books, white stockings, and tan shoes—that was all. They watched the strange apparition breathlessly till it came abreast of them.

Then Karima's pent-up mirth burst forth in peals of

¹ A Mahomedan preacher.

FEROZA

laughter so distinctly audible through the open lattice that the cause stopped in surprise.

Feroza started to her feet. 'For shame, Karim, for shame! He says they are so good.' And before they guessed what she would be at, the wicket-gate was open, and she was on the bare, indecent doorstep.

'*Salaam! mem sabib, salaam!*' rang her high-pitched, girlish voice. 'I, Feroza Begum of the house of Mir Ahmed Ali, barrister-at-law, am glad to see you.'

Before Karima, by hanging on to Mytâb's scanty attire, lent weight enough to drag the offender back to seclusion, the English lady raised her veil, and Feroza Begum, Moguli, caught her first glimpse of a pair of mild blue eyes. She never forgot the introduction to Miss Julia Smith, spinster, of Clapham. Perhaps she had reason to remember it.

'I might have believed it of Karima,' whimpered the duenna over a consolatory pipe, 'but Feroz! To stand out in the world yelling like a hawker. *Ai, Ai!* Give me your quiet ones for wickedness. *Phut!* in a moment, like water from the skin-bag, spoiling everything.'

''Twas Karim's laugh burst the *mashk*, nursie,' laughed Feroza. She and her sister-in-law seemed to have changed places for the time, and she was flitting about gay as a wren, while the former sulked moodily on her bed.

Yet as the days passed a new jealousy came like seven devils to possess poor Feroza utterly.

What was this wisdom which inspired so many

well-turned periods in the Mir's somewhat prosy letters? Beauty was beyond her, but women even of her race had been wise; passionate Nurjehan, and even pious Fâtma—God forgive her for evening her chances with that saintly woman's! The thought led to such earnest study of the Koran that old Mytâb's wrath was mollified into a hope of permanent penitence. And all the time the girl's heart was singing pæans of praise over the ease with which she remembered the long strings of meaningless words. Buoyed up by hope she confided her heart's desire to Karima.

'Eat more butter and grow fat,' replied that little coquette. 'Dress in bright colours and redden thy lips. And thou mightest use that powder the *mems* have to make their skins fair. Inaiyut saith he will buy me some in the bazaar. That is true wisdom; the other is for wrinkles.'

Despite this cold water, the very next London post-mark brought matters to a crisis.

'Is that all?' asked Feroza dismally, when her father-in-law, the Moulvi, had duly intoned her husband's letter. 'It looks, oh! it looks ever so much more on paper.'

The old Mahomedan stared through his big horn-rimmed spectacles at her reluctant finger feeling its way along the crabbed writing.

'Quite enough for a good wife, daughter-in-law,' he replied. 'Bring my pipe, and thank God he is well.'

As she sat fanning the old man duteously, her mind was full of suspicion. Could *she* have compressed the

desire and love of her heart into a few well-turned sentences? Ah! if she could only learn to read for herself. The thought found utterance in a tentative remark that it would save the Moulvi trouble if she were a scholar.

' 'Tis not much trouble,' said the old man courteously; 'the letters are not long.'

The effect of these words surprised him into taking off his spectacles, as if this new departure of quiet Feroza's could be better seen by the naked eye.

'So thou thinkest to learn all the Mir has learnt?' he asked scornfully, when her eloquence abated. '*Wab illab!* What? Euclidus and Algebra, Political Economy and Justinian?'

The desire of the girl's heart was not this, but jealousy and shame combined prevented her declaring the real standard of her aims, so she replied defiantly, 'Why not? I can learn the Koran fast—oh, ever so fast.'

It was an unfortunate speech, since it brought down on her the inevitable reply that such knowledge was enough for those who, at best, must enter Paradise at a man's coat-tails. Driven into a corner, she felt the hopelessness of the struggle, until, flushed by success, the Moulvi forgot caution, and declaimed against his son's stupidity in desiring more.

Feroza seized on this slip swiftly. If it was as she feared, if her husband's wishes were kept from her ignorance, she must, she would learn. If she could not go to school, the *mems* would come and teach her at home. They did such work at Delhi; why not

here? As for the Moulvi's determination that no singing should be heard in his house, that was a righteous wish, and she would tell the *mems* not to sing their hymns. Indeed, such a question seemed all too trivial for comparison with her future happiness. Therefore her disappointment when Mytâben brought back a peremptory refusal from the mission-ladies to teach on this condition was very keen. Her piteous, surprised tears roused Karima's scornful wonder.

'I can't think why thou shouldst weep; it thickens the nose, and thine is over-broad as it is. Inaiyut offered once to teach me, but when I asked him if learning would make him love me better, he kissed me with a laugh. So I let it alone.'

'Thou dost not understand,' sobbed Feroza; 'no one does. The Mir is wise, and I am different.'

'*Wah!* Thou art but a woman at best, and life is over for us with the first wrinkle, no matter what we learn. Ah, Feroz! let's enjoy youth whilst we have it. See! I have a rare bit of fun for thee if thou wilt not blab to Mytâben. Promise!'

Three days afterwards Feroza, escaping from the turmoil of a great marriage in a relative's house, found herself, much to her own surprise and bewilderment, forming one of a merry party of young women disguised in boys' clothes, and bound for an hour or so of high jinks in one of the walled orange gardens which lay on the outskirts of the quarter. The idea, which had at first filled her with dismay, had next grown tempting, and then become irresistible with Karima's

artful suggestion that it would give occasion for a personal interview with the mission-ladies who had taken up their abode close by. So she had allowed her doubts and fears to be allayed ; though inwardly she failed to see the vast difference on which her sister-in-law insisted, between the iniquity of standing on doorsteps in the full light of day, and sneaking out at night on the quiet.

‘ Verily,’ said Karima in a pet, ‘ thou art a real noodle, Feroz ! I tell thee all the good-style women do this, and my sister will be there with her boys. *Wah !* were it not for my handsome Inaiyut, I should die in this dull old house where folk wish to be better than God made them.’

So it came to pass that while Miss Julia Smith spinster, of Clapham, sat with her fellow-workers in the verandah resting after their labours, a boyish figure with a beating heart was creeping towards her as the goal of every hope.

The English mail was in ; an event which by accentuating the severance from home ties is apt to raise the enthusiasm of the mission-house beyond normal.

‘ How very, very interesting it is about the young man Ahmed Ali,’ remarked Julia, in a voice tuned to superlatives. ‘ Dearest Mrs. Cranston writes that he spoke so sweetly about his ignorant child-wife. As she says, there is something so—so—so comforting, you know, in the thought of work coming to us, as if—well, I can’t quite express it, you know—but from our own homes—from dear, dear old England ! ’

FEROZA

There was a large amount of confused good feeling in Julia Smith. A kindly soul she was, if a little over-sentimental. Perhaps a broken sixpence, stored side by side with a decayed vegetable in her desk, formed a creditable explanation of the latter weakness. Such things account for much in the lives of most women.

'I suppose,' she continued, 'we were right to refuse without hymns; but I shall never forget the sweet child's face as she popped from her prison. I am making up the incident for our magazine; it will be most touching. But now that dearest Mrs. Cranston has written, it seems like the finger of Providence——'

'A boy wanting a Miss,' interrupted the nondescript familiar, inseparable from philanthropy in India. 'The one with an umbrella, a big hat, and a bag of books.'

A very womanly laugh with an undercurrent of militant pleasure, ran round the company. The description fitted one and all, and they were proud of the fact.

The moon shone bright behind the arches, the scent of orange blossoms drifted over the high garden wall, and every now and again a burst of laughter close at hand overbore the more distant noise of wedding drums and pipes.

'What do you want, my son?'

The soft voice with its strange inflections took away the last vestige of Feroza's courage. She stood dizzy with absolute fear, her tongue cleaving to her mouth. A repetition of the question roused her to the memory that here lay her one chance. She gave a despairing glance into the gloom in search of those pale blue eyes;

then, suddenly, inheritance broke through her terror. She flung her hands up to heaven, and her young voice rose in the traditional cry for justice. ‘*Dohai ! Dohai !*’

‘ We do not keep justice here,’ was the soft answer. ‘ You must go to the Courts for that. We are but women——’

‘ And I too am a woman ! Listen ! ’ The words which had lagged a moment before now crowded to her lips, and as she stepped closer her raised arm commanded attention. ‘ You have taken my husband and left me ; and I will not be left ! You gave him scholarships and prizes, tempting him away ; and when I also ask for learning, you say, “ You must sing.” What is singing when I am sad ? Surely God will hear my tears and not your songs ! ’

Her passion swayed her so that but for Julia Smith’s supporting arm she would have fallen. ‘ I don’t understand,’ said the Englishwoman kindly. ‘ What have we done ! Who are you ? ’

‘ I am the wife of Mir Ahmed Ali, barrister-at-law, and I want to be taught Euclidus, and Justinian, and the—the other things. You shall not take him away for always. Justice ! I say, justice ! ’

‘ My dears ! My dears ! ’ cried Julia Smith, ‘ didn’t I tell you it was the finger of Providence——’

Half an hour afterwards little Feroza, flying back to rejoin her companions, felt as if Paradise had been opened to her by a promise. But if Paradise was ajar, the orange garden was closed, the gate locked, the key

gone. She peered through the bars, hoping it was a practical joke to alarm her. All was still and silent save for the creak of the well-wheel and a soft rustle from the burnished leaves where the moonlight glistened white.

‘ Karim ! let me in ! for pity sake let me in ! ’

Then a wild, uncontrollable fear at finding herself alone in an unknown world claimed her body and soul, and she fled like a hare to the only refuge she knew. The *mems* must protect her ; for were they not the cause of her venturing forth at all ? But for them, or their like, would she not have been well content at home ? Yea ! well content.

The verandah was empty, and from within came a monotonous voice. She peered into the dimly lit room to see a circle of kneeling figures, and hear her own name welded into the even flow of prayer. God and his Holy Prophet ! They were praying that she might become apostate from the faith of her fathers ! Tales of girls seized and baptized against their will leapt to her memory. She covered her eyes as if to shut out the horrid sight and fled ; whither she neither knew nor cared.

‘ *Hai !* have I found thee at last, graceless ! scandalous ! ’ scolded someone into whose arms she ran at full tilt.

‘ Mytâb ! oh, dear Mytâb ! ’ she cried, clinging frantically to the familiar figure. ‘ Take me home, oh, please take me home ! I will never go out again, no, never ! ’

FEROZA

That was the determination of ignorance. Eighteen months after, wisdom had altered it and many other things, for during that time Julia Smith had sung hymns on the doorstep three days a week. Sometimes she had quite a large audience, and sometimes Feroza herself would listen at the lattice. On these occasions the thin voice had a ring in it ; for, despite the fact that her pupil was taught all the truths of religion in prose and monotone, poor Julia used to wonder if this relegating of hymns to the doorstep was not a bowing in the house of Rimmon ; nay, worse, a neglect of grace, for she loved her pupil dearly. Not one, but two pair of eyes glistened over the surprise in preparation for the absent husband. Wherefore a surprise no one knew, but surprise it was to be. Feroza said the idea originated in her teacher's sentimental brain ; if so, it took root quickly in the girl's passionate heart. Thus, beyond the fact of her learning to read and write, the Mir knew nothing of the change wisdom was working in his wife. And meanwhile time brought other changes to the quiet courtyard. Handsome, dissipated Inaiyut died of cholera, and over him, and the boy-baby she lost, Karima shed tears which did not dim her beauty. Three months after, she was once more making the bare walls ring with her inconsequent laughter. She jeered at Feroza's diligence with increased scorn. No man, she said, was worth the losing of looks in books, and if the Mir really spoke of return, a course of cosmetics would be more advisable.

Even Julia shook her head over Feroza's thin face.

FEROZA

‘ You work too hard, dear,’ she sighed. ‘ Ah ! if it were the one thing needful ; but I have failed to teach you that.’

‘ Dear Miss ! don’t look sad ; think of the difference you have wrought. Oh, do not cry,’ she went on passionately, for the mild blue eyes were filling with tears. ‘ Come, we will talk of his return, full of noble resolutions of self-sacrifice to find—oh dear, dear, Miss ! I am so happy, so dreadfully happy ! ’ As she buried her face in the gingham dress her voice sank to a murmur of pure content. But some unkind person had poisoned Julia’s peace with remarks of the mixing of unknown chemicals. After all, what did she know of this absent husband, save that dear Mrs. Cranston had met him at a *conversazione* ?

‘ I suppose the Mir is really an enlightened man ? ’ she asked dubiously.

The gingham dress gave up a scared face. ‘ Dear Miss ! why, he is a barrister-at-law ! ’

Her teacher coughed. ‘ But are you sure, dear, that he wanted you to learn ? ’

‘ Not everything ; because he did not think I could ; but he spoke of many things. I have learnt all—except—’

‘ Except what ? ’

Feroza hesitated. ‘ I was not sure,—Inaiyut said he would teach it, but he died— ’Tis only a game called whist.’

‘ Whist ! ’

‘ Do I not say it right ? W-h-i-s-t—*wist*. Oh,

Miss ! is it a wicked game ? Is it not fit ? Ought I not to learn it ? ’

The fire of questions reduced Julia Smith’s confusion to simple tears. ‘ I don’t know,’ she moaned, ‘ that is the worst ! I thought it was the finger of Providence, and —ah, Feroza ! If I have done you harm ! ’

‘ You have done me no harm,’ said Feroza, with a kind smile. ‘ You have harmed yourself with cinnamon tea and greasy fritters in the other zenanas, and you shall have some, English fashion, to take away your headache.’

So grumbling Mytâb brought an afternoon tea-tray duly supplied with a plate of thin bread-and-butter from within, and Feroza’s small brown face beamed over Julia Smith’s surprise. ‘ He will think himself back amongst the *mems* ! won’t he ? ’ she asked with a happy laugh.

Would he ? As she jolted home in her palanquin Julia’s head whirled. Old and new, ignorance and wisdom !—here was a jumble. A stronger brain than hers might well have felt confusion. For it was sunset in that heathen town, and from the housetops, in the courtyards, in the very streets, men paused to lay aside their trivial selves and worship an ideal. Not one of the crowd giving place to the mission-lady but had in some way or another, if only by a perfunctory performance of some rite, testified that day to the fact that religion formed a part of his daily round, his common task. And on the other side of the world, whence the missions come—— ?

F E R O Z A

Meanwhile Karima, bewailing the useless cards, found herself backed up by old Mytâben. Such knowledge, the old woman said, would have been more useful than learning to be cleaner than God made you. 'Twas easy to sneer at henna-dyed hands ; but was that worse than using scented soaps like a bad one, and living luxurious ? Sheets and towels, forsooth ! Why, Shah-jehan himself never dreamed of such expenses.

'I like them, for all that,' cried Karima gaily ; 'and I think the *mems* are wise to have big looking-glasses. It is hateful only seeing a little bit of one's self at a time. And Feroza and I are going out to be admired like the *mems*, aren't we, Feroza ?'

'If the Mir wishes it,' replied her sister-in-law gravely.

Mytâb looked from one to the other. 'Have a care, players with fire !' she said shrilly. 'Have a care ! Is the world changed because it reads books and washes ? Lo ! the customs of the fathers bind the children.'

'Mytâb hath been mysterious of late,' remarked Karima, giving a queer look, as the old lady moved away in wrath. 'Ah me ! if I had but my handsome Inaiyut dicing in the vestibule 'twould be better for all of us, maybe.'

Feroza laid her soft hand gently on the other's shoulder. 'I am so sorry for thee, dear ! but we will love thee always and be a sister and brother——'

Karima's look was queerer than ever, and she laughed hysterically.

FEROZA

The day came at last when Feroza sat in the sunlit courtyard holding another unopened letter in her hand, knowing that ere a week was over the writer would be prisoned in her kind arms, surrounded by friendly faces, caught in the meshes of familiar custom. She was not afraid, even though his letters gave her small clue to the man himself. Her own convictions were strong enough to supply him with opinions also, and even if she did not come up to his ideal at first, she felt that the sweet satisfaction of a return to home and kindred would count for, and not against her. So she sat idly, delaying to read, and dreaming over the past, much as she had dreamt over the future nearly two years before. Only she sat on a chair now, and her white stockings and patent-leather shoes twisted themselves tortuously about its legs. She thought mostly of the childish time when she, their cousin, had played with Ahmed Ali and Inaiyut; it seemed somehow nearer than those other days, when the studious lad's departure for college had been prefaced by that strange, unreal marriage.

And Karima watched her furtively from the far corner where she and Mytâb were making preserves.

Suddenly a loud call, fiercely imperative, made them come sheepishly forward to where Feroza stood at bay, one hand at her throat, the other crushing her husband's letter. 'What is this? What have you all been keeping from me? What does he mean?—this talk of duty and custom. Ah-h-h——!'

Her voice, steady till then, broke into a ringing cry

FEROZA

as a trivial detail in Karima's reluctant figure caught her eye. The palms and nails of those delicate hands were no longer stained with henna. They were as her own, as nature made them, as the Mir *sabib* said he liked them! She seized both wrists fiercely, turning the accusing palms to heaven, while a tempest of sheer animal jealousy beat the wretched girl down from each new-won foothold, down, down, to the inherited nature underneath.

'Then it is true,' she gasped. 'I see! I know! Holy Prophet! what infamy to talk of duty. He is to marry—and I who have slaved—He is mine, mine, I say! Thou shalt not have him!'

Mytâb's chill old hand fell on the girl's straining arm like the touch of Death. '*Allah akhbâr wa Mahomed rasul!*¹ Hast forgotten the faith, Feroza Begum, Moguli? Thine? Since when has the wife a right to claim all? Since when hast thou become a *mem*?'

The girl glared at her with wild passion, and Karima gave a whimper as the grip bit into her tender wrists. 'Don't; you hurt me!'

Feroza flung them from her in contemptuous loathing. 'Fool! coward! as if he would touch you. I will tell him all. He will know— Ah God! my head! my head——!' She was in the dust at their feet stunned by her own passion.

'I warned the Moulvi to break it by degrees,'

¹ 'God Almighty and his prophet Mahomed'; a brief confession of faith.

FEROZA

grumbled Mytâb, dragging the girl to some matting ; ' but he said 'twould make no more to her than to the Mir. Books don't seem to change a man, but women are different.'

' It's not my fault,' whimpered Karima. ' I don't want to marry the Mir ; he was ever a noodle. Prating of its being a duty, forsooth ! '

' So it is ! a bounden duty. Never hath childless widow had to leave this house, and never shall, till God makes us pigs of unbelievers.'

' I wish my handsome Inaiyut had lived for all that,' muttered the girl, as Feroza showed signs of recovery. She resisted all attempts at explanation or comfort, however, and made her way alone, a solitary resolute figure, to her windowless room, where, when she shut the door, all was dark. There she lay tearless while the others, sitting in the sunlight, talked in whispers as if the dead were within.

' The Moulvi must bid her repeat the creed,' was old Mytâb's ultimatum. ' God send the Miss has not made a Christian of her, with all those soapings and washings ! ' She had no spark of pity. Such was woman's lot, and to rebel was sacrilege.

' Don't make sure of my consent,' pouted Karima, her pretty face swollen with easy tears. ' If he is really the noodle Feroza deems, I'd rather be a religious. 'Twould be just as amusing.'

Mytâb laughed derisively. ' Thou a religious ! The gossips would have tired tongues. Besides, choice is over. Had the child lived, perhaps ; but now the

F E R O Z A

Moulvi hath a right to see Inaiyut's children on his knee.'

The sunshine had given place to shadow before Feroza appeared.

'Bring me a *burka*; ¹ I am going to see the Miss. Follow if thou wilt,' she said; and though her voice had lost its ring, the tone warned Mytâb to raise no objection. Ere she left the sheltering walls she stood a moment before her sister-in-law, all the character, and grief, and passion blotted out by the formless white domino she wore. 'I could kill you for being pretty,' she said in a hard whisper, as she turned away.

She had never been to the mission-house since that eventful night, and the sight of its familiar unfamiliarity renewed the sense of injury with which she had last seen it. 'Miss *Eshsmitt sabib*,' they told her, was ill; but she would take no denial, and so, for the first time in her life, Feroza entered an English lady's bedroom. Simple, almost poor as this one was in its appointments, the sight sent a throb of fear to the girl's heart. What! Was not Karima's beauty odds enough, that she must fight also against this undreamed-of comfort? She flung up her arms with the old cry, '*Dobai! Dobai!*' The fever-flushed face on the frilled pillows turned fearfully. 'What is it, Feroza? Oh! what is it?'

The question was hard to solve even in the calm sessions of thought, well-nigh impossible here. Why had she been lured from the old life in some ways and

¹ The veil worn by secluded women.

FEROZA

not in all? Was their boasted influence all words? Then why had they prated of higher things? Why had they *lied* to her?

Poor Julia buried her face in a pocket-handkerchief drenched in eau-de-Cologne, and sobbed, 'Ah, take her away! Please take her away!'

So they led her gently to the text-hung drawing-room with a cottage piano in one corner, and shook their heads over her passionate appeals. They could do nothing, they said—nothing at all—unless she cast in her lot with them absolutely; so she turned and left them with a sombre fire in her eyes.

She never knew how the days passed until, as she watched the sunlight creep up the eastern wall of the court, it came home to her that on the next evening Mir Ahmed Ali would watch it also. She seemed not to have thought, and it was Karima, and not she, who had shed tears. On that last night the latter came to where her cousin lay still, but sleepless. 'Why wilt be so foolish, Feroza?' she said petulantly. 'Nothing is settled. If he is a noodle, I will none of him, I tell thee. If not, thou art too much of one thyself to care. God knows he may not look at either, through being enamoured of the *mems*. And oh, Feroza,' she added, her sympathy overborne by curiosity, 'think you he will wear the strange dress of the Miss *sabib's* sun-pictures? If so I shall laugh of a surety.'

A gleam of consolation shot through poor Feroza's brain. Men disliked ridicule. 'Of course the Mir

F E R O Z A

dresses Europe-fashion,' she replied stiffly. 'Thou seemest to forget that my husband is a man of culture.'

A man of culture ! undoubtedly, if by culture we mean dutiful self-improvement. That had been Mir Ahmed Ali's occupation for years, and his gentle, high-bred face bore unmistakably the look of one stowing away knowledge for future use. He was really an excellent young man ; and, during his three years at a boarding-house in Notting Hill, had behaved himself as few young men do when first turned loose in London. He spoke English perfectly, and it would be difficult to say what he had not learnt that could be learnt by an adaptive nature in the space of thirty-six calendar months spent in diligent polishing of the surface of things. He learnt, for instance, that people looking at his handsome, intelligent face, said it made them sad to think of his being married as a boy to a girl he did not love. Thence the idea that he was a martyr took root and flourished, and he acquiesced proudly in his own sacrifice on the altar of progress. For him the love of the poets was not, and even in his desire for Feroza's education he told himself that he was more actuated by a sense of duty than by any hope of greater happiness for himself. The natural suggestion that he should marry his brother's widow he looked on merely as a further development of previous bondage ; and he told himself again that, not having swerved a hair's breadth from his faith, he was bound to set his own views aside in favour of a custom desired by those chiefly concerned. Besides, in the

FEROZA

atmosphere of surprised sympathy in which he lived it was hard, indeed, not to pose as a victim.

And so, just as poor Feroza was confidently asserting his culture, he, having given his English fellow-passengers the slip, was once more putting on the clothes of an orthodox Mahomedan. Feroza, on the other hand, had adopted the dress of the advanced Indian lady, which, with surprisingly little change, manages to destroy all the grace of the original costume. The lack of braided hair and clustering jewels degrades the veil to an unnecessary wrap; the propriety of the bodice intensifies its shapelessness; the very face suffers by the unconcealed holes in ears and nose.

Karima stared with a smile akin to tears. 'There is time,' she pleaded. 'Come! I can make you look twice as well.'

Their eyes met with something of the old affection, but Feroza shook her head. 'I must find out——'

'If he is a noodle?' The interrupting giggle was almost a whimper. 'You mean if he is blind! Ah, Feroza! look at me.'

No need to say that; the puzzled eyes had taken in the sight already. Gleams of jewelled hair under the gold threaded veil; a figure revealed by the net bodice worn over a scantier one of flowered muslin; bare feet tucked away in shells of shoes; long gauze draperies showing a shadow of silk-clad limbs; above it all that dimpling, smiling face. She shook her head again.

In the long minutes of waiting she lost herself in

counting the bricks on the familiar wall until the sight of a tall man at the door dressed as a Mahomedan startled her into drawing the veil to her face in fear of intrusion.

As the man withdrew quickly Karima's laugh rang out. 'To think, Feroza! thou shouldest be *pardah* to him after all thy big talk.'

'The Mir! Was that the Mir?' faltered Feroza. 'I did not—the dress——'

'Bah? I knew the likeness to my poor Inaiyut. See! yonder he comes again ushered by father-in-law. Now, quick, Feroza!'

The voice quavering over the prepared phrases of thanks to the Great Giver of home-coming was infinitely pathetic; and yet, as Ahmed Ali took the outstretched hand, he was conscious above all things of a regret, almost a sense of outrage; for the bondage of custom was upon him already. Karima, catching his look, came forward with ready tact. 'We welcome my lord,' she said in the rounded tone of ceremony, 'as one who, having travelled far, returns to those who have naught worthy his acceptance save the memory of kinship. My sister and I greet you, *as sisters*. Nay, more,' she added lightly; 'I too shake hands English-fashion, and if I do it wrong forgive us both, since learned Feroza is teacher.'

'You make me very happy,' answered the Mir heartily. 'How well you are all looking!'

No need to say where his eyes were.

'You mistake, Mir *sahib*,' cried Karima swiftly,

‘Feroza looks ill. ’Tis your blame, since she worked over-hard to please you.’

The forbidding frown came too late to prevent Ahmed Ali’s glance finding it on his wife’s face. It was not becoming. ‘Was it so hard to learn?’ he asked with a patronizing smile. ‘But your handwriting improved immensely of late.’

The tips of Feroza’s fingers showed bloodless under their nervous clasp, but she said nothing. Indeed, she scarcely opened her lips as they sat talking over the morning meal. Even when the Mir refused tea and toast in favour of *chupatties* and *koftas*¹ it was Karima who supplied surprise. Feroza was all eyes and ears, and not till the sun tipping over the high walls glared down on them did she lose patience enough to ask, vaguely, what he thought about it all.

‘*Wah illah,*’ cried the Moulvi, ‘Feroza hits the mark! What thinkest thou, my son? But I fear not, for thou hast the faithful air, and canst doubtless repeat thy creed purely.’

The young man looked round the familiar scene, every detail of which fitted so closely to memory that no room remained for the seven years’ absence. A rush of glad recognition surged to heart and brain, making him stand up and give the *Kalma*.²

‘I am content, O my father!’ he cried in ringing tones, as the sonorous echoes died away to silence.

¹ Unleavened cakes and mince-meat balls.

² The Creed.

FEROZA

'I am content to come back to the old life, to the old duties.'

'The sun makes my head ache,' said Feroza, rising abruptly, 'I will go into the dark and rest.'

'Don't go, Feroza! Thou hast not told the Mir about thyself,' pleaded Karima, rising in her turn. 'She hath worked so hard,' she added petulantly to the young man. 'No one is worth it, no one.'

The Mir looked from one to the other. 'Learning is hard for women,' he began. Then something in his wife's face roused the new man in him, making him say in a totally different tone and manner, 'I am afraid I hardly understand.'

'That is what Karima says of me,' replied Feroza icily.

Her cousin, as she sat down once more to listen, shrugged her shoulders. 'And she counted herself as something better than a woman,' was her inward comment amid her smiles.

Feroza saw nothing of her husband for the rest of the day. The men's court was crowded with visitors, and she herself had to bear the brunt of many feminine congratulations. Only at sunset, before starting to attend a feast given in his honour, he found time for five minutes' speech with her; but, almost to her relief, he was far too content, far too excited by his own pleasure, to be able to distinguish any other feeling in *her* mind. Yet a momentary hesitation on his part as he was leaving made her heart bound, and a distinct pause brought her to his side with wistful

eyes, only to see Karima nodding and smiling to him from the roof, whither she had gone for fresher air. 'What is it?' he asked kindly, though his looks were elsewhere.

'Nothing,' she answered, 'nothing at all. Go in peace!'

The moon, rising ere the sun set, stole the twilight. So she sat gazing at the hard square outlines of the walls till far on into the night, her mind filled with but one thought. The thought that by and by Ahmed Ali, flushed with content at things which she had taught herself for his sake to despise, would come home to her—to his wife. The little room she had travestied into a pitiful caricature of foreign fashions seemed to mock her foolish hopes, so she crept away to the lattice whence she had had her first glimpse of wisdom. Even on that brilliant night the vestibule itself was dark; but through the door she could see the empty arcades of the men's court surrounding the well where she and her cousins used to play.

A rustle in the alley made her peer through the fretwork, for the veriest trifle swayed her; but it was only a dog seeking garbage in the gutter. Then a door creaked and she started, wondering if Ahmed Ali could be home already. Silence brought her a dim suspicion that, but for this wisdom of hers, she might have waited his return calmly enough. Foot-steps now! She cowered to the shadow at the sight of Karima followed by Mytâb bearing something.

FEROZA

'He mayn't be back till late,' came the familiar giggle; 'and a soft pillow will please him.'

The pair were back again before she recovered her surprise, and Karima paused ere re-entering the women's door. 'Poor Feroza! She will get accustomed to it, I suppose.'

'Of what hath she to complain?' retorted the old voice; 'he is a properer man than I deemed. Say, heart's desire, what said he when I saw thee——?'

'Mytâb! thou mean spy! Bah! he told me he would change a letter and call me Carina, since it meant dearest in some heathen tongue. They begin thus over the black water likely; 'tis not bad, and new at any rate.'

Feroza scarcely waited for distance to deaden the answering giggle. She was on her feet, pacing to and fro like a mad creature. Ah! to get away from it all—from that name, from the look he must have given—to get something cold and still to quench the raging fire in her veins! Suddenly, without a waver, she walked to the well and leant over its low parapet. Her hands sought the cool damp stones, her eyes rested themselves on the faint glimmer far down—ever, oh, ever so far away! Hark! someone in the alley. If it were he? Ah! then she must go away, ever so far away——

Mir Ahmed Ali found his pillow comfortable, and only woke in the dawn to see Mytâb standing beside him.

FEROZA

‘Feroza!’ she cried. ‘Where is Feroza?’

A dull remorse came to his drowsy brain. ‘It was so late—I——’

‘Holy Prophet, she is not here! Thou hast not seen her! Then she hath gone to the *Missen* to be baptized. Why didst turn her brain with books? Fool! Idiot!’

‘The Mission!’ Mir Ahmed Ali was awake now, and the peaceful party, gathered in the verandah for early tea, stared as the young man burst in on it with imperious demands for his wife. Then his surroundings recalled his acquired courtesy, and he stammered an apologetic explanation.

‘She has gone away?’ cried Julia, with a queer catch in her breath. ‘Oh, Mir *sahib*! what a mistake we have all made. It was too late to write, and then I got ill; but, indeed! I was going down this very morning to try and make you understand.’

‘Understand what?’ asked the Mir, helplessly confused, adding hurriedly, ‘but I can’t stay now. She must be found. I will not have her run away. I will have her back—yes! I *will* have her back.’

Half an hour later Julia Smith, driven to the Moulvi’s house by remorseful anxiety, found the wicket-gate ajar. She entered silently upon a scene framed like a picture by the dark doorway of the men’s court.

Feroza had come back to those familiar walls. She lay beside the well, and the water from her clinging garments crept in dark stains through the dust. She

F E R O Z A

had wrapped her veil round her to stifle useless cries, and so the dead face, as in life, was decently hidden from the eyes of men. She lay alone under the cloudless sky, for her friends, shrinking from the defilement of death, stood apart: Karima sobbing on Mytâb's breast, with Ahmed Ali, dazed yet indignant, holding her hand; the Moulvi, repeating a prayer; the servants still breathless from their ghastly toil. Julia Smith saw it all with her bodily eyes; yet nothing seemed worth seeing save that veiled figure in the dust. She knelt beside it and took the slender cold hand in hers. 'My dear, my dear!' she whispered through her sobs. 'Surely you need not have gone so far, so very far—for help.'

But the dead face was hidden even from her tears.

THE VILLAGE LEGACY

‘THE case of Mussumât¹ Nuttia being without heirs,’ droned the Court-Inspector.

‘Bring her in.’

‘She is already in the Presence. If the Protector of the Poor will rise somewhat—at the other side of the table, *Huzoor!*—beside the yellow-trousered legs of the guardian of peace—that is Mussumât Nuttia.’

A child some three years of age, with a string of big blue beads round her neck—a child who had evidently had a very satisfying meal, and who was even now preserving its contour by half a yard of sugar-cane, stared gravely back at the Assistant Magistrate’s grave face.

‘She has no heirs of any kind?’ he asked.

‘None, *Huzoor!* Her mother was of the Harni tribe, working harvests in Bhâmaniwallah-khurd. There the misfortune of being eaten by a snake came upon her by the grace of God. Mussumât Nuttia therefore remains——’

‘Oh, Guardian of the Poor!’ said two voices in unison, as two tall bearded figures swathed in whitish-brown draperies pressed a step forward with outstretched petitioning hands. They had been awaiting

¹ A title of courtesy equivalent to our *mistress*.

THE VILLAGE LEGACY

this crisis all day long with that mixture of tenacity and indifference which is seen on most faces in an Indian Court.

‘ Give her in charge of the head-men of the village ; they are responsible.’

‘ Shelter of the world ! ’tis falsely represented. The woman was a vagrant, a loose walker, a——’

‘ Is the order written ? Then bring the next case.’

One flourish of a pen, and Mussumât Nuttia became a village legacy ; the only immediate result being that having sucked one end of her sugar-cane dry, she began methodically on the other. Half an hour afterwards, mounted on a white pony, with pink eyes and nose, and a dyed pink tail to match, she was on her way back to the cluster of reed huts dignified by the name of Bhâmaniwallah-khurd, or Little Bhâmaniwallah. Big Bhâmaniwallah lay a full mile to the northward, secured against midsummer floods by the high bank which stretched like a mud wall right across the Punjab plain, from the skirts of the hills to the great meeting of the five waters at Mittankote. But Little Bhâmaniwallah lay in the lap of the river, and so Bahâdur, and Boota, and Jodha, and all the grave big-bearded Dogras who fed their herds of cattle on the low ground, and speculated in the cultivation of sand-banks, lived with their loins girded ready to shift house with the shifting of the river. That was why the huts were made of reeds ; that was why the women of the village clanked about in solid silver jewelry, thus turning their persons into a secure savings-bank.

THE VILLAGE LEGACY

Mussumât Jewun, Bahâdur the head-man's wife, wore bracelets like manacles, and a perfect yoke of a necklet, as she patted out the dough cakes and expostulated shrilly at the introduction of a new mouth into the family, when Nuttia, fast asleep, was lifted from the pony and put down in the warm sand by the door.

'She belongs to the village,' replied the elders, wagging their beards. 'God knows what my Lords desire with the Harni brat, but if they ask for her, she must be forthcoming; ay! and fat. They like people to grow fat, even in their jail-*kbanas*.'

So Nuttia grew fat; she would have grown fat even had the fear of my Lords not been before the simple villagers' eyes, for despite her tender years, she was eminently fitted to take care of herself. She had an instinct as to the houses where good things were being prepared, and her chubby little hand, imperiously stretched out for a portion, was seldom sent away empty. Indeed, to tell the sober truth, Nuttia was not to be gainsaid as to her own hunger. 'My stomach is bigger than *that*, grandmother!' she would say confidently, if the alms appeared to her inadequate, and neither cuffs nor neglect altered her conviction. She never cried, and the little fat hand silently demanding more, came back again and again after every rebuff, till she felt herself in a condition to seek some warm sunny corner, and curl round to sleep. She lived for the most part with the yelping, slouching village dogs, following them, as the nights grew chill, to the

THE VILLAGE LEGACY

smouldering brick-kilns, where she fed the little dust-coloured puppies with anything above, or beneath, her own appetite.

As she outgrew childhood's vestment of curves and dimples, someone gave her an old rag of a petticoat. Perhaps the acquisition of clothes followed, as in ancient days, a fall from grace ; certain it was that Nuttia in a garment was a far less estimable member of society than Nuttia without one. To begin with, it afforded opportunity for the display of many mortal sins. Vainglory in her own appearance, deceit in attempting to palm the solitary prize off on the world as a various and complete wardrobe, and dishonesty flagrant and unabashed ; for once provided with a convenient receptacle for acquired trifles, Nuttia took to stealing as naturally as a puppy steals bones.

Then, once having recognized the pleasures of possession, she fought furiously against any infringement of her rights. A boy twice her size went yelling home to his parents on her first resort to brute force consequent on the discovery of a potsherd tied to her favourite puppy's tail. This victory proving unfortunate for the peace of the village, the head-men awoke to the necessity for training up their Legacy in the paths of virtue. So persistent pummelling was resorted to with the happiest effect. Nuttia stole and fought no more ; she retired with dignity from a society which failed to appreciate her, and took to the wilderness instead. At earliest dawn, after her beg-

THE VILLAGE LEGACY

ging-round was over, she would wander out from the thorn enclosures to the world—a kaleidoscope world where fields ripened golden crops one year, and the next brought the red-brown river wrinkling and dimpling in swift current; where big brand-new continents rose up before eager eyes, and clothed themselves in green herbs and creeping things innumerable; going no farther, however, in the scale of creation, except when the pelicans hunched themselves together to doze away digestion, or a snub-nosed alligator took a slimy snooze on the extreme edge. If you wished to watch the birds, or the palm-squirrels, or the jerboa rats, you had to face northwards and skirt the high bank. So much of Dame Nature's ways, and a vast deal more, Mussumât Nuttia learnt ere the setting sun and hunger drove her back to the brick-kilns, and the never-failing meal of scraps—never-failing, because the Lords of the Universe liked people to be fat, and the head-men were responsible for their Legacy's condition.

So when an Assistant Magistrate—indefinite because of the constant changes which apparently form part of Western policy—included the Bhâmaniwallahs in his winter tour of inspection, a *punchaiyut*, or Council of Five, decided that it was the duty of the village to provide Nuttia with a veil, in case she should be haled to the Presence; and two yards of Manchester muslin were purchased from the reserve funds of the village, and handed over to the child with many wise saws on the general advisability of decency. Nuttia's delight

THE VILLAGE LEGACY

for the first five minutes was exhilarating, and sent the head-men back to other duties with a glow of self-satisfaction on their solemn faces. Then she folded the veil up quite square, sat down on it, and meditated on the various uses to which it could be put.

The result may be told briefly. Two days afterwards the Assistant Magistrate, being a keen sportsman, was crawling on his stomach to a certain long low pool much frequented by teal and mallard. In the rear, gleaming white through the caper bushes, showed the usual cloud of witnesses filled with patient amazement at this unnecessary display of energy ; yet for all that counting shrewdly on the good temper likely to result from good sport. So much so, that the sudden uprising into bad language of the *Huzoor* sent them forward, prodigal of apology ; but the sight that met their eyes dried up the fountain of excuse. Nuttia, stark naked, stood knee-deep in the very centre of the pool, catching small fry with a bag-net ingeniously constructed out of the Manchester veil.

The Council sat again to agree that a child who could not only destroy the sport of the Guardian of the Poor, but could also drag the village honour through the mud, despite munificent inducements toward decency, must be possessed of a devil. So Nuttia was solemnly censured with red pepper and turmeric, until her yells and struggles were deemed sufficient to denote a casting out of the evil spirit. It is not in the slow-brained,

THE VILLAGE LEGACY

calm-hearted peasant of India to be unkind to children, and so, when the function was over, Mussumât Jewun and the other deep-chested, shrill-voiced women comforted the victim with sweetmeats and the assurance that she would be ever so much better behaved in future.

Nuttia eyed them suspiciously, but ate her sweetmeats. This incident did not increase her confidence in humanity ; on the other hand, the attitude of the brute creation was a sore disappointment to her. She might have had a heart instinct with greed of capture and sudden death, instead of that dim desire of companionship, for all the notice taken by the birds, and the squirrels, and the rats, of her outstretched handful of crumbs. She would sit for long hours, silent as a little bronze image set in the sunshiny sand ; then in a rage, she would fling the crumbs at the timid creatures, and go home to the dogs and the buffaloes. They at least were not afraid of her ; but then they were afraid of nobody, and Nuttia wanted something of her very own.

One day she found it. It was only an old bed-leg, but to the eye of faith an incarnation. For the leg of an Indian bed is not unlike a huge ninepin, and even a Western imagination can detect the embryo likeness between a ninepin and the human form divine. Man has a head, so has a ninepin ; and if humanity is to wear petticoats one solid leg is quite as good as two—nay, better, since it stands more firmly. Arms were of course wanting, but the holes ready cut in the oval

THE VILLAGE LEGACY

centre for the insertion of the bed-frame formed admirable sockets for two straight pieces of bamboo. At this stage Nuttia's treasure presented the appearance of a sign-post ; but the passion of creation was on the child, and a few hours afterwards something comically, yet pitifully, like the Legacy herself stared back at her from that humble studio among the dirt-heaps—a shag of goat's hair glued on with prickly-pear juice, two lovely black eyes drawn with Mussumât Jewun's *khol* pencil, a few blue beads, a scanty petticoat and veil filched from the child's own garments.

Nuttia, inspired by the recollection of a tinsel-decorated bride in Big Bhâmaniwallah, called her creature Sirdar Begum on the spot. Then she hid her away in a tussock of tiger-grass beyond the thorn enclosures, and strove to go her evening rounds as though nothing had happened. Yet it was as if an angel from heaven had stepped down to take her by the hand. Henceforward she was never to be alone. All through the silent sunny days, as she watched the big black buffaloes grazing on the muddy flats—for Nuttia was advanced to the dignity of a herd-girl by this time—Sirdar Begum was with her as guide, counsellor, and friend. Whether the doll fared best with a heart's whole devotion poured out on her wooden head, or whether Nuttia's part in giving was more blessed, need not be considered ; the result to both being a steady grin on a broad round face. But there was another result also—Nuttia began to develop

THE VILLAGE LEGACY

a taste for pure virtue. Perhaps it was the necessity of posing before Sirdar Begum as infallible joined to the desire of keeping that young person's conduct up to heroic pitch, which caused the sudden rise in principle. At all events the Legacy's cattle became renowned as steady milkers, and the amount of butter she managed to twirl out of the sour curds satisfied even Mussumât Jewun's demands; whereupon the other herds looked at her askance, and muttered an Indian equivalent of seven devils. Then the necessity for amusing the doll led Nuttia into lingering round the little knots of story-tellers who sat far on into the night, discoursing of *jins* and *ghouls*, of faithful lovers, virtuous maidens, and the beauties of holiness. Down on the edge of the big stream, with the water sliding by, Nuttia rehearsed all these wonders to her adored bed-leg until, falling in love with righteousness, she took to telling the truth.

It was a fatal mistake in a cattle-lifting district, and Bhâmaniwallah-khurd lay in the very centre of that maze of tamarisk jungle, quicksand, and stream, which forms the cattle-thief's best refuge. So Bahâdur, and Jodha, and Boota, together with many another honest man, made a steady income by levying blackmail on those who sought safety within their boundaries; and this without in any way endangering their own reputations. All that had to be done was to obliterate strange tracks by sending their own droves in the right direction and thereafter to keep silence. And every baby in both Bhâmaniwallahs knew that hoof-prints

THE VILLAGE LEGACY

were not a legitimate subject for conversation ; all save Nuttia, and she—as luck would have it—was a herd-girl ! They tried beating this sixth sense into her, but it was no use, and so whenever the silver-fringed turban, white cotton gloves, and clanking sword of the Indian Inspector of Police were expected in the village, they used to send the Legacy away to the back of beyond—right away to the Luckimpura island maybe, to reach which she had to hold on to the biggest buffalo's tail, and thus, with Sirdar Begum tied securely to its horns, and her own little black head bobbing up and down in its wake, cross the narrow stream ; after which the three would spread themselves out to dry on the hot sand. Nuttia took a great fancy to the island, and many a time when she might have driven the herds to nearer pastures, preferred the long low stretches of Luckimpura where a flush of green lingered even in the droughts of April.

But even there on one very hot day scarcely a blade was to be found, and Nuttia, careful of her beasts, and noting the lowness of the river, gathered them round her with the herdsman's cry, and drove them to the farther brink, intending to take them across to a smaller island beyond. To her surprise they stood knee-deep in the water immovable, impassive, noses in air, with long curled horns lying on their necks.

The Legacy shaded her eyes to see more clearly. Nothing was to be seen but the swift shallow stream,

THE VILLAGE LEGACY

the level sand, and gleams of water stretching away to the horizon. Something had frightened them—but what? She gave up the puzzle, and with Sirdar Begum bolt upright before her sat on a snag, dangling her feet over the stream for the sake of the cool air which seemed to rise from the river.

The buffaloes roamed restlessly about, disturbed doubtless by the cloud of flies. The sun beat down ineffectually on the doll's fuzzy head, but it pierced Nuttia's thick pate, making her nod drowsily. Her voice recounting the thrilling adventures of brave Bhopalûtchi died away into a sigh of sleep. So there was nothing left but the doll's wide unwinking eyes to keep watch over the world.

What was that? Something cold, icy-cold! Nuttia woke with a start. One brown heel had touched the water; she looked down at it, then swiftly around her. The buffaloes huddled by the ford had ceased to graze, and a quiver of light greeted her glance at the purple horizon. She sprang to her feet, and breaking off a root from the snag, held it to the dimpling water. The next instant a scared face looked at the horizon once more. The river was rising fast, rising as she had never seen it rise before. Yet in past years she had witnessed many a flood—floods that had swept away much of the arable land, and driven the villagers to till new soil thrown up nearer the high bank. Ay! and driven many of them to seek new homes beside the new fields, until Bhâmaniwallah-khurd had dwindled away to a few houses, a very few, and these on that hot

THE VILLAGE LEGACY

April day deserted for the most part, since all the able-bodied men and women were away at the harvest. Even the herds had driven their cattle northwards, hoping to come in for some of the lively bustle of the fields. So there remained none save Nuttia on the Luckimpura island and Mussumât Jewun with her new baby and the old hag who nursed her, in the reed huts. All this came to the girl's memory as the long low cry of the herd rose on the hot air, and with Sirdar Begum close clasped in her veil she drove the big buffalo Moti into the stream. How cold the water was—cold as the snows from which it came! The Legacy had not lived in the lap of the river for so long without learning somewhat of its ways. She knew of the frost-bound sources whence it flowed and of the disastrous floods which follow, beneath a cloudless sky, on unusual heat or unusual rain in those mountain fastnesses. The coming storm whose arch of cloud, shimmering with sheet-lightning, had crept beyond the line of purple haze, was nothing; that was not the nightmare of the river-folk.

She stood for a moment when dry land was reached, hesitating whether to strike straight for the high bank or make for the village lying a mile distant. Some vague instinct of showing Sirdar Begum she was not afraid made her choose the latter course, though most of the herd refused to follow her decision and broke away. She collected her few remaining favourites, and with cheerful cries plunged into the tamarisk jungle. Here, shut out from sight, save of

THE VILLAGE LEGACY

the yielding bushes, her thoughts went far afield. What if the old *nullah* between the reed huts and the rising ground were to fill? What if the low levels between that rising ground and the high bank were to flood? And every one beyond in the yellow corn, except *Mai Jewun* and people who did not count—babies, and old women, and the crippled girl in the far hut! Only herself and *Sirdar Begum* to be brave, for *Mai Jewun* was sick.

'Wake up! Wake up! *Mai Jewun*! the floods are out!' broke in on the new-born baby's wail as *Nuttia's* broad, scared face shut out the sunlight from the door.

'Go away, unlucky daughter of a bad mother,' grumbled *Jewun* drowsily. 'Dost wish to cast thy evil eye on my heart's delight? Go, I say.'

'Yea! go!' grumbled the old nurse, cracking her fingers. 'Sure some devil possesseth thee to tell truth or lies at thy own pleasure.'

But the crippled girl spinning in the far hut had heard the flying feet, caught the excited cry, and now, crawling on her knees to the door, threw up her hands and shrieked aloud. The water stood ankle-deep among the tamarisk roots, and from its still pool tiny tongues licked their way along the dry sand.

'The flood! the flood!' The unavailing cry rang out as the women huddled together helplessly.

'*Mai Jewun*! there is time,' came the Legacy's eager voice. 'Put the baby down, and help. I saw

THE VILLAGE LEGACY

them do it at Luckimpura that time they took the cattle over the deep stream, and Bahâdur beat me for seeing it. Quick! quick!’

Simple enough, yet in its very simplicity lay their only chance of escape. A string-woven bed buoyed up with the bundles of reeds cut ready for re-thatching, and on this frail raft four people—nay five! for first of all with jealous care Nuttia placed her beloved Sirdar Begum in safety, wrapping her up in the clothes she discarded in favour of free nakedness.

Quick! Quick! if the rising ground is to be gained and the levels beyond forded ere the water is too deep! Moti and a companion yoked by plough-ropes to the bed, wade knee-deep, hock-deep, into the stream, and now with the old, cheerful cry Nuttia, clinging to their tails and so guiding them, urges the beasts deeper still. The stream swirls past holding them with it, though they breast it bravely. A log, long stranded in some shallow, dances past, shaving the raft by an inch. Then an alligator, swept from its moorings and casting eyes on Nuttia's brown legs, makes the beasts plunge madly. A rope breaks—the churned water sweeps over the women—the end is near—when another frantic struggle leaves Moti alone to her task. The high childish voice calling on her favourite's courage rises again and again; but the others, cowed into silence, clutch together with hid faces, till a fresh plunge loosens their tongues once more. It is Moti finding foothold, and they are safe—so far.

THE VILLAGE LEGACY

‘Quick! *Mai Jewun*,’ cries Nuttia, as her companions stand looking fearfully over the waste of shallows before them. She knows from the narrowness of the ridge they have reached that time is precious. ‘We must wade while we can, saving *Moti* for the streams. Take up the baby, and I——’

Her hands, busy on the bed, stilled themselves—her face grew grey—she turned on them like a fury. ‘Sirdar Begum! I put her there—where is Sirdar Begum?’

‘That bed-leg!’ shrilled the mother, tucking up her petticoats for greater freedom. ‘There was no room, and Heart’s Delight was cold. Bah! wood floats.’

‘*Hull-lal-lal-a lalla la!*’ The herdsman’s cry was the only answer. *Moti* has faced the flood again, but this time with a light load, for the baby nestling amid Nuttia’s clothes is the only occupant of the frail raft.

‘My son! My son! Light of mine eyes! Core of my heart! Come back! Come back!’

But the little black head drifting down stream behind the big one never turned from its set purpose. Wood floated, and so might babies. Why not?

Why not, indeed! But, as a matter of fact, *Mai Jewun* was right. A dilapidated bed-leg was picked up on a sand-bank miles away when the floods subsided; and *Moti* joined the herd next day to chew

THE VILLAGE LEGACY

the cud of her reflections contentedly. But the village Legacy and Heart's Delight remained somewhere seeking for something—that something, doubtless, which had turned the bed-leg into Sirdar Begum.

FAIZULLAH

HE was beating his wife—an occupation which annihilates time, dissolves the crust of culture, and reduces humanity in both hemispheres to a state of original sin. It is therefore immaterial what Faizullah and Haiyat Bibi did or said during the actual chastisement, for they behaved themselves as any other couple in the same circumstances would have done, that is to say, after the manner of two animals—one injured in his feelings, the other in her body.

She screamed vociferously, but for all that took her punishment with methodical endurance; indeed, there was a distinct air of duty on both sides which went far towards disguising the actual violence. Finally he let her drop, decisively but gently, in one of the dark corners of the low windowless room, and laid aside the bamboo in another. From a third crept an older woman, silent, but sympathetic, carrying a *lotah* full of water with which she administered comfort to the crushed victim. Faizullah Khan watched the gradual subsidence of his wife's sobs with evident satisfaction.

'Hast had enough for this time, O Haiyat?' he asked mildly. 'Or shall I catch thee peeping through the door at the men-folk again like a cat after a mouse?'

FAIZULLAH

True, 'tis the way thou caughtest me for a husband, Light of mine Eyes ; but I will have none of it with other men. Or rather, thou shalt pay for the pleasure. Ay ! every time, surely as the farmer pays the usurer for having a good crop. And if there be more than peeping, then I will kill thee. Think not to escape as a mere noseless one ; some may care to keep a maimed wife, secure that none will seek her ; but not I, Faizullah Khan, Beluch of Birokzai. Did I not marry thee, O Haiyat, Marrow of my Bones, because of thy fair face ? Then what good wouldst thou be to me without a nose ? Therefore be wise, my heart, or I shall have to kill thee some day.'

'The *sahibs* will hang thee in pigskin if thou dost,' whimpered the woman vindictively. 'Yea, I would die gladly to see thee swing like the wild beast thou art !'

The sense of coercion was evidently passing away, nor were there wanting signs that ere long tears would be dried at the flame of wrath fast kindling in Haiyat's big black eyes. Faizullah, standing at the open door, through which the yellow sunshine streamed in a broad bar of light, looked across the mud roof of the lower story, past the sandy stretches and broken rocky distance to where a low line of serrated blue mountains blocked the horizon. They were the Takt-i-Suleiman, and beyond their peaks and passes lay Beluchistan.

'There are no *sahibs* yonder,' he said, stretching his right hand towards the hills ; 'no one to come

FAIZULLAH

between a man and his right of faithful wife. God knows I am ready for my father's house again; 'tis only thy beauty, Skin of my Soul! Core of my Heart! that keeps me dawdling here a stranger in the house of mine ancient enemies. Why wilt thou not come with me to the mountains, O Haiyat?'

'I am not a wild beast as thou art,' she retorted, still with speech checked by sobs. 'I will stay here and get thee swung, for the *sabibs* worship a woman away over the black water and do her bidding. They will fill thy mouth with dirt, and burn thy body, and curse thy soul to the nether——'

'Nay! innermost Apple of mine Eye! do I not worship thee? And art thou not a Beluch also by race, though thy people have dug the grave of their courage with the plough, and tethered their freedom beside their bullocks? They were not always dirt-eaters, mean-spirited, big-bellied——'

'*Hai! Hai!*' That was the beginning of the storm. What followed drove big Faizullah into the court below, where the voices of the two women ceased to be articulate; for it is one thing to beat the wife of your bosom in order to correct a trifling indiscretion, another to deny her and her attendant the right of subsequent abuse. So he smoked his pipe placidly, and amused himself with polishing his well-beloved sword which he kept in defiance of the Arms Act.

The poorer women of the village nodded at each other as the shrill clamour, floating over the high

encircling wall, reached the well where they came to draw water.

‘The stranger hath big hands,’ chuckled one; ‘yet are they smaller than Haiyat’s eye. That comes of being a widow so long.’

‘There will be murder some day, mark my words!’ muttered an old hag with a toothless leer. ‘What else canst thou expect from a Beluch of Birokzai? *Peace! Peace!* that is what our men say nowadays. In my time, if a man of his race had laid a finger on a woman of ours, there would have been flames over the border, and blood enough to quench them afterwards. But they are afraid of the *sabibs* and the pigskin; not so Faizullah; he is of the old sort, knowing how to keep his wife.’

‘He will not keep her for all that, mother,’ sneered a strapping girl, who by the handsome water-vessels she carried showed herself to be a servant in one of the richer houses. ‘We shall get her back some day, despite her father-in-law’s wickedness in letting her marry a good-for-nothing soldier, just because of keeping a hold on her jewels.’

‘Hold on their honour, O thou false tongue!’ shrilled another of the group. ‘The daughter of thy house would have brought shame on ours. She needed a fierce one to keep her straight.’

‘After the man—woman, thy house gave her first, O depraved tongue that tasteth not the truth. Had thy people sent her back, our house would have kept her safe enough.’

‘ And her jewels doubtless——’

So the war of words, begun on the top story of Faizullah’s house, found its way into the narrow village street, and thence into many a mud-walled courtyard where the women set down the pots of water and rested themselves in wrangling. It even went farther, for in not a few of them, when the men came back from their day’s work in the fields, the subject of Haiyat Bibi’s peeping eyes and covetous jewels gave rise to slow, deliberate conversation over the evening pipe. Faizullah was right to beat her, of course ; on that point all were agreed. The rest was open to argument, and had been so any time these last two years, ever since the bold Beluch of Birokzai, on his way home from short service in a frontier regiment, had halted in his retreat at the sight of a pair of big black eyes behind the chink of a door.

Long before that, however, the question as to whether those jewels of Haiyat Bibi’s were to come back with her in search of a new bridegroom among her own relations, or to remain with her in her late husband’s family, had greatly exercised the minds of this little village, which lay, as it were, safely tucked away between the sheets of sand in the bed of the Indus and the soft pillow-like curves of the rising ground. It was given to be excited over trifles, this far-away, peaceful-looking cluster of mud huts ; for beneath the newly acquired placidity of the peasant which its inhabitants presented on the surface, the lawlessness of the border bravo remained ready for any emergency.

FAIZULLAH

On the whole, however, it afforded a beautiful example of the civilizing effects of agriculture, and as such figured in many reports having as their object the glorification of British rule. Consequently it was watched with jealous eyes by the district and police officials, who felt their sheet-anchor of reference would be gone did any serious crime occur to throw discredit on the converted community.

Despite this constant care, the village might have been situated in the moon for all the authorities knew of the petty intrigues, the hopes and fears, which formed the mainspring of its life. Even the ordinary human interests of its inhabitants were all too low in tone and insignificant to secure alien sympathy. So Haiyat Bibi's peeping eyes and her Delhi-made jewels were disturbing elements unknown to those who signed the monthly criminal reports with placid self-satisfaction at their own success in securing virtue. Even when, egged on by the family, her best-looking male cousin made bids for possession of both these charms in various underhand ways, the consequent employment of Faizullah Khan's marital discipline did not resound so far as the magistrate's ears.

Therefore it was an unpleasant surprise when, some six weeks after the original homily against peeping, the significant red envelope which proclaims the shedding of blood found its way into the Deputy Commissioner's mail-bag, and brought the news of Haiyat Bibi's murder by her husband, and his subsequent flight to the hills. Furthermore, it was reported by the

FAIZULLAH

sergeant of police, whose very writing showed signs of trepidation, that the whole village was in an uproar, and he himself quite unable to cope with the situation.

As luck would have it, some eighty miles of desert and alluvial land lay between the excited village and the fountains of law and order; for when the red envelope arrived, the responsible officials were in camp at the other end of the district. Nearly a week passed ere they could arrive on the scene, and by that time the villagers had sworn to renew a blood-feud which in past days had thriven bravely between their clan and that of the murderer. They were, in fact, on the point of turning their ploughshares into swords—an example which is dangerously contagious among the border tribes. Owing, therefore, to the necessity of persuading the people to trust the far-reaching arm of the law for revenge, instead of seeking it for themselves, the actual murder itself dropped into comparative insignificance. Indeed, the details of the crime were meagre in the extreme, though the evidence of previous jealousy on the husband's part, even to the point of grievous hurt, was copious. Nor did the family of the murdered woman's late husband hesitate to accuse her blood-relations of a deliberate attempt to seduce her from the path of virtue, in order to bring about a poisoning of the bold Faizullah, and a subsequent transference of her affection, and her jewels, to a more suitable husband. Inquiry, indeed, opened up such a vista of conflicting rascality, that the district-officer was fain to draw a decent veil over it by accepting the

FAIZULLAH

result, namely, that on a certain specified night, between certain specified hours, Faizullah Khan, not content with having beaten his wife to the verge of death during the day, had stealthily completed his devilish work, dragged the corpse of his victim a mile or two from the village, stripped it of ornament, and left it to be devoured by jackals and hyenas. In support of which statements, gruesome remains, found, it was said, some days after the woman's disappearance, were produced and sworn to vociferously by all. Relics of this sort are apt to be somewhat indefinite ; this objection, however, was met by the subsequent discovery of portions of Haiyat Bibi's clothing, and a golden ear-ring which the murderer had evidently dropped in his flight. The latter whetted the desire for revenge to a point, for, as the district-officer sorrowfully admitted to himself, the old-fashioned wrath at injury to their women, so conspicuous among these border clans, was now freely intermixed with that greed of gold which civilization brings in its wake.

Finally, since nothing else could be done, a reward of two thousand rupees was put upon the capture of one Faizullah Khan, Beluch of Birokzai, accused of murdering his wife and stealing her jewels, value twelve hundred rupees. In addition, vague promises were made that on the next punitive expedition into the mountains an eye would be kept on the escaped criminal's particular village, and some indemnity exacted. There the matter rested peacefully, and so,

on the whole, did the village, though the friction between the blood-relations of the murdered woman and her connections by marriage remained a fruitful source of petty disturbance.

‘ There is something odd about that case,’ remarked a new magistrate when some fresh complaint of quarrel came in for settlement. ‘ It is always more satisfactory to have a real, *whole* body ; but when there is neither corpse nor criminal it is useless depending on facts at all.’ The police officer, however, declared, that having personally conducted the inquiry no mistake in either facts or conclusions was possible.

Eighteen months passed by and early spring was melting the snows on that great rampart of hills which, properly guarded, would make the rich plains of India impregnable to a Western foe. The border land was astir, its officials busy, for the long-talked-of punitive expedition was about to thread its way through the peaks and passes, bearing the rod which teaches respect, and perhaps fidelity. On the outermost skirts of British territory the district-officer sat in front of his tent writing a rose-coloured report on the progress of education. It was long overdue owing to the pressure of martial preparations, so he was in a hurry and superlatives came fast.

‘ A Beluch from beyond the border is seeking the Presence with insistence,’ pleaded a deferential myrmidon.

‘ Let him come,’ was the prompt reply ; and the pen, laid aside, rolled over, blotting the last sentence.

FAIZULLAH

What matter? Reports have various values, and the Beluch might bring information that would make force more forcible.

An old soldier, by the look of him, tall and well set up, with merry brown eyes and a determined face. He brought himself to the salute gravely. 'May the life of the Presence be prolonged and may his gracious ears bear with a question. Is it true that the armies of the Lord of the Universe march against the village of one Faizullah of Birokzai?'

'The armies of the Kaiser-i-Hind march against all thieves and murderers, no matter who they are.'

'The words of the Presence are just altogether. Yet may the Protector of the Poor bear with this dust-like one. Is it true that he who brings Faizullah captive will receive two thousand rupees reward?'

'It is true.'

'*Wah illah!* The purse of the great Queen is big if the long tongue of the Presence wags in it so freely. The sum is great.'

'The crime is great. He murdered his wife; besides, he stole twelve hundred rupees' worth of jewels.'

The smile of contempt which had crept into the listener's face at the first part of the sentence gave place to a frown at the sequel. 'The Presence says it; shall it not be true?' he remarked with deference after a pause. 'Nevertheless the sum exceeds the purchase. Does not the price of the calf buy the cow also?¹ There is no wisdom in a bad bargain.'

¹ In India the cow will not give milk if separated from her calf.

FAIZULLAH

The Deputy Commissioner looked at the new-comer sharply. 'Doubtless ; yet none have given the man up, though all know we will keep our threat of burning the village next month.'

The sudden clenching of the slender, nervous hands and quick inflation of the nostrils convinced the Englishman that there was an envoy prepared with concessions, but asking for some in return.

'The Presence hath said it, shall it not be true?' came the urbane reply. 'Yet we Beluchis do not give up our friends readily. Still Faizullah is no friend of mine, so for twelve hundred rupees I will bring him to the Presence, *dead or alive*, if his honour pleases.'

The Deputy Commissioner stared. 'But the reward is two thousand ; why do you ask less?'

'The price of the calf is the price of the cow, *Huzoor!* I lack but one thing, and the sum is enough for the purchase. Am I a pig of *baniab* to fill my stomach with rupees I cannot digest? Nevertheless the task is hard, and those who go near violence may suffer violence. What good then would the money be to me if I were dead?'

Like many of his race, he had a curiously round mellow voice that seemed to linger over the slow, stately periods as he went on deliberately. 'Surely God will reward the Presence for his patience ! But a man's son is as himself. And I have a son, *Huzoor*, a babe in his mother's arms—may the Lord bring him safe to man's estate ! If the great Purveyor of Justice would cause a writing to be made, setting forth that my son is as

FAIZULLAH

myself, and my earnings as his earnings—nay, surely the Presence will have the best bliss of Paradise reserved for it specially! And if the munificent Keeper of the Purse of Kings would cause the twelve hundred rupees to be set apart from this day in the hands of some notable banker—not that this slave doubts, but the Presence knows the guile of all women, and that all men are born of women, and therefore guileful. It knows also that without the hope of money naught but the stars in heaven will move; and if I say, “Lo, I will give, when I have it,” who will listen? But if I say, “Lo! there it is safe, do my bidding and take it,” ’tis a different matter. If, therefore, the Presence will do this, his slave will bring Faizullah, Beluch of Birokzai, to him *alive or dead*, and there will be no need to burn the village.’

‘And the jewels?’

Once more the frown came quick. ‘If I bring Faizullah to the Halls of Justice alive, surely the mightiness of the Presence will make him speak. If I bring him dead, can this slave follow him and find speech in the silence of the grave? Say! is it a bargain? Yes or no?’

The anxious brevity of the last question showed the sincerity of the man more than all his measured words, and after some further parley, the conditions were arranged. That is to say, the sum of twelve hundred rupees was forthwith to be paid into the hands of a responsible third party, and the informer was to bring Faizullah to the Deputy Commissioner dead or alive,

FAIZULLAH

before reprisals had been taken on the village, when, even if he lost his life in the capture, the reward was to be paid to his heirs and assigns. He positively refused to give either name or designation, asserting with the measure of sound common sense which characterized all his utterances, firstly, that no one would know if he gave a false one ; secondly, that if he failed to keep his promise he would prefer to remain in oblivion ; thirdly, that if he did succeed in bringing Faizullah to book, the Presence would be sure to recognize his servant and slave. Thus he departed as he came, a nameless stranger.

Three days after an excited crowd rode pell-mell into the magistrate's compound. '*Huzoor!* we have found him ! we have found him !' rose a dozen voices, as the more influential men of the party crushed into the office room.

'Who?'

'Faizullah the Beluch ! Faizullah the murderer ! The reward is ours, praise be to God and to your honour's opulence. *Wah*, the glad day ! *Wah*, the great day !'

'*Salaam alaikoum*, Friend of the Poor Man !' came an urbane voice from their midst. 'The dust-like slave of the Presence hath kept his word. Behold ! I bring to you Faizullah Khan, Beluch of Birokzai, alive, not dead.'

A sudden hush fell on the jostling crew as the prisoner raised his fettered hands in grave obeisance, and then solemnly, vigorously, spat to right and left

FAIZULLAH

ere he began : ‘ Snakes gorged to impotence by their own greed ! Bullocks with but one set of eyes to seven stomachs ! Listen ! whilst I recount the tale of your infamies to the ear of this wise judge. *Huzoor !* I am Faizullah, husband of the virtuous Haiyat, mother of my son, dwelling content in the house of my father. Yea ! it is true. For her jewels’ sake, her father-in-law bound me by promises, when he found me caught in the meshes. So for her sake I stayed in a strange land, and the fields and the jewels were as his. Then the old man yonder, her uncle, wroth at the marriage, set his son to beguile her ; so I beat her till she had no heart to be beguiled. For all that they would not cease from evil ways. Therefore said I to her father-in-law : “ Let me go, for surely if I stay thy daughter-in-law will have to die some day, and then her blood-kin will claim all. Let me go in peace with the Core of my Heart ; but keep thou the jewels, for I have no need of them.” So in the night, he consenting, I crept away with her in my arms, for she had eaten her full of the bamboo that day, and could not walk. The Presence knows what came next—how they called me murderer and thief, her blood-kin claiming the land, her father-in-law denying that he had the jewels—and I nursing her to health in the mountains ! *Huzoor !* the *sabibs* are like eagles. They look at the Sun of Justice and see not the maggots it breeds in carrion like these men. Yet what cared I, away in the hills, what men called me here, save that my house wept for her jewels, and I knew not how to get them ;

FAIZULLAH

for the reward was heavy and oaths are cheap in your land. Then came word that the armies of the Lord of the Universe were to march on this slave's village, and I said, "What is life to me? I will try and speak them fair." The Presence knows what came next. When the paper concerning the twelve hundred rupees had been writ, I knew that my house would have her rights anyhow, even if the eyes of the Just Judge were blinded by false oaths, or that I came dead into the Presence. So I said by message to the carrion: "Dispute no longer among yourselves. Let me buy the jewels at the price ye have put on them. Let one take the money and the other the land, or half-and-half. Only give me the jewels, and say in the Court of Justice, 'Lo! we were mistaken! Faizullah hath not killed his wife. He nursed her back to life, and she hath a right to the jewels and her son after her. But the land is ours by agreement.'" And to this they said "Yea" guilefully. But when I went to the village, trusting them not at all, they seized me and brought me hither for the reward, not knowing that the Presence had deigned to cast his gracious eye on this poor man before, and that the reward was for me, or my son. It is spoken. Let the Presence decide!

Nothing is more surprising than the rapidity with which a got-up case breaks down when once the judge is seen to have an inkling of the truth. *Sauve qui peut* is then the motto; especially when nothing more is to be gained from consistency. Haiyat's relations

professed themselves both astonished and overjoyed at her return to life, and before the inquiry was over had arranged for the discovery of the jewels, which were found carefully hidden away in the house of Haiyat Bibi's female attendant, who had died of cholera the year before, an ingenious incident productive of injured innocence to all the living.

'It has not emptied the purse of the great Queen after all,' said Faizullah with a broad smile, as he stood beside the Deputy Commissioner on the crest of a hill, and pointed to a terraced village on the opposite side of the valley. 'Nor hath the house of the poor suffered; for the dwelling of this slave will not burn.'

The jewels were in a bundle under his arm, and he was taking leave of the expedition he had accompanied so far. He turned to go, then suddenly saluted in military fashion. 'If this dust-like one might give freedom to his tongue for a space, the wisdom of experience might reach the ear of those above it. Yea, of a surety the patience of the Presence is beyond praise! *Huzoor!* if the reward writ in the police stations had been for me, alive or dead, peace would have been beyond my fate, for the great mind of the Protector of the Poor will perceive that a man hath no power against false oaths when once his own tongue is stilled by death; and that even the justice of kings avails little when the case has been decided already. Let this memory remain with the *sahibs*, "Peace bringeth Plenty, and Plenty bringeth Power." So it

FAIZULLAH

comes that false oaths are easy under the rule of the Presence.'

That was his farewell.

The snow still lay low, but the orchards were ablaze with blossom as, next morning, the little force led by white faces straggled peacefully along the cobbled ledges of the steep village lane. On either side strips of garden ground, where the heart-shaped leaves of the sweet yam pushed from the brown soil, led up to the low houses, backed by peach and almond trees and festooned by withered gourds. On the steps leading to a high-perched dwelling overhanging the lane, stood Faizullah Khan with a sturdy youngster in his arms. The Deputy Commissioner happening to come last and alone, stopped to look at the child with kindly eyes. As he did so a door above was set ajar, and through the chink he caught a glimpse of a singularly beautiful pair of black eyes and a flash of jewels.

'It is my house, *Huzoor*,' said Faizullah with rather a sheepish grin. 'I gave her leave to peep this time.'

RÂMCHUNDERJI

‘**B**UT the tenth *avatar* of the Lord Vishnu is yet to come.’

‘Exactly so, pundit-ji,’ I replied, looking at my watch. ‘It is yet to come, seeing that time’s up. Half-past eight ; so not another stroke of work to-day. No, not for twice a thousand rupees!’

A thousand rupees being the sum with which the Government of India rewards what they are pleased to call ‘high proficiency’ in languages, I, having regard to its literature, had chosen Sanskrit as a means of paying certain just debts. To which end the head-master of the district school came to me for two hours every morning, and prosed away over the doings of the Hindoo pantheon until I came to the conclusion that my Lord Vishnu had been rather extravagant in the matter of incarnations.

The pundit, however, to whom would be due a hundred rupees of the thousand if I succeeded, smiled blandly. ‘The tenth *avatar* will doubtless await his Honour’s leisure ; the tenth, and last.’

‘Last!’ I echoed with scorn. ‘How do you know? Some authorities hold there are twenty-four, and upon my soul I don’t see why there should not be twenty-four thousand. ’Tis the same old story all through ;

R Â M C H U N D E R J I

devils and demigods, *rakshas* and *rishies*, Noah's ark and Excalibur. That sort of thing might go on for ever.'

Now, Pundit Narayan Das was a very learned man. He had taken a Calcutta degree, and was accustomed to educate the rising generation on a mixture of the *Rig-Veda* and *The Spectator*. So he smiled again, saying in English, ' " History repeats itself. " '

Thereupon he left me, and I, going into the verandah with my cigar, came straight upon Râmchunderji and his wife Sita. At least I think so.

They were the oddest little couple. He, at a stretch, might have touched a decade of life, she, something more than half such distance of time. That is, taking them by size : in mind and manners, and in their grave, careworn faces, they were centuries old. His sole garment consisted of a large yellow turban twined high into a sort of mitre, with just a tip of burnished silver fringe sprouting from the top ; and, as he sat cross-legged against the verandah pillar, a hand resting on each knee, his figure awoke a fleeting memory which, at the time, I failed to catch. Afterwards I remembered the effigies in Indra's celestial court as represented by some Parsee actors I had once seen. Sita was simply a bundle, owing to her being huddled and cuddled up in a veil ample enough for an ample woman.

' I am Râmchunderji, and this is my wife Sita,' said the boy gravely. ' If the Presence pleases, I will beguile time by singing.'

R Â M C H U N D E R J I

‘What will you sing?’ I asked, preparing to idle away ten minutes comfortably in a lounge-chair which lay convenient.

‘I sing what I sing. Give me the *vina*, woman.’

The veil gave up such a very large instrument that the smallness of the remaining wife became oppressive. So large indeed was it, that one gourd over-filled the boy’s lap, while the other acted as a prop to the high twined turban. Even the connecting bamboo, slender though it was, seemed all too wide for those small fingers on the frets.

‘Is the permission of the Presence bestowed?’ suggested Râmchunderji, with the utmost solemnity.

Twang, twang, twangle! Heavens, what a *vina* and what a voice! I nearly stopped both at the first bar; then patience prevailing, I lay back and closed my eyes. Twang, twangle! A sudden difference in the tone made me open them again, only to find the same little bronze image busy in making a perfectly purgatorial noise; so I resigned myself once more. Palm-trees waving, odorous thickets starred with jasmine, forms, half-mortal, half-divine, stealing through the shadows, the flash of shining swords, the twang of golden bows bent on ten-headed many-handed monsters. Bah! Pundit Narayan Das, prosing over those epic poems of his, had made me drowsy. ‘What have you been singing?’ I asked, rousing myself.

Râmchunderji spread his hands thumbs outwards, and the three wrinkles on his high forehead deepened. ‘God knows! It is what they sang before the great

flood came. The *vina* was theirs and my turban, and my wife's veil ; the rest was too big altogether, so I gave it away for some bread. When the belly is full of greed the heart hath none left, and the nine-lakh necklace is worth no more than a mouthful. If the Presence could see into my heart now, he would find no greed there.'

This delicate allusion to an inward craving produced a four-anna bit from my pocket, and sent Râmchunderji away to the sweet-meat sellers in order to appease his hunger, for sweet-stuff is cheap in the East, especially when it is stale. Sita and the *vina*, mysteriously intertwined beneath the veil, followed duteously behind.

The next day they were back again, and the twang of that infernal instrument broke in on the pundit's impassioned regrets over the heroic days of his favourite poems. 'By the by,' I interrupted, 'can you tell me what that boy is singing? I can't make out a word, and yet——' But it was no use bringing fancy to bear on Narayan Das, so we went out to listen. They were sitting under a trellised arch covered with jasmine and roses, and a great Gloire de Dijon had sent a shower of blown petals over Sita's veil.

'A little knowledge is a dangerous thing,' quoted Narayan Das sententiously, after listening a while. 'It is Râmâyâna, the immortal poem your honour reads even now ; but debase, illiterate. You say wrong, boy ! it is thus.'

Râmchunderji waited till the pompous periods

R Â M C H U N D E R J I

ceased ; then he shook his head gravely. ' We did not sing it so in the days before the great flood came.'

His words gave me a curious thrill ; but there is no more matter-of-fact being in the world than a Calcutta Bachelor of Arts ; so the pundit at once began a cross-examination that would have done credit to a Queen's counsel. ' What flood ? who were " we " ? ' These and many other questions put with brutal bluntness met with a patient reply.

It had been a very big flood, somewhere, God knows how far, in the south country. One, two, three years ago ? Oh, more than that ! but he could not say how much more. The bard who sang and the woman who carried the *vina* had disappeared, been swept away perhaps. Since then he, Râmchunderji, had wandered over the world filling his stomach and that of his wife Sita with songs. Their stomachs were not always full ; oh, no ! Of late (perhaps because the *vina* was so old) people had not cared to listen, and since the great flood nothing could be got without money. Sita ? Oh, yes ! she was his wife. They had been married ever so long ; he could not remember the time when they had not been married.

It was Narayan Das's opportunity for shaking his head. These infant marriages were subversive of due education. Here was a boy, who should be in Standard II. doing the compound rules, idling about in ignorance. It struck me, however, that Râmchunderji must be pretty well on to vulgar fractions

R Â M C H U N D E R J I

and rule of three, with himself, Sita, and the world as the denominators, so I asked him if his heart were still so devoid of greed that another four-anna bit would be welcome. His face showed a pained surprise. The Presence, he said, must be aware that four annas would fill their stomachs (which were not big) for many days. They had not come for alms, only to make music for the Presence out of gratitude. Thinking that music out of an ill-tuned *vina* was hardly the same thing, I forced another four-anna bit on the boy and sent him away.

Nearly a month passed ere I saw him again, though Narayan Das and I used, as the days grew warmer, to sit out in the trellised arch, within sight of the road. My knowledge of Sanskrit increased as I read of Râmchunderji's long exile, shared by Sita, his wife; of how he killed the beasts in the enchanted forest; how she was reft from him by Râvana, the hydra-headed many-handed monster; and of how finally she was restored to his arms by the help of Hanumân the man-monkey, the child of the wild winds. But though the pundit used to waste many words in pointing out the beauties of a poem which held such hold on the minds of the people that their commonest names were derived from it, I never seemed to get into the spirit of the time as I had done when I listened with closed eyes to the boy's debased, illiterate rendering of the *s'lokas*.

It was after the school vacation had sent Narayan Das to see his relatives at Benares that the odd little

R Â M C H U N D E R J I

couple turned up again. Râmchunderji's face looked more pinched and careworn than ever, and as he held the *vina* across his knees, Sita, losing its contours, seemed more than ever inadequate to her veil.

'Perhaps one of the many devils which beset the virtuous has entered into the instrument,' he said despondently; 'but when I play, folk listen not at all. So greed remaineth in the stomach, and the heart is empty.'

I offered him another four-anna bit, and when he demurred at taking it before beguiling the time with music, I laid it on the flat skin top of one of the gourds, hoping thus to ensure silence.

The wrinkles on his forehead seemed to go right up into his turban, and his voice took a perplexed tone. 'It used not to be so. Before the flood Sita and I had no thought of money; but now——' He began fingering the strings softly, and as they thrilled, the four-anna bit vibrated and jiggged in a murmur of money that fitted strangely to the sort of rude chant in which he went on.

'Money is in the hands, the head, the heart;
Give! give, give, before we give again;
Money hath ten heads to think out evil-doing;
Money hath twenty hands to mete out pain.
Money! money! money! money!
Money steals the heart's love from our life.
Money I have not—say! art thou hungry, wife?'

If anything was possessed of a devil it was that four-anna bit. It buzzed, and hummed, and jiggged

R Â M C H U N D E R J I

infernally, as the boy's finger on the strings struck more firmly.

'I'll tell you what it is, Râmchunderji,' said I uneasily, 'that *vina* is enough to ruin Orpheus. As you don't care for my money, I'll give you another instrument instead. I have one inside which is easier to play, and more your style in every way.'

So I brought out a *râvanâstron*, such as professional beggars use, a thing with two strings and a gourd covered with snake-skin. To my surprise the boy's face lost its impassive melancholy in palpable anger.

'The Presence does not understand,' he said quite hotly. 'We do not beg; Sita and I fill ourselves with songs. That thing whines for money, money, money, like the devil who made it. Rather would I live by *this* than by mine enemy.' And as he spoke he struck the snake-skin with his supple fingers till it resounded again. 'Yea! thus will I find bread,' he went on, 'but the *vina* must find a home first. Therefore I came to the Presence, hearing that he collected such things. Perhaps he will keep it in exchange for one rupee. It is worth one rupee, surely.'

His wistful look as he handed me the instrument made me feel inclined to offer a hundred; but in good sooth the *vina* was worth five, and I told him so, adding, as I looked at some curious tracery round the gourds, that it appeared to be very old indeed.

'The Presence saith truly; it is very old,' echoed Râmchunderji drearily. 'That is why folk will not listen. It is too old; too old to be worth money.'

Nevertheless he cheered up at the sight of his rupee ; for he would not take more, saying he had every intention of returning to claim the *vina* ere long, and that five rupees would be beyond his hopes of gain.

A fortnight after I came home from my early-morning ride by the police office, which stood outside the native town, close to a brick-stepped tank shaded by *peepul* trees, my object being to check the tally of poisonous snakes brought in for the reward given by Government for their capture. The first time I saw some six or seven hundred deadly serpents ranged in a row with all their heads one way, and all their unwinking eyes apparently fixed on me, I felt queer, and the fact of their being dead did not somehow enter into the equation. But habit inures one, and I walked along the thin grey fringe of certain death spread out on the first step of the tank with an air of stolid business, only stopping before an unusually large specimen to ask the captor, who sat behind awaiting his pence, where he had come across it.

‘ Six hundred and seventy in all, *Huzoor*,’ remarked the Deputy Inspector of Police, following me, resplendent in silver trappings and white cotton gloves. ‘ That is owing to the floods, and the season, since this is the sixth of *Bhâdron* (August), the month of snakes. Yet the outlay is excessive to the Government, and perhaps with justice the price of small ones, such as these, might be reduced one-half.’

I looked up, and behind a fringe of diminutive vipers sat Râmchunderji and the bundle he called Sita.

R Â M C H U N D E R J I

On his bare right arm he wore a much-betasselled floss silk bracelet bound with tinsel.

' I am glad to see the greed is in your heart again,' said I, pointing to the ornament.

' The *Râm-rucki* is not bought, but given, as in the days before the flood,' replied the boy. ' Everyone wears the *Râm-rucki* still, everyone ! '

The Deputy Inspector pulled down the cuff of his uniform hastily, but against the gleam of his white gloves I caught a glimpse of bright colours. The *Râm-rucki*, he explained evasively, was the bracelet of luck given to Râmchunderji in old days before his search for Sita, and common, ill-educated people still retained the superstitious custom of binding one on the wrist of each male during the month of *Bhâdron*. There was so much deplorable ignorance amongst the uneducated classes, and did the Presence look with favour on the proposal for reducing the rewards? Perhaps it was Râmchunderji's eager, wistful face hinting at the way promises were kept before the flood which made me reply that I considered no one but the Viceroy in Council had power to reduce the price of snakes.

Several times after this I found the odd little couple disposed behind their tally of small vipers ; then the season of serpents ceased, and one by one the *habitués* of the tank steps dropped off to pursue other professions. The fringe broke into isolated tassels, and finally the worn, ruddy steps lay bare of all save the flickering light and shade of the leaves above.

R Â M C H U N D E R J I

November had chilled the welcome cool weather to cold, when a report came in the usual course that a boy calling himself Râmchunderji, and a girl said to be his wife, had been found in a jasmine garden outside the city, half-dead of exhaustion and without any ostensible means of livelihood. They had been taken up as vagrants and sent to hospital, pending Government orders. Now the Jubilee year was coming to a close, leaving behind it a legacy of new charities throughout the length and breadth of India. Of some the foundation stone only had been laid by direct telegram to the Queen-Empress ; others had sprung to life in a manner suggestive of workmen's tenements. Among the latter was a Female Boarding School and Orphanage for the children of high-caste Hindus, which had been built and endowed by a number of rich contractors and usurers, not one of whom would have sent their daughters to it for all their hoarded wealth. Persistent pennies had attracted a creditable, if intermittent, supply of day-scholars to its stucco walls ; but despite an appropriate inscription in three languages over the gate, the orphanage remained empty. Money can do much, but it cannot produce homeless orphans of good family in a society where the patriarchal system lingers in all its crass disregard of the main chance. So at the first hint of Sita I was besieged on all sides. A real live, genuine, Hindu female orphan going a-begging ! Preposterous ! Sacriligious ! The Chairman of the Orphanage Committee almost wept as he pictured the emptiness of

R Â M C H U N D E R J I

those white walls, and actually shed tears over the building estimates which he produced in order to strengthen his claim to poor little Sita. Was it fair, he asked, that such a total of munificent charity should not have a single orphan to show the Commissioner-*sahib* when he came on tour? His distress touched me. Then winter, hard on the poor even in sunlit India, was on us; besides Narayan Das tempted me further, with suggestions of a Jubilee Scholarship at the district school for Râmchunderji himself.

I broke it very gently to the boy as he lay on a mat in the sun, slowly absorbing warmth and nourishment. He was too weak to contest the point, but I felt bad exceedingly, when I saw him turn face down as if the end of all things was upon him. I knew he must be whispering confidences to Mother Earth respecting that happy time before the flood, and I slunk away as though I had been whipped.

Now, if in telling this veracious history I seem too intermittent, I can but offer as an excuse the fact that an official's work in India is like that of a Jacquard loom. A thread slips forward, shows for a second, and disappears; a pause, and there it is again. Sometimes not until the pattern is complete is it possible to realize that the series of trivial incidents has combined to weave an indelible record on the warp and woof. So it was early January before the Râmchunderji shuttle stirred again. Narayan Das came to me with a look on his face suggestive that neither the *Rig-Veda* nor *The Spectator* was entirely satisfactory.

R Â M C H U N D E R J I

The boy, he said, was not a bad boy, though he seemed absolutely unable to learn ; but his influence on Standard I. was strictly non-regulation, nor did any section of the Educational Code apply to the case. If I would come down at recess time, I could see and judge for myself what ought to be done. When I reached the playground the bigger boys were at *krikutts* (cricket) or gymnastics, the medium ones engaged on marbles, but in a sunny corner backed by warm brick walls sat Râmchunderji surrounded by a circle of Standard I. Small as he was, he was still so much larger than the average of the class, that, as he leant his high yellow turban against the wall, with half-closed eyes, and hands upon his knees, the memory of Indra's Court came back to me once more. He was reciting something in a low voice, and as the children munched popcorn or sucked sweeties their eyes never left his face.

' Look ! ' said Narayan Das in a whisper from our spying-ground behind the master's window. The song came to an end, a stir circled through the audience, and one by one the solid children of the fields, and the slender, sharp little imps of the bazaars, rose up and put something into the singer's lap. A few grains of corn, a scrap of sweet stuff, and as they did so each said in turn, ' *Salaam, Râmchunderji !* ' ' No wonder the boy has grown fat,' I whispered, dropping the reed screen round which I had been peeping.

Narayan Das shook his head. ' If it were only comestibles,' he replied gravely, ' I could arrange ;

R Â M C H U N D E R J I

but when they are devoid of victuals they give their slate-pencils, their ink-pots, even their First-Lesson books. Then, if nobody sees and stops, there is vacancy when such things are applied for. Thus it is subversive of discipline, and parents object to pay. Besides, the *in forma-pauperis* pupils come on contingent with great expense to Government.'

I looked through the screen again with a growing respect for Râmchunderji. 'Does he eat them too?' I asked.

The head-master smiled the sickly smile of one who is not quite sure if his superior officer intends a joke, and fell back as usual on quotation, 'The ostrich is supposed by some to digest nails, but——'

I laughed aloud, and being discovered, went out and spoke seriously to the offender. His calm was not in the least disturbed. 'I do not ask, or beg,' he replied; 'they give of their hearts and their abundance, as in old days before the flood. Is it my fault if they possess slate-pencils, and ink-pots, and First-Lesson books?'

I must confess that this argument seemed to me unanswerable, but I advised him, seeing that the flood *had* come, to return such offerings in future to the store. He did not take my advice, and, about a week after, being discovered selling these things to the bigger boys at a reduced price, he was caned by the head-master. That night he disappeared from the boarding-house and was no more seen. His name was removed from the rolls, his scholarship forfeited for absence without leave, and the arrears absorbed in refunds for

R Â M C H U N D E R J I

slate-pencils and ink-pots. So that was an end of Râmchunderji's schooling, and Standard I. once more became amenable to the Code.

Winter was warming to spring, the first bronze vine leaves were budding, and the young wheat shooting to silvery ears, before the Commissioner, coming his rounds, was taken in pomp to visit the Orphanage and its occupants. I remember it so well. The Committee and the Commissioner, and I, and everyone interested in female orphans and female education, on one side of a red baize table decorated with posies of decayed rosebuds and jasmine in green-glass tumblers ; and on the other Sita and the matron. The former, to enhance her value as a genuine high-caste waif, was still a mere bundle, and I fancied she looked smaller than ever ; perhaps because the veil was not so large. Then the accounts were passed, and the matron's report read. Nothing, she said, could be more satisfactory than the general behaviour and moral tone of the inmates, except in one point. And this was the feeding of the monkeys, which, as everyone knew, infested the town. The result being that the *bunder-lôg* had become bold even to the dropping down of stones into the court—quite large stones, such as the one placed as a stepping-stone over the runnel of water from the well.

Here I unguardedly suggested an air-gun : whereupon Narayan Das, who always attended these functions as an educational authority, reminded me reproachfully that monkeys were sacred to the god

R Â M C H U N D E R J I

Hanumân, who, if I remembered, had finally rescued Sita from the ten-headed, many-armed monster Râvana, the inventor of the *râvanâstron* or beggar's fiddle.

It was at this juncture that I suddenly became aware that the Jacquard loom of Fate was weaving a pattern ; Râmchunderji ! Sita ! the exile ! the killing of the wild beasts ! the ten-headed, many-handed monster Râvana ! Yet I could tell you almost every word of the Commissioner's speech, though he prosed on for the next ten minutes complacently about the pleasure he felt, and the authorities felt, and the whole civilized world felt, at seeing ' Money, the great curse and blessing of humanity, employed as it should be employed in snatching the female orphan of India from unmerited misfortune, and educating her to be an example to the nineteenth century.' Everyone was highly delighted, and the Committee approached me with a view of adding the Commissioner's name as a second title to the school.

But I awaited the completion of the pattern. It was on the eleventh of April, that is to say, on the High Festival of Spring, at the fair held beside the tank where humanity in thousands was washing away the old year, and putting on the new in the shape of gay-coloured clothing, that my attention was attracted by a small, dense crowd whence came hearty guffaws of laughter.

' 'Tis a performing monkey,' said a bearded villager in response to my question as to what was amusing

R Â M C H U N D E R J I

them so hugely. 'The boy makes him do tricks worthy of Hanumân ; yet he saith he taught him yonder down by the canal. Will not the Protector of the Poor step in and see ? Ho, ho ! 'twould make a suitor laugh even if the *digri* (decree) were against him.' But I recognized the pattern this time, and I had made up my mind not to interfere with the shuttle again. As I turned away, another roar of laughter and a general feeling in pockets and turbans told me that the final tip had succeeded, and that collection was going on satisfactorily.

A few days later the Chairman of the Committee came to me in excited despair. The real, genuine female Hindu orphan was not to be found, and the stucco walls were once more empty. Inquiries were made on all sides, but when it came out, casually, that a boy, a girl, and a monkey, had taken a third-class ticket to Benares, I said nothing. I was not going to aid Râvana, or prevent the due course of incarnation, if it *was* an incarnation. That great city of men, women, and monkeys should give the trio fair play.

Last year, when I was in Simla, I overheard a traveller giving his impressions of India to a lady who was longing all the time to find out from a gentleman with a moustache when the polo-match was to begin at Annandale next day.

'The performing troupes are certainly above the European average,' he said. 'At Benares, especially, I remember seeing a monkey ; he, his master, and a

R Â M C H U N D E R J I

girl, did quite a variety of scenes out of the Râmayâna, and really, considering who they were, I——'

'Excuse me—but—oh! Captain Smith, is it half-past eleven or twelve?'

The *vina* still hangs in my collection next the *râvanâstron*. Sometimes I take it down and sound the strings. But the waving palms, the odorous thickets, and the shadowy, immortal forms have got mixed up somehow with that infernal humming and bumming of the four-anna bit. So I get no help in trying to decide the question—'Who was Râmchunderji?'



MUSSUMÂT KIRPO'S DOLL

THEY had gathered all the schools into the Mission House compound, and set them out in companies on the bare ground like seedlings in a bed—a perfect garden of girls, from five to fifteen, arrayed in rainbow hues ; some of them in their wedding dresses of scarlet, most of them bedecked with the family jewellery, and even the shabbiest boasting a row or two of tinsel on bodice or veil.

And down the walks, drawn with mathematical accuracy between these hotbeds of learning, a few English ladies with eager, kindly faces, trotting up and down, conferring excitedly with portly Indian Christian Bible-women, and pausing occasionally to encourage some young offshoot of the Tree of Knowledge—uncertain either of its own roots or of the soil it grew in—by directing its attention to the tables set out with toys which stood under a group of date-palms and oranges. Behind these tables sat in a semi-circle more of those eager, kindly foreign faces, not confined here to one sex, but in fair proportion male and female ; yet all with the same expression, the same universal kindly benevolence towards the horticultural exhibition spread out before their eyes.

MUSSUMÂT KIRPO'S DOLL

At the table, pale or flushed with sheer good feeling, two or three of the chief Mission ladies, and between them, with a mundane, married look about her, contrasting strongly with her surroundings, the Commissioner's wife, about to give away the prizes. A kindly face also, despite its half-bewildered look, as one after another of the seedlings comes up to receive the reward of merit. One after another solemnly, for dotted here and there behind the screen of walls and bushes squats many a critical mother, determined that her particular plant shall receive its fair share of watering, or cease to be part of the harvest necessary for a good report. The Commissioner's wife has half a dozen children of her own, and prides herself on understanding them ; but these bairns are a race apart. She neither comprehends them, nor the fluent, scholastic Hindustani with which her flushed, excited countrywomen introduce each claimant to her notice. Still she smiles, and says, '*Bobut uchcha*' (very good), and nods as if she did. In a vague way she is relieved when the books are finished and she begins upon the dolls. There is something familiar and cosmopolitan in the gloating desire of the large dark eyes, and the possessive clutch of the small hands over the treasure.

'Standard I. Mussumât Kirpo,' reads out the secretary, and a tall girl of about fifteen comes forward. A sort of annoyed surprise passes among the ladies in quick whispers. Clearly, a Japanese baby-doll with a large bald head is not the correct thing here ; but it is

MUSSUMÂT KIRPO'S DOLL

so difficult, so almost impossible with hundreds of girls who attend school so irregularly, and really, Julia Smith might have explained! This the lady in question proceeds to do almost tearfully, until she is cut short by superior decision.

'Well, we must give it her now as there isn't anything else for her. So, dear Mrs. Gordon, if you please! Of course, as a rule, we always draw the line about dolls when a girl is married. Sometimes it seems a little hard, for they are so small, you know; still, it is best to have a rule; all these tiny trifles help to emphasize our views on the child-marriage question. But if you will be kind enough in this case—just to avoid confusion—we will rectify the mistake to-morrow.'

Mussumât Kirpo took her doll stolidly—a sickly, stupid-looking girl, limping as she walked dully, stolidly back to her place.

'Ari!' giggled the women behind the bushes. 'That's all she is likely to get in that way. Lo! they made a bad bargain in brides in Gungo's house, and no mistake. But 'twas ill luck, not ill management; for they tell me Kirpo was straight and sound when she was betrothed. May the gods keep my daughters-in-law healthy and handsome.'

Then they forgot the joke in tender delight over more suitable gifts to the others; and so the great day passed to its ending.

'I do believe poor Kirpo's getting that doll was the only *contretemps*,' said the superintendent triumphantly,

MUSSUMÂT KIRPO'S DOLL

'and that, dear Julia, you can easily remedy to-morrow, so don't fret about it.'

With this intention Julia Smith went down at the first opportunity to her school in the slums of the city. A general air of slackness pervaded the upstairs room, where only a row of little mites sat whispering to each other, while their mistress, full of yawns and stretchings, talked over the events of yesterday with her monitor. Briefly, if the *Miss-sahib* thought she was going to slave as she had done for the past year for a paltry eight yards of cotton-trousering, which would not be enough to cut into the 'fassen'—why, the *Miss-sahib* was mistaken. And then with the well-known footfall on the stairs came smiles and flattery. But Kirpo was not at school. Why should she be, seeing that she was a paper-pupil and the prize-giving was over? If the *Miss-sahib* wanted to see her, she had better go round to Gungo's house in the heart of the Hindu quarter. So Julia Smith set off again to thread her way through the by-ways, till she reached the mud steps and closed door which belonged to Kuniya, the head-man of the comb-makers. This ownership had much to do with the English lady's patience in regard to Kirpo who, to tell truth, had been learning the alphabet for five years. But the girl's father-in-law was a man of influence, and Julia's gentle, proselytizing eyes cast glances of longing on every house where she had not as yet found entrance. Hence her reluctance to quarrel definitely with her pupil, or rather her pupil's belongings, since poor Kirpo did not count for much

MUSSUMÂT KIRPO'S DOLL

in that bustling Hindu household. But for the fact that she was useful at the trade and as a general drudge, *Mai Gungo* would long ago have found some excuse for sending the girl, who had so woefully disappointed all expectations, back to her people—those people who had taken the wedding gifts and given a half-crippled, half-silly bride in exchange. Unparalleled effrontery and wickedness, to be avenged on the only head within reach.

'She wants none of your dolls or your books,' shrilled *Mai Gungo*, who was in a bad temper; 'they aren't worth anything, and I expected nothing less than a suit of clothes, or a new veil at least, else would I never have sent her from the comb-making to waste her time. Lo! *Miss-sahib*,'—here the voice changed to a whine—'we are poor folk, and she costs to feed—she who will never do her duty as a wife. Yet must not *Kuniya's* son remain sonless; thus is there the expense of another wife in the future.'

So the complaints went on, while *Kirpo*, in full hearing, sat filing away at the combs without a flicker of expression on her face.

But when *Julia* had settled the business with eight annas from her private pocket, and was once more picking her way through the drain-like alley, she heard limping steps behind her. It was *Kirpo* and the Japanese doll.

'The *Miss-sahib* has forgotten it,' she said stolidly. *Julia Smith* stood in the sunlight, utterly unmindful of a turgid stream of concentrated filth which at that

MUSSUMÂT KIRPO'S DOLL

moment came sweeping along the gutter. Her gentle, womanly eyes saw something she recognized in the child-like, yet unchild-like face looking into hers.

'Would you like to keep it, dear?' she asked gently. Kirpo nodded her head.

'She needn't know,' she explained. 'I could keep it in the cow-shed, and they will sell the book you left for me. They would sell this too. That is why I brought it back.'

This admixture of cunning rather dashed poor Julia's pity; but in the end Kirpo went back to her work with the Japanese doll carefully concealed in her veil, and for the next year Julia Smith never caught sight of it again. Things went on as if it had not been in that straggling Hindu house, with its big courtyard and dark slips of rooms. Perhaps Kirpo got up at night to play with it; perhaps she never played with it at all, but, having wrapped it in a napkin and buried it away somewhere, was content in its possession like the man with his one talent; for this miserliness belongs, as a rule, to those who have few things, not many. Once or twice, when Julia Smith found the opportunity, she would ask after the doll's welfare. Then Kirpo would nod her head mysteriously; but this was not often, for, by degrees, Julia's visits to the house and Kirpo's to the schools became less frequent. The former, because *Mai Gungo's* claims grew intolerable, and the Mission lady had found firm footing in less rapacious houses. The latter, because to *Mai Gungo's* somewhat grudging

MUSSUMÂT KIRPO'S DOLL

relief her daughter-in-law, after nearly four years of married life, seemed disposed to save the family from the expense of another bride by presenting it with a child. Nothing, of course, could alter the fact of the girl's ugliness and stupidity and lameness ; still, if she did her duty in this one point *Mai Gungo* could put up with her, especially as she really did very well at the combs. She was not worked quite so hard now, since that might affect the future promise. Perhaps this gave Kirpo more time to play with the Japanese doll, perhaps it did not. Outwardly, at any rate, life went on in the courtyard as though no such thing existed.

'She may die, the crippled ones often do,' said the gossips, scarcely lowering their voices ; 'but it will be a great saving, *Mai Gungo*, if the grandson comes without another daughter-in-law ; they quarrel so. Besides, it is in God's hands. May He preserve both to you.' *Mai Gungo* echoed the wish, with the reservation that if the whole wish was impossible, the child at least might not suffer. Kirpo herself understood the position perfectly, and felt dimly that if she could do her duty she would be quite content to give up the comb-making once and for all. It was niggly, cramping work to sit with your crippled legs tucked under you, filing away at the hard wood all day long, while mother-in-law bustled about, scolding away in her shrill voice. It had been much greater fun at the school ; and as for the prize-giving days ! Kirpo had four of those red-letter glimpses of the world to

MUSSUMÂT KIRPO'S DOLL

recollect, but she always gave the palm of pleasure to the last, when they had laughed at her and the Japanese doll. Perhaps because she remembered it best ; for, as has been said, poor Kirpo's was not a brilliant intellect.

So just about the time when the Mission House was once more buying large consignments of dolls and books, and laying in yards on yards of cotton trousering and Manchester veiling against another prize-giving, the mistress of the little school-room up two pairs of stairs said to Julia Smith :

' Kirpo had a son last week. *Mai Gungo* hath given many offerings in thanksgiving.'

' And Kirpo herself ? '

' She ails, they say ; but that is likely. The hour of danger is over.'

That same afternoon Julia Smith once more picked her way along the gutters to the mud steps and closed door of Kuniya's house. Kirpo was lying alone on a bed in the shadow of a grass thatch.

' And where is the baby ? ' asked Julia, cheerfully.

' Mother-in-law hath it. 'Tis a son—doubtless the Miss hath heard so.' There was the oddest mixture of pride and regret in the girl's dull face.

' She will let thee have it when thou art stronger,' said her visitor quickly. ' Thou must give me back the dolly, Kirpo, now thou hast a live one of thine own.'

The girl's head shifted uneasily on the hard pillow.

' Ay ! and the prize-giving day must be close, I have

MUSSUMÂT KIRPO'S DOLL

been thinking. If the Miss-*sahib* will look behind the straw yonder she will find the doll. It is not hurt. And the Miss can give it to someone else. I don't want it any more. She might give it to a little girl this time. She could play with it.'

'*Mai Gungo*,' said Julia severely, as, on her way out, she found the mother-in-law surrounded by her gossips, exhibiting the baby to them with great pride, 'you must look to Kirpo; she thrives not. And give her the baby—she pines after it.'

'The Miss doth not understand,' flounced Gungo. 'What can Kirpo do with a baby? She is a fool; besides, a mother like that hath evil influences till the time of purification hath passed.'

Ten days afterwards the mistress of the school told Julia that Kirpo had the fever, and they did not think she would recover. It was never safe for such as she to have sons, and nothing else was to be expected.

Perhaps it was not; for Julia found her on the bare ground of the courtyard where she had been set to die. The oil lamps flared smokily at her head and her feet, and *Mai Gungo*, with the fortnight-old baby in her arms, cried '*Râm! Râm!*' lustily. But the girl lingered in life, turning her head restlessly from side to side on Mother Earth's bosom.

'Give her the baby—only for a minute,' pleaded Julia, with tears in her eyes. *Mai Gungo* frowned; but a neighbour broke in hastily—

'Ay! give it to her, gossip, lest in her evil ways she returns for it when she is dead.'

MUSSUMÂT KIRPO'S DOLL

So they laid the baby beside her ; but the restless head went on turning restlessly from side to side.

' My doll ! my doll ! I like my doll best.'

Before they could fetch it from the Mission House, Kirpo was dead.

THE FOOTSTEP OF DEATH

Godliness is great riches if a man be content with what he hath.

THESE words invariably carry me back in the spirit to a certain avenue of *shesham* trees I knew in India ; an avenue six miles long, leading through barren sandy levels to the river which divided civilization from the frontier wilds ; an avenue like the aisle of a great cathedral with tall straight trunks for columns, and ribbed branches sweeping up into a vaulted roof set with starry glints of sunshine among the green fretwork of the leaves. Many a time as I walked my horse over its chequered pavement of shade and shine I have looked out sideways on the yellow glare of noon beyond in grateful remembrance of the man who—Heaven knows when !—planted this refuge for unborn generations of travellers. Not a bad monument to leave behind one among forgetful humanity.

The avenue itself, for all its contenting shade, had nothing to do with the text which brings it to memory—that co-ordination being due to an old *fakcer* who sat at the river end, where, without even a warning brake, the aisle ended in a dazzling glare of sand-bank. This sudden change no doubt accounted for the fact

THE FOOTSTEP OF DEATH

that on emerging from the shade I always seemed to see a faint, half-hearted mirage of the still unseen river beyond. An elusive mirage, distinct in the first surprise of its discovery, vanishing when the attention sought for it. Altogether a disturbing phenomenon, refusing to be verified ; for the only man who could have spoken positively on the subject was the old *fakeer*, and he was stone-blind. His face gave evidence of the cause in the curious puffiness and want of expression which confluent small-pox often leaves behind it. In this case it had played a sorrier jest with the human face divine than usual, by placing a fat bloated mask wearing a perpetual smirk of content on the top of a mere anatomy of a body. The result was odd. For the rest a very ordinary *fakeer*, cleaner than most by reason of the reed broom at his side, which proclaimed him a member of the sweeper, or lowest, caste ; in other words, one of those who at least gain from their degradation the possibility of living cleanly without the aid of others. There are many striking points about our Indian Empire ; none perhaps more so, and yet less considered, than the disabilities which caste brings in its train—the impossibility, for instance, of having your floor swept unless Providence provides a man made on purpose. My *fakeer*, however, was of those to whom cleanliness and not godliness is the reason of existence.

That was why his appeal for alms, while it took a religious turn as was necessary, displayed also a truly catholic toleration. It consisted of a single monotonous

THE FOOTSTEP OF DEATH

cry: 'In the name of your own Saint,'—or, as it might be translated, 'In the name of your own God.' It thrilled me oddly every time I heard it by its contented acquiescence in the fact that the scavenger's god was not a name wherewith to conjure charity. What then? The passer-by could give in the name of his particular deity and let the minor prophets go.

The plan seemed successful, for the wooden bowl, placed within the clean-swept ring bordered by its edging of dust or mud, wherein he sat winter and summer, was never empty, and his cry, if monotonous, was cheerful. Not ten yards from his station beneath the last tree, the road ended in a deep cutting, through which a low-level bed of water flowed to irrigate a basin of alluvial land to the south; but a track, made passable for carts by tiger-grass laid athwart the yielding sand, skirted the cut to reach a ford higher up. A stiff bit for the straining bullocks, so all save the drivers took the short cut by the plank serving as a footbridge. It served also as a warning to the blind *fakcer*, without which many a possible contributor to the bowl might have passed unheard and unsolicited over the soft sand. As it was, the first creak of the plank provoked his cry.

It was not, however, till I had passed the old man many times in my frequent journeyings across the river that I noticed two peculiarities in his method. He never begged of me or any other European who chanced that way, nor of those coming from the city

THE FOOTSTEP OF DEATH

to the river. The latter might be partly set down to the fact that from his position he could not hear their footsteps on the bridge till after they had passed ; but the former seemed unaccountable ; and one day when the red-funnelled steam ferry-boat, which set its surroundings so utterly at defiance, was late, I questioned him on the subject.

‘ You lose custom, surely, by seeking the shade ? ’ I began. ‘ If you were at the other side of the cut you would catch those who come from the city. They are the richest.’

As he turned his closed eyes towards me with a grave obeisance which did not match the jaunty content of his mask, he looked—sitting in the centre of his swept circle—ludicrously like a figure on a bazaar penwiper.

‘ The Presence mistakes,’ he replied. ‘ Those who come from the town have empty wallets. ’Tis those who come from the wilderness who give.’

‘ But you never beg of me, whether I go or come. Why is that ? ’

‘ I take no money, *Huzoor* ; it is of no use to me. The *sahibs* carry no food with them ; not even tobacco, only cheroots.’

The evident regret in the latter half of his sentence amused me. ‘ ’Tis you who mistake, *fakeer-ji*,’ I replied, taking out my pouch. ‘ I am of those who smoke pipes. And now tell me why you refuse money ; most of your kind are not so self-denying.’

THE FOOTSTEP OF DEATH

‘That is easy to explain. Some cannot eat what is given; with me it is the other way. As my lord knows, we dust-like ones eat most things your God has made. But we cannot eat money, perhaps because He did not make it—so the *padres* say.’

‘Ah! you are learned; but you can always buy.’

‘Begging is easier. See! my bowl is full, and the munificent offering of the Presence is enough for two pipes. What more do I want?’

Viewed from his standpoint the question was a hard one to answer. The sun warmed him, the leaves sheltered him, the passers-by nourished him, all apparently to his utmost satisfaction. I felt instinctively that the state of his mind was the only refuge for the upholders of civilization and a high standard of comfort. So I asked him what he thought about all day long. His reply brought total eclipse to all my lights.

‘*Huzoor!*’ he said gravely, ‘I meditate on the Beauty of Holiness.’

It was then that the text already quoted became indissolubly mixed up with the spreading *shesham* branches, the glare beyond, and that life-sized pen-wiper in the foreground. I whistled the refrain of a music-hall song and pretended to light my pipe. ‘How long have you been here?’ I asked, after a time, during which he sat still as a graven image with his closed eyes towards the uncertain mirage of the river.

THE FOOTSTEP OF DEATH

' 'Tis nigh on thirty years, my lord, since I have been waiting.'

' Waiting for what? '

' For the Footstep of Death—hark! ' he paused suddenly, and a tremor came to his closed eyelids as he gave the cry: ' In the name of your God! '

The next instant a faint creak told me that the first passenger from the newly arrived ferry-boat had set foot on the bridge. ' You have quick ears, *fakeer-ji*,' I remarked.

' I live on footsteps, my lord.'

' And when the Footstep of Death comes, you will die of one, I presume! '

He turned his face towards me quickly; it gave me quite a shock to find a pair of clear, light-brown eyes looking at, or rather beyond, me. From his constantly closed lids I had imagined that—as is so often the case in small-pox—the organs of sight were hopelessly diseased or altogether destroyed; indeed I had been grateful for the concealment of a defect out of which many beggars would have made capital. But these eyes were apparently as perfect as my own, and extraordinarily clear and bright—so clear that it seemed to me as if they did not even hold a shadow of the world around them. The surprise made me forget my first question in another.

' *Huzoor!* ' he replied, ' I am quite blind. The Light came from the sky one day and removed the Light I had before. It was a bad thunder-storm, *Huzoor*; at least, being the last this slave saw, he

THE FOOTSTEP OF DEATH

deems it bad. But it is time the Great Judge took his exalted presence to yonder snorting demon of a boat, for it is ill-mannered, waiting for none. God knows wherefore it should hurry so. The river remains always, and sooner or later the screeching thing sticks on a sand-bank.'

'True enough,' I replied, laughing. 'Well, *salaam, fakeer-ji.*'

'*Salaam*, Shelter of the World. May the God of gods elevate your honour to the post of Lieutenant-Governor without delay.'

After this I often stopped to say a few words to the old man and give him a pipeful of tobacco. For the ferry-boat fulfilled his prophecy of its future to a nicety, by acquiring intimate acquaintance with every shallow in the river—a habit fatal to punctuality. It was an odd sight lying out, so trim and smart, in the wastes of sand and water. Red funnels standing up from among Beluchis and their camels, bullocks scarred by the plough, *zenana*-women huddled in helpless white heaps, wild frontiersmen squatted on the saddle-bags with which a sham orientalism has filled our London drawing-rooms. Here and there a dejected half-caste or a specimen of young India brimful of *The Spectator*. Over all, on the bridge, Captain Ram Baksh struggling with a double nature, represented on the one side by his nautical pea-coat, on the other by his baggy Indian trousers. 'Ease her! stop her! hard astern! full speed ahead!' All the shibboleths, even to the monotonous '*ba-la-mar-do*'

THE FOOTSTEP OF DEATH

(by the mark two) of the leadsman forr'ards. Then, suddenly, overboard goes science and with it a score of lascars and passengers, who, knee-deep in the ruddy stream, set their backs lazily against the side, and the steam ferry-boat *Pioneer*, built at Barrow-in-Furness with all the latest improvements, sidles off her sand-bank in the good old legitimate way sanctioned by centuries of river usage. To return, however, to *fakeer-ji*. I found him as full of trite piety as a copy-book, and yet, for all that, the fragments of his history, with which he interlarded these common-places, seemed to me well worth consideration. Imagine a man born of a long line of those who have swept the way for princes—who have, as it were, prepared God's earth for over-refined footsteps. That, briefly, had been *fakeer-ji*'s inheritance before he began to wait for the Footstep of Death. Whatever it may do to the imagination of others, the position appealed to mine strongly, the more so because, while speaking freely enough about the family of decayed kings to whom he and his forbears had belonged, and of the ruined palace they still possessed in the oldest part of the city, he was singularly reticent as to the cause which had turned him into a religious beggar. For the rest he waited in godliness and contentment (or so he assured me) for the Footstep of Death.

The phrase grew to be quite a catch-word between us. 'Not come yet, *fakeer-ji*?' I would call as I trotted past after a few days' absence.

THE FOOTSTEP OF DEATH

'*Huzoor!* I am still waiting. It will come some time.'

One night in the rains word came from a contractor over the water that a new canal-dam of mine showed signs of giving, and, anxious to be on the spot, I set off at once to catch the midnight ferry-boat. I shall not soon forget that ride through the *shesham* aisle. The floods were out, and for the best part of the way a level sheet of water gleaming in the moonlight lay close up to the embankment of the avenue, which seemed more than ever like a dim colonnade leading to an unseen Holy of Holies. Not a breath of wind, not a sound save the rustle of birds in the branches overhead, and suddenly, causelessly, a snatch of song hushed in its first notes, as if the singer found it too light for sleep, too dark for song. The beat of my horse's feet seemed to keep time with the stars twinkling through the leaves.

I was met at the road's end by the unwelcome news that at least two hours must elapse ere the *Pioneer* could be got off a newly invented mudbank which the river had maliciously placed in a totally unexpected place. Still more unwelcome was the discovery that, in my hurry, I had left my tobacco-pouch behind me. Nothing could be done save to send my groom back with the pony and instructions for immediate return with the forgotten luxury. After which I strolled over towards my friend the *fakeer*, who sat ghostlike in the moonlight with his bowl full to the brim in front of him. 'That snorting devil behaves worse every day,'

THE FOOTSTEP OF DEATH

he said fervently ; ' but if the Shelter of the Poor will tarry a twinkling I will sweep him a spot suitable for his exalted presence.'

Blind as he was, his dexterous broom had traced another circle of cleanliness in a trice, a new reed-mat, no bigger than a handkerchief, was placed in the centre, and I was being invited to ornament just such another penwiper as the *fakcer* occupied himself. ' Mercy,' he continued, as I took my seat, shifting the mat so as to be able to lean my back against the tree, ' blesses both him who gives, and those who take,' (even Shakespeare, it will be observed, yields at times to platitude). ' For see,' he added solemnly, producing something from a hollow in the root, ' the Presence's own tobacco returns to the Presence's pipe.'

Sure enough it was genuine Golden Cloud, and the relief overpowered me. There I was after a space half-lying, half-sitting in the clean warm sand, my hands clasped at the back of my head as I looked up into the shimmering light and shade of the leaves.

' Upon my soul I envy you, *fakcer-ji*. We who go to bed at set times and seasons don't know the world we live in.'

' Religion is its own reward,' remarked the graven image beside me, for he had gone back to his penwiper by this time. But I was talking more to myself than to him, in the half-drowsy excitement of physical pleasure, so I went on unheeding.

THE FOOTSTEP OF DEATH

' Was there ever such a night since the one Jessica looked upon ! and what a scent there is in the air—orange blossoms or something ! '

' It is a tree farther up the water-cut, *Huzoor*, a hill tree. The river may have brought the seed ; it happens so sometimes. Or the birds may have brought it from the city. There was a tree of the kind in a garden there. A big tree with large white flowers ; so large that you can hear them fall.'

The graven image sat so still with its face to the river, that it seemed to me as if the voice I heard could not belong to it. A dreamy sense of unreality added to my drowsy enjoyment of the surroundings.

' Magnolia,' I murmured sleepily ; ' a flower to dream about—hullo ! what's that ? '

A faint footfall, as of someone passing down an echoing passage, loud, louder, loudest, making me start up, wide awake, as the *fakcer's* cry rose on the still air : ' In the name of your God ! '

Someone was passing the bridge from the river, and after adding his mite to the bowl, went on his way.

' It is the echo, *Huzoor*,' explained the old man, answering my start of surprise. ' The tree behind us is hollow and the cut is deep. Besides, to-night the water runs deep and dark as Death because of the flood. The step is always louder then.'

' No wonder you hear so quickly,' I replied, sinking back again to my comfort. ' I thought it must be the Footstep of Death at least.'

THE FOOTSTEP OF DEATH

He had turned towards me, and in the moonlight I could see those clear eyes of his shining as if the light had come into them again.

‘Not yet, *Huzoor!* But it may be the next one for all we know.’

What a gruesome idea! Hark! There it was again; loud, louder, loudest, and then silence.

‘That came from the city, *Huzoor*. It comes and goes often, for the law-courts have it in grip. Perhaps that is worse than Death.’

‘Then you recognize footsteps?’

‘Surely. No two men walk the same; a footstep is as a face. Sometimes after long years it comes back, and then you know it has passed before.’

‘Do they generally come back?’

‘Those from the city go back sooner or later unless Death takes them. Those from the wilderness do not always return. The city holds them fast, in the palace or in the gutter.’

Again the voice seemed to me not to belong to the still figure beside me. ‘It makes a devilish noise, I admit,’ I said, half to myself; ‘but——’

‘Perhaps if the *Huzoor* listened for Death as I do he might keep awake. Or perhaps if my lord pleases I might tell him a story of footsteps to drive the idle dreams from his brain till the hour of that snorting demon comes in due time?’

‘Go ahead,’ said I briefly, as I looked up at the stars.

THE FOOTSTEP OF DEATH

So he began. 'It's a small story, *Huzoor*. A tale of footsteps from beginning to end, for I am blind. Yet life was not always listening. They used to say that Cheytu had the longest sight, the longest legs, and the longest wind of any boy of his age. I was Cheytu.' He paused, and I watched a dancing shadow of a leaf till he went on. 'The little princess said Cheytu had the longest tongue too, for I used to sit in the far corner by the pillar beyond her carpet and tell her stories. She used to call for Cheytu all day long. "Cheytu, smooth the ground for Aimna's feet"—"Cheytu, sweep the dead flowers from Aimna's path"—"Cheytu, fan the flies from Aimna's doll,"—for naturally, *Huzoor*, Cheytu the sweeper did not fan the flies from the little princess herself; that was not his work. I belonged to her footsteps. I was up before dawn sweeping the arcades of the old house ready for them, and late at night it was my work to gather the dust of them and the dead flowers she had played with, and bury them away in the garden out of sight.'

A dim perception that this was strange talk for a sweeper made me murmur sleepily, 'That was very romantic of you, Cheytu.' On the other hand, it fitted my environment so admirably that the surprise passed almost as it came.

'She was a real princess, the daughter of kings who had been—God knows when! It is written doubtless somewhere. Yes! a real princess, though she could barely walk, and the track of her little feet was often

THE FOOTSTEP OF DEATH

broken by handmarks in the dust. For naturally, *Huzoor*, the dust might help her, but not I, Cheytu, who swept it for her steps. That was my task till the day of the thunder-storm. The house seemed dead of the heat. Not a breath of life anywhere, so at sundown they set her to sleep on the topmost roof under the open sky. Her nurse, full of frailty as women are, crept down while the child slept, to work evil to mankind as women will. *Huzoor*, it was a bad storm. The red clouds had hung over us all day long, joining the red dust from below so that it came unawares at last, splitting the air and sending a great ladder of light down the roof.

“ ‘ Aimna ! Aimna ! ’ ” cried someone. I was up first and had her in my arms ; for see you, *Huzoor*, it was life or death, and the dead belong to us whether they be kings or slaves. It was out on the bare steps, and she sleeping sound as children sleep, that the light came. The light of a thousand days in my eyes and on her face. It was the last thing I saw, *Huzoor*—the very last thing Cheytu the sweeper ever saw.

‘ But I could hear. I could hear her calling, and I knew how her face must be changing by the change in her voice. And then one day I found myself sweeping the house against her wedding-feast ; heard her crying amongst her girl friends in the inner room. What then ? Girls always cry at their weddings. I went with her, of course, to the new life, because I had swept the way for her ever since she could walk, and she

THE FOOTSTEP OF DEATH

needed me more than ever in a strange house. It was a fine rich house, with marble floors and a marble summer-house on the roof above her rooms. People said she had made a good bargain with her beauty ; perhaps, but that child's face that I saw in the light was worth more than money, *Huzoor*. She had ceased crying by this time, for she had plenty to amuse her. Singers and players, and better story-tellers than Cheytu the sweeper. It was but fair, for look you, her man had many more wives to amuse him. I used to hear the rustle of her long silk garments, the tinkle of her ornaments, and the cadence of her laughter. Girls ought to laugh, *Huzoor*, and it was spring-time, when the rain turns dry sand to grass and the roses race the jasmine for the first blossom. The tree your honour called magnolia grew in the women's court, and some of the branches spread over the marble summer-house almost hiding it from below. Others again formed a screen against the blank white wall of the next house. The flowers smelt so strong that I wondered how she could bear to sleep amongst them in the summer-house. Even in my place below on the stones of the courtyard they kept me awake. People said I had fever, but it was not that—only the scent of the flowers. I lay awake one dark, starless night, and then I first heard the footstep, if it was a footstep—loud, louder, loudest ; then a silence save for the patter of the falling flowers. I heard it often after that, and always when it had passed the flowers fell. They fell about the summer-house too, and in the morning I

THE FOOTSTEP OF DEATH

used to sweep them into a heap and fling them over the parapet. But one day, *Huzoor*, they fell close at hand, and my groping fingers seeking the cause found a plank placed bridge-wise amongst the branches. *Huzoor!* was there any wonder the flowers fell all crushed and broken? That night I listened again, and again the footsteps came amid a shower of blossoms. What was to be done? Her women were as women are, and the others were jealous already. Next day when I went to sweep I strewed the fallen flowers thick, thick as a carpet round her bed; for she had quick wits I knew.

“Cheytu! Cheytu!”

‘The old call came as I knew it would, and thinking of that little child’s face in the light I went up to her boldly.

“My princess,” I said in reply to her question as I bent over the flowers, “’tis the footstep makes them fall so thick. If it is your pleasure I will bid it cease. They may hurt your feet.”

‘I knew from her silence she understood. Suddenly she laughed; such a girl’s laugh.

“Flowers are soft to tread upon, Cheytu. Go! you need sweep for me no more.”

‘I laughed too as I went. Not sweep for her when she only knew God’s earth after I had made it ready for her feet! It was a woman’s idle word, but, woman-like, she would think and see wisdom for herself.

‘That night I listened once more. The footstep

THE FOOTSTEP OF DEATH

must come once I knew—just once, and after that wisdom and safety. *Huzoor!* it came, and the flowers fell softly. But wisdom was too late. I tried to get at her to save her from their pitiless justice. I heard her cries for mercy ; I heard her cry even for Cheytu the sweeper before they flung me from the steps where the twinkling lights went up and down as if the very stars from the sky had come to spy on her. What did they do to her ? What did they do to her while I lay crushed among the crushed flowers ? Who knows ? It is often done, my lord, behind the walls. She died ; that is all I know, that is all I cared for. When I came back to life she was dead, and the footstep had fled from revenge. It had friends over the border where it could pause in safety till the tale was forgotten. Such things are forgotten quickly, my lord, because the revenge must be secret as the wrong ; else it is shame, and shame must not come nigh good families. But the blind do not forget easily ; perhaps they have less to remember. Could I forget the child's face in the light ? As I told the Presence, those who go from the city come back to it sooner or later unless Death takes them first. So I wait for the Footstep—hark ! ’

Loud—louder—loudest : ‘ In the name of your own God.’

* * * * *

Did I wake with the cry ? Or did I only open my eyes to see a glimmer of dawn paling the sky, the birds

THE FOOTSTEP OF DEATH

shifting in the branches, the old man seated bolt upright in his penwiper ?

‘ That was the first passenger, *Huzoor*,’ he said quietly. ‘ The boat has come. It is time your honour conferred dignity on ill manners by joining it.’

‘ But the footstep ! the princess ! you were telling me just now——’

‘ What does a sweeper know of princesses, my lord ? The Presence slept, and doubtless he dreamed dreams. The tobacco——’

He paused. ‘ Well,’ said I, curiously.

‘ *Huzoor* ! this slave steeps his tobacco in the sleep-compeller. It gives great contentment.’

I looked down at my pipe. It was but half-smoked through. Was this really the explanation ?

‘ But the echo ? ’ I protested. ‘ I heard it but now.’

‘ Of a truth there is an echo. That is not a dream. For the rest it is well. The time has passed swiftly, the *Huzoor* is rested, his servant has returned, the boat has come—all in contentment. The Shelter of the World can proceed on his journey in peace, and return in peace.’

‘ Unless the Footstep of Death overtakes me meanwhile,’ said I, but half-satisfied.

‘ *Huzoor* ! It never overtakes the just. Death and the righteous look at each other in the face as friends. When the Footstep comes I will go to meet it, and so will you. Hark ! the demon screeches. Peace go with you, my lord.’

About a year after this the daily police reports

THE FOOTSTEP OF DEATH

brought me the news that my friend the old *fakeer* had been found dead in the water-cut. An unusually heavy flood had undermined the banks and loosened the bridge; it must have fallen while the old man was on it, for his body was jammed against the plank which had stuck across the channel a little way down the stream. He had kept his word and gone to meet the Footstep. A certain unsatisfied curiosity, which had never quite left me since that night in the rains, made me accompany the doctor when, as in duty bound, he went to the dead-house to examine the body. The smiling mask was unchanged, but the eyes were open, and looked somehow less empty dead than in the almost terrible clearness of life. The right hand was fast clenched over something.

‘Only a crushed magnolia blossom,’ said the doctor, gently unclasping the dead fingers. ‘Poor beggar! it must have been floating in the water—there’s a tree up the cut; I’ve often smelt it from the road. Drowning men—you know the rest.’

Did I? The coincidence was, to say the least of it, curious. It became more curious still when, three weeks afterwards, the unrecognizable body of a man was found half-buried in the silt left in the alluvial basin by the subsiding floods—a man of more than middle age, whose right hand was clenched tight, over nothing.

So the question remains. Did I dream that night, or did the Footstep of Death bring revenge when it came over the bridge at last? I have never been

THE FOOTSTEP OF DEATH

able to decide ; and the only thing which remains sure is the figure of the old *fakcer* with blind eyes, looking out on the uncertain mirage of the river and waiting in godliness and contentment—for what ?

AN APPRECIATED RUPEE

SHE was a poor Mahomedan widow, and lived in an inconceivable sort of burrow under the tall winding stair of a big tenement house, which in its turn was hidden away in a long, winding, sunless alley. The stair centred round a sort of shaft, barred at each story by iron gratings, narrow enough to admit of refuse being thrown down—the shaft being, briefly, the rubbish shoot of the building, so that old Maimuna—who seldom left her seclusion till the evening—had, in passing to and fro, to step over quite a pile of radish parings, cauliflower stalks, fluff, rags—a whole day's sweepings and leavings of the folk higher up in the world than she.

And even when she reached the odd-shaped cell of a place, whose only furniture consisted of a rickety bed with string-halt in two of its emaciated legs, a low stool and a spinning-wheel, she was not free from her neighbours' off-scourings ; for down the wall beside the low latticed window, where, perforce, she had to set her spinning-wheel, crept a slimy black streak of sewage from above, which smelt horribly, on its way to join the open drain in the middle of the alley. Yet here Maimuna Begum, Pathani from Kasur, had lived for fifteen years of childless widowhood ; lived far away

from her home and people, too poor to rejoin them, too ignorant to hold her own among strangers. For she had been that most intolerable of interlopers—the wife of a man's old age. Not a suitable wife bringing a dower into the family ; but one who, as a widow, might—unless the other heirs took active measures to prevent it—claim her portion of one-sixth for life. A wife, too, without a pretence of any position save that of the strictest seclusion ; a seclusion so untouched by modern latitude as to be in itself second-rate. Without good looks also, and married simply and solely because old Jehan Latif had fancied some quail curry which he had eaten when business called him to Kasur, and, as the best way of securing repetition of the delicacy, had married the compounder and carried her back to Lucknow ; where, to tell truth, he found more attractions in the cook than he had anticipated when he paid a good round sum for his middle-aged bride. For Maimuna was a good woman—kindly, gentle, pious—who had lived discreetly in her father's house, and helped to cook quail curry for that somewhat dissolute old swashbuckler ever since, as a girl of twelve, her husband had died before she had even seen him.

So, while she pounded the spices and boned the quails (since that was one of the refinements of the *bonne-bouche*) for old Jehan Latif, Maimuna used sometimes to think, with a kind of wondering regret, what life would have been like if the husband of her youth had not died of the measles ; but, being conscientious,

she never allowed the tears to drop into the quail curry.

It was no carelessness of hers, therefore, which led to fat Jehan Latif falling into a fit shortly after partaking of his favourite dish, which for ten years she had dutifully prepared for him. But his heirs (who had had all these years in which to cook their accounts of the matter) treated her as if it were. There is no need to enter into details. Those who know India know how unscrupulous heirs can oppress a strange lone woman—ignorant, secluded; a woman whose position as wife has from the first been cavilled at, resented, impugned. It is sufficient to say that Maimuna, after a few feeble protests, found herself in the little cell under the stairs, earning a few farthings by her spinning-wheel, and thankful that her great skill at it kept her from that last resort of deserted womanhood in India—the grindstone. Even so, it was hard at times to wait till there was sufficient thread in the percentage she got back for her spinning, to make it worth while for the merchant to buy it from her, or for her to break in, by a cash transaction, on the curious succession of cotton bought, and thread returned, without a coin changing hands. And this winter it was harder than ever, for the unusual cold made her fingers stiff, and sent shoots of rheumatism up her arm as she sat spinning in the ray of light which came in with the smell.

It was very cold indeed that New Year's afternoon, and Maimuna felt more than usually down-hearted; for there had been a death upstairs, and she knew that

the stamping and shufflings she could hear coming rhythmically downwards over her head were the feet of those carrying a corpse. Now, weary and worn as she was, Maimuna—between the fifties and sixties—did not yet feel inclined to fold her hands and give in. Even now it needed a very little thing to bring a smile to her face ; and once, when a child had fallen downstairs, she had surprised the neighbours by her alert decision. So that when she heard girls' shrill voices in half-giggling alarm through her door—which was ajar—she guessed at the cause, and called to the owners to come in until the stairs should be clear.

One (a slip of a thing ten years old) she knew as the daughter of a gold-thread worker higher up the stairs ; the other (not more than five or six) was a stranger ; a fat broad-faced morsel, with a stolid look, and something held very tight in one small chubby hand. She was dressed in the cleanest of new clothes, scanty of stuff, but gay, with a yard or two of tinsel on her scrap of a veil. Maimuna paused in the whirr and hum of her wheel to look at the children wistfully ; her own childlessness had always seemed a crime to her.

'It is Fatma, the pen-maker's girl, mother,' said the gold-worker's daughter, patronizingly. 'She is just back from the Missen School, where they have been having a big festival because it is the *sabib* people's big day.'

'Tchuk,' dissented the solemn-faced baby, clucking her tongue in emphatic denial. 'It is not the Big Day. It is because *Malika* Victoria is—is——' The

solemnity merged in confusion, finally into a sort of appealing defiance : ' Is—is—*that*——'

She unclasped her fist, and held out a brand new shining silver two-anna bit. It was one of those struck when her Majesty the Queen assumed the Imperial title.

The gold-worker's daughter giggled. ' She means Wictoria Kaiser-i-hind you know. What the guns were about this morning. They are to go off every year, they say. That will be fun !'

' But why ?' asked Maimuna, puzzled. Her life for close on five-and-twenty years had been spent in the cooking of quail curry and spinning of cotton—the very Mutiny had passed by unknown to her. She had heard vaguely of the Queen, and knew that it was her head on the rupee which, despite the hard times, she always wore on a black silk skein round her neck, because she had worn it since her babyhood, when the parents of the boy who had died of the measles had sent it her ; but what the Queen had to do with John Company Bahadar, or he to her, was a mystery.

' Why,' giggled the elder girl, ' because she is going to be the King, and turn all the men out. That is what father says. He says she is sure to favour the women, and I think that will be fun. But Fatma knows it all. Come ! dear one ! Sing Maimuna that song the *Miss-sahibs* made the schools sing to-day. Sing it soft, close, close up to her ear, so that no one may hear it—for they don't like her singing, you know, at home, *Mai* : it isn't respectable.'

AN APPRECIATED RUPEE

So, standing on tiptoe, steadying herself against Maimuna's arm by the hand which held the two-anna bit, Fatma began in a most unmelodious whisper to chant a Hindee version of 'God Save our Gracious Queen.' The words as well as the tune were a difficulty to the fat, solemn-faced child, but the old woman sat listening and looking at the two-anna bit with a new interest, a new wonder in her weary eyes.

'Bismillah!' she said, half-way through, when the gold-worker's daughter, becoming impatient, declared the corpse must have passed, and dragged Fatma off incontinently. 'And she is a woman—only a woman!'

The girls paused at the door; the elder to nod and giggle, the younger to stand sedate and solemn, wagging one small forefinger backwards and forwards in negation.

'Tchuk! you shouldn't say that, *Mai!* Little girls are made of sugar and spice. It is little boys that are made nasty—the Miss says so.'

'She should not say so,' faltered Maimuna, aghast. The very idea was preposterous, upsetting her whole cosmogony; but when they had closed the door, she sat idle, too astonished to work. Then, suddenly, she took off the black silk hank with its precious rupee, and looked at the woman's head at the back.

It was a young woman there; young and unveiled—strange, incomprehensible! But that other on the two-anna bit had been an old woman, more decently dressed, and with a crown on her head.

'Frustrate their knavish tricks.'

AN APPRECIATED RUPEE

Fatma's song returned to memory. So the Queen, too, had enemies ; and yet she was Kaiser-i-hind, and, what is more, she made men like the gold-thread worker upstairs tremble !

' On thee our hopes we fix ! '

* * * * *

Maimuna sat, and sat, and sat, looking at that rupee.

* * * * *

It was a day or two after this that an English official was sitting smoking in his verandah, when he became aware of a whispered colloquy behind him. It was someone, no doubt, trying, through the red-coated orderly, to gain an audience of him ; and he was newly back from office, tired, impatient, perhaps, of the hopelessness of doing justice always. So he took no notice till something roused him to a swift turn, a swifter question. ' What's that, orderly ? ' *That* was the unmistakable chink of fallen silver, the unmistakable whirr of a running rupee, the unmistakable buzzing ring of its settling to rest. And there, midway between a giving and a taking hand, lay the rupee itself—the Queen's head uppermost.

' Your Honour ! ' explained the orderly glibly, ' your slave was virtuously refusing ; he was sending this ill-bred one away. Go ! old woman ! Go ! '

But the sight of that head on the precious rupee, which, after many heartsearchings, poor Maimuna had determined to risk in this effort to gain justice from an old woman like herself, whose enemies also had

AN APPRECIATED RUPEE

knavish tricks, brought courage to the old heart, and she stood her ground.

‘ Protector of the Poor ! ’ she said quietly, with her best *salaam*—and in the old Pathan house they had taught manners, if nothing else—‘ Little Fatma, the pen-maker’s daughter, says that Wictoria Kaiser-i-hind is an old woman like me, and so I have fixed my hopes on her. There is my rupee. It is all I have, and I want my widow’s portion.’

* * * * *

And she got it. It happened years ago, but the story is worth telling to-day, when women can no longer sing ‘ God Save the Queen.’

THE FLATTERER FOR GAIN

PREM LAL, census enumerator raised to that fleeting dignity by reason of his being a ' middle fail ' student (as those who have at least gone up for the Middle School examination style themselves in India), paused in his ineffectual attempt to write with a fine steel nib on the fluttering blue paper held—without any backing—in his left hand, and, all unconsciously, gave the offending pen that sidelong, blot-scattering flick which the native reed requires when it will not drive properly.

Then he coughed a deprecating cough, and covered the previous act—natural enough in one whose ancestors, being of the clerkly caste, had spent long centuries in acquiring and transmitting it—by displaying his Western culture in another way.

' Now for the next " adult " or " adulteress " in this house,' he said pompously in polyglot.

The grammatical correctness of his genders passed unchallenged by his half-curious, half-awe-stricken audience. The blue paper, ruled, scheduled, classified, contained an unknown world to that patriarchal party assembled in the sleepy sunshine which streamed down on the roof set—far above the city, far above Western civilization—under the sleepy sunshiny sky ; so it

THE FLATTERER FOR GAIN

might well hold stranger things to its environment than untrustworthy feminines.

'There is the grandfather's father, Chiragh Shah, Huzoor,' replied a man of about thirty who, standing midway between the real householder and his grandsons, had assumed the responsibility of spokesmanship in virtue of his possibly combining old wisdom and new culture. He used the honorific title 'Huzoor' not to Prem Lal—whom he gauged scornfully to be a mere schoolboy, and a Hindoo idolater to boot—but to the blue paper which represented the alien rulers, who were numbering the people for reasons best known to themselves.

A stir came from the door-chink behind which the females of the family were decorously hiding their indignant anxiety.

'Yea! let the old man go forth,' shrilled a voice to which none in that household ever said nay. 'He is past his time—let them take his brains if they will, and leave virtuous women alone. Who are we, to be registered as common evil walkers?'

Even Prem Lal grew humble instantly.

'Nay! mother,' he said apologetically, in unconscious oblivion of his own previous classification. 'The Sirkar suggests no impropriety. We seek but to know such trivials as age—sex—if idiot, cripple, spinster, adult or adult—'

'Let Chiragh Shah go forth to him,' interrupted the hidden oracle with opportune decision. 'Lo! his

THE FLATTERER FOR GAIN

midday opium is still in his brain. Let it bring peace to him and the eater thereof.'

The chink widened obediently, disclosing a fluttering and scattering of dim draperies. So, roused evidently from a doze in the inner darkness, a very old man shuffled out into the sunshine, then stopped, blinking at it as if, verily, he found himself in some new and unfamiliar world.

'The Sirkar hath sent for thee, grandad,' bawled the appointed spokesman in his ear. 'They need——'

But the words were enough. The blank, dazed look passed into a sudden alacrity which took years from the old body as it set it a-trembling with eagerness.

'The Sirkar,' he echoed. 'It is long since I, Chiragh Shah—long since——' He relapsed as suddenly into dreams. His voice failed as if following the suit of memory, but he supplied the lack of both by a smile which spoke volumes.

For it was the smile of a sycophant as unblushingly false as the teeth which it displayed—teeth which were square, dicelike blocks of ivory, unvarying in size, strung together on a bold gold wire, and hung—Heaven knows how—to his toothless gums.

'Sit down, *meeân-jee*,' said the census enumerator, politely, for the heart-whole artificiality of the smile admitted of no breach of manners. 'We seek but honourable names and ages.'

So they brought the old man a quaint red lacquered stool, which had once carried a certain dignity in its

THE FLATTERER FOR GAIN

spindled back rail by reason of its having come into the family with some far dead and gone bride—Chiragh Shah's own, mayhap!—and there he sate, still with that look of urbane smiling alacrity rejuvenating his wrinkled face.

There was a hint, beneath the semi-transparency of his frayed white muslin robe, cut in a bygone fashion, of very worn, very old brocade fitting closely to the very thin, very old body, and the embroidered cap set back from his high, narrow forehead showed a glint here and there of frayed old worn gold thread.

'His name is Chiragh Shah,' yawned the spokesman, adding in a bawl, 'How old art thou, dâdâ—the Sirkar is asking?'

There was a little pause, and wintry though the sun was, its shine seemed to filter straight through all things, denying a visible shadow even to the blue paper.

'How old?' came the urbane voice, speaking with a long-lapsed precision of polish. 'That is as God wills and my lord chooses.'

Prem Lal glanced doubtfully at the schedules. They did not provide for such politeness, so he appealed mutely to the spokesman, who replied by roundabout assertion :

'He was of knowledgeable years when the city fell—wast thou not, dâdâ?' The explanatory shout brought keen intelligence to the hearer.

'Aye! it was from the palace bastion I watched the English. Half the city watched them that 14th of

THE FLATTERER FOR GAIN

September. . . .’ Here once more voice and memory lapsed awhile. But Prem Lal’s history was at least equal to the more recent event of that memorable date, so his pen grew glib in ciphering. ‘Taking knowledgeable age as ten,’ he commenced rapidly, ‘with deduction of years 1857 from present epoch 1881—’

His face darkened. ‘He has the appearance of more age than thirty-five,’ he began dubiously, when the suave old voice picked up the lost thread of recollection.

‘Lake sahib came to our court two days after, and the King, being blind, saw not that the English face was no more merciful than the French face which had been driven away, so there were rejoicings.’

‘He means the day which began the hundred years of tyranny,’ suggested the spokesman; and Prem Lal’s pen had already substituted 1805 for 1857, when the voice of her who had to be obeyed came sternly from the chink. ‘Put him down as a hundred, boy!’ it said scornfully. ‘Meat is tough when the sacrifice is past its prime, anyhow, so what does it matter?’

The next question presented no difficulty. No one in that house could be aught but a descendant of the Prophet, so the answer ‘Syyed’ sprang to every lip with chill, almost scornful, pride.

‘Profession or trade,’ continued Prem Lal, mechanically; ‘gold-thread embroiderer, I suppose, like the rest of you.’

It was a natural supposition, seeing that the high-

bred, in-bred household had for years past—since, in fact, courts were abolished in Delhi—taken to this, the trade of so many ousted officials.

‘Huzoor ! no !’ replied the spokesman with a yawn, for the proceedings were becoming uninteresting to him. ‘He is before that. He does nothing—he never did anything.’

‘Gentleman at large,’ hesitated on Prem Lal’s pen ; then an ephemeral conscientiousness born of his ephemeral dignity made him appeal to the old man himself.

Chiragh Shah smiled courteously. His hands trembled themselves tip to tip.

‘My profession,’ he echoed. ‘Surely I am Chaplaoo—of inheritance and choice,’ he added alertly.

‘Chaplaoo !’ That was clear enough to Prem Lal in the vernacular, but how was it to be translated for the blue paper which must be written in English as an exposition of learning that might lead to further employment ?

Being prepared for such emergencies by a pocket dictionary, he looked the word up—a proceeding which revived interest in the audience, notably behind the chink, whence the magisterial voice was heard remarking that it was no wonder the Sirkar wanted brains if it was so crassly ignorant as not to know what chaplaoo meant !

This flurried Prem Lal into premature decision. ‘Chaplaoo,’ he quoted under his breath, ‘a fawner—ha ! I see. One who keepsers the fawn—forester—

THE FLATTERER FOR GAIN

hunter—Am I not right ? ’ he translated with a preparative flick of the steel pen.

The even ivory smile was clouded by an expression too blank for resentment.

‘ The Sirkar mistakes. This slave kept no animals. ’

Prem Lal dived hurriedly into further equivalents. ‘ Parasite—backbiter—one who bites backs ! Ah ! I see—bug—etc. ’

‘ This slave, as he has said, kept no kind of animals whatever, ’ repeated Chiragh Shah, with a suave, unconscious dignity which appeased even the rising storm of virtuous indignation behind the chink. ‘ He was—if the Sirkar prefers the title—Chapar-qunatya, by inheritance and choice. ’

The rolling Arabic word had a soothing sound, and a hush fell with the sunshine even on Prem Lal’s search after a common factor between East and West.

‘ Toad eater ! eater of toads—— ’ he began with doubt in the suggestion ; ‘ lick spittle—one who licks the spittle ? ’

‘ Eater of toads, lick of spittle, ’ shrilled the voice of the chink. ‘ Dost come here defiling an honourable house—and I who purvey its food—with such vile calumny—I—— ’

‘ Peace, mother, ’ soothed a softer voice ; ‘ such things do no harm save to the speaker. What you spit at the sky falls on your own face ! ’

‘ Aye ! ’ assented a ruder voice, ‘ and is he not a Kyasth (clerk)—lie he must or his belly will burst. ’

The word ‘ lie ’ gave the agitated enumerator a fresh

THE FLATTERER FOR GAIN

clue, and the pages of the dictionary fluttered as if in a full gale.

‘ Lie—liar—slanderer——’

There was no connection in his tone ; but the suggestion being at least plausible to his audience, the question was referred loudly to old Chiragh Shah, who was beginning to nod with combined sunshine and opium drams.

‘ Lie ? ’ he asked, with a return of that swift alacrity. ‘ Surely, I lied always. Yea ! from the beginning to the end.’

He used the high-sounding Arabic word for liar, and so sent Prem Lal a-fluttering once more. Ere he had lit on the correct guttural, old Chiragh Shah’s set smile had changed into a real one. The slack muscles of his neck stiffened ; he flung out his right hand airily.

‘ Hush ! ’ said the two smallest boys on the roof in sudden interest ; ‘ dâdâ is going to talk.’

He was.

‘ Lies ! ’ he began, and there was tone in the old voice, ‘ and wherefore not if it is a real lie and not a bungle ? But I never was a bungler. I know my profession too well—even at the last—yea, at the very end they had to come to me for artifice—for subterfuge. It was the last lie—to count as a real lie.’

He paused, one of the boys had crept round to him and now laid a compelling hand of entreaty on the old man.

‘ Tell us of it, dâdâ.’

THE FLATTERER FOR GAIN

The spokesman looked at the enumerator as if for orders.

‘It may elucidate the meanings,’ muttered the Middlefail to himself.

So in the stillness of that sunshiny roof, set so far above the workaday world, they sate listening.

‘Yea! it was the last lie that was worth the telling. Yet I was past my prime like the court itself. For none, save those who saw, knew the heart-burnings, the bitterness of those last years. King but in name, the very court officials drifting away to other allegiance. And Lake sahib had been so full of promise on that first September day, when the Frenchman was driven away because, forsooth! he had made the blind Shah Alum a prisoner in his own palace——’ There was a pause in the thin old cadences, and a flitting shadow fell on the sun-saturate listeners from a wheeling kite overhead.

‘And what was Bahadur Shah but a prisoner, too? What matter—the Huzoors gave him bread after their fashion and he was unfaithful to the salt of it. That was not well—one must be loyal even to a lie! So after the mad midsummer dream of recovered kingship in the palace—such a mad dream—we who dreamed it knew at the time that we were dreaming—came that second September day when the English returned to Delhi. We did not watch them, then; we were hiding in the tombs—Humayon’s tomb without the wall.

‘It was the night after Hudson *sahib bahadur* had

wiled away the King by fair promises—aya! the Huzoor knew the trick of those well—but the Princes were still hiding—and many a better man, too.

‘ My son for one. He was wounded to the death. Ah! I knew it—though the brave lad—he was the son of mine old age—steadied his breath and smiled when I spoke to him. But there was little leisure for words with treachery to right and treachery to left, and none to trust fairly. For the world had changed even then, and there were but one or two of my kind left, and I was out of favour. Too old for the new court—too old for new pleasures. And the young Prince—lo! how he used to laugh at my worn flatteries—had many pleasures—so many of them that he took some of them from other folks’ lives; thus he had foes. Aye! but friends, too, for he came nearer to kingliness than his brothers. And my son loved him.

‘ So when the danger came, and I knew by chance of the plot to kill the Prince as he slept, and gain the reward set on him by the English, I had no choice. Yet I dare trust no one in the skulking crowd which crept about the shadows of the old tomb. In those days it was everyone for himself, and the Prince had scant following at best. And he lay drunk with wine and women, out of bravado partly to the skulkers—in one of the half-secret upper rooms. But I knew which, and I remember it so well. The grey spear-point of the distant Kutb showed through its open arch.

‘ And below, in a far nook of the crypt, where there

THE FLATTERER FOR GAIN

was a secret swinging panel in the red sandstone wall, known only to the old, my son lay dying.

‘ He steadied his breath as I stooped over him, and whispered that he would soon be fighting for his Prince again.

‘ “ Soon, my son,” I answered, waiting as he smiled. for I knew the silence was at hand—silence from all things save the breathing that would only steady into death.

‘ We, my servant and I, lifted him easily. He was but a lad, though he would have grown to greater stature than the Prince. His head lay so contentedly on my shoulder as I went backward up the stairs, telling those who stood aside to let us pass, that he was better and craved the fresher air of the roof. “ Better? Aye! he is better, or soon will be, old fool,” said one with a laugh. Then clattered noisily after his companions, so noisily that the echo of the winding staircase sent their scornful mirth back to me. “ He will be dead—like someone he followed—by morning.”

‘ Before morning, if I did not fail, thought I, silently, as, searching the shadows, we sought the Prince’s hidden room. There was a youth ever with the Prince—a baby-faced, frightened, womanly thing—yet faithful as far as in him lay. Him, I caught by the throat. “ They would kill thee, too,” I said; “ better take the chance of life. If fate be kind, ere dawn discovers the deceit, *he* will be fit to fly.”

‘ So after my servant and I, wailing at our lack of

THE FLATTERER FOR GAIN

wisdom, had carried the Prince down, face covered as one to whom worse sickness had come suddenly, I crept to the upper room again. It was growing late, but the grey spear-head of the Kutb still showed beyond the open arch as I covered the lad's face, lest, for all his gay dress, the murderers might see too much.

' " Dream thou art fighting for the Prince, sonling ! " I said, knowing he was past even the steadying of his breath for an answer ; but the smile had lingered on his face.

' Then I covered my face also, and, bidding the baby-faced one escape to the crypt as soon as it was possible, sate as a servant might have sate, at the turning of the ways from the stair-head.

' Would those who were to come be familiar or strange ? I wondered. The latter, most likely, since Chiragh Shah, the Chaplaoo, had long since passed from court life, almost from remembrance.

' They were strange ; as they challenged me, I drew the cloth from my face without fear.

' " The Prince's room ! " they cried, dagger-point at my breast. But that could not be. There must be no suspicion, only certainty, only soothed certainty. " I have been waiting to show it to my lords," I answered. " Lo ! he sleeps sound—yea ! he sleeps sound, his face toward the Kutb."

' So, with smooth words, I led them in the dark——'

The memory of the darkness seemed to fall as darkness itself on the old brain, and Chiragh Shah sate

THE FLATTERER FOR GAIN

silent in the sunshine for a few seconds. When he spoke again, it was as if years had passed. 'It was the last lie that was worth the telling,' he said, almost triumphantly.

'And a good lie, too,' came the shrill voice from behind the door-chink. 'See you, boy!—call the old man by his right name in your paper, or may God's curse light on you for ever!'

Thus adjured, Prem Lal, who, throughout the whole tale, had been fluttering his dictionary from one synonym to another, suggested 'sycophant'; that was, he explained, one who flatters and lies for personal profit.

'Profit!' echoed the voice. 'Small profit dâdâ gained. Was not the Prince killed with his brothers next day by Hudson Sahib; so there was no one left even to reward the old man?'

'Save God,' suggested Prem Lal, piously trying to escape somehow from the dilemma.

'And there is gain, and gain,' admitted the spokesman, combining new and old, east and west.

'Hush!' said one of the two small boys again; 'dâdâ is going to talk—he may know——'

So once more the old voice rose in unconscious apology for the difficulty of condensing what etymologists call his life history into a census paper.

'Yea, it was good, and hard—yet not so hard as the first. *That* never left me, despite the long years.'

It seemed, indeed, as if it had not, for something of childlike complaint came into the old voice. 'It was

THE FLATTERER FOR GAIN

my first day at court. Mother had cut my father's brocade robe—crimson with gold flowering—to fit me, despite her tears. Her eyes were heavy with them when she kissed me; but I had no fear for all I was so young. I knew the women's bread depended on my tongue—though it was my heritage also to be Chaplao.

' And the King was pleased. Mother had tied my turban so tall and he laughed at that. It was out in the garden, he under the gilt canopy, the nobles round, and beyond, the flowers, and birds fluttering among the roses.

' And I was standing beside the King, and he was laughing—for I knew my part.

' Then the fluttering came closer, closer, and lo! a bird settled on my wrist. It was Gul-afrog—I had left it with my sister, but it had followed me—for we loved each other. So, on my wrist it sate joyful, and *salaamed* as I had taught it, drooping its pretty wings.

' Then the King cried, "How now, whose pretty bird is this?" and someone laid a warning hand upon my shoulder. But I knew before what I must say if I was to stand in father's place. I knew! I knew!

' "It is yours, my king."

' So I said, kneeling at his feet! "It is yours, it is yours," and Gul-afrog had been with me since it fell out of the bulbul nest in the rose tree. Then they brought a golden cage . . .' The old man sate staring out into the sunshine in silence, and only the littlest of the two boys wept softly.

THE FLATTERER FOR GAIN

‘ We will call him “ Flatterer for Gain,” ’ said Prem Lal, in desperate decision, and perhaps the description came as near to old Chiragh Shah’s profession as was possible in a census schedule.

THE FOOTSTEPS OF A DOG

SHE passed, smiling softly, though a vague trouble seemed to clutch at her heart. She had found him asleep so often of late, and if the driver slept, the oxen might well pause in their task of drawing water, and so the fields which needed it so much be deprived for yet another day of their life-giving draught. They were not, however, pausing now, at any rate. Their slow circling brought her sleeping husband to Sarsuti's eyes and carried him away again, wheeling round by the well from whose depths a stream of water splashed drowsily into a wooden trough and then hurried away—a little ribbed ribbon of light—out of the shade of the great banyan tree into the sun-saturated soil beyond where the young millet was sprouting.

How cool it was, after her hot walk from the village ! No wonder he slept ! She sat herself down beside the runnel of water where a jasmine bush threw wild whips of leaf and blossom over the damp earth. There was no need to wake him yet. The bullocks would not pause now that she was there to make them do their work.

That was her task in life !—to make them do their work.

She sighed, and yet she smiled again, as the slow-

THE FOOTSTEPS OF A DOG

circling oxen brought her husband Prema almost to her feet once more. How handsome he was, his bare head lying on the turban he had pressed into the service of a pillow. And his slender limbs! How ingeniously he had curved them on the forked seat so as to gain a comfortable resting-place! Trust Prema to make himself and everyone else in the world comfortable! A sudden leap of her heart sent the blood to dye her dark face still darker, as she thought of the softness, the warmth, the colour he had brought into her life.

How long had they been married? Ten years—a whole ten years, and there was never a child yet. It was getting time. No! No! Not yet—not yet! She need not look that in the face yet.

She rose suddenly as the wheeling oxen brought him to her once more, and staying them with one swift word, bent over the sleeping man.

‘Prem!’ she said. ‘Prema! I am here.’ His arms were round her in an instant, his lips on hers; for here, out in the shadow amongst the sunshine, they were alone.

‘Sarsuti! Wife!’ he murmured drowsily, then with a laugh, shook his long length and stood beside her, his arm still about her waist. Tall as he was, she was almost as tall, a straight, upstanding Jatni woman with eyebrows like a broad bar across her face.

But, as her dark eyes met his in passionate adoration, something in the sight of his exceeding beauty smote her to the heart. The thought that there was none to inherit it, the knowledge that if it passed it would leave

THE FOOTSTEPS OF A DOG

nothing behind it. It is a thought which has driven many an Indian woman to take another woman by the hand and lead her home to be a hand-maiden to the lord. It drove Sarsuti—after long weeks, nay, months of thought—almost to speech.

‘ Prem ! ’ she faltered, hiding her face on his breast, ‘ I have been thinking—thou needst a son—and—’ But she could get no further, partly because the words seemed to choke her, partly because Prema, turning her face to his with his soft, supple hand, stopped her mouth with kisses.

What was the use ? What was the use, she asked herself fiercely, thinking of such things when she loved him so ? Some morning, aye ! some summer morning after a summer’s night, she would rather make the Dream-compeller send her to sleep, once and for all !—to sleep and dreams of Prema and his love ! Then he could marry again, and there would be children to light up the old house, a son to light the funeral pyre.

But now—no ! Not yet ! . . .

The sunshine filtering through the broad leaves dappled them with light and shade ; the oxen resting stood head down, nosing at the damp earth ; the water, ceasing to splash, ran silently more and more slowly on its way, and all around them a yellow glare of heat hemmed them in breathlessly. Yet here, at the well, the jasmine grew green, a big datura lily, rejoicing in the shade, threw out its wide white blossoms, and, looking down to the mirror-like pool of water into which the long, unending circle of deftly arranged

THE FOOTSTEPS OF A DOG

earthen pots and ropes dipped, you could see the tufts of maidenhair fern which came God knows whence. They were like love in the heart, heaven-sent.

'Thou wilt call at the Lala-jee's this evening, Sarasuti,' said Prema, with a faint note of half-ashamed uneasiness in his voice, as, his midday meal of milk and hearth-cakes over, she prepared to go back. 'He deals more justly with thee than with me—may he be accursed, and may the footsteps of a dog . . .'

'S't! Prema,' she interrupted, 'the Lala-jee is no worse than his kind; and we have asked so much—lately.'

Yes! she thought as she trudged homewards, they had asked much, for Prema had a lavish hand. Yet she would, of course, have him keep up his position as head-man of the village; the position that had been hers by right as the only child of her father. Prema, her cousin, had gained it through his marriage to her, by special favour of the Sirkar, in memory of good service done in the Mutiny time by the old man. He had been a better husbandman than Prema, and money had gone fast these few years since he died, though she had tried to keep things as they had been. Still, who could grudge Prema the handsomest yoke of oxen in the countryside, the fleetest mare? And those mad experiments of his with new ploughs, new seeds that the Huzoors spoke about! It was well to keep to the soft side of the masters, no doubt, yet it should be done discreetly—and when was Prema ever discreet? She almost laughed, even while she stooped to let the water

THE FOOTSTEPS OF A DOG

from an overflowed plot run into the next by removing the clod which her husband had forgotten, thinking of his indiscreetness—of the gifts he showered on her when he had money in his pocket to pay for them; sometimes when he had not. Of course, the Lala-*jee* would listen to reason and lend more on the coming crop—who could deny Prema anything?

But the Lala was curiously obdurate. He was an old man, who had backed the luck of the village for three generations, had never had a dispute with his creditors.

‘See you, daughter,’ he said. ‘Prema for all he is head-man and thy husband, is but man, and there is none to come after him.’

Her face darkened with a hot blush again.

‘The land will be there,’ she replied, haughtily.

‘Aye, but who will own it? Strangers, they say, from far away. I have no dealings with strangers.’

‘There will be my share,’ she protested.

‘Aye! but how wilt thou fare with strangers also, thou—childless widow?’ he asked.

Her hot anger flamed up. ‘Wait thou and see! Meanwhile, since thou art afraid, take this,’ she tore off the solid gold bangle she wore, ‘’tis worth fifty rupees at the veriest pawnshop—give me forty!’

‘Nay,’ replied the bunnya, with spirit. ‘’Tis worth a good seventy-five, though thy man—I’ll warrant me—paid a hundred. So seventy-five thou shalt have; but, look you, daughter—or, if thou willest it, mother—keep Prem in leash, or a surety the footsteps of a dog will show on his ashes.’

THE FOOTSTEPS OF A DOG

She looked at him, startled. Curious how the phrase born of a belief that one can read the reward of the dead from the marks which show on his funeral pyre, should crop up. First from Prem, regarding the *Lala-jee*, next from the *Lala-jee* concerning Prem. Was there any truth in it, she wondered? She had the money, that was one comfort, and Prema would be pleased. Then, when the Biluch mare foaled, and they sold it as a yearling for the three hundred rupees Prem thought it would fetch, she would tell him how she had pawned his gift; meanwhile, a brass bracelet, to be had at the shop for a rupee, would serve to deceive his eyes. But not the sharp ones of Veru, the young widow who was the only other inhabitant of the wide courtyard with its slips of arcaded rooms round about it, and great stacks of millet stalks, and huge bee-hive stores of grain.

Her eyes were on it from the moment Sarsuti, sitting down above her on the little raised mud dais, began to spin.

'Thou needst not stare so, girl,' broke in Sarsuti, at last. 'Yes! I have pawned it. He needed money, and he is more to me than aught else beside—more than thou, husbandless, can dream, child.'

Veru—she was indeed but little more than a child, this virgin widow of Sarsuti's half-brother, who had been born and died in his father's old age—held her head lower over her wheel, and said nothing. Her widow's shroud seemed to swallow her up. Yet in that Jat household she was kindly enough treated, for

THE FOOTSTEPS OF A DOG

Sarsuti's strong arms loved work, and she had a great pity in her great soft heart for all unloved things. Here was no question of shaven head or daily fasting. Veru simply led a cloistered life, and did what share her strength allowed of the daily work. Of late that had not been much ; she had complained of fatigue, and had sat all day spinning feverishly as if to make up for her failure in other ways ; for she was a sensitive little thing, ready to cry at a word of blame.

So the evening passed by. Prema was not to be back from the well till late, not, indeed, until the moon set ; for the young millet had been neglected somewhat, and even he was roused to the necessity for action. Water it must have, or there would be no crop. Thus, as the sun set, Sarsuti cooked the supper, reserving the best dough cakes, the choicest morsels of the pickled carrots against her husband's return, and then, being weary, lay down so as to freshen herself up to receive him as he should be received. The night was hot, there was a restlessness in it which found its way into her mind, and she lay awake for some time thinking of what the Lala-jee had said. Yes ! It was time, it was growing time for so many things. Yes ! she must harden her heart and be wise—the footsteps of the . . .

Here she fell asleep.

When she woke, there was pitch darkness. The moon had set. What had happened ? Had Prema returned, and, full of kindness as ever, seen she was tired and so refrained from waking her ? She put out her hand and touched his bed, but he was not there.

THE FOOTSTEPS OF A DOG

How late he was ! And where was Veru ? Veru, who should have been watching for him.

‘ Veru ! lazy child—art asleep ? ’

Her question came back to her unanswered ; Veru, also, was not in the wide courtyard. Where were they ?

The very conjunction of her thought regarding them, woke in her a sudden swift pang of jealousy.

Where were they ?

A minute later, holding an oil cresset in her hand as a guard against snakes, she was passing swiftly through the deserted village on her way to the well. Prema might have fallen asleep—he might be asleep still. The night was so dark, she held the lamp high above her head so as to throw its light before her on the narrow edge of a pathway between the flooded fields. It was so still, she could hear the faint sob made by some deadly thing slipping from her coming into the water, over which a wandering firefly would flash, revealing an inky glimmer between the rising shoots of corn. Ahead, that massed shadow was the banyan tree. The fireflies were thick there, thick as cressets at a bridal feast . . .

If Prema slept—Yes ! if he slept, to be awakened by a kiss.

Underneath the arching branches of the banyan tree it was dark indeed, but the silence of it told her that the oxen anyhow were at rest.

And Prema !

As she held the light forward, something on the

THE FOOTSTEPS OF A DOG

ground at her feet caught her eye—jasmine! Jasmine twined into a wreath. For whose head? Not hers!

‘Prema!’ she called. ‘Prem!’

There was no answer. But he was there for all that, half-resting on the forked seat, as if he had flung himself upon it when weary; weary and content; his head thrown back upon his arm, his whole body lax with sleep—and with content.

She had seen him look thus so often! ‘Prem!’ she whispered. ‘Prem!’ and touched him on the bosom.

Then a hideous shriek of terror and horror startled the sleeping oxen into forward movement, as from the folds of his clothes, like some evil thought, there slipped a snake, swift, curved, disappearing into the darkness.

‘Prem! Prem! Speak to me! Oh, Prem—speak!’

As she flung herself upon him, the forward movement of the oxen forced her to her knees, so heeding it not at all, one hand holding the light close to his face as she strove vainly to rouse him, she was dragged along the accustomed round, until the beasts, recognizing the unaccustomed strain, paused once more.

‘Prem! Say thou art not dead—say only that, Prem!’ she moaned.

Her voice seemed to reach him on the far edge of the great Blank, for his eyelids quivered. Then, for one moment, he looked at her, and there was appeal in his eyes.

‘Wife—Veru—my——’ It was scarcely a whisper,

THE FOOTSTEPS OF A DOG

but she heard it, and with a cry of joy, she caught him in her strong arms, laid him on the ground, and, tearing his cloth aside, sought for the wound. Finding it, her lips were on it in a second. Ah! could kisses draw the poison, surely her frantic love must avail.

But no. His eyelids closed. There was no sound, only a little quiver that she felt through her lips. Then his beauty lay still beneath them.

After a time she drew herself away from him, and laid his head upon her lap. So she sat, dazed, thinking of that jasmine wreath in the dust, and of that half-heard whisper—

‘ Wife—Veru—my——’ My—what ?

* * * * *

‘ And there is none to come after him,’ said the village worthies, when the fire of Prema’s burning had died down to smouldering embers, and the oldest man of his clan in the village had performed the rites which should have been the duty of a son.

And then they shook their heads wisely, thinking that men of Prem Singh’s kind ran an ill risk in the next world without a son to perform the funeral obsequies ; especially nowadays, when the law prevented a dutiful wife from ensuring her husband’s safety and salvation by burning herself on his funeral pyre. Yea ! it was an ill world indeed in which the fostered virtue of a woman you had cared for and cossetted might not avail to save the man she loved from the pains of purgatory. And then they drifted away, full of surmise

THE FOOTSTEPS OF A DOG

and deep desire concerning the headship of the village. *Mai* Sarsuti could not hold it as a widow, though she could hold the land; and there were no relations—none. So the coast was clear for many claims.

Sarsuti meanwhile had not clamoured—as many an Indian widow does even nowadays—to be allowed to sacrifice herself for her husband's salvation. She had scarcely wept. She had, on the contrary, spoken sternly to Veru, bidding her keep her foolish tears until all things had been done in due order to keep away the evil spirits and ensure peace to the departed.

Then, after all the ceremonies were completed, and Prem's beauty lay swathed awaiting sunset for its burning, she had sat on one side of his low bier, while Veru sat on the other, and the wail had risen piercingly—

'Naked he came, naked he has gone; this empty dwelling-house belongs neither to you nor to me.'

There had been a menace in her voice, high-pitched, clear, almost impassive, while Veru's had been broken by sobs.

So now that frail weakling was asleep, wearied out by her woe, while Sarsuti sat where the bier had been, still in all the glory of her wifely raiment, still with the vermilion stain upon her forehead, still wearing round her neck the blessed marriage cord with which he had so often toyed. For she had point-blank refused to allow it to be broken. Time enough for the widow's shroud, she had said. To-day she was still Prem's wife—he had scarce had time to die.

So she sat quite still, looking at the place where he

THE FOOTSTEPS OF A DOG

had lain, thinking of those last words. Had she really heard them? Was it possible, the thing that had leapt to her mind?

Deep down in her heart she knew vaguely that the feet of her idol had been of clay; that with Prem all things were possible. Poor, wandering feet, which might yet have kept to the straight path, if—Oh, Prem! Prem! Had it been her fault? Or was she wronging him?

Then, suddenly, that recurring phrase recurred to her once more.

‘The footstep of a dog—the footstep of a dog.’

Was it past midnight? Had another day begun—the day of judgment? Surely; then she could see—yea! She could prove it was not true.

The moon was just sinking as, close-wrapped in her veil, she crept down to the edge of the nullah, where the burning-ground lay; a gruesome place, haunted by the spirits of the departed, not to be ventured near after dark. But Sarsuti had forgotten all the village lore, she had forgotten everything save that deadly doubt.

Yonder, it must be on the point close to the water, for still an almost mist-like vapour lingered there. She sped past the faintly lighted patches on the hard-baked soil which told of other burnings, murmuring a prayer for the peace of dead souls, and so found herself beside that little pile of dear ashes. A breeze from the coming dawn stirred them, sending a grey flake or two to meet her.

THE FOOTSTEPS OF A DOG

'Prem!' she whispered; then, as she stooped to look, the whisper passed to a cry—

'Oh! Prema! Prema!'

She lay there face down, her hands grovelling in the still warm embers on which there showed unmistakably the footstep of a dog!

And the moon sank, so there was darkness for a while. Then in the far east the horizon lightened, bringing a grey mystery to the wide expanse of the level world. And behind the greyness came a primrose dawn, and the sun, rising serene and bright, sent a shaft of light to touch her as she lay.

Then she rose, and dusting the dear ashes from her almost blistered hands, she crept back to the wide courtyard, where Veru still slept, worn out by sorrow. She stood watching her asleep, wondering at her own blindness. Then she touched her on the bosom.

'Wake!' she cried, in a loud voice. 'Wake! Oh, Veru! And speak the truth!'

The girl started up, and the eyes of the two women met.

* * * * *

The village was bitterly disappointed; but, of course, there was nothing to be done but wait and see if the child was a son, for *Mai Sarsuti* had stolen a march on them. She had gone straight to the Big Sahib, straight to the head district official, and told him of her hopes. What is more, she had petitioned for trustees to work the land, seeing that she and her sister-in-

law were poor widows ; and she, especially, unfit for work.

So three of the village elders had been convened to see to the land and render account to the sahib, who would be sure to keep an eye on them seeing that *Mai Sarsuti* was an upstanding, straightforward Jatni, just the kind to whom the *sahib-logue* gave consideration. And, after all, she and hers deserved it, for they came of a long line of virtuous, loyal people.

So Sarsuti, with Veru, lived in the seclusion which befitted her recent loss ; though, according to custom, she still wore a wife's dress. But she grew haggard as the months went by. Small wonder, said the village matrons, when they returned from their occasional visits, seeing that she awaited a fatherless child.

Then one morning Veru, looking very worn and frightened and ill, came to tell the elders that a son had been born to Sarsuti. Perhaps it was as well, they thought, since otherwise there might be disputes about the headship. Now there could be none ; and as there would be a very long minority under the care of the sahibs, Prem's son would come in to free land, and money laid up in the bank. A rich head-man was always a prop to the village. So their wives went to congratulate the new-made mother.

She was looking haggard still, and scarcely seemed to rejoice in her great gift ; but that, perhaps, might come by and by.

But it did not. Sometimes she would take the baby

THE FOOTSTEPS OF A DOG

and look at it long and earnestly. Then she would give it back to Veru, whose arms were seldom empty of Prem's child, and return to the work of the house, or sit watching them gravely from her spinning-wheel, her large dark eyes full of wistful pain.

So the months sped by.

And still Sarsuti wore a wife's dress and smeared vermilion on her forehead; and the mangala sutram, still unbroken, held the wife's medal round her throat. It would be time, she answered proudly to the shocked village women, to think of breaking it when Prem should have been dead a year, and the child be able to suck cow's milk.

She prepared for the anniversary by purchasing a Maw's feeding-bottle, and an eagerness grew to her face as she watched little Prem take it, and roll over contentedly to sleep, like the fat good-natured little lump of a healthy child as he was. But Veru wept.

Still, Maw had supplanted Motherhood when the night came round again on which Sarsuti had heard that faint whisper from her dying husband. The child slept as a child should, and Veru, once more worn out by tears, slept also.

But, as on that night a year ago, Sarsuti sat on the place where Prem's bier had lain and thought, her dark eyes full of a great resolve. Suddenly she rose, tall, straight, upstanding, and passed to where the child lay. She stooped and kissed it—kissed it for the first time—then, throwing her arms skywards, murmured to High Heaven, 'Lo! I have saved him—I, his wife'; and so,

THE FOOTSTEPS OF A DOG

catching up a small bundle which she had prepared, passed into the darkness of the night.

* * * * *

They found her charred body at dawn, face downwards, where the footsteps of a dog had shown upon Prem's ashes.

She had saturated her clothes with paraffin, and set fire to herself deliberately.

'Lo! how she loved him,' said the village elders, behind their outward and decorous disapproval. 'See you, she is decked as a bride with all her jewels. Now, with a son in his house, and suttee on his pyre, there is no fear but what Prem hath found freedom.'

'Ay!' assented the Lala-jee. 'The footstep of a dog will not be seen on his ashes.'

THE GIFT OF BATTLE

‘**T**HEN you recommend them both,’ said the mild little Commissioner, doubtfully ; he was a vacillating man, by nature lawful prey to his superiors.

Tim O’Brien, C.I.E.—the uncoveted distinction had been, to his great disgust, bestowed on him after a recent famine, in which his sheer vitality had saved half a province, removed his long Burmah cheroot from his lips and smiled brilliantly. He was a thin brown man with a whimsical face.

‘ And what would I be doing with wan of them on the Bench and the other in the dock ? For it would be that way ere a week was past. It is very kind of the L.G. to suggest putting either Sirdar Bikrama Singh or Khân Buktiyar Khân on the Honorary Magistracy, but he doesn’t grasp that they are hereditary enemies and have been the same for eight hundred years. Ever since the Pathans temporarily conquered the Rajputs, in the year av’ grace 1256 ! So you couldn’t in conscience expect wan of them not to commit a crime if the other was to be preferred before him. Ye see, he’d just have to kill someone. But, if ye appoint them both, the dacencies of Court procedure and the hair-splittin’ formalities of the local Bar will conduce to dignity—to say nothing of their own sense of justice, which, I’ll go

THE GIFT OF BATTLE

bail, is stronger than it is in most people ye could appoint. Equity's apt to go by the board if ye've too much legal knowledge ; and they have none of that last. But I'll give them a good Clerk of the Court and guarantee they come to no harm. Yes, sir, I recommend them both—to sit *in banco*.'

When Tim O'Brien spoke, as he did in the last sentence, curtly and without a trace of his usual rollicking Irish accent, his superior officers invariably fell in with his views ; it saved trouble.

So, in due course, what answers to a J.P.'s commission at home (with no small extra powers thrown in) was sent to Sirdar Bikrama Singh, Rajput, at his castle of Nagadrug (the Snake's Hole), and also to Khân Buktiyar Khân at his fortress of Shakingarh (the Falcon's Nest).

Both buildings had been for some centuries in a hopeless state of dilapidation, as, from a worldly point of view, were their owners' fortunes. But, just as the crumbling walls still commanded the wide arid valley which lay between the rocky steeps of the sandhills on which they stood, so the position of the two most ancient families of Hindus and Mahomedans in the district still commanded the respect of the whole sub-division. Of course, they were antagonistic. Had they not been so always ? But, in truth, the old story of how they came to be so was such a very old story that none knew the rights of it : not even the two high-nosed, high-couraged old men, who, having in due time succeeded to the headship of their respective families,

THE GIFT OF BATTLE

had done as their fathers had done ; that is to say, glared at each other over their barren fields, formulated every possible complaint they could against their neighbour, and denied any good quality to him, his house, his wife, his oxen, or his ass.

Yet the two had one thing in common. They were both soldiers by race. Their sons were even now with the colours of Empire, and in their own youth both had served John Company, and afterwards the Queen. This bond, however, was not one of union, but rather of discord. For the one had belonged to the crack Hindu and the other to the crack Mahomedan corps of the Indian army, and their respective sons naturally followed in their fathers' footsteps. Indeed, on occasions the pair of dear old pantaloons would appear in the uniforms of a past day, hopelessly out of date as regards buttons and tailoring, but still worn with the distinctive cock of the turban and swagger of high boots that had belonged of old days and still belonged to the 'rigimint.'

Bikrama Singh was seated on the flat roof which had sheltered him and his for centuries when he received the little slip of silk paper, so beautifully engrossed, which appointed him to the Honorary Magistracy. It was a barren honour, since he was not one of those—and there are many—who make a stipend out of an unpaid post ; but his thin old fingers trembled a little and his eye lost the faintly blue film which age draws between the Real and the Unreal. Whether his mind reverted at once to his hereditary enemy—who was not mentioned in the

THE GIFT OF BATTLE

paper—is doubtful, but he felt it to be an honour in these miserable days, when a moneylender had more chance of being elected to a district council than a gentleman of parts to be chosen by the Sirkar. It was a thousand times better than being ‘puffed by rabble votes to wisdom’s chair.’

‘It is well,’ he said simply, but with a superior air, to his womenfolk—the wife and daughters and granddaughters and daughters-in-law and their kind who filled up the wide old house. ‘I shall do my duty and punish the evil doer; notably those who do evil to my people and my land, since true justice begins at home.’ And he curled his thin grey moustache to meet his short grey whiskers and looked fierce as an old tiger.

Over in Shakingarh also the commission met with approval. ‘It is well!’ said Buktiyar Khân, as he sate amongst his crowding womenfolk with a poultice of leaves on his short beard to dye it purple. ‘I shall do my duty and punish the evil doer; notably him who has done evil to my people and my land, since that is the beginning of justice.’ And his hawk’s eye travelled almost unconsciously from his flat roof to that other one far over the valley.

Yet, when they met, a few days afterwards, duly attired in their uniforms on the threshold of *Brine sahib’s* verandah, whither they had repaired full of courteous acknowledgments to one whom they recognized as being at the bottom of the appointment, a faint frown came to their old faces. But *Brine sahib* broke it to them gently, with the graceful tact which

THE GIFT OF BATTLE

gained him so much confidence. Government, recognizing their many and great excellencies, had found it impossible to do otherwise than elevate them both to the Bench, where they would doubtless remain, as they were now, the best representatives of Hindu and Mahomedan feeling in the district. And then Tim O'Brien made a few remarks about the King-Emperor and devoted service which sent both old hands out in swift stiff salute.

Doubtless it was a shock to find themselves equally honoured ; but regarding the '*in banco*,' they both admitted instantly to themselves that it was better to sit next a hereditary enemy than a stinking scrivener or a mean moneylender. So Bikrama Singh twirled his grey moustache and said, 'It is well,' and Buktiyar Khân twirled his purple one and said the same thing.

Thereinafter they began work. The women of both houses made the first court day a regular festival, and sent the two old men from home dressed and scented and decorated as if for a bridal. The purple of Buktiyar's beard was positively regal, while the points of Bikrama's thin trembling fingers were rosy as the dawn.

They were fearsomely stately with each other, of course, but that only added to the dignity of the Bench. An excellent Clerk of the Court had been provided for them, and their first cases had been carefully chosen by Tim O'Brien for their simplicity.

Thus there had seemed no possibility of friction ; yet

THE GIFT OF BATTLE

the two new judges returned to their womenkind vaguely dissatisfied, dimly uneasy.

'The Mahomedan is no fool,' remarked Bikrama Singh thoughtfully, 'he saw as quickly as I did that truth lay with the defendant, lies with the plaintiff.'

'By God's truth,' admitted Buktiyar Khân grudgingly, 'the Hindu is not such a blockhead as I deemed him. He saw as quickly as I did that lies were with the plaintiff, truth with the defendant.'

It was almost intolerable; but it was true. The hereditary enemies had agreed about something on God's earth. And as time went on this unanimity of opinion became the most salient feature of the newly constituted court. They agreed about everything. Of different race, different religion, something deeper in them than these surface variations coincided. Their innate sense of justice, fostered by the fact that they had both been brought up in the India of the past, that they represented its laws, its morals, its maxims, made their judgments identical.

'We waste time, *babu-jee*,' broke in old Bikrama Singh on the lengthy peroration of a newly passed pleader, eager to air his eloquence. 'Words are idle when facts stare you in the face. "Who knows is silent, he who talks knows not," as the proverb hath it. That is enough. We are satisfied.' '*Wâb Wâb*,' assented Buktiyar Khân at once, acquiescent and regretful. 'Truly, pleader-*jee*! thou hast said that before. Why say it again? If sugar kills, why try poison? We are satisfied, so that is enough.'

THE GIFT OF BATTLE

It was more than enough for the local Bar. They went in a body to Tim O'Brien and complained that they were not treated as lawyers should be treated.

As usual, *Brine sahib* met them with sympathy ; but it was the sympathy of inaction.

' I sincerely regret, gentlemen,' he said softly, ' that sufficient toime is not allowed you to get all the words you have at command off your stomachs—I beg pardon, your minds. But, ye see, the judgments of the Bench are unfortunately quite sound ; they'd be watertight against the full forensic flood of the whole High Court Bar. So I don't see what the divvle is to be done—do you ? '

They did not. In sober truth the sense of equity in the hereditary enemies was too strong for the lawyers. The old men were honestly fulfilled with the desire of punishing the evil doer and praising those who did well. Such flimsy overlays as race and tribe and caste and family and creed did not touch their agreement on all things necessary to salvation.

The fact was rather a pain and grief to them. It did not make them treat each other with less stately dignity or cause them to be one whit more friendly out of court.

Sirdar Bikrama Singh went home to his womenfolk and railed as ever against his neighbour, and Khân Buktiyar Khân, as he rolled his little opium pill betwixt finger and thumb, would do the same thing. But in their heart of hearts they knew that, since a judge must always be ' an ignorant man between two wise ones '

(the plaintiff and defendant), it must be some common ground in themselves which made their views coincide.

Meanwhile the fame of the collective wisdom grew amongst the litigants, and indignation at its brevity increased amongst the lawyers. Tim O'Brien, however, when the timid little Commissioner showed him a numerous signed petition from the local Bar protesting against the 'strictly non-regulation curtailment of eloquence,' only smiled suavely. 'They get at the rights of a case by congenital intuition, sir. The High Court have upheld their judgments in the few appeals the pleaders have cared to make ; so I don't see what the div—— I mean, sir, I don't see what is to be done—do you ?'

Once again there was no answer, and Tim O'Brien, as he dashed off here and there to institute inquiries in obedience to the cipher telegrams which came pouring in from Calcutta by day and by night, felt comfort in knowing that one sub-division of his district at any rate was being well-administered.

For they were troublous days for officers in charge. Someone somewhere had been unwise enough to take the thumb-marks of a peripatetic preacher who was suspected of being an anarchist. He was proved to be an apostle of unrest ; he was also unfortunately a man not only of thumb-mark, but of mark. A professor, briefly, in some far-away college. So the official who had ordered the indignity in the interests of public order was degraded ; and thereafter, naturally, began a campaign of would-be terrorism amongst the school-

THE GIFT OF BATTLE

boys and students of the province which shattered the nerves of government.

'By the Lord who made me,' ejaculated Tim O'Brien angrily, as he flung aside the last urgent *communiqué* from headquarters, 'one would think from that bosh, we were in danger of losing India to-morrow. Can't they see it's only schoolboy rot, sheer daredevil schoolboy mischief, like throwing caps under a motor-car and heads you win, tails I lose, you're over last. I'll tell you what it is, Smith,'—here he addressed his assistant, a pale-faced boy not yet recovered from the strain of examinations—'if I was worth my salt and had the courage of my opinions I'd have up those boys' masters and give 'em each thirty with the cane for not keeping their pupils in order. That 'ud stop it. Instead of that, I have to arrest a poor child of thirteen who threw a badly made bomb, as harmless—it turned out—as a squib. However! my pension stares me in the face. There isn't even a House of Lords left to which I could appeal. So here goes for the innocent victim av' education! Inspector! arrange the arrest, please!'

Naturally, of course, as Tim O'Brien had known, every other schoolboy in the district marched about singing patriotic songs and doing wanton mischief to their hearts' content; thus there was quite a crop of minor arrests.

In fact, when the Bench of Hereditary Enemies held its next sitting it was confronted with a lengthy police case against a gang of boys whose ages varied from ten to thirteen.

THE GIFT OF BATTLE

Bikrama Singh listened gravely to the details and twirled his grey moustache. Buktiyar Khân also listened gravely and stroked his purple beard. They listened very patiently, yet a vague impatience came to their old faces. Then they looked in each other's eyes, and at last the wisdom of their hearts found speech.

'Where is the teacher of these children? Bring him hither that he may show cause for himself.'

To be brief. That night the head-master of the sub-divisional school could neither sit down nor stand up comfortably. But the streets were quiet; the boys peacefully in their beds.

'Glory be to them,' cried Tim O'Brien exultantly, when the news was brought to him. 'They've more spunk than I have—so now to get them out of the scrape.'

He did his best, and that was a good deal, but the law and lies were against him. The schoolmaster happened to be somebody's nephew by marriage, and though there was ample evidence to prove that he had misused his position as a Government servant, the utmost favour Tim O'Brien could screw out of the Powers was permission for the offenders to retire instead of being dismissed from the Honorary Magistracy.

He broke this to the old men with his usual tact, applauding them between the lines for their courage. To his surprise and relief they accepted the position calmly. The better the subordinate, they said, the less likely he was to be always in agreement with others. During their three years' work, which, in truth, had

THE GIFT OF BATTLE

been laborious, not one of their decisions had been upset on appeal. How many judges could say the same! And as for head-master-*jee*——? Would *Brine sahib*, if he could, remove those thirty stripes from the miscreant's back. 'Ye have me there, *sahiban*,' Tim O'Brien replied, with conviction, 'I would not; an' that's God's truth.'

So the old men sent in their resignations, not altogether regretfully. For one thing, the unanimity of their opinions had been disturbing; the old antagonism seemed more natural. And there the matter should have ended. Unfortunately for all, it did not. Tim O'Brien was asked one day, as District Officer, to sign a warrant for the arrest of Sirdar Bikrama Singh and Khân Buktiyar Khân on a charge of assault and battery against the head-master-*jee*, who turned out to be related to half the local Bar.

There is no reason to go into the legal points of the incident, or to tell of the vain efforts of Tim O'Brien to save the whilom Bench from this last affront. An epidemic of cases against magistrates had set in, and late one evening the District Officer started to ride over and break the news of the coming arrest to the Hereditary Enemies.

Nagadrug stood on the nearest scarp of sand, so he went there first. He found the old Sirdar, looking rather frail, engaged as usual in glaring out over the arid fields to Shakingarh.

But this time all Tim O'Brien's tact did not avail for calm. Incredulous anger, half-dazed indignation,

THE GIFT OF BATTLE

took its place. It could not be true. What ! was he, Rajput of Rajput, to be dragged to court at the bidding of a miserable hound whom he had whipped, and rightly whipped ? Had not *Brine sahib* himself applauded the act ? Had they not done right ?—the plural pronoun came out naturally. Was not a false *guru* God's basest creature ? Did not the law say so : ' He who teaches false teaching, who kills his own soul and another, let him die.' Why had they not given the vile reptile a hundred stripes and so got rid of him altogether.

And now were they to have a degree (decree) against them ? Shivjee ! It should never be, never ! never ! They would not have it ! The old tongue found no difficulty in thus claiming companionship in revolt, the old heart knew it was certain of sympathy in the ancient enmity.

Utterly sickened at a tragedy he could not prevent, the District Officer went, tactfully as ever, to Shakingarh ; only to meet with even deeper indignation. Innocent though he knew himself to be, the Englishman positively writhed under the contemptuous unsparing scorn of the old Pathan. What ! was the Sirkar not strong enough to protect itself ? Then let it pack up its bundle and get out of Hindustan. Let it leave India and its problems to *his* people—those northern folk who had harried Bengal in the past, who, God willing, would harry it again. Had *Brine sahib* not heard the saying : ' He who uses his public office to betray the State commits a crime against himself, his

THE GIFT OF BATTLE

country, and his God.' And had not the base hound betrayed the State? A thousand times, yes! It was a pity they had not flogged him to death.

The moon rose over the low sandhills before the District Officer, bruised and broken by the verdict of past India on the present, rode back to the sessions bungalow, where he meant to pass the night. For with the dawn he would go up with the police officer and so soften the arrest of the Hereditary Enemies so far as it could be softened.

They would be let out on bail, of course, and, at the worst, a fine more or less heavy would see them through. It was not so bad—not so very bad.

The District Officer tried to comfort himself with such reflections; in his heart he knew they were futile; that nothing would soften the degradation to those two old warriors.

Nothing! unless it was the calm moonlight that lay over the arid valley and turned the round old fortresses to dim mysterious palaces of light.

Perhaps the peace of it sank into the wearied hot old eyes that looked out from the ancestral roofs with a new feeling of comradeship, each for each, dulling the hereditary hatred, yet bringing with it old memories, old tales of past enmity.

'Bring me my uniform, women!' said Bikrama Singh suddenly. Half a dozen weeping daughters and daughters-in-law and an old wife too blind to see did as they were bid, and in a short time the old man stood arrayed as for a bridal, his word buckled tight to his

THE GIFT OF BATTLE

bowed back. 'And the shield, women—the shield of my fathers that hangs in the entry. I shall need it, too!'

Over in Shakingarh, Buktiyar Khân, impelled likewise by those memories of the past, that hatred of the present, had donned his uniform likewise; and so the moonlight shone on cold steel and damascened gold as, silently obeying some inward community of thought, the two old men started silently alone, leaving all behind them, to seek for Peace in their own way.

Steadily over the arid fields, nearer and nearer to each other. The fields had been cut and carried; the harvest was over; it was nigh time to plough again for a fresh crop——

Of what?

'The Peace of the Unknown be upon you, oh, mine enemy,' said Bikrama Singh, when at long last they stood face to face in the open.

'And the Peace of the Most Mighty be on you, my foe,' answered Buktiyar Khân.

So for a moment there was silence. Then the Rajput spoke, his old voice full of fire, full of vibration.

'In the old days to which we belong, oh, Mahomedan! did brave men wait for Fate?'

'They did not wait, oh, Hindu,' came the answer. 'When brave men found sickness or dishonour before them: when there was no longer hope of victory: when that which lay ahead was hateful, and they left sons to carry on the race, did not the ancestors of my race claim of their enemies the glorious gift of battle?'

THE GIFT OF BATTLE

'They did so claim it, oh, Bikrama Singh! Dost claim it now?'

The reply, quick, vibrant, rang through the moonlight; a veritable challenge.

'Yea, Pathan—robber! thief! I claim it now! *Jug-dân, Jug-dân*—the Gift of Battle to the Death.'

'Take it, pig of an idolater! *Jug-dân, Jug-dân*—the Gift of Battle!'

The still, hot air became full of faint chinkings, as buckles were settled straight, scabbards thrown aside. Then there was an instant's silence as the two old warriors faced each other.

'Art ready . . . friend?' The question came softly.

'Yea! I am ready . . . friend!' The reply was almost a caress.

So, with a quick clash of sword on sword, youth and health and strength came back to the Hereditary Enemies.

* * * * *

It matters little if the combat ended in quarter of an hour, half an hour, or an hour; whether Bikrama Singh or Buktiyar Khân got in the first blow. The moon shone peacefully on the Gift of Battle. She still hung a white shield on the grey skies of dawn when Tim O'Brien and the police officer, coming to do their disagreeable duty, found the two old men lying stone dead within sword's thrust of each other on the stubble.

'They are really an incomprehensible lot,' said the

THE GIFT OF BATTLE

police officer, almost mournfully; 'why the deuce should the two poor old buffers come out and kill each other, as presumably they have——'

Tim O'Brien smiled a grim smile. 'You haven't heard, I suppose—why should ye—of what they call the Gift of Battle? Well! I have. It's an ould Rajput custom by which a man who feared he'd die in his bed or be put to it any way by any other stupid inept limitations, could claim a decent death from his nearest foe.'

'Well! they've done it. That's all, and small blame to them.'

'By God who made me, it's a protest with a vengeance. But the worst of it is, the Government won't see it and I can't explain it. Cipher telegrams won't run to it. So . . . peace be with you, friends!'

THE VALUE OF A VOTE

A SKETCH FROM LIFE

HE was an old man ; a very old man. A Syyed—that is, a Mahomedan who claims direct descent from the prophet—by trade a Yunani hakeem, or physician according to the Grecian system, introduced to India, doubtless, by Alexander the Great. He had a little sort of shop, close to the principal gate of the city, where he was in touch with all those who, with its ship the camel, went out, or came back from the desert beyond, and with all strangers and sojourners in the land. So all day and every day you might see wearied travellers resting on the hard wooden platform set in a dark archway, of which his shop consisted, drinking out of green glass tumblers some restorative sherbet of things hot or things cold, things dry or things wet, while he showed dimly in the background, a visionary outline of long grey beard and high white turban. In this way he heard a good deal of what was going on both inside and outside the city, and as he was of the old school of the absolutely loyal outspoken Mahomedan, who, while he holds our rule to be inferior to that of his own faith, emphatically believes it to be superior to all others, I used often to pause in riding into or out of the

THE VALUE OF A VOTE

city for a chat with the old man ; seldom without benefit to myself. One morning—I remember it so well !—the *gram* fields outside the city were literally drenched with dew, making the fine tufts look like diamond plumes, amongst which the wealth of tiny purple blue pea blossom showed like a sowing of sapphires—I found him sitting with a troubled look on his high, wrinkled forehead, peering through his horn spectacles at a blue printed paper.

A patient was snoring contentedly on the boards, with, tucked into the hollow of his neck, a hard roly-poly bolster which made me ache to look at. Nothing brings home to one the impossibility of any Western judging what is, or is not pleasant or convenient to an Eastern more than the ordinary rolling-pin, two feet by six inches, stuffed hard with cotton wool, which the latter habitually uses as a pillow. The sight of it makes a Western neck feel stiff.

I recognized the paper at once. We were then in the throes of ' Local Self Government,' and a violent effort was being made to induce this little far-away town, inhabited for the most part by Pathans (exiled these centuries back from northern wilds to the Indian plain) to elect a Municipal Committee.

I had spent the better part of the day before in explaining to various Rais'es or honourable gentlemen of the city, that no insult was intended by asking them to put themselves up to auction, as it were, by the votes of their fellow citizens, instead of being discreetly and as ever nominated to the office of Councillor by the

THE VALUE OF A VOTE

'hated alien.' A few had gravely and dutifully given in to this new and quite incomprehensible fad of the constituted authorities, others had hesitated, but one, a fiery old Khan Bahadur, who was a retired risseldar from one of our crack native cavalry regiments, had sworn with many oaths that never would he take office from, amongst others, the perjured vote of Gunpat-Lal, pleader, who belonged to his ward, and whose evil, eloquent tongue had deliberately diddled him out of ancestral rights in a poppy field in the Huzoor's own court. No! He had served the Sirkar with distinction, he had, with his own hands, nearly killed an agitator he had found in the lines; nay, more! he had absolutely sent his daughter to school to please the *sahib-logue*; but *this* was too much. It had been all I could do to prevent the hot-tempered old soldier from giving up the sword of honour with which he had been presented on retirement, as a signal of final rupture with the Government.

So, as I say, I recognized the blue paper at once as one of many voting-papers which had been sent out for marking and return; for in these out-of-the-way places in those days, the secret ballot-box was not the best blessing of the world, as it is now. And my old friend the hakeem was, I knew, on the Khan Bahadur's ward.

'What have you got to do with it?' I echoed, in reply to an anxious question. 'Why, put a mark against the Khan Bahadur's name and give it back whence it came.'

He *salaamed* profoundly. 'Huzoor! that was the

THE VALUE OF A VOTE

settled determination of this slave, thus combining new duties with old—which is the philosophy of faithful life ; but, being called in last night to an indigestion in his house, which I combated with burnt almonds, he told me that if I so much as went near his honourable name with my stylus, I should cease to be physician-in-ordinary to his household. And, father and son, we have been physicians to the Khan Bahadur ever since our fathers followed his fathers from Ghazni in that capacity with the Great Mahomed—on whom be peace.’

‘ Then mark one of the other names—which you choose, and send it in,’ I replied, taking no notice of the scandalous attempt at coercion on the old Khan Bahadur’s part.

A still more profound *salaam* was the answer. ‘ That also would have occurred to me,’ came the suave old voice, ‘ but that the Khan Bahadur said, with oaths, that if I so much as made a chance blot on this cursed paper against any of the names thereon, I should be cast for life from his honourable company.’

I felt quite nettled. Her Majesty’s lieges must not be intimidated in this fashion. ‘ Well ! you must think of the person whom you consider most fitted to fulfil all the many duties which will devolve on him, and put down *his* name,’ I said, for in these days when we really wished to get at the wishes of the people, we were not so strict about nominations and proposings and secondings as we are now, ‘ and I will speak again to the Khan Bahadur and see if I cannot induce him to stand.’ (I

THE VALUE OF A VOTE

meant to do so by threats of exposure for using force to Her Majesty's lieges !)

As I rode off, my horse picking its way through the piles of melons, the bags of corn, the jars of milk, the nets of pottery and all the *olla podrida* of trivial daily merchandise which finds pause for a few minutes about an active gate at dawn time, the patient sat up straight from his backboard and yawned, then asked for another violet drink. But the hakeem was absorbed in the problem of voting.

I happened that day to have business in the city in the evening also, but I entered by another gate, so that the sun was nigh setting when, on my homeward way, I saw my old friend the Yunani hakeem sitting with his pile of little medicine bottles and tiny earthenware goglets of pills and ointments beside him.

He was pounding away at something in a minute jade mortar and looked no longer disturbed, but weary utterly.

'Have you settled that knotty point, hakeem sahib?' I asked.

He gave a sigh of relief, but pounded away faster than ever. 'I give God thanks I have been led into the way of wisdom,' he replied, 'else would I be harried, indeed! Never, within the memory of man, have so many gentlemen of rank been sick as during this day. I am but now compounding the "Thirty-six-ingredient-drug" for one honourable house, and have but just finished the "Four-great-things" for another. 'Tis anxiety about the elections, methinks, for they talk

THE VALUE OF A VOTE

of nothing else. Hardly had your Honour left this morning, than Gunpat-Lal sent to say he had a belly-ache which his idolatrous miracle-monger could not touch. I had it away in half an hour with cucumber and lemon juice. Cold things to cold. And Lala-ji full of compliments and regrets that the Khan Bahadur would not be elected.' A faintly worried air crept over the high old face.

'Did he ask you to give him your vote?' I inquired, with a sinking at my heart.

'Yea!' replied the Yunani hakeem cheerfully, 'and offered me five rupees for it.'

Ye Gods above! How soon political corruption seizes on the innocent, I thought.

'But others have offered more,' continued the old man, with a certain self-satisfaction. Then his face clouded. 'Yonder pasty-faced knock-kneed student, who calls himself "Hedditerlile-jackdaw"' (Editor Loyal Objector), 'told me it was his by right, since he and his like were Hindustan. But I told the lad God had ordained otherwise—for look you, Huzoor, we Mussalmans came from the north many long years before the *sahib-logue* came from the west. So I let him talk, having, by God's mercy, come to a decision.'

'What is that, hakeem-ji?' I asked, curious to know what had influenced the old man.

He *salaamed* quite simply. 'The Huzoor bade me think who could best do the work, so I decided to vote for him. He is noble, and he knows what has to be done. He knows *santation* and *inspekshon-conservance*.

THE VALUE OF A VOTE

Also *newsense*, and *karl-ra-pre-kar-sons*, and '—he added, with the most beautiful supplementary *salaam* of pure flattery—'all other noble arts and philosophies.' It quite gave me a pang to tell him that this scheme of his would not work. That I was *ex officio* president of the Municipal Committee, and thus beyond the reach of voters.

His face was illumined by a vast relief even amidst his perplexities.

'That is as it should be,' he said simply. 'The Sirkar then, has not, as they say, quite lost its head; the Huzoor retains it still. But what am I to do?'

I left him looking the picture of woe, absolutely unheeding of two patient travellers who had been awaiting my departure with that calm stolid disregard of the passing hour which brings with it to the Western such a sense of personal grievance; whereas to the Eastern it only emphasizes his trust in Providence by proving the omnipotence of Fate.

Next morning, however, the whole aspect of affairs had been changed. Hakeem-ji was alert, spry, surrounded by quite a congregation of would-be patients, to whom he was giving out his *dicta* with quite a lordly air. There was no need to ask him if he had settled his vexed question. That was apparent. I simply asked him what he had done about the paper.

'Huzoor,' he said again, with that lucid candour which was so marked a feature of the man himself, 'the Lord mercifully directed me. Therefore I ate it, and it hath done me much good.'

THE VALUE OF A VOTE

‘ Ate it ? ’ I echoed. ‘ You don’t mean to say——’
‘ Huzoor ! ’ he interrupted cheerfully, ‘ this is how it was. After your Honour left, it was the time of evening prayer. So I went, after my usual custom, to the House of God, to await the cry of the Muazzim and prepare myself for the presence of the Most High by the necessary ablutions. And as I sat squatted on the edge of the Pool of Purification, my hands in the cool water, I felt as if naught could cleanse me from that accursed paper that lay folded in my breast. So I cried in my heart to the prophet that he should show me a way, and then in one moment I saw where the error lay. I was arrogating to myself decisions that should be left to the Almighty. So I did what I do ever when life and death are at issue, when even the mighty skill of medicine has to stand on one side and do nothing.

‘ I took my stylus, and I wrote all over that paper the attributes of the Most High—His mercy, His truth, His wisdom, His great loving-kindness. And then, Huzoor, I crushed it into the form of a bolus, covered it with silver foil, and swallowed it as a pill.

‘ It hath done me much good. I am now free from anxiety. The decision of all things rests with the Most Mighty.’

SALT DUTY

I

‘**L**O ! nigh on fifty years have passed since that dark night ; just such a night as this, O ! Children-of-the-Master ! and yet remembering the sudden yell of death which rose upon the still air—just such an air as this, hot and still. . . . Nay ! fear not, Children-of-the-Master ! since I, Imân (the faithful one so named and natured), watch, as I watched then . . . and yet, I say, the hair upon my head which then grew thick and now is bald, the down upon my skin which then was bloom and now is stubble, starts up even as I started to my feet at that dread cry, and catching Sonny-*baba* in my arms fled to the safer shadows of the garden. And the child slept. . . .’

The voice, declamatory yet monotonous, paused as if the speaker listened.

‘It is always so with the Master-Children,’ it went on, tentatively, ‘they sleep. . . .’

The second and longer pause which ensued allowed soft breathings to be heard from the darkness, even, unmistakable, and when the voice continued something of the vainglorious tone of the *raconteur* had been replaced by a note of resignation.

SALT DUTY

'And wherefore not, my friends, seeing that as masters they know no fear?'

Wherefore, indeed?

Imân Khân, whilom major-domo to many sahibs of high degree, now in his old age factotum to the Eurasian widow and children of a conservancy overseer, asked himself the question boldly. Yet the heart which beat beneath the coarse white muslin coatee starched to crackle-point in the effort to conceal the poorness of its quality, felt a vague dissatisfaction.

In God's truth the memory of the great Mutiny still sent his old blood shivering through his veins, and some of the tribe of boys who slept around him in the darkness were surely now old enough to thrill, helplessly responsive, to the triumphal threnody of their race?

Yet it was not so. The tale, on the contrary, was a sure sleep-compeller; indeed, he was never able to reach his own particular contribution to the sum total of heroism before sleep came—except in his own dreams! *There* he remembered, as he remembered so many things. How to decorate a ham, for instance—though it was an abomination to the Lord!—how to ice champagne—though that also was damnable!—when to say 'Not at home,' or dismiss a guest by announcing the carriage—though these were foreign to him, soul and body.

Out there, beyond the skimp verandah, amid the string cots set in the dusky darkness in hopes of a

SALT DUTY

breath of fresher air, old Imân's imagination ran riot in etiquette.

And yet the faint white glimmer of the Grand Trunk Road which showed beyond the cots was not straighter, more unswerving than the *khânsâman's* creed as to the correct card to play in each and every circumstance of domestic life.

His present mistress, a worthy soul of the most doubtful Portuguese descent, knew this to her cost. It was a relief, in fact, for her to get away at times from his determination, for instance, to have what he called 'sikkens' for dinner. But then she did not divide her world into the sheep who always had a savoury second course in their menu, and the goats who did not. To him it was the crux of social position.

So, an opportunity of escape having arisen in the mortal illness of a distant relation, she had gone off for a week's holiday full of tears and determination, while away, to eat as much sweet stuff as she chose, leaving Imân Khân in charge of the quaint little bastion of the half-ruined caravanserai in which she was allowed free quarters in addition to her pension.

He was relieved also. He had, in truth, a profound contempt for her ; but as this was palpably the wrong game, he covered his disapproval with an inflexible respect which allowed no deviation from duty on either side. Yet it was a hard task to keep the household straight. Sometimes even Imân's solid belief in custom as all-sufficing wavered, and he half regretted

SALT DUTY

having refused the offers of easier services made him by rich Indians anxious to ape the manner of the alien. But it was only for a moment. The claims of the white blood he had served all his life, as his forbears had before him, were paramount, and whatever his faults, the late *E-stink Sahib*, conservancy overseer, had been white—or nearly so! Did not his name prove it? Had not *Warm E-stink Sahib* (Warren Hastings) left a reputation behind him in India for all time? Yea! he had been a real master. The name was without equal in the land—save, perhaps, that which came from the great conqueror, *Jullunder* (Alexander).

Undoubtedly, *E-stink Sahib* had been white; so it was a pity the children took so much after their mother; more and more so, indeed, since the baby girl born after her father's death was the darkest of the batch. It was as if the white blood had run out in consequence of the constant calls upon it. For Elflida Norma, the eldest girl—they all had fine names except the black baby, whom that incompetent widow had called Lily—was. . . .

Ah! what was not Elflida Norma? The old man, drowsing in the darkness after a hard day of decorum, wandered off still more dreamily at the thought of his darling. *She* did not sleep out on the edge of the high road. Her sixteen years demanded other things. Ah! so many things. Yet the Incompetent one could perceive no difference between the claims of the real Miss-Sahiba—that is, *E-stink Sahib's* own daughter by a previous wife—and those of the girl-brat she herself

had brought to him by a previous husband, and whom she had cheerfully married off to a black man with a sahib's hat ! For this was Imân Khân's contemptuous classification of Xavier Castello, one of those unnecessarily dark Eurasians who even in the middle of the night are never to be seen without the huge pith hats, which they wear, apparently, as an effort at race distinction.

The Incompetent one was quite capable of carrying through a similar marriage for the Miss-Sahiba. Horrible thought to Imân ; all the more horrible because he was powerless to provide a proper husband. He could insist on savouries for dinner ; he could say ' the door is shut ' to undesirable young men ; he could go so far in weddings as to provide a *suffer* (supper) and a wedding cake (here his wrinkles set into a smile), but only God could produce the husband, especially here in this mere black man's town where sahibs lived not. Where sahibs did not even seek a meal or a night's rest in these evil days when they were whisked hither and thither by rail trains instead of going decently by road.

Through the darkness his dim eyes sought the opposite bastion of the serai. In the olden days any moment might have brought someone. . . .

But those days were past. It would need a miracle now to bring a sahib out of a post carriage to claim accommodation there. Yea ! a real heaven-sent car must come.

Still, God was powerful. If he chose to send one,

SALT DUTY

there might be a real wedding—such a wedding as—there had been—when—he . . .

So, tired out, Imân was once more in his dreams decorating hams, icing champagne, and giving himself away in the intricacies of sugar-piping.

When he woke, it was with a sense that he had somehow neglected his duty. But no! In the hot dry darkness there was silence and sleep. Even Lily-baba had her due share of Horatio Menelaus' bed. He rose, and crept with noiseless bare feet to peep in through the screens of Elfida Norma's tiny scrap of a room that was tacked on to the one decent-sized circular apartment in the bastion, like a barnacle to a limpet. One glance, even by the dim light of the cotton wick set in a scum of oil floating on a tumbler of water, showed him that she was no longer where an hour or two before he had left her safe.

Without a pause he crept on across the room and looked through the door at its opposite end, which gave on the arcaded square of the serai.

All was still. Here and there among the ruined arches a twinkling light told of some wayfarer late come, and from the shadows a mixed bubbling of hookahs and camels could be heard drowsily.

She was not there, however, as he had found her sometimes, listening to a bard or wandering juggler; for she was not as the others, tame as cows, but rather as the birds, wild and flighty. So he passed on, out through the massive doorway, built by dead kings, and stood once more on the white gleam of the road,

SALT DUTY

listening. From far down it, nearer the town, came the unmelodious hee-haw of a concertina played regardless of its keys.

‘Hee, hee, haw! Haw, hee, hee!’

His old ear knew the rhythm. That was the dance in which the *sahib-logue* kicked and stamped and laughed. This was Julia Castello’s doing. There was a ‘nautch’ among the black people with the sahib’s hats, and the Miss-Sahiba—his Miss-Sahiba—had been lured to it!

Once more, without a pause, the instinct as to the right thing to do coming to him with certainty, he turned aside to his cook-room, and, lighting a hurricane lantern, began to rummage in a battered tin box, which bespattered still with such labels as ‘Wanted on the Voyage,’ proclaimed itself a perquisite from some past services.

So, ten minutes afterwards, a starched simulacrum of what had once been a Chief Commissioner’s butler (even to a tarnished silver badge in the orthodox head-gear shaped like a big pith quoit) appeared in the verandah of Mrs. Castello’s house, and, pointing with dignity to the glimmer of a hurricane lantern in the dusty darkness by the gate, said, as he produced a moth-eaten cashmere opera-cloak trimmed with moulting swansdown:

‘As per previous order, the Miss-Sahiba’s ayah hath appeared for her mistress, with this slave as escort.’

Elflida Norma, a dancing incarnation of pure mischief, looked round angrily on the burst of noisy

laughter which followed, and the pausing stamp of her foot was not warranted by the polka.

‘Why you laugh?’ she cried, passionately. ‘He is my servant—he belongs to our place.’

Then, turning to the deferential figure, her tone changed, and she drew herself up to the full of her small height.

‘Nikul jao!’ she said, superbly; which, being interpreted, is the opprobrious form of ‘get you gone.’

The old man’s instinct had told him aright. There, amid that company, the girl, in the white muslin she had surreptitiously pinned into the semblance of a ball dress, her big blue eyes matching the tight string of big blue beads about her slender throat, showed herself apart absolutely, despite her dark hair and almost sallow complexion.

‘The Huzoor has forgotten the time,’ said Imân imperturbably; ‘it is just twelve o’clock, and *Sin-an-bella* dances of this description’—here he looked round at the squalid preparations for supper with superlative scorn—‘always close at midnight.’

There was something so almost appalling in the answering certainty of his tone regarding Cinderellas, that even Mrs. Castello hesitated, looking round helplessly at her guests.

‘In addition,’ added the old man, following up the impression, ‘is not the night Saturday? and even in the great *Lât-Sahib’s* house, where I have served, was there no nautch on Saturdays—excepting *Sin-an-bellas*.’

SALT DUTY

He yielded the last point graciously, but the concession was even more confounding to Mrs. Castello than his previous claim. Besides, old Imân's darkling allusion to service with a Governor-General was a well-known danger-signal to the whole Hastings family, including Elflida Norma, who now hesitated palpably.

'I t'ought you more wise,' insinuated her partner, who had actually laid aside his hat for the polka, 'than to have such a worn-out poor fellow to your place. Pay no heed to him, Miss 'Astin', and polk again once more.'

Elflida drew herself away from his encircling arm haughtily.

'No, thanks,' she drawled, her small head, with its short curls, in air. 'I am tired of polking—and he is a more better servant than your people have in your place, anyhow.'

'But Elfie!' protested Mrs. Castello.

The girl interrupted her step-sister with an odd expression in her big blue eyes.

'It will be Sunday, as he says, Julia; besides, the princess always goes home first from a Cinderella, you know, because——'

'Because why?' inquired Mrs. Castello, fretfully; 'that will be some bob-dash from the silly books she adores so much, Mr. Rosario.'

Elflida stood for a moment smiling sweetly, as it were appraising all things she saw, from the greasy tablecloth on the supper table to old Imân's starched purity;

from the cocoanut oil on the head of one admirer, to the tarnished silver sign of service on the head of the other.

'Because she was a princess, of course,' she replied, demurely; and straightway stooped her white shoulders for the yoke of cashmere and swansdown with a dignity which froze even Mr. Rosario's remonstrance.

'Thank you,' she said loftily in the verandah, when he suggested escort; 'but my ayah and my bearer are sufficient. Good night.'

So down the pathway, inches deep in dust, she walked sedately towards the glimmer of the lantern by the gate, followed deferentially by Imân. But only so far; for once within the spider's web halo round the barred light, she sprang forward with a laugh. The next instant all was dark. Cimmerian darkness indeed to the old man as he struggled with the moulting swansdown and moth-eaten cashmere she had flung over his head.

'Miss-Sahiba! Miss-baba! norty, norty girl!' he cried after her, desperately, in his double capacity of escort and ayah. Then he consoled himself with the reflection that it was but a bare quarter of a mile to the serai along a straight deserted high road. Even a real Miss-Sahiba might go so far alone, unhurt; so, after pausing a moment from force of habit to re-light the lantern, he ambled after his charge as fast as his old legs could carry him. Suddenly he heard a noise such as he had never heard before close behind him. A horrid, panting noise, and then something between a

bellow and a whistle. He turned, saw a red eye glaring at him, and the next instant the infernal monster darted past him, whirring, snorting. In pursuit, of course, of Elflida Norma!

What tyranny was here! What defiance of custom! Saw anyone ever the like?—on a decent metalled road—and only the ayah—God forgive him the lie!—wanting to make all things in order?

These confused, helpless thoughts ran swifter in the old man's mind than his legs carried his body, as he followed in pursuit of the monster. The lantern, swinging wildly, hindered such light as there might have been without it, but he knew the Thing was ahead of him, by the truly infernal smell it left behind it.

And then from the darkness ahead came a curiously familiar cry, 'Hut, hut! (get out of the way). Oh, damn!'

A crash followed; then silence. A few seconds afterwards he was gazing, helplessly bewildered, at two figures who were looking at each other wrathfully across the white streak of road.

One he knew. It was Elflida Norma, her impromptu ball dress metamorphosed by her race into loose white draperies out of which the small dark head and slim throat, with its circlet of big blue beads, rose as from clouds. The other, unknown, was that of a tall, fair young man.

'If you had only stood still,' the latter was saying angrily, 'I could have managed, but you dodged about

SALT DUTY

like—like——’ His eyes had taken her in by this time, and he paused in his simile. But hers had wandered to the monster prone in the dust ; and she stepped closer to it curiously.

‘ I suppose it is named a motor-bicycle,’ she said, coolly. ‘ I have not seen one in our place before, only in picture-books. I am glad.’

There were no regrets or apologies. And even Imân Khân, when he recovered his breath, made no inquiries as to whether the young man had hurt himself in getting out of the Miss-Sahiba’s way. He simply looked at the wheels of the bicycle and then at its stalwart young rider.

God had been kind and sent a husband in a miraculous car !

II

Imân Khân sate in the early dawn, putting such polish as never before was put on a pair of rather large-size Oxford shoes. So far all had gone well. His own vast experience, aided by the stranger’s complete ignorance of Indian ways, had sufficed for much ; and Alexander Alexander Sahib (all the twelve Imâns be praised for such a name !) was now comfortably asleep in the bastion opposite the widow’s quarters, under the impression that the hastily produced whisky and soda, with a ‘ sand beef ’ (sandwich) in case hunger had come on the road, the simple but clean bedding, and briefly, all the luxuries of a night’s sleep after a somewhat severe shaking, were due to the commercial instincts

of a good old chap in charge of the usual rest-house : that being exactly what Imân had desired as a beginning.

The sequel required thought, and, as he polished, his brain was full of plans for the immediate future. One thing was certain, however, quite certain. The husband God had sent in a car must not be allowed to ride away on it before seeing more of the Miss-Sahiba. Arrangements must be made, as they always had to be made in the best families. Generally it began with a tennis party—but this, of course, was out of the question—and perhaps the accident on the road might be taken as an equivalent for that introduction. Then there were dances, and ‘fools-food’ (picnics). The one might be considered as taken also, the others were out of season in the heats of May. There remained drives and dinners. Both possible, but both required time ; therefore time must be had. The young sahib must not ride away after breakfast, as he had settled on doing, should he and the monster be found fit for the road.

Now the young sahib seemed none the worse for his fall, as Imân, in his capacity of valet, had had opportunities of judging. The inference, therefore, was obvious. It must be the monster who was incapable.

Imân gave a finishing glisten to the shoes and placed them decorously side by side, ready to be taken in when the appointed hour came for shaving-water. Then he went over and looked at the motor-bicycle, which was

SALT DUTY

accommodated in the verandah. It did not pant or smell now as if it were alive, but for all that it looked horribly healthy and strong. It was evidently not a thing to be broken inadvertently by a casual push. Then a thought struck him, and he ambled off to the old blacksmith, who still lived in the serai arcade and boasted of his past trade of mending springs, shoeing horses, and selling to travellers his own manufactures in the way of wonderful soft iron pocket-knives with endless blades and corkscrews warranted to draw themselves instead of the corks!

‘Oh, Brother,’ said Imân mildly to this worthy, ‘thou art a prince of workmen, truly; but come and see something beyond thy art in iron. I warrant thou couldst not even guess at its inner parts.’

Could he not? Tezoo, the smith, thought otherwise, and being clever as well as voluble, hit with fair correctness on pivots, cog-wheels, and such-like inevitables of all machinery, the result of the interview being that Imân, armed with his kitchen chopper and a bundle of skewers, had a subsequent *tête-à-tête* with the monster, in which the latter came off second best; so that when its owner, fortified by a most magnificent breakfast (served in the verandah by reason of the central room of that bastion having an absolutely unsafe roof), went to overhaul his metal steed, he was fairly surprised.

‘It is a verra remarkable occurrence,’ he said softly to himself as his deft hands busied themselves with nuts and screws (for he was a Scotch engineer on his way to

take up an appointment as superintendent in a canal workshop), 'most remarkable. And would be a fine example to the old minister's thesis that accident is not chance. There's just a method in it that is absolutely uncanny.'

In short, even with the smithy on the premises, of which the good old chap in charge spoke consolingly, it was clear he could not start before evening, if then. Not that it mattered so much, since he had plenty of time in which to join his billet.

Thus, as he smoked his pipe, the question came at last for which the old matchmaker had been longing.

'And who would the young lady be who smashed me up last night?'

In his reply Imân dragged in *Warm E-stink Sabib Babadur* and a vast amount of extraneous matter out of his own past experiences. Regarding the present, however, he was distinctly selective without being actually untruthful. The late *E-stink Sabib's* widow and children, for instance, being also at rest in the serai, were equally under his charge. And this being so, since there was but one public room in which dinner could possibly be served as it should be served—here Imân made a digression regarding the rights of the *sabiblogue* at large and *E-stink Sabib's* family in particular—it was possible that the Huzoor might meet his fellow-lodgers and the Miss-Sahiba again.

In fact, he—Imân—would find it more convenient if the meal were eaten together and at the same time, and the mem—her absence being one of the eliminated

SALT DUTY

truths—would, he knew, fall in with any suggestion of his ; which statement again was absolutely true.

Alec Alexander, lost in the intricacies of a piston-rod, acquiesced mechanically, though in truth the likelihood of seeing such a remarkably pretty face again was not without its usual unconscious charm to a young man.

This charm, however, became conscious half an hour afterwards, when hard at work in the smithy, his coat off, his sleeves rolled up, showing milk-white arms above his tanned wrists, he looked up from the bit of glowing iron on the anvil and saw a large pair of blue eyes and a large string of blue beads about an almost childish throat.

It struck him that both were as blue as the sky inarching the wide inarched square of the old serai. It struck him also that the eyes, anyhow, had more in common with the sky than with the house made with hands in which he stood, even though dead kings had built it. Yes ! the whole figure did not belong somehow to its environment ; to the litter of wasted forage, the ashes of dead fires, to the desertion and neglect of a place which, having served its purpose of a night's lodging, has been left behind on the road. It seemed worth more than that.

'I gave you a nice toss, didn't I?' said Elflida Norma, breaking in on his quasi-sentimental thought with a certain complacency. 'If you had got out of my way it would have been more better.'

'You mean if you hadn't got in mine,' he replied

SALT DUTY

grimly. 'But don't let us quarrel about that now. The mischief's done so far as I am concerned.'

The blue eyes narrowed in eager interest.

'Have you broken things inside, too?' she asked, sympathy absent, pure curiosity present in her tone.

'No! I didn't,' he said, shortly. 'I'm not of the kind that breaks easily.'

She considered him calmly from head to foot.

'No-o-o,' she admitted, sparingly. 'I suppose not—but your arms look verree brittle, like china—I suppose that is from being so—being so chicken-white.'

'Perhaps,' he said, still more shortly, and was relieved when Imân (having from the cook-room, where he was feverishly feathering fowls in preparation for the night's feast, detected Elflida's flagrant breach of etiquette in having anything whatever to do with a coatless sahib) hurried across to beguile his charge back to the paths of propriety by reporting that Lily-baba (to whom the girl was devoted) evinced a determination to eat melons with her brothers, which he, Imân, was far too busy to frustrate.

'You need not make such pother about big dinner to-night,' she said viciously, when, with the absolutely accommodating Lily in her arms, she stood watching the far less interesting process of pounding forcemeat on a curry stone; 'for I heard him tell the smith that he would go this evening if—well, if somebody kept his temper in boiling oil. Such a queer idea—as if anybody could!'

Old Imân's hands fell for an instant from the *munâdu*

(Maintenon) cutlets he was preparing, for he understood the frail foundation on which his chance of manufacturing a husband stood. Jullunder-sahib must be making a spring, and if the oil in which it had to be boiled—— But no! As cook, he knew something of the properties of hot fat, and felt convinced that the spring would never be fried in time.

So all that long hot day he toiled and slaved in company with an anatomy of a man whom he had unearthed from the city. A man who had also in his youth served the white blood, but had never risen beyond the scullery. A man who called him 'Great Artificer,' and fanned him and the charcoal fire indiscriminately according to their needs.

And all that long hot day on the other side of the arcaded square work went on also, so that the clang of metal on anvil or cook-room fire rose in antagonism on the dusty sunshine which slept between them. Dinner or no dinner? Spring or no spring? And the circling dark shadows of the kites above in the blue sky were almost the only other signs of life, for Elflida Norma had found sleep the easiest way of keeping Lily-baba from the melons, and the boys slept as they slept always.

But as the sun set Imân knew that fate had decided in favour of the dinner, for Jullunder-sahib came over from the smithy with empty hands, and found hot water in his room, and the change of white raiment he carried in his knapsack laid out decorously on the bed.

SALT DUTY

He took the hint and dressed for dinner, even to the buttonhole of jasmine which he found beside his hair-brush.

Elflida Norma, under similar supervision, dressed also. In fact, everything was dressed, including the flat tin lids of the saucepans which Imân had impressed into doing duty as side-dishes. Surrounded by castellated walls of rice paste, supporting cannon balls of alternate spinach and cochinealed potatoes, they really looked very fine. So did Imân himself, starched to inconceivable stiffness of deportment. So even did the anatomy, who, promoted for once to the dining-room, grinned at the young man and the girl, at the Great Artificer and all his works, with his usual indiscrimina-tion.

And, in truth, each and all deserved grins. Yet Elflida Norma looked at Alec Alexander, he at her, and both at the dinner table set out marvellously with great trails of the common pumpkin vine looped with the cheap silver tinsel every Indian bazaar provides, and felt a sudden shyness of themselves, of each other, and the unwonted snowiness and glitter.

'Cler or wite?' said Imân, his old hands in difficulties with two soup plates. There was a dead silence.

'He means soup,' faltered Elflida Norma desperately, wishing herself with the boys who were being regaled with curry and rice in her room, and thereafter became dumb until the next course, when a sense of duty made her supplement Imân's 'fish-bar'l' with

SALT DUTY

the explanation that it was not really fish, which was not procurable, but another form of fowl.

So, in fact, were the side dishes which followed, and in which Imân had so far surpassed his usual self that Elflida was perforce as helpless as her companion for all save eating them solidly in due order. The old man, however, was too much absorbed in the due handling of 'bredsarse' with the fowl, which was at last allowed to appear under the title of 'roschikken,' too much discomforted by the subsidence of his favourite 'sikken,' a cheese *soufflée*, to notice silence, or the lack of it, until, just as—the worst strain over—he was perfunctorily apologizing for the impossibility of 'Hice-puddeen,' a fateful cry came from the next room and Elflida started to her feet.

'It's Lily,' she began; but Imân frowned her into her seat again, and turned to the anatomy superbly. 'Go!' he said with dignity, 'and bid the ayah see to Lily-baba.'

The result, however, was unsatisfactory, and a certain obstinacy grew to Elflida's small face, which finally blossomed into open rebellion and a burst of confidence.

'You see,' she said, those blue eyes of hers almost blinking as she narrowed them with earnestness, 'she smells guavas, and they are more her hobby than melons even.'

The young man smiled.

'Who's Lily?' he asked; 'your sister, I suppose.'

'My half-sister,' she replied, solemnly. 'But she

will cry on, you see, if she is not let to come to my place.'

'Then let her come—why not?'

'It is an evil custom,' began Imân, as the order was given. He knew no graver blame than that even for a whole Decalogue in ruins; but Elflida Norma stamped her foot as she had stamped it in the polka, so he had to give in and thus avoid worse exposures.

And, after all, the introduction of the dimpled brown child in a little white night-shift, who leant shyly against Elflida's blue beads, seemed to help the conversation. So much so that after coffee and cigarettes had been served in the verandah, old Imân felt as if success must crown his efforts—if only there were time! But how could there be time when the possible husband had arranged, since the motor-bicycle refused to be mended with the appliances at his disposal, to have it conveyed by country cart overnight to the nearest railway station, five miles off, whither he must tramp it, he supposed, next morning, to catch the mail train.

It was when, pleasantly, yet still carelessly, Alec Alexander was saying good-bye to the blue eyes and the blue beads, with the brown baby cuddled up comfortably in the girl's slender arms, that Imân, with a sinking heart, played his last card by saying that there was no need for the Huzoor to tramp. The Miss-Sahiba and Lily-baba invariably took a carriage airing before breakfast, and could quite easily drop the Huzoor at the railway station.

SALT DUTY

'Yes! I could drop you quite easily at that place. It would be more better than the walk,' assented Elflida Norma, with a Sphinx-like smile. Her heart was beating faster than usual. She was beginning to be amused with the tinsel glitter and the general pretence. It was like playing a game. Still she slept soundly; and so did the young engineer, and Lily-baba, and the boys gorged with as-a-rule-prohibited native dainties. Even the smith slept, and the anatomy had already reverted to reality, his transient dignity vanishing into thin air. So that in that wide ruined serai, built by dead kings, all were at rest save the Great Artificer, Imân, who sate among the ruins of his dinner, satisfied, yet still conscious of failure. Something was lacking, which once more only God could create—only a miraculous car could bring.

In truth, if any vehicle might from outward appearance claim miraculous powers, it was the extraordinary sort of four-wheeled dogcart which, in the cool morning air, appeared as Imân's last card. He had, indeed, not wandered from the truth in telling Alec Alexander that carriages were not to be hired in that sahib-forsaken spot, and it had been only with extreme difficulty that he had raised these four wheels of varying colours and a body painted with festoons of grapes, all tied together with ropes.

Still, it held the party. Imân, with Lily-baba in his arms, on the box by the driver, Elflida and the young engineer disposed on the back seat. The horse, it is true, showed signs of never having been in harness

before, but this was not so evident to those behind, and Imân held tight and set his teeth, knowing that success has sometimes to be bought dearly.

Still, it was with no small measure of relief when they were close on their destination, and the beast settled down to the two hundred yards of collar work leading up to the small station level with the high embankment of the permanent way, that he turned round to peep at progress on the back seat.

Had anything happened? His heart sank at the cool, collected air with which the possible husband took his ticket; but it rose again, when, after saying good-bye to *Lily-baba* and tipping the coachman, the young man went off to the platform with Elflida, as if it were a matter of course she should see him off. In truth, that is exactly what he did feel concerning this distinctly pretty and rather jolly little girl with a bad temper.

And Elflida? Her world seemed to have had a fresh start in growth, it held greater possibilities than before, that was all.

So everything had been in vain, even Imân's sense of duty towards the white blood he had served so long.

'Good-bye!' He could not hear the words, but he saw the young hands meet to unclasp again, as with a whistle the mail train rushed out from behind a dense mango clump, and the Westinghouse brakes brought a sudden grinding rattle to the quiet morning air.

SALT DUTY

'All was over!' thought Imân sadly, as, still sitting on the box with Lily-baba, he watched. Surely it had not been his fault. He had done all—only the cheese *soufflée* had failed, and that happened sometimes even in the house of *Lât-Sahibs*. Yet it was over.

It was, indeed. Almost including the miraculous car, as deprived of its driver, who was spending part of his tip in the sweet stall, the horse, frightened at the train, reared, bounded forward, and then, finding its progress barred in front by a railing, swerved on its track, and came past the station again, heading for that downward incline with the steep banks falling away on either side.

Elflida grasped the position first, and with a cry of 'Lily! Lily!' was at the horse's head as it passed. The possible husband was not far behind—just far enough to make the off rein as convenient to his pursuing feet as the near one, to which she clung, half dragged, helpless, half in wild determination to keep pace with the terrified beast.

'Let go!' he shouted. 'He'll get you down, and then—let go, I say!'

She did not answer. In truth, she had no breath for words. And, besides, her mind was not clear enough to grasp his order, though it grasped something else—namely, that relief from her dead weight on one side must bring a swerve to the other. And that must not be till the embankment was passed, or the man holding to the off rein must go under.

SALT DUTY

' Let go ! ' he shouted, again and again, as he, in his turn, grasped her purpose ; but he might as well have shouted to the dead.

* * * * *

' I believe—I hope—she has fainted,' said Alec Alexander, with a catch in his voice not all due to breathlessness, as, the runaway safe held by other captors, he stooped over the girl who lay in the dust, her hands still clenched over a broken rein. Then he lifted her tenderly and carried her back to the station whence the mail train, careless of such trivialities as miraculous cars, had departed.

And if on his way he kissed the closed blue eyes and the blue beads round the childish throat, who shall blame him ?

* * * * *

Anyhow, the hot dry nights of May were not over before old Imân's voice rose once more in declamation over the unforgettable story of the white blood.

But this time sleep did not come to the black-and-tan tribe gathered in the light of the floating oil wick. For the boys were watching something they had never seen before—the icing of a wedding cake.

And so the long-deferred personal climax came at last.

' The trouble being over, the masters were masters again, and I took Sonny-*baba* back to his people. And

SALT DUTY

wherefore not ? Seeing I had eaten of their salt all my life and they of mine. Yea ! even unto wedding cakes. Look, my sons ! That is done, and I, Imân, the faithful one by name and nature, made it.'

* * * * *

There was but one flaw in the old man's content on the great day ; for he had managed to get a ham cheap for the 'suffer,' and Mrs. Hastings, only too glad of greater freedom in the future, had consented to his turning his attention to the education of the young couple and Lily-*baba*, who was to live with them. That flaw was a slight irregularity in what he was pleased to call a 'too-liver-ot' on the said cake. Not that it really mattered. The true lover's knot itself was there, though the hands which fashioned it were not so young and steady as they had been when they caught up Sonny-*baba* and carried him to the safe shadows.

Yet, old as they were, those hands had forgotten no duty. *E-stink Sahib's* widow, absorbed with a friend in the recipe of a mango pickle she meant to make on the morrow—a pickle full of forbidden turmeric and mustard oil—had to be reminded of her rôle as bride's mother over and over again, but it was Imân who hung a horseshoe for luck on the miraculous car—drawn this time by an old stager—Imân, who was ready with rice, Imân, who finally ran after the departing lovers to fling the old white shoe, in which Elflida had danced the hee-haw polka, into their laps as they sate on the back

SALT DUTY

seat, and then, overbalancing himself in the final effort, to tumble into the dust, where he remained blissfully uncertain as to praise or blame, murmuring blandly, 'What a custom is here!'

A MAIDEN'S PRAYER

'**T**HAT is over ! Thanks to Kâli Ma !' sighed Ramabhai, fanning herself vigorously as the last man shambled, a trifle sheepishly, from the inner apartment. She was a stoutish Bengali lady, with red betel-stained lips and smooth bandeaux of shiny black hair. Good-looking, good-natured, at the moment distinctly excited as she went on garrulously, ' Muniya ! down with the curtain, there is no further use for it now that crew has gone ! And to think that the master will have to give each one of them five rupees ! And for what ? Forsooth ! for the first seeing of such a bride as not one of them ever saw before. Lo ! Shibi, marriage-monger !' Here she turned accusingly on one of the women who were busy unveiling themselves, chattering the while with shrill voices. ' Hast no mind at all ? Thou mightst have found newer words for thy description of my daughter !—" beautiful as a full moon, symmetrical as a cart-wheel, graceful as a young goose." What are these for perfection ? And thou didst use the same last week for Luchi Devi's girl, who is pock-marked and blind of an eye ! But there ! " What's a fowl to one who has swallowed a sheep." Parbutti,'—here she transferred her attentions to a young girl who was seated on a cushion resting her face

A MAIDEN'S PRAYER

in her henna-dyed hands, as if she felt dazed or tired—
' an thou hast a grain of sense have a care of that nose-
ring thy paternal auntie lent for the occasion or there
will be flies in the pease porridge—there always is in
that family. Yea ! it is well over ; and thank the gods,
the priest found good omen in the morning watches, so
I have not to dine the creatures. Fish curry and kid
pillau is too much to pile on the getting of a trousseau ;
yet one must have meats at a wedding feast, if one is
Sakta ; and the bridegroom's folk are strict. As for
clothes, I tell you, sisters, that " boycotts " is well
enough to play with every day, but when it comes to
weddings and tinsel, 'tis a different matter. Kâli Ma !
what a price for *kulabatoon* ! Parbutti ! an thou canst
not remember that thou hast on thee four hundred
rupees' worth of Benares *khim-kob*, go put on the old
Manchester. Thank Heaven ! " Boycotts " is not so
old yet, but one has stores left to come and go upon !
Yea ! Yea ! A wedding is a great strain on a mother ;
and then there is the parting with my daughter, too—
my sweeting, my little lump of delight——'

Here Ramabhai discreetly dissolved into regulation
tears mingled with sharp sobs and little outcries. It
came easily, for she was really devoted to Parbutti, the
little bride, who, in truth, looked distractingly pretty,
all swathed in scarlet gold-flowered silk gauze, and
hung with jewels.

Her grave open-eyed face looked, perhaps, a trifle
stupid and obstinate, but there could be no question of
its beauty.

A MAIDEN'S PRAYER

'Mother!' she said seriously, 'there is a smell of smoke—the tall one in the black coat smelt of it, and it is defilement. Had we not better pacify the gods?'

'Hark to her!' exclaimed Ramabhai, drying her facile tears triumphantly. 'Saw you ever such a saint? He who gets my Parbutti is certain of salvation.'

Parbutti sate silent. She did not even blush, though that is allowed to a Bengali bride. But for all her outward calm she was inwardly quivering all over; and small wonder if she was! After long years spent, not like an English girl, in ignorance and innocence of matrimony, but in matter-of-fact expectation of it, that one great event in woman's life was close at hand. It had been delayed almost beyond propriety by the difficulty of finding a high-caste husband. For her father, though a Kulin Brahman, was sufficiently Westernized not to hold with the caste habit of marrying a daughter to what may be called a professional husband: that is, to a Kulin who already possesses a score or two of wives. A suitable student had, however, been found at last, and the feminine portion of the household had plunged hysterically into all the suggestive ceremonials of a high-class Bengali marriage. Even the widows let their blighted fancies dwell on kisses and blisses; so, feeling vicariously the sensuous pleasures of bridedom, vied with happier women in drugging the girl with sweets and scents, and secret whisperings of secret delights. The whole

A MAIDEN'S PRAYER

atmosphere was enervating, depraving ; but Parbutti took all the gigglings and titterings gravely as her right. For this was the consummation of her hopes ever since, as a child of five, she had been taught to worship the gods, to pray for an amorous husband, and curse any woman who might try to win love from her.

' Look ! how the little marionette scowls over it,' the women had tittered as they watched her, a bit of a naked baby, going through the formula of the Brata, as it is called. ' Truly no co-wife will dare to enter her house.' And certainly her energy was prodigious.

' Mâta ! Mâta ! Mâ ! Keep my co-wife far—
Shiv ! Shiv ! Shiv ! Grant she may not live—
Pot ! Pot ! Pot ! Boil her hard and hot—
Broom ! Broom ! Broom ! Sweep her from the room—
Mud ! Mud ! Mud ! Moist thee with her blood—
Bell ! Bell ! Bell ! Ring her soul to hell—'

and so on through every common and uncommon object on God's earth—and beneath it !

The childish body had swayed to the rhythm of the chant ; the childish voice had risen clear in denunciation ; the childish soul had given its consent to every wish ; for Parbutti was nothing if not serious.

The very cantrips of the Sakta cult to which her parents—and so many millions of other Bengalis—belonged, were to her indispensable realities.

She, as an unmarried girl, ate her plateful of sacrificial meat contentedly, though her mother refused it. She sate wide-eyed, solemn, acquiescent, when after long

A MAIDEN'S PRAYER

fasting the whole family waited in the dead of the night till the auspicious moment for sacrifice arrived, and in the silence the only sound was an occasional piteous, half-wondering bleat of the miserable victim—a pet goat, mayhap! She did not wink an eye when the consecrated scimitar curved downwards, a jet of red, red bubbling blood spurted into the dim light, and a sort of sob from the dying and the living alike told that atonement was made.

That sort of thing did not make her or any of the other women quiver; yet they were affectionate, emotional, kind-hearted. 'Without shedding of blood is no remission of sin,' is a Pauline text; but it was theirs also. Graven by age-long iteration in their limited minds and lives was the dogma that the Blood is the Life thereof. There was but one Sacrament, the Sacrament of Blood. Marriage was secondary, but cognate to it, of course; that was because it was the Gate to Birth and Death, through which none pass without the Great Sacrifice. So they clothed the bride in scarlet, and smeared her forehead with vermilion. It was this stability of inner thought which enabled the women to be so untiring in their variants of its outward application. All the bathings and anointings and sooth-sayings had this unchangeable dogma as foundation. So the round of ritual went on, the drums throbbed in unending rhythm, the conches blared in deafening yells, the whole house was full of the rustlings and bustlings of womenfolk. It must surely have been a wedding which made the reformer Kishub

A MAIDEN'S PRAYER

Chander Sen write the ponderous dictum : ' Man is a noun in the objective case, governed by the active verb woman.'

Parbutti's father, being a sensible man, removed himself as much as possible from the ebullient atmosphere ; perhaps it was as well, since he was a light in the Nationalist party, and the ceremonials of a Sakta wedding do not go well with talk of political rights and wrongs, of education, and equality, and exotic tyranny.

Even Parbutti's solemnity was not quite proof against the silly suggestiveness, the almost indecent jokes and tricks, the hysterical enhancing of emotions with which she was surrounded.

She felt it a relief when, the guests having retired for some sleep, she was free to perform her daily devotion at the shrine downstairs.

It was a quaint place, this shrine dedicated to *Mai Kâli* in her terrific form—in other words, to Our Lady of Pain—the Woman ever in travail of mind and body—the *Ewig Weibliche* which is never satisfied. It formed on the river side of the house a sort of low basement, private in so far that a flight of steep stone steps led down to it from the lowest story of the house, public in that it opened on to some bathing steps. But few people came thither except on certain festivals ; so Parbutti, still in her wedding finery, stole down to it confidently. She liked the small, dim, arched chamber where you could only see *Mai Kâli* as a blotch of crimson in her dark niche. And as you crept down

A MAIDEN'S PRAYER

the stairs behind that niche, and looked through the criss-cross iron bars that filled up the arch, 'She' showed nothing but a black shadow against the brilliance beyond. Parbutti used often to stand for an instant or two on the cornerwise landing of the stairs to look before passing up. Everything showed black but the low square of the outside doorway ; and even the pigeons when they flew across it seemed flitting shadows on the light. To-day she was in a hurry, so she squatted down promptly at a respectful distance from the image, and began to smear the floor from a goglet of red paint she had brought with her. And as she did so she chanted :

' Om ! Om ! Kâli Ma !—
Ruler, Thou, of blackest night—
Dark, Dark, not a Star—
In Thy Heaven Kâli Ma !—
Thou who lovest the flesh of man—
By this blood I pray thee ban—
Aliens in Hindustan—
Kill them, Kâli Ma !—
Drink their blood and eat their flesh—
Thou shalt have it fresh and fresh—
Lo ! devour it ! lick thy lips—
Flesh in lumps and blood in sips—
Stain thyself with sacred red—
Make them lifeless, dead ! dead ! dead !
Blessed Kâli Ma !
Ho-o-m ! Phut ! '

The last two words were spoken with relish, not only because they were supposed to be the most potent part

A MAIDEN'S PRAYER

of the charm, but because they lent themselves to dramatic effect. *Hoom* being given soft and low ; *phut* explosively. The result being suggestive of an angry tom-cat. But the rest of the doggerel came slackly, for Parbutti was not much interested in it. It was not her curse at all, but one she had promised her schoolboy brother, Govinda, to say every evening. For many reasons ; chiefly, it is to be feared, because someone else, at present nameless, was a class-fellow of the said Govinda's. But everyone knew that if there was one compelling prayer on earth it was that of a maiden bride ; even *Mai Kâli* could not resist it. And the petition was a fair one. Who wanted aliens in Hindustan ? Not she ! Why ! their presence made your menkind do unspeakable things, so that life became wearisome with pacifying the gods. Imagine not being able to kiss . . .

Voices close at hand made her leap to her feet, and gain the staircase like a frightened hare. Then, of course, being a girl, she paused to peep through the grating.

Surely it was Govinda ! Then she need not have run away ! No ! he had a tall lad with him ! Parbutti's heart beat to suffocation. Was it possible ? Could it be ? Was it—well ! what she had been taught to consider her prayer, her pilgrimage, her paradise ; that is, her duty and her pleasure combined ? Stay ! there was another lad—short ! And yet another—middle-sized !

This was disconcerting ; but perhaps if she listened

A MAIDEN'S PRAYER

a little she might find out. So she stood still as a mouse, all ears, praying in her inmost heart it might be the tall one.

Though they spoke in Bengali, they used such a plenitude of English words that it was difficult for her to understand fully what they said. It was not all their fault, as it arose largely from the fact that the ideas they wished to express, being purely Western, had no Eastern equivalents. Parbutti, however, had been accustomed to this sort of talk, as she had been a great favourite of her father's, and till the last year or so, had often sate on his knee as he entertained his friends.

So she listened patiently to pæans about Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, mingled with darkling threats—threats which must destroy all three by depriving some brother of the Liberty of Life or at best of an arm or a leg!

For they were only silly schoolboys, who, but for an alien ideal of education, would have been learning, as their father had learnt, unquestioning, unqualified obedience at a Guru's feet. Learning it probably with tears, tied up in a sack with a revengeful tom-cat, or with a heavy brick poised on the back of the neck for livelong hours; such being the approved punishments for the faintest disobedience. Small wonder then, if the organism accustomed to this immemorial control, runs a bit wild when it finds itself absolutely free to do and think as it likes.

These particular boys were very angry, apparently,

A MAIDEN'S PRAYER

because some one of their number had been forced to obey something or someone. It was tyranny. The Motherland and their religion was outraged. They were all Bengali Brahmans ; so Kâli worshippers by birth, and of the Sakta cult ; possibly of the Left-handed or Secret form of that cult. Anyhow they talked big of Force being the one ruling principle by which men could rule, of the true Saktas' or Tantriks' contempt for public opinion, of their determination to show the world that the Tantras had been given by the gods in order to destroy the oppressors of men. So, ' *Jai*¹ *Anarchism ! Jai Kâli ! Jai Bhairavi ! Jai Banda Materam !* '

It was a sad farrago of nonsense ; Western individualism dished up skilfully by professional agitators in a garb of Eastern mysticism ; but they talked it complacently, while Parbutti, still as a mouse, told herself it must be the tall one ; he had such a nice voice.

Her hopes gained confidence when he lingered behind with Govinda after the others departed, and began speaking in a lower voice. Could he be talking about her ? Ever and always that came as the uppermost thought. Then consideration told her this was not possible ; no respectable bridegroom could talk of his bride to another—not even if he also were a Kulin and a brother. What was it, then, about which they were so mysterious when there was nobody nigh ?—here a twinge of compunction shot through her—at least nobody they could know about.

¹ Hail.

A MAIDEN'S PRAYER

At last, her ears becoming accustomed to the strain, she caught one sentence : ' My father was *Mai Kâli's* priest here ' ; so by degrees gathered that there was some secret receptacle somewhere, and that the tall youth wished to hide something.

The something appeared to be in what Parbutti had supposed to be a hooded cage such as students often carry about with their pet avitovats or fighting quails inside. But this one contained a square box, which the boy removed with great care, and then, before Parbutti had grasped what he was doing, he was round at the back of the carven image, kneeling with his back towards her, and fumbling at the gilt wooden drapery about *Mai Kâli's* waist, Govinda meanwhile keeping a look-out at the door.

How close he was ! If she put out a hand she could touch him—she thrilled all over at the thought ! Too close at any rate for her to move ; besides, she must see what happened.

Ye gods ! The drapery slid up ! *Mai Kâli* was hollow !

' If aught happens to me,' said the nice voice solemnly, ' I leave this in thy charge, oh ! Govinda Ram, Kulin. Thou art the only other living soul who knows of it. And see thou use it as it should be used. A cocoanut full for a bomb. It requires no fuse. The concussion is sufficient if the hand is bold.'

The box deposited, the panel slid back again, and the tall lad rising from his knees stepped to the front again. As he did so, Parbutti caught a glimpse of

A MAIDEN'S PRAYER

his face. It was beautiful as the young Bala-Krishna, and the whole soul and body of her went out to him—her hand stole through the bars to touch the air in which he had stood—the happy air which had touched him.

So absorbed was she in her joy that she did not realize what was going on until the sound of their voices brought her back to reality. Then she recognized that they were repeating the vow of secrecy which is imposed on all initiates to the Tantrik cult. 'I swear by the Eternal Relentless and Living Power I worship never to divulge the Secret, but to bury it deeply in silence and ever preserve it inviolate and inviolable. I will conceal it as the water in a cocoanut is concealed. I will be a Kaula internally, a Saiva externally, and a Vaishnava when talking at public meetings.' Then they branched off into that of the new secret political society which underlies the old religious mysteries. And Parbutti listened with growing fear, for this was sheer straightforward cursing of informers and lukewarm supporters and spies—and—and——

If they should go on to her? If he should curse her?

The long stillness had told on her nerves—she felt as if she must scream, must do something to prevent the dreadful sequence going on and on. . . .

'And cursed be they who listen and——'

The voices were checked by a passionate cry—

'Curse me not! Curse me not! I swear! I, Parbutti, swear to keep faith!'

A MAIDEN'S PRAYER

Then, terrified at everything, even her own temerity, she turned and fled.

There was little leisure allowed her for thought in the women's apartment that night, for each one vied with the other in devising cantrips, most of them indescribable, to secure for her a truly uxorious husband; but one thing beat through her brain. Would he, could he—if it *were* he—be angry with her? Surely not! She had sworn, and she would keep her oath. Yes! she would keep it faithfully.

So the day dawned and another tumult of rejoicing rose around her.

In view of the delay in her betrothals it had been arranged to crowd in the ceremonials as closely as possible, so as to expedite the actual marriage, and everybody was running about, conches were blowing, women were giggling and laughing as the professional guests of the male sex cracked doubtful jests while they awaited the arrival of the bridegroom.

And then came a sudden hush. Something must have happened. What was it?

Parbutti, sitting apart swathed in her wedding scarlet, was too dazed to notice the pause at first, until low, and whimpering, an unmistakable woman's wail rose amid the garlands and tinsels, the paper flowers, the swinging lanterns.

She started to her feet—was someone dead?

In a way, the news that had come was worse than death. *That* was an act of God to be accepted with what resignation could be mustered. But this?

A MAIDEN'S PRAYER

What ! They had arrested a bridegroom on his wedding day !—and Govinda, too, the son of the house ! What ! Those boys—they *could* not be guilty ! It was only the tyranny of the hated police. They could not be mixed up with Anarchists. So said some of the men ; but others held their peace and looked sinister, while all the women wept and wailed, and called on *Mai Kâli* to avenge the sacrilege. Only Parbutti sate very still, very silent. She knew something that the others did not know, but the knowledge only increased her blind resentment, only aggravated her blind despair.

He had been filched from her—if it *was* he. She was too dulled by disappointment at first to do more than realize her loss, and the thought of her oath of fealty did not come to her at all until after three months' needless delay in trying the conspiracy case against some forty students in the college—a delay due entirely to the hair-splitting efforts of the counsel for the defence—Govinda settled it for himself by dying in prison of autumnal fever. His had never been a good life ; he had almost died of it the year before ; he might have died of it at home. But the loss of a son, even when he is not the only one, is a grievous loss to a Hindu household, and it brought enhanced and almost insensate anger to every member of it ; except to Parbutti, who went about her household duties calmly, almost stupidly.

Then came the final blow. The bridegroom—was it *he* ? she wondered dully—shot himself with a revolver

A MAIDEN'S PRAYER

smuggled in to him by a woman, a young and pretty woman full of patriotism and poetry, a woman brought up on Western lines, who was almost worshipped by the Nationalist party of unrest.

Parbutti heard the tale, still calm to outward appearance. She heard women's voices, full of curiosity, tell of the deed of patriotism, as it was called: she heard them wonder what the woman agitator was really like, and say that Kâli Ma would surely, ere long, rise up in Her Power and smite the M'lechas hip and thigh.

And then they looked at her and shook their heads. Neither maid, wife, nor widow, it would be more difficult than ever to find fresh betrothals for her. Whereupon Ramabhai wept as she had wept before with sharp sobs and little outcries. And once more Parbutti said nothing, though she was quivering all over. It would be impossible to define her feelings, they were such an admixture of hatred, and love, of fear, and jealousy, and despair. And through it all came the question: 'Was it he?'—while, as a background, sheer physical disappointment stretched every fibre of her mind and body almost to breaking-point.

So it went on until one day someone spoke to her almost as if she had been a widow, and bade her do something almost menial.

She did it without a word. It was noontime and the house was deserted, those who were in it being asleep. She sate for a while in the sunshine of the courtyard, her hands on her knees, doing nothing. Then suddenly

A MAIDEN'S PRAYER

she rose, and slipped into the room which Ramabhai used as a wardrobe.

When she emerged from it she was swathed in the scarlet and gold Benares *khim-kob* that had cost four hundred rupees, and her arms, her neck, her feet, were hung with golden ornaments.

They tinkled as she made her way down the steep stone stairs to Kâli's shrine. Dark and still and small it lay, with a faint scent of incense about it, for the previous day had been a festival, and many folk had been to worship there.

But Kâli—*Mai Kâli*—would never have better worshipping than Parbutti meant to give her. How the idea had come to the girl's mind who can say ; but dimly, out of her confused thoughts had grown the conviction that something must be done. She was the only one, now, who knew the secret ; but it was useless in her hands. She could not go out and throw bombs, as he doubtless would have thrown them had he lived, so giving the Great Goddess the Blood for which she craved. Yes ! he had meant to do it, for were not the aliens accursed ? Had they not killed him ?

She mixed everything up hopelessly ; *Mai Kâli* and the Sacrament of Blood, her own loss and the public good ; she felt angry, and weary, and disappointed ; she felt that she ought to do something, that she must get Someone stronger than she was on her side, to do what she was helpless to do.

So, confused, obstinate, she stepped behind the image, slid back the panel, and took out the box.

A MAIDEN'S PRAYER

Then, producing a cocoanut shell from the folds of her *sare*, she filled it carefully, methodically, and put back the box carefully, methodically.

This done, she went to the front of the image, smeared the floor once more with blood-red, and began her maiden's prayer—the prayer that is infallible!

'Om! Om! Kâli Ma!—
Dark! Dark! Not a star—
In my Heaven, Kâli Ma!—'

This time her voice was high and hard, for had not *Mai Kâli* to be compelled—yea! even by the greatest of sacrifices?

'Thou shalt have it fresh and fresh—
Blood to drink, and lumps of flesh—'

Higher and higher grew the voice; it did not falter at all: not even when at the final

'*Hoom phut*'

the girl, raising her hand on high, dashed the cocoanut she held upon the ground boldly.

There was a faint flash, an instant explosion, a grinding noise as the house rocked to its foundation, then steadied into quiescence.

But Parbutti had kept her promise to *Mai Kâli*, and to—*him*; for the Goddess might have satisfied Her craving for Blood, Her desire for Flesh amid the welter of broken stones and twisted grids, of shattered wood-carving and torn Benares *khim-kob*, of jewels rent apart

A MAIDEN'S PRAYER

and splintered bones, that was all remaining of Her shrine, Her image, and Her worshipper.

Whether She will keep Her part of the bargain is another matter.

But the Maiden's Prayer has been said, the Greatest of Sacrifices has been made.



1



