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BEST STORIES
OF
Modern Bengal

BEST STORIES OF MODERN BENGAL



VOLUME TWO

Edited by Dilip K Gupta

Translated by Nilima Devi



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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

The second volume of "Best Stories of Modern Bengal" has been long delayed by the many war-time difficulties which publishers have to face. We hope that the numerous readers who have repeatedly enquired about its date of publication will realise that this delay was really unavoidable and accept our apologies.

In spite of its shortcomings, the first volume of "Best Stories of Modern Bengal" received very warm appreciation from the press and public throughout India and many places abroad. This has strengthened our belief that there was a real need for presenting the works of modern Bengali writers to the English-reading public. We note, with satisfaction, that the first volume published by The Signet Press has given the impetus to several publishers to supplement our work with other translations.

In preparing these two volumes of stories, we have not followed the usual chronological order, nor have we attempted the impossible by placing the authors in order of merit. Stories by some of the mature and well-established authors have been included in this second volume together with stories by the most promising writers of the younger generation, in order to make it as well balanced and varied as possible.

It is natural that personal preferences should have played some part in our selection, but advice was also

sought from a wide circle of critics as well as the authors themselves who, in the majority of cases, agreed with us. We are grateful to all of them for giving us the benefit of their valuable opinion.

We have, however, tried to keep two main points in view. The first: that the stories should be the most suitable for translation, both from the writer's and the translator's point of view—it should, when translated, convey the writer's style in the most representative manner, and at the same time be equally readable in translation as in the original. The second: that the stories should cover as many aspects as possible of the life of Bengal as it was lived yesterday, is being lived today, and will perhaps be lived tomorrow; that the themes should provide the greatest variety and feature every class and strata of Bengali society.

We acknowledge our debt of gratitude to a number of people for their help, advice and co-operation. First to the authors and publishers for granting us permission to include their stories in our anthology; to Mr M. H. Broom for undertaking the arduous task of revising the manuscript and his continuous encouragement and support; to Mr Pratap K. Sinha of Bengal Paper Mills Ltd. for arranging the supply of paper; to Dr Amiya Chakravarty and Mr Debī Prasad Chatterjee for writing the notes on the authors. We have also to thank Miss Emily Durham, Mrs Edna Bridge, and Mrs Colleen Barrett for doing the laborious secretarial work.

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AMALA DEVI



NAARA

Naara was the son of our neighbour Mahesh Acharya. Mahesh used to work in a coal mine ; while working there he was buried under a load of coal and died. For his widow he left plenty of memories, plenty of inherited debts, a dark thirteen-year-old marriageable daughter and a ten-year-old son. So, before she could finish bewailing her husband, the widowed Dayamoyee had to come and stand before the creditors. Their lands, garden, pond—whatever they possessed was sold off to pay the debts. There only remained the paternal home, that is, a mud-built cottage and a couple of thatched huts.

Dayamoyee's father was working in a district town school as a Pandit. When he heard the news he came to see his daughter. He wept much, beating his forehead and his chest. He proved to Dayamoyee that her present sorrow was due to some act she had done in a previous incarnation, by reciting several well chosen Sanskrit verses; but he could give Dayamoyee no inkling as to how she was to carry on her daily existence, marry her daughter and bring up her son. Of course, one could not blame the Pandit very much, because it was beyond the means of a middle-class Bengali father to take upon himself the burden of a daughter together with her children, after having spent his last penny on marrying that daughter. Dayamoyee realised this, she said, "I'll be able to manage somehow by begging or taking up domestic service, but father, please arrange

about Naara's education. If he can read and write English, the sahib has promised a job for him." The Pandit agreed to this. After a few days, with a good deal of coaxing and explaining Naara was sent to his maternal grandfather's home to study English. Dayamoyee took up the job of both cook and maid-servant in a well-to-do house in the neighbourhood.

Seven years later. The year I believe was 1930, it was the month of Jaistha. After getting my M.A. degree I was just about to pull up by its ears the minor school in our village which had just been promoted to a high school, when the wind in India, as well as Bengal, suddenly became hot. Leaders poured forth a stream of heated rhetoric and boys came out from schools and colleges, began picketing excise shops and razing the date-palms to the ground. I heard that our district town was also infected. So, sitting in my front-room, I was consulting the Head Pandit whether we should give up all hope of being able to realise our salaries and close our school, when cries of 'Bande Mataram,' 'Mahatma Gandhiji-ki-jai,' came to our ears.

The Head Pandit ran towards the door with his dhoti flying in all directions. He peeped out, shook his head, threw up his hands and said, "It has arrived, I had better go and look after Bhonda." With this he ran off trying to arrange his dhoti.

As soon as I came out into the verandah to see what it was all about, I saw—our Naara and a band of vagabond boys who had been driven out from school. Naara wore a Gandhi-cap and a dhoti and shirt made of khaddar. The other volunteers had not yet been able to get together their uniform. Seeing me Naara came forward with his followers, greeted me and said, "I've come to you Dada."

I asked, "When did you come?"

Naara replied, "Last night."

"Has your school been closed?"

"I've left school."

In surprise I asked, "You've left school, why?"

With a smile Naara replied, "What's the good of studying? In a slave country—"

Before he could finish I cried out, "Instead of studying what should you do?"

With fire in his eyes, his right hand fisted and flung out Naara replied, "Fight."

Bewildered, I asked, "Fight? With whom?"

Naara replied in a solemn, unmoved voice, "Fight with the British Government."

"What are you saying? Where is your ammunition?"

"There's no need for ammunition. Our fight is a non-violent fight. We won't obey the British Government, we'll take their bullets with our chests outstretched. Our blood will flow and beat wave upon wave on the heart of the country, and with that blood our mean-

ness, our poverty, our cowardice and our slave-mentality will be washed away."

I realised that Naara was passing off someone else's speech as his own. I protested, "Didn't your grandfather say anything?"

Naara cried out angrily, "Who is grandfather to me that I have to listen to him? Mother, uncle, sister, brother? We need no one. Our country is our mother. Mahatma Gandhi is our teacher, Nakur Babu is our general."

I questioned, "Who is Nakur Babu?"

Narra was thunderstruck. In great surprise he said, "You don't know Nakur Babu, the president of the District Congress Committee? Although you live in this district?"

I replied, "What need have I of knowing Nakur Babu?"

Naara replied with a smile, "That's true. When one has to rot all one's life in prison, it is enough to know only the warders. But Nakur Babu has said that he himself will come to make your acquaintance."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that he is coming here in a few days time and we've come to make the arrangements. We need your school courtyard. The meeting will be held there."

I became anxious and said, "You can't hold any swadeshi meetings in the school premises, the Government aid will be stopped."

Naara replied indifferently, "Let it, what does it matter? The school will be closed in any case. We'll picket the school and get out all the boys. When one's house is on fire, it's not the time to sit and do sums; old and young, all will have to gird on their belts and help to put out the fire."

I became disgusted and said, "You needn't give all those wordy lectures to me; I've heard them all before. Listen, I'm giving you good advice. Give up all this, go and get properly educated and become a man, then rid your mother of her sorrows."

Naara laughed and said, "It's to rid our mother of her sorrows that I've come out, Dada."

Just behind Naara was Taana (this boy had given up his studies after he failed to get promotion to the second class). He had been testing whether he could turn me to ashes just by glaring at me. He said contemptuously, "Dada, we've no time to waste on futile discussions, we've to go to many other places." Naara remarked, "True." Then looking towards me, he continued, "We are going today, the meeting will be held in the school courtyard, we have all decided about it. But there's something else—you'll have to give us a donation, with a man like Nakur Babu coming, it won't look well unless we give a good purse. All right, good-bye." He went away with his followers.

I was charmed with Naara's appearance. A tall, well-built figure, fair complexion—the blue khaddar shirt

suitd him wonderfully well. But I was perturbed to hear all he had to say! Mahesh Acharya's son! The Mahesh who had served sahibs with life-long devotion; the man who fell flat on the ground in salutation when he saw a sahib twenty yards away; who even crawled when he dreamt of a sahib; and that his son should be out to fight the self-same sahibs! There was no harm if he went on with this mission, but why did he have to bring all these troubles into our village? Already, the school was shaky, if it got a push from outside would it last? More than likely it would collapse to the ground, and what then? I rushed off to the secretary's house.

Our secretary gave the order to close the school. So I ordered the students to assemble in the courtyard and appeared with all the teachers before them. The Head Pandit gave a long lecture full of good advice on the duty of the students. He said, "You should avoid with all your might the movement which is being carried on against the Government by a lot of unemployed and irresponsible young men. British rule was established in our country by the will of God Almighty for our own good. Thousands of years ago, it was predicted by sages such as Manu and Jagyabalka; there is no limit to the sin of those who go against it. In this life they will serve lifelong imprisonment and after death they will suffer eternal pain in hell. Besides, you read every day in your books what a lot of good the British are doing for us. You know about the Railways and the Union Boards.

So many of our people who have learnt English are serving in good jobs, bringing home fat salaries every month, would it have been possible if there was no British Raj? Haven't you seen our Magistrate Sahib and his wife? (A few of the boys stood up and cried out, 'We've seen them, sir, we've seen them.') To look at them, by their dress and speech, no one can take them for anything but a sahib and memsahib—never as Bengalees like us. How was this possible? They learnt English, went to England and were taken into favour by the British—that's how. If you too learn English with devotion, when you grow up, who knows you may become judges, magistrates or at least circle officers? So my sons, don't listen to these people. As soon as the school is closed, go each one of you, to your own home and put your mind to your studies. God will bless you."

Finally, after telling the students that they should not join any movement; that they should study well during the holidays and send two months' school fees without delay, I closed the meeting.

The same evening I was sitting talking with my assistant teachers, when the order came from inside the house that I should put in an appearance without delay. When I went in, I saw Naara's mother—Dayamoyee—and my wife sitting facing each other in the verandah. Seeing me, my wife pulled her veil forward and said in a whisper, "Listen to what Kakima is saying." Dayamoyee said, "Tell me my father, what am I to do—

Naara has given up his studies and come here."

I said, "I've met him." Dayamoyee cried eagerly, "Have you seen him? Have you reasoned with him?"

I said, "How can I reason with him? He wants to reason with me." My wife cried in surprise, "Really?" I said, "Yes! He says I should break up the school and all of us should join him in his rowdiness."

My wife cried angrily, "The boy has gone to the dogs!" Dayamoyee said in a wailing voice, "He says a lot more, which I don't understand. He says that Lakshmi and I are nothing to him. His mother is somebody called 'Bharat.' Says that he'll fight; a fire's burning somewhere—he's going to jump into it. What am I to do? He's the only hope I live for—if he behaves like this it's better for me to die!" With this she began weeping silently.

I said, "The fault is your father's. If he had brought Naara here himself, or had sent you the news the moment Naara escaped, the boy wouldn't have dared to become so unruly. Instead of that, your father sat doing nothing. Meanwhile Naara has been going all over the place, mixing with leaders, his head has been turned by their lectures; now he has returned home and is trying to create trouble here. Do you think the worry is yours only? Our worry is still greater. Ganguly Mahashaya has gone to take the advice of the Daroga."

Startled with fear Dayamoyee cried out, "Why the Daroga? Are they going to take Naara away?"

I said, "No, it's not as bad as all that. Naara has said that he'll bring someone from town to give a lecture here—that's why."

My wife cried angrily, "So they've been to inform the police about that tiny boy! He could be stopped with a good scolding. Instead of that Ganguly runs to the Daroga! The old man is in his second childhood!"

Dayamoyee caught hold of her hand and said, "You are right my daughter!"

I said, "It's no use scolding him or trying to coax him. If he sees reason, it'll only be through fear of the police." After a pause I continued, "We're trying, you too try to induce him by weeping. If he doesn't change after all that, then it's just your evil fate!"

Next morning I was attending to the books and papers of the Union Board, when the cry of 'Bande Mataram' from many voices came to my ears. After that came a lot more noise, then still louder cries of 'Bande Mataram' and a little later the Head Pandit's excited voice, "I'll call the police, I'll go to court, I'll teach the wretched boys a lesson!" I came out. Seeing me the Pandit burst into loud wailing, beating his head he said, "Everything's lost!" Seeing that the sunshine had suddenly melted into rain I asked in surprise, "What's the matter? Is someone ill in your house?"

The Pandit stopped crying and said, "It would have been better if someone was ill, he would have died at home. Now he'll die for nothing after being beaten up

by the police.' I asked. "Who are you talking about?"

"Why, our Bhonda! The wretched boy has gone and joined Naara. The boy is really a devil! He tried to intimidate me. If I had strength in my body, I'd have pulled out his teeth one by one." He gestured with his hands as if he were really doing what he said.

I made the Pandit sit down and got the whole story from him. It was like this—the Pandit's wife had put a four-anna bit for the next day's marketing on a shelf in her bedroom. When she went to find it in the morning, she saw that it had disappeared and in its place there was a tiny slip of paper. The lady was stupefied and gave the slip to the Pandit. Reading it, the Pandit was enflamed and losing all reason went to beat his wife. But the next moment he realised his mistake and rushed off towards the Swaraj Ashram. I asked, "Where is the Swaraj Ashram?"

The Pandit replied, "Why? That thatched hut of Mahesh Acharya's! They have flown a flag over it—the Swaraj flag"—

"And then?"

The Pandit did not have to go very far. He met the Swaraj Committee on his way. The Pandit went right into their midst and caught hold of his son Bhondarchandra, by the ear and began dragging him away. Everyone protested loudly. Naara chased him and growled at him, "Let him go!" The Pandit did not listen but continued dragging the boy away. The band of

volunteers surrounded him. Naara was ready to give him a thrashing and said, "You've no right to lay hands on any of our members." The Pandit asked wryly, "Was the boy first a Swaraj volunteer or my son?"

Naara replied, "What proof have you that he's your son?"

The Pandit was fired with rage. He said, "Proof? This is the proof." With this he let go of Bhonda's ear and gave him a hard slap. Reeling, Bhonda managed to hide in the midst of the volunteer-army. Everyone began shouting "Bande Mataram," and some of them began making insulting remarks about keeping a 'top-knot.' The Pandit then had to leave the place after cursing their living and dead parents.

I said it was not good to create such a fuss over such a small matter. The Pandit shouted, "Not good? What are you saying sir? One's son goes mixes with a lot of bad companions and I have to keep quiet? Besides there's the four-anna bit!" Then getting excited he said, "He's lucky that I didn't chop off his head."

I said, "The luck is not his, but yours. This isn't the era of Mahabharata, this is the kingdom of the British; you have the right to feed and bring up your son, but not to take his life."

"Then sir, are all the boys in the village to be ruined because of this boy and nothing done?"

"What can be done?"

"I'll send Bhonda to his maternal uncle's home. It's

an absolutely old-fashioned village; it's still in the pre-historic age."

"What, if your son doesn't want to go?"

"I'll discard him."

"But if he discards you before that?"

The Pandit got annoyed and said, "You are talking nonsense sir. Your own children haven't grown up—that's why you can remain so calm. It's easy for you to do nothing; I'll go to Ganguly Mahashaya, if anyone can show us a way out of all this, he can." With this the Pandit departed.

That evening when I returned home I saw that my wife was wiping her eyes and nose on the end of her saree. I said, "Have you caught a cold?" In a heavy voice she replied, "No, Naara came."

Not understanding what relationship there could be between Naara's coming and water streaming out of her eyes and nose, I asked, "What of it?"

My wife without replying to my question said, "I'm wondering how God can put up with all this!"

What could have happened to God! I asked, "What's the matter?" A streak of lightning flashed across the damp dull sky. In a harsh tone she cried, "As if you don't know anything. Go and hear from Naara." In fear I asked, "Why don't you tell me?" My wife replied, "Don't try to be so clever. I may be an ignorant woman but you are educated, you read newspapers, and still you don't know anything?" I gazed at her stupefied. She

continued, "They are shooting down people like mad dogs. They aren't sparing either children, old people or even women; they are snatching away babes from their mothers' breasts, dashing them on the ground and killing them in front of their mothers. They are whipping women in their homes, after stripping them of their clothes, and you know nothing?" I said gravely, "These are all lies. Naara made them up." Flashing her eyes my wife said, "They are not lies, if they were lies all the boys in the country wouldn't have gone crazy, besides nowadays the boys don't tell lies. It's rather"—

I finished the sentence for her and said, "We who tell lies."

"That's quite true. You've hung up a curtain of lies and are hiding behind it, lest you should have to go out of your home. You are not only cowards, but also worthless as human beings."

I stared at my wife and said, "I should go and join Naara, is that what you want?"

My wife nodded assent. I said, "But I'll lose my job."

"Let it go—it's not such a wonderful job! After a year when we establish our own kingdom, you'll get many better jobs."

"Did Naara tell you that?"

My wife nodded and said, "Yes."

"But I'll have to go to prison."

My wife paused and then said, "Why will you have to go to prison?"

"Why? I go against the Government and they, I suppose, give me a title and a pat on the back?"

"But Naara said that everyone needn't go to prison."

I shook my head and said, "Of course he says that. If Swaraj is established, those who go to prison will get the best jobs. If I am to join them I insist on going to prison."

My wife was silent and worried for a few moments then she said, "Very well then, go. So many young boys are going, what's there to be afraid of?"

I replied in great delight, "I'll go. From today I'll practise eating 'lapsi.' We are already used to doing salaam to the Sirkar. Now you needn't rub your nose and turn it into a ripe tomato!" And I rushed out.

I felt grieved and hurt. What was the good of a domestic life, when one's wife was so eager to push one off to prison. Whatever happened, tomorrow I would go and put down my name in Nakur Babu's gang. But how wrong of Naara! He might do whatever he liked outside, but what was the necessity of spreading his movement inside one's home? Or perhaps this was the first maxim of propaganda. If you want to get the men into your group—get at the women. You need an army? Go and turn the women crazy—all the men will come and put down their names for your army. You want votes? Send women to canvass, all the people will come rushing to give you votes. You want to run

a Guru's business? Get at the women and make them disciples, all the men will come and stretch themselves flat on the ground.

I went off and reached Ganguly Mahashaya's sitting-room. The light had not been lit. As soon as I entered, I could hear Ganguly's voice, "You'll send me to prison, wretched woman—with whom are you going to live?" Mrs. Ganguly replied, "Yes, they'll send you to prison! As if that's true! The wretched man can't get over his fear! Just because you are the most respected person in the village, that's why the boys are asking you. Think, they didn't go to anyone else?"

Ganguly replied, "Why should they? All this is that devil Radhu's machinations. He's trying to get me into trouble."

"Yes, everyone is trying to get you into trouble! Naara was saying that if you don't agree Radhu will."

Ganguly asked, "What did Naara say?"

She replied, "He said that Radhu will join, then your face will shine with glory!"

Ganguly paused for a while, then said, "Let him, I can't be mixed up with all this."

Mrs. Ganguly replied firmly, "Very well. I too will have nothing to do with your home. You can live with your Daroga, Chowkidar and Circle Babu. You haven't a son, just a whole gang of daughters, who's going to inherit your kingdom? A broomstick on the face of the Union Board Presidentship!"

Ganguly cried arrogantly, "What! A broomstick on my face? I'll leave this place and go. It's better to become a beggar and live with a Vaishnava woman, than to live with a wife like you!"

Ganguly's wife shouted, "How dare you! I'm telling you—you're not to talk like that!"

"I'll say it a hundred times. I am going off to the akhra at Shyampukur!" He came running out and crashed into me. I too nearly fell, but balanced myself by holding on to the wall and Ganguly balanced himself by holding on to me with both hands. After a few moments he said, "Who is it? I suppose it's Radhu. So you're eavesdropping, are you?"

I said, "No grandfather, it's I."

Ganguly became reassured and said, "Oh, you. I've got into an awful mess. Come outside I'll tell you."

As we were going I said, "You needn't tell me, I know. You've got to preside tomorrow. Isn't that it?"

"Yes That wretched Naara has turned my wife crazy. Can you tell me what I am to do?"

"Why do you ask me, in my home also?"

Ganguly broke in, "They've turned your wife crazy too? What does she say?"

"She says that I'll have to go to prison."

"And my school? It's to go to blazes, I suppose? I'll drive Naara out of the village—you wait and see."

"Where are you going?"

"To Daroga Babu. I've to find a way out. Come.

At night when I sat down to have my meal I pushed away the fish and vegetable-curry, mixed up a sloppy mess with the rice and some dal and began swallowing it up hurriedly. My wife as usual was sitting near me and looking after me, she said gravely, "What's this?"

I said, "I'm practising eating 'lapsi.' When I go to prison that's what I'll have to eat." Then pretending great satisfaction I said, "It's not bad—I like it. I see I'll have no trouble about food. I'll probably feel a little lonely, but if I get a companion"—

My wife said, "How are you going to get a companion in prison?"

I said, "One didn't get companions before of course, but nowadays men and women are going to prison in great numbers, and there's not room for so many people to stay. So, they shut up the men and women together."

My wife asked in surprise, "They keep men and women together?"

With my mouth full, I replied, "Of course they do. That's the fun; otherwise why should so many people go to prison?" I paused and then continued, "If I get a beautiful, genial and sweet woman as a companion, I shan't return from prison. I'll stay there for the rest of my life!" My wife gave no reply and went away looking grave.

Next morning Ganguly's youngest daughter Tunoo came and said, "Mother's calling you," and ran off before I could ask anything.

When I arrived at Ganguly's house I saw Grannie Ganguly sitting silent on the verandah. Seeing me she said, "Come in."

I sat down and looked at her face questioningly. She said, "Last night he went out in anger—he hasn't returned yet."

I asked, "Why?"

Grannie began spinning out her tale, "Naara came and said they are going to hold a meeting today, and wanted him to be the president. Who is there in the village except my husband who is worthy of this honour? So I agreed. Was I wrong? But the moment I told him, he flared up and said whatever came to his mind, then in the end he went out."

"Have you searched for him?"

She replied in a sharp voice, "Who's going to search for him? He isn't a baby to get lost or be kidnapped? I'll do nothing; I'll wait a little longer and if he doesn't return I'll go off to my parents' home with the girls. Then see what the old man does!"

I said very gravely, "Listen—you mustn't do that. He's really been very depressed the last few days. It won't surprise me if he leaves home."

Discarding her solemn manner Grannie asked anxiously, "Has he said anything to you?"

"Yes, after the Vaishnavies sang at the akhra in Shyampukur, the very next day"—

She asked drily, "What did he say?"

"He said that he didn't like home any longer and if it wasn't for his work as President of the Union Board, he would have gone away. I suggest you had better let him do what he wants, don't force him into anything."

"Who's forcing him to anything, let him do what he wants!" She paused a little then said, "Can you go and ask him back? I'm a woman—it wouldn't look well if I went."

I asked, "Where has he gone?"

Ganguly's wife turned away her face and said, "Perhaps to Shyampukur."

For a long time there had been a Vaishnava akhra in Shyampukur. A number of middle-aged Vaishnavas and Vaishnavies lived there permanently. These Vaishnavies very often came to our village to beg. Recently there was a festival of the Vaishnavas at Sonapur. A number of pretty young Vaishnavies had come from there and taken shelter in the akhra. A couple of them had come to our village a few days back and their singing had created quite a stir amongst the men and women of our village.

I said, "Who told you that he has gone to Shyampukur?"

Ganguly's wife replied angrily. "Where else is there room for him to go?" She gnashed her teeth and cried, "Before, I'd have given him a broomstick"—

"There, you see—you're getting angry. Then it's no use calling him back, you'll start quarrelling as soon as

he returns." Ganguly's wife controlled her temper and said in a natural manner, "No, I won't quarrel with him, go and call him."

But I went towards the police station and not towards Shyampukur because according to the advice of the Daroga Babu, Ganguly had spent the night there. I brought Ganguly back, sent him inside, stood in the front-room and listened to the conversation between husband and wife. The wife said, "Where did you spend all last night? I was so worried I sent the teacher-grandson to search for you."

Ganguly replied gravely, "Where else? In the hut dedicated to Siva."

The wife said in surprise, "What? In that depot of ghosts! The cremation ground is nearby! Oh my! What am I to do?"

Ganguly replied in an indifferent manner, "To me the cremation ground and my home are all the same. How many days have I left to live?" His wife cried, "You mustn't say these inauspicious things."

Ganguly said, "I'm telling you the truth. With clouds in the sky hiding the sun, the day is far gone!" He smiled philosophically and said again, "Get my shirt and my chaddar cleaned."

The wife asked, "Why?"

"Because there's the meeting in the afternoon."

The wife replied, "No, no, there's no need for you to go to any meetings."

Ganguly said, "Are you mad? The boys have made a request, if I don't preside over the meeting what will people say of me? You are thinking about my Presidentship of the Union Board—I'm going to resign it. I've already told the Daroga Babu."

"Have you gone crazy? You mustn't give up anything!"

"What's the good of it? I've no son and heir, I have only a gang of girls!"

"Look here, I won't let you go one step out of the house. If you talk about the meeting I'll beat my head on your feet and my blood will flow like the Ganges."

At noon, next day, after I had finished my meal, I was just about to go out when my wife asked, "Where are you going in this heat?"

"I'll come back after going round a bit."

"The sun is strong enough to crack one's head open! You shouldn't go out now, go to your room and lie down."

I scratched my head and said, "I'll return quickly. I haven't many more days in hand, and I'll have to work the whole day out in the sun when I'm imprisoned."

My wife asked, "Oh! So that's why you're practising being out in the sun!" She gazed fixedly at me for a while and then said sarcastically, "Last night you practised eating 'lapsi,' but today I didn't see you leave either the vegetable-curry or the fish or the milk." In a

sharper tone she said, "Instead of being silly go and lie down."

I said, "Just for a little"—

My wife's face went red. She said, "All right go!" And she went off to the kitchen stamping her feet. Thinking it too dangerous to provoke her too much, I went into my bedroom. A nudge woke me up and I saw my wife sitting in front of me. She said, "It seems that with worrying over your country's fate you can't sleep at all! Shall I send for the Kaviraj?" I sat up rubbing my eyes and said in a hoarse drowsy voice, "Do." Suddenly I remembered the meeting and asked, "Did Naara come?"

My wife replied, "Yes, he came. The poor chap has got into a terrible difficulty. Old Ganguly had promised to be the president but I hear his wife has sent a message saying that he won't do it. Naara came to request you." I asked, "What did you say?"

"I said he's getting ready to go to prison, why bother him now. Get hold of someone else."

Suddenly the village sky was pierced with cries of 'Bande Mataram.' I said, "Nakur Babu has already arrived, I'd better go." My wife laughed and said, "No, no, you had better not go near those baby-snatchers. They'll bundle you into their sack and run away with you."

I replied gravely, "Why will they have to bundle me into their sack? I'm ready to go with them willingly."

The meeting was arranged not in the school yard but in the Chandi-mandap. None of the chairs or benches from the school had been lent. The newly-elected president, Radhashyam Naik, had emptied his house to lend one table, two chairs and one bench. These were arranged in the middle of the Chandi-mandap to seat the president and the guests of honour. For the rest of the audience there was the bare floor. Of course for them nothing had to be arranged, but special arrangements had been made for the lady visitors (this was according to the order and desire of Nakur Babu). On the paved platform in front of the temple, a couple of sheets of sacking had been spread for them to sit on and purdah was maintained by hanging up three or four bedsheets.

Seeing me, Naara came forward, received me and seated me next to Nakur Babu and introduced me to him. Nakur Babu raised his two hands to his forehead and asked, "You are the headmaster of the school here?" I nodded assent.

In a chair next to the president—Radhashyam, sat a pretty young woman with a solemn face. I shot Naara a questioning glance indicating her and he replied, "She is Srimati Reba, Nakur Babu's daughter." Naara went forward and told Reba Devi about me. With a smile, a coquettish glance and a nod, she acknowledged me. With a fat belly below his close-necked coat and a bald head over his forehead sat

Radhashyam, he made his naturally solemn face still more solemn.

Gradually the Chandi-mandap became filled with a crowd of people. With the noise of children's and women's voices one's ears seemed about to become deaf. Nakur Babu said, "Narayan Babu (Naara's proper name) is doing a great deal of propaganda." I nodded and said to myself, "He didn't have to do much propaganda, these people have come here of their own accord, but not to hear your speech. They thought that probably there would be a folk-play or fireworks. Besides they haven't seen many well-dressed pretty young women who wear shoes and swing a plait down their backs."

Naara tried to silence the crowd by shouting at them and his co-volunteers wearing blue khaddar shirts and Gandhi-caps went around making them sit down.

After a while the crowd became quiet. Then Naara went up to the table and proposed that Radhashyam should preside and Taana seconded his proposal. But Radhashyam had already occupied the president's chair. Radhashyam ran a cloth-shop and did money-lending. He had tried several times to become the President of the Union Board and failed; probably this was the reason why he had joined Naara. In his life he had never had the opportunity of sitting in a chair in front of everyone. That was why he had lent the chairs and lest others should occupy them he had come and sat down on one first. If he had not been made president he would pro-

bably have left the meeting taking his chairs with him. Naara whispered, "Now offer thanks." Radhashyam replied, "what for? I've paid a subscription, I've lent the chairs and the table"—

Naara said, "It's the rule."

Radhashyam sitting in his chair cried out, "All right, all right. Thanks."

Reba Devi went on smiling to herself. Then Naara gave a short talk introducing Nakur Babu and his daughter and requested Nakur Babu to speak.

Nakur Babu's body was long and thin—a worthy representative of a famine-stricken country. His hair was cropped short; his nose was as beaky as the beak of a kite; his eyes were tiny but their gaze was sharp. His cheek bones stuck out on his thin cheeks next to the hollows round his eyes. His Adam's apple stood like a pyramid on his throat. He wore a short khaddar jacket with short sleeves, a narrow-width khaddar dhoti and swadeshi slippers.

But Reba? Pretty—slim—young. Her face was not square like Nakur Babu's, it was rather longish. A pointed chin, thin lips, eyes bright and black. On whomsoever a glance from those eyes was turned there was a swadeshi volunteer. She wore a Dacca pattern khaddar saree and a blouse to match; a pair of blue velvet sandals on her fair feet. There was no over-abundance of ornaments, she wore only a pair of thin gold bangles and a pair of ear-rings. As soon as Nakur Babu got up Reba

Devi pulled her chair towards me and asked, "You are the headmaster?" I said, "Yes."

With a sweet smile Reba Devi asked, "How much longer are you going to be an overseer of slaves? Why don't you come away with us?"

Though my mind had become mouldy with teaching students grammar and composition, still my heart began to beat and my ears to burn. If a pretty young woman requested me with such a sweet smile I could easily jump into fire, joining the Congress was nothing by comparison. But immediately I remembered my wife and children. I said to myself, "Oh, Mother Mangalchandi! Save me Mother! Rescue me just for this once!"

Reba Devi went on saying, "Mahatma Gandhi is in prison, none of the great leaders are outside prison; the heart of the entire country is afire (Naara too had said these things) and you people are sitting in your homes in comfort?"

Meanwhile, Nakur Babu was pouring forth fire: "One day, our barns were full of grain, our ponds full of fish and our minds full of happiness and peace. The British have looted all that. Today who is there in the world so poor, so low and so wretched as we are. We can't even speak to our own mother as 'mother,' the British choke our throats! If we try to retrieve the honour of our Mother—the British raise their guns at us"—

A group of people sitting in front were pointing their

fingers at Reba Dewi and making funny remarks about her. Gazing towards them with his hand raised menacingly, Nakur Babu went on: "You don't like what I am saying—it's not possible for you to do so. For two hundred years you've spent your lives like animals and lost your humanity and self-respect. You don't hear the pathetic weeping of the Mother—our country—who is fettered, oppressed, and lying in the dust. That cry was heard by the greatest son of Mother India—Mahatma Gandhi—that cry was heard by Chittaranjan and Bipin Chandra—that cry has been heard by us—that's why we've left our homes and gone forth. Our homes are on fire—look, (everyone looked in the direction towards which Nakur Babu was pointing) the very roof of our homes are about to be set on fire! (All the low-caste people of the village had gathered outside around the Chandi-mandap and loud cries of 'fire,' 'fire,' came from them. The volunteers went and quieted them and said, 'It's not that fire, it's a different kind of fire—you keep quiet.') Leave your homes and come out. The fire must be put out. All the men and women, boys and girls of the country are coming out—they are giving their lives—they are giving their hearts' blood. The country's sky is resounding with cries of pain. Are you people going to remain deaf? Come—don't hesitate—every moment is precious. Come! The thirty-three crores of people in India with their thirty-three crores of determined minds and sixty-six

crores of fisted arms—let us all join the fray. Our homes will be built up once again, our Mother will once again be established as queen in her own home. Cry out brothers, cry out—‘Bande Mataram!’” Naara and his gang shouted, “Bande Mataram!” One or two people joined in their cry and shouted, “Bande Mataram!”

Reba Devi gave me a killing smile and said, “Say ‘Bande Mataram,’ there’s no harm.”

I laughed and said, “I’m saying it to myself.”

Reba Devi said, “Whom are you trying to cheat? Through the gap of your cheating, all your humanity is completely disappearing—don’t you see that?”

Nakur Babu returned to his seat. Naara requested Radhashyam to make a speech.

Radhashyam shook his head and said, “Are you mad! I can’t do that.” Naara said, “It’s the rule.”

Naara pulled Radhashyam and made him stand up. He stood there perspiring. Naara urged him, “Go on, say something.”

Radhashyam somehow managed to say, “What this gentleman has said is very good. Everyone of you should do according to what he says.” On this point someone called out from behind, “Set fire to Radhashyam’s foreign cloth-shop!” Radhashyam shook his head and said, “No, no, you mustn’t do that. If you do I’ll fix all of you!” Naara pulled him back and made him sit down.

Reba said, "I want to get acquainted with the village-women, do come with me!" When I called Naara she said, "Why don't you come too?" The moment I went in front of the women with Reba Devi, those who were married to men younger than myself veiled their faces, the girls stared blankly, the older women smiled sarcastically and my wife gave one burning look at me and turned her face away.

Reba Devi addressed the women and said, "The success of our movement depends on you. I don't ask you to come out of your homes, only to send out your men. This is no time for us to live in comfort with our husbands, sons and relations. You know about the Rajput women. They used to gird their husbands and sons in battle array with their own hands. If they came back defeated they refused to allow their husbands to enter their homes, even to recognise them. Did they love their husbands less than you do? No, they loved their husbands very deeply but they loved freedom, bravery and humanity far more. Another thing, to carry on the movement we need money. We're all poor, but the vast ocean is composed of drops of water. Narayan Babu has collected some subscriptions from the men, you should also give something. A gift from you will be to your credit in the book in which the debit and credit account of our lives is being recorded."

After this everyone pulled forward their veils and sat down turning their backs on us. Only my wife took off

[a bangle and sent it by my daughter. Naara whispered something into Reba Devi's ear—she turned round with a soul-piercing smile at me and said, "Oh, I understand." Then Naara's elder sister, Lakshmi, came and stood in front of her. With trembling hands she put a pair of gold ear-rings into Reba Devi's hands. This was probably the only thing that the poor woman had in the world—the only memory of her married life. She sacrificed it to please her brother. If any gift is recorded in any book of life, Lakshmi's gift should remain there far above any other gift ever given.

After the meeting was over, when I returned home putting Nakur Babu and his daughter into their car (Naara also accompanied them) my wife asked, "May I know what have you been doing all this time?" I replied absent-mindedly, "What could I do? They wouldn't let me go." My wife cried angrily, "As if they'd bother about having you with them! It was you who stuck to them like a leech!" Then after a pause she continued, "They—you mean that wretched girl?" I made no answer either by word or sign but sat looking at the beams of the roof; with my whole body I could feel my wife's threatening gaze concentrated on me. A little later she said, "If anyone in your home asks you anything you don't feel like answering, you sit with a face as round as a cooking-pot with grumpiness May I

know what was the subject of conversation which was going on there with your face wreathed in smiles? I didn't see you paying attention to the speech."

I replied, "She was telling me about the movement."

"I saw that she was telling you something, but what was she actually saying, be kind enough to tell me that!"

"She was requesting me to join the movement. She's going to prison very soon. She was saying 'Why don't you come too, let's go to prison together.'"

My wife cried out angrily, "Yes, how else can there be any fun? That's why she was telling us to drive out our men from our homes! Do you think I didn't understand to whom she was speaking? Even if I don't know how to dress like her, I've some brains in my head, I am not absolutely a fool. Such side glances and smiles! May her face burn!"

I replied, "Shame! You shouldn't say such things! She was praising you highly."

"A broomstick on her praise! I lost my bangle for nothing. It would have been far better to give it as an offering to the gods or to a Brahmin."

I said, "You've done very well. It's really a bad day for our country. It's not the time for anyone to sit at home in comfort. Each of us must do whatever he can."

My wife frowned and asked, "What does that mean?" I said, "It means that one must join the movement!" My wife said angrily, "Who must join—why don't you say so frankly!"

I replied, "Myself and others following my example."

She stretched out her right hand and shook her thumb many times in front of my nose and said, "Give up all these ideas. Even if you burst your heart and die I won't let you move one step. You'll join! What about me! Did I come drifting in on a flood?"

Anyway, on one side I was reassured, but within two days there was another sensation in the village. Naara's gang began picketing opium and excise shops. I asked permission from my wife to go and see it. After a lot of questioning she allowed me to go, but she sent our eldest son to guard me. When I arrived, I saw that a crowd of people had gathered in front of the shop. I pushed myself into the front row. My son complained that he could not see properly, so I had to pick him up in my arms.

It was Taana and Paana's turn that day. With folded hands they were begging customers not to buy—they were falling on the feet of some people, others they pulled back clutching at the back of their dhoties. Some of the buyers turned their backs and fled; some of them moved and stood waiting their opportunity; some used force to push their way in; others shoved the boys away, snatched their hands from their clothing and ran into the shop. All the onlookers were rolling with laughter. They had never seen such fun in their lives. Suddenly crying, "Move away, move away," Bishu Gorai of our village came and stood right in front. Anyone could

realise without any difficulty that Bishu was a confirmed opium-eater from his looks. A skeleton of a body, arms and legs like sticks; a basket-like belly; eyes sunk into hollows; puffy cheeks and very little hair on the head.

Seeing him, Taana and Paana came forward. Bishu gestured with his hands and said, "Brothers, you don't have to worry about me, go and stop those fellows." With this he pointed towards the men who were seizing this opportunity to slip in. Paana rushed towards them. Bishu said, "I've given up smoking ganja absolutely." Then tightening up his dhoti he said, "I'll do 'pacating' with you today." With this he came forward with folded hands and began requesting the onlookers, "My brothers—never take ganja. One gets a cough and cold and one's belly turns into a basket if one takes ganja"—and he touched his own belly. Then he went on, "If one takes ganja one's land becomes mortgaged, one's gardens are sold off and one's pond becomes slimy. So my brothers—instead of buying ganja go back to your homes like good people. The babu told you the other day that your homes are on fire, it has reached to the roof—why are you crowding here instead of putting it out?" He now put both hands on his waist, closed his eyes, curved his neck and stood there like a veritable question mark and the onlookers were shaken with gusts of laughter. Paana and Taana were looking after the buyers on the other side. Bishu sudden-

ly gave up his pose, turned his back and shouted, "There's the fellow! Catch him! Catch him!" and ran straight into the shop and stood there waving his thumbs. Another gust of laughter shook the onlookers.

A little later, a man came pushing through the crowd crying, "Move away my fathers—a lady!" He went forward accompanied by an unknown woman and stood before the crowd. The woman's body was covered with a thick sheet, her face was heavily veiled, she was tall and looked fat as well.

Taana came and knelt down in front of the woman and said, "My mother, you mustn't buy opium. I am like a son to you—please listen to my request." The woman stood there with bowed head and made no reply. Her companion said, "It's not for herself. There's a patient in the house, opium is required for preparing medicine."

Taana said, "Use some other medicine, mother, don't give him that poison."

The man said a little angrily, "You aren't a doctor. Why should we listen to you." Then turning towards the onlookers he said, "Look here everybody, her only son is dying, it's only a question of time, and he says use some other medicine! All kind of medicine have been used, the Kaviraj said that he can't be saved with anything but opium!" A lot of people cried out, "Let them buy! Let them buy!" Taana moved away, but seeing that the man was trying to go in with the woman he

barred his way and said, "Let her go, you aren't allowed to go." The man smiled a little and said, "She's very shy, that's why I want to go with her. All right. You go in alone mother." As soon as the woman returned after buying opium from the shop, the man pulled off her veil. Everyone saw in surprise that it was Digambar Pal of Naogaon village, his face covered with a heavy beard and a pair of thick moustaches and as a sign of modesty he had put out his tongue. The onlookers again burst into laughter.

And so the tamasha went on. I paid homage to Mahatma Gandhi for having discovered such an easy road to freedom and returned home.

At night Pandit Mahashaya brought news that Daroga Babu had had a conference with all the village elders. Order had come from town that anyone doing picketing must be caught and sent to the district town. There, they would be sent to prison. The Daroga Babu had, however, no desire to oppress the people of the village. So he sought their advice as to what should be done about the village boys.

When I asked what had been settled after the conference, the Pandit said first they were to be intimidated and if necessary they would be thrashed.

Then I asked, "Where is Naara, tell me?"

Pandit Mahashaya replied, "Is Naara in this village sir! Day and night he's going round from village to village making speeches and recruiting volunteers. The

wretched fellow has set the whole district on fire!" After pausing for a while he continued, "He can go on! Bhonda was saying that Naara doesn't even eat every day—some days he has a handful of parched rice, on other days pantha-bhat. If he can't find a place to sleep in, he spends the night under a tree. If he had kept straight, the boy would have been a real man, it's just his mother's evil chance!" I asked, "Is Daroga Babu going to arrest him?"

Pandit winked his eye, nodded and said, "He will, he will, why are you so impatient? He's not like one of us, he doesn't care to land the fish as soon as the fly moves. He's a clever man. He'll play the fish first, then land it."

Next day I heard Taana and Paana had been handcuffed, taken to the thana and detained there. At night when Pandit Mahashaya came I asked, "I hear they've caught Taana and Paana?"

The Pandit replied, "Yes, they were caught, but their fathers gave an undertaking and got them released. The boys too rubbed their noses on the ground and said that they won't do anything again."

I asked in surprise, "Is that so?"

The Pandit related with great delight, "Yes sir, after they had been tied hand and foot, a lot of worms were put on their bodies, how they howled! Where then was their Bharat Mata and Gandhi Dada! They yelled for their real father and mother. In the end, when they

were let off they literally ploughed the entire floor of the room with their noses!"

I asked, "What's your Bhonda doing?"

"He's probably going to the fray tomorrow, but I've told them to arrange for big frogs."

"Why?"

"The great hero begins leaping in fear the moment he sees a big frog. If a couple of dozen fat frogs are put on his body and they begin leaping on him, his mania for saving his country will soon disappear."

In this way, one by one, the village boys returned home, but those boys who had come from other villages did not give up so easily. They were caught and put into a bus and sent to the district town, some of them were convicted with one month's, some with two months' imprisonment.

Ten days later. Storm and rain descended in the afternoon and went on steadily till midnight. So, that night the Pandit did not come round. The next morning I was feeling anxious to get news. When he arrived, his face was beaming with smiles. He said, "Have you heard the news? The wily old fish has been landed! The Daroga is really clever! But otherwise would the Government have made him a Daroga?"

In amazement I asked, "What's happened?" Gesturing with his hands the Pandit said, "Naara has been caught sir. Last night Naara and his gang broke the lock of the opium shop and were stealing when they were

caught red-handed. Now the young idiot will see some fun."

I asked, "Where have they put Naara?"

"Where ~~the~~ they to put him? They sent him away before dawn."

"But there's no bus at night."

The Pandit snapped out, "What's the need of a bus? He's thief! So like a thief, with handcuffs on his wrists, a rope round his waist, shoving him with a baton they took him on foot." The old Pandit's whole body seemed to dance with glee imagining this scene. Biting his lips, screwing up his eyes, beating his fisted hands in the air, he said, "Let them break the wretch's ribs, let them pull out the brain from his broken head, then the wretch will learn a lesson! He tries to be clever with the British! They're ruling the whole world, and he's only a tiny mouse!" With this he put out his little finger to illustrate this proved fact. I said, "Do you believe that Naara is a thief?"

Without answering my question the Pandit said, "I suppose you don't, is that it? Go then and tell the Daroga Babu."

Quickly I retracted my statement and said, "Are you mad? That's not my meaning. I'm saying that Naara used not to be like this."

"Bad company sir, bad company! For example, you saw what happened the other day. Everything's possible in bad company. Take my Bhonda whose father is

his god, his religion—even he went astray for some time.” Then he began banging his folded hands on his forehead. I asked, “What are you doing?” He said, “I’m paying homage to the Daroga Babu. He managed to save us. Well, I’ll go now to Ganguly Mahashaya.” The Pandit departed.

As soon as I went inside my house, I saw Naara’s mother sitting in the verandah. Her eyes were swollen, the marks of tears were wet on her cheeks. My wife was sitting with her hands on her cheeks and eyes wide open. As soon as I got near to her my wife asked, “Have you heard?” I nodded and told her, “Yes.”

“Is there no way out?”

I said nothing. My wife cried, “May thunder crash on his head!” Nervously I asked, “Whose?” My wife cried sharply, “That old Ganguly’s! These things have happened because of that black-faced old fool’s advice!” I said nothing. Naara’s mother began saying in a wailing voice, “Long before dawn a boy came and woke me up. He said some of the boys were returning home when suddenly they were surrounded by a number of police. Naara snatched a stick from the hand of a policeman, told his companions to run away and began fighting them single-handed. But how long could he fight alone with all those men? In the end he was caught.” She paused and then continued, “As soon as I got the news, I forgot my sense of shame and modesty and ran to the thana. I saw that they had tied

my poor boy against the post. I begged the Daroga Babu on my knees, fell on his feet, but he drove me away with insults." She wiped her eyes and said again, "Won't my poor boy come back, my father?"

My wife said trying to give her courage, "Why are you worrying Kakima? Even though we're under British rule, still, can so much wrong be done? Will they punish him without being guilty?" With this she looked at me. I gave no reply. My wife said, "Tomorrow I'll send this husband of mine, he'll go and bring Naara back. You've nothing to be afraid of."

The next morning Naara's mother arrived and asked, "Will you go today my father?" I said, "Yes." After hesitating a little Naara's mother pressed four rupees into my hand and said, "I can't afford more than this, my father. What more can I say to you. Do whatever is necessary, but see that they let my poor boy off."

I replied, "Whatever is necessary will be done. Then it's up to your luck."

Naara's mother went away blessing me profusely. Just then my wife entered. Seeing the money she said, "What's that?" I said, "Naara's mother gave it to me." My wife replied, "And you put out your hand and took it?" I remained silent seeing the awkward turn the conversation had taken. After gazing at me for some time my wife said in a sharp voice, "You didn't feel ashamed? They've no food in their stomach, no thatch on their roof, she mortgaged her household utensils to raise

that money and you took it without blushing?" I asked, "Where am I to get the money?"

My wife said mimicking me, "Where am I to get the money? Where would you have got the money if they had taken away your own son?" I said, "One's own son"—My wife broke in, "And are they nobody to you? It's you people who can allow Naara's mother to work as a maid-servant—if you were worthy to be called a man you couldn't have. Why, haven't you seen in my father's home? There—fifty relations are fed daily."

I gave no answer. I thought to myself, "If instead of being a teacher I had taken the post of a zamindar's overseer like your father, I would have opened an orphanage!"

My wife called out to our eldest daughter and said, "Tooni, go and give back this money to Naara's mother. I'll pay the money My father sent me ten rupees to feed the children with mangoes and jackfruit. What's the good of that money. You take it with you."

When I reached town in the afternoon I went first of all to the Congress Office. A two-storied house in a narrow lane. I pushed the door and entered. The room was very dark, all the doors and windows were closed. A gurgling sound churned the little air that was in the room. The moment I opened the window I realised that this was really the original and genuine Congress Office. Mother Bengal had impressed her handprints on its floor, on its wall and on its roof—everywhere—to proclaim it

as her very own. And that huge fat man who was lying sleeping with his clothes loosened and whose huge belly was moving like a large bellow—nobody could have the slightest doubt that he was dedicated to the services of Mother Bengal seeing his thick sack-like dirty khaddar dhoti. Suddenly there was the sound of a slap and the dead body of a fly rolled on to the ground from the cheek of the sleeping man. The roaring of the ocean stopped for a moment, taking this opportunity I yelled out, "Sir, can you hear me?"

Half-opening his sleep-tainted red eyes the great man said, "Who is it?" And sprang up suddenly like a weighted rubber-doll

I asked, "Where is Nakur Babu?"

In a sleepy voice the answer came, "What do you want Nakur Babu for? What am I here for?"

I said, "You"—

"Yes I—I'm Kalantak Kanangoe, Secretary of the District Congress Committee. All the work of this district is in my hands," and he spread out his right hand

I told him all about Naara. In an indifferent voice Kalantak Babu answered, "Indeed! And what's to be done about this?"

"His mother is wailing and weeping."

Kalantak laughed and said, "She's weeping?" The next moment his voice turned harsh, he narrowed his eyes and with a frown on his brows, said, "You can only hear the weeping of a widow, you can't hear the

Mother weeping?" In surprise I asked, "Mother, whose mother?"

"Whose mother? My mother, our mother, the mother of thirty-three crores of Indians—Mother India." Suddenly he closed his eyes, inclining his head, he spread out his right hand and said, "There—listen to the Mother weeping."

I said, "He's his mother's only son"—

The answer came, "What if he is the only son? Have you read the Mahabharata? How many sons did Avimanyu's mother have? Was she spared?" He patted his chest and said, "And I—I'm also my mother's only son. Still, my mother, father, wife, dear ones, my practice (I saw a small box near the wall and realised that he was a Homœopathic doctor), a house full of children, a village full of patients—I left everything behind and am staying here—what for? To sacrifice this unworthy life (he touched his neck) before the Mother's feet." He laughed contemptuously and said, "His mother's only son!"

I was flabbergasted and said haltingly, "Still, something should be done. You people know the lawyers"—

With a roar like thunder Kalantak said, "What! We've to engage a vakil? We are to go to the court of the British, appear before their servants with a cloth round our neck and say 'Dharmabatar' to them? Aren't you ashamed even to suggest this?" For a few moments he

glared at me then continued, "What are you afraid of? Prison? Mahatma Gandhi is in prison; all the great leaders are in prison; men and women from all over the country are in prison; we are standing with one foot forward towards prison and you are afraid of prison?"

He paused for breath then said, "Tell me where are you yourself? You are also in prison. The whole of India is a huge prison. Feel your body with your hands and see! What do you feel? Chains! You're tied all over with iron chains! Stand up for a moment, the chains will rattle!"

I broke in and said, "Then, there's nothing to be done?"

"No, if you want to do picketing stay here. Eat in a hotel and sleep here. Otherwise, go home and tell the widow to stop weeping."

Realising that I would not get any help from these people, I left and went straight to the house of a vakil. The vakil was lying practically flat in his chair, his legs on the table and his body covered up with newspapers. Hearing footsteps he poked out his head and said, "Who is it?"

I told him my name.

"Oh! A client! Then sit down." Saying this he indicated a bench next to him, threw all the newspapers on the table and put down his feet. He asked, "What's the case about? Is someone ruining you or do you want to ruin someone?"

I said, "No sir, it's a swadeshi case."

"I don't understand swadeshi or bideshi. Tell me what the case is about?"

When I had told him everything, the vakil said, "Oh, theft! Then why have you come here? Go to a muktear. Get him released on bail, then inform me at the right time."

As soon as I got up to go, the vakil asked, "Who's going to pay my fee?"

I said, "Fee? In the service of the country"—

The vakil laughed and said, "In the service of the country! Do you think when Swaraj comes that vakils and muktears will lose their livelihood?"

I said, "You did nothing, and still you want a fee?"

The lawyer asked in surprise, "I did nothing? I let you sit on the bench, I gave you advice, I wasted all this time, who's to pay for that? What do you do? Teach?" I saw he recognised me for what I was. I nodded and said, "Yes."

Shaking his head, the vakil said, "No wonder you've no sense!" He put out his hands and scolded me saying, "Come on pay, give me my fees." So I had to bring out a rupee from my pocket, when I put it on the table the lawyer picked it up, threw it down on the table and said, "Not one rupee, two rupees." He stood up towering over me. I was afraid that he would snatch it from me, so I put down another rupee, then paying my homage to him, respectfully this time, I left.

Next morning I went to the court in search of a muktear. All of them explained to me clearly that to fight the case would cost at least a hundred rupees, nothing less—not even if Mother India appeared in person. But where was I to find so much money? Naara's mother did not possess anything in the world excepting her hut. And I—I was merely a school master. Whatever else a teacher's life might contain in abundance, at least it was not money. Besides, my worldly sense constantly prompted me that I should not create all this fuss, that one should give up trying to quarrel with the crocodile while one lived in water. So I decided to see Naara and then go back to the village.

Through a young muktear I managed to get an interview at little cost. Naara came. I asked him, "How are you?" He laughed and said, "I'm a Government guest—naturally I'm well. How are all of you? Is the picketing going on?" I answered both questions by nodding my head.

Naara said, "You too come and join us."

Instead of answering this, I spoke to him about getting him released on bail. Naara shook his head violently and said, "What's the good of going out for a few days? It's certain that we'll have to go to prison. Besides, I'm not alone."

"What do you mean?"

"They've caught quite a number of us." After a pause he said, "We don't fear imprisonment. The entire

country is one big prison. Do you know what we are afraid of? That the movement will come to a standstill!" I broke in, "Kakima is weeping and wailing terribly."

Naara replied, "Mother! Is mother weeping for me? She's weeping for the household I could have built up in the future, by taking a job under a sahib." He stayed silent for a few moments and then continued, "Our greatest hindrances are our mothers and sisters. Whereas, see Reba Devi! She is also a girl of our country and how inspiring! She's in no way inferior to the Rajput women who used to array their husbands and sons in battle-dress with their own hands, who used to go and sacrifice their lives on the funeral pyre. I feel"—

I broke in, "Do you want me to take any message to your mother?"

Naara replied, "What is there to say to her? Tell her that I'm well."

At the trial, Naara was convicted with three years' rigorous imprisonment. There was no dearth of witnesses to prove the theft. A few among Naara's own gang gave evidence about the conspiracy. Two of Ganguly Mahashaya's tenants had seen Naara break open the door with their own eyes. The shopkeeper himself identified Naara and his companions as the guilty persons. Naara's mother wept and wailed for some time. Then as she had borne her husband's death and her daughter becoming a widow, she went on silently bearing the separation from her son.

The three years were nearly over. The leaders had stopped the Non-co-operation movement and joined the co-operation movement. Swaraj did not come forward even an inch from across the sea. The sale of opium and ganja increased four times; foreign cigarettes and foreign-made dhoties were once more established in their former glory. Not finding even a knee-depth of water in the Indian Ocean, Bharat Mata had given up all hope of suicide and taken shelter in the Sabarmati Ashram.

One evening Naara's mother came with a letter bearing the Government seal. Giving the letter to me she said, "This letter came today, perhaps it's Naara's letter. Will you see, my father, what he has written?"

I began reading. Naara's mother asked anxiously.

"Well father, is he coming back?"

I said, "He'll be coming."

"Is he well?"

I shook my head and said, "No. He's ill, very weak. Someone will have to go from here and fetch him."

With her face turned pale Naara's mother said, "He's ill? He'll have to be fetched? Who'll go, my father?"

In the meantime my wife arrived. She tried to give her heart and said, "Why are you afraid Kakima? My husband will go. Whatever medical treatment is needed, he'll arrange for. There's nothing for you to fear."

One evening about a week later, I went to Ganguly Mahashaya and told him about Naara and asked for leave. With a worried look he said, "The fellow's com-

ing back again? He won't create any more trouble will he?" I replied, "Are you crazy? The movement itself has stopped, what can he do alone?"

"But is he alone, brother, and how long does it take to get people together? Didn't you see what he did last time? Somehow we managed to stop it, but I must say the Daroga Babu is clever. I've never seen another Daroga like him. He is a man to remember each morning." I made no reply. Ganguly continued, "Didn't you say the fellow's very ill? Then what's the good of bringing him straightaway to the village. Whatever treatment he needs you better arrange for in the district town. If he gets well then there is no way out and if he doesn't."

I broke in, "Where's the money for getting him treated in town?"

Ganguly replied, "Why, is the woman going to keep her hut to give witness in her next life? Let her mortgage it. I'll lend the money." I changed the subject and began talking about the school and discussing how the work could be arranged while I was away.

At about nine o'clock at night when I was returning home I met Ganguly's wife. Seeing me she said, "There you are, brother! I've been waiting for you." I replied, "Why granny? Why do you have to stand waiting for me? If you had ordered me I'd have come to you." Granny asked, "Never mind. Are you going tomorrow?"

I replied, "Yes."

"Is Naara very ill?"

"That's what it seems from the letter. He can't come alone."

"You'd better take that wretched woman with you. One never can tell what'll happen." She then brought out a piece of paper from the end of her saree, gave it to me and said, "I am giving you fifty rupees, have the boy treated. If it's necessary I'll give you more money. But you mustn't tell anyone, not even your wife." With this she quickly walked away to her home.

On the appointed day, a little before the appointed hour, I arrived in front of the prison in a thikka-ghari. I told the driver to wait and stood in front of the gate.

Dong! Dong! Dong! The hour was struck on a gong, it was time for Naara's party to come out. A few moments later they appeared. They were bringing someone, perhaps Naara, holding him and walking slowly. When they came near I found that I had guessed right.

But it was not possible to recognise Naara. His fair complexion had turned dark, his strong muscular body had become skin and bones, skeleton-like and bent. His hair was cropped short, his eyes had sunk into hollows and his high nose stood up like a knife in the middle of his pale, fleshless face. Seeing me, he smiled and said, "Dada, you've come," and then tried to touch my feet. I stopped him and drew him to my heart and said, "What has become of you? One can hardly recognise

you!" One of the boys said, "He was very ill, there was no hope of his living." When I touched Naara his body was burning with fever and was so hot that it seemed to burn my hand. I said, "You still have fever." Naara released himself and said, "Of course I have, but it shan't remain. I've come back to my mother's lap. Now I'll get well." Then he stood up straight, looked all around and said with great emotion, "This open field, the sky above me, I haven't seen them for such a long time." Saying this he began coughing, clutched his chest and sat down. I said, "Let us go, don't talk now. Get into the carriage." I took him slowly and put him into it.

In the train, all the way Naara lay lifeless. Once he asked, "Dada, did you go and see Reba Devi before you came?" I answered "No." He said, "You should have." He paused a little and then went on, "If she had got the news, she would certainly have come to the station. I don't know her very well, but those who have worked with her, all praise her so much. They say that so many girls in Bengal have joined this work, but none of them can compare with her, neither in beauty nor in devotion to her country. The day we left she came herself to the station and stood there. She didn't say a word, only gazed at us with unwinking eyes. Our waists were tied with ropes, our hands handcuffed and we were surrounded by police. We were feeling afraid, but seeing her all our fear disappeared.

We felt that there was no work in this world which we couldn't do after seeing that face." He became silent for a little while and then continued, "In prison whenever our suffering seemed unbearable, I immediately closed my eyes and tried to remember her face. I thought 'I suffer alone, but she has taken to heart all the suffering endured by the people in this movement wherever they may be.' " He paused again and then said, "Whenever I tried to imagine the image of Mother India, immediately Reba Devi's face floated up in my mind."

One of Naara's companions said, "When Dayal Babu and others came out from prison we heard that there was a great procession. Quite a number of us are returning today, won't there be anything for us?" Naara said, "I don't know, perhaps there will be."

When Naara got off from the train he seemed to look for someone, and not seeing that person he was disappointed. The boy who had been demanding a procession began grumbling, "None of them have come. We've come back after such a long time. But then, we aren't leaders, everything is for them!"

All of us went to the Congress Office. I saw Kalantak Babu sitting reading a newspaper and munching fried-gram. He looked at us and said, "Who are you?" One of us said, "We've just returned from prison." Putting a handful of gram in his mouth Kalantak said, "Oh, but why here?" The boy replied in a sharp tone, "Where are we to go, may we know?"

“Why? To your homes.”

“We severed all connection with home. With what face are we to return there again?”

“Then go to hell!”

Another of the boys asked, “What are we to do when we go home?”

Kalantak replied, “Study or tend cows—whatever you like.”

Suddenly looking towards Naara he said, “Why is that stork-like fellow panting like that?”

I said, “He’s ill, from prison”—

Kalantak stopped chewing gram and questioned, “What’s his illness?” I told what I knew. Kalantak said, “But instead of sitting there and panting, why didn’t you ask my advice? I have cured the whole town of disease and he has got just a little cold and cough!” With this he opened his Homœopathic medicine box, brought out a small bottle and said to Naara, “Come forward young fellow. Do I have to go to you?” Naara came nearer. Kalantak ordered, “Open your mouth.” Naara opened his mouth. Carefully, Kalantak Babu dropped one drop of medicine into his mouth and said, “That’ll cure you, go home now.”

I laughed and said, “It seems that you are still waiting with one foot forward. You couldn’t manage to get to prison, could you?”

Kalantak shook his head and said in a complaining voice, “That’s what everybody is saying, but when could

I go? Having arranged to send everyone to prison, the movement ended. Besides is it easy to wait with one foot forward towards prison? How many people have done it, pray I know?" And he looked at my face with questioning eyes.

I said, "The movement has stopped, you say, but why are you here still?"

Kalantak said, "The Non-co-operation movement has stopped, now the Harijan movement is going on. That's what I'm doing." He pointed to some torn books and broken slates in a corner of the room and said, "See that. I'm teaching sweepers and practising medicine. The complete responsibility for their body and mind is now in my hands." He pointed to a pitcher in another corner of the room and said, "Do you know what's in that? Water from all places of pilgrimage. This water has been touched by every variety of Harijan everywhere—will you have a glass of it? Have a glass each."

I changed the subject and said, "We would like to stay here for a little while."

Kalantak Babu shook his head and said, "I can't allow you to do that."

As we came out of the Congress Office, I saw Nakur Babu and Reba Devi getting down from a rickshaw. Everybody greeted them. Naara went near Reba Devi and said humbly, "Do you recognise me?" Seeing the look in her face and eyes, one would not have thought

that she had ever seen Naara in her life. In surprise she said, "No, I can't recognise you." Naara told her about himself. Reba Devi, playing for time, said, "Of course I recognise you, you're returning from prison, aren't you?"

Naara replied, "Yes, all of us." With a slight smile and showing her teeth, Reba Devi said, "Oh! All of you? All right, now go home, you haven't seen your near and dear ones for such a long time."

I said, "He is very ill." Looking at me Reba Devi said, "Who? You? Are you well now?" I said, "Not I, but he—" and pointed to Naara. With an expression of kindness and sympathy in her eyes Reba Devi said in a gentle voice, "You are ill? That's why you've become so weak. Did you have to suffer a lot? Poor boy!" Naara's eyes glistened. One of the boys asked Nakur Babu, "What are we to do now?" Nakur Babu replied, "Now all of you go home. Then go to the villages and establish night-schools. Go and open the eyes of the poor, suffering and downtrodden people—rouse the masses in the country. The next movement won't be in towns but in villages. India is composed of lakhs and lakhs of villages. Thirty-three crores of people"—

I broke into the diatribe and said, "We'll have to make arrangements for his treatment."

Nakur Babu said, "Do so then. Brishabahan Babu is the best doctor here. Go to him. All right, good-bye." With this he went into the Congress Office with his daughter.

The boys themselves searched and found a house for me. It was a little distance away from the street in a small lane. A small one-storied house, it was in a congested quarter, but there was no one's home open to us. The landlord's house was quite close, he was a grocer by caste. He earned quite a lot from his shop in town. With mention of the Congress, he asked for extra rent and demanded it right away. He clearly explained that he had no faith in anyone connected with the Congress. Lest we might have to go about hunting for a house somewhere else, I agreed to his terms and leaving Naara under the care of the other boys, I went home to fetch his mother and sister.

Three days later, I went to Brishabahan Babu's house at eight o'clock in the morning. A two-storied house, the doctor's name and titles were written on a sign-board on the gate. There was a crowd of patients in the verandah of the dispensary. The doctor was examining a patient inside. I went inside, pulled up a chair and sat down. The doctor was about forty. He was tall and thin. The front of his head indicated approaching baldness. He was wearing a durzee-made silk suit and a stethoscope hung round his tie-less neck.

After the patients had been disposed of one by one, I went forward and the doctor asked, "What's yours?"

I explained to him about Naara and his illness. The doctor frowned and said, "He went to prison? Belongs to the Congress?" He paused for a moment then said,

"I don't mind going, but you'll have to pay my full fees." I begged, "He's very poor." The doctor replied drily, "Then take him to the hospital, you won't have to spend a pie." He rose to go and said, "I've no time, I have to go out." I said, "You'll have to do us a favour, doctor." The doctor said scoldingly, "I can't do any favour, excuse me. He hasn't done us any favour by going to prison after doing Congress work but I am supposed to run to treat him free. Does any shopkeeper give things for half-price at the mention of the Congress? Then why this especial favour on me? If you can pay the full fee, say so, I'll go immediately, otherwise you had better go somewhere else"—and he put out his hands.

Paying the full fee in advance, I brought Brishabahan Babu. After examining the patient the doctor said gravely, "It's about to turn into pneumonia, very great care should be taken." Before leaving the doctor said, "Carry on with the prescription I've given you. Probably you won't be able to call me again, but there is Bijoy Doctor in the neighbourhood, his fee is low, call him. If it's necessary you can inform me."

That night Naara's fever rose very high. The next morning I went to Bijoy Doctor's door. Bijoy Babu was about thirty, a doctor just passed out from the medical school. Chubby in appearance and with a cheerful face. He listened courteously to what I had to say and then came with me. Seeing the patient, however, his face be-

came very serious. He said, "Pneumonia, both lungs are affected" Seeing Brihabahan Babu's prescription he said, "Carry on with this, if it's necessary, I'll alter it." When I gave him his fees, he laughed and said, "You won't have to pay me my fee now. First of all see to everything for the patient. Let him get well, after that give me whatever you can."

Bijoy Babu began treating him with great care. Brishabahan Babu was also given another call, but nothing was of any avail. The patient's condition became worse each day. Naara became delirious. He talked about all sorts of things—disconnected anecdotes of his various experiences in prison. One day he raised his bloodshot eyes to me and said, "Reba Devi came, didn't she?" I said, "No!" But without listening to what I said he said, "Yes she came. I saw her" Then he closed his eyes and went on mumbling to himself.

From the day she had arrived Naara's mother had sat next to the patient's bed and excepting for a bath or some food she did not move away for a moment. Sometimes she would feed the patient, stroke his head or fan him; most of the time she spent gazing into his face. He seemed to be slipping away further and further and his consciousness was slowly becoming clouded. He could not recognise anyone, gave no answer when he was spoken to. Only, would he open his bloodshot eyes now and then and look around seeking someone. One night his condition became very seri-

ous. I called Brishabahan Babu. After examining the patient he came out and said, "Hopeless! There's no hope at all." Then he gave Bijoy Babu some advice about giving an injection.

Naara was gasping. He signed to me and said, "I want to see Didi." Lakshmi was sitting near his head with a sad face. She brought her face near Naara's and said with great emotion, "Here I am, my brother." Naara shook his head and said, "No, not you, Reba Devi." Lakshmi's sad face became sadder and she moved away.

I went to Nakur Babu's house to fetch Reba Devi. From his house it seemed that Nakur Babu was quite well-to-do. His father was said to have been a Government servant and had left him plenty of money. A two-storied house with a flower garden surrounded by a barbed-wire fence, a wooden gate in front of the garden, over which a flowering creeper flowed down in the shape of a crescent moon. I had to go into the house through the garden. Nakur Babu was sitting reading in the drawing-room. Today he was not wearing a narrow-width cloth, but a fine full-length dhoti, a short-sleeved shirt, and a pair of sandals. As soon as I saluted him he looked at me and asked, "Who are you?" When I told him, he said, "Sit down. What do you want?" I explained to him about Naara and said, "There's no hope of his living. He wants to see Reba Devi just once."

In surprise Nakur Babu asked, "He wants to see

Reba, why?" I replied, "He has a great regard for her, you must send her."

Nakur Babu laughed contemptuously and said, "Are you crazy? How can she go there?"

Just then Reba Devi came into the room calling out, "Father!" Seeing me she stopped short, then gravely she went and stood near Nakur Babu.

Reba Devi had just bathed, her wet hair hung in a mass down her back, a vermillion spot marked her forehead; she was wearing a fine white handloom saree with a wide black border and a white chemise, her feet were bare. As soon as she entered the room the air was filled with a sweet fragrance. Nakur Babu said looking annoyed, "What a bother this gentleman is creating, That fellow whom we saw the other day—Narayan or something by name, he's dying. Suddenly, he wants to see you. Will you be able to go?"

Reba Devi replied, "How can I father? Today Pishima is going away by the eleven o'clock train. You said you'd take us to the station."

Nakur Babu said, "Yes, that's so. I forgot about it." He looked at the clock and said, "There's no more time, tell someone to call a carriage quickly." Reba Devi was about to go when she stopped and spoke to me, "I'm sorry, if I had time I would certainly have gone."

Nakur Babu said, "Certainly, certainly. I too. They are all like sons to me. Never mind, you go and give my sympathy to Narayan Babu's mother. If I can manage it,

I'll call a condolence meeting and send you a copy of the resolution. Leave your address in the Congress Office. And look here, when you go, leave a message for Kalantak Babu to make arrangements for the funeral procession. He's a very capable man, he'll leave no flaw in the arrangements."

When I returned Naara's breathing had become difficult. He was unconscious, his eyes were closed, the black shadow of death was creeping over his whole body. Naara's mother and Lakshmi were lying on the floor weeping. I said, "Don't weep now Kakima. You'll have time to weep for the rest of your life. Let him go in peace now."

"I can't bear it! My son! My heart is bursting!" Naara's mother burst into loud wailing.

Someone shouted just outside the door, "Do you hear me, sir! Come outside."

I wiped my eyes, came out and saw that the landlord was standing in the courtyard. Seeing me he said, "What's all this wailing about? What's the matter?"

I said, "The boy is dying." With a start the landlord cried, "He's dying? What are you saying?"

I replied, "Yes, sir. What can I do? It's just our luck."

The landlord said drily, "It's your luck, I can understand that, but I can't allow anyone to die in my house. Later on, I won't be able to get another tenant. He'll have to be removed immediately."

I was amazed and said, "How can you say such a

thing? His life is only hovering over his lips, it'll fly out immediately!"

The man said in a rough voice, "Let it, but he can't die inside my room."

I asked, "Are you a man or a demon? Isn't there a single drop of human kindness in you?"

"No, there isn't, and you needn't worry about it. Will you remove him yourself, or shall I have to call my men?" Saying this the man rushed off, probably to call his men.

I stood there stupefied for some time then as I was going towards Naara's room, his mother came out and said with tears in her eyes, "Let us not quarrel with him. This is a town, we have no friends here." We carried Naara out and laid him on the open paved space in front of the house. A few minutes later with his head on his mother's lap Naara went to sleep forever.

Almost immediately Kalantak Babu and all his followers arrived. Bijoy Babu and his friends came. Many people of the town also came. A bed was laid out with a mattress and clean sheet. Naara was snatched away from his mother's arms, laid on the bed and covered with the National Flag. Someone spread a mass of flowers over him. The Congress volunteers went forward carrying the bier on their shoulders. Behind them went a band of hymn-singers, singing of the fleeting nothingness of life, beating drums and clashing cymbals. Behind them went hundreds of excitement-mongers

including even the landlord, piercing the sky with shouts of "Glory to Mother India" and "Glory to her dead sons."

Naara's mother gazed with tearful eyes at the path of her son's last victorious journey. Freed from his body Naara's soul perhaps realised, in the light of newly-gained knowledge, that this mourning, this paying of homage, was only the temporary agitation of a mania-ridden mass. All this was directed towards nobody, neither to Mother India nor to him.

BIBHUTI BHUSAN MUKHERJI



RANOO PRATHAM BHAG
OR
RANOO'S FIRST PRIMER

fore me looking the absolutely helpless young innocent, as if my voice has put a rope round her neck and dragged her here. My sense of duty keeps me firm. I say briefly, "First Primer. Fetch it."

If after this, the First Primer had arrived each time without any hitch and Ranoo could be made to swallow a word or two, its few pages might have been completed during the first two and a half years of her lessons. But my orders instead of being obeyed, only create a variety of complications. For instance, sometimes for two or three days on end I do not find any trace of the girl. One does not know where she has gone, when she eats or where she sleeps. When at length I do spot her, she would be busy arranging tea for her grandfather, or else with her First Primer open in front of her, talking about sending money for her uncle's education, or discussing the present high prices of food-stuffs, or some other complicated detail of the household. She might even be going round with her grandfather giving advice and helping him as his right hand in arranging his garden. In such case she would send a side-glance at me without the least fear or anxiety—secure in the knowledge that she has taken shelter in such an impregnable fort that for some time at least she could remain unmolested.

Perhaps I may say, "Why Ranoo, didn't I tell you to bring that book three days ago."

Instead of looking at me she looks at my father and

he replies, "Look here, she's in a fix, poor dear—she has mislaid her book and can't find it."

Ranoo corrects him in a whisper, "I haven't mislaid it—tell him somebody has stolen it."

"Ah—er—yes, someone has stolen it. The poor child has searched high and low but—"

Ranoo prompts him in the same low whisper—"Say, she's tired out from searching for it for the last three days."

"Yes,—er—to be sure—has she not been searching for it for the last three days and given it up for lost in despair?"

Ranoo perseveres, of course inaudible to me—"But I haven't given up as yet."

"Yes, bother me!—did I say she has given it up? Surely not; she is still at it with full vigour. Anyway, get a new copy for her today, the price isn't much."

I feel angry and say, "I suppose you are searching for the book in the garden with a chopper in your hand, you naughty girl!"

Father pleads, "Why scold her over this small matter? From now on you'll keep it in its place, Ranoo, won't you?"

Ranoo nods her assent.

As I depart, I overhear, "I have taken such pains to teach you, and still you can't remember what's the right thing to say, grandfather. I don't know what you are coming to!"

Sometimes she brings a torn half of the book and begins loudly scolding her baby-brother. But the scolding is really a quip at me. She says, "Mejoka, see what your favourite nephew has done? How am I to do my lessons?"

But I know the real culprit only too well. I glare hard at her.

The naughty girl rushes off and brings the baby with the goods on him—he has perhaps stuffed one page of the book into his mouth and is thinking over how best to dispose of the others.

Ranoo bangs him down before me in a glorious rage and says, "If you don't believe me, look! Do you think, Mejoka, this boy'll ever learn anything?"

I say, "Is it his handiwork? Haven't you torn it yourself, Ranoo? Isn't it funny how only the first five pages are gone? About thirty of these primers have been finished off already!"

Being caught, in shame and fear she stands, dumb like a statue, so that unless one is absolutely heartless one cannot say anything more to her. Then I have to forget about punishment and in order to comfort her and make her forget her shame, I have to brow-beat the baby—"Well naughty boy! why did you tear your sister's book?" Then turning to her, "And you too might discipline him a bit Ranoo, what sense do you expect in this mere suckling?"

The cloud moves away from the lovely face and

laughter blossoms on it. Then the barrier of the First Primer is completely removed from between us and Ranoo begins prefacing her domestic activities with easy grace. She suddenly feels so grown-up that from her baby-brother to her father, uncle, grandmother and even her grandfather—everyone seems tiny and helpless to her—an object of her affection and anxious solicitude. One such day, after the incident of the tearing of the First Primer, the conversation begins like this: "How am I to discipline him, Mejoka? Have I time to breathe? For me it's only work, work and work."

Though I feel like laughing, I say solemnly, "Really! How many things is it possible for you to look after!"

"Whatever I don't see to, is always mismanaged. You've just seen what Baby did? Why, isn't there anyone else in the house except Ranoo? When it comes to feeding there are plenty of mouths, aren't there, Mejoka? Now tell me, was there any salt in your favourite hot-curry yesterday?"

I say, "No, it wasn't fit to eat."

"The simple reason is that Ranoo couldn't go to the kitchen—she had not the time! That's the way they all cook. Today it won't be like that. I've put in the salt with my own hand."

I gave up all hopes about eating my hot-curry but I said, "If you would only go and look after it every day, mother."

* Her cheeks swelled a little more with sulking.

She said, "It can't be done, Mejoka. Ranoo has become a perfect terror in this house. All are ready with a complaint: One says—'Take care, Ranoo's going to the store-room!' Another—'Look! Look! Ranoo has taken the baby and sat down to feed him with milk!' A third—'Who asked you to do all this housewifely meddling, Ranoo!' And so on. Now tell me Mejoka, I'm so big now, have you ever seen me meddling—even one little bit?"

I said, "They just say whatever they like—what does it matter to them?"

"I listen in silence. Again, perhaps one of them will say, 'There, Ranoo's gone into the kitchen!' Even the cat has more standing in this house than I have. Somebody yells out, 'There, Ranoo has smashed her father's vase' Tell me, Mejoka, do you believe that I broke the vase in my father's room?"

This event was Ranoo's latest; in her housewifely enthusiasm for changing the water in the vase it was Ranoo who smashed it, no one else was in the room.

I, however, said, "Why, I'd never believe it even if I had to die!" Ranoo pouted her lips and said, "Whoever has even a drop of sense in his head would refuse to believe such a tale. Why, what need can I have to touch the vase? Why, didn't I have my own First Primer to handle so why should I want to touch my father's vase, pray?"

Her terrible fondness for the First Primer tickled

me enormously but I repressed my laughter and said, "It seems to have become a disease with them to blame the wrong person for anything that happens."

The naughty girl remained silent for a few minutes—her head bent; then seizing the chance, she tried to extricate herself from all blame for her latest misdeed by burying her face in my lap and saying in a sulky tone, "You too suffer a little from the same disease, Mejoka; weren't you just saying that I had torn the First Primer!"

Defeated by the child I smile and begin stroking her hair with my fingers.

When the stock excuses about her book being lost or torn, about a stomach-ache, headache or having to look after the baby become stale and ineffective, then for a day or so Ranoo is forced to appear with her book and slate. Of course, lessons do not progress. First of all, she tries to start a chat. If I am not in a favourable humour or for some other reason very particular about my duty, I scold her—the book is opened and the lesson starts. I confess it difficult to decide whether such lessons are lessons *de facto* or a test of my qualities of patience, forbearance and affection!

Two years have passed, during which time Ranoo has finished just the first page of her Primer and come to a standstill on the second at the word 'achala' (static).

She opens her book and looks at me as much as to say that I shall have to tell her how the word is to be pronounced. Very often I begin with a small lecture on the necessity of studies. I say, "Ranoo, if you don't study now, when you marry and go away to your father-in-law's house how will you find out how your Mejoka is, whether he is getting his tea in the morning all right, whether his soap and towel are in order when he goes to have his bath, whether anyone strokes his head when he is ill?"

Ranoo remains silent for a little while picturing to herself her Mejokaka's distress when she is gone, but probably thinking that there is not the remotest possibility of her crossing the ocean of the First Primer she says, "Well, Mejoka, couldn't one begin with the Second Primer? There you don't have to tell me anything—listen I can spell out—"

That is enough to upset me again. I say, "Stop this nonsense, will you? Jumping to the Second Primer leaving the First to take care of itself! That's just the reason why you don't learn anything. Now, read How far did we get the other day? Did you finish spelling 'Achala,' 'adhama' (humble)?"

Ranoo nods her head without enthusiasm.

I say, "Then let me hear you read it again."

She puts her tiny finger on the word 'achala' and sits silently. The blood starts boiling in my head and all tender instincts of affection and pity begin to vanish in

a cloud of steam. And is my temper really to blame? For the last one year we have been labouring over these two words 'achala' and 'adhama' and still she is as far away from them as ever!

All the same I control my temper and say gravely, "You've learnt just nothing! Now say, 'a', 'cha' and 'la' —'achala'."

Ranoo reads out all the three letters without moving her finger from the first. 'Adhama' is also read similarly—an indication that she does not recognise the individual letters; yet it took her one and a half years just to learn the alphabet!

Then I have to ask, "Which is 'a', please?"

Ranoo gives a frightened glance at me, moves her finger and puts it on 'la'.

I still hold on to my patience and say, "Fine!—which is 'la' then?"

She quickly moves her finger and puts it on 'cha.'

My patience is already at breaking point, "but I still persevere. I say quietly, "Wonderful! And where is 'cha', pray?"

Ranoo stares at her book for some time and then says, " 'Cha'? There is no 'cha', Mejoka."

The control over my temper snaps, I give her a smart slap and say, "Oh no indeed, there is no 'cha'! It has taken to its heels in fear of you The wretched girl has become a cargo-load of words, but when it comes to the First Primer, she can't finish two and a half of

them in two and a half years! I've beaten so many old donkeys into passing examinations and now I've to own defeat at the hands of a tiny girl like you! You needn't go back to the alphabet. Sit here till evening and go on repeating 'a—cha—la', 'a—dha—ma'. You shan't have any food the whole day!"

In utter annoyance I take up a newspaper or a book and sit down. Ranoo begins to recite these two words in a wailing monotone.

Though I say that she will have to read till evening yet after giving her that slap I feel sure that lessons are over for that day. Ranoo banks all her hopes on her tears and the moment they descend she uses them with the most consummate skill.

A little later I miss her voice and without turning from the newspaper I ask, "What's the matter?"

Ranoo answers wailing, "It's not there!"

"What's not there?" I turn round and see that with the help of dropping tears, Ranoo has managed to rub out not only those two words but also the print on two or three pages beyond. Or else she has drowned the words in eternal darkness with the help of the Khol from her tear-laden eyes. When it is thus, she says, "I can no longer see them, Mejoka!"

Ever since the slap I have felt remorseful; besides, I am amused at her cunning. My theory regarding education for women returns to my mind. I say, "No, Ranoo, it's no use—you'll never learn. Bring the slate I'll write

out the letters, you go on tracing over them Does your back smart? Come here, let me see."

Ranoo knows that she is on the road to victory. She will get whatever she wants. She comes and puts her arms round my shoulders and calls softly, "Mejoka"?

"Well!"

"Haven't I grown up, Mejoka?"

"Indeed, you have, but you don't—"

She breaks in and says, "Then, can I discard the slate which is for the youngsters only and bring a paper and pencil like the youngest uncle? I've got as many as four lead pencils. Baby can use the slate when he's a little older." Then with a start she suddenly says, "Oh, Mejoka! Good gracious! You've two grey hairs on your head! Shall I pull them out?"

I say, "Do But tell me, Ranoo, I'm getting old now, you too will go away to your father-in-law's house in a short time. If you don't learn to read or write, how will you find out whether I'm dead or alive? Whether anyone looks after me, cooks for me—"

Ranoo replies, "I really do know how to read, Mejoka—only not the First Primer, and that's because I'm so grown up. Who among the elders reads the First Primer in this house Mejoka? Tell me?"

In his younger days, Dada (my elder brother and

Ranoo's father) was most liberal-minded about religion, i.e. his ignorance about the Hindu religion was as deep as his knowledge about Christianity and the old Jewruanthrian cult was wide. If necessary he could astonish people with long quotations from the Bible; and even where there was no call, he could give plenty of proof about the futility of all religions and criticize them in irreligious language. Then his admirers would say, "Yes. Here you can't get away with anything—he is the one and only Sasanka Mukherjee!"

Dada would say, "No, I'm not at all willing to encourage conservatism."

To him every form of religion stood for conservatism and he believed that if one did not pour abuse, it amounted to encouraging conservatism.

But Dada of today is completely changed. He does not touch a drop of water without worshipping three times a day. Nor does he seem to take anything much over and above water. He is always busy worshipping and reading the scriptures. Nor does he stop there—he is so alert about adhering to orthodox Hindu ritual in word and deed that our lives have become intolerable.

His admirers now say, "Of course, we knew this before, this is the natural evolution, it's now the absolute essence."

What heightens our misery still further is that Dada has suddenly become terribly anxious to make some great sacrifices for the sake of the helpless and much

maligned religion of the Hindus and finding nothing handy has selected his tiny daughter for the purpose.

One day he says to me, "Look here, Sailen, I've been thinking of something lately—er—why should I say thinking—I've practically decided about it."

Rather scared by the solemn gravity of his look I ask with an inward tremor—"What is it Dada?"

"I've decided to make a Gauridan (giving an eight-year-old daughter in marriage—considered to be a meritorious deed)—how old is your Ranoo?"

Without telling him her age I ask in utter amazement, "What's this Dada! In these days—when new light "

Dada replies in a firm and yet controlled manner, "There's no such thing as this or that age, Sailen—there you make a mistake. Time is an eternal and limitless entity and the pure ancient religion gives to that time—"

I become impatient and say, "But Dada, she's only a baby yet!"

Dada says, "True enough, and she'll remain a baby till you create an opportunity for the consecration and flowering of her soul by giving her in marriage. To make you realise this, firstly, I have to tell you that our ancient law-givers—"

Impatiently I cry out again, "I do understand all that.

But she has just completed eight years, Dada. How big is her little body, to hold a soul to be consecrated? What I want to say is—”

Without paying any attention to this Dada says in a tone of despair, “She has completed eight years—has she? Then how can I do it Sailen? The great Law-giver Manu has said eight years is the ripe time for Gauridan. So that’s crossed already! Ah, alas! but I knew, such a holy thing couldn’t possibly be done through me—cursed as I am! How old is the younger girl?”

Ranoo’s younger sister Rekha is five years old. I tell him. Hearing this Dada makes a grimace and remains silent for a while. I cannot make out whether he is annoyed with Manu himself for not having sanctified the giving-in-marriage of a five-year-old daughter as a holy action, or if he is annoyed with this daughter Rekha for having been born so late. I, too, can at last release my pent-up breath and say to myself, “Good, the poor girl has got over one crisis at least!”

Two days later Dada sends for me again. When I go to him, he says, “I’ve practically solved that problem Sailen. I mean about the marriage of your Ranoo. Yes, I am convinced that one should obey the dictates of the current age to a certain extent.”

I breathe a sigh of relief and with a laugh I say joyfully, “Certainly, nowadays, in educated circles girls are being married at the age of sixteen or seventeen. In

such an age as this how can one marry a girl who isn't even nine years old? Besides, she's tiny for her age—"

"A broomstick on your educated society!" cries Dada. "I'm not talking about that. I was saying that if I marry Ranoo now—it won't be too bad. It'll be keeping up with the times on one hand, and on the other, it'll practically be a Gauridan also, being so near the prescribed age. What's the harm? It'll be what can be called a modified Gauridan."

I am absolutely stunned. I do not know how to make Dada see reason.

He continues, "The Pandit Mahashaya (the priest) also agrees. He has looked up many holy books and says that in Kalijuga (The Iron Age) it'll have the merit of Gauridan—the slight excess in age not counting!"

At last I find someone on whom to vent my grief and anger and say with some heat, "Then the Pandit Mahashaya has told you a low-down lie Dada. Remember, if it pleased you, he'd also have looked up the books and said that if you tied your daughter hand and foot and threw her into the river, it would be equal to Gauridan in these days. To them, Kalijuga has become a Kalpataru (the tree of desire)—whatever they want can be made to drop into their hands like a ripe fruit at any time."

Both of us remain silent for a while. Then it is I who speak, "Anyway, if they advise you, go and give her

away in marriage. I'm going, I've some work to attend to." Before leaving I turn round to say: "By the way, I've decided to go up-country for four or five months because I'm not keeping too well. I'll probably start in about a week." With that I depart.

By sulking, I somehow manage to put off the affair for three or four months, but after that Dada himself begins sulking so much that I have to admit defeat. Father is so old that he lacks the strength to stand as an obstacle in anyone's path of religion, but still, his love of his grand-daughter leaves him undecided and leaning towards my point of view for some time, but gradually he puts his weight on the other side. I become, seemingly, alone and segregated as a rebel against faith.

Ranoo's marriage is decided upon.

I have given complete leave to Ranoo. The little enchantress would soon belong to someone else, perhaps that is why she clings to our entire household with all the might of her tiny heart. Whether she can manage it or not, she tries to set her hand to everything. Nowadays, she looks so mortified and hurt over everything she cannot do properly, that it seems as if through playing at domesticity she has become infected with its reality. Her helpless Mejokaka had always been an object of her special solicitude; nowadays, having complete leisure, having been relieved of the burden of the First Primer, her Mejokaka seems to have become a veritable baby in her arms.

At times we sit and talk and mostly our conversation centres round the wedding. Though she feels shy about talking of it with other people, she has no diffidence in doing so with me. The reason for this is that discarding all frivolity we discuss the most solemn problems involved in the affair. I say, "All right Ranoo, you may come twice a month as you say, from your father-in-law's home and put our household in order, but what will you do about your Mejokaka?"

Ranoo sits and thinks steadily for a while, then she says, "We're all tired of telling you Mejoka—marry! Marry! but do you listen to us? Can Ranoo look after you for ever, Mejoka? Later on, I'll also have to look after my own children, won't I? How long does a daughter remain one's own?"

I don't know whether to laugh or cry hearing the parrot-like repetitions of grown-up talk from her baby mouth. I say, "Don't you think that I might find a nice, elderly woman to marry even now—what do you say?"

This set sentence is the prologue to a joke about her future father-in-law's home. Ranoo pretends to be annoyed and says with a smile, "Go away! Mejoka, I shan't talk to you any more! You're making fun of me!"

Rolling my eyes, I say with great solemnity, "Certainly I'm not making fun of you Ranoo. I've heard that your mother-in-law is a wonderful housewife, that's why I was saying if I do have to marry why shouldn't I "

Ranoo looks at me angrily, she looks at me solemnly and in the end she looks at me with a smile. When she cannot change the tremendous solemnity of my face with all her wiles, she is deceived and says with equal solemnity, "All right, then I'll no Mejoka, you're certainly joking—go away!"

I open my eyes still wider and say, "Where's the joke in this Ranoo? Must one joke about everything?"

Ranoo then pretends to be grown-up and says, "All right then I'll propose it to my mother-in-law, let me go there first. If she agrees to marry you then I'll let you know. You don't have to worry any more about it." Then, looking at me with mischievous eyes, she says, "Well, Mejoka, I haven't even learnt the First Primer, how shall I write to you? If you can tell me that, you'll be really clever!"

I make many suggestions. The victorious girl shakes her mass of curls and says, "No, you can't solve it. It's a very difficult riddle!"

But suddenly all this gossip, joking and laughter breaks off in the middle. In the midst of her gay frivolity Ranoo suddenly turns grave and says, "Let it be, we'll decide things of the future later on, I'm going to see if your tea is ready." Or she may say, "It won't do just to gossip all the time. I'd better go and arrange your writing table, it's in an awful mess." And so on.

Thus, the day of parting draws nearer bringing Ranoo closer and closer to my heart.

Perhaps unknowingly, in Ranoo's little heart also, the pain of the coming separation has begun to gather little by little. She is too young so she does not realise everything, but whenever she has nothing else to do, she brings the slate and the First Primer of her own accord to me. I realise then that her eagerness is only another form of consoling her poor uncle. Because, whatever reason Ranoo may have had for not learning her First Primer, the idea has become firmly fixed in her mind, that all her uncle's happiness and comfort depend entirely on it. Since there is no longer any help, her childish heart is filled with pain. Still, like a wise matron she gives me courage, "Don't worry Mejoka, until I can finish your First Primer I shan't go to my father-in-law's home. Now come, teach me my lesson."

Of course the lessons do not make any progress. How am I to teach her? Whenever I see the First Primer, tears well up in my eyes. On the other hand, every day the arrangements for the Gauridan go on with increasing pace. Even the atmosphere of the house seems to suffocate me. Some days I press the girl to my heart and say, "For what fault of ours are you leaving us so soon, Ranoo?"

She does not understand, but only gazes at me with a sorrowful face. Some days she comes to the verge of tears; some days she takes a resolute vow and says, "If it hurts you Mejoka, I shan't marry yet. I'll explain everything to father."

One day in the midst of her taking vows, the sad sweet notes of the marriage pipes ring out filling the atmosphere with a note of wailing. Ranoo looks at me with joy leavened with diffidence, but suddenly she changes colour and lowers her face: perhaps the shadow of sorrow which had gathered on her Mejokaka's face was now at its darkest.

The Gauridan is over; it is the day for our Gauri to leave us. I could not earn merit in heaven by taking part in the wedding ceremony, but roamed about restlessly from this house to that. At the time of their departure I come to bless the bride and the bridegroom. My smarting eyes are, however, utterly soothed at the sight of Ranoo in her wedding garments and ornaments, forehead decorated with sandalwood paste, standing by the side of her bright handsome young husband. But she is so tiny! How could one think of parting with her so early? Does she know, how far we are removing her from us by sending her away?

I wipe my eyes with the end of my dhoti and bless this angelic child-couple. I hold up Ranoo's face by the chin and ask, "Ranoo, with whom are you going to leave this helpless son of yours—" I cannot say any more. I hear that Ranoo had not wept till now. The reason for this must have been, that the moment she stood on the threshold of genuine domestic life, her mock domesticity evaporated leaving the child in her overcome with surprise and curiosity. The implication of my

words now overpower that little child with a sense of her own helplessness. She buries her head in my arms and overflowing with emotion, bursts into sobs.

She had never needed comforting like a child before. It was she who, playing a mother to me, had through all these years petted me, offered me hope and consolation—this had seemed most easy, natural and befitting to our relationship. For the first time, I hold her close to my heart and comfort her as one comforts little children—reasoning with them, telling lies, offering many temptations

Still, can I stop her tears? Behind all her merry laughter, these several days, only tears had been secretly gathering. She sobs and sobs for a long time, then she stops. Through sheer habit she wipes her face on the palm of my hand, then she gives it a little pull and says softly, "Come away. Listen, Mejoka!"

Both of us move away a little. Everyone looks at this strange performance of the unmatched mother and son. From inside her burden of clothes close to her breast, Ranoo brings out ten or twelve copies of First Primers carefully tied in a red ribbon. She raises her tear-sodden face towards me and says, "I hadn't lost the First Primers, Mejoka. I was naughty, I told lies"

She stops because her voice breaks, then she says, "I'm taking all of them with me. I'll be very good, I'll read and read till I really learn. Then I'll write to you every day. Don't you worry about anything Mejoka!"

BUDDHADEVA BOSE



MEJAJ
OR
STUDY IN TEMPER

For several days, the plot of a story had been running in my head. An editor had written to me asking for a contribution at the earliest possible date. So, one morning, after gulping nearly four cups of tea for both physical and mental stimulation, I had just sat down with paper and pen when three handsome, well-dressed young men appeared and greeted me.

They were absolute strangers to me but it did not take me more than a minute to realize for what they had come. Clearly, they had not come just to offer me friendly felicitations. So I said, "Look here, yesterday I had to buy a ticket for a dramatic performance in aid of flood-relief, although I didn't go to see the play."

The young men had sat down without even waiting for an invitation. One of them ran his fingers through his long hair, and said, "Of course, no gentleman could possibly ever go to see a performance on the L stage. Our performance will be at the B Institute on N Road. We've especially made this arrangement for people like you. So, please take one of these." Saying this, he placed a book of ten-rupee tickets on the table and began to smile, expecting that I would be taken in.

Very courteously and mildly, I told him of my objections. I said I was very busy at present and could not manage to make time, and therefore, I was compelled to deprive myself of the pleasure of witnessing their show. Now, the second young man said, "At any rate,

couldn't you kindly just go there for a little while? It's only a few paces away from your house. You do go to the restaurant on S Road sometimes." The man who had spoken first added: "For that matter, we have noticed you there often even at midnight." And all three of them began laughing loudly as if they had scored a point with a well-aimed shot. But it made no impression on the person at whom it was directed.

In order to be brief but courteous, I said, "Sorry, I've no money to spare." After saying this, I took up my pen, turned away my head and bent over the paper. I had expected that my cold attitude would be sure to freeze their enthusiasm, but I had yet to learn how ruthless the enthusiasm of people in our tropical country can be.

The first young man, expanding a very broad smile, said, "You haven't any money? H'm—I guess your cigarette bill comes to a hundred rupees a month!"

I was astonished. I looked up when the third man, who had not spoken till now, said "Whatever you may say, we are not going away till we've been able to sell you a ticket. You needn't pay now. Ha, ha! We know we can trust a man like you to pay up this paltry sum of ten rupees later on." He looked smilingly at his companions, who began nodding their heads vehemently in approval.

I thought that the father of each of these fortunate young men must be either a contractor in Rangoon or a Zemindar in Mymensingh. Else, how could they

imagine anyone smoking a hundred rupees worth of cigarettes a month? Presumably, they could blow away ten rupees at a puff! So that was why a Princess had once asked her famine-stricken subjects to eat black bread! How can these people realise the position of middle-class people such as ourselves? I felt ashamed of my poverty, and said rather sadly, "Really it is quite impossible for me to buy a ticket. Please excuse me."

I thought there could be no room for further argument when a gentleman says this, and so once again I bent over my paper. Although this altercation had somewhat muddled my head, I managed to scribble the first line of my story. But inspiration seldom comes to an author in the presence of a lot of people: so I could not help remarking at last, much against my desire: "Why are you still waiting? There are many rich people in the neighbourhood. If you go to them you might be able to sell some tickets. Besides, you can see I am a little busy now."

The first young man (I never had the good fortune of knowing their names, so I have to speak of them numerically) picked up the book of ten-rupee tickets and put it in his pocket. Then, making a movement to get up he said, "But I am leaving one of these for you," and started to tear out a ticket from a five-rupee ticket book.

In utter desperation, I protested, and said, "What are you doing? I have already told you that "

The second young man interrupted. "How can we go and tell people that you haven't bought a ticket?"

I had been quite patient till now, but when I heard this, I really felt annoyed. I blurted out, "You needn't tell people. You've heard what I've said. I've no more time to spare."

The number one said, "What of it? Many rich people buy ten-rupee tickets though they never use them."

By this time my story had almost evaporated from my brain. I closed my fountain-pen, leaned back in my chair and got myself ready to deliver a long sermon on Charity. Just as I was going to begin, my nine-year-old nephew Tookoo came in and asked, "Uncle dear, what's the time?"

I looked at the watch. It was ten minutes to nine. Ten minutes could not make much difference to a child, so I said, "Nine o'clock."

After Tookoo departed, I discovered that the sermon I had prepared in my mind had got muddled. With difficulty I controlled my temper and said, "Really I've no time to spare; I've no money to give away; I won't buy a ticket. I wouldn't have bought a ticket in any case even if I had the money. I have had to subscribe to the flood-relief in various ways—much more than a man of my means can afford—I can't do anything more." I paused for a moment and then continued, "Can't you see that I am busy? You had better give up the idea of selling a ticket to me once for all."

No wonder that people who go about day and night with a mission of help attach no value to other people's time—to them, apparently, it is a trifling matter.

Even after what I had just said, they showed no signs of making a move. Rather, the number one got out a three-rupee ticket book from his pocket and said, "All right, then take one of these." He said this in a manner which suggested that he was doing me a great favour by coming down to three rupees.

I sat stiffly in my chair, and gripping both arms, I gave a ferocious look at the three of them. Then, clearing my throat, I began: "Look here, I am not in the least in favour of these charity shows. If I send even a four-anna bit direct to a Committee or through a newspaper, I know it will get there all right; but if I buy a ten-rupee ticket from you, I am sure only ten pice will go to the relief-fund and the remaining nine rupees and thirteen and half annas will be wasted by you in the name of the show. It isn't that you will spend less on your food and drink in consideration of the flood-stricken people. Even if you buy a pice worth of betels, you will take it out of the subscriptions. To supply you with the luxuries

"Uncle dear, what is the time?" Tookoo again came in and asked me. This gave a sudden jerk to my flow of words which was accumulating force in proportion to my mental excitement. I looked at the watch and replied "nine o'clock," and continued—"for your luxuries—"

"You said it was nine o'clock when I asked you before and is it still nine o'clock? Has your watch stopped, uncle dear?" said Tookoo.

No, the boy would not let me finish what I had started to say. I felt inclined to give this impudent kid a hard blow and knock out his teeth. With difficulty I controlled myself and replied gravely, "No, now you must go away from here."

Tookoo smiled and went away. He had no idea what a narrow escape he had had.

At last the theatrical charity mongers were kind to me. Before leaving, they said to me rather drily, "We beg to be excused for wasting a good deal of your time. I hope you didn't mind."

I said to myself that they might as well have knocked my head off and said, "Sir, we've broken your head, please forgive us."

Anyway, it was a relief. I felt like going down on my knees and crying aloud my thanks to Providence.

The wretched story had its death in embryo. When I looked at the paper with the one and only line written on it, I felt like crying. I tore up the paper with unnecessary vehemence and threw it out of the window, but the bits hit the window-pane, flew back into the room and scattered all over the floor. How untidy—how sordid the room looked! What a fool I was! Why had I not used the waste-paper basket under

the table! Early in the morning I had got up in such a delightful frame of mind. But those theatre ticket-sellers had come and spoilt it all!

Anyway, let the floor be untidy! I was not going to pick up the pieces and throw them away. Not I! I found it impossible to put my mind to any work. I felt like smashing up the cups and saucers. For fear I should really break some of them, I quickly hurled myself on the bed and lay down flat on my back.

For the last few days it had been raining incessantly and the sun had just come out this morning after a long time. The sky was clear and blue and a lovely breeze was blowing. An ideal morning for writing a story, but wasted! Maybe, it would start raining again in the afternoon and continue for days together. And I would not feel at all like writing anything. My poor little story!

Meanwhile, the cool breeze had eased my temper a little and its temperature now had come down a few degrees. I could feel it. Then I heard a soft, low voice call me, "Uncle dear!" The mercury went up at once and rose very high, too. I had a rough idea of the time, and said, "It's quarter past nine."

"Then there's still a long time before I have to go to school, uncle dear," said Tookoo.

I had neither the power nor the inclination to speak. I closed my eyes. Sleepily I just made a queer sound through my nose: "Um."

"Uncle dear!" began Tookoo again.

"Uncle dear be hanged! What are you bellowing for? What's the matter? Come here!"

Tookoo approached me, half afraid, and showed me a book he had in his hand and said, "Please help me a little to learn today's English lesson."

"Why have you come to me? Isn't there anybody else in the house? Couldn't you go to Shubol? Do you think I am going to waste my time to help you with your lesson—eh?"

On the verge of tears, Tookoo said, "Grannie told me to come to you."

"Grannie told you—eh? Go and tell your grannie that if ever she suggests such a thing again, I shall go and hang myself. Now don't stand there like an idiot, with your mouth gaping!" I fired off.

Tookoo stood silent for a few moments. Then collecting some courage he said, "Uncle dear, just tell me one thing—what does 'dead of night' mean?"

"It means—" Good heavens! Shortly I would go mad! "Will you go now? Or would you like to get a thrashing?" I just made the gesture of lifting my hand, and Tookoo burst into tears and ran away for all he was worth.

Suddenly, I remembered that such a thing as a cigarette existed in this world and I felt happy, as happy as one can be when one gets into a temper. I tried to light a cigarette lying down; the lighted match-stick

slipped and fell on me. Ugh! I jumped up at once and threw away the match. I was chafing the burn when my sister-in-law came in. "Are you going out now, brother?" she said.

"No," I replied.

"But I need a box of soap very urgently."

"I have other things to do in this world besides buying soap for you."

"Well, as far as I can see, the only two things you are capable of are, lying on the bed flat on your back, and smoking away cigarettes endlessly."

"In any case, I can't go out now," I said.

"I knew it. You can go about in the sun even at noon to visit your friends, but if you are asked to do something for anyone, you can't move—your feet feel paralysed," she said, unnecessarily upset.

"Please leave me alone for a while, good sister," I begged of her.

"Oh, I am going. Lord, how contemptuous you are! But it's quite natural! You seem to have grown wings nowadays. I don't know what would have happened to you, if I hadn't mortgaged my bangles when you had to pay your examination fees! Oh, God!" she ejaculated and left.

Hardly two minutes had passed after the departure of my sister-in-law, when my mother entered the room looking upset. "Why didn't you help Tookoo with his lesson?" she asked me gravely.

"My head's aching—I have gripes—I am ill—I am very uneasy. No, no, I am quite all right—but I have lots of work to get through. Please leave me alone, mother." I asked her to go away.

"H'm—go away? One day I will go away for ever and leave you in peace. I find you always treat me as if I were a pariah dog and would be glad to be rid of me. Just you wait a little while more, my days are numbered. You are getting more and more bad-tempered every day. You haven't a drop of human kindness in you. That little child! Why did you hit him? You needn't have helped him with his lessons if you didn't wish to."

"I didn't hit him," I protested.

"No, he cried because you gave him sweets," she remarked sneeringly.

"Really, mother, you must go away now. I've a lot of things to do."

"I'm going—and God knows to what hell!"

"It won't be only you who will go there—we'll all have to go there some day." I could not help making this remark.

Mother wiped her eyes and said in a broken voice, "I find this is the way with you modern folk. You always say you'll go mad because of me and hang yourself because of me. Don't you feel ashamed to say these things to me? As though I was your step-mother; as if I didn't bear you! If your father had been alive, could

you have tortured me like this? A woman who loses her husband loses everything. She has to go on existing while her sons heap insults on her. How foolish of people to take pride in their sons! What good is a son to a woman who has lost her husband?"

Moaning and complaining at the top of her voice, mother went away at last. But I really felt like weeping aloud in tune with her lamentations.

My thoughts turned to God, while I stretched myself more comfortably on the bed. The blue sky and the soft air which a little while ago had felt so sweet, became bitter as poison now. The world seemed flat and tasteless—so, what could one do but think of God? But I was interrupted in my pious thoughts when, all flustered, sister-in-law came into the room and called me in an excited voice.

I couldn't pretend to be asleep. So I jumped up and said, "What's the matter? Is the house on fire?"

"Don't be flippant. There—" And she threw a telegram on my lap.

I read the telegram. "What am I to do about it?" I said.

"That's very simple. Go and send a wire to Suren Babu that Shefali left yesterday and he needn't get leave and come," she said.

"No hurry. Just as well send it in the afternoon. Just this moment I don't feel quite equal to it," I said.

"You are old enough to have some sense and I am

really surprised at you! Can't you realise how worried Suren Babu is?"

"Worried? I should think not. What an awful fuss over just a little touch of fever!" There must have been a touch of banter in my voice.

"Really, you modern young men are absolutely heartless! What a loving brother you are!"

The long and short of the telegram-affair was that my sister Shefali had an attack of fever while staying with us. Her husband in Jamshedpur had become worried about her and wired to ask how she was, and whether he should come. But, although not quite recovered, she had already left for Jamshedpur with an escort and was stopping in Calcutta en route for a day and would get there tomorrow. In these circumstances, I seemed heartless and my soft-hearted sister-in-law was hurt, because I had suggested that the wire might as well be sent in the afternoon! This was nothing to be surprised at, because I had known all along that all unmarried people in this world always had to make personal sacrifices, and cheerfully too, to suit even the most trifling convenience of people who go about as husband and wife!

So, I did not protest any more. Now that I was in for it, I had no alternative but to go out into the street during a hot scorching noon. I felt so cross that I did not even take an umbrella. Hot and perspiring I reached the post office. I took a telegraph form and searched in

my pocket for my fountain-pen, but it was not there! My blood ran cold. I remembered quite clearly that I had brought it before leaving the house. Then, where was it? I began to search all my pockets, but it was nowhere. Then, it must have been stolen! Pick-pockets? But not many people were walking in the streets at this hour! Then it must have dropped out somewhere. I suddenly remembered that on my way I had stumbled on a brick; it must have dropped then. I recollected also that a Chaprassi fellow was walking behind me. He must have picked it up. So my pen was gone. A 'Waterman' at that! I wondered when I would be able to afford another like it, and even if there was another, it would not be like the one I had lost. Strange fate!

I longed to bang my head against the post office walls. I wondered why I did not. So, in a mechanical way I wrote on the form with a pen supplied by the office, put stamps on it, got the receipt and my change. In the street, I kept on looking this way and that, if by any chance—alas! one never ceases to hope! I reconnoitred a little at the spot where I had stumbled. An up-country lad was passing by, smoking a biri. Noticing me, he enquired if I had lost money. I waived him away and walked on.

I tried to convince myself that I had not brought the pen with me, but it was useless! I remembered quite clearly that I had taken it out of my drawer and put it in my pocket when I took the money from my sister-

in-law. So, it could not be possible that I should have left the pen behind when I was going to send a telegram.

So this was the fitting climax to the morning's events! If I could get hold of one of those "flood-relief" fellows now I would murder him.

Like a thief, I entered my room. Like a mother who puts her face close to a dead son's nose to see if he might still be breathing, I pulled the drawer open slowly as soon as I came into the room.

I heaved a deep sigh when I saw the blue box which used to contain my 'Waterman' pen. How sad that the pen which had lived so many years peacefully in this box, was now perhaps adorning the pocket of a wretched Chaprassi! I pretended to myself that I only wanted to handle the empty box. I opened it. My fountain-pen was sleeping peacefully inside.

As soon as sister-in-law came, I said, "Ugh! I feel so tired after going about in the sun."

"Have you sent the wire? Really, you can't possibly imagine how anxious Suren Babu will be till he gets it. (I nodded and she smiled as if pitying my unmarried state). Now go and have your bath quickly. I am waiting for you to have our meal."

"Just look how blue the sky is and how sweet the air smells," I said taking no heed of the bath or her waiting.

"I will look later on. Now, I am being consumed by the fire of hunger," she said.

"My dear sister, up to what standard did you read while at school?" I asked her.

That very moment mother called out from the adjoining room: "Now, do go and have your bath. How long are you going to keep your sister-in-law waiting? The servants have been grumbling and eating my head off."

"All right, I am going, mother." I asked my sister-in-law: "Has Tookoo gone to school?"

"Of course. Why?"

"Oh, nothing particular. I just asked. Your Tookoo is a splendid kid," I said. Then I shouted to mother: "Mother, will you come with me to see the oculist to-day?"

"No, not today. I have to go to a meeting of the Women's Society."

While bathing I thought: After all, I might as well have bought a three-rupee ticket. Moreover, they were quite decent fellows; I should not have disappointed them. My sister-in-law might have gone to see the play even if I did not for she was really a lover of the theatre.

GAJENDRA MITRA



GARIR ADDA

OR

THE CAB STAND

Every day Sārbeswar's paratha shop buzzed with noise and people from six in the morning till midnight. The reason, of course, was the cab-stand next to the railway station. No one could remember who had first set out the broken-legged, tar-smeared wooden seat in front of the shop, but the cab-owners and cab-drivers always sat and gossiped on that one seat day and night. Sitting on it they would consume alur domm (curried whole potatoes) with paratha—both cooked by Sarbeshwar himself; drink tea; play cards; discuss the affairs of the world and quarrel among themselves in filthy language.

Sundry gentlemen of the village had tried many times to shift the rendezvous of the cabbies elsewhere, but without success. It was necessary for cabs to be available near the station, so they could not in any case be asked to move far. What could have been moved was Sarbeshwar's shop, but even that had not proved possible.

The reason, of course, was Sarbeshwar's deep friendship with Ajodhya Pandya. Everyone in the district knew Ajodhya Pandya. He was the owner of three cabs, of which he drove one himself. Even though his father Sambhu Pandya had made a pile of money from plying a cab, Ajodhya had not given up his father's profession. He hired out his three cabs under his personal supervision and spent practically all his time in this cab-stand. But this was not the only reason for his renown, he also did occasional money-lending business as a side-

line. Practically everyone in the village—both high and low—had to put out their hand to Ajodhya from time to time. That was why they behaved so respectfully towards him.

Besides, the speciality about Ajodhya's money-lending business was the fact that he would lend money without security. One could come to borrow from him empty-handed. He would strike his broad chest and say: "I haven't yet seen a father's son who can cheat me of my money! But yes, if the man dies that's something quite different, there's no curse greater than death. But if he is alive, I'll certainly get it out of him. 'Pon my father! To me there's no law, no court—I've lent money, when the time comes I'll get it back if necessary by sheer physical force."

And really, looking at that six-foot tall figure and forty-two inch chest even the thought of cheating him could not enter one's head!

But one day, Sarbeshwar had a terrible quarrel with no less a person than the mighty Ajodhya! And the cause of the quarrel was as comical as it was petty!

It began with Sarbeshwar's daughter Puntee.

When Sarbeshwar first came from Tarakeshwar and started his paratha shop, Puntee was only seven years old. At that time it was Sarbeshwar who cooked the rice and fed his daughter; and at night they both slept in the shop. But during the last four or five years, since his daughter had grown up a little, Sarbeshwar had

rented the hut behind his shop which lay next to Narahari's cow-house and made his home there. Puntee did her cooking there and at midday she would come to the shop and give Sarbeshwar his meal of rice. Besides this, she had often to come over to the shop to give Sarbeshwar a betel or a drink of water; for whenever he needed anything Sarbeshwar would yell out to his daughter.

It was, however, true that there had never been a row because of her. For one thing, Puntee herself was rather grave and dignified, then she was Sarbeshwar's daughter, and so even the cabbies never had the courage to discuss her.

But on the day of the quarrel Sarbeshwar himself raised the subject. While taking off the bowl from Bansi's hookah, he said, "Look for a groom for the girl Bansi, how much longer shall I keep her in my home—"

Turning his hands round and round as if he held a hookah, Bansi answered, "How old is she now, Sarbeshwar-da '(short for dada—elder brother)?"

Calculating mentally Sarbeshwar replied, "Well, when I first came here she was seven, and that's about eight years ago. She can't be less than fifteen!"

Bansi said, "Then one must look for a groom now. It's fortunate she belongs to a Brahmin family—otherwise had she belonged to a family like mine—people would have begun to spit at us by this time!"

Kaabla butted in: "But if you marry off Puntée, what'll happen to you Thakur Mahashaya (respected Brahmin)? You'll have to burn your hands cooking and eating your meal, won't you?"

Sarbeshwar replied, "That's what I've been afraid of, that's why I've been delaying so long, but I can't keep her any longer."

After pulling at his hookah for some time Bansi said, "Do you know what I would suggest? That young fellow Suren who works in Nilkamal the grocer's shop—I've heard he's a Brahmin; marry Puntée to him. Then bring him over to your shop, he'll help you to look after it and when you are old he'll preside over it."

Sarbeshwar shook his head and said, "No brother, I don't want to get hold of another illiterate Brahmin. All my life I've done this work, and for my son-in-law to have to do the same when I die—doesn't appeal to me. I'd rather my daughter remained a spinster—even that's far better—"

Ajodhya had been lying flat on one end of the wooden seat, intently reading a book of Bengali rhymes. Suddenly he sat up and said, "Why are you worrying so much Sarbeshwar, give Puntée into my hands—and let all the fuss be over."

Probably this was a joke; everyone burst out into loud laughter, thinking that it was. But Ajodhya had probably taken a heavier dose of siddhi (an intoxicating

sherbet made with hemp leaves) that day, for he suddenly cried out scolding them, "Why are you all laughing, showing your teeth? May I know why my proposal is so laughable? Even if I'm forty, I'm far stronger and more youthful than any of you—better know that—"

Then he addressed Sarbeshwar and said; "Look here Sarbeshwar, you'd better think over it well, I don't feel like going about like a vagabond any more, I've been thinking for quite some time that I'll marry and settle down."

Sarbeshwar laughed and replied, "While your intoxication is on every day you say that you'll marry and settle down. But the idea cools off as soon as your intoxication wears off—"

Ajodhya caught his hand and said, "Pon my mother—no! I touch you and swear. I give you my word. Say and I'll go right now to the priest's house and fix a date—"

Sarbeshwar said, "Have you gone crazy Ajodhya? You are a Khotta (North-Indian) Brahmin. Do marriages ever take place between you people and us?"

"What is it to you if I'm a Khotta Brahmin? Do you know that I'm a greater Brahmin? If I lower myself, what's that to you?"

"All right, all right. Now smoke a pipe of tobacco and cool your head."

But Ajodhya did not cool down; opening his blood-

red eyes wide he stared and demanded, "Then you won't give me your daughter?"

Sarbeshwar became suddenly obstinate, he said, "No. If I give my daughter to a Khotta Brahmin, I'll lose caste—"

Ajodhya replied, "Do you know that the Brahmins in your province come from the land of Khotta's?"

Sarbeshwar replied in a disbelieving tone, "Pooh! You consider yourselves Brahmins! And talk about it! Have you no sense of tradition or custom?"

Ajodhya sprang up in a towering rage and cried, "Is that so? Just because I condescend to eat paratha and vegetables cooked by you? Do you know that even your father can't give you the power to dare stand where we wash our feet?"

Sarbeshwar flared up, "Look here Ajodhya, don't you dare speak of my father! I'm telling you. Mero Brahmin (a term of contempt applied to North-Indians)! He drives a cab and I'm going to give my daughter to him? I'd rather drown her in the river—even that's better!"

No one could clearly comprehend what happened after that. Ajodhya went and clutched Sarbeshwar's neck and Sarbeshwar poured forth a stream of vile abuse. Everyone came rushing up and parted them. But Ajodhya did not brag or bluster any more, he just cried in a terrible voice: "You'll reap the fruit of this Sarbeshwar, or else I'm not Sambhu Pandya's son—"

Then he went straight back to his home. He told Kaabla, "Unharness the horses. I'm not coming back."

Even then everyone had thought it was only the intoxication of siddhi, when it wore off the affair would settle down. Sarbeshwar too had hoped likewise, that was why early in the morning he had mixed the dough for paratha and put on the kettle for tea. But as the day progressed, when one by one the cabbies went and gathered round Mihir's fried-food shop, his face shrivelled up. He did not have the slightest doubt in his mind that this was according to Ajodhya's orders. Yet, still he could not believe that Ajodhya would ruin him like this for such a petty reason. He decked out the food and sat there with a pale, strained face, hoping that in the end Bansi or Kaabla or Paran—one of them would get hold of Ajodhya and bring him over. In that case, instead of standing on false pride, he would go himself to Ajodhya and beg his pardon. He sketched out in his mind how he would do this.

But the noon rolled on into afternoon, no one turned up. Of his custom, practically three-fourths was provided by the gang of cabbies. So during the whole morning he sold only six annas worth of food. The parathas in the basin became dry as sticks, the alur domm and vegetable curries began to smell sour, and in front of it all, like a block of wood—sat Sarbeshwar.

Nilkamal yelled out: "Why brother, is the old love off?"

Satya chipped in: "Mihir has all the luck today!"

Only Narahari volunteered good advice: "Go to Ajodhya's house and make it up with him Thakur Mahashaya. Why ruin your trade for nothing!"

All of Sarbeshwar's despair and annoyance burst and fell upon Narahari. "I'm to go and fall on that low-down cabby's feet? Why, what for? I'm not born of that kind of a family—you'd better remember that! I may be plying this trade for the sake of my tummy; but my grandfather never even drank a glass of water from the hands of anyone who belonged to a different branch of our caste."

Narahari replied in an indifferent manner, "As you wish, what else can I say!"

For the time being he went away. But Narahari was really a good man. In the evening he went to Ajodhya Pandya and begged him also on the quiet, "Dada, his friendship with you is of long standing. Why should you ruin him for such a petty reason? Take pity on him, forgive him and do make it up."

Ajodhya replied, "And do I have to go and fall on his feet and make it up? From every point of view, I'm his superior, if he wishes to—let him come and make it up!"

Narahari was going to say something but Ajodhya raised his hand and said, "Enough! No more of it!"

So it was of no avail. Next day the sale in Sarbeshwar's shop was four and a half annas; the day after it was still less. Over and above this the landlord of the shop-room suddenly appeared and gave him warning: "Two months' rent is owing, Thakur. Settle this up. And in future you must pay the rent in advance, otherwise I won't be able to let you stay here."

Sarbeshwar realised who was behind this also. Sitting glum, all by himself, he was thinking over everything when Puntée came and said, "Father, the grocer said he won't allow us any more credit. From now we'll have to pay cash for everything we buy."

The meaning of this did not enter Sarbeshwar's head. He asked, "What does it mean? I always pay him up every few days."

Puntée answered, "I don't know. Besides he was saying—'your shop will close down, how will you pay up for my things?'"

Sarbeshwar did not reply any further, he just sat silent. He had never even imagined that he would suddenly come face to face with ruin like this. After paying for the living expenses of the two of them out of the takings of this shop, nothing much was left for saving. At best they could carry on for a week with the cash he had in hand; besides this, all he had were a few silver and gold ornaments belonging to his dead wife. Even if he sold all of them they would not fetch more than a hundred rupees. Of course, he had a Post

Office Savings Account, but not more than three or four rupees could be lying there.

Yet it was quite certain that he would not be able to run his shop if things continued like this. Mayabe, he could stay here for two or three months longer if he waited for complete ruination. But of what use was that? He had either to go and fall on Ajodhya's feet and make it up with him; or else, fly by night—before another day dawned, to go and start all over again somewhere else. He thought over both possibilities. He might sacrifice his pride and fall on Ajodhya's feet, but supposing he really demanded Puntee? His age had reached the wrong side of forty, and moreover, he was addicted to two or three varieties of intoxicants. Supposing some day he kicked her in a fit of drunkenness, that young girl of his would perhaps die that very day. The moment he thought of this he became startled. No, he would not be able to do that, it was far better to take his daughter by the hand and beg in the streets!

But was it not a little difficult to make a new start somewhere else? There were plenty of shopkeepers everywhere—supposing his business did not flourish! He had only those few rupees to fall back on!

He worried over this problem till late at night but could see no light anywhere. In the end when he put up the shutters and returned home, he had not sold even nine pice worth, yet in order to keep up the show he had to burn more than nine pice worth in coal alone!

In his hut Puntée was still waiting up with his food. As soon as Sarbeshwar had washed his hands and feet and sat down on the pīree (a flat square or oblong of wood), she served his rice and asked with a grave face, "Well, what are you going to do about all this?"

Her father gave no reply. Puntée said again, "How long can we carry on like this? All our money is nearly finished. The coal-man said he wouldn't give us any more coal on credit—you'd better keep the money for that ready too—."

Sarbeshwar replied, "What's the good of buying any more coal? From tomorrow I've decided not to open the shutters, what's the good of sitting there for nothing?"

"What'll you do then?"

Silently, Sarbeshwar went on eating his rice. After a long pause he replied, "I'm thinking of going away from here."

"Where?"

"Anywhere. We might go to Katwa. If we go and sit near the Court, won't we be able to feed our two stomachs?"

"Where will you get the money? To go and open a shop—it's a big expense!"

"Let me see. Perhaps I'll have to sell those few grains of dust your mother left. I had thought I'd give them to you at the time of your marriage. But now it can't be done!"

He got up. Puntée too did not say anything more. She sat there in silence, then went and lay down without having her meal.

Even though he swore that he would not open his shop, Sarbeshwar could not rest quiet next day. He lit the coal stove and sat down in his shop setting out his utensils. On the other side, Puntée too locked up their hut and went out as she did every day. Every Monday, the haat (weekly village market) took place by the river; so on Mondays after finishing her marketing, Puntée went to bathe in the river, that was why on haat-days she would be delayed in returning home. On that day too, when Puntée returned the nine o'clock train had gone. Quickly putting down her bundle of marketing, she unlocked the door and saw that in the meantime someone had cut out a portion of the hut's reed-wall and completed their ruin. The trunk had been dragged out from under the bed, its lock broken, its contents scattered here and there; and the tiny cash-box which always remained in the trunk for keeping her mother's ornaments and their one or two rupees of spare cash—it had gone.

Even Puntée could understand who could have done such a thing in broad daylight. For some time she stood there thunderstruck, then she went to the shop to inform her father.

At first Sarbeshwar could not take it in, because whatever Ajodhya might do, Sarbeshwar had never imagined that he could deal such a cruel blow. He too got up, came and stood looking at the heartrending scene—stunned and stupefied. Then he went back to his shop as silently as he had come, and sat down there without saying a word. When at midday Puntée came to call him, after she had rearranged their hut and finished her cooking, Sarbeshwar did not go to have his meal.

Sarbeshwar knew it was useless to inform the police. If he knew that Ajodhya Pandya was on the other side no Daroga (inspector) would listen to the tale of the theft. He would have to leave the village and as soon as possible! He would leave before dawn, without telling anyone—otherwise who knew what fresh trouble might arise!

In the afternoon he called Puntée and told her: "Pack whatever clothes or utensils we have left in a bundle. We'll have to creep away just before dawn. We'll leave the trunks and bedding, if we try to take them people will get to know about it."

Puntée said, "But where will you go? Whatever we had, has been taken away!"

Sarbeshwar replied, "I'm a Brahmin's son, I may even beg. But if we stay here, we won't even get alms!" Towards the end his voice, it seemed, had trembled.

Puntée did not say any more. She came out of the shop. But she did not return to their hut either. For a while

she sat under a mango-tree and made marks on the ground, then suddenly she got up, went through the Ganguly's mango-garden and walked straight into Ajodhya Pandya's house.

Ajodhya had just finished his meal and was getting ready to take a rest. He lived all by himself. A part-time maid-servant came morning and evening and went away after finishing her work; only Kaabla came and slept in the outer room every night. An old blind and deaf aunt used to live with Ajodhya, but recently she had died.

Ajodhya had just sat down on his bed, hookah in hand, when the sound of footsteps came to his ears. He started and looked up—to his great surprise he saw Punttee. He put down his hookah and got up in unnecessary haste, but was unable to speak a single word of welcome.

Punttee did not wait for any reception. She looked at him straight and said, "Why are you worrying us like this for nothing? What have we done?"

Ajodhya sat down on the bed, picked up the hookah again and said in a grave voice, "Huh! What do you understand? A child!"

Punttee retorted angrily, "There's no need for me to understand either! If I'm a child, why do you want to marry me? If we marry, I'll be the mistress of your home!"

Ajodhya turned his face aside and said, "Get along! Don't be cheeky—"

Puntee replied, "You're bringing your own ruin on yourself! If we marry do you think I'm not going to pay you back for all this? I shan't rest unless I make you shed tears every morning and evening!"

Ajodhya flared up, rolling his eyes he said, "You're getting too impudent for words. Have you no rein on your tongue?"

Puntee took not the slightest notice of his scolding. She said, "Anyway, let it go; I haven't time to waste on useless talk. I've heard next Friday is an auspicious day for marriages. Call the priest and arrange everything. I'll marry you."

In a mocking voice Ajodhya asked, "Why has your father now agreed?"

Puntee replied, "Never mind about my father agreeing! He's not that kind of a Brahmin's son. He'll beg rather than stoop so low—"

"So?" Ajodhya asked in surprise.

"What's there to say so about? Through your devilish scheming you've put my father on the streets, where's the old man to go? Must he be forced to go about begging? I'm saying this on my own. Father doesn't know—"

She did not say any more but walked out of the room. Ajodhya followed her out quickly and asked, "Suppose your father doesn't agree to the marriage, what then?"

Puntee replied gravely, "I'm telling you—I'll do it myself."

She went away. Ajodhya stood there dumbfounded.

Sarbeshwar knew nothing of all this. He sat guarding his empty shop as he had been doing before. Late in the afternoon, Ajodhya suddenly came and sat down on the wooden seat in front of the shop and said, his face turned to one side, "Light up some tobacco Sarbeshwar, I haven't had a smoke for a long time—"

At first, Sarbeshwar could hardly believe his eyes. After looking at him well for some time and grasping that it really was Ajodhya, Sarbeshwar was dumbfounded at his impudence. All the other shopkeepers bent forward to see the fun. Ajodhya probably did not even notice that Sarbeshwar had not spoken to him, he said, "That chit of a girl of yours has become very haughty and high-handed—she's been to scold me!"

At last Sarbeshwar could see some inkling of light. He stirred slightly in his seat. But Ajodhya went on: "Do you know what she says—'Marry me!' Heaven help me! Am I going to marry that impudent shrew of a girl? Not I! But she mustn't be allowed to remain unmarried for long—understand? She's becoming too mannish! Arrange for her marriage as quickly as you can—"

At last, Sarbeshwar replied, "With what am I to

arrange, may I know? Whatever twenty or fifty rupees I had—even that you snatched away—”

Ajodhya barked out, scolding, “Go on! Go on! What a lot of things he had that he’s moping over their loss! All that’ll be arranged. I’ve also selected a groom—the Banerji’s Romen. I’ve heard he’s a good boy, he’s passed an examination too. I hear he’s got a job somewhere in Calcutta. You negotiate with him, whatever expenses are required, I’ll pay! Good lord! I shan’t have a moment’s peace till I can marry off that girl. Who knows some day she might really marry me by force!”

‘JUVANASHYA’



BHUKHA BHAGAWAN
OR
THE HUNGRY GOD

Fatima spent the whole afternoon going in and out of her hut, at the turn of evening she came out and stood on the road in front of it.

At noon the Zemindar's peons had come and taken away her husband Kaloo because of the unpaid rent. She knew that the question of rent would not be settled. How could it be settled? Last year, because of a terrible draught not a grain of corn had grown on their tiny, narrow strip of land—and this year there was scarcity all over the country; they did not even have enough to put two handfuls of rice in their stomachs—then to talk of rent! Both of them had passed the last three days in sheer starvation. When her husband—half-dead with worry and hunger—was dragged away by the Zemindar's peons, as fearsome as the messengers of the God of Death, she knew what the result would be. So there was no end to her anxiety throughout the afternoon.

She sat on the roadside for a long time, but there was no sign of Kaloo returning. She looked round this way and that way, at last, late, she became so fatigued with worry and anxiety that she entered the hut and lay down flat on the tattered mat on the floor. Her cheeks were flooded with mute tears.

Outside, the cry of a pack of jackals rose above the incessant chirping of crickets in the still darkness of the night. After screaming loudly for a few minutes, they too became silent.

Suddenly she started up, hearing footsteps, quickly wiped her tears and came out of the hut and stood in the verandah.

Complete darkness. One could see nothing. Fatima called out, "Who is it?"

No one answered.

Fatima called again, "Who is it?"

Still getting no answer she went back into the hut feeling a little surprised; she brought out the kerosene dibba (a tiny tin-can-like kerosene light) and lit it. She inspected the courtyard well in the rays of the light then went inside and shut the door.

Who knows what sound it was—she did not even remember its exact nature.

Sitting alone in the room she began thinking how she would give her husband to eat when he returned. She had nothing in her home. She did not possess anything which would bring a pice if pawned. Early in the morning she had picked a bundle of wild fruit from the jungle, a few of them still remained. Her own body was drowsy with hunger, she felt a great temptation to put two of the fruit into her mouth and chew them, but remembering that her husband had not eaten, her hand did not move to reach out for the fruit. In one corner of the room, there was water in an earthen pitcher, she poured some of it down her throat, opened the door, went out and sat leaning against a wooden post in the verandah.

Sitting there, she began to think about her husband. He was guilty, it was quite true that he had not been able to pay the rent, but why did no one understand that he did not have the means to pay it? For the last year, they had been carrying on practically without eating, in a state of semi-starvation. She could understand this even though she was a woman, and was there not even this much sense in the head of the Raja-Babu of the land?

She did not know how long she had been sitting there, she came to herself suddenly hearing footsteps very close to her. Startled, then she looked around this way and that, her eyes fell on someone who was standing at one end of the verandah. She felt a tremor of nervousness. She cried out, "Who's standing there?"

Whoever was there made no reply.

Suddenly from behind came another person—with one hand pressed over her mouth, he caught her round the waist with the other. For a moment she became numb, no strength remained in her to offer any resistance.

Her assailant dragged her in to the hut. The man who had been standing in the darkness followed them in.

Fatima was a young woman of nineteen, she had enough strength to fight one man. But her strength was of no avail against the joint bestial force of the two of them.

Starving for three days, her mind worn out with anxiety for her husband, all the protest and objections

raised by the weak girl were burnt to ashes by the flames of their flesh hunger. Half an hour later the Zemindar's son left with his boon companion—Fatima had lost consciousness.

The unconscious outraged woman's heart trembled in rhythm with the all-pervading dark stillness of the night.

Kaloc returned very late in the night. Climbing with trembling legs on to the verandah, he called, "Fatī—oh—Fatī" No one answered. Thinking she was out, he went forward and saw that the door of the hut was open. He was a little surprised, the hut was left open—yet Fatī was not in perhaps she had gone somewhere nearby perhaps to fetch water. He thought that he would go round the pond, but after the reception he had got in the Zemindar's kutcherry, his entire body was still sore and weary, his legs refused to move. Thinking that wherever she might be, she would soon return, he entered the hut.

At his second step his foot knocked against something and he started. He bent down to see and his hand touched a hand, slowly he stroked the body and face to make out who the person was; worried, he called out, "Fatī Fatima"

Fatima gave no response.

Feeling frightened, he groped in the darkness and hunted out a tiny piece of candle which he had picked

up on the road and lit it. Quickly going to sit down near his wife, his eyes fell on something near the door which looked like a piece of paper. He picked it up and held it before the light.

It was a five-rupee note. Kaloo could make nothing of it at all. He carefully tied the note in one end of his dhoti and sat down to splash water on his wife's face and eyes.

A little later Fatima opened her eyes and said, "Who is it? Have you come Sheikh?"

Suddenly she remembered and giving out a hardly audible moan, she moved away in a diffident manner.

Kaloo asked in an eager voice, "Fati, what's happened to you? Why are you like this? You aren't ill, are you?"

Fatima made no reply but gazed dully at Kaloo's face. The escape of a long repressed, deep sigh made her body tremble. Indistinctly she asked, "What are those marks on your body, saheb? Blood—isn't it?" With this she drew close to her husband.

Kaloo pressed Fatima against his heart with both hands. A few big tears rolled down from his eyes.

Stroking his body Fatima said, "Lie down I'll fan you. Shall I give you water? I'll bring it Don't sit looking sad for me. There is nothing the matter with me!" She wiped her husband's tears, then brought water from the pitcher and the wild fruit and held them before him.

Kaloo quickly put the fruit into his mouth, gulped

down the water and asked in a choked voice, "And you? You don't eat anything?"

With a sad smile Fatima said, "I've already eaten."

Lying relaxed on the torn mat, drawing the torn patched kantha (a covering made with several folds of old cloth sewed together) over himself Kaloo said, "After tomorrow we won't have to worry about our tummies, Fati! See what I've found" He brought out the note from the end of his dhoti. "Khoda alone knows how it came! But since its come, Khoda will not be pleased if we spurn it. Seeing that two of His beings are dying of starvation, perhaps He caused me to find it."

Seeing the note, Fatima's face turned pale. In a flash she remembered again the full horror of all that had happened earlier in the night. A flood of tears burst from her eyes—she could not restrain them hard though she tried.

Kaloo looked at Fatima's face in amazement. He could not understand why, instead of being pleased to come by some money in these hard days, anyone should burst into tears. He said, "Why have you begun to weep my girl? What's the matter?"

Fatima covered her face with both hands and prostrated herself at his feet.

Everything heard, Kaloo stood up in great agitation and anger. He crumpled and crushed the note in his

hand and flung it away. He picked up the dah (chopper) from the corner of the room, Fatima came and stood before him.

"Where will you go at this hour of the night?"

"Move away Fatī! In a land where the poor have no father or mother—there, the strength of one's own hand is the only thing we have! If I can't sever that bastard's head from his body tonight—I'll "

"You don't have to go, lie down."

Fatima's firm tones maddened Kaloo into crying, "Why are you barring my way? With all the starvation the strength of Kaloo Sheik's wrist hasn't decreased one jot—he has still the strength to chop off the heads of a couple of miscreants "

"Let it be Because of this, are you to walk into the tiger's jaw at this hour of the night? What'll you do against the whole lot of them? Moreover, the Zemindar's people can deal out bullets and gun-powder. It's far better to cool your head and lie down now. Do whatever you like in the morning."

In his excitement Kaloo had not thought over all this. Also whatever strength he had, had gone with the persecution he suffered during the day. Exhausted, he lay down again. He called, "You too, come and lie down."

Fatima replied, "I'm lying down here, you go to sleep."

"I don't know all that, I don't want to hear anything

either. Have you been lowered in the slightest degree in my estimation—that you should say this?”

“My mind will not let me rest Sahib Let to-night pass at least ”

Kaloo said no more. His eyes were closing with sleep and weariness.

Sleepless, it came again and again to Fatima's mind throughout the night—would she ever be able to live freely with her husband again or not? The assault on her body had left its mark not only on her body, but a deep wound on her mind also. So despite all reasoning, argument, understanding—everything, her mind remained unassuaged and moaned in its agony, “No—No—” it can never be the same again.”

She controlled her tears and sat down to think: Supposing things might be the same between her husband and herself, what then? For the last three days they had been undergoing sheer starvation How many more days could they carry on? If Kaloo was alone perhaps he could manage. It was she who created all the trouble, she had not the slightest doubt in her mind that she was at the back of Kaloo's persecution that very day.

Fatima wondered Supposing she died, how would that be? Would it not be better from all sides? If she lived, there was bound to be a clash over her between the Zamindar and Kaloo—and the result was so certain that Fatima shivered with fear. No by

living she had already made her husband suffer enough.

Unconsciously, tears were flooding her eyes, she wiped them away with her hands and sat gazing at the face of her sleeping husband for a long time, then she got up, slowly she opened the door and went out.

The morning star glittered and blazed in its corner of the sky.

When Kaloo woke and sat up towards early morning, the fire of hunger seemed to be consuming his very entrails.

He called out, "Fati "

Getting no response he looked around and saw that Fatima was not in the room. He came out into the verandah and called loudly, "Fati "

Still no response, he decided that Fatima must certainly have gone into the nearby jungle in search of wild fruit and berries. Feeling a little reassured he went towards the pond to wash.

A tiny slime-covered pond, at its edge a wild tree hung down to its waters. Something was floating in the slime just below the tree. Looking carefully, Kaloo discerned some cloth which looked like Fatima's torn striped saree. Like a flash of lightning searing the heart of the sky, a terrible fear flashed across Kaloo's mind. Not breathing he ran towards the tree.

Kaloo brought Fatima's dead body and placed it on the verandah of his hut. His eyes were dry, but bloodshot.

Taking Fatima's head on his knee, he sat there overwhelmed and lost to everything.

When he came to himself again, the sun was high in the sky, and his body was reeling with excitement, weariness, sorrow and hunger.

He gazed once again at Fatima's lifeless face, sat in silence for a time, then suddenly he shook himself. Standing up, his legs trembling he picked up the crumpled five rupee note lying on the floor and walked abruptly off in the direction of the food-shop.

KAMAKSHI PRASAD CHATTERJEE



DOYA
OR
MERCY

A big mela (fair) takes place in our village at the end of Magh (January-February) every year.

The village is small, a small river curves by its side and flows towards the west. Here and there along its banks are heaps of sand; sand—amazingly white, as white as bleached bones. In the sunlight its shimmer blinds the eyes and in moonlight it becomes entrancingly beautiful.

Rowing against the current, it takes three hours, to reach the station. When the current is stronger than usual, it takes still another hour. But except for two or three months in the year, the current is never very strong, occasionally there seems to be no current at all. Most days in the year, the curve of the river lies in the sunshine like a dead snake. Now and then, strange flowers blossom on its surface—pink and green and yellow. No one knows the proper names of those flowers, they call them whatever names they fancy—Nolok (long drop pearl worn on the cartilidge between the nostrils by women), Biswanather Jata (Siva's matted locks)—and many more such names.

This mela on the full moon of Magh is the greatest festival of the year in our village. No one can say for certain when it first began. The feeble old people with cataract-ridden eyes still alive in the village, say that as children they bought 'Til-laddus' (a variety of sweets) from it.

There are many Siva temples—big and small—in the

village itself and all around the neighbourhood. The legend is that within a night Viswakarma (the master-craftsman of heaven) himself had built and established a hundred and eight temples here—thousands of years ago—on the night of a full moon in Magh. In the majority of these temples, the Siva-lingam was missing. But people did not often enter even those temples in which it still remained. The reason was fear—not the fear of Siva, but of snakes and wild animals. The majority of the temples had been swallowed up by a tangle of cacti and other wild plants.

Worship went on only in two of the temples for which a rich gentleman in town sent five rupees a month to Harihar Pundit—he is the priest. Except on special occasions, no lamp was lit inside the temples. People who came to pay homage to the deity, groped in the darkness and somehow managed to touch the Siva-lingam by sheer intuition.

Magh was nearly over, but the cold had not decreased. Before it passed, winter was giving its last sting.

For some time before the mela, the entire village suddenly sat up in the frenzy of an unnatural excitement like a patient in delirium. They did not have a clear conception of what they hoped for. But a smoky hope curled up in their minds, that something which had never happened before—would happen.

Torn tents and small sheds had already begun to

spring up in the big field to the east of the village. People who intended opening shops in the mela had to come sometime beforehand. If they did not come early, they did not get a good place for their shop. On both sides of the river many boats had begun to gather; big and small, new and old—boats of many varieties and many sizes.

The mela was only for one day. But the preparations for it began long before. And it took quite a long time after it was over to wind it up completely.

A thousand varieties of strange people crowded to this mela. That was why the village people had to be on their guard beforehand. At night doors had to be closed carefully; dirty dishes could not be left lying in the courtyard at night. A long time ago two girls of our village had been stolen after the fair. Some people said that the girls had made the mela a convenience for running off with the men of their choice. Anyway, whether they ran away themselves or were stolen, ever since, people of the village carefully guarded their young daughters and wives. Our women had practically to stop going to the river to bathe or wash. Besides, the river itself was so narrow, that when crowded with boats, there was little space for them to use for bathing. Of course, this undoubtedly caused a lot of inconvenience, especially to those women who had no pond near their homes. So this year the village elders had conferred and arranged to screen off one of the

bathing ghats on the river with a temporary barrier built of split bamboos.

On the eastern side of the fair-ground a lot of shops had opened. Fried food, sweets, tea, chop-cutlet, cloth and clothes, wood and tin toys—all these regular shops were there of course; in addition, four big tents had been pitched—and it was these that were causing the greatest excitement to the village people. The biggest tent was pitched in the middle of the field. Every year a jatra (folk-play) was performed and this year too there was to be a performance—not of jatra but of a theatre. This theatrical troupe had come from town. This time the play would not be a mythological folk-play like ‘Sitar Banabas’ (Sita’s forest-exile) or ‘Bhisma’s Sarasajjya’ (Bhisma’s bed of arrows) This time it was to be a regular modern drama—‘Grihadaha’—by Sarat Chatterjee. A regular theatre with a proper stage, settings, and a blaze of bright footlights! What enthusiasm it stirred in the hearts of the young bloods of the village—the sort who smoked biris, dressed their well-oiled hair elaborately, and went playing a flute on the riverside. One of them had brought the news that beardless boys or clean shaved young men were not going to play the women’s roles—they had real girls in this troupe! Real girls—as beautiful as the heavenly dancer Urvast, their skin fair as a memsahib’s! There was a rumour that on the strength of their beauty—these girls had been able to make a tour to England!

They were supposed to dance amazingly well! And sing? They sang like sirens—no one could keep still after hearing their songs!

The old and middle-aged men who sat on the stone-paved verandah in front of the temple every evening and pulled at their hookahs, played chess or cards—they, however, were most annoyed over the whole affairs. Nowadays no games were played, only discussions went on about the speedy manner in which the world was going to the dogs. They had decided that none of them would go to the theatre; and moreover, so that none of the village people attended the theatre, they would go from house to house requesting people not to do so. They would also tell people that they should go to see the jatra party from Palasdanga who had pitched their tent on the western side of the fair-ground. Besides, the theatre charged from two annas up to five annas per head, whereas the jatra party from Palasdanga charged only two pice per head. This was also something worth considering.

There was no end, however, to the curiosity the gang of old men felt in their heart of hearts. They were wondering—if they sat in some dark corner, covering themselves up well—would people be able to recognise them? The crowd did not consist of their village people only. If they could find some way of getting mixed up in the crowd, there could be no doubt that many of the old men would see the theatre.

There were three small tents in a row on the south side of the field. The extreme left among these three tents was the one in which photos were being taken. They took your photo and gave you a print in twenty minutes and it cost only eight annas! Many people had their photos taken and were most awfully pleased to see themselves depicted on a wet postcard. This was the first time in their lives that the majority of them had had a chance of having their photos taken—and this would perhaps be also the last. There were few people in this village who had the luck to have their photos taken more than once in their lives.

The second tent was not less amazing either. A platform had been built in front of the tent by placing packing cases side by side. On it a man was standing and shouting every now and then, "Come and see, folks, come and see! Two annas each, folks, you've never seen such a girl. From her waist up she's a sixteen-year-old girl, from her waist down she's a three-year-old child. Come and see, folks, come and see. Two annas each, folks, two annas each." The man's get-up was as strange as his cry: torn pants; patched up coat; white paint on one cheek, black on the other; a sola hat whitened with chalk on his head. When he stopped shouting he stood there and did conjuring tricks; sometimes he pulled out innumerable strips of paper, sometimes he shoved a flaming torch into his mouth and put it out. Whenever the crowd became thick he

stopped making magic and started ringing a big bell which he held in his left hand shouting. "Come on folks two annas each two annas each!" A curtain with a hideous picture painted on it, hung on the door of the tent. The picture depicted a horrible looking girl—the top half of her body was that of a young woman and the lower half that of a child. Such a strange show had never come to this village. So the people in the mela were crowding not a little, round this tent. Those who came out from inside the tent after having seen the girl, were surrounded by groups of people and asked, "What was she like?"

A talkative young man, who knew one or two words of English said, "Wonderful, sir, wonderful! Go and see. It's a thing worth seeing."

Another young chap came out of the tent and went up to the first young man and said, "Hello! Have you seen?"

"Haven't I? I was the first to see."

"I mean have you seen everything?"

- "What do you mean by everything?"

The younger chap brought his mouth close to the other's ear and with a ogling glance replied, "Everything means everything! If one pays four annas he takes off all the girl's clothes and shows her—"

With bated breath the first young man ejaculated: "Go on! 'Pon your mother—is it true?"

"'Pon my mother! And do you know, if you pay eight

annas," he brought his mouth still closer to the other's ear and said in a hardly audible whisper—"If you pay eight annas, they let you touch her once. Eight annas of mine went. I'm wondering now how I'll get hold of the money for the theatre tonight."

On the tent next to it hung a signboard with 'Paradise Restaurant' written in big letters on it. Inside were: about five pinewood tables with four small iron chairs set round each. Here too, there was quite a crowd. Tea was one and a half pice a cup, besides, stale cakes and biscuits, chops, and cutlets fried in oil could be had. The majority in the crowd consisted of those birismoking young village dandies. There were, of course, one or two old and middle-aged men. Pouring the hot tea into saucers and after blowing on it—they sipped it.

Next to this tent was a reed hut. This had been rented by a man wearing long flowing robes. His face was covered with a crop of black and grey beard and moustaches, the look in his eyes was permanently sharp and wide-awake. The man had put his cloth bag on a packing case. This place was also crowded.

It was heard that the man had cures for every disease in the world with him. His medicines were amazing and every disease was bound to get cured by these. Most of the time the man did not talk, he shouted in a heavy hoarse voice. His get-up, his heavy beard and moustaches, his voice—everything somehow struck one with fear and one did not have the courage to disbelieve him. He was

supposed to have invented all his medicines from indigenous herbs. He was also supposed to have brought some of them over from England.

A man rushed out from the crowd and came all of a tremble to this doctor. He had wound a torn Japanese rug round himself like a chudder and tied strips of torn material round his head and chin like a bandage. Every now and then he screwed up his face in unbearable agony.

The gist of what he said to the doctor in a broken voice was this: About four days ago the gum at the root of one of his teeth had swollen up and brought him to this state. The pain was so unbearable that it seemed that it would tear away his head. For the last four days and four nights he had not been able to eat a morsel of food, nor been able to close his eyes. He was being treated by the village Kaviraj, but instead of the pain being allayed by his medicines, it was increasing by leaps and bounds.

The doctor took out a torch from his bag and said gravely, "Open your mouth." With great difficulty and suffering agonies the man opened his mouth. The doctor examined it carefully, then said, "Yes the medicine for this—one rupee."

"One rupee—?" Indistinctly and in an inarticulate manner the man said, "Where will I get one rupee? I paid the Kaviraj only two annas for his medicine."

"Then go and take the Kaviraj's medicine!" scolded the doctor. "Your condition is such, that at most you might live another two days. I won't cheat you of your money. I'll give you the medicine in front of all these people. Then you sit here and pay me my money only if your pain becomes less and you feel better. If it doesn't become less in ten minutes, then I don't want a pice."

Everyone nodded their heads and said, "Quite right!"

The hope of his pain decreasing in ten minutes made the man very restless. Moving his swollen cheeks with great difficulty, he said, "But where am I to get one rupee from? If I give you one rupee, what will we eat? I have five children, besides there's my wife "

But not allowing him to finish what he had to say the doctor glared at him, and cried, "Look here, you'll get medicine from me but not mercy. In all my life I've never shown mercy to anyone, nor has anyone been merciful to me. It's no use telling me about your sorrows; medicine not mercy is my trade."

The sick man changed his mind for some reason and came forward and said, "Then give me the medicine. But I shan't pay you till the pain's less."

"Certainly. How can I take money till it's less? Everyone is here to see."

The doctor brought out some dried leaves from his bag, which he put in his palm and ground into powder. Then he got out a bottle and poured out a few drops of

medicine into a small glass and mixed it with a little water. He held up the glass against the light and examined it for some time, then gave it to the man and said, "Drink it up." After the medicine was taken, he made the man open his mouth, took a pinch of the powdered dry leaves and rubbed it on the tooth which was causing pain; then he said to the man, "Go and sit in that corner. At first your mouth will water. Then after a while it'll be all right."

All the people who had gathered there went on gazing at the sick man. The moment ten minutes were over the man stood up.

"Well? Don't you feel better?" the doctor asked in a hoarse, rough voice.

The man spoke, "How extraordinary! The pain has completely vanished! Really, your medicine is wonderful!" All the people there were astonished at this terribly astonishing occurrence. Different persons began saying different things.

But the doctor said, "Give me the rupee before you go."

The man brought out the rupee from his waist-cloth and tried to say something, but meeting the doctor's gaze he suddenly became disconcerted and silent. Without a word he paid the money.

From one person to another, the news spread everywhere: "An amazing doctor has come to the mela. He cures any and every disease within the twinkling of an

eye. Besides he is said to have super natural powers. He is supposed to have brought back many dead persons to life!"

Different people began coming to the doctor. The majority of them took medicines for their sick relations: asthma and phthisis, dengue and kala-azar, even for leprosy. The doctor told everyone that his medicines would effect a cure in two or three days. The man, however, was most money-conscious. He did not let off anyone for even a pice.

Suddenly an old woman arrived howling and weeping and fell on the doctor's feet. She said that her only son had been lying ill with fever for the last twenty-five days. Since yesterday he was gasping for breath all the time, he was no longer conscious—she wanted medicine for him.

"Three rupees," said the doctor solemnly.

"Three rupees?" the old woman practically broke down. "Three rupees? Father have mercy, have mercy father. Save the only son of a widow; have mercy"

Again, the doctor began to scold. He repeated the things he had said before, "Mercy—I've no such thing as mercy in me. I give mercy to no one. My trade is to give medicines, and not to ladle out mercy."

The old woman now broke down completely, "What'll happen to me, my father? Then my son will have to die? No one but you can save him!"

With a harsh grimace the man replied, "What am I

to do, tell me? No one has given me mercy, and I give mercy to no one. Pay three rupees and you'll get medicine, otherwise not. This is my last word."

It was quite late at night. The lights in most of the shops had gone out. Only the daylight lamps in the theatre-tent were burning bright, and all the people in the mela had gathered round it. The theatre was going full swing. Young and old, men and women—everyone had assembled there. The jatra from Palasdanga had carried on for half-an-hour, then news came that such a theatre had never come to the village before ; such a wonderful thing had never been heard or seen before. Within a short time all the seats in the jatra emptied. Everyone rushed off to the theatre-tent. The biris-moKing young dandies, the gang of old and middle aged men who played cards everyday in the temple verandah, the young women so carefully guarded lest they be stolen—no one was missing, the whole lot of them were there. There was not space for a pin-head left in the tent. A crowd of people covering themselves up with rugs and chudders jostled outside the tent. They could see nothing, but they could hear broken bits of dialogue and occasional songs. That gave them their satisfaction. They were all overwhelmed with the strange intoxication of the theatre-tent.

Probably, the doctor was the only person in the mela

who had not gone to the theatre. He was sitting on a bench in his reed hut, smoking in the darkness. He had decided to lie down and go to sleep after he finished his smoke. Just then a faint sound of weeping came to his ears ; as if a girl was weeping and trying to choke down her sobs.

“What a nuisance! Who’s crying in the middle of the night. I hate all this sort of thing ”

He stirred a little in his seat then gave a few hard pulls at his hookah. A song sung in a woman’s voice floated across from the theatre-tent in the distance—broken disjointed lines of a song. But another sound too could be heard: though the doctor would have been pleased not to hear it: somebody was sobbing and panting for breath, panting and sobbing. The doctor put down his hookah and went out. At first he could not make out whence came this sound of weeping. After pausing a little he realised that it was coming from the tent next to the tea-tent. The doctor walked over and found himself in front of the tent where the strange figure of a girl had been exhibited throughout the day.

The sobbing could be heard distinctly. There could be no doubt that a girl was crying: brokenly, pausing for breath. “What’s happened there inside? Who’s in there?” the doctor asked. No answer came. For a few seconds the sobbing stopped. Then it was heard again.

“What a bother! Who’s there inside?” the doctor asked again.

The sobbing stopped. Then faintly in a woman's voice came: "I'm here."

"Who are you?"

"I? I'm nobody." The sobbing was heard again.

"Good heavens! What does 'nobody' mean? You are a girl aren't you? From your voice it seems so."

But no reply came.

"Who else is inside?" The doctor addressed the question to the unknown persons in the tent.

"No one," came the answer from inside. "Everyone has gone to the theatre."

"Only you are there?"

"Yes, only I'm here."

The doctor took the torch from his pocket, lit it, and pushing open the cloth door of the tent, went inside. There were various odds and ends and a small wooden box in the tent.

"Where are you?" asked the doctor.

"I'm in this wooden box," came the reply from the box.

"In the wooden box?" ejaculated the doctor in surprise and he went forward. He saw that bed clothes were arranged in the box and the girl was lying there. She was covered with an old rug up to her waist. From her face her age seemed to be between eighteen and twenty, her head was covered with a mass of hair. But how could such a box suffice for her whole body? That was the strange part of it.

"Who are you?" the doctor asked again. "Why are you in this box and for what were you weeping?"

"You don't know me?" the girl asked in surprise. "You haven't seen me? Why, everyone in the mela saw me; for two annas one can just see me, for four annas I'm shown without my clothes, for eight annas I can be touched once—you're lucky, you didn't have to spend your money, you've seen me free of charge—why are you standing there? See me! Have your fill of seeing me! Move away this rug, see me, touch me! I'm a strange girl. Waist up I look a sixteen-year-old. waist downwards I'm like a three-year-old "

The doctor could not understand and perhaps for the first time in his life he could not find words.

"What are you waiting for? You haven't the courage to take it off? All right, I'll take it off for you myself." The girl suddenly threw off the rug and the doctor emitted a weird moan of pain: the crippled body of a woman appeared before his eyes; the upper part like that of a sixteen-year-old, the lower half that of a three-year-old!

The doctor put out the torch and screamed out, "Cover it! Cover your body!"

"Why?" In the darkness, the girl asked in surprise, "Are you frightened? So many people have seen me but no one gets frightened."

"Cover it! Have you covered your body?" shouted the doctor.

"Yes, I have. Put on the light," said the girl. The doctor put on the light. The girl had pulled up the rug over her body again. A torn and foul-smelling rug. The girl looked into the doctor's eyes and said, "Now tell me, who am I? Am I a human being? You've seen my whole body."

"You—you—how did you become like this? Were you born like this?"

"No, no, after we were born "

The doctor broke in: "We? What do you mean?"

"Oh! Both of us—my sister and I were born together. From our birth we were kept in *handies* (wide-mouthed earthen cooking-pots). For fourteen years we lived inside those *handies*. The upper portion of our bodies grew in the natural manner, but waist downwards our bodies could not grow. After fourteen years the *handies* were broken and we were brought out. After fourteen years! Understand?"

"Fourteen years you remained in a *handi*?" There was surprise and disbelief both mixed in his tone. "Impossible! How could you have stayed in it?"

"Oh, I understand! A round hole was kept at the bottom of the *handi*. Do you understand now? We belonged to the animal species. Then, when we came out we were neither animals nor human beings! So many thousands and thousands of people saw us. So many people were amazed like you. My father began earning well "

The doctor broke in again, "What do you mean—your father? Who's your father?"

"Why, the man who shows us to people? It's father who exhibits me; who whispers to people that if they pay four annas they can see everything and if they pay eight annas they can touch me once." The girl said this in an easy manner. She paused a little then began weeping and saying, "My sister suddenly died three years ago. I'm still living. I wonder when I'll die. Can you tell me when I'll die?" But without hoping for any answer from the doctor she continued again: "My mind has matured like the upper part of my body—like a girl of eighteen. But, I'm not a human being. What price are my wishes? What price is my sense of modesty and shame? Nothing!—You can see the whole of my body for four annas, touch me once for eight annas. If I object, I have to take a beating, go without food. Even if I go crazy with hunger, I won't be given food. Till I die I can't run away either!"

The girl began sobbing and gasping for breath as before. Suddenly the girl stopped her weeping and asked, "But who are you? You didn't come to see me before this, you haven't gone to see the theatre, you are a strange person!"

"I'm a doctor."

"Doctor?" The girl burst out laughing. "What disease can you cure? Can you cure me?"

"Of course I can!" The doctor seemed to be pondering

over something. "You'll be all right with one bottle of medicine."

"I'll be all right? Really?" The girl's eyes glistened in the light of the torch. "I'll be all right? I'll be able to walk? Become a human being?"

"Yes," replied the doctor gravely.

"Have mercy, give me medicine, have mercy" the girl burst into loud wailing.

"Mercy! Mercy! Mercy!" By this time the doctor had changed to his old self. "The blood rushes to my head the moment I hear that word 'mercy!' I have never shown mercy to anyone, nor has anyone shown me any mercy. Why should I be merciful to you?"

The doctor came back to his dark hut and sat again on the bench. It was Maghi-Purnima—the full moon night of Magh and outside the sky was flooded with moonlight. From the distance songs floated over from the theatre-tent. Now and then, a crippled girl's sobbing could also be heard; she was sobbing and gasping for breath.

The doctor sat numb like a stone for about fifteen or twenty minutes. Then suddenly he got up and brought out a bottle containing a white powder from his bag. He poured some of the powder into a small glass, then mixed some water with it. After that he went near the girl's tent with the glass in one hand and a torch in the other. For a moment he seemed to ponder over something, then he lit the torch and entered the tent. Seeing

the light the girl stopped weeping and asked, "Who's that?"

"I'm the doctor. I've brought medicine for you." He went near the box and said, "Don't talk. Drink up the medicine. You'll go to sleep immediately. When you wake up, you'll see that you're all right. You will have become a human being."

The girl opened her mouth. The doctor poured the medicine into it. "I'll get well, won't I?" the girl asked.

The doctor came out and smashed his glass on the ground.

A little later the doctor was seen to come out from his hut: a bag on his shoulder, a bundle in his hand. He did not look in any direction. He just walked away down the path by which he had come.

NARAYAN GANGOPADHAYA



NAKRA - CHARIT
OR
THE STORY OF A CROCODILE

With a sharp rat-tat-tat three or four knocks fell on the door. Scribbling with permanent ink on the red cloth-bound account-book Nishikanta Karmakar looked up with a frown. He knew the meaning of this sound.

Outside, the night was dark and crickets chirped noisily; in the room a kerosene lamp burned dimly. Nishi never increased its flame lest too much oil be consumed. From working in half-darkness his eyes had become sharper than those of a vulture. He went on with his writing in permanent ink on the cloth-bound account-book—his script was like a row of ants—to-day's debit and credit.

Rat-tat-tat! The sound was familiar but still—still—who knew! The shadow of doubt gathered deeply in Nishi's vulture-like eyes. On his forehead disorderly serpentine lines became visible. In the dim light of the lamp, the foreign-made iron-safe handle and two Hobbs locks were glittering. In raw gold, ornaments, notes and cash, about twenty thousand rupees decorated that iron-safe's interior.

Nishi put down his pen and stood up. The man was hunchbacked. Not with the weight of age, but with continuous contact with account-book and hammer, his body had become bent like a bow, before its time. With careful hands he opened the heavy bolt of the door.

Four men came in—if their faces had not been known to Nishi, he would have given out a sky-piercing moan. None of their faces were worthy of being seen or shown

in bright daylight. Their dhoties were closely tied, they had made their ugly appearance still more fearsome by painting their faces with lime and lamp-black. Mud was splashed up to their knees. In their hands they held bamboo-sticks ripened in oil, and razor-sharp long shimmering scythes. One of them had a heavy tin-trunk on his head, another held a bundle tied in a saree in his hand.

Without a sound the door at the back was closed.

They put down their trunk and bundle and sat down wearily. They had come at a run a distance of four miles—they were panting hard with fatigue. Eight or ten market-carts had been coming behind—so it would not have been surprising if they were caught, but they had missed being caught by the skin of their teeth. One of them looked at his feet with a face twisted in pain. One of his nails had been completely knocked off by a brick. Black blood mixed with mud was dripping from the wound—drop by drop.

Nishi Karmakar looked with questioning eyes once towards the trunk and once towards the bundle “To-day’s shikar?”

“Yes.”

“Any gold?”

“Why don’t you open it and see—the ornaments we got are in that bundle.”

Putting up the flame of the lamp Nishi opened the bundle. With the touch of light a huge pile of gold and

silver ornaments flashed like a mass of frightened eyes. Silver anklets, bangles, two gold neck-chains, a pair of heavy bracelets, a ring and—a pair of gem-set earrings. Nishi winced and quickly moved his hand away the moment he touched them. A soft piece of flesh sticky with blood was still hanging on each. To save time, they had cut away the two ears to bring away the earrings.

“Ugh! has there been a murder?”

The man who was the fattest and strongest among them answered. Even if one were not told, one could understand that according to self-evident laws he was their chief. A few red whiskers like a cat's stuck out below his short Mongolian nose. His eyes were so dim and yellow that one would think they were anointed with turmeric. His whole body seemed tied in knots, as if it was made only with muscles. His name was Madan.

Madan laughed showing his three sticking-out, ugly, dirty teeth. “No, no one has been murdered. She didn't want to part with them, that's why we had to snatch the earrings away.”

The youngest in the group—Jogi—was sitting silently. He had only recently been initiated into highway robbery. The cry of helpless wayfarers in the dark night struck some chord in his heart. When the sharp blade of the scythe shone like a cruel laugh over the victim's head, he could not bear to look at the wide-open eyes of the one menaced with death. His nerves had not yet been able to get accustomed to accept this night-life

easily. Jogi said, "Oh! how the girl was crying! Need we have snatched the earrings away like that—"

Madan burst out laughing. "This isn't your job! You shame the name of Bhuinmalı (a criminal caste). Tomorrow you go home and weave baskets—that would be better. With a mind like a woman's one can't do a strong man's work."

Abashed, Jogi remained silent. He was not afraid but doubt had risen in his mind. Strong man's work! But was this the work of a strong man! The moonless dark night had drowned everything in darkness, here and there in the open fields loomed a jungle of dark thorn-bushes and on these innumerable glow-worms glowed like the eyes of ghosts. Through it ran the bullock-cart track, here and there water and mud had collected. Practically melting into the shadow of the thorn-bushes they sat in anxious expectation—when would a cart pass this way? In the distance when they saw a big light in the middle of the field, a wave of restlessness flowed through their fiery veins. Madan stood up straight. Even in the darkness, Jogi could see his eyes flare up like the yellow eyes of a greedy tiger and the scythe tremble in his hands. The light hopefully came forward flaring brightly, then raising false hopes, like a mirage it disappeared into the bottomless darkness like a bubble. No! It was a will-o'-the wisp! Madan bit his lower lip with his ugly teeth in despair—a horrible swear-word came from his mouth. "To-night's going waste, can't a

single blasted cart come? What injustice is this of God?"

"Really! What injustice is this of God!" Jogi thought in surprise. There should have been a little more consideration on the part of God. Here they were sitting up with sleepless eyes throughout the night waiting for prey, and taking this opportunity all the mosquitoes in the field had surrounded them with all their might, was there no reward for so much trouble and hardship? If He had so wished, God could easily have sent one or two carts with three or four women wearing heavy ornaments this very minute—at half past one in the night. He had created His creatures, yet why was He so miserly about finding them food?

But there is reward for patient striving. In the end a cart puts in an appearance. Quickly Madan lights a torch, then with a horrible yell they go and bar its way. In the red flare of the torch the big eyes of the bullocks look strangely frightened. The cart-driver jumps off and runs away towards the jungle, the sky is filled with the cries of the helpless wayfarers!

The work of a strong man—Jogi does not understand this word properly.

Nishi Karmakar spoke bringing Jogi back to reality.

"Twelve tolas of silver."

"And gold?" Madan's voice sounded anxious.

"Gold? Where's the gold? Even if one takes every

little thing into account it can't be more than three tolas."

"What on earth are you saying?" Madan started. "This chain, these bangles—"

"They're all gilt."

Gilt! Madan looked at Nishi Karmakar's face with wide-open eyes. Not a muscle on that face twitched, only the lines of his forehead undulated like a snake. Not a single word could be read from his face or the slightest inkling from the region of his mind be discovered. His mind was as mysterious and impenetrable as a forest. Only, behind the thick lenses of his glasses in their nickel frame his eyes had become impossibly greedy.

Nishi Karmakar frowned. "You don't believe me, do you? Then take away your goods. I'm not going to allow myself to get a bad name!"

In a moment Madan seemed to wilt. If Nishi Karmakar got angry all was lost. They would never find such a dependable clever man for doing this sort of thing. He was a well-known dealer in the haat (bazar) in Golapara; he not only dealt in gold, but had godowns of rice and carried on a cloth business too. He was the President of Golapara Union Board—envelopes bearing the Government seal came to him from the district town. Besides, no one knew with what spell he had subdued Ibrahim Meah—the Daroga of the Habigunj thana, so at least they were free from worry about being harassed by the police.

"No, no, I didn't mean that. But—"

"There is no 'but' in this." Nishi took off his glasses and put them in a tin case. "I never do a wrong for there's such a thing as a life after death! It can't be more than a hundred and seventy-five, but I'm giving you two hundred in full. Take it."

"Two hundred?" Despair was in the voices of all four. They had nabbed the cart of the Sahas of Kalai-gunj. The Sahas were famous for their riches and only two hundred rupees worth of ornaments came from the bodies of the women of their family? It was difficult to believe.

Madan tried for the last time. "At least two hundred and fifty."

"I can't give one pice more—if you don't feel like taking it, you can take your things back. If you can make anyone agree to give you more than a hundred and fifty, you can twist my ears."

"Can we do that!" In a helpless tone Madan said, "All right, then give us two hundred."

At last Nishi Karmakar smiled. His smile was most affectionate and beatific.

"Why do you distrust me so much? These are the earnings of your hard labour, if I deceive you, won't God punish me? Besides, I'd have to answer for them in the next world. Where there is Right there is victory. Un-righteous earnings are synonymous with the flesh and blood of cows."

They came out with the money—their faces melancholy. In the darkness Madan's ghost-like blackened face looked still darker, still more terrible. His clenched teeth made a loud grinding noise. He gave a fiery glance at Nishi Karmakar's closed door.

"He says the money from wrong-doing is cow's flesh and blood! The damned old vulture! As if we can't distinguish between guilt and gold! I feel like taking a big iron hammer and cracking his head to pieces. But what can one do, he's a pet of the Government, otherwise by now . . ."

Madan's manner of speaking made Jogī feel like laughing. Madan was a wild aloe but Nishi Karmakar was its antidote—the sourest tamarind.

After they went out, Nishi put up the flame of the lantern once again and began examining the ornaments. The heat and smell of perspiration from the bodies of the women seemed still to linger on them. At the lowest calculation these were worth a thousand rupees, one had to admit that the Sahas were large-hearted. But the money from wrong-doing was cow's flesh and blood! Remembering what he had said, a smile spread over his line-riddled face. One's sense of wrong-doing certainly differed. No one would call it wrong-doing if one went one better over a thief!

Nishi did not sleep soundly at night. He had cultivated this much-desired sleeplessness by taking very great pains.

With every breath of air the leaves of trees rustle and his sharp sense of suspicion keeps him awake in bed, his eyes remain sleepless. Snakes pass through the jungle of grass; with his ears alert, he tries to follow the disappearing sound. Inside, the room is utterly dark, yet still he can clearly see the bright handle and heavy Hobbs locks on his big iron-safe; keeping watch—wide-awake-like sentries. On tiny velvet-like feet hungry mice scamper all over the room, but there is not one iota of waste in Nishi Karmakar's house for them to hunt out and eat.

The victorious cry of jackals marks every hour of the night. Then before the darkness outside becomes lighter, Nishi Karmakar sits up. He is a Vaishnava—a worshipper of Krishna. After counting his rosary he begins singing Kirtan (religious songs with Radha and Krishna for their theme) songs—out of tune. He has to pass the whole day in the polluted atmosphere of domestic and business life, so he earns as much holiness as he can during this auspicious hour.

Early each morning, bringing a basket-full of parched rice and a handful of cane-molasses, Bishakha appears. Bishakha is Nishi's Shebadashi (the serving-maid of a Vaishnava).

This name was given by him. Before she became a Vaishnava, Bishakha was a low-caste girl. Her name was Kastabala (the daughter of sorrow). But the great Vaishnava Nishi Karmakar has removed all her sorrows

by putting a Tulsi garland round her neck. Now she is Sri Radha's handmaiden and Nishi's companion in his Brindaban Leela (the idyll of Krishna and Radha in Brindaban).

This day also, according to the daily routine, Bishakha appeared with the basket of parched rice in her hand.

After a long time Nishi raised his eyes and looked at Bishakha. For five years now he had forgotten to look at her face like this. Old age had intervened to remove him from her life, but this morning after her bath Bishakha had anointed herself with sandalwood paste. Mixed with the sweet fragrance of hair-oil and sandalwood, a burst of early morning sunshine suddenly glittered on her face. Like a streak of lightning it flashed across Nishi's mind, that it was only *his* age which had increased, that was why all the sap of sweetness had dried up in the veins of his life. But in her charm of youth Bishakha still bloomed like a hundred-petalled lotus. So much honey, so much sweetness—to-day he had neither the right nor the power to taste it. Like the bars of gold in his iron-safe he was only guarding this image of beauty, only a sentry of this kingly treasure-house. He did not even remember to put out his hand for the basket of parched rice.

"You are looking wonderful, my sweetheart!"

The sweetheart turned away her face. Nishi's compliments did not thrill either her mind or body these days.

She said, "You're getting sentimental in your old age, I see!"

"Old! It's true." With all his body he felt the helpless ineffectuality of his veins and nerves. Yet once upon a time, which beautiful girl in the village had he not mastered for at least a couple of days? And at this moment his own Bishakha was beyond his reach! Yet how wonderfully charming she was looking now! Even though she was of low caste her complexion was fair. At the juncture of youth and middle age, her face had become plump and well-rounded; her cheeks were red like a ripe mango; her thin lips were ruby with pan (betel leaf) juice. On her forehead there was tattooed a tiny spot which served to increase her beauty still more. A strange excitement made the cold blood suddenly pound in Nishi's heart.

"Will you come close to me Bishakha?"

A shadow of doubt fell on Bishakha's eyes.

"What's the matter—have you taken to intoxicants?"

"I haven't taken to intoxicants—I'm intoxicated."

Nishi was being as silly as only one whose youth had passed could be. "Last night I managed to get hold of two gold neck-chains, will you take one?"

The doubt in Bishakha's eyes became still deeper, "Good heavens! Such luck! Will I live?"

"Why, have I never given you anything?"

The 'cring—cring' of a cycle-bell was heard outside. Then with a loud creaking of shoes someone walked up

to the verandah and called out, "Karmakar—are you at home?"

Nishi started as if struck with lightning. Ibrahim Daroga had come.

A blush swept across Bishakha's fair face. Like the water of a lake suddenly touched by a gust of breeze, a restless wave of beauty passed over her body. There was nothing to understand anew, still a sharp jealousy overwhelmed Nishi for a moment. He thought: "Oh! that's why she tells me I'm old. That's why she doesn't like me any more!"

Bishakha understood what was in Nishi's mind. She felt sympathy on seeing the futile greed of a poverty-stricken man. But excepting sympathy, what else could she possibly give him? But why this jealousy? If it had not been so, handcuffs would have gone round his wrists long ago—he did not seem to realise that.

True, very true. It was this chain which had bound down a mad elephant like Ibrahim Daroga. It was no use being jealous. Only a big sigh came out from the depths of Nishi's heart.

Bishakha had disappeared from the room. A respected guest and a priceless lover. One could not keep him waiting outside for long. He had to be presented with a few sweet smiles, a cup of tea and a pan. Occasionally the Daroga spent the night in Nishi's house. Everyone in the village knew about the affair, but none of them had the courage to say a word. At least one could expect

this much sense from them, that they would not quarrel with the crocodile while living in water.

Nishi Karmakar was the biggest mahajan (dealer) in the Golapara haat. And it was better not even to think at all about the power of the Daroga. Since the war began, he was completely girded with the armour of the Defence of India Act.

Ibrahim Daroga seemed a little displeased today. Three or four dacoities had been committed in his area, yet it had not been possible to do anything about any of them. From higher up, the Superintendent had sent a firm reprimand. If things went on like this, it would not be surprising if the Daroga was transferred.

Ibrahim Daroga rapped the cane in his hand again and again against his shoes. He said, "You'd better proceed a little carefully Karmakar. Am I to lose my job for you?"

Nishi's vulture-like eyes became stupid with humility as the eyes of a carp. "Please, please huzur!"

"No, no, really. They're continually sending reminders from above. If your name comes out suddenly, I shan't be able to save you. You know that wretched inspector. He's an absolute shark! Unless his mouth is shut—"

A smile came to Nishi's face. He understood the meaning of this. He opened his iron-safe, brought out a small roll of notes and held it towards the Daroga. The moment the Daroga got the money he shoved them nonchalantly into his pocket. His heavy black-bearded face

beamed with pleasure. The man probably had some Pathan blood in him and taken as a whole there seemed to be a suggestion of unpolished primitiveness about him. But which wretch could say that loyalty had disappeared from this land of Bengal? However much the nationalists might boast, in every corner of India, wise and sensible men like Nishi Karmakar were always to be found. Otherwise, what pleasure could there be in taking a job in the police!

Bishakha entered with pan and tobacco on a silver dish. With a side-glance at her the Daroga took a handful of pan and tobacco and put it into his huge crocodile-like mouth. The Daroga's mouth was unnaturally red with continuous chewing of pan. If one suddenly saw him one would think the fellow drank blood!

"Yes, there's another thing—rice can't be had anywhere. Is there any in your godowns? I've to send a report to the higher authorities."

"Rice? In my godowns?" Nishi became dumb with surprise. "Where is it to come from? I finished off everything before July. I'll hardly be able to carry on with the little I have for myself till the new crop's garnered. I'll run short."

Through the gap of his black beard an animal-like toothy smile appeared on the Daroga's face. "You're really a crocodile—a fat crocodile! If I search your godowns I can immediately seize five hundred maunds of rice, do you think I haven't got that news?"

Nishi practically moaned, "Hare'-Krishna! In my go-down? Who has spoken such an evil thing against me? Have I no fear of wrong-doing? Won't I have to give an answer in the next world?"

Ibrahim Daroga said sarcastically, "All right, all right—why do you drag in poor God with the tons of lies that you tell first thing in the morning? Cry 'Bismilla' and sacrifice a hen at my tabernacle, if I'm well and happy, who can touch you?"

"It's with this assurance in my heart that I live, huzur."

"All right, I'm going now." The Daroga stood up. Then he looked at Bishakha's face with hungry eyes and said, "I'm very busy to-day, I'll come to-morrow."

A ricketty Hercules cycle was heard passing over the rough, uneven District-Board road, and the sound gradually melted into the horizon.

After the Daroga went away Nishi sat benumbed. Rice—of course he had rice! If one was to carry on any trade or business, nobody could be like Judhistir—the son of Dharma (one of the five Pandava brothers in the epic Mahabharata). If you did not cheat other people, then other people would cheat you—this was the law of the world. But the Daroga had not got the correct news—it was not five hundred but eight hundred maunds. Bought at twelve rupees, he could easily sell it for at least forty rupees a maund in the monsoon market. One or two people had already started making

negotiations. They were said to have obtained military contracts and did not care about money. They would give a pile of bright, clean, new notes and buy the rice at any price. But it was better to wait and see how the market behaved.

“We came to visit you, Karmakar Mahashaya.”

Three great mahajans of the Golapara haat had put in their appearance. Madhusudan Kundu, Nityananda Poddar and Jagannath Chakravarti.

“Come in, come in, have a smoke. What’s up that you’ve all come together?”

“The matter isn’t much, brother. We’ve arranged for an ‘astaprahar’ (day and night sitting in the Hari-sabha—a religious gathering of the Vaishnavas). We hear that Satya-jug (a holy era) and Kalki-avatar (the tenth and last incarnation of Vishnu in which he was to destroy the wicked) will descend to earth to destroy all sinners. Seeing the state the country’s come to, at least we can arrange to sing His name—”

“Certainly, certainly, there is nothing like it, to remove the sins of Kali (the fourth or present age of the world according to the Hindus).”

“Then, do come to-morrow evening—brother. You’ll have to give a subscription of course.”

Great arrangements had been made for the non-stop singing of Kirtans. The auditorium was lighted by placing candles on top of eight or ten trunks of banana plants and by hanging lanterns. Torn mattresses were

laid on the ground, and on them sat the mahajans of Golapara with their pipes of ganja (hemp) in readiness. The fumes of ganja have one virtue, as the intoxication deepens, one can see the descent to earth of the saviour Kalki with the eyes of one's mind. Of course, this time no sinner would have a chance of being saved, but no blasphemer could express any doubt that the mahajans of Golapara haat would live to decorate the Satya-jug by virtue of singing His name and of their intoxication.

From the neighbourhood a gang of Vaishnavas and Vaishnavies had gathered—a feast had been arranged to take place after the singing of hymns. Their eyes were blood-shot with intoxication, their faces dull and pale with bad living. The discussion that went on amongst them might be anything, but certainly neither spiritual nor soulful.

On one side, three big logs were burning with a blood-red glow. Every now and then someone would throw powdered incense on them. A little further beyond Khichuri (Kedgerie) was boiling in a huge pot—occasionally the eyes of the Vaishnavas circled towards it.

“Hare’-Krishna! Hare’-Krishna! Krishna! Krishna! Hare’! Hare’!” From all sides of the audience came broken snatches of hymns. One or two were reeling and not with ganja only, for in order to be drowned in a sea of emotion—a few amongst them had also had some swigs of country-liquor. One of them was beating the drum in such a manner that one would think that

he had made up his mind somehow or other to break it into pieces. Another was leaping up towards the sky in the violent rhythm of the Tandava dance (Shiva's dance of destruction), with his hands held high, as if he was seeking to pluck something from above—probably the fruit of deliverance from the tree of devotion.

Nishi Karmakar's eyes were closed. His whole body was trembling with emotion like the petals of the Kadamba flower, it seemed the eight pure emotions would gradually be experienced by these devotees, one by one. The entire assembly seemed to be immersed in a great flow of emotion. The smell of burning candles, ganja, incense, burning fire-wood and half-boiled Khichuri produced a feeling of suffocation. The candles burned down, became dim, and gradually one by one went out. The red glow from the incense-lots had strangely coalesced into one single face—all the cruel faces of the evil-doing Vaishnavas and Vaishnavies. One among those who had come after partaking of country-liquor fell down while dancing—perhaps stunned with emotion. The man who was leaping, his hands held high, was jumping still more madly, it seemed the fruit was slipping from his hand just by a little.

"Babu, Babu, President Babu?"

The rhythm was broken. The Chowkidar of the Union Board had arrived like a broken-down messenger—it must be something very important. No, the

Presidentship was not worth carrying on with. One could not even pursue one's own religious rites in peace.

"Well, what's the news?"

"You'll have to come away Babu. Government work."

"Government work?" Nishi's eyes travelled round the audience with a disappointed look. "Carry on the hymn-singing, I'll come back soon."

Nishi frowned when he came outside. "Have you no sense of time—when to come and when not to come? What's this urgent thing at midnight?"

There was excitement in the voice of the Chowkidar. "Moti Pal's wife has committed suicide by hanging herself. Babu you'll have to come at once."

"And Moti Pal?"

"He has also died."

"Good riddance!" Nishi's face went dark with disgust. It might bring some money, but really being President was a nuisance. If anyone had an accident in the village or somebody died an unnatural death, he had to run to inspect the body and report it to the thana. In the middle of the night when a flood of emotion was flowing over the assembly of the hymn-singers; when the Lord Sri-Gouranga had descended on his disciples, when the sin of 'Kali' was being purified by the singing of His name; to have to go running at such a time to inspect some wretched Moti Pal's wife who had committed suicide by hanging herself!

With a look of disgust on his face Nishi said, "Come

along then. The wife may have died by hanging herself, but how did Moti Pal die?"

"How were they to live?" The Chowkidar's voice choked with sympathy and sorrow. "They've died of starvation! They were beggars before. When the price of rice is thirty rupees, who's going to give them charity? The wife couldn't bear the pangs of hunger any more, so she put an end to all her troubles by hanging herself."

"Yes."

The Chowkidar became encouraged, "It's not only in this one home, Babu, if it goes on like this, in two months the whole country will become empty. Can anyone hope to escape the fire that's burning on every side? You will see, within two or three days, you'll get news of five or six more deaths."

"All right, shut up!" Nishi silenced him curtly. One did not like to hear about such things. Those who are dying, let them die! When one's time was over, all human beings had to die. No one was born with a head framed in iron. That they died of starvation was the result of their own Karma. In this life, they had to pay off the debts of their bad deeds committed in their former incarnation. There could be no injustice in the Kingdom of God.

The road was overcast with the deepest darkness. On both sides the bamboo clumps creaked in the wind. Nishi started, hearing the sound. He felt that fleshless,

skeleton-like shadow images would creep out from the bamboo clumps—the ghosts of those who had died of starvation, suffering pangs of hunger. A sudden fear seemed to suffocate him. He felt that these shadow-images would moan and cry: “Our food, our lives—you have taken and stored them in the store-house of your greed. Your power, your riches, your laws have saved you from our revenge. But—now? Now? Now?”

Summoning all his strength Nishi went on repeating the name of his deity.

Moti Pal's house. All around there were heaps of rubbish. Wetted with rain this rubbish stank most horribly. A broken roof, rickety bamboo posts, a broken-down verandah. The atmosphere inside the hut was damp, suffocating, but pervading all was the smell of death. Holding a cloth over his nose Nishi went forward carefully. Where was the assembly of hymn-singers, where—

Moti Pal was lying in the verandah. In his hunger, probably he had eaten a handful of mud. A stream of vomit mixed with mud clung to his chaps. All thirty-two teeth gaped, one might think that he had laughed a devilish laugh as at some great joke. His stomach stuck to his back, his bare black legs looked unnaturally long, as if they were those of a ghost. But his eyes were the most inhuman, as if a terrific blow from inside had shoved them out. Half of one eye was eaten away—a rat had paid a visit.

In front, the door of their hut lay wide open and the inside—only waited for the light from the Chowkidar's lantern. In indescribable fear Nishi jumped straight off the verandah and fell over the Chowkidar. Moti Pal's wife was hanging by her neck. She had hung herself with her last possession—the torn saree which had covered her shame. In the light of the lantern, that completely naked unnatural-looking woman's body seemed like a devilish nightmare.

In a trembling voice Nishi said, "Enough, come on, come on."

The Chowkidar said, "What'll happen to the two dead bodies, Babu?"

"Go and inform the thana, let them do whatever they like. What a terrible nuisance! Hare'-Krishna!"

Again the dark road bordered with bamboo clumps. A moaning sound like the weeping of a ghost-woman came as the wind passed through the worm holes in the bamboo. In indescribable fear, Nishi Karmakar did not dare to raise his eyes from the path. In his state of insupportable fear he felt that all over the road and throughout the bamboo jungle countless dead bodies were scattered—their thin legs—the legs of ghosts; and at the top of every bamboo countless bodies of dead women hung—a cloth wound round their necks—their naked bodies a ghastly nightmare. What an assembly of death had gathered on all sides of him! Perspiration began dripping drop by drop from his

overheated forehead. This death—this suicide, who was responsible for this? Fate?

“Shall I take you up to the Hari-sabha, Babu?”

The Chowkidar's question brought on a violent fit of trembling which shook Nishi from head to foot. Then he controlled himself, licked his dry lips and said, “No, come on, see me home. I've work to do.”

Nishi Karmakar's house lay beyond the Bazar. In front was a mango garden. He had planted good Langra and Fazlee mangoes. His own house, a known road, but still Nishi felt frightened. This night was strange. In the deep darkness of this moonless night, the entire world seemed to be occupied by the ghosts of people like Moti Pal—the sky, the breeze and the forest were filled with the breath of ghostly bodiless shadows!

When he came to the front of his house, his eyes fell on the decrepit Hercules cycle leaning against his door. Ibrahim Daroga had come to meet his sweetheart. It was said that he had two wives and three slave-women, but like pouring oil on fire, this had not put out the flames of his lust. It was a lust which could be called world-pervading.

The door of Bishakha's room was shut—it was dark inside. A sound of whispering came to his ears. Nishi sighed a deep sigh in distress and despair. He too had been young once!

He brought out a lantern from his room, lighted it

and slowly walked lantern in hand to his godown. He had stored eight hundred maunds of rice. If he let go this rice at the time of monsoon at forty rupees a maund, he would become not only red with riches, but absolutely blood-red. These days of war which could be termed also of famine, if one wanted to make money, this was the opportunity!

The moment the door of the barn swung open, the eight hundred maunds of heaped white rice shimmered as if it was a mountain of silver. Of course, it was a mountain of silver. If one made a profit of eighteen rupees on every maund, then how much would eight hundred maunds—

Suddenly a fetid smell came to his nose. Here too—a smell of decomposition!

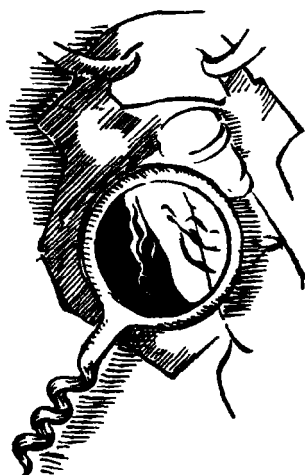
Rain had dripped from the tin roof. With a touch of that water, the top layer of rice had rotted and was giving off a bad smell—a hideous smell! The food for human beings—mother earth's greatest blessing, but how uncouth, how deprived of glory had its appearance now become!

At least fifty or sixty maunds would go to waste for nothing—there could be no doubt about that. He gave vent to an anguished wail, "Such waste in such a bad year!" Probably he would not be able to keep it till the monsoon. To-morrow, he must get a mistry to mend the roof, and he would have to throw away the rotten rice, otherwise coming in contact with it, the

rest would be ruined too. Luckily he had found out in time!

Suddenly for no reason irrelevantly it came to Nishi's mind, that he had smelt just this kind of bad smell once before. He had been returning from Sibpur haat. His eyes had fallen on the rotten body of a cow in the middle of a field, which a mangy dog was guarding. Overhead circled a number of vultures, every time they tried to peck at it, the dog drove them off with fierce, unnatural howls!

PREMANKUR ATORTHY



SWARGER CHABI
OR
THE KEY TO HEAVEN

After some five years of being shut one day the door and windows of our Club-room were opened. This is the history attached to this sudden re-opening.

About five years ago, one evening in the midst of a monsoon downpour we had come to our Club-room and found that someone else had established himself in it. After making enquiries, we found that the owner of the room, Atul Chandra, had rented it out to some shopkeeper and disappeared.

Suddenly without a room to club in, the sigh which had escaped from our eight pairs of nostrils blew the shopkeeper inside the walls of the Presidency Jail within a few months, but of Atul no trace could be found.

A few days ago, one of the crystal pillars of our Club—Nalini—died, and we were having difficulty in finding men to take him to the cremation-ground at midnight, when suddenly Atul arrived panting. The very next day, the door of our Club-room was opened again. And so that evening the discussion was about whether Nalini had gone to heaven or to hell.

Naren said, "But Nalini believed neither in heaven nor hell."

Sachin cried out, "Who says so? Nalini did believe both in heaven and hell. And I can put it down in writing that he has gone to heaven."

Naren said, "What for?"

Sachin laughed and said, "I've proof of that with me."

"What's the proof may we know?"

Sachin began his story:

After practising as a doctor for ten years, I was consulting my wife each day as to whether it would be too bad to become a horse-broker, when suddenly a wind from the West came flying the flag of death! Just as the clerks in an office somehow or other manage to finish off their left-over work before they go on leave, Chitrugupta (the recorder of men's virtues and vices at the gate of heaven) too began finishing off his work in the same manner.

Leaving aside the question of whether I should be a horse-broker or not, I gave my entire attention to the practice of medicine with great enthusiasm. From morning till evening there was no pause to the calls. The method of my treatment tallied completely with that of great doctors. After trying my hardest for ten years, I hadn't been able to become even a Vaidya (country physician), but in these two months I became not only a doctor, but a great doctor.

One day when I returned home in the evening after a hard day's work killing patients, my son informed me, "They sent for you from Nalini-kaka's house."

The carriage was still waiting in front of the door so I went out again and got into it.

When I reached Nalini's place, I found him clutching his stomach with both hands and moaning and rolling from side to side on his bed. Before I had asked him anything, he said, "It seems like my blessed liver to me."

I asked, "How long have you had it?"

Nalini said with a moan, "I've had this pain for the last two days. Today, it became absolutely unbearable, so I sent for you. I've a little fever, a feeling of nausea too, there's nothing lacking!"

I became a little frightened after hearing the description of the disease. About three years previously, he had nearly died from a liver-abscess; only because he still had his portion of life to live had he recovered. The wretch had managed to get the same disease again!

Seeing me silent, he said panting hard, "What is it brother? What do you think?"

I replied, "You had better not hear what I think. Let me examine your stomach."

I examined him and found that his liver was sodden with pus. I asked, "You've begun again?"

Nalini replied, "I only begin my friend, when have I the time to finish?"

I examined the stomach once again and said, "Look here, I feel that you should call Jubbart sahib and let him examine you."

Nalini said, "You do whatever is necessary, what can I say?"

The next day Jubbart sahib was brought, he examined Nalini's stomach for half-an-hour and gave his opinion that an operation was absolutely necessary. I asked the sahib, "What do you think of the patient's condition?"

He said, "There's little hope of his living; he might

be saved with an operation, but the chances of his not surviving are greater."

I was in a terrible difficulty. Nalini was my childhood friend. Because our houses were near each other, I had been on visiting terms with him since childhood. He had no one of his own excepting a rich widowed Pishima (aunt—father's sister). His mother having died in his childhood, this Pishima had brought him up. Now to whom was I to speak about Nalini's condition? If I told the aunt, she would create an awful scene by weeping and wailing, yet if the operation was not performed within a day or two, then it would make no difference whether it was performed at all.

After thinking over the situation, I went and told Pishima frankly about Nalini's condition the same evening. When she had finished her fit of weeping and wailing, she said, "Then you had better inform his uncle. I'm a woman, what can I do? How many times have I told him not to drink those rotten things, now see what the wretch has brought about?"

I had completely forgotten about Nalini's uncle. His name was Radharaman Babu—he was a Brahmo and not only a Brahmo, but also a great puritan. They say that a nephew always follows the footsteps of his maternal uncle, but Nalini had proved this saying wrong at every step of his life.

Radharaman Babu was dreadfully surprised to hear of Nalini's condition. That his nephew should drink,

and to such an extent as to cause a liver-abscess—this he did not want to believe. Hearing everything, he asked, "Has Nalini been told about his condition?"

I replied, "No, we haven't told him everything, but he knows that he'll have an operation tomorrow."

Radharaman Babu said, "Nalini ought to be told about it, what do you say?"

I replied, "Oh, yes, of course it's necessary. I'll go to him this evening."

Radharaman Babu immediately went off in a great hurry to see his nephew, and I rushed off to Jubbart sahib to make arrangements for the next day's operation.

When I went to Nalini's room in the evening, I could hardly see across the room for incense-smoke. Garlands of flowers were hanging on all sides, a carpet was laid on the floor, a stool with a few books on it was set out in the middle of the carpet. I asked Nalini, "What's all this?"

Nalini replied, "All this is uncle's doing. Somehow or other he has found out that I've earned this disease of mine as a result of many sins. Moreover, somebody gave him the news that I'm going to die tomorrow. So, to-day, a small bribe has been arranged for the executive officer of heaven, in order to keep his nephew's path to heaven clear."

While he was saying this, Pishima arrived. She brought something from the worship-chamber, touched Nalini's forehead with it, then went away.

The news about Nalini's illness had spread among his aquatic friends—the boon companions of his drinking bouts. One or two of them had arrived on getting the news. Radharaman Babu followed them in with a few of his pious friends. With a bolster at his back, Nalini remained in a half-sitting, half-reclining position on his bed. After the singing of a religious song, Brahmo worship began.

Radharaman Babu had really been upset on suddenly hearing about his only nephew's condition. He uttered such a heart-rending prayer, that for a long time after it was over, none of us could speak a word. After some time had passed in silence like this, Nalini himself said, "Uncle, Pishima, friends—whoever are here I've something to say to you." Radharaman Babu went forward towards Nalini eagerly. Nalini said, "Look uncle, I've done plenty of what you call sinning. But have I ever done you any harm?"

Radharaman Babu said, "Why talk of such things now?"

Nalini said, "No, no, tell me—have I ever done you any harm?"

"No my son, what harm have you ever done me, nothing!"

Nalini said, "All right, now you tell me Pishima, you've brought me up—have I ever done you any harm?"

Pishima said weeping, "You're my good boy! Only by drinking those rotten things—"

Nalini interrupted his aunt, turned towards me and said, "Anyway, if I've ever done any wrong to any of my friends, then forgive me brothers." With all this, Nalini created such an atmosphere, that the eyes of everyone who was there filled with tears. I said, "Nalini, why are you saying such things now?" Tears began dripping from the eyes of the friend of Radharaman Babu who had sung the song. Nalini said, "I've raised this subject because there's reason for it. Tomorrow I'll have an operation. Before dying I've only one request to make to you, which you'll have to keep."

No one said anything. All of us knew that his death was practically certain and none of us wanted to have an unpleasant argument with a dying man. Nalini said, "I want to make arrangements about my body after my death, right now."

Sanjib said, "Nalini, if you die, will no arrangements be made for your body?"

"You'll cremate it, won't you?"

Sanjib replied, "When you're dead, what's the good of keeping your body?"

"No, I object to that." Pishima had been listening to Nalini holding her breath. Hearing that he objected to his body being cremated, she said, "Then—then, have you turned a Christian?"

Nalini cried out, "Pishima, please keep quiet! Today I realise that you don't know your nephew yet."

Radharaman Babu said, "What's your desire, tell us."

Nalini said, "After my death take this body of mine and hand it over to some tantric worshipper." Everyone was absolutely dumbfounded. There was not even the sound of a breath. Startling everyone Nalini began again, "A tantric worshipper sits upon the chest of a dead-body and pours cup after cup of wine into its mouth. If he gets my body, it'll do good to both him and myself. Few tantric worshippers ever find a dead-body like mine. It'll be as useful in his path of worship, as his method of worship will help to relieve my weariness during my journey to the next world."

A pious friend of Radharaman Babu cried out, "Scoundrel!" Everyone else remained silent. After sitting in silence for about five minutes, Radharaman Babu heaved a deep sigh and went out of the room. Nalini lay with his eyes closed. One by one his friends went away. Only his aunt stood holding a corner of his bed—motionless like a statue carved of stone.

Anyway, next day Nalini's operation was performed. The doctor sahib examined his heart and told me in confidence that Nalini might die the very same day. Naturally I didn't move from his bedside till evening. Nalini's two cousins—Suren and Dwijen—were nursing him. I told them to ring me up the moment there was any need. I got no telephone call throughout the night. Next day Jubbart sahib came and examined him and said he was better, but one couldn't say anything for certain yet. But proving everyone's expectation false,

Nalini improved from day to day. A small patch of sore was, however, refusing to heal. About this time, one evening when I arrived at his house, I was startled to hear Pishima's loud wails. I crept inside on tiptoe, and heard Pishima wailing, "When they departed from this world your parents left you in my hands"—

My legs refused to move any further and I felt like sneaking away, but couldn't do so. I walked slowly to her door and called out, "Pishima!" Hearing my voice Pishima burst into still louder wails and cried, "Who is it? Sachin? Go and see what that wretch Nalini is up to now!"

"What's he doing again?"

"He has brought that rotten thing again and is swallowing it. I had hidden the corkscrew, but the wretch made his cousin—Suren—hunt it out and now he has hung it on his neck like an amulet."

Hearing this I felt really angry with Nalini. I thought that when someone wants to commit suicide like this, it was better to let him die. As soon as I entered his room in a rage, I understood what it was all about. The whole room was smelling of drink. I went up to Nalini and cried angrily, "Have you no sense, you've begun drinking in your present condition?"

Nalini smiled a little and said, "So Pishima brought it to your ears the moment you arrived!" Then he drew my head close to his lips and whispered, "I'm not drinking, I got it for Suren and Dwijen. The poor chaps

have been nursing me for so long. I'm only initiating them into the experience of the most heavenly bliss it's possible to enjoy on earth. In future they'll be able to say that they learnt it from someone really worthy of his name." I breathed a sigh of relief. Nalini said again, "You'll also have to take a little today doctor. You do drink every evening, why not have it here? Dwijen, give the doctor a drink."

One by one, friends began to arrive. As each arrived Nalini ordered a drink for him. Everyone had a few drinks. Nalini went on saying, "You're my well-wishers, if you drink, the thirst in my soul will be assuaged."

In no time one bottle was finished. Another bottle was nearly empty, quite a lot of rowdiness was going on in the room, when suddenly a maidservant came and said, "Pishima has sent for Doctor Babu."

In a moment all the fun in the room came to a standstill. One friend asked in surprise, "Pishima's calling! What does that mean?" I wished the earth would swallow me, such was my state. The hard frame of mind in which I had entered Nalini's room had melted into water with the repeated doses of liquid fire. I was in such a state of mind then that even if Nalini had asked for a drink, I wouldn't have opposed it very strongly. Pishima's call at this moment could be compared with a sudden call from death himself in the midst of brimming joy! I looked towards Nalini and saw that he was lying with eyes closed—completely unconcerned. I

nudged him and said, "I say, Pishima's calling me, see what disaster you've brought upon me!"

Nalini replied with his eyes still closed, "Pour some eucalyptus oil on your handkerchief and go. What's the disaster?" I poured a bottle of eucalyptus oil on my handkerchief and standing ten yards away from her, I said to Pishima, "There's nothing to worry about Pishima. Nalini has taken nothing. He has only arranged a little fun for his friends."

Pishima looked me up and down and said, "Can't there be any fun without drinking that muck?" As I couldn't understand to whom this question was directed, I brought out the handkerchief from my pocket and pressed it against my nose. Pishima said again, "Have you snatched away that corkscrew from the wretch?"

I said, "All right, I'll take it away from him and give it to you." The friends were waiting anxiously for me. The moment I entered the room, they asked, "What's the matter, is she making an awful row?" I didn't answer their question and told Nalini, "You've got the corkscrew with you. Please give it to me brother, I'll go and give it to her. As long as it's with you Pishima'll remain suspicious."

Nalini replied, "I'm not anxious about removing Pishima's suspicions. You sit down. I say, Dwijen, give doctor a big drink." Before he had finished speaking, Dwijen brought the drink for me. I saw that lying in

his sick-bed, Nalini had taught his cousins so well that they would never have to suffer for lack of water in their journey through the desert of domestic life. I finished my drink and said, "Now give me that corkscrew, so that I can go and give it to Pishima."

This time Nalini said, "Forgive me brother, it's something which I obtained in a dream—I can't let it go out of my hands."

All of us were startled and cried out, "What's this yarn you're spinning?"

Nalini replied, "Yes, there's a history attached to it. Sit down quietly and if you'll listen I'll tell you the story." All of us drew our chairs round Nalini's bed and he began his story:

I once had to go to the Punjab on some business or other. By Punjab, I don't mean Meerut, but a place somewhere right in the middle of the province. It was the month of Baisakh (April-May) and terribly hot. Anyone who hasn't been there in Baisakh doesn't know what heat can be like. For instance, if one had to fry rice or make popcorn, instead of going to the kitchen, it would be enough to go up to the roof-terrace.

There, I made the acquaintance of a Raja in a very surprising way. The Raja was absolutely a Raja in every sense of the word. His height was six feet three inches and he had a pair of moustaches and beard to match; his temperament was equally generous. He had no lack of any kingly qualities, his only lack was that of a king-

dom. Because, he was still a minor, there being still a year and a half to go before he got his estate into his hands.

The Raja's grandfather had been a high official under Ranjit Singh—the lion of the Punjab. A big district had been under him. When the British attacked Ranjit Singh's kingdom, instead of getting ready for battle, our Raja's grandfather sat down to calculate. There is an English proverb which says all great men think alike. Our Raja's grandfather too was a great man. So the result of his calculations and the result of the calculations of the great men who were his masters—tallied absolutely. That is, the map turned red. If everything was to turn red, what was the use of fighting? So he opened the doors of his fort and invited the British inside. Just because there was this lack of judgment on the part of Ranjit Singh, today, no trace can be found of his heirs; and just because there was no lack of such calculation, his officer's descendant could ensure eternal bliss in heaven for himself, by pouring the waters of love on our thirsty souls in that terrible heat.

The heat, however, went on increasing. In the end, when the condition became such that from frying rice without fire, even meat could be fried, I said to the Raja, "Now give us permission to leave. If the heat increases any more, then we'll have to end our lives here."

The Raja said, "Oh! Is that the trouble? Come, let's

go and spend a few days in my country house—the heat is much less there.”

Immediately arrangements began. For a few days we were to leave town and stay in his country house. The place was about sixty or seventy miles from town. Throughout the day all accessories for keeping us cool were sent in motor-lorries. Next day we started in three big cars at ten o'clock in the morning.

Three of us were Bengalees and one was a Parsi called Jimmy; his real name was Jamshedji, but it had now turned to Jimmy. The fifth and sixth persons in our party were two Konkani Brahmins, of the two, Joshi, had been suffering terribly for about a fortnight because of the heat and vomitted whatever he ate. According to his religious code meat and drink were forbidden to him, but along with us he occasionally took a bottle or two of beer in the evening.

The seventh man was Dewan Swarup Singh. Dewanji had a little history. Like our Raja Sahib's grandfather, his grandfather had also been the governor of one of the provinces of Ranjit Singh's kingdom. But his grandfather wasn't as good at calculation as the Dewan himself evidently was. When the British attacked his province, he immediately plunged into the battle arena. With the result that Dewanji now got only a few hundred rupees as a pittance from the British Government. If he wanted to go anywhere a hundred miles out of town, he had to get permission from the Government.

So unless he got a pass he couldn't go even to his father-in-law's home.

Dewanji was a very competent man. Without any selfish motive he acted as a sycophant to the Raja. All arrangements were in his hands. The Raja couldn't do without him at all. Because if suddenly tiger's milk became necessary in the middle of the night, no one could get it excepting the Dewan!

The eighth person in the party was the Wazir. Once upon a time he had been the Raja's private tutor. He was now the Chief Minister but not a very important companion. The ninth person was Lall Singh. He was the Raja's personal chauffeur—his boon companion and trusted adviser. With several more companions besides these we started with great noise and bustle. At about four o'clock in the afternoon our car entered the gate of a huge fort. This fort was the Raja's country house. It had been built by the Mughals and later it had been snatched away by the Sikhs. Most of the rooms in the fort were now unusable.

The moment we got down from the car Dewanji showed us into a room. Inside it were laid out a row of lovely beds. The Raja said, "Let's rest a little now, then we'll do whatever occurs to us in the evening."

The inside and outside of our bodies were full to the brim with whisky, brandy, beer and dust. Seeing the beds, we went and stretched ourselves on them without even taking off our shoes.

In the evening, after bathing we went and sat in the Dewan-i-Am. It was a big pillared hall built in the fashion of the Dewan-i-Am at Delhi. On one side a big carpet and bolsters were arranged on the floor. The moment we sat down, the Raja called out, "Dewan!"

The Dewan came rushing and stood with hands folded saying, "Huzur."

"Were the sodas put on ice?"

"Yes, huzur."

"Is the tikia-kabob (fried meat-balls) ready?"

"Yes, huzur."

"Then why wait—begin serving drinks to the guests."

Nectar was now distributed. We were sitting in the Dewan-i-Am, enjoying this wonderful synthesis of the East and West—drinking the nectar produced in Scotland, when suddenly the Raja cried out, "What's this Jimmy—you aren't having anything? Dewan! Where's that rascally Dewan gone?"

The Dewan came running. The Raja scolded him and said, "Stupid, don't you see that Jimmy isn't having anything?"

Jimmy was sitting next to me. He whispered in my ear, "Save me. I don't drink—I'll become unconscious the moment I take any."

In the meantime the Dewan said, "I had served Jimmy, but he doesn't take any drink."

The Dewan was somewhat crestfallen after being scolded by the Raja. The clever Raja understood this

and said to him, "Now you sit down here and have a drink with us."

In a moment all his distress evaporated. With a wide smile on his face the Dewan sat down and said, "I am proposing that instead of mixing whisky with soda let's make it a long drink by mixing whisky with beer." From all sides came loud cries of praise and approval—"Very good, Dewanji—very good!"

Whisky and beer were mixed. The drinks were served. Before I had taken a sip of my drink, suddenly Jimmy whispered in my ear, "Can you give me a little beer?"

The moment I put the glass into Jimmy's hand, he finished it in one gulp.

The Raja was probably still feeling remorseful about having scolded the Dewan. He suddenly said, "Probably you don't know who the Dewan is. He's the son of a Raja and see in what a condition he is today."

The Dewan replied, "Two flowers blossom on the same stem, perhaps a lover picks one of them and presents it to his sweetheart and the other is picked by someone who goes and throws it on a grave. Maharaja! We're two flowers from the same stem, only because of circumstances you're the Raja and I'm nothing!"

The Raja said, "Bravo Dewan! Bravo! You've pleased me greatly. Now let there be some songs."

Joshi could sing very well. The Raja said, "Joshiji, sing a song!" But Joshi's dose of beer had probably been a little too much. It was found that he was sleeping,

leaning against a fat bolster. The Raja said, "Oh, let him sleep. The poor chap's not very well. Jimmy, you sing a song."

Jimmy had begun to hiccup after the glass of whisky mixed with beer had gone into him. He replied hiccupping, "I know a song from a play."

We said, "Very good, sing that song from a play."

He began singing softly, each word of the song punctuated with a hiccup!

Seeing this the Dewan quickly came and led Jimmy outside holding him by the hand. From the distance very unpleasant sounds of hiccupping and vomiting came to our ears

A little later the Dewan came back and said, "The poor fellow is rather upset. I made him lie down."

The Raja said, "Can none of you sing? Very well. Is everything ready Dewan?"

The Dewan replied, "Huzur, everything is ready."

Raja ordered, "Good, then go and fetch—"

As the Raja spoke the Dewan went out. While we were wondering where the Dewan had gone and what he went to do, suddenly a door on one side of the Dewan-i-Am opened. Through the door first came the Dewan followed by about eight hours. Their figures were draped in red, blue, pink, buff and orange veils.

Their sudden appearance startled me. I felt as if the aurora of the North Pole had descended to the desert in a new form.

The Raja introduced them all—Amira, Nadira, Hasnu and so on.

Singing and dancing began. With the light of the moon in the sky, flashes of beauty on all sides, the blaze of the electric bulbs in the glass lanterns reflected on the white marble walls and the liquid electricity inside us—to us heaven, earth, the infernal regions—all merged together. I was drowned in this wonderful joy, when suddenly the Raja whispered to me, "Go and call poor Jimmy. The intoxication of the beer must have passed by now."

Jimmy had been made to lie down on an open roof-terrace on one side of the Dewan-i-Am. When I went there—I was reeling myself—and gave him a push, he said something and turned over on his side. I gave him another push. Still lying, he said, "Forgive me, brother." Hearing his mournful pleading I said in rhyme,

"Forgive me, Oh, forgive me.
Forgive me, Oh, sea of forgiveness.
I came running like a deer,
Struck by arrows of shyness."

Jimmy was probably inspired on hearing my rhyme. He began screaming out a song:

"I lie crying on my bed,
Oh, where has my pearl gone?
I can't sleep without my pearl,
Oh, where has my pearl gone?"

I said, "Get up my child! Come and see, a regular market of pearls has opened up." But who was going to listen to anyone? Jimmy began screaming again, "I lie crying on my bed—"

In the end he started really wailing as if he was mourning a dead person. Hearing his cries, the Raja and the gang of girls came rushing out. Leaving Jimmy in their hands, I moved away to a corner of the roof-terrace. I was watching Jimmy's antics from there. Suddenly I heard Dewanji's voice and looked down. Three or four people were making a row down below. I called out loudly, "Dewanji, what's the matter?"

Seeing me Dewanji shouted back, "Brother! Come down quickly! There's awful trouble here." Quickly, I went down and saw that Dewanji was holding Gopal and a Pathan servant was holding back Lall Singh. I asked, "What's the matter?"

Dewanji replied, "Gopal Babu and this Lall Singh had come and sat down here. Umar Khan was passing by, when they got hold of him and said that they'd jump off from here and Umar Khan was to stand and watch it. It's lucky that I came here."

I felt like giving Gopal a hard slap on the cheek, but controlled myself and said, "What's all this childishness! Come along"

In his intoxication Gopal could hardly speak, still he said in an inarticulate voice, "You don't know, these days Bengalees have earned a bad name as cowards—

I shan't move from here without removing that name!"

I said to him, "Rascal! By jumping sixty feet from here even if you rid Bengalees of the name of coward, still people will call you a fool. It's even worse to be called a fool than being called a coward."

Gopal said again, "You don't know, we've had a bet that Lall Singh will jump first."

Leaving Gopal in my hands the Dewan ran and called the Raja. Hearing about this bet, the Raja was very startled. He was silent for a few moments then said, "Come on brothers, let's go to the Baradwari. We'll go and have a boat-race there."

Hearing the Raja, Gopal slapped him on the back and said, "Very good, this is just what a Raja should be like. Come, let's go upstairs."

We all went upstairs. The Raja told the Dewan, "Go to the Baradwari and have bedding laid ready in eight of the boats. Sixteen of us will go, hurry."

The Dewan rushed off immediately saying, "Jo-hukum (as you order)." We went and sat down again in the Dewan-i-Am.

In about an hour's time the Dewan returned and said, "Huzur, everything is ready, it only waits for you to be kind enough to come."

Eight men and eight of the houris got into cars and went along.

A car filled with whisky and ice went with us.

Nearly four hundred years ago a Moghul Prince had

built this Baradwari as his summer residence. A huge paved pond—one could not see across it—in the middle of it was a palace built on the twelve arches of twelve doors, hence the name Baradwari. The palace belonged to our Raja's family, since the time of his grandfather. The place was about three miles from the fort. Within fifteen minutes we arrived by the side of the pond. There, snow-white bedding was laid out on wide-bottomed boats. The Raja shoved a bottle of whisky, a glass, a man and a woman into each boat, then he himself got into one.

The Raja shouted standing in his boat, "Pull at your oars and go to the other end of the pond. Should you need anything then come to the Baradwari and call the Dewan, he'll attend to you."

The beauty who accompanied me said, "Let's take our boat under that bridge, right across the other end." Pulling at the oars I rowed to one end of the pond, then rolled down on the bedding. Seeing my condition, my companion said, "Have you gone to sleep?"

"No, I haven't gone to sleep, I'm tired of rowing the boat. You sing a song."

The beauty softly sang a Punjabi song of which I couldn't understand even one word. I asked, "Where's your home?"

She replied, "My home is in this village, but I live in town."

"Then you've come from town?"

She replied, "Yes. Whenever the Raja comes here with guests we are given orders to come. There are about twenty families, whichever of these the Raja orders, they have to come." I couldn't understand this quite clearly. I asked, "Are you the servants of the Raja?"

She replied, "No, not exactly servants, but yes, we are servants."

"What does that mean?"

The beauty replied, "The father of this Raja was a very fashionable man. He brought twenty or twenty-five families of dancing girls from various places and established them here. They still live here and enjoy their lands without paying taxes, and in return for that, we have to come here occasionally to please the Raja and his friends"

She paused a little and said, "Why,—doesn't this sort of thing happen in your part of the country?"

I said, "No my beauty, this sort of thing isn't customary in our parts, but if I ever become a landowner I shall certainly introduce it in my estate."

I was lying flat on my back with my hand on my chest gazing at the moon and wondering whether there was any hope of inheriting some estate in the future when suddenly my companion bent over me and said in a sweet voice, "I'm going to say something—you won't be angry?"

"What is it?"

"You won't tell the Raja?"

"No."

"A man's coming to see me, will you let me go?"

"Who's coming to see you here in the middle of the night?"

She replied, "He's someone. Hearing that I'd come here, he sent a message to the fort. I told him to come at night. He'll certainly go there, find out where I am and then come here."

I said, "Very well. If any friend of yours comes here, then tell me. I'll put you down at the edge of the pond."

The beauty was very pleased, took my right hand in her own and began caressing me. My eyes were already heavy with intoxication, and with the entrancement of the beauty's caresses my eyes closed. Suddenly getting a shake, I opened my eyes a little and saw that the beauty was holding my hand and gazing at my ring, I said, "What are you looking at?"

The beauty asked, "Is that a firoza?"

"It seems like a firoza."

"You'll have to give me the ring!" With this she began pulling at my finger. I quickly pulled my hand away from hers and said, "The ring isn't mine"

"Isn't yours? Then whose is it? Your sweetheart's?"

Finding me silent, she gave me a push and said, "Tell me."

I said, "Yes, the ring belonged to a sweetheart. Just like the sweetheart you've become tonight. Similarly

five years ago as a result of making love to someone else like this, I was rolling on the sand in the moonlight. Where you see a firoza ring, there—on that night—had been a diamond ring. When I got up in the morning, I found that with my sweetheart, the diamond ring had also disappeared and in its place was this firoza ring.”

Hearing the story the beauty became really encouraged. She said, “All right, I’ll give you this ring from my finger.”

I thought, instead of coming here, it would have been far better to have stayed in the fort and watched the game of jumping between Gopal and Lall Singh.

Making her voice soft and a little tearful the beauty said, “Just because someone took away your diamond ring when I’m asking for your firoza—”

I said, “Beauty, on that day, on my one side was the sea ; it was calling me continuously with its strangely aloof and mysterious music; overhead was the sleepless moon filled with nectar as well as stained with disgrace; and on my other side was someone like you, filled with the nectar of beauty and sordid with debasement. Today also, there’s the same moon overhead and the same beauty by my side. But on that day even though I was lying by the side of the sea I wasn’t drowned. But today of my own desire I’ve floated a boat on this sea. Take it my beauty, take away the firoza. It has been waiting for you for so

long, it's your due!" The beauty took off my firoza ring and put one of her rings on my finger. Even in the moonlight I could realise that it was a white glass ring worth about two annas. Putting my ring on her finger she said, "Now come, take me to the edge of the pond and let me get off. I feel that he has come."

I sat up on the bed and felt that a man was standing in the distance. The beauty pointed in that direction and said, "See, the poor fellow has been waiting there for a long time."

Slowly I rowed the boat towards the edge. Now she came and sat next to me and said, "Now give me the bucksheesh you were going to give."

I was in an awful difficulty. Where was I to find the bucksheesh for her in the middle of the night, here in the midst of water. I said, "I brought nothing with me, I'll give it to you tomorrow."

She said, "How can you give it to me tomorrow—you'll go away tomorrow."

I said, "Don't be silly! We'll stay here for fifteen days."

"But I'll go away tomorrow. A new group will come tomorrow—whatever you mean to give me, give it now."

I replied, "How can I give it now? I've nothing with me. All right when I return to town, I'll go to your house and give you your bucksheesh."

"Everyone says that. I'll realise my bucksheesh right now, then I'll let you go."

I found that I was in a terrible mess. Anyway without saying anything I began slowly rowing the boat to the edge of the pond. The girl got out, caught hold of the boat and stood there. Seeing that she didn't leave, I said, "No bucksheesh today—now go! Look, your man's coming this way."

I saw the man was really coming towards the pond. The girl replied, "Oh, he's coming for bucksheesh."

Hearing this I was startled. I thought, are they going to give me a thrashing finding me in this lonely place? One or two pictures of former experiences rose from my sleeping memory and flashed across my eyes. I quickly said, "Look here, if you try any more tricks, then I'll call out to the Dewan from here. He'll come and give you good bucksheesh!"

Hearing this, she let go the boat. Then standing there for a few moments she said, "All right, I'm going. Don't mind my pressing you for bucksheesh."

She pushed the boat towards the water and went away slowly into the field. The field was flooded with moonlight. Gradually her figure melted into the moonlight.

I lay down flat on the bedding again. I became very depressed. I thought, the poor girl went away very disappointed, when I returned to town I'd go and please her greatly. The next moment I thought, what have I got to give which could please her? If I had money like a Raja then I might have been able to please her.

I had heard that once upon a time, we had plenty of property, but my grandfather, before he died in his youth, spent everything in pleasing hours like this. I began musing, if only I had that property of my grandfather's today; but alas! What's gone can't come back. In sorrow and disappointment, I heaved a deep sigh. I never saw my grandfather, but I felt my heart twisting inside me in anger against him.

Pondering over all this, I probably went to sleep. I don't know after how long, someone seemed to be calling me in a very sweet voice, "Dadu!"

I don't know what was mixed in that voice. All the sorrow in my heart evaporated in a moment. I saw a fair tall man standing by my side and saying, "Are you grieving because I wasted that property?"

Then I realised that moved by his grandson's sorrow my famous dead grandfather had come down from the other world. A cloud of sorrow began gathering in my mind again. My grandfather said again, "Why Dadu, won't you speak to me?" This time I spoke, "Dadu, you did a very bad thing by wasting the property. See the condition you've brought your grandson to!"

My grandfather said, "I made a little mistake in calculation, brother. I thought that I was the last great man in our family, I didn't realise then that you were coming. Anyway don't grieve. Whatever is lost can't return."

I replied, "No, I've never grieved over it before, but today I've been very hurt over something. Anyway, let's forget my sorrows. I've never seen you, tell me about yourself. How are you?"

"I am very well and happy, brother."

"Where are you now?"

"In heaven. Why?"

I said, "I thought that you must have gone to hell."

My grandfather replied, "As long as I was on earth I never imagined I'd go to hell. As long as I lived, I built a heaven after my own heart around me and lived in its midst. When I died, I died thinking of heaven; and after death I went straight up to heaven."

Hearing my grandfather, I felt very frightened. I said to him, "Grandfather, though I couldn't do it as well as you did, I also have tried to build a kingdom of heaven around me. But an idea has been growing in my mind that as the degree of my enjoying heaven in this life is rising, the chance of my going to hell after death is also increasing. I know, as soon as I reach the door of heaven, I'll see that the sentries have locked it and disappeared. Can you do something about this?"

My grandfather said, "You are worrying very much about this? All right if you find that the door of heaven is closed when you go there after death, open it with this key." I stretched out my hand and my grandfather put the key to the door of heaven into it and disappeared.

When I sat up awake in the boat, the eternal game of hide and seek between the dawn-maiden and the sun had just begun on the threshold of the sky. When I opened my fist I found the key to heaven given by my grandfather—this corkscrew!”

Nalini lay silent for a few moments and then said, “If I give this into Pishima’s keeping, what consolation remains for me—brother?”

PROBODH SANYAL



P R E T I N E E
OR
THE GHOST WOMAN

All her hopes and desires ended when she was a girl of thirteen. Married but three days, her husband disappeared. The vermilion mark of marriage remained on her forehead, but the play stopped midway and the show never went across again with a swing. In the eyes of everyone Chandramoyi became a rare being by merging the parts of married woman, widow, and maiden—all in one.

The test of her self-restraint and chastity went on year after year. But having no intensity of emotion in her heart, and no sense of futility to grieve her, in her journey through life—never once did her steps falter. Her youth passed in play and laughter; in enjoying the good things of life; in quarrelling with others or serving them; in travelling from one place of pilgrimage to another; and in reading the epic tales of the Ramayana and Mahabharata.

Whatever restlessness there was in her became still, the little fire there was in her smoked away and turned to ashes. Her blood became thin and watery, the shadow of imminent old-age overcast her faculty of understanding.

Chandramoyi had just passed her fortieth year. Who knew if love had come, even once to her life! Perhaps it had! That no one should have loved her as a wife—is something most damaging to the self-esteem of a mature woman. Many women can easily say that they have never loved anyone, but somehow it is difficult

for any woman to admit that she had never been loved.

Chandramoyi's place of residence was large. But it has never been discovered who is its master and who are the people who live in it. There were many rooms and verandahs in its three stories and it was not unnatural to mistake it for a Dharamshala (a charitable inn); it was not easy to find such unlimited opportunity of obtaining hospitality anywhere else. One day it was seen that a husband and wife came and occupied the room on the first floor which had long been lying empty.

The wife was very young. She cooked and did all the housework herself and during the absence of her husband, she spent hour after hour seated by the bolted door of her room—making no sound. There was such a crowd of men all around. And no pause in the comings and goings of people.

One day, Chandramoyi came down from the third floor, knocked on the door and was received by the young wife herself. Chandramoyi asked with a smile, "What's your name, mother?" The girl had never come across such sudden curiosity on the part of anyone. Slowly she replied, "Nirupama."

"Nirupama? A very nice name. All right, I'll call you Niru. What's this! Why is your hair unbound at this unearthly hour? Your hair's just like a mass of cloud, child! Sit down, let me do it for you."

Nirupama could not say a word in protest. She brought out her comb, hairpins and ribbons. Chandramoyi went inside, sat down with Nirupama close beside her and began binding her hair.

"What does your husband do—Bowma (daughter-in-law)?"

"He has a shop."

"Oh. How many children have you?"

"None as yet."

Chandramoyi looked this way and that while doing Nirupama's hair. This was a bad habit with her and a painful suspicion and anxiety would appear in her frowning stare of curiosity.

"Whose picture is that Bowma? There—next to the window."

"He is my eldest uncle."

"Oh, I see some sewing; do you sew?"

"Yes."

"Why have you kept such a lot of wilted flowers. Your husband brought them—did he?"

"Yes."

"That's very nice. Now tell me mother, why haven't you swept the room?"

"I'll do it now."

After pinning in the hairpins Chandramoyi sat silent for a while. Then she said, "You use enamel utensils, do you Bowma?"

"Yes ma'am."

“What are those tins? For keeping spices—are they?”

Nirupama was irritated by these endless questions. But whether Chandramoyi realised it no one can say. Before she got up to go she said, “Let me look at you Bowma, turn round this way!”

As soon as Nirupama turned in her seat, Chandramoyi took hold of Nirupama’s chin, shook it caressingly and said, “A very nice bride, worthy of approval.” As she was going, she said again, “You’re of the age of a daughter to me. Goodbye mother, I’ll come again ”

Nirupama gazed in amazement at her departing figure.

Quickly, Chandramoyi went and entered her room on the third floor. Standing near her door she began to laugh. There was keen sharpness in her laughter rather than womanly sweetness. It reminded one of the exultation of victory.

One realised with a look round her disordered room, that there was no system in her way of living. The room was full with rags, torn bedding, empty tins, leaking pots and pans, broken plates and bowls. Hordes of cockroaches swarmed in a mangowood chest which lay open; a pile of rubbish lay heaped on a broken-legged stool; a headless dented celluloid doll rolled on the floor.

It was something to wonder at how she managed to eat, sleep and keep alive. But to Chandramoyi the chaos had no significance.

Throughout the day Chandramoyi’s work never seemed to end, she had no leisure at all. But unless one

watched carefully, one would not be able to discover why she was so busy rushing about. Though her link with other people was only slight, yet she had no clear individuality of her own. Even though she lived in the midst of people, her place was far removed from each. She had no personality, even her footsteps made no sound when she walked or ran! It had become a habit to her to sneak about like a thief.

The ground floor was not really habitable, its two or three dirty rooms had been lying empty for a very long time. Yet frequently Chandramoyi could be seen hurrying out of these rooms. When asked she would say, "Oh nothing, in case someone comes. If they are clean, the rooms look better."

She had not guessed wrong, one day some people did come. Three young men up for a change from Calcutta. They were to stay for some time.

Chandramoyi came down with who knows whose soldered bucket in her hand. She stood at the door and said, "Will it suffice father, can you manage with these two rooms? The houses in Benares are all like this father, every place is dark!"

One of the boys said, "We'll manage somehow. This is your house, isn't it?"

"Can I call it mine my father? All this is yours. I only sit guarding it like a durwan. What's your name?"

"Bhupati. This is my friend Sadananda and this is Nikhil."

Chandramoyi went and fetched a bucket of water from the tap; put it down and covered it; then brought a broom and began sweeping the rooms. The boys gazed at her speechless, then said, "What are you doing? Is this proper? If you do so much, we'll feel ashamed to stay here."

Chandramoyi smiled a little. Her smile seemed to denote that she and only she had the right to do this work, no one else!

Thus a relationship was established, she literally grabbed at such rights over others! She had a strange fascination for giving an uncalled for over-abundance of service to people who were nothing to her.

The person who lived in the second floor was a middle-aged doctor. He was about fifty and his head was peppered with grey hairs. A widower, he lived peacefully with his children, the eldest of whom was a maiden daughter. Negotiations about this daughter's marriage were going on. She was quite grown up. One day Chandramoyi called her aside, took her into the bathroom, then putting one hand round the girl's neck and holding her chin with the other, she asked, "You're going to be married aren't you Binita?"

Binita was an educated girl and there was a shadow of gravity about her looks. She said, "But why have you called me aside and ask me about it in secret. If I'm married it won't remain hidden!"

"No, no, that's why I'm asking," whispered Chandramoyi. "Will you really be married?"

"Where do girls remain unmarried for ever, mashima (aunt)?" Bristling with annoyance Binita went upstairs.

Contempt from anyone never hurt Chandramoyi.

Bhupati and his friends were out, Chandramoyi looked around, then went to their room and peeped in.

Only she knew her intention. As she was returning and had just reached the stairs, her glance fell on a heap of dirty dishes. These belonged to Bhupati and his friends. Chandramoyi came down, took them to the tap and began cleaning the dishes. A Brahmin's daughter—but traditions of caste never even crossed her mind.

After she had finished cleaning them she neatly arranged the pile of dishes near the door and went upstairs, her mind content. Suddenly seeing the Doctor Babu in front of her, she pulled her veil a little more forward in bashfulness and modesty, then quickly went up to the third floor. Blood began to pound in her heart whenever she saw the Doctor Babu!

She was panting when she came to her room. Her face trembled with excitement. Had the Doctor Babu been able to see her face?

Beauty? One felt a sense of nausea on looking at Chandramoyi. Thin hair; sticking-out teeth; tiny eyes

like those of a snake; hideous hands and feet; a thin body like that of an eternal ascetic—Chandramoyi reminded one of the futility of God's creation.

The afternoon light was becoming dim. Slowly Chandramoyi came down again. She pushed the door near the stairs on the second floor, it flew open. Nirupama had gone downstairs to have a wash.

On entering the room Chandramoyi saw several dhotis and sarees lying on the ground, she picked them up and arranged them neatly. The bedding was heaped on one side, she began spreading it out on the floor with meticulous care. First the mat, on it the durrie, then the mattress and a clean white sheet on top. After tucking in the sheet she arranged the pillows. Then as she got up and turned towards the door she came face to face with Nirupama. Nirupama's face had turned red on seeing the laid-out bedding.

"Here you are Bowma, take over charge of your room—how much for you to do all alone, mother!"

Nirupama replied, "But I do it every day!"

Chandramoyi smiled a little. She said, "I felt like doing it, I did it for you. Wait child, I'll fetch you some water for the night."

"No, no, let it be—why should you take so much trouble?"

On coming out of the door Chandramoyi paused for a few moments, then before she went downstairs she said with a smile on her unsightly face, "It doesn't matter

Bowma, be so kind as to let me do a few things for you. Won't it be to your advantage?"

Chandramoyi came down the stairs. A light was burning in the downstairs room. Bhupati and his friends were sitting and talking. A Hindustani boy was getting their dinner ready in the kitchen. From the door she whispered, "Hey!"

The boy looked up. Chandramoyi said, "Don't shout. The spices need grinding, don't they?"

The boy nodded assent. Could anything hold her back? Chandramoyi went in, wrapped the end of her saree round her waist and sat down to grind the spices. With the greatest care, caution and secrecy, one by one she ground chillies, turmeric and the rest into an exceedingly fine, smooth paste. One felt that she was pouring all the generosity, affection and tenderness of her heart into these little labours—all those emotions which had lain hidden and lost in her heart.

"Who engaged you?"

The boy replied, "Bhupati Babu."

Chandramoyi said, "Don't ask for too much salary, Bhupati has a lot of expenses."

The boy remained silent. She said again, "I'm not keeping very well, that's why we have to employ you! Look after your master well, I'll increase your salary."

In the room outside, there was a loud burst of laughter over something. The boys were as restless and bubbling with high spirits as children—Chandramoyi had been

listening attentively to them. She said, "Each one should behave according to his age, how can outsiders understand this! Unless they laugh and joke, how can they keep fit?"

The boy now said, "The Babu has come here on a visit!"

"Stop talking nonsense! As if you know everything! The Babu's work is in Calcutta, that's why he can't always stay here. Now! What's that you're doing? Is that the way to fry fish? You've gone and burnt it! Now move away!"

Chandramoyi washed her turmeric-smeared hands, pushed the boy aside and sat down to cook herself. She said, "Unless I show you for a few days, you shan't be able to manage, I can see. Wait, wait, don't go away yet, listen to me."

The boy turned round. Chandramoyi got up and gave him some sweets which had been brought from the bazar and said, "Sit here and eat the sweets, don't move away, understand?"

Thinking her to be the complete mistress of the household, the boy obeyed her without any question in his mind and sat down in silence.

From the other room came a shout, "Here, Girdhari, why don't you put on the rice to cook, our tummies are cramped with hunger!"

Girdhari got up. Chandramoyi became alarmed and said, "Answer from here, say, 'I've put on the rice!'"

She put down the ladle from her hand, came and peeped outside, then said, "Mind! Don't let Bhupati know that I'm here. He's told me not to come downstairs, because I'm not well!"

But Girdhari was not liking this secretive behaviour and was feeling most uncomfortable. A person with great powers of self-concealment was always endowed with a god-given capacity for reading another's mind also. Chandramoyi glanced outside, it may have been a bright moonlit night, but, downstairs—it was pitch dark. There was no light, no air, no sky, no leisure—in this atmosphere of suffocation the human voice thudded like the sound of a cracked drum. Chandramoyi turned and looked at Girdhari's face. Then she said slowly, "How are you to know that Bhupati is my son, you've only just come! Born out of a mother's travail—is a son not to look after her health?"

Girdhari had already comprehended this.

After cooking the rice, Chandramoyi arranged the food, then stole away. When the boys sat down to eat she watched them by stealth, hidden like a thief. It also did not escape her eyes—with how little care Girdhari served their food. If only she could have fed Bhupati and his friends with her own hands!

She entered their room on tiptoe. Then she made up their beds taking great pains. She picked up and threw away the cigarette butts and burnt matches which lay strewn all over the room. Lest she made a sound in

sweeping the room with a broom, she cleaned the entire floor by brushing it with the end of her saree.

When she silently tiptoed up the stairs, the boys had just got up after having eaten with great gusto. Chandramoyi's body trembled all over with joy. Does not the repletion of her son fill a mother's heart with joy?

Nirupama was standing near the door having served her husband inside the room. Seeing Chandramoyi come up so stealthily, she said, "You're coming and going so many times in the dark, why don't you carry a light?"

"A light—mother? I haven't the time even to remember such a thing. How much a mother has to bear for the sake of her son—when she has one!" Saying this she went up to the third floor.

The conversation came to the ears of the husband as he was eating. With his nose crinkled, a frown on his brows and a sharp look in his eyes, he said, "Why does that woman talk to you at all times of the day and night? Ugly witch!"

Chandramoyi plumped herself down on the floor on entering her room. She felt blessed today in having been able to cook for Bhupati. There was not an inkling of any sorrow in her heart on this night. Perhaps sleep would not come to her eyes tonight, the usual, habitual weariness would not gather in her mind—perhaps she might even have to roam about on the roof-terrace throughout the night in the excitement of her joy!

The doors and windows were left open, the bed was not made, nor was the room cleaned—and for what should she light a lamp?

But her mind filled with unbounded joy and satisfaction gazing at the untidy, worn out, dirty accoutrements of her room. A flame had lit up in her heart rendering all her insignificance worth while!

After the day's labour her eyes began to close. And with her closed eyes she saw the infant Bhupati. A lovely two-year-old child, restless, hard as a chip of stone, in his hunger for a mother's breast, it seemed as if he was tearing at Chandramoyi's breast like a baby-tiger with his sharp new teeth. Thinking of this, Chandramoyi's body became ravished with pleasure.

Nirupama was turning over the pages of a magazine, sitting on a mat spread on the floor; Chandramoyi entered the room.

"I don't even find the time to come and sit near you for a few moments. That sewing of yours—have you finished it?"

"Yes, there were only a few."

"If only I'd learned to sew! It's just because I really have no work in my hands, that's why I can't find time to do anything. All my life I've remained ghost-ridden, mother!"

The slight note of adulation in Chandramoyi's voice

did not escape Nirupama's notice. But she said with a pained look at Chandramoyi, "One can't understand why such things happen in the kingdom of God!"

"I liked you from the very first day, Bowma. I've thought so many things about you."

With a faint smile Nirupama asked, "Such as?"

"No, no, I mean—as for instance, I can't think of you as a daughter, if only I could have had you as my son's wife in this life."

"What's the good of saying that? One has all kinds of desires but one only increases one's sorrow by talking about them!"

"That's what I mean." Drawing lines on the floor with her fingers, Chandramoyi continued, "Unless one is extremely lucky one can't bear a son like Bhupati. He's as handsome as he is good. He has passed three examinations—has a business in Calcutta and landed property at home. Frank as a child, amiable—he is the treasure of my sorrows, Bowma."

Such deep affection for another's son and this spinning of dreams over him! A little surprised, Nirupama turned her face and glanced aside.

"Many things which, had they happened would have been for the best—don't happen. Here, you're living with your husband, yet Bhupati remains unmarried, did anyone think of this? There are many things in this world, which we can't make out."

"That is to say—what?"

Nirupama turned to look at her. Who was this Bhupati anyway, why discuss his not having married, with her? And what connection did this have with her living with her husband?

Chandramoyi said, "Besides, mother, our Bhupati is not a man to disapprove of. Do you think any girl would feel unhappy if she had to cook in Bhupati's pot?"

"Isn't there a marriageable girl that you know of?" asked Nirupama.

"I'm not talking of that Bowma," said Chandramoyi with a smile. "Where am I to find a girl? Will anyone think of getting their daughters married through my negotiations? I'm talking about you mother. Ever since I saw you I've been thinking of it."

Nirupama gazed with wide-open eyes.

"Yes, I'm speaking of you Bowma, I can't even think that you've a husband! You are a young maiden! Well, whisper to me quietly, tell me, don't think me mad, do tell me if you don't like Bhupati. Really, I'm telling you mother, if Bhupati was your husband "

Nirupama sprang up like a snake which springs to strike. Hardly breathing, she pointed to the door and said, "Get out—get out immediately, don't sit there another second!"

Looking at her face Chandramoyi could not sit any longer, she got up, stared stupidly, swallowed hard and said, "Have I done wrong, Bowma?"

Bowma said in reply to this, "Get out—get out!"

What my husband says is right, he knows people. Don't you dare to call me Bowma, again! Have you no religious scruples or fear? Get out of this room. Just because I'm living here as your tenant, how dare you insult me?"

Chandramoyi crept out with her head bowed.

She went, it was true, but this did not touch her in the least bit. When she went up to her room and began doing the appointed tasks of her day, one felt that the experience of being humiliated was nothing new to her. She felt nothing on being hurt, she had no compunction in crushing social laws underfoot, completely impervious and indifferent, she went about with her mind quite tranquil.

She went past Nirupama's door many times, but she did not have the courage to speak. This door had closed for ever on her face.

She went down to the second floor and laughed and joked with Doctor Babu's children. She sometimes played with them. They were very dear to her. Binita was mostly busy with her studies—she did not feel the necessity of keeping an eye on the doings of this monstrously ugly woman.

The little children had learnt that Chandramoyi could play hide and seek too. So they got a lot of fun out of mixing with this kind, affectionate woman. They did not want anything better than being able to run riot the whole day long.

Sometimes Chandramoyi paused for a while, drew aside one of the children and asked of many things.

"Your father laughs very loud, doesn't he Montu?"

Montu replied, "Yes, a lot. He laughs with a loud ha-ha, mashima!"

"What does your father like to eat?"

The second daughter cried out, "Puin-Sak (a variety of spinach) mashima, with Hilsa. Hilsa and Puin curry!"

"Oh!" Chandramoyi remained seemingly indifferent for a while. Then she asked, "What does he eat at night?"

"At night? Loochi (Puri—a variety of fried pastry)!"

"Doctor Babu loves all of you very much, doesn't he?"

"Yes—me, most of all."

Then a riot began. All of them screamed, "Father loves me best, me Mashima!"

Chandramoyi said, "Wait, let us find out by having a lottery."

It took place, but the result of the lottery was—just nothing. Chandramoyi said, "Let it go. Who sleeps with Doctor Babu at night?"

Montu came forward like a hero. He said, "I."

Chandramoyi coaxed him into her arms and took him upstairs. She gave him sweets and raisins, took him in her lap and fondled him, kissing him hungrily. Then bringing him back to the top of the stairs she said, "Would you like to buy a top Montu? How much do they cost? Tell me, I'll give you the money."

Montu said, "Four pice."

"All right, I'll give it to you. But promise you'll listen to what I say?"

"Yes, I'll listen."

Chandramoyi was trembling with a mad joy and excitement—her blood pounded in big waves in her heart. She said, "Who is Doctor Babu to you?"

"Father."

"Who am I to you?"

"Mashima."

"Hush!" She pressed her hand over Montu's mouth and said, "I'll kill you this minute. Say—'You're my mother,' say it! Good boy, I'll give you the money to buy a top. Say it!"

Montu was seven years old. His mother had died only about two years ago. Still, somehow feeling afraid, he said, "Mother!"

Chandramoyi took four pice from the money knotted at the end of her sarce, gave it to him and said, "Now run along. But in future every time I press some money into your hand call me softly by that name. Understand?" Montu nodded and went downstairs.

Whatever hunger may have peeped out of this hideous trick, this expression of a distorted mind—this mental voluptuary of a woman went to and fro overwhelmed with her own joy. Chandramoyi laughed to herself and began wondering if the joy of having a husband, son, daughter-in-law, children and grandchildren was just like this.

Doctor Babu was studying very late at night. In front of the verandah, beside an open window stood his table. A bright lamp burned in the midst of a disorderly mass of papers. Through the glasses on his nose, the Doctor Babu gazed intently at the book in front of him. There was no chance of his gaze travelling beyond the radius of the light, everything beyond was plunged in darkness.

It was very late. The children were sound asleep. No sound of Bhupati and his friends came from downstairs. Nirupama's door was bolted on the inside. In the silence of the night, the sound of a temple bell came from a distance.

"Who's standing there?"

Binita came out from the next room. Taken aback, Chandramoyi mumbled, "Binita? You haven't gone to sleep yet?"

In a bitter tone Binita replied, "No, my eyes are completely clear and wide-awake, I saw a shadow in front of the lamp. May I know what you were staring at through the window? Father has to sit up working late every night, what do you gain by coming and standing here?"

Doctor Babu called out from the room, "What's happened Binu?"

"Nothing father, you do your work."

Drawing her veil a little forward and moving away, Chandramoyi said in a guilty manner, "My light's gone out mother, that is why I came for a match—"

"You might have asked me for a match!" She hunted round for a matchbox, then flung it at Chandramoyi and said, "Now go, if ever you need anything come and ask us in broad daylight—in front of everybody. This sneaking thievishness at night! Shame on you!"

Chandramoyi picked up the matchbox and went upstairs again. The light was burning in the room. Dirty dishes and leavings of food were scattered all around. She brought out a bowl of curry from under the end of her saree and put it down on the ground—Hilsa and Pun-Sak curry!

She sat down and remained still for some minutes. She remembered with what eagerness, pains and care she had cooked the whole day. It would not have been so bad if she could have fed all the people in this house!

She sat there thinking of many things. She felt that there was no end to her thoughts—they had no past, no present! She felt that in this small frustration was clearly mirrored the complete picture of her life!

Then she brought the lamp nearer, and began to eat—one mouthful after another of rice, Hilsa and Pun-Sak curry; a flood of tears had begun to stream down from her two sharp tiny eyes.

Binita, however, could not forgive her thief-like behaviour.

The faint hum of indignation against Chandramoyi had gradually grown into a big roar.

Nirupama's husband Khagen suddenly made a comment, which Doctor Babu could not help contradicting. Binita was burning with rage, from downstairs she began to hurl loud insults at Chandramoyi, choosing her words carefully and avoiding abuse.

Emboldened, Khagen said nastily, "She may belong to a decent family, but I believe the woman capable of any wrong. One not only feels sick looking at her, but she gives one a positively creepy sensation! Revolting woman!"

Chandramoyi had come down and stood near the stairs. Looking at Nirupama's expressionless face, Binita said, "I don't trust her one bit Bowdi (brother's wife), understand? Benares is the right place for this sort of women—they sit here all day spinning their webs. Being a woman she dares to imagine she can hide her real self from women!"

Now Bhupati and his friends joined the chorus of hate. Khagen came and stood on the verandah. From downstairs Bhupati cried out, "You're talking about the landlady aren't you? We too were thinking of speaking out. The woman is absolutely vile! God knows with what intent she hovers around us day and night—one's head is ready to bow in shame when one thinks of it. Old hag! She steals food and eats it! Besides, she has plenty of other virtues—understand?"

Khagen said, "A first-class coquette! Bhupati Babu, we have to think of our wives and daughters, I'm going to leave!"

Binita said, "I made father find another house this morning, we'll leave tomorrow!"

Bhupati said, "The time-limit of our concession-tickets is nearly up, we'll also leave for Calcutta very soon!"

One by one, Chandramoyi heard them. Then turning to go upstairs she said with a sad smile, "What can I say? You'll all go from here, well, go, I shan't be able to hold you back. But my house won't remain empty—it'll fill up again with children, with men, with women! My life is lived with strangers! How many people have come—how many have gone away. My house is a Dharamshala!"

Gazing at the pale light of the dying day Nirupama's eyes shone with tears. Nirupama judged people by their hearts.

RAMPADA MUKHERJI



TRISHNA
OR
THIRST

A morning in the month of Sraban.

Rain had descended since before dawn. Looking at the sky, one would think that the downpour would continue for ever. A village road; where there had been knee-deep dust in summer, in this monsoon—slippery mud had gathered. The few people who had to use this road, driven by the necessities of their work, were loudly cursing the gods. But the tune of the tumult which Harish was creating, sitting on the verandah of his thatched hut, was enough to drown the sounds of rain, roars of thunder and curses of the passers-by

Harish had many complaints. One instalment was addressed to the gods, one instalment was poured against the human race and one instalment against fate. The hut had mud walls, its roof had been thatched a few years ago. It had only two rooms; a verandah lay on the lap of these rooms, a portion of it had broken down and merged into the courtyard. The anger of the gods seemed to be specially directed towards this worn-out hut. Rain was dripping through the roof in several places. Where it dripped most, Durga had set out an ancient brass pot, drops of water fell in it with a tinkling sound. The children's faces were bright with joy. Not heeding their parents, one of them had put out his head from under the roof, one was playing a 'Jaltaranga' (a musical instrument) by beating a strip of bamboo on the water-filled brass pot.

The eldest son, Fani, was reciting loudly:

“Come rain pour—

I’ll give you a measure of corn—”

His children’s glee, however, maddened Harish. Suddenly he caught Fani by the ear and, making a face at him, said, “We’ve a barn full of corn, haven’t we? I’ve been telling you, you little bastard—go—go and pick a few cucumbers—but I might as well talk to the air!”

A ten-year-old boy. He was not daunted by being held by the ear or his father’s abuse; with equal insolence, distorting his face, he said, “Why don’t you go—old crock!”

“What! He has more daring than he’s big enough to hold! I’ll chop the boy to pieces—”

But the blustering ended there. The slap which was about to descend—hung midway in the air. Durga appeared before her son as reassurance incarnate. “He hasn’t said anything wrong! Why don’t you—old crock—go yourself! You haven’t an ounce of worth in you and you dare to discipline your son!”

Harish also did not forego a roar in futile spite, “I’m to go? I? If I could have gone myself, would I have begged him?” He sat down on the verandah and stretched out his leg, “Look at the sole of my foot. A thorn stuck into it while picking a pumpkin the day before yesterday. I didn’t have time to get it out immediately. A fellow was going down the road, and

asked, 'How much did you pay for the pumpkin?' I said, 'One anna.' He said, 'You've been cheated. You'd have got it cheaper in the market—three pice at the most. You've come all this distance for nothing Ghosh Mohasay!' I said to myself, I know what gain I've made. This pain in my foot is my only loss! The thorn had then gone under the skin. When I came home, I took it out with a knife and rubbed it with lime. But now I can hardly put my foot to the ground."

"Careless as you are, it serves you right! When one goes to fetch something one has to be careful. But let that go, where are you sending him for cucumbers?"

"Not to Delhi—only to the Bose's place. Day before yesterday, I saw that their trellis was full of tender young cucumbers."

Durga said, "Supposing he's seen?"

"Huh! They'll see him! Their garden is at the back of their hut, with only a leadwort fence round it, he'll easily be able to jump over it."

"The cucumber trellis is high, what if he can't reach up?"

"What nonsense! At most, it is the height of my neck. Get up Fani—stand up with your left hand held high." With great enthusiasm Harish pulled up his son. "You see now?"

Durga said with a laugh, "But you should explain all this to him, instead of which you go on scolding. Go my son, go and fetch as many cucumbers as you can."

In the meantime, I'll quickly fry some rice." Fani said, "Bah! As if I didn't go the other evening? Just as I had crossed the fence and gone near the trellis, Bhusno came and began swishing a cane on my back—look at it, touch my back with your hand."

Durga stroked his back and patted him, "You silly! You went at the wrong time. They can see you then. Today it's raining, go quietly, look all around, then go over the fence. They have no window at the back of their hut, no one will see you!"

After his son departed, Harish said, "I feel like having Khitchree today."

Gesturing with her hands, Durga said, "I too feel like having fried Hilsa. But isn't there a saying 'Hasn't got an ounce of worth, but has ordered a chariot.' It's the same with us—there's no dhal in the house."

Harish had no alternative but to stay silent.

Before the cucumbers came—a letter arrived.

The peon with a white cloth-covered umbrella over his head, flung the letter on the verandah as he was going down the road.

The hut stood next to the road, there was no trace of a fence or wall, so inside or out it had no privacy. Few people lived at this end of the village and there was a plot of waste land behind, so no one heard the discussions and conversations which went on in the household.

Harish stared stupidly for sometime, holding the letter in his hand. Such an unusual event had not happened during the last three years. Of course, as long as dada (elder brother) had been alive, the peon delivered a money-order at the beginning of every month. With the money they would get a slip of a coupon with two lines written enquiring about the well-being of the family and sending blessings. Then one day a postcard came bearing the tidings of his death. According to long-established custom it had been torn and thrown away. The printed card which came inside the envelope bearing the invitation to the Sradh ceremony (post-funeral religious ceremony) could perhaps still be found somewhere in the house, but not a single letter written by hand.

Recovered from his surprise, Harish began reading the letter. At the other end of the verandah Durga was sitting before the fire frying rice. She glanced back on hearing the peon's shout then became engrossed in her work again. She had the firm conviction that after reading the letter, her husband would immediately tell her everything. The hubbub they created throughout the day—whether in joy or anger—was something of the uttermost enjoyment to both of them. Sitting on the verandah of this broken hut with its background of uninhabited weedy tangle of waste land, the moments which resounded with the ever-changing rhythm of their matrimonial discourses seemed to be the product of this

extraordinary environment. There were no neighbours, so Durga made up for the lack by her soliloquies. When her husband went out, Durga would sit on the verandah and recite the glories of her father and father-in-law's family in a loud voice. When her husband returned, she would drown the light of that glory in a flood of abuse and then begin to rain curses.

It would be difficult for most people to understand how the household was run on the few rupees poor Harish earned by doing job-work as a clerk.

Meanwhile, Fani returned and placed four or five tender cucumbers on the verandah. The younger boy sat pricking the cucumbers with his nails, licking his tongue and screaming at his mother to apportion the cucumbers. Durga finished her frying of rice. She came and sat down near her children with the bowl of fried rice. The eldest boy brought his mother a knife.

But Harish paid no attention to all this. He was sitting still with his eyes fixed on the letter.

Durga asked while cutting the cucumbers, "Have you become ghost-ridden? What are you thinking of—sitting like a wooden doll?" Harish flung the letter at Durga. Durga put down the knife and cried in a sharp voice, "Don't you feel ashamed? Did you ever buy me a First Primer? Did you ever teach me to read or write a single letter of the alphabet?"

Harish laughed. As if this was his duty! As if Durga's

glorious, noble parental family had no responsibility in the matter!

Harish's laugh scattered poison over Durga. She flung back the letter aiming at Harish's face and cried, "Shame adorns a shameless, as a Champaka flower on the ears of an earless! How dare you laugh!"

Durga had joined his household long ago, Harish's knowledge of her temper and behaviour was therefore very keen. He had no desire to remain hungry on this rainy day; he saw the fried rice in front of him and smelled the fragrance of sliced cucumbers. He said quickly, "Calm yourself, my niece has written to me."

Astounded, Durga exclaimed, "Niece!"

"Yes, yes, my dada's daughter—the dada who used to send us money!"

"I can understand, my good man, I'm not a dolt, you needn't make lengthy explanations. As if he bought us body and soul by sending money! What's there in giving money to an incapable brother? My brother—"

"Then talk about your brother!"

"What do I have to say that you don't already know? Their customs, their manners—" she suddenly paused then said, "Well, what has the niece written?"

Harish said, "Something wonderful! She wants to come here!"

All language came and took shelter in Durga's wide open eyes.

Harish said, "She's really coming. Either today or

tomorrow." Durga controlled her surprise by opening her eyes wide and exclaiming, "Oh!"

"What does 'oh' mean? Do you understand nothing?"

"No, I can't, how can I? As if I eat grass and not rice!"

"What do you understand?"

"That she's coming to eat us out of house and home!"

"What's that?"

Durga said with a laugh, "What's the good of men tucking five yards of cloth round their waist, when it's a question of sense—the knot at its root is loose. Stupid! Look at the way he's staring! Come on, eat a mouthful of fried rice, I'll listen to you later." After a pause, she continued, "Whatever you might say, I won't allow her to sit on your chest and pluck your beard. I'll send her away on the same feet that bring her here!"

Harish heaved a sigh and said, "It's not what you think!"

"Oh! No! Of course not! But the gypsy never mistakes the hiss of a snake for a sneeze! Isn't she coming to take a share of the land?"

"No."

This time it was Durga's turn to be surprised, but she hissed at him, "Then is she coming here to exhibit her beauty?"

"Listen. They have a society which aims to open schools for little children, wherever there isn't one, all over the country. That's why Maya is coming here."

"Oh!" Rolling back her lips in contempt Durga went on mixing oil with the fried rice.

Munching the fried rice, Harish said, "Then she's to come?"

Completely indifferent, Durga replied, "If she wants to, let her."

"Where is she to sleep here?" questioned Harish.

"Let the uncle and the niece settle it!"

The matter was, however, not left only to the uncle and the niece to settle—everyone took a hand.

The next day. It was still drizzling. A covered bullock-cart came and stood before Harish's broken hut.

Durga was standing on the verandah with her sons, gazing out into the rain. Taking advantage of the rainy day, Harish had gone limping to do some 'business' somewhere.

A slim girl got down from the bullock-cart. She had no shoes on her feet, no umbrella in her hand. She was moderately tall and her complexion was not very bright. Wet with the spray of rain, her face glistened like a swaying lotus leaf on a brimming pool. Her manner of wearing the saree was slightly different, otherwise there was nothing in her get-up which could make her seem unsuited to receive the hospitality of this broken hut.

She got down and told the driver, "Take the box and bedding up to the verandah. Also the pot of rasogollahs

(a variety of Bengali sweets). This is the house, isn't it?" With quick steps she walked into the verandah.

Her eyes full of disgust, Durga was going to say something to the girl when she bowed low and touched Durga's feet.

Durga had no alternative but to control her annoyance and say, "Enough, enough, mother, may you remain a wife all your life. Let your marriage-bangle—"

The girl stood up straight and said with a smile, "That blessing is of no use yet, Kakima (father's younger brother's wife); I'm not married."

Durga gazed openmouthed at the girl. Such a grown-up girl had not yet been married! And how easily and smilingly she spoke of her own marriage before her elders! Utterly shameless!

Having sent the cart-driver away, the girl said, "My name is Mamata. But don't make me an Egyptian 'Mummy' by shortening my name as the girls in college do! Why Khoka (baby boy), what are you staring at? Will you come to me?"

In answer, Khoka moved away behind his mother, raised his right leg and made a face.

Mamata did not get angry. She said with a laugh, "Shame! I'm your Didi (elder sister), you shouldn't point a kick at me. It's a sin."

Khoka replied, "Sin indeed! Here's a kick—here's another and another—"

Durga said nothing to her son. Glancing at Mamata

she said indifferently, "Where are you going to stay?"

Mamata said smiling, "Wherever the mother lives, the daughter will also stay. Even if it is a broken hut, if it has room for you, won't there be any for me?"

Durga said sneeringly. "It's good if there is. You won't be able to eat coarse rice and spinach like a maid-servant. You'll want milk and ghee, fish and meat—"

Mamata was quite amused. She said, "Pilau, curry, chop, cutlet—"

Durga said drily, "All that lordliness may be possible in Calcutta. We're poor people, where have we the means to maintain an elephant?"

Mamata saw that her Kakima was not joking at all, her face wore an expression of extreme annoyance. A clever girl, she put a stop to all possible unpleasantness by saying, "Spinach and rice will be enough for me. What greater joy can there be than in sharing it with you? Well Khoka, will you have a rasogollah?" She began uncovering the pot of sweets.

The boys no longer felt diffident. They surrounded Mamata yelling, "I'll eat! I'll eat!"

Durga, too, came and stood near her.

Mamata was about to give them two sweets each, Durga snatched away the pot from her and said, "Move away. Those demons will eat up everything, however much you give them. You sit down and rest."

She gave one sweet each to the boys and hung up the pot on a hanging shelf in the smaller room.

Mamata was surprised to hear the language in which the boys began cursing their mother after putting the sweets in their mouths.

Durga came out and screamed at the top of her voice, "A herd of swine, you've come here to die with your empty bellies! Die! Die! And let's be rid of these nuisances—then stretching my feet, I can rest in peace for a few moments."

The eldest son Fani cried, "You die! Foul-tongue!"

"How dare you—you rascal!" Durga rushed after him. Pouring forth a stream of unmentionable abuse, Fani disappeared into the rain. Durga looked at Mamata, "Stay for a few days, since you've come; the days will pass somehow—in sorrow or joy. Sleep in this store-room. It's full of pots and pans, but you'll be able to sleep on this small takta (wooden bed) Let that box remain in my room."

Anyway, Mamata found shelter.

After having a wash she entered the store-room. It was quite true, the room was full of half-broken earthen pots, kitchen utensils, brass pots and pans. The moment she rested her foot on the worm-eaten bed it began creaking and swaying. All around lay pellets of cockroach dung; mice scampered about even in daytime; there was no window—the room smelt musty. But where else could she find a room to rest her head in this small village? She had rushed down to render service to

her village-mother even though she knew she would have to suffer many inconveniences.

Mamata moved away the pots and pans and made a little space for herself on the bed. She was dragging the bedding into the room, when Durga came rushing with a small pot of Ganges water in her hand. She cried, "Wait, purify it first! You could have washed the bedding, if there was any sun. Mother Ganges! Mother Ganges!" She went on incanting and sprinkling the water on the bedding.

Without a murmur Mamata went in with her purified, half-wet bedding into the room.

Suddenly shouts were heard outside, "Fani! Fani! Where has that rascal gone? Why don't you take this pile of spinach and vegetables. No! With my lame foot—"

From the verandah Durga put her finger over her mouth and signed to Harish not to shout.

Harish took no notice of it, "Die! Wretched hag—why don't you come and take these! She's signing to me with a finger on her mouth! And here I'm dying—"

"You die!" saying this Durga took the things.

Having found so many things, Harish could hardly hold his glee, "I plucked the parwals from Khetra Ghosh's field, the jhingas belong to Kaloo Sheikh's land—"

"Shut up, don't chatter so much." Durga flung the vegetables in one corner of the verandah.

"No! Of course I'm not to talk! Because I brought food for seven days—"

Durga put her mouth close to Harish's ear and said grinding her teeth in repressed rage, "If there was only a drop of sense in that pot! Fool!"

Then with a glance toward the room she said, "She's come—"

Staring stupidly, Harish questioned, "Who?"

"The messenger of your death!" Durga moved away.

Some of their words had reached Mamata's ears. By this time she had arranged her bedding and come out to salute her uncle by touching his feet. She did so as soon as Durga went away. Seeing that his stupefaction had not yet passed, Mamata said, "I was to have come yesterday, but I couldn't manage to do so. I saw you once long ago as a child, you used to call me 'Maya.' I've heard from father that you gave me the name Jogmaya—isn't that so?"

Harish nodded his head and said, "Is that today? It's an age ago. But Maya—"

Mamata laughed, "Today your 'Maya' has become 'Mamata.' Mother changed the name because it was too long, but both mean the same."

Even though Harish did not know the meaning of either name, he laughed and said, "Very nice, it's a good name. Here, do you hear, why not cook Khitchree today? Maya's come—"Durga came and stood behind Mamata and with a grimace she pointed her thumbs

at him. Krishna, the second son, clapped his hands and cried, "Father! Mother showed you her thumbs! Just like this!" He began swinging his two little thumbs in front of Harish's face.

Mamata said in a scolding voice, "Shame! You shouldn't do that to your father!"

Krishna grinned and said, "You she-monkey!"

Mamata frowned, "You're being rude again!"

Nothing daunted, Krishna said in an equally cheeky way, "You barbarian!"

The moment Mamata got up and held him by the ear he began screaming.

From inside the room Durga shouted, "Enough! You don't have to behave like a schoolmistress the moment you step into the house. There's a saying 'One who shows more concern than the mother, is a witch.'"

Mamata let go Krishna's ear and stood stuffily.

Harish said, "These children are a little unruly, mother. They don't heed anything. Let them go and hang themselves!"

Mamata said softly, "Why don't you discipline them Kaka (father's younger brother)?"

Frightened, Harish looked around helplessly and said, "I can't give them enough food to fill their tummies, then to talk of discipline! Besides they're very young. When they grow up they'll themselves learn how to behave!" He smiled sadly.

Mamata said, "If you don't keep them under control

now, you won't be able to correct them later on. In which class do they read?"

Harish scratched his head and said, "Let one or two more years pass, then I'll put them in school. My position is not such that I—"

Mamata said gently, "Father used to get terribly annoyed if he found children being allowed to run wild without studying. I've heard that was why he sent you some money every month."

Finding no answer to this, Harish covered his eyes and began weeping, "Dada himself has left us! Such physique, so young, so learned, he disappeared before our eyes like magic!"

Mamata realised it was no use trying to sharpen their wits with reasoning. Like a deep-rooted Banyan tree, age-long tradition had dug deep its many roots in their hearts; spreading its twigs and branches, it had concealed even the colour of the vast liberal sky which lay beyond the limits of this household. She would not be able to do away easily with the customs and traditions they had nurtured since birth. But she would try. Living in their midst, giving them love, affection and reverence, she would carry them beyond the darkness of night into the boundaries of light. The lamp of knowledge which wears away darkness—she would light that lamp at the altar of this household which was without beauty and on the verge of ruin.

Durga called Harish inside the room and said in a

muffled voice, "Do I say you're stupid for nothing? We're poor—this that and the other, what's the need of telling her all these things? She's come for a few days, do you think she'll take notice of you as an uncle when she goes away?"

Harish said, "No, the girl isn't like that—she's good. She speaks as sweetly as she behaves."

"Then live on her sweet words and behaviour! You'll know her, when she begins partitioning the land to a hairsbreadth division and takes it, then you'll realise how much rice comes from how much seed!" Durga scolded him.

If Mamata had not been there, Harish would not have forgotten to pay Durga back for the scolding. Afraid of what the girl might think of him, he remained silent.

Durga said, "You needn't relate all your qualities to her. Tell her you bought the vegetables from the market—very cheap. If you can't say this, keep mum—I'll say whatever there is to say. It's only a few days." Harish had to nod assent.

He nodded—but somehow he felt depressed. This girl of his brother's, as a child he had petted her, taken her in his arms, scolded her—to have to feel any constraint before her! Ever since he had come to know her smiling face, her easy behaviour, her friendliness, he had been feeling a great sense of want. A want for what? The worn-out hut leaked in a thousand places,

there was a constant lack of food—such things did not cause this particular feeling of want. This sense of insufficiency was of a different order. Their torn dirty clothes, the poverty which was manifest everywhere in the household—what did these matter before one with whom the relationship was one of affection? But still, the floods of deep shame which again and again swept over and submerged one's whole being in the inky waters of diffidence—did the sordidness which piled up with the dishonest provending of vegetables, increase its darkness day by day? Just as the monsoon sky lost in the pouring rain could not be discerned by the gaze of the sharpest pair of eyes—similarly, who knew from where these waves of thought had suddenly risen in his bewildered mind?

Durga brought two rasogollahs, put them in Harish's hand and said, "Eat."

"Have you eaten?"

"First, you eat. Here's water for you," Durga put down the glass of water and asked, "Did she say any thing?"

"What's there to say?"

"That's why I get cross with you. I mean about partitioning the land."

"Don't be afraid. She hasn't come for that."

"If she hasn't, why did she say she was going to establish a school here?"

"Here means—in this village."

"Who's waiting to give her any room in the village. You'll see, she'll partition the land to a hairsbreadth and raise a hut."

"You're very low—"

"What?"

Flurried, Harish said, "Hush, the girl will hear you."

"Let her. So I'm low-down?"

"Good lord, what a nuisance! I'm saying we can only think of petty things, she's not like that."

"What is she like, then?"

"What, I don't know. I'm her uncle, someone to be respected by her—but I somehow feel small before her. Just consider, what does she lack? Why has she come to endure so much inconvenience in this broken hut? Did she pay heed to anything—to how much she would have to suffer in living here? She'll establish a school—teach and inspire little children—think what a big mind one has to have in order to do such work."

Durga's very entrails flamed up with rage. "So take a pot of oil and massage her feet! I've seen plenty of such empty vessels! Is she really going to establish a school or is it a trick to take possession of the land?"

"Anyway, it's no use bandying words over this. Go and put on the rice to boil."

"I'm going. But I'm telling you, the sun may rise in the west, but my words won't prove false."

Harish said to himself, "As if they are the words of God!"

After tidying her bed Mamata came and sat down near her uncle. She said, "Look Kaka, I want to put Fani, Krishna—both of them in school."

Pleased, Harish said, "Very good, mother."

Mamata said, "The condition of the roof is such that it should be re-thatched as soon as the monsoon ends."

Instead of answering, Harish sighed.

Noticing this, Mamata said, "I'll have to stay here now; I'm thinking of having it done myself. You've no objection, have you?"

Overwhelmed with joy, Harish could not speak. He only shook his head to convey that he had no objection.

After a pause Mamata said, "We'll build a school-hut on that land in front, what do you say?"

Durga's words crowded into Harish's mind. Then, had the girl come to accomplish her own ends under cover of mock amiability? He gave her a sharp glance.

Mamata said with a smile, "You're perhaps thinking it'll create a lot of noise and you won't be able to sleep during the day!" Harish smiled with great difficulty.

Mamata went on, "You needn't be afraid of that. Our method of teaching is quite different. I'll prove that to you."

Harish's forehead wrinkled up, he gave no reply. Mamata said, "As soon as the rain stops, we'll build an atchala (a hut with eight posts) there."

Harish no longer had any doubt—word for word, what Durga had said was proving true. But Harish was

not annoyed by the clever, polished manner in which Mamata was achieving her own selfish ends. He felt hurt. Selfishness did not become this joyous girl either in word or deed. If only Durga's prognostication had proved false!

Mamata said as sweetly as a small child, "Why don't you speak, Kaka?" Harish hid a sigh and said gravely, "No, that can't be done Maya."

"What can't be done?"

"Building a hut there."

"Why Kaka?"

"Because, unless the property is properly partitioned—"

Mamata laughed like a child and said, "What's this partitioning of property? That land is yours—it'll remain yours."

It choked him to say it, but unless he said it, the girl would not understand. He coughed and cleared his throat several times to get over his hesitation and said, "You know the property belonged both to your father and myself. As soon as an agreement—"

Mamata spoke like an unreasonable child, "What's the agreement about? That land is yours, not an inch of it belongs to father."

"The law doesn't say that Maya."

"I don't know about the law Kaka; I'm father's only child, I'm saying that this property is yours and no one else's. If you like, I could sign a deed—"

Shame of course—but there was also no bounds to

the joy which flooded Harish's heart. Looking at Mamata his eyes filled with tears. He nodded his head again and again and went on saying, "I know, I know Maya, I know!"

The mid-day meal was over, but the rain-god was not appeased, the downpour of rain had increased since the morning.

Mamata was sitting and talking about her childhood days with Harish. Durga went rushing from this room to the other on the pretext of work, but her ears were glued to their conversation. Durga had not missed one word while she was cooking. But strange, the girl seemed to keep Harish under constant surveillance! Durga had not been able to get Harish to herself for a single moment in which to assuage her itching tongue by giving him a few words of good advice. Now she came out of the room and said, "What are you going to eat at night, tell me, so that I can make the preparations."

Harish put his hand over his belly and gave out a belch.

Mamata said, "Good heaven! If I eat again at night over and above what I've had, I shan't survive. Why cook this evening, Kakima? Take a little rest."

Durga pushed out her lips and said, "Rest! What a lot of luck I have! They say that 'a tread-mill husks rice even when it goes to heaven,' it's the same with me. If

you aren't going to eat, go to bed early. You can talk tomorrow!"

Mamata said, "This rainy evening in the village is very pleasant. Why don't you sit down for a while, Kakima?"

Durga replied a little sharply, "Oh! What a lot of time I have to sit down! Don't you see, I pass my whole day in sitting and lying about! On the other hand, there's no kerosene in the house, do you realise that?"

Harish said with a pinched face, "That's true. You go to bed Maya. Perhaps you didn't sleep well last night—go."

Mamata felt most reluctant to enter that dungeon so early. To lie in the darkness with cockroaches, mice and insects crawling all around—it made her shiver even to think of it!

Sitting here alone and watching the rain-swept, dark image of the road, field and jungle, filled one's mind with a joy mixed with fear. How enchanting was the incessant happy song of the frogs. Nothing else existed in the world except this unbroken, limitless darkness, the occasional moaning of the wind, the roars of thunder which broke into the soft sound of rain, the splashing sound of water when a dog or jackal crossed the water-clogged courtyard. All this combined to create the fear-some atmosphere of a demon's castle. At such an hour, one should sit circled round a small lamp and exchange stories. Stories—to suit the mood of the moment. Strange,

unreal stories which leave no gap through which the light of intellect can peep in and lead to arguments. Stories—which do not die an unnatural death—pierced by the arrows of criticism. Stories—which cannot be discarded as rubbish on the pretext of being measured by the canons of literary or artistic judgment. Simple stories which were in tune with this sable-hued night, the music of the incessant patter of rain, the roars of thunder—stories which spun out endless threads like a spider.

Harish had got up, the children had gone to bed immediately on finishing their meal. How long could Mamata sit there alone? A barrier-less house—the many shameful stories one read in newspapers brought fear to the heart—Mamata could not but help going into her solitary prison-chamber.

No light had been lit in the other room either, conversation went on in whispers.

“Well, didn’t what I predicted—happen? In the end my words did come true.”

They could not see each other’s face, and Harish remained silent. The impatient Durga pinched him and said, “You’ve turned dumb. Speak!”

“Ugh!” Harish moved away.

Durga was not one to give up. She moved towards him and said, “Speak shameless creature! You’ve absolutely melted on seeing your niece. She’ll give money, give land, have the boys educated—what more

can one want! There's no end to her bluffs—" She gave a push at Harish and continued, "Hasn't what I said come true?"

Harish became annoyed and said, "True, true, how can what you say ever be untrue?"

"Of course it can't be. But I'll teach her a lesson to-night."

In fear, Harish asked, "What are you going to do?"

"You'll see what I do. Her life is hidden inside that box, that's why the witch can brag so—"

"Are you going to break open her box?" Harish's voice was full of trepidation. Durga burst out laughing.

In the darkness, Harish tried to clutch her hand, "No Durga, I beg of you, don't do that. If you like, I'll tell her to go away."

"As if she has any obligation to go!"

"I'll see that she goes. Here, I swear touching you—truly, truly, truly. We are low-down, it's true—but I can't lower myself still further before her."

Amazed, Durga did not say any more. She drew the covering up to her breast, lay down and said, "All right, all right. Now go to sleep"

Durga had never imagined that such a tone of distress could enter into Harish's voice! Such pleading over such a small matter. As if it would be Harish's death to be lowered before this girl! The man who never felt any hesitation about following mean pursuits; the one who brought the reappings of other

people's fields without any compunction everyday; the man who when caught, smilingly painted the story of his humiliation in glorious colours—that the same person should refuse to take a pile of money when it came to his hands! There must be money in that box—a lot of money! If it came to her hands, they could buy new clothes; new straw to thatch their worn-out roof; build a barn in the courtyard to store the year's provision of corn; put a strong fence round the courtyard. Build a small cowhouse to keep a small milch-cow and next to it a hut for the tread-mill. One after the other, many lovely pictures of her dream household rose in Durga's mind. Unsatiated desire caused a terrific thirst in her heart. As the rain increased with the hours of the night, so Durga was maddened with the increasing pressure of her thoughts.

The small steel-trunk lay at the head of her bed—inside it was the reward of Durga's life-long penance—the sweet dream of her life-long poverty and sorrow—the sweet water to quench her parching thirst. A cold body of steel—how soothing it was to her burning hand. Again and again she touched the hard steel body with her hand. Still more deeply—all desire—all love—all hopes of happiness became centred in that touch and in this manner Durga bathed in a limitless sea of joy.

At last the day dawned, the downpour of rain continued as before. The children were demanding food, but Durga did not abuse them. She brought the pot

of rasogollahs and gave them not one—but two sweets each, the boys were delighted. Laying out a towel and jug for Harish at one end of the verandah, Durga began cleaning out the ashes of her kitchen fire.

Except for the sound of rain which broke into the peace of this gentle morning, no smoke from any fire of revolt could be seen anywhere in this household.

Harish got up and went to have a wash. Mamata came and stood behind Durga and watched her work for a while, then said, "Kakima, is my trunk in your room? I'll have to change my clothes—"

Going on with her work and head bowed, Durga answered, "Go to my room and take it."

Mamata was dumbfounded on entering the room and seeing the condition of her box. Krishna had opened the lid and got out a couple of sarcees; the small mirror, comb, toothbrush—many things had come out along with them. Spreading the sarcees on the floor the two boys were happily rolling over them.

Mamata ran up, sat down next to the box and put her hand inside. After getting out her clothes and many other things, she could not find the thing she was looking for. Her face pale, she asked Krishna, "Here, where's my money-bag gone? Where have you put it?"

He shook his head and said, "How am I to know?"

Mamata became worried and said, "You didn't open the box?"

"Yes! I opened it—of course!"

Mamata coaxed, "Good boy, give me my bag, I'll give you a rupee!"

"How am I to know where your bag is!"

Mamata sat stupefied in front of her scattered things for a long time. One could realise from the creasing of her brows that she was trying to solve this mystery by the light of her intelligence.

Then, with great difficulty she repressed a deep sigh inside her heart and began rearranging her things inside the box. Mamata's boat had reached its shore.

It was difficult to close a box, the lock of which was broken; after several futile attempts, Mamata went to Durga and begged for a piece of rope. Durga did not face her, but a thick tough piece of saree-border fell near Mamata's feet. She had begun tying up her box with it, when Harish came and stood by the door, jug in hand. He said, "What's this Maya? Why are you tying up your box like that?"

Mamata dragged a smile to her face and said, "I left behind something Kaka, I have to go today."

Harish said, "Write a letter and have it brought. How can you go in this rain and storm?"

Mamata shook her head, "No, Kaka, I've got to go today, otherwise it'll cause me a great deal of loss. What time is the train? Will you please take a little trouble for me and call me a bullock-cart."

Without pressing her further Harish went out.

Having heard Durga's resolution of last night, he could not but feel relieved to get rid of Mamata somehow.

After returning from her bath, Durga saw Harish sitting on the verandah with his head resting on his hand. The boys were playing inside the room, Mamata was not to be seen anywhere. She was neither in the small room nor the big, nor even in the verandah. Mamata had gone away—there could be no doubt about that. Anyway, she had gone. Durga had dallied a long time at the ghat of the pond. This delay was, however, not intentional. After many days she had scrubbed her body with soap, her face also looked pink. (Of course Durga believed that with a little care even now her face could become tinged with the colour of a rose!). Very nice soap—fragrant with the scent of oleander. Raising her hand to her nose several times, Durga smelled the fragrance with great delight. Just as her body felt light after her bath, similarly her mind had become completely disburdened. The lines of a long-forgotten song came to her mind. She hummed it in a nasal tone.

Durga went into the room and changed her saree. A gold-bordered saree soaked in the fragrance of flowers. "Ah! Ah!" The nose was doing the work of her five senses. The restless stream of blood which pounded in Durga's heart, was rising and beating in mad waves for no reason at all, her feet seemed unable to bear the burden of her body.

What would Durga do? She would never speak another harsh word ever again in her life. She would bear the greatest loss as silently as that patient girl, she would conquer humiliation behind the cover of laughter. Today she was complete and fulfilled. In every way she was fulfilled, like that girl.

In riches, beauty, affection, forgiveness and love—how was Durga's glory any less than that girl's? New thatch would be raised on the roof; marking its boundary—a strong fence would go round the courtyard; a milch-cow in her cowhouse; her sons smiling in their new garments. Sitting in the verandah, with the incessant rain pouring down in front, Harish and she would talk of so many things—as they had done when their introduction to each other had begun in the early days of first love. The heavenly stream of past joys would once again leap in waves of unnecessary laughter and flow with ease. Arm in arm—heart upon heart—lip upon—

Harish called out, "Do you hear? Aren't you going to cook today?"

Durga held her broken mirror in her hand and answered from inside the room, "I'll go and put on some Khitchree at once, you go and look for a Hilsa."

Harish was not in a good mood, he said harshly, "You can joke later on, you seem to be most delighted at having driven away the girl, but I'm not."

Durga replied in a gentle voice, "Really—I'm not

joking. Do you think only you feel sorry and I don't feel anything?"

Harish was absolutely astonished, he said, "What's up? Even your voice has changed! Have you become a new person?"

Durga said with a sweet smile, "If you think I'm new—then I am. Here's the money—be a darling—come back quickly."

As the rupee clanged down on the floor, Harish's momentary stupefaction vanished. He sprang up straight as if he had been struck with a whip. It seemed he had found a clue to Mamata's sudden departure. He went to the door of his room and saw that it was as if the Durga of long ago had returned in the garb of a bride. With Mamata's toilet products spread out in front of the mirror, she had decked herself charmingly. She had painted a tiny spot of vermilion between her eyebrows, the burning flame of the saree's gold border encircled and half-veiled the beauty of her dark hair and the room was heavy with fragrance. Taking a blob of 'snow' from the jar beside her, Durga was beautifying her pale face.

Harish had no time to be charmed. His eyes red with rage, with a choking voice he cried, "Durga!"

Durga turned her face hearing his angry voice. She drew a soft expression into her eyes, a smile to her lips and asked in a shy tone, "What?"

Harish mimicked her, "What? Behaving as if she's

a baby-bride! Stop your silliness and tell me the truth!"

Durga said with dancing eyes, "What need have I to tell a lie?"

"You broke open Mamata's box last night?" Durga nodded her head and like a spoiled child, she said without any hesitation, "Yes."

"You've stolen everything of hers?"

"You mean money? Yes, I've taken it."

"You felt no shame, no compunction? You're rubbing her 'snow' on your face and wearing her saree? Damned thief!"

Durga replied gently, "Who's not a thief? Whoever takes—is a thief. Some steal with their minds—some steal with their hands. One only takes for one's own good."

Harish began trembling in uncontrollable rage.

Durga turned away her face and said softly, "Why are you trembling—sit down. Mamata isn't a stupid girl—she understood everything, that's why she went away." Then with a laugh she asked, "Well, don't you think if I use these things, I still look nice?"

Harish could not bear any more, aiming at her forehead, he flung the rupee with great force.

A stream of blood flowed down her cut forehead. Durga cried a single "Ugh!" Then she picked up the towel and began calmly wiping the bleeding spot.

She had no complaint against Harish. She was no longer the unlucky mistress of a leaking worn-out hut.

After crossing many barriers of the past twenty years she had at last become the sweet loving wife who is enthroned on a golden lotus like Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth.

The blood completely wiped away, she took some more 'snow' and began complacently anointing it on her face.

‘SAMBuddHA’



Shikar Kahini

OR

SHIKAR STORIES

KANTI Chowdhury was our neighbour.

We were children then, and he was very old. He was a tall man, fair-complexioned, high-nosed and bald-headed.

Every evening we crowded into Kanti Chowdhury's. In his youth, Kanti Chowdhury had been a famous shikari. He used to tell us the stories of his shikar expeditions. We listened and were charmed. Chowdhury would be cross unless we were charmed.

Kanti Chowdhury is dead now. But his stories are not. They still live in our memories. I will tell you one or two of these stories. I will relate them just as I heard them.

The Tiger's Paw

Kanti Chowdhury said:

"The Sunderbans were in those days a depot of tigers. Tigers swarmed in every bush and shrub. When a steamer passed tigers would roar and spring at it from both banks.

"Tigers of that sort are not to be found now, they've all died out. The few which can still be seen are half-dead with starvation. They lack the mettle of their predecessors.

"Let me tell you what happened once. I speak of the days when steamer lines were just being opened in those areas. The lines could hardly be run because of the ravages of tigers. People went about with their lives in their hands. They were, however, quite used to this.

But the station houses too disappeared because of the tigers. They would come overnight and demolish everything.

"I was then on leave. A telegram came from the sahib— 'Chowdhury come at once.' The messenger of death can be kept waiting but not the call of the sahib. I caught the train at once and went direct to Calcutta.

"I reached the sahib's house. With him was another sahib, his paunch advertised him to be a big bug somewhere. My sahib jumped up to greet me. 'You've relieved me, Chowdhury. I've been waiting for you. You've brought your gun, I hope?'

"I never moved one step without a gun. I said, 'Sure. But why?'

"The sahib said, 'I'll tell you.' He introduced the other sahib. 'This is Mr. Cramp, the Agent of the new steamer line operating in the Sunderbans. He wants your help.'

"I said, 'For what?'

"Mr. Cramp said, 'Tigers are ruining me. Only the day before yesterday, I got news that tigers had completely eaten up an entire station called Mirpur.'

"I said, 'I know Mirpur. What have the tigers eaten?'

"Mr. Cramp replied, 'Everything! The station-master, the red signal-lamp, the booking-counter tickets included, even the chairs and tables!'

"My sahib said, 'That's why I sent for you. These tigers must be killed. And no one but you can do it!'

"Mr. Cramp said, 'My men have gone there too. But I

pin my hopes only on you. If you can do this, Chowdhury—I'll be yours for life!

"So be it. I shouldered my gun and boarded the steamer.

"When I reached Mirpur, I found the situation simply dreadful. People were so terror-stricken that they wouldn't stir out of their houses. All work in the locality had come to a standstill—agriculture, wood-cutting and everything.

"I sent out my name, and the shikaris of the place came to see me. They were headed by a man named Ketu-Lal—people called him Kalketu (a Hero of old Bengali literature; a Hercules). And he could claim the name. A real Hercules he was—well above six feet in height, shoulders broad and powerful—every thread of his body was spun out of steel. He neither knew fear nor the meaning of rest. He would enter the jungle and fight tigers single-handed. He killed tigers with the 'hensho' (a sharp scythe used for cutting into the date-palm tree to extract its juice).

"I had met Kalketu before. I had also gone out shooting with him many times, but I had never seen him frightened. This time, this very Kalketu had also taken fright. He said to me, 'Don't be foolhardy, this isn't a tiger to play about with!'

"Pug marks of the tiger had been found on the soft ground near the station. Kalketu took me with him and showed me the marks. I measured one, it came to

eleven inches in diameter. One can't believe that a tiger's paw can be so large, unless one sees it with one's own eyes. Even after seeing I could hardly believe it. I said, 'Ketu, I don't think this is a real tiger. Some mischief-monger must have made these marks here. A tiger's paw can't be so big. If its paw is so large, what will the size of the tiger be?'

"Ketu said, 'The tiger isn't unreal, many people have seen it. This is, however, no ordinary tiger from the forest, but a demon posing as a tiger. Our 'Ostad' (the man whom one recognises to be one's preceptor or trainer in some craft—hunting, fencing, music etc.) has consulted the stars and prophesied that if I try to molest it, I'll have to lose my head.'

"I said, 'What's this? So at last you too have got frightened? You're getting old, Ketu!'

"Ketu said, 'I haven't got old, sir, I'm still the same Kalketu. But one can't overcome the Gods.'

"This put my blood up. I said, 'I don't want to hear about Gods, I must have that tiger. What's the fun of killing a tiger unless it's big? Have I brought my gun to kill wild cats?'

"Ketu was a man of few words. He said, 'As you think best. But I don't feel happy about it.'

"I said, 'Don't worry—go home and fetch your hatchet and spear. The Ostad has said you'll lose your head; he didn't say you'll lose your life, did he?'

"Ketu said, 'I've got my hatchet and spear with me.

But let me send home a message.' He called a man standing near him and gave him the message. He said, 'Mahesh, tell my wife she is not to put my share of rice in the pot. Supposing I'm killed by the tiger! If I return alive, it can be cooked then.' He turned to me and said, 'She's a girl from East Bengal—this is the sort of thing they appreciate most.'

"I said, 'But we should not delay any longer. Come on, let's start, invoking the name of the goddess Durga!'

"We started. Myself, Ketu, two sahibs of the steamer company and about a hundred beaters.

"We followed the tiger's trail by its pug marks and by trampled and broken bushes. We stalked all over the forest but didn't find the tiger. We had started in the morning, noon came rolling on, still the tiger wouldn't appear. The sahibs said, 'There's no tiger, Chowdhury, it has taken fright at your name and fled. Come, let's return!' But the truth was that the fellows had become hungry.

"I replied, 'Sahib, if you want to return, do so. I won't go back before I have killed the tiger.'

"Ketu too supported me. The sahibs were put out of countenance and didn't speak of returning again.

"We wandered for miles beating up the whole forest and finally found the tiger at about four in the afternoon.

"Ketu was walking in front, spear in hand, the two sahibs and I were walking a few yards behind him. Further back were a group of shikaris. A small shrub

stood in front of us, not very high but covered with leaves and creepers. None of us dreamed that the tiger could lie hidden in that tiny shrub. Not even Ketu. Besides, the wind was blowing from behind us, so we got no smell of the tiger either. Ketu was passing by the shrub, when on a sudden impulse, he gave a poke at it with his spear. Now, that was an insult no decent tiger could swallow. With a roar the tiger sprang up and gripped him with its two fore-paws.

"The first attack stunned Ketu, the spear dropped from his hand. But what wonderful courage! The next moment he controlled himself once more and bellowed out: 'Khabardar!'

"It seemed as if Ketu's roar was more unnerving than the tiger's! Then I saw them both rolling on the ground clinging to each other. Ketu had encircled the tiger with both arms.

"The two sahibs at my back were shaking with fear. I raised my gun. But I could not shoot—there was the risk of Ketu being wounded.

"Ketu shouted to me, 'Huzur, shoot, don't delay The creature's very strong. I can hardly hold him down!'

"I said, 'It may hurt you. Do what I tell you. We will move back a few paces, then you let go of the tiger. It will come out into the open to chase us and I'll shoot!'

"Ketu said, 'There isn't time for all that—you shoot. Don't worry about me, I'm already done for. My head's completely gone!'

"Suddenly the struggle ceased. As they had been rolling in the midst of tall grass we couldn't see anything very clearly. Now, suddenly the tiger's head rose above the grass. Ketu was on the ground, the tiger was sitting on him and staring at us. There was no time for delay.

"I fired aiming at its head. The tiger was hit and sprang with a terrific roar. I fired again while it was still in mid-air. The sahibs also fired. The tiger fell on the ground in the space between Ketu and ourselves. It couldn't get up again but struggled in pain. Then with a few more shots I quietened it.

"I measured the tiger. From nose to tail it measured twenty-one feet. I have never again seen a tiger of this size."

We asked, "And what happened to Ketu?"

Kanti Chowdhury said: "Ketu, I thought, was dead. But I went near him and found he wasn't dead. He had merely fainted.

"But it was practically the same as death. He had told me, 'My head's gone.' And he hadn't exaggerated. In their struggle, the tiger had given him a terrific blow with its paw which had cracked his head in a circle parallel with his ears and the skull had been completely knocked off.

"The sahibs had a flask of brandy with them. I revived Ketu somewhat by giving him a swig from it. Then we picked him up and carrying him, we returned to the station. You may easily guess the plight we were

in. We were miles away from civilization, there was no doctor and no medicine. All we had were a few bottles of tincture of iodine, and the brandy in the sahibs' flask. I kept his heart going by giving him small sips of it at intervals. There was one fortunate sign—his skull had come away from his head, but his brain wasn't damaged. I spread a piece of tender banana-leaf over it and tied it up with a handkerchief.

"The sahibs lit the stove and sat down to make Halua (a kind of semolina pudding) and tea.

"In about an hour Ketu regained consciousness. His was what people call an iron heart! The first thing he said on opening his eyes was, 'Is the tiger dead?'

"I said, 'Yes. But don't get up, stay as you are.'

"Ketu asked, 'What's the state of my head? Is it still there or is it gone?'

"I said, 'The inside is all right. The outside is gone.'

"Ketu said a little absent-mindedly, 'The Ostad had warned me!'

"For a while he lay silent. After a long time he opened his eyes and said, 'Where's Mahesh? Has he delivered my message to my wife?'

"I said, 'Mahesh didn't go.' Ketu said with a start, 'Good God!' and tried to get up. We held him down. It was no easy job even so. Ketu looked at me and said, 'Tie a turban tightly round my head. It's throbbing. Then I'll go home.'

"We told him, 'Don't go home now. You've no roof

to your head—how can you go? The brain will melt in the strong rays of the sun.'

"Ketu said, 'Let it melt. God knows what is happening at home. It's so late in the day and she has cooked the rice. Is this the time to worry about brains?'

"What a fight! We wouldn't let him go and he was bent on going. At last he became furious. He cried, 'No roof to the head, no roof, no roof! I've heard this talk long enough. But what are you doing about it, may I ask? The skull is not skin. It won't grow again of itself!'

"This was dangerous. If he flew into a rage and blood rushed to his head, it would be impossible to save him. I said 'Wait. I'll see to it!'

"I've always found one interesting fact about my brain—whenever I am in a fix, it develops a queer sharpness and pulls me out of it.

"I came out on the verandah wondering what I should do. As I came out my eyes fell on several coconut trees nearby. Ureka! I told a beater, 'Climb that tree and pluck a bunch of green coconuts. See that they are big but tender.'

"The coconuts were plucked. I halved one, scraped the shell clean and fixed it on Ketu's head. It fitted as if made to order. The sahibs had sujeer (semolina) with them, I soaked some to a paste and with it I stuck on Ketu's new skull—his head became absolutely whole again. These are wild people, you know, the tiniest

drop of medicine works wonders with them. Ketu sat up, then stood up. After that he said, 'I'll go home now.'

"I sent two men to escort him home. I told him, 'You mustn't fly into rages for some time now. Even if the wife becomes exasperating, swallow it and remain quiet. Don't go out in the sun. Anoint your head well everyday with mustard oil. The shell will be seasoned with oil and turn hard.'

"And that's exactly what happened. I met Ketu again after a couple of years. I saw him going about quite happily with his shiny bald head covered with a towel. When I asked how he was, he laughed and said, 'I'm very well, thank you. I'm not bitten with lice, I can do with less hair-oil too.' Oh! What a vast baldness was his, if you had only seen it! My bald head is nothing to compare with it. It was just like the dome of the Taj Mahal, only black in colour."

We said, "But the poor fellow going about baldheaded—shouldn't he have tried a good hair-oil like Kesharanjan?"

Kanti Chowdhury said, "I did suggest it and he used it for a few days too. But the result was a thick crop of coconut fibre. So at last Ketu said, 'I'd rather be bald' and gave up using it."

The Bear's Embrace.

On another day Kanti Chowdhury related the following story:

"Tigers in the Sunderbans, elephants in Assam and if you want to see real bears go to the Terai of Nepal. I've seen bears at Madhupur, killed bears in Assam, hunted bears in the C. P., but I've never seen bears of the size I saw in the Nepal Terai. They're as big as they're ferocious. Once I fell in with one and miraculously escaped death. A strange idea flashed into my brain just at the right moment and saved me; or I wouldn't have been sitting here telling you stories. I'll tell you the story—listen.

"My second uncle practised as a doctor in Nepal. In those days Bengalis were held in high esteem in Nepal; whoever went there—whether on service or as a trader—would return home red with riches. My uncle also became quite red.

"But at the time I'm talking of, he hadn't yet become quite red—he was just turning pink. He practised at a place called Judhapur—about thirty miles away from Katmundu.

"I was then about thirty or thirty-one. I had entered service a few years previously. I would attend office, and whenever I got a chance and leave, I would run away somewhere outside Calcutta. On one such occasion uncle wrote inviting me, and I went up to Nepal.

"I found the place really charming. It was summer, but the place was up in the mountains and was quite chilly. Judhapur wasn't quite a town, yet it couldn't really be called a village—it was something in between

both. Surrounded by mountains and forests, the scenery there was really worth viewing. Uncle hadn't taken up his family there then. He lived almost outside the town, in a small bungalow by a hillock, his sole companion a Nepalese servant. The servant managed the house and did the cooking. Uncle was always out, busy looking after his patients and looking at the scenery when he was free.

"I too began roaming about, soon after I arrived there. I would get up very early in the morning and go out.

"Sometimes I went alone, sometimes I found a companion. I'd take any road at random, walk down it for a few miles, and then return the same way. Back home, I would have my bath, and by that time it would be ten o'clock. On these hilly roads one can't walk fast.

"I have heard that tigers are found high up in Nepal. But I never saw any there. Perhaps they lived higher up, in deeper forests. Here, there were bears. Often hillmen would kill and bring down huge ones. Uncle had warned me the very first day that I mustn't enter the forest alone. So, whenever I went for a walk in the forest, I'd take someone with me. There was another reason—the fear of losing my way. Inside the forest, places look strangely similar, so there are always plenty of chances of losing one's way.

"A few days after I reached there, a hillman came peddling goods; from him, I bought a nice handy dagger.

"It is good to have a weapon in one's hand while roaming the forests and jungles, if for nothing else, at least for the confidence it inspires. I would stick the dagger in my belt whenever I went out. I never dreamed it would ever be called to real service. Going on a morning walk with a dagger in one's belt smells a bit of stage-heroism, and uncle did not spare me his taunts. But one day this dagger came to be of use in such a way that had I not had it with me, that would have been the last day of my life.

"That morning I had a walk of about four miles. It had rained the night before and was quite chilly. It was ten o'clock, but the sky was still cloudy, the air damp—one naturally felt reluctant to take off any clothes. I was wearing puttees over a pair of boots, a shirt and a pair of trousers, the dagger was stuck in my belt. I decided to cling to my clothes till the bath, and sat down to shave without taking off anything. The belt with the dagger also remained, but that was through sheer oversight.

"But I could not shave in peace. I lathered my face, picked up my razor and found that the blade had disappeared. I at once knew it was Thapa's doing. Thapa was the name of uncle's servant. He had a terrible greed for razor blades, he stole one whenever he could. Uncle had warned me about this, too. But that he should take away the blade from the razor case and make me hunt about the whole house with a lathered face and looking

like a clown—this was unbearable. I shouted angrily, 'Thapa!' But there was no Thapa—no response came from him. And yet only two minutes ago he had brought me the hot water for shaving. I got up and peeped into the kitchen, he wasn't there. So, fuming inside, I opened my box and got out a new blade. I'd fitted the blade on the razor, lathered my face again and just picked up the razor, when a piercing scream came from the back of the house—'Oh, oh, oh—save my life!'

"It was a terrible scream, I sprang up, and ran to the verandah at the back of the house, the razor still in my hand.

"At first I could see nothing. Who had screamed? I shouted, 'Who is it?' No reply came. I paused a few moments. Then, I thought—'It's nothing—must be a prank played by some mischievous person!' As I was about to turn back to my room, the same scream came to my ears again. It was much more feeble this time, as if the person who had screamed was losing strength.

"This time I could make out the direction. There was a grove about twenty-five yards away from the house, it contained a variety of large and small trees. The scream came from there. But who was screaming there like that? Was a hill dacoit murdering someone? I leaped off the verandah and ran just as I was. The scene which confronted me on entering the garden stunned me. A big chestnut tree stood a little way off, and beneath it, a fight was going on between Thapa and

an immensely huge bear. One couldn't really call it a fight either, because it was completely one-sided. Thapa was practically unconscious, and the bear was clutching him in both its arms and crushing him against its breast. That's how bears kill men—the man gets suffocated and has all his ribs broken to pieces and dies. Thapa had clearly come to the end of his tether. He had no more strength to fight. He probably wasn't even conscious. He hung limply in the arms of the bear.

"The sight stupefied me. True it wasn't a proper town. But it wasn't also a forest. I had never heard of a bear coming near a house and attacking a man in broad daylight. And what a bear it was! An enormous body, brownish hair—I recognised it to be a grizzly. They're the biggest and most ferocious amongst bears.

"Thoughts were rushing at the speed of lightning through my head. First I thought I'd run and fetch a gun. Then I thought that by the time I brought it, Thapa would be finished off. And uncle's gun was so light, bullets from it could do nothing to this bear. My uncle was no shikari; just because one had to have a gun he kept one—a very light one. I hadn't brought my gun. I couldn't make out what to do. But I didn't have to think for long. At sight of me the bear had paused. Now, before I could decide on a course of action, it dropped Thapa and with a loud grunt rushed at me. It was impossible to meet it in a hand-to-hand fight. I quickly turned and ran, but before I'd gone two paces,

the bear was on my shoulders. I had no alternative left. I told myself, 'Let whatever happens happen, I'll die fighting.' I unsheathed my dagger and wheeled round and the bear at once encircled me in its huge arms.

"You see me, I'm a good bit taller than the average man. Still, standing on its hind legs the bear towered over my head.

"One overpowering squeeze from its two huge arms made me realise that this time there was no escape for me. Man's ribs were not made to stand that embrace. In that solid darkness of despair there was only one tiny ray of hope I had raised my right hand high when I pulled out my dagger; the bear had encircled my breast and left arm, but my right hand and arm remained free. I said to myself, 'My life's gone, but why should I spare the bear the blows I can give? He will squeeze out my breath, and I will strike and wound him with the dagger; whoever can finish the job first wins the victory; he will be the one to live.'

"I knew there was no hope. Still it was no use feeling any tenderness for one's life or getting frightened. In desperation I gave a pull with all my strength. For a second the bear's grip slackened. In that one second I doubled up my left arm and put it across my chest. I gained some advantage by this. My left arm now created a barrier between the bear's chest and mine and the pressure of the bear's embrace no longer fell directly on my chest. I pushed with my hand and slackened its

grasp slightly. But one can't hope to keep it up for long. The pressure of the embrace slackened for a brief moment. Then came back with renewed force I held off the pressure with all the strength I had in my left arm, raised my right hand and gave a stab at the bear with my dagger. Once, twice, thrice! Good God! The dagger couldn't pierce its body! The whole body was covered with hair one foot long, the dagger got caught in it and didn't reach the skin at all. The bear was now pressing me very hard; I pushed at it with my left arm with all my might, yet I felt the pressure on my chest. I realised I couldn't do anything to it with my dagger, and my nerve suddenly collapsed. My heart thudded, perspiration streamed down my face, my whole body was bathed in sweat. The fight was straining the bear also. Its noisome breath fanned my face, I could hear its heart thudding. My right ribs and its heart lay against each other, and it seemed I could feel the movements of its heart against my ribs.

"Heavens! How horrible its breath was! I felt suffocated and my head reeled as it poured on my nose and mouth. My right hand fell down limp by my side—the dagger still held in it. As it fell the hilt of the dagger struck and resounded against something hard in my right trouser pocket. Strange indeed is the mind of man! Death was there before my eyes, yet there was no confusion in my mind—I could think calmly and coolly. I heard the sound, and it started a stream of

thought in me. What was it? What had I put in my pocket? I don't keep keys in my pocket. My purse I usually keep in my left pocket, and today, I didn't even have it with me. This very morning I'd brushed my trousers, there was nothing in the pockets. Then what was it? And whatever it might be, how did it get there?

"More than once I tried to brush aside the thought, and said to myself, 'Hang it all, whatever it may be, how can it matter to me now!' Still the thought persisted; it came and stirred up my mind again and again. I fought with my mind for a while, then curiosity won. I felt it with the fingers of my right hand.

"My fingers touched a small hard thing, shaped like the letter 'T,' a narrow round handle, a flat head.

"Safety-razor! I suddenly remembered that I'd come out of my room with my razor in hand. Then I had forgotten it and in my flurry I had put it into the pocket.

"But a razor! The idea flashed into my head like lightning. Not a moment's delay, there was no time to lose. I shoved the dagger from my right hand into my left fist, put my right hand into my pocket and took out the razor. Then I pulled one stroke of the razor just where, next to my ribs, the bear's heart was throbbing. It was a Gillette blade—the bear's chest was shaved to the skin in a trice.

"My hand trembled with excitement. I felt, I might still be saved. 'God! give me strength to hold on a little while longer, only another two minutes,' I prayed. One

stroke, two, three—a strip nearly three inches wide had been shaved off over the bear's heart. I could clearly see its heart-beats throbbing through its skin. I dropped the razor and took the dagger back from my left to my right hand. Victory to Mother Kali! I gathered all the strength of my body into my hand and plunged the dagger through the shaved spot—straight into the bear's heart.

“The bear let out a roar that pierced the sky. The hot blood from its heart burst like a fountain and sprayed over my face. Then its grip loosened and it rolled to the ground. In my excitement I, too, turned back and ran a few paces, then fell down unconscious.

“When I regained consciousness, I found I was lying in my room. Uncle was applying ice to my head. He said, ‘Lucky boy! You had a very narrow escape.’

“None of my bones had been broken. In a few days I recovered completely. Thapa, however, couldn't be saved. Three of his ribs were broken and had pierced his lungs. He died of gangrene in hospital at Katmandu.

“Uncle said later that bears don't live there. It must have come down from the mountains and probably day had dawned before it was aware and it had been unable to go back. Who knows why Thapa had gone there at such an untimely hour!

“I still have the razor with me. It had saved my life in the face of such danger, could I ever discard it? I have had a silver case made for it and have put it away carefully in my box. It is my lucky razor!”

SARADINDU BANERJEE



PRAGJYOTISH
OR
BEFORE ASTROLOGY

IN the life of every race—Aryans, Dravidians, Huns, Mongolians—there comes a time which can be called the dawn of youth. At such a period in its life, the hardness of youth impels every race to make what may have seemed utterly impossible and even laughable vows, but strangely enough they somehow always managed to keep those vows—whatever the cost.

This stage of youthfulness came to the life of the people, whom we know as the Aryans, perhaps even before the battle of Kurukshetra. Almanacs had not come into existence then. The stars and planets, the sun and the moon could move along their orbits in a care-free manner. Man had not yet begun to keep a watch on their movements or their doings.

After coming to India, the Aryan heroes did not rest content with just driving away the ancient non-Aryan inhabitants beyond the Vindhya Mountains. Over and above, they saddled them with the nomenclature of demons, ghosts and robbers! It would seem that even in that age, calling an enemy by bad names was already in vogue!

Some time after the Aryan conquest of the North, the sage Agasthya with a few of his disciples made his final exit—into the South—never to return. It is, however, not mentioned in the Puranas whether or not the non-Aryan ghosts and demons ate the sage and his party like cannibals. But in spite of this, other Aryan heroes began to peep 'into' the region south of the

Vindhya Mountains and two young Aryan warriors named Pradumna and Maghava with their armies went forward far into the South. After looking around, they selected a portion of fertile land for themselves. Then driving out the black-bodied bandits who were its inhabitants, they established Swaraj or their own kingdom there.

There was great friendship between these two young warriors. Nowadays the bond of friendship does not have much strength. A friend is only needed for cracking jokes and gossiping. In those days, when people were surrounded by robbers and demons, friendship really got the chance of flowering completely!

Their kingdom was established by the strength of arms of both the friends and the question arose as to who should be the King.

Pradumna said, "Maghava, you be the king and I'll be your general."

Maghava replied, "Oh, no, you be the king and I'll be the general of your army."

The problem could not be solved. Neither of them was anxious to be king at the cost of depriving his friend. On the other hand, the newly-gained kingdom was so small, that if it was divided there would be nothing left for either of them to rule over. Even if their subjects were divided, a loss of strength was inevitable; and on every side, enemies were waiting for an opportunity. The two friends became very worried.

One night when it was full moon, the two friends were standing with a worried frown on their brows on the top of a high, stone-built fort which had been built by the driven out non-Aryan bandits. The Aryans did not know how to build forts at that time.

Maghava was pacing the roof terrace, running his fingers again and again through his light brown beard. A big, burly figure of a man with blue eyes, his body was firm and solid as a mallet. He was not used to thinking, that is why, whenever worrying thoughts came into his mind, he always pulled at his beard.

The build of Pradumna's body was comparatively lighter, but it was still more solid and firm. The hair on his head was golden and the colour of his eyes a deep blue. He had no beard, because it tickled his throat, he shaved it off regularly with the tip of his sword. He only possessed a pair of moustaches. Stroking his moustache with his fingers he leaned on the balustrade of the fort and frowned at the moon, but the moon was smiling. There being no almanac, the moon had no premonition of the fact that a terrible calamity was in store for her. Suddenly Maghava said, "A plan has come to my head. Pradumna come, let's see whose wrist is stronger. Whoever can twist the other's hand shall be the king."

Pradumna smiled sarcastically behind his moustache and said, "Your intention is to cheat! You know that I sprained my wrist in the last battle."

Finding his plan defeated, Maghava again began pulling his beard. In the end he said, "What's the harm if we both become kings?"

Pradumna replied, "If we are both kings, who will obey whom? And who's going to pass the orders to the subjects?"

"That's true."

"But then, we can both be kings, one after the other."

"How can that be?"

"You become king for a time and I the general. After that I become the king. It'll go on like this."

Maghava thought over it and said, "It's not a bad idea, one day you be the king and the next day—I."

"Oh, no, if we change kings so quickly there'll be a terrible muddle."

"What would the muddle be about?"

"Just think, I become king and order you: 'General I have heard that a variety of lovely fruit named Rasala (Mango) is to be had in the kingdom of the demons called Lombodar in the South. Go quickly and get some for me. I desire to eat it.' By the time you come back with the fruit you have become king and I the general. Who'll eat the fruit then?"

Maghava said, "Yes, that is true. This is going to be a terrible botheration, I can see that."

It must be remembered that the Aryans had not then settled down and begun to make research in knowledge and science. One or two sages suddenly becoming seers

through divine intervention would pronounce one or two maxims in a flash of inspiration. Even though they had a general idea about the change of seasons—winter, summer and rains—the Aryans did not yet have knowledge enough to divide time into weeks, months, and years. That was why Pradumna and Maghava had got into a terrible difficulty.

On the other hand, the moon in the sky had got into a difficulty also. When Pradumna raised his eyes to frown at the moon he exclaimed in surprise: "Oh! Oh! What's this?"

Maghava also raised his eyes. He saw that the sky was cloudless, but a grey shadow had fallen on the white face of the moon and this terrible shadow was gradually trying to swallow her up. Both the friends felt excitement mixed with fear in their minds. Even though they had seen this sort of thing a few times before, it had not yet been accepted as a natural phenomenon, and was considered as terrible a disaster as an earthquake. Maghava quickly came and caught hold of Pradumna's hand and whispered in a hoarse voice, "An eclipse of the moon!"

His face pale, Pradumna tried to give courage to his friend by saying, "Yes, but there's nothing to be afraid of. The moon will be released again. When I was a child I went several times to study with the old sage—Angira. The old man told me one day that there is an invisible demon in the sky named Rahu. He sometimes grabs

at the moon and the sun, and swallows them up, but he can't keep them in for very long."

"Yes, I too have seen it four or five times."

"I too. Occasionally such things do happen."

The two friends held each other's hands and looked on. It seemed as if the sad, troubled moon was passing backwards through the stomach of a copper-coloured, half-transparent snake. Below the fort a crowd of frightened people had gathered. They shouted and sounded many kinds of musical instruments. The wicked demon was supposed to run away in flight on hearing this kind of terrific noise.

After a long time a bright corner of the moon came out. Then within a short time the moon came out from the hands of the demon completely unhurt and with a smiling face.

From everyone came loud cries of joy. Maghava let go Pradumna's hand, heaved a deep sigh and said, "What a relief!"

Pradumna replied, "It's not only that, our problem too has been solved."

"How?"

"Listen, from today you've become the king. When there is an eclipse of the moon again, the period of your kingship will be over and I'll be the king. It'll go on like this."

Maghava thought it over and said, "It's not a bad idea, but why should I be the king first?"

"Because I thought out the plan. Now I'm going. To-morrow I'll go out to fight with my army. What other work can there be for a general? In the meantime, let the king rule his subjects like a father. Victory for my King!" With a smile Pradumna attempted to go down from the top of the fort.

Maghava became very depressed and began pulling at his beard. It was not often that an idea came to Maghava's head, but now, suddenly a kingly idea rose in its hollow. He called out in solemn tones: "General Pradumna!"

Pradumna returned and stood waiting with folded hands: "Order me, my King!"

King Maghava thundered out, "To-morrow morning I shall go with my army on an expedition of conquest, and I order that until I come back you will look after my subjects with paternal solicitude. It is late and now I am going to lie down on my royal bed." Maghava was not used to smiling. He winked at Pradumna and laughing loudly, departed. Being fooled, Pradumna began scratching the back of his left ear.

It is the law of youth not to look at life through lenses of gravity; to the eyes of youth the world is a play-field; a battle—a matter of joke and fun; and love—an intoxicating excitement!

Accompanied by half the army King Maghava went away to fight in great glee. A race of non-Aryans named

Kodandas lived on the southern border of his kingdom. The intention was to subjugate them.

Maghava returned from battle after about that space of time which according to modern calculations we call—three months. His light brown hair was rough and dry, his clothes made of skins were torn to tatters, but on his face was a smile of repleted desire.

As soon as he arrived he gave a thunderous slap on Pradumna's back and said, "Hello! How are you?"

The two friends caught each other in a deep embrace. Pradumna said, "I find you've become thin. Didn't you get anything to eat in the country of the demons?" Then he recollected himself and said, "Victory for my King! Is all the news of my King good?"

"Not bad. I've given the wretched Kodandas a good hammering! But not noly that, I've brought back something amusing too. Come, I'll show you."

Many kinds of strange things taken from the defeated race were being guarded by a company of soldiers. Maghava signed to them and went towards the palace. While going along he asked Pradumna, "How's the kingdom going on? Are all the subjects happy?"

"Their joy has recently increased a great deal."

"How?"

"The emotion called love has suddenly awakened in the hearts of the Aryan warriors. They are all getting hold of non-Aryan girls and marrying them!"

Maghava burst out laughing and said, "Is that so? It seems the disease is infectious."

Pradumna gave a questioning glance at Maghava.

Maghava said, "But where's the help for it? Since we have to live in this country, it's impossible to keep Aryan blood pure. It isn't possible to import so many girls from the land of the Aryans. On the other hand, one can't but carry on the family line. This kingdom which we have conquered, whom is it for?"

Pradumna only replied, "Hah!"

The king and the general went and sat in the council chamber. There were no courtiers, counsellors, ministers or traders, so the council chamber was empty. Four soldiers brought in a huge cane basket and placed it in front of them. The basket was closed. It seemed that there was something very heavy inside it. Pradumna asked in surprise, "What's inside it? A huge serpent?"

Maghava signed with his hands ordering the soldiers to depart, then he laughed and took the lid off the basket. Just as a black snake rises with its hood expanded the moment the snake-charmer opens his basket—a woman rose from it. Her dark blue eyes flashed lightning. Pradumna became stupefied. Open-mouthed, he ejaculated, "What's this? A girl!"

Maghava laughed out loud. Then he said, "How's the girl? Isn't she beautiful?"

Pradumna examined the girl in silence. Her complexion was like polished copper. Her eyes—khol-

smudged, her hair—crumpled. There was no superfluity of either clothes or ornaments on her—around her neck a garland of seeds and round her arms a bangle of conch-shell. The flowers on her ears and her coiled hair had dried up. A multi-coloured strip of cloth wound round her waist hung down to her knees. A glow of fire seemed to gleam from inside her slim, youthful body. Maghava asked again, "What do you think? Isn't she beautiful?"

Pradumna started and turned round to Maghava, then he scolded him and said, "You really are a complete barbarian! You go to fight, then catch a girl and bring her back! Now what'll you do with her?"

One look at her and one could have no doubt that she could not be used as a maid-servant.

Maghava replied, "I've decided to marry her."

Startled, Pradumna asked, "Marry?"

"Yes. Do you know who she is? She's the daughter of the Kodanda King."

Pradumna's face suddenly became grave. Maghava went on saying, "When I occupied the palace of the Kodandas I found that everyone had fled excepting this girl who was standing alone by herself. I asked her many things, but she understood nothing. That's why I shut her up in the basket and brought her. She is really worthy to be the queen of an Aryan King; but first of all, she must be taught the Aryan language. Then I shall make her my queen."

Pradumna once again turned round and looked at the young woman. She had not understood anything of their conversation. Only her eyes travelled from one face to another. There was no sign of fear or anxiety on her face—only pride and a contemptuous questioning about the doings of the barbarians.

With a slight frown Pradumna turned to Maghava, "You've done wrong Maghava. Whatever it may be, she's the daughter of a king; it's not worthy of Aryan manners to bring her away like that."

Maghava replied, "It does not go against Aryan manners to kidnap a girl with the intention of marrying her."

"Yes it does. To take away an undefended girl is the act of a thief. You ought to send the girl back this very moment."

Maghava said heatedly, "Never!" Then he controlled himself and said in gentler tones, "I am King Maghava, I order you General Pradumna to make proper arrangements for this girl to stay, so that she can live happily yet be unable to escape. You must remember that if the girl does escape, the responsibility is yours."

Pradumna gazed at his friend's face for a few moments, then with folded hands and bowed head he said drily, "As the King desires"

The future queen's abode was fixed in a room on top of the fort. The daughter of the Kodandas walked to her lofty prison-chamber with firm unshaken steps and

lips tightly closed. Even though it was a prison-chamber, it was spacious and a wide verandah adjoined it. There was every convenience excepting that of escape.

In great delight Maghava slapped Pradumna on the back and said, "I've found a queen worthy to be a queen—what do you say?"

Pradumna replied, "Yes."

Next morning, however, brought bad news. A half-dead messenger just returned from the land of Kodandas came and gave information that after hearing of the kidnapping of their princess, the runaway Kodandas had returned in legions, wild with rage. The few Aryan soldiers whom Maghava had left on guard had been annihilated on a sudden attack from the maddened enemy—every one of them excepting this messenger, whose fleet foot had saved his life! The situation was very grave indeed.

Hearing this Pradumna became suddenly restless and cried, "Give me permission my King, I'll teach the wretches a lesson."

But Maghava did not agree to this. He said, "That can't be, if a lesson is to be taught, I'll teach it."

Maghava got his army ready and started. After he had gone a little distance, he returned and told Pradumna, "In the meantime you teach the Aryan language to the girl."

Pradumna hid his disappointment and said, "Very well."

In a few days Pradumna realised that the non-Aryan girl was extremely intelligent. Within a week she began speaking the Aryan language brokenly. Her name was Ela. It was a non-Aryan name of course, but it was sweet both to hear and to say. Pradumna repeated it several times, "Ela! Ela! Good, it's very nice."

The first question Ela asked after learning to speak the language was, "Who's that man who caught and brought me here?"

Pradumna replied, "My friend."

It took a little time for Ela to understand the meaning of the word 'friend'. At last when she understood it she crinkled her nose and said in a voice full of great disdain, "You are barbarians."

Pradumna was amazed. He wondered—how strange! We Aryans—can we be barbarians?

Gradually Ela began conversing in the Aryan language. She had no difficulty in understanding or speaking any word. One day she asked, "Why have you kept me here?"

Pradumna swallowed and replied, "To teach you the Aryan language."

Ela said, "A rotten language—what's the good of learning it?"

Pradumna said jokingly, "It'll be easier to make love, King Maghava has decided to marry you."

Ela was sitting. Slowly she got up, for a while she gazed at Pradumna unwinkingly. Then she sat down

again and said in a completely reassured manner, "I won't marry him. Barbarian!"

Pradumna tried to comfort her, "It's true Maghava has a beard, but he is not a bad sort."

Ela only said, "Barbarian!"

Days continued to pass like this. But there was no sign of Maghava—no news whether he had taught the Kodandas a lesson or the Kodandas had taught him a lesson. Pradumna became very anxious. Slowly three months passed away. One morning when Pradumna entered Ela's prison-chamber, he saw that she was standing by the window and unbinding her plaited hair. Seeing Pradumna she turned round, then continued to gaze at the distant view through the window and unwind her snake-like plait.

Pradumna cleared his throat but with no result. Then, he too went and stood in front of the window. He looked at the sky, he peeped down below, then once again cleared his throat and said, "The winter has gone; it's getting quite warm now."

Ela said, "Yes."

Feeling encouraged Pradumna continued, "The breeze which comes from the south now, is this the breeze which you call Malaya? In the land of the Aryans there is no such breeze."

Ela raised a pair of sombre eyes to his face and questioned, "Why haven't you been here for two days?"

Pradumna became a little nonplussed and said, "I was

busy." Then after a pause, "Besides, you no longer need to learn the Aryan language. You can manage to burst our ear-drums with what you've already learnt."

For a little while neither spoke. Ela began fiddling with her plait, her eyes lowered. In the end Pradumna tried to drag on the conversation and said, "It would be a great relief to have Maghava return. It's a long time now and there's still no news of him. I'm feeling worried."

Ela did not show the slightest sympathy and said with a cruel laugh, "Your Maghava will never return again. My people have finished him off."

Gazing angrily at her Pradumna retorted, "There's no one in the South who can finish off Maghava. He's a great hero!"

Ela replied contemptuously, "Barbarian!"

Still more angry, Pradumna cried, "You'll have to marry that barbarian!"

Ela remarked raising her eyebrows, "Really? Against my desire?"

"You're a prisoner. What does your desire matter?"

Pronouncing each word distinctly Ela answered, "No man has been born in your Aryan land who can marry me against my desire. Do you see this garland of seeds?" Ela picked up the garland round her neck, and showed it, then continued, "Only the time it takes to chew one seed with my teeth—then he'll not get me!"

Pradumna said in a frightened voice, "How terrible

—poison! Give it to me, give me the garland at once.”

Ela moved away to a distance and said, “Do you think because I remained your prisoner so long, that I am helpless? That I am, a doll for you to play with? I can take my freedom whenever I choose.”

Pradumna gazed at her stupidly and said, “Then why haven’t you taken it?”

Ela kept silent for a few moments then she said proudly, “That’s because I so desire.”

Just then deep blasts of conch-shells came from the distant valley. With a start Pradumna looked out. From the row of trees on the far horizon the Aryan army was returning with flags flying. Pradumna placed his hands over his forehead and gazed towards them. Then with a deep sigh he said, “Good, it’s a great relief—Maghava has returned.”

Pradumna quickly turned to go. From behind him came Ela’s gentle voice, “I too am relieved. It won’t be long now before I’m free.”

In a moment Pradumna spun round, Ela was standing plaiting her hair just as she had been doing before. There was a smile on her face which reminded one of a pinned dead butterfly.

Pradumna went over to her and beseeched, “Ela, don’t be childish. It takes time to understand Maghava. After you marry him you’ll realise that there’s no one like him. I beg of you—don’t do anything on a sudden impulse.”

Ela replied, "It's not my habit to do anything suddenly. I am a daughter of the Kodandas—not a barbarian. If Maghava tries to force me into marriage I'll take my freedom in front of the wedding gathering."

Maghava said, "I couldn't subdue the Kodandas properly. When they get enraged they fight terrifically. Anyway, in the end I made a treaty with them."

Pradumna asked, "What are the conditions of the treaty?"

Maghava burst out laughing, "Wonderful! These Kodandas are a strange people and their customs are amazing. Do you know that amongst their race, the daughter is the heir to the father and the nephew inherits the property of his maternal uncle? Have you ever heard of such a thing before?"

Pradumna shook his head and said, "No. But what are the terms of the treaty?"

"The condition is this. Their honour has been badly wounded because of the abduction of their princess; the only way to remove this dishonour is to marry the girl. If I don't marry her, they'll fight, and listen to nothing; but if I do marry, then by right of inheritance I'll become the King of the Kodandas. Isn't it a formidable condition!" With this Maghava began laughing loudly.

Pradumna remained with his face lowered for a while and then with a smile he said slowly, "It is formidable indeed!"

Maghava said, "So you mustn't delay. It's necessary to marry the daughter of the Kodandas quickly. Is the girl all right?"

"She is all right."

"Has she learnt the Aryan language?"

"Very well."

"Then I'll marry her to-morrow."

After remaining silent for a few moments Pradumna said, "Is there no necessity to find out the girl's wishes?"

"Not at all. This is an affair of the State. I can't move an inch this way or that. The condition of the treaty must be obeyed."

That night Pradumna entered Ela's room like a thief. Through the window, the clear full moon was pouring forth a stream of light; Ela was sleeping on the floor in the moonlight. There was no lamp in the room.

Pradumna drew near her quietly. He knelt down beside her; he held his breath and brought his face close down to her. Ela was sleeping but tear-drops were dripping down from her eyes. In her dream she was saying in a voice choked with emotion, "Pradumna! Pradumna! Pradumna! I don't want to die; what kind of a person are you? Don't you understand? Barbarian!

Save me Pradumna, Pradumna "

The garland of seeds remained round Ela's neck. Pradumna could not do what he came for. He went back like a thief without making a sound.

The next day with the setting of the sun, a full moon rose in the eastern sky. Maghava had been waiting for the night, he said, "Pradumna, now make the arrangements for the marriage."

In the courtyard in front of the Palace the sacred fire was lit; the marriage would be performed with the sacred fire as witness. The wedding seats for the bride and groom were placed in front of it.

The news of the marriage had already spread and a crowd of onlookers had gathered in the courtyard. Pradumna stood with his arms crossed over his heart gazing fixedly towards the fire; a deep sigh escaped from his breast. Maghava came and placed his hands on Pradumna's shoulder and he came out of his trance. He raised his eyes from the fire and looked up.

Straight ahead of them the moon was just rising from behind the trees. Pradumna gazed towards it. Maghava said, "It's late and time for the marriage to take place. Go and bring the bride."

Pradumna slowly turned towards Maghava; and in solemn tones he called out, "General Maghava."

Maghava became bewildered. He had become so much used to being a king that at first he could not understand. Then following Pradumna's gaze his eyes fell on the moon. The sky was cloudless but a grey shadow had fallen on the white face of the moon. The terrible shadow was gradually drawing across it and swallowing the moon.

Pradumna said, "Maghava, I'm going to fetch the bride; I'll marry her in order to obey the conditions of the treaty. In the meantime explain the matter to our subjects."

For a few moments Maghava stood as though turned into stone. Then the sky was filled with his loud laughter. Suddenly he controlled himself and said with folded hands, "As you order, my King!".

Ela was sitting near the window, as soon as Pradumna entered she got up. "Have you come to fetch me?"

"Yes, Princess, we have made a treaty with the Kodandas; the condition of it is this; that the Aryan King must marry the daughter of the Kodandas. We are honour-bound to obey it."

"Have you anything more to say?"

"Very little. Because of circumstances, I am now the King of the Aryans and Maghava is my General. If the marriage has to take place, it has got to be with me."

Ela sat with her eyes wide open for a long while, then in a faint voice she said, "What did you say?"

Pradumna replied in tones of kingly solemnity, "You will have to marry me. Now decide quickly whether you will marry me or eat one of those seeds."

The sorrow which had been expressed through a dream now came down in a flood and began overflowing through her khol-smudged eyes. Pradumna sat on the edge of the window and said, "There's still some-time for the eclipse to be over, I give you time till then to think it over."

Like a flash of lightning in the midst of rain, Ela laughed and mocking him, cried out, "Barbarian!"

SAROJ KUMAR ROYCHOWDHURY



OPITT
OR
THE OTHER SIDE

THAT day, such a storm of rain had descended throughout the afternoon that Amal and Bilash sat disconsolate having abandoned all hope of enjoying their daily bout of gossip.

Suddenly, at about eight o'clock, splashing through the rain, an umbrella over his head, came Asoke. Putting the umbrella in one corner of the room and stamping his wet feet, Asoke said, "Good God!" Amal and Bilash jumped up in joy crying, "Hurrah!"

Asoke had unlimited fondness for this den of daily gossip, but not unnaturally suffering from a sense of irritation occasioned by his long tramp through the rain, he merely barked at them, "Enough! Enough! Shut up. Don't shout!"

But the next moment he was ashamed of his temper and said with a slight smile, "You're sitting comfortably inside the room and shouting hurrah. But you can't realise what a downpour has descended on my head!" Saying this he got out a handkerchief and began wiping his head with it.

Amal said, "You're wet, but no matter. Bilashda—"

Bilash gestured reassurance with his hands, "He'll get it, he'll get it, let him rest a bit."

Asoke said quickly, "No, no, not today."

Amal was going to say something in protest, but Asoke stopped him by saying, "No, no, my wife's been very ill for the last few days. I've to keep awake practically the whole night."

Bilash said, "You've to stay up at night? Then it's all the more necessary. Amal—"

"Yes, sir." Amal brought out a bottle and a glass. Then quickly he opened a soda and within the twinkling of an eye, he mixed a drink and held it before Asoke and said, "Please, sir."

Asoke nodded his head slightly and said, "Thanks." Then he gulped it down in one breath and said, "It's lovely! What's it, White Label?"

Mixing another drink Amal said, "Pooh! Can't you recognise a good thing when you drink it! I can tell if I only smell it."

For half-an-hour they sat gossiping and drinking. Then suddenly humming a melody, Asoke rapped smartly on the table and said, "'Pon my mother! I feel like hearing a song!"

Bilash nodded his head in a lordly manner and said, "Don't worry! Call a taxi—I'll pay the fare." And he brought out a roll of notes and placed it on the table.

Amal shoved the notes back into Bilash's pocket and said, "You'll pay the fare? While Asoke is here?"

Asoke banged his fist twice on the table and said, "I said call a taxi!"

"Straight to Kundarani's house."

Kundarani was ready waiting, all dressed up. Amal gazing at her, pleased with her looks and get-up, cried joyfully, "Beautiful!"

Kunda smilingly invited everybody to sit down.

Bilash said, "We came to hear you sing, Kunda."

Kunda said, "Order what you want me to sing."

Amal interrupted, "Sing whatever you feel like—of parting, meeting, a lover's quarrel—anything!"

Kunda burst out laughing on seeing Amal's condition. When money was spent out of another's pocket, he could not gauge the capacity of his own stomach.

Kunda sang, "Dear love, don't delay—the night is waning."

The song and music went on, many songs and much music. In the midst of all this festivity, Kunda suddenly saw that Amal was lying flat at one end of the carpet with a bolster on his chest and though Bilash was sitting on the carpet, his head was lolling on the bed apparently beating time with the music.

In the beginning there had been occasional outbursts of rowdiness on the part of Amal and Bilash, but neither Kunda nor Asoka had noticed that they had stopped of their own accord.

The rain had not yet stopped. Asoke was gazing at the faintly lit blurred scene outside through the glass of the closed windows. For some time he had not spoken a word. Some remote irk in his mind prevented him from speaking to Kunda in the old familiar way.

Kunda cut short her song, took him by the hand, drew him outside and said, "Listen."

Asoke came out, leaned indifferently against the verandah railing and gazed at Kunda's face.

Kunda's face was beautiful and a trace of Asoke's intoxication still lingered.

Kunda had come to say something harsh. Asoke's hand was held fast in hers. But suddenly looking up at him she lowered her face. Gazing into the distance, smiling a little, she spoke as if half to herself, "I realised how beautiful I was after I found you."

Asoke felt thrilled at first but the next moment he suddenly said very rudely, "Tell me what is it that you called me here to say."

This rudeness made Kunda glance at him sharply. Then she heaved a sigh and said, "You haven't been here for the last four days."

Asoke said, "No."

Kunda asked, "Is Sobhana's illness very serious?"

"Not very."

Kunda said again, "Will you be going away immediately?"

Asoke glanced at his wrist watch and said, "Yes. It's nearly ten."

Kunda let go his hand and said, "Go then." Then she laughed a little and pointing inside the room, said, "But what are you going to do about them?"

Asoke too burst out laughing, he said, "That's truly a problem!"

"Will you be able to drag them away in this condition?"

Asoke said, "Impossible."

“Then?”

Smiling in a suggestive manner, Asoke said, “Let them stay here!”

Backing away in fear Kunda cried, “Heaven help me!”

Asoke caught one of her hands, pulled her in front of him and said, “It’s just for one night, can’t you manage?”

Kunda said hesitatingly but in a gentle tone, “You won’t be here—I’m alone—will I be able to control them?”

Asoke shook her hand impatiently and said, “How silly you are Kunda! Is this the first time you’ve looked after men in this condition?”

Kunda’s face went pale with pain. But controlling herself she said sharply, “I know it isn’t the first time. But others who left behind people in this condition always paid well for my labours. Why do you forget that you haven’t even the means their chauffeurs have?”

His teeth set hard, Asoke glared at her for a while, then asked, “How much is your fee?”

Kunda felt abashed for having spoken so unkindly. She played with Asoke’s fingers and said coaxingly, “All right, that’s enough! You’ve quite a temper!”

It was settled that Bilash and Amal would spend the night there. Asoke would come and find out about them in the morning.

When Asoke reached home it was nearly 11 o’clock.

His sick wife was sleeping with her face turned towards the wall and his old mother was sitting nodding with sleep at the head of her bed.

Hearing Asoke's footsteps she quickly got up from the bed and whispered cautioning him, "She's sleeping."

It seemed so. But when he came back after eating his meal, Sobhana sat up and began laughing.

Asoke asked in surprise, "What's this, weren't you sleeping?"

Sobhana shook her head and went on laughing.

Asoke stroked her back and said, "Have you heard what the doctor said?"

Sobhana said in annoyance, "I've heard. He said, drink sago and barley water, take quinine and sleep day and night. What's it to the doctor? He doesn't have to lie in bed for three days!"

Asoke was gazing charmed at his sick wife's pale, tired face. At that gaze, Sobhana shyly lowered her face and continued, "Just remember about yourself!"

"What do I do?"

"What do *you* do? Last time you were ill, you sang, laughed, wept, shouted and gave no one any peace for seven days." Asoke began to laugh.

Just then the music of a wedding procession was heard. Becoming restless, Sobhana said, "It'll probably pass this way."

Asoke said with a laugh, "Probably. But you mustn't get up."

Sobhana said pleadingly, "It's only for a little while and I can lean on you."

Asoke could not ignore her pleading. They both went and stood outside in the verandah. The procession passed startling the road with a blaze of lights and blare of music. The rain had stopped. A few clouds hung here and there in the sky. Asoke said, "Come back to bed."

This short excursion had tired Sobhana. She went inside resting wearily on Asoke's arm. Asoke said, gently scolding her, "See, how weak you've become? I told you—"

He laid Sobhana down, arranging the pillows under her head. This time Sobhana did not protest. She took one of Asoke's hands in her's and clung to it in deep weariness. She seemed to want to ask Asoke to lie down, but she could not.

It was a disease with Sobhana to talk about her husband. Probably this fault was due to her being very young.

Bhabasundari came to see her every day at noon. It was with her that Sobhana talked about her husband. Bhaba was Sobhana's friend and mentor, both. Bhaba was some thirty-five years old and had become a widow with three children about five years ago.

Bhaba says, "Why do you follow Asoke around—day and night?"

Sobhana laughs, she says, "Why? Do you feel jealous?"

Bhaba says, "You don't find this old woman's words to your taste now—you'll see later on."

Sobhana takes fright at Bhaba's tone. The smile disappears from her face. She plumps herself down next to Bhaba and says, "What will I see? Why don't you tell me grannie?"

Bhaba presses the cheeks of this timid girl and says, "Don't get so attached to your husband, his love will fade. Understand?"

As she is speaking, Asoke returns from office. The moment the sound of his feet comes to her ears, Sobhana runs to meet him. In a moment she forgets everything.

Bhaba laughs and lies down on the floor spreading out the end of her saree.

In the other room Asoke asks, "You were sitting and having a nice gossip. Why did you come running to this room?" Sobhana pulls out a chair, sits down and says, "Because I choose to!"

Bhaba passed every afternoon with Sobhana. The days of Sobhana's illness caused more inconvenience to Bhaba rather than to the patient, because she could not bear to sit near a sick person. For the last two days the fever had abated and today when Bhaba arrived Sobhana was sitting reading a novel. Bhaba came chewing pan and said, "You haven't any fever today?"

Sobhana cried angrily, "Yes, I have remittant fever and delirium!" At least ten people had asked her the same question since morning.

Bhaba felt her forehead tenderly and said, "No! You've no fever." Saying this she drew a pillow towards her and lay down by Sobhana's side and said laughingly, "I'm lying in your husband's bed dear. Don't get jealous!"

In a moment Sobhana's anger melted. She burst out laughing like a little girl and said, "But you are lying here for nothing now grannie, you'd better come at night."

Bhaba said, "Supposing I come. What'll you do? Swing a fan?"

Sobhana whispered into her ears, "Really, my dear, I feel awfully jealous."

Moving away the hair from Sobhana's forehead, Bhaba said gravely, "There's nothing to be afraid of. I'm not really coming."

Suddenly Sobhana was disconcerted and said with a laugh, "As if I'm really serious! Very well, don't come." Bhaba said with a faint sad smile, "No dear, I have no desire to come. One person has made me suffer enough, now what I pray for is that even if I have to be born again as a woman, let me never have to be married!"

Sobhana quickly sat up and stared sharply at Bhaba. Then she said harshly, "Then you mean to say that you're pleased at your husband's death?"

Bhaba continued to stare outside. She answered half to herself, "This desire of mine has nothing to do with either joy or sorrow, my sister, it's just a desire in my heart. But I hope you never have to understand what I mean!"

After this, the conversation did not proceed well that day. The two women sat each immersed in her own thoughts. Then late in the afternoon Bhaba heaved a deep sigh and departed. Sobhana did not even feel capable of saying the usual words of farewell.

As soon as Asoke returned from office late in the afternoon, Sobhana asked, "Tell me, did her husband tyrannise over Bhaba terribly?" She could hardly wait for an answer. Asoke said, unbuttoning his coat, "Very much."

Annoyed at Asoke's indifference, Sobhana said, "Go on! I don't like your joking! Tell me the truth."

"I told you the truth." Asoke hung up his coat and asked, "Why, haven't the marks of his beatings disappeared from Bhaba's back yet?"

Sobhana frowned and said, "As if I was speaking of that? Does a gentleman ever hit his wife?"

Asoke asked grinning, "Doesn't he? Only twists her ears I suppose?"

Sobhana said gravely, "No, really this isn't a matter to joke about. She was complaining today. Her husband, it seems, didn't behave well to her."

Asoke could hardly restrain his laughter whenever

Sobhana became grave. But lest she became angry, he said quite gravely, "He wasn't a very good man."

Sobhana got up excitedly from the bed and said, "Really? He wasn't good—truly?"

Asoke said feeling a little uncomfortable, "That's what everyone says."

Sobhana said, "If it had been I, I wouldn't have put up with it! Never! Never! How extraordinary that she should have!"

Asoke asked laughing, "What would you have done?"

"I would have—" Sobhana stopped short. She could no longer decide what she would have done. Just as a frightened chick takes shelter under the wings of its mother this timid girl drew close to her husband and said, "But you aren't like that!"

Asoke's mind filled with tenderness. Still, he asked, "How do you know?"

This time Sobhana arched her neck proudly and said, "Oh, I can sense it, sir! One can find out with one touch whether a man is a bad coin or a genuine one!"

Asoke felt as though his mind had been pricked by a thorn. He smiled a dry tight smile and said, "Then, why worry? Go and get me my tea now!"

"Oh my! I've forgotten your tea!" Abashed, Sobhana rushed off to fetch the tea from downstairs. When she brought it, she asked, "Are you going out this evening?"

Asoke said in surprise, "Why do you ask?"

Sobhana could say nothing. She only bent her head

and twisted the end of her saree round her finger. Asoke said with a laugh, "I shan't go out at all today!"

Sobhana felt she could burst into tears for joy.

It was, however, very necessary for Asoke to go out. He had not been able to go to Kunda's house for several days. Yesterday Kunda had written a stern letter, she had even threatened to commit suicide unless Asoke went to her straight from office today. He had not gone from office, but had thought to go in the evening after seeing how Sobhana was. Then this hindrance!

Kunda had written, since the days when Asoke had no one else, she had belonged to him. Formerly, Asoke could hardly wait for his office to close to come to her. Now, he could not find time to put in an appearance even once a week. All this was just her bad luck!

Then after covering six, long pages with past reminiscences, she had ended the letter saying: "It is no use reminding you of past memories. Still, I can't help feeling tempted, that's why I have written all this. I have only one question to ask you, just because you won me, does it give you the right to tyrannise over me? Tomorrow is my birthday. Come, if only for two minutes. Probably this won't ruin your character."

There were plenty of pin-pricks in the letter, moreover Asoke himself was by no means reluctant to go, yet he did not have the heart to hurt this girl—his wife—who relied so absolutely on him.

Just then, Bilash and Amal arrived and began shouting to him from the front door. Asoke said, "Do sit down, I'll come in a moment."

When Asoke came down, he asked sharply, "What is it?"

Amal said, "What's up? Why are you riding the high horse?"

Bilash interrupted him, "Oh! Stop it Amal, I'll do the talking."

Amal was both stupid and coarse. He shouted, "What are you going to talk to him about? Father Asoke, you had better put on your clothes and come with us like a good boy. Kundarani has ordered us, we must take you to her—dead or alive."

Asoke replied firmly, "I can't possibly go today. Tell her I'd rather go tomorrow—"

Amal cried loudly, "I don't care about what you'd rather do! You'll have to go today."

Asoke calmly shook his head and said, "No."

Bilash said gravely, "If you don't want to go—don't! We don't want to force you to come with us. There's only one thing I'd like to say before going, it's this, that Kunda hasn't touched a morsel of food while she's been waiting for you. If you feel that even after hearing this, it's not possible for you to go, then don't."

In doubt, Asoke began hesitating a little. Amal shouted again, "I want to know whether you're coming or not,"

Asoke said anxiously, "Don't shout," and pointed up-

stairs with his finger indicating that they might be heard by his wife.

Amal burst into loud laughter, "Supposing she does! My wife knows everything. I told her myself."

Asoke said disgustedly, "You've done something grand!"

Bilash asked, "Then are we to go back without you?"

Asoke pondered for a long time. Sobhana's lovely timid face rose again and again in his mind. After a long pause he said, "Nothing will induce me to go to-day. I'll go tomorrow for certain."

Amal and Bilash departed. But Asoke could not return to Sobhana's room. He went into his study, picked up the book which first came to his hand, opened it and lay back in an easy chair.

Every word had entered Sobhana's ears. Amal's loud laughter and shouts, Bilash's bitter solemnity, Asoke's fear and anxiety conjoined to make the whole affair so clear and easy to understand—so hideous in its implications that Sobhana stood lifeless and stunned like a block of wood, clinging to the bars of her window. The revelation was so unexpected.

Sobhana's past turned out to be false, her present a deception, the palace of dreams she had built on the future—a mere idle day dream!

The whole of the next day Sobhana went about hiding herself. All her pride had toppled into the dust, she

could not bear to show her face to anyone for shame—not even to Asoke. The previous night she fell so fast asleep before Asoke came into the room, that with all his efforts he failed to rouse her.

At noon Bhaba had come and had gone away again after enjoying a midday sleep all by herself.

Towards afternoon, after deciding something upon a sudden resolve, Sobhana waited for Asoke in the bedroom.

When he returned from office Asoke said, "Hello! Is your sleep over?"

Sobhana said laughing, "But I didn't sleep!"

Asoke said pressing her cheeks, "I'm not talking of the noon, I'm talking of last night."

Freeing herself, Sobhana said, "I don't know why, but I was terribly sleepy."

Asoke asked anxiously, "You're not feeling ill, are you?"

Sobhana did not answer this question, she said, "Wait a moment, I'll bring your tea." When she came back with the tea, Sobhana asked, "Are you going out now?"

Asoke hesitated a little, then said, "I've got to go out, there's something I've to do."

Perhaps he felt apprehensive that Sobhana might make another demand to keep him in today also. So he said in an explanatory manner, "I'll return early. It won't take me long."

As Asoke stood up in readiness to go out, Sobhana

said, "What's this, are you going out dressed like that?"

Asoke said laughing, "Why? Does it matter?"

Throughout the day Sobhana had sat and pleaded a dhoti for him, crinkled the sleeves of a Punjabi (a variety of shirt worn with the dhoti), polished his best pair of shoes with her own hands.

She brought out all this and began decking out Asoke herself. She put a fine white gold-bordered scarf round his neck, poured perfume on his handkerchief and after putting on his shoes, she gave them a final polish with the end of her saree.

Occasionally Sobhana got an impulse like this. She could not be prevented by asking her not to do these things. When it was all over, Asoke put his hand on her head and blessed her in a dramatic manner, "May you remain a wife for ever. But I can't make out the meaning of today's drama!"

With a sad smile Sobhana said, "I'm not play-acting."

Probably there was a note of sadness in her words. Asoke remembered that in the early days of their marriage Sobhana used to dress him up like this and send him out for a stroll every evening. She was then a slip of a girl. Then, in the few long years which had gone in between, somehow this custom had disappeared.

Today, it had been resurrected. Sobhana had kept her face lowered throughout the whole performance, now she said, "You'll return after having your meal?"

Asoke said, "What do you mean?"

"It means that your friends were saying it was somebody's birthday."

Asoke turned pale, as if he had been slashed with a whip. And just as a dog when it reaches the last fence of its self-defence and finding no way of escape turns fiercely on its attacker, Asoke said in the same manner, "Well, so what?"

Sobhana gazed at him sternly.

Asoke said again, "One doesn't lose one's character just by going there."

This made Sobhana feel like laughing. She said, "You've been deceiving me for so long. Well, speak the truth for once today. Don't you really like me any more?"

There were many things which Asoke could have said in answer to this. But he was getting more and more irritated at his continued mortification, so he said harshly, "No."

"Why don't you like me? Have I no attraction left?"

Actually, Asoke had not thought over this matter at all. Recently he had been reading a story and he began quoting whatever he could remember from it, "You haven't in you what I desire. The perfect woman whom I desire with all my heart, in order to find her—grain by grain I have to gather the best that is in a thousand women, then I will find my Tilottama (the most beautiful among the court-dancers of heaven, who was created out of all beauty in creation gathered together

grain by grain). What do you lose by this? Have I ever neglected you?"

Sobhana admitted, "No, that you haven't done."

Feeling a little stronger, Asoke asked, "Well?"

Dragging a wry smile on to taut lips, Sobhana said, "Today, I'm sending you to your tryst, dressed by my own hands. I too may have the desire to obtain a perfect man—the Tilottam. When I go seeking him will you be able to deck me with your own hands and send me to my tryst?"

The question was so unexpected, that completely bewildered, Asoke repeated stupidly, "Send you decked with my own hands?"

"Yes. Just imagine—today we are both going out in the car—each to our tryst. You'll go to your bower and I to mine."

"In the same car?"

"What's the harm?"

Dumbfounded, Asoke sat speechless staring at the spot where she had stood.

SUMATHA NATH GHOSH



JATILATA
OR
AN INTRICATE AFFAIR

WHEN Patla was seven years old—wearing of going round and round without being able to find a job—he entered one day a goldsmith's shop. Here he found employment. He was to get his food and clothes and one pice for his daily tiffin. When he had learnt the work—his future was to be full of golden opportunities!

After ensuing tortuously for some distance a narrow alley suddenly enters Nilmoni Dutt Lane. At one side of the entrance stands a gas post, on the other a dirty, stinking dustbin—focal point for swarms of buzzing flies and receptacle for bloodstained rags, cotton wool, fish scales, bones, mango skins and stones, and such like, much of which, failing to find a resting place inside the bin, repose on the pathway. The entrance to the alley is flooded by the drippings from a leaky water tank on a broken down old house. Immediately opposite the entrance is a tiled hut—it is this hut which houses the goldsmith's shop.

Patla swept the room, blew the bellow, put charcoal into the oven, poured oil into the big castor oil lamp, rolled fat wicks from cotton wool, prepared the hookah for his master and carried his master's infant daughter in his arms. He had no one in the world to call his own, so he slept in the shop-room at night.

In this way ten of his years passed.

In the meantime many changes took place in the world. Patla's master had lived in a tiled hut, gradually it changed to a one-storied then a two-storied pucca-built

house. But as for Patla's advancement, it was only in respect of one pice tiffin-money and one dhoti. Before he was given two dhotis a year, now he was given three, and his daily tiffin-money was now two pice instead of one—though he could now melt gold and make ornaments. Still he was quite satisfied with his lot. Not only did he not have the need for any kind of ease and comfort for himself, but moreover he had perhaps no near and dear ones alive to make any demands on him. So his days passed in perfect peace and contentment, thinking of his master's household as his own.

A village boy—dark and sturdy in appearance—he did not know how to say no to any work. Day and night he toiled like a ghost, whatever his master said was akin to an injunction from Vedas to him.

The owner of the shop was Sri Radha Kanta Karmakar, a famous craftsman from Dacca, an expert in fine workmanship. His age had long reached beyond the borders of fifty, but he could still do his work without the aid of glasses for his eyes. That was why despite fierce competition, people sent for him and gave him orders.

Nowadays Radhakanta did not go out much himself, he sent out his son to bring the orders. It had not always been so, formerly he went to the houses of his customers himself; but now his eldest son Rudrakanta did not allow him to go anywhere. He believed that his father did not know how to talk properly with people, his

ways and manners were terribly old-fashioned and absolutely unacceptable in modern educated circles.

Rudrakanta was a high-handed type of man and all the subordinates in the shop went in fear of him. His discipline was strict. He would not put up with any defect in anyone's work or any neglect of duty on anyone's part. He punished the delinquents with abuse, harsh nagging or by docking their pay. Though he was young, yet beginning from the accounts everything about the shop was at his finger-tips—he bought gold from the market, went round securing orders from customers in their houses, and explained the work for every order to the workmen.

Radhakanta never contested his son's authority, but just accepted whatever the latter thought best. He only worked with his own hands if there was any special order or the likelihood of getting extra payment, otherwise he spent most of his time in his home.

At the time of the Pujas, they got the largest number of orders. At that time even with employing extra workmen and the father and son both working day and night themselves, they could not manage to finish all the work.

Then Rudrakanta rushed about outside and the father supervised the work inside the shop. They forgot about eating or sleeping—it was only work, work, and work!

Working day and night for three days Radhakanta made a necklace with his own hands. It was an order from a rich household—a necklace set with pearls and

precious stones and decorated with fine chasing. Moving a pearl from here, a ruby from there, Radhakanta decorated the ornament according to his heart's desire.

Nowadays the fashionable folk wanted ornaments made with very little gold and he did not often get the opportunity of doing the fine engraving in which he took so much pride. Some people gave orders to make three pairs of bangles out of three annas weight of gold, these would be of copper inside, with only a thin sheet of gold to shimmer on top; others would order a necklace to be made of only one and a half tolas of gold. This fine sense of taste among the educated people did not suit Radhakanta's own taste, that was why when he got the opportunity to make a heavy ornament, he made it according to his own desire; and this opportunity to show off his craftsmanship had given him not a little self-satisfaction.

Rudrakanta was to have delivered this necklace to the customer as he did in every other case; but he was unable to do so that day owing to the pressure of work, so for once he sent his father.

It was a long way, so Radhakanta felt diffident about going alone and took Patla along with him.

It was Autumn—the golden light of dawn shimmered everywhere. Past many lanes, crossing many tramlines, at last the two of them arrived before the door of a very big house. On rattling the door it opened and they went in and sat down.

A huge room, big oil paintings hung on the walls, many green cloth-covered sofas and couches were set out on the marble floor, on every door hung blue hangings, overhead the huge crystal chandelier swung in the gentle breeze and gave further evidence of riches.

Patla gazed around him in amazement. Everything was strange and surprising to him. Never before had he entered a rich man's house furnished in the modern fashion.

The mistress of the household came and took the necklace from Radhakanta's hand, examined it moving it this way and that. She kept up the dignity of being the mistress of the household by making useless remarks such as: 'It would have been better to have set this stone here instead of there.' 'If the catch had been made like that instead of this there would have been less chance of its coming off easily.' 'Why was the gold in this part of the necklace so dull' and so forth.

Radhakanta smiled and instead of protesting, went on acquiescing in everything she said. She then called out in a low voice, "Daloo, your necklace has arrived. Come and see it!"

Daloo alias Dahlia entered the room. She stood with the blue curtain at her back, it seemed to Patla that a lotus had suddenly blossomed out on the blue waters of a lake. The beauty of youth filled her body to its brim. Her gaze was as intoxicating as a newly blossomed flower, a mass of wet hair flowed down her back, a tiny vermilion

spot on her not very wide forehead, two petal-like red lips, a long white smoothly rounded neck like a swan—below it a new-fashioned chemise which exposed more than half of her breast and back.

Perhaps she had no sense of modesty or perhaps these people were not worthy enough to make her feel modest before them! To think that these were also human beings, that they too were made of flesh and blood went against the grain of a rich woman like Dahlia—so without any hesitation she removed the end of her saree which covered her breasts and began putting on the necklace.

Patla was a young man, he had never seen such beauty, such brimming youth—in any woman. The blood in every vein and nerve in his body seethed violently and a flame of fire leapt across his face and eyes. With all five senses he seemed to be absorbing the enchantment of Dahlia's body.

Though Radhakanta's age was nearing sixty and half his head of hair had turned grey, still everything in his mind seemed somehow to be getting muddled. Looking at Dahlia's face he began thinking of the women in his family, wherever they might be—not one of them was as beautiful as this! Every one was dark and ugly—hideously dark, there was not a sign of loveliness anywhere in their faces or eyes; besides, he had never seen such abundance or such sweet manifestation of brimming youth in anyone's body. First of all he

remembered his wife, then the other daughters and wives in his home. In a moment his whole mind became defiled with loathing and disgust. He raised his eyes again and looked at Dahlia.

The necklace was glittering over the pink rounded nakedness of her bosom. Which was more beautiful? The necklace studded with innumerable pearls and diamonds or Dahlia's lovely face? Radhakanta could not decide, that was why he was looking at it and thinking that this necklace could not have looked well anywhere except on that neck.

Blessed was the necklace and blessed its craftsman! Really, at that moment Radhakanta felt that his life too was at last worth while.

Just then, raising both her hands towards the back of her neck Dahlia came and stood in front of Radhakanta and said in a slightly complaining tone, "Look Karigar Mahasai (Mr. Craftsman) how stiff the clasp is, I can't press it in."

Radhakanta came to himself with a start; he had been sitting in a chair, slowly, like a man under a spell, he got up and stood behind her. Patla was gazing intently at the thin line of fine down that descended from the back of her neck into her chemise. He too had silently gone and stood beside his master.

Dahlia laughed and said, "Done? You've made it with your own hands, so why is it taking you so long to fit it?"

A little abashed, Radhakanta replied, "Now it's fixed,

it's a little stiff because it's new." With this he went back and sat down in his chair.

Laughing Dahlia tripped off inside the house with eager feet.

Patla gazed unwinkingly at the disappearing figure. He felt as if the murmuring of that soft laughter still floated about in the corners of the room.

Dahlia went and stood before the huge mirror in her room and minutely examined how the necklace suited her.

A few minutes later she came running back and said, "No, Saakra Mahasai (Mr Goldsmith), this flower set with red stones doesn't look well here, please remove it, and polish the necklace better, then bring it back tomorrow—now, take it off." With this she turned her back towards him.

Radhakanta got up again and took off the necklace from her neck.

Then after the usual farewell salutes the pair of them stepped out into the road.

Both of them stayed silent! Neither said a word Patla walked in front and Radhakanta followed him. One was a young man—devoted to his master and extremely faithful. The other—an old man, completely honest and pious. After going some distance Radhakanta suddenly called Patla.

Startled, Patla stood still, Radhakanta put the necklace case into his hands and said, "You get along home, I'm

going to see another customer—but look after the box very carefully.”

“All right, sir,” said Patla. Then mentally thanking his master for his good sense, Patla pressed the case against his heart and after buttoning up his coat on he went. A storm of joy was heaving inside him.

After going some distance Patla entered a lonely park. He wished to touch the necklace just once with his hands. He sat in the shade of a tree, then carefully brought out the case, but when he opened it he started violently. What was this! Where had the necklace gone? He began searching high and low—all around him, in the grass, on the bench, in his clothing, in every fold of his dhoti. But alas he found no trace of it! The entire world turned dark before his eyes. What was he to do? Where could he go to find it? He could think of nothing and just sat there dumbfounded.

On the other hand when Radhakanta returned he found that Patla had not yet arrived. Gradually the hours passed one by one, still there was no sign of Patla. Everyone became impatient, specially Rudrakanta—humming with rage he cried, “The wretch has run away!” Then without waiting further he informed the police.

Towards afternoon Patla was caught by the police, the necklace case was still held in his hand. Without another word they took him off to the lock-up.

Three days later he was tried in court. On Radha-

kanta's evidence he was sentenced to one year's imprisonment.

Patla made no excuses, only when the handcuffs were being put on his wrists did he beg for the necklace case. They gave it to him. Patla put it next to his heart and buttoning up his coat went along with the police and got into the black prison van.

Nobody could make out what was in the case or what Patla would do with it so everyone laughed hearing his plea. Only the One who, remaining beyond the sight of man, understands the secrets hidden in the minds of men—perhaps only He did not laugh at this poor boy!

Two years later, Radhakanta died suddenly of heart-failure. Rudrakanta then took charge of the key of his father's iron safe and tied it on his own bunch of keys.

Some time passed after the Sradh ceremony; one day at noon Rudrakanta went quietly and opened his father's iron safe. He found some old almanacs; a few old account books and beneath these a few gold sovereigns tied in a bundle. In disgust, Rudrakanta threw away the books, he could find no reason why his father had not trusted him with the key of the iron safe before his death. He began clearing out the safe, and after he had brought out all the accumulated rubbish, he picked up the red cloth spread on the bottom, a necklace rolled out on to the floor. Rudrakanta

quickly picked it up and began examining it. It looked brand new, its polish was still gleaming and the shimmer of the jewels set in it was undimmed, only two long strands of hair clung to one of the stones. He gazed at it turning it this way and that and tried to think to whom it might belong and how it came to be there.

Suddenly he remembered that this was the same necklace for which Patla had paid recompense in prison. But from where it had come and how it came to be hidden inside his pious, honest father's iron safe, he could never make out.

¶ About Authors ¶

Amala Devi : Among the few lady writers in Bengal who have seriously devoted themselves to the novel and short story, Amala Devi—this is a pen-name—has won for herself a particular area of distinction. She has not clung to the domestic tradition which was supposed to be the women's sphere even in literary efforts, but boldly entered the human field. She has tackled psychological and political issues, making them an inalienable part of the vital experiences that she had to communicate. There is perhaps an extra dose of manliness in her writings, both in her choice of subjects and in the language that she uses, but this is a corrective that the extreme tradition of timid writing needed and which will be found helpful at a time when literature must come nearer to life. The mystery of the pseudonym prevents any conjectures as to the literary career of the author but her writings are there, and these certainly are more truly biographical than the usual "inside information" supplied by outside sources.

Bibhuti Bhushan Mukherji : An Indian artist today finds himself in a strange plight; the modern age gives him an outlook and discernment which makes it difficult for him to accept the social life which is still largely tradition-ridden. And at the other end there is that other type of society which has lost its sense of

tradition altogether. As an individual he feels powerless to change the situation, and often falls into a mood of frustration. In most of his writings, Bibhuti Bhushan Mukherji maintains his artistic balance by raillery and ironical comment on circumstances—he has also a stock of good humour which restores confidence in the mind of the reader and makes him sympathetic.

Bibhuti Bhushan Mukherji is an established writer and has many well-known novels to his credit. He is also one of the most eminent short story writers of modern Bengal. In all his writings he reveals an understanding of psychology and a sense of situation which few writers possess.

Buddhadeva Bose : Few among his contemporaries has been so hotly discussed as Buddhadeva Bose was when he first emerged into Bengali literature. The reactionaries found in him the would-be leader of dangerous modernists, with new views on sex and society while the younger generation liked his style and ardently supported his iconoclasm. That was years ago, the time of *Pragati* and *Kallol*, two promising periodicals started by the group which included Premendra Mitra, Achintya Sen Gupta and other literary artists of the new school. The extravagant reactions to his writings cooled down but Buddhadeva Bose continues

to hold the eager interest of literary Bengal. He has led many literary movements, piloted many journals, and is widely known as the Editor of the finest magazine of poetry, *Kavita*, which has maintained a high standard of excellence for several years. He runs his own publishing house. But above all, he is an artist with remarkable creative gifts both as a poet and as a novelist; he is also one of our best literary critics, and recently he has written and produced on the stage a topical social drama. He is a prolific writer, with humour and an accurate but kindly observation which leave a vivid impress on his writings. His short stories are quite on the level of his best novels and have a subtle lucidity of style which we associate with his finest prose

Gajendra Mitra : Gajendra Mitra creates an impression of tidiness and fine poise in his writings, apart from the intrinsic excellence of his literary productions, particularly in the domain of short stories. He started writing at the age of eighteen, inspired, he says, by the great epic *Mahabharata*. His characters too have often an epical grandeur because nothing is trivial for him and he can invest ordinary circumstances with the dramatic truth which belongs to all life. His short stories have come to stay, and they defy categories by being both romantic and real.

Gajendra Mitra has written many books for children and also runs his own publishing house. He has done much in raising the standard of book production in Bengal—a rare achievement for an author.

‘Juvanashya’ : Though he seems to have given up his pen these days, Juvanashya or, to use his real name, Manish Ghatak, was once a prominent figure in the *Kallol* and *Kali Kalam* group which included a number of progressive writers, who now enjoy established reputations. His stories, scattered in magazines and periodicals deserve publication in book form and a wider circle of readers. Unconventional in his attitude towards religion and society, Juvanashya outraged many susceptibilities but there was always an air of detachment in all that he wrote; his prose style, again, combined crude vigour with an artist’s search for an inclusive language. Indifference to public opinion has, unfortunately, also gradually made him indifferent to his own writings so that he not only began to write little but cared even less to publish what he had written. In his poems he shows the reverse side of his art; there he is romantic and traditional; his characteristic indifference to the gentler emotions revealing itself in moving lyrics which are cast in ornamented and associational language.

Kamakshi Prasad Chatterjee : Though his name is polysyllabic and heavy-sounding, Kamakshi Prasad is the youngest writer represented in our anthology. But though very young, his literary output is considerable. He is one of the most prolific contributors to various journals beginning from the most highbrow to the definitely middlebrow, or even at times to the positively lowbrowed. And he contributes not only short stories but also poems, novels and essays. He has, therefore, a miscellaneous crowd of admirers; those who are fond of modern Bengali poetry know Kamakshi Prasad as an artist and a significant poet, others know him by his short stories and a fine novel; the young talk of his juvenile writings. He is, moreover, known in many quarters as an artist in photography which, along with travel, is his main hobby. Recently, he has become the editor of a children's magazine with his brother as co-editor.

Kamakshi Prasad steers clear of party affiliations, and though he is in the vanguard of the progressives in literature, his eyes are fixed on an artistic destination which is reached by depth of experience and adequate craftsmanship.

Narayan Gangopadhyaya : The young college professor who hides his identity behind the pen-name of Narayan

Gangopadhaya, misses the distinction of being the youngest writer in this book by the narrow margin of ten days. He won his way to literary reputation by contributing short stories to magazines and periodicals, and though his books are few in number, they contain some remarkable short stories from his more mature pen. He has no sympathy with hypocrisy whether the practitioners are rich or poor, rural or 'civilised.' With incisive knowledge he has laid bare the snobbery and superstition of village society and exposed the exploiters—particularly of the 'new-rich' type who thrive on the ignorance of villagers. "Nakra-Charit" is typical of his style and the stark realism of his characterisation grips the reader's mind. His art is sure to grow with more experience and attain a harmony which is already evident in his stories.

Premankur Atorthy : It is not difficult to explain the popularity of Premankur Atorthy. His stories are compact, descriptions minute, dialogues appropriate and he has a true sense of humour. What else is expected of a popular writer? But there is perhaps something more to be found in Premankur Atorthy. The atmosphere of his stories is light and peaceful. We are induced to enjoy the world and not to wrestle with the oddities of circumstance. The world is like the curly tail of a dog, you cannot set it straight however much you may try to do so. The best thing, therefore, is to accept, and

compromise; why make the world more dull and uninteresting by sermonising? That seems to be his typical attitude. And thus he speaks of the bohemian way of life with sympathy and persuasion. A step further would perhaps bring in seriousness: Mr Atorthy knows where to stop. Others, under similar circumstances, would perhaps fail to resist, would go a step further, and assume solemn airs. But not so Mr Atorthy.

The themes of his stories are traditional. They can be summed up in two words: Love and Ease. But Mr. Atorthy knows how to present his stories in an interesting manner, and there he is an artist.

Probodh Sanyal : Mr Sanyal is a traveller who can write fascinatingly on his adventures. *Mahaprasthan* *Pathe* is without any doubt his best book. It is the diary of a pedestrian who goes on a mountain pilgrimage in the Himalayas. To reach Badrinath is difficult, but Mr Sanyal accomplishes the more difficult task of transforming his experience of travel into artistic expression. When you read his narrative you feel the shiver of the snow-clad mountain, smell the mysterious odour of the jungle. His stories and novels too bear the impress of a tramp's life. The characters he is so fond of portraying are not peaceful residents of cities or villages, they are restless, and they drift forward. This air of adventure in his books has made Probodh Sanyal popular among the

reading public who, in their dull and boring existence find a compensatory exhilaration in his tales. This does not mean that Mr Sanyal caters to the vulgar taste of the public. Far from it. He is, in his own way, an unsparing critic of all that he thinks irrational and vulgar in contemporary society. Besides his adventurist spirit, his popularity may be explained by another point. He is, in literature, the most direct disciple of Saratchandra, the most obvious follower. Saratchandra's *Srikanta* has permanently endeared itself to Bengali homes, and an author who follows the same lure of vagabondage, using the vigorous descriptive style of Saratchandra, is sure to attract a large circle of readers.

Rampada Mukherji : Rampada Mukherji is an artist of the unsophisticated type. He has derived, he says, his literary inspiration from his mother and from the works of Bankimchandra. "In my childhood," he says, "I heard the stories of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* from my mother. She recited Kaviranjan Ramprasad's songs, verses from Bharatchandra, Hemchandra and Sri Madhusudan along with the typical news of the day such as the battle of Port Arthur, Swadeshi movement, Boer War, etc. She also narrated stories from Bankimchandra's novels which roused my inquisitiveness about Bengali literature and inspired me with new aspects of life." Thus inspired Rampada Mukherji took

to writing at the age of 16. Now he is 44, and mature not merely in age but also as a writer. But this maturity has not brought any enrichment in subtlety or in complexity of characterisation. His writings are marked by a simplicity and grace which preclude the more austere beauties of art. This makes him an ideal contributor to popular and conservative magazines.

‘Sambuddha’ : The pen-name ‘Sambuddha’ means the ‘Awakened’ and therefore some sort of dynamism. But Mr Amulya Dasgupta personally prefers to lie lazy and sleep during the day. He confesses that these two are his only hobbies. He cannot, he says, gather himself up to publishing his writings in book-form. He is fond of travelling but mostly in the region of dreams and dislikes even that much of exertion which is required for reading serious books. “Anything serious gives me a headache”—he says. It is a good idea, he thinks, to turn over the pages of Chamber’s Dictionary and Nesfield’s Grammar without any serious motive; and to be frank, he relishes detective stories. Why, then, does he write at all? “Just to kill boredom”—that is his own answer. This has a little history. As a consequence of joining active politics he had once to undergo detention for five years, and in the concentration camp, having nothing to do, he could only think of writing though he could not actually do much of it. Yet, inspite of all his confessions,

you cannot afford to neglect him. He can be witty and brilliant; he wields an easy pen; and his satires penetrate below the surface.

Saradindu Banerjee : If somebody complains that the stories of modern Bengal are much too serious, much too subtle and complex, the works of Saradindu Banerjee should be recommended to him. For, here is a writer who writes a lot of thrillers, detective fiction and light humorous stories. And they are typically Bengali with the unmistakable flavour of our modern transitional phase.

There are many writers in Bengal today who write detective stories. But they are mostly commercial penmen who might as well have dealt with any other commercial article. Saradindu Banerjee's stories, however, are not merely written for money; they are the gift of an exuberant personality delighting in good fun. What is more, his thrillers do thrill; his uncanny moods seldom fail to infect the nocturnal reader; his complacent good humour soothes the tired nerves of those who turn to fiction as an escape after the daily grind. His style contains the same soothing quality and is persuasive.

Saroj Kumar Roychowdhury : While a B.A. student he joined the Non-Co-operation movement and graduated

from the National College. Career, in the ordinary sense is, in our country, generally blocked for young men with a political past. Mr Roychowdhury suffered from this but he did not strain after a career either. He took life as it was and tried to make the best use of it. Being a descendent of a famous Vaisnava poet, he had an early fascination for literature; he began to cultivate writing as a substitute for "career building". Mr Roychowdhury also took to journalism so that the domestic financial wheels might move more smoothly, but, strangely enough journalism did not kill his literary instinct. It is interesting to note how, besides his regular work in the Ananda Bazar Patrika as an assistant editor, he can write so much and can maintain a standard. He has already to his credit a long list of books, mostly novels and short stories; these writings are compact, serious and rich in variety. He has a large heart and a wide sympathy for his countrymen. His literary style and his technique of story-telling are traditional.

Sumatha Nath Ghosh : Among those artists who in Bengali literature have consciously tried to cultivate the psychological novel, mention must be made of Sumatha Nath Ghosh. His favourite theme is to find out how the minds of those who are commonly taken as normal are in fact full of deep complications and obsessions. In this, Sumatha Nath has his predecessor in Manik Banerji.

But Mr Ghosh has an original mind and he has tackled a different field—mostly the urban or semi-urban areas which reveal a tangle of maladjusted lives. He knows village Bengal and has given us a series of delightful pictures of stark humanity in a village setting; but his excursions into town-life are no less convincing. The flow of his language is quietly meandering; they resemble the rivulets of Bengal and carry the same charm and variety. His novels and short stories have captured even the unsophisticated mind; and he has gained recognition within a few years.

THE END