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THE FLOWER OF FORGIVENESS

THE

FLOWER OF FORGIVENESS

BY

FLORA ANNIE STEEL

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THE FLOWER OF FORGIVENESS.

"Surely this is very rare?" I remarked, as looking through a herbarium of Himalayan plants belonging to a friend of mine, I came upon a small anemone which, contrary to the custom of that most delicate of flowers, had preserved its colour in all its first freshness. Indeed, the scarlet petals, each bearing a distinct, heart-shaped blotch of white in the centre, could scarcely have glowed more brilliantly in life than they did in death.

"Very rare," returned the owner after a pause; "I have reason to believe it unique--so far as collections go, at any rate."

"I see you have called it *Remissionensis*. What induced you to give it such an odd name?"

He smiled. "Dog Latin, I acknowledge. As for the reason--can you not guess?"

"Well," I replied, looking closer at the white and red flowers, "I have not your vivid imagination, but I presume it was in allusion to sins as scarlet, and hearts white as wool. Ah! it was found, I see, near the Cave of Amar-nâth; that accounts for the connection of ideas."

"No doubt," he said quietly, "that accounts for the connection in a measure; not entirely. The fact is, a very odd story--the oddest story I ever came into personally--is connected with that flower. You remember Taylor, surgeon of the 101st, who died of pyæmia contracted in some of his cholera experiments? Well, just after I joined we chummed together in Cashmere, where he was making the herbarium at which you have been looking. He was a most charming companion for a youngster eager to understand something of a new life, for, without exception, he knew more of native thought and feeling than any other man I ever met. He had a sort of intuition about it; yet at the same time he was curiously unsympathetic, and seemed to look upon it merely as a field for research, and nothing more. He used to talk to every man he met on the road, and in this way managed to acquire an extraordinary amount of information utterly undreamed of by most Englishmen. For instance, his first acquaintance with the existence of this anemone grew out of a chance conversation with an old ruffian besmeared with filth from head to foot, and it was his consequent desire to add the rarity to his collection, joined to my fancy for seeing a real pilgrimage, which brought us to Islamabad about the end of July, about the time, that is to say, of the annual festival.

"The sacred spring where the pilgrimage is inaugurated by a solemn feeding of the holy fish is some way from the town, so we pitched our tents under a plane-tree close to the temples, in order to see the whole show. And a queer show it was. Brummagem umbrellas stuck like mushrooms over green stretches of grass, and giving shelter to a motley crew; *jogis*, or wandering mendicants, meditating on the mystic word Om, and thereafter lighting sacred fires with Swedish *tändstickors*; Government clerks, bereft of raiment, forgetting reports and averages in a return to primitive humanity. Taylor never tired of pointing out these strange contrasts, and over his evening pipe read me many a long lecture on the putting of new wine into old bottles. For myself, it interested me immensely. I liked to think of the young men and maidens, the weary workers, and the hoary old sinners, all journeying in faith, hope, and charity (or the want of it) to the Cave of Amar-nâth in order to get the Great Ledger of Life settled up to date, and so to return scot-free to the world, the flesh, and the devil, in order to begin the old round all over again. I liked to think that crime sufficient to drag half Hindostan to the nethermost pit had been made over to those white gypsum cliffs, and that still, summer after summer, the wind flowers sprang from the crannies, and the forget-me-nots with their message of warning came to carpet the way for those eager feet seeking the impossible. I liked to see all the strange perversities and pieties displayed by the *jogis* and *gosains*. It was from one of the latter, a horrid old ruffian (so ridiculously like *Il Re Galant 'uomo*, that we nicknamed him Victor Emanuel on the spot), that Taylor had first heard of the Flower of Forgiveness, as the man styled it. He and the doctor grew quite hot over the possible remission of sins; but the subsequent gift of one rupee sterling sent him away asseverating that none could filch from him the first-fruits of pilgrimage--namely, the opportunity of meeting a Protector of the Poor so virtuous, so generous, so full of the hoarded wisdom of ages. I recognised the old humbug in the crowd as we made our way to a sort of latticed gallery belonging to the Maharajah's guest-house, which gave on the tank where the fish are fed. He salaamed profoundly, and, with a grin, expressed his delight that, after all, the great doctor *sahib* should be seeking forgiveness.

"'I seek the flower only, Pious One,' replied Taylor, with a shrug of the shoulders.

"'Perhaps 'tis the same thing,' replied Victor Emanuel with another salaam.

"The square tank was edged by humanity in the white and saffron robes of pilgrimage. Brimming up to the stone step, worn smooth by generations of sinners, the waters of the spring lapped lazily, stirred by the myriads of small fish which, in their eagerness for the coming feast, flashed hither and thither like meteors, to gather in radiating stars round the least speck on the surface; sometimes in their haste rising in scaly mounds above the water. The blare of a conch and a clanging of discordant bells made all eyes turn to the platform in front of the temple, where the attendant Brahmans stood with high-heaped baskets of grain awaiting the sacrificial words about to be spoken by an old man, who, with one foot on the bank, spread his arms skywards--an

old man of insignificant height, but with an indescribable dignity, on which I remarked to my companion.

"'It is indescribable,' he assented, 'because it is compounded of factors not only wide as the poles asunder from you and me, but also from each other. Pride of twice-born trebly-distilled ancestry bringing a conviction of inherited worthiness; pride in hardly-acquired devotion giving birth to a sense of personal frailty. *That* is the Brahman whom we lump into a third-class railway carriage with the ruck of humanity, and then wonder--hush! he is going to begin.'

"'Thou art Light! Thou art Immortal Life!' The voice, with a tremor of emotion in it, pierced the stillness for a second before it was shattered by a hoarse, strident cry--'Silence!'

"Taylor leaned forward, suddenly interested. 'You're in luck,' he whispered, 'I believe there is going to be a row of some sort.'

"Once more the cry rose harsher than before: 'Silence, Sukya! Thou art impure.'

"A stir in the crowd, and a visible straightening of the old man's back were the only results.

"'Thou art the Holiest Sacrifice! We adore Thee, adorable Sun!'

"'Silence!'

"This time the interruption took shape in a *jogi*, who, forcing his way through the dense ranks, emerged on the platform to stand pointing with denunciatory finger at the old Brahman. Naked, save for the cable of grass round his loins and the smearing of white ashes, with hair lime-bleached and plaited with hemp into a sort of *chignon*, no more ghastly figure could be conceived. The crowd, however, hailed him with evident respect, while a murmur of 'Gopi! 'tis Gopi the *bikshu* (religious beggar)' passed from mouth to mouth. This reception seemed to rouse the old man's wrath, for after one scornful glance at the new-comer he was about to continue his invocation to the sun, when the *jogi*, striding forward, flourished his mendicant's staff so close to the other's face that he perforce fell back.

"Before the crowd had grasped the deadly earnest of the scene, a lad of about sixteen, clad in the black antelope skin which marks a religious disciple, had leaped, quivering with rage, between the old man and his assailant.

"'By George,' muttered Taylor, 'what a splendid young fellow!'

"He was indeed. Extraordinarily fair, even for the fairest race in India, he might have served as model for a young Perseus as he stood there, the antelope skin falling from his right shoulder, leaving the sacred cord of the Brahman visible on his left, while his smooth, round limbs showed in all their naked, vigorous young beauty.

"'Stand off, Amra! who bade thee interfere?' cried the old man sternly. The bond between them was manifest by the alacrity with which the boy obeyed the command; for to the spiritual master implicit obedience is due. At the same moment the chief priest of the shrine, alarmed at an incident which might interfere with the expected almsgiving, hurried forward. Luckily the crowd kept the silence which characterises gregarious humanity in the East, so we could follow what was said.

"'Wilt remove yonder drunken fanatic, or shall the worship of the Shining Ones be profaned?' asked the old Brahman savagely; and at a sign from their chief the attendants stepped forward.

"But the *jogi* facing the crowd, appealed direct to that fear of defilement which haunts the Hindu's heart. 'Impure! Impure! Touch him not! Hear him not! Look not on him!' The vast concourse swayed and stirred, as with a confident air the *jogi* turned to the chief priest. 'These twelve years agone, O! *mohunt-ji*'[1] thou knowest Gopi--Gopi the *bikshu!* since for twelve years I have been led hither by the Spirit, seeking speech, and finding silence! But now speech is given by the same Spirit. That man, Sukya, anchorite of Setanagar, is unclean, false to his race, to his vows, to the Shining Ones! I, Gopi the *bikshu*, will prove it.'

"Once again a murmur rose like the wind presaging a storm, and as the crowd surged closer to the temple, a young girl in the saffron drapery of a pilgrim took advantage of the movement to make her way to the platform, with the evident intention of pressing to the old man's side; but she was arrested by the young Perseus, who, with firm hands clasping hers, whispered something in her ear. She smiled up at him; and so they stood, hand in hand, eager but confident, as the Brahman's voice, clear with certainty, dominated the confusion.

"'Ay! Prove it! Prove that I, Sukya, taught of the great Swami, twice-born Brahman, faithful disciple, blameless householder and pious anchorite in due turn, as the faith demands, have failed once in the law without repentance and atonement! Lo! I swear by the Shining Ones that I stand before ye to-day, body and soul, holy to the uttermost.'

"'God gie us a gude conceit o' oursels,' muttered Taylor.

"The remark jarred on me painfully, for the spiritual exaltation in the man's face had nothing

personal in it; nothing more selfish than the rapt confidence which glorified the young disciple's whole bearing, as he gazed on his master with the sort of blind adoration one sees in the eyes of a dog.

"'Think! I am Sukya!' went on the high-pitched voice. 'Would Sukya come between his brethren and the Shining Ones? I, chosen for the oblation by reason of virtue and learning; I, Sukya, journeying to holy Amar-nâth not for my own sake,--for I fear no judgment,--but for the sake of the disciple, yonder boy Amra, betrothed to the daughter of my daughter, and vowed to the pilgrimage from birth.'

"A yell of crackling laughter came from the *jogi* as he leapt to the bastion of the bathing-place, and so, raised within sight of all, struck an attitude of indignant appeal. 'When was an outcast vowed to pilgrimage? And by my *jogi's* vow I swear the boy Amra, disciple of Sukya, to be an outcast. A Sudra of Sudras! seeing that his mother, being twice-born, defiled her race with scum from beyond the seas.'

"'By George!' muttered Taylor again, 'this is getting lively--for the scum.'

"'Perhaps the Presence is becoming tired of this vulgar scene,' suggested an obsequious *chuprassi*, who had been devoted to our service by order of the Cashmere officials; but the Presences were deeply interested. For all that, I should not care to witness such a sight again. The attention of the crowd, centred a moment before on the *jogi*, was turned now on the boy, who stood absolutely alone; the girl, moved by the unreasoning habit of race, having dropped his hand at the first word and crept to her grandfather's side. I can see that young face still, awful in its terror, piteous in its entreaty.

"'Thou liest, Gopi!' cried the Brahman, gasping with passion; and at the words a gleam of hope crept to those hunted eyes. 'Prove it, I say; for I appeal to the Shining Ones whom I have served.'

"'I accept the challenge,' yelled the *jogi* with frantic gestures, while a perfect roar of assent, cries of devotion, and prayers for guidance, rose from the crowd.

"Taylor looked round at me quickly. 'You are in luck. There is going to be a miracle. I saw that Gopi at Hurdwâr once; he is a rare hand at them.' He must have understood my resentment at being thus recalled to the nineteenth century, for he added half to himself, ''Tis tragedy for all that,--to the boy.'

"An appeal for silence enabled us to hear that both parties had agreed to refer the question of birth to the sacred cord, with which every male of the three twice-born castes is invested. If the strands were of the pure cotton ordained by ritual to the Brahman, the boy should be held of pure blood; but the admixture of anything pointing to the despised Sudra would make him *anathema maranatha*, and render his master impure, and therefore unfit to lead the devotions of others.

"I cannot attempt to describe the scene which followed; for even now, the confusion inseparable from finding yourself in surroundings which require explanation before they can fall into their appointed place in the picture, prevents me from remembering anything in detail--anything but a surging sea of saffron and white, a babel of wild cries, '*Hurri! Gunga-ji! Dhurm! Dhurm!*' (Hurri![2] Ganges! the Faith! the Faith!) Then suddenly a roar--'Gopi! a miracle! a miracle! Praise be to the Shining Ones!'

"It seemed but a moment ere the enthusiastic crowd had swept the *jogi* from his pedestal, and, crowned with jasmin chaplets, he was being borne high on men's shoulders to make a round of the various temples; while the keepers of the shrine swelled the tumult judiciously by cries of 'Oblations! offerings! The Shining Ones are present to-day!'

"In my excitement at the scene itself I had forgotten its cause, and was regretting the all too sudden ending of the spectacle, when Taylor touched me on the arm. 'The tragedy is about to begin! Look!'

"Following his eyes I saw, indeed, tragedy enough to make me forget what had gone before; yet I knew well that I did not, could not, fathom its depth or measure its breadth. Still, in a dim way I realised that the boy, standing as if turned to stone, had passed in those few moments from life as surely as if a physical death had struck him down; that he might indeed have been less forlorn had such been the case, since some one for their own sakes might then have given him six feet of earth. And now, even a cup of water, that last refuge of cold charity, was denied to him for ever, save from hands whose touch was to his Brahmanised soul worse than death. For him there was no future. For the old man who, burdened by the weeping girl, stood opposite him, there was no past. Nothing but a hell of defilement; of daily, hourly impurity for twelve long years. The thought was damnation.

"'Come, Premi! come!' he muttered, turning suddenly to leave the platform. 'This is no place for us now. Quick! we must cleanse ourselves from deadly sin--from deadly, deadly sin.'

"They had reached the steps leading down to the tank when the boy, with a sob like that of a wounded animal, flung himself in agonised entreaty at his master's feet. 'Oh, cleanse me, even me also, oh my father!'

"The old man shrank back instinctively; yet there was no anger, only a merciless decision in his face. 'Ask not the impossible! Thou art not alone impure; thou art uncleansable from birth--yea! for ever and ever. Come, Premi, come, my child.'

"I shall never forget the cry which echoed over the water, startling the pigeons from their evening rest amid the encircling trees. 'Uncleansable for ever and ever!' Then in wild appeal from earth to heaven he threw his arms skyward. 'Oh, Shining Ones! say I am the same Amra, the twice-born Amra, thy servant!'

"'Peace! blasphemer!' interrupted the Brahman sternly. 'There are no Shining Ones for such as thou. Go! lest they strike thee dead in wrath.'

"A momentary glimpse of a young face distraught by despair, of an old one firm in repudiation, and the platform lay empty of the passions which had played their parts on it as on a stage. Only from the distance came the discordant triumph of the *jogi's* procession.

"I besieged Taylor's superior knowledge by vain questions, to most of which he shook his head. 'How can I tell?' he said somewhat fretfully. 'The cord was manipulated in some way, of course. For all that, there may be truth in Gopi's story. There is generally the devil to pay if a Brahmani goes wrong, and she may have tried to save the boy's life by getting rid of him. If you want to know more, I'll send for Victor Emanuel. Five rupees will fetch some slight fraction of truth from the bottom of his well, and that, as a rule, is all we aliens can expect in these incidents.'

"So the old ruffian came and sat ostentatiously far from our contaminating influences in the attitude of a bronze Buddha, his mustaches curled to his eyebrows, his large lips wreathed in solemn smiles. 'It was a truly divine miracle,' he said blandly. 'Gopi, the *bikshu*, never makes mistakes, and performs neatly. Did the Presence observe how neatly? Within the cotton marking the Brahman came the hempen thread of the Kshatriya, inside again the woollen strand of the Vaisya; all three twice-born. But last of all, a strip of cowskin defiling the whole.'

"'Why cow-skin?' I asked in my ignorance. 'I always thought you held a cow sacred.'

"Victor Emanuel beamed approval. 'The little Presence is young, but intelligent. He will doubtless learn much if he questions the right people judiciously. He will grow wise like the big Presence, who knows nearly as much as we know about some things--*but not all!* The cow is sacred, so the skin telling of the misfortune of the cow is *anathema*. Yea, 'twas a divine miracle. The money of the pious will flow to make the holy fat; at least that is what the doctor *sahib* is thinking.'

"'Don't set up for occult power on the strength of guessing palpable truths,' replied Taylor; 'that sort of thing does not amuse me; but the little *sahib* wants to know how much truth there was in Gopi's story.'

"'Gopi knows,' retorted our friend with a grin. 'The Brahman saith the boy was gifted to him by a pious woman after the custom of thanksgiving. Gone five years old, wearing the sacred thread, versed in simple lore, intelligent, well-formed, as the ritual demands. Gopi saith the mother, his wife, was a bad walker, even to the length of public bazaars. Her people sought her for years, but she escaped them in big towns, and ere they found her she had gained safety for this boy by palming him off on Sukya. 'Twas easy for her, being a Brahmani. Of course they made her speak somewhat ere she fulfilled her life, but not the name of the anchorite she deceived. So Gopi, knowing from the mother's babbling of this mongrel's blasphemous name, and the vow of pilgrimage for the expiation of sins, hath come hither, led by the Spirit, every year. It is a tale of great virtue and edification.'

"'But the boy! the wretched boy?' I asked eagerly. Taylor raised his eyebrows and watched my reception of the *jog's* answer with a half-pitying smile.

"'Perhaps he will die; perhaps not. What does it matter? One born of such parents is dead to virtue from the beginning, and life without virtue is not life.'

"'He might try Amar-nâth and the remission of sins you believe in so firmly,' remarked Taylor, with another look at me.

"Victor Emanuel spat freely. 'There is no Amar-nâth for such as he, and the Presence knows that as well as I do. No remission at all, even if he found the Flower of Forgiveness, as the doctor *sahib* hopes to do.'

"'Upon my soul,' retorted Taylor impatiently, 'I believe the existence of the one is about as credible as the other. I shall have to swallow both if I chance upon either.'

"'That may be; but not for the boy Amra. He will die and be damned in due course.'

"That seemed to settle the question for others, but I was haunted by the boy's look when he heard the words, 'Thou art uncleansable for ever and ever.'

"'After all 'tis only a concentrated form of the feeling we all have at times,' remarked Taylor drily; 'even I should like to do away with a portion of my past. Besides, all religions claim more or

less a monopoly of repentance. They are no worse here than at home.'

"We journeyed slowly to Amar-nâth, watching the pilgrims pass us by on the road, but catching them up again each evening after long rambles over the hills in search of rare plants. It is three days' march, by rights, to Shisha Nag, or the Leaden Lake, where the pilgrimage begins in real earnest by the pilgrims, men, women, and children, divesting themselves of every stitch of raiment, and journeying stark naked through the snow and ice for two days--coming back, of course, clothed with righteousness. But Taylor becoming interested over fungi in the chestnut woods of Chandanwarra, we paused there to hunt up all sorts of deathly-looking growths due to disease and decay. I was not sorry; for one pilgrim possessed by frantic haste to shift his sins to some scapegoat is very much like another pilgrim with the same desire; besides, I grew tired of Victor Emanuel, who felt the cold extremely, and was in consequence seldom sober, and extremely loquacious. I thought I had never seen such a dreary place as Shisha Nag, though the sun shone brilliantly on its cliffs and glaciers. I think it must have been the irresponsiveness of the lake itself which deadened its beauties, for the water, surcharged with gypsum, lay in pale green stretches, refusing a single reflection of the hills which held it so carefully.

"The next march was awful; and in more than one place, half hidden by the flowers forcing their way through the snow, lay the corpses of pilgrims who had succumbed to the cold and the exposure.

"'Pneumonia in five out of six cases,' remarked Taylor casually. 'If it were not for the *churrus* (concoction of hemp) they drink, the mortality would be fearful. I wonder what Exeter Hall would say to getting drunk for purposes of devotion?'

"At Punjtârni we met the returning pilgrims; among others Victor, very sick and sorry for himself physically, but of intolerable moral strength. He told us, between the intervals of petitions for pills and potions, that the remaining fourteen miles to the Cave were unusually difficult, and had been singularly fatal that year. On hearing this, Taylor, knowing my dislike to horrors, proposed taking a path across the hills instead of keeping to the orthodox route. Owing to scarcity of water and fuel, the servants and tents could only go some five miles farther along the ravine, so this suggestion would involve no change of plan. He added that there would also be a greater chance of finding 'that blessed anemone.' I don't think I ever saw so much drunkenness or so much devotion as I saw that evening at Punjtârni. It was hard indeed to tell where the one began and the other ended; for excitement, danger, and privation lent their aid to drugs, and a sense of relief to both. The very cliffs and glaciers resounded with enthusiasm, and I saw Sukya and Premi taking their part with the rest as if nothing had happened.

"Taylor and I started alone next morning. We were to make a long round in search of the Flower of Forgiveness, and come back upon the Cave towards afternoon. The path, if path it could be called, was fearful. Taylor, however, was untiring, and at the slightest hint of hope would strike off up the most break-neck places, leaving me to rejoin him as best I could. Yet not a trace did we find of the anemone. Taylor grew fretful, and when we reached the snow slope leading to the Cave, he declared it would be sheer waste of time for him to go up.

"'Get rid of your sins, if you want to, by all means,' he said; 'I've seen photographs of the place, and it's a wretched imposture even as a spectacle. You have only to keep up the snow for a mile and turn to the left. You'll find me somewhere about these cliffs on your return; and don't be long, for the going before us is difficult.' So I left him poking into every crack and cranny.

"I could scarcely make up my mind if I was impressed or disappointed with the Cave. Its extreme insignificance was, it is true, almost ludicrous. Save for a patch of red paint and a shockingly bad attempt at a stone image of Siva's bull, there was nothing to distinguish this hollow in the rock from a thousand similar ones all over the Himalayas. But this very insignificance gave mystery to the fact that hundreds of thousands of the conscience-stricken had found consolation here. '*What went ye out into the wilderness to see?* As I stood for an instant at the entrance before retracing my steps, I could not but think that here was a wilderness indeed--a wilderness of treacherous snow and icebound rivers, peaked and piled up tumultuously like frozen waves against the darkening sky. The memory of Taylor's warning not to be late made me try what seemed a shorter and easier path than the one by which I had come; but ere long the usual difficulties of short cuts cropped up, and I had eventually to limp back to the slope with a badly cut ankle, which bled profusely despite my rough efforts at bandaging. The loss of blood was sufficient to make me feel quite sick and faint, so that it startled me to come suddenly on Taylor sooner than I expected. He was half kneeling, half sitting on the snow; his coat was off, and his face bent over something propped against his arm.

"'It's that boy,' he said shortly, as I came up. 'I found him just after you left, lying here--to rest, he says. It seems he has been making his way to the Cave ever since that day, without bite or sup, by the hills,--God knows how,--to avoid being turned back by the others. And now he is dying, and there's an end of it.'

"'The boy--not Amra!' I cried, bending in my turn.

"Sure enough, on Taylor's arm, with Taylor's coat over his wasted body, lay the young disciple. His great, luminous eyes looked out of a face whence even death could not drive the beauty, and his breath came in laboured gasps.

"'Brandy! I have some here,' I suggested in hot haste, moved to the idiotic suggestion by that horror of standing helpless which besets us all in presence of the Destroyer.

"Taylor looked at the boy with a grave smile and shook his head. 'To begin with, he wouldn't touch it; besides, he is past all that sort of thing. No one could help him now.' He paused, shifting the weight a little on his arm.

"'The Presence will grow tired holding me,' gasped the young voice feebly. 'If the *sahib* will put a stone under my head and cover me with some snow, I will be able to crawl on by and by when I am rested. For it is close--quite close.'

"'Very close,' muttered the doctor under his breath. Suddenly he looked up at me, saying in a half-apologetic way, 'I was wondering if you and I couldn't get him up there--to Amar-nâth I mean. Life has been hard on him; he deserves an easy death.'

"'Of course we can,' I cried in a rush of content at the suggestion, as I hobbled round to get to the other side, and so help the lad to his legs.

"'Hollo,' asked Taylor, with a quick professional glance, 'what have you done to your ankle? Sit down and let me overhaul it.'

"In vain I made light of it, in vain I appealed to him. He peremptorily forbade my stirring for another hour, asserting that I had injured a small artery, and without caution might find difficulty in reaching the tents, as it would be impossible for him to help me much on the sort of ground over which we had to travel.

"'But the boy, Taylor!--the boy!' I pleaded. 'It would be awful to leave him here.'

"'Who said he was to be left?' retorted the doctor crossly. 'I'm going to carry him up as soon as I've finished bandaging your leg. Don't be in such a blessed hurry.'

"'Carry him! You can't do it up that slope, strong as you are, Taylor--I know you can't.'

"'Can't?' he echoed, as he stood up from his labours. 'Look at him and say can't again--if you can.'

"I looked and saw that the boy, but half conscious, yet restored to the memory of his object by the touch of the snow on which Taylor had laid him while engaged in bandaging my foot, had raised himself painfully on his hands and knees, and was struggling upwards, blindly, doggedly.

"'Damn it all,' continued the doctor fiercely, 'isn't that sight enough to haunt a man if he doesn't try? Besides, I may find that precious flower,--who knows?'

"As he spoke he stooped with the gentleness, not so much of sympathy, as of long practice in suffering, over the figure which, exhausted by its brief effort, already lay prostrate on the snow.

"'What is--the Presence--going--to do?' moaned Amra doubtfully, as he felt the strong arms close round him.

"'You and I are going to find the remission of sins together at Amar-nâth,' replied the Presence with a bitter laugh.

"The boy's head fell back on the doctor's shoulder as if accustomed to the resting-place. 'Amar-nâth!' he murmured. 'Yes! I am Amar-nâth.'

"So I sat there helpless, and watched them up the slope. Every slip, every stumble, seemed as if it were my own. I clenched my hands and set my teeth as if I too had part in the supreme effort, and when the straining figure passed out of sight I hid my face and tried not to think. It was the longest hour I ever spent before Taylor's voice holloing from the cliff above roused me to the certainty of success.

"'And the boy?' I asked eagerly.

"'Dead by this time, I expect,' replied the doctor shortly. 'Come on,--there's a good fellow,--we haven't a moment to lose. I must look again for the flower to-morrow.'

"But letters awaiting our return to camp recalled him to duty on account of cholera in the regiment; so there was an end of anemone hunting. The 101st suffered terribly, and Taylor was in consequence hotter than ever over experiments. The result you know."

"Yes, poor fellow! but the anemone? I don't understand how it came here."

My friend paused. "That is the odd thing. I was looking after the funeral and all that, for Taylor and I were great friends--he left me that herbarium in memory of our time in Cashmere. Well, when I went over to the house about an hour before to see everything done properly, his bearer brought me one of those little flat straw baskets the natives use. It had been left during my absence, he said, by a young Brahman, who assured him that it contained something which the great doctor *sahib* had been very anxious to possess, and which was now sent by some one to

whom he had been very kind.

"'You told him the *sahib* was dead, I suppose?' I asked.

"'This slave informed him that the master had gained freedom, but he replied it was no matter, as all his task was this.' On opening the basket I found a gourd such as the disciples carry round for alms, and in it, planted among gypsum debris, was that anemone; or rather that is a part of it, for I put some in Taylor's coffin."

"Ah! I presume the *gosain*--Victor Emanuel, I think you called him--sent the plant; he knew of the doctor's desire?"

"Perhaps. The bearer said the Brahman was a very handsome boy, very fair, dressed in the usual black antelope skin of the disciple. It is a queer story anyhow--is it not?"

HARVEST.

[Respectfully dedicated to our law-makers in India, who, by giving to the soldier-peasants of the Punjab the novel right of alienating their ancestral holdings, are fast throwing the land, and with it the balance of power, into the hands of money-grubbers; thus reducing those who stood by us in our time of trouble to the position of serfs.]

"*Ai!* Daughter of thy grandmother," muttered old Jaimul gently, as one of his yoke wavered, making the handle waver also. The offender was a barren buffalo doomed temporarily to the plough, in the hopes of inducing her to look more favourably on the first duty of the female sex, so she started beneath the unaccustomed goad.

"*Ari!* sister, fret not," muttered Jaimul again, turning from obscure abuse to palpable flattery, as being more likely to gain his object; and once more the tilted soil glided between his feet, traced straight by his steady hand. In that vast expanse of bare brown field left by or waiting for the plough, each new furrow seemed a fresh diameter of the earth-circle which lay set in the bare blue horizon--a circle centring always on Jaimul and his plough. A brown dot for the buffalo, a white dot for the ox, a brown and white dot for the old peasant with his lanky brown limbs and straight white drapery, his brown face, and long white beard. Brown, and white, and blue, with the promise of harvest sometime if the blue was kind. That was all Jaimul knew or cared. The empire beyond, hanging on the hope of harvest, lay far from his simple imaginings; and yet he, the old peasant with his steady hand of patient control, held the reins of government over how many million square miles? That is the province of the Blue Book, and Jaimul's blue book was the sky.

"Bitter blue sky with no fleck of a cloud,
Ho! brother ox! make the plough speed.
[*Ai! soorin!* straight, I say!]
'Tis the usurers' bellies wax fat and proud
When poor folk are in need."

The rude guttural chant following these silent, earth-deadened footsteps was the only sound breaking the stillness of the wide plain.

"Sky dappled grey like a partridge's breast,
Ho! brother ox! drive the plough deep.
[Steady, my sister, steady!]
The peasants work, but the usurers rest
Till harvest's ripe to reap."

So on and on interminably, the chant and the furrow, the furrow and the chant, both bringing the same refrain of flattery and abuse, the same antithesis--the peasant and the usurer face to face in conflict, and above them both the fateful sky, changeless or changeful as it chooses.

The sun climbed up and up till the blue hardened into brass, and the mere thought of rain seemed lost in the blaze of light. Yet Jaimul, as he finally unhitched his plough, chanted away in serene confidence--

"Merry drops slanting from west to east,
Ho! brother ox! drive home the wain;
'Tis the usurer's belly that gets the least
When Râm sends poor folk rain."

The home whither he drove the lagging yoke was but a whitish-brown mound on the bare earth-circle, not far removed from an ant-hill to alien eyes; for all that, home to the uttermost. Civilisation, education, culture could produce none better. A home bright with the welcome of women, the laughter of children. Old Kishnu, mother of them all, wielding a relentless despotism tempered by profound affection over every one save her aged husband. Pertâbi, widow of the eldest son, but saved from degradation in this life and damnation in the next by the tall lad whose grasp had already closed on his grandfather's plough-handle. Târadevi, whose soldier-husband was away guarding some scientific or unscientific frontier, while she reared up, in the ancestral home, a tribe of sturdy youngsters to follow in his footsteps. Fighting and ploughing, ploughing and fighting; here was life epitomised for these long-limbed, grave-eyed peasants whose tongues never faltered over the shibboleth which showed their claim to courage.[3]

The home itself lay bare for the most part to the blue sky; only a few shallow outhouses, half room, half verandah, giving shelter from noon-day heat or winter frosts. The rest was courtyard, serving amply for all the needs of the household. In one corner a pile of golden chaff, ready for the milch kine which came in to be fed from the mud mangers ranged against the wall; in another a heap of fuel, and the tall, beehive-like mud receptacles for grain. On every side stores of something brought into existence by the plough--corn-cobs for husking, millet-stalks for the cattle, cotton awaiting deft fingers and the lacquered spinning-wheels which stand, cocked on end, against the wall. Târadevi sits on the white sheet spread beneath the quern, while her eldest daughter, a girl about ten years of age, lends slight aid to the revolving stones whence the coarse flour falls ready for the mid-day meal. Pertâbi, down by the grain-bunkers, rakes more wheat from the funnel-like opening into her flat basket, and as she rises flings a handful to the pigeons sidling on the wall. A fluttering of white wings, a glint of sunlight on opaline necks, while the children cease playing to watch their favourites tumble and strut over the feast. Even old Kishnu looks up from her preparation of curds without a word of warning against waste; for to be short of grain is beyond her experience. Wherefore was the usurer brought into the world save to supply grain in advance when the blue sky sided with capital against labour for a dry year or two?

"The land is ready," said old Jaimul over his pipe. "'Tis time for the seed, therefore I will seek Anunt Râm at sunset and set my seal to the paper."

That was how the transaction presented itself to his accustomed eyes. Seed grain in exchange for yet another seal to be set in the long row which he and his forbears had planted regularly, year by year, in the usurer's field of accounts. As for the harvests of such sowings? Bah! there never were any. A real crop of solid, hard, red wheat was worth them all, and that came sometimes--might come any time if the blue sky was kind. He knew nothing of Statutes of Limitation or judgments of the Chief Court, and his inherited wisdom drew a broad line of demarcation between paper and plain facts.

Anunt Râm, the usurer, however, was of another school. A comparatively young man, he had brought into his father's ancestral business the modern selfishness which laughs to scorn all considerations save that for Number One. He and his forbears had made much out of Jaimul and his fellows; but was that any reason against making more, if more was to be made?

And more *was* indubitably to be made if Jaimul and his kind were reduced to the level of labourers. That handful of grain, for instance, thrown so recklessly to the pigeons--that might be the usurer's, and so might the plenty which went to build up the long, strong limbs of Târadevi's tribe of young soldiers--idle young scamps who thrashed the usurer's boys as diligently during play-time as they were beaten by those clever, weedy lads during school-hours.

"Seed grain," he echoed sulkily to the old peasant's calm demand. "Sure last harvest I left thee more wheat than most men in my place would have done; for the account grows, O Jaimul! and the land is mortgaged to the uttermost."

"Mayhap! but it must be sown for all that, else *thou* wilt suffer as much as I. So quit idle words, and give the seed as thou hast since time began. What do I know of accounts who can neither read nor write? 'Tis thy business, not mine."

"'Tis not my business to give ought for nought--"

"For nought," broke in Jaimul, with the hoarse chuckle of the peasant availing himself of a time-worn joke. "Thou canst add that nought to thy figures, O *bunniah-ji!*[4] So bring the paper and have done with words. If Râm sends rain--and the omens are auspicious--thou canst take all but food and jewels for the women."

"Report saith thy house is rich enough in them already," suggested the usurer after a pause.

Jaimul's big white eyebrows met over his broad nose. "What then, *bunniah-ji?*" he asked haughtily.

Anunt Râm made haste to change the subject, whereat Jaimul, smiling softly, told the usurer that maybe more jewels would be needed with next seed grain, since if the auguries were once more propitious, the women purposed bringing home his grandson's bride ere another year had sped. The usurer smiled an evil smile.

"Set thy seal to this also," he said, when the seed grain had been measured; "the rules demand it. A plague, say I, on all these new-fangled papers the *sahib-logue* ask of us. Look you! how I have to pay for the stamps and fees; and then you old ones say we new ones are extortionate. We must live, O *zemindar-ji!*[5] even as thou livest."

"Live!" retorted the old man with another chuckle. "Wherefore not! The land is good enough for you and for me. There is no fault in the land!"

"Ay! it is good enough for me and for you," echoed the usurer slowly. He inverted the pronouns--that was all.

So Jaimul, as he had done ever since he could remember, walked over the bare plain with noiseless feet, and watched the sun flash on the golden grain as it flew from his thin brown fingers. And once again the guttural chant kept time to his silent steps.

"Wheat grains grow to wheat,
And the seed of a tare to tare;
Who knows if man's soul will meet
Man's body to wear.

Great Râm, grant me life
From the grain of a golden deed;
Sink not my soul in the strife
To wake as a weed."

After that his work in the fields was over. Only at sunrise and sunset his tall, gaunt figure stood out against the circling sky as he wandered through the sprouting wheat waiting for the rain which never came. Not for the first time in his long life of waiting, so he took the want calmly, soberly.

"It is a bad year," he said, "the next will be better. For the sake of the boy's marriage I would it had been otherwise; but Anunt Râm must advance the money. It is his business."

Whereat Jodha, the youngest son, better versed than his father in new ways, shook his head doubtfully. "Have a care of Anunt, O *baba-ji*,"[6] he suggested with diffidence. "Folk say he is sharper than ever his father was."

"'Tis a trick sons have, or think they have, nowadays," retorted old Jaimul wrathfully. "Anunt can wait for payment as his fathers waited. God knows the interest is enough to stand a dry season or two."

In truth fifty per cent, and payment in kind at the lowest harvest rates, with a free hand in regard to the cooking of accounts, should have satisfied even a usurer's soul. But Anunt Râm wanted that handful of grain for the pigeons and the youngsters' mess of pottage. He wanted the land, in fact, and so the long row of dibbled-in seals dotting the unending scroll of accounts began to sprout and bear fruit. Drought gave them life, while it brought death to many a better seed.

"Not give the money for the boy's wedding!" shrilled old Kishnu six months after in high displeasure. "Is the man mad? When the fields are the best in all the country side."

"True enough, O wife! but he says the value under these new rules the *sahib-logue* make is gone already. That he must wait another harvest, or have a new seal of me."

"Is that all, O Jaimul Singh! and thou causing my liver to melt with fear? A seal--what is a seal or two more against the son of thy son's marriage?"

"'Tis a new seal," muttered Jaimul uneasily, "and I like not new things. Perhaps 'twere better to wait the harvest."

"Wait the harvest and lose the auspicious time the *purohit*[7] hath found written in the stars? *Ai*, Târadevi! *Ai!* Pertâbi! there is to be no marriage, hark you! The boy's strength is to go for nought, and the bride is to languish alone because the father of his father is afraid of a usurer! *Haè, Haè!*"

The women wept the easy tears of their race, mingled with half-real, half-pretended fears lest the Great Ones might resent such disregard of their good omens--the old man sitting silent meanwhile, for there is no tyranny like the tyranny of those we love. Despite all this his native shrewdness held his tenderness in check. They would get over it, he told himself, and a good harvest would do wonders--ay! even the wonders which the *purohit* was always finding in the skies. Trust a good fee for that! So he hardened his heart, went back to Anunt Râm, and told him

that he had decided on postponing the marriage. The usurer's face fell. To be so near the seal which would make it possible for him to foreclose the mortgages, and yet to fail! He had counted on this marriage for years; the blue sky itself had fought for him so far, and now--what if the coming harvest were a bumper?

"But I will seal for the seed grain," said old Jaimul; "I have done that before, and I will do it again--we know that bargain of old."

Anunt Râm closed his pen-tray with a snap. "There is no seed grain for you, *baba-ji*, this year either," he replied calmly.

Ten days afterwards, Kishnu, Pertâbi, and Târadevi were bustling about the courtyard with the untiring energy which fills the Indian woman over the mere thought of a wedding, and Jaimul, out in the fields, was chanting as he scattered the grain into the furrows--

"Wrinkles and seams and sears
On the face of our mother earth;
There are ever sorrows and tears
At the gates of birth."

The mere thought of the land lying fallow had been too much for him; so safe in the usurer's strong-box lay a deed with the old man's seal sitting cheek by jowl beside Anunt Râm's brand-new English signature. And Jaimul knew, in a vague, unrestful way, that this harvest differed from other harvests, in that more depended upon it. So he wandered oftener than ever over the brown expanse of field where a flush of green showed that Mother Earth had done her part, and was waiting for Heaven to take up the task.

The wedding fire-balloons rose from the courtyard, and drifted away to form constellations in the cloudless sky; the sound of wedding drums and pipes disturbed the stillness of the starlit nights, and still day by day the green shoots grew lighter and lighter in colour because the rain came not. Then suddenly, like a man's hand, a little cloud! "Merry drops slanting from west to the east;" merrier by far to Jaimul's ears than all the marriage music was that low rumble from the canopy of purple cloud, and the discordant scream of the peacock telling of the storm to come. Then in the evening, when the setting sun could only send a bar of pale primrose light between the solid purple and the solid brown, what joy to pick a dry-shod way along the boundary ridges and see the promise of harvest doubled by the reflection of each tender green spikelet in the flooded fields! The night settled down dark, heavenly dark, with a fine spray of steady rain in the old, weather-beaten face, as it set itself towards home.

The blue sky was on the side of labour this time, and, during the next month or so, Târadevi's young soldiers made mud pies, and crowed more lustily than ever over the *bunniah's* boys.

Then the silvery beard began to show in the wheat, and old Jaimul laughed aloud in the fulness of his heart.

"That is an end of the new seal," he said boastfully, as he smoked his pipe in the village square. "It is a poor man's harvest, and no mistake."

But Anunt Râm was silent. The April sun had given some of its sunshine to the yellowing crops before he spoke.

"I can wait no longer for my money, O *baba-ji!*" he said; "the three years are nigh over, and I must defend myself."

"What three years?" asked Jaimul, in perplexity.

"The three years during which I can claim my own according to the *sahib-logue's* rule. You must pay, or I must sue."

"Pay before harvest! What are these fool's words? Of course I will pay in due time; hath not great Râm sent me rain to wash out the old writing?"

"But what of the new one, *baba-ji?*--the cash lent on permission to foreclose the mortgages?"

"If the harvest failed--if it failed," protested Jaimul quickly. "And I knew it could not fail. The stars said so, and great Râm would not have it so."

"That is old-world talk!" sneered Anunt. "We do not put that sort of thing in the bond. You sealed it, and I must sue."

"What good to sue ere harvest? What money have I? But I will pay good grain when it comes, and the paper can grow as before."

Anunt Râm sniggered.

"What good, O *baba-ji?* Why, the land will be mine, and I can take, not what you give me, but

what I choose. For the labourer his hire, and the rest for me."

"Thou art mad!" cried Jaimul, but he went back to his fields with a great fear at his heart--a fear which sent him again to the usurer's ere many days were over.

"Here are my house's jewels," he said briefly, "and the mare thou hast coveted these two years. Take them, and write off my debt till harvest."

Anunt Râm smiled again.

"It shall be part payment of the acknowledged claim," he said; "let the Courts decide on the rest."

"After the harvest?"

"Ay, after the harvest; in consideration of the jewels."

Anunt Râm kept his word, and the fields were shorn of their crop ere the summons to attend the District Court was brought to the old peasant.

"By the Great Spirit who judges all it is a lie!" That was all he could say as the long, carefully-woven tissue of fraud and cunning blinded even the eyes of a justice biassed in his favour. The records of our Indian law-courts teem with such cases--cases where even equity can do nothing against the evidence of pen and paper. No need to detail the strands which formed the net. The long array of seals had borne fruit at last, fiftyfold, sixtyfold, a hundredfold--a goodly harvest for the usurer.

"Look not so glum, friend," smiled Anunt Râm, as they pushed old Jaimul from the Court at last, dazed, but still vehemently protesting. "Thou and Jodha thy son shall till the land as ever, seeing thou art skilled in such work, but there shall be no idlers; and the land, mark you, is *mine*, not thine."

A sudden gleam of furious hate sprang to the strong old face, but died away as quickly as it came.

"Thou liest," said Jaimul; "I will appeal. The land is mine. It hath been mine and my fathers' under the king's pleasure since time began. Kings, ay, and queens, for that matter, are not fools, to give good land to the *bunniah's* belly. Can a *bunniah* plough?"

Yet as he sat all day about the court-house steps awaiting some legal detail or other, doubt even of his own incredulity came over him. He had often heard of similar misfortunes to his fellows, but somehow the possibility of such evil appearing in his own life had never entered his brain. And what would Kishnu say--after all these years, these long years of content?

The moon gathering light as the sun set shone full on the road, as the old man, with downcast head, made his way across the level plain to the mud hovel which had been a true home to him and his for centuries. His empty hands hung at his sides, and the fingers twitched nervously as if seeking something. On either side the bare stubble, stretching away from the track which led deviously to the scarce discernible hamlets here and there. Not a soul in sight, but every now and again a glimmer of light showing where some one was watching the heaps of new threshed grain upon the threshing-floors.

And then a straighter thread of path leading right upon his own fields and the village beyond. What was that? A man riding before him. The blood leapt through the old veins, and the old hands gripped in upon themselves. So he--that liar riding ahead--was to have the land, was he? Riding the mare too, while he, Jaimul, came behind afoot--yet for all that gaining steadily with long, swinging stride on the figure ahead. A white figure on a white horse like death; or was the avenger behind beneath the lank folds of drapery which fluttered round the walker?

The land! No! He should never have the land. How could he? The very idea was absurd. Jaimul, thinking thus, held his head erect and his hands relaxed their grip. He was close on the rider now; and just before him, clear in the moonlight, rose the boundary mark of his fields--a loose pile of sunbaked clods, hardened by many a dry year of famine to the endurance of stone. Beside it, the shallow whence they had been dug, showing a gleam of water still held in the stiff clay. The mare paused, straining at the bridle for a drink, and Jaimul almost at her heels paused also, involuntarily, mechanically. For a moment they stood thus, a silent white group in the moonlight; then the figure on the horse slipped to the ground and moved a step forward. Only one step, but that was within the boundary. Then, above the even wheeze of the thirsty beast, rose a low chuckle as the usurer stooped for a handful of soil and let it glide through his fingers.

"It is good ground! Ay, ay--none better." They were his last words. In fierce passion of love, hate, jealousy, and protection, old Jaimul closed on his enemy, and found something to grip with his steady old hands. Not the plough-handle this time, but a throat, a warm, living throat where you could feel the blood swelling in the veins beneath your fingers. Down almost without a struggle, the old face above the young one, the lank knee upon the broad body. And now, quick! for something to slay withal, ere age tired in its contest with youth and strength. There, ready since all time, stood the landmark, and one clod after another snatched from it fell on the

upturned face with a dull thud. Fell again and again, crashed and broke to crumbling soil. Good soil! Ay! none better! Wheat might grow in it and give increase fortyfold, sixtyfold, ay, a hundredfold. Again, again, and yet again, with dull insistence till there was a shuddering sigh, and then silence. Jaimul stood up quivering from the task and looked over his fields. They were at least free from that *thing* at his feet; for what part in this world's harvest could belong to the ghastly figure with its face beaten to a jelly, which lay staring up into the over-arching sky? So far, at any rate, the business was settled for ever, and in so short a time that the mare had scarcely slaked her thirst, and still stood with head down, the water dripping from her muzzle. The *thing* would never ride her again either. Half-involuntarily he stepped to her side and loosened the girth.

"*Ari!* sister," he said aloud, "thou hast had enough. Go home."

The docile beast obeyed his well-known voice, and as her echoing amble died away Jaimul looked at his blood-stained hands and then at the formless face at his feet. There was no home for him, and yet he was not sorry, or ashamed, or frightened--only dazed at the hurry of his own act. Such things had to be done sometimes when folk were unjust. They would hang him for it, of course, but he had at least made his protest, and done his deed as good men and true should do when the time came. So he left the horror staring up into the sky and made his way to the threshing-floor, which lay right in the middle of his fields. How white the great heaps of yellow corn showed in the moonlight, and how large! His heart leapt with a fierce joy at the sight. Here was harvest indeed! Some one lay asleep upon the biggest pile; and his stern old face relaxed into a smile as, stooping over the careless sentinel, he found it was his grandson. The boy would watch better as he grew older, thought Jaimul, as he drew his cotton plaid gently over the smooth round limbs outlined among the yielding grain, lest the envious moon might covet their promise of beauty.

"Son of my son! Son of my son!" he murmured over and over again, as he sat down to watch out the night beside his corn for the last time. Yes, for the last time. At dawn the deed would be discovered; they would take him, and he would not deny his own handiwork. Why should he? The midnight air of May was hot as a furnace, and as he wiped the sweat from his forehead it mingled with the dust and blood upon his hands. He looked at them with a curious smile before he lay back among the corn. Many a night he had watched the slow stars wheeling to meet the morn, but never by a fairer harvest than this.

The boy at his side stirred in his sleep. "Son of my son! Son of my son!" came the low murmur again. Ay! and his son after him again, if the woman said true. It had always been so. Father and son, father and son, father--and son--for ever--and ever--and ever.

So, lulled by the familiar thought, the old man fell asleep beside the boy, and the whole bare expanse of earth and sky seemed empty save for them. No! there was something else surely. Down on the hard white threshing-floor--was that a branch or a fragment of rope? Neither, for it moved deviously hither and thither, raising a hooded head now and again as if seeking something; for all its twists and turns bearing steadily towards the sleepers; past the boy, making him shift uneasily as the cold coil touched his arms; swifter now as it drew nearer the scent, till it found what it sought upon the old man's hands.[8]

"*Ari*, sister! straight, I say, straight!" murmured the old ploughman in his sleep, as his grip strengthened over something that wavered in his steady clasp. Was that the prick of the goad? Sure if it bit so deep upon the sister's hide no wonder she started. He must keep his grip for men's throats when sleep was over--when this great sleep was over.

The slow stars wheeled, and when the morn brought Justice, it found old Jaimul dead among his corn and left him there. But the women washed the stains of blood and sweat mingled with soil and seed grains from his hands before the wreath of smoke from his funeral pyre rose up to make a white cloud no bigger than a man's hand upon the bitter blue sky--a cloud that brought gladness to no heart.

The usurer's boys, it is true, forced the utmost from the land, and sent all save bare sustenance across the seas; but the home guided by Jaimul's unswerving hand was gone, the Târadevi's tribe of budding soldiers drifted away to learn the lawlessness born of change. Perhaps the yellow English gold which came into the country in return for the red Indian wheat more than paid for these trivial losses. Perhaps it did not. That is a question which the next Mutiny must settle.

FOR THE FAITH.

I.

An old man dreaming of a past day and night as he sat waiting, and these were his dreams.

* * * * *

Darkness, save for the light of the stars in the sky and the flare of blazing roof-trees on earth. Two shadowy figures out in the open, and through the parched silence of the May night a man's voice feeble, yet strenuous in appeal.

"Dhurm Singh?"

"*Huzoor!*"

The kneeling figure bent closer over the other, waiting.

"The *mem sahiba*, Dhurm Singh."

"*Huzoor--dhurm nâl*."[9]

Then silence, broken only by the long howl of jackals gathering before their time round that scene of mutiny and murder.

* * * * *

Darkness once more. The darkness of daylight shut out by prisoning walls. The sweltering heat of July oozing through the shot-cracked walls; the horrors of starvation, and siege, and sickness round two dim figures. And once again a strenuous voice--this time a woman's.

"Dhurm Singh!"

"*Huzoor*."

The answer came as before--broad, soft, guttural, in the accent of the north--

"Sonny *baba*, Dhurm Singh!"

"*Huzoor--dhurm nâl*."

Then silence, broken only by the *whist-ch-t* of a wandering bullet against the wall of the crumbling fort, where one more victim had found peace.

* * * * *

Both the May night and the July day were in old Dhurm Singh's thoughts as he sat on his heels looking out from the Apollo Bunder at Bombay across the Black Water, waiting, after long years, for Sonny *baba's* ship to loom over the level horizon. A stranger figure among the slight, smooth coolies busy around him with bales and belaying pins than he would have been among the dockers at Limehouse. Tall, gaunt, his long white beard parted over the chin and bound backwards over his ears, his broad mustache spreading straight under his massive nose, his level eyebrows like a white streak between the open brown forehead and the open brown eyes. A faded red tunic, empty of the left arm, a solitary medal on the breast, and above the unseen coils of white hair--long as a woman's--the high wound turban bearing the sacred steel quoit of the Sikh devotee.

Such was Dhurm Singh, *Akâli*; in other words, Lion of the Faith and member of the Church Militant. Pensioner to boot for an anna or so a day to a Government which he had also served *dhurm nâl* as he had served his dead captain, his dead mistress, and, last of all, Sonny *baba!*

Twenty years ago. Yes! twenty years since he had answered those strenuous appeals by his favourite word-play on his own name. He had used it for many another promise during those long years; as a rule, truthfully. For Dhurm Singh, as a rule, did things *dhurm nâl*--partly because a

slow, invincible tenacity of purpose made all chopping and changing distasteful, partly because fidelity to the master is sucked in with the mother's milk of the Sikh race: very little, it is to be feared, from conscious virtue. Twenty years ago he had carried Sonny *baba* through the jungles by night on his unhurt arm, and hidden as best he could in the tiger-grass by day, because of his promise. And now, as he sat waiting for Sonny *baba* to come sailing over the edge of his world again, the broad simple face expanded into smiles at the memory. He passed by all the stress and strains of that unforgotten flight in favour of a little yellow head nestling back in alarm against the bloodstains on the old tunic, when the white *mems* in the big cantonment of refuge had held out their arms to the child.

Sonny *baba* had known his friends in those days; ay! and he had remembered them all these years: he and the *mem's* sister, who had taken charge of the boy in the foreign land across the Black Waters whence the masters came--a gracious Miss who wrote regularly once a year to ex-*duffadar* Dhurm Singh, giving him the last news of Sonny *baba* and as regularly urging her correspondent to safeguard himself against certain damnation by becoming an infidel. For this, briefly, crudely, was the recipient's view of the matter as he sat staring at the little picture texts and tracts in the Punjâbi character which invariably accompanied the letters. They puzzled him, those picture cards in the sacred characters which were printed so beautifully in the far off land by people who knew nothing of him or his people, and who yet wrote better than any *mohunt*.[10] Puzzled him in more ways than one, since duty and desire divided as to the method of their disposal. Respect for the *captân-sahib*, whom he had left lying dead at the back of the native lines on that May night, forbade his destroying them; respect for his own religious profession forbade his disseminating the pictures, irrespective of the letterpress, as playthings among the village children. So he tied them up in a bundle with his pension papers, and kept them in the breast pocket of the old tunic under the bloodstains and the solitary medal which was beginning to fray through its parti-coloured ribbon--an odd item in that costume of a Sikh devotee which he had assumed when the final loss of his arm forced him into peace and a pension. As a rule, however, the tunic was hidden under the orthodox blue and white garments matching the turban, just as the huge steel bracelets on his arms matched the steel quoit on his head; but on this day loyalty to the dead had spoken in favour of the old uniform. It may seem a strange choice, this of devoteeship, but to the old swash-buckler it was infinitely more amusing, even in these degenerate days when *Akâli-dom* had lost half its power, to go swaggering about from fair to festival, from festival to fair, representing the Church Militant, than to lounge about the village watching the agricultural members of the family cultivate the ancestral lands. They did it admirably without his help, as they had done it always; so Dhurm Singh, at a loose end now legitimate strife was over, took to cultivating his hair with baths of buttermilk instead, adopted the quoit and the bracelets, and used the most pious of Sikh oaths as he watched the wrestlers wrestle, or played singlestick for the honour of God and the old regiment. And there were other advantages in the profession. A man might take a more than reasonable amount of opium occasionally without laying himself open to a heavier accusation than that of religious enthusiasm; since opium is part of the *Akâli's* stock in trade.

As he sat among the tarred ropes with his back against a consignment of beer and rum for the British soldier, he broke off quite a large corner of the big black lump he kept in the same pocket with the tracts, and swallowed it whole. Sonny *baba's* ship was not due, they told him, for some hours to come, so there would be time for quiet dreams both of past and future. The latter somewhat confused, since the Miss-*sahib's* letters had not always been adequately translated by the village schoolmaster. Only this was sure: Sonny *baba* was three and twenty, and he was coming out to Hindustan once more as an officer in the great army. In fact, he was a *captân* already, which was big promotion for his few years. So Dhurm Singh--who to say sooth, was becoming somewhat tired of the Church Militant now that younger men began to beat him at singlestick--had returned to the old allegiance and made his way down country, like many another old servant, to meet his master's son and take service with him. You see them often, these old, anxious-looking retainers, waiting on the Apollo Bunder, or coming aboard in the steam launches with wistful, expectant faces.

And some beardless youth, fresh from Eton or Harrow, says with a laugh, "By George! are you old Munnoo or Bunnoo? Here! look after my traps, will you?" And the traps are duly looked after, while the Philosophical Radical on the rampage is taking the opportunity afforded by baggage parade to record in his valuable diary the pained surprise at the want of touch between the rulers and the ruled, which is, alas! his first impression of India. In all probability it will be his last also, since it is conceivable that both rulers and ruled may be glad to get rid of him on the approach of the hot weather. Mosquitoes are troublesome, and cholera is disconcerting, but they are bearable beside the man who invariably knows the answers to his own questions before he asks them.

Dhurm Singh's dreams, however, if confused, were pleasant; full of strong meats and drinks, and men in buckram. He could not, of course, serve the Sirkâr again with the chance of *batta* and *loot*, but he could serve the *chota sahib* and wear a badge. After all, a badge-wearer had his opportunities of hectoring. And then, how he could talk round the camp fires! What tales he could tell!--bearing in mind, of course, the advancement of God and the *Gurus*. He fell asleep finally in the sunshine, blissfully content. The tide ebbed in the backwaters, the guardship lay white and trim in the open, the tram horses clattered up and down, the Royal Yacht Club pennant flew out against the blue sky, a match was being played on the links hard by, and the very coolies, as they hauled and heaved, used a polyglot of sailors' slang. Only the palm-trees on the point over the bay gave an Oriental touch to the scene.

* * * * *

"Dhurm Singh! my dear, dear old friend! Look, comrades, this is the man who carried me to safety in his arms even as the Good Shepherd carries His lambs."

The speech had that unreal sound which is the curse of the premeditated, except in the mouth of a born actor, which Sonny *baba* was not. And yet the young curves of the lips quivered. Perhaps the commonplace exclamation of the British boy mentioned before would have come more naturally to them, but Staff-captain Sonny *baba* of the Salvation Army was on parade, and bound to keep up his character. Nevertheless there was no lack of warmth in the grip he got of the old man's reluctant hand.

"*Huzoor*," faltered Dhurm Singh, taken aback at this condescension, and letting the sword he was about to present fall back on its belt with a clatter. The fact being that the said sword had been an occasion of much mental distress; as an actual ex-*duffadar* it was irregular, but as a possible bodyguard it was strictly *de rigueur*. Perhaps, however, times had changed in this as in other ways during those twenty years. The very uniform worn by the score or so of men drawn up on the deck was strange; and what did that squad of *mem sahibs* mean? Their dress did not seem so strange to the old *Akâli*, since in those palmy days before the Mutiny the fashions were not so far removed from the costume of a Salvation lass; but the tambourines!

"Come and speak to the General," said Sonny *baba* somewhat hurriedly. He spoke in English; but just as the formula, "Look after my traps" is "understanded of the common people" at once, so the word "General" brought a relieved comprehension to the old Sikh's face. There were blessed frogs on this one's coat also, which, like the word Mesopotamia, were charged with consolation.

The General looked at him with that curious philanthropic smile which, while it welcomes the object, has a kind of circumambient beam of mutual congratulation for all spectators of the benevolence.

"You have seen service, my good old friend," he exclaimed in fluent Urdu, as he pointed with a declamatory wave of his hand to the solitary medal, "but it was poor service to what we offer you now. Come to us, be our first-fruit, and help to carry the colours of the Great Army in the van of the fight."

A speech meant palpably for the gallery.

Dhurm Singh, however, took it at attention, and saluted--

"Pension-*wallah*, *Huzoor*, unfit for duty," he replied with modest brevity, indicating his empty sleeve.

The General caught at the occasion for even greater unction with a complacency which could not be concealed.

"The Great Army is recruited from those who are unfit for duty, from those who are sinners. Is it not so, comrades? Are we not all maimed, halt, blind, yet entering into life?"

"Hallelujah! Hallelujah!" cried the company, bursting into the refrain of a hymn, in which Sonny *baba* joined with an angelic voice. The voice, in fact, was largely responsible for the position in which he found himself. The old swash-buckler's eyes grew moist as he looked at him, thinking that he was the very image, for sure, of his dead father, who had been the pride of the regiment. Nevertheless the effervescence of song left the old man still deprecating and fumbling in his tunic.

"The General-*sahib* mistakes; these are my *pinson* papers."

That proved a climax. When, just as you are setting foot on a country which you have sworn to conquer, an old warrior comes aboard and produces a bundle of Scripture texts and Salvation hymns out of his innermost breast pocket, naturally nothing is left but to *enthuse*. What followed Dhurm Singh only dimly understood, but he stuck manfully to his intention of following Sonny *baba* to the death if needs be. The result being that at four o'clock in the afternoon he took part in a procession round the town of Bombay--mortal man of his mould being manifestly unable to resist the temptation of marching in step behind a big drum, with the colours of a whole army on his shoulders; especially when unlimited opportunity for scowling defiance at hostile crowds is thrown into the bargain. By eight o'clock, however, matters had assumed a different complexion; so had Dhurm Singh, as he sat in the lock-up, vastly contented with his black eye and an ugly cut on the nose, which he explained gleefully to Sonny *baba* put him in mind of old times. The latter, through the medium of a fellow-passenger who knew Punjâbi, was meanwhile trying to make the old sinner understand that he had got the whole army into trouble, and that personally he must stand his trial for a breach of the peace.

"And tell him, please," said Sonny *baba* with grieved diffidence, "that we all think he must

have been drunk."

An odd smile struggled with the gravity of Dr. Taylor's interpretation of the reply.

"He says, of course he was drunk, as you all were. In fact, he bought a bottle of rum instead of taking his opium, so that the effects might be uniform--I'm telling you the sober truth, my dear boy. You see you don't know the people or the country, or anything about them. I do. Besides, the Tommies--the regular soldiers I mean--always make a point of getting drunk if they can when they go down or come up to the sea in ships. Perhaps it's the connection between reeling to and fro, you know. I beg your pardon; no offence--but really, what with the tambourines--"

Dr. Taylor paused with his bright eyes on the boy's face. They had been cabin companions, and despite an absolute antagonism of thought, chums. It is so sometimes, and as a rule such friendships last.

"Did you tell him the General was greatly displeased? It is such a terrible beginning to our campaign; so unscriptural," mourned Sonny *baba* evasively.

"I don't know about that; wasn't there some one who smote off some one else's ear? and that, I believe, is what the old man is accused of doing. I beg your pardon again, but the coincidence is remarkable."

"And what is he saying now?" put in the other hurriedly.

Dr. Taylor paused.

"He is calling down the blessing of the one true God upon your head, now and for all eternity," he answered slowly, and there was a sort of hush in his voice.

Sonny *baba's* eyes grew suspiciously moist, but he shook his head dutifully. "How--how sad," he began.

"Very sad that you can't understand what he says," interrupted Dr. Taylor curtly, "because as I've only just time to catch my train I must be off. Salaam, *Akâli sahib!*"

Dhurm Singh, standing to salute, detained the doctor for a minute with eager questioning.

"What is it?" asked Sonny *baba* again. "What is it he wants to know?"

Dr. Taylor gave a short laugh. "He wants to know who the General's papa and mamma were, because he isn't a gentleman. You needn't stare so, my dear fellow. That is the first thing they find out about an Englishman, and it needs a lot of grit and go in a man to get over the initial drawback. Well, good-bye, and if you will take my advice, come up north, see the people, learn their language, and appreciate their lives before you try to change them. And look here! don't go taking an *Akâli* about in a religious procession with drums and banners. It isn't safe, especially if you are going to Bengal."

"Why Bengal more than other places?"

"Accustomed to lick them, that's all--hereditary instinct. Well, good-bye again, and take my advice and come north. The old swash-buckler might be of some use to you there. He'll be in the way down country."

II.

Some eighteen months afterwards, the doctor, being busy over that great hunt for the comma-shaped *bacillus*, which, as is told elsewhere, ended in a full stop for the seeker, saw a man come into his verandah with a note.

"The old swash-buckler, by all that's sinful," he said to himself. "Now, what can he want?" According to the superscription of the letter, it was a "Civil Surgeon"; according to a few almost illegible words inside, help for a suspected case of cholera in the European room of the *serai*.

Dr. Taylor, with grave doubts as to being able to supply either of these desires, went into the verandah.

"Is it Sonny *baba?*" he asked.

Dhurm Singh's delight was boundless; since a *sahib* to whom you have once spoken is not as other *sahibs*; just as a *sahib* whom you have once served becomes a demi-god--transfigured, immortal. Undoubtedly it was the *Baba-sahib*[11]--for unto this semi-religious title the old man had compounded his memories and his respect; who else was it likely to be, seeing that he,

Dhurm Singh, had taken service with the master's son? Undoubtedly also he was ill, though, in the poor opinion of the dustlike one, it was not cholera--at least it need not have been if the *Baba-sahib* had only taken the remedy proposed to him.

"Opium? hey!" asked Taylor, who in a huge pith hat which made him look like an animated mushroom, was by this time walking over to the *serai*, which was but a few hundred yards off.

The old *Akâli* grinned from ear to ear, the massive curves of his lips stretching like india-rubber. "The *Huzoor* knows the great gift of God in the bad places of mind and body. But the *Baba-sahib* will not have it so. He understands not many things through being so young. But he learns, he learns!"

There was a cheerful content in the apology, suggestive of the possibility that Dhurm Singh had something to do with the teaching. If so, he had been an unsafe guide in one point; for it was cholera; cholera of the type which merges into a dreary convalescence of malarial fever, during which Dr. Taylor saw a good deal, necessarily and unnecessarily, of his old cabin companion; thus renewing a friendship which, like the majority of those struck up on board ship, would have been forgotten but for an accident--the accident of his doing civil duty for a colleague during ten days' leave.

"Civil Surgeon, indeed!" he would say, as he sat on the edge of the bed amusing Sonny *baba* when the latter began to pull round. "Deuce take me if I could be that to save my life! One of my patients the other day said I was the most uncivil person calling himself a gentleman she ever came across, just because I told her she couldn't expect her liver to act if she lived the life of a Strasburg goose. 'Liver!' she cried, 'why, doctor, it's all heart that is the matter with me.' Now, my dear boy, can you tell me why that unfortunate viscera, the liver, has got into such disrepute? You may tell a patient every other organ in the body is in a disgraceful state of disrepair, but if you hint at bile it's no use trying to be a popular physician. Stick to the heart! that's my advice to a youngster entering the lists. Both for the healer and the healed it is ennobling. Now you, for instance! you will put it all down to your ardent affection for your fellow-man; but what the devil have you done with your muscle, my dear fellow? Oh, I know! you have been doing the *dâl-bhât*[12] trick, in order to show your sympathy with the people, and to assimilate your wants to theirs, so that in some occult way they are to assimilate their religious beliefs to yours. Lordy, Lordy, what an odd creature man is! But you didn't get old Dhurm Singh to give up his kid *pullao*, I'll go bail. Now, he looks fit--more like your Church Militant business than you do."

"I've--I've given up the Army," said Sonny *baba* after an embarrassed pause.

And Dr. Taylor actually refrained from asking why, or from saying he was glad to hear it; for there was a puzzled, pained look in his patient's face, which, like any other unfavourable symptom, had to be attended to at once. In the verandah, however, he commented on the news to Dhurm Singh, who with his turban off and his long white hair coiled round the high wooden comb like any woman's, was putting an extra fine polish to his sword to while away the time.

"*Huzoor!* it is true. It did not suit us. I told the *Baba-sahib* so from the beginning. They were not of his caste. As the Protector may see, I did all in my power. I set aside the steel bracelets and the quoits. I refrained myself to humility and carried a tambourine, but to no purpose. It did not suit. So now, praise be to the Lord, we have taken '*pinson*' again, and the Baba is to serve the Big *Lât-padre* (bishop) according to *hukm* (orders), as all the *padre sahibs* do."

As he drove home, the doctor decided that he would gladly give a month's pay to know the history of the past year and a half. The very imagination of it made him smile. Yet there must have been more than mere laughter in his thoughts, for even when the lad grew strong enough to resume the arguments which had begun in the cabin, the doctor never tried to force his confidence. And Sonny *baba* was reserved on some points. But the enthusiasm, and the fervour, and the faith were strong in him as ever, though the angelic voice now busied itself with Hymns Ancient and Modern; especially the Ancient. For, face to face with the Rig-Vedas, the advantages of unquestioned authority had begun to show themselves.

There is no need to repeat the arguments on either side; they are easily imagined, given the characters of the arguers. Nor is it difficult to imagine the grip of hands when they parted. One of them, no doubt, said something about the other not being far from a certain kingdom, and the saying was not resented, though, no doubt, the hearer laughed softly over the comma-shaped *bacillus* as he watched Sonny *baba* and the old swash-buckler set off together to the wilderness again. The former to itinerate from village to village, learning the language and lives of the people he hoped by and by to convert; the latter, presumably, to complete the education he had begun. They were an odd couple.

"Ten to one on the swash-buckler," thought the doctor; "he is a fine old chap."

Christmas had come and gone ere Sonny *baba* reappeared in civilised society. When he did so he looked weather-beaten and yet spruce--the natural result on a healthy young Englishman of combined exposure to sunshine and a good washerman.

"Hullo!" cried the doctor cheerily, "back again in boiled shirts, I see! Find 'em a bit stiff, I expect, after *kurtas* and *dhotees*. The natives know how to dress comfortably at any rate."

Sonny *baba* blushed under his bronze and hesitated. "The fact is," he said with an effort, "I did not, after all, adopt native costume as I intended, or perhaps"--here a faint smile obtruded itself--"I might say it wouldn't adopt me. You see, to enter into details, I couldn't exactly give up--a--a night shirt, or that sort of thing, you know--now could I? And what with being a very sound sleeper, and sleeping in public places--*serai's* and *dhurmsâlas*--or out in the open--somehow my day clothes were always being stolen. As soon as ever I got a new outfit it disappeared, until at last Dhurm Singh said,--"

"Yes! what did Dhurm Singh say?"

"That it was very peculiar, and that as the thieves didn't seem to fancy my English clothes it might be--more economical--" Here a half-embarrassed laugh finally interrupted the sentence. "I don't think I was sorry," went on the speaker hastily; "I found out afterwards that the people don't understand it. One old fellow asked me why it was that though a native convert always had to wear trousers like the *sahib-logue*, the '*missen*' people preferred to preach without them? Of course it was an exaggeration both ways, but the more I see of these people, the more necessary it seems to me that we should be ourselves armed at all points before beginning the attack. And then their poverty, their patience, the insanitary conditions--the needless suffering! Surely before we can touch their minds--"

"I know," broke in the doctor cynically. "Medical missions, *et cetera*; so it has come to that already, has it, old chap?"

"I don't know what you mean by its having come to that," retorted Sonny at a white heat; "but if you think it right to live in the lap of luxury while these brothers and sisters of ours--"

So the arguments began again, more fiercely than ever, for the two fought at closer quarters--so close that ofttimes the doctor had to retreat from his own position and seek another, because Sonny *baba* had already entrenched himself therein; the which is a direful offence, rousing determined resistance in a real argufier.

Despite this, Sonny *baba* rented a room in the doctor's house, and shared the doctor's dinners and library and hospital after the easy Indian fashion, while Dhurm Singh swaggered about among the dispensary badge-wearers, explaining at full length why he did not wear a badge like the rest of them. His *sahib* had not yet settled which branch of the public service he would exalt by his presence. He was young, doubtless, as yet, but he made strides. Two years ago he had found him in a very poor "*naukeri*" (service), in which he paid all the rupees and no one gave him anything; a topsy-turvy arrangement: not that his *sahib* needed the *paisas*. He was rich as a nawab. Then he thought of being a *padre sahib*; now it was *doctoré* department, but in his, Dhurm Singh's opinion, that was not much either. Personally he would just as soon wear no badge, as one of those with "Charitable Dispensary" on it. But only God knew where the *Baba-sahib* might end; at Simla, as "*burra Lât sahib*," no doubt. Till then it was more dignified to refrain from ignoble badges of which afterwards one might be ashamed.

And while he talked in this fashion he sat in the sunshine combing his long hair, and piously wondering how folk could defile their insides with tobacco. Then he would stroll off into the shadow and bring out the black lump of dreams. Yet if Sonny *baba* came out into the verandah calling after the Indian fashion for some one, the broad northern accent was always ready with its "*Huzoor!*"

So the months passed in preparations, and the angelic voice might have been heard to sing "Lead, kindly Light" more often than any other hymn in the book. About this time, also, Sonny *baba* speaking of Dhurm Singh and his ways, used to quote in rather a patronising manner a certain text regarding those who might expect to be beaten with few stripes--a speech which roused the doctor to vigorous retort. He had observed, he said, that the remark held good about most honest, healthy men who could play singlestick.

The fact being, however, that Sonny *baba* was beginning to get obstinate, as is only natural when a man passes five and twenty. It was time, he felt, to begin work in earnest; for the enthusiasm and the faith and the fervour were as hot as ever in him still. Looking back on the last three years he hardly understood why he had done so little.

"There seems so much to learn before one can even begin on the problem," he sighed, "and then, dear as the old man is, I really think Dhurm Singh is a drawback. I hoped when we left the Army--but indeed, Taylor, I think even you will allow that he is hardly the sort of man for a missionary's servant."

"Well, I don't know that I should classify him under that head; but then," he paused, thinking, perhaps, that when all was said and done the master was no more fit for the place than the servant.

"I'm glad you agree with me," put in Sonny eagerly, "for I've quite made up my mind to a change. You have no idea how the old fellow hectors over getting me a pint of milk or a couple of eggs. You would think I was about to loot a whole village. I must own that I invariably get what I want--that, too, without the least unpleasantness; but it is not edifying. Not the sort of thing that ought to go on. Then his habit of eating opium. It does not seem to hurt him, I own; but that again

is not what it ought to be. It is bad enough to belong to a race who, while they go about with words of condemnation on their lips--"

"Pardon me," murmured the doctor, "I pass--"

"--on their lips, are at the same time battening on the proceeds of an infamous monopoly of a drug dealing death and disease to a whole continent."

"One-third of one per cent of the total population," murmured the doctor again.

"You forget the opium grown in China," put in Sonny with great heat.

"My dear fellow, isn't there a story somewhere about the Emperor of China's clothes? If I remember right he forgot to put 'em on, and then every one was afraid to tell him he was naked. It appears to me that in this opium business the good gentleman hasn't a rag of reason for complaint, but that you are all afraid to say so. If we can prevent our subjects from growing poppy except under supervision, why can't he? It isn't Jonah's gourd, but a three month crop."

Sonny *baba* began to walk up and down the room excitedly. "It is perfectly inexplicable to me how a man like you--"

"Excuse me," interrupted the doctor. "I'll explain. I'm forty-four years of age. Two and twenty years of that I lived in a parish in Scotland where every decent, respectable body would have thought shame to himself if he didn't have more whisky than he could carry on market days. The other two and twenty I've spent in India. Out of cantonments, where they've learnt the trick from us, I only remember having met two drunken men in all those years, and though I see more of the natives than most people, I can only call to mind three who might be said to have suffered seriously from the effects of opium.[13] But it is a subject which it is quite useless to discuss. It turns on a question of heredity, like most things. The Indo-Germanic races never have taken and never will take to narcotics, so naturally they abuse them--and drink instead. *Chacun à son gout*."

"And mine is to give poor old Dhurm Singh an extra pension when I go itinerating, and send him back to end his days in peace in his village."

The doctor whistled. "Don't you wish you may get him to do it?"

"He must if he is a hindrance to the work--"

"And if your work is a hindrance to him? That's what it comes to all round. He was put in charge of you, and mark my words, Dhurm Singh will do it *dhurm nâl* until he goes to settle the vexed question."

"What vexed question?"

"Whether his work or yours was the better."

III.

"Dhurm Singh?"

"*Huzoor*."

After five and twenty years the same appeal--the same reply. But on that May night and July day neither the man nor the woman had any doubt as to what was to come next; the universe held no possibility save "the *mem sahib*" or "Sonny *baba* But the latter, now it came to his turn, hesitated; even while he was conscious that to a well-balanced mind capable of weighing advantage and disadvantage fairly, there ought to be no difficulty in telling any one that you had no further need for his services. The recollection of certain thin-lipped, dignified, self-respecting conversations overheard at home sprang to memory obtrusively. "Then, Mary Ann, it had better be this day month." "Yes, ma'am, this day month, if you please; and if you please, ma'am, Wednesdays and Saturdays from eleven till one, if convenient, for a character."

But things were different somehow in this heathen country, which was so backward in education, so ignorant of liberty, equality, and--ahem!

"Dhurm Singh," began Sonny once more rather hurriedly.

"*Huzoor*."

"I--I am going to make a complete change of plan, Dhurm Singh. I--I am going to begin work on a new principle. I--I am going to start in another part of the country where I shall not require--er--many things I have hitherto required." He paused, well satisfied at his plunge *in medias res*.

Dhurm Singh, standing attention at the door, smiled approvingly. "It is a good word, *Huzoor*. So said the *Gurus* also. When do we start?"

Half an hour afterwards Sonny *baba* in rather a shamefaced manner, told the doctor that, after all, he had come to the conclusion it would be better not to dismiss Dhurm Singh. To begin with, the village children delighted in his tales, and then--it was a triviality, no doubt, perhaps in a measure a giving in to prejudice--the elders certainly set store by position; for instance, they were always more ready to listen to him if the old swash-buckler had had an opportunity of giving the family history, embellishments and all. In addition, Dhurm Singh had promised to amend his ways generally; to spend his days in compounding pills and potions instead of hectoring about. Finally, he had agreed to an allowance of opium, swearing *dhurm nâl* to take no more than was served out by the master.

"Of course," said Sonny *baba* at this juncture, with a considerate superiority which raised every atom of the doctor's original sin, "I shall be careful, I shall not dock it too much at once; but in the course of a year or two I hope to break him entirely of this most pernicious habit."

"Which has never done him or his surroundings the least harm," growled Taylor savagely. "Upon my soul, I begin to wish I were five and twenty again, if only that I might be as cock-sure of being right about everything as you are. As it is, even the *bacillus*--" He wrinkled his eyes over the microscope once more, and did not finish his sentence.

After this Dhurm Singh might have been seen any day of the week in the dispensary verandah grinding away vigorously with pestle and mortar at unsavoury medicaments, rolling pills under his flexible brown fingers, or polishing up surgical instruments with all the fervour bestowed of yore on the old sword.

"Lo! if the *Baba-sahib* cares not for being a big *Hâkm* (magistrate, ruler), sure the next best thing is to be a big *Hâkeem* (doctor)," he would say, smiling simply at his own wit. "And doth not the *Guru* say, 'Fight with no weapon but the sword of the Spirit'? Besides, when I feel like fighting I can put an edge to the knives or pound harder with the pestle. God knows they may both do more damage than a sabre. Then the rolling of pills is ever the first step towards dream-getting. Thus in all ways, I, Dhurm Singh, Sikh, ex-*duffadar*, *pinson-wallah*, and *Akâli*, am consoled. But there! God is good to the Sikh. Know you that He never made an ugly one yet?"

This was a favourite boast of the old man's, backed always, should doubts be expressed, by a modest appeal to his own looks, joined to an assertion--which, by the way, was perfectly true--that he was the meanest looking of ten brothers.

So, in due season, the doctor once more watched the odd couple pass out together into the wilderness; and this time, noticing the change in Sonny *baba* and remembering the raw lad who had been his cabin companion, he, so to speak, put his whole pile on Dhurm Singh--unless the boy killed him with philanthropy.

The rains, after an unusually heavy fall, had ceased early, the result being an epidemic of autumnal fever. Now the cholera may kill its thousands, but year by year, with every now and again a sort of jubilee over its own strength, malaria kills its tens of thousands quietly, unostentatiously; so quietly, that it is only when the officer in charge of a district finds himself during his cold weather camp deciding the rival claims to hereditary offices day after day in village after village, that even he realises how widely the archangel Azrael has spread his wings over the people. The doctor, however, judging simply by the weather, sent Sonny into the jungles well supplied with that carmine-tinted quinine which carries the fact of its being Government property in its colour: a useless attempt to prevent the sale of charity in a land where the regulation five grain powder is as much a part of the currency as a two anna bit. Well supplied, yet at the same time with cautions not to be over generous except in genuine cases. Let him stick to the country medicines as prophylactics. Opium and aconite were to be had for the buying; and if he did wander into the low jungles close to the hills, and if he could be tolerant and learn not to despise old wisdom, let him prescribe the former in preference to the latter--though perhaps that was too much to expect from a five-and-twenty-year old who was cock-sure he knew best.

"I know nothing of myself," replied Sonny in all seriousness. "The Eternal Right decides. There lies the difference between you and me--pardon me if I say between the Christian and the Unbeliever. You trust to your finite mind, I to Something which is and was, which cannot err."

And Dhurm Singh, gleefully employed in turning a cash transport mule with its fixings into a perambulating dispensary, was keeping up his character of devotee by repeating verses from the *Adhee Grunt'h*[14] in sing-song; his round, mellow voice echoing out through the sunshine--

"Remember, oh man, the primal truth--the Truth ere the world began.

The Truth which is and the Truth which must remain.

How can this Truth be told, save by doing the will of the Lord?"

"Listen!" said Taylor, and Sonny *baba* moved uneasily in his chair.

When these same preparations were complete, the old man's delight was huge; and he drove the mule forth to the wilderness before him with much futile waving of the stick which had replaced the sword. Even over that abnegation he was cheerful.

"Lo! I am turned a *dhundi-wallah*[15] in mine old age, as becomes the pious-minded. *Ari!* thou misbegotten offspring of a mixed race doomed to childless extinction, wilt stray from the beaten path! Wouldst steal the corn of others, when thy master is a *missen sahib*, and thy tender a devotee? May the uttermost--"

Then to Sonny's pained reproof he would reply, cheerfully as ever, that he had understood the refraining of his tongue from abuse was to be towards those born of Adam; and this was not even a God-created thing, but a nondescript invented by the *sahib-logue*.

Cheerful always; even when, as time went on, his daily pills of opium were mixed with quinine. He sat and compounded them himself *dhurm nâl*, keeping no grain of the beloved dream-giver from the sacrilegious mixture, and telling the full tale of the "*fiat pillulæ*" into the master's locked medicine chest, whence they were doled out daily.

For the first month or more, everything went smoothly. Never before had Sonny *baba* had such attentive listeners to the great truths he expounded as a preliminary to his other work; never before had he felt that he was really on the right tack, really had his opportunity of a fair hearing. The letters he wrote home to his aunt who, fond woman, had faithfully followed, as woman can do, every step in the career of her darling with unswerving confidence, filled that excellent creature with sheer, unalloyed delight. She told all her circle of friends that her nephew had fulfilled her dearest wishes in going in for the medical mission, which was undoubtedly the only way of getting at the poor, dear natives.

And Sonny, in less emotional fashion, felt this to be so true that he worked as he had never worked before. A sort of feverish desire to utilise every opportunity, to lose no occasion for preaching the great Gospel of Peace came over him, and he spared himself not at all, after the manner of his kind.

So that sometimes returning tired out in evening from some long tramp, it was a relief to find the old swash-buckler ready with kid *pullao* or "*rose chikken*,"[16] and to see the tea-kettle swinging over a fire of twigs. Sometimes after they entered the tract of forest-land near the foot of the hills, the indefatigable old poacher would produce a stew of black partridge; and once Sonny, coming home to the tiny tent late at night, found his henchman keeping an eye on roast pork, and at the same time utilising the flame-light in giving a suspicious clean to the biggest surgical knife--a queer picture seen by the fire, leaping and dancing up into the shadows of a mango grove.

But one evening Sonny came home with no appetite for dinner, and half an hour afterwards he was blue and shivering in the cold fit of ague.

"If the *Huzoor* would take some of my pills," said Dhurm Singh wistfully; "look at me! nothing touches me, and, lo! am I not three times as near the grave as the *Baba-sahib*?"

There is no need to describe the scorn which this suggestion met. As for the pills, where would the old sinner be but for the quinine contained therein? This was nothing but a chill, an isolated attack. He would take an extra dose of the specific and be done with it.

But the third day, suddenly, in the very middle of an eloquent appeal he felt goose skin going in thrills down his back, and five minutes after the only sound he could make was the chattering of his teeth.

"If the *Huzoor*," began Dhurm Singh, but was checked by the frown on the master's face; for the lad had grit and fire in him.

Neither of these, however, avail much against a tertian ague, and it was not long before Sonny *baba* in the half-querulous, half-hysterical stage before the hot fit merges into perspiration, confided with tears to the old swash-buckler that it was no use. He was an accursed being. From the very beginning had it not been so? And then he retailed garrulously many and many an incident of the past three years, forgotten by his retainer, in which something had occurred to mar the smooth working of good luck. Something as often as not, it struck the listener, to be referred to his own share in the business. To the speaker it was otherwise. He was not fit for the work; he was of no account, and now when at long last the time had come, when he felt that his hand was on the plough--

"It is time the *Baba-sahib* took his quinine," remarked Dhurm Singh sagely, unsympathetically. "If the *Huzoor* will give the keys of the chest, this dust-like one will bring the medicine--*dhurm nâl*." The last words came softly, half to himself, and an important, self-satisfied smile broadened the open face as he made his choice among the bottles. "Lo! there it is," he continued, laying two pills in the burning hand before passing his one arm under the burning body, "but the *Huzoor* must have faith. Without it medicine is but a bad taste in the mouth. He who believes shall be

saved."

Perhaps Sonny *baba* took his advice yet once again, perhaps the quinine got a fair hold of the enemy at last. Certain it is that from the time Dhurm Singh commenced to bring the pills *dhurm nâl*, the ague began to abate. At the end of a week Sonny *baba* was eating "*rose chicken*" once more with appetite. That evening, as the sun was setting red over the thick brakes of sugar-cane, the old man sat pounding diligently with pestle and mortar while he intoned away at the *Adhee Grunt'h*--

"God asks no man of his birth,
He asks him what he has done,
Since all are the seed of God,
Lo! what is the world but clay,
Tho' the pots are of many moulds."

And Sonny *baba* lying out in the shade blissfully conscious that he was getting better, nay, that he was better, raised himself on one arm and looked over with moist eyes to the old man.

"What are you doing, Dhurm Singh?"

"This slave makes pills. The *Huzoor* hath eaten so many, and those of the dust-like one have given out also. Lo! I fill the bottles against the return of the *Baba-sahib* to his medicine chest."

"But, I say! are you sure you have made them right?"

"The *Huzoor* may rest satisfied. Five grains of the blessed medicine for the master, and the other as before. It is *dhurm nâl, Huzoor*."

"So you call it a blessed medicine now, Dhurm Singh?"

"Wherefore not, since the master is better?"

"Well! the addition of that small quantity of ipecacuanha which I began--let me see--that day when I was so bad, certainly had a marvellous effect. I shall write and tell Taylor about it; he was inclined to sneer at the idea just because he didn't suggest it. Doctors are awfully jealous of each other. That's the worst of them."

These remarks were made mostly for his own benefit, as he lay comfortably watching the stars come out one by one as the daylight died.

It was that same night that Dhurm Singh had his first go of ague. It shook him as a sharp attack of malarious fever does shake a native past his prime, and Sonny *baba* amid his regrets, could not avoid a certain elation.

"So much for opium," he said, and yet in his heart of hearts a fear gained ground that perhaps he might have been over rapid in diminishing the dose. Now that the old man was actually ill, it seemed unkind to deny him comfort; so an addition was made to the number of pills, thus increasing the amount both of opium and quinine.

It was more than a month later that a small procession of two men carrying a string bed on their heads, and one man driving a pack mule, turned into the dispensary compound.

"It is the old man," said Sonny *baba* to the doctor, "and I'm afraid--" he paused before the break in his own voice. "It was that *terai* land. I was as bad as could be, and thought I should have to give up; but, under Providence, quinine and ipec. pulled me round to do the best work I have ever done in my life. But he--he would stick to the opium, and then I'm afraid that at first I hardly noticed--you see he went round as usual, bragging he was better. So I didn't think--the work was so absorbing, and I myself felt so fit. Otherwise, I might have gone to a healthier part, though, of course, the impression would not have been so good. Still--it came upon me quite by surprise three days ago--and--and I've brought him in by forced marches. You--" The voice failed again. Indeed, there was no need for more, the doctor being already on his knees by the bed, making his examination. Suddenly he looked up.

"Why the devil did you stop his opium, you young fool? Here, Boota Mull, the syringe and a disc of morphia--sharp. But, after all, what does anything matter so long as you save your own soul alive!"

Sonny *baba* looking very white, drew himself up into dignity. "We can discuss that question by and by, Dr. Taylor. In the mean time, let me warn you, that the man has already had ten grains of opium in the last twenty-four hours."

The doctor's quick hands were at the closed eyelids. "Ten grains--bosh! But, as you say, those questions can be settled by and by--when he is dead, if you like."

Sonny *baba's* face had grown whiter still. "I tell you he has had the opium--I gave it to him myself--I was afraid--" he paused abruptly, and the doctor looking up shot a rapid glance of

negation towards him.

"There's a mistake, or else-- It doesn't matter now, at any rate. The thing is done."

But Sonny *baba* did not hear the latter words; he was beside the mule, fumbling hastily in the travelling dispensary, of which the old man had been so proud, for the medicine chest. His hands trembled as he brought it back; and Dr. Taylor, his face unseen, yet with its keenness shown in every movement of the capable hands busy over the morphia, heard an odd sound--something between a gasp and a cry--behind him. Then some one came and knelt down at the other side of the bed.

"Dhurm Singh!"

But there was no answer.

"Dhurm Singh, you can tell them it was *dhurm nâl*, and that I killed you."

* * * * *

"Killed him--fudge! Though, upon my soul, it would serve you right if you had. So the old sinner changed the pills, and it wasn't the ipec. after all. Most reprehensible practice, and, upon my soul, it would serve him right if he did die. Now--don't be a fool, man! I tell you he shan't die--I won't let him die. Besides, he can't die--it's impossible--absolutely impossible."

Despite his despair and dejection, the young man gave a wan smile at the other's vehemence.

"And why?"

"Because of you, naturally. You don't suppose that you're fit to be trusted alone with a medicine chest, do you? Boota Mull, if you don't hurry up with that turpentine and the brandy mixture I'll report you. So it wasn't the ipec. after all! I'm glad of that."

In after years the young fellow used to deny strenuously that it had been the opium either. Plainly and palpably he had been cured of his fever "by faith." And as for Dhurm Singh? What the doctor said was true; he could not be spared as yet. How could he be spared when even now from the verandah came a woman's voice, soft, confident--

"Dhurm Singh, Sonny *baba*."

"*Huzoor! dhurm nâl*."

And any one looking out might have seen a very old man, gorgeous in scarlet raiment, decked with golden lace and golden curls, as a child's head nestled up against a solitary arm, and a child's fingers played with the solitary medal, or tugged unavailingly at the hilt of the old sword.

"The *Huzoor* is too young," would come the broad, arrogant voice, "but he will learn--he will learn. Even a Sikh is made, not born. He must wait till the years bring the Sacred Steel. Let the *Huzoor* rest awhile peacefully, and old Dhurm will sing to him."

Then there would be a surreptitious swallowing of a pill before the drowsy chant began.

"He is of the *Khâlsa*[17]
Who combats in the van,
Who gives in charity,
Who loves the Poor.

He is of the *Khâlsa*
Whose mind is set on God,
Who never fears though often overcome,
Knowing all men created of one God.

He is of the *Khâlsa*
Who lives in arms,
Who combats with the wrong,
Who keeps--the--faith--"

So there would be a silence broken only by the even breathing of the old man and the child.

For Sonny *baba* and his wife, watching the scene from within, only looked into each other's eyes and said nothing.

THE BHUT-BABY.

"According to established precedent it is reported, under section so and so, that one Buddha Singh of Kidderjana having died, his rightful heirs inherit." The court-reader's voice hurried the liquid Urdu syllables into long, sleepy cadences like the drone of a humble-bee entangled in the swaying punkah overhead. Backwards and forwards, rising and falling, the rhythm seemed to become part of me, until the colourless reports were a monotonous lullaby, and each wave of sound and motion bore me farther from earth, nearer to the land of dreams. Ah! if the right people always inherited, and my old uncle received ticket-of-leave from the gout, I might afford furlough, and stand once more on that big boulder at the foot of the One-stone pool waiting for a new ring of light to show on the dark eddy by the far side--a ring with a swirl and a gleam of silver scales in the centre, a tightening line under the finger, till the reel went whirr-rr-rr-rr! It was a lovely dream while it lasted.

"According to established precedent, the canal-officer reports, under section so-and-so, that certain rebellious persons in Chori-pani have opened the sluices of the cut, and taken water that did not belong to them." The heather-sweet breeze off the One-stone pool ceased to blow, and I was back, with the punkah, in the humanity-laden atmosphere of the court-house, where even the mosquitoes were glutted, and the lizards, hanging head downwards on the wall, looked as if they had congestion of the brain. Stealing water! Poor wretches, who could blame them with their crops withering in the June sun and the sluice-doors within reach? Even a juicy apple on a hot day is irresistible, despite Farmer Smith's big dog watching from below, while you sit on the lower branch, and Jerry sits on the upper, eating all the ripe fruit just to pass the time, and thanking Providence meanwhile for making you Christian children in a cider-country!

"According to established precedent it is reported, under section so-and-so, that the devil was born three days ago in village Hairan-wallah. Orders are requested. Meanwhile the *chowkidar* [watchman] remains watching the same." Startled into wakefulness, I looked sharply to see if the reader had not been nodding in his turn; but my alertness merely produced a respectful iteration of the paragraph, which showed all too clearly my subordinate's explanation of the sudden display of attention.

The suspicion of sleep is always irritating. "*Sarishtadar!*" [clerk of the Court] I began in English, "what, the devil?"

"Nossir," interrupted the reader suavely in the same language, "pardon the suggestion, sir, but the devil is somewhat free translation, sir. In Dictionary *bhut* (the word used, sir,) equals an *indefinite* devil, thus *a* devil, *a* fiend, *a* imp--pardon the indiscretion, sir! an imp."

A glow of proud humility at his own quick detection of these trivial errors filled up the pause which followed, while the punkah went on swinging, and I sat wondering if I were asleep or awake. Finally the *sarishtadar* dipped his pen in the ink, fluttered the superfluous moisture on the carpet, and suggested deferentially that the *chowkidar* was waiting for orders. A sudden curiosity as to what his self-complacent brain, surcharged with Western culture, would do with the situation made me reply curtly, "The usual orders."

I managed to forbear laughing in the grave face raised to mine in deprecating apology. "I am unable, sir," he said after a pause, "to recall, at the present moment, any section, penal or civil, suitable to occasion. Would you kindly jog memory, sir, by suggesting if it is under judicial or administrative heads? Or perhaps," he added, as a bright after-thought, "it is political job." Then, I regret to say, I went off into yells of unseemly mirth, as most Englishmen have to do at times over the portentous solemnity of the Aryan brother.

There was a stir in the verandah, a sudden waking to renewed effort on the part of the punkah coolie, resulting in a general breeziness. Or was it that Terence O'Reilly, our young Irish doctor, as he came into the darkened Court, brought with him a thought of fresh air, a remembrance of Nature in her sunniest, most lovable moods? He invariably suggested such things to me at any rate, and as he paused in astonishment at my indecorous occupation, I thought once more that it was a pleasure simply to look at him. His face sympathised promptly with the unknown joke. "Whwhat the divvle are ye laughing at--me?" he asked in a rich brogue as he seated himself astride a chair, in which equestrian position his dandy costume for polo showed to great advantage.

Nero fiddling over the flames of Rome is sympathy itself compared to the indifference with which we often speak the first lines of a coming tragedy in every-day life. So it was with a jest that I introduced Terence O'Reilly to the existence of the *bhut*-baby, and in so doing became instantly aware that he surpassed me in other things besides good looks. He could scarcely be said to become grave, for to lose brightness would have been to lose the essence of the man, but his expression grew to a still more vivid reflex of his mind. "'Twill be one of those poor little craytures that come into this worrld God knows why," he said with an infinite tenderness of

voice. "Ten to wan 'tis better it should die, fifty to wan I can do nothing to help it, but I'll ride over and see annyhow."

The *sarishtadar* laid aside his pen somewhat mournfully, the practical being out of his line; while I, smitten by admiration into immediate regret at my own indifference, murmured something about having thought of going over next morning.

"There's no time loike the present, my dear fellow," he replied buoyantly. "The pony's at the door, and sure I'm got up for riding annyhow;" and as he spoke he stretched out his long legs, and surveyed their immaculate boots and breeches critically.

"And what will your team do without their best forward?" I asked, feeling a certain captiousness at his prompt decision.

"Get along with your blarney! Sure it's practising, and you can take my place at that anny day; indeed 'twas to fetch you I ventured into the dock, for whin I caught a glimpse of your face at the jail this morning I said to meself, 'Terence, me bhoy, that's a case of polo, or blue pill, for by the powers his liver's not acting.' So 'twas to hound you into exercise I came annyhow."

A feverish desire to amend and excuse my own lukewarmness shot up through the loophole his words afforded. "To tell the truth, I *was* feeling a bit slack; but if you'll wait five minutes while I slip over to the bungalow and change my clothes, I'll ride with you to Hairan-wallah. It will be better for me than polo; I might get over-heated, you know."

"'Tis over-*eating*, not over-*heating* that's the matter with you, me bhoy," he replied coolly; "but I'm proud,--and by the powers!" he added, starting up in great excitement, "you shall ride my pony; I call him Blue Pill, for he's better than wan anny day; and while you're dressing I'll send me *syce* round for the Lily of Killarney. I've a bet on her at the *gymkhana* next Monday, and we'll try her on the quiet against the stable."

Half an hour afterwards I was enjoying plenteous exercise, and it seemed to me, far behind, as if the Lily--a great black beast without a single white hair on her--was trying to buck Terence over into the saffron-coloured horizon, as she went along in a series of wild bounds. He came back to me, however, after a time, as fresh as paint; but the mare, with head down and heaving flanks, appeared to have had enough of it.

"'Tis a pity the faymale sex is so narvous," he said casually. "Ye can't hold 'em responsible for annything; but if it wasn't for hysteria they'd be angels entirely. She has the paces of wan, annyhow."

Fourteen miles of constant canal cuts, that were a perpetual joy to the doctor and a terror to me, brought us to Hairan-wallah, a large village standing among irrigated fields. Here cautious inquiries for the devil led us to a cluster of mud huts beyond the pale, where the low-caste servants of the community dwelt apart. Before reaching it we were joined by the head-men and their followers, all anxious to explain and excuse the calamity which had befallen their reputation; but as the fear of evil eye had prevented any of them from personally inspecting the fiend, the accounts of its appearance were wildly conflicting. The doctor, indeed, refused to listen to them, on the ground that it was sheer waste of time, and rode along affably discussing the crops with an aged patriarch. His manner changed, however, when we were requested to dismount, and he led the way into the enclosure where, guarded by the police *chowkidar*, the devil-baby lay awaiting Government orders. The courtyard was hung round with coloured thread, old iron, and other devices against witchcraft, and a group of low-caste men and women were huddled up dejectedly in one corner. So far the crowd followed us; but when some of the reputed relations showed us into a dark out-house at the further end, even curiosity failed to prevent a visible hanging-back. Blinded by the change from the glare outside, I could at first see nothing but my companion's tall form bending over a bundle of rags on a low stool, beside which a half-naked hag sat chanting a guttural charm; and before I regained clearer sight his voice rang out in tones of evident relief, "By the powers! 'tis only a black albino."

The bull was perfect, seeing that it conveyed succinctly a very accurate description. The *bhut*-baby was a black, a very black albino, for the abnormal colouring was confined to its hair, which was unusally well developed, and grew in tight clustering curls over its head like a coachman's wig. The faint eyebrows and eyelashes were also white, and the result, if not devilish, was extremely startling. For the rest, it was as fine a man-child as ever came to gladden a mother's heart. I deemed it asleep till I saw the doctor bend closer, and then raise the eyelid in keen professional scrutiny.

"Where's the mother?" he cried, turning like lightning on the nearest male relative, and seizing him by the scruff of the neck in order to emphasise his words. "Bring her at once, or I'll go inside and fetch her myself. The child has been left to starve," he added rapidly in English, "and it's nigh dead of neglect. You're a magistrate! Make them bring the devil of a mother here at once, or it will die."

But they met my commands and remonstrances with frightened obstinacy, asserting after some hesitation that the mother was dead, had died virtuously of shame at bringing such disgrace to her people. I had every reason to believe this statement was a lie, but no means of

proving it to be one, for of course the whole village favoured it.

Then there came to Terence O'Reilly's face a look that was good to see, but not to endure. "And if the poor little creature has lost its own mother," he cried in that strong, round voice of his, "are there no other women among you all with the milk of kindness in their breasts that will give it a drink for the sake of the time when they took suck themselves? Look at it! What are you all frightened of? 'Tis as fine a babe as a woman could bear. Only the white hair of it, and God knows we shall all come to that if we are spared. Look at it, I say! Handle it, and see for yourselves!"

Suiting the action to the word, he lifted the infant in his arms and carried it out to the lingering light of day, among the crowd which fell back in alarm from him and his burden. He did, indeed, look somewhat of an avenging angel with his face ablaze with indignant appeal. There was a scuttling from behind as some of the head-men tried to force a sweeper-woman to the front, but ere they succeeded she had promptly gone into hysterics, and so roused a murmur of disapprobation and dismay among the rest. Her shrieks brought Terence back to earth; and ceasing to hold the child at arm's length, as if offering it for acceptance, he turned to me once more. "At least your magistracy can make them bring me milk. If ye can't even do that, then God help the British rule!"

Stung by the sarcasm, I exerted myself to such an extent, that three separate head-men arrived breathless at the same moment with large *lotahs* full of nourishment for the devil, or any one else on whom the Presence was foolish enough to bestow it. So much lay within their conceptions of duty.

The scene which followed will linger in my memory until memory itself ceases to be. Terence in polo-costume seated on a string bed under the darkening skies with the devil on his lap, feeding it methodically with the corner of his pocket-handkerchief moistened in the milk held by three trembling *lambadars*. Beside him the Presence, with, thank God, sufficient vitality left for admiration. And round about a cloud of awestruck witnesses, wondering at his audacity, doubtful of its effect on the future.

"Sure 'tis the firrst toime I ever did dhry-nurse," he remarked after a long silence, during which I became absorbingly interested in the little imp's growing desire for life. "Hark to that, now! The ungrateful divvle's wanting to cry just because it's got something to digest, as if that wasn't the firrst duty of a human stomach. Great Moses! don't ye think it's time you stepped in as ripresentative of the *Kaiser-i-Hind*, and took things in hand a bit? Ah, it's after having dill-water ye are now, is it? Whist, whist, whist now!"

He walked up and down, the crowd swaying from him, as he dandled the infant with what seemed to me marvellous skill, while I did my best to argue sense into the dull brains of the villagers. I was quite unsuccessful, of course, and after many words found myself, as before, with two courses open to me; either to leave the *bhut*-baby where it was, or give it in charge of the head-men--the one a swift, the other a more tardy certainty of death from that mysterious disease called "by the cause of not drinking milk properly," which figures so largely in the records of infant mortality in India; the former for choice, since, as Terence remarked, "It would save trouble to kill it at the beginning instead of the end of its life."

"So the magistracy can do nothing," he said at last; "thin I will. *Chowkidar!* take this baby to the headquarters' hospital. I'm master there, annyhow, and I'll make it anny case I please, and dye its hair, an' no man shall say me nay!"

So the *chowkidar* was ordered to carry the devil to hospital to be cured of its devilry, and we rode home in frantic haste, because Terence was engaged to sing "*Killaloe*" that evening in barracks. Some of the relations ran about a mile after us yelling out blessings for having removed the curse from them.

Six weeks after I saw an atrocious hag nursing a white-haired infant in the doctor's own compound, and questioned him on the subject. "The fact is," he said ruefully, "it gave fits to the patients. I tried shaving its head, but it grew so fast and the white eyelashes of it betrayed the cloven hoof. And dye wouldn't stick on; so I've hired a harridan on two rupees a month to look after it under my own eye."

There was, no doubt, something of combativeness in this particular instance of Terence O'Reilly's charity; but the *bhut*-baby was by no means the only pensioner on his bounty. The row of mud houses beyond the cook-room was filled with the halt, the maimed, and the blind--especially the latter, for the fame of his infinite skill and patience as an eye-doctor was spreading far and wide. Besides, he had the secret, possessed by some Englishmen unconsciously, of inspiring the natives with absolutely unbounded devotion, and many of his patients would literally have laid down their lives for him; among others his bearer, a high-caste Brahman. The man, who had originally come to him for blindness of long standing, had, on recovery, made his way straight from hospital to the doctor's house, and announced his intention of serving him till death. "What are hands, and feet, or brain," he answered calmly to all objections, "if they have not eyes to guide them? Therefore are they all predestined since all time to be servants to my Lord the Light-bringer for ever and ever."

Treated at first as a joke, Shivdeo's determination had outlived opposition, and at the time of the *bhut*-baby's advent he had achieved his intention of becoming trusted personal attendant to the "Light of the World," for without some such allusion to the benefit he had received at his hands he never spoke of his master. The introduction of a baby, pariah to begin with and devil to follow, brought about a temporary disturbance of his office; for he was haughty, with all the pride of his race, and superstitious beyond belief. But after a week of dismissal consequent on failing to provide the harridan with proper milk for the bottle, Shivdeo, almost blind again with fruitless tears, crept back to the Light-giver's feet and swore a big oath to feed the low-caste demon himself if thereby he might return to the only life he could live. He kept his promise of strict neutrality to the letter, never by word or deed showing his aversion to the child; affecting indeed not to see it with those mild, short-sighted eyes of his. Yet, as it grew older, he must often have been brought into contact with the child, for it would crawl after the doctor like a dog. Despite the peculiarity of its silvery curls and pale blue eyes, it was really pretty, and by the time it was two years old had picked up such a variety of comical tricks and odd ways, that Boots, as we called it, became quite an institution with the doctor's friends. We used to send for it to the verandah and laugh at the silent agility with which it tumbled for sweetmeats, and the equally silent quickness of its mimicry; for to all intents and purposes the child was dumb. Beyond a very rare repetition of the feeble wail I had first heard from it in the doctor's arms at Hairan-wallah, it made no articulate sound whatever; but once or twice when we tired of it and forgot its presence, I have heard a purring noise like a cat, and looking down, found that the little creature was curled up with its silver curls resting on the doctor's foot in perfect content. He spent many hours in demonstrating its full possession of all five senses, and always declared it would speak in time; certainly if speech went by intelligence it would have been the most eloquent of babies. As it was, its unusual silence undoubtedly added to its uncanny appearance, and helped to strengthen the still lingering belief in its devilish origin. As long, however, as Terence O'Reilly's voice gave the orders for its well-being, not a soul in his compound or elsewhere would have dreamt of disobedience. Indeed, it often struck me that poor little Boots lived by virtue of his exuberant vitality, and by nothing else.

I remember one evening we had been screaming with laughter over the comical little creature's mimicry of Shivdeo's stately, short-sighted way of bringing in whisky and soda-water. The applause seemed to get into the baby's brain, and it took us off one after the other with such deadly truth that we nearly rolled off our chairs. Then some one suggested that we should ask it to imitate Terence, who happened to be absent; and when it failed to respond, a young subaltern, thinking it had not understood, came out with a fair copy of the doctor's round, rich brogue. We were all startled at the result; the child made for the speaker like a wild beast, stopped suddenly, then crept away with silent tears brimming up into its eyes. I think we all felt a bit ashamed, especially when Terence, coming in from a patient, found Boots curled up asleep in a damp corner by the *tattie*, and, with a mild rebuke that, "'Twas enough to give the poor little crayture fayver an' ague," lifted the child in his arms, and proceeded to carry it across the garden to its harridan. But he had hardly raised it before Shivdeo, gliding in like a ghost from heaven knows where, came forward and took the child from him with a rapid insistence that left me wondering. So, when the man brought me my parting cheroot, I questioned him on his interference. He looked startled for a moment; then replied gravely that it was not meet for the Light of the Universe to bear a sweeper's child in his bosom. "Nor is it meet for a Brahman either," I returned, feeling sure he had some other reason. The man's eyes flashed before they dropped submissively: "Nor is it meet for a Brahman to serve; but the Presence knows that this slave cares not if he wakes as a dog so that the Lord of Light remains to give sight to the blind."

Shortly after this Boots sickened for some childish complaint, in the course of which pneumonia developed, making it hover for a day or two between this world and the next. Once more Terence stood between the *bhut*-baby and the shadow of death, and had it been the heir of princes, the resources of modern science could not have been more diligently ransacked for its benefit. Indeed the doctor looked quite worn out when I met him one morning, going, as he said, to give himself a freshener by taking the Lily round the steeple-chase course.

"You're over-working, Terence," said I, noting his fine-drawn clearness of feature; "up all night after Boots (I'm glad to hear the little fellow's better, by the way), and Blue Pill waiting for you day after day till after dark at the hospital gates, to say nothing of *gymkhanas*. It won't do for long; I'm serious about it, old chap."

"Are you? Well, it's kind of you to be that," he laughed; "though mayhap 'twould be more of a change for your friends if you were the t'other thing. Don't fret yourself about me, annyhow; I'm well enough. Maybe 'tis having done dhry-nurse to him at first that makes me feel Boots on me mind; but I think he's well through. And d'ye know! the little beggar wouldn't touch a thing unless I gave it him. 'Tis a queer place this worrld, annyhow."

His voice had a suspicion of a break in it, and his eyes were brighter than ever; whence I augured that he felt worse than he cared to confess. Next day he sent a note asking me to inspect the jail for him, as he was going to try conclusions with his liver; the day after I found him in bed, but lively. Then the deadly fever which kills so many fine young fellows in India laid fast hold on him, and for three long weeks we, who loved him, watched the struggle for life, helpless to do aught save keep up his strength as best we might against the coming crisis. It was as if a calamity had befallen the whole Station. Men when they met each other asked first of all how *he* was; and women sent jellies and soups enough for a regiment to the bungalow where the young

doctor, who had soothed so many of their troubles, lay bravely fighting out his own. Quite a crowd of natives gathered round the gate by early dawn, waiting for news of the past night; and, so far as I knew, Shivdeo never left the verandah during all those weary days. I could see him from my post by the bed, sitting like a bronze statue against a pillar, whence my slightest sign would rouse him. For I assumed the office of head-nurse after Terence, full of gratitude for the kindly offers of help showered upon him, had said with a wistful gleam of the old mischief, "But I loike your sober face best, old man; it makes me feel so pious." I sent in for leave that morning and never left him again. It was the twenty-sixth day, about ten o'clock in the evening, that the doctor in charge shook his head over my patient sorrowfully. "He is terribly weak, but while there's life-- We shall know by dawn."

The old formula fell on my ears--though I had been waiting for it--with a sense of sickening failure, and unable to reply, I turned away from the figure which lay so still and lifeless despite all my care. As I did so I noticed Shivdeo listening with eyes and ears at the door. For the last three days the man had been strangely restless, and more than once I had discovered odd things disposed about the room, and even on poor Terence's pillow--things used as talismans to keep away the evil eye, such as I had seen in Hairan-wallah when the *bhut*-baby was born; and I had smiled--good heavens, how ignorant we are in India!--smiled at the silly superstition which evidently lingered in Shivdeo's mind. He came to me when the doctor left to ask if he had understood rightly that the great hour of hope or dread drew nigh. I told him we should know by dawn, and that till then all must be quiet as the grave. His face startled me by its intensity, as standing at the foot of the bed he fixed his eyes on the unconscious face of his master and *salaamed* to it with all the reverence he would have given to a god. But he spoke calmly to me, saying that as I would doubtless be loth to leave the room he would order the servants to bring me something to eat there. He presently appeared, bearing the tray himself, giving as a reason for this unusual service his desire to avoid any disturbance. It was just upon twelve o'clock when, with Shivdeo's help, I gave Terence, who was quite unconscious, a few drops of stimulant before sitting down with a sinking heart to my anxious watch. It was early April, and the doors, set wide open to let in the cool air, showed a stretch of moonlit grass where shadows from the unseen trees above quivered and shifted as the night-wind stirred the leaves. In the breathless silence I could hear even the faint respiration of the sick man, and found myself counting its rise and fall, until the last thing I remembered was Shivdeo's immovable figure with the moonlight streaming full in his face.

When I awoke the rapid Eastern dawn had come. The sparrows were twittering in the verandah, and Shivdeo stood by his master's bed holding his finger to his lips. "Hush!" he whispered, as my eyes met his; "the light has brought life to the Giver of Light."

It must have been the sound of wheels which woke me, for ere I had time to reply the doctor entered the room, and after a glance at his patient shook me silently by the hand. "I believe he's through," he said, when he had cautiously examined the sleeping man; "fever gone, pulse stronger. I scarcely dared to hope for it even with his splendid constitution. Hullo! what's that?" It was only a tiny spot of blood on the forehead just where the trident of Shiva is painted by his worshippers, but it showed vividly against the pallor of the skin.

"There is a little spot by the Light-giver's feet also," remarked Shivdeo quietly. "I noticed it yesterday just after the Presence cut his hand with the soda-water bottle." And sure enough there was one.

"I can't think how I came to fall asleep," I said to him after the doctor had gone; "just at the critical time, too, when I was most wanted."

The man smiled. "We do not always guess aright when we are wanted, *Huzoor*. You slept and the Light-giver got better. It is God's way; He has refreshed you both."

"Refreshed!" I retorted crossly. "I feel as if I had been pounded in a mortar. I had the most frightful dreams, but I can't recall what they were."

"It is not well to try," replied Shivdeo, with rather an odd look. "If I were the Presence I would forget them. There is enough evil to come without recalling what is past and over for ever."

Perhaps involuntarily I followed his suggestion, for, though I chased the fleeting memory more than once through my brain, I never overtook it.

Terence O'Reilly made a quick recovery; but in view of the fast approaching hot weather, the doctors put him on board ship as soon as it could be done with safety. Hurry was the order of the day, so it was not until my return from seeing him to Bombay that I found time for outside affairs. Then it was that Shivdeo informed me of poor little Boots' death in the interval. As the Presence was aware, he said, it had been thought advisable when perfect quiet was necessary to the Light-bringer to send the child away from the compound, because of the difficulty experienced in keeping it out of the house. So it had gone with its nurse to the cantonment-sweeper's hut, where it had caught fresh cold and died. By the advice of the native doctor who had seen it, he had kept the death secret at first, from fear of the news delaying his master's recovery. I made every inquiry, but found nothing of any kind to give rise to suspicion of foul play. The native doctor had sent medicine three days running as for bronchitis, and on the fourth he had seen the child's dead body. It had died, he thought, of croup.

"You will write and tell the Light-bringer?" asked Shivdeo, when the inquiry was over. "And you will say that I did my best, my very best, for my lord's interest?"

"Certainly," I replied; "but he will be sorry, the child was so fond of him."

"When people are beautiful as Krishna, like the Lord of Light, it is easy to be fond of them."

I did not see Shivdeo again for over three months; and the bungalow in the Civil Lines, which he kept swept and garnished against his master's return, gradually assumed the soulless, empty appearance peculiar to the dwelling-places of those who make holiday at the other side of the world. Then a message came to say that he was ill, and wished to see me on business. I found him, a mere wreck and shadow of his former self, propped up against his old pillar in the verandah. He shook his head over my suggestions of remedies. "I have taken many," he replied quietly, "for the native doctor is my caste-brother. The hand of Shiva is not to be turned aside, and am I not his sworn servant? What ails me? Nay, who can say what ails the heart when it ceases to beat? Men cannot live without the light, and it is night for me now. Perhaps that is it, who knows? Yonder old man is my father come to see me die; yet ere the last 'Ram-Ram' sounds in mine ears I want the Presence to understand something, else would I not have vexed his quiet. It will be hard for the *Huzoor* to understand, because he is not of our race."

He paused so long that I asked what he wished me to understand, thinking that in his weakness he had drifted away from his desire. "Something new and strange," he answered, "yet old and true. See! I sit here in the old place, and the Presence shall sit there as he used to do, because old memories return in the old places, making us see and remember things that are past or forgotten. Is it not so?"

Truly enough, as I humoured him by occupying the familiar chair, ready placed half-way between the bed and the window, it seemed to me as if I were once more watching Terence pass through the valley of the shadow.

"The Presence once slept in that chair," continued the weak voice, "and he dreamed a dream. Let him recall it now, if he can."

How or wherefore I know not, but as he spoke a sudden certainty as to what he wished me to know rushed in on me. "Great God," I cried, starting up and seizing him roughly by the shoulder, "you killed poor little Boots! You brought the child here! You killed it before his very eyes and mine! I know it! I think--I think I saw it done!"

He set my hand aside with unexpected force and a strange dignity. "I am the prisoner of Death, *Huzoor!* There is no need to hold me; I cannot escape him. For the rest, if I killed the child, what then? The Lord of Light lives, and that is enough for me. What is a Sudra or two more or less to the Brahman? But what if it was a devil sucking his heart's blood because of his beauty? Shall I not have honour for saving him? Thus both ways I am absolved; but not from my oath, the false oath which I swore to my lord for my own sake. When I wander through the shades waiting for Vishnu's decree, it will lead my blind steps to the body of a foul thing. So I speak that the Presence may judge and say if I were not justified, and confess that we people of the old knowledge are not always wrong. *Huzoor!* you have seen its eyes glisten, as its body clung to his beauty; you know he sickened after it had lain night and day in his arms; you know how it crept and crawled to get at him while he lay helpless. Now listen! One day he was better, brighter in all things, and bid you refresh yourself in the air. I sat here, and like you I fell asleep; and when I woke the thing was at him, close to his heart, its arms round his neck, its devilish lips at his throat, crooning away like an accursed cat! And he was in the death-sleep that lasted till the dawn came that you and I remember so well. Then I knew it must be, and that my oath was as a reed in the flood. Yet would I not be hasty. I took counsel with holy men, men of mighty wisdom, men with such tenderness for life that they bid God speed to the flea which keeps them wakeful; but they all said, 'Yea! one of the two must die.' Did I stop to ask which? Not I. So I fasted, and prayed, and made clean my heart, and waited patiently for the moment of fate; for so they bid me. Even then, *Huzoor*, the holy men would do naught by chance or without proof. It was a bright moonlight night, and the Presence slept by reason of our arts and drugs; and so we put the accursed creature we had brought from the sweeper's hut down at the gate, yonder by the flowering oleanders, and hiding ourselves among them, watched it. Straight, straight as a hawk or a bustard, until we found it there in the old place! Devil of Hell! we made it vomit back the blood, we--"

My hand was on his mouth, my one thought to stop the horrible words that somehow conjured up the still more horrible sight before my eyes. "I know,--there is no need for more,--I cannot bear it."

And indeed, the vision of poor dumb little Boots in their relentless hold froze my blood. As my hands fell away from him in sudden, shrinking horror, he looked at me compassionately. "The Presence does not understand aright. Let him remember the strange doctor's face when he came in the dawn, thinking to find hope had fled. One of the two had to die. If the Presence had thought as I did, as I *knew*, what would he have done?"

I was silent.

His face, which had remained calm enough so far, assumed a look of agonised entreaty, as with an effort painful to see he dragged himself to my feet and clung to them. "What would you have done, *Huzoor*, in my place? What would you have done?"

Then a fearful fit of coughing seized him, and his lips were tinged with blood. Water lay close at hand, yet I knew that this murderer would sooner have died than accept it from my defiling hand; so I called the old man who all this time had sat like a carven image in the next archway. He came, and wiped the dews of death from his son's face without a word; and as he did so, Shivdeo, looking at the faint stains on the cloth, smiled an unearthly smile, and whispered, "I did not suck my lord's blood, for all that. It comes from my own heart."

I am not ashamed to say that my brain was in such a whirl that I turned to escape from a situation where I felt utterly lost. As I did so, I heard Shivdeo's voice for the last time. The old man was holding a little brass cup of water to the parched lips; but it was arrested by the dying hand, and the dying eyes looked wistfully up into his father's.

"Did I do well, O my father?" he asked.

"You did well, my son; drink in peace."

When I reached home, the English mail was in. It brought a letter from Terence. He was in Dublin and engaged to be married; considering that he was an Irishman, no more need be said. He wrote the kindest letter, saying that the great happiness which had come into his life made him all the more grateful to me, seeing that but for my care he would have gone down to the grave without knowing how the love of a good woman can make existence seem a sacred trust. He ended by these words: "And sure, old man, if it be true that all happiness is bought, some one must have paid dear for mine!"

I could not sleep that night--the war of conflicting thoughts waged too fiercely; but it was nearly dawn before I found it impossible to withstand the memory of Shivdeo's cry: "If the Presence had thought as I did, what would he have done?"

He was dead before I reached the house, but surely if he knows anything, he must know that I, for one, cast no stone.

RÂMCHUNDERJI.

"But the tenth *avatar* of the Lord Vishnu is yet to come."

"Exactly so, pundit-*ji*," I replied, looking at my watch. "It is yet to come, seeing that time's up. Half-past eight; so not another stroke of work to-day. No, not for twice a thousand rupees!"

A thousand rupees being the sum with which the Government of India rewards what they are pleased to call "high proficiency" in languages, I, having regard to its literature, had chosen Sanskrit as a means of paying certain just debts. To which end the head-master of the district school came to me for two hours every morning, and prosed away over the doings of the Hindoo pantheon until I came to the conclusion that my Lord Vishnu had been rather extravagant in the matter of incarnations.

The pundit, however, to whom would be due a hundred rupees of the thousand if I succeeded, smiled blandly. "The tenth *avatar* will doubtless await his Honour's leisure; the tenth, and last."

"Last!" I echoed with scorn. "How do you know? Some authorities hold there are twenty-four, and upon my soul I don't see why there should not be twenty-four thousand. 'Tis the same old story all through; devils and demigods, *rakshas* and *rishies*, Noah's ark and Excalibur. That sort of thing might go on for ever."

Now, Pundit Narayan Das was a very learned man. He had taken a Calcutta degree, and was accustomed to educate the rising generation on a mixture of the *Rig-Veda* and *The Spectator*. So he smiled again, saying in English, "'History repeats itself.'"

Thereupon he left me, and I, going into the verandah with my cigar, came straight upon Râmchunderji and his wife Seeta. At least I think so.

They were the oddest little couple. He, at a stretch, might have touched a decade of life, she, something more than half such distance of time. That is, taking them by size: in mind and manners, and in their grave, careworn faces, they were centuries old. His sole garment consisted

of a large yellow turban twined high into a sort of mitre, with just a tip of burnished silver fringe sprouting from the top; and, as he sat cross-legged against the verandah pillar, a hand resting on each knee, his figure awoke a fleeting memory which, at the time, I failed to catch. Afterwards I remembered the effigies in Indra's celestial court as represented by some Parsee actors I had once seen. Seeta was simply a bundle, owing to her being huddled and cuddled up in a veil ample enough for an ample woman.

"I am Râmchunderji, and this is my wife Seeta," said the boy gravely. "If the Presence pleases, I will beguile time by singing."

"What will you sing?" I asked, preparing to idle away ten minutes comfortably in a lounge-chair which lay convenient.

"I sing what I sing. Give me the *vina*, woman."

The veil gave up such a very large instrument that the smallness of the remaining wife became oppressive. So large indeed was it, that one gourd over-filled the boy's lap, while the other acted as a prop to the high twined turban. Even the connecting bamboo, slender though it was, seemed all too wide for those small fingers on the frets.

"Is the permission of the Presence bestowed?" suggested Râmchunderji, with the utmost solemnity.

Twang, twang, twangle! Heavens, what a *vina* and what a voice! I nearly stopped both at the first bar; then patience prevailing, I lay back and closed my eyes. Twang, twangle! A sudden difference in the tone made me open them again, only to find the same little bronze image busy in making a perfectly purgatorial noise; so I resigned myself once more. Palm-trees waving, odorous thickets starred with jasmin, forms, half-mortal, half-divine, stealing through the shadows, the flash of shining swords, the twang of golden bows bent on ten-headed many-handed monsters. Bah! Pundit Narayan Das, prosing over those epic poems of his, had made me drowsy. "What have you been singing?" I asked, rousing myself.

Râmchunderji spread his hands thumbs outwards, and the three wrinkles on his high forehead deepened: "God knows! It is what they sang before the great flood came. The *vina* was theirs, and my turban, and my wife's veil; the rest was too big altogether, so I gave it away for some bread. When the belly is full of greed the heart hath none left, and the nine-*lakh* necklace is worth no more than a mouthful. If the Presence could see into my heart now, he would find no greed there."

This delicate allusion to an inward craving produced a four-anna bit from my pocket, and sent Râmchunderji away to the sweet-meat sellers in order to appease his hunger; for sweet-stuff is cheap in the East, especially when it is stale. Seeta and the *vina*, mysteriously intertwined beneath the veil, followed duteously behind.

The next day they were back again, and the twang of that infernal instrument broke in on the pundit's impassioned regrets over the heroic days of his favourite poems. "By the by," I interrupted, "can you tell me what that boy is singing? I can't make out a word, and yet--But it was no use bringing fancy to bear on Narayan Das, so we went out to listen. They were sitting under a trellised arch covered with jasmin and roses, and a great Gloire de Dijon had sent a shower of blown petals over Seeta's veil.

"A little knowledge is a dangerous thing," quoted Narayan Das sententiously, after listening a while. "It is Râmayâna, the immortal poem your honour reads even now; but debase, illiterate. You say wrong, boy! it is thus."

Râmchunderji waited till the pompous periods ceased; then he shook his head gravely. "We did not sing it so in the days before the great flood came."

His words gave me a curious thrill; but there is no more matter-of-fact being in the world than a Calcutta Bachelor of Arts; so the pundit at once began a cross-examination that would have done credit to a Queen's counsel. "What flood? who were 'we'?" These and many other questions put with brutal bluntness met with a patient reply.

It had been a very big flood, somewhere, God knows how far, in the south country. One, two, three years ago? Oh, more than that! but he could not say how much more. The bard who sang and the woman who carried the *vina* had disappeared, been swept away perhaps. Since then he, Râmchunderji, had wandered over the world filling his stomach and that of his wife Seeta with songs. Their stomachs were not always full; oh, no! Of late (perhaps because the *vina* was so old) people had not cared to listen, and since the great flood nothing could be got without money. Seeta? Oh, yes! she was his wife. They had been married ever so long; he could not remember the time when they had not been married.

It was Narayan Das's opportunity for shaking his head. These infant marriages were subversive of due education. Here was a boy, who should be in Standard II. doing the compound rules, idling about in ignorance. It struck me, however, that Râmchunderji must be pretty well on to vulgar fractions and rule of three, with himself, Seeta, and the world as the denominators, so I asked him if his heart were still so devoid of greed that another four-anna bit would be welcome.

His face showed a pained surprise. The Presence, he said, must be aware that four annas would fill their stomachs (which were not big) for many days. They had not come for alms, only to make music for the Presence out of gratitude. Thinking that music out of an ill-tuned *vina* was hardly the same thing, I forced another four-anna bit on the boy and sent him away.

Nearly a month passed ere I saw him again, though Narayan Das and I used, as the days grew warmer, to sit out in the trellised arch, within sight of the road. My knowledge of Sanskrit increased as I read of Râmchunderji's long exile, shared by Seeta, his wife; of how he killed the beasts in the enchanted forest; how she was reft from him by Râvana, the hydra-headed many-handed monster; and of how finally she was restored to his arms by the help of Hanumân the man-monkey, the child of the wild winds. But though the pundit used to waste many words in pointing out the beauties of a poem which held such hold on the minds of the people that their commonest names were derived from it, I never seemed to get into the spirit of the time as I had done when I listened with closed eyes to the boy's debased, illiterate rendering of the *s'lokas*.

It was after the school vacation had sent Narayan Das to see his relatives at Benares that the odd little couple turned up again. Râmchunderji's face looked more pinched and careworn than ever, and as he held the *vina* across his knees, Seeta, losing its contours, seemed more than ever inadequate to her veil.

"Perhaps one of the many devils which beset the virtuous has entered into the instrument," he said despondently; "but when I play, folk listen not at all. So greed remaineth in the stomach, and the heart is empty."

I offered him another four-anna bit, and when he demurred at taking it before beguiling the time with music, I laid it on the flat skin top of one of the gourds, hoping thus to ensure silence.

The wrinkles on his forehead seemed to go right up into his turban, and his voice took a perplexed tone. "It used not to be so. Before the flood Seeta and I had no thought of money; but now--" He began fingering the strings softly, and as they thrilled, the four-anna bit vibrated and jigged in a murmur of money that fitted strangely to the sort of rude chant in which he went on.

"Money is in the hands, the head, the heart;
Give! give, give, before we give again;
Money hath ten heads to think out evil-doing;
Money hath twenty hands to mete out pain.
Money! money! money! money!
Money steals the heart's love from our life.
Money I have not--say! art thou hungry, wife?"

If anything was possessed of a devil it was that four-anna bit. It buzzed, and hummed, and jigged infernally, as the boy's finger on the strings struck more firmly.

"I'll tell you what it is, Râmchunderji," said I uneasily, "that *vina* is enough to ruin Orpheus. As you don't care for my money, I'll give you another instrument instead. I have one inside which is easier to play, and more your style in every way."

So I brought out a *ravanâstron*, such as professional beggars use, a thing with two strings and a gourd covered with snake-skin. To my surprise the boy's face lost its impassive melancholy in palpable anger.

"The Presence does not understand," he said quite hotly. "We do not beg; Seeta and I fill ourselves with songs. That thing whines for money, money, money, like the devil who made it. Rather would I live by *this* than by mine enemy." And as he spoke he struck the snake-skin with his supple fingers till it resounded again. "Yea! thus will I find bread," he went on, "but the *vina* must find a home first. Therefore I came to the Presence, hearing that he collected such things. Perhaps he will keep it in exchange for one rupee. It is worth one rupee, surely."

His wistful look as he handed me the instrument made me feel inclined to offer a hundred; but in good sooth the *vina* was worth five, and I told him so, adding, as I looked at some curious tracery round the gourds, that it appeared to be very old indeed.

"The Presence saith truly; it is very old," echoed Râmchunderji drearily. "That is why folk will not listen. It is too old; too old to be worth money."

Nevertheless he cheered up at the sight of his rupee; for he would not take more, saying he had every intention of returning to claim the *vina* ere long, and that five rupees would be beyond his hopes of gain.

A fortnight after I came home from my early morning ride by the police office, which stood outside the native town, close to a brick-stepped tank shaded by *peepul*-trees, my object being to check the tally of poisonous snakes brought in for the reward given by Government for their capture. The first time I saw some six or seven hundred deadly serpents ranged in a row with all their heads one way, and all their unwinking eyes apparently fixed on me, I felt queer, and the fact of their being dead did not somehow enter into the equation. But habit inures one, and I walked along the thin grey fringe of certain death spread out on the first step of the tank with an

air of stolid business, only stopping before an unusually large specimen to ask the captor, who sat behind awaiting his pence, where he had come across it.

"Six hundred and seventy in all, *Huzoor*" remarked the Deputy Inspector of Police, following me, resplendent in silver trappings and white cotton gloves. "That is owing to the floods, and the season, since this is the sixth of *Bhâdron* (August) the month of snakes. Yet the outlay is excessive to the Government, and perhaps with justice the price of small ones, such as these, might be reduced one-half."

I looked up, and behind a fringe of diminutive vipers sat Râmchunderji and the bundle he called Seeta. On his bare right arm he wore a much betasselled floss silk bracelet bound with tinsel.

"I am glad to see the greed is in your heart again," said I, pointing to the ornament.

"The *Râm-rucki* is not bought, but given, as in the days before the flood," replied the boy. "Every one wears the *Râm-rucki* still, every one!"

The Deputy Inspector pulled down the cuff of his uniform hastily, but against the gleam of his white gloves I caught a glimpse of bright colours. The *Râm-rucki*, he explained evasively, was the bracelet of luck given to Râmchunderji in old days before his search for Seeta, and common, ill-educated people still retained the superstitious custom of binding one on the wrist of each male during the month of *Bhâdron*. There was so much deplorable ignorance amongst the uneducated classes, and did the Presence look with favour on the proposal for reducing the rewards? Perhaps it was Râmchunderji's eager, wistful face hinting at the way promises were kept before the flood, which made me reply that I considered no one but the Viceroy in Council had power to reduce the price of snakes.

Several times after this I found the odd little couple disposed behind their tally of small vipers; then the season of serpents ceased, and one by one the *habitués* of the tank steps dropped off to pursue other professions. The fringe broke into isolated tassels, and finally the worn, ruddy steps lay bare of all save the flickering light and shade of the leaves above.

November had chilled the welcome cool weather to cold, when a report came in the usual course that a boy calling himself Râmchunderji, and a girl said to be his wife, had been found in a jasmin garden outside the city, half dead of exhaustion and without any ostensible means of livelihood. They had been taken up as vagrants and sent to hospital, pending Government orders. Now the Jubilee year was coming to a close, leaving behind it a legacy of new charities throughout the length and breadth of India. Of some the foundation stone only had been laid by direct telegram to the Queen-Empress; others had sprung to life in a manner suggestive of workmen's tenements. Among the latter was a Female Boarding School and Orphanage for the children of high-caste Hindus, which had been built and endowed by a number of rich contractors and usurers, not one of whom would have sent their daughters to it for all their hoarded wealth. Persistent pennies had attracted a creditable, if intermittent, supply of day-scholars to its stucco walls; but despite an appropriate inscription in three languages over the gate, the orphanage remained empty. Money can do much, but it cannot produce homeless orphans of good family in a society where the patriarchal system lingers in all its crass disregard of the main chance. So at the first hint of Seeta I was besieged on all sides. A real live, genuine, Hindu female orphan going a begging! Preposterous! Sacrilegious! The Chairman of the Orphanage Committee almost wept as he pictured the emptiness of those white walls, and actually shed tears over the building estimates which he produced in order to strengthen his claim to poor little Seeta. Was it fair, he asked, that such a total of munificent charity should not have a single orphan to show the Commissioner-*sahib* when he came on tour? His distress touched me. Then winter, hard on the poor even in sunlit India, was on us; besides, Narayan Das tempted me further, with suggestions of a Jubilee Scholarship at the district school for Râmchunderji himself.

I broke it very gently to the boy as he lay on a mat in the sun, slowly absorbing warmth and nourishment. He was too weak to contest the point, but I felt bad, exceedingly, when I saw him turn face down as if the end of all things was upon him. I knew he must be whispering confidences to Mother Earth respecting that happy time before the flood, and I slunk away as though I had been whipped.

Now, if in telling this veracious history I seem too intermittent, I can but offer as an excuse the fact that an official's work in India is like that of a Jacquard loom. A thread slips forward, shows for a second, and disappears; a pause, and there it is again. Sometimes not until the pattern is complete is it possible to realise that the series of trivial incidents has combined to weave an indelible record on the warp and woof. So it was early January before the Râmchunderji shuttle stirred again. Narayan Das came to me with a look on his face suggestive that neither the *Rig-Veda* nor *The Spectator* was entirely satisfactory. The boy, he said, was not a bad boy, though he seemed absolutely unable to learn; but his influence on Standard I. was strictly non-regulation, nor did any section of the Educational Code apply to the case. If I would come down at recess time, I could see and judge for myself what ought to be done. When I reached the play-ground the bigger boys were at *krikutts* (cricket) or gymnastics, the medium ones engaged on marbles, but in a sunny corner backed by warm brick walls sat Râmchunderji surrounded by a circle of Standard I. Small as he was, he was still so much larger than the average of the class, that, as he leant his high yellow turban against the wall, with half-closed eyes, and hands upon his knees,

the memory of India's Court came back to me once more. He was reciting something in a low voice, and as the children munched popcorn or sucked sweeties their eyes never left his face.

"Look!" said Narayan Das in a whisper from our spying-ground behind the master's window. The song came to an end, a stir circled through the audience, and one by one the solid children of the fields, and the slender, sharp little imps of the bazaars, rose up and put something into the singer's lap. A few grains of corn, a scrap of sweet stuff, and as they did so each said in turn, "Salaam, Râmchunderji!" "No wonder the boy has grown fat," I whispered, dropping the reed screen round which I had been peeping.

Narayan Das shook his head. "If it were only comestibles," he replied gravely, "I could arrange; but when they are devoid of victuals they give their slate-pencils, their ink-pots, even their First-Lesson books. Then, if nobody sees and stops, there is vacancy when such things are applied for. Thus it is subversive of discipline, and parents object to pay. Besides, the *in forma-pauperis* pupils come on contingent with great expense to Government."

I looked through the screen again with a growing respect for Râmchunderji. "Does he eat them too?" I asked.

The head-master smiled the sickly smile of one who is not quite sure if his superior officer intends a joke, and fell back as usual on quotation, "The ostrich is supposed by some to digest nails, but--"

I laughed aloud, and being discovered, went out and spoke seriously to the offender. His calm was not in the least disturbed. "I do not ask, or beg," he replied; "they give of their hearts and their abundance, as in old days before the flood. Is it my fault if they possess slate-pencils, and ink-pots, and First-Lesson books?"

I must confess that this argument seemed to me unanswerable, but I advised him, seeing that the flood *had* come, to return such offerings in future to the store. He did not take my advice, and, about a week after, being discovered selling these things to the bigger boys at a reduced price, he was caned by the head-master. That night he disappeared from the boarding-house and was no more seen. His name was removed from the rolls, his scholarship forfeited for absence without leave, and the arrears absorbed in refunds for slate-pencils and ink-pots. So that was an end of Râmchunderji's schooling, and Standard I. once more became amenable to the Code.

Winter was warming to spring, the first bronze vine leaves were budding, and the young wheat shooting to silvery ears, before the Commissioner, coming his rounds, was taken in pomp to visit the Orphanage and its occupants. I remember it so well. The Committee and the Commissioner, and I, and every one interested in female orphans and female education, on one side of a red baize table decorated with posies of decayed rosebuds and jasmin in green-glass tumblers; and on the other Seeta and the matron. The former, to enhance her value as a genuine half-caste waif, was still a mere bundle, and I fancied she looked smaller than ever; perhaps because the veil was not so large. Then the accounts were passed, and the matron's report read. Nothing, she said, could be more satisfactory than the general behaviour and moral tone of the inmates, except in one point. And this was the feeding of the monkeys, which, as every one knew, infested the town. The result being that the *bunder-lôg* had become bold even to the dropping down of stones into the court--quite large stones, such as the one placed as a stepping-stone over the runnel of water from the well.

Here I unguardedly suggested an air-gun; whereupon Narayan Das, who always attended these functions as an educational authority, reminded me reproachfully that monkeys were sacred to the god Hanumân, who, if I remembered, had finally rescued Seeta from the ten-headed, many-armed monster Ravana, the inventor of the *ravanastron* or beggar's fiddle.

It was at this juncture that I suddenly became aware that the Jacquard loom of Fate was weaving a pattern; Râmchunderji! Seeta! the exile! the killing of the wild beasts! the ten-headed, many-handed monster Râvana! Yet I could tell you almost every word of the Commissioner's speech, though he prosed on for the next ten minutes complacently about the pleasure he felt, and the authorities felt, and the whole civilised world felt, at seeing "Money, the great curse and blessing of humanity, employed as it should be employed in snatching the female orphan of India from unmerited misfortune, and educating her to be an example to the nineteenth century." Every one was highly delighted, and the Committee approached me with a view of adding the Commissioner's name as a second title to the school.

But I awaited the completion of the pattern. It was on the eleventh of April, that is to say, on the High Festival of Spring, at the fair held beside the tank where humanity in thousands was washing away the old year, and putting on the new in the shape of gay-coloured clothing, that my attention was attracted by a small, dense crowd whence came hearty guffaws of laughter.

"'Tis a performing monkey," said a bearded villager in response to my question as to what was amusing them so hugely. "The boy makes him do tricks worthy of Hanumân; yet he saith he taught him yonder down by the canal. Will not the Protector of the Poor step in and see? Ho, ho! 'twould make a suitor laugh even if the *digri* (decree) were against him." But I recognised the pattern this time, and I had made up my mind not to interfere with the shuttle again. As I turned away, another roar of laughter and a general feeling in pockets and turbans told me that the final

tip had succeeded, and that collection was going on satisfactorily.

A few days later the Chairman of the Committee came to me in excited despair. The real, genuine female Hindu orphan was not to be found, and the stucco walls were once more empty. Inquiries were made on all sides, but when it came out, casually, that a boy, a girl, and a monkey, had taken a third-class ticket to Benares I said nothing. I was not going to aid Râvana, or prevent the due course of incarnation, if it *was* an incarnation. That great city of men, women, and monkeys should give the trio fair play.

Last year, when I was in Simla, I overheard a traveller giving his impressions of India to a lady who was longing all the time to find out from a gentleman with a mustache when the polo-match was to begin at Annandale next day.

"The performing troupes are certainly above the European average," he said. "At Benares, especially, I remember seeing a monkey; he, his master, and a girl, did quite a variety of scenes out of the Râmayâna, and really, considering who they were, I--"

"Excuse me,--but--oh! Captain Smith, is it half-past eleven or twelve?"

The *vina* still hangs in my collection next the *ravanastron*. Sometimes I take it down and sound the strings. But the waving palms, the odorous thickets, and the shadowy, immortal forms have got mixed up somehow with that infernal humming and bumming of the four-anna bit. So I get no help in trying to decide the question,--"Who was Râmchunderji?"

HEERA NUND.

He stood in the verandah, salaaming with both hands, in each of which he held a bouquet--round-topped, compressed, prim little posies, with fat bundles of stalk bound spirally with date-fibre; altogether more like ninepins than bouquets, for the time of flowers was not yet, and only a few ill-conditioned rosebuds, suggestive of worms, and a dejected *champak* or two, showed amongst the green.

The holder was hardly more decorative than the posies. Bandy, hairy brown legs, with toes set wide open by big brass rings--a sight bringing discomfort within one's own slippers from sheer sympathy; a squat body, tightly buttoned into a sleeveless white coat; a face of mild ugliness overshadowed by an immaculately white turban. From the coral and gold necklace round his thick throat, and the crescent-shaped ear-rings in his spreading ears, I guessed him to be of the Arain caste. He was, in fact, Heera Nund, gardener to my new landlord; therefore, for the present, my servant. Had I inquired into the matter, I should probably have found that his forbears had cultivated the surrounding land for centuries; certainly long years before masterful men from the West had jotted down their trivial boundary pillars to divide light from darkness, the black man from the white, cantonments from the rest of God's earth. One of these little white pillars stood in a corner of my garden, and beyond it lay an illimitable stretch of bare brown plain, waiting till the young wheat came to clothe its nakedness.

I did not inquire, however; few people do in India. Perhaps they are intimidated by the extreme antiquity of all things, and dread letting loose the floodgates of garrulous memory. Be that as it may, I was content to accept the fact that Heera Nund, whether representing ancestral proprietors or not, had come to congratulate me, a stranger, on having taken, not only the house, but the garden also. The *sahibs*, he said, went home so often nowadays that they had ceased to care for gardens. This one having been in a contractor's hands for years had become, as it were, a miserable low-degree native place. In fact, he had found it necessary to steep his own knowledge in oblivion in order that content should grow side by side with country vegetables. Yet he had not forgotten the golden age, when, under the ægis of some judge with a mysterious name, he, too, Heera Nund the Arain, had raised celery and beetroot, French beans and artichokes, asparagus and parsley. He reeled off the English names with a glibness and inaccuracy in which, somehow, there lurked a pathetic dignity. Then suddenly, from behind a favouring pillar, he sprung upon me the usual native offering, consisting of a flat basket decorated with a few coarse vegetables. A bunch of rank-smelling turnips, half-a-dozen blue radishes running two to the pound, various heaps of native greens, a bit off an overblown cauliflower proclaiming its bazaar origin by the turmeric powder adhering to it in patches, a leaf-cup of mint ornamented by two glowing chillies. He laid the whole at my feet with a profound obeisance. "This dust-like offering," he said gravely, "is all that the good God (*Khuda*) can give to the *sahib*. Let the Presence (*Huzoor*) wait a few months and see what Heera Nund can do for him."

I shall not soon forget the ludicrous solemnity of voice and gesture, or the simple self-importance overlaying the ugly face with the smile of a cat licking cream.

I did not see him again for some days, for accession to a new office curtails leisure. When, however, I found time for a stroll round my new domain I discovered Heera Nund hard at work. His coatee hung on a bush; his bare, brown back glistened in the sunshine as he stooped down to deepen a watercourse with his adze-like shovel. A brake of sugarcane, red-brown and gold, showed where the garden proper merged into the peasants' land beyond; for the well, whence the water came that flowed round Heera Nund's hidden feet as he stood in the runnel, irrigated quite a large stretch of the fields around my holding. The well-wheel creaked in recurring discords, every now and again giving out a note or two as if it were going to begin a tune. The red evening sun shone through the mango-trees, where the green parrots hung like unripe fruit. The bullocks circled round and round; the water dripped and gurgled.

"How about the seeds I sent you?" I asked, when Heera Nund drew his wet feet from the stream, and composing himself for the effort, produced an elaborate salaam.

He left humility behind him as he stalked over to a narrow strip of ground on the other side of the well, a long strip portioned out into squares and circles like a doll's garden, with tiny one-span walks between.

"Behold!" he said, "his Honour will observe that the cabbage caste have life already."

Truly enough the half-covered seeds showed gussets of white in their brown jackets. "But where are the tickets? I sent word specially that you were to be sure and stick the labels on each bed. How am I to know which is which?"

"The Presence can see that the sticks are there," he answered with a superior smile; "but there are others beside the *sahibs* who love tickets."

He pointed to the tree above us, where on a branch sat a peculiarly bushy-tailed squirrel, as happy as a king over the brussels-sprouts' wrapper, which he was crumpling into a ball with deft hands and sharp teeth. How I came to know it was this particular wrapper happened thus: I threw my cap at the offender, and in his flight he dropped the paper on my bald head; it was hard, and had points.

"They are mis-begotten devils," remarked Heera cheerfully; "but they are building nests, *sahib*, and like to paper the inside. Notwithstanding, the Presence need fear no confusion; his slave has many names in his head. This is *arly walkrin* (Early Walcheren), that is *droomade* (Drumhead), yonder is *dookoyark* (Duke of York), and that, that, and that--He would have gone on interminably, had I not changed the subject by asking what was growing beneath a dilapidated hand-light, which stood next to a sturdy crop of broadcast radishes. Only a few panes of glass remained intact, but the vacancies had been neatly supplied by coarse muslin. The gardener's face, always simple in expression, became quite homogeneous with pure content.

"*Huzoor!* It is the *mâlin* (female gardener)!"

"The *mâlin!* What on earth do you mean?"

Have you ever watched the face of a general servant when she takes the covers off the Christmas dinner? Have you ever seen a very young conjurer lift his father's hat to show you that the handkerchief (which he has palpably secreted elsewhere) is no longer in its legitimate hiding-place? Something of that mingled triumph and fear lest some accident may have befallen skill in the interim showed itself in Heera Nund's countenance as he removed the light with a flourish, thus disclosing to view a fat and remarkably black baby asleep on a bed of leaves. It was attired in a pair of silver bangles, and a Maw's feeding-bottle grew, like some new kind of root-crop, from the ground beside it.

"My daughter, *Huzoor*--little Dhropudi the *mâlin*."

His voice thrilled even my bachelor ears as he squatted down and began mechanically to fan the swift-gathering flies from the sleeping child.

"You seem to be very fond of her," I remarked after a pause. "It is only a girl after all. Have you no son?"

He shook his head.

"She is the only one, and I waited for her ten years--ten long years; so I was glad even to get a mâlin. Dhropudi grows as fast as a boy, almost as fast as the *Huzoor's* cabbages. Only the other day she was no bigger than my hand."

"Your wife is dead, I suppose?" The question was, perhaps, a little brutal, but it was so unusual to see a man doing dry nurse to a baby girl, that I took it for granted that the mother had died months before, at the child's birth. I never saw a face change more rapidly than his; the simplicity left it, and in place thereof came a curious anxiety such as a child might show with the dawning conviction that it has lost itself.

"She is not at all dead, *Huzoor*; on the contrary, she is very young. Children cry sometimes, and my house does not like crying. You see, when people are young they require more sleep; when she is old as I am she will be able to keep awake."

His tone was argumentative, as if he were reasoning the matter out for his own edification. "Not that Dhropudi keeps me awake often," he added, in hasty apology to that infant's reputation; "considering how young a person she is, her ways are very straight-walking and meek."

"If she cries you can always stop her with the watering-pot, I suppose."

He looked shocked at the suggestion.

"*Huzoor!* it is not difficult to stop them; such a very little thing pleases a baby. Sometimes it is the sunshine--sometimes it is the wind in the trees--sometimes it is the birds, or the squirrels, or the flowers. When it is tired of these there is always the milk in its stomach. Dhropudi's goat is yonder; it lives on your Honour's weeds. You are her father and her mother."

However much I might repudiate the relationship, I soon became quite accustomed to finding Dhropudi in the most unexpected places in my garden. For, soon after my first introduction to her, the claims of an early crop of lettuces to protection from the squirrels led Heera Nund to transfer the hand-light from one of his charges to another. Dhropudi, he said, could grow nicely without it now; the black ants could not carry her off, and the squirrels had quite begun to recognise that she was of the race of Adam. At first, however, he took precautions against mistakes, and many a time I have seen the sleeping child stuck round with pea-sticks, or decorated with fluttering feathers on a string, to scare away the birds. Sometimes she was blanching with the celery, and once I nearly trod on her as she lay among the toppings in a thick plantation of blossoming beans. But she never came to harm; the only misadventure being when her father would lay her to sleep in some dry water channel, and, forgetting which one it was, turn the shallow stream that way. Then there would be a momentary outcry at the cold bath; but the next, she would be pacified with a flower, and sit in the sun to dry, for to say sooth, no more good-tempered child ever existed than Dhropudi. In this, at any rate, she was like her father, though I could trace no resemblance in other ways. "She is like my house," he would say, when I noticed the fact. "She is young, and I am old--quite old."

Indeed, as time passed I saw that Heera Nund was older than I thought at first. Before the barber came in the morning there was quite a silver stubble on his bronze cheek, and his bright, restless eyes were haggard and anxious. Despite his almost comic jauntiness and self-importance, he struck me as having a hunted look at times, especially when he came out from the mud-walled enclosure at the further end of the garden, where his "house" lived. He went there but seldom, spending his days in tending Dhropudi and his plants with an almost extravagant devotion. His state of mind when that young lady used her new accomplishment of crawling, to the detriment of a bed of *sootullians* (Sweet Williams) in which he took special pride, was quite pathetic. I found him simply howling between regret for the plants and fear lest I should order punishment to the offender. His gratitude when I laughed was unbounded.

After this Dhropudi used to be set in a twelve-inch pot, half sunk in the ground, where she would stay contentedly for hours, drumming the sides with a carrot, while Heera weeded and dibbled.

"She grows," he would say, snatching her up fiercely in his arms; "she grows as all my plants grow. See my *sootullians!* They will blossom soon, and then all the *sahibs* will come and say, 'See the *sootullians* which Heera Nund and Dhropudi have grown for the *Huzoor*.'"

Yet with all this blazoning of content the man was curiously restless--almost like a child in his desire for action and vivid interest in trivialities. "See the misbegotten creature I have found eating the honourable *Huzoor's* roots!" he would say, casting a wire-worm on the verandah steps, and dancing on it vindictively. "It was in the *Huzoor's* carnations, but by the blessing of God and Heera Nund's vigilance it is dead. Nothing escapes me. Have I not fought wire-worms since the beginning of all things, I and my fathers? We kill all creeping, crawling things, except the holy snake that brings fruit and blossom to the garden."

One night I was disturbed by unseemly noises, coming apparently from the servants' quarters; but my remonstrances next morning were met by my bearer, with swift denial. "It is Heera. He, poor man, has to beat his wife almost every night now. I wonder the Presence has not heard her before; she screams very loud."

I stood aghast.

"He should let her go, or kill her," continued the bearer placidly. "She is not worth the trouble of beating; but he is a fool, because she is Dhropudi's mother. Yes, he is a fool; he beats her when he finds her lover there. He should beat her well before the man comes. That is the best way with women."

It was an old story, it seemed, dating before Dhropudi's appearance on the scene. It occurred to me that perhaps a deeper tragedy than I had thought for was ripening in my garden among the ripening plants. I found myself watching Dhropudi and her father with an almost morbid interest, and hoping that, if my idle suspicion was right, kindly fate might hide the truth away forever in

the bottom of that well where Heera often held the child to smile at her own reflection, far down where the water showed like a huge round dewdrop.

So time went on, until the *sootullians* showed blossom buds, and Dhropudi cut her first tooth on one and the same day. Perhaps the excitement of the double event was too much for Heera's nerves; perhaps what happened was due anyhow; but as I strolled through the garden that evening at sundown I saw the most comically pathetic sight my eyes ever beheld. Heera Nund, clothed, but not in his right mind, was dancing a *can-can* among his *sootullians*, while Dhropudi shrieked with delight and beat frantically on her flower-pot. Even with the knowledge of all that came after, the remembrance provokes a smile,--the rhythmic bobbing up and down of the uncouth figure, the cowlike kicks of the bandy legs, the preternaturally grave face above, the crushed *sootullians* below.

I sent him in charge of two sepoys to the Dispensary, and there he remained for two months, more or less. When he came back he was very quiet, very thin, and there were the marks of several blisters on the back of his head. He resumed work cheerfully, with many apologies for having been ill, and once more he and Dhropudi--who had been handed over meantime, under police supervision, to her mother--were to be found spending their days together in amicable companionship; his only regrets being, apparently, that the *sootullians* had blossomed and Dhropudi learnt to walk in his absence.

But for one or two little eccentricities I might have been tempted to forget that *can-can* among the flowers; indeed, I always met his inquiries as to the *sootullians* with the remark that they had done as well as could be expected in the circumstances. The eccentricities, however, if few, were striking. One was his exaggerated gratitude for the blisters on the back of his head; the last thing in the world one would have thought likely to produce an outburst of that Christian virtue. But it did, and an allusion to the all too visible scars invariably crowned the frequent recital of the benefits he had received at my hands. Another was the difficulty he had in distinguishing Dhropudi from the other fruits of his labor. On two separate occasions she formed part of the daily basket of vegetables which he brought in to me, and very quaint the little black morsel looked sitting surrounded by tomatoes and melons. But though he treated the matter as an elaborate joke when I remarked on it, there was a dazed, uncertain look in his eyes as if he were not quite sure as to the right end of the stick.

Nevertheless peace and contentment reigned apparently in his house. When I sat out in the dark, hot evenings, a glow of flickering firelight from within showed the mysterious mud-walled enclosure by the wall, decorous and conventional. The winking stars looking down into it knew more of the life within than I did, but at any rate no unseemly cries disturbed the scented night air and the *Huzoor's* slumbers. Perhaps the police supervision had impressed the lover with the dangers of lurking house-trespass by night; perhaps the dark-browed, heavy-jowled young woman who had taken my warning so sullenly had learnt more craft; perhaps the languor which creeps over all things in May had sucked the vigour even from passion. Who could say? Those crumbling mud walls hid it all, and Heera seemed to have begun a new life with the hot-weather vegetables.

So matters stood when an old enemy laid hold of me. Ten days after I found myself racing Death with a determination to reach the sea, and feel the salt west wind on my face before he and I closed with each other. The strange hurry and eagerness of it all comes back to some of us like a nightmare, years after the exile is over; the doctor's verdict, the swift packing of a trunk or two, the hope, the fear, the mad longing at least to see the dear faces once more.

They packed me and a half hundred pillows into a *palki ghâri* one afternoon. The servants stood, white clad, in a row beside the white pillars, dazzling in the slanting sunlight. I drove through the flower garden dusty and scorched. At the gate stood Heera Nund, one arm occupied by Dhropudi, the other supporting a huge basket of vegetables. He looked uncertain which to present; finally, seeing the carriage drive on, he deliberately let the basket fall, and running to my side, thrust the child's chubby hands forward. They held just such ninepin bouquets as he had carried on our first introduction. "Take them, *sahib!*" he cried. "Take them for luck! and come back soon to the *mâdli* and the *mâlin*." As the *ghâri* turned sharp down the road I saw him standing amidst the ruins of the basket with Dhropudi in his arms.

Six months passed before I set foot on Indian soil again, and then fate and a restless Government sent me to a new station. When my servants arrived with my baggage from the old one, I naturally fell to asking questions. "And how is Heera Nund?" was one. My bearer smiled benignly. "*Huzoor*, he is well--in the month of July he was hanged."

"Bearer!"

"Without doubt; it was in the month of July. He killed his wife with an axe. Dhropudi was bitten by a snake while she slept one day when Heera had to leave her with her mother; and that night he killed his wife as *she* slept also. It was a mistake to be so revengeful, for every one knew Dhropudi was not really his daughter."

"Do you think that Heera knew?"

"She told him when the child died, in order to stop his grief; but it did not. She was very kind to him,--after the other one went to prison for lurking about."

"And did no one tell about it all?"

"About what, *Huzoor?*"

"About the vegetables, and Dhropudi, and the *sootullians*, and the blisters on the back of his head! Did no one say the man was mad?"

"There was a new assistant at the Dispensary, *sahib*, and her people were very rich; besides, Heera was not mad at all. He did it on purpose. He was a bad man, and the Sirkâr did right to hang him--in July."

But as I turned away I could think of nothing but that *can-can* among the *sootullians*, with little Dhropudi beating time with a carrot.

FEROZA.

Two hen sparrows quarrelling over a feather, while a girl watched them listlessly; for the rest, sunshine imprisoned by blank walls, save where at one end a row of scalloped arches gave on two shallow, shadowy verandah-rooms, and at the other a low doorway led to the world beyond. But even this was veiled by a brick screen, forced by the light into unison with the brick building behind. The girl sat with her back against the wall, her knees drawn up to her chin, and her little, bare, brown feet moulding themselves in the warm, sun-steeped dust of the courtyard. In the hands clasped round her green trousers she held an unopened letter from which the London post-mark stared up into the brazen Indian sky. She was waiting to have it read to her--waiting with a dull, almost sullen patience, for the afternoon was still young. It was old enough, however, to make a sheeted figure in the shadow sit up on its string bed and yawn because siesta time was past.

"Still thinking of thy letter, Feroz? *Bismillah!* I'm glad my man doesn't live in a country where the women go about half naked."

"Who told thee so, Kareem? The Meer *sahib* said naught."

A light laugh seemed prisoned in the echoing walls. "*Wah!* How canst tell? 'Tis father-in-law reads thy letters. Inaiyut saith so. He saw them at Delhi dancing like bad ones with--"

"Peace, Kareema! Hast no decency?"

"Enough for my years, whilst thou art more like a grandam than a scarce-wed girl. Why should not Inaiyut be a man? A husband is none the worse for knowing a pretty woman when he sees one."

She settled the veil on her sleek black head and laughed again. Feroza Begum's small brown face hardened into scorn. "Inaiyut hath experience and practice in the art doubtless, as he hath in cockfighting and dicing."

"Now, don't gibe at him for that. Sure 'tis the younger son's portion amongst us Moguls. Do I sneer at thy Meer amusing himself over the black water amongst the *mems?*"

"The Meer is not amusing himself. He is learning to be a barrister."

Kareema swung her legs to the ground with another giggle. "*Wah!* Men are men all the world over, and so are women. Yea! 'tis true." She looked like some gay butterfly as she flashed out into the sunlight, and began with outstretched arms and floating veil to imitate the sidelong graces of a dancing girl.

"*Hai! Hai!* Bad one!" cried a quavering voice behind her, as an old woman clutching for scant covering at a dirty white sheet shambled forward. "Can I not close an eye but thou must bring iniquity to respectable houses? 'Tis all thy scapegrace husband; for when I brought thee hither thou wast meek-spirited and--"

"Deck me not out with lies, nurse," laughed Kareema. "Sure I was ever to behaviour as a babe to walking--unsteady on its legs. So wast thou as a bride; so are all women." She seized the withered old arms as she spoke, and threw them up in an attitude. "Dance, Mytâben! dance! 'Tis the best way."

The forced frown faded hopelessly before the young, dimpling face. "Kareema! Why will'st not

be decent like little Feroz yonder?"

"Why? Because my man thinks I'm pretty! Because I've fine clothes! Feroza hath old green trousers and her man is learning to be '*wise*,' forsooth! amongst the *mems*. So she is jealous--"

"I'm not jealous," interrupted the other hotly.

"Peace, peace, little doves!" expostulated the old nurse. "Feroz is no fool to be jealous of a *mem*. Holy Prophet, Kareem! hadst thou seen them at Delhi as I have--"

"Inaiyut hath seen them too. He saith they are as *houris* in silk and satins with bare breasts and arms--"

Mytâben's bony fingers crackled in a shake of horrified denial. "Silence! shameless one! I tell thee they have no beauty, no clothes--"

"There! I said they had no clothes," pouted Kareema.

The duenna folded her sheet round her with great dignity. "Thy wit is sharp, Kareema! 'Tis as well; for thou wilt need it to protect thy nose! The *mems* have many clothes; God knows how many, or how they bear them when even the skin He gives is too hot. They are sad-coloured, these *mems*, with green spectacles serving as veils. Not that they need them, for they are virtuous and keep their eyes from men truck. Not like bad bold hussies who dance--"

"'Tis not true," cried Kareema shrilly. "Thou sayest it to please Feroza. Inaiyut holds they are *houris* for beauty, and he knows."

In the wrangle which ensued the London postmark revolved between earth and heaven as the letter turned over and over in Feroza's listless fingers.

"I wish I knew," she muttered with a frown puckering her forehead. "He saith they are so wise, and yet--"

Mytâben paused in the war of words and laid her wrinkled old fingers on the girl's head. "Plague on new-fangled ways!" she grumbled half to herself. "Have no fear, heart's life! they are uncomely. But for all that, 'tis a shame of the Meer to leave thee pining."

A hand was on her mouth. "Hush, Mytâben! 'Tis a wife's duty to wait her lord's pleasure to stay or come."

There is a dignity in submission, but Kareema laughed again, and even old Mytâb looked at the girl compassionately. "For all that, heart's life, 'tis well to be sure. Certainty soothes the liver more than hope. So thou shalt see a *mem*. For lo! the book-readers have come to this town, and one passeth the door every eve at sundown."

"Oh, Mytâb! why didn't you tell us before?" cried both the girls in a breath.

"Because 'tis enough as it is, to keep two married girls straight, with never a mother-in-law to make them dance to her tune," grumbled the nurse evasively. "*Hai*, Kareema! I will tell thy father-in-law the Moulvie,[18] and then 'twill be bread and water."

"Bread and water is not good for brides," retorted Kareema with a giggle. "And I will see the *mems* too, or I will cry, and then--" She nodded her head maliciously.

That evening at sundown the two girls sat huddled up by the latticed window of the outer vestibule, while Mytâb watched at the door of the men's court which, with that of the women's apartments, opened into this shadowy entrance. By putting their eyes close to the fret-work they could see up and down a narrow alley where a central drain, full of black sewage, usurped the larger half of the rough brick pavement.

"Look, Feroza! look!" cried Kareema in a choked voice. A white umbrella lined with green, a huge pith hat tied round with a blue veil, a gingham dress, a bag of books, white stockings, and tan shoes,--that was all. They watched the strange apparition breathlessly till it came abreast of them.

Then Kareema's pent-up mirth burst forth in peals of laughter so distinctly audible through the open lattice that the cause stopped in surprise.

Feroza started to her feet. "For shame, Kareem, for shame! He says they are so good." And before they guessed what she would be at, the wicket-gate was open, and she was on the bare, indecent doorstep.

"*Salaam! mem sahib, salaam!*" rang her high-pitched, girlish voice. "I, Feroza Begum of the house of Meer Ahmed Ali, barrister-at-law, am glad to see you."

Before Kareema, by hanging on to Mytâb's scanty attire, lent weight enough to drag the offender back to seclusion, the English lady raised her veil, and Feroza Begum, Moguli, caught her first glimpse of a pair of mild blue eyes. She never forgot the introduction to Miss Julia Smith,

spinster of Clapham. Perhaps she had reason to remember it.

"I might have believed it of Kareem," whimpered the duenna over a consolatory pipe, "but Feroz! To stand out in the world yelling like a hawker. *Ai, Ai!* Give me your quiet ones for wickedness. *Phut!* in a moment, like water from the skin-bag, spoiling everything."

"'Twas Kareem's laugh burst the *mashk*, nursie," laughed Feroza. She and her sister-in-law seemed to have changed places for the time, and she was flitting about gay as a wren, while the former sulked moodily on her bed.

Yet as the days passed a new jealousy came like seven devils to possess poor Feroza utterly.

What was this wisdom which inspired so many well-turned periods in the Meer's somewhat prosy letters? Beauty was beyond her, but women even of her race had been wise; passionate Nurjehan, and even pious Fâtma--God forgive her for evening her chances with that saintly woman's! The thought led to such earnest study of the Koran that old Mytâb's wrath was mollified into a hope of permanent penitence. And all the time the girl's heart was singing pæans of praise over the ease with which she remembered the long strings of meaningless words. Buoyed up by hope she confided her heart's desire to Kareema.

"Eat more butter and grow fat," replied that little coquette. "Dress in bright colours and redden thy lips. And thou mightest use that powder the *mems* have to make their skins fair. Inaiyut saith he will buy me some in the bazaar. That is true wisdom; the other is for wrinkles."

Despite this cold water, the very next London post-mark brought matters to a crisis.

"Is that all?" asked Feroza dismally, when her father-in-law, the Moulvie, had duly intoned her husband's letter. "It looks, oh! it looks ever so much more on paper."

The old Mohammedan stared through his big horn-rimmed spectacles at her reluctant finger feeling its way along the crabbed writing.

"Quite enough for a good wife, daughter-in-law," he replied. "Bring my pipe, and thank God he is well."

As she sat fanning the old man duteously, her mind was full of suspicion. Could *she* have compressed the desire and love of her heart into a few well-turned sentences? Ah! if she could only learn to read for herself. The thought found utterance in a tentative remark that it would save the Moulvie trouble if she were a scholar.

"'Tis not much trouble," said the old man courteously; "the letters are not long."

The effect of these words surprised him into taking off his spectacles, as if this new departure of quiet Feroza's could be better seen by the naked eye.

"So thou thinkest to learn all the Meer has learnt?" he asked scornfully, when her eloquence abated. "*Wah illah!* What? Euclidus and Algebra, Political Economy and Justinian?"

The desire of the girl's heart was not this, but jealousy and shame combined prevented her declaring the real standard of her aims, so she replied defiantly, "Why not? I can learn the Koran fast--oh, ever so fast."

It was an unfortunate speech, since it brought down on her the inevitable reply that such knowledge was enough for those who, at best, must enter Paradise at a man's coat-tails. Driven into a corner, she felt the hopelessness of the struggle, until, flushed by success, the Moulvie forgot caution, and declaimed against his son's stupidity in desiring more.

Feroza seized on this slip swiftly. If it was as she feared, if her husband's wishes were kept from her ignorance, she must, she would learn. If she could not go to school, the *mems* would come and teach her at home. They did such work at Delhi; why not here? As for the Moulvie's determination that no singing should be heard in his house, that was a righteous wish, and she would tell the *mems* not to sing their hymns. Indeed, such a question seemed all too trivial for comparison with her future happiness. Therefore her disappointment when Mytâben brought back a peremptory refusal from the mission-ladies to teach on such condition was very keen. Her piteous, surprised tears roused Kareema's scornful wonder.

"I can't think why thou shouldst weep; it thickens the nose, and thine is over-broad as it is. Inaiyut offered once to teach me, but when I asked him if learning would make him love me better, he kissed me with a laugh. So I let it alone."

"Thou dost not understand," sobbed Feroza; "no one does. The Meer is wise, and I am different."

"*Wah!* Thou art but a woman at best, and life is over for us with the first wrinkle, no matter what we learn. Ah, Feroz! let's enjoy youth whilst we have it. See! I have a rare bit of fun for thee if thou wilt not blab to Mytâben. Promise!"

Three days afterwards Feroza, escaping from the turmoil of a great marriage in a relative's

house, found herself, much to her own surprise and bewilderment, forming one of a merry party of young women disguised in boy's clothes, and bound for an hour or so of high jinks in one of the walled orange gardens which lay on the outskirts of the quarter. The idea, which had at first filled her with dismay, had next grown tempting, and then become irresistible with Kareema's artful suggestion that it would give occasion for a personal interview with the mission-ladies who had taken up their abode close by. So she had allowed her doubts and fears to be allayed; though inwardly she failed to see the vast difference on which her sister-in-law insisted, between the iniquity of standing on doorsteps in the full light of day, and sneaking out at night on the quiet.

"Verily," said Kareema in a pet, "thou art a real noodle, Feroz! I tell thee all the good-style women do thus, and my sister will be there with her boys. *Wah!* were it not for my handsome Inaiyut, I should die in this dull old house where folk wish to be better than God made them."

So it came to pass that while Miss Julia Smith, spinster of Clapham, sat with her fellow-workers in the verandah resting after their labours, a boyish figure with a beating heart was creeping towards her as the goal of every hope.

The English mail was in; an event which by accentuating the severance from home ties is apt to raise the enthusiasm of the mission-house beyond normal.

"How very, very interesting it is about the young man Ahmed Ali," remarked Julia, in a voice tuned to superlatives. "Dearest Mrs. Cranston writes that he spoke so sweetly about his ignorant child-wife. As she says, there is something so--so--so comforting, you know, in the thought of work coming to us, as if--well, I can't quite express it, you know,--but from our own homes,--from dear, dear, old England!"

There was a large amount of confused good feeling in Julia Smith. A kindly soul she was, if a little over-sentimental. Perhaps a broken sixpence, stored side by side with a decayed vegetable in her desk, formed a creditable explanation of the latter weakness. Such things account for much in the lives of most women.

"I suppose," she continued, "we were right to refuse without hymns; but I shall never forget the sweet child's face as she popped from her prison. I am making up the incident for our magazine; it will be most touching. But now that dearest Mrs. Cranston has written, it seems like the finger of Providence--"

"A boy wanting a Miss," interrupted the nondescript familiar, inseparable from philanthropy in India. "The one with an umbrella, a big hat, and a bag of books."

A very womanly laugh with an undercurrent of militant pleasure, ran round the company. The description fitted one and all, and they were proud of the fact.

The moon shone bright behind the arches, the scent of orange blossoms drifted over the high garden wall, and every now and again a burst of laughter close at hand overbore the more distant noise of wedding drums and pipes.

"What do you want, my son?"

The soft voice with its strange inflections took away the last vestige of Feroza's courage. She stood dizzy with absolute fear, her tongue cleaving to her mouth. A repetition of the question roused her to the memory that here lay her one chance. She gave a despairing glance into the gloom in search of those pale blue eyes; then, suddenly, inheritance broke through her terror. She flung her hands up to heaven, and her young voice rose in the traditional cry for justice. "*Dohai! Dohai!*"

"We do not keep justice here," was the soft answer. "You must go to the Courts for that. We are but women--"

"And I too am a woman! Listen!" The words which had lagged a moment before now crowded to her lips, and as she stepped closer her raised arm commanded attention. "You have taken my husband and left me; and I will not be left! You gave him scholarships and prizes, tempting him away; and when I also ask for learning, you say, 'You must sing.' What is singing when I am sad? Surely God will hear my tears and not your songs!"

Her passion swayed her so that but for Julia Smith's supporting arm she would have fallen. "I don't understand," said the Englishwoman kindly. "What have we done? Who are you?"

"I am the wife of Meer Ahmed Ali, barrister-at-law, and I want to be taught Euclidus, and Justinian, and the--the other things. You shall not take him away for always. Justice! I say, justice!"

"My dears! My dears!" cried Julia Smith, "didn't I tell you it was the finger of Providence--"

Half-an-hour afterwards little Feroza, flying back to rejoin her companions, felt as if Paradise had been opened to her by a promise. But if Paradise was ajar, the orange garden was closed, the gate locked, the key gone. She peered through the bars, hoping it was a practical joke to alarm her. All was still and silent save for the creak of the well-wheel and a soft rustle from the

burnished leaves where the moonlight glistened white.

"Kareem! let me in! for pity sake let me in!"

Then a wild, uncontrollable fear at finding herself alone in an unknown world claimed her body and soul, and she fled like a hare to the only refuge she knew. The *mems* must protect her; for were they not the cause of her venturing forth at all? But for them, or their like, would she not have been well content at home? Yea! well content.

The verandah was empty, and from within came a monotonous voice. She peered into the dimly lit room to see a circle of kneeling figures, and hear her own name welded into the even flow of prayer. God and his Holy Prophet! They were praying that she might become apostate from the faith of her fathers! Tales of girls seized and baptised against their will leapt to her memory. She covered her eyes as if to shut out the horrid sight and fled; whither she neither knew nor cared.

"*Hai!* have I found thee at last, graceless! scandalous!" scolded some one into whose arms she ran at full tilt.

"Mytâb! oh, dear Mytâb!" she cried, clinging frantically to the familiar figure. "Take me home, oh, please take me home! I will never go out again, no, never!"

That was the determination of ignorance. Eighteen months after wisdom had altered it and many other things, for during that time Julia Smith had sung hymns on the doorstep three days a week. Sometimes she had quite a large audience, and sometimes Feroza herself would listen at the lattice. On these occasions the thin voice had a ring in it; for, despite the fact that her pupil was taught all the truths of religion in prose and monotone, poor Julia used to wonder if this relegating of hymns to the doorstep was not a bowing in the house of Rimmon; nay, worse, a neglect of grace, for she loved her pupil dearly. Not one, but two pair of eyes glistened over the surprise in preparation for the absent husband. Wherefore a surprise no one knew, but surprise it was to be. Feroza said the idea originated in her teacher's sentimental brain; if so, it took root quickly in the girl's passionate heart. Thus, beyond the fact of her learning to read and write, the Meer knew nothing of the change wisdom was working in his wife. And meanwhile time brought other changes to the quiet courtyard. Handsome, dissipated Inaiyut died of cholera, and over him, and the boy-baby she lost, Kareema shed tears which did not dim her beauty. Three months after she was once more making the bare walls ring with her inconsequent laughter. She jeered at Feroza's diligence with increased scorn. No man, she said, was worth the losing of looks in books, and if the Meer really spoke of return, a course of cosmetics would be more advisable.

Even Julia shook her head over Feroza's thin face. "You work too hard, dear," she sighed. "Ah! if it were the one thing needful; but I have failed to teach you that."

"Dear Miss! don't look sad; think of the difference you have wrought. Oh, do not cry," she went on passionately, for the mild blue eyes were filling with tears. "Come, we will talk of his return, full of noble resolutions of self-sacrifice to find--oh dear, dear, Miss! I am so happy, so dreadfully happy!" As she buried her face in the gingham dress her voice sank to a murmur of pure content. But some unkind person had poisoned Julia's peace with remarks of the mixing of unknown chemicals. After all, what did she know of this absent husband, save that dear Mrs. Cranston had met him at a conversazione?

"I suppose the Meer is really an enlightened man?" she asked dubiously.

The gingham dress gave up a scared face. "Dear Miss! why, he is a barrister-at-law!"

Her teacher coughed. "But are you sure, dear, that he wanted you to learn?"

"Not everything; because he did not think I could; but he spoke of many things. I have learnt all,--except--"

"Except what?"

Feroza hesitated. "I was not sure,--Inaiyut said he would teach it, but he died-- 'Tis only a game called whist."

"Whist!"

"Do I not say it right? W-h-i-s-t--*wist*. Oh, Miss! is it a wicked game? Is it not fit? Ought I not to learn it?"

The fire of questions reduced Julia Smith's confusion to simple tears. "I don't know," she moaned, "that is the worst! I thought it was the finger of Providence, and--ah, Feroza! If I have done you harm!"

"You have done me no harm," said Feroza, with a kind smile. "You have harmed yourself with cinnamon tea and greasy fritters in the other zenanas, and you shall have some, English fashion, to take away your headache."

So grumbling Mytâb brought an afternoon tea-tray duly supplied with a plate of thin bread-

and-butter from within, and Feroza's small brown face beamed over Julia Smith's surprise. "He will think himself back amongst the *mems!* won't he?" she asked with a happy laugh.

Would he? As she jolted home in her palanquin Julia's head whirled. Old and new, ignorance and wisdom!--here was a jumble. A stronger brain than hers might well have felt confusion. For it was sunset in that heathen town, and from the housetops, in the courtyards, in the very streets, men paused to lay aside their trivial selves and worship an ideal. Not one of the crowd giving place to the mission-lady but had in some way or another, if only by a perfunctory performance of some rite, testified that day to the fact that religion formed a part of his daily round, his common task. And on the other side of the world, whence the missions come?--

Meanwhile Kareema, bewailing the useless cards, found herself backed up by old Mytâben. Such knowledge, the old woman said, would have been more useful than learning to be cleaner than God made you. 'Twas easy to sneer at henna-dyed hands; but was that worse than using scented soaps like a bad one, and living luxurious? Sheets and towels, forsooth! Why, Shah-jehan himself never dreamed of such expenses.

"I like them, for all that," cried Kareema gaily; "and I think the *mems* are wise to have big looking-glasses. It is hateful only seeing a little bit of one's self at a time. And Feroza and I are going out to be admired like the *mems*, aren't we, Feroza?"

"If the Meer wishes it," replied her sister-in-law gravely.

Mytâb looked from one to the other. "Have a care, players with fire!" she said shrilly. "Have a care! Is the world changed because it reads books and washes? Lo! the customs of the fathers bind the children."

"Mytâb hath been mysterious of late," remarked Kareema, giving a queer look, as the old lady moved away in wrath. "Ah me! if I had but my handsome Inaiyut dicing in the vestibule 'twould be better for all of us, maybe."

Feroza laid her soft hand gently on the other's shoulder. "I am so sorry for thee, dear! but we will love thee always and be a sister and brother--"

Kareema's look was queerer than ever, and she laughed hysterically.

The day came at last when Feroza sat in the sunlit courtyard holding another unopened letter in her hand, knowing that ere a week was over the writer would be prisoned in her kind arms, surrounded by friendly faces, caught in the meshes of familiar custom. She was not afraid, even though his letters gave her small clue to the man himself. Her own convictions were strong enough to supply him with opinions also, and even if she did not come up to his ideal at first, she felt that the sweet satisfaction of a return to home and kindred would count for, and not against her. So she sat idly, delaying to read, and dreaming over the past, much as she had dreamt over the future nearly two years before. Only she sat on a chair now, and her white stockings and patent-leather shoes twisted themselves tortuously about its legs. She thought mostly of the childish time when she, their cousin, had played with Ahmed Ali and Inaiyut; it seemed somehow nearer than those other days, when the studious lad's departure for college had been prefaced by that strange, unreal marriage.

And Kareema watched her furtively from the far corner where she and Mytâb were making preserves.

Suddenly a loud call, fiercely imperative, made them come sheepishly forward to where Feroza stood at bay, one hand at her throat, the other crushing her husband's letter. "What is this? What have you all been keeping from me? What does he mean?--this talk of duty and custom. Ah-h-h--!"

Her voice, steady till then, broke into a ringing cry as a trivial detail in Kareema's reluctant figure caught her eye. The palms and nails of those delicate hands were no longer stained with henna. They were as her own, as nature made them, as the Meer *sahib* said he liked them! She seized both wrists fiercely, turning the accusing palms to heaven, while a tempest of sheer animal jealousy beat the wretched girl down from each new-won foothold, down, down, to the inherited nature underneath.

"Then it is true," she gasped. "I see! I know! Holy Prophet! what infamy to talk of duty. He is to marry,--and I who have slaved--He is mine, mine, I say! Thou shalt not have him!"

Mytâb's chill old hand fell on the girl's straining arm like the touch of Death. "*Allah akhbâr wa Mohammed rasul!*[19] Hast forgotten the faith, Feroza Begum, Moguli? Thine? Since when has the wife a right to claim all? Since when hast thou become a *mem?*"

The girl glared at her with wild passion, and Kareema gave a whimper as the grip bit into her tender wrists. "Don't; you hurt me!"

Feroza flung them from her in contemptuous loathing. "Fool! coward! as if he would touch you. I will tell him all. He will know--Ah God! my head! my head!--" She was in the dust at their feet stunned by her own passion.

"I warned the Moulvie to break it by degrees," grumbled Mytâb, dragging the girl to some matting; "but he said 'twould make no more to her than to the Meer. Books don't seem to change a man, but women are different."

"It's not my fault," whimpered Kareema. "I don't want to marry the Meer; he was ever a noodle. Prating of its being a duty, forsooth!"

"So it is! a bounden duty. Never hath childless widow had to leave this house, and never shall, till God makes us pigs of unbelievers."

"I wish my handsome Inaiyut had lived for all that," muttered the girl, as Feroza showed signs of recovery. She resisted all attempts at explanation or comfort, however, and made her way alone, a solitary resolute figure, to her windowless room, where, when she shut the door, all was dark. There she lay tearless while the others, sitting in the sunlight, talked in whispers as if the dead were within.

"The Moulvie must bid her repeat the creed," was old Mytâb's ultimatum. "God send the Miss has not made a Christian of her, with all those soapings and washings!" She had no spark of pity. Such was woman's lot, and to rebel was sacrilege.

"Don't make sure of my consent," pouted Kareema, her pretty face swollen with easy tears. "If he is really the noodle Feroza deems, I'd rather be a religious. 'Twould be just as amusing."

Mytâb laughed derisively. "Thou a religious! The gossips would have tired tongues. Besides, choice is over. Had the child lived, perhaps; but now the Moulvie hath a right to see Inaiyut's children on his knee."

The sunshine had given place to shadow before Feroza appeared.

"Bring me a *burka*;[20] I am going to see the Miss. Follow if thou wilt," she said; and though her voice had lost its ring, the tone warned Mytâb to raise no objection. Ere she left the sheltering walls she stood a moment before her sister-in-law, all the character, and grief, and passion blotted out by the formless white domino she wore. "I could kill you for being pretty," she said in a hard whisper, as she turned away.

She had never been to the mission-house since that eventful night, and the sight of its familiar unfamiliarity renewed the sense of injury with which she had last seen it. "Miss *Eshsmitt sahib*," they told her, was ill; but she would take no denial, and so, for the first time in her life, Feroza entered an English lady's bedroom. Simple, almost poor as this one was in its appointments, the sight sent a throb of fear to the girl's heart. What! Was not Kareema's beauty odds enough, that she must fight also against this undreamed-of comfort? She flung up her arms with the old cry, "*Dohai! Dohai!*" The fever-flushed face on the frilled pillows turned fearfully. "What is it, Feroza? Oh! what is it?"

The question was hard to solve even in the calm sessions of thought, well-nigh impossible here. Why had she been lured from the old life in some ways and not in all? Was their boasted influence all words? Then why had they prated of higher things? Why had they *lied* to her?

Poor Julia buried her face in a pocket-handkerchief drenched in *eau-de-Cologne*, and sobbed, "Ah, take her away! Please take her away!"

So they led her gently to the text-hung drawing-room with a cottage piano in one corner, and shook their heads over her passionate appeals. They could do nothing, they said,--nothing at all,--unless she cast in her lot with them absolutely; so she turned and left them with a sombre fire in her eyes.

She never knew how the days passed until, as she watched the sunlight creep up the eastern wall of the court, it came home to her that on the next evening Meer Ahmed Ali would watch it also. She seemed not to have thought, and it was Kareema, and not she, who had shed tears. On that last night the latter came to where her cousin lay still, but sleepless. "Why wilt be so foolish, Feroza?" she said petulantly. "Nothing is settled. If he is a noodle, I will none of him, I tell thee. If not, thou art too much of one thyself to care. God knows he may not look at either, through being enamoured of the *mems*. And oh, Feroza," she added, her sympathy overborne by curiosity, "think you he will wear the strange dress of the Miss *sahib's* sun-pictures? If so I shall laugh of a surety."

A gleam of consolation shot through poor Feroza's brain. Men disliked ridicule. "Of course the Meer dresses Europe-fashion," she replied stiffly. "Thou seemest to forget that my husband is a man of culture."

A man of culture! undoubtedly, if by culture we mean dutiful self-improvement. That had been Meer Ahmed Ali's occupation for years, and his gentle, high-bred face bore unmistakably the look of one stowing away knowledge for future use. He was really an excellent young man; and, during his three years at a boarding-house in Notting Hill, had behaved himself as few young men do when first turned loose in London. He spoke English perfectly, and it would be difficult to say what he had not learnt that could be learnt by an adaptive nature in the space of thirty-six calendar months spent in diligent polishing of the surface of things. He learnt, for instance, that

people looking at his handsome, intelligent face, said it made them sad to think of his being married as a boy to a girl he did not love. Thence the idea that he was a martyr took root and flourished, and he acquiesced proudly in his own sacrifice on the altar of progress. For him the love of the poets was not, and even in his desire for Feroza's education he told himself that he was more actuated by a sense of duty than by any hope of greater happiness for himself. The natural suggestion that he should marry his brother's widow he looked on merely as a further development of previous bondage; and he told himself again that, not having swerved a hair's breadth from his faith, he was bound to set his own views aside in favour of a custom desired by those chiefly concerned. Besides, in the atmosphere of surprised sympathy in which he lived it was hard, indeed, not to pose as a victim.

And so, just as poor Feroza was confidently asserting his culture, he, having given his English fellow-passengers the slip, was once more putting on the clothes of an orthodox Mohammedan. Feroza, on the other hand, had adopted the dress of the advanced Indian lady, which, with surprisingly little change, manages to destroy all the grace of the original costume. The lack of braided hair and clustering jewels degrades the veil to an unnecessary wrap; the propriety of the bodice intensifies its shapelessness; the very face suffers by the unconcealed holes in ears and nose.

Kareema stared with a smile akin to tears. "There is time," she pleaded. "Come! I can make you look twice as well."

Their eyes met with something of the old affection, but Feroza shook her head. "I must find out--"

"If he is a noodle?" The interrupting giggle was almost a whimper. "You mean if he is blind! Ah, Feroza! look at me."

No need to say that; the puzzled eyes had taken in the sight already. Gleams of jewelled hair under the gold threaded veil; a figure revealed by the net bodice worn over a scantier one of flowered muslin; bare feet tucked away in shells of shoes; long gauze draperies showing a shadow of silk-clad limbs; above it all that dimpling, smiling face. She shook her head again.

In the long minutes of waiting she lost herself in counting the bricks on the familiar wall until the sight of a tall man at the door dressed as a Mohammedan startled her into drawing the veil to her face in fear of intrusion.

As the man withdrew quickly Kareema's laugh rang out. "To think, Feroza! thou shouldest be *purdah* to him after all thy big talk."

"The Meer! Was that the Meer?" faltered Feroza. "I did not--the dress--"

"Bah! I knew the likeness to my poor Inaiyut. See! yonder he comes again ushered by father-in-law. Now, quick, Feroza!"

The voice quavering over the prepared phrases of thanks to the Great Giver of home-coming was infinitely pathetic; and yet, as Ahmed Ali took the outstretched hand, he was conscious above all things of a regret, almost a sense of outrage; for the bondage of custom was upon him already. Kareema, catching his look, came forward with ready tact. "We welcome my lord," she said in the rounded tone of ceremony, "as one who, having travelled far, returns to those who have naught worthy his acceptance save the memory of kinship. My sister and I greet you, *as sisters*. Nay, more," she added lightly; "I too shake hands English-fashion, and if I do it wrong forgive us both, since learned Feroza is teacher."

"You make me very happy," answered the Meer heartily. "How well you are all looking!"

No need to say where his eyes were.

"You mistake, Meer *sahib*," cried Kareema swiftly, "Feroza looks ill. 'Tis your blame, since she worked over-hard to please you."

The forbidden frown came too late to prevent Ahmed Ali's glance finding it on his wife's face. It was not becoming. "Was it so hard to learn?" he asked with a patronising smile. "But your handwriting improved immensely of late."

The tips of Feroza's fingers showed bloodless under their nervous clasp, but she said nothing. Indeed, she scarcely opened her lips as they sat talking over the morning meal. Even when the Meer refused tea and toast in favour of *chupatties* and *koftas*[21] it was Kareema who supplied surprise. Feroza was all eyes and ears, and not till the sun tipping over the high walls glared down on them did she lose patience enough to ask, vaguely, what he thought about it all.

"*Wah illah*," cried the Moulvie, "Feroza hits the mark! What thinkest thou, my son? But I fear not, for thou hast the faithful air, and canst doubtless repeat thy creed purely."

The young man looked round the familiar scene, every detail of which fitted so closely to memory that no room remained for the seven years' absence. A rush of glad recognition surged to heart and brain, making him stand up and give the *Kalma*.[22]

"I am content, oh, my father!" he cried in ringing tones, as the sonorous echoes died away to silence. "I am content to come back to the old life, to the old duties."

"The sun makes my head ache," said Feroza, rising abruptly, "I will go into the dark and rest."

"Don't go, Feroza! Thou hast not told the Meer about thyself," pleaded Kareema, rising in her turn. "She hath worked so hard," she added petulantly to the young man. "No one is worth it, no one."

The Meer looked from one to the other. "Learning is hard for women," he began. Then something in his wife's face roused the new man in him, making him say in a totally different tone and manner, "I am afraid I hardly understand."

"That is what Kareema says of me," replied Feroza icily.

Her cousin, as she sat down once more to listen, shrugged her shoulders. "And she counted herself as something better than a woman," was her inward comment amid her smiles.

Feroza saw nothing of her husband for the rest of the day. The men's court was crowded with visitors, and she herself had to bear the brunt of many feminine congratulations. Only at sunset, before starting to attend a feast given in his honour, he found time for five minutes' speech with her; but, almost to her relief, he was far too content, far too excited by his own pleasure to be able to distinguish any other feeling in her mind. Yet a momentary hesitation on his part as he was leaving made her heart bound, and a distinct pause brought her to his side with wistful eyes, only to see Kareema nodding and smiling to him from the roof, whither she had gone for fresher air. "What is it?" he asked kindly, though his looks were elsewhere.

"Nothing," she answered, "nothing at all. Go in peace!"

The moon, rising ere the sun set, stole the twilight. So she sat gazing at the hard square outlines of the walls till far on into the night, her mind filled with but one thought. The thought that by and by Ahmed Ali, flushed with content at things which she had taught herself for his sake to despise, would come home to her--to his wife. The little room she had travestied into a pitiful caricature of foreign fashions seemed to mock her foolish hopes, so she crept away to the lattice whence she had had her first glimpse of wisdom. Even on that brilliant night the vestibule itself was dark; but through the door she could see the empty arcades of the men's court surrounding the well where she and her cousins used to play.

A rustle in the alley made her peer through the fret-work, for the veriest trifle swayed her; but it was only a dog seeking garbage in the gutter. Then a door creaked and she started, wondering if Ahmed Ali could be home already. Silence brought her a dim suspicion that, but for this wisdom of hers, she might have waited his return calmly enough. Footsteps now! She cowered to the shadow at the sight of Kareema followed by Mytâb bearing something.

"He mayn't be back till late," came the familiar giggle; "and a soft pillow will please him."

The pair were back again before she recovered her surprise, and Kareema paused ere re-entering the women's door. "Poor Feroza! She will get accustomed to it, I suppose."

"Of what hath she to complain?" retorted the old voice; "he is a properer man than I deemed. Say, heart's desire, what said he when I saw thee--?"

"Mytâb! thou mean spy! Bah! he told me he would change a letter and call me Carina, since it meant dearest in some heathen tongue. They begin thus over the black water likely; 'tis not bad, and new at any rate."

Feroza scarcely waited for distance to deaden the answering giggle. She was on her feet, pacing to and fro like a mad creature. Ah! to get away from it all--from that name, from the look he must have given--to get something cold and still to quench the raging fire in her veins! Suddenly, without a waver, she walked to the well and leant over its low parapet. Her hands sought the cool damp stones, her eyes rested themselves on the faint glimmer far down--ever, oh, ever so far away! Hark! some one in the alley. If it were he? Ah! then she must go away, ever so far away--

Meer Ahmed Ali found his pillow comfortable, and only woke in the dawn to see Mytâb standing beside him.

"Feroza!" she cried. "Where is Feroza?"

A dull remorse came to his drowsy brain. "It was so late--I--"

"Holy Prophet, she is not here! Thou hast not seen her! Then she hath gone to the *Missen* to be baptised. Why didst turn her brain with books? Fool! Idiot!"

"The Mission!" Meer Ahmed Ali was awake now, and the peaceful party, gathered in the verandah for early tea, stared as the young man burst in on it with imperious demands for his

wife. Then his surroundings recalled his acquired courtesy, and he stammered an apologetic explanation.

"She has gone away?" cried Julia, with a queer catch in her breath. "Oh, Meer *sahib!* what a mistake we have all made. It was too late to write, and then I got ill; but, indeed! I was going down this very morning to try and make you understand."

"Understand what?" asked the Meer, helplessly confused, adding hurriedly, "but I can't stay now. She must be found. I will not have her run away. I will have her back--yes! I *will* have her back."

Half-an-hour later Julia Smith, driven to the Moulvie's house by remorseful anxiety, found the wicket-gate ajar. She entered silently upon a scene framed like a picture by the dark doorway of the men's court.

Feroza had come back to those familiar walls. She lay beside the well, and the water from her clinging garments crept in dark stains through the dust. She had wrapped her veil round her to stifle useless cries, and so the dead face, as in life, was decently hidden from the eyes of men. She lay alone under the cloudless sky, for her friends, shrinking from the defilement of death, stood apart: Kareema sobbing on Mytâb's breast, with Ahmed Ali, dazed yet indignant, holding her hand; the Moulvie, repeating a prayer; the servants still breathless from their ghastly toil. Julia Smith saw it all with her bodily eyes; yet nothing seemed worth seeing save that veiled figure in the dust. She knelt beside it and took the slender cold hand in hers. "My dear, my dear!" she whispered through her sobs. "Surely you need not have gone so far, so very far--for help."

But the dead face was hidden even from her tears.

IN THE HOUSE OF A COPPERSMITH.

I.

The clangour of metal upon metal filling the low, dark workshop, pulsating out into the hot sunshine of the courtyards behind, and the hot shadow of the narrow street in front. Pulsating musically, yet with an undercurrent of jarring vibration like a north-country burr on a woman's tongue. The whole best described, perchance, in the native name for the copper which the workmen were hammering and welding into pots and pans--*tambur*.

Tâm bur, tâm-burr-urr-ur.

Thus endlessly through afternoon sunshine and afternoon shade, as the shine fell full on a woman who was sitting silently beside a row of mud cooking-places in the first courtyard. So still, so silent; it seemed as if the waves of sound must break baffled upon the carven folds of the coarse, whitey brown veil which, covering her almost from head to foot, was drawn tight over the forehead to conceal the hair, and wound tight under the chin so as to hide all save the oval face barred by level black brows, and the brown curves of a wide mouth. Only about her feet a voluminous petticoat showed its dingy red and green borderings like a frill. The typical dress of a widow in Northern India, and the face matched it. More indifferent than sad; the lack of vitality, inseparable from the conviction that the life is not worth living, written on every feature, blurring its beauty. For Durga-dei had been beautiful a year ago when sunsetting had sent the master coppersmith to tell her so, and praise the order of a well-kept house. Now the shadow creeping inch by inch along the sunlit dust, and up the sunlit mud wall, brought her no emotion save the mechanical hope that the lentils would be properly cooked by supper time, and the vague wonder why her sister-in-law's shrill voice had not recommenced the conjugation of the imperative mood from the inner court. Parbutti had been sleeping longer than usual; she who but a year agone would no more have dared to sleep! And as for command? Was not a *dewarani*--the husband's younger brother's wife--bound by every principle of religion and decency to obey? Durga-dei's black brows grew straighter at the thought of the change one short year had wrought. And Gopâl, Parbutti's husband, was the master now. A pretty master for all his good looks, for all his learning! yet what else could one expect, seeing he had spent his youth over books at the Municipal School, while his elder brother, despite his crippled condition, had kept the ancestral business a-going? Yes! on that point the dead husband had been weak; and yet how proud he had been of the handsome lad who was to bring sons to the ancestral hearth! But he had not even

done so much, though to be sure, for that Parbutti was to blame; a jealous wife, too selfish--

"Durga! Durga-dei! The broom, quick! Am I to sit in the dust like a lone widow because thou art lazy? The broom, I say!"

The voice which overbore one clamour by another was not pleasant; but it was so in comparison with Durga's face as she rose reluctantly. A thousand times more so than that same face when, after a few minutes of listening to the high-pitched voice, the shrouded figure showed again through the doorway leading to the inner court. Not an ungraceful figure, despite its shroud, as it leant despondently against the lintel, while the black eyes shifted in a sort of helpless indifference over the blank walls imprisoning them.

A year ago; only a year ago!

Her unpractised brain attempted no other complaint; but this unformulated sense of injury possessed her utterly, and everything in heaven and earth became an outrage on that capable past when she had held the reins of government. Of a truth, in that small kingdom of hers behind the coppersmith's shop naught had been wanting that she could compass. Naught save children; for that Parbutti, feckless Parbutti, with youth and health and strength on both sides, was far more responsible than she. If the curse had been hers, would she not gladly have given a handmaiden to her lord? But they had waited for the brother's child which would be as their own, and in that hope had refused to adopt a son while yet there was time. Even now--the small supple hands sought the crevices beyond the door lintel against which they had been resting slackly--sought them as if intent on finding some flaw, some finger-hold in the blank brick wall--yes! even now, but for Parbutti's indecent jealousy, the old customs might bring a tardy comfort, and give her, the widow, back something of her lost power and position. The Mosaic maxim, "Let him take the woman and raise up children to his brother," was so familiar to Durga-dei that its fulfilment in this case seemed to her quite commonplace. Married to Gopâl by *kurao*, she would not, of course, regain her status as the wife, but she might find solace as the house mother, if there were children. The passion of hearth and home was strong in her, as it is in most good Hindu women; and it is not too much to say that the disregard of time-honoured custom towards herself counted for far less in her resentment than the disregard of a time-honoured custom which was clearly for the good of the family; since she would then have the right to keep handsome, lazy Gopâl and his work together for the sake of the son who might be born to the old trade. She was of the stern old school; but those two were not; and so, between the hearth and that calm perpetuity in which lay its only chance of success, stood a strong woman's jealousy and a weak man's cunning. For Gopâl knew well that sooner or later even the most indecent of barren wives must give her lord a child-bringer. And in such case, without being bad to the heart's core, a handsome fellow like Gopâl might well speculate on a youthful bride in the future, rather than take a widow in the present, since Parbutti would never allow both. So, on the whole, he was not so much to blame. Men were men when all was said and done. They loved beauty. Yet she had been beautiful--surely she had been beautiful.

The clangour ceased suddenly, leaving, as it were, an echo in the chime of the police office gong at the nearest gate striking the hour--five o'clock. Durga, as she counted the strokes, smiled contemptuously. As usual Gopâl was seizing on the first excuse for knocking off work, though a good two hours of daylight remained for the industrious--for the old style masters, such as her dead husband had been. But this one did not even trouble to see the shop properly closed, the implements put aside, or guard against the prentice trick of concealing a handful or two of snippings and filings; for there was his lithe figure at the door, about to cross to the inner courtyard--to ease and indolence--to his supper--to--to Parbutti!

A flash of intense vitality came to Durga's face: despite its silence, its absolute stillness, her whole figure was instinct with life as she stood looking at the man opposite her. He was about her own age, and the scanty clothing of the artisan clashes left the strength and beauty of his limbs unconcealed. The face was handsome also, and pleasant in its beardless contours, surrounded by the fringe of silky black hair showing beneath the artisan's round calico cap. Both figure and features displaying at their best the characteristics of that curious guild which for thousands of years has defied the Sudra origin imputed to it by the Brahmans, and worn the sacred thread of the twice-born in the smithy, the mason's yard, and the carpenter's shop. It curved now like a piece of whipcord across the bronze body to which the afternoon sunshine sent gleams of gold as it shone on the sweat-dewed muscles. A fine young fellow certainly, with the thin, deft hands and feet which are the outcome of generations on generations of manual dexterity displayed in one and only one direction. So far, a type of past ages when Nasmyth hammers and Archimedean drills were unknown. Yet they were not unknown to Gopâl the coppersmith. He had not been idle at the Municipal School, where the primers discourse glibly of all the wonders of the world, all the marvels born from that curious potentiality--the human brain. So the forty and odd ounces of grey matter in Gopâl's own skull were leavened with ideas foreign to those which had been transmitted to him through ages of slow heredity. A curious anomaly; one which has to be taken into account by the master builders of the Great Imperial Institute when they count the cost of progress. And yet as he paused, arrested by the glow on Durga's face, his thoughts defied his education. For it came home to him suddenly, causelessly, that this woman, the widow of his dead brother, was beautiful, and that he had a right to her--if he chose. Yes! she was beautiful--far more beautiful, despite her widowhood, than the jealous wife awaiting him within; and she was his by right--if he chose. Why should he not choose? These thoughts were crowding culture from his brain, as he crossed the courtyard without a word; for convention

so far held him fast. Only as she stepped aside from the door to let him pass, their eyes met.

When he had gone, and the sound of Parbutti's shrill welcoming rose over the high partition wall, Durga crouched down beside the fireplace, and blew softly at the smouldering embers under the pot of lentils. It was woman's work to fan a flame if--if it were not fierce enough to do its duty to the hearth. Easy work also: a woman could do it with no more exertion than would make the bosom rise and fall a trifle quicker, or send a tremble through the arm supporting the bowed shoulder. No more than that. And even that Parbutti did not notice, as she bustled out, full of wifely service and housewifely blame, to set the finishing touches to the meal and carry it off to the hungry master, leaving a shapeless bundle of widowhood waiting indifferently for such dog's share of food as might be left when other appetites were satisfied. Then a great silence seemed to take possession of and fill the outer court, just as the clangour had filled it, and still Durga sat waiting, her eyes upon the fire. The sunlight left the wall to dull shadow, the flames died down, but no one called; perhaps they had eaten everything, and she must stave off her whole day's hunger with a handful of parched grain. Well! 'twould count as a virtue, not for herself, but for the dead husband who had gone down to death sonless; not by her fault, though--not by her fault! The old vague sense of injury returned, lulling her to a sort of resignation.

"Durga! Durga-dei!"

She started from a half doze to see Parbutti pausing on her way to the outer door, in order to exclaim at laziness--exclaiming all the louder because Gopâl, also on his way to the world beyond those four walls, stood by listening both to the scolding and the silence. Suddenly he moved impatiently to the door.

"Come, wife! There is no time for such things nowadays. Stay wrangling if thou wilt. I hate it all. Holy Lukshmi! it hath been so since the world began, and I am tired of it!"

He scarcely knew his own meaning; only this was clear--the old customs, the old conventional ways were an annoyance. Yet, as he walked moodily down the narrow street towards the police station, his mind circled round one thought--he had a right by immemorial usage to claim Durga if he chose. A queer medley altogether was Gopâl, the coppersmith, seated in the growing darkness on a certain flight of steps leading at one and the same time to a small Hindu temple and the back door of a native printing-office. Just over the way a yellow-trousered constable was pacing up and down in front of the police and octroi station, between a patent Birmingham-made weighing machine, warranted all the latest improvements, and a primitive water-clock; thus as it were keeping watch over the due measurement of the two great staples of civilisation--Time and Money, and looking with equal impartiality at the rising beam registering its burden accurately, and the copper bowl--made no doubt by a forebear of Gopâl's--sinking lower and lower as the water filtered through the hole in its bottom, until it marked the whereabouts of an hour by having to be fished up and set afloat once more on the Sea of Time--like the soul of a man according to the theory of metempsychosis. This flight of steps was a favourite resort of the idle, for, lying as it did just within the city gate, it was a coign of vantage whence things new and old might be seen clearly side by side. Gopâl liked it, because he himself was compounded of ancient characters and modern ideas. He sat gossiping over an ill-printed newspaper, watching the worshippers go up to do *pooja* in the temple, commenting on the last police news, and the chance of so and so being run in for a breach of the bye-laws; while through the high arched gateway, showing in shadow against the darkening sky, the herds of cattle came trooping dustily, undriven save by custom and the homing instinct. A packed throng, streaming through the gate in unison, then separating into flocks, and so, by endless unswerving subdivision through highways and byeways, into units, arriving each at last in the familiar stall. One of them, a big, pearl-grey, soft-eyed creature, walked in composedly to the courtyard where Durga-dei still crouched by the ashes of the fire, and, sidling into her accustomed corner, lowed for her supper. The woman rose and brought it mechanically. The cow at any rate must not fast. As she mixed the portion of parched grain with the fodder it smelt appetising, but she did not taste it. The hunger that was on her was not to be stayed by food. She did not envy Parbutti away at the wedding festivities at a neighbour's house--those festivities whence the ill-omened widow's face was barred; she did not envy Gopâl sitting on the steps watching the current of life slip into the old and the new channels, but in a vague way she envied Motiya, the milk-giver, her honoured place by the hearthstone. She envied her the calf which the milker on his rounds loosed from its tether in the dark shed, and an answering quiver seemed to run through her limbs as she saw the mother yield to the first rough touch of the sucking tongue. When that was over, she crouched down again to brood over the empty house. Parbutti would not be back till all hours, and Gopâl--what of Gopâl?

The night settled down. There was no moon, only a spangled star or two showing in the narrow slip of sky above her. The noise of the city without seemed lost in the stillness of the courtyard, where, through the darkness, you could hear the sound of Motiya chewing the cud of content.

That in one corner; in the other something different, and yet--

"Durga! Durga-dei!"

It was Gopâl's voice through the darkness.

II.

The dark nights had yielded to light ones, and drawn back into darkness again more than once, before the second act of the drama began. Such a still night! The moon over-riding the high walls shone straight down upon a man and a woman standing beside the row of fireplaces where the dead ashes of the past day's flame showed white. Through the stillness and the moonshine a man's voice petulant, almost peevish.

"Lo! I told thee from the beginning it must be so. There is time yet. Have patience awhile, Durga; when there is no escape Parbutti will yield--that is woman's way. Thou knowest that I love thee; were it not so why should I have sought thee?" Durga's clasped hands fell from their hold upon his arm listlessly.

"Yea! thou didst love me; that is true. And I? Knowest thou, Gopâl, why my heart sinks now as it never did when first I yielded to thy plan for peace? Then it seemed naught to keep it secret awhile--no harm--no blame; but now--Gopâl! knowest thou it comes upon me even as if I were a shameless one--since--since I have learnt to care--"

Her voice died away to a whisper, her dark eyes sought his with a passionate gloom in them before which his shifted uneasily.

"A wife should love her husband, surely? so say the Scriptures--and thou lovest old sayings, O Durga! Yea! and she should obey him also. So let the question be awhile. When due time comes Parbutti shall be told that the old custom hath prevailed, and that the child is of the hearth. She is quick-witted, and will see that after all 'tis better for *her* than a stranger wife."

A certain aggressiveness of accent provoked a sharp, half-questioning protest.

"And for thee also, Gopâl; surely 'tis best for thee--if as thou sayest I am dear unto thee?"

"For me also, if thou desirest it so, though we men ask first that our women live in peace. But see, the moon climbs high; Parbutti will be returning, and she must not suspect yet awhile. Look not so troubled, Durga! Sure I love thee, else wherefore should I have sought thee?"

The repetition of this argument seemed as much for his own conviction as for hers, and there was something of the same motive in the half-hearted kiss he stooped to bestow upon her. To his surprise she shrank from it, and the unexpected rebuff bringing sudden stimulus to his passion, he slid his arm under the widow's shroud and drew her towards him with a patronising laugh. "Lo! thou art a fool, Durga! Afraid because thou hast found a weak spot in thy heart for lazy Gopâl, when thou shouldest be thanking thy namesake,[23] *Mai* Bhavani, for sending pleasure in the path of duty. Afraid lest folk should blame thee, when, woman-like, thou shouldest be praying the gods Parbutti might return even now to see thee preferred before her."

The words were spoken lightly, and the speaker's eyes smiled into the earnest ones raised to his. So neither saw a muffled form at the entrance behind them--a form which showed itself for a second, then shrank back behind the strip of wall, built like a screen, across the outer door.

"If she came, Gopâl, wouldst thou tell her the truth?"

The night was so still that every word of the passionate whisper was audible to that unseen listener.

"Sure would I, sweetheart, if only to prevent her claws from scratching. For look you, once 'tis known that you and I have settled it, she can do naught--save quarrel. That is why I say wait till the last. There will be no time then for words--or wiles. Now, Durga, I must go--I would not she had the knowledge secretly--that were an evil chance."

The night was so still that a keen listener might have heard a light footfall behind the screen, as if some one were stealing away from it. But those two only heard their own soft breathing as their lips met.

"Durga! Durga! asleep as usual, and I bade thee keep the fire aglow lest I should need aught."

The familiar fault-finding rang through the courtyard, and not even a tremble in Parbutti's voice betrayed knowledge of that unseen listener, who, five minutes before, had hid behind the screen. Gopâl was right; her wits were quick to seize on what was to her own advantage. Anger and reproach were desirable, doubtless, but what if they left her helpless? Besides, there was time to spare for such things when she had accepted the inevitable. So through the still summer night she lay awake piecing together a plan of revenge against the woman who, on the other side of the mud wall, lay awake piecing together her plan for peace. Revenge! That was the first consideration; if it could be combined with comparative comfort. Peace! Yes! peace; if it could be had without that gnawing sense of shame which had come so unexpectedly to complicate the situation. So much for the women's thoughts; as for the man's, as he sat in the dawning light

eating his morning meal, they might have been inferred from a certain irritation towards both the women who, in one way or another, were engaged in ministering to his comfort. For polygamy is not altogether tragic; it is often comic--at times almost farcical.

The clangour of metal upon metal rose with the sun, and all through the long hot day the beat and the burr filled the courtyards where those two women went about their daily tasks. When evening came it brought Gopâl an unusual display of platters at supper time--an unusual sweetness both in the viands and in Parbutti's voice.

"Lo! 'tis like a wedding feast, wife," he said, well pleased.

She gave an odd little hysterical laugh. "Perhaps 'tis time there was a wedding, O Gopâl!" Then she grew grave. "Thy people say so, and mine also. Even last night *Mai* Râdha spoke to me of her daughter. And perhaps 'twere better so. Thou wouldst not cease to love me, O Gopâl! because I brought thee fair sons; ay! and a fair wife too."

Her face was turned away; she spoke softly, regretfully, dutifully, as a good Hindu wife should under the circumstances, and her husband could hardly believe his ears. Parbutti--jealous Parbutti--suggesting a wife of her own choice! Here indeed would have been a chance of peace, were it not for Durga. What a fool he had been to be so precipitate! A sudden regard for the wife who was prepared to sacrifice so much to him mingled not unnaturally with a corresponding resentment against the woman whose love was certain to stand in the way of his pleasure. Yet he was too much taken aback for real assent or denial, and murmured something incoherently about there being no need for hurry, no need to bring a strange woman to the house--as yet. Parbutti's conventional decorum gave way before even this faint allusion to realities, and she turned upon him sharply.

"Wherefore no stranger, Gopâl? Sure it must be so, seeing thou wouldst not mock me by thinking of a widow--a childless widow. 'Tis not as if thou didst set store by foolish old ways. 'Tis not as though thou wast old and foolish thyself. Thou canst choose a virgin bride, and thou shalt choose one, else will I not yield thee. For thine own sake, husband, I will not. *Mai* Râdha's daughter is worthy of thee. Lo! I have seen her, but if thou heedest me not inquire of her secretly. Durga is old and a widow. We want no more childless ones in this house--nor her sons, even if fate were kind; for look you, I hate her--I hate her."

Gopâl's faint protest died down before Parbutti's vehemence; if she hated, she hated, and there was an end of it. No use in words, or for the matter of that in deeds. He went moodily out into the bazaars for comfort, telling himself he had been a fool to let his fancy for a woman as old as he was fetter his future. He might have known it would not last. That was the worst of it! Had he braved Parbutti's shrill wrath at first when the passion was there, it might have seemed worth while to suffer discomfort; now it was hard to hark back dutywards. What a fool he had been! halting as it were between the new and the old. He had glozed over the secrecy by appealing to the customs of his forefathers, and now he hated the tie they imposed upon him. Durga was his dead brother's widow, but what right had she to more consideration than any other woman who had yielded to a man's promise? She was no better than those others, would be no worse off than those others if he-- Even Gopâl could not put the thought plainly before himself; so he took refuge in a general sense of injury.

"Let be! Let be," he said angrily, the next time that Durga, with a growing passion in her voice, demanded that he should admit the truth. "And if thou sayest a word--I swear I will deny it. Nay! look not so, Durga! I meant only if thou wilt not obey."

She stood as if turned to stone.

"Thou wouldst deny it? deny thy brother's child? Thou durst not, lest the gods should slay thee for the infamy."

He gave an embarrassed laugh.

"Thou believest in the gods more than I, Durga; but I mean no harm to thee. None shall say aught against thee if thou wilt have patience."

III.

"And see that thou cleanest them well; they may be wanted ere long."

There was jeering malice in words, tone, and manner as Parbutti handed over the tarnished silver ornaments; but Durga took them without a word--that aggressive silence of hers seeming, as it always did, to defy the ceaseless clang of the copper which, as usual, filled the sunlit courtyard. And yet to a woman less restrained than she here was an occasion for bitter outcry. The ornaments had been hers in those past days of honoured wifehood; now they were Parbutti's

to wear, or to give, as she chose. But what did that matter? what did anything matter if only Gopâl could be kept content--if only Gopâl could be kept to his promise? Two months of patience, two months of growing anxiety had told against Durga-dei's good looks according to native standards, though to Western eyes the face had gained more than it had lost. There was no indifference in it now. That had given place to an eagerness almost painful in its intensity; and Parbutti, as she watched the widow begin her task, smiled to herself at the certainty of its being well performed; for Durga displayed a vast anxiety to please nowadays--a most convenient state of affairs for the household generally. Parbutti smiled again, thinking what Durga would say when she knew the truth--that the ornaments were to go in the wedding baskets of the virgin bride who was to be the reward of Gopâl's treachery.

"They will need tamarinds to give them back their whiteness," thought Durga, looking at the silver with experienced eyes. This interest in the drudgery and detail of her life was not a conscious effort on her part; of late a sort of dull comfort had come to her in the knowledge that already, in a thousand ways, she was standing between the household and that disregard of old ways which to her meant disgrace, if not disaster. And so it was with a certain pride in her work that, while Parbutti was sleeping, she watched the tamarind pulp boiling away in the copper vessel over the fire, until her critical eye told her that its office was over, and that the ornaments boiling in it would need no silversmith's aid to enhance their lustre. With a certain pride, also, in her own carefulness, she let the pulp stay on the fire till it had regained its original consistency, and then set it aside in the storeroom against future use. Parbutti would not have thought of such economy. Parbutti, in a reckless modern fashion, would have thrown the pulp away, and bought more when next she wanted some. The thought cheered her as, still with the same careful conservatism, she went on to some other process, approved by old tradition, for the due cleansing of tarnished silver. It was no light matter, that keeping of the household ornaments as if they were fresh from the goldsmith's hands; for did it not redound to the credit of the hearth? When she had worn them, none could have told they were not newly-made out of new rupees; but Parbutti thought only of wearing them in a becoming manner.

Well! this time she should acknowledge that there was some good in having Durga in the house.

There was something infinitely pathetic in the slow workings of this woman's mind, as she sat busy over the ornaments--something infinitely pathetic in the pride with which, after the two or three days of treatment prescribed, she showed them white and glistening to her rival.

"Ay!--they are as new--*Mai* Râdha will deem them so at any rate," said Parbutti, with studied carelessness. The time had come for revenge. Gopâl's passion for pleasure had been aroused, he would allow nothing now to stand in the way of this projected marriage, and so--and so there was no harm in springing the mine upon Durga. There is nothing in heaven or earth so cruel as a jealous woman even when her nature is kindly, and Parbutti's was not.

"*Mai* Râdha! What hath she to do with them?" The quick anxiety of the widow's tone was as balm to the other's ears.

"What a mother hath to do with her daughter's trousseau for sure," she answered lightly. "I meant to tell thee ere this, but Gopâl would not have it, and 'tis true that widows are ill meddlers with marriage. He weds the girl next month by my consent. The house needs a child."

So far Durga had stood staring at her enemy incredulously. Now she flung out her arms in sudden passion, letting the widow's shrouding veil fall from her figure recklessly.

"'Tis a lie--an infamous lie! The house needs no stranger's child. Thou knowest it! Yea, thou hast known it, and this is thy revenge. But it shall not be. Gopâl shall speak! Gopâl, I say! Gopâl!"

Parbutti's hands gripped her rival's as in a vice despite her struggles.

"So! is it that? And thou wouldst lay the burden of thy shame on Gopâl, base walker of the bazaars, betrayer of thy dead lord! On Gopâl who weds a virgin; let us see what he saith. Gopâl! I say, Gopâl!"

It almost seemed as if their clamour must have pierced that of the coppersmith's shop, for the latter ceased suddenly in the slow chiming of five o'clock. Instinctively the women fell away from each other, feeling that the crisis had come. Another minute would bring the man to answer for himself. So they stood waiting for the well-known figure on the threshold.

"Gopâl!"

He recoiled from the sight of them, coward to the backbone.

And Parbutti knew it--knew the man with whom she had to deal a thousand times better than Durga knew him; so her shrill voice came first, allowing no compromise, no shilly-shallying. Durga had claimed him as the father of her child. Was it true? for in that case there was no need to bring a bride to the house, nor indeed under such circumstances would *Mai* Râdha ever consent to her daughter's marriage. Let him take his choice without delay.

And Durga, still gauging him by the measure of her own nature, claimed the truth also.

Between the two Gopâl stood irresolute, divided between fear and desire.

"'Tis thy choice, O husband!" came Parbutti's shrill voice; "the widow or the bride, thou canst not have both."

He knew it perfectly. It was one or the other, and a sudden fierce dislike leapt up against poor Durga.

"It is a lie," he muttered, his eyes upon the ground; "I have naught to do with her, naught."

Durga fell back as if she had been struck, but Parbutti's laugh of triumph failed before the sombre fire of those big blazing eyes. For an instant it seemed as if the former would give herself up to vehement upbraiding; then suddenly she passed into the silence of the outer court without a word, and crouched down in her favourite attitude beside the smouldering fires. She felt sick and faint with horror, shame, incredulity. In all her known world of custom and conduct she seemed to find no foothold on which to recover her balance. He had denied her, he had denied the hearth. Her tense fingers hung rigidly without clasp or grip on anything, just as her mind seemed to have lost hold on all her beliefs, all her knowledge.

In a dim, half-dazed way she knew what would happen. By and by, when opportunity occurred, Gopâl would creep out, as he had crept out many a time before, and seek to soothe her. There need be no scandal, no open turning into the streets, if she would promise to make no fuss. Perhaps, once the marriage were accomplished he might even be induced to acknowledge the child. And at this thought something that was not shame, nor anger, nor horror, but sheer animal jealousy, leapt up within her; for she had learnt to care, as women do learn, even when they know that he for whom they care is not worth it.

So Parbutti and this new woman were to have him, and she--

When the brain is quick its owner may suffer more from the very variety and complexity it gives to grief; but the grief for all that is less absorbing. Durga was so lost in hers that she scarcely noticed Parbutti coming in after a time to see about the supper. There was no call on her for help this evening, no blame because the fires were slack and nothing ready. To tell truth, even Parbutti did not care to drive the stunned look from Durga's face, lest it should be replaced by seven devils; so she was left alone. Yet even so, something made her start, and for a second her hand moved as if she were about to thrust it out in a gesture of dismay; then it sank back listlessly. The impulse had come and gone--the housewifely impulse of warning to the younger woman that tamarind pulp which had been kept for days in a copper vessel was not likely to be a wholesome ingredient in a man's supper. After all, what did it matter to her? Surely Parbutti should know such things without being told them; if not, what right had she to be house-mother, ousting those who did? A curiously petty spite against her simmered up in Durga-dei's mind, and like the bubbles on boiling water served for a time to break up the surface of her hot anger against Gopâl. What! was she to save Parbutti from the consequences of her own ignorance and negligence? There was no more than that in Durga's mind as she watched the cooking; no more than that, and a dumb conviction that somehow the future must be changed, utterly changed. It could not be as the past had been; so much was certain. Yet as she sat, thinking not at all, something must have been juggling with her brain, for Parbutti's first words, when an hour or so afterwards she came bustling back into the outer court, found their reply ready on Durga's lips.

"He is not well," she fussed. "Durga! thou art more learned in simples than most. What shall I give to stay the burning in his throat and keep the sickness from him? God send it be not the great sickness; but 'tis in the city they say." The widow stood up mechanically, and her right hand sought once more the crevices of the wall against which she was leaning.

"I know not. Give him tamarind water an thou likest. 'Tis not my work, but thine."

Revenge had sprung full-fledged from her slow brain in familiar face and welcome form. And it would not be her doing, but Parbutti's! A sort of sensual delight in the idea surged through her, making her add--as if to, give an edge to the sword of fate--"yet if the sickness be about 'twere well to have more skill than mine. I would not have it said I killed him!"

Once more the spite against the woman overbore all other feelings for the time. That, and a dull recognition of the fact that if Gopâl died he would be beyond the reach of them all--that it would benefit no one; save that in good sooth the child would be fatherless instead of--and then, suddenly, those black eyes of hers blazed up fiercely. Yes! that was the only possible end; as well now, when opportunity offered a beginning, as later.

"Ay! give him tamarind water--'tis best for such as he."

Not a shadow of regret came to her as she watched Parbutti follow her advice. It was as if since all time this thing had been ordained, as if aught else were beyond her control. The curious calm with which the Oriental regards death, even for himself, does not count for nothing in such situations as this. We of the West, who reckon the measure of guilt without it, judge harshly, even while we judge equitably. Durga-dei did not think out the question at all. Chance gave her quick opportunity, and she took it. Yet as the night wore on, bringing a succession of gossiping neighbours, she became restless, asking herself if the native doctor, summoned from the *sahib-logue's* hospital beyond the walls, to satisfy that curious streak of education in the sick man's

mind, said sooth in declaring it to be a case of cholera? or whether the wise woman sent by *Mai* Râdha was right in hinting at the evil eye? Was it, briefly, God's judgment, or man's? The uncertainty oppressed her.

So the dawn breaking over that unseen, unknown world beyond the house of the coppersmith found three haggard faces within it. Found the same thought in each heart: was it to be death, or death in life for one, or for all? yet each awaited the answer with a strange indifference.

"Yes! 'tis the great sickness; he grows blue and cold already," said the neighbours in frank wisdom as they looked in. The air was cooler then with the sudden freshness which seems to come with the sun's first rays; a thin blue smoke began to rise over the awakening city; the sparrows sat preening themselves on the tops of the walls; the loose slippers of the visitors, as they shuffled over the empty courtyards, had whispering, gossiping tongues of their own, which seemed to echo the ominous cackle of the wearers as they left those three faces to their task of waiting. One turned passively to the brightening sky from the low string bed; the other two bent on the ground as passively. A vessel full of tamarind water stood by the sick man, but he had scarcely touched it. Perhaps after all it was the great sickness. Durga scarcely knew whether she were glad or sorry at the thought.

So the sun climbed up until, with one clear distinct "*tam-burr-urr-ur-r*," the daily clamour of the shop began. Maybe the master would not die, maybe he would; either way work must be done, and no one had said the workers nay--as yet.

"Gopâl is still alive," commented the neighbours cheerfully as they listened; "they will stop, likely, when they hear the death wail, and 'tis as well for him to end as he began with the ring of the metal in his ears."

The water-clock from the stairs where Gopâl used to sit chimed noon. The heavens were as brass. A perfect blaze of light beat down on the courtyard and those three faces. But one of them waited no longer, though it still gazed passively into the pale sky from the ground where it lay. And Parbutti, the new-made widow, glared in terrified hatred at the face of that other widow who stood looking down at the dead man.

Then suddenly the death wail rose loud and clear in a woman's voice.

"*Naked he came, naked has gone. This empty dwelling-place belongs neither to you nor to me*."

The clangour ceased, ending in a faint vibration like a dying breath.

"Listen!" said the policeman watching the waterclock; "there is death in the coppersmith's house. I heard he was ill of the sickness. God save him--he hath no son."

FAIZULLAH.

He was beating his wife--an occupation which annihilates time, dissolves the crust of culture, and reduces humanity in both hemispheres to a state of original sin. It is therefore immaterial what Faizullah and Haiyat Bibi did or said during the actual chastisement, for they behaved themselves as any other couple in the same circumstances would have done, that is to say, after the manner of two animals--one injured in his feelings, the other in her body.

She screamed vociferously, but for all that took her punishment with methodical endurance; indeed, there was a distinct air of duty on both sides which went far towards disguising the actual violence. Finally he let her drop, decisively but gently, in one of the dark corners of the low windowless room, and laid aside the bamboo in another. From a third crept an older woman, silent, but sympathetic, carrying a *lotah* full of water with which she administered comfort to the crushed victim. Faizullah Khan watched the gradual subsidence of his wife's sobs with evident satisfaction.

"Hast had enough for this time, O Haiyat?" he asked mildly. "Or shall I catch thee peeping through the door at the men-folk again like a cat after a mouse? True, 'tis the way thou caughtest me for a husband, Light of mine Eyes; but I will have none of it with other men. Or rather, thou shalt pay for the pleasure. Ay! every time, surely as the farmer pays the usurer for having a good crop. And if there be more than peeping, then I will kill thee. Think not to escape as a mere noseless one; some may care to keep a maimed wife, secure that none will seek her; but not I, Faizullah Khan, Belooch of Birokzai. Did I not marry thee, O Haiyat, Marrow of my Bones,

because of thy fair face? Then what good wouldst thou be to me without a nose? Therefore be wise, my heart, or I shall have to kill thee some day."

"The *sahibs* will hang thee in pigskin if thou dost," whimpered the woman vindictively. "Yea, I would die gladly to see thee swing like the wild beast thou art!"

The sense of coercion was evidently passing away, nor were there wanting signs that ere long tears would be dried at the flame of wrath fast kindling in Haiyat's big black eyes. Faizullah, standing at the open door, through which the yellow sunshine streamed in a broad bar of light, looked across the mud roof of the lower story, past the sandy stretches and broken rocky distance to where a low line of serrated blue mountains blocked the horizon. They were the Takt-i-Suleiman, and beyond their peaks and passes lay Beloochistan.

"There are no *sahibs* yonder," he said, stretching his right hand towards the hills; "no one to come between a man and his right of faithful wife. God knows I am ready for my father's house again; 'tis only thy beauty, Skin of my Soul! Core of my Heart! that keeps me dawdling here a stranger in the house of mine ancient enemies. Why wilt thou not come with me to the mountains, O Haiyat?"

"I am not a wild beast as thou art," she retorted, still with speech checked by sobs. "I will stay here and get thee swung, for the *sahib-logues* worship a woman away over the black water and do her bidding. They will fill thy mouth with dirt, and burn thy body, and curse thy soul to the nether--"

"Nay! innermost Apple of mine Eye! do I not worship thee? And art thou not a Belooch also by race, though thy people have dug the grave of their courage with the plough, and tethered their freedom beside their bullocks? They were not always dirt-eaters, mean-spirited, big-bellied--"

"*Hai! Hai!*" That was the beginning of the storm. What followed drove big Faizullah into the court below, where the voices of the two women ceased to be articulate; for it is one thing to beat the wife of your bosom in order to correct a trifling indiscretion, another to deny her and her attendant the right of subsequent abuse. So he smoked his pipe placidly, and amused himself with polishing his well-beloved sword which he kept in defiance of the Arms Act.

The poorer women of the village nodded at each other as the shrill clamour, floating over the high encircling wall, reached the well where they came to draw water.

"The stranger hath big hands," chuckled one; "yet are they smaller than Haiyat's eye. That comes of being a widow so long."

"There will be murder some day, mark my words!" muttered an old hag with a toothless leer. "What else canst thou expect from a Belooch of Birokzai? *Peace! Peace!* that is what our men say nowadays. In my time, if a man of his race had laid a finger on a woman of ours, there would have been flames over the border, and blood enough to quench them afterwards. But they are afraid of the *sahibs* and the pigskin; not so Faizullah; he is of the old sort, knowing how to keep his wife."

"He will not keep her for all that, *mai*," sneered a strapping girl, who by the handsome water-vessels she carried showed herself to be a servant in one of the richer houses. "We shall get her back some day, despite her father-in-law's wickedness in letting her marry a good-for-nothing soldier, just because of keeping a hold on her jewels."

"Hold on their honour, O thou false tongue!" shrilled another of the group. "The daughter of thy house would have brought shame on ours. She needed a fierce one to keep her straight."

"After the man--woman, thy house gave her first, O depraved tongue that tasteth not the truth. Had thy people sent her back, our house would have kept her safe enough."

"And her jewels doubtless--"

So the war of words, begun on the top story of Faizullah's house, found its way into the narrow village street, and thence into many a mud-walled courtyard where the women set down the pots of water and rested themselves in wrangling. It even went further, for in not a few of them, when the men came back from their day's work in the fields, the subject of Haiyat Bibi's peeping eyes and covetous jewels gave rise to slow, deliberate conversation over the evening pipe. Faizullah was right to beat her, of course; on that point all were agreed. The rest was open to argument, and had been so any time these last two years, ever since the bold Belooch of Birokzai, on his way home from short service in a frontier regiment, had halted in his retreat at the sight of a pair of big black eyes behind the chink of a door. Long before that, however, the question as to whether those jewels of Haiyat Bibi's were to come back with her in search of a new bridegroom among her own relations, or to remain with her in her late husband's family, had greatly exercised the minds of this little village, which lay, as it were, safely tucked away between the sheets of sand in the bed of the Indus and the soft pillow-like curves of the rising ground. It was given to be excited over trifles, this far-away, peaceful-looking cluster of mud huts; for beneath the newly acquired placidity of the peasant which its inhabitants presented on the surface, the lawlessness of the border bravo remained ready for any emergency. On the whole, however, it afforded a beautiful example of the civilising effects of agriculture, and as such figured in many reports having as their object the glorification of British rule. Consequently it was watched with

jealous eyes by the district and police officials, who felt their sheet-anchor of reference would be gone did any serious crime occur to throw discredit on the converted community. Despite this constant care, the village might have been situated in the moon for all the authorities knew of the pretty intrigues, the hopes and fears, which formed the mainspring of its life. Even the ordinary human interests of its inhabitants were all too low in tone and insignificant to secure alien sympathy. So Haiyat Bibi's peeping eyes and her Delhi-made jewels were disturbing elements unknown to those who signed the monthly criminal reports with placid self-satisfaction at their own success in securing virtue. Even when, egged on by the family, her best-looking male cousin made bids for possession of both these charms in various underhand ways, the consequent employment of Faizullah Khan's marital discipline did not resound so far as the *hâkm's* ears.

Therefore it was an unpleasant surprise when, some six weeks after the original homily against peeping, the significant red envelope which proclaims the shedding of blood found its way into the Deputy Commissioner's mail-bag, and brought the news of Haiyat Bibi's murder by her husband, and his subsequent flight to the hills. Furthermore, it was reported by the sergeant of police, whose very writing showed signs of trepidation, that the whole village was in an uproar, and he himself quite unable to cope with the situation. As luck would have it, some eighty miles of desert and alluvial land lay between the excited village and the fountains of law and order; for when the red envelope arrived, the responsible officials were in camp at the other end of the district. Nearly a week passed ere they could arrive on the scene, and by that time the villagers had sworn to renew a blood-feud which in past days had thriven bravely between their clan and that of the murderer. They were, in fact, on the point of turning their ploughshares into swords--an example which is dangerously contagious among the border tribes. Owing, therefore, to the necessity of persuading the people to trust the far-reaching arm of the law for revenge, instead of seeking it for themselves, the actual murder itself dropped into comparative insignificance. Indeed, the details of the crime were meagre in the extreme, though the evidence of previous jealousy on the husband's part, even to the point of grievous hurt, was copious. Nor did the family of the murdered woman's late husband hesitate to accuse her blood-relations of a deliberate attempt to seduce her from the path of virtue, in order to bring about a poisoning of the bold Faizullah, and a subsequent transference of her affection, and her jewels, to a more suitable husband. Inquiry, indeed, opened up such a vista of conflicting rascality, that the district-officer was fain to draw a decent veil over it by accepting the result, namely, that on a certain specified night, between certain specified hours, Faizullah Khan, not content with having beaten his wife to the verge of death during the day, had stealthily completed his devilish work, dragged the corpse of his victim a mile or two from the village, stripped it of ornament, and left it to be devoured by jackals and hyenas. In support of which statements, gruesome remains, found, it was said, some days after the woman's disappearance, were produced and sworn to vociferously by all. Relics of this sort are apt to be somewhat indefinite; this objection, however, was met by the subsequent discovery of portions of Haiyat Bibi's clothing, and a golden ear-ring which the murderer had evidently dropped in his flight. The latter whetted the desire for revenge to a point, for, as the district-officer sorrowfully admitted to himself, the old-fashioned wrath at injury to their women, so conspicuous among these border clans, was now freely intermixed with that greed of gold which civilisation brings in its wake. Finally, since nothing else could be done, a reward of two thousand rupees was put upon the capture of one Faizullah Khan, Belooch of Birokzai, accused of murdering his wife and stealing her jewels, value twelve hundred rupees. In addition, vague promises were made that on the next punitive expedition into the mountains an eye would be kept on the escaped criminal's particular village, and some indemnity exacted. There the matter rested peacefully, and so, on the whole, did the village, though the friction between the blood-relations of the murdered woman and her connections by marriage remained a fruitful source of petty disturbance.

"There is something odd about that case," remarked a new magistrate when some fresh complaint of quarrel came in for settlement. "It is always more satisfactory to have a real, *whole* body; but when there is neither corpse nor criminal it is useless depending on facts at all." The police officer, however, declared, that having personally conducted the inquiry no mistake in either facts or conclusions was possible.

Eighteen months passed by and early spring was melting the snows on that great rampart of hills which, properly guarded, would make the rich plains of India impregnable to a western foe. The border land was astir, its officials busy, for the long-talked-of punitive expedition was about to thread its way through the peaks and passes, bearing the rod which teaches respect, and perhaps fidelity. On the outermost skirts of British territory the district-officer sat in front of his tent writing a rose-coloured report on the progress of education. It was long overdue owing to the pressure of martial preparations, so he was in a hurry and superlatives came fast.

"A Belooch from beyond the border is seeking the Presence with insistence," pleaded a deferential myrmidon.

"Let him come," was the prompt reply; and the pen, laid aside, rolled over, blotting the last sentence. What matter? Reports have various values, and the Belooch might bring information that would make force more forcible.

An old soldier, by the look of him, tall and well set up, with merry brown eyes and a determined face. He brought himself to the salute gravely. "May the life of the Presence be prolonged and may his gracious ears bear with a question. Is it true that the armies of the Lord of the Universe march against the village of one Faizullah of Birokzai?"

"The armies of the Kaiser-i-Hind march against all thieves and murderers, no matter who they are."

"The words of the Presence are just altogether. Yet may the Protector of the Poor bear with this dust-like one. Is it true that he who brings Faizullah captive will receive two thousand rupees reward?"

"It is true."

"*Wah illah!* The purse of the great Queen is big if the long tongue of the Presence wags in it so freely. The sum is great."

"The crime is great. He murdered his wife; besides, he stole twelve hundred rupees' worth of jewels."

The smile of contempt which had crept into the listener's face at the first part of the sentence gave place to a frown at the sequel. "The Presence says it; shall it not be true?" he remarked with deference after a pause. "Nevertheless the sum exceeds the purchase. Does not the price of the calf buy the cow also?[24] There is no wisdom in a bad bargain."

The Deputy Commissioner looked at the new comer sharply. "Doubtless; yet none have given the man up, though all know we will keep our threat of burning the village next month."

The sudden clenching of the slender, nervous hands and quick inflation of the nostrils convinced the Englishman that there was an envoy prepared with concessions, but asking for some in return.

"The Presence hath said it, shall it not be true?" came the urbane reply. "Yet we Beloochees do not give up our friends readily. Still Faizullah is no friend of mine, so for twelve hundred rupees I will bring him to the Presence, *dead or alive*, if his honour pleases."

The Deputy Commissioner stared. "But the reward is two thousand; why do you ask less?"

"The price of the calf is the price of the cow, *Huzoor!* I lack but one thing, and the sum is enough for the purchase. Am I a pig of *baniah* to fill my stomach with rupees I cannot digest? Nevertheless the task is hard, and those who go near violence may suffer violence. What good then would the money be to me if I were dead?"

Like many of his race, he had a curiously round mellow voice that seemed to linger over the slow, stately periods as he went on deliberately. "Surely God will reward the Presence for his patience! But a man's son is as himself. And I have a son, *Huzoor*, a babe in his mother's arms--may the Lord bring him safe to man's estate! If the great Purveyor of Justice would cause a writing to be made, setting forth that my son is as myself, and my earnings as his earnings--nay, surely the Presence will have the best bliss of Paradise reserved for it specially! And if the munificent Keeper of the Purse of Kings would cause the twelve hundred rupees to be set apart from this day in the hands of some notable banker--not that this slave doubts, but the Presence knows the guile of all women, and that all men are born of women, and therefore guileful. It knows also that without the hope of money naught but the stars in heaven will move; and if I say, 'Lo, I will give, when I have it,' who will listen? But if I say, 'Lo! there it is safe, do my bidding and take it,' 'tis a different matter. If, therefore, the Presence will do this, his slave will bring Faizullah, Belooch of Birokzai, to him *alive or dead*, and there will be no need to burn the village."

"And the jewels?"

Once more the frown came quick. "If I bring Faizullah to the Halls of Justice alive, surely the mightiness of the Presence will make him speak. If I bring him dead, can this slave follow him and find speech in the silence of the grave? Say! is it a bargain? Yes or no?"

The anxious brevity of the last question showed the sincerity of the man more than all his measured words, and after some further parley, the conditions were arranged. That is to say, the sum of twelve hundred rupees was forthwith to be paid into the hands of a responsible third party, and the informer was to bring Faizullah to the Deputy Commissioner dead or alive, before reprisals had been taken on the village, when, even if he lost his life in the capture, the reward was to be paid to his heirs and assigns. He positively refused to give either name or designation, asserting with the measure of sound common sense which characterised all his utterances, firstly, that no one would know if he gave a false one; secondly, that if he failed to keep his promise he would prefer to remain in oblivion; thirdly, that if he did succeed in bringing Faizullah to book, the Presence would be sure to recognise his servant and slave. Thus he departed as he came, a nameless stranger.

Three days after an excited crowd rode pell-mell into the magistrate's compound. "*Huzoor!* we have found him! we have found him!" rose a dozen voices, as the more influential men of the party crushed into the office room.

"Who?"

"Faizullah the Belooch! Faizullah the murderer! The reward is ours, praise be to God and to your honour's opulence. *Wah*, the glad day! *Wah*, the great day!"

"*Salaam alaikoum*, Friend of the Poor Man!" came an urbane voice from their midst. "The dust-like slave of the Presence hath kept his word. Behold! I bring to you Faizullah Khan, Belooch of Birokzai, alive, not dead."

A sudden hush fell on the jostling crew as the prisoner raised his fettered hands in grave obeisance, and then solemnly, vigorously, spat to right and left ere he began: "Snakes gorged to impotence by their own greed! Bullocks with but one set of eyes to seven stomachs! Listen! whilst I recount the tale of your infamies to the ear of this wise judge. *Huzoor!* I am Faizullah, husband of the virtuous Haiyat, mother of my son, dwelling content in the house of my father. Yea! it is true. For her jewels' sake, her father-in-law bound me by promises, when he found me caught in the meshes. So for her sake I stayed in a strange land, and the fields and the jewels were as his. Then the old man yonder, her uncle, wroth at the marriage, set his son to beguile her; so I beat her till she had no heart to be beguiled. For all that they would not cease from evil ways. Therefore said I to her father-in-law: 'Let me go, for surely if I stay thy daughter-in-law will have to die some day, and then her blood-kin will claim all. Let me go in peace with the Core of my Heart; but keep thou the jewels, for I have no need of them.' So in the night, he consenting, I crept away with her in my arms, for she had eaten her full of the bamboo that day, and could not walk. The Presence knows what came next--how they called me murderer and thief, her blood-kin claiming the land, her father-in-law denying that he had the jewels--and I nursing her to health in the mountains! *Huzoor!* the *sahib-logues* are like eagles. They look at the Sun of Justice and see not the maggots it breeds in carrion like these men. Yet what cared I, away in the hills, what men called me here, save that my house wept for her jewels, and I knew not how to get them; for the reward was heavy and oaths are cheap in your land. Then came word that the armies of the Lord of the Universe were to march on this slave's village, and I said, 'What is life to me? I will try and speak them fair.' The Presence knows what came next. When the paper concerning the twelve hundred rupees had been writ, I knew that my house would have her rights anyhow, even if the eyes of the Just Judge were blinded by false oaths, or that I came dead into the Presence. So I said by message to the carrion: 'Dispute no longer among yourselves. Let me buy the jewels at the price ye have put on them. Let one take the money and the other the land, or half-and-half. Only give me the jewels, and say in the Court of Justice,--"Lo! we were mistaken! Faizullah hath not killed his wife. He nursed her back to life, and she hath a right to the jewels and her son after her. But the land is ours by agreement."' And to this they said 'Yea' guilefully. But when I went to the village, trusting them not at all, they seized me and brought me hither for the reward, not knowing that the Presence had deigned to cast his gracious eye on this poor man before, and that the reward was for me, or my son. It is spoken. Let the Presence decide!"

Nothing is more surprising than the rapidity with which a got-up case breaks down when once the judge is seen to have an inkling of the truth. *Suave qui peut* is then the motto; especially when nothing more is to be gained from consistency. Haiyat's relations professed themselves both astonished and overjoyed at her return to life, and before the inquiry was over had arranged for the discovery of the jewels, which were found carefully hidden away in the house of Haiyat Bibi's female attendant, who had died of cholera the year before, an ingenious incident productive of injured innocence to all the living.

"It has not emptied the purse of the great Queen after all," said Faizullah with a broad smile, as he stood beside the Deputy Commissioner on the crest of a hill, and pointed to a terraced village on the opposite side of the valley. "Nor hath the house of the poor suffered; for the dwelling of this slave will not burn."

The jewels were in a bundle under his arm, and he was taking leave of the expedition he had accompanied so far. He turned to go, then suddenly saluted in military fashion. "If this dust-like one might give freedom to his tongue for a space, the wisdom of experience might reach the ear of those above it. Yea, of a surety the patience of the Presence is beyond praise! *Huzoor!* if the reward writ in the police stations had been for me, alive or dead, peace would have been beyond my fate, for the great mind of the Protector of the Poor will perceive that a man hath no power against false oaths when once his own tongue is stilled by death; and that even the justice of kings avails little when the case has been decided already. Let this memory remain with the *sahibs*, 'Peace bringeth Plenty, and Plenty bringeth Power.' So it comes that false oaths are easy under the rule of the Presence."

That was his farewell.

The snow still lay low, but the orchards were ablaze with blossom as, next morning, the little force led by white faces straggled peacefully along the cobbled ledges of the steep village lane. On either side strips of garden ground, where the heart-shaped leaves of the sweet yam pushed from the brown soil, led up to the low houses, backed by peach and almond trees and festooned by withered gourds. On the steps leading to a high-perched dwelling overhanging the lane, stood Faizullah Khan with a sturdy youngster in his arms. The Deputy Commissioner happening to come last and alone, stopped to look at the child with kindly eyes. As he did so a door above was set ajar, and through the chink he caught a glimpse of a singularly beautiful pair of black eyes, and a flash of jewels.

"It is my house, *Huzoor*," said Faizullah with rather a sheepish grin. "I gave her leave to peep

this time."

THE FOOTSTEP OF DEATH.

Godliness is great riches if a man be content with what he hath.

These words invariably carry me back in the spirit to a certain avenue of *shesham* trees I knew in India; an avenue six miles long, leading through barren sandy levels to the river which divided civilisation from the frontier wilds; an avenue like the aisle of a great cathedral with tall straight trunks for columns, and ribbed branches sweeping up into a vaulted roof set with starry glints of sunshine among the green fret-work of the leaves. Many a time as I walked my horse over its chequered pavement of shade and shine I have looked out sideways on the yellow glare of noon beyond in grateful remembrance of the man who,--Heaven knows when!--planted this refuge for unborn generations of travellers. Not a bad monument to leave behind one among forgetful humanity.

The avenue itself, for all its contenting shade, had nothing to do with the text which brings it to memory--that co-ordination being due to an old *fakeer* who sat at the river end, where, without even a warning brake, the aisle ended in a dazzling glare of sand-bank. This sudden change no doubt accounted for the fact that on emerging from the shade I always seemed to see a faint, half-hearted mirage of the still unseen river beyond. An elusive mirage, distinct in the first surprise of its discovery, vanishing when the attention sought for it. Altogether a disturbing phenomenon, refusing to be verified; for the only man who could have spoken positively on the subject was the old *fakeer*, and he was stone-blind. His face gave evidence of the cause in the curious puffiness and want of expression which confluent small-pox often leaves behind it. In this case it had played a sorrier jest with the human face divine than usual, by placing a fat bloated mask wearing a perpetual smirk of content on the top of a mere anatomy of a body. The result was odd. For the rest a very ordinary *fakeer*, cleaner than most by reason of the reed broom at his side, which proclaimed him a member of the sweeper, or lowest, caste; in other words, one of those who at least gain from their degradation the possibility of living cleanly without the aid of others. There are many striking points about our Indian Empire; none perhaps more so, and yet less considered, than the disabilities which caste brings in its train--the impossibility, for instance, of having your floor swept unless Providence provides a man made on purpose. My *fakeer*, however, was of those to whom cleanliness and not godliness is the reason of existence.

That was why his appeal for alms, while it took a religious turn as was necessary, displayed also a truly catholic toleration. It consisted of a single monotonous cry: "In the name of your own Saint,"--or, as it might be translated, "In the name of your own God." It thrilled me oddly every time I heard it by its contented acquiescence in the fact that the scavenger's god was not a name wherewith to conjure charity. What then? The passer-by could give in the name of his particular deity and let the minor prophets go.

The plan seemed successful, for the wooden bowl, placed within the clean-swept ring bordered by its edging of dust or mud, wherein he sat winter and summer, was never empty, and his cry, if monotonous, was cheerful. Not ten yards from his station beneath the last tree, the road ended in a deep cutting, through which a low-level bed of water flowed to irrigate a basin of alluvial land to the south; but a track, made passable for carts by tiger-grass laid athwart the yielding sand, skirted the cut to reach a ford higher up. A stiff bit for the straining bullocks, so all save the drivers took the short cut by the plank serving as a footbridge. It served also as a warning to the blind *fakeer*, without which many a possible contributor to the bowl might have passed unheard and unsolicited over the soft sand. As it was, the first creak of the plank provoked his cry.

It was not, however, till I had passed the old man many times in my frequent journeyings across the river that I noticed two peculiarities in his method. He never begged of me or any other European who chanced that way, nor of those coming from the city to the river. The latter might be partly set down to the fact that from his position he could not hear their footsteps on the bridge till after they had passed; but the former seemed unaccountable; and one day when the red-funnelled steam ferry-boat, which set its surroundings so utterly at defiance, was late, I questioned him on the subject.

"You lose custom, surely, by seeking the shade?" I began. "If you were at the other side of the cut you would catch those who come from the city. They are the richest."

As he turned his closed eyes towards me with a grave obeisance which did not match the

jaunty content of his mask, he looked--sitting in the centre of his swept circle--ludicrously like one of those penwipers young ladies make for charity bazaars.

"The Presence mistakes," he replied. "Those who come from the town have empty wallets. 'Tis those who come from the wilderness who give."

"But you never beg of me, whether I go or come. Why is that?"

"I take no money, *Huzoor*; it is of no use to me. The *sahibs* carry no food with them; not even tobacco, only cheroots."

The evident regret in the latter half of his sentence amused me. "'Tis you who mistake, *fakeer-ji*," I replied, taking out my pouch. "I am of those who smoke pipes. And now tell me why you refuse money; most of your kind are not so self-denying."

"That is easy to explain. Some cannot eat what is given; with me it is the other way. As my lord knows, we dust-like ones eat most things your God has made. But we cannot eat money, perhaps because He did not make it--so the *padres* say."

"Ah! you are learned; but you can always buy."

"Begging is easier. See! my bowl is full, and the munificent offering of the Presence is enough for two pipes. What more do I want?"

Viewed from his standpoint the question was a hard one to answer. The sun warmed him, the leaves sheltered him, the passers-by nourished him, all apparently to his utmost satisfaction. I felt instinctively that the state of his mind was the only refuge for the upholders of civilisation and a high standard of comfort. So I asked him what he thought about all day long. His reply brought total eclipse to all my lights.

"*Huzoor!*" he said gravely, "I meditate on the Beauty of Holiness."

It was then that the text already quoted became indissolubly mixed up with the spreading *shesham* branches, the glare beyond, and that life-sized penwiper in the foreground. I whistled the refrain of a music-hall song and pretended to light my pipe. "How long have you been here?" I asked, after a time, during which he sat still as a graven image with his closed eyes towards the uncertain mirage of the river.

"'Tis nigh on thirty years, my lord, since I have been waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

"For the Footstep of Death--hark!" he paused suddenly, and a tremor came to his closed eyelids as he gave the cry: "In the name of your God!"

The next instant a faint creak told me that the first passenger from the newly-arrived ferry-boat had set foot on the bridge. "You have quick ears, *fakeer-ji*," I remarked.

"I live on footsteps, my lord."

"And when the Footstep of Death comes, you will die of one, I presume!"

He turned his face towards me quickly; it gave me quite a shock to find a pair of clear, light-brown eyes looking at, or rather beyond, me. From his constantly closed lids I had imagined that--as is so often the case in small-pox--the organs of sight were hopelessly diseased or altogether destroyed; indeed I had been grateful for the concealment of a defect out of which many beggars would have made capital. But these eyes were apparently as perfect as my own, and extraordinarily clear and bright--so clear that it seemed to me as if they did not even hold a shadow of the world around them. The surprise made me forget my first question in another.

"*Huzoor!*" he replied, "I am quite blind. The Light came from the sky one day and removed the Light I had before. It was a bad thunder-storm, *Huzoor*; at least, being the last this slave saw, he deems it bad. But it is time the Great Judge took his exalted presence to yonder snorting demon of a boat, for it is ill-mannered, waiting for none. God knows wherefore it should hurry so. The river remains always, and sooner or later the screeching thing sticks on a sand-bank."

"True enough," I replied, laughing. "Well, *salaam, fakeer-ji*."

"*Salaam*, Shelter of the World. May the God of gods elevate your honour to the post of Lieutenant-Governor without delay."

After this I often stopped to say a few words to the old man and give him a pipeful of tobacco. For the ferry-boat fulfilled his prophecy of its future to a nicety, by acquiring intimate acquaintance with every shallow in the river--a habit fatal to punctuality. It was an odd sight lying out, so trim and smart, in the wastes of sand and water. Red funnels standing up from among Beloochees and their camels, bullocks scarred by the plough, *zenana*-women huddled in helpless white heaps, wild frontiersmen squatted on the saddle-bags with which a sham orientalism has filled our London drawing-rooms. Here and there a dejected half-caste or a specimen of young

India brimful of *The Spectator*. Over all, on the bridge, Captain Ram Baksh struggling with a double nature, represented on the one side by his nautical pea-coat, on the other by his baggy native trousers. "Ease her! stop her! hard astern! full speed ahead!" All the shibboleths, even to the monotonous "*ba-la-mar-do*" (by the mark two) of the leadsman forr'ards. Then, suddenly, overboard goes science and with it a score of lascars and passengers, who, knee-deep in the ruddy stream, set their backs lazily against the side, and the steam ferry-boat *Pioneer*, built at Barrow-in-Furness with all the latest improvements, sidles off her sand-bank in the good old legitimate way sanctioned by centuries of river usage. To return, however, to *fakeer-ji*. I found him as full of trite piety as a copy-book, and yet, for all that, the fragments of his history, with which he interlarded these common-places, seemed to me well worth consideration. Imagine a man born of a long line of those who have swept the way for princes--who have, as it were, prepared God's earth for over-refined footsteps. That, briefly, had been *fakeer-ji's* inheritance before he began to wait for the Footstep of Death. Whatever it may do to the imagination of others, the position appealed to mine strongly, the more so because, while speaking freely enough about the family of decayed kings to whom he and his forebears had belonged, and of the ruined palace they still possessed in the oldest part of the city, he was singularly reticent as to the cause which had turned him into a religious beggar. For the rest he waited in godliness and contentment (or so he assured me) for the Footstep of Death.

The phrase grew to be quite a catch-word between us. "Not come yet, *fakeer-ji?*" I would call as I trotted past after a few days' absence.

"*Huzoor!* I am still waiting. It will come some time."

One night in the rains word came from a contractor over the water that a new canal-dam of mine showed signs of giving, and, anxious to be on the spot, I set off at once to catch the midnight ferryboat. I shall not soon forget that ride through the *shesham* aisle. The floods were out, and for the best part of the way a level sheet of water gleaming in the moonlight lay close up to the embankment of the avenue, which seemed more than ever like a dim colonnade leading to an unseen Holy of Holies. Not a breath of wind, not a sound save the rustle of birds in the branches overhead, and suddenly, causelessly, a snatch of song hushed in its first notes, as if the singer found it too light for sleep, too dark for song. The beat of my horse's feet seemed to keep time with the stars twinkling through the leaves.

I was met at the road's end by the unwelcome news that at least two hours must elapse ere the *Pioneer* could be got off a newly-invented mudbank which the river had maliciously, placed in a totally unexpected place. Still more unwelcome was the discovery that, in my hurry, I had left my tobacco-pouch behind me. Nothing could be done save to send my groom back with the pony and instructions for immediate return with the forgotten luxury. After which I strolled over towards my friend the *fakeer*, who sat ghostlike in the moonlight with his bowl full to the brim in front of him. "That snorting devil behaves worse every day," he said fervently; "but if the Shelter of the Poor will tarry a twinkling I will sweep him a spot suitable for his exalted presence."

Blind as he was, his dexterous broom had traced another circle of cleanliness in a trice, a new reed-mat, no bigger than a handkerchief, was placed in the centre, and I was being invited to ornament just such another penwiper as the *fakeer* occupied himself. "Mercy," he continued, as I took my seat, shifting the mat so as to be able to lean my back against the tree, "blesses both him who gives, and those who take," (even Shakespeare, it will be observed, yields at times to platitude). "For see," he added solemnly, producing something from a hollow in the root, "the Presence's own tobacco returns to the Presence's pipe."

Sure enough it was genuine Golden Cloud, and the relief overpowered me. There I was after a space, half-lying, half-sitting in the clean warm sand, my hands clasped at the back of my head as I looked up into the shimmering light and shade of the leaves.

"Upon my soul I envy you, *fakeer-ji*. We who go to bed at set times and seasons don't know the world we live in."

"Religion is its own reward," remarked the graven image beside me, for he had gone back to his penwiper by this time. But I was talking more to myself than to him, in the half-drowsy excitement of physical pleasure, so I went on unheeding.

"Was there ever such a night since the one Jessica looked upon! and what a scent there is in the air,--orange blossoms or something!"

"It is a tree farther up the water-cut, *Huzoor*, a hill tree. The river may have brought the seed; it happens so sometimes. Or the birds may have brought it from the city. There was a tree of the kind in a garden there. A big tree with large white flowers; so large that you can hear them fall."

The graven image sat so still with its face to the river, that it seemed to me as if the voice I heard could not belong to it. A dreamy sense of unreality added to my drowsy enjoyment of the surroundings.

"Magnolia," I murmured sleepily; "a flower to dream about--hullo! what's that?"

A faint footfall, as of some one passing down an echoing passage, loud, louder, loudest, making me start up, wide awake, as the *fakeer's* cry rose on the still air: "In the name of your

God!"

Some one was passing the bridge from the river, and after adding his mite to the bowl, went on his way.

"It is the echo, *Huzoor*" explained the old man, answering my start of surprise. "The tree behind us is hollow and the cut is deep. Besides, to-night the water runs deep and dark as Death because of the flood. The step is always louder then."

"No wonder you hear so quickly," I replied, sinking back again to my comfort. "I thought it must be the Footstep of Death at least."

He had turned towards me, and in the moonlight I could see those clear eyes of his shining as if the light had come into them again.

"Not yet, *Huzoor!* But it may be the next one for all we know."

What a gruesome idea! Hark! There it was again; loud, louder, loudest, and then silence.

"That came from the city, *Huzoor*. It comes and goes often, for the law-courts have it in grip. Perhaps that is worse than Death."

"Then you recognise footsteps?"

"Surely. No two men walk the same; a footstep is as a face. Sometimes after long years it comes back, and then you know it has passed before."

"Do they generally come back?"

"Those from the city go back sooner or later unless Death takes them. Those from the wilderness do not always return. The city holds them fast, in the palace or in the gutter."

Again the voice seemed to me not to belong to the still figure beside me. "It makes a devilish noise, I admit," I said, half to myself; "but--"

"Perhaps if the *Huzoor* listened for Death as I do he might keep awake. Or perhaps if my lord pleases I might tell him a story of footsteps to drive the idle dreams from his brain till the hour of that snorting demon comes in due time?"

"Go ahead," said I briefly, as I looked up at the stars.

So he began. "It's a small story, *Huzoor*. A tale of footsteps from beginning to end, for I am blind. Yet life was not always listening. They used to say that Cheytu had the longest sight, the longest legs, and the longest wind of any boy of his age. I was Cheytu." He paused, and I watched a dancing shadow of a leaf till he went on. "The little princess said Cheytu had the longest tongue too, for I used to sit in the far corner by the pillar beyond her carpet and tell her stories. She used to call for Cheytu all day long. 'Cheytu, smooth the ground for Aimna's feet'--'Cheytu, sweep the dead flowers from Aimna's path'-'Cheytu, fan the flies from Aimna's doll,--for naturally, *Huzoor*, Cheytu the sweeper did not fan the flies from the little princess herself; that was not his work. I belonged to her footsteps. I was up before dawn sweeping the arcades of the old house ready for them, and late at night it was my work to gather the dust of them and the dead flowers she had played with, and bury them away in the garden out of sight."

A dim perception that this was strange talk for a sweeper made me murmur sleepily, "That was very romantic of you, Cheytu." On the other hand, it fitted my environment so admirably that the surprise passed almost as it came.

"She was a real princess, the daughter of kings who had been--God knows when! It is written doubtless somewhere. Yes! a real princess, though she could barely walk, and the track of her little feet was often broken by handmarks in the dust. For naturally, *Huzoor*, the dust might help her, but not I, Cheytu, who swept it for her steps. That was my task till the day of the thunderstorm. The house seemed dead of the heat. Not a breath of life anywhere, so at sundown they set her to sleep on the topmost roof under the open sky. Her nurse, full of frailty as women are, crept down while the child slept, to work evil to mankind as women will. *Huzoor*, it was a bad storm. The red clouds had hung over us all day long, joining the red dust from below so that it came unawares at last, splitting the air and sending a great ladder of light down the roof.

"'Aimna! Aimna!' cried some one. I was up first and had her in my arms; for see you, *Huzoor*, it was life or death, and the dead belong to us whether they be kings or slaves. It was out on the bare steps, and she sleeping sound as children sleep, that the light came. The light of a thousand days in my eyes and on her face. It was the last thing I saw, *Huzoor*--the very last thing Cheytu the sweeper ever saw.

"But I could hear. I could hear her calling, and I knew how her face must be changing by the change in her voice. And then one day I found myself sweeping the house against her wedding-feast; heard her crying amongst her girl friends in the inner room. What then? Girls always cry at their weddings. I went with her, of course, to the new life, because I had swept the way for her ever since she could walk, and she needed me more than ever in a strange house. It was a fine

rich house, with marble floors and a marble summer-house on the roof above her rooms. People said she had made a good bargain with her beauty; perhaps, but that child's face that I saw in the light was worth more than money, *Huzoor*. She had ceased crying by this time, for she had plenty to amuse her. Singers and players, and better story-tellers than Cheytu the sweeper. It was but fair, for look you, her man had many more wives to amuse him. I used to hear the rustle of her long silk garments, the tinkle of her ornaments, and the cadence of her laughter. Girls ought to laugh, *Huzoor*, and it was spring time; what we natives call spring, when the rain turns dry sand to grass and the roses race the jasmin for the first blossom. The tree your honour called magnolia grew in the women's court, and some of the branches spread over the marble summerhouse almost hiding it from below. Others again formed a screen against the blank white wall of the next house. The flowers smelt so strong that I wondered how she could bear to sleep amongst them in the summer-house. Even in my place below on the stones of the courtyard they kept me awake. People said I had fever, but it was not that--only the scent of the flowers. I lay awake one dark, starless night, and then I first heard the footstep, if it was a footstep,--loud, louder, loudest; then a silence save for the patter of the falling flowers. I heard it often after that, and always when it had passed the flowers fell. They fell about the summer-house too, and in the morning I used to sweep them into a heap and fling them over the parapet. But one day, *Huzoor*, they fell close at hand, and my groping fingers seeking the cause found a plank placed bridge-wise amongst the branches. *Huzoor!* was there any wonder the flowers fell all crushed and broken? That night I listened again, and again the footsteps came amid a shower of blossoms. What was to be done? Her women were as women are, and the others were jealous already. Next day when I went to sweep I strewed the fallen flowers thick, thick as a carpet round her bed; for she had quick wits I knew.

"'Cheytu! Cheytu!'

"The old call came as I knew it would, and thinking of that little child's face in the light I went up to her boldly.

"'My princess,' I said in reply to her question as I bent over the flowers, ''tis the footstep makes them fall so thick. If it is your pleasure I will bid it cease. They may hurt your feet.'

"I knew from her silence she understood. Suddenly she laughed; such a girl's laugh.

"'Flowers are soft to tread upon, Cheytu. Go! you need sweep for me no more.'

"I laughed too as I went. Not sweep for her when she only knew God's earth after I had made it ready for her feet! It was a woman's idle word, but, woman-like, she would think and see wisdom for herself.

"That night I listened once more. The footstep must come once I knew--just once, and after that wisdom and safety. *Huzoor!* it came, and the flowers fell softly. But wisdom was too late. I tried to get at her to save her from their pitiless justice. I heard her cries, for mercy; I heard her cry even for Cheytu the sweeper before they flung me from the steps where the twinkling lights went up and down as if the very stars from the sky had come to spy on her. What did they do to her? What did they do to her while I lay crushed among the crushed flowers? Who knows? It is often done, my lord, behind the walls. She died; that is all I know, that is all I cared for. When I came back to life she was dead, and the footstep had fled from revenge. It had friends over the border where it could pause in safety till the tale was forgotten. Such things are forgotten quickly, my lord, because the revenge must be secret as the wrong; else it is shame, and shame must not come nigh good families. But the blind do not forget easily; perhaps they have less to remember. Could I forget the child's face in the light? As I told the Presence, those who go from the city come back to it sooner or later unless Death takes them first. So I wait for the Footstep--hark!"

Loud--louder--loudest: "In the name of your own God."

* * * * *

Did I wake with the cry? Or did I only open my eyes to see a glimmer of dawn paling the sky, the birds shifting in the branches, the old man seated bolt upright in his penwiper?

"That was the first passenger, *Huzoor*," he said quietly. "The boat has come. It is time your honour conferred dignity on ill manners by joining it."

"But the footstep! the princess! you were telling me just now--"

"What does a sweeper know of princesses, my lord? The Presence slept, and doubtless he dreamed dreams. The tobacco--"

He paused. "Well," said I, curiously.

"*Huzoor!* this slave steeps his tobacco in the sleep-compeller. It gives great contentment."

I looked down at my pipe. It was but half smoked through. Was this really the explanation?

"But the echo?" I protested. "I heard it but now."

"Of a truth there is an echo. That is not a dream. For the rest it is well. The time has passed swiftly, the *Huzoor* is rested, his servant has returned, the boat has come--all in contentment. The Shelter of the World can proceed on his journey in peace, and return in peace."

"Unless the Footstep of Death overtakes me meanwhile," said I, but half satisfied.

"*Huzoor!* It never overtakes the just. Death and the righteous look at each other in the face as friends. When the Footstep comes I will go to meet it, and so will you. Hark! the demon screeches. Peace go with you, my lord."

About a year after this the daily police reports brought me the news that my friend the old *fakeer* had been found dead in the water-cut. An unusually heavy flood had undermined the banks and loosened the bridge; it must have fallen while the old man was on it, for his body was jammed against the plank which had stuck across the channel a little way down the stream. He had kept his word and gone to meet the Footstep. A certain unsatisfied curiosity, which had never quite left me since that night in the rains, made me accompany the doctor when, as in duty bound, he went to the dead-house to examine the body. The smiling mask was unchanged, but the eyes were open, and looked somehow less empty dead than in the almost terrible clearness of life. The right hand was fast clenched over something.

"Only a crushed magnolia blossom," said the doctor, gently unclasping the dead fingers. "Poor beggar! it must have been floating in the water--there's a tree up the cut; I've often smelt it from the road. Drowning men--you know the rest."

Did I? The coincidence was, to say the least of it, curious. It became more curious still when, three weeks afterwards, the unrecognisable body of a man was found half buried in the silt left in the alluvial basin by the subsiding floods--a man of more than middle age, whose right hand was clenched tight, over nothing.

So the question remains. Did I dream that night, or did the Footstep of Death bring revenge when it came over the bridge at last? I have never been able to decide; and the only thing which remains sure is the figure of the old *fakeer* with blind eyes, looking out on the uncertain mirage of the river and waiting in godliness and contentment,--for what?

HABITUAL CRIMINALS.

The very *mise-en-scène* was indeterminate. A straight horizon meeting the blue sky evenly, though not an inch of level ground lay far or near in the pathless waste of yellow sand. Pathless, yet full of tracks. Looking down at your feet, which, breaking through the rippling crust of wind-waves on the surface, sank softly into the warm shifting sand beneath, you could see the tracks crossing and re-crossing each other, tracing a network over the world, each distinct, self-reliant, self-contained. Yet such tiny tracks for the most part! That firm zigzag, regular as a Gothic moulding, is printed by a partridge's foot; yonder fine graving is the track of a jerboa rat; and there, side by side for a space, the striated lines of a big beetle and the endless curvings of a snake. A certain wistful admiration comes to the seeing eye with the thought that, here in the wilderness, life is free to go and come as it chooses, untrammelled by the fetters of custom, free from the necessity for doing as your neighbours do, being as your neighbours are. Something of this was in my thoughts one day when, as I rode at a foot's-pace across the sand-sea to my tents, I suddenly came upon a boy. He must have been ten years old, at least, by his size; any age, judging by his face; stark naked save for a string and a scrap of cloth. His head would have been an admirable advertisement to any hair restorer, for it was thick and curly in patches, bald as a coot's in others; briefly, like a well-kept poodle's. For the rest he was of unusually dark complexion. He was sitting listless, yet alert, beside some small holes in the sand, and when he saw me he smiled broadly, showing a great gleam of white teeth. I asked him cheerfully who he was, and he replied in the same tone,

"*Huzoor! main Bowriah hone*." (I am a Bowriah.) It gave me a chill somehow. So the lad was a Bowriah; in other words, one of that criminal class which Western discipline keeps in walled villages, registered and roll-called by day and by night. Not much freedom there to strike out a line of life for yourself, unless you began before the time when you were solemnly set down in black and write as an adult bad character. The boy, however, seemed to have no misgivings, for he smiled still more broadly when I asked him what he was doing.

"Catching lizards, *Huzoor!* They are fat at this time."

My chill changed its cause incontinently. "You don't mean to say you eat lizards?"

He looked at me more gravely. "Wherefore not, *Huzoor*? The Bowriahs eat everything, except cats. Cats are heating to the blood, especially in spring time."

His air of well-defined wisdom tickled me; perhaps it touched me also, for, ere riding off, I asked him his name, thinking I might inquire more of him; for the sole reason of my tents being a few miles farther in this sandy wilderness was the due inspection of a Bowriah village which had been planted there, out of harm's way, by the authorities.

"Mungal, *Huzoor*" he replied. So I left him watching for the fat lizards, and cantered on over the desert.

Suddenly I drew rein with a jerk. There he was again in front of me sitting before another group of holes.

"Hullo!" I cried, "how on earth did you manage to get here, Mungal?"

The boy smiled his broad, white smile, "The *Huzoor* mistakes. I am Bungal. Mungal is my brother over yonder." He stretched a thin dark arm into the desert whence I had come. Mungal and Bungal! Twins, of course! Even so the likeness was almost incredible. My memory could find no dissimilarity of any sort or kind--no outward dissimilarity, at any rate. The thought suggested an experiment, and I asked him what he was.

"*Huzoor! main Bowriah hone*," came instantly.

"And what are you doing?" I continued.

"Catching lizards, *Huzoor!* They are fat at this time."

Positively my chill returned, making me say quite naturally, "What! do you eat lizards?"

"Wherefore not, *Huzoor*? The Bowriahs eat everything, except cats. Cats are heating to the blood, especially in, spring time."

Identical so far. The quaintness of the idea prevented me from disturbing it by further inquiry, so I rode on, dimly expectant of finding a third habitual criminal--say Jungal this time--watching for fat lizards at other holes. But I did not. They were twins only; Mungal and Bungal. Out of sheer curiosity I sent for them that evening, when I had finished my work of inspecting the adult males and females, listening to their complaints, and generally setting the odd little village on the path of virtue for the next three months. By no means a disagreeable occupation, for the Bowriahs have always a broad smile for a sportsman. Indeed, several of the most suspicious characters had promised me the best of *shikar* on the morrow; and what is more, they kept their promise faithfully.

As for Mungal and Bungal, even when seen together it was absolutely impossible for me to detect any difference of any kind between the two boys. Even their heads were shaven in the same tufts, and as they invariably repeated each other, there was no differentiating them by their words.

Only their works remained as a means of knowledge, and with a view to this I questioned the Deputy Inspector of Police, who was out with me, as to the lads.

"*Huzoor!*" he said, "they are of the Bowriah race. Their father and mother are dead, but in life these were Bowriahs also. The boys, however, not being adult, are not as yet on the Register; but they will be. For the rest they are as Bowriahs. They eat jackals, wolves, and such unclean things."

I felt myself on the point of adding, "But not cats--cats, etc.;" however I stopped myself in time, and asked instead if the boys stole, or lied, or--

The Deputy Inspector interrupted me respectfully, yet firmly. "*Huzoor!* not being adult they are not on the Register. Therefore the police have no cognizance of them--as yet."

"Then why do they make for the village now they hear the roll beginning?" I persisted somewhat testily, as I saw Mungal and Bungal racing along to the gateway in company with a number of boys about their own age.

"They do it to please themselves. It gives them dignity. Besides, in youth one learns habits easily. Thus it is better, since the boys will surely be on the Register if God spares them to adult age."

I looked at the man sharply; there was positively not one atom of expression of any kind whatever on his face. It is a great art.

On the morrow Mungal and Bungal turned up again as part of the shooting excursion, for even

among their tribe of hunters they had already made themselves a sporting reputation; perhaps because, being orphans, they lived chiefly on their wits. It certainly was remarkable to see them on a trail, turning and twisting and doubling on traces invisible to my eyes; or sometimes, like a couple of Bassett-hound puppies, on all fours, nose down, creeping round some higher undulation to see what lay behind it. We had stalked a ravine deer which another party of Bowriahs had stealthily driven--all unconsciously--into a suitable spot, and I was just crawling on my stomach to the shelter of a low bush whence I intended to fire, when a small dark hand clutched mine from behind, and another pointed to something within an inch of where I had been about to place my fingers. By everything unpleasant! a viper coiled in a true lover's knot! "T--Tss-ss," came a sibilant whisper checking my start; "the buck is there, *Huzoor*; the buck is there still."

And he remained there, for my bullet went clean through his heart. It was after the excitement of success was over that I turned to the boys, and, somewhat thoughtlessly, held out a rupee.

"Which of you two pointed out that *jelaibee?*" I asked.

"*Huzoor!* I did," came both voices simultaneously. At first they refused to budge from this simple statement, reserving the remainder of their vocabulary for indignant abuse of each other. Nor could I from their expression or tone glean the slightest corroborative evidence for or against the truth of either. The greed in their beady black eyes, their scorn at the dastardly attempt at cheating them out of their due were identical. Finally, to my intense bewilderment they suddenly, without even a wink that I could see, made a *demi-volte* towards a new position, and declared in one breath that they both did it, and therefore that they both deserved a rupee. Certainly there had been two hands, the one to clutch, the other to point, but I felt morally certain that they had belonged to one body. However, to settle the matter I gave each of the boys eight annas, and went back to my tents convinced that either Mungal or Bungal was a liar. The question was--which?

That evening, when I was awaiting the appearance of my dinner with the comfortable sense of a good appetite, I heard trouble in the cook-room tent. It was followed by the violent irruption into mine of the whole posse of servants gathered round my old *khânsâman* who, breathless but triumphant, held Mungal and Bungal each by one ear.

"It was the *esh-starffit*[25] quails, *Huzoor*, that I had prepared for the Protector of the Poor; two for his Honour, seeing that he loves the dish, and one for *Barker sahib*,[26] should God send a guest, so that the dignity of the table be upheld even in the wilderness. And, lo! as I sat decorating the dish, my mind occupied in desires to please, I saw him--the infamous Bowriah boy--make off with one. Aged as I am I fled after him, then remembering boys' ways, ran back round the tent in time to see him, from fear, replacing it. Finally, with hue and cry, we caught both escaping into the darkness of the desert."

"Both of them!" I echoed; "but you said there was only one."

"The *Huzoor* mistakes," retorted the *khânsâman* quite huffily. "Perchance there was one who stole, and one who gave back. This slave had no time for trivial observation, these being undoubtedly the thieves." He emphasised his words by dragging Mungal and Bungal forward by the ears, and knocking their heads together; his following meanwhile testifying its assent by undertoned remarks, that being Bowriahs the boys were necessarily thieves, and that in addition it was superfluous, if not impious, to draw invidious distinctions where it had pleased Providence to make none.

But my curiosity had been aroused. "Mungal and Bungal," I said solemnly, addressing the culprits who, with hands folded in front of them like infant Samuels, stood cheerfully stolid, just as the adult members of their tribe invariably did when brought before me as habitual criminals, "do you by chance know what telling the truth means?"

As they assured me fervently that they did, I went on to explain that my only desire in this case was to have the truth; that no one should suffer by it; that contrariwise the tellers should receive *bucksheesh*. Here their beady eyes wandered in confident familiarity to the rotund person of the Deputy Inspector, who had rushed to the scene in mufti on hearing of the crime, and I knew instinctively that they were discounting my words by inherited experience of similar promises. So it was with a prescience of what would follow that I put the least formidable question--

"Which of you replaced the quail?"

The answer came double-barrelled, unhesitating, "I did, *Huzoor*."

"Let me give the boys five stripes each with the bamboo, *Huzoor!*" suggested the Deputy Inspector with a stifled yawn, when I had wasted much time and more unction, "it is good for boys at all times, and these are but boys--as yet."

It would have been the wisest plan, but I could not make up my mind to it, so I went to bed that night certain of but one thing--either Mungal or Bungal was a thief. The question was--which?

It kept me awake until I made up my mind that somehow, by hook or by crook, I would find out. Twenty-four hours was after all too short a time for a character study; but I was to be on tour for six weeks at least, and if I took the boys with me I should have ample opportunity of settling the question. Besides, they would be invaluable as trackers.

They proved themselves useful in many ways, and even the old khânsâman grudgingly admitted their skill in the capture of chickens. The spectacle of a half-plucked fowl defying all the resources of the camp became a thing of the past, for Mungal or Bungal had it fast by the leg in a trice.

"*Sobhan ullah!*" (Power of the Lord) the old man would say piously. "But there! they were made for such work from the beginning. We all have our uses."

My first desire was naturally to distinguish Mungal from Bungal. The camp, it is true, had no such ambition. It was content to speak of them as "*Yeh*" or "*Dusra*" (This or the Other), to which they answered alternately. Thinking to effect my purpose, I gave one a necklace of blue, the other a necklace of red beads; but they were evidently suspicious of some plot, for I caught them exchanging decorations several times. Evidently no reliance was to be placed on beads, so I had a brass bangle riveted on the arm of one, and an iron bangle on the arm of the other. That succeeded for a week. At least so I thought, till I discovered that they had utilised my English files to cut through the metal so that they could slip their flexible hands in and out quite easily. Then I became annoyed, and pierced the ears of one boy. Next day the other had his pierced also. So I got the two alone by themselves, and asked them why they objected to the manifest convenience of individuality. It took me some time to worm the idea out of their small brains, but when I did, it touched me. Briefly, no one had ever made a difference between them before, not even the mysterious Creator, and in the village no one had cared. Personally, they never thought if Mungal was really Mungal, or Bungal. It was a joint-stock company doing business under the name of Mungal-Bungal. As they said this they stood, as usual when before me, in the attitude of the praying Samuel, but I noticed their shoulders seemed glued to each other, and that the whole balance of their lithe brown bodies was towards each other. In truth the tie between them was strong indeed. By day they and my big dog hunted together, and by night the trio slept in each other's arms like puppies of one litter. When they pilfered, they pilfered in pairs, and when they lied, they lied in pairs; still, through it all, the idea clung to me that perhaps only one lied and stole. But punishment of some sort being imperative, I gave in to the impartial bamboo--for which, to say sooth, neither of them seemed to care very much.

In fact, the experiment appeared so successful, the boys so happy, that the demon of self-complacency entered into me on my return to headquarters, and I determined to send Mungal and Bungal to school, and so differentiate them by their intellects. It was a disastrous experiment, both to the clothes in which I had to dress them, and to the peace of the compound; but it proved one thing, that neither Mungal nor Bungal had any aptitude for learning the alphabet. Then, as the recognised way of reclaiming the predatory tribes is to make them tillers of the soil, I set my boys to work weeding in the garden. It was a large garden, full of blossoming shrubs and shady fruiting trees, where the squirrels loved to chatter, the birds to sing, and I to watch them both. Within a fortnight neither fur nor feather was to be seen anywhere. On the other hand, Mungal, Bungal, and Co. had killed five cobras, two iguanas, and some dozens of cockroaches, rats, and mice--all of which they had eaten. It was when, failing other game, a pet parrot of the *khânsâman's* house disappeared, that I solemnly thrashed both boys myself, after giving them a moral lecture on cruelty to animals. The next morning the bird's cage contained a new and most highly-educated parrot,--which must have been stolen from some one,-- and when I went out into the verandah, I found a whole family of young squirrels, and two bul-buls with their wings cut, dotted about the flower stands. One of the culprits was evidently bent on restitution and amendment. Perhaps both; that was the worst of it. One never could tell; for in speech they both clung to virtue and disclaimed vice. My Commissioner's wife, who lived next door, and was a very philanthropic woman, told me she thought they needed female influence to soften and subdue their wild nature; so they used to be sent over to her twice a week. She found them quite affable, until the *khitmutghâr* accused one of them of sampling the lunch which had been set down on the verandah steps on its way to the cook-room. Then, instead of beating them, she locked them up without food for twenty-four hours, and begged me to continue the like discipline whenever the offence was repeated. Hunger, she said, had a gentle and humanising influence on all wild animals, who might thus be brought to eat from the hand of authority. So it seemed; for one night the lady's pet Persian kitten disappeared mysteriously from her room. I tried to persuade myself it could not be the boys, because "cat is heating to the blood," etc., etc.; but I knew they had been hungry, and that game was scarce in both gardens. And, sure enough, the police in searching their hut found some gnawed bones, poor pussy's white skin neatly stretched on a board to dry, and, of course, both the boys. They always were found together. This time they attempted excuse, the one for the other. Mungal or Bungal had been hungry; must have been hungry, or he would not have eaten cat, seeing that cat, etc., etc. So they were sentenced judicially to so many stripes apiece, and I resolved on sending them back to the walled village as incurable.

"It is a good word, indeed," said the old *khânsâman* pompously. "Thus the *Huzoor's* compound will be free from all kinds of vermin; for, as I live, the boy hath killed a snake in his Honour's henhouse every night, save the last; and that, methinks, is because there are no more to kill."

"The boy? which boy?" I asked, suddenly curious. Then it came out that every one in the place

knew that either "Yeh" or "Dusra" had been locked up in the hen-house from dusk till dawn every night for a week or more, because some vermin was carrying off the chickens. Locked up from daylight to daylight! without a possibility of cat*icide*. The fact revived all my old curiosity, all my old determination to differentiate these boys. I shall not easily forget the Deputy Inspector's face of incredulous horror when I told him that Mungal-Bungal was to remain for another trial. Even the Commissioner's wife told me she thought it conceited on my part, seeing that female influence had failed so signally.

And, as a matter of fact, I gained nothing in the end by my perseverance.

The nights were growing warm, so I slept with the doors open; secure, however, so I deemed, from fear of any kind by reason of the mastiff which was chained in the verandah,--a most ferocious beast to all save his friends. They were moonless nights, too, dark as pitch in the central room, where I slept in order to enjoy the full current of air. Hopelessly dark for the eyes as I woke one night to the touch of a small flexible hand on mine.

"Hullo! who are you?" I cried in the half-drowsy alertness which comes with a sudden decisive awakening.

"*Huzoor, main Bowriah hone*."

I seem to hear the answer as I write--confident, contented, cheerful. And then my attention shifted absolutely to a streak of light glimmering under the closed door of my office. Thieves! thieves in the house! I was among them in an instant, getting a glimpse of dark figures at my cash box before the light was put out. One oily body slipped from my hold, another fled past me. But my shouts had roused the sleeping servants, and, as the cressets came flickering up like stars from the huts, I heard the well-known cry, "*Bowriah logue! Bowriah logue*." And then, of course, in the centre of the posse of indignant retainers I saw Mungal-Bungal led by the ears, caught in the very act of running away in the rear of those adult members of their tribe whose accomplices they had been; for the mastiff was dead--brutally, skilfully strangled by some fiend of a friend whom the poor dog had trusted to slip a noose round its neck.

One of those two, of course; who else could it have been?

But then that small warning hand on mine! That answer I knew so well:--

"*Huzoor! main Bowriah hone*."

Great God! what a tragedy lay in these words!

I was too sick at heart to question those infant Samuels again; I knew the double-barrelled denial too well. However, as I had been roused in time to prevent actual theft, I managed to hush the matter up by promising the Deputy Inspector to send the boys back to their village without further delay, there to await due registration as adult male members of a predatory tribe, and thus gain the privilege of being within the cognizance of the police. I think my decision gave satisfaction to every one concerned, except myself, for as I watched Mungal-Bungal go from my gate in charge of the constable who was to conduct it back to the hereditary place in life to which it had, apparently, pleased God to call the firm, I knew that if one-half was already a habitual criminal, the other half was an embryo saint.

The question remains--which?

MUSSUMÂT KIRPO'S DOLL.

They had gathered all the schools into the Mission House compound, and set them out in companies on the bare ground like seedlings in a bed,--a perfect garden of girls, from five to fifteen, arrayed in rainbow hues; some of them in their wedding dresses of scarlet, most of them bedecked with the family jewelry, and even the shabbiest boasting a row or two of tinsel on bodice or veil.

And down the walks, drawn with mathematical accuracy between these hotbeds of learning, a few English ladies with eager, kindly faces, trotting up and down, conferring excitedly with portly native Christian Bible-women, and pausing occasionally to encourage some young offshoot of the Tree of Knowledge--uncertain either of its own roots or of the soil it grew in--by directing its attention to the tables set out with toys which stood under a group of date-palms and oranges. Behind these tables sat in a semicircle more of those eager, kindly foreign faces, not confined here to one sex, but in fair proportion male and female; yet, bearded like the pard or feminine to

a fault, all with the same expression, the same universal kindly benevolence towards the horticultural exhibition spread out before their eyes.

At the table, pale or flushed with sheer good feeling, two or three of the chief Mission ladies, and between them, with a mundane, married look about her, contrasting strongly with her surroundings, the Commissioner's wife, about to give away the prizes. A kindly face also, despite its half-bewildered look, as one after another of the seedlings comes up to receive the reward of merit. One after another solemnly, for dotted here and there behind the screen of walls and bushes squats many a critical mother, determined that her particular plant shall receive its fair share of watering, or cease to be part of the harvest necessary for a good report. The Commissioner's wife has half-a-dozen children of her own, and prides herself on understanding them; but these bairns are a race apart. She neither comprehends them, nor the fluent, scholastic Hindustani with which her flushed, excited countrywomen introduce each claimant to her notice. Still she smiles, and says, "*Bohut uchcha*" (very good), and nods as if she did. In a vague way she is relieved when the books are finished and she begins upon the dolls. There is something familiar and cosmopolitan in the gloating desire of the large dark eyes, and the possessive clutch of the small hands over the treasure.

"Standard I. Mussumât[27] Kirpo," reads out the secretary, and a tall girl of about fifteen comes forward. A sort of annoyed surprise passes among the ladies in quick whispers. Clearly, a Japanese baby-doll with a large bald head is not the correct thing here; but it is so difficult, so almost impossible with hundreds of girls who attend school so irregularly, and really Julia Smith might have explained! This the lady in question proceeds to do almost tearfully, until she is cut short by superior decision.

"Well, we must give it her now as there isn't anything else for her. So, dear Mrs. Gordon, if you please! Of course, as a rule, we always draw the line about dolls when a girl is married. Sometimes it seems a little hard, for they are so small, you know; still it is best to have a rule; all these tiny trifles help to emphasise our views on the child-marriage question. But if you will be kind enough in this case--just to avoid confusion--we will rectify the mistake to-morrow."

Mussumât Kirpo took her doll stolidly;--a sickly, stupid-looking girl, limping as she walked dully, stolidly back to her place.

"*Ari!*" giggled the women behind the bushes. "That's all she is likely to get in that way. Lo! they made a bad bargain in brides in Gungo's house, and no mistake. But 'twas ill luck, not ill management; for they tell me Kirpo was straight and sound when she was betrothed. May the gods keep my daughters-in-law healthy and handsome."

Then they forgot the joke in tender delight over more suitable gifts to the others; and so the great day passed to its ending.

"I do believe poor Kirpo's getting that doll was the only *contretemps*," said the superintendent triumphantly, "and that, dear Julia, you can easily remedy to-morrow, so don't fret about it."

With this intention Julia Smith went down at the first opportunity to her school in the slums of the city. A general air of slackness pervaded the upstairs room, where only a row of little mites sat whispering to each other, while their mistress, full of yawns and stretchings, talked over the events of yesterday with her monitor. Briefly, if the Miss-*sahib* thought she was going to slave as she had done for the past year for a paltry eight yards of *sussi*-trousering, which would not be enough to cut into the "fassen "--why, the Miss-*sahib* was mistaken. And then with the well-known footfall on the stairs came smiles and flattery. But Kirpo was not at school. Why should she be, seeing that she was a paper-pupil and the prize giving was over? If the Miss-*sahib* wanted to see her, she had better go round to Gungo's house in the heart of the Hindu quarter. So Julia Smith set off again to thread her way through the byeways, till she reached the mud steps and closed door which belonged to Kuniya, the head-man of the comb-makers. This ownership had much to do with the English lady's patience in regard to Kirpo who, to tell truth, had been learning the alphabet for five years. But the girl's father-in-law was a man of influence, and Julia's gentle, proselytising eyes cast glances of longing on every house where she had not as yet found entrance. Hence her reluctance to quarrel definitely with her pupil, or rather her pupil's belongings, since poor Kirpo did not count for much in that bustling Hindu household. But for the fact that she was useful at the trade and as a general drudge, *Mai* Gungo would long ago have found some excuse for sending the girl, who had so wofully disappointed all expectations, back to her people,--those people who had taken the wedding gifts and given a half-crippled, half-silly bride in exchange. Unparalleled effrontery and wickedness, to be avenged on the only head within reach.

"She wants none of your dolls or your books," shrilled *Mai* Gungo, who was in a bad temper; "they aren't worth anything, and I expected nothing less than a suit of clothes, or a new veil at least, else would I never have sent her from the comb-making to waste her time. Lo! Miss-*sahib*," here the voice changed to a whine, "we are poor folk, and she costs to feed--she who will never do her duty as a wife. Yet must not Kuniya's son remain sonless; thus is there the expense of another wife in the future."

So the complaints went on, while Kirpo, in full hearing, sat filing away at the combs without a flicker of expression on her face.

But when Julia had settled the business with eight annas from her private pocket, and was once more picking her way through the drain-like alley, she heard limping steps behind her. It was Kirpo and the Japanese doll.

"The Miss-*sahib* has forgotten it," she said stolidly. Julia Smith stood in the sunlight, utterly unmindful of a turgid stream of concentrated filth which at that moment came sweeping along the gutter. Her gentle, womanly eyes saw something she recognised in the child-like, yet unchild-like face looking into hers.

"Would you like to keep it, dear?" she asked gently. Kirpo nodded her head.

"She needn't know," she explained. "I could keep it in the cow-shed, and they will sell the book you left for me. They would sell this too. That is why I brought it back."

This admixture of cunning rather dashed poor Julia's pity; but in the end Kirpo went back to her work with the Japanese doll carefully concealed in her veil, and for the next year Julia Smith never caught sight of it again. Things went on as if it had not been in that straggling Hindu house, with its big courtyard and dark slips of rooms. Perhaps Kirpo got up at night to play with it; perhaps she never played with it at all, but, having wrapped it in a napkin and buried it away somewhere, was content in its possession like the man with his one talent; for this miserliness belongs, as a rule, to those who have few things, not many. Once or twice, when Julia Smith found the opportunity, she would ask after the doll's welfare. Then Kirpo would nod her head mysteriously; but this was not often, for, by degrees, Julia's visits to the house and Kirpo's to the schools became less frequent. The former, because *Mai* Gungo's claims grew intolerable, and the Mission lady had found firm footing in less rapacious houses. The latter, because to *Mai* Gungo's somewhat grudging relief her daughter-in-law, after nearly four years of married life, seemed disposed to save the family from the expense of another bride by presenting it with a child. Nothing, of course, could alter the fact of the girl's ugliness and stupidity and lameness; still, if she did her duty in this one point *Mai* Gungo could put up with her, especially as she really did very well at the combs. She was not worked quite so hard now, since that might affect the future promise. Perhaps this gave Kirpo more time to play with the Japanese doll, perhaps it did not. Outwardly, at any rate, life went on in the courtyard as though no such thing existed.

"She may die, the crippled ones often do," said the gossips, scarcely lowering their voices; "but it will be a great saving, *Mai* Gungo, if the grandson comes without another daughter-in-law; they quarrel so. Besides, it is in God's hands. May He preserve both to you." *Mai* Gungo echoed the wish, with the reservation that if the whole wish was impossible, the child at least might not suffer. Kirpo herself understood the position perfectly, and felt dimly that if she could do her duty she would be quite content to give up the comb-making once and for all. It was niggly, cramping work to sit with your crippled legs tucked under you, filing away at the hard wood all day long, while mother-in-law bustled about, scolding away in her shrill voice. It had been much greater fun at the school; and as for the prize-giving days! Kirpo had four of those red-letter glimpses of the world to recollect, but she always gave the palm of pleasure to the last, when they had laughed at her and the Japanese doll. Perhaps because she remembered it best; for, as has been said, poor Kirpo's was not a brilliant intellect.

So just about the time when the Mission House was once more buying large consignments of dolls and books, and laying in yards on yards of *sussi*-trousering and Manchester veiling against another prize-giving, the mistress of the little school-room up two pair of stairs said to Julia Smith,

"Kirpo had a son last week. *Mai* Gungo hath given offerings galore."

"And Kirpo herself?"

"She ails, they say; but that is likely. The hour of danger is over."

That same afternoon Julia Smith once more picked her way along the gutters to the mud steps and closed door of Kuniya's house. Kirpo was lying alone on a bed in the shadow of a grass thatch.

"And where is the baby?" asked Julia, cheerfully.

"Mother-in-law hath it. 'Tis a son--doubtless the Miss hath heard so." There was the oddest mixture of pride and regret in the girl's dull face.

"She will let thee have it when thou art stronger," said her visitor quickly. "Thou must give me back the dolly, Kirpo, now thou hast a live one of thine own."

The girl's head shifted uneasily on the hard pillow.

"Ay! and the prize-giving day must be close, I have been thinking. If the Miss-*sahib* will look behind the straw yonder she will find the doll. It is not hurt. And the Miss can give it to some one else. I don't want it any more. She might give it to a little girl this time. She could play with it."

"*Mai* Gungo!" said Julia severely, as, on her way out, she found the mother-in-law surrounded by her gossips, exhibiting the baby to them with great pride, "you must look to Kirpo; she thrives

not. And give her the baby--she pines after it."

"The Miss doth not understand," flounced Gungo. "What can Kirpo do with a baby? She is a fool; besides, a mother like that hath evil influences till the time of purification hath passed."

Ten days afterwards the mistress of the school told Julia that Kirpo had the fever, and they did not think she would recover. It was never safe for such as she to have sons, and nothing else was to be expected.

Perhaps it was not; for Julia found her on the bare ground of the courtyard where she had been set to die. The oil lamps flared smokily at her head and her feet, and *Mai* Gungo, with the fortnight-old baby in her arms, cried "*Râm! Râm!*" lustily. But the girl lingered in life, turning her head restlessly from side to side on Mother Earth's bosom.

"Give her the baby--only for a minute," pleaded Julia with tears in her eyes. *Mai* Gungo frowned; but a neighbour broke in hastily--

"Ay! give it to her, gossip, lest in her evil ways she returns for it when she is dead."

So they laid the baby beside her; but the restless head went on turning restlessly from side to side.

"My doll! my doll! I like my doll best."

Before they could fetch it from the Mission compound Kirpo was dead.

"LONDON."

The rains had fallen late, bringing unusual greenness to the stretches of waste-land, and unusual promise of harvest to the bare, brown fields where man and beast were hard at work, day and night, ploughing, harrowing, sowing, watering. Waiting--that integral part of Indian husbandry--had yet to come, but the memory, almost the dread of it, lurked ever in the slow brains of the labourers. In mine also, alien and uninterested though it was; for surely no one who has seen a Jât cultivator, tall, meagre, soft eyed, wandering amongst his green wheat, waiting for Râm to send rain, can ever forget the incarnate tragedy of the sight.

The sun was setting cloudless in a sea of light, that still flooded the scene with the brightness of noon, though the shadows lengthened in swift strides. I was sitting on a wide flight of steps leading down into a small tank closed in on all sides by masonry. Viewed thus, with the mass of brick work surrounding it, this square of placid water reflecting back the lemon-coloured sky, the fringe of dull *farâsh* trees, and the gilded spires of the temple rising above them, showed like a small Dutch picture set in a heavy, deep-recessed frame. On the opposite side a woman in a saffron veil was filling her brass pot, and on the trumpery stucco arcades of the temple-plinth were painted blue elephants, gingerbread tigers, and spidery monkeys. Round and round the central spire the iridescent breasts of the whirling pigeons glinted in the level rays.

It was peaceful, colourful, almost in its way beautiful, especially after a long day's work in the office tent which rose a few hundred yards away. Suddenly the clear-cut silence of the scene was marred by a deprecatory voice behind me.

"The Presence will not think it so fine as '*Ide Park*, doubtless?"

"So fine as what?" I echoed carelessly, being accustomed to the thousand and one interruptions of a district officer's life.

"So fine as your '*Ide Par-k* in the town of London."

"Hyde Park!--why! what the deuce do you know of Hyde Park?"

Intense surprise had replaced my indifference, for there was nothing to account for the strangeness of his words either in the face or figure of the man who stood behind me leaning on a long staff over which his hands were crossed. It was just such a face and figure as I saw every day. A typical Jât--in other words, a farmer by race and heritage--tall, high-shouldered, lank, with a bushy-shaped turban adding to his height, and straight folds of heavy, unbleached cotton cloth suggesting the lean, bony frame beneath. A face well cut, but not refined, marked, but not strong, in which the most noticeable features were the large dreamy eyes like those of Botticelli's Moses in the Sistine Chapel.

Immovable from the knee downwards he squatted, as the Americans say, "in his tracks," keeping his submissive face towards mine like a dog awaiting his master's pleasure.

"By the mercy of the Presence I have seen 'Ide Park. Yes, I have been there--in the city of London--where the *sahibs* and the *mem-sahibs* sit and walk."

A vision of the figure before me planted out amongst flower-decked mashers and powdery belles aroused such a sense of incongruity in my mind that I could only echo feebly--

"So you have been to London!"

"Yes!" he replied cheerfully, "I've been to London to see the great Queen."

For the life of me I could not help reverting to the sequence of childish days: "*Pussy cat, pussy cat, what saw you there?*" and his reply fitted in so neatly that my query lost its lightness and became serious.

"I saw the *Sikattar* (secretary) who sits in her chair."

I laughed then; I could not help it, for I felt convinced that no other words could have expressed the whole incident more truthfully.

"I went to London, O Protector of the Poor!" continued the stranger softly, "because I wanted, to get back the land. The Presence knows we Jâts cannot live without our land."

Involuntarily his eyes turned to a neighbouring field, where a couple of plough bullocks were slowly scoring the levels into feeble furrows, whilst the ploughman--just such a man as the one before me--held his hookah in one hand, his goad in the other.

"So you did not get the land after all? How was that?" God knows I was not always so ready of access to the native (as the departmental pastorals put it), but then one does not meet a Jât who has been to Hyde Park every day.

"Perhaps if it had not been a *Sikattar*," replied the low soft voice--"perhaps if it had been the great Queen herself--" Here the plough bullocks he was watching turned too sharply, and his hand closed mechanically on the stick he held between his knees, as if he were responsible for the mistake. "If the Presence has not heard it all before, I will tell it why Dewa Râm the Jât went to London."

I give the story in his own words, for mine might fail to transmit the perfection of his patience.

"The land was my father's, and my father's father from Mahratta times. In those days no one could sell the land or prevent the sons from following the father's plough. To begin with, no one wanted to sell good land, and then they could not if they would. That was before the great Sirkâr--life and prosperity be with it always--came to lift the hearts of the poor and set their heads high. There was much land, and on some of it in olden days a mortgage had been put. The Presence will know the kind of mortgage, where for a hundred rupees or so of loan another man is allowed to till the soil worth thousands. Only if it is wanted back, then the owner returns the hundred rupees. That is all. It is done when a family is small and has too much land to till properly. So the village accountant's people held the land because they were relations by marriage. It was in my father's time that the great Sirkâr came, and we began paying the dues to it instead of to the Maharajah. Then, when my father fell into evil ways because of drugs, my mother took her sons--we were twins, Sewa Râm and I--if the Presence pleases, back to her people far away beyond Amritsar. For she was of a high, proud family, and when the hemp gets into a man's head he does unclean things. So my father was alone, and the accountant made him do as he liked, bribing him with drugs. That was how it happened, as the Presence will doubtless perceive. So when my father neglected his own land, the accountant's people cultivated it for him and gave him what was due. My mother heard of this, but she said nothing, because we were but little lads, and the land could not run away--it was better that it should be tilled than left to rack and ruin. At last my father died, but they sent no word to Amritsar, because the great Sirkâr was coming to count the village, and make a map of it with all the holdings of the proper shape, and all the fields coloured green. If the Protector of the Poor will forgive his dust-like slave, he will remember that fields are not green always, and so likewise the holdings are not always right, no matter how carefully they are put on the map. There was the old mortgage, a man who lied tilling the soil, and no one to come to the Sirkâr and say, 'Here is the hundred rupees, give us back the land and write it in our names,' because, as I have said, Sewa Râm and I were away beyond Amritsar, and our mother thought the land could not run away. It was no wonder the Sirkâr was deceived, no wonder at all, but when we came to claim the land even our names were not on the list. They had written the wrong thing because the mortgage had been foreclosed, and there were no heirs. After this one judge--may he become the *Lât Sahib*--said he would put it right, but the accountant was rich and made it into an appeal. The Presence knows what an appeal is, doubtless, and how, when a little thing like this--just a mistake in a map--gets up amongst the pleaders and the *Sikattars*, it is sometimes too small for them to see. It would have been different if the Sirkâr had seen two big noisy boys when it counted the village. Then Sewa Râm was set free from the prison of life, and I was alone; for the Presence knows a Jât cannot marry without land, or have sons when there is no plough to keep the furrow of existence straight. So I sold my mother's jewels and went to show the great Queen herself that my father really had a son. Thus I came to 'Ide Park in London

city, and saw the *Sikattar*."

"Then you did not succeed?"

"The Presence knows that the *vizier* is not as the *badshah*. He was very kind, sending me back by ship P. and O. And writing! God knows how many letters he wrote, and he bade me wait. That is two years gone, so I am waiting still."

"Have you a case in my Court?"

He shook his head with a certain pride. "Oh no! it is in the big Court, or with the Financial, or a *Sikattar* just now; but it will come to the Presence sooner or later. That is why I journey with the Protector of the Poor. When that day comes the Presence will remember how Dewa Râm the Jât went to 'Ide Park."

As I strolled back to the tent he followed at a discreet distance. Afterwards, as I sat smoking outside, I saw him wandering in the fields listlessly, his tall figure standing out against the sky as he paused to look at the sprouting wheat. When I questioned my underlings as to his story, they smiled obsequiously, as the native will smile before the master's face. The case, it appeared, had grown to be quite a standing joke in the office, nor was this the first cold weather that Dewa Râm had haunted the camp of the Deputy Commissioner and waited for news of his land. They hemmed and hawed, however, over the rights and wrongs of his claim, until I asked them point blank what their own impressions were; then habit gave way to truth, and they frankly declared their belief in some miscarriage of justice. A man, they said, would not go all the way to London for nothing. As I inclined to the same view, I took the trouble to try working the oracle by the back stairs--a method no less successful in India than elsewhere. Replies, more or less hopeful as to some ultimate settlement of the question, came from various friends in high places. Some of these I communicated, in a guarded way, to "London," who as the sowing time passed fell a victim to fever and deferred hope. It was impossible for mortal man to see those dreamy eyes of his watching the crops of other men without feeling an insane desire to bring the promised land within his reach. He was very grateful. So condescending a Presence, he said, had never before dwelt in the tents of the great Sirkâr; and often on Sunday afternoons, when the camp was at rest, he would steal ostentatiously to a spot about thirty yards from where I was sitting, and if opportunity offered, enter into conversation--generally beginning by some apologetic allusion to 'Ide Park, but ending with a vast amount of information. He was a perfect mine of folk-lore, and many a half hour did he beguile by old-world stories and traditions. One, in particular, I will retail in his own words, because it seems to me to give insight into the nature of the man and of his race.

I had been having my Sunday cup of afternoon tea in the shade of a huge banian tree, and was idly amusing myself by throwing crumbs to a bright-eyed, bushy-tailed palm squirrel, that had crept down the trunk not two yards from me. Attracted, partly by hunger, but more by the sheer light-hearted cussedness which makes the Indian squirrel so charming a companion, the little creature came nearer and nearer, its tail in an aggressive pluff, its large eyes scanning my face knowingly. A pause, a dart, and it was chirruping on the branch above my head with the crumb in its deft fingers.

"The Presence is a friend of Râm's," said "London" deferentially, "that is why the heart of the Presence is so soft."

"And why do you say I am a friend of Râm's?" I asked.

"Because the Presence is a friend to Râm's friend. Has the *Huzoor* never heard how the squirrel people come to have four black marks on their golden backs? Then I will tell. It was in the old days when Râm's parents fastened the silken bracelet on his wrist, and sent him out to find Seeta his wife. The Presence will have heard of that, and how each year our women folk tie the *râm rukkhi* to our wrists for luck. Well, when Râm, the King of all men, came to Sanderip, he found the great Monkey had carried off Seeta the Queen of women. Then, being in distress, he bid all the birds and beasts and fishes come to help him, for great Râm was the Lord of the whole earth. Now the first to answer his call was the squirrel. In those days it was all golden, like corn in the sunlight, and light-hearted beyond all mortal things, as it is now. It leapt on to Râm's sword and cried, 'Master! I am ready.' But the great god's eyes grew soft as he saw the little thing's slender beauty, and perceived that it had the bravest heart of all his creatures. So he laid his hand on it in blessing, saying softly--

"'Nay! tender little warrior! thou art too pretty for strife and death. Live on, brave and careless for ever, so that weary men may see the beauty of the life great Râm has given.'

"But, lo! when he raised his hand the squirrel's shining coat bore the shadow of Râm's tired fingers, for even golden life is dimmed by the touch of care."

This and many another tale he told to me, while the green pigeons bustled about in the branches, and the squirrels lay yawning amongst the mango flowers. For the winter had flown, the camping season was at an end, and still "London" was waiting. He never complained; only when rain fell, or when there was a heavy dew, or a good winnowing wind,--anything, in short, calculated to gladden the heart of a farmer,--he used to talk of 'Ide Park, and bewail the fact that

Sikattar sahibs had penetrated even there. The hot weather passed, as usual, in a stagnation of mind and body more or less modified by individual energy, and during it "London" paid me but occasional visits, and was fairly cheerful. No sooner, however, did the stir of coming cultivation begin again in the high, unirrigated soils, than he followed suit with a growing restlessness. And still no answer came. Just then a small piece of Government land,--that is to say, land in which no cultivator had a vested interest,--fell vacant in a village not far from "London's" ancestral home, and I bethought me of putting him in as tenant if I could. But it is no easy task to find soil to cultivate in India, since farms are not "to be let" as they are in England, and the State, though in reality owner, has no power to turn out one man or his heirs in favour of another, or in any way to manipulate the holdings of hereditary cultivators. Why, knowing this, it could have delegated the power to the money lender, in giving the right of alienation by sale or mortgage to the cultivator, is one of those abstruse mysteries over the elucidation of which volumes have been and are still to be written. A mystery, moreover, which is responsible for half the growing poverty of those whose patient labour is the bulwark of the State.

The particular village in which I hoped to find a more or less temporary outlet for poor "London's" hereditary instinct--which made the sight of a plough have much the same effect on him as a clutch of eggs has on a broody hen--had earned an unenviable notoriety from the number of mutineers it produced in the '57. Nearly one-half of the land had come under direct Government control by confiscation, and as the country settled down, had been leased, at fixed rentals, to the loyal families, or in many cases to the heirs of the dead offenders.

One of these, the son of a notorious mutineer, had just died childless, and it was into his place that I determined, if possible, to put "London." The case "Dewa Râm *versus* the Empress and others" had come back to me for the third time, with a request for further inquiry and evidence. There was none to give, for in a country where birth and marriage certificates are unknown quantities, and registers of all kinds are inaccurate, legal proof of a case like "London's" is almost impossible. As he himself invariably said, it was no wonder the Sirkâr had been deceived by the foreclosed mortgage, and the lying man who tilled the soil, joined to the newly-invented theory that the peasant proprietor had a right to alienate the ancestral property of his descendants. So, with the prospect of another cold weather camp before me, I felt an almost morbid desire to get rid of "London," and those patient eyes that seemed to me as if they were ever on the look-out for the promised land.

I was told afterwards by my superiors, in set terms, that my behaviour was illegal and indiscreet, and that I should have gone round the mutinous crew one by one, giving them the option of leasing the land, before offering it to any one else, above all, before putting in a man whose claim to other ground was "in course of settlement." I believe my superiors to have been quite right theoretically, and I know that, practically, my philanthropic experiment proved a disastrous failure. Not a week after "London," glowing with gratitude, set out for the village in which his new holding was situated, he was brought back to the hospital on a stretcher with a broken arm and several clouts on the head. Indeed, I have always felt it to be the crowning mercy of my career, that no one was actually killed in the free fight which ensued on my protégé's arrival in the mutineers' village; for he had some friends, stalwart as himself, and the Jâts, once aroused from their usual calm placidity, fight like devils with their long quarterstaves. On this occasion they gave the truculent crew as good as they got, until overpowered by numbers. When the incident occurred I was in a very out of the way part of the district, and I well remember having to send a special messenger thirty miles with an urgent telegram in order to allay still more urgent inquiries as to the "serious agrarian riot in B----."

When I returned to head-quarters I found "London" convalescent and distinctly cheerful. He was sitting on the hospital steps whittling a new staff, and expressed his determination of going back to the village as soon as possible with a larger supply of friends. I felt constrained, however, to deny him his revenge. To begin with, my official reputation could not have stood another agrarian riot; in addition, the mutineering village had appealed against my action "*en masse*," so the matter had passed beyond my control. "London" was sorrowful, but sympathetic, seeming to enjoy the idea that I too might become a prey to *Sikattars* ere long. He took great pride in his broken arm and new stick, and more than once suggested that if the great Queen only knew how he had clouted the heads of the misbegotten, unfaithful devils, she might believe that his father had indeed left a son.

After this I made several attempts to bring a plough handle within "London's" reach, but my philanthropy was guarded, and my efforts uniformly unsuccessful. Once, a small atom of land on which I had my eye was taken up by a newly-made Municipal Committee as a public institute. It was Jubilee year, and various things of the kind were being started. When I saw this particular one last, a stuffed crocodile, two spinning wheels, some tussar silk cocoons, and a specimen card of aniline dyes, occupied what they were pleased to call the Industrial Department. In the reading room opposite an interesting collection of seditious journalism lay on the table, and a chromo of the "Kaiser-i-Hind" hung over the fireplace.

Then once again, when I thought I had found a resting-place for those dreamy eyes, the Military Department stepped between hope and fruition with a stout Subadar-major who had done the State good service. Finally, sick leave--the end of so many kindly plans and hopes for those who, living amongst the peasantry learn to admire them as they deserve to be admired--came to put an end to all my plans for "London."

He bore the tidings with gentle regret. The Presence, he said, had not been well for some time; It would be the better of seeing 'Ide Park again, and perhaps as It was to be away so long--a whole year he was told--there would be a chance of seeing not only the *Sikattar*, but the great Queen herself.

"And if," he continued, standing up and leaning on his staff as I had first seen him, whilst his eyes followed the ploughing for yet another harvest,--"and if the Presence is so fortunate, perhaps It might find time to remember that Dewa Râm the Jât is waiting for his land."

The reason for my writing this absolutely true experience is one of those distressing inconsistencies which are part and parcel of poor humanity. One might have thought the facts sufficient to excuse a resort to pen, ink, and paper on the part of one really interested in that peasant life of which the rulers and governors know so little. But it needed an unreality, a mere feverish fancy to supply the motive power.

I was in Hyde Park yesterday at the close of a bright afternoon. No need to describe what I saw. To those who live in London the scene is as familiar as their own faces, while those who do not, have at their disposal a thousand descriptions far better than any I could give. An unusually thick sprinkling of clerical attire among the crowd testified to the attraction of missionary meetings when combined with London at its best. Indeed, as I had come down Piccadilly the vast number of sandwich men advertising lectures, meetings, and addresses on every conceivable subject, struck me as favourable evidence of the growing intelligence and sympathy of the many for things beyond the daily round of English life.

I sat down, and being a comparative stranger, amused myself, as many have done before me, in listening to the scraps of conversation which fell from the lips of the passers by--the flotsam-jetsam left by the stream of humanity; and as usual my initial curiosity and interest died down before the growing perception of some strange likeness underlying all the atoms of thought and speech.

Slowly, uncertainly, as the confused tints of a child's magic lantern focus into some horrid monster, or as the ebbing tide discloses the drowned face of a victim, the half-heard assertions, denials, protestations of the pleasure-seeking crowd, gave up their individual form and colour, and were lost in the one unchangeable, indestructible characteristic of humanity--its selfishness. On every face an interest, a smile, a frown, a thought; below these, the one source of all. Inevitable, no doubt, but depressing in the masks are men and women claiming to be the cream of culture and civilisation. I wondered if, when the best was said and done, the art of widening our vitality by our sympathies had made much progress.

A stir in the crowd, a murmur, a look of expectation roused me from idle moralisings. A couple of outriders in red came down the drive, and people paused to look.

"By Jove! it's the Queen herself," said some one hurriedly, as a brougham drove past giving a glimpse from behind closed windows of grey hair and a widow's cap. The murmur swelled to a roar, almost a cheer. Every hat was off, and some country cousins stood up in their chairs in order to see better.

Now, what followed will, I know, be set down to the attack of Indian fever which some ten minutes afterwards sent me home to shiver in bed. Nevertheless, I am prepared to swear that there, amongst the flower-decked mashers and the powdery belles, I saw the tall, gaunt form of "London" leaning on his quarterstaff. The gentle, deprecatory smile I had so often seen when he spoke of 'Ide Park was on his face, as if he knew the incongruity of his own appearance in such a scene. His eyes were not on the modest carriage in which the *Kaiser-i-Hind* was being partially displayed to her faithful subjects. They were fixed on me! On me, the tape-tied, sealing-waxed representative of a paternal despotism in India. The myriad tongues resumed their civilised shibboliths, but above them came a well-known cadence, "And if the Presence is so fortunate, perhaps it might find time to remember that Dewa Râm the Jât is waiting for his land."

As I said before, I went home to bed. What else could I do? Perhaps if other people could have seen what I saw, Dewa Râm and his kind would not be so often in difficulties about their land.

LÂL.

Who was Lâl? What was he? This was a question I asked many times; and though it was duly answered, Lâl remained, and remains still, an unknown quantity--an abstraction, a name, and nothing more. L A L. The same backwards and forwards, self-contained, self-sufficing.

The first time I heard of Lâl was on a bright spring morning, one of those mornings when the plains of Northern India glitter with dew-drops; when a purple haze of cloud-mountain bounds the pale wheat-fields to the north, and a golden glow strikes skywards from the sand-hills in the south. I was in a tamarisk jungle on the banks of the Indus, engaged in the decorous record of all the thefts and restitutions made during the year by that most grasping and generous of rivers. For year after year, armed by the majesty of law and bucklered by foot-rules and maps, the Government of India, in the person of one of its officers, came gravely and altered the proportion of land and water on the surface of the globe, while the river gurgled and dimpled as if it were laughing in its sleeve.

Strange work, but pleasant too, with a charm of its own wrought by infinite variety and sudden surprise. Sometimes watching the stream sapping at a wheat-field, where the tender green spikes fringed the edges of each crack and fissure in the fast-drying soil. A promise of harvest,--and then, sheer down, the turbid water gnawing hungrily. Every now and again a splash, telling that another inch or two of solid earth had yielded. Sometimes standing on a mud bank where the ever watchful villagers had sown a trial crop of coarse vetch; thus, as it were, casting their bread on the water in hopes of finding it again some day. But when? Would it be there at harvest-time? Grey-bearded patriarchs from the village would wag their heads sagely over the problem, and younger voices protest that it was not worth while to enter such a flotsam-jetsam as a field. But the ruthless iron chain would come into requisition, and another green spot be daubed on the revenue map, for Governments ignore chance. And still the river dimpled and gurgled with inward mirth; for if it gave the vetch, had it not taken the wheat?

So from one scene of loss or gain to another, while the sun shone in the cloudless sky overhead. Past pools of shining water where red-billed cranes stood huddled up on one leg, as if they felt cold in the crisp morning air. Out on the bare stretches of sand where glittering streams and flocks of white egrets combined to form a silver embroidery on the brown expanse. Over the shallow ford where the bottle-nosed alligators slipped silently into the stream, or lay still as shadows on the sun-baked sand. Down by the big river, where the swirling water parted right and left, and where the greybeards set their earthen pots a-swimming to decide which of the two streams would prove its strength by bearing away the greater number,--a weighty question, not lightly to be decided, since the land to the west of the big stream belonged to one village, and the land eastward to another. Back again to higher ground through thickets of tamarisk dripping with dew. The bushes sparse below with their thin brown stems, so thick above where the feathery pink-spiked branches interlaced. Riding through it, the hands had to defend the face from the sharp switch of the rosy flowers as they swung back disentangled; such tiny flowers, too, no bigger than a mustard seed, and leaving a pink powder of pollen behind them.

It was after forcing my way through one of these tamarisk jungles that I came out on an open patch of rudely ploughed land, where a mixed crop of pulse and barley grew sturdily, outlining an irregular oval with a pale green carpet glistening with dew. In the centre a shallow pool of water still testified to past floods, and from it a purple heron winged its flight, lazily craning its painted neck against the sky.

The whole *posse comitatus* of the village following me broke by twos and threes through the jungle, and gathered round me as I paused watching the bird's flight.

"Take the bridle from his honour's pony," cried a venerable pantaloon breathlessly. "Let the steed of the Lord of the Universe eat his fill. Is not this the field of Lâl?"

Twenty hands stretched out to do the old headman's bidding; twenty voices re-echoed the sentiment in varying words. A minute more, and my pony's nose was well down on the wet, sweet tufts of vetch, and I was asking for the first time, "Who is Lâl?"

Lâl, came the answer, why, Lâl was--Lâl. This was his field. Why should not the pony of the Protector of the Poor have a bellyful? Was it not more honourable than the parrot people and the squirrel people, and the pig people who battened on the field of Lâl?

It was early days yet for the flocks of green parrots to frequent the crops, and the dainty squirrels were, I knew, still snugly a-bed waiting for the sun to dry the dew; but at my feet sundry furrows and scratches told that the pig had already been at work.

"Is Lâl here?" I asked.

A smile, such as greets a child's innocent ignorance, came to the good-humoured faces around me.

Lâl, they explained, came when the crop was ripe, when the parrot, the squirrel, and the pig people--and his honour's pony too--had had their fill. Lâl was a good man, one who walked straight, and laboured truly.

"But where is he?" I insisted.

Face looked at face half puzzled, half amused. Who could tell where Lâl was? He might be miles away, or in the next jungle. Some one had seen him at Sukkhur a week agone, but that was no reason why he should not be at Bhukkur now, for Lâl followed the river, and like it was here to-day, gone to-morrow.

Baulked in my curiosity, I took refuge in business by inquiring what revenue Lâl paid on his field. This was too much for the polite gravity of my hearers. The idea of Lâl's paying revenue was evidently irresistibly comic, and the venerable pantaloon actually choked himself between a cough and a laugh, requiring to be held up and patted on the back.

"But some one must pay the revenue," I remarked a little testily.

Certainly! the Lord of the Universe was right. The village community paid it. It was the village which lent Lâl the field, and the bullocks, and the plough. It was the village which gave him the few handfuls of seed-grain to scatter broadcast over the roughly-tilled soil. So much they lent to Lâl. The sun and the good God gave him the rest. All, that is to say, that was not wanted for the parrot, the pig, and the squirrel people, and, of course, for the pony of the Lord of the Universe.

There are so many mysteries in Indian peasant life, safe hidden from alien eyes, that I was lazily content to let Lâl and his field slip into the limbo of things not thoroughly understood, and so, ere long, I forgot all about him. Spring passed ripening the crops; summer came bringing fresh floods to the river; and autumn watched the earth once more make way against the water; but Lâl was to me as though he had not been.

It was only when another year found me once more in the strange land which lies, as the natives say, "in the stomach of the river," that memory awoke with the words, "This is the field of Lâl." There was, however, no suggestion made about loosening my pony's bridle as on the former occasion, the reason for such reticence being palpable. Lâl had either been less fortunate in his original choice of a field this year, or else the sun and the good God had been less diligent care-takers. A large portion of the land, too, bore marks of an over-recent flood in a thick deposit of fine glistening white sand. A favourite trick of the mischievous Indus, by which she disappoints hope raised by previous gifts of rich alluvial soil--a trick which has given her a bad name, the worst a woman can bear, because she gives and destroys with one hand. Here and there, in patches, the sparse crop showed green; but for the most part the ground lay bare, cracking into large fissures under the noonday sun, and peeling at the top into shiny brown scales.

"A bad lookout for Lâl," I remarked.

Bad, they said, for the squirrel people and the parrot people, no doubt; but for Lâl--that was another matter. L&I did not live by bread alone. The river gave, the river took away; but to Lâl at any rate it gave more than it stole.

"What does it give?" I asked.

It gave crocodiles. Of all things in the world crocodiles! Not a welcome gift to many, but Lâl, it seemed, was a hunter of crocodiles. Not a mere slayer of alligators, like the men of the half-savage tribes who frequent the river land; who array themselves in a plethora of blue beads, and live by the creeks and *jheels* on what they can catch or steal; who track the cumbersome beasts to their nightly lair in some narrow inlet, and, after barring escape by a stealthy earthwork, fall on the helpless creature at dawn with spears and arrows. Lâl was not of these; he was of another temper. He hunted the crocodile in its native element, stalked it through the quicksands, knife in hand, dived with it into the swift stream, sped like a fish to the soft belly beneath, and struck upwards with unerring hand, once, twice, thrice, while the turbid orange water glowed crimson with the spouting blood.

I heard this tale curiously, but incredulously. Why, I asked, should Lâl run such risks? What good were crocodiles to him when they were slain? There was not so much risk, after all, they replied, for it was only the bottle-nosed ones that he hunted, and though, of course, the snub-nosed ones lived in the river also--God destroy the horrid monsters!--still they did not interfere in the fight. And Lâl was careful, all the more careful, because he had but two possessions to guard, his skin and his knife. As to what Lâl did with the crocodiles, why, he ate them, of course. Not all; he spared some for his friends, for those who were good to him, and gave him something in return. Had the Presence never heard that the poor ate crocodile flesh? They themselves, of course, did not touch the unclean animal; and their gifts to Lâl were purely disinterested. He was a straight-walking, a labourful man, and that was the only reason why they lent him a field. Even the Presence would acknowledge that crocodile flesh without bread would be uninteresting diet; but as a rule the pig, the parrots, the squirrels left enough for Lâl to eat with his jerked meat. The village lent him the sickle, of course, and the flail, and the mill, sometimes even the girdle on which to bake the unleavened bread; but all for love, only for love. Yet if the Presence desired it they could show him the jerked meat, some that Lâl had left for the poor. It was dry? Oh, yes! Lâl cut the great beasts into strips, and laid them in the sun on the dry sand, sitting beside them to scare away the carrion birds. Sometimes there would be a crowd of vultures, and Lâl with his knife sitting in the midst. "He will have to sell some of his jerked crocodile to pay his revenue this year," I remarked, just to amuse them. Again the idea was comic; evidently Lâl and money were incompatible, and the very idea of his owning any caused them to chuckle unrestrainedly amongst themselves. Then, growing grave, they explained at length how Lâl had nothing in the world but his knife. All the rest--the sun, the river, the crocodiles, the field, the bullocks, the plough, and the seed-grain--were lent to him by them and the good God; lent to him and to the other people who ate of the field of Lâl.

As I rode away a brace of black partridges rose from one of the green patches, and close to

the tamarisk shelter a brown rat sat balancing a half-dried stalk of barley. The river gleamed in the distance, a wedge-shaped flight of *coolin* cleft the sky. All that day, when the shadow-like crocodiles slipped into the sliding water, I thought of Lâl and his knife. Was it a crocodile, after all; or was it a man, stealthy, swift, and silent? Who could tell, when there was nothing but a shadow, a slip, and then a few air bubbles on the sliding river? Or was that Lâl yonder where the vultures ringed a sand-bank far on the western side? Why not? None knew whence he came or whither he went, what he hoped, or what he feared; only his field bare witness to one human frailty--hunger; and that he shared with the pig, and the parrot, and the squirrel people. But though my thoughts were full of Lâl for a day or two, the memory of him passed as I left the river land, and once more spring, summer, and autumn brought forgetfulness.

There were busy times for all the revenue officers next year. The fitful river had chosen to desert its eastern bank altogether, and concentrate its force upon the western; so while yard after yard of ancestral land was giving way before the fierce stream, amidst much wringing of hands on the one side, there was joy on the other over long rich stretches ready for the plough and the red tape of measurement. In the press of work even the sight of the river land failed to awake any memory of Lâl. It was not until I was re-entering the outskirts of the village at sundown that something jogged my brain, making me turn to the *posse comitatus* behind me and ask,--

"And where, this year, is the field of Lâl?"

We were passing over an open space baked almost to whiteness by the constant sun,--a hard resonant place set round with gnarled *jhand* trees, and dotted over with innumerable little mud mounds.

"There," wheezed the venerable pantaloon, pressing forward and pointing to one newer than the rest. "That is the field of Lâl."

Then I saw that we were in the village burial-ground. I looked up inquiringly.

"*Huzoor!*" repeated a younger man, "that is Lâl's field. It is his own this time; but for all that the Sirkâr will not charge him revenue." The grim joke, and the idea of Lâl's having six feet of earth of his own at last, once more roused their sense of humour.

"And the other people who ate of the field of Lâl?" I asked, half in earnest, for somehow my heart was sad.

"The good God will look after them, as He has after the crocodiles."

Since then, strangely enough, the memory of Lâl has remained with me, and I often ask myself if he really existed, and if he really died. Does he still slip silently into the stream, knife in hand? Does he still come back to his field under the broad harvest moon, to glean his scanty share after the other people have had their fill? I cannot say; but whenever I see a particularly fat squirrel I say to myself, "It has been feeding in the field of Lâl."

A DEBT OF HONOUR.

A flood of yellow sunshine on yellow sand, and a horse at the gallop. A horse guided by an English boy, in blue spectacles, sitting squarely enough, but somewhat stiffly, in his saddle, as if too independent to give himself away even to the joyous swing of the handsome little beast beneath him. A big boy undoubtedly; but a boy for all his size, and despite the fact that he was an Assistant Commissioner of the third grade. In other words, one appointed to administer justice to the ignorant heathen--those ignorant heathen who seemed to have such odd ideas of life, and to require such immediate regeneration--at the hands of English boys.

In front, across the foreground, the glaring white high road for which he was steering; to the left centre a gnarled, knotted old *jhand* tree hung with coloured threads and patches, proclaiming it to be still sacred to some effete modern form of serpent-worship--one of those mysterious Indian cults of which no one, not even the disciples themselves, know anything. Young Jones, or Smith--what matters the name when a character has but to figure before the footlights of a single scene?--noticed these threads and patches with the quick but incomprehensive eye of superiority. A not uncommon feeling of contemptuous interest came over him, which prolonged itself even when the cause changed into a wonder why the brute he was riding would not keep its head at the proper angle. Then darkness, and silence!

Smith-Jones's horse had put its foot into a rat-hole and given him a bad fall, about as bad a fall as could well have been, short of those curious plunges over the edge of one world into the next. He lay white and still on the yellow sand, neither in time nor eternity, for a long while. How long matters no more than his name, for this is the story of Smith-Jones, and it is through his eyes and his thoughts that it must be seen and told; therefore until he began to gain consciousness the scene remained, as it were, a blank, despite the fact that there were other actors on the stage.

Most people when coming to themselves (to use a popular, but confusing phrase) meet first of all with a sound of slow, storm-spent breakers rolling in on some unknown shore. Is it the one they are leaving, or the one to which they seek return? Who knows--for the vague wonder is stilled by a whispering *hush!* growing louder and louder as if both worlds were waiting, finger on lip, for a decision. Then, as a rule, comes a kindly, familiar voice or touch to settle the question in favour of this earth; perhaps some day it may come to summon us to another. Again, who knows?

Smith-Jones, however, felt something so distinctly unfamiliar that he opened his eyes in a fright, relieved to find himself in that unmistakable flood of sunshine which does not exist out of India. Briefly he felt, or thought he felt, a kiss upon his lips. Now Smith-Jones, like most well-trained, unemotional English boys, had a strong dislike to kisses. He lumped them, with many other things, under the generic term *bosh*, and confined himself to reserved pecks at the foreheads of his mother, his sisters, his aunts, and an occasional, a very occasional, cousin. Even when they had all stood round in tears while Robin the gardener hoisted the brand-new cabin-trunk on to the fly, which from the large white placards on the luggage was evidently destined to carry Smith-Jones part of the way to Bombay, he had only got as far as a kiss on the cheek, despite a choke in his throat, and a distinct inclination to cry.

And now? It was startling in the extreme!

Lying on his back, a prey to somewhat alarmed surprise, he became aware through his nose of a pleasant scent, and through his eyes, of the pendant mistletoe-like twigs of the *jhand* tree. Mistletoe,--yes, that might account for the kiss; but what about the perfume of roses? There it was again, in company with an old peacock's feather fan which looked as if it were half through a severe moulting. Some one was fanning him, positively fanning him! for the feathers swooped again and again just above his face in composed curves suggestive of leisure and perpetual motion. He tried to find out more by turning his head--an effort which made him realise that he had been within an ace of breaking his neck, and sobered him to acquiescence for a time. Not for long, however, seeing that the boy was a pertinacious boy. So, at the expense of a fearful rick, he discovered a hand and arm belonging to the fan--at least if it was a hand and arm after all, and not merely a withered brown branch. Smith-Jones's blue eyes came to the conclusion that it was at any rate the skeleton of a hand and arm, and what is more a curiously graceful skeleton. Then, being still confused out of speech, he tried to arrest the arm by catching hold of it; but either he had not yet recovered a just estimate of distance, or it eluded his grasp, for the even monotony of the curve continued. And, on the whole, it was pleasant enough to lie on one's back in the yellow sand and be fanned sleepily, gracefully. An enjoyment, however, which could not be allowed long continuance when there was a horse to be caught, a camp to be reached, a judgment to be written; the whole burden of a world, in short, on Smith-Jones's young shoulders.

"I could get up now, if you would remove that fan," he said at last, weakly surprised at his own difficulty in stringing two words together in a foreign tongue.

"There is no hurry, *Huzoor*," came in immediate reply. "The Protector of the Poor being so very young, there is naturally plenty of time for all things ere he has to leave life; yea, plenty of time."

What a remarkable voice! Soft as the cooing of the doves in the *jhand* tree, and no louder; the far-away echo of a voice, toneless, yet mellow. But then the whole experience was remarkable, and he lay trying to piece common-sense into it with his brain still muddled by the jar which had so nearly sent him to still more novel environments, until his hatred of *bosh* made him sit up suddenly, unsteadily, one hand supporting himself, the other averting the sweep of the fan. There was no doubt as to the place; yonder was the white road, there the responsible hole, the wallow in the sand where his horse had rolled, the *jhand* tree gay in its shreds and patches.

But what was that to one side of him? Some one, either half-fledged girl or shrunken old woman, seated in one of those flat baskets which packmen use for carrying their burdens. It was, in effect, a pack-basket, since cords attached it to one end of a *banghy*, or yoke, which was resting against a net-full of small earthern pots fastened to the other extremity of the pliant lever. The sight of a human being in a pack-basket was unusual, but Smith-Jones during the last six months (that is to say, during his service in India) had seen so many strange things that he set it down as yet another eccentricity of an eccentric people. The occupant of the basket, however, disturbed him more; he even thought (with a certain sense of shame, which would have been wanting had he been older, or younger) of fairy godmothers--as if such banalities could be considered by Smith-Jones, Assistant Commissioner of the third grade! And yet he was not without excuse. Mr. Rider Haggard has described what "She" became when the fire scorched the charm out of a face and form which, but for magic, would have mouldered and been remoulded to fresh beauty centuries and centuries before. The figure in the pack-basket was as shrunken, as shrivelled, as any "She." Extreme old age had driven womanhood away; it had stolen every curve, every contour, every colour; and yet, possibly because the slow furnace of natural life is kinder

than its artificial fires, there was nothing unlovely in the wizened face or form. On the contrary, Smith-Jones, despite the memory of that fancied kiss still haunting his brain, looked at her without a shudder. She was dressed in a way which even his ignorance of the gala costumes of respectable females told him was unusual. A very full red silk petticoat bordered with gay colours was half tucked into the basket, half displayed over the edge in coquettish quillings and frillings of the bright embroidery. A loose sacque of the same stuff, many times too large for the bones it covered, lay in wrinkles on arms and bust with here and there a glint of tarnished tinsel, while a veil of like material, faded to a purplish tint, its heavy gold thread tracings torn, frayed, or wanting, hid all but the tiny hand and arm swaying the fan, and a shrunken, waxen face whence a pair of bright black eyes looked at him wisely.

"The Presence would do well to repose once more," came the worn-out voice. "He is not to die this time. He has broken nought save his blue spectacles, and that is well. Spectacles are not for the young; and, as this slave said but now, my Lord is in possession of such great youth that he can afford to rest till Dittu returns from pursuing the Presence's horse, which, conceiving that the Protector had no immediate need of its services, hath retired, after the manner of beasts, to gorge in a *gram* field. But I, being Dittu's relation, can affirm that he will of a surety return ere long; therefore rest is within reach, and if the Presence will lie down again I will keep the fly-people from settling on the Presence's face."

To tell the truth, the effort to rise had made Smith-Jones feel decidedly queer, so without more ado he lay back on the pillow which the strange watcher had evidently improvised from the coarse outside veil she had worn over her finery. He guessed this by the lingering smell of roses which clung to the fabric.

"You might tell me how I came to fall off, and who you are," said he after a pause, a little fretfully, for he was unused to inaction, and impatient at things he did not understand.

"*Huzoor!* rat-holes are very simple things. Or perhaps it was a snake-hole. If my Lord had gone a pace farther from the tree, he would not have been on sacred ground, and then the serpent might not have revenged himself."

Smith-Jones gave a little wriggle. "What bosh!" he muttered; adding aloud, as if to change the subject, "And who are you, mother?"

"If my Lord dislikes old wives' tales," came the cooing voice, "he will not care for mine. He is so young. If the Presence's great-grandfather--"

"What do you know about my great-grandfather?" he interrupted hotly.

"Nothing, except that the Protector of the Poor must have had one. That is all. Nevertheless, if the Presence's great-grandfather (Heaven cool his grave!) had been in Jodhnagar when he was young he might have heard Gulâbi[28] sing. I am Gulâbi, *Huzoor*."

The peacock's feather fan, with its scent of dead roses, swung backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, in that even rhythmical sweep which only those accustomed to the task from childhood can maintain for long without break or flaw. It was particularly soothing.

"I was singer to the great Mâharâni at the Pearl Palace," went on the voice, "I had to sing her to sleep whilst I fanned her as I am fanning the Pillar of Justice even now, I used to sing also before the Court in the evening, sitting in the screened room where only the great and the favoured had sight of my mistress. Sometimes the Presence's people came from over the sea; I have seen them. They came in those days for gold and jewels. Sometimes also for love; not for justice, as my Lord comes now. Nor did they wear blue spectacles; but then they were young, and I, who am so old now, I was young also."

The melancholy cadence of her words was quite lost on Smith-Jones, who was fast recovering himself, and beginning once more to take a rational view of life, and an interest in the situation, as a situation. Among other things he was a student of folk-lore, and the chance of acquiring information from this old woman, something that might even be construed into a sun-myth, was exceedingly tempting. "You must know a lot of old songs, mother," he said in superior tones. "Sing me one while we are waiting for Dittu. Or if you can't sing it, you know, just say it; I only want the words."

Was it a faint chuckle he heard, as he lay prone on his back, or only a louder gurgle of those ceaseless doves in the *jhand* tree? The old lady's voice, imperturbably toneless, arrested his wonder. "Why should I not sing, *Huzoor*, seeing I am of a family of bards? We sing both of the old and the new order. My father and my father's father sang of them before me; yet I have no son to sing them after me. So the songs I sing die with me. When I am dead no one will hear them any more."

All the more reason why he should hear them now, thought Smith-Jones, feeling surreptitiously in his pocket for a note-book.

"The Presence need not trouble himself. He must close his eyes or I shall forget my song. My singing is for sleep and dreams, and this song has been waiting to be sung so long that it is well-nigh forgotten already. Listen and dream, *Huzoor!*"

She began in the usual low chant, varied by occasional sudden turns modulating the tone into a higher or a lower key in accordance with the spirit of the story. From a musical point of view there was nothing remarkable in the performance, save the absolute want of vibration in the worn-out voice, whose even softness became all the more remarkable when contrasted by the passion in the words. Yet Smith-Jones felt at once that he was listening to a past mistress in her art. The art which in old times represented history, literature, and the drama, and made the desire for, or possession of, a really good bard a just cause for battle, murder, or sudden death among rival Courts. He could not, of course, recollect the exact words used, but, in telling me the tale years after, he declared that his memory clung close to the original, and that her song swept on untrammelled by more rhyme or rhythm than what seemed to come to it spontaneously through the chant. She sang, in fact, as the native bards sing, with every now and again an interlude of refrain or exclamation serving as a pause during which the singer grasps a fresh idea, a new measure. And this, according to Smith-Jones, was the song that she sang.

Listen, Pillar of Justice! Listen.

Roses smell sweet, but they are silent when the sun kisses them. I sing of a rose who sang, yet rose-like was silent of kisses. Heart of my heart? why should I sing of a kiss which never came, of the kiss owed to the rose, not by the dead but the living!

For what is a dead man's kiss to lips that are like the rose? He was so fair and young, he came from far over the seas. Was it jewels or gold he was seeking? No matter! 'twas love that he found.

His hair was golder than gold, his eyes, full of laughter, were blue--blue as the sapphires he sought whilst love was seeking for him. Yea, the black sought for love in the blue. Oh, cold were his eyes! cold as the snows in the north when the rose began singing

Hai, golden sun! *Hai*, cold blue skies!
Grant me but this, a look, a kiss.
Hai! Hai! Hai!

Right to the inner court of marbles and jewels, 'mid peacocks' fans waving and tinkling sutaras, he came when the stars came and talked to my mistress--talked of love and of jewels, the one for the sake of the other. For the Rani grew old, and such women are easily flattered. But Singing-Rose smiled as she sang. Though naught but a singing slave, men sought her for love and for kisses, who sought not her mistress. And one, a snake of a man, sought both without shame; he was high in the Court and a noble, the Rani's known lover.

Hai, the snake! *Hai*, venomous thing,
Dead of your own poisoning!
Hai! Hai!

But what is a snake to a rose when the gold sun may kiss her? So she sang sweeter and sweeter till blue eyes grew kinder. "What is your price for a song, Singing-Rose?" he asked softly. "Gold from a snake, but a kiss from the sun," I sang bravely; giving no heed to her frown, for speech was not mine, save by singing; night after night singing on, whilst they whispered of love and of jewels. "I owe her a gift of a surety," he said the last night to my mistress. "Give her gold," she replied with a sneer. "What more would you give to a slave?"

Hai! Gold, nothing but gold!
The heart of the Rose turned cold.
She sought for love!
Listen! listen!
Oh, the ways of love are bold,
And the guiles of love are old.

The coins were wrapped in a paper; it had a voice of its own. "To-night, when the gong chimes one, the seeker will find a kiss, in the twelve-doored marble summer-house bowered in roses." Alone in the garden I read it. I saw not the snake hid in the bushes with unwinking, venomous eyes. "This to my mistress," he laughed, "and to-night, when the clock chimes one, he dies; for the Rani sought love, and he gave her but words. What are words in exchange for the jewels she gave as a bride? The jewels he steals from the Queen when he leaves us to-morrow."

Lies, lies! nothing but lies from the snake!
The sun gives gold he does not take.
Lies! lies!

Heart of my heart! what are words and tears to a snake? And the sun far, far from the rose; too far for a warning. Listen! the rose has thorns to protect her blossoms; a woman has guiles and smiles to protect her lover. "What matters a kiss at one?" said I. "Take yours at *eleven*, in the twelve-doored marble summer-house bowered in roses."

Hai! the greed and lust in his look.
The greed at the baited hook!
He saw not the thorn.

But the Rose saw his lying soul; she knew he would take his kiss, and betray her when it was over. She knew that with venomous snakes there is no safety but death. *One* and *eleven* when figured on paper show little of change. A stroke, a scratch of a thorn! No need for more than a scratch, ere the paper was lost by the maiden and found by her mistress. Lost by the guile of one woman, found in the path of another.

> Oh, heart! waiting 'mid the flowers,
> Counting out the hours
> Till the snake's kiss!

One--two--three--four--five--six--seven--eight--nine--ten--eleven!

The clasp of a snake is cold, but the clasp of death is colder; and coldest of all, the warm clinging clasp of a rose, holding him tighter and tighter when the knife flashed out of the dark. "Let me go," he shrieked in his terror, but the thorns of the rose held fast, the warm blood staining her bosom as she waited for death in her turn. Then lights and an uproar, and, lo! instead of the stranger the Rani's own lover was dead.

> Dead! who grieves when a snake is dead?
> Men are glad that its power has fled.
> They laugh in their sleeve.

Yet was there crying and shouting, and noise bringing warning to all, reaching the moon in the heavens, the sun in its rising,--hastening its flight from the east, to its home in the arms of the west. Is not that the course of the sun? Leaving the cast with a smile; leaving the rose and the nightingale? Yea! 'tis the course of the sun.

> *Hai*, for the Rose, the Singing-Rose!
> *Hai*, for the nightingale.

Yet who kills his own pleasure? Who kills the bulbul in the rose? No! they cut its wings, they prison it, they bid it sing; sing with a blood-stained heart when the sun shines on other roses. So it sang, waiting always for the kiss which never came. Pillar of Justice, from the land of the western sun, say! did the Rose deserve the kiss which never came? Hath she not waited long enough for the promised kiss?

The song ceased as abruptly as it began, and Smith-Jones, distinctly disappointed at its want of historical value, thanked the old lady politely. It appeared to him confused and bewildering; nevertheless part of it might be twisted into some semblance of a myth. The sun was frequently mentioned, and the chiming of the hours pointed conclusively to the swallowing up of darkness by light, and *vice-versâ*. And--by Jove, that must be Dittu returning with the horse!

It was; Dittu, the horse, a bundle of green wheat, and a very broad grin--all of which common objects relieved Smith-Jones, who, to say sooth, felt out of his element lying on his back and being fanned by an old mummy. In his more collected mood it struck him as undignified. He blushed a little, rose hastily, and prepared to mount his horse and depart at once. With this intention, proceeding to rummage in his pockets for a rupee, which with a courteously intended grunt he tendered to the old woman. She might have been a graven image for all the notice she took of him or his coin. The hand holding the fan rested on her lap, her eyes were half-closed.

"The Presence wastes time. He had better give the *bucksheesh* to me," remarked Dittu, grinning again. "The old mother is nigh stone-deaf and blind. She sits so all day, never saying a word save her prayers. She is a real pious one. *Hai, Hai*, what misfortune! The stirrup of the Protector of the Poor is broken. God send the iron may be lying in the sand where the base-born beast fell!"

Smith-Jones's puzzled, perturbed look, as he watched Dittu on his knees searching for the missing stirrup-iron, may have been due to anxiety lest he should have to walk six miles into camp. On the other hand, he may have been wondering if the fall had seriously injured his brain; anyhow there was an unusual air of doubt about him when Dittu's grin and the iron came out of the sand together with the remark that, if the Presence would sit down and wait a while, he, Dittu, had some string with which a splice of the broken strap could be made in a minute or two. Meanwhile, as the Presence no longer required the pillow, he would e'en cover up the old mother again with the veil he had taken from her. It was more decent like; and she was a decent old creature, despite the fancy she had to wear those gay garments of her youth. So the white veil was wound about the faded finery, leaving nothing visible but the waxen face with its half-closed eyes.

"What are you carrying her about for?" asked Smith-Jones jerkily.

"She is so old, *Huzoor*, and we, her belongings, thought she might like to end her long life peacefully in holy Ganges. So as I had the dead ancestors of the village to carry (they are in those little pots on the other side of the yoke, *Huzoor*) we just put her to make a balance in the basket."

Smith-Jones's blue eyes (they really were fine eyes now the spectacles were away) grew big with surprise. "You mean that those little pots contain your dead ancestors?"

"Their ashes, *Huzoor*; the ashes of the village for the year. Some one always takes them at pilgrimage-time, and as I was strong I brought the old lady too. She doesn't seem able to die up there amongst us all, and she will have to be brought along some time. She is mostly bones, as it is, no heavier than the ashes yonder."

He nodded his head at the net-full of pots and went on twining the thread. Smith-Jones's face grew more and more troubled. He had read in books of old people being brought thus to end their days devoutly in the sacred stream, and it had seemed to him an interesting and curious habit. That was all. It seemed different now.

"The Presence is surprised at the ways of the dust-like ones," continued Dittu cheerfully; "but old Gulâbi is accustomed to being carried about in a basket. When she was quite a girl--a long time ago, before the gracious and beneficent rule of the Presences came to put an end to all wrongdoing--she had both her feet cut off for something she did. I have heard my grandmother say she was a gay one; but it must have been so long ago that we may forget it in her present decency."

"Both her feet cut off!"

"*Huzoor*, the feet of young people lead them into mischief. She was a singer, and she got into trouble, so I have heard old folk say. If the Presence will cause forgiveness to be awarded to the speaker, it may be said that the trouble was an Englishman. One of the no-account wanderers who used to come before the Great Company Bahâdur threw the mantle of protection over the poor. I know not the story rightly; perhaps even old Gulâbi hath forgotten it, seeing it was so long ago. The Rani she served was jealous, and would have killed the Singing-Rose (so they called the old mother) but for her art. That they could not spare. What tyrant kills the bulbul in his garden? So they cut her feet off to keep her in the paths of virtue. It is an excellent plan for those who walk lightly. See! the stirrup is ready for the foot of the Presence and will support him safely on his road."

Smith-Jones stood irresolute before the mummylike figure in the basket. "Did she ever tell you the story herself?" he asked at length.

Dittu's tongue clucked emphatic denial from the roof of his mouth. "*Huzoor*, she became decent before my day. Besides, grandmother said even when she was young Gulâbi held her tongue on that score. Only if folk pitied her for crawling like a frog she would smile, saying some things were worth more than feet, and she expected her deserts some day. *Hai! Hai!* a bold saying for carnal sinners, but holy Ganges will choke the wickedness from her for ever."

"Then you will take her--to--to Hurdwâr--and--and leave her there." Smith-Jones had a difficulty with this euphemism for the strange and barbarous custom he had read about in books. He seemed to see the old creature seated in her flat basket in the stream, a prey to exposure and cold.

"It would scarcely be worth while her coming back," suggested Dittu humbly. "My grannie (she is over there, *Huzoor*," nodding his head towards the earthern pots) "was the last person who knew her ere she ceased singing. Now she is gone, wherefore should Gulâbi wait longer? She hath waited over long as it is. To-night, when the moon rises, we will travel onwards to her rest. I must get back to the village by harvest-time."

Smith-Jones gave Dittu the rupee. He rode into camp sedately; he wrote his judgment still more sedately; then he ate his dinner and sat down sedately to read, one book after another--the *Asiatic Antiquary*, a sermon by his father on the relative guilt of the heathen--which in its day had fluttered the fold of Muddleton-on-the-Fens by its laxity--Herbert Spencer's *Sociology*, finally *The Whole Duty of Man*, which had been presented to him by a maiden aunt. And outside, beyond the thin film of canvas separating him from the calm Indian night, stretched a flood of moonshine; the tent-ropes glittering like silver cords against the dark leafage of the banyan-tree, the white road shining like a straight broad path to heaven--or elsewhere. Sitting beside the reading lamp he could see past the furled *chicks* of the door, right away to east and west: west to Rajputana and the Pearl Palace; east to holy Ganges and the golden gates of the great Rest-House.

Chink-a-chink-a-chink came the brass jingles of a *banghy*, making Smith-Jones lay down *The Whole Duty of Man* restlessly, and move towards the door. Along that broad white shining path from west to east came a strange sight,--an old mummy of a woman wrapped in a shroud-like veil and balanced by the ashes of the village. Swaying, bobbing, dancing, mummy and ashes alike, as the pliant bamboo lever on Dittu's shoulder made the jingles chink and the eyes on the worn peacock's plume at either end look as if they were alive. Shuffle, shuffle, shuffle, bob, bob, bob, came Dittu and his burden. *Hurri Gunga! Hurri Gunga! Hurri Gunga!*[29] Just a little guttural grunting, like a pig's, to keep the shuffle and the bob together.

Smith-Jones stood staring into the moonlight, the picture of irresolution. The shadow of the banyan-tree lay right across the road in a solid mass of darkness, as if a great gulf were fixed between the light westward and the light eastward. Here, in this No Man's Land, Dittu set down

his *banghy*, propped the lever into position with his packman's stick, and made sideways for an interlude of tobacco among the camp-followers at the watchfires across the road.

Smith-Jones and the *banghy* were alone. He could scarcely see it in the darkness, though a wayward gleam of moonlight glittered on the brass jingles and lit up the peacock's eyes. For all that he saw it clearly in his mind. He saw the net of earthern pots, the figure in the shroud,--nay, he saw more! He saw through the grave clothes to the faded finery within, and through that again to something which had not faded despite the long, long years. To something which was waiting still for its reward.

And then a strange thing happened. Smith-Jones forgot everything he had been taught. He forgot his father's sermon, he forgot sociology, folklore, and the whole duty of man. He forgot the sun-myth and the great fight between darkness and dawn which never ceases. He even forgot himself, as he stepped into the shadowy gulf, stooped, and paid another man's debt of honour with a kiss.

He told me the tale years after, when we were sitting over our toddy round a camp fire. It was a moonlight night, and the shadow of a great banyan-tree lay like a gulf across a white road; perhaps that awoke the memory. He was then a married man, with a charming wife and a growing family, but never, he assured me, had he forgotten, nor could he ever forget, that kiss! He declared that for one short second the whole world was at his feet, the wilderness a blossoming rose, the perfumes of which lingered-- Here he took off his spectacles, for though he had given up wearing blue ones years before, his kind eyes had become a little dim, perhaps with the sympathy they bestowed on all sorts and conditions of men; he took off his spectacles, I say, and wiped them furtively.

THE VILLAGE LEGACY.

"The case of Mussumât[30] Nuttia being without heirs," droned the Court-Inspector.

"Bring her in."

"She is already in the Presence. If the Protector of the Poor will rise somewhat,--at the other side of the table, *Huzoor!*--beside the yellow-trousered legs of the guardian of peace,--that is Mussumât Nuttia."

A child some three years of age, with a string of big blue beads round her neck,--a child who had evidently had a very satisfying meal, and who was even now preserving its contour by half-a-yard of sugar-cane, stared gravely back at the Assistant Magistrate's grave face.

"She has no heirs of any kind?" he asked.

"None, *Huzoor!* Her mother was of the Harni tribe, working harvests in Bhâmaniwallah-khurd. There the misfortune of being eaten by a snake came upon her by the grace of God. Mussumât Nuttia therefore remains,--"

"Oh, Guardian of the Poor!" said two voices in unison, as two tall bearded figures swathed in whitish-brown draperies pressed a step forward with outstretched petitioning hands. They had been awaiting this crisis all day long with that mixture of tenacity and indifference which is seen on most faces in an Indian Court.

"Give her in charge of the head-men of the village; they are responsible."

"Shelter of the world! 'tis falsely represented. The woman was a vagrant, a loose walker, a--"

"Is the order, written? Then bring the next case."

One flourish of a pen, and Mussumât Nuttia became a village-legacy; the only immediate result being that having sucked one end of her sugar-cane dry, she began methodically on the other. Half-an-hour afterwards, mounted on a white pony, with pink eyes and nose, and a dyed pink tail to match, she was on her way back to the cluster of reed huts dignified by the name of Bhâmaniwallah-khurd, or Little Bhâmaniwallah. Big Bhâmaniwallah lay a full mile to the northward, secured against midsummer floods by the high bank which stretched like a mud wall right across the Punjab plain, from the skirts of the hills to the great meeting of the five waters at Mittankote. But Little Bhâmaniwallah lay in the lap of the river, and so Bahâdur, and Boota, and

Jodha, and all the grave big-bearded Dogas who fed their herds of cattle on the low ground, and speculated in the cultivation of sandbanks, lived with their loins girded ready to shift house with the shifting of the river. That was why the huts were made of reeds; that was why the women of the village clanked about in solid silver jewelry, thus turning their persons into a secure savings-bank.

Mussumât Jewun, Bahâdur the head-man's wife, wore bracelets like manacles, and a perfect yoke of a necklet, as she patted out the dough cakes and expostulated shrilly at the introduction of a new mouth into the family, when Nuttia, fast asleep, was lifted from the pony and put down in the warm sand by the door.

"She belongs to the village," replied the elders, wagging their beards. "God knows what my Lords desire with the Harni brat, but if they ask for her, she must be forthcoming; ay! and fat. They like people to grow fat, even in their jail-*khanas*."

So Nuttia grew fat; she would have grown fat even had the fear of my Lords not been before the simple villagers' eyes, for despite her tender years, she was eminently fitted to take care of herself. She had an instinct as to the houses where good things were being prepared, and her chubby little hand, imperiously stretched out for a portion, was seldom sent away empty. Indeed, to tell the sober truth, Nuttia was not to be gainsaid as to her own hunger. "My stomach is bigger than *that*, grandmother!" she would say confidently, if the alms appeared to her inadequate, and neither cuffs nor neglect altered her conviction. She never cried, and the little fat hand silently demanding more, came back again and again after every rebuff, till she felt herself in a condition to seek some warm sunny corner, and curl round to sleep. She lived for the most part with the yelping, slouching village dogs, following them, as the nights grew chill, to the smouldering brick-kilns, where she fed the little dust-coloured puppies with anything above, or beneath, her own appetite.

As she outgrew childhood's vestment of curves and dimples, some one gave her an old rag of a petticoat. Perhaps the acquisition of clothes followed, as in ancient days, a fall from grace; certain it was that Nuttia in a garment was a far less estimable member of society than Nuttia without one. To begin with, it afforded opportunity for the display of many mortal sins. Vainglory in her own appearance, deceit in attempting to palm the solitary prize off on the world as a various and complete wardrobe, and dishonesty flagrant and unabashed; for once provided with a convenient receptacle for acquired trifles, Nuttia took to stealing as naturally as a puppy steals bones.

Then, once having recognised the pleasures of possession, she fought furiously against any infringement of her rights. A boy twice her size went yelling home to his parents on her first resort to brute force consequent on the discovery of a potsherd tied to her favourite puppy's tail. This victory proving unfortunate for the peace of the village, the head-men awoke to the necessity for training up their Legacy in the paths of virtue. So persistent pummelling was resorted to with the happiest effect. Nuttia stole and fought no more; she retired with dignity from a society which failed to appreciate her, and took to the wilderness instead. At earliest dawn, after her begging-round was over, she would wander out from the thorn-enclosures to the world--a kaleidoscope world where fields ripened golden crops one year, and the next brought the red-brown river wrinkling and dimpling in swift current; where big brand-new continents rose up before eager eyes, and clothed themselves in green herbs and creeping things innumerable; going no further, however, in the scale of creation, except when the pelicans hunched themselves together to doze away digestion, or a snub-nosed alligator took a slimy snooze on the extreme edge. If you wished to watch the birds, or the palm-squirrels, or the jerboa rats, you had to face northwards and skirt the high bank. So much of Dame Nature's ways, and a vast deal more, Mussumât Nuttia learnt ere the setting sun and hunger drove her back to the brick-kilns, and the never-failing meal of scraps--never-failing, because the Lords of the Universe liked people to be fat, and the head-men were responsible for their Legacy's condition.

So when an Assistant Magistrate--indefinite because of the constant changes which apparently form part of Western policy--included the Bhâmaniwallahs in his winter tour of inspection, a *punchaiyut*, or Council of Five, decided that it was the duty of the village to provide Nuttia with a veil, in case she should be haled to the Presence; and two yards of Manchester muslin were purchased from the reserve funds of the village, and handed over to the child with many wise saws on the general advisability of decency. Nuttia's delight for the first five minutes was exhilarating, and sent the head-men back to other duties with a glow of self-satisfaction on their solemn faces. Then she folded the veil up quite square, sat down on it, and meditated on the various uses to which it could be put.

The result may be told briefly. Two days afterwards the Assistant Magistrate, being a keen sportsman, was crawling on his stomach to a certain long low pool much frequented by teal and mallard. In the rear, gleaming white through the caper bushes, showed the usual cloud of witnesses filled with patient amazement at this unnecessary display of energy; yet for all that counting shrewdly on the good temper likely to result from good sport. So much so, that the sudden uprising into bad language of the *Huzoor* sent them forward, prodigal of apology; but the sight that met their eyes dried up the fountain of excuse. Nuttia, stark naked, stood knee-deep in the very centre of the pool, catching small fry with a bag-net ingeniously constructed out of the Manchester veil.

The *punchaiyut* sat again to agree that a child who could not only destroy the sport of the Guardian of the Poor, but could also drag the village honour through the mud, despite munificent inducements toward decency, must be possessed of a devil. So Nuttia was solemnly censed with red pepper and turmeric, until her yells and struggles were deemed sufficient to denote a casting out of the evil spirit. It is not in the slow-brained, calm-hearted peasant of India to be unkind to children, and so, when the function was over, Mussumât Jewun and the other deep-chested, shrill-voiced women comforted the victim with sweetmeats and the assurance that she would be ever so much better behaved in future.

Nuttia eyed them suspiciously, but ate her sweetmeats. This incident did not increase her confidence in humanity; on the other hand, the attitude of the brute creation was a sore disappointment to her. She might have had a heart instinct with greed of capture and sudden death, instead of that dim desire of companionship, for all the notice taken by the birds, and the squirrels, and the rats, of her outstretched handful of crumbs. She would sit for long hours, silent as a little bronze image set in the sunshiny sand; then in a rage, she would fling the crumbs at the timid creatures, and go home to the dogs and the buffaloes. They at least were not afraid of her; but then they were afraid of nobody, and Nuttia wanted something of her very own.

One day she found it. It was only an old bed-leg, but to the eye of faith an incarnation. For the leg of an Indian bed is not unlike a huge ninepin, and even a Western imagination can detect the embryo likeness between a ninepin and the human form divine. Man has a head, so has a ninepin; and if humanity is to wear petticoats one solid leg is quite as good as two--nay, better, since it stands more firmly. Arms were of course wanting, but the holes ready cut in the oval centre for the insertion of the bed-frame formed admirable sockets for two straight pieces of bamboo. At this stage Nuttia's treasure presented the appearance of a sign-post; but the passion of creation was on the child, and a few hours afterwards something comically, yet pitifully, like the Legacy herself stared back at her from that humble studio among the dirt-heaps--a shag of goat's hair glued on with prickly-pear juice, two lovely black eyes drawn with Mussumât Jewun's *khol* pencil, a few blue beads, a scanty petticoat and veil filched from the child's own garments.

Nuttia, inspired by the recollection of a tinsel-decorated bride in Big Bhâmaniwallah, called her creature Sirdar Begum on the spot. Then she hid her away in a tussock of tiger-grass beyond the thorn enclosures, and strove to go her evening rounds as though nothing had happened. Yet it was as if an angel from heaven had stepped down to take her by the hand. Henceforward she was never to be alone. All through the silent sunny days, as she watched the big black buffaloes grazing on the muddy flats--for Nuttia was advanced to the dignity of a herd-girl by this time--Sirdar Begum was with her as guide, counsellor, and friend. Whether the doll fared best with a heart's whole devotion poured out on her wooden head, or whether Nuttia's part in giving was more blessed, need not be considered; the result to both being a steady grin on a broad round face. But there was another result also--Nuttia began to develop a taste for pure virtue. Perhaps it was the necessity of posing before Sirdar Begum as infallible joined to the desire of keeping that young person's conduct up to heroic pitch, which caused the sudden rise in principle. At all events the Legacy's cattle became renowned as steady milkers, and the amount of butter she managed to twirl out of the sour curds satisfied even Mussumât Jewun's demands; whereupon the other herds looked at her askance, and muttered an Indian equivalent of seven devils. Then the necessity for amusing the doll led Nuttia into lingering round the little knots of story-tellers who sat far on into the night, discoursing of *jins* and *ghouls*, of faithful lovers, virtuous maidens, and the beauties of holiness. Down on the edge of the big stream, with the water sliding by, Nuttia rehearsed all these wonders to her adored bed-leg until, falling in love with righteousness, she took to telling the truth.

It was a fatal mistake in a cattle-lifting district, and Bhâmaniwallah-khurd lay in the very centre of that maze of tamarisk jungle, quicksand, and stream, which forms the cattle-thief's best refuge. So Bahâdur, and Jodha, and Boota, together with many another honest man, made a steady income by levying black-mail on those who sought safety within their boundaries; and this without in any way endangering their own reputations. All that had to be done was to obliterate strange tracks by sending their own droves in the right direction and thereafter to keep silence. And every baby in both Bhâmaniwallahs knew that hoof-prints were not a legitimate subject for conversation; all save Nuttia, and she--as luck would have it--was a herd-girl! They tried beating this sixth sense into her, but it was no use, and so whenever the silver-fringed turban, white cotton gloves, and clanking sword of the native Inspector of Police were expected in the village, they used to send the Legacy away to the back of beyont,--right away to the Luckimpura island maybe, to reach which she had to hold on to the biggest buffalo's tail, and thus, with Sirdar Begum tied securely to its horns, and her own little black head bobbing up and down in its wake, cross the narrow stream; after which the three would spread themselves out to dry on the hot sand. Nuttia took a great fancy to the island, and many a time when she might have driven the herds to nearer pastures, preferred the long low stretches of Luckimpura where a flush of green lingered even in the droughts of April.

But even there on one very hot day scarcely a blade was to be found, and Nuttia, careful of her beasts, and noting the lowness of the river, gathered them round her with the herdsman's cry, and drove them to the further brink, intending to take them across to a smaller island beyond. To her surprise they stood knee-deep in the water immovable, impassive, noses in air, with long curled horns lying on their necks.

The Legacy shaded her eyes to see more clearly. Nothing was to be seen but the swift shallow

stream, the level sand, and gleams of water stretching away to the horizon. Something had frightened them--but what? She gave up the puzzle, and with Sirdar Begum bolt upright before her sat on a snag, dangling her feet over the stream for the sake of the cool air which seemed to rise from the river.

The buffaloes roamed restlessly about, disturbed doubtless by the cloud of flies. The sun beat down ineffectually on the doll's fuzzy head, but it pierced Nuttia's thick pate, making her nod drowsily. Her voice recounting the thrilling adventures of brave Bhopalutchi died away into a sigh of sleep. So there was nothing left but the doll's wide unwinking eyes to keep watch over the world.

What was that? Something cold, icy-cold! Nuttia woke with a start. One brown heel had touched the water; she looked down at it, then swiftly around her. The buffaloes huddled by the ford had ceased to graze, and a quiver of light greeted her glance at the purple horizon. She sprang to her feet, and breaking off a root from the snag, held it to the dimpling water. The next instant a scared face looked at the horizon once more. The river was rising fast, rising as she had never seen it rise before. Yet in past years she had witnessed many a flood--floods that had swept away much of the arable land, and driven the villagers to till new soil thrown up nearer the high bank. Ay! and driven many of them to seek new homes beside the new fields, until Bhâmaniwallah-khurd had dwindled away to a few houses, a very few, and these on that hot April day deserted for the most part, since all the able-bodied men and women were away at the harvest. Even the herds had driven their cattle northwards, hoping to come in for some of the lively bustle of the fields. So there remained none save Nuttia on the Luckimpura island, and Mussumât Jewun with her new baby and the old hag who nursed her, in the reed huts. All this came to the girl's memory as the long low cry of the herd rose on the hot air, and with Sirdar Begum close clasped in her veil she drove the big buffalo Moti into the stream. How cold the water was--cold as the snows from which it came! The Legacy had not lived in the lap of the river for so long without learning somewhat of its ways. She knew of the frost-bound sources whence it flowed and of the disastrous floods which follow, beneath a cloudless sky, on unusual heat or unusual rain in those mountain fastnesses. The coming storm whose arch of cloud, shimmering with sheet-lightning had crept beyond the line of purple haze, was nothing; that was not the nightmare of the river-folk.

She stood for a moment when dry land was reached, hesitating whether to strike straight for the high bank or make for the village lying a mile distant. Some vague instinct of showing Sirdar Begum she was not afraid, made her choose the latter course, though most of the herd refused to follow her decision and broke away. She collected her few remaining favourites, and with cheerful cries plunged into the tamarisk jungle. Here, shut out from sight, save of the yielding bushes, her thoughts went far afield. What if the old *nullah* between the reed huts and the rising ground were to fill? What if the low levels between that rising ground and the high bank were to flood? And every one beyond in the yellow corn, except *Mai* Jewun and people who did not count,--babies, and old women, and the crippled girl in the far hut! Only herself and Sirdar Begum to be brave, for *Mai* Jewun was sick.

"Wake up! Wake up! *Mai* Jewun! the floods are out!" broke in on the new-born baby's wail as Nuttia's broad, scared face shut out the sunlight from the door.

"Go away, unlucky daughter of a bad mother," grumbled Jewun drowsily. "Dost wish to cast thy evil eye on my heart's delight? Go, I say."

"Yea! go!" grumbled the old nurse, cracking her fingers. "Sure some devil possesseth thee to tell truth or lies at thy own pleasure."

But the crippled girl spinning in the far hut had heard the flying feet, caught the excited cry, and now, crawling on her knees to the door, threw up her hands and shrieked aloud. The water stood ankle-deep among the tamarisk roots, and from its still pool tiny tongues licked their way along the dry sand.

"The flood! the flood!" The unavailing cry rang out as the women huddled together helplessly.

"*Mai* Jewun! there is time," came the Legacy's eager voice. "Put the baby down, and help. I saw them do it at Luckimpura that time they took the cattle over the deep stream, and Bahâdur beat me for seeing it. Quick! quick!"

Simple enough, yet in its very simplicity lay their only chance of escape. A string-woven bed buoyed up with the bundles of reeds cut ready for re-thatching, and on this frail raft four people--nay five! for first of all with jealous care Nuttia placed her beloved Sirdar Begum in safety, wrapping her up in the clothes she discarded in favour of free nakedness.

Quick! Quick! if the rising ground is to be gained and the levels beyond forded ere the water is too deep! Moti and a companion yoked by plough-ropes to the bed, wade knee-deep, hock-deep, into the stream, and now with the old, cheerful cry Nuttia, clinging to their tails and so guiding them, urges the beasts deeper still. The stream swirls past holding them with it, though they breast it bravely. A log, long stranded in some shallow, dances past, shaving the raft by an inch. Then an alligator, swept from its moorings and casting eyes on Nuttia's brown legs, makes the beasts plunge madly. A rope breaks,--the churned water sweeps over the women,--the end is

near,--when another frantic struggle leaves Moti alone to her task. The high childish voice calling on her favourite's courage rises again and again; but the others, cowed into silence, clutch together with hid faces, till a fresh plunge loosens their tongues once more. It is Moti finding foothold, and they are safe--so far.

"Quick! *Mai* Jewun," cries Nuttia, as her companions stand looking fearfully over the waste of shallows before them. She knows from the narrowness of the ridge they have reached that time is precious. "We must wade while we can, saving Moti for the streams. Take up the baby, and I--"

Her hands, busy on the bed, stilled themselves,--her face grew grey,--she turned on them like a fury. "Sirdar Begum! I put her there--where is Sirdar Begum?"

"That bed-leg!" shrilled the mother, tucking up her petticoats for greater freedom. "There was no room, and Heart's Delight was cold. Bah! wood floats."

"*Hull-lal-lal-a lalla la!*" The herdsman's cry was the only answer. Moti has faced the flood again, but this time with a light load, for the baby nestling amid Nuttia's clothes is the only occupant of the frail raft.

"My son! My son! Light of mine eyes! Core of my heart! Come back! Come back!"

But the little black head drifting down stream behind the big one never turned from its set purpose. Wood floated, and so might babies. Why not?

Why not, indeed! But, as a matter of fact, *Mai* Jewun was right. A dilapidated bed-leg was picked up on a sand-bank miles away when the floods subsided; and Moti joined the herd next day to chew the cud of her reflections contentedly. But the village Legacy and Heart's Delight remained somewhere seeking for something,--that something, doubtless, which had turned the bed-leg into Sirdar Begum.

FOOTNOTES

1: Head of a religious community.

Footnote 2: Name of Vishnu.

Footnote 3: Runjeet Singh never enlisted a man who, in counting up to thirty, said *puch-is* for five and twenty, but those who said *punj-is* were passed. In other words, the *patois* was made a test of whether the recruit belonged to the Trans-Sutlej tribes or the Cis-Sutlej.

Footnote 4: *Bunniah*, a merchant. *Bunniah-ji* signifies, as Shakespeare would have said, Sir Merchant.

Footnote 5: *Zemindar-ji*, Sir Squire.

Footnote 6: *Baba*, as a term of familiarity, is applied indifferently to young and old.

Footnote 7: *Purohit*, a spiritual teacher, a sage, answering in some respects to the Red Indian's medicine-man.

Footnote 8: Snakes are said to be attracted by the scent of blood, as they are undoubtedly by that of milk.

Footnote 9: With faith.

Footnote 10: Priest.

Footnote 11: Lit. Father. Baba is constantly used to a religious teacher.

Footnote 12: Lit. *rice and lentil*. A catchword for native food.

Footnote 13: A fact.

Footnote 14: The Sikh bible.

Footnote 15: Lit. stick-bearer, but applied always to wandering devotees who tramp the country living on alms.

Footnote 16: Roast chicken.

Footnote 17: The Sikh Commonwealth.

Footnote 18: A Mohammedan preacher.

Footnote 19: "God Almighty and his prophet Mohammed;" a brief confession of faith.

Footnote 20: The veil worn by secluded women.

Footnote 21: Unleavened cakes and mince-meat balls.

Footnote 22: The Creed.

Footnote 23: The Hindu Venus; Durga in another form.

Footnote 24: In India the cow will not give milk if separated from her calf.

Footnote 25: Stuffed.

Footnote 26: Literally *bâkee*, or extra; but *Barker sahib* is a perennial jest with both master and man, answering to the English Mr. Manners.

Footnote 27: Title of honour equivalent to our "mistress."

Footnote 28: Rose.

Footnote 29: The usual pilgrim's cry.

Footnote 30: A title of courtesy equivalent to our mistress.

END.

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