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MORE TALES FROM TAGORE

Adapted
by
E. F. DODD, B.A.

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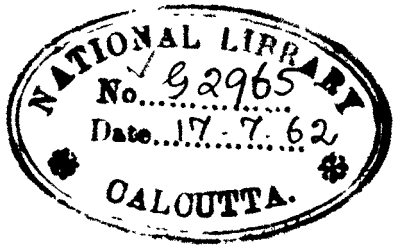

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

This book is intended for non-detailed study during the School final or pre-University Course, and is therefore slightly more advanced in thought and structure than the previous *Tales from Tagore* in this series.

Some difficult words and phrases have been replaced by more familiar synonyms, but the aim in these stories has been not so much the simplification of vocabulary as the elucidation of Tagore's philosophy and imagery, some of which might—in the original versions—prove too complicated and obscure for students reading English as a foreign language.

E. F. D.

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THE EDITOR

As long as my wife was alive, I did not pay much attention to Probha. As a matter of fact, I thought a great deal more about Probha's mother than I did of the child herself. I enjoyed playing with my little daughter occasionally, and listening to her baby talk; but I soon grew tired of it, and I would surrender her to her mother again with the greatest readiness.

At last, on the early death of my wife, the child dropped from her mother's care into mine, and I took her to my heart.

But it is difficult to say whether it was I who considered it my duty to bring up the motherless child with double care, or my daughter who thought it her duty to take care of her wifeless father with an unnecessary amount of attention. At any rate, it is a fact that from the age of six she became my housekeeper. It was quite clear that this little girl considered herself the one and only guardian of her father.

I smiled inwardly but surrendered myself completely to her hands. I soon saw that the more helpless I was, the better pleased she became. I found that even if I took down my own clothes from the hook, or went to get my own umbrella, she looked so offended that it was clear she thought I ought to have allowed her to do it. She had never before possessed such a perfect toy as her father, and she took the greatest pleasure in feeding him, dressing him, and even putting him to bed. It was only when I was teaching her arithmetic or the First Reader

She had never before possessed such a perfect toy as her father

that I had the opportunity of showing my parental authority.

Now and then the thought of money troubled me. How could I find enough to provide her with a dowry for a suitable husband? I was giving her a good education, but what would happen if she fell into the hands of an uneducated fool?

I made up my mind to earn money. I was too old for employment in a Government office, and I knew no one who would give me work in a private one. After a good deal of thought I decided that I would write books. If you make holes in a bamboo tube, it will no longer hold either oil or water; but if you blow through it it may produce music. I felt quite sure that the man who

is not useful can be ornamental, and he who is not productive in other fields can at least produce literature. Encouraged by this thought, I wrote a play. People said it was amusing, and it was even acted on the stage.

Once having tasted fame, I found myself unable to stop. For days and days together I wrote amusing plays with unceasing determination. Probha would come with her smile and remind me gently: 'Father, it is time for you to take your bath.'

And I would grumble: 'Go away, go away; can't you see that I am busy? Don't annoy me.'

The poor child would leave me, unnoticed, her face as dark as a lamp whose light has been suddenly blown out.

I drove the women-servants away, and beat the men-servants, and when beggars came to sing at my door I would get up and run after them with a stick. My room being by the side of the street, passers-by would stop and ask me to tell them the way, but I would tell them to go to Jericho. It seemed to me that no one took into serious consideration the fact that I was busy writing a funny play.

I got a great deal of pleasure and some fame from my writing, but I did not make much money. This did not trouble me, although in the meantime all the possible husbands were growing up for other girls whose parents did not write plays.

But just then a splendid opportunity came my way. The landlord of a certain village, Jahirgram, started a newspaper, and sent a request that I would become its editor. I agreed to take the post.

For the first few days I wrote with such fire and zeal that people used to point at me when I went out into the street, and I began to have a great sense of my own

importance.

Next to Jahirgram was the village of Ahirgram. Between the landlords of these two villages there was a ceaseless rivalry and war. There had been a time when they often came to blows. But now the police had made them promise to keep the peace, so I took the place of the hired fighters who used to act for Jahirgram. Everyone said that I succeeded very well. My writings were so powerful that Ahirgram could no longer hold up its head. I blackened with my ink the whole of their ancient tribe and family.

All this time I had the comfortable feeling of being pleased with myself. I even became fat. My face shone with the joyful light of a successful man. I admired my own delicate cleverness when, at some delightful article in my paper aimed at the inhabitants of Ahirgram, the whole of Jahirgram would burst its sides with laughter like an over-ripe fruit. I enjoyed myself thoroughly.

But at last Ahirgram started a newspaper. Its publications were written without any literary delicacy. The language was so rough and outspoken that every letter seemed to scream in one's face. The result was that the inhabitants of both villages clearly understood its meaning.

But my style was restricted by my sense of correctness; I was too polite in my replies, which often produced only a very small effect on the power of understanding of both my friends and my enemies. The natural result was that, even when I really won in this battle of insults, my readers did not realize my victory. At last in despair I wrote a solemn article on the necessity of good taste in literature; but I soon found that I had made a great mistake, because things that are solemn give more cause for laughter than things that are truly amusing. Thus my effort to

improve the morals of my fellow-beings had the opposite effect to the one which I had intended.

My employer ceased to be so polite and attentive towards me. The honour to which I had grown accustomed grew less in quantity, and its quality became poor. When I walked in the street people no longer spoke to me of serious matters, listening earnestly to my words of wisdom; on the contrary, they were playfully familiar in their behaviour towards me, hitting me on the back with a laugh, and calling me by foolish names. My admirers seemed quite to have forgotten the plays which had made me famous. I felt like a burnt-out match, blackened to its very end.

I became so wretched that, no matter how hard I tried, I was unable to write a single line. I seemed to have lost all pleasure in life.

Probha had now grown afraid of me. She would not dare to come near me unless I called her. She had come to understand that an ordinary toy is a far better companion than a clever father who writes funny plays.

One day I saw that the Ahirgram newspaper, leaving my employer alone for once, had directed its attack on me. Some very ugly accusations had been made against myself. One by one, all my friends and acquaintances came and read it to me, laughing heartily. Some of them said that, however much one might disagree with the subject-matter, it could not be denied that it was very cleverly written. In the course of the day at least twenty people came and said the same thing.

In front of my house there is a small garden. I was walking there in the evening, my mind disturbed with pain. When the birds had returned to their nests, and surrendered themselves to the peace of the evening, I

understood quite clearly that, among birds at any rate, there were no writers for the newspapers, nor did they hold discussions on good taste.

I was thinking only of one thing, namely, what answer I could make. The disadvantage of politeness is that all classes of people do not understand it. So I had decided that my answer must be given in the same rough language as the attack. I was not going to allow myself to admit my own defeat.

Just as I had come to this decision, a well-known voice came softly through the darkness of the evening, and immediately afterwards I felt a soft warm hand in mine. I was so dreamy and absent-minded that, even though that voice and touch were familiar to me, I did not realise that I knew them.

But afterwards, the voice sounded in my ear and the memory of the touch became living. My child had slowly come near to me once more, and had whispered in my ear, 'Father'; but, getting no answer, she had lifted my right hand, gently touched her face with it, and then silently gone back to the house.

Probha had not behaved so lovingly towards me for a long time, and I suddenly remembered all the happy times we had had together in the past. Going back to the house a little later, I saw that she was lying on her bed. Her eyes were half closed and she seemed to be in pain. She lay like a flower which has dropped into the dust at the end of the day.

Putting my hand on her head, I found that she was feverish. Her breath was hot and her skin was dry.

I realised that the poor child, feeling the first signs of fever, had come with her thirsty heart in search of her father's love, while he was trying to think of some

Her eyes were half closed and she seemed to be in pain

stinging reply to send to the newspaper.

I sat beside her. The child, without speaking a word, took my hand between her two little fever-heated ones, and laid it upon her head, lying quite still.

I burnt to ashes all the copies of the Jahirgram and Ahirgram papers which I had in the house. I wrote no answer to the attack. I have never felt such joy as I did then, when I thus acknowledged defeat. I had taken the child to my arms when her mother died, and now, having burned the rival of her mother, I again took her to my heart.

THE VICTORY

THE court poet of King Narayan had never seen the Princess Ajita, but on the days when he sang a new poem to the king, he would raise his voice just to that height which could be heard by unseen listeners in the screened room high above the hall. He sent up his song towards this heaven out of his reach, where the star who ruled his Fate shone unknown and out of sight.

He would see a shadow move behind the screen. A bell-like sound would reach his ears, and set him dreaming of the ankles whose little golden bells sang at each step. Ah, the rosy-red tender feet that walked the dust of the earth like God's mercy on the fallen! The poet had placed them in the temple of his heart, where he wove his songs to the tune of those golden bells. He never doubted that it was the princess's shadow which moved behind the screen, and that it was the tune of her ankle-bells which sang in his beating heart.

Manjari, the servant of the princess, passed by the poet's house on her way to the river, and she never missed a day without having a few words with him. When she found the road empty, and evening shadows on the land, she would boldly enter his room, and sit and talk to him. People smiled and whispered at this, and they were not to blame; Shekhar the poet never took the trouble to hide the fact that these meetings were a pure joy to him.

The meaning of her name, Manjari, was *the spray of flowers*. One must confess that for an ordinary person it was sweet enough, but Shekhar made his own addition to this name, and called her the Spray of Spring Flowers.

And ordinary people shook their heads and said: 'Ah, surely this is love!'

In the spring songs that the poet sang, the praise of the spray of spring flowers was repeated over and over again; and the king smiled at him when he heard it, and the poet smiled in answer. The king would ask him the question: 'Is it the business of the insect merely to hum in the court of the spring?'

And the poet would answer: 'No, but also to taste the honey of the spray of spring flowers.'

Then they would all laugh in the king's hall, and it was said that the Princess Ajita also laughed at the girl's accepting the poet's name for her, and Manjari felt glad in her heart.

Thus are truth and falseness mixed in life. The poet worshipped his ideal of the princess, and yet he loved her servant. Which was the true and which the false in his heart? Even he himself did not know.

But in his poetry, the poet sang only pure truths. His poems told of Krishna, the lover god, and Radha, the beloved; the Eternal Man and the Eternal Woman. He sang of the sorrow which comes from the beginning of time, and the joy without end. The truth of his songs was proved by everybody, from the beggar to the king himself, because the poet's songs were on the lips of all. In the soft moonlight, or with the first whisper of the summer breeze, his songs would be sung by countless voices—from windows and courtyards, from sailing-boats, from shadows of the wayside trees.

Thus the days passed happily. The poet sang his songs, the king listened, the hearers applauded, Manjari passed and repassed the poet's room on her way to the river, and the shadow moved along the screened passage

of the room above.

About this time a poet came up from his home in the south, to visit King Narayan in the kingdom of Amarapur. He stood in the great hall and sang a poem in praise of the king. He had competed with all the court poets on his way, and he had been victorious over them all.

The king received him with honour, and said: 'Poet, I offer you welcome.'

Pundarik, the poet, proudly replied: 'Sir, I ask for war.'

Shekhar, the court poet of the king, did not know how this poetic battle was to be fought. He had no sleep that night. He could think of nothing but the proud, smiling face of the famous Pundarik. Next morning he entered the great hall with a trembling heart. The room was filled with the crowd.

Shekhar greeted his rival with a smile and a bow. Pundarik hardly troubled to return his greeting, and turned his face towards his circle of admiring followers with a meaning smile.

Shekhar looked towards the screened passage high above the hall, and saluted his lady in his mind, saying: 'If I am the winner at the competition today, my lady, I will write new songs in praise of your victorious name.'

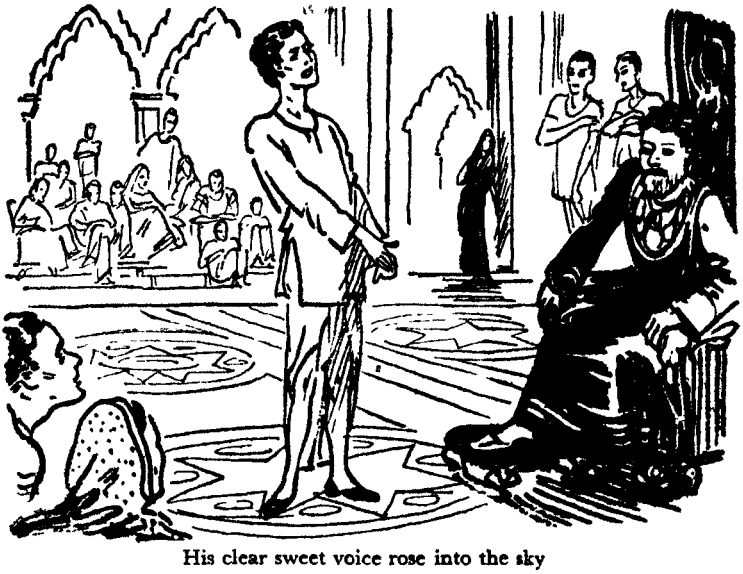
The king, dressed in white, came slowly into the hall like a floating cloud of autumn, and the great crowd stood up, shouting victory to their king. Pundarik rose, and the great hall became silent. With his head raised high, he began in his thundering voice to sing the praise of King Narayan. His words burst upon the walls like great waves of the ocean, and seemed to knock against the hearts of the listening crowd. The skill with which he gave various meanings to the name Narayan, and

wove each letter through his poetry, took away the breath of his amazed hearers.

For some minutes after he took his seat, his voice continued to ring through the hall and in thousands of speechless hearts. The learned *pandits* who had come from distant lands raised their right hands and cried, 'Bravo!'

The king looked across at Shekhar, and in answer Shekhar raised his sorrowing eyes towards his master, and then stood up like a wounded deer facing the huntsmen. His face was pale and he seemed as timid as a woman; his straight youthful figure made one think of the delicate strings of a *vina*, ready to break out in music at the softest touch.

When he began, his head was bent and his voice was almost too low to be heard. Then he slowly raised his



His clear sweet voice rose into the sky

head, and his clear sweet voice rose into the sky like a trembling flame of fire. He began with the ancient story of the long line of kings, starting in the distant past and bringing it down through its long course of heroism to the present age. He fixed his eyes on his master's face, and the audience was so moved by his words that their great unspoken love for the royal house seemed to surround the king in a protecting cloud. These were Shekhar's last words when, trembling, he took his seat: 'My master, I may be beaten in play of words, but not in my love for thee.'

Tears filled the eyes of the listeners, and the stone walls shook with cries of victory.

Taking no notice of this popular outburst of feeling, Pundarik stood up with a scornful smile on his lips, and flung this question to the audience: 'Is there anything superior to words?' In a moment the hall was silent again.

Then, with a wonderful show of learning, he proved that the Word was the beginning, that the Word was God. He piled up quotations from sacred literature, and built a temple for the Word, high above all that there is in heaven and earth. And then he repeated that question: 'Is there anything superior to words?'

He looked proudly around him. No one dared to argue against him, and he slowly took his seat like a lion who has just made a full meal of its victim. The *pandits* shouted, 'Bravo!' The king remained silent with wonder, and the poet Shekhar felt himself to be of no importance compared with this amazingly learned man. The meeting was ended for the day.

Next day Shekhar began his song. It was about the day when the sweet tune of love's flute was first heard

in the silent Vrinda forests. The shepherd women did not know who was the player or from where the music came. Sometimes it seemed to come from the heart of the south wind, and sometimes from the feathery clouds on the hill-tops. It came with a message of love from the land of the sunrise, and it floated from the edge of sunset with its whisper of sorrow. The music seemed to burst all at once from all sides, from fields and woods, from the shady paths and lonely roads, from the melting blue of the sky and the cool green of the grass. The women neither knew its meaning nor could find words to express the desire of their hearts. But its perfect beauty made them feel that only in death would they find complete joy and understanding.

Shekhar forgot his audience; forgot the trial of his strength with a rival. He stood alone with his thoughts, which whispered and trembled round him like leaves in a summer breeze, and sang the Song of the Flute. In his mind he saw the shadowy shape of the princess, and heard the faint sound of her distant footsteps.

He took his seat. His hearers trembled with the sadness of an indescribable delight, and they forgot to applaud him. As this feeling died away, Pundarik stood up and asked his rival if he could explain his song of love; who was this Lover and who was the Beloved? He looked scornfully around him, smiled at his followers, and then put the question again: 'Who is Krishna, the lover, and who is Radha, the beloved?'

Then he began to explain the meaning of those names, with cool, learned arguments. He gave various interpretations of their meanings. He confused the amazed audience with all the puzzling details of a scientific problem. He divided each letter of those names from its

fellow, and then explained them with such deep reasoning that his words were entirely beyond the understanding of his listeners. They simply felt that they had never before heard such a wonderful speaker.

The *pandits* were carried away with admiration. They cheered loudly and the crowd followed them, as crowds always will; swayed by fine words into thinking that they had witnessed, that day, the curtains of truth torn to pieces before their eyes by this superior being. His performance so delighted them that they forgot to ask themselves if there was any truth behind it all.

The king's mind was filled with wonder. No longer did the air ring with Shekhar's music, with the singing memory of the Song of the Flute. Pundarik, with his bold, clear arguments, seemed to have changed the world from its freshness of tender green to the solid coldness of a high road levelled and made hard with stones.

To the listeners, their own poet appeared a mere boy in comparison with this learned stranger, who walked with such ease and knocked down every difficulty in the world of words and thoughts. For the first time they began to feel that Shekhar's poems were foolishly simple, and it was only by a mere accident that they had not written them themselves. They were neither new nor difficult, nor educative, nor necessary.

The king tried, with anxious looks, to urge his poet to make a last effort. But Shekhar took no notice, and remained fixed to his seat.

The king, in anger, took off his pearl chain and put it on Pundarik's head. Everybody cheered in the hall. From the upper room came the sound of whispering voices, and the soft ringing of waist-chains hung with golden bells. Shekhar rose from his seat and left the hall.

It was a dark moonless night. The poet Shekhar took down his books of poems from his shelves and heaped them on the floor. Some of them contained his earliest writings, which he had almost forgotten. He turned over the pages, reading passages here and there. They all seemed to him to be poor and ordinary—mere childish words!

One by one he tore his books into small pieces and threw them into the fire, saying: 'To thee, to thee, O my beauty, my fire! Thou hast been burning in my heart all these useless years. If my life were a piece of gold, it would shine more brightly after this trial by fire; but it is only grass, and nothing remains of it but a handful of ashes.'

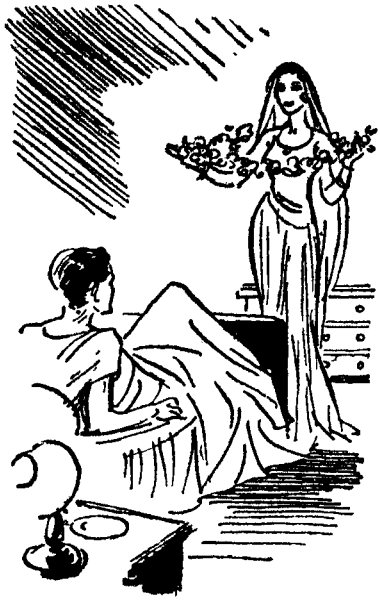
The night wore on. Shekhar opened wide his windows. He spread upon his bed the white flowers that he loved: jasmine, roses and chrysanthemums; and brought into his bedroom all the lamps he had in his house and lighted them. Then, mixing with honey the juice of some poisonous root, he drank deeply and lay down on his bed.

There were soft footsteps in the passage outside the door, and a delicate perfume came into the room with the breeze. The poet, with his eyes shut, said: 'My lady, have you taken pity upon your servant at last, and come to see him?'

The answer came in a sweet voice: 'My poet, I have come.'

Shekhar opened his eyes, and saw before his bed the figure of a woman.

His sight was faint and failing, and it seemed to him that, in this last moment of his life, the shadow which he had ever kept hidden in the secret places of his heart



His beloved dream princess had come to visit him in reality

had become substance. His beloved dream princess had come to visit him in reality.

The woman said: ' I am the Princess Ajita.'

The poet, with a great effort, sat up on his bed.

The princess whispered in his ear: ' The king has not done you justice. It was you who won the competition, my poet, and I have come to crown you with the crown of victory.'

She took the chain of flowers from her own neck and put it on his hair, and the poet fell down, dying, upon his bed.

THE SON OF RASHMANI

I

KALIPADA's mother was Rashmani, but she had to do the duty of the father as well, because Bhavani, her husband, was wholly incapable of controlling children. To know why he was so determined to spoil his son, you must hear something of the former history of the family.

Bhavani was born in the famous house of Saniari. His father, Abhaya Charan, had a son, Shyama Charan, by his first wife. When he married again after her death he was himself an old man, and his new father-in-law took advantage of the weakness of his position to have a special share of the family estate settled on his daughter. In this way he was satisfied that proper provision had been made for his daughter if she should become a young widow. She would be independent of the charity of Shyama Charan.

He was right in his fears, for very soon after the birth of a son, who was named Bhavani, Abhaya Charan died. It gave the father of the widow great peace and consolation to know that she was properly looked after.

When Bhavani was born, Shyama Charan was quite grown up. In fact his own eldest boy was a year older than Bhavani. He brought up the latter with his own son. In doing this he did not take an anna from his step-mother's share of the property. His honesty in this affair surprised the neighbourhood; in fact, they thought that he was a fool to be so honest. They did not like the idea of a division being made in the hitherto un-

divided ancestral property. However, Shyama Gharan strictly set aside the portion allotted to his step-mother, and the widow, Vraja Sundari, trusted him as if he had been her own son.

Shyama Charan was a strict parent, and his children were perfectly aware of the fact. But Bhavani had every possible freedom, and this gave rise to the impression that the boy was spoilt and favoured by his step-brother. His education was sadly neglected, however, and he relied completely on Shyama Charan for the management of his share of the property. He merely signed occasional documents without even glancing at their contents. On the other hand, Tarapada, the eldest son of Shyama Charan, was quite an expert in the management of the estate, for he had to act as assistant to his father.

After the death of Shyama Charan, Tarapada said to Bhavani: ' Uncle, we must not live together as we have done for so long, because some small misundertanding might come at any moment and cause hatred and bitterness between us.'

Bhavani had never imagined, even in his dreams, that a day might come when he would have to manage his own affairs. He began to rack his brains to find the easiest way in which the property could be divided. Tarapada was surprised at his uncle's anxiety and said that there was no need to trouble about the matter, because the division had already been made in the lifetime of his grandfather.

In amazement Bhavani exclaimed: ' But I know nothing about this!'

Tarapada replied: ' Then you must be the only one in the whole neighbourhood who does not. For my grandfather gave a fair share of the property to your mother.'

Bhavani thought this was possible and asked: 'What about the house?'

Tarapada said: 'If you wish, you can keep this house yourself and we shall be contented with the other house in the town.'

As Bhavani had never been in the town-house he had no desire to live there, and was astounded at the generosity of Tarapada in giving up his right to the house in the village where they had been brought up. When he told his mother, however, she struck her forehead with her hand and exclaimed: 'This is absurd! What *I* got from my husband was my own dowry and the income is very small. I do not see why *you* should be robbed of your share in your father's property.'

Bhavani said: 'Tarapada is quite positive that his grandfather never gave us anything except this piece of land.'

Vraja Sundari told her son that her husband had made two copies of his will, one of which was still lying in her own box. The box was opened, and it was found that the copy of the will had been removed.

In their difficulty they sought advice, and the man who came to their rescue was Bagala, the son of their family *guru*. Bagala said that if the will was missing, the ancestral property must be equally divided between the brothers. And then a copy of a will was found supporting the claims of the other side. In it there was no mention of Bhavani and the whole property was given to the grandsons—and at that time no son had been born to Bhavani. With Bagala to guide him, Bhavani set out on his voyage across the dangerous seas of a law-suit. When his ship at last reached harbour, his money was nearly exhausted and the ancestral property was in the

hands of the opposite party. Then Tarapada went away to the town and they never met again.

II

This act of treachery pierced the heart of the widow like a knife. To the end of her life she vowed that God would never allow such an injustice to continue. She said to Bhavani: 'I am certain that my husband's true will and testament will some day be recovered. You will find it again.'

Bhavani was so ignorant in worldly matters that his mother's words gave him great consolation. He settled down calmly, certain in his own mind that his mother's prophecy would come true. This certainty of future wealth was so clear to his mind's eye that his present poverty escaped his attention; and after his mother's death his faith seemed to become stronger still. His one anxiety—the absence of an heir to inherit his great future wealth—was ended with the birth of his son. The stars plainly indicated that the lost ancestral property would come back to this boy.

From this time onwards Bhavani's attitude changed. Previously he had borne his poverty cheerfully; but now he felt that he had a duty towards his son. He was filled with shame and sorrow that he could not have the usual expensive celebrations on the occasion of the birth of his child. He felt as though he were cheating his own son. To make up for this he spoiled the boy, utterly and completely.

Bhavani's wife, Rashmani, had a different nature from her husband. She never felt any anxiety about recovering the family wealth; all she cared for was the welfare of her child. There was hardly an acquaintance in the

neighbourhood with whom Bhavani did not discuss the question of the lost will; but he never spoke a word about it to his wife. Once or twice he had tried, but her perfect unconcern had made him drop the subject. She paid attention neither to the past greatness of the family, nor to its future glories; she kept her mind busy with the actual needs of the present, and those needs were not small.

There were several poor relations of her husband's family who lived with them, expecting to be fed and cared for in return for very little work. All the responsibilities of maintaining the family were laid upon Rashmani; and besides the household affairs she had to keep all the accounts of the little property which remained, and also to make arrangements for collecting the rents. Never before had the estate been managed with such strictness. Bhavani had been quite incapable of demanding his dues; Rashmani never failed to collect every fraction of rent. The tenants grumbled and cursed her behind her back, and Rashmani cheerfully took all the blame. Tying the end of her *sari* tightly round her waist, she went on with her household duties, and made herself thoroughly disagreeable to everybody except her husband.

Rashmani was middle-aged when her son was born. Before this, all her tenderness and love had centred round her simple-hearted, good-for-nothing husband. Inwardly she pitied him and said: ' Poor man, it was his misfortune, not his fault, to be born into a rich family.' For this reason she never expected her husband to deprive himself of any of his accustomed comforts. She would never allow him to notice if there was something unavoidably missing in his meals, or if his clothes wore out without her

being able to replace them. She would blame some imaginary dog for spoiling dishes that were never made; she would attack the servant for letting some garments be stolen or lost.

Although Rashmani treated her husband in this way, she acted very differently towards her son. For he was her own child, and why should he be allowed to give himself airs? Kalipada had to be content with a few handfuls of puffed rice and some treacle for his breakfast; during the cold weather he had to wrap himself in a thick rough cotton *chaddar*. This treatment of his own son was the hardest blow that Bhavani Charan had suffered during the days of his poverty, but he had not the spirit to stand up against his wife in her method of bringing up the boy.

Bagala, the *guru's* son, was now very rich owing to his part in the law-suit which had brought about Bhavani's ruin. With the money which he had to spare, he used to buy cheap toys and ornaments from Calcutta before the Puja holidays. The young men of the village bought all this rubbish from him, for he assured them that it was bought and treasured by the city gentry.

Once Bagala bought a wonderful toy—a doll dressed as a foreign woman—which, when wound up, would rise from its chair and begin to fan itself with sudden energy. Kalipada was fascinated by it. He knew that his mother would never give him the toy, so he went straight to his father and begged him to buy it for him. Bhavani instantly agreed, but when he heard the price his face fell. Rashmani kept all the money. Bhavani went to her timidly, and after all sorts of irrelevant remarks he took a desperate plunge into the subject.

Rashmani's only remark was 'Are you mad?' Bhavani

sat silent, wondering what to say next.

'Look here,' he exclaimed at last. 'I don't think I need curds every day with my dinner.'

'Who told you that?' said Rashmani sharply.

'The doctor says it's very bad for me.'

'The doctor's a fool!'

Bhavani Charan was ready enough to make sacrifices, but he was not allowed to. Butter might rise in price, but the number of his *luchis* never decreased. Milk was quite enough for him at his midday meal, but curds had also to be supplied because he had been accustomed to them all his life. All his attempts to cut down his daily food, so that the fanning foreign woman might enter his house, were an utter failure.

Then Bhavani paid a visit to Bagala, and after a great deal of rambling talk asked about the foreign doll. He produced an expensive old Kashmir shawl, and said in a husky voice: 'I am very hard up at present and I haven't got much cash; but I have decided to part with this shawl to buy that doll for Kalipada.'

If the shawl had been less valuable, Bagala would have agreed at once; but—knowing that the whole village, and Rashmani in particular, would be furious with him if he accepted it—he refused; and Bhavani had to go back disappointed, with the Kashmir shawl under his arm.

Kalipada asked every day for the foreign fanning toy, and Bhavani smiled every day and said: 'Wait a bit, my boy, until the seventh day of the moon.'

On the fourth day of the moon Bhavani suddenly made up his mind to mention the subject to his wife again, and said: 'I've noticed that there's something wrong with Kalipada. He doesn't look well.'

'Nonsense,' said Rashmani, 'he's in the best of health.'

'Haven't you noticed that he sits silent for hours at a time?'

'I should be greatly relieved if he could sit still for as many minutes,' said Rashmani with a laugh.

Bhavani heaved a deep sigh and went away and sat down on the verandah.

At breakfast on the fifth day Bhavani refused his curds. In the evening he only took a single *chapatti*. The *luchis* were left uneaten. He complained of having no appetite.

On the sixth day, Rashmani took Kalipada into her room and, calling him by his pet name, said: 'Betu, you are old enough to know that it is almost as bad as stealing, to desire what you can't have.'

Kalipada said sulkily: 'Father promised to give me that doll.'

Rashmani tried to explain to him how much lay behind his father's promise: how much pain, how much affection, how much loss and misery. Rashmani had never in her life talked in this way to Kalipada, because it was her habit to give short and sharp orders, not to plead. It filled the boy with amazement to hear his mother coaxing him and explaining things at such length. Child though he was, he understood something of the deep suffering of his mother's heart. Yet at the same time it was hard for him to turn his mind away altogether from that fascinating foreign fanning woman.

Kalipada went out; but next time he saw his father he could not resist saying: 'What about that doll?'

Bhavani put his arm round the boy's neck and said: '*Baba*, wait a little. I have some important business to complete. Let me finish it first, and then we will talk

about the doll.' Saying this, he went out of the house.

Kalipada saw him brush a tear from his eyes. He stood at the door and watched his father. It was obvious, even to him, that Bhavani was weighed down by hopeless despair.

Kalipada at once went back to his mother and said: 'Mother, I don't want that foreign doll.'

That morning Bhavani Charan returned late. When he sat down to eat, it was evident that the curds would fare no better with him than on the day before, and that the best part of the fish would go to the cat.

Just at this moment, Rashmani brought in a cardboard box, tied up with string, and set it before her husband. The foreign doll came out of the box, and began to fan herself vigorously.

And so the cat had to go away disappointed. Bhavani remarked to his wife that the cooking was the best he had ever tasted. The fish curry was delicious and the curds were perfect.

On the seventh day of the moon, Kalipada got the toy. During the whole of that day he allowed the foreigner to go on fanning herself, and made all his friends jealous. In any other case, he would soon have tired of the doll, but this time he knew that on the following day he would have to return it. Rashmani had hired it from Bagala at a fee of two rupees a day.

From that day onwards, Kalipada began to share the confidences of his mother, and it became so absurdly easy for Bhavani to give expensive presents every year that it surprised even himself. Kalipada became a valued assistant to his mother in her daily tasks, and through her he learnt many lessons in devotion and unselfishness.

When Kalipada won a scholarship at the Vernacular

Examination, he said to his mother: 'I shall never be satisfied if I do not complete my education.'

'You are right, Betu. You must go to Calcutta,' she replied.

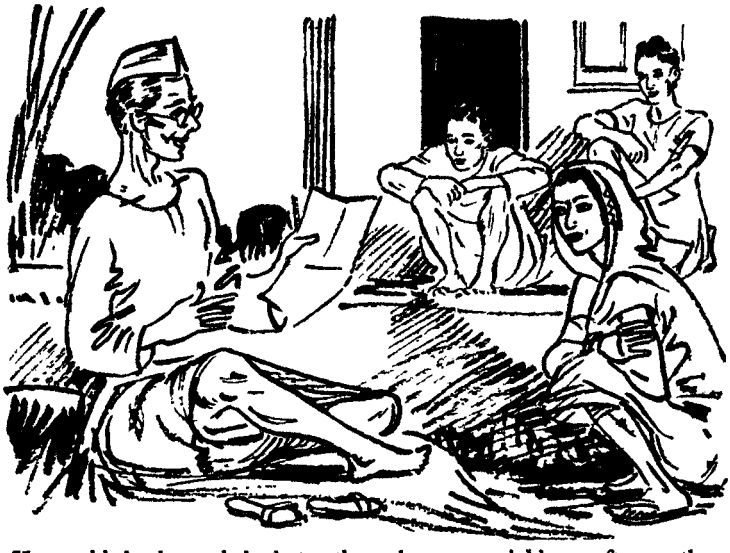
Kalipada explained to her that it would not be necessary to spend a single pice on him: his scholarship would be sufficient, and he would try to get some work to supplement it.

Together they persuaded Bhavani to agree, and the day before Kalipada left for Calcutta Rashmani hung round his neck an amulet containing *mantras* to protect him from all evils. She also gave him a fifty-rupee note, advising him to keep it for any special emergency. This note, the symbol of his mother's numerous daily acts of self-denial, was the truest amulet of all for Kalipada. He determined to keep it by him and never spend it, whatever might happen.

III

From this time onward, Bhavani's one subject of conversation was the marvellous adventure of Kalipada in search of education. Kalipada was actually studying in the great city of Calcutta! The day on which Bhavani received his son's regular letter, he went to every house in the village to read it to his neighbours, and he could scarcely find time even to take his spectacles from his nose. On arriving at each house he would remove them from their case, wipe them carefully with the end of his *dhoti*, and then—word by word—he would slowly read the letter through to one neighbour after another.

Meanwhile Kalipada with great difficulty scraped together just enough money to pay his expenses until he passed the Matriculation Examination. Again he won a



He would slowly read the letter through to one neighbour after another

scholarship, but even so, he had not an anna to spare for luxuries. He was fortunate enough to secure a corner in a students' lodging-house near his college. The owner allowed him to occupy a small room on the ground floor, which was absolutely useless for other lodgers. In exchange for this and his food, he had to coach the son of the owner of the house. The one great advantage was that there would be no chance of any fellow-lodger ever sharing his room; so, although the place was tiny and airless, his studies were uninterrupted.

The students who paid their rent and lived upstairs took very little notice of Kalipada at first; but soon it became painfully evident that those who live up above have the power to hurt those below, and with the greater

force because of their height. The leader of those above was Sailen.

Sailen was the son of a rich family. It was unnecessary for him to live in a students' hostel, but he convinced his parents that this would be the best for his studies. The real reason was that Sailen was naturally fond of company, and the students' lodging-house was an ideal place where he could have all the pleasure of companionship without any of its responsibilities.

Sailen had plenty of money, and it must be said to his credit that he had a genuine desire to help people in their need; but if a needy man refused to come to him for help, he would turn round on him and do his best to add to his trouble. His friends had their theatre tickets bought for them by Sailen; they borrowed money from him with no intention of paying it back; and when a newly married youth was in doubt about the choice of some gift for his wife, he could fully rely on Sailen's good taste. On these occasions the lovesick youth would take Sailen to the shop and pretend to select the cheapest and most suitable presents: then Sailen would intervene with a scornful laugh, and select the right thing. He was always ready to pay for it if it proved too costly for the young husband's purse. Indeed, to help others in this way had become Sailen's hobby.

Now, Kalipada's mother had made him promise that he would avoid the company of rich young men. He therefore bore the burden of his poverty alone, carefully avoiding the wealthy Sailen and his friends. To Sailen, it seemed sheer impertinence that a student as poor as Kalipada should have the pride to avoid his patronage. Every time he passed Kalipada's room, he was offended by the sight of the cheap clothing, the old mosquito net

and the torn bedding.

One day Sailen and his friends condescended to invite Kalipada to a feast, but he sent an answer saying that his habits were not the same as theirs and it would not be good for him to accept the invitation. Sailen was furiously insulted by this refusal, and for some days afterwards the noise upstairs became so loud that Kalipada could not go on with his studies. He was compelled to spend the greater part of his days studying in the park, and to get up very early, sitting down to his work before it was light.

Owing to his half-starved condition, his overworking and his airless room, Kalipada began to suffer from continual headaches. There were times when he had to lie on his bed for three or four days together; but he made no mention of his illness in his letters to his father, and did not fail to write to him, even when suffering from one of these sharp attacks of pain. The deliberate noisiness of the students upstairs added to his distress.

Kalipada tried to keep himself as hidden as possible, in order to avoid notice; but this did not help him. One day he found that a cheap shoe of his own had been taken away, and replaced by one of an expensive foreign make. It was impossible for him to go to college in such an ill-matched pair. He made no complaint, however, but bought some old second-hand shoes from a shoemaker. One day one of the students came into his room and said: 'Have you, by any mistake, taken away my silver cigarette case?'

Kalipada was annoyed and answered angrily: 'I have never been inside your room.'

But the student insisted on making a search and a minute later said: 'Hullo! Here it is!' And he picked

up a valuable cigarette case from the corner of the room.

Kalipada made up his mind to leave this lodging-house as soon as he had passed the Intermediate Examination, provided that he could get a scholarship to enable him to do so.

Every year the students of the house celebrated the Saraswati Puja. The greater part of the expenses were borne by Sailen, but everyone contributed what he could afford. The previous year the young men had scornfully left out Kalipada from the list of contributors, but this year, merely to tease him, they came with their subscription book. Kalipada instantly paid five rupees to the fund, although he had no intention of taking part in the feast. The Saraswati Puja was performed with great magnificence and the five rupees could easily have been spared. It had been hard indeed for Kalipada to part with such a sum. His landlord provided his meals, but, since the servants brought him the food, he did not like to criticise the dishes. He preferred, instead, to provide himself with a few small extras; but, after the forced extravagance of his five-rupee subscription, he had to do without these, and suffered in consequence. His headaches became more frequent, and, although he passed his examination, he failed to obtain the scholarship he desired.

The loss of the scholarship forced Kalipada to do extra work as a private tutor, and made it impossible for him to change his unhealthy room in the lodging-house. The students overhead had hoped that they would be relieved of his presence, but on the day before college reopened Kalipada returned to his old room. A station coolie took down from his head a steel trunk and various other packages, and laid them on the floor of the room.

The packages contained mango chutneys and other sweetmeats which his mother had specially prepared. Kalipada knew that, in his absence, the upstairs students would not hesitate to search his room, and he was especially anxious to keep these home gifts from their cruel eyes. As tokens of home affection they were very precious to him; but to the town students they would merely reveal him to be a poverty-stricken villager. The earthen jars were crude, and were covered by earthen lids fixed on with flour paste. Being neither glass nor china, they were sure to be regarded with scorn by rich town-bred people.

Kalipada had formerly kept these stores hidden under his bed, but now he also locked his door, even if he went out for only a few minutes. This annoyed Sailen and his party. It seemed to them ridiculous that the room, which was poor enough to fill even a hard-hearted burglar with pity, should be as carefully guarded as if it were a second Bank of Bengal. Sailen sent his companions to explore the room below, and find out what treasure Kalipada had hidden.

The lock on Kalipada's door was a cheap one—any key would fit it. One evening when Kalipada had gone out to his private work, three of the students took a lantern, unlocked the room, and entered. It did not need a moment's search to discover the pots of chutney under the bed, but these hardly seemed valuable enough to demand such watchful care on the part of Kalipada. Further search disclosed a key under the pillow. They opened the steel trunk with the key and found a few soiled clothes, books, and writing material. They were just going to shut the box in disgust when they saw, at the very bottom, a packet covered by a dirty handker-

chief. On unwrapping this they found a fifty-rupee note. Kalipada evidently suspected the whole world because of his fifty-rupee note!

They burst into peals of laughter, and at that moment they heard a footstep outside. They hastily shut the box, locked the door, and ran upstairs with the note in their possession.

When Kalipada came home that night after his work was over, he was too tired to notice any disorder in his room. One of his worst attacks of nervous headaches was coming on, and he went straight to bed.

The next day, when he pulled out his trunk he saw it was unlocked. He lifted the lid and saw the contents in confusion; his heart gave a great thud when he discovered that the note given to him by his mother was missing. He searched the box over and over again in the vain hope of finding it, and when he had made certain of his loss, he flung himself upon his bed and lay unmoving.

Just then, he heard footsteps on the stairs and an outburst of laughter. It struck him that this was not an ordinary theft: Sailen and his party must have taken the note to amuse themselves. It would have given him less pain if a thief had stolen it. It seemed to him that these young men had laid their unclean hands upon his mother herself.

For the first time Kalipada ascended those stairs. He ran to the upper floor, his face flushed with anger and with the pain of his illness. As it was Sunday, Sailen and his friends were seated in the verandah, laughing and talking. Without any warning, Kalipada burst upon them and shouted: 'Give me back my note!'

If he had pleaded with them they would have

relented; but the sight of his anger made them furious. They started up from their chairs and exclaimed: 'What do you mean, sir? What do you mean? What note?'

Kalipada shouted: 'The note you have taken from my box!'

'How dare you!' they shouted back. 'Do you think we are thieves?' Four or five of them seized him, dragged him down to his room, and thrust him inside.

In the morning they had almost forgotten Kalipada, but some of them heard the sound of talking as they passed his room. The door was locked. They tried to overhear, but the words were quite incoherent. They went upstairs again and told Sailen. He came down and stood with his ear close to the door. The only thing that could be distinctly heard was the word 'Father.' This frightened Sailen. He began to wonder if Kalipada had gone mad with grief. He shouted 'Kalipada Babu!' two or three times, but received no answer. Only the muttering continued. Sailen called: 'Kalipada Babu, please open the door. Your note has been found.' But still the door was not opened and the muttering went on.

Sailen had never expected such a result as this. He did not admit sorrow or repentance to his companions, but he felt the sting of remorse all the same. He sent at once for a doctor who lived next door; and when they broke into the room they found the bedding hanging from the bed and Kalipada lying on the floor unconscious. He was tossing about and throwing up his arms and muttering, his eyes red-rimmed and staring and his face flushed. The doctor examined him and asked whether he had any relatives in Calcutta, for the case was serious.

Sailen answered that he knew nothing, but would make inquiries. The doctor then advised the removal of the

patient to an upper room, where he could be nursed properly day and night. Sailen took him up to his own room and sent his friends away. He made Kalipada comfortable on his own bed, and then he went downstairs again to find out the young man's home address. Kalipada, fearing the other students' ridicule, had taken special care to conceal the names and address of his parents, so Sailen had no alternative but to open his box. He found two bundles of letters tied up with ribbon. One of them contained his mother's letters, the other his father's. Sailen took them upstairs and began to read. He was startled when he saw the address: Saniari, the house of the Chowdhuris; and then the name of the father, Bhavani. He folded the letters and sat still, gazing at Kalipada's face. Some of his friends had casually remarked on a resemblance between Kalipada and himself, but he had been offended and had not believed it. Today he discovered the truth. He knew that his own grandfather, Shyama Charan, had had a step-brother named Bhavani; but the later history of the family had remained unknown to him. He did not even know that Bhavani had a son named Kalipada; and he had never suspected that Bhavani had come to such a miserable state of poverty as this. He now felt not only relieved, but was proud of his relative, Kalipada, who had refused to accept his charity.

IV

Knowing that his companions had insulted Kalipada almost every day, Sailen was reluctant to keep him in the same lodging-house; so he took a more suitable room elsewhere, and kept him there. Bhavani set off in haste for Calcutta the moment he received Sailen's letter

informing him of his son's illness. Rashmani parted with all her savings, and told her husband to spare no expense. When Bhavani Charan arrived, he found Kalipada still unconscious and delirious. Kalipada often called him in his delirium, and Bhavani tried in vain to get his son to recognise him.

Gradually, however, the fever went down and Kalipada recovered consciousness. He was astonished when he saw his father sitting in the room beside him. His first anxiety was lest Bhavani should discover the miserable state in which he had been living; but he looked round and could not recognise his own room. He supposed that his father had removed him to this better lodging, but he could not imagine how he could possibly bear the expense.

Once, when Bhavani was absent, Sailen came in with a plate of grapes in his hand. Kalipada immediately suspected some practical joke. He became nervous and excited, and wondered how he could save his father from annoyance. And then Sailen set the plate down on the table and humbly touching Kalipada's feet said: 'My offence has been great; please forgive me.'

Kalipada sat up on his bed in amazement. He could see that Sailen's repentance was sincere, and he was greatly moved.

When Kalipada had first come to the students' lodging-house, he had been strongly attracted by this handsome youth, and would have given a great deal to be his friend. The barrier, however, was too great to be broken down. Now, today, when Sailen brought him the grapes and asked his forgiveness, he silently looked into his face and accepted the grapes as a token of his repentance.

As the days went on, it amused Kalipada greatly to

see the affection which sprang up between his father and Sailen. Sailen called Bhavani Charan 'grandfather', and took full advantage of the grandchild's privilege of joking with him. In fact, the time of his convalescence became the happiest period of Kalipada's life.

There was only one flaw in this ideal happiness. Kalipada had a fierce pride in his poverty, which prevented him from speaking about his family's better days. Therefore, when his father talked of his former wealth, Kalipada felt ashamed. Bhavani could not keep to himself the one great event of his life—the theft of the will, which he was absolutely certain he would some day recover. Kalipada noticed that Sailen did not enjoy such conversation, and that he often tried to prove its absurdity: he obviously could not bear such talk, and would seize the first opportunity to leave the room.

Sailen would, in fact, have revealed his own relationship to Kalipada and his father, but this talk about the theft of the will prevented him. It was hard for him to believe that his grandfather or father had stolen the will; on the other hand, he felt sure that some cruel injustice had been done in robbing Bhavani of his share of the ancestral property.

Kalipada still had headaches in the evening, with a slight rise in temperature, but he did not take them seriously. He was anxious to start studying again, knowing what a tragedy it would be if he again failed to win a scholarship. Secretly he began to read once more, in spite of the doctor's strict orders. He begged his father to return home, assuring him that he was quite recovered. Bhavani, who had for so many years been fed and cared for by his wife, was longing to get back to his village, and needed no persuasion.

On the morning of his intended departure, however, he found Kalipada very ill indeed, his body burning and his face flushed with fever. The doctor took Sailen aside. 'This relapse is fatal,' he said; and Sailen said to Bhavani: 'Kalipada needs a mother's nursing: she must be brought to Calcutta.'

It was evening when Rashmani came, and she saw her son alive for only a few hours. In her pity for her husband's grief she concealed her own sorrow. Her son and her husband were one person again, and she took up this burden of the dead and the living on her own aching heart. She cried to God: 'It is too much for me to bear.' But she did bear it.

V

It was midnight. Worn out by grief, Rashmani had fallen asleep soon after reaching her home in the village. But Bhavani could not sleep that night. At last he got up from his bed and went to the room where Kalipada had learned his lessons as a child. Bhavani opened the shutters on the eastern side of the room and stood still, gazing into the darkness. Through the drizzling rain he could see the outline of the clump of trees at the end of the outer wall, where the boy Kalipada had made his own garden. The passion flowers which he had planted had grown thick and dense. Bhavani choked with sorrow. There was nobody now to wait for and expect daily. The summer vacation had come, but no one would return home to fill the vacant room and use its old familiar furniture.

'O my darling son!' he cried, and sat down beside the window. The rain came faster. A sound of footsteps was heard among the grass and withered leaves. Bhavani's

Bhavani stood still, gazing into the darkness

heart stood still. He thought it was Kalipada himself come to see his own garden....and in this rain how wet he would be! Somebody stood for a moment in front of the window. The cloak round his head made it impossible for Bhavani to see his face, but he was the same height as Kalipada.

'My boy!' cried Bhavani. 'You have come!' And he hurried to open the door.

But when he came to the spot where the figure had stood, there was no one to be seen. He walked up and down the garden in the drenching rain calling 'Kalipada!' but no answer came. The servant, Noto, who

was sleeping in the cow-shed, heard his cry and came and coaxed the old man back to his room.

Next morning, while sweeping the room, Noto found a bundle just underneath the window. He brought it to Bhavani, who opened it and found it was an old document. He put on his spectacles and after reading a few lines rushed into Rashmani's room with the paper in his hand.

'What is it?' Rashmani asked.

'It is the will!' replied Bhavani. 'He came last night and gave it to me.'

'What are you going to do with it?'

Bhavani said: 'I have no need of it now.' And he tore the will into small pieces.

When the news reached the village, Bagala proudly nodded his head and said: 'Didn't I prophesy that the will would be recovered through Kalipada?'

But the grocer Ramcharan replied: 'Last night, when the ten o'clock train reached the station, a handsome young man came to my shop and asked the way to the Chowdhuris' house, and I thought he had some sort of bundle in his hand.'

'Absurd,' said Bagala.

ONCE THERE WAS A KING

'ONCE upon a time there was a king.'

When we were children there was no need to know who the king in the fairy story was. It didn't matter whether he was called Siladitya or Salivahan, whether he lived at Kashi or Kanauj. The thing that made a seven-year-old boy's heart go thump with delight was

this one great truth, this reality of all realities: ' Once there was a king.'

But the readers of this modern age are far more exact and exacting. When they hear such an opening to a story, they at once ask suspiciously: ' Which king?'

The story-tellers also have become more precise. They are no longer content with the old indefinite ' There was a king,' but instead they look very wise and begin: ' Once there was a king named Ajatasatru.'

The modern reader's curiosity, however, is not so easily satisfied. He blinks at the author through his scientific spectacles and asks again: ' Which Ajatasatru?'

When we were young, we understood all sweet things; and we could detect the sweets of a fairy story. We never cared for such useless things as knowledge. We cared only for truth. And our innocent little hearts knew well where the Crystal Palace of Truth lay and how to reach it. Today we are expected to write pages of facts, while the truth is simply this: ' There was a king.'

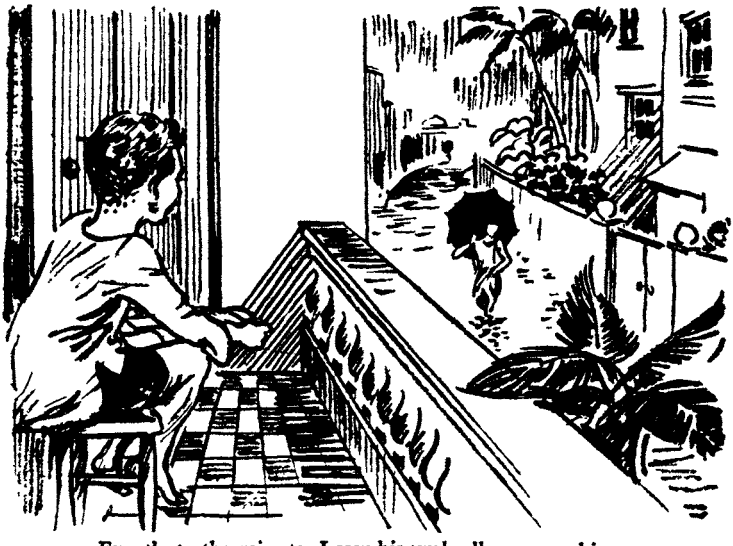
I remember vividly that evening in Calcutta when the fairy story began. It had been raining all day long. The whole city was flooded. In our lane the water was knee-deep. I had a hope, which was almost a certainty, that my tutor would be prevented from coming that evening. I sat on the stool in the far corner of the verandah looking down the lane, and my heart beat faster and faster. Every minute I kept my eyes on the rain, and when it showed signs of stopping, I prayed with all my might: ' Please, God, let it keep on raining till half-past seven.'

I was quite ready to believe that the only reason for rain was to protect one small boy from the clutches of his tutor.

If not in answer to my prayer, at least according to some law of nature, the rain did not stop. But alas, neither did my teacher! Exactly to the minute, I saw his umbrella approaching. The great bubble of hope burst in my breast, and my heart collapsed. Truly, if there is after death a punishment to fit the crime, then my tutor will be born again in my place, and I shall be born in his.

As soon as I saw his umbrella I ran as hard as I could to my mother's room. My mother and my grandmother were playing cards by the light of a lamp. I ran into the room, flung myself on the bed beside my mother, and said: ' Mother, my tutor has come, and I have such a bad headache. Need I have my lesson today?'

I hope no child will be allowed to read this story and



Exactly to the minute, I saw his umbrella approaching

I sincerely trust it will not be used in text-books or primers for junior classes. For what I did was dreadfully bad, and I received no punishment whatever. On the contrary, my wicked request was granted.

Mother said: 'All right,' and turning to the servant added: 'Tell the tutor that he can go back home.'

It was quite plain that she did not think my illness very serious, for she went on with her game and took no further notice of me. And I, burying my head in the pillow, laughed to my heart's content. We understood one another perfectly, my mother and I.

But everyone must know how hard it is for a boy of seven years old to keep up a pretence of illness for long. After about a minute I caught hold of my grandmother and said: 'Grannie, please tell me a story.'

I had to ask many times. Grannie and Mother went on playing cards and took no notice. At last Mother said to me: 'Child, don't bother us now. Wait until we've finished the game.' But I persisted. I told Mother she could finish her game tomorrow, while I was having my stupid lessons. She must let Grannie tell me the story now.

At last Mother threw down the cards and said: 'You had better do what he wants. I can't manage him.'

As soon as Mother had given way I rushed at Grannie. I seized her hand, and dancing with delight I dragged her inside my mosquito curtain on to the bed. I clutched the pillow with both hands in my excitement, and jumped up and down with joy, and when I had at last become a little quieter I said: 'Now, Grannie, let's have the story!'

Grannie started: 'Once upon a time there was a king.' After a pause she went on: 'And the king had a queen.'

That was good to begin with. He had only one!

It is usual for kings in fairy stories to have too many queens; and whenever we hear that there are two queens, our hearts begin to sink. One of them is sure to be unhappy. But in Grannie's story there was no danger of that. He had only one queen.

The next detail of Grannie's story was that the king had no son. At the age of seven I did not think one need bother if a man had no son. He might only have been in the way. Nor was I greatly excited when I heard that the king had gone into the forest to do penance in order to obtain a son. There was only one thing that would have made me go into the forest, and that was to get away from my tutor!

But the king left behind, with his queen, a little girl, who grew up into a beautiful princess.

Twelve years passed away, and the king went on doing penance and never thought of his beautiful daughter. The princess reached the full bloom of her youth. The age of marriage passed, but the king did not return. The queen was filled with grief and cried: 'Will my golden daughter die unmarried?'

Then the queen sent men to the king, begging him to come back if only for a single night, and to eat one meal in the palace. And the king consented.

With the greatest care, the queen cooked with her own hand sixty-four dishes. She made a seat for him of sandalwood and arranged the food in plates of gold and cups of silver. The princess stood behind his seat with the peacock-tail fan in her hand. After his twelve years' absence the king entered the house, and the princess, waving the fan, lighted up the whole room with her beauty. The king looked at his daughter's face and forgot even to eat.

At last he asked his queen: 'Who is this girl whose beauty shines like the golden image of a goddess? Whose daughter is she?'

And the queen cried: 'Do you not recognise your own daughter?'

For some time the king remained in silent amazement, but at last he exclaimed: 'My tiny daughter has grown to be a woman.'

'How could it be otherwise?' the queen asked with a sigh. 'Do you not know that twelve years have passed?'

'But why did you not give her in marriage?' asked the king.

'You were away,' the queen replied. 'How could I find her a suitable husband?'

The princess went on waving her fan

At this the king vowed that the first man he saw the following day when he went out of the palace should marry her.

And the princess merely went on waving her fan of peacock feathers, and the king finished his meal.

The next morning, as the king went out of his palace he saw the son of a Brahman gathering sticks in the forest outside the palace gates. He was about seven or eight years old. The king said: 'I will marry my daughter to him.'

Who can interfere with a king's command? At once the boy was called, and the marriage garlands were exchanged between him and the princess.

At this point I came close up to my wise Grannie and asked her eagerly: 'What then?'

At the bottom of my heart there was a wish that I might be that fortunate seven-year-old wood-gatherer. The rain fell steadily outside. The earthen lamp by my bedside was burning low. My grandmother's voice echoed softly as she told the story. And all these things helped to build up in my heart the belief that I had, in some far distant past, been gathering sticks in the forest of an unknown king, and garlands had been exchanged between me and the princess, beautiful as the Goddess of Grace. She had a gold band on her hair and gold earrings in her ears. She wore a necklace and bracelets of gold, and a golden waist-chain round her waist, and a pair of golden anklets tinkled with the movements of her feet.

If my grandmother had been an author, how many explanations she would have had to offer for this little story! First of all, everyone would ask why the king remained twelve years in the forest? And then, why should

the king's daughter remain unmarried all that time? Such a delay would be regarded as absurd.

Even if my Grannie could have gone so far without quarrelling with her critics, there would still have been a great outcry about the marriage itself. How could there be a marriage between a princess of the Warrior Caste and a boy of the priestly Brahman Caste? Her readers would have imagined that the writer was preaching against our social customs in an indirect and unfair way. And they would write letters to the papers.

But I was no critic. So far as I was concerned the story was perfect. I asked Grannie excitedly: 'What then?' And she went on.

Then the princess took her little husband away, and built for him a large palace with seven courtyards, and took care of him there.

I jumped up and down on my bed, clutched the pillow more tightly than ever and said: 'What then?' My Grannie continued her story.

The little boy went to school, and as he grew up the boys in his class began to ask him: 'Who is that beautiful lady living with you in the palace with the seven courtyards?'

The Brahman's son was eager to know who she was. He could only remember how one day he had been gathering sticks and there had been a great disturbance. But all this was so long ago that he had no clear recollection of it.

In this way, four or five years passed. His companions were always asking him: 'Who is that beautiful lady in the palace with the seven courtyards?' And the Brahman's son would come back from school and say sadly to the princess: 'My school friends always ask me who

that beautiful lady is in the palace with the seven courtyards, and I cannot answer them. Tell me, oh, tell me who you are!'

The princess said: 'Let it pass untold today. I will tell you some other day.' And every day the Brahman's son would ask: 'Who are you?' and the princess would reply: 'Let it pass untold today. I will tell you some other day.' And so four or five more years went by.

At last the Brahman's son became very impatient and said: 'If you do not tell me today who you are, O beautiful lady, I will leave this palace with the seven courtyards.' Then the princess said: 'I will certainly tell you tomorrow.'

Next day the Brahman's son, as soon as he came home from school, said: 'Now, tell me who you are.' The princess said: 'Tonight after supper I will tell you.'

The Brahman's son began to count the hours in expectation of the night. And the princess spread white flowers over the golden bed, filled a golden lamp with fragrant oil and lighted it; combed her hair, and, dressing herself in a beautiful robe of blue, also began to count the hours in expectation of the night.

That evening her husband, the Brahman's son, was almost too excited to eat, but when he had finished his supper he went to the golden bed in the bed-chamber strewn with flowers, and said to himself: 'Tonight I shall know who this beautiful lady is in the palace with the seven courtyards.'

The princess ate what was left from her husband's supper, and slowly entered the bed-chamber. She had to reveal that very night the identity of the beautiful lady who lived in the palace with the seven courtyards. And as she went up to the bed to tell him, she found a snake

had crept out of the flowers and had bitten the Brahman's son. Her boy-husband was lying on the bed of flowers, his face pale in death.

My heart suddenly ceased to beat, and I asked with a voice choking with tears: 'What then?'

Grannie said: 'Then...'

But what is the use of going on with the story? It would only lead to what was more and more impossible. But a child never admits defeat. His faith in his grandmother is complete. To him, it would be impossible for this story, told on an evening when his teacher was away, to come so suddenly to an end. Therefore the grandmother has to call back her little Brahman from the chamber of Death. And she does it so simply—merely by floating the dead body down the river on a banana stem, and having some *mantras* read by a magician. And thus, on that rainy night and in the dim light of a lamp, death loses all its horror in the mind of the seven-year-old boy: it seems nothing more than the deep slumber of a single night. When the story ends, the tired eyelids are weighed down with sleep. Thus it is that we send the little body of the child floating on the back of sleep over the quiet waters of Time, and then in the morning a few magic *mantras* restore him to the world of life and light again.

THE HUNGRY STONES

My cousin and I were returning to Calcutta from our Puja trip when we met the man in the train. We thought at first that he was an upcountry Mahomedan, but we were puzzled when we heard him talk. No matter how

unimportant the topic, he would quote science, or comment on the *Vedas*, or repeat verses from some Persian poet; and as we had no knowledge of science or the *Vedas* or Persia, our admiration for him increased and my cousin, in particular, listened to every saying that fell from the lips of our extraordinary companion with admiring rapture, secretly taking down notes of his conversation. I fancy that the extraordinary man saw this, and was rather pleased.

At ten o'clock at night I spread my rug on the seat and was about to lie down for a comfortable doze when this strange person deliberately started to tell the following story. Of course, I could get no sleep that night.

When I entered the service of the Nizam of Hyderabad, *the man began*, I was sent to Barich as collector of cotton duties.

Barich is a lovely place. The river Susta runs, like a skilful dancing girl, in and out of the woods below the lonely hills. A flight of one hundred and fifty steps rises from the river, and above that flight stands a solitary marble palace. There are no other houses nearby, the village and the cotton market of Barich being some miles away.

About two hundred and fifty years ago the Emperor Mahmud Shah II built this lonely palace. In his day, jets of rose-water spurted from its fountains; and on the cold marble floors young Persian maidens danced and sang sweetly to the tune of the guitar.

The fountains play no longer; the songs have ceased; snow-white feet no longer step gracefully on the snowy marble. Karim Khan, the old clerk in my office, warned me not to camp there. ' Pass the day there, if you like,' said he, ' but never stay the night. The house is haunted.'

I laughed at his fears, but my servants said they would work till sunset, and go away at night. The place had such a bad name that even thieves would not go near it after dark.

At first the loneliness of the deserted palace weighed upon me. I stayed out at my work as long as possible, and then returned home at night—so tired that I went to bed and fell asleep immediately.

Before a week had passed, however, the place began to exert a strange fascination upon me. It is difficult to describe, but I felt as if the whole house was like a living creature which was slowly absorbing and digesting me. I distinctly remember the day I was first conscious of it. A little before sunset I was sitting in an arm-chair near the water's edge below the steps. As the sun sank behind the hill-tops, I heard a footfall on the steps behind. I looked back, but there was no one.

As I sat down again, thinking I was mistaken, I heard many footfalls, as if a number of people were rushing down the steps. A strange thrill of delight, mixed with fear, passed through my body, and—although I could see no one—I had a feeling that a crowd of laughing girls came down the steps to bathe in the Susta in that summer evening. There was not a sound in the valley, in the river, or in the palace to break the silence, but I distinctly heard the maidens' gay and happy laughter as they ran past me towards the river. They did not seem to notice me at all. Just as they were invisible to me, so I was invisible to them. The river was perfectly calm, but I felt that its still, clear waters were stirred suddenly by the splash of arms jingling with bracelets; that the girls merrily splashed water at one another; that the feet of the fair swimmers tossed up the tiny waves in showers

of pearl.

I felt a thrill at my heart—I cannot say whether the excitement was due to fear or delight or curiosity. I had a strong desire to see them more clearly, but nothing was visible. I had a feeling that I could catch all that they said if I only strained my ears; but however hard I listened, I heard nothing but the chirping of the grasshoppers in the woods. It seemed as if a dark curtain of nearly three centuries was hanging before me, and I was not quite able to lift a corner of it and look through to the other side.

Next morning the whole affair seemed like a strange dream. With a light heart I drove out to my work. I was to have written my quarterly report that day, and expected to return late; but before it was dark I was strangely drawn to my house. I felt they were all waiting, and that I should delay no longer. Leaving my report unfinished I rose, and returning by the dark lonely path I reached the vast silent palace standing on the wooded skirts of the hills.

On the first floor the stairs led to a great silent hall, its roof stretching wide over ornamental arches resting on three rows of pillars. The sun had just set, and the lamps had not yet been lighted. As I pushed the door open, there seemed to be a great bustle inside, as if a crowd of people had scattered in confusion, rushing out through doors and windows to make their hurried escape.

But I saw no one and I stood bewildered, my hair standing on end in a kind of ecstatic delight, while a faint scent of *attar* and age-old ointments lingered in the air. Standing in the darkness of that huge desolate hall, I could hear the gurgle of fountains splashing on the marble floor, a strange tune on the guitar, the jingle of orna-

ments and the tinkle of anklets, the clang of bells ringing the hours, the song of caged birds in the corridors, the cackle of storks in the gardens,—all creating round me a strange unearthly music.

At that moment my servant entered with a lighted kerosene lamp in his hand, and the strange spell was broken. I sat down at my camp-table to read the newspaper and eat my dinner. After I had finished, I put out the lamp and lay down on my bed in a small side-room.

I do not know when I fell asleep or how long I slept; but I suddenly awoke with a start. I heard no sound and I saw nobody, but I felt as if someone was gently pushing me, and beckoning me to follow her cautiously. I got up noiselessly, and, though not a soul except myself was there in that deserted palace, I was afraid with every step that someone might wake up. Most of the rooms of the palace were always kept closed, and I had never entered them.

I followed my invisible guide with silent steps. Although I could not see her, I somehow knew that she was an Arab girl, with a thin veil falling on her face from the fringe of her cap, and a curved dagger at her waist. She stopped in front of a deep blue screen, and seemed to point at something. There was nothing there, but a sudden terror froze the blood in my heart—for I thought I saw a terrible negro dressed in rich silks, sitting and dozing, with a naked sword across his knees. My fair guide stepped lightly over his legs and held up a fringe of the screen. I caught a glimpse of part of a room spread with a Persian carpet. Someone was sitting on a bed: I could not see her, but glimpsed two exquisite feet in gold-embroidered slippers. Beside the bed there was a

My fair guide held up a fringe of the screen

tray of fruit, two small cups, and a golden jug. The owner of the lovely feet was evidently expecting a guest.

With a trembling heart I tried to step across the outstretched legs of the negro, but he woke suddenly and the sword fell with a sharp clang on to the marble floor.

I was startled by a terrified scream, and I found myself sitting on my camp-bed, sweating heavily. A crescent moon looked pale in the morning light, and a crazy wanderer was crying out, 'Stand back! Stand back!' as he went along the lonely road. This madman, Meher Ali, passed that way each day at dawn. He was harmless and troubled no one; but he always cried 'Stand back! Stand back! All is false!' in a despairing voice.

Such was the abrupt end of my first dream night; but

there were more to follow. During the day I would go to my work, worn and tired, cursing the bewitching night and her empty dreams; but after nightfall I was transformed into some unknown person of a bygone age, playing my part in unwritten history. With a red velvet cap on my head, loose pyjamas, and a long flowing silk gown, I would sit on a high-cushioned chair, smoking—instead of my usual cigarette—a many-coiled *narghileh* filled with rose-water.

I felt as if I was taking part in a beautiful story, which I could follow for some distance, but of which I could never see the end. The centre of these dream fragments was always the girl with the gold-embroidered slippers. She had maddened me. In pursuit of her I wandered from room to room the whole night long. Sometimes I would see, in a looking-glass, a sudden reflection of her Persian beauty; a swift turn of her neck, a quick eager glance of passion and pain glowing in her large dark eyes; just a suspicion of speech on her dainty red lips; her figure, fair and slim, crowned with youth like a blossoming flower; a smile and a glance and a blaze of jewels and silk—and then she melted away.

And after she had gone, at dead of night I would hear the heart-breaking sobs of someone—someone below the bed, below the floor, below the stony foundations of that gigantic palace. From the depths of a dark, damp grave a voice cried piteously, imploring me: 'Oh, rescue me! Press me to your heart, and take me to the warm radiance of your sunny rooms above!'

I struggled to reach her, to discover her secret; and just when I felt that success was within my grasp, suddenly that crazy Meher Ali screamed out: 'Stand back! Stand back! All is false! All is false!' I opened my eyes

and saw that it was already light. My servant came and handed me my letters, and the cook waited with a *salaam* for my orders.

I said: 'I can stay here no longer.' That very day I packed up and moved to my office. Old Karim Khan smiled a little when he saw me. I felt annoyed, but said nothing and carried on with my work.

As evening approached I grew absent-minded; I felt as if I had an appointment to keep, and the work of examining the cotton accounts seemed wholly useless. Whatever belonged to the present appeared unimportant, meaningless and absurd.

I threw down my pen, closed my books, got into my carriage and drove away. I noticed that it stopped of itself at the gate of the marble palace just at the hour of twilight. With quick steps I climbed the stairs and entered the room.

There was a heavy silence everywhere. The dark rooms looked sulky, as if they were annoyed with me. My heart was full of remorse, but there was no one to whom I could confess and ask forgiveness. I wandered vaguely from room to room.

Suddenly it began to rain. Land, water and sky shivered, and a wild storm rushed howling through the distant woods, showing its lightning teeth like a raving madman who had broken his chains. The servants were all at the office, and there was no one to light the lamps. The night was cloudy and moonless. In the dense gloom I could distinctly feel that a woman was lying on her face on the floor—tearing her long hair with desperate fingers. Blood trickled down her lovely face, and she was now laughing a harsh, mirthless laugh, now bursting into violent sobs, now tearing her bodice and striking

I wandered vaguely from room to room

at her bare breast; and the wind roared through the open window, and the rain poured in torrents and soaked her through and through.

All night long the storm and that passionate cry continued. I wandered from room to room in the dark, filled with helpless sorrow. Whom could I comfort, when no one was there? Whose was this intense agony of despair? What was the cause of this inconsolable grief?

And then the madman cried out: 'Stand back! Stand back! All is false! All is false!'

I saw that the day had dawned, and Meher Ali was

going round and round the palace with his usual cry. Suddenly I wondered if he also had once lived in that house, and that, though he had gone mad, he came there every day, and wandered round and round, fascinated by the strange spell of the marble palace.

Despite the storm and rain I ran out to him and asked: 'Ho, Meher Ali, what is false?'

The man answered nothing, but pushed me aside and ran on with his frantic cry, making a desperate effort to warn himself by repeating: 'Stand back! Stand back! All is false! All is false!'

I ran like a madman myself through the pouring rain to my office, and asked Karim Khan: 'Tell me the meaning of all this!'

What I learned from that old man was this:—

At one time countless unhappy passions and unsatisfied longings had raged within that palace, and all the heartaches and wild despair had laid a curse upon the house—so that every stone was filled with a terrible hunger, a craving to swallow up, like a starving giant, any living man who might approach. No one who lived there had escaped these cruel jaws, with the exception of Meher Ali, who had escaped at the cost of his reason.

I asked: 'Is there no way in which I can escape?' And the old man answered: 'There is one way, and that is very difficult. I will tell you what it is, but first you must hear the history of a young Persian girl who once lived in that pleasure palace. A stranger or more bitterly heart-breaking tragedy was never enacted on this earth.'

Just at this moment we reached our destination, and as our fellow-passenger was continuing further in the train we had no chance of finding out who the man was,

nor what was the end of his story. I was of the opinion that the man had made up the story from start to finish, but my cousin took his tale more seriously, and vows that some day he will discover the ending. It will be interesting to hear if he ever does.

MASTER MASHAI

I

ADHAR Babu lived upon the interest of the money left him by his father, and, though he was thus a very rich man, he was very careful with his money and never spent an anna unnecessarily. However, at the time this story opens, a new guest came into his household. His wife, Nanibala, bore him a son. They named him Venugopal.

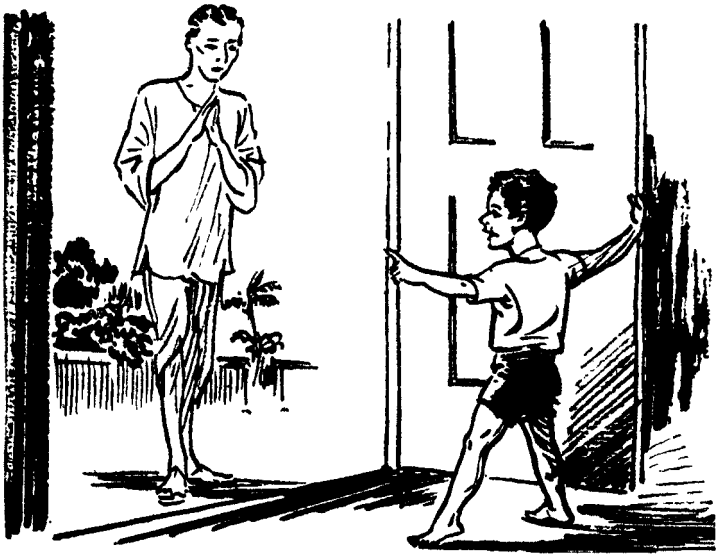
Adharlal's wife had not been in the habit of arguing with her husband about household expenses, but now Adharlal found that he had to give way, little by little, when it was a question of buying things for his son.

As Venugopal grew up his father gradually became accustomed to spending money on him. He engaged a good teacher, with a considerable reputation for wisdom and learning, and this old man tried his best to win the boy's heart; but Venugopal did not like him. The mother, in consequence, objected to him strongly, complaining that the very sight of him made her boy ill. Finally Adharlal, for the sake of peace and quiet, got rid of the teacher, and for a while the boy Venu had no lessons at all.

And then one day Haralal made his appearance, in dirty clothes and a torn pair of old canvas shoes. Hara-

lal's mother, who was a widow, had kept him with great difficulty at a district school out of the small earnings which she made by cooking in strange houses and by husking rice. He had managed to pass the Matriculation Examination and was now anxious to earn enough money to take him to college.

The servant asked Haralal what he wanted, and he answered timidly that he wished to see the master about a job as tutor to the son. The servant eyed his shabby clothes and said sharply: 'You can't see him.' Haralal turned away slowly, and at that moment Venugopal, who had been playing in the garden, came to the door. For some unexplainable reason the boy was immediately attracted by the thin-faced young man, and when the



The boy was immediately attracted by the thin-faced young man

servant shouted at Haralal to go away Venugopal cried: 'No, he shan't go away.' And he dragged the stranger to his father.

It at once struck Adharlal that he would be able to employ this youth very cheaply as a tutor for his son, and he agreed to take him on at a salary of five rupees a month with free board and lodging.

II

From the very beginning of their acquaintance Haralal and his pupil became great friends. Haralal had never before had the opportunity of loving a young human creature. His mother had been so poor and dependent that he had never been allowed to play with the children at the houses where she was employed.

Venu also was glad to find a companion in Haralal. He was the only boy in the house. He scorned his two younger sisters as unworthy playmates; so his new tutor became his greatest friend.

Two years passed by. Venu was now eleven, and Haralal had passed the Intermediate Examination and won a scholarship. He was working hard for his B.A. degree. After college lectures were over, he would take Venu into the public park and tell him stories about the heroes from Greek history and from Victor Hugo's romances. The child, in spite of his mother's attempt to keep him by her side, was always impatient to run to Haralal after school hours.

This displeased Nanibala. She thought this friendship was a deep-laid plot of Haralal's, so that he might remain indefinitely in his post as tutor. One day she talked to him behind the *purdah*. 'It is your duty to teach my son for an hour or two each day,' she said,

'but why are you always with him? The child has nearly forgotten his own parents. You must understand that a man in your position is no companion for a boy of this house.'

Haralal's voice choked a little as he answered that in future he would be Venu's teacher merely, and would keep away from him at other times.

It was Haralal's usual practice to begin his college study long before dawn. The child would come to him as soon as he had washed. There was a small pool in the garden where they fed the fish with puffed rice each morning, and Venu was also building a miniature garden-house at the corner of the garden, with tiny gates and hedges and gravel paths. When the sun became too hot they would go back to the house, where Venu would have his morning lesson from Haralal.

On the day in question Venu had risen earlier than usual, because he wanted to hear the end of a story which Haralal had begun the evening before. But he could find his teacher nowhere. The servant at the door said that he had gone out. At lesson time Venu sat unnaturally quiet. He did not even ask Haralal why he had gone out, but went on silently with his lessons. At breakfast his mother asked him what had happened to make him so gloomy, and why he could not eat. Venu did not answer; but she questioned him repeatedly, and at last the boy burst into tears and said: 'Master Mashai.' His mother asked him: 'What about Master Mashai?' But Venu found it difficult to say in what way his teacher had offended.

'Has your Master Mashai been saying anything to you against *me*?' his mother persisted; but Venu could not understand her question and went away.

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III

Soon after this, Adharlal called his son's tutor and said to him: ' It is no longer convenient for you to live in the house. From today you must live elsewhere, and only come to teach my son at the usual time.'

Haralal did not say a word, but he knew perfectly well that Venu's mother was behind this request. She was his enemy, and he was not strong enough to fight her. He sent a letter saying that he could no longer remain as tutor to Venu, and then he left the house.

When Venu came back from school, he found his tutor's room empty. His old tin trunk had vanished. The rope was stretched across the corner of the room, but there were no clothes or towels hanging on it. On the table, which had formerly been covered with books and papers, stood a bowl containing some goldfish. On the bowl was a label with the one word *Venu* in Haralal's handwriting. The boy ran at once to his father and asked what had happened, and his father told him that Haralal had resigned his post. Venu went to his room, feeling forsaken and lonely, flung himself on to his bed and began to cry bitterly. Adharlal could do nothing to comfort him.

Next day, Haralal was sitting on his wooden bed in the hostel where he had taken a room, when suddenly Adhar Babu's servant entered the room, followed by Venu. The boy ran up to him, threw his arms round his neck, and begged him to return to the house at once; and poor Haralal could not explain why it was absolutely impossible for him to go back. Whenever the young student thought, later, of those clinging arms and those pleading and reproachful eyes, a lump rose in his throat

and he was very near to tears.

After his sad parting from his little friend, Haralal found that his mind was unsettled; he knew that he had no chance of winning a scholarship, even if he could pass the examination. So he tried to obtain employment in an office.

Fortunately for him, the English manager of a big mercantile firm took a fancy to him, and offered him a post at a salary of twenty rupees a month. The manager made Haralal work extremely hard. He had to stay after office hours, and sometimes go to his master's house late in the evening; but in this way he learnt his work more quickly than others, and his fellow clerks were inclined to be jealous of him. As soon as his salary was raised to forty rupees a month, he took a small house and brought his mother to live with him. Thus happiness came back to his mother after weary years of waiting.

IV

Haralal's mother frequently said that she would like to see Venugopal, of whom she had heard so much. She wanted to prepare some dishes with her own hand, and to ask him to come just once to dine with her son. Haralal always avoided the subject, until one day the news reached him that Venu's mother was dead. He at once went to Adharlal's house to see Venu, and from that time onwards they saw each other fairly frequently.

But times had changed. Venu, stroking his growing moustache, was now a fashionable young man, with numerous wealthy and fashionable friends. He was at college, but showed no haste or wish to cross the boundary of the Intermediate Examination.

Haralal remembered his mother's request to invite

Venu to dinner, and after some hesitation he passed on his mother's invitation. Venugopal, with his handsome face and easy charm of manner, at once won the old woman's heart; but as soon as the meal was over he became impatient to go, and looking at his gold watch he explained that he had important engagements elsewhere. Haralal watched him drive away in his carriage, and said to himself with a sigh that he would not invite him to his home again.

One day when he returned from office, however, Haralal noticed a man sitting in the dark room on the ground floor of his house. He would perhaps have passed him by, had not the heavy scent of some foreign perfume attracted his attention. Haralal asked who was there, and the answer came: ' It is I, Master Mashai.'

' What is the matter, Venu?' said Haralal. ' When did you come here?'

' I came hours ago,' Venu answered. ' I didn't know that you returned so late from office.'

They went upstairs together and Haralal lighted the lamp and asked Venu how he was getting on. He soon discovered that the young man was thoroughly discontented. He said that he hated college, and that his father did not realise how dreadfully hard it was for him to attend the same class year after year, with students much younger than himself. Haralal did not point out that the solution to that problem was the obvious one of Venu himself passing the Intermediate Examination and moving up into a higher class; instead he asked him gently what he wished to do. Venu then told him that he wanted to go to England and become a barrister. He gave an instance of a student, much less advanced in his college course, who was getting ready to go. Haralal

asked him if he had received his father's permission, but Venu replied that his father would not hear a word of it until he had passed the Intermediate. Haralal suggested that he himself might try and persuade Venu's father, but the young man forbade him to do so.

Haralal asked Venu to stay to dinner, and while they were waiting he gently placed his hand on Venu's shoulder and said: 'Venu, you should not quarrel with your father, or leave home without his permission.'

Venu jumped up angrily and said that if he was not welcome he would go elsewhere. Haralal caught him by the hand and begged him not to go away without dining; and at that moment Haralal's mother brought in the food on a tray. She, too, pressed Venu to remain, and he finally agreed to do so, but with very bad grace.

While they were seated at dinner, the sound of a carriage was heard outside. A moment later a servant entered the room, followed by Adhar Babu himself. At the sight of his father Venu's face turned pale. Adhar Babu began to blame Haralal in a voice thick with anger. 'I could not believe that you would be a man of such devilish cunning,' he said. 'So you think you can live upon Venu's money? Well, I warn you—if you see the boy again, I shall prosecute you in the Police Court.'

He turned and left the room, and—without a glance in Haralal's direction—Venu silently followed his father out of the house.

V

The firm in which Haralal was employed began to buy large quantities of rice and *dhal* from country districts; and in order to buy this produce, Haralal took the cash every Saturday morning by the early train and paid it

out. Some discussion had taken place in the office about Haralal being entrusted with this work, but the manager undertook all responsibility and said that he had complete confidence in Haralal. This special work continued from December to April, and Haralal frequently returned home very late at night.

One day, after his return from work, his mother told him that Venu had called and that she had persuaded him to stay to dinner. This happened more than once, and on one such occasion Venu waited for Haralal to return and had a long talk with him.

'Master Mashai,' he said, 'my father has lately become so irritable that I can no longer live with him. Besides, I know he is thinking of marrying again. If this marriage takes place, I feel that I cannot live in the house any longer. You must show me a way out of this. I want to become independent.'

Haralal felt deeply grieved, but he could see no way of helping his former pupil. Venu was still determined to go to England and become a barrister. He swore that, somehow or other, he must get the passage money out of his father. He might borrow it from someone, and then his father would have to pay when the creditor claimed payment.

'But who would advance you the money?' Haralal asked.

'You!' said Venu.

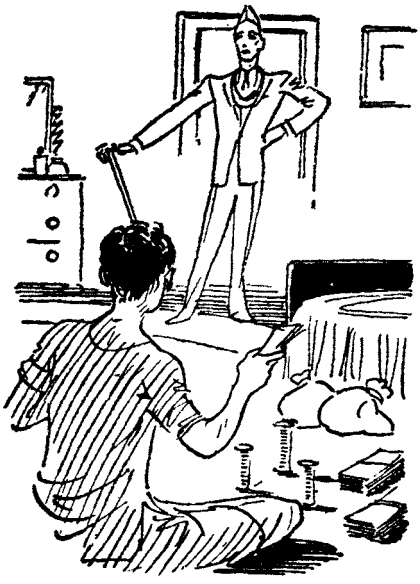
'I!' exclaimed Haralal in amazement.

'Yes,' said Venu, 'I've seen the servant bringing bags of money here on Friday evenings.'

'The servant and the money belong to someone else,' Haralal explained, and told Venu why the money came to his house on Friday nights, like birds to their nest,

only to be scattered again next morning. It was not his to lend.

One Friday night Venu once more visited Haralal. When he arrived, Haralal was sitting on the floor of his bedroom, counting the firm's money. Venu was dressed in an unusual manner: he had discarded his Bengali dress and was wearing a European coat and trousers, and he had a cap on his head. Rings glittered on most of his fingers, and thick gold chain hung round his neck. There was a gold watch in his pocket, and diamond studs could be seen in his shirt sleeves. Haralal at once asked him what was the matter and why he was wearing such clothes.



Venu was dressed in an unusual manner

Venu replied: 'My father is to be married tomorrow. He tried to keep it from me, but I found out. I've asked him to let me go to our garden-house at Barrackpore for a few days, and he was only too glad to get rid of me so easily. I'm going there tonight, and I wish to God I could stay there for ever.'

Seeing Haralal glance at the rings on his fingers, Venu went on to explain that they had belonged to his mother. He then asked Haralal if he had had his dinner, and Haralal replied: 'No. I can't leave this room until I have counted all this money and locked it up in this iron box.'

'Go and have your dinner,' Venu said. 'Your mother will be waiting for you. I'll keep guard here.'

For a moment Haralal hesitated, and then he went down and had his dinner. Afterwards, he and his mother returned, and the three of them sat talking, among the bags of money, until nearly midnight; and then Venu glanced at his watch and jumped to his feet, saying that he would miss his train if he did not leave at once. He asked Haralal to take care of his rings and his watch and chain until he asked for them again. Haralal put them all together in a leather bag, and Venu helped him to put all the bags of money into the safe before he left the house.

VI

The next morning Haralal woke early and, after washing his face and hands, he went back to his bedroom and began to take out the bags containing the silver coins and the currency notes. Suddenly his heart seemed to stop beating. Three of the bags were empty. He opened them and shook them with all his might; but he could

find nothing inside except two letters, one of which was addressed to Venu's father and the other to himself. Both letters were in Venu's handwriting.

Haralal tore open his own letter and read it hastily. It was perfectly clear. Venu had taken three thousand rupees in currency notes, and had started for England. The steamer was to sail before daybreak that very morning. The letter ended with the words: 'I am explaining everything in a letter to my father. He will pay off the debt. Also, my mother's ornaments, which I have left in your care, will more than cover the amount I have taken.'

Haralal locked up his room and, hiring a carriage, hurried to the docks. But he did not even know the name of the steamer that Venu had taken. He found two ships had sailed for England early that morning. It was impossible for him to find out which of them carried Venu, or how to reach him.

When Haralal returned home the sun was strong and the whole of Calcutta was awake. Everything before his eyes seemed blurred. He felt as if he were pushing against a fearful obstacle, invisible but pitiless. His mother came on to the verandah and asked him anxiously where he had been; but Haralal pushed past her without a word, and locked himself into his own room. She kept calling to him, '*Baba! Baba!*' and at seven o'clock a servant came as usual from the manager's office, saying that they would miss the train if they did not start at once. Haralal called from inside: 'I cannot go this morning,' and the servant shrugged his shoulders and returned to the office.

Suddenly Haralal thought of the ornaments which Venu had left behind. He had quite forgotten them,

but with the thought came instant relief. He took the leather bag, and also Venu's letter to his father, and left the house.

Before he reached Adharlal's house, he could hear the band playing for the wedding, yet on entering he could feel that there had been some disturbance. Haralal was told that there had been a theft in the night and that some of the servants were suspected. In his anxiety to see Venu's father, he did not ask what had been stolen, but hurried through the house. He found Adhar Babu sitting in the upper verandah, flushed with anger. Haralal said to him politely: 'May I speak to you privately, sir?' but Adharlal's anger flared up and he shouted: 'I've no time now!'

Haralal, however, handed him the bag which Venu had left behind. Adharlal opened it impatiently and then said with a sneer: 'It's a paying business that you two have started—you and your former pupil! You knew that the stolen property would be traced, and so you decided to bring it to me to claim a reward!' And Haralal suddenly realised what the previous night's theft had been. Venu had removed all his mother's jewellery without his father's knowledge or permission.

Haralal quickly presented the letter which Venu had written to his father, but this only made Adharlal more furious still. 'What's all this?' he shouted. 'I'll call the police! My son has not yet come of age—and *you* have smuggled him out of the country! I'll bet my soul you've lent him a few hundred rupees, and then you claim three thousand from me. But I'm not going to be bound by *this*!' He waved Venu's letter angrily in Haralal's face.

'I haven't lent him a single pice,' protested Haralal.

'Then how did he find the money?' asked Adharlal, with a sneer. 'Do you mean to tell me that he broke open your safe and stole it? I don't believe a word of it!'

Haralal now knew that he could hope for neither help nor sympathy from Venu's father, and he turned and left the house without another word. It seemed to him that he had reached the depths of despair and anxiety. His mind refused to work. As soon as he reached his home he saw a carriage waiting outside the house, and for a moment he thought that it was Venu's. It was so impossible to believe that his calamity was hopeless and final.

Haralal went quickly to the carriage, but found an English assistant from the firm sitting inside. The man seized Haralal's wrist and asked him urgently: 'Why didn't you leave by the train this morning?' The servant had told the manager his suspicions and he had sent this man to make inquiries.

Haralal answered: 'Because I found that notes to the value of three thousand rupees were missing.'

The man asked how this could have happened, but Haralal only shook his head in unhappy silence. Seeing his embarrassment, the assistant said: 'Let us go upstairs together and see where you keep your money.' They went up to the room, counted the money carefully, and then made a thorough search of the house.

When Haralal's mother saw this, she could contain her curiosity no longer. She came anxiously up to them and asked what had happened. The man answered in broken Hindustani that some money had been stolen.

'Stolen!' the mother cried, in great distress. 'How could it be stolen? Who would do such a terrible thing?'

Haralal forbade her to say any more, but when the man collected the remainder of the money and told Haralal to come with him to the manager, the old woman barred the way and said: 'Sir, where are you taking my son? · I have done everything in my power, I have even starved myself, to bring him up as an honest and hard working boy. My son would never touch money that was not his own.'

The Englishman, however, did not understand Bengali, and could only reply: '*Achcha! Achcha!*' Haralal entreated his mother not to be anxious; he would explain everything to the manager and soon be back again.

But when the manager asked him gently: 'Tell me the truth, Haralal. What *did* happen?' the young man could only reply: 'Sir, I haven't taken any money.'

'I fully believe that,' said the manager, 'but surely you know who has taken it?'

Haralal remained silent, with his eyes on the ground.

'Somebody,' said the manager, 'must have taken it with your connivance.'

'Nobody,' replied Haralal, 'could take it away with my knowledge unless he first took my life.'

'Look here, Haralal,' said the manager at last, 'I trusted you completely. I employed you in a post of great responsibility. Everyone in the office was against me for doing so. The three thousand rupees is a small matter, but the shame of all this is, to me, a great matter. I will do one thing. I'll give you the whole day to bring back the money. If you do so, I'll say nothing about it and I'll keep you on in your post.'

It was eleven o'clock when Haralal, with bent head, walked out of the office, leaving his fellow clerks to laugh among themselves at his disgrace.

'What *can* I do? What can I *do*?' Haralal repeated to himself, the sun's heat pouring down upon his head as he walked along. At last his mind ceased to think at all, but he continued to walk mechanically.

This city of Calcutta, which offered its shelter to thousands and thousands of men, now seemed like a steel trap to him. Nobody had any special grudge against him, yet everybody was his enemy. The crowd passed by, brushing against him: clerks from different offices ate their lunch on the roadside out of plates of leaves: a tired wayfarer on the *maidan* was lying under the shade of a tree, with one hand beneath his head and one leg crossed over the other: up-country women, crowding into carriages, were on their way to the temple: a *chuprassi* came up with a letter and asked him the address on the envelope. So the afternoon went by, till one by one the offices began to close. Carriages started off in all directions, taking people back to their homes. The clerks packed tightly on the seats of the trams, looked at the theatre advertisements as they returned home. It came into Haralal's mind that he was no longer a unit of this throng; no work would engage him all day long, and there would be no need to hurry to catch the homeward tram. All the busy occupations of the city—the buildings, the horses and carriages, the incessant traffic—seemed at one moment to swell into dreadful reality, and at the next to sink into the shadowy unreal.

All that day Haralal had eaten no food and taken no rest, nor had he sheltered from the sun. The veins on his forehead throbbed, and he felt as if his head must burst. Through this agony of pain one thought came again and again into his mind: the image of one person rose before his mental vision, and one name alone found its way

through his dry throat: ' Mother!'

He said to himself: ' In the depth of the night, when no one is awake to arrest me, I will creep silently to my mother's arms and fall asleep, and may I never wake again!'

He hailed a carriage. The driver asked him where he wanted to go, and he answered: ' Nowhere. I want to drive across the *maidan* for a breath of fresh air.'

The man at first did not believe him and was about to drive on, but Haralal put a rupee into his hand. And so the driver crossed and recrossed the *maidan* from one side to the other by different roads.

Haralal laid his throbbing head on the side of the open window of the carriage and closed his eyes. Slowly all the pain left him. A deep peace filled his heart and supreme deliverance seemed to embrace him on every side. It was not true, this day's despair which threatened to drag him into utter helplessness. It was *not* true, it was false. He knew now that it was only a vain fear that his mind had conjured up from nothing. Deliverance was in the infinite sky and there was no end to peace. In the sky, surrounding his emancipated heart on every side, he felt the presence of his mother. In her presence all his pain vanished; thought, consciousness, itself, was ended. The bubble of pain had burst, and now there was neither darkness nor light, neither past nor future.

The cathedral clock struck one. The driver called out impatiently: ' Babu, my horse can't go on any longer. Where do you want to go?'

There was no answer.

The driver got down and shook Haralal and asked him again where he wanted to go.

There was no answer.

And this was a question which never received its answer from Haralal.

MY FAIR NEIGHBOUR

My feelings towards the young widow who lived in the next house to mine were feelings of worship; at least, that is what I told my friends and myself. Even Nabin, who was my greatest friend, did not know the real state of my mind; and I had a sort of pride that I could keep my love pure by hiding it deep in my heart. She was like a dew-soaked flower which has fallen to earth too soon. I felt that she was too beautiful and holy for the flowery marriage-bed; she was more like a goddess from Heaven.

But love is like a mountain stream. It refuses to be imprisoned in the place of its birth, and must find some way of escape. That is why I tried to give expression to my feelings by writing poetry; but even my pen seemed unwilling to describe anything so perfect as my feelings for the young widow.

It happened, curiously enough, that just at this time my friend Nabin was also seized with a mad desire to write poems. It took hold of him like a fever. It was the poor fellow's first attack and he was quite unprepared for it. He had no talent for poetry but he could not resist the urge, and at last he came to me for help.

The subject of his poems was the old, old one which is ever new; they were all addressed to the loved one. I joked with him and asked: 'Well, old fellow, who is she?'

Nabin laughed as he replied: 'I have not yet discovered that!'

He came to me for help

I confess I found much comfort in bringing help to my friend. Like a hen sitting on a duck's egg, I poured all the warmth of my own secret love into Nabin's love-poems. I changed and improved his feeble productions so much that the larger part of each poem became my own.

Then Nabin would say in surprise: ' That is just what I wanted to say, but I could not. How on earth do you manage to think of all these fine expressions?'

Poet-like, I would reply: ' They come from my imagination. As you know, truth is silent, and it is imagination only which bursts into speech. Reality stops the flow of feeling like a rock; imagination cuts a path for itself.'

And the poor puzzled Nabin would say: 'Yes, I see .....yes, of course.' And then after some thought he would say again: 'Yes, yes, you are right!'

As I have already said, in my own love there was a feeling of sacred delicacy which prevented me from putting it into words. But with Nabin as my screen, there was nothing to hinder the flow of my pen, and a true warmth of feeling poured out of me into these poems.

In his more sensible moments, Nabin would say: 'But these are yours! Let me publish them over your name.'

'No, no!' I would reply. 'They are yours, my dear fellow; I have only added a touch or two here and there.'

And Nabin gradually came to believe it.

I will not deny that I sometimes turned my eyes towards the window of the house next door. It is also true that my secret glances were occasionally rewarded by the sight of the pure and lovely face of my fair neighbour. But one day I had a shock. Could I believe what I saw? It was a hot summer afternoon. A storm was threatening. Black clouds were massed in the north-west corner of the sky; and, against the strange and fearful light of that background, my fair neighbour stood looking out into empty space. And what a world of sad loneliness I saw in her lovely eyes! Was there, then, still some living volcano within the calm beauty of that moon of mine? Surely that sorrowful look, which was winging its way through the clouds like an eager bird, was searching, not for heaven, but for a nest in some human heart!

I was deeply moved by the flame of love which burned in that unhappy face. I was no longer satisfied with correcting foolish poems. My whole being ached to express itself in some worthy action. At last I thought I

My fair neighbour stood looking out into empty space

would try with all my power to make widow-remarriage popular in my country. I was prepared not only to speak and write on the subject, but also to spend money on it.

Nabin began to argue with me. 'Permanent widowhood,' he said, 'has in it a sense of immense purity and peace; a calm beauty, like that of the silent places of the dead shining softly in the pale light of the moon. Don't you think that the mere possibility of remarriage would destroy its sacred beauty?'

Now, this sort of senseless idealism always makes me angry. In time of famine, what should we think of a well-fed man who spoke scornfully of food and advised a man who was dying of hunger to satisfy himself with

the perfume of flowers and the song of birds? I said with some heat: 'Look here, Nabin, a ruin may be a beautiful object to an artist, but houses are built not only for artists to enjoy, but for people to live in; so they have to be kept in repair in spite of artistic tastes. It is all very well for you to idealise widowhood from your safe distance, but you should remember that even a widow may possess a tender human heart, aching with pain and desire.'

I had suspected that Nabin might be difficult to persuade, so perhaps I spoke more strongly than I need have done. I was rather surprised to find at the end of my little speech that Nabin completely agreed with me. I did not need to add anything more.

After about a week Nabin came to me, and said that if I would help him he would lead the way by marrying a widow himself. I was overjoyed, and promised him any money that might be required for the purpose. Then Nabin told me his story.

I learned that his loved one was not an imaginary being. It appeared that Nabin, too, had for some time loved a widow from a distance, but had not spoken of his feelings to any living soul. Then the papers in which Nabin's poems, or rather *my* poems, were published had reached the fair one's hands; and the poems had had their effect.

Nabin was careful to explain that he had not really intended to make love to her in that way. In fact, he said, he had no idea that the widow knew how to read. He used to post the papers, without giving the sender's name, addressed to the widow's brother. It was just a fancy of his, like giving flowers to a god; it does not matter to the worshipper whether the god knows or not,

whether he accepts or rejects the offering.

Then followed a long story about how an illness of the brother at last brought them together. The presence of the poet himself naturally led to much discussion of the poems; and this in turn led to talks on other matters.

After his recent defeat in argument at my hands, Nabin had at last dared to propose marriage to the widow. At first he could not win her consent. But when he had quoted my words on the subject, and added a few persuasive tears of his own, the fair one had agreed to marry him. Some money was now wanted by her brother to make arrangements.

'Take it at once,' I said.

'But,' Nabin went on, 'you know it may be some months before I can persuade my father to agree to the marriage and to continue the allowance of money he gives me. How are we to live until then?'

I wrote out the necessary cheque without a word, and then I said: 'Now tell me who she is. You need not look on me as a possible rival; I swear I will not write poems to her, and even if I do I will not send them to her brother, but to you!'

'Don't be silly,' said Nabin; 'I have not kept back her name because I feared your rivalry. The fact is, she was very worried about taking this unusual step, and had asked me not to talk about the matter with my friends. But it no longer matters, now that everything has been satisfactorily arranged. She lives at No. 19, the house next to yours.'

If my heart had been an iron boiler it would have burst. 'So she has no objection to re-marriage?' I simply asked.

'Not at the present moment,' replied Nabin with a

smile.

'And was it the poems alone which caused this wonderful change?'

'Well, my poems were not so bad, you know,' said Nabin. 'Were they?'

I swore to myself.

But at whom was I to swear? At him? At myself? At Fate? All the same, I swore.

THE RENUNCIATION

I

It was a night of full moon in Spring, and the breeze was heavy with the perfume of mango flowers. The tuneful notes of an untiring *papiya*, hidden in the thick leaves of an old tree by the side of a pool, could be heard in a sleepless bedroom of the Mukerji family. Hemanta, sitting beside his wife at the open window, was like an evening breeze which played about a favourite flowering bush. First he restlessly twisted a curl of his wife's hair round his finger; then he took her hand in his and gently pulled her fingers; and then played with the flowers in her hair, until most of them fell to the floor at her feet. He was trying to wake her out of her dreamy state, but Kusum sat motionless, looking out of the window at the moonlit depth of never-ending space beyond. She did not notice her husband's touch.

At last Hemanta took both her hands in his and, shaking them gently, said: 'Kusum, where are you? You seem to have flown far away to join the stars. Come back to me, dear Kusum! See how beautiful the night is.'

He was trying to wake her out of her dreamy state

Kusum turned her eyes from the emptiness of space towards her husband, and said slowly: ' I know a *mantra* which could in one moment break this Spring night and the moon into pieces.'

' Please don't say it, even if you do know it,' laughed Hemanta. ' If any *mantra* of yours could bring three or four Saturdays each week, and make the nights last until five o'clock the next evening, say it by all means.'

Saying this, he tried to draw his wife a little closer to him. Kusum, freeing herself from his arms, said: ' Do you know, tonight I feel I must tell you something of which I promised to speak only on my death-bed. To-night I feel that I could endure whatever punishment you might give me.'

Hemanta started to make a joke about punishments, but the sound of an angry pair of slippers was heard walking rapidly towards their room. They were the familiar footsteps of his father, Harihar Mukerji, and Hemanta, not knowing what it meant, was filled with surprise and excitement.

Standing outside the door Harihar shouted: ' Hemanta, turn your wife out of the house immediately.'

Hemanta looked at his wife, but he saw no sign of surprise in her expression. She merely buried her face in her hands, and wished, with all her heart, that she could then and there melt into nothingness. The sweet song of the *papiya* floated into the room with the south breeze, but no one heard it. The beauties of the earth are endless, but how easily everything is twisted out of shape.

II

Returning to the bedroom, Hemanta asked his wife: Is it true?'

' It is,' replied Kusum.

' Why didn't you tell me long ago?'

' I tried, many a time, but I always failed. I am a wretched woman.'

' Then tell me everything now.'

Kusum quietly told her story in a firm unshaken voice. She walked barefooted through fire, as it were, with slow courageous steps, and nobody knew how badly she was burned. Having heard her to the end, Hemanta rose and walked out.

Kusum thought that her husband had gone, never to return to her again. She did not think it strange. Her mind had become so dry and empty during the last few

moments that she took it as naturally as any other occurrence of everyday life. The world and love seemed false and meaningless. The memory of her husband's protestations of love brought a hard, joyless smile to her lips, like a sharp cruel knife which had cut through her heart. She was thinking of this love which had, until now, filled her whole life; which had brought with it so much deep and tender feeling, making even the shortest separation seem painful and a moment's union so very sweet; and which had seemed as if it would never end. And now, in this moment of trial, how feeble was this love's support! At a touch it had broken into a handful of dust! Only a short time ago Hemanta had whispered to her: 'What a beautiful night!' The same night was not yet at an end, the same *papiya* was still singing, the same south breeze still blew into the room, making the bed-curtain tremble; the same moonlight lay on the bed near the open window. But it all seemed unreal now. Love was more false and changeable than the moon herself.

III

The next morning Hemanta, tired out after a sleepless night, and wild-eyed with misery, called at the house of Peari Sankar Ghosal.

'What news, my son?' Peari Sankar greeted him.

Hemanta, flaming up like a big fire, said in a trembling voice: 'You have stained our caste. You have brought destruction upon us. And you will have to pay for it.' He could say no more; he felt choked.

'And *you* have preserved my caste, prevented my being expelled from society, and treated me with great friendliness!' said Peari Sankar with a twisted smile.

Hemanta wished that his Brahmin anger could reduce Peari Sankar to ashes, but his anger only burned himself. Peari Sankar sat before him, unhurt and in the best of health.

'Did I ever do you any harm?' demanded Hemanta in a broken voice.

'Let me ask you one question,' said Peari Sankar. 'What harm had my daughter—my only child—done to your father? You were very young then, and probably never heard. Listen, then, and I will tell you. There is a strange justice in what I am going to relate.

'You were quite small when my son-in-law Nabakanta ran away to England after stealing my daughter's jewels. You might truly remember the fuss in the village when he returned as a lawyer, five years later. Or perhaps you did not know about it, as you were at school in Calcutta at the time. Your father, unjustly claiming to be head of our caste in the village, declared that if I sent my daughter to her husband's home I must disown her, and never again allow her to enter my house. I fell at your father's feet and begged him to be merciful, saying: 'Brother, save me this once. I will make the boy go through the *prayaschittam* ceremony. Please take him back into the caste.' But your father remained determined. For my part, I could not disown my only child, and, saying goodbye to my village and my friends, I went away to Calcutta. But my troubles followed me. When I had made every arrangement for my nephew's marriage, your father stirred up the girl's people against us, and they broke off the match. Then I made a solemn promise that, if there was a drop of Brahmin blood flowing in my veins, I would have my revenge. You understand the business to some extent now, don't you? But

wait a little longer. You will enjoy the rest of the story; it is interesting.

'When you were at college, a man named Bipradas Chatterji lived next door to the house where you were staying. The poor fellow is dead now. In his house there lived a moneyless child-widow called Kusum, whose father, a Kayestha gentleman, was dead. The girl was very pretty, and the old Brahmin desired to shield her from the admiring eyes of college students. But it is not difficult for a young girl to deceive her old guardian. She often went to the top of the roof to hang her washing out to dry, and, I believe, you found your own roof best suited for your studies. I do not know whether you ever spoke to each other, but the girl's behaviour excited suspicion in the old man's mind. She made frequent mistakes in her household duties, and she could neither eat nor sleep. Some evenings she would burst into tears in the presence of the old gentleman, without any reason.

'At last he discovered that you two frequently saw each other from the roofs, and that you even went to the extent of returning from college at midday, in order to sit on the roof with a book in your hand. Bipradas came to me for advice and told me everything. 'Uncle,' I said to him, 'for a long time you have wished to make a sacred visit to Benares. You had better go now, and leave the girl in my care. I will look after her.'

'So he went. I arranged for the girl to live in the house of Sripati Chatterji, pretending he was her father. You know what happened next. I feel a great relief today, having told you everything from the beginning. It sounds almost unbelievable, doesn't it? I have thought of turning it into a book and getting it printed. But I am not a literary man myself. They say my nephew has

some talent in that direction; I will get him to write it for me. But the best thing would be for you to work together, because the end of the story is not known to me so well.'

Without paying much attention to Peari Sankar's last remarks, Hemanta asked: 'Didn't Kusum object to this marriage?'

'Well,' said Peari Sankar, 'it was very difficult to guess. You know, my boy, what women's minds are like. When they say "No", they mean "Yes." During the first few days after her removal to her new home, she was in despair at not seeing you. You, too, seemed to have discovered her new address somehow, because you seemed to lose your way after starting for college, and waited about in front of Sripati's house. Your eyes did not appear to be exactly in search of the Presidency College; they were directed towards the barred windows of a private house, through which nothing but insects and the hearts of love-sick young men could find their way. I felt very sorry for you both. I could see that your studies were being seriously interrupted, and the girl's unhappy state was pitiable.

'One day I called Kusum to me and said: "Listen to me, my daughter. I am an old man and you need feel no delicacy in my presence. I know whom you desire in your heart. The young man's condition is hopeless, too. I wish I could bring about your union." At this Kusum suddenly burst into tears and ran away. On several evenings after that, I visited Sripati's house and, calling Kusum to me, discussed you with her, and I gradually succeeded in overcoming her confusion. At last, when I said that I would try to arrange a marriage, she asked me: "How can it be?" "Never mind," I said,

" I will say you are a Brahmin girl."

'After a good deal of argument, she begged me to find out whether you would approve of it. " What rubbish!" I replied. " The boy is almost mad with love as it is—what's the use of worrying him with all these complications? Let the ceremony take place smoothly and then—all's well that ends well. There is not the slightest risk of his ever discovering the truth, so why should you make the fellow miserable for life by telling him?"

'I do not know whether Kusum agreed to the plan or not. At times she cried, and at other times remained silent. If I said, " Let us give up the idea, then," she would become very restless. In the end I acted without telling her, and sent Sripati to you with the proposal of marriage. You consented without a moment's hesitation and everything was settled.

'Shortly before the appointed day, Kusum became so stubborn that I had the greatest difficulty in persuading her. " Please give it up, uncle!" she said to me constantly. " What do you mean, you foolish child?" I scolded her. " How can we back out now, when everything has been settled?"

'" Spread the story that I am dead," she begged, " and send me away somewhere."

'" And then what would happen to the young man?" I said. " He is now in the highest heaven of delight, knowing that his greatest desire will be achieved tomorrow; and today you want me to send him the news of your death? The result would be that tomorrow I should have to carry news of his death to you, and the same evening your death would be reported to me. I should feel like a double murderer!"

'At last the happy marriage was celebrated, and I felt

relieved of the solemn duty which I had set myself. I had had my revenge. You know best what happened afterwards.'

'Wasn't it enough to have done us such an irreparable injury?' burst out Hemanta after a short silence. 'Why have you told the secret now?'

With complete calm Peari Sankar replied: 'When I saw that all arrangements had been made for the marriage of your sister, I said to myself: "Well, I have stained the caste of one Brahmin, but that was only from a sense of duty. Here, another Brahmin's caste is in danger, and this time it is my duty to prevent it." So I wrote to them saying that I was in a position to prove that you had taken the daughter of a *sudra* to wife.'

Hemanta controlled himself with a great effort, and said: 'What will become of this girl if I abandon her now? Would you give her food and shelter?'

'I have done what I had to do,' replied Peari Sankar calmly. 'It is no part of my duty to look after the unwanted wives of other people.' He called a servant. 'Bring a glass of coconut milk for Hemanta Babu, with ice in it,' he said. 'And bring some *pan*, too.'

But Hemanta rose and left the house, without waiting for these refreshments.

IV

There was no moon and the night was dark and silent. No birds were singing. The old tree by the pool looked like an inky shadow against the paler shadow of its background. The south wind wandered blindly in the darkness like a man walking in his sleep. The watchful stars were trying to see through the mysterious darkness.

No light shone in the bedroom. Hemanta was sitting

on the side of the bed near the open window, looking out into the darkness. Kusum lay on the floor, her arms round her husband's feet and her face resting on them. It seemed as if time stood still, like a great ocean which has suddenly become tideless. On the background of eternal night, Fate was painting this one single picture for all time: silent unmoving darkness on every side, the judge in the centre of it, and the guilty one at his feet.

The sound of slippers was heard again. Outside the door, Harihar Mukerji said: 'You have been long enough; I can allow you no more time. Turn the girl out of the house.'

When she heard this, Kusum covered her husband's

Kusum lay on the floor, her arms round her husband's feet

feet with kisses, gently touched her forehead to them, and moved away.

Hemanta rose and, walking to the door, called: 'Father, I will not give up my wife.'

'What!' roared Harihar. 'Would you prefer to lose your caste?'

'I don't care about caste,' was Hemanta's calm reply.

'Then I renounce you as well!' came his father's angry shout; and the old man walked away leaving the young man and his wife together.

NOTES

THE EDITOR

If you make holes.....music : he compares himself to a bamboo tube, which can either be useful for holding oil and water, or ornamental in producing music.

go to Jericho : meaning 'go to the devil,' or 'I don't care where you go so long as you leave me in peace.'

I took the place of the hired fighters : the landlord of Jahirgram now carried on the battle with the words supplied by the editor of his newspaper.

good taste : the knowledge and natural feeling of what was correct and polite.

THE VICTORY

spray : a delicate bunch of flowers.

the star who ruled his Fate : a poetic way of describing the princess whom he worshipped.

throne : the king's royal chair.

The skill with which he gave various meanings.... through his poetry : this was a favourite test of skill in making poems in the olden days in India.

Bravo ! : an expression of praise. Well done!

thee : and *thou*, meaning *you*, are now only used in English to show great respect to a king or God, or in poetical speech.

play of words : skill in giving various meanings to words. Note Pundarik's scornful answer: 'Is there anything superior to words?' by which he at once crushes Shekhar's appeal to his king.

carried away with admiration : greatly influenced by the poet's words.

The king took off his pearl chain and put it on Pundarik's head : as a sign of victory in the competition. Later on, the princess gives the young poet a chain of flowers as the crown of victory.

THE SON OF RASHMANI

do the duty of the father : by correcting and punishing the child.

when his ship at last reached harbour : when the law-suit was finally settled.

this act of treachery : she fully believed that the original will had been stolen and a false one put in its place.

some imaginary dog : she would pretend that some thieving dog had run off with the dishes she had prepared; but really she had not had sufficient money to buy the food.

to give himself airs : to imagine that he was a person of importance.

the cat had to go away disappointed : Bhavani had regained his appetite.

it became so absurdly easy : because both Rashmani and her son could join in the pretence together.

he would turn round on him : his vanity would be offended, and he would become his enemy instead of his helper.

forced extravagance : Kalipada had been forced, by the sneers of the students, to give much more than he could afford.

laid their unclean hands : they had deeply insulted his mother.

ONCE THERE WAS A KING

exacting : *exact* means precise, and *exacting* means demanding, or making others be precise.

half-past seven : the time his tutor was due to arrive.

I will marry my daughter to him : the verb *to marry* in English can be used in two senses:—

(a) to wed someone; to take a husband (or wife) in marriage.

(b) to give a son (or daughter) in marriage.

The latter sense is used here.

a child never admits defeat : a child refuses to believe in death.

THE HUNGRY STONES

Puja trip : probably the holiday for *Durga Puja.*

attar : a fragrant oily scent made from rose-petals.

narghileh : a Persian tobacco-pipe very similar to the *hookah.*

escaped at the cost of his reason : Meher Ali had certainly managed to escape death, but had gone mad—had ' lost his reason.'

MASTER MASHAI

Victor Hugo : the famous French author.

deep-laid plot : notice how, throughout this story, the different members of this wealthy house seem quite unable to believe in unselfish motives.

with very bad grace : sulkily and unwillingly; ungraciously.

currency notes : notes of ten, fifty, a hundred rupees, etc.

it's a paying business : Adhar Babu imagines that Venu and Haralal have become partners in order to swindle other people.

my son has not yet come of age : Venu was still under the age of twenty-one, and was therefore, by law, under his father's protection.

with your connivance : with your secret knowledge and approval.

deliverance was in the infinite sky : in his light-headed and dying state, Haralal felt that all the evils which were pressing close around him had disappeared, and that he had come out beyond them into the clear light of truth. It was like coming out of some dark and narrow prison into the open sky.

his emancipated heart : his heart was now freed from slavery to all earthly things.

MY FAIR NEIGHBOUR

still some living volcano : did the young widow still have feelings as strong and fierce as the heat of a volcano?

was winging its way : travelling on wings, flying quickly.

It was like giving flowers to a god : the god was the widow, the flowers were the poems, and the worshipper was Nabin.

it may be some months before I can persuade my father to agree to the marriage : his father would disapprove of his marrying a widow.

THE RENUNCIATION

renunciation : is from the word *renounce*, meaning to give up or disown.

papiya : one of the sweetest song-birds of Bengal.

angry pair of slippers : it is the owner of the slippers who is angry, but his anger can be guessed by the sound of his footsteps.

she walked barefooted through fire : in telling her story, she suffered as much pain as if she had actually walked through fire.

stained our caste : by allowing Hemanta to marry a woman of another caste.

your father stirred up the girl's people : by telling them that the young man's family had been disowned by their caste.