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# LIFE AND MYSELF

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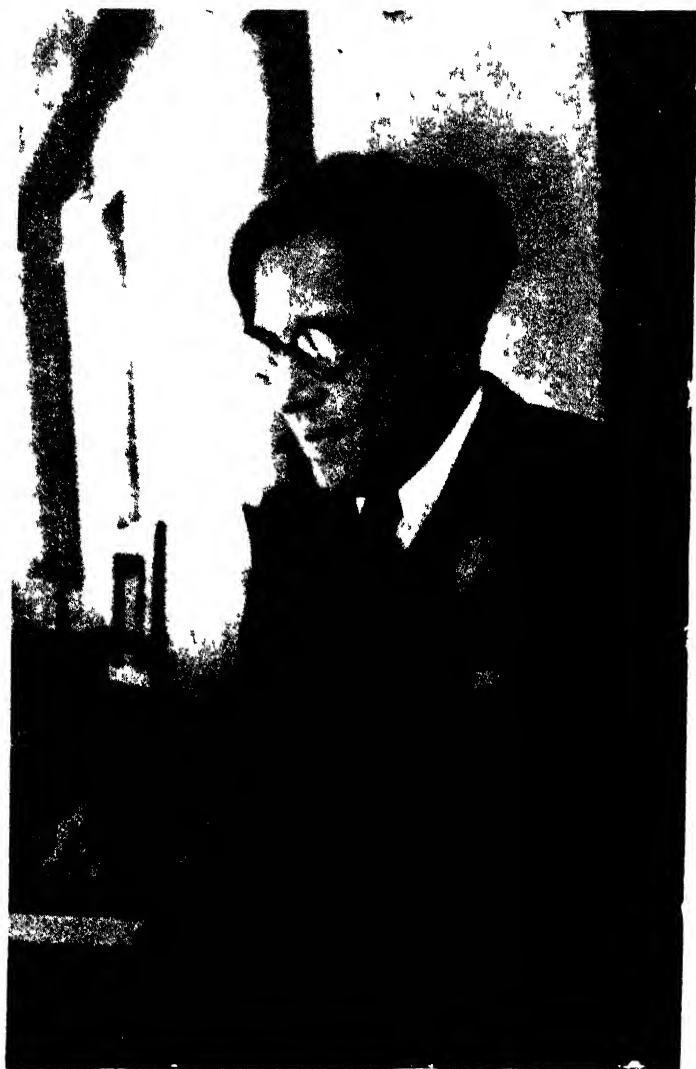
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**THE AUTHOR**

**HARINDRANATH CHATTOPADHYAYA**

# **LIFE AND MYSELF**

**VOL. I**

**DAWN APPROACHING NOON**



**NALANDA PUBLICATIONS**

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**DEDICATED  
IN  
DEEP REVERENCE  
TO  
THE SACRED MEMORY OF  
MY  
FATHER AND MOTHER**

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## **PRELUDE**

Between birth and death man is a traveller constantly coming face to face with crossroads, halting-points where he has to choose between one road and another for the continuance of his travel.

Some say that the choice is dependent on one's will, and others, that it is dependent on destiny. An autobiography is the story of the conflict of circumstance with the will of man, the result of which, at every stage, may be named his destiny.

Life is, indeed, a kaleidoscope, trembling into accidental patterns of colours. It is the twist, the tap, the turn we give it. All the same, the fact remains, that the patterns, however fascinating in their complex or simple arrangement, are formed by bits of coloured glass which human desires and dreams often seem to be in their last analysis.

**HARINDRANATH CHATTOPADHYAYA.**

20th Dec. 1947.



## I WAS BORN

According to the old Birthday Book, with yellowing pages and strange inscriptions of the date and time of birth of sisters and brothers who were born before me, I was born on the 2nd April, 1898, which is to say, a day after the 1st of April. Everybody tells me that I have just escaped being an April Fool. But in my heart of hearts I seem to be convinced that the influence of the day previous to my birth has exerted itself right throughout my life; in other words, I have been a sort of fool walking God's earth with little knowledge of men and events though, to those who know me, I seem to have a great deal! I have had an unshakeable faith in man, despite my being considered most unwise, and this faith has led me into many an awful predicament and sorry situation, making me marvel for a moment at the fool I was born, and at the utter foolishness of faith, which thought, however, does not ever last long. For faith is the keynote of my life, and without it I could never think of breathing a single breath or living in the midst of men—and women.

The old eight-day clock on the wall of our ample and comfortable house in Hyderabad (and the house still stands there with additions made to it, but subtractions from its large and beautiful compound of our childhood) struck 4 o'clock in the afternoon while my mother was bearing me into a world of pain, paying for my birth with her own pain; and when the clock stood at a quarter after hour, I came into the world, or rather, "leapt naked" into it. I did not know at that moment to what great and wonderful parents I was being linked in the history of man in general; now that I look back

## LIFE AND MYSELF

and recollect their greatness and their spiritual integrity, I do realise that I was born under fortunate stars, although, judging from the constant intrigue of them throughout my life and their endeavours they may be recorded as being unfortunate and tricky. It is enough fortune for me to remember that I had parents such as I have had. They were not merely human parents, but rare spiritual beings, high points of evolution, two truly unworldly lights walking through the darkness of life, illumining it wherever they walked, casting hope and blessing on whomever they met on life's roadway.

In the earliest years, I grew up under the protection of my mother, a true embodiment of generosity and affection. When I recall her face now, and she passed away when I was in my teens, what comes foremost to my mind is the large mole which she had on her right cheek, and hair grown grey in a night through the sorrow of having lost father just a year before we lost her, and wrinkles on her forehead and cheeks which had grown quiet, quiet with the history of a spiritual resignation to uncounted sufferings which she had bravely borne in her lifetime. I also remember her sweet, birdlike voice. It is said that she won the Viceroy's gold medal for singing when she was a girl studying in school in a village in Eastern Bengal. I do not wonder, for whenever she sang, seated on the broad window-sill of our house looking towards the old gate, singing to forget some inward grief unknown to us, I remember quite clearly that tears brimmed in her eyes and the notes in her voice which came through half-choaking, choaked our voices which wanted just to say "Mother, how sweetly you sing, but why do you cry?"

Next to mother we had a nurse called Gangu, but we children called her Gagga. She was a strange creature, but since she was almost a sort of second mother

## I WAS BORN

to us, we thought her, perhaps, eligible for a beauty competition anywhere in the world. She had a little snub nose and slits for eyes and a head with a shock of almost negroid hair. Very often she used to stink of something we did not understand then. Along with that stink invariably her eyes were as red as a kitchen fire, and her movements rather zigzaggy. The outcome of such a queer transformation was invariably a quarrel with mother whom she considered, after all, only second to herself where it came to a question of right over us, "my children" she would call us, and demanded an immediate and final recognition of her guardianship over us. This only evoked in my mother a sense of amusement masked under an attitude of sternness, while my father, who had a way of revealing himself when he was amused through a twinkle of his nostrils, said nothing at all and behaved like an onlooker merely!

"I am leaving the house at once. . . ." she would say, and then, flying into a last paroxysm of real rage, fly out of the house almost with the passion and uncanniness of a possessed person. Whenever this happened, and this happened at regular intervals, when the fit of drink was on her, we children, my little sister Suhasini and I, whom she loved deeply, felt sad and thought that losing her we had lost our all! But we were told by mother that she would return after she felt a little better, for she was not well and needed rest. True to mother's understanding of her, she would suddenly turn up on the second or third morning before anybody was up from bed, and begin sweeping the floors and humming to herself as if nothing had happened at any time and the whole house really and truly belonged to her. The swish of the broom on the floor sounded like the wash of a wave to our ears and would wake us up.

We got to know, through experience, as we grew up



## LIFE AND MYSELF

in the home bit by bit, that Gagga was an inevitable part of it; and that she was destined never to leave us of her own accord. And this proved true for she only left us when Death who takes everybody away, took her, too, one afternoon while we were at school, and had to be called back immediately, in time to watch her going away on a bier in a sitting posture, for that is the custom of her class among the Telegus of Hyderabad. After she left us, there was a gap in our lives which nobody could fill, not even our mother.

One of the dearest recollections of my childhood is the woodland behind our house; it was more than a woodland, it was a miniature forest with shaggy trees which, at times, looked to me like silent ancestors who did not say a word but noticed all that we were doing by ourselves. There were stones, large and bald which seemed miniature rocks: and there were all sorts of richly floated insects and butterflies more gorgeous than the most gorgeous costumes of actors in painted puppet shows. Tall grasses, and little wild flowers that suddenly peeped out through the grasses like eyes which seemed to wish to take us by surprise.

In fact, the miniature forest which we called garden, was full of whispering things and listening things and seeing things; in my mind the whole combined effect was that of some ancestral garden wherein ancestors were still alive and breathing only we could not see them but feel them.

But, in moments when we forgot their presence, we did queer things, like trying to imitate older people. We stole a beedi from our tailor or cigarette from father's box, and a box of matches which it was a delight to possess, since we were told that fire was dangerous, and in secrecy, stricter than that of political discussions, we set out to smoke them! But we had not learned, at that

## I WAS BORN

raw age, the way to light a smoke, and instead of inhaling it, we blew through it as through a tiny pipe, with the result that it did not light. A moment after we realised that there were ancestors looking at us, and that we had been saved by them from heinous wrong.

This sense of wrong and right somehow began to gnaw into us from a very early age. Very often it leads to wrong values, and narrows the growth of children; fear and a sense of "hell" and all that which, unfortunately, was instilled into us by our Gagga who was the only one who got to know all our childish tricks and efforts at doing elderly things.

In my childhood, I loved butterflies and trees most of all; I also loved clouds. A story is told of my watching clouds seated on the long steps of our verandah, watching them for long hours, when an English lady who called to see mother and my sisters, asked me what my name was and I replied "Aileen" . . . (Harin) and the lady went in and said: "That girl is charming. She said her name was Aileen". I wore frocks when I was a child and my face was soft then. Today it is hard, hard with the experience of life, but, I trust, not unkind.

## GAGGA

Gagga, my nurse, was a swarthy woman with large breasts gathered up tightly under a small half-blouse, a Telegu 'choli,' which she tied up between them, at a point beneath, in a tight knot, leaving a large band of deep copper flesh naked upto the waist. She walked with her whole body which trembled like jelly, every bit of flesh alive and throbbing with an almost primitive sincerity of passion, altogether a sort of figure that Rodin might have desired to catch in rough-hewn ebony or Hogarth to paint and include among his masterly studies of exquisite crudeness. Often, just to aggravate my sister Suhasini and myself, my mother would say: "O! what an ugly woman your nurse is!" when we would genuinely feel hurt. In my deepest heart I would search sensitively for my own values of beauty, and come to the conclusion that mother's values were all wrong, and that, passing an unkind remark about Gagga's looks, she was insulting part of the finest beauty in God's creation. To us, Gagga was part and parcel of all that was good, all that was kind, all that was beautiful.

It is curious when I analyse, today, my reverence for what is conventionally called ugly; I can trace it back to my reverence for Gagga. I am struck with awe, for instance, at a rhinoceros, a black rough mountain, a strangely-shaped pig. I have never thought them ugly. Most people think that they are ugly. But, the reader will say, a black mountain is not ugly, it is beautiful! Why? on analysis, it is not—it is crude, it is swarthy, it is uneven, it has contours like any animal. In fact, it is a gigantic beast which is dumb and immobile and asleep! I can never think of a mountain except in terms of mighty

## GAGGA

animals—and I cannot help reverencing might and the miracle of crudeness where it is not man-made, where it is the result of laws which operate towards their shaping in an intoxicated world of power and magnificence. I associate, in my mind, Gagga with such dark and strange and beautiful, ugly things. For Gagga had a wonderfully beautiful presence—was a great soul, and had a heart as large as a mountain!

On our birthdays she was the first to wake us up early in the morning and greet us with birthday gifts. On one occasion, I distinctly remember, she presented my sister a large -sized sleeping doll—an uncanny mechanism which made the doll open and shut its eyes, linking up the life of an inanimate creature with our own! On another occasion, my birthday, I woke up and, to my deep joy, found a large kaleidoscope lying beside my pillow....“Get up, get up, you naughty girl-boy,” she would shout. “Today, you are born.” God! what a gift for one like me, a lover of colours! The whole day and the next passed in spiritual excitement. For that kaleidoscope meant a great deal to me and, I think, was one of life’s gifts destined to mould and influence my imagination. I can never read Shelley’s

*“Life like a dome of many-coloured glass  
Stains the white radiance of eternity”*

without recalling nurse Gagga’s gift. It has been responsible for much of the colour that has crept into my poetry. When I was only a boy I wrote the line

*“Colour is my hungriest lust”*

I have again and again found that kaleidoscope creeping into my work. Colour! Thanks to you, sweet kaleidoscope of my childhood! Colour! Later, much later in life, I wrote a lyric to colour.

*“Without it I would languish,  
My spirit never climb*

## LIFE AND MYSELF

*The white and lonely ladder  
At each rung growing sadder  
For colour is an anguish  
That I suffer all the time”.*

Nurse Gagga did not merely start me off on a colourful imagination with that kaleidoscope. She was also responsible for my achievement of, at least, three letters of the English alphabet—she knew only three! She would take me to school every morning, carrying my satchel for me. In it were some beautiful rag-books, kindergarten primers, and a slate which had the colour of Gagga's skin. It also held three or four slate-pencils, again resembling Gagga. Those pencils looked like swarthy straight-backed dancers with colourful skirts on, for at one end the pencil was nude and half way from its waist downwards it wore a fancy-dress of flowered paper! On the way we would sometimes halt at a favourite shop—a Banya's shop is so interesting—it smelt of a strange world, narrow, earthly, money-haunted. The Banya's shop was next to the Hanuman Tekri, a Temple of Hanuman where loud bells rang morning and evening. While Gagga stopped to make a bargain of an exercise book or pencil or eraser, I looked each time we stopped, and so furtively, for the large orange-coloured Idol of Hanuman with his tail twisted into a veritable question-mark! Gagga enquired of the Banya the price of a green exercise-book. . . . “How much?”—The Banya said, “One anna” . . . .

“Get along with you!” she would retort. . . . “I bought it the other day, not even a week ago, for two annas.” And the Banya (with a little gold ring in the lobe of his right ear) would laugh good-naturedly. He knew, and we knew and the world knew that Gagga was deaf, stone-deaf! And that deafness of her's led her into many anecdotes of unconscious humour!

## GAGGA

- The school. Gagga reached me to the school safely, after much persuasion, after many heart-rending pangs which I invariably suffered whenever I left the cosy home and the woodlands behind the house. I now realise that I hated school, that I invariably experienced a choking sense of tyranny to have to leave the peace and the freedom of trees and butterflies which I always loved, and pass the precious day inside a formal school, resembling a jail in which all the little boys were just like prisoners!

School-walls! I think they are hideous, immoral. Schools should always be established under trees and in wild woodlands. Our ancestors knew the art of teaching and the authentic atmosphere for cultural and educational activities. School-walls! I hated them, and I always wondered as to why I was forced to live within them during the glowing blue hours of the days!

Gagga would sit at the threshold of the door close to my seat on the bench, draw out the black slate and scribble in capitals "A. C. D." She was never conscious that there was such a thing as the letter B—she did not ever know it came between A and C thus dividing them in the alphabetical catalogue forever and ever! Beyond D was a great big blank, as far as she was concerned. But I shall ever remain grateful to her for having taught me A. C. D! My distrust of the boys around me was great! I hated them as I hated everything about school, I hated them as I hated arithmetic. I was never able to calculate or work out a sum. I believe that habit remains till this day—for I have never been able to calculate or count which makes me supremely indifferent to keeping an account of all I spend!

Whenever I wanted to trick myself into a holiday, I thought out ways and means of achieving it. Sometimes I would hide my books in the coiled springs underneath a sofa. I was discovered on one occasion by

## LIFE AND MYSELF

my sister Mrinalini who slapped the books and addressed them chidingly: "Naughty books! they want to hide inside the sofa and spoil your day, sitting at home" and then pack me off to school. But I was always obstinate. "That's because you have drunk ass's milk," Gagga would remark wisely! I would return home from school within an hour, being packed back with the remark from the lady-teacher. "Ayah! take him back home! He has dirtied his trousers!"

## OUR TAILOR BALAYYA

My earliest and most romantic impression of a tailor anywhere in the world is Balayya Darzi who, though life-cancelled, yet lives in my life as a memory full of strangeness and sweetness.

In our Hyderabad home he was one of the most persistent and familiar members of a staff which consisted of persons who rendered some urgent part in our day's routine. Without Balayya Darzi the day seemed to miss something in our childhood for he was part of the vision of beauty which I had conjured up in my young growing heart, being master of a sewing machine which, by the way, was Singer's, and what mattered most of all, he was keeper of coloured chalks!

He wore a maroon turban throughout the months and I am doubtful whether it was ever washed. But all the same, it came to become, in our minds, undeniable and interpretative part of his existence. Maroon! and with little white dots! What a lovely colour maroon is! if only one of his chalks had been of that colour. But alas! his chalks were only a pale blue which resembled the veins of an anaemic mother, a dull crimson which imitated the hue of blood that had lost its tradition and gone astray, and a flat stale white which was certainly an insult to whiteness, because it seemed to sleep in the heavy flat marking-chalk.

These chalks used to be one of my most tempting temptations, and times out of number, the impulse of a veritable thief sprung up inside me somewhere, I couldn't locate the actual spot; and when he was not looking, when he was busy trying to run the machine over a frill or over a hem, my little hand would grab at the chalks,



as many as they could possess, and then runaway, imagining that distance was a sure cancellation of theft.

It was always easy, really, to steal them, since he was most of the time drunk, which is to say, not at all in communion with the world of tailors. But his tailoring was fine. It was not the result of experience so much as intuition which guided his thin long light-coloured fingers to run the machine over all sorts of printed and coloured cloths proving himself at his greatest when he was most drunk! He was comparable to the average artist who depends on ordinary liquor which makes him an extraordinary thing!

Light-coloured. . . . yes, he was extremely light-coloured, like an Anglo-Indian almost. My parents sometimes whispered that there was some touch of romance between the East and West in his birth. His fingers tapered. . . . I can still recall so clearly the shape and the contour of each of his fingers, especially his forefinger and his thumb which held the needle between to do the rough tacking before the more delicate and deliberate sewing. Pale whitish yellow, or shall we say yellowish white. If only his features had not been so utterly Aryan, I might have deduced that China had played some part in the life of his mother . . . or, father. And how those fingers trembled when he worked! I remember. Before each tack, the fingers trembled, as though they had their own individual consciousness of the artistic duty they were about to perform. Pale, yellowish white fingers tightly holding a fine needle between and doing everything to clothe me and my brothers and my sisters, and my father and mother! Yes, that is why I remember them.

His face was equally tremulous, each nerve quivering away, not entirely because of an overdose, but because of some inherent quality inside his being, the spiri-

## OUR TAILOR BALAYYA

tual quality of an artist of which he was unconscious. Even his voice spoke low, as if it was afraid of speaking . . . every sentence ended off in a real whisper, as if Balayya Darzi was always in a mood to communicate a secret, as if he was always standing tip-toe on the verge of some mighty mystery. But, of course, it was the result of an artist soul wanting to say something, plus—overpowering liquor.

In childhood we spent some part of the afternoons by him, occasionally trying to help to turn the wheel of the machine obstructing more than aiding. His mouth often smelt, and I wondered what the strange smell could be! It did not smell good, but it certainly smelt romantic in the sense of sadness, of a peculiar world which I did not then understand. It must have been the smell of a man who was seeing fairy tales! Gagga, too, smelt like that, sometimes!

We children were brought up in a curious way—in our home we constantly heard of the Hindu gods, of Mohammad, of Zoroaster, of Christ. In the school, however,—the St. George's Grammar School—we were taught the Catechism and were fairly familiar with scriptural phrases and quotations. One of them was mixed up in my imaginative brain with Balayya Darzi.

**“It is easier for a camel to enter the eye of the Needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” . . .**

Now, there were camels in Hyderabad; they used to pass by our gate quite frequently. We could see them from the verandah where we sat by Balayya. Invariably I thought to myself that, one day, suddenly, if only to prove the wise saying, one of the camels would rush into our compound and enter the eye of the needle Balayya plied with dexterity—or, at least, take him unawares while he nodded over his work—and all this, only to prove, further, that a Hyderabad Nawab would find it

## LIFE AND MYSELF

difficult to enter the Kingdom of Heaven—which, again, was mixed up, in my brain, with the beautiful woodland behind our house into which, I was convinced, all good souls passed after they got released from the body!

And there was another idea with which I invariably associated our tailor. It was an idea from the Arabian Night's Entertainment. When I was a child my sister Sarojini had in her lovely drawing room a copy of the Arabian Nights Tales (illustrated by Edmund Dulac). It lay on a black richly carved table standing on three elephant heads for legs, with white tusks jutting out. It was one of my most favourite books, and whenever I opened on the picture representing Baba Mustapha, the cobbler sewing up the mutilated body of Ali Baba's brother Cassim, I had a sneaking suspicion that Mustapha was no cobbler at all, but in reality, Balayya Darzi in disguise, who had been bribed heavily to do the uncanny job.... And then, would spring in my mind, automatically, the old proverb.

“As you sow so shall you reap”—

I was too young then to know the difference between “sew” and “sow”; for I learned my vocabulary by ear and hardly worried about the difference in the spelling of words which sounded similar but held different meanings! “As you sew so shall you reap”, when, sometimes, Balayya, through carelessness or oversight during one of his dozing fits, pricked his finger with the needle I said to myself—“That is what he has reaped”—But, frankly, I liked to see the drops of blood—they looked like ruby beads. I always loved red—and I thought to myself “what a pity Balayya's chalks are none of them as red as his blood!”

## STRANGE PEOPLE

Our home was something of a cross between a museum and a zoo; museum crowded with precious things of wisdom and culture; zoo crowded with a medley of strange types—some even verging on the mythic! For our home was open to all alike; our parents never made any invidious distinction between man and man. To them everything was unique, nothing was insignificant.

In the words of Blake "All that lives is holy." And this was not merely a beautiful phrase to my father and my mother; it was translated into obvious and easy realisation by them in their life, at every moment, at every turn, through their behaviour and their actions. Father and mother were one, absolutely one, sharing striking qualities of generosity and the wisdom of an unfaltering love of humanity. They stood together like an immense tree in the centre of life itself, affording ample shade for any traveller who chose to rest awhile in that shade. The broken, the wounded, the diseased, the frustrated, the demented all had an equal claim to rest in that cool and comforting shade. With the result that it was quite the normal experience to see father seated in his easy chair surrounded by a host of visitors and guests—consisting of a variety that might well have baffled the most critical and meticulous observer; great men and small men; astronomers and thieves—the learned and the foolish; the nawab, flaunting his wealth, twirling his moustache in moneyed vain gloriousness, and the beggar with hardly a cloth on his unwashed greasy back.

I remember them all clearly, distinctly. Especially do I recall some among them who, in my childhood, almost seemed to be characters physically manoeuvred

out of story books. I remember, for instance, "Roti Ka Bhooka" (hungry-for-bread). It was the name given by father to a very queer ordinary coarse type of man who constantly visited our house, and was one of the few who were allowed complete freedom to enter any part of it. He had a round clean-shaven head which, every fortnight, would ripen into a silvery growth of hair which sparkled in the sunlight like a soft harvest of glow. He was dark-skinned—his feet were bare and I can still recall them as being full of hard growths and corns on his toes. They were feet that surely knew the roads and the streets and the lanes of cities and countryside by heart. In short, they were the feet of a true wanderer who preferred the open road and the open sky to the imaginary safety of a house and the imaginary security of a manbuilt roof.

Father always reminded us that here was somebody to be respected. Respect this queer ordinary fellow? Sometimes he smelt queer too—it was the blended flavour of "bidis" and "ganja" which emanated from his breath when we came close to him. Respect him? for what? Father held him in great esteem. For months and months he ate nothing; but when the eating-time came, he would devour food and then, woe betide our kitchen! Yet, our kitchen was always hospitable. It must have fed thousands with a sense of deep gladness and satisfaction. During our childhood, our kitchen was almost proverbial. "Mrs. Aghorenath's 'dal'—(lentil-soup)." Woman-servant after woman-servant would come to the kitchen door with a bowl which my sweet mother would fill to the brim with her celebrated 'dal'; such a kitchen would feed 'Roti-ka-Bhooka' when he became a veritable glutton and seemed to make up in the latter half of a year what he had renounced during the first half! But the question always worried us "why

## STRANGE PEOPLE

should we respect this fool?"

Father explained that he was a remarkable sanyasi and that he was an alchemist! Alchemist!—it was a big word to us then, and did sound like magic. If he was such a magic word then surely, he must be respected. But we couldn't help teasing him when father was not looking. He was gentle with us. Now I realise that he must have been great—since father thought so.

Another figure that stands out in my recollection was a tall, lanky fellow—a Mussalman—who never changed his clothes. Year in, year out, he seemed to wear the same dark brown sherwani of wool—in winter it suited him, but in the summer he perspired terribly. He wore a black woollen cap, too. His pyjamas were loose and long and, of course, very dirty. His shoes were 'moghlai' and his coat and the cuffs of his sleeves were thickly coated with dirt. He spoke little. He sailed in with the helpless motion of a skiff that is just blown in any direction the wind chooses to blow it. He talked a great deal to himself strange, disconnected phrases. Everybody thought he was one of those unfortunate cases who should be housed in an asylum. But father knew better and yet, he never let us know—until we got to know better through rumour who sometimes speaks the truth! To himself he would remark about everybody that came his way: "This is only a figure of clay—a doll—a doll . . . but it has life . . ." and then would shift across his taut strained closed lips a smile which was more cunning than mad! It was rumoured one day that he was dead. We received the posthumous information that he was a C.I.D.! Father had known it all the time!

And what about Gangadhar Shastry, the old grey-haired clerk in a Government office in Hyderabad? He was truly one of the most remarkable beings we had seen in our younger days. I remember him on two occasions.

## LIFE AND MYSELF

A very quiet unobtrusive person who was deeply respected by my parents. One night we sat in the hall waiting to watch what father described as a great spiritual performance. Among us were old friends, northern-Indians and southern Indians, Hindus, Muslims and a sprinkling of Europeans.

Shastry arrived, a spotless white dhoti on, and only a rough towel thrown across the left shoulder. "May I, with your permission, start?" he asked in a very deep voice which seemed to echo from magic depths. "Yes, if you please, sir", replied father. Shastry went to a corner of the room with a piece of cloth which his servant had brought along. He screened off a triangular portion where two walls met, muttered a mantra, and then sat down in the centre of the hall, covering up his legs and his lap with that piece of cloth. Then he requested us to ask him to produce almost anything from anywhere. Apples, oranges, grapes. . . . a South Indian, true to tradition, called for "hot rice". . . . when everybody laughed—but the laughter died out and soon yielded to a stunned stillness. Shastry drew out from under the cloth a brass vessel stuffed with steaming rice!

Towards the end of the demonstration, he announced: "I will produce something after my own choice. . . . and it shall be for the saintly couple of the home—(referring to my parents)—So saying his hands plunged under the cloth which seemed to swell up like a billow—and then, behold! two large beautiful garlands was the result! He garlanded father and mother. It was later, when I was about eleven, that I learned Shakespeare's famous lines, "*There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio! Than are dreamed of in your philosophy*". . . .

## SKETCH OF FATHER

He stands out in my memory even now as some tremendous epoch of large-heartedness, wisdom and spiritual achievement carved into the figure of a broadchested man with a Homeric face, and whom Sarojini has described as one whose "Homeric laughter brought down the roof" . . . But his blessing always raised a roof above the heads of the destitute and the homeless. In his house everybody had a place from the most learned astronomer in touch with sidereal systems to the most low—down despicable wretch of a thief in touch only with drab living and sordidest mud.

He was not a man, my father, but a veritable epoch: in myriad ways he established eras in realms of knowledge and in the realms of the life of humanity. Untruth was to him taboo: it was something which he could not bear in this world of untruth itself! I remember one or two incidents where untruth made his "hair stand up as quills upon the fretful porpentine." One was during the floods of Cuttack, when I was hardly more than thirteen and looked like a child of ten. My sister, Sunalini, had been married then to a lawyer from Cuttack which town she adopted as her own for years. We had gone to her as temporary guests, but at a time when the Mahanadi thought it better that we should quit Cuttack. We had to leave the town in a great hurry, for the river was rising in wrath and threatening everybody who would dare to try and come her way! So, in haste, with hardly a few bundles of clothes we rushed to the station and bought our tickets and travelled third class. A ticket was bought for me on the strength of my looking under age, which meant that we saved a few rupees. On the



train I was being congratulated for looking younger than I really was, for it paid to do so. It saved some money! After all, money is more important in this world of gold than truth!

When we arrived at Calcutta, all excited, with a breath that did not want to continue breathing until I had divulged the merry secret of the half-ticket, I told father that I had travelled on a half-ticket and that the ticket-collector could not make out that I was over twelve! Father's eyes reddened like a sun-set, his lips twitched in divine anger, his hair stood like sentinels on his hand guarding the tower of truth; his nose trembled with indignation and his voice almost choked when he raised it like a thunder and said: "What, cheating the railway company?"...I trembled like a leaf in a storm and felt that had father given me a good shoe-beating for the lie to the ticket-collector it would not have hurt as much as father's single sentence: "What! cheating the railway company!..." On another occasion, and that was when I was smaller still, I must have been somewhere around six or seven, I remember an incident which I do not think I shall ever be able to cancel from my memory, not even in future births, if future births exist, as Hindus say they do. One evening drove into our compound a sealed 'jhatka', screened all round and drawn by a fairly active and self-conscious pony. Father came out of the verandah into the compound when he was told that a certain Begum Saheba had come on very urgent business to interview him and take his advice on certain very urgent matters.

Father was the embodiment of curtesy, a characteristic which cannot be learned but one which comes as heirloom from ancestors. I heard a sort of vague whispering from inside the 'jhatka,' for she was a Begum, beautiful or ugly, God only knew then (He never seemed to know

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much about His own creations, though) and when she spoke from behind the purdah, father grew furious and broke into an indignation which resembled that only of gods. "Where is the whip," he shouted to the coachman, "bring the whip and flog this woman!" . . . Afterwards we were told that she had come to request father to do something which was not legal, in the strict sense of the term, and the worst of it was that she had come with a bagful of real gold 'ashrafis' as bribe! When father got angry, and that was only when truth had been insulted, he was the very picture of a mountain-storm which having had its birth on a high peak was determined to sweep away the little structure of the depths.

I also remember that I had told a lie once—(I have told many lies in my time, thanks to a social structure which expects one to utter falsehood calling it by the polite name of tact! Cowardly social structure! unable to bear the truth! Masked falsehood strutting about as truthfulness and culture!) I told a lie and father had got to know of it. "Baby" he called out. I recognised in the tone of the voice that there was a spiritual doom awaiting me. "You told a lie?," his large deep eyes rolling and piercing my own with subtle psychic shafts. . . . I was silent, and he timed the blow with a painful pause and then, turning his grand head away, just said: "Go" . . . O, that "Go" of father's! Nobody who had not known his greatness and his majesty and his stern alliance with integrity can ever understand how that one little word, and the way he said it, had the power of an atom bomb capable of blowing up a whole city of deception. . . . "Go!" . . . I walked out of the room, feeling an absolute exile. . . . "Go" . . . O father dear! the way you said a word of rebuke was the most terrible punishment of all!

And yet, when anybody had done a good thing and

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spoken the truth, father's face lit up like a whole horizon catching the glow of ages which seemed to challenge the darkness which has always tried to fight the light. But while he was warm and appreciative of friends and associates from outside, inside his own home he was apparently reserved with his children where it came to the expression of appreciation.

On one occasion, when one of my sisters had stood first in the university and done brilliantly in her matriculation examination, and everybody came from every quarter to offer warm congratulations to her, father kept very quiet, and after the congratulations were done, he called her aside and said: "Baby, what is the wonderful thing you have done by standing first in your examination and doing as you have done?. It was expected. Had you not stood first, I should have been rather surprised. Go!"

You can now realise that we were under the influence of a father who did not allow of sentiment, while yet being the most emotional man in the world, the most human, the most magnificently grand being I have ever come across . . . . and I make this statement impersonally, without the stupid and hollow pride as having been created by him: It is impersonal, a hundred per cent. I have never seen or met a man either of his spiritual integrity or intellectual calibre living a world-life fulfilling every detail with precision and nobility and yet, all the while conscious of the masterpiece of life he was helping to build in his time while respecting the detail.

Absent-minded was not the word for him; but it was the absent-mindedness of a man who was constantly present in worlds beyond the little world of daily existence with its little fleeting dreams and ambitions. Indeed, there were times when he would seem to be walking above the earth and beyond time. His mind was

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in touch with the universe, not only through a keen and crystalline intuition which brought infinite truth into the neighbourhood of his breathing and moving, but through hard-won knowledge gathered from books written in several languages; Hebrew, French, German, Greek, Sanskrit, Bengali, Urdu. . . . He was a linguist, but few knew that his list of languages included the deep and unheard stillness standing without a break, even as a vast horizon stands, almost unnoticed, behind shapes and images which pass across it.

Father was a walking Encyclopaedia. There was nothing he did not know, literally. A morning walk with him for an hour would be enough to give one an insight into his interior stores of knowledge and information. Now he would pick up a stone on the way and give a discourse on its formation, and advance a calculation of years which took to shape it. He would raise it to dignity with a big, scientific name and would house it in a high-sounding category which would certainly dispel the feeling that it was just an "ordinary" stone. And now he would linger before a flower and pour endless details over it, till one began to wonder at his familiarity with it! One would even suspect that he had himself created the flower, the way he described both its exterior and interior mysteries. When we were children we had already learned words like calyx, corolla, stamen, pistil. But the word pistil, somehow, always woke up a recoil in my heart, for it was instinctively associated with a trigger and a bang and then the spurting of blood from somebody's chest!

"There," he would suddenly point out, "there goes a beautiful bird" . . . and then he would tell us all about the species to which it belonged and its habits. There again we would believe, for certain, that he was responsible for the creation of that lovely creature of wings

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and trebles. If a wind blew he would turn our attention to the fact that the wind was blowing, and then go on to inform us as to how and why the wind blew, where it was born, how it began to blow.

He often told us about the stars, as well. He knew them by heart, even more by heart than I knew nursery rhymes! He knew all about their orbits and about their distances from us and their speed. We had very early in life heard of light-years and of space being boundless; at that time, Einstein had not turned up with his tantalising proof of space having a boundary. Even today, through a habit of childhood's way of thinking, I prefer to imagine that space is infinite and has no limits at all!

When thunder rumbled my mother would say, poetically, "There goes the golden chariot of God. Its wheels are rumbling! Wonderful!"... and the next moment, scientific father would very politely and tactfully seat us beside him and explain that two clouds had in their hurry met each other with a terrific bump and that friction was created and there was, as a result, the lightning that we saw and the thunder! Lightning was seen first, and then, we heard the thunder. At an early age we got to know, therefore, that light travelled faster than sound!

Father never tired of filling our minds with general knowledge. He was not afraid of our questions, and sometimes we put him very interesting ones, as most children do. He never met those questions with the abrupt answer: "Don't be inquisitive!", a convenient way of covering up our own grown-up ignorance. What was there, we wondered, that father did not know?

When I met Rabindranath in 1939, at Shantiniketan, he said: "Do you know that I have described your father in my story 'Hungry Stones'?" I said that I knew. At the very start of the story you find a man being described



**AGHORENATH CHATTOPADHYAYA**

**Author's Father.**



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as one who was the very Lord of the Universe, for he talked as if he was in touch with every detail of it! But father literally answered to the description. He would often say: "Baby, I am God.... you are God!" and we children would feel quite hurt, since we were brought up in a Christian school, the St. Georges' Grammar School where we were taught that God was in the heavens; yet, somehow, the only detail in which God resembled father was, perhaps, his long flowing beard! Of course, as we grow older now we realise the great truth of that statement: "I am God, you are God.... Aham Brahma, An-al-Haq, I am That I am".... What greater god can there be than man who is striving constantly to return to the knowledge which he has lost that he is infinity, is unqualified power, is creator of all that exists and glows and fades around him and above him?

There is one incident which I shall never forget. It relates to two great men, one of them being my father. I was travelling from Calcutta to Hyderabad Deccan, long years ago, when I was growing into manhood, and the first streak of moustache, which flatters youth, was showing on my upper lip. I travelled second those days feeling a sneaking contempt for third-class travelling and travellers! I was in khaki shorts and wore a silk shirt and boasted an expensive hat. Soon after I had got into the compartment, a little small-made man got in, wearing a check-coat which seemed to have seen many weathers. Numbers of young Bengali students were making a fuss about and around him; they brought in his luggage and attended to his comforts. There was a young fellow among them particularly who had struck me as being "somebody"; his face was lit with a glow which seemed partly inspired by his devotion to the little man in the check-coat.

When the train left Howrah, the little man and I



were sole occupants of the compartment. "Well, young man!" he started, and took me aback for a moment, for I could not associate the English language with his type, his queer-cut coat, and the peculiar smell about his person which was that of a villager. "Where are you going?" "I am going to Hyderabad," I replied, beginning rather to like the man, and to be interested in him. "In that case, we shall have a right royal tea tomorrow morning!" "May I know who you are?" I asked, not suspecting that he was also a "somebody". "They call me P. C. Ray" . . . . I felt for a moment that a thunder-cloud had burst and a bolt of lightning struck my head. What! I thought to myself, and then in a childish manner, I asked with some nervousness. . . . "Are you the great P. C. Ray, the scientist?" . . . . He smiled gently, and with no trace of pose, he replied. "Yes, but there are greater scientists than myself at this moment travelling third class on the same train. . . . They are my students. You will hear of them some day!" . . . . He was not exaggerating in the least, as we now know, for many of those very students have become world-celebrated as original research-workers in the realms of science. One of them was Meghnad Shaha.

"So, you are going to Hyderabad. I have a very dear friend there. . . . Have you heard of Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya?" I have always been a fairly good actor, so I indulged in a bit of acting chiefly through curiosity for I wanted to have his opinion about father.

"Why, yes, of course, he is well known in Hyderabad. What do you think of him, Sir?" . . . .

P. C. Ray cast a glance at the rushing trees and the telegraph poles through the window. "Aghorenath is one of our greatest geniuses, one of the very greatest Bengal has given to the world. But he should have come straight to Bengal after his return from Europe. Instead

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of that he went and settled down in the Nizam's Dominions where he has not been appreciated as he would have been in Bengal! But he is a great scientist, one of our very greatest" . . . .

I could not help paying a tribute to his tribute of father, and the most natural way was expressed by my eye which shed a tiny, almost unnoticed tear. The time came for me to leave him and wait for another train which would take me to Hyderabad. I lingered long by the window of that compartment, feeling a strange pang of sadness to leave my fellow-passenger whom the world flocked to see and who had come for a few hours into my young life so spontaneously and without any stupid formality!

Just when the train was about to start I said: "Sir, I am grateful for the journey with you. I want to tell you that I am Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, the youngest son of Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya" . . . . The scientist flung his arms through the window, while the train had started to move, and embraced me walking beside the train, and his parting message was: "Be great yourself, my boy! my blessings are with you. Tell Aghorenath that Bengal misses him."

## COLOURFUL MEMORIES OF FESTIVAL

Each passing day of our childhood was like a mysterious parcel brought to our door by some invisible postman from some wonderland. We opened each passing dawn, with hearts a-beating, wondering as to what marvellous gift was awaiting us—what painted hours, what glorious excitements inside that parcel, the mysterious parcel of each new yellow-and-pink day that dawned for us. Childhood, if it is beautiful and merry as ours was, thanks to an understanding home, and parents whose sole ambition was to make us grow into joyous fullness of life and vision,—such childhood is one long and unbroken holiday!

When it is not, one must immediately deduce that “something is rotten in the State of Denmark.”—that there is a canker eating into the heart of the structure in which children are born and grow up, that, to that extent, the country is heading towards doom! Dejected and frustrated childhood, childhood without happy laughter, health, hope and colourful dreaming, is already a signal of the waning of a people’s life.

As children, we enjoyed ourselves immensely; we never knew in the heart a distinction between rich and poor, between caste and caste, religion and religion. We were brought up in a home where Hindus and Muslims and Christians, Parsis and Sikhs, Brahmins and Sudras and, indeed, all living things, had an honoured and equal place! We never lost one opportunity of associating ourselves with celebrations of all kinds; festivals, whether they belonged to the Hindu or the Muslim, the Christian or the Parsi, were all part of our yearly programme, and we knew them all by heart! We were walking calendars,

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and would wait breathlessly for the festivals to arrive and the waiting always seemed so long, so very very long.

Some outstanding memories of those grand and simple days live in me as part and parcel of the very texture of my imagination. During the Moharram we had "tigers" which came dancing into our compound to the throbbing of large drums. They were real tigers, as far as we children were concerned. But, in reality, they were men transformed into the fierce beast. Their bodies for the occasion were almost nude, striped yellow and black, except for a coloured loin-cloth, either yellow, green, blue or red. The varnished pigment used to glow in the sun, and it must have been most uncomfortable for the men-tigers during the few days that they had the stripes on. For we were told that the stripes were not washed off every night, since it was a tough and intricate job to paint the design over and over again.

Each tiger, or pair of tigers, had a group of drummers and buglers, who followed in their track and created a weird atmosphere of jungle-fight. The music literally used to thrill our blood! The air was torn with bugle-shrieks and, as the excitement grew around the dance, the drums beat louder and louder and challenged the silence of the sky for many miles around!

Sometimes, two groups of tigers met on the road, and then they stopped and each tiger tried out his strength with the other. It took the form of fighting "panjas", interlocking all the five fingers each trying to bend the other's fingers to cracking point. Sometimes the fight was so fierce, due chiefly to the fact that the tigers were dead drunk and had acquired an animal stamina and purpose, that the test ended in the actual dislocating of fingers on one side or the other.

Our favourite Moharram tiger was, of course, our baker, who was a spectacular one! He was the most

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spectacular tiger of all existing Moharram tigers of my childhood. And he was also known for his exquisitely subtle dance which revealed a real artist. Apart from his dancing he was known for his skill in fighting "panja" as well as his phenomenal strength. And the most thrilling part of the whole thing was that he was brought in a regular cage drawn on wheels! The floor of the cage was thick-strewn with pointed spikes embedded in it. On these spikes he would dance, and it seemed a miracle to the onlookers; but he was a 'pahlwan', a master of muscle-control.

O, what a wonderful tiger he was! His hands had tiger-claws sewn on to bits of tiger-skin covering his hands, knuckles and fingers. He wore a skull-cap of tiger-skin as well. And his mouth jetted out, as it were, a flame-like tongue, long and ominous! He wore smoked goggles to hide the look in his eyes, and to give them an appearance of dread! Brother Baker! what a tiger you made, and how deeply we respected you for your sheer mystery!

One fine day, some Anglo-Indian friends of the family, young enthusiasts who always played games with my brothers and sisters, conceived of the idea of transforming my brother, Ranen, into a Moharram tiger. But before the impulsive artists had finished striping the black and yellow, father somehow got scent of it, and caught them in what the young fellows considered a highly-developed form of artistic expression, but which father said was "barbarous" . . . whenever father thought a thing was not just what it ought to be he called it barbarous!

Dasara brought us another equally thrilling experience, but it was thrilling in a different way. It gave us the sensation of the graveyard, and all the secrets connected with it; for, during that festival, came the most

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weird performers to our home, creatures who seemed to come straight out of centuries of silence associated with cremation grounds. Bearing huge-painted wooden boards on their backs, boards which bore spectral designs, such as evoked some gruesome cult which had something to do with dead bodies and bones and skulls and the howling of jackals at midnight, and wearing ugly masks, black or red or green, with staring eyes looking upwards, as though to search out the God behind blue vacancy; that stare seeming to cast in uncanny challenge to Him who dared to defy the devil, who was their God! They were called "Satis," and their dance was known as the dance of the Sati! The music was uncanny, too. It was more a sound-pattern verging on a mischievous mantra which could destroy decent sentiment. I still remember the queer disharmonies blaring out of the Indian wind-instrument! It surely must have seemed perfect harmony to the wandering demons of the graveyards!

We were told that these dancers actually spent many midnights drinking human blood out of dead men's skulls, in order to be saturated in some mystic manner with extraordinary demon power! Whatever it may have been, we were certainly face to face, each time, with evil spirits let loose from the caves of hell, when they danced in our compound. We clung to mother's side while we watched them, and, as the dance progressed, we imagined spirits sailing round and about us, going in and out of tables and chairs, and sitting on our verandah-steps! The Sati-dancers certainly switched us on to a world beyond our own. We were afraid of them, and yet, we waited every Dasara for their return.

They were colourful dancers, and their dance has somehow lived in my memory, and come through in one of my maturer art-creations known as "The Curd Seller," in which I have adopted their rhythm-patterns.

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Another item on our yearly programme was the Holi Festival during which several sorts of performers came to amuse us. But the most interesting item among them all, was that of Gagga's husband, a pitch-black hugely hideous fellow, who, not satisfied with the original blackness of his skin, insisted on laying a thick coating of charcoal-paste over his face and hands in order to feel that he had masked off his original self! He would come with a number of young boys dressed shabbily as girls. The illusion was never successful, for the male sex, despite white-chalked faces and long strands of false hair under crowns, and bells round heavy-ankled, obviously male feet, revealed itself pathetically at every turn. This tradition, with an equal amount of disillusionment is still, alas! carried on, on a different scale, in our Indian theatres.

These young "male-females" danced and sang together "Ranee ra ranee ra, ranee ra ranee ra".... dancing in a circle, when suddenly, cleaving through the group, and breaking that circle, would emerge Gagga's husband, like a nightmare carved out of the black of charnelhouses! Good Lord! what red eyes! Round the lids and inside the eye-balls; what redness! As though in each eye had been lit a funeral-pyre. It was the funeral pyre of his human soul, lit by excessive drink! He was a great drunkard, and his dance itself was that of a drunkard! Towards our steps he came out of the crowd watching them and then slowly climbed those steps until he reached our verandah where we sat and watched. He danced strange swift abrupt measures, a bottle in one hand and a glass in another.

We were frightened, and when we were told that that was Gagga's husband, we were very sorry for her. But Gagga would come to us and whisper in immense pride, glowing all over with inane delight, "Children!

## COLOURFUL MEMORIES OF FESTIVAL

don't get frightened. He won't do anything to you. He dare not! He is my husband". And then everybody would burst into laughter. Gagga hardly lived with him, for she did not like him a bit. She was ashamed of him during the greater part of the year. Only in the month of the Holi festival, when he danced, she liked him, and was even proud of him!



## THE FESTIVAL OF LAMPS

I was born with rhythm in my heart. It was no wonder I was, since both my mother and father were essentially poets, and mother was a sweet singer who chanted exquisite little lyrics and lullabies either when she put me to bed, sometimes, patting me on the chest beating rhythm to the chanting—or when after getting tired of running about or playing, I would come running to her straight and impulsively diving my head into her lap for safety and comfort, when she would stroke my head, gently, with a touch that was all rhythm. Rhythm became an obsession and I could hardly control my limbs, when the mood was on, from working out its unpremeditated patterns. And it was all impersonal, it was nothing to be ashamed of—so I danced whenever and wherever I felt like dancing. But my favourite theatre was the drawing-room where father and mother received their innumerable guests.

On one occasion Sir Kishen Pershad, the then Prime Minister of Hyderabad, paid us one of his friendly visits and his visits were familiar and frequent. I was always attracted by his large, jewel-like eyes full of a liquid light, and his very large moustache and long black side-locks. That was years ago—for when I saw him last, after I grew up into a young man, I experienced a curious disillusionment to find that the impression gathered in childhood, had completely been belied by his faded eyes, snowwhite moustache and wisps of pale white side-locks. But what has Sir Kishen Pershad to do with Deevali? Everything, really—for he was responsible chiefly for making it a real Festival of Lamps....

Sir Kishen sat talking to father and mother in the

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drawing-room, one morning. In the middle of the conversation I imitated the sound of the curtain-bell, raised the door-curtain and, dressed in a frock with frills, came sailing in to perform a song-dance before the honoured guest: "main tho sayan ki piyari—" ("I am the beloved of my friend") The conversation suddenly stopped, father became serious, not with anger, but with understanding. Mother whispered something in Sir Kishen's ear—and Sir Kishen applauded profusely after the dance was over and I rushed out with a professional sort of bow to the impromptu audience! The result of it all was seen the next day. A baby elephant was sent from the palace "as a gift for the little artiste"! And it was Deevalitime. On Chathurdasi day, a baby elephant! But I was told that it was a white elephant although I could see quite distinctly that it was dark grey almost merging into a brown-black! It was later that I learned the meaning of the expression "white elephant"—that was after the elephant had been given away because its upkeep would mean expense!

On Deevali Sir Kishen Pershad made it a point to send us, year after year, with the regularity of the season itself, large, very large square wooden-trays literally packed every inch with glorious fireworks. These trays used to be covered with richly embroidered velvet, blushed crimson or blinding yellow which looked like gold. And they were borne to our home by stalwart men who seemed as if they had just stepped out of the Arabian Nights—I even imagined them to be the result of Sir Kishen's wonderful lamp which he must surely have hidden somewhere in the palace. Each tray, when it was uncovered, was like a miniature garden or orchard. The strings and layers of different sized crackers looked like dull red stalks and I always suspected fire flowers to be asleep inside their hollow. They would awake only when

they were lit at night.

Then there were 'anars' or pomegranates—as they were called, shaped like pomegranates, and made of clay; inside the pomegranate resided a wonderful capacity to leap into magical trees of flames rising to the height of several feet when they were kindled O! how I thrilled at these pomegranate-trees which alas! were ephemeral! Surely, I thought to myself, these must be the sort of trees in "the Garden of Eden"—only when they were born on earth they faded before you could count twenty!—And then, there were 'scorpions' queer, uncanny things that seemed to run here and there, impulsively, when a match-stick touched them I was always nervous of them—even as I was of real scorpions. Only, real scorpions were less impulsive and one could avoid them. These firework-scorpions would rush at you at any moment and sting you! And what about the rockets? wonderful! they were able to travel towards God Himself and speak to Him for a few moments before they burst into coloured sparks to celebrate the brief conversation!

Towards fireworks I always had a very peculiar attitude. I loved them for their coloured flames, their extraordinary power of flight and the miracles of patterns they could create in the air—but what I could never understand or appreciate was the unnecessarily loud noises they made—especially the crackers. And in our day what crackers came on the market!

Some were almost a foot in length, and with a large circumference; when they burst their sound covered many miles. In fact Deevali evening was crowded with the explosions of warfare! One would imagine that literally "Right" was battling against "Wrong" and, in doing so, made no bones about it. Real warfare—terrific explosions, and a hot smell of gunpowder.

When I could not bear the noise, I stuffed my ears

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with cotton-wool! I still do so whenever I sit to read or write in the midst of sounds which I dislike—not only exploding crackers, but, what is much worse and most disturbing voices of people round about exploding into loud, idle and scandalous talk!

Once again I must not forget to mention Gagga—who was part and parcel of our childhood and its celebrations. On Deevali morning she would have a really thoroughly honest 'head-bath.' Her hair, which was fast falling in love with her old broken comb to which wisps of it would cling and refuse to return to her head, hanging down her neck was straight and wet and black and even smelt of incense for the occasion. Clad in new clothes, presented by mother, she came to us in the morning and said: "Now, children, we must get ready for Deevali"—It meant, in short, that we were to spend the whole morning building forts of sand and paper and decorating them with little 'panthis' or clay-lamps to be lit up in the evening.

In passing, I might mention that we used newspapers to built the forts with; and it was thus that newspaper had come to mean to us "sensible material", because out of it Gagga created the most marvellous forts you can imagine—with turrets and towers and walls with holes in them through which we could shoot the enemy dead if we wanted. The bastions were strong, stabilised and made to stand by the sand thickly filled into the paper cylinders.

Why, we could have sworn that our Deevali fort was, any day, much more interesting than the Fort of Golconda itself, which was about five miles away from our house. At any rate, it was far more impregnable and formidable! When the evening came and the oil lamps were lit our hearts beat with sheer excitement to see how it looked—our fort of newspaper and mud. To what

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greater use could newspaper and mud have ever been put, we wondered!

I have always been in love with fire. Shelley, in a single line which was found in his Mss. after his death, said:

“Men scarcely know how beautiful fire is”..... Testimony tells us that he was cremated and that the fire consumed everything that was his external self, excepting his heart! Was it because his heart, that always loved and admired fire, still wanted to exist to have a last look at the most mournful and mysterious fire in all the world—that of a funeral pyre? I sometimes wonder even now, as I have always wondered, whether when I am cremated my heart, too, may not survive to watch the funeral flames and remark, unheard, wistfully to itself: Do these flames of my body’s funeral-pyre not hide in their scorching folds memories of the fires and the flames of many Deewalis that I had loved in childhood?

Man dies; but I doubt if memory dies—for memory is the essence of life. And there are memories that fade because they were not urgent to growth—and memories that live forever as intimate and inevitable part of the very growth of life itself. Such memories are the essence of existence, and one of such memories for me, at least is that of the Deewalis of our childhood which had never known of the black night of tragedy which the children of today are passing through in our country. I sincerely look forward to a new India which will once again make possible for children and for grown-ups the ecstasy of beautiful festivals which by right belong to every human being—and the right to celebrate them without hindrance, without mutual misunderstanding.

## ABOUT MY MOTHER

Father never tired of telling us the tale of his romance with mother; of how and where he first met her and subsequently made her his wife and our mother. Father was a born revolutionary and, in his childhood, he was full of vitality and verve, always yearning to challenge and overcome anything that was not in keeping with the law of the being, the conviction of the intellect, the integrity of the spirit. He was a born lover of truth, of beauty, of freedom.

Being a lover of beauty he was naturally attracted by mother who was considered, in her time, a rare beauty of her village. The romance happened in a village—for both father and mother were born in Eastern Bengal—he in his village, and she in her's. Father used to love to go about in boats, crossing from one village to another—for he had the roaming spirit and never cared to waste his time inside four-wall enclosures.

There was a gang of dacoits in his time, quite decent fellows really, with whom he became acquainted; he used to accompany them and they readily took him into their boat since he was a fine talker and, when they were not on their exploits of burglary, loved to row the boat lazily and listen to father's talk, full of freedom and interest. In him they found a sense of liberation, a sense of revolt which attracted them. Soon, they got to look upon him as their little master and treated him with great respect and curtesy.

They marvelled at his daring when he broke his sacred thread one morning and flung it into the Holy River saying: "It is only an ordinary twisted thread. There's nothing sacred about it. Sacredness is in the

mind, the heart. . . . "It was, indeed, the most sacrilegious act for a son of the highest class of Brahmin to have done! But there it was! Already at the raw age of fourteen he had shown a most uncomfortable wisdom and revolted against a whole gigantic centuries-old structure which depended on unbroken credulity for its safe continuance.

The son of a Chattopadhyaya in an orthodox village named Brahmangaon, eighty years ago, having the guts to tamper with the sacred thread. He deserved the rope instead! Unthinkable! But he went further and committed an equally unthinkable act, which I, for one always remember with a thrill of joy and pride. Father caught a glimpse of a girl one day. She was hardly nine. He was fourteen. Love at first sight. But how was he to meet her, leave alone possess her? The dacoits assured father it was very simple, and that they would help him. Father always related the story of the elopement with immense delight.

The nine-year-old girl fell in love with the fourteen-year-old boy. And we know that love is strong enough to surmount all obstacles. It is not blind; it is wideawake and sees more clearly than we imagine. The boat reached the landing of the little girl's village, and, once and forever, she became the little boy's bride!

It all sounds like a tale of real dacoits, but we thank father for stealing mother away from her village. We are grateful, since otherwise we should have been deprived of the honour, the extreme honour of carrying throughout our lives the memory of a woman who was "half-angel and half-bird." . . . .

Mother's name was Varada Sundari. Her face was round like a moon. If you watch Sarojini's eyes and catch them in a moment, when they lapse into contemplating politics—cancelled and quiet, you will get a glimpse into the quality of mother's eyes, which were always



**VARADA SUNDARI**

**Author's Mother.**





## ABOUT MY MOTHER

brimful of mercy, kindness, contemplation. When mother smiled her cheeks dimpled and the heart of those who saw that smile felt as if a blessing had been imparted. When I was a child I remember that mother wore the most beautiful clothes you ever saw; each saree a work of the most gorgeous texture and design—sarees of ripe shades embroidered with thick heavy gold—patterns of flowers, of conch-shells, of mango-fruit, of elephants and parrots. But this regal attire never really meant more to her than a symbol of father's high position in the Nizam's State and the high social status which he had attained. She was never attached to anything of worldly value—ornaments or clothes,—she wore them through a sense of duty.

But her most natural kingdom was the kitchen and her most befitting attire, a simple inexpensive saree which seemed to suit her real nature. She was proud of her cooking. Like a veritable angel she would sit and invent rare dishes, surrounded by a host of the most devoted servants you can imagine.

While peeling potatoes or cutting vegetables, or stirring the pot on the oven, she would chat with them and laugh with them, as if they were members of the family. A servant, in those days, was part of the home and was treated as such. Service, and not hired labour, was what a servant accepted. That is why there was a dignity and a truthfulness and an eagerness in every detail of the work the servants did. It is no wonder, therefore, that there were some servants in our house who had already served for over fifteen and twenty years. And mother was in all departments of the home, helping in the kitchen, (though we had a most excellent chef—) and in making the beds (inspite of three or four women-servants to make our beds) and tending the garden, though there was an old gardener to do the job.

She was all-attentive and felt that she must cooperate in every field of the day's work which made her entirely a real mother of the house and of all who worked or lived under her roof.

But that was not all; anybody who visited our home was immediately as good as a member of the family who had almost "the divine right" of kings and queens to the food and warmth and the generous comfort existing in our house. The kitchen not only supplied food for twenty to thirty guests a day—(and that was normal) but, without exaggeration, flowed with tea the whole day long. Every visitor meant a cup of tea—there was absolutely no objection to his requesting that the cup should be multiplied. Thus, early in childhood, we became great "tea-drinkers." It was very early in life, too, that I coined the expression "amber liquid" which, I think, promoted the subtle poison to a high position and helped to make tea-drinking aesthetic. Almost as if to make it part of culture, a book came into our house, presented by a visitor who bore an overwhelming enthusiasm for Japan and its way of life. "The Book of Tea," by Okakura Kakuzo. That really "put the lid on," as the saying goes—and helped to make the tea-pot the most finished symbol of cultured existence. Ever since then, I have been a votary at the shrine of the Goddess (or is it the God?) of liquid amber.

Mother spoke to father in Bengali, to us in Hindustani and to the servants in Telegu. Though we heard the Bengali tongue spoken in the house, we never spoke it. Father, whose vision always penetrated into the future through the fogs and the mists of preconception and conventional thinking, always encouraged us to speak Hindustani because he said that it was the national language.

He always believed that Bengali could and would

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come later. In my case, it has proved true; for, later in life, I got interested in reading Tagore and very swiftly was able to get acquainted to an appreciable extent with the language. Mother knew enough English to be able to converse with her European lady-friends and to write letters. In those days the English language had a great vogue and it was considered the height of ignorance and misfortune not to be acquainted with it. At any rate, it was complementary to the reign of Queen Victoria and to the Queen herself whom propaganda had raised, in the minds of the Indian people, to the level of a Goddess.

Mother had a gift for languages—even as father had. Between them both they left a certain flare for tongues in all of us.

My brother, Virendranath, is (if he is still alive) a wonderful linguist, master of over sixteen languages. While, with his exception, none of us are masters, yet we have a feeling for words of any language we hear and it does not take us long to acquire a sense of familiarity with it. Mother spoke Telugu quite fluently with all the nuances of the tongue pat. She had acquired an ease in Urdu which made it seem almost her mother-tongue. And when she spoke to us children it took on the flavour of literature.

Whenever I see a crescent, the first faint crescent of the waxing fortnight, I cannot help thinking of mother. It is associated in my mind, indelibly, with a very sweet memory of childhood. When such a crescent became visible in the dim grey-blue evening, mother would send several servants running here and there to find out where I was, I would, perhaps, be in the midst of a most interesting game somewhere in the garden behind our house, or playing at "sharks" in the large compound, strewn about with boulders which seemed hills to us, children; voices would call for me from all sides, and I would be

## LIFE AND MYSELF

led away from the play towards mother, who usually loved to sit at the back of the house surrounded by her servants. Of course, I, at once, knew the reason why mother had sent for me, the moment I saw her seated on her chair, like a statue, with closed eyes and breath held in expectancy. She would not open her eyes until she was sure that she had me in her arms, when she would open them gradually to look at my face, with the words: "My moon, my little moon! yours is a lucky face to look on first thing, after catching a glimpse of the crescent!" Then she would kiss me warmly on my cheeks and my brow and say: "God bless you and give you a life of a hundred and twenty five years."

I felt a mixed sense of delight and conceit to think that mother thought my face was lucky and not the faces of other brothers and sisters! And then, as if to continue in the sensation of the pride of the chosen one, I would linger by mother's side with the hope of catching complimentary remarks about myself both from mother and our servants; and they usually praised me to the skies, and agreed with mother that I was a moon, a lamp, mother's wealth and all the lovely things which a mother usually attributes to her child.

Once; I remember, before the servants she said: "What a lucky girl she will be who will marry small baba," and the servants nodded assent, and supported her statement with a gusto which almost seemed to indicate that the marriage would take place the next day! Enjoying the idea that a girl was waiting for me somewhere, I still felt like dramatising the happy event with a touch of gravity and old-fashioned sadness, and I said: "No mother! it is not a girl I shall marry, but the grave!" And mother chided me for such ill-omened talk, and the servants scolded me for saying things I did not quite understand myself! The grave! how dare a child of my age

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think of such a gloomy thing! How dare a child, hardly seven or eight years old, talk of marrying a grave! I made the statement just for effect, without at all meaning anything particular. It was one of the earliest indications, I suppose of my love for literary expression, and for dramatisation—for the changing of one idea to another, a sort of histrionic transformation of my little self into a grown-up being!

Then, when I realised that I had said something which did not meet with encouragement, but, on the contrary with silent resentment and superstition, I tried to change the subject by saying. "Mother! you see that crescent! It is really a finger-nail!"

"I always imagined that there was a huge Being called God seated behind the sky paring His nails; I imagined Him to have long, tapering fingers, too! Fingers of an artist. For He could paint the sunset and the dawn and the petals of flowers and the beaks of birds. He could change the tints of clouds at will. So He must be an artist, and, at an early age, I heard it said that long-tapering fingers indicated the temperament of an artist. God was an artist who was always in hiding; I never understood why, though. But there you were! that crescent was a distinct proof that He had fingers, and that every fifteen days, He sat down to pare them. Mother thought it was a beautiful idea. And she gave me to understand that God was the greatest artist of all!

Thus, early in life, mother instilled into my heart a belief in a Great Being called God. When she spoke about Him to a Hindu friend she talked of Him as "Bhagwan," and when to a Muslim friend, she talked of "Khuda." To the servants, who were Telegu, she talked of Him as "Devadu." Behind the mask of names, God remained one and unchanging in our home.

We grew up under the care and the teaching of such

a mother who made no distinction between one creed and another, one caste and another, one human being and another. Everybody who entered our home was a member of the family, and was treated as such. Mother's friends were numerous: Christians, Parsis, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs. In our house for years and years lived a Khoja lady whom we called "Miriam khala," and we actually believed she was our aunt. She must be, since we were told that she was. We believed mother implicitly.

Then every week or fortnight another "khala" paid us a visit. She was "Peerani khala" one of our favourite "khalas"; for she told us the most wonderful stories you can imagine! She was a sort of walking "Arabian Nights Entertainments"; for she knew the tales by heart and the way she told them made them happen, as it were, for the first time, in our house! Mother made her to tell us stories every evening, after lamplight. I owe to Peerani khala part of my love of literature, especially literature dealing with faery imagination.

But I was never able to forgive or forget a certain incident connected with her. It was mother's fault, though! I had a terrible ear-ache once which kept me awake for two or three nights; Peerani khala happened to call one evening and found me writing with pain. She had a sort of secret "cabinet meeting" with mother, and then—I shall never forget what happened then! Peerani khala caught hold of my head in a tight grip, and bending it sideways, spat into my ear a stream of blood-red betel-leaf saliva! I recoiled with hate and with indignation! I never could have imagined mother giving sanction to such a "barbarous procedure" as father afterwards called it. But mother's intention was kind! She had faith in the cure. And I was cured, within a few hours after the unaesthetic, unhygienic method!

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Mother was somewhat of a psychic. She told us the story of her favourite hen of which she dreamed one night, dying with its head resting on a slab of stone. She woke up father in the middle of the night and asked him to light the lantern. Father said: "Go to sleep. What do you want with a lantern at this hour of the night?" "I must go and see the hen in the yard," she said. "I have just this moment, woke up from a dream of the hen, dying with its head on a slab of stone".... Father lit the lantern and led mother into the poultry-yard; and there, true to her dream, the hen lay dying, head rested on a slab of stone, just as mother had seen it in dream and described it to father!

Such an experience does make one sit up and think. Our rationalism must still take into account layers and layers of subtle being in man, rare capacities of vision and of prophesy, making the superficial fade into insignificance. Surely, there are more things in heaven and earth—as Shakespeare said, in one of his finest moments of illumination—more things than are dreamed of in your philosophy!



## WORK AND PLAY

Father being a born educationist developed in his children the conviction that work was not something different and apart from play. For us work meant play, even as play meant work. Everything we were taught was done through the medium of fun or games.

For instance, one fine morning father, before going to his college to lecture, told us that when he returned in the evening he would introduce us to a very interesting gentleman from Scotland who always wore a patched-up coat of colours. We were naturally, excited—but then we would have to learn his name by heart before we met him—and father told us that his name was BAKFARBEN IRSCOSAR L.D.S. The entire day passed in our repeating it until it began to echo and re-echo behind the subconscious. The name has come through, along with other impressions and survivals in our memories. When father returned we rattled the name off proudly and asked him as to when the gentleman of the patch-work coat from Scotland would visit us. He asked us to fetch our Atlas. We wondered what the Atlas had at all got to do with the anticipated visitor! When father opened the Atlas and showed us the map of Scotland, and, letter by letter taught us that B stood for Bute, A for Argyle, K for Kincardine, F for Forfar, A for Aberdeen, etc. until the whole name had been spelt—and, laughing his usual loud magnificent laughter, he said: "There, you are! The gentleman from Scotland with a beautiful coat of so many colours on!" This was his attitude in all that he taught, be it mathematics, physics and chemistry, botany, zoology.

One peculiarity about his teaching was that every-

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thing he dealt with took on a sense of life, actual warm breathing life. The figures in mathematics were not just cold shapes meant only for complicated calculations—each of them had an individuality of its own—and when numbers were grouped together they resembled living families with traditions of their own! It was the same with plants—father used to tell us that plants had life and that there was a certain Bose in Calcutta who was, at the time, working at experiments on plants to prove that plants had life.

“Everything has life,” he always told us. That is the reason why I have never been lonely in my life. Wherever I go, whatever I see, I immediately sense that I am in the midst of a crowded living multitude; stones, clouds, walls, trees, twigs, grass; I can see them clearly breathing; I can hear them whispering and even, sometimes making fun of me and my thoughts. This strange vision which seems to “see behind the veil”, and pluck out of inanimateness a continual experience as of a process of contact and companionship, is due to my early training.

And yet, we wondered how father could be so cruel, at times, to these creatures that lived: both living creatures that were still, and living, creatures that had movement. For father’s verandah-walls were crowded with large botanical plates framed like pictures. On these plates plants of various varieties were pitilessly gummed and below each plant there was a very big Latin name which we could hardly pronounce; nevertheless those names, each name running into a number of letters, celebrated the death of the poor plants, for whom I felt very sorry. And then, there were the butterfly-plates, as well. Beautiful yellow and brown butterflies, with jet-black wings dotted with the most delicious scarlet imaginable; large-sized butterflies and medium-sized butterflies and

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even small, delicate little butterflies! Father dared to have them trapped in nets and then commit the cruel act of sticking pins through their quivering beauty and imprisoning them once and forever inside frames—their wings spread out in death flat against the paper-boards? Father did all sorts of gruesome things, we thought. He even dissected live frogs to see what was inside them! That was the limit! What right had father to meddle with life?

But father told us that we must cultivate a scientific inquisitiveness, for life was one long opportunity for enquiry, for the gaining of knowledge, without which life had no right to live. He told us that it was necessary, for the sake of knowledge, to sacrifice some life, since, without knowledge life was as good as death itself. It was not murder to kill a creature if the intention was scientific.

Father was very fond of quoting Newton's definition of human beings in terms of knowledge: "We are as children picking up shells on the seashore of knowledge" Another favourite sentence of his was: "All knowledge is but a process of remembrance, and all remembrance is but a process of repetition." So, it was great fun for us to take up the scientific attitude of enquiry towards everything. But sometimes it became utter travesty and we were guilty of acts of sheer cruelty.

One afternoon, I went into the shaggy woodlands behind our house. Suddenly, I came face to face with a white cat which glared at me uncannily. I fixed my gaze on to its own until it almost grew into a deep hypnotic something which even frightened me for a few seconds. Then I thought of "the scientific enquiry" idea. What does the cat feel? Why does it look at me like that? Will it suddenly fly at my throat and wrench it until the whole world could see my gullet gaping inside? Is it a cat, after all? Or only an evil spirit in the shape of

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one? All these thoughts flashed across my brain within the fraction of a second when, suddenly, the impulse took me to find out the truth of the matter. I began pelting stones at the cat that still glared at me—without moving one inch, even in self-defence. It surely was a cat that had something to do with the one that grinned in Alice in Wonderland—only it was born of evil parents—it must be investigated. Stone after stone, and suddenly the cat leaped high with a loud yell, dripped with blood, and—vanished! I came home and told everybody of the incident—and described it quite seriously as an experiment in scientific enquiry—which resulted in the conclusion that all cats are not what they seem, even as all that glitters is not gold. Some cats are real cats, while others are just spirits and goblins with eyes that can hypnotise you and lead you away into unknown kingdoms.

Strangely enough, however, I learned much later in life, from the Mother of Shree Aurobindo Ashram, that cats were deeply psychic creatures; that was the conclusion she had arrived at after experimenting with twenty three cats. The more you gaze into their eyes, the more will you be able to develop your own psychic nature.

Just as father had taught us the names of counties in play—he also gave us a humorous demonstration of the birth of lightning and thunder. He would take us into a darkened room, and with a dry comb he would comb his beard with swift, sharp, jerky strokes. There was a crackling sound and in the darkness we saw sparks coming out of his beard. We thought that soon the whole beard would catch fire and father would then have to face mother without a beard, and that would be a great blow to her, since father's beard was really beautiful and it was so much a real part of science and mathematics and everything. Father went on to explain: "You see! the sparks are born out of 'friction'. The same thing hap-

pens in the sky. When two clouds meet there is a 'friction' created and what is happening here happens there. Only, here, out of my beard, you get a 'crackling' sound, accompanied by sparks. There, you get a cracking sound and very large sparks that light up all the sky. But, the process is the same. Friction creates heat and light."

It was a relief, after the lesson on friction, to find, when we came out of the room into the light, to see father's beard still intact. It was, as if, we had come out after playing a game—yet, we had been taught a real and solid lesson in science.

A child's imagination is a conjuror, possessor of a magic wand. It can make something out of nothing and create a world of colour and of image out of anything and everything. Its dictionary never contained, in any age, the term "commonplace," which is purely an invention of grown-ups who have lost the vision of the wonderful, and the miracle which exists everywhere and in everything at any given point in time.

Our childhood was one long and never-ending experience of ecstatic invention and discovery. Twenty-four hours seemed too, too short and few, and the wise men who, with such a great deal of accurate calculation, made the calendar, seemed somewhat short-sighted and miserly. They did not take into consideration the long and never-ceasing dreams and raptures of children which deem the short day of just twenty-four hours' duration as "the unkindest cut of all", the meanest trick played on them by the adult creators of calendars. But, surely, man, who is likely to err, and made such unwise and unjust calculations, might be forgiven, but what about God who holds the beakers of paints and the brushes with which he lays the colours light or thick across the sky? Surely he has enough gold liquid in one of his beakers

## WORK AND PLAY

to splash over the twenty-four hours instead of cutting the day short by putting an end to the light, with gashes of red and orange, until it bleeds itself to death, and passes away and is buried in a coffin of darkness nailed fast with stars! Does not God realise that the child needs a very long day to play all the games he wants to play—the old games which he has played over and over again, without surfeit, and the new games he invents, all of a sudden, which he must begin to play with all the passion and the excitement of one who has conquered new Kingdoms?

That is the identical feeling we felt when we were children. Sarojini's two sons and two daughters—Jaya-surya, the eldest child, Padmaja, the next to him, Rana-dheera, the third child and Leelamani, the youngest daughter—and we two, my sister Suhasini and I. It is curious to look back across the days that are no more and recount the wonderment of life in childhood when time was an experience as of being tip-toe all the time, expecting something magical and lovely to happen, and life never knew the folly of sorrow and the falsehood of death! I wonder whether there are children in any part of the world who have never played games similar to the ones we did. After all the imagination of childhood does not suffer from the patchwork limitations of a map which tricks us into believing that life is different in each of the patches representing a particular country. We really mean life on the surface—and this life on the surface hardly has any existence or meaning for children who live on the fluid and colourful plane of the imagination.

What child, for instance, has escaped the game of "railway-train" which was one of our most favourite indoor games? The conjuror, with his magic wand transforms ordinary chairs into railway compartments ar-

ranged in a long line almost touching each other, yet separated by imaginary buffers which, to the child, exist, really and truly exist. Then the wand chooses to transform the first chair, (which is usually distinctive and differs in looks from the chairs which serve for compartments) into the engine, the powerful, dark, male engine which has fire inside the pit of its stomach, and also has a boiler, and when the whistle goes, it is able to steam and puff and move out of the station leaving the platform far behind. Then again, the conjuror used to come to our aid to transform us, too. Each of us would become engine-driver, guard, station-master, ticket-checker, passenger by rotation. It was, of course, grandest of all to be transformed into "engine-driver." What a responsible job, and he never sleeps. He takes the whole train through black tunnels and over lonely miles of country, wide awake, feeding the engine with coal as black as tunnels, while his face and his body are stained with the blood-red glow of the dancing fire! Think, just think what a picturesque figure the engine-driver cuts! and, of course, the most wonderful and manly thing about him is that while all the passengers snore away in their compartments, he wakes up and drives the engine!

It was no make-believe travel. Long before we had ever visited the various cities of India in later life, we had become familiar with them, travelling, as we did, so often (and with such serious preparation) in our faery trains made up of verandah chairs. We had visited Calcutta, Bombay, Delhi, Lucknow, Cawnpore, Allahabad, Lahore and all the largest cities Geography had taught us. And how real the cities were.

One of our chief pastimes after we alighted in a city, was to visit the zoological garden for which it was "so famous"! "There" we would cry aloud, "what a wonderful lion!"—Sure as we were alive, it was a living, terrible

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lion—It was the conjuror again at work—transforming our dog lying in the compound into the dangerous beast inside a cage! In the same way, our Persian cat definitely took on both the contours and the dimensions of a tigress who seemed to be ferocious and waiting for her chance to pounce on one of us, “in which case” we deduced, “she would become a sort of man-eater!” O wonderful travels of childhood! the verandah of our house became transformed from station to station, and our train moved with the rapidity of lightning itself!

I have travelled in real trains since then across thousands and thousands of miles, but I still believe that children alone are the most realistic travellers. They are not bound by space and time: they do not wait for scientists to try out their experiments to telescope Lindbergs to the moon. Children are not so stupid as all that. They just go to whatever spot they choose. They travel across worlds of reality, since they travel in the imagination. And there is no reality deeper and greater than that which exists in the imagination, the unspoilt and daring imagination of a child which fears no boundaries and imagines no complications!

Another favourite game of ours was “shark in the water.” The whole compound, which used to be very large in those days, was, during this game, one immense sheet of water. From this “water”, here and there, jutted out “huge rocks”—they were, in reality, small-sized boulders on which we would occasionally sit and learn our lessons when we were not playing. The idea was that one of us was a very horrible shark with jaws you could hardly measure with our tailor Balayya’s measuring stick! This shark was in the water trying to attack the smaller sea-creatures, the helpless fish after whose life it ran here and there with all the ruthless determination of a Fascist! The fish would cry aloud to the shark,



“Shark in the water, can you catch a fish?”—and would run for their lives to take shelter on the rocks. Once perched there there was no likelihood of being caught by the shark. When the shark waited at the base of one rock for its prey to descend into water once more, from another and yet another rock, other fish would alight and daringly challenge the greedy shark with their aggravating question “shark in the water! can you catch a fish?” When the shark, in a paroxysm of rage, would turn and dash at them, leaving an opportunity to the one he was waiting for to leap down into the water and make a dash for the neighbouring rock for shelter before the shark could catch it!

Today that innocent game seems to take on an almost political significance. The shark everywhere in the world is being aggravated by the challenge of the “lesser fish” who mockingly ask him the question “shark in the water can you catch a fish?” The answer is obviously more and more becoming that the shark is losing his old powers of preying on the “small fry”—and the whole, political game seems to be that the sharks rush about, to and fro, hoping to capture their prey—but then, the smaller fish are a multitude and are getting together and intriguing against them, escaping from them by taking shelter for a while on the hard and unapproachable rocks of united will!

## POETS ARE MADE, NOT BORN

There was a conceited person once who imagined he was a born poet; I have known many such persons all my life. This "born-poet" creature sent his manuscripts of verse to publisher after publisher who returned them, without a moment's delay, but not without many respectful thanks. The born poet could hardly stand the insult much longer. One day, in a volcanic mood of unpoetic paroxysm and rage, he rushed, with a heart beating a hundred and fifty beats to the second, hair all dishevelled like waves in a black storm, and finally arriving at publisher after publisher's house raved and fumed: "Don't you know, Sir, that I am a born poet?" The publishers used tact and amiability in their retort, "Now, now young man! do not try and shift the blame on your parents."

Even in childhood we heard the elders around us sometimes using phrases like "poets are born, not made" and I used to think that this particular one sounded very deep and beautiful. It was the word "poet" that interested me without the actual implication of the whole phrase itself. But by the time I outgrew my childhood I got to realise that it contained at best only a half-truth which is much more misleading and mischievous than a downright lie! An honest lie is far more decent than a dishonest half-truth. That poets are born, no sensible person will deny; but it all depends on *where* they are born and *when*—in what period of history, into what family, what class, what society. And to say that they are not made is far from the truth of the evolution of a poet who has at all mattered in literary history. The poet is not a mere freak, an accident of nature, one who sort of

tumbles into the world from some special star, with a preconceived vision of life and a preordained fund of prophecy! Perhaps, it may be true to say that he does bring with him a fund of sensitiveness, a peculiar receptivity, a rich capacity to absorb in himself the forces working around him even from his childhood, which he learns to transmit through the language he acquires best and which he uses as his expressional instrument. But the fact remains that these very qualities which we attribute to the poet makes him, more than others, a sort of finely strung lyre on which events and beings play at every turn, giving shape both to his growing self and his manifold musings. The poet, more poignantly than most men, is being made all the time, being moulded into shape by the viewless fingers of forces working deftly and surely at the changing history of mankind.

I began writing at the raw age of eight, but when I was born nobody, am sure, could tell that I was one of those peculiar phenomena who are said to be *born* and not *made*!

The year 1898 was not free from a deep reverence for the good Queen Victoria of whom the parents of most of those of my generation talked with tender affection, naming her the Queen of Peace. Everything during my childhood seemed characteristic of her reign apparently, for I do not remember having ever lived in an atmosphere of excitement and the frustration of life and its dreams. It was an atmosphere conducive to nature and her beauty, to spiritual talk and discussion, to a life of abstract idealism.

The English language was held in high esteem at that time, and it was the language which was most spoken around me. It was not unnatural, therefore, that English came so naturally to me when I started to write rhymes.

Tennyson, was at the time, still in vogue. I read and

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re-read his *Lady of Shallot!*, and fell in love with the running rhythm of the piece. It inspired me to write my first poem. Here it is! It tried to catch the rhythm of Tennyson's poem—but with what disastrous results!

*As I was walking in the street  
I spied a maiden fair and sweet  
She hurried down her little feet  
Towards a lonely desert.  
I got enchanted with her face  
And by her footprints tried to trace  
Her lovely little dwelling-place  
In that wide open desert.  
We were soon tired. 'Twas half-past four,  
We slept upon the open floor  
Like cannon we began to snore  
In that wild open desert....*

Possibly the image in the last stanza with the cannon in it was reminiscent of the Russo-Japanese war which had been fought when I was a very tiny boy just waking into consciousness. I even remember to this day that we celebrated with eclat the victory of the Japs on the night we heard the news. How history does change and, with it, our sympathies!

I took the poem to my father who gave it serious consideration enough to make me feel that I was a "born poet." "But," he remarked while his nostrils twinkled with concealed amusement, "how is it possible for anyone to snore like a cannon?" I found, on thinking it over, that father's question was quite sensible. I went to a corner of my room and changed the word "snore" to a word which struck me as being more appropriate; at any rate, it was a very good and creditable rhyme-substitute. I returned to father and read out the last stanza as it now stood after the transformation.

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*"We were soon tired. 'Twas half-past four  
We slept upon the open floor  
Like cannon we began to roar  
In that wild open desert." . . .*

My father screwed up his brows in dark scrutiny; I could see him weighing the worth of the new rendering in the scales of an assumed seriousness which was almost about to erupt into a fit of laughter. But being an educationist he was full of tact and encouragement. He merely remarked "Baby, I suggest that the line remain in its first version or snoring like a cannon, rather than roaring like one!" I have told you the story to show how fortunate I was in having been born in a home of culture where I was not discouraged from writing verse. Had my father given me the slightest idea that I wrote rubbish, I might, today, have been either a clerk in a Government office or a wild-throated creature adding my voice to the chorus of voices at a share market!

On my tenth birthday I received a wonderful birthday gift. It consisted of about a dozen books of poetry presented to me by our circle of grown-up friends who had by then come to look upon me somehow or the other, as a budding poet. The complete works of Shelley, bound in dark green; Tennyson, in a rich maroon; Longfellow, in a deep blue; Scott in an attractive scarlet, and others. The smell of the new pages maddened me. I even remember once to have impulsively licked a page of Shelley's poetry to taste the delicious smell which came out of it. Incidentally, I suppose, I even took in some of the poetry itself in a magical manner. One day my sister Mrinalini gave me a large MSS. book containing hundreds of pages. Clean, white, fascinating blank pages—their blankness waiting, as it were, to be crowded with lines of verse. I spared no page; I took up the attitude almost of a tyrant towards the pages, feeling that I should

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master every inch of paper with my imagination, conquering it with scribbles in blueblack ink. The MSS. book was soon overcrowded chiefly with rubbish.

\*It was lent to an old friend of our family who was anxious to read what I had written! One afternoon that friend sent an orderly to our house with the request that the "little baba," that is, myself—should at once come over to the friend's house. When I arrived a cheerful looking gentleman (with rather pinky cheeks, a Mahratta turban adorning his head)—welcomed me warmly, seated me on his lap, opened my MSS. at a certain page and pointing to the lines on it asked me as to when I had composed them. I replied "why, of course in the middle of the night, sitting beside a hurricane lantern, when everybody was fast asleep...." That was dramatic untruth. It was meant merely to impress. A little boy working hard at literary creation "in the middle of the night" when the world was asleep! It sounded romantic. But the fact was that the lines had been written during the day.... The poem was addressed to "The Dying Patriot"—Khudiram Bose who had been hanged about that time.

The little poet of ten imagined Khudiram's voice coming through the jail-walls, from the gallows:

*"When I am lifeless and upon the pyre, . .*

*Mine ashes will arise and sing in joy;*

*It will proceed like music from the fire:*

*Weep not, my country! for this patriot boy!*

*Why weepst thou! though I, now captured, be*

*I'll rise again and smash the bonds and set thee free!"*

The guest at my friends house was obviously moved to tears. "God bless you, my lad! Go on writing...." He who blessed me then was Gopal Krishna Gokhale—who said later in one of his writing to the poet of ten:

*"That boy's genius gives me electric thrills."*

When I was a child it was quite the proper thing to

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look upon acting and actors as highly improper. An actor was considered to be the high water-mark of "low-classness". He had the misfortune of being an outcaste of so-called "respectable society", the very members of which, more or less, went, night after night, to watch and applaud him on the stage! The actor, in short, held the rather ambiguous and unpleasant position of being a god on the stage and a dog off it!

The theatre, in those days, and even now to some extent, is synonymous, in the minds of most "respectable" people, with a world of evil, a hotbed of immorality, the creation of Satan in his most satanic moment; they think that an actor is capable of committing almost any crime under the sun, capable of any indecency, any anti-social act, being rather different from the common run of humanity, with a temperament whose whims and impulses nobody may calculate with certainty for they come under no rules and defy all sense of pattern and premeditation!

The worst thing about the actor is that he is, almost all the time, in touch with women as "actresses", who, without exception, are all of them supposed to be "born harlots", whose souls are entirely bartered away to the devil and whose hearts are heavily coated, like their faces, with paint and falsehood! In short, neither the actor nor the actress is supposed to be human; they are a class by themselves, the celebrated yet shunned untouchables of *dignified and saintly society!* But, fortunately for us, we were never made to think about the theatre with contempt, nor of the stage-artist with disrespect, thanks to the large understanding of our parents who always encouraged in us our natural love and esteem for the fine arts.

When we were children we went to Calcutta, the city of theatres and the home of really remarkable artistes! Father used to be invited with the whole family to witness

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great performances of great plays by great artistes in great theatres. Great performances, indeed, since the whole conception of histrionics and stage-sets was on a distinctly high and mature level; great plays, since they were the creations of geniuses like Girish Ghosh and Dwijendralal Ray, the then acknowledged masters of play-writing; great artistes of the stage, yes, and they were included on a long and formidable list, men like Girish himself, Dani Babu, Girish Ghosh's son, and Amar Dutta, who, at that time, had reached sensational heights of popularity! Shishir Bahaduri came much later with his exquisite style of delivery and emotional acting controlled by an economy of gesture.

There were well-known and much loved lady artistes as well: I remember the highly-strung acting of Kusum Kumari whose name was a household word; great theatres, since Calcutta could boast and still boasts of some of the largest and best-equipped theatres in India! The revolving stage had become an ordinary affair in Bengal by the time I had grown into youth. Bengal always tried to make progress by adding to her knowledge of art and technique learned from countries outside India.

I remember being told one day by a Bengali friend that Amar Babu the fine actor, was about to leave for "foreign" (that is to say, for England!) to learn "*gesture-posture*" a word-combination which meant "theatre-craft and histrionics." Bengali artistes have always been very serious about their art: the reason being that art to the Bengali is his life-breath, his most vital evolutionary necessity; he has never been afraid to learn from the world's art and world-artistes.

Bengal has imbibed a great deal of knowledge and understanding from the West without becoming mere imitators; and this escape from mere imitation is possible only where one's national foundation is strong and secure.



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In literature it was possible to produce a Tagore, a Bankim, a Sarat, a Michael Madhusudan, a Dwijendralal, because each of them was a living fount of his own natural cultural heritage which with open arms accepted to accept the best from the world's existing cultures. That is why Bengal's artistes have made headway in almost every sphere of art, whether painting, sculpture, literature or theatrecraft. Even in music one finds experimentation based on the musics of the world. This breaking away from fossilised perfections in art to new paths of effort is due to the fact that they have deliberately seen and heard and experienced a great deal of the richness existing in other countries, and have never been afraid to absorb it.

Bengal's theatres, while making new experiments in staging and in acting, have always tried to preserve a national interest and a high standard of technique, based on an ever-growing desire to learn, a changing technique which never seems to come to a standstill, and a bold dash for striking innovations in style and craft.

I remember those exciting evenings when the whole house would be a-gog. The feeling was that of a marriage-day whenever it was decided that we would go to see a play in the evening. I sensed a restlessness in the heart, an itching in the feet and a peacock-dance in the blood with spread wings of excitement. O! and what a helpless sense of waiting for the evening to happen; what a hopelessly forlorn wish that it would come sooner than it did. The afternoon, on such a day, was a nuisance, a regular transgression, the way it came between the morning and the evening, unnecessarily delaying the hour of the performance which started at 7 o'clock in the evening and came to a close at about six the next morning.

The tradition in those days was somewhat different from that which holds today. There were two to three

plays in a night; but we were told by father that it was a much longer affair with Chinese theatres which entertained the audiences for two to three days and nights at a stretch; for theatres were the most treasured holiday-places of the Chinese, true lovers of theatrecraft. We certainly did not at all mind the idea of waking up through the night. In fact, it was exciting and colourful. Besides, it was such a grown-up thing to be allowed to do! Waking up all night! Wonderful! for we should then be able to watch the dawn breaking and return home with eyes red and heavy with sleep; and the servants of the house, and the friends who called the next day would remark: O how tired the children must be after the sleepless night! Brave of them to have sat up all night. . .

But, arrangements were always made for "Dr. Aghorenath's children," who were liable to lapse into sleep after an hour or two of watching the performance, however attractive. In a room adjoining the Manager's Office large and comfortable beds used to be prepared and ready to receive us when we chose to tumble into them. Literally, therefore, the theatre became our home; we were brought up in its domain; we grew up as neighbours to a world of powder and paint, stage-sets and music and dances, acting and actors. We were never made to have any prejudice against the art of the stage.

Orthodox Brahma friends especially criticised my parents for initiating us into "a world of evil", the theatre; but I suppose my parents knew what they were about. They were conscious that they had brought forth artistes into the world; and, as such it was their duty to give us all the scope they did, of growing into imaginative beings, guarding us carefully and watching over our growth with masterly affection and understanding always working round our minds the logical place of things in life, the patterns of thought and behaviour suited to our growth

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and imparting to us a sense of value which might, in later life, prove useful to our mental and spiritual progress; values different from those held by the average code-haunted man who usually sits in judgment without in the least being qualified to do so.

My love for the theatre grew as I grew; it became essentially part of my dreams and my imagination. Father encouraged me to read the plays of Shakespeare and Moliere at a very early age. By the age of ten or eleven I had read a number of plays from Shakespeare after first getting to know all about his stories from "Lamb's Tales". Incidentally Lamb's Tales always brought up before my mind the picture of fields and the tails of bleating lambs waving to and fro. And, for a long time, I did not realise that Lamb was an author and that tales were different from tails. Just as I had mixed up one of Wordsworth's lines with the then Prime Minister of Hyderabad, Kishen Pershad when father asked me what Wordsworth had meant by the lines

**"The minster clock has just struck two  
And yonder is the moon" . . . .**

which made my father say: "Baby, if you don't understand a thing don't pretend you do. Minster has nothing to do with the Prime Minister of Hyderabad! It means the church tower" . . . .

Father never let us go to see any performance by students of schools or colleges unless and until we had gone through the play which was advertised. "This evening the College boys are going to play Sheridan's School for Scandal. We must read it before attending the performance." A book was forthwith fetched from a library or purchased from the booksellers, and religiously read from page to page. "Now you will enjoy the play, baby!" father would say with pride and relief. Indeed, I am grateful to father that he made us go through the

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discipline of study as he did. Sometimes we even thought he was a sort of unimaginative tyrant. But now I understand, I understand. . . . People around me thought me quite clever because I could recite lines from the poets and long passages from William Shakespeare! I knew a lot about Moliere, as well; there was a certain amount of wonder attached to the fact that I was conversant with a French author! Moliere was one of father's favourite authors. Father talked to us a great deal about Moliere as a dramatist and as an actor. He told us, too, that he saw a fine performance in Paris, long years ago, Moliere's "La Malade Imaginaire" or the Imaginary Patient. I loved the sound of French and often spoke about this play myself to guests and friends in order chiefly to sound learned, and watch the reactions on their faces at my erudition! This habit in me led father once to remark: "Baby, you talk too much."

But whilst most people around me considered me to be a sort of freak of brilliance, father sometimes thought me to be a freak of dullness. Once he called me "the idiot of the family," and not without reason. In certain things I was a downright dud; in Arithmetic, for instance. I was never able to calculate well; I cannot say that I am able to calculate even now. That is why I have always had the reputation of being a good artiste but a very bad business man.

\* \* \*

Father, when he was at home, usually wore a loose black cloak which made him look like a sufi mendicant; that cloak fascinated us. I imagined it to be all sorts of things, including a magic cloak, belonging to some magician in an Arabian Nights story.

But slowly the cloak began to conjure up theatrical possibilities for us. We decided, therefore, that it shall be borrowed from father and used as a king's cloak in

our first play which I wrote. In our time, the idea was fixed, once and forever, with regard to the theatre, that in every play there had necessarily to be a king, a queen and a villain. Of course, the cheap jackass of a buffoon was taken entirely for granted.

When one reviews the theatre of today in our country—I refer to the professional theatre—one still finds the idea persisting. A visit to any theatrical costume-shop will easily impress upon you that the old tradition of king and queen will yet take another century to die out—at least, on the professional stage. Notice the vulgar costumes of royalty, heavily and meaninglessly embroidered, without the least trace of artistic plan or design; notice the hideous crowns and wigs crowding the shelves. Watch professional companies, and alas! even amateurs, flock to such a shop and seriously make a most careful choice, with bated breath and breathless awe, from the heap of gaudy and low-class junk that is piled into a smelly hillock before them—smelly, because the costumes have been worn and outworn hundreds of times over by artistes of different odours. And no amount of laundrying really ever completely exiles those odours from the costumes of which they form essential part! So, as a child, I too, believed that my first play should have a king in it. Suhashini and I were the regisseurs—Sarojini's children were on the list of the artistes who were to perform. Of course. I was also on that list; there was a feeling from the very beginning about me that I was sure to be able to "fill the stage" and turn the audience upside-down with my genius! That myth, more or less, still lingers round about me.

The first thing we were now to do was to capture "the black cloak" somehow. We went to father and put our case before him. It never took father long to understand and appreciate anything that we wished to do in

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the world of artistic expression. "We want to have the loan of your cloak" we said. "You will see how we transform it, beyond recognition...." Father readily consented and, without the least hesitation, took it off his back and gave it to us. "You will have to form part of the audience tonight, father. We want you to see our first play." Father was delighted and genuinely keen about forming part of the audience.

We immediately set to the task of transforming the "sufi" cloak into a theatrical one. We embroidered it with a silver border borrowed from mother's old sari. After the transforming act, really, the cloak looked a beauty. We could feel it breathe and smile with theatrical consciousness. Every fold of it, every bit of the embroidered sleeve and hem suddenly seemed to understand its new destiny which was to be fulfilled the same evening on the stage constructed in our drawing-room, our theatre!

Evening came. The play started at six o'clock. The audience had arrived. It consisted of one person only—and that was father who took his seat quite seriously on a chair facing our stage. It was an experience. When I think of him now I realise what greatness father had. Alone he sat and watched our really stupid first play which had hardly any story or interest—which, in a word, was honestly just silly tosh.

But what mattered to our "audience" was that we were making a serious effort to express ourselves; and that was the main thing! He met our serious effort to express with his serious effort to understand and encourage us in our efforts.

After the play was over we returned the cloak to him, just as it was in its new state. Father thanked us and praised our play: and then, looking at the cloak, he said, "Baby, do you know what a proverb is? It is a

wise saying. My cloak with its silver border reminds me of a proverb. Every cloud has a silver lining! And my cloak is a black cloud. And you have bordered it with silver. So, my cloud has a silver border". And he laughed his grand roof-rending laughter and kissed us all: that was the price he paid us for his ticket!

Theatricals soon became part of our daily life; they were just as urgent as eating and drinking, sleeping and waking. But occasionally we even thought of becoming members of a home-circus. When we talked of starting a circus, one of our intimate friends remarked with affection: "It would suit this house well—you children are already a menagerie" My sister Sunalini, who seemed much older than ourselves then, than she seems now, had already initiated us into circus-mysteries; one of her best-known feats was the balancing of a lighted table-lamp on her head while climbing up a table and then bending to climb down again; when she reached the floor she would crawl on all fours, balancing the lamp like a veritable professional circus-artiste.

Hyderabad always loved the circus. Famous companies visited it among the most popular were Chatre's Circus and Bose's Circus. In Bose's Circus there were two Chinese brothers who performed balancing feats. Their names were Arakeechee and Toosee. So my brother, Ranen and I, conceived of the idea of becoming those brothers. Ranen was Arakeechee, the elder acrobat, and I was the younger, Toosee. I was applauded for my feats—which consisted of balancing a walking stick on the chin, the tip of the nose and on the forehead. I can do it still, and with great success. Another feat, and, perhaps, the most amusing was the one of tying up a doll to the top-end of the stick and setting out to balance it in all seriousness after announcing to the audience that it was going to be a balancing feat such as the world

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had hardly witnessed: a human being going to climb the pole and 'Toosee'—that is myself, was going to bear the weight and perform it. A doll described as a human being!

After all what is a human being, if not a performing doll?

\* \* \*

Thanks to a most nasty attack of typhoid I ceased to go to school. I really hated school at heart and during those first few years that I was forced to attend it, I suffered an unspeakable torture of mind and soul. What a relief it was now to be able to stay indoors in a world of my very own—painting, reading, writing.

Our parents had done everything to make us feel that life was one fluent process of rainbows and faery happenings. But despite the happiness and the cheerful glow always existent in our home I always seemed to sense a loneliness in the heart, a loneliness I could hardly explain to myself. I felt a romantic desire to change places with the ragged beggar in the street, a cobbler cobbling away on the edge of a road, the peasant working hard in the fields under the scorching sun. Somehow, even at that early age, I felt somewhat strange in the society into which I was born; I was never really at ease. I was always awkward and nervous in company, and at tea parties, always a misfit. I was gradually growing up, thinking, responding more consciously to things around me. O, if only I could have gone away to some strange distant place and lived in a hut, perhaps as member of a poor family which worked hard for a living!

But this was only a romantic craving. From a distance poverty and want, which others are going through, somehow take on the colour of romance! But this romantic attitude did not last long. Gradually the reality of things began to dawn on me, slowly, very slowly, but



surely—I was growing conscious of the agony of those who were “socially inferior” to us!

Philosophy played almost the greatest part in the moulding of my character and my verse, for we grew up in an atmosphere brimmed over with terms like God, creation, soul, life after death, ascetism, yoga. . . . One of my father’s favourite sayings, as I have already said, was “I am God, you are God”. . . . which we resented deeply. We were sure, in our heart of hearts, that poor father would have to pay for such insolence, would have to suffer brimstone and hell-fire some day—poor father! But this conviction, too, changed when I began to understand life more intimately.

Slowly I deepened into a mystic, a really conscious mystic. From that age I have always held an almost continuous vision of the One-behind-the-many and the One broken into the many! This just came to me with ease; as it were, a gift from the ancestors. In my earliest poetry, therefore, there were very clear indications that I had acquired this vision of a mystic which from the standpoint of the modern world is the vision of a mistake!

It is queer, too, that the world recognised immediately in my first published work ‘The Feast of Youth’ one of the foremost mystical writers of my country. Sri Aurobindo, in a seven-page review in his famous journal *ARYA*, hailed me as a supreme singer of the fusion of God with Nature and human existence. And all this poetry came to me during a period when I was falling in love with several women all at once and together! It was, on a different plane, a case of the one-among-the many and the many all in one—and with a vengeance!

Love-poetry never came to me naturally or often. Whenever I sat down to essay verse of that stuff I somehow felt I couldn’t say much. Love-poetry was never

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my line—for never, really, has my nature been able to take too seriously the phenomenon of any individual's love for another to exclusion of others.

Shelley's lines have always meant a great deal to me:

*"True love in this differs from gold and clay  
That to divide is not to take away" . . .*

Beauty and love and life have ever been for me many-sided and myriad-marvellous. That is why, perhaps, I was always a failure at writing the poetry of love. Further, I never seemed to be able to escape the grip of the mystic's vision of the Love that is beyond the calculated martyrdom of shape. Shape has always suggested imprisonment to me. Writing in one of my later poems about shape, I have made a Pitcher talk or rather think aloud:

*"Pitchers are beautiful, and yet, indeed,  
Even from beauty we would all be freed  
And slipping into earth, secure escape  
From the enchanted tyranny of shape!*

The enchanted tyranny of shape—that is how all shape, however beautiful, has always struck me. But despite this persistent mysticism or was it because of it, because of the vision of seeing the One-in-the-many, I had always been haunted also with the vision of the thousands who suffered from want and misery, I never understood why a world—which was so full of beauty should also be full of ugliness. The elders around me tried to explain away the existence of unjust inequalities by quoting the theory of Karma. But it never satisfied me, though it has always interested me as a theory deeply, very deeply. Vaguely I felt a sneaking sympathy for the suffering. I found the better placed around me easing their conscience by doling out a meal or dealing a coin or two to the hungry and poverty-stricken passer-by. But that seemed more often than not, only a subtle

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way to satisfy one's own ego and bribe the unseen gods to give back something in return to the giver. "God gives back double or treble to him who gives" was one of the most familiar sayings in my younger days. I somehow, felt that the poverty around us was not the outcome of the law of Karma but the result of something wrong for which we ourselves were responsible. I remember to have cried out in one of my earliest verses:

*"God! break my body up and knead it into bread  
Of hunger, lo! how many little lives are dead!  
God! make a lightning of my soul and at a stroke  
Free poor men who bleed beneath the tyrant's yoke!"*

I called out to God to help humanity which was being hurt by the tyrant. But I could not exactly define in those days as to what was tyranny and who precisely was the tyrant!

## CROSSING THE THRESHOLD

Boyhood quivers into the early stage of youth even as the dawn into the first faint stirrings of a half-morn; and, in a similar manner, between the one and the other, cleaving the horizon of life like a blood-red sacrificial streak, the light begins to burst almost into the sensation of a bleeding stab; that is the moment of division, of a farewell to innocence and beautiful joyance, and a simultaneous welcome to a new life, a new experience, a new responsibility.

For, with creatures of my type, life begins early to be aware of its growing mysteries, though as yet blended with a curious unconsciousness which strains and strives towards an unravelling, all alone, because shy and sensitive, of those strange stirrings which touch the soul into an opening of its eyelids and the body into an opening of bud into flower.

My boyhood crossed the threshold into the experience of earliest youth with awe, a deep loneliness of heart and an almost unbearable sweetness of sensation which already marked for me a destiny of extraordinary response and reaction to Nature, to people, to the One which began to watch my movements now with alertness. For the first time, then, but yet vaguely, sex began to rub its eyes and yawn and stretch itself through my raw young limbs getting ready for a life of the most varied and chequered series of mood, experience and reception.

It was the hour for my signing a pact with time and growth which demanded that my signature should be traced with a pen dipped in my own blood and that pact was sealed with a red and unbroken seal, once and for all, indicating that I no more belonged to my eternal self

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which is free from shadow, strife and pure fulfilment.

Even as an individual after a long process of strenuous seeking on the surface for the truth logically arrives at it when he unconsciously but surely delves deeper and deeper into his own being, so does a whole nation.

This delving-time is the time of great wars and mighty scars; of apparent conquests and defeats alternating even as light and the shadow, swiftly chasing each other; of a reshuffling of values and visions; of egoisms imagining themselves to be master of all wisdom. But finally, in a curious and evasive way, the time of delving is done and nations return to the truth of the old culture, the old self-re-adoring the world with a new wisdom and knowledge for a certain span of time; but while it remains and grows and is authentic one may be certain that it has its roots in the eternal self with which childhood is surcharged.

Everything which I saw around me began to grow exceeding new and interesting, not merely pleasing. I began for the first time to notice the trembling contact a bee made on a flower; I watched with keen avidity the way that flower trembled under his dark weight seeming to hold her like a master who would not let her go until his purpose was over. I also saw him return to her again and again and then, leaving her desolate and solitary, pass on to another and yet another flower. I did not understand the nature of this tremulous intimacy but I could not help feeling in my young, throbbing, opening heart that some vital event was being gone through. Then, I could not help watching birds and ducks and monkeys and dogs, and the peacock and the pea-hen, and a host of other creatures. The most familiar sight of pairing was among the grey-bodied sparrows chirping in the eaves who, off and on, danced in pairs round each other; at the end invariably, one insisted on covering the other.

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I knew again that that was a very delicate form of game. It was when I suddenly pointed to two dogs on the road, during a drive with father: "There, father, look! how they are playing" that father grew serious and, unlike most fathers, explained that they were not just playing but creating pups. He went on to explain further that all things in Nature create their species, from the little birds to the hugest animals; the process was known as mating. It was one of the grandest and most beautiful of Nature's acts and I was always to look upon it with awe and reverence. I realised for the first time what those sparrows did in our eaves, monkeys did, rather humourously though, in the zoo. When, at times, I saw people laughing in the streets at the naked mating of dogs and ignorant urchins hurled stones at them to unlock their embrace, I used to shout "Ay! what are you doing? let them alone! That is Nature's way", they shouted back ugly abuses at me until I blushed and for an instant or two, thought that they were right and father was wrong. It was in those days, then, I learned the terms male and female. My father was a male, my mother a female. By that time I had, of course, become familiar with great Percy Bysche Shelley whose poetry was my ideal and who was my literary god. I recalled his lyric, one of the loveliest and most spontaneous in the world:

Nothing in the world is single,  
All things by a law divine  
With each other's being mingle,  
Why not I with thine?

And then the mind took me a little further into the process of thought and I followed up Shelley's philosophy and said to myself: "Why, the fountains mingle with the river and the river with the ocean. The winds of heaven mix forever with a sweet emotion." I wondered as to which was the male and which the female; the fountain

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or the river, the river or the ocean? And have even winds got sex? if so, are there male winds as well as female winds blowing and mixing? All this was extremely complicated at the outset. It set me thinking deeply on matters of sex when, one day, I instinctively knew that boy meant male and girl, female. I was a boy. A Narcissus-like feeling possessed me, feeling of falling in love with my own growing, trembling body. Gradually the sense of Adam's first shame began to creep over me and the very idea of human flesh had changed and become for me something to hide and cover up with more than the mere fig-leaves of poor Adam in the Garden of Eden. Whenever I went into the bathroom I found it exciting, as if I was an explorer about to make a new and vital discovery. "I am a boy", I said to myself. I saw my reflection in the large tub filled up with water; I stirred the water and examined the marvellous manner in which it broke up into wavy lines, circles and a dance of distorted reflection from which I tried to recapture my own real contours. But until the water returned to its normal calmness of surface, I could not, try as I may.

It was an interesting phenomenon which taught me of my body what the scriptures taught of the mind with which I was acquainted at that age, that unless the water is calm, form gets distorted even as truth does unless the mind is placid. So, there I was, with a body I could claim as my own, my very own. I sensed now the significance of what sex was and why I was a boy, a male. After all, one could not tell of sparrows as to which of them was male and which female. Perhaps girls also had similar bodies to boys. And yet, and yet—then I went on to think that grown-up men had moustaches and women had none, except, of course, an old Parsi lady who lived opposite our childhood's home who had quite a thick dark streak on her upper lip with a very big mole

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at the right. . . .

All these thoughts did perplex me most sorely; and slowly but surely, the thought of innocent games was being replaced with strange secret thoughts I myself could hardly fathom. Until one day. . . .

How distinctly I recall the tent pitched in our neighbour's compound. It was during the summer. There is something fascinating about a glaring golden sky frank and honest about its gift of fire to earth. Occasionally, a cool wind blows like the breath of some hidden beloved and touches the body into a sense of relief and romance. Hyderabad summers are pure gold fire, and the custom during those hot months is to drink "falsa" sherbet and iced "mango fool". The tent itself had already lent to my imagination a touch of Arabian Nights. I imagined myself a bedouin, a wandering Arab full of loneliness and impossible dreams; imagination was my camel, it always has been, on which I rode then, even as I ride now, across desert-miles of days.

Now and again I would stumble across a well of real water, but most of the time it seems to have been a mirage, attractive yet disappointing on closer approach. The tent was lonely; nobody would be about during the hours of noon. For our neighbours had the habit of having more than forty winks after their midday meal. And nobody ever visited their compound at noon; at least none from our home. I found the tent a wonderful noon-day-place to spend the naked golden hours and to dream my own slowly-growing dreams, alone, unwatched. Inside the heart welled up strange new thoughts in my solitudes; yet, I dared not tell even myself of these thoughts. I listened, as it were, to my pulse beating a new measure. I could hear my blood dancing to a new rhythm, a distinctly new and maturing rhythm. Occasionally I sighed to myself out of sheer exhaustion of this growing



experience. I now began to realise that my body was becoming taut like a violin that was being tuned to a certain pitch, the tuning beginning to seem painful. But all the while, behind the process of pain, there was an undoubted surety of the sweetness of the music to come—the music of young life which had not as yet started for me—after all the awakening into sex is like listening to music—the music of a new land to which one has to get accustomed. One does not at first understand it, but one knows intuitively that it is, perhaps, the most urgent music in creation—to which forms dance and fragrances flutter, without which the universe would be folded up like a scroll and there would be an end to all existence. Yet, it is more than mere irony that such a tremendously significant and grand thing as sex has been the most degraded and vulgarised.”

One afternoon, when I was lying all alone on a rope-cot inside the tent, thinking of the then puzzling intricacies of creation—and while I was thinking and listening to the background sounds of cooing doves on a tree close by—I suddenly saw a shadow stain the ground in front of the tent door. It was tall and thrilling. I knew that it was the shadow of a female. Soon stood before the tent opening a tall, very dark young woman with a head covered thickly over with rough tough curls. She was the daughter of a Tamil mother by a Negro father. I forget her name now; but I shall never be able to forget her. I shrank for a second, for I was in the position of a prey to an animal that sought me. With an assuring smile and a non-chalant gesture, she walked into my tent, and without ceremony, sat on the cot and plucking my head between her strong hands, placed it as if by right, on her lap. I remember that she smelt strangely but I was entirely, for a few moments, in her grip. I did not say a word. I did not even dare to ask her to go away, for, quite

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frankly, behind my young raw fear, I somehow felt flattered that such a tall and attractive figure should have sought me on such a beautiful golden afternoon.

There was something of the summer's heat in that half-woman, half-girl. She stroked my head tenderly, passed her fingers through my hair and said: "This is how I put my husband to sleep in the night" . . . Husband! It sounded queer. Ever since that day, I have never been able either to hear or pronounce the word "husband" without a least small tremour in the being!—Then she bent her head over my head over my face and, after gazing on it quietly for a few moments, brought her hot mouth to mine. She kissed me—that was the first terrible passionate kiss that a woman had ever given me.

I had kissed and been kissed thousands of times before that, but never did I realise that the world contained kisses which were so hot, so significant, so life transforming. My body ached with a torture I could not understand. I began to grow afraid. I said "Go away!"—She laughed and said "you are still a child!" It was an insult, the way she said it. It was as if she had thrown a challenge to my growing youth. Yet, I did not dare to enter the new experience so easily as that. I said "Go away". She walked out of the tent, into a wide world where there were several men waiting to possess her. While I was left alone in the tent with my thoughts; I struggled dreadfully, for that one hot mouth had wakened up something in my young life which never could be lulled to rest again. After she had gone, I felt a curious sense of remorse, a sort of mixed remorse at what had happened and a regret at what did not happen! However, one thing was now certain: that I was growing up rapidly and that, since a woman had already wanted to hold me in her embrace. I had grown up. I was no more a mere boy, I was almost a man now,—at any rate, I was standing on

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the verge of manhood. That kiss had, as it were, hastened the process of my coming to the stage where the body would begin to have new functions and seek new thrills and experiences.

When I returned home that evening, later than usual, for I lingered on in the tent in the vague hope of her return—I found that my throat was parched and my eyes a little red with a sense of overstrain. I was entirely in the mental position of one who had been led to the gallows and set free just a few moments before the actual moment of execution. My mother, I think understood what I was suffering. But she said nothing. She merely placed my head on her lap and stroked me gently with her hands, passing her fingers through my hair. O God! what a difference between the two laps, the two hands, the two sets of fingers!! The contrast was so marked that I began to feel my conscience biting me bitterly. Why had I allowed that dark skinned woman, some “husband’s” wife, to meddle with my face and my head? I swore I should never let a woman touch me again. But Nature is larger than all men put together. She has sworn to fulfil herself through all forms in creation. . .and her oath is stronger than ours. We are but experiments that are being carried out in her laboratories. And some of us succeed, others fail. It is her experiment that matters—not our personal triumphs or defeats!

## NATURE THE EXPERIMENTER

Nature is forever busy experimenting and experimenting and experimenting. The whole universe is her secret laboratory and we human beings are as the test-tubes into which she constantly pours her many-coloured liquids of dreams and desires, mixing and mixing them until they change from colour to colour, composition to composition, bearing her farther and farther towards success in her experimentation.

Nature is, indeed, inscrutable and her laws dark and mysterious. Nobody ever can predict completely her next effort. Over the flame of her lamp she holds each of her test-tubes and watches how the transformations take place, watches with keen interest the manner in which chemical changes lead to new discoveries, unknown even to her. The whole point of nature is her extreme restlessness. She never stands still; she dare not. Since in movement alone is rest for her. That is the secret of her continuance.

I look upon life, therefore, as an experiment for which I am not responsible. But there is nothing to be troubled about one's failures when they happen; even as there is no real cause to be excited and flushed with pride over one's success. A combination of forces leads each individual to work out his individual equation in a particular given direction, very often much against his own will. In a sense, therefore, it may be termed destiny—but with this difference that while the common idea of destiny involves an unbroken pre-destination with the pattern of which nothing on earth may interfere, I understand it, as something which is both unpremeditated and unpredictable. It works out as it escapes or is hurled

into the vortex of unforeseen forces which meet in ways not even the gods might foresee. Accident, therefore, goes hand in hand with life which is an interwoven texture of both accident and incident—the latter being the invisible and inevitable outcome of the former.

When I look upon my life and the way I grew up, out of boyhood into youth, and out of youth into manhood, I cannot help remarking that no today of man can ever prophesy as to the gifts tomorrow might bring—they may be gifts of flower or gifts of fire. But these gifts are dependent on the sum-total of the life of the world which constantly brings pressure on my own.

When I was growing out of boyhood our home was breaking up; due to the extreme generosity of my parents whose palms always itched not to receive but to give, the home began to take a turn which threatened to leave us with hardly one meal a day. But we had a mother who was such an adept in the culinary art that she knew edible plants by heart. We saw her plucking greens and herbs from our compound and hardly knew why she did it. We realised later in life that, during those hard times that visited us, mother had kept the table going with delicacies which were unrecognisable. They were often those very herbs and greens picked from the wild patches of vegetable growth in our own compound.

But a story is told about father. One day there was hardly any food in the house—barely enough for us, the children who must be fed first and who, at any rate, must never be allowed to feel that they were face to face with hardship of any kind. Father walked into the dining room, shouting out to the butler, "Boy! bring in the food." "Sir, there is no food". Father said: "No food? It's quite all right." Then back again he went to his easy-chair on the verandah to resume his discourse on philosophy surrounded by eager guests who considered

father's conversation a veritable feast.

The home was distinctly changing its aspect. I was about fourteen then. The old cosiness had almost vanished and the furniture was beginning to take on the sad aspect of the presentment of an auction. There were debts to pay, debts due to an uncontrolled generosity which could not bear to withhold itself at the sight of the needy and the destitute. . . .

One impression stands out sharply etched against the horizon-glow of other days. The debts had accumulated and creditors were pressing for payment. My parents had never lived beyond their means; they had given away beyond their means. One night some fierce looking fellows came to our house. I still remember one of them with moustaches, dark and thick, twisted to question-marks to which there was only one answer. Cruelty. I clung to mother who broke into a fit of sobbing. I did not understand why she did so. Those hard-looking men came with a warrant to attach our property. Father sat in his easy-chair, embodiment of composure, smoking away with all the coolness of a Nero fiddling while Rome was burning. "What do you want?" he enquired. "We have come to put a seal on all your belongings." Father said that they were entirely welcome to do so. He explained to mother that it was but the logical conclusion to their two pairs of hands that did not ever know to withhold or stint.

One by one the botanical plates framed in black, were being pulled down. These plates were perhaps father's most treasured property if ever he had had a sense of possessing any thing in the world. The furniture was being taken over, and the carpets—lovely, precious Persian carpets, were being rolled like large scrolls of destiny revealing only the bare floor which seemed to feel ashamed of its bareness. One after the other our

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inanimate friends, tables, chairs, bookshelves, books, mirrors, sugarcaddy, ornamental vases and a host of other precious articles, the more precious for their heirloom—memoriedness, were being instructed, before our very eyes, to bid us and the old home farewell.

Mother sobbed her eyes out nearly; her heart certainly was about to break—while on the other hand father smiled, smoked and carried on a most friendly conversation with the monsters “who” father explained “were only doing their duty.”

But a miracle changed the whole scene from one of funeral gloom to that of marriage-merriment. There was in the city of Hyderabad a famous vendor of sweetmeats, named Ramnath. He happened to be converted to Brahmoism by father a few days before this night of impending doom. Ramnath looked upon father as a god. He was, of course, not the only one to do so. Almost every week we were the happy recipients of rich sweets, made of milk and nuts, pasted over with fine edible silver sheets which enhanced their beauty and their taste. Suddenly, as if heaven had marvelled at father’s patience and decided to grant him a prize for that quality of his, he sent Ramnath to our place at that most unusual hour. “What is happening here,” enquired the sweetmeat-vendor. “Is this a ‘tamasha’, you fellows?” Ramnath’s voice grew as wild as a forest and his eyes as red as a fire which could melt all the seals of the world. “What, come to seal Dr. Aghorenath’s property? . . . . Father received Ramnath with open arms and asked him not to be excited.

“You fellows, what debts are due to your clients?” They ran into five figures. “Wait”, he said, “until I return from the city.” Ramnath disappeared and appeared again as swiftly as the genii in Aladin’s story. “Take this and be off. You do not know whom you have insulted

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this evening. You will have to pay for it.”

The debts were paid up in full and after the creditors with their fierce-looking men went away Ramnath prostrated before father and begged for blessings at his feet! We were struck as with lightning. It was nothing short of a shock of joy. Mother sobbed and sobbed. She could not stem the tide of her emotion. But what started as the sob of sorrow changed to a sob of gratefulness.



## WITHOUT AND WITHIN

The house broke up. My brother, Bhupendranath and his sweet lovely wife, Ushabala, moved from the original old home to a new one situated in the adjoining compound and owned by our old landlady's eldest daughter. Our parents had left for Calcutta and we, my youngest sister Suhashini and I, were left in our brother's care. And now started a truly strange period of romantic struggle for my mind which made my life a chequered chessboard across which some invisible hand seemed to move chesspieces of emotions and cravings continually, without respite, as though the game was urgent and must be won somehow. I remember how feverishly that hand moved and how the game was one between my life and experience which, sometimes, even assumed the mask of death.

The house was a round one painted, a jaundiced yellow. The rooms below were dark and seemed to yearn for sunshine; but, except for a few chance rays that entered despite obstacles in their way, light had not the ghost of a chance to enter wholeheartedly. With the result that those rooms served as store-rooms where badminton nets, rackets and shuttlecocks, old boxes and castaway trunks, broken iron-bedsteads, stacks of old newspapers, bottles, kerosene tins and a host of odds and ends possessing but a dubious destiny were given habitation. One of the side-rooms served as granary. But there was some sort of inexplicable fascination for me about the gloom, the sickly and choking stench, the overcrowded atmosphere of those downstairs-rooms. What I loved most were the cobwebbed corners of the roofs thick with dust. Now and again I came across that most active

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worker of all, and the most subtle,—the spider weaving and weaving its queer house of finest silver—its house of life, but a veritable house of death to unwary insects which happened to get caught in its meshes. It struck struck me very early in life that the mind was like a spider. It weaves meshes around itself and lives in the centre, and draws to itself all sorts of restless winged creatures of thought and dream which, once caught in its meshes, ebb away and perish since however subtle the pattern of its weaving may be, the mind's webs are brushed away again and again by some gust of living truth or hand of wisdom, and yet, it never says die! It begins all over again to weave the inevitable mesh round itself—a house of life which is a house of death!

I loved the gloom. It somehow woke up in me deep deep thoughts. Perhaps the graves in the cemetery close by were some such rooms as our downstairs-ones—men and women who once lived and breathed were laid in them to rest. Surely something survived and continued a secret life inside the gloom-laden underground hollow? Yes, and it was that very “something” in me which trembled and loved the gloom of the downstairs-room; the soul which felt alone and cut away from the light and the life outside. It was a morbid sensation of pleasure. Upstairs, the rooms were bright and airy. I had a room which I called my study, it overlooked a busy street.

Through the window at the left of my study-table, I watched for hours on end, the passersby. For the first time I began to wait for women to pass by; now and again a very lovely woman would: now it was a woman fruit-vendor with a basket easily balanced on her head—and now, a group of Telugu women going to the market. In a sense I gradually became a pair of binoculars the Psychic adjusting and re-adjusting the lense in order to take in details more and more clearly of the human

form of the rhythm in the various ways of walking, of the vivacity in some, the lassitude in others. I began to reflect on the composite nature of life, on the intensely interesting kaleidoscopic arrangement of the world around which it moved, moved, moved all the time without a moment's rest.

Movement! Why did life move so much? What did it want? What was it looking for? How did it first happen? Where would it finally go? These were the thoughts that began to haunt me. I began to cogitate on the serious problems of life. I could hardly still the mind. But behind all my restless mental struggle and torture there was an unbroken sense of the horizon-vastness circling around life—the vastness which was always silent and unmoved, and which held all men, all houses, all trees and waters, all the passing details which made up creation and the little life of man—held them all as in a large yet condescending embrace. It was this sense of the unchanging and indestructible vastness of the horizon that always came to my rescue.

At this time, I was studying for my Senior Cambridge Examination, all by myself. It was an unfortunate experience, the way obsessions of the flesh and the mind came between me and my books. I took up logic, among other subjects; but somehow the very word seemed humorous, since everything that the grownups did in particular, and people did in general, lacked logic. The same humdrum way of existence continued in season and out of season; going to office in the morning after breakfast at 9 o'clock and returning from office tired, too tired even to smile at the children at home. The wife toiling away at "household duties" as they are called; washing pots and pans and clothes; sweeping the floors, dusting chairs and tables and, by way of self-hypnotism, sitting before a little household god in a corner, begging him to grant small

human favours. The beggar in the street begging the livelong day—seated on the edge of a road or trudging through streets and lanes. People repeating themselves day after day, night after night! Everything seemed nauseating and meaningless and—illogical! I did not ever care for so-called logic.

What I liked most was English. I had to study Hamlet—my favourite among Shakespearean plays. I did all my study during the early hours of morning; and all night I wandered....I grew sleepless. My brain was in a whirl, I could not exactly tell why! Under the stars which were cold and dumb, under the midnight sky which never had a dictionary to express itself or to respond to our prayers addressed to it, I walked the streets for miles and miles, alone, alone. During the day, under the sun, at least there is one's shadow to keep one company. But in the black night one feels terribly alone since even one's shadow deserts one! I thrilled to the stillness of night rendered the stillier for an occasional distant barking of a dog, or the cough of an old sentry walking like a ghost with a livid yellow-flamed smoky lantern.

Whenever I passed by the Imperial Bank I could hear my heart go pit-a-pat; a sentry with a gun kept vigil and whenever one passed by he challenged with "Halt! who goes there!" at the dead of night that voice and the sudden fullstop of silence accompanying it as after-effect sounded deathly and freezing. Invariably I would pass it by, just to hear the challenge sounded and my voice reply without a quiver "A friend,"—followed by the sentry's voice: "Pass, friend! for all is well".... "Pass friend"—the word "friend" thrilled me to the bone. A stranger calling me "friend";—what a wonderful thing is friendship. Had I any friends really? None—none I could recall. I was alone. I was lonely. The

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only real friend I had was my little sister, Suhashini, who understood me, in a sense, understood that I must be understood and helped. The others in our new home were grown-up and, although they were kind, they could not understand.

Sometimes I jumped into a bullock-cart and sat throughout the hours of the night listening to the cartman's song of weird high-pitched cracked notes, to the accompaniment of the creaking of the cartwheels. Towards the early hours of dawn, before the first cockcrow, I would jump out of the cart and return homewards in time to have a wash and sit down to study.

The Senior Cambridge Examination. How foolish examinations are. Who is competent to examine whom? And for what? How unnecessary so many of our human institutions are—really! How stupid. Why waste time over books? When the world is such a large open book in whose pages all that one wants to know is written so clearly. And—then, before I yawned and began to read, I sometimes shut the eyes and felt a vastness inside me—and thought to myself.

“Why, inside me there is another vast book, wherein every thing is written.” In short, I became a typical battlefield on which was fought a fierce battle of the without and the within. Sometimes, the victory was on the side of without; and at other times, on the side of within. My whole life since that age has been such a battlefield—with this difference, of course, that now, with the coming in of maturity and wisdoms won from immensely huge suffering, I am striving hard to transform the battlefield into a quiet centre of harmony where the without and the within may some day meet and call truce, to start with. And then, after getting more and more acquainted with each other, I am hoping that they may become inseparable and indivisible—realising at last

## WITHOUT AND WITHIN

that neither of them can afford to grow and continue in significance without the other.

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Without and Within! But the world around me seemed to believe only in a without. All the rest was just sheer moonshine. I met men and women who laughed and talked a great deal and "enjoyed life" as they called it. They did not have either the time or the need to believe in a within, apparently. Then there were sad men and women with broken homes and broken lives, and when they at all smiled, there was an effort at masking tragedy. Such people vaguely believed in a so-called destiny—something inexplicable and inexorable, some queer dark hovering power which was very much mightier than life itself, some moulding hand which none dared escape in history.

But most of them left it at that; they did not either know or care to know the within: that the inner world is as true as the world outside, wherein miracles of strength, calm and beauty have ever happened since the beginning of time. But having since childhood been in an atmosphere that always impressed upon our minds that each one of us was a veritable god, I could hardly help searching the innermost being trying to find out as to where exactly our "godhead" was located.

The struggle became keener and keener, and with it growing irrevocably into a really genuine seeker, I felt I became lonelier and lonelier. So much so that in spite of the urgent and delicious call of the flesh towards pleasure and excitement, my deeper self resisted, for a length of time, and I even seriously contemplated going away to some desolate and solitary spot where it would be possible to live "in tune with the Infinite". I waited for my examination results, but knew beforehand that I was not destined to get through it suc-

cessfully. The reason was obvious—since, behind all my hours of study, disturbed invariably by strange and far away thoughts, I sensed a contempt for the very idea of a formal examination which somehow never struck me as being either serious or natural. The creaking of cart-wheels, the opening of springtime's eyes, the passing of large white clouds during the noonday, were all in all to me and engaged my attention, leading me far away into abstruse contemplations which were beyond the little world of man-made books.

The results were announced contrary to my belief I got through my weakest subjects: Mathematics and Logic. But I won poor marks in a subject which I thought was my strongest: English. It was the Essay on Hamlet that did the mischief. Very grandly I evolved a theory of my own which at the time seemed ludicrous to the examiner and that, too, coming as it did from a mere lad! I offered a thesis on the character of Hamlet, and tried in my own faltering immature way, to prove that Hamlet was not a manly man—he was an "Urning"—an Aphroditic creature who was naturally an idealist of a very high order, incapable of decision, when face to face with the problems of the earth. His love for Ophelia smacked of acuriously unusual romanticism, his inability to strike the King, his step-father, once his uncle, was due to a certain sensitivity which proved him unfit for worldly heroisms. I quoted profusely from the play itself and, I remember, that after the Essay had been written and, submitted, I felt, not only a sense of relief, but a sense that I had achieved a new theory which would stun critics and throw them off their seat! Nothing of the sort! It only threw me off mine!

I was, of course, depressed, since it was a shame that I could not stand the test and—what will everybody say now. What will the world say? Dr. Aghorenath's son is

a nincompoop—"Harin is the idiot of the family"—father often said and I had proved to the hilt that I was. While everybody around me was cold and treated me as if I was a sort of intellectual untouchable, the feeling for woodlands and solitude grew deeper. But suddenly one day a letter came from father who was then in Calcutta and I trembled while I opened the envelope. Surely father would in plain terms call me an outcast of the family. What did he write? He cheered me up and said that an examination was really no criterion of one's knowledge, and therefore, there was no need at all to worry about my failure! What a father! what generosity! what understanding! That letter saved me and eased my conscience which had been gnawing me like a rat for days!

I wrote verse to while away the hours. But most of it was piffle and nothing written during this period has been preserved. I even tried to write plays but I could not achieve anything worth while. In fact, it looked as if I had spurted into literary expression during my raw childhood which was full of promise, which these struggling years of my mental life had almost seemed to leave unfulfilled. Something was wrong with me, something was dying up. But no; it was just the opposite.

Something was growing into maturity and during that growth I had not the time to think—the growing pain of life left me no time to collect my thoughts. It was stronger than my vocabulary and so I did not succeed in putting down experience. I had not as yet fallen in love in the real sense of the term. So far it was "response" to beauty, to form, to fragrance. Behind all this response I used to sense a beloved, an indefinable undefined haunting beloved waiting for me behind the curtain of a door opened by degrees, slowly but surely. Now and again I imagined I saw her, the hidden beloved—in some woman I saw on the road, or in somebody's yard or at the public



water-tap.

Most of the time I was attracted by the women of the working class: Telugu women with wonderful figures—perhaps, the most beautiful in the world! I still hold the view I held then. There is a haunting grace in the gait of the Telugu working-class woman and a rich vibration in her whole physique. The toe-rings she puts on strike music on the harp of streets and lanes. Constant toil and bearing of loads on the head have preserved for her a slimness to be envied by many a society lady who undergo strict and difficult methods to reduce fat!

My first real thrill was that moment, years and years ago, when I saw a fair-skinned woman by a well drawing milk from her cow; she smiled at me and surely realised that I had been struck by her beauty. She spoke to me on her own and I felt grateful. I found myself waiting for her by the well every morning. And she came every morning, too. In silence the madness gathered strength making me lose mine! I choked with first passion, but I was still quite a child. I did not know why the heart beat so rapidly and unevenly and why I stammered when I tried to talk to her. Fortunately for me she ceased coming to the well suddenly, and although in the mornings I missed her for a day or two, I got over it. But it has remained as one of my most intense memories!

Within was fast vanishing and without began to possess me in a titan's grip. My eyes saw outwards, feverishly, I was fast losing touch with that shy and lonely inner self which receded into the background leaving me to the outer world which was now, with breaks and lapses to reveal to me my own vital nature and its own.

\* \* \*

The without was displacing the within with a fierce and cruel rapidity, with the speed and the quality of lightning which was pregnant, at every point of its flash, with

a possibility of attack and devastation. It was the experience of one who felt the earth grow more and more into an obstinate magnet which rooted my feet irrevocably to terrestrial gravitation; about my head all heaven, once so very intimate and urgent to my nature and growth, seemed suddenly, without notice, to be cut off, cancelled. The heart was denied access even to its usual hunger for something beyond and above mundane existence. "The desire of the moth for the star" became less and less until it seemed well-nigh extinguished. I began to see more "with the eyes" than "through the eyes" with the logical result that now the body held sovereign sway over that strange inexplicable thing which was me.

I was a poet still, but a poet whose vocabulary had disappeared. I went through an intensely dry period of life, it resembled a drought. All the tanks of thought were dried up, there was hardly any water left in the once easily-flowing river of my life. Even the eyes sensed a feeling as of an intense lack of teardrops. I was dead, dead as far as the heart and the spirit were concerned. But my mind grew mad with a meaningless and vacant activity, and ran here, there and everywhere in a fruitless effort to possess something, someone—it hardly knew itself what it wanted. But it was an acute suffering of growth, of sex-ache, of out-flowering in the gardens of time—a most necessary period of growth. For it is during such a point in life that one is subjected to the torture of self-discovery on the plane of temporal existence. One must go through it, reacting and responding, each in one's own way.

The Hindu belief is that it all depends on the accumulated deeds and thoughts of past births which result in the personality and its make-up in the present birth. There are some who, at an early age, bid farewell to earth and its multi-coloured lure and doggedly seek the moun-

tain-peak on which they evolve during their earth-time until they become mountain-peaks themselves which the lesser ones, full of struggle at the base, flock to see. There are others who walk easily into the trap of desire and idle ambition and pass a whole lifetime as the hostages of sorrow and death. I seemed one of the latter band of the blind. Sex! what a torturous thing it seems when it first awakens in early manhood; and yet, what a blinding and beautiful event! I felt it aching in me. I tried sometimes to forget it by losing myself in exterior activity.

It was about this time I learned to ride a push-byke. I learned it avidly and became a master of its secret. The cycle became my true companion. I literally lived with it. Peculiar little construction! How simple and yet, when you think of it, how absolutely cunning the way she conquers distance, with sovereign ease, speeding along on her two-tyred circumferences which, to me, had become synonyms for legs; and when I rode it I felt a secret pride that I had mastered gravitation for the time being and learned its mysterious rhythm, its fine calculated balance in relation to me and me to it. In those days the cycle was still a watchable phenomenon—it evoked wonder in passersby and those who did not know to ride it looked on just as if it were something which had been drawn out of a lumber-room of the Mysterious. Whenever I rode it, I felt conceited—for I was able to ride at great speed letting my hands go, folding them across my chest and whistling away some English air to impress the passersby in the streets with my modern progressive self! The cycle in a sense, came to my rescue. It occupied my mind and subjected me to constant exercise which, to some extent worked out a good deal of the growing morbidity within, resulting from an overpowering condition of new desire yearning to be quenched.

We had a badminton court in the compound. Every

evening the "water-carrier" known a "behishti" ("the heavenly one") came to water the whole compound, bearing a huge bloated dark brown bag of skin which resembled an animal, with its head and its limbs chopped off. It poured the water through an opening which always looked like a helpless gullet. I never failed to watch "the watering ceremony" as I called it: It was most like a ceremony—the meeting and mating of water and mud, O God! what fragrance wet mud has! It used to madden me. I dilated the nostrils as wide as I could to inhale "the perfume of earth" (the title of a book of poems I wrote a few years later). It was no ordinary perfume, I used to think. It was coming out of the cells and the pores of the earth in bridal ecstasy! Wonderful! wonderful! It used to wake up strange agony in the blood. It made me long for a companion, for somebody who would be close to me and be full of sweet and gentle perfume, like the earth, the true beloved of time and existence!

After brother Bhupen returned from office and friends gathered together in the compound according to custom, we got ready for tournaments on the badminton court. Ushabala, my sister-in-law, was a devotee of the game. So was my cousin, Priyanath, a short person who taught French and never felt happier than when he said something quite dirty to shock society! I loved badminton and I played it quite well. Whenever I saw the shuttlecock being smashed about from one side of the court to another I could not help deriving from it a philosophical correspondence to the mind which seemed nothing short of a shuttlecock helplessly knocked about hither and thither! That was a very tiresome and heavy time—between fourteen and sixteen. Nothing seemed to happen to fulfil the meaning of growth. I wrote nothing during this grey and mournful interim; words never cared to come to me. Nor did experience care to come

to me, though I longed for it.

Only once, I remember, I met a very lovely, fair-skinned Telugu girl who had come with her uncle to Hyderabad for a few days. She was young and I was young. One evening we managed to go up a hill—like Jack and Jill did in the time-old nursery rhyme. But we did not go to fetch a pail of water. We just went up the hill urged by an unconscious desire. I suppose to know each other in an innocent way. Frankly I had not as yet known the mechanism of the body. I only knew that the mind was lonely and wanted a companion. When we reached the top of the hill we sat close to each other. She began to tell me in Hindustani that she had come from Karnool which was “very hot in summer”. I felt her breath a moment on my face. It was hot like Karnool in summer. She was distinctly more in touch with the affairs of life than I was. I made bold to creep yet a little closer to her. She seemed to like the move.

Then I said: “why do you wear shoes? Take them off. I want to see your feet. They must be beautiful; your face is beautiful. Are your feet as beautiful? Let me see! Take them off. I hate shoes. . . .” Raji—for that was her name—took off her shoes without any fuss.

Her feet were strong, but not beautiful. Besides, they were not too well looked after—I was disappointed. I knew for the first time then how much the feet of women mattered to me. They still do. They have always been the deciding factor in my love-affairs. I love beautiful feet. They speak a language I understand. It may be the reminiscence of our need, as a nation of the worship of the Mother. I told Raji to put her shoes on again for it was about time to be going down the hill. In a sense, then Jack fell down and broke his crown, for he was disillusioned! Raji, while walking down the hill with me, told me on her own that she was married—

otherwise", she made bold to say, "I would have married you. . . ." While I felt flattered that such a beautiful girl was attracted by me, I was relieved to learn that she was already married. How had she learned to be so bold? I learned afterwards that she was really not her "uncle's" niece. She was the daughter of a nautch-girl who had been rescued from a life of degradation and had settled down to "a decent family life. . . ."

## MY FIRST LOVE

I used to feel quite superior to those around me who wore Indian clothes. It was the fashionable glad-neck shirt and short trousers that did the unfortunate trick. It was a real thrill to wear dark shorts with a white stripe on either side, football stockings and rather strong boots to indicate that I was "somebody" on the football field, one who meant a great deal to the game!

For my age, I was not a bad player at all; while my brother Ranendra was fine at keeping goal. I was considered quite a decent half-back. When on the field, running about sometimes quite unnecessarily, from one point to another, putting on the serious air of fulfilling a duty which involved life and death. I was always conscious of my striped trousers which surely, I thought to myself, must be attracting the notice of the crowds around watching our game.

I was, in a word, an actor first, a halfback afterwards—an actor with a sort of stage-costume on crowding my hour or two on the field with pose. Yet, it was innocent. Behind my effort at play, however, there was always a sense of loneliness. I wanted something, I could not explain to myself what exactly it was. I was missing someone, but couldn't quite place the person. That person was still to be met. And she was waiting somewhere—but I did not know where! But destiny knew and made it a point to effect a meeting with her. The process was queer, the technique of its moves was most inscrutable. Yet, it all happened in a simple and natural way.

One afternoon I had got ready to go to the football field which was about three-fourths of a mile away from our yellow, round house. I was stepping out of the house

## MY FIRST LOVE

and was just about to rush away when my brother, Bhupendra, stepping out of his carriage accosted me and said: "Harin, Mr. and Mrs. V.— are very anxious to meet you. Mrs. V—is most anxious to hear you sing. They have invited us to tea this evening, you are to accompany us. . . ." Far from my feeling upset, I felt a curious exhilaration, a foreboding distinct and tremulous. I sensed in the heart that it was not merely the invitation of human acquaintances, but of the gods. It was a case not of a woman wanting to hear me sing, but life itself inviting me to sing to it, life which would begin to teach me a new series of songs, a new manner of singing!

Bikram, brother's black horse, drew the carriage across four miles of roadway, for the house to which we were invited, was far way. For the first time in my growing and nervous life I felt as though I was heading towards the unknown. It was prophetic. Bikram was a wonderful animal and seemed carven of polished black rock gleaming like metal. Was he conscious of my approaching destiny? He was no more a horse, an ordinary horse, but a veritable Pegasus. He was of the family of birds, flying on viewless pinions, and my brother's carriage seemed, all of a sudden, to be decked with blossoms.

Throughout the journey I was in a reverie. I spoke little. The change had come over me, as of a new season about to conquer my life, my blood, my bones. I grew silent as the hour of night which is about to pass into dawn, chill, sweet, strange dawn which widens and reveals a whole world. My heart-beats kept rhythm with the trotting of the horse.

Bhupen, my brother noticed my quietness and said: "You have got to sing your best this evening. We are going to the home of a great scholar and his wife sings very beautifully. . . . At last we were entering a very huge gate into a compound, that was only the first gate to cross.



We had to pass through yet another gate to enter that compound which was about to decide my fate. Intuition told me, without reserve or veiling, that these very gates would play a strange part in my life one sudden midnight—that they were the unscalable gates of a fate itself which, however, something greater and mightier than fate, would enable me to scale!

There, they were—the guests at the party. An elderly gentleman, in white flannels well-creased, and a dark grey serge coat, was entertaining a few guests who had already arrived. My eyes looked for “somebody” who was not there. It was the same “somebody” whom they sought on the football field, in the studyroom, on the roads, in the crowds, everywhere—but sought apparently in vain. Dumb as a statue sat a heavy tall well built man without moving at all, resting his weight on a thick walking stick. He was blind and he called himself Professor Parthasarathy; when we were introduced to him, he smiled the smile of the blind, sorrowful behind the affected note of cheer it always essays to strike. After greeting us, he sank once again into a depth of stillness which was all ears.

It has always struck me that the stillness of the blind listens to sounds which we clear-eyed ones may never hear; for the blind, while having the disadvantage of not being able to see, have all their attention focussed on aural vibrations. Sight gives way to sound, colour to shades of tones which are graded to the most refined and subtle sensitiveness of audition. The blind man is a high class eavesdropper without meaning to be. He is able, in an uncanny way, to dive into our thoughts, at times, thoughts which whisper and echo in the caves of the heart.

Slowly, almost inaudibly, the self-styled Professor broke into humming. I sat beside and close to him and

## MY FIRST LOVE

caught strains of a really beautiful piece which, later, I was told was one of Thyagaraja's classical compositions. I was also told later that the Professor's blindness was due to an unfortunate disease which had been neglected, that he was not born blind, but rendered blind through his own evil deeds! All this I heard at the party. For society loves scandal and gossip. It has such a lot of time to waste, and many a member of society has much need of talking loudest of another's weaknesses to give the world no time to consider his own. Of course, I was still too young to understand what those guests were hinting at. It didn't really matter to me that he was blind or how he became blind. It was enough for me that he was a good singer, an artist.

Suddenly, a woman with a little baby in arms approached the refreshment table on the compound and after instructing her neatly uniformed butlers to serve the refreshment and drinks, joined the guests.

I rose with reverence and greeted that "somebody" I had been missing for years, ever since I grew conscious of my body, my youth, the rhythmic movements in the blood. I rose to greet my destiny. I rose to greet new experience, to greet that sum-total of life, love and all—death. In her eyes I saw the mirrors of my past births. They were dark brown and deep. At a distance they appeared black, jet-black. But, at closer quarters, they were the richest, most miraculous brown in love with itself: What hypnotic eyes . . . They, looked straight into mine and my eyes looked straight into them. For a few moments, and those moments were swift as arrows, it was as if the Invisible Creator of hearts and of eyes, had made us sign a pact, a heady dangerous pact.

She was already in touch with human life; she had a baby in her arms. I was raw. I did not know and yet, I was sure that there stood before me one who would

## LIFE AND MYSELF

introduce me to the mysterious world of love, even as she introduced me to the blind Professor as "Harindra-nath, the poet and the singer". . . Love is blind, the world says. I knew the expression by that time, but my heart refused to indulge in that definition which was stupid, I thought to myself.

Here was an angel of loveliness, throbbing, wonderful-eyed, gripping. I was wide-awake—I was clear-visioned. I knew her. I knew her from the depths of my being. I knew her in past ages—Surely, she was the one I had lost somewhere, sometime an dhad re-discovered after many wanderings through hells of births . . . . Surely, she was . . . .

## MY FIRST ROMANCE

I had attended the tea-party at the house of the Professor dressed in a most untea-party like way—A glad-neck shirt with an open collar revealing my throat and part of the chest, callow and young,—and football pants on, striped white on either side. When the eyes of the professor's wife met mine, for the first time I realised that I should think of wearing long trousers which would cover up the shins and make me look a little more grown-up and respectable! I grew conscious, in a curious way, that a woman was growing conscious of me who, before I met her, was a little lad who had looked upon life with a certain amount of freedom in his eyes. That pair of dark brown eyes had begun to work a change in the heart: no more did I think of spending the evenings on the field playing games, one among a group of fellow-players. I began to feel solitary and to avoid company. I knew that I had met somebody who was to mark for me an epoch of youth amounting to manhood.

I missed her, missed her in everything I saw, did and thought. Behind every moment that passed me by, I could hear my heart throbbing, throbbing at the thought of her. It was definitely a new experience which, however, did not formulate itself until one afternoon when she sent word to me to meet her. She was packing her boxes to leave for Calcutta.

I said, in an underbreath almost, with an unavoidable and uncontrollable quiver in my voice: "You sent for me?"

"Yes," she replied, "only to tell you that I loved your songs the other evening—and that I am going away."

“Going away?”—and without my realising, the eyes were filled with tears. . . . Suddenly she left her box half packed and rising to her feet sprang towards me as though to preserve me from imminent death.

No, no. . . . then I shan't go” . . . and wiped my tears away with the hem of her sari. It was a tenderness for which, in after years I had to pay with great agony and struggle.

The Professor came in a little late! and was rather surprised to learn from his wife that she had changed her mind about leaving. . . . she said: “I shall stay on and learn singing from Harindranath.”

I felt a thrill of joy and pride. Immediately I took on the pose of a superior artist capable not only of communicating to her just music, but also the stillness which lies beyond it and out of which it is born. The Professor thought it a splendid idea. At any rate, he did not for a moment, argue with her. She was free to do as she liked. There was a reason for this freedom. The Professor was almost double her age and had, after a few years of married life, got to know that there was an unbridgeable gap between his age and hers, and that while he was both physically and mentally in a state of oncoming winter, with its silvery whiteness and natural tranquillity, she was still young and the very embodiment of spring about to merge into a perfectly golden summer, fraught with heats and splendours and dark-eyed shadows. Besides, he was more interested in books than in women. His library was his world. It was said that he was an authority on Wordsworth, his favourite poet. He knew more about the actual depths and heights of his nature—poetry than he knew or cared to know of his young beautiful wife's nature.

It is always a great error for an elderly man to wed a woman much younger than himself. And, likewise it

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is an equally great error for a young man to fall in love with a woman older than himself. Great error—but destiny works out queer patterns and sometimes, even seems deliberately to use us to fulfil its own sharp and ruthless sense of humour!

I did not meet the beautiful woman for two or three days after this incident. Every time the heart prompted me to cycle across to her place—some restraint, shy and nervous held me back from fulfilling the heart's natural and spontaneous dictation. Was it my last effort to escape life? To avoid, instinctively, the colourful lure of the tempter who spreads hypnotic nets of destruction round our lives? Was it some sort of awe for what was about to happen which struck a sense of tremulousness in me? Was it my last longing lingering look at freedom of life—which, I knew deep down in the being, would soon be forfeited for ever? Was I loathe to leave behind a youthfulness and a youth which, with all the loneliness behind its laughter, was, withal, free, and unsubjected to the habit of desires indulged? I was certainly avoiding the eventful moment which was there, staring me in the face.

One night I was not only sleepless and tossing about on my bed, but tortured with the sweetness of her beauty which seemed to haunt me more vividly than ever before, I leaped up from my bed, crept stealthily out of the house, rode my cycle without a lamp, and before I knew what I was doing, I was covering miles of road towards the beloved's home. It was as though some inner force was goading me on and on, I nearly ran over a sleeping dog. I passed by a constable who asked me why I was riding a cycle so late at night without a light. I did not reply. I was dumb with awe. I was silent like one who was being led to the gallows. I was at it were, a somnambulist, part and parcel of my cycle automatically set in motion. I made no reply to the constable, but just went

on and on. The night was dark. The dim yellow street lamps stood at long intervals on the road side, like sleepy sentinels who seemed to understand everything in a state of half-drowse, but never spoiled the atmosphere of mystery by professing to know anything about it. At last, I stood before the huge closed gate. In a second I was on the other side of it. I unfastened the bolts and bars of that formidable barrier, took my cycle in and then reached the second barred gate equally huge and formidable. But that, too, was overcome.

When I reached her compound I found that a figure clad in white was walking about under the dark sky, like unembodied angel. Was it a dream? Was I doing all that I did, seeing all that I saw, inside a dream within a dream? It was all so impossible and curious! Walking? An angel? No—I must be dreaming. What? sealed those two mighty gates? how? no—it was only a dream—But the dream was real—She stopped suddenly and turning towards me said: “So, you have come?—I expected you. Now, you must go back. I wish I could have held you close and given you comfort—poor sensitive creature, creature of love, of music, of art.... but you must go back. Come in the morning?.... As one possessed, entirely obedient to the spirit commanding me to return, I turned away and retraced the distance, back homewards. I returned before dawn and got back to bed but I could not sleep. The old gift of dropping into deepest slumber the moment the head touched the pillow—that gift had been withdrawn by this new sensation of loving and being loved. This torture, this sweetness, this poison, this honey....

Sleep had now begun to become a stranger. The eyelids kept wide-awake night after night. I visited her house more and more frequently and each time I entered those two huge giant gates, I wondered how I had scaled

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them that wonderful deep dark night. What is there that love cannot do? It is both a miracle as well as a miracle worker. It has wings, it has vibration. It can reach to any point in the universe and transform the impossible to the possible. . . .

To me she had become my goal, my waking, my thinking, my dream. She possessed me in every pulse and cell. It was still beautiful and free from jealousy, for all I had so far wanted and got was a look from her, an occasional smile which cooled the hot being, and a constant appreciation of my efforts at writing verse and singing. I grew in her estimation, day by day, and to be with her was very heaven. She was the first Bengali woman that had ever come into my life. And the culture of Bengal, which she had embodied, somehow woke up strange new planes in my being, reminding me of the tradition of my own blood and soul.



## BLOOD IS THICKER THAN WATER

There is a most compact and expressive phrase in English. It is more than a phrase, it is a maxim, well-known to individuals and nations. One might even go a step farther and say that it is more than a mere maxim. It is history itself in a nut-shell: "Blood is thicker than water. . . ."

Though I was born in Hyderabad Deccan, the Dominions of the Nizam, and spent the first few impressionable years of my life in the midst of non-Bengalis—my company being chiefly Christians, Anglo-Indians, Hyderabad Hindus and Muslims—the rhythm and the tempo of my blood was, in a real sense, always lonely and unsatisfied. It seemed as if I was a dual being, one belonging to exterior environment entirely estranged from the life of my forbears, and the other, to myself, to me, the sum total of Bengali ancestors who were storehouses of Brahminism at its highest and purest, and of classic stature being serious cultivators of the "cosmic consciousness" of which my father spoke to us over and over again.

When the family moved for a little while to Calcutta during my boyhood, I hardly realised that I was a Bengali, for we still continued to live amidst friends who spoke English, and were, most of them, "England-returned". In those days anybody who had either returned from "home" (!) or spoke fluent English was looked upon only as second to the Divine Creator himself! So I had not come into touch with Bengal or with the deeper soul in me which after coming into contact with a Bengali woman had, as it were in a moment, awakened to a fierce passion and love for Bengal. But I never could become

Provincial. It was only an admiration for the literature and the music of Bengal into which, in a very small way, I was initiated by Mrs. V.—who sang prettily, sitting at a Japanese organ in the drawing room. Now and again her voice cracked and those little rifts seemed to reveal the depths of her being. I tried for the first time to speak in Bengali but, somehow, I remained only at lispings in the language. She spoke English fairly well and so there was no urgent need for me to learn my own mother-tongue. But I had become acquainted with Bengali songs and began to love them.

I have always held the opinion that the love-lyrics and songs of Bengal are among the most wonderful and magical in the world. Rabindranath's songs have been popular for years. They have a special appeal, a most delicately wrought sentiment which at once captures the hearts of romantic beings; they throb and ache and sob and embody the subtlest shades and moods of pain and separation and love and union. If only to read Rabindranath in the original one should learn to read Bengali.

In my early days I learned a few of his songs from Mrs. V— but in later life, when my last real emotional linking-up has been with another Bengali woman beautiful, artistic and highly capable, I have been approaching the language with more seriousness and with a maturity which is conscious of the great heritage which the literary genius of Bengal has bequeathed to India. If you miss Rabindranath you miss the Himalayas, you miss the authentic union of the India of yesterday with the India of today. And, despite the challenge thrown to a writer of his stature, due to reaction, Rabindranath will be remembered among the great giants of the India of tomorrow as well.

I am grateful to my first love in life; for the first

contact she gave me with the soul of Bengal—the warmth, the something peculiar which may be described as “home-sickness”—a nostalgia to ‘go back home’, the home of my generations of people, who had shaped me and given me singing blood and a soul that is all art, all poetry, all rhythm.

Gradually the state of falling in love deepened to a sense of deep love. When one falls in love it is like intoxication which renders life and things around to a sweetness and an enchantment which almost make heart and brain reel wildly. One hardly realises that eyes keep watching from all sides easily realising that one’s behaviour is abnormal, restless and somewhat insane. One’s eyes are blind and seem to see everywhere the face and the form of the one who has worked the terrible and sweet magic about the heart. They become obviously drunk when they gaze into the eyes of the beloved, oblivious of the world’s watching eyes. But after the intimacy has deepened and the first phase of shy distance has passed by—when soul trembles to soul then, if the note struck be true, the heart deepens to love and there is hardly any more room for foolish and puerile gesture, no more room for making it obvious to the world that one is coming into the possession of another’s beauty and attention.

## THE DEVIL'S BREW

My youth entered into a long period of deep and continued struggle. I had lost the young innocence of life, the capacity of a free and untroubled mind to transfer sweetness and hope and joyance to everything that it contemplated. My love for a woman had led me to a new world of a romance that was not "all roses." I suffered terribly as a result of my intimacy with her. I felt an outcaste most of the time since I had to move and breathe and have my lonesome being apart from her.

She was expecting to bring another life into the world, which she did at a time when, through the evil and slanderous intrigue of so-called "well-wishers" both of her family and mine, I was refused access to her home. After the second babe was born—it was again a girl—a lady friend of the babe's mother brought me secret news of the event and, in the afternoon, when all was quiet and the house was in a position to receive me without any fear of being discovered, I called on her escorted by that good lady-friend. There she was, lying on her large bed, with a nursling crouched innocently beside her.

"Do you like her face?" the mother asked.

I did not answer. I only felt like a stranger now, an outcaste who had no right to be sitting beside her on her bed. I felt jealous of everything in the room: of the cot, of the chairs, of the mirrored table, the walls, the pictures hanging on the walls; I felt jealous because of their constant nearness to her. They were watching her all the time, the beauty of her face, her lovely dark eyes, her long dark hair. I could not bear the struggle any longer. She noticed that I was going through the tortures of hell.

“You are suffering, my poor one!”

I told her how lonely and bitter I was feeling, I told her that I was going mad. She thought that it might do me a world of good if I went away to Calcutta for a bit where my parents were.

I took her advice, and, crushing the grief of my heart, began planning a trip to Calcutta. A change of place is always prescribed by doctors in cases of mental struggle: if only a change of heart were as easy as a change of place! I left Hyderabad with a heavy heart and went to Calcutta. My mother was struck with grief to see how utterly weak and pale I had become. My father, of course, said nothing, though he understood that, what he had heard from people of my state of mind and health, was not untrue.

“I am glad you have come away, my son” he said, after a long silence. “It was wise. You must learn to distinguish love from infatuation. . . . You will when you grow older. In the meanwhile, I want you, during your stay here, to have a complete holiday. . . .”

Then he drew me close to himself and kissed me. . . . Mother thought that I was innocent, and that I was led into the lure of an infatuation by a woman. She was sure that it would pass like coloured mist, revealing me once again, as the strong rock behind it covered up temporarily and lost to ken. But it was no infatuation. It did not pass away so easily as all that. I continued suffering and feeling like a wandering blank, aching for her touch to fill it up all the time. Even today when I look back realise that it was a deep affair, one which went a great way to mould my nature and open up in me the early vistas of vision through intense loneliness and anguish.

I left Calcutta after a fortnight. A day before I left father called me to his room where he sat with a black

gown rolled round his head like a turban and he seated poring over a book of mathematics. Shifting his silver-rimmed spectacles on to the tip of his nose, with an inexpressibly soft blue light in his fading eyes, he drew me tenderly to himself and said:

“Now, baby! You must listen carefully. You are going back to your brother tomorrow. You must learn self-control and avoid the trap of temptation. In my day I, too, had temptations, but I had a will that never swerved, and so I have always remained true to my vision of truth. I have not long to live—but remember that I am leaving a great heritage for you. Not wealth, not houses, not lands. I do not believe in private property. I never believed in it for myself; I do not believe in it for my children either. I am not leaving a penny for any of you—but I am leaving you a wonderful thing: a life of culture and a life of struggle. You must earn your living by the sweat of your brow. No man has a right to eat or live unless he toils and contributes his bit to the nation. Thank God, I have been able to leave you a brain, an intellect, knowledge and, I hope, a really honest and upright heart.”

I wept, I shook like a tree in storm, I was all nervy and full of remorse; I felt unworthy of being his son. I was struggling, struggling against the huge tragedy of having loved where I could never have hoped to possess. I knew that it had dealt a great blow to my parents and to my friends. But there it was: I was bleeding “on the thorns of life.” Was it my fault? Was it not the fault of circumstance? Is man not just a bit of straw driven hither and thither on the tempestuous waters of time? mere chaff flying on the naked and sharp wind of fate. And yet, around me there were people who were apparently unaffected by time and life. My father seemed to me the picture of the lines:

“I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul” . . . and yet—who is to judge? Surely, on closer analysis, every man goes through storm—only some know how to bear it silently, while others wither under the cruel stress. I formulated the truth in my mind then: “Man is greater than man-made codes. Life is greater than code-made man.” Ever since that age I have consistently held this view and, as I grow older, I find much living truth in it. . . .

On the day I was leaving for Hyderabad, my brother Ranen arrived in Calcutta; when I said goodbye to him he merely said, “Look after yourself. You need to. . . .” Mother, of course, flowed like a river of tears. I hardly realised when I was leaving that house in Lovelock Street, Calcutta, that I was never more going to see my father; that, when I saw mother again, I was never again going to see hair black and her eyes full of the changing expression they always had.

A few days after I returned to Hyderabad I met Melville Boardman, an Anglo-Indian friend of ours, who had studied the violin in Italy and had come back to India as a fine violinist. He had a wonderful head thickly covered over with soft silken silvery hair which was a thousand lovely curls. His face was pinkish and furrowed over with marks of suffering. He was sitting at a table all by himself at a store-and-wine shop with a glass of amber-coloured liquid in front of him. I entered the shop to buy a tin of salmon and a loaf of bread. Boardman accosted me, for he recognised me “to be one of the Agernaths” (Aghorenath—my father’s name). I sat at his table and watched him drinking.

“You know, my boy, we are both artists” he said, for he had heard that I was writing fairly good verse then; besides, he had heard of me as a stage-artiste, as well: “You know that an artist was born different from the

## THE DEVIL'S BREW

average man. He suffers more than most men, because he is much more sensitive than the men around him. Now, you see this glass? It is my world. I play the violin, you know. But this here, this (pointing to the glass) gives me inspiration, makes me forget the whole hideous world and transforms the violin to an angel!—It makes me forget that I am separated from the woman I love. It makes me. . . .” here he slowly laid his head on the table and closing his reddening sad eyes dropped asleep. It set me thinking. That glass was his world, he said. It made him forget the one he loved and from whom he was separated! It made him transform the violin, a dead thing of wood and cat's guts, to an angel! . . . . .Perhaps, perhaps, this was a solution to my most intense suffering for which there was no cure. My passion for my beloved grew into a volcano. It would burst both itself and me.

One afternoon, I walked into the store-and-wine shop when the roads were very quiet and sensible people were having forty winks after a happy midday meal. Nobody was at the counter. On one of the tables lay stretched and snoring one of the “waiters”, his turban lying by his side. He woke up, rubbed his eyes, and yawning, asked as to what I wanted. I said “Call the manager. . . . .” Just then, he walked in—a tall Parsi lad—who, afterwards, became a good friend of mine. His name was Pacy.

“I want a peg, please,” I said.

“Of what”.

“O , of anything”. . . . .I was not acquainted as yet with the names of the various brands of the devil's own brewery.

“Try a little Hennessy” he said, “It is excellent.”

He poured out my first drink. I drank it up at a gulp. The effect was instantaneous and not without an



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obvious touch of magic in it. It made the world seem a worthy place to live in. It made my struggle laugh at itself. I felt that I was now master of time and space and all that had seemed so utterly real and urgent was now far away and lacking substance. Time could wait..... I was no more in a hurry to rush to the lane of the beloved, and in no mood to give in to sadness. I ordered for "a second peg".....

I had been initiated into one of the most attractive and colourful mysteries of the devil. I had found a way to forget myself and my sorrow. I had become one of life's cowards who are afraid of facing life...It was both an escape from life as well as a walking right into the nets of death and a deeper torture which at that time was not as yet apparent.

## PLANE OF PROPHECY

A few days after I returned from Calcutta to Hyderabad I began to feel quite queer. I seemed to sense in myself extraordinary visions and prophecies. On one occasion, I became a celebrated and uncanny fortune-teller. I haunted the shop round the corner—the wine shop where I was initiated into the mysteries of the devil's brew by the artist, Boardman, whose head was a head that I shall never forget—a veritable fund of the silver of deep and painfully-earned wisdom! Bottles filled up to the neck with many-coloured liquids: green, yellow, scarlet, deep orange, inviting amber. They seemed more interesting and meaningful than the liquid colours in sky and water, on the tops of suddenly lit-up trees and hills. Time seemed a lie. It always does when one drinks. After all what is time, if not a tremendous lie? In after-years I wrote a poem about Time,

*Time is the painted lie  
Eternity has told  
And thus it is the morning sky  
Is pink and gold.  
If only we could come  
Clear of this narrow cell  
And this majestic martyrdom  
Of touch and smell,  
Then there would be no sky  
And there would be no earth  
And there would be no painted lie  
Of death and birth.*

Time seemed the veriest of lies. It seemed a lie in the sense that it had veiled the truth of eternity.

I suddenly acquired a rare and magical intuition:

which seemed to foretell events. It was dependent on clouds. That intuition became deepened with deepening clouds. Whenever the sky was overcast and there was a little drink in me—(I had begun by this time to acquire a special taste for good beer—a sensible and healthy acquisition according to doctors—) I seemed to have been transformed into a veritable prophet. I should like to relate an incident that happened one evening. It was at the Collins's. The Collins family were intimate with my brother, Ranendranath. That was years ago. My brother spread the news (and news spreads swifter than disease) that his brother, Harindranath, was "a wonderful fellow" who could see clearly into the future with some invisible third eye, the eye of the Lord Shankar himself. The result was that I was invited to a tea-party at their place. My brother said, "The Collins family is extremely anxious to meet you and you are to tell their fortunes tonight." I replied, "It will depend on the sky. If it is clear, I shall be dull. If it is dull I shall be clear." As luck would have it, the clouds intrigued that same evening to adorn the skies with the mystic colour of Krishna. I had drunk two bottles of beer and gone to the party. Beer stared me in the face there, too, for it was a sort of social bribe given to me for entertainment. After laughter and merriment, suddenly the party became serious. "Tell me my fortune"—"and mine"—"and mine"—girl after girl, boy after boy approached me extending their hands and bringing their palms close to me.

I jested the whole procedure out, for I did not feel like being a serious prophet; but just before bidding good night to the family, I fixed my gaze straight on an elderly, wrinkled woman who was introduced to me as the aunt of the family. On her face the history of life was written, it was a history that had come to an end. In a sphinxlike

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manner I looked at her and said, with an impersonal touch in the voice, "If you do not wish to have a corpse in this house by tomorrow morning, send this lady away." It was not at all clear to the family as to what exactly I had meant by such a last-minute, apparently stupid prediction. The family, every member of it, burst into ironical laughter and considered me at best to be drunk or a madman whose brains, if I had any at all, needed thorough overhauling.

The next morning—it was earlier than morning—it was dawn, just that mystical hour when the heavens seem reluctantly to blossom into delicacies of glow for the sake of man and his little daily routine of what he seriously calls work. "Ranendranath!" there were two voices competing with each other to awaken my brother. My brother yawned and opened the door: "What's it, fellows?" "The old lady is dead!" I had proved to be a prophet to the hilt. My brother merely remarked: "How is it that your prophetic utterances are always so gloomy?"

They were always about death! One evening the air was exceptionally sad and sombre and heavy with premonitions; I stripped myself semi-nude and jumped through the window into the compound and rushed about like a lunatic. Everybody around me was quite sure that I was an authentic case for the asylum. But they were mistaken. I had become full of vision, sad and tortuous vision. I had left my parents in Calcutta barely a fortnight then, and now I saw my father's spirit almost with Hamletesque eyes. I saw him distinctly. I raved rubbing my hot, naked body against the small cold rocky stones on our compound. I raved, that is what they thought who saw me and heard me rave—that is what they thought and pitied me. But I pitied them all. Father was dead. But they were convinced that it was I who was as good

as dead.

That same evening, there was a very big at home at sister Sarojini's place; while the guests were making merry, an old woman, who had disappeared years ago, suddenly stood at the gate and shouted at the top of her voice: "I shall not ask alms of you! He who gave generously has gone, gone, gone... The giver has gone". And she disappeared after her apparent fit of hysterics. Nobody could guess as to where she had come from after a lapse of so many years, nor as to where she had disappeared. Was she a ghost? "There are more things in heaven and earth..." That old woman had once upon a time received regular weekly alms at my parent's doors—"gone, gone, gone...."

A wire came to us: "Terrible calamity. We are with you..." Father had passed away on that very day, in the afternoon. It was later told us that his last discussion was with a friend, Nandalal Seal, once Accountant-General of Hyderabad. The discussion veered round to the deep subject of life and death. "They are one and the same", father is reported to have said. Nanda Babu retorted: "Then why not die?" To which father replied: "I could, at this instant, if I wanted." There was laughter all round, and the guests left the place. Twenty minutes later they had all to return to find that my father had passed away, if, perhaps, only to prove that life and death were really one and the same!

Ranendranath had to undergo the dreadful torture of performing the last ceremonial rites, being the only son present at the cremation. He told me later: There was a sight fit for the gods at the cremation-grounds; from all parts suddenly and automatically congregated ochre-robed sanyasis chanting: "Our brother has gone away, out of his earthly body. We come to pay him deep homage.." It was a miracle. The yogis know each

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other. In fact, all spiritual men are one. Ranen said: "Harin, you were spared a torture. You could not have stood it. I had to insert scarlet coal into father's mouth before cremation" O! scarlet coal on a tongue that was cold at the end of a fiery tradition of utterance which did honour to truth itself! Father was dead. But my mother's hair, which was black till that moment, had turned snow-white in a night—believe it or not. When we went to Calcutta together, Sarojini, Mrinalini, Suhashini and I—mother received us with extended arms, cheerfully smiling as though she was an inspired idol. "Come, come, my children! here is your father, alive. Your mother is dead". She had not shed one tear—it was psychically and physically impossible, for the well-spring of emotions had dried up and her eyes were two lonely blanks of a tragedy too grim and devastating to realise itself.

## CHANGE OF PLACE

Most people believe that time is a great healer of wounds. They say that time has a way of making human suffering fade away gradually until it exists no more. But this is wholly untrue; time never really heals any wound, especially the wound of the heart if it happens to be real. What it does is that it tricks the wound into a lasting and delicate sanctuary behind the forgetfulness of the mind. But while the mind apparently forgets, the heart never yields one iota of its treasured suffering with which it is eternally in love.

Time might, therefore, seem to make one forget, but what it can do, at most, is to hide away remembrance, which lives forever behind a cunning veil it has wrought for itself of the colours of new impressions and new activities. There, behind that veil so deftly wrought, lives and breathes the sweet and the bitter intimacies of life, its memories, its tragedies, its despairs and its fulfilments, all these attaining to an undying significance in the growth of the being. For what is one's real and deepest being, in the last analysis, but the sum-total of experience, pain-fraught or joyous, which alone works out the design of life and embroiders our floated and constant moods with lights and half-lights, dark shadows and light shadows, like to the cloths of heaven which the poet Yeats would have spread beneath his beloved's feet? Experience is the root of life and of growth; and there never was a grief too cruel for words with which the being would like to part, the memory of it being one of its priceless treasures, the very recalling of which is a spiritual tonic which revives the spirit and makes one feel the richer for having had it. Time then

## CHANGE OF PLACE

does not heal a wound, but only shifts it into a dim background against which the whole drama of life is unfolded act by act, scene by scene, moment by moment.

Change of place was prescribed for me since the mind was breaking into bits and I could scarcely put my thoughts together or rid my head of a sense of swimming impressions of a passionate and strangely-coloured experience which the first storm of loving and being loved had brought on me. My sister, Mrinalini, decided that we should both spend a few days in Madras, a city which at that time was unfamiliar to me, though, much earlier in life, we had paid it a flying visit by way of brief holiday. That was years before this visit we were planning. Madras! yes, it had strange memories for me. Brother Bhupen and Usha Bowdi, sister Suhashini and I were the four who had come on the holiday to Madras. We lived right on top of what was then a Hotel, in a room which overlooked the mighty sea which we saw for the first time. That Hotel later on became the Queen Mary's College where I was destined to meet a young woman who was, later, destined to become my wife—Kamala.

In connection with Madras, I remember an incident which is still vivid in the mind. One night we had retired after a heavy meal. The meal consisted of a sumptuous lot of fish; my sister-in-law was not at all enthusiastic about it. We had brought it home from the beach earlier that evening. She refused to touch it, while we, my brother and I, were as proud as heroes for having been able to buy such a huge monster of a fish for only one small coin called a Rupee! My sister-in-law being Bengali, knew all about the children of the waters, could tell at a glance the type and the genus of fish, whether it was edible or not, whether it had one large bone running through its middle or consisted of countless bones which were very inconvenient from the gorman-



diser's point of view, and which to him might almost seem proof of a lack both of wisdom and consideration on the part of the Creator who should have known, when he created it, that man would be catching it in nets and cooking it on fire for his own delight. Somehow, I did not enjoy the fish that night; but I had to act my part in order to justify the rupee which went proudly to purchase it. My sister Suhashini neither felt one way nor the other; but the fact that Usha Bowdi did not touch it made us feel that something was wrong somewhere. Catch a Bengali refraining from fish! Whenever Bowdi saw fish, especially "hilsa", you should have seen her eyes dilate! They were transformed to highwatermarks of ecstasy! Bengal has always been associated (along with the mob-cult, poetry and lots of other things) with an unbroken and unbreakable tradition of fish and fish-eaters.

In the middle of the night I woke up from deep sleep, catching myself snore. I seemed to sense something heavy on my out stretched feet under the blanket. I waited a few moments to make sure that I was not dreaming a bad dream; then, suddenly, in a fit of terrible fear, I sprang to my feet, dashing the queer weight off with a swift unwavering kick. This was accompanied by a shriek which woke up brother who also shrieked, clutching me in his arms. We both distinctly saw a black ugly creature rushing away through the door. To this day I do not know what that creature was; it looked like a mongoose which seemed to have been fed on an over-lavish Christmas dinner. It had a curious pointed bill, I saw it distinctly. When we related the story to some friends the next morning they told us that there was a very uncanny tradition among fisher-folk which answered to our night's experience. The fisherfolk believe that when a human being eats shark he calls into the room an

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evil spirit which coils itself and goes to sleep on the body of the person who has eaten it. That evil spirit evidently chose me. Was it because I had eaten the major portion of a shark? Good Lord! We had eaten shark! The question remained as to whether the shark was a greater monster than we were!

A few words about the journey. It did not escape the colour of new emotion and experience. Nature, as it were, intrigued to lure my mind away from tiresome mental conflict and uncertainty into a domain of fresh interest in the possibility of a fresh lease of life and of hope. I travelled all the way from Hyderabad to Madras along with my sister Mrinalini in a Lady's Compartment, with the permission, of course, of the co-travelling handsome Gujerati lady and her two rather lovely daughters. They not only had no objection to my travelling in the same compartment with them, but it was obvious they rather enjoyed the idea. The mother sweetly said: You are as good as my son. Where's the harm?

Nature had definitely decided to help me to conquer the edge of the pain of separation from one by affording me a chance to meet another who had qualities of holding my attention for a day and a night, while the train rattled away along its steel parallel of lines, or stopped at stations. From the mother's attitude towards me it was obvious that she was getting interested in me while I was getting interested in her younger unmarried daughter, pale and pretty. When the train halted at Basin Bridge Junction where the tickets were checked and collected before the train puffed into Central Station, I found an opportunity of expressing my desire to the girl to correspond with her. She gave me her school address and said that it would be quite safe, my writing to it, rather than her home address, since her father had the most unsociable and criminal habit of opening and reading

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letters addressed to his children. I told her that I was sorry she had a father who read other people's letters, which he had no right to do. I think she liked the criticism and arrived at the conviction that I was a fair-minded youth.

Youth! yes, I was sensing a recapturing of it all over again! It had been submerged for five whole years under the dark and cruel waters of an impossible yearning. Love had made me weary with waiting for a fulfilment which could never come! A change of place for me had been the wisest thing, indeed, and it had been effected at the right time. For, had I continued living in Hyderabad, under the stress of mental conflict and the tragic struggle of loving where I should not have loved, I might have dwindled to a shadow and passed away into a world of shades which weep and shades which wander!

## HOST AND GUEST

We were received as guests at Dr. Swaminathan's beautiful large house situated in the centre of a huge compound bearing multi-sized and multi-coloured trees among which there was one outstanding tree right in front of the spacious verandah. By the side of one of the long running walls enclosing the compound ran railway-lines over which rattled local electric trains tinted a pale silver-blue. Close by was the Chetput Station, and the name, ever since I heard it, gave me a sensation of activity and restlessness. It is queer how certain names have certain associations in the mind, and call up certain sorts of pleasurable or uncanny vibrations. The house in which we were guests for quite a while was christened "Gilchrist Gardens" after the Gilchrist Scholarship the Doctor had won in his younger days.

It was undeniably the house of a deep-hearted scholar, and the whole atmosphere which it breathed was one of a curious loneliness such as one associates with men who are far away and accustomed to living a secret life of thought behind all the trivial movement and rhythm of outer life. We were received—not by the Doctor, for he happened to be out at the time, possibly at his advocate's chambers at Georgetown,—but by a small-made, rather shy sort of person clad in spotless white, her long straight black hair running down in a cataract over her back which was erect with a young, conscious dignity. She was obviously a Malabar lady. At that time I hardly knew the topographical position of places. But Malabar always called up before the mind's eye palmyra trees, black magic and an austerity of life almost amounting to a cult. The little lady who stood

before us was certainly austere. Plain white cloth without any trappings is, I think, a very beautiful thing. In fact, I am in love with whiteness, true, untainted whiteness such as one finds in white flowers and white peacocks. White clouds have always meant far more to my imagination than coloured ones. There is something of spiritual realisation in whiteness. It is the womb out of which colours are born and to which colours return in the cyclic whirl of thought and existence. One of the most genuine thrills of satisfaction I get is when the washerman unties the knot of his bundle and hands over clean white clothes and sheets which smell of purity and sinlessness. It is a strange fact that I have never been able to sleep soundly on coloured sheets. A white sheet on the bed is the symbol of peace and rest, and a surcease from the struggle of the patchworkiness of day-to-day existence.

“The lady in white” was Ammu Swaminathan, the young wife of the elderly doctor, and the proud mother of children who were destined, when they grew up, to be brilliant, each in his or her own way. In those days nobody could have imagined the turn Ammu Swaminathan herself would take, nor ventured to guess that she would enter the field of politics, go to jail in the cause of the country, and to-day reside in Delhi, an active and well-known member of the Assembly!

Ammu gave us tea, and then took us round the ample tree-peopled compound which resembled an informal woodland rather than a formal garden. The gardeners suddenly engaged themselves in over-enthusiastic activity seeing the lady of the house come out with us from the house. I pointed to a tree and said: “What a lovely banyan tree!” She thought I was a duffer, for it was anything but a banyan tree. But she was too polite to inform me of my complete non-acquaintance with Botany. I insisted on telling her that it was a banyan tree, only

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that I spelt the word "banyan" a little different from the way the botanist spelt it. She saw through the joke I was trying hard to put over. The tree stood there with its boughs thickly decorated with the washed banians of the gardeners, who had set them to dry there! Did not Ammu Swaminathan roar with laughter! She thought I was quite clever, and came to the conclusion that I was almost the greatest humourist after Dickens!

Punning has been a habit with me all my life. It has been the characteristic of all the members of my family. Psychologists hold that punning is a sign of superficiality. I do not deny to being superficial; but at the same time, I do not agree with the statement. Punning, as far as I am concerned, has always been a way of trying to relax the mind from complex thought. I am at my best in puns when I am at my worst inside the heart, when the state within is tired or sore, and when I want to forget the gloom and the frustration of life. It is one way with me of throwing a challenge to sadness; I pun to make others laugh and, behind their laughter, to take shelter from my own inability to laugh. As far as I am concerned, therefore, punning is not an indication of superficiality, but of depth.

After my self-introduction with the pun on the banyan tree, we three got on famously together, sister Mrinalini, Ammu and I. I broke through the wall of Ammu's reserve and formality which, in her case, was not a social habit nor a natural one, but one of shy self-defence.

Then we were introduced to the children. Two of them stand out clearly in my memory. One, a girl and the other a boy. The girl's name was Lakshmi, and the boy's Govind. Govind was a little fellow with a rather longish face and eyes which seemed to smile all the time. I could feel that he had the vibration of a mind that was active and was always asking questions to itself. Lak-

shmi was all sweetness and resembled a doll of butter soft and about to melt every minute. She would creep up to my knees and so would Govind and, gazing deep into my eyes, look at me with admiration; for they were told I was a poet and wrote beautiful rhymes. But I had not as yet published any book of verse. All the same, the children took their mother's word on trust and gave me adoration. The children including the younger ones, called me uncle, but Lakshmi called me "carbuncle". Whether she meant the precious stone or the ugly disease I cannot tell to this day when Lakshmi, who is now the celebrated "Colonel Lakshmi" still addresses me as "carbuncle"! Govind today is a well-known lawyer and full of wit and sarcasm. The other day Lakshmi told me that he had decided as to what he was going to do with the five yards of ration cloth Government allowed "per head". He was just going to wear it as a turban and go about naked since there was nothing else he could hide with five yards. The younger girl, Mrinalini, was very shy and retiring, and so I never really got to know her as well as the older children. Nor did I ever get to know Govind's younger brother. Mrinalini today, has won for herself much praise and appreciation as a dancer and a student of elocution and theatrecraft. Gilchrist Gardens was, therefore, a memorable house and our acquaintance with the Swaminathans has ripened, through the long years, into a real and lasting friendship.

Dr. Swaminathan came home, as usual, late in the evening and we were introduced to him. He was a simple man, and his simplicity was typical of a great and earnest scholar. His room was covered with huge tomes dealing with what to me has always seemed a nerve-racking and impossible subject, Law. In my heart of hearts I have always had a sneaking contempt for the word law as men

understand it. Man-made law is extremely clever and intricate, and many a lawyer uses it to overthrow the very end for which it stands, justice. Since my youngest days I have somehow sensed a deeper law which operates behind us, above us and around us; the law which never goes awry, and which has no truck with twisting and turning points, and squeezing out of its own workings, deviations and interpretations which insult the truth of itself. Dr. Swaminathan, however, was known by the people of Madras to be a very astute and brilliant lawyer, one of the leading men of his day. He encouraged younger men in the profession; one of them was Ethiraj, a frequent visitor to the house, whom we got to like immensely. He struck me as being an aesthete, and I still remember the trembling light in the stone of his ring. His handkerchief was always perfumed delicately. And his clothes bespoke a mind in love with correct line and crease, both in dress and in behaviour. Today he is one of the leading lights at the Bar and as old as Dr. Swaminathan was in those days.

On the first day of our arrival, I eagerly posted a letter to the school address given to me by my fair co-traveller on the train which brought us to Madras. Two nights later Doctor Swaminathan whispered to my sister, Mrinalini, that he would like to talk to her alone after dinner. Intuition told me that it was about myself that he wished to talk! I knew that all was not well, that my letter had created trouble. . . . And I was not far wrong. For I learned afterwards that Dr. Swaminathan, my sister and I were to visit the girl's house the next day; and I was told that I would have to apologise for having written the letter. Apologise! what a stupid thing to have to do! Apologise for what? I had done no wrong, as far as I could make out. I had written a letter to a girl who had struck me as being quite beautiful. Was it wrong to



communicate with beauty, was it a crime to tell the beautiful that it was beautiful? It was not wrong, was not a crime, though it might be superfluous. My letter had been read by the girl's father, and he was in a rage! But how did the letter reach his hands? I had posted it to the school address. I learned later that the girl herself had exposed me! It immediately struck me that I should change the old maxim of "Man proposes, God disposes," to "Man proposes, Woman exposes!"

I accompanied the Doctor and my sister without one twitch of the lip; I did not think that I was a criminal in any sense of the term. I had only followed the law of my being, a law which had nothing much to do with the law Doctor Swaminathan was dealing with!

The father grew red when he saw us, and wholly outraged at my behaviour, fumbled for words and stammered: "Is this—is this—culture? writing to my daughter . . . is it gentlemanly behaviour?"

The Doctor, who was more broad-minded than that Banker Father of the girl, smiled demurely, and my sister argued: "My brother is a poet. He falls in love at every turn. Today it is with your daughter, tomorrow, perhaps, he will write a love-letter to a rose or a rainbow. You must not take him seriously".

But I wanted to be taken seriously. I certainly wanted very much to try and win that girl for my wife. There was really nothing wrong in my intention.

The mother watched the whole proceeding from behind a curtain; I watched her watching me,—slyly, through one eye that peeped out of the curtain-folds. I could even sense that she was saddling, not at my foolish position as a man brought to the dock, but at the thought that it might, perhaps, be good to bring about the chance of counting me as one of the members of her family.

This was so, since, a few days later, she stopped her

car and accosted me. "How are you, my son?"

In reply I did not show any perturbation, nor anxiety to renew my acquaintance with her home or her family. My mind was made up, once and for all. I was not going to accept her daughter, even if she were to be offered to me along with a fabulous dowry! For acceptance would have meant being tacked on to a father-in-law who was a narrow-minded fool lacking imagination and proved to be a downright nuisance.

I was given a room to myself. It was quiet and flooded with a half-light which seemed shot through with the strange sickly odour of old books blended with that of air which hardly received frank sunlight. But it was attractive; I have always loved lumber-rooms precisely for the reason of their half-light mixed with mysterious smells. But it was no lumber-room in which I spent my days. It was a very nice and spacious room with plenty of books in old almirahs which revealed them through their panes of glass. Near my bed stood a revolving book-case peopled with books of verse, biography and drama.

The book that became a favourite with me was Vikramorvasi, translated into very poor English by an author whose name I now can hardly recall. It was the first Sanskrit work I had come into touch with and it at once woke up in me a most extraordinary experience. I felt the imagery of the play as part and parcel of my own imagination. Chunks of its poetic exuberance seemed to be hewn out of my own consciousness. It was the first time I realised my ancestry; I realised that the ancestors dreamed their dreams through me. It was as though I had gone through a sudden process of authentic homecoming. Although I read Vikramorvasi in poor translanguage, I heard Sanskrit well up like my own blood's music through every dialogue. I was transformed, with-

## LIFE AND MYSELF

in a while, to one of my own ancestors. I made up my mind to transform that poor prose translation into a rich poetic form, which I did with immense ease.





**KAMALADEVI**

## LIFE CHANGES SWIFTLY

Whenever I gazed on the large rolling waters I seemed to realise the dimensions of my own being in a mystical way; and when they were tranquil they seemed to mirror my soul which now began to appear more and more vividly behind all my thoughts, activities and the details of daily existence. I dwelt more and more, too, in the innermost recesses of the heart from where poetry comes. Words and phrases became an obsession; thoughts floated across the mind like clouds, some delicately tinted, others stormy, but past all their movement I began to grip more firmly the thought of the horizon, behind and beyond, which never stirs, never says a word, never breaks into troubled crease and wrinkle.

In short, I was being linked slowly to the being's mission, to what, in Sanskrit, is called *dharma*. My *dharma* was to dream and express myself, to catch the mysterious moods that are born past our normal mental plane. The period of "the Feast of Youth" poems was one of tremendous inspirations; a swift succession of images shot continuously across my waking state which even began to transgress the domains of sleep. Night after night, I lay awake in bed, but not tossing restlessly. I sat awake and gazed, as it were, at an invisible point in the distance, trying to fix it between the eyebrows until it lit up into a dot of light radiating beams shooting towards a larger and larger circumference. It was, as if, a pebble had been thrown into the well of my life creating circle upon circle of widening vision which held incalculable distances in view before it could hope to reach its goal. The flower, in a sense, was ripening gradually into the fruit; idle winds which, in the past, could

dally with its petals and even strew them meaninglessly on hot sands, could not now easily play with the flower which was learning to merge its petals into a state of quiet roundedness of fruiting. I became quieter and quieter though from time to time, the old energy welled up and swept me off my feet due to the inability of my vessel to contain it.

The sea which rolled and rolled without a moment's respite behind our house, became more and more intimate with me, until I actually began to speak to the waves and derive imageries from them. I, sometimes, even imagined I could see the Neraïads whom Shelly described—"under the green waves". In the Feast of Youth there is a poem on the sea:

"O sea, I watch thy many-coloured game  
With changing sky in vast playhalls of Time."

The early morning-light made it look different from what the blue-grey evening-light did: and when the moon rose, the waters crashed into blinding silver, making giant music for the night. I never tired of watching the undulation of waves, their breaking into white and sudden foam wriggling along the beach like monstrous serpents spangled with faery phosphorescence. I had not yet gone across the waters; I used to imagine how wonderful it would be to be carried across them day after day, with only the prospects of the marriage of sea and sky looming large before one.

I also thought of my marvellous revolutionary brother, Virendranath, who was an exile, and who had left home several years ago! I thought to myself "He must be on the other side of the sea, somewhere", and I wondered as to how he looked; whether, if I saw him, some day, I should be able to recognise him. The sea worked me into far-away thoughts until, sometimes, I actually forgot time and space and became a temporary blank.

## LIFE CHANGES SWIFTLY

When I came back from the trance I suffered unspeakable loneliness and depression.

My brothers and sisters thought it would not be a bad idea at all to stage a play in Madras, now that we were all together. The histrionic urge has been strong in every member of the family, which, from time to time, has made efforts to express itself in one way or another. I had written a play, "Abdul Hassan" in verse form and it was interspersed with witty songs set to Indian airs. This experiment I had carried out in a tent when I was a little fellow of eleven. With years the music had matured and so had the quality of my rhyme-schemes. We at once decided to do this play, and we were sure it would make a sensation, which it did. The theatre was packed with audiences night after night; people even came from far-away towns and villages to see our play which had won for itself instantaneous applause and credit. We collected quite a fair sum of money and gave it to the National Education Fund with which Dr. Annie Besant had been then connected. The play established for me, beyond a doubt, a reputation to be envied by artists. I had become famous as a "really fine" actor and writer, not only of verse, but of plays. This success encouraged me to create my literary contributions with greater and greater enthusiasm.

But the play did not only get me fame, it also got me my wife, Kamala. Literary and artistic activities had led my foot-steps into crowded halls and on to innumerable platforms. Kamala was then studying at the Queen Mary's College, a young rather attractive girl with large eyes which almost seemed to be conscious all the time of their own limpid quality. I first saw her in a crowd of ladies at a show where I was invited to sing. Her face was outstanding; I somehow guessed that that face was destined to play an important role in my life. On enquiry



I found that she was Mrs. Krishna Rao. A few months later I met her in our own house which she visited on an invitation from my sisters with whom she had become intimate. The moment I saw her I realised "that that was the face which I felt was destined to play an important role in my life!" She was now a widow. After opposition from some of her people, and support from a few members of her family who mattered, she became my wife.

Soon after marriage circumstances decided that I should leave for England. It was just at the close of the 1914-1918 war. My brother-in-law, Nambiar, and I left Madras with heavy hearts for we were both of us leaving our dear ones behind and embarked from Colombo. We were heavily garlanded at Egmore Station, but the garlands, which were sweet, became bitter after the train left, for throughout the journey they reminded us of home, and smelt uncannily of separation.

Flowers smell different at different times; they exhale a particular fragrance when they celebrate marriage, another typical one when they are placed on a coffin or bier. When they go along with you on a railway train they choke the compartment with memories which become poignant and almost unbearable.

At Colombo we were the guests of Dr. John Rockwood, just for two days. Gloom had overpowered our hearts; we felt that it was the shadow of some viewless vulture which had been cast on us suddenly. We were home-sick already without even so much as seeing the boat.

The fateful day arrived and we were given a very meagre send-off. On a tender, we had to reach the ship lying at anchor. What an over-powering thing a ship can be! When we reached it we felt small; we felt lost; even our gloom seemed to vanish before the sheer

## LIFE CHANGES SWIFTLY

immensity of the vessel lying on the vast waters. It was very soon after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. We were mixed up on the boat mostly with commercial travellers who did not seem at all emotional about anything in the world. For the first time in my life I had been thrown into strange company and put into a wide world.

It was good for me, for it cured me, to a great extent of my nervousness and sensitivity. It is necessary for one to experience the wide world alone. One begins to know that one is not the only one in it, and that one's country is not the only country either. Human beings are interesting everywhere; and the whole pattern of life is similar everywhere. In a sense it is possible to dream some day of the brotherhood of man, for human nature is the same everywhere and cannot be broken up into patches on a map as the countries of the world are. Scratch a human being and you will find that he has the same dreams, the same hungers and thirsts, the same loneliness, the same sorrows and joys as any other.

Only the climate may make his method of behaviour differ, his training give him a mask which suits him behind which the human being remains what it has remained throughout the centuries. Evolution, with all its apparent variety and urge, is totally monotonous in its repetitions of tyrannies, obsessions, defeats, triumphs. It is all the same throughout history. But all the same it moves in a spiral and comes back to the position of the same point from where it started off with time; but each time the point is slightly on a higher level. Along the circle it traces, events take place with a historical monotony.

I soon got used to human beings, men and women, returning home to England and the Continent. On the boat there was a Buddhist Monk who had broken one of

## LIFE AND MYSELF

the sacred rules by deciding to go on a voyage. I forget his name now; but I remember his personality which was what might be described in a word as a laughing personality. One morning he insisted on inviting us to play "squirrels" with him. We had never heard of a game of that description. Later we got to understand that he meant "skittles", a favourite game on a sea-voyage.

## VOYAGE

The voyage buoyed the being up, at intervals rendering it ethereal, and distant from the small everyday self caught in the disgusting groove of diurnal monotonies of behaviour and work. The boat was worked on oil and sailed slowly, not at all bothered about time; it called at Aden and Port Said and Marseilles; after a rough time on the Bay of Biscay which is notoriously boisterous, at Tilbury Docks thus bringing a long voyage of twenty nine days to a close.

But I soon got used to the boat and the sea; while the voyage made for days and days, without a break, between just large waters and larger sky, expanded the being which was hidden behind the daily self and brought it to the forefront reducing, at the same time, that little superficial self to shrinking point.

Often on the sea, the thought occurred to me: If a storm should suddenly gather and burst and whip the boat with flails of red lightnings, if the boat should be smashed by the turbulence of tempest-driven waters and sink, with the whole lot of us,—variegated entities of breath and movement, each imagining itself all-important and urgent in the scheme of existence—(fools that we are)! if, in short, we were to be drowned in the deep deep waters, what would be my personal reaction to that dire moment? Frankly I felt that I had lost the last vestige of fear; I suppose it was due to the fact that I felt so utterly cancelled as an entity by the magnificent infinities of space and waters, which, as inevitable result, had worked me into a remarkable experience as of a paradox of being the vastness itself as well as an extreme insignificance forced to vanishing point. The fear of death is possible

only where the individual being considers itself, through the blind error of mind, as apart and different from the process of all life. The moment one joins oneself to life in a real and living way, feeling oneself part of all that is, has been and shall be in evolution, one is no more afraid of death—for there really is no such phenomenon.

Death is one of the most tricky words coined by man. It signifies darkness and mystery and a leap into the unpredictable; it even suggests extinction to many. But what it should mean to us is change along the line of imperishability.

On the sea, by virtue of the being's glorious expansion, I felt that I could not feel about death and danger in the little and nervous way I did when on land! Yet, I talked to some of my fellow-passengers and found that they did not, somehow, feel the way I left. They were, most of them, bored stiff with the voyage, the greater part of which they marked with yawns. Some of them possibly had never realised that the sky was quite an incalculable length of blue and wonderful vacancy, and that the sea was presenting, all the time, an immensely rich drama of rising and bursting water-cones often resembling veritable pyramids.

There was one man, however, who stood an hour every morning and evening, leaning on the rails of the deck and watching something out in the distance. He had a beard and wore the sort of hat that seemed typical of a Christian Missionary. I began to notice that this gentleman had designs on me, but it took him well over a week to shake of his reserve and approach me. The approach was gradual, but certain; and my intuition had already guessed that he had hoped to do a little transformation work on my "heathen soul"—(or, perhaps, he did not credit a heathen with such a sacrosanct gift as a soul!) One morning, while I walked about on deck, he took his

hat off to me politely and started his first conversation with the usual "fine morning, isn't it?" It did not take him much time to talk to me of Christ but he was surprised when he heard me rattle off Christian hymns by the yard, and verses from the Psalms and Proverbs.

"Are you a Christian?" he enquired. He thought I was a downright liar when I told him that I was not.

"Then what are you?"—he asked.

"A human being"—"Have you no religion?"

"No".

"Man cannot live without religion, and Jesus Christ has given us the only true religion".

This went on for days. He repeated himself like a gramophone record until it began to sound as if a much-used needle had begun to scrape on its already worn-out grooves.

He stood by me one evening and that was the last time he stood by me. Before he could start his proselytising campaign all over again, I gripped his wrist tight and fixing my eyes on the setting sun without moving a lid, and with a voice surcharged with a neatly-timed elocution, I said, "Do you see, my dear friend, yonder, the setting sun?"

"O yes," he replied with a sense of over-drawn ecstasy in his voice.

"That setting sun and those beautiful tints blushing all over the place...."

Silence prevailed and the missionary had almost made his mind that he had triumphed over a heathen and added one more to his fold.

"Wonderful colours, my brother," ejaculated the missionary, conscious, I am sure, of the colour his wrist was becoming in my tight grip which he took for an emotional seizure.

"Well, listen," I said. "It took me centuries and cen-

turies to think out those colours; to make that cloud catch that exact tint of purple, its edges catch that flow of liquid orange amounting to gold—I made all that you are now witnessing—do you like them all? Enough for me if you just appreciate my works!”

The missionary did not know just what to say or where to look. Gaping at me aghast, without a word, and feeling a sense of personal indignation, besides being quite angry that I had dared to be a competitor of the divine creator—he walked away mumbling to himself: “A heathen, after all. You’ll come to no good—you will go to hell”.—I laughed at his helpless wrath and over my ultimate triumph. The bearded gentleman made it a holy point, thereafter, to avoid me like poison, which was a blessing to me!

On the way we saw many wonders. Silvery porpoises leapt in line occasionally and drew a dance-pattern across the water close to the ship that cut it deliberately and conqueringly. Then, one day, the Captain, who was a very friendly fellow, pointed out a certain phenomenon in the distance which he could not quite grasp, for he had witnessed such a spectacle for the first time in his “travel-life of forty-two years”; it was a yellowish island of glittering scales under the noonday sun, on this side of Port Said. It speeded along like a veritable whirlwind in front of our ship which seemed heading right towards it. The Captain gave orders to slow down our “floating island” of passengers, for he wished to avoid a disaster similar to that which was met by the Titanic when it dashed against an iceberg. What was that yellowish monster defying the waters and imagining itself the monarch of all it surveyed? It was, the Captain said, a sea-monster, perhaps the most gigantic creature anybody had ever seen in a lifetime. The sea has innumerable and incalculable creations of which we were fortunate enough to

## VOYAGE

catch a passing glimpse.

After Port Said, with the altering of our watches to new time, it began to grow colder and colder. My brother-in-law, who was my fellow-voyager and shared a cabin with me, complained in the morning of a night of restlessness. Somehow, sleep had bade farewell to his eyelids. I discovered later on, towards the end of our voyage, that it was through a fault of ignorance that he spent chilly nights in the cabin. For he did not know that it was the custom to get into the bed and not on to it!

The atmosphere began to change. The sun appeared like a chunk of raw flesh in a dull grey atmosphere, and seemed to be happening in a fairy tale in which one might come across shapes and events which hardly belonged to reality. I felt as if I had suddenly been swung out into another sphere far removed from earth.

The boat arrived at Tilbury, at last; those who were sea-sick and weary were grateful for solid land again. From the Docks we travelled by train to King's Cross where we were met by Ranbir Soni, a very dear friend of my sister, who had been a brilliant scholar at Cambridge. To be met by an Indian on English soil was an experience as of home-coming. London! Every city has its own typical smells. London certainly has its own. Contrary to my expectations, however, it was a city which did not seem unfamiliar at all. Had I lived in it, in some past birth, or was it so familiar because of my acquaintance with English poets and novelists whose beautiful and vivid descriptions of London had already sunk deep down into our hearts making it almost a second home of the modern Indian mind? I began, not only to get used to London, but to love it.



## LONDON...AND CAMBRIDGE

London, grey and sombre, wrapped in memories of great poets and novelists; and, frequently, in fog! On one occasion, while crossing the Westminster Bridge on a freezing winter-afternoon I had my first experience of what is known as a "pea-soup".

It was a cancellation of form and life for over an hour. Everything around was completely blotted out and time seemed at a standstill. One could hardly see one's own hand through it. What fog! yellow, heavy, stifling! Perhaps the 'blank' which is described as resulting from yogic concentration is somewhat like it. Only it has no colour, and is neither heavy nor stifling. While it suspends all sense of time and form, name and number, it does not work one into the despair, the trembling dread and feeling of absolute helplessness which a pea-soup fog tends to do. Traffic was stopped all of a sudden. The world was transformed into one immense and incalculable vacancy, menacing movement. My fellow-passengers on the bus became "non-existent". Only sounds came trickling through, voices of busmen shouting to each other, and voices of warning commanding pedestrians to stand still and not venture into that dangerous vacancy.

Then slowly the fog began to lift—through it we started to move led by a stout fellow who lit our way across the bridge with a lurid lantern that blurred the air around into a wound-like glow. We were told, later, that there were a few deaths due to accident in the fog. One man had tumbled into the Thames mistaking it for solid ground! The pea-soup defies human foothold. Such a unique farewell to time and space and life I had never experienced before!

I got familiar with English life. In fact, I began to ape the style around me and flattered myself into the vanity of a being grown superior to the being I had left behind in my own country. I wore clothes cut to perfection and, in the bargain, signed the pact with a pipe, and a tobacco-pouch bulging with tobacco. I bought two plush hats, one a silver-grey and the other, a nigger-brown. I have always detested hats. At any rate, they have never somehow suited me. But I went about invariably with one of those two hats in my hand, my head uncovered but the mind conscious of the colour of the hat and its exorbitant price. It is queer how a slave mimics his master!

Nambiar and I moved from a "bed-and-breakfast" lodging to the Shakespeare Hut in Gower Street. The hut was a miniature India inhabited by Indians from all parts of India; some quite elegant and stylish; others, obviously fresh and unacquainted as yet with the style and the manner of English dress, food and table-manners. But the waitresses got used to us all and took all our discrepancies in good humour. There was one Indian who always insisted on having for breakfast half a couple of a couple of eggs sitting on a toast with a strip of bacon lying by it!

I had, by this time, formed my own circle which did not seem to break at any point of its circumference, for our centre of interest and of habit was one and we fitted into every plan admirably. One of our favourite haunts became "the Pub" which was often the meeting place of some really admirable and memorable poets and artists.

The Public Bar in London was typical of London itself with regard to class-consciousness. It was divided into three sections: Public Bar, Private Bar, Saloon Bar. In the Public Bar you often met high-class thinkers who, being negligent of exterior living and vaingloriousness,

looked like downright loafers; while in the Saloon Bar, specially meant for the elite, you came across, quite often, low-down evil men who looked like the cream of society incapable of disturbing the serene and speckless standards of social morality and ethics.

The Private Bar was for the middle-class man, that sorry social phenomenon of a "Trisanku" who hangs eternally between heaven and earth, his legs dangling in a vast of uncertainty—that "neither-fish-nor-flesh-nor-good-red-herring" sort of individual; that washerman's dog belonging neither to the washerman's house nor the river-landing.

One of my finest memories of London is the British Museum—a solid, stolid building which breathes every inch and every moment of learning; whose Library, one of the greatest in the world, smells of wisdoms and of immortal wonders born of heart and brain. I was introduced to the Library as a permanent reader by the poet Lawrence Binyon, a shy man whose quietness was the result both of a nature which wooed it, as well as his deep acquaintance and assimilation of the wisdom of the East.

He was, in fact, the first Englishman in London to whom I showed my verse. I presented him with a copy of "The Feast of Youth" and left for a few days two *mss* of my unpublished poems which were published later in two volumes: "The Perfume of Earth" and "The Magic Tree." Lawrence Binyon had, on a much later occasion, been chief guest at a dinner given in London in my honour—where he spoke on my work and recited my poem "Forgiveness" remarking: "He has drunk from the same founts as Shelley and Keats".....

After a few months had elapsed and I was feeling a peculiar nostalgia for my own country, a sort of homeward hunger which travellers feel after a long journey—

## LONDON . . . AND CAMBRIDGE

it was suddenly suggested to me by my very dear friend from Waltair, B. V. N. Rao (who is no more) that I should send my poems to Cambridge University and see whether I would be admitted into it as a research scholar. At that time young people were being exempted from degrees on the merit of their work and being allowed to work for a post graduate course. The idea seemed as flattering, indeed, as unfeasible. The *mss* were posted along with a copy of "The Feast of Youth". To my surprise, a card came in a few days inviting me for an interview with a Mr. Reddaway, the then Dean of the University.

Mr. Reddaway received me with extreme courtesy and informed me that "Q"—(as Sir Arthur Quiller Couch was known then and will always be known) had read my poetry and said "We would have given Shelley and Keats a chance, why not this young poet." "But", Mr. Reddaway asked "what would you like to do at our University."

I did not know what to answer for I had not the foggiest idea about University courses and degrees. Mr. Reddaway suggested I should choose a subject and evolve a thesis; and then, with an enquiring look and an amused smile, he said, "You write verse very well, but you realise that you cannot write a thesis in verse. Can you write prose?" I have often wondered to myself at the confidence with which I have accepted to do things which I have never done before! It has been my experience that my success in achieving them has always been dependent on a faith, lurking behind the mind unchallenged, that "somebody" will help me to do it; and that "somebody" has never really failed me in moments of great responsibility. That somebody dwells in everybody. It is the all-wise and illumined consciousness, a dependence on which offers swift, sudden and even unpremeditated solutions to some of our most knotty and tricky problems.

I was set a subject to work out in plain honest prose—without glamorous trappings which tend to cover up superficial thought. “Yoga and Sufism” was a fascinating thing to think about. I delved into the innumerable books on the subject; and after a few days I was ready with my formulation of it, covering eighteen typed pages. At the time a Mr. Thatcher happened to be delivering a series of University lectures on the same subject. My test essay was referred to him for appraisal. Not only did I pass the test with honours, but my essay came of great assistance to the honoured lecturer himself.

I was then given a long gown and a square. I don’t know why, but the sight of the University crowded with black-gowned and “squared” undergrads always conjured up before my mind the picture of a cemetery teeming with wandering spirits who hardly had either aim or hope. While it was not true of the University students there, it is certainly not untrue of University students in our country where they graduate and often wander about without any hope of a future, frustrated and heavy-hearted.

When the undergraduates saw me strutting about with a long gown on, (and quite conscious of it, too) they fell upon me and crushed my square into bits until it looked quite comical on my head, the corners sagging and the whole square knocked out of shape.

The subject I chose for my thesis for a Ph.D. was “William Blake and his Eastern Affinities” suggested to me by Mr. Leonard of the University of Birmingham whom I met at the Shakespeare Hut during the brief period of sojourn between being accepted as Post-Graduate Researcher at the Cambridge University and my going back to Cambridge to settle down there as “a regular student,” an experience both new and pleasurable.

The period of time I spent in London before leaving

## LONDON . . . AND CAMBRIDGE

for Cambridge was fraught with some of the most interesting happenings in my life, the memory of which comes back to me again and again, proving that man is not a mere accident of evolution but a well-planned series of links in the chain of evolution sure of itself and its pattern, sure of its own significance in time, with us as tools of its strange workings of which we know and understand but utterly little!

## VISION AND DREAM

Mr. Leonard of Birmingham was a tall man. When I walked beside him I felt extinguished. He was tall and lanky, and from his appearance you might have drawn the conclusion that he was, in some way, related to Alfred Lord Tennyson, which, of course, he was definitely not. For he had derived his existence from an ancestry of miners who are anything but lords or have blood in their veins of the colour of the sky. Blue blood! No! Mr. Leonard did not fancy that phenomenon in the least. He was a real working man at heart and in his gait you clearly saw that he was a hardboiled tramp. He loved walking and, as proof, you only had to see his large, black, heavy thick-soled boots which had undergone many an operation of patch and stitch, and the edges of whose soles began to be frayed and worn-out. The heels, of course, were practically on the way to being abolished completely.

Mr. Leonard said "Mr. Chatto, I love roads, I love lanes and streets; I love to walk, walk, walk, for it is an opportunity for thought developing into a clear process, often leading to self-illumination and discovery, thanks to the sound of one's own footfalls. Walking is not merely physical exercise keeping the body fit; it is a spiritual training leading to the preservation of the being itself. . . ." I liked to walk and talk with him. He insisted on saying to me that "most people who say they know London hardly know London. They only know the modern squares, comparatively modern, of course. Leicester Square and Piccadilly Circus and all that. Shop-windows and the rest engage the attention of moderners. But come with me. I shall show you bits

of old London brimful of memories such as make history history!"

Hampstead was my favourite haunt; and I was delighted when he took me towards Hampstead. I said "I love Hampstead, the heath which undulates like a number of billows, yellow-green under the sun, grey-silver in the winter. Hampstead, the home of Keats, the haunt of Shelley. . . ." But Mr. Leonard only shook his head and insisted on cross-questioning me. "Have you been through winding lanes round about its locality?" I told him that I had not much fascination for winding lanes in the neighbourhood of large open spaces lying day in, day out, under the sky, inviting me every moment of my visit to roll on their soft carpet of grass.

Suddenly, Mr. Leonard stopped before a weird little lane in Hampstead off the heath. "This is one of the most marvellous lanes in all England" he told me. "It is of historic interest"—but before he could continue to elaborate on the historicity of the lane, I seemed suddenly to slip into the past, my mind obliterated of its usual workings—for whole moments I seemed to see pictures of the past float before "the mind's eye" as Hamlet put it to Horatio. But it was not just the mind's eye; it was not an act of seeing merely through the mind but through time whose veils suddenly lifted, one by one, as if through magic.

I described the lane in detail to Mr. Leonard, including a most attractive giant square lamp suspended from a wall a little further away round the turning of the lane. I described the ornamental work on it. It was, I said, a very ancient lamp which had been witness to a king's frequent walks—I forget now what king I mentioned, but I remember that Mr. Leonard was literally thrown off his feet at the information I rattled off like a parrot! "You are well-informed, I must say," he said, "you evi-



dently know this lane by heart and, along with it, your know intimate details with regard to it".

I told Mr. Leonard that I myself was amazed at the way history unfolded itself for a few moments before my vision. I told him, too, that he should believe me that I had never visited that lane before; it was familiar, however, in a psychic way. I knew that lane by heart; in fact there were many places in London, especially the suburbs, which seemed most familiar to me at first sight. It had probably got a great deal to do with past births—Mr. Leonard became interested in the theory of past births. And, I think, before we parted finally after a short period of acquaintance, I did manage to convince him that life, all life, is only a point in a spiral which returns again and again, each time, on a slightly higher level; and that death is neither a break in life nor an extinction. It is only

"The spiral process of the end of things  
Fulfilled into beginning. . . ."

Mr. Leonard was truly glad that I had been accepted by the University of Cambridge as a Post Graduate Student on the strength of my verse. It was he who suggested that I should write a thesis on "William Blake and his Eastern affinities"—a subject, he said, which would be deeply engrossing and near to my heart. "You are a mystic, that is clear Mr. Chatto, Blake was one of the greatest mystics ever born." I had become Mr. Chatto during my visit to Cambridge. Mr. Reddaway had asked me what my name was. I rattled off the whole Brahmanical length of it. "Harindranath Chattopadhyaya". Mr. Reddaway was flabbergasted for a moment. I almost saw him wondering as to how it could be possible for any one to go about bearing the burden of such an unconscionably long appendage, without being driven to suicide! "I am afraid, Mr. all-that-

## VISION AND DREAM

length-of-name! we shall have to come to a compromise with regard to it. We shall, in future, call you Mr. Chatto. That's good enough. . . ." to which I added: "What's in a name" as Shakespeare said. . . . which re-assured Mr. Reddaway that I was in touch with English literature.

"William Blake and his Eastern affinities"—what a fine subject to tackle. But on second thoughts a very tough one, too. How on earth was I going to link up Willie with a Sa'adi or a Kalidas? How was I going to find links which would help me to build up a chain of sensible research? For days and days I was restless—I did not know what I was going to do about it. One night I had a strange dream. But I did not take much notice of it when I woke up. Curiously enough, the dream repeated itself, *in toto*, in the course of the same week.

I dreamt that I stood before the door of an English barn. I stood wondering as to where I had landed myself. Suddenly a man with a red Turkish cap on appeared on the scene. His face was unfamiliar at first, but as I looked at him at close quarters, I noticed that it was a very familiar face, indeed. Yet, I couldn't quite place it.

"Good day to you, Sir", the man greeted me.

"Good day", I replied, "and who may you be, I pray you?"

"I am Mr. Blake. . . ." I was taken aback.

"You mean, you are William Blake, the great poet?"

He smiled very strangely "No, no! you are right when you suggest that I am William Blake—but I am not a poet; I am a coachman."

So saying, he flung the door open of what I had mistaken for a barn. I saw a huge stallion inside it. It was a stable and not a barn.

"Mr. Blake", I said, "you are surely not a coachman.

You are the poet Blake about whom I am supposed to write for a PhD."

The man burst out into huge laughter. "Well, well, well! perhaps you have seen photographs of me. So, I have been traced at last! I was hiding away from men for the past two centuries. And now, here we are! You of the twentieth century and I of the eighteenth. So you are going to write about me"—"and of your Eastern affinities", I interrupted. "O yes, O yes, I first got into touch with the East through a painted bowl. . . ." The darkness closed around him and the stallion, the stable-door closed, and I was left alone wondering—"painted bowl. . . ."

I woke up from the dream, not a little vexed with the stupid, "incoherent dream". But I must confess to its having tantalised me for days on end. Later on, when I started my studies, first at the British Museum and then at the University Library at Cambridge, I found to my utter amazement that it was not all stupid or incoherent, that queer dream which came to me twice! I stumbled across a passage in a book on Blake, which described the few books that he had access to in his friend's library—and incidentally talked of the interest in the East which was awakened in Blake by a beautiful bowl richly painted with the legend of Sa'adi, the Persian poet, with some of his famous couplets inscribed round its border! It had been purchased by Blake's friend from a hawker!

One thing was certain, that the first link had been found to establish Blake's interest in the East. Later study led me safely to other conclusions. Blake had come into contact with our ancient wisdoms, the Vedas and the Upanishads—his mind, inherently mystical, (and coloured a great deal by Swedenborg and by Boehme, the mystic and shoe-maker), was made to travel far by his

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spasmodic contacts with India and Persia. In the body of Blake's greater poems one comes across our old cosmogenies veiled by his own—and even the term "Brahma" which seems to become his quill. Ever since the uncanny dream of the painted bowl I have begun to look for meanings in dreams. But most of our dreams may be what Freud and Jung say they are, while only a few transcend the plane of a bad liver and troublesome sex, touching the luminous fringe of psychical vision!

## THE INVITATION

The winter had set in. The sun had been sentenced to a long term of imprisonment behind mist and fog which seemed to build up an impregnable fortress across the sky. I had watched the effect of Autumn on the heath, on the trees and on the roofs of houses. There was something golden about the autumn-months which held peculiar magic in their touch. The leaves on the boughs blushed into such tints as any painter would have been stirred to imitate on canvas; red-browns, russet-golds, greens turning into silver-greys. One felt instinctively that Nature was preparing herself for a spell of inward concentration necessitating the withdrawal, for a time, from outer gaudiness, outflux of flowers and leaves.

One almost smelt in the air a white chilliness approaching with its own genius of snow and fog which holds a mastery over the exquisiteness of next year's springtime! Winter set in, mantling itself in a speckless whiteness. It was my favourite season, strangely enough. I have always loved the cold. It is most conducive to the poet's imagination. I have always felt it whipping the blood into an ecstasy of rhythmic poise. I have worked out my best in winter-time.

It was almost second nature with me, while in London, to catch the bus the Hampstead Heath. I forget now whether it was the 24 Bus or the 29. At the end of the journey one stood before the heath. For me it had become a spiritual necessity to visit it at least once a day from wherever I might have been. After spending a few hours in crowded isolation, cramming them with contemplations which sparkled and glowed out of the in-

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most being, I returned rather sadly, heavy with an unspeakable sense of separation from my highest self which waited for me on the heath every day—how like a breathless bride full of expectancy! The terminus was usually red with waiting buses and crowded with dark-coated and brown-gloved drivers and conductors who, to keep the chill away, would, off and on, strike their strong chests with their gloved hands muttering and mumbling abuse at the awful cold. The air into which they breathed, blowing on to it with bulging cheeks, steamed away in visible puffs of mist.

One day, however, the terminus was unusually quiet; I saw no bus waiting, hardly any passengers either. I was told that the buses would be coming in late for a certain reason. I felt cold and thought that I might both while away the minutes as also warm myself up with a cup of tea from the tea-stall at the terminus specially run for the bus-men. The stall was quiet; it was extremely well-kept and attractive. The tea-stall keeper was an old man of about seventy dressed in overalls, a pipe in his mouth steaming away and performing patterns, by fits and starts, across his face clouded in smoke. "May I have a cup of tea, please." The old man gazed at me intently, then sighed heavily. His large hands lifted up a large kettle from whose spout he poured out a stream of rich amber-coloured liquor of tea; the milk and the sugar had already been administered in the giant cup.

"'Ere, my son, is a nice cup o' tea for you, an' do you good it will, if I know hennything about 'ot tea hin the cold winter-time"—that's how he offered me, what turned out later, to be only a first cup of many warm cups. When I took out my purse to pay for it, he pushed my hand back saying, "you honly hinsult your daddy, for God in 'is 'eaven knows you har my son.!" His large hand took me by mine which was comparatively a pigmy's

hand, and almost shook it off forever. But I could feel that the handshake had marked a new and lasting friendship. Experience proved the feeling entirely correct.

This old strong man was Mr. Goodman, a name which remains in my memory forever on the list of names which bear with them friendship and sweetness. This old strong man, Mr. Goodman, who left out his aitches where he should not have and tacked them on where they were equally unnecessary! this old strong man with iron sinews and gnarled workman's knuckles hiding beneath his massive British exterior a heart that was tender and deeply affectionate and true. All this I came to understand later. Mr. Goodman shed a tear or two and, choking with real emotion, said: "You know, my son, you 'ave come to me has a ray of light in my gloom." I was told later that it was just about a year since he had lost his good wife who "ad spent forty 'ole years as companion and never once showed a frown, she did never, and that's true as true can be!"

I was invited to Mr. Goodman's home on Christmas night. "5 Agincourt Road" was the address he gave me asking me to be sure not to miss the evening, since he was going to celebrate Christmas eve with "heclat," he said. He told me that he wanted his daughter Rosina and all his other daughters, his sons and sons-in-law, to meet me, his "Hindian son". I was the first Indian he had met in his life, he said. Until then, he did not ever know what to make of "the dark-skinned young fellows who wandered about London like lost sheep"....

On Christmas eve, I stood in front of the door of 5, Agincourt Road. I was perplexed awhile and most uncertain as to whether I had arrived at the correct address. For it was such a beautiful cottage, one of a row of similar cottages. For an instant, too, I was taken

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aback when, in response to the door-bell, the door opened revealing, to my surprise, a well-dressed old man who looked most unlike the Mr. Goodman I had met at the Tea Stall at the bus-terminus. "Come hin, my son," he said, and warmly drew me into the home with an affection which was both touching and mysterious. Then, the round of introductions. I had never bargained for such warmth, I must confess,—the combined warmth of the brightly-lit logs glowing with X'mas cheer in the fireplace and the shower of kisses which fell on my forehead, my cheeks and my mouth. The one who kissed me most warmly and every five minutes throughout the evening was Rosina Goodman, the old man's unmarried daughter fairly advanced in years, with a face obviously marked with suffering and self-sacrifice. Blushing like a tomato she stressed the fact over and over again that she had found "an Indian bladder"—which was the affectionate way of pronouncing "brother." Rosina was called Rosy in the house; and it did not take very long for my name to change from the formal "Mr. Chatto" to "Harry." Rosy, however, always called me "you puss"... I always wondered as to what exactly made her associate feline qualities with me. The whole evening really went off with a 'bang', as they say, and we spent it in Christmas carols and cakes and wine, not to speak of the feeling in me of an Abul Hassan crowned king; but with the difference that while Abul Hassan woke up and found the fine dream ended, I continued to be in what looked like a dream too good to be true, but which, withal, turned out to be a most beautiful reality. The friendship had been sworn in by lips of loyalty.

The whole family was so sad when, at the end of the evening, I informed them that I was going away to Cambridge within a few days. The old man and Rosy shed tears and wiped their noses. It was unbelievable. When



taking leave they made me promise faithfully that I would, when I returned to London, walk straight into 5 Agincourt Road and live with them as a member of the family: which promise I made.

After my first term at Cambridge, during the vacations I had to leave Cambridge. I found my heart full of anxiety when I found my purse empty. I had hardly just enough to pay for my fare to London, with a few shillings left over to keep the wolf away from the door for a couple of days when I arrived there. I wrote to Rosy that I was coming to London—and straight to Hampstead “to fulfil a promise made last Christmas,” which, of course, was not the whole truth. I was grateful for the kind invitation which had now given me a sense of security. I had a home to go to, more than most Indians had during my time.

Rosy had gone, as usual, to work early in the morning. She worked in a toy-factory. Her father who believed in the old adage “Early to bed and early to rise” stuck by it throughout a life-time of many useful and healthy years. He had already gone to his tea-stall round the corner. When he saw me approaching it, he shouted “welcome home, my boy! Rosy ’as kept your breakfast ready hin the left’and room downstairs, hand the rooms ready and hall, a basin of water for a nice wash after your journey which must ’ave made you tired!” Then he gave me a key. “’Ere’s the key to your ’ouse, and God bless yer!” Of course, before I left him at the stall I just simply had to drink a large cup of tea accompanied by two thick mutton sandwiches which were welcome.

I entered the house and found a room tidied and ready for me. A basin and a jug full of water; a bed covered with a beautiful flower-printed bedspread. On a table close by, breakfast of eggs and bacon, bread and butter, jam and a pot of excellent coffee. Good Lord!

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what love, what a strange and sudden linking up of souls! I was grateful for the experience, it came at a time when I might have broken down completely in sad isolation and helpless penury. The usual instalment of money was overdue; it had not come. It left me with an almost empty purse, and an empty purse leads to so many burning thoughts on life which, in our time, seems based on a purse that is full.

## THE TEN POUND NOTE

There are many who, being well-settled in life, possessing enough to buy up even the souls of artists, never tire of reiterating that poverty is good for the artist, that it makes him increase in spiritual riches, that it goads him on to more and more creative toil than it would be likely he would have performed had circumstances been otherwise. This is the old way in which the well-off satisfy their own conscience, as also make artists their private property and their tool. An empty purse and a hungry stomach are hardly conducive to the progress of a creative genius.

Shelley wrote his best when he was settled in a condition of security. William Blake, the mystic painter and writer, complained in his note-books that he could not execute his big dreams in colour and line since he never did have enough to buy him larger lengths of canvas! And yet, there have been idle and ignorant critics of Blake himself who, being blissfully ignorant of this tragic statement in Blake's note-books, in pronouncing judgment over his small but wonderful canvasses, have remarked that such miracles were possible only because Blake was struck with the chronic disease of artists known as penury; and that he could not, in any case, have painted larger canvasses than he had done.

When I found myself with a purse which hardly contained a few shillings on the day of my arrival in London for my vacations, I felt as though the great big world around me had suddenly contracted to the cramped compass of a prison-house. Everything I looked upon, the heath at Hampstead, the trees, the rooftops of houses, men, women, roads, street-

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lamps. . . . all these seemed suddenly to have been poisoned and death-stricken. The flavour of life had vanished; even the trilling of an occasional bird, once so beloved of my heart and my nature, went like a stab through me. When one is helpless and sad, the sweetness of life and of Nature, their colour and sound, their rootedness and their flowing, become portions of an unbearable burden which one strives to shake off. Most of an artist's life especially is subjective: it is not the world that is urgent with him. It is his mood which paints the world with hues which change as swiftly as his reactions to conditions. The artist has no half-way house; he is all extremes. Either he is in the seventh heavens with the ecstasy of life and the gladness to be alive, or he is down in the unfathomable depths of depression full of the ache to die and be done with the whole damned thing called human life. This is true of the artists of our class who are egocentric, who take up the attitude towards existence that they are the centre round which all things move, breathe and have their being; or if they do not, they ought to. They fall into the trap of loneliness because of their dislike for collective living, a subtle form of snobbery which wears the garb of humility.

That whole day of "the empty-purse" state I spent on the heath, lying flat on my back, watching the vast circle of vacancy which at the moment had lost its deep spiritual significance. It changed in my mind to a steely nothingness to which it seemed laughable that men should offer prayers! There was no God anywhere, really. He was of our own making. If there was any God at all, in our time, it was the full purse. Of that I was beginning to be assured. It is one thing to be conscious of the capacity to purchase food and not eat it, and quite another, to be without the wherewithal to buy food and be forced to go without it. Fasting is not starving. A

fast is as different from starvation as a peacock is from a vulture. There is something ostentatious about a fast, especially when it is advertised in the papers. One is certain of a whole public support, one automatically becomes a hero. While one is not remembered even as the shadow of a martyr when one perishes for lack of food. Most Hindus, without any more argument put down the death of men and women and children through starvation to the ruthless law of karma!

What was I going to do during my more than a month's sojourn in London? There was Rosy there, of course, to look after me, but how long could I go on sponging on a not too well-to-do woman who was worked for hours a day at a toy factory? It was hardly manly even to think of it. Sponge on Rosy and her good father who stood at the tea-stall all the day long pouring out tea for busmen? I did not know what to do, I did not know what I was going to do. Thoughts crowded my brain and made it a veritable beehive, with this difference, that while bees stored honey in their hive, my thoughts could only store the poison of an anxiety in the brain!

Towards the afternoon I rambled across the heath and walked straight to the tea-stall and without the feeling of awkwardness, for, on the way, I tried to tell myself that, after all, the old man, Mr. Goodman, had called me his son, and that was as good as saying that I had at least some claim on a cup of afternoon tea! The tea-stall was loud with bus-men all talking together, with an occasional humming of a snatch of love-song cleaving through. London busmen are as witty as the proverbial coachmen of Dacca. They can make you blush with repartee, at times. When I reached the stall I felt a little awkward, for the attention of the whole lot of them was on me. But before they could pass re-

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marks on my dark skin, or hurl a jest at the differentness of my make-up from theirs, Mr. Goodman, whom they respected deeply, introduced me as his "Hindian son". Then followed innumerable handsakes which were warm and sincere. When they heard me speak their language, they were flabbergasted and not a few remarked "Why egad! 'ee speaks Henglish better than us folks 'ere seated!" This banned awkwardness from my heart, and I became free and familiar in a moment. I drank tea along with them and, for a while, heard their wit and humour which once again brought back to my mind the thought that, after all, life was not all gloom. Surely, here were so many men working hard for their bread; they had large families and their standard of living was fairly high, too. And sometimes their purses, too, were empty!

They had their tragedies and their experiences of despair, only, unlike me, a quivering sensitive bourgeois creature, they did not give in to gloom and stupid misery as easily as all that! But the secret of their cheer was in their feeling of belonging to a team. None among them was isolated, no one among them felt an entity by himself to the seclusion of others, that was the main thing! To know oneself part of others, part of human life. Isolation is death. It gives one leisure to destroy oneself. What does it matter, I thought to myself, that today is different from yesterday? Surely, tomorrow will again be different from today! Nothing lasts forever. I felt elated and almost sensed a dark cloud slip off the brow. I went back to the heath and recovered the old sense of beauty, and an inexplicable faith that, somehow things will change and that there was a Power greater than all men put together who will soon lead me out of the darkness into the light.

That evening I returned to my rooms and found

Rosy and the old man, her father, waiting for me anxiously. They jumped with joy when I arrived and the old man, whom I called Daddy, made me climb on his back, and then went all round the room imitating a horse. "My son his a rider. I am 'is horse" . . . And Rosy blushed with extreme pride and happiness. "You know dearie, God 'as sent sent you to hus, and Daddy never smiled for a 'ole year after mother went, and now 'ee is bright like a summer's day, 'ee is!" . . . After dinner, we retired early. Both father and daughter led me to the room and kissing me good-night, left the room. I undressed, with depression creeping over me all over again, and just at the instant I took out the purse from my trouser pocket and began to examine its contents, Rosy came in, excusing herself "ere's a clock, dearie. But sleep so long you like. This is your 'oliday-time." But her eye caught mine and with all a woman's intuition, understood the thought uppermost in my mind: the thought of an almost empty purse. "Good night. Sleep well". She left the room and went upstairs.

As usual, Rosy woke up early, with the dawn coloured like her name. And so did Daddy. When I awoke, the house was without a soul in it. The rooms were bright with morning. I had over-slept, somehow. Just as well. Sleep made me pass several hours in unconsciousness. Sleep is a kindly thing when one is anxious. I dressed and yawned and said to myself: Another day! well, one had to live it, or else one had no business to be in the world. I said to myself: I shall forget everything today by steeping myself in verse-writing. And then, I took up the purse from the tea-poy close to my bed and, through force of habit, I examined it once again, hoping for an impossible refilling of itself in some mysterious manner. Why had I not stumbled across Alaudin's lamp, I wondered. Why did not some fairy or Jinn help me to

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carry out my impossible dreams and imaginative cravings to their fullest? Surely an artist has a right to dream, and it is the duty of some mysterious Force to see to it that no dream drops to the dust and withers! This must be true somewhere, or, was it the fault of our system of life that dreams had no place in it?

Perhaps, but... While thinking these thoughts my fingers idly rummaged among the pockets inside the purse, when lo! Mystery had truly worked a miracle. A ten-pound note! Unimaginable, unbelievable! It surely was not that I was dreaming? I was not dreaming. I was wide awake, and I was wide awake to the experience of a world of kindness and generosity which I suspected in the person of Rosina Goodman. But she had gone to the factory. You just wait! Let her only come back home and won't I scold her! Just fancy stealthily walking into the room, early at dawn, and saving the inside of my purse from the shame and sorrow of utter helplessness and penury! And yet, in my deepest heart, what a sense of relief and gratefulness!

I did not tell Daddy anything about the mysterious ten-pound note. When the evening came, and with it, the mysterious donor, I said: "Rosy, look straight into my eyes!" Jestingly she remarked: "You har a puss but your heyes are not blue-grey... You puss"... and then, with an impulse of deep affection, drawing me to herself, she kissed me warmly, and said: "Now, now! I shan't 'ave no word about the ten-pound. It is my hernings, and I 'ave a right to put them hennywhere I choose..."

That was one of the finest experiences in my life. Most people think that a Britisher, man or woman, is stuck up and unemotional. The true-born British man and woman are not stuck up, but shy. It takes long for them to open out, but once they do, they make excellent friends, and their friendship is staunch and unshakeable



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as mountains. Had we not had the bitter experience of British Imperialist rule which has enslaved us (and Britain's people, in the bargain, too!) degrading us for well-nigh two centuries, we would have thought of the British nation with respect and love. But our prejudice is so intense that the very word British has come to be synonymous with cunning, intrigue, playing one against the other, and an iron determination to dole us deeper and deeper slavery and sorrow in the name of freedom. I owe to Rosy and Daddy my first glimpse into the heart of real England, the heart of her people which beats to the heart of the peoples of the world.

## 'VARSITY MEMORIES

I became member of the Fitz William Hall which name being somewhat lengthy, and man inherently lazy, was contracted to Fitzbilly; one not only got used to this contraction but even seemed to find it fashionable when tripped on the tongue. Fitzbilly was non-collegiate. The colleges had all been crowded by the time I had arrived at the University. And there was a fatality about my possessing a similar name to a son of Ramananda Chattopadhyaya, the late Editor of 'Modern Review', who was my contemporary and who got into the only available seat in a college due to that similarity.

When I arrived at Cambridge in response to a card from the authorities there, I was both surprised and grieved at the complication which had already happened with regard to my admission into a college: "We are sorry, Mr. Chatto, that there was some misunderstanding on our part with regard to your initials. We had addressed a card to you: A. Chattopadhyaya, while now we realise you are many letters away from the first letter of the alphabet. You are H; aren't you? Well, well, it is too late now to mend matters. Mr. Ashok Chattopadhyaya has already been given the last seat which was available, and you will have to be a non-collegiate student and find rooms outside. . . ."

I did not at all mind this arrangement, although, of course, I should have to miss the direct collective life of students who live together inside the college and move about like monarchs of all they survey. I soon found a very comfortable place to live in, but, of course, no student ever called rooms rooms. They were known as 'digs', very suggestive of the grave-digge'r spade which

scoops out a dwelling for the dead. The difference being that while the dead were buried in sand, we students were buried in books. Not all students, though.

As far as I could see, there were many students who hardly seemed to be at the university to study. It was, on the surface, at least, one long glorious holiday with them. Sport, and the favourite one with both Cambridge and Oxford was boating. A boat-race is one of the most exciting sights you can ever imagine. It has all the speed and the spur, the uncertainty and the breathless awe involved in horse-racing—but it is much more aesthetic—much more dreamy and refined. It seems to be happening on a plane of the being which verges on the spirit, itself as fluent as a river, reflecting darkly the swift, fleeting existences of men, vying with each other, racing each other and casting shadows as they speed along. I have always loved to watch a boat race.

It is, again, as different from a horse-race as the effect of opium is from that of liquor. The former lulls the nerves and makes one see bodiless visions, quiet and yet vibrating and alive without waking up the blood to coarse excitement as the latter tends to do.

A boat-race is like a beautiful poem. A horse-race is like a sheet of accounts kept by a drunken fellow who doesn't know what the sum-total, after adding up, might turn out to be!

I lived a very silent life in my 'digs'. Everyday I would put in a certain amount of work: research, writing, and, sometimes, just thrilling in deep reverence while Blake's beautiful original illustrations to books, both his own and others; lay open before me on my desk at the Library. The story told of Blake's marriage always came back to me, over and over again, whenever I browsed among his original creations.

It is said that Blake had loved a girl madly and that

girl jilted him, which made him sad. When he lived in a tumbledown room, after that—in a sort of garret-hotel, the hotel-maid, a simple plain-looking creature, used to serve him his meals in his room. She knew that its inmate was heavy-hearted. Blake told her the story of his love and of the tragedy of being jilted by the one to whom he had, poet-like, poured out the best that his soul could do. "I pity you, Mr. Blake" she said, with a simplicity and a genuineness in her voice typical of the unspoilt poor class. Blake leaped to his feet, revived as by some magical shock of relief, and holding her in his arms, gazing deep down into the depths of her eyes, he said: "You pity me. I love you then"... And they became man and wife.

This wife's intuition told her that she had united with a very wonderful man; she began to realise that he was what big learned men described as "genius," although she did not quite grasp the implications of the term. She knew, however, that, if she was to make him happy, it would not be enough merely to cook for him and supply his animal wants which were, indeed, few and verging almost on the ascetic.

She persuaded Mr. Blake, her husband, to teach her to fill the colours into his wonderful drawings of large serpents and long angels and almost breathing children; which he did. The result was amazing!

It was there, before me, the work which Mr. and Mrs. William Blake had done together. That is why I thrilled with reverence, as before a holy thing, whenever I sat before the desk with Blake's drawings spread on it, wide-open to my gaze.

But my life was not all sombre and without colour. I had many forms of recreation, and many friends both English and Indian. Among the latter I must not fail to refer to three particularly intimate friends with whom

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I spent several hours during the week. Dilip Ray, the son of Dwjjendralal Ray, the well-known Bengali playwright. Dilip, we called him. He struck me in those days as being an overgrown baby. That first impression has outlived time. Even now when we meet occasionally Dilip seems to breathe a certain amount of babyhood from every pore of his being. I loved that quality in him. It is rare. It certainly is a precious gift of the spirit.

Dilip had come to Cambridge to work for a Doctorate in Music. We met every Wednesday at his "digs" and after an early dinner, we sat at the piano singing songs together. The poor old landlady, I think, secretly dreaded Wednesdays, but she was too polite to tell us that. Indian music, to the average English ear, is something which, at best, one must learn to tolerate. The landlady sometimes entered the room while the music was in full swing. Once, I remember, realising that it was getting on her nerves, I stopped and asked her: "Tell me is Dilip Ray putting up with you, or are you putting up with him?" The landlady, a Mrs. Somebody, saw through the pun and burst into a smile which seemed to say "Go on, go on. I know your songs must mean something to you, though they may mean a nuisance to me...." She was kindly. Had it been the crotchety type of woman she would have made no bones about expressing herself, not only in terms of bitterness towards the music, but towards "you natives", as well.

Dilip had a very sweet voice then and I thought that it fulfilled itself best when he sang his father's songs. But, combined with the babyhood in him, there was a sense of class ostentation which he has never quite been able to shake off. He is typical bourgeois, and there is hardly any thought he thinks or garment he wears which is not symbolic of class consciousness.

Discussing music once, just before he returned to

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India after his first sojourn at Cambridge, he said with a sigh: "When I go back to India I shall sing to the circles of the few who understand my music. The masses cannot understand it, which is a great pity."

Dilip is talented. At Cambridge, apart from working at the Doctorate, he read voraciously and took down notes on literature and wrote lengthy letters not only to friends at home, but to the authors of the world. His favourite author was Romain Rolland which name came rolling off his tongue in season and out of season. But I had always felt a deep affection for Dilip, though we might have differed in our outlook on life.

Then there was K. P. Chattopadhyaya who, at the time, was a student. Today he is one of the best known men in Bengal: Dr. K. P. Chattopadhyaya, the anthropologist. A broad-boned fellow with a large heavy face and a heavy jaw. I always thought of him as a mighty boxer, his whole physique suggested pugilistic possibilities. But actually, he was kind and gentle and extremely intellectual.

Last but not least, there was a man of destiny, one among the three of my intimate Indian friends. Quiet, shy, reserved; he listened more than spoke. And whenever he spoke, he saw to it that he did not trouble too much vocabulary! His lips were always set on silence. His eyes, when you caught their real significance, seemed to look through the wall of the room into distance, into the future, into the very heart of an India whom he looked upon as his authentic Mother. Affectionate, unassuming, extremely courteous. In a crowd, he would make himself insignificant. His capacity to slip into insignificance was remarkable. It veiled the significance that he was but which we could hardly suspect or measure then.

Of course, we had known of his revolutionary life when he was a student in his own country. But then,

there were so many Indian students at the University who had stood for India's freedom. It is very curious now for me to recall him. I still remember him walking along with us—four of us together walking across the lawn or on "Milton's Walk", three among us jabbering away, the fourth one listening. And while I boasted a long gown, this silent fourth wore the half-gown of an undergrad! I recall his reserve and think of it as that of a first-rate seeker of spiritual truth who has hardly any time to talk, nor even the need to talk. When once one is conscious of his quest, one seems to conserve one's energy more and more in a mysterious, automatic manner.

Today we are told that he died in an air crash, after an unbelievable series of heroisms such as have made the world wonder, made even some of his bitterest adversaries in our own country now believe that "had he been among us at this critical moment in our country's history, India would have fought British Imperialism tooth and nail and a whole, stubborn United India would have been his bulwark. He would have saved the Motherland from the disgrace of division." His name was Subhas Chandra Bose.

## TALK OF THE TOWN

Livne is one of the most colourful memories I bear of Cambridge. Who or what was Livne? The name suggests such a number of things, does it not?—a flower, a book of poems, a piece of music?

As a matter of fact, it was all all these and—more.

One fine day all Cambridge woke up to the consciousness of a very beautiful young woman who had arrived to spend a few days in our pretty university town. She was not quite the sort of sensation which should have been allowed to remain too long in such a town; for rumour, which spread like wild fire, had it that the young woman was a paragon whose beauty had literally gone into the heads of the students like irresistible intoxication. Nobody knew precisely who she was or what she was. She seemed to walk through the town and in the midst of men like a spirit which had built a diamond wall of mystery round itself! Soon she began to be known as a cross between a paragon and a paradox!

Students, "with bated breath and whispering humbleness," spoke to each other of her eyes; which they said were wells of night, and of her hair which they said was a cataract of blinding excessive glow, and while some talked of her walk, other talked of her talk. There were some who were completely conquered by her voice and others swore that her skin was an exquisite golden-olive. She took the town by storm, she was what might safely have been described as a blitzkrieg had she happened at Cambridge after Hitler had made his tactics of warfare famous. Gathering all I could of this young woman's grace and beauty from innumerable quarters, I began to think of her as a synonym for orchard: luscious, sweet,



alluring as clusters of ripe grapes glistening and shot through by sun-rays.

I was invited by the Indian Majlis one evening to a soiree. Dilip Ray and I were to be the principal "performers." Now, I must confess to a queer feeling when I am told that I have to "perform." It conjures up before my mind a circus-animal: trained under the lashes of a whip, disciplined to do what it was not born to do, trotted out before the curious gaze of an audience which considers it as a commodity of amusement. Circus-animals! That is what an artist is, in the last analysis, wherever the capitalist system is in existence—a system in which the artist is no better and no less than a purchasable commodity meant for the delectation of the purchaser. But, as with the circus-animal, so is it with us, the artists, who have got so used to "performing", that we are grateful and feel not a little flattered when we are asked to perform and not a little disappointed when we are not.

Besides, rumour had already reached my ears that the young person who had made all Cambridge dizzy was going to be present on the occasion! I had not seen her as yet. But, quite honestly, I waited anxiously for the evening when I had decided, in my heart of hearts, not to be allured by her beauty. If anything, I would conquer her with my art, my verse. I felt intuitively that I was definitely going to draw her attention in some way; my poetry was surely as attractive as the handsomeness of many a young student who would be present at the *soiree*. If the young woman did not care for art, why then, she would not be worthwhile attracting! But I was told that she loved music and literature and the dance.

The evening arrived and with it arrived the guests and the "performers." The talk of the town had not

as yet turned up. I suppose the delay was purposeful. It is fashionable for a beautiful person to arrive late so that her arrival may be recorded by thirsty eyes awaiting her. Then, there was a flutter in the hall, something of the sort which happens on the entry of a celebrated political leader. She, in a sense, was a leader all right, for she led the young men a dance—and her politics was beauty, real exquisite beauty. My heart went pit-a-pit, but, while every one in the hall made no bones about feeling a queer sensation in their bones, I summoned up my histrionic skill and transformed my face into a placid mask which did not record any extraordinary sensation. The programme was about to begin. Short speeches were made by undergrads who did their best to impress the beauty who was being felt throughout the evening, the beauty who seemed to surcharge the consciousness of everybody present.

Dilip Ray was to do the opening ceremony. It was obvious that he was not an exception to the rule of beauty. He told himself that he was going to sing his best and leave an indelible impress on her. Dilip sang very beautifully that evening; but I marked an unusually exaggerated tendency of gesture which accompanied his singing. Dilip is always full of mannerisms when he sings. His face puts on an expression of depth and height and his eyes seem to close like windows on an inwardness which he strives hard to communicate to his listeners. In the Cambridge days, however, the closing of eyes assuming an incommunicable ecstasy of expression and expression of ecstasy was not so marked as it began to be since Dilip joined Sri Aurobindo's Ashram, where, it is said, Dilip's music is slowly becoming divinised.

Cambridge saw us all in our youth: youth which lusts after colour and thrill and the ecstasy of meeting

and mating. The young beauty cheered Dilip at the close of each of his songs.

Then came the beckoning time for me. I blushed with pride in the blood, but did not reveal the trace of a tremor outwardly. There was a red glow burning about my ears, the tips of which were literally burning. Had I been of lighter skin than I am, perhaps my ears would have revealed excitement through their fire-red tinge. I rose, amidst applause, and said: "I am not a singer. I am a poet, I shall recite some of my own verses." I watched her response to my poetry. That evening I was particularly successful as a reciter. My voice took on a velvety purple colour—and grew rich. There was pin-drop silence in the hall. After I had finished reciting my poem there was loud applause.

The poem was "The Jealous God", a lyrical piece of some length with a rather fascinating rhyme-scheme and dealt with the theme of the cruel Irony which dwells and works within and behind this world of love and longing. It is fierce and brooks no softness. It cannot bear to see the lover and the beloved happy; the flower fades after a little day of fragrance and colour because of it. That Irony is jealous of us all, of the lovely things in Nature. It survives because our loves die, our dreams perish. But the poet throws a challenge to It, but all in vain, apparently. Finally, of course, with complete realisation of true love immortality sets in and mortality passes away; immortality transforms the perishable into a sealed and impossible Beauty and Joy which nothing evermore can destroy.

"And now in us is no more of clay

To pass away . . ."

declares the conqueror of death, triumpher over the inherent Irony in things, the human lover to his human beloved now grown eternal and sublimated in a union

## TALK OF THE TOWN

which knows no canker of decay.

At the end of the programme a young Bulgarian student came up to me and said very quietly: "A young lady would like to be introduced to you." The talk of the town shook my hand warmly and only expressed a desire to meet me and get to know me more. I became exceptionally marked that day; and in fact, Cambridge began to weave round me a tale of romance. An Indian poet and a beautiful young woman from—nobody could quite place her, none could guess her nationality—she became known to all Cambridge as the beautiful Livne.

When I met Livne at close quarters I seemed to be in the direct presence of a rare and aesthetic vibration. She had eyes into whose depths the soul of any artist might have easily dropped without ever being able to plumb them. Quietly she gazed at me and said: "We must meet. I want you to know me. I want to know you. I have loved your poetry tonight. It has uplifted my soul. I needed to listen to such poetry. We simply must meet. . ." I knew that my art had conquered her soul which, I guessed, must surely be that of an artist.

I met her the next day again for a little while—but this time she was highly painted and looked more like a masked beauty than the spontaneous and authentic beauty she was in reality. I have since then often wondered as to why beautiful women paint at all? Or is it plain truth to say that women paint to hide their ugliness? Look at most women in society, so-called high-class fashionable society. They evoked a quatrain from me years ago and it still holds good:

"I caught a sudden passing glance  
Of men and women tired and pale.  
Society is a painted dance  
Of skeletons behind a veil . . ."

When Livne heard me recite this to her she knew I was:

hurling criticism at her painted face that day.

I said: "Livne, if you ever want to meet me again, you must give up your rouge and lipstick. They are an insult to your beauty."

"Why do you paint?" She replied: "O, I paint only when I am tired of life and of everything. I paint only to hurt myself, to appear cheap and tawdry, to hide myself under a mask, to put people off, to escape being noticed lest they should discover how full of sorrow and frustration I am, I think you will understand; I want a friend. I think you can give me friendship, friendship without the flesh, the animal touch."

I was taken aback, and I genuinely appreciated her frankness and I promised her that I would be able to prove a true friend to her. She promised to meet me the next day, the real Livne as she is in the spirit, in the being which hated decoration and ostentation. We decided that we should meet the next afternoon at a spot a little away from Cambridge which was a bus terminus. I called that spot "Chalk-Cliffs"—since there were little hillocks of glistening white chalk standing there. Beside them grew tall grasses waving delightfully in the breeze. Livne and I would meet the next day at those chalk-cliffs . . .

She promised to come to me even as the beggar-  
maid to King Cophetua. "And tomorrow, I will reveal my identity to you. I will bring along with me my MSS of poetry in French . . . I know you will see through my soul then, for poetry is the soul of a true poet and the soul of a poet is true poetry . . ." Livne, a poet, and not one person in the whole of Cambridge knew that she was much more than merely beautiful!





**VIRENDRANATH**

**Author's Brother.**

## INDIA CALLING

Once again the wheel of time in its revolutions which nothing can stay or hinder, brought vacation-time and I had to leave Cambridge; I did not realise the day I left it that I was leaving it for good, that my cap-and-gown existence had abruptly come to an end. I did not know that a chapter was closing and a new one, beyond imagination, was about to start for me. I did not know that I was going to bid farewell to the many dear acquaintances at Cambridge, to Livne whom I had got to know, honour and admire for her remarkable talents and personality, and, in a sense, to the colourfulness of youth free from the larger worries of a life awakened to deeper and more intricate responsibilities of which it knows but little.

For India, my country, was in a ferment and the Civil Disobedience movement launched by Gandhiji was slowly but surely gathering force. A cable, too, had arrived telling me that Kamala was coming to England which, indeed, seemed somewhat of an anachronism. But, of course, we were all still young then and had not quite grasped the implications of a national movement.

One thing, however, was beyond the shadow of doubt; most Indians re-discover India and begin to want her, love her, long for her intensely, once they have left her and moved, breathed and felt for a short while on "foreign soil". I recall my own experience. In spite of the forgivable and even lovable vagabondage of my artist's nature, which did not think it at all necessary to miss any real opportunity to express itself or deliberately experience the many-sided romance which is true life, I yet felt growing in me, all the while a deeply intimate sense of quietness such as seemed to express a need for



home-returning.

However comfortably settled one might be abroad, I think that one cannot help aching for the land of one's birth, for its dust which inspires a sentiment in the heart not easy to shake off. I know how I craved for India all over again and even with a greater intensity of longing than I had ever felt before. The name of India thrilled my bones until each one of them seemed transformed to an ivory flute sounding the sweet and enchanting music of my very soul, and the lips could only find one word to accompany that music; it was "Motherland."

Do not think it is exaggeration to say that many an Indian becomes a patriot for the first time in his life only after a visit abroad. While he accepts the superiority of progress made by countries outside his own, he yet retains an inexpressible love and tenderness for his own country round which, in his heart, centuries have gone to create an inextinguishable halo.

I went back to London, bidding the University farewell. There, I awaited the day when Kamala would arrive. I received her at the docks. It was a very strange reaction. I had outgrown the first madness of early love; what I felt for her was a mixed feeling of joy to see her look so young and fresh and beautiful, and a sense of sadness that my sanctuary had fled. Every real artist has a need of solitude and sanctuary which are sacred to him. During the hours of his fleeing into them he outgrows his usual ordinary captivity inside the little circumference of that most tantalising invention known as a clock which has a way of defying eternity and breaking up the artists' vision of it into time. It was at that period in life I began to feel a dearth of moments for myself; the sense of time transgressed my growing hunger to outgrow it. Possibly, behind all this new restlessness, quite unconsciously, I was feeling from far and far away the

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gathering vibrations of the Indian National Movement which set the whole of London astir. Kamala joined the Bedford College and began to qualify for a diploma, while I spent much of my time in a sort of spiritual vagabondage which no more led my steps to the doors of ordinary romance.

I was invited to meet one of the most celebrated personalities of my country—who had now come to London and was staying at one of its most posh hotels: Rabindranath Tagore, a rage throughout the world after his winning the Nobel Prize for his really beautiful work “Gitanjali”. I had seen him for the first time, when I was a boy of twelve, at the home of a man who was destined, in a different sphere, to become equally celebrated—that was Sir J. C. Bose. I was all a-glow to meet him. The moment arrived, I found myself, dressed in my “Sunday best” as they call it, seated in a large reception hall, alone, quite alone, waiting breathlessly for “the greatest poet of Asia,” “the poet-laureate of the world” etc. titles which excited my imagination and made me say in an underbreath: “How wonderful it must be to be a poet like him. I wonder if he sleeps at all. Don’t poems worry him all night long crying to be transcribed on paper.”

While I was witnessing within this tireless procession of thought, I suddenly saw some one pass by the door of the hall almost like an unbodied being. It surely was Rabindranath, clad in spotless creamy silk matching the soft silken waves of his hair and beard. After waiting a whole quarter of an hour I saw him sail into the hall towards me like a boat whose sail had just caught a favourable wind. The first sentence he uttered was kind and encouraging: “You are a very evasive creature. I have been wanting to meet you but you seem to be found nowhere!” During the course of conversation, referring to air-travel he said: “My daughter-in-law dreads the aero-

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plane because, she says, it is dangerous. But I tell her that the whole charm of air-travel lies in the very fact of the element of danger which lurks in it!" And he laughed and I laughed with him and we laughed together.

In a mysterious way I realised that we belonged to each other, bound in a brotherhood of the spirit, and that together we belonged to India. A feeling of pride welled up in my heart. Rabindranath talked of India and his train of thought led him to say "what is merely big is not great."

Looking out of the large hall-windows, he pointed to the magnificent buildings in front and continued "Look at those huge structures . . . hugeness is not greatness," as though he meant to prove the superiority of his own cultural heritage which was spiritually great and did not care to build up merely giant structures on the surface plane, structures which the first Great War had already reduced to pitiful handfuls of ashes and which, in the last analysis, belong to time which fleets and are not builded of everlasting material.

There were rumours floating across the ocean, from shore to shore. All England was in a psychological mess and Manchester's lungs which are the mills and factories, were suddenly experiencing unrelieved suffocation. Non-co-operation in India, the boycotting of 'foreign cloth' the dramatic bonfire of mountains of it, had dislocated Manchester. The 1921 movement was now gathering momentum; it was not only humming but resounding. It was rumoured in London that White Hall had drawn up new terms of a truce with India—the masses of India had risen like a flood determined to sweep Imperialist calculation and capitalistic self-aggrandisement away like logs of wood which could no more flower and which were too weak to resist the onrush.

Jallianwala Bagh had enraged the whole country and

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sown the seeds of a decision towards freedom which seemed about to break into bloom at last, after a century and a half of bondage; sad, despicable bondage—England was trembling.

In fact, reviewing the political history of our country, I think that the Civil Disobedience Non-co-operation Movement of 1921 was the only movement which had seriously threatened British rule in India and had Gandhiji not made the colossal blunder of calling it off at Bardoli, at the psychological moment when India was literally and realistically one and indivisible, in the sense the USSR is and was during its stubborn war against the Nazi hordes.

I feel certain that India would have attained Independence years ago. But the reason for the Bardoli decision was obvious. The people rose to gain the country independence and rose in a way which threatened those whose intention was to gain independence, not for the country as a whole, but for the handful as a class! Gandhiji, who was a marvellous and genuine mass-man, a mass-leader during that single movement, became a class-man, leader of his own class, suddenly realising that the masses would overthrow everything which had consistently overthrown them during the past years. To the exploited it does not matter a jot as to whether the exploiter is white or yellow or brown. The word Exploitation never brooked of a boundary commission. It cannot be divided up. It is one, and is shared by the exploiters of the world. Gandhiji at the Belgaum Congress while seated in a tent, surrounded by leaders including the Ali Brothers, remarked to the younger "Shaukat, if I had not called off the Civil Disobedience Movement, for which people blame me, you and I would not have been sitting here today". . I was there, I heard it. It was most revealing!

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India was calling us back; we could resist the call no longer. I ran up to Cambridge and told Mr. Reddaway of my decision to give up the idea of a University Degree which I said, was rather silly as compared with the call my country had given. "It's a pity, Mr. Chatto! If only you could have stayed on a few months longer, we would have worked up a case for you—we want you at least to return to your country as a Master of Literature".... But it was useless. Both Kamala and I had decided to return to a country that was about to make history.

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“HAD I the wings of a dove!” . . . Time is a mental state. Its swiftness or slowness depends solely on the mood of man, the quality of a situation. When one wants to reach towards something dear and precious, when one yearns to touch the point of a joy which is far-away, time becomes abominably slow, it begins to behave very much like a railway train whose wheels are rusted and have not been oiled for at least half a century and the brakes of whose engine have gone wrong. The destination calls with growing intensity, but contrary to that urgent call, the train slows down and with every tardy revolution of the wheel marks what the mind calculates as an unnecessary and tantalising century.

And likewise, the reverse is true—have you not noticed how unutterably swift time seems when one is, for instance, with one's beloved just for a day or a night? Do you not think then that time is a very sad and tragic invention? If only it did not exist, the beloved would always be with one!

The thought of the distance stretching between Paris and Berlin was enormous and discouraging. Yet, it was a question of patience and the evening would surely deepen into darkness and the darkness into dawn. By the time the next day came our train would have borne us closer and closer to my brother Viren whom I was longing to meet and know and realise for the first time in my life!

We left Paris. A few friends came to see us off. Before we left we met a very important person whose name was a password among Indian revolutionaries abroad—an old, wrinkled woman, with large wrists and hands and a face which seemed obviously a history of Indian revolution; every line traced upon it was a sen-

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tence which expressed a determination to help to set India free.

She always dressed in jet-black; simple, austere, breathing an air of ascetic sorrow; "I shall never return to an India of slaves. I shall only go back to her when she is free. And I have so many brave sons who are doing their best, sacrificing every pore of their bodies, every drop of their blood, every second of their lives in the thought of the Motherland whom they are going to help become free!" . . . That woman of true greatness, mother of all celebrated Indian revolutionaries and exiles from home, was known as Madame Cama. She is no more now, but every fighter in the cause of Indian freedom should know of her, if he did not have the privilege of knowing her. "Give Virendranath my blessings and tell him that they are still and always shall be a true mother's blessings."

We found our train about to steam into the impressive station—There! the platform was teeming with men and women who had come to receive and welcome their dear ones. It is amazing how a crowd of human beings, when seen from a distance, or even at close quarters, with a dispassion and an impersonalness, can resemble a crowd of tiny and insignificant insects born in the morning only to perish by the time the evening comes. After all, in the last analysis, what is man if not only a very tiny and insignificant insect in the incalculable scheme of the universe? Stupidly helpless, powerless, inane under the masterstroke of events. Apparently he is a god, able to control forces and delve into the secrets of nature. Apparently he is a conqueror of time and space. . . . he certainly appears on the surface to be all-powerful. But he has hardly as yet started on the journey of significance. Yet, this same man, this overbearing egocentric point in evolution, is full of a yearning to reach

towards something beyond and greater than the sum-total of all apparently brilliant achievement which makes him what he is even at this point of evolving to-day. It is this yearning which makes him already meaningful, that therefore is the future hope of the experimental success of the Divine.

A revolutionary—an Indian revolutionary! As if he could ever afford fashion, as if he cared whether his head was bare or graced by a plush hat, as if he ever could find the time for polished shoes or the money to buy himself a pair, made of high-class leather! As if the Indian revolutionary could ever be conscious of the suit he wore, its cut, its style—he could not even have the patience to examine his buttons and see if they were all of them intact!

There! That was a most uncanny experience, one which remains as unforgettable and affords a thrill yet when I recall it in its details. A short, well-set swarthy man, holding a hat in his hand, dressed in a suit which was hardly ironed for months, the trouser of which had long ago forgotten the idea of a crease! His face was the blended face of two of my brothers, Bhupen and Ranen. It was unmistakably a being who had been created by the same parents as had created mine. His face distinctly said: "I am Virendra, son of a great father and a great mother. My father's name was Aghorenath, my mother's, Varana Sundari. I am an exile, and forgive the loneliness in my face. I have tried to hide it up under a constant smile of courage, but sometimes the thought of being away from one's home, one's motherland, one's own people, becomes unbearable. I have left my sisters and brothers at home. But to-day I am expecting my youngest brother, Harin and his wife Kamala. I wonder whether they have really and truly arrived by this train! If not—no! I am sure they have arrived..... it will be



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a touch of home to see them....” I could see beyond a doubt, that the face that was anxiously looking among the passengers who had arrived was looking for us. It was intensely quiet, lonesome and sorrowful—it had been marked with suffering but had also been steeled into a mask by courage and faith and hope.

A sudden swift embrace which lasted for about a minute. I cannot tell whether my brother shed a tear in secret, a tear of mingled joy and agony. I suspect he did—for, as I got to know later, he was as capable of defying a Government armed with weapons as he was going under a mood of affection and sentiment. He embraced Kamala too. The most marvellous thing about him was that he was an embodiment of the sheerest simplicity you can imagine. And the manner of greeting was significant and worthy of one who was Indian in every fibre of his being, Indian in every heart-beat. Gazing deep down into my eyes he broke the silence and for the first time I heard his voice: “Can you speak Hindi”? I knew at once that I was now in contact with a real and worthy son of the Motherland whom he among so many other true-hearted sons, was all out to rescue from the clutches of British imperialism.

Then he looked at Kamala and thought her beautiful. On the way to his rooms he said: “I am glad, fellow, that you have married a pretty person, and brought her along with you. We need beautiful women from India to visit Europe. When you return to India go and tell the leaders to arrange to send a whole host of them by a specially chartered ship. It will be one of the finest forms of propaganda for our country. Usually the ugliest women come out from India as students and visitors—women disappointed in love or castaway, women who had nothing at all to hope for in their own country. The beautiful ones get married and remain

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inside their homes as virtual prisoners. Go back and release them from their kitchens and have them sent abroad. The people here think that India has nothing beautiful to show. A German showman paid handsomely and brought out a number of the vilest specimens of men and women from Southern India and locked them up in cases and exhibited them at a mighty exhibition in Berlin during the war: "Indian Zoo" it was labelled! we have got to counteract all the filthy propaganda which imperialism makes to lower our country in the estimation of the world..."

We reached his rooms—and were introduced to the elderly, buxom and cheerful landlady who evidently considered Viren to be more a member of her own family than a paying inmate. Then we were introduced to a plain looking sickly, nervy woman with pale eyes and a smallish tilted nose. She looked more like a working class woman which she was, as we came to know later. She was proud of her birth as, indeed, she had every right to be. She was the daughter of a miner and had worked her way up to her present position as the intellectual and domestic companion of one of India's greatest men... At that time she was still a student.

She had got deeply interested in India and had come under the influence of Lala Lajpat Rai whom she considered as her master. It was through him that she had heard of Virendranath Chattopadhyaya and through correspondence ultimately reached him and lived and worked with him in Berlin. During the last war she suddenly shot into fame all over the civilized world with her brilliant reportage—her books on China made a sensation; special study classes were founded in Moscow and Leningrad to study her writings. Her name was Agnes Smedley...

Some of the most striking and distinguished patriots

and revolutionaries were the contemporaries of my brother, Viren. There was Champakraman Pillai, the fighter who fought not only for the freedom of India, but for the rights of humanity in general. He wore a beard which gave him an air, the air of a Continental painter or poet, and his dog, Prince, followed him about like a shadow. But Prince was not the sort of dog which could be put into the list of other dogs who followed Champakraman wherever he went! You would always find this patriot sitting, either over a mug of fresh-drawn Munchen Beer or over a good cup of hot tea, dreaming away either by himself or in company, and, between the puffs of smoke from his pipe which was almost always between his teeth, he would flash forth a sentence which would give one an inkling into his soul that was lacerated with a love for his Motherland and a grim fiery determination to do something to regain for her the old lost freedom and "glory that was Ind." When Viren and Pillai met the stage was set for discussion which at times would go off at a flaming tangent and even appear to come to a point of pugilism, but they were good comrades and the hottest moments of intellectual dissension would cool off and give way to brilliant wit over clanking beakers of beer! I met Champakraman on several occasions and visited his rooms quite often. He was a queer cross between a temperamental artist and the one-track revolutionary whose whole being concentrated every moment on the question of India's bondage which was hideous and disturbing.

I had never met Hardayal. But Viren described him to us as a veritable genius during the first half of every hour, and a pretty polly prattling nonsense, a dull-as-ditch-water creature during the second half. When he was inspired Hardayal was a phenomenon of intellectual sparkle and crystalline vision. As a test of his

capacity to grasp things at a glance, you could place fifty to a hundred objects on a table and bringing him into the room, give him a few swift seconds to survey them just once. Take him away from that table and that room and ask him to make a list on paper of the objects which were spread before him on the table. He would, without hesitation or fumbling, rattle off the list with uncanny precision. He was even as a hundred kingfishers rolled into one, which, with one dip of its bill, trapped and picked up all the collected objects both singly and collectively with a spontaneous and unerring simultaneousness. This marvellous gift of his stood him in great stead for the period of revolutionary life he had assumed along with his compatriots sharing exiledom with a smite that never failed. When his brain burned like a live coal with blushed genius, the first half-hour brain, those who heard him converse or thresh out some of the knottiest political problems of the times, could not but accept him as a leader, qualified with the vision, the certitude and the personality of an authentic one. But the brain gradually dimmed and dwindled resembling a dying ember. Later in life, when, on my third trip to Europe, I had an opportunity of watching the Alpine glow from my hotel rooms stuck right away on the Alps, I could not help thinking of my brother's description of Hardayal's curious brain, a freak of Nature. The Alpine range seems to become translucent a little after the sun sets. It glows, a bright roseal-red graph of solidity transformed into ethereal fire imprisoned inside the trembling body of the graph. It glows magnificently and works like magic on the sense inspiring awe and stillness in the being. One feels that one has come face to face with one of the most overpowering phenomena Nature ever invented for man. Then, just at the moment when the experience is at its

highest, the whole range swiftly crumbles and dwindles and perishes, as it were, into the sad sensation as of something which was, in the last analysis only a figment of the brain and non-existent, a rare and living beauty and fire vanishing into a long stretch of ashen contortion and wrinkle.

Viren, however, admired Hardayal greatly; but gradually even the brilliant first-half-hour brain began to wear out and become ordinary. This slowly led his footsteps away from revolution to reaction which the whole group of his contemporaries resented.

About Vinayak Savarkar he told us things which were hardly credible. We were inspired with certain heroisms he displayed during his chequered life as exile. The story of his revolutionary life should be written by one of his intimate fellow-fighters and should be written in letters not of gold but of blood, the same blood which signed and sealed the sacred vow of the revolutionaries to free the Motherland. Savarkar shared with his compatriots abroad the deep and unquenchable hunger to free India from her century and a half of bondage. The group was closely knit and its members signed the bond of loyalty to India and to each other with blood drawn from their veins.

Savarkar, like Viren himself, had escaped to France with his life at the eleventh hour, thanks to the vigilance of that grand old lady, real mother to Indian Revolutionaries, Madame Cama who was in touch with rumour and the activity of spies and the intention of those who bought them up, body and soul. She somehow got to know that her great brave sons were in danger. She literally packed off Viren and Savarkar in the nick of time, thus hoping to rescue them from the dungeon and the swinging rope which would surely have been their fate had they lingered a half hour longer on the soil of

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England. Savarkar stayed in Paris for a while, moving safely about the city free and unmolested. But some invisible irresistible ironical power seemed to be dragging his mind and soul back to England despite the obvious danger that was lying in wait for him there. Slowly but surely that power dragged even his body away along with the mind and the soul; again and again he expressed his intention to Viren and other friends of returning to England. Viren advised him against such a step; other friends dissuaded him from such rank stupidity and crass rashness. "Nothing will happen to me" Savarkar not only thought but said, "I shall hardly be recognised when I return and"... But walls have ears and there are spies everywhere, yes, even in quarters where one least expects to find them. I am here reminded of a highborn well-bred Indian in London who, years ago, betrayed, in a weak moment, some of his very dearest friends for "a mess of pottage". He is now one of India's most well-known sons, after a period of true repentance and the turning over of a new leaf. A hireling's eye is like the eye of an X-ray. It pierces through layers and layers of secret and security, and reveals what is deep down inside. Much against the will and the wish of his co-workers Savarkar sailed back to England in the fond confidence that he would be able to live and work there undetected and unsuspected.

The moment he landed at Dover he was arrested, that is the beginning of the story as told to us by Viren. Soon he was manacled and put on to a boat which was to take him as a life-prisoner to the Andamans to rot through future years of gloom and hopelessness in the grim sombre and ugly prison at Port Blair. He realised that the urge which had brought him to this pass had been weighed against the wisdom of his brothers and had been found to tilt the scales. He had wantonly

walked into the mouth of treachery even as a deer, they say, walks right into the open mouth of a boa-constrictor whose very breath exhales a fragrance which the deer cannot resist to save its life.

On the cruel lonely waters the boat went tossing bearing the brave but indiscreet exile away to a cruel lonely island where he would have to spend the rest of his life in cruel lonely isolation. Surely Savarkar's heart must have been transformed in its contours into the vision of his Motherland, the Map of India, for whom he was now about to undergo a lifetime defeated and deprived, once and forever, of its dreams, its ambitions ---but that was not as terrible as the thought that, henceforth, he was deprived even of that little freedom which was his, before being captured, to strive and labour actively for the liberation of the country of his birth.

The boat cut through the waters and the siren sounded like the voice of Death itself, who had at last conquered at least one important person who had dared so long to defy and hoodwink it. Yet, hope is stronger than death and while there is love there is hope. Love there was in plenty, love for the great Mother. Therefore, there must be hope. Yes, all of a sudden, as if a lightning flash had streaked the mind, a hope flashed and wrote a message across his being. He could still escape, and he would. But how? In a split second he had planned it all. Heavily guarded by armed guards, guns pointed at him all the while, and equally heavily cramped under fetters closing round his wrists, it seemed but the impossible and unrealisable hope of a lunatic. Within a short while of the boat leaving Dover, while still in the English Channel, Savarkar requested the guards to allow him a few minutes for a bath since he was feeling uncomfortable and grimy. Would they kindly take his handcuffs off for a little while, while he

had a bath? They very politely and generously allowed him the request. Once inside the bath he locked the door, stripped himself bare, smeared himself well with soap, until his whole body became as slippery as an eel! Then, in the wink of an eye, before you could call either to the gods or the devils, he squeezed himself through the porthole, and, with the undaunted will of a titan, slipping out right into the Channel swam towards France unobserved for a few minutes. Lord, he swam, but how! He seemed to have suddenly been transformed into the embodiment of lightning. Stroke by stroke, he covered miles of distance before the guards discovered that the bird had flown! Alarms were sounded, guards stripped and jumped into the Channel to give him chase. The boat was turned in the direction of the swimming fugitive who was crossing over to Calais with the ease and confidence of a master-hero. Many hounds to one hare, the chase went on. But by a narrow shave, within an ace of being recaptured on the Channel itself, Savarkar touched French shores. He even stood on its soil, shouting in English for rescue and protection. Had Savarkar only known enough French to explain that he was a political refugee and had every right to French protection, he would surely have been saved those nightmarish after-years of body-rot and soul-rust on the island beyond the "Black Water" and the face of Indian History might have changed beyond recognition. But alas, Savarkar could not speak one word of French literally even to save his life. The British taking advantage of the situation shouted at the top of their voices, "Thief, thief!!!" . . . The French are obviously a gullible race. However, those present on the shore were entirely taken in by the British hounds lusting after the blood of an Indian patriot.

Besides, the sight of a stark naked man was surely



not, by any stretch of imagination, one that could be said to be suggestive of decency. How could those French onlookers imagine the astounding nature of the feat performed by that selfsame nude creature within the half hour preceding his arrival at their shores? "Thief thief!" The news of Savarkar's arrest had already reached his friends in Paris. It was the sort of news that does not wait for the wireless to carry it across distance. It travels faster than lightning; it certainly travels faster than steamers which forcibly carry away captives who spell danger and destruction to the tyrants and knaves of Imperialism. We must not forget that the mother of Indian revolutionaries was still in London and was always on the alert. Madame Cama had power enough to foil the plans of her bitterest adversaries.

Viren got the news in time but he told his fellow-compatriot who brought it, that he was through with Savarkar, and that it was no good trying to help him. What was one to do with or for such a wonderful sort of creature? After a slight delay, Viren and his friend rushed by car to his rescue, but alas, they arrived two minutes too late. They could see Savarkar being handed over to the British boat which was as good as a miniature British Isles on which all the British laws in existence operated. Savarkar had been given away by the French to the British as one of the most precious gifts they ever received in the cunning history of their rule over our country and our countrymen. The international law of France could easily have saved him, had Viren and his friend only postponed argument until after his rescue. But

"There is a divinity which shapes our ends  
Rough-hew them how we will...."

How often in a lifetime we come face to face with certain events which baffle human calculation and make the

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human mind tend to believe in a hidden invincible Power which has its own will and works out its own pattern at the expense of our dreams and our hopes and our comforts.

Savarkar waved a sad farewell to the fighter-friends who had worked along with him for many years for the country for which they had sacrificed hearth home and life. . . . Thus sailed away to the Island of exiled patriots, the Andamans, Veer Savarkar, true-hearted hero, where he was about to undergo untold and unimaginable suffering, unrelieved and unmitigated torture. It is said that the Wedgewood Report on the Andamans revealed that among the tortures of both body and spirit which were introduced to lend colour to the otherwise dull existence of the prisoners, one of the most ingenious was that which Savarkar had to undergo. Day after day, he was strapped to his bed and flogged. The intention, of course, was to bend his indomitable will and break his unyielding all-defiant spirit. It was meant to crush his strong body and quench the fire in his proud heart. How could one expect the British authorities to be less ruthless to the celebrated author of a book, every page of which seared the reader's eyes and soul with fire, the book which was proscribed and which, in spite of the proscription, was hungrily devoured by hundreds of the author's countrymen who drew inspiration and courage from every line of it?

After his release and return from the Andamans to the land of his love and of his dreams, Savarkar most graciously called on me. He seemed quiet and weary and to some extent broken. That was years ago. It was more than obvious that the Andamans had managed to tamper with his earlier zeal and to temper the steel which he was before he was taken life-prisoner. It seemed to cool the all-devouring flame that he was in those

bygone days when he looked upon India as one and indivisible, as the Mother whose wide and understanding embrace held within its mystical circle all creeds, all castes, all nationalities alike who chose to name her mother. My brother's faith in man was something to marvel at; but, unfortunately for him, that faith awakened opportunities in others against him, and often weakened into mere credulity which was responsible for the numerous narrow escapes he experienced during his life of exiledom. He told us blood-curdling tales about himself, about the treacherous traps laid for him on occasion after occasion by British Imperialism through its soulless, shameless prostituted agents at work all over the Continent.

One fine morning he received a telephone call from some unknown person who furnished him with plausible and convincing credentials, adding that he would like to contact him most urgently in order to discuss with him the plan of despatching a whole shipload of guns and ammunition to India which might then easily be able to organise an armed insurrection leading to the freedom of her people. Viren, of course, jumped with joy at the prospect which held out for him such high hope for his poor enslaved country smarting under the Imperialist yoke for over a century and a half! The despatching of guns to India! How exciting! Whenever anybody started off on the subject of guns for India, Viren was all enthusiasm and had the sorry knack of immediately conjuring up the vision of a final struggle against the insolent white man who had no right to be in his country. His optimism was immense and unshakeable. It made him draw, within the fraction of a second, the roseal conclusion that India would be liberated within a week of the starting of the struggle!

The telephone call whipped his blood into a dance of

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freedom. He was in Zürich at the time. Off went Viren, his heart-beats competing, in all the way, with his footsteps in speed and excitement. "Guns for my country! Hurrah!" This sentence beat against his heart even as a wind-lashed wave beats against the shore. "Guns for my country!" It nearly proved a sentence of death for him!

He reached the appointed meeting-place where the two strange men were waiting for him with a posh car, with a high-class exterior and low-down, mean, treacherous interior.

With broad sweet smiles they greeted him and while extending their hands towards his own to grasp in acknowledgement of friendship, they suddenly gripped him and gagged him and bundled him into that car, after tying him, hand and foot, with strong cords and snuffing his consciousness out for a while with the chloroform-cap pressed close to his nostrils before he knew where he was. Then the car speeded away and tried to cross the border across which they had planned to take him into some deserted forest-place where nobody would know when they stuck a full-stop to his life which was like a brilliant phrase of fire and knowledge, power and vision.

But the old maxim, sometimes, proves its own wisdom: Man proposes, God disposes. In this case, two men proposed to take the life of one man, God disposed their venomous calculations, while the car exposed the hirelings and their intrigues. The speed of the car had to slacken when the Gendarmes on duty stopped it. Were the Gendarmes inspired by India, the Motherland who willed that one of her finest sons should be rescued from the hands of shameless bought-up butchers? The car was searched closely, and to their amazement, the Gendarmes discovered their dear

friend and hero, Virendranath Chattopadhyaya, whom they honoured deeply and with whose burning mission in life they were familiar. Viren, through innumerable contacts among various classes, had become a celebrated figure who had almost become a legend. The two agent-dogs were put under arrest and their wagging tails cut. Released from the grip of death and the cords that bound him tightly, Viren breathed the air of a new lease of life. The leather suitcase inside the respectable looking car was confiscated. In it they found a bottle of chloroform, a chloroform cap, cords, revolvers, secret papers, and, in fact, all the knickknacks collected from the House of Murder which is the natural dwelling-place of men without hearts, without human conscience, men who are masked vultures hovering about the lives of men who love and dream of justice, truth, equality. When Viren returned to consciousness they heard the harrowing story about the telephone call and the little he remembered of what followed. The kindly Gendarmes patted him patronisingly on his back and advised him never again to trust unusual telephone calls and the usual men who make them.

For months and months Viren had literally to be in hiding, since there was a tempting price on his head and those who had fixed it were thirsting after his blood. Night after night he slept in new places. No two nights ever seemed to find him in the same place. Once, he told us, of how he escaped to a lonely countryside which was unlikely to draw the attention even of the most vigilant spy. He reached it in the middle of the night and, after wandering about awhile, stood and knocked at the door of a humble tumbledown two-storeyed cottage glowing, even at that inky hour, with a dismal yellowy glow. Possibly, the inmates were dead asleep and one lonely lamp in a niche was keeping loyal vigil. Perhaps

the lamp was similar to himself, to every real revolutionary, who hardly sleeps but keeps loyal vigil over his country's cause while thousands are dead asleep snoring heavily in overpowering bondage.

Some one opened the door in response to the knock. "Yes?" a voice enquired from inside to the accompaniment of the creaking opening door. It was an elderly woman who brought the lamp with her to light the face of the stranger and ascertain the quality of his look. Viren spoke her tongue even more fluently than she did. "I want a room in which to spend just this one night, Lady of the House. I shall leave tomorrow morning. I am footsore and tired. Besides, I am hungry...." She was the landlady whose thick rough hands and fingers, chapped and red, told the whole history of a lifetime's toil. Intuition urged her to treat the stranger with sympathy. Besides, his voice was so clear and honest, its expression so utterly undisguised and convincing that the lady's heart did not need to allow even a shadow of suspicion to cross it. "I could certainly let you have our room in the attic, but I fear I will not be able to provide you with supper. You could, perhaps, find some at the small wayside inn which never does seem to want to close its eyes. But then, it is meant for tramps such as you...." Viren was thankful for little mercies. But accomodation for a night, and so warmly given, was more than a merely "little mercy" to one who was tired and a perpetual refugee in flight, from place to place, from door to door, from day to day, hoodwinking death which comes in several and tricky guises.

Through sheer force of habit brother always examined a room before he occupied it. He was led up to the small attic. When the light was switched on he found the walls gummed with wall-paper flowered profusely. Its sickly colour was in keeping with the sickly stench of the

room which was possibly hardly, if ever, used by the inmates of the house.

The landlady went downstairs after being paid the rental for the night. Brother next examined the walls and the doors carefully shooting the eye-rays of his powerful torch in every nook and corner of roof and rafter. He found it was absolutely innocent; certainly, it was safe enough for a single night. Leaving his light attache-case on the rather dilapidated iron bedstead, locking the door from outside, he went out into the night, whistling away as usual, to find a meal for himself, for he was ferociously hungry. The wayside inn was a friendly little place which seemed accustomed to welcome and receive tramps of all descriptions. But it had never, I am sure, had the privilege of such a tramp as had visited it that night! After a merry meal, Viren returned to the attic, tired and yawning and grateful for the prospect of a quiet, safe night in the small secluded upstairs room. When he switched on the light he found, to his dismay and shock, the figure of a death's head painted above the door beside his bed! It was not there before, of that he was certain. How had it suddenly appeared, he wondered. Was the kindly generous landlady in league with a spy who had warmed her palms with a luring bribe? Was he, then, followed all the way from the bustling city of Berlin to the quiet lonesome countryside? The spy, in that case, was exceptionally smart! Or, perhaps, after all, the death's head had been there, above the door, all the time, only he was too tired when he entered the room to notice that it was there. It had been there for years, perhaps, for reasons best known to the landlady. Death's head! Why, it is always lurking round and about and above every true fighter, patriot, revolutionary, even though one cannot see it. It was nothing new, nothing for apprehension. Viren had the courage of a god. He

decided that he would sleep peacefully, inspite of that silly ugly thing trying to intrigue his heart into fear. It was only an idle thing painted on the wall free from menace. Still, the thought "I wonder how it came there" tried to get the better of him, off and on. No, he was sure that the night was going to bring him no alarms. This time he had complete faith, not in man, but in a Divine power which, despite his rationalism and scientific attitude towards all things in life, came to the forefront assuring him of security and protection.

The habit which clings to us most closely and obstinately is the habit of ancestry. It is difficult to shake off entirely the ancestral call, suddenly to banish from our lives the vision and the ideal which they realised in theirs. The idea of a Divine Power is deep-rooted in most of us, if not all of us. It is the unquenchable fire lit at the altars of the heart. The idea of an all-seeing, all-knowing Divine Being remains intact through the centuries, and, even if it be only makebelieve to give us consolation and strength in hours of crises, it is withal a habit which seems more potent and overpowering than any drug invented by man!

Viren had his roots in mysticism which rose to the surface in silent lapses and, whenever it came, it brought tears into his eyes. Mysticism and worship have been the quality of most revolutionaries from Bengal. How few ever suspected this mystical vein in Viren. But it was there, ever-present, ready to flood the being like a glow reminiscent of his great father who was a passionate out-flowering of the spirit, a mystic of the highest order, one who saw and realised the universe as part of his own being; this world of change and colour, as a composite pattern of time and space still in a state of childhood and quest. For father constantly talked to us of the macrocosm and the microcosm, words which well-nigh sent my



brain whirling into flights of imagination. Wonderful words I have always thought them to be. But when I think of the gigantic dimension of father's genius and personality, I begin to find the microcosm lost in the macrocosm of which he seemed a human embodiment.

As I have said before, we were all taught to say and believe that we were God. Viren was no more afraid of any danger. He was cautious but never turned pale in a moment of crisis. He made up his mind that the ugly figure of death above his door was, at best, a humourous and pitiful sketch done in coloured chalk. Perhaps, after all, it was there as a messenger of death to guard him from life entering the room in the form of a filthy spy or assassin paid to take his own.

He slept and snored the night away into dawn. He awoke and found himself as alive as ever. Everybody who knew Viren and of his life's dark vicissitudes were certain that he was ringed round with a magic which Death with all its boast and brag could never hope to penetrate or touch.

Viren took us round. Berlin, which city struck me as being as strong as the language of the Germans and as exquisite. The wide "strasses" and buildings gave one the immediate impression of a solid culture which it would take long to disturb. At the time we were there on our first visit the Great War of 1914-1918, had come to a close; and we noticed the apparently quiet movement and behaviour of the people, despite the ravage left by it and a consequent inflation rendering millions of marks meaningless and without purchasing value.

There was a hatred which was growing, a hatred for the victors which gradually took on the aspect of a womb throbbing and bursting with new decisions, new determinations of vengeance. Hitler was as yet in the background; one felt of the people that they were regretting

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the absence of the Kaiser who had become, through a long and unbroken tradition, their symbol of power and protection. The Germans are essentially worshippers of monarchy without which they seem to be orphans wandering about looking for their lost parent. Everywhere one went one seemed to miss the Kaiser, the **Unter der Linden** streamed with men and women who were obviously trying their best to get used to his absence.

How deeply the Germans loved monarchy those days became obvious on the occasion of the visit of Aga Khan to Berlin which became an occasion for colourful excitement and enthusiasm. How wildly their hearts beat and with what continued gusto for days their lungs vibrated in vociferous adoration of the self-conscious, whiskey-fied owner of race horses and of a whole big community who look upon him as veritable god incarnated! Aga Khan, prince and potentate on a lesser scale than the Kaiser, but prince and potentate withal! What would they have done, I now wonder, had he been weighed before that as he has been of late weighed against solid gold and Australian diamonds? Would they not have considered him as the divinest being on earth? It was a clear indication of their love of Monarchy the way they welcomed this bloated genius of kingship!

It was thrilling to hear Viren talk to innumerable friends in the street, in the restaurant, in beer-cellars, in different languages—for he was known literally to every second man in Europe; his name was a pass-word during the 1914-1918 war in the camps of German soldiers; he came to be looked upon as one of the most powerful men in Germany. He held keys which opened sealed doors and his commendation of a plan or a man worked like instantaneous magic. Viren was conversant with fourteen to fifteen languages: It was said of him that he would go to a new Province and within ten days be able

to write an article in the tongue of that Province. He spoke English and wrote it with a mastery which, it was rumoured, evoked unstinted encomiums from no less a literary genius than George Bernard Shaw. But Viren told me that he knew French better and could write and speak it with less effort than he did English. Of course, German he rattled off from the tip of his tongue, and Swedish was almost as good as his mother tongue. He spoke Persian and Urdu with fluency and wrote in several scripts, including Hebrew. A born linguist, he spoke all the languages of the civilised world and, therefore, felt at home wherever he went.

He always remarked that Sweden was the most cultured country in the world and claimed it to be his second home. When he was hunted about from place to place, hounded from country to country, just grazing past death in a series of narrow hair-breadth escapes, it was in Sweden that he had found not merely political refuge but a natural home of which he had automatically become member. The Swedes at once realised the genius that he was, his stature of vision and of culture.

And as a mask to all this deep serious reflection on the problem of his country's freedom and that of the world, his humour kept on changing its hues and ran into several patterns! One of his favourite sports was to shock Hindu students and visitors who came into contact with him. "You know what's wrong with you fellows. Listen! learn to drink beer and eat beef; until then you cannot fight for or win freedom."

It reminds one of Mustapha Kemal who ordered the digging up of the tombs of 'holy men' who had become a cult of his nation, a cult that was holding its mind and heart in the thrall of superstition. Superstition is taboo to the revolutionary. At first the visitor would be taken aback and arrive at the natural conclusion that Viren was

a damned heretic and traitor to the tenets of his own religion. But gradually it dawned on them that he was only out to release them from the chains of superstition and cult which are obstacles in the path of progress.

Another favourite criticism of his was with regard to our so-called Indian National Anthem. He would roll his eyes upto heaven in hollow assumed ecstasy, imitative of most of his countrymen whose voices are anaemic and dull and without fire—and then he would intone quite seriously: “Vande Mataram.” Of course, true to tradition, he drew out the “de” part of Vande almost to vanishing point, very much in the manner the American draws chewing gum out of his mouth. . . . At the end of the long-drawn-out phrase he would say: “By the time you have finished with that whole length of agony, any conqueror could finish the whole lot of you Indians with one round of machine gunnery taking its own time to emit its bullets dipped in contempt of the whole nation and its mournful National Anthem!”

Which, of course, though apparently meant to be humorous, is dangerously true. India’s national song is yet to come; such a song as may be worthy of taking an honoured place among such songs as the Marseilles and the Internationale—songs which know how to make the people one and indivisible, to inspire even the most unresponsive heart, to pour lava into the being thereby rendering it a veritable volcano.

In the midst of his varied activities, and while shifting from place to place in order to escape police detection and the vigilance of spies, Viren found the time to concentrate on verse and essay writing, besides the writing of countless articles and tracts on International Politics of which some of the foremost political men of Europe acclaimed him the greatest student of the age. But one of his most remarkable achievements was a dissertation

he wrote years ago on "A Mathematical Explanation of the Perso-Arabic Script" which won him high applause from some of the most celebrated savants of the West. It is typical of our own country that this great and momentous work went unnoticed, perhaps, our savants were not willing to treat it with seriousness and respect. It is also possible that the title of the dissertation put them off striking them as, perhaps, a far-fetched idea, the work of a man who wrote it in a whim in a mere mood of just sheer cleverness which wants to advertise itself. It seemed one of those "explanations" which try, for instance, to explain that Jesus Christ was a Tamilian, supporting it with amusing, but quite intelligent proofs which on the surface appear irrefutable! But this mathematical explanation was not only brilliant but deeply historical in its tracing. In India it is not known at all; possibly, a copy or two of it might with diligence, be traced on the shelf of an Indian savant.

But the fact remains, the work of a serious genius like Viren has been neglected; so little is known even of the genius himself not to speak of his creations. It is nothing to be surprised about; slave-India has always had a knack of forgetting its pioneers. Or else, should we not have had a beautiful monument to a mighty mathematician like Ramanujam, acclaimed by the West as "the-greatest thinker after Newton?" The case of Ramanujam is a typical example. He had the misfortune of being born an Indian. Had he been born an Englishman, a German, an American, a statue of him would have been found in hundreds of places, in college halls, at the cross-roads, in the centres of parks.

This sad neglect is true of most geniuses in and of India where the work of a man is only weighed against money bags, where men are not ashamed to lick the feet of wealth and break the heart of genius!

## HOMEWARDS

The days we spent with Agnes and Viren were days of experience and knowledge. At every turn we learned something worth while; off and on they threshed out for us problems touching life and society. Agnes was an ardent champion of woman and her neglected cause. The instant anybody suggested that woman's intellect or capacity to build was inferior to that of man, she jumped up from her seat like a wounded lioness and almost clawed him red in the face!

Nobody suspected then that Agnes would carve out for herself the brilliant future she has done, winning an honoured place in the history of the literature of the day, being acclaimed by the world as one of the rarest reportage creators the modern world has come across. Her books "Chinese Red Army Marches On", "China Fights Back" and her latest "Battle Hymn of China" have literally set a new manner and style in reportage literature. Who could have thought, in those days, when we were together, day after day, that that self-same nervous little woman whose lips twitched and colour went pale at the thought of Viren in danger, would herself, a few years later, be in the thick of the struggle in China and establish herself as eye-witness of the carnage and rapine which resulted in the unequal battle which Marshal Chiang waged against the brave Red Army which yet, through sheer discipline and united will, scored many a glorious triumph over boasted numbers and weapons set in action by the reactionary government of China. It is said that Agnes got wounded on one of the fronts. But nothing daunted her flamelike spirit which burned clear and unflickering in

the midst of blackest storms. Borne about in a stretcher, she watched the grim battles raging in front of her and around her, surveyed death taking his toll on battlefields, cannon vomiting smoke and belching fire and behind it all, saw as clear as daylight the Army of the People, scornful of danger and death, capturing new life and hope and marching bravely onwards towards a new world wherein not the vestige of a chain shall be allowed to remain.

Viren spared no pains in tutoring her to this freedom from fear, until Agnes began to sense a transformation in her whole outlook on life. Her deep attachment to Viren began to slacken and the necessity of a new way of life and action gradually prepared her for the life of the revolutionary she now is, ripe with courage and political understanding full-fledged for flights which nothing dare hinder.

Viren became more and more silent as the time drew nearer and nearer for our departure from Germany. When he came to see us off at the station, the night we left for Italy, he kissed Kamala and me over and over again and, when he could not quite manage to hide his emotion, he left us and went aside to the corridor and wiped away the rolling tears from his eyes.

Then, with assumed cheer and an exaggerated gusto in his voice he said, "Well, babes, go back to the Motherland and tell her that she has sons abroad in exile who have never, for a moment, betrayed her. Tell her that we are longing to return to her. My boy, Harin, don't bother. We shall all be returning home some day, returning with our own Nation's Banner proudly hoisted on the mast of the ship that will take us back home. . . ."

\* Now that the Union Jack has disappeared and our

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\* Virendranath is now no more. News has only just come that he passed away in the month of January, 1941.

country's banner with the Dharma Chakra centred amidst three colours, is flying all over Hindusthan, I wonder whether my brother's words might become prophecy. I wonder whether our National Government will charter a special ship for the weary exiles and indefatigable fighters yearning to return to the lap of the ancient Mother?

Just before the train left, clutching my hand impulsively, Viren asked in a choked whisper: "If I came back to India in disguise, would not my people hide me and give me protection? I should then be able to work underground and create a mighty upheaval and drive the British out within a week!" I told him that, unfortunately, a country of slaves had traitors lurking about in every corner, and that although we talked so loud of spiritual life and brotherhood, we were incapable of either.

After all a slave, through time, acquires all the qualities of one; or else the enslaver would have a poor chance to exploit him. Treachery, deceit, vulgarity, falsehood, willingness for filthy lucre to cut the throat of a brother. . . . all this exists in every enslaved country. In ours, these qualities are often masked by home-spun cloth and the performing parrot-like of religious rites which lend us an air of a love of freedom and of respect for the nation.

A heart-curdling shriek from the massive engine; then slowly the train moved on and on, gliding past the immense length of platform, leaving brother in the distance, a dot which did not move, dimly washed in the light of the station-lamps. It was obvious that he wanted to see the train itself become a similar dot as it steamed away bearing in one of its compartments two young persons who had become very dear to him. After the train left, both of us had tears in our eyes and, for a long while we held a silence choked with



the painful experience of parting from one who had not only become dear to us but spiritually intimate. I thought to myself: "What a brother!" It was no wonder that father used to speak of him with such pride; that the family, in my younger days, thrilled, as though a divine event had occurred whenever Viren's letters arrived, which was rarely. This was the man who was worthy of being the offspring of Aghorenath and Varada Sundari. When our house in Calcutta was searched in 19—, and a photograph of Viren was found by the police who enquired whose likeness it was, father's eyes brightened up and his voice rang with dignity. "This, my friend, is the photograph of my son of whom I am justly proud." And the irony of it was that the search had been carried out mainly because of him and his highly inflammable activities abroad! The police were out to discover in our house "secret and incriminating correspondence" received from him either direct or through friends who had returned after meeting him.

There is hardly any doubt that men of the stamp of my brother led the British Government a dance. Such men are more than a match for any Imperialist Government or State and its most cunning network of treachery and intrigue!

The journey was extremely lonesome and mournful. We did not know a word of Italian and found it difficult to travel in Italy. Yet, inspite of the strangeness and unfamiliarity of Italian people and places, we did manage to do a fair amount of travelling—we visited Verona, Florence, Rome. In Rome it was by a stroke of luck that we met Shahid Suhrawardy, the sensitive artist and art-critic who had spent many years of his life away from his own country. He was before the Russian Revolution, a *regisseur* at the Moscow Art Theatre. Not being able to see eye to eye with the Revolution nor with those who

## HOMEWARDS

made it, he left Moscow along with a group of celebrated Russian artistes of the Moscow Art Theatre. He spent months after that in the various countries of Europe studying art under the changing conditions which resulted from the Great War which was over, leaving in its trail a restlessness, a fever and a fret in the heart of shocked and maimed humanity. Shahid Suhrawardy automatically became our guide and took us round Rome. He left on us the impression of one who had an ancient Hindu consciousness, and the old Hindu intuition which in a flash grasps the composite and exquisite mysticism of life which is the immortal substance of true art.

We caught a boat at Brindizi and sailed homewards. Already in our hearts there was a feeling of homesickness. Truly, one's own country is more than just mud and rivers and mountains and peculiarly kindled horizons and stars twinkling in a particular way. Each body a country shapes is, in a mysterious and psychic manner, indivisible part and parcel of that country. It is not something apart from the food that feeds and nourishes it, from the soil which grows that food. Each man is his nation in more than a mere symbolical sense. His nature is blended with the nature of the land, and derives its sustenance, even beyond its own knowledge, from the winds that blow across it, the harvests that laugh out of its depths, the sun that rises above it pouring forth its benediction of warmth and transforming glow.

India seemed to call us back with an urgency which was inexplicable. We were glad we were returning. I was full of a new dream for my country. I decided to go back to it in order to discover my soul which, I was beginning to feel, I had only touched on the surface. I was realising within myself a nausea for the suit I had on, for my clean shaven face, for the superficial English culture I had imbibed. I was sounding hollow deep down

## LIFE AND MYSELF

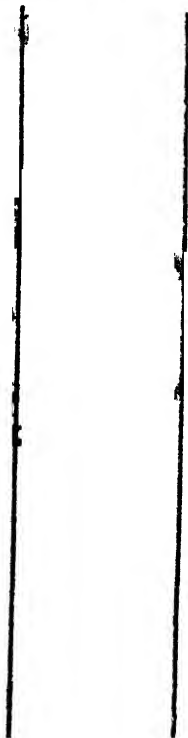
in my own heart. I awoke to the realisation that most of us were no better than automatons without a soul of our own, aping the manners and the surface-values of the West. I decided that I would, instead, banish the inferiority complex which imitated the English and assumed false airs in order to pass off for a superior being. Reaction was definitely setting in. I was reacting to the erroneous idea of progress, which I had, along with thousands of my countrymen, been entertaining all those past years, and the pity of it all was that we did not know that it was erroneous.



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