RABINDRANATH TAGORE

# RABINDRANATH TAGORE

By
MARJORIE SYKES

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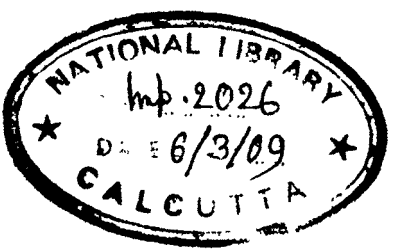


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The purpose of this book is a very modest one. It lays claim to no scholarship or originality. It seeks only to present Rabindranath Tagore as a man, a thinker, and a poet, in such a way that the young student or general reader, without any specialist knowledge, can appreciate something of his greatness. If it succeeds in interesting such readers, and awaking in some a desire to know more, its aim will have been fulfilled. Even so, it could not have been written without the generous assistance and encouragement of many friends at Santiniketan, to whom, and especially to Mr. Rathindranath Tagore and to Dr. Amiya Chakravarty, I wish to acknowledge my debt. Without their unfailing interest and constructive criticism, its faults would have been much greater than they are.

MARJORIE SYKES.

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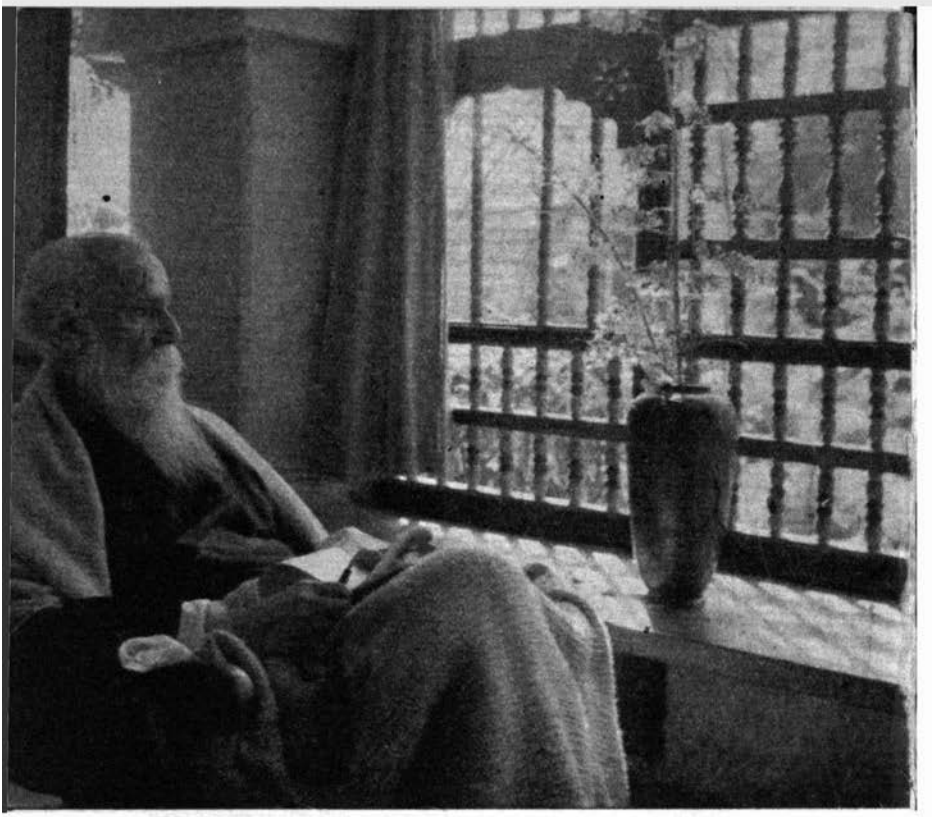


Rabindranath in the last year of his life

# CHAPTER I

## A CHILD OF THE EIGHTEEN-SIXTIES

THE Chitpore Road runs from south to north through the district of Jorasanko, in the centre of crowded Calcutta. Trams run down it clanging their bells, buses hoot, and heavy carts and lorries are always passing to and fro. The street is narrow and lined with shops—cloth shops, hat shops, sweetmeat shops; and people push and shout from morning till night on the littered pavements, and in the roadway. At one corner there are musical instruments for sale, and men are sitting in their shops making drums. At this point a narrow lane turns off the main street. At the end of the lane, about a hundred yards from the main road, is a pair of great iron gates, and beyond are the verandahs of a large old three-storeyed house. This is the home of the Tagore family. On May 7, 1861, a baby boy was born in this house and was named Rabindranath Tagore.

Rabindranath's father was Devendranath Tagore, a great and saintly man; people called him "Maharsi" (great saint) because of his goodness and devotion. Devendranath's father, Dwarkanath Tagore, had been known as "Prince" Dwarkanath on account of his wealth and the magnificent style in which he lived. When Rabindranath was born the family had lost a good deal of this wealth; but they were still very rich, and gave the children the best education. The family was a very large one. Rabindranath was the Maharsi's

fourteenth child and youngest son. Some of his elder brothers and sisters were already grown up and married while he was still a child. His two chief playmates were both a little older than he was. One was his next elder brother Somendra, and the other was his sister's son Satya. These three boys used to play and go to school together.

Rabindranath himself has described for us his memories of his childhood and school days. His book, *My Reminiscences,* describes his life until he was about twenty-five years old. Another book, *My Boyhood Days,* ends with his first journey to England at the age of seventeen, but tells many new anecdotes about his childhood. *The Crescent Moon,* a book of poems about children, reflects some of his own early memories. From all these we can build up in our minds a picture of the little boy who was to become one of India's greatest men.

The children were brought up very simply and had no unnecessary toys or possessions. The Maharsi did not like luxury, especially for children. Later on Rabindranath saw the wisdom of his father's rule, and always declared that it was a good thing for them that they had so little. When children have too many ready-made toys, he said, their natural powers of imagination and invention have no chance to grow. They lose the greatest joy of play, the joy of creation ; and they grow tired very quickly of most of the toys invented for them by other people. But the little Tagores had to invent their own playthings and depend on their own imagination for amusement, and the simple things they had were used and enjoyed to the full. In *The Crescent Moon* there is a poem called

'Playthings' where Rabindranath expresses the difference between the child and the man:

"Child, how happy you are sitting in the dust,
playing with a broken twig all the morning.
I smile at your play with that little bit of a broken twig . . .
Child, I have forgotten the art of being absorbed in sticks and mud pies.
I seek out costly playthings, and gather lumps of gold and silver.
With whatever you find you create your glad games;
I spend both my time and my strength over things I never can obtain."

The life of the Tagore children was in some ways a very narrow one. They were not allowed to go beyond the great gates, and they saw almost nothing of the outside world. Jorasanko was in the centre of the city then, as it is now, and the little boys used to envy the servants who could go freely in and out, among the sights and sounds and excitements of the streets. There were no trams or buses then. Rich men used to have private carriages, with splendid horses, and coachmen in smart uniforms. The children could hear the clatter and rattle as these carriages dashed along the Chitpore Road, and the coachmen cracked their whips and shouted to clear the way. People who were not so rich went to their work in the city in palanquins, or joined in groups of four or five to hire a carriage, which was known as a "share-carriage". The cries of hawkers also reached the children's ears; their calls of "*Bel*-flowers" or "green mangoes" fascinated the little Rabindranath, whose imagination wove round them pictures of some distant

fairyland of beauty. There was one corner of the verandah from which he could see, over the garden wall, the corner of a *bustee*.* He spent hours in watching the people who lived there, as they went about their daily occupations, and in making up stories about them. Everything which lay outside the walls of home was for him an unknown world, full of romance and adventure.

Even inside the walls of home there were two different worlds, the world of the grown-ups and the world of the children. There were no cinemas or public entertainments then, no football or cricket or recreation clubs. People did not go out to find amusement as they do now; they entertained themselves and their friends in their own homes instead. In the brilliant and gifted family of the Tagores, the world of the grown-ups was an exceedingly interesting one; all kinds of activities and amusements were in full swing. But in his childhood and schooldays Rabindranath knew almost nothing of this grown-up world. As he expressed it later, only the far-flung spray of the fountain of its joyous activity ever reached the children. "Run away and play," ordered the big brothers and cousins, when eager curiosity led them to creep too near. The children went and played. "But for proper play," Rabindranath explains, "noise is necessary." Very soon the grown-ups shouted at them to be quiet!

In Rabindranath's memories of the children's world at Jorasanko, the servants who looked after them, both men and women, played a large part. He has left us reminiscences of them, and of the boyish activities

* The name given to the crowded slum quarters of Calcutta.

and interests which he shared with his brother and nephew ; of the more intimate hours with his mother ; and, what is now most interesting of all, of the solitary games and fancies of the hours when he was left alone. It was in many ways a lonely childhood, for Somendra and Satya were two years older than Rabi, and two years is a long time for children ; the "big man" of six feels himself infinitely superior to the "baby" of four! Looking back on those days of the eighteen-sixties through the eyes of the poet, we see one little revealing scene after another. Their chronological order is lost, but their interest remains.

Three little boys stand before the visiting tailor. It is a great and rare occasion—they are to have new clothes. "Plenty of pockets, lots of pockets," they insist, as small boys in every country always do. Very soon the pockets will be full of boyish treasures . . . . The children are sent back to their own part of the house in high spirits ; they rollick along, kicking their sandals ahead of them, running to catch them up, kicking again. Who says sandals are intended to be *worn*?

* * * *

Three little boys, absorbed and happy, squat on the floor in a corner of their school-room. Earth and stones are scattered about, for they are building a mountain. A mountain is a wonderful thing in the eyes of these Calcutta children, whose everyday world is so flat. And this is a magnificent mountain with real rocks! . . . Is that *dada** coming? Well, never mind, surely he will see how fine it is . . . "What a

* dada = elder brother.

dirty mess you children are making? Where did you get those stones?—from my rockery garden? They must be put back at once!" . . . No, grown-ups *never* seem to understand.

* * * *

Brajeswar is the name of the lean old Brahmin servant; his special work is to look after the children. Brajeswar is bathing in the tank, and picking his way back to the house afterwards as if the very garden might pollute him! He behaves as if even the world that God made is unclean! Brajeswar is serving the children's food with a niggardly hand. How reluctant he is to offer them a second helping, how pleased when they refuse it! For they all know Brajeswar's weakness for *luchis** and milk, and they are too shy to deprive him of his anticipated feast by eating too much themselves. And Rabi never did like milk very much!

* * * *

Sometimes they spend evenings in the servants' room, when the day's work is done. One dim lamp hangs in the centre, for there is no electric light in the eighteen-sixties, nor even a kerosene lantern. (How brilliant the kerosene lanterns seemed, when they first came into use!) Stories are passed from mouth to mouth. Sometimes there are recitations from the *Ramayana,* and the children creep in to listen. There is a village version which is a special favourite, with jolly, jingling rhymes. The stories are short, and there is time to finish one before

* fried pancakes.

bed-time. Sometimes there are tales of dacoits, wonderful and terrifying men, men not of long ago but of the present, whom one might even meet one day! Some dacoits are renowned for their courage, skill, and chivalry towards women; their exploits are told and retold, losing nothing in the telling. Rabi is all ears.

Other evenings are passed in Mother's room, curled up on her divan, while Mother or Auntie tells fairy stories . . . the prince who travels on the endless plain . . . the seven seas of fairyland.

* * * *

A little boy stands half-frightened inside a circle drawn with chalk on the verandah. The servant-boy who drew it says that it is a magic circle, like the circle which Lakshmana drew round Sita in the story. If one steps outside it, terrible things might happen, so he says. And Rabi believes him, and is afraid to disobey. He stays there till he is set free, watching the comings and goings below in the courtyard—the people going to bathe in the tank, the ducks, the banyan-tree with its slowly-changing shadow. How dark the shadows are in its twisted roots! What secrets must be hiding there!

* * * *

A lonely child is exploring the remote corners of the roomy old house, with his mind full of ghosts and demons. There are dark, mysterious rooms on the ground floor where great earthenware vessels hold the drinking-water—enough for a whole year. For there are no pipes or taps in the house; the drinking water is carried up from the Ganges in February, when

the river is clear, and stored here. These dark rooms are full of demons, of course; demons with eyes in their breasts, and big ears like winnowing-fans. So are some of the trees; didn't one of the maidservants actually *see* the demon one day, in that big tree by the corner of the house?

* * * *

On the ground floor is Father's office; little Rabi sits there on the knee of old Kailash, the clerk. Kailash is telling him stories. The old man has a great gift for impromptu doggerel, and the rhymed lines go on and on. These are the most exciting stories of all, for Rabi himself is the hero. It is he who fights the dacoits and rescues the beautiful princesses. A few years later, the kindly, indulgent office clerks were to be the first to encourage the budding writer by the gift of an exercise book from their stores.

* * * *

There were solitary games and enterprises too, such as other children have. In one corner of the verandah a pile of dust had accumulated. Here was a chance of a garden! With infinite care, Rabi planted a custard-apple seed, and watered it patiently every day, watching eagerly for the leaves. The garden ended when the floor was swept more carefully, and dust and seed together disappeared under the broom. He played at school; he was the teacher; the wooden railings of the verandah were his pupils. And for him, as for so many other children, the symbol of the teacher was the stick, and the naughty and luckless railings were scolded and beaten unmercifully. Be-

sides these games of "real life" there was the *pujah* game. He had a wooden toy lion, and when he heard stories of ancient horse sacrifices, he decided that a lion sacrifice would be an even grander thing. He was the priest, with a little stick for the sacrificial knife. He made up a *mantra* for the sacrifice from scraps of nursery rhymes, like this:

> Liony, liony, off with your head!
> Liony, liony, now you are dead!

He would shout this at the top of his voice and then give the wooden lion a great whack with his stick.

Very soon the little Rabindranath began to tell himself stories of his own. His imagination took hold of the fairy tales, the dacoity stories, the *Ramayana*, the "true" stories of tiger-hunting which sometimes came his way, and wove them into new patterns for his own amusement. The children's world at Jorasanko might seem dull and ordinary, but Rabi began to live for hours at a time in a private world of glorious adventure. In the corner of one of the verandahs stood an old, worn-out palanquin which was no longer used. Once it had been a magnificent thing, with painted sides and heavy poles, needing at least eight bearers for each pole. Now it was shabby and neglected, and it became the little boy's private playground. He would climb inside and shut the door, and sit there hidden from all the world. Inside the palanquin was a land of endless adventure. He was no longer a lonely child of no importance, but a master and a prince, riding on wonderful journeys through forest and desert, or sailing a peacock boat on magic rivers. The poem called 'The Hero' in

*The Crescent Moon* is a description of one of these palanquin adventures.

Even in early childhood, Rabindranath had a deep feeling for beauty, which he could not then express in words. Every morning as soon as he woke up, he used to run out into the garden in the inner courtyard, to enjoy the cool scents which rushed to meet him, and the touch of the dewy grass and leaves. He had a special love for rain, for the rainy season, and for poems about rain. There were two little jingling sentences in his first Bengali primer which so touched his love of rain and love of rhythm that he remembered them to the end of his life. One was, "The rain patters, the leaf quivers". The other was, "The rain falls pit-a-pat, the tide comes up the river". And even in these early days, he had a strong sense not only of the beauty of the world, but also of its mystery. The dark depths of the earth, and the infinite distances of the sky, filled him with awe and wonder. When the awnings were to be put up in the courtyard for some festival, and men came to dig holes for the posts, he was always very excited. Surely, he thought, if they would only dig just a little deeper, they would uncover most wonderful secrets. From early childhood he had a special love for the midday hours, when the city grew quiet, and the household went to rest. Then, whenever he could, he would slip away from the servants, and hide himself in some little room at the top of the house, where he could see the blue spaces of the sky, and hear the kite calling from the far heights.

## CHAPTER II

## SCHOOL DAYS

At last there came a day when Somendra and Satya had to go to school. Rabi was two years younger, and his elders thought that he should stay at home for some time longer. But Rabi wanted to go to school, because to go to school meant to go out into the big, free, outside world. He thought it would be a way of escape from his imprisonment in the house. People told him plainly that he would not enjoy it as much as he expected. "You are crying to go to school now," said one; "you will soon cry much more to stay at home!" Rabi took no notice. He cried and pleaded so much that in the end he was allowed to go to school with his playmates. He soon found that he had made a mistake. School was another prison, much more dreary than home, and he named it his "Andamans", when he looked back on those days.

No one then tried to make school interesting or pleasant for children. Hard benches, and dull, prison-like walls shut them in from ten to four. When a boy could not repeat his lesson, he had to stand on a bench with his arms stretched out and the palms of his hands turned upwards. A pile of slates was then placed on each hand, and there he had to stay till the master allowed him to come down. "The master", says Rabindranath, "looked like a cane incarnate". The other boys in the school were no more likeable than the master. Most of them were so disgusting in their habits and conversation that the little Tagores could

not make friends with them. They did not stay long at this school, but were moved to another one, and later to a third.

School-days were busy days for Rabindranath, who was then about nine or ten years old. During these years, his father was often away from home, and his third brother Hemendranath, who was about twenty-five years old, took charge of the children's education. He was determined that they should be well taught. Every day except Sunday was filled with study from morning till night. Lessons began at dawn, winter and summer. Shivering with cold in winter, Rabindranath went out as soon as it was light for his daily wrestling practice in a corner of the compound. When his lesson was over he came in and dressed. At seven o'clock a private tutor came to begin the morning's work. The three boys worked together, and an older sister also joined them. In those days it was the common practice in Bengal for everything to be taught in English. Hemendranath, however, did not approve of this, and by his orders the children were taught all their subjects in Bengali. When he grew up, Rabindranath felt very grateful to his brother for this wise decision. Learning, he said, is like eating; if the first mouthful is pleasant to the taste, the boy continues to eat with a good appetite; but if the first mouthfuls are wrapped in the indigestible cover of a foreign language, the boy's appetite is spoiled.

From seven to nine they worked at Bengali literature, mathematics, anatomy, and many other subjects. They had a special tutor for elementary science, in which Rabindranath was very much interested. The tutor showed them all kinds of experiments with

common objects, and Rabi was very disappointed if for any reason he could not come on his regular day. At nine o'clock they had a bath and a meal, and then they went to school until four. Even then the day's work was not over. As soon as they returned from school came an hour of gymnastics, and then drawing. After supper, when the feeble lamp was lit, came the English master. It is not surprising that the sleepy little boy hated English, and longed for some free time! The "reader" had a black cover; it was torn and shabby. At the beginning of each new lesson, lists of new words were printed in heavy type, with accent-marks above them. How he hated them! They looked like soldiers with fixed bayonets! At nine o'clock the day was over at last, and he ran to his mother's room and begged for a story. The story would begin, but he was always asleep long before it was over.

Rabindranath often got tired of such a heavy programme, and used to try hard to find ways of getting a holiday. Unfortunately, the tutor was a very strong young man, who was never sick, and who never failed to come for his lessons, even on the wettest and stormiest day. If the pupil wanted a holiday, he must be sick himself! So Rabi tried hard to catch cold or fever, but found it very difficult. He lay out on the roof in the heavy dew, but he never caught fever. He got his clothes wet through in the rain, but he never caught cold. He never had measles or chicken-pox, or any such children's disease. As he could not escape his lessons in this way, he would sometimes tell his mother that he had a stomach-ache. She would smile and send a message to the tutor not to come, but she knew perfectly well the reason for the stomach-

ache, and she did not give her son any other medicine! Rabindranath used to say later that this perfect health must have been due to Brajeswar, who gave them such simple food in such moderate quantities. "Mothers who want their sons to be healthy should engage a servant like Brajeswar", he says. "He would save them not only food bills but doctor's bills also!"

Here is a memory of those days told in Rabindranath's own words in his short story 'Once there was a King'.

"I remember vividly that evening in Calcutta when the fairy story began. The rain and the storm had been incessant. The whole of the city was flooded. The water was knee-deep in our lane. I had a straining hope, which was almost a certainty, that my tutor would be prevented from coming that evening. I sat on the stool in the far corner of the verandah looking down on the lane, with a heart beating faster and faster. Every minute I kept my eye on the rain, and when it began to diminish I prayed with all my might: 'Please God send some more rain till half-past seven is over.' For I was quite ready to believe that there was no other need for rain except to protect one helpless boy one evening in one corner of Calcutta from the deadly clutches of his tutor.

"If not in answer to my prayer, at any rate according to some grosser law of nature, the rain did not give up.

"But alas! nor did my teacher.

"Exactly to the minute, in the bend of the lane, I saw his approaching umbrella. The great bubble of hope burst in my breast, and my heart collapsed. Truly, if there is a punishment to fit the crime after

death, then my tutor will be born again as me, and I shall be born as my tutor.

"A soon as I saw his umbrella I ran as hard as I could to my mother's room. My mother and my grandmother were sitting opposite one another playing cards by the light of a lamp. I ran into the room, and flung myself on the bed beside my mother and said:

" 'Mother, the tutor has come, and I have such a bad headache; couldn't I have no lessons today?'

"I hope no child of immature age will be allowed to read this story, for what I did was dreadfully bad, and I received no punishment whatever. On the contrary, my wickedness was crowned with success.

"My mother said to me 'All right', and turning to the servant added, 'Tell the tutor that he can go back home'.

"It was perfectly plain that she didn't think my illness very serious, as she went on with her game as before and took no further notice. And I also, burying my head in the pillow, laughed to my heart's content. We perfectly understood one another, my mother and I."

Rabindranath tells several amusing stories of his school-days. All the members of the family had very fair complexions; their schoolmates used to tease them by saying that all the new-born babies in the family were bathed in wine to make them look like Europeans. Rabi's eldest sister was one of the first Indian girls to go to school in Calcutta, and one day, while she was on her way there in her palanquin, she was stopped by the police. They thought she must be an English girl who had been kidnapped!

The boys had an older schoolmate who used to

boast at school about his knowledge of magic. He described to them all kinds of marvellous experiments which he said he had done. Rabindranath was anxious to try these for himself to see if what he said was really true, but usually he could not get the necessary materials. One day, however, the magician told him that if any seed were to be dipped in the juice of a certain cactus, and dried, twenty-one times, it would sprout and bear fruit within an hour! Here at last was something which could be tested! Rabi at once got some of the cactus juice from the gardener, and set to work dipping and drying a mango stone. Needless to say, he failed to get any mangoes.

Rabi was too much interested in his mango stone to notice what Satya and the magician were doing in the meantime. They were talking earnestly, and looking occasionally in his direction. Next day at school the magician said that he wanted to make a scientific observation, and asked each boy in turn to jump off a bench, while he watched them carefully. They all jumped, Rabi among them. The magician shook his head wisely and said "Ah!". A few days later he invited Satya and Rabi to his home, and they were given permission to go. A number of people were sitting there, and they asked Rabi to sing. All admired his sweet voice. Then refreshments were brought. Rabi felt very shy of eating before so many strangers, and besides, thanks to Brajeswar, he was never greedy for food, so he ate only very little. Next day, to his surprise, he received a letter from the magician. When he opened it he was still more surprised, for it was a love letter! Then Satya explained the trick he had played. While the younger boy was busy with the mango stone, Satya had told the

Rabindranath (left) at the age of 9

magician, as a great secret, that Rabi was really a girl. She was dressed in boy's clothes, he said, in order to get her a better education. When the boys jumped off the bench, Rabi had jumped with his left foot first, which was said to be a thing that only girls do. In addition he had a sweet, childish voice, a small appetite, and a fair complexion. The proof was complete! The magician was convinced that Satya had told him the truth.

During these school years Rabindranath began to write verses, in his large, childish hand writing. The exercise book which the good-natured clerks had given him was soon filled. He was not in the least shy about his verses, and used to read them aloud to anyone in the house who was willing to listen. He felt sure that "proper" poetry ought to use grand, high-sounding words and when one day he found in an old book the word *dwirepha,* he was delighted. This is a word which is never used nowadays. It meant "a bee". The word immediately found its way into a poem, and the poem was read out to a friend of the family. "Very nice," said he, smiling, "but pray what is a *dwirepha*?" The young poet felt quite angry that the word of which he was so proud should be laughed at like this. He also felt quite sure, at eleven years old, that sorrow was a better subject for poetry than happiness ; he used to write verses about "the sorrows of the world", even though he really knew nothing about them. This amused his father very much ; but in spite of his amusement Devendranath no doubt often wondered whether his little son's gift for writing would prove to be a really great one or not.

The family smiled, but they were interested and

pleased. At school it was different. The headmaster heard that the boy could write, and one day he called him and ordered him to write a poem. The master chose the subject; it was to be a moral poem. Rabindranath obediently brought the poem the next day, and was told to read it in front of the senior class. He did so, but the boys would not believe that their little school fellow had written it. They said he must have stolen it from a book. "The only praiseworthy thing about that moral poem," writes Rabindranath, in his *Reminiscences,* "was that it soon got lost. Its moral effect on that class was far from encouraging . . . Most of them were certain that it was not my own composition. One said he could produce the book from which it was copied, but was not pressed to do so—the process of proving is such a nuisance to those who want to believe."

Rabindranath often found these busy school-days very dull, but now and again something interesting happened to interrupt them. His grown-up brothers were very much interested in acting, and they used to arrange private performances in which they and their friends took part. The children, however, were not allowed to see them. Rabi and the other little ones could only stand on a distant verandah watching the guests and trying to hear what was going on. But once a professional company was giving the drama of 'Nala and Damayanti' in the outer courtyard, and this time the children were told that they might come. It did not begin until very late, and they were sent to bed at the usual time; the grown-ups promised that they would wake them when it was time to go down. Rabi was very excited, and went to bed very unwillingly, for he did not believe these grown-up

promises! However, all went well, and they went down into the brightly-lit courtyard. Rabi went and sat with his big brothers, who gave him little sums of money to throw on the stage and reward the actors at the best parts of the play. How wonderful it all was! But the play was very long, and long before the end he was fast asleep again and had to be carried away to bed.

On another great and memorable day there was an exhibition of dacoity tricks in the courtyard. Rabi had often listened to the servants' stories of the great strength and skill of the dacoits. Now he saw these wild-looking men with his own eyes. They jumped on poles up to the second storey, walked on stilts, tossed heavy weights, and performed wonderful athletic feats.

Another kind of interest was brought into his life by the coming of a new sister-in-law into the house. She soon won the heart of her younger brother-in-law by inviting him to "dolls' weddings". For these feasts she cooked all kinds of tasty food, and she liked to see the boy's enjoyment of it. It was very different from the food provided by Brajeswar! The two had a merry time together, teasing and playing practical jokes upon each other. The girl teasingly made herself his chief critic. She would never admit that there was anything to admire, either in his personal appearance or in his writings. "At any rate", wrote the poet in later years, "she kept me from growing proud."

Last, but not least in importance, was the day when the children were taken to stay in a "garden house" by the side of the Ganges. For the first time they saw the beauty of the great river, with its boats and its tree-clad banks. In those days the endless lines

of smoking factories did not exist. The beauty of the water and the trees made a great impression on Rabindranath. He felt like a caged bird which had been set free. He and the other boys set out joyfully to explore the neighbouring village, but alas! they met their elders in the road and were sent back in disgrace to their own garden. They found that their freedom was not yet complete. "We were out of the cage," writes Rabindranath, "but we were still chained to the perch."

## CHAPTER III

## THE TRAINING OF A POET

WHEN Rabindranath was nearly twelve years old, Somendra, Satya and he were invested with the Brahminical sacred thread. The thread is put on at a solemn ceremony, which Maharsi Devendranath himself conducted. The putting on of the sacred thread is a very important event in Hindu religious life, and in preparation for it the three boys had to spend three days in retirement. The three days were supposed to be a serious time of prayer; but it is not surprising that three lively boys left alone together for so long, found plenty of opportunities for playing tricks on each other and on the servants. During these days they were given specially prepared food. Rabindranath had delicious memories of that food—it was so different from their ordinary diet! Nevertheless, for Rabindranath the ceremony meant much more than good food and michief He felt deeply the solemnity of the occasion, and the *Gayatri mantra* made a very great impression on him. He repeated it often and reverently, and tried to fix his mind on its deep meanings. These are the words which meant so much to him:

> "Let me contemplate the adorable splendour of Him who created the earth, the air, and the starry spheres, and sends the power of comprehension within our minds."

After the ceremony had been completed, the Maharsi said to his son, "How would you like to go

away with me and visit Bolpur and the Himalayas?" Would he like it? How the boy's eyes shone with happy excitement at the thought! In a very few days he was getting into the carriage with his father to go to the station. He had never been in a railway train before.

While Rabindranath was still a baby, Devendranath had bought some land two miles from the village of Bolpur, and built a house to which he could go for a time of quiet and prayer whenever he pleased. This *ashrama* was named Santiniketan, the "Home of Peace". Satya had visited Santiniketan already, and he told Rabi all sorts of tall stories about the terrible dangers of railway journeys, and the impossible wonders of Santiniketan itself. With his mind full of Satya's stories, Rabi reached the railway station in great excitement and expectation, and he was almost disappointed to find how safely and smoothly the train ran! But he was not disappointed in Santiniketan. Here at last he could wander about and explore just as he pleased. Here at last there was no cage and no chain. The bird was free! His wise father took an interest in all his doings, listened to his happy chatter, and gave him little duties which he eagerly carried out.

Rabindranath had always held his father in great reverence. During his childhood the Maharsi was rarely at home, but from time to time he visited the house and stayed there for a short period. One of the boy's earliest memories was of how his father sat at prayer in the early dawn, very still and quiet in his white garments. At Santiniketan were two trees growing near together, and overlooking a wide, open plain. Under these trees the Maharsi used to sit each

day for his morning meditation. Many years later his son had a memorial stone set up on this spot, where the ancient trees still stand. On the stone were carved the beautiful words in which the Maharsi expressed what God meant to him:

HE IS
the Repose of my life,
the Joy of my mind,
the Peace of my spirit.

Rabindranath was very greatly influenced by his father's life and example, and the months which he spent with him in this summer of 1873 were one of the landmarks of his life.

From Santiniketan father and son went on to Amritsar, where there is a very famous Sikh temple. Devendranath took his son with him to the Sikh temple for worship. The Sikhs were greatly surprised and pleased that a stranger from Bengal should know some of their hymns and wish to share their worship. Soon Devendranath had many friends. Rabindranath learned from his father's example to respect the noble teachings of religions other than his own; he saw for himself how men of different creeds can unite in worship and share with each other whatever is good and true in their faiths.

After this they settled down for four months at Dalhousie in the Himalayas. The steep slopes were covered with pine woods, and Rabindranath was free to roam about in them as much as he wished. Every morning father and son started out together for a walk, but the boy was not yet strong enough to keep up with Devendranath for long, or to walk as far as he

did. After a time he would leave him and return home by his own route. The father continued to train his son in the simple and strenuous life in which he believed. Even in the climate of Dalhousie, where the water was icy cold, he insisted that the boy should have cold baths as he did at home, and would not allow any heating of the water. Rabindranath learned this lesson so well that, when he went to England, he took cold baths regularly there too, even in the coldest weather.

During their stay at Dalhousie, Devendranath gave his son regular lessons in English and Sanskrit, and encouraged him to read for himself. It was at this time that he first read Kalidas' great poem *Megha-duta* (The Cloud Messenger). *Megha-duta* has beautiful pictures of the scenery of rural India, magnificent descriptions of the rainy season and of the splendour of ancient courts and palaces. Rabindranath could not then understand its full meaning and beauty, but he loved the glorious music of the words. The lovely similes and descriptions filled his mind and excited his imagination. In later years he returned to Kalidas again and again, with the deepest affection and admiration. He read a great deal more also ; in fact, the months at Dalhousie seem to have awakened to full conscious his passion for literature.

At night, after it grew dark, Rabindranath sat with his father under the stars, and his father showed him the planets and constellations, and talked to him about simple astronomy. Even when he was a tiny child the sky had attracted him, and he had wondered at the mystery of its remote spaces. Now he heard something of the marvellous things which have been discovered in the depths of space. From that time

on he took an unfailing interest in astronomy. For him it was not a science of figures and calculations, but something full of poetry and mystery. Many of his poems are filled with joy at the thought of the magnificent universe of which we are a part. Towards the end of his life he wrote a book on astronomy, which gives in very simple language a picture of the whole glorious world of stars, and includes the latest discoveries of science. Devendranath also inspired his son with an interest in botany, and throughout his life Rabindranath remained a keen observer of the life of the flowers and trees of which he wrote with such deep affection.

Devendranath wished his children to learn to think for themselves, not to accept other men's ideas without consideration. When Rabindranath differed from his father and argued with him, Devendranath never scolded him. He listened patiently to the boy's ideas, and then explained to him carefully where he was mistaken. In this way Rabi could follow his reasoning and understand his conclusions. Devendranath never asked him to agree with any statement because his father said so, but because he himself could see that it was true. "He wanted us to *love* Truth with our whole hearts," writes Rabindranath. His elder brothers also treated him with the same respect and patience, so that the boy was not afraid to express his own opinions, and learned from them to think clearly and honestly about life.

When Rabindranath came back to Calcutta he was once more sent to school. This time he went to St. Xavier's College. He liked both boys and masters much better than at his previous schools. There was one master in particular, Father de Peneranda, who

made a great impression on him. The peace of his spirit shone through his face, and even when he was busy in outward tasks, his soul seemed to be always in inward prayer. Another master soon realised that Rabindranath was not likely to benefit much by the ordinary school course, and gave him special work to do. He made him translate Shakespeare's *Macbeth* into Bengali, and do a good deal of reading in classical literature. The boy made good progress with this, but school seemed to him more of a prison than ever, when he remembered the freedom of study and life which he had enjoyed at Dalhousie. He became an expert in playing truant. Finally, his elder brothers came to the conclusion that, with freedom and the opportunity to read as he pleased, their youngest brother would be quite capable of educating himself. They decided to allow him to stay at home. Rabindranath's school-days came to an end, this time for ever.

From his thirteenth to his seventeenth year, Rabindranath lived in the grown-up world of Jorasanko, taking more and more part in its life and interests. His elder brothers had gathered round them a brilliant intellectual and artistic circle, and life in that household was in itself a liberal education. The eldest brother Dwijendranath, a serious, vigorous thinker, had a gift for writing and very wide interests. All kinds of people used to visit his rooms. At one time they discussed philosophy, and Dwijendranath wrote long articles on philosophical subjects, which Rabindranath found "very difficult to understand". At another period his interest was in mathematics. From time to time he composed poetry. Pages and pages of his writings would be scattered about the

house. When a poem was finished, he would invite his family and friends to hear him read it. In such moods of eager enthusiasm he loved to have them with him and his hearty laughter could be heard all over the house. He was also a very good swimmer and used to swim in the Ganges whenever he had the chance to do so. His younger brothers began to teach themselves in the tank at home, and he helped and encouraged them. Rabindranath became a good strong swimmer himself.

The fifth brother, Jyotirindranath, was Rabindranath's special friend and companion during these years. He was twelve years older than the poet, and he was a brave reformer of social customs which seemed to him wrong or foolish. It was his wife who had invited Rabindranath to dolls' weddings when they were smaller. She did not keep *purdah,* which was very bold and unusual in Bengal in those days.

Rabindranath admired his courage and freedom in social experiments, but the most important link in their friendship was that they both loved music and drama. Jyoti had a piano in his room, and he used to spend hours sitting at it and composing tunes in new styles. Rabindranath sat by his side and composed words to fit the tunes, so that they could be remembered more easily. This was excellent practice for a future poet and writer of songs. Every evening the two brothers and Jyoti's wife would sit on the terrace and Jyoti would play the violin while Rabindranath sang. Musical friends often came in to spend the evening with them too.

Rabindranath had known and loved one of these men since childhood. His name was Srikantha Babu ; he was a bald, smiling, gentle man whose heart over-

flowed with music and kindliness. Srikantha Babu used to sing for the pure joy of singing, while the child listened and joined in the chorus and so picked up the songs. He could never say a hard or unkind word, even when others tried to hurt him. Another musician, who felt jealous of him, once got drunk and said some very insulting things about him. When Devendranath heard about it, he wanted to turn this man out of the house. But Srikantha Babu himself begged that he might be forgiven. "It was not he, it was the liquor," he said.

Another music-loving friend was Akshay Chaudhuri. He had no voice, and he knew it, but that did not prevent him from singing! He used to beat time to his song with anything which would make a noise, even with an exercise book. One day when Rabindranath was about sixteen, Akshay Chaudhuri told him the story of the English boy-poet, Chatterton. When Chatterton was sixteen years of age (like Rabindranath), he had written some poems in imitation of ancient English poetry. He published them as genuine ancient poems which had recently been discovered in old manuscripts, and the scholars and experts were for some time quite deceived. Rabindranath thought that it would be fun to play the same trick in Bengali. He wrote a series of poems in which he imitated the style of the Maithili Vaishnava poets of the Middle Ages. He signed them "Bhanu Simha" and said that they had been found while going through some old books in a library. The imitations were so good that when they were published many people really believed that "Bhanu Simha" was a genuine Maithili poet. It is said that one scholar even

wrote a thesis on the newly-discovered works for his Ph.D. degree in a German University!

People in educated families in Calcutta were then very much interested in the new Bengali literature that was being written in their own time. The most famous writer was the great novelist, Bankim Chandra Chatterji. He was publishing many of his stories by instalments in a magazine called *Bangadarsan*. The next instalment was looked forward to with such interest that when a new number of *Bangadarsan* arrived, the members of the Tagore family used to compete keenly for the privilege of reading it first. Luckily for Rabindranath, he could read aloud very well, and the ladies of the family liked to hear him read better than to read for themselves; so he would take the book and read out the story to a circle of excited listeners.

A little later on, Jyotirindranath decided that he too would start a Bengali literary magazine. He called it *Bharati,* and persuaded his eldest brother Dwijendranath to be the editor. Rabindranath quickly became a regular writer of poems and stories for this magazine. He also became a member of the committee which managed it, though he was only sixteen years old.

The "Bhanu Simha" poems were first published in *Bharati.* Besides poems and stories, he also wrote articles of many kinds; for example, he wrote about European literature and some of the great poets of Italy. This fact shows clearly that the plan of letting him study at home and follow his own tastes had been very successful. He was reading widely and his knowledge of the world was extending rapidly.

Jyotirindra also wrote dramas, and got them

acted in the courtyard of the Jorasanko house. Rabindranath first took part in these dramas when he was about sixteen. He was a fine actor, both in comic parts and in serious ones. All through his life he loved to act, and he often took important parts in his own plays. He not only acted himself, but he taught his young schoolboys at Santiniketan to act also. It was his brother Jyotirindranath who first helped him with this part of his work.

Before this time, when he was about fourteen years old, Rabindranath suffered his first great sorrow. His mother, who had been sick for some time, died. Her death gave him no fear, for her dead face seemed to him to be full of peace and happiness; but he felt very lonely when her body had been carried away through the great gates and he knew that she could never come back. Fortunately there were others who could give him friendship and affection, especially his sister, Swarna Kumari, and his young sister-in-law. Swarna Kumari, who herself became a well-known writer, always befriended and encouraged him, and had his affectionate devotion in return.

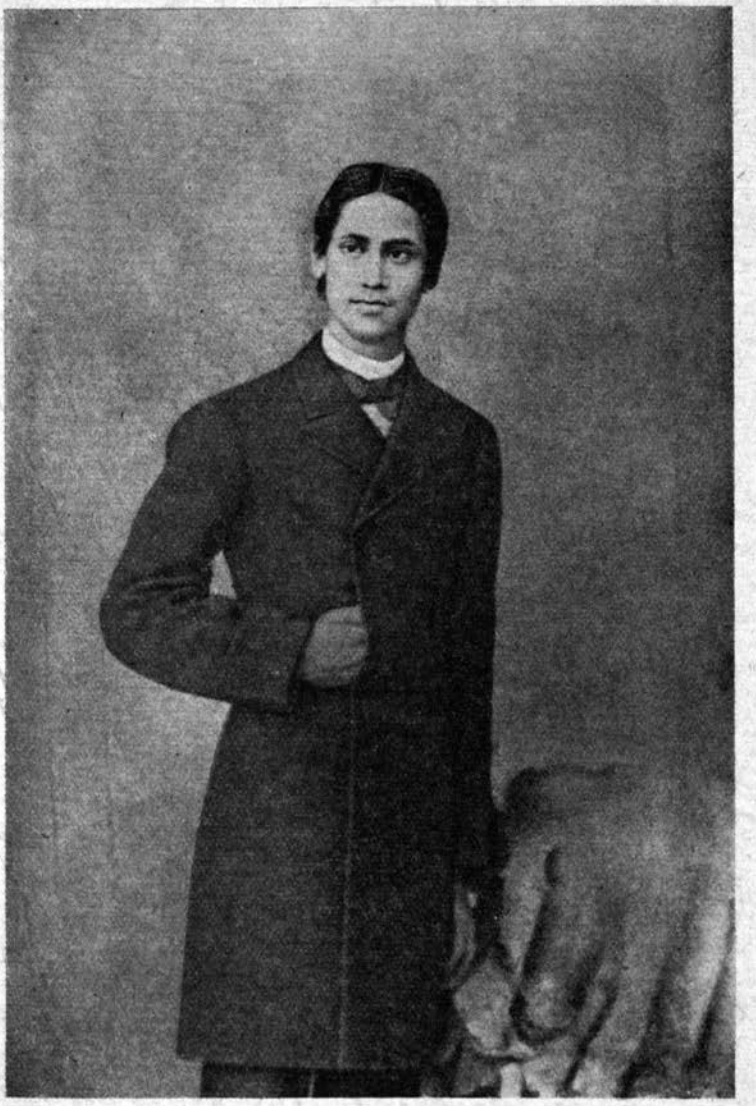
## CHAPTER IV

## "THE AWAKENING OF THE FOUNTAIN"

WHEN Rabindranath was seventeen years old it was decided to send him to England. His second brother Satyendranath had entered the Indian Civil Service; he was the first Indian member of it. Satyendranath was now stationed at Ahmedabad, and his wife and children were in England. He was planning to take a furlough and join them, and it was arranged that he should take Rabindranath with him when he went. Rabindranath went, therefore, to stay with him at Ahmedabad and learn something about English manners and customs. Ahmedabad is an ancient city, full of old buildings which caught the imagination of the young poet. Calcutta is a purely modern city, built on commerce, and with no ancient memories. History began to live for him in Ahmedabad, which was a visible witness to the splendid past of India. His brother's official residence had itself been formerly a palace; its stately halls and courts filled him with enthusiasm. He spent happy days wandering about the wonderful old house and garden, and picturing to himself the life with which they had once been filled—the glittering splendour, secret intrigues, and hidden sorrows of a Moghul court. He never forgot that thrilling experience. Years later he wrote a famous story called 'Hungry Stones', in which he describes the feelings and adventures of a young official housed in an ancient palace. He tells us that the first idea of this story came to him

at Ahmedabad. Still later, when Mahatma Gandhi returned to India from South Africa, he established his famous Sabarmati *Ashrama* close to the place where Rabindranath had stayed. On one occasion the poet spent some time with him there, and was able to revisit the scene of his story.

From Ahmedabad Rabindranath went to Bombay and stayed some time with a family there in order to practise English. Then, in September 1878, he sailed with his brother for England. When he first arrived there he lived with his sister-in-law and her children, and went to an English school. The boys were evidently anxious to show their goodwill to their Indian classmate; to Rabindranath's astonishment, they would come shyly up to him, slip an orange or some sweetmeat into his pocket, and then run away! Later on he attended classes in English literature in London University, and stayed with an English family called Scott. Mrs. Scott, he says, was like a mother to him, and the whole family took a great interest in his reading. In the long evenings he read aloud with them from many of the best English authors, and got through a great deal of informal reading. He stayed in England for a year and a half, but he did not complete any regular course of study or take any degree or certificate. He had many English friends, of whom he used to speak with affection to the end of his life, and he got to know England not by studying books, but by mixing with the people. Then he returned to India; but the family wanted him to study law, so about a year later it was arranged that he should travel to London again. He and his cousin accordingly left Calcutta by sea, but the cousin was taken ill almost immediately and they both returned home from



Rabindranath in England, aged 18

Madras. After this, the idea of a career in law was given up. Rabindranath, who was then about twenty years old, was asked by his father to undertake the management of the family estates in East Bengal.

Before taking up this work, however, Rabindranath spent some time in literary work in Calcutta. He now began to make serious experiments in various kinds of writing. One of his first experiments was a musical drama, or opera, called the 'The Genius of Valmiki' (*Valmiki Pratibha*). It is the story of how Valmiki came to write the *Ramayana*. Valmiki as a young man is the leader of a band of robbers who worship Kali. One day his followers capture a young girl in the forest, and bring her to be sacrificed to their goddess. Valmiki, however, is suddenly filled with a strange new feeling of pity, and sets her free. He then roams sadly about the forest, filled with a restlessness which he cannot understand. He comes upon two of his followers who have killed a bird and once more he is filled with pity. Suddenly, two Sanskrit verses burst from his lips. While he stands amazed at the sweetness of his own words, the goddess Saraswati appears to him. She tells him that she herself was the young girl who had come to awaken his pity; she then gives him her own *veena*, and blesses his poetry.

The play is full of lively and amusing action, choruses of robbers, songs of revelry, hunting scenes, and, in contrast, the wood-nymphs' songs and dances which express the beauty of the forest. The music is extremely interesting, because, while keeping the traditional Bengali frame-work, Rabindranath used several English and Irish melodies with which he had become familiar during his stay in Europe. The choruses

express most successfully both the vigour of the dacoits and the lyrical beauty of the forest. The music of the play was therefore something quite new to Bengal.

These musical experiments, which the poet continued throughout his life, led to the growth of a new and vigorous type of Bengali music.

During this year Jyotirindranath and his wife were living at Chandernagore, a small town by the side of the Ganges and a few miles from Calcutta. Rabindranath went to stay with them there. It was a beautiful, peaceful place. Rabindranath always loved the Ganges, and he spent long hours at Chandernagore watching the beauty of its changing colours. Morning, noon, afternoon and sunset were all lovely, and at night the moon shone on the dark water. In this happy home, among these beautiful scenes, he wrote many poems and songs. They were published in one volume and called *Evening Songs*. This book made Rabindranath famous among the Bengali writers of the time. One day, soon after its publication, the great novelist, Bankim Chandra Chatterji, was invited to a wedding. When he arrived, his host came forward with a garland to honour his famous guest. Rabindranath, who had also been invited, reached the house just at that moment. Bankim took the garland from his own shoulders, and garlanded Rabindranath instead, saying to his host: "It is he who deserves a garland, my friend! Have you not read his *Evening Songs*?"

In the year 1882, when Rabindranath was twenty-one years old, he had an experience which changed his whole life and gave him a new outlook on his work as a poet. Like many of man's greatest adventures, this was an adventure of the mind and not of

the body. He was living in Calcutta, not in Jorasanko but in a house in Sudder Street, near the Museum. The street runs from east to west, and at the eastern end there are trees growing in a distant garden. One morning Rabindranath was standing on a verandah of his house watching the sun rise behind the trees. "While I stood watching," he writes, "I suddenly felt as if some ancient mist had in a moment lifted from my sight, and the morning light on the face of the world revealed an inner radiance of joy." In another place he describes the experience as "waves of beauty and joy swelling on every side." It seemed to him that up to that moment he had seen the world with his bodily eyes only and seen only the outward appearances; now he seemed to be seeing with his whole mind and spirit, and seeing things as they really are. Nothing was "dull"; the most ordinary things were filled with a new and wonderful meaning. An eternal, beautiful Life and Joy shone through them all. He saw two boy friends going arm in arm down the street, laughing together; that was part of the Infinite Joy. He saw a cow with its calf, and a mother carrying her baby; that was part of the Infinite Love. Nothing in the world was common. Soon after, a man came to see him whose visits had previously always annoyed him; now, he welcomed him and found a new interest and pleasure in his company.

This tremendous experience found expression that same day in a poem. "The poem I wrote on the first day of my surprise," Rabindranath continues, "was named *The Awakening of the Fountain*. The waterfall whose spirit lay dormant in icebound isolation was touched by the sun, and, bursting in a cataract of freedom, it found its finality in an unending

sacrifice, in a continual union with the sea." There is a lovely picture of the icy prison of the river in the frozen Himalayan caves; then, verse after verse, the poet writes of the joy of the rushing water in the sunlight, the joy of freedom, and the joy of self-sacrifice to which it leads, as the free water gives itself gladly away and loses itself in the sea.

"Dawn to my spirit brings,
The touch of the morning sun,
Dark of my cavern rings
With song of a morning bird.
I know not by what ways, after so many days
My life is awaked and stirred.
O waked indeed and stirred
In a full, tumultuous tide;
And the longing of life is strong,
And the passion of life is high
And will not be denied."

The first overwhelming glory of this Vision gradually faded, but the effect of it remained throughout Rabindranath's life. The vision of the wonder of ordinary things is in all his poems and stories; he tries to make us see it too.

The next year Rabindranath went to stay with Satyendranath and his family at Karwar on the west coast of India. Here also his life was filled with friendship and beauty; the loveliness of the sea sank into his spirit and was a great inspiration in his writing. Rabindranath was always active, always occupied, always whole-hearted in work and play. The days at Karwar were filled with all kinds of pleasant activities—picnics, sports and moonlight walks —yet he had time and energy for literary work also.

The most interesting and important of his writings at Karwar was a new play called 'Nature's Revenge', which he afterwards translated into English and renamed 'The Sannyasi'. This play expresses in a different form the message which Rabindranath had been given in his Vision. It teaches that the love of friends and the beauty of nature are not obstacles which prevent man from finding Truth. Love and Beauty are the language in which Truth speaks to man, and we do not need to leave the world in order to find it.

In the first scene the *Sannyasi* is sitting outside his cave boasting of his freedom from all earthly desires. He decides that he can now safely return to live among men. "Now when I am free of fears and desires, when the mist has vanished and my reason shines pure and bright, let me go out into the Kingdom of lies and sit upon its heart untouched and unmoved." So in the second scene we see him sitting by the roadside, watching the people go by. Among them comes the child Vasanti, lonely and friendless. Everyone treats her as an outcaste because her father defied the laws of caste and custom. The *Sannyasi* allows her to sit near him and touch him, for no outward touch matters to him now. The lonely child does not understand his thoughts, but she sees that he does not despise her, and she is filled with loving gratitude. She falls asleep happily at his side, and as he watches her the *Sannyasi* feels human love beginning to grow again in his heart. When Vasanti wakens, she caresses his hand confidingly with her soft cheek, and innocently shows him the wild creeper with its lovely blue flowers, which like herself needs a strong tree to cling to. But the *Sannyasi* is now afraid of his own

feelings. Violently he tears down the creeper, and roughly shakes off the pitiful child. "Father, if you leave me, I shall die," she pleads; but he takes no notice and rushes from the spot. In the third scene we see him seated by a mountain path, among all the beauty of nature. A change has come over him. A little ragged girl comes running along calling aloud to her father. Her voice and figure, her innocent answers to his questions, all recall his own little Vasanti. He is no longer ashamed of his love, and no longer tries to drive it away like an enemy. He longs to find Vasanti again and to comfort her loneliness. So in the last scene we see him on the village path once more, breaking his *Sannyasi's* staff and alms-bowl, and proclaiming his new faith in love and in the ordinary world of men. "O the fool who gave up the light of the sun and stars, to pick his way by his own glow-worm lamp! . . . . I am free from the bodiless chain of the Nay—I am free among things and forms and purpose. The finite is the true infinite, and love knows its truth." From every passer-by he asks for news of Vasanti, and at last he hears it—the child is dead.

At the end of this year, 1883, Rabindranath was married to Mrinalini Devi. A few months later he had to bear a very great sorrow; Jyotirindranath's wife, his favourite sister-in-law, died, and the friendship which had meant so much to him came to an end. After his mother's death she had befriended and inspired him, and her presence had filled the whole household with happiness. Now this link with his past was broken. With his marriage, a new period of his life began.

## CHAPTER V

## "GOLDEN BENGAL"

For fifteen years following his marriage, Rabindranath lived and worked almost entirely in Bengal. Between 1884 and 1899 he paid only one short visit to Europe, of less than three months altogether. During these years his two sons and three daughters were born, and he enjoyed all the happiness of a family. He wrote a great deal and published several books of songs, plays and dramatic poems. His brother Satyendranath's wife had started a magazine for boys, called *Balak*. Rabindranath wrote a great many stories, verses, and articles for this magazine, and also for *Bharati*. As time went on, his fame increased. People began to listen to what he had to say, and he took part in many activities of a public nature. Love of justice, and the courage to stand up for what was right even when it was unpopular, marked his public work from the very beginning.

Devendranath Tagore was one of the founders and leaders of the Brahmo Samaj. This great religious society believed in and worshipped One God, opposed the use of idols, and supported many social reforms. In Rabindranath's time the Samaj had divided into three sections, and the Tagore family belonged to the Adi Brahmo Samaj. A year or two after Rabindranath's marriage he became the secretary of this section, and held the position for many years. He wrote many hymns which were used in the worship of the Samaj, and he frequently spoke in its meetings. These

addresses were an inspiration to all who heard them, for they were the fruit of the poet's real experience and of his deepest thought. In later years, however, Rabindranath gradually withdrew from any active share in the work of the Samaj. "I am like a ripe seed," he would say, "which, when the right time comes, quietly leaves the tree on which it grew so that the new life may spring up in freedom." He served the Brahmo Samaj and paid his debt to the tree on which he had grown, but he came to feel that his search for truth could not be limited within the bounds of that or any other religious organization. He believed in the power of the Spirit of God to unite men into one Humanity; but the different religious organizations seemed to him more often to divide men than to unite them, and so he had no faith in organizations. When he spoke of his religion, he preferred to speak simply of the Religion of Man.

During the nineteenth century, the Brahmo Samaj and similar societies criticised the practices of Hinduism very freely. There were some customs which they wished to abolish altogether. On the other hand, they welcomed any foreign idea which seemed to them to be good and right in itself. Many orthodox people were alarmed, and feared that Hinduism might be altogether destroyed if all these reforms and changes were carried out. In Bengal, towards the end of the century, the opposition to "modern" ideas became very strong. Many maintained that the Hindu religion contained all wisdom and needed no changes. Some even said that all the discoveries of modern western science had already been made by the sages of ancient India, and that it was unpatriotic to copy any idea or custom from the

West. This movement was called "neo-Hindu" (that is, new Hindu). Many people joined it because it seemed to be patriotic. Some of them were noble and honest men, like Bankim Chandra Chatterji. Others, however, were narrow-minded and self-seeking, cared little for truth, and used cowardly and dishonest methods to help forward their party.

Rabindranath, who had learned from his father to "love Truth with his whole heart," opposed the neo-Hindus with all his might. He believed that their teaching was untrue, that it was unjust to the truths of other religions and that it would bring dishonour to Hinduism and to India.

One day an English Christian missionary, barefooted and dressed in *Sadhu's* robes, was preaching alone in the streets of Calcutta. A group of "neo-Hindus" of the worst kind attacked and beat him and left him lying hurt by the road-side. The news of this cowardly and shameful attack made Rabindranath furiously angry. At once he sat down and told the story of the attack in a biting satire in verse called 'Dharma Prachar'. He mocked the so called "Hindus" who showed no respect to the *sadhu's* dress ; and the so-called "heroes" who attacked a single, unarmed man and then ran from the police. He fearlessly declared that some of the deeds of the neo-Hindus were the very opposite of true Hindu *dharma.* Rabindranath's stand against neo-Hindu excesses unfortunately caused some misunderstanding between him and Bankim Chandra Chatterji. It was hard for Rabindranath so to lose the friendship of the older writer whom he admired so much. but he stuck to his own convictions. Happily, before Bankim died, their good relationship was restored.

Although Rabindranath opposed a false and narrow patriotism, he was himself the most enthusiastic of patriots. He worked all his life for India's real and lasting good. And while it is true that he is a poet of the whole world, it is also true that he is first and foremost a poet of Bengal. His poems are full of the beauty of Bengal scenes, the rains and the harvest and the sweet scents of spring. The rivers and the rice-fields, the villages hiding in delicate clumps of bamboo, the people with their poverty and their poetry, their hidden heroism and their silent tragedies, all these called out his deepest, tenderest love. One of the most popular of these songs of the homeland is a poem called 'Sonar Bangla' (Golden Bengal). The word *sonar,* which literally means golden,' cannot really be translated; it is full of the idea of love and adoration for something whose beauty cannot be expressed in words. Both the words and the music of the song are very simple, in the style of a Bengali folk-song, and it is sung all over Bengal. Here are two stanzas:

"My *Sonar Bangla,* I love you.
Ever your skies, your breeze
play the flute in my heart.
In *Falgun*†, in your mango grove
the perfume makes me wild with joy,
ah me:
In *Aghran*†, in your fields full of grain,
what sweet smile have I seen.

* * * *

† Falgun is a spring month, Aghran an autumn month.

"In your fields where cattle graze
and at your ferry-ghat for crossing over to the other shore,
all day, in your shadow-covered village lanes where birds sing,
in your court-yard filled with grain,
my days they pass away,
ah me:
they are my brothers all, your shepherd and your peasants."

Rabindranath was not content merely to write or sing the praises of Bengal. For him, to love meant to serve. Few poets have ever served their country in so many different ways. During the fifteen years of which we are speaking he set himself to serve two great causes, the Bengali language and the Bengali village. Both of them held his interest for the remainder of his life.

It was common at the end of the last century for educated Bengalis to despise their own language. They used English in all public meetings, and on every possible occasion in private life. English was used in the schools for teaching all subjects. It was the fashion to look down on the mother-tongue. Men were almost ashamed to speak it well. Rabindranath felt ashamed of their shame. He pleaded first that children should be taught in school in their own language. He remembered that his brother had let him begin his own education through the medium of Bengali, and learn English only afterwards. He felt sure that this was the right method. He remembered how he had enjoyed his first music lessons, because the teacher had not made him learn the Hindustani music with words that he could not understand, but

had let him sing simple Bengali village songs. He argued tirelessly in favour of Bengali, both in speech and writing. He collected the songs and nursery rhymes which he had loved in his own childhood so that they might be easily available for other children to enjoy.

At that time there was an annual political meeting called "The Bengal Provincial Conference", which Rabindranath used to attend. In 1897 he tried to persuade the leaders that the meeting ought to be conducted in Bengali, as the members were all Bengalis, but he did not succeed. They had become accustomed to using English, and they did not want to change. Rabindranath was in a minority, but he went on fighting for his point of view. Two years later he spoke in Bengali at the conference, giving a summary of the President's address, which was in English. A little time afterwards, the conference began to conduct its business in Bengali.

After years of struggle, Rabindranath won the battle for the Bengali language. Bengali children are now taught in Bengali until they finish High School, and learn English as a second language. Bengali is used in almost all public meetings. In the University of Calcutta, the advanced students are still taught in English, but Bengali is taking a very prominent place. The Convocation Address of the University had always been given in English, until a few years ago. On that occasion, the University invited Rabindranath to be the speaker. For the first time, the address was given in Bengali. Nowadays Bengali people are not ashamed of their mother tongue, but proud of it, and proud to speak and write it well. What is more, the influence of Rabindranath's ideas is not confined to

his own province. The example which he set in Bengal has inspired men of other parts of India to give the mother-tongue a place of honour in education and in life. "Love of the mother-tongue" is one of the thirteen points of Mahatma Gandhi's programme for the service of the nation.

In Rabindranath's work for Bengali, he met with opposition not only from English-educated people who despised it, but from the pandits and classical scholars who considered themselves the only people who were qualified to judge how a language should be used. When Rabindranath first began to write, there was a big difference between the Bengali that was commonly *spoken* and the language that was used for *writing*. In this it was in exactly the same position as many other Indian languages. Spoken Bengali shortens and simplifies verb-endings and other grammatical forms, but these simple, ordinary forms were thought to be too "rude" and "undignified" to be used for public speeches or for literature. Rabindranath believed that if writers and speakers, the best thinkers of their time, were to take their rightful place in the life of the country, they must be able to speak to and write for the people in a way which the people would understand. If they wanted to be listened to, they must use the natural language of the people, not a special "literary" language.

Rabindranath saw that the language of actual speech was living and powerful; the unnatural language of books often dead. He began to experiment, writing poetry and serious prose in the common language of the people. The pandits did not like these experiments. If ordinary people could understand the meaning of a writer's work without their help, what

was the use of their learning! They opposed Rabindranath as far as they could, but he went steadily on with his experiments, and in the end made them completely successful. He wrote songs, such as 'Sonar Bangla', which can be understood at once by simple village folk, as well as by the educated. He wrote prose which is full of life and vigour, using the homely, witty, natural expressions of daily talk. Some of his greatest poetry has a strength and energy which is due in large part to his use of the short, crisp words of the spoken language. Their forcefulness would have been lessened by the heavy "literary" grammatical endings which add to the length of a word without adding anything to the meaning. The modern writers of Bengal have followed Rabindranath in using this simple, common language. Modern Bengali poetry is not dull and difficult for children, or full of strange words which they do not understand. There are many books of children's songs and poems which even small children can easily enjoy. The change is tremendous, and it is the work of Rabindranath more than of any other single man.

Rabindranath's intimate knowledge of the problems of the villages of Bengal dates from the year 1890. In that year he took responsible charge of the family estates. The Tagores owned land in Orissa, at Shileidah by the side of the river Padma, and at Potisar in North Bengal. The income of the family came from these estates. Rabindranath was not yet thirty, and he had no knowledge of village life or experience of estate work. He did not feel at all confident that he could make his work a success.

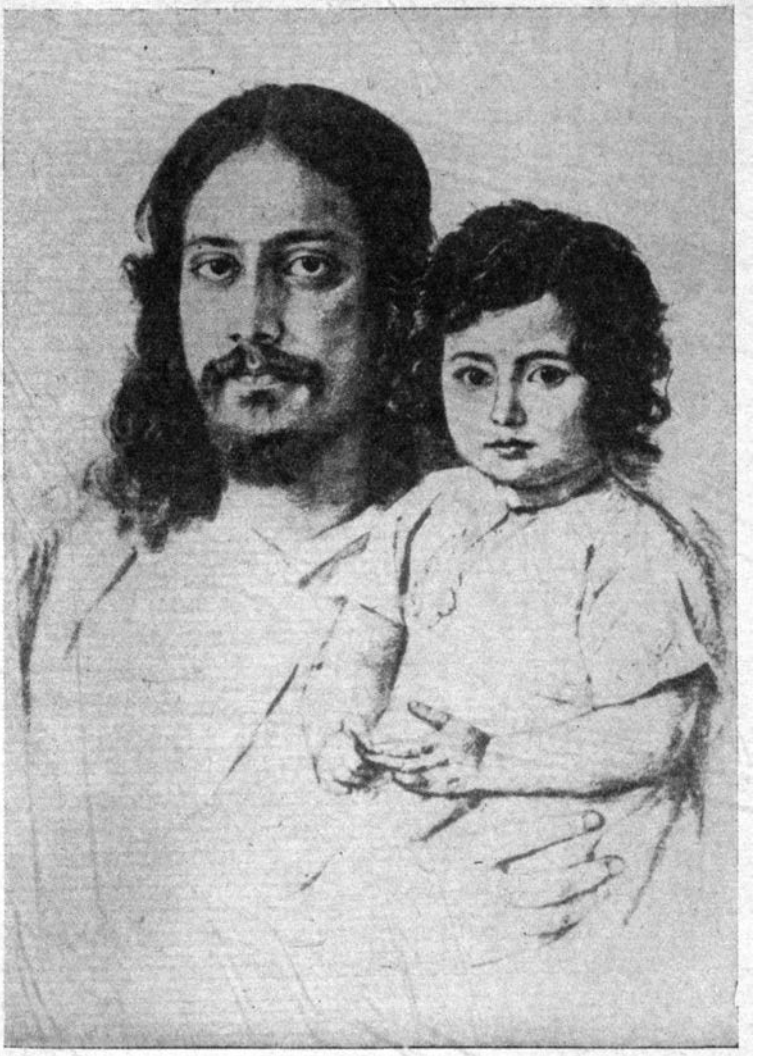
He went to live at Shileidah, where he had stayed as a boy with his elder brother. In those days he had loved it for the complete freedom it gave him, as well

as for the quietness and beauty of the countryside. Now, however, the management of the estates took him into a whole new world of work and interest. For the first time, he came into close touch with the village people of Bengal. He saw the difficulties caused by changing social customs, and especially by the departure of the wealthy people of the villages to live in the cities. He travelled about by boat from place to place in the course of his work, and little by little he made friends with the villagers. He began to understand their needs, and the reasons for the decay of village society.

In old days the common needs of the villagers were looked after by the rich land-owners. They were the natural leaders, and each one had a personal interest in the welfare of his own village. They made the roads, and repaired the temples and other public buildings. They saw that the tanks were clean and the surroundings healthy. Carpenters, smiths, weavers and craftsmen of all kinds lived in the village and served both rich and poor. The village was able to provide itself not only with food and clothing and shelter, but also with education and entertainment. When the land-owners left the villages and went to live in the new, growing cities, everything was changed. They no longer cared about the health, cleanliness and good order of the villages, because they did not live in them. They cared only about collecting the income from their land. They no longer employed the village craftsmen, but had their needs supplied in the cities. As a result, the villages became ruined and unhealthy. Most of the craftsmen left because they could make a better living in the towns, and only the poor working farmers remained.

Rabindranath saw clearly that many things necessary for the welfare of the villages could be done by the villagers themselves. They needed no capital, only goodwill and the power to work together. In the seasons when there was not much field work, they themselves could repair their roads, clean their tanks, and dig new wells. But when Rabindranath explained his ideas to the villagers, he found that they were quite unwilling to carry them out. They would not even help one another to put out a fire which destroyed their straw-thatched huts! What was the reason for this? Rabindranath saw two reasons. First, the villagers were so accustomed to having things done *for* them by their landlords, or by the distant, mysterious "Government", that they had lost the power to do anything for themselves. They expected to be led and given orders by others, and they felt helpless when left alone. The old landlord system had had many good points, but this was one bad result of it. Secondly, the villagers had a strong belief in *karma* or fate. When troubles came they said "It is the will of God", or "It is the fruit of the sins of my previous birth" ; they did not really believe that they could get rid of disease or hardship by any efforts of their own. On the whole, Rabindranath found that the Muslim villagers were more ready to listen and learn than the Hindus, because they did not depend so much on others to lead them.

Rabindranath did not let himself be discouraged by the failure of his first enthusiastic efforts at rural reform. He soon saw that the whole question was very much more difficult than he had at first thought. The villagers could not really be helped by advice and instruction from outside. They must be helped to



Rabindranath and his daughter, Bela

help themselves. That is a simple thing to say, but Rabindranath knew well that it would be a most difficult thing to do. It meant changing the villagers' habits of mind, so that they would develop self-respect and depend on their own efforts for what they needed. That, in its turn, meant education, the training of a new generation of village boys in leadership and co-operation. And even if these great things could be done, and alert, vigorous men were ready to work "each for all and all for each", would it be possible to solve the biggest problems of village poverty without reforming the land system, and changing the economic conditions under which the people lived? There was no answer to these questions then; but many years later Rabindranath Tagore started to look for an answer when he founded his rural reconstruction centre at Sriniketan. When Sriniketan began to take shape the poet was nearly sixty, but his enthusiasm was as bright and his plans as forward-looking as when he was thirty; and he had gained much knowledge and experience.

Meantime, Rabindranath's letters, sketches and short stories were filled with the village characters and places which he was beginning to know so well. *Glimpses of Bengal* is a selection of letters written from Shileidah and elsewhere to a favourite niece. In some of them we can see the seed of an idea that later grew into a short story. There is the village post-master, for example, home-sick for the town, teaching his little servant-girl to read. Many of the short stories have been translated into English and are considered to be among Rabindranath's best writings. They also played a large part in giving the educated townsfolk of Bengal a new interest in the village people of their own country.

## CHAPTER VI

## "A HOME FOR THE SPIRIT OF INDIA"

WHEN Rabindranath was about forty years old, in the years 1900-1901, a new period of his life began. He felt restless, as if he were seeking his way, as if the time were coming for him to make a new start in life, with some new work or adventure. But at first he did not clearly see what that new work should be.

About this time Rabindranath wrote a book of beautiful hymns of devotion, in which he expressed his faith in God. His father the Maharsi was now a very old man, and used to spend most of his time in prayer and meditation. Rabindranath came and sat at his feet, and sang to him some of the songs from the new book, which he had called *Naivedya* (Offerings). The Maharsi was delighted with the songs, and rejoiced that his son had found and loved the Truth which is God. Rabindranath dedicated his book to his saintly father to whom he owed so much.

Here is one of the hymns, so sincere and so simple, which the Maharsi heard that day:

"They who are near to me do not know that you are nearer to me than they are.
They who speak to me do not know that my heart is full with your unspoken words.
They who crowd in my path do not know that I am walking alone with you.
They who love me do not know that their love brings you to my heart."

"In old days," said the Maharsi with a smile, "the poet would have sung his songs in the king's court, and the king would have given him a royal reward. But in these days our poet would wait in vain for the king to reward him—so I suppose I must do it myself!" So saying, the old man gave his son a sum of money towards the expenses of the publication of his book. Later, when the book was published, Rabindranath went once more to his father for his blessing, and for a greater favour than money. He asked that he might be allowed, in the *ashrama* at Santiniketan, to establish a school—a school where he would teach his boys the lessons of freedom and joy in work and life which he had learned from his own father. The Maharsi listened and blessed him, and the school began.

In 1901 Rabindranath went to live at Santiniketan with his family. It was a place which he already knew well. His father and eldest brother were now spending most of their time there, and friends who wished to share in their quiet life of thought and prayer used to go and stay there for longer or shorter periods. The *ashrama* was now full of beautiful trees, and open country stretched to the horizon on all sides. The Maharsi had built there a *mandir,* or hall of worship, and Rabindranath spoke at its tenth anniversary celebrations in 1900. The life of the *ashrama* was one of simple freedom. There were the fewest possible rules. An inscription on the gate runs as follows: "Here in this *ashrama* the One Invisible God is to be worshipped." To preserve the peace of worship, three things were required from those who lived there: to use no idol or image of God in their worship, to avoid speaking ill of others' religious beliefs, and to do no injury to bird or beast.

It is easy to see why Rabindranath should decide to found a school, and why he should choose Santiniketan as the place for it. He had a deep love for children, and he had several little children of his own. He wanted them to be happy, and to be trained to use to the full their gifts of mind and body and spirit. He had been interested in education for years, and he had vivid memories of his own boyhood which guided him in what he should do and what not do. What had he hated when a child?—the imprisonment. He had hated the imprisonment in the city house, and still more the imprisonment in the dreary class-room with its hard straight benches. What did he long for?—the freedom of the kite as it soared into the midday sky above the city. He would give his children freedom. Again, what did he hate when a child?—dull, lifeless lessons out of ugly books, especially books that he did not understand, like the English reader. And what did he love and never grow tired of?—to learn songs, not at set hours, but when he felt like it; to read for hours together the treasures which he had discovered for himself, to go exploring, to live (if he only could!) like that great and wonderful hero, Robinson Crusoe. The children of his school should learn by exploring and experimenting, by activity, by music and drama, by making a noise! And, like Robinson Crusoe, they should learn by living and working with Nature, they should know that Nature is a friend and not an enemy. How well Rabindranath remembered the coconut palms which in his childhood had grown along the compound wall at Jorasanko! Even then they seemed to speak to him of the friendship which the "great brotherhood of trees" can give to man. Here in Santiniketan the great

brotherhood of trees was waiting to welcome his children.

During the first year, Rabindranath had only five pupils, one of whom was his own son. But slowly the school grew. After a few years there were a hundred and fifty boys living there. Nowadays, there are many girls also, who have their own hostel, but share all the classes and other activities with the boys.

When Rabindranath started his school, he had in his mind the *tapovana,* the forest dwellings of ancient India. The scholars and students who founded them were seekers of truth, and for the sake of truth they lived away from crowds, among the natural beauties of the forest. The boys lived with their teachers, in a very simple way. They learned to think truth more important than riches, to love Nature, and to respect all life. Rabindranath believed that India's work is to teach the world this love of outward simplicity and inward truth. But in the cities and towns of India Indians themselves are forgetting it. People gather too many *things* round them—money, motors, radios—and lose the secret of happiness. India needs to find again the secret of real happiness, and to do so she needs modern forest schools away from the noise and rush of town. Rabindranath wanted Santiniketan to be the first new forest school, but he did not want it to be just a copy of the old ones. He hoped that it would have the same spirit as they did, but with a different outward form suitable to the present times. It was to be, as one of his friends called it, "A Home for the Spirit of India".

Santiniketan was a poet's school, so it was full of music and poetry. In fact, Rabindranath once called the school itself a poem—a poem that was written on

life, and not on paper. "When I brought together a few boys, one sunny day in winter, among the warm shadows of the *sal* trees, strong and straight and tall, I started to write a poem . . . but not in words." The days in the school began and ended with music. Rabindranath taught the boys to sing his own beautiful hymns, and every morning before sunrise a group of singers would go round the *ashrama* and wake the boys by singing one of these songs. They were songs of joy and praise to God for morning and evening, for the flowers of spring and the harvest of autumn, for the heat and dew, for the days of storm and rain, and for the quiet moonlit nights. Here is a translation of one of these hymns:

"I salute Thee.
In the heart of the darkness Thou hast laughed,
I salute Thee.
In this downcast still deep placid sky
I salute Thee.
In this gentle, peaceful, drowsy wind
I salute Thee.
On the grassy couch of this tired earth
I salute Thee.
In this silent incantation of the steadfast stars
I salute Thee.
In the lonely rest-house at work's end
I salute Thee."

A man who gave a great deal to the school in later years was Dinendranath Tagore, the poet's nephew, who was a great musician. It was he who taught the children his uncle's new songs and helped them to keep the fresh beauty of the tunes as the poet composed them. The children loved these songs, and by learning them

they learned also something of the poet's joy in this lovely world, and his thoughts of God who creates it and dwells in it.

Rabindranath taught the children of his school to celebrate with poetry and song the changing of the seasons and some of the great events of country life. In Santiniketan there is a festival of spring, a festival of the rains, a festival of autumn ; there is a ceremony for tree-planting, and, now that village service has been started in the *ashrama*, there is a ceremony of ploughing. The festivals are celebrated with processions and music, with pageants full of colour and movement, and with poetry and dancing. Sometimes a special play was written for performance at one of these season festivals. *Saradotsava* (Autumn Festival) and *Falguni* (The Cycle of Spring) were both written by Rabindranath for this purpose. *Vasanta,* another spring play, was written later. Rabindranath was a strong believer in the educational value of acting, and it became the custom of the school to act a play at the end of almost every term. In the early days when the numbers were small, every boy had a chance of taking part in the dramas, and rehearsals were attended by the whole school. The boys must have learned a great deal from those rehearsals, and from the discussions about scenery and dress. *Dak-Ghar* (The Post Office) was one of the plays which were written specially for these young actors, and was a favourite of the poet's.

Rabindranath took great pains to gather round him as teachers a group of young men who really understood what he was trying to do in his school, and who would know how to teach children literature, or science, or history, in a way which made these

subjects alive and interesting. He knew by his own experience that all knowledge about the world we live in, and about the men who live in it, is interesting to children, if only it is taught to them in the right way. He did not want to fill the minds of the boys with dead facts which would soon be forgotten, but to rouse their interest in the subject for its own sake. He knew that, when a child is really interested in anything, he will find out and remember all that he needs to know about it. A boy puts tremendous energy and enthusiasm into his play and his hobbies, because he is working at something in which he is deeply interested and which he has chosen for himself. Rabindranath wanted to remove all false distinctions between work and play, and encourage the boys to put the same energy and enjoyment into all the activities of their life.

In describing his work in the Santiniketan school, Rabindranath often used the word "home". The school was to be, he said, "a home and a temple in one". In another place, speaking of the children's contact with Nature, he says, "I prepared for them a real home-coming into this world". Rabindranath did his best to make his school a friendly place—a place where there should be real home-like affection between the older and younger members. The teachers and the boys lived and played together like elder and younger brothers, and Rabindranath played with them, and was often the liveliest of all. It is quite a mistake to think that because he was a great man, he was always solemn and unsmiling. He enjoyed playing tricks as much as the youngest and naughtiest boy in the school! He encouraged them to try stilt-walking like his old heroes, the dacoits, just for fun and exercise.

Married teachers used to invite the boys to their homes, and their wives treated the little ones like mothers. Rabindranath would never allow the classes to be very large, even when the number of boys increased. They were always taught in little groups, in which the teacher could pay proper attention to each boy. These little groups sat in friendly circles under the shade of the trees; sometimes, if they felt like it, they sat *in* the trees for their lessons! There was no need for the fixed rules and strict class discipline that has to be followed in schools where this friendly home feeling does not exist.

"I never said to them, 'Don't do this'. 'Don't do that.'" "I never prevented them from climbing trees or going where they liked." "I wanted to make these children happy in an atmosphere of freedom." So Rabindranath emphasized in this school the freedom which he had missed so much in his own childhood. Some of the ways in which he gave freedom to the children have been described already. But he knew that we do not get real freedom by doing exactly as we like, without considering the needs and wishes of other people. Motors would not be "free" on the road if they ran on the right or the left side or on the pavement, just as they pleased. They are free to move quickly and easily because they all agree to keep the same rules. In the same way, men are free when they agree to keep whatever laws are needed for the good of all. Rabindranath taught his boys to understand and enjoy this kind of freedom. They saw for themselves that some laws were necessary for their school society. They made their own rules and they elected their own leaders. These leaders, with the help of a council of the whole school, took charge of the

cleanliness and order of the *ashrama,* of the games and entertainments, of the serving of their meals and the comfort of their visitors. When a boy did not keep the rules which had been agreed on, the boys themselves decided whether he should be punished and how.

This method of training in self-government and freedom was one of the ideas which Rabindranath had got from England and America. On his visits to those countries he had seen schools which were specially planned to help very difficult boys who had got into trouble with the police by their unruliness. When these difficult boys were given freedom to take charge of their own lives in the school society, they quickly settled down to happy and useful work. The plan was just as successful in Santiniketan. Parents often sent Rabindranath difficult boys, but in the happy freedom of his school he very rarely had any difficulty with them. Rabindranath was always ready to combine the best that he found in the West with the best that he found in his own country. In this way he built up a "forest school" which was really suited to the needs of modern India.

By good teaching which roused the boys' interest, Rabindranath opened their minds to the world of truth. By close contact with nature, and the music and poetry with which he surrounded them, he awakened their imaginations to the world of beauty. There is another world, the world of goodness. This is the world of living creatures, and especially of men, because goodness is shown, and evil too is shown, most of all in men's behaviour towards one another. Rabindranath tried to awaken the children's feelings of sympathy, and to make their sympathies as wide as

possible. He believed strongly in the wisdom of his father's rule, that in the *ashrama* no harm should be done to any bird or beast. Children, he thought, should be taught to sympathise with the animals. He was also very eager that they should grow up with right feelings of respect towards men of different languages and customs. For this reason he was very glad indeed when, later on, foreign teachers came to join his staff.

Rabindranath did not believe in trying to teach religion to children by set lessons in school. True religion, he said, is not to know any set of historical facts, but to feel the reality of God. Children will learn of God naturally if they live with people who love and worship Him, and with the beautiful things which God, the "World-Poet", pours into His world. Rabindranath taught the children to sit in silence for a quarter of an hour, at sunrise and sunset every day. He did not tell them what they should think about in the silence, or ask them afterwards how they had spent their time. He believed that the time of quiet was in itself good for body, mind and spirit, and that the beauty of their surroundings would of itself, and without any effort, help their minds to grow. After the silence the whole school gathered together and chanted a prayer. The words were chosen by Rabindranath ; they are in Sanskrit, but he took care that all his boys should understand their meaning. Here is a translation of part of the prayer.

"Thou art our Father ; help us to know that Thou art our Father . . . .
O God our Father, remove from us the world of sin and give us what is good.

"From Thee come the enjoyments of life, from Thee comes the welfare of man.
I bow to Thee. Thou art the Good, the highest Good."

It is a prayer in which people of every religion can join.

The work in the school gave Rabindranath great joy and satisfaction, but the years during which he was starting it were full of sorrows and anxieties for him in other ways. There were money difficulties, for a school cannot be run on nothing, and Rabindranath did not charge any fees in the first years of the *ashrama* school. His wife sold her jewels to help him at this time. But money difficulties were only a small matter. Much greater sorrows had to be borne. In November, 1902, his beloved wife was taken ill and died. A book of poems called *Smaran* (Remembrance) which he wrote at this time, helps us to understand how terrible a loss her death was to him.

"When she still lived, then every gift
She gave me, Lord, I could repay.
That time will never come again.
Her night is morning now."

A short time afterwards his daughter Renuka became very ill. Rabindranath took her away to Almora in the hills to try to save her life. While he was staying there with her he wrote the lovely poems about children which we now read in *The Cresent Moon* in order to comfort and amuse his own little motherless children.

His love and care failed to bring Renuka back to health. She grew worse and died in May, 1903, only

six months after her mother. The next year came another sorrow. Rabindranath had a very great friend who was helping him in the school, a young poet called Satish Chandra Roy. He also fell ill with small-pox and died in 1904. To lose him was like losing a son, for Rabindranath loved him dearly, and believed that he might become a great poet as well as a great teacher. In 1905 the Maharsi Devendranath died at the age of eighty-eight. In 1907 Rabindranath's younger son Samindranath, a little boy of thirteen whom he loved very dearly, died also from an attack of cholera. He felt these bereavements deeply, but private sorrow did not interfere with his work nor destroy his belief in the goodness of the world.

## CHAPTER VII

## THE POET AND POLITICS

FOR some years before the foundation of Santiniketan school, Rabindranath had been seeking for ways of giving practical service to the needy of his country. He believed strongly that more of Indian trade and industry should be in Indian hands, and he was convinced of the value of *swadeshi* goods. Two of his nephews started a jute factory and sugar-cane crushing mills at Kushtia, and some friends opened a shop in Calcutta called "The Indian Stores". Rabindranath fully supported them in these *swadeshi* enterprises and became a partner in the business. Unfortunately, the shop and the factory were not a success, and after a few years they had to be closed down, leaving Rabindranath with heavy debts which had to be paid off. This was one of the reasons why money difficulties caused him such anxiety in the early years of the Santiniketan school.

Another way in which Rabindranath showed his practical patriotism was in the help which he gave in the epidemic of plague in Calcutta in 1899. He at once put all his energy into the work of relief, and took a leading part in the collection of funds and the organisation of help. Throughout his life he shared actively in the relief of suffering. Floods and famines frequently occur in Bengal, and Rabindranath sympathised deeply with the poor village people and did everything possible to help. In the same way he gave

generously to the relief of the suffering after the great earthquakes in Bihar and at Quetta. His great human spirit and practical experience were always ready for the service of human need.

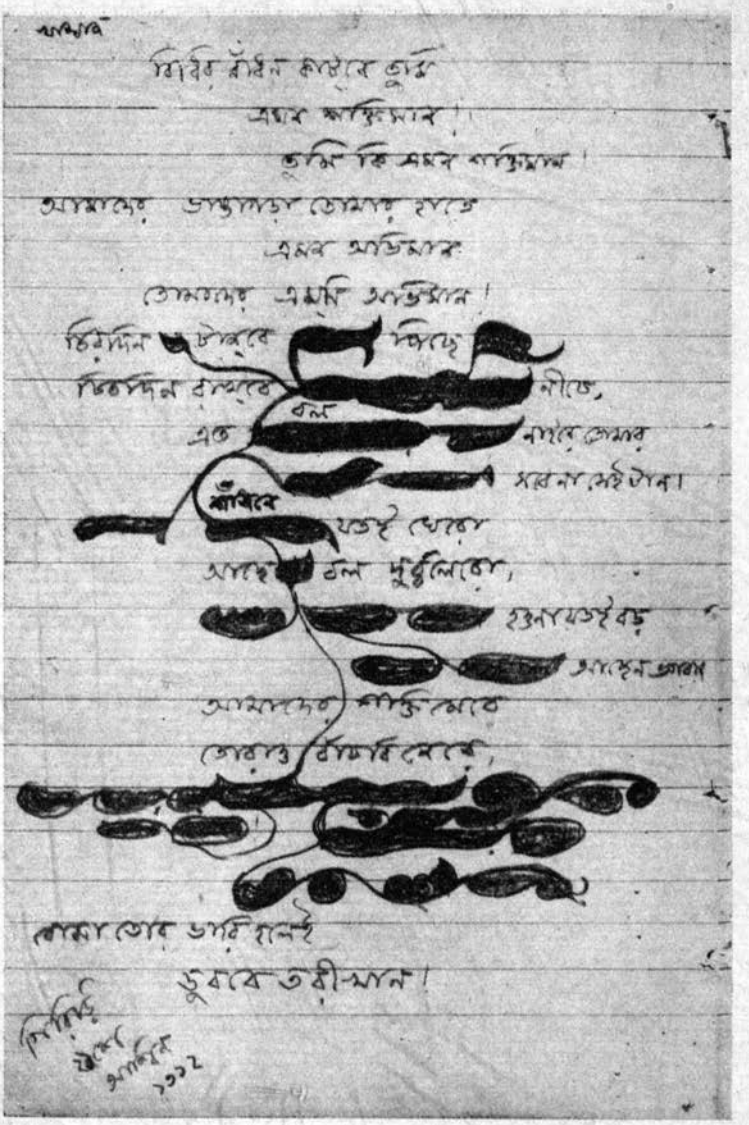
Early in 1905 Rabindranath became the editor of a new magazine called *Bhandar,* whose purpose was to discuss the leading public questions of the time, especially questions in politics and economics. He wrote an essay for this magazine in which he showed that the effect of British rule in India had been to help the foreign trader and not the Indian people. In this and many other writings and speeches he declared that the Indian rulers of Indian States should show their love for their country by helping Indian crafts and industries. In such work we see Rabindranath's practical patriotism and watchful care for his countrymen.

Later in the same year, 1905, an event occurred which roused the anger of the whole country. Lord Curzon announced his intention of dividing the province of Bengal into two portions, East and West. This "Partition of Bengal", as it was called, caused a great outburst of fury against the Government. Every Bengali felt that it was an insult to his motherland, and that the rulers did not understand or care about the feelings of the people. Meetings to protest against the partition were held everywhere, and Rabindranath made himself the leader of the national demand for "One Bengal". He addressed meeting after meeting in Calcutta, crowded with excited people. He wrote national songs which were eagerly learned and sung, spreading like wild fire among the masses. He marched through Calcutta at the head of a huge procession, singing his new song which asked the rulers:

"The ties in which Fate bound us
Are you so strong to break?"

At one meeting he collected Rs. 50,000 on the spot for a National Fund to fight the partition. How was it to be fought? "By non-co-operation," answered Rabindranath. "But non-co-operation does not mean destruction. We will not co-operate with the Government, but we ourselves will organise and carry out the reform of our society. We will become a strong nation by showing justice and practical brotherhood among ourselves, and then no one will be able to resist us." This was the programme which he gave to Bengal. At the same time he protested strongly against a Government order which forbade students to attend political meetings.

Most of the excited and angry young men of Bengal, however, would not listen to Rabindranath's words or follow his programme. To destroy the evils in their own social life, give justice to the poor, and educate the nation in self-respect and self-reliance, was a long, slow, hard task. It seemed quicker and easier and more interesting to fight for *swaraj* by making violent attacks on officials. They did not stop to think whether the people would be able to use *swaraj* if they won it in that manner, or whether the poor villager would really have more freedom and a happier life if the leaders did not follow the path of truth and social justice. Gradually, the movement began to follow a policy which Rabindranath felt to be narrow and wrong. He, therefore, retired from political activities and went back to his work at Santiniketan. People were angry with him, and called him disloyal, unpatriotic and a traitor. But great men do



A typical page of manuscript

not change their opinions for the sake of winning praise, and Rabindranath was not afraid to stand alone. He believed that he could serve his country better by holding fast to his own standards of truth and right, and by putting them into practice in his daily work in the school and in the villages.

Another thing in Bengal politics hurt him deeply. This was that Hindus and Muslims were being divided and were forming a "Hindu Party" and a "Muslim Party". In 1908 Rabindranath was the President of the Bengal Provincial Conference, and he spoke to the conference about this danger. He suggested that all young men who really wanted to serve their country should go and work in groups in the villages. Each group should contain both Hindu and Muslim young men, and they should make it their special responsibility to increase the friendship and understanding between Hindus and Muslims in the villages. They should help the villagers to see that, to whichever religion they belonged, their real interests as human beings were the same. This ought to be done, he said, not because it might help in a political movement, but simply because it was the right thing to do.

As Rabindranath himself belonged to the Hindu community, he laid special emphasis on the duties of Hindus towards the Muslims with whom they lived. He asked them to remember the great gifts which the Muslims had made to India, and to make friends with their Muslim neighbours. This is what he said:

"The Mahomedan has come to India from outside, laden with his own stores of knowledge and feeling, and his wonderful religious democracy . . . . In our music, our architecture, our picture art, our literature, the Mahomedans have made their perma-

nent and precious contribution. Great religious movements have arisen among them, great saints have lived among them, . . . But we Hindus have always treated them as foreigners . . . We have not respected each other, we have not helped each other, we have not even tried to know each other."

At the same time, with his usual commonsense, Rabindranath warned those who were working for Hindu-Muslim unity that it is no use pretending that there are no differences between them. It is of no use to paint over a crack in the wall and pretend that it is not there. Soon the crack will be seen plainly in spite of the paint. In the same way, real differences between Hindus and Muslims must be honestly recognised. If we take the trouble to recognise and understand them, we shall be able to live together in a friendly way in spite of the differences. Rabindranath never had any sympathy with sentimental people who closed their eyes to unpleasant truths. In politics, when strong feelings are aroused, it is easy to exaggerate one half of the truth, the half which is most pleasant from our own point of view, until it becomes a falsehood. As we shall see from other examples later in his life, Rabindranath never did this, even when his own feelings were strongest. He tried always to see the whole truth of any situation. We might say of the poet's political work, as was said by Arnold of the famous Greek poet, Sophocles,

"He saw life steadily and saw it whole".

## CHAPTER VIII

## WORLD FAME

IN 1911 Rabindranath reached the age of fifty. From 1908 onwards he was writing some of his finest work. He wrote in Bengali many poems which he afterwards translated into English and published in the collection named *Gitanjali.* He wrote the beautiful musical play *Saradotsava* (The Autumn Festival) for the Santiniketan school-children, and a serious drama called *Prayaschitta* (Atonement). One of the most interesting characters in this play is Dhananjaya. He is a man of the people, a Saivite devotee, and sings simple, homely songs like those in which the prayers of the village saints of Bengal have been expressed for centuries. Dhananjaya stands for the power of non-violence. At that time Mahatma Gandhi's ideas were still practically unknown in India, but there is a very close resemblance between his teachings and Dhananjaya's words about *ahimsa.* When the play was performed at Santiniketan in 1910, Rabindranath himself took the part of Dhananjaya. By such performances as these, which they rehearsed under the poet's own directions and in which they acted with him, the boys at Santiniketan learned to know his teachings and to share his outlook on life without any need for fixed lessons. *My Reminiscences* was also written about this time and published in a Bengali magazine.

There were great rejoicings at Santiniketan on the poet's fiftieth birthday. The boys met together in the

*Mandir* in the morning for special prayers, and in the evening they acted the play, *Raja*, with Rabindranath in the part of the King. On birthday festivals such as this, Rabindranath would sometimes talk to the children in their *Mandir* service, humorously, but quite seriously, about birthdays and their meaning. At the time of his birth, he said, the baby cries; he does not like to leave the warmth and safety of his mother's body and come out into the cold and danger outside. But the family is glad and celebrates the birthday, for it means that the child has entered a wider world and a bigger life than he had in his mother's womb. He must come out, and face adventure and danger, in order to grow up and become a man. So we celebrate our birthday because it is the beginning of our adventure in the world. A boy has another birthday when he leaves the little world of home for the bigger world of school. In the same way, all through our lives we have opportunities for entering new worlds, different from those which we have known before. Each new world brings new dangers and adventures. We should not fear them, we should remember that we cannot grow in spirit without them. "I myself," said Rabindranath, "had a new birthday when I started this school, and entered the new world which it gave me." When we die, we have another birthday, when we leave what we now know for the unknown adventure of a larger life still.

Rabindranath's fiftieth birthday was celebrated not only in Santiniketan, but in many parts of Bengal also. It was a good opportunity for his fellow-countrymen to express their pride in their national poet and their admiration for his work. In Calcutta a great meeting was held at the Town Hall, in January,

1912, at which the Bengal Literary Academy presented him with an address. The hall was packed with people, who cheered the poet again and again.

A few days later came the *Maghotsava,* the great annual festival of the Brahmo Samaj. Rabindranath attended the festival, and sang there for the first time a new national song which he had just composed. This was the famous song *Jana gana mana,* which is now known all over India. A few years later he made his own translation of it into English:

"Thou art the ruler of the minds of all people,
Thou Dispenser of India's destiny.
Thy name rouses the hearts
of the Punjab, Sind, Gujrat and Maratha,
of Dravid, Orissa and Bengal.
It echoes in the hills of the Vindhyas and Himalayas,
mingles in the music of Jumna and Ganges,
and is chanted by the waves of the Indian sea.
They pray for Thy blessing and sing Thy praise,
Thou Dispenser of India's destiny,
Victory, Victory, Victory to Thee."

The next two months were full of literary activity, and of plans to start at once for a visit to Europe. But in spite of Rabindranath's great strength of body, he was worn out by the excitement of the last few months. He fell ill, and had to put off his voyage to England and go and rest at Shileidah, in the quiet house by the side of the river. Here he lived in peace for a few weeks and regained his health. To amuse himself during these days of leisure, he did something which was destined to have tremendous results, though he never dreamed at the time that it was of any importance. He translated some of his poems into

English. He found this an enjoyable pastime, and continued with the translations during the voyage which followed. He had no idea, then, of getting them published.

The voyage to England was made in May, 1912. Rabindranath had a friend in London named William Rothenstein. Rothenstein was an artist and, while on a visit to India, had once visited Joransanko and met Rabindranath. When the two men met in England, they talked of the work they had been doing. Rothenstein asked Rabindranath if he had any translations of his work, and Rabindranath showed him what he had done. They were the poems which now form *Gitanjali*. Rothenstein was enthusiastic in his admiration, and eager that Rabindranath's poems should be made known to others. He felt that he had made a great discovery; that Rabindranath was not only a poet of India but also a poet of humanity and belonged to the whole world. One of the first people to whom he showed the poems was the Irish poet, W. B. Yeats, who at once recognised Rabindranath to be a great poet. Rothenstein then invited a number of his friends, including many well-known English writers, to a meeting at his house. W. B. Yeats was there, and read Rabindranath's poems aloud to them. When he finished there was perfect silence. Rabindranath's heart sank; he feared that these English people did not understand or like his work. But he soon found that the silence was not due to any dislike, but quite the opposite. The feelings of admiration and reverence were too deep to be expressed in words or applause.

Some of the men who were present that day became Rabindranath's life-long friends. One of them

was Ernest Rhys, the editor of the famous Everyman Library. Another was Charles Freer Andrews, who had taught for several years in a Christian College in Delhi. As he listened to the reading of the poems, a strong desire grew in his heart to know Rabindranath better, and if possible to have him for a friend. After the meeting was over and the other visitors had gone away, Rabindranath and he went for a walk together. Here is the story as told by Rabindranath, when he spoke in the *Mandir* at Santiniketan on the evening of Andrews' death, in April, 1940:

"I crossed at a leisurely pace the open stretch of Hampstead Heath. The night was bathed in the loveliness of the moon. Andrews came and accompanied me. In the silence of the night, his mind was filled with the thoughts of *Gitanjali*. He was led on, through his love of God, into a stirring of love towards me. Little did I dream, that day, of the stream of friendship in which his life and mine were destined to be mingled to the end."

Charles Andrews remained from that day a firm friend of Rabindranath, and a close co-worker in the school at Santiniketan. For the rest of his life, whenever he was in India, Santiniketan was his home, and his friendship with Rabindranath enriched the lives of both.

Before 1912 Rabindranath's name was quite unknown in England. After the meeting in Rothenstein's house, he suddenly became famous. Parties were held in his honour, where he met many of the best known writers of the time. The *Gitanjali* poems were published, and made him many friends. There were some people, naturally, who did not admire them, and others who admired them but did not really

understand them. But many people did understand, and felt that Rabindranath had a new message to give them, and a new vision of truth to show them. They thought of him as not merely a poet, but a prophet of God. The name *Gitanjali* means "Song-Offerings", and the poems in it are translations of Rabindranath's religious poetry. Here are one or two short extracts, but the poems should be read in full for their beauty to be properly understood.

"Have you not heard his silent steps?
He comes, comes, ever comes. . . . .
In the fragrant days of sunny April through the forest path
He comes, comes, ever comes.
In the rainy gloom of July nights on the thundering chariot of clouds
He comes, comes, ever comes.
In sorrow after sorrow it is his steps that press upon my heart, and it is the golden touch of his feet that makes my joys to shine."

* * * * * *

"Thou art the sky and thou art the nest as well.
O thou beautiful, there in the nest it is thy love that encloses the soul with colours and sounds and odours.
But there, where spreads the infinite sky for the soul to take her flight in, reigns the stainless white radiance. There is no day nor night, nor form nor colour, and never, never a word."

* * * * * *

"Thou art the Brother among my brothers, but I heed them not, I divide not my earnings with them, thus sharing my all with thee.
In pleasure and in pain I stand not by the side of men, and thus stand by thee. I shrink to give up my life, and thus do not plunge into the great waters of life."

In the winter of 1912-1913 Rabindranath paid his first visit to the United States of America. There he gave several lectures at Chicago and Harvard Universities. He spoke of the subjects in which he was always most deeply interested. One lecture was on "The ideals of the ancient civilisation of India" He explained how the purpose of the Santiniketan school was to re-live those ideals of outward simplicity, and inward harmony and truth, in the modern world. Another lecture was on "Race Conflict", which was an important subject to the mixed population of the United States, especially in the regions where prejudice against the Negro still remained. Rabindranath also realised its great importance in connection with his own country. His lectures at Harvard were afterwards published in a book, *Sadhana* (The Realisation of Truth). They describe in prose the same experiences and beliefs as are recorded in his poetry. From America Rabindranath returned to England, and after a short stay there he embarked for India in the autumn of 1913.

In November, 1913, very soon after Rabindranath reached home, it was announced that the Nobel Prize for Literature had been awarded to him. The prize is awarded by a Swedish trust, and it is one of the greatest public recognitions of the work of a writer.

It had never before been given to any writer not of European race. There was great rejoicing in India at the honour paid to the Indian poet, and Rabindranath himself was naturally pleased. For although unfriendly criticism never made him change his course, it often hurt him and made him unhappy. He once joked about this in a letter to C. F. Andrews: "I must not feel myself too far above my critics," he wrote, "and when I say 'I don't care!' let nobody believe me!"

But although Rabindranath was pleased to get the prize, and rejoiced that the money he received would help his school, he disliked the exaggerated praise with which some of his countrymen now spoke of him, even more than he had been hurt by their former criticisms. He reminded them that many others had deserved to be famous, and had never been rewarded as they deserved. He was hurt that some of his own countrymen, who had never troubled to read his work or understand his ideas, were now flattering him because he had won recognition from foreigners. He felt ashamed of their lack of self-respect.

More honours were to follow. In December, 1913, the University of Calcutta conferred on him the degree of Doctor of Literature. In June, 1915, he was given a knighthood, in recognition of his greatness as a writer, and became Sir Rabindranath Tagore. *Gitanjali* had made him a world-famous man. From that time onwards his works were read and his words listened to not only in India, but all over the civilized world.

## CHAPTER IX

## THE SHADOW OF WAR, 1914-1919

RABINDRANATH'S visit to Europe and America in 1912 and 1913 was in many ways a very happy one. It was full of the joy of new friendships with those who understood and welcomed his ideas. The poet rejoiced in the opportunities he was given for meeting with some of the greatest thinkers in Europe, and in the warm friendliness of ordinary, kindly people. But, in other ways, what he saw of the life of the western countries made him unhappy and troubled. Western civilisation seemed to him to be going in a wrong direction. The governments of the west cared too much for riches and comfort and safety, and not enough for justice and truth. He found the European nations full of fear and suspicion of one another ; each one was building up a great army or navy to protect itself against the others. Fear and jealousy and violence were everywhere ; they seemed to him to be signs of the disease and decay of civilization, and he felt sure that they would end in disaster.

Rabindranath was convinced that the nations of the world can only find happiness and real wealth by friendship and co-operation. He taught his boys that the history of the human race is not a meaningless list of names and dates which have nothing to do with real life. It is a story with a meaning. History is a record of how men learned to work together, little by little, in larger and larger groups. They worked together first in families, then in small clans or tribes,

then in nations. The history of India is a story of many foreign invasions, but each new group of foreigners has gradually become part of the Indian people and settled down to live at peace with the rest. In this way all history points forward to the next step, when the different nations will in their turn learn to work together in the largest group of all, the Family of Man. Races and nations, the poet taught, have different gifts; but these differences are not a reason for fighting, they are a contribution to the common wealth of the world. The human race must go forward into a free and world-wide friendship, in which each nation will use its own special gift of beauty and skill for the good of all.

But how can men be shown this right road and persuaded to follow it? Rabindranath believed that it was India's task and privilege to show humanity the road to peace. In India people of many different languages, religions and customs have lived together for hundreds of years. From ancient times India has stretched out hands of friendship both to the East and to the West. It is the meeting place of the nations, where, if anywhere, the way to understanding and peace can be found.

Rabindranath was eager that Santiniketan should have its share in the work of building international friendship. In October, 1913, he wrote, in a letter to Andrews, "We must have the widest possible outlook for our boys, and universal human interests". It was a great joy to him that early in 1914 both Andrews and another English friend, W. W. Pearson, were able to come and live at the *ashrama,* and so make its international aspect more of a reality. In 1915 a link was made with the Indian community of South Africa.

The students of the Phoenix School, which Mahatma Gandhi had founded there, came to India and found a welcome and a temporary home at Santiniketan; Gandhiji himself stayed with the poet there. This was the first meeting of the two great Indian leaders. By events like these, gradually but surely, Santiniketan became linked in friendship and sympathy with more and more of the great movements of thought and endeavour that were taking place in other parts of the world.

In August, 1914, the disaster which Rabindranath had foreseen fell on Europe; war broke out, and continued for four years, with awful destruction of human life. The sadness and darkness of the world tested Rabindranath's belief in humanity and in freedom. He did not lose his belief, he held it more strongly than ever, and he gave long and careful thought to the questions which were forced on his mind—What is the true meaning of freedom? What kind of work will really be of lasting value to humanity? The only work that will endure, he thought, is work which is sincere and living. It is much more important that we should put truth and sincerity into our own work, than that we should preach to others and try "to do them good". Rabindranath expressed this in a beautiful metaphor. "I am praying to be lighted from within," he wrote, "not merely to hold a light in my hand." His belief in freedom was so strong and deep that he was willing, in his own dearly loved school, to leave his fellow-workers free to follow their convictions, even when they differed from his. "I do not believe in compelling fellow-workers by coercion," he wrote. "All true ideas must work themselves out through freedom . . . I

would rather see them perish than leave them in the charge of slaves." That is a great thing to say, and a still greater thing to do.

During the early years of the war Rabindranath wrote *Balaka,* a book of grandly beautiful poetry. Many of these poems were inspired by the terrible and tragic events through which the world was passing. Others were inspired by thoughts of the mysteries of life and the universe which the discoveries of science reveal to us. Here, for example, is a part of a poem called 'Judgment'. In times of war we commonly hear talk about the 'judgment' of God, by which the speaker means that God punishes the nations for their wrong-doing by the terrible sufferings that war brings. Forgiveness is also thought of, by most people, as being a thing of softness, beauty and love. In the poem 'Judgment' Rabindranath contradicts these common opinions because he feels that they do not go deep enough, and that the whole truth is something different and more wonderful.

"Thy judgment-seat
Is in the woodlands blossoming,
In balmy breezes sweet,
In insects on the grass with humming wing,
In warblings of the birds in spring,
In wave-kissed shores, and fan-like green twigs'
murmuring.

. . . . . .

"O Love, Thy judgment-chamber lies
Within the wordless pain of love with sleepless eyes;
In heart's blood shed by friends,
In love's awaiting through the night that never ends.

. . . . . .

"And Thy forgiveness fierce
As the terrific storm appears . . .
O Lord of dreaded name,
Thy grim forgiveness dire
Is in the crash of thunder-fire,
In ruin that's writ in sunset-flame, . . .
In sudden blind collision's clash and roar."

Rabindranath's mind, however, was not occupied completely by grave and serious matters, and his thoughts were not always filled with the sorrows and sufferings of war. Men fought and suffered and died, but the sun and the wind and the rain still made the earth beautiful, and at each returning spring the glory of new leaf and fragrant blossom clothed the world once more. The lovely musical play *Falguni,* called in English "The Cycle of Spring", was written and acted at Santiniketan in the spring of 1915.

Even when we can only read *Falguni* in English, without all its music and colour and movement, we can enjoy something of the gay, high-spirited fun which makes the whole play run like a laughing river. There is first the prologue, which is, and is meant to be, ridiculous. The King finds two grey hairs behind his ear, and begins to think gloomily about Death. He listens to the pandit's solemn, joyless words about "renunciation", and refuses to do any of his State business. Then comes the Poet who promises the King a play—a play which "is not meant to have any sense", but only music; which has "no philosophy in it, thank goodness", but only the joy of living; which can't even be classified by any of the rules which learned men say that plays should follow! The subject, he says, is stolen from the drama of the World Poet; it is "The Disrobing of Winter".

Then comes the play itself. There are human actors, a crowd of lively boys who have sworn to catch the "Old Man" in his dark cave—this mysterious "Old Man" whom everyone fears. There is *Dada*, who thinks that all poetry should have a "meaning" and a "moral", and that it must be all "explained"—what fun Rabindranath pokes at him! There is the blind minstrel, who "sees with his whole body and mind and soul", and who sings the most lovely songs, lovely even in the translation. There are also the fairies, the spirits of the flowers and the south wind and of youth and beauty and spring itself. The stage is no sooner left empty by the human actors than these green spring fairies invade it with their happy, triumphant music, teasing Old Winter till his mask falls off and he is revealed as Spring. It is a wonderful play for children. When it was acted, Rabindranath himself was the blind minstrel, and one or two of the adult members of the *ashrama* took some of the "grown-up" parts in the Prologue; but it was the children who made the play so joyful, and even the tiniest of them had a place among the flower fairies. Early in 1916 *Falguni* was acted again in Calcutta, to raise money for famine relief in Bengal. There were two things in it which those who saw it could never forget. One was the marvellous beauty of Rabindranath's acting and singing as the blind minstrel. The other was the fairy music. "It brought the very spirit of the wild woods into the crowded city," writes a member of the audience. "This is how the spirits of the bamboo, the spirit of the south wind and the spirits of the flowers might sing, if they took human voice."

During the winter of 1916-17 Rabindranath went abroad once more, this time to Japan and the United

States. When he first arrived in Japan, he received a great welcome from the Japanese Government and people. They welcomed him as a poet of a sister nation of the East, and many public and private meetings were held in his honour. The Japanese people are great lovers of beauty, and Rabindranath quickly made many friends among them, especially among poets and artists. He felt that this love of beauty in them was the source of their heroism, and he wanted his own country to learn this lesson from Japan. "This love of beauty is the source of her (Japan's) heroic spirit of renunciation," he wrote. "The renunciation blossoms on the vigorous soil of beauty and joy . . . . We need in India more fulness of life, and not asceticism."

Rabindranath admired the joy and courage of Japanese life, but he did not admire the policy of the Japanese Government. He saw the spirit of hate and greed, even then, in its attitude towards China. He disliked the exaggerated honour which was given in Japan to endurance in duelling and in other forms of fighting. On one occasion he was asked to write some verses to be carved on a memorial stone to two Japanese heroes. The story was that the two men, who had some private dispute, had met and fought all day. In the evening, both lay dying of wounds, and the Japanese held in honour the spot where this fatal struggle had taken place. Rabindranath was filled with pity at the story. It seemed to him a waste of human life which God had intended for a nobler use. These are the verses he wrote:

"They hated and killed, and men praised them;
But God in shame hastened to hide its memory
under the green grass."

Rabindranath gave a series of lectures at the University of Tokyo. He chose as his subject, "Nationalism". In these lectures he spoke plainly of the dangers and evils of national pride, and criticised the life of the modern nation-states. In modern tendencies he saw three chief evils. The first of these evils is "government by machinery". The poor man is made to feel that there is no ruler who really cares for him, but that government is like a great engine which goes forward on its fixed path, whether he is ruined or not. The second great evil is the narrow, selfish, desire for wealth and power for their own country which makes men blind to the rights of other people. He openly condemned Japan's actions in China, and said that no country could be really great or happy if it did not consider the laws of right and wrong more important than its own success or wealth. A few years later he said the same thing to his own people in India. "My countrymen have no patience with me." he wrote, "for I believe God to be higher than my country." The third great evil of nationalism is that the modern nation allows great social injustice and does not make any real effort to improve the life of the common people. The poor workers of Japan, he knew, had very low wages, long hours and bad housing.

Rabindranath spoke to the Japanese as a friend, believing that to speak the unpleasant truth is sometimes the duty of a friend. He would have said the same to any other of the nation-states, for the same evils were, and still are, to be found in many parts of the world. But it is not surprising that his honesty cost him his popularity in Japan. The government and its supporters withdrew the honour they had shown

him, and the remainder of his visit was not a very happy time.

For the rest of the war period Rabindranath remained in India busy with many kinds of work. He was still fighting his battle to make Bengali the medium of instruction in Bengal schools, and pleading for teaching with life in it, in harmony with children's needs. He wrote a short, amusing satire called 'The Parrot's Training'. The "ignorant" parrot, which sang and flew in freedom, is "educated" by being imprisoned in the golden cage and stuffed with "copies of copies of copies" of text-books. Its wings are cut and its feet are chained. When at last it lies dead, and only the paper stuffing rustles when it is poked, everyone is quite satisfied that its education is complete!

In literature, Rabindranath was doing his best to help those who were writing in the simple "spoken Bengali" style, and his house in Calcutta was a famous meeting-place of writers. In politics he became once more an active member of the National Congress, and inspired thousands of people by his beautiful songs. At home, he had another great sorrow in the death of his eldest daughter in May, 1918. All the time, the work of the Santiniketan School was going quietly on. As the months went by, Rabindranath thought more and more of how India might make her contribution to a new and better world. He formed the idea of a World University; its outline grew clearer in his mind, and before the end of 1918 the foundation stone of Visva-Bharati was laid at Santiniketan. The work of Visva-Bharati began only in July, 1919, and it will be described in the next chapter. But before it had begun, a new and terrible event once more

brought India and Rabindranath before the eyes of the world.

At Amritsar, on April 13, 1919, General Dyer ordered his troops to open fire on a dense crowd which had assembled in the Jallianwallah Bagh, and hundreds of people were killed and wounded. Martial Law was proclaimed in the Punjab and, although news was strictly censored, accounts of the terrible things which took place there soon reached Rabindranath. He felt deep anger and shame at the attitude of the Government and went to Calcutta to persuade the political leaders there to organise a public protest. He promised that he would preside at a public meeting if they would arrange one. But the leaders refused to do anything, so Rabindranath made up his mind to protest alone. On May 30, he wrote to the Viceroy and resigned the knighthood which the King had conferred on him in 1915. He said in his letter that he was ashamed to hold any honour while so many of his countrymen were being treated in a way "not fit for human beings", and that he wished to stand by their side without any special distinctions. He never used his title again.

In making this protest Rabindranath did not speak as a politician. He expressed the feelings of the whole Indian nation at the tragedy which had occurred, and India loved and honoured him for his protest. Neither did he speak in the name of India alone. He spoke out as a man, against a wrong done to humanity. Because he loved England, counted Englishmen among his great friends, and believed that equal co-operation between the two countries would bring the utmost blessing to both, he could not bear any injustice, on either side, which would hinder their co-operation.

## CHAPTER X

## VISVA-BHARATI

WHAT is Visva-Bharati? It is Rabindranath Tagore's international university at Santiniketan. Its name means "University" in its true sense—a place of universal knowledge, or "world culture" as it is often translated. It also contains the idea of the union of the world (*Visva*) and India (*Bharat*) to seek this knowledge. Its motto is: *Yatra visvam bhavati ekanidam*—"Where the whole world meets in one place."

Rabindranath himself has described for us the thoughts and hopes which led to the establishment of Visva-Bharati in the years which followed the war. After the school at Santiniketan had become established and worked for a number of years, he was seized by a "new restlessness of spirit" and a desire to find "freedom in a larger world of men and things". As the years passed he began to discover little by little what this "larger world" should be.

Rabindranath was fascinated by the descriptions in Indian literature of the ancient Indian University of Nalanda. He felt keenly that modern India had a great need for such a truly national university, something which should be a natural expression of all that was best in Indian thought, art, and civilization. He saw in the existing modern universities of India nothing but copies of institutions which had grown naturally in the West, but which were foreign to this country. These universities were tied to a foreign

system of education ; a student could not go to them and find there what *India* had to give. But as Rabindranath began to think this out, his thoughts quickly passed beyond the borders of India. "I experienced the want of an institution in India," he writes, "which should be a true centre for all the different Eastern cultures." He goes on to mention by name the three main cultures of which he was thinking—the civilisation of India itself, that of the Far East and that of Islam.

We have already seen how during the period of the war, events had compelled Rabindranath to declare his faith in free co-operation between nations, in a world-wide brotherhood, as the natural end of human history. His two English colleagues at Santiniketan, Andrews and Pearson, helped him to realise that Santiniketan itself might play a part in this world brotherhood. Then in 1920, he paid another visit to the west, during which he travelled widely in different European countries. He received a tremendous welcome wherever he went. The goodwill with which he was received made him feel that he had a great responsibility. It was his duty to do whatever he could to "bring about a true meeting of the East and the West, beyond the boundaries of politics and race and creed". So, he decided, Santiniketan must open its doors to "lovers of truth and of men from all parts of the world".

In accordance with the Poet's thought, the work of Visva-Bharati can be thought of as growing up in three concentric circles. The innermost circle is the circle of India. Rabindranath, the patriot, wanted Indians to learn to understand and love all the treasures of their own country. The social traditions,

literature, art, and music of India contain rich treasures which vary from place to place. Rabindranath saw clearly that it was not enough to know only one's own province, language or religion. He himself loved Bengal deeply, but he never forgot that Bengal is only one part of India. It is good that love should be deep, but it must not be narrow. It is right that a Muslim should feel proud of the greatness of Islam, that a Bengali should be proud of his musical language, and that a Tamil should be proud of the saints and poets of the Tamil Nad. But, said Rabindranath, this good and rightful pride will become a false and poisonous one if we do not also respect and honour different forms of greatness in other provinces, languages and creeds. Viṣva-Bharati, therefore, welcomes students from every part of India. They live together in the same hostels and eat in the same dining-room. Even in the matter of food, they learn to enjoy the dishes of other provinces! In the Music School, the Manipuri dance from Assam is taught side by side with the Kathakali from Travancore. Students learn to appreciate and understand Rabindranath's modern Bengali music and at the same time to take an interest in the traditional schools. The Art School has in its museum treasures from every part of India—paintings, carvings, pottery, embroideries—which are placed in turn, one by one, in a special case in the centre of the *ashrama*, where everyone can see and enjoy them. In the library, scholars and advanced students are working to increase our knowledge of ancient and mediaeval India, both through Sanskrit and Hindi, and through Persian and Islamic studies. They give talks and lectures on their work which are open to all. Visva-Bharati makes full use of its visitors! Very few

are allowed to escape without sharing their special knowledge or skill. The Gujerati or Hindi poet must recite his poetry, and if possible explain the literary movements of his province. The musician must play his instrument, the orator must show his oratory. They all contribute to that interest in and respect for the achievements of other provinces which Rabindranath wished to see.

The second circle is the circle of Asia. Persia and India, Ceylon, Burma and Malaya, Thibet, China and Japan, are all parts of one great continent. Travellers, traders and teachers have journeyed to and fro across this continent for thousands of years. China and India are the homes of civilizations which are thousands of years old. The teaching of Gautama Buddha was first given in India, but it has spread through Asia, and millions of people in every corner of the continent are now called by his name. His ideas have spread more widely still. Therefore, in many ways, it is easier for the people of these lands to understand each other's ideas and customs than it is for Englishmen and Indians to understand each other.

Of Visva-Bharati's links with other parts of Asia, the department of Chinese studies has up to the present made the greatest progress. In 1921 Professor Sylvain Levi, a great French student of eastern languages, came to help Rabindranath to arrange for the study of Chinese and Thibetan civilisation. Two or three years later Rabindranath himself paid a visit to China, where he made many friends and became a warm admirer of the Chinese people. Cheena-Bhavana was built up as a special department of Visva-Bharati for Chinese and Thibetan study. It now has a library of valuable books both

in Chinese and Thibetan; and Chinese, Thibetan and Indian scholars have all shared in its work. A number of young Chinese students come to Santiniketan to study in this and other departments.

The beautiful handicrafts and arts of Japan and China, Malay and Thailand, Java and Sumatra, and other Asiatic countries, can be seen in the Art School Museum. From time to time students from all these lands have been enrolled in one or other department of Visva-Bharati. In this way the students are helped to realise that no country is ever completely independent of other countries in its thought, or art or civilization. The history of Asia is the story of a great give and take between the different nations. Each one owes much of its own beauty to other nations.

The third circle is the world circle, which includes along with Asia the civilisations of the West, of Europe and America. Every invader in Indian history, from the Aryans onwards, has contributed something of value to the rich civilization of the country. Rabindranath believed that the British people also, the latest comers, have a valuable contribution to make. India must not turn her back on western culture, but study and understand it, and learn the lessons it can teach her. "I know Santiniketan will not bring forth its fulness of flowers and fruit if it does not send its roots into the western soil." wrote Rabindranath. Even in the midst of the anger that followed the Amritsar shootings, and although he himself shared that anger, Rabindranath reminded his countrymen that the West did not acquire even its material strength by brute force only. Material strength is itself an achievement of the spirit. It is

the reward of courage, perseverance, and the clear-sighted use of scientific knowledge. Rabindranath welcomed western teachers and western students into Visva-Bharati. They learn much from India and the East, and they are able to give something of their own in return. During the first twenty years of its existence, teachers and students from almost every country in Europe, and from the United States of America, have helped to make Visva-Bharati a real world university.

It is the law of Visva-Bharati that there shall be in it no barriers of caste or creed, and no test of religious belief imposed on the students. Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Parsee, Buddhist, Christian, Jew—all are to be equally welcome, and each is to be encouraged to give to Visva-Bharati the very best of his own faith. In the hostels and the dining-halls, the students all live and eat together, and divisions according to province, race, religion or caste are not allowed. But Rabindranath loved truth too much to pretend that all religions are the same. He knew that they are not the same; each sees some aspect of truth with special clearness and builds up its greatest teaching round the truth it sees. He asked the members of his university to be loyal to their own vision of truth, to respect the vision of others, and to study the best and highest both of their own and other faiths. He arranged that Santiniketan should celebrate an annual festival of each of the world's greatest religious leaders, so that the students might have an opportunity of learning about their teaching.

Visva-Bharati was formally opened on December 22, 1921, exactly twenty years after the foundation of the Santiniketan school, and on the anniversary of the

*ashrama.* In his speech at the opening ceremony Rabindranath explained his purpose and his hopes. In former centuries, he said, there was not so much intercourse as there is now between the different parts of the world. Travel was slow and difficult, and each great civilization grew up separate from the others, with very little knowledge of the outside world. Nowadays these civilizations are forced to come into touch with very little knowledge of the outside world. Now-broken down; they can no longer live as if in their own private houses, taking no notice of their neighbours. Those who cannot learn to co-operate in the public market-place of the world will perish.

"I have founded Visva-Bharati," said Rabindranath, "as a school in which men of different civilisations and traditions may learn to live together. You may think it is a very small place in which to begin such a huge task. The smallness of the beginning does not frighten me. All great ideas have to be born, like men, as very small babies. Visva-Bharati is a big idea. If it is alive, it will grow, as all living things grow. People who are anxious to see a big outward form, imposing buildings, and large sums of money, do not really believe in the power of the living Truth, which can grow and spread from very small beginnings." He was not even troubled at the thought that his plan might fail. It was his duty to God to make the attempt. If he did his best, and did not succeed, he would still have done his duty. "We prove our worthiness for God's gift of responsibility by acceptance of it, and not by success or anything else," he wrote.

Some of the poet's dreams for his university have not yet been realised in their completeness. The great

idea which began as a small baby in 1921 is still growing. Rabindranath believed much too strongly in the need of *life* in education to start a new thing with money and buildings and organization, without having the right people to whom he could entrust it. He was content to wait, and trust in "the power of the living Truth", which would in good time attract the right men to the task. So there is still no study of the other great cultures of the world on the same scale as the Chinese—that is a task for the future. There is still no international department of music, where study of European music could be taken up alongside that of Indian music, and the two great traditions compared. But twenty years is not very long in the life of a university, and when we look back on them, we are amazed that the faith and vision of one man should have been able to do all that has been done already.

The establishment of Visva-Bharati coincided with the political non-co-operation movement of 1921. From the time of Mahatma Gandhi's first visit to Santiniketan in 1915 the two great men remained very close friends. Each served India in his own way, and each had the greatest admiration for the other's work. In an article written during the non-co-operation days, the Mahatma gave Rabindranath the title of "The Great Sentinel"—the man who watched faithfully over the true interests of his country, to guard her from evil both from within and without. Both worked together to keep the non-co-operation movement true to the highest ideals of national freedom, for both knew that the ideals of international co-operation, for which Visva-Bharati stood, could only be shared by India as a free and independent nation.

## CHAPTER XI

## SRINIKETAN

Ever since Rabindranath took charge of the affairs of the family estates at Shileidah and elsewhere, he had taken a great interest in the condition of the villages of Bengal. He believed that the country could never have real freedom or happiness until the villagers became independent and self-reliant. Therefore, one of the best services he could render to India was to help the villagers to shake off their feelings of helplessness and realise that they had power to help themselves. At the same time Rabindranath knew very well how difficult this task was. To succeed in it, a man needed not only enthusiasm and patience, but a thorough and accurate knowledge of the district in which he worked.

In Rabindranath's opinion, an important part of the work of a university is to gather accurate knowledge about village conditions, and discover how to use that knowledge to solve village problems. Villages form by far the largest part of India, and Rabindranath believed that a really Indian university must be in close touch with them. He, therefore, included the study and service of the villages among his plans for Visva-Bharati. In this his eldest son, Rathindranath, who had studied agriculture for three years in the United States of America, was well qualified to help him. Rabindranath refused to begin any rural reconstruction work without the aid of men who had had some similar scientific training. He knew that inter-

ference with village life by ignorant persons would probably do more harm than good.

Round Santiniketan are many villages inhabited not by Bengalis but by the ancient tribe of the Santals, whose language and customs are very different from those of Bengal itself. They are a sturdy, honest, independent people, full of merriment and energy. In the old days, when Devendranath first came to Santiniketan, a good deal of dacoity was still carried on across their lonely, barren country. Nowadays they do all the hardest outdoor work of the district. Rabindranath was strongly attracted to them, and in the work he now planned he had their welfare in mind no less than that of the Bengali villagers.

When Rabindranath was in England in 1913, he had bought a large house on the edge of the village of Surul, about two miles from Santiniketan. This house was now ready for use as the headquarters of the new village work. His son was trained; other friends were eager to help. In 1921 an Englishman, L. K. Elmhirst, came to India to help to develop the rural service department of Visva-Bharati. He was a man who had devoted himself to English village problems, and who had also had much experience in America. On February 6, 1922, only a few weeks after the formal opening of Visva-Bharati, the centre at Surul was formally opened with the name of "Sriniketan".

The word "sri" contains the idea of prosperity, of welfare resulting from activity and growing into healthy beauty. The name Sriniketan, therefore, reveals Rabindranath's hopes and ideals. He wished to make the village centre "a home of welfare and beauty".

Like the other departments of Visva-Bharati, Sriniketan grew slowly from small beginnings to its present form. The old house is used for necessary offices and library. To one side of it are the cottages of the Sriniketan staff and their families ; on the other side is a stretch of farm land. The farm has helped the farmers of the district to introduce improved crops which can be grown successfully in their soil. It is a dry and poor soil, where some of the improved crops recommended by the Government Agricultural Departments will not grow. But if new strains succeeded in the Sriniketan farm, the local farmers were encouraged to try them, and in this way better kinds of rice and sugar-cane have been introduced into the villages. Another difficulty is that, in this treeless country, a great deal of the surface soil is carried away every year by the heavy rains, and over large areas nothing but gravel and rock remains—they are deserts where nothing will grow. Sriniketan workers are trying to find the best way of preventing this loss and building up the soil again. There is also a dairy, one of whose aims is to find the cheapest and most practical way of providing proper fodder for the cattle during the long dry season when there is no good pasture to be found in the fields. There is an orchard, and villagers are encouraged to grow more fruit trees in their courtyards for their own use, and on their land as a money crop. Healthy young trees of good varieties can be bought from the farm at a cheap rate.

Health and medical services form a very important department at Sriniketan. Most of the work is done through Health Co-operative Societies in the villages. Each family in the village pays a small annual contribution to the Co-operative Society. With this money

a doctor's salary is paid. The doctor lives in the village and has a dispensary where the members of the Society can get free advice and treatment, and buy medicines at cost price. If the doctor has to visit the patients in their homes, a small fee is charged for each visit, and the money collected in this way belongs to the Society. If there are not enough families in one village to pay for a doctor, several neighbouring villages are grouped together to make one Society. The doctor not only treats people when they are ill, but also tries to prevent sickness by teaching them healthy habits and how to destroy mosquitoes. A village with a Co-operative Society spends on medicine only about one third or one quarter of what it was spending before; and at the same time the amount of malaria in the villages has been greatly reduced. This department also has had its international aspect. It received very valuable help from Dr. Harry Timbres, an American expert in anti-malarial work, who spent several years at Sriniketan with his family.

A Health Society will not succeed if a man says to himself, "This year I and my family have had no sickness. What is the use of paying money to the Society for the doctor? I will stop paying now, I will pay only when I fall ill." If the village is to get real benefit and be kept healthy and free from infection, all must pay regularly. So the success of a Health Co-operative Society depends on the intelligent understanding of the villagers, and their willingness to help one another. It is one example of what Rabindranath had seen from the beginning, that very little can be done unless the people themselves learn habits of helpfulness and co-operation. Sriniketan, therefore, has an education department. It does not run village

A ceremony at Santiniketan

schools or pay village teachers—that is done by the local government—but it tries to help the village children in two ways.

The first method is to help them indirectly, through the teachers. If all village teachers loved and understood children as well as Rabindranath did, and had as clear an idea of how their teaching could serve the villages, how many difficulties would vanish! The Sriniketan staff make friends with the teachers, get to know their difficulties, and try to help them to improve their teaching. They also have, in Sriniketan, a training school for teachers where the course is specially planned to give the students both a knowledge of village problems and some practical experience of village work, and where their enthusiasm, too, may be roused.

The second method is to get into touch with the boys themselves, and this is done by means of scout troops. The scouts are called *Brati Balak,* and Rabindranath wrote for them a little four-line verse which is used as their Scout promise. It is a promise to help people in need or in trouble whenever and however they can. In the scout meetings, the boys learn all kinds of interesting and useful things which are not taught in the village school. They learn to keep themselves clean and healthy, to be alert and smart, to put out village fires. They grow vegetables in their own homes, and learn which vegetables are most valuable in their diet. They learn how to recognise and use the plants, trees and fruits which have medicinal value, and where they are to be found in their neighbourhood. They help the village doctor by reporting cases of illness and fetching medicine for the patients from the dispensary. They fight mosqui-

toes by clearing jungle and cleaning dirty village tanks, and they keep the village roads clean and well-drained. One scout troop in a very poor village not only had a private vegetable garden in every scout's home, but a common garden for the troop also. They sold the produce of the common garden in the local bazaar and used the money to buy their school books. There is plenty of fun in the scout activities, and they have games and singing, stories and dramas, games and excursions, where work and play are combined.

In this way the scout troops for the village boys are made centres of training in habits of mutual helpfulness and co-operation. They are an excellent example of the way in which Rabindranath used good ideas from all over the world in the building up of his Indian centre of education and service. The *Brati Balak* troops owe a great debt to the genius of Robert Baden-Powell, the founder of the English Boy Scouts, and his insight into the needs of boys; Rabindranath studied his methods, saw where their value lay, and adapted them to the needs of the Indian village boy.

Most of the village schools are only primary schools, and Rabindranath knew that some of the most intelligent boys ought to have more education than they could obtain there, so as to be really useful leaders in their villages. At Sriniketan there is a central boarding school for village boys, to which they come when they are eight or nine years old and stay till they are fifteen or sixteen. Here, through the study of Bengal history and literature, the reading of biography and the discussion of current events, their outlook on life is widened. Science and mathematics have their place. The boys go on with their gardening, and they begin to learn some craft, such as weaving

or pottery. They do not usually take any public examination.

In order to encourage young men and women to go on reading and keep their interest in the outside world even after they leave school, Rabindranath made a plan for home reading in subjects of general knowledge. The students who take up this course of home reading are encouraged by the award of junior, intermediate, and advanced certificates when they successfully complete each course. Rabindranath was deeply interested in the scheme, and wrote several of the books for it himself. Sriniketan also published a little magazine written in very simple Bengali, which contained important items of news of general interest, and articles about things which are of special interest to villagers. This little magazine was most helpful in adult education. Rabindranath always insisted that "adult education" did not mean only the teaching of adult pupils how to read and write; it meant also helping them to think, to lead a life of healthy interests and, therefore, of happiness. Reading brings joy, but only if there are worthy things to be read.

The Silpa-Bhavana, the school of crafts, is a very important department of Sriniketan. A full training is given to older boys in industries which will help them to earn their living in the future. The carpentry section makes furniture, and all the necessary doors, windows and other woodwork for houses. The weaving section makes saries, carpets, towels, and many other useful things. Book-binding is taught and leather objects such as sandals and purses are also made. The pottery section makes cups and saucers, teapots, jugs and flower-vases. In all the sections, the aim is to keep in close touch with the art school and

artists at Santiniketan, and to make all the productions beautiful in colour and design. The Silpa-Bhavana has a shop in Calcutta at which its goods are sold. The boys are given wages as soon as they have learned to make things which are good enough to sell.

When the rains fail and there is famine in the villages, the Sriniketan workers are able to give great help. They know the villagers well and are trusted by them. They know which of the people are most in need of help, and they work with the government officials in the arrangements for relief.

Rabindranath tried to bring to the villages round Srinikétan not only more money, but also more interest in life, more happiness and more enjoyment, for he thought these things to be just as important as money. He did not care that the work should spread over a very wide area. He used to say that if a man could bring real joy and happy co-operation into one small village, his life would have been well spent. That would be true *swaraj*. Rabindranath never forgot that there could be no real independence for the nation except through the independence of spirit of all its countless villages. The greatness of the villages was the test of the greatness of India, the happiness of the villages the test of the happiness of India. The poet longed to make every village in India a Sriniketan, a home of welfare and beauty.

## CHAPTER XII

## RABINDRANATH THE STORY-TELLER

DURING the four or five years that followed the war of 1914-19, Rabindranath had founded a university with world-wide interests and great ideals ; he had taken an active part in the Indian national movement at a time of grave crisis ; he had thrown himself with enthusiasm and devotion into the work of village uplift. Any one of these would have been sufficient to use up the energy of any ordinary man. But they did not exhaust the energy of Rabindranath, although he was over sixty years old at this time. During these years he was also writing, translating, and supervising the publication of his various works. Both in England and in America translations of poetry, short stories, novels and lectures were being published, and translations were also being made into many of the other languages of Europe. In 1923 he founded the *Visva-Bharati Quarterly*. This is a literary magazine published once in three months which carries on the work of Visva-Bharati by means of articles on many aspects of Indian, Asiatic and world civilization, and discussions of literary and artistic subjects. For some time Rabindranath himself edited this magazine, and he wrote at least one article or poem in every number from the beginning till the year of his death. While he was travelling in Europe and elsewhere, Rabindranath kept in close touch with Santiniketan by means of long letters to his friend, Andrews, there. Many of these were afterwards published with the title *Letters to a Friend*. There is

much wisdom in them, much shrewd comment on the affairs of India and of Europe, but also there is a great deal of fun. Rabindranath loved a joke.

"Once upon a time the kid went to Brahma weeping. 'How does it happen,' he asked, 'that I am used as food by all living beings?' 'Alas! What can I do, my son?' replied Brahma. 'Why, when I look at you, even I am tempted to munch you!'" That is an old story, one which Rabindranath enjoyed very much. It is quoted by a French admirer in a preface to the translation of one of his novels. The writer then goes on to describe how many people in his country, who knew only Rabindranath's religious poetry, and his essays on serious historical and philosophical problems, found it difficult to think of him as a real human being. They did not connect his tall, stately, bearded figure with the actual daily common life of the country where he had been born; they thought of him as a kind of divine prophet far above ordinary human affairs. But, says the writer, great saints and thinkers in India have nearly all had a very good sense of humour and Rabindranath has it too. To understand his humorous sympathy with ordinary life and ordinary people we must read his novels and short stories.

Many of Rabindranath's charming short stories are built up round little memories of his own childhood and boyhood. One example is the story called 'The Skeleton'. When he was a small boy a human skeleton used to hang in the children's study-room and he and his brother learned from it the names of the different bones in the body. When the wind blew, the bones rattled together, but the children were so used to it that they did not mind in the least. In the story, the skeleton on the wall comes to life in his

dreams, and tells him about its own life as a beautiful young woman.

In *My Boyhood Days* Rabindranath tells us how, as a child, he was attracted by the strange servants from the Punjab and other distant parts of India, whom his father would sometimes bring home after his travels. Hawkers too, especially "up-country" hawkers, had a great fascination for him. The story of 'The Cabuliwallah' reflects this childish love for hawkers and for travellers from distant lands. The story of 'Hungry Stones', which was one of the fruits of his stay with his brother at Ahmedabad when he was seventeen years old, has already been mentioned. A young government official is sent to live in an ancient palace for the purpose of his work. The thought of the life of the old days there so fills his imagination that he dreams of it by night and thinks of it even by day ; the "hungry stones" of the ancient buildings have caught him in their magic prison, and he only escapes into the "real world" again with the greatest difficulty.

The subjects of Rabindranath's short stories are very simple and the events in them are very few. He takes ordinary men and women of the city or village, and enables us to enter into their daily lives and share their feelings so that the commonest events become deeply interesting to us. There is Subha, the little dumb village girl, her parents' third daughter. "All the world seemed to think that because she did not speak, therefore she did not feel." Knowing herself unwanted, the child makes friends with the two cows, with Pratap the idle lad of the village, with the quiet river, and "Earth, her strong silent Mother", and shrinks from other human society. But caste and custom demand her marriage. A bridegroom is sought

for, an interview arranged, Subha is required to go with her parents to Calcutta. "Her parents were dizzy with anxiety and fear when they saw the god arrive to select the beast for his sacrifice . . . The great man, after scanning her for a long time, observed, "Not so bad". Luckily, till after the marriage is safely accomplished, no one expects a bride to talk! The parents returned home satisfied. "Thank God! their caste in this and their safety in the next world were assured!" . . . But as for Subha, "she looked on every hand, she found no speech, she missed the faces, familiar from birth, of those who had understood a dumb girl's language." So the simple picture is drawn, beautiful in its tender description of the child's silent friendships, and biting in its satire of the degrading marriage customs that condemn her to misery and loneliness in a distant land.

An almost equally simple story is that called 'The Home-Coming'. Here the hero is a boy, the "black sheep" Phatik, neglected and misunderstood by his mother, who pours all her affection on his spoiled younger brother. An uncle offers to take him to Calcutta and educate him there with his own children, and Phatik goes with him joyfully. But alas, his uncle's wife grudges him his place in the house, and the awkward, fourteen-year-old boy, starved of the affection which he has missed all his life, and longing in vain to feel that he is of some use to someone, soon wishes with all his soul for the holidays and home. When finally he gets an attack of malaria, he dare not face the thought of giving his aunt any more trouble by his illness, and desperately tries to leave Calcutta and make his way home to his village through the storms of August rain. His fever increased by expo-

sure and exhaustion, he is brought back to his uncle's house to die. "Mother, the holidays have come."

The greatness of Rabindranath's little stories lies in the beautiful simplicity and understanding with which they are told. They are all filled with the light of the vision which he had seen so long before in Calcutta—the vision which showed him the glory hidden in common lives, and the joy which flows from man to nature and from nature to man.

Some of Rabindranath's short stories are full of fun and witty talk, with a joke in every line. Often, when he had finished a new story, the poet would read it aloud one evening to a group of his friends and students at Santiniketan, and enjoy the laughter which followed every joke. The story came alive, the reader's eyes twinkled with fun, and the listeners listened with "all their ears", unwilling to lose a single word. The poet's musical, expressive voice, and his great sense of humour, made these readings a special treat.

Rabindranath's short stories and novels taken together give the reader a wonderful picture of the home life of Bengal, and of the changes which have come over it during this last changeful century. The most famous of his longer novels is *Gora*. It describes a section of Calcutta society as it was when Rabindranath himself was a young man, for the hero, Gora, was born in 1857, the year of the Mutiny, four years before the poet. Part of the interest of the story lies in the fact that the readers are told very early in the book—what Gora himself does not know until the last chapter—that he is not really the son of the Hindu father and mother who have brought him up from babyhood, but is the orphan child of British parents. In the

confusion of the Mutiny the foster parents had adopted the helpless baby and brought him up as their own. Gora grew up with a deep love for India, and became a strong nationalist leader, and a very enthusiastic and devoted Hindu—not because of religious feeling so much as because he regarded Hinduism as the national religion. In Gora's character Rabindranath has drawn a picture of the best kind of neo-Hindu nationalist, ready to work and to suffer, with high and noble ideals. Some of the companions with whom he works are not so noble. The main interest of the story is in how Gora and his friend, Binoy, get to know a family which belongs to the Brahmo Samaj, whose customs are different from their own, and in some ways westernised. Gora is torn between his dislike of their customs and his respect for the saintly father of the family and his educated, intelligent daughters. There are narrow and proud Brahmos in the story as well as narrow Hindus. There are also some most beautiful women characters, not only the charming Brahmo girls, but also the unselfish and broad-minded Anandamoyee, Gora's adopted mother.

*The Home and the World* is one of Rabindranath's most popular novels. In *Gora* there are a great many interesting characters, but in this novel there are only three people of importance, a husband and wife, and the husband's friend who comes to stay at their house. The husband, Nikhil, belongs to a rich land-owning family, and is the first member of that family to have had a modern education. He, like Gora, is a patriot, and he expresses his patriotism by seeking ways to give practical help to the village people round about his home. The novel is planned so that each of the three main characters tells a part

of the story in turn, speaking from his or her point of view. In Nikhil's conversations with his wife and his friend, and in his description of his own opinions, we can see that Nikhil expresses Rabindranath's own convictions about national service. His friend, Sandip, has a different point of view; he preaches destruction of foreign goods, and would like to put his own party in power by force. Nikhil spends his money on encouraging *swadeshi* cloth, but he refuses to force the villagers to buy it by forbidding the sale of foreign cloth in the market which is held on his land. Sandip, who has done nothing practical for *swadeshi*, shouts that foreign cloth should be burnt. Rabindranath gives us a picture of a poor, innocent man who is ruined, partly by the tyranny of the landlord who is Nikhil's neighbour (an old kind of injustice) and partly by Sandip's thoughtless followers who burn the whole stock of goods on which his living depends (a new kind of injustice). Meantime, Nikhil gives a great deal of loving care to the education of his young girl-wife. She herself, however, is carried away for a time by the teachings of Sandip. When her English woman teacher, who has been her friend for so long, is forced to leave the district because of the behaviour of Sandip's followers, Nikhil goes with her to the station and treats her with justice and courtesy to the end—but his wife is almost ready to consider him a traitor to his own country for doing so! The interest of the story, however, does not lie so much in the outward events as in the relationships between the three main characters, and the way in which each describes the development of his or her own feelings towards the others.

Another story, *Four Chapters*, also contains a very

interesting picture of some of the political movements of the time. *The Wreck* is a story of home life. A boat containing a bridal party is caught in a storm on the river on its return from the wedding, and almost everyone is drowned. The bridegroom is thrown on to a sandbank, and, when he recovers consciousness, he finds close by him a girl dressed in the bridal sari. He has never seen his bride's face, because at the moment of the "auspicious look" during the ceremony, he was too shy to look at her and kept his eyes shut. He naturally thinks that this girl is his little new wife, and when they are rescued he takes her with him. It is not long, however, before he finds that he is mistaken, and that she was a member of a different party. What is he to do? He cannot leave her, for she is quite alone in the world. He cannot tell her the truth, for if he did she would be unwilling to accept his protection. Yet he cannot treat her as his wife! At the end of the story this muddle is happily solved.

Rabindranath wrote stories in verse as well as stories in prose. Many of these are tales from Indian history, full of drama and tragedy and deeds of splendid loyalty and courage. Some of them are Buddhist legends retold by the poet. Rabindranath was very fond of these Buddhist legends, and used some of them over again as subjects for his plays. *Natir Pujah* (The Dancing Girl's Worship) is a play based upon one of these story poems, and *Chandalika* and *Shyama* also make use of Buddhist legends. Some of the story poems are about recent events. One of these is a poem called 'Sea-Waves', which is a magnificent description of a storm at sea and the wreck of a pilgrim ship.

In the years after 1919 the poet's life was filled

with travel and crowded with activities of all kinds. But he never let his days become so over-crowded with business that he could not enjoy the beauty of the "ordinary" things which surrounded him. In one poem he describes the humble beauty of the tiny river Kopai near Santiniketan, which he now loves so much; he contrasts its harmless friendliness with the terrible strength of the Padma river at Shileidah, in which he rejoiced in his youth. Another poem tells how he watches the Santal girl who is working as a builder's cooly in his compound, hears her merry laughter, and sees the grace of her womanhood which her lowly work cannot hide or spoil. Another poem is a word-picture of a simple old farm labourer plodding along the dusty road towards the market. This joy in human life remained with Rabindranath to the very end. He was a great thinker and teacher, a great patriot and servant of humanity, but first and last and all the time he was a musician, an artist, and a poet. Here is a poem from *Balaka,* written a few years earlier, which expresses what he always felt of the poet's love for the world:

"I've loved this world's face splendour-girt,
With all my heart,
And I have wound
In fold on fold,
My life around it and around;
The gloom of dusk, the gold
Of countless dawns across my soul have rolled,
And sped and passed;
At last
My life today is one
With earth and sea and sky, and moon and sun.
Thus life hath won my heart,
For I have loved this world's face splendour-girt."

## CHAPTER XIII

## PLAYS AND ACTING

No story of Rabindanath's life would be complete without some details of his work for the stage. One of his childhood's memories was of leaning over the verandah with the other children, watching guests arrive at the house, and then listening to the distant sounds of a play being acted by his grown-up brothers and cousins. They could hear the sobbing of the "heroine", whose part in those days, even in the modern society in which the Tagores lived, was taken by a young man. But while Rabindranath and his companions were children, they never had a chance to see these wonders for themselves.

When Rabindranath grew up he shared his brothers' interest both in acting and in writing plays. We have already told how he began to take part in them, with great success, at the age of sixteen, and how, when he was nineteen, he wrote his own first play, *Valmiki Pratibha,* to be acted at home. Many of the other plays which he wrote from time to time have already been mentioned. In this chapter we will describe some interesting and important plays which have not yet been referred to.

Some of Rabindranath's plays consist almost entirely of conversation and action in the style which we are accustomed to see in English plays. In others, the actions and feelings of the characters, and the development of the story, are expressed almost entirely through song and dance. The dialogue is reduced to

a minimum or disappears altogether. But even in those plays where the dialogue is most important there is always some music, and the spirit of the play is expressed through the music. What is more, Rabindranath was a poet in the original meaning of the word. Poet means "maker", and Rabindranath was always making his plays anew. While he lived, each new performance of them was in some way or other a fresh creation. In this way several of the plays, in which a large amount of dialogue exists, have been acted as dance dramas with the spoken parts reduced to a minimum.

*Mukta-dhara* (The Free Current), written in 1922, is one of the most interesting of Rabindranath's dramas It is the story of two kingdoms, Uttarakut and the adjoining land of Shiutarai. Shiutarai is subject to Uttarakut, which, in order to make profit for itself, puts difficulties in the way of Shiutarai's foreign trade. Abhijit, the Crown Prince, who is the Viceroy there, does his best to help Shiutarai by throwing open the roads for trade and excusing the people from paying taxes till better times come. But the government of Uttarakut is not so wise. It punishes Shiutarai for not paying its taxes, by allowing the Royal Engineer to build a dam across the stream of Muktadhara, and so cut off Shiutarai's water-supply. The completion of this dam is celebrated on a festival day, on which the people of Uttarakut are all going to the temple to give thanks. The scene of the play is by the side of the road along which they all pass to and fro. The king and his minister, Abhijit the Crown Prince, the common people of the two kingdoms, Dhananjaya the wandering musician and saint of Shiutarai (whose character has been taken from the earlier play

*Prayaschitta*), the schoolmaster and his boys, all come and go, to and from the temple. This schoolmaster of Uttarakut gives his boys a "parrot's training", not in language but in ideas. In history they learn about nothing but the "glory" of their own country, which always wins its battles and which is always right. They are taught to despise the Shiutarayans because their noses are a different shape from their own!

The political meaning of the story is plain. The schoolmaster of Uttarakut can be found in many countries today, teaching such false and boastful "history", and changing the natural friendliness of children into pride and vanity and contempt for other races. The great Machine which dams the stream stands in the background, overshadowing the temple of God. This machine, which ruins the helpless people of Shiutarai, stands for the "machine government" which Rabindranath had criticised in his lectures on "Nationalism" in Japan. The Engineer who built it cares nothing for God or for the happiness of the Shiutarayans. The oppressed and despairing people want to start a violent rebellion against their rulers. Their saintly leader, Dhananjaya, strongly opposes this, and tells them that only perfect courage in non-violence will be able to help them. Rabindranath puts into the mouth of Dhananjaya his own conviction:

"What is worse than to be crippled in one leg? Kingship is crippled, when it is the king's alone, and not the people's. *You* may shiver with fright to see that one-legged kingship limp along, but the eyes of the gods fill with tears. For the king's own sake, men, you must demand your kingship."

Such words as Dhananjaya's had a very plain meaning with regard to the relationships between

Rabindranath as Valmiki

India and Britain. In the end of the play the Crown Prince, who stands for freedom and merciful justice for Shiutarai, goes out alone to break the Machine and set free the imprisoned waters, although he knows he will be swept to his death in the escaping flood. Throughout the play *sannyasi* devotees, chanting in procession the adoration of Siva the Terrible, have been coming and going across the stage, and their appeal to the Unseen Avenger forms the background of the human drama. Dhananjaya's songs increase the feeling that not only political justice, but the greatest truths of life also, are at stake in the action. There is a magnificent close, as Dhananjaya's triumphant, solemn song welcomes the coming of Freedom in the dance of Siva, and the thunder of the free water rolls majestically in the distance.

*Natir Puja* (The Dancing Girl's Worship), which was written in 1927, is one of Rabindranath's favourite acting plays, and made dramatic history on the Calcutta stage when it was first performed there. For the first time in Calcutta society, girls of good family not only acted, but danced, in public on the stage. Of course there was an outcry of criticism from some quarters, but the story of the play was so noble and the dancing itself so pure and beautiful that the criticism was silenced. The art of dancing was restored, as Rabindranath longed that it should be restored, to its proper place among the honourable arts of India.

The story of the play which made this great impression is a Buddhist legend. Sreemati, the heroine, is a dancing girl at the palace of the Kings of Magadha. The Kingdom has been converted to Buddhism by the preaching of Buddha himself under the *asoka* tree in the royal garden. One of the king's sons has

turned monk ; but the other leads a Hindu party and demands the throne from his father, who under the influence of Buddha willingly yields it and retires to a life of meditation in the forest. He leaves his queen torn between her own reverence for the Buddha and her bitterness at the loss of her husband and son. Ajatasatru, the Hindu prince, leads a storm of reaction, and for the short period during which the action of the play takes place the loyalty of the followers of Buddha is tested to the utmost.

In the prologue a Buddhist monk, coming to the palace for alms, tells Sreemati that the Lord will require from her "her best gift". Sreemati replies that she is ready to give whatever he may ask, but she does not know what her best gift is.

In the scenes which follow, the conflict between the Hindu ideal of social strength and the sanctity of family ties, and the Buddhist ideal of freedom through complete renunciation, is dramatically shown. The crisis comes when Sreemati, the dancing girl, is commanded by the Sangha to act as priestess at the evening worship of Buddha under the *asoka* tree. Ajatasatru forbids the worship on pain of death, and at the same time adds insult to injury by ordering Sreemati to dance that evening in front of the altar where she was to have worshipped. This, as everyone thinks, would be an act of blasphemy. Sreemati, waiting quietly for the voice of the Lord in her heart, sees at last that her "best gift", which she is to make holy by offering to God, is this very gift of music and dance. She dresses with the greatest care in her dancing robes, and, fearless of the guards with their drawn swords, she carries out the command that she has been given. Her song is a song of worship ;

her dance is a dance of worship. Little by little, as it goes on, she casts off her ornaments and rich scarves as offerings before the altar, and stands revealed in the simple dress of a nun. As she kneels before the altar and chants the words of worship, she is struck down by the soldiers of the king. But her fearless devotion has won the victory. As she lies dead at their feet, the proud princesses who have plotted to bring about her death confess that her spirit was more queenly than their own ; and the unhappy queen, her mind at peace, takes on herself for ever the robe of a Buddhist mendicant.

In these two dramas dialogue plays a very important part. As an example of another kind we will take *Chitrangada,* which was written in 1892, and which is a favourite at Santiniketan. Let us imagine ourselves attending a performance there, in the setting for which so many of Rabindranath's plays were originally written.

The play takes place out of doors, the open verandah in front of the library of the *ashrama* being used for the stage. The audience sits on carpets, or on the grass, under the stars, for the performance cannot begin till after night has fallen. The musicians with their instruments sit on one side of the stage, together with the choir which is to sing the songs ; and on the stage in the opposite corner sits the drummer who accompanies the dancing. There is no curtain to be lowered or raised ; the stage is lighted and the action begins.

There is no scenery, but we are to know that the scene is a forest. A hunter enters, and dances a hunting scene to the accompaniment of male voices singing a hunting song. We picture the trees, the

birds, the lovely surroundings. The hunter's work in the play is done, when he has called up the scene in our imagination, and as he leaves, the stage there enters young Prince Arjuna, the great hero, who has sought out these distant forests to perform his twelve-year vow of austerity. His meditation finished, he lies down to sleep, and, splendid in their boyish hunting dress, there enter Princess Chitrangada and her girl companions. Against the plain, dark background the colourful dresses make a lovely picture. Chitrangada is her father's only child, and he has trained her, as if she were his son, in all the duties of a prince. In the midst of their forest revels, the girls find Arjuna's sleeping form in their path and proudly command him to get up. In all this no word is spoken ; the songs of the choir and the movements of the dance tell the story clearly. When Chitrangada finds that it is the hero Arjuna who stands before her, she is seized for the first time in her life with longing for the womanly beauty which she does not possess. With the help of her maidens she dresses in woman's clothes and tries to make herself physically attractive. A little later, as Arjuna is once more engaged in his meditations, she comes before him dressed in all her finery, and tries to tempt him away from his devotions. But he turns away in scorn, leaving Chitrangada in despair.

Now Chitrangada expresses, through her dance with her companions, her longing for the beauty of body which might attract Arjuna to her. She prays to the God of Love, begging to be allowed for just one day to have "all the beauty of the spring", and the God of Love appears to her and grants her desire —not for a day only, but for a year. The boyish Chitrangada disappears from the scene, and her place

is taken by another actor who represents Chitrangada in all her magical, spring-time beauty. This Chitrangada dances with her maidens, and then, alone in all her loveliness, before Arjuna, and is successful in winning him away from his prayers. And yet from the very first, she hates the thought that in all this she is deceiving him, and that her beautiful form is not her real self, but "a flower of a day".

So time passes, with lovely dances representing the life of the maidens in the forest, as they bathe in the rivers, deck themselves and their princess in their robes, and live in pleasure with Arjuna. But from time to time Chitrangada in the midst of her success feels the sadness of her false form. Finally, Arjuna hears from the village people of the neighbourhood the story of their warrior princess, who used to defend them from robbery and injustice, and whom now they can no longer find. Arjuna's imagination is fired ; he asks Chitrangada, when she next visits him, to tell him more of this wonderful princess. She describes to him her lack of beauty, but Arjuna cares nothing for that. Finally, praying that the God of Love will take back his gift, she reveals herself to him as she really is, and "The Spirit of Beauty unadorned, Truth untroubled by Self" is seen triumphant.

## CHAPTER XIV

## THE CITIZEN OF THE WORLD

FROM 1920 onwards Rabindranath travelled a great deal both in India and throughout the world. He was already sixty years old, no longer a young man. Many men at that age feel that they have finished their life's work and are free to rest. But Rabindranath would never rest while there was work to be done and he had strength to do it. Many of these travels were very tiring. Crowds followed him everywhere, and always there was a heavy programme of lectures and entertainments. He received great welcomes in many countries and this gave him great pleasure. But at the same time certain newspapers in England and America were working against him and causing him to be misrepresented, and this opposition wearied him. Very often he wished that he could be at home again in quiet Santiniketan, and forget that he was a famous man.

If he felt like that, you may say, why did he travel? The answer is that he travelled for the sake of Visva-Bharati. He wanted to make it known throughout the world. He wanted to meet scholars in all countries who would be enthusiastic about its ideals and come and help him to carry them out. He wanted to raise money to meet the necessary expense of the university. So he did not yield to his desire to stay at home ; instead, he undertook tour after tour to distant places and to other parts of India.

Here is a list of the travels of Rabindranath outside

Bengal from 1920 onwards. Between 1920 and 1936 there is only one year (1931) in which he did not go outside his own province.

In 1920 he toured Western India, and then spent fourteen months in 1920-21 in Europe and the United States. In 1922 he visited South India and Ceylon. In 1923 he went to Sind and Kathiawar, Assam, and the Western India States. In 1924 he visited first China and Japan and afterwards South America, and spent a short time in Italy on his way home in January, 1925. In 1926 he returned to Italy for a longer visit, and then travelled through Switzerland, Norway, Denmark, Germany, Czecho-slovakia, the Balkans, Greece and Egypt. In 1927 he visited the United Provinces and Central India for a short time, and later he travelled in Malaya, the Netherlands East Indies and Thailand. In 1928 he went once more to South India and Ceylon. In 1929 he went by the Pacific route to Canada, and visited Japan and French Indo-China on his return journey. In 1930 he was invited to Baroda; later in the year he set out again for Europe, visited France, England, Germany, Denmark and Russia, and then went for a short time to the United States. The last time he left India was in 1932 when he travelled by air to Persia as the guest of the Shah and visited Iraq on his way back.

Each year from 1933 to 1936, when he was seventy-five years old, Rabindranath visited a different part of India, usually taking with him a company of Santiniketan actors and musicians to raise money for Visva-Bharati by the performance of his plays. On these tours he went to Bombay, Andhra Desh, Madras, Ceylon, the United Provinces, the Punjab and Bihar. In 1936 Mahatma Gandhi met him in Delhi. Gandhiji

felt ashamed that the people of India should allow their aged poet to go on these wearisome travels in order to raise the money he needed for his university work. He persuaded an anonymous friend to contribute Rs. 60,000 on the spot so that Rabindranath might return home without anxiety. The last time he left Bengal was in 1939 when the Government of Orissa entertained him as their guest at Puri. In addition to these more distant travels he made many journeys, long and short, inside Bengal itself.

In Europe, in 1920, Rabindranath found many things to make him sad. In England he was not popular ; it was the year after the shootings at Amritsar, and he met with misunderstanding and unfriendliness in many places. In Parliament there were debates on the Indian situation and the action of General Dyer. Rabindranath went and listened to some of these debates. They made him feel that England was thinking first of her own interests and trade, and that the British Government of that time was unwilling to listen to India's demands. He wrote to his friends at home that he wanted India to cease to beg favours from Britain, and to labour instead to remove the injustices of Indian society. Social justice would make the nation strong, he said, and it would then have no need to ask favours from anyone.

Many English people objected not only to Rabindranath's protest against the Amritsar shootings, but also to his condemnation of war. Rabindranath visited France while the destruction caused by the war of 1914-19 was still visible. He saw the terrible condition of the ruined villages and farm lands after four years of fighting ; he saw the graves of tens of thousands of young men whose lives had been cut short in the

awful slaughter, who might have given so much to the world. War seemed to him to be like a mad and terrible demon, greedy for human blood, and the enemy of everything that is good, beautiful and true in human life. He understood and respected the noble and unselfish motives of those who had borne the sufferings of the battlefields so bravely for the sake of what they believed to be right. To him, their courage seemed to make it all the more terrible that their lives should be wasted in a useless and senseless murder. For Rabindranath did not believe that the justice and freedom for which they had fought could be reached by the method of war.

From France, Rabindranath went on to Germany. In 1920 Germany was a defeated country, suffering from a terrible famine, and struggling in poverty and starvation to pay the enormous fine which had been imposed on her by the victorious Allies. No other country was then willing to be her friend or to help her in her difficulties. Rabindranath saw the sufferings of ordinary, innocent people, and the weak and diseased little children. "Germany needs sympathy," he wrote. He saw that only generosity and forgiveness could overcome the evils left behind by the war. But the people of France and Britain blamed Germany for the war, and refused to forgive or to help. If Germany had been helped then, she might never have listened to the teachings of the Nazis, and the world might have been saved from the horrors of a second war. Rabindranath and other wise and generous thinkers spoke in vain.

During this visit to Germany, a little incident happened which touched Rabindranath very much. Two German girls came to see him, bringing him

flówers. They could not speak much English, and he knew no German, but one of them said to him, "I love India". "Why do you love India?", asked the poet. "Because you love God," she said. When Rabindranath told this story afterwards, he said, "The praise is too high. I wish it were true. The world is waiting for a country that loves God more than herself."

When Rabindranath went to China in 1924 he did not at first find a very warm welcome. Many of the young Chinese had been educated in America, and some in England. They had returned home eager to use their western scientific knowledge in order to help their own country. Most of them were communists, and had fixed opinions and plans which they wanted to carry out by force. They had read accounts of Rabindranath which described him as a friend of all the old ways and an enemy of western knowledge, and so they were prejudiced against him. But when they heard him speak, they soon found that these accounts were not true. Instead of an "enemy of knowledge", they found a man who was eager to study truth wherever he found it, in east and west, in the past and the present, in science and religion After this a number of young Chinese students became very friendly towards Rabindranath, and he had a very happy time in their country. The great Chinese scholars, Dr. Hu Shih and Dr. Lian Chi Chao, welcomed him and helped him in every way. From that time onwards, the number of Chinese visitors and students at Santiniketan largely increased.

When Rabindranath visited Italy in 1926 he was entertained by the Italian Government, and met all the great men of the country. He liked the King of Italy very much and thought him very modest and

friendly. He met Mussolini, who told him that he had read all the Italian translations of his work and admired them greatly. He also met the great Italian thinker and writer, Benedetto Croce. But he enjoyed most of all his meeting with Italian school children. While he was there the school children of Rome gave their annual concert. The songs were sung by a choir of a thousand children, and the music was wonderful. Afterwards they gave him some of their school note-books in which they had written essays about him and drawn pictures of him. Rabindranath kept these little note-books all his life, and was very fond of talking about the children.

At that time the Fascist party under Mussolini was already governing Italy. Newspaper reporters often asked Rabindranath what he thought about Fascism. As he did not know any Italian he was very careful in his replies. "I do not know the real thoughts of the Italian people," he would say, "and I am not qualified to speak about their government." He did, however, ask the Italian people to remember that to seek for material wealth would never make them great, and that the real "world powers" are those countries which give the world permanent gifts of the spirit. After he left Italy, he stayed in Switzerland with some friends who knew Italian. They told him that the Italian newspapers were all saying that he admired and approved of the Fascist Government. They also told him about some of the injustices which the Fascists had committed, and one lady described to him some cruelties which she had herself seen. Rabindranath was very much shocked at this news, and very angry that the newspapers had printed a false report of his words. He, therefore, wrote a letter

to a famous English newspaper, *The Manchester Guardian,* in which he explained what he had really said, condemned the cruelties for which the Fascists were responsible and declared that he always had been, and always would be, an enemy of tyranny and injustice in any country in the world. This letter made the Italian newspapers very angry.

The rest of this tour, especially in Germany and the Balkans, was very happy. Rabindranath always remembered with the greatest of pleasure the welcome he received from simple, ordinary people and children. Although they could not understand his language and had not read his work, it seemed that they knew him at once for a real friend. The memory of their goodness and kindness comforted him, and helped him to keep his faith in the real goodness of men, during the last years of his life, when war and hatred and evil made the whole world dark.

Rabindranath's visit to Russia in 1930 was a memorable time. Everything that he saw there interested him deeply, and he wrote long descriptions of it to his friends in India, which were published as *Letters from Russia.* He thought that the progress made by the peoples of the Soviet Republics was almost miraculous. He rejoiced to see all that had been done for the health and welfare of the people in the short space of ten years. He admired the way in which the Russians struggled to give all boys and girls a good education, and an equal chance of taking up any work which they were qualified to do. When the time came for him to say farewell to Russia, he gave generous praise to the people who had carried through these great reforms, for their great energy and devotion and the wisdom of their policy. He said that he

longed for the time when it would be possible for India to enjoy such universal education and such great opportunities. But there was one thing in Russia which did not please him, and he thought it his duty as a true friend to speak of that also. This was that in Russia no one who disagreed with Communist ideas was allowed to express his opinions freely. Rabindranath was completely opposed to the policy of using force to suppress unpopular political ideas, and he begged his Russian friends to beware of the danger. Here are his words:

"I wish to let you know how much I admire your energy in spreading education among the masses. You have recognised the truth that to get rid of social evils one has to go to the root, which can only be done through education. I must ask you, are you doing your ideal a service by arousing, in the minds of those under your training, anger and class hatred against those not sharing your views? You are working in a great cause. Therefore, you must be great in your minds—great in your mercy, your understanding, and your patience."

Rabindranath never visited Australia or New Zealand, and, except for Egypt, never saw any part of the great continent of Africa. But with these exceptions, he went to almost every part of the civilised world. He was very fond of remembering the meaning of his name, Rabi, the sun. He used to say that just as the sun shone on east and west alike, and belonged to the whole world, so he also wished to belong to every country. In one of his letters he wrote, "I earnestly hope that I shall find my home anywhere in the world, before I leave it". On his eightieth birthday the Maharaja of Tripura conferred

on him the title *Bharat Bhaskar,* "The Sun of India". It is a beautiful title, but in one way it is not big enough for him. He loved his own country as dearly as anyone has ever done, but he was a citizen of the world too, and made his friends in every corner of the globe.

## CHAPTER XV

## THE FINAL YEARS

In 1931 Rabindranath completed his seventieth year. This event was celebrated not only at Santiniketan but all over India. A committee formed of men of all communities met together to arrange for a grand celebration in Calcutta. They decided to have special festivities during the last week of December, 1931. They asked Tagore's friends and admirers all over the world to write contributions for a commemoration book, and they arranged for a Tagore Exhibition to be held. When December came, the poet went to Calcutta to attend the *Rabindra Jayanti* celebrations. There was a great meeting at the Town Hall at which the Commemoration Book was presented to him. It is called *The Golden Book of Tagore.* There were also performances of some of his plays. It was arranged that the programme of festivities should be continued during January, 1932.

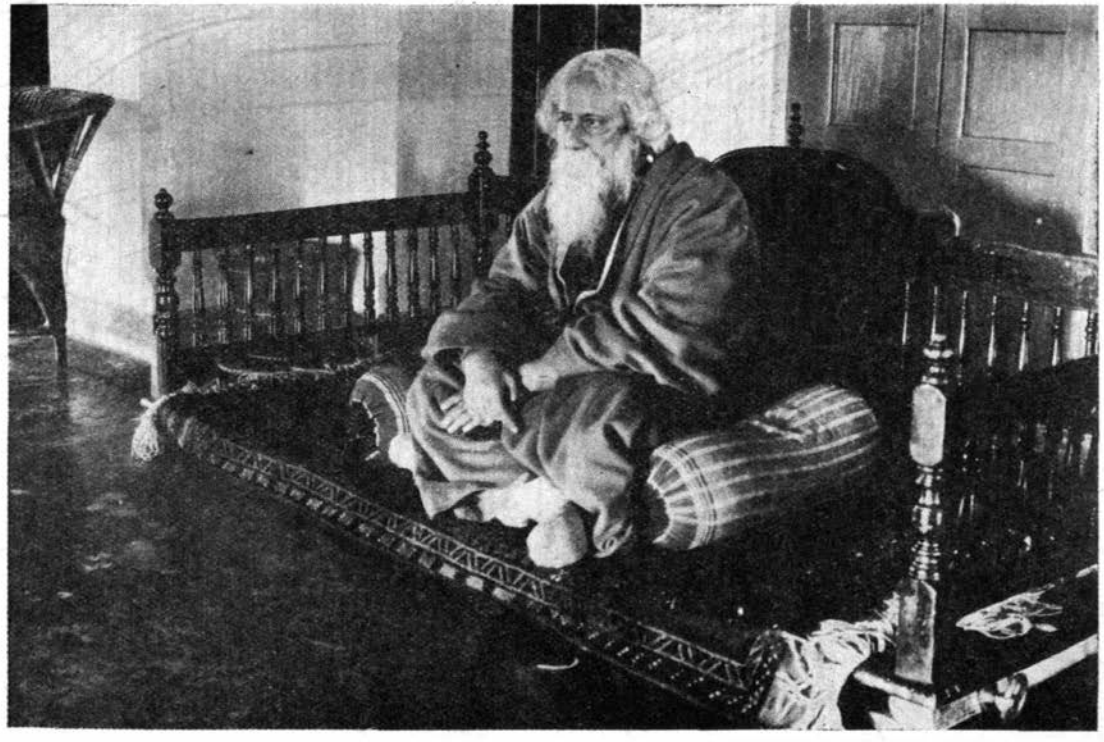
All this rejoicing was suddenly changed into sorrow. On January 5, the news came that Mahatma Gandhi had been arrested, very soon after his return from the Round Table Conference in London. Rabindranath was very much shocked and troubled, and he stopped all the celebrations as a sign of mourning. But even then he refused to join the extremists who condemned everything British and encouraged hatred. He wrote a famous letter to the London newspaper, *The Times,* in which he pleaded with both countries to make a new beginning, to trust one

another and try to understand one another. He begged both of them to show a friendly spirit and generous forgiveness of the past. Alas! in both India and England his letter was misunderstood and his attempt to make peace was ignored.

Soon after this, Mahatma Gandhi began his great fast of protest against the "Communal Award". Rabindranath was very anxious about him, but he agreed with Gandhiji that the achievement of real communal unity would be so great a thing that it would be worth the sacrifice of life itself. So he did not, as many others did, attempt to persuade Gandhiji to give up his fast without having succeeded in his object. He himself travelled to Poona to visit him, and was present in the Yerwada Jail when the fast was broken.

During these years Rabindranath was lonely, not only in some of his political opinions, but also because of the loss by death of many of his personal friends. One by one, all his brothers and sisters, except for one sister, had died. His wife and three of his own children had died long before. The poet dearly loved the son and daughter who remained, and his two grandchildren, a girl and a boy. The boy grew up to be a fine young man, and was sent to study in Germany. In 1932, when he was barely twenty-one years of age, he died there. Some years before this, in 1923, W. W. Pearson, Rabindranath's trusted English friend and colleague, had lost his life in a railway accident in Italy. In 1935 the poet's nephew, Dinendra, who had been for so many years "the treasury of his songs", followed the others. Still, C. F. Andrews and many other devoted friends remained.

In the poet's old age, public engagements and



Rabindranath in old age

honours of all kinds were heaped upon him. So long as his strength allowed, Rabindranath welcomed all opportunities of speaking in public of the great ideals for which he had lived—true nationhood, true liberty, true courage, true peace. The shadows of approaching war grew darker, but he still continued to call men away from the mad scramble for material wealth to the grace of beauty, human kindness, and love which cannot be conquered. In 1936 the World Peace Congress was held at Brussels. The leaders asked Rabindranath to send a message. He replied, "We cannot have peace till we deserve it by paying the full price, which is, that the strong must cease to be greedy and the weak must learn to be bold."

In 1937 Calcutta University invited him to give its Convocation Address. This was the first time in the history of the University that the address was given in Bengali and not in English. It was also the first time it was given by a man who held no official position.

All these years the poet went on writing and composing new music. But from 1930 onwards he also spent much of his time in a completely new kind of work, painting. We do not often hear of a man who starts serious work upon a new subject when he in his seventieth year! The fact that Rabindranath did so shows, more clearly than anything else could, his wonderful energy and youthful spirit. He grew old in body, but he never grew old in mind. When he went to Europe in 1930 he took many of his drawings with him, and held exhibitions of them in several great European cities.

The story of how he began to draw is an interesting one. As he was writing his poems he would

sometimes cross out words or whole lines, or perhaps a whole section of several lines. Then with his pen he would play with these erasures. He would draw more and more lines to and fro across the crossed-out words, make the lines end in curves and fanciful shapes, and go on adding a line here and a line there until the erasure had the form of a strange bird, or a dragon, or a fish. Sometimes he would cover a whole page of writing with a pattern made by joining several of these erasures together with long curving lines. Some of these patterns are very beautiful. From this beginning he went on to draw human figures, trees, and landscape scenery. European artists found his work very interesting and gave it great praise.

Although he could no longer take long journeys, the last years of Rabindranath's life were almost as full of activity as those that had gone before. He had the joy of seeing two of his dreams for Visva-Bharati take shape in bricks and mortar. In 1937 the building for the Chinese Hall at Santiniketan was opened, to help forward the study of Chinese life and literature. Less than two years later, in January, 1939, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru opened the new Hindi Hall.

In September, 1937, Rabindranath was suddenly taken very seriously ill. For some days it was feared that he might not recover, but at last he grew better and was once more able to do his work. During this year he wrote a little book in Bengali called *Visva Parichaya* which is a simple introduction to general science. Ever since he was a little boy and watched his tutor's experiments, or wondered how high one must go to reach the sky, he had been deeply interested in science and scientific discovery. He loved to think of the long and wonderful history of the universe, of

the birth of the world in fire, and the long, slow ages that passed before it could become the cool, green earth into which the animals and men were born. He thought of the birth and death of suns and stars in the immense distances of space. There was to him a most wonderful grandeur and beauty in it all. From his scientific knowledge he drew many of the majestic pictures of the world which fill his greatest poetry. Many of us think that science and poetry are two quite different things which have no connection with one another. Rabindranath did not think so. He agreed with the English poet, Keats, that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty", and he found, and helped others to find, the wonderful beauty in the truths of science.

In the following year, 1938, Rabindranath wrote poems and a humorous drama, and composed music for one of his earlier plays, *Chandalika*. He also wrote another simple book in Bengali called "An Introduction to the Bengali language". All his life he had been interested in his own language, and how to combine simplicity with beauty when writing it. He took a great interest in younger writers and would help them whenever he could. In December, 1939, he travelled to Midnapore to do honour to the great founder of modern Bengali prose, Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, whose centenary was being celebrated there.

Rabindranath was very happy when, after a long absence, his old friend, C. F. Andrews, came back to live at Santiniketan at the end of 1939. But this happiness was not to last long. After a month or two C. F. Andrews became very ill, and had to be taken for treatment to Calcutta where he died on April 5, 1940.

That summer of 1940 was a very dark one. News came from Europe, in April, May and June, of the invasion of Denmark and Norway, and of Holland, Belgium, and France. Rabindranath had many friends in all these countries, of whose fate he knew nothing. He knew that, in all the warring countries, it was the innocent common people who would suffer most heavily, the people who in every country in Europe had given him such a welcome when he travelled there. The news from China too brought more tales of innocent suffering, and the sorrow of the world often weighed heavily on his mind. Seeking relief from the suffering of the present, his memory went back to the far distant years of his childhood. It was during this summer of 1940 that he wrote the little book, *My Boyhood Days*, with all its wit and fun.

In August, 1940, the University of Oxford conferred on the poet the honorary degree of Doctor of Literature. The ceremony was performed at Santiniketan itself by Sir Maurice Gwyer and Sir Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan. It was conducted in Latin, the ancient language of European learning. Rabindranath made his response in Sanskrit, the language of the ancient Indian universities. The Sanskrit learning of the East met with the Latin learning of the West in Visva-Bharati, "where the whole world meets in one place". It was a happy day and a memorable one. Rabindranath rejoiced to think that the ceremony added one more link to the chain of friendship between East and West which he had worked so hard to forge.

A few weeks later he was again taken seriously ill. He recovered, but he did not recover so quickly or so completely as he had done before. When at last he

was able to leave Calcutta and go home to Santiniketan, he had to spend a large part of his time in bed. But although in bed he was not idle, and he continued to write poems and stories. When he was too weak to hold his pen easily, he dictated his poems to others, who wrote them down.

In April, 1941, Santiniketan celebrated Rabindranath's eightieth anniversary. There was great rejoicing when the aged poet was able to be present at one of the meetings, to speak a few words to the crowd of his friends and students, and to listen to the reading of the speech which he had written for the occasion. This speech, the poet's last great message to the world, was published in the *Visva-Bharati Quarterly* with the title "Crisis in Civilisation". The whole of India celebrated his birthday, and telegrams and letters of congratulation came from all over the world. The *Visva-Bharati Quarterly* published a special volume, the *Tagore Birthday Number,* full of interesting information about his life and work.

Gradually, however, the poet grew weaker and attacks of fever became more frequent. All through the hot weather of 1941 faithful friends nursed him and did everything possible for his comfort. In July it was decided that he must go to Calcutta for treatment there, and one morning, the whole *ashrama* assembled sadly and in silence at the gates of his house to say goodbye to him. As the car moved slowly away they sang to him the Santiniketan song. In Calcutta everything possible was done to save his life, but in vain. On August 7, 1941, he died, very peacefully and quietly, in the old Jorasanko house where he had been born, and his body was cremated in the evening at the Nimtola Ghat by the Ganges.

Here are some of the words which Rabindranath wrote when he thought of the gates of death to which he, like all men, must come:

"At this time of parting wish me good luck, my friends. The sky is flushed with the dawn and my path lies beautiful."

"Ask not what I have to take there. I start on my journey with empty hands and expectant heart."

"Because I love this life, I know I shall love death as well."

The lines which follow were originally written to be sung at the close of *The Post Office* as Amal, the child with the fearless, friendly heart, lies on his death-bed. The performance for which they were written never took place, and at the poet's own wish they were sung for the first time at his own funeral service at Santiniketan, on the evening of his death.

"In front lies the ocean of peace.
Launch the boat, helmsman . . .
May the mortal bonds perish.
May the vast universe take him its arms.
And may he know in his fearless heart
The Great Unknown."