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THE FLAME-GATHERERS



•The  Co. •



THE FLAME-GATHERERS

BY

MARGARET HORTON POTTER

New York

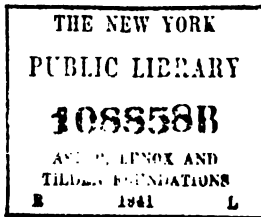
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Set up, electrotyped, and published May, 1904.

Norwood Press
J. S. Cushing & Co. — Berwick & Smith Co.
Norwood, Mass., U.S.A.



TO
Gerhardt Hauptmann
WITH THE PROFOUND ADMIRATION
OF THE AUTHOR





PRELUDE

"UP FROM EARTH'S CENTRE THROUGH THE SEVENTH GATE
I ROSE, AND ON THE THRONE OF SATURN SATE ;
AND MANY A KNOT UNRAVELLED BY THE ROAD,
BUT NOT THE MASTER KNOT OF HUMAN FATE."¹

GREAT OMAR, THIS VAGUE TALE RETOLD CONTAINS
PART ANSWER TO THE RIDDLE. ALLAH DEIGNS
A LITTLE WISDOM THROUGH THE MOST UNWISE :
THE SECRET OF THE UNIVERSE IN CHAINS.

BEHOLD IT, WRITTEN FOR THE OCCIDENT.
AH ! WILL THEY SEE, ALTHOUGH THE VELL IS RENT ?
OR WILL NOT ONE BELIEVER PAUSE BEFORE
THE TATTERED GLORIES OF THE ORIENT ?

M. H. P.

¹ "The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam," Ed. Fitzgerald, trans.



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BOOK I

FLESH-FIRE

“Daily walked, in radiant beauty,
To and fro, the Sultan's daughter;
In the twilight, where the fountain
Ripples o'er with crystal water.
Day by day the youthful slave stood
In the twilight, where the fountain
Ripples o'er with crystal water.
Daily he grew pale and paler.

“Once at evening came the Princess
To his side, with hurried accents:
'Tell thy name, for I would know it;
And thy home, thy sire, and kindred.'

“And the slave replied:
'My name is Mahomet. I come from Yemen,
And my race is the race of Asra,
Who must die if love they cherish!'

— HEINRICH HEINE, “The Asra.”

THE FLAME-GATHERERS

CHAPTER I

THE CONQUEROR

THE sun was setting over the Narmáda plain. In the midst of long stretches of sunburnt farm land the waters of the great river rolled and flashed with light. The barren millet-fields were illumined with long streaks of yellow sunshine that ran to the base of Mandu, an immense plateau, rising sheer from the lowlands to a height of some three or four hundred feet. Between it and the nearest of the Vindhya is a deep chasm, a quarter of a mile or more in width, bridged over by a miracle of man, a stone causeway, many centuries old even on the day of September 6, in the year of the Christian Lord 1205, and of the Hejira 601.

This causeway, a vast, stone bridge, supported on piers built up from the rocks below, balustraded to a height of five feet, and finished on each corner by watch-towers in which lookouts were always stationed, made the single approach to the otherwise impregnable plateau which formed in itself the entire principality of Mandu. Remarkable among Indian ruins to-day are

those that crown the deserted height of this unique spot: temples, houses, and vast palaces of the most ancient times; and at the period of which we speak, the opening years of the thirteenth century, Mandu was in the heyday of its Indian glory, renowned throughout the West for its wealth, its power, and the righteousness of its rulers.

The rice harvest was just beginning, and the inhabitants of Mandu — Brahman, Vaisya, Sudra, and Pariah alike — were busily engaged in this toil of peace. The Kshatriyas, or warrior part of the population, were not in the minds of their fellows to-day; for at the end of the rains they had marched to the north on an expedition against an army of Mohammedans by whom their neighbors of Dhár were beset.

The great causeway was deserted save for its look-outs and a fakir who had chosen to light a harvest Ishti on the stones near the southwest tower. As the sun neared the horizon, however, the silence was broken by a sudden screaming of birds and monkeys in the wooded mountain gorge beyond the bridge. Two of the guards stretched themselves and looked out along the pass — looked, and were transfixed. Shrill trumpet-notes and the faint beating of hoofs along a rocky road became suddenly audible. The glint of spear-heads shone among the trees. Lastly came the tapping of the tiny saddle-drums. Two of the soldiers shouted together: "Avalu! They are coming!" and, leaping down to the bridge, started at breakneck pace toward the fields, crying as they ran: "The army! The sol-



diers! Lord Rajah! They are here! They have returned!"

The other two guards made no move to leave their advantageous posts. The Brahman, also, abandoning his invocation to Agni, mounted the nearest tower, to watch the arrival of his earthly ruler. He had scarcely taken up his position when the vanguard of returning warriors rode out upon the bridge, a glittering company, headed by the stateliest of figures, at whose approach the guards all but knelt in salute to their ruler, Rai-Khizar-Pál, Rajah of Mandu in the country of Malwa, a brave and noble king. Slightly behind him rode two other richly dressed men, mounted on beautiful horses, each of whom came in for some share of the acknowledgments of the guards,—Puran, captain of the troops, and Ragunáth, confidential adviser of the Rajah. Slowly, for the horses were fagged with long marching, the three passed over the bridge, followed by a lengthening train of officers and men, horse and foot, over whose robes of crimson and white and green played the last beams of the setting sun, sending off a dazzle of light from the rubies that fastened a long spray of white feathers to the turban of the Rajah.

By the time the first of the cavalcade had entered the broad road leading straight across the plateau to the palaces at its eastern end, throngs of field-workers and people of the town had begun to line the edges of the route; for the news of the army's return had spread from one end of the plateau to the other, and men and women left their work and, stained and disordered

with toil, rushed to the road to greet their ruler and their defenders. A well-built lot of people they were, by far the greater number of the men invested with the cord of the twice-born. And their king's popularity was very evident from the welcome they were giving him. Men of the Brahman caste lifted their hands to him, Vaisyas fell upon their knees, and Sudras and Pariahs prostrated themselves upon the earth till he had passed. Then all stood gazing eagerly at the slow-moving file of troops. Jests, salutations, and words of welcome passed between the onlookers and the returning warriors; and the general spirit of joy was redoubled when it was found that the campaign, short as it had been, was also a victorious one. Evidences of victory presently became visible; for, at the end of the lines of foot-soldiers, came a long string of captives, many on foot, a few mounted upon mules, these last with their feet bound together by thongs passed round the animals, their arms tied behind them with ropes of hide, and the beasts themselves fastened together in a long chain. Beside this mounted company, who represented captives of station, rode a soldier armed with a triple-lashed whip, which he used with no great degree of compassion upon the backs of his charges.

These captives were greeted by the onlookers with shouts of triumph, but with no insults or even unfriendly remarks. The followers of the Prophet were still rather mythical enemies to these dwellers of the Dekhan. Mahmoud of Ghazni was a name they recog-

nized; but Aybek, the great slave, who had just mounted the throne of Delhi, was as unreal to them as their own kings who had died three thousand years ago, in the first conquest of India. These captives now among them were tangible enough, but they presented too abject an appearance to give any idea of their force in battle. The chagrin of captivity, the many days of riding and walking, the intolerable suffering occasioned by their bonds, had broken the spirit of all save one, who rode at the head of the pitiable procession. He was young, this man, good to look on even in his unkempt state, and his clothes, through the stains of war and woe, showed their richness. He sat straight on his unsaddled mule, and his head was not bent down. He seemed to notice nothing of what passed around him, but kept his eyes fixed far ahead on the long, curving range of blackened mountains, lighted by the glow of the sunset sky that blazed behind them. His dignity and his unconsciousness made him a continual object of interest to the crowd, and the slave-master was under a running fire of questions which he was not slow to answer.

“He is a prince, a son of the enemy’s leader. He will bring a great ransom,” he repeated again and again, proudly.

Cheers never failed to follow the explanation; and, after some twenty minutes of this trial, the Arab’s head for the first time drooped, and a deep sigh broke from him.

“Let not my lord grieve,” whispered the person

riding next behind him, a boy, scarcely more than fifteen years in age. "My lord will be ransomed."

But the Mohammedan sighed again, making no answer; and the slave-master, overhearing the whisper, cut off the conversation with a quick stroke of his whip on the back of the boy, who bore it, as he bore all things for his Prince, without a sound.

By this time the road, which had hitherto run through grain-fields, approached a building set, as was the custom with many Indian temples and palaces, in the midst of a square pool of water. The structure was built of white stone, in the usual massive and grotesque Indian style, and seemed only approachable by a narrow path between two glassy sheets of water, which reflected in their mirror-depths the clumps of wild cotton trees, graceful bamboos, and feathery tamarinds by which they were surrounded. The eyes of the captives, turned from this structure only when it lay behind them, were instantly fixed upon another, infinitely greater, which a new bend in the road disclosed a few hundred yards beyond. The entrance to this new building was filled with a bustling throng, for here the soldiers were dismounting. It was the dwelling of the rulers of Mandu; and in five minutes more the captives themselves had halted in the huge, unpaved courtyard round which the palace was built.

The sun had now set and the brief twilight sunk into darkness. A bonfire burned already in the centre of the courtyard, and its fitful, wavering light accentuated the activity of the scene. The Rajah and a few

of the officials had disappeared into the palace; but it seemed as if all the rest of the little army, together with a hundred attendants, were crowded into the courtyard:—soldiers, slaves, eunuchs, page-boys, villagers, and women,—women unveiled, unabashed, openly interested in their fellow-creatures. Finally, in the portal of the north wing, quiet, calm, betraying no sign of weariness, stood Ragunáth, the right hand of the Rajah, that small, slender, well-favored man, with the eyes of the lynx, an intellect keen as a steel blade, and a constitution that was superior to time and disease. He was still clad in his crimson riding-costume. The turban had not been lifted from his head; but he carried in his hand a thin, ebony staff. He was engaged in directing the dismount and disposal of the captives. Already those that had come on foot had been led away by guards into the south wing; and now, under his low-voiced commands, two men were lifting the riders from their mules and, as soon as they could stand, sending them after the others. One of these, only, made any resistance to this plan. He was the boy who had ridden second in the line, behind his leader. Spent as he was, this child struggled violently against separation from his master, at whose commands only he finally consented to be led away. And now this master remained alone, upon his mule, his face turned to Ragunáth, and in his eyes the faintest expression of dislike.

“What is thy name, captive?” demanded the Indian, in a flat, low tone.

“Fidá Ibn-Mahmud Ibn-Hassan el-Asra,” returned the captive.

“The son of the Mohammedan leader?”

“His brother’s son.”

“Ah! then you are not a prince?”

“I am the head of our race. My father is dead.”

“Ah! — Partha, let him be taken down and brought to my apartment. Then go tell the Lord Rajah that the work is done.” And, turning upon his heel, the minister disappeared into the corridor behind him.

Immediately the two men beside him cut the thongs that bound Fidá’s feet to the mule; and they also unfastened his arms. He was lifted from the animal, and set upon his feet, at the same time supported on either side. It was some moments before his numb and stiffened limbs would bear him; but at length he straightened, and followed his guides into the palace. They proceeded for some distance down a hall hung at regular distances with finely wrought lamps, and at length turned into a narrower passage that ended, Fidá could see, in another courtyard. Before this was reached, however, they halted at a doorway closed by a hanging; and here Fidá was bidden to enter and pass through into the farthest room. Then he was left alone.

The captive gave a sigh of relief. After the long strain, just ended, silence and semi-darkness seemed to him unspeakable boons. He longed to lie down here upon the ground and sleep. That being impossible, however, he took the only practicable advantage of the

respite. Facing toward what he believed to be the west, — and Mecca, — he threw himself into the devout attitude and repeated the sunset prayers. Then, relieved in mind and heart, he pushed aside the hanging, and entered the apartment of Ragunáth. The first room was empty, illumined by a single lamp, the light of which gave some indication of the richness of the furnishings. Through this and another room Fidá passed, and then halted on the threshold of the third, the living-room of a fortunate man.

Here, reclining on a great pile of cushions, was the adviser and confidant of the Rajah. Beside him, on a low stand, were a dish of rice and a chased goblet containing wine. Two attendants were bathing his feet with perfumed water; and at the opposite side of the room, under a hideous image of Krishna, a Brahman was making the evening sacrifice of meal and ghee, over two or three sticks of burning wood. Fidá forgot himself in gazing at this scene, till Ragunáth, opening his eyes, which were shut under the soothing influence of rest and quiet, cried out, rather harshly :

“Come ! Enter, slave ! To thy knees !”

Fidá walked slowly forward, made a respectful salutation to the master of the room, and then stood upright again. Ragunáth shrugged his shoulders, but did not attempt to enforce his command, which was, indeed, contrary to the etiquette of captivity, he being in no way Fidá's overlord. It was some moments before he would speak; and, during the interval, the Brahman, his task over, turned to him, announcing:

“The evening Agnihotra is accomplished. Krishna and the gods are appeased. I will depart,” and forthwith left the room. Then Ragunáth, once more master of his tones, said smoothly:

“You are here, Asra, to choose the life of your captivity. Will you wait imprisoned and guarded till there come members of your race to treat for ransom; or will you take the clothing of the Rajah’s household and become the servant of our lord, his cup-bearer, till the time of your freedom?”

“Will not Rai-Khizar-Pál send messengers to treat with Omar for my ransom?” cried Fidá, in amazement.

“The way is long and difficult. We are but just returned from a dangerous campaign. The Rajah is satisfied with his victories.”

For some moments Fidá stared hopelessly at Ragunáth’s impenetrable face. Then he bent his head beneath the tumultuous wave of bitterness that overswept him. Finally, controlling himself, as all Arabs are taught to do, he looked up again, and answered in an unnatural voice: “I will enter the household of the Rajah. I will serve him as his cup-bearer.”

Ragunáth nodded, and touched a gong beside his couch. After a moment’s waiting a slave ran into the room, knelt before his master, and bent his head to the floor.

“Radai, take this man to the house of slaves, and let him be clothed in the fashion of the Rajah’s servants. He will serve to-night, at the feast, as cup-bearer to the Lord Rai-Khizar-Pál. Go!”

The slave rose, took Fidá by the hand, and turned to leave the room, when they perceived that a new-comer was standing in the doorway: a eunuch of high office. Ragunáth, seeing him, gave an exclamation.

“Kasya! Enter! enter!”

“My lord summoned me?” The man did not move from the doorway, and Fidá and his companion stood aside.

“Yes, yes, I summoned thee. How goes thy office? Enter, Kasya. All thy work is well?”

“The Lady Ahalya — is well.”

The answer was made in such a tone as brought Fidá's eyes to the face of the man that uttered it. Kasya's eyes were bright, Kasya's lip was curled, and Fidá perceived that the sarcasm, the almost insult, in the eunuch's tone had been fully intentional. In another moment Fidá was drawn from the room, but not before he heard Ragunáth utter a smothered oath, and had perceived a light of satisfaction in the eunuch's eyes. It was an incident unusual enough to impress itself on the mind of the new-made slave; for he was sometimes a student of men. But there seemed no adequate reason why one word, the name that Kasya had spoken, should so have fixed itself in Fidá's brain that, for the next hour or two, it beat upon him with a constant rhythm, “Ahalya — Ahalya — Ahalya,” till it seemed fuller of import than the great battle-cry the syllables of which so much resembled it. And, in the end, Fidá accepted it as an omen of all that afterward came upon him in this new land.

In the meantime the whole palace, and especially the great central portion of it, had been humming with life. Manava, the regent-minister, and all his staff of servants, were preparing an unexpected welcome for the return of the Rajah and his victorious troops. By half-past eight in the evening, the vast audience-hall presented a gala appearance; and shortly after that hour Rai-Khizar-Pál, with Purán on his right hand, Ragunáth on his left, and a great company bringing up the rear, entered and was received at the foot of the dais by Manava, who, with this act of reception, discharged himself of his three months' regency.

The hall, which was the largest in the palace, and opened immediately from the central courtyard, was a remarkable example of the massive, clumsy, and inartistic architecture of uninvaded India. Stone pillars, of unequal size and design, supported the roof. The walls were covered with multicolored hangings, and furthermore were to-night covered with ropes of flowers. A hundred lamps of wrought bronze and silver hung from the ceiling, and torches were fastened to the pillars. At the head of the room, opposite the entrance, was the dais, on which stood a broad divan overhung with a canopy. This was the judgment seat of Mandu, to be used to-night in a lighter cause. As the Rajah laid himself in his place, the three high officials squatted on cushions near the royal couch, each with a low, round stand before him. Below, in the hall, stood three long, low tables, raised

not more than eight inches from the floor, beside which were rows of woven mats, on which the feasters squatted in customary fashion. In three minutes every seat was taken, and immediately a throng of slaves came hurrying in, each bearing his burden of food or wine or metal bowls filled with water for the washing of hands. Among these ministers of the feast was Fidá, who came halting along in the rear, side by side with the young Ahmed, now perfectly content by reason of the nearness of his lord. Fidá was dressed in a loose white cotton vestment that hung to his ankles, and was confined about his waist with a broad, red scarf. The sleeves were wide and short, and the tunic opened loosely in the front, disclosing his bare, bronzed chest. His feet were unshod; but his head was bound round with a brass circlet, the sign of slavery. In his hands he carried a jar of the liquor forbidden to his creed. As he neared the royal divan many eyes were turned to him, and he was pointed out, here and there, as a prince of the enemy; and if the feasters gazed at him once for his station, they looked a second time at his beauty, for Fidá was worthy of his birth. Taller in stature, better shaped as to limb, cleaner-cut in feature than any Indian, he gave ample evidence of the higher civilization and keener intellect of his race. For at this time the men of Arabia were at the zenith of their power; and were bearing the religion of their Prophet at the point of their swords into every nation of the known world.

Fidá went up and bent the knee before his master;

and Rai-Khizar-Pál turned upon him a gentle and kindly glance. "Come up, young man. Let me behold thee. So. Thou art named master of my drink. Fill, then, this cup, and Indra grant it may be full forever!"

Fidá obeying this command, the Rajah lifted the golden vessel to his lips, and instantly all those in the room sprang to their feet. He drank deeply, replaced the cup on the stand before him, waved one hand to his people, and the feast was opened.

To Fidá, tired, dreary, and, above all, famishing with hunger, the meal seemed endless. It was not, indeed, a refined sight to one suffering as he suffered. Flagon after flagon of wine he poured into the Rajah's bowl, dish after dish of the richest food was presented at the royal stand, mountain after mountain of meat, river on river of drink, disappeared under the attacks of the feasters below; and still there was no end. One man alone, of all the number, displayed some fastidiousness in his taste. Ragnáth, after a moderate meal, ceased to eat, and sat cross-legged on his cushion, silent, motionless, oblivious, seemingly, of the sights and sounds around him: untempted by any viand or wine to exceed his capacity. In spite of this fact Fidá could not regard the man with admiration or even with respect. For to the prejudiced eyes of the slave, delicacy in Ragnáth only assumed a guise of affectation.

Time went on, hours apparently had passed, and still Fidá's ministrations as cup-bearer showed no sign

of diminishing. Finally, however, relief came from an unexpected source. Kasya, the head eunuch, whom Fidá had already seen, glided into the room through a small door to the right of the daís, connecting the audience hall with the Rajah's private apartments. Kasya knelt before Rai-Khizar and murmured a few words which brought the royal master to his feet, exclaiming to those near him :

“Come, my friends, let us go. There is to be dancing.”

Purán and Manava rose at once from their cushions, Ragunáth emerged from his spell, and the three of them, with Kasya and one or two slaves, followed the Rajah from the room, unnoticed by the rabble below.

Fidá, to his infinite relief, found himself left behind. He realized, indeed, that he was at the end of his endurance; and this fact made him bold. Going to Ragunáth's place, he sat down and set to work upon the untouched food left there. Never had slave been so daring before; but, also, never before had a meal been so direfully needed. As he ate, he regarded the crowd below apprehensively; for he did not know what discovery might bring. But the great feast was nearly at an end. Half the company had gone straggling off to their beds. Of those that remained, few were in condition to observe anything; and, to his reassurance, Fidá presently perceived that slaves and servitors had begun to slip into empty places, and to begin their part of the meal. Among this number was Ahmed; and when presently the eyes of the two met, Fidá nodded

slightly, and the other came running to the daïs, and stood before his master.

“Sit here by me, and eat, Ahmed,” commanded the young man.

“My lord ! It is not fitting — ”

“Sit here. Am I not a slave also ? There ! Here is lamb roasted with cinnamon and stuffed with raisins and sugar. Excellent ! Eat of it. And this is deer flesh. And here is sesame, and rice, and a duck fried in oil. They do not starve in Mandu ; but I have seen no water in this room.”

“I will fetch it !” and Ahmed darted away, to return presently with the prescribed liquid in a large, porous bottle.

Fidá drank gratefully, and then the two ate in silence, while below them, minute by minute, the great hall grew quieter. The meal was almost finished, and Fidá was smiling at the contentment of his devoted little servitor, when suddenly a eunuch came running through the Rajah’s door, and, seeing Fidá seated tranquilly on the daïs, gave him a violent cuff on the head, crying out :

“Dog ! Leave thy gluttony and come to the King. He calls for his ‘cup-bearer’. — Faithful cup-bearer thou ! Come !”

At the blow, both Mohammedans leaped to their feet ; and the Asra stared upon the eunuch, his face flaming with anger. Ahmed, indeed, would have thrown himself upon the man, but that Fidá fortunately regained his temper, and, restraining the lad’s arm,

bent his head before the messenger, and with a slight smile at Ahmed's outraged expression, followed his guide from the room.

They passed through a hallway more richly furnished than any Fidá himself had ever seen; and then, crossing a corridor, turned down a narrow passage into the open doorway of the "theatre"—a large, irregular room, with a slightly elevated platform at one end, and the usual dais at the other.

The place was brilliantly lighted. Rai-Khizar-Pál lay upon a divan; and disposed about him were his usual companions, together with one or two new officials, and a dozen or more slaves, who crouched back in the shadow of the hangings. In one corner of the room, below the stage, sat three musicians, playing, upon their strange-shaped instruments, a rhythmical minor air. The stage was occupied by six nautch-dancers, gayly and scantily clad, of their type good-looking, perhaps. They were performing a dance with which Fidá was familiar enough, having seen it many times at Delhi. It was called the "serpent", and appeared to be highly acceptable to the spectators. The Rajah was laughing and talking genially, and even Ragu-náth's face wore a smile. At the entrance of Fidá, Rai-Khizar called him to the couch and good-naturedly abused him for deserting his post. The Arab offered no excuse, and was finally ordered to his task of pouring wine. Cups and jar stood close at hand; and from time to time the whole company drank a toast to some favorite performer. Fidá, refreshed by food

and encouraged by the leniency of his master, watched the stage with some interest. In the course of an hour many dancers came and went. There were sometimes six, again two, occasionally one, on the stage; and all the time the low, droning, monotonous music never ceased.

In time the audience began to grow drowsy under the effects of light, wine, and unceasing sound. Rai-Khizar had nodded on his pillows, and Ragnáth yawned openly. By and by all the dancers left the stage, and the musicians' tune died away. The Rajah started up, demanding to know why the dance stopped without his command. But, while he spoke, the music began again, this time with a different air, a swinging, graceful melody, new to its hearers. A little murmur of approval came from Manava and Purán. The rest waited. Then Fidá, his curiosity awakened, saw a woman run on to the stage:—a woman fair-skinned, dark-eyed, with a wreath of poppies woven into her hair, and garments of scarlet gauze flying about her slender, beautifully shaped figure. For an instant he shut his eyes; and, before he could open them again, there burst from two throats the same hoarse cry :

“Ahalya!”

Rai-Khizar-Pál and Ragnáth together had started to their feet; but she who danced only smiled and half lowered the lids of her dark and lustrous eyes.

“Ahalya!” shouted the Rajah, in a frenzy of excitement. “Ahalya! Get thee from this room! How darest thou appear—in this place? Kasya—take her away!”

As the enormity of his wife's offence grew upon him, Rai-Khizar's wrath waxed hotter till he stood panting with emotion as Kasya dashed upon the stage. Ragunáth, entirely forgetting himself, stood still, gazing upon the charming figure of the young woman, with a light in his eyes that was all too easy to read. Of the rest, slaves and officials alike watched the scene with impartial interest, all but Fidá, who, even after Ahalya, rebellious and laughing at her escapade, had left the room, still crouched in the shadow of the canopy, the blood pounding at his temples, his heart literally standing still, his brilliant eyes staring as at the vision of the wonderful red and white beauty of Ahalya, youngest wife of Rai-Khizar-Pál of Mandu in Malwa.



CHAPTER II

THE INCEPTION OF A FLAME

FIDÁ slept that night on a divan in an antechamber of the Rajah's suite, instead of in his lawful place, the house of slaves behind the palace. This breach of duty came about simply enough. After the tumultuous breaking-up of the party in the theatre, the slaves in attendance on the Rajah and his officials seized the opportunity for retiring, and disappeared with such quiet zeal that, three minutes after Ahalya's departure from the stage, Fidá found himself alone on the daïs in the empty room. Rai-Khizar had rushed away to his delinquent wife; and the officials, tired out, lost no time in betaking themselves to their own apartments. Fidá was perfectly well aware of the situation of the house of slaves. He had dressed there in the early evening. But the Asra had no intention of passing the night in that uninviting spot if it could be helped. After a moment's consideration, therefore, he left the theatre and wandered through the tangled web of little rooms constituting the royal suite, till he came upon one room which promised comparative safety for the night. It was unlighted. He believed it to be out of the way of the more inhabited part. And all round it ran a divan

well covered with cushions. So, without stopping to consider consequences, Fidá lay down upon the pleasant couch, buried his tired head in a pillow, and in five minutes was sleeping the sleep of the slave.

He woke by degrees. First there was the consciousness of light; secondly of a weight upon his heart; thirdly it was extraordinarily still. Evidently he was not in camp. Was it Delhi—the palace? He opened his eyes to see—and he saw. Memory brought a groan to his lips; but he stifled it, half-uttered, and lay still to consider his situation. The first thing that occurred to him was that it must be past the hour of morning prayer. Rising, then, he turned his back to the sunlight that streamed in through a half-screened window, and, having gone through the form of ablution permitted when water is not at hand, he began the *Niyat*, speaking in Arabic. The syllables fell lovingly from his lips, and his heart swelled with the comfort of his religion. Except the moment at Ragunáth's door on the previous evening, this was the first solitude that had been his since the day of battle in which he had been taken captive by the Rajah. During the succeeding days he had stumbled through his prayers as he lay bound in tents, or rode, strapped to the mule, along rough paths through the hills. At last he was alone, unhampered, free to take the attitudes of prayer, free also to whisper the words of his own tongue, which of late years he had seldom used in ordinary intercourse with men.

Yet Fidá was not to end his devotions as he had

begun them. He was standing with eyes cast down, repeating the *Subhán* :

“Holiness to thee, O God!
And praise be to thee!
Great is thy name,
Great is thy greatness;
There is no deity but thee!”

when a figure suddenly appeared in the doorway, and the captive's words were stopped short as he met the eyes of Rai-Khizar-Pál, his conqueror.

So amazed was he that Fidá forgot to kneel or to give any sign of abasement. Thus they stood, gazing each at the other. Perhaps some mute message was carried from the slave to the master; for the Rajah's expression little by little softened, till at length he asked quietly :

“What is it thou doest here, Asra?”

Fidá bent his head. “Mighty lord, I prayed.”

The Rajah smiled slightly, lifted one of his hands to the curtain beside him, grasped it, and settled into an easier position. “Thou art not a good servant, Asra,” he observed at last.

“It has not hitherto been my place to serve, O King.”

There was another pause, while the Rajah's eyes travelled around the room. “Thou hast slept here?”

“Yes.”

“And why? Knowest thou not the house of slaves?”

For a second Fidá hesitated. Then he answered, “Too well I knew it, Lord Rajah.”

“What sayest thou?”

“Thou, O King — wouldst thou lie among the base born?”

“I! — I am Kshatriya! Among you there is no caste.”

“There is pride.”

Rai-Khizar laughed. “Thou’st a tongue, slave. It were my duty to have thee whipped. But this day is a day devoted to the gods. Begone, then. Get thee a morning meal and wait for a message from me. Yet remember this, my Asra : here there is no prince but me. If thou anger me, I shall have thee killed.”

“You dare not!” rose to Fidá’s lips, but he checked the words; for it was indeed time that he learned his place. And he stood with lowered head as the Rajah turned away and left him.

This encounter strongly affected Fidá’s state of mind. Reconsidering the conversation, he perceived that he stood the debtor of the man whose slave he had become — an infidel dog, a worshipper of images and Jinn. It could not be denied that Rai-Khizar’s toleration was greater than that of any Arab chief; and Fidá felt bitterly the humiliation of his leniency. Yet in all the Rajah’s mildness there had been a dignity that inspired in the Mohammedan an unwilling admiration and respect.

Perfunctorily, Fidá finished his prayers, and then acted upon the first of the two commands of his master : — he left the palace in search of food. It was some time, however, before he found it, and then only in the

house of slaves, where a number of his fellows were beginning the morning meal. Among them was Ahmed, who sat a little apart from the chattering herd, apparently watching for some one. At sight of Fidá he rose eagerly and ran forward, greeting him with marks of respect which the Asra reproved. Then the boy led the way into the interior of the dirty, barren house, in the centre of which was a wood fire, overhung by a large iron pot filled with a bubbling mass of millet. Near by, on a stand, was an immense bowl of clarified butter, or "ghee", which, mixed with the meal, formed the staple as well as the sacrificial food of the low-caste Hindoo throughout India. Fidá waited in silence while Ahmed handily procured him a dish of the none too appetizing mess. And then, eager to escape the vile and smoky air of the interior, the two hurried out into the shaded veranda, while the other slaves were eating.

It was now a not unpleasant scene that the captives looked upon. The day was hot, gay with sunshine and the chatter of birds, sweet with the perfume of the jessamine vines, which were still covered with flowers. The slave-house faced the angle of the palace formed by the juncture of the central building and the south wing. Directly opposite them was a long, wooden-pillared arcade called the veranda, running the length of the wing. It was covered with flowering vines, and furnished like a great room, with cushions and stands and hangings in place of more customary frescoes. In the end that faced the central courtyard, invisible from without, was a temple room, the priests of which seemed

to spend the greater part of their lives lounging on mats in the fragrant veranda. In this same side of the palace lodged Manava's suite and Purán's; and at the end of all was a wooden barracks, where the soldiers were now just waking from the sleep induced by last night's festivity. A group of these hung about the well, which stood between the house of slaves and their domicile, waiting their turn for water. There was a general splashing and shouting, little laughter, but also no swearing, for the Hindoo is always clean-mouthed.

From their vantage-point, Ahmed and Fidá, observing this life, found themselves entertained; for all the human nature of the palace found vent here. The two captives lingered over their meal, talking generally; and presently Fidá remarked on the number of slaves who had been passing and repassing near them. Ahmed answered him at once:

"There are more than three hundred employed here — including eunuchs, who do not sleep in this house. I have been made a sweeper. This morning the slave-master, Kanava, roused me at dawn, gave me a broom of dried kusa grass and sent me, with nine others, to sweep the corridors of the north wing."

"Then thou hast had little enough sleep. Go, therefore, lie down and rest while I sit here. By my life, I would I knew what my duties are to be. No one orders me about. I am given no instructions. I have not even seen this Kanava."

"Ah, dear lord, to think that thou must serve! He — Look. There is a stir opposite."

Two slaves had entered the veranda of the south wing, and went running down it, shouting, as they went, some unintelligible words. At the sound, men came pouring out of the interior rooms, and turned in the direction of the courtyard, whither, in a moment or two, there moved a long procession of priests, soldiers, and petty officials. The last of these had not yet disappeared when every rear doorway and opening in the main building near by began to let forth slaves, who came toward their particular house in a straggling group of almost two hundred.

"It is a big sacrifice," observed Fidá, who was familiar enough with Indian customs to know that no Sudra can participate in the service of the gods.

"Yes, early this morning there stood erected in the courtyard a great altar, to which many men were bringing fagots and flowers. It will be an animal sacrifice also; for a dozen sacred cows were tethered in an enclosure there when I passed through."

"The animal sacrifice is not common. I have never seen one. It must be in honor of victory."

Ahmed did not answer. His eyes were fixed on a man who had come out of the palace alone and was running toward the slave-house. "That is Kanava," he whispered, as the man drew near. Fidá beheld a cruel face, marked with lines of habitual ill-temper and impatience, and rendered doubly unpleasant by the deep pock-marks which pitted it everywhere. His dress was that of the common slaves; but the band about his head was of beaten silver. At his appear-

ance the clamor in the slave-house suddenly ceased. Ahmed jumped to his feet, but Fidá remained seated, his empty bowl in his lap. Kanava scowled at the breach of respect, and shouted :

“Up, slave ! Up ! You are summoned. Come !”

Fidá rose obediently, went to the first opening in the trellis, and stepped to Kanava's side. Together they started toward the palace, and the groups left behind looked after Fidá with new respect ; for, though he had been rash, Kanava had neither struck nor abused him, and was now, moreover, walking not in front of him, but at his side.

As they neared the palace, Fidá's curiosity as to their errand rose. But he would ask no questions, and Kanava did not offer information. So in silence they entered the palace, walked down long corridors to the audience hall, now cleared of every trace of last night's festivity, and finally to the threshold of the outer door, where, without a word, Kanava turned and left the Asra standing stock-still before a remarkable scene.

He had but an instant's view of the thing in its entirety : — a vast, close-packed sea of people, garlanded, decked, nay robed, in the brightest flowers ; in the centre of the living mass a high, square altar, piled with firewood ; and surrounding the altar, ranged in symmetrical order, twelve sacred cows, twelve accompanying priests, and twelve huge, earthen jars. All this Fidá took in at one, swift glance. The next instant a universal shout arose, and he was seized and drawn through the crowd, which opened for him, by two

young Brahmans, naked except for loin-cloths and the sacred cord. In a moment Fidá was beside the altar, where stood the Rajah, flaming with jewels, and Ragunáth, scarcely less magnificent. Here, without a moment's delay, the bewildered captive was taken in hand by two snatakas, and bound, hand and foot, with ropes. Then, as at some signal, the twelve priests began to chant those verses of the Rig-Veda that are designed for the great Srahda sacrifice. The crowd was silent now. There was not a whisper; there was scarcely a movement among them all. The twelve gray cows stood, as if long accustomed to such sights, mildly surveying the people. Fidá felt himself like them. He was stunned into perfect tranquillity. His eyes wandered aimlessly; he listened without interest to the words of the chant. He counted the number of flowers in the garland round the neck of the nearest cow. And all the time his mind was really circling about one idea, too horrible to be faced. For he had no doubt that he was to be the first offering in that triumphal sacrifice. This was the reason for Ragunáth's evasion about his ransom. This was the explanation of Rai-Khizar's mildness. Fidá looked toward the Rajah, whose eyes were fixed reverently on the ground. The next instant, however, he had caught Ragunáth's glance, and the minister was smiling at him — a small, cruel, white-toothed smile, a smile like a grimace, that sent a sudden bolt through Fidá's heart. Ragunáth could smile upon him in his death-hour! In that moment hatred was born in the Arab: — a hatred

for this man, which, through all their future intercourse, never lessened and was never still.

At length the chant came to an end. Fidá felt a breath of relief; for self-control was becoming difficult. Now, at last, he was seized by the stalwart young Brahmans and lifted, like a log of wood, up and up till he was laid on his back on top of the great heap of unlit firewood. A hoarse shout went up from the people gathered below. Fidá's heart throbbed to suffocation. His hair was literally rising on his head; but he made no movement, nor did he utter any sound. Even in his horror he remembered the behavior of women enduring the suttee, and the memory shamed him into stillness. Under the fierce rays of the sun, now in mid-sky, he closed his eyes and waited — waited for the first crackling flame to leap upon his flesh. Evidently the time for this had not yet come. Again the priests were praying those endless, senseless, Vedic prayers, to Indra, to Vishnu, to Agni — Agni, the fire-god. How long he lay upon the pyre Fidá did not know. It was at once a century and a second. Then the voices of the priests were still. Once more he was seized by the head and the feet and lifted to the ground. There his ropes were cut. He was free again. Trembling and faint, he found himself facing the King's minister, who was smiling at him still.

"The captive did not know," he murmured, "that our sacrifices are bloodless."

Fidá felt himself redden, and the next instant met

the eyes of the Rajah, who was staring at him in amazement: "Knew you not? told they you not? Didst fear such a death? It was a needless fear. Human blood stains not the altars of our gods. You, the foremost of our captives, were laid upon the altar of Indra as a sign that we attribute all our victories to him. That ceremony is over. You are free to depart from the sacrifice." And, with a friendly gesture, the Rajah turned away again, and Fidá knew himself dismissed.

It was not now so easy a task to force his way through the dense crowd; for this time they did not voluntarily make way for him. He was fiercely possessed with the desire, however, to escape from this mob who had been unconscious witnesses of what he felt to be his cowardice. And, after a persistent pushing and edging, he found himself beyond the people and in front of that doorway where he had dismounted the night before. Here Ragunáth had stood and watched him, but had not then read his soul; or, if he had, had found there nothing of which an Asra might be ashamed. Now!—Coward or not, that Asra was leaning up against the palace wall, gone very faint, even his knees trembling with the reaction of a strain that had been greater than he realized.

He remained standing here for a long time, regaining command of himself, and, afterward, attracted by the spectacle before him. The wood on the altar had been lighted, and a hot, wavering flame leaped high in the centre of the garland-strewn multitude. Into

this fire went the contents of the jars that had stood at the base of the altar:—four of fine, ground meal, four of ghee, and four of strained honey. From this sacrificial mess arose a thick smoke; but the odor that came from it was, surprisingly enough, decidedly agreeable; for the meal and butter had been so skillfully treated with aromatics that the natural smell of burning vegetable and grease had been overcome. The sacrifice was of course accompanied by a continuous high and musical chant from the priests. Chapter after chapter of the Vedas they repeated without halt or break. Prayers were sent up to every Vedic god: to Vishvakarma, the all-maker, to Varuna and Mitra, to Agni, to Surya, to Yama, to the Ashvins, brothers of dawn and twilight, to Rudra, the storm-god, and Vivasat, the father of death. The sacred cattle were offered to Prishni, the holy cow of heaven; and, their spirits being accepted by a sign in the flame, they were led away to resume their duties in the great temple at the other end of the plateau. Finally, at the conclusion of the ceremony, the last god was introduced: he who, for many centuries, had played the great rôle in this ceremonial: Soma, lord of the moon, and lord of drunkennesses, whose name is that of the plant from which the powerful, sacred liquor is distilled. And at the first pronouncing of this name, the sacrifice was interrupted by the arrival of fifty slaves, who made their appearance from the great hall, bearing on their heads jars of the liquid to be quaffed to the great ones above. They were greeted by a long, loud

murmur of anticipatory joy, such as no lavish display of meal or cattle could ever call forth from the crowd. And now at last Fidá, too well aware of what was to follow, turned from the courtyard down the corridor through which he had passed on the previous night, on his way to Raguánath's rooms.

He walked slowly along the cool, dim hall, the silence of which was refreshing. Evidently there was not a single soul in this part of the palace; and for an instant there rose in the mind of the captive a wild idea of escape. He was here, alone, unseen—and hundreds of miles away from his uncle's army, hundreds of miles from any possible safety. Sanity returned as quickly as it had left him, but bringing a new heaviness on his spirit. He came presently to the passage that led to Raguánath's rooms; and, looking down it, perceived that it ended in a bright patch of sunlight, marking an inner court. Instinctively he turned thither, finding himself presently on the edge of a charming little three-cornered courtyard, shut in on every side by vine-clad walls. Opposite the passage ran a veranda, overrun with passion-flowers; and in a corner near by rose a group of small tamarinds. The courtyard was unpaved, but in the centre of it stood a little fountain of clear, bubbling spring-water. This place, like the corridor, was without a sign of life; but, pleased with its homelike, pleasant air, Fidá entered it, suddenly seized with a sense of unfamiliar delight.

As if in answer to his appearance, a door across from him was opened, and out upon the veranda, and thence

into the court, came a young woman, unveiled, dressed in pale, flowing silk, her hips bound with a striped sash, of the broad Indian fashion, her dark hair twined with purple clematis. She was humming to herself a little tune; and as she hummed, she swayed her lithe body from side to side and stepped as a dancer does. Fidá drew a sharp breath. She was the woman who had danced the night before. She was Ahalya, youngest wife of Rai-Khizar-Pál. She was—the fairest creature that Fidá's eyes had ever looked upon. As he drew quickly back into the shadow of the doorway, he knew, as one knows things in dreams and visions, that it was her spirit filling this place that had made it dear to him. Oblivious of himself, he stood gazing at her while she came to the fountain, sat down upon its brim, and dabbled her hands in the cool water, smiling to herself the while, reminiscently.

Presently, lifting her eyes, she looked full upon Fidá, and, startled out of her composure, jumped to her feet, and then stood still again, uncertain whether she wished to run or not. Fidá advanced matters by walking forward into the courtyard again and performing a deep salaam before her. She saw the metal circlet on his head, knew him for a slave, and yet lifted up her voice and spoke to him. What manner of woman could she be!

“Who art thou? What is thy name?” she asked, surprising herself by her unpremeditated boldness. The beauty of her voice, however, made the slave's senses swim anew.

“My name is Fidá. I come from Yemen. And my race is the race of Asra—” he looked into her eyes, and his voice sank to a whisper, as he added involuntarily, “who must die if they cherish love !”

The girl started slightly ; but she did not move while he looked at her, her white face, her deep, heavy-lidded eyes with their long, black fringes, and the slender white throat left uncovered by her dress. Presently she spoke again, more timidly: “Thou’rt a captive — brought home from war by my lord ?”

“I am a captive. I am the slave of thy lord. May Allah pity me !” And this last was drawn from him not by the thought of his captivity, but by the sight of her surpassing loveliness.

Ahalya’s expression softened and grew wistful. “I am a captive too,” she said. “I was born in Iran.”

“The land of roses ! I have been in Iran. We passed through it on our long march from Yemen. And we rested in Teheran, where our people have made treaties with the Shah.”

He hoped to see her eyes brighten when he spoke of her country. But she only gazed dreamily beyond him and answered : “I do not remember it — Teheran. I was a baby when my mother brought me into this land. She was in the house of the King of Dhár, and from there I was married to the King of Mandu. — But thou must go, Asra ! Thou’lt be — killed if they find thee here.”

“Nay, lady !” Fidá suddenly fell upon one knee. “Let me stay but another moment. Thou — thou hast made captivity so fair to me !”

“Hush, Asra! Go quickly. Indeed, indeed, I would not have thee harmed.”

She drew back from him, and he, coming suddenly to his senses, rose and turned away. Yet before he reached the doorway he had twice looked back at her, and each time found her facing him, her great eyes shining, a half smile trembling round her lips.

Fidá reached the corridor on fire. It was as if he had been drinking Soma. His blood raced in his veins. His heart pounded. His hands were cold. Yet he was not too much distraught to hear the sound of some one approaching in the corridor; and, with a quick sense of self-protection, he slipped into the nearest doorway, and concealed himself behind the hangings of Ragunáth's antechamber.

The newcomer had come down the passage; and Fidá, peering cautiously out, perceived, with a start, that it was Ragunáth who was approaching — Ragunáth, the mild, the temperate, who had left the Soma sacrifice and come hither alone, to seek — quiet? To Fidá's surprise and momentary relief, he passed his own doorway, and went on toward the little courtyard. And now the slave, suddenly forgetting himself in his interest in the movements of the man he hated, stepped full into the passage and watched. In the courtyard Ahalya was still seated beside the fountain; but at sight of Ragunáth she rose hastily.

“She was here to watch for him!” thought Fidá; and he clenched his hands at the thought.

Ragunáth went up to the princess and bowed before

her as profoundly as Fidá himself had bowed. Evidently, at the same time, he spoke. Ahalya, however, began at once to move backward, away from him, he following her by degrees, till they had proceeded clear across the court. And then, suddenly, at the veranda step, the young woman turned around, and literally ran into the women's apartments, whither none could follow her.

Ragunáth would be coming back now, and Fidá perceived the necessity for a quick escape. In a moment or two he was back in the broad corridor ; and, looking round the angle into the passage, saw Ragunáth come slowly in from the court and enter his own rooms. From the man's walk Fidá read enough to satisfy him. "She was not waiting," he thought ; and at the idea his spirits rose dizzily. Yet, after all, in this last pleasant surmise he was wrong.

CHAPTER III

AHALYA

SHORT of breath, flushed of face, and discomposed in temper, the Ranee Ahalya entered her day-room after the brief interview with Ragunáth. As she appeared, a girl, who sat on some cushions at the side of the room, working at a piece of embroidery, rose and bowed, and then asked eagerly :

“Did he come?”

Ahalya flung herself down on the broad divan that ran across the end of the room under the screened windows. “Yes, he came,” she said, petulantly. Then, after a moment’s reflection, she added: “I hate him, Neila.”

“Did he — what did he say?” asked the handmaid, forgetting her work as she watched her mistress.

“I don’t know what he said. How should I? I did not think of him. But I think he dishonors the gods. They were all at sacrifice, and he stole away because he does not like Soma. Nor is it good,” she added, with a touch of sympathy.

“But he is a man, and should have a man’s tastes.”

Ahalya shrugged her shoulders, and the two of them were silent for a few minutes, Neila waiting

patiently for the mystery that she knew her lady would reveal — in time. Presently, indeed, the Ranee began to speak, in a low, reflective tone as if she were merely thinking aloud. “In all those months when my lord and the rest were away, fighting, I have thought many times of Ragunáth, who was kind to me at my first coming here. I thought I should be happy when he came again. I wanted him to come. And oh, Neila, thou knowest the days have been long and lonely, and I have been sick for Dhár and for my mother. My lord is very tender of me, and I know that he is good. But he is not young and beautiful to look on. His eyes are not bright nor do his lips smile when he sees me. And Ragunáth seemed younger and more in love with life. Last night, when I danced the poppy dance, it was for him. But, Neila, I have perceived that he is not a man. He makes me think of a snake, with his shiny eyes and his long, still hands. He does not burn with an honest fire. — Ugh, I hate him! So will I tell my lord.”

“Thou wilt not, Lady Ahalya! Thou darest not tell the Rajah you have seen this man! We should all be killed!” Neila sprang to her feet, her work dropping unheeded, while she stared at her mistress, who lay, hands clasped above her head, staring off into space, nor gave the slightest heed to her companion’s fear. Thus Neila presently returned to her place and took up her work again, not without anxiety in her eyes; for the service of the youngest wife of the Lord of Mandu was, to say the least, no monotonous life.

Ahalya was as erratic and as reckless as an existence of stifled loneliness can make a young, brilliant, and impulsive nature. And this very careless openness, mingled as it was with a singularly pure and unsuspecting nature, had won a place for her with every one, from the King of Mandu down to the humblest eunuch of the zenana. She was even tolerated by Malati, the oldest wife, who had been born a Brahman. And than this nothing more can be said.

For some moments Ahalya continued to smile into space; which smile, considering her just-avowed aversion to Ragunáth, Neila was decidedly at a loss to interpret. Then Ahalya asked :

“Neila, have any of the slaves told thee anything concerning the captives brought home in the Rajah’s train?”

“Yes, Kasya spoke to me of one of them, who has been made the King’s cup-bearer. He presumes greatly on his station; for last night he would not even sleep in the slave-house, but lay on the divan in one of the Rajah’s antechambers, sleeping like a god. This man was a prince of his race: — At — Ak — I cannot remember —”

“Asra,” put in Ahalya, quietly.

“Asra! ’Tis that!”

Ahalya sat suddenly up and leaned forward a little. “Kasya told you this! Said he more? What will they do with him? Will he be ransomed?”

“The captive, madam?” Neila, so used to her mistress’s whims, was still surprised at this one. “I

do not know what they will do with him. Kasya did not tell me. He was offered on Indra's altar to-day — being by birth Kshatriya, and the chief of the captives."

"Yes. He is a prince. Neila, I have seen this man."

"Seen him! Oh, Ranee, Ranee, be careful! Why, he is a slave! If he were seen speaking with thee — they would burn him!"

Ahalya laughed joyously. "None saw him but me. He came before Ragunáth. And, Neila, he told me a strange thing. He said: 'I come from Yemen; and my race is the race of Asra, who must die if they cherish love!' What could he mean by that? To die because one loved! I should not die, I think. Neila, Neila, *he* was young, and his eyes shone. Neila! I am lonely! Go bring to me the young Bhavani. Say to him that I will tell him the tale he loves most to hear: of Prince Arjuna and the great bow and the beautiful Princess Draupadi." Ahalya smiled. "Go tell him, Neila, and put away that endless work of thine."

Obediently the girl rose, left her embroidery lying on the cushions, and went out of the room. When she was gone, Ahalya stretched herself still more lazily on her divan, closed her eyes to the light, and, as if she saw with her mind things more beautiful than real, smiled slightly, and began to sing the swaying melody of the poppy dance. About her was a perfect stillness. Not a sound, not so much as the tones of

women's voices from the interior of the zenana, penetrated to her solitude. Perhaps her reverie was broken by the silence, but she only smiled the more; for it had come to be an uncanny habit with her to smile through her loneliest and saddest hours. Only at those rare times when joy or interest lifted her out of herself did her face show all the strength and purity of its melancholy beauty. Her heritage from her mother was a self-defence of constant concealment, and a kind of inward cynicism, which, never revealed on the surface, was nevertheless constantly nourished and strengthened by the many humiliations of her existence. Just now she was considering her performance of the evening before, and the results of it, when, after she had left the theatre, her lord had come to her in great anger, expecting tears, repentance, and abasement from her, and had got only petulance, rebellion, and remorseless laughter, so that finally, worked into a fierce rage, he had left her alone to wake to a realization of her offence. This realization had by no means come; and she fully expected the Rajah to appear before her that evening humbly craving favor; for experience had taught her that she need never be the first to surrender. Rai-Khizar-Pál loved her far more dearly than she, unhappy child, cared for him, grave, honorable, and just as he was; and it was to her carelessness of favor and the consummate skill with which she let that carelessness be known, that the Lady Ahalya owed the favoritism she enjoyed and the rooms she lived in.

These rooms were the choicest in the zenana. They

consisted of a tiny suite of three, opening from a passage that led directly into the main palace. The first of them was an antechamber, heavily spread with rugs, walled with carved wood brought from Ceylon, and lighted day and night by a single crimson lamp suspended from the ceiling. The second room, in which Ahalya now lay, was a light and pleasant place, its floors covered with silken rugs, the walls frescoed gayly with birds and flowers, the furniture and the thousand ornaments it contained all of the costliest variety, and, at the end farthest from the windows, a little shrine to Rahda, the Lady of Love. The last room, accessible only through the other two, was the sleeping-room, its walls hidden by silken hangings of pale purple and gold; its couch covered with cloth of gold; the chests to hold the Ranee's garments, of precious woods inlaid with ivory and pearl, lined with sandal-wood; and teak-wood toilet-stands displaying mirrors, brushes, perfumes, and cosmetics wherewith a woman might be beautified:—a heavily gilded room indeed, and one in which Ahalya spent little time.

Beyond these apartments of the favorite wife, across the whole length of this inner palace wing, stretched a long, narrow room, furnished with every luxury that Indian ingenuity could devise. This was the women's day-room,—their common lounging-place,—where wife and slave met together in free converse. Around it were ranged the rooms of the other wives: Malati's, where the young Bhavani, Rai-Khizar-Pál's only son, the heir of Mandu, lodged with his mother; Bhimeg's

the Kshatriya woman's ; and those of Chundoor, the despised Sudra wife. At the end of the wing, farthest from the palace, lived the women slaves ; and beyond was a separate house for the eunuchs. Such was the zenana, in the days of Indian rule in Mandu : a place full of life and color and sound ; of interminable jealousy, strife, and bitterness ; a place which only one man ever entered ; he on whom all these women must expend the human love and fidelity that lay seething in their hearts.

In the meantime, to Ahalya, waiting on her couch, came Neila, bringing with her a lad ten years old, shaggy-headed, with big, black eyes, and a sturdy figure, who went up and kissed the Ranee affectionately. His eyes were bright with excitement as he cried to her : " Alaha ! Alaha ! " (it was his name for her), " I have been riding to-day ! Kasya put me upon a horse, and we went almost to the old temple and back. And— and I am to go every day now ! " Trained studiously to the dignity of his birth, he gave little active sign of his pleasure ; but his face expressed his delight, and Ahalya, more demonstrative than he, threw her arms about him and laughed in sympathy.

" Beautiful, Bhavani ! Beautiful ! Now thou wilt soon be given a bow ; and then — "

" Then I shall really go and contend in the games before the beautiful Draupadi ! "

" Yes. Shall we play it now ? You will be Arjuna, and these cushions your horse. Pile them up ! Pile them up ! "

“Yes, and you are Draupadi, there on the divan, and I will ride before you and contend with — with —”

“Neila !” cried Ahalya : “Neila ! Where are you ? There,” as the girl came in at the door, “Neila, if you please, you are all the other princes contending for my hand in the royal games. You are four of the sons of Pandu, and the hundred sons of Hastinapura, and —”

“And I am to wrestle with you, and shoot you, and kill all of you, Neila ! And it will be splendid !”

And, Neila smilingly consenting to the slaughter, the game began. For half an hour the contest raged fiercely ; and finally Ahalya herself came down from her throne to be killed by the all-conquering one. But at last, when the little room looked as if a devastating army had passed through it, the sport came to an end, and Ahalya and the little boy sat down together to rest, while the untiring Neila began the task of setting things to rights. It was then that Ahalya’s turn came, and she lost no time in beginning : —

“Bhavani, hast seen thy father to-day ?”

“Yes ! Oh, yes ! He left the Soma sacrifice to see me ride !”

“Was he — was he in a glad humor ? Asked he of me ?”

Neila paused in her labors to hear the answer to this question.

“He was very glad and gay. He gave me a piece of silver for sitting straight on my horse. But—dear ’Laha, I think he did not ask for you.”

“And said he naught of any one else ?”

“Of whom? Oh, but he just talked about me, and my riding, and how in a few years I should go to war with him.”

Ahalya laughed, but not with her eyes. “Well, I am tired now. I am going to sleep, Bhavani. Therefore run away. See what a mess we have made of the room! Run away.”

“But — I may come again soon, to play Arjuna?”

“Oh, yes.”

“To-morrow?” wistfully.

“Yes. But go now, Bhavani.”

Obediently and reluctantly, Bhavani went.

When he was gone, Neila and Ahalya found themselves looking at each other intently. “He will surely come this evening,” said the slave. “He cannot stay away longer.”

Ahalya flushed and frowned. “I do not want him to come,” she said. “I am tired. I am going to sleep now. Do not wake me till the evening meal is ready.” And the Ranee forthwith disappeared into her bedroom, pulling the purple hangings across the doorway behind her so that Neila could not see, as she lay on her bed, whether she slept or not.

Rai-Khizar-Pál did not come that evening, nor the next day, nor the next. And by the third afternoon Ahalya was secretly very anxious. Nothing ever went unknown for twenty-four hours in the zenana: that place whose inmates had nothing to do all day long but discuss each other; and for two days now nothing had been talked of in the common day-room but the

favorite's fall from favor. The Lord Rajah had been at home from his campaign nearly four days and had seen Ahalya in that time only once ! Glory to Krishna ! Who would get her place ? On the afternoon of the fourth day Ahalya, braving the worst, appeared in the day-room. The chill of humiliation that met her was expected, but none the less hard to endure. Malati, when profoundly saluted, set the example for the room by barely noticing the Ranee. The very slave-girls laughed at her as she passed them ; and only Chundoor, the Sudra woman, offered to make room for her. Ahalya, however, had not yet come to passing a whole morning with a person of low caste ; nor yet was she to be driven from the day-room because Rai-Khizar-Pál was offended with her for the poppy dance. After her one bow to Malati, who, as oldest wife, was entitled to it, she walked once round the room, leisurely chose out a pile of cushions apart from the general groups, settled herself with inimitable, lazy grace, despatched one eunuch for sweetened rose-water, commanded another to fan her, gave orders to three or four more, and, when she had made herself important enough, caused Neila to bring in a tray of toilet articles and begin to shape and polish her nails. While Neila worked, she lay perfectly still, surveying the company near by in a supercilious manner, and giving her rivals ample opportunity to realize that, try as they would, not one of them could ever approach her in beauty, in grace, or in charm.

By this time the whole room was in a ferment of

disdain and concealed envy. Suddenly, as if the excitement had not been already great enough for one morning, Rai-Khizar-Pál appeared on the threshold, and looked eagerly down the room. Every head was turned to him: Ahalya's too, but leisurely, and with an indifference that was noticeable. Scarcely did she take the trouble to lift her eyelids, as the Rajah came slowly forward. Her husband's eyes were busy, however, during his ceremonious progress; and he read a deal of history in that walk. It would have been impossible for him not to have made the comparison between Ahalya and those from whom she had so studiously withdrawn herself. Beside their dark, heavy, sensual faces, hers, in its clear-cut, Persian fairness, stood out as a rose among thistles, as gold beside brass. This morning, after three days without her, the Rajah appreciated her more keenly than usual; and, before her indifference, his displeasure melted like mist in the sun. Stopping to speak with no one else, he went to her, amid a sensible but scarcely audible murmur of disappointment. Ahalya looked up only when he bent over her; but she smiled at him for greeting, and he asked nothing better.

"My lotus-flower! My heart's delight!" he said, gazing thirstily at her fair face. "Ahalya! Thou wilt dance no more nautch dances at the theatre?"

For a moment she seemed to hesitate. Then, because she had had enough of playing for the time, she answered, truthfully enough: "Nay, lord. I—am sorry that I danced the poppy dance."

Rai-Khizar longed to take her in his arms; but this, in the face of all the zenana, even he scarcely ventured to do. So, bending low over her, he whispered:

“In two hours come to the marble bath, and we will eat together, alone, by the fountain there. Make thyself beautiful for me, rose of Iran! — my treasure! — my child!” Then, with the smile that he gave only to her, the Rajah turned away, and left the room without speaking to any other in it.

Ten minutes after he had gone Ahalya also departed, running the new gantlet of hurt and angry glances with less indifference than she had borne her humiliation an hour before. Her pride served her well in trouble; but ill-natured jealousy always cut her to the quick; and she had found but light armor against it.

Returning to her own room, she bathed, and let Neila dress her as the Rajah commanded. Her garments were silken tissues of palest pink, delicate as rose-petals. Her waist was girdled with gold and pearls; and her hair braided and bound up with golden threads. When Neila had finished her she was a picture, and she knew it, perhaps, though she took small delight in it; for the unexpressed thought in her heart was that she would have matched her raiment with her love; and Rai-Khizar-Pál she loved as a father, as a venerable and powerful man; her master, but never the lord of her heart.

The Rajah, however, was waiting her coming with very different feelings; for he loved Ahalya as most men love only in early youth. His delight in her was

out of all proportion to his reserved and conservative nature. On her he lavished the wealth of his treasury. For her he would have sacrificed, without a thought, every other woman in his zenana. And while her escapades and her insubordination never failed to startle and hurt him, they only served, in the end, to bind her more strongly to him by the chains of fascination and elusiveness.

The place where the two were to sup together was the Rajah's favorite retreat:— an open-roofed, white-colonnaded room, in the centre of which was a broad, marble bathing-pool. Beside the water grew grasses and flowers, carefully tended; and near at hand, on the marble pavement, were piles of cushions, low stands, and all the articles of Oriental furniture necessary to a retreat where even slaves were not allowed to come without command. By night the marble terrace was lighted with lamps placed on stands; and now, in a soft glow of rosy light, beside an ebony table spread with choice dishes and rare wines, the Rajah lay, appreciating the change of this miniature fairy-land from the rough existence of camps and battle-fields; and waiting for that which should put a finishing touch to his deep content.

She came, the Ranee of his soul, unattended, her delicate garments floating about her like a cloud. At sight of her he exclaimed, and she went to him, smiling and holding out her hands, secretly desirous that he should not kiss her face. She had her wish. Scarcely daring to touch her in her delicacy, he put her off at

arm's length, and gazed at her in a kind of wonder that such a thing should be human.

"Beautiful one! My princess! Sit there and let me look at thee. Most exquisite one! Art thou too frail to eat?" He smiled at his fears, and began to lay before her the various dishes. "See, here are mangoes, and figs, and tamarinds, and little custard apples. And here is a kid cooked in sugar. And rice — and all these sauces. And there is a cup of the wine of Iran, from thy mother's land, beautiful one."

With his own hands he served her, talking inconsequently, content just to gaze upon her roseate presence. And Ahalya, who had been wont to enjoy this patent adoration, sat wondering at herself that it had become painful to her. She strove well to conceal her feeling, not knowing what to make of it. And she ate, smiled, and praised the food and wine, but could think of nothing else to say. She was dreading the time that was coming; but she could not put it off. When both had eaten enough, and when another jar of Persian wine had been opened for the Rajah's use, and Ahalya had washed her hands in a silver basin filled with rose-water, Rai-Khizar lay back on his cushions, called the Ranee to his side, and began tenderly:

"Thou'rt glad, beloved of mine, that I am returned to Mandu?"

Ahalya sighed. "I am glad," she answered. "Oh — the days have been dreary! The weeks would not pass. Loneliness hath killed my soul. Hath my lord ever dreamed of the sadness of women's lives when they are left alone in the zenana?"

Rai-Khizar laughed, misunderstanding her words; but Ahalya flushed with anger that he mocked her earnestness. Seeing her expression, his changed at once. Laying one hand on hers, he said, gently:

“Thou hast been lonely, beautiful one? Tell me of it.”

“How can I tell thee, who hast not been a woman? There are we left, day after day, hating and hated by those with whom we live. And we must dress and powder and perfume, eat, drink, sew, and be content that we have beds to sleep on by night and a prison to house us by day. If I leave the palace and wander abroad in the fields, under the bright sun, the women chatter and the slaves stare, and bearers must be at my heels to carry me if I tire. I cannot sleep away my days. Rather I would live like the Vaisya women, who are free to labor, and laugh, and grow hungry and weary with their toil. The monotony, the idleness of my life, kills my soul! It is for this I danced the poppy dance. It is for this I sometimes sit for hours in the old, ruined temple of Surya, watching the monkeys play in the cotton trees. It is for this I shout and sing and tear to pieces my silken garments, and break the ivories you bring me from the south. For I am not of Hindoo blood. My mother came from free Iran, and I am also of that race. And here, in this sleepy indolence, I suffer—I stifle—I die! There! Is it enough? Have I told thee?”

She stopped, hot and eager with the feeling of her speech, to find Rai-Khizar staring at her with troubled

eyes. He gave her a long and close scrutiny; and when he spoke it was only to say, in a quiet tone: "Thou wilt do well to crush this spirit, Ahalya. I cannot make thee a man;—nor would I if I could. Therefore, being a woman, thou must be protected as one. Speak of this no more. Nay, listen, and I will tell thee of our campaign, of the battle on the plain of Dhár, and of these men of the west that are worthy warriors. Thou knowest, Ahalya, that, hundreds of seasons ago, there came, over the snow-clad mountains of the north, a great host, led by one called Mahmoud of Ghazni. They came, in the name of their one God, to conquer our country; and though many hundreds of times Indians and Rajputs drove them back, they have persevered, and are now masters of the north and east. In Lahore, their kings have ruled for generations; and now a slave sits on the throne of the new Kingdom of Delhi.¹ And out of Delhi a fresh horde has come for the conquest of Malwa. Beyond the walls of Dhár we met them in battle; and, by Indra and Vishnu, we routed them well! I have brought back in my train the nephew of their leader; and I think it will be long ere Omar crosses the Vindhya to get him back!"

"Thou hast brought home the nephew of their leader! What glory for thee! Is he to be ransomed?"

"No, by my life! I like the fellow, and I have made

¹Aybek, a slave of Mahommed-Ghori, founded the present Kingdom of Delhi.

him my cup-bearer. He pleases me with his manner. He is like thee: — rebellious. Why, look you, on the first night of his captivity he slept in one of my rooms here — would not go into the house of slaves, and so put me to the blush for asking a prince to demean himself, that I have granted him a bed in one of the antechambers near my sleeping-room. Also, yesterday, at the noon meal, he ceased to fill my cup after the second jar was empty. I asked him why he failed in his duty, and he answered that he did not fail, but was, rather, careful of my welfare: — that the gods had made kings to be examples to their people; and that a drunken king bred drunkenness in his subjects!

Ahalya's eyes shone. "And thou — what didst thou, my lord?"

"I gave the fellow ten lashes for his impertinence. But I like him, and I shall keep him in my service."

"Keep a prince for thy slave, lord?"

"Whooroo, Ahalya! Thou hast his tongue to-night. Come; I am weary of talking. Dance for me — the poppy dance, if thou wilt, now we are alone."

Ahalya rose submissively, and poised herself, while the Rajah lay back in deep comfort on his pillows. She was a beautiful dancer when she chose to dance; and she could hum her own music, beating the rhythm with her feet as she swayed slowly from one posture to another. But she did not dance the poppy dance to-night. She only made a series of tableaux that would have delighted the soul of an artist, and which fully

satisfied the eyes of the Rajah. Ahalya circled round him like some broad-winged bird, moving more and more lightly, becoming more and more cloudlike to his stilled senses. And presently when, out of her gauzy mist, the Ranee looked at him, she perceived that his eyes were closed and that his breath was coming deeply and regularly.

Ahalya experienced a sudden feeling of relief. He slept. His sleep would wear the night away. She was free to go. Joyously, softly, swiftly, she passed out of that room and the next; but in the antechamber beyond she paused. Three or four rooms and a passage lay between her and the zenana. These she appeared to be in no haste to traverse. Halting indecisively, she stood looking about her as if in search of something — or some one; and her brow was drawn in meditation. Then, all at once, she started, not in the direction of her apartments, but through another door that led off into a long range of rooms, little used, in one of which the captive slave of Rai-Khizar-Pál had had the audacity to sleep on the first night of his coming to Mandu; and the use of which the lenient Rajah had afterward granted him. As she continued on her way, Ahalya's excitement and her speed increased until she was fairly running along, her eyes, meantime, swiftly examining each room as soon as she entered it. At last, when her breath had become panting, and her color unnaturally brilliant; when, as it would seem, she began to realize what she was doing, she reached, by her devious route, the antechamber to the zenana, where an eu-

nuch stood on guard. And he stared in amazement at her flushed and frowning face as she hurried past him into her voluntary captivity.

It was as well that the Ranee Ahalya sought her sleep that night without having peered out of her screened windows into the inner court; for had she done so, she might have found by accident that which she had unsuccessfully sought. For, till a very late hour that night, Fidá, the slave, risking his life, crouched in the shadow of the fountain of that court, watching, with burning eyes, the glow of a single lamp that shone in the Lady Ahalya's rooms: a lamp which, though he knew it not, was never extinguished. And so, when weariness finally overcame him, he crept away without learning whether or not the lady of his dreams was sleeping behind her imprisoning walls.

CHAPTER IV

THE ASRA RUBY

It was some time past midnight when Fidá, baffled and exhausted, returned to his antechamber, and, wrapping himself in his white cloak, lay down on the floor. Weary as he was, he could not sleep at once, but lay for a little while thinking profitlessly on what he had done. Fate had twice given him that which he had not sought. But now, trying to circumvent Fate, he had been doubly defeated; for, had he been where he should that evening, Ahalya, in her reckless search, must have come upon him. This, happily, he did not know; but he was none the less unrighteously angry at his failure to find out something, even the smallest, of her habits. *Her* habits! Reason, which he had persistently smothered, rose up against him, and began to lay before him certain grim truths. This woman, of whom his nearly every waking thought was now composed, was a Ranee — a queen, a wife. To her he was an outcast, and yet he had dared to lift his thoughts to her. Fool that he was, he had got himself into a state men called love! What love could be more unholy than his? She was a Ranee. But, argued his other self, he was himself a prince by birth,

and the actual head of a great race. Nevertheless, this race of his was a strangely unhappy one ; and he, Fidá, had, all his life till now, persistently avoided women ; for to his family women were fatal. He had taken the highest pride in his reputation for coldness, for chastity, for temperance. At sixteen he had left Yemen to put himself under the guardianship of his uncle, — a power at the court of Delhi ; and, upon his departure for India, he had vowed lifelong devotion to the extension of the Prophet's power ; and had determined to allow no human temptation to conquer him. This present matter, however, he protested, was no temptation. It was even most unlikely that he should see the woman again, considering the difference in their present stations. Nevertheless, after a little more chaotic thinking, Fidá took from a certain secure hiding-place in his vestment a tiny golden box, scarcely half an inch square, fastened by a minute spring. Without opening it, he clasped this box closely to his breast ; and, as if it held some magic power, under its pressure he grew calm again, his brain ceased to throb, sleep stole upon him, and little by little his hold on it relaxed, till at last his hand fell from his breast and his treasure rolled upon the floor.

Fidá's awakening was sudden. The tones of a loud voice, calling confusedly, mingled themselves with his dreams. Then he sprang to his feet to find the Rajah standing over him, in a most dishevelled state, crying to him to bring drinking-water, instantly. And Fidá, startled and sleepy, hurried away on his errand.



When he returned with the desired drink, he found his master in his bedroom, surrounded by half a dozen attendants, each ministering to him in some way. Way was made with alacrity for the cup-bearer, however; for Rai-Khizar greeted the appearance of water with a positive roar of eagerness. After three brimming gobletfuls had been quaffed without pause, the Rajah gave a great sigh and sank back on his cushions. "By the fingers of Ushas," said he, "that is the best liquor ever brought me! Fidá, thou abstainer, where learned thy people their wisdom?—Now I bathe. Let a meal be ready when I return, and summon Lord Ragunáth to eat with me. Sacharman, go rouse him. Thou, Asra, say thy prayers, and then come and wait at my table. Away! Out of my sight!"

There was a general scurrying, in the midst of which Rai-Khizar, restored to tranquillity, walked away to his bath, leaving the room free for other slaves to prepare in it the morning meal. In half an hour, when the King reappeared, all was in readiness, and Fidá stood alone behind his master's seat. The Rajah seated himself at once; but, not greatly disposed toward food, sat waiting for Ragunáth before beginning his meal. The official did not long delay, though he made his appearance in no way hurriedly. He was carefully dressed, fresh-colored and smiling; and in his hand he carried a tiny, golden box. Fidá perceived it at once, and his heart throbbed with anxiety, but he did not speak. Greetings passed between Rajah and minister, and then Ragunáth took his place opposite Rai-Khizar,

and laid Fidá's box on the low brass table in front of him.

"This was upon the floor in the second ante-chamber," he observed.

The Rajah took it up and examined it, Fidá still silently watching. For a moment Rai-Khizar seemed to consider. Then, suddenly turning to his slave, he exclaimed: "'Tis thine, Asra! I remember they found it on thee in my tent in the plain of Dhár, and returned it to thee again, it being a charm of thy god."

"Yes, it is mine, O King."

Rai-Khizar-Pál examined it further, with curiosity. "Doth the box open? What is its power?" he asked.

"It contains a charm, great Rajah, the charm of my race."

"Show us this charm," demanded the master, handing the box to his slave.

Fidá's hand closed upon it with visible eagerness; but he was very loath to open it. However, there was no choice. Touching the delicate spring, that was almost undiscoverable, the golden lid flew open, and Fidá turned the box upward on his palm. When he lifted it, there lay in his hand a stone, red and brilliant: a ruby, as magnificent a gem as the Rajah had ever looked on. It was cut and polished, and from its prismatic sides shone an inward fire of palest crimson. This stone Fidá placed in the Rajah's hand, who received it with an exclamation of wonder.

"Whoorroo! There is not, in all Mandu, a gem so wonderful! Thy family, Asra, must be powerful



indeed! Come, as the price of keeping thy treasure, relate to us its merits as a charm, and how it came to be thine."

Fidá was deeply troubled. He gazed at Ragunáth, who, forgetting himself, was leaning over the tray, his eyes fixed—was it hungrily?—upon that gleaming stone. There was an eagerness in the clear-cut face that was too easy to read; and as he watched, Fidá saw the man's hands fairly tremble for the gem. Rai-Khizar-Pál was wholly different. His face, as he examined the stone, expressed pleasure; but there was not a hint of avarice in his large, quiet eyes. After three or four minutes of hesitation and inward struggle on the part of Fidá, the King exclaimed:

"Thy tale, Fidá! Or wouldst really lose the jewel to me?"

"The jewel," cut in Ragunáth, in a smooth, quiet voice, "belongs by right of war to the Rajah. No slave should possess such a fortune as this."

"Ah, good counsellor, there thou'rt wrong. This Mohammedan is not a Sudra. Moreover, he does not carry the ruby as riches, but for a reason that we wait to hear. Come, Fidá, speak!"

The King laid the ruby on the tray before him, and began to eat, slowly. At the same time Fidá, overpressed, entered upon his tale; and during the whole of the recital his eyes never once rested on the jewel, but were fixed unwinkingly on Ragunáth's æsthetic profile.

"O conqueror, the story of this jewel that you

bid me tell is stranger than you think. 'Tis such a story as is scarcely to be found outside of fairy lore. And yet I stand here to prove that it is true.

“Know that my race, the Asra, are an ancient and powerful family, that have dwelt for many centuries in Yemen, the holy land. We are of high descent, and among us, at the time of the Hejira, was a follower of Mohammad, afterward one of the writers of the Koran, a venerable and a holy man, accounted a sage : by name, Hussen el-Asra. At the same time there lived in Mecca the high and holy Osman, compiler of the Koran, worshipped throughout the city as a saint. Now Hussen had a son, a young man of great beauty of face and form, and of highly virtuous mind, called Abdullah. One day this young man, by an unhappy accident, chanced to see a maiden, the daughter of a wealthy nobleman of Mecca, Said ibn-Alnas ; and in the first sight of her he loved the maiden, and, going to her father, asked her hand in marriage. Said received Abdullah in the most courteous manner, but was distressed by the object of his visit, in that his daughter had already a suitor in old Osman, who, though four times married to virtuous women, had become so enamored of the beautiful Zenora that he purposed divorcing himself of one of his wives in order to marry her. Abdullah, however, was unmarried ; and the venerable Said preferred to make his child the first wife of an honorable man, to bringing dishonor on the head of another woman by marrying her to Osman. Zenora, likewise, when the matter



was laid before her, as is our custom with our women, begged earnestly to become the wife of the younger man, whom she already loved. Thereupon, before Osman was made aware of the matter, Zenora and Abdullah were safely married, and she had taken up her abode in the house of her husband and her husband's father.

“When news of this wedding was brought to the saint Osman, he fell into a violent rage of despair. Praying to the Prophet for vengeance, the Prophet listened to his prayer, and put into his mouth a curse. And so Osman went into the market-place and waited ; and when Abdullah came thither, Osman went up to him and cursed him and his love, and the loves of his children and his children's children, that whosoever of his race should truly love a woman should die of it, having by her no more than one son. And though an Asra should, in his heart, cherish love for a woman and not marry her, the curse should yet be upon him, till in a short time their whole race should perish from the face of the earth.”

“It was an unholy curse,” observed the Rajah, deeply interested. And Fidá rejoined :

“So thought all that heard it ; and no man looked for it to come to pass. Yet it happened that Abdullah and Zenora had not been wedded a month when the husband sickened. Though he grew constantly worse, he but clung the more to his wife, and she to him, until it seemed that he must surely die. Then, in her bitterness and grief, Zenora called upon her father and

her husband's father for aid ; and the nobleman and the learned and holy one took counsel together, and prayed to Allah and the Archangels. And their prayer was answered. A voice from heaven addressed them, bidding Said bring forth the richest treasure of his house, and then Hussen to bless it and then take it to Abdullah for a charm against the evil of the curse ; and, while he carried it, it would give him health and bring him children. So Said went and got this ruby, which was renowned throughout Yemen for its size and perfection. And Hussen, performing his part of the task, blessed the gem and consecrated it to Allah, and took it to his son, who by it was miraculously restored to health. Abdullah and Zenora lived happily, and had many daughters, but only one son, to whom the ruby was given at his father's death, with the word that it should descend in time to his first-born, and so on down. In time it was found that only those children born of deep and lasting love were subject to the curse ; but upon these, since the time of Abdullah and Osman, the evil has never failed to take effect when the ruby is not worn as a protective charm. It was my father's, and given me by him according to the custom ; wherefore my uncle, though he married and has a son, has devoted his life to pursuits of war and hunting, knowing that the gentler pleasures of life are not for him."

"And hast thou never put thy stone to the test? Hast never loved?" inquired Ragunáth, with a faintly curling smile.

“No,” answered Fidá, shortly. But the Rajah broke in :

“By Surya, 'tis a tale worth the price of the gem ! Take it, Asra ; and I think it were well for thee to keep it idle while thou remainest in this palace.”

Fidá gave a little, imperceptible start, and stared quickly into his conqueror's face. There was nothing to be read in it ; and surely it was impossible that the words could have had any under-meaning. Greatly relieved at receiving back his treasure, the Asra replaced it in its box, which he fastened again in his garment. As he did this he was aware that Ragunáth's eyes were still upon him ; but Ragunáth's glances had annoyed him so often, that he failed especially to note this. He had recovered his jewel ; and now the meal was coming to an end and for an hour he would be released from duty.

When he was again summoned to the Rajah's side, it was in the great audience hall, where Rai-Khizar-Pál officiated in his judicial state. The Mohammedan was not a little interested in the proceedings of the long morning ; and his respect for the ability of his master increased not a little as he watched him settle, one after another, with ease, rapidity, and remarkable insight, the great number of quarrels and suits brought before him by his subjects. At the second hour after noon, however, the court rose, and those natives whose cases had not come up that day were told to return on the morrow ; whereupon they got up, without comment, from where they had been sitting in rows

around the wall, and departed to their various pursuits. The Rajah, accompanied by Manava, retired to eat his second meal, which Fidá served. When it was over, he stood waiting to be dismissed ; for it was the time of day when Rai-Khizar usually slept and the slave was accustomed to enjoy a period of idleness. Left alone with the captive, however, the King turned to him, and, after a few moments' consideration, said gravely :

“Asra, I have said that I would not ransom thee ; liking too well thy presence and thy service. Yet this I have in my heart reconsidered until, though I shall grieve to let thee go, I am willing to send envoys to thy uncle to treat for thy ransom. Doth this rejoice thee ?”

Fidá fell upon one knee and pressed the Rajah's hand to his head. “Thanks to my lord !” said he, in a voice muffled with emotion.

“Ah, thou'lt be glad to be in thine own estate again ! I send the envoys forth to-day. It should be not more than three weeks ere thy freedom cometh. On my life, I shall be loath to part with thee. But now I can keep thee no longer in this servant's garb. Thou shalt be habited like a prince again, and wait here, my guest, till thou goest forth.”

“Let the King pardon my boldness. What is the ransom thou wouldst free me for ?”

“Far less than thou art worth, my Asra : five thousand pieces of copper, jewels to the worth of an hundred cows, and the oath that the Rajah of Mandu

and the mighty Aybek of Delhi be henceforth as brothers."

Fidá had risen to his feet ; but he stood with his head so bent that the Rajah could not see his face. "I have a favor to ask my lord," he said, still in the muffled tone that could not be interpreted.

"Speak."

"Will the Rajah permit that, till the time of my freedom, I may remain as I am now : — the cup-bearer of my lord ?"

"What ! Art not a prince ? Wouldst thou remain a slave ?"

"I asked a favor of my lord."

"Then it is granted, Asra. But, by the bolt of Indra, I understand thee not !" And, displeased with his captive's request, he got up and strode out of the room. Fidá stood there alone, staring at the floor, with a curling, sorrowful smile on his lips, and a deep melancholy in his eyes. For Fidá knew his race well ; and he was perfectly aware that, though an army of twenty thousand Mohammedans might storm the plateau of Mandu for the simple purpose of taking him out of captivity, yet they would never pay one-half of the ransom demanded ; and, should they take the oath of brotherhood with an infidel, it would be for the purpose of plundering him at the first opportunity. Entertaining, then, from the first, no false hope of freedom, Fidá preferred remaining in his present state as personal servant of a king, to mutilation and degradation when the answer that his uncle would send should reach the ears

of Rai-Khizar-Pál. Understanding all this, and having the courage to face it from the first, Fidá was none the less bitter at heart at the thought of it. And it was with dragging steps and a darkened face that he finally set off toward the house of slaves.

There, as he had hoped, he found Ahmed, unoccupied and awake. The brightness of the boy's face at sight of his master roused Fidá a little from his mood, and his eyes had lost their sombreness when, side by side with his young companion, he left the chattering veranda, and walked in the direction of the great courtyard. As they went, they talked in their native tongue, and Ahmed, his boyish spirits always light, recounted all the gossip of under-life in the great palace which had not come to Fidá's ears. The Mohammedan boy had made himself very popular even among the Indian slaves; and he, like all servants, was in possession of intimate details of the higher life that would have astonished and nonplussed certain august personages. His chatter was innocent enough, however. One of the slave-women in the zenana had had a quarrel with Bhimeg, the second wife, over a pet paroquet. Purán and Kanava had had a trial of strength in wrestling, and Kanava had come out victor. Two of the eunuchs of the zenana were just dead of a fever. And so on, infinitely, till Fidá had ceased to listen, and was occupied with his own thoughts, which had suddenly turned in another direction. After all, did he really wish to leave Mandu? Was there not something here that could not be taken away; something that was not to

be found in any other country of the earth? Dwelt not the fairest woman in the world here, in the place of his captivity? Did he really desire to leave her land even for princely honors? Nay. It might be impossible that he should see her again; yet always she was here, and here only, the lady of his secret heart.

The two companions, loitering through the great courtyard, finally entered the temple room of Vishnu, that began the south wing of the palace. A curious place, this temple, devoted to that species of half-formed Hindooism that was at this time the prevailing religion of India. Into this religion, as into a gigantic pie, had been thrown pell-mell the doctrines of ancient Vedic worship, the religion of the great Triad, the worst side of dying Buddhism, and the Philosophies, insulted by their anthropomorphic company. This temple room was a fair specimen of the mingled faiths. On one side, decked and carved with the symbols of fifty other gods, the images of Vishnu and Lakshmi reclined upon a throne about which was entwined the great serpent Sesha, symbol of eternity, in whose coils was caught a golden lotus, from which Brahma and the demigods had, in the beginning, come forth. Over the head of Vishnu hung a wooden monkey, representing Hanuman, the friend of Vishnu; and three or four living members of the chattering tribe dwelt in the room. Around the three other walls were images of different gods, all comparatively insignificant, but each with his priest and a sect, however small, of worshippers. At any hour of the day, indeed, but

especially in the morning and in the evening, there were to be found from one to twenty worshippers seated on the floor before the various deities, engaged in performing an Agnihotra or an Ishti for prosperity and good fortune.

In the dusk of this holy place, lighted by its fires, Fidá and Ahmed continued their low-voiced talk, which had now turned upon the long-standing feud between Kasya, chief of the eunuchs, and Kanava, the slave-master. Kanava was high in the favor of Ragunáth; but Kasya, heart and soul devoted to his Rajah, found little favor in Ragunáth's eyes.

"Kanava," Ahmed said, "is Ragunáth's spy; and he can go anywhere in the palace except into the zenana. Kasya watches his eunuchs, so that Kanava has never been able to get in there; and I have heard one of the eunuchs say that he has tried to bribe every one of them to let him in. They say that Ragunáth is in love with one of the women —"

"What woman?" demanded Fidá, sharply.

"The youngest wife. They call her Ahalya."

Fidá's eyes blazed with anger. "Why is not the Rajah told of this?"

"Great Allah! Every one would be killed, I suppose," returned the boy; and the subject was dropped.

In the midst of all this gossip Fidá had not told his companion anything of the chief event of the day: — the matter of his ransom. And, on reflection, he decided to say nothing about it. Ahmed's young buoyancy could never be made to understand Fidá's own

view of the incident; and he could do nothing but raise hopes that would not be fulfilled. So, after a while, each returned to his duties, insensibly lightened at heart by the taste of intimate and affectionate companionship.

Fidá lay down in his corner, that night, tired out. According to old habit he slipped his hand inside his tunic and made sure that his little box was in its place, in a pocket that he had made for it himself, after his other clothes had been taken from him. Finding his treasure safe, he offered up a prayer, wondered where his uncle slept that night, still more wondered whether the Lady Ahalya was asleep, and, with her name on his lips, drifted off into unconsciousness.

He was awakened by the sense that some one was bending over him. Next he felt the lightest touch upon his body. A hand was slipping along him so softly that only an acute sense could have felt it. Then Fidá opened his eyes. Ten brown, sinewy fingers were working at his sash. Quietly the Asra laid his own hands on those of the marauder, and, while the blood rushed to his heart, gripped them with the strength of a giant. The intruder gave a soft exclamation; and Fidá found himself looking into the eyes of Kanava.

The gaze continued till the slave-master was beaten. He turned his eyes away. Then Fidá's lip curled, and he spoke, his voice soft with scorn.

"Go back, Kanava, and tell thy master that the Asra ruby is not for him." And, with a violent gesture, he

flung the man away from him as one would fling a bag of meal.

Without a word Kanava got up and crept out of the room. After he was gone again Fidá relaxed, and, curiously enough, found no difficulty in going back to sleep. Nor did he afterward waste much time in thinking of the mortal enemy he had made by that night's work.

CHAPTER V

POPPIES

ON the night after the reconciliation with her husband, the night also after her search for a slave in the palace, the Lady Ahalya went to bed in a temper, without having roused Neila, her maid. During the night, while she slept, some subtle change surely worked upon the brain and heart of the Ranee; for she herself, and Neila too, knew afterward that this night was, with her, the beginning and the end of all things. For the next three or four days Neila's life was made miserable; but Ahalya did not attempt to account even to herself for the freaks, moods, and whims which changed with such rapidity that, before human power could gratify one, the next had made the work all to do over again. Not for an entire week did the long-suffering attendant get an inkling of what was really the trouble; and then she went into a state of consternation that Ahalya made no attempt to lessen. For the Ranee's secret mind was running continually now, perhaps without her own volition, on the most dangerous of topics:—how she might see the Asra again. This was not a matter so absolutely impossible as Fidá deemed it. Life in the Indian zenanas was not

quite that of the harems of Arabia; though, as Ragnáth knew, this one was certainly well guarded. By degrees, however, Ahalya approached her end. How it came about, who could say? But Neila found herself presently acting in the character of a spy. This eunuch and that she questioned; now and then she ventured into the great courtyard or, more warily, into the palace itself: observing, listening, asking a question of one slave or another, till Fidá's daily habits had become familiar to her. Then, after so much patience, opportunity arrived. One afternoon at the very end of the month, after the Rajah had partaken of his afternoon meal and gone to rest, Neila herself saw the slave Fidá set out alone into the fields, along the old temple road. This incident being duly reported to her mistress, Ahalya's face lighted like a child's.

"I, too, am going to walk on the temple road! Yes, yes, Neila, I am going! Seek not to detain me. I am going to gather the late poppies in the temple field to make a rouge for my face. Come, prepare me!"

The unhappy Neila protested violently, all her courage failing. Gradually she had been drawn into Ahalya's madness; but now, brought face to face with possible consequences, she rebelled. There was a scene between her and her mistress such as had never been known before. But while Neila wept on the border of hysterics, Ahalya, the power of her great malady holding her above such things, remained dry-eyed, firm, commanding. What wonder that Neila in the end submitted? Nevertheless, one thing the maid insisted on. She and

Kasya must follow their lady, as indeed many times before they had followed her unconventional rambles; or Ahalya should leave the zenana only over her, Neila's, body.

Twenty minutes later the three set out along the temple road, Neila bearing with her certain fiercely given instructions that had caused her heart to grow leaden in her breast. Kasya, as they proceeded, wondered more and more about the relations between his mistress and her maiden; for Ahalya was walking with a rapidity that sent the blood into her cheeks and her heart pounding; while the traces of tears on the other's face were fresh enough to denote some unusual incident before the expedition. A little more and his suspicions, ever ready because ever needed, would have been aroused. But, at this juncture, Fate, more powerful even than Love, stepped in and took command of the day. The three had not proceeded half a mile from the palace when there came running to them a little slave-boy, who, halting beside Kasya, spoke a few rapid words in his ear that turned the eunuch's mind from all thought of the Lady Ahalya and her walk. The Ranee Malati, it seemed, had called for her son to be brought to her; and the young Bhavani, the most important person in Mandu after the Rajah, was not to be found. For a moment or two Kasya hesitated. He had no choice but to go.

"I beseech the pardon of the Lady Ahalya. I must return to the zenana."

Ahalya's face brightened. "Go then," said she.

“I will send after thee another of the eunuchs.”

“It is not necessary.”

“Lady — thy lord would be angry. I dare not —”

“Then send Churi after us; but let him not intrude on me.” And Ahalya, now a little angry, started on again, Neila perforce following her. Kasya, troubled in his mind, turned away, and set off at a run for the palace, nor did he neglect to despatch Churi, “the doctor,” Ahalya’s favorite slave, after the errant Ranee. But Churi, who was more an individual than a slave, had ideas of his own about Ahalya, and did not hurry to follow her. He arrived, indeed, at the temple ruin, to find Neila stationed at its entrance as if on guard. And he had the immense self-restraint to join her without asking any questions.

Fidá, in the meantime, unconscious of the little sensation he was stirring up, was occupied in making an exploration of one corner of the plateau. As soon as the Rajah dismissed him he had started off by himself, having a great desire for solitude in which to meditate on a situation that was becoming every day more galling to him. Two weeks had passed since the departure of the embassy to his uncle’s camp; and he found himself gradually beginning to hope against hope that he would, after all, be rescued from his slavery. For this captivity which, for a few days, had been tinged with the glamour of adventure and romance, had now become the most irksome, the most unendurable of degradations. He walked for a long time, thinking deeply, paying little heed to his way till the

scene became too remarkable to go unnoticed. He was two miles away from the palace when the road, which, some distance back, had turned sharply to the left, ran out of the flat, cultivated fields, and entered a wood which shortly became a little jungle, the road being cut through the heaviest undergrowth of bushes, trees, and sinuous vines. Around him, monkeys and parquets chattered and screamed. The foliage was brilliant as with a second summer; for with autumn and the first suggestion of the second rains, summer leaps up again over all the northwest country; and Fidá was gazing about him delighted with the color and the life, the trouble of his heart banished by the beauty of nature, when suddenly his road turned again, and — ended.

Before him, to the precipitous edge of the plateau, stretched a naturally clear space, in the centre of which stood a giant building, gone all to ruin. Its huge sandstone blocks were black with age and green with moss and growing plants. Its veranda and great doors were open to the daylight; and within, through openings in the roof, bright sunlight shone. The architecture was crude and heavy; but Fidá recognized, without difficulty, the style of the oldest Buddhism. And he divined correctly the history of this building, which he had started out to find: that it had once been a Vihara, later converted to the uses of Surya, one of the Brahman gods.

The place was, like the religion it still symbolized, a magnificent ruin. And its setting was worthy of it;

for the fields on either side were overrun with flaming poppies, blooming for the second time in the year, and filling the whole air with the somnolence of their burden of opium. Beyond the fields, a fitting frame for the picture, the jungle commenced again: a high wall of subdued color, green and brown, splashed with the scarlet of the wild-cotton flowers. Fidá, halting in wonder, felt his heart suddenly grow light. Here were poppies — her flowers. It was a propitious omen. In his trouble, he had come upon a place devoted to her symbols. Was it a sign to him to remain in Mandu, hoping, however vainly, sometime to find a way to her? Smiling a little at the Indian superstition of his thoughts, he moved on, rambled for a time round the rock-strewn rooms within the temple, and finally out into the fields, where the flowers took effect on him again and set his mind running hotly upon Ahalya, the one woman of his world.

An hour had passed since he left the palace, and he knew that in a little time he must turn his steps again toward slavery. This thought intensified the delight of lingering here, held by the fascination of the wild flowers. And it was now, at the most beautiful hour, in this enchanted spot, that she herself, Ahalya, came to him. Fidá saw two figures appear from the trees by the temple. Both were women. He got to his feet, trembling a little. Only one was advancing: — dressed all in white, the head-veil thrown back from her face, under one arm a broad, flat basket. Yes; it was Ahalya. Fidá perceived that he was neither blind

nor mad. She, the Ranee, was here, with him. Hesitatingly he advanced toward her, two or three steps, and their eyes met.

Ahalya crimsoned violently; and seeing this, Fidá grew bold. Not thinking of the enormity of his daring, with only the memory of two empty weeks upon him, he went straight toward her, and when he was at her side began, passionately: "Most beautiful of women! Lotus-lidded! Lily-faced! I behold thee, and thou art not a dream!" And then abruptly he paused, overcome by the situation.

Ahalya turned to look behind her, and Fidá's eyes followed hers. Churi had arrived at the ruin, but he and Neila stood leaning against a fallen stone, their backs to the poppy-field, evidently talking together. The Ranee, seeing herself safe enough, became confused; and, still half turned away from the slave, murmured, with an embarrassed manner:

"I came — to gather poppies. Did my lord send you hither?"

"Thy lord — sleeps," muttered Fidá.

Ahalya gave a nervous start. Now that she had attained her end, the Ranee began to wish herself a thousand miles away, so confused was she by the presence of this man. Fidá saw how her hands trembled; and, emboldened by the flush of her half-averted cheek, his heart beating furiously with a sudden hope, he took her by the hand and gently, persuasively, led her to the stone from which he had just risen. Here, though she would have protested, he

caused her to sit down. "I must have the poppies," she found courage to say, lifting up her basket, and suddenly smiling. "Neila and Churi may come at any moment." And she turned again to look at the ruin. This time the two figures had disappeared entirely.

"I will get poppies for you. Wait." And, taking the basket, Fidá darted forward and began plucking the tough-stemmed flowers. In five minutes the basket was heaping full, though the assortment was anything but select. But while he worked, his back turned to Ahalya, all his new-born audacity suddenly ran out at his finger-tips, and when he returned to her with the narcotic burden, his eyes were fixed on the ground, and he was more confused than she. He laid the basket at her feet, and then stood, like a culprit, before her.

"Let the Ranee pardon me!" he whispered.

"Pardon thee?" she asked, wondering.

"Ah, I have dared to lift my eyes to thee, and now — and now —" his voice, unpent, rang clear.

"And now," she breathed, most softly.

"Now," his heart throbbed, "I cannot lower them again!"

Her eyes lifted themselves to his, and she smiled at him, half shyly, half with a beautiful pride. Seeing that smile, Fidá's senses deserted him. He fell upon his knees before her, and lifted up his hands, crying:

"Ahalya! I love you! I love you! I love you!"

The princess shivered, half in terror, half in — something else. But she could not speak. Slowly, therefore, the fire died out of Fidá's face. His dark head, bound with its slave's circlet, drooped lower and lower, till at length it rested on a stone at the edge of her silken garment, and his face was buried in his arms. So they remained for a long time, taking no account of the moments as they passed, neither of them happy, both afraid of what they had done, of the astonishing betrayal. Fidá was sick and shaken with his inward tumult. Ahalya sat in a rigid calm, thinking, after a desultory fashion, of many ordinary things that now seemed infinitely far removed from her. The bitter weariness of her life had suddenly disappeared; but that which replaced it, she could not just now consider. The revolution was too absolute. How should she readjust herself so soon? Yet, since they were here together, free and alone, she wished to speak; and so, in a sweet, monotonous tone, she gave voice to many fragments that were in both their minds.

“I love you. Is it not right, and holy? I love young things, and youth, and beauty. Krishna and Radha loved thus. Who knows how it comes? I loved you by the well. Your eyes shone into mine, and you smiled at me, and you were not afraid. I loved to think of you, a captive, and a prince. Most of all I love you here, because, Fidá — because — ah, look!”

At the change in her voice the slave roused himself,

as one wakes, with an effort, from some wondrous dream. Ahalya also had risen, and was staring fearfully at a figure that approached them out of the shadow of the trees.

“Ragunáth !” muttered Fidá. “Name of the prophet ! how comes he here ?”

“Where I am, there he is also,” murmured the Ranee. “Ah, Fidá, run, run, and bring Neila and Churi ! I fear this man. He must not see you.”

“He has already seen me. I cannot go.”

This much they had time to say, as the Rajah’s counsellor came slowly toward them, his arms folded across his breast, his eyes aflame with angry suspicion. Ahalya, trembling though she was, still straightened up to receive him, and Fidá fell slightly behind her, to one side, as became a slave. But there was, in his attitude, small suggestion of respect for him who approached. At a little distance Ragunáth halted and looked at them : — looked as only he could look, from one to the other and back again. To-day, however, his lips did not smile, but wore the hard line of jealousy. Under this gaze Ahalya quivered anew ; and Fidá heard her catch her breath. Instinctively he stepped forward. But, just at that moment, Ragunáth raised his upper lip a little off his teeth, and spoke :

“The Lady Ahalya has found a new slave.”

Ahalya turned white, but remained silent. Fidá gazed steadily and scornfully at the eavesdropper, who, after waiting a moment, said again :

“Is there a new law of the Lord Rajah’s, that his slaves shall walk with his women — picking poppies, in the fields?”

Ahalya, angered beyond her dread, opened her lips to speak; but Fidá was before her.

“The Lady Ahalya, attended by Churi, and Neila, her woman, came to this field to gather poppies. I, unknowing, was here before her. When the Lady Ahalya perceived me, she allowed me to pluck the flowers for her and to lay them at her feet.”

“Churi and the woman, then, — am I blinded? I do not see them here,” and he peered about the field like a man looking for a lost gem.

Fidá’s hands itched for his throat; but now, suddenly, Ahalya assumed the height of her position, and, actually stamping her foot with outraged dignity, cried: “Does Lord Ragunáth presume — *dare* — to doubt my word? I say that Neila and Churi brought me hither; and, coming here, we found this trusted slave of my lord, whom I commanded to pluck the poppies for me. But my Lord Ragunáth — came he hither also to get flowers to make a rouge for his face?” The last words she all but spat at him.

Ragunáth was silenced, but very far from being suppressed. Indeed, the slight lifting of his eyebrows and the shrugging of his shoulders spoke as words could not speak; and Fidá was perilously near an outbreak. At this juncture, however, by intervention of a dilatory providence, Neila, and with her Churi, made their appearance from the temple. At sight of three figures in

the field where they had thought to find one, or, at worst, but two, they came hurriedly forward to their lady, who stood awaiting them in silence. Ragunáth's eyes were now fixed upon the face of Churi, who endured the look very well; for in his own way he was much interested in the situation. No words passed till Ahalya, indicating her slaves with a gesture, said icily: "Attend me." And then, without looking again at the minister, but with the barest, fleeting glance at Fidá, she moved away toward the road, and was presently lost to sight among the trees near the ruin.

The Arab and the Hindoo were left alone, face to face. Fidá's eyes were fixed unwinkingly on Ragunáth's. On the counsellor's lips a half-smile hovered, and his expression had in it more of mockery than anger. When Ahalya was quite out of sight, he spoke, slowly:

"So — slave. Art thou prepared to greet thy god in death?"

Now Fidá's lip curled. "May Allah receive me at the appointed time," said he.

"That time is near."

"Nay, Lord Ragunáth."

"'Nay'? 'Nay'? Knowest thou not that Rai-Khizar-Pál, hearing of this adventure of thine, will not leave thee an hour alive?"

"Even that I do not know, Ragunáth. But, were it true, still, who shall tell the Rajah of the incident of the day?"

"I, dog, shall tell him."

“Am I indeed a dog? Be it so, I am a dog that speaks. And I am not a thief. — Does thy master know thy taste in rubies, lord?”

Ragunáth flushed scarlet. “Thou speakest like a madman!”

“Nay, it is rather thou that art mad. Thou hast walked on dangerous ground before, thou traitor to honor; but never so near destruction as now. Hast thou told thy master of thy visit to the zenana courtyard on the day of the great sacrifice? Did he despatch thee to-day to the poppy field? Hath he ever trusted the honor of his lady in *thy* hand? Oh, though thou couldst hush the mouths of all the eunuchs in the zenana, the story of thy bribes and treachery would be shouted aloud by every slave in Mandu. — Thus, the Lord Ragunáth is the madman. — A slave picks poppies in the field. A slave is near a lady when Ragunáth would speak with her. The slave has eyes, ears, and a tongue. Moreover, this slave understands honor, for he was born a prince. Speak, then, to the Rajah concerning this day’s incident. It were fitting he should know —”

“Be silent, man!”

“It seems I am become a man!”

“Be silent, — or thou diest.”

Fidá shrugged, but let the threat go. “*If* I am silent, then?” he asked.

“If thou art silent, fool,” Ragunáth made an effort, “if thou art silent, I will let time and thine own folly betray thee; for it is not fitting that I should soil myself with the affairs of infidels and slaves.”

And this last insult also, though he was obviously in the position to command, Fidá passed over. Was it because he knew that, for all his bravado, he was not himself innocent of treachery to his conqueror?

CHAPTER VI

CHURI

FIDÁ had lived in the palace of Mandu for nearly a month before he had his first glimpse of one of the most important persons in the lower stratum of its life, a man with whom he was later to become but too familiar:—Churi, the eunuch. They beheld each other first, distantly, in the poppy field. On the evening of that same day they met again. It was about sunset, and Fidá was at the well in front of the house of slaves, washing out certain of the Rajah's drinking vessels, when he became aware of a white-robed figure standing at his side, and, turning, gave a sudden start to find himself gazing into a pair of eyes one of which was of a lustrous brown, the other of a pale, greenish hue. The owner of the eyes smiled slightly; and then Fidá recalled Ahmed's description of the doctor, he whose position ranked next to that of Kasya among the guardians of the zenana.

"Thou art Churi," observed Fidá, wondering if the man had seen him start.

Churi nodded, and took thoughtful survey of the Mohammedan. During this look Fidá felt, uncomfortably, that his secret soul had been penetrated by those

singular eyes. Churi's words, however, when he spoke again, were simple enough: "Did Ragunáth trouble thee to-day?"

Fidá smiled. "Nay. Why dost thou ask?"

"His face boded thee no good when I saw it. He is a man scrupling not to lie."

"Have I lived a month in Mandu and know not that?"

Churi chuckled. "Thou hast no need of help?" said he.

"None."

"Then I will delay thee no longer. Yet remember that no slave in this palace need have any fear of that mighty counsellor."

Fidá shrugged. He felt himself suddenly put upon the status of a servant who discusses the persons whom he serves; and, furthermore, Churi's words seemed to dispel the secret satisfaction he had felt in having outwitted Ragunáth that afternoon. Even these thoughts it is possible that Churi robbed him of; for, as the latter turned away, the smile was still upon his lips; nor did it wholly fade as he went back to his quarters, which were at the other end of the palace, beyond the zenana wing.

In his own sphere, Churi was a privileged person, commanding a respect and an interest above that of Kasya, the incorruptible. Like Kasya, Churi had a room of his own; though he by no means always occupied it alone. So great was his skill in medicine and surgery that he took the place of first official physician

in the palace, though he had had many rivals for the place, and the Rajah was still obliged to employ a corps of priests who strove, by means of spells and charms, to prove their methods superior to those of the eunuch with his herbs, simples, and tourniquets. Churi's opponents troubled him little, however. He appreciated his gift; and generally cared for the sick among the slaves and eunuchs in his own room. Two of his fellows had, in spite of his care, recently died there of the malignant fever so common at this season of the year. And to-night, having no desire to eat alone, Churi took his evening meal of millet and ghee with the other eunuchs in the common room. While he was still there, chatting with a companion or two, Kasya invaded the apartment, evidently in search of some one; and, finding Churi, seized upon him, and drew him back to his own room, where they could be alone. As they went, Churi broke silence :

“The young lord was safely found to-day?”

They were out of possible ear-shot before Kasya answered: “Too safely. He was in the rooms of Ragunáth. But my lord himself was not there. Kanava had the child, and I do not understand the alarm. Tell me, didst thou overtake the Ranee before she reached the ruin?”

During this last question Churi had begun to laugh. “Oho! I perceive! Mine eyes are enlightened!”

“What sayest thou?”

“Oho! The faithful Kasya walks out with the Ranee. My lord councillor is disappointed, captures the child, amuses him in his rooms with toys, spreads the alarm

that he is lost, brings back the faithful Kasya to the search, and then goes to join the Ranee in the poppy field! Oho!"

"Ragunáth! He *dared!*"

Churi laughed again. "Dared he not? The Lady Ahalya was in the middle of the poppy field. Neila and I stood, by command, near the ruin. Then the councillor appeared. He had come through a path in the little jungle. At very sight of him the Ranee fairly fled to us, whereupon we set out again for the palace. Nor have I seen him since." Churi stopped rather abruptly, wondering how this ingenious version of the truth had ever come out of him. Was it worth while to add the important details? There was no time to consider. Kasya was furious.

"This—this, at last, shall go to the King! This even I cannot countenance from the man—"

"Not so fast, comrade. What hast thou to carry to the King? Young Bhavani wanders by accident into Ragunáth's rooms. My lord himself goes for a walk. By accident he meets the Ranee Ahalya in the poppy field. They scarcely speak. She returns home with her woman and me;—my lord remains there on whatever business is his. Bah, Kasya! The fool is punished now. Doubt it not. The Ranee can lash a man with her eyes, an she will; and Ragunáth was not favored to-day. I swear that by Lakshmi. A turmoil is never the result of wisdom. Let it rest, Kasya."

Churi was committed in good earnest, now. For his own sake the affair must not go up to the Rajah.

“I thought—” Kasya bent his brows, “I feared the Ranee did not disdain him wholly. If you speak truth, however—”

Churi shrugged.

“Then let it pass. In time we shall show him that the Rajah’s will is done in Mandu.” And, with a sigh, Kasya turned and departed.

Churi’s desire for company had gone, apparently; for he made no move to return to the common room. For a few moments he stood in his own doorway, brows drawn, head bent, meditating. Then he turned inside, and dropped the hanging across the open space, to prevent interruption. Stretching himself out on an improvised but remarkably comfortable divan, he gave himself up to a more critical consideration of the drama that had been revealed to him that afternoon. It was a thing that he had never dreamed of. A day before, he would not have believed that he could be so calmly reviewing the situation that evidently existed between the one thing he cared for in Mandu—Ahalya—and the Mohammedan captive. If it piqued him that he had had no knowledge of its beginnings,—he, to whom every intrigue enacted in the palace during the last ten years had been an open book,—he could console himself with the reflection that he was still the only one that knew of it at all. But he wished especially to understand himself with regard to Fidá, toward whom, as yet, he felt no animosity. Fidá, however, continued to baffle him. He could come to no satisfactory opinion. His concealment of what he knew from Kasya,

though it had come about accidentally, gave him little anxiety; for it was perfectly consistent with his usual methods: those plots and plans and hopes in which he, even he, the eunuch, constantly indulged.

Doctor Churi was, in fact, a person out of the ordinary. He had been the child of a Rajput woman and an Arab. For his birth, his mother had been put to death, and he himself, in his babyhood, sold into slavery. Before he was even aware of the existence of right and wrong, he had been made a creature apart from ordinary men. And when he was old enough to understand this, his soul rose up in revolt. From that time, his whole nature was warped; and he became an iconoclast in his every thought. His brain was unquestionably fine. His talent for medicine was manifested at an early age, when he tried to poison himself with opium, and was only saved by the quick skill of the doctor in whose charge he was still living. Under this man's tuition, he gained his knowledge of anatomy and the power of herbs. At the age of eighteen he was sold to Rai-Khizar-Pál, his education having trebled his value. At the time of the transaction, Churi was made aware of the sum paid for him; and it was then that his great idea came: which was, by some means to obtain the equivalent of the amount, and with it buy himself into liberty.

Since that day, twelve years had passed away. Churi was thirty years old; and the little hoard of copper pieces which he had been able to store up, was still pitifully small. Meantime his heart had grown bitter,

and his mind had taken to winding through tortuous ways of perception and imagination. He was known to many evil thoughts, but to few evil practices. And there was in him a volcanic passion of humanness kept relentlessly in check, that occasionally betrayed itself above the surface in some eccentric outburst.

The man led a solitary and loveless existence ; yet as all human things must know some softening of the heart toward some one, so Churi had, by degrees, come to feel a strong interest, a more than interest, in the Ranee Ahalya, the universally beloved. She was very different from the other women in the zenana ; and Churi had been first attracted to her by the quality rarest in women : that quality which she had in marked degree, and he not at all—disinterestedness. Because she had never had ends to gain, because she curried favor with none, he gave her the only genuine devotion that he had ever felt for any one ; and, where her interests were concerned, was accustomed to waive his own. Perhaps it was this instinct in him that had suggested the lie to Kasya ; and thereby, probably, he saved the life of Fidá. But it was quite for his own amusement that Churi now lay on his divan considering the incidents of the afternoon. All the result of these thoughts was, that he decided to see something of the Asra in the near future, and that the Lady Ahalya would perhaps bear a little watching also.

Fortune favored Churi's first decision in a very simple way. Two or three nights later Fidá, who had not been in the house of slaves for forty-eight hours,

went there to find his young comrade, Ahmed, lying in one corner of the porch, uncovered to the evil air of night, and burning with fever. Another slave, also Arabian, stood near by, regarding the sick boy helplessly. When Fidá appeared, Ahmed, who had lain with closed eyes, heeding nothing, sat up, stretching out his hands to his master. Fidá took them tenderly into his own, and was frightened to feel how hot they were. Wrapping the boy in his cloak, he bent over him, keeping off the swarm of little flies and insects that hovered around, and listening with alarm to the boy's half-delirious murmurings. Something must be done. He was not to be left in this state. Surely even slaves were given help. And as he cast about, anxiously, for means of assistance, he was addressed by one Chakra, a soldier, who stood looking into the veranda :

“If thou couldst bring Churi to the sick boy, he would not die.”

“Ah ! Churi ! Where is he ?” cried Fidá.

“I will show thee where he lives.”

“Come, then ! — Nay, better, I will take the boy to him.”

Ten minutes later the physician, squatting comfortably in the doorway of his own room, perceived a small group approaching out of the darkness. First came the soldier, quite subdued by Fidá's peremptory manner ; and then Fidá himself, with Ahmed in his arms. Churi got up and went toward them a step or two, peering with his strange eyes.

“Thou, Chakra ?” said he.

“I come with a slave who brings you a boy sick of a fever.”

“Oh,” said Churi, recognizing Fidá. “Come into this room. — Is the boy thy son ?” he demanded, sharply, of the Asra.

“Nay, I have no son,” answered Fidá, calmly. “But this boy is my friend, who followed me into captivity. And he is sick. I fear he is very sick.”

They were now inside the room, where two lamps burned. Fidá laid his burden down in a corner, and then, as Ahmed clung to him, sat down beside the boy, who gave a faint moan of satisfaction. The soldier had already gone; and Churi, after a moment's survey of his two self-invited guests, came over and made a speedy examination. It took little astuteness to perceive that the boy was dangerously ill, with a fever that was common enough at that season of the year. When he was assured of its nature, Churi turned to Fidá, saying :

“Let him remain here. I will care for him. But it is not well that thou shouldst also stay. Go, then, and fear not.”

Fidá made two or three attempts to release himself from the boy's hold, Churi watching him. Then Fidá shook his head. “He will not suffer me to leave him.”

“I will do it. See.” Churi placed himself immediately in front of the Asra, and laid his hands, with great gentleness, where those of the Mohammedan had been. Ahmed, drowsy with fever, did not notice the

change. "Now go, softly," commanded Churi, in a whisper, and Fidá obeyed.

Such was the beginning of Ahmed's sickness. It endured for more than five weeks, and, but for Churi's unceasing care and skill, had lasted scarcely three days. It was, moreover, the beginning of an intimacy between the eunuch and Fidá, which developed with a rapidity and a completeness that surprised them both. During the first few days, when the danger was extreme, no one was allowed to see the sick boy. But after that Fidá was admitted regularly; and, first for the sake of Ahmed, then on his own account, he spent three quarters of his spare time in the sick room. Churi having a private interest in Fidá, he succeeded in making himself so interesting that the slave, though suffering doubly from captivity and from hopeless love, was drawn out of himself by the strength of the other's personality.

Ahmed's convalescence was a fruitful period. Churi had returned to the regular zenana duties, modified when there were any sick whom he must attend; and so the hours in which he saw the captive were much fewer, but thereby more prized. Churi early disclosed the fact that he had Arabian blood in his veins; and Fidá, in a passion of yearning for his people, made this almost a symbol of brotherhood, and poured out to his new-found confidant all his life-story, with its fury of battle and its dulness of peace. Churi studied the young man keenly; for just at this time pressure was being brought to bear on him from another quarter,

and amazing possibilities began to shape themselves in his imagination. Ahalya, chafing with impatience, longing, and bitterness, in her pretty prison-house, had become imprudent, and told him half of what he already knew.

Churi had high responsibilities when he served the zenana. His duties during the day were light enough; but by night, his was the task to fasten every door and window looking out upon the unguarded court of the zenana; and his night-watch at the inner entrance, in the antechamber connecting the women's wing with the palace, was between the hours of twelve and two. Here was the trust which he had never betrayed. And here, also, were possibilities which he had never considered. The problem was before him now, however; for his feeling for Fidá grew daily stronger. He was beginning to consider things which, had they been suspected by a single soul in Mandu, would have sent him, and with him Fidá, on the quickest road to death.

Meantime, weeks had gone by. The autumn rains were at hand, and it was more than a month since the Rajah's men had left for the north on Fidá's behalf. Daily now their return was looked for; and, with every twelve hours of delay, Fidá grew more wretched. His mind was full of fear. It was not at all out of the nature of his uncle to have murdered the ambassadors for the money they might have with them, or for any fancied disrespect in their demeanor. Had this thing been done, Rai-Khizar-Pál must know it ere long, and

then even the meagre joys of captivity would end for him. And at this time Fidá did not want to die. The existence of Ahalya made slavery more than bearable ; for while he lived in the same building with her, the hope of seeing her again never quite left him. He loved her. He had told her that he loved her. That fact never failed to bring exhilaration upon him. Even the hope of freedom could not reconcile him to the idea of losing her forever. In his sanguine moments there flitted through his head the wildest plans : — storming the palace at the head of an army, bearing her forth in triumph, and carrying her home with him to Yemen, where they should live together forever in the house of his fathers, in the holy city.

But, in time, these dreams were brought to an end by the return of the messengers from their long journey. On the night of the twenty-fifth of October, Fidá lay asleep in the little box of a room that had been made his own. He had gone to bed early that night, for the Rajah was hunting in the hills, and his services were dispensed with. It was nearly midnight when the slave opened his eyes to find a soldier of the guard standing over him. He started up, and was presently following the man stupidly through rooms and passages till they had come to the audience hall, where the Rajah, dressed in dusty hunting-garb, sat on his dais, a frown of deepest anger on his brow. In front of him were five men, worn, dishevelled, heavy with sleep. Save for this little group, the vast room was empty. The torches flickered, ghost-like, into shadowy corners.

The deep night-stillness was only broken by the rattling of the soldier's armor and weapons as he walked.

In his first glance at the scene in the hall Fidá, now fully awake, recognized the situation. As his guide stood aside, he walked alone to the foot of the royal divan, and prostrated himself there, kissing the ground before him, in the deepest reverence a Moslem can do. When he had risen again, he lifted his eyes to the conqueror's face and found the Rajah regarding him solemnly, with something like compassion.

"O King, live forever! Thou hast summoned me."

"I summoned thee, Fidá ibn-Mahmud ibn-Hassan el-Asra, to hear thine uncle's message to me. Thou seest my men are returned."

Fidá, gone white to the lips, looked into the Rajah's eyes, and, albeit his voice was unsteady, said quietly: "Let them speak."

"Radai Sriyarman, repeat the message of Omar el-Asra."

The soldier nearest Fidá turned slightly toward him, and began, speaking as if by rote: "Omar the Mohammedan, answering our demand of five thousand copper pieces,¹ specified jewels, and treaty of eternal peace with Mandu as the price of the freedom of Fidá el-Asra, spake thus: That what was demanded was greater than the value of any man. That he would give, with the permission of the Lord Aybek of Delhi, the large price of five hundred dirhems for his nephew;

¹ Before the Mohammedan conquest, copper was the standard of currency in India.

and, we refusing the offer, he then returned this message to Rai-Khizar-Pál, Maharaj' of Mandu : ' Let the King beware that he touch not one hair of the head of Prince Fidá. The sword of the great Prophet is ablaze over the land, and, in a year's time, all the country from Lahore to the great Ghats will be under the rule of the faithful. Let Fidá, my nephew, be of good heart. Let him be assured that any injury to him will be avenged a thousand-fold upon the people of Mandu, and that the King himself shall answer for his daring with his life. Thus speaks Omar of the Asra, a follower of Mohammed, in the name of Allah, the one God, the compassionate, the merciful.' "

"Thou hearest it! Thou hearest this message of thy kinsman?" shouted Rai-Khizar, stirred anew to wrath with the rehearing of the insolent message.

"Ah! Dost thou not perceive? My uncle desires my death—longs for my death, that he may know himself the head of his race!" Fidá cried, in an agony of bitterness. Then, while the Rajah gazed down upon him in astonishment, the slave once more fell upon his face before the conqueror: "O King, live forever! Let the King show mercy to his slave! Let him remember how I refused to assume the state of the ransomed when the messengers left Mandu. Let Rai-Khizar-Pál remember that I am his slave, defenceless. Let him show himself more merciful than my own people!"

Fidá pled passionately, scarce knowing why it was that life had suddenly become so precious to him. To the surprise of the soldiers, and, perhaps, to his own, his

words served. The Rajah sat silent for some moments, his pride and anger struggling with his sense of justice. In the end the good triumphed. His frown softened, and he rose to his feet, saying :

“Thou shalt live, then, Asra, by my mercy. Return to thy kennel ! But, by Indra, the Mohammedan hath not yet seen the last of Rai-Khizar-Pál !”

Fidá, scarcely believing in his own deliverance, scarcely able to grasp the scene that had just passed, stumbled from the room, and returned to the place that the King had called his kennel. All that night he tossed and turned on his uneasy bed, sleeping fitfully, glad when he woke out of his dreams. Relief at his scarce-hoped-for escape for a time prevented his facing the future. But at last he began to realize the fact that the hope, so slight and so desperately clung to, of release, was gone : that henceforth he faced a life of unremitting toil, of thankless servitude. Years — centuries, perhaps — must elapse before the Mohammedan rule could spread through Malwa. Nay, India might rise and drive the invaders back across her cruel mountains before the prophet's followers had looked upon the Dekhan. And as Fidá grimly strangled his new-springing, infant hope, his cup of misery seemed full. Despair gripped him ; and in its iron arms he slept.

Two days passed before Fidá again visited Ahmed. There was some excuse for his absence, perhaps, for he was now become a slave indeed, and had been given new tasks, one of which might, perhaps, have been regarded as something of a favor. The charge of

young Bhavani's horsemanship was placed with him; and every afternoon, for an hour, he was commanded to lead the young prince up and down the road beside the water palace, instructing him as to his seat, the carrying of weapons, and the management of his animal. Although the spirit of his new work made Fidá ache with the memory of his free warrior days, still he was proud of the confidence reposed in him; and he and the young prince soon took a fancy for each other. At first Rai-Khizar-Pál frequently appeared at some period of the lesson; and, having convinced himself that his slave was really fitted to instil the knightly spirit into his son, Fidá found himself restored to a part of his former favor.

The matter of the riding lessons and the companionship with Bhavani were not given up while Fidá lived in Mandu; and, long before he left it, despair over his captivity had been driven from his heart. For forty-eight hours after the return of the ambassadors of ransom, he hugged misery close, and the future was veiled in black. But on the third day his lonely fortitude gave way, and, when Bhavani's lesson was over, he stole down to the house of eunuchs and into Churi's familiar room. Ahmed, convalescent now, lay sound asleep upon his bed. But upon Fidá's appearance, Churi came forth from a shadowy corner, and took him by the hand.

"Come, let us sit here, Asra," he said, in a low voice, at the same time leading his visitor to the place where he had been sitting.

Fidá, mildly surprised at his manner, settled himself. Churi sat down at his side, and stared at him, meditatively, for some minutes. Then a distorted smile broke over his face. "I was waiting for thee, prince of the Asra."

"I am no prince," returned Fidá, savagely. "I—"

"Yet," broke in Churi, "I bring a message to you from a—princess." He paused. Fidá sat staring at him, incredulous of his ears.

"I have a message for Fidá, Prince of the Asra," repeated Churi, at length, with emphasis. "Wouldst hear it?"

"Speak!" answered the slave, hoarsely.

"These, then, are the words I was told to say to thee: 'Why comes not the Asra to her that waits? The way shall be easy to one greatly aspiring'." Churi spoke in the lowest voice; and Fidá strained forward to catch the words.

"'Why comes he not to her that waits? The way shall be easy—to one greatly aspiring'," he repeated, trying to grasp all that it meant.

"And there was this to be given," continued Churi, taking from his girdle, and handing to Fidá, a faded and wilted poppy.

Fidá grasped the flower in his hand, and started wildly to his feet. "Take me to her!" cried he. "Take me to her, Churi! Allah give thee life!"

"Quiet! Quiet! Shall the whole palace hear thee?" Churi glared at him, without moving from where he sat. In his face there was no sign of life. And,

at his words, and still more by the cold indifference into which his expression had relapsed, Fidá's flaming eagerness was chilled. His face grew questioning. The hand holding the poppy dropped to his side. Then Churi spoke, slowly :

"I have delivered to thee the message. Find thou the way."

"Churi !"

The eunuch smiled, vaguely.

The smile accomplished much. Fidá's impatience gave way. Determination took its place. He sat down again beside his tormentor, placed the poppy carefully in his own sash, and then leaned persuasively toward his expressionless companion. "Tell me, Churi, wherein I am wrong," he said, sweetly.

Now, Churi had got himself into an anomalous position. He had, as a matter of fact, accepted a gift from Ahalya for the transmission of her message ; and he was perfectly well aware that she expected him to go much farther in the betrayal of his office than she had asked in words. But Churi was not quite prepared for these lengths. His actions during the last few moments had been instinctive. He was trusting to chance to show him a method of procedure. After some little thought, he answered Fidá as truthfully as he could.

"Thou'rt wrong in this, Asra, that thou acceptest this message for truth when it says : 'the way is easy to one greatly aspiring'. The way is not easy, but, rather, so difficult that I see no means of traversing it."

“Dost thou not, indeed? Ah, but thou aspirest not, Churi. That is the difference.”

Churi shrugged.

“Now I already see the feat performed. Shall I explain it to thee?”

“I am a listener, Asra.”

“Then hark. Between the hours of twelve and two, the zenana is guarded by one that is a kindly man. At the hour of his watch this fellow, for just the shadow of an instant, falls asleep. Lo! The way is open!” Fidá smiled delightedly.

Churi, however, turned on him a solemn look. “Truly thou hast little regard for the life of the ‘kindly one’. Knowest thou not the penalty for a guardian that sleeps?”

Once again Fidá sprang to his feet. “Name of Allah, man, why hast thou brought this message then? Was it to drive me mad? Am I a fool to be mocked at? What meanest thou?”

Churi’s color changed perceptibly. “I mock thee not,” he said, in a voice that rang untrue. “I mock thee not. Behold, thou demandest of me my safety, my fidelity, my life. Is that so small a thing to ask — as a gift?”

“A gift! Ah! I see.” Fidá’s head sank upon his breast, and, for a moment, he was lost in thought. Then, looking Churi straight in the eyes, he said: “I am a slave — thou knowest that. What wilt thou have of me? Wilt thou take my life when once I have done the bidding of — the beloved?”

“Thy life is useless to me.”

“Killing me, thou couldst save thine honor.”

“I am no murderer.”

“Then — wait! Wait.” Fidá’s hand flew to his sash. He was not treasureless. Nay, at this moment there was, on his body, a fortune greater than that asked as his ransom. True, it was worth more to him than his freedom. He had been willing to suffer slavery rather than deliver up his race to death. But love! — Ah, the Asra had always held that greater than life. Love was beyond price. Should not the Asra ruby buy him the love that must eventually kill him? Instantly impulse answered that death, after the love of Ahalya, would be as nothing. Yet he waited to weigh the question further; and was met on every hand by reason flanked with love. What promise did life hold out to him: — the dry, lonely, lowering life of the slave? At the end death would come, and the ruby be buried with him, or pass to the conqueror of the alien race. Let him, then, buy a great, brief joy with it, and afterwards a speedy exit from his slavery.

Fidá drew forth the golden box, Churi watching him with surprise and interest. Pressing the hidden spring, he let the ruby roll into his palm, and held it out to Churi.

“Look,” said he. “Take it into thy hand and look.”

The eunuch complied; and, seeing how the wonderful stone gleamed and glowed even here in the shadows, his eyes brightened and his lips twitched.

“This is the key to the zenana. Take it, Churi, and unlock the door for me — to-night.”

Churi looked up into Fidá's face, and found there sincerity and earnestness. For a moment he hesitated, considering, counting the cost. At last his eyes fell. “How much is this ruby worth?” he asked, in a low voice.

“More than was asked for my ransom.”

“Why, then, didst thou not ransom thyself with it?”

“It holds in it the fate of the Asra. For her, only, would I surrender it.”

“Hath the Rajah seen it?”

“Yes, and suffered it to remain with me for the sake of my people.”

“How, then, shall I take it from thee?”

“Because I give it — freely.”

Churi's hand closed slowly on the stone. His eyes were glittering as he rose at last. “Come, then, to the antechamber, to-night,” he murmured.

Fidá's face grew radiant. “Wilt thou tell her?”

“I will tell her.”

“At midnight to-night — oh, my beloved!”

Churi stared at him still. “Truly thou aspirest greatly,” he said, with envy in his heart.

CHAPTER VII

THE POWER OF THE FLAME

AFTER his arrangement with Churi, and the delivery of the ruby, the remaining hours of daylight passed for Fidá in swift chaos. Ahmed woke before he could leave the room; and he sat beside the boy trying to talk to him for a few minutes, though he had little notion of what he was saying. Then he returned to his duties beside the Rajah, and for the next three hours was fully occupied, though his mind wandered far from his hands, and he drifted through mists of thought. It was not till later that there came an idea that filled him with terror. Might not the King himself guard the zenana to-night? Happily this dread was of short duration. The King sat late over his wine with Manava; and Fidá himself saw him in bed and beyond apprehension. Then, at last alone, Fidá betook himself to his diminutive room, and there prepared to wait through two eternal hours.

How long the time was; and how short! He would not look back; he dared not look forward. He existed only in a consciousness that she, she, the one, was waiting for him; that to-night, at last, he should be alone with her, fearing no intrusion. This unexpressed thought

he had lived with all day; and it became keener, now, till he could not be still. It grew late. The palace was quiet; but Fidá was beyond passiveness. He rose, walked swiftly through the maze of rooms and passages, and entered the silent courtyard. The moon, a little past the full, had come up from the east, and swung, like a great, yellow lantern, above the dark outlines of the palace roof. The world shone softly in the mellow light. The night air from the hills was cold; but the earth was sweet. Fidá loitered near a doorway, wrapped in his cloak. The great courtyard was empty save for the two motionless soldiers that guarded its entrance. Apparently not another soul was abroad in the palace to-night. Fidá moved languidly across and looked into the temple room of Vishnu. Darkness and silence here. The gods also slept. A great excitement, a great terror, a high ecstasy were drawing over him. Surely now it was time — time to claim the price of the ruby. Surely by this time Churi stood on guard in the antechamber. Yet nothing must be risked. If he were too early? — The thought was impossible. He waited, therefore, till the moon was halfway to mid-heaven, and then, when he could endure no more, left the outer world. A moment later he stood at the door of the antechamber.

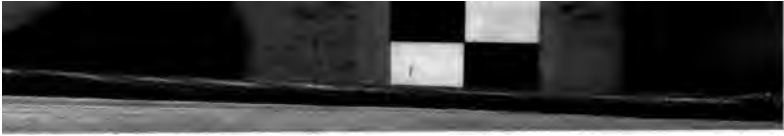
“Is it thou?” came, in the faintest breath, from Churi, within.

In an instant Fidá was at his side, and had seized him by the arm. “Now! Now!” said he, gazing fiercely, eagerly, into the eunuch’s unmatched eyes.

“Enter then, and turn to the left hand. The way is short. It is not to be missed.”

Fidá grasped Churi by the shoulders, clasped him for a second like a madman, and then ran across the forbidden threshold — where man not of the royal house of Mandu had never set foot before. Swiftly he traversed the short, dark passage opening on his left, and presently found himself in an oblong room, lighted by a single crimson lamp that glowed through a mist of incense smoke pouring up from a metal jar on a stand, near by. Dazed by the overpowering sweetness, he shut his eyes for an instant. When he opened them again, he had a swift impression of rich tapestries, thick rugs, many cushions, and then — and then he beheld, lying on a divan at the end of the room, a slight figure, all clad in red and gold, lying asleep in the heavy air.

His heart pounded against his sides. His throat tightened till he could have uttered no sound; and he went to her, softly, and knelt at her side, and gazed at her. She was here — waiting for him. Her white lids were shut over her eyes, and the long, silky lashes curved outward a little from her cheek. Her heavy hair was pushed back from her brows; and one of her little hands lay in a mass of it above her head. Fidá studied her, hungrily, eagerly, silently. He had never seen her like this before — had, indeed, never dreamed of seeing her so. She was his, for his eyes to feast on. And oh — how fair! how fair! In that moment he dreaded to have her wake; for then she would surely



send him from her. It seemed to him impossible that she could love him, could suffer him to kneel beside her. Yet, with an effort, after two attempts, he whispered her name, hoarsely: "Ahalya!" Then again, after a moment, "Ahalya!"

She sighed, and her eyes opened. Shivering slightly, she stared, and sat up, crying: "Thou art come! Ah, thou art come at last!"

That was all. It was more than mortal flesh could bear. He had touched, he had clasped her. She was lying in his arms.

Nearly two hours went by; and then Neila appeared from an inner room. Ahalya was still upon the divan, her head pillowed on the breast of Fidá, who sat upright. It seemed almost as if they slept, so motionless they were. Neila halted in the doorway, staring at them, till she encountered the glittering eyes of the Asra.

"Oh, thou must go! It is time," she murmured.

"No!" Ahalya, feeling the intruding presence, roused herself, and convulsively tightened the clasp of her arms about Fidá's neck.

"Krishna!" mourned Neila, "we shall all be killed!"

Fidá, however, conquered himself, and loosened the Ranee's arms. "Beloved, I must go — that I may return," he whispered.

Trembling, Ahalya submitted; and, as Fidá rose, she sank upon the divan, face downward, nor could any intreaty induce her to lift her head again. So they

parted, without a word; and, at the zenana door, Fidá found Churi, excited and uneasy. He hailed the Asra's appearance with infinite relief.

"Mahendra will be here in a breath. I had nearly come for thee."

Fidá smiled at him out of shining eyes. "Ah, Churi, had I a thousand rubies, they should all be thine!"

"Thou fool!" rose to Churi's lips. But he only said: "Verily, the danger is worth rubies, even of the value of thine. Is this thing to be done again?"

"Again and yet again! until—" Fidá's face darkened, "until I pay my price—of death."

But Fidá as yet was far from death. Overcome with weariness he returned to his bed, and slept for nearly six hours before he woke to the new joy of light and living. That day he was as a man drunk. His exhilaration was boundless. He walked upon air. His eyes shone, his voice rang triumphant with love. The world was at its climax. She was his. What mattered dishonor? What mattered treachery, slavery, or the old, forgotten curse? Love, youth, the world, were his. Should he ask more?

With the evening came his answer. With all this, he had still little enough; for the King ruled in his zenana, and Fidá began to know something of the sinner's suffering. She was beyond the protection of him to whom by right of soul she belonged. She was beyond him; and yet, second by second, he must suffer for and with her. He wept and raved and clenched his

shaking hands in the madness of jealousy at this retribution of the wrong he had done. In the new day, as he came to gaze upon the tranquil face of his conqueror, his whole being was stirred with wonder that such things as were in his heart could lie there unsuspected. But Rai-Khizar-Pál could not know the heart of his slave, nor how, with night, hope came again.

As soon as Churi went on guard at midnight, Fidá appeared in the antechamber, unstrung and reckless. He would have rushed past the eunuch without a word, but that he was forcibly restrained. This action, on the part of his one ally, goaded Fidá fairly to madness; and, without speaking, he flung himself into a fierce struggle with the eunuch, whose strength, however, he presently discovered to be very great. When both of them were all but exhausted, the Asra, coming to himself, fell back, staring hopelessly at his opponent, and murmuring, more to himself than to Churi :

“Thou traitor ! Oh, miserable ! Have I sold my birthright for this !”

“Madman !” retorted Churi, “thinkest thou there is no reason in what I do ? I serve our lady. She bade me deny thee entrance.”

“It is not true !”

“By Krishna, I swear it.”

“Ahalya !” Fidá’s face grew deathlike.

“Neila came to me at dusk. The Ranee is sick and shaken with grief and fear. Thou canst not see her — yet.”

“Yet !”

Churi smiled cynically. "Thou boy! Verily thou knowest little of women. Wait in patience, Asra. I think thou shalt see her again. I will not prevent thee. But now, leave this place, if you court not death."

Without further words, Fidá turned and left the room. When he reached his bed again, he flung himself upon it, and lay for a long time staring into the dark. Then, gradually, he fell to weeping; and while he wept, Allah had pity on his weakness, and sent him sleep.

But Ahalya! Poor Ahalya! While her lover's heart accused her of all faithlessness, she suffered not one whit less than he. She loved Fidá, indeed, wholly. Their meeting had been of her own desire and arrangement. But she was young in intrigue, new to dishonor. And when solitude brought her face to face with what she had done, she was plunged into despair. Her mind distorted all things. Fidá seemed infinitely remote from her. Their love had been a thing of such magical growth that, having been half the time unconscious of the workings of her own senses, she, in the first reaction, began to disbelieve altogether in her love. She was in a labyrinth of warped emotion, shame, and remorse; and, till she found herself again, the very name of Fidá was abhorrent to her.

All through the day that followed their first meeting the Ranee lay on her bed, wide-eyed, tearless, and unapproachable. Neila wondered and watched, but dared not intrude upon her. On the evening of that

day came Rai-Khizar-Pál, all unconsciously bringing her punishment for her sin. For two days after this she remained in seclusion, while Neila and Churi vainly took counsel together on behalf of the slave, for whom each felt some sort of unselfish concern. But, though Fidá was on the verge of madness, not a word could be got out of Ahalya concerning him : not one message would she send. Churi began to doubt his theory of the fallibility of women ; and Neila would not have been surprised at a full confession of everything to Rai-Khizar-Pál. But at last, miraculously, came an incident from an unexpected quarter that did what no amount of pleading and persuasion could have accomplished.

In the hidden drama that had, in the past few days, been enacted in Mandu, there was a certain personage, long since accustomed to play an important rôle in every game of intrigue, who had had no part at all. Nevertheless, Lord Ragunáth was not going to be discounted forever ; and it was at this stage of events that he appeared upon the scene. Perhaps a scent of hidden things was in the air. Perhaps his sensibilities, attuned to all that was secret, caught some vibration of treachery ; though the nature of that treachery remained undreamed-of. At any rate, it was just at the time when the object of his furtive desires was torn and riven with a struggle in which he was not concerned, that Ragunáth suffered one of his periodic fits of madness, and hit upon a new and, at last, successful method of gaining one of his ends.

The two eunuchs who had recently died of fever in the palace had been men of experience and importance in their station; and they had been replaced by two others, supposedly responsible, from Bâgh. Kasya had satisfied himself that both were trustworthy; but Kanava, sounding them from another quarter, found in one of them a long-sought weakness. On the afternoon of the fourth day of Fidá's misery, when the Rajah was attending ceremonial in the village at the other end of the plateau, one of these men, Kripa by name, stood on guard in the zenana antechamber. Kripa was tired, and Kripa was bored with the prospect of two stifling hours of solitary watching. He was, then, undisposed to be short with any one that came to break his dull thoughts. And when Lord Ragunáth unexpectedly appeared before him, he greeted the minister with a mixture of curiosity and reverence that Ragunáth found propitious to his purpose. He had come well prepared and fortified with the corrupter of prudence, the breaker of faith, the power of the evil-minded — a goodly sum of money. For a few moments he applied himself to his task with all his considerable mind and tact; and, at the end of that time, Kripa stood before him a newly enlisted mercenary. It had been arranged between them that Ragunáth was to stay in the anteroom and there have a brief interview with the Lady of his Desire; provided of course that, what he did not for a moment doubt, she would see him.

Quite tremulous with eagerness, Ragunáth pushed

his minion into the zenana, bearing a blind message to the Lady Ahalya to come at once, if it were her pleasure, to the antechamber. Kripa reappeared in a very short space of time, smiling the word that the Ranee would follow him. And Ragunáth, drunk with high success, commanded the fallen one to remain away for at least an hour. Promising nothing, but very well satisfied to be free for a little while, though he dared not join his companions, Kripa, drowsy with the dusk and quiet of his watch, wandered off into the maze of rooms around the audience hall, lay down upon a convenient divan, and was shortly sound asleep.

Ragunáth, meantime, had grown as nervous and eager as a youth while he waited the coming of the Ranee. She did not keep him long. As he stood watching the curtained doorway, she appeared, her young face pale and strained, but with expectation in it; her form all swathed in crimson silks. At sight of her, Ragunáth gave a low cry of emotion; but, in the same instant, Ahalya's face changed utterly.

"Thou!" she said, half wondering, half sobbing.

"I, rose of heaven! I, star among women, whose hair holds the fragrance of the jessamine, whose breath is perfumed like the almond blossom. I, I, Ragunáth, have sought thee, and beseech thy favor; for, indeed, I am gone mad for love of thee!" And, throwing himself before her, Ragunáth lifted the filmy hem of her garment to his lips.

Ahalya still stood in the doorway, clinging to the curtains on either side of her, her face expressing a

mixture of repulsion and disappointment. As Ragunáth would have clasped her feet, she drew back, sharply :

“Away from me, dishonorable one!” she said, in a low, angry voice. “If you would not have me expose this treachery to Rai-Khizar-Pál, — begone !”

Ragunáth did not rise. Rather, he lay writhing at her feet, like one possessed of a frenzy — as indeed he was. But it was a resolving frenzy. After the period of madness, he was coming to himself again. Pride returned to him, and, with it, something of his usual cunning, as he remembered how willing Ahalya had been to come before him. It was then that he got to his feet; then that he turned on the woman, asking, softly, through shame of the display he had made :

“O, Ranee, it was not I, then, that you came to greet? It was not for Ragunáth that you are decked out in crimson and gold? And for whom? for whom? Not Rai-Khizar. He waits not in antechambers for thy greeting. Ah, will it be wise, Ranee, to ‘expose’ me to thy lord? There are things —”

“Be still! thou shameless, treacherous, hateful one! I hate you! Know that. I hate — I hate — I hate you!” And, her voice on the last word rising to a shrill cry, the young woman, white faced and burning eyed, turned from him and fled into the inaccessible rooms beyond. There, panting, sobbing, angry, and, in her heart of hearts, greatly terrified, she flung herself upon a couch and gave herself up unreservedly to acknowledgment of her hidden love and woe.

Now, during the few moments of this interview, Neila, astonished and frightened at what she, like Ahalya, believed to be Fidá's appearance at this hour, had, as soon as her mistress left her, run to seek out Churi, whom she brought back more disturbed than she, just as the Ranee returned to her rooms. Churi did not enter there, but proceeded at once to the antechamber. Parting the curtains that hung before the door, he started, and stood stock-still to find himself face to face with the one man he had had no thought of. Ragunáth was still standing where Ahalya had left him, and, at this new appearance, he was too much taken aback to note the newcomer's discomposure.

"Churi!" he muttered, half in alarm, half angrily. "Even so, Lord Ragunáth." At once Churi was himself again.

"Dog! who sent thee here?"

"The Puissant One speaks the same words that had lain on my humble lips."

"Strangely indeed is the King's zenana conducted! I pass the antechamber and see no guard therein. I enter the antechamber that I may see if the guard be perhaps concealed from view; and, as I look, there appears a pariah, who sees fit to insult me. By Indra, thou doctor of dogs, thou shalt be whipped for it!"

There came a little pause, during which Churi, with his disturbing eyes, gazed steadily, smoothly, quietly upon the man that faced him, till Ragunáth fairly writhed under the look. Then Churi said: "It pleases the high lord to speak these words. Since it

pleases him, it is well. But," and the tone changed, "let him take care that he act not as he speaks. There are things more strange than unguarded antechambers that may come to the ears of the Rajah." Churi's eyes menaced now.

Ragunáth gave some sort of hoarse ejaculation ; and then, after wavering for a moment, he turned and walked swiftly away, nor halted till he was safe in his own rooms, with a personal slave or two on whom to wreak his wrath and his double mortification.

Churi, left alone, was well pleased with himself. Luckily the self-satisfaction was not too great to prevent his having his wits still about him. He knew that this was Kripa's watch, and in three minutes he had hunted out the deserter's retreat, kicked him awake, and despatched him to his post thoroughly frightened. Yet Kripa was allowed to remain in possession of his gold ; for Churi was in no position to expose the acts of the man he hated.

Unlucky as it had already proved to its two principal actors, the little drama of the afternoon had further results. Ahalya, even in the anger of revulsion against Ragunáth, knew that there was another feeling in her heart : dared, after a time, admit to herself her disappointment that it had not been Fidá who thus boldly summoned her to him ; for indeed she had gone to the anteroom, on Kripa's summons, thinking to find her lover there. Before nightfall she knew that she longed to see Fidá again ; and the more she repudiated the thought, the more insistent it became, until she yielded

to it. In the early darkness Churi was despatched to bid him come to her that night.

When Churi managed to waylay the slave, Fidá was on his way to the rooms where wine was stored, to fill a jar for his lord's evening meal. It needed only a look between the two for the eunuch's errand to be understood. Fidá laid a hand on Churi's arm, and said, softly: "In the name of Allah, Churi, speak to me!"

"There is no need," answered the other, looking at him in a quizzical but not unkindly manner.

"She will see me? I shall go to her again?"

"To-night. As before."

In a single instant the accumulated anger and anguish of the past four days melted and ran away from the youth's heart. His load of unhappiness was lifted. Once more he walked on air. It seemed to him that he radiated life. But the few hours that still separated them brought him much that was new in the way of thought. Since she had forgiven him, he perceived that his banishment had been, in large measure, brought on by himself. He had not sufficiently considered her, her woman's delicacy and hesitation. He had acted as his youth and his manhood prompted him. But he resolved that there should be no such mistake again. The thought of her now brought a deep tenderness, which, indeed, might have surprised Ahalya could she have read it. Nor were the six hours of the evening long or heavy. He had a foundation on which to build his castle of dreams; and his heart was full of thankfulness and relief. It was five minutes after

midnight when he entered the little room where Churi stood.

“All is well?” asked Fidá, his mouth dry.

“All is well. No one is stirring. Enter.”

Fidá's bright eyes grew brighter still; and he ran boyishly through the doorway into the little passage where, this time, Neila awaited him. He followed her, in silence, down the short hall, through the memorable room at the end of it, which was empty to-night, and across the next one, that he had never seen, to a door at which Neila knocked. A moment's suspense, and then a muffled voice said, “Open!” The maid pushed it, and motioned to Fidá, who passed swiftly within. The door closed behind him. He was gazing upon the figure of Ahalya, who stood a few feet away, looking at him, doubtfully, longingly, half sadly. His heart throbbed with many emotions. He took a hesitating step or two toward her, pleading with his eyes. Then, all at once, there was a quick, low cry, and Ahalya had flung herself into his arms.

What passed between them now were difficult to relate. Afterwards they themselves had but a confused idea. It was very certain that Ahalya loved him; for she delivered herself up entirely to his will. Yet, with each of them, passion was mingled with something better: a deep tenderness, a high companionship, the mutual compassion of the unhappy. She laid upon him a great responsibility, telling him over and over again that without him she should not try to live; explaining the torture of her self-hatred: the shame that,

loving him, she must still submit to another ; wetting his eyes with her tears while she demanded from him a solution of her miserable problem. Pitying while he loved, Fidá read what her warped life had been, and all the history of her loneliness. Nor did he fail her in a certain sort of comfort, of a philosophical nature, for which she cared little, save that it came from his lips. But she listened eagerly to all that he told her of himself, of his country and his life ; though he withheld the story of the curse, of which, at their first meeting, he had given her a suggestion that she seemed to have forgotten. They talked long, but the talk was finally hushed. Fidá extinguished the single lamp that burned. And later, Neila, come to warn them of the time, found them there in the darkness, Ahalya weeping in his arms.

This time it was the woman that bade her lover leave her ; for Fidá had not the strength to put her from him. When at last he reached the anteroom, only three or four minutes before the appearance of Churi's relief, the latter's heart was in his throat, and he was ready to declare that he would never again run the risk of disaster and discovery through the slave's rashness. Later in the night he sought Fidá in his own room, and the two had a long talk together. The eunuch had come with the purpose of protesting against the present arrangement, with which he was in a high state of dissatisfaction. But he ended by allowing himself to be, to some extent, overpowered by the earnestness and the logic of love ; though after he had departed, Fidá lay

awake for a long time, anxiously considering the risks that he ran in placing all his dependence on this one person, whom he knew very well to be in some ways entirely unreliable.

Churi, indeed, was playing a part very different from the one he had imagined for himself. He had entered upon the affair rather blindly, and with the belief that a few weeks, perhaps days even, would convert his ruby into money; upon which his freedom would quickly follow. A little time had shown him his mistake. The ruby was not a gem easily to be sold; for the simple reason that no one in Mandu save the Rajah himself was wealthy enough to buy it; and Rai-Khizar-Pál knew the stone, and to whom it belonged. Questions were not to be risked. Churi soon realized that he must wait until the spring, when the travelling merchants from Rajputana would come down from the north with the rich wares that made their arduous journeys profitable. One of these, the eunuch knew very well, would take his stone, without questions. Meantime, what was his course to be? It was true that he was genuinely attached to Ahalya, and had some feeling for Fidá. Moreover, his natural talent for intrigue rejoiced at the risk of the present affair. Nevertheless, that risk, as matters stood at present, was too great. Soon, then, he found his mind at work reconstructing, building up new safeguards against that bombshell which, one day, no caution could keep from an explosion that must betray its existence to Mandu in ruin and destruction.

Churi, evil-thinking, evil-doing, was nevertheless faithful to his better instincts. It was not for his own gain that he set his mind to work at new plans of entrance to the zenana; and at finding therefrom new exits, to be used in case of need. These plans materialized well; and, by the bedside of the now almost recovered Ahmed, he expounded his ideas to Fidá. The Asra was already aware that the zenana was accessible by other ways than the central portion of the palace. The passage from the north wing to the little court was left unguarded for the simple reason that, by day, no one could enter there without risk of being seen by half a hundred eyes; and by night the face of the zenana itself was made, by means of chains and locks, a perfectly impenetrable wall, by which the high Lord Ragunáth himself had more than once been baffled. For Fidá, however, this difficulty did not exist. On the other side of that wall there were willing hands to work for him; for Churi himself had the task of fastening doors and wooden window-screens at nightfall. Who was there to discover that one of these, in the inner room of the Ranee Ahalya, was left unlocked? Who was there to note the tiny hinge which deft-handed Churi substituted for a bolt? Rai-Khizar-Pál never perceived these things; and, beside him, Neila was the only soul that entered the Ranee's bedroom. Shortly, then, Fidá had ceased to be dependent on the antechamber for access to his lady; and he and Churi both wondered how so obvious a means had slipped their first consideration. But passion soon

began to get the better of the Arabian. His gracelessness no longer stopped with the night. Hair-brained were the risks he ran, wild the chances that he took, though all the time it seemed that he was protected by a scandalous providence. Churi and Neila spent days and nights of dread; but Ahalya was as blind to caution as the Asra; and together they overran advice or pleadings; and recklessly they laughed with Fate.

Two months—a little more—went by: to the lovers, months of ecstasy and despair, of joy inexpressible, and keenest agony; for love like theirs carries constantly its own punishment. But the man and the woman were young, of Oriental blood, the desire for affection in each rendered abnormal by the restraint to which both had been subject. Fidá went without sleep and without food, and yet seemed to suffer no untoward effects from his nerve-destroying existence. Indeed, so remarkable was his vitality, so strong his power of recuperation after the longest service and watchfulness, that he, and Churi also, began in their minds to scoff at the Asra curse, and wonder whence the quaint legend had originated. Ahalya, who had little to do, save in so far as Rai-Khizar-Pál demanded her companionship, spent all the hours in which she and Fidá were apart, in dreaming of their next meeting. Never had she been so beautiful as now. Every line of weariness and discontent had disappeared from her face. Her eyes, under the light of their new knowledge, shone like stars. Her face took on a new glow of color, more

clear, more pure, more rose-and-white than ever. Her voice had gained a new and tender richness; and, as she dreamed over the Persian harp that she loved to play, Neila used to listen in amazement to the beauty of her singing. Her increased charm had its penalty, however; for the Rajah was not slow in perception, and seemed more and more to delight in her, keeping her at his side oftener than of old. And the suffering entailed by this was nearly enough to drive the loveliness away.

Varied as were the duties of Fidá's life, pleasant, or dull, or interesting as they might otherwise have been, he performed all save one apathetically, as so much dull labor to be got through willy-nilly. Everything in him, every thought, every wish, was under Ahalya's sway. Body and heart and brain she ruled him, as, indeed, he ruled her. There was now scarcely a suggestion of remorse or regret in either of them. The lower natures of both were in the ascendant; and there were numberless hours when the flesh reigned supreme. In his saner moments Fidá sometimes paused to analyze himself, doubtfully, wondering if he could be the Fidá of Delhi and of Yemen. But during the last month he was not often sane; and when, with the glare of the day, other thoughts, truths, reproaches, came to him, he fought them off, refusing to consider, not daring to remember, his code.

El-Islam, life to the true Arabian, was, by degrees, deserting the captive. How should he maintain a religion that taught moderation in all things, duty to the master, forbearance from intoxication? Ahalya, whose

mother, in her long captivity, had lost her own beautiful Magian religion, and who had herself been brought up a Hindoo, had, like many Indian women of station, taken the god Krishna, lord of beauty, romance, and love, for her special deity. And some of the pretty ceremony and graceful superstition of her half-doubtful beliefs had woven themselves like an evil web around Fidá's brain. Often, during their quiet hours, Ahalya used to sing to her lover parts of the great Indian Song of Songs — the wooing of Krishna and Radha. And her voice, and the smooth-flowing poetry of the words, charmed him into new forgetfulness of the sterner western creed. The story was well fitted to their state. As Ahalya sang, he loved to call her Radha; and if she delighted in him as the incarnation of her too well worshipped god, her lover saw in it no sacrilege. But in this way his prayers grew strange to him; and he became in some sort a pagan, unworthy of any god.

There was but one pursuit left in which they found an honest pleasure. Both of them loved the boy, Bhavani, whom, in different ways, each was instructing in a primitive code of manhood and chivalry. The child had taken so strong a fancy to Fidá that his father, perfectly confident of the Asra's fitness for the position, began more and more to surrender him as cup-bearer in order that he might attend his son. And Fidá, finding the child truthful, obedient, and affectionate, took a genuine pride in instructing him in all that he knew. There were times, indeed,

when the man, brought into close contact with young innocence and instinctive honor, was drawn to a certain unavoidable sense of guilt; and this same thing Ahalya felt, when, in accordance with the young prince's wishes, she rehearsed with him, in their old way, the dramatic epics of ancient Indian heroism and self-sacrifice. And so much alike had the minds of the lovers become, that the young Bhavani, imbibing from each the same often identically expressed principles, came by degrees to connect the two in his mind; perhaps even, with a child's intuition, guessing something of their position, though unconscious of its sin.

The momentary and fleeting suggestions of remorse were very slight, however, even with Ahalya. Neila, who knew all, watched her mistress in perpetual wonder; for she had changed utterly. She was a gazelle transformed to a tigress; and the handmaid, who worshipped her with the worship of a slave for a queen, now feared her while she loved her, and because she loved her, also feared. Neila, never told anything in words, had known all from the first, and from that first had acted as go-between. In spite of the cynicism of Fidá, who, after the Mohammedan fashion, trusted no woman, she had proved faithful to both of them, and had held the interests of both at heart. For, if Ahalya were her princess, Fidá was a captive prince, a man rarely beautiful in form, and, moreover, the very first that, to her knowledge, had ever succeeded in doing what he had done. He had risen to great heights in her eyes; and if Ahalya sometimes called her lover by

the name of her wooden god, Neila carried the matter farther yet, and half believed that Fidá was really more than human.

In this different-wise ten weeks passed, and it came to be the third Ashtaka¹ of Magghar Poh (December). This sacrifice and festival, begun at noon, was wont to continue till midnight; and the Rajah, jealous of Brahman prerogatives, never failed to take a chief place in such rites. Fidá, an outcast according to Hindoo codes, was, during this holy ceremony, not allowed on sacred ground; and he therefore gave himself up to the propitious time, and spent eight of the twelve hours at Ahalya's side. It wanted ten minutes to two when he left her, by the now usual means of the low window in her room. Wrapping himself closely in the long, white cloak of thin woollen stuff that made part of his winter clothing, he started across the little, dark courtyard.

The noise of the revellers in the great court had not yet died away; and Fidá debated whether he dared pass through them on his way to bed. For the first time in many weeks he was thoroughly exhausted; and the chilly night air swept over his parched and burning body with grateful effect. All at once he felt that he dreaded to be alone because of the thoughts that might come upon him. Entering the north wing, he rapidly traversed the narrow passage

¹ On every eighth day through December and January there is a special Brahman sacrifice called the "Ashtaka." (See Grihya-Sutras, Vol. I, p. 203, M. Müller edit.)

leading past Ragunáth's rooms, turned instinctively in the usual direction, and presently emerged at the court, where the ceremonial was over, the fires burning low, and the soma revellers lying or standing about in various degrees of intoxication. Near the door of the audience hall stood a little group of priests and officials, among whom were the Rajah and Ragunáth. Not daring to approach these, and giving not more than a passing thought to the matter, gradually overcome by vague, chaotic ideas that were rising in his mind, Fidá went on, out into the road, and along it till he came to the water palace that stood on the edge of the plateau, overlooking the south plain, through which the great Narmáda rushed. Here, in the stillness, Fidá halted, looking around him. He was beside one of the smooth water-basins overhung with slender bamboos and tamarind shrubs, with tangles of lotus-plants floating, brown and dead, upon its mirror-like surface. Before him rose the low, level walls of this charming accident of Indian architecture. On high, overhead, hung a late moon, wreathed in a feathery mist of night clouds, and throwing a faint light over the plain and the distant river. To the right, in the distance, a long, black, irregular shadow, rose the giant barrier of the Vindhya, beyond whose mystic recesses, far northward, lay distant Delhi, the city of the slow-conquering race, the people of the captive now standing here alone with the night. Gradually, as Fidá looked, a great awe stole upon him. His body had grown cold with the night chill; but his

mind took no heed of the flesh. A change was upon him. His chaotic thoughts were shaping themselves. Gradually, before the vastness, the high dignity of nature, the ugliness of his last weeks became clear to him, and he trembled with horror of himself. Slow tears ran down his cold, set face. He locked his hands together, and rocked his stiffened body to and fro. A cry was welling up in the heart of him, standing there in the face of Allah's creation: the high-reaching hills, the wide, moonlit plain. To his overstrained nerves it seemed that they judged him, in their immense incorruptibility: — him, the corrupt. And presently the mountains lifted up their voices and spake. Plainly to his ears, out of the dim, black recesses, came low, deep tones, uttering first his name: "*Fidd ibn-Mahmud ibn-Hassan el-Asra,*" and then, after a long pause, the words, old and familiar to him since childhood, the tradition of his race:

"Cursed be the Asra by Osman: cursed this day and forevermore any man of them that loveth woman as I have loved Zenora. Let him die in the first year of his loving, though from east to west he seek a cure. And to him that taketh from another a promised wife, may the curse of Allah the Avenger seek him out till he be hidden in the depth of Hell. Thus I, Osman, curse thy race!"

Down from far generations rolled these words into the ears of the youngest of the Asra, who, hearing them, uttered a deep cry, and, swaying for a moment where he stood, presently fell, face down, into the dead grass beside the pool.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CURSE

THE night moved quietly on, the moon dropped westward, and still Fidá, lying there on the dead kusa grass, did not stir. From his swoon he had fallen into a heavy sleep which was unmoved by the slow passing of the night. The far mountains, oblivious of the havoc they had wrought upon a human mind, reared themselves grimly toward the stars, and out of their fringing forests came now and then the roar of some king animal, or the melting cry of a night-bird. Little by little the moon paled and the stars grew dim, and a white mist rose over the far-flowing river. The cold breath of dawn was upon the world, and in its inimitable stillness the slave, wakened perhaps by the throbbing of his own pulses, opened his eyes dully, and shivered and then rose and stood staring down into the pool, struggling to free himself from the bonds of oblivion and of sleep. When the memory of the past night opened before him, it was as if he contemplated the undoing of another man. He made no attempt, he had no wish, to think or to reflect upon himself. The dawn was upon him—the sacred hour. Already, in the east, a pale, clear light had lifted itself upon the horizon. One or two silent birds—kites—floated

over the walls of the water palace and began to sink slowly into the depth of the plain. In the village a dog howled, an ass brayed. Instinctively the spectator inclined his ear for the muezzin's call to prayer. But there was audible only the flutelike note of the newly wakened koil. The east brightened. The clouds over the Vindhya grew rosy, and the river mist was tinged with gold. In the fresh morning air Fidá could perceive how his brain burned, how his head throbbed. His body was racked with misery, but there was a great clearness in his mind:—no searching, no thinking, only a sudden upliftment and a simple sense of gratitude to nature for this, her hour. Prayer was not upon his lips; but at last it lay in his heart:—the great natural prayer that the first Hindoo, waking on his world two thousand years before, had felt and could not utter.

The hour was advancing. The line of clouds above the northeast hills changed from pale pink to a fiery rose-color that shed a glow over the whole plateau, and haloed the man who stood, with his white-clothed arms upraised, drinking in the purity around him. When at last the sun pushed its edge over the horizon, it was invisible to Fidá; but he knew, from the gradual disappearance of the delicate vapors, from the sudden quieting of the birds, the *sense* of day, that the mystic dawn was over. Then, at last, Fidá realized suddenly that he was faint with weariness and parched with thirst. Slowly he took his way back to the palace, thinking not at all, only passively longing for rest. His walk over, he stopped for a moment at the

well, then went at once to his own room, and, thankfully remembering that every one would rise late to-day, threw himself on his bed and sank into another stupor-like sleep. How long it was before he regained a vague consciousness, he did not know; but he found two men standing over him, and one he recognized as the Rajah. The sight of his face caused Fidá a dull surprise; but he returned into the stupor without having uttered a word. After that his rest seemed to be broken by various dire sensations and many monstrous dreams. When his eyes opened, he always found Ahmed, and sometimes Churi, near at hand; and, comforted by their presence, realizing that, with them, delirium would be safe, he resigned himself. He knew that he was very ill. Every one else knew it. Churi was exerting his utmost skill; though he never once thought of the ruby. It did not remotely occur to him to try that as a remedy. Three or four weeks passed away, and then the fever abated a little, and gradually it came to be understood that the Rajah's favorite slave would live. By degrees his strength, wofully depleted by the reckless strain he had put upon it for so long, came back; and by the end of January he made a feeble appearance again. He soon discovered that his sickness had not been thought unusual by any one, since in his ravings he had betrayed the fact that he had spent a night on the ground near the water palace. Indeed, it would have been strange if the fever that lurks in all damp night mists in western India had not made him a victim of his own imprudence.

This view of the matter brought a great relief to Fidá. Perhaps, after all, the incident of the curse had been just the wild dream of a sick man. Perhaps those sinister words had been spoken by his own heart. Perhaps. — Perhaps. — Perhaps. But, unnaturally, after Fidá was up and about again, he did not get well. There were days when it seemed as if his old-time vitality were returning to him ; but there were many more when he felt as if, by no possibility, could he bear the weight of his limbs : when, racked with an inward fever that penetrated to the very bone, he dragged himself about only by a superhuman effort. Yet, unspeakably dreading that time when he must face the end, the slave made every effort to conceal his illness, forcing himself to much that seemed impossible for a man in his condition. One thing only he could not do. He could not see Ahalya. Now, in the light of their past vital relationship, he realized that he could no longer attempt his former rôle. Day and night, it is true, he longed for her sympathy, her tenderness, the touch of her gentle hands. But in return for her ministrations he could give her nothing — nothing but the weary plaints of a sick man. And so, steeling his heart to loneliness, he went his way, blindly and dumbly, yet still, after the pathetic human custom, hoping that life held yet a few empty years for him.

When, with mid-February, the spring appeared, Ahalya could no longer bear her unhappiness, and one evening sent Churi to Fidá, bidding him come to her. It was a summons that could not be refused; and,

in the early darkness, he stole to her rooms by the little courtyard. Alas! How many, many times had he come to her thus in highest joy! How differently to-night he came! In each heart there was dread, and fear:—in hers that he long since tired of her, in his that she could no longer care for him. When he appeared she was alone, standing at the end of the room by her narrow bed, her face turned to the window through which he entered. Seeing him, she did not move, but her eyes grew big with inquiry, and her mouth drooped a little. Fidá, who could not look upon her without deep emotion, also stood silent till he could command his voice. Then he said, gently, but without much expression:

“Thou hast sent for me. I have come.”

Ahalya's lip quivered, pitifully; and she lowered her head, without replying.

Fidá, watching her, moved forward a step or two. “Ranee—what is thy grief?” he asked, putting her, by his appellation, infinitely far away.

Ahalya gave a sob that was like a scream, and, flinging herself face down upon the divan, laughed and wept hysterically, but still without speaking. Fidá, bewildered, miserable, yet hoping something that he dared not voice, knelt at her side and longed to give her comfort; restraining himself only by a great effort. She wept as long as she would, and then suddenly ceased, lifted herself, and turned a burning gaze on him.

“Faithless one,” she said, in a low, monotonous tone: “thou faithless, infinitely despised! Did I not give

myself to thee, for thee committing the greatest sin? I loved thee, and my heart was true, and in thy long sickness by day and night I prayed to the gods for thee, vowing that, shouldst thou die, I would follow thee as becomes a widow; for in all ways I have considered myself thy true wife. And after thine illness, when I yearned unspeakably to comfort thee, didst thou come hither? didst send one word to me, that still live only in the thought of thee? Oh, tell me," and her voice rose passionately, "who is thy new love? What is the name of her on whom thy traitor kisses fall? O thou wretched one —" her tone became a long, ungovernable wail, "O captive — O Fidá — hast thou forgotten me?"

"For the soul of Allah, Ahalya, do not torture me! Ahalya, Ahalya — I am true to thee! Look at me!"

Dropping his concealing cloak upon the floor, he stepped into the glow of light under the hanging-lamp, the pitiless rays of which fell directly across his emaciated and deathly face, out of which shone his eyes, glittering with fever. Ahalya gave a low exclamation, which he answered. "Yea, look upon my face. It is that of one that hath not much longer here. I have not told thee, thou beloved of my soul, of the curse that lies upon my race. That curse was given me by the Vindhya on the last night that we loved. In my heart I know well that I am doomed. My strength is gone, and the weakness grows daily greater. Shall I bring this misery upon thee? Shall I —"

But here he was stopped. Comprehending him at

last, Ahalya, her eyes shining with new-found peace, went to him and put her arms about his wasted frame ; and he, feeling no desire to resist, let himself be drawn down upon the divan, his head pillowed on her breast, her strong, young arms around him. "Beloved," she murmured over him, and Fidá gave himself up to her. As he lay, passive, motionless, one of his hands wound in her curling hair, they talked together, scatteringly, of many things. Both of them understood that their burning days were forever at an end ; that indeed of the quiet ones there were left not many. But, for the moment, Fidá could look upon the future without dread ; and Ahalya was under the spell of too great a relief to face new calamity at once. Both knew, indeed, that the situation might have been infinitely worse. There might have come sudden parting : — death for one, for the other the torture of long waiting. Instead, the future was to be to them but a golden repetition of the golden past. And even now their companionship could be resumed, their love only growing the stronger as Fidá's body became weak, since they were now bound by ties of truth and unselfishness that no misrepresentation or sorrow or suffering could break.

Thereafter ensued a quiet period of nearly four weeks. The spring was advanced. The planting was over, and Mandu abloom. The sun's rays grew daily hotter, though as yet there was little discomfort from heat. It was the time of year when all growing and living things love and mate ; but for Ahalya and Fidá it was the autumn of love. Their days were filled with

misgiving ; for, as the inevitable end drew near, both came to suffer a great anxiety about the manner of that end.

Nor did the late spring bring joy and peace to Mandu. With the advent of gay birds from Ceylon, came also messengers from Dhár, in the north, bringing word that Omar the Asra, with a Mohammedan army, had come out of Delhi and was sweeping victoriously southward on his way to Mandu. To this warning and covert appeal for aid, Rai-Khizar-Pál could not but reply by gathering together his fighting men, and preparing to march. Mandu was in a state of excitement ; but there was no rejoicing that their well-loved King must prepare to set out on a new campaign. The ministers that were to be left to rule were unpopular ; for this time Ragunáth was not to accompany the army, but left co-regent with Manava over the people. For many days these matters kept all the plateau in a state of ferment ; and there was perhaps only one person among them all that viewed the proceedings with apathy. He, indeed, was one to whom events might have been considered to be most important. Fidá might not unreasonably have entertained some idea of being taken upon the expedition in his position as King's cup-bearer. But this hope, or fear, was quickly killed ; for Rai-Khizar-Pál valued his slave too highly to run the risk of losing him by allowing him to come into actual contact with his own people. Nor could Oriental flesh and blood have been expected to withstand such temptation to escape.

It was on the twelfth of March that the Rajah, with his army, was to set out upon his second campaign against the Mohammedans. On the afternoon of the eleventh, Fidá was with young Bhavani when the Rajah summoned him. It had been one of the slave's most miserable days. During his morning service he had taken care to keep himself as much as possible behind his master; and now he dreaded the interview extremely. There was, however, nothing for it but to obey the call; and, resigning Bhavani to his attendants, he hurried away to the King's private room, where he found Manava and Kasya standing one on either side of the royal divan. At the door Fidá performed his usual deep salaam, and was motioned to come forward.

"Enter, Asra. I sent for thee. By the flocks of heaven, thou'rt sick to-day! Hast no care for thyself, good slave?"

Fidá smiled, slightly and bitterly. "I have no need for care. I am in health, O King," said he.

"Tell me not that any man with visage so deathly is in health. Thine appearance troubles me, for I repose great trust in thee, and I dare not depart in fear of thy death. Speak, Manava, — what thinkest thou of him?"

"He hath the appearance of a man very ill," answered the minister, thoughtfully regarding the slave.

"Fidá, for the space of a week keep to thy room, and let Churi and the priests attend thee and bring thee back to strength again. Thou must accept so much of aid, for thy look troubles me sorely."

The Asra threw himself on the floor at the King's feet, and once more protested that his looks belied him, that he was perfectly able to perform his usual tasks. And the Rajah, whose projects were upset by the prospect of this slave's illness, allowed himself to be persuaded against his own judgment, and proceeded to the object of the audience.

"Fidá el-Asra, thou hast been in Mandu, in my service, scarce half a year as yet; but because thou art of high birth and noble training, I repose confidence in thee. I cannot take thee with me upon my campaign, because I should fear to lose thee in the north. But, in leaving thee behind, I am about to place thee in a position of great trust. Manava, whom thou seest standing upon my right hand, is, in my absence, to be part ruler of Mandu. To Kasya here, my faithful eunuch, I intrust the guardianship of my women. To thee I give the last of my treasures, the hope of Mandu: my son, Bhavani, the flower of my heart; to be taught and guarded till my return. Thou shalt have full direction over him, save only in those times when the Lady Malati, his mother, desires his presence. Already Bhavani loves thee, Asra; and thy training makes thee fitted to be his companion and his master in my absence. For this trust that I repose in thee, give me thy fealty."

Deeply touched by a mark of favor so little deserved, Fidá fell upon his knees and pressed the Rajah's foot with his brow. In that moment of abasement he was very near to confession; and, had it not been for the

presence of the other two, Fidá might, at that moment, have opened up his heart and told his lord all the story of his treachery and crime. A moment's swift reflection, however, brought with it the remembrance of Ahalya ; and in dread for her the impulse passed away, and he found himself protesting incoherently his gratitude, his fidelity, and his sorrow at the departure of the Rajah. Once more, before he was dismissed, Rai-Khizar-Pál, noting anew his gaunt and pallid face, expressed some concern for his health ; and then, giving his hand to his slave's lips, sent him away. Fidá, his nature suddenly revolting against himself, sought his room, flung himself face down upon his bed, and there, in guilty misery, poured out some sort of inchoate prayer of remorse.

After an hour or two of meditation and quiet, the Asra took resolution on a certain matter which he had been pondering for a long while. Ever since he had become certain that the curse was actually on him, he had wondered whether or not Churi had yet disposed of the ruby. It was Churi's place to have thought of the stone for him ; and he hated himself for the desire he had to touch it again. But it had apparently never occurred to the eunuch to use the blessed jewel as a remedy ; and, as often as the thought came to Fidá, he put it resolutely from him in shame. By this time, however, his hunger to gaze upon the charm had grown great and fierce. He felt an intense desire to live ; and, believing the means of health to be within easiest reach, what wonder that his temptation came again

and again? This evening, in view of the new trust, which he had the strongest desire honorably to keep, the temptation suddenly overcame him, and, putting away his pride, perhaps even his self-respect, he went to seek out the doctor.

Churi was in his own room, eating. Looking up from his food, he gave Fidá his usual easy salute:

“Vishnu favor thee! I am told that thou’rt to be given sole charge of the young prince. Truly, Asra, the King loves thee as well as his wife. Wilt deign to eat with me?”

Fidá did not respond to the ill-timed raillery. He stood leaning against the wall, gazing at the eunuch with so strange an expression that Churi changed his mood.

“Thou’rt ill to-night,” said he, more gently.

“Yes, I am ill,” answered the Asra, in a low, harsh tone. “I am dying, Churi.”

“Dying! Why shouldst thou die, lover?”

“Allah! Thou knowest why.”

“Ah! The old legend. Dost really believe—that—”

“Canst thou doubt that I am cursed?”

They remained facing each other, silent, staring. No further words were necessary. Churi knew very well now why he had come; but he sat struggling with himself, for he was disturbed. Nevertheless Fidá’s ghastly face pled strongly. After a few moments, during which the slave suffered under his degradation, Churi rose, walked to the shadowy corner of the room,

bent over for a moment or two, working in the earth of the floor, and then came back to Fidá with the gold box in his hand. Fidá, looking into the unmatched eyes, saw animosity in one and scorn in the other.

"There. Take back thy gift." Churi held the box out to him.

To the eunuch's astonishment, Fidá deliberately accepted it, rolled the ruby out into his hand, and for a moment feasted his eyes on it. Then he pressed it to his breast, shut his eyes, and moved his lips in prayer. When the prayer ended, he replaced the jewel in its case, and once more held it out to Churi, who had stood in silence, watching him.

"I thank thee," said Fidá, simply.

Churi looked surprised anew. "Wilt thou not keep it?" he asked.

"Ah! Thou thinkest me such a dog?"

"Will that help thee — just the moment of it?"

"I do not know; yet it seems to me that the very sight of it hath helped me."

A second time Churi held out the box, this time voluntarily. "Take it and keep it on thy person for a week."

Fidá drew back.

"Nay, I wish it. I trust thee."

"But it is thine. How hast thou not already sold it?"

"That is not easy. I dare not show it in Mandu. But in the month of April will come a man from the north, a travelling merchant of Rajputana, that comes

each year, bringing with him silks, rugs, gold work, and gems of the costliest kind. I know him well, and he will take the ruby and give me my freedom. Therefore thou seest there is time for thee to recover. Take the stone at least for the space of a week ; and then if thou art better, thou shalt keep it till the merchant comes."

There was only friendliness in Churi's tone. Fidá's simplicity had disarmed him. Seeing that the favor was done willingly, Fidá accepted it ; and, when he walked away from the eunuch's house, the little golden box lay in its old place in his girdle.

Next day, at noon, all Mandu thronged about the palace and along the old road to witness the departure of the Rajah and his army. It was indeed a brilliant pageant that set forth upon the long and dangerous journey to the north. Fidá, in a throng of slaves, stood against the south wall of the great courtyard, and watched the companies form. At high noon Rai-Khizar-Pál, attended by his two ministers, who walked one on either side of him, came out of the palace, and was greeted with tumultuous acclamations by the throng of soldiers and people. And the Lord of Mandu was unquestionably worthy of admiration. Never had Fidá seen him more magnificent. His large, well-proportioned body was clad in half-armor, of a purely ornamental type, under which he wore a fine, white garment heavy with red and silver embroidery. On his head was a white turban from which rose a black aigrette fastened with a pin glittering with rubies.

His horse, a magnificent animal, in trappings of black, red, and silver, with the small double-drum rimmed in silver placed before his saddle to mark his rank, was held in waiting. After a few inaudible words with the regents, and an effective parting from each, he walked swiftly to his steed, sprang upon it without aid, caught up his bridle, swept an arm toward his body-guard which immediately galloped up and surrounded him, and then, amid the renewed shouts of his people, rode rapidly out of the courtyard, and began the march. He was followed by Purán, in more serviceable costume, surrounded by a group of what might be called aides; and then by the army itself:—first, two hundred horse, and then five hundred foot, the whole of the forces of Mandu. Slowly, line by line, they formed in the limited space, and wound away after their leaders, spear-heads and head-pieces flashing in the sunshine, men and animals alike fresh and vigorous — eager for what lay before them.

To Fidá, still leaning against the courtyard wall, this sight of armed and armored men passing out to honorable combat, was bitter indeed. All the warrior in him rose and struggled for place in his enfeebled frame. He was sick with the servility of his life. He loathed the despicable part he had played. Every soldier that passed him seemed to him to walk over his heart, bringing back vivid pictures of what had been, when the smell of battle was sweet to his nostrils, and the battle-cry the fairest music his ears could know. Once he had been a man! Now — now — he would not



answer the question of his conscience. When the hour was over, when the last foot-soldier had passed out of the courtyard and was lost in the winding road, he drew a long, heavy sigh, and moved his eyes. The first thing they encountered was the figure of Ragonáth, standing near him, gazing fixedly in the direction of the departed host ; and Fidá saw with wonder the expression on his face : an expression of deep-seated relief, joy, — nay, rather, triumph. The Asra stared yet more earnestly, a sudden apprehension striking home. Was it possible that, at last, Rai-Khizar-Pál being gone, Ragonáth meant to taste the well-guarded fruit? Fidá's lips shut tight. Was there finally to be an open struggle between them? Was it to be his happiness once to perform a real service for the King? Wondering, hoping, hating, he stood there, nor heeded how he was grinding the golden box deep into the flesh of his left side.

CHAPTER IX

ASRA FIGHTS AGAIN

THE departure of the Rajah and his army wrought, at first, little visible change in the life of the palace at Mandu. The zenana was a little duller, the ceremonies less formal, the work of the royal court less arduous; — for Manava, though a just man, had not his over-lord's popularity as a judge. To Fidá, however, the absence of Rai-Khizar-Pál made a marked difference; and his life was almost entirely changed. He had a new sense of freedom; and he saw Ahalya oftener than ever. Since she was no longer subject to her husband's will, both she and Fidá had a much greater feeling of confidence, but also a greater sense of dishonor than when he was at hand. The duties of the Asra, meantime, were light, and less uncertain than they had been. All the morning, and, indeed, nearly to mid-afternoon, he was with Bhavani. But when their various tasks and pursuits were over, the young prince generally elected to spend the rest of his time in the zenana, where he was the spoiled pet of twenty or thirty women. In this way many hours were unquestioningly open for the slave and Ahalya; but Fidá was shortly made aware that most of them must be hours of sadness. One week

from the evening on which he had had his last talk with Churi, he reappeared in the room of the eunuch, who, as usual at that hour, was within. The Asra walked up to him, and silently tendered him the golden box. Churi looked quickly into his face—and his eyes remained fixed there.

“The charm—hath not worked?” he asked.

“No,” answered Fidá, shortly.

“Thou’rt not better?—Thou’rt worse?”

“Yes.”

“But the reason of it?” Churi looked down at the treasure now lying in his own hand, and a faint smile stole across his lips. “The charm—is gone?”

“I sold it. I sold the birthright of the Asra. I have doubly cursed my race. It is fitting, indeed, that I should expiate the sin by death!”

“Nay, despairing one. We shall cure thee yet. ’Tis but a lingering fever. I shall try to help thee. There is a certain draught of herbs—”

Fidá interrupted him with a sort of laugh. “Nay, Churi, spare thy skill. Fever-draughts will not avail against the curse of the Saint. There. I thank thy generosity. I thank thee, also, Churi, for all the rest thou hast done for me. I tell thee now in the face of death, that, were all to do over, I would face a thousand ends for half the glory I have known in her. And all this, I owe to thee. Had I mine uncle’s riches in addition to the ruby, they should be thine. And yet—Allah comfort her when I am gone! That—that, Churi, makes me suffer. Oh, I talk folly in my

weakness. Heed me not. A peaceful rest to thee !” And, turning on his heel, Fidá was gone.

Time crept slowly along, and the Asra, absorbed in his duties and in his increasing weakness, took little note of the many things that passed about him. Ragunáth, busied with his share of government, was now doubly occupied with certain plans and desires of a private nature. It was a strange thing that Rai-Khizar-Pál had never seemed to suspect what all the rest of the palace knew : that Ragunáth was, and for a long time had been, deeply enamoured of Ahalya, who, six months before, had been almost at the stage of returning his affection. But for the past four months, indeed since the sharp repulse he had met with from the lady herself, Ragunáth had had the wisdom to make no attempt to see her. Now, at last, however, the time seemed favorable for a renewal of his efforts ; and the mere possibility of success roused the man’s long-stifled passion with unconquerable fierceness. Rai-Khizar being well out of reach, Ragunáth was now a great power in the government. Manava he considered almost unimportant, but pliable. And so did he turn over matters in his mind, that he finally arrived at a casual, well-arranged talk with his fellow-minister, begun about servants in general, and continuing to Kasya in particular, who was getting old, who would be well replaced by some younger, more vigorous man : — Kripa, perhaps? He, Ragunáth, felt that the whole matter might be adjusted very simply, and would himself undertake it and its responsibility. Manava

listened to him, seemed struck with the idea, considered it for a little, in his grave, inscrutable way, and then said some pleasant things to his coadjutor. Nevertheless, Ragunáth, on retiring, found that his point had not been gained ; found that he had an impression that Manava considered the whole affair absurd ; but was able to lay his memory on not one single unpleasant word that the other had spoken. He began then to perceive that he had underestimated his companion in office.

The failure of his scheme was a serious disappointment, and proved for a time a check upon his plans. Review the situation as he would, he could see no point in Ahalya's guardianship that had not already been tried and found invincible. Considerably involved in other matters, he was forced to leave this, that was nearest his heart, alone for a little ; though her image was scarcely out of his mind by day or night. And with all his brain's ferment, Ragunáth found no hope of action until, for her own reasons, Chance, the great goddess, stepped scornfully in, and gave him what no scheming could have brought about.

Spring was now far along, and March at an end. It was the time of year when all young things were at the fulness of their vitality ; for in India the late spring, before the coming of intolerable heat, is the real summer of the growing world. All nature was filled with vivid life. Each lightest thread of zephyr carried with it a shower of golden pollen, blown for floral marriage-beds. Birds and beasts had long since mated. And by night the bulbul in the champak bushes sang to his

mate throbbing songs of the children that were coming to them from the eggs over which she brooded. Lutes in the hands of poets attuned themselves to the triumph of love ; and, under the universal spell, only Fidá could not rise to it. On the afternoon of the third of April, the Arab had been with Ahalya for a moment only, showing himself too miserable to linger at her side ; and she had sent him sadly away to rest alone, and perhaps sleep back into a semblance of life. Left to herself, Ahalya found it impossible to be still. She was young, and there was no curse on her to keep the summer from flowing in her veins. Neila was asleep somewhere in the zenana. She must have some one to speak to ; and, even as she pondered, the young Bhavani bounded in to her with a fascinating and unwise proposal. Some slave, he said, had told him that this year, in the water-palace pool, there was a blossom of blue lotos, the flower said to be found only in paradise. Would she not go out with him to see if it were really there ? Ahalya seized on the idea with alacrity. She longed to get into the living world ; and Bhavani was delighted with her enthusiasm. The Ranee veiled herself, and then, calling no one to attend them, they hurried into the little courtyard, out of it into the north wing, and so across a corner of the great court and into the road to the water palace. And, as Fate had decreed, Ragnáth, sitting at council in the great audience chamber, caught, through its open doorway, one fleeting glimpse of Ahalya's veiled figure, recognized it instantly with the divining eyes of desire, and began to calculate how soon he should be able to follow her.

Unconscious of the ill-omened gaze, careless of the recklessness and the indecorum of walking abroad unattended, Ahalya went on, hand in hand with the worshipful boy, joyously drinking in the exquisite air of the late afternoon. The sun almost touched the river in the west, and the air was suffused with rosy gold. From the south came a fragrant breeze, laden with the spicy breath of far Ceylon. There was a twittering chorus of birds. The trees and shrubs on every side were clad in foliage in the highest stage of fresh beauty. The tamarind and the willow vied with each other in grace. The bamboo was tufted with palest silver-green. The almond trees had finished blossoming, and the grass beneath their branches was strewn with pinkish petals. Here and there was a lilac shrub, heavy with clusters of pale purple flowers — emblems of Persia. And in sunny places the grass was strewn with white and golden gillyflowers, with occasional starry narcissi and daffodils. The whole world was abloom, and the air heavy with perfume.

As she proceeded, Ahalya's languid delight increased to a species of intoxication. She was bewildered by the beauty of the world, enchanted by the high, pure notes of the birds, by the whisper of winds in the trees, by the heavy hum of drunken bees, by the murmur of distant, rushing water. Bhavani, a little overcome by her manner, presently broke away from her to run after a new-come butterfly; and Ahalya walked on alone to the water palace. Arrived there, and seeing Bhavani happily racing away at a little distance, the Ranee

seated herself beside the pool, almost in the very spot where, months before, Fidá had stood and listened to the curse that welled from out the mountains, whose sides were now swathed in a bluish haze, that grew gradually golden in the light of the setting sun. Here, in the shade of the willows and bamboos that overhung the basin, Ahalya's mood changed, and her thoughts were no longer of the joy of the young summer.

She thought on darker things: of the plight in which she was, of the worse one that was shortly to come to her. In her love of Fidá Ahalya was now, and, after the first day, had been, remorseless and surprisingly careless of discovery. This was all in accordance with the training of the child-woman, who, though she did not know it, had loved the Rajah as a daughter only, and had turned from him to the young Arab with all the truth and all the womanhood in her. There could never be for her another like Fidá. And she knew now that the end of love was very near. She had been denied its expression for a long time; but while its object lived she did not care. Now, however, in the midst of this brilliant scene, she suddenly perceived how weak, how worn he was. And it was borne in upon her that the pallor of his face was the pallor of death. How soon would the end come? How would it come? Could she show her love for him in performing the suttee? Would there be opportunity? or would he be burned, like a dog, on a handful of sticks, in the city of the dead at the other end of the plateau, far from her reach? The thought

was too hideous to be maintained ; but the shadow of it darkened over her heart. How was it possible that such dreadful things could be ? How —

She was interrupted in her morbid reverie by Bhavani, who, tired of butterflies, came to drag her round the pools in search of the blue lily. Ahalya was not now in the humor for this amusement ; and Bhavani became slightly peremptory in his demands. So, finally, she released herself from him, and, while he ran on, to the other side of the building, she, desirous of returning to her meditation, melancholy though it was, began slowly to pace up and down the flowery turf. Bhavani was quite out of sight ; and Ahalya herself, her back toward the road, stood gazing out over the sunset plain below, when there was a sudden step behind her, and a voice exclaimed in her ear :

“ Can it be that I have found the embodied spirit of the summer ? ”

She turned sharply, and found herself face to face with Ragunáth. Her first impression was one of disgust at the expression on his face ; her first instinct to escape as quickly as possible from his presence.

“ I am not a spirit at all. I have lingered here too long and must go at once. Your favor, sir. Let me pass ! ” She motioned him imperiously out of her way ; but, to her amazement, he only moved as she did, so as to be always in her path.

He smiled, regarding her half-admiringly, half-respectfully, but kept his position till, stamping one

small foot upon the ground, she cried, angrily: "Out of my path, my Lord Ragunáth!"

"Nay, be not so hurried, Ranee," he returned, mildly.

Annoyed by the presumption which his tone belied, she lifted her eyes and looked him fairly in the face. A shudder ran through her frame. At last she realized that he did not intend to let her go: that her wishes were now of no consequence. Instantly she was alive to her situation. She looked around her, terrified, desperate, and perceived, at a little distance along the wall of the palace young Bhavani, standing quite still, staring at the figure of the newcomer. Immediately Ahalya began waving her hand to him:

"Bhavani! Bhavani! Run quickly! Seek thy master!"

Ragunáth grasped her roughly by the arm. "Silence!" he cried. And indeed she was silent, for, even as her tormentor spoke, she saw Bhavani turn and start like a deer in the direction of the palace. And Ahalya knew well to whom he would go first of all.

In a measure relieved, understanding that now she had only to gain time, her wits rose to the situation, and she turned her face to Ragunáth's frown, and laughed. "Art thou so angry that I have sent the boy away? Wouldst thou have had him stand there gazing at us? Even Radha despatched her maidens ere she let Krishna look upon her face unveiled. Hast thou not heard that tale, my lord?" She smiled on him incomparably.

Ragunáth's reply was a laugh. He, who trusted no living man, was in an instant thrown off his guard by a woman's trembling coquetry. "I have heard the tale. — What lover hath not? Yet it hath never been sung to me in the young summer, and by one resembling Radha as thou dost. Sing to me, then, beautiful one, of the loves of Radha and Krishna."

"But I have neither lute nor harp."

"It matters not. There is no instrument that would dare accompany thy voice."

So Ahalya, her heart throbbing with fright, her whole body quivering with loathing of the man who walked so closely at her side, began to sing. And as she sang, the daylight sank from the sky; for the sun had set, and darkness, most terrible to her plight, was upon the land. She sang the eleventh Sarga of the great epic: that of the union of Krishna and Radha, which she had so often poured into the ears of him she delighted to call her god. And even now, at the joyous triumph in the words, her heart was sighing at the emptiness of her love. This, to the music Vasanta and the mode Yati, is what she sang:

"Follow, happy Radha, follow,
In the quiet falling twilight,
The steps of him who followed thee
So steadfastly and far —"

"That is true, most beautiful Radha. Let thy fair feet henceforth follow me through the land of delight," murmured Ragunáth, in her ear.

Her voice shook as, without replying, she went on:

“Let us bring thee where the banjulas
Have spread a roof of crimson
Lit up by many a marriage lamp
Of planet, sun, and star.’

“For the hours of doubt are over
And thy glad and faithful lover
Hath found the road by tears and prayers
To thy divinest side—’”

“‘And thou wilt not deny him,’”

broke in Ragunáth, whispering,

“‘One delight of all thy beauty;
But yield up open-hearted
His pearl, his prize, his bride!’”

Ahalya shuddered again and was silent, wondering what evil genius had made her begin that song. She began to fear, desperately, that Bhavani had not understood: that she was really left alone, at the mercy of this man whom she feared as much as she hated. Therefore, filled with terror at what she had made herself do, she suddenly determined to attempt escape; and, on the instant darting from Ragunáth's side, she started, at the top of her speed, across the grass, in the direction of the road. Ragunáth, taken wholly by surprise, stood for a second staring after her, and then hurried in pursuit. Unhampered by his garments, and far more used to swift exercise than she, he overtook her halfway to the road, and caught her round the waist in an iron clasp.

She gave a faint cry, and, at his touch, strove wildly to escape it. But Ragunáth was not now in a mood to let her go. Grasping her yet more firmly, he lifted her, and, in the starry darkness, carried her across the open space and into a little copse of champaks and wild cotton trees at one side of the empty lawn. Here began a fierce struggle. Ahalya fought like one possessed of a demon; and Ragunáth was a little aghast at the strength of her fury. Fearing to hurt her, and realizing that at this rate her strength could not last, he devoted himself only to defence and the prevention of her escape, reserving his force for the time of her exhaustion. And indeed Ahalya presently found herself in a sad plight. Her strength would not last above a minute more. Only one hope was left now; and that was desperate enough. Lifting her head, she uttered two piercing screams. And—to Ragunáth's consternation—she was answered by a fierce cry, as a man's figure dashed through the trees to where they stood.

Ahalya had only an instant in which to recognize the gaunt form of Fidá. She caught one view of his face in the gloom, alight with such fury as she had never dreamed he possessed. Then the two men were locked together in mortal struggle.

Broken and weak with the strain and terror of the last half-hour, horror-stricken at what was happening now, Ahalya stood like one entranced, watching without sound or movement the combat going on before her. She could not, in the darkness, distinguish between the

two forms rolling together on the ground. The men fought without a sound : — Ragnáth with the strength of passion, Fidá with a final fury of jealousy and despair. It lasted only three or four minutes. Then the woman, who, in her terror, stood rocking her body back and forward, holding both hands to the sides of her head as if that helped her to suppress the wild screams on her lips, saw one figure suddenly rise above the other, draw a weapon from his girdle and plunge it once, twice, thrice, into the breast of the other who was struggling to lift himself from the ground. Instantly, with a low, gurgling cry, the body fell back. And Ahalya, peering like a mad-woman into the dusk at the living man, whispered hoarsely :

“Fidá — Fidá — is it thou ?”

And he, who was standing straight and still, his arms hanging at his sides, answered quietly: “Yes, Ahalya. I am here. I have killed him.”

CHAPTER X

THE SONG OF NARMÁDA

FOR a long time they stood there, in the stillness of the night, looking at each other in a kind of lethargy; while between them, on the ground, lay the body of Ragunáth, gradually chilling, the blood from its three wounds still running thinly down into the pool beside it. Around and over all three of them myriad fireflies fluttered, like stars of the under-world, setting a ghastly glow over the ghastly scene. Fidá's heart was beating very faintly now. He was obliged to breathe in little gasps. But he was not thinking of this. His mind was groping. He was still in a great darkness when Ahalya came over to him, walking carefully to avoid the blood, and laid both hands on his arm.

"Let us go back to the palace," she whispered.

Fidá shook his head. "I think I shall not go back to the palace. I think I shall go on," he answered.

"On! Whither?"

"Up. Up to be judged."

"Fidá! Beloved! You will come with me."

But the man was not to be moved by her tone, which was such a one as is used to a sick child. Possibly

Fidá was mad, or very near it; but it was a quiet madness, and he was sure of his desires.

“Alas, Ahalya, what wrong I have done thee! All the wickedness that man can accomplish I have accomplished. Wherefore I am going up before Allah. But thou must not grieve for me, thou fairest of all women. Thou knowest well that I was very near the end. Most beautiful—most sweet—lotos-lidded, fear not lest I should not take upon my soul the double crime. Thou shalt be freed from all sin in the eyes of Allah and Mohammed. It is the last joy of love that I can perform for thee.”

He spoke in a quiet, solemn tone that frightened the woman inexpressibly. As he paused, she threw herself before him, clasping his knees.

“O my lord—O beloved of my heart—thou Krishna—whither thou goest permit that I go also! If thou art to appear before thy great god, suffer me to remain at thy side. Spurn me not for that I am a woman. Did I not vow to thee long since that, since thou wast my true husband, I, thy faithful one, would not suffer thee to die alone, but, performing the suttee with mine own hand, would accompany thy spirit to its blest abode? And I swear now by the faithfulness of Radha, and by Lakshmi and Devi and the divine Ushas, that, if thou goest forth alone into the presence of the gods, I will surely follow thee. Wherefore, thou, who hast loved me well, grant me a last boon. Let me go forth and die with thee, that we may be judged together, and, if thou lovest me still, together endure our punishment.”

“Consider thy words, Ahalya. Just now thou’rt not thyself. Return to the palace and dwell there quietly, and let peace come into thy heart. I absolve thee from that old vow of love. There is no one that could suspect thee of this murder. I have done it; and this my absence will proclaim. Bhavani knows nothing. He is now with Churi, and thou canst tell the child what thou wilt. Return, then, to the house of the Rajah, and forget — and forgive — my sins.”

“Nay! Nay, nay, nay!” It was the first time that either of their voices had been raised. “I will not be absolved from my oath! I will not be left alone to face the terrors of Kutashala Máli! Take me with thee, else, by mine own hand, I die alone. Oh consider the sweetness of death together! Consider the terror of death alone!”

“Again — I plead with thee!”

“No, no. If thou diest, I also will die.”

“But thou knowest, Ahalya, that I cannot live. Thou knowest that to wait will mean either execution by torture for the murder of a Brahman-Kshatriya, or a long and agonizing death through my curse. And I, coward-like, perhaps, choose here a swifter and more merciful end. Yet, if thou wilt, I will return with thee to the palace and wait there for what may come.”

For an instant Ahalya considered. Then she answered: “Nay, beloved, I will not have thee return to the palace. Only take me with thee that I may not die alone.”

“And if I took thee with me? How should we die?”

“What was it that thou wouldst have done, going up alone?”

“I have here the dagger that slew Ragunáth.”

Ahalya shuddered. “Not that! Listen. Thou knowest that by my people there are certain waters held sacred to the gods, so that those that die in them are cleansed of many sins. Such a stream is the broad Narmáda, which to us is the little Gunga, the promised sacred flood. Let us, then, under cover of night, go down to the river and there, in the same moment, die together—thou in my arms, I in thine.”

Fidá reflected. “How shall we reach the river?” he asked.

“I have heard that there is a way down the rocks of the plateau at this end. When the plain is reached, it is an easy walk to the river. By dawn we should be there if—if only—thou hast the strength.”

“I shall have the strength. Did I not slay this man?” Fidá’s pride was touched; and perhaps, after all, just this little, human vanity, decided them. “I have the strength. But thou, most beautiful, canst thou endure this long and painful journey now? Faintest thou not for food? Will my arm be enough to uphold thee by the way?”

“If I fall, Fidá, thou shalt kill me where I lie and thyself proceed. Nay, I shall not fail thee. Come. Let us seek the path down the cliff.”

There was a moment or two of delay while the knife was plucked from the body of the dead man, and Ahalya removed a part of her hampering drapery.

Then, after one solemn embrace, they started. It was the time of the month when there was no moon; but the stars, nowhere in the world more brilliant than here, shed a faint, steady light over the quiet earth. The descent of the great cliff was begun at a point almost immediately behind the water-palace; and they soon found themselves occupied enough to forget the tragic circumstances of the journey, as they picked a fearful and uncertain way from point to point, from rock to rock, down, through the night, from high Mandu to the plain. What chance it was that stayed their destruction, they scarcely knew. But certainly it was a miracle that, in the first five minutes, they were not dashed headlong down the whole depth. Fidá's knees shook under him. Had it not been for Ahalya, he would have ended all just here, swiftly. But, with an effort that he felt to be the final summing up of all his forces, he went on, the woman following uncomplainingly, fleetly, silently. It lacked an hour to midnight when they reached the plain, and, looking back and up, wondered at what they had accomplished.

Now they threw themselves upon the ground, for a few moments of necessary recuperation. Ahalya was drooping with sleep, which Fidá dared not permit her to indulge. He realized, vaguely, that the unnatural strength on which he was enduring must break soon; and by the time it was gone, they must be at the river-bank—the borderland of eternity. So, after a few moments, he bent over her, whispering:

“Up, beloved—up, and on! We must reach the

river by dawn. There, my Ahalya, thou mayest sleep — we may both sleep—long and undisturbed.”

And Ahalya, heeding him in all things, rose and put her hand in his, and they passed into the night again, over the plain, toward the distant river.

* * * * *

Dawn, white, mistlike, broke slowly upon the world, over the plains of Dhár, where, to the south of the city, two armies were encamped: one, that which guarded the city walls, the joined forces of the Lords of Dhár and of Mandu; the other, Omar el-Asra, with five thousand Mohammedan warriors out of Delhi. In the earliest dim shadow of daylight these two armies stirred, woke, and swiftly prepared them for the day; till, when the first shafts of the sun tipped the Indian spear-heads with red fire, there rose from either line a low, deep battle-cry,—from the Indian ranks the oath of the gods: “May the bright bolts of Indra, the discus of Vishnu, the lingam of Siva protect us to-day!” and from the other side the cry that was echoing over all the civilized world, from Granada to Benares, the great shibboleth of conquest and carnage, before which the earth bowed: “La-Ilaha-il-lal-laha!” “There is no god but Allah!” a god of violence and death. And while these shouts still echoed to the sky, the two lines began a slow advance, till, ere they met, a great cloud of sun-bright dust whirled up and around them, and the haze of impending battle closed them in from mortal sight.

* * * * *

Light lifted itself also over the swift-flowing, holy Narmáda, on the north bank of which stood the man and the woman, hand in hand, silently watching the coming of the day. They were exhausted with the horror and the travail of the long night ; but their minds were now above the physical state. That no longer mattered. Fidá stood staring at the slowly lightening waters, his face fixed and very stern. Ahalya also was still, leaning on the arm of her lover, her eyes closed. She was not praying, nor did she even think. Of what was there to think? The past lay behind them, ended. Of the future there was none. The present was painless. Like Fidá, she was tacitly waiting for the first rays of the sun to mark that spot in the water where It must come.

Just before the first finger of gold was raised over the Vindhyas, just before the armies in distant Dhár began their advance, Fidá turned to Ahalya beside him, and murmured, softly :

“Beloved, it is too terrible for thee. I cannot let thee die here, thus. See, it is cold, this mountain water. It comes from far above.”

“Hush, Fidá. We are to go up together. Thou hast promised it,” she replied quietly, her lips barely moving.

Fidá uttered a groan. “It is not I — it is not for myself I falter. But thou — there is no sickness upon thee — ”

“Look ! look, beloved, it is the sun ! See where it makes a bed of gold upon the stream ! Lift me up,

Fidá — carry me out — carry me out and lay me there — upon our golden bed.”

She turned to him, and he, looking into her up-raised face, could urge no more. Lifting her, with a last effort, gazing the while deep into her unrepentant eyes, he sought for the last time her lips, and then — with a setting of all his muscles — stepped forward into the stream. The rush of water, even near the shore, was very swift. It was scarce up to his waist, no more than covering Ahalya’s ankles, when, suddenly, he knew that he could not breast the current. There was a second of agonized realization — a scream from the woman as she was plunged into the icy flood. Then came a moment’s struggle with the resistless, irresistible force, which at one time covered the whirling bodies and again exposed them to the air. Suddenly Ahalya was swept into the arms of Fidá. With the last instinct of life, the hold of each tightened about the other. Then, in the tumult of the running river, came a mighty stillness. The current might toss them as it would. They were alone and one, and there was for them a moment of indissoluble peace before they were called up to answer for their deed.

* * * * *

And now, upon the plain of Dhár, the battle-lines had met, and were mingled in an inextricable mass. Those watching from on high — Brahma, Vishnu, Siva, and Allah — might, in the hideous mêlée, have been able to distinguish one single combat, short, swift, decisive. There, in the midst of the shouts, shrieks,

and yells, encompassed by flashing weapons and life-streams running red, two men, Omar el-Asra and Rai-Khizar-Pál of Mandu, met together, fighting mace and mace, and, later, sword and sword. One moment, only, in that chaos of duels, did this endure. Then the great Rajah, husband of Ahalya the beautiful, conqueror of an Asra prince, plunged forward from his saddle, his skull cloven in two by the keen blade of the Mohammedan warrior.

Thus, in that fair April morning, by devious ways, four souls that had been closely bound in their earth-life, went up and met together at the throne of the dread judge: — Rai-Khizar-Pál, his sceptre laid down forever; Ragunáth, his faithless minister, passion-spent at last; and finally, still hand-in-hand, still unrepentant of their love, Fidá of Yemen and the Ranee Ahalya, not now flushed with the sweet rose-hue of her Iran.





BOOK II

SOUL-FIRE

“ . . . Yes, who am I? God wot!
How often have I prayed to Heaven to tell me!—
Who am I, God?— But Heaven itself is mute.
Yet this I do know: whatsoe'er I be,
Hero or weakling, demigod or beast,
I am the outcast child of the bright Sun
That longs for home!—
A bundle of sorrow, weeping for the light
That stretches out its radiant arms in vain
And yearns for me!”

—GERHARDT HAUPTMANN, “The Sunken Bell,” Act V.



CHAPTER I

THE SON OF GOKARNA

It was July ; and in Bul-Ruknu, Vindhya-sheltered, the rains were over. From now till September one could but avoid the open sunlight and sleep as much as the human system would permit. This afternoon the heat poured blindly over the mud and bamboo village, and even animals and children had deserted the streets and sought shelter from the molten sky. One woman, her head and body wrapped round in bright-colored cotton, darted out of the close veranda of her own dwelling and hurried swiftly down the street toward the spot where, set a little off by itself, stood the largest and best-built house in the town. Entering the veranda of this she found seated there, on a pile of straw cushions, her half-sister, Kota, wife of Gokarna, the head-man, and at the same time, which was unusual, chief priest of Siva, the village deity.

Greetings passed between the two ; and Kota, causing her sister to sit beside her, clapped her hands for a slave who presently appeared in the doorway, a timid, unkempt girl of fifteen.

“Bring us fruits, Jensa,” commanded her mistress. Then, as the girl disappeared, she turned to Hilka :

"'Tis six days since I have seen thee. Are thy gods propitious?"

"Yesterday, at sacrifice, the omens for the harvest were bad. But Gokarna has told thee that. How art thou?"

Kota stirred a little, uncomfortably, and lifted her languorous eyes to her sister's face. Just then the slave came back with custard-apples, early mangoes, and pomegranates in a basket. Kota took them from her, proffered the dish to her visitor, who accepted one of the mangoes, and then, while both began to eat, Kota said slowly: "I am not happy, my sister. My mind is troubled. I am filled with melancholy and foreboding concerning the child. I see many strange visions in my sleep. The gods refuse me peace."

"Art thou thus, Kota? That is not right. Yes, I can see thou art not well. Let Gokarna offer special sacrifice for thee."

"He hath done so twice already since the *Pumsavana*. But ah, Hilka, I cannot speak my heart to him. It seems to me as if my thoughts were not my own. They are put into my mind by evil spirits. I fear them, and I fear the end. Alas, shall the soul of this child be evil? I fear it! I fear it!" She spoke with a nervous intensity that made a strong impression upon Hilka, who knew well her sister's lazy, thoughtless temperament. It was the first time she had ever perceived any strong feeling in her. Now she said anxiously: "Go to Naka, at the end of the village, and get a charm from him to ward off the *Devas*."

“Hush ! Gokarna is coming ! Do not speak before him of charms, or he would scold us both.”

Hilka, who had been sitting with her back to the street, turned hastily, as Kota's husband appeared in the veranda entrance : — a tall and austere-looking Brahman, clad in a long, white garment. He came forward at once to greet his wife, giving Hilka but a careless recognition ; for, to the head of the village, even his wife's relatives were scarcely worthy of attention from him. And Hilka's visit was brought to a sudden close ; for no woman of Bul-Ruknu would, from choice, have stayed long in the proximity of the Priest of Siva.

Kota bade her sister a quiet farewell, not asking her to come again — rather taking that for granted. And when the visitor was gone, she turned immediately to her husband, who touched her on the forehead, answered briefly her questions concerning the day's auguries, and presently left her and went into the house.

Kota, knowing that it would be useless to follow him, too dreary at heart to care whether or not he talked with her, returned to her cushions and sat down again to gaze off into space at the swirling, white heat-waves, and to dream, vaguely, of days that had never been.

For an Indian, Kota was a pretty woman, her eyes being very large and soft, and her black hair, just now woven with yellow champak flowers, thick and long. She was seventeen years old, and had been married for three years. Moreover, she had been born a Brahman, and, in her married life, had been highly honored ; for, though until now she had been childless, her husband

had not taken another wife. Above all, Gokarna's parents had died in his early youth; so that Kota, at her marriage made mistress of the finest house in Bul-Ruknu, had been also spared that terror and curse of all young Indian women — the mother-in-law, whose traditional duty it was to make the life of the young wife one of perpetual misery.

At the time of her marriage, the girl Kota had been envied by every woman in the village. Later, despite the unheard-of advantages of her position, she had not been so much looked up to, for the reason that she was childless. But, just now, her star was again in the ascendant, since, in the winter, she was to present Gokarna's house with a much-prayed-for heir.

In spite of the fact that she was to have what she herself had most longed for, Kota, as she had just explained to her sister, was not happy. Her mind was in an abnormal state; and was seriously affected by the slightest incident. Highly imaginative, like all her race, she had always been more or less given to visions and presentiments; though never so much as now. She would sit for hours motionless, wrapped in unhappy dreams, or, as the result of some slight accident, a prey to the keenest forebodings of evil. These things she did not often confide to her husband. Nor did she see enough of the members of her own family to get much comfort from them. Thus the naturally morbid state of her mind was fostered and increased by her loneliness and her secret broodings, till her nights were filled with terror, and her days were of the length of years.

The hot months passed slowly ; and when, after the early harvest, the fall monsoon came on, Kota grew more than ever listless and unhappy. Her time was now much occupied, however, with religious ceremonial ; and, in this respect, probably no woman was ever better cared for than Kota. The *Simontonnayana* was made the occasion of a special festival, which was attended by the whole village. According to the commands of the Vedic ritual, the mother was magnificently dressed, and adorned with gold and jewels. Gokarna sacrificed a bull to Indra, the flesh of which, after an offering to the gods, was partaken by everybody. Then the ceremony of the parting of the hair was performed, and texts were chanted by all the Brahmans. Only one event marred the general gayety of the night. At the end of the prescribed ceremony, and before the beginning of the feast, Gokarna, following custom, bade his wife sing the merry festival song : "Taza ba Taza". Kota, who had sat silent and solemn through the entire ceremony, looked up at her husband pleadingly, then opened her lips, uttered the first words of the song in a hoarse and trembling tone, and suddenly burst into a torrent of tears that no entreaty of her friends nor stern command of her husband could still. This incident was considered an evil omen ; but, in the subsequent feast and merrymaking, it was quickly forgotten by all save the poor little mother herself.

After this, Kota did not appear again in public. Indeed, for the next two moons she spent her time almost wholly on her bed, attended by Jensa, and

sometimes by Hilka, till, at length, January came. In the last days, Gokarna suddenly became attentive, nay, almost tender, to his wife. He was by nature neither demonstrative nor affectionate. But the matter of his child touched the dominating note of his nature: — pride. And he could not but be interested in the person who had power to present him with sons to whom he could hand down his state and dignity. Gokarna was inordinately anxious for a son. Though his dispassionate nature rebelled bitterly at the thought, he was determined that, should this child prove to be a girl, he would take another wife. Meantime, however, Kota was the object of his highest interest; and not a little was she astonished when he left the conducting of the full-moon sacrifices to an under-priest, that he might stay beside her. He wished to talk with her of the child. But Kota's three years of wedded life had not prepared her to confide her secret thoughts to her husband, and he got surprisingly little from her on the subject nearest both of them. His conclusion was that she was like all women: — too stupid to think. But had Kota chosen, she could have disclosed to him a little wonder-world of motherhood that would have opened his eyes anew to womankind. Melancholy she had been. Now she was full of dread. Nevertheless, the sacred love was in her; and, in her brighter hours, she had given her child all the tenderness of hope, all the ambitions and desires for its welfare, that her stunted womanhood could conjure up. For the first years of its life, at least, the baby would be her own to

love and to rule. Her heart would have something to cling to. The dry dust of her existence was about to put forth flowers and foliage at last. But of such thoughts, and the joy in them, she could tell Gokarna nothing, as he sat beside her mat-bed in mid-January of that year 1207. He could only make ceaseless inquiries as to her welfare ; and, toward nightfall, he was rewarded by her suddenly sitting up, and crying to him to send at once for the low-caste nurse who was to attend her in the coming hours.

These hours were terrible enough, even to the emotionless Gokarna. Religion forbade his remaining with his wife, or allowing any but the woman of special caste to behold her. All he could do was to sit in the room next to that in which she lay, kindle a sacrificial fire, repeat over it certain prescribed Vedic texts, and listen anxiously to the sounds issuing from the neighboring room. This lasted an unconscionable time. Then, when the night was at its most solemn ebb, the moaning and sobbing suddenly ceased, and silence fell on the priest's house. This stillness was far more terrible than the noise had been. Gokarna's unemotional nature was stirred to its very depths. Should he brave the Vedas—and go to her? While he waited, straining his ears, a new sound came : — a faint, baby wail that pierced the heart of the man and caused him to start joyously to his feet. A moment later the hanging before the doorway was pushed aside, and the nurse appeared, holding in her arms the child, wrapped in a piece of cotton cloth. For a second,

Gokarna stood still, choking with hope. Then he ran forward, and put his hands on the tiny form :

“Is it — is it a boy? Speak!” he said.

The nurse answered not a word, but laid the child in his arms.

* * * * *

Not until noon the next day did Gokarna enter the room where his wife lay. Kota, on the bed, with the baby beside her, started up as he entered. But the words on her lips were stopped by his look.

“In the name of the gods, Kota, I give greeting to thee — and to my son. My son,” he repeated, slowly, his eyes fixed upon the face of his wife, whose frightened expression did not diminish. “And thou,” he continued, turning to the nurse who stood at hand, listening intently, “see that, on penalty of banishment, thou prate to none concerning the matters of this house. I am now come to perform the ceremony of the breathing and the secret name. Therefore depart, woman, from the room, nor return until I summon thee.”

The nurse, alarmed at his tone, made a hasty exit; and Gokarna turned again to his wife. Nor did he say another word on the subject nearest both their hearts. Immediately he took the child from its mother’s arms, at which it protested, with lusty voice, Kota watching it the while with tenderest mother-eyes. Gokarna, holding the child up before him, breathed three times upon it, and murmured: “Draw in thy breath with the

Rik, breathe within the *Yagus*, breathe forth with the *Saman*."

Then, handing the babe for a moment back to its mother, he left the room, shortly returning with the articles of daily sacrifice: — honey, melted butter, and barley mixed together in a small earthen dish, in which stood also a spoon of beaten silver. Placing these on the floor beside the bed, he seated himself, took the child again, and looked up to Kota. "The name," he said. "Find thou the omen for our name for him."

Kota stirred uneasily. "Hark!" she said, listening, "what do they sing there without: — what song?"

Somewhere in the village a chant was sounding, the words as yet indistinct, but becoming gradually louder, till a little procession passed Gokarna's house, uttering these words, over their heavy and sorrowful burden:

"Call on Rama! Call to Rama!
Oh, my Brothers, call on Rama!
For this dead
Whom we bring,
Call aloud to mighty Rama!"

"Rama!" echoed Kota, tremulously. "God of death! — Alas! Alas! That is the omen."

"It is surely an evil omen that a funeral should pass the house of the new-born. Yet Rama is a god. He must be honored. Let the secret name of the child be 'Ramasarman'. There are the four, holy Brahmanic syllables. 'Ramasarman.' Say it with me, Kota."

And the mother, with tears in her eyes and in her voice, repeated with her husband the words that



gave her first-born a secret name of death. And when this ceremony was over, receiving the baby once more into her arms, she wept over it, quietly and persistently, throughout the afternoon.



CHAPTER II

OMAN THE CHILD

It was thus that the child of the head-man and high priest of Bul-Ruknu entered the world and found his place there. But his subsequent baby days did not bear out the dreary omens of the first. The whole town, and a throng of farmers from the rice-fields to the north, were present at the ceremony of the public christening of the child, who was named Oman, and was thenceforward regarded by the village as their prospective head and ruler. As such he became at once an important little person, both in the community and in his father's house.

Having been born a Brahman, Oman's first year was punctuated with ceremonies prescribed for every minutest change in his little existence. In his sixth month, at the first feeding with solid food, upon which the character of his future career was supposed to depend, he was given, not rice, to bring him splendor; nor beef, to bring him power; nor fish, to bring him swiftness; nor goat's flesh, for a fine physique; but a bit of white partridge breast, which is said to confer upon a child the gift of mental purity. And from this time on, every step in his education was for the purpose

of making him a worthy successor to his ascetic father. From his earliest babyhood he was trained in rigorous ways of propriety and grave conduct. Much speech, inarticulate or otherwise, was not sanctioned in Gokarna's presence; nor did the father sympathetically regard the manufacture of mud-pies, or even the jingling of Kota's ankle-bells and bracelets. The delights of babyhood were indulged in secret, at times when Kota's warm-hearted motherhood overcame the unceasing dread of her husband; and she and the baby found amusements that delighted them equally.

During the first three years of his life, Oman certainly gave no evidence of unusual characteristics. When he was two, and his mother nineteen, a girl was born into the family of the high priest, which fact, however, in no way diminished Oman's importance. He was now at a delightful age; and even Gokarna sometimes fell from dignity and allowed his son to drag himself to his feet by aid of the paternal leg, and then, by means of the same member, permitted himself to be urged out to witness the antics of some badgered kitten, or peep into the first home of half a dozen tumbling puppies; which creatures the child never molested, but would watch by the hour with solemn delight.

In his third year, little Oman underwent the ceremony of the *Kudakarman*, or tonsure, by which his rough and tumbly black hair was clipped close to his head, and thenceforth kept so:—a very comfortable bit of religion, considering the climate of Bul-Ruknu. This concluded the ceremonies of babyhood, and was the last he

should have to undergo till the day of the great initiation, or second birth, when he would become a true Brahman, a student of the Vedas.

This period, from his third to his eighth year, was the happiest and freest of his life. He was now emancipated from the close supervision of his mother, and allowed to go forth alone to explore the wonders and the glories of the town. All the simple and unfathomable joys of childhood were there, awaiting his pleasure. First of all were the children; for Bul-Ruknu swarmed with them; and, boy and girl, Brahman or Sudra, they were turned out to live in the streets till it came time for them to take up the duties of life: — the boys, from seven to twelve, to begin their Vedic studies or their slavery; the girls, from ten to fourteen, to marry. Little Oman, so far brought up to the most rigid solitude, now entered the world, and found hordes of his own kind awaiting him. Forthwith he offered himself to them. They accepted him readily into their numbers, and let him find his own place there. They ranked him nowhere, for their spirit was entirely democratic. They were the only species of Indian humanity that did not, openly or secretly, recognize caste. With them, it was not a Brahman who must lead, but the boy who could fight best; it was not the girl of wealthiest parents that was most popular, but she that had greatest talent for making dolls out of straw and rags.

Among his kind Oman did not make astonishing progress. He proved gentle and quiet, and made friends, in a mute sort of way, with those of his own age or a

little younger. He never attempted leadership. As a matter of fact, such an idea did not occur to him. But he was thoroughly intolerant of any sort of ruling. The boy that tried to command his occupations, he regarded with astonished disapproval, immediately renouncing the acquaintance of the would-be general. He never fought, — had, indeed, been known to run away from the scene of a struggle, and hide himself till it was over. Yet his spirit was not generally considered cowardly. The result of this course was that, gradually, Oman gathered around him a handful of little folk like himself, among whom he always felt at liberty to do what he liked. They were an odd little band. Among them were no concerted plans of action, no organized raids, hardly even general games. Each child, occupied with some pursuit of his or her own, would simply carry it on in the proximity of others, because the feeling of companionship was pleasant. Oman, indeed, after the first novelty of it had worn off, did not always remain with his fellows. There were many things that he found it eminently pleasant to do alone. For him the town held ever fresh delights. He knew every donkey that came to the weekly bazaar. He was also on friendly terms with the troops of dogs, the cats, and the chickens of his immediate neighborhood. Animals liked him, and he returned their affection with warm appreciation. Nor was he ever known to harm, or even so much as startle, any living thing. And this extreme gentleness was perhaps his most distinguishing characteristic,

In due time this child of high future approached his eighth birthday, and, at that early age, entered upon the rigorous life of the Snataka, or student of the Vedas. The ceremony of second birth, investiture with the sacred cord of the Brahman, was the most important event of his life, since he was universally looked upon as the successor of his father, the future high priest of the village. The girdle of Menga grass was fastened round his waist and the cord knotted over his left shoulder. Into his hand they put a staff made of the polished bilva wood prescribed for the Brahman student. Aside from these things, and the single cotton garment that he wore, all the possessions that had been his in the world were supposed to belong to his teacher, who was a priest under Gokarna, a man named Asvarman, who had taken four pupils, of whom Oman was the youngest.

It was at this time of the first separation from her oldest child that Kota brought into the world a new son, who, for the time being, took up all her thoughts. And from the hour of this boy's birth, Oman's prospects, though he was unaware of the fact, assumed a different aspect. His career depended now upon his own abilities; for he was no longer indispensable to the ambitions of his father.

When a Hindoo boy begins his studentship, which lasts for an indeterminate number of years, he is no longer regarded as an inmate of his father's house, but is wholly under the supervision of his instructor, and is supposed to beg his food and lodging from persons

a single hour of the day
student had taken place
year 1215, and was immed
Sravana festival for the
Adhya-Yopa-Karman, or
study. His part in the re
a week, during which time
little sleep. Then, on the 1
of March, began the routi
unbroken, for five years.

Every morning, between
and his three fellow-stude
sandy square near the apolo
there replenished the sacrif
extinguished. When the l
had reached the horizon, .
appearance, and, seating hi
face to the east, his pupils
side of the blaze, would be

afternoon, they returned to continue their study, which lasted till sunset, when the evening Agnihotra was performed and they were dismissed for the night, burdened with an endless list of rules which they must not break on pain of penance. The only relief from this monotonous existence came on Uposatha days:—days of sacrifice to the new or the full moon; and certain sacred festival days, when ceremonial took the place of the usual study.

In a year, by means of this persistent application, the boys were able to read with tolerable fluency, both in Pāli and in Sanscrit. But the rigor of their labors was not lessened thereby. Rather, instruction now took a severer turn; for, young as they were, the little students were of Brahman birth, and, therefore, entitled to the highest education. According to the law, Asvarman now began to expound to these pathetic children the doctrines of the three mystic philosophies:—the Sankhya, the Vedanta, and the Yoga—speculations of such profound abstraction and such absolute intellectuality, that their effect on these childish minds would have been amusing had it not been pitiable. Solemnly, with his wide, unfathomable eyes fixed on the dull orbs of the priest, Oman, now at the age of nine, informed his master that Nature was created in order that the world-soul might become united with itself; that contemplation is the soul's highest duty till its time of liberation from material fetters; and that only essence is infinite.

Just how much of this found some sort of home in

the boy's young mind, to reappear long years afterward with new meaning attached to it, it were difficult to say. Probably it was at this time, and through the agency of those vast philosophisms, that Oman's double self began dimly to be shadowed forth. By the time he was eleven, and had been for three years a Snataka, he commenced in his own fashion to meditate, and, also in his own fashion, to suffer. Much that had hitherto lain dormant within him began to stir. He realized that he could scarcely fathom his own state. There seemed to lie within him two distinct natures: the one strong, non-combative, but self-rebellious; the other gentle, and weak, and shrinking. Until now he had had no clear idea of this. He had been all things at once. But the elements were beginning to resolve themselves. He had moods, of longer or shorter duration, during which one set of characteristics or the other seemed to dominate him. Half the time he wondered at himself angrily for his indecisiveness. The other half he shrank from self-analysis, and from any effort at study as well.

Immersed as he was in a self-conflict which he believed to be part of everybody's ordinary life, his attempts at understanding himself tinctured all his thoughts, and his questions as to the philosophies and their significance always bore a personal relation to himself and his needs. Here he found not a little assistance. But with the Vedas it was different. There was nothing there to apply in any way to the inner life. The formal ritual, the Sutras, the Mantras,

were all mere objective texts. And, gradually, as he strove in vain to find in them something personal, their meaningless intricacy impressed itself more and more upon him.

His life, at this time, was far from happy. He was closely bound, even as to his thoughts; and he had really no freedom. His state was almost constantly one of melancholy; but he was subject to violently changeable points of view; and, in his continual secret analysis and meditation, he endured the first pangs of loneliness. How strongly he felt all this, it would be difficult to say. At the time, his existence seemed to him overwhelming. Later on, he could remember it with yearning, as holding a peace and a contentment that would never come for him again.

The years passed over the head of the boy, slowly for him, swiftly for many around him; and when he was thirteen years old, and had been for five years a Snataka, a heavy sickness came, and he was taken to the home of his father, to be cared for there. He alone knew how, for many days, his body and his mind were torn with strangest anguish. Dimly he understood that the souls imprisoned in him were struggling mightily to burst the bonds of flesh, and free themselves. Finally came the evening that was always most vivid in his memory.

Toward sunset he was carried out into the vine-walled veranda of the house; and he felt that people — two, three, four — stood around him, looking upon him. He heard murmurings and exclamations, which gradu-

ally melted away ; and then only his father and mother were there, standing on either side of him ; and he felt afraid, and wept, in misery.

There, indeed, through the whole night, the man and the woman who had brought him into the world stood over him in the agony of the crisis, Kota shaken with sobs of affliction, Gokarna stiff and straight, hands clenched, skin damp with sweat. There the father gave up his son, the priest renounced his hope and his ambition. Lifting up his voice he prayed Siva to take the life of Ramasarman ; and this prayer the child, and the mother of the child, dumbly echoed in their hearts. Yet, in the clear, red light of dawn, the agony left Oman's body, and his mind, exhausted with a weight too terrible to bear, grew gradually quieter. Kota and Gokarna, knowing nothing more to do, spent with weariness and emotion, returned together in silence into the house, leaving Oman alone in the half-light of early day.

The child's first sensation was one of extreme peace. Pain had left him ; and the eyes, half curious, half horrified, that had watched him through the night, were gone. The early air came fresh and sweet to his dry lips ; and it seemed to act on him as a powerful narcotic. He grew languorous and drowsy. The spirit within him was still ; yet, somewhere, there was a tension. He could not quite give himself up to insensibility. Was it habit : — the old sense of rising at this hour to prepare the sacrifice ? Not that. The Vedic ritual, and all its infinite detail, lay quite outside his

path just now. No ; it was rather a curious sense of expectation, of waiting for something to come — what, he neither knew nor asked. But the waiting was not long. From out of that clear, vermilion dawn-light, came flying a tiny, gray bird, — Spirit-bird, Hindoos call it, — slender-necked, clean-winged. This, hovering for an instant about the entrance to the veranda, darted suddenly in and plunged, quivering, into Oman's breast.

The boy gave a faint cry — expressive of unutterable things — and laid his two hands with greatest gentleness upon the soft feathers, caressing the creature, and uttering to it little, inarticulate sounds. With the coming of this bird it was as if his being was suddenly complete. Now, for the moment, happy with a happiness that is beyond mortals, still clasping to his breast the feathered thing, which, under his touch, lay perfectly still, he closed his hot and aching eyes and slept.

CHAPTER III

HIS SOLITUDE

WHEN Oman woke, the sun was high in the heavens, and the bird had gone. During his sleep some one — his mother, doubtless — had covered him with a pliable mat, and had placed something soft under his head. Full consciousness returned by degrees. A sense of physical discomfort was the first thing he knew. Then came a faint memory of what had happened before the dawn. Sunrise and the bird were inextricably mingled in his mind. In his heart he believed that the bird and the peace it brought had been a dream. Now that he was fully awake, there was no peace. He was hot with fever; and soon his body began to ache again, with a dull, numb pain that was hard to bear in silence. Moreover, he panted for water. It was not long, however, before Kota came out into the veranda, her little boy clinging to her skirts and retarding her progress. Disengaging the child, who fell backward disconsolately, she bent over the sick one, felt the burning of his hands and head, drew from him confession of his pain and also of his hunger and thirst, and at once retired into the house, to return in a few moments with a bowl of millet and milk. She found the baby

sitting beside Oman, who was talking to it in his mellow, gentle voice. Kota hastily set the bowl upon the ground, picked up the baby, carried him inside, and, on coming back once more, found Oman lying on his face, shaken with sobs ; nor could she, for a long time, persuade him to turn his face to the light and take the nourishment he needed.

Despite his mother's furtively loving care, and the cessation of his exacting duties, Oman did not grow better of his sickness. Instead, his fever increased till delirium came, and for days he was out of his mind. In his times of pain he would become violent, screaming and struggling when any one approached him. He talked much. Snatches of Vedic text, old Sutras and Mantras, philosophical premises, and suggestions of his own self-struggle were jumbled together in wildest chaos. Gokarna, dreading to have a woman's ears hear the holy words that are forbidden to women, dreading still more the alternative of a masculine Sudra nurse, sure to carry gossip, had Oman carefully guarded and tended within the house. In his heart, the father, bitter with grief and worse than grief at the outcome of Oman's student-life, repeated many times his prayer for the child's death ; and had he been in a state to realize anything, Oman would have echoed that prayer with all his heart.

Desire, however, was vain. For four weeks Oman lay fever-stricken, and then, suddenly, began to convalesce, and in a fortnight more was about as usual. Spring was now nearly gone, and summer, with its

murderous heat, upon the town again. The crops were up, and the business of irrigation begun in the fields; for all the luxuriant foliage of the wild was withered and dry, parched for the rains that were not yet to come for a month or more. Among the town-folk, in the evening, the great subject of gossip was always: "The Child of Gokarna — called Oman." "He has given up the life of the Snataka." "No more does he study the sacred books." "Yet the ceremony of the cessation of study has not taken place." "Ah, yes, something is wrong. It is very strange."

Oman still wore the sacred cord of the Brahman. How should he, knowing so much of the holy Vedas, remove it? But he moved through his native town a wanderer, an outcast, addressing none of the townspeople, who would scarcely have answered him for fear of defiling their caste. How this situation had come about, Oman could not have told. It had been a gradual and natural growth. During his convalescence it had occurred to him that his father and mother were ashamed of him. This idea he tested in various ways, and found it to be true. Up to that time he had been ashamed of himself: furiously, bitterly rebellious concerning his weakness. But now, at once, the spirit of self-protection rose hot within him. Others, his own parents, were ashamed of him. Should he turn against himself? Never. The masculine instinct of self-defence turned inward toward that other timid, shrinking nature that he longed so to conceal. And when, at length, he was about again, his parents

found him wrapped in an impenetrable mantle of— was it pride?—was it stupidity?—was it temper?—arrogance? He was unapproachable and unsociable. He took not the slightest notice of those around him, never speaking of his own accord, and doing his best to prevent the address of others.

Gokarna held many periods of self-communion with himself as to his duty toward this child, and especially about the matter of the sacred cord. But time passed, and no special action was taken. Oman seemed to have marked out his life for himself; and the father, bewildered, let him pursue the course he would, and finally ceased to torment himself with questions.

Through the rainy season, Oman spent most of his time close to his father's house. There was a place for him there, such as it was, where he was never molested. In the first weeks of his recovery, his overworked mind found some delight in simple freedom from burdensome tasks. Idleness, silence, absence of rules and binding regulations, were sweet to him. He had the true Hindoo faculty for dreams, and would sit for hours lost in contemplation of unknowable and unfathomable things. Little objects—the bluish curl of smoke over a house-roof, the distant, flickering flame of sacrificial fires at dusk, a flight of heron toward the southern hills, the notes of the bulbul or the koil—such things brought him infinite pleasure, and formed subjects for long contemplation. These were the periods when his mind was freest from its burden. But there were hours—days—weeks, when the world gave

nothing to him ; when melancholy held him for her own. At these times life seemed a burden too terrible for any mortal, and the continuance of such suffering as his, a thing beyond the endurance of spirits of the blessed.

When the rains were over, and August came in, Oman began to spend much time wandering through the countryside, returning to the village only to eat and sleep : — sometimes not that. The country around Bul-Ruknu was broken, fertile, and unusually picturesque for India. To the east and southeast, at a distance of three or four miles, rose the northernmost hills of the Vindhya range, which extended thence, southward, to the Narmáda plain, fifty miles away. To the north and west were stretches of fertile fields, fringed with woods, and watered by a little stream fed by mountain brooks and springs, that went meandering through bottom-lands, and was used by farmers for purposes of irrigation. Very early in the course of his wanderings, Oman came upon this little river. During his childhood he had exhibited the curious trait of marked aversion to running water ; but he found now that the old dread of it lingered only in a half-fascinating fear lest some day, out of very wantonness, he should plunge into the little stream and resistlessly let himself be overwhelmed in its lucent depths. This fascination did not diminish with time. He loved to explore its windings through the countryside, and follow it up a little way into its mountain fastnesses. In the hills, one day, he came upon a shadowy glade,

turfed with kusa-grass and canopied with a giant banyan grove, a tree of a hundred trunks, that overspread two acres of ground. Here, in the green twilight, in a spot to which human beings never penetrated, Oman found his haven: — a haven of solitude where, for three or four years, he spent the greater part of his time.

Of the struggles, the wretched inward conflicts of this isolated mortal developing alone, unaided, avoided by humankind, it were terrible to speak. Physical maturity had come before the mental; and it was here, in this scene of lonely beauty, that he passed through the first, fierce stages of the new awakening. He was most miserably human; and all the faults of humanity raged within him, unrestrained and uncomprehended. He yearned constantly for that of which he could know nothing; and, helpless and half-mad, he was tossed upon a sea of morbid and lonely imaginings. At such times, the fact that he was an outcast seemed to him hideous and impossible. Rebellious, he would rise up and curse himself and the God of his creation. Then, when he had spent himself in tragical invective, the other side of him would take possession of his mind, and he would melt into tremulous weeping: weeping so piteous, so forlorn, that it would have melted the heart of any woman hearing it. Again, Oman was filled with a gentle and eager desire for something on which to expend affection: — a dog, a kitten, a bird, — any living thing that would accept his love. But nothing came to him. It seemed as if the very beasts avoided his haunts. A few apes were occasionally seen

within the banyan grove; but no other living thing passed through there, nor even a snake slept in the shadow of its stones. Yet the hills beyond were alive with wild creatures. By night lions cried through the great darkness. Immense troops of monkeys chattered in the trees. Both the tiger and the bear dwelt in the ravines; and the buffalo and antelope found pasturage on sunny hillsides. The steepest crags were the resort of myriad wild goats, and birds of all kinds winged their way over the heights and found their nests by hundreds in the jungle trees. But in the midst of all this wild, free life, Oman dwelt alone, unsought, lost in the wilderness of his solitude.

How, through three long years, he managed so to occupy his mind as to keep at bay the madness that besets the absolutely solitary, he himself knew best. Probably the first months seemed longest. The hours were dismissed, one by one, while he busied himself over little things; for, at his age, he was not able to create a systematic pursuit. His mind worked in unaccustomed spheres, conning, vaguely and indefinitely, problems that put him at a more or less safe distance from himself. In time, the atmosphere of the deep banyan shade, with the near tinkling and flashing of the brook, and the dim, greenish sunlight that slipped through the interwoven foliage, became so beautifully familiar that it was home to him. He bathed and floated in the chilly water, and afterwards kindled a sacrificial fire and sat before it on his knees, delighting in the high-leaping flames,

feeling that the play of the two elements satisfied his bent of mind. And during this time, by unconscious cerebration, what Oman had learned in his five years of studentship, all that mass of inert, half-decayed knowledge, concentrated into living truths that fixed themselves firmly in his brain and lay waiting to be used. Something further still came out of the solitude: — a self-dependence, a strength, and a fortitude without which, at a later period, he could not have lived.

Thus, until his sixteenth year, Oman spent his days. Then a change came upon him, and he felt this life unendurable. Insensibly, a scene from one of the old, heroic epics that he had read in his student days, came to him, fastened itself in his mind, and would not be dislodged. It was the picture of the "Sinner's Road", described with ghastly vividness by a long-dead writer :

" A burning forest shut the roadside in
On either hand ; and mid its crackling boughs
Perched ghastly birds — or flapped among the flames —
Vultures and kites and crows, with brazen plumes
And beaks of iron ; and these grisly fowl
Screamed to the shrieks of Prets, lean, famished ghosts,
Featureless, eyeless, having pin-point mouths
That hungered, but were never full."

Here, in the land where these dim spirits dwelt, Oman, in perilous despair, beheld himself. He must die as he had lived, and live in death as he had lived in life — miserable, desolate, desperate, without hope of betterment. And then, as the days scourged him, he

was finally driven to take a stand, for sanity's sake. Thus, one noontide, he girded himself up and returned to Bul-Ruknu, and there, within his father's house, sought an interview with Gokarna.

It was a long and solemn talk. Since the days of his sickness, three years before, Oman and his father had spoken scarcely a dozen words together. True, he usually slept at home, and his mother always left him food for the day in a corner of the veranda. But he was not of his family. In the village he had come to be looked on as a recluse, almost a hermit; and as such was in some measure respected. Now, however, Oman had come to demand one of two things: speedy death, or a place in the world. Gokarna was taken aback, demurred, finally offered his son a menial position among the priests, which Oman straightway refused.

"My brain is sick of religion and the gods. My power of worship is spent. Let me work."

"Work! You are a Brahman."

"Thou knowest I am not — cannot be."

Gokarna glared at him, and muttered some sort of insult; whereupon Oman rose and left his father, and within twelve hours apprenticed himself to a weaver in the town, thereby renouncing caste and becoming one of the Vaisyas, the lowest order to whom was granted the right of re-birth and investiture with the sacred cord. Yet, in the village, Oman was now regarded as a privileged being; and, after a week of banishment from his home, during which time he worked steadily and well, Kota went to him, and begged him to return to

his father's house, to sleep and eat as he had been wont to do; and when Gokarna sent a message to the same effect, Oman, for his mother's sake, consented, and resumed the old relations with his people. He could not, of course, eat in their presence, nor sleep in the same room with one of them, nor take part in the Agnihotra. But at night he was there, in the veranda, as of old; and the heart of his mother was at peace.

Now, in the endless sunshine, Oman Ramasarman worked at his trade: first combing and carding the wool, later dyeing it, then learning how to mix the different threads for warp and woof, and finally sitting down to the loom, where, under his skilful manipulation, the cloth was turned off, smooth and strong and useful. And now, at last, Oman's thoughts were taken from himself, and he was like a busy child, playing at work, working at play, till two swift years had rolled round again, and it was the spring of the year 1224, with Oman in his eighteenth year of expiative life.

CHAPTER IV

HUSHKA IN THE MARKET-PLACE

It was spring. The Sravana sacrifices were over. Farmers had finished their planting, and the world ran with life. As yet, there was no presage of summer heat. The nights were cool, and the mornings soft as in winter. But the new foliage was delicately bright, and more tender flowers had come to join the perpetual blossoms. Almond and apricot trees were in bloom; and the breeze was perfumed with orchard breaths. The mongoose and the turtle began their roving. There was an air of love and liberty in all things; and the heart of Oman was filled with suppressed yearning. He worked as steadily as usual; but his thoughts went wandering. For the first time since the day he had left the banyan grove, he desired solitude. But it was solitude in a new form. He felt in him the longing to wander, to roam the land, to penetrate distant places that he had heard of:—great cities and fair plains, where historic men had dwelt.

Gradually he fell into the habit of dreaming over this new ambition; and by degrees strange pictures rose up before him:—pictures of places that he had seen and known, somewhere, somehow, perhaps only

as myths in an epic, perhaps actually, in an old life. And with these pictures was always the unattainable—a golden thread, running in and out of all his dreams: the thought of that which he already had perceived to soften the whole world,—love—the love of man for woman, the love of woman for man. And dangerous as this brooding was, it grew so dear to him that he could not relinquish it, but cherished it, secretly, as a gift from the high gods.

There came an evening when he betrayed his thoughts, involuntarily, resistlessly, to the one being in the world who would try to understand them. And forever after he rejoiced that he had done so. He was sitting alone in the veranda of Gokarna's house, waiting for his meal of millet-cakes and milk, which Kota presently brought. Then, when she had laid it before him, she walked slowly over to the veranda entrance and seated herself there, and looked off upon the swift-falling dusk. In the misty radiance of the sunset, still more under the spell of the rising night, spangled with white stars, the little village of mud and straw lost its marks of poverty and squalor, and was softened into a dream-city, of ineffable delicacy. As they sat looking out upon it now, the thoughts of mother and son were alike, except that Oman was regretting what he could never have, and Kota that which had not been given her, for Gokarna was not such a man as the springtime loves. But mother and son felt a sympathy with each other, and, under this sense, the nature of each expanded.

“ Ah, it is one of Krishna’s nights,” murmured Kota, dreamily.

For answer, Oman sighed ; and the sigh came from his soul.

Kota turned and looked at the young man. Hitherto, Oman’s heart had been strange to her ; she had never thought of questioning the workings of his brain. Now, suddenly, his humanity was apparent ; and her heart went out to his human sorrow as she asked, gently : “ Dost thou mourn, Oman ? ”

Oman, for whom no human voice had ever taken on this tone, felt a throb of gratitude. But he answered : “ I do not mourn, mother. I do not mourn. And yet it is the time of love ; and for me there is no love.”

Though caste forbade it, she went over and sat down at his side, and took his two hands in hers. “ Thinkest thou there is none to love thee ? ” she asked, tenderly.

Oman’s head drooped to his knees ; and, resting it there, he let some part of his sorrow find expression for the woman, and her tears rained down with his, while, forgetting all but her motherhood, she clasped him to her heart.

After Oman’s emotion had spent itself, and he had become quiet, Kota remained at his side, and together they looked off upon the village, over which the half-grown moon was now shedding a bluish silver light. The two sat silent, watching, till the moon was past mid-heaven, and halfway down the sky. Gokarna had not returned. He would evidently sleep that night

with the snatakas and priests in the square of sacrifice. But at last Kota, rising reluctantly, left the night behind, and sought her rest in the house, while Oman lay down in his accustomed corner of the veranda, and, after a little, slept.

When he opened his eyes again, the sun was nearly in mid-sky. He would unquestionably get a beating from the master weaver, when he reached his loom. However, it must be faced; and, without pausing for food, he rose, thinking to make his ablutions at a fountain on the way. Reaching the veranda step, however, he paused. A man was standing there, silently: a man clad in mud-stained yellow robes, holding in his hand a wooden bowl. Oman looked at him with some curiosity. A century or two before, such men had overrun all India. Now, so rarely was one seen that he was an object of interest to every beholder. In the days when the wild Brahmanic leader, Kumarila Bhatta, had raised his brethren against the Buddhists, it had been death to this man to stand thus at a Brahman's door; for, unquestionably, he was a Bhikkhu, a Buddhist mendicant monk, come out of Bágh, the one remaining stronghold of Buddhism in Malwa, one of the few left in all India. And the man stood here, quite still, silently asking alms. Pity and curiosity were nowadays the only sentiments with which even Brahmans regarded these harmless men. And Oman, after a moment's halt, would have hurried on, but that he caught the expression in the wanderer's eyes, and paused to look again.

Certainly it was a remarkable face. The eyes were very large, and dark, and long-lashed; and the look in them was such as one finds in oxen. The man's body was lean to emaciation; but his face, owing to the round-cut hair, had more or less of a full appearance. His robes—which he wore in the regular Buddhist manner, over the left shoulder, under the right, and reaching to the heels,—were well worn, as were his sandals, and the knotty, wooden staff in his hand. On his back was a small bundle, fastened with a rope; and this, with an alms-bowl, completed his equipment for the eight months' yearly pilgrimage prescribed for every Bhikkhu.

When his swift scrutiny was ended, Oman, following a sudden impulse, went a little closer to the man, and said, gently: "Peace to your heart, reverend sir. Let me fill your bowl with food."

The Bhikkhu bowed, and silently handed his dish to the young man, regarding him the while with grave scrutiny. Oman carried the bowl inside, and requested his mother to fill it with whatever was at hand. Kota, decidedly taken aback, complied with the request, albeit it was the first Buddhist bowl ever filled in that Brahman household. Kota prepared a dish for her son at the same time; and Oman carried them both outside. The monk received his with humble thanks; and, squatting on the ground where he was, without prayer or ceremony began his meal. Oman watched him for a moment, and concluded that, since he was already half a day late, another hour would make little differ-

ence. So he sat down at some distance from the stranger, and himself began to eat. They finished at the same time, and, rising, faced each other inquiringly. This time it was the monk who spoke.

“For thine alms, I give thee thanks. One favor more I will ask of thee. Tell me in what direction lies the bazaar; for thither I must go to preach Dharma¹ to the people.”

“O Bhikkhu, on my way to work I shall pass through the bazaar. If you will walk with me, I will lead you thither.”

The monk looked astonished at this civility, but agreed at once to the proposal; and, Oman having left his dish on the veranda, they started down the winding street in the direction of the market-place. As they went, they talked, scatteringly, and Oman found himself listening with delight to the low, mellow tones of his companion's voice. The Bhikkhu's name, he found, was Hushka. He was now returning from his pilgrimage and on his way to Bágh, where he was to spend the summer months, the Vassa season, in one of the Viharas there.

When they reached the bazaar, they found in it a busy throng of men and women, buying, selling, shouting, laughing, wrangling, gossiping together, each contributing in some way to the general tumult. Oman wondered not a little how his companion was going to obtain hearing here. Hushka, however, appeared as untroubled as if he had mounted a platform before a respectfully

¹ Dharma : Truth, the Word, the Law.

attentive multitude ; and Oman, interested in the prospect, still lingered, watching his chance acquaintance.

First, the Bhikkhu reminded Oman of his own personal neglect, by going to the fountain in the middle of the square, and carefully washing out his alms-bowl. When it was cleaned and dried, he still stood, resting one hand upon the stone, looking thoughtfully around him. One or two people, passing, caught his eye, and halted, uncertainly. Then three or four middle-aged and old men drew out of the throng and stood still, close at hand. They were those that had a curiosity concerning the dying faith: perhaps even, in their secret hearts, leaned a little toward it; and usually availed themselves of each rare opportunity of listening to the Dharma.

Having now before him the nucleus of an audience, Hushka faced them, his back to the fountain. Absently he stuck his flat bowl into the pouch depending from his leathern girdle, fixing his eyes, the while, upon Oman, who, fascinated by the man's simplicity, still stood, apart from the others, watching and waiting. And now the Buddhist lifted both hands, clasped them high before him, and repeated, in tones of greatest reverence, the Buddhist profession of faith, with which all mendicant preachers were accustomed to begin their discourse :

“‘Of all things proceeding from cause, their causes hath the Tathagata (Buddha) explained. The great Sramana (Buddha) hath likewise explained the causes of the cessation of existence.’”

At these words, spoken in a low, melodious, monotonous voice, addressed, not to the people, but, apparently, to Heaven, Oman, unconscious of himself, took a step nearer to the speaker. After a slight pause, Hushka, now removing his eyes from Oman's face and using them at discretion, began his sermon, choosing language that was clear and simple, using figures calculated to appeal to the people, carrying his hearers with him by means of his own personal magnetism, which was never at so high a pitch as when he was engaged in this kind of speaking. Gradually, his audience increased in numbers. The little group of half a dozen became twelve, and then twenty, and then forty, till the clamor in the market-place was strangely diminished, and buyers and sellers alike stood still before the power of this wanderer of alien and dying faith, surnamed, by his brethren of the Vihara, "honey-throated", and "golden-tongued".

And this was the nature of his address ; these the words that he spoke :

"Have you considered, O people, how all that we are is the result of what we have thought? Our life is founded on our thoughts, made up of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with an evil thought, pain follows him, as the wheel follows the foot of the ox that draws the vehicle.

"'I am abused, miserable, receive not my due in the world.' For him who constantly harbors such thoughts, there is unending discontent. But for him who reflects : 'I am happy in living, for the world is a

spot of joy and beauty,' discontent will cease forever. And so, also, hatred will never cease by hatred. Hatred ceases through love. This is an old rule. Again, he who lives seeking pleasures only, his senses unbridled, his nature through indulgence growing idle and weak, him will Mara (the tempter) overthrow, as the wind blows down a rotten tree. But for him who lives to labor and to love his fellows, his senses controlled, his appetites moderate, faithful and strong in his work, him Mara can no more overthrow than the wind blows down a rocky mountain-peak.

“Now I declare to you that truth is an image clearly to be seen only by the pure in heart. And those that follow vain desires, imagine that truth is untruth and see untruth in truth, and never arrive at truth. But those whose aims are high, whose minds are unpolluted with vanity, are able to distinguish between the false and the true, and delight in truth. Therefore follow not after vanity nor the enjoyment of lusts; for when ye have known truth for yourselves, therein will ye find great joy.

“Earnestness and meditation bring in their train serenity and happiness. By earnestness did Indra rise to the lordship of the gods. And he who delights in sincerity, who looks with fear upon hypocrisy, moves about like fire, burning all his fetters; and he that has conquered himself by reflection, is close upon Nirvâna.

“I would speak with you also concerning the tyranny of passion. For as rain breaks through an ill-thatched house, so passion breaks through the unfortified mind.

Therefore it is necessary carefully to train the mind, which is difficult to check and constantly rebellious, rushing where it listeth. Yet, only a trained mind will bring happiness. Let the wise man guard his thoughts, lest the torrent of passion, rushing upon him, overwhelm him in its depths. The mind travels far, moves about alone, without a body; and, to be freed from Mara, must often hide in the chamber of the heart. But so long as man is under the bondage of passion, so long is he exposed to the persuasions of Mara. And so long as the desire of man toward woman, even the smallest, is not destroyed, so long is his mind in bondage. Thou shalt also cut out the love of thyself with thine own hand; for it is the greatest tree in the forest of dangers. From its root springs desire. Its foliage is wanton. From lust spring fear and grief; but he who is free from lust knows not grief nor fear. Yet no man can free another from these things. As by one's self the evil is done, so by one's self is one purified. Is the struggle long? Is it lonely? Is it exceedingly difficult? Fear not. By such measures only is serenity attained. Well-makers lead the water where they will. Fletchers bend the arrow; carpenters split a log of wood; but a good man doeth the greatest thing of all, for he can fashion himself."

Hushka concluded his discourse quietly, with a benign smile flickering from his eyes and just touching his lips. The holy law that he preached to men never failed to affect himself, and to uplift him. And this, probably, was the secret of his power. Certainly,

if it took some courage nowadays to preach the word of the Buddha in India, the preacher found his reward; for his audiences were held fairly spellbound during the ten or fifteen minutes of the discourse; and, under the magic smoothness of the golden voice, the disjointed nature of his preachment had passed unnoticed. After a moment or two of silence, more complimentary than any applause, the little throng began to break up, and, five minutes later, the noise of the market-place was as deafening as before. The Bhikkhu, his work here finished, was turning to depart, when he perceived his companion of the noontide still standing near, apparently watching a chance to speak to him again. Hushka gazed at him inquiringly, and Oman came up, but stood silent and a little confused before him.

“Is there any service that I can perform for thee?” asked Hushka, after regarding him for a moment attentively.

Oman again gazed deep into the large, gentle eyes; and with the look, a thrill of joy ran through him. “Tell me, if you will, O Bhikkhu, if your order practises this Dharma? Are all Buddhist brethren free from desire and from the pain of discontent?”

“It is our endeavor thus to free ourselves. We follow the teachings of the great Master.”

“Sramana-Gautama?”

The Bhikkhu bowed his head.

“There are many Jainists that come here, saying that they also worship the Buddha truly —”

“Jainists! Hypocrites!” for an instant, Hushka’s

eyes flashed fire; but he pressed his lips tightly together, and when he spoke again it was quite calmly: "The Jainists are false Buddhists. The world has been sadly overrun with hypocrisy; and they have been its devotees. They do not follow Buddha, but Buddhaghosa; and their law is not our law, for they do not possess the manuscripts of truth."

Oman nodded, and there was a pause. Then the youth, his heart beating rapidly, his throat quite dry, asked: "What is required of those that would join your order?"

Hushka looked at him penetratingly, and said: "Come. Let us proceed out of ear-shot of this tumult, where we may talk together in peace."

Willingly Oman complied; nor did either speak again till they were in one of the least frequented of the village streets. Even then, Oman hesitated to begin. He was in such an inward turmoil that he could not think of words in which to express himself. After a little waiting, Hushka spoke for him:

"You have asked me, young man, what is required of one that wishes to join our order. I answer you that nothing is required save the wish."

"But Sudras — outcasts — the once-born — do you accept these into the brotherhood?"

"In the eyes of the Sramana, any man and any woman may attain to Arahatsip."

"Women! Then there is no caste among you?"

"Thus it is written in one of our sacred books: 'A man does not become a Brahmana by his family or by

his birth. In whom there is truth and righteousness, he is blessed, he is a Brahmana.' ”

It was the first time that Oman had dreamed of such a thing as a social order without caste ; and the idea was so overwhelming that for some moments he was silent out of sheer amazement. All his preconceived notions went whirling in his head while he strove to adjust himself to this. Never, until this Bhikkhu had spoken in the market-place, had he had any idea of a religion built solely for the help of human frailty, and for the consolation of human sorrow. Now, what a vista was suddenly opened before him ! Small wonder that he shut his eyes to the first radiant flood of light. That he could see anything at all of the possibilities carried in Hushka's words, was due to the fact of his three years of bitter solitude and lonely meditation. After a few moments, during which Hushka kept a wise silence, Oman asked slowly, with a trembling that betrayed itself on his very lips :

“ Could — a weaver — a Vaisya — become one of you ? Could I become a Bhikkhu ? ”

“ Art thou a weaver ? I had thought thee Brahman born. ”

“ That also is true. I was born a Brahman. ”

There was a short silence. Oman was sick now with dread of a next question, — that never came. Hushka was turning certain matters rapidly over in his mind. From the first, Oman's intense interest in his words had been a mystery to him. Converts to Buddhism were seldom made, in this day. It was now most rarely that

the Bhikkhus brought novices back with them for the Vassa ; and the few that came were almost always of Sudra caste. Oman, on the other hand, was apparently of high breeding ; and only some unusual fact could have brought him into his present situation. Hushka scented some misdeed, crime, perhaps, that had put the youth into present bad standing. But the misdeed of a Brahman was no Buddhist's affair. To make him a convert was the chief consideration ; for had not the great Buddha received into his order men of dark past ? There was excellent precedent for what Hushka wished to do.

Later in his companionship with Oman, Hushka's first suspicion of crime was completely laid by the openness of his pupil's behavior. But, in justice to the Bhikkhu be it said, he had never, until the end, the faintest suspicion of the real nature of Oman's trouble.

Many thoughts and much reasoning passed rapidly through Hushka's mind ; and then he turned again to the youth, and said to him : "Thou hast asked me if thou canst become a Bhikkhu. I answer thee — yes. But first you must know something of our lives, and the purpose of them. Then, understanding all that is to be renounced, if you would still join us, I will myself give you the first ordination, the Pabbagga, and will take you as my pupil. I will be your master, your Upagghaya ; for I have instructed many youths through their novitiate. Later, you will be given the second, the highest ordination, Upasampada, and so become a

Bhikkhu. But first you must understand whither I would lead you."

"Tell me! Tell me," besought Oman, looking into Hushka's eyes, before whose steady orbs his own suddenly fell.

And so, while they walked, the Buddhist expounded to the lonely youth the simple doctrines of the great religion: the renunciation of desire, of pleasure, of indulgence in the flesh, and the growth of that serenity that leads gradually to Nirvâna, the great extinction. And the plan of it all, the eightfold abstinence, the fourfold path, seemed to Oman a perfect conception. The whole doctrine was, to his troubled soul, like balm on a deep wound, a draught of water to one perishing in the desert. And in his delight, he was freed from traditional prejudice, and gave himself up entirely to the new companionship.

Thus, through the whole afternoon, the two walked together, communing, until, as the sun slipped under the western horizon, they paused once more before the house of Gokarna. Hushka had reminded the young man that his father and mother must be told of his wish to become a Buddhist. Indeed, in the depths of his quiet mind, the Bhikkhu apprehended insuperable difficulty here, yet knew that the matter must be faced; and he let Oman decide the manner of its presentation. To Hushka's astonishment, Oman took it unquestioningly on himself, asking Hushka to wait in the veranda while he went within to inform his parents, or, in case Gokarna were absent, at least

his mother, of his great decision. Hushka made no protest, nor suggested his own fitness to give a favorable impression concerning the Bhikkhu's life. Remembering Oman's new-born enthusiasm and seeing in him no sign of nervousness about approaching his guardians, Hushka reflected that Oman might have been divinely fitted for this task. So, after a short colloquy at the veranda step, the monk sat down in the vine-covered retreat, and Oman went on into the house, where, contrary to his expectation, he found both his father and his mother.

For a long time Hushka sat there in the falling night, cross-legged, in the manner of the Sakyamuni, his hands on his knees, his head resting against the wall of the house, meditating. And while he indulged himself in hope, there came, through the open doorway, the low, monotonous murmur of voices. They were never raised above the ordinary pitch; and this Hushka perceived with increasing satisfaction. Once or twice there were to be heard a woman's tones, followed always by the musical voice of Oman, and the heavier baritone of Gokarna. But the discussion, if discussion there were, was carried on in an entirely matter-of-fact manner.

During this time, outside, the hands of Nature had been at work, and now the whole sky was robed in luminous, fleecy gray, strewn with white stars, and crowned with the radiant half-moon, which shed silver beams over the whole earth. The air was warm and fragrant with the breath of spring. It was a night

when the very atmosphere brought intoxication. And gradually the expression of him sitting alone in the veranda changed, and grew very sad ; and a new light, one of sorrow and yearning, shone in the depths of his large eyes.

Now the murmur of voices inside the house ceased. Oman's task was accomplished. After a moment of silence the three came out of the firelit room, into the cool and shadowy veranda. It was a second or two before any one of them could see Hushka, who had risen, and slowly moved forward to them. Then Gokarna also advanced, and spoke :

“O Bhikkhu, Oman, my son, has told me that which my heart is sad to hear. He wishes to receive from you Buddhist ordination and go forth as your pupil.”

Hushka bent his head once. “That is true. The young man came to me after I had discoursed upon the Dharma in the market-place, and asked that he might become my Saddhiviharika, to listen daily to the Dharma and become versed in the way of the great life.”

“So says my son ; and, O Bhikkhu, so fervently doth he desire to enter upon this life, that he hath won consent from us. So I bid you take him for a pupil, and treat him with that forbearance that is a law of all religions.”

Hushka bent his head again. “Let it be thus,” he said solemnly.

There was a stifled sob from Kota, who stood in the background, behind her husband ; and then Oman, who

had embraced her, went forward to his master, asking :
“When shall I receive the ordination ?”

“When thou wilt. Any time is a proper time for the Pabbagga.”

“Then let me be at once ordained, that we may set forth at an early hour on the morrow.”

“Come then into the moonlight here before the step, that each may look upon the face of the other. Yet,” — he glanced toward Kota and Gokarna, who still stood close at hand, — “yet we should not act in the presence of any but followers of Gautama.”

At this, the father and mother embraced Oman, and then, when Kota had murmured to him that she should see him again in the morning, the two retired for the night, leaving Oman and Hushka alone in the veranda. Hushka was struggling with the bundle on his back, which Oman helped him to remove. In it, wrapped in the mat used by Buddhists for many purposes, lay a set of yellow robes, apparently new, yet mudstained to a height of a foot above the hem.

“Whence come the stains? And how dost thou carry this set of garments?” queried Oman, delighted that he was at once to assume the dress of his new faith.

“Thus is it decreed that, in such emergencies as this, when we take a pupil, we should have a robe for him. And the robes are stained with earth, that no Bhikkhu or student shall vainly rejoice in his new garment.”

Laying aside the yellow robes, Hushka bound up

his mat again, this time putting the little bundle to one side, on the veranda. Then he said to Oman :

“Now must thou don this garb. It is our rule that the brethren shall not look upon one another in the act of robing or disrobing ; so I turn my face from thee. Yet it will be necessary that I show thee the required manner of passing the cloth about the upper part of the body and over the left shoulder. Therefore, when the skirt is adjusted, call me to thine assistance.”

Oman nodded ; but, as Hushka turned toward the other end of the veranda, Oman, who, in loosening his usual tunic, had accidentally touched the cord that he always wore, called out to Hushka : “The cord — the Brahman cord — must it be put off ?”

“Let it remain,” answered Hushka, without turning around ; and Oman in his heart rejoiced.

When he was dressed and Hushka had taught him the trick of fastening the end of the yellow cloth under his arm, Oman declared himself ready for the ordination. Thereupon Hushka, in a solemn tone, once more repeated to him the laws of abstinence for a novice ; and then, Oman having faithfully promised to observe them all, Hushka bade him sit down, cross-legged, somewhat after the manner of a Yogi, and, when he had raised his clasped hands to a level with his eyes, caused him to repeat slowly, three times, these words :

“I take my refuge in the Buddha. I take my refuge in the Dharma. I take my refuge in the Samgha (the community of brethren).”

This said, Oman repeated after his preceptor the creed that he had heard for the first time that morning :
“Of all things proceeding from cause, their causes hath the Tathagata explained. The Great Sramana hath likewise explained the causes of the cessation of existence. Let him be forever worshipped.”

With these simple words, the ordination was completed ; but Oman still remained in the half-kneeling, half-sitting position, motionless, silent, a little pale. It was as if the repetition of the creed had wrought a change in his whole being. He experienced an inexplicably strong emotion, an emotion amazing to himself, perhaps not so much so to Hushka, who stood looking down on him with the silver moonlight in his gentle, dark eyes. Oman found himself gazing into those eyes as if they had been of the Buddha himself. After a little, however, Hushka broke the spell, saying, quietly :

“Come, my pupil, let us seek our rest. On the morrow we must proceed upon our way.”

Oman rose at once, and followed his master to that end of the veranda where he was wont to sleep. Here, dressed as they were, the two lay down, some distance apart, with no covering but their yellow garments and the sweet night air. Very soon Hushka's breath came evenly and long ; and the other knew that he slept. But Oman closed his eyes in vain. He could not sleep ; nor, indeed, did he desire to. His heart was full. It had come, at last, all that he had dreamed of. The impossible was come to pass. On the morrow he was

going out into the world, — out into the broad, shining world, in the companionship of a man that did not scorn him, with a faith in his heart that he loved, that loved him, that had been decreed for him and all the scattered brethren of the lonely life.

CHAPTER V

YELLOW-ROBED

THE moon had set before Oman finally lost himself in sleep. It seemed to him that an hour could not possibly have passed when he felt a touch on his brow, and, looking up, beheld Hushka bending over him.

“Up—up—my Saddhiviharika! The new day is here. Let us renew our faith.”

Oman, sleepy and confused, rose, and, following his master's example, knelt on one knee, lifted both his clasped hands, and repeated after Hushka the short creed that he already knew by heart. Then the Bhikkhu, rising, said :

“Let us now go and cleanse ourselves at a fountain. Is that in the market-place the nearest?”

“No, my master. I will lead you to another, close at hand.”

“Come, then. And, as we walk, see that thou meditate upon this thought, which should now be with thee constantly : the extermination of desire for earthly things. For it is written in the book of the law : ‘Leaving all pleasures behind, calling nothing his own, let the wise man purge himself of troubles of the mind.’”

It was a fair morning. The sun was not yet above the horizon, but the whole eastern sky glowed fiery crimson in the clear atmosphere. Gay bird-notes filled the air; and a vagrant breeze shook the fragrance from every jessamine and honeysuckle vine in Bul-Ruknu. It was an ecstatic hour; and Hushka's eyes were bright with the beauty of it when he and Oman reached the well. As the young man filled Hushka's bowl with water, he turned to his master and said:

"The day, sir, is very fair. Does the Dharma forbid us to rejoice in the beauty of the dawn?"

Hushka lowered his eyes, and answered softly: "We are told that the extinction of feeling is the most desirable of all things. But, until that comes, I think it can hurt no man to rejoice at the sight of a sunrise sky."

Their ablutions over, the two returned to the house of Gokarna, and found Kota standing in the veranda, anxiously awaiting them. She had prepared two large dishes of rice—a great luxury—and, as soon as they came up, bade them sit and eat. Oman helped his master to the fullest portion, and then ate his own from the wooden bowl in which it had been prepared. This dish Kota offered to her son, to be used for his alms; and Hushka himself thanked her for the gift to his pupil.

Oman, to his own surprise, found himself delaying the meal out of sorrow at thought of leaving this home. He had never in his life been more than twenty miles from Bul-Ruknu. Now, very probably, he should never see the town again: never again look on his

mother, his father, or any of the familiar people among whom he had grown up. As he reflected on this, the spoon dropped from his hand, and he bent his head, conscious all the while that Hushka's eyes were fixed on him. He was blind with tears which he was struggling furiously not to shed, when some one knelt beside him, and he felt two twining arms around his neck, and a long kiss on his cheek. A thrill ran through his heart. With passionate grief he returned his mother's embrace. Then, breaking suddenly from her clasp, a "Farewell!" choking in his throat, he ran out of the veranda, down the street, and then halted, with clenched hands, till Hushka should come.

Presently the Bhikkhu joined him, walking rapidly; and Oman perceived that in his face there was no ridicule; only a mute sympathy. He carried with him the two bowls, each of which contained some rice which, he explained, they would keep for their midday meal. Oman took his own dish, asking to carry both, which he was not permitted to do. Side by side they went, through the narrow and ill-kept streets of the town, till at length they came to its outer wall, and passed out by the gate called after the street along which they had come: the street which, outside of Bul-Ruknu, became a public highway leading straight up into the Vindhyas.

"Ah! Go we up into the hills?" asked Oman, a note of joy in his voice.

"From now till we reach Bâgh we shall be almost constantly in the hills. And there are nearly three

months of journeying before the Vassa¹ can be begun.”

“I am glad. The hills are a delight to me !”

But no sooner had this simple thought escaped Oman's lips, than he repented of it; for he imagined that he should bring upon himself a text commending the beauty of indifference to all things. But Hushka, in the interval, had read his mind, and, smiling faintly, said: “Be not afraid, Oman, that this religion will take from thee all thy delights. Our lives, free from care, free from dread of the morrow, of any concern for to-day, free from loneliness or the burdens of poverty, want, and suffering, are almost wholly without pain; and this was the great wish of the Buddha. We are taught to look charitably and kindly on all living things, allowing each its place. And if, in our hearts, we have cherished any evil thought toward any man, we are allowed the relief of confessing it before the assembled Samgha. This frame of mind is conducive to the greatest serenity. And you, O Oman, will find, in one year's time, that your whole attitude of mind is changed. You will regard meditation on holy things, and the study of the Dharma, as the highest privileges of life.”

Hushka paused, and Oman found in his words enough food for thought to be glad of silence. They proceeded for a long time without speech. And gradually, as Oman came out of his reverie, he found his

¹ Vassa : the customary sojourn in Viharas, or monasteries, from June to October.

spirits growing lighter. A sense of freedom had taken possession of him; and now every step that increased the distance between himself and the home of his unnatural and unhappy youth, increased also his delight.

When the sun hung in mid-sky, and they had reached the end of the first pass and stood in a little valley, through which ran a stream of fresh water, the two sat down to eat and take an hour's rest. They seated themselves on the thick grass, careful to disturb no insect visible to the eye; and then, without any preliminary grace or offering to any god, a matter as natural to Oman as eating, began their meal. They faced each other, and Hushka kept an eye on his pupil to see that he transgressed none of those rules of polite eating so minutely set forth in the *Kullavagga*. But there was no fault to be found with the student on this point. On the contrary, Oman ate as delicately as a woman; and Hushka, after watching him for a moment or two, exclaimed pleasantly:

“By the word of the Samgha, Oman, thou hast the look as well as the way of a woman about thee, sometimes.”

Oman lifted his head, a gleam of terror in his eyes. “I am not a woman. How, then, should I resemble one?” he demanded fiercely.

Hushka, still contemplating him, smiled, but did not answer the question. Then Oman, distressed and angry, sprang to his feet, and began to pace up and down the bank of the stream; and it was five minutes before he could return to his meal.

At this time of his life, perhaps what Hushka said about Oman's appearance was more or less true. His slender figure, dreaming dark eyes, face guiltless of any beard, and hair flowing to his shoulders, might, indeed, have belonged to a woman of high caste. But there was also something about him that was decisively masculine:—whether his manner of carrying himself, the habit of looking any one piercingly in the eye, or his taciturnity, it would be hard to say. But it is very certain that the mingling of two elements in him had produced no weak and vacillating creature, of meagre intellect and silly tongue. Freed from the unhappy surroundings of his youth, Oman was likely henceforth to command both interest and respect; and Hushka's foregoing remark had been nothing more than a thoughtless and haphazard jest.

Oman recovered himself before he sat down again; and, his rice finished, he washed both bowls, and dried them with leaves. Then he rose, supposing that they were to proceed. It seemed, however, that this was the hour for meditation. In imitation of the Sramana, who was wont to sit in concentrated thought for days at a time at the foot of some forest tree, Hushka and his pupil, obeying one of the few rules of "hours," seated themselves, cross-legged, under different trees, and remained there for a long time, motionless, wrapped in contemplation of Nirvâna—the bliss of emancipation. It was the first time that Oman had ever performed this especial act of worship, which is common to all the higher Indian religions. He

found it more interesting than he had imagined it could be; and was glad to think that, at Bâgh, much of it would be required in his studies.

By two o'clock the wanderers were on their way again, and Hushka told his pupil where they were to pass the night. Some miles farther on, in a valley, was a large banyan grove, inhabited by hermits of various sects, among whom were half a dozen Buddhists, who passed their lives in rigid asceticism, but had abandoned the routine of pilgrimage and Vassa.

For a long time they proceeded on their way, following the track of the sun into the southwest, each wrapped in his own thoughts. Then Oman, as much out of desire to listen to Hushka's melodious voice as to learn something of the Being both were worshipping, began to question his master concerning the holy life. And Hushka, taking up his duty, recited to his companion the history of the life of Gautama Sramana, from the hour of his birth in the forest of Kapila-Vastu, until that of his death in the forest of Tirhut, where he fell back into the arms of his disciples, murmuring: "I am exhorting you for the last time. Transitory things are perishable. Without delay, qualify yourselves for Nirvâna."

The life-story, told simply, but with an eloquence born of reverent love, moved Oman powerfully. Here, indeed, was a man! — a man who had lived a comprehensible life and had died naturally. To his mind, crammed with legendary tales of Vedic demigods and monsters, with all their meaningless miracles and overinterpreted

allegorical deeds, there was something in this remarkable, but perfectly credible history, that brought conviction of the truth of the Buddha's doctrines. The life he had lived was enviable. Evidently he had seen clearly from the very beginning; had known his course and had run it, gathering strength as he went on. True, the Buddha had been born into honor and riches, and had never had the terrible struggles of loneliness forced on him. But he had chosen these for himself; and he had voluntarily made himself outcast from men.

These musings occupied Oman till the sun was setting on their first day's journey. They were now descending the slope that led into the valley of the banyan tree. When they reached its level, and could look down the long aisle of trunks into the green twilight of this natural temple, Oman felt a throb of pleasure, as one at home. They entered in silence, and had not walked far before the light of a fire became visible among the trees in the distance. Thither they bent their steps, and, reaching it, found that it burned before the entrance of a small building, built around the tree trunks. Beside this shrine and before the fire were half a dozen naked men, their black hair wild and dishevelled, their bodies caked with dirt and disfigured with scars of flagellation.

"These are Agivakas. We do not stop here," murmured Hushka, as they approached.

Oman looked at the repulsive creatures curiously. They were passed, however, without any salutation,

with not even a look, so far as the ascetics were concerned; and presently the yellow-robed were out of sight of their dancing fire. The green interior of the grove was now nearly dark. Hushka quickened his steps; and Oman, spent though he was with unwonted exercise, followed bravely, knowing that they must reach protection that night, since to sleep in the open, in this mountain region, was a danger not lightly to be undergone. However, further firelight among the trees presently reached them, and they proceeded with new heart, soon arriving at the Buddhist retreat. Here was no temple. Five tonsured men, clean-shaven, clad in worn yellow robes, sat round their fire, partaking of a supper of millet-seed and water. This meal the Upagghaya and his pupil received a cordial invitation to join; and it was taken for granted that they would also sleep there. To Oman, weary as he was, the mere fact of eating, of being near a shining fire, of seeing around him friendly faces, of listening to talk from which he was not excluded, brought an almost overpowering sense of happiness. Here was such companionship as he had not known since his baby days. Here were no curious, repellent eyes upon him. And, suddenly, the feminine in him rose, bringing to his eyes tears which it took all his angry self-control to keep from falling.

That night Oman slept the sweet sleep of healthy fatigue; but he wakened early, and in a new world. The fire had died. Far overhead the first glimmer of dawn shone down in a veil of translucent, deep green

light—like the light in the sea. The air was vibrating softly with the twittering chorus of myriad birds that made their home in the banyan tree. Otherwise, there was a great, morning silence. Oman, drowsy, and unwilling to move, lay like one in a trance, looking, listening, wondering, at the beauty around him. Presently it was transformed. Every one was awake, and up and moving about; but the past half hour lay deep in his heart, and the pureness of it remained with him always.

The morning repast was hastier than had been that of the evening; and about sunrise the pilgrims, after many good wishes and farewells from those they were leaving, set forth again on their way. This time they took no food with them in their bowls; for in the early afternoon they should reach a mountain village where, after Hushka had preached in the bazaar, they were sure to obtain at least one meal. This morning's walk was difficult, for it lay steadily uphill. Hushka, however, kept the mind of his pupil too much occupied for him to feel the weariness of the road. The master talked to him of religion, explained the canon of Buddhist law in its simple form, and repeated long passages from holy books. Oman listened intently to everything. His new religion delighted him anew. The laws that he heard seemed to him divinely wise, so well were they adapted to human weakness. And all the time, in his subconsciousness, he had another joy: that to-day he should again hear Hushka speak to many people. The Bhikkhu's conversation

was precious; but Oman, thirsting for a broader triumph, was waiting to watch his magnetism again gather up an antagonistic audience and draw them to his feet.

And Oman came to taste the fulness of this delight; for, wherever they went, success followed Hushka's preaching. What it was — the expression of his great eyes, the low, musical, leisurely tones of his admirably managed voice, or perhaps just the words he spoke — his pupil could not determine: probably a measure of all three. At any rate, even in this day of the fall of the great faith, in many towns from Bâgh to Dhár and even farther to the north, the annual coming of the Bhikkhu Hushka was awaited as an event; and where he stopped for the first time, he was remembered with delight, and his return hoped for. Nor, after one of his discourses, was there to be found even a Brahman, that had heard him, who had anything but words of praise for his eloquence.

March passed away and April followed, and still the two fought their way through the mighty hills, surrounded by possible dangers, but encountering none. The days were growing hot; and, when the moon was full, they sometimes travelled by night, but this not often, because of the wild creatures that loved to roam abroad during the quiet hours. The time passed too quickly. Oman, now inured to constant exercise, throve on it and grew strong. His limbs began to show muscle, and his body renewed its vigor, till he looked a straight and handsome youth. And as his physique developed, so also his mind. Hushka never

ceased his instructions in the Dharma, nor did Oman fail to treasure his master's lightest precept. He was familiar now with what lay before him during the Vassa season. He learned the mode of daily life; the rules of procedure in the Samgha, or community of brethren; and also the ritual of the general confession, the Patimokkha, held fortnightly, on new and full moon days during the Vassa. But the multitude and minuteness of the laws, and the petty tyranny they exercised, remained happily unguessed by him; for Hushka was too wise to burden his mind in the beginning with what would soon become a natural part of existence.

Oman's present life was beautiful to him. The magnificence of the scenery amid which they lived, the season of the year, when the earth was at its height of joy, still more, perhaps, the beautiful influence of Hushka's companionship and the spirituality of what he taught, combined to waken in Oman a buoyancy of spirit, a sense of hope and of ideality, that furnished him strength to sustain the years of bitter tribulation and trial that were still to be his.

At length one day Oman and Hushka, side by side, staves in hand, reached the treeless summit of a high hill, up the side of which they had toiled throughout the morning, Hushka for a purpose, Oman following unquestioningly. When they stood upon the crest, there spread before them a mighty prospect, fair and far-reaching in the clear light of noon. In the distance, a mere sinuous, sparkling thread, was a river,

bordered by a strip of green plain. Nearer yet, a deep-hued patch of foliage marked a jungle, dwindled by height and distance. Then came foothills, curving round and out, like a rough causeway, toward that fast-flowing river; and, in the midst of rocky cliffs and sudden tufts of foliage, were to be seen the low roofs and white walls of many buildings.

"Look," said Hushka, gently: "yonder is Bágh. Our pilgrimage is over. We have crossed the Vindhya. June is here, and it is the Vassa season. Art thou ready, Oman?" And he turned to examine his pupil's face.

Oman neither spoke nor answered the look. He was beyond himself. Suddenly, out of the dark fastnesses of the past, shot a gleam of light. A new vista was opening before his eyes. Memory—fleeting, evanescent—hovered over him. His mind was struggling to penetrate the land of forgetfulness. The gates seemed still barred; and yet—here was a key. That river—that shining river, yonder, in the light—he knew it well,—so well that he was shuddering at sight of it.

"Oman," repeated Hushka, disturbed at the look in his pupil's eyes.

With that one word, the dream broke. Oman turned sharply, stared for a second into his Master's face, and then, in a voice of the far away, answered: "Yes, I am ready, master. Let us descend. Let us enter the Vihara of Truth."

CHAPTER VI

THE VIHARA OF TRUTH

THE town of Bâgh, begun in a little valley, had gradually spread, up an open hillside looking toward the southeast, and over and beyond the jungle, to the Narmâda plain. The great Viharas were two or three miles south of the village, built, all nine of them, in the flat of a ravine, with wooded hillsides rising abruptly on either side. It was not until the morning after their view from the hilltop that Hushka and Oman made their appearance here. They had arrived in Bâgh at dusk the evening before, unusually wearied by an unusual day's toil. Now, after passing the night in Bâgh, they had come, in the glow of a June morning, fiercely hot, but filled with that glorifying sense of summer that cannot be burnt away even by the deadly rays of an Indian sun, to begin the Vassa season.

Along the path from the town, and through the ravine itself, they met with what seemed to Oman, brought up to regard Buddhism as a dead faith, a surprising number of Bhikkhus, all, apparently, like themselves, returning from the pilgrimage. And Oman further wondered by what feat of perfect calculation

they had managed to arrive from their wanderings on this particular day. As a matter of fact, some that they passed had been in the neighborhood for a week or more; and others would continue to arrive through the next week. There were perhaps a hundred and fifty men in all, including fourteen or fifteen novices; and there were few here who could remember a time when there had been more in the valley. Yet tradition told a great tale. For, whereas now, all these men lived in a single Vihara, the last in the row of the great buildings, in the days of the past every one of the nine huge monasteries had been filled to overflowing, and twenty-five hundred men had passed their Vassa in the ravine.

Happily, to-day, none cared to dwell on the memory of old glories. The Brethren were all busy greeting one another, and giving hasty account of incidents of their various pilgrimages; for, through the winter months, the Buddhists of Bágh were scattered over all Malwa, as far north as Rajputana, and southward, through the plains, nearly to the great ghats. Hushka was never alone, for he was one of the most important and also one of the most popular monks of the Samgha. Oman, indeed, following at his master's heels, felt aggrieved and neglected. He occupied himself in observation, finding high cause for wonder in the vast, empty buildings lining the valley. They were immensely long, narrow for their width, and built entirely of stone cut from the great quarries near the river. Their verandas were wide, roofed and

pillared with stone; but the shade-mats of straw had long since rotted and fallen away, and the interior of the mighty monuments stood open and empty, deserted by their builders and their faith.

Gradually the two approached the last of the line of monasteries, which, as Hushka had told him, was called the Vihara of Truth, and was the only one still inhabited. This place presented a very different appearance from that of its silent neighbors. As they came near the central doorway, Hushka left off his conversation with a friend, and turned to Oman. Taking him by the hand, he led him up the step, to the spot where stood a large man, wearing a white cloak over his yellow robes, and further marked by an air of extreme dignity and condescension. Oman had observed his statuesque figure some moments previously, and saw that, though he never moved from his place, every Bhikkhu that approached made haste to go to him, to bow and receive his greeting.

“That is the Sugata, the master of the Vihara, who has almost attained to Arahatsip, and remains in meditation throughout the period of pilgrimage,” murmured Hushka in Oman’s ear, just before they reached the great man.

Oman felt a thrill of reverence, and looked again, hoping to perceive new marks of holiness. All that his eyes could see, however, was a tall, stout person, with a round, benign-looking face, plump and smooth-shaven. The Sugata was smiling, and Oman, hungrily as he searched, could find in that countenance no traces of

divine spirituality. However, the great One's eight months of meditation seemed to have agreed with him uncommonly well.

Before this irreverent thought had taken root in Oman's mind, he was led up by Hushka and presented to the mighty one as a Saddhiviharika who had received first ordination three months before. The Sugata fixed his eyes upon the young man, who ingenuously returned the look, as the master addressed Hushka :

"He appears young. Is he of age?"

"Of eighteen years, sir."

"Let him study well the Dharma, that, in a year, he may receive Upasampada."

With this, Oman's audience appeared to be at an end ; and, a little relieved to be out of the neighborhood of such holiness, he followed Hushka across the veranda to a square, arcaded cloister, where, directly in front of the entrance, stood a man with an open bag before him, containing coins. Hushka took from his girdle the alms-purse that he had worn for eight months, and emptied its contents into the receptacle, at the same time exchanging greetings with the almoner. Oman, looking on, understood that it was upon this money, received on the pilgrimages, that the Bhikkhus lived in their monastery through the Vassa season.

Hushka's exchange of courtesies ended in the question as to where he should find one Mahapra. Informed that he was in the Uposatha hall, the monk went back, Oman still at his side, and, passing into the veranda again, turned down it to the right, and, some distance farther

on, entered a room so vast that Oman stopped upon its threshold, staring. Here, near the door, was gathered quite a throng, engaged in lively altercation with one of their number, whose lean face wore a perturbed and strained look. At sight of him Hushka began to laugh.

"It is, this year, Mahapra's lot to assign the cells," he explained to Oman. And, leaving the young man where he was, Hushka himself plunged into the crowd.

So long a time elapsed before he emerged, that Oman, tired and bewildered by so much that was new, squatted down on the floor, to the left of the entrance, to wait. Finally Hushka returned to him, a look of satisfaction on his face; and, signing Oman to follow, walked rapidly across the hall, through a small door at the end into the cloister, across this open space, and finally down a narrow passage that ended in another open square surrounded by small doors. Here Hushka stopped, looking round him till he found a door inscribed with a certain letter. This he threw open.

"Behold, Oman," said he, "here is your home. This is the square of novices, and I have got you a cell with an outer window. It will be well that you should remain here for a time. The Vihara will be all confusion to-day. But, if you come forth, do not forget the letter of your door."

Then, without further ado, Hushka turned and hurried away, having himself much to accomplish before nightfall. Oman, peremptorily left alone, looked around him, at his new abiding-place. The room

was extremely small, considering the size of the Vihara. Opposite the door was a small window, with a straw shade rolled up from it and bound round with a string. From the window could be seen a strip of hill-side, where the light of noon glared over shadowless gray earth, dotted here and there with clumps of stunted bushes. This, with a bit of deep blue sky, was his view. The furniture of the room consisted of a straw bed with a sleeping-mat, an earthen water-jug, another jar, and, under the window, on a low, stone platform a foot square, a small bronze image of the Buddha. The stone walls of the cell were nearly covered with carvings and bright-colored frescoes, which, crude as they were, gave the room an air of comfort and furnishing.

Oman, accustomed to absolute simplicity, looked around him highly satisfied with his dwelling-place. He was not, however, so well pleased at the prospect of spending the whole afternoon without food; for his breakfast had been scanty, and the morning long. Nevertheless, Hushka had bidden him remain here, and Hushka's slightest wish was law. So, calling up some of the Vedic fortitude of his childhood's fasts, he remained for an hour or more gazing out of the window, considering some of the features of the new life; and then, since there seemed nothing better to do, let down the curtain over his window, threw himself upon his bed, and, in a few moments, had lost himself in sleep.

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The first week of the Vassa life passed without order, in a jumbling way. Then, suddenly, as if by magic, everything changed, and existence ran as if by clockwork. Without knowing how it had all come about, the novices found their studies begun, and perceived that they were living under stringent laws. Only Oman, among the twenty youths that had received the Pabbagga ordination, found nothing to chafe him in the rules of the day, which were enforced with a rigor that defied disobedience. It was a long time, indeed, before the young Brahman, occupied with the unusual joys of companionship and congenial work, awoke to the fact of how much was being accomplished by himself and by those around him.

At dawn — which was early enough at this time of year — the whole Vihara was roused by the clanging of a bell, which rang till the most persistent sleeper could no longer retain his drowsiness. Then monks and novices alike made the prescribed ablutions and put on the outer robe. After this came half an hour of meditation, each one sitting alone in his open cell, while masters of the day passed through the corridors at irregular intervals to make sure that meditation did not lapse into sleep. This over, the whole company repaired to the Uposatha hall, and, seating themselves on the floor in orderly rows, repeated in concert the creed and prayers for the day. Now came a scramble to the refectory, where a meal was served : — a meal such as could scarcely have been duplicated in any Rajah's palace. For if the Bhikkhus were accustomed

to begin the Vassa with yellow robes hanging on their emaciated frames, they were sure of setting forth on their pilgrimage in October well fortified for the rigors of the fasting season.

The morning meal at an end, monks and novices separated, and the succeeding hours were occupied with varying tasks. The novices repaired to the smaller audience hall, where they were taken in charge by one of the four masters. Squatting in an orderly row on the floor, they listened in decorous silence to the reading of passages of the law, and then to a long lecture expounding all that had been read, with paraphrases by certain of the more notable commentators. This ordinarily occupied from two to three hours, after which followed lessons in the Dharma, the novices themselves being called upon to interpret chapters previously learned by rote. Then came a period of silent contemplation of the longed-for state: the cessation of desire and the extinction of feeling. This over, the second meal was served, and after it came relaxation, the novices being allowed to watch the distribution of the remains of the meal among the poor of the village who, at this hour, came crowding to the Vihara gates. This was the one period of unrestrained liberty in the day; and novices were permitted to indulge themselves in games and amusements forbidden to the doubly ordained.

By three o'clock this was over; and the two following hours were spent in the library, in the perusal of sacred manuscripts, of which the Vihara of Truth owned a large number. Of all the day's occupations this was,

to Oman, the most deeply engrossing. He had a great advantage over most of his companions, in being able to read easily both in Sanscrit and the older Pāli; for the scholarship of his youth had not left him. The working day was ended by the most difficult task of all: — three hours of silent meditation on some tenet announced at the time. At first, to those unaccustomed to it, these three hours seemed as long as the eight months of the Sugata's retirement; and the novices whispered, and yawned, and eyed each other, and let their minds wander, till the length of their penances became startling. But gradually the time seemed shorter, the habit of abstract thought more fixed, until it was sometimes a surprise to hear the great bell ringing out the close of day, when all save penitents were commended to seek a needed rest.

This daily program was varied every two weeks, on Uposatha days, by the ceremony of the recitation of the Patimokkha; which meant the reading of lists of misdeeds punishable, the special penance for each offence, and, finally, a general confession and fixing of penances. The whole thing usually lasted from six to eight hours, and was very tiresome. But the remainder of the day was a holiday, when rules were abandoned, and monks and novices allowed to mix indiscriminately.

Such was the outline of Vihara life, which, in the beginning of the thirteenth century, differed little from that maintained in the first Buddhist monastery eighteen hundred years before. The circumstances of the day were unvaried; but the details, for the indi-

viduals living the life, were never the same. The occupations held infinite possibilities, being perfectly adaptable to moods. The meditation that one day seemed to stretch out into infinity, passed rapidly on the next. If the incidents of the life of Gautama set forth in one day's reading were dull and dreary, on the next the excerpt might sound like a fairy story, and the reading-hour prove all too short. For those of dull, phlegmatic temperament, perhaps there was not, after all, much difference. But Oman Ramasarman was everything but phlegmatic. A creature of strange moods, stirred by many feelings incomprehensible to the multitude, devoted to the working out of a mighty expiation, as unknown to himself as it was to his companions, his four months of Vihara life were a momentous period with him. He very soon came to an understanding of what this wisely regulated existence might hold for him. He perceived that here he might build a foundation for that resignation to the actual that he needed so terribly to attain; and forthwith he set himself, with all the determination of which he was capable, to attain to a full appreciation of the worth of the Buddhist teaching.

From the books of his religion Oman extracted much food for thought, on which he dwelt during the hours of meditation. From the very first, these periods of silence had been pregnant. In them, now, he found answers to his infinite, unasked questions. They, first of all, had awakened him to the import of the days. Perhaps, since Gautama's first conceptions of his great

creed, there had been no proselyte so apt for the faith as this poor, bewildered subject of a pitiless judgment. Within Oman's body two natures, both human, both filled with direst cravings of humanity, had long struggled for supremacy. Now he had been removed from the old life, where he beheld sense worshipped on every side, and found himself in a community which taught, as an inviolable law, the renunciation of all sense gratification as the only road to happiness. A sudden austerity, born of the brain, began to work in Oman's heart. Self-denial and abnegation became a passion with him. It was with deep delight that he graved upon his mind such verses as these :

“That middle path of knowledge which the Tathagata has gained, which leads to wisdom and conduces to calm, is the holy eightfold path : right belief, right aspiration, right speech, right conduct, right means of livelihood, right endeavor, right memory, right meditation. This is the path that conduces to Nirvâna.”

“And this is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, decay is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering. Presence of objects we hate, separation from objects we love, not to obtain what we desire — all these are suffering. Briefly, the clinging to existence is suffering.”

“Now hear the truth of the cessation of suffering : it will cease with the cessation of thirst — a cessation which consists in the abandonment of every passion. With deliverance from this thirst comes the destruction of desire, the cessation of suffering.”

This was the subject on which, in his hours of contemplation, Oman insistently dwelt. In his heart he knew that here lay his help; and he felt it no wrong that he clung to one topic, disregarding many of the others prescribed. The process of enforced and long-continued meditation is a curious thing, and productive of strange results. Thought is hardly governable, as volatile as a gas; and to keep it fixed for any length of time upon a single point, requires a power difficult of attainment. When it is gained, however, and then persistently made use of, the character of the thinker is sure to change in one of several ways; and it is axiomatic that, in a meditative community, the individuals are never quite normal.

In Oman's case, the effect of the silent hours, which began to be visible after two months of Vihara life, was one of increasing dignity and age. He had entered the Vihara a youth, of extremely boyish appearance, with shyest manners. He had been thoroughly crude, and so awkward before older men that he had given an early impression of stupidity. Now all this was altered. He was quiet, grave-eyed, thoughtful-looking; but his manner, filled with self-control, was almost impressive. His grasp of the teachings of the Dharma had been quick, his questions keen and pointed. Moreover, during the periods of relaxation, he began to keep himself apart from his fellows, but was often to be seen talking with his master, Hushka, or some one of the older monks of Hushka's faction. And it was among the novices, who began to look up to him, that the idea first originated

that Oman was to receive his Upasampada at the end of the Vassa season, instead of waiting the full year of novitiate.

By the first of August, with the Vassa half gone, Oman began to perceive that he was happy:—happy as he had never believed happiness itself could be. It seemed to him that he lacked no earthly joy. Hushka, his Saint, the man he looked up to as the perfect model of virtue and unselfishness, was one of his four masters; and Oman was much with him. Apart from this companionship, he found that he desired nothing. Solitude was not now loneliness. But though, with the ineradicable instinct of the Brahman born, he kept himself aloof from his fellow-novices, they seemed never to resent this, but rather looked up to him as one of higher caste than they, and one that had, consequently, a right to exclusiveness. Moreover, through the whole Vihara, even by Sugata himself, Oman was spoken of as a scholar of high promise, such a one as their decadent community now rarely saw. Treated with respect on every hand, the memory of his old, marked days growing dim within him, it seemed to Oman that his cup of happiness was full. He was mastering the primal, the greatest difficulties of a religion which, as it opened, became more and more beautiful to him. In certain ecstatic hours he saw himself attaining to the highest state, Arahatship, where pale Nirvâna gleamed like a silver armor of repose around the passionate soul. His nature was already under subjection; and he no longer doubted that it was wholly conquerable. The way

was stretching out before him straight and smooth, the last boulder lifted away, when, suddenly, out of the clear sky, came a thunder-bolt that laid waste the fair country of his life, and left him standing alone, terrified, a yawning chasm at his feet, the wilderness on either hand.

It happened very simply, and without any sort of preparation. He sat one afternoon in the library, among a throng of monks and novices, before him one of the Vinaya texts, the Mahavagga, a manuscript of law rigidly adhered to by Buddhist and even by Jainist communities. There, in the list of those creatures unfit to receive ordination, and commanded to be driven from the Samgha if, unknowing, they had been already ordained, he came upon the sixty-eighth section, wherein all such as he were declared unfit for holiness, ineligible for Buddhism, and therefore outlawed, absolutely, from the blessed life.¹

He read the passage once, and then again, slowly. After that he leaned a little farther over his book, no longer seeing the writing, hoping only that none observed him. Stupidly he sat there, for an hour or more, neither reading nor thinking, only conning over and over again the two simple verses that had undone him. And when he had been quiet for a very long time, an idea came, and he whispered it over, lingeringly, wistfully, to himself: "I shall not confess. I shall not confess; and so — they can never know."

¹ "Sacred Books of the East," Max Müller edition, Vol. XIII, Vinaya texts, Part I. Mahavagga, p. 222. (Trans. W. Rhys-Davids and H. Oldenburg.)

CHAPTER VII

THE WHEEL OF THE LAW

FOUR weeks passed, and Oman realized, dully, that September had come. For him, Time had lost the power of flight. He took little note now of the incidents in the life around him. He was in the grip of his conscience, wholly absorbed in the pangs of a new suffering. The consciousness that he was an outcast never left him for a single moment. The All-knowing, the master, the Buddha, had declared him ineligible for the serene life, had tacitly denoted him a creature unfit to attain to any degree of peace. This, after the first shock of discovery, was his chief thought. Instinctively, also, he clung to another: the passionate decision that he should stand alone in his knowledge. The broad inconsistency between these two points formed the land of his misery. He dared not reflect on the workings of the Dharma. He was forbidden, by every tenet of religion, to use his higher reason in the criticism of religion. But he knew that he was, by decision of the law, unfit for the Samgha; and that in the Samgha he intended, bitterly, to stay.

For long periods his brain went numb with the pressure of thought refused. Gradually his behavior took

on an aspect of guilt ; and he slunk among his fellows like one who had committed far worse than a Dukata offence. He fell off, wofully, in his work, in his comprehension of the Dharma. He went through his meditations dull-eyed, palpably unthinking ; and the masters of the novices began to comment on his behavior. Finally, he got into the habit of torturing himself, daily, after the last meditation was over, by waiting till every one had left the hall, and then getting out the manuscript of the Mahavagga and reading his death-sentence over again, to make sure of every keenest pang that lay in it, every drop of poison hidden in its innocent characters. And after he had seen it, and found that it was real, that he had not been under the influence of some baleful misapprehension, he would steal silently to his cell, and wear the night away in woman's tears or fierce rages of rebellion that left him, at dawn, a bundle of trembling nerves.

The load that he carried became nearly unendurable. It was lightened by only one thing : when, occasionally dragging his mind from himself, he looked around him at his high superiors, the doubly ordained. These, in their dignity, their approachment to Arahatship, gave cause for highest wonder at and admiration of their freedom from all worldly concern. He envied, indeed, the lowest of the novices. But it seemed to him that, if he could only receive the Upasampada ordination, he might, in some way, cheat both himself and his god into believing in his fitness for the honors of the holy life.

Poor Oman! It had been infinitely easier for him had he known to how little serenity those envied men had actually attained! In the strangeness and isolation of his lot, it was not given him to understand that there is never a creature that must not bear its burden and suffer under it, believing it a little heavier, a little less adaptable, than that of any one else.

The poor novice thought that Upasampada opened the door upon a life in which a tranquil and scholarly mounting to perfection, untroubled by a single jarring incident from the outer world, was a natural sequence. Those high beings, advancing with rapid paces toward Nirvâna — surely their hearts and minds knew nothing of the battles, the uprisings of self, the human desires and yearnings that he was forever struggling against! Perhaps, indeed, the monks of the Samgha knew no such troubles as these. Their difficulties were usually of a more ignoble kind. As in the monasteries of another faith, in the far west, the Buddhist Viharas, even during their pathetic decadence, were too often seething hot-beds of rivalry and inward strife, thinly whitewashed with an outer coat of obedience to precept and renunciation of the fivefold clinging to the world. In the Vihara, a man desirous of attaining to Nirvâna had not only his own weakness to conquer, his own nature to strengthen; but he had before him the long battle of rivalry with those who, for every step he advanced, strove to make him take two backward. The result was, that the Samgha became a place of inner plots and counter-plots, intrigues worthy of a royal court,

stealthy meetings and conversings of one faction or another, where obstacles innumerable were devised for any man who desired to mount to a higher and holier estate.

Of all the men in the Vihara of Truth, probably no one had received more of the miserable stabs of envy and jealousy than had Hushka, the honey-throated. Greatly beloved — by more than Oman — he was also passionately hated. It was now twenty years since his Upasampada ordination; and in all that time he had known scarcely an hour when he was not enduring the malicious jealousy of a rival. For a long time now his opposing faction had been led by Mahapra, a man who had passed his Upasampada a year earlier than Hushka, and who had caused him more and bitterer disappointments and humiliations than any dozen of his other enemies. And there were those of his friends who whispered that, had Mahapra been out of the way, it had not been Sugata who stood now an Arahata, at the head of the Samgha. Never came there a Pavarana, scarcely even an Uposatha day, that Hushka was not made to taste the venom of his enemy; and there was surely no heart-sickness that he had not endured. He had suffered as few of his companions could suffer; for his nature was delicately organized, and he was sensible to the most refined stings of misery. With all this, Mahapra himself rarely caught a glimpse of the wounds he inflicted; for Hushka had the power of concealment, and the wisdom never to burden any one with a recital of his own unhappiness. It was

thus that, to an outsider, his life could scarcely seem other than beautiful.

During the last weeks of the Vassa season the constant, hidden strife that went on in the Samgha centred itself, curiously enough, around the figure of Oman. In the early months Hushka, through Oman, had enjoyed a triumph, for having brought from the pilgrimage a novice, of Brahman caste, and, moreover, a pupil of such high intelligence and one so devoted to the Dharma. The Sugata himself had complimented Hushka on his pupil's progress; and at this point Mahapra's bitterest ire and fear were roused. Too soon Oman began to give opening enough for criticism and belittlement. His laxity in effort and the falling off in his work and behavior became grossly apparent during the latter half of August, while whispers and comments from the adverse faction penetrated even to the Chaitya hall. From day to day Oman, absorbed in his own misery, pursued his course unconscious of notice. And day by day Hushka's eyes followed him, in doubt and dread.

Long Hushka forbore to speak; though through the demeanor of his pupil he suffered as he would scarcely have believed it possible that he still could suffer. The Bhikkhu had lately been allowing himself to believe that the thankless labor of years was about to find its reward. And now as, little by little, that belief was broken down, it seemed to carry with it his very vitality, till he had lost courage to engage with Mahapra any more in the slightest controversy over the commenta-

tors or the higher criticism of the holy books. Indeed, the honey-throated was aging, visibly; and this Oman woke at last to see.

On the 3d of September the last meditation of the novices ended rather earlier than usual, at about seven o'clock. Hushka, who was master of the day, came in to dismiss them. He stood leaning against a pillar, near the door, wearily watching them file by, till the last had gone. Then Hushka turned to glance over the room, and beheld Oman still standing at its far end, his face gleaming pale in the waning light. Hushka gazed at him for a moment or two, and then moved slowly toward his pupil. Oman stood perfectly still, trembling a little, till the other halted within a foot of him. The two looked at each other till the novice dropped his eyes.

"Oman," said Hushka, after a heavy pause; "Oman," and he paused again, while the guilt-laden one grew cold, "art thou ill?"

For one, swift instant Oman looked at his master. "No, reverend sir, I am not ill," he murmured.

"Oman! Oman! Repentest thou of thy faith?"

Oman gave a quick cry. "No!" he answered.

"Yet something troubles thee. Canst thou not confide in me? Shall not I, thy master, give thee help? Tell me, Oman, tell me what it is that lies in thy heart. Do not fear. I have suffered too long, too well, not to know compassion."

Oman's head drooped low. He clasped his two hands tightly over his breast, and then suddenly threw

them out as if in supplication. Hushka, not understanding that Oman would have warded him off, took the hands gently in his own. The warm, living clasp suddenly broke through Oman's carefully built barrier of concealment. He sank to his knees upon the stone pavement, and his brain burned with the fire of his knowledge. He was losing his self-control. As tears fell from his eyes, his thoughts also flowed, till he was overwhelmed in the torrent of his wretchedness, and crouched, rent with emotion, at the feet of the troubled man who supported him.

The dusk deepened. Through the long, carven hall, eerie shadows fell, and the orange light of the west melted to purple and then to black, till the two were alone in darkness. Hushka now knelt by Oman's side, and soothed the youth with fragmentary words, till he was quieter in his grief. There followed silence, pregnant and foreboding. Hushka would not break it. Heavy-hearted, dreading unknown things, he bowed his head, waiting. And gradually it was borne in upon Oman that there was no longer any way of concealment. He must give utterance to the truth: his tragedy. How he began, how he told it, he could not afterwards remember. At first the words choked him, then they came faster, finally in fury, till the pent-up emotions of years were finding expression beside that of the remorse of yesterday. Hushka remained at his side, silent, stunned, at first, by the feeling displayed by this youth, this child to life. It was the first thing that impressed him: — the silent suffering that Oman

must have known. Hushka could understand him there so entirely! He knew each smallest phase, each bitter turn of the wheel of solitary misery! In his heart, as yet, was only pity.

Oman came at last to the end of his strength and his confession. Crouching there, numb, blind with tears, swollen-lipped, breathing thickly and in gasps, he found himself, like one groping in a fog, uttering vague questions — doubts — hopes.

“But it is true? Those words — are they the law, then? Must Oman follow them? Must I be thrust forth? Master! — Help me! — Master!” And Hushka felt the wretched creature clasping his knees in the darkness.

Then silence fell. Only Oman's breath could be heard, rushing in and out, like that of a dying dog. At this sound, Hushka felt a sudden revulsion, a sudden despairing anger with him. Was Oman to be pitied: — Oman, who had wrecked his, Hushka's life, as well as his own? The monk rose from his knees, walked across the hall, and stood at one of the un-screened openings, staring out into the starlit night. Here, silently, he struggled with himself: — struggled for justice toward Oman, justice toward the Samgha, toward himself. Oman had not moved from the place where he was at first. Only now he lay prone on the floor, and his breathing was quiet. He was waiting, without any feeling, without any emotion, for his sentence.

The suspense continued for a long time. Hushka's

heart was full, and his brain reeling. Now he addressed himself passionately to Gautama, now he turned to his own judgment. Prayer and reasoning, however, led him alike to one conclusion—a conclusion pitiless to himself, pitiless to Oman. Nay, the cruel result was inevitable. Oman had dared formulate nothing to himself; but Hushka was obliged to face the situation.

After a long time, then, the monk went back to his pupil, sat down beside him, laid a trembling hand on the prostrate shoulder, and began to speak, softly, as a mother might :

“Thou knowest, Oman, that the word of the Mahavagga is our law. If the Samgha knew this thing that thou hast told me, thou wouldst suffer public exposition and expulsion. I, knowing, dare not let thee remain here. Thou must escape to-night, quietly; and I will be here to—to accept the consequences of thy going. I can do no more for thee. But the blessed Buddha, the Sakya —”

He broke off, suddenly, for Oman, raising himself halfway from the floor, had begun to laugh. Hushka shuddered as he listened. It was so high, so harsh, so quavering, that it seemed as if it must go on forever. But suddenly it broke, and melted into a long, heart-broken wail. Oman was going to pieces; and Hushka sanely set to work to stop it. How it was accomplished he scarcely knew. Under sharp command and gentlest soothing Oman was presently quiet again, save for the trembling of his body, and the little, broken moans that involuntarily escaped him. Now that he

had pulled himself together, Hushka left him for a quarter of an hour, and then reappeared, carrying over one arm an old and much-worn garment that was not yellow. In the other hand he had a small millet loaf.

Oman was dimly aware of being stripped of his robes, of having the other garments put upon him. Then he received into his hand the food. After that he followed his preceptor quietly out into the empty veranda. Behind them the monastery was still. Over the great world beyond, the golden moon was slowly rising. In its light, Oman turned a dumb face to the man he had so worshipped. He saw that Hushka was suffering — suffering as perhaps high Sakyamuni had not suffered. Neither one of them, however, could speak. Hushka, with an air of benediction, pressed his fingers, once, to the cold brow of the outcast. Then, — he was gone. Oman was alone on the brink of the world, irrevocably and forever shut out from the protecting walls behind him. Outcast of men, he stood, facing life. And, since he had already drunk the dregs of feeling, mercifully his heart was numb. After a little he moved off, unsteadily, into the faint-starred blackness of the ravine: halted, went on again to the edge of moonlight, and then paused once more, struck by some new thought, expectant, his head up-lifted. Out of the night came the sound of whirring wings. He opened wide his arms, and into them flew a small, gray bird that nestled to his breast as if it had been at home. Holding the mysterious creature close, Oman proceeded, staggering, through the night, down

and down the ravine, till all the Viharas were passed, and a few lights, twinkling in the distance, showed him the town of Bâgh. Then, utterly exhausted in body and mind, he crawled, on his hands and knees, under a spreading bush, and, with the bird still warm in his bosom, gave himself up to merciful sleep.

CHAPTER VIII

THE OUTCAST

BLANK hours passed. The glimmer of false dawn came and went again. At last the day, inevitable, rose, like an opal, out of the East. The silent world was overspread with clear light; and, in its first moments, the bird, which till now had lain motionless on Oman's breast, fluttered up, hovered for a second over the quiet form, and then took flight, winging away into the invisible. Oman was still sleeping: a heavy, transitional sleep.

Day swept up the sky, and the blazoning sun whirled from the heart of the hills. Now, at last, Oman opened his eyes, sat up, looked around — stared, indeed, and all at once remembered fully. For the moment memory unnerved him. Then the strain proved again too great; and, with a renewed sense of dulness, he rose. The bird was gone. He seemed to have known that before. He wished now to discover his whereabouts. In the darkness he had reached the end of the ravine, and was at the edge of a long, barren slope, to the west of Bággh. The houses of the town began not far away. He could see people moving about there; and the sight of them reminded him that he was

hungry. He felt faint, a little weak, and shaken, with the after effects of last night's tumult. He determined not to enter Bággh. With an undefined weight of grief and ruin upon him, he began to toil upward along the slope, turning his face to the north, where the high hills rose. And, as he went, he ate the millet-loaf that Hushka had put into his hand.

It was a fair morning, hot, cloudless, blazing. Oman wilted in the heat, but his steps went on, mechanically. He had already determined in his mind to reach the hills that day. As he went, he found his thoughts groping vaguely in once-accustomed ways: loneliness — fear of people — hatred of those that shunned him — hunger — physical discomfort — all the old details of that solitude that he knew so well. And still his feet did not falter. It was his masculine nature that upheld him now; but, adding to his dread, he felt the feminine, knocking — knocking at his heart, at his brain; and he fought desperately against admittance, knowing that, when it came, his suffering would be trebly increased.

His old training with Hushka stood him in good stead to-day. He made progress. By noon, seven miles stretched between him and Bággh, and he was now among the foothills of the great Vindhya, which, so far as he knew, stretched eastward before him into infinity. In this thought there was something like comfort. Those dark-wooded wilds meant refuge from men and the haunts of men. There should be no day in his life to come when he would not be able to plunge

into some deep ravine, or mount some thickly jungled steep, knowing, in his heart, that whither he went no curious, human eyes could rest on him, no living creature follow. He felt just now that never again, while he was doomed to remain on earth, would he suffer a glance from human eyes.

At noon, after a few moments' rest, Oman plunged into the woods and began to move upward to the heights. The underbrush was not too thick to prevent progress; and the trunks of young trees afforded grasping-places for his hands. In this sort of country snakes were supposed to abound; but he moved on without any fear of them. No wild thing would molest him. Only man he feared.

After a while he found refreshment. In the dense undergrowth were bushes and trees bearing fruits; and many of these were at their ripening season. Mangoes and custard apples there were in plenty, and tamarinds and a few bananas. He was also presented with a cocoanut, delivered by an interested monkey, who first flung it at him, and then came hurrying to the ground to see what had happened. The incident proved unfortunate, however. The suggestion of fellowship about the little, bright-eyed thing, unnerved Oman for the space of a second. In that second he was undone. The door opened to the woman. Tears flooded his eyes, and, throwing himself upon the ground, he yielded to an outburst of the wildest grief. The monkey, who had seated himself near at hand, scratching his black head and chattering

volubly to the stranger, now looked on sorrowfully, and shed a few tears himself:—wherefore, who can say? After a time, when Oman had recovered again, the grotesque little creature broke the cocoanut against the tree trunk, and solemnly offered half of it to his new friend. There in the jungle they ate together; and presently, when the monkey had run off to rejoin his tribe, Oman rose and moved on, comforted and fortified.

The incident had turned his thoughts away from himself; and the afternoon passed rapidly. At night-fall he halted once more, near the summit of a hill, ate again of the fruits of Mother Earth, and lay down in the solemn stillness, not to sleep very readily this time. Physically, he was very tired. Mentally, he was waking. He must now—alas!—begin to weigh his loss, and face the future. His thoughts travelled back through the few intervening months to the spring, when he had wandered southward with Hushka. Then he reviewed the early part of the Vassa, and began to see how his life had broadened before him. There had taken place his first struggles against himself; and there could be marked his first victories. He recalled to mind passages of the Dharma, which he had loved to think were made for him alone. And, with this memory, the bitterness became intolerable. He lifted his arms toward the stars and wailed his woe. And passively the stars shone on, nor heeded him. The parts of nature, so imperturbable, so enduring, so changeless,—were they satisfied? Had they received

enough of God? Oh, surely, yes! On all save him had the Creator showered blessings, to all given gifts and mercies. He, only, was marked out for constant woe, constant disappointment, constant misery. Having thus grieved through long hours, the outcast finally closed his eyes upon his first day of probation, and once more slept.

On the morrow he found himself able to make less progress. His nature, lately accustomed to over-nourishment, demanded something more substantial than fruit and nuts. He began to realize that, until he became inured to this life, he must occasionally have a little grain, or meat. Also, the utter loneliness of the vast jungle through which he travelled, began to appall him. He had so lately known the constant companionship of many men, that there hung over him a sense of direst oppression, in this uninhabited wilderness. His recently engendered dread and hatred of mankind was already giving way to an unconquerable longing for the sight of a human face.

On the third morning he woke almost to desperation. Should nothing happen to him to-day, he felt that he must break under the strain of thought: — that empty, beating thought — of nothing. Meantime, there crept upon him the insidious desire to try again, only once again, if men would not accept him; if, knowing nothing of him, his mark must be apparent to a point of instinctive aversion. And, at the same time with this, he was coming to something that he had not had to endure before. He was beginning to hate himself for what he

was. His restless longing to be respected among men turned him away from that rebellion against them which had long possessed him ; and, in the revulsion, he went to the other extreme : hating himself because he could not be as others.

The whole afternoon of the third day he spent in toiling up a great hill, the summit of which was reached at sunset ; and from this height he gained recompense for the long travail. Around him — to the south — to the east — to the west, rolled great hills, verdure-clad. No sign of plain or level land was visible. On three sides of him the hills stretched away, a little lower than that on which he stood. But in front, to the north, rose a series of gigantic, rocky heights, which towered infinitely upward, bringing him a realizing sense of his own pygmy unimportance. And now his eyes, travelling downward, perceived the deep ravine that separated him from the first of the high mountains ; and, looking, his heart leaped within his breast. For there, in that gulf, were houses : — mud huts, wooden ones — two, three, a score ; and beside them ran a swift mountain stream, the murmur of which rose up to him through the stillness.

“I will go down ! I will go down to them, for they are built of men !” he said to himself, eagerly, like a child. And forthwith he began his descent, walking with a new buoyance. As he proceeded, his way grew difficult. The houses, far below, were hidden from his view in the thickness of the undergrowth. The light was melting away ; for the sun lay on the edge

of the horizon, behind the hills. Still he pressed on, a tempered joy in his heart that was not to be stilled by reason.

Though he hurried, darkness was on him before he reached the level; and then, indeed, it seemed as if he must resign himself to another night of solitude. Nevertheless he fought, still refusing to abandon his hope. And suddenly, from a more open space on the slope, he looked down and saw, but a little way below, half a dozen shining lights — flames of sacrificial fires. And after that no falls, no bruises, no difficulties of the precipitous way, could keep him back. An hour after sunset he stood at the edge of the clearing where the village was.

The first hut was near at hand: a square one, tiny, tumble-down, even squalid. Yet it was roofed over with wood, and within the open doorway firelight shone. There must be human creatures there; and there Oman was determined to enter. He approached, almost reverently, and halted before the door. Within, was only one person — a woman, or girl, of perhaps sixteen. Her dress proclaimed her widowhood, and her caste was too easily recognizable. Oman, however, accustomed to such matters, thought of nothing but that she was a woman — kneading barley-cakes before her fire; and, as he watched her, his heart warmed with humanness, and he smiled. After a moment she, lifting her head, perceived him, dimly outlined near the doorway. At once she rose, though without any welcome in her eyes, and advanced, with respectful

salute, saying, in a voice that was pleasantly modulated:

“Enter, sir, enter. I have entertainment for him that desires it.”

Oman shook his head. “I come from out of the hills. Nor have I any money,” he added, suddenly aware of his destitution.

But the girl only saluted him again: “The reverend One is a Brahmana.¹ Enter, then, in the name of the gods.”

Once more, though slowly and with deep reluctance, Oman shook his head. “I am neither Bhikkhu nor Brahmana,” he answered. “I am — an outcast.”

For a moment the woman turned away her head, and Oman’s heart sank. But, all of a sudden, she ran to him, taking him by the hand, and looking at him so that he perceived the gentleness of her face and eyes. “Enter,” she whispered. “I am lonely. I will share my cakes with you. And there is milk. — But my husband’s brother must not know this thing. He is of the weaver caste; and he is very proud.”

Chattering in a subdued voice, she led him in, and placed him before the crackling fire, the smoke of which escaped through a hole in the roof. The cakes which she had just kneaded and shaped lay on a board before the fire, baking questionably. Now she ran to a cupboard in the corner and took therefrom a large jar of meal, a little of which she put into an earthen

¹ Wandering fakirs of any religion were called “Brahmanas,” a word to be distinguished from “Brahmans.”

pot, near at hand. Water, from another jar, was poured over the grain; and then she set the dish in the fire, where the simple porridge was soon steaming pleasantly.

Oman sat silent on the floor, looking on with rising emotions. It was such an unspeakable luxury to watch her, low-caste and poverty-stricken as she was, moving about in the one-roomed hut which was none too tidy in its simple arrangements, that he could not be ashamed of his beggary. The meal was soon ready; but, before he ate, the wanderer, suddenly realizing what his appearance must be, took occasion to make use of some of the contents of the water-jar for his face and hands. The girl brought him a piece of cloth on which he dried himself; and, when he turned to the fire again, she cried out:

“Why! Thou art beautiful! And—ah! You are not an outcast!” And, leaning over, she laid her hand on the Brahman cord still fastened over his left shoulder.

Oman looked at it—and flushed. He had a momentary impulse to tear the thong away. But the impulse passed, and it was not done. His father had not removed it. Why should he? So, without answering the girl’s exclamatory question, he turned again to the fire, and she, with great forbearance, refrained from pursuing the subject.

It was a pleasant meal,—the pleasantest, perhaps, that Oman had ever known. The girl, who gave her name as Poussa, chattered to him unrestrainedly:—of

her life ; of her brother-in-law, who took most of her wages, and beat her when these were too little ; of the doings of the little village ; and a thousand details of the people therein, that brought new warmth to Oman's heart. In return he told her something of himself :— that he had been a weaver, but had gone to join the Biikkhus, with whom he had now tired of living. She seemed satisfied with what he said, and they talked, comfortably, while she cleared away the remains of their meal, and then, returning, seated herself in front of him, and took his two hands and kissed them.

“See how my heart inclines to my lord. I love him,” she said, simply.

Oman started to his feet, shaking her from him violently. Then he strode to the doorway, and stood there, staring into the night, till Poussa, frightened, crept to him again, and, kneeling at his feet, timidly sought his pardon.

“Nay, Poussa, nay, there is no fault. But I must not remain with thee, for I am not of thy kind— not like other men.”

“Lord, I know it well. Thou art far above me ; yet I beseech thee to remain, and I will trouble thee no more. Ah, let my lord incline himself to my forgiveness !” And so prettily did she entreat, and so weak was he with the yearning for sympathy, that, in the end, he did as she asked, and returned into the hut, where they fell to talking again.

Before he slept that night, however, Oman learned

something of the personal life of his pathetic little hostess. They were still before the fire, but their talk had grown fitful and full of pauses, when, out of the blackness beyond the open door appeared a man, lean, ill shapen, but well clothed. His face was not good to look upon, and his expression made it worse. In the doorway he halted, apparently not intending to come in, after he had seen Oman. Nor did he speak; but stood still for a moment, looking hard at Poussa. Words from him were unnecessary. Oman and the girl saw him at the same moment, and she, her face instantly losing its tranquil look, sprang to her feet, and, running to the door, saluted the newcomer with profoundest respect. The man snarled some words at her, the purport of which Oman caught. They related to money — apparently a demand to see what she had earned during the day. Poussa fell upon her knees, pleading, in a low tone, that her guardian would refrain from altercation in Oman's presence. The man seemed to accede to her request, and, after a few words more, the lowered tone of which did not lessen their ugliness, strode off again into the darkness.

Oman, relieved at the departure, looked up, prepared to find Poussa smiling again. He was disappointed. The girl finally rose from her knees and came back again. But her head was bent, and her whole attitude one of deep dejection. Indeed, by the glow of the low fire, Oman perceived that slow tears were rolling from her eyes, and that her hands were clasped as if in pain.

“Why do you weep? He is gone. You are safe,” he began, half timidly.

Poussa looked up at him with eyes full of misery. “Early to-morrow he will come again. And then—I shall be beaten. Oh, I shall be beaten!”

“But why—why will he beat you?” he demanded, in astonishment.

“Because—no, it is nothing.” She would not speak.

Oman took her by the shoulders. “Why will he beat you?” he asked, stupidly.

“He is my brother-in-law,” she responded, as if that were quite sufficient to explain any cruelty.

“He desired money,” muttered Oman to himself. “Ah—ah—I see! *I* have no money for you! *I!*”

Poussa quivered under his touch, and her answer was only a faint moan.

“Oh! Oh! It is unendurable! Do you hear? It is unendurable! Let me go after him! I will tell him.”

“No.” The word was firm. “No. He would only beat you. He is master in this village. I am used to it. See, I will not weep—I weep no more. Come, we will sleep now. Let us sleep.”

But Oman was not satisfied. He had too much of the woman in him to be indifferent to the prospect of a woman’s suffering. Because of charity to him, a woman was to be beaten! The thought was too much. In his agitation, he began to pace up and down the little room, thinking—suffering—once again cursing his fate. Suddenly something caught his attention. In the dark

corner of the room, beside the unshuttered window, was a rough hand-loom, half filled with a piece of badly woven cloth. Before this Oman paused, considering.

"Thou sayest thy husband's brother is a weaver?" he asked.

"Yes. He is a weaver. He caused this loom to be built in my house, that I might occupy my idle hours in working at it. But I cannot weave evenly enough for him to sell the cloth I make. Therefore only my own garments can be fashioned from what I do," she explained, in a dreary tone.

Oman, however, had suddenly recovered himself. "It is well, Poussa. I shall repay thy brother for thy charity. Come, I beseech thee, do not weep." He laid a hand upon her shoulder, smiled into her eyes, and presently, in spite of herself, she was comforted; and, through Oman's gentle words, forgot her trouble. In a little time they went to rest, Poussa lying upon her accustomed bed, Oman on the floor near the door. And both of them being weary with the day, they shortly slept.

In the first gray of morning, however, Oman was astir. While the light in the hut was still too faint for him to see clearly, he took the empty water-jar from its place, ran down through the still, shadowy hamlet to the edge of the mountain stream, into which he first plunged himself, coming out shivering and gasping, but refreshed; and then, after drying himself in the air, he replaced his tattered garments, filled his jar with water, and returned to Poussa's hut,

where a bright daylight now threw the meagre furniture into bold relief. Poussa herself still lay upon the pallet, sleeping like a child. And Oman, after looking at her for a moment with a sudden tenderness in his heart, sat himself down at the loom, and, with a thrill of independence and pleasure, set to work, first remedying and straightening the knotted and uneven warp already stretched; and then, seeing that there was plenty of yarn left for the weft, began to throw it on.

A full hour later Poussa woke to the "hock-hock-hock" of the loom, before which sat her guest of the previous evening. The shuttle was flying fast over the straight and even threads, and, under Oman's fingers, which had lost none of their skill of five months before, the finished cloth was slowly gathering in the frame: as fine a bit of work as her brother himself could have put forth. After a moment's staring, to wake herself from a supposed dream, Poussa, with a little cry, ran to the loom and gazed into Oman's face.

"Thou! Thou an outcast! Thou'rt even Krishna himself!" she cried, throwing herself on her knees before him, while he ceased his work and bent over her, smiling and protesting.

"In this way I pay my debt to thee. Tell me! When I have worked all day, and have produced a piece of cloth that will bring twenty copper pieces, will he then forbear to beat thee?" he asked.

Poussa stooped over the loom, examining the work at first anxiously, then with delight. "Yes — ah yes! It is more than enough. Thou hast saved me!"

and, throwing herself on the floor, she touched Oman's feet with her brow. Then, when he had raised her up, she began, joyously, the more useful task of preparing breakfast.

Oman was true to his word. All the morning, barring the half hour in which he and Poussa broke their fast, he toiled at the loom, till Poussa's guardian came for the expected money. The interview with him Oman undertook, making as much explanation as he saw fit, and allowing Salivan to examine his handiwork critically. Salivan was satisfied. His own vanity could not deny that the work was good. Though the man's words were few and not overgracious, Poussa's face, after his departure, all radiant as it was with relief and pride, doubled Oman's reward, and he toiled from pure pleasure to the last moment of the light.

In the early afternoon Poussa, whose work began late in the day, went to the forest to gather firewood; and Oman, left alone at the loom, began to meditate. His first musings were vague: instinctive impressions rather than definite ideas; but he was too much master of this art of thought to leave them, as most Hindus would, in embryo. As his shuttle flew in and out of the warp on the loom, so were his thoughts busy weaving a new pattern on his fabric of life. But, in his imagination, there grew two distinct possibilities, one of which must soon be made a fact, the other discarded. One was the natural existence of a man among his fellows—himself, settling quietly down in this world-sheltered spot, to weave away his life

in tranquil monotony. The other presented to him a strange aspect, beginning in hardship, in loneliness, in unceasing trial and probation, and ending in—he knew not what. And perhaps just in this uncertainty lay the fascination that, from the beginning, made the harder course seem so much more attractive than the other. After all, he was not as other men; and, by the arrangement of inscrutable providence, life could never look to him as it looked to those who had been given individual lives and individual chances.

For many hours Oman's fancy played thus with destiny; and all the while, in his inmost heart, he knew that, when the choice came, he should not hesitate. He knew that Fate enwrapped him, grim, unconquerable. And he knew that he should run the course prescribed by her, though all the temptations of humankind were placed in his way. For so much of the scheme of his life disclosed itself to him.

At dusk, Poussa returned, staggering under a weight of boughs. Oman met her at the door, and took half of her load from her, as a woman might, she standing by the while, wondering what manner of man it was that would help her at such a task. When the Agnihotra was burning the two sat down, cross-legged, beside the fire; and she, assuming for a moment, unconsciously, a rôle of Fate, began to try him, tempting:

“O High-born, listen! It has been spread about through the village that thou, a master weaver, art come among us. Soon my brother-in-law will ask

you to take up your abode with him, that you may jointly ply the trade. My master, say not again that thou art outcast of men. Come thou and dwell near me, and let me serve thee, who will then have the happiness of thy nearness. As Krishna pities women and protects them, so do thou ! ”

It was thus that she brought up a new battle in Oman's soul. Two forces struggled again within him: one, man's natural need; the other—what? The summoning of the higher law? The half-conscious necessity for the fulfilment of his mission? Something of these. Something that would not yield the battle. Something that had taken possession of Oman's mind, and would not lessen its hold, but forced from him words that were scarcely his own. Yet even secretly rebelling, he recognized the power that had hitherto held him. He perceived that it was the first choice that had been given him:—his first glimpse of the two roads that stretch before every living thing. And, in gratitude for this new trust, he yielded to the power, and spoke as Prophets speak :

“Nay, Poussa. I may not dwell among you. My way lies upward and on. My destiny cannot be the destiny of men; for I travel the road of those that have sinned. ‘A burning forest shuts my roadside in.’ One more night I shall remain with you, and then I set out again—up—to the heights above, there to finish my soul's travail. Yet I shall see thee again; for, in my weakness, I must return to thee for help. Do not grieve. For what I do has been already

decreed, and is now turning from the wheel of present time. Let us speak of it no more."

Poussa obeyed him. Nor was he to be moved by the suave arguments of Salivan, who returned, that evening, to examine his work, and to lay the proposition of partnership before him. Yet, in the silent watches of the night, doubts came, and he wondered at himself for his choice. The morning scarcely brought comfort; and how it was that he fulfilled his word, it would be hard to say. But it is true that, while the day was young, he withdrew himself from Poussa's clasp and set out, alone once more, into the world, up, toward the great mountain that overhung the village to the north, and was called of men the "Silver Peak". Thither went Oman, driven by destiny, to attain to the heights that held for him, though he knew it not, on the one hand the scourge of suffering and blind wandering for the soul; on the other the crown of victory and life.

CHAPTER IX

THE STRUGGLE ON THE HEIGHT

IN all great mountain ranges there are what might be called heights of man and heights of nature. There are always hills that seem to invite the puny human agility: that hold at their summits resting-places whence men may obtain their "view" and begin their descent again, filled with pride at the conquest of inconsequent difficulties. But there are other heights that were not made for such: places which, even should man attain to them, refuse him his vain reward, bind him about with a spell of bewildered awe, and, if he safely reach his earth-kennel once more, leave him with the sense that he has been refused his due.

Heights such as these owe nothing to humanity. They are the retreating-places of defeated nature. To man they are not natural. Their high glory is not for him. Towering into regions above slow-drifting clouds, where sun and stars and moon lean close on high, they are in communion with eternity. Nor is their secret of the ages to be borne away and exploited in the depths below.

Such a height as this rose up beyond the little hamlet of the mountain stream. Its peak, a spirelike pinnacle,

not so lofty when compared with Himalayan or even Alpine heights, rose up from a high, rounded plateau which itself lay above the tops of the surrounding hills. On the far side of the mountain the slope ran gradually down to the basin of a tiny mountain lake, that lay five hundred feet above the valley level. But on the south end of this heavenly plateau, rocks jutted down in a vast, tumbling mass, to a depth of three thousand feet. Alone in its far summit, sunlit, glorious, the strange mountain top might have been hailed king of the whole range. And, indeed, it was one of the few mountains of the Vindhya distinctive enough to possess a name. The valley dwellers called it the "Silver Peak"; and its name fitted it well. The eastern slope was densely wooded. The rocks at the base of the peak on the plateau were filled with caves; yet animals and reptiles shunned these easy abodes. Only sure-flying birds, eagles and falcons and kingfishers and floriken, swept through its forests and over its height, unawed by the inviolable stillness. But this stillness, unbroken since the day the mountain rose from the earth's seething surface, was something to be feared. Here man had been defeated in the moment of his triumph. His blatant voice, lifted upon this royal height, had shrunk to a faint whisper; and he had fled his sacrilege in shame.

It was midday on the height. Overhead blazed a September sun, infinitely brilliant. The plateau, bathed in gold, lay drowsy in the noontide. Below, a few shreds of silvery cloud clung about the rocks,

veiling higher mysteries from the lower world. The loneliness was absolute. Neither eagle nor cormorant dared the sun at this hour; and it seemed as if living things had never existed here. Not one world-murmur sent its vibration through the tranquil atmosphere. Man and the works of man were forgotten or undreamed-of. Here was such peace as the flesh-clothed spirit cannot know: the peace that terrifies, because it was declared primevally of God.

Up to this height from the depths below came Oman, mounting slowly, all but overcome with the long toil of nearly twenty hours. From the torrent, through cloud fringes, out of forest darkness came he, upborne by his strange will. Reaching at last the level, he walked on it till he emerged from the trees into an open space, on one side of which rose the rocky wall of the peak, pierced with its little caves. Far to the east, down the long, slow slope, twenty-five hundred feet below, the lake lay glittering with golden ripples. Beyond it hills rolled, on and on, till, in the far morning-land, they ended in a deep, violet mist.

Here, in the open, Oman paused and looked. As he stood, gaunt and tall, clad in the floating, tattered raiment of some long-dead Bhikkhu, in his right hand a stout staff, in his left a small bag of millet — Poussa's gift, the two spirits in him looking out through his great eyes, there was no suggestion of triumph about him. He was overcome by the wonderful beauty of the surrounding scene; but he also betrayed a terrible fatigue, the fatigue of mind, as well as of body.

The mountain lazily surveyed him as he stood, and perceived that he carried the key to the gate of solitude. He was not to be denied admittance. Deserted of mankind he had come unto Nature, asking shelter from the world; and Nature, pitying, could not refuse.

Still actuated by the spirit that seemed distinct from himself, Oman moved slowly toward the rocky ridge, and entered one of the caves that pierced it. Here was a place that would shelter him from storms; and here, should nights prove cold, a fire would always live. In the cave's mouth he sat, for a long time, musing on the possibilities of making an abode in this strange place. There seemed to be only one vital lack. There was no sign of water anywhere about. Should that not exist, he must descend again. This thought caused his heart fairly to sink. Obeying a quick impulse, he set out in search of water; and it was nearly an hour before, fifty feet down the eastern slope, he found a spring that sent a tiny, falling thread down in the direction of the lake, till it was lost under the earth, a long way below.

The last obstacle was gone now. This place was fitted to be his abode. Here, far from the reach of his kind, he would dwell, till he had fashioned for himself a life that should be impervious to the shafts of wanton injustice and cruelty. Here he must fight the great battle of his dual nature, the outcome of which he himself could not foresee.

This much settled, he turned to practical needs. After a long draught of water, he went back to his cave,

and began the tedious process of building a fire after the fashion of the woodsman:—twirling a small, pointed stick, like a drill, into a close-fitting hole made in a piece of harder wood; feeding the heat with fine dust particles and crumbled dead leaves, till at last a flame appeared. It was a matter of an hour or more before his fire was ready; and by this time Oman was famished with hunger. He parched some of his millet on a flat stone, ate it with eagerness, and finished the meal with some mangoes gathered on the mountain side. Then, his faintness relieved, though his hunger was not wholly satisfied, he lay down and slept, waking again just as the sun was setting.

The wonder of the following hour made an impression on him that was indelible: that bound him about with a spell which lasted as long as he dwelt upon the mountain top. Far away in the great west, from the palpitating flame in which the sun had set, spread a vast cloud of deepening crimson that slowly broadened, through the air and over the hills, clothing peak after peak with rose-gold, its misty glow shimmering over the whole earth, till every crag, every tree-top, every eagle's wing, was transcended with the light. Gradually the color shifted, changed, sunk to a paler pink, encompassed with gray and violet shadows that shrouded the form of Night, who presently set on high her beacon: the diamond-pointed evening star, hanging, tremulous, in the deep-tinted west. And lo! as the swift Indian twilight died, the sister stars one by one flashed into view, till the sky was crowned with them, and the day lay dead under a velvet pall.

Slowly Oman turned and walked back into his cave, his sense of exaltation changing into oppression: a realization of his infinite littleness before the immensity of the changeless world. Night after night such a scene as he had just witnessed was unfolded here, where no mortal eye was supposed to look on it. He felt himself an intruder in a holy shrine. His presence was the sacrilege of an inviolate fane, the retreating-place of God. And the loneliness, the oppression of his senses, was like the weight of the whole mountain on his soul. Still, through it all, was a joy: the joy of the knowledge of those things that no man knoweth, the splendor that man cannot parallel.

All that night Oman scarcely slept; and yet the hours were not long. His mind wandered unrestrained through space. His thoughts were of a great and solemn beauty, of which he was scarcely conscious. In the first glimmer of dawn he left his rocky bed, and went out again into the open, this time turning his face to the east. And there was enacted before him another indescribable drama, which lasted till the sun was high in the heavens. Then he returned to eat another meagre meal of parched grain, supplemented with water. That bare sustenance seemed the only permissible food in the face of the ascetic splendors of sky and mountain-top. All through the day he moved quietly about the plateau, feeling more and more that it would be impossible now for him to leave the enchanted place. And the mountain, still watching how he moved and communed, humbly, within

himself, sanctioned his presence, and bade him welcome to her undisciplined heights.

Such was the beginning of his sojourn on the Silver Peak, which lasted not weeks nor months, but years — how many years, Oman never knew. The tale of this life might be compassed in a line, if one dealt only with events ; but the mental phases through which he passed are scarcely to be transcribed. Life was sustained in him by the meagrest food. He lived as the Chelahs live : upon his soul ; and was satisfied therewith. In the beginning, he was forced to return some dozen times to the hamlet in the valley, where he wove on Poussa's loom, to earn grain enough to live on. But, early in his hermit's life, he ploughed himself a field on the plateau, planted millet-seed therein, and, after that, reaped two scanty crops a year : — enough to live on. And from the period of his first harvest, he descended no more into the valley, where Poussa mourned for him as dead.

To one choosing, or chosen for, the life Oman had elected, dwelling in utter solitude from year to year, two courses are open. If the physical in him predominates, he draws out of the nature around him all that is animal, savage, or untamed, gradually loses his powers of thought and articulation, finally, the very habits of man, becoming a creature wilder than the wild things themselves. But, if he be of the spiritual type, a dreamer or religious fanatic, he draws toward him the soul of Nature ; his mind expands as his body dwindles ; and it is said that strange psychi-

cal powers come to him. With Oman, in the beginning, it seemed doubtful which he was to become: beast or angel. Buddhism had not uprooted the passion and the animal instincts of his dual spirit; but it had at least opened his eyes to the spiritual life. For many months — two, or perhaps three years, even — the battle of the two forces raged within him. And probably it was the mere fact that he was able for so long a time to retain spiritual remembrance, that gave him victory in the end. At first his moods alternated. For days at a time he would sit wrapped in a state of impenetrable calm, meditating as Gautama had meditated. Then, without any warning, the brute in him would rise, and, driven by it, he would range through the mountain woods like a demon, climbing, goat-like, over crags and precipices, and performing feats of physical strength that were almost superhuman. Again, suddenly, in one breath, he would break into a tempest of tears and cries, and, flinging himself on the ground, wherever he happened to be, would lie there, shaken with sobs, till sheer exhaustion brought quiet. Reaction never failed him, however; and it was always the same. Quietly, like a numb, dazed creature, he would rise and drag himself back to the open summit and his cave, and there would sleep, for an uncalculated period. When he woke he ate; and, in the torpor that followed, the great calm would descend on him again.

His tempests were always a source of deep trouble and dejection to him. That incomprehensible woman-

ishness that lived within him he half despised and half deplored. When she was uppermost, she was pitiable enough. Her high, wailing voice roused the dreariest echoes among the surrounding rocks ; and one hearing them might have fancied himself listening to a chorus of damned souls wandering along the road to Kutashala Mali. This weaker spirit used, in the beginning, to be roused by the thunderstorms which, from time to time, raged across the heights. With the first hissing fire-streak that crossed the sky, Oman's frame would be shaken by a quiver of terror, and he would cower away into his rude habitation, and, covering his face, remain moaning and trembling with every crash, every blaze of lightning, every fresh onslaught of cold rain. To him it was as if these phenomena brought back some experience of the dimly veiled past, when, in words that smote his ears like the near thunder itself, he had heard pronounced on him a doom, and had thenceforth been plunged into deepest night.

After the passing of the storm, when the stars came radiantly forth upon the newly refreshed sky, or the sun shone through an upstretched, radiant bow, there would steal upon the stricken creature of the cave a sense of comfort and consolation almost repaying the evil hour of fear. At such times, Oman would put away his sense of wretchedness and shame ; and his heart would open out in praise. What he should praise, whom, which of the gods his life had known, he could not tell. None of them all — Siva, Vishnu, Indra, not the Buddha himself — could satisfy his new,

groping sense. But the searching, seeking, wondering after the unknown, the greatly desired, usually led him back into his state of meditation, where he could claim himself again a man.

In the end, it was this search that brought him into the kingdom. Brahman born, a Vedic student, instructed also in the three great philosophic systems, and, later, introduced to Buddhism, he had at hand a great fund of religion, and a variety of hypotheses on which to meditate. As soon as he began to perceive that he must find some creed to lean upon, he set to work consistently to analyze and compare these different systems. And from that time, when he felt himself occupied with a real work, the tempests of his unconquered self came less often, and were far less fierce, till, by degrees, they ceased entirely, and he found himself master of his solitude. Now, truth began to disclose herself to him. Gradually he discovered that he understood a few things. He perceived life to be a period of trial and probation. The beginning and the end are good. One comes into the world innocent, pure at heart, untroubled by sordid doubts and fears. One leaves it calmly, having ceased to desire the things of life. In the interval many phases hold possession of the soul: ambitions of various kinds (lusts and loves, for which one pays with blood and tears), and the worshipping of many idols. But one by one these break and crumble away. Men perceive that they are false, and cease to search for them; and their lack—the loss of riches, power, even love,

—are not to be felt as evils. The soul is self-sufficient if it know its god. This is the story of life.

Afterwards came higher considerations: — cause, purpose, natural law, finality. Deep were Oman's meditations on these matters, and strange the answers that he found. The twenty-five principles of the philosophy of Kapila he reduced to two — matter and essence. From the combination of these the universe has risen. The great fountain of Spirit, situate in the heart of the rolling worlds, sends forth a constant spray, each drop of which is a soul, which, entering a material form, begins its long pilgrimage back, through imprisoning matter, into the fountain-head again. Into such form, after long and troubled study, did Oman work his truths; and then, still unsatisfied with the infinitude of existence involved in the idea, sought further solution to unsolvable things.

Six, seven, eight years went by; and Oman was no longer young. Yet his appearance was still not that of a man. His face was without any trace of beard; nor was his expression one borne by world-dwellers. His eyes glowed with an inward fire. There were certain lines about his mouth and eyes that gave his features the droop of constant melancholy. His form was tall and gaunt; but his fine skin was still untoughened by exposure to sun and wind. Save for a cloth about the loins, he now went unclothed, unconscious of nakedness, exposed to no observing eyes. His muscles stood well up on his lean body, for he was a tiller of the soil. In his whole

life there on the mountain he had never known one day's sickness; nor did it occur to him to consider health in the light of good or evil. His solitude had effect on him in infinite ways; but he kept himself from forgetting speech by frequently talking aloud. His thoughts, however, were not at all those of men. He made companions out of the natural objects round him, and regarded the phenomena of nature as beautiful scenes in which he himself had a part. He called greetings to the rising sun and to the moon, which looked on him with jovial, distorted face. Wild creatures that lived in the lower woods — bears, small, burrowing animals, even snakes, moved near him without fear and without any threat of battle. During his long residence in the open, he had never knowingly injured a single sentient thing; and for this his reward came in the shape of companionship with the wild. The tenth year of his mountain solitude had passed, when, suddenly, all things were changed for him.

In some mysterious way, how, cannot be explained, for the rumor could have had no other origin than the wind, it was spread among the scattering mountain villages that, on the summit of the Silver Peak, there dwelt a Chelah, or hermit, of great holiness and wonderful powers. And thereupon pilgrimages thither began.

The meeting of Oman and the first stranger that penetrated his solitude was unique. It was more than ten years since Oman had looked upon the face of one of his kind or heard the sound of any voice

other than his own. He had for a long time felt neither need nor desire for companionship; and his mind had become quite deadened to the necessity of reëntering the world. One afternoon, returning from a short walk down the eastern slope after fruit, he found himself face to face with a man, standing near the entrance of his cave, who, seeing him, began to prostrate himself rapidly. Oman stopped perfectly still, looking at him with wonderment in his face. After a while, seeing that the holy one did not speak, the man began :

“O most excellent, reverend sir, accept my worshipful homage of your learning and holiness. I am come to ask of you the fate of my wife, who is sick of the white plague. All doctors I have rejected, and come to you, on the top of this amazingly high mountain, to ask your aid. And, that I may not seem to be wanting in reverence, I bring with me a jade anklet,—which may the reverend One accept!” and forthwith he proffered his gift.

Oman looked at him long and steadfastly, striving to master the emotions that were welling up within him, the foremost of which seemed to be acute displeasure. He hesitated also to speak; for he realized, on listening to the speech of the man, that his own articulation had become almost unrecognizably altered. An answer seemed, however, to be a necessity; so, presently, he nerved himself to the effort, and said, slowly, with great difficulty :

“Do not bow down before me, O man, nor before

any being like yourself. Return to your wife and keep your place beside her bed; nor neglect to obtain doctors for her in her sickness. I will not take your gift, for what need have I of jade? Return to your dwelling and trouble me no more."

Vainly the man protested, tried propitiation, prayer, demand. Oman would pretend to no knowledge concerning the sickness of his wife. But when the stranger asked for food before beginning his arduous homeward journey, Oman could not refuse him, but offered what he had; and, when they had eaten together, the man continually exclaiming that he was not worthy of the honor, he departed, unsatisfied, carrying with him his jade anklet.

Oman was left in a state of great agitation. The single hour of human companionship had brought down on him, in a torrent, all the old desires, fears, worries, hopes, in fine the inevitable emotions of human life; and he was whirled into the stream of the old problem. That day, and the next, and three or four nights, were filled with restlessness. Then, as time passed, and he found himself unmolested, calm returned, and the thoughts of the other life faded again.

Nevertheless, the spell had been broken, and he was not destined to a much longer period of solitude. Less than a month had passed when another visitor appeared upon the Silver Peak, this one with no higher purpose than a desire to look upon the hermit. He also, however, brought with him a gift, and re-

mained and ate with Oman, who conversed with him without much constraint, out of a kind of eager desire to convince himself that the life of men was really as troublous as of old. This fellow departed, carrying with him a glowing report of the tractability of the holy man, and the great wisdom he had gained from conversing with him. And this tale destroyed Oman's peace; for it brought upon him a perfect deluge of visitors, of every degree, male and female, whom, in the beginning, he helplessly received, and gave of his store of wisdom, replying to their innumerable questions with the patience of a child. Among these pilgrims to his shrine were Poussa and her guardian, who, when they learned that he still dwelt so close above them, lost no time in seeking him. And Poussa, indeed, Oman greeted with real pleasure; providing her with the choicest of his fare, of which he by now had some variety; for many of his visitors brought gifts of food, which, his stock of grain running low under the demand, he perforce accepted. Moreover, he was now clad in a new robe, finer of texture and richer as to border than any he had ever worn. From Poussa, however, he would accept nothing, reminding her that she had long since made him her debtor for what he could never repay. And the girl and her guardian left the mountain top after promising to repeat their visit.

For some weeks, buoyed up by the thought of genuine friendship, Oman continued to let himself be seen, treated his visitors with courtesy, and occasionally

accepted some of their gifts. But after another month of it, he grew sick of the servility of his visitors and the transparent curiosity with which they regarded him; and, taking with him only a pouch full of grain from his small store, he disappeared into the forest of the east slope, and remained there for a fortnight, till hunger drove him home again. It was sunset of an October day when he reappeared upon the height, and, arriving at his cave, found it already tenanted. Across the threshold, motionless, unconscious, lay the body of an old man, shrunken and pitiably emaciated, clad in a tattered robe, a much-used staff lying at his side.

Oman's anger at sight of the intruder quickly melted to pity. Kneeling beside the prostrate body, he lifted one of the limp hands and began to chafe it back to warmth. This being of no avail, he hurried to the spring, returning with a wooden vessel full of water, which he sprinkled upon the worn face and poured down the parched throat. It had its effect. The stranger stirred uneasily, muttered a few words, and suddenly opened his eyes. Oman, with a momentary throb of memory, perceived that one of these eyes was brown, and the other a faded blue.

CHAPTER X

THE WANDERER

FOR a long moment Oman bent close over the intruder, staring into those strange orbs, his mind groping back, back, into the dim past, wondering where it was that he had known them before. Then, as the old man uttered a faint moan, he started to himself again, asking anxiously :

“You are better? You can speak?”

“I am better. Help me — to rise,” answered the other, feebly.

Oman, newly compassionate, lifted the light form in his arms, carried it farther into the cave, and laid the unbidden guest upon his own grass bed in the far corner. Then he set about the tedious task of making a fire. Before his sticks were ready, however, the newcomer, summoning him, in a high and querulous voice, to the bed, gave him a flint and steel, and a piece of inflammable substance that he carried in his pouch. These Oman thankfully made use of, and presently a fire burned again in the rude habitation. Then, out of his stores, the hermit prepared a meal for both of them : rice and dried fruits, which, with fresh water, formed a repast that seemed luxurious enough in Oman's

eyes. When it was ready he approached the stranger, and asked gently if he desired to be fed. For answer the old man drew himself into a sitting posture, and then, after a moment's effort, rose to his feet, walked to the fire, and sat down ; but before Oman had placed his portion of the meal before him, he looked into the young man's face, and said, in a harsh and trembling tone :

“This is charity that you give. I cannot repay you for the shelter. I am a mendicant, old, feeble, very near to death.”

“And I am a hermit. The lonely have need of little. What I possess, therefore, I will share with you.”

So they began their meal. It was a silent one. The stranger did not make any effort to talk ; and Oman, watching him, sank by degrees into a fit of abstraction in which his memory moved, groping, searching, wandering back through time to find the clew to his recognition of this man. The stranger himself, though probably he had been in a half-starved condition, showed no great eagerness for his food. He ate slowly and little, and seemed to droop forward, while he sat, with the weariness of age ; and Oman began to wonder how he had ever reached such a height as the Silver Peak.

While they sat there at their meal, the sun set, and the swift twilight faded. And when the old man rose and moved toward the mouth of the cave, the stars were shining, close overhead. After gazing for a moment at the shadowy lines of hills stretching away to the east and west, the old man turned to his host, and said :

"I will go out now and spend the night upon the mountain. For the hospitality you have given me, I thank you, in the name of Siva."

"Out upon the mountain! Why, thou wilt perish there! The nights are cold at this height. Nay, surely my cave is large enough for two. Remain here till dawn, at least, O stranger."

The old man turned on him those peculiar eyes, in which there now lurked an expression of suspicion, of craftiness, of secrecy:—the expression of a dotard; and there was an evil smile upon the old, trembling lips as he said: "No, no. I shall sleep alone. There is no one to prevent me. Hermit, it is thirty years since I slept in a human habitation. No, no. No one shall get the better of me in my sleep. No, no. And look you," his tone grew querulously savage, "look you that you do not try to seek out my bed!" As he spoke these last words, one hand crept up to a string that was about his throat, its end lost under his robe, and the other went to his girdle, wherein a knife was stuck.

Believing him now to be insane, Oman made no further protest; and the man, with another look at him, went out into the darkness of the eastern slope, with a step that tottered with weakness.

Amazed by the strange incident, Oman turned into his cave again, and, worn out with many days of privation and discomfort, lay down to sleep. All night his dreams were troubled. The personality of the old man had laid strong hold upon him, and he appeared in his

sleep : now in the guise of some grewsome spirit of evil, now as a guardian angel shielding him from mysterious dangers. Oman woke at dawn, troubled and scarcely refreshed, the old man still uppermost in his thoughts. Possibly he had been feverish through the night ; for his mouth was parched, and he longed for water. In the cool twilight of new day he rose, crossed the open plateau, and went a little down the eastern slope to the spring. As he reached his destination, his ear caught a faint sound that came from some distance to the right : — the sound of a human voice, moaning, as if from pain.

Oman hurriedly started toward it ; and, after some moments' search, came upon the body of the wanderer, lying in a smooth space surrounded by trees. His eyes were closed, his color ghastly, and, from his parted lips there came, with every breath, the deep moan that had drawn Oman thither. The hermit knelt beside his strange visitor and lifted one of the cold hands. At the touch, the prostrate one opened his eyes, as it were with an effort. Seeing Oman beside him, he murmured, with a suggestion of relief in his tone :

“ Hermit — is it thou ? ” and immediately relapsed into a state of semi-consciousness.

Oman did, at once, the only thing to be done. Lifting the body in his arms again, he carried it up the slope and back into the cave, where the fire still smouldered ; and, laying the old man again on his grass bed, began to work over him.

The day passed without his returning to a normal

state. Oman knew that he was very ill, but whether with some disease, or simply as the result of old age and exposure, he could not tell. He warmed him, fed him, bathed his brows with water, and sometimes caught what he took to be a murmur of gratitude from the feeble lips. As night came on, he began to fear lest the stranger should make some attempt to leave him again; but the fear proved groundless. With the setting of the sun, a hot fever rose in the aged and world-weary body. The sick one's mind wandered through far-off regions, and he talked, loudly, of fragmentary things. For Oman there was no sleep that night. With a great pity for the helplessness of his guest, he watched over him tenderly, doing for him those things that only a woman would have thought of. During that night of anxiety, there rose up in the heart of the hermit something that for many years he had been striving vainly to kill. It was the hunger for human love and affection, a desire for something to care for. Suddenly, this last had been given him. This old man, querulous, evil-eyed, unlovable bodily and mentally, had become sacred in his eyes, an object of trust for which he should be answerable; and, in this thought, all the starved affection in Oman's nature welled up within him, till his heart was full and overflowing with pain and joy.

On the evening of the second day of the stranger's illness came the rains; and Oman knew that now, for the space of a month, at least, they were safe from intrusion. He and his charge were alone at the mercy

of Nature; and, far from being dismayed at the prospect, Oman hailed it with joy. For him, who was now become veritably the mountain's child, the old fear of the tempest was quite gone. Lightning and wind and rain were his brothers, when they sported across the peaks; and, since they brought him security against the impertinence of the people of the valleys, he blessed them anew for their presence. Thus, relieved from any untoward anxiety, he turned with all his strength and all his will to the assistance of the worn and world-weary creature whom chance or God had sent him to be his charge.

In the beginning, Oman always hoped that a few days would see the old man recovering, in some measure, his strength. But little by little that hope faded away. The illness, however, was never very alarming. By night there was always low fever, by day sometimes an abnormal chilliness, which Oman frequently strove to overcome by the heat of his own body. He would lie by the hour stretched along the bed, clasping the old form to his own, literally feeding his strength into the other. The stranger never tried his patience, at least. He was perfectly passive, obeyed every suggestion of his guardian, ate and drank whatever was given him, and never asked for more. Much of the time, indeed, Oman was in doubt as to whether he knew what was going on around him. By night his mind wandered, and he talked in his dreams; but by day he generally lay like one in a stupor, heeding nothing that passed. The one hour when he seemed to regain pos-

session of his faculties, was at sunset. Usually, at this time, he would open his eyes, and, if Oman were not already beside him, would call for him, and ask a few questions, or address him on topics of interest to himself, the significance of which was lost on his listener. For a few days, just at first, he would often ask to sleep apart from his companion, would suggest vague dangers that were surrounding him, and certain suspicious circumstances that he believed himself to have noticed. From the general tenor of this talk, Oman gathered that he was in constant fear of being robbed; and, from watching the hands that were forever fumbling and playing with the string about his neck, he guessed that this string must be attached to the object of his anxiety. He was, therefore, scrupulously careful never to mention, and, so far as was possible, not even to look at this string; and the result of his consideration was what he hoped for: — very soon the old man dropped his suspicions, and seemed to feel for Oman a spirit of friendliness, almost affection.

The latter half of October and the first fortnight in November were wild weeks on the mountain top. It seemed as if the very elements were struggling over that soul in the cave. Never had such storms of hail, rain, wind, and snow raged round the Silver Peak. In all that time, however, Oman's weaker nature never once manifested itself. He was using all the man and all the strength in him for the wanderer, whom the wild weather greatly disturbed. Indeed, often, during the storms, he would lie cowering with terror in his fax

corner of the shelter, talking deliriously of strange things, or uttering wild and terrified cries that wrung Oman's very heart.

It was early in the afternoon of a mid-November day that one of the fiercest of these storms began, and lasted till early evening, when a great and unexpected peace descended upon the earth. Remarkably, the working of Nature was paralleled within the cave by an inexplicable scene. All through the morning the stranger had been conscious, sane, and unusually tranquil. After the noon meal he lay back on his bed with the avowed intention of sleeping; and Oman seated himself in the doorway of the hut, to watch the clouds roll up from the west and swirl close round the peak, in moisture-laden mists. For some moments the storm had been imminent; and Oman's nerves were keyed for the first rush of the wind. His back was toward the bed. He could not know that the figure of the old man was suddenly upright. He could not see the fire of madness burning in the weird eyes, nor perceive that the shrunken muscles were as tense as those of a panther about to spring. But, in the first roar of the blast, with the first, fierce sweep of hail across the mountain top, the storm within also broke. Oman felt himself seized about the throat in an iron grip, and heard the shouting of the madman above the fury of the gale.

The half hour that followed he never clearly remembered. There was a fierce, almost mortal struggle. Locked in each other's arms, the two reeled and rolled

about the cave, like animals. Oman fought simply to preserve himself; but he was pitted against a madman's strength. Blinded and half-stunned by the suddenness of the attack, it was many minutes before he got full control of his own forces. He soon became aware that a flood of wild ravings was pouring from the old man's lips; and finally, at the very climax of the battle, when Oman felt his strength giving way, the wanderer suddenly dropped his arms, and his maniacal force seemed to throw itself into words, which he screamed out till they sounded high above the gush and clamor of the storm:

“Thou shalt not have it—thou shalt not, dog! Nor thou! Nor thou!—It is mine! The Asra ruby is mine own, given me in payment for work.—Ah—ye shall not take it from me! Faces—faces—faces!”

The last words sank, grewsomely, to a whisper, as he struck out once and again into the air at the phantom forms that closed him round. Then, suddenly, without any warning, he flung both hands over his head, reeled, and dropped in a heap at Oman's side.

For a moment or two the hermit stood perfectly still, exhausted by the struggle that had passed. Then he took the unconscious man by the arms, and dragged and pulled him back to the bed, on which he placed him, limp and unresisting. Afterwards he went to replenish the fire, over which he busied himself for some minutes. Finally he returned to the doorway, and seated himself so that he could watch both the bed and the world without.

He was thoroughly tired. He could not remember ever experiencing such a battle as the one just passed; and it had taken all his strength. In the corner, the stranger had now begun to moan, faintly; but Oman made no move to go to him. Just now he felt no desire to help a creature who had so lately attempted his life. Rather, there was a new bitterness in him. Had it not been always thus—a return of evil for good? This was all that unselfishness or self-sacrifice had ever brought him. Where was the divine justice to be found? Where was that universal law of compensation? Alas! Experience was once more accomplishing its work, narrowing its victim down to the little present, blotting out all the breadth of view that reflection and solitude had brought.

For many hours Oman sat there, musing bitterly, till the cloud-veiled sun was down, and night, still filled with the rush of tempest, advanced. Then, at last, he turned within, replenished his fire, and cooked himself a meal of rice. As he ate, he glanced over toward the stranger, who, however, made no sign. When he had finished, Oman crept quietly to the bed, and looked down at his charge, to see if he had need of anything. But he found the old man fast asleep.

After a time he returned to his post in the doorway. He found the night changed. Through torn and shimmering mists, the golden moon came rolling up out of the hills, bringing with her a court of stars, and driving the heavier clouds away down the western slope of the sky. Peace had come upon the height. The ruin

wrought by the storm was being atoned for now. It was the hour of Nature's repentance. Oman looked, and his own soul grew calm. This scene was so familiar to him! How many times, in his long sojourn on the height, had he not gazed upon it thus, gloried in it, loved it? But to-night, when its mission had been accomplished, and he had been restored to tranquillity, he turned his thought to other things — one other thing: — a strange, foreboding sense of recognition of some of the words spoken by the wanderer: "The Asra ruby is mine own — given me in payment —" And it was Oman himself who involuntarily added, in thought, the last words that his charge had uttered: "Faces! Faces!" What were the faces rising round him here, in the firelit night? What pale ghosts of the long ago were taking shape? What was it now burning behind his brain, struggling to break the barrier of the past? Oman bent his head, and clasped it in his two hands, thinking in vain, yet ever with the sense that remembrance was imminent. He was at a high pitch of nervousness when the unwelcome voice reached his ears: — a voice faint, and weak, and low, as if it came out of the depths of the bygone years:

"Hermit — art thou there?"

With a passing shiver, Oman rose and went to the bed where the old man lay. As he approached, the stranger lifted one hand slightly, and murmured:

"Fear not, hermit. I am not now mad. Nay — all things are clear before me, for I am approached by Rama."

Oman knelt beside him, and gazed earnestly into the gaunt, white-bearded face, across which the fire cast a flickering light that brought out every smallest line and wrinkle. An ashen pallor pinched his features, giving them the unmistakable, waxen look that comes only to those whose souls are poised for flight. Oman saw at once that death was near; and his heart contracted, painfully :

“ Yes, — thou seest it,” said the wanderer, quietly, as he looked into Oman’s eyes. “ It is time. My spirit is glad of its release.”

He lapsed into silence again; nor had Oman any desire to break the stillness over which, as he knew, Rama brooded. The wanderer retained his consciousness: seemed, indeed, to be lost in a reverie, while Oman sat watching him. After a time, in the course of his musing, the dying man’s hand crept up to that string which was about his neck; nor, this time, did his touch stop with the string. With an air of delivering himself of a heavy secret, he drew, from beneath his loose garment, a tiny, golden box. Lifting this in his thumb and first finger, he turned his face to Oman, and began to speak, disjointedly, at first, as if he were thinking aloud; then, by degrees, launching into narrative form, with a story that held Oman spell-bound at his side.

“ Look — it is here,” he observed, quietly. “ Here is the Asra ruby; the great stone that I have kept my own for thirty years. Here it is, in this box, safe to the end. And Fidá is gone — and I cannot — See, hermit! It

lies in this little box, that treasure. Thou hast never made move to take it from me since I have dwelt with thee; and therefore it shall be thine after my death. Yes, I have said it. Thine. But take it not from me until I have passed. Dost thou hear, hermit?" His tone grew threatening and harsh. "I am dying, and thou mayest take it from me dead." He glared again into Oman's face; but, seeing the gentle expression there, lost his sudden angry fear, and dropped again into the lighter tone.

"The years—the years are many since it came to me. I was not then a young man; and I had done much wrong in the world. My name—no one knows it now. I have never told it since that night. But I may speak it at last. My name is Churi, and I was a slave, a doctor, in the palace of Mandu."

"Mandu!" echoed Oman, quickly, in a strange tone.

"Yes, I was a doctor there, as well as a slave; and I was valued and trusted by my Rajah. But I wanted my freedom. I planned to buy my freedom, that I might no longer be called 'slave'. And then Fidá was brought thither. The Rajah, returning from war in the north, brought back a noble captive who was made royal cup-bearer, and afterwards raised to high favor in the palace. But Fidá loved. Ha! He loved a woman of the zenana—not a slave, mind, but a wife, and the *favorite* wife. And she loved him also. And because I guarded a door of the zenana by night, he gave me the ruby to open the door to him. And

I, hoping by it to buy my freedom, accepted it, knowing that it was the life of his race."

"This man — his name," suggested Oman, trembling a little.

"His name? — I have said it, — Fidá el-Asra. That was his name; and the gem was the gem of the Asra. When he gave it away, he became cursed; and the evil fell on all of us. For many weeks I sanctioned the crime in the zenana: for months played I traitor to my Rajah, for the sake of the ruby, and because I loved Fidá and Ahalya, and because they were happy together. Then at last the slave fell sick of a sickness that would not be cured, though I even returned the ruby to him to be worn, in order that he might be well again. But it could not help him then; and he gave it back to me.

"It was spring. I hoped daily for the coming of a certain merchant to whom I would sell the ruby for the price of my freedom. But alas! freedom and vengeance came upon me together, without the selling of the stone. There was a new war. Rai-Khizar-Pál marched away, leaving his favorite slave to be guardian of the young lord Bhavani, his son. Then, in the fair April, it fell upon us: — death! death! death!

"We found it in the early dawn, — Kasya and I. We found the body of Ragunáth, dead, in the champak bushes, by the water-palace. He was lying in his blood. — And Ahalya and Fidá had not come back from him. They were gone. Soon everything must be known; and I should surely be betrayed to my death

when Kasya learned the things that I had done ; for there was a little Arab slave — Ahmed — who also knew. Therefore, by night, I stole away from Mandu, and out — out — into the hills, carrying the ruby with me. Blood was upon it. Blood it had brought, and with the fire of blood it gleamed. I dared not part with it. It ate into my flesh, and yet I could not sell it. I suffered from heat and from cold, from hunger and thirst and nakedness, while I bore on my body this great wealth. For thirty years, hermit, I have wandered over the earth, carrying fear with me. Each man has worn for me the mask of Rama. Each bite of food has had for me the flavor of poison. I have wandered the Vindhya over, from east to west, from Dumoh to Khambot. And ever Mandu has drawn me back toward her. Terror and death have dogged my footsteps ; yet have I lived long, till I am very old. Suffering, hardship, sickness, most hideous remorse — all these I have known, and still have clung to life. My spirit was broken long ago ; but I have not wanted to die. I should have fought with any that threatened to take life from me. Tell me, Wise One, what is this love of living ? Why have I, most miserable of creatures, clung so long to it ?

“But behold — behold — the face of Rama stares at me, from the shadow yonder ! Back, Rama ! Back yet for a little ! Back !” For a second, the old man lifted himself from the bed, and levelled a tremulous hand at the haunting visage. Then he fell, weakly, and for a long time was still. Oman, sitting beside

him, still under the spell, could not speak. Finally Churi himself broke the silence again, this time in a voice that had faded to a thin whisper :

“I am dying, hermit. Rama’s face grows brighter in the gloom. The visage is less fearful, now. My madness is gone. I see clearly. But for many years I have been mad. It is the ruby. It holds evil in it for all but the race of Asra. I had dreamed of returning it to them. But thou, who hast sheltered me and fed me, to thee I say : the ruby is cursed. I warn thee of it. Better burn it on my body. — Hark ! — hark ! — the drums of Rama ! I am dying, hermit. Take me by the hand !”

Feebly he held out his shrunken fingers, and Oman clasped them close and steadied him. Then Rama and his hosts came by, and halted for a moment at the cave till their number was joined by one. Thereafter they moved on again, beating their muffled drums. And Oman was left alone on the Silver Peak, with the body of Churi, the dying fire, and the gem, enclosed in its golden box. Long Oman sat there, beside the body of the vagabond, thinking. Finally, when the dawn was still three hours away, he rose and made ready for his task. But first, perhaps unconscious of what he did, he loosened the treasure from the stiffening fingers of the dead, and slipped the string, with its yellow box, about his own neck.

CHAPTER XI

SUNRISE

BY night, on the eastern slope, Oman, under the light of the stars and moon, built a great funeral pyre of dry wood, brought from his store in the cave. There was in it neither sandal nor aloes, nor yet frankincense, nor any fragrant spice to cover the stench of burning human flesh. But the dry fagots would blaze high and fast; and the gay flames would quickly purify the long-tenanted body. When all was ready, Oman returned to the cave, and, lifting the still form of the old man, bore it out into the air of heaven and laid it on the pyre, its face turned toward the west, where the moon was now quietly sinking. Then, with a blazing stick brought from the cave, he lighted the funeral pyre and stood watching the flame-wreath that rose in a halo round the hoary head.

To an Indian, this purification by fire is no infamy, nor is there anything horrible in it. It is his sacred ceremony for the beloved dead. While Oman made his preparations for it, he had suffered no repulsion. And yet now, as he watched the dead form—so pinched, so pallid, so unreal, lying complacently on the great fire-bed, with the flames curling around the flesh: now, as the long beard and white hair were singed away,

and the blackened visage grinned in horrid baldness, a thrill shot through Oman's breast, and, stifling a cry, he turned and ran from the spot, up, up, through the wood, and into the open, on the height. There he threw himself down, beside a giant boulder, and, burying his head in his arms, gave himself up to a new repulsion and a new heart-sickness.

The moon had set; and the world was very still. The crackling of the fire and the hiss that went with it were the only audible sounds. Animal noises had ceased. A far, faint breeze stirred the tree-tops; but there was no suggestion of the fierce rains of the previous day. The whole sky was softly luminous with waning moonlight and the redoubled splendor of stars. Far below, the valleys and the base of the hills were lightly swathed in mist. Peace brooded over the great Vindhya; and gradually Oman's horror was swept away. The sweet night air cooled his frame and dried the tears that had wet his face. Weariness overcame his excitement at the events of the day and night; and he fell into a kind of stupor. He was not asleep, for he was still conscious of the workings of nature:—the setting of the moon, the dark hour, the dying glow of the fire, whose work was done, and the heavy wheeling through the sky of two or three night birds. His brain, however, was numb. He neither thought, nor felt the desire to think. His head rested against the rock, and his eyes closed. An hour passed; and, by degrees, the darkness gave way to a faint, shadowy light. The night was over. Day was at hand.

In this first grayness, Oman lifted his head and opened his eyes. Then he rose and looked down to the wood, where the fire had been. For a moment he hesitated, but finally turned away. He could not go there yet. For a few moments he paced up and down the broad, treeless space on the height, and then returned to his rock, and set his face to the wondrous east.

The far horizon was streaked with palest rose and yellow, melting into a shadowy sky. Above this bed of color, the starry rushlights one by one melted away. Only the morning star, the jewel in Ushas' frontlet, remained, flashing in the now deepening crimson, till Ushas herself, having opened the sun-gates, passed from the sky and returned into the land of the gods. The colors were intensified as new light crept up the heavens; and above the gold was a band of pale, clear green that merged softly into the upper blue. Now, down the slope, and over all the wooded hillsides, rose a musical murmur, the song of waking things: birds, and insects. And fearlessly they performed the morning hymn, undisturbed by any thought of man. By now the creatures of the jungle had returned to their lairs, the night's prowling ended; and the world was waking from dread to the joy of new day.

There was a long, still pause. The clear light grew clearer, the crimson deepened with inner fire, two or three little cloud-boats near the horizon were gay with rosy glow; but the shimmering valley mists had passed quietly away. The world was ready and waiting. Yet still Surya, rejoicing in the magnificence of his

pageantry, delayed his coming, till the man upon the mountain top, impatient of the time, bethought him of his treasure, pulled the golden box from beneath his robe, opened it, and let the contents fall into his hand. The ruby seemed a talisman; for, as Oman held the clear stone against the sky, the first fire-beam shot above the horizon, and the great, flaming wheel rolled up from behind a far-off hill. The world broke into the climax of its morning song; and, in his heart, Oman also sang: strange words, fitted to a wondrous melody. Then, by degrees, he was silent again, his eyes, lowered from the too dazzling light, fixed upon the fiery heart of Churi's legacy—the Asra ruby.

As Oman gazed into the scintillating depths of this rare and wonderful stone, he was thrown into a kind of waking slumber, a trance, in which scenes of a dim-lit past crowded upon him. Churi's tale returned:—the young prince in captivity, who had bought his love with this stone:—Fidá el-Asra. Oman saw him, clearly, standing in a small and richly furnished room, beside a woman clad in clinging, scarlet draperies, a wreath of poppies woven in her heavy hair. This woman's face grew more distinct, and shone almost transparent, till, as she gazed into the face of the man, a faint smile lighted her lips. But there was a mournful sadness in her lustrous eyes; and, seeing these eyes, Oman's heart throbbed with understanding.

This man and this woman, burning in the depths of the ruby, were no vision. Nay, he knew them both: *he*, Oman, the outcast, the hermit. But how

explain the reality of the dream? Had he sheltered the twain in his own breast? How else came he to know their suffering : to suffer with them? How else was it that he saw the dark shadow of crime lying on both their hearts? How else that a gurgle and rush of water sounded in his ears, and that he shuddered as he felt the chilly contact? How else could he realize the terror of helplessness that had been upon these two souls, as they rose together from the embracing waters, to that space where water could not hide their deed? How, finally, was it that, straightway after this, he was himself again, standing upon the height where his battle had been fought and won, and where the vision had appeared? The jewel was still glowing in his fingers; the sun was only just upon the edge of the horizon; — but he had lived a year in three minutes. Did this mendicant's gem hold within it some baleful magic? With a sudden sense of revulsion he dropped the ruby back into its box, thrust it out of sight under his robe, and, shaking away the still clinging dream, walked slowly back into his cave.

Fortunately his fire had not quite gone out; and, with a little effort, he revived it. Then he cooked himself some food, ate, threw himself upon the bed where Churi had died, and fell into a deep sleep.

When he awoke, it was afternoon. Clouds were rolling up the west, and there was promise of more rain. Oman went slowly out of his cave, with a new sense of desolation on him. The air was cold. The surrounding hills lay wrapped in still, gray shadows.

All the morning joy had left the world. Reluctantly, with dread in his heart, Oman made his way down the eastern slope to the place of the funeral pyre. There lay a heap of wood ashes, mingled with white bones, a few scraps of cloth, and some pieces of charred and blackened flesh. That was all. The fire had done its work well. A week of rains and wind, and no trace would remain of him who had ascended the Silver Peak to die. The sight was less dreadful than Oman had feared; and he returned to his cave with a lighter heart.

During the remainder of the daylight, Oman occupied himself in a desultory way by reviewing his depleted resources. His fire-wood was nearly gone; and, the woods around being soaked with rains, it would be a month or more before a new stock could be gathered and sufficiently dried to burn. His food supply was also very low. This fall he had neglected to care for his grain field; and the crop, which, by this time, should have been harvested, still lay in the soil, draggled with mud and mildewed with wet. He had yet a little millet from the last season, and some rice and dried dates brought by visitors, before the rains. But, fast as he might, these could not suffice for the winter. Tired and heavy-hearted, he sat in the doorway of his cave and watched night and the storm come on together. Then, while the rain beat into his shelter, and a fierce wind raged without, he rekindled his fire in the farthest corner of the cave, and lay down upon his grass bed, thinking to sleep.

But rest was not yet for him. By degrees he was

seized with a great restlessness of mind and body. He tossed and turned, nor was able to shut his eyes, which stared wide into the light-streaked gloom. His brain burned, and was filled with chaotic visions. The spirit of Churi moved close beside him; and he chilled with dread. Where was the calm of his former high estate? Alas! It had of late become a mockery. On his breast the ruby burned; and at length he took it out and gazed at it by the light of the fire. Again it brought upon him strange thoughts, bathed him in a stream of remembrances so vivid that he felt himself of another life. Under this influence, after a long time, he fell asleep, only to find his dreams taking the same direction as his waking visions. He found himself standing on a great eminence, a vast plateau, rising sheer out of a fertile plain. Behind him were rice-fields, trees, running water, and vast buildings. He was standing with his back to one of these buildings, which was half hidden in clustering tamarinds and bamboo; and the structure was called, in his dream, the water-palace. In the dying light of day he stood there, looking down over the far plain, to a broad river that rushed through the fields. His old calm was upon him, for he was at home. This, he perceived, was the land of his desire, the place where he should find welcome and rest. And so the vision faded and his sleep became dreamless.

When he awoke, the morning was well along. He found that he still clasped the ruby in his right hand; and, returning it to its box, he prepared to go about the duties of his day. He was determined now to force

himself to a long period of reflection, as a remedy for the restlessness brought about by recent happenings. But, to his great disturbance, he found his determination easier made than carried out. True, he meditated. Long habit had not so basely deserted him. But his meditations were no longer satisfying, and, when they were over, the dreaded mood, a restless loneliness, an unquenchable yearning, crept upon him again, till he soothed himself anew with thoughts of the ruby, the power of which never failed.

All this could end only in one way. For three weeks longer he dwelt on his height; and then, suddenly abandoning a useless battle, made ready to leave the mountain top. At dawn of a December day he stood for the last time on the summit where he had dwelt for so many years; and then, at last, not without a pang of regret, he turned his steps downward, toward the haunts of men.

CHAPTER XII

MANDU IN MALWA

LATE in the evening of the same day that he had left the height, Oman appeared at the door of Poussa's hut; and found that the years had changed it little. Poussa, now a woman of some authority in the village, though she was not yet thirty, received him with joyful acclaim, and with a reverence that she gave neither to the head-man nor to the priest of her community. She feasted him on rice and curry, millet bread, dried fruits, and sweetmeats, and gave him to drink out of a jar of mellow (not too precious) wine. They ate alone, he and she; and he slept the whole night in her hut before she deigned to acquaint the village that the great hermit was among them.

Oman, who had expected to spend the next day at the loom, to pay his debt of food to Poussa, found himself, instead, a centre of attraction to the whole village, and was obliged to submit, for a matter of twelve hours, to the entertainment of the chief citizens of the hamlet, and as many visitors as had time to reach him that day. At dusk he was borne to the room of the gods in an old palanquin, carried on the shoulders of eager Vaisyas. And there a sacrifice was conducted, and Soma was

drunk, and fires were lighted in the council square. They also demanded of him an address; and Oman talked, preaching a little of his own creed, couched in the simplest language. His audience, accustomed, like all Hindoos, to thoughts of the broadest abstraction, gave close attention, and, getting his meaning, approved it, because of the novelty of his ideas. Later he was borne back, triumphant, to Poussa's hut.

That night Oman could not sleep for very joy. Here at last was — success. At last men had given him free right of brotherhood, and more. He had known the respect, the reverence, of his own kind. By a miracle, the outcast was become the acclaimed among men. The cost of it, those bitter years of loneliness and despair, was not counted now. Oman knew only that he was welcome, was honored among the people; and his heart went out to them in praise and thanksgiving.

Nevertheless, he stayed only a day longer in this mountain hamlet. His departure was not easy. Through Poussa it had become known that he was Brahman-born; and immediately a post as second priest was offered him by Nala himself. Here Oman might have ended his days, universally revered and beloved. But Fate was pulling at his sleeve. The yearning for the dreamland, the land of the Ruby, had not left him; and his heart told him that it actually existed, while Fate whispered in his ear, bidding him go find it. Thus, obedient to the voice, he said farewell to his new friends, detached Poussa's clinging hands from his knees, smoothed the rough hair back from her face,

pressed his lips to her brow, and then set off, alone, into the jungle.

Now began his period of wandering:—the long progress through the Vindhya, which occupied many months. It was not a time of suffering. Long inured to the greatest hardships of the body, neither fatigue nor hunger dismayed him, nor did the mountain woods and ravines hold for him any terror. The animals of the wild would not molest him. Indeed, he encountered singularly few. The winter weather was pleasant; the sun's rays mild. With a stout wooden staff in his hand, he journeyed leisurely, halting at any villages he came to, finding welcome and acclaim wherever he arrived; for his appearance proclaimed his estate. It became his regular custom to preach in the market-place; and he never lacked an audience. Perhaps from the memory of Hushka, perhaps out of the depths of his own solitude, he had drawn a kind of picturesque eloquence that rushed upon him as he began his talks, and drew his listeners to him like a magnet. An Indian will listen to any fantastic creed, interest himself in any philosophy, nor deem it heresy to his million gods. It is, with him, either the instinctive knowledge that Truth in any form is good; or else, and more probably, a kind of inconsequential, dreamer's grasping of all happily expressed maxims that bear the stamp of understanding. At this time, Oman made no attempt to get to the root of his success. It was enough for him that it existed. Joy walked with him on the road; and the stimulus of his popularity seemed to know no reaction.

Fortunately, he never felt any desire to take up a permanent abode in these mountain towns. Some of them were of fair size, boasted of a petty ruler, and had some military force. Many had open offices for such as he, where he might have taken a place of rank. Almost all were set in surroundings of great natural beauty, calculated to appeal strongly to Oman's inbred love of nature. But he never entertained the least idea of settling in one of them. His early purpose, vague as it was, lay enshrined in his heart. He was a pilgrim to the land of vision and memory: a high and holy place, peopled with ghosts of beloved dead, a shrine that all twice-born love to carry in their hearts. For months he hid his desire. He longed constantly to make inquiry of the men among whom he passed, but he always hesitated, fearing to be taken for a fool should he speak of a country the name of which he could not tell, and no part of which he could definitely describe.

The winter months drew along pleasantly; but, with the coming of spring and the thought of the hot weather, his restlessness and the vision in his heart grew, till one day he was driven to speech. He was walking through a narrow valley, a long strip of which had been recently ploughed for the first time; and a man was at work there, sowing millet. On the edge of the field Oman paused; till the farmer, bag at belt, right arm working mechanically in and out, came slowly toward him, and then halted.

"Fair spring and a rich crop to thee!" said Oman.

"Alas! It is too late in the year for a heavy crop!

But a peaceful journey to thee, reverend sir," returned the man, civilly.

Then Oman, resolutely putting away his fears, began, in haste: "Friend, I am seeking a far country:—a kingdom that lies on the edge of the hills, high in the sunlight, while below it are a broad plain and a great river. Canst thou tell me the name of such a place?"

The man looked at him, first surprised, and then puzzled, but not asking a closer description. "A high kingdom," he muttered, knitting his brow. Oman's chance words had caught his imagination. "Ah! Perhaps—there is a plateau, lying five days' journey to the west and south, that is called Mandu—"

"Mandu! Mandu! It is the name! Churi said it! Tell me, stranger, tell me again! The place lies west and south? A plateau! Thou hast been there?"

The farmer shook his head. "Nay, I am newly come from the north. But traders and mendicants have spoken of it. It is well known:—a Rajah's land. South of it, below, is the Narmáda, the holy stream. Doubtless thou wouldst bathe there. But Mandu, I have been told, is to be reached from the mountains by a causeway. Yes, I have heard much of that place."

Oman's face was alight, and he longed for money wherewith to repay the man for his information. The farmer, however, expected no such unusual thing as money out of a mendicant, and hoped for no more than a blessing from this one, which he got. Then Oman passed on, his face turned to the southwest.

For five days, and more than five, he journeyed

toward the sunset. He was all aflame with eagerness and delight; but he would ask his way no more. He had a strange notion that it would be a shame to him were he unable, now, to find the country of his heart's desire; and he kept his eagerness within himself, never allowing himself to say to any one the words that burned on his lips: "I go south, to Mandu! To the plateau of Mandu!" though the pride in him was almost too great to be restrained.

It had served him better, indeed, if he had put away his hesitancy. For he was now in the region where all men knew Mandu, and he might have saved himself a weary walk. At the end of six days' journeying, about the full-moon day of the Sravana month (March), he came to the southern boundary of the Vindhya, and, through an opening on the slope, looked out over the Dekkhan. It was the first time in eleven years that he had seen the plain; and there was joy in the sight,—but anxiety also. For where was Mandu, high Mandu, "that stands on the edge of the plain"? Had he come too far to the west, or was he yet too near the rising sun? Fortunately, a little below him, on the hillside above the flat land, he perceived a town, whither he directed his steps, and there, because it was become a necessity, asked his way. He was answered, readily, that Mandu was still a day's journey to the east; and he was furthermore given directions so minute, that, pausing only to eat a piece of bread and drink some goat's milk offered by a hospitable peasant, he started again that same night, under the light of the radiant

moon. Again he took his way up into the hills, following the course laid out for him, until, about dawn, he found a well-kept roadway such as he had not before seen in the Vindhya. And now, his uncertainty banished at last, he lay down beside the road, in the shadow of a pipal tree, to sleep.

When he awoke, it was noon. For a little while he lay still, puzzled and thinking, for he had slept heavily. Suddenly it rushed upon him, the great sense of finality. And, with a prayer in his heart, he rose up, and took the road, starting southward at a rapid pace. The way wound round and down, through a rocky gorge which he had a vague sense of having passed through before. Then it began to re-ascend, and Oman's excitement grew. He felt that he was nearing the climax of his life. It was just this that he had unconsciously waited for through the years. And now it had come! At the top of the eminence the veiling trees suddenly parted, and, in the flooding light of afternoon, he found himself looking along the stone-built causeway that Rai-Khizar-Pál, returning from triumphant war in the north, had crossed, with his captives, thirty-one years before.

Faint, quick-breathing, Oman halted, leaning on his staff, to gaze upon the scene. It appeared to him most natural, most right, that, at this moment, with its familiar little whirring sound, a slender-winged gray bird should come hovering up from the wood and seek shelter in his breast. With the advent of this companion creature, his vision was doubled. Twice

before had he known this road. There had been a bride of Dhár, and a captive from Delhi. The feelings of both were mingled in him : — bitter pain, veiled joy, curiosity, hope, weariness. He saw the bright pageants pass slowly before him ; and then, leisurely, he moved downward to the bridge.

All was exactly as it had been, thirty years before. From the watch-towers the soldiers looked out and up into the hills, taking no notice of the solitary, toil-worn mendicant who passed toward the plateau. If they perceived the bird in his bosom, they only thought him some dealer in magic who had trained the creature to be his oracle. Nor, indeed, did Oman notice them. They were part of the whole scene, but not to be singled out. His eyes rested on the fields that stretched along beside two roads that wound, one to the right, the other to the left, along the plateau. Which of the roads to choose, he scarcely knew. Memory did not serve. The fields, already planted, were empty ; and he bethought himself that it was the time of the Sravana ceremony, when all the people would be in the town, sacrificing and celebrating in temple and bazaar. At a venture, he turned to the left, and walked for some time past fertile rice-fields, and through a patch of woodland ; and all the while, as he went, his heart was full to bursting, and his eyes were bright with tears. For he had come home — home. This land was home. He knew the feel of it. The very air was familiar to his cheek. The little sounds of animal and bird life were as the sounds of childhood heard again after many

years. A great restfulness pervaded him. The tears that were in his eyes fell, slowly. Then his heart swelled with a mighty prayer of joy and thanksgiving. His way had been very long, very dark and dreary; but it was traversed now. His struggle and his loneliness were over. Behind him lay the wilderness, and all about him was the promised land.

CHAPTER XIII

A BROTHER OF THE SOUL

THIRTY years had passed over Mandu since that strange time of death, when, in a single day and night, a Rajah, his minister, his Ranee, and his favorite slave had perished, each in his own way. During those thirty years Bhavani, the only son of Rai-Khizar-Pál, had been nominal ruler of Mandu. A boy of eleven at the time of his father's death, he had of his own will placed himself and Mandu under the guardianship of Manava, a minister grown old in service, who acted as regent till, on his twentieth birthday, the young man took the cares of government upon his own shoulders. So well did Manava acquit himself during the nine years of his regency, that, at the end of that time, had he chosen to take the throne from Bhavani and install himself thereon, Mandu would willingly have hailed him Rajah. But if Manava had been capable of such an act, he would not have been the ruler he proved himself to be; and he had his reward for faithful labor in seeing, before he died, his young charge come to be called "beloved" by his people.

Bhavani, indeed, spite of many evil influences that

surrounded his youth, had grown into a beautiful manhood. From some unknown source he had gained that kind of spirituality that is not inherited, and yet is scarcely to be acquired. His father before him had been high judge of his people. Bhavani was their friend. If Rai-Khizar-Pál had been absolutely just, Bhavani was more than that: he was charitable. The old Rajah had been most of all a warrior, loving the sound of battle, first for himself, and afterward for the glory it would bring his people. Bhavani hated war, because it carried with it death; and for death he cherished a horror of which he never spoke. It had been born in the moment when, stealthily following Kasya and Churi in their dread morning's search, he had looked on the body of Ragunáth, stiff and bloody, under the champaks near the water-palace, where he had himself left the Lady Ahalya the evening before. No one had ever got Bhavani to tell what he knew of the happenings of that night. In the beginning, he did not himself understand the part he had played in the tragedy; but the horror of it was rooted deep in his secret soul. And, little by little, as he came to manhood, he began to realize something of the drama that had been played before his childlike innocence; though, with strange perversity, his interpretation did injustice to the slave. And the memory of the two he had loved, Ahalya and Fidá, became embittered; for he endured for them all the shame that they had never known themselves.

The influence of this dreadful incident of his child-

hood had had an incalculable effect on his character. To it Mandu owed the fastidiousness of this beloved ruler. There was but one misdeed in the calendar of crime toward which Bhavani was immovably severe. By him adulterers were punished to the fullest extent of the law. Nor had he ever been known to consider an extenuating circumstance. He was himself a man of the most rigid chastity; and, though he conformed so much to custom as to marry while still very young, he had but one wife, attended by women only. And, there being no zenana in his palace, he employed no eunuchs elsewhere.

These things considered, one strange act of his extreme youth must also be recorded. When, after three or four days of expectancy and dread, the bodies of those two who had drowned themselves together were washed ashore, by Narmáda waters, many miles to the west, Manava, following the old Hindoo superstition, prepared to burn the body of the Ranee there on the shore, and to erect over her a fitting tomb, where, on the anniversary of her death, a sacrifice might take place for the salvation of her soul. Young Bhavani, then under the close supervision of instructors, heard, in some way, of this plan of the regent, went to him in the council hall, and commanded, by the blood of his father that flowed in his veins, that the body of Fidá should be burned with that of Ahalya, and their ashes buried together. Manava heard him in shocked silence; and then explained that a Ranee might not be so dishonored. Useless objection. Bhavani insisted.

And, after a time, he won his way. Thus, now, for thirty years, the two had slept in a little stone temple, by the bank of the river which still chanted in their dead ears its plashing song.

Since the death of Rai-Khizar there had been no war in Mandu. After the battle on the plain of Dhár, in which, in spite of the fall of one of the Indian leaders, the Mohammedans had sustained a heavy defeat, the invaders had not again penetrated so far into Malwa. They were still within their northern strongholds; and the Dekkhan, hearing naught of the crossing of the Gunga, nor of Agra, nor Benares, the merciless conquest of the holy of holies, went its way placidly, catching not so much as an echo of the far-ringing war-cry of the men of Yemen with their Prophet's sword. The relations between Dhár and Mandu, always of the friendliest, had been further cemented by the marriage of Bhavani with a daughter of the neighboring province. But, happily for Bhavani's views, the brother state had no enemy against whom Mandu was supposed to take part.

The years passed in peace and well-doing until the Rajah attained his five and thirtieth year. Then came an event which, for a long time, seemed to have turned the severely upright ruler quite out of his course, and to have made him a man of men, erring and weak. From some distant land, none knew where, there came to Mandu one of those purely Indian characters, known long before the time of the great Buddha: a religious courtesan, a woman of supreme beauty and magnetic power,

by name Zenaide. How, by what means, she got her first audience of Bhavani, no one knew. But within a month after that, she was installed in the long empty water-palace, where she dwelt as a queen among men, or, as men whispered, the Queen of a King. That whisper was an ugly one, but it found ear for a long time. Bhavani, immovable by wiles, impervious to temptation, adamant against force, seemed voluntarily to have fallen to this woman; and it was not till after his death that his people perceived how their Rajah, unconquered by her, had been her conqueror, ruling her beauty and her will by the inviolable purity of his mind. But, at the time when Oman came to Mandu, in the Rajah's forty-second year, no one understood what were the relations between the mistress of the beautiful little palace, and the King of the great building near by. They were much together. Zenaide, indeed, was with no one else. How, then, should men not wonder, and watch, and whisper together?

It was March, and the half-dead world had been undergoing its annual rejuvenescence. In the late afternoon, when the shadows are long, and bird-calls are beginning again, Bhavani, the day's state at an end, went walking slowly down the open garden that bordered the road between the two palaces, and finally halted at the stone parapet built along the edge of the plateau. Two slaves followed the King, but halted at a respectful distance as he paused, gazing down over the green plain and its shining river. After a few seconds he noticed that another than he stood near by, also leaning upon the parapet:—

a man, tall and gaunt, clad in a much-worn garment, his head and feet bare. Something about the figure drew Bhavani's attention, and, looking farther, he suddenly caught the man's eyes — great, limpid eyes, laden with the sorrow of the world. A significant look passed between the two. Oman had also swept the figure before him, upward, from the embroidered shoes, over the rich dress, to the face, finely chiselled, but cast in a mould of melancholy. There he who had won purity through the flames of hell, gazed upon him to whom birth had given all good, and who had taken upon his slender shoulders some of the burden of the world. In the first instant of the meeting eyes, each found kinship in the other.

Bhavani moved a little toward the stranger, and asked, in a suppressed voice :

“Thou art newly come to Mandu?”

“I crossed the causeway two days since.”

“Whence art thou come?”

“Out of the hills.”

“And whither — art thou going?”

“I do not know, Lord Rajah.”

“Thou knowest me!”

“Thou — art Bhavani,” muttered Oman, softly, to himself.

The Rajah recoiled a step or two, gazing at Oman earnestly. Then he asked, in a new voice: “*Who art thou?*”

Oman had now recovered himself enough to reply to Bhavani's question literally. “I am called Oman

Ramasarman. I was born a Brahman. — I have been a Bhikkhu, and a hermit, dwelling in the hills, whence I descended to Mandu.”

For a moment, Bhavani's expression was puzzled. Then he shook himself, slightly, woke from his dream, and observed: “Thou lookest younger than I. What is thine age?”

Oman shook his head. “My lord, I do not know. When I went up to dwell on the Silver Peak, my age was nineteen years. But how long I lived there — fifteen, twenty years, perhaps, — I cannot say. It is a lifetime, and yet again it seems to me as if I had not lived there at all: as if I had only known a great vision, that has faded away.”

“Thou wast young, very young, to go up into the hills alone. And, from thy face, it was indeed many years before thou camest down. Then tell me, Oman: was that solitude very terrible to endure?”

Oman's eyes grew vague. It was as if he looked into the infinite as he replied: “Yes, it was terrible. I am told that not many can live as did I, in utter solitude, and, at the end of five years, still retain reason and speech. The Chelahs that go up into the fastnesses, for prayer and the study of sacred manuscripts, go two together, and, by companionship, preserve their minds. But I had no companion. I was outcast of men.”

“Outcast! Thou? A Brahman?”

“Outcast! Of what do ye speak?” came a woman's voice, from behind them.

Both men turned, instantly; and Oman drew in his

breath. Before him stood the most beautiful woman that he had ever dreamed of. She was tall and voluptuously built; and her coloring was radiant. According to the privilege of her class, she wore no veil over her face; and as a covering for her heavy, red-gold hair, she had only an openwork cap of turquoise-studded gold, bordered with a broad band of the polished stones. Her dress was of blue, heavily embroidered; and a wide sash, of palest willow-green, spread smoothly over her hips, and was clasped low in front with a turquoise crescent.

The two gazed at her in involuntary, silent admiration; and she bore the look easily, as one accustomed to it. Presently, however, Bhavani returned to himself, and addressed her:

“Thou art well come, Zenaide. Behold, here is Oman Ramasarman, a sage, who has come out of the hill fastnesses, to dwell in Mandu.”

Then, turning to Oman, he added: “This is the Lady Zenaide, most beautiful, most wise: my friend.”

Oman looked at her again, and made his salutation. It was not necessary that he should be told her estate: — that she belonged to the only educated class of women in India. And, in spite of himself, the sight of her gave him a strong feeling of mingled pleasure and of pain, that had in it a further reminiscence of this land. There had been a time when looks like hers had been for him. — But how? — and where?

If the two men were preoccupied, Bhavani with Oman, Oman with his own thoughts, not so Zenaide. She was in the lightest of her moods, and she talked

rapidly, her musical voice sounding like running water in Oman's ears, as she addressed now one, now the other, now neither or both of them. To the wanderer, she had added the crowning touch to the scene: — the long, shadowy valley, far below, over which the crimson dusk was stealing; and, behind them, the delicate structure of the water-palace, its clear outlines softened by high-climbing vines and great clumps of feathery tamarind and bamboo. It was the land of enchanted dreams, and with him were its King and Queen: — this royal man with the quiet eyes, and the superb woman, crowned with her glory of hair — the henna-dyed locks that Oman had never seen before. But the hour passed like a breath. He remembered little of her careless talk; but he listened with intense interest when she fell into a discussion with Bhavani. She had been speaking lightly of the beauty of the evening, when, suddenly, without any reason, she made an abrupt transition to a matter in which the Rajah was deeply interested.

“My lord, I have been thinking all day of the matter of Lona, the woman, and her child; and it is my wish that thou send the child to me. He shall become one of my household. Because he was taught theft from his infancy, shall he be punished for it? Let the woman meet what fate my lord wills. But send the boy to me. Is not this a solution of thy trouble?” and she smiled upon the King.

“It is well thought, Zenaide. I will send him to thee. And yet the woman troubles me more.”

“And wherefore? Did she not sin knowingly? Disobeyed she not the law?” answered Zenaide, with a little shrug of indifference that was almost scorn.

Bhavani's expression grew sad. “She sinned, but she knew also that her suffering could only be saved by sin. She stole first of all for her child. To her it meant that they should know hunger and nakedness no more. She had been brought into the world, and, in her turn, bore a boy. But the world refused her sustenance. Had she no right to take it, then? Listen, sage, to what I say; and tell me which is right: the woman, or the law? If a creature starve, and so steals bread from one that does not starve, shall she receive the ten lashes that the law provides?”

Oman bent his head a little. “Could she not work?” he asked.

“She is a widow. There is but one vocation open to her; and that I have forbidden in Mandu.”

“Then is it not the duty of the Lord Rajah to provide for those whom he has deprived of a means of livelihood?”

Bhavani flushed, deeply; and Zenaide burst into a ringing laugh. “My lord, thou art reproved!” she said, looking at Oman for the first time with interest.

“Yea, I am reproved, and deservedly. Hermit, thou art wise and just also. Alas! all my life of training hath never led me to this simple perception of the truth. But it shall be as thou hast said. Henceforth, every one that hath been deprived of his means of livelihood through me, shall by me be provided for.

This mother and child shall be pardoned, and shall live together."

"But have I not said that the boy should enter my service?" demanded Zenaide, suddenly displeased.

Oman opened his lips to speak, but Bhavani was before him: "This man, Zenaide, hath shown more wisdom than either thou or I. Let us acknowledge the truth of his words without any anger or false pride. Thus it seems good to me." He turned a gentle look on Oman as he spoke; but the woman, her face obstinately set, turned away and walked to the parapet at some little distance, and stood leaning upon it, staring moodily off upon the darkening world. A faint, half-anxious smile curled Bhavani's lips; but Oman, who was far from smiling, felt moved to say:

"Lord Rajah, you do me too much honor. My word should not be accepted at once against that of the beautiful woman. Least of mortals am I."

"Most humble, but most wise!" exclaimed Bhavani. Then, after an instant, he added: "Fruitful hath been my walk to-night. Thou shalt be my guest at the palace, Oman, and later I will come to thee and we will talk. For I would know much more of this life of thine." Then, with a little gesture that put Oman from him, he went to Zenaide and stood beside her for a moment, speaking to her; though what he said and whether she spoke at all, Oman could not tell. Finally Bhavani drew Oman to him again, and the two moved slowly away, through the star-spangled dusk, to the palace.

The next half hour was to Oman a dream. How

much of what he felt was memory and how much revelation, he had no means of knowing; but there seemed to be no unfamiliar corner in this great building. They entered the central courtyard, where, as of old, a fire burned by night. Before them was the open entrance to the carved and pillared audience hall. To the left, rose the north wing, with its long corridor and tiny entrance to the triangular zenana courtyard; and, on the right, the south wing, with its temple room, official suites, and barracks. Behind it, Oman knew, without any doubt, lay the slave-house. Bhavani, guessing nothing of what his companion was undergoing, presently left him, with a slave to whom he had given directions concerning Oman's lodging and entertainment.

It was with a feeling of tremulous awe at his profound sensations that Oman followed his guide into the north wing, down the broad hall, and up the old, familiar passage, till they halted before what had once been the apartments of Ragunáth. The doorway was still heavily curtained. But within, all was changed. The room that had been an antechamber, was now cut off from the others of the suite, and was evidently where Oman was to lodge. The little place was richly furnished. Around two sides ran a low, broad divan, many-cushioned. Walls and floor alike were covered with heavy rugs. Round stands, piles of pillows, a tall incense burner, a huqua, and a little shrine containing an image of Vishnu, completed the furniture; and the whole place, which was windowless, was lighted night and day by three swinging lamps.

on the cushions. His knees were drawn up under him. His eyes burned brilliantly under their half-closed lids. And his mind, once more under control, wandered far, through unfathomable space. Time passed. The hour grew late, and the busy life of the palace was stilled. Oman heeded nothing, nor remembered what surrounded him. He had forgotten Mandu, the day, the woman of gold, the beauty of Bhavani — everything; and had slipped back into the old freedom of his days on the Silver Peak. Humankind was infinitely far from his thoughts. But humankind had not forgotten him. Suddenly the curtain of his doorway was thrust aside, and Bhavani came quietly into the room.

The Rajah was not now in royal raiment, but clad from head to heels in spotless white, the purity of which seemed a fitting frame for his fine physique and the spiritual dignity of his face. At sight of the figure on the divan before him, he paused for a few seconds, and then spoke, gently:

“Oman Ramasarman, I am come hither — thine host.”

For a moment, Oman seemed not to have heard. Then, with an effort, he rose, and stood submissively before the Rajah, evidently waiting for him to speak again. This Bhavani did.

“O stranger, I have come to talk with you on the subject of wisdom; for this is the only time at my disposal for the pursuit of those things that I have most at heart. And it is for this reason that I break in on thy revery. Sit there, then; and I will place myself

thus, that we may look into each other's eyes. Ah—now we may talk together freely.”

Obedient to the request, which was really a command, Oman seated himself, his knees crossed under him; and Bhavani took his place on a pile of cushions three or four feet away. There, for a time, they sat, looking at each other silently. Bhavani had come into the room, his brain teeming with thoughts and questions; but he was quick to feel the chill of Oman's mood. The wanderer, indeed, was thoroughly disturbed at Bhavani's interruption of his meditation; and he showed his displeasure by a silence that the Rajah found it impossible to penetrate. After a little while, however, realizing his ungraciousness, Oman forced himself out of his stolidity, and said, in a muffled voice:

“My lord hath sought me. What doth he require?”

For a moment Bhavani looked at the immovable face, and then replied, in a tone the gentleness of which Oman had never heard equalled: “I have proffered hospitality to the stranger, and now violate the privilege of solitude. Let him forgive me!”

“Do not say it! It is the right of the host at any time to seek the presence of his guest! What wilt thou of me, O King? Speak, and what I have is thine.”

A faint smile shone for a moment in Bhavani's eyes, but was instantly succeeded by an expression of deep thoughtfulness: “There is much, stranger, that thou canst give me, who am a beggar of minds. Thou saidst that thou wast come out of the hills. What wealth hast brought with thee from them?”

“What wealth — of thought?”

“Yea, of thought.”

“Ah, much, great Rajah. Much. There, in the vast wilderness, is peace. I ascended the height toil-worn, weary of the world, outcast of men. And in the great Silence was a balm for every wound. Peace I obtained, and strength, and calm. And after a while came Truth also. Creeds and philosophies of men I had studied in my youth, in temple and Vihara. But it was there, on the height, that my soul found itself, and gave me a belief that had not come before.”

“Tell me of this belief.”

“It is a system, long and complex.”

“There is time. The night is young. Tell me, I beg of thee, — Oman.”

Oman looked at Bhavani thoughtfully, and wondered. For many months he had preached his creed to men, in the market-place, and it had seemed good to him, and high, and true. Yet now he was confronted by a ruler of men: — a King, one who exercised over him a peculiar fascination. Perhaps he felt a desire to open himself entirely to this melodious-voiced Rajah; and yet, on the other hand, a new sense urged him to prudence, to silence, to secrecy in that which intimately concerned himself. After a little he asked, almost humbly: “Tell me then, noble One, why thou seekest of me my — faith?”

“For many years it has been my delight and my desire to learn all that I can of the many forms of Truth that live in the minds of the thoughtful. I have also

a son, nearing manhood, for whom I have founded a school here in my palace, which has been taught by very learned men. This school I overlook myself; and I have been accustomed to search among every class of men for new thought that can be laid before the noble youths of my kingdom. For them, and for myself, I ask thee to expound to me thy creed."

"And likewise for Zenaide, the woman of red gold?" demanded Oman, with a flash in his eye.

But Bhavani did not wince. "For her also, who is my sacred charge."

"Hear, then, O Rajah, the Dharma that came to me in the wilderness:

"In space are, and from the beginning have been, two elements: one, that which we call spirit; the other, matter. And spirit, which lives and feels and does not change, struggles constantly after knowledge. In the beginning, Spirit entered matter and ruled it, and out of chaos brought form, and conceived and organized the laws of Nature. But, having entered matter, Spirit found itself encumbered and bound about by the inert substance that is foreign to it; and it learned also that its great Unity had been broken into various particles, each of which was now enclosed in a form. And thereupon perceiving itself caught by the encumbering mass, it set itself to dominate matter, and so to rule it that in time the fetters should disappear. But this was, and still is, difficult. Matter is subject to change and to decay. Moreover, it is the exact opposite of that which has taken possession of it. And the spirit in the clay

finds itself ever and again freed and ever and again seized anew and enclosed in another form, until, after infinite experience, certain units of spirit found themselves actually dominant over the evil element, and free to pursue their natural vocation of perfect power and stainless happiness. And these, uniting together to give what aid they might to their still unconquering brethren, are the only God: that which we should all pray to for strength.

“We, Bhavani, are spirits still encompassed by matter; and we struggle from life to life, from form to form, still hoping, still aspiring, still achieving, still advancing a little along the road to victory over the evil element, till, in the end, we shall come into a state of perfect dominion over our enemy.

“This is the Dharma that I have found in the wilderness.”

“And it is good. Yes, it is good. Yet thy creed is pitiless, O sage. Tell me: what of those that yield their lives to matter, that give themselves up wholly to the evil influence? Is there no punishment for them?”

“Those that travel backward along their road must, with double pain and suffering, retrace their steps. That is their punishment.”

“But there is no Kutashala Máli — no place of everlasting punishment?”

“How can there be? Spirit is good. Spirit cannot die. And the only power in matter is its inertia. Who is there to decree such a place as that?”

“Listen, Oman, while I tell thee the story of two

that I knew and loved in my childhood, who sinned together past forgiveness. Thou shalt tell me if they yet strive toward happiness; whether they do not still walk, helpless and despairing, along the Sinners' Road. For of such sin as theirs, thou surely canst know naught.

“My father had a wife, the fairest and the youngest in his zenana, brought from Dhár, but of Persian blood, so that her skin was pale, like the lotos petal. She was called Ahalya; and every one that saw her, loved her. She had been a bride for two years when my father brought hither, out of the north, a noble captive of the invading race:—by name, Fidá el-Asra. And my father favored him greatly, and came in time to value him above all his other slaves. And at last he was made my master, my guardian in my father's absence. By some means that I do not know, this slave once saw Ahalya, the lady of my father's heart; and, like all men, he loved her. Then, because he was young and a captive, she loved him also, through pity. And here he dwelt, for many months, deceiving the King who had so trusted him. More than this, Ahalya, like all women, weak, also gave herself up to wickedness. Thus these two loved until they sinned themselves even unto death. For they died together, at last, by drowning in the Narmáda stream, after the slave had murdered one of my father's counsellors, who, I believe, died in defending the honor of his King. Now tell me, Oman, if thou canst, what these two found waiting for them beyond the river of death?”

"They 'found,'" answered Oman, slowly and distinctly, "a life of the deepest woe, a constant suffering, a shame that they can never escape. For those two, unlawfully joined in one life, are, in the next, inseparably united. Their two miserable souls inhabit but one body, in which they have struggled vainly for release. And," here Oman rose and lifted his face, straining upward as if the words he spoke were received from some invisible source, "and thus they shall exist till they have drunk the cup of retribution to the very dregs. But, in the end, they shall escape their bondage. In time they will complete the expiation and know the blessed end:—freedom from travail and from woe. For they will regain their right to move forward alone, on the road to the Great Release."

With the last words, he sank back upon the divan, and a silence followed. Bhavani sat amazed at the absolute conviction with which this man had spoken; and he was again seized with strange wonders and suspicions concerning the stranger's identity. After a long pause the Rajah, groping for his words, asked, hoarsely:

"Wilt thou remain here in my kingdom and in my palace, master, and lay the foundation of thy faith in the heart of my son?"

For answer, Oman solemnly bowed his head. He knew it to be written that he should remain in Mandu.

CHAPTER XIV

THE ANCIENT FLAME

So Oman took up his abode in the palace ; nor were the circumstances of his settling there very surprising to himself. From the first it had seemed as if, in the natural course of things, this should become his home ; and the new duties and new habits of life were acquired mechanically. His intuition of the link that bound him to the past, however, though at times it was strong on him, proved evanescent ; so that there were weeks when he lived wholly in the passing hour, without any memories of bygone days. But he knew that Fate had been kind to him. He was wrapped in impenetrable serenity : the outcome, the reward, of his years of solitude ; and he felt that no mischance could disturb this again.

On the first morning after his arrival, the Rajah himself introduced him to the palace school, held in that room which, in the old Rajah's day, had been a theatre : — the place where the slave Fidá had first looked upon poppy-crowned Ahalya. Whatever its former glories, this room, on the morning that Oman first beheld it, presented a pleasanter picture. Save for a great rug upon the floor, and the teacher's cushion on a dais at

one end of the room, the place was quite unfurnished. On the floor sat an orderly company of young men, between the ages of fifteen and twenty: all of them clad in white, with scarlet sashes around their waists, and red shoes on their otherwise bare feet. These youths were engaged in a variety of occupations: some of them studying manuscripts of various kinds, many simply sitting in meditation, still others indulging, rather surreptitiously, in games. Among them, without any distinction as to dress or position, was Bhavani's son, Viradha, the heir of Mandu: a pleasant-faced youth, but not remarkable for any special wit or wisdom; for he had inherited the disposition of his grandfather, and was fonder of the chase and the table than of reflection on the doctrine of atoms¹ or the working of the primordial soul.

Up to to-day, the palace school had been conducted on a very irregular plan, Bhavani bringing various men of wisdom or holiness to lecture one or two days a week, the rest of the time being occupied with indiscriminate reading from philosophic or poetical manuscripts. On this day, as soon as the youths had assembled, Bhavani and Oman made their appearance together. The Rajah offered a few words of introduction and explanation: setting forth the fact that at last they were to have a permanent master, who would reduce their hours of study to some sort of system and order. During his speech, every eye in the room was fixed upon Oman's tall, gaunt figure, clad in white garments,

¹ The foundation of the Nyaya system, originated by Kanada.

his serene face, with its deep-set eyes, and his broad, lined brow, on each side of which fell masses of thick, black hair. At the end of the introduction Oman came forward a little and the young men advanced to him, and, one by one, kissed his hand. Then they returned, expectantly, to their places; and Bhavani, able to spare no more time from matters of state, hurried away, leaving Oman to his new task.

It was the most difficult morning that Oman had ever spent. He had had no preparation for his situation, no time to arrange a course of work. Hitherto he had preached in small towns, to mere handfuls of uneducated men and women. Now he stood before a critical assembly of young noblemen, all of whom had had considerable instruction in abstract thinking and reasoning: far more, no doubt, than he himself had ever known. That he impressed them all, immediately, as a man of dignity and wisdom, of wide knowledge of men and high purity of mind, was again probably due to his years of miracle-working solitude.

To his own keen satisfaction, Oman felt that he had begun well with his school; and he determined, in his heart, that the end should be better still. For a month or more, then, he was invisible to every one save his pupils. He found that a full and detailed exposition of his creed to thinking and sometimes sceptical men, demanded a new labor of thought, a new working out of little things that had hitherto been mere suggestions in his own mind; the rejection of some ideas that proved themselves impossible; and the admission of others

that he had not hitherto acknowledged. This work, while difficult, gave him the keenest delight; for the breadth and fulness of his logic was coming home to him; and he perceived that this creation of his brain was no puny shadow, but a thing finely formed, capable of proper development. He, the seeker after Truth, had found it; and from the heights was bringing it to men. It was its own greatest reward.

At the end of six weeks, his labors began to be less exacting. He had reduced his own thinking to a system; and he now began to introduce other studies than philosophy into this school, where arithmetic of the simplest kind, and writing in any living language, were considered not as necessities but as arts. Oman found time now to see something of the palace and of its Rajah, who eagerly sought his society. A few days wrought great changes in his quiet existence; and presently an incident, entirely unexpected, brought him a revelation which, for some time to come, eclipsed every other interest in his mind.

During the six weeks of close work, the circumstances attendant on his first meeting with Bhavani had slipped from Oman's mind. He no longer thought of the scene by the parapet behind the water-palace, or of Zenaide, the woman with wonderful hair. But now, in mid-May, she was recalled to him. One noon, as he sat in his room meditating through the hot hours, a slave-boy broke in upon him and delivered to him a message to the effect that the lady Zenaide desired the presence of Oman the sage, that she might hear the creed he taught.

Oman, taken by surprise, had an impulse to refuse the request. A moment's reflection, however, changed his mind. She had asked for his creed. Believing as he did, he had no right to refuse her the knowledge. Besides, was she not under the special protection of Bhavani? Bhavani was his patron, nay, his friend. Whom Bhavani loved, Oman would not deny. So he sent an answer by the little slave that he would come that day; and the child departed, leaving him in chaos.

Oman spent the next two hours in the greatest confusion of mind. Never in his life had he been brought into contact with such a woman as he knew this one to be:—such a woman as the great Indian romances love to concern themselves with. He thought of the incident of the Buddha's entertainment by the woman of Vesali, the beloved of Ajuta-Satra, and of her conversion to the faith. Had the Sakyamuni found danger in her presence? Was her hair of golden red? And then, suddenly, Oman started up, resolutely turning his mind to other things. Hurriedly he bathed and clothed himself in a fresh gown of white linen, girt himself with a broad, yellow sash, and wound a white turban around his head. Then, without pause, he set out for the water-palace.

The afternoon was late, and the shadows lay long and golden across the road. Full summer was already on the land, and Mandu was a riot of verdure. Oman's mood responded easily to the scene. Under the spell of the surrounding beauty, his thoughts grew lighter, till, when he paused before the open doors of the water-

palace, he no longer looked like an ascetic. The sombre fires in his eyes had brightened, and his face was softened with a smile.

In the curtained doorway stood a tall slave, clad in rich livery, who addressed Oman with an air of profound respect, and at once made way for him to pass within. Oman found himself following the slave across a broad, square hall, in the centre of which was a marble tank filled with clear water; and thence they proceeded to the end of a short corridor, where, before another curtained doorway, Oman was left alone.

After a moment's hesitation he lifted the curtain, and crossed the threshold. He was facing a long, narrow room, stone-paved, lighted from the top, the walls hung with embroidered silks of delicate hues. There was an air of unusual lightness and airiness about the whole place; and Oman's eyes wandered for some seconds before he perceived that, at the far end of the room, in front of a long, amber-colored divan, half hidden by a screen, stood Zenaide. Oman uttered a short exclamation, and started forward, observing, as he approached her, that there was no smile on her lips. His eyes estimated her again; and they found much that was new. She was clad to-day in a long garment of silvery green, that showed her more slender than he had thought. She was also paler. Her hair was woven into a crown upon her head, but was without ornament; and in her dark eyes there was no expression of the voluptuary. Oman found himself newly puzzled as he seated himself, at her bidding, on the divan, while she sank upon

a low pile of cushions on the floor. They had not yet spoken when a slave entered, with a tray of sherbets and sweetmeats which Oman refused, and Zenaide, not pressing him, herself waved away. When they were alone again, she rose, impulsively, ran down the room, and lowered a double hanging before the door. Then she turned, slowly, facing Oman, who was watching her. For some moments she neither advanced nor spoke. Oman perceived that she was in a state of repressed agitation, for her fingers twined and intertwined, and her clinging garments betrayed a nervous quivering of her body. It seemed as if it were impossible for her to speak; yet, as Oman did not help her, she had, perforce, to make a beginning. She had examined him minutely, face and figure, before she exclaimed, abruptly:

“Art thou indeed as learned as they tell me, O sage?”

Oman's expression changed. “Not in thy lore,” he answered.

“My lore? And what is that?”

“Art thou not a woman? Thy lore is love.”

“Ah!” The expression escaped involuntarily. It was a betrayal.

“Ah!” echoed Oman. “It was for that you sent for me! Know, then, that I am not a faquir, not a mag—”

“No, no!” Reading the scorn in his tone, she came forward swiftly and sank down in the cushions at his feet. “Think not that of me. I know something of thy creed. Bhavani has expounded it to me. I have con-

sidered it, carefully. But it is very pitiless. Thinkest thou not it is pitiless to the weak? Wouldst thou leave no sweetness in life?" Her eyes lifted themselves to him searchingly, and he felt the spell of her magnetism.

Shaking himself free from the impression, he looked down upon her with a quizzical calmness that disconcerted her. "What wouldst thou of me, Zenaide?" he asked.

Again, overcome by her nervousness, she rose and began to pace up and down before him. "Nothing. — Nothing," she answered; but her words did not indicate a pause. For a moment or two she walked, but finally faced him, frankly. "Is love — true love — so ignoble, then?"

Oman, taken aback, did not immediately answer. Then, many memories overcoming him, he cried out painfully: "Unless it be lawful, yes. Surely yes!"

"Lawful! Love hath no law save itself."

Oman's lip curled. "Doubtless thou knowest more of it than I. Wherein am I to help thee? Hast thou left this love of thine? Return, then, to the land where he dwells."

Zenaide listened, and a far-away look came into her eyes. She was standing now with her back against a stone pillar, and, as she began to speak, Oman felt himself gradually fascinated by the perfection of her beauty and by the abandon of her manner, which, in the beginning, had been held in restraint, but grew more and more impassioned as, carried out of herself by her own emotion, she forgot everything but her theme.

“The land of my love — lies here, Oman. I came out of the east, seeking love, journeying through broad countries. To many I brought happiness, but I found it never for myself. Then came I to Mandu. And here, in a breath, I knew that it awaited me. My soul was lighted as by a torch; and I am still consumed by its increasing flame. I love. And him I love rejects me. I, the priestess of love, am unloved! Am I so ugly? — so old? — so young? — so ignorant? Am I surpassed by another? I, Zenaide, consumed with fire and tears, pour out all my wealth on him, and he knows it not. Daily he looks on my face, hears my voice, reads mine eyes, and still I am not known. Oh, my beloved — adorable — transcendent — Bhavani — ”

She stopped short. Her passion had carried her beyond herself. She had more than betrayed, she had proclaimed, her secret. But now, suddenly brought back to consequences, all her force died, and she stood trembling, fearful, before Oman, whose face was stern and angry. There was silence for a long, pulsating moment, while Zenaide realized that the teacher of men had become her judge. Oman, indeed, felt his anger growing within him, and presently gave it voice:

“Hast thou dared to defile the purest of men with thy love? Hast thou known him, lived near him for more than two years, seen all the strength of his white soul, and still dreamed he could so dishonor himself and thee? Shame to thee! Thou hast, moreover, sullied him in the eyes of his people; for many say what is false, that he yielded long ago to thine eyes

and thy red-dyed hair. He has housed thee like a queen. He has paid thee greater honor than if, indeed, he loved thee. Shame, then, woman, for thy thoughts! Shame to thee!—What—thou weepest!”

For Zenaide, sinking slowly to her knees, bent her head upon her hands, and Oman saw two or three bright tears run through her fingers and fall to the floor. Her frame was shaken and convulsed with ill-restrained sobs. After gazing at her for a moment, Oman, unable to judge of the sincerity of her pose, went on more quietly:

“Thou hast confessed to love the ruler of his people, a man standing in the eyes of men for all that is upright—more than upright. And now thou callest upon me, his servant, a lover of truth, to condone thy sin. How couldst thou think thus of me?”

“No—no! Listen! Not to condone—” she lifted her head, and he perceived that her face was stained and distorted with real grief. “Not to condone. I sent for thee because, despairing—” she gave a little convulsive sob—“despairing of bringing his love to me, I long to cure myself of the malady. Thou art wise. I wish to learn wisdom of thee. Thou art good. So I also would be. Bha—Bhavani has sought to teach me wisdom, to teach me strength. But I—could never learn but love from him. O stern—O wise one—cast me not away! Help me, and I will honor thee all my days!”

Her pleading was eloquent because it was sincere. Her voice was not smooth. The words were forced

out like sobs; and in them Oman read the struggle she had endured before she sent for him. Her abandon showed this, indeed; for, had he not been her final hope, she would never have laid her soul bare before him in her stress. And seeing all these things, his anger was softened, and he was moved to some sort of feeling, less pity than sympathy. Kneeling beside her as she still crouched upon the floor, he soothed her a little, and raised her up, and led her, unresisting, to the divan, where he caused her to sit down. Then, himself taking her former place upon the cushions, he began to talk. His voice was low and smooth, and flowed along monotonously. At first he cared not so much what he said, as that his manner should quiet her. In this he succeeded. And when he saw her, forgetful of her tears, sit up and lean forward, listening to him, he took up a text on which he had never spoken before — on which he had scarcely permitted himself to meditate, yet concerning which all knowledge seemed to be stored away in his heart and brain. It was the ceaseless, rebellious yearning of woman for man, of man for woman: that insistent, unreasoning desire that has caused chaos in the world. Of himself and his own abnormal struggles, he did not speak. But it was from them that he drew his words: — the words that Zenaide knew to be expressive of universal truth. For some time Oman talked broadly on this theme; and then, waiving generalities, he continued:

“And it is thus that you have suffered in your soul, desiring for a companion the noblest of men. But,

because you would match your heart with such as him, so you must become his equal, worthy of him. Let his own nobility illumine you. It is unlawful, in the light of the higher law, that you two should love. Show yourself his peer, then, in quenching this desire, and, dwelling near his brain, seek not to unlock the chamber of his heart. Let it not be said that, through you, his high nature has been weakened and defiled.

“Nay — speak not yet. I see it in your eyes — how cold my words are to you; how hard. It is true that I feel within me no fire burning. I know little of that restless pain. But, hearing many speak of it, I believe in it; and yet, above, see plainly the great Dharma shining. Receive, then, the truth. Be not defeated in your struggle. Go your way knowing that the blessing of Brahma is upon you for your keeping of the law.”

“But, in the end, what reward shall there be for this, my sacrifice? What in the wide world could repay me for the delight of one hour — of one moment, in the strength of his arms?”

“The reward is great: — greater, indeed, than any that receive it not can fathom. It comes in the earthly Nirvâna, the high, conscious strength, the calm, the tranquillity, that permeates the soul as water permeates and renews a parched and dying plant. With this peace comes the death of yearning and desire. The pursuits of man and the objects of his struggles — love, power, wealth, fame — these are little to those that feel their futility. And I assert this not as the Dharma, nor

as what has been told me; but I speak of what I know. For, Zenaide, that same reward is mine. Many years I labored for it, fighting such battles as you could scarcely understand. But in the end it came;—the great Relief; and, knowing that at last I should be safe to dwell among men, I returned to them, and shall remain among them till my death. The reward is always with me. It cannot leave me now.”

“But—” Zenaide sat studying him, his seamed face, his deep-set eyes, his black hair, shaded here and there with a thread of white; and when she spoke, there was a pathetic childishness in her tone: “But thou art old. Thou hast seen life. Desire dies out of the hearts of the aged.”

Oman shook his head. “I am not an old man. I was not twenty years old when I went up into the mountains. I dwelt there for many years; but still I am not more than five and thirty. I am younger than Bhavani,” he added, thoughtfully.

To this the woman made no reply. Oman had expended all his comfort; and now he sat waiting for her to speak again. She remained quiet, however, her chin resting on her clasped hands, her elbows on her knees, her face thrust a little forward. Her brow was contracted, and she seemed to be thinking, deeply. Her cheeks bore the marks of tears. Her hair and dress were disarranged. But she was oblivious of her appearance. Oman sat studying her, and did not realize how long the silence had lasted when, without changing her attitude, she said slowly:

“It is a creed for men, only for men, that you preach, O sage. It is cold. It is hard. It is relentless. What need have I of tranquillity and calm? I am a woman of red blood. Preach you to me resistance of the emotions? Think you that bloodlessness, quietude, loneliness seem beautiful to me?—Ah, yes—it is true! It is true! He is like that, and I wish to be like him. I will be like him, Oman Ramasarman! I will, I will—dost hear? I will!”

“What is it that thou wilt, Zenaide?”

Oman and the woman sprang to their feet, as Bhavani walked quietly into the room.

“My lord!” cried Zenaide, faintly; and Oman went hastily forward, with an irrelevant remark which Bhavani answered, wondering. While this was in progress, Zenaide’s hands were busy with her hair, with her face, with her dress; and presently she approached, mistress of herself again, so quiet, so self-contained, that Oman could only marvel at her power.

Bhavani did not stay long, nor would he permit Oman to depart before him, however much Zenaide wished it. He seated himself beside the woman, and talked with her about one or two personal matters; while Oman, standing apart, covertly watched the two. He tried hard to discover in Zenaide some sign of the feeling she had so lately displayed. But, search as he would, he could find nothing in her bearing that remotely suggested her true state. If she was always thus with Bhavani, there was surely little to fear.

From her the hermit's eyes moved to the Rajah. He was talking as he would have talked to a man whose friendship he valued. Seeing them both thus, Oman took heart. Surely an unlawful emotion could not be very strong in either heart.

It was after sunset when Bhavani rose to go; and he and Oman took leave together, Zenaide begging Oman, in an undertone, to come again to her that she might talk with him further. Oman promised readily; and then, arm in arm, he and the Rajah set out into the starry half-light. As they left the water-palace behind them, there fell on both an unexpected silence: — such a silence as, coming from the mind and will of one, is not to be broken by his companion. It settled over Oman oppressively; for where Bhavani was concerned, he was quick to feel the slightest change in mood. Encompassed by uneasiness, they moved on in the evening light, and Oman perceived that Bhavani's steps lagged. It was as if he loitered to get courage to speak. Oman had a sense that some revelation was pending; but instinct told him that he might not question, might not make the slightest advance toward confidence. They proceeded till they were within a few yards of the palace, and Oman began to think his feeling a mistake, when suddenly Bhavani halted, and, turning to his companion till, even in the dim light, Oman could see how drawn and pale was his face, he said, in a muffled voice:

“Zenaide sent for thee to-day?”

“Yes.”

“And wherefore? Wherefore? What did she want of thee?”

For the shadow of an instant Oman hesitated. Then he answered, quietly: “She had heard that I taught a new creed. She desired to hear it.”

“Is that all?” The words shot from Bhavani’s lips.

“That is all,” was the tranquil rejoinder.

Bhavani found no reply to this, yet he did not move on. Oman stood waiting, with fear in his heart. He heard Bhavani say, in a voice that was monotonous with repression: “She had been weeping. I could see it. She had wept.” Then, all at once, he flung both arms over his head, and cried out, in a voice deep with long-endured anguish: “How long, O Brahma! How long? My strength fails me at last. I can endure it no more. I shall fall — I shall fall!”

“Wherefore?” murmured Oman, at his shoulder.

“Can you not see? Do you not perceive?” whispered Bhavani, hoarsely. “I love her. I love her, Oman. I love Zenaide.”

Then Oman began to laugh. He laughed till Bhavani, seizing him by the shoulder, shook him like a rat, crying to him the while to speak. And Oman obeyed him, saying, in a tone of bitter mockery: “Thou lovest her, Bhavani, thou, Rajah of Mandu! Thou lovest her whose heart has been given in turn to half a hundred; who loves thee to-day for thy gold, who will love me to-morrow for my creed: *Thou*, son of Rajahs, stoop to *such*?” And again he laughed.

Bhavani straightened up, and his face grew hard and set. "Ah, thou speakest well. It is folly indeed to talk to thee of love. But have no fear. I am Bhavani, a prince, the son of princes. I have not stooped, nor shall I."

With that speech his expression was not pleasant to look upon. But Oman felt a sudden relief. He had won a battle in behalf of the law. Yet, a few moments later, as he shut himself into his room, he felt a new confusion and a new bitterness in his heart; and he repeated over and over to himself these words: "And these — and these — the greatest and the best, know still the struggle, still faint before it, still call on high for the Reason that never comes. Was it so wonderful that I — we — failed?"



CHAPTER XV

THE RIVER TEMPLE

THE events of that afternoon, which formed the unpremeditated climax of two years of restraint on the part of both man and woman, threatened consequences that did not actually come. For some time after Oman's bitter reproach, Bhavani did not go at all to the water-palace. And Mandu wondered and rejoiced. But to Zenaide, these weeks were the most terrible she had ever known. It was probably Oman who kept her from suicide ; for, little as Oman could understand her or her passion, she seemed to cling to him, and to him only, in her stress. He felt himself both cowardly and hypocritical when she moaned to him of Bhavani's sudden hatred of her ; but he nevertheless held to his tenets as her one possible safeguard. At times, indeed, when he could see clearly, he felt that these two creatures had been given into his hands ; that it was for him to keep them both from a relationship which would, in the end, shatter them morally and mentally. With Zenaide he dealt tenderly, for she showed herself to him in lights of unselfishness unsuspected by any one else. But he never concealed from her the fact that he would himself exert all his power to keep her true

feelings from becoming known to the Rajah. And the woman after a time accepted, miserably, his view, and acquiesced in all that he told her about the necessity of constant struggle, constant watchfulness, constant self-restraint.

After some weeks it came about that Bhavani recovered his strength and went again to the water-palace, where, by degrees, the old relations were resumed. For this was possible, in that neither of the two entertained any suspicion of the other's feeling. In these new days Oman was, by common desire, much with them. And nothing, probably, could have made the lonely creature happier than this. With these two people he found entire satisfaction. The two sides of his nature got sustenance; and he experienced for the first time the delights of true companionship:—a full and complete companionship, such as few normal people have the happiness to find. From the first it was plain that there was little danger of betrayal between the man and the woman. Oman watched their self-possession, wondering. Zenaide was no less steady, no less impenetrable, than the Rajah. Not a look, not a gesture, not a tone, ever conveyed to Bhavani her feeling for him. And Oman began to believe that she was really conquering her nature. The three spent many hours in the discussion of problems political, judicial, or philosophical; and, their minds being in harmony each with the others, these periods became the fullest in their lives.

To Oman, especially, had come the deep joy of un-

breakable tranquillity. His life was flowing smoothly, in chosen ways. He had the assurance that his living was not in vain; and he knew also that he had succeeded in conquering himself. Bhavani, loving and honoring him, would have loaded him with gorgeousness. But Oman's sense of fitness did not desert him. He had no desire to go unkempt; but he accepted only the state that a lower official of the royal house was entitled to hold. Gifts of precious metals or gems he refused. But, early in his coming to Mandu, he took the Asra ruby from its concealing box, and caused it to be set in a thin, golden chain which, henceforth, he wore about his neck; till it became known to all the plateau as his badge. The story of how it had come to him — from a mendicant who had died in his cave — he told, readily enough, to Bhavani. But anything further, the mendicant's name, or the strange powers possessed by the stone, he kept to himself. The matter of reawakened memory, indeed, had come, little by little, to be a constant part of the secret understanding that was always with him. He knew that it had been decreed that he should learn something of the vast scheme of life and progress; but he knew also that this inner knowledge must not be taught to men.

Months passed quietly away. Summer came, with furious rains; and then the hot autumn, when the nights were cooled by winds from the hills. The late monsoon followed, and the fields were green as with spring. Mountain torrents plunged from the heights and over the plain to join the turbulent Narmáda

stream. And winter was there again : — the mild, sunny winter of the upper Dekkhan, the winter of flowers, the winter of Eden. Great riches brought these seasons to the man who had come, a year before, out of the hills to Mandu. He was known now to every soul in the plateau ; and he viewed his adopted land with enchanted eyes. He knew places and parts of Mandu that were not known to men born on its soil. Often he walked alone through the still palace, living amid scenes of the long past, seeing in silent rooms faces of those long since consigned to crematory flames. There were days when memory was on him overpoweringly : when Rai-Khizar-Pál and Ragunáth walked abroad through the corridors and assembly halls ; when the Ranee Ahalya, attended by Neila, sat at her embroidery in the tiny room, dreaming of him who was to come to her by night ; when Fidá, the slave, watched near the zenana door, waiting, with trembling limbs, for the hour when he might seek his love. These times of vision laid hold of Oman like dreams that are not to be shaken off. But he pursued his way quietly, in the face of the double life decreed for him by his distorted Fates.

The winter passed. Spring stole upon the land, and grew, and proclaimed herself again, and got joyous welcome from all the earth. And it was only now, when he had been a year in Mandu, that Oman learned of a strange custom of the new rule. Down upon the shore of the Narmáda, five miles west of Mandu, at the spot where, thirty-three years before, the bodies of the Ranee Ahalya and Fidá had been washed ashore

close locked in each other's arms, there had been raised a little stone temple, whither, once in two years, on the anniversary of the death, the Rajah of Mandu, his officers, and the Brahmans repaired to serve the high gods for the souls of the sinful twain. This custom, inaugurated during the regency of Manava, had been continued through his reign by Bhavani, in whom the act was the one sign of countenance granted toward any one guilty of the degrading sin. The alternating anniversaries of the quadruple death were given to mourning services at the magnificent tomb of Rai-Khizar in the palace temple. And the incongruity of the two acts was much whispered about, but never mentioned before the Rajah.

It was the year of the river pageant, for which preparations were begun a week or more before the fourth of April. On the morning of that day, the whole palace was astir by dawn; and, in the early light, a large company set out on foot to descend from the plateau; for horses could only await them in the plain, below. Oman found that the descent was easy enough, for, directly behind the palace, where the slope was less steep than anywhere else, a long flight of steps had been cut in the rock, and the plain could be reached thereby in less than half an hour. Oman and Bhavani started first and were on level ground in advance of the rest of the party. There, at the base of the plateau, they found horses and donkeys assembled, all yellow-caparisoned, and wearing high funeral plumes in their crests. Presently there was a general mounting: priests, lords, and

officials, according to their rank, ranged two and two on their steeds; and after them, on foot, a number of villagers and country-folk, for whom the day was a holiday. In the first hour of sunrise the cavalcade was set in motion and began to wind across the plain to the river bank:—a long, slow-moving line of pinkish yellow, that saddest of Indian colors.

To Oman, the sensation of riding was novel enough, and far from unpleasant. Everything—the sweet, early morning air, the silvery mist on the plain, the rushing river-song, the rolling hills in the distance, and the grave-eyed, silent man beside him, all worked themselves into his mood, deepening the impression of the hour. By nine o'clock the little temple was in sight. When it first appeared, a dim, bluish blot in the flat distance, the heart of Oman rose within him. His face grew very white. On his breast the Asra ruby burned, and the light of it, shining blood-red in the sunlight, or the fact that he had gazed too long at the temple, or perhaps some still more natural cause, made him suddenly dizzy and faint. In the whirl of his feeling, he looked toward Bhavani beside him. The Rajah sat stiffly in his saddle, his yellow turban throwing into pale relief his stern, set face and deeply glowing eyes. He gazed unwinkingly forward, and Oman's look followed his.

Directly in front of them it lay now,—a small, square building of grayish white stone cut in heavy blocks. The top of the structure was flat and square, but from the middle of it rose a conical, pagoda-like dome, also of stone:—to the Indian eye a sufficiently symmetrical

finish to the whole. The entire building was ornamented with innumerable bas-reliefs, flutings, and carvings, crude enough in themselves, but, taken in the mass, giving an effect of considerable richness. Neither wing, veranda, nor jut marred the straight lines of the side walls ; and for this, the temple was probably unique in the jumbling architecture of its period. As it stood here, silent, deserted, on the edge of the wild-rushing stream, surrounded by shadowy plain and backed by high-reaching hills, it gave an impression of loneliness that no momentary spectacle of trooping horses and men could shake off.

It was some time before ten o'clock when the procession halted and dismounted at its destination. There was a pause, while the priests opened the long-locked doors and kindled a fire inside, before the small, stone image of the god. Then, Bhavani leading the way, with Oman close behind him, the throng passed into the stone-lined chamber. Oman entered with closed eyes. There was an oppression on him that would not be shaken off. He shook and shivered in the chill of the little place. When he finally looked about him, the chant of prayers had begun, and he was surrounded by silent, motionless men. There were no windows, and little light entered through the doorway, which was occupied by villagers who strove to hear something of the service. The audience, therefore, could see only by means of the flickering firelight. Everything — roof, walls, floor, and the image of the god, were of the same grayish-white stone, polished, but not carved. In the

centre of the floor, however, close to where Oman stood, was the marble tomb that had been built over the ashes of the two whom they came to mourn. The whole of this sarcophagus was covered with inscriptions and carvings gracefully arranged. And this was all that the temple held. A single glance was enough to take it in. Oman saw it so; and then he stood listening dully to the meaningless words of the chant, while the ruby burned upon his breast, and his brain throbbed with the pain of memory.

When the prayers were finished, every one left the temple and went out into the open, where a meal was to be served. But, while priests and people ate, in separate groups, Oman and Bhavani, who were of one mind, returned to the building, and silently reëntered it. Advancing to the sarcophagus, they paused, one on either side of it, Oman resting both hands on the chilly marble. The eyes of the two met, and each found in the other's look what lay in his own:—bitterness and sadness. When they had stood there for a long time, each wrapped in his own thoughts, Bhavani murmured, quietly, as if to himself:

“I loved them — both. Ahalya, thou beautiful one, — lying here, — what hath been thy Fate in death?”

The last words were barely audible; for it required courage to break the silence of that room. The stillness of it seemed almost supernatural. It was scarcely broken by the faint fluttering of a winged creature that skimmed in through the half-open doorway. Oman looked up and perceived a slender, gray bird, of peculiar

shape, hovering under the roof above his head. It was his companion, he knew at once. Bhavani seemed not to have noticed the intrusion; and Oman did not mention it. But the scene was suddenly complete for him. He felt comforted. And he realized also that here, some day, he should himself yield up his imprisoned souls, and in this silent place enter upon his well-earned rest. Looking into Bhavani's eyes, he said, quietly:

"Lord Rajah, let thy father's ashes be some day laid within this room. Many years have passed since these two committed their sin against him. To their troubled souls it would be forgiveness should he, whom they so wronged in life, come to them in death, and lie beside them, peacefully."

So gently did Oman say this, and with such conviction, that Bhavani could not be shocked by the idea. After a long, thoughtful silence, he only observed: "Thinkest thou so, indeed?" And then he relapsed again into thought. Shortly afterward, without further speech between them, they passed out of the tomb, closing the door behind them.

A little later the company rode away from the lonely place, their faces turned toward Mandu. It was a quieter journey than that of the morning; for the service in the temple-tomb had not failed to make its impression on the most careless. Oman and Bhavani were again side by side, still silent and thoughtful, gazing into the cloudy east. When at last they left the river and struck across the plain, Bhavani, leaning toward his companion, said, in a muffled voice:

“Thou hast spoken of peace to the twain were my father laid beside them there by the river. Why, rather, should not their ashes be carried up into Mandu, and placed in the palace temple, where their Rajah lies?”

Oman hesitated for a moment, stroking his horse's mane. Then he answered, dreamily: “That is their place there, by the river. It is a peaceful sleep. They would not rest well near the palace of their treachery.”

Bhavani bowed his head, and seemed as if about to reply; but he closed his lips again without having uttered any word.

Thus ended Oman's first visit to the tomb: an incident that brought much into his life. It proved the beginning of intangible things that carried changes in their train. There was at first a new relaxation of mind; for it seemed as if some final touch had been put upon his own existence. Less than ten miles away was his own resting-place, waiting his coming. He knew this intuitively; and it seemed to him that, however long he should still live, there could be no further pilgrimage for him. His life at Mandu was not for a mere Vassa season. He had attained his Arahatship; and need not any longer dread the privation months each year.

During the following summer Oman went twice, alone, to the tomb; each time spending the night there and returning, next day, on foot. What he did in those times, or why he went, no one knew. But he had been given a key to the temple doors, and men might see, if

they wished, that he carried it always in his girdle. Zenaide once ventured to ask him of the purpose of his journeys, and he smiled, and answered her :

“I go there to pray to the great Brahma for two erring souls.”

“The souls of the Ranee and the slave who were drowned together?”

Oman bent his head.

“And dost thou not think, O Oman, that for such sinful ones there must be hundreds of reincarnations to expiate their crimes?”

“Was there happiness enough in their sin to repay a thousand years of suffering?” he asked, bitterly. “Nay, woman, I tell thee that thirty years of sorrow and struggle hath more than paid — more than paid! There is a strict justice over all things. The Divine Soul alone knows the real measure of happiness and misery meted out to each of us. He also knows in how much the crime carries with it its punishment.”

“Thou art a strange man, Oman,” she answered, looking at him curiously. “Sometimes I could think thee mad if thou wast not so — so assured. Whence come these thoughts of thine? Art thou inspired?”

“Nay, Zenaide. Knowledge must come to all who, by bitterness and tears, have drawn near the infinite. Suffering brings much beauty to the soul. I begin to think that men shun it too much.” And then Oman smiled, and went away, fearing lest he had spoken too plainly to one who, through her nature, might understand.

Much to Oman’s surprise, and to the amazement and

consternation of the whole plateau, Bhavani, after six months of deliberation, acted upon the impulsive suggestion made by Oman, in the river temple on the anniversary of the death of Ahalya and Fidá. In the autumn of that year the ashes of Rai-Khizar-Pál were removed from their tomb in the palace, and borne down the river to a new grave. The act came very near to causing a general uprising. Bhavani's own son pleaded with his father on his knees not to dishonor the great warrior, his grandfather, and thus bring infamy upon himself and the whole line. It was in vain. Oman's secret idea had taken root in Bhavani's heart; and a revolution would not have turned him from his object. In the month of October, just before the rains, Rai-Khizar's ashes were laid beside those of his dead wife, in a new marble tomb, the magnificence of which a little consoled the people for the disrespect to their warrior king.

It was Oman who was charged with the matter of the reinterment; and, when the priests had finished their service after the burial, he went down to the river bank, and at the risk of his life began to talk to the angry mob that waited there. It was a dramatic scene. In the beginning his voice was completely drowned by the roars and cries that rose from the usually passive and obedient people. Probably only the presence of Bhavani saved the hermit, as he was called, from personal violence. But Oman held doggedly to his place; and, after a time his very appearance, as he stood upon a block of stone twenty yards from the temple,

silenced the noise, and brought the people, against their will, to listen to him. As he began to speak, his voice was like the melodious ripple of a summer stream. He talked of wrong-doing and the forgiveness of sin; and the doctrine that he preached had never been heard in the east at all. One long before, in the west, had spoken such words; but they had not lived truly in the hearts of men. Before Oman paused, however, he had brought all the throng literally to his feet, because of the things he said and the way he said them. And, in that hour, Oman won his place with the low castes of Mandu, among whom, henceforth, he was privileged to much that their priests could not obtain of them.

By this unpremeditated act, Oman made possible for himself something that he had desired long and earnestly. It opened the way for him to go down among the humbler people, and cause them to reveal their souls to him, that he might give them his truths. In the next months he studied, ardently, the nature of mankind, in the hope of finding means of escape from temptation for those too weak to resist it, and of giving proper strength to those who could still struggle against themselves. But, even while he labored, a new discouragement came upon him. He succeeded only too well in probing the natures of those who sought his help. To him, whose severe and troubled life had been exempt from the complicated wrong of living, the constant discoveries made to him of selfishness, pettiness, deceit, of warped and perverted notions of right and wrong, thrown before him in all the chaotic tangle of actual existence,

brought revelations that overpowered him with their barefacedness. All alone he wrestled with problems that have neither beginning nor end; where, from the first, all has been so wrong that there is no hope of setting it right. He saw almost as the Almighty must see:— the terrible falsity of each individual; and, the reason for it, the reason for the fact of existence, being withheld from him, he fainted under the burden of seemingly irreparable wrong. It was no joy to him to reflect that, compared with most men, he had lived the life of a saint. Oblivious of himself since his victory was won, he tried to take up the battle for others too ill-equipped for resistance. And thus, after all, Oman showed himself not very wise; for he had not learned that, by the first law of creation, man works out his destiny alone. But this new problem proved to be also his last turning-point. He had ceased to live for himself. Henceforth all his desire was for others. It is the last lesson:— one that men are not often trusted here to learn.

CHAPTER XVI

“LA-ILAHA-IL-LAL-LAHA”

TEN years glided away. Oman was more than forty, and Bhavani about fifty-five. To the worker among men the time had seemed longer than that spent on the Silver Peak. There he had, after a little, won faith in himself. Here he came gradually to perceive that he was accomplishing nothing of that which he had set out to do. Little by little he was made to realize that those who are wholly of the world can get no help out of the great, abstract truths: the high standard of religion. This at last he perceived. But he would stoop to no creed petty enough to catch the belief of his people. It was, indeed, only what is discovered by all men who seek to bring high truths home to narrow minds: — that the great, polluted religions have, by slow process of retrograde development, been constituted by the masses for the masses, who must thenceforth only be left alone to peck over and over the heap of chaff from which the last kernels of truth have been long since snatched away.

Fortunately, during this period of thankless labor, Oman had not lost touch with a wider world. Bhavani and Zenaide, the man and the woman, were still his

refuge. To them he carried some of his weariness, and from them got constant renewal and refreshment. Their lives had become tranquil, —singularly so, indeed. Only Bhavani, as he grew older, sometimes chafed at the thought that he alone, of all Manduvian rulers, had been peaceful, had brought no glories of conquest and plunder home to his people. He fretted lest Mandu's prestige had been dimmed by his policy; though he could not deny that he had trebled the strength of his kingdom in wealth and in population.

“Ah,” he would sometimes say, “at my death the country will be fit for Viradha's rule. He will find her ready to give him soldiers and gold for his wars. He will be what my father was. With all thy teachings, Oman, thou hast never eradicated in him the warrior spirit.”

And Oman would shake his head, his eyes growing sad; for he was not a lover of war.

This matter of the long-continued peace in Mandu was not wholly owing to the policy of its present Rajah; for, during all the early part of his reign, there had been quiet in the turbulent north. Now, however, sinister rumors began to spread and grow. It was, indeed, a time of universal disquiet; for this was the middle of the constructive period of Indian history: the time of the fusion of two great races. Conquest had begun two hundred years before, under the great lord of Ghazni. The second conqueror, Mohammed Ghori, had been dead but forty years. And, since then, the first line of slave kings, founded by

Aybek, had been broken by another slave:—Balban, the mighty minister of studious Mahmoud. Under him began the first concerted campaigns into Gujerat and Malwa, which were eventually to result in the conquest of everything north of the Dekkhan. In Delhi, now the capital of Moslem India, there dwelt more than one powerful general of the Prophet's faith. Among these, Osman-ibn-Omar, the Asra, had won high reputation for the courage and daring that were, indeed, characteristic of his race. In his youth he had known Lahore, even mountain-built Ghazni; and now, his father long ago honorably dead in battle, the son, himself more than sixty years old, dwelt in Delhi, yearning for new wars. And it was eventually he, still bearing in mind an old, disastrous campaign of Dhâr in the Vindhya, who now, in the year 1249, swore to his lord a mighty oath that in him Malwa should find its conqueror. He would go down to the south, and learn whether a cousin of his, whilom head of the Asra race, were still, by any chance, alive and in captivity among the unconquered natives. But of this matter the folk of Mandu, peacefully engaged in the garnering of rice and millet, knew nothing, and as little cared.

Oman, perhaps, had some premonition of what was about to come. At any rate, during this winter, his spirit was restless. He had recourse to many long-abandoned methods of tranquillizing himself. He felt that he was becoming world-troubled. The still waters of his nature had been disturbed and set into motion by a too intimate knowledge of various matters. And

all his efforts after calm brought him but temporary relief.

Part of his trouble lay in the sad knowledge of Bhavani's state. The beloved of Mandu was afflicted with a mortal disease, slow in its fatal progress, but so sure that no man knew of a single prayer, a single sacrifice, that could prove efficacious. Zenaide and Oman, much depending on each other, did not scruple to speak of the inevitable: the shadow of death that hovered daily over them. Zenaide grew strong, now. It was that strength of despair that upholds us at the last. Even Oman, knowing, as he did, her inmost heart, marvelled sometimes at the calm that possessed her. She was no longer young; but, unlike most of her race and class, middle age had not made her ugly. She had lived too well for that. Beauty of spirit, gathered during her years of painful youth, the time of her sacrifice, brought its reward, clothing her with a dignity and a serene beauty that mere happiness cannot give. Bhavani's wife was dead: had died as she had lived, among her embroideries and her trivialities, regretting to the last the zenana life in which she had been brought up. Bhavani, always reverent toward her in life, felt no acute sorrow at her decease, and, after her burial, returned to his usual way of life, affecting nothing. There were still those in Mandu who wondered if he would not take to wife the woman to whom he had been far more devoted than ever he was to the daughter of Dhár. But Bhavani never entertained a thought of marrying her who had been the greatest courtesan in Malwa. Nor did Zenaide

herself regard marriage as a possibility. Youth had passed both from her and from him who, all unknown to her, had passionately loved her. The fire of youth, quenched in its height, had found another life, had been transmuted into a deep and holy affection that demanded no closer bond than that of friendship. If the thought of marriage ever came to the woman, it was only with the wish that, in the suffering he endured almost constantly, she might comfort him as only women can. But Bhavani preferred to die as he had lived: austerely and alone. If he was aware how closely his people watched him, he gave no sign. Oman sometimes wondered if the Rajah dreamed of the storm that his marriage with Zenaide would have raised among the people. Only Oman, from his constant intercourse with the lower classes, knew how blindly and how bitterly the woman of the water-palace was still hated. But Oman himself, had the two chosen to unite themselves, would have uttered not one word of remonstrance: — would, indeed, have given his life in their defence. So had time changed his earlier, rigid views.

It was in this year 1249 that Viradha-Pál, the young prince, began to take his place in the government of Mandu as a person of importance. Indeed it was time that he came into his own. Bhavani had kept him too long in the background. Mandu was beginning to whisper that he should have been at war for them these five years past: that it behoved a Kshatriya to follow his profession. And Viradha, allowed liberty of action, proved himself worthy of his people by quickly

claiming his own. Bhavani let him go; for he knew that the spirit of the old warrior kings was upon the youth; and he knew also, still better, that the time approached when a warrior would be sorely needed in Mandu. For Bhavani, in his peacefulness, was by no means blind to the outlook of India; and it was no surprise when Viradha came to him with tales of Mohammedan invasions in the north, and demands of an army with which to march against the alien race. Bhavani acceded to his demands, making, however, one stipulation. Viradha must marry. *Then* he might leave his wife and go forth to battle. Such was the rule in the Orient.

Thus it came about, after all, that there were marriage feasts that year in Mandu. A princess was brought from Mandaleshwar, on the north bank of the Narmáda, far to the east. And there was a great Brahman sacrifice, and the usual three days of ceremonial. The deserted zenana was opened once more, and a new woman installed there in her loneliness. One week her husband tarried by her side. Then he took his man's privilege, and left her alone in her state, while he marched away at the head of his little army — fifteen hundred men — into the echoing north. The benedictions and the adoration of all Mandu followed him. Old Bhavani had been a good ruler, the kindest, the most just of men. But, after all, men were made for war, and it was better that the princes of men should be generals than judges. Alas for Mandu! Rejoicing in its newly raised standards, shouting itself hoarse with

its own battle-cries, deaf to presentiment, to rumor, to the prophecies of the gods, what wonder that it heard nothing of that faintly-echoing cry that was ringing out over all the plains and heights of India? the cry that had risen out of the black Kaaba of far Mecca, and now rolled, in one continuous shout, from western Granada to Benares, the holy city, transcending speech by its sharp fanaticism, finding by force a home in every land: "*La-ilaha-il-lal-laha!*" This was the cry that Viradha had gone forth to oppose. It was the same cry to which Viradha's grandfather had answered with his death.

The young prince went away in the middle of the Ashtaka month (December). His going made no change in Mandu, save that it gave the people an added interest outside their monotonous lives. The pleasant winter passed slowly away. Bhavani had begun to depend much on his appointed teacher of men; and Oman left his unheeded labors among the lowly in order to watch over his dearly loved lord. Bhavani was sad; missed his son; suffered keenly, but did not complain. Oman himself never suspected how much that royal soul endured, silently. But, as the days passed, he became more and more aware of a changing aspect in many things. There was in him a sense of foreboding, a feeling of finality, indefinable, omnipresent. Zenaide also felt it, and her melancholy became unconquerable. She knew what the outer senses could not tell her; and even Oman's quietly proffered sympathy was repelled. Bhavani doubtless guessed all that passed in their

minds; but he could not take their burden from them. He knew himself to be too near the end. He could only spare them anxiety by the silent endurance of pain.

The end came sooner than even he, perhaps, had expected. It was in February, about the middle of the month; and early thrills of spring hung in the air. On the eighteenth day, at noon, Oman, who was in his own room after a long morning in the school, was roused by Bhavani's favorite slave and conducted swiftly through the palace to Bhavani's bedroom. Bhavani was on his couch; and Oman, who had not seen him since the previous evening, at once knew everything. The room was in confusion. Evidently many people — doctors, priests, slaves — had been there recently. Why they were now gone, Oman could not surmise. Bhavani lay breathing in long, heavy gasps, with intervals of startling length. His face wore the gray hue of death. His eyes were closed; but he felt Oman's entrance, for he put out his hand, and Oman took it and fell upon his knees beside the bed.

“ Let me summon help for thee,” he said, in a low, clear voice that suggested nothing of what he felt.

“ No,” gasped the dying one. Then, after an effort, he added: “ I hear Brahma's voice. Shall I not — answer it? ”

Oman could not speak. He buried his head near the face of his friend. It seemed to him, at that moment, that Fate had found a cruelty too great for passive endurance. For Oman loved this man as he had never

hoped to love in life. It was like tearing his heart in two to watch that inevitable, resistless advance of death. Yet, with the heroism that was in him, he accepted Bhavani's own decree: feeling, indeed, that there was no human help for his King.

Moments passed: — an hour: — and still Oman knelt by the bed. Suddenly it seemed as if the Rajah's breath was coming a little more easily, a little less terribly. Quickly he lifted his head, and looked. There was a change. Bhavani looked older, grayer, more shrunken. But his eyes were half unclosed, and he seemed to be in less pain. While Oman gazed, unable to speak, scarcely to think, a shadowy smile crossed the Rajah's lips, and he began to murmur a few unintelligible words. Oman bent to catch them, and Bhavani's eyes rested on his face.

"Fidá," he whispered, low, but distinctly: "we played together — with Ahalya —"

"Yes. Yes!" answered Oman, hoarsely.

"Brave things. Let us play again. I always Arjuna. Thou, O Fidá, Yudishtir, the King. — Ahalya, the beautiful Draupadi. I have won her from all the rest. But now — we are marching away — from Hastinapur. We are seeking heaven. It is a long journey. We reach the sea. Dost thou remember all the places, Fidá? Agni stops us awhile; and then — we come into the plain that leads to Himavan. I have read it many times. See, — they are gone, all of them! Nakula and Bhima and Draupadi are dead in the desert. But I go on alone into the hills — and — yes,

this time he is there!—Sakra—O God!—I come!—Behold, I come!”

Smiling, gasping out these words of one of his childhood's games, that was, in fact, an epic of the pilgrimage of life, Bhavani, holy among men, slipped away out of existence, perhaps ascending in Sakra's own chariot, that had so often awaited him in his young imagination.

Till long after he knew that Bhavani was gone from him, Oman knelt there, by the bed, gazing blindly on the still, waxen face. Presently he became aware that there were others in the room. Slaves crept in and out, and brought doctors and officials, and those who were to care for the high dead. Then, dazed and bowed down with his weight of grief, Oman rose and passed out, through the palace, between little knots of whispering men who made way for him and looked after him, longing but not daring to question. He left the palace behind and went on to the duty that was his. The heart in him bled. There were no thoughts of help or of comfort in his brain; yet he knew that none but him could tell the woman of their common woe. So he turned toward the water-palace, where he was always admitted without delay.

Zenaide was in the wide, central court of her dwelling, lying on a pile of cushions placed beside the marble pool. In her hand she held a piece of millet cake, which she had been crumbling for the fishes in the water. At Oman's entrance, however, she rose, and went to him, hastily. As she looked into his face, Oman,

without speaking, watched her expression change from gayety to wonder, and so to fear, till he knew that there was not much to put into words. Now she reached out both her hands, and Oman took them into his own.

"Tell me," she said, faintly.

"Dost thou not know?" he asked, his voice seeming to him to come from another world.

"Bhavani, —" she began; but her voice broke.

"There is no longer a Bhavani," he answered, wondering at himself for the speech.

She took it quietly, letting his hands drop from hers, and turning away so that, for some seconds, he could not see her face. Then she moved nearer him again, and said, in tones not natural, but still well controlled: "Come, let us go into a smaller room."

Oman assented in silence; and she led the way down a short passage to that apartment in which they had held their first interview, many years before. And there she caused him to sit down upon the broad divan, while she took her place at his knee. Again, in their woe, their hands met. And then Zenaide, bowing her head, let tears come. Oman could not weep. His grief was deeper: far more terrible, indeed, than he had believed it could be. His own great creed brought him no comfort.

* * * * *

Bhavani was entombed in the temple room of the palace, in the place whence his father had been lately removed. The ceremonial of cremation was magnif-

cent; but there was one grave lack in it. No willing women accompanied him into the flames. There were no blood relatives, no children, to mourn at his bier. The spectators, who could remember his father's entombment, compared with this the wailing concourse which had assembled about that funeral pyre, on which lay the body that had been carried all the way back to Mandu from the disastrous plain of Dhár. Here was no terrible grief of dying concubines and dust-covered widows: no deep-throated sobbing of warrior sons. Two aliens, man and woman, stood together, hand in hand, beside the frightened little bride of Viradha; and these were all, beside the people, that mourned Bhavani's death. Truly, the royal line of Mandu was fading away! The long ceremony brought to every heart a feeling of emptiness, of forlornity, that was not easy to overcome. The people felt it, and even the Brahmans; and there were those who covertly wondered if young Viradha, returning home, would find his own awaiting him.

Fortunately for himself, Oman had no time, in the next few weeks, to grieve. Not knowing just how it came about, he found himself in the position of regent, all Mandu having voluntarily demanded their government of him. There being no other hand ready for the helm, he accepted the place, constituting himself keeper of Viradha's state, guardian of his honor, treasurer of his heritage: holding himself ready at any moment to deliver all these into the hands of the young King. He clung closely to Bhavani's methods, finding

himself little at a loss to fill a place the duties of which, from constant observation, he had learned so well.

Thus a month passed away. Oman, occupied almost day and night, saw little of Zenaide, whose burden of grief was hers to bear alone. Oman, even in his sadness, had found consolation in an unexpected effect of his labor of the past ten years. He perceived that what he had hoped for against hope was true: the people loved him. Through his years of work among them they had treated him ill. They had been deaf to his teachings; they had mocked at his laws; they had reviled him for heresy to their faith. He had come to believe that he had brought good to not one soul. And now, suddenly, upon the accession of a little pomp, they went to him, sought his counsel, obeyed and loved him more than they had ever obeyed and loved even Bhavani. Oman took their devotion for the best that it brought; and rejoiced that his way was made easy for him. Now he longed only for the return of Viradha, which could not be much further delayed. He had gone away in December. It was now the end of March. Surely the thought of his young wife must draw the warrior homeward soon. Nay, Oman had a presentiment that the course of events would force him back.

Oman was right. Viradha did return, shortly. It was the last week in March, and the spring was in its loveliest, early beauty. Was it right that this renewal of youth, these ever-recurrent love-yearnings of nature, should be broken by the harsh voices of war, an autumnal woe of blood and death? Yet this came: so

swiftly, so overwhelmingly, that there was no time for consideration or planning. Only action was necessary; and only action was taken.

The first premonition of disaster came upon the afternoon of the second day of April, when two or three wounded and exhausted fugitives reached the haven of Mandu, bringing the startling news that Viradha and his little army were close at hand, in full retreat before a victorious Mohammedan horde, who had pursued them clear across the mountains. It was a thunderbolt; for none had ever dreamed that the plateau, defended by the whole wide range of the Vindhya, could be in danger from the conquerors of Delhi. But the word of the fugitives had to be accepted. Their plight was unquestionable. Within twenty-four hours Viradha and his men would be in Mandu, where something, no man said what, must happen.

Through the night, every soul on the plateau labored as never before. Even the children were pressed into service; and Brahman and Sudra worked side by side, placing barriers along the causeway, which, when the Manduvians had reached the plateau, could be thrown across the narrow bridge, and the invaders shut away. It was the only plan of defence that occurred to Oman as feasible; and none of those that sat in council with him could find a better. All was uncertain. They could only busy themselves as best they could;— and wait.

The waiting was not long. Through the whole of the morning of the third, fugitive soldiers continued to pour in from the mountains, bringing word of the valiant,

the desperate bravery of Viradha in his retreat, and of the overwhelming force of the invaders. Oman sat in the great audience hall, questioning every soldier that came in, ordering, thinking, planning, till, about one o'clock in the afternoon, there came to his ears the sounds of a great, confused clamor: — the distant battle-din that proclaimed the arrival of the Rajah and his army.

Then, had any one been there to watch, he might have thought that the Saint of Mandu had gone suddenly mad. A spirit of fury had, indeed, rushed upon Oman. He ran out of the palace into the courtyard, where, by his command, a horse was waiting for him. He sprang upon it. All the man, all the one-time Asra bravery of Fidá, was seething in his blood, beating in his brain. From a staring slave-boy he seized a shield and spear, but waited for no armor. Clad in his accustomed white garments, a white turban on his head, and, for his one ornament, the great ruby hung about his neck, he started away, at full gallop, down the road toward the causeway. As he advanced, the sounds grew nearer: the noise more hideous. And above it all, from time to time, like a sentence of doom and death, came the strange accents of that strangest of all battle-cries: "*La-ilaha-il-lal-laha!*" which, twisted, means: "There is no God but God."

CHAPTER XVII

THE SIGN OF THE RUBY

THE galloping horse, with its white rider, dashed round the curve in the road that opened upon the great stone causeway; and Oman perceived that he was none too soon. It was upon that narrow bridge that the long, horrible retreat of the young Rajah of Mandu had reached its climax. Here he made his last stand against the invincible Prophet-horde. The scene on the causeway was indescribable. Oman had one moment's survey of it: one moment, during which all his strength, all the fury of race and loyalty that were in him, rushed into his two arms, into his brain, into his eyes. Then, without pause, he was carried down into the writhing, struggling mass.

The plan of defence prepared over night for Viradha's assistance had come to naught. The two armies had fought their way, hand to hand, all down the rocky defile that led to the plateau; and they reached the causeway in an inseparable mass. It had taken the whole morning for the Moslems to force the defenders from the entrance of the pass, two miles above, to the bridge. The men of Mandu, knowing well the consequence of defeat, had fought as never men fought before; and

now, on the threshold of their homes, they made the supreme effort. The retreat was over. The fight on the causeway was the death struggle. When it ended, there would be no more resistance to the followers of Mohammed.

Like others on that bridge, Oman too had gone mad. He did not think, he did not feel. He was a machine. His horse, trained to war, had plunged into the very thick of the battle. On every side men were fighting together: man to man, two to one, three to one, but always without concerted action, always as in a series of duels. Of those in the *mêlée*, Oman was the only one who wore no armor; and how, during the first ten minutes, he escaped with his life, it would be impossible to say. After that, his shield was omnipresent, his sword all-pervading. Man after man went down before him. Those of Mandu that saw him, marvelled. Their Saint had become inspired by a demon. The Mohammedans regarded him with suspicious fear. Was this an angel, a Jin, come from heaven to defend a chosen country? It seemed, for a few minutes, as if his appearance might turn the tide of battle. But victory was not for Mandu. Where the war-cry of the Prophet now rose in India, it was not to be stilled by any bravery, any heroism. Just now, no one looking at that close-writhing mass of combatants could have told which way the fight was going. But there was, for the Indians, a very *sense* of defeat, a gradually increasing fear, born of presentiment. Oman felt it with the rest; but still he fought, with the fierceness of despair.

Not yet, in the closely packed company, had he caught a glimpse of the young Rajah. Dealing out his blows and parries almost mechanically, Oman found time to wonder in which of the heaps of dead and dying piled against the high balustrades of the causeway, the son of Bhavani lay. But presently the horror of that thought was removed. Just before him, upreared on a bleeding horse, helmetless, blood-smeared, worn almost beyond recognition with the work of the last week, was Viradha, closely beset by a powerful Moslem, whose rich accoutrements and shining scimitar proclaimed him of rank. In a kind of maze, Oman watched the young man parry blow after blow, saw the terrible weapon finally plunged down with undefensible stroke, and, in the same instant, waking from his trance, flung himself forward across the young man's body and lifted his face to that of the Mohammedan. There was a strange shock. The Moslem recoiled from the blow he had dealt, his eyes fixed in fascination on something that shone on Oman's uplifted breast: — the Asra ruby, blazing in the sun.

Oman recovered himself swiftly, and drew back from the body beneath him. His attempt had been vain. Viradha lay supine upon his horse, limp and motionless, the bright life-blood gushing out of his very heart. He was dead. Oman knew it before he looked. The hope of Mandu was gone; and, in the same instant, the battle was ended. Like one in a dream Oman heard the din gradually fade into silence, and saw the great Moslem chief lean over, draw his weapon from

the young body, and then straighten up and look about him with a half smile. The Manduvians, those that remained, had lowered their arms, and were piteously begging for quarter. But Mohammed spares not the unfaithful. Oman, perceiving what a hideous, silent carnage was beginning, felt a new rush of fury, and hurled himself at the Mohammedan leader, the slayer of Viradha. At once two other Arabs fell upon him, from the right and from the left, and Oman surrendered, as the general gave two or three sharp orders, and the soldiers, stopping short in their attack, seized Oman by the arms, lifted him forcibly from the saddle, and dragged him down till he stood on his feet. Then they led him back along the causeway to one of the empty watch-towers. Into this they climbed with him, bound him fast, hand and foot, with his own sash and two leathern straps from their accoutrements, and then, with some words incomprehensible to him, they descended to the bridge again, leaving him alone. For a moment his thoughts swam through seas of blood. After that, the deadly reaction of passion setting in, he mercifully fainted.

He was unconscious for a long time. When he came to himself again, there was a singular stillness around him: — the stillness of many dead, not to be broken by the faint, indistinguishable sounds of the horde on the plateau. It was late in the afternoon; for the sunlight was pouring through an opening in the west wall of the watch-tower. Oman looked into the yellow light till he was half blinded. Then he closed his eyes. He

was in great pain; and half of him was numb with lying for so long in one position. Unknown to himself, he had, in the battle, received one or two wounds, not serious, unfelt, indeed, in the excitement, but which now troubled him severely. This, and the ache of his arms and ankles where the fetters held him, threw him into a kind of stupor of pain. He could hear the flies buzzing over his blood; but he could not think of anything. Why should he? Everything was gone; and the mass of fact was too overwhelming to be realized. His brain, recently overactive, was as weary as his body. He was aware only of the lengthening afternoon, his own pain, and his rising thirst.

After a while the sun set, the swift twilight passed, and the young moon shone in the west, above the dead, sunset colors. Oman was sleepy. It seemed fitting that, with night, he should rest. He wondered a little if he was to die in the watch-tower, forgotten, and raving for water. To his dulled mind it made little difference, just now. Wondering, stupidly, he fell asleep.

Oman had, however, been by no means forgotten. Shortly after moonset, which was very early that night, he was waked by two men — soldiers — who, penetrating his retreat, undid his bonds by the light of a torch, and addressed certain sharp words to him in their unknown tongue. Oman, obeying the instinct of common sense, rose to his feet, swayed and reeled with numbness, and was promptly pummelled into sensibility by one of the men who seemed to understand what he needed. So, presently, the three of them, Oman with a

soldier on either side, descended the narrow stone steps of the tower and came out upon the causeway. Here was a sight to try the nerves of the Mohammedan conqueror himself. All was deathly still, yet already men were working by the light of torches, the sickly, flickering glare of which cast streaks of light and shadow over the horrid scene. The whole width of the bridge reeked and steamed with blood; and here and there separate bodies blocked the central path. Against the high balustrades, on either hand, were great, inextricable heaps of slain. At the sight, Oman's gorge rose; but, at the same time, there shot into his mind the question: "Why am I not lying here? What was it that preserved me from death?" He had seen Osman's look; but he could not account for it. He only knew that quarter had been given him where nobody else was spared; and, even before this scene of horror, he sighed; for he had long since been ready to face the Unknown Beyond.

It was a long walk to the end of the plateau. Oman wondered a little why the conquerors had made the palace, instead of the town, their headquarters, never dreaming that, in six hours, Osman and his army had swept Mandu from one end to the other, after the manner of a race long accustomed to conquest. When the prisoner and his guides passed the water-palace, Oman gazed sorrowfully upon its dark outline and its empty door. Where was Zenaide, the Lady of Mandu? Alas! who could say? Finally, when the captive was on the verge of exhaustion, they reached the palace courtyard,

and here, at last, found a scene of life. In the centre of the court, where so many holy sacrifices had burned to Agni and the Hindoo Trinity, was an immense bonfire, at which torn and weary soldiers were cooking food. Everywhere were men, talking, shouting, laughing in their barbarous tongue. But nowhere could Oman find a familiar face. Where were all the slaves that had been wont to pass and repass through this court by night and day? Where were the officials? Had they followed the fate of their defenders? At the thought, Oman trembled like a woman. However, he and his guides crossed the square, and entered the audience hall, where there was a scene indeed.

The place was lighted by a hundred torches and hanging-lamps that threw a yellow, smoky glare over the confusion below. An impromptu feast had been prepared for the general and his officers; and, the wine-cellars found and rifled, these good Moslems for one night waived the tenets of their creed and celebrated the day's carnage after the Delhi¹ fashion, by drinking themselves either maudlin or insane. As Oman, in his blood-stained robes, appeared upon the threshold, Osman, the great general, not so drunk as his men, was walking toward the daïs at the head of the room, where stood the royal throne. Catching sight of the figure in the doorway, however, the conqueror paused, with one foot on the step and turned a little toward him. Oman got

¹ The law against drunkenness was never strictly kept by the Mohammedans during the conquest of India. The Delhi kings were notorious for debauchery.

a distinct picture of him there. The leonine head was bare, and the heavy, whitish hair and beard framed a face of fierce and vigorous strength. Most of his armor had been removed; and he was clad in a crimson robe, heavily embroidered and studded with jewels. His undertunic was a vivid green; and in his belt was stuck a dagger, the hilt of which flashed with emeralds and blood-stones. This was Osman ibn-Omar el-Asra, head of that perishable race; and he turned, in his hall of conquest, to meet the deep-eyed gaze of him who wore the lost charm of the Asra.

Lifting his voice above the general clamor, the conqueror summoned Oman to him. The captive obeyed, moving slowly forward till he could have touched the hand of his captor, who still stood gazing at him. Again their eyes met; and this time, before the penetrating glance of the hermit, the eyes of the warrior fell. After an instant, however, they were lifted again, and Osman, speaking in perfect Hindustanee, said:

“Thou art he whom they called, this afternoon, the white Demon?”

“I do not know what men called me.”

“Thou wouldst have saved the young Rajah from my scimitar?”

“Assuredly,” answered Oman, scowling; and the conqueror laughed.

In a moment, however, he was serious again, and, dropping all preliminaries, demanded: “That stone — the ruby that you wear upon your neck — what is it called? Where found you it?”

A sudden flash of understanding, of more than understanding, rushed over Oman. Out of the long, long ago came remembrance of this same man that now stood before him; and he asked, suddenly, the involuntary question:

“Art thou Osman ibn-Omar el-Asra?”

“Yes. By the Prophet, how knewest thou I was ibn-Omar?”

Oman did not answer. He took from his throat the chain on which hung the great ruby; and, with an indescribable gesture, he went forward and slipped it over the head of the Mohammedan. “It is the Asra ruby,” said he. “It has found its race again. My trust is finished.”

Then, without another word, he turned and walked out of the room; nor did any one attempt to stop him. Osman, confounded, dazed, indeed, by the assurance of Oman’s act, remained motionless, staring after him. The two guards who had brought him from the tower, and had watched the scene with speechless astonishment, seeing that their lord gave no commands about his recapture, stepped aside to let him pass. And the others in the room never noticed him at all.

Heeding nothing of what lay behind, entirely fearless of the conquerors, Oman left the hall in which Rai-Khizar-Pál, and Bhavani, and lately he himself, had been wont to sit in council, crossed the broad courtyard where the slave Fidá had so often watched, and finally reached the road, which was silent, and lighted only by the stars. The palace of Mandu was behind him, but

he had yet one other mission to fulfil. He went on to the water-palace, which, a little while before, he had beheld, still with the stillness of death. Was Zenaide there? Or whither was she gone? He must know. For she had now only him in the world to look to.

When he came to the door of the building he found, to his amazement and consternation, that it stood open. No slave was on guard; but within, near the marble pool, hung a burning lamp that cast a faint light round about. Oman halted beneath it, and listened intently for some sound. There was one: — the softest, intermittent sighing: — a low cry, like the wailing of a new-born child. Unhesitatingly Oman followed the direction from which it came — followed through room and passage, till he had reached the inner apartments of Zenaide, and penetrated to the sanctum: her sleeping chamber. Here he found her.

All that he at first perceived was a long, narrow room, the walls hung with palest blue, on which were embroidered white flocks of doves. There were many tiny lights round about, and against the walls knelt half a dozen women, wailing and beating their breasts. Beside these were one or two of the male slaves, standing about dejectedly, but uttering no sound. This was Oman's first glance. Then he perceived something else, which instantly swallowed up every other thought. At the far end of the room stood a bier, hung with blue embroideries; and upon it, quiet, peaceful, still as a marble figure, lay the priestess of Radha, in her last sleep. The great eyes were shut. The wonderful,

red-dyed hair was bound smoothly into a high crown above her brow, and one or two white lotos flowers were fastened above her ears. Her garments were all white, her feet encased in white shoes. There was but one spot of color anywhere. Over her heart, beneath her left breast, was a stain of moist crimson, that widened and spread a little, even as Oman gazed. It told him all that he would have asked. He stood silent over her, while the women and slaves crept close, looking up to him with some sign of hope in their heavy eyes. But, for the first time, perhaps, Oman had no hope to give. His thoughts, indeed, were not here. He was thinking of the slow order in which every one that he had known and loved in his life had passed into the other land. It was beginning to come home to him that his own hour of liberation was near. His eyes travelled slowly over Zenaide's perfect form, from her face, which now, in its repose, showed the marks of time and sorrow, down her white arms, and to her white-clothed feet. Then, suddenly lifting his hands over her, he said, softly: "Rest thee, rest thee, in peace!"

Then he turned to go. But the living ones crowded about him, demanding what they were to do.

"The invaders cannot forbid the right of burial. On the morrow let her be burned, and the ashes placed in an urn. By night let one of ye convey this to the palace temple and lay it upon the tomb of the Lord Bhavani. Thus they shall meet in blessed death."

Then Oman would have gone, but that one of the

women, Zenaide's favorite attendant, ran to him and laid her hand upon his arm, saying: "And thou, my lord, whither art thou going?" Her voice sank to a whisper, for she felt her presumption.

"Whither I go ye know not. Sufficient it is that ye see me for the last time. I commend your mistress to your care. Farewell."

Then Oman, in his stained garments, with the marks of fetters on his wrists and ankles, left the room of mourning and passed through the house till he came again to the central room. Here, the crises of the day at last ended, his body was overcome with weariness; and he lay down beside the marble pool, and slept.

CHAPTER XVIII

SUNSET

WHEN Oman opened his eyes again, red dawn was just breaking upon a silent world. Kneeling at the pool, he performed his ablutions, and then walked to the open door. How fragrant the morning was! The air was rich with the perfume of flowers. Even in the early freshness there was a promise of heat; and drowsy bird twitterings complained of it. But Oman, standing quiet in the door of the water-palace, thought not of nature. He was looking out across still Mandu, the conquered land; and the heart in him bled and ached. Yesterday he had fought for his people, his country, his lord. To-day there remained only the bitterness of irretrievable defeat. And Oman's one thought now was for the people: — the men and women of the fields, who were left to bend beneath the conqueror's yoke. These lowly ones, for whom he had labored so long, he could help no more. If he went among them to-day, and listened to their complaints, he should have no comfort for them, could counsel nothing but that which it were best for them to learn for themselves: — submission.

Oman, faint from long fasting, leaned his head against the door, and looked out across the quiet fields. His

thoughts were turned to strange things. He remembered that it was the fourth day of April: — the day when Mandu was accustomed to worship at the distant tombs of Rai-Khizar-Pál, the Woman, and the Slave. There would be no prayers offered there to-day. What matter? What mattered anything? To the strange one, leaning upon the dawn, came a great peace. Perhaps he slept. Certainly he dreamed; for there passed before him, in the faint light, a pageant of those whom he had known. And they called to him, softly, and welcomed him with greetings. First of all, from out of the long ago, came Kota, his mother, who looked on him with tender eyes, as one who had worshipped her first-born; and, with gentle motions, she beckoned to him. Next was Hushka, the Bhikkhu, clad in worn, yellow robes, with a pale nimbus round his head. There was peace in his shining eyes, and Oman knew that he no longer dreaded the weary eight months' pilgrimage. He had won his eternal Arहतship. Then followed Churi, madness no longer written in his haggard face. He smiled upon Oman, and called a greeting, in friendly voice. After him came Bhavani, looking as in life, an expression of high dignity mingling with the infinite affection in his face. Behind, moved young Viradha, with many wounds; and Zenaide, newly dead, with lilies in her hands. Slowly, slowly they passed from sight: phantasms, perhaps, of Oman's brain. He thought them gone, when, out of the gray mist, came two more, hand in hand, spirits interlocked, faint, shadowy, as if they did not live even

in their ghostly land: a man and a woman. Seeing them, Oman shuddered violently, and shut his eyes. When he looked again upon the world, there was nothing there. He felt only a great warmth in his heart, a burning eagerness to answer the calling of his dead. Thus he straightened up, and started forth, looking neither to the right nor left, in the direction of the great palace.

His way was lonely. He met no one till he had passed round the building where the Asra chieftain lay asleep. Behind the palace sat a little group of slaves, eating a meal of millet cakes and milk, which they timidly offered to share with Oman. Oman sat with them, and broke their bread, and drank of their simple beverage; then, rising, he offered them a ring which he wore in memory of Bhavani: — a circlet of plain gold; all that he had upon him of any value. Wondering, the simple creatures accepted it, not in payment for what he had eaten, but because high lords walk always abroad with gifts for the poor. And, proffering thanks to Oman and to Vishnu indiscriminately, they watched the hermit begin his descent of the plateau.

It was nearly noon when he stood at last upon the plain. He had been a long time coming down; for he had been often obliged to pause and rest. He began to realize that he was shattered by the struggle of yesterday. Body and nerves played him false, and the result of his many years of austere living suddenly threw itself against him and broke his force. Nevertheless, he proceeded, walking feebly across the plain toward the

river bank, wondering a little how, when he had reached the river, he was going to finish his journey. None seeing him would have believed that he could walk five miles more. Yet that was what he had set out to do. He wished to go to the river temple, to pray for the three that were buried there.

His passage across the plain was strangely solitary. The rich fields, in which stood crops already a foot high the young spears calling for water, were deserted. Here also was the trace of the invader. All the people of the lowland, quickly getting news of Mandu's disaster, had driven together their herds of cattle and buffalo and retreated with them into the jungle:—a heedless, sheeplike retreat, that lost them their half-year's crops, but could not make encounter with the soldiers of the Prophet less inevitable.

An hour after noon, weary and faint, tottering, indeed, as he moved, Oman reached the bank of the bright-flowing Narmáda. Here he found that his providence had not deserted him. On the shore, close at hand, drawn a little up from the swift water, lay one of the broad, flat-bottomed boats used occasionally by peasants for ferrying the stream. The guiding-poles lay in it—a fact that told much. Those that had used the boat would not use it again, else they had taken the poles with them. Oman stared at it for a few moments, uncertainly. Then he waded into the water, and dragged it, with great effort, after him. When it was afloat, he threw himself upon it, took one of the poles, pointed his barge down-stream, and then, as the

current took it with a rush, lay down supine, folded his arms across his breast, and shut his eyes.

The afternoon of the first day of Mohammedan Mandu was growing late. Yellow shadows lengthened across the fields. To the south, the flat, alluvial plain stretched away, dotted now and then with a mud town, or fringed with the jungle into which, in the India of that day, all civilization sooner or later resolved itself. In the north, not very far distant, rose the great rock of Mandu, crowned with her circle of stone palaces; and back of that, a silent, threatening horde, stood the dark Vindhya, barriers of the Dekkhan.

Of these things Oman saw none. He knew that they were there, but his eyes were at rest, and the troubles of life and of conquest had left his heart. He was floating swiftly into the sunset. His boat, guided as if by magic, swept on, down the rushing current, till the tiny, dark blot of the temple-tomb grew, and took shape, and drew near upon the right bank. After a time Oman stood up to watch, waiting for a moment when he could beach the boat beside the building. But help was not demanded of his hands. As they neared the destination, the river curved; and suddenly, driven by some counter-current, the boat whirled off and ran aground, exactly in front of the tomb. It was, perhaps, the selfsame twist that had, more than forty years before, thrown the bodies of the man and woman up out of their grim refuge. To him that was waiting to enter the temple, it was a miracle. He felt that he had chosen a true way; that his act in

leaving Mandu had been approved by a higher mind than his.

Now, in the golden afternoon, he stood alone before the tomb. A vast stillness encompassed him as he moved forward and unlocked the heavy doors. There, in the dim mustiness of the long-closed place, stood the two sarcophagi; and, as always, when he came alone hither, he had a feeling of intimacy with the dead. But this sense had never been so strong as now. He knelt beside the ashes of Ahalya and Fidá, and prayed to the great Brahm; and, as he prayed, there arose in his breast an overmastering desire: — the desire to lay himself down in the shadows of the little place and sleep. After a time he passed over to the resting-place of the old Rajah, and dumbly craved his forgiveness for the wrong done him by his wife and his slave. Then, finally, he went outside again, and stood upon the bank of the stream.

Sunset had come. The Narmáda rushed by: a tempestuous flood of crimson and gold. The world was alight with fiery glory. It was the sign of the conqueror in the land. Only the being who stood alone in his surrounding solitude, the long years of his expiation and atonement behind him now, could turn his face fearlessly, without dread, toward that coppery sky. As he gazed into it, the gray and violet shadows came stealing out over the splendor. The day was dying. It was again the prophecy of the India that should, in time, conquer its conquerors.

With a palpitating heart, Oman gazed about him,

overcome by the strangest emotion. It was as if his souls were straining at their fetters. Yet still there was a sense of desolation, a lack of something that was to come. Darkness was around him. Then suddenly, out of the west, from the now hidden fires there, it appeared: — the slender, gray-winged bird, the mysterious complement of his souls. As of old, straight to his breast it flew, trembling and warm. Clasp- ing it close, Oman lifted his head and murmured softly :

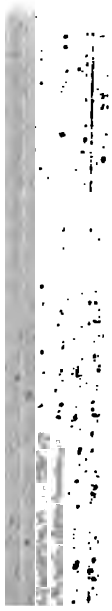
“ Lord, it is finished. Let me now go.”

Then he turned, and slowly, very slowly, walked into the temple. One outside, looking in through the shadows, might have perceived that he laid himself down upon the tomb of the two that had sinned of old; and that the bird upon his breast was still. A little later, moved, perhaps, by the evening wind, the doors swung gently to upon the body that had now delivered up its long-imprisoned souls.

* * * * *

What befell on High I do not know. But the her- mit of the Silver Peak, the Saint of Mandu, was gone. Nor was he seen upon earth again.

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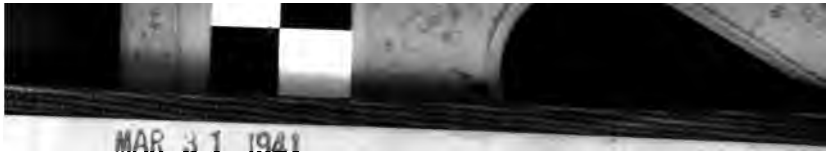
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