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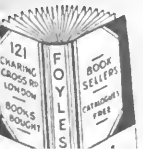
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'Many novelists and spinners of tales have made use of the Indian Mutiny, but Mrs. Steel leaves them all a long way behind. "On the Face of the Waters" is the best novel of the great Mutiny, and we are not likely to see its rival in our time.'—*Saturday Review*.

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London : William Heinemann

In the
Permanent Way

and Other Stories

By

Flora Annie Steel

London

William Heinemann

1898

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SHUB'RÂT

I

66
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—further and further and further—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 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 traceries, 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 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 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. Perhaps 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 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 watered 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 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, 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* will not have his grandson touch the *Ungeel* (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 *Jehad* (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 *Meean* 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 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 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. Carmichael, make those niggers stand back. 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 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 *chuprassie*! 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 bât*! 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) as the *sahib* 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 desert land 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 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 *sahibs* 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 *sahibs* can stomach them.'

Some one laughed, a gay laugh chiming to the tinkle of jewels.

'*Wâh!* 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 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 white-washed 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 Elias, Jesus and Mahomed—taking part in the Great Assizé 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 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 the note went alone into eternity, seeking judgment ; for the harmonium was mute.

'Deen! Deen! Deen!'

The cruelest 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 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 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 Isa¹ himself and the blessed

¹ Jesus.

Miriam his mother; for there were times when even motherhood must be forgotten. His trembling old hands, strained under the task which will not bear description, 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!'

A horrible scene, look at it how you will; but, even in its horror, not altogether base.

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.

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. 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 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! Allah-i-hukk!*'

The old watchman stood, still with that stupid stare,

¹ Grandfather.

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 be true?—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 the dying man, 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 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 dreering 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 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. '*Hi'ao, hi'ao, neendhi argia*' ('Swing, swing, sleep has come').

'*So j'ao mera butchcha*' ('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.

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 sepoy and sowars, to whom a man in mufti was fair game, no matter what the colour of 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 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.

'*Allah akbar wa Mahomed rusool,*' 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.

'*Ari,* 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, 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 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 a *sahib* 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—

'Allah akbar wa Mahomed rusool.'

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.

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.

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.

‘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 further 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 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,

¹ Marjoram.

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 versâ*. He was very learned over the *Vaishnavas* and the *Saivas*; and all the time that bronze image with its hands on its knees squatted 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 further 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 com-

¹ Tent-pitchers—men employed in measuring land.

pass 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 Cooper's Hill joke, especially when he is your superior officer. 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 mediatin' on the word *Hom—Hommi-puddenhome*¹ it is, sir, I've bin told—an' doin' 'is little level to make the spiritooal man subdoo 'is fleshly hin-stinckts. 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 most ways drink.'

Poor Craddock! He went on the spree hopelessly the day after we returned to civilisation, 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

¹ *Om ni pudmi houn.* The Buddhist invocation.

jumped down and ran forward. Even then I was only in time 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 *Hommi-puddenhome*; '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 his sort,' continued Craddock meditatively, 'though wot 'is sort may be, sir, is not my part to say. I've arst, and arst, and arst them pundits, but there ain't one of them can really tell, sir, 'cos he ain't got any marks about him. You see, sir, it's by their marks, like cattle, as you tell 'em. Some says he worships bloody

*Shivers*¹—'im 'oos wife you know, sir, they calls *Martha Davy*²—a Christian sôrt 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 holiness 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. '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 hope to

¹ *Shiva*.

² *Mata devi*.

³ *Vishnu Lukshmi*.

⁴ *Holi*, the Indian Saturnalia.

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 him to-day, sir,' said Craddock, 'so as you shall see wot '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 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-subdoo'in' 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.'

It old him there was no reason to apologise 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 his name was given to 'im in Holy Baptism, I do assure you, was going to knuckle down that way to old *Homnipuddenhome*? '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 further 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 *sútáras* and jasmin 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 to ten now, and in one hour 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, 'aving 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 he'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, he wasn't no better than some other Harrys I've heard on. And Canyer,³ I expect he could just about. To say nothin' of *Gopi-naughty*;⁴ and naughty he were, as no doubt you've heard tell, sir. There's too many on them for a pore fellar who don't set store by 'is spiritooal nater; especially when they

¹ *Kristna*.

² *Hari*.

³ *Kaniya*.

⁴ *Gopi-nath*. These are all names of Vishnu in his various Avatars.

mixes themselves up with *Angcore*¹ 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.

'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 hour and seventeen minutes from the distance signal. I'll keep 'im out o' 'arm's way, an' willing, 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 to 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

¹ *Encore.*

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 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 some one standing beside me on the footboard. No! not standing, swaying, lurching—

‘Don’t!’ I cried. ‘Don’t! it’s madness!’ But that some one 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 whirl 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 native *employés* 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

¹ A fossil ammonite.

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.

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 further 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 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 unhurled 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 plinthe 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.

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 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 specialised 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, have only lately become acquainted with the ideas such phrases are supposed to express, and have 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, for another of the good lady's choosing. For that other matter of slighting the shrine downstairs is too common nowadays in India to excite any recrimination ; 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 inferiority ; 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 Kâli *devi*¹—which his ancestors had tended faithfully—was being besieged by as fervent a mother-prayer as had been laid before any divinity—or *dev*-inity, as the word really stands.

In truth Ramanund had no special desire to marry all ; or even to fall in love. He was too busy with the exact sciences to experimentalise 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 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

¹ Goddess.

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 be sleeping the sleep of the just upstairs, after sitting up past midnight over his pupils' exercises ; for one of the first effects of civilisation is to make men prefer a kerosene 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 women-folk 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 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 elo-

¹ 'Victory to Mother Kâli!'

quence, frowned ; but he resumed his paper, which was in English, without a pause, being quick 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 prey 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 *iee* !’ 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—hast 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 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 Land¹ 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, 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 publico*. In moderation lies safety.’

¹ The first Aryan settlements were in the Punjab.

‘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 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, civilised, 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 *jōgi* in answer to his taunt had reached 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 comrade's 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 civilisation 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 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 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, 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 further 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-omened¹ 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, her veil falling

¹ A widow brings ill-luck with her.

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 *reveillé* 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 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 ghost-like 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 within the closed fret-work 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, Ramanund 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 assignments.

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 earshot of a man's raised voice, had passed out of both into the grave. But Anunda never seemed to think of 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 realise 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 he was a school-master. ‘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. Every one 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 demoralising, brutalising 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 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 Ananda 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 Ram-

anund 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 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 legalised 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 Ananda 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 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.'

'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

¹ Ram anund : *Ram*, God ; *anund*, happiness.

end. It was lucky, he told himself, that it had happened 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. 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 Ramanund, 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 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 civilised 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 ; and as the sun set it began, loudly imperative, under his very roof. The only son was being carried out to the burning *ghât*, 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 flowered-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 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 ante-shrine picking his steps in an almost morbid terror of what he might be treading upon.

‘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.

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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 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

disagreeables. *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 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! 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, unrecognisable, 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.

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 Mohammedan 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 quern-handle—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 Fakrun-nissa (that was how her name ran in the soft, courtly tongue of the most brutal of cities) was a *Syyedani*—in other words, 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 recognised custom in the backwater 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 any one, 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 Mohammedan 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 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, Yâsmina; so was I once; yet thou wilt be as I am, some day.'

And Yâsmina 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 every one'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 nature; and had every one heard that some one 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 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 Yâsmîna's advocate, who having come to the gold thread late in life found it apt to knot.

'*Wâh-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 Khânûm's veiled head nodded sagely. 'Thou hast it, Hamedâ-bânu. Lo, I, for one, know not why the girl was ever given such freedom, save indeed that it tallies with Fakr-un-nissâ'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 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——'

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 Khâdjiya's wrathfully-satisfied voice. 'To the bazaar, and in Mohur-rum-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 Syyedâni perchance,' retorted Juntu, with some acerbity. 'Yet this I say: there is no harm in the girl, though she be younger than some folk who need *dhoolis* 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 Mohur-rum-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 *dhooli* 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 *dhooli*, 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 situation. 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 *dhooli* 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

¹ The dirge in honour of the martyred Hussan and Hussain.

the remainder. Perhaps the others were right, and this generosity of hers had fostered the girl's independence. Khâdjia 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 canonised 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 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 Khâdjia Khânûm'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 door-

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.

step. 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 instant, though she did not realise 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 recognised 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.’

‘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?’

Some one 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.’

¹ A pet name for mother or nurse.

Chambelé's titter rang high and shrill. 'Wáh! That is a tale! See you, friends; her mother hath been dead five years. Enough of this, little fool! Thou hast made thy choice already; there is no place for thee yonder with the saints.'

'She hath 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 unsheltered 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 *Mursiâh*, 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 some one. '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 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.'

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 sugar-cane 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 Nānuk 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 naturally 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 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.

'*Bullah!* 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? *Ai teri!*' 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 *Puramêshwar*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-sahib*—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 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-sahib*, “This is because *Puramêshwar* 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 daïs beneath the *peepul* tree, where he was welcome to a pull out of anybody’s pipe, he spoke again of his intention.

¹ The Great God.

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 realised his mistake. By harvesting his own crop he had driven the little raiders further 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 pantaloons 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—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, with feverish hands, giving 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 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 civilised 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 was 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) and the rat the *mudêe-âla* (defendant) in a case

they were going to lay before the *Lât-sahib*; 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 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 fitted 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 *Purmeshwar* 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.

'*Bullah!*' 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 Nânuke.

'Doth thy rat do tricks?' asked the children critically. 'What, none? Trra! 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 Nânuke trudged on.

'See the *Lât-sahib*,' 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-sahib*—the big one or the little?'

'The big one,' replied Nânuke 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.

'*Ari*, 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? *Wâh!* 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? *Ari!* 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 *kâkhi* and crimson uniform. Old Nânuk looked at it wistfully.

'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 further 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 *orfèverie* 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, 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

¹ A reduction in the number of guns is the first punishment for bad administration.

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 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 macadamised 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 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 *kikar* 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.

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, Nānuk 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 *Puramēshwar* 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 flagstaff 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 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 nigger! 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? — Was'her-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 *Puramêshwar*. 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!'

¹ *Pagul*=mad.

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' want it. I've had 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 mutineering 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, throwing 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 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 has 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 Nānuk Singh did not remember even the name of his own village; and, though he still talked about the plaintiff and the defendant, *Puramêshwar* and the State, he was apparently content to await his chance of a hearing at another and greater durbar.

THE BLUE-THROATED GOD

WE sat after lunch in the stern of the steam-launch watching the bridge grow from the semblance of a caterpillar hung across the horizon between clusters of temples and *topes*, to that of some monstrous skeleton whose vaulting ribs rose high overhead into the pale sky.

Bannerman and I had come out from England together, and come up-country together; I to take up work at the bridge, he on a sporting tour, with letters of introduction to the chief engineer. We had been doing the sights of the native city, and now, in company with several officials of sorts, were on our way home to the reaches above. And as we surged through the yellow-brown flood we talked vaguely and airily of old gods and new, of Siva's religion of stern reality, and Krishna's pleasure-loving cult.

'You should read *Prem Sâgar*, sir,' said Mr. Chuckerbutty, the native assistant-engineer, aside to Bannerman, who had given his vote for the latter; 'it is of much merit, containing the loves of Krishna and other cognate matter.'

'It's a mere question of temperament,' went on Bannerman, unheeding the interruption. 'Some people are born to one thing, some to another. I was born to enjoy myself—Hullo! what's that?'

That was a low note like a bird's, a flash in the sunlight beyond the huge pier along which we were edging our way up the current, and then a cloop like a cork.

'Sambo,' said some one.

'His name is Rudra, sir,' replied Mr. Chuckerbutty.

'Nilkunta,¹ *Huzoor*,' suggested the captain of the launch. I looked from one to the other interrogatively.

'The bridge-diver,' said the first speaker,—'sees after the foundations and that sort of thing—knows the bottom of the river as well as most of us know the top. A queer sort of animal—there he is to your right.'

Out of the yellow-brown flood a grave, yellow-brown face crowned by a curious brass pot not unlike a tiara, then two yellow-brown arms, reminding me unpleasantly of snakes, curved up in the overhead stroke as the swimmer slipped down to where a rope hung from one of the huge ribs. He swarmed up it like a monkey, to sit still as a carven image on the outermost buttress of the pier, his legs crossed under him, his hands resting on his knees, his eyes fixed on the swirling water below, so that the full eyelids drooping over them gave them an empty, sightless look.

'By George!' said Bannerman carelessly, 'he reminds me of the big idol over at the temple. What's its name, Chuckerbutty? You're posted in such things; I'm not.'

The assistant-engineer, mindful of the B.A. degree super-added to his ancestral beliefs, became evasive.

'Well, it doesn't matter. I mean the brute like a land crab with a superfluity of arms. The brute we were talking of just now who crowds life and all its joys into one eternal and infernal birth and death—the most uninteresting events of life to my mind.'

Bannerman was right. That figure on the buttress could not fail to remind one of Siva, or Maha-deo—the Creator and the Destroyer—barring, of course, the arms. And as

¹ Blue-throated; the name of the kingfisher.

I looked, the two which the figure possessed rose slowly from its knees and hovered up in the oddest fashion above its head, then sank again as slowly, leaving one with the impression of any number of circumambient members.

‘Does it when he dives,’ said a boy who was watching also; ‘must have thought he saw something in the stream. He brings up all sorts of things.’

The notion was absorbing until Chuckerbutty’s idiomatic English, in reply to a query of Bannerman’s, roused me—

‘Sambo is nickname; but indubitably verbal corruption of the Sanskrit *Sambhu*, lord or master. Rudra, real name, has equivalent synonymous meaning. The most ancient god mentioned in *Rig Veda*. Symbolised in eight attributes, sun, moon, water, earth, air, fire, ether, and soul of man. In other words, the visible and invisible universe—as Siva the Creator, the Preserver, the Destroyer.’

Chuckerbutty puffed at his cigar in quite a European fashion.

‘What rot!’ murmured Bannerman under his breath.

‘And as for Nilkunta,’ put in the boy, ‘that is simple. It means blue-throated, and Sambo is tatoosed all round.’

‘Yet is that also name of Siva,’ interposed Chuckerbutty with importance. ‘As per *Mahabharata*—

“To soften human ills dread Siva drank
The poisonous flood which stained his azure neck.”

‘Nil-kunt is also sometimes applied to the bird kingfisher by Europeans; but this is erroneous. It belongs properly—’

I heard no more, my thoughts being with that odd figure again. It was certainly a most extraordinary resemblance.

‘Well, if you really are going to fish for *mahseer* at Hurd-

war, Mr. Bannerman, you should take advantage of that man's knowledge,' said the chief pompously. 'He goes on leave next week—his home is somewhere in the hills—and he knows everything that is to be known about fishing.'

Bannerman laughed. 'Back myself against him any day, even on the Ganges. I expect I've as much general good luck—in every way—as any one in this world.'

'He gave you that impression. In addition he was eminently handsome—if a trifle dark for a country where people fight shy of any admixture of blood. Extraordinarily graceful and supple, too, doing everything with extraordinary grace and skill. Beyond that, rich. For the rest, cosmopolitan in mind and manners. As for morals, that does not enter into the equation of a pleasant chance acquaintance, and the only blemish I could lay finger on was an excess of jewellery. But that was a hobby of his. He was for ever waylaying the passers-by and wanting to make a deal for their ornaments, regardless of injured feelings. It was a mere question of money, like everything else, he asserted, and he generally succeeded in getting what he fancied. Apparently he fancied Sambo, or Rudra, or Nilkunta—whichever you choose to call him,—for, a day or two afterwards, the man came to me clothed in the loose garments and aggressive turban usually worn by Mohammedans. He looked less startling, but the type of face was utterly new to me.

'I am a hunter, *Huzoor*,' he said gravely—indeed I think his face was the gravest I ever saw. 'I kill to live; I live to kill. That is all. I come from the mountains, and I know the river. Wherefore not, since it is my birthplace? None know it as I; others may claim it, but it is mine, and the fish also. It is all one to Nil-kunt the

diver, *Huzoor*. *Eshspoon* bait, feather fly, or poach-net. I kill to live; I live to kill. That is the old way, the best way; and if the *Huzoor* comes with "Buniah-man" sahib, he will catch big fish.'

'And the sahib also, I hope?'

'The sahib thinks he knows, but he is a stranger to the river and the old ways. He must learn them.'

A week after this, Bannerman and I were encamped on the south side of the gorge through which the sacred river debouches on the plains, with Sambo, who was on leave, as our boatman. And curiously out of place he looked in the English-built wherry which my host had insisted on bringing up by rail. He had never, he said, been able to stand the discomforts of a Noah's Ark, and he did not intend to begin self-denial, even though he was in the birthplace of the most ascetic cult the world had ever known; if indeed the worshippers of Siva had right on their side in claiming Hurdwar as *Hara-dwara*—the gate of Siva. For his part he inclined to the Vaishnâva view. *Hari-dwara*, gate of Vishnu, was just as likely a derivation. It was only the change of a letter; and yet that made all the difference between believing in pleasure or penance. He talked away in his reckless fashion about this as we fished fruitlessly, the first evening; fruitlessly, for I was crippled with a slight sprain of the wrist, and Bannerman caught nothing. And Sambo sat gravely sculling, with a perfectly immovable face, until Bannerman, who was changing his fly for the fiftieth time at least, leant forward suddenly and laid his hand on the other's wrist.

'That's a fine cat's-eye,' he said, looking at a ring on the supple brown finger. 'How much will you take for it?'

'I do not sell,' replied Sambo, still without a quiver of

expression. The water dropped from the upheld oar like molten gold. I could hear it fall in the silence, as those two sat looking at each other. But my eyes were on those hands clasped upon each other; they were extraordinarily alike in contour and not far apart in colour.

'Ten rupees! twenty! forty!' he went on. 'What! you won't? Here! let me see it closer. I don't believe it is worth more—even to me—unless I'm mistaken. Hand it over, man!'

Bannerman turned the ring over curiously, and a sudden interest came to his face.

'It isn't worth five, but I've taken a fancy to it. Fifty! a hundred! a thousand!'

'I do not sell,' repeated Sambo indifferently.

'Not sell! then you're a fool! Here, catch!'

He spun the ring like a coin high into the air. Perhaps he had meant it to fall into the boat, but it did not, and as I leant over in dismay I could see it sinking in shimmering circles through the sunlit water.

Sambo did not even seem surprised, but crossing the oars leisurely proceeded to strip.

'It does not matter,' he said briefly. '*Mai Gunga*¹ is kind to me, and I know my way to her bosom.'

A minute or so afterwards he came up from the depths with the ring fast held in his teeth.

'The fish are lying between the shallow and the deep,' he remarked, as if nothing had happened. 'If the *Huzoor* will believe me he will catch them.'

Apparently the faith was wanting, for we did not see a fin till I commenced fishing; and even then the luck was all with me. Bannerman began to grow restive, suggesting

¹ The Ganges.

that in a boat 'one man's sport was another man's spoil'; so we moved across the range of the Siwaliks to higher ground. We pitched our tents between the river and a backwater, where the boat—which despite my advice Bannerman insisted on bringing round by road—lay moored beneath a big cotton tree. A desirable resting-place certainly—cool and shadowy, and haunted by many a kingfisher busy among the shoals of silvery fishlets in the still water. Across the river, just above its great race to the gorge below, stood a group of Hindu temples backed by sun-steeped slopes ablaze with flowering, scented shrubs. Further up, however, the hills sank almost to the level, leaving a wedge of sky clear, before rising again in swift gradations of blue, cleft by a purple chasm marking the further course of the river towards the snows of Kedarnath.

'You live yonder, do you not?' I asked of Sambo, pointing to the peaks, as I stood settling my tackle.

For the first time a slow smile showed on the man's fine, delicate face. 'No, *Huzoor*. I live everywhere. Wherever there are things to kill, and that is in most places. But not here, sahib,' he continued hastily, turning to Bannerman, who was about to launch his minnow into a likely spot. 'This pool is sacred to the god yonder.'

And sure enough, close to the water's edge, beneath the shade of a banyan tree, stood a crowned image of Mahadeo, with his eight arms, his necklace of snakes, and chaplet of skulls.

'Dash it all!' muttered Bannerman impatiently, 'as if the world were not full enough of limitations as it is! I'll have it out with that old land crab some day.'

His irritation grew as the days passed bringing continued

ill-luck. But what wonder, he said, when the fish were fed and pampered by the priests morning and evening, that they would not take his lure? For his part he did not believe there was a fin in any other pool in the river—at least when he fished it.

‘The *Huzoor* can see, if he chooses,’ said Sambo gravely.

‘I suppose I can—as well as you, anyhow,’ retorted Bannerman.

‘Then let him look.’ As he spoke Sambo swung himself into the branch of a cotton tree which, swaying with his weight, scattered its huge scarlet flowers on the water. Perhaps it was this, engendering a hope of food; perhaps it was the curious low whistle he made, but instantly the calm surface of the pool wavered, shifted, and broke into ripples. Sambo stretched himself full length on the branch and craned forward with his long blue neck.

‘Plenty of them, *Huzoor!* Beauties! That one with the scar is full twenty *sirs* weight. See! I will catch it.’

He slid from the branch like an otter, to reappear a second afterwards with the fish bent round his neck like a yoke of silver.

‘It is bad luck,’ he continued, ‘and the *Huzoor* must do *puja*¹ to the great god. That is the only way.’

Bannerman’s face was a study, and to soothe him I remarked that I had been lucky enough without any one’s help.

‘How does the *Huzoor* know?’ asked Sambo boldly. ‘If he had been up by dawn he might have thought otherwise, since the blood of the cock I sacrificed in his name still reddens the feet of Ishwara.’

‘The devil you did!’ I exclaimed laughing; ‘then sacrifice two for Bannerman sahib to-morrow.’

¹ Worship.

The latter, however, turned on him fiercely. 'If you dare!' he began; then pulled himself together, muttered something about its being 'd——d rot,' and went off declaring he would fish no more till dusk drove the glare from the water.

I found him hours after lolling on his bed, and reading a translation of the *Prem Sâgar*. It was as amusing and true to life as a modern French novel, he was pleased to remark, and Krishna with his milkmaids the wisest of gods. In fact, after dinner, as we sat smoking outside, he recurred to the subject, denouncing the folly of all ascetic cults from Baal downwards.

'You are awfully well up in it all,' I said, surprised at his knowledge.

'Seems to come to me, to-night, somehow,' he replied gaily; 'things do, you know—previous state of existence and all that rot. Besides, it's needed when a fellow calmly suggests my making a blood offering! To a brute of a land crab too—a miserable fetish evolved from the fears of a semi-ape—a creature incapable of rising above the limitations of his own discomfort, counting this lovely life as mere birth and death, and ignoring the joys between—the only realities in the world.'

He went on in this fashion, till, declaring that he meant to be up by dawn, both to catch a fish and prevent the blood sacrifice, he turned in. I could hear him humming the refrain of a French song as I sat on the scented flood of moonlight.

It was not a night surely to waste in sleep! The very flowers kept the memory of their colours, and every now and again I could hear the silvery splash of a fish rising on the level reaches beyond. But from below came a

vibration in the air like the first breathing of an organ note. That was the river racing to the gorge.

Scarcely knowing what I did, I strolled over to the backwater which circled round the oasis of the valley. A fringe of trees marked its course, and behind them the hill sloped up in a tangle of jasmine and pomegranate, while on the river-side grew shingle and grass tufted with oleanders. In the distance, faint yet clear, came a snatch or two of Bannerman's *fin de siècle* song. And then suddenly, round a bend, rose the low note of a kingfisher. Could it be a kingfisher at that hour of the night?

By all the gods, old and new, what was this? Sambo? Could that be Sambo knee-deep in the water? Sambo with a golden tiara on his head and girt about the waist with a regal robe? Purple and red—at least you guessed the colour, just as you guessed that the shadowy pillar of that long neck was blue. Were those his arms curved above him, or were they snakes, swaying, swaying in the moonlight with hooded heads and open jaws? And was that cry Sambo's or the kingfisher's? Then, and not till then, I saw the bird perched on a branch above the strange figure; and even as I looked it swooped straight into those swaying, snake-like arms, bearing something in its mouth.

I suppose in my surprise I made some exclamation, for the figure turned quickly. Then, for the first time, I felt sure it was only the diver in his diving dress. The next instant he was beside me on the bank, holding out a small land crab for my inspection.

'It is the best bait, *Huzoor*. Better than phantom or *esh-spoon*.'

I felt utterly bewildered and not a little aggrieved at his

everyday appearance. 'But, but,' I began, 'how the mischief did you make the bird——?'

His hand went up to his throat as if in explanation. 'Tis the trick of their cry, *Huzoor*; besides birds are afraid of the holy snake; and even the *Huzoor* doubted his own eyes. It is good bait. If Buniah-man sahib will consent to use it, he will have luck.'

'Of course he will use it,' I replied angrily; and then a sudden doubt seized me. 'I don't know, though. I don't seem to understand. I can't see——'

'The *Huzoor* has two eyes,' he interrupted, with another of his slow smiles. 'Does he want a third, like mine?'

A third! Then I noticed a central spot on his forehead set in an oval of white. In good sooth it was not unlike a third eye placed upright between the others. I had seen similar ones painted on the images of Siva.

'Tis but a caste sign, *Huzoor*,' he explained, 'I wear it sometimes.' He stooped as he spoke, gathered some dust in his fingers, and rubbed out the mark. 'Lo! it grows late. Midnight is past. If the *Huzoor* rises with the sun 'tis time he slept.'

True enough; but as I strolled homewards to the tent my eyes fell by chance on the shade beneath the great banyan tree where the idol stood. The plinth was empty! It lay reflected in the water vacant, bare! Scarcely knowing what I did, or why I did it, I ran back to where I had left Sambo, calling him by all his names in turn. But there was no answer, and when in hopeless bewilderment I retraced my steps it was only to find myself mistaken. The eight-armed image stood in its accustomed place, reflected in the still water.

I was glad when the dawn came, one of those lemon-coloured dawns when the sky grows light at once.

‘Had the jolliest dreams,’ said Bannerman, coming out of his tent. ‘Dreamt I was Krishna among the milkmaids. Wish I could find one in this fish-forsaken place, I’d—Hullo, what the mischief is that on my line?’

It was Sambo’s land crab neatly impaled on a Stuart tackle. I began an explanation only to stop short at the—to me—absolutely incomprehensible intensity of both the faces before me. Dimly I seemed to recognise the situation, and then it escaped me again.

‘Tomfoolery! One might as well fish with that ridiculous fetish at once,’ came Bannerman’s jeering voice. ‘What was it Chuckerbutty drivelled about? eight attributes—tall order for any god! Well! here they go. No, Sambo, you may keep one—the soul of a man, if there be such a thing——’

He had torn off five of the crab’s legs, leaving three; two of them the nipping claws, which, with gaping jaws, swayed about seeking reprisals.

‘There! take your offering, Siva! snakes, and souls, and all!’ He flung the maimed creature full in the idol’s face as we sculled past it. I shall never forget Sambo’s look.

‘You shouldn’t do that sort of thing,’ I remonstrated in a low voice. ‘If the priests saw it;—then this man——’

‘Bah! Nilkunta won’t mind, and rupees will settle anything.’ I tried to make him understand they would not in these fastnesses of the Hindu faith, but almost immediately afterwards his attention wandered to a woman’s figure which, as we rowed up the river, was outlined equally against earth and sky, while figure, earth, and sky shared equally the perfect reflection in the water.

'By George, a milkmaid!' he cried. She was not unlike one in dress, certainly, but her face, marked with the crescent of Siva on the forehead, was of a different type; beautiful too, and Bannerman simply couldn't take his eyes off her.

'Who is she? Who can she be? Sambo! Rudra! Nilkunta! whichever you are—do you know who she can be?' he queried in hot excitement.

'She is somebody's house, *Huzoor*.' The voice was cold as an icicle.

'Somebody's house! What a way to mention a woman, beautiful—beautiful as—but it's the old Puritanical game! A house—a hearth mother—the British matron in Eastern disguise—Mrs. Grundy in a *sâri*. I say, Nil-kunt, whose house do you think she is? I should like to buy the freehold.'

'She is your slave's house,' replied the man without a wink.

'The dickens she is!' blurted out my companion, somewhat abashed for the time. Perhaps that was Sambo's intention. At any rate I have no means of knowing if he spoke the truth or not. Indeed, looking back on it all, I scarcely seem to know what really happened, and what must have been sheer fancy. Only this remains clear; a growing antagonism between these two, a growing disinclination on Bannerman's part to do anything but lounge away his days.

'Can't help it, my dear fellow,' he would say, 'it's the air, or something. If I had a shepherd's pipe I'd play it. And as for flowers! Do you know, some one puts a bunch of them on my pillow every night. I believe it's the milkmaid!'

There were flowers, too, garlanded round his door, while just over the way those ominous splashes of red on Ishwara's feet seemed to grow deeper and deeper.

At last I put the case baldly and crudely before him. Something was going on which I didn't understand, which might get him into mischief at any moment, and I appealed to his good sense to put the Siwaliks between him and a temptation which seemed to have fascinated him. He laughed, admitted the fact, and yielded; the more readily because our time was almost up.

For the first two days he was rewarded by success in the lower reaches; possibly—since fish shy at novelty—because we used a native Noah's Ark, our own boat remaining in the backwater till we could send coolies to fetch it. On the third he left the river early on plea of a headache. As he had been in wild spirits all day, quoting the *Prem Ságar* and singing French songs, I half thought he was going in for fever, the day being exceptionally hot. But on my return at dusk the servants asked if I would wait dinner for the sahib or not. Beset by immediate misgivings I rushed into his tent, where I found a slip of paper impaled like a bait on some tackle lying on the table.

'Off to the divine milkmaid! Don't wait. *Vogue la galère!*'

'How far?' I asked Sambo breathlessly.

'Twenty *kos* by the road—the sahib borrowed the police inspector's mare—not half that over the hills. But the moon is late, and the snakes love the dark.'

If it had been the darkness of Egypt I had no choice but to follow, and half an hour afterwards I was stumbling along after Sambo. Even by daylight the hills, heat-

cracked, rain-seared, strewn with sharp rocks, were bad walking; on a dark, hot night, with the snakes' eyes gleaming from the stones, they were horrible—most horrible. The straight fingers of the stiff candelabra bushes pointing up and up, the gnarled, stunted trees growing into strange shapes, reminding one involuntarily of those antediluvian animals whose bones lie buried all along the Siwaliks. A cold sweat of suspense lay upon my forehead despite the scorching blast tearing down the ravines; scorching, yet laden with the scent of earth, as from a new-made grave.

'There has been rain in the hills beyond,' said Sambo's voice out of the dark. I lost sight of him constantly, and at the best of times he was little more than another weird shape among the shadows. 'Holy Maha-deo! Have a care, *Huzoor!* Let the snake pass in peace!'

As he spoke something curved over my instep. Such things take the nerve out of a European; but I stumbled on, peering into the darkness, trying to think of Bannerman's danger, and not of that next step and what it might bring. But it came at last—just as we dipped into a cooler, moister glen, where I could hear the flying foxes hovering from tree to tree—a slither of the foot, and then a spiral coil up my leg gripping the muscles tight. My shriek echoed from the heat-hardened, resounding rocks until the whole hillside seemed peopled by my fear; and even when Sambo, stooping down, uncoiled the snake and threw it into the darkness, I could scarcely realise that I was none the worse for having put my heel on a viper's head. My nerve seemed gone; I could not move, except at a snail's pace.

'Time speeds,' came Sambo's voice again. 'The moon

rises but the clouds gather. If the *Huzoor* would only not mind——'

'I'd mind nothing if I could see—see as you seem to do,' I muttered, ashamed yet aggrieved.

'That is it,' he replied; 'the *Huzoor* cannot see, and the holy snakes do not know him as they know me. If the sahib will let me put the caste mark on his forehead as it is on mine he need not fear. It can do no harm, *Huzoor*.'

True; besides the very idea by suggesting confidence might restore it.

'Lest the dust should fall into the *Huzoor's* eyes,' said the voice softly, and I felt long thin fingers on my eyelids; then something on my forehead, cold and hard; cold and hard like a ring—the effect of such pressure when the eyes are closed is always confusing, and I felt as if I was dozing off when the same soft voice roused me—

'The *Huzoor* can see now.'

I opened my eyes with a start as if from sleep. Had the moon risen, or whence came that pale light by which I saw—what did I not see? Everything, surely, that had been created since the world began: the tiny watersprites in the half-stagnant pools, the flying motes in the dim air. Or did I dream it? Did I only feel and know that they were there, part of those endless, endless æons of life and death in which I was a unit.

'Sambo,' I gasped feebly, but there was no answer. Where was I? By degrees memory returned. This must be the Gayâtri glen, for there, at the further end, stood the great image of the dread Maha-deo where the pilgrims worshipped; and surely the odd light came from that gleaming cat's-eye on its forehead? Surely, too, the snakes curled and swayed, the outstretched hands opened and

shut? My own went up to my forehead in my bewilderment, when, suddenly, the light seemed to fade, till I could just see Nilkunta's blue throat as he stood beside me.

'The *Huzoor* has scratched his forehead; the blood trickles from it. See, I have brought a *tulsi* leaf. There! that is better.' I felt the coolness between my eyes, and something of my bewilderment seemed to pass away.

'It is the Gayâtri, *Huzoor*, and yonder is Maha-deo. He is but half-way, so we must press on. The sahib can see now; there is no fear.'

None. Yet did I see them, or was I only conscious of that teeming life in the jungles? Of the tiger crouching by our path, the snakes slipping from it, the deer standing to watch us, and, strangest of all, those shapes hiding in the dim shadows—undreamt-of monsters, neither fish, flesh, nor fowl? Was it a dream? or—the idea brought a faint hysterical laugh—was it the Zoological Gardens and the British Museum rolled into one?

'We must cross the river, *Huzoor*,' said the dim form flitting before me; 'Buniah-man sahib will have taken the boat.'

I suppose it was the usual rope bridge swung across the narrowing chasm of the river, but it seemed to me that night as if I walked on air. Below me, not ten feet from the lowest curve of the loop, was the Ganges, wrinkled and seamed, slipping giddily eastwards: overhead, a stream of clouds speeding eastwards also.

'She rises fast,' muttered Sambo. '*Mai* Gunga is in a hurry to-night.'

The whole world was in a hurry. I seemed to hear flying feet keeping time with our own. Not an instant's pause was there even for breath until we reached the last

declivity above the little oasis of the valley. The moon had risen, but the clouds hurrying across her face gave greater uncertainty to the scene; still I could see a woman's figure standing with widespread arms by the edge of the rising river. I could see a man sending a boat across the shallows with mighty strokes. And above the growing rush of the water I could hear two murmuring voices, which seemed to fill the world with soft antagonism. 'Ooma! Ooma!' from the hills; 'Râdha! Râdha!' from the valley. These were calling to the woman, and, as in a dream, I seemed to remember and understand: Râdha, the queen of pleasure; Ooma, the mother of the universe—Krishna's mistress, and Siva's wife!

I looked round for Sambo. He was gone; so I ran on alone feeling there was no time to be lost. My foot slipped and I fell heavily. But I was up again in a second unhurt, save, perhaps, for that scratch on my forehead, whence I could feel the blood flowing as I dashed into the shadow of the banyan tree. Merciful heaven! what was this? A glare as of noonday, and two radiant forms with a cowering woman between them! between the chaplets of skulls and the chaplets of flowers. And behind them was an empty plinth! Before I had time to realise what I saw, came shouts and cries, a *mêlée* and a scuffle. Armed men ran out of the shadows, and then Sambo's voice rose insistent, 'Run, sahib, run! 'Tis° your only chance. The boat—the boat!' Then some one hit me over the head from behind, and when I came to myself I was lying in the bottom of the boat. Bannerman was standing beside me shaking his fist impotently at the twinkling lights on the bank, and Sambo sat aft steering as best he could; for the oars had gone, and we were racing with the flood

towards the rapids. They had bound up my head with something, but I still felt stunned, and the rush of the rising river surged in my ears through the thin planks as I lay. So perhaps it was only my fancy that those two sat talking, talking, arguing, arguing, about the old, old problems.

Till suddenly I sat up to the clear sound of Sambo's voice—

'It is not to be done, *Huzoor*. We are in the hands of fate. If death comes, it will come, but it will end in birth.'

The answer was that half-jeering laugh I knew so well. 'I'll chance it, Nil-kunt; I don't believe you.'

Bannerman had stripped to the skin, and stood forward looking at the narrowing rush of the river. I could see the great logs of wood, swept from the hill-forests above, dancing along beside us on the curved surface of the stream—so curved by the very force of the current that as our boat, steered by Sambo's skill, kept the centre, the dim banks slid past below us. Across them, just ahead, a curved thread not four feet, now the flood had risen, above the water. The rope bridge! Then I understood.

'Don't!' I cried feebly. 'No man—can—withstand the force—of the stream.'

He crooked his knees beneath the thwarts and held up his arms.

'Don't——' I cried again.

The boat slackened for an instant—for an instant only. Then it shot on, leaving Bannerman clinging to the rope—shot on round the bend, leaving him hanging there between birth and death. But Sambo never took his watchful eyes off those merry, dancing logs, which meant destruction.

The horror of it all was too much. I fainted. When consciousness returned, Sambô, grave and composed, was bending over me. We were drifting fast into the back-water before my own bungalow, and behind us, looking spectral in the first glint of dawn, lay the great bridge, the flare of the watch-fires on its piers telling of the severity of the flood.

'The *Huzoor* is at home,' said the man quietly; 'if Buniyah-man sahib had taken my advice he would have been at home also.'

We had been a whole day and night on the river; but he seemed no more fatigued than I, who had escaped all the suspense. For the rest, no trace remained of the adventure save an oval scratch on my forehead surrounding the faint vestiges of something like an eye.

'It is the mark of Siva,' said my servant piously—he had come down with haste by rail to bring the news of my death—'doubtless he took the *Huzoor* under his protection; for which I will offer a blood oblation without delay.'

Bannerman's body was never found; but some months after, when I was inspecting foundations, I heard the king-fisher's cry, and the familiar cloop of a dive at the further side of the pier. Then Sambo, Rudra, Nilkunta—whatever you please to call him—showed his yellow-brown face above the yellow-brown flood bearing a ring in his mouth: a *Palais Royal* affair—two diamond hearts transfixed by a ruby arrow.

I had seen Bannerman wear it a hundred times, but I had never seen the inscription engraved inside—

'Thy lips, O beloved Life, are nectar.'

It was a quotation from the *Krishna* or *Prem Sâgar*!

A TOURIST TICKET

Dost forget, brother, that it is the Fast?’ said Raheem, as with gentle, determined hand he pushed the leaf-cup of sweets further from the board on which his tools lay. There were not many of them, though the inlaid work upon the sandalwood comb he was making showed delicate as lace. It suited the delicate hands employed upon it; in a way also it suited the delicate brain behind the high, narrow forehead, which had a look of ill-health about the temples, where the thick, coarse, black hair was also delicately streaked with silver; sure sign, in a land where greyness is long deferred, of a troubled body or mind. Raheem had barely touched middle age; in his case the trouble seemed to be in both body and mind, to judge by his hollow eyes and the expression in them as they rested on a younger man, who sat, as a visitor, on the plinth of the comb-maker’s shop. His feet were in the gutter, and his handsome head was nodding gaily to various acquaintances in the steady stream of passers-by; for the odd little shop was wedged into the outer angle of a sharp bend in the narrow bazaar, so that as Raheem sat working at his scented combs he could see both ways—could see all the world, coming and going, from dawn till dark.

Hoshyar laughed, nodding his handsome head once more: ‘Yea! I forgot that thou dost fast for both of us,

and pray for both of us. Mayhap in the end, brother, thou mayest have to go to Paradise for both of us, despite all thy pains.'

The busy hand ceased to work in a gesture of negation. 'Say not such things, Hoshyar. We go together, or go not at all. Thou knowest that was my promise to the dead.'

Hoshyar ate another comfit before replying with a shrug of the shoulders: 'Twas not on stamped paper, though, and promises are naught nowadays without it. 'Tis bad policy to be over-pious, brother. As all know, the saint's beard goes in relics, and to tell truth, I would be better pleased to leave Paradise to those who wish for it. The world suits me. I was not born to be religious, as thou wert.'

The comb-maker looked at him with a sort of perplexed patience. 'God knows His own work,' he said in a low voice. 'The Potter makes; the World fills. I remember when thou first wentest to school, Hoshyar, how thou didst weep because it prevented thee from prayer-time. And at the festivals,—dost remember, brother, thou hadst a little coat of brocade? Mother cut it from our father's old one she cherished so——'

'Old tales, old tales!' interrupted Hoshyar, rising with another shrug of his shoulders. 'If thou hadst wished me to continue in them, why didst send me to school to learn new ones? Why didst not make me a comb-carver instead of a clerk? Then might I have saved money, as thou hast, gone on the great pilgrimage, as thou hast, and worn a green turban like thine to show it, as thou dost——'

A sharp spasm of pain swept over the older man's face,

but there was anger also in his voice. 'As thou wouldst have done also, clerk though thou art, if——'

'Yea, I know, I know!' interrupted Hoshyar impatiently; 'if I had not emptied the bag so often. But 'tis a pity to let money lie idle. And that time when thou hadst the sum needed for the journey, I would have gone. I meant to have gone,—I swear it; but the leave failed, and thou wouldst not, surely, have had me give up my post? Then, ere the leave came, the money had gone instead. I can never keep it lying idle, and so——'

Raheem's anger faded, leaving nothing but the pain. What use was there in finishing the sentence, in reproaching the sinner with having done far worse than let good money lie idle? The fact only made the pilgrimage a greater necessity than ever, if Nakir and Munkir, the recording angels, were to be bribed to leniency. 'Thou shalt have the green turban yet,' he said quietly, 'if thou wilt have patience. But my combs are not like Peera's over the way: he makes a dozen to my one; ay, and sells them, too, for folk buy ever the cheapest thing, nowadays, even for an Eed-offering.'¹

There was almost an incredulous wonder in his voice as he went on working, while Hoshyar stood kicking one patent-leather shoe viciously against a loose brick in the pavement. 'And in the meantime the future pilgrim must live,' he remarked jestingly, as if, even to his effrontery, it was easier to treat what he had to say thus, than in earnest. 'So if thou couldst spare a rupee or two from the bag, Raheem,——'

His brother's eyes looked up, full of reproach. 'I know what thou wouldst say,' he went on pettishly. 'I have had

¹ Equivalent to our Easter.

more than my share this month; but I need it sorely. The skinflints at the office have cut my pay for being late,—as if I could help the tramcar passing full five minutes before its time,—so I had to walk. And then the mixed train, which is ever an hour late, chose to be punctual; so there was none to receive the waybills.’ He paused, and seeing the doubt on Raheem’s face, continued: ‘As for the combs, if thou hast difficulty in selling, I might try. That one thou madest last with jasmine flowers in ivory,—’tis a deft piece of work, and I know one who might buy it.’

‘Not Yasmeena?’ asked Raheem, his face hardening, despite the girl-like flush which came to it.

Hoshiyar laughed uneasily. ‘Thou hast Yasmeena on thy brain, brother. She is no worse than others of her trade, and that will last till all men are of thy way of thinking. Yasmeena! Nay, thou knowest she hath not the money to pay for such costly gewgaws, for she is not as the others, *now*; she is not to be bought or sold herself.’

A man more of the world than Raheem, noting the change of tone in the last words, would have augured much of Yasmeena’s power over the speaker; but the comb-maker was too simple for such wisdom. ‘If *she* buy it not, well and good,’ he replied, relaxing his frown; ‘but I will lend myself to no truck between thee and her. And as for the rupees——’ He sighed, yet there was no hesitation in the hands which began to unlock a brass-bound box lying beside his board. ‘Thou wouldst rise earlier, brother,’ he continued, almost tenderly, as he counted three rupees from a little bag into the outstretched palm awaiting the gift, ‘if thou wouldst sleep a little earlier also. Lo! I sleep and wake with the birds, since my work must be of the light.’

It streamed full upon him and his tools as he spoke, a pale gold flame of sunshine, searching for each flaw, each failure.

'Couldst not make it five, Raheem?' came the sordid voice. 'That is bare bread.'

The flame of the sunshine had found a resting-place in Raheem's eyes as he looked at the beggar from head to foot. 'And this is salvation,' he replied, dropping the bag back into the box with a chink, and turning the key upon it.

Salvation! Yes! that is what it really meant to Raheem. It meant salvation for one soul; but for which? After his brother had gone, he asked himself this question for the hundredth time, asked it almost feverishly. Ought he to trust to the chance? Was it likely that he would have time ere his life ended—that life which had always been so uncertain—to make provision for both himself and Hoshyar in death? It would not do to trust Hoshyar with the money. He, Raheem, must make the pilgrimage for him; and was it likely when the rupees came so slowly and went so fast that the hoard in the bag would be complete for years? Ought he not then to make over—as according to the canon he could do if he chose—the virtue of that past pilgrimage to his brother, and take the risk of the coming one upon himself? Hoshyar needed virtue sorely, and yet the very thought of going forth to the Judgment-Seat without the panoply in which for long years he had found peace and shelter was a terror to Raheem. Could he do it? Nay, it was too much; and yet—if that promise to the dead were broken wilfully—what good would imputed righteousness be before the Throne?

And meanwhile Hoshyar his brother, a clerk in the railway, sat smoking a vile cigar at the feet of Yasmeeana, who, lounging on a string bed, was drawing the scented sandalwood comb, inlaid with the flowers whose name she bore, through her sleek hair. 'Give it me, beloved,' she said scornfully; 'then thy promise to the saint will be secure. I must have it; 'tis the prettiest in the bazaar; even Gulanâri, with all her airs, has not its marrow. See, I will sell it to her when I tire of it, and then thou canst give back his three rupees to the miser. Three rupees! I shall spend that in a day. And Monday is the Eed. I must have a new gown for it, or——'

She did not finish her sentence, but her look was eloquent; and Hoshyar, as he lay awake that night, her meaning driven home by hints of coming coldness, racked his brains for some means of procuring the dress. Raheem meanwhile lay awake also, thinking of a very different costume—of a robe of righteousness, a wedding-garment. Those three rupees given to Hoshyar had been meant for an Eed-offering, the Eed which drew so near. There was no time to earn more. Should he go empty-handed to give thanks for the added virtue of having been granted life to keep the Great Fast, or should he offer up his pilgrimage by making it over once and for all to his brother?

Hoshyar had been asleep for hours, and the sparrows were astir ere Raheem found any answer. He would wait another day, he told himself, before deciding; so he sat in the sunlight seeking perfection in his delicate curves and lines, while the pale gold rays peeped and pryed for flaws and failures.

'Have you a comb like that, finished?' asked a foreign voice, making him raise his head and *salaam* hopefully.

‘None so good, *Huzoor*; but I have others.’ He took them from the brass-bound box and waited; then noting the Englishman’s look, said wistfully: ‘I had one yesterday, but it—it is gone. I could finish this one quickly for the *Huzoor* if—if he pleased.’ There was a catch in his breath. If he could sell something, surely he might keep salvation a little longer.

‘Can you finish it by Monday evening?’

It would mean working extra hours, mean working through the Festival when all the world rested; but what was that in comparison with the reward? Ten minutes afterwards Raheem was putting three rupees into the bag. He had sold out his stock, and, still more wonderful, had a promise of twenty rupees more on account for future work if he brought the comb punctually on the Monday evening. He had not done such a business for years. The Eed-offering was secure, and the chances of his hoard reaching the necessary amount for a speedy pilgrimage doubled.

The sun shone brighter and purer than ever on the crowds assembled in the Eedgâh,—a huge enclosure, set with trees and with a mere façade of a mosque upon its western front, which lay beyond the city walls. It shone on no more brilliant figure than Yasmeeha’s, who, in the gayest of new dresses, was saying her prayers effusively; for if the daily life be doubtful, there is all the more need to have the full advantage of festivals—a theory which obtains all over the world. But Raheem, despite his green turban of the Passed Pilgrim, despite the three rupees given scrupulously in charity to his neighbour, felt glad to escape, when prayers were over, to his work. And yet

the sight was one to stir most hearts: the long lines of men, women, and children—thousands and thousands and thousands of them—half-seen amid the shading trees; the boom of the firework-signal from the eastern gate echoing like a cannon from the wide walls, and ending in a silence like the grave; fifty thousand living, breathing beings shoulder to shoulder, and not a sound, not a quiver; only the swish of a bird's wings, only the hush of a breeze among the leaves. Then suddenly came a great shout as from one throat, and the long lines bent like a field of corn before a mighty wind. 'God is great; there is no god but God!'

And afterwards he had been used, wifeless, childless himself, to wander with kindly eyes among the merry family parties picnicking beneath the trees, watching the little ones' delight over their new toys, the old men's delight over their grandchildren. Then, often, he would hear folk say in a whisper: 'Look at his turban! He is a Hâjji; he has been to Mecca. Look, children, he has found salvation. God grant you to follow in his steps!' But on this Eed he took off the sign of saintship ere he began work; yet as he worked he shivered as if he were cold without it.

The weight of the twenty rupees, however, which, when the comb was finished and taken to the Sahib at the hotel, were duly paid into his hand, seemed to make his heart feel lighter. It meant two months' work, and that meant two months' food. Then Hoshyar must have at least five rupees. Still enough would remain to bring the hoard in the brass-bound box within measurable distance of salvation, to make it possible perhaps for him to wear his green turban without a heart-ache. His present lack of the dis-

tinguishing mark seemed to strike even the Englishman's eye, making him say kindly: 'I thought you wore the green, and you look the sort certainly; if not, I have something which may interest you. Here, Baboo, one of those leaflets, please. If you want to hear more, go to the address of the Agency. I'm off to-night.'

Raheem, with a *salaam*, tucked the little printed page into his common-place white headgear and trudged home-wards, tired and dispirited. It was too dark to begin work again as a distraction, and he had not had the heart, somehow, to prepare himself a feast as on other Eeds; so, bethinking him of the leaflet in his turban, he took it out and began to read. It was in the Arabic lettering of the Holy Book he knew so well, and his eyes were keen; still the wording puzzled him. A pilgrimage to Mecca,—exceptional opportunity,—specially chartered vessel,—*Firmân*,—absolute orthodoxy guaranteed,—to start in a month's time,—a limited number of tickets available at Moulvie Futtehdeen's, near the mosque, Imambarah bazaar! Briefly, it was the prospectus of a pilgrimage, which was being organised as a speculation by a well-known firm, whose travelling agent combined the business with a private venture of his own in all the artistic productions he could pick up by the way; whence came the purchase of Raheem's combs.

'Thou hast the way-bill, I see, Hâjji,' came a cracked, wistful voice, as an old man who was passing paused at the plinth; an older man even than his looks, for the sparse beard was palpably dyed, and his dress still had a youthful jauntiness about it. His face, however, betrayed him by its wrinkles. He carried a huge *dhol* (a kind of drum) slung by a cord about his neck, and as he spoke

his lissom fingers slid and curved over the stretched goat-skin, making a muffled, trembling boom. 'Not that it means aught to thee,' he went on in a grumble to match. 'Thou hast the ticket to Paradise already. Would I had it also! I go no nearer it, yet, than damning myself by playing to profligates, and so putting by a nest-egg against my desire. How else, since drum-banging is my trade, and drums ever keep bad company? But I grow old, I grow old. Thus the sin is greater to a soul which should have learned wisdom; but the pay is less by reason of fingers growing stiff. So I am wicked both ways, and ere next year's pilgrimage this empty maw of a thing may have swallowed me up, body and soul.' He gave a more vicious knuckling to the drum, which hummed and boomed in response.

'Next year's?' echoed Raheem.

'Ay; it comes every year, they say. There was a man at Gulanâri's,—God knows, neighbour, I must burn if I die in such company, and I so old! 'Tis the drum drags me to it—seest thou? it will play naught but dance-tunes, though I swear I am weary of them as a lame squirrel with her nest in the sky. I would play hymns, but that I am hindered; and a man's belly, Hâjji Raheem, will not stay empty as a drum and not shrink; so——'

'About the pilgrimage,' suggested Raheem, knowing the drum-player's talk of old.

'Ay, ay, for sure! The man,—a saint for all his company—there, seest thou, is the pull of it—had I but the green turban, this devil of a drum might take me where it would. But as I was saying, this man said it was true, every word. He had been and returned comfortably for the money.'

‘For so little,’ murmured Raheem, looking once more at the price named. It was far less than what his previous experience told him would be required.

‘Little!’ echoed the drum-banger reproachfully. ‘That comes of making decent combs. Didst thou try to wheedle salvation from a thing that hath neither heart nor bowels of compassion, that is naught but a devil of a noise that grows worse instead of better when ’tis whacked, thou wouldst tell a different tale. Well, the cat, says the proverb, killed seventy rats and went on a pilgrimage, so I must wait my turn, though if I have not more than seventy sins, may I never play a measure again. I swarm with them, neighbour, as flies on sugar.’ He tucked the tempter further under his arm, and moved on, muttering to himself: ‘And I have but half the money saved, so I am lost if I get not virtue on a reduction.’

Raheem sat looking at the paper stupidly, as the mingled growl of the drum and its beater died away. Then suddenly those delicate hands of his reached out swiftly to the brass-bound box. Surely he had so much, or would have so much when those twenty rupees were earned!

So it came to pass in the following days that every minute of the light found him at work on the scented combs; and whenever he finished one, he spent some of his scanty rest in toiling over to the Imambarâh bazaar, and paying over its fairly-earned price to swell the deposit which secured to him one of the limited supply of tickets. Finally on one night, the very night before the day of starting, he packed up the combs complete, took the price of the last one over to the Moulvie, and received in return a neat little booklet full of incomprehensible printed

papers. He felt almost afraid of his new possession, with its gay tie to keep everything in its place within the cover. Supposing he lost something and found himself stranded? He broke out at the thought into a cold sweat, and hunted hurriedly for the extra ticket which the Moulvie had told him was to be used to the junction, since the railway which passed through the town was not on the direct line. He found it, an ordinary third-class ticket, tucked away safely; but the fright made him resolve on keeping it separate and hanging the precious remainder in a bag round his neck. The empty money-bag would do; or, better still, there were some bits left yet of Hoshyar's little coat of brocade, and the ticket deserved a fine holder.

As he sat stitching away at the familiar fragments, however, by the flicker of the cresset, a certain remorse assailed him at having seen so little of his brother during the past month. True, Hoshyar, for various reasons, preferred coming to see him; but ever since the Eed, Raheem had been dimly conscious that something seemed to have come between him and the soul he meant to save. Was it that he knew in his heart it ought to be already saved? There was no longer any need, however, for such questions. So soon as the bag was finished he would go over and find Hoshyar; would find and tell him the great secret, the secret which even Raheem's small store of worldly wisdom had kept jealously.

A sound at the plinth made him look up, and there was Hoshyar himself. Something in his face made the sewer say quickly, 'I set aside the money for thee, Hoshyar, though thou camest not. It is here, five rupees.'

Hoshyar looked at the little pile with a queer expression,

and leaving the plinth came within the reach of a whisper. 'That will not serve me to-night,' he said quietly. 'I must have thirty.'

'Thirty!' echoed Raheem. 'I have it not.'

'Thou hast it in the box. See here, brother, thou hast told me always that the money was mine—for my salvation. Well, I need it; I must have it.' He spoke almost carelessly, as one who has a certainty of succeeding; and in truth he thought so. Once before Raheem had almost emptied the bag to save him from ruin, and he had calculated deliberately on its being emptied again when he had bought Yasmeena her new dress out of office-funds which would have to be replaced at the end of the month. Raheem would not have given a *pie* for such a purpose, of course; but with detection and disgrace staring his brother in the face it would be different. Besides, the money was his, for his salvation. 'Listen, Raheem,' he went on, summoning up a penitential tone; but his brother interrupted him swiftly, a sort of dread in his dark, hollow eyes.

'There is naught in the box now, brother,' he said, with a catch of fear in his voice. 'I have naught but this'; he laid his hand lightly upon the booklet, and its very touch seemed to bring comfort, for he smiled. 'Tis my salvation, Hoshyar, for I have given thee my pilgrimage. See, I am making a holder for it. Dost recognise the stuff? 'Tis a bit of the little brocade coat, brother.'

Hoshyar had caught up the booklet, glanced at it, and now flung it down with a passionate oath. 'Salvation,—fool, 'tis perdition!' Then he laughed suddenly, a loud, bitter laugh. 'That is an end,' he said, rising to go. 'I only waste time here. Good-bye, Raheem; 'tis well

thou hast a keepsake of me; thou art not likely to see much of me these seven years to come.'

'What dost mean, brother?' began the comb-maker fearfully; but Hoshyar, without another word, turned back to the bazaar.

'Tis thou that art the fool,' said Yasmeena, with a yawn, after Hoshyar had raged for a quarter of an hour of his ill-luck, of his brother's foolery, of her extravagance. 'Why didst not take the ticket? It must be worth something, surely?' Then a sudden interest came to her languid eyes, where vice itself seemed weary. 'Seest thou, beloved, I have an idea! Old Deena the drum-player is for ever talking of second-hand salvation. He hath forty rupees saved for it; that would leave me ten as commission. He need not know; I can say I got it; we of the bazaar get most things at times in our profession. And the money was thine,—for thy salvation, remember.'

Hoshyar looked at her as a man looks at a venomous snake he has no power to kill.

'Lo, Baboo-ji!' said a trollop of a girl, lounging in with a giggle. 'Thy brother Raheem asks for thee below. 'Tis the first time, methinks, he hath entered such a house, for he stands like a child, c'asping a brocaded bag as if there were pests about, and it held camphor.'

Yasmeena sat up among her quilts and looked at Hoshyar. 'Bid the good creature to the courtyard at the back,' she said in a level voice. 'Thou wilt like to see him alone, doubtless, Hoshyar. And, Merun, bid some man take him a sherbet; he would be affrighted of a *houri*. Make it of sandal-essence, girl, and bring it to me to see that it is rightly flavoured. Thou likest not sandal-essence, Hoshyar, 'tis true, but 'tis most

refreshing to those who have walked, and thou needst not touch it.'

Hoshyar's look changed. It was the look now which a bird gives to the snake.

Raheem was at the station next day in plenty of time, though, rather to his surprise, he had slept later than usual that morning, and slept heavily also; perhaps because he seemed not to have a care left in the world after Hoshyar had retracted all his reproaches and bidden him go in peace. Peace,—what else could remain in a man's heart after that renunciation in the dark, deserted mosque upon the homeward way, which had left Raheem's conscience clear at last, left him without a wedding garment, and yet content? And now, with his ticket to the junction duly snipped, his bundle in one hand and the other assuring itself of the booklet's safety in the brocade bag, he passed down the platform in the rear of the rush from the waiting-shed, looking diffidently for a seat in the close-packed carriages, which with their iron bars and struggling occupants looked like cages of wild beasts.

'Here, neighbour Hâjji, here!' cried a cracked, familiar voice full of elation, full of importance. 'Now that demon of a drum hath gone there is room for a saint or two. He is Hâjji already, my masters, and will be a good companion. But 'tis done cheaper nowadays, and I, I swear, have it cheaper than ye all. How much, is a secret; but the Lord kept his eye on old Deena.' So he went on boastfully, till even his voice was drowned in the great shout which went up as the train moved on. He was back on his own good fortune, however, when the hundred and fifty and odd passengers in their carriage, separated into scores by

iron bars, had subsided into a mere babel of speaking voices. 'No cover, say you?' he replied resentfully to a captious criticism on his ticket. 'What good is a cover? Dew is pretty, but it don't quench thirst; so I, being a pilgrim, drink plain water. My ticket will take me as far as thine.'

Raheem, crouched up between the drum-player and a fat butcher, heard vaguely, and fingered the outline of his treasure in its bag of brocade, feeling glad he had so honoured it; for it took him further than Mecca, further than this world. The Gates of Pearl were set ajar for him, and he could see through them to the glory and glitter of Paradise. And so, after a rush through a long stretch of desert sand, the train slackened, rousing him from a dream. This must be the junction, and he must take out the other ticket; but not while a score of folk were struggling over him in their rush to be out first. He was out last, of course, and had barely time to snatch the booklet from its bag, ere an official warned him to hurry up. So panting, confused, his bundle in one hand, his treasure in the other, he sped over the bridge to the next platform.

'Tickets, tickets, all tickets!' came another alien voice, and he paused to obey, setting his bundle on the ground in order to have both hands for his task. But the opening of the cover was to him as the closing of the Book of Life; for it was empty.

'Pass on, pass on!' came the not unkindly voice of command once more. 'Out of the way, you there, and don't stand like a fool. You've dropped it likely; run back and see; there's time yet.'

So over the bridge again went Raheem, in frantic hope, back on his steps again in frantic despair. 'I had it, *Huzoor*, indeed I had it! Here is the cover!'

The ticket-collector shook his head, and Raheem, with a dazed look, turned away quietly.

'Trra!' came the voice of the drum-player sententiously and safely from the window of a carriage. 'He hath lost the inside; that comes of a cover. Well, well, prayers are over; up with the carpet! But he is Hâjji already, my masters, so 'tis not as though it were one of us sinners.'

'Keep thy sins to thyself, chatterer,' retorted his next neighbour tartly, as the train moved on. 'We be virtuous men enough.'

'If you haven't money to go on, you must go back. The booking-office is over there, and the up-mail will be in in a few hours.'

This official view of the question, given by the authorities as they gathered round the disappointed pilgrim, was simplicity itself, even to Raheem. He never thought of connecting his ticketless cover with Deena's coverless ticket. The fact that his chance was gone absorbed him utterly; he had lost salvation, for the very thought of taking back his gift to Hoshyar was impossible to him. That was the outcome of it all. So he sat patiently waiting for his train to come in; sat patiently, after he had found a place in it, waiting for it to go on, so absolutely absorbed in his loss that he did not even hear his neighbours' comments on the delay.

'Line clear at last!' said the guard joyfully to the driver as he came out of the telegraph-office, where but one instant before the welcome signal had echoed. 'Steam away all you know, sonny, and make up lost time. I promised my girl to be punctual; there's a hop on at her house.'

So, with a shriek, they were off for a twenty-mile scamper across the desert; out, with a bump over the points, out

with a whistle past the last signal, out with a flash by the telegraph-posts. But something else was flashing by the posts also; for a message came clicking into the station they had left not a minute ago, '*Mistake—line blocked—down mail.*'

'My God!' said the station-master in a thick voice, standing up blindly. He was an old Mutiny man, but he was white as a sheet.

'It isn't our fault, father,' began his son, a slim young fellow, showing mixed blood.

'D—n it all, sir!' shouted the other furiously, 'what does it matter whose fault it is? What's to be done?'

Nothing could be done, save to telegraph back quick as kind nature could carry it: '*Line blocked—up-mail also.*' Fateful words! The line blocked both ways, and not a signal for twenty miles! Half an hour of warning at the least, and nothing to be done; nothing save to accept the disaster!

'Bring up the relief-engine sharp, Smith,' said the Traffic Superintendent at the terminus, when, ere a minute was past, the hopeless news reached him. 'Graham, run over for Dr. Westlake—for Harrison, too, if he's there; splints, bandages, dressers, and all that. Davies, wire back to the other end to send what they can from their reserve.'

And so, swiftly as hands and brains could compass it, two more engines fled shrieking into the growing dusk of evening behind those two, the down-mail and the up-mail, coming nearer and nearer to each other on the single line.

'Twenty minutes since they started, about,' said one man, who was standing with a watch in his hand, in curiously quiet tones. 'It must be soon now; and there

is a curve about the middle. I hope to God there is no friend of mine in either !’

‘Royston’s in the down,’ replied another studiously even voice. ‘He was going to see his wife. But the firsts are well back ; it’s the thirds, poor devils——’ He paused, and the others nodded.

The thirds, doubtless ! And in one of them, far forward, crouched Raheem, staring out into the calm dusk, absorbed in the horror of going back, going back to die before he had saved his own soul !

So, suddenly, through and above the rush and the roar and the rattle that he scarcely heard, came a new sound forcing him to listen. It was a quivering, clamorous, insistent whistle. It brought no recognition to his ignorance, or to the ignorance of those around him, but far back in the first-class carriages white faces peered out into the gloom, and foreign voices called to each other : ‘ Danger whistle—what’s up ?’ Still, it was a strange, disturbing sound with a strange echo. And was that an echo of the rush, and the roar, and the rattle ? Raheem sat up quickly. Was it the end of all things ? Why had they struck him—Who—Hoshyar ! Then thought ended in a scream of pain.

‘There is a man caught by the feet under that wheel,’ said Dr. Westlake not many minutes after, as he came out of the hideous pile of wreckage all grimed and smirched. ‘He is breathing yet, so have him out sharp. We may save him, but these others——’ He passed on to seek work significantly.

And so Raheem, stunned, and with both feet crushed to a jelly, was dug out ; the only man left alive in the forward third-class carriage of the up-mail. He was still uncon-

scious when it came to be his turn for the doctors in the crowded hospital. 'Badly nourished,' said Dr. Westlake, 'but it is his only chance. Harrison, the eucalyptus sawdust, please; it is a good case for it, and we shall be short of dressings.'

So two days afterwards Raheem, recovering from a slight concussion of the brain, found himself in a strangely comfortable bed with a curious hump of a thing over his feet under the coverlet. He did not know that there were no feet there; that they had both been amputated at the ankle, and that he was a cripple for life. And there was no reason why he should find it out, since the sawdust did its work without more ado, much to the doctor's delight, who, as he took Raheem's temperature, talked of first intents and septic dressings to his assistant. In fact, they were both so pleased that it came upon them by surprise one day, when Raheem, with clasped hands, asked when he was to die.

'Die? Rubbish!' said Dr. Westlake cheerfully. 'Not from this, at any rate, and we will do what we can for the lungs afterwards.'

Raheem's face did not lose its anxiety. 'And when, if the *Huzoor* will say, shall I be able to walk again?' As he lay in the comfortable bed, he had been making up his mind to sacrifice all comfort, to leave life behind him, and start on foot for death, with his face towards Mecca.

'Walk?' echoed the doctor, with a significant look at his assistant. Then he sat down on the edge of the cot, and told the truth.

Raheem heard it, looking incredulously at the cradle; and then suddenly he interrupted a platitude about its being better to be a cripple than to die, with an eager

question: 'Then the *Huzoor* means that I shall never be able to walk again?'

The doctor nodded.

'May God reward the *Huzoor* for ever and ever,' said Raheem in a whisper, raising both hands in a salute; and his face was one radiant smile.

Dr. Westlake looked at his assistant as they passed on to the next cot. 'They are an incomprehensible people,' he said, in rather an injured tone. 'I never expected to hear a man thank me rapturously for cutting off both his feet.'

He did not know that cripples are specially exempted from the duty of pilgrimage, and that the patient was repeating his version of the text: 'It is better to enter halt into life, than, having two feet, to be cast into hell.'

THE KING'S WELL

THIS is one of poor Craddock's many stories which he told me when we were in the wilderness together, engaged—like another Moses and Aaron—in preparing a way for a Western people across the desert, and dividing its sand waves by a pathway of red-brick ballast edged with steel,—in other words, in making the railway on which he afterwards met his death in trying to prevent a survival of past ages from being in the permanent way of civilisation.

We used to sit at the door of my little tent—two Englishmen adrift on a sand sea,—and I used to listen while he talked; for the life he had led made him the best of company, and his combined ignorance and knowledge of the East was a perpetual surprise. Some of his stories were grossly, frankly impossible, but this one, despite its strangeness, I believed unhesitatingly; as any one would have done who had seen, as I saw, the indescribable world-tarnish which long years of loose living brings to the kindest face, leave it clear, bright, and eager to a rejuvenescence of love, and pity, and pain.

The sun had dipped below the rising rim of the great sand-circle whose centre we were, but the sky was still a cloudless expanse of yellow radiance dazzling to the eyes from sheer excess of light. There was nothing far or near to differentiate one part of earth or heaven from another save the thin red line of ridiculous little flags we had been

planting out during the day; and I remember thinking that I could not for the life of me tell the exact spot where, five minutes before, I had seen the last curved glint of the sun disappear—for one bit of horizon seemed to the full as bright as another.

'Looks like the yaller bottle in the chemist's shop; don't it, sir?' remarked Craddock cheerfully,—'leastways, as I used to think when I was a boy. Lordy! Lordy! boys is—is boys, I do assure you. Old Pargiter's shop to our village was over against the public, sir, next the church, an' comin' 'ome o' evenins from the catechism, sir, it seemed Je-reusalem the Golden. Expect it was the anathysts, an' sapphiras, an' rubies, an' them sort o' stones did it, for boys—is boys you, see, sir.' He gave an apologetic smear to his corn-coloured moustache as if to wipe away the flavour of his own sentiment—the wrist-smear of those whose hands are habitually soiled.

'It *is* like a topaz seen against the light,' I replied, accepting both confidence and excuse with the calm indifference which always encouraged Craddock to further indulgence. 'I don't think I ever saw it quite so daz-zlingly clear, did you?'

He paused awhile, and the blue eyes, bloodshot by exposure to unspeakable lights and unspeakable darknesses of all sorts and kinds, grew a trifle absent.

'I dunno but what I 'ave, sir; leastways it looks more light-like from the bottom o' a well. As, savin' your presence, sir, is only nat'ral.'

'From the bottom of a well?' I echoed. 'When was that, Craddock? you never told me that yarn.'

He paused again. 'No, sir. It ain't a pleasing inter-lood, for 'twas in the Mutiny time, sir, w'en we was all mad

devils, black an' white—white an' black——,' and then suddenly, as I have said, some past pity and passion and pain seemed to come back upon him with a rush, so that he sat staring into that cloudless sky as if he saw a vision, and his voice came at last half to himself, 'By the Lord as made me, I dunno which was worse, black nor white, white nor black; yet it was white as did for me, Nathaniel James Craddock, at the bottom o' the King's Well.' Then he was silent again, and I sat silent too, for there never was any use in pumping Craddock. His fund of experiences was too vast for you to be sure of bringing what you wanted to the surface. So, after a time, he began again deviously:—

'Not as wot it was, so to speak, a well at all, but what they calls, in the lingo, a *bawly*—a thing, you know, sir, with flights o' steps a-leadin' down to the bowels of the yerth—right down to the water as maybe a hundred or a hundred and fifty feet below the surface, as the sayin' is, sir. It was just a large, round, black spot o' ink, that was wot the water was, an' standin' on the stone edge you could see right up the stairs to a round yaller spot of Je-rewsalem the Golden. Two spots there were, sir, owin' to their being two flights o' steps, an' many a time as I lay like a rabbit in 'is burrow down by the water, I'd tell myself luck was in there bein' two—two whites to one black, yet after all it was white as did the business for me, sir, at the bottom o' the King's *bawly*.'

'You must have been very young in Mutiny time?' I remarked in casual aid to his lagging confidence.

'One-and-twenty, sir—more by token I come to man's estate, as the sayin' is, at the bottom o' that there well. Lordy! I can see it now! A sort o' mist o' light from

Je-rewsalem above a-fadin' away half down the stairs, and leavin' the rest to get darker an' darker to the black spot o' water; but it had a glint o' light on it too that come, God knows how, when the sun was low.' As he spoke I had noticed a curious change in his voice; a sort of refining process, as if he were going back to a self that was less rough, less common, and the change was still more marked when, after a pause, he began again: 'It was an awful hot year, sir, just a white flame of heat—a burning fiery furnace; but there wasn't none of us come through it praisin' an' magnifyin'—leastways I didn't, but then I was a wild lot. Run away from home, sir; that is how I came to be in the country, knowing a good bit of the lingo for a youngster. Served my way out before the mast, and then backed my luck. And won it too; for a Rajah fellow paid me to wrestle with his men, and play monkey tricks. Lordy! I remember the first time I got in grips with the champion, and he stood head down expectin' me to go on buttin' like a goat. There wasn't one of them could touch me, sir, but that wasn't no protection when the time came. It's an odd sort of thing, I do assure you, for a man who knows he could lick every one he sees, to be runnin' like a hare for dear life, hidin' by day an' circumventin' the villages by night; but that was how it was for three weeks before I come plumb—as the sayin' is—on the King's Well. It was right in the worst country, and I was foot-sore, and stumblin' like as if I were in liquor with the fever. A queer sort o' place it was as I saw it first in the dawn which come—as the dawns had a trick o' doin' in those times—a deal too soon for Nathaniel James. It was right in the open in the middle o' a lot o' broken-bricks and little mounds o' mud—miles and miles of them it had

seemed to me, footsore an' stumblin'; for the place had been a big city, so I'm told, sir, in the old times. And now it was nothin' but a plain o' broken brick an' graves, except for a cluster of tall old houses with the usual mud-huts a-crowdin' up round them. And I knew from what I'd heard that the biggest murdering villains o' the lot lived in them houses, poor *budmarsh*¹ Mohammedans, proud as Lucifer, a-screwing the tails o' the ryots for a livin'—though why ryots, sir, is hard to say, for a more peaceable lot o' able-bodied men and women never was. Well, there I was in the worst place I could have chosen, and the dawn comin' sudden all in a blaze. Then, right at my feet I sees the *bawly*; just a hole o' broken masonry, an' the steps leading down like a rabbit burrow. They didn't seem to be much used that side furthest from the village among the graves, for the drifted sand was a-lying thick on the topmost steps, and I didn't see no footmarks to speak of, only a queer sort o' track that might 'ave bin a man's and mightn't. Anyhow I thought I'd risk it, seeing as if any one come down the one stair, I could hoof it up the other, an' there's generally a lot o' little arched recesses at the bottom o' *bawlies* where I could lie low. So I chanced it. An' Lordy! wasn't it cool as I hobbled down them vaulted steps. 'Twas a fine place, sir, when all was said an' done. Half a dozen steps or so, and then a landin', as the sayin' is, with a sort o' travellers' rest on either side; but I went right down to the bottom, so as to see what sort o' trap I'd got into. An' I found it none so bad, for there wasn't no passage round as there is in most *bawlies*, but only an arched room on either side my stairs ending sheer in the drop o' ink which filled up a

¹ bad-living.

round sort o' well that was vaulted over up in the dark somewhere. So there wasn't no way of getting from one stair to the other but by a leap such as there wasn't one but Nathaniel James in the country-side as could leap it; an' that would give me time. Still I do assure you, sir, it takes the spunk out of a fellow to go skulkin' round for three weeks with your life in your hand in baggy silk trousers an' a dressin'-gown—for I'd put on what they calls a *killit* as the Rajah give me for smashing up another Rajah's champion—that's a dress o' state, sir, an' *killit* or not, it nigh killed me, for it was chock full o' embroidery an' that hot; but beggars mustn't be choosers, and that night I run off from the Palace it was all I could lay hands on. An' did its work too—just to give what them surveyor chaps calls the proper contour, as the sayin' is. Anyhow, what with the stain, a deal more knowledge of the lingo than I have now, sir, an' through my being considerable stronger than the only two fellars as caught me napping, here I was in the King's *bawly* watching them two round spots o' Je-rewsalem like a man in his grave awaitin' the last trump; an' the first pair o' feet I saw on the stairs opposite set me a-tremblin' like a ferreted rabbit, even though I knew that wot with the stairs, an' the drop o' ink, I'd 'ave a good five minutes' start. But then I heard the jingles on them, sir, and knew it was only a woman from the village comin' down to fill her water-pot. There was a lot o' them come chatterin' and laughin' during the day, but always down the further stair. And Lordy! it was cool after the fiery furnace! I had a mouthful or two o' corn I'd *looted*, so when dusk came it seemed to me as if I couldn't move on—small blame to me, sir, seein' how cool an' quiet it was, and I so close on done. But just as I was

a-callin' myself names for bein' lazy come a footfall on my stair. Now you know, sir, them *bawlies* bein' arched an all that, is awful echoey places, an' I do assure you I made up my mind a man was coming down, slow and deliberate-like. I looked out, an' couldn't see nothing, but there was the footfall just like a procession; an' then somethin' let loose a bellow, and I felt inclined to cut. But then I thought I'd wait a bit seein' I was stronger nor most, an' the drop o' ink was handy for a corpse. So I waited until the bellow come again; an' this time—bein' close as it were, an' out o' the echo—I knew my friend, for I do assure you, sir, it was nothin' but the biggest bull toad you ever see, coming flop, flop down the stair for his evenin' drink. A great green thing with a yaller waistcoat, as sat up on the last step and looked at me quite proud-like. Lordy! how I laughed! It was the first laugh I'd laughed for three weeks, an' it done me good; that an' seeing the bull toad go douse into the water like a man, for it set me alongin' for a swim too, an' when I come out o' that drop o' cold ink I was a new man. Slept like a babby in its cradle, and woke to see through the maze o' arches a woman on the tother side a-rinsin' out her brass pot quite calm-like. She was a-takin' his breakfast to her man in the fields, I expect, for there was a pile o' them flapjacks on a platter beside her. I dunno, sir, if it was the sleep, or the sight o' food and me ravenin' wolves, or just sheer devilry—for I was a wild lot—but I out o' my rabbit 'utch an' let loose a yell. You may well call 'em *bawlies*, sir, for I do assure you I felt kind o' queer myself havin' made all that noise. She gave no look, but let loose another yell of her own as she turned tail and ran up them stairs like a lamp-lighter. It seemed to me as if she was callin' on 'the

King—the King,' but I didn't stop to think. Now was my time. I was over the drop o' ink clear on to the second step in my hurry, before she was half way up to Jewersalem, an' I was back again to the 'utch with the flap-jacks making ready to run if need be for dear life, when I heard the silver tinkle again an' women's voices. Every word, sir, I could hear through its bein' a *bawly*, an' I heard her'—he paused sharply, waited a second, and began again—'there was two on them now, disputin' an' half laughin', half cryin'; one was pullin' the other an' tellin' her she was a fool; there wasn't no King, more's the pity, and if there was she wasn't afraid seein' he was her *bâp-dâda*;—that's ancestors, sir—but the tother wouldn't hear of it, an' kept sayin' 'twas well enough for some folk as pretended wisdom, but every one knew the King's footmark on the stair an' had heard his voice after dusk. My friend the bull toad, thinks I, feelin' considerable easier in my mind, for I knew enough o' their ways, you see, sir, to know as there wasn't much chance o' any one else comin' down my stairs if a ghost lived there; so I listened to the arguifyng quite interested like. But it wasn't no good—the half-laughin' voice hadn't a chance even when it grew sober, and cried shame on bein' frightened at the spirit of the good King, who every day come down to his *bawly* all alone, so that any pore soul as wanted justice might go down the other stair and tell him what was amiss across the black water with no fear. "If he was only there now instead o' bein' where saints are," I heard her say, "I'd go down this instant an' tell him to stop it all—but there's no one to listen nowadays—no one." An' with that she come tinkling down the steps alone—a tall girl, sir—but, there—'tain't no good describin' her, for I never see her but in half

light till——Well! she just rinsed out her pot like the rest o' them and filled it; but afore she went she stood so with it on her head on the tother side o' the black water for a moment, an' said quite loud an' bold-like, "*Salaam, Mâhârâj.*"¹

'I was that wild sort, as I might have given a bellow just to frighten her for the fun o' the thing, but I kept somehow a-thinkin' o' what she had said of the old King a-trailin' down them steps in his royal robes, and listenin' in that *bawly* to all the pore folk's troubles, an' a-promisin' never to forsake them but to bring justice with him down the stairs to the end o' all things. Not that he was an old King, sir, as I found out afterwards, but a young sort o' saint, as got killed afore his time. You see I heard a lot o' talk from the women as came down in companies, skeery, and just in a mortal hurry to fill their jars and git home because of the girl as said she had heard the King in the daytime. So that it came to me, sir, that I couldn't do better nor lie hidden a day or two and get strong where I was, for there wasn't no manner o' hurry. Like as not I'd get killed somehow before I got to the river, and I couldn't help anyways, seein' as I couldn't look to get into any o' the places where we was holdin' out against the black devils. An' that evenin', when the old bull toad come down for his swim, I just laughed again quite light-hearted, and says as she said, "*Salaam, Mâhârâj!*"

'Well, she was the only one as come alone after that; but come she did, an' every time she come she would stand an' say loud-like, but a bit wistful, "*Salaam, Mâhârâj.*"

'She was a tall girl—but there, it ain't no use describing her.

¹ Greeting or peace to the King.

'So what with the women coming all together I didn't have much chance o' flap-jacks, and what with the village bein' walled in an' full of them murderin' nobility, I wasn't, so to say, successful in thievin', an' at last I see it was time to move on. A bad time, too; for I heard from the women's talk as there was crowds o' sepoys about a-screwin' the pore folk's tails, an' I heard *her* say to 'em once as it were their fault. "If they wasn't so frightened o' the King," said she, "maybe he'd come back and give 'em justice." An' that evenin' when she come down she stood so with her arms spread out lookin' up the stair, and said again, bowing down after their fashion, "*Salaam, Mâhârâj*, your slave waits!"

'There was a pile o' flap-jacks on the platter beside her water-pot, an' maybe it was the sight o' them, and knowin' they would be worth gold to me, or maybe because it was my last time o' askin', or maybe the devil that was in me, but I just out o' my rabbit 'utch, in my baggy silk trousers and dressing-gown—in the whole blessed *killit*, sir—and stood quite still on the steps. It was most dark, you see, sir, an' the contours was correc', so 'twas no wonder she give a little cry, half glad, half afraid, as she come up from her salaam. I guessed she'd run and leave me the flap-jacks, but she wasn't that sort. A tall girl—but there, it ain't no use describin'. Well, afore I could think what to do she was at it; such a tale o' wrong, sir; not about herself, though she was one of those pore souls as is born widows; but about Lord knows what of the people. An' I listened. Did you ever listen, sir, to a woman's voice just chock full o' confidence in your bein' a good sort? Well, I did; an' I dunno how 'twas, sir, but the confidence was catchin'. I was a reckless, bold chap, you see, an' I knew

she had grit, so the next moment I was over that circle o' black water and beside her. She give another little cry, but, my Lord! she *had* grit, for she drew back quick against the wall and thrust out her hands to keep me off.

"The King! the King!" she said, "I thought you was the King!"

'An' with that I caught her by the hands. "I'm not the King," says I, "but don't you be afraid, I'm only a pore man as won't hurt you."

"I'm not afraid," she says, tryin' to make believe. "You come down the King's stairs o' justice," she said, "an' that 's enough."

'Then somehow, I dunno how it was, sir, but all in a moment it come home to me that I'd go my whole pile on her, an' I drop her hands an' I says—

"Yes! I come down the King's stairs, and I'll be a King to you for justice if you'll be a Queen to me."

'And by God! sir, she was.

'So there we were, lookin' into each other's eyes and sayin' nothin', till she gave a queer little laugh.

"Why," she says, "you're a white man!" and with that she lay her finger quick and confident on my wrist; an' sure enough, what with the swim and the dark it were white indeed—white an' shivery too, with the touch somehow, so that I couldn't but keep her hand so and say—

"Yes, my dear, I'm white and you're black; I'm a man and you're a woman, but it shan't make no odds. I'm King and you're Queen in this here *barvly*, and there shan't be nothing but justice atween us, so help me God!"

'An' there wasn't, sir. No! though we went our whole pile on each other, I do assure you, sir.'

The assurance was needless; one look at his face was

enough—that world-worn face with its bloodshot eyes, fixed on the dazzling glory of the sky as if they saw a vision.

‘I used to see her first against Je-rewsalem,’ he went on in a lower tone. ‘Then I could hear her come down the stairs ever so soft to stand close to the water’s edge and cry, “*Salaam, Mâhârâj*”—for she called me that, just for fun, you see, sir. An’ there weren’t much wistfulness in her voice, sir, mostly laughter, an’ somethin’ better nor laughter, when I come leapin’ across that drop o’ ink to stand beside her for a little, an’ tell her—what folks say to each other when they’ve set their whole pile on each other, you know, sir. For she wouldn’t never come down the King’s stairs, sayin’ it was unlucky an’ what not. Excuses, sir, but I understood ’em, and I didn’t want her, for you see it was justice between us I ’d sworn, and I was a wild lot. She had told her father—a blind old Brahman, sir, awful holy, and nigh bedridden too—and he sent word to say, stop where I was. The villagers wouldn’t venture down the stairs either, and, if they did, wouldn’t harm me, being, as I say, sir, as peaceable a lot o’ able-bodied men as ever was. But the maraudin’, murderin’ crew in the big *hawelies*—that’s houses, sir—was harbouring those mutinous devils of Jack Pandies, and playin’ high old Tommy for miles round, so I ’d better lie low till justice came; as it ’d sure to do at last, seein’ that the Lord was King. They talks a sight, sir, about the heathen and their ignorance, but I do assure you she knew a deal more nor me, what with being of a king’s family an’ havin’ a bedridden saint of a Brahman for a father. An’ they mayn’t know much book-learnin’ p’raps, but some of ’em knows how to make a man put his whole pile on them. And she had grit, my Lord! she had grit!

' Yet there was a catch in her breath that evenin' when I was nigh mad with fear lest she had come to harm because it was so late, and hearing her footfall on the stair I leapt over, and nearly fell back into the ink-pot through seein' her in a man's dress.

" 'I'd rather you didn't come if there's danger," said I quite sharp like, when she told me the sepoys was setting watch because folk said the white soldiers were a-coming. " Don't ! I can't stand it here in the dark, idle, thinkin' o' you God knows how. I'll fend for myself quite well."

' An' with that she laughed low with the little catch in her breath still, and come a bit closer so as I could slip my arm round her a little ; an' by that I knew 'twas more danger than she let on—for she was not that sort. .

" "Now don't you come," says I, as I might be the King himself givin' orders, " I won't have it. If the soldiers is comin', they'll bring justice, an' if not a little starvin' won't hurt me, for I'm gettin' quite strong again." An' so I was, sir, what with the rest and the food an' the happiness. For I do assure you, sir, on my solemn oath, that I was happy at the bottom o' that King's *bawley*. Happy ? By the Lord ! sir, 'twas enough to make a man happy to see the look she gave me, as much as to say I was strong enough and everything enough for her ; for though it was nigh dark I could see her face from its bein' so close to mine—she bein' a tall girl—but there, it ain't no use describin'. There don't seem much to say, sir, when it comes to lookin' at each other that way, an' so we stood silent a bit, till sudden I hear the old bull toad at his jinks again, and partly to ease off the sort o' burstin' feelin' at my heart, I cries with a laugh, " There's the King !"

' But she just lays her head down, pugree an' all, on my

shoulder, and says with a sob, "No, here's the King. The King as I come to for justice."

He paused for so long, that something of the excitement which had been thrilling in his tones seemed to pass into my mind, and I felt almost a shock when he went on quite calmly—

'Well, it was arranged that she wasn't to come back for three days unless somethin' turned up. I would have it so, an' she give in at last. It was mortal dull without her, and I made up my mind when I see her again to tell her I'd back my luck once more and fight my way safe somehow. Then when it was over I'd come back for her; for it didn't seem it could go against me as I sat down by the drop o' ink a-lookin' up to Je-rewsalem over the way, and a-wonderin' when I should see her on the top step a-comin' for justice to her King.

'Well, she come at last. It were the second day, I think, sir, and it took me all of a sudden, for, owin' to its bein' a *bawly* in the bowels of the yerth you couldn't hear nothin' of what was goin' on up top. I was sittin' lookin' over the way when I hear a noise behind an' a voice, "*Mâhârâj! Mâhârâj!*"

'It was she, sir, down the King's steps in the man's dress, an' behind her, my God! not black devils but white ones with red coats an' set bayonets!—" *Mâhârâj! Mâhârâj! Justice! Justice!*"

'I was out, sir, tearing up to meet her in a second, shoutin' in English to hold hard—that she was a woman; but them cursed *bawly* echoes mixed it all up, an' the cursed baggy trousers and things didn't give me no chance of a hearin' through it's bein' half dark—

"*Mâhârâj! Mâhârâj!*"

'I heard it plain enough, God knows. I hear it now sometimes, sir, an' I see her face as I saw it for the only time in the light afore I fell over her dead body a-lying on the steps half-way down the stairs o' justice.

'They told me after, as I had finished the cry for her many and many a time whilst I lay in 'orspital—for they 'd struck me playful-like before they found out I was white, an' I took mortal bad ; but there wasn't much use in justice then for none o' us. An' I never could tell quite how it happened, for when I went back the village was just bricks, and the corpses lyin' about thick, unburied. They had had a hard fight as they told me, had the Tommies, an' bein' fresh from Cawnpore, was keen—as was nat'ral—an' she was in man's clothes, you see, when she come flyin' down the steps o' justice calling for the King.'

He sat silent, looking out to the now darkening sky where the light had faded save in the widening rays spreading out from the grave of the sun. And down one of them, as down a golden staircase, I seemed to see a flying figure with outstretched arms pass to Jerusalem the Golden with the cry '*Mâhârâj! Mâhârâj!*'

But Craddock was already clearing his throat suggestively for the usual glass of whisky and water ; yet ere he drank it his eyes wandered absently, helplessly, to the horizon, and I heard him mutter to himself—

'An' so 'twas white, not black, as did for Nathaniel James Craddock at the bottom o' the King's Well.'

And as I looked at him, drink-sodden and reckless, I understood that when the time came he too would have the right to pass down the King's stair seeking justice—and finding it.

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 sinpering over an apple, or subsequently sighing over 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 wifhood, motherhood, and that mystical virginity which, in Eve-ridden faiths, finds its worship in Mariolatry.

That she could even dimly recognise 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 civilised 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 Râdha 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 in to 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 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 Râdha, 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 *lotah* 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

¹ A common belief in India,

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 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 Râdha or some one 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, may be, 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——'

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—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

¹ The Universal God.

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 purpose

ful 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! *Wah!* 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 out 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 hands for other harvests. That was also as it should be. And yet? She turned her face down into the wheat.

'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 preservation of the hearth fire, not the fire of passion, and the jealousy which is a virtue to the civilised, 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 curves, 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 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 lightening 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.

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 Panjab—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, head man 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 resistance 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 filagree 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 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, 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 ought 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 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 Nânuk, who, every one 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; NânuK, 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. 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 parson's part?')

'Tra! That's neither in three nor thirteen,' retorted his wife. 'Give me the barber¹ for certainty.'

¹ The barber is always employed in regular betrothals.

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 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 Pertâb 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, 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 woman-kind were less satisfactory.

‘Thou art worse than a peacock which cries even after rain has fallen,’ finished the big villager testily. ‘What is 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 Pertâb 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 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 Pertâb 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 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 '*jei-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 furthest 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

¹ Judge.

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 tantalising 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 Nânu'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 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 Nânu'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, Pertâb! 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 *Chachchaji* could possibly finish with his friends. She could get off at the corner, and then even if *Chachchaji* had discovered their absence Nâno could say he had taken the mare for water, or that the flies were troublesome. Excuses were so easy.

Ten minutes after, his feet barely reaching the big shovel stirrups, young Lochinvar ambled out of the court-house compound with his bride behind him.

‘We must come back at the turn, Pertâb,’ 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 *Chachchaji* 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 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 further 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 Nânuk's back, and she said sleepily—

'We'll keep the *gur-row* (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 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 Pertâb. 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 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 Nânuk, 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 Nânuk 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.’

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.

'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 head-quarters. 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 any one 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. *Ari hai!* the lads would be forgetting next which end of the plough to hold, the share or the handle! But *Pur-m-eshwar*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 *put-waries* 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 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

¹ The Universal God.

² The Monkey-god.

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 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 pugree 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-men 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 Gurditta 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 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 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.

'*Trrra!*' 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. '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 re-appeared

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 scapegoat ; 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 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 natives 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 the alien, 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 head-men. '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 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 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, some one 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.

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 finding 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! 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,

¹ Headman of village.

unseen. Unseeing also. Other women might have lent eyes to aid their ears, but Saraswati was no spy—no eaves-dropper 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, somehow, 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-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 enchain 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 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 any one would cast such a gift away in the sweeper's pan! As if the gods themselves, far off as they were, could be deceived

¹ From *chujj*, a sweeper's basket. One of the many opprobrious names given to avert the envious, and therefore evil, eye.

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 semicircular 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-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

¹ For the most part, sugar animals, such as are sold at English fairs.

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.

'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 dying 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.'

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.

Even she, town born and town bred, did not dare before this grave-eyed peasant woman to name her 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,' 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.'

¹ A husband's name should never be mentioned by a wife, especially in matters referring to herself.

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 ghât 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 Anant Ram, the *khuttri* (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. Be-

neath it some cow-dung 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 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.'

'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.

¹ Worldly wealth.

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.

'*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 wisdom 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 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.

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.

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, 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. 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 furled red flag in her grandfather's shaking hand.

'Lo! *nanna*,' 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.

'It shall be the red one some day, *nanna*! 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 waistcloth. 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 furthest.

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

'*Ari budzart !*' 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——'

'*Trrra,*' 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 whack 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.

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 civilisation 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 civilisation, 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! —*nanna*, 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. 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?'

'*Ari budzart!*' 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 inquire 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 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 some one 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 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 flywheel. 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 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 *nánna* 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 that Craddock stroked his corn-coloured beard and shook his head mournfully.

'She's a deal 'arder than I took 'er for, seein' her, 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*³ till I can hand her over. Now Craddock, on with the steam, or I shall miss my connection. Confound the girl!'

¹ Take her hand.

² Explain to.

³ Watchman.

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 monkey ; 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.

‘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 recognised 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 Crad-

dock's voice could possibly come back to him through the lessening rattle.

'Danger signal comin' down the line. On a trolley, 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; 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 further 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. Every one 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' her she'd go to 'ell! Lordy! ain't it like a woman to have 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 further 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, as the sayin' is, to act fair an' square by her—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 her a hounce 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 flywheel 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 sympathising 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, some one sprang into the cab and

turned the steam hard on, some one with a half-pained, half-glad look on his face.

‘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——?

AMOR VINCIT OMNIA

THIS story began and ended in a public library. An odd, forlorn little offshoot of progress, dabbled out beyond the walls of a far-away Indian city, which drowsed through the sunny to-day as it had drowsed through many a century of sunny yesterdays. True it is that in a certain mimetic and superficial manner Poorânâbad had changed with the changing years. It had evolved a municipal committee, and this in its turn had given birth to various simulacra of civilisation; but in effect the former was but the old council of elders in modern guise, and the latter but Jonah's gourd, springing up in a day or a night at the bidding of some minor prophet from over the seas. They came and went, these minor prophets, each with his theory, his hobby; and even when Poorânâbad knew them no more, it could remember its rulers by the libraries and band-stands, the public gardens, the schools, and the museums they had left behind them.

The library itself stood in the midst of a newly laid-out public garden, which but two summers before had been a most evil-smelling tank—at least, for nine months of the year; the remaining three found it a shining lake flushed with fresh rain and carpeted with pink lotus blossom. But culture of all sorts had stepped in with drain-pipes, bricks, mortar, flowers, and books, and the result was a maze of winding walks, stubbly grass, and stunted bushes

gathered round a square stuccoed building of one room encircled by an arched verandah. To east and south the deceptive walls and flat mud roofs of the native city looked like towers against the sky. To west and north stood avenues of *shishum* trees, with here and there a peep of the white bungalows wherein the minor prophets dwelt and grew gourds.

Within, under the one roof hung with two punkahs, stood two tables, the one littered with English magazines and illustrated papers, the other bare, save for a few leaflets of the native press, with high-sounding names and full of still more lofty sentiments. The two bookcases, one at each end of the room, showed the same well-intentioned, but unsuccessful, impartiality; for the eastern one was nearly empty, while the western overflowed, chiefly with novels; a dozen shelves of them to one of miscellaneous literature, made up for the most part of works on the Central Asian question and missionary reports. The novels, however, had a solid appearance, since most of them had been re-bound by the district office bookbinder in the legal calf and boards which he used also for the circulars and acts by which India is governed.

Before this bookcase stood the only occupant of the room, a tall, weedy boy of about fifteen—a boy with remarkably thin legs, somewhat of a stoop in his narrow shoulders, and a supple brown finger travelling slowly along the ill-spelt titles of the books; ill-spelt, because the Government bookbinder could hardly be expected to grapple successfully with the title of a modern novel. The hesitations of this brown finger might have served as an index to the owner's taste, and showed a distinct

leaning towards sentiment. It lingered over several suggestive titles, until it finally settled on something writ large in three volumes. After which the boy, crossing to a double desk midway between the tables, wrote in the English register in a fine bold hand any clerk might have envied—

Amor Vincit Omnia. Govind Sahai, Kyasth.

So, with two volumes under his arm, and one held close to his soft, short-sighted black eyes, Govind Sahai, of the tribe of Kyasths, or scribes, made his way citywards down one of the winding paths. Thus strolling along he was typical of the great multitude of Indian boys of his age. Boys who read—great heavens! what do they not read, with their pale, intelligent faces close to the lettering? And their thoughts?—that is a mystery.

Govind Sahai's face was no exception to the rule; it was young, yet old; high-featured, yet gentle; the ascetic hollows in the temples belied by the long sweeping curves in the mouth, and both these features neutralised by the feminine oval of the cheek. He was the only son of a widow, who, thanks to his existence, led a busy and contented life in her father-in-law's otherwise childless house; for the honours of motherhood in India are great. Yet she was poor beyond belief to Western ears. Across the black water, in a Christian country, such poverty would have meant misery, but in the old simplicity of Poorânâbad the little household managed to be happy; above all, in its hopes for the future, when Govind's education should be over, and he be free to follow his hereditary trade as a writer. His father had found his ancestral level, oddly enough, in compiling sanitary statistics in an English office,

until the cholera added one to the mortality returns by carrying him off as a victim; after which all the interest of life to the inhabitants of the little courtyard and slip of roof which Govind called home, centred in the clever boy, who could only follow his father's trade if he succeeded in gaining the necessary pass; for education has undermined heredity. So Govind worked hard for the scholarship which would enable him to go to college. Day after day he absorbed an amount of information which was perfectly prodigious. Month after month found him further and further adrift on the sea of knowledge. Even in play-time he gorged himself on new ideas, as might be seen by the library register. It was not only *Amor Vincit Omnia* which showed on its pages, but many another similar work—

<i>Lost for Love,</i>	Govind Sahai, Kyasth.
<i>Love the Master,</i>	” ”
<i>My Sweetheart,</i>	” ”
<i>One Life, One Love,</i>	” ”

And so on down one column and up another, for the boy read fast.

On this particular hot, dusty May morning he became so interested in his last book that he sat down on the parapet of the city's central sewer, and twining one thin leg round the other plunged headlong into a sentimental scene between two lovers, heedless of his unsavoury environments. The interweaving of intellectual emotion and material sensation pictured on the page seemed to this boy, just verging upon manhood, to be an inspiration, lifting the whole subject into a new world of pure passion. It appealed, as a matter of fact, though he knew it not, both

to his inherited instincts and his acquired ideas, thus satisfying both.

'My darling,' said Victor, raising her sweet face to his, and pressing a kiss on those pure, pale lips, 'love such as ours is eternal. Earth has no power'—et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. The tears positively came into his eyes; he seemed to feel the touch of those lips on his, making him shiver.

'The little soft tendrils of her hair stirred with his breath as Una, shrinking to his side, whispered, 'I am not afraid when I am with you, my king. I feel so strong! so strong to maintain the Right! Strong to maintain our Love before all the world! For Love is of Heaven, is it not, dear heart?' *'Our Love is,' murmured Victor, once more raising her pure, pale—* Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

Yes, it was very beautiful, very exalting; also very disturbing to this inheritor of a nature built on simpler, more direct lines. That ancestral past of his seemed brutally bald beside this highly decorated castle of chivalry.

'Aha! Good evening, pupil Govind,' broke in the accurate voice of Narayan Chand, headmaster of the district school. 'You have, I am glad to see, availed yourself of the advantages of the public library. With what mental pabulum have you provided yourself this summer's eve?'

As he spoke, he seated himself likewise on the parapet of the sewer, and read over the boy's shoulder, 'Amor Vincit Omnia.' Then his spectacled glance travelled down the page, returning for comfort to the title; that, at least, smacked of learning. 'Ah, aha! I see. Light literature. Good for colloquial, and of paramount use in *vivás*. So

far, well. For superiority of diction, nevertheless, and valuability to grammar studies, give me *Tatler*, *Spectator*, and such classics.'

Govind closed his book in most unusual irritation. 'Even in English literature, master-*ji*, new things may be better than old.'

'Of that there is no possible doubt,' quoted master-*ji*, with cheerful gravity. He was a most diligent reader of the English papers, and used to sit at the library table for hours of an evening devouring the critiques on Gilbert's or Tennyson's last with indiscriminating absorption in the formation and style of the sentence. His quotations were in consequence more various than select. 'Of that there can be no possible probable manner of doubt, as a modern poet puts it tersely,' he repeated, tilting his embroidered smoking-cap further from his forehead, and drawing the black alpaca tails of his coat round his legs; 'yet still, for all that, it is held, that—to speak colloquially—for taking the cake of scholarship, the classics——'

Govind Sahai put his feet to the ground and the first volume under his arm.

'Master-*ji*, when one labours long days at cube roots, then classics in the evening become excessive. Life is not all learning; life is love also.'

He was quoting from the book he had been reading.

'Sits the wind in that quarter,' began Narayan sagely; then he looked at the boy reflectively and changed manner and language. 'That brings to memory, my son,' he said in Hindustani. 'When comes thy wedding procession? I must speak to the virtuous widow that it come in vacation time, so as not to interfere with study.'

A sullen indifference was on Govind's face.

'You need not fear, master-*ji*; I mean to have the scholarship. The wedding will make no difference.'

Narayan Chand smiled a superior smile.

'Nay, my son; it must—it should—for a time. So is the vacation convenient. Thou canst return to school when the festal season is over. Come, I will speak to thy relations even now.'

The widow was sifting wheat—a pleasant-faced little dump of a woman, with dimples on her bare brown arms.

'Mother,' said Govind calmly, 'is grandfather in? The master-*ji* hath come about my wedding.'

'What have men to say to such things?' she answered, with a shrill laugh; 'go tell master-*ji*, heart of mine eyes, that it is settled for the first week of vacation. Her people were here but now. *Hurri hai!* but I shall laugh and cry to see thee! There shall be nothing wanting at all! Flowers and sweets and merriment. Thy granny and I have toiled and spun for it. And the bride sweeter than honey. Fie! Govind, be not shy with thy mother! Think of the bride she gives thee, and tell her thou art happy.'

She flung her arms round her tall son, kissing him and plying him with questions till he smirked sillily.

'Happy enough, mother,' he admitted, then felt *Amor Vincit Omnia* under his arm, and sighed. 'I would much rather not be married; at least, I think not. O mother, I would she had fair hair and blue eyes!'

'*Lakshmi!* hear him! Wouldst marry a fright, Govind? Wait the auspicious moment; wait till I lift the veil. O the beauty! fresh from the court of Indra, wheat-coloured and languishing with jewels and love.'

Govind shook his head.

'Profane not the great name of Love.' He quoted to

himself, being forced to this secrecy by the fact that the only language his mother understood has no word for love—as he meant it. So he added mournfully, ‘I am ready for my duty whenever you wish it, mother; that is enough.’

Nevertheless, he dreamt dreams that night as he lay curled up on his short string bed, with the second volume of *Amor Vincit Omnia* under the quilt, so as to be ready for the early summer dawn. Out under the stars in the bare, mud-walled courtyard, destitute to Western eyes of all comfort, he dreamt the dreams of his race—of a gorgeously attired bride, shy, yet alluring, looking at him for the first time.

‘Thou hast a nightmare,’ said his mother crossly, when just before daybreak he woke them all by sitting up in his bed and declaiming, *Amor vincit omnia* in a loud voice. ‘Tis that book under thy head. Put it aside, and lie as thy forefathers lay; they dreamt not of pillows. So shalt thou sleep sound and let others sleep also.’

She went yawning back to bed, and lay awake till dawn brought work, counting over the savings she had made, and calculating how much she could spare for flowers and sweets and spiced dishes, for all the hitherto unknown luxuries which, according to custom, were to make the boy’s life a dream of pleasure for a time. Only for a time, since the scholarship had to be gained.

A month afterwards a red-curtained bridal palanquin containing a mysterious bride was carried over the threshold of the little mud courtyard, and Govind Sahai, with a silver triptych on his forehead, his ears tasselled with evil-smelling marigolds, his scented tinsel coat hung with jasmine chaplets, dismounted from a pink-nosed pony

amidst an admiring crowd. That was an end of the spectacle as far as the outside world was concerned. Within it was only beginning for those two fond women who had spun and scraped and saved for this great occasion ever since the bridegroom was five years old. Much had to be done ere they would sit down in proud peace knowing that no possible enhancement of delight had been omitted. The boy himself went through the countless ceremonies, all tending towards an apotheosis of the senses, with a certain shy dignity; perhaps the sight of master-*ji* doing wedding guest in a copper-coloured alpaca coat gave him confidence by reminding him that even the learned stoop to folly. He was pale, partly from the turmeric baths, which are supposed to produce a complexion favourable to feminine eyes, partly because he really felt sick after the unusual sloth and sweets of the last few days. So much for his physical state. Of his mental condition this much may be presaged: that if either his inherited instincts or his acquired convictions had any reality whatever, it must have been chaos.

More chaotic than ever when, far into the night, after endless tests and trials, Nihâli, the mysterious bride, proved beautiful as—— — as—— ?

Well, the fact was sure; only the comparison remained doubtful. The inherited instincts said a 'peri,' the acquired convictions an angel. Both, it will be observed, denizens of another world. But then there are more 'other worlds' than one.

'Master Narayan Chand hath sent to remind us that school re-opens next week,' said Govind's mother when nigh two months had passed; two months during which

the path of life had been smoothed, scented, and decorated for the special use of a boy and a girl. Govind Sahai looked up from his work, which was, briefly, holding Nihâli's slim, ring-bedecked fingers. The fact that he did so on pretence of teaching her to write is of secondary importance. She was undoubtedly a very pretty girl, and her delicate, refined face was at that moment full of adoring tenderness for the lad beside her. Not thirteen at the most, she was taller than English girls of that age, but far more slender, with a figure still following the straight lines of childhood. Graceful for all that, since her small head poised well over a round throat, and the want of contour was dexterously hidden by masses of jewellery, gleaming through the tinsel-shot veil. Even from wrist to elbow the thinness of the arm was concealed by the bridal bracelets of white ivory lined with red, whilst the slender ankles beneath the scarlet, gold-bordered petticoat were hung with silver-gilt jingles.

A typical bride briefly, arrayed in all attractions, save for the big nose-ring, with its dangling golden spoon hiding the lip. Govind objected to its presence, his mother to its absence—both, curiously enough, for the same reason—because it served as a check to indiscriminate kissing of the bride. The pious widow used to blush over her son's habit of saying good-bye to his wife when he had to leave her for an hour or two. It might be English fashion, warranted by all the love literature in creation; it was not decent. Neither did she approve of seeing them, as now, seated together over that ridiculous farce of pothooks. Marriage was one thing, love-making was another, so she spoke sharply.

'Well,' answered the boy, utterly unabashed, 'dost think

I have forgotten, *amma jan?*¹ Nay! Nihâli hath been hearing my holiday task half the morning. Hast not—O Nihâli?’

His arm, under cover of the veil, stole round the girl's waist and remained there—a flagrant breach of decorum which, fortunately for the female accomplice, remained unnoticed by mother-in-law, who was busy over a knot in a thread she was skeining from her unending pirn. Yet Nihâli, despite this awful lapse, looked sweet and good enough to fill the heroine's part in any novel, and her looks did not belie her. The past two months had been a fever of delight to Govind. With the curious apathetic resignation to the limitations of custom so noticeable in clever Indian lads whose brains are full of theories, he had accepted marriage in the spirit of his forebears, only to find that Love (with a big L) such as he had read of in books was actually within his reach. To be sure, in books the object was chosen by the lover; but what did that matter in the end? So he used up all the stock-in-trade of the sentimental novelist for little Nihâli's benefit, and she listened to his rhapsodies on perfect marriage and twin souls, her eyes set wide with wonder, admiration, and belief. No 'first lady' in white satin could have played her part more prettily than this Indian child of thirteen, who from her cradle had been taught to venerate her husband as a god, and who now, in a sort of rapture, found herself the object of a sentimental passion absolutely novel and bewildering. She nestled her sleek head on his shoulder, telling him that she believed every word he said. And so she did; had he told her the world was flat, instead of explaining to her with great pomp and precision that she

¹ Mother dear.

was living on an orange depressed at the poles, it would have been the same to her. The world she lived in was of his creating. Like most Hindu girls of the higher classes, she had a marvellous memory, and Govind had hardly known whether to be pleased or pained at the discovery that, after hearing him read it over a few times, she knew his repetition better than he did himself; yet, shy of her own exploit, she only replied to his laughing reference to the holiday task by a timid squeeze of the hand still holding hers.

Mother-in-law broke the knot with a snap—a habit with the determined little woman, who thereafter would twirl the ends together as if nothing had happened. One twist of the thumb, and all was as it had been.

‘I know not what holiday tasks may mean,’ she said scornfully. ‘In my time, work was work and play play. So must it be now. Nihâli’s people have sent to ask when she returns to them, after established custom. I have answered, “When school begins.”’

They had been so supremely, so innocently happy over their pothooks! And now the consternation on their two young faces was quite piteous. Mother-in-law, however, found it scandalous. Did not all decent girls cry to go home long before the honeymoon was over? Had not she herself wept bitterly in her time; and there was Nihâli actually snivelling at the idea of leaving; before her husband, too! And Govind was no better.

‘It is so soon,’ pleaded the boy, too much taken aback for instant revolt; besides, the situation had never come into any of the novels he had read, so he really felt unable to cope with it.

His remark only increased the pitch of his mother’s

voice. Soon, was it? Had he not had two months of billing and cooing, to gain which she and granny had spun their fingers to the bone? Soon! Whose fault was it if time had been wasted over alphabets and pothooks? Her shrill tones brought granny from her labours below, and before these two eminently respectable matrons the guilty pair could only hold each other's hands like the babes in the wood, feeling lost and miserable.

That afternoon he went over to the public library, for the first time since his marriage, and spent hours hunting up precedents on the subject, only to return discomfited and hopeless. Nihâli would revolt, of course, if he bade her follow his lead; but how could he bear to have the finger of scorn pointed at her by those unacquainted with the theory of perfect marriage and twin souls? That night, when the rest of the little household retired from the roof, leaving the luxury of fresh air to the younger people, he and Nihâli sat down under the stars on the still flower-strewn bed, and cried like the children they were.

So with awful swiftness the dawn came when Govind had to put on the pale-pink turban proclaiming him a first-class middle student, and set off to school with his books under his arm—books, on the whole, less disturbing than *Amor Vincit Omnia* and its congeners. Nothing further had been said about Nihâli's approaching departure. It was inevitable, of course; meanwhile, they must make the most of the time left to them. So Govind looked haggard and feverish as he took his accustomed place; nevertheless, being student by nature, the work leguiled him. By evening he was light-hearted enough to run home and race up the crumbling stairs leading to the roof, full of anecdotes and news for Nihâli. There was

no one to receive them. The roof itself had resumed its normal workaday appearance, and in the very place where the little bride had sat on her lacquered bridal stool squatted his mother, piecing two broken strands of her skein together as if nothing had happened. And nothing out of the common had happened. Whose fault was it if Govind flung himself on his face and wept like a baby for what was beyond his reach?

His mother had expected so much when she planned her *coup d'état*. But he continued to cry—which she did not expect—for something more complex than simple passion had been aroused in the boy. Of that he might have been ashamed; in this he gloried. Was it not, in short, a legitimate subject for self-glorification? So he wept himself sick in a subdued, docile sort of way. Finally, master-*ji* called one day in consternation to say that, though painstaking as ever, poor Govind could not remember the simplest problem; while as for riders, he just sat and looked at them. The scholarship was thus in danger. She tried scolding the boy in good set terms, but he met her reproaches with an invulnerable superiority before which she stood aghast. What was to be done? Perhaps this spiriting away of the bride in order to avoid a scene had been an error, but was that any reason why she should be requested to return? To begin with, it would be an appalling breach of etiquette, and then there was the risk of consequences much to be deprecated between such very young people. The whole household, including master-*ji*, puzzled over the difficulty, which seemed all the more puzzling because it was so uncalled for, boys having been married at fifteen and sent to school again afterwards since time began without any fuss. But

then, those boys had not read *Amor Vincit Omnia* and learned to mix sentiment with passion.

While matters were at this deadlock, Nihâli's mother arrived on the scene unexpectedly, and, *en petit comité* with the women-folk, gave a new turn to affairs. The possibility suggested was in a measure disconcerting, but, on the other hand, afforded Govind's mother an opportunity of retreating with dignity, since the girl must not be allowed to fret as she had been fretting.

The result being that a week afterwards Govind Sahai did a difficult rider in a way which made Narayan Chand dream dreams of a future when folk would say, 'This eminent man received primary and secondary education at the hands of our most successful teacher of youth, Pundit Narayan Chand.' It was a dream he frequently indulged in about his pupils.

The little strip of roof was once more frequented by pigeons, and the snappings and joinings of threads relegated for the most part to the court below. Yet the boy's appetite did not return, and as winter came on he developed a teasing cough in that narrow chest of his. The fact was, that he burnt the candle of life at both ends in more ways than one. Perhaps if his soul could have been left in peace he might have passed through the ordeal safely, as many a boy manages to do in India. But it was not. Poor Govind had no rest. He strung himself up to the highest pitch in obedience to the mixed result of his birth and education. Then on this quivering instrument he proceeded to play scales. It was Tausig's exercises on a zither. He had to teach himself, teach Nihâli, think of the coming baby, and go through the whole gamut of intellectual and physical emotion of which he had read.

The first string gave way when his mother, laughing, crying, and blessing him all in a breath, put a boy baby into his arms on his return from school one day. He sat down stupidly on the lowest step of the mud stairs, gazing at what he held in a sort of bewildered amaze at finding himself thus, till his mother angrily snatched the child from him, saying he should be ashamed of shedding tears on a new-born baby's face. It was very like Nihâli, he thought, only years older with all those wrinkles. Then he thought helplessly how he had decided, with Nihâli's consent of course, on a thousand contraventions of old customs at this time. Yet there was she upstairs in the hands of the wise women, and the baby ready to be doctored by its grandmother. What could a boy of sixteen do against such odds? So the little proselytising pamphlet he had read was put away with a sigh; and after all Nihâli did very well under the old *régime*. He found her, when the wise women permitted him, in the seventh heaven over the baby. Was there ever such a doll, with its little sharp nose and pinched-up lips! And would he believe it?—the tiny creature was so lazy that grandmother had to tickle it so—on the mouth—before it would take any interest in the sugar and spices! By and by, when she could nurse it herself, it would be different. She lay smiling at the idea, while downstairs, as they left the house, the gossips were shaking their heads and saying calmly, 'It is an unnecessary baby, but a forerunner. Others will come. There is plenty of time.'

Even when Nihâli could not nurse the child, and they had recourse to a Maw's feeder, which Govind, with many blushes, bought at the same shop which supplied him with slate pencils, those two young things feared nothing. He

used to bring his books to the roof where she lay with the little quiet mouse of a thing tucked away in her veil. Then, while the sun set red over the dusty city, he worked away at all the 'ologies'—worked somewhat feverishly, since more depended now on his success. Sometimes Nihâli's smile gurgled over in laughter, and Govind, looking up, would find baby's fingers being clasped round his pen.

'Look you,' she would whisper, as if in presence of some great potentate, 'I asked my lord if he wished to be a writer too, and see how fast he holds!'

There was one thing, however, to which the baby did not hold fast, and that was life. But not till the very day before the eventful examination, which meant so much to Govind, did those two children read fear in each other's faces about that other child.

'O Govind! what shall we do? what shall we do?' wailed Nihâli, when the grandmother, seeing them wild with anxiety, told them the truth, while the great-grandmother stood by wagging her head and mumbling of others by and by. What was that to them now? How he got through the next day he never knew. He took the papers and went with them to his desk; nay, more, he did his level best with them, nerving himself to the effort chiefly by thoughts of master-ji's disappointment if he failed. But his personal interest in the matter seemed gone; that was centred on a roof in the dusty city where one child sat crying over another. What were *plus* or *minus* to him save a world with or without an unnecessary infant?

All that night was passed beside Nihâli, waiting for his mother's voice to say the end had come; but the morning found the little sleeper still in the young mother's arms.

Perhaps there was still hope. He hastily swallowed some breakfast, and, delayed by this hint of respite, found himself five minutes late in the examination-room. The first papers had already been given out, and to avoid possibility of fraud none save those present at the issue were allowed to compete. So Govind had to sit idle for a while, knowing he had lost a definite number of chances. Nor was this the worst; the pause gave him time for thought. Hitherto, once within the familiar walls, old habits of attention and forgetfulness had possessed him. Now, with nothing to do, he remembered and yet forgot. So when the order to go up for the second paper came he rose with his brain in a whirl, a wild desire to cry, 'Let me alone, my baby is dying!' seeming to blot out everything else in the world. Perhaps had he done so he might have had a chance in the examiners' human pity; as it was, he pulled himself together, and failed hopelessly.

In the pause before the *vivâ voce* he sat looking straight before him, dully conscious that he had done badly.

'Govind has never been the same since he married,' whispered one boy, and the other giggled.

'Silence!' cried Narayan Chand fussily. 'Govind Sahai, your name is first for *vivâ*. Come up, Govind Sahai, Kyasth.' Then, as the dull yet anxious face passed him, he whispered: 'Now for value of light literature. You are best at colloquial, my pupil, so courage, and remember "Amor Vincit Omnia" and such like things.'

'Amor Vincit Omnia!' The boy's last chance fled before those words. When the ordeal was over, he turned back to his place mechanically. As he passed the master-*ji* once more, he read his fate in the disappointed face raised to his, then in the confident smile of the boy succeeding

him, finally in the surprised nudging of the whole class. Something seemed to snap in his brain; he paused, and, facing the examiners, raised his hand. The rush of thought was too much for him at first; then he broke silence in a gentle, deprecating voice—

‘If you will be kind enough to excuse me, sirs, I will beg leave to retire. The exigencies of the case forbid explanation, but this much is admitted—that “Amor vincit omnia.”’

‘That boy speaks better English than I thought for,’ said one examiner to the other, when the leave had been granted. ‘Give him five marks more; he’s failed, of course, but it’s as well to be just.’

When Govind reached home Nihâli’s arms were empty. There is no need to say more. It was an unnecessary infant to all save those two.

‘You have failed, failed badly, my poor pupil, owing, doubtless, to domestic bereavement,’ said the master-*ji*, when he called a week or two later full of vexed sympathy. ‘Such circumstances point to special privilege of entering again next year, for which we will apply. And then, Govind, there must be no killing of two birds with one stone. There must be no complicated states of mind, confusing idiom.’

But Govind Sahai, Kyasth, did not avail himself of the permission duly given, as the pundit-*ji* put it, ‘in consideration of the strictly non-regulation death of his infant at a premature age.’

The old grandfather, whose small life-pension had been the prop of the household, died of autumnal fever, and during the ensuing winter the result of his failure to win the scholarship came home to Govind with depressing force, since even from that poor ten rupees a month some-

thing might have been spared to stand between those three fond women and the grindstone, that last resort of poverty. Then Nihâli's mother, coming over unexpectedly and finding her daughter at the mill, carried her off in a huff. This time Govind said nothing; the spirit had gone out of him, and for the girl's own sake he gave in to custom. He worked very hard, but as the winter advanced his shoulders seemed to grow narrower and narrower, and the teasing cough became louder. Good food, care, and rest might have done something perhaps; only perhaps, for there is not much to be done when the candle of life is alight at both ends, except to put it out. That is what happened one April morning when the bougainvillea round the arched verandah of the library looked like a crimson drapery. He used to go there every morning before school-hours, for the memory of his failure in *vivâ voce* rankled keenly, and he was possessed by a curious determination to prove Master Narayan Chand wrong in attributing it to Govind's unwise selection of books. So, secure at those hours from interruption, he used to sit and study the idiom of light literature.

'Thou art not fit to go,' said his mother tearfully one morning after the boy had been kept awake all night by cough and fever.

'Reading will not hurt me, *amma jan*,' he replied, 'and the examination is next month.'

They found him two hours afterwards seated at the desk before the ledger, his head resting on a novel he had just been entering in the register. A horrible stain of blood from the blood-vessel he had ruptured blotted the page, but through it you could still see, in his bold handwriting—

Amor Vincit Omnia. Govind Sahai, Kyasth.

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 natives, 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 quail-fighters buy and bet in the wide portico of rosy 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 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 further away along the step with the curious gliding shuffle peculiar to native girls and pigeons. ‘*Kaboo-tri, ka-boo-tri, ka-boo-tri,*’ gurgled the pigeon, as 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 further along the step?

'So! that is good riddance,' said the birdcatcher to the parrotseller angrily. 'God made the rainbow, but 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 whack 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 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 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, 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, '*Yahee, choori-yâh-mâr. Aihee, choori-yâh-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 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. 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 Parasnâth. Newcomers 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 recognise 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 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 further.

‘*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 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-meean¹ [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, however, 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

¹ *Aga*, noble; *Meean*, prince.

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 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 native 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 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 them best himself.' So the mother, with hopeless tears over the scarce-worn things, had sent them over to the chaplain for his poor.

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 lavender 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 lavender 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 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 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, being of her own caste, 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 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?

‘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 tiny 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, 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.

THE SWIMMERS

‘MIRIAM, Miriam, what is it? Canst thou not tell a body, bound to a millstone as I? Thy tongue goes fast enough when I wish thee silent!’ It was a woman’s voice that was beginning to lose its fulness and sweetness, in other words, its womanliness, which called up from the courtyard, where the hum of the quern grinding the yellow Indian corn deadened all other sounds.

‘It is nought, mother! Only Hussan and Husayn once more.’ It was a woman’s voice also from the roof where the Indian corn was drying to a richer gold in the sunlight; but it was a voice which had hardly come as yet to its full roundness, in other words, to its perfect womanliness.

‘Hussan and Husayn! What makes them be for ever fighting like young cocks?’

There was an instant’s pause; then the voice from the roof came piously, ‘God knows!’

Probably He did, but Miriam herself might have been less modest as to her knowledge. For the case stood thus. It was a corner house between two sequestered alleys which intersected each other at right angles, and there had been a lingering lover, expectant of some recognition, in each alley. Now, if half a handful of golden corn be thrown as a guerdon over the parapet just at the angle, and if the lovers, hot-blooded young sparks, spring forward

incontinently to pick up the precious grains and meet, then——

‘Indeed, mother, they were very like cocks,’ remarked Miriam gravely, as she stepped daintily down the narrow mud stairs again to resume her spinning in the courtyard. Once more she spoke truth, but hardly the whole truth; since when featherless bipeds are picking up grains of corn out of a gutter, they can hardly avoid a resemblance to feathered ones.

So the whir of the wheel joined the hum of the quern, and both formed a background to her sudden girlish laugh at the recollection of what she had seen through the peep-hole in the parapet.

The whole thing was a play to this Osmanzai girl, who, for all her seclusion, knew perfectly well that she was the beauty of the village, and that many another spark besides Hussan and Husayn would be only too glad of half a handful of Indian corn to pick up out of the gutter. But these two being the most expert swimmers in that quaint, bare colony of huts set on a loose shale slope with the wild, wicked rush of the Indus at its foot, were, perhaps, the most interesting. That is to say, if you excepted Khâsia, the big, soft shepherd who came down sometimes from the grassy, fir-crowned slopes higher up the gorge; the Maha-bân or Great Forest Hills, beyond which lay the Black Mountain.

A strange, wild country, is this of the Indus gorge, just as the great river begins to think of the level plains in front of it. A strange, wild people are those who live in that close-packed, flat-roofed village upon the shale slope, where a footfall sends the thin leaves of mica-schist slithering away into the rushing river. There is no stranger

country, no wilder people. For this is Sitâna, the place of refuge for every Mohammedan fanatic who finds the more civilised plains too hot even for his fiery faith; Sitâna, the dwelling-place of the Syyuds who, since the days of their great leader Ahmad, have spent their lives in killing every hell-doomed infidel they can get hold of in cold blood. And as the pigs of Hindus live on the other side of the rushing river, it follows that those who kill must also swim, since there is no bridge far or near. That was why Hussan and Husayn, and many another of their sort, with carefully oiled thews and sinews of bronze, would go down the shale slope on dark nights and slip softly into the ice-cold stream. Then, if there was a glint of moon, you could see them caught in the great upward curve of the mad current inshore, the two skin bladders that were slung under their armpits making it look as if six dark heads, not two, were drifting down and down; yet somehow drifting nearer and nearer to the other side where the pigs of Hindus were to be found. But even a glint of moon kept them, as a rule, talking of future nights—unless there was some cause to raise their recklessness to fever-height; for even that glint was enough to make the police watchers on the other, the English, side slip softly also into the stream, and give chase. A strange, wild chase indeed it was; down and down in the dark till the blockade was run, or the venture abandoned for another night. Or stranger, wilder still, two men with knives met on the crest of the current and fought a strange, bloodless fight, hacking at the bladders because they were larger than the head, and the loss of them meant equally certain disablement. For there was nothing to be done in that wild stream, if they were pricked, but to cast them free and dive—dive

down and down past the current, to come up, please God ! nearer home.

So, because of those watchers on the other side, the Sitâna swimmers could not start openly, nor from the same place. They went singly, silently, but the next morning ere the light came fully they would all be resting together on the steps of the little mosque ; unless, indeed, some of them had not returned ; were, in fact, to return no more. And the worshippers would be crowding round one or two, perhaps, while the others looked on enviously to hear how some traveller had been happened upon and done to death in the dark upon the undulating tract of low jungle on the other side. Then the worshippers going home would say casually in their houses : ‘Hussan killed his man last night ; that makes him two ahead of Husayn. And Ahmad, the new one, hath another, so that brings him next to Husayn, who will need to work hard.’ And the women would gossip about it among themselves, and say that, of course, Miriam, the village-beauty, would choose the best swimmer when the time came for the curious choice which is allowed the Pathan girl among lovers whom she is supposed never to have seen. As yet, however, Miriam had only laughed, and thrown handfuls of yellow corn into the gutter, and said things to the aspirants’ female relations which were sure to be repeated, and make the rivalry run fiercer than ever. She did all this partly because of the big shepherd, partly because it was good for the faith to stimulate the young men’s courage, but mostly because it amused her.

It was far, however, from having that effect on the Englishman who was responsible for the reputation of the district over the water. The more so because his name

happened to be John Nicholson, and John Nicholson was not a man to allow any increase of crime within his borders without knowing the reason why, and meting out punishment for the offence.

‘What the deuce does it mean?’ he said to the trembling native official in charge of that particular portion of the country which lay over against Sitâna. ‘There have been twenty murders this quarter against ten in the last. And I told you that for every man killed on our side there were to be two in Sitâna. What on earth are your swimmers about? If they are not so good as theirs, get others. Get something! There must be some fault on your part, or they wouldn’t cock their tails up in this way. Remedy it; that is what you have got to do, so don’t ask questions as to how it is to be done. I’ll back you up, never fear.’

And then he took his telescope out, as he sat on his horse among the low bushes down by the rushing river, and prospected before he galloped off, neck or nothing, as his fashion was, to regain his camp thirty miles away, and write an urgent letter to Government detailing fully the measures which he intended to adopt for the repression of these scandalous crimes. But even a telescope did not show him Miriam’s face as she sat spinning in the courtyard. And the rest of the long, low, flat-roofed village clinging to the shaly slope seemed very much at its usual; that is to say, the commonplace nest of as uncommon a set of religious scoundrels as could be found north or south. So he told himself that they must have been strengthened lately by a new contingent of fanatics from the plains, or that the approaching Mohurrum-tide had raised their religious fervour to boiling-point. He

allowed these reasons to himself, though he permitted none to his subordinate; but neither he nor the scared police inspector dreamed of that laughing girl's face over the water which was the cause of Hussan and Husayn's unusual activity. Still, as he gathered his reins into his left hand he paused to give a more kindly look from under his dark eyebrows at the inspector's knock-knees.

'Why don't you get some of their swimmers?' he asked curtly. 'I could.' Doubtless he could; he was a man who got most things which he set himself to get. Yet even he might have failed here but for that girl's face, that handful of yellow Indian corn, and the fierce fight which followed for both between those two, Hussan and Husayn, who, as they were finally held back from each other by soothing, friendly hands, felt that the end was nigh if it had not already come. Brothers of the same belief—fellow-workers in that stream of Death—first and second alternately in the great race for men's lives, they knew that the time had come when they must be at each other's throat and settle which was to be best once and for all—which was to be best in Miriam's eyes. And then to their blind wrath came an authoritative voice, the voice of the holiest man there, the Syyud Ahmad, whom to disobey was to be accursed. 'There is too much of this brawling,' came the fiat. 'Tis a disgrace. Lo! Hussan, Husayn, here among the elders, swear before the Lord to have done with it. Swear that neither will raise hand again against a hand that fights for the same cause. Swear, both of you.' A chorus of approval came from the bystanders as those two, thus checked, stood glaring at each other. There were a few grains of the yellow Indian corn still in the gutter at their feet; and they looked at them as

they swore never again to raise a hand against one fighting the good fight.

That same day, at dusk, Hussan and Husayn sat on the edge of the stream, their feet almost touching the water, their skin-bladders beside them, their sharp knives hung in a sheath round their necks. Their bronze muscles shone even in the growing gloom; from head to foot they were lithe, strong, graceful in their very strength. They sat close to each other as they had often sat before, looking out over the tumbling rush of the wild current, to the other side of the river.

'Yea! Then I will go forth to-night as thou sayest, Hussan; and when I return equal, we will draw lots which is to take service on the other side.'

'So be it, Husayn; I will wait for thee. And see, if thou couldst kill one of their swimmers, 'twere better. Then will it be easier to get his place. Hit up, brother, from the water; 'tis more deadly than the downward stroke.'

And as they sat side by side, speaking quietly, almost indifferently, the evening call to prayer rang out over the wild, wicked stream, and without another word they faced round from the river to the western hills. The parapet of Miriam's house stood out higher than the rest of the village. Perhaps they made it the Kaaba of their prayers, though they were orthodox enough in their genuflexions.

'Hussan and Husayn have been made by the *Pir sahib* to swear they will not fight any more,' said a girl, who giggled as she spoke, to Miriam when they were coming back with their water-pots from the river.

'*Loh!* there be plenty others who will,' answered the round, sweet voice that had not yet come to its full sweet-

ness and roundness. 'They are all like fighting-cocks, except the shepherds. Belike 'tis the sheep which make them peaceful, so they have time to laugh. Hussan and Husayn are ever breathless from some struggle. I would not be as they.'

'Lazybones!' retorted the giggler. 'Thy mother-in-law will need her tongue. Thy water-pot is but half-full even now.'

'Still, it is heavy enough for my arms,' replied the sweet voice indifferently, yet sharply, 'and the river is far.' Then it added inconsequently: 'But there are streams up in the hills that folk can guide to their doors. And the grass grows soft too. Here is nothing but stones; I hate them; they are so hard.'

'And the big shepherd's mother is dead,' put in another girl pertly; whereat the rest giggled louder than ever.

Was it Hussan or Husayn who, three days afterwards, appeared suddenly before the District-officer in camp with a nicely written petition on a regulation sheet of English-made paper, requesting that he might be put on as a swimming patrol on the river opposite Sitâna in place of one who was supposed to have been killed or drowned? There is no need to know. No need to know which it was who won the toss when Husayn came back with a smile to say that, so far, they were quits, and might begin a new game. Whichever it was, John Nicholson looked at the lean bronze thews and sinews approvingly, and then asked the one crucial question, 'Can you?'

The man smiled, a quick, broad smile. 'None better, *Huzoor*, on the Indus. There is one, over the water, who deems himself my match. God knows if he is.'

John Nicholson, who had bent over his writing again,

glanced up hastily. 'So that is it. Here, *moonshee*, write an order to the man at Khânpur to put this man on at once.' He was back at his writing almost before the order was ended, and in the silence which followed under the white wings of the tent set wide to all the winds of heaven, the sound of two pens could be heard. One was the Englishman's, writing a report to headquarters saying that the increase of crime must be checked by reprisals, the other the natives bidding the inspector put on the bearer as a Government swimmer.

'For signature, *Huzoor*,' came a deferential voice, and the still-busy pen shifted itself to the shiny paper laid beside it, and the dark, keen, kindly eyes looked up once more for half a second. 'Well, good luck to you! I hope you'll kill him, whoever he is.'

'By the help of God, *Huzoor*, by the help of God!'

Which was it, Hussan or Husayn, who in the growing dusk walked up and down the shaly glacis below the long cluster of Sitâna, watching the opposite bank with the eyes of a lynx for each stone of vantage, each shallow whence a few yards' start might be gained? Which was it, Husayn or Hussan, who in the same dusk paced up and down the low bank on the other side watching in his turn, with untiring eyes, for the quicker curve of the current where a bold swimmer might by one swift venture drift down faster to the calmer water, and so have a second or two in which to regain breath ere the fight began? What matters it whether the panther was on the western bank and the leopard on the eastern? They were two wild beasts pacing up and down, up and down, with their feet upon the water's edge; up and down, up and down, even when the moon rose and their shadows showed more distinctly than they

did themselves; for the oil upon their limbs caught the light keenly like the glistening shale and the glistening wet sand at their feet. Up and down, up and down, they paced, in the stillness and the peace, with only the noise of the rushing river, slumberously, monotonously, insistent; the up and down, up and down till the cry of the *muazzim* at dawn came echoing over the water.

Prayer is more than sleep! Prayer is more than sleep!

Ay! more even than sleeplessness with sheer murder in heart and brain. So peace fell between those two while they turned towards Mecca and prayed; for what, God knows. Perhaps once more the real spiritual Kaaba was what they saw with the eyes of the flesh; that flat-roofed house just beginning to blush rosy in the earliest rays of the rising sun; more probably it was not, since they had passed through love to hatred. And then, prayers over, murder was over also for the time, since they could not court detection by daylight.

'They are wondrous keen on the other side, despite the moon,' said the elders of the village and the officials over the way, alike; 'but there is no fear *our* watchman will be taken at a disadvantage. He is there from dusk till dawn.'

'Ay!' replied wiseacres on either side; 'but when the moon wanes, what then?'

It came even before that, came with a great purple mass of thunder-clouds making the Black Mountain beyond the Mahabân deserve its name, and drawing two pair of eyes, one on either side of the stream, into giving hopeful glances at the slow majestic march of gloom across the sky. It was dusk an hour sooner, dawn an hour later than usual that night and day, so there was plenty of time for sheer murder before prayer-time. And as there was no storm,

no thunder after all, but only the heavy clouds hanging like a curtain over the moon, a faint splash into the rushing river might have been heard some time in the night, followed by another. Then after a while a cry broke the brooding silence above the hurrying whisper below; the cry of faith, and fate, and fight.

Allah-ho-Akhbar! Allah-ho-hukk!

Perhaps it was the *muazzim* again, proclaiming out of due time that 'God is Might and Right'; or may be it was those two swimmers in the river as they caught sight of each other in the whirling water. If so, Hussan struck upwards from the water, no doubt, and Husayn, mindful of advice, followed suit; and so the six black heads must have gone drifting down stream peacefully, save for the hatred in the two faces glaring at each other, since the river hid their blows decorously. But there was no trace of them on it far or near when the sun rose over the eastern hills, and the big shepherd, singing a guttural love-song, came leaping down the stony path towards Sitâna with a bunch of red rhododendrons behind his ear.

Some days afterwards, however, the native official at the Police Station rode over to see his superior, and reported with a smirk that he had seen through the telescope a great weeping and wailing at Sitâna. Two of their swimmers had apparently been killed in fair fight, for their bodies had been brought up for burial from the backwater further down the river; and as the new man, whom the *Huzoor* had appointed, had either absconded or been killed also that just made the proportion what his Honour had laid down for future guidance, two to one.

'H'm!' said John Nicholson half to himself, 'I wonder which of the two was really the better man.'

THE FAKEER'S DRUM

'O! most almighty wictoria, V.R., reg. britannicorum (V. I., Kaiser-i-Hind), please admit bearer to privileges of praising God on the little drum as occasion befitteth, and your petitioner will ever pray,' etc.

It was written on a scrap of foreign paper duly stamped as a petition, and it did not need the interpolation of imperial titles to prove that this was not by any means its first appearance in court. To be plain, it had an 'ancient and a fish-like smell,' suggestive of many years' acquaintance with dirty humanity. I looked at the man who had presented it—a very ordinary *fakeer*, standing with hands folded humbly—and was struck by the wistful expectancy in his face. It was at once hopeful yet hopeless. Turning to the court-reader for explanation, I found a decorous smile flowing round the circle of squatting clerks. It was evidently an old-established joke.

'He is damnably noiseful man, sir,' remarked my *sarishtidar* cheerfully, 'and his place of sitting close to Deputy-Commissioner's bungalow. Thus European officers object; so it is always *na-munzoor*' (refused).

The sound of the familiar formula drove the hope from the old man's face; his thin shoulders seemed to droop, but he said nothing.

'How long has this been going on?' I asked.

'Fourteen years, sir. Always on transference of officers,

and it is always *na-munzoor*.' He dipped his pen in the ink, gave it the premonitory flick.

'*Munzoor*' ('Granted'), said I, in a sudden decision. '*Munzoor* during the term of my office.'

That was but a month. I was only a *locum tenens* during leave. Only a month, and the poor old beggar had waited fourteen years to praise God on the little drum? The pathos and bathos of it hit *me* hard; but a stare of infinite surprise had replaced the circumambient smile. The *fakeer* himself seemed flabbergasted. I think he felt lost without his petition, for I saw him fumbling in his pocket as the janissaries hustled him out of court, as janissaries love to do, east or west.

That night, as I was wondering if I had smoked enough and yawned enough to make sleep possible in a hundred degrees of heat and a hundred million mosquitoes, I was suddenly reminded of the proverb 'Charity begins at home.' It had, with a vengeance. I had thought my *sarishtidar*'s language a trifle too picturesque; now I recognised its supreme accuracy. The *fakeer* was 'a damnably noiseful man.' It is useless trying to add one iota to this description, especially to those unacquainted with the torture of an Indian drum. By dawn I was in the saddle, glad to escape from my own house and the ceaseless '*Rumpa-tum-tum*,' which was driving me crazy.

When I returned, the old man was awaiting me in the verandah, his face full of a great content, and the desire to murder him, which rose up in me with the thought of the twenty-nine nights yet to come, faded before it. Perfect happiness is not the lot of many, but apparently it was his. He salaamed down to the ground. '*Huzoor*,' he said, 'the great joy in me created a disturbance last night. It will not occur again. The Protector of the Poor shall sleep in

peace, even though his slave praises God for him all night long. The Almighty does not require a loud drum.'

I said I was glad to hear it, and my self-complacency grew until I laid my head on the pillow somewhat earlier than usual. Then I became aware of a faint throbbing in the air, like that which follows a deep organ note—a throbbing which found its way into the drum of my ear and remained there—so faint that it kept me on the rack to know if it had stopped or was still going on. '*Rumpa-tum-tum-tum, rumpa-tum-tum-tum, rumpa—*' Even now the impulse to make the hateful rhythm interminable seizes on me. I have to lay aside my pen and take a new one before going on.

I draw a veil over the mental struggle which followed. It would have been quite easy to rescind my permission, but the thought of one month versus fourteen years roused my pride. As representative of the '*almighty victoria, reg. britannicorum,*' etc., I had admitted this man to the privileges of praising God on the little drum, and there was an end of it. But the effort left my nerves shattered with the strain put on them. It was the middle of the hot weather—that awful fortnight before the rains break—I was young—absolutely alone. Every morning as I rode, a perfect wreck, past the *fakcer's* hovel by the gate, he used to ask me if I had slept well, and I lied to him. What was the use of suffering if no one was the happier for it?

At last, one evening—it was the twenty-first, I remember, for I ticked them off on a calendar like any schoolboy—I sat out among the oleanders, knowing that sleep was mine. The rains had broken, a cool wind stirred the dripping trees, the fever of unrest was over. Clouds of winged white ants besieged the lamp: what wonder, when the rafters of the old bungalow were riddled almost beyond

the limits of safety by their galleries? But what did I care? I was going to sleep. And so I did, like a child, until close on the dawn. And then—by heavens, it was too bad! In the verandah surely, not faint, but loudly imperative: 'RUMPA-TUM-TUM-TUM!'

I was out of bed in an instant full of fury. The fiend incarnate must be walking round the house. I was after him in the moonlight. Not a sign; the white oleanders were shining in the dark foliage; a firefly or two—nothing more.

'Rumpa-tum-tum-tum!' Fainter this time round the corner.

Not there!

'*Rumpa-tum-tum-tum!*' A mere whisper now, but loud enough to be traced. So, on the track, I was round the house to the verandah whence I had started.

No sign—no sound!

Gracious! what was that? A crash, a thud, a roar and rattle of earth! The house! the roof!

When by the growing light of dawn we inspected the damage, we found the biggest rafter of all lying right across the pillow where my head had been two minutes before. The first sunbeams were on the still sparkling trees when, full of curiosity, I strolled over to the *fakcer's* hut. It also was a heap of ruins, and when we dug the old man out from among the ant-riddled rafters the doctor said he had been dead for many hours.

This story may seem strange to some; others will agree with my *sarishtidar*, who, after spending the morning over a Johnson's dictionary and a revenue report, informed me that 'such catastrophes are but too common in this unhappy land after heavy rain following on long-continued drought.'

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 temptation 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 some one. 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, further 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 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 some one. 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 further 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?

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 recognised 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.

MUSIC HATH CHARMS

It was the very last place in the world where you would have expected to hear the notes of a church harmonium ; and the old man who, seated on a reed stool, was playing *God Save the Queen* with one finger, was the very last person whom you would have expected to see performing upon it. But there it stood, quite at home, between the wooden pillars which divided the central living-room from the crowd of latticed closets around it ; and there he sat, quite at home, on the stool, his naked brown legs struggling with the bellows, his brown fingers patting down the keys with a sort of pompous precision. For Punoo was a music-master, and that was his pupil who, with a yawn, was watching his proceedings from the floor while she threaded beads on a string intermittently. That was also the last place from which one would expect any one to take a music-lesson ; but old Punoo, being blind, was fully persuaded that Bahâni was dutifully at his elbow. This blindness of his was, however, far more to his advantage than his disadvantage as a master. It was, in short, the cause of his being one at all ; since had he had the use of his eyes no mother would have dreamed of employing a man, who was not more than forty-five at the outside, in teaching her girls. As it was, his time was fully taken up in the houses of the clerks, contractors, barristers, and

such like, who for some reason or another desired to impart the exotic accomplishment of music to their daughters or wives. But of all these houses Punoo loved the one which contained the harmonium best; not because of his pupil, since Bahâni, who was betrothed to a young man who might be seen any day on a Hammersmith omnibus over on the other side of the world, never learned anything; but because of the instrument itself. To tell truth, it had quite a fine tone, especially when all the wind in its wheezy bellows was sent into one note. And then the playing of it seemed to satisfy him from head to foot. All the other instruments, the accordions and concertinas, even his own fiddle with seven strings, of which he was really very fond, only employed his head and his hands; but this made his whole body as it were to toil and labour after melody. As he sat, his forehead bedewed with perspiration, the expression on his sightless face, turned upwards, all unconscious of the dingy, sordid, smoke-blackened rafters which limited his vision, was quite sufficient to make up for the lack of it in the music; it was the expression of a prisoner who, through the bars of a cage, sees freedom. But the odd little gridiron in the centre of the dark room, which gave it some light and air from the roof above, was scarcely large enough to allow even of Punoo's wizened figure passing through.

'Lo, it gives one a melting of the liver, and a sinking of the heart to hear thee, Master-ji,' remarked Mai Kishnu, bustling in with a handful of radishes for the pickle-stew. 'Canst not play something more lively, something that goes not wombling up and down like an ill-greased wheel, something with a count in it that gives a body time to catch the beat of it? For sure I could make better music

with my ladle and tray ; better music for a bride anyhow ; and mark my word, Bahâni, when thou art really one, there shall be none of this *boo-hooing* and *ow-wowwing*, that might set free thoughts of wolves and God knows what monsters to damage all thy hopes.'

'Tis not likely, Mai,' said Punoo, desisting to speak with great dignity, 'that Bahâni will have mastered so much. 'Tis not given to all to play *God Save the Queen* as I do.'

'That is good hearing !' ejaculated the house-mother piously. 'But the girl gets on, I hope, Master Punoo. Her father writes of it often ; and the instrument, as thou knowest, cost fully ten shillings.'

In Punoo's account, which he retailed to his other customers, it had cost five times that amount, and he had a spirited description of the auction where Colonels and Deputy-Sahibs, and Barrack-Masters had bidden in vain against Bahâni's father Mool Chand, who was municipal clerk in an outlying district. According to Punoo also it had cost five hundred times that amount when the Padre Sahib—sometimes it was the Lord Padre Sahib—(the Bishop)—had sent for it originally from England. There was a further legend, vague and misty even to himself, which he kept holy, as it were, from profane use by locking it away in his own breast, which hinted that the harmonium had been thrown on the market from no desire to get rid of it, but simply from pecuniary necessity, the Chaplain having been forced into selling his greatest treasure in order to pay the bill for a new one. To tell truth, Punoo's estimate of the harmonium was vague and misty on more points than this. He was, in fact, absolutely ignorant of anything concerning it, save that if you blew persistently at

the bellows and pressed the keys it made a noise which somehow or other seemed to set you free, and yet kept you longing for something more. Punoo knew not for what, having not the slightest idea that he had been born with music in his soul, and that if he had first seen the light in the Western hemisphere instead of the Eastern, he would most likely have been a Wagnerite, or some other kind of musical enthusiast.

As it was, to oblige Mai Kishnu, he played *Minnia Punniya* as quickly as he could, though it was a pain and grief to him to give up the long-drawn notes which sounded so beautiful in *God Save our Gracious Queen*. But Mai Kishnu stirred the pickle-stew to the new rhythm, emphasising it properly with little strokes of the ladle upon the resounding brass pot. Bahâni, she said, must learn that tune against her man's return from being made into a *balester* (barrister), whereat Bahâni with the utmost decorum giggled and blushed over her beads. She was a pretty, pert girl, who looked upon the future with perfect serenity; for being married to her first cousin, whose widowed mother lived in the house, she knew exactly what the amount of friction between her and her future mother-in-law would be; and knew also that she would generally be able to escape quietly, as she did now, from the scene of conflict, and leave the two elder women to have it out at full length if they chose. They generally did choose, because they nearly always had an interested audience; for the quaint rambling old house with its rabbit-warren of tiny rooms opening out to little bits of roof, was full of relations, chiefly women whose husbands were away in Government employ. They each had a separate lodging, as it were, though they were quite as often in some one else's room as in their own,

especially when the sound of shrill altercation echoed through the wooden partitions. By a recognised etiquette, however, all serious disputes were carried on in the well-room where the women bathed. It was more a verandah than a room, though the arches were filled up breast-high with a screening wall. But through the hole in the floor, above which the windlass stood, you could not only see right down into the well on the basement story, but also see the people in the street coming for their water. It was when Bahâni was discovered lying flat on the floor so as to crane over and peep into the very street itself, that the fiercest quarrels arose between Mai Kishnu and her widowed sister-in-law. And no quarrel ever ran its course without a reference of some sort to the harmonium, and the iniquity and idiocy of learning to play tunes as if you were a bad woman in the bazaar. In her heart of hearts Mai Kishnu agreed with this view of the question, but she would sooner have died than confess it, so she invariably carried the war into the enemy's country instead by insisting on it that Bahâni learned in deference to the oft-expressed desire of her lawful husband, that husband being the complainant's own son. And sometimes, but not often, for she was a faithful defender of the absent municipal clerk, she would clinch the matter by telling her sister-in-law that if there was iniquity or idiocy about, her brother was also to blame. Whereupon Râdha, who, being the widow of an elder brother, really was, in a way, the head of the house, would retort that in that case it was all the more necessary for the women-folk of the family to remember that the salvation of souls lay with them ; so she would beg to remind all present, that this being a dark Saturday or a light Friday, with some particular event in prospect or some particular event in the

past, it behoved no pious woman of *that* family to eat, say radishes, on that day. Now, when you have just spent much time and skill in the preparing of pickles for a large household, it is aggravating to be told that it is an impious diet. Still there was always the obvious retort that on such days widows ate nothing at all. So then Râdha, with pharisaical acquiescence, would retire to her own little bit of a room, with her husband's photograph (he had been a clerk also) hung between two German prints of the Madonna and Herodias's daughter (which did duty respectively for the infant Krishna and Durga Devi slaying the demons) and begin counting her beads with a clatter, and repeating her texts in an aggressively loud voice ; while Mai Kishnu, after sending the pickle-stew of radishes down in the window-basket as an alms to the first beggar in the street, would begin to cook something else ; something as nasty as her deft hands could make it, since this, oddly enough, relieved her feelings.

But Punoo would go on playing *God Save our Gracious Queen* on the old harmonium with perfect serenity, all unconscious of the fact that two women were cursing it in their hearts as a malevolent demon bent on ruining the household. It was a quaint household when all was said and done, this colony of women, whose husbands were for the most part away serving the Government in remote stations. Quaintest of all it was, perhaps, when in the afternoon the boys belonging to it (and there were many, thank Heaven ! despite the demon) came home from school ; embryo clerks full of classes and examinations, yet with a word or two for 'crickets' and a desire for pickled radishes on every day in the calendar.

'Ask your Aunt Râdha,' Mai Kishnu would say shortly to their remonstrances over the nasty substitute for the delicacy. "'Twas she forced me into giving your stomachs'-ful of my best pickles to some dirty beast of a beggar in the street. God forgive me if he was a holy man, but he may have been a Mohammedan for all I know, and what good will that do to my soul?'

But despite the 'crickets' and the examinations, despite the vague leavening of Western free-thought, the boys fought shy of their Aunt Râdha, perhaps from the veil of uncertainty which their education was necessarily throwing over all things. There were so many ideas, and one must be right; it might be this one. In a way they were more afraid of her and her views than Mai Kishnu was, who never doubted at all. But then Mai Kishnu knew that she could always have the upper hand over her sister-in-law in the matter of cold baths in the winter mornings; for Râdha thought twice about interfering with the beams in other folks' eyes, when the mote of her own about warm water for religious ablutions was ready to her adversary's hand.

The boys, however, though they ate the nasty substitute for pickles without more ado, were not so biddable in the matter of *God Save the Queen*. As they sat on the dark flight of steps between the living-room and the well-verandah, they used to pipe away at it in English in the oddest falsetto. And Bahâni, who was a bit of a tomboy, would imitate them, and then go into fits of shrill laughter at her own gibberish.

Altogether it was a very quaint household, and it was a very quaint noise indeed which went up to high Heaven

from it ; the boys' voices, Bahâni's mocking laugh, Râdha's muttered texts, Mai Kishnu's vexed clattering of her ladles and pots, and blind Punoo's perspiring efforts after melody on the old harmonium. For he never attempted harmony ; that was beyond his self-taught execution altogether. But the sense of it was there, showing itself in sheer delight at pulling out all the stops that still existed, and blowing away till he could no more from sheer exhaustion.

So the years had passed contentedly enough for every one ; especially for the old music-master, who every day went away with the unleavened cake, which was his only fee, knowing that even such payment was in excess of his desires, since it was enough for him to have the honour and glory of playing on the harmonium, and of boasting about his proficiency on that instrument to his other pupils who were forced to be content with an accordion or some such ignoble instrument.

And then one day the funny old rambling house was in a perfect ferment of preparation, and even Râdha's face was beaming ; for her son was coming home. He was coming from the Hammersmith omnibus and the boarding-house in Notting Hill, coming from the rush and roar of London, to take up the threads of life again in the dark latticed rooms where Mai Kishnu made pickles and his mother said her prayers ; above all, where Bahâni waited for him, all dyed with turmeric and henna, and clothed in tinselled garments. The little household temple up on the roof, where there were more German prints doing duty as various gods and goddesses, had scarcely an instant's respite from the multitudinous rituals ; and if there was a minute or two to spare, the women downstairs were sure

to remember something else which if left undone would bring the most direful misfortune on the young couple. There was no quarrelling now, only a babel of shrill, kindly voices. And there was no music, save of a kind to which Mai Kishnu could clatter her ladles and pans ; drubbings of drums and endless tinklings of *sutaras*—for the good lady had set her foot down as regards the harmonium, even to the extent of showing off Bahâni's accomplishment. Accomplishment forsooth ! What need was there of such fools' talk between a newly-met young couple ? And though Gunesha had come back from the other side of the world dressed like a real Sahib, that did not prevent his being a young man, and knowing a pretty bride when he saw one. So, thank Heaven ! there they were at last, in the pleasant cool upper room on the roof, which had been all newly whitewashed and painted and strewn with flowers for the auspicious occasion, looking into each other's eyes as young people should. It was all so proper, so touching, so infinitely satisfactory, that for once Kishnu and Râdha fell on each other's necks and wept tears of sympathy.

But Punoo wandered in and out as a privileged guest among the merry-making and the bustle, sidling up to his closed treasure, feeling it all over in sightless fashion, and longing for the time when he should be called upon, as the bride's master, to display her accomplishment ; for by this time she could play *Minnia Punniya* and a few other tunes quite correctly. But the days passed, and those two on the roof, despite music and culture, despite all the sciences and all the 'ologies, were quite content with those things which had contented their fathers and mothers

before them. It was not so with old Punoo. Even his fiddle afforded him no comfort; and though his other pupils' accordions and concertinas gave him the correct musical intervals which his ear approved instinctively, but which his hand was too unpractised to reproduce with the accuracy which satisfied him, they were poor substitutes for that splendid tone which was born of vehement pumping and perspiration. Perhaps it was really the latter he craved, that feeling of labouring body and soul to give expression to something within him.

Even billing and cooing like a couple of pigeons on the roof, however, must come to an end, and after some three weeks of it, the barrister one day discovered that there was a harmonium in the dark arches of the living-room. He was beginning by this time to think that he had perhaps drifted a little too far back into the old life, and that as he had every intention, when this first very natural and inevitable relapse was over, of setting up house on more civilised lines, it might be as well to show off his new habits a little, and so emphasise the difference which he meant to draw between his life and the life led in the quaint old ancestral house. So without more ado, without any asking of how it came there, or who played on it, he whisked his coat-tails (for he had resumed European dress on his descent from the roof) over the music-stool with the consummate air of a performer, and set his feet to the pedals and his hands to the keys.

'What a wheezy old thing!' he cried, when a sort of agonised moō as from a sick cow came in response. Bahâni, standing decorously in the shadow with her veil down in most alluring bashfulness, tittered, and old Punoo,

who had stood still in sheer surprise, moved forward with a superior smile.

The barrister heard and saw, and a frown came to his self-satisfied face. 'The bellows are leaking,' he cried again; 'but never mind, it shall do something; I'll make it!'

Something indeed! The women giggled and stopped their ears, but old Punoo stood transfixed, a great pain, a great joy coming to his sightless face. Was that the harmonium? Was that *God Save the Queen*, that pæan of melody and harmony together, coming in great waves of sound and bearing him away, further and further and further, into some unknown land that was yet a Land of Promise? And all these years he had lived in ignorance; he had boasted, he had said that he could play it, his priceless treasure! Priceless! ay, he had been right there. Listen to it! Was it not priceless? A sort of passion of pride surged up in him, overpowering all thought of himself.

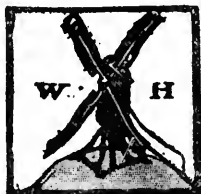
Then there was a loud crack, a wheeze, a sudden silence, and the barrister stood up wiping his forehead, for he had worked hard. 'That has done for the old thing,' he said with a laugh; 'but it was past work anyhow, and I prefer a piano any day of the week. Don't stand in the corner, Bahâni. You must learn to behave like an English lady now, and there is nothing to be ashamed of in your husband, I assure you.'

Mai Kishnu and Râdha looked at each other as if for support, and the vague affright and sheer surprise of their faces made them once more sympathetic. 'It is a new world, sister,' whispered the one to the other as they moved off respectively to their prayers and their pickles, leaving

the barrister making love to his bride over the prospect of the piano he was going to give her.

But Punoo moved softly, blindly, over to his old seat, and set his feet to the pedals and his fingers to the keys. But no sound came from them, not even that poor travesty of *God Save the Queen* which had once filled him with pride. And as he sat fingering the dumb keys, idly, a dim content that it should be so came into the old musician's soul. The swan-song had been beautiful, but it had been a song of death. He, after all, had known the harmonium best.

Mr. William Heinemann's
Autumn Announcements
mdcccxcvii



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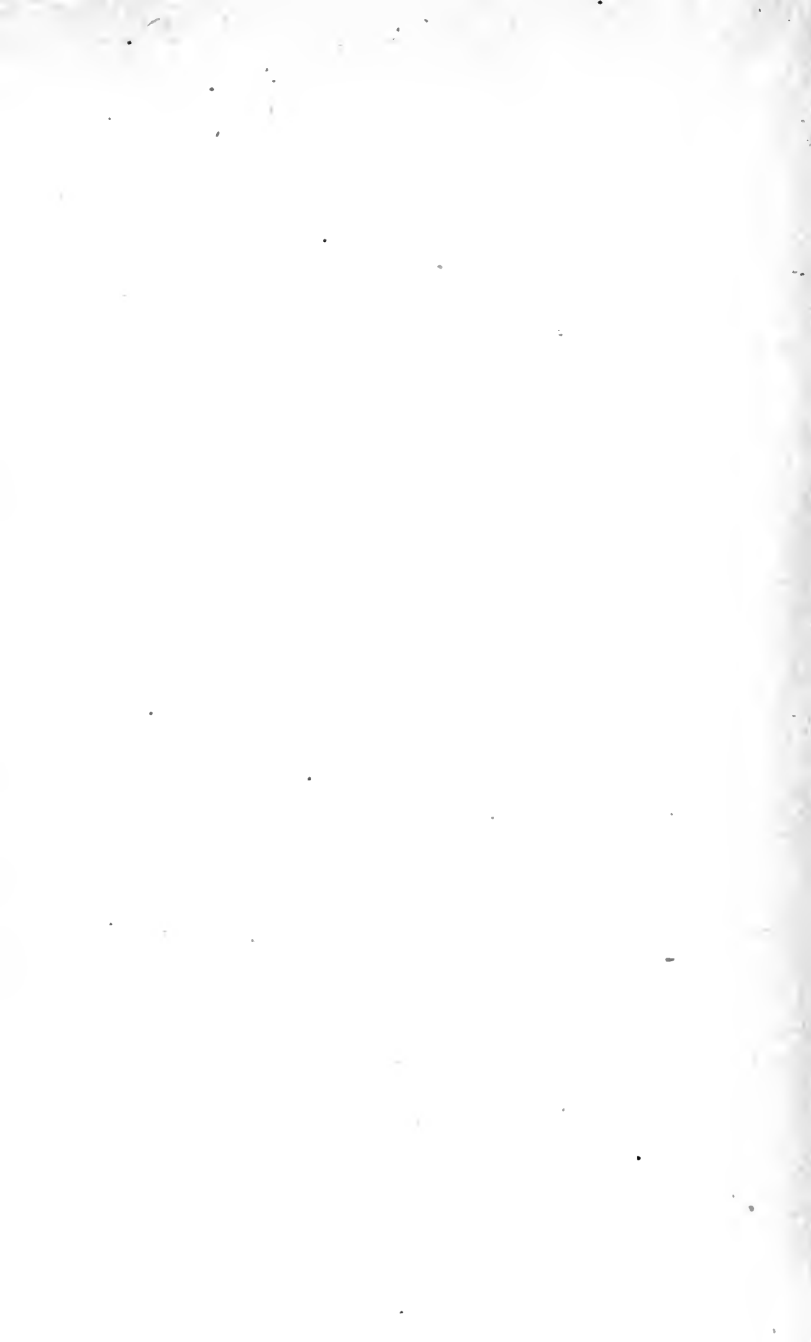
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