

FICTION

Flora Annie Steel

From the Five Rivers

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From the Five Rivers

By

Flora Annie Steel

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**TO MANY FRIENDS AND ONE FRIEND
SINCE WITHOUT THE MANY
THESE STORIES COULD NOT HAVE BEEN WRITTEN
WITHOUT THE ONE
THEY CERTAINLY WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN PUBLISHED**

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FROM THE FIVE RIVERS.

GUNESH CHUND.

Outside the village a man stood alone in the moonless night. Yet it was not dark; for in the unending depths of violet blue the stars hung many-hued and many-sized--each in their order, so clear, so bright, that the simile "as one star differeth from another in glory" stood out in all its vivid truth, undimmed by the mists of a Western atmosphere.

The man, however, neither looked nor thought of the stars. He had seen them shine thus after the winter rains ever since he had been able to see, and his eyes were full of the shadowy stretch of level fields which seemed to rise towards the pale horizon. There was a fresh, damp smell in the air, and close to his feet some lighter shadows surrounded by darker ones showed that the recent rains had been heavy enough to leave fresh pools of water in the hollows whence the village had been dug--hollows like the skeleton at the feast, serving to remind the inhabitants that their origin was dust, their end the grave.

Toil and moil flung their refuse into these as if in derision; the pitiless eastern rain washed the mud from wall and roof back to its birthplace; but year after year the antlike builders piled more mud over the ruins of the old, until the village, girt by its grave, grew dignified by age, and, gaining renewal from its own mortality, rose higher and higher above the surrounding plain.

Such a treeless, formless plain, circled round by that fillet of paler sky where the stars shone dimly, like distant fire-flies. Not a landmark anywhere, save, behind the man, his own village. By day an ant-hill of low huts; in the soft darkness piled like a fort, lightless, soundless. He turned towards it, his eyes seeking a central block standing higher than the rest. It was his house; the house where he and his forebears for many a generation had been born; where he had stood by his father's death-bed and taken the reins of office from the dying hands; where he, too, hoped to die and pass the headship of the village to some stalwart son. And it was childless as yet. A curious thrill seemed to join heart and hand and brain in a trinity of skill and strength and love, for yonder in that dim house a woman was bringing a child into the world with pains beyond the primal curse; and he, the father, driven by a restlessness new to him, had wandered out into the night to seek patience in action. It could not be over yet; his mother had said it would be long, and the jackals had not yet given their second cry. He turned again to the fields.

"The land is good," he murmured to himself, "the crop is good, and the rain is good. If only this be a son--"

He drew a long breath that was half a sigh. A stir in the thorn enclosures where the cattle were folded for the night caught his practised ear, and he walked towards them, listening. A feeble bleat followed by a patter of feet made him push aside the rude hurdle barring the entrance. Among the crowding sheep and goats the first lamb of the season lay beside its mother, and his eyes lit up as he forced his way through the circle of uncertain elders to reach it. He was in luck to be there, else the first-fruits would have been dead by morning. He lifted the lamb gently, thinking the while that he must divide the flock ere another night, and so run no more risks. As he made his way back to the village with swinging strides the mother trotted after him, bleating, and the village dogs snuffed at his heels silently; they knew better than to bark at Gunesh Chund the head-man, tall and strong; looking all the taller by reason of his white turban and the lank folds of white drapery falling from his high shoulders--so tall, that he had to stoop in order to enter the door leading to the outer court of his house. Within were lights and a cackle of women's voices; but here, in the wide expanse of beaten mud floor, darkness and silence, save for the cud-chewing of the milch kine ranged in one corner, and the rasping rub of a weighted halter through its ring, as the head-man's pony turned at its master's entrance.

Gunesh stood still and called, "Mother! mother!"

An old woman with an oil cresset held above her head came to the inner doorway and peered into the darkness through the flowers and branches garlanding the entrance. Then she set aside the swinging sickle hung to bar all passage to evil spirits, and, stepping out, shook her head at the mute inquiry in her son's eyes.

"Not yet, O Gunesh. But all goes well. 'Twill come with the dawn, like many another. And fear not, O my child. 'Tis a son. The stars and the omens are agreed."

A faint bleat made her set the cresset nearer. "What hast thou there, O Gunesh?"

"The firstling, mother. 'Twas in the fold. I have brought it hither for safety."

The old woman's face shone with delight.

"A ewe lamb! 'Tis another omen; and there is luck in the house to-night; for as the ewe lamb to the fold so is the male child to the hearth. Have no fear, O Gunesh! Have no fear!"

She laid one wrinkled hand on her son's arm, and, with the lamp held high in the other, gazed fondly on his face,

curiously like her own--the same refined, aquiline features and narrow forehead; but the man's was less alert than the woman's, and softer, especially now as he stood hesitating.

"And--and--Vëru?" he asked, somewhat sheepishly.

His mother shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, Vëru! She is well enough. She suffers, but that is the woman's part. 'Twould have been better for her years ago. But she will forget. All women do, and the omens are good--"

A querulous complaint from within, followed by women's voices, made her pause.

"I must return. Folk are so ignorant nowadays, I wonder aught comes right. But thou needst not fear, my son; the old mother knows it all. So! the lamps are lit, the flowers strewn, the spices burned, the chants raised duly. The Great Ones must needs be pleased; and look you, Guneshwa! the sun comes back with the dawn."

"Yea, mother," he answered, meekly, "and sure the firstling shows luck."

When she left him he threw some straw in one corner for the ewe, and guided the tottering lamb towards it, smiling to himself over the frail, ridiculous attempts at escape made by the little creature. The bleats subsided into contented silence, and he groped a stumbling way up the narrow steps leading to the flat, square roof of his house. There he sat down, his back against the parapet wall which gave seclusion to the women's court below, whence a glimmer of light and a murmur of voices reached eyes and ears. The rest was darkness and silence.

"With the dawn," he muttered--"it will come with the dawn."

He took a nugget of opium from an inner pocket, broke off a bit, and having swallowed it set himself deliberately towards patience. Most men of his race would have found the situation simple, and their minds, if on the rack of expectation, would have been free from doubt. Gunesh Chund's heart, however, was softer than most men's--softer than his mother, for instance, deemed a true man's should be. It was occupied with one thought. Supposing it was a girl, after all? What should he do? He could not feel orthodox disgust or anger at the idea. Yet he longed for a son, if only because it would settle so many vexed questions and make life so much easier. Even now with his mother and Vëru peace was not always to be had; but how would it be if the second wife with whom the former threatened him came to make a third in the quarrel? Sooner or later he would have to make a fourth, of course; that was always the end, and he had all a kindly man's hatred of tears and fuss.

Yet a son he must have, and that quickly, for, as his mother said, truly the cousin's young wife was becoming unbearably pretentious over those big boys of hers. What wonder? Were they not what all boys should be? Gunesh Chund felt himself mean and spiritless as he recognized his own admiration for those whom his mother regarded as mere pretenders to the hereditary office of head-man. Did not Kishnu, their black-browed, sony mother, openly declare that, even if Gunesh had a son, hers might yet be preferred as being older, should autumn chills and summer pestilence carry the present incumbent off before his time? At least so the old mother said. And one thing was certain: Devi Ditta and Pooram Lal, the village elders, were no friends of his since that dispute about the common lands. They might side with the other branch. Without doubt a son must be had to carry on work in this world and give life to the next.

And if this was a girl? A bleat from the lamb below made him suddenly smile at the very idea of baby fingers playing with his beard and baby kisses on his face. Were girls' kisses less sweet, girls' fingers less soft?

He shifted uneasily, conscious that his thoughts were heresy in his mother's eyes. Doubtless she was right. He would have to marry again, since Vëru would plainly be accursed, unable, even after all the pilgrimages and vows, to perform her first duty. As he sat trying to harden his heart, wild, skirling chants rose every now and again from the women's court, and at each outburst he shifted again uneasily; for through the noise he seemed to hear the cry it was meant to deaden, lest a complaint might anger the Dread Givers of Pain and Pleasure. And Vëru had been good to him. He sat on till the dream-compeller made even his hazy thought more hazy, and patience came with sleep.

When he awoke the dawn was past, and as he stretched his long length skyward in the first enjoyment of past sleep, the whole circle of earth and heaven round him was ablaze with the sun rising gloriously over the cloudless world. He stood so, for a moment, the centre of his universe, contented, serene, ere memory returned to him. Then he made his way down to the yard with fear at his heart. All was still as the grave, even in the women's court, and it was a relief when he peered past the swinging sickle to see his mother wrapped in her quilt dozing by the open fire-place in one corner.

He went over to her and touched her on the arm.

"Mother!" he called.

She was alert in an instant, and looking in his face answered his mute question fiercely.

"It is a girl--a useless girl! What need to wake thee for such bitter news? The woman is accursed."

The quick assent rising to his lips was stilled by a little cry from within the quilt. Something--he knew not what it was--thrilled him and kept him silent.

"Is--is it pretty, mother?" he asked, sheepishly, after a while.

The old lady eyed him with suspicious scorn.

"See for thyself, ninny," she replied, shortly.

Gunesh Chund felt a distinct disappointment as he looked down at his first-born. He had forgotten what new-born babies were like since the days when, as a boy, he was admitted to such sights. This one struck him as ugly, or at least as less pleasing than a lamb or a calf.

"God send it be not ill-looking, mother!" he blurted out in a tone of alarm.

She laughed, still in the same short and scornful fashion.

"Lo! there never was a plain woman among us. The child is well enough, and favours thee. Is it not enough that it should be a girl?"

He did not hear the latter sentence. Accustomed in all things to accept his mother's fiat, he was lost in trying to trace the likeness to himself, and, to aid his efforts, drew a reflective forefinger over the featureless face, feeling, as he did so, that strange thrill at his heart again. Suddenly, as he neared the mouth, the lips trembled and a little red tongue shot swiftly on his finger-tip. He burst into a great roar of delighted laughter.

"Ho! ho! Look, mother, look!"

"Didst never see a child suck before, O Gunesh Chund, *lumberdar*?"^[1] retorted the old woman, crossly, as she tucked the baby away again. He felt abashed, but the laughter had left him at peace with all mankind.

"And Vëru? How is she?"

This was too much. The stern old lady rose to her full height and faced him. Her grey hair, disordered by the night's watching, escaped from the close folds of her veil, and the quilt slipping from her showed her tall, erect as a girl. She threw out her right hand in declamation:

"Thou art no better than a woman thyself, O Gunesh! To ask after Vëru, the wife of disgrace! Thou shouldst not have thought of her. Were it not better she were dead? Ungrateful! wicked! For she must be wicked to frustrate my prayers and alms. Lo, have I not fulfilled her every wish these nine months past? And now 'tis 'How is Vëru?' forsooth, and no thought of the mother who has slaved in vain. But this is an end. She is accursed, and thou must bring a new wife to the hearth if thou wouldst not lose thine own soul, and the soul of those who begat thee. Leave Vëru her girl, and be kind to her, if thou art a ninny. There are other women in the world who can bear sons."

As Gunesh crept out of the house feeling small, despite his great height, he told himself it was only what he had expected. For all that, his mother might have waited a day or two ere speaking of the new wife, within Vëru's hearing also. God send she had been asleep after her long suffering!

He was so dispirited that he did not care to face the *dharmshala* with its congregation of elders ready to condole, and its younger men inclined to sneer. So he gave up his morning pipe, and carried the firstling to take possession of the lambing fold. As he walked along in the sunshine, as he had walked in the shadow, with it in his arms, he felt its little tongue sucking at his hand, and it seemed to hurt him, body and soul.

The forty days of seclusion being over, Vêru, in her finest clothes, sat cross-legged on a string bed ready to receive company. The court-yard had been freshly swept, the brass cooking-vessels scoured and set in a row against the mud wall, where the sun smote them into retaliating rays. A few flat baskets of sweets, covered with penny-halfpenny Manchester pocket-handkerchiefs printed in the semblance of a pack of cards, stood ready for the expected guests, and Gunesh Chund's mother had been busy all the morning making a sort of furmenty in honour of the occasion; for, though she considered her labour thrown away on the birth of a girl, she would not for the world have omitted a single ceremony, and so have given colour to outside condolence. Vêru herself was a delicate-looking, pretty woman of about six-and-twenty, with a broad forehead, and a thin-lipped, sensitive mouth--both of which characteristics were more blemishes than beauties in the opinion of her neighbours. Her chief defect, however, in the eyes of the stalwart, open-hearted, shrill-voiced, village women lay in a certain refined reserve, which they set down to conceit born of her pretensions to scholarship--though how any woman could be so wrong-minded as to usurp man's estate by learning to read and write passed their simple understanding. But Vêru, who had lived with a rich uncle during her girlhood, had shared her cousin's desultory visits to a mission school for a year or two, and returned to her parents and marriage with a book in which she could read glibly, and a reputation for writing. She could also knit many-hued comforters in *brioche* stitch, and darn strips of net in divers patterns--appalling and almost incredible culture, viewed with disfavour by all save Gunesh, who was simple enough to admire it; probably because *she* was woman enough to admire him immensely.

The infant, to whom the name of Nihali had been given, lay in her arms, bedizened into the semblance of a performing monkey; tight little silk trousers on the bandy legs, a tinsel-decorated muslin bodice, and a flowing veil, the size of a pocket-handkerchief, disposed over the round skull-cap where a black fringe of wool simulated hair. On this outfit Vêru had spent much time and trouble, while her mother-in-law grumbled under her breath at the expense, or openly said that in her day a decent woman would have thought it shame to make such a fuss over a girl, after keeping her master waiting ten long years for a child.

There was bitter war between these two women outwardly: yet, however fiercely Vêru combated the elder woman's views, in her heart of hearts she could not overcome the inherited conviction that the meanest thing on God's earth, was a sonless wife. Cultured retorts as to what she had heard and read in school of Western opinions, and of the sex of the Queen-Empress, did very well as lethal weapons, but as inward balm were most unsatisfactory. Often and often, after a passage of arms in which her more dexterous point had reduced her adversary to the usual appeal for patience, she would creep away into one of the dark, windowless rooms opening off the central court-yard, on pretence that the light prevented her baby from sleeping. There, safe from observation, she would weep salt tears over its unconscious face. After all her prayers and alms, why had not Fate given her a son? How much easier it would have been for everybody, Fate included; for now high Heaven would have to be wearied once more!

She had seen but little of her husband during her days of seclusion, so the task of shutting her white teeth over a retort when he was by had not been a very difficult one. But now the every-day life was beginning again, and it would be harder to keep up the forbearance--though she was clever enough to see that it earned his gratitude.

He came in before going to his afternoon's work in the fields to inspect the preparations. The sight of the bedizened baby awoke his broad laugh.

"Ho! ho! ho! Grandmother, see what a figure Vêru hath made of the child! For sure it is like the puppets Dya Ram brought round at Diwali Fair, that danced on a string!"

"I'm glad thy wits give thee sense to see the folly of dressing the child so," grumbled the old woman. "In my day there were none of those fal-lals on farmers' children. We left them to the silly town's-folk."

"In your day, mother, farmers' wives did not know how to make them; but I cut and sewed them all," retorted Vêru, with studious courtesy.

"Aye, aye, that's true," remarked her husband, relieved. "Thou hast clever fingers despite they are so small.--Hath she not, mother?"

"Clever, mayhap; but in my time wives found better work than snipping and sewing. They made stalwart sons for the hearth, and left clothes to the tailor. 'Tis the other way on now, I suppose. Thou wilt send to the tailor for a son soon, I suppose. It is time."

"Nay, but the mother is right," interrupted Gunesh Chund, hastily, seeing Vêru's eyes begin to flash; "the little one

is like a puppet, as I said, Veru, and 'tis happier with its arms and legs free. I love to watch it struggling on its back like a young duck with the megrims. 'Tis comical. But feed it well, wife; if 'twere a calf I would hold it over-thin. Young things need fat. Do as the mother bids thee, and 'tis sure to thrive. Had she not daughters of her own in her time?" His voice had a ring of appeal in it.

"Aye, and some of them in man's guise," muttered the old lady as she watched him bending over the baby. Nevertheless, she spoke more softly as she bade him get to his fields, the proper place for a man.

"True, mother, true," he assented happily, as he went to the door with her. "And there is no place I like so well. 'Tis good to stand knee-deep in young corn when it grows blue-green, as this year. Thou shouldst see it in the dip by the sandy bottom. And see the dappled sky like a partridge breast, auguring more rain. A good harvest, mother! A good harvest and new dresses--"

She checked him. "Nay, Gunesh, there is the new wife to think of first. Good harvest days are good wedding days."

They were beyond ear-shot, and yet the man gave a quick glance at the woman within.

"Hush, mother, hush!" he said, almost in a whisper. "Should a man take the name of another woman in his mouth, with the cry of a month-old babe in his ear? There is time yet."

"Time!" she echoed. "Time, indeed! 'Tis not time, but will, is wanting. Get thee gone to thy fields--thank Heaven thou art not a ninny there--for see, yonder comes Kishnu to the reception, bringing all her three. The jade! 'Tis only to crow over our girl!"

Gunesh tried to frown as he stood irresolute, but his mild face refused the task.

"May be, mother," he replied simply, "yet were the boys mine I would take them wherever I went, crow or no crow. They are so sweet."

His mother stamped her foot. "Aye, aye! Sweet for sure. And will not the eldest make a fine *lumberdar*? Folk might almost deem him thy son."

"I could wish none better."

Foiled by his gentleness, she watched his tall figure go down the alley for a minute, and then began the attack in a more promising quarter.

"Here comes Kishnu, Veru. Did I not say she would be the first? The crowing cock loves early hours. She hath her three with her, and Gunesh, poor soul, must needs stop and fondle them. He loves those boys; and who can blame him? Sure, a man's heart cannot live in his breast always!"

"That is true; but when a man gives it to a wife she can keep it from straying," retorted Veru. She was never without words, but they were empty diet, and she could not help looking at Kishnu's boys with hungry eyes.

"I scarce liked to bring Shivu here to-day," quoth the latter, settling herself with a flounce among the voluminous skirts that hung half-way down her trousered legs. "You see, he grows so big--almost too much of a man for these women's doings."

She tittered, twisted her huge nose-ring to one side, disposed her youngest at her capacious bosom, and, thus prepared for conversation, began afresh in a shrill, strident voice:

"So that's your girl, Veru! Sure you have dressed it for the wedding already! Early days; but with a daughter one has to think betimes.--Is it not so, grandmother?"

"Our women have no difficulty in finding husbands," replied Veru's mother-in-law, who, whatever she might say herself, was not inclined to stand impertinence from outsiders. "But perhaps in thy family 'tis a different story."

Now Kishnu was no beauty, despite her fruitfulness. Neither was she ready of tongue. So she sniffed, comforting herself with the knowledge that words, after all, were but poor weapons against facts. As an immediate revenge, however, she dragged the most disagreeable topic she could think of into the conversation.

"Guneshwa looked but ill at ease, it struck me. No doubt the new settlement in the village gives him trouble."

"What new settlement?" asked Vèru, sharply.

Settlement time meant war time, since in the compiling of new records lay ample opportunity for spite; and her husband as head-man had enemies.

Kishnu tittered again. This was better than she had expected.

"So! I have broken the seal of a secret. Mayhap Gunesh said nothing lest it should worry thee during the time of recovery. But 'tis so. My man heard it awhile ago through his friends at court; for certain, yesterday. Sure, Vèru, 'tis a thousand pities this is a girl. Gunesh could have written a son's name as his heir in the new papers; and that would have ended dispute forever."

The *lumberdar's* women folk looked at each other, for once in accord. Gunesh had hidden this thing from them, and they were too proud to show how it had moved them. They preferred letting the shaft rankle, perhaps needlessly, rather than inquire further of Kishnu.

"'Tis no pity at all," retorted Vèru, tossing her head. "There can be no dispute that I know of. And I prefer girls."

This went too far for her mother-in-law. At the risk of Kishnu's delectation, she lost patience.

"There 'tis! Heard one ever the like? *'I prefer girls.'* So! thus thou mockest the great ones, and by idle words turn my prayers to naught. 'Tis too vexatious--"

"Girls are every whit as good as boys. The great Queen--"

"Pshaw! I am sick of the great Queen! Why did she come to breed dissension, and teach young women to mock at the old? Though, for sure, she herself knows better, seeing she hath proved her worth by a good family of sons."

"So may Nihali in her time."

"What! That sickly thing! Thou wilt scarce rear her to the first year, and mayhap 'tis better so. 'Dead girls,' thou knowest, 'bring live boys.'"

Vèru's face of fear sent a pang of remorse to a heart which beat true after its fashion, and the old lady went on, hastily:

"Nay, daughter-in-law! Perchance I am wrong. The child dwindles a bit, no more. I will make seven spices for it. 'Twill thrive if only thou wilt be reasonable, and save thyself from tantrums and tears. 'Tis the calf has the pain, mind you, if the cow steals green wheat."

"And with a girl the mind is at rest," continued Kishnu, in malicious consolation. "Now, with me, if the charcoal rubs from their foreheads I'm agog with fear of the evil eye, and the rest of my day is wasted in prayers and offerings. As thou sayst, Vèru, girls are better."

Vèru had no answer ready; and even when the stream of visitors set in, full of chattering congratulations and condolences, she did not find her tongue. The noise, she said, made her head ache and disturbed the baby. She stripped the finery from its little limbs, and, wrapping it warmly in her veil, held it tight to her breast, refusing to uncover it in order to gratify the curious.

Gunesh, coming in from the darkening fields, with their calm in his face, found her crying in the inner room.

"She wants to bring another wife home even now. She will not have patience and wait awhile." That was the burden of her complaint, while Gunesh sat comforting her uneasily.

"Surely, Vèru, I have waited," he said, after a time. "Few would have been so patient; but thou art a good wife and duteous even with the mother."

"And thou! Oh, thou art good, Gunesh--so good to me! See, thy patience hath brought Nihali. Wait a year, only a year longer, husband, and it will bring thee a son."

He looked at the mother and child with kindling eyes.

"A year! Surely, surely! That is but fair. So dry thine eyes, wife, for I am hungry."

That night, when Vêru had retired to her bed with the baby, and he sat smoking with his mother in the outer yard, he asked her wistfully if she really thought the child was dwindling.

She turned on him fiercely, perhaps from a feeling of pity.

"And if it does, canst not trust me to physic it? Or wouldst thou have a man doctor to thy women's rooms? They tell me the travelling one sent on his rounds by the *Sirkar*^[2] is in the next village but now. Shall I bid him come, since thou seemst to hold by new-fangled ways?"

Gunesh Chund filled his pipe again with poppy-leaves and tobacco, and watched his mother carding cotton viciously. What would she say if she knew of the promise he had made to Vêru? The narcotic did not soothe him; and when sleep failed, he strolled out to where the village elders sat discussing the possible effects of this new settlement on the total of revenue due from the community. The familiar company was a relief, though it brought a doubt of his own wisdom in waiting a year. Still it was only a year. After that, if Vêru failed to bear him a son, his duty to himself, to his ancestors, and to the *Sirkar* demanded another wife.

III.

Whether Gunesh Chund's mother, when she prophesied evil to little Nihali, did so from conviction or temper, it was not long before her words came true. Despite the marvellous seven spices, and many another time-honoured remedy, the baby dwindled and pined unaccountably. Then came a day when Vêru, half distraught and absolutely helpless, sat with it in her arms, sullen and silent. The old women of the village dropped in one after the other, more from curiosity than sympathy, each laying down the law as to some infallible nostrum, whose efficacy they defended against other views in high-pitched cackle. At last Vêru, whose smattering of knowledge only brought incredulity without lending aid, declaring she would not have the child tormented further, laid it to her breast, and turned her back upon hoarded wisdom. Only when Gunesh Chund came wandering in restlessly from the fieldwork, which for the first time in his life failed to bring him peace, she unclasped her straining arms to show him the still face lying against the full breast that roused no sign of life or desire.

A piteous sight. The big tears ran down his cheeks and fell on the soft, closed hand. He took a corner of his cotton shawl and wiped them away clumsily but with infinite tenderness.

"Sure, thou dost love her, though she is a girl," said Vêru, with the calm of despair.

The man broke into a sob and turned away.

"Mother, canst thou do nothing?" he asked, in all the wistful confidence of a child, laying his great hand on the old woman's head as she bent over her task of kneading the dough for his supper.

"Do! What is to be done with a woman who cries out if the child is touched? I tell thee, O Guneshwa, the little one is bewitched--though God only knows why any one should trouble to cast an eye on a girl. Ask Munlya. Ask Premi, or Chuni, or any wise woman. But Vêru heeds us not, saying the books deny it. So be it! The child will die!"

Gunesh Chund lingered, hesitating.

"I--I--perhaps, mother, 'twould be better to fetch the doctor. He is here still, they say."

His mother sprang to her feet, all the vigour and fire of her past youth in eyes and gesture.

"That I should have lived to hear such words in the house where I came a modest bride, where never man set foot save thy father and mine! Wilt thou cast thy honour and mine in the dust for a baby girl? Be it so, Gunesh! Choose now between her and me; or choose, rather, between Vêru's barren kisses and my curse, for the child will die if the evil eye be not averted by charms. Choose, I say; for, by my father's soul, if this bastard half-a-man enters the house, I leave it!"

"Nay, mother! I did but suggest. Vêru--"

"O Vèru! Vèru! I am sick of the name. 'Tis she who hath bewitched thee; 'tis her evil eye--"

He interrupted her fiercely, seizing her by the wrist.

"Peace, I say, mother! Peace! I will not hear such words."

"They are true for all that. She *hath* bewitched thee!"

They stood for a moment face to face, so like each other in their anger and dread. Then the strong man quailed, and fled before her words and his own thoughts. He was no wiser than his fellows, for all the soft heart that betrayed him into progress; perhaps less so, since the superstitions of his fathers enslaved his mind without controlling his affections. He wandered into the fields once more, where the rows of blossoming mustard sown among the wheat showed like a yellow sea against the horizon, but close at hand broke the green gloom of the earing corn in long, curling waves crested with gold--a sight dear to husbandmen's eyes! Yet it brought no comfort to the dull ache in Gunesh's heart, which drove him to finish work with the first excuse of waning light.

The child was at least no worse. Perhaps the warmth had soothed its pain; perhaps the feeble life was sinking silently; but the ignorant, loving eyes that watched it knew not whether the stillness made for sleep or death.

Save for Gunesh Chund and his wife the house was empty, for his mother had sought the relief of words with a neighbouring crony.

"Vèru," said Gunesh in a whisper, as if the darkening walls had ears, "dost think the doctor might do her good? The mother will not have him here--mayhap she is right--but I could take the child to him."

"O husband!" Brought face to face with decision, the woman shrank from action. "I know not, and the mother would be so angry."

But the slower mind and warmer heart had been at work on the problem, and ciphered it out once and for all.

"She need never know. Sit within, silent, as if thou hadst it still, should she return. I shall not be long; so give the child to me."

Half fearful, half pleased at his decision, the mother shifted her burden to his awkward arms. How small, how light it seemed, hidden away in the folds of his flowing plaid-like shawl, as he passed through the twilight alleys on his way to the camping-ground where, in the mud caravanserai, the travelling vaccinator was to be found! Neighbours, resting after the day's labour, called to him in various greeting, and he paused to reply with dull patience, conscious always of the unseen burden near his heart. So had he carried the firstling lamb on the night when Nihali was born. How it had struggled to escape, and sucked at his restraining hand in fierce desire for life! A fear lest the child's quiet was death made him turn aside more than once into a darker corner to look and listen.

Still with the same dull patience he sat down before the vacant room in the serai to await the vaccinator's return; for patience and doggedness are the peasant farmer's unfailing inheritance, not to be reft from him by tyrants or strangers. Some camel-drivers, newly arrived, were cooking their food at a blazing wood-fire in the open, whence the flames threw long shadows, distorted out of all human semblance, into the far corners of the court-yard, where a circle of kneeling camels browsed upon a pile of green branches. Familiar sights and sounds to Gunesh's eyes and ears, yet to-night, with that strange burden near his heart, seeming out of place and unexpected.

Meanwhile Vèru, with empty arms and nervous fingers twisting and turning themselves on each other restlessly, was straining her eyes into the darkness, and wondering with greater and greater insistence what kept her husband. Her mother-in-law had not returned. She almost wished she had, for the solitude and silence seemed unending. At last, unable to endure the suspense any longer, she drew her veil tightly, to avoid recognition, and stole like a shadow along the darkest side of the street to meet Gunesh. But he, also weary of waiting, returned from an unsuccessful pursuit of the doctor by another route. Thus no reply came to his whispered call to Vèru, as he stepped over the threshold. What had happened? He repeated the call louder.

"Vèru!--Mother! Is there no one in the house?"

His mother's voice answered him from behind, and he turned to her, relieved; for all its lightness, the little burden at his heart grew heavy in responsibility. Even in his mother's arms it seemed safer.

Two old women who had accompanied her, with the intention of making a last appeal to common sense, looked at

the child critically.

"Truly, O mother of Gunesha," said one, "'tis the evil eye; but there is time yet to cast the devil out by fumigations."

"Without doubt," echoed the other. "I have seen children nearer death than this, snatched from the grave by wisdom such as thine."

Gunesh Chund's mother looked at him, her triumph dimmed and softened by appeal.

"Wilt kill the little thing by over-kindness?" she whispered. "See, chance hath given her to us. Vêru, poor fool, is away.--Let us work the charm, Guneshwa. I worked it on thee when thou wast a sickly babe, and see how strong and tall thou art."

He looked from one to the other doubtfully. What was he, an ignorant man, to set his wishes against these wise mothers, when they assured him of success? He gave a sign of assent, and set himself towards authority should Vêru come back ere the business was well over.

The old women turned to their task joyfully. The time was past, they cackled, for any but robust measures, and life in Nihali's frail form must be made unendurable to the devil without delay. For this purpose, what more effectual than red pepper and turmeric? Swiftly, with muttered charms, and many a deft passing through of this thing seven times, and that seven times seven, the child was laid on a low, strong-seated stool, in full blaze of the fire-light, while the grandmother, bringing the drugs from her stores within, mixed them in approved manner. An earthenware saucer filled with smouldering charcoal served for brazier. Then, all being ready and placed beneath the stool, a discordant chant was raised, and the powder flung on the embers.

From the dense yellow smoke enveloping poor little Nihali came a feeble, gasping cry.

"Mother!" pleaded the man, hiding his face.

"'Tis the devil cries," replied the stern old woman, flinging fresh drugs on the coals.

A fainter cry came, echoed in a shriek from the door, where Vêru stood, paralyzed for an instant by rage and terror. The next, dashing the witches aside with furious blows, coughing and suffocating in the fumes, her empty, craving arms sought the child and found it--too late! A sigh, a struggle, and the demon, or angel of life, had fled forever.

Smarting and half blind with the foul smoke, Vêru's eyes failed to see the tall figure half hidden in the corner; but her voice seemed to pierce him through and through.

"I gave her to Guneshwa! Where is he?"

Then, as the full extent of the result came home to her, shriek after shriek rent the air, and she fell into one of the violent hysterical fits so common among Indian women of all classes.

"The devil hath entered into *her*," said her mother-in-law, bitterly; so the turmeric and red pepper came in handy.

Gunesh Chund, torn by a vague remorse, and uncertain what to think, found his refuge in the dream-compeller. But while he dreamed under the stars, on the roof that rose like a watch-tower above the village, and Vêru lay in the unconsciousness of exhaustion below, a strange, ghastly scene was enacted in the outer court-yard, where the old women flitted about with tiny oil lamps in their hands. Little Nihali, dressed in her fine clothes, with bandy legs straightened and struggling arms at rest, lay stiff on the string stool, with each tiny palm clenched over a ball of raw sugar, and miniature cards of cotton-wool, such as women prepare for their spinning, between each finger. So armed with all female attractions, the sugar symbolizing sweetness to a lover, the cotton diligence as a wife, Nihali was ready, like a true woman, to sacrifice herself unconditionally in order to bring sons to the hearth.

"Vêru, of course, would not hear of this," said the stern grandmother to her cronies, "and Guneshwa is fairly bewitched by her obstinacy. Nevertheless, the opportunity shall not slip; for if the omens are bad, I must give him another wife without delay."

So, in the darkest of the night, before the jackal's last cry heralded the dawn, the three women slipped through the deserted streets. No fear was on their faces, no huddling together or whispering; straight in solemn order, as to a sacred duty, went the little procession, headed by the tall, gaunt grandmother, bearing the dead baby in her arms.

Past the still, shining pools of water girdling the village; beyond the thorn enclosures; through the fields of wheat, till the village common-land, a stretch of bare mud and low, sparse bushes, lay dim and desolate around them.

"'Tis the nick of time," said one of the cronies, pointing to a grey shadow slinking away from their steps; "now may the Great One send a good omen!"

In an open spot surrounded by bushes Gunesh Chund's mother paused and looked around.

"Here," she whispered, and the others nodded.

She stooped to lay the dead child on the ground, carefully placing it so that the feet were from the village; then raising herself to her full height, she stretched her right hand towards the horizon, as if pointing out a road, repeating in a wild chant echoed by those behind her:

"Thus we drive you forth, O daughter!
Come not back, but send a brother."

Swift and silent as they had come, they made their way back to the village, leaving the dead baby alone, unwatched. For a while the night was still; then soft pattering feet crept round Nihali, and fierce eyes glared on her from the bushes; but Death held her in his arms secure, and fear was over forever.

"Hist!" cried the retreating women, as the sobbing wail of the jackal, beginning with a faint whine, rose louder and louder, till each bush and brake seemed to give a voice to swell the horrid chorus.

They waited listening.

"Now may the omen be good!" said one.

"The dawn will show," replied the grandmother, calmly. "I will wait here; go you home to bed."

But when the rising sun brought sufficient light to see withal, her eager eyes could find no certain indication on which to build either hope or fear. Marks there were, and plenty, showing where the beasts had fought, but no broad track of dragging, either away from or towards the village, conveying Nihali's last message to her friends.

Had she gone over the edge of the world seeking for the long-sought son? Or had she come back to haunt the hearth with her unwelcome presence? Who could tell?

"Everything goes wrong nowadays," muttered the discontented old woman. "Even the omens fail! 'Tis all the fault of the great Queen and her new-fangled notions."

IV.

The next three months brought Gunesh Chund many an uneasy hour. Even when, driven to bay by his mother's entreaties to allow her to look for a new wife, he confessed his promise to wait a year, he gained no respite from her reproaches, but rather enhanced their venom by her contempt for his weakness. What was he, to set himself above the wisdom of his fathers? What was the reading-writing woman, that she should run counter to the traditions which held the first duty of a Hindu wife was to be that of bringing a son to the hearth? He had no answer save a dull consciousness that somehow he was not quite as his fathers. They, for instance, had calmly acquiesced in such customs as the exposure of the dead child to the jackals; while, despite his familiarity with the idea, its practice had filled him with aversion. Honest as he was by nature, he never regretted the deceit which sent Vêru, after she recovered from the illness following on the shock of Nihali's death, to cool a little grave^[3] by the burning-ground with her tears and offerings.

"'Twill only make her ill again to know what thou hast done," he had said to his mother, with a decision new to him. "Silence will be the wisest for thee also, since in this I am on her side."

As for the casting out of the demon which had hurried on the inevitable end, Veru always maintained to her mother-in-law that it partook of the nature of murder; but with her usual shrewdness she exonerated Gunesh Chund from blame. For this he was grateful, though his mind was by no means made up as to the rights and wrongs of the question.

From this and many another problem he took refuge in the fields. The fierce dry winds of summer blew with scorching heat, bringing with them the necessity for a ceaseless watering of the crops. Many and many a silent, peaceful hour he spent in the forked seat behind the oxen, half asleep, half awake; while the well-wheel circled round he circled round the wheel, and the great world circled round beyond him. Whether it span swift or slow he knew not and he cared not.

Many an hour, too, he spent resting, smoking and talking, under the shade of the one big mulberry-tree, while the greybeards wheezed out their mouldy proverbs, and the lads listened with their mouths full of the overripe dead-sweet fruit. A kindly, honest crew; mayhap not far above the circling bullocks in mind or ambitions, but for the most part without an ungenerous thought or unfriendly wish.

Or he would take his pipe down to the village *dharmshala*, where strangers found a lodging and the inhabitants a debating club; but here the goad of Fate hit keenly at times when the talk fell on the coming settlement, and Kishnu's people would condole with him in covert sneers. For Gunesh Chund had been accustomed, ever since his father died, to have the first and last word in that assembly of elders, and even his gentle self-depreciation could not fail to feel a certain loss of authority. One night, after Kishnu's husband, his own cousin, backed by some friends, had openly derided his opinion, and talked big about changes in the future, Gunesh sat on longer than was his wont among the elder men. They had been his father's friends, and he turned to them instinctively for support. Yet as they sat, solemnly crouched up on the high wooden bench which filled the rudely carved veranda from end to end, no voice came from the darkness where they showed grey and shadowy in their white drapery; almost formless, save when every now and again a more vigorous pull at a pipe fanned the embers in it to a glow, which lit up the lean, high-featured faces and wrinkled hands.

And Gunesh, too, remained silent and perturbed, knowing well what was in their thoughts. It was a relief when the hubble-bubble of the pipes dropped into insignificance before a speech summoned up by neighbourly nods and nudges. It came from the patriarch, whose palsied hand shook as he stretched it forward.

"Listen, O Guneshwa, the *lumberdar*. Thy grandfather and I played together as boys in the house of my father and his. But his father was the *lumberdar*, and mine but an elder. If the seed of strife springs in the village, whose task is it to root it out? Answer me, ye who hear me!"

A murmur of approbation ran round the assembly, whereat the patriarch went on in a louder key.

"If there be young, untutored cattle in the herd, whose duty is it to see they do not gore the old? Answer ye who hear me!"

But Gunesh Chund, knowing of old the length to which this system of exhortation could be extended, broke in quickly:

"Granted that 'tis my task, wouldst thou have me root out mine own family?"

"Nay!" retorted the elder, laughing in proud anticipation of his own joke, "I would have thee plant some more of the same stock.--Is it not so, my brothers?"

This time a wheezy chuckle of assent came from the darkness, followed by a fresh voice:

"A man without a son hath one life; a man rejoicing in a son hath two."

Then another took up the parable.

"Aye! and four hands to boot, wherewith to root out weeds."

"The hundredfold wheat hath more stems than one," quoth a third.

"And a toddling child can drive bullocks," put in a fourth.

So in solemn adage ran the talk, with many a weighty pause, and many a self-complacent wag of the head when the

ball of ancient wit had been successfully passed to the next neighbour.

Accustomed as he was to this style of reasoning, each remark was a fresh tap driving the nail of conviction into Gunesh Chund's slow brain. As he stood on the roof that night, whence he could see the horizon strike the sky in one unbroken circle, a keen desire to live as his fathers had lived excluded all other thoughts. Here was his world; here lay his duty.

"Thou canst choose a wife for me if thou wilt," he said sheepishly to his mother, when, in the early dawn, he found her already at work, while Veru lay abed with some ache or pain.

"O my son! O Guneshwa!" cried the old woman, flinging her arms around his neck with unwonted tenderness, and with tears of joy in her bright old eyes. "I will find thee a pearl and paragon. With a skin wheat-coloured, and--"

"Nay, mother," interrupted the big man, still more sheepishly, "an' she please thee, and have a soft tongue, that is all I care for. And, mother, say no word to Veru yet. There is time; and mayhap thou wilt not find a wife soon."

His mother laughed scornfully.

"Not find one to marry the *lumberdar!* such a fine, straight man as thou art, Guneshwa. Why, they will come in crowds! Nay, be not so modest; that is the girl's part, not the man's. Nevertheless, as thou sayst, 'tis time enough to tell Veru when all things are settled. There is but one woman needed in a marriage."

If some rankling doubt as to the honesty of his silence lingered in Gunesh Chund's mind, it vanished quickly before the personal peace which his decision brought to the household.

Perhaps Veru might have wondered at the lull which thereafter fell over the combat, but that she herself was absorbed in a new hope of victory, and thought it possible that her keen-eyed mother-in-law might, in like manner, be preparing for defeat.

So the time of truce passed on; until one day, almost before Gunesh had realized his own capitulation, his mother informed him that a bride had been found.

"So soon!" he exclaimed, dismally. "O mother, take care! Sure the choice of a plough-bullock would take me longer."

"Then 'tis time to tell Veru," was his only remark, when the beauties, virtues, and charms of the young lady were dinned into his ears. Whereupon his mother, with much inward contempt at his scruples, told him curtly that she had purposely chosen a bride from a far country, so that he need say nothing, since nothing would be known by others, until the festivities began.

"I will tell her before then," he said, relieved; but somehow the days passed by, leaving behind them the silence that they found.

Meanwhile Veru wearied Heaven with prayers and penances till she grew thin and pale--given to fits of hysteria and tears, yet with a triumphant look in her eyes as she listened to her mother-in-law's constant allusions to her ill-health, with which the old lady bolstered up Gunesh Chund's failing resolution. All three were too much occupied with their own thoughts and secrets to notice anything unusual in the bearing of the others; or if they did notice it, naturally put the change down to vague suspicions, and so held their own counsel more firmly.

The crops were fast turning russet and gold under the glare of sunlight succeeding to the monsoon rains, when Gunesh Chund said good-bye to his household for ten days, and rode by winding village ways to the broad white road that carried Western civilization, in the shape of a post-bag, through the district. Veru, clothed in madder and indigo, stood on the roof to watch him out of sight; loath to lose him, and regretting that she had not risked her secret ere he left. How much more would she have regretted it had she known that her husband's destination lay far beyond his usual bourne, the Central Revenue Office, and that his bundle contained all things necessary for the interchange of presents with a new bride! Meanwhile her mother-in-law, stolidly at work below, wondered how any woman could be so immodest as to show grief at a husband's departure. And Gunesh Chund, riding between serried ranks of feather-topped maize and swelling bosses of millet, thought of the coming harvest. In a way, each and all were looking forward with eager desire to reaping what they had sown; as if life held any other fate for humanity!

That same afternoon, Veru, unwilling to relax any of her efforts because of her hopes, set off to worship a snake which frequented an old ant-hill at the farther end of the village common. The day had been one of extreme heat, and a

yellow dust-haze hung over everything. Dust above, below, around her; only the ant-hill, furrowed by long-past rains into rugged pinnacles, rising clear and distinct. She was a timid woman, unused to roaming so far, and she looked fearfully around, dreading lest from one of the dark holes piercing the mound a hooded head might rear itself and speak to her. Such things had been, she knew; for beneath the veneer of unbelief the old superstitions held her in thrall.

Hastily, yet carefully, lest evil should befall from any lack of ceremony, she ranged her sugar-cakes, hung up her chaplet of flowers, and sprinkled the milk she had brought in a little brass pot with a lavish hand; it left dark, ominous-looking stains on the white dust.

Glad to escape from such weird surroundings, yet feeling the need of rest, she drew aside among the wild caper-bushes, and sat down, wiping the beads of perspiration from her forehead with the corner of her veil. It felt quite hot against the damp skin, cooled by the fierce, dry wind that even in this sheltered spot drove the dust along in swirls. She drew her veil over her head and sat still as a statue, in the curiously drooping attitude which to Western eyes suggests absorbing grief; but Vêru's mind was full of a great joy, which gained no little sweetness from the thought of revenge. Yet as she dreamed far away into the years, a spreading fold of her veil, caught in a caper-thorn, seemed pointing to something that glistened among the roots behind her. Vêru, rising to go, stooped to disengage herself, and saw--a baby's bracelet! The next instant, with a shrill, high-pitched shriek of rage, she set off running towards the village. Her mind, slow enough to take in novel ideas, needed no prompting here. It was little Nihali's bracelet, and the explanation of this fact followed as a matter of course. The dead child had been exposed as an augury; *but what had the verdict been?* Strange as it may seem, that thought came uppermost. Doubtless, had the truth been told her in the first freshness of bereavement, when the soft touch of the little hands and the clinging of the lips were more than a memory, indignation and horror at the outrage on her child might have overcome her curiosity. At any rate, the desire to pose as an advanced woman would have induced her to conceal it. But months had passed, bringing a new hope, to ensure which her inherited instincts would gladly have sacrificed more than a *dead* girl. Indeed, the wish for some such augury had more than once invaded her, and lo! the sign had been given, and she knew nothing of it. That it had been favourable she assumed, believing that otherwise her mother-in-law would have hastened to make it known. Unheard-of spite and cruelty!--but if it were the climax, it should also be an end to tyranny. Trembling with excitement and the uneducated woman's desire for words, she ran forward panting and breathless, with little cries of anger and grief, until she sank down exhausted with the unwonted exertion and her own emotions. When she arose again, it was with greater calmness but more resentment.

Her mother-in-law was toasting the new-made dough-cakes by the fire, when, after many pauses, Vêru reached home. Wearied out, she leaned against the door-jamb for support ere commencing the fray, and looked at the elder woman with sombre, menacing eyes. The latter paid no attention, but went on tossing aside the heat-blistered cakes, and placing others upright in the embers till they blew out like bladders.

Suddenly Vêru raised her hand; something gleaming flew through the air, and the dead baby's bracelet fell at her enemy's feet and rolled among the ashes.

"The jackals have sent thee a present, grandmother."

The old woman looked at it, startled; then sprang up and faced her adversary in fiercest indignation.

"What hast thou done, fool? Bringing the curse of girls back to the earth! The wild beasts were more merciful than thou art, for they gave no sign; and see, where the bread is baking thou hast thrown the augury. O Guneshwa! O my son! would that thou wert here to see this witch casting her spells to bring barrenness to the bride thou art wooing! But no matter; the old mother will avert them; so bring home thy bride, Guneshwa! bring home the virtuous Kirpa Devi, daughter of Kirpo Ram of Badrewallah!"

Vêru, struck dumb by the possible consequences of her own act, as revealed to her in her mother-in-law's unforeseen reproach, felt the whole world turn round as the old woman, roused out of caution, let loose her secret and her tongue without reserve.

"It is not true! it is not true! Guneshwa would never deceive me so!" was all the poor creature found to say against the torrent of words and facts.

"Not true!" echoed the other, remorselessly. "Come hither, and see if it be not true that a wedding is nigh."

Seizing Vêru by the wrist, she dragged her across the court-yard, flung open the store-room door, which was kept jealously locked against all intrusion, and pointed to a row of handkerchief-covered basket-trays, ranged in order on the ground.

"Behold!" she cried, jeeringly, as she lifted the covering from one, displaying a pile of cheap tinsel-decked garments, such as are made to fill up the measure of more solid wedding presents. "Guneshwa's mother is not so careless as his wife. Here is everything needful, and yonder is the pile of dates whence he took the offering that went with him to-day. Stay--thou canst read! Put thy scholarship to some use for once, and see if it be not true."

But Vêru did not take the letters thrust at her; the shock was too great, following on her excitement and utter weariness. She swayed as she stood, and with a cry of "O Guneshwa, bring the dates back! bring them back!" she fell in a heap among the baskets.

In the dawn of the next day, her mother-in-law, as she lay down to snatch a little sleep while one of her cronies watched by Vêru's bed, told herself that the house was cursed indeed! Who would have dreamed of the gods bringing such hopes to Vêru? Who would have thought of her concealing them even for a day? And what a heritage of evil she would leave behind her if she died now! Nihali's augury was bad enough, but what chance would there be for the new wife if the ghost of an expectant mother haunted the house?

Vêru must not die--should not die; so the old woman nursed her tenderly, and strove in her rough way to bring comfort to the mind stricken by mad jealousy and resentment.

"I *will* die," was the only response; "I will die and become a ghost!^[4] I will! I will!"

"Hearken, O Vêru," replied her mother-in-law at last, "thy dying will not harm any one, for if thou diest ere Guneshwa returns, I swear he shall never know a word, neither of thy hopes nor of thy fears! It shall be silence, silence forever, and who fears a ghost he knows not of? Answer me that!"

And Vêru, gripped in the stern old woman's greater strength, could only turn her face to the wall sullenly.

"Hast thou no message for Guneshwa?" asked the watcher at the last, as Vêru lay sinking.

"None--that--thou--wouldst--give," came the reply, with a strange smile that remained on the lips even after death.

"Now, thank God, neither Guneshwa nor his bride need know aught of this!" thought the old lady, as they streaked the corpse with many a weird ceremony and precaution.

V.

The moon shone brightly as Gunesh Chund rode through the village common on his homeward way. There was scarcely a track to be seen on the hard, white ground, where the sparse bushes close at hand lay like shadows here and there, but in the distance blended themselves into a grey line against the lighter sky. No visible track, yet the *lumberdar's* pony picked its way unerringly, true as the needle, towards the manger awaiting it; instinct or habit supplying the place of reason. Its rider could boast of no such contented certainty. Something--what, he would have been puzzled to say--had made the path of custom seem doubtful, without supplying him with a new or clearer road. And, overlying the dull sense of discomfort, was a distinct remorse for the deceit to which his honest if sluggish soul was quite a stranger. The memory of his promise troubled him, although he quite acknowledged that a *pudmuni*, or ideal Hindu wife, would never have claimed its fulfilment.

Suddenly his pony started and swerved, throwing him forward in his shovel stirrups.

In his efforts to keep in his seat the cause seemed to be the sudden appearance of a veiled woman, beckoning with outstretched hands; but when he could give a calmer look, the difference in position caused by his pony's advance showed him that it was but the dead trunk of a tree. With a sign of relief he gave the animal a dig in the sides.

"'Tis thinking so much of women-folk does it," he said to himself. "I weary for the ploughing and peace."

A sense of well-being came over him at the familiar sights and sounds, as he neared the village. Even the dogs barking in chorus at the pony's echoing steps seemed to him a welcome, and the house, quiet and dark though it was, a haven of rest after the hustle and bustle of his rapid excursion into an unknown world. The door of the inner court was

closed, for he was not expected till dawn, and he stood for an instant beside it, listening. All was still as death, and with another sigh of relief he stumbled up the steep stairs to his favourite sleeping-place.

How calm it was there under the stars; how clear the path, now that he was at home once more among familiar landmarks! Why, if difficulties arose, had they not arisen over and over again in the lives of those who had gone before him? What more easy than to adopt the ancient remedy, and, by building a new court for the new wife, separate the jealous women! His mother would, of course, side with her own choice; so Veru, far from having any ground of complaint, would find greater peace than heretofore. In his quiet, limited way, he loved her more than he would have cared to avow, and so, thinking of her ease, he fell asleep full of content.

The night passed, the dawn lightened into sunshine; yet still he slept, wearied out by his ten days' exile from the village. And so it came to pass that his mother, apprised of his return by finding the pony in its accustomed place, had to rouse him by sad words.

"Awake, O Gunesh Chund, son of Anant Ram, and make thy heart strong, for Veru thy wife is dead."

A sad amaze, an almost pitiful resignation, followed the first incredulity; and then, as he sat below, patiently waiting for many a rite and conventional lamentation, the memory of his last waking thought returned to him.

"I thought of building her a new house for peace' sake," he said, wistfully, to his mother; "and lo! the Great Ones have given her a grave and peace forever."

"Perhaps 'tis as well, Guneshwa!" replied the old woman, softened by his gentle grief. "Her health was poor, and if Death drew nigh, it was better he should come before the bride."

Perhaps 'twas as well! That was all her tongue found to say, but her heart rejoiced exceedingly that eternal silence had fallen over the dead wife's reproaches. If Premi and Chuni only held their tongues, as they always did if it was made worth their while, neither Gunesh Chund nor his bride need know the curse that had come upon them. Above all, the soft-hearted bridegroom would be saved the daily terror of seeing the fatal ghost.

Even as it were, the autumn chills were upon him, making him shiver and shake, and bringing the haggard, ague-stricken look so common at that time of year to his sad face. He took little interest in the preparations which his mother pressed on with feverish haste, but passed days and nights out of doors among his fields, going the round of the crops with the village accountant, and seeing to the payment of revenue dues.

"Thou takest no rest, Gunesh Chund," exclaimed his mother, indignantly, when he pleaded business as an excuse for not going to the silversmith's to hurry him up with the remodelling of poor Veru's ornaments. "A *lumberdar* was a *lumberdar* long before the *sahibs* came to the land. What is it to thee if they want this written one way, and that another? There were no such piles of papers in thy father's day, and he was a better *lumberdar* than thou wilt ever be."

"Mayhap, mother; but somehow 'tis ill work nowadays doing things as they used to be done. It suits no one, not even thee."

"Not suit me--I'd like to know--"

"Nay! are not the old trinkets being altered even now. For my part, I liked them best as they were."

"Guneshwa thou art a ninny! But thou wilt sing another song when the bride comes to thee adorned. That new silversmith hath done well. There is a fashion of necklet--French pattern he called it--like needlework for fineness. And I have not forgotten the old ways, for the talisman Veru wore is made into a *saukinmhora*, to keep her ghost away."

The *lumberdar's* face assumed a startled, alarmed look.

"The ghost, mother! Wherefore the ghost? Veru was a good wife, loving me, and I was a good husband to her. There was no ill-will betwixt us, surely."

His mother could have bitten her tongue out for her inadvertence.

"'Twas but a thoughtless word, O my son, and I am over-anxious. Surely the woman took too many blessings from thee in life to give thee curses in death. And see," she added, hastily, in the hope of diverting his eager anxiety, "I have found what thou wert asking for--the certificates of thy fathers to many and many a generation. Thou hadst given them into Veru's keeping, but they are too precious for a woman's holding. Who knows but she has lost some? Squandering

thy son's heritage out of spite! Who canst give back the praises of the dead?"

So she went on in purposeful grumbling, while Gunesha, opening the handkerchief in which the precious documents were folded, counted the frayed papers laboriously.

"Nay! they are here, and more; let me count again. Surely, there are thirty-and-two, and when the canal *sahib* gave me his last year there were but thirty-and-one. Thirty-and-one, no more."

He sat down on the door-step, shifting the papers through his awkward hands, with the uncertain eyes of one who, being unable to read, has to seek recognition through more devious ways. His mother, meanwhile, utterly indifferent, had turned to some household occupation.

"See, there is a new one; that one, may be; 'tis cleaner than the rest," he muttered to himself, opening up the folded sheet conspicuous by its whiteness.

It was written in the Nagari character, and his puzzled face cleared at the sight.

"'Tis all right, mother!" he exclaimed; "there are but thirty one. The other is a letter."

He was about to add a suggestion that Veru might have written it, but checked himself, from fear of starting another tirade against the dead woman.

"A letter!" echoed his mother, contemptuously. "Throw it in the fire! I have no patience with folk who find their tongues too short to touch friend or foe."

"But, mother," returned Gunesh, with a smile, "even thy tongue is not long enough to reach over the world."

"And wherefore should I try? I tell thee, Guneshwa, that we peasant-folk have naught to do with the world. What he can touch with his hands is a man's portion till he dies, and 'tis theft to go beyond. Writing is no good except for certificates. There is Devi Ditta's house thrown into grief, just as the boy's betrothal began, by the news of his father being killed in Burma. God knows where Burma is. Far enough, may be, to keep the news back till a more convenient time, if it came as God meant it to come. And the man is dead, anyhow."

But Gunesh Chund refolded the paper and placed it in his waistband. His friend the accountant could tell him its purport.

"The chills again?" asked his mother, with no anxiety in her voice, when, coming back from Devi Ditta's house with a throat rendered hoarse by neighbourly lamentations, she found her son huddled up under his quilt. "You must get the sahib's white powder. For a wonder, it does good."

"Quinine will not cure me, mother," he replied in a curiously muffled voice that startled the hearer by its dull despair.

"What ails thee, then, Guneshwa?"

The man sat up amid his heavy wrappings and looked at her without resentment. The ague cramped his blue fingers, and made him draw shuddering breaths through widely distended nostrils, as he sat gazing at her with wild eyes full of a mute appeal and reproach. Then, with a little, almost childish cry, he fell back among the quilts once more.

"Thou knowest, mother; thou knowest it well."

Her heart throbbed, but her voice was steady as she replied:

"What do I know, O Gunesh Chund?"

"That Veru kept her promise and I broke mine! She knew you would not tell me, so she wrote. That was the letter."

The old woman stood for an instant bewildered. Then, as she realized that all her wisdom had not availed against the dead wife's knowledge, she threw her lean arms up over her head and beat her hands together wildly, while the court re-echoed with her high, resonant voice.

"She wrote it? Now may God curse her utterly! My curse upon her and every woman who learns--"

A shivering hand reached out towards her.

"Hush, mother! I have had enough of curses to-day."

The mild reproof made her forget her anger in thoughts for him.

"Light of mine eyes! heart of my heart!" she cried, flinging herself on her knees by the bed and stretching the arms, but now raised in cursing, around him in fierce protecting. "She cannot hurt thee--she dare not, if charms avail. The iron rings are about her hands and feet, the nails are through her cursed, writing fingers--would God they had been there ere she wrote that letter!--and the mustard-seed lies thick between her grave and the hearth. I have sown it, and will sow it with each new moon. Look up, Guneshwa! She cannot, she dare not return."

"She hath returned already."

The old woman rose with a gesture of despair.

"Say not so! Break not thy mother's heart with idle words. 'Tis but the chills, and thou hast them often. The powder will cure them."

"Perhaps 'tis so," he replied, listlessly. "But I have seen her. Ere ever I knew of her death she met me on the common as I rode home. Nay, weep not so soon; the truth will be told ere long, and there will be time enough for tears then."

"There will be no need to weep at all, my son," she said, crushing down her own dread in order to lessen his, and fiercely determining to shed no more tears till life held nothing else.

She kept her word; though, as the days passed on, even her wilful blindness could not fail to see how the strong man grew weaker and weaker. Her heart stood still with fear, as she watched for the sleep of exhaustion which followed each successive attack of fever and ague, before stealing away to seize the opportunity for the charms she dared not work save in secrecy.

Indeed, the subject was barred between them; and even when the fever fiend held him in its grip, Gunesh Chund never alluded again to the fatal ghost.

He put aside the *saukin-mhora* which, in her clutching at straws, she would have had him wear as a talisman, with quite a broad laugh.

"Wouldst have me altogether a woman, mother?" he asked, cheerfully. "I deemed instead I was too soft for thee. But see! whether it be the chills or the other thing, Death will come if he is on the road."

For all the courage of his words, a conviction that he was doomed dulled his interest in all things save his fields, and when he grew too weak to find his way there and back his patience broke into restlessness.

"I will go and stop at the well, mother," he said at last; "the air is freer out there, and I weary to death looking at these dull mud walls."

So, leaning on his mother's arm, Gunesh Chund, the *lumberdar*, made his way for the last time down the village street, to meet Death in the open.

"It is good to be here," he said, with peace in his face and heart, as he lay day after day, gazing with dull, contented eyes at the broad expanse of newly-tilled soil, where the sun gleamed on the furrows. The birds chattering in the mulberry-tree overhead, and the ceaseless babble of the life-giving water flowing past him, filled his ears with familiar comfort. There was nothing here to puzzle his slow brain; nothing to disturb a nature welded, by long centuries of toil under the sunny skies, into perfect accord with its environment.

So his mother, coming back from her unavailing spells, found him one day looking out over the springing crops with sightless eyes and placid face.

"I might have saved him," she said to herself with infinite bitterness, as from the sleeping-place on the roof she watched the smoke of his funeral pyre drift away into the cloudless blue--"I might have saved him but for the letter. Oh, curses, curses, ten thousand curses on those who taught her to write! Curses to all eternity on all new-fangled ways!"

Once more her lean brown arms flung themselves in wild appeal towards heaven, as she stood out against the sky facing the future--old, sonless, hopeless.

THE BLUE MONKEY.

"Willie," Mark Twain tells us, "had a purple monkey climbing up a yellow stick"; he further informs us that this quadruman made its owner "deathly sick."

The following story shows the effect that a blue monkey on a gilt spike had in a remote Indian village called Jehadpore--a very ordinary village set out on high, unirrigated soil, beside a large irregular tank, whence the bricks of many generations of houses had been dug; the only peculiarity about it being a glaringly whitewashed mosque facade, rising above the whole and flanked by a palm-tree. Merely a facade: viewed frontwise, distinctly imposing, with minarets and domes in orthodox numbers and positions; viewed sidewise, as distinctly disappointing. The jerriest of London jerry builders could have done nothing better than this one brick front elevation, of which even the domes were but *basso-relievos*.

Still it dominated the village in every way; for it was built in the court-yard of ex-Rissaldar-Major Azmutoolah Khan Sahib Bahadur's house, and he with his hangers-on represented Jehadpore. It was a Rangur village--that is to say, a village of Mohammedan Rajputs, a race which supplies half the native cavalry of upper India with recruits. That was the case at Jehadpore. When the district officer came round every year to attest and write up the big village note-book there was always something to add on this score. Either the number of those away a-soldiering had to be increased, or an entry made that So-and-so had returned with a "*pinson*"^[5] to his wife and family. On these occasions the district officer invariably found an escort awaiting him at the boundary, consisting of *sowars* on leave from various regiments (with their horses), a contingent of "*pinson-wallahs*" in nondescript uniform on broodmares, and Khan Azmutoolah Khan Bahadur, C.I.E., *ex-rissaldar*, at their head. He was a very old man, as deeply wrinkled as a young actor doing the part of an ancient retainer. In the privacy of that court-yard, garnished by the jerry mosque, he clothed himself scantily in limp white muslin, and his beard was tricoloured--white at the roots, red in the middle, purple at the ends. But on his screaming stallion, sword in hand, a goodly row of medals on his worn tunic, Azmutoolah's beard was of the fiercest black, and the line of moustache shaved from the hard mouth into an arched curve under his aquiline nose, curled right up to his eyes. His voice, too, lost its quaver of age, and before he had safely inducted the *Huzoor* into his tents down by the tank that irregular troop of cavalry had been put through enough manoeuvres to last out three ordinary field days. It was the old soldier's *Kriegspiel*.

When it was over, and he dozed, wearied out by the unaccustomed effort, on the wooden bed under the *nim*-tree, the hard roly-poly bolster tucked in to the hollow of his neck--or something else--made his sleeping-place a Bethel, and he dreamed dreams.

Then he had to resume the old uniform once more and go over to the tents again with a petition. Rangurs always have petitions about wells, or water, or brood mares; for, if they make excellent troopers, they are intolerably bad ploughmen. That was why Mool Raj, the hereditary money-lender of Jehadpore, was able to send his son, Hunuman Sing, to college and make a pleader of him.

The *ex-rissaldar*, with two sons and three grandsons in the old regiment, waxed contemptuous over the "pleadery" career. But that was his attitude in all things towards Mool Raj and the small Hindu element the latter represented in Jehadpore. The fact that the Mohammedan population to a man was in the usurer's debt did not affect the position of affairs at all, or detract from the feeling of virtuous tolerance which allowed a most modest and retiring Hindu temple to conceal itself behind the back wall of the mosque facade. It was a great concession, for Azmutoolah was not the only *Hadji*^[6] in Jehadpore. The place was a perfect hot-bed of fighting Mohammedanism, which only needed opposition to grow into fanaticism.

Yet, when Mool Raj added a new story to the Hindu temple, nobody said him nay. They were good friends with the wizened, monkey-like usurer.

"*Bismillah!* Khan Sahib," laughed one of the group of *sowars* round Azmutoolah's wooden bed. "He saith it is to save his soul from sin. God knows he needs it, for he hath charged me rascally interest on my last debt. If we must needs have a Hindu in the place, seeing God and his Prophet forbid the true believer to soil his hands with usury, then, by the *Imams*, let us have a pious one!"

Even when he put a gilt spike on the top they spoke of it in contemptuous kindness. "Whether he buries our gold or sets it on high is all one, so long as he hath enough to lend us when we seek it. And 'tis thank-offering, he says, for his son Hunuman passing as B.A. God knows what that may be, but the boy hath thin legs and a narrow chest."

Azmutoolah Khan, C.I.E., looked distastefully at the extreme tip of a gilt spike which from the farthest corner of the court-yard showed just over the facade.

"So far well," said the old martinet. "A Hindu may have repentance, and he is like to ourselves in affection for his family--though, Allah be praised, none of mine carry themselves like a *'lumpa ta heen*."^[7] But that is an end of repentance and affection. I will have no idolatrous spike under my eyes, and so I will tell Mool Raj. Let Hunuman build himself a temple in Lahore out of his scholarships and pleader's fees. We want none of his kind in Jehadpore."

The usurer came back from his interview with his patron quite resigned. To tell the truth, he himself was not much set on these pious additions which cost a heap of hard-won money. Their initiator was Hunuman's mother, who, ever since her pilgrimage to Shah Sultan had been rewarded by the long-prayed-for son, had looked on him as doubly dependent on the favour of the gods--his very name, Hunuman, having been bestowed on him because she had seen a monkey when she first regained consciousness after the curious hysterical crisis which seizes on most women at that most famous shrine. The inference being, of course, that the monkey god was responsible for the baby--a presumption not in the least weakened by the fact that Shah Sultan was a Mohammedan saint to whom monkeys and gods were an abomination.

Chand Kor, therefore, gave shrill disapproval to Azmutoolah's fiat. In her heart of hearts she nourished the ideal of a blue monkey god perched on the top of that golden spike; and when, two days afterwards, Hunuman Sing, B.A., came down for his vacation, she poured the tale of intolerance into his ear.

Now, Hunuman Sing, after the manner of his kind, did not care--well, what the Iron Duke said cost him twopence--for his godfather, nor, indeed, for most of the beliefs of his mother. How could he? Who could expect it of him? The cry which goes up now and again in India when some clever lad, educated at a mission-school, openly forsakes his religion, is beneath contempt. There is not one orthodox Hindu father, north or south, who, pushing his lad on for the sake of worldly success, does not do it with his eyes open to the inevitable gulf which must separate them in the future. This particular son was like many another son of the sort; a good lad, on the whole, if more interested in his own development than anything else in the world. This, again, was inevitable. When you have to cram the evolution of ages into two-and-twenty years, and grow from a baby named after the monkey god into a B.A., a strict attention to business is necessary. If he was pushing, was not that also inevitable? Jonah's gourd had to push "some," as the Americans say. For the rest, he was like hundreds of the amiable, clever young graduates whom one longs to have in the desert for forty days and nights opposite the Sphinx. One by one, of course; for if there were two of them they would form a sub-committee and vote the Sphinx to the chair. Then the millennium would come, of course, and that would be inconvenient for *nous autres*.

But, though Hunuman cared not at all for the blue monkey god, he worshipped liberty--especially his own; and he preferred it, if possible, with a flavour of law about it. What! deprive a citizen, a subject of the Queen Empress, from due exercise of religious right? Who was Azmutoolah Khan, to promulgate such a pernicious attempt at intimidation?--*vide* section so-and-so.

Little Mool Raj, who seemed to shrivel smaller as he grew older, listened to all this with great pride but steadfast inaction. He knew who Azmutoolah Khan was well enough. He knew the temper of the people who had enriched him all too well. Liberty was a fine thing, but money was better--peace and comfort best of all. This latter conviction, however, made him give way slightly before Chand Kor's tears; and the next evening, when the *rissaldar*--major was interviewing two new arrivals on leave, and bringing the wisdom of a lifetime to bear on their horses, an odd noise floated over the sham domes of the mosque.

"'Tis a donkey with the strangles, Khan Sahib," remarked Rahmat Ali. "Yea, mine is a lucky one--five curls and--" He paused.

No, it was not a donkey. What was it? A camel snoring? A cow dying? The women servants baking bread in the

corner stood up to listen. The two boys, heads down, arms interlaced, wrestling stark naked in the sun, paused also. Then, suddenly, as if by mistake, an inconceivable gamut, beginning with an earthquake, passing on to a foghorn, and ending with a pennywhistle, let itself loose.

"God and his Prophet," yelled Azmutoollah, "it is a conch!"

As they stood petrified by the audacity, the low grunting recommenced, and then once more something let go, lost control over itself, and went skirling up like a burst bagpipe.

"My sword!" gasped the *ex-rissaldar*. "The idolatrous defiler of the faith--the desecrator of my fathers' graves! A conch in Jehadpore! By the Lord who made me, 'tis the last!"

If the opponents had been better matched, there would have been bloodshedding in the village on that calm evening; but what could a dozen *sowars* with drawn swords, headed by Azmutoollah, joined by half the populace of the village, do against Hunuman Sing, who, with a trembling in his knees but the courage of martyrs in his mind, stood on the steps of the temple, nearly bursting himself in his efforts to play the unwonted instrument?

A roar of laughter went up from the crowd, as, alarmed but determined, he backed from the onslaught to the temple door, stumbled on the step, sat down violently, and the concussion sent a perfectly supernatural "Ker--who--oo--oo--oo--ph!" through the conch.

Even Azmutoollah's indignation could not withstand it.

"Go, Rahmat Ali, and take it from him ere he do himself an injury, and seek Mool Raj, Kutb-u-din. 'Tis his blame, not the boy's."

But Hunuman was on his feet again, full of outraged importance. The affair to him was deadly earnest.

"I am no boy, Khan Azmutoollah, but of legal age, with B.A. pass. I am a loyal citizen of Victoria Kaiser-i-hind. Religious liberty enjoins me to play conch if I choose, and I do choose."

The spirit was willing, but the flesh, in the hustling hands of half a dozen troopers, was perforce weak. The Hindu is not naturally resistant, and the fighting men around him were not slow to recognize Hunuman's unusual show of determination.

"It is assault! it is battery! I am coerced. I claim my rights. The law is on my side!" he gasped, between his struggles.

"Smash the blasphemous thing, and let the boy go," called Azmutoollah. "Enough, Hunuman-ji. Seek thy law elsewhere--not here, in the house of my fathers."

The conch lay shivered to atoms, but the young man felt himself master of the situation. Just as the concussion of his fall had forced his breath into the conch, so the pressure of illegal coercion made his newly acquired love of freedom overflow into eloquence. Heart and head were both full to inflation with the finest sentiments. As he stood on the steps, haranguing the people, he would have done credit to the House of Commons in a party discussion.

"By the faith, he speaks well! 'Tis a pity his shoulders are so narrow," remarked a trooper, carelessly, as he strolled away to a bare, beaten patch by the tank, where a number of naked boys were standing in pairs, heads down, hands on knees, smacking their thighs, and crying "Hull-la-la!" to give themselves courage ere closing for the grip. Beneath the skeleton of a peepul-tree hard by, whence the branches had been stripped for fodder, some elders were at work over gymnastic exercises, swinging clubs, or--supported on palms and feet--touching the dust with their foreheads, and then rising again like a strung bow. The sunlight shone on their bronze sinews.

"Didst kill him?" asked one, breathlessly keeping the count of his own performance.

"Kill him? Look you, Allah Baksh--there was not enough of him to kill!"

And a chuckle ran round the assembly.

A fortnight after, when the district officer was playing whist with the policeman, the doctor, and the young assistant, who was gradually being taught that rules are occasionally more honoured in the breach than the observance, Dhunput Rai, judicial assistant, sent in to ask five minutes' leisure of the *Huzoor*. Every one laid down his

cards at once, and the doctor lit a fresh cigar, for Dhunput Rai was one of those natives of the old school who many a time and oft have steered the British bark safely through troubled waters, as their fathers steered the alien armadas of the Mogul. He was a Brahman of the highest caste, keen-witted, clear-sighted; privately a bigot, publicly a statesman.

"*Huzoor*," he said, briefly, "young Lala Amr Nath the Extra hath this day in a case given leave for a conch to be blown in Jehadpore. There will be trouble. In my opinion, it is a fitting occasion for the *Huzoor* to act under section 518, which gives absolute power to the district officer in emergency."

Five minutes afterwards, Dhunput Rai took his leave with an interdict in his pocket, and a deputy inspector of police and four mounted constables rode out with it post haste, so as to arrive before the earliest blink of dawn made conch-blowing compatible with anything save sheer malice aforethought. It was a great blow to Hunuman and a small circle of select college friends who had assembled to witness the triumph of religious freedom. They consoled themselves during the interval of appeal by writing an article to the 'Sun of Asia,' in the course of which they promulgated several valuable new discoveries, such as that there was one law for the rich and another for the poor. Azmutoolah, meanwhile, admitted grudgingly that there was some sense left in the *sahibs* still, in spite of their setting goldsmiths' sons, like Amr Nath, to rule over honest folk.

"I'm dashed if I can find a precedent," remarked the district officer, disconsolately talking over the matter with the policeman, the doctor, and the assistant. "And in a case like this, where every thing depends on the environment, and it's sure to be appealed again, there is no mortal good in anything but a precedent. If I say there will be a row, I shall only be told with great dignity that Mr. Smith is expected to keep his district in order."

There was a pause. Finally, the doctor spoke. He hailed from Aberdeen.

"It's an ill burd that files his ain nest, but for religious into-lerance give me Scotland. Aw'm no saying ut'll hold as a preecedent amongst the heathen, but it's a preecedent in the Court o' Session. It was *aprepaw* of a bell."

"A bell! Heaven be praised! the very thing."

"A bell is not a conch," remarked the assistant.

"Alias, I should say," murmured the policeman. "Bell, conch, call to prayer: that's the spirit. Fire away, old chap!--Bearer, bring the doctor-*sahib* another peg."

So the precedent of a far-away cathedral, whose schismatic chime annoyed good Calvinists, was brought to bear on Hunuman and the conch, and the latter, not being an integral part of public worship, was proclaimed a nuisance.

The deputy commissioner himself had no doubt about its being one, as he wiped the perspiration from his brow, and remarked to Dhunput Rai that that ought to finish the business.

The courteous old gentleman smiled.

"*Huzoor*," he said, "I have heard my father say that Akbar's order to his judges was, 'Write ever with the pen which has been cut by the sword; then there is peace in the land.' The case will be appealed, and the pen of the *Huzoors* is cut by machine."

He was a true prophet. Hunuman, backed by the 'Sun of Asia,' not only appealed the conch question, but raised another in the interim by putting a small blue plaster monkey on the top of the gold spike, in fulfilment, it was urged, of the pre-natal vow made for him by his mother, a pious Hindu lady, whose virtuous life was crowned with honour.

The monkey remained there exactly five-and-twenty minutes after the first beams of the rising sun disclosed the fact that it had been put there during the night. That it remained so long was due to three reasons: First, that the Jehadpore troopers, if good swordsmen, were uncommonly bad shots; second, that Azmutoolah's blunderbuss was a flint-lock; third, that he insisted on letting it off himself until it knocked him down.

This time the case was taken direct to the deputy commissioner, who, urged on the one side by a remembrance of Dhunput Rai's remark, and on the other by a sneaking fear of revision, decided that the blue monkey, as an idolatrous image, was a distinct nuisance when displayed unnecessarily over the top of a Mohammedan gentleman's private mosque. On the other hand, viewed from the Hindu standpoint, the image of a blue monkey might be an integral part of public worship. Azmutoolah Khan Bahadur, C.I.E., ex-rissaldar, must therefore pay over to Mool Raj and to Hunuman Sing the price of the destroyed blue monkey, as they might wish to erect a similar one in a less conspicuous place.

Now, though Mool Raj's name was duly entered in the file as complainant, the affair had long ago passed out of his hands and become a real, solid, Heaven-sent grievance to a small knot of advanced young pleaders. Indeed, the old man was so distinctly unsatisfactory as chief victim, that they had more than once taken the opportunity of his absence to advance matters a step. Azmutoolah Khan, as shrewd an old soldier as could be found on either side of the Indus, was not slow to notice this, and his blind opposition covered a great longing to have these youngsters on the hip. After all, he and Mool Raj had pulled along well enough for years before this B.A. was thought of--ay, and their fathers before them. If the usurer had been alone, the money screw could have been put on him somehow; since he would not risk a pice for all the blue monkeys in heaven or on earth.

Azmutoolah Khan was cogitating these matters one afternoon on the wooden bed, with his turban as usual standing like a helmet beside him, when a party of boys rushed into the court-yard full of news and excitement. Hunuman Sing, who, as every one knew, had come with some friends in a bullock cart that morning, must have brought the thing with him; but as sure as fate there was a blue monkey sitting on the square pedestal in front of the temple which Alla Ditta, the mason, had built in all innocence of heart last week--a blue monkey, not a miniature marionette at the top of a gilt spike like the last, but a life-sized affair; and, what is more, all the Hindus in the place and many more from neighbouring villages were doing *poojah* to it.

The fierce old Mohammedan's very lips turned pale. He never even thought of his turban, but, bald-headed as he was, and stumbling in his haste, was out of the court-yard into the narrow street. The next minute a cry, that was not pleasant to hear, cut the calm sunshine like a sword.

"*Jehad! Jehad! Futt-eh Mohammed! Jehad! Jehad! Futt-eh Mohammed!*" shrilled the boys in refrain.

A knot of young men in patent-leather shoes, standing by the blue monkey, heard the cry with a glow of triumph.

"Brothers and sisters," called one, in the polished, curiously artificial tones of one accustomed to public speaking, "remember we are peaceable citizens. There is to be no opposition. Our trust is in truth and justice, not in violence. Our weapon is right, not might. Stand aside and let them do their worst. 'I will repay,' saith the law."

It was a bold paraphrase lost on all save that little knot of culture which said, "Hear, hear!" as if to the manner born. The speech, however, though admirable, proved somewhat superfluous. The first sight of that mad assault coming round the corner sent the crowd, composed for the most part of women and children, scattering hither and thither like frightened sheep. Culture stood firm, unwisely firm, for a minute. Then a voice rose in English:

"Gentlemen, discretion is better part of valour--nor is it permissible to foster or excite breach of peace. We can speak with equal fluence and freedom from roof of house." And they did.

The scene thus described sounds farcical. There was not even a grain of comedy in it to the actors; least of all to the plaster monkey on whose blue hide the sabres hacked fast. Above, on the roof, as on a hustings, the new culture wielded the sword of the Spirit; below, the older cult clinched argument by the sword of the flesh.

That night peace reigned in Jehadpore. Young India, in a body, had gone to report wilful destruction of private property accompanied by violence, to the deputy commissioner. Old India sat triumphant but thoughtful on the wooden bed, while the troopers laughed and drank and made merry over the discomfiture of the blue monkey.

"By the Prophet," cried Rahmat Ali, "I swear it had a look of old money-bags! And why not, seeing 'tis the father of Sri Hunuman? Ha-ha! But thou shouldst have seen the old man's face, *rissaldar-sahib*, when he returned but half an hour gone, and I told him we were but waiting leisure to burn his books and clear off old scores in the old way. He wept, and said 'twas none of his doing; that he asked but peace, as in the old days. Yea, as he sat a-begging on his haunches, praying forgiveness, he looked more like the blue monkey than ever."

Khan Azmutoolah Khan let off a detonating *roulade* of Arabic anathema as a *Te Deum*.

"Fetch him here, Rahmat! I have a plan. We old folk will settle it old ways."

The next morning the deputy commissioner, the police officer, and the doctor rode out in hot haste to the scene of what they were told had been a bloodthirsty riot. At the village boundary they were met, rather to their surprise, by the usual escort. The leader of the little band was more military than ever, but there was an odd twinkle in his eye as he obeyed the curt order to fall behind, and the hint--which British majesty gave in the interests of law and order--that his presence even there was undesirable. Hunuman Sing, and a friend who had remained to see fair play, certainly seemed to think the troopers jingling and clashing along in close order very much in their way. They edged their ponies here

and there, only to find themselves perpetually ridden over; especially when, at the head of the lane leading to the temple, British majesty reined up short, the troop behind turned to stone, the horses on their haunches steady as rocks. Then there was a wild hustle; the two ponies shot out in front, where their owners managed to pull up flabbergasted at the sight which met their eyes.

"How is this?" asked the deputy commissioner, sternly. "I thought you said the blue monkey was destroyed; and there it is, in perfect condition!"

There it was, indubitably--bright blue, with a long tail curving over its legs.

From behind among the troopers came gentle grunts of disapproval, that the ears of the *Huzoor* should be assailed with such wanton lies. Blue monkeys indeed! What quarrel had the faithful with blue monkeys?

"Khan Azmutollah Khan sahib," called British majesty, "what does this mean? I was told you and your fellows had wantonly destroyed Mool Raj's monkey. Is this true?"

The old man rode up from behind, his martial dignity undimmed by the discipline he respected and understood.

"I am no scholar myself, *Huzoor*," he said, saluting, "but I am a just man for all that. I injure neither man nor beast wantonly. Let the *Huzoor* ask the blue monkey if it or its master hath aught against me. Of these"--here he gave a contemptuous wave of his hand to the pleaders on their ponies--"I know naught, nor did my fathers."

Then he rode forward. "Oh, *bunder-jee!* speak for thyself and for thy master."

"By the Lord Harry," shrieked the policeman, as the figure on the pedestal rose slowly and salaamed, "it's old Mool Raj himself!"

"My lord!" faltered Hunuman, "this is irrelevant--this is contempt of court."

"Peace! oh Hunuman! and respect the voice of thy parent," began the blue monkey.

Then a roar of inextinguishable laughter played the mischief with majesty.

Half an hour afterwards, when Chand Kor in tears was washing the blue distemper off her lord and master's shrivelled limbs, he repeated his injunction regarding the fifth commandment to his son, who sat haranguing on liberty, freedom, public spirit, equality, fraternity, and a host of other duties and privileges.

"They are good, my son," he said, "but money is good also, and peace best of all. Ask no more. I am content, and thou hast naught to do with it. The temple is, and the blue monkey was mine--at least I was the blue monkey."

Then Hunuman Sing swore.

That evening the deputy commissioner held a friendly inquiry, and everybody shook hands all round, excepting Hunuman Sing and his friend, who left by *ekka* before the proceedings commenced, vowing vengeance on all summary justice. He was a full-blown pleader before the famous case of "Mool Raj and a Conch *versus* Azmutollah Khan and Others" came up before the chief court of appeal. On that occasion he argued most eloquently on various subjects for half an hour, and was about to resume his seat, covered with perspiration and honour, when a voice from the body of the court cried:

"Respect thy parent, O Hunuman! Remember the things that are behind."

Coiled up neatly on his chair was a blue tail, and once more laughter played the mischief with majesty.

Some people say that was why the appeal was dismissed. Anyhow, it is certain that shortly afterwards Hunuman set up as a pleader in another province.

So Jehadpore brought up its troopers, and paid or did not pay its debts in peace. And when Mool Raj died, the folk wagged their heads, saying, "Well, he was not much to speak of as a man, but he was a first-rate monkey."

SHAH SUJAH'S MOUSE.

He had no name. The village folk, it is true, called him Baba; but so they called all such as he. Nor did he ever show that he identified the word as anything more personal than the rest of the strange sounds to which he listened serenely as if he had no part or lot in them. Perhaps he was deaf, perhaps he was dumb. Perhaps he was neither. Nobody knew, nor for the matter of that cared. He was one of Shah Sujah's mice; no more, no less. In that lay the difference between him and other men. A small difference in some ways; in others illimitable. To the level of the brows he was as fine a young fellow as you could meet; of middle height, with clean, straight limbs. Above that nothing--nothing but a skull narrowed to the contours of a new-born babe's, conical, repulsive, like a rat's. Whence the name Shah Sujah's mouse.

The learned among us call such poor creatures microcephalous, and talk glibly of joined sutures and osseous formation. The natives of upper India have a different theory. These mouselike ones belong to Shah Sujah's shrine, because they are the firstlings of barren women made fruitful by the saints' intercession. Therefore, from their birth they bear the token of the mother's vow, dedicating them to his service. The seal is set on them from the beginning in mute witness to the truth.

Whatever that truth may be; whether, as some say, the new-born babes brought to be reared, like Samuel in the temple, are born as other babies, and the typical distortion produced by slow pressure--as in lesser degree the coveted bomblike foreheads of the Sindhi women are produced--or whether, as others hold, a tradition favourable to the wealth of the shrine is kept up, and additional gain assured by the secret exchange, through agents all over India, of the normal babies for that percentage of microcephalous infants which Nature makes--this much is certain: all children dedicated to Shah Sujah are his mice. There are hundreds of them; growing up at the shrine, dying there, and during the cold months spreading over the length and breadth of India begging with unvarying success of all women, fruitful and unfruitful; living meanwhile on the broken food given them, but hoarding the money with an odd unconsciousness of all save that in some mysterious way it belongs to the saint; then, as the heat returns, wandering back like a homing pigeon to the insignificant little shrine at Gujrat, which means so much to so many.

Most of the mice are repulsive; some are more or less deformed, more or less idiotic, making idiotic noises as they dawdle through the village alleys carrying their hollow gourds in their outstretched hands. He was not repulsive, and he made no sound of any kind; whether from inability, or from some lingering consciousness that his sounds would not be as those he heard, no one knew. In fact, no one knew anything about him, save that he was a mouse; too naked to be dirty in that country of canals and tanks, and seemingly quite content with a beggar's staff and gourd as his only tie to this world. Here to-day, gone to-morrow, secure of a meal, and of a sand blanket to sleep in if the nights were cold.

Perhaps he had more sense than others of his kind. Perhaps the theory of deliberate distortion was true, and his fine physique had struggled against it more successfully than some. But all such things were idle speculations, and there was nothing to be learned even from the big, luminous eyes, somewhat over-prominent, which looked at everything so serenely. At the children running out to him with their mother's dole, at the lean dogs following him in hopes of a scrap, at the birds and squirrels watching for the crumbs he might leave behind. Down by some water-cut, his feet buried in the warm sand, his naked body covered with the fairy garments made of sunbeams, the very minnows and sticklebacks gathered round him in radiating stars, expectant of bread cast on the water beneath the arching plumes of the date-palm thickets--plumes almost touching the surface, and sending lanceolate shadows, like the fishes themselves, through the sliding water as the breeze stirred the leaflets.

It sounds idyllic viewed from our standpoint. From his, with that osseous formation of the learned closing in like an egg-shell round the embryo, God knows what it was. Until one day something happened.

Sonny baba went amissing. Fuzli, the *ayah*, prone on her stomach, beating her palms in the dust, called God to witness that he had never been out of her sight except for one single minute when she took a pull at the gardener's pipe. This was down in the Taleri Bagh, where the English roses blossomed madly beneath the mango-trees, and the well-wheel under the big peepul-tree had the oddest habit of creaking the first two bars of "Home, Sweet Home" as the slow zebus circled round and round--

Then a silence, save for the twitterings of birds and the soft thud of a peepul fig falling, rifled, to the ground, until the bullocks were back to the old spot. Then it began again--

"Mid pleasures and palaces."

If there was no place like home, Sonny baba evidently did not think so. Anyhow, he had left it. Had disappeared utterly in that luxuriant little world down by the big canal, which was a maze of sunlight and shadow, of thickets of sweet lime and groves of date-palms interspersed with patches of tomatoes and gourds, and plantations of pomegranates laden with leaf and flower and fruit--such ugly, ill-humoured fruit, after all that beauty of blossom!

Yes, he was gone, and the solitary bungalow a mile up the road, nearer the city, where the assistant commissioner in charge of the subdivision lived, was in a lethargy of despair; for a child means much when it has been waited for during long years. Every one, from the highest to the lowest, was away searching; save only for the mother walking up and down the pretty drawing-room clasping her hands tighter and tighter as the hours went by, and the *ayah*, numb with grief and remorse, in the dust outside. It was growing late. The sun sent its picture of the *shisham*-trees to decorate the blank side wall of the house; the wilderness of wild petunia, usurping the place of the fast-yielding English annuals, began to send out a faint perfume. And Sonny had been out all day alone, under the hot sun, among the treacherous canal-cuts and the lurking snakes--Sonny, who since his birth, three years ago, had never known what it was to be alone.

"Thath way, manth."

It was a sweet little voice full of liquid labials. The *ayah* gave an inarticulate skirl of joy as she sprang from the dust.

"Leave me l'alone, l'*ayah*--l'th all light. Puth me down now, pleath, man."

A cry came from within, a woman's figure came flying to the veranda, a child bubbling over with glee went flying to meet it and bury a little mop of golden curls in mother's dress.

"O Mummie, Mummie, he'th got 'quith!"

Then, after a time, with dignity: "Don'th, pleath; them kitheth hurth. And, Mummie, don'th l'oo hear?--he'th got 'quith.' Oh! l'ever tho many 'quith.'--Hathn't l'oo, man?"

The man was Shah Sujah's mouse. He stood as he had set the child down, obedient to Heaven knows what understanding of the little voice. Now he seemed to hear nothing as he looked serenely, almost brightly, at those three out of his large soft eyes.

"*Ayah!*" cried the mother, clasping her darling tighter as by instinct. "Who--what is he? Ask him--ask him about it all."

Not only the *ayah*, but many others, asked him, fruitlessly--people running in from the court-house close by, hearing the news of Sonny's safe return; wanderers coming in disheartened from the search. Finally, Sonny's father, with an odd catch in his voice. But there was no answer, and the child's tongue went no further than "Loths and loths to eat, an' loths an' loths of quith."

"Loh!" said the *ayah*, indignantly. "He is nothing but a mouse--a *janowar*.^[8] Give him a rupee, *Mem sahiba*, and let him go; if the *Huzoor*, indeed, will not hang him for stealing my king of kings."

"Don'th, l'*ayah*--them kitheth hurth.--O Mummie, don'th l'oo know he'th goth 'quith,' l'ever tho many 'quith?'"

"Can't *you* make out *anything*, dear?" asked Mummie, almost aggrievedly; it was dreadful to lose a whole long day of Sonny's life.

"No, dearest," replied her husband, meekly aware of the offence. "No more than you can make out what 'quith' means. Except, of course, that the *tahsildar* tells me that he--the man or the mouse, as you please--has been begging right away to the river's meet and is now, no doubt, on his way back to the shrine. Possibly he will meet an agent at Mooltan; they are seldom later than this in calling in their itinerants. He must have been in the gardens, and either met

the child after he had lost himself, or--or stole him. That is all, unless Sonny remembers something when he is less excited. At any rate, *he* brought him back, unharmed, and--and--I should like to reward him."

"Reward him! Why, of course we must reward him. Think--only think what might----" She paused, able to think, not to speak of it.

"Just so. But how? The *tahsildar* says he will put any money into his bag and never touch it. And--and it does seem mean to reward a man for saving your son's life with broken victuals."

There was no help for it, however; though, just for the sake of appearances and proprieties, they gave him five whole rupees for the bag. He slipped them into it as if they had been pice, took up his gourd and went away, his beggar's staff making little round holes in the dust as he walked down the petunia-edged path, serenely, as if nothing unusual had happened.

So that was an end of Sonny's adventure for the time, since ere he woke, like a young bird at dawn next day, the child seemed to have forgotten all about Shah Sujah's mouse; but only for a time.

At first they thought it nothing but a touch of sun fever from being out all day which made the darling of their hearts so languid. He was down in the heat a little later, too, than was perhaps quite wise, but those holidays at the end of the month, which would give father the chance of settling mother and son in the wee house among the Himalayan pines, and of getting a whiff of fresh air himself, had been so tempting.

But a week after, the doctor, summoned from headquarters, looked into their scared faces and said "Typhoid," ere, loath to leave them to this knowledge, he had to ride back, promising to arrange his work so as to be there as often as possible. He stood talking in undertones to the native doctor in the veranda before mounting, and the sound of their voices made the mother shiver. It was soon after this that the little voice began:

"O Mummie, he had 'quilth'--lovely, lovely 'quilth.' Whereh he gone--the 'quilth'--man? I wanth to thee the 'quilth' again.--Dada, will l'oo shend for the 'quilth'--man?"

"Can't you send for him--somehow?" She had Sonny in her arms, and the heat of him struck through to her own breast. Yet she shivered again.

Two days after, when the cot was set out in the veranda for the sake of the cool evening air, she bent over the child, who lay more languid than suffering among the toys he liked to see even while he did not care to play with them.

"Sonny, the 'quilth'-man has come. Dada has brought him."

Whence, is no matter. The fiat had gone forth, as fiats do go forth. The order had been given to find and, if possible, to bring back one of Shah Sujah's mice, who had wandered on northward through the villages. They had found him, and he had returned with them peaceably, contentedly, serenely.

"Thath's jolly," sighed Sonny. "Now, Mummie, l'oo'l thee the 'quilth,' too."

He wanted to be carried out in those brown arms as before, and stretched his hands to Shah Sujah's mouse, who stood just as he had stood before, silent, uncomprehending, incomprehensible--except, perhaps, to Sonny; but they took him, cot and all, as he lay, across the petunias, and set him down under one of the great *shisham*-trees, backed by palms and a wide-spreading banyan. The air was dry and balmy; he was as well there as elsewhere until the dew should begin to fall.

"Spec'ths l'oo'l flighten them, Mummie; 'quilths' is flightful fings. 'Posing l'oo an' Dada an' *l'ayah* thits light away--light away."

So they sat right away, over the petunias once more, upon the veranda steps, and two pairs of strained, anxious eyes looked at the group under the trees. The third pair looked also, doubtfully. It was an odd sight, certainly. The child's soft curls on the pillow, his flushed cheek seen sidewise, his little hot hands clasped round the bars of the cot. Beside him, on the grass, like a bronze statue, Shah Sujah's mouse.

"Now, manth! if l'oo pleath," murmured Sonny. And, as before, he seemed obedient to the liquid voice. A strange sound indeed! Not a cry, not a whistle. More like the croon of wind through tall tiger-grass. Scarcely audible, and yet a hush fell on the trees, as if they stopped to listen. Jack, the fox-terrier, cocked his ears. A horse neighed from the stables. Then came a rustle, as of leaves.

"I know," whispered Mummie, touching Dada on the arm. "He means squirrels. How stupid of me! Look!"

Along the branches they came, circling shyly down the trunks, now with a swift patter, now hanging splayed against the bark, petrified by curious timidity. Odd little mortals these, with the mark of Great Ram's fingers on their shining coats, and barred tails a-bristle. Soft little mortals, not much bigger than a mouse, their round ears cocked, their bright eyes watchful. Nearer and nearer, by fits and starts, hopping from distant trees through the short grass as through a thicket, while the croon went on, and Sonny's eyes grew heavy with sheer satisfaction.

"Lovely, lovely 'quith.'--Go on, pleath, manth."

Nearer and nearer; a dozen or more sitting up with the scattered crumbs in their odd little fingers. Dainty over the feast, nibbling a bit here and a bit there, and growing fearless, climbing on to the bronze limbs, looking into the dark, serene eyes.

Sonny's grew heavier and heavier.

"I think he is asleep," said Dada, indistinctly, through a lump in his throat. But Mummie could not speak at all.

"Dew fallin', *mem sahiba*" remarked the *ayah*, in a dissatisfied tone. "Time Sonny baba leave *janowars* alone."

It was a slow fever, as it often is with the little ones in India, and every day for many days Sonny would rouse himself when the sun left the air cooler and ask for his 'quith.'

"It will not hurt him," said the doctor, who looked graver at each visit. "Our best chance is to keep him going somehow. If you were on the railway, I'd risk all and have him in the hills to-morrow; but that long *dhooli* journey--it is not to be thought of. We must keep him going--keep hold on life as best we can."

So they used to carry him out under the trees to the quith and Shah Sujah's mouse. And some sort of a comprehension seemed to come to the *janowars*, as the *ayah* called them scornfully, of what was required of them, for day by day the crumbs were scattered nearer the cot, and day by day the timid courage grew into some new venture, rousing a languid smile from Sonny.

"Lovely, lovely 'quith,'" he would say, as the bright eyes looked at him knowingly, and the patter, patter of the little feet came nearer. But the sheer content came quicker and he slept sooner and sooner, until one day when they were racing over the cot and playing gymnastics with the bars, he made up his mind that there could be nothing more to wake for, and fell asleep once and for all.

"Take her away at once," said the doctor, as in the early dawn they drove back without the little coffin on the back seat of the dog-cart, from the graveyard where Dada had read the service without a break in his voice. There was no lump in his throat now; nothing but an angry despair in his heart. "Take her away. I telegraphed for you to the commissioner last night; that will give you three days. Then furlough, privilege, urgent, private--anything. She must not come back till the baby is born. And leave the *ayah* behind--they will get talking of the child."

That evening, when the servants were being paid off, and certificates to character written, while the *dhoolies* waited in the shade where Sonny's cot had stood the day before, the *ayah*, whimpering but indignant, asked what was to be done about the *janowar*.

"I'll look after that," said the doctor, kindly, seeing Dada's look. "Five rupees, I suppose, and the *tahsildar* to have him escorted so far on his way north to the shrine. 'Tis time he were getting back."

Undoubtedly. Even the last few days had brought the heat. The roses down in the Taleri gardens had dried to *pot-pourri* as they grew, smelling almost sweeter than ever. The mangoes grew larger and larger, and the green parrots clung to them, eating the pulp as it ripened. That was when the gardeners were away turfing a grave in the little enclosure opening out of the garden, and planting red and white quamoelit to twine up a wooden cross. It did not take long, for the grave was small. So they came back to frighten the parrots, leaving it to take care of itself; for the rains came early that year, and after a time there was no need for watering.

So much rain, that three months after, when Dada, back from leave, walked through the garden at sunset, many of the mango-trees were ankle-deep in water, and a second crop of roses nodded at their own reflection in the still pools. But the graveyard stood purposely on higher ground, and its brick wall was backed by a perfect thicket of date-palms stretching away to the low sand-hills, save on the side marching with the garden. There oleanders and roses and elephant creeper massed themselves into a hedge, and clambered over the arched gateway where Dada paused. The

doctor was there too, for fever comes with heavy rain, and the outlying hospitals needed constant inspection. As the gate swung open, they paused again, not at the sight within, but at a sound they seemed to recognize. It was a shady spot. To begin with, great branches swept over it from the garden, and then in the far corner a huge peepul stood quivering its silver-lined leaves. There lay the little grave, solitary in its square of grass, for the place was divided into four by two narrow gravel walks ending abruptly at the walls. Two other graves claimed other squares, the fourth lay vacant. It seemed as if, when that was occupied, the shady spot would refuse another tenant. Yet there were others even now.

"Who's that?" cried the doctor, sharply.

It was Shah Sujah's mouse. He sat propped against the peepul-tree, and over the grass and the cross of quamoelits the squirrels were chasing each other and playing pranks with the crumbs they were scarcely hungry enough to eat, while the other *janowar* looked at them out of hollow serene eyes.

He shifted his gaze to the new-comers, but did not rise. He could not.

"Good God," muttered the doctor, kneeling down beside him, "the man is a skeleton, and burning with fever. How the mischief-- Well, the first thing is to get him moved to hospital."

When Dada came back with a string bed and four coolies impressed from the garden, he found the doctor looking suspiciously at the crumbs, at a piece of dough-cake and a bag of money. There were ten whole rupees in it, besides odd coins.

"The poor beggar seems starved, and yet he had this and--he was feeding the squirrels. There's something deuced odd about it all."

Odd, but simple, especially in the *ayah's* eyes. "Master, having given orders for the *janowar* to go, the police had naturally taken him away. He had come back again and begged--naturally, when the *mem sahiba* had given him sweet rice every day. But she had given nothing, nothing at all, except information to the police. Then they had taken him away again miles and miles, quite close to the highroad to the shrine, and had bidden him to go home. Even a *janowar* could have found his way had he chosen; but the obstinate animal had come back after the sweet rice. So then every one had been told not to give the disobedient one anything to eat. Indeed, it was past time for alms to Shah Sujah's mice; they should have been back at the shrine with their earnings. To linger was sacrilege, nothing less, especially when the *Huzoor* had said he was not wanted any longer. But instead of going, when he was starved out, as every one imagined, he must have hidden in the damp garden and got fever. As to what he was doing on the little king of kings' grave, that was mysterious. Perhaps now the master might believe that *janowars* were not safe round a sick--"

"*Chuprao*,^[9] you fool!" shouted Dada. As the *ayah* sidled away, still indignant, the two men sat and looked at each other.

"I'm afraid it's no use," said the doctor. "Starvation and fever are ill companions; but I'll stay over to-morrow and see what I can do. It is as much my fault as yours, if any one is to blame, but--"

The doctor, being orthodox, paused.

When they went down on the following evening to see the patient in hospital they found the native assistant volubly apologetic. He had seemed so content, not to say weak, that they had left him alone while busy over an accident. Half an hour ago they had missed him from his cot. "Doubtless delirium had supervened with acerbation of fever; but since peons were out in all directions, by the blessing of God--"

"Come on, doctor," said Dada, impatiently interrupting the flow of words.

He was there, face down on the grass, and the squirrels were playing over his dead body and searching for crumbs.

"No!" said Dada, when the coolies came with a string bed again. "Bring a spade or two. I'm going to bury him here."

The doctor, having religious views, looked doubtful. "I--I wonder if it is consecrated ground?"

"I hope to God it is!" said Dada, fervently.

As they lingered at the gate when the work was over, a squirrel hung head downward on the peepul-trunk, eying the new-turned earth suspiciously. Then another with bushy tail erect came hopping fearlessly over the grass--

"Cher ip--a pip--pip--pip!"

It was a challenge. The next moment they were chasing each other over the cross of quamoelits.

Dada closed the gate softly.

"Lovely, lovely 'quith," he murmured to himself.

The lump had come back to his throat, and the doctor gave something between a laugh and a sob.

But they neither of them said anything about the other *janowar*. Perhaps because there was a difficulty in finding an epithet to suit Shah Sujah's mouse.

SUTTU.

I.

A grove of date-palms; each cluster of carved stems set in its feathery crown and base, separated from its neighbours by sandy spaces, where the snakes sunned themselves right in the wayfarer's path. Finding few victims, however; for the *karait*, stretched out like a blue whip-lash, curved back to the prickly cover at the distant step, and though the dusk-coloured vipers tied in true-lovers' knots held their ground, their evil temper gave warning of their presence as scale rustled on scale in the angry sliding of the watchful coil.

Day and night the sweeping fringes overhead swayed softly, even when no breath stirred the tangle below. But now, when the coming of dawn sent that curious whisper of wind through the world, as if warning it of what the sun may disclose, the leaves tossed their long arms wildly.

A stretch of level land curved inward to the palm-grove; outward till it merged on the village common with its grey-spined caper-bushes set with coral buds. In the distance, shadowy in the half light, was a native town, flat-roofed against the sky. Close at hand an open grave, with a man and woman standing beside it. A queer couple. The old man, dwarfed to distortion, grotesquely ugly; the woman young, straight as a palm, supremely handsome.

"Lo, they come, Shahbash!" she said, in a bold, mellow voice which fitted her appearance. As she shaded her eyes with her hand, the coarse madder veil she wore fell from her broad shoulders as if cut in stone.

"*Wah illah!* Thou hast sight to boast of, Mother Suttu," replied her companion. She might have been his daughter in age, but he used the title of respect due to all decent women from one not of their own blood.

"Yea, 'tis true," she echoed, carelessly. "The Potter's hand slipped not when he made me. I have naught to bring against him." It was perhaps a heartless truism, considering her company.

But then Shahbash was bucklered against bitter thoughts by an ingenious theory accounting for his own ill looks. A fairy, he held, had fallen in love with him as a babe, when (as might be augured from his name, which meant "Well done! Bravo!") he must have been possessed of extraordinary beauty. Her jealous determination to keep his perfections to herself had attained its object in roundabout fashion, by preventing the eyes of others seeing him as he really was. Hence the distortion lay with them.

"I would thine eyes were as sharp for the future as they are for the present," he said, thoughtfully, leaning on his adze-like shovel.

"'Twere better they were sharp enough to see through dust," she answered, smiling broadly into the grave at her feet. "So thou didst not find it after all, Shahbash."

"Not a cowrie, not a *dumri*! And I swear 'tis into the tenth dozen of graves I have dug--with texts of the holy Koran pouring from me the while without stint. Good sound texts, hard as melted solder on a body's teeth. And to no good, except to pave a blessed bed for another sinner. For they pay worse and worse, *mai* Suttu. When old Feroz Shah buried his son, last week, he left but a rupee's worth of clothes on the corpse for perquisite. Look you! If I take not the very winding-sheet which decency would leave e'en to the dead, thou and the holy saint yonder will starve--to say naught of servant Shahbash, who needs muscle to sow men in this hard soil."

He let his shovel fall on the hard ground to show how it echoed to the clang.

Suttu laughed. "If dead men do not pay, there are the dates still. They will ripen ere long."

"Aye, but how long can they be kept? If the saint dies without speaking, the others will find their tongues. A woman needs gold--or a man. Thou wilt have neither unless thou wilt give up the religious vow and marry the Kazi's son. He is willing."

Suttu laughed.

"So are others that be not pock-marked and one eye to boot."

"*Tobah!* And thou virtuous and a widow! Lo, he is a man, and beauty is not safe for us. Was not I, Shahbash, the handsomest--"

She interrupted him remorselessly. "'Tis safe for me, anyhow. The grandfather may rouse any day and tell me where the gold is hidden. Once it is found, none will covet the graveyard."

Shahbash wrinkled his hideous face to an appalling frown.

"God knows! If not, then it is a case of digging graves all my life till I get over-scant of breath for texts and mattock together. If only the sickness would come, 'twould give more chance. For the fox of a father-in-law will be claiming shares of treasure with thee if I dig aught but graves. Lo! *mai* Suttu, I tell thee, 'tis ghoulish work. I watch the old folk in the village, and my fingers itch to give them a blessed bed in Deen Ali's yard. 'Tis destroying my soul. Thou must marry, or I am damned!"

"Sure the fairy will make thee a paradise anywhere," laughed Suttu. "Lo, they come! Is all prepared? Alms or no alms, Deen Ali's bed must be ready for the faithful. 'Tis in the bond."

She spoke with a grave dignity quite apart from her previous manner.

"Would God they had put the alms in the bond likewise!" grumbled the dwarf as he slid into the shallow grave to sweep some loosened soil from the niche hollowed in the hard ground to one side for the uncoffined tenant. Then he swung himself out again by his brawny arms and strained his shortsighted eyes toward the advancing procession.

"'Tis well," he muttered, as a sudden braying of shawms, beating of drums, and skirling of songs rent the still dawn. "At least they remember that the burying of the old is a bridal. Sure it may be better than I feared, and they will not send the decent patriarch back to his friends half naked."

It was an odd funeral. The bier, covered by a tissue-paper canopy, swayed as it was borne shoulder-high at a slow trot. The crowd laughed and sang. The streamers fluttered, flying round that still, muslin-swathed form bound with tinsel. Only Suttu seemed in keeping with it, as she stood forward welcoming it to Deen Ali's bed.

But the next instant, as she stepped aside to let it pass, a malicious look of amusement was on her face as she returned the greeting of a pock-marked man with one eye.

Then, her *role* of hostess being over, she walked away to the date-grove followed by admiring eyes. For Suttu, the *fakeerni*, if somewhat outrageous, was distinctly attractive. That made her vow of celibacy all the more unnatural.

She sat down on the edge of a back channel of the river, which, after creeping tortuously in a deep, narrow bed, expanded here during the rains to a broad, shallow lake, dotted by clumps of pillared palms, beneath whose fringed crowns great bunches of fruit were ripening fast. Each islet was reflected so clearly in the water that it needed sharp eyes to see where reality ended and unreality began. Here and there, showing where the perennial pools lay beneath the temporary flood, stretched a green carpet of lotus-leaves, where the flowers rose in varying height; the buds, still resting on the water; the full-blown flowers flaunting between them and the mace-like stems on which the hidden "jewel in the lotus" stood disclosed, while the fallen petals floated like shells on the water, or lay piled up in little pink heaps on the green carpet. A faint scent, as of bitter almonds, perfumed the breeze which now and again ruffled the lake and slid a fresh gift of rolling, sparkling water diamonds into the leaf-cups. Beyond this was a golden sunrise, cloudless, serene.

Suttu, seated on the edge of grass which grew just as far as the moisture filtered through the sand, and no farther, nodded at the scene approvingly. The Potter had made no mistake here either; she liked it, liked her own freedom purchased by an easy vow. The idea of giving it up in favour of another ten years or more of marriage in a stifling city quarter was absurd.

A kingfisher flashed down into the water like a sapphire, and her quick eyes followed it.

"*Shahbash!*" she cried, gleefully, as the bird came up with a bar of silver in its purple bill.

"'Tis not Shahbash," said a voice behind her. "'Tis I, come to ask--"

She leaped to her feet, confronting the Kazi's son in real wrath.

"So! Will not even death keep thy mind from marriage? Why hast crept here to see me alone? 'Tis not decent--far worse, 'tis not even pleasant. Have I not told thee--aye, and others--that I am a pious widow?" She drew a corner of her veil across her eyes and hid the suggestion of a smile under the semblance of tears. "A pious widow vowed to the sonless shrine of my ancestors."

The Kazi's son drew a step nearer.

"Thou art too young and too well favoured for a religious. Every one says so," he began.

"The Lord looks not at beauty, Mir Sahib," retorted Suttu, gravely; "and 'tis well for some of us that it is so."

"A sharp weapon is no weapon against enemies, and thou hast enemies. My house would protect you. Think! I am the Kazi's son."

"Lo, why should I forget my lord's merit?" smiled Suttu, sweetly. "He has not so many."

He bit his lip. Repartee of that sort he knew, but not from the lips of reputable women. The whole affair had the intoxication of an intrigue, and its defiance of conventionalities set his pulses throbbing.

"Listen, O Suttu!" he said, curbing his passion. "Hussan, thy dead husband's father, will claim the land when the saint dies, and God knows how the case may go against a woman! Marry me, and I will gain it, were thy father-in-law fifty times over the village accountant. Hast heard the saying, 'Only the Kazi can fight the Putwari?'"

"Lo, if I came to thy house, there would be fighting enow to fill thy stomach, without going to a neighbour."

She drew the coarse veil which she had slipped from her head back to its place, with wide-spread arms, as she spoke; and the action displayed the full vigour of her finely moulded form. He cursed her bigness and boldness inwardly, but schooled himself to another and more tender appeal.

"Why not, O Suttu? Lo, I am rich, I am young. I--I lie awake o' nights thinking of it. Yea, I swear it! I get no good from my food. I love you. If I died, the very houris in paradise would not tempt me.

"But I would make thy grave gladly, Mir sahib, and then may be thou wouldst find rest."

It was too much. He seized her by the wrist and glared at her, every evil instinct roused to fury. "Then I will buy thee. Thy father-in-law has the right, for the saint is half dead already. Listen! I will buy thee to be my slave. What dost say now?"

"That even slaves have naught to do with pockmarks and one eye." Her free right hand came down on one cheek with a resounding slap, making him stagger. Her left, thus released, followed suit on the other. "Go!" she cried, "or I will make Shahbash yonder strangle thee with his monkey arms. Go! And remember that Suttu, the *fakeerni*, hath slapped thee in the face!"

The Kazi's son, entangled in the trail of his turban, which had fallen off, caught sight of the gravedigger within call, and felt that his chance was over. He stalked away, trying to look dignified as he wound his head-dress on again, but conscious of a suppressed titter behind him, making him grind his teeth and swear vengeance.

When he had gone, Suttu sat down again on the grass and slipped her hands into the cool water. They tingled unpleasantly.

"Yonder beans look ripe," she murmured, "and they would eke out a meal."

Five minutes after, her sleek black head was rising and falling, her round arms gleaming in the overhead stroke which sent her straight to a lily-field. A couple of moor-hens fled, leaving a rippling streak of silver behind them. As she entered the leaf carpet it took in great waves of water over the edges--waves which broke into dew-drops that ran races with each other for first place in the leafy hollows.

The dragon-flies darted around her, timid but persistent; and myriads of tiny insects, disturbed from the sweet stems, rose in clouds, attracting the swift swooping of the bronze-winged fly-catchers.

Shabash was waiting for her on the bank as she came back wading, her arms full of blown lotus, her track marked by drifting petals. As she approached he flung a few yards of tinsel and muslin on the ground in extravagant, theatrical disgust.

"That is all," he cried; "by the faith of my fathers, six ells of false tinsel and four of twopenny muslin for digging a grave in *kunker*^[10] soil. God and his Prophet! why didst not send them to be born Hindus? Then 'twould have taken ten rupees of fire-wood to save them from being burned in hell. And last night, look you, I cut a sleeping snake in two as I dug, and both ends fell at my toes. *Ari!* A riddle indeed in the dark, which be head and which be tail? And I am to go through such moments for six ells of tinsel and four of such muslin. No, *mai* Suttu. 'Tis the Kazi's son, or starvation."

Suttu smiled as she stooped to wring the water from her scant petticoat.

"Not so, Shahbash. The Kazi's son doth not like me. And lotus-beans are good till the dates ripen. Then the gold! It may be in the next grave."

He scratched his thick grey hair, on which he wore no turban, doubtfully.

"God knows! Every full moon I stretch my sheet on the ground and dance to please my fairy. Then when I fall into the trance I ask the old question, 'Where is Deen Ali's gold?' But there is no answer in the morning. Now, if the fairy cannot tell--"

Suttu laughed. "Dost not, may be, forget the answer? The black bottle steals thy brains--"

"'Tis not the bottle," muttered Shahbash, sulkily, as he gathered up his perquisites. "'Tis the fairy steals my brains. For sure there be not rum enough in it nowadays--"

So they walked home to the mosque-like tomb in the date-grove, she with her sheaf of lotus, he with his shovel and shroud.

II.

Suttu's great-great-grandfather had been a saint of the first water--a double-distilled, above-proof performer of miracles; his holiness being strong enough to stand two generations of dilution and still leave spiritual distinction to his descendants. Yet the difference in the saintship of Deen Ali, the original, and Inam Ali, the present incumbent of the

shrine, lay more in their surroundings than in themselves. The former, according to tradition, had lived for ten years in a trance, oblivious of all save the touch of a certain prayer-carpet on his feet; a carpet brought from holy Mecca, which had been used--again according to tradition--by the Prophet himself. Then sight, speech, action, were restored to Deen Ali for a space, and while earth and sky wore the glorious apparel of sunrise and sunset, his soul came back in praise and prayer.

Inam Ali inherited the trance, but folk called it paralysis, and the death in life yielded to carnal, not spiritual, food. Doubtless physiologically it was quite as wonderful that twice a day, regularly as clock-work, the half-dead organism should accept nourishment; practically it was not so impressive.

But other things had changed too in the seventy-and-odd years since Deen Ali had planted the Arabian date-stones he had also brought back from holy Mecca in the land granted to his saintship. Curious holdings these, burdened at times by quaint conditions in return for official canonization; for in those days saintship paid. In this case the offerings of the faithful had taken visible shape in the blue-tiled tomb where Deen Ali's body lay under a stucco roly-poly twelve feet long. Whether this length awarded to saintly tombs, which contrasts so oddly with the curtness of those allowed to the laity, has reference to the extent of piety, or whether some Mohammedan exemplar of old really was of unusual stature, is a moot point. Certain it is that in upper India, as elsewhere, the "unco guid" are tedious even when at rest.

The blue-green dome of the saint's tomb, therefore, soared up into the green-grey plumes of the palms, as a record of past munificence; and round it the green-blue parrots circled and swept till the wearied eye sought relief in the gold clusters of dates above and the gold sand below.

Gold! If report said true, golden indeed with other records of munificence. But where? That secret lay hid in Inam Ali's paralyzed brain. He must have known; for, despite the slackness of modern offerings, there had never been any want in the mud hovel hitched on to the tomb; until Suttu, coming in one evening with her veil full of dates, had found the old man quite unconscious on the saint's high wooden bed, which still stood over the grave under the dome.

The news thrilled the adjoining township with brief enthusiasm. Then a bustling Hindu assistant surgeon got wind of the case, and sanctity vanished before science. From that day, several years past, matters had gone from bad to worse. A railway appeared, reducing offerings to the lowest ebb; for, as Shahbash declared with mingled truth and tears, the pilgrims counted their third-class return tickets as offerings to the shrine, and the traffic department charged dead against charity in the extortionate fares for sheep, goats, and fowls. On the other hand, the railway had certainly brought cholera three years in succession--an unheard-of event--and that had increased the chances of finding the gold in the digging of graves--graves, however, for which the perquisites lessened month by month. That was due to the village accountant's spite; spite born of family matters which went back to the time when Suttu was born.

Inam Ali, briefly, had lived for six months in hopes that a posthumous child of his only son would be an heir to the saintship; and in his first disappointment had been only too glad to get rid of mother and child, by the former's marriage to the accountant and the latter's betrothal to her stepfather's son. After a time, however, he had bought the child back, with bribes, to keep him company, and thereafter had spent years in spoiling her. Consequently, when the inevitable fulfilment of the betrothal came round, Suttu was dragged off to *zenana* life, struggling like a wild animal. She failed, however, to fulfil her duty of bringing a son to inherit, through her, the date-palms and the hidden treasure; and after one baby, born when she was thirteen, ceased its feeble efforts to live, she settled down--well, as a leopardess might settle in its cage.

Ten years after, she paid her first visit to the cemetery, in order to cool her newly buried husband's grave with decorous tears. She went there calmly, and then as calmly refused to return. She had made up her mind to become a religious, she said. Now this fell in with both the old man's and her father-in-law's views. The former was willing, as before, to pay for her companionship; and the latter, with an eye to a future when he should have Suttu entirely under his control, thought it as well she should keep in with her grandfather and the hidden treasure. So a religious she became, somewhat to the scandal of the neighbourhood. Then came the paralysis, leaving Hussan *minus* his monthly payment, and quite uncertain whether Suttu said truth when she denied all knowledge of the hoard. In truth, the position was awkward. The saint might recover speech, and then, if he found that Suttu had been violently used, he might resent it and make away with the treasure. If, however, by starving her out, Suttu could be induced to break her vow and marry, Hussan could no doubt get himself appointed guardian of the shrine, and so have an opportunity of searching where he chose. The task was not a difficult one, since the people around were easily led to believe that her ways and works were anything but what a *fakeerni's* should be. So the offerings grew less and less, the complaints of mischance or neglect more frequent; yet still Suttu held her head jauntily and laughed when, of an evening, she met her father-in-law prowling around the graveyard. It had a fascination for him; and often when his feet were not there, his

finger was tracing its outline on the village map. There, within that little space, lay the treasure, and a horrible conjunction of a half-dead old man and a very much alive young woman prevented him from getting hold of it. The thought kept him from sleeping when there had been a death in the village, and he knew Shahbash was digging and delving. And when he slept he dreamed that the old saint sat up and spoke, but that no one could hear a word he said. He did not know that Suttu and her henchman had gone the crucial length of spreading the holy carpet Mecca-ways, and setting the old saint's feet upon it, more than once, at sunrising and sunsetting. In vain; the miracle would not work for gold; so they had lifted him back again to the high wooden bed.

Shahbash was really losing his temper over his part of the business. Lotus-beans for breakfast were all very well, but you could not dig graves on lotus-beans. Besides, the black bottle was always empty.

"Lo, *mai*, I grow thin," he grumbled; "then the fairy will cease to care for me, and that is an end. Women are not to be trusted."

As he set to work on a baby's grave, he went on grumbling and muttering to himself. He had been her father's foster-brother, and she was the apple of his eye. For all that, he must eat. Some day her enemy would tempt him to treason when he ached with hunger, and who could be faithful on an empty stomach? He blubbered at the thought of his own betrayal.

Thus, on the evening of the day when Suttu slapped the Kazi's son, matters were approaching a crisis all round; even Hussan, prowling about the graveyard in the vague disquiet which beset him after every fresh excavation of the soil, made up his mind to a bolder game. As he picked his way through the short mud mounds, a sort of thrill shot up his legs at the thought that he might be treading on gold; for the hope of buried treasure takes possession of men, body and soul. He found no one in the reed thatched-hut; but a savory smell of curried beans from the fire-place showed that its mistress would soon be back to supper. So he went over to the tomb where the saint lay on the wooden bed under the dome, in which the faint breathing of the old man swelled to a murmuring echo like a swarm of bees. Hussan stood beside the bed, full of rage, malice, and greed. If he could only crack that bald old noddle and pick out the kernel!

Suddenly the thought came that perhaps now--this moment or the next--was the one appointed from all eternity in which speech would return, and he stood petrified by expectation. Perhaps a call might rouse the sleeping soul. He started as his own hoarse whisper grew to a roar in the echoing dome. That should wake the dead. Then, as the sound died ineffectually to silence, the desire to crack the old man's skull at all costs returned. The kernel might take care of itself.

Something of this must have showed in his face, for Suttu, coming in behind him, passed softly to the bed and raised a menacing hand. Only for an instant. Then she sat down on the edge and laughed.

"Well! did he tell you?"

A brutal question; for the answer would be dinned into his ears by the echo, and he knew it all too well already.

"Come outside, daughter," he said, with a curse; "one cannot hear one's self speak in this chattering place."

They sat down on the topmost step of the low flight leading to the tomb. The heat of the sun was over, but a scorching air struck up from the bricks, making Suttu fan herself with the corner of her veil. No wonder men coveted her, thought her companion, eying her askance. She grew handsomer every day.

"Suttu," he began, taking the plunge boldly, "peace is better than war. Give me half the gold, and I am content. Let it stay in the family, Suttu."

"Whose family--mine or thine?" she asked, scornfully.

"'Tis the same. Lo, is not Murghub thy brother, since he is thy mother's son, though he be but a poor natural?"

"Lay not that to her charge," retorted Suttu, flippantly. "She made no mistake in me."

Hussan coughed down his impatience. "Well, well, I care not. I came not to chop words. It is the gold, Suttu! I mean to have some of it."

"What gold? I know of none. I have seen none."

"Then have I! See!" He felt in an innermost pocket, and showed her, lying in his palm, a broad gold-piece. "They make not such pieces nowadays. Where that came from there are more."

She turned it over and over in her long, brown fingers. "Aye, 'tis old. Didst steal it from him, then?" A backward toss of the head indicated her meaning.

"Nay, he gave it."

"Wherefore?"

"For thee, Suttu, when thou wast a child. Give it me back. Stop! what dost thou?"

"This," she cried, shrilly, seizing his clutching hand by the wrist in a grasp firm as a man's, while in sheer bravado she held the coin high above her head. "I will give it back to the old man, and see what he thinks of thee for keeping it. What! wouldst fight for one gold-piece, fool, and lose the chance of lakhs by my death? Yea, yea, I know. Thou art not my heir in death, though thou mayst have hold on me alive. Hands off, or I will fight too! And Shahbash comes to his supper. He is a devil when hungry!"

Her tone was still mocking, the grasp on his wrist firm but not straining. Her temper in control as yet, but she meant mischief, if mischief was to be; and for the life of him Hussan could not help admiring her.

"Thou art a she-devil," he said, sulkily--"a she-devil, and no woman."

"I bore a son to your son, anyhow," she retorted quickly, and her frown warned him that he had gone too far.

"If thou wilt but listen--"

"Not till I have laid this offering in the saint's hand," she interrupted imperially, with a gesture of disdain. Hussan kicked his heels savagely as she marched over the platform and entered the tomb. He could see her stoop and lay the coin in the indifferent palm resting beside the still body. She came back much the better for this serio-comic interlude, for her dramatic instincts were strong, and she played her part of independence vigorously.

"Well," she began, quite graciously, settling herself down on the step beside her father-in-law, "if peace be better than war, what price hath peace?"

The accountant leaned over to her eagerly. "Halves--halves in everything save liberty. That is all thine own."

For an instant she felt tempted. Then her natural waywardness returned.

"And if I claim the whole?"

"War! And that to a woman without gold--"

She gave an irritating chuckle. "Bah! It may come any day. Shahbash may find it; the old man may speak."

The very possibility of her words being true roused his anger. "Speak! He will never speak again."

A rattle behind made them both turn with the alertness of those who live among snakes. Suttu was on her feet in a second without a cry. The accountant let loose a yell of dismay, and in his recoil rolled back a step or two, where he lay clutching at the bricks wildly. For the old saint was sitting up on his bed waggling his bald head over the coin; he could not have looked more ghastly had he risen from the dead.

The great moment was upon them!

This thought came first to both spectators; and they were too uncultured to conceal it.

"Tell us where!" cried Suttu, as she stood.

"Yea, tell us ere you die!" echoed the accountant as he lay.

Not a very warm welcome back to life, but the old man, though he raised his head at the cry, understood nothing. The dim eyes passed the covetous faces and rested on the familiar landscape darkening beyond the door of his tomb. Then the nerveless hand slipped from its resting-place on his knee--slipped, slipped, till with a clink, and a roll, and a

rattle, given back a thousand-fold by the dome, the coin fell upon the stone floor.

"Gone!" he whispered, "gone--yea, gone forever!"

But the look of life in his face had carried Suttu back to her childhood, and her arms were already round the failing figure, as she turned such fierce forbidding on her companion that he shrank back silent.

"It is the last chance!" he whispered, after a time.

"I care not."

Suddenly the bald head fell back on Suttu's breast.

The chance was over.

They sat all through the night waiting for a sign, and none came. Before the dawn broke, the old saint and his secret had gone together into the darkness.

Hussan, as he walked cityward, felt that Fate had done him a good as well as an ill turn. He had made no compact with Suttu, and, now that the grandfather was out of the way, he could sue for guardianship at once, and unmask a battery he had been keeping in reserve.

And Shahbash, disconsolate over the cold curry he had actually forgotten to eat in the hope of hearing his old master speak once more, made gruesome faces over his coming task. The gold, for sure, was not hidden under Deen Ali's roly-poly, so he would have to find a resting-place in it for the last incumbent without greed of gain to beguile his labour.

Only Suttu did not think of the future, but of the past, when the old man had been her willing slave.

III.

The dates were ripe. Great drooping bunches of them hung under the swaying palm-leaves--rose-pink and purple-black, yellow and brown, many-tinted like some rare agate. Shahbash gorged himself on the sickly-sweet fruit, and every one, far and near, grew visibly fatter. But Deen Ali's Arabian dates were too valuable for home consumption, and Suttu only awaited the new moon in order to summon the pluckers and driers to prepare the fruit for market. Shahbash, with a sigh at the shortness of opportunity, ate all the more and thought of little else.

Yet the four weeks since the saint's death had not been uneventful. The Kazi's son and the accountant had joined issue in their desire to see Suttu worsted. As yet, however, there had been no overt act. To begin with, the native of India does nothing in a hurry. In addition, none gauges better than he the indisputable advantage of an old lie over a new one. It is like port wine depositing a crust for itself out of its own sediment. Finally, even a false claim acquires dignity by being preferred deliberately, moderately. All these considerations had coincided towards inaction--as yet.

But a day or two before the new moon matters changed. Suttu, coming at dawn from her hut, saw a sight which literally took her breath away. Three of the tallest stems in the nearest clump of palms were swaying under the weight of men clinging to them by clamps and a rope passed round their waists. Below, the freshly gathered fruit lay in heaps under the fingers of women busy in sorting it and carrying it in baskets to a drying enclosure already fenced in by hedges of plaited leaves. In a word, date-picking was in full swing. Had she by chance given the orders in her sleep?

Incredulous of her own sight, she roused Shahbash, who still lay snoring on the raised platform of the tomb.

He was on his feet in a moment, and shouting "Thieves!" loudly as the only explanation, swung himself down like a monkey, and ran gesticulating with windmill arms towards the trees. His ugliness, even when familiar, was phenomenal; seen by the date-pickers, who as usual were strangers employed by a big contractor, it appeared supernatural; and the women, taking him to be nothing more nor less than the demon in charge of the grove, flung down their baskets and fled, screaming. The men would doubtless have followed their example, had it been possible; but, rather than run the gantlet of the dancing, yelling creature below, they dug their clamps tighter and held on in

mortal terror of what would happen next.

Suttu's more tardy appearance led to an explanation; from which it appeared that the pickers had been sent by a contractor, who had formally bought the crop from one Hussan the accountant.

"Leave them to me, *mai* Suttu!" shrieked Shahbash, in an ecstasy of rage over this calm appropriation. "Lo, I will give them a crop of blows if they come down. If not, let them starve and drop like bats in the cold. I am in no hurry." He squatted himself on the matting and helped himself to the gathered dates with both hands. But Suttu saw further than the immediate present, and knew a protest must be raised, and that quickly. She turned at once to that confidence in the power of personal appeal which, thank Heaven, still lingers in India, despite Western attempts to strangle it with red tape and smother it with sealing-wax.

"Yea, watch thou," she cried, "while I go to the big *sahib's* house and cry for justice. He listens to the poor."

"*Wah! wah!*" assented the clingers, "but see us safe first, O mother!"

"Let them be," said Shahbash, confidentially, "else they may make away with the dates they have picked. Lo, they are safer there till the police come."

So there they clung, while the *fakeerni*, her indignation increasing at every swinging stride, made her way to the deputy-commissioner's bungalow.

He was a small, fair English lad, put in charge--with many instructions to telegraph to headquarters if he saw signs of the millennium or another mutiny--during the absence on three weeks' leave of a senior man. He was just mounting his polo pony in order to keep his hand in by chivying a ball round a stick, when wronged womanhood appeared and flung out a pair of remarkably beautiful arms for justice. Perhaps the fact that the complainant was superbly handsome and struck a most impressive attitude had something to do with the readiness with which he turned to the red-coated orderlies for a translation of her *patois* petition.

"'Tis Suttu, the *fakeerni*, and she comes to tell the Protector of the Poor that contractors are feloniously picking her dates."

"Send and stop 'em. And, and--what the deuce is the right thing to do. Oh, yes. Tell the police to report as usual." Then, as he rode off, he nodded affably to Suttu. "Take comfort, mother; I'll see to it."

He had been swished at Harrow quite an incredibly short time before, but he did the part of Providence neatly, while men for whom he had fagged were enjoying the inestimable privilege of sitting on a vestry--or the knife-board of an omnibus conveying them citywards to act as copying-machines for the term of their natural lives.

Suttu's apparent triumph, however, dwindled in Shahbash's eyes to ignominious defeat when the police refused permission for any one to pick the dates until the petition of Hussan for the land on behalf of his son Murghub should be decided.

"What has that idiot to do with my land?" cried the *fakeerni*, indignantly. "Lo, there is no drop of saint's blood in him. He is of the second marriage."

The policeman sniggered. "I know not, mother! But this I hear, that Hussan saith otherwise, and the Kazi is with him. And births and marriages are ticklish things to date, if the Kazi be not friendly."

Suttu's heart throbbed. If the Kazi were indeed her only refuge, she might have to face the storm in the open.

"O thou with the yellow trousers on thy legs, and wisdom in head and heart," moaned Shahbash, "dost mean that these dates--Deen Ali's famous dates--are to be food for parrots? while I----" He sat in the sand, clasping his stomach, rocking backwards and forwards, a ludicrous spectacle of woe; yet there was tragedy in the comedy.

That evening, when supper consisted of a few millet-cakes and a tray of watery *pilu*-berries, which Suttu had gathered from the jungles, he looked at the ripe dates overhead and felt that the hour of apostasy had come. After the barmecidal feast he took his mattock and went to the graveyard--not to dig, but solemnly to consider which of Suttu's two enemies should have his services. Dawn found him returning from the Kazi's house, with the black bottle full of rum, and the remains of a perfect feast of *bakkar khana* tied up in a handkerchief--both of which he hid carefully. All that day he did nothing but vaunt the delights of a sheltered home combined with rich food; especially to a woman--more especially to a woman who had nothing to eat but *pilu*-berries and millet cakes! Suttu smiled at him indulgently.

"Lo, God did not make me all stomach," she said. "I eat the air and the sunshine; and I like to see the parrot people and the squirrel people eat my dates, even if I can't."

Shahbash gave a rumble of despair, and bolstered up his uneasy conscience by telling himself such views were unnatural, accursed.

"Is a grave ordered?" asked Suttu, in surprise, when, that evening after supper, the dwarf shouldered his mattock. "Who is dead?"

"The saddler's son. Leastways he was so nigh his end to-day that his people gave me warning it might be wanted. And like as not they would eat oaths had it been bespoke in form, for they are keen to quarrel. Aye, aye, if lies were satisfying, my belly wouldn't be empty."

He disappeared into the soft, balmy darkness, grumbling and muttering--to come back circuitously to the hiding-place of the black bottle. He would need that for consolation, aye, for forgetfulness, before midnight brought the bribed watchmen to guard the date-grove. Then sooner or later after that some one's cries--- Well, why not? Suttu would not be the first woman who had been carried off to a rich marriage, and had lived to tell the tale cheerfully. Still, the thought of those cries when the Kazi and his friends came was disturbing. Shahbash took a great pull at the bottle. It would bring the fairy, and the fairy was unfailing consolation.

Meanwhile Suttu sat on the steps of the tomb, too much disturbed, by this outrageous claim of Hussan's, for sleep. The grounds which he would put forward were easy to guess. He and the Kazi would post-date the second marriage, and ante-date Murghub, the idiot's birth, so as to make him out her full brother. Besides, they had money for evidence; she had none, and the neighbours were unfriendly. Her only help lay in the Lord, and that, she knew, had nothing to do with a court of justice. Still, it was as well to omit nothing which might be of use; so she brought out the trestle-shaped stool, on which her grandfather's copy of the Koran lay, and began to chant an additional chapter of Holy Writ as a kind of bribe to favour. As she rocked herself backward and forward, her lips busy with the long rhythm in which the unknown words quite lost all identity, her mind was busy over the time when she had learned it all with tears and trouble from the saint, stern on this one point. How fond he had been of divinations!--and Suttu paused in the middle of a pious apothegm to recollections of her grandfather compiling date-names for his neighbours--names, that is to say, which by the values of the composing letters would give the date of birth. What if her own name, Sutura Begum, was one of these, and the idiot's also? That would be proof indeed! Perhaps Shahbash--- She had started to her feet, when she remembered her chapter, in some trepidation, since half a bribe was no bribe. She would just go on chanting till Shahbash came home. It could do no harm, and might do good. Her round, full voice echoed back from the tomb, and out into the date-palms.

"*Wah!* if she were really, after all, a pious one, and not a bad walker," said one of the watchers to the other. His companion clucked a denial. "*Thchu!* 'tis likely she knows the Kazi is to be here to-night. That is woman's way."

Suttu chanted and chanted till she grew hoarse. Then she stood up and listened. The night was still and silent. Not even the distant thud of the mattock, so Shahbash must be on his way back. She waited with the little oil-lamp in her hand, eager for her question. Then impatience gained the mastery, and still with the oil-cresset in her hand--for the new moon gave little light, and snakes were common--she set off swiftly through the palms towards the cemetery.

"Shahbash!" she cried, but nothing stirred or answered as she picked her way through the short graves. Suddenly she was brought up sharply by something at her feet--something she had deemed another grave. It was the dwarf stretched fast asleep on a white sheet. His grey hair was twined with jasmine blossoms, and a black bottle lay empty by his side. He had been dancing to amuse his fairy. That was no uncommon affair; but whence had he got the inspiration, and the greasy remnants of a feast which the light of the lamp disclosed? What villainy had he been bribed to commit? Something, she felt sure, even if it were nothing more serious than a failure to fulfil the duties of her freehold, by having Deen Ali's bed ready for the saddler's son. If it were that! She seized the shovel, and swinging it over her head brought it down on the ground, where Shahbash had outlined a grave, with a thud which set her arms tingling. The soil was hard, indeed, and surely that was twelve o'clock chiming from the court gong! Not much time left; but softer spots were to be found than the one Shahbash had chosen. She took up the oil-cresset again and wandered round to the extreme edge of the graveyard where it merged into the sandier common.

Thud! thud! The strokes of the mattock echoing through the night made the Kazi's son smile as, about an hour after midnight, he crept alone to the tomb. A man who is the prey of a purely animal passion does not have his ears boxed for nothing, and his idea of revenge went further than marriage. No one would heed Suttu's cries for help this time, and the watchers were in his pay.

Thud! thud! Suttu's respect for her henchman increased at every stroke. She was well into the grave by this time, digging round and round methodically, though she ached all over. Yet, if she died of it, that grave should be ready. What was that? Metal on metal! The surprise sent a tingle all through her. Then she was down on hands and knees, groping in the loosened soil.

Yes, it was the treasure at last, and no one, no soul alive, except herself, must know of it. She looked round hastily into the darkness and silence. There was no fear of interruption now; there might be afterwards. Her best plan was to finish the grave, so as to obliterate all trace of the spot whence she had taken that heavy brass pot, and then, but not till then, to go home quietly. The next instant the thud of the mattock began again. A lucky decision; for the Kazi's son, surprised at finding Suttu absent, was beginning to suspect treachery from the silence, when the digging recommenced. Shahbash, then, meant to keep faith, and not seek safety in flight. But Suttu? As the spoiler sat beside the friendly watchman he asked himself if the lies he himself had circulated so diligently about the religious were true, and she had an assignation elsewhere. He gnashed his teeth over the thought and his own rejection.

"A step, my lord! it was a step!" whispered one of the guardians, and the Kazi's son crept towards the hut. He had not entered it before, being assured it was empty; but now, thinking Suttu might have seen him and slipped into the darkness for safety, he felt his way through the door and so on by the wall.

Then a yell burst from him—a cry once heard never to be forgotten:

"Snake! snake!"

The watchmen heard it and came slowly, feeling their dark way with sticks, lest where one snake was there might be two. Suttu heard it also, and, lamp in hand, ran back to the hut, knowing that friend or foe was in deadly peril.

Something huddled up, writhing, moaning, clasping one hand with the other, shapeless, convulsed by fear, lay upon the ground—something that flung itself before her and yelled for a charm—the saint's charm—for mercy—for help—for anything.

"Thou!" she cried, "thou! What dost here?"

She knew well enough, and she thrust him back savagely.

"Never mind that now, mother," whimpered one of the men. "Give him the charm. Sure God gave such to the saints for all men, and all men are sinners."

"For men—not for dogs! Go, hound—go and die! I have no charm for thee."

The wretched creature, struggling from the hands of the watchmen, who strove to set him on his feet, caught her by the ankle. "Save me! save me, to be thy friend! I know—I can save—I—"

He sank down helpless, foaming at the mouth from abject fear.

Suttu paused. There was something in that view of the case. If anything could be done, if by chance— By the light of the lamp she examined the bitten finger closely, and an odd look came to her face.

"It was near the door, breast-high by the sticks of the thatch thou wast bitten," she said, as she hastily concealed the wound under a bandage.

"Yea, yea, thou knowest! The charm, mother Suttu, the charm! I swear to be thy friend!"

The *fakeerni* looked contemptuously at her writhing lover. "Swear by thy son's head, fool! naught else will satisfy me!"

When the only oath a native will not break had been pronounced, Suttu stood up with a laugh.

"The charm is worked, Mir Sahib. Thou wilt not die of that bite." Then she checked herself, and with the same odd look on her face assumed a graver tone. "Lo, I will work the charm. As for thee—go home, swift as thou canst. Call the barber, let him bleed thee to faintness. Take *kala dana*^[11] and sulphur to the full. Eat naught for two days, live righteous, and look not on the bite for a month. Then give a hundred rupees to the saint's shrine."

"'Tis all right, master," whispered one of the men. "There is no fear of the bargain when payment follows cure. Lo,

thou art better already, and by this thou shouldst have been worse, had not the charm worked. Hurry, hurry, lest harm come from disobedience!"

When they were quite out of sight and hearing, Suttu took the lamp, went to the door of the hut and chirruped. From a hole in the wall a pair of bright eyes looked out.

"The Brahmans say true," she chuckled, "and Ram befriends those who befriend his favourite. Shahbash would have had me tear the squirrel's nest down, but I love the chattering things."

She had little time, however, to spare for amusement at her own trick. The grave had to be completed, the treasure brought home by dawn. Her arms ached worse than ever from their short rest, and there was a grey glimmer in the east, before she judged that her work would pass muster. Then she removed all Shahbash's belongings to the side of the grave, leaving him still in a drunken sleep upon the bare ground.

Finally, lifting the brass pot, which was carefully luted over with hard clay, she carried it to the hut, shut the door, and by the growing light through the chinks began to open up her treasure.

The pot was full of farthings--nothing but farthings. She sat and looked at them hopelessly. What did it mean? Why should any one take the trouble to bury farthings? The puzzle was beyond her, and when a gleam of real sun warned her that time was passing, she hid the pot under a pile of brushwood, and stepped out with a feeling of relief into the open air. The world was ablaze with the clear, uncompromising light of an Indian morning. The parrots were wheeling round the blue dome, and a squirrel sat on the top of the thatch chirping over a date stolen from the disputed crop.

Suttu thought of the Kazi's son physicked, bled, and hungry. Her laugh echoed out among the palms, and she felt more comforted than when, the night before, she had sought solace in chanting.

IV.

Shahbash sat up and opened his mouth with a tremendous yawn. Then he opened his eyes, and at the same moment reached around for the black bottle. Its absence woke him thoroughly, and the further discovery that he was on the bare ground made him instinctively cry "Thieves!" before he was alert enough to notice the sight of his belongings on the ground some little way off. Rising slowly, for he was stiff in his limbs, he stumbled towards them, conscious only of a racking headache. Memory of his own treachery had not yet returned, and when he all but fell into a new-made grave on his way to the black bottle, his mind seemed to him a perfect blank, and he stood transfixed before this evidence of an industry which he could not remember. He sat down helplessly on its edge, dangling his legs over the side, and peered into it critically. Without doubt, if that was his handiwork, he must have been very drunk indeed. The mere force of habit made him slip into it, and, seizing the mattock, begin to trim the shape. Suddenly he gave a yell, and the next moment was up on solid earth again, clutching at something which had rolled out of the last spadeful of earth--something which had clinked and glittered.

Undoubtedly; for all that, it was only a farthing. His face fell. Still, a farthing was money, and pointed to money. Ah, how pleased little mother Suttu would be!

The thought transfixed him again; this time by excess of memory. What had happened to her? What had he done? What cursed fate was this, that he should find money on the very day when he had given up hope and faith? His trembling legs would scarcely support him, as, driven by the necessity of knowing the worst, he stumbled towards the hut, wondering how he should ever face the saint's roly-poly, or how he would endure life without Suttu's laugh to lighten his labours.

What was that echoing among the palms? Surely, surely, it was her laugh. Were the fiends playing tricks with him, or-- Hope literally gave him wings, for, as he galloped forward, the sheet he had thrown round his shoulders spread out on either side, and his matted hair, still bound with chaplets, blew round his head like an aureole. Suttu, standing on the steps, laughed louder at the ridiculous figure gambolling towards her, uttering little cries of joy.

If he had looked like a whipped hound a minute before, he was like a cur restored to favour now, in his delight quite

forgetting the necessity for caution, till Suttu sternly asked him to explain. Then, inspired by elation, he lied magnificently. Was there no just cause for joy when he had found the treasure?

"The treasure! Thou hast found it?" cried the *fakeerni*, paling before the fear lest she had overlooked the real prize. "Where--what treasure?"

"The saint's treasure--lakhs on lakhs! Listen, O incredulous! O suspicious! and eat shame. Last night, urged by the virulence of thine enemies, I vowed a mighty vow for the accomplishment of thy desires, caring naught for my own ruin. I spread a cloth for my fairy, setting it well with flowers, and dancing to please her. But when she came, allured by my graces, I spurned her. Yea, I trampled her under foot. I took my heart and hers out of our bodies and ate them before her face. 'Show me the treasures,' I cried; 'rescue my little mother Suttu from the necessity of marrying a one-eyed, pock-marked man, or I set no more cloths for thee!' Lo, thou shouldst have seen her clinging to me like a weanling child; but I would none of her! Then she grew wroth, saying she would ne'er return; but I answered, 'Who cares?' Think, *mai* Suttu--I, Shahbash, said that to my fairy for thy sake, and thou hast suspicions. Nay, smite me, but I said more. I said--what did I not say?--till--till she smote me on the forehead, so--and I died. Yea, I died as much as a man may and yet live. So--so--she dug a grave for me--for she would not the jackals had my beauty. Yea, a grave! See you, it was not much of a grave--a poor grave, such as a woman's hand could make. Lo, my heart aches for the blisters there must be--"

"Go on, liar," said Suttu, calmly, "and let the blisters be. They will heal without thy lip-salve."

"May I eat dirt if it be not true! Then, towards morning, being chastened by blisters, her heart melted: so she buried the treasure instead of me. That is how it came about."

Suttu could not resist a smile.

"But the treasure, fool--the treasure?"

Shahbash, dancing round her, flourished a coin, which she snatched from him hastily.

"Lo!" she cried, in tones of disappointment, "'tis only a farthing."

"Only a farthing!" echoed Shahbash, ironically. "Hark to the incredulous. Aye, but it means gold close at hand. Dost not know that wise men put pennies when they take pounds, so that the *jinn* who guards the treasure may find the tale true when he counts the coins?"

Suttu's hand went up swiftly to her forehead; she gave a little cry.

"Dost mean they put farthings in place of gold?"

"Aye! Sure, a coin is a coin to the *jinn*, and when the last gold bit is gone he sits guarding a pot of farthings till judgment. Ho, ho!--ha, ha!"

His mirth left Suttu smileless.

"A pot--of--farthings," she muttered slowly. Then a light broke in on her, and she threw up her hands, exclaiming: "Gone! Aye, he said it was gone, and we thought he meant--gone! Yea, it is clear! Gone, gone, gone!"

"What is clear? What hath gone?" asked Shahbash, curiously. The need for caution came home to her.

"'Tis clear thou art a fool," she said, "and my trust in thee is gone. Why cannot folk leave me alone?" she continued, querulously. "I only ask peace and quiet."

And then, to the dwarf's horror and amazement, she suddenly began to cry--*mai* Suttu crying like any other woman!

"'Tis but the *pilu*-berries," he whimpered. "Did I not tell thee they were watery diet, apt to turn acid and destroy the courage? But there shall be no more wild meats for thee, *mai* Suttu. The treasure is found."

It was, indeed. All that day the *fakeerni* sat wondering what she had better do; but, if she was quick to carry out a suggestion, she had no head for the weaving of plots and plans. The pot of farthings represented a few rupees, but not enough to purchase witnesses and conduct a case in court. The Kazi's son would at least not give evidence against

her, but even the break-down of this particular claim would benefit her little. She must have something to live upon; and, what is more, nothing but the hope of discovering treasure would keep Shahbash faithful to his salt, or induce the accountant to come to terms.

Towards evening she strolled over to watch the dwarf, who had been digging the grave deeper and deeper, longer and longer.

"Art going to bury a saint, O Shahbash?" she asked, with a broad smile.

From the trench behind the growing mountain of soil came grunts and groans. Then a verse of the Koran, mingled with something suspiciously like curses.

She sat down on the pile and looked over the level stretch dotted by mud hillocks, with here and there a masonry tomb. On one of these a squirrel sat perched, hard at work on a peach-stone which some wayfarer on the adjoining path had flung aside.

Suttu's keen delight in open-air sights and sounds kept her watching the dainty little creature as it shifted the prize this way and that in its deft fingers so as to bring its teeth to bear on the hard shell. It worked as hard as Shahbash, she thought, with another of her broad smiles, and deserved the sweet kernel. No, another squirrel had caught wind of the affair and came pirating along with tail full set. Lo, 'twas a play to watch! Up and down, round and round. The peach-stone dropped here, snatched up there, now in this one's possession, now in that, until finally the new-comer sat in the place of the old, gnawing at the hard shell, and twisting it about with deft fingers.

Suttu, with her chin on her hands, watched the second as she had the first.

And, after all, there was no kernel in the peach-stone, nothing but a shrivelled skin which had once----!

Suttu stood up, clapping her hands.

"*Shahbash! Shahbash!*" she cried.

The dwarf stuck his head out of the grave.

"Well, *mai* Suttu, what is it now?"

She turned with a flaunt of her petticoat, a flinging out of her round arms.

"'Twas the other 'Shahbash' I meant, but 'tis all one. Leave digging, and go and call Hussan, the father-in-law. I have made up my mind."

* * * * *

It was ten years after these events that the English boy, who had stayed proceedings in the date-picking, returned to the district as deputy commissioner. Gratitude, she averred, was her first reason for appearing in my garden with a cunningly plaited basket of Deen Ali's fruit. Afterwards a mutual fancy between her and my young barbarians led to confidences when she came over with all sorts of odd toys made out of palm-leaves and supplies of young squirrels for the children. She was still undoubtedly handsome, and the indisputable possessor of the tomb and the date-trees. The graveyard with its rights of alms and treasure had passed into the hands of the village accountant, in consideration of a monthly pension of ten rupees.

It was in answer to a query why she kept so many tame squirrels that this tale was told.

"And you had no difficulty in persuading your father-in-law?"

"None, *Huzoor!* God gave the bait, the fool swallowed it. The farthing Shahbash found bought him, greed and all. It was better than fighting when the Kazi would not swear to the marriage, and our names were birth-names. He signed

the stamp paper gladly; and the perquisites have gone up again, so he hath lost nothing."

"Shahbash?"

A big, broad smile came to her face.

"He digs, and his stomach is always full. What more can he want? The squirrels are quite happy over the peach-stones while they are gnawing. Shahbash and the father-in-law think the kernel is inside, that is all. I know it is not. So we are both content."

When I left the district on promotion, Suttu came out as I rode past the blue-tiled tomb on my way to the river, with a great sheaf of lotus-blossoms in her arms. A tame squirrel, reared from the perennial nest in the thatch, peered from the folds in her veil, with furtive, bright eyes. The parrots circled, screaming round the ripening dates, and but a minute before my horse had shied from a *karait*, curving back to the prickly covert. The well known setting seemed a part of that familiar figure.

"May the Lord have the *Huzoor* in his keeping ever!" she said, decorously, as became a *fakeerni*. But her smile seemed to dim the sunlight, as with a gesture full of grace she flung the lotus-blossoms in my path.

That was my last sight of Suttu.

AT A GIRLS' SCHOOL.

I.

It was a large, square block of a building, which had once been somebody's palace. Not very old. That could be recognized by the odd, reminiscent air of a Genoese palazzo which clung to it, proclaiming the influence of some Italian adventurer in the Mogul times. In those days, doubtless, its blank arcaded walls had risen from a terraced orange-garden; but now the surrounding slums of a big, native city ended abruptly, at varying distance, in an irregular brick-strewn space, where buffaloes were tethered to eat street sweepings, and their refuse in its turn was set out to dry in fuel cakes--that being the last resort of matter in India, where poverty and greed fight for the uttermost farthing of utility. Besides the buffaloes and the refuse-heaps, the space in its longest angle showed the inevitable weaver's warp twined in and out of tiger-grass stalks stuck slantwise in the dust--inevitable, because it is never absent from an open space in a native city. Sometimes solitary, like a huge worm impaled and left to dry; more often tended by two chattering Fates, one on each side, whose tongues gabble an accompaniment to the whirring bobbins tied to long sticks which dance a ladies' chain through the grass-stalks, as the bearers walk swiftly up and down the long length of growing warp--up and down, with an outward swirl of a full petticoat and a veil bulging backward, as the free brown arms twist and twine. A common sight, a picturesque one withal, seeing that it shows a good figure at its best. Sometimes beyond these two Fates you may see Clotho spinning her lacquered wheel, but not often. As a rule she hides in narrow alleys, where, set well over the central gutter on a stool, she can discuss past, present, and future with half a dozen neighbours at a time.

For the rest, the building was distinctly imposing. Like a palazzo, it was tunnelled by one single high archway, leading into a central court-yard, decorously circled by orange-trees in tubs. Above these, again, was a further likeness in the three tiers of graceful arcades surrounding a square of deep ultramarine sky. There, however, the resemblance ended. A Genoese palace is sacred to silence and shadow; this was set apart to sunshine and sound, excepting on a gala day, when the philanthropic great ones came down to distribute prizes. Then it burst forth into carpets, awnings, curtains, and even the *Alif-Bey--wallahs* (alphabet-class) in the first story bit their tongues to keep them still. That was the noisiest story. All day long the inmates chanted letters in high childish voices, while the monitors stood over them like the parent bird, ready to drop a fresh titbit of knowledge into the clamorous mouths.

Up-stairs, in the primary department, the babel had lost its first barbarous simplicity; the makers of it did not always understand what they themselves were saying, and the uncertainty of all things had damped their infant light-heartedness. Higher again, in the third story, quite an academic silence prevailed among the girls working away at Euclid, algebra, and all the 'ologies, and they had learned an automatic thrust forward of the arm towards the teacher worthy of a British board school. This never failed to please exotic philanthropy. The connection may not have been quite clear, but this particular branch of knowledge was invariably looked upon as a sign that education was really at last beginning to leaven the mass of deplorable female ignorance in India.

Perhaps it was. Certainly this school, with its court-yard devoted to the *dhoolies* in which the pupils were carried to and from their lessons, and its three stories of different standards, formed a perfect ladder of learning; the lowermost rung being the listless, lazy group of bearers lounging in the gateway with the female chaperons until four o'clock chimed from a hundred gongs in the city. Then they earned a monthly pay from the Government by carrying the climbers of the ladder back to their homes in decent seclusion--playing, as it were, the part of Prince Hassan's carpet in transporting them into another hemisphere--nay, more, another world. At any rate, from algebra and the exact sciences to a cell of four walls, and, if Fate were kind, a few square yards of flat roof open to the sky. Something of a mental somersault; therefore it was perhaps as well in one point of view, if not in another, that many of the claimants to genteel seclusion who were comfortably carried by a paternal Government to their own doors, could, on arrival, set aside the convenient pretence and go about to see their friends with the more simple and less costly protection of a veil.

"*Ari*, sister!" said a young, dissipated-looking loungee in the gate; "there is that baby awake again. Go, Chundoo, and call Fatma."

The woman addressed--a big, brazen lump--went yawning and stretching to stand on the bottom step of the arched stairway. Then she called into the clamour above:

"Fatma! Fatma! The baby is awake."

Her hard tones echoed up the arcades, but the sing-song went on without a break. After a while, however, a pattering step came down the stairs, bringing into view a child of about ten, with a sharp, old face. Her blue trousers were rent at the knees, her skinny hands inconceivably smeared with ink--there was more ink than hand--and the coarse cotton cloth she wore as a veil was frayed, worn, and dirty. Beneath it, the odd little galloon of plaited hair on her forehead showed sun-bleached and rumpled, despite its tightness. A competent observer could have told at once that she belonged to the Cashmiri quarter, and to either a poverty-stricken or a bereaved house. No mother's fingers had been at that plaited hair for weeks.

"Where is Peru?" she began shrilly, still coming down the stairs. "Gambling and dicing, or snoozing and sleeping. How am I to win scholarships if my days are lost over a baby? *Ai*, sluggard! is that you? Art not ashamed of thyself?"

So, passing through the knot of jeering men into a dark recess in the entry, till her rating ceased over a year-old baby whimpering on the floor on a ragged quilt. "Peace! peace, my son, it is I, Fatma--yea, it is Fatma, thy father's sister."

The baby's fat, yellow legs--for it was one of those fair Cashmiri children who look sickly among the brown ones--were astride her curved hip, the whole balance of her thin bare body against its weight, as she paused once more among the men to fling a parting gibe at the sluggard.

"*Ai, teri nani!*" "Tis thy baby, I suppose--not mine."

A roar of laughter greeted the words, in which the girl joined, not because she quite understood its cause, but because she was quick enough to see that it was at Peru's expense, not hers. The veil which Nature draws to protect childhood counts for little among the men and women busy in drawing one to conceal their own unnatural vice, but Fatma's hoary knowledge of evil did not extend to a *double entendre*. She repeated her sally in childish ineptitude, till Peru with a curse bade her begone and take the boy to his mother.

"*Tobah!*" but she hath a tongue," murmured another loungee.

"*Pucki, burri pucki!*" (ripe or ready--very ready), assented Chundoo, shaking her head wisely. "Tis time thou hadst a husband for her, O Peru!"

"Not I. Who is to bake bread and take the child? 'Tis ten rupees a month for the other, remember; and Fatma--I swear it--is a good sort, for all her tongue."

Meanwhile the object of their remarks had begun to climb the stairs with her heavy burden. She had to sit down every now and again to rest, for she was but a poor scrap of a thing, ill-fed from her birth. She paused longer than usual at the turn of the stair whence you could see both ways along the first-story corridors.

*"One and one make two--oo--oo,
One and one make two--oo--oo,"*

chanted the infant classes in full choir over their first table.

One and one certainly made two; and two were heavier to carry than one. Fatma clutched her burden tighter and toiled up the steps once more, leaving the clamour behind her.

"*Ari!* Is that babe hungry again?" queried a tall girl, flashing past the next landing, plumaged like a parrot in red and green. "Babies seem hungry things. I'm glad I haven't one as yet." She was a bride, kept from her husband's house in order to enjoy a scholarship.

Fatma, out of breath, said nothing, but leaned against a pillared shaft. The baby, having seized on her inky thumb, was sucking at it contentedly, for India ink is sweet and sticky.

"Fifteenth page, second paragraph. Among the lower animals the maternal instinct falls little short of that displayed by the human race. Even in the family of Aves the female, during the period of incubation--"

Fatma's foot was on the ladder again, for the babe, having sucked the ink from her thumb, demanded something more satisfying.

Oh, how quiet it was up here in the long, matted corridor! One seemed to have left the stress of life behind. Through the doorways leading into darker rooms you could see groups of girls and women squatted on the floor over their low desks. Here busy over pen and ink, here murmuring from books. More circled round the terrestrial globe. An odd company: some wrinkled and old, with shaven head and white shroud; others dressed in the same fashion, but fair and fresh. Hindu widows these, seeking solace for death in life endured or yet to come. A young Sikh wife or two ablaze--ears, nose, and forehead--with jingling gold set thick with jewels. And here, sharper than any, with finger pointing to the pole, a small Bengali girl, who had been married these seven years gone, and looked a perfect child.

All this interested Fatma not at all. She had seen it too often. Her goal lay in the end room among the second-year students, who sat on benches.

"*Find the value of B in the following equation: A square plus X squared equal AX plus B,*" read out the teacher from her desk as Fatma entered. Whereat she promptly added in English, "Bother that baby!"

It must be remembered that the B, representing baby, does not enter into equations at Girton or Somerville.

"I wonder you don't give it a bottle, Hoshiaribi?" continued the teacher, sternly, as a delicate-looking young woman, rather overdressed and overscented, took the child from Fatma with a sigh, and retired to a corner.

"Fatma breaks them on purpose," replied the mother, sullenly; "she says they disagree with him."

"Yea, 'tis true," assented Fatma, gravely; "they give him a pain in his inside; then he cries, and I have to sit up, since Hoshiaribi is always tired, and Peru is too lazy."

Teacher looked at the little sharp face and was silent. That household, consisting of disreputable, good-for-nothing Peru, who gambled away the five rupees he gained by helping to carry his wife and other students to and from the school; shiftless Hoshiaribi, who spent half her scholarship of ten rupees on her clothes; and Fatma, whose eight annas, a week for cleaning the writing-boards seemed to keep the whole going, was a perpetual puzzle to the English lady, even without the child. And with it? She felt quite relieved when Hoshiaribi came back to her equation minus the baby.

The afternoon sun was slanting in bars through the closed grass chinks, making the floors ring-streaked. It was close on four o'clock; the tide of learning slackened at full flood. Down-stairs among the little ones, first to go, there would only be time to chant "*One and one make two--oo--oo*" a few times more; so Fatma sat down in the sunny, sleepy corridor, with the baby in her limited lap; and as she sat thinking, heaven knows of what, she joggled the base of

its skull backward and forward on the palm of her supporting hand in approved native fashion. She did not know that it conduces to slight concussion of the brain and consequent coma, convenient to the nurse; but she knew mother always did it. This odd little woman of ten knew most of the old-fashioned, old-established ways of the world she lived in; and when the value of B had been discovered, she saw Hoshiaribi and the baby into the folds of a white domino, and so, on their way down-stairs to the husband, the curtained *dhoolie*, and the oblong room up two flights of stairs in the Cashmiri quarter. Then she came to linger sturdily yet unobtrusively in the corridor, till teacher, coming out, busy over a mass of papers, nearly fell over her.

"Gracious me, child! what do you want? Why aren't you down-stairs?"

Perhaps Fatma had been rehearsing her petition while she was nursing the baby; anyhow, she had it clear and pat.

"*Huzoor*, I want promotion to the primary department. It is such a long way to carry the baby to Hoshiaribi, and he sleeps not at all among the infants. We make too much noise. And Peru goes away gambling and forgets him, so I get no time for study. Thus, when Hoshiaribi's scholarship ends next year we shall be destitute, since Peru's money goes in quail-fighting, and we cannot fill our stomachs on eight annas."

Incontrovertible facts, every one of them.

"Have you read your grammar through?"

Fatma shook her head.

"Oh no, *Huzoor!* But the baby could sleep in the upper primary, and then, Miss Sahib, I could soon read it. Now I am always on the stairs."

Another incontrovertible fact. Teacher had visions of the big, yellow-legged baby going up and down the ladder of learning on Fatma's curved hip. That, however, could not possibly be held equivalent to a pass from one department to another. Yet the child's face was deadly earnest; a sudden sympathy and compassion brought a promise to consider the matter.

"But there are already three babies in the primary!" shrilled the Mohammedan head of that department, a portly lady with voluminous skirts trailing behind her, and red betel-stained teeth. There was no one in the school from the top story to the bottom who was the equal in deportment of Mumtaza Mihr-un-nissa Begum, whose father had been Munshi to some dead-and-gone Mogul. To begin with, she could silence every one with Persian epithets, and the pebbles of her polished speech hit hard. "These may Providence protect, but God hath sent this proof of his bounty to a handmaiden who is 'second-year student.' What! are we to reduce this gift of the Most High to a standard beneath its birth? Let Hoshiaribi, out of her plenty, appoint a wet-nurse, or let its amiable aunt supply it with 'Maw' at four annas. To allow her a primary pass without due qualification, in my poor thought, is non-regulation; and, in addition, a bad precedent."

Mumtaza mihr-un-nissa bowed her sleek, net-veiled head, and threw out her podgy fat hands, as if deprecating her own opinions.

For all that, Fatma stayed among the infants, and spent most of her time on the wide stairs with the yellow-legged baby, while Peru joked shamelessly with Chundoo on the sunshiny steps, and Hoshiaribi, in the academic silence up-stairs, worked a crewel antimacassar between the equations. It suited her indolent, comfort-loving nature. Ever since she entered the school, nearly sixteen years ago, she had been in receipt of a scholarship of sorts. At the beginning influence may have had something to do with her good fortune, for her mother was only a poor, good-looking Cashmiri, and her reputed father dead. But since then she had justified her selection. If not clever, she was studious, and quite understood that learning meant livelihood. In the good old days when the one great object was to catch and keep a scholar, this might have gone on indefinitely; but now, under new rules, Hoshiaribi's scholarship would cease in a year, whether she passed or did not pass. Then she must become a teacher, or starve on Peru's five rupees.

The prospect was not pleasing. It would be a very different thing having to worry over thirty unwilling pupils in a poky little room, spending part of your own pay in bribes so as to get the grant for attendance, and then never knowing from day to day if some neighbourly spite would not result in empty mats on inspection-days.

"But if you pass," suggested a Hindu widow in her class, "you can go on, as I am doing, into the medical school. That is two years' more scholarship, and certain employment afterwards."

"'Tis all very well for you," muttered Hoshiaribi, sullenly. "You only came in three years ago. I have been here all my life. I like it. I don't want to go home and nurse the babies. I don't want to work. The committee paid me to learn, and I have learned. I will learn anything else they like. Why, then, should they take away my scholarship?"

"How foolish you are!" said the little Bengali; "you don't seem to *understand* what a *scholarship* is."

"Perhaps I don't," retorted Hoshiaribi, flushing up. "My fathers were not scribes and quill-drivers since creation, like yours. My people are poor. If I go home I must spin and grind corn. I will not. I tell you *I will not!* That is an end of it."

"Then you must teach."

"I don't want to teach. I want to stay here and learn."

"Be quiet, girls!" reproved the English teacher. "Do stick to your lessons, and remember why you come here. Think, just think, of the money that is being spent on your education!"

Hoshiaribi gave a triumphant glance at the Bengali girl. That was it. They had paid her to learn, and she had learned. The rest was an injustice.

II.

A loud, resounding slap, another, and another! A torrent of irrelevant abuse in a strange tongue. Then something which is the same all over the world--a fit of hysterics.

Hoshiaribi, as she stormed and sobbed and laughed, might have been any spoiled, overwrought young woman in any country.

That was an end of everything. After slaving for months, after doing without a new bodice in order to pay the ungrateful imps, after cozening and flattering their stupid, cow-like mothers, it had come to this: that Sultani, on whose performances Hoshiaribi relied for a fair inspection, had divided four thousand one hundred and seven by six thousand three hundred and two. She had not only tried to divide it--she had divided it--with a quotient of fifty-six, and a remainder of five thousand and three. It was too much--too much in every way; with Peru lounging all day at the Central flirting with Chundoo, Fatma thinking of nothing but the babies, the gold edge on the dress she must wear at the wedding next week wanting renewal, and inspection-day next month.

She propped herself up against the whitewashed wall at one end of the room, Sultani, the injured prize pupil, at the other, and the two sobbed vindictively across the intervening space, while a connecting circle of alphabet-learners whimpered in sympathy with some one, which, they scarcely knew, for they were mites of babies, not six years old any of them.

The women up and down the central stair, which served also as a sort of drain and dust-bin, came attracted by the hope of a scene, to discuss the whole aspect of the affair without the least reserve. Peru was a bad lot, and it was sheer tyranny of the *Sirkar* to have refused Hoshiaribi a scholarship after all these years. At the same time she was a poor, flighty creature, and had no business to slap their children; the latter train of thought becoming accentuated by the arrival from a neighbouring tenement of Sultani's mother. Was it for this her daughter had been bribed away shamelessly for a neighbouring "missen," where, if they did read the Bible and try to pervert the scholars, they made up for it in prizes? Was it for this that base-born brat of a base-born mother had taken one rupee a month out of Hoshiaribi's own pocket? These two questions were the theses of a controversy, which spread like wild-fire till it embraced the personal history of every one present, and the room was a seething mass of excited women, bordered by a whimpering circle of small girls, until a little figure came rushing up the stairs and forced itself into the thickest of the clamour.

It was Fatma returning from her daily marketing. Her already scrimped veil was further abridged by all the corners being utilized as bags for her various purchases; and as she flung out her skinny brown arms in the small space still left between the combatants, and turned first to one side and then to the other in vociferous reproach, her weighted veil

swung out, leaving her body quite bare. It was not much bigger; certainly no fatter than it had been, eighteen months gone, when she had struggled up the ladder of learning with the yellow-legged baby.

"*Ari*, mothers! *Ari*, sisters!" she scolded in her thin child's voice. "This is unseemly! This is a deplorable word! Have you forgotten this house is a school? You come here to learn, not to make beast-like noises! What a bad example! Does not shame come to you?"

The fateful phrases, which had so often reduced the infant department to tears, fell powerless, and Fatma's own imperious temper asserted itself. She turned like a whirlwind to the alphabet-learners; they were her special charge, they at least should obey her.

"Come, my daughters," she cried, "let us leave this scene of infamy. This is no place for us people. Come, let us go!"

The circle stood up instinctively. They adored Fatma; besides, the chance of escape was welcome. She thrust her new nephew, a babe of three months, who had been squalling patiently in a corner, into the biggest girl's arms, seized on the yellow-legged one herself, and so, full of dignity, headed the little procession.

The women, touched by the passionate delight in children's ways which is so marked among them, fell back with sudden laughter.

"*Ai! dil aziz! Wah*, the little marionettes. See how they go like old women! Heart's-core! are we so wicked? Look at my Amma, Fuzli--not four, I swear, and grave as a judge! *Tobah! tobah!* Go not, little lives. We are sorry. See, we bite our tongues, we hold our ears."

So, squatting down, standing aside, reaching over, the women, chattering their amusement, let the babies pass. And, as for Fatma, she was "*pucki, burri pucki*." God knows why, but the bairns were set to obey her. This one's Miriam, not four till *Baisakh*, leaped out of bed at her first call, as she came her morning rounds for the pupils, and that one's Janet had been known to refuse her breakfast if Fatma said it was late. *Aye--pucki, burri pucki*--for good, not evil, and 'twere well others were more like her. So, with side sniffs, they pattered up and down the stairs to their several abodes, leaving Hoshiaribi sulkily exhausted. Sultani and her mother, as they went casting glances of final scorn at the odd little row of maidens ranged along the gutter in the sunshine, piping away the incontrovertible fact that "*one and one make two--oo--oo*" while Fatma and her babies sat opposite on a door-step and led the chorus.

So that was an end of the incident for one day. Unfortunately, it was not the first of its kind, and Hoshiaribi had almost made up her mind that it should be the last. She lay, feeling a perfect worm, as any woman, East or West, might have done after the turmoil, kicking one heel petulantly over the side of the string-bed on which she had flung herself, and looked at the map of Asia and the map of Europe, which hung on opposite walls, with equal abhorrence. She hated everything, everybody. The last six months, since her failure to pass had sent her as a favour to the lowest pay of a branch-school teacher, had been sheer misery to her. For her husband's neglect she did not care, save in so far as it gave her complaint a sound basis. She had been betrothed to him, and so she had married him; but the six years since she had lived with him as his wife had only taught her that she could set her duty to him aside without reproach, for the sake of ten rupees a month, and that he was quite content with this arrangement. She looked once more round the long, narrow slip of a room with its mud floor, its smoky rafters, its single-shuttered window two feet square, giving on a close alley; then she thought of the cool, matted corridors of the Genoese palazzo, the leisurely studies, the ease of ten rupees compared with six, and rolled over, face down on the bed, whimpering. She hated teaching, but it was that or starvation. At least--unless--

Some one came jingling up the stairs, heralded by a strong smell of musk. Hoshiaribi set up frowning; for all that, content to be interrupted, since Meran bibi, reputation or no reputation, was at any rate able to talk. At least she knew something of the world beyond that swarming yet dead-alive Cashmiri quarter, for she had been show-pupil for years at another branch school, knew the three first readers by heart, and, after a somewhat tarnished girlhood, had married a policeman; consequently, she was not a woman to be scorned in the quarter, just because folks' tongues had cause to wag. She was a buxom person, with oily hair, great bosses of silver tassels in her ears, and a perfunctory veil of Manchester hitched on to the very back of her head and drawn tight over her high bust. Finally, she had the usual shrill voice in which she could always tell her gossip of the latest "*fassen*" in the cutting of a bodice or the number of suits in a bride's trousseau, for she came of a tailor family, and spent all her days in gadding about, despite her pretence to the *pardah*; an institution which is, as a rule, only inviolable when exotic benevolence seeks to interfere with it.

She and Hoshiaribi fell on each other's necks in an elaborate stage embrace, and then crouched up side by side upon the string-bed.

After a time, however, Hoshiaribi moved to put her head out of the window and call to Fatma below:

"Send those brats away--it must be close on four--and make some tea. My head aches."

Surely, when the Creator made women with his right hand, his left must have been busy over tea. These two groups had it sickly sweet, cinnamon-flavoured, in little basins with an English flag, and "Union is Strength" upon them in gay colours.

"Yea, 'tis true, Hoshiaribi. A star of emerald with a red centre, three crinkles of gold lace, like a 'heart's comfort' in pattern on the breast, and two rows of seed-pearls round the collar. Then the bridal dress! To begin with, a full skirt--for, look you, the newest 'fassen' is six breadths, gored--"

So on, and so on, while the map of Europe winked at the map of Asia; and Fatma, after making the tea, was kneading as for dear life at the dough of bare flour and water which, with the smear of some curd, was to form the household dinner.

"Thou couldst see it easily," continued Meran, "and thou deservedst something to cheer thee after those senseless fools. Come! I could take thee by the Mori gate, a step from here; so into the gardens. Lord! how they smell of orange blossoms--like any bride. Then we could come home by the Badami bazar. To think thou hast never seen these things, and thou so clever--one who has learned wisdom of the *sahibs*! *Wah!* it tickles me."

Meran's peal of laughter crackled like thorns, and Hoshiaribi flushed up.

"I could have gone had I wished. Peru should not stop me. But I have not chosen."

"Peru! Why, I tell thee, Hoshiaribi, he will marry the widow Chundoo. Tchut! what matters it if thou art not a fool, slaving away to no purpose? Look you, they wanted me to keep school. Not I! Come, Hoshiaribi, 'twill do thy head good. I have to buy new tinsel for a *kurta*, and the bazar is worth seeing. A fair for noise, with the criers selling sugarcane and fresh fritters. The shops full of jewels, the people crowding, the soldiers marching up and down, the *mem-sahibas* in their carriages, and, above all, the wooden balconies with the girls in white nodding and smiling; but the great ones like Chandni, of Delhi, stand up and salaamas the big folk go by. Yet she is naught to look at. Thou wouldst be twice her match for looks wert thou not so pale."

Half an hour afterwards Fatma was alone in the room. The babies were asleep, so she had taken out a sort of lapstone, and was busy punching gilt thread into stars through the front of a shoe upper. That, by rights, was Peru's hereditary trade, which he had deserted in favour of *dhooli* bearing and a fixed salary of five rupees a month. It came, therefore, more naturally than anything else to Fatma, and so, when the babies left leisure, she earned a pice or two by sweating for an old woman and her crippled grandson who lived up the same stair and were employed by a big shop. But for these odd earnings life could not have gone on at all, what with Hoshiaribi's tea, and Peru's inroads for dinner or supper when he was short himself.

There he was, even now, coming up the stair lazily. Fatma had put away her lapstone ere he arrived, and was ready to greet him with calm contumely, even while she set two cakes a toasting in the embers, and brought out the green leaf of curds. If the one was his right, as master of the house, the other was hers as mistress; and she exercised it fully, Hoshiaribi being away with Mai Rajjun, who had a new baby; for Fatma had no scruples about abstract truth when face to face with the absence of a wife and the presence of an inquiring husband. With that same unconscious knowledge that it was the right thing to do which had made her jog the baby's cerebellum to keep it quiet, she lied cheerfully to avoid possible disturbance. Peru accepted the explanation with a like indifference to its truth. To begin with, that same indifference to all save appearance is a common feature among husbands; and then Peru would not have been exactly sorry to feel cause of complaint. It would have balanced his own indiscretion. Briefly, he had married Chundoo two days before, and had come to break the fact to his first wife. There must be something painfully bald about such a statement to European readers. When fully one half of harrowing modern fiction is based upon the axiom that Thingumbob, having married So-and-So, cannot possibly marry What's-his-name also, it takes the starch out of a story when a hero can have as many wives as he likes, and his religion counsels four.

The facts in this case were extremely bald. Chundoo, the chaperone, an elderly widow, had taken a fancy to the handsome young scamp; and having been appointed doorkeeper to a new female hospital, thought it more respectable to have a man of her own. Then, *dhooli*-bearers got six rupees at the hospital, instead of five at the school. That, sordid as it may seem, was why Peru had news to tell. The reason for his telling it was this: he knew perfectly well that Hoshiaribi would never consent to live in the same house as Chundoo, and so his responsibility for her maintenance would cease, as he could plead poverty against any claim for separate alimony. As for her pay as a teacher, that, if

Central school gossip said true, would not be for long; but Fatma would look after the babies somehow. Such were his thoughts as he sat watching the child's odd little figure busy over the cakes, which he did not want, seeing that his new bride had given him *kababs* and *bakkharkana* for breakfast. He had a sort of affection for Fatma, who was the only relation he had in that part of the world. He did not mean her to starve, and, if she could not manage, it would be easy to give a rupee or two on the sly. What he *did* want was to keep Chundoo in a good temper, by showing conclusively that Hoshiaribi had no hold on his affections.

To be sure, he had shown this illegally for some months back, but now law and order demanded something legitimate; so he would respectfully command her to come and live with Chundoo, and, when she refused, be quit of responsibility: for polygamy is made for the virtuous, not for the vicious.

Suddenly Fatma looked at him, sniffed, and looked at him again.

"Thou hast been to a wedding--whose?" she asked, suspiciously. In truth, an odour of orange blossom and *attar* began to be apparent in the close room. Peru coughed, hesitated; it was a good beginning, and might save him a scene with his wife; so he began.

"H'm!" commented Fatma; "then that's an end of bread for your stomach. God be praised!" That is how it struck her.

"Little imp of sin!" cried Peru, seizing her half roughly, half jestingly, by the shoulder. "Keep a quieter tongue in thy head, or I'll find a husband to gag thee."

She gave a shrill laugh of scorn, and twisted herself from his hold.

"A husband, indeed! Then Chundoo will take the babies? *Ai budzart!* Think not I do not understand. Let be. They are my babies, not thine; and, thank God, I go not to bed hungry this night."

She sat herself down on the floor as she spoke, and began calmly on the cakes she had been toasting.

"Go, my brother--go back to thy Chundoo," she said, eying him disdainfully--from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot, dissolute idler was writ all over him--"Go! we have no need of thee." Then her dignity gave way; she leaped to her feet, scattering the broken cakes upon the floor, and the echoes of her plain speaking followed him down-stairs and flooded up into the room where Lalu the cripple sat, with a ray of sunlight glittering on the gold thread he was laying on the leather.

"Heaven save her husband!" he muttered good-humoredly. Then he sighed. Perhaps the thought that he would never have even a shrewish wife oppressed him. When his grandmother died he would be quite alone in the dark room, with the glittering thread which seemed to make the darkness more dingy and dreary. He was a young man of five-and-twenty, who might stand years of imprisonment in those four walls, with--Heaven be praised!--a scrap of roof open to the sunlight beyond; that is to say, if he could pay the rent. He looked down at his fine, supple hands and smiled, knowing that so long as they were left there was no fear. If only the rest of him had been to match, instead of marred, twisted, helpless!

"'Tis God's will," he said half aloud, as fervently as any Christian; for there are saints of all creeds, and this poor cripple, up three flights of stairs in the Cashmiri quarter, was one of them. Then he took to thinking tenderly of the odd little girl downstairs, whom his grandmother did out of the uttermost farthing. Poor little soul! when he was alone he would at least be able to give her what was due.

Meanwhile Fatma, down-stairs, was nursing her childish yet all too comprehending wrath against Peru for Hoshiaribi's return. Would she not be angry? It would serve Peru right if she went off straight to Chundoo's house and clawed her.

The room, with its one small window, darkened early. Fatma put the babies to sleep and went out into the alley to watch, eager to give the first words of disaster. After a time she ventured round the corner. No one. A little farther. No one. Down the next turn. No one still. Perhaps she had chosen the other way. Back up the now pitchy stairs to the dim room. No one there save the sleeping babies. Fatma's wrath--cooled, rose again against the loiterer, had time to cool again into dismay. She knew well enough, young as she was, what Meran's guidance might mean in the Badami bazar. For all that she waited patiently, crouching on the stairs, peering down into the darkness, watching, listening for the shuffling footstep of a veiled woman--watching and waiting stolidly, without fear or blame.

Such things were, and neither Peru nor Hoshiaribi counted for much with her save as extra appetites for dinner. When ten o'clock chimed from the police station gong at the Mori gate, she went back to the room and drew the bolt of the door. All was dark, save where a ray of moonlight shone through a chink in the shutter. She stole over to this, and, standing in the bar of light, undid a knot in the corner of her veil. One, two, three annas, some pice, and a few cowries.

If the worst came to the worst, and Hoshiaribi did not come back, that would buy a "Maw" at the gimcrack shop round the corner. So she cuddled up on the bed beside the babies contentedly.

III.

*"One and one make two--oo--oo,
Two and two make four--or--or."*

"That is enough, my daughters," said Fatma, royally. "Miream and Anna will play with Mohammed Ali; Janet and Kareem will take Ahmad Hassan for a walk down the alley and back again. The rest of you will sit still and think how good you are going to be to-morrow."

The little, large-eyed, gentle mites, ranged solemnly behind a row of ink-pots, primers, and writing-boards, did as they were bid decorously--for the organization of Mussamat Fatma's school was excellent, its discipline first class. The cleanliness, too, of its primers, its pens, and its writing-boards was quite abnormal. Not because of abnormal neatness, but because none of these things were ever used. They were there because that was part of the game of school, and Fatma's school was emphatically a school with the learning left out. To be sure, the pupils chanted their letters, and asserted the gospel that one and one make two all the world over; but, after that, education went down the by-path of learning how to sit still and do as you were bid. Yet somehow the wee girlies liked it well, and their busy mothers liked it better still. In that crowded quarter of evil repute it was something to have a *creche*, where for a few hours the little ones with a tempting jewel or two were safe from the avarice of any passer-by. And then Fatma's pupils gave no trouble at home. So the school throve, and though educationally, of course, it was a miserable sham, it gave great satisfaction to all concerned; Fatma finding sufficient payment in the general good-will of her neighbours, and the constant relays of nurse-maids she secured. She had plenty of time now for the golden stars; and since Lalu, the cripple's grandmother, had died, Fatma not only got full price for the work she did for him, but earned something besides by cooking his bread and doing his marketing when she did her own. An excellent plan, said the neighbours, since Mussamat Fatma, aged fourteen, was as sedate as a great-grandmother, and poor Lalu, for all his kind face and clever hands, was not to be reckoned as a possible husband for any one. The only thing over which the women shook their heads was this lack of a husband for the girl, who, though she was a little crooked perhaps, with hauling those big children up and down stairs, had not, like Lalu, lost her right to be married. What excuse could that rascal Peru offer to his conscience for his neglect of the natural guardian's first duty? He, and Chundoo, and Hoshiaribi flaunting away in the Badami bazar, were no better than pigs of infidels. It would serve them right if Fatma were to appeal modestly to the elders, and let herself go to a husband for the beggarly five *dumris* the law demands. Then Peru would have to support his boys, and would not even get compensation in the price of the bride. But Fatma herself scouted the idea. She had seen enough of husbands, and would never marry. She had her babies and her school; and then there was always Lalu, who was as wise as any saint, and as good as any father to the boys. She used to leave them in his charge when she did her marketing; for this was after hours, when her little school-maidens had gone home. And as for Hassan Ahmad, the yellow-legged baby of two years past, if ever he went a-missing, Fatma knew she would find him cuddled up among Lalu's helpless legs, watching the gold thread loop itself into dainty patterns very different from her coarse, crooked stars, and listening contentedly to Lalu's musical voice intoning some versicle of the Koran. He knew as many as a Moulvi, she used to say proudly; for all that she repulsed with scorn his suggestion that she should teach some to her pupils.

"*Ai tobak, Mian Lal Khan!* Dost forget mine is 'primary girls' school'? It is not a 'missen' or an 'indigenous school.' We do not teach such things. Only letters and tables, and such like."

She did not care to confess that she herself knew none of the versicles which even the poorest girl ought to know.

"Well, well, perhaps thou art right, Mussumat Fatma," he replied. "All learning is good." As he sat at his work he used often to pause and listen with a smile to the chorus of children's voices, insisting on the fact that one and one make two. After all, it did not differ much from the creed he had somehow extracted from the sonorous Arabic phrases which were so constantly on his lips. What was, was; what would be, would be.

Meanwhile life was brighter for him because of Fatma and the baby, Hassan Ahmad cuddling close to him, and the children's chorus echoing up the stairs. It was easier for Fatma also. When she had closed the door at ten o'clock one night, nearly two years ago, and counted out the money in order to buy a "Maw," she had thought of nothing but the immediate morrow. Now, when she barred it, she closed it deliberately against all interference. Peru, at first, had come prowling round to see how matters went, and Hoshiaribi had sent inquiries from the Badami bazar. Fatma had given both a cool reception. She was quite happy, quite content. The babies did not belong to those *budzarts*; they belonged to her. So, by degrees, they had left her to her own devices, and for the last year she had seen or heard nothing of them.

It was a stifling afternoon in August. The dry heat which had baked into the bricks with the June sun, had boiled out of them again with the scanty rain of July into a sort of sodden vapour, like the hot breath of some evil creature. The alley smelled horribly. Even the inhabitants spat as they emerged from the dark drain of a tenement stair, which all the sweeping in the world could not keep clean. The very water spilled on it, as the woman carried the *chatties* full to their rooms, seemed to dissolve the dirt and give it greater freedom. When those on the ground-floor sprinkled the entry for the sake of coolness, the stench rose to the roof. And in and out the highways and byways of the city cholera played pranks with the people--here to-day, gone tomorrow; biding its time, till on some steamy, dull morning folk would wake to find it in earnest.

"The sickness was at Haiyatun's yesterday," Rajjun would say to Fajjan; "it took the cousin who came from Umritsur. The police were burning clothes and sulphur as I went by this morning. It is tyranny when the Lord is over all."

"Yea, and they carried Mai Jeswant's man to the hospital, and the doctors never left him, but he died all the same. Look you, 'tis God's will."

And the two women grinding at the mill ground on. The one might be taken and the other left before the day was out, but the meal was wanted for the survivors' supper. People all over the world die silently from pluck, or pride, or piety; but not all of them die as these do, casting no shadow of blame either on the heaven above or on the earth beneath. One has to go to civilized lands, and to a people who profess a faith which proclaims its triumph over the grave, before we find the fear of infection producing a selfish panic.

Fatma, having attended the Central school during an epidemic, had views on sanitary subjects and the procedure due to the dignity of a primary school. She fumigated her maidens solemnly with sulphur, she had covers to the water-pots, and confiscated melon-rinds with the utmost rigour. This proved a vast amusement to the squatting circle.

"*Ari, Muallama!*" would come a little pipe. "Juntu hath a bit of pumpkin in her veil; I saw it."

Then would ensue a sort of hunt the slipper, beset for each with delicious tremors, lest, after all, the contraband morsel should be found in your possession; until some one, seized by shyness or sudden virtue, would give it up to be burned.

Fatma, on a sultry August afternoon, had just been playing the part of grand inquisitor over a gnawed fragment of cucumber, when a big heavy-browed woman pushed her way unceremoniously into the room, and sat down on the bed with an air of possession. It was Chundoo. Fatma had last seen her gossiping on the palazzo steps, and something told the girl the visit boded no good. Her heart gave a throb, her usual courage seemed to leave her.

"So this is thy school," began her sister-in-law. "Lord, what a farce! But that is over. I have come for thee because thy wedding is settled at last. The dates will be brought to-morrow, so thou hadst as well return with me to-night. 'Twill save trouble."

The studiously careless tone of undoubted authority had its effect. There was nothing incredible in it. Marriage in Fatma's world meant coercion. She had seen most of her contemporaries handed over to a husband without even a pretence of consulting their wishes.

"I--I--want no husband," she faltered, utterly taken aback.

Chundoo laughed--a nasty laugh.

"*Wah illah!* So girls say ever. 'Tis pretty behaviour, and thou hast said it. The thing is settled."

"By Peru?" asked the girl, quickly.

"By Peru; who else? Look you, the scoundrel is in jail. Nay, why shouldst start? It was his appointed end, and serve him right, wasting my substance to a shadow. He robbed a peasant in the *serai*, treating him with liquor, after '*Englis fassen!*' Well, he is there for two years, and hath repented him of the evil and bethought him of his duty. So I have found thee a husband--honourable, if somewhat old. But thou, God knows, art a grandmother, so that matters not. And he can afford to pay for a young wife, and keep her in plenty. So send these brats away, and the woman I have downstairs will take them to Hoshiaribi. Their father being in jail, they are her charge, not mine. Come, chicken, there is no time to lose."

She laid her hand on the girl's arm as Fatma stood stupidly staring at her. The touch seemed to make her realize the situation, for she darted with a cry to where her babies sat in the charge of the first class.

Perhaps the little nurses, gazing with that stolid, wide-eyed dislike at the strange woman who spoke so roughly to their teacher, thought that the latter sought their protection. They gave it anyhow. In a second, Chundoo was surrounded by a mob of twenty mites, full of shrill cries and ineffectual beatings of tiny hands--ineffectual, till the tiniest, giving way to the natural Eve, slipped down and deliberately bit the enemy in the calf. Chundoo, yelling with pain, slapped right and left. Fatma, her fear gone before this attack on her pupils, flew to the rescue. Such a scene had not been enacted within those walls for two years. Before five minutes passed even the stairs were blocked by infuriated mothers.

When Chundoo had been dragged off the Kotwal, followed by half the matrons in the alley, Fatma sat down, dazed and dry-eyed, between her two charges. That bite had saved her; she would not have to go that evening, perhaps not even to-morrow. But afterwards? Girls had to be married, and Peru could marry her to any one he chose. Even the neighbours, when they heard about the husband, would side against her. And it would be of no use to beg mercy of Peru in jail. That was the very reason why they had thought of marrying her. The money would be useful to keep Chundoo comfortable, and yet she would not be bothered with the boys, as she would have been had Peru been free. Now Hoshiaribi, their mother, must keep them, but Chundoo would get the dowry. What did it matter who got it, if she must marry?--and if Peru said she must, she must. There was no help; even the neighbours would side against her.

A rapping on the floor above reminded her that she had forgotten Lalu's dinner. Poor Lalu! Who would look after him when she was gone? Drearily and still dry-eyed, she hitched the two-year-old on her hip, and with a pile of dough-cakes and pease porridge in her hand toiled up the stair behind Hassan Ahmad, who climbed the high brick steps on all-fours, slowly, methodically.

It was almost dark in the room above, and Lalu's voice came kindly from a shadowy corner.

"Trouble no further, Mussumat Fatma. I was loath to knock, yet knew thou wouldst be vexed to forget. Set the food down--so. Sure thou hast enough to-day without my service."

She gave way to tears then, and crouched down on the floor suddenly, an image of forlorn, crushing grief.

"O Lalu, Lalu! Peru is going to marry me, and what will become of my school? And what will become of my babies? And what will become of you, O Lalu?"

Hassan Ahmad had toddled over to the cripple's helpless knee, and Mohammed Ali, half asleep, buried his head on the girl's thin breast. There was no sound in the room save her sobbing, and a passing rustle as if something in the shadows had tried to move and sank back to the old position again. After a time the response came feebly:

"*Ai*, my sister, cry not. Marriage is good. It is the Lord's will, and Peru hath the right."

Perhaps for the first time the cripple hesitated in his creed. To say sooth, it seemed odd to put Peru on the Lord's side.

"Yes, he hath the right. Therefore I cry, Lalu. Is there nothing to be done, Lalu? Canst thou not help at all?"

Lalu, in the shadows, looked down at his dexterous hands, then covered his face with them. They were good for nothing else. A girl must marry where she was bidden, and even had the rest of him been as face and hands, there

would have been nothing to be done, nothing to be said. What chance had a cripple, a girl, and two babies, against the will of the Lord represented by law backed up by principalities and powers, by custom and chief courts, by wisdom and civilization?

"Cry not, my sister, cry not. Marriage is honourable in all."

So by degrees Fatma's sobs ceased before the inevitable.

"Come, Hassan Ahmad," she cried; "it grows late. 'Tis time for sleep."

"He sleeps already," replied the voice from the shadows; "'twere pity to wake him, sister."

"I will carry Mohammed Ali first and then come back." Her old decision and motherliness showed even through her utter dejection.

Lalu gathered the boy closer and half mechanically hummed the chorus he had so often heard Fatma use as a lullaby. Yes, one and one made two, and two and two made four. But only if God willed it so; not otherwise.

"Stoop down, little mother, and I will lift the boy to thee," he said, when Fatma, feeling her way through the dark, paused as her fingers touched Lulu's knee. She felt his fine hands linger as he drew them from the burden he laid in her arms--linger almost caressingly.

"One and one, and two and two, are what He chooses to make them. Remember that, my sister."

"Not so, Lulu. In school they are ever the same. The big teacher said so. One and one is two all the world over."

He sighed, sitting crouched up in the dark; then he called after her, "Peace go with thee, Mussumat Fatma."

"And peace be thine, Lulu," echoed back from the stairs.

The next morning the whole alley was being censed. A group of policemen were standing round a bonfire of beds and clothes over which the flames licked blue and clear as the brimstone was scattered on it.

Fatma's room was empty, so was Lulu's. So were several others in the high pestilential tenements of the quarter. The cholera had grown tired of playing at school. It had taken arithmetic and education and creeds and customs all into its own hands and settled the problem its own way. Two and two were not four, but none; and only Chundoo called Heaven to witness that she had been defrauded of the remuneration justly due to those who possess a marriageable female relation. The rest of the neighbours said it was God's will.

IN A CITRON GARDEN.

This is a very idle tale--only the record of five minutes in a citron garden. Not a terraced patch set like a puzzle with toy trees, such as one sees on the Riviera, but a vast scented shade, unpruned by greed of gain, where sweet limes, mandarins, shaddocks, and blood-oranges blended flower and fruit and leaf into one all-sufficing shelter from the sun. There are many such gardens in India, lingering round the ruined palaces or tombs of bygone kings. This particular one hid in its perfumed heart a white marble mausoleum, where the red and green parrots inlaid themselves like mosaic among the tracery. For they are decorative birds, and, being untrammelled by prejudice regarding the position of their heads, lend themselves to many a graceful, topsy-turvy pattern. Girding the garden was a wall twenty feet high, bastioned like a fort, but, despite its thickness, crumbling here and there from sheer old age; invisible, too, for all its height from within, by reason of the tall thickets of wild lemon on its inner edge. Four broad alleys, sentinelled by broken fountains, converged to the mausoleum, high above a marble reservoir where the water still lingered, hiding its stagnation beneath a carpet of lotus-leaves. From these, again, narrower paths mapped the garden into squares, each concealed by the dense foliage from the next. It was a maze of shadowy ways edged by little runnels of water and bordered by roses and jasmine, with here and there a huge white draecena usurping the path. Day and night the water ran clear and cool, to flood each square in turn, till it showed a shining lake, wherein the roof of fruit and blossom lay

reflected as in a mirror.

A Garden of Eden; like it, tenanted by a woman and a snake; famous, also, for its forbidden fruit.

Nowhere did shaddocks grow so regardless of possible danger to the world. The green-gold globes weighed the branches to the ground; the massive flowers burdened the air with perfume. For all their solid, somewhat stolid look, they are fragile flowers. Gather a spray as gently as you can, and only the buds remain; the perfect flower has fallen. So, in a citron garden it is well to purge the soul from "*karma*" or desire, in order to reach the "*nirvana*" of content in which--so say the Buddhists--lies the full perfection of possession.

Naraini, the gardener's granddaughter, had different views. She stood, at the beginning of the five minutes, beneath a citron-tree. One dimpled brown hand held the branch above her, and, as she swayed her body to and fro leisurely, the flowers dropped into her stretched veil. She was not unlike a citron-blossom herself. Like them, arrayed boldly in saffron and white; like them, looking the world in the face with calm consciousness that she was worth a look in return. Finally, her world was theirs--that is to say, these few acres of scented shade. As yet Naraini knew no other, though the next day she was to leave it and her childhood in order to follow the unknown bridegroom to whom she had been married for twelve years.

The incessant throbbing of a tom-tom, the occasional blare of a horrible horn in the ruined arcade which was all that remained of a royal rest-house, proclaimed that the marriage festivities were even now going on beyond the crumbling walls. From all this Naraini being necessarily excluded, she had spent the morning in receiving the female visitors with simulated tears, in order to impress them with her admirable culture; thereafter relapsing, with them, to shrill-voiced feminine chatter until the heat of noon stilled even the women's tongues. Then, driven by an odd unrest, she had slipped away to the cool alleys she knew so well; even there busying herself with preparations, since the flowers she gathered would be needed to strew the bridal bed. It was no new task. Every year an old distiller came, in blossom-time, to set up his still beside the well. Then, in the dewy dawns, she and the old grandmother beat down the blossoms, and when sunset brought respite from the heat Naraini used to watch while the flowers were crushed into the pan, and luted down with clay as if into a grave. And a grave it was to beauty. The first time she saw the yellow mash which was left after the sweetness had trickled into the odd assortment of bottles the old distiller brought with him, she had cried bitterly. But a whole bottle of orange-flower water as her very own had been consoling, and the fact that the label proclaimed her treasure to be "*Genuine, Old, Unsweetened Gin*" did not disturb her ignorance.

Every year afterwards the old man had given her another bottle, and as she had always chosen a fresh label, she had quite an assortment of them in the shed which served her as a play-room. And now, being nearly sixteen, she was about to leave other things besides that row of bottles labelled "*Encore*," "*Dry Monopole*," "*Heidsiecker*," and "*Chloric Ether Bitters*!"

She was not alarmed. She had taken a peep at her future husband that morning and satisfied herself that he had the requisite number of eyes, legs, and arms. For the rest, men were kind to pretty girls, and she knew herself to be a very pretty girl. It is hard to convey any impression of the girl's state of mind to English ears, simply because marriage had never been presented to her as an occasion for personal choice. She had been happy hitherto; the possession of a husband ought to increase that happiness, if Fate sent her a pleasant mother-in-law. The man himself was a trifle, since men were always kind to pretty girls. That, formulated so plainly as to rob it of all offence, was Naraini's first and last argument for content.

As she stood swaying in the shadow, some one came down the alley. She recognized him at once. It was the bridegroom; and the demon of mischief, which enters into Eastern girlhood as causelessly as it does into Western, suggested that she had him at an advantage. He had not seen her since she was three years old--could not possibly recognize her. Besides, what brought him there? An intolerable curiosity, mingled with a pleasant conviction, made her stand her ground. Perhaps she knew that the spot occupied by her was the only one visible from the roof of the arcade, and drew her own conclusions. Perhaps she did not. It was true nevertheless, and the bridegroom, having caught a glimpse of something attractive, had taken advantage of the general sleepiness to climb over the ruined wall for a closer view; for he was of those who are very kind indeed to pretty faces. He, it must be remembered, had caught no consolatory glimpse of his bride. People told him she was beautiful, but that was always said: but here was undoubted good looks; so, despite his wedding-day on the morrow, he slipped into the citron garden intent on a lark. No more refined word expresses his mood so clearly.

Naraini, however, neither shrieked nor giggled at the sight of a stranger. She simply drew her veil closer, and went on gathering citron-blossoms. He paused, uncertain of everything save her entrancing grace. Was she only a servant, or did he run risks in venturing closer? Naraini, meanwhile, behind her veil, gurgled with soft laughter, pleased at being

able to test the value of her beauty on the man she meant to rule by it. So they stood--she in the shadow at one end of the alley, he in the shadow at the other; between them the scented path bordered by the runnels of water slipping by to bring a deluge to some portion of that little world. Some might have called it a pretty scene, instinct with the joy of youth; others might have turned their heads away, praying to be delivered from the world, the flesh, and the devil. Naraini thought of nothing save her own laughter.

The garden seemed asleep save for those two, as, with the cruelty of a chase waking in him, as in a cat stalking a mouse, the cruelty of success waking in her as in a snake charming a bird, the distance between them lessened.

Suddenly, with a burst of high, childish laughter, the veil full of citron-blossoms was flung in his face, and Naraini was off down the alleys, while he, with anger added to admiration, was after her.

The walls echoed to the soft thud of their flying feet--down one path, up another, round by the tomb, scaring the parrots to a screaming wheel. Confident in her superior knowledge, she paused on the topmost step, ere scudding across the causeway, to fling back a handful of flowers lingering in a fold. He set his teeth hard. If she tried short cuts, so could he; and he was round the next square so fast, that she gave a little shriek and dived into the thickest part of the garden, whither the water was flowing, and where the beasts and birds and creeping things innumerable found a cool, damp refuge. His blood was up--the jade must be caught and kissed, if only in revenge! The flutter of her saffron skirt at the opposite side of a square made him try strategy. He crept into the thickest undergrowth and waited.

Something else waited, not a footfall off, but he did not see it. His eyes were on that saffron flutter, pausing, advancing, retreating, pausing again. Naraini had lost the bearings of her pursuer, and, like a child playing "I spy," was on the alert for a surprise.

Suddenly came a cry as she caught sight of him, a shout as he bounded out; both lost in a yell arresting her flight and his, as if it had turned them to stone. He stood with the wide nostrils and fixed eyes of ghastly fear, clinging for support to the branch above him, whence the flowers fell pattering to the ground. On his ankle two spots of blood, bright against the brown skin. Across the path a big, black rope of a thing, curving swiftly to the roses beyond.

"Snake! snake!"

Her cry echoed his, as she ran back to him; but he struck at her with clenched hand.

"Go, woman--she-devil! Thou hast killed me. Curse thee! oh, curse thee for beguiling me! It has bitten me. Holy Gunga, I am dead! and I was the bridegroom. 'Tis thy fault. I was the bridegroom." He had sunk to the ground clasping his ankle, and rocked himself backward and forward, moaning and shuddering in impotent fear. Naraini stood by him. There was no hope: the big, black rope of a thing did its work well; yet, even so, anger was her first thought.

"It was a lie! 'Tis not my fault! Why didst come? Why didst follow? And if thou art the bridegroom, was not I the bride?" Then something leaped to memory. She threw her hands above her head and beat them wildly in passionate despair and horror.

"He is dead! he is dead! And I am the bride."

The words rang through the garden, and pierced even his grovelling fear. As he turned to fly, he clutched at her skirts, and dragged himself to her fiercely.

"The bride? Then the widow! my widow! Thou hast killed me, but thou canst not escape me. A widow! a widow! a widow!"

His face was terrible in its fear, its regret, its revenge. She fought against him desperately, but his hands held fast, shifting to her waist, till he forced her down to the dust beside him, where she crouched silent, like a young animal terrified into acquiescence.

"Thou shalt see me die--'tis thy fault--thou shalt see me die!" he muttered again and again.

So they sat side by side in the grip of death, his head on her bosom, his hands bruising her wrists, his eyes, full of despair and regret, on her face.

The sun-flecks shifted over them, the citron-flowers fell upon them as the afternoon breeze stirred the branches. And even when the swift poison loosed his clasp, Naraini was still a prisoner to the dead body, lying with its face of desire and disgust hidden in her lap.

She was a widow. The citron-blossom had fallen.

That night there was weeping and wailing instead of feasting in the garden; and at dawn the women put bowls of sweetened milk into the scented thickets to propitiate the holy snake, lest, having chosen one victim, it might seek a pair. Perhaps, as far as happiness goes, it might as well have claimed Naraini also.

After a time, to be sure, life went on as before. The old distiller came, and Naraini shook the blossoms for him into her widow's shroud. The sweetness of them was no less sweet as it trickled into the old gin and champagne bottles, but Naraini got no share of it. What have widows to do with the perfumes of life?

This is an idle tale of a five minutes' tragedy--perhaps none the less of a tragedy because it is true.

NUR JEHAN.

Long ago--so runs the story--in the days of King Akbar,
Mid the pearly--tinted splendours of the Paradise Bazar,^[12]
Young Jehangir, boyish--hearted, playing idly with his dove,
Lost his fav'rite, lost his boyhood, lost his heart, and found his love.

By a fretted marble fountain, set in broidery of flowers,
Sat a girl, half child, half maiden, dreaming o'er the future hours,
Wond'ring simply, yet half guessing, what the harem women mean
When they call her fair, and whisper, "You are born to be a queen."

Curving her small palms like petals, for a store of glistening spray,
Gazing in the sunny water, where her rippling shadow lay,
Lips that ripen fast for kisses, slender form of budding grace,
Hair that frames with ebon softness a clear, oval, ivory face.

Arched and fringed with velvet blackness, from their shady depths her eyes
Shine as summer lightning flashes in the dusky evening skies.
Mihr un-nissa (queen of women), so they call the little maid
Dreaming by the marble fountain where but yesterday she played.

Heavy-sweet the creamy blossoms gem the burnished orange-groves;
Through their bloom comes Prince Jehangir, on his wrist two fluttering doves.
"Hold my birds, child!" cries the stripling, "I am tired of their play"--
Thrusts them in her hand unwilling; careless saunters on his way.

Culling posies as he wanders from the flowers sweet and rare,
Heedless that the fairest blossom, 'mid the blaze of blossom there,
Is the little dreaming maiden, by the fountain-side at rest,
With the onyx-eyed, bright-plumaged birds of love upon her breast.

Flowers fade, and perfume passes; nothing pleases long to-day;
Back towards his feathered favourites soon the prince's footsteps stray.
Dreaming still sits Mihr-un-nissa, but within her listless hold
Only one fair struggling captive does the boy, surprised, behold.

"Only one?" he queried sharply. "Sire," she falters, "one has flown."
"Stupid! how?" The maiden flushes at the proud, imperious tone.
"So, my lord!" she says, defiant, with a scornful smile, and straight
From her unclasped hands the other, circling, flies to join his mate.

Startled by her quick reprisal, wrath is lost in blank surprise;
Silent stands the heir of Akbar, gazing with awakening eyes
On the small, rebellious figure, with its slender arms outspread,
Rising resolute before him 'gainst the sky of sunset red.

Heavy-sweet the creamy blossom gems the gloomy orange-tree,
Where the happy doves are cooing o'er their new-found liberty.
Slowly dies the flush of anger, as the flush of evening dies;
Slowly grow his eyes to brightness, as the stars in evening skies.

"So, my lord!" So Love had flitted from the listless hold of Fate,
And the heart of young Jehangir, like the dove, had found its mate.

SHURFU THE ZAILDAR^[13]

Then you'll give me a character, won't you? and say I'm a first-class *zaildar*.
Not a man of them's done half so much as old Shurfu to please the *Sirkar*.
Why, I've brought you full forty "suspected ones"; that isn't bad as a haul.
Look you! forty "suspected ones" *present*, and gone bail myself for them all.

And a word, *sahib*--for your ear alone--if you'd like me to bring a few more,
Just to make a round fifty on paper, and show that the work's to the fore--
Bismillah! they never shall say, while old Shurfu is one of the crew,
That his district *sahib's* schedules were shaky for want of a *budmash*^[14] or two.

And what do I think of the system? Why, just what the Presence may choose;
But a good cattle-thief nowadays must look after his p's and his q's.
There are many more folk to be squared, and the hire of the bail to be paid;
But it makes the lads three times as careful, and raises the style of a raid.

Still the game, as a game, is no more; for your reign has been death to all sport.
E'en a cattle-thief thinks like a banker, and scarcely gives honour a thought.

'Tis mere money grub--pennies and farthings. What *I* in my youth you have heard
Was a noted--O fie on the Presence! It shouldn't believe such a word.

There are twenty-three schools in my circle; I pay all the Government fees!
I've made a canal and a garden! I've planted some thousands of trees!
I've headed the lists and subscriptions! I've tried queer new crops on my land!
Not a village of mine owns a dung-heap! My mares are all Government brand!

Not a hobby his district *sahib's* ridden, but Shurfu has ridden it too;
Though the number of *sahibs* has been awful, and every one's hobby was new.
Well, I don't mind a glass, since there's nobody nigh; you won't tell, I'll engage.
True! the Prophet forbids; but he didn't know brandy, and wasn't my age.

When a man turns of eighty, there ain't many sins he has strength to commit,
So his day-book can stand a few trifles. Aye, wine wakes the mem'ry a bit.
As for Fuzla, we've all heard of Fuzla--the *best* cattle-thief in Punjab--
Pooh! you don't mean to say he ne'er met with a match on this side of Chenab?

I could tell you a story--well, half a glass more--but I'd best hold my tongue.
So Mian Fuzla had never his match! come, that's good! Why, when we were both young--
What the deuce am I saying? *Jehannam* be mine, but I cannot keep still!
I'll tell how I swam the Chenab in full flood! Yes, by Allah! I will.

Mian Fuzla had squared th' police on his side of the stream, as one can
With good luck; but my cowards were cautious, and hadn't the pluck of a man;
So Mian Fuzla got up in the bottle and sent me a message to say
He had fifty-three head of my cattle, and when would I take them away?

Now the waters were out, so the boast was scarce fair; but I took up the glove,
And with Mokhun and Dittu to help, that same night crossed the river above
While they thought all secure; but it wasn't! So dawn found us stealing along
With a herd of a hundred she buffaloes, all of them lusty and strong.

Well, we made for the river, through tamarisk jungle and tussocks of grass,
And narrow-pathed tangle of *jhau* that would scarce let a buffalo pass,
With our thoughts on the footsteps behind, till the first level streak of the light
Brought us down to the stream; and, by God! it had risen ten feet in the night!

'Twas a broad, yellow plain, shining far in the rays of the sun as it rose,
And a cold wind swept over the flood that came hurrying down from the snows
With a swift, silent current in eddying swirls--not a sound, not a dash
Save a sudden, dull thud, as the bank, undermined, tumbled in with a splash.

Then we looked at each other in silence; the looks of the others said "No."
But I thought of that challenge of Fuzla's, and made up my mind I would go,
Though I knew that the odds were against me; so, bidding the cowards turn back,

With a few of the beasts on their traces and try hard to deaden the track--

For 'twas time, it was time that I wanted--I drove the rest down to the brink,
But the brutes wouldn't take to the water; they loved life too well not to shrink.
So I took a young calf from its mother--'twas cruel, but what did I reckon?
And butchered the brute with my hanger, and fastened my *pug* round its neck,

Then I dragged it right into the water, and buoyed it up well round the throat
With a bundle of grasses and reeds that would keep the dead body afloat.
I thought of that challenge of Fuzla's; then turned and struck out like a man,
While the mother leaped after her young one, and all the rest followed the van.

The flood swept me down like a leaf, and the calf swept me farther down still,
But I knew 'twas a life or death struggle, and breasted the stream with a will;
While the hope I could lead the beasts on, till 'twas safer before than behind,
And the fear lest Mian Fuzla should win, were the only two thoughts in my mind.

It was half a yard forward to half a mile downward, yet still I made way,
While behind, in a long single file, the black heads of the buffaloes lay,
Till I knew we had reached the big stream, and that now there was no going back;
Then I gave one faint shout, and I cast off the dead calf, and let myself slack.

So we drifted, and drifted, and drifted. I strove to recover my breath,
But a numbness came over my heart, and I knew I was drifting to death,
As the big, heavy beasts were swept past by the terrible force of the stream,
And the whole world seemed slipping away, as I swam on alone in a dream.

Then I wondered how Fuzla would take it, and how many miles I had come;
Or guessed what the people would say when days passed and I never came home--
Till it came to me, as in a dream, that the current was setting in shore;
And after that, *sahib*, it is strange I could never recall any more.

Only this I can tell you: we measured it after, from starting to end,
And the distance was over ten miles by the straight, without counting the bend.
So Mian Fuzla was beat; and sent me a *pugri* with knots which his women had tied,
And the song of the "Crossing of Shurfu" is known through the whole countryside.

Wah! illah! How my tongue has been wagging, and I the *zaildar!* But in sooth
'Tis dull work for old Shurfu compared to the merry, mad days of his youth.
Ji salaam! And whatever you want, send for Shurfu the *zaildar*; and, *sahib*,
You'll remember that Fuzla once met with his match on this side of Chenab!

SONGS OF THE PEOPLE.

I.

PLOUGH SONG.

Bitter blue sky with no fleck of cloud!

Ho! brother ox, make the plough speed;

For the dear hearth-mother with care is bowed

As the hungry little ones round her crowd.

'Tis the *buniya's* belly grows fat and proud

When poor folk are in need.

Sky, dappled grey like a partridge's breast--

Ho! brother ox, drive the plough deep;

For the wind may blow from the north or west,

And the hungry fledglings fall from the nest,

Or the dear hearth-mother fold hands in rest,

Ere harvest's ripe to reap.

Clouds, driving up in the teeth of the wind--

Ho! brother ox, guide the plough straight;

For the dear hearth-mother feeds halt and blind,

While the hungry little ones garlands bind

Round the tree where the Dread One sits enshrined,

On whom we poor folk wait.

Merry drops slanting from south and east--

Ho! brother ox, drive home the wain;

For the dear hearth-mother will spread a feast.

There's none shall be hungry--nor bairn nor beast;

'Tis the *buniya's* belly that gets the least

When Ramsends poor folk rain.

II.

SOWING SONG

Sun-flash on the grain

As it leaps from the sower's hand,

Quick with desire to gain

New life from the land.

Seams, furrows, and scars

On the face of our Mother Earth,
For the gods set sorrow and tears
At the gates of birth.

Swift flight of the seed,

Like a bird through the sun-bright air,
To rot in the ground, or breed
In the Dread One's care.

Broken heart of soil,

Taking all to its patient breast,
With never a cease from toil
Or a dream of rest.

Wheat-grains grow to wheat,

And the seed of a tare to tare.
Who knows if Man's soul will meet
Man's body to wear?

Great Ram! grant me life

From the grain of a golden deed;
Sink not my soul in the strife
To wake as a weed.

Seek thy grave, O grain!

Some day I will seek mine too,
To rise from the level plain,
The old in the new.

III.

HARVEST SONG.

Scorching sun that shrivels and sears,

Withering wind in the rustling ears,

Rattle of death as the dry stalks fall,

Promise of life in the seed for all.

Flash of the sickles, sweat of the brows,

Rest in the noon, beneath sheltering boughs.

Gather and reap,

Death is but sleep.

Golden grain ripens though lovers are dead;
Lips long for kisses, but mouths must have bread.

Blazing brass of the sky at noon,
Broad, bright face of the harvest moon;
Slow stars wheeling to meet the morn,
Toilers asleep on the sheaves of corn;
Stealthy snake with the lifted crest,
Poisoned prick in a tired breast.

*Gather and bind,
Fate is but blind.*

Golden grain ripens though dear ones may weep;
Love longs for gladness, but toil must have sleep.

Kine knee-deep in the glistening straw;
Flocks of birds round the threshing-floor;
Clouds of chaff from the winnowing-tray,
Gleaming gold as they drift away;
Wreath of smoke from the funeral pyre,
End of love and its vain desire!

*Gather and sheave,
Why should we grieve?*

Death finds new life in the Great Mother's breast,
Rest turns to labour, and labour to rest.

IV.

COTTON-PICKING SONG^[15]

In the field how many blossoms showing,
In the field how many maidens rare?
Golden, set with red, the blossoms glowing;
Red veils sewn with gold the maidens wear.
Oh, the merry hours
Midst the maids and flowers!
Tell us, which of these twain is most fair?

CHORUS OF BOYS.

O golden bud!

Spotless without thou art,
Sin--stained within, like blood--
So woman's heart.

CHORUS OF GIRLS.

Not so! No, no!
We will not have it so!
O pale, pure bloom,
Cold to the world thou art;
Yet warm love finds a room
In woman's heart.

In the field the merry leaves are dancing;
In the field small hands which never rest;
Leaves with five points crimson-tinged and glancing,
Fingers henna-tipped and daintiest.
Fate a bright spell weaves
With the hands and leaves.
Tell us, which of these twain is the best?

CHORUS OF BOYS.

Wind-driven leaves,
Busy at its command,
Idle when none perceives--
So woman's hand.

CHORUS OF GIRLS.

Not so! No, no!
We will not have it so!
Pitiful leaves,
Doing, by kindness planned,
Work that no man perceives--
So woman's hand.

In the field, down on the breeze is blowing;
In the fields, the maidens' thoughts rise light;
Down to bear the seed for wider sowing,
Thoughts which fly to dear ones out of sight;
Merrily they've flown,
Thoughts and cotton down.
Tell us, which of these twain does the right?

CHORUS OF BOYS.

Unstable down,
By every idle wind
Hither and thither blown--
So woman's mind.

CHORUS OF GIRLS.

Not so! No, no!
We will not have it so!
Soft, white--winged down,
Eager new work to find,
Hoarding naught for its own--
So woman's mind.

In the field the husk-shells swing and rustle;
In the field the merry tongues wag fast;
Clatter! chatter! Oh, the laughing bustle!
Smiles and jests at all as they come past.
Yonder's a man--
Answer if he can.
"Blows and kisses, tears and smiling;
Women's faith and man's beguiling;
Money spending, money piling:
Tell us, what in life will longest last?"

VOICE OF A MAN.

Ram, give me strength,
Else it will be unsung,
For none can tell the length
Of woman's tongue.

CHORUS OF GIRLS.

Fie, fie! Not so!
We will not have it so!

CHORUS OF MATRONS.

Have patience, lassies--wait a little space;
The bridal lamps will flame, the songs be sung;
Then you can laugh, and teach your own good man
To know the length of his good woman's tongue!

FOOTNOTES

[Footnote 1](#): Head-man.

[Footnote 2](#): Government.

[Footnote 3](#): Female children are not worth the expense of burning.

[Footnote 4](#): A woman dying with her unborn child has infinite power for ill.

[Footnote 5](#): Pension.

[Footnote 6](#): Pilgrim to Mecca.

[Footnote 7](#): Big crane.

[Footnote 8](#): *Janwar*, animal.

[Footnote 9](#): "Hold your tongue!"

[Footnote 10](#): Nodulated limestone.

[Footnote 11](#): Ipomea seeds.

[Footnote 12](#): Hung and decorated in silver and white.

[Footnote 13](#): Head-man of a circle of villages.

[Footnote 14](#): Bad character.

[Footnote 15](#): This is often an occasion for mutual chaff between the bands of boys and girls, which, as a rule, takes a riddling form. Blossom and fruit grow side by side.

THE END.



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