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**Son of Jesus
Sister Pauline At the Cross-Road
The Lean Lamb
And Other Stories**

JATINDRA MOHAN GANGULI

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Author's other works—

WHEN EAST AND WEST MEET (NEW YORK)

AS I HAVE FELT

FIRE ON THE SNOWS OF THE HIMALAYAS

TWO MOTHERS

THREE WOMEN HAD MADE HIM A SAINT

“I'M POLLUTED” SHE TOLD HIM

THE FISHERMAN OF KERALA

BOND OF BLOOD

SO THE WORLD GOES

STORIES BUT TRUE, &C.

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DEDICATION

I have seen images of gods, in paintings and in stone; I have heard and read about gods and their great virtues and qualities;—but I have not visualised such gods in person, and without understanding I have only tried to imagine what godly qualities could be like. But a human being I have seen and known very closely and intimately from early childhood, who lived a life more dutiful, more virtuous and noble than the life of gods and who possessed qualities well above the level of the qualities which the most inspired devotees have attributed to their divine idols. That human being was Rai Bahadur Hem Chandra Ganguli of Tarakutir, Allahabad, my uncle, who had lifted me up when, two years old, I lost my father. He was then only about twenty-six or so and his means was very small and he had children of his own. But he cared for me more than for his children and when once I was seriously ill he had prayed to God to take away his five sons and spare my life. If I were to write pages and pages giving only brief references to his many virtues and qualities the description will be far from complete. To his, my Kakababu's memory I humbly, reverentially and lovingly dedicate these stories.

father, who was ever occupied with his text-books, was not aware that the church priest, Reverend Father O'Mally, was steadily working on his son's mind to turn him to his own vocation. Service of God was a very good appeal to a quiet and sentimental boy whose rather poor family condition could provide little to brighten his reflective outlook. His chequered progress in the school was further gradually turning his mind more to the appeal in the eloquence of Father O'Mally and one gloomy frosty evening he timidly asked the Priest "Father, can I dedicate myself to the service of the Church?"

Father O'Mally benevolently answered "Can the Church refuse the dedication of the faithful, and can the faithful turn away from the divine impulse when he feels that in his heart?"

Joseph's father looked on but his mother put her handkerchief to her eyes when Joseph was sent to India where for a number of years he went through the course of training for novitiates at Poona and Kodaikanal. During the period he learnt three vernaculars, Hindi, Marathi and Tamil. After the course he was posted as a priest at Kamptee, a small town ten miles from Nagpur.

II

Priest Mulligan started off with keen young enthusiasm. He paid regular visits to the members of the church in his parish, noted their needs

and wants, pointed out their faults in living, instructed them in home hygiene, and, of course, emphasised the need of moral and religious living. His Sunday sermons in vernacular were clear and inspired and they drew the young and the old. On Wednesdays he received confessions and on Saturdays, both morning and evening, he gave special audience to the new village converts, whom he met and talked to individually to pull them more strongly to the church. He went out to neighbouring villages also to preach and by the force and vigour of his tongue and by his door-to-door visits he was not only very successful in drawing many simple village folk to the church, but he became also very popular in a wide area. Men, women and children, Christians and non-Christians, all came to him for his love, sympathy, help and advice. At confession time he listened very sympathetically and gave encouraging advice with his blessings to the repentants. Old men and simple and superstitious women came also for special audience with him on Saturdays to narrate their domestic troubles. He heard with understanding sympathy and encouraged them to come again. "If you come like this God will see your earnestness and whatever you tell me He Will hear."

A young woman, Budhia, newly married and newly converted, came one evening with other women. She was very shy and didn't know what to say and how to start when her turn came to go

into the screened parlour where Father Mulligan was seated. Pushing aside the curtain when she stepped in or rather was ushered in by her village companion she asked the latter to stay with her. To put her at ease the Priest came up and said "This is God's place; there can be no fear here. All troubles, all worries leave when you come here. Tell me whatever is in your mind, and the Lord will know it."

So saying he asked her to come with him and sit on the chair by his side. Budhia narrowing herself sat on half of the chair-seat away from him and kept her eyes down over the fingers of her bare feet. To cheer her and to give her confidence Father Mulligan sympathetically put his right hand on her back and said "Look up to me. You're a good simple child of God who has called you here to speak to Him through me."

She obediently raised her face to him, but her eyes immediately dropped to the ground again after the first clash with his. Father Mulligan had seen her before this in the church congregation and also in her village home where he had in his usual round paid visits to her family, but he hadn't met her like this, face to face, sitting close to him by his side in the seclusion of a small curtained room, in the soft dimness of the evening light. The appealing shyness, the pathetic timidity and the soft freshness of the young girl triggered the heavily suppressed emotions of the young man in the Priest, whose hand was still

resting on her back. He lost control as his knees instinctively turned and approached hers and his face involuntarily went closer to her face. The blood in his veins flowed fast and hot and, when momentarily the furtive glance of her black eyes met his, his male senses stood on ends in violent defiance of the scriptural inhibitions, which he had observed throughout. Impulsively with two hands he held her head and pulled as he moved over the edge of the chair to get nearer. Budhia in fear was about to shriek but was silenced into submission as he hoarsely said "Don't break the holiness of the place, where God's children come to tell Him of their needs and desires, faults and frailties, troubles and difficulties to become stronger and happier. There's nothing that the Lord can't give. Come, dear, speak."

She sat stiff against his gentle pull, holding the chair with both hands and keeping her eyes down as before. Her breast heaved with emotion. With intense excitement he repeated "Come, dear, tell me what is in your mind. Come closer to me, come closer to God that He may hold you as I hold."

"There's nothing to say" somehow she managed to say as she attempted mildly to extricate herself. But his hold was strong and it became stronger as he moved further close to her. There was a sound of something falling on the floor. Both looked up. Two lizards fighting each other had slipped from the wall and fallen. As Mulli-

gan looked up he saw the picture of Jesus on the Cross on the wall. His ferocious impulse at once shrank and his hands withdrew from her and fell on the sides of his chair. She looked at his face which had bent down over his chest. She sat confused, unable to understand the reason of his sudden change and feared that she might have disobeyed and wronged him. Born and brought up in the tradition of implicit obedience to religious priests she, like other new Christians of the village, had faithfully accepted the virtue of obeying, trusting and depending on the words of the priest to whom nothing was to be refused and from whom nothing was to be withheld.

She timidly asked "Father, have I sinned? Have I disobeyed you?"

He had not recovered from the intense agitation in his mind following the sudden struggle which had started between the fury of his excited passion and the strong brake applied to it by the picture of Jesus, to which the lizards had raised his glance. He sat gripping the sides of his chair to steady himself. She said again "Pardon me, Father, and ask the Lord to forgive me. I was afraid to confess my sins and faults, for which I had come. I don't serve my husband devotedly and do not obey him. I fall asleep when he comes home in the night and do not serve him meal and water. If anytime he rebukes me I become angry and contradict him. Forgive me, Father, I shall now be good and obedient."

"Lord will forgive you" slowly said Mulligan, without lifting his head. She stood up, but still fearing that she had displeased him she knelt down before him and with folded hands said "Father, I shall always listen to you and will never disobey."

"God bless you" answered Mulligan without changing his stiff pose, nor raising his eyes from the floor. Budhia noiselessly walked off. There was none in the vestibule. All had left. Her village companion had not waited also for her. It was dark. She stood undecided how to go to her village, which was on the other side of the river Kanhan. She knew a shallow ford in the stream, which in the day the villagers used to save the long way over a bridge a mile down the river. It was Saturday when usually by the night train her husband, who worked in the Empress Cotton Mill in Nagpur, came home for the week-end. She should be back home before him, and that decided her to get into the river.

When Budhia left Mulligan went and knelt below the picture of Jesus and more ardently than ever prayed silently for forgiveness. His lips in fear and shame didn't open and his eyes dared not look up. And the excitement still in his mind disabled it from steadying on the prayer for mercy. Budhia was still moving before his closed eyes and was invading his repentant thoughts. It was night and dark. How would she go alone, thought he, and he stood up and went out hurriedly. The

church was on the bank of the river. He knew the ford by which the villagers crossed the stream. He went down to the edge and saw Budhia getting into the water. "Wait, Budhia, it's dark, I shall hold you." He went into the stream, held her hand and took her across. "Now you can go. God bless you." So saying he turned back and without looking at her recrossed the river and returned to the church.

III

Next day in the Sunday service his voice was low and his sermon was mostly reading from the Bible. Some of those who sat near the pulpit asked after the service "Father, aren't you well?"

"O, I'm well enough. It's nothing."

"It's cold, I suppose. It's so common at this time of change of season," they remarked.

Mulligan was mentally far from well. Day and night a tearing storm was blowing over his mind, which he could not steady during his ecclesiastical duties, nor at the time of his personal prayers for which he sat long below the picture of Christ, asking repeatedly for forgiveness and invoking divine strength to come in him to fight his desires and passions. But even when praying like this his mind irresistibly turned often to the woman, the touch of whose body had set the passionate desires of his body on fire. Reading aloud from the Testament, kneeling before the

altar, repeating the austere vow of celibacy which he had taken at the prime of his vigorous youth, nothing helped to cool down the struggle raging between his sense of right and wrong, virtue and sin. His day went like this in fighting nature with all the weapons of injunctions in the armoury of his religious teaching. When night came and he lay on bed in the still darkness of the room he withdrew from the struggle and closing his eyes abandoned himself to amorous dreams through which subconsciously his desire sought satisfaction.

Next Saturday came. Mulligan since afternoon was impatient for the evening, but he strove to deny it and prayed that Budhia didn't come. He sat in the audience room, and as one after another came and left his eyes turned up to the curtain to see who the next one was. The procession ended; Budhia didn't come. He went outside and asked the woman, who had ushered Budhia into the room the previous Saturday, "Budhia didn't come?" The woman replied "She was coming, but went back from half-way, saying that her husband would return early."

With a disappointed grin on his face he said "Yes, every other thing is more important than coming to meet God and bare your heart to Him."

"Father, I asked her to come, but she halted, lingered a little and then swept back in a hurry."

Mulligan returned to the prayer room and knelt down before the Cross to say "Like this save me everyday, my Lord."

The next day he finished the Sunday service by drawing the attention of the kneeling congregation to the religious necessity of coming on Saturdays to receive individual attention from him. "The Lord ever waits to take the burden of your worries on Himself."

Disappointment and dissatisfaction, if not smoothly diverted away from the mind, sharpen the desires and hankerings in the absence of the objects of longing. Mulligan waited miserably and impatiently a long week for the next Saturday evening.

Saturday came and the afternoon slowly dimmed into twilight. The workers and the field labourers, those, who could, came. Mulligan was waiting from before the usual hour to start and get through the many who had assembled. He listened to and blessed the in-comers one by one with mechanical precision. Then Budhia came and his face brightened up as he said "Come, Budhia. You missed last Saturday. Is it all right with you?"

With less timid hesitation than on the first occasion she sat on the chair by his side and just said "Yes."

"I've been wondering what the reason could have been. This is a place where one can never fear to come. Things of the world call and attract people, but the call of the holy place must be heard over all other calls."

She seemed to listen unresponsively. He

grabbed her hand and said "You look indifferent. Don't you feel a thrill when you come in here, the thrill which others feel when they come and go out carrying God's blessings for the week."

The simple superstitious girl said "I've sinned and so I don't perceive it. I only get a fear when I enter this room".

Mulligan's struggling resistance to the onslaught of his rushing desires cracked and he pulled her over his knees and circled her with his arms. "I give you the fuller touch to dispell your fear and take away from your soul whatever guilt you may fear is there." he whispered into her ear. She dared not resist, nor the youthful woman in her, excited by the amorous embrace of the blue-eyed, handsome Priest, wanted to protest.

When she came out and went to the ford to cross he offered to escort her to the other side as on the other day, but to-day she feared to be seen with him in the dark on the river side. "No, I shall go all right," and swiftly getting into the river she waded through to the other side, not looking back at Mulligan whose hungry eyes followed her through the thickening darkness on the other side.

IV

Saturday followed Saturday. Neither the little flowing stream between the church and Budhia's

village, nor the high pile of moral taboos and scriptural injunctions, which had been loaded on his mind from young boyhood and through youth, could keep the two from meeting oftener, longer and more intimately.

One evening Budhia asked "Father, I come here to leave my sins committed outside ; where shall I carry the sins committed here?"

Mulligan, imprinting a lavish kiss on her plump cheeks, said "No sin can be committed here."

One afternoon, after some months, while coming to the church, her village companion said to her "You're going to be a mother shortly, but though I pray every day God hasn't blessed me with a son yet."

Budhia was alarmed and looked doubtfully at her to see if she suspected anything, but the latter continued "Your husband is lucky. My husband frets and blames, but what can I do? If it isn't in the luck of a man to be a father what can his wife do? But he blames me and is unhappy and makes me unhappy too. I ask him to pray, but he has no faith. So I come here to pray as often as I can and ask the Father to pray that I get a son. Did you ask the Father to pray for a son to you?"

Budhia couldn't answer and turned her face forward. Her companion said "You also pray for me and ask the Father to pray too that I get a son as he must have prayed for you."

That evening Budhia was absent-minded, seeing which Mulligan asked "Why is your face dry and your cheeks pale to-day? Haven't I told you to leave all your troubles and worries outside the threshold of this holy place?"

She indifferently answered "Yes, I leave behind whatever I carry from outside, but the fear and anxiety which seize me here stay and oppress me."

"What fear could you have here under the eyes of God?"

"I'm going to be a mother."

He collected her in his arms and said "Every woman is happy to become a mother. You should be happier for you'd get a blessed child. Your husband would be happy too."

Without warming to his assurance she said after a pause "Father, to whom do you go to confess?"

He was stung, but he had to answer "I've nothing to confess. God works through me, and my impulses and inspirations come from Him."

He was not in his senses, and his ears didn't hear what his lips uttered.

Budhia's husband, Domru, met with an accident in his factory and was seriously hurt. He lay in the Medical College Hospital in Nagpur and Budhia every day went to see him. One day, Domru, who was recovering, said to her "You shouldn't come by train this distance from Kanhan to Nagpur any more. Jerks and movements

wont be good to our child. In a month or so I should be up. In the meantime our son will be born and I shall see and lift him up when I go home."

Budhia in a week entered the Maternity Home in Kamptee and delivered a son. She sent words to the Priest to come and bless the baby. When the nurse gave the child to her she was overjoyed to see the blue eyes and the white complexion of her son as she lifted him up to her bosom. The nurse had to ask her twice to lie down and return the child to her.

When Father Mulligan came Budhia happily said "He's just like you, the same blue eyes, the same red lips, and even he has the same little scar on his right chin that you have."

The nurse brought and held the child before the Priest, who looked over the boy's face with the affectionate impulse of a father, but immediately his face fell and his hands shook a little as he held the child for performing his religious duty to him. Handing over the child to the nurse, who acted as God-mother, he closed his eyes, uttered a prayer and crossed his arms over him. The nurse noticed the awkwardness in his manner, but couldn't divine the reason. Budhia noticed it too. After christening him Stephen he blessed Budhia and the nurse and left smoothly without looking back.

On the tenth day Budhia was asked to go home, but she was afraid to go to her village where everyone would ask about the blue eyes and the

white complexion of her son. So she pleaded with the nurse to let her stay a few days more till she was strong enough to go. On the fourteenth day, however, her bed had to be vacated to receive another patient, and, so, taking the boy on her arms she called a rickshaw to take her to the church.

It was mid-day. Father Mulligan had his lunch and the short siesta he used to take after it. He was seated in his study and was taking down notes and preparing the Sunday sermon. Seeing Budhia enter with the child on her arms he shivered with an instinctive fear which turned his face white. He gazed at her, but a sense of guilt rising from his inside lowered his face from her look and choked his throat as she advanced and placed her little living load on his table. "Here's your son. Take him even though you leave me."

Mulligan wished that the floor cracked and he fell and disappeared from the fixed gaze of her big black eyes, which had once attracted him out of his senses and control. He felt miserably guilty before the little helpless creature lying and moving his soft weak limbs on his table. He sat stiff and breathless at the table of judgement before the two judges, one whose simple faith and trust he had used for his long suppressed sex gratification, and the other, whose little fingers were involuntarily pointing to the big cross hung on the wall opposite to his seat. "Since I can't stay here nor can carry him with me I shall leave him to God's

care here" she said breaking the stupefied silence of Mulligan, who got afraid "No, no; you can't leave him here."

"It's God's child and this holy place is for him" persisted Budhia.

"No, no" repeated Mulligan excitedly "He should be with his parents and not in the church compound."

"His parents are here, and if one parent has to go the other remains."

"No, Budhia, you don't understand. I'm a priest and a priest can't have a self-begotten child with him."

"But his self-begotten son can't remain with his other parent, who has no place on the earth to take him to."

"Take him to your home, to your husband."

She fixed her eyes on his and with an unusual sternness in her voice asked "To my husband? What shall I say to him when he will ask about his blue eyes and white complexion?"

"Tell him that the ways of God are unexplainable."

"But he has known me intimately these years. He would know that I was telling an untruth and he'd read on my guilty face that I knew what the unexplainable ways of God were in this case."

"Then I'd come and explain and convince him."

"My husband and others who come to the church have noticed that scar on your chin. My

husband on the first day of our visit had pointed that to me. How will you explain when he marks the exactly similar scar on the chin of the boy. Let me go; you can carry the child to him and tell him as you want. I can't."

"But you can't leave him here. If you insist I'd have immediately to send him to a distant orphanage stating that the child was left at the church-door."

Her eyes flashed. "You'll cast him away like that, being his father?"

"There'll be no help."

She kept her eyes fixed on his face which had become bloodless with fear, guilt and shame. She then turned back, took the child up and said as she went towards the door "Rather, I should with my own hands take him to the cemetery giving him his mother's last kiss. I won't let him be touched by a father who disowns him and despatches him to a distant orphanage. Jesus was fatherless, let this child be fatherless and motherless too."

Tears dripped down her cheeks as she went out not knowing which way and where she would go. She went to the river edge and sat down. As momentarily an impulse came to destroy her son by plunging him into the water she hugged him to her bosom and held him tight. She hid herself behind a tree from the village folk fording the stream a hundred yards from where she sat. What if she fled with her son to a distant place where nobody would suspect and question her about her

son—she reflected, but where and how could she go? She was a weak, inexperienced and meansless woman whose world knowledge stretched between Kanhan and Nagpur. She would be lost and devoured in the wide world and there would be none to save her and protect her son. At home too she would be discarded by all, by her husband, father, mother and all. Her memory searched every nook and corner of the few places she had known for a spot where she could leave her child in safety. She had once been to the cemetery in Kamptee to attend the burial of a relative. She remembered now the old bearded gateman at the cemetery, who had given her a glass of water to drink when she was very thirsty and was looking for a water-tap outside the gate. His kindly face now came floating before her misty eyes. "He will be kind to my son also and save him." She stood up at once to go to the cemetery. The sun had gone down the horizon and twilight's dimness was advancing from the east. She walked briskly, but, as she neared the cemetery, she slowed down not knowing how to meet the old man and hand over her charge to him. If he didn't accept, and why indeed would he?—she feared. And what would she say to him? Everything would be exposed and known and there would be no place on the earth to go away to with her son to hide in. Then the desperate idea came that she would leave her son at the door of the gate-man and go away. She looked around. There was nobody passing that

way. She softly treaded towards the old man's room by the side of the cemetery gate. Giving a last lingering look at the sleeping child she laid him softly at the door, wrote his name Stephen on the ground with her finger nail, and moved away. Taking the Nagpur Road she proceeded towards Nagpur to go to her sick husband who was convalescing in his quarter in the Empress Mill. It was a good ten miles walk, but with the bursting agitation in her mind she didn't perceive fatigue till she saw the lights of Nagpur. She had been without food the whole day and had nothing but a few annas with her. Reaching the Octroy outpost she sat down and after resting a little bought boiled gram for one anna. After eating it and drinking water from a tap she started again for the Empress Mill. Reaching her husband's room she dropped on the floor and into long soothing unconsciousness. When she revived after twelve hours she spoke incoherently. The Mill doctor examined her and sent her to hospital for both physical and mental treatment.

V

After Budhia had left Father Mulligan went to his desk and wrote to the Bishop in Nagpur, requesting him to shift him to another parish as early as possible as he was badly run down at Kamptee and needed a change. In three days the

Priest from Wardha came to relieve him and he went there to take his post.

Mulligan had already started doing penance for his crime and serious moral lapse. He had cut down his diet, particularly protein and fat which he had read were stimulant to sensuous urges; he sat longer for prayer; and, if he woke at midnight, he sat up on the bed and prayed again. Unlike many people who, if they slipped once, lost and even desperately gave up all restraint on themselves and went down slipping faster and longer, Mulligan had turned his face up and by austere penance and remorseful prayer strove to make his stand firmer and his God-ward progress surer. He tried to forget the face of his son and to wash off its impression from his mind, for, it was to him the symbol of his sin, the mark of Satan's touch on his weakness. Yet, that small, innocent, sleeping face came now and then before his eyes when he was at work or during prayer or in dreams, and it opened the hitherto closed spring of filial love in him. Little children, who came to church with their parents, attracted him as they hadn't attracted previously, and his thoughts and sentiments turned more from the congregation and from his religious obligations to it to the little beings who holding their mother's finger toddled to him and, as taught, called him Father.

On going to Wardha he opened a church school for the kiddies, whom along with some appointed teachers he taught himself. In the even-

ing he played with them. On Saturdays he often took them out for picnic. If a child was sick he visited him on his sick bed at home to cheer him. The School rapidly became very popular and since admission was not restricted to Christian boys every parent, who could afford to pay the fees which were somewhat higher than in other schools, persistently requested him to admit his or her son.

VI

Twenty years went by. Father Mulligan's hair and flowing beard had turned three-fourths grey. His continuing penance, reduced diet, and frequent fasts had quickened the advent of age even when he was clearing through his forties. There were wrinkles on his forehead, veins had stuck out of his contracting skin, his eyes were somewhat sunk but looked more meditative, his thoughts had become more introspective, his sermons were less emphatic though more appealing, and his personality had changed from the assertive to the sympathetic. His little school was over-full, but parents came from far and near and said "Father, we don't know what you'll do, but we shall leave our children here in your hand."

Father Mulligan applied to Church Fund and to Government for building aid, which came promptly. The construction of a three-storied

building started and it was going up high. The third floor had been reached when a serious accident occurred. A cooly carrying concrete to the second-floor roof slipped from the scaffold and fell on the ground. He was rushed to hospital but to no purpose. Work stopped for the day, but started again the next day. The poor labourer, who had come from his far village and had laboured brick by brick, step by step, over the rising stairs to reach the second-floor roof, could not go higher and from there he fell not to rise again. But the building continued to rise over the level of where he lay, and, while his little orphaned son wept, others looked up with eagerness and expectation to the rising structure where they would go to learn.

The labourer Rupan was a widower and, so, when he had come from his twenty miles away village for work to Wardha he had brought his eight years old son Gokul with him. At first he had got a domestic job in one Dr. Kathalay's house, where he was provided with lodging for both himself and his son. Dr. Kathalay's ten years old son, Krishna, was in the Church school. Rupan's son, Gokul's job was to carry Krishna's tiffin to school, and to attend to him in a general way. There wasn't much work actually for Rupan, and so Dr. Kathalay let him work outside in the day and paid him for the part time service in the evening which the family took from him. The accident to Rupan happened three months after his coming to Wardha. Dr. Kathalay had rushed

to the scene and had done all that he could do as a doctor and as a kind master to save him. The little Gokul shrieked in fear and grief when he saw the height from which his bleeding unconscious father had fallen. Dr. Kathalay took the boy home and entrusted him to the motherly care of his wife.

The three-storied annexe to the Church school was completed by the end of the autumn term. Dr. Kathalay's son had been promoted to the fourth class, one section of which was moved to the second floor of the new building. Krishna was in this section, and he was very happy to know that his class would move up to the top floor and he told Gokul while returning home that from the next day he would be in the new building on the second floor. Gokul was frightened as he remembered that his father had fallen from the floor of the second story. "It's too high" he said.

"Yes, our class is on the highest floor. I shall show you the way up to-morrow."

The next day at tiffin time Gokul waited with Krishna's tiffin as usual on the ground corridor where Krishna used to come to eat. Three minutes after the tiffin bell Krishna came down running with some boys of his class and said "Gokul, come, I shall take you to our new class room. From the window of the room our house is visible." Gokul hesitated "You eat here. From our house I shall see your class-room."

"No, no, come; it's so wonderful from there.

You can see the bazar too. I shall eat there. Our tiffin room is adjoining the class-room."

So saying Krishna took up the tiffin-carrier and proceeded to the stairs of the annexe. At the base of the stairs Gokul took the tiffin-carrier from Krishna and followed him up the stairs. On the first landing he halted, looked down on the ground and remembered the spot where his father had fallen from the roof of the first floor. He looked up to the ceiling and stood motionless.

"Come up, Gokul. Our class is upstairs."

Gokul was silent. His face was pale; his eyes were turned up to the ceiling, and the tiffin-carrier in his hand shook.

"Come, Gokul, there's no fear. We go further up to the terrace also." said Krishna again as he caught his arm and pulled. Gokul stepped up, dragging his legs and now and then looking up to the ceiling. Reaching the next landing at the bend, as his eyes viewed the ground underneath, his head reeled, his legs trembled under the knees and the tiffin-carrier fell from his grasp. He swooned, fell and rolled down the steps to the first floor. Krishna and other boys cried out and ran to Father Mulligan in his office. Receiving a phone call Dr. Kathalay came and took the boy to his house. Gokul wasn't much hurt except for some bruises on his face, elbows and knees. Dr. Kathalay understood that his fall was due to the psychological effect on his mind of the memory of his father's fall from the roof of the first floor. He

didn't send him to school for three days, after which he went to Father Mulligan and said "Father, you know why that boy fell when going up to the second floor with my son? He remembered that his father had fallen from there and, as he looked down on the ground, where he had seen his unconscious father lying, he fainted and fell. He brings the tiffin to my son. May I suggest that my son's class be brought down from the second floor to where it was or to another floor so that Gokul may not have to climb to the floor from where his father had fallen?"

Mulligan replied "What you describe as psychology may be no more than a mere superstition, which will go after the boy has gone up and down a few times."

"But, if the boy fears the height and if while ascending the memory of the accident to his father comes to his mind, he may fall again; so it's better that he doesn't go that way."

"Yet, it will be good if he shakes off a superstition and learns to trust in the benevolence of God."

"Let him develop that trust in God gradually. We can't say that we have much of it ourselves."

"But you see if I make a change, as you suggest, and bring that class down an idea will spread among the boys that there was something inauspicious on the second floor, from where the boy's father had fallen and from where the boy also has fallen. At the opening ceremony of the new build

ing prayers were held on every floor, and now, if I do anything like what you say, they would think that prayers and religious ceremonies couldn't bring the blessing of God to the building. That mustn't be. I'm unable, therefore, to accept your proposal."

Dr. Kathalay returned home making up his mind on the way that he would withdraw his son from the school. Accordingly he sent a letter by Gokul to Father Mulligan the next day. Gokul waited for half an hour with the letter before Father Mulligan was free to call him in. Mulligan opened and read the letter and then called Gokul to come near him. The thin, pale-faced boy approached him timidly.

"What's your name?" asked Mulligan, putting his hand affectionately on his back.

"Gokul"

"Can you read?"

"No"

"Come to school. I shall teach you."

The boy didn't understand.

"You bring Krishna's books. Now you'll take your books and sit like him in the class-room. Where's your mother?"

"I've no mother."

Mulligan knew that he had lost his father, so he didn't ask him about him.

"You live with Krishna?"

"I live in his house."

Mulligan wrote a letter to Dr. Kathalay saying

that he would bring Krishna's class down if he wanted it, but it won't be necessary since he was taking Gokul in the school. He requested him to release him from his service, and added that he would deem it a favour if he would let him keep Gokul in his house so that he could give him extra time and lessons to make up for the years the boy had lost. He handed over the letter to the boy and said "Take it to Dr. Kathalay and come in the evening. I shall give you books. You'll start learning in the school from to-morrow."

There was something on the soft face of Gokul and in his eyes which had touched the kind heart of Mulligan. He felt an impulse to make the orphan his God son, and to bring him up in his house. He wasn't aware that the fatherly sentiment, which was twenty years ago excited in him when Budhia had held his begotten son on her arms before him, was raked up again in him by the poorly clad and ill-fed orphan boy who stood before him without any parental support behind him. His pity, love, affection, fatherly sentiment,—all went crowding on the boy, when he took him to his house to live with him. He placed his bed by the side of his own, and fed him and talked with him with greater love and eagerness than that of a common father.

Gokul had never received so much love and indulgence in the eight years of his life. His sudden lift from poverty to plenty brought shine to his dull eyes, red tinge to his pale cheeks, freshness

to the complexion of his skin and cheerfulness in his movements. He didn't know English which he started to learn, but Father Mulligan spoke to him in Hindi and asked him to address him as Baba (Daddy), which sounded very sweet to him. The more Mulligan nursed and handled the boy the more his fatherly love, which had remained suppressed for twenty years, oozed out. His visits to members of the parish became fewer, and the whole-hearted interest which he used to take in his church duties slacked as Gokul attracted him indoors. But, after sometime, the satisfaction which Gokul was giving him started paling. When Gokul slept by his side in the night he blessed him after saying his prayer, but his eyes floated away from the boy's face back through twenty years and fixed on another little sleeping face from which the pile of these years could not block off his hankering gaze. He sometimes sat up in the middle of a dream with arms outstretched to take his son from Budhia's arms, and, then, after rubbing his eyes, would lie down again with a painful longing sticking in the mind. Everyday he increasingly felt that the penance he had been doing was not washing the sin of his having disowned his begotten son and of having forsaken the father's duty and responsibility to him. Budhia had said, when departing after his refusal to accept the child, that she would take and leave the charge, which she was unable to carry and keep to herself, at the cemetery. Did she actually do it? Every night he

had wondered and worried over it, but now Gokul's face made his worry intense and agonising.

One evening while returning from a village he got drenched in rain. The next day morning he woke with fever and tearing headache. Dr. Kathalay examined his chest and suspected a patch of pneumonia and prescribed complete rest. But he became more restless. In the night he dreamed that his son was alive and was looking for his father all around. Early morning he woke weak and with fever still on, but he stood up, put on his coat and left the house impatient to go and meet his son. He took a rickshaw and went to the bus stand to go to Nagpur, where he took a cup of tea and changed into another bus for Kanhan which he reached in mid-day. He was fatigued, but taking another cup of hot tea and a few biscuits he proceeded in a rickshaw to Budhia's village. Outside her house some children were playing, who, on seeing the Padri-saheb, ran inside to call Budhia. He walked up to the door, where he met Budhia, who had grown bulky and who looked older than she was with a sprinkling of grey hair on her head. She stood surprised and confused as she saw the Padri-saheb before her to whom she was duty-bound to pay religious respect, but she remembered how he had left her terribly guilty to her husband. She had had in the meantime three sons and two daughters from her husband, but the memory of her first issue, of the beautiful, blue-eyed boy whom she had held to her breast for

a little while, had remained bitterly fresh in her. She had left him at the cemetery gate and never knew thereafter what had happened to him. She hadn't since gone that way and hadn't dared enquire of anyone if he or she had heard about a baby left at the cemetery gate. She had only prayed that the Father of all children saved his life.

Mulligan raised his hand to bless her and her children without response from her. He then asked "Tell me, Budhia, where my son is. I've come to meet and take him with me."

Budhia's suppressed feeling burst and her eyes shot out fury when asked about her lost son. "Meet him in the cemetery, in the grave." She swept away inside the room to hold the swelling agitation in her breast. Mulligan stood speechless but not surprised. In spite of the last night's dream he was prepared for the news. Ill and exhausted his legs were giving way, but with effort he pulled himself up and went back to the rickshaw and directed the puller to take him to the Kamptee cemetery.

It was past afternoon, and evening's cool embrace was inducing the sullen sun-dazed tree-tops to wave a gentle breeze, which was very soothing to the heated temple of Mulligan and to the perspiring rickshaw puller. Getting down at the cemetery he knocked at the door of the old gate-man, whom he knew. But he hesitated to appear before the old man who lay on a cot inside the room.

"God bless you, Lewis. But I won't disturb you if you are unwell. I only wanted to glance

through the twenty years old register of burials in the cemetery."

Lewis was sick. Without getting up he said hoarsely "Excuse me, Father, I'm sick for a month and can't get up. When my son comes in the night he will find out and give you what you want."

"All right, send him inside the cemetery when he comes. I shall be there."

So saying he went inside thinking that he might be able to find the grave he wanted from the engravings on the grave stones. He went from grave to grave reading the engravings in the fading light of the evening, but didn't come across the name he was looking for. Then he came to a corner where there were old graves over which stood no stones to bring to mind the memory of those who were long forgotten. He sat down exhausted and knelt down to pray, but fainted before the prayer was half said.

When his son returned Lewis asked him to go inside the cemetery to meet the Priest. Stephen went with a torch in hand and after a close search came to the spot where Mulligan lay unconscious. He was terrified to find the Priest lying between two old graves and rushed back to tell Lewis who said "Take water and that bottle of brandy and pour a little into his mouth. The old man is exhausted."

Lewis went back and put a few drops of brandy into Mulligan's mouth and rubbed his scalp and forehead with cold water. In a few

minutes Mulligan revived, but without opening his eyes he held Stephen's hand and drawled "My son, dear Stephen, you've come. Let me hold you on my chest where these twenty years I've missed you. You were lost to me, but I knew that God would give you back to me. Yester-night I dreamed that you called me, but I didn't know from where. So I came running and gasping to meet you, to embrace you, to kiss you, and to ask for your forgiveness, my son, before I am called to meet my Great Father. Stephen, come and let me hold you tight on my breast. Call me Daddy, and tell into my ears that you forgive me, your undutiful father who has sinned to you. My son, if you don't forgive me I won't be forgiven by my Heavenly Father."

Stephen didn't understand the emotional outbursts of the old man, who wasn't fully conscious yet, he thought. Gently smoothing the ruffled hair of the lying man with his fingers he said "Father, be well; don't worry. It's not for me to forgive you, but to thank you for your blessings and for your invoking Lord's forgiveness for me and for all of us who are your children."

But Mulligan was not listening. He was still in his dreamy thoughts as he lay holding Stephen's hand. His eyes were closed but he was pressing Stephen's hand over his heart to feel the touch of his son whom he had seen in his dream. Stephen thought of giving him a little more brandy.

"Open your mouth, Father, and drink a little" he said, giving him a helping hand to sit up.

"How sweetly you call me Father!" said Mulligan as he sat up and looked at Stephen's face. "Who are you?" he asked coming to full consciousness.

"I'm the son of Lewis. My name is Stephen."

"Stephen? You are Lewis's son? But Lewis had no son twenty years ago, and he had lost his wife."

"But he got me as son later."

"You don't look like him. He is dark and you are rosy white. Let me see your eyes. They are sea-blue. And what's your name?"

"Stephen."

"I had christened a blue-eyed boy Stephen twenty years ago, and he was my son."

Mulligan caught Stephen's face with two hands and pulled it closer. He couldn't see very clearly in the moonlight, so he felt the chin of Stephen with his hand.

"Yes, here's the cut mark which you got from me. I've given you many cruel cuts, my boy, my son, my son" exclaimed Mulligan as he grabbed Stephen in his embrace and kissed all over his forehead and cheeks with a frantic outburst of paternal affection.

"Father, come, I shall take you to our room. You'll be well there" said Stephen, thinking that he hadn't come to his senses yet.

"No, my son ; let not Lewis know that you are

my son. Let him love you as before as his son. Let him give you the father's love of which I deprived you when you needed it most."

Tears rolled down his cheeks. He left Stephen, knelt down, and rolling his eyes up to the little sparkling lights of the silent heaven, in weak trembling voice he slowly uttered "Father, forgive me, forgive my sin. My own son can't forgive me. He is born of flesh and blood. He's begotten of a sinful father. But Thou my Heavenly Father canst forsake even Thy sinful son. Forgive me, Father, and bless my son and give him that fatherly love that I didn't give him."

He stretched out his hands to hold the feet of Jesus who appeared to stand before his half-closed watery eyes. "Jesus, my Father," he called as he had never called before. Never indeed he had felt himself to be truly the Son of Jesus as he felt now. Then he stopped. His hands fell on his sides, his eyes closed in exhaustion, and he fell unconscious over his son between the two unnamed graves where he had come to search and meet him. As he fell the soft echo of his prayer, reflected from the depths of the sky, came and went into his ears for his face looked serene and peaceful under the soothing shine of the moon.

The night before he had dreamed that he was meeting his little baby son whom he had disowned but could never forget. To-night, as he lay unconscious on his son's lap, he dreamt that he was meeting his Divine Father Who forgives whatever

his son may do when he takes his faults and sins to lay them at His feet.

III

Man is born of flesh and blood. His legs are weak; his hands are unsteady; his vision is short and obscure. He moves, works and lives where weather changes, wind blows, colours play, and light and dark alternate to touch, excite, prick and infuriate the urges and impulses of his body and the desires of his mind. His body and mind, his life, his world and his surrounding are indeed meant for what he does. He can not defy them, nor he need try, for they help him to grow, and they provide all that he needs, physically and mentally, to become Man which the Creator has made him. He falls and gets up; runs and slips; he gets bruised; his clothes are torn; his face becomes dirty;—and then, after the day's run and struggle, he arrives at the height from where he sees the shining peak which he has to reach. From here his prayer is heard at the mountain top where the happy Father waits for his son. The difficulties and hardships, the sorrows and miseries, the failures and disappointments, the faults and mistakes, the crimes and sins,—all that he did and which came in the way were steps leading to the height from where he could visualise his great destiny and the high way he had to go.

We make a mistake and judge man wrongly when we condemn him if he stumbles on a step or simply aberrates from the path we chalk out for him. Father O'Mally's strong and sinewy hand on the tender mind of the boy Joseph had torn the growing boy from his natural life, like a budding flower broken off from the stem, and the little boy struggled through his growing years with the needs and calls of his body and mind by incessant repetition of scriptural injunctions, in the cold printed letters of which he couldn't perceive the pulse of life and the animation of living. The boy's and the youth's mind was always bent down with the fear of a moral lapse, and his thoughts remained cramped within the walls of religious taboos. He had looked to God rather with fear than with love, fearing His punishment for any digression from the holy life imposed on him. He tried to believe that he lived religiously and was ever near God, but when he prayed he didn't have that earnestness with which a child calls his father. But Stephen made him feel what a son's needs and a father's emotions were. He felt now as weak and helpless without a father as Stephen had been without him. Who else but the loving father would lift the son up when he falls, and so, he turned to Him as he hadn't turned before. Tears came from his eyes and fell on his son and also on the feet of the Lord whom he saw standing for the first time face to face before him.

THEY MISUNDERSTOOD

I

In his youth he was not different from others. He had emotions of love as others had; rather, he reacted strongly to romantic impulses and took love very seriously. Love to him was not just a mental fancy and a physical impulse, which united man and woman to give them a passing thrill and to serve a purpose of creation. It was to be an all round understanding between the two, for which a perfect harmony in nature, temperament and outlook was needed. But, as such agreement and harmony could seldom be had, he carefully kept away from any adventure in love. In his diary one night, under an emotional excitement, he had written "O God, I may never fall in love, for I shall not be able to bear a rupture." Those words well represented his youthful feelings. Naturally, therefore, he lived somewhat exclusively, his recreating interests being reading, writing and travelling.

Thus from youth Atul crossed into middle age and in the course of it developed some definite ideas in respect of love. Differences of race, language, religion, customs and politics seemed to be very real impediments in it. And, so could be an unusual age-gap between the two, even if it was only a few years more than what was common

between husband and wife. As such differences, one or the other, were likely to be always present he thought it unwise to form an intimacy which could bring disappointment in the end.

He worked in the office of the Accountant General, Bengal. The Assistant Accounts officer, Shri Suren Roy, an elderly man under whom he worked, one day slipped from the stairs to the first floor when coming down at lunch time and broke his leg. For two months he was confined to bed during which Atul almost every evening went to him and sat by his side. Suren Babu liked his soft and sympathetic nature, and, being similarly minded, was interested in his philosophic outlook. His daughter, Malati, was also attracted to the philosophical discussions between her father and Atul, and after a few days of acquaintance started participating in them. She became so much interested that sometimes, on her own, she requested Atul to come early and on holidays when they sat together and talked. But such meetings were not frequent and became less so after Suren Babu became fit to attend office.

But their talk and discussions developed a liking and understanding between them which more and more attracted them to each other. Whenever some question agitated his mind Atul remembered her and if an occasion for meeting did not come he wrote a long letter to her expressing the thoughts that had come to his mind. The increasingly strong desire to meet her, which he

felt, was, he thought, due only to an intellectual liking between them. How could it be anything else? He was thirty-seven and she eighteen. Could a girl of her age develop a fancy to a middle-aged man like him, and, even if she did, could that fancy endure when younger and brighter company came and impulses of youth stirred her? Yet, he couldn't remove her image from his thoughts in the day and from dreams in the night.

One day a letter came "Beloved Sir, I haven't been able to go to you for a long time. I feel so dull and vacant without our those discussions. I wonder how to be with you freely whenever I've something to ask. Letters do not satisfy. I've so much to tell, so much to ask."

He read and re-read it. It opened his eyes and he saw the glimpse of what he didn't want to acknowledge. Love was growing between them. It must be stopped. The more intensely he felt love for her the more severely he blamed himself for not having foreseen the possible effect of their intimate discussions and correspondence. He felt she would be unhappy later if her growing sentiment was not diverted from him. His heart and soul longed to have her, to possess her, but he asked himself "Should I for my sake blight her budding youth?" His answer was an emphatic No. Love to him had meant giving himself completely and possessing his beloved also completely; but, deeply sentimental that he was, it seemed to him, now that he was in actual love, that true love

should be unselfish and unpossessive. He decided to clear himself out of her path and one day told her father that if he was thinking of his daughter's marriage he could recommend a good boy, an Engineer working in Delhi. To keep himself diverted he devoted himself to intensive reading and writing, but yet in the loneliness of the night, he felt an anguish, which his philosophy of love could not remove. He longed and dreamt her and in the morning woke bitter for the dream having broken.

II

Malati's father, six months after the accident to him, was transferred from Calcutta to Delhi from where she wrote "I felt like crying when I had to come away without seeing you, but you must come to Delhi, you must. We've a nice bungalow here with a beautiful garden."

Atul looked out through the window to the dull afternoon sky. Calcutta seemed so vacant. In the Medical College Hospital was a nurse, Rupa, who was his cousin's daughter. Her father had died when she was four years, since when he had supported her. She lived with her mother and had not married. She often visited him to set things right in his neglected home.

One night he received a letter from Malati's father who wrote that her marriage with the

engineer whom he had recommended was fixed and that he must come to the wedding. Her father was a traditionalist, who didn't consider it necessary to consult his daughter about her marriage. One evening he had brought the engineer to meet her, when she for the first time came to know what was going on. She protested when her mother asked her to put on a silk saree and go to the parlour to meet the boy. She had to go but sat indifferently for ten minutes on a chair, keeping her face down while her father talked to the uneasy youngman, who was accompanied by a friend who tried in vain to make her turn her face and speak. After they left she said to her father "I didn't know about this. I wont marry." Her father just said "Your marriage is my responsibility." She was aware of his firmness in matters which he considered his duty and responsibility. In this matter her mother was of the same mind as her father, but, even if not, her intercession, she knew, wouldn't sway him in what he had decided. In the night she lay awake wondering what to do. She was now fully conscious of her intense love for Atul and she knew also his feeling to her in spite of his effort to suppress his emotions in her presence, though she didn't understand why he tried to hide his love and keep away from her. In his letters the language was always so guarded that she could never catch a word expressing an emotion which she longed to read. In the dead of night she decided that she would escape from the

situation before the negotiation proceeded further and would go to Calcutta and tell him about the matter, which she would definitely end by speaking out her love to him and surrendering herself to his arms to force him to speak out his. This decision brought a thrill to her midnight imagination and dispelled the misery and distress which had oppressed her since the evening in the parlour.

In the morning she planned and waited for her father to go to office. Then she wrote a letter for him explaining how sick she was feeling since meeting that man, whom she didn't at all like and adding that to provide him an excuse to put off the negotiation she was going to Calcutta to her uncle's place for sometime. Her father had, however, already written to Atul that her marriage with the engineer, whom he had recommended, was settled and he had invited him to the wedding. The letter had dropped from Atul's hand after reading and with it the world of his dream where Malati reigned, but he sobered his excitement by telling himself that it was what he had wished and planned to cut himself away from her. When Rupa came that afternoon he said "Let's go to market to purchase a present for a friend's daughter to whose wedding I've been invited."

When Malati called at his house in the evening he hadn't returned. She waited. She had come resolute to have a clearing-up of the hide and seek between them and to decide the issue. Nothing else appeared in her vision, nothing else she

longed for, nothing else she would have. Waiting minutes brought impatience, but her objective became clearer and her decision firmer. Then the door opened and Atul stood there more than surprised at the sight of her. As was his wont his shy eyes turned down to hide what they were betraying, and his lips failed to speak out at once the simple words of welcome. "You're surprised, Sir, at seeing me and are wondering if it's I or my apparition."

He had recovered "Yes, Malati, I'm more than surprised. You were in Delhi, I was sure, for your father had written"

She understood what her father had written and that annoyed her. Cutting him short she snapped. "He wrote, but I came personally in connection with the same matter."

He didn't understand and looked vaguely. Rupa came up from behind with a packet in hand. Malati was surprised. She hadn't even seen her or any girl in his house. Rupa was tall, slim and beautiful and about her age. Malati's eyes glistened and she looked hard at her. He introduced "She's Rupa and She's Malati." Before he could lengthen the introduction Rupa advanced and placing the packet on the table before Malati opened it and asked her "Isn't this saree beautiful? How nice the shade and rich the embroidery on the border. It's of course costly, but he insisted on buying."

Malati's face darkened; her heart burned with

jealousy. She was sure that the saree was for Rupa and she went loose in guessing and imagining more and all the rest. He noticed but didn't understand the reason of the changing colour on her cheeks. He said "Sit down, Malati, do you like the saree?"

Hoarsely she replied "Yes, but I must go now. It's late, my uncle will be worried."

"Don't worry, I shall reach you to his place."

"No, you must be tired. I shall go all right myself."

Rupa held out her hand. Stiffly Malati put her cold fingers in her grasp and not looking at him walked out, leaving him more surprised than he was at her unexpected visit.

As she came out the whole thing shone clear before her eyes,—why his letters had become short and belated, why what he wrote contained more about weather and good wishes for her health and happiness than sentences which she eagerly looked for. Rupa had come between them and her fair complexion and well-framed body had drawn his attention. She had thought that she had correctly read his eyes, which expressed his emotions in her presence, and she was sure that they were emotions of his strong love for her. On that she had confidently built and rested her love. She had run away from Delhi on the eve of her marriage to take shelter in his embrace, where she was sure was warm love for her. But now she understood that that warm love was not for her but for Rupa.

Her understanding, inference, judgement and decision followed in quick succession, making her bitter, stern and impulsed to act.

She was in her eighteenth summer.

III

Returning to Delhi she consented to the marriage and even showed enthusiasm in it. Her father was pleased, but her enthusiasm weakened as the wedding day advanced. She woke after a restless dreamy night on the day before the wedding with a heavy depression hanging in the mind. To dispell it she reasoned with herself that she had justifiably acted firmly and emphatically. His love which had enamoured her was fickle and had gone to the charms of Rupa's face, figure and complexion. As she thought so she became more bitter and went to her desk to write to him to let him know that she didn't care. "Please come to our wedding. You'll be pleased to meet my husband. He's so good, so handsome, so charming." The letter however didn't write off her depression.

The day passed, the wedding day dawned. She got up uneasy. Another few hours and she'll be married and the break with Atul will be complete and irreparable. She felt diffident and shaky and uncertain of what she had done. Her mother called her to see the presents which had come. She glanced over them indifferently till her mother showed her a saree which she at once recognised

as the one which she had seen at Calcutta at Atul's place. "How do you like it?" he had asked, but she had guessed that it was for Rupa. And on that vital guess she had acted swiftly and decisively.

Had she judged wrongly?

The marriage hour came. The groom with party arrived. She was escorted to where the priests sat to solemnise the marriage. Her steps stumbled, heart sank, body shook. It was natural nervousness, they thought. She looked around. She was thickly surrounded by bride's and groom's people. Not she, a girl of eighteen, but none could slip out. She resigned to the ordeal which sacramentally bound her to her husband.

Two days passed. She pretended indisposition and didn't let her husband touch her. The letter she had written to Atul the day before the wedding came back with the postal stamp "Addressee not at station." She became anxious and wrote to her uncle's daughter to find Rupa and enquire about him. Reply came "Rupa said that after despatching the present-parcel to Delhi for you he said that he would go for a change. He didn't look so well."

Malati's husband was posted to Simla for six months, but she declined to accompany him. "I'm not well." Her parents didn't understand, but when after ten days a telegram came from Simla hospital from her husband "Only an attack of bronchitis, don't worry," her father insisted on her going. She did go and attend him as a good

nurse, not as wife. On the third evening when entering the hospital she saw a new patient arriving. It was Atul. She went forward anxiously "You, Sir, here? What has happened?"

With a dry grin on his pale face he asked with surprise "How are you here? I'm all right, except a little fever which I got on the way when hiking from Mussourie. I went to a hotel, but they won't take a sick man. So I'm going to stop in the hospital, that's all. And now about you?"

"My husband's here, so I had to come from Delhi."

"Then don't stop here, go to him."

"He's better and will be discharged tomorrow."

Next day afternoon she came to the hospital to see him. "How's your husband?" he asked.

"He went home, this morning."

She sat on a chair by the bed-side.

"How are you?"

"Almost well."

She touched his forehead. "In spite of this fever, you mean?"

He made no reply. His eyes were turned to the ceiling.

"Why did you go on this long hike from Mussourie all alone?"

"Himalayas attract me, I've told you before."

"But not during monsoon. You went because you wanted to leave Calcutta."

He changed the topic. "Your husband is alone at home, better go."

"But in two days I shall return to Delhi. He'll be well and wont need me."

"He'll need you through life. He's your husband."

"Formally."

"And religiously also."

He inclined up on the elbow supported over the pillow. "Malati, you're agitated and forgetting fact and reality."

She broke down. "I wish to forget the later fact, but I can't forget the first fact. Sir, didn't you know my heart and how it pulsated? Yes, you did, I know, and so did I know your heart also. Yet you moved away and eluded me. And I've come to know that this marriage was on your proposal. To break the negotiation I went to meet you at Calcutta but there I found that your affection had been diverted to Rupa."

"Rupa? She's my niece and I brought her up from four years when she lost her father."

She was startled. "Your niece?"

"Of course."

Tears came to her eyes. "O I misjudged you, Sir. For the crime of that I've got involved in this misery. But I shall break out of it and—"

She stopped and faced him.

"And what?" he asked.

"I shall go my way."

"Your way is with your husband."

"No, you know, my way is not with him. It's with—"

He guessed and feared what she was going to say. Interrupting her he quickly said "No, it can't be with anybody else but your husband. You're united with him and will and must so remain. You can't break away. Your happiness, your future rests on it."

She snapped bitterly "You didn't want me to be happy."

He lay silent.

"Yes, you didn't think of my happiness, otherwise you wouldn't have turned me off and thrown me, without my knowledge and consent, into a stranger's hand."

She sobbed and put her face on the bed-sheet and stretching out her hand caught his. "I won't leave this grip again."

He was intensely moved but controlled himself. His long-suppressed love for her was about to burst. He sat up and put his other hand on her head and affectionately said "Malati."

"Yes, Malati is yours and will be nobody else's."

"Yes, you'll be mine but not in the way in which you will be your husband's."

"No, I shall be yours in the one way in which I want to be."

"That's not possible."

"I shall make it possible. Religion, society,

custom, tradition, nothing can over-ride my love, its claim, its right."

"But there's another thing which you can't do. You may break other barriers, but not the age barrier between eighteen and thirty-seven."

She shook up and fixing her gaze on him said

"O I see. It was that which had worried you and scared you away from me. Sir, you misunderstood me, misunderstood a woman's heart. If that was a real barrier my heart couldn't leap over it and cling to you. Why didn't you ask me once.?"

"It was not a thing to be asked; I could see, I could understand it. I could foresee its consequence to you if on selfish impulse I had disregarded it."

"Only you didn't foresee the consequence which has actually come to me. I know how intensely you've loved me, but with all that you misunderstood me just as I misunderstood your relation with Rupa and missed the chance when things might have been set right."

"No, Malati, I still think I was right. You're a girl of eighteen. What you thought to-day you wouldn't think when you were a woman of twenty-eight. Then your fancy to me would have decoloured."

"Yes, if it were a fancy it would have, but not if it were more."

"Now forget the past and accept the present.

Be happy with your husband. I shall be happy then."

"No, you wont be happy without me, nor shall I be without you."

She stood up to go, then turned back to say "Will you let me attend you till you're well, only as—"

He cut her short and said "Of course, but I'm well enough."

IV

A week after his return to Calcutta he received a letter from her husband—"Your description of Malati when you recommended her before marriage was very true. She's a girl any man would covet, but, unfortunately, she couldn't be a good wife to me. In fact, she never became a wife at all. I waited and hoped that there would be a change in her mind. But, now, she says she will leave and join a hospital as a nurse."

After three days another letter came "She has gone, but I continue to wait and hope."

Atul could only think of writing a line in consolation in reply "She's only eighteen. Allow for it and do wait."

SISTER PAULINE AT THE CROSS-ROAD

I

That evening Mother Regina with Mother Paul of St. Peter's Convent in Nagpur had gone to hospital to see a sick girl, who was a day scholar in the Convent school.

As they crossed through the wards, going between sick beds, they came to a sick man, who was groaning in pain. A nurse was in attendance. The two nuns stopped and asked the nurse what the man's trouble was. The nurse, who was fixing an ice-bag on the man's head, said "He was brought in an hour ago from the street, where he was lying on the pavement, by a Red-Cross worker who was passing by that side. He has high fever and what else we can't say yet."

Mother Regina asked "He was lying on street pavement like this, you say? If he had not been picked up and brought here what would have happened to him?"

"No more than what happens to so many others lying there," said the nurse with indifference and without lifting her eyes from the ice-bag, which she was holding.

"You mean he would have remained there unattended in his suffering?"

"Mother," replied the nurse, looking up to her "You live within the high walls of the Convent and do not see the world outside. So many such

sick and ailing people groan in pain to the end on the street."

"They lie there without anyone by their side?" said Regina more to herself than to the nurse. Her eyes were on the sick man's face. The words of the nurse had gone through her ears deep into her heart, violently agitating there the faith-grown equanimity of long years of her sequestered life of nunhood.

II

Regina was the daughter of a school teacher in Wales, who lived a simple quiet life given to the company of little boys and of books. Whether there is anything in heredity or not, and if so how much, one may not know, but his son, his eldest child, had been very different from his father, at least in his youth. He was ambitious and outward-minded and went for a business career. But, not to discredit heredity his daughter, Julian, went much her father's way. She was quiet like him, and even when young she liked to sit with him and read rather than go about and play outside. After dinner, when her mother took her younger sister to bed, she went to her father's study and with him, across the table, she sat to read.

One night she was reading Marie Correlli's **SORROWS OF SATAN**. She had come to the end of the book when she raised her eyes and asked

her father "Daddy, how to save oneself from the long hands of Satan?"

Mr. William raised his brows to look at his daughter to divine what thought could have suddenly made her ask that unusual question.

She explained "I mean, Daddy, Satan is so hard to know and recognise, and, as he may be even among those who come as our friends, one cannot be safe anywhere, unless he shuts himself away in a high-walled place out of his reach and cuts himself off from all society."

"No, Julian, if you think that high walls of brick and stone can shut out the Apostle of Evil you're mistaken. Inside holy places also you may find him spreading his snares and catching careless victims. What can keep off Satan is one's internal goodness."

"But, Daddy, till goodness develops enough to keep him off one must hide away from the long glances of the Tempter."

"But how do you think Geoffrey saved himself from his Satan friend?"

"I don't know. Indeed, I wonder how he did in spite of close friendship and association with him when others could not. It must be by God's kindness and blessing."

"Yes, you're right. His kindness and blessing can alone save, and His blessing always easily comes to the Good."

"But, Daddy, I fear he may come before I'm good enough to get God's protection. Goodness

must get time to grow and like a little plant it has to be nursed and reared in shelter away from sun, wind and storm. I feel so shaky to enter the world, where you can never know which way the Satan may come from. And he may come as a good friend too as he did to Geoffrey."

"No, Julian, you need have no fear for yourself, for I can see that solid virtue and goodness in you which no Satan can go near."

She looked away over the table and sat quiet and thoughtful and then after the pause softly said "Daddy, let me enter a convent and dedicate myself, body and soul, to the service of God. I shall pray for myself and pray for others."

Thus she had become a nun. For the last ten years she was the beloved Mother Regina to the girls of the St. Peter's convent school in Nagpur.

III

Mother Regina returned to the convent from visit to the hospital so absent-minded that the Mother Superior noticed it and asked if she was unwell.

"No, Mother, I'm well, but I was very depressed by what I saw in the hospital. There was one man lying there, who had been brought in a semi-conscious state from the street, where he was lying, and the nurse told us that many such sick people remained to their end on the street with nobody to attend to their dire needs."

"That's true. We can only pray for them."

Regina did pray for them long that night, sitting on the bed but that did not bring peace to her mind. The sick man's painful face haunted her, and when she fell asleep he appeared before her and asked "Does your mere pity relieve my pain and suffering when I lie alone in the cold on the street?" Then she saw an angel coming from the other side and going to attend to the man. As the angel passed she signed to her to follow. Regina woke from the dream and looked around to see where the man and the angel had gone till after sometime she recovered and came to herself.

The next day, while she attended to her work and activities, her mind often turned to the dream. In the night after the prayer she decided to propose to the Superior that she would seek the permission of the Pope to found a separate convent of sisters devoted to service to the poor, the sick, the wretched and the helpless.

The Pope's permission came, and inspired by her example and appeal a generous man gave his house for opening her convent, and some other people also gave her help and money. Some women responded to her call to join in her mission of charity and service.

IV

Mother Regina's convent opened and started with ten nuns. Near it in another house she

opened a sort of nursing home where she lifted the sick and the dying from the streets, those whom nobody cared for and the hospitals did not admit. Besides this work she extended her activities to slums where she started a health centre, a school and a Poor store, from where she gave food and clothes, which she could collect from institutions, hotels, schools and individuals, to the needy. But what she found difficult to provide was medical aid, because she could not pay fees to doctors, who could not always give free service. "I must have doctor nuns in our convent" she said to herself; and in the night after prayer she proposed to the nuns "Sisters, to help and serve the poor we have to gain knowledge of medicine and of proper nursing, otherwise, with all our efforts, we wont be able to do much. Some of you, therefore, have to join medical college, some nursing course and some also have to train as teachers for teaching in the slums. I have received encouraging offers from quite a few sisters from different parts of the country to join our convent. It makes me feel that we have God's blessing in our work. Indeed, without His blessing what can we, little beings, do?"

"Yes, Mother, we shall do as you say. We shall learn and train ourselves in our work, otherwise how can we do and give our best?"

Thus, according to their fitness and educational qualification, some joined medical college, some took nursing course, while Sister Michael,

Sister Pauline and three other nuns took to teaching. As more nuns joined, Mother Regina sent more of them for training while keeping an adequate number with her to carry on her work. Domestically the convent was run entirely by the nuns, who did cooking, cleaning, washing and everything themselves. Mother Regina, besides her strenuous work, weekly visited schools and colleges to request the Principals to ask their students to send their discarded clothes to her for distribution to the poor. She also approached big hotels for getting whatever foodstuff they could spare, cooked or uncooked. Her devoted and self-sacrificing work impressed and moved many generous people, who offered their help with which she was able to expand the sphere and scope of her work. In the convent she maintained a very simple and austere life. She said to the nuns "We can feel for the poor if we live poorly ourselves."

V

Ramen Chatterji lived outside the city proper of Nagpur, in a white two-roomed house, built on a high plinth, close to the southern bank of the lake, called Ambajheri, which supplied water to the town. From the terrace of the house one could see the lake stretching from the slopes of the hill on the west from where rain water drained into the catchment, to the northern and eastern em-

bankments of concrete, on which, when the breeze blew, the waving water splashed to surrender its force and vigour. The lonely little house stood on barren ground, enclosed by a low wire fence, which marked out the compound of the house on the wide open land stretching to a village two furlongs away. Ramen liked the situation of the house. Here he had few visitors, except his old friend, Ashok, who occasionally called and who often asked why he lived in that lonely place. Ramen with a smile would answer

“You find the place lonely because you come from busy town, but I don’t feel so. You see, the sense of loneliness is rather subjective. It doesn’t come so much from the place and environment as from one’s mood and temperament. Also, it depends on the kind of company one seeks. One, for instance, who loves books, more enjoys the company of an author and of the characters he creates than the company of visitors who come for gossip. In writing one gets even more enjoyable company for he gets the company of his own creations.”

Ashok sat unimpressed as he sipped hot tea from the cup. Ramen was in expansive mood.

“Ashok, I wonder at times why one should ever feel lonely, because you’re always in the midst of varieties of things of absorbing interest. The stars in the sky in the night, the changing colours on the horizon at dawn, the songs of the birds, the ripples on that lake sparkling under

moonlight. What more and better company would you have? They always want to show their charms, their wonders, their mysteries to you, but you turn your eyes away to fix them on a person sitting opposite to you across a table and talking the mere commonplace. Do you not in that way withdraw yourself from a wider and more inspiring company to talk to one who would keep you confined to the scanty limits of his thoughts and experiences?"

"But a man's face can reveal more than the same unchanging surface of the lake or the little sparkle of the same twinkling stars in the evening. Remember man stands before a background which holds the Fundamental Cause of the Creation. I often think that by your aloofness you are missing that essential impact with life, which can bring you closer to a realization of what it is."

"I don't deny that, but isn't it true that a man reveals more of him when you watch him from a distance and do not interrupt him and pull him out of his pose and doings? I find that when I look at that village from here and watch there the men, women and children, moving in their little world, I get more to reflect over than when I go to the village and meet them closely."

"But, by reflecting from a distance you'll ever remain in confusion about what you want to know about life. You've to feel and react and respond yourself to the impulses of the body and the mind

as they are excited by contact and association with others."

Thus the two often talked and discussed, but each held his ground though appreciating the viewpoint of the other.

Rather sparsely built, tall, light complexioned, with a straight back and wide shoulder and smooth forehead Ramen was thirty three years old. His grey eyes, which matched the colour of the light and soft hair on his head, thin lips and sharply defined nose combined to give an expression to his face which was both affectionate and reflective. He was an artist in a litho-press. He was also a student of homoeopathy and gave medicine to the villagers for simple ailments.

VI

One evening he was returning from the city. Generally when there was no hurry he walked leisurely, letting his mind travel and follow his thoughts. When he had come out of the crowded bazar area he saw a man lying by the side of the road. He went up and asked but the man was groaning in pain and could give no reply. He sat down by his side and put his hand on his forehead. The man had high temperature but he wondered what he could do, when a station-wagon came up from behind and stopped by his side. Three nuns got down, one of whom asked him "How is the man's condition? Can he get up?"

"He has high fever and terrible pain somewhere, which he can't express. I don't know what to do."

Mother Regina said "If you'll please help us we shall take him to the car."

"Of course, Mother,. Let us take him to a hospital."

"Not to a hospital, for hospitals do not or cannot receive all these destitutes lying ill on the roadside. We shall take him to our place, our little simple hospital, where we shall pray for him and give him whatever humble service our hands can give."

Ramen stood up and facing her said "You're Mother Regina, I believe. I had heard of you and of your divine service to the poor and the sick, but I did not have the good fortune to see you at your work. Mother, I shall take him up and carry to the van."

The two nuns, who were with Mother Regina, helped him to carry the man into the van. The three nuns then got in and Mother Regina said to him "You also come in. We shall drop you at your place."

"No, Mother, I wont inconvenience you, but I shall be glad to be of any service to you."

"Then pray for us and pray for this man and for the many other such destitutes like him."

"And you Mother pray for me too."

Mother Regina had come on her usual evening round to pick up sick destitutes from the

streets. She could only take as many as could be accommodated in the house gifted to her by a kind-hearted man, named Dinkar Ketkar, whose only daughter Asha had been a student of St. Peter's school.

Mother Regina used to bring two or three nuns with her; this evening Sister Michael and Sister Pauline were with her. When Ramen walked off Sister Pauline's eyes, unconsciously followed him. Sister Michael was attending the sick man. Mother Regina said "That man was a gentle kind soul. I saw him from distance sitting down by the sick man and that attracted my notice."

Michael said "Yes, Mother, he's very soft-hearted. He so gently carried the man into the van that it seemed he felt his pain himself."

"Yes, so he is. I was so touched when he looked at me and called me Mother and asked me to pray for him. His eyes spoke of his simplicity, sincerity and goodness. God bless him."

During this talk between Mother Regina and Sister Michael Sister Pauline was silent. She had bent her head on the sick man to stroke his head and back with her hand to give him comfort, but more to hide her eyes from Michael's, who she feared, had noticed her absent mood.

Ramen was much impressed by Mother Regina. As he strode away he thought of her and of her great work. The gentle contour of her face, the lustre of kindness beaming from her blue eyes, the unmistakable imprint of faith and devotion on her

face, the loving delicate touch of her hand on the sick man, and her soft voice—these filled his mind and kept his thoughts fixed on her. He was himself soft-hearted to those who were in trouble and sorrow and was ever eager to be of help to them. But Mother Regina's earnestness and devotion to her work made him feel that he was living selfishly and was not doing what he should. He thought of asking her if he could join in her work. Absorbed in such thoughts he had hardly noticed the two nuns who were with Mother Regina while carrying the sick man to the van with them.

VII

For sometime an old woman from the near-by village had come to stay with Ramen. It was in this way.

One morning when he was returning from his usual walk he saw a woman sitting on the field by the side of the path not far from his house. She was seated on the dusty ground with her legs stretched out and she remained unconcerned at his approach. She looked to be over sixty, with wrinkles on her square face over which had fallen stray locks of greying hair. He went and stood by her but hesitated to ask. She sat as before. A village woman going that way explained to him "She has been turned out of the house by her son's wife, because she couldn't bring as much water from the water

tap on the road as she wanted. Her sight has become dim and she can't see well in the evening when her daughter-in-law wants her to bring water for the night."

The old woman's eyes moistened which with the backside of her hand she wiped. Ramen was moved by what he heard and by the sad face of the old woman. Bending before her he put his hand on her shoulder and said "Mai, come to your second son."

She looked up vaguely at him.

"Yes, I'm your second son" he repeated "I'm alone; come to my house."

The village woman, who had spoken to him, was surprised at his offer and stood motionless for a time, after which she said to the old woman "Yes, go with Babuji and forget your son who has turned you out."

Ramen had left everything in the house to her. He called her Ma and in every way tried to make her at home and fill the void in her mind caused by separation from her son. His attention and softness quickly dispelled the strangeness which she had felt in the new place, and her motherly affection flowed to him.

When Ramen went the next day morning to Mother Regina's Convent to enquire about the sick man who was taken there the previous evening she with some nuns was coming out to go for her morning visit to a slum. She greeted him and said "The sick man we picked up yesterday is

better. We might have passed him if we hadn't noticed you sitting by his side."

"No, Mother, you would have found him even if I were not there, for he was to be saved by you. I only happened to be there because it was going to be my good luck to meet you."

"But, actually, it was neither you nor I who did or could do anything. It was the will of God and it was His kindness to us to let us have the chance to do His work by serving the sick man."

Ramen was impressed by her faith and by the modesty and humility with which she served the sick and the poor, believing that in that way she was only serving her God.

She asked him "Will you come with us, if you have the time, to the slum where we're going?"

"It'll be more than a pleasure to share a little of your humanitarian work; it'll be making life a little purposeful."

In the slum he found a field where he could contribute a little to the work of Mother Regina, for which he had high admiration. He offered to look after hygiene, which was more important than teaching. Every morning or afternoon, as he could make time, he went to the slum of which he took charge and enthusiastically applied himself to his work. Sister Michael and Sister Pauline were assigned to this slum. Mother Regina was very pleased to see his earnestness, modesty and gentleness. The nuns also found him very helpful and co-operative. One day he told Sister Michael, who

was senior to Pauline and who was more free in talk with him, "Sister, I used to wonder sometime how you felt in your rigid austere life, dedicated unselfishly to the service of the poor, but now my little experience of this service shows to me that it's not necessarily a question of self-sacrifice, it's rather self-satisfying. These simple people give you wonderful company and dispell your loneliness. And their grateful appreciation of the little help or even of a little touch of sympathy, which I may be able to give them, which they express more by their eyes than by words, dwells in my thoughts when I am away in my home."

"Yes, Ramen Babu, you're right. In serving them you feel that you're serving God, and that adds to the satisfaction of being helpful to them."

He didn't answer and looked away absently as he and the two Sisters drove from the slum to the Convent in the Convent's station wagon. Sister Michael, without noticing the absent look on his countenance, went on in her mood "Indeed, if we didn't meet people in suffering we wouldn't get the blissful inspiration to serve them and thereby fulfil God's purpose in our life."

He turned to her, for her words didn't appeal to him, and said "Sister, wont that be rather selfish thinking? For, it would mean then that we wished people to suffer so that we might serve them and thereby make our life purposeful."

"No, I don't mean that. I meant only that

since there were people in need, distress and suffering, it was good to go and meet and serve them."

"That is all right, but when it is said that in that way God's purpose is served, well, it doesn't appeal to me. For, will that not then imply that it was in God's plan to give suffering to some so that some others might get the chance to fulfil His mission in their life by serving them?"

Pauline's face showed agreement, but Michael argued in the orthodox way "What you call distress and suffering are really not so. They are blessings of God, for they turn our eyes to Him. And when we look up to Him He cannot stand away. He comes with open arms to receive us in His grace. It's only when we lose faith that we suffer and feel pain."

Ramen was going to say—Should God give pain and suffering to man to make him turn and pray to Him,—but he refrained so as not to hurt her faith and sentiment by extending the argument. He simply said

"You must be right in what you say, but, perhaps, I lack that faith for I feel very bad and miserable when I get physical pain and mental suffering and when I see the pain and suffering of others. At the time of suffering the sufferer looks more to man, who knows what suffering is, for help, comfort and sympathy than to God whom he can well be inclined at the moment to hold responsible for his woes and troubles."

They arrived at the Convent gate, where he

got down. "You'll excuse me, Sister, for what I've said. The sight of pain and suffering so agitates me that I go on wrong thinking. My faith falters, my belief in what I've read and heard shakes and I can't fix my mind on any explanation which could satisfy the questions which shoot up in me. I feel so sad and confused as I look around on this earth, which, they say, is the beautiful creation of a benevolent God. You'll excuse me, Sister, for disturbing the peace of your mind by this rude outburst of my feelings, which were violently agitated this morning by the sight of a man, who had lost his leg in an accident and had lost his job and was unable to attend to his sick wife, who had an ailing suckling by her side. What can you or I do to him except to give a little help or a sympathetic touch for a minute and then leave him with a few words of comfort which fail to change the complexion of life to which he, his wife and child were doomed?"

"You're agitated, Ramen Babu, I shall pray for you. You come in the morning to join in our prayers. What you can't see God will show you, and what troubles and discomforts you He will remove."

He walked off thoughtfully, his unpeaceful mind not having accepted her words inspite of the earnestness with which they were spoken.

Michael said to Pauline as they passed in through the gate of the Convent "He's a good soul,

kind and generous. The confusion in his thoughts will go if he comes to our prayers."

Keeping her eyes on the ground Pauline said "There's some point in what he says."

Turning her head sharply to her Michael replied "What point except this that it shows that his faith is shaken by his lonely thoughts."

"Yes, he looks lonely."

VIII

The next day was Mother Regina's Feast day. She asked Michael to tell Ramen and invite him to the evening prayer, but he hadn't gone to the slum and the nuns didn't meet him there. On their return they went to his house to enquire. He came out to meet them.

"To-morrow is Mother's Feast. She has invited you. We didn't meet you in the morning, so we've come to tell you."

"Come in, Sisters. It's so kind of you to come. But Gopia is sick, so I'm with her."

"Who's Gopia?"

"She's an old woman of that village, who has been living here since her son and his wife turned her out. She looks after me like a son."

Gopia was lying on bed. She had high fever and a strong head-ache. She said to him "You're still moving about. When will you eat? I'm well now. Go and cook. I don't know when I shall get up and be able to cook."

Pauline went and sat on her bed and put her hand on her forehead. Gopia looked up to Ramen. "She's Sister Pauline. She will cure you by her touch."

He went out and brought a cup of milk to Gopia, but she refused "No, I wont take anything till you've eaten."

"I've eaten enough, biscuits and milk."

Pauline looked up and asked "You've taken nothing but a few biscuits and milk in the whole day? We're here now with her; you can go and cook."

"I could cook, but that, I suppose, wont do." said Michael. Pauline understood that because they were Christians they could not cook his food. He had gone to the kitchen, lighted the oven and put rice on it to boil, after which he returned and said "I have eaten enough, but since Gopia is insisting I've put rice to boil."

Pauline asked "But how will you manage all this alone? Who will attend to her when you go on work? And where's the time for cooking? Surely you can't live on biscuits."

Michael suggested "I shall ask Mother if we can take Gopia to our place till she is well."

"But she wont go, I know. She wont leave me alone. If I'm late in returning some evening she'll sit at the door-step anxiously and ask me to explain. She says 'If I fall sick you'll attend me, but if you are sick who will attend and nurse you? I'm a woman and old. I can't go and bring a

doctor even.' She always worries about me. She wont let me eat anything which is cold or stale."

"She's very affectionate" said Pauline "but she needs care and nursing now so that she may pick up quickly and be able to cook and feed you as she wants."

The next day Mother Regina came with Michael and Pauline. Gopia was no better. Ramen looked worried and fatigued. She said "You're alone; how will you manage? Let me take her to our place, but if she wont go some Sisters must come to help you."

"No, Mother, don't trouble them. They have more important work to do. I can very well look after her. She helps herself mostly and doesn't let me do much. And I hope she'll be well in a day or two."

But she asked Michael and Pauline to come to nurse Gopia till she recovered, Pauline in the morning and Michael in the afternoon. When Pauline came the next morning Ramen asked her if she would mind taking her lunch there.

"Well, as you know, we don't eat outside; so I've brought my lunch with me."

"I'm feeling so bad to cause you so much inconvenience."

"Don't think like that. Instead of inconvenience there's happiness in being of service to anybody."

"I don't know. You may feel so because you have been told and taught to think like that. Do this and don't do that; don't mind your self; serve

others and give to others,—that has been one way of thinking, which has developed into a religious faith. But there have been other ways of thinking as well. Both sides may give some satisfaction, as you say, in a way, and yet may not. In living as one likes or rather as one is urged by the natural impulses of life there's at least one thing, no continuous strain on the mind; and that may help a fuller development of the individual."

"But that wont be living to a purpose and therefore it wont be satisfying."

"What purpose? Isn't that purpose just an idea coming from the faith of someone who sets it before another, who is under his influence, irrespective of whether the task imposed on the disciple to follow that purpose suits his mental and physical constitution or not. I'm afraid that in that way we interfere very harmfully with the free growth and natural evolution of the self in the individual. And I much doubt if a life moulded so artificially by external hands could be satisfying to that life."

She looked up to him contemplatively, not quite grasping the import of his words, which sounded strange to her ears. He did not understand her difficulty in following him and thought that her silence was due to his idea having sounded unconventional and contrary to her faith and incompatible with her life as a nun. So he held himself from going further.

"Sister, don't take me seriously. It was just an effusion of feelings in a passing mood, which, as you know, changes. At another time I might disagree with myself and think differently. In that way perhaps you're better off. You think steadily one way, and that may give you a sort of satisfaction, unshaken by diversion, in the way in which you have learnt to be content."

"I don't know." She said absently. The weakness in her reply drew his eyes on her face, feeling which she straightened up on the chair and said

"I meant Yes on my part, though I didn't understand your doubt about it. The mind of course has to be steady on a faith, otherwise happiness and satisfaction also cannot be steady either."

Gopia turned to this side and opened her eyes. Ramen asked "What shall I cook? What will you like to eat, Ma, dal-roti?"

"Have you eaten yourself? No, you haven't had your bath yet." Then turning to Pauline, who was seated at the head of her bed, she said "Why didn't you send him to eat? He's very careless about himself. My son was like him till he was married. I'm asking him also to bring a wife so that I may be relieved of anxiety for him. His wife would look after me too, as my son's wife used to do previously."

She stopped and looked away on the opposite wall sadly as she recalled the past. Ramen understood and to divert her said "I know, Ma, I can't

look after you well, but will my wife do more and better?"

Her eyes moistened. "No, Beta, none will do more than you. You were my true son in the previous life and that's why you picked me up from the road and made me your mother. You haven't sucked milk from my breast but have sucked mother's affection from there. When I had come out of my house it had become all hollow inside me, but it becomes full again when you call me Ma and my breast fills with mother's milk again."

She put her hand on his knees and looked on his face with tender affection "But, Beta, this is not all that satisfies me. - Mother never likes to see her son lonely. I wont let you remain single. Bring me a Bahu."

Pauline stood up and dryly said "Sister Michael is late to-day."

"I could reach you to the Convent if she's late."

"No, not that; but I'm wondering why she should be late."

Actually there were a few minutes yet to go for her to be relieved by Michael, but she wanted to be away from there where Gopia's words had started an emotional agitation in her. To correct the abruptness with which she had interrupted the talk she turned to Gopia and said "Yes, Mai, you're right, he should marry."

Michael came in.

"Aren't you late, Sister?"

"Why? I'm five minutes early. But, have you taken your lunch?"

"I don't think she has," said Ramen "I forgot to stop talking and she forgot to take lunch."

Gopia said "None of them has eaten and that makes me so worried. When will this fever go? It's because of me that everybody is troubled."

It was the time, one o'clock, when her fever had been going up last three days. To-day also the fever came with headache and cold feet. She turned to the other side and wrapped herself with the blanket, which Ramen put on her.

IX

Michael was six years older than Pauline, but both were from the same district, Bankura, They generally went and worked together and slept also in the same small room by the stairs on the second floor.

It was rather hot that night. The lights were out at 10 P.M.. They had said the prayer and were in bed, but both were awake and were changing sides to get sleep. Pauline was looking out through the small window by the side of her bed, through which thin moonlight had entered and spread on half of her bed.

"Should we close the window to make the room dark. I'm not getting sleep," said Michael.

"That's because it's hot to-night. There's no breeze. If the window be closed it'll be stuffy."

"That's true. Pauline, Gopia so much resembles my mother in appearance, in voice, and even in her worry about her son, which is like my mother's worry about me, that she brings my mother's face before my eyes and I can't divert my mind from it. Perhaps darkness might help, I thought."

Pauline had her own thoughts to keep her awake. She didn't answer. Michael continued to relieve herself of the depression which had come in her, due to her thoughts going back to the past which, with the force of her faith in her dedicated life as nun, she had for eight years tried to banish from her mind. She was the only daughter of her parents and, therefore, the most beloved of their children. Her two brothers were older to her and were married when she was only eight years. She was dark in complexion, had a longish face and squint eyes, due to which she couldn't be easily married. When she realized how her parents were worried because of this she decided to be a nun in spite of their disapproval. Recently Gopia had brought her mother before her eyes, and though she prayed ardently for strength to divert her mind she was not able to do so.

"Pauline, I wonder if my mother remembers me and worries for me as before."

"Of course she does."

"But what could I do? How could I remain all the time a load on my old parents? They were

worried about my marriage and more about my future if I was not married."

"You could have worked just as you're working here, and instead of being a load you could have been a support to them."

"That would have been selfish work. Here it is work of God."

"There, you mean, it wouldn't have been service of God. Our hands and legs, our body and mind, which cause and bring the urge and incentive to work, haven't they all been given by Him? So, whatever we do and wherever we work must all be His work."

"You're talking so differently to-day, Pauline. Do you really think that a family life can be the same as convent life, which is dedicated to the service of God? You would perhaps also say that it would have meant no difference even if I had married and had a family myself."

Pauline had such discussions with Ramen, whose words had been revolving in her mind, which was less rigid than Michael's on faith in nun's life. She had been in the Convent five years and in that time she had been trying to convert herself, her mind and thoughts, to the convictions of a true nun, but had not succeeded. Questions and doubts, caused by the urges of life, had been rising in her mind, which she had been trying to suppress by diverting her mind to work and by straining it into concentration at prayer times. But this struggle to suppress them left a dissatis-

faction in her, which often brought an absent look on her face. This did not escape the eyes of Michael, who was her close associate in work and who took a sisterly interest in her and was six years older. Michael remembered how some years ago when she had entered the Convent she too had mental struggle to adjust to a nun's life and so her sympathies had gone to Pauline. She felt sure that Pauline also would come smoothly through this initial struggle as she had in the pious atmosphere of the Convent. But there was a difference between their mental make-ups and in the circumstances under which they had joined the Convent. Michael was less sentimental and more realistic; Pauline was more emotionally strung and more sensitive to reactions. And, therefore, Michael could turn her mind more easily to the religious obligations of a life, which she had adopted, than the latter, whose entry into the Convent was less inspired by a disgust of the present than by impatience to find something new and better. Pauline had read up to the school final. Her parents were not as badly off as Michael's, but they were sticky in following traditional customs, according to which boys and girls were married early. Her sister was married at fourteen, but somehow Pauline went unmarried through to eighteen due to her father's failure to get a suitable match for her. But at eighteen her ideas, likes and dislikes had begun to form, which she brought into discussion with her mother when she heard

that a marriage proposal was under negotiation. Her elder sister's marriage had turned out to be unhappy; her husband was reckless, hot-tempered and given to drink and gambling. The unhappy course of her sister's married life had made her wary about her own marriage. Her confidence in the judgement of her parents in the selection of a match for her was shaken and she feared to leave it entirely in their hands. "No, Ma, don't make my life miserable like sister's by fixing me with that man. I've seen him. He looks rough and crude."

"No, he's a good proposal. He has a house and is in Government service."

"But that's not all that matters."

"Then what else do you want? If you don't like this proposal, then better yourself find your husband."

To that her slow and quiet reply was "I wont marry."

And every day, as she heard about the woes and difficulties of her sister, her reply to her mother, when a proposal for her marriage came, became firmer, "No, Ma, leave me single."

Her mother was displeased, her father was irritated. She felt it and wanted to take off the responsibility of her marriage from their hands. She saw Mother Regina and expressed her desire to be admitted to the convent.

That was how she had become Sister Pauline. The newness of the life and work in the Convent enthused her and settled the doubts and agitation

in her mind, with which she had broken away from her home and parents. She accepted the rigidity of nun's life with enthusiasm and earnestness and applied herself to everything with more than common buoyancy of spirit. But this enthusiasm was not as genuine as it appeared to be. It was worked up by her effort to divert her mind from the rising impulses of her growing womanhood, the struggle to suppress which often left her fatigued and distracted. But only Michael had noticed it, and she had believed that the cure of it lay in prayer. She, therefore, prayed for her and asked her to join her in the prayer, freeing her mind from all thoughts related to her past. "Look, the Lord stands before you. Don't look back; look ahead and follow the way He points and devote your body and mind to His service."

But Ramen's advent in her life had put her progress on the rails laid by Michael on the back gear and the tie between the call of religious faith and the call of life had made her short of patience to appreciate Michael's words. So, when Michael asked

"Do you really think that family life could be the same as the convent life for serving the Lord?" she replied plainly "Why not? Isn't Ramen Babu doing as much as we? His sympathies may be more tender and his understanding truer than ours, because he feels and experiences in his life the troubles and sorrows, the pains and sufferings, the emotions and reactions, which he goes out to

soothe in others. We don't stand on the same plane with the sufferers. We suppose that we stand on a higher level from where we stretch out our hand to give comfort to a sufferer who suffers, we think, because of his living the life that we have not approved in our own case. Thus, we miss that sympathetic understanding when we reach out our hand to him which a family man could have. We pity him for his errors and wrongs, but the family man understands him, because he has been a similar sufferer. Don't you think, Sister, there is something in living life fully? Doesn't it expand and extend our vision over the expanse of God's creation? Doesn't it lead to better understanding of His hand in everything, in both joys and sorrows of life? Is it helpful to our rising up to see His glory in all things of life to shrink and suppress many things of life because of some pre-conceived ideas about them?"

She was getting excited. Michael understood that she was under the effects of pent-up feelings and suppressed emotions, which had reached bursting point. Tenderly she said "Dear Pauline, you're excited, let's pray. The Lord will give you peace of mind and then you won't think and worry like that."

Pauline burst into sobs and going to Michael's bed put her face on her chest and her arms round her neck. "Yes, Didi, I was excited. I lost control on my good sense. God will not forgive me for it."

"No, Pauline, God forgives everything. He knows our weakness. He may sometime put us into moments of weakness so that the experience of it may turn us back into stronger faith and trust in Him. Don't think that we deny and condemn any parts and portions of life. How can we? Does not our life as a whole come from Him? He has, however, given us also the sense to judge and discriminate and to see what to check and control and to what to turn the mind so that we may fulfil His purpose in our life. Now don't cry. We all at times fall into moments of weakness. You're a good child. Your heart is so good and simple and full of kind sentiments."

X

The next day morning, as she woke, Pauline decided that she would not go to Ramen's house. She would ask Mother Regina to change her assignment with another Sister's. During prayer her mind was unsteady. She prayed for strength but it flew to Gopia's bed-side from where she had talked to and discussed with Ramen and watched him do the little things of the household like sweeping the floor, peeling vegetables and preparing for cooking.

After the prayer, instead of speaking to Mother Regina, she went and took her seat in the station wagon which was to drop her at Ramen's house.

When she entered Gopia's room she found her seated on the bed. Ramen said "She's better and has no fever now. You needn't have come. I feel so bad because on account of me you are missing your more important work."

"Why should you feel so? All work done in the service of God is equally important."

"But here you come to help me who can help himself; there you go to help the helpless."

Gopia said "Now, Beta, you go and take milk. It's so late now, yet you haven't eaten anything. I'm well now, let me go and cook."

"No, Ma, not till you are strong and fit. You cook every day for me; if you're sick can I not manage even for a few days.?"

Pauline felt a strong impulse to get up and assist him but hesitated and could not speak.

Gopia remonstrated "Cooking, washing, sweeping, these are not male's work. This is why I want a Bahu in the house. I'm old; what will you do after me? You're so shy. How will you negotiate and get a wife? Every day, as I see your spiritless face and watch you quietly doing housewife's work I become anxious and concerned about you. I was less concerned about my own son, for he was more pushing and enterprising. When I'm up I shall go to the city and see marriage brokers, and choose a bride, as soft and gentle as this Sister, and not like my son's wife."

The reference to her made Pauline and also

Ramen embarrassed. Ramen went out. Gopia asked Pauline

"Sister, do you know a good girl like you? I've seen how kind and attentive you are. The touch of your hand is so soft and soothing. It removes pain and brings sleep to my eyes."

Pauline lowered her eyes on the pillow, which with her hand she set right, and slowly said

"You're getting well and in a few days you'll be able to look after him."

While lying on bed Gopia had noticed a flush on Ramen's face when Pauline came in the morning which made her understand that his indifference to woman was softening. Pauline used to sit at the head of her bed and so she could not see the reaction in her, nor was she interested in seeing it. Her interest was in getting him married and the change that was evident on his face when in conversation with Pauline led her to hope that he would now be less repellant to marriage than before.

In the evening Ramen told Michael that as Gopia was well she and Sister Pauline need not come from the next day.

XI

Ramen had resumed his normal activities and Gopia hers. In the week's familiarity between them a barrier of delicate hesitancy had arisen

between Pauline and Ramen. Each turned away eyes from the other, apprehensive of their eyes expressing their thoughts which each tried to hide from the other. Each understood that the barrier must remain and should rather rise in height, for they must remain apart and away. The more each felt agitated in the presence of the other the more each felt a prick inside which brought regret and disquiet to their mind. Ramen used to visit the slum two or three times in the week. He stopped that to avoid meeting her. She also had thought of requesting Mother Regina for a transfer to another place, but had refrained, fearing that Michael might be led to guess some reason. But the transfer came itself. An appeal came from Raipur to Mother Regina to open her humanitarian work there as in Nagpur. A house with some adjoining land was donated to her for the purpose by a businessman, who shifted to another house for his own residence. Mother Regina thankfully accepted the offer and selected three senior and three junior nuns to go and start work there. Among the juniors was Pauline, who clearly saw the hand of God in this, and at prayer time, she thanked the Lord for removing her from Nagpur. She tried to feel the comfort of having been lifted out of a situation wherein she was uneasy in her mind and guilty to her conscience. She told herself that away from Nagpur she would be free from the diversion which caused emotional disquiet in her mind and unsteadiness in her faith. But, when

she turned on her bed and closed her eyes the face of Ramen, his shy looks, his single life, his tenderness for Gopia came vividly to her mind. She changed sides and repeated the bed-time prayer and looked out through the window to the starry sky, but sleep did not come. She called Michael "Sister, I shall miss you there."

Michael had become drowsy. She woke at her call and solemnly said "Let us miss each other, but let us not miss the Lord. He comes closer to us when we feel lonely and when we separate from things which draw our thoughts away from Him. Pauline, Lord is kind to you and He knows the agitation that comes to you. So He is taking you away to another place where you will turn more to Him and to the work to which He has called you."

"Sister, pray for me that I may not lose touch with Him and may not ever deflect from the path on which He has led me. I feel so weak."

"Why? Lord never forsakes the weak unless the weak prefers to forsake Him. Leave your thoughts to Him, Pauline, and entrust your body and soul to His care, and you'll have no cause for any fear or worry. That's what I shall pray for."

Pauline was comforted. She touched the cross on her chest and repeating the prayer closed her eyes to sleep.

XII

A new place, new environment, new work freshened Pauline's mind and brought interest and enthusiasm in her work, which she had lost recently in Nagpur. She went for extra work. In the Convent also she put her hand more actively to all household work, cooking, washing, floor-dusting, etc, to keep her mind engaged and to tire her body so that she might fall asleep immediately on going to bed. But the stronger the repression the stronger the reaction often is. It started working in her mind, disturbing sleep in the night and weakening enthusiasm in the day. In the night she would dream, exclaim and wake her room mate, who would get up and break her dream. In the day she would sometimes hold her hand from work and stare away absently. If asked—What's the matter?—she would stir up and say Nothing. She wrote to Michael that she wished she was with her; she was missing her very much and her words which used to give her strength and confidence. She added "Do pray for me; don't forget."

She prayed herself also more ardently than ever, but even when saying the prayer her mind slipped out from her effort to concentrate on it to Gopia's bed-side and then came floating before her eyes the face of Ramen. She touched the cross and begged for forgiveness again and again. All the same her mental sickness grew. Oftener than

before she would stop abruptly in the midst of work and look away vaguely, and when called to attention by someone she would take time to bring her mind to work. In the night sometime she would sit up and pray aloud "Forgive me and give me strength, Father, to forget him."

The room mate being aroused asked "What's the matter, Pauline?" She would recover herself and say "O, I had a bad dream."

"Whom did you want to forget?"

"Did I name anybody?" she asked in fear.

"No, but yester-night also you had exclaimed like this, as if somebody was in your thoughts whom you wanted to remove."

"Yes, Sister, somebody disturbs me in my dream."

"Who is he? Any of your relatives?"

Pauline lay down on the bed and turning to the other side said "It was a dream. Pray, Sister, that I may not have dreams in the night."

The nun however reported to Mother Regina the strange behaviour of Pauline. Mother Regina saw nothing serious in the report, yet she requested an old doctor of Raipur, who was sympathetic and helpful to her humanitarian work, to examine Pauline. The Doctor reported that physically there was nothing wrong with her, but there seemed to be something in her mind which occasionally distracted her. He had given tranquilisers, but if they failed he would recommend psychological treatment. The Doctor added that

there was nothing strange about her, for he had known several unmarried women of her age developing psychosis for a period and thereafter returning to normal again.

XIII

Ramen, in Nagpur, after Gopia's recovery, was not composed in mind, even though he was attending to work as usual. When Michael told him of Pauline's transfer to Raipur he had said "I hope she would like the change" and he had told himself also, while returning home, that it was good that she had gone and that they won't meet. But that argument did not stop a depression creeping into his mind, which made him sit in the night on the terrace staring at the stars. He lost the eagerness with which he had joined Mother Regina's work. He talked less with Gopia and when sitting and eating in front of her he looked indifferent to what he ate. She didn't like this "What's the matter, Beta, that for sometime you're not eating well?"

In the night she asked "Why not invite the two Sisters to dinner one day. They were so good to me in my sickness."

"The Nuns can't come to invitation. They can only go where the Convent sends them on Convent's work."

"You mean they can't go anywhere if they want to."

"Yes, that's how it is. A nun dedicates everything, body, mind, desire, freedom and all to the church and God, to serve whom they enter the Convent."

She heard with surprise and sat gazing at his face, and after a pause asked "But if a nun wants to leave the Convent?"

"Why should she?"

"She may not be able to endure its rigid life and may wish to return to her family and marry. When lying on bed I often watched the Sisters and it seemed to me that they weren't very happy. How could they be without husband, children and home?"

"They get satisfaction and happiness otherwise through service to God."

"No, Beta, that can't be enough. A woman needs a husband and children, and a man needs a wife. That is the way of God."

So saying she went to the kitchen and he remained sitting unrelieved of the depression that was in his mind.

One night Gopia's son came and told him that he had to go to Raipur for three months on work, during which he requested him to look after his family. "I can only depend on you and on none else in the village."

"Your mother can go and stay in your house in your absence."

"No, I'm afraid my wife will repeat the old story."

Gopia also was disinclined to go, for she knew that her daughter-in-law would not like her return and also because she had developed a motherly affection for Ramen, whose soft nature and very watchful consideration for her feelings had strongly attracted her to him.

Three weeks after her son had gone to Raipur a telegram came to Ramen from him to the effect that he was sick and his mother should be sent. Ramen took Gopia by the night train to Raipur, but he wondered what she would be able to do in a new place. Two alternatives came to his mind, one to admit her son in a hospital, and the second to seek the help of Mother Regina's Convent in Raipur. But like other country women Gopia had fear and prejudice against hospitals. So he decided on trying the second alternative. Gopia's son had high fever but, otherwise, there was nothing serious. After seeing the Doctor and enquiring about the treatment he went towards the Convent. He knew that Pauline was there, but he thought that he would avoid meeting her. When he came in sight of the Convent he saw six nuns coming out, two of whom he had met in Nagpur. Behind them he noticed Pauline. The senior Nun asked "When did you come?"

"I came this morning with Gopia, whose son is sick here. I'm coming directly from there to

tell you about her and her son, for I know none else here."

Pauline had stood motionless on seeing him and was trying to control the agitation, which had started in her. The Doctor's prescription, the tranquilisers, had done no more than keep her physically fit to go about in her work. Her ailment had remained rotting in the mind. When Ramen looked up and met her wide open eyes she shook with emotion and gripped the arm of the nun by her side. The Nun turned round and held her and asked "What's the matter?"

Pauline had had fits twice before this. The Nun saw the symptoms of another fit coming. Her face was going pale; jaws were getting locked; her grip on the Nun's arm was tightening, her eye lids were closing, and convulsions were coming. Two nuns turned round to hold her "Be steady, Pauline," but with a violent effort she released herself of their hold and turning back to the Convent said "No, I won't go, I won't go. Send him away," and ran inside the Convent. Two nuns followed, but before they could overtake her she had gone into her room and fallen on her bed unconscious. Ramen was extremely embarrassed. Her direct reference to him put him out of his wits and made him terribly uneasy, for he understood her mental psychology, which had brought the fit at his sight and had made her behave and say as she did. He feared that the nuns might have also guessed the reason. He regretted that

he had come and wished to go away at once, but that would, he thought, all the more expose the cause of her fits. The nuns also felt bad at Pauline's remark at him. The senior one among them said "She has been getting fits like this for sometime, and when she gets a fit she speaks incoherently, making no sense."

"I'm sorry I caused it this time. I shouldn't have come if I had known that she was suffering like this."

"She could have got it all the same even if you hadn't come. She has been getting like this for two months and has been under treatment."

"At Nagpur she was all right."

"Yes, but since coming here she has developed this. At night she would get up and pray. Sometimes she would get into a melancholy mood and look vacant. The Doctor says that it is a mental malady caused by some shock or by frustration of some intense longing. We are praying for her. Mother from Nagpur has written that she shouldn't be left alone and should be kept always engaged. She was also praying for her and she hoped that she would soon be well."

Ramen stood silent. He had read Freud's hypothesis about such mental maladies resulting from intense suppression of sex when it was excited by strong love for some one. He knew that she loved him but he didn't know that she had reacted so strongly as to become a victim to hysteria. He felt guilty to his conscience that he

should have been the cause of deflection of the mind of a nun from piety, and he thought that it must have been his own love for her which had attracted her mind to him. To-morrow or the day after Mother Regina and all the nuns would come to know that and then what would they think of him?

Noting embarrassment on his face the Nun said "Ramen Babu, don't mind what she said. When the fit comes she talks at random without any meaning and when she returns to normal she doesn't remember what she had said a little while ago under fit. So we don't mind and don't even listen to what she says. You come in and let us go to see if she has recovered."

"No, I better not go. She might get a relapse. Possibly my unexpected visit upset her. I really shouldn't have come, but I didn't know that she was unwell and my visit could cause an agitation in her. But when one is unwell any sudden and unexpected sight can over-excite the weak mind. After the fit she might not remember that I had come; so please don't refer to it."

He decided that he would never come to the Convent again nor would go to the Convent in Nagpur. He even thought that he would leave Nagpur so that he might never meet the nuns again. Going back to Gopia's son he arranged for his treatment and engaged an old man to attend to him, and left for Nagpur in the afternoon. On reaching Nagpur he started arranging for leaving

Nagpur and going to a distant place. He feared that Mother Regina must have heard from Raipur about his visit there and the hysteric re-action of Pauline at the sight of him. She might, therefore, come to see him to enquire about what had happened and about Pauline's condition. To avoid meeting her he kept out of home the whole day, leaving early morning and returning in the night. Like this a week passed.

XIV

One late evening he was returning from walk. He was in a melancholy mood. He had gone round Gopia's village avoiding the chance of meeting any acquaintance. Since his return from Raipur he had been doing like this. Besides going to work he went nowhere and stayed out of home till night. Leisurely as he was walking home he was worrying how long he could escape an explanation. The nuns had possibly guessed that a sentimental relation had developed between Pauline and him and must have accordingly reported to Mother Regina. What would he say if she asked him about it? She had in good trust sent two nuns to help him during Gopia's illness, but he had belied the trust and sinfully influenced and attracted the mind of a nun. That's how, he feared, she would think of him. Even if he had purposely done nothing of the kind he would be judged guilty and

whatever explanation he might give would not be accepted. So, he must not meet her or any nuns and, therefore, he should leave Nagpur.

Reflecting like this when he came to the little gate of his compound he was surprised to notice a figure seated on the step of the verandah. Hurrying in he was more surprised to find the figure of a woman, who got up on his approach and said "You've come?"

"Sister Pauline!" exclaimed Ramen in fear, surprise and excitement.

"Yes, Gopia asked me to come."

"Gopia asked you to come?"

"Yes, the next day after you had left we went to see her and her son as you had requested. Her son was better, but she was very anxious about you. She called me aside and asked if I could not come here to help you. You were all alone."

Irritated and annoyed to hear this he said "Gopia said that and you listened? She has been with me only two years, how did I manage before that? She doesn't understand but you know that a nun cannot come out of the Convent and go to a stranger's house. Did you ask the Superior?"

She turned her head to the gate and stared away into the gloom outside and remained quiet. Her body shivered a little. Ramen remembered the scene at Raipur when she had got a fit of hysteria and at once controlled himself and said softly "It's cold here, come inside. I was indeed

feeling very lonely without Gopia. It's good that you've come."

So saying he gave her his hand and led her inside and put on the light.

"You look tired. Let me go and cook."

He was watching her and to his relief it appeared that the attack of hysteria, which was coming, had left and she looked normal. She said "Gopia had also told me that you might not be inclined to cook for yourself. So, she particularly asked me to cook, but how can I cook? I'm a Christian. When I went to the Convent I was christened. I can't cook your food."

"When you were christened your name was of course changed, but were your hands with which you cook also changed? Were your body, mind, heart, soul and all that you had before converted to something that they weren't before. That's what I ask when I see the fanatic enthusiasm of people, who make conversion of people of other faith to their own the sacred mission of their life, and when I hear the converts talking bravely and proudly of their having changed their religion for a better one. Good and virtue can just as well be in one religion as in another and to seek God and to address a prayer to him one need not leave one place of worship to go to another. But I won't talk now. You are tired and must be hungry too. Let's go to the kitchen. With four hands, instead of two, put to it cooking shouldn't take long. But

perhaps you'd like to change your dress. There in that room you'll find Gopia's sarees."

After meals Ramen said "To-night you'll have to sleep on Gopia's bed in that room. To-morrow I shall bring new bedding for you."

So saying he went to his room. In spite of having been free and easy in talk and behaviour to her so long to make her feel easy and not to let her reflect over the very hasty and improper step which she had taken, his mind was so worried that he wanted to separate and retire to his room to think out what to do to clear her and himself from the extremely bad situation in which she had placed them both. She had acted on an impulse when psychologically in unsound mind, but that would not justify or in any way rectify the grave impropriety of her action. He saw that she had completely and irretrievably cut off from nun's life, which also on an impulse, when young, she had hastily adopted. Not only that, but she would be condemned and would become the object of mean talk. This thought all the more made him anxious. He himself would also be associated in such talk, but that did not worry him now. His concern was for her.

He went to his room and spread the bed, but Pauline came behind and said "Let me help you."

"No, Sister, there's nothing to help in this. I've made it. You go and sleep."

"But won't you join me in prayer?"

"I pray silently. Prayer is better said when alone and in silence."

"Good night."

"Good night."

He lay on bed with eyes wide open. In the other room she put out the light, sat on bed, said her prayer and lay down, and tired as she was in no time fell asleep.

After about two hours' sleep she cried out "No, Mother, forgive me, let me come in."

Ramen was awake and heard her and came rushing into her room. Putting the lights on he saw her seated on the bed. Going up to her he asked "What's the matter, Sister? You had a dream, I suppose. Dreams mean nothing. When we don't get sound sleep we dream. I shall give you a glass of water. Drink and lie down."

"I saw Mother. She reproved me and won't let me enter the Convent."

"But why must you enter the Convent? Can't you remain outside and do the same work, giving help and service to the poor and the sick, from here as from there? You should be able, in fact, to do more, if you want to, because your movements and activities will not be restricted and controlled by the rigid rules of the Convent."

"But life in the Convent is holy and dedicated to the Lord."

"We can make our life here also holy and dedicated. It's easier and there's more scope for it outside than inside the Convent, because you

can follow your inclination and your own inspiration, which give more stimulus to work, while there, whether it agrees with your feelings and sentiments or not, you've to follow directions and go a certain marked way. So don't worry. You've come out in the open, on a wider field of activity, where you'll do more, achieve more and serve more the noble cause that you have in your heart."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Now you go to sleep."

She caught his hand and pressed and said "You see, Ramen Babu, I had another dream in Raipur the night before I came from there. I saw myself standing alone in a desert encircled by a round far-off horizon, which showed no break anywhere to attract notice and give me an urge to proceed that way. I was bewildered in the midst of that trackless, directionless expanse, which seemed to engulf me. I felt like crying in helplessness when on the east rose from below the horizon a big cross and then a bright majestic figure bearing the Cross. I stood stupefied and then as the figure approached I knelt down and folded my hands. The Figure raised his right hand to bless, which brought tears to my eyes, and then came nearer and through my tears I saw a man behind Him, who came forward at a sign from Him. I was greatly surprised for I had seen and known this man. Ramen Babu, it was you. My tears dried off and I looked at the holy Figure with nervous emotion. With benevolent

kindness in His eyes He signed to me to go with the man who had come with Him. Instinctively I obeyed and stood up by his side. The Holy Figure ascended to the sky and vanished and we two proceeded over the desert on a track that became visible in front of us. I woke from the dream and looked around for the Figure I had seen in the dream, and sat agitated and confused. I prayed to Him to appear again to tell me what He meant and what His sign indicated. I lay awake the rest of the night till the morning light brightened the dark room."

She stopped, released his hand and lowered her eyes on the stone floor. Ramen put his hand on her shoulder and said "How can you have any worry after that dream? It was so clear, so indicative, so meaningful. Now sleep in peace and don't look back and worry any more. We've to go forward as the Lord has signed to you."

She raised her eyes to him and held his hand again and asked "Do you see a meaning in the dream?"

"I do."

She took his hand to her lips and held it pressed there as her bosom heaved, and then lay down on the bed with peace, joy and assurance on her face.

XV

The next day Ramen brought clothes, toilet requisites, etc. for her and took a month's leave, which he intended to prolong if possible, otherwise, he thought he would resign, for he saw that at least for sometime he would have to stay away with Pauline from Nagpur.

In the evening he told her "We're leaving to-morrow for Bhopal. I've been thinking of going for a change. It'll be more enjoyable to go together."

In one day Pauline was wonderfully changed. Fear, doubt, agitation, which were in her mind, had gone making room for joy, hope, enthusiasm. She smiled, laughed and moved about happily and applied herself to all work in the house and with buoyant enthusiasm to arrange and adjust everything according to what she thought was right and correct, like a housewife returning home after a period of absence elsewhere.

In Bhopal Ramen secured a small house out of the town on the far side of the Lake. They both liked the quiet environment and were happy.

"To-morrow we're going to be married." he said in the night after meals. She took his hand and pressed it on her bosom. He bent down and imprinted a lingering kiss on her forehead.

Months passed. One night she took his hand and pressed between her two, as she used to do in

moments of emotion, and asked "Have you thought of a name for our son? I think of so many names, but can't decide by which name I would love most to call him. And, moreover, what about baptism?"

"Baptism? Why and what for? I won't sprinkle cold baptismal water on the small thing come to life and make him shiver."

"But isn't that necessary?"

"Far from it. It's bad and improper, I think, to bind a child by tight ropes of a religion before he opens his eyes and begins to feel his way, and before his understanding and judgement develop. He should be free to develop and then find and take the religion that is suited to him. Religion should not be a thing to be imposed on him to cramp and crush his individuality; though that is just what is done all around, and, therefore, instead of opening and widening the mind it closes and confuses it and makes one a narrow-minded fanatic, who would see no good in other faiths, and who would, instead of looking out on the many-fold manifestations of God in different things, creatures and men, turns his mind to wrong and false propaganda and to other means to wean people from their faith to his own. Such a man, to my mind, lacks real faith in God, for he won't leave things to Him and won't let a man grow and develop according to the conditions and circumstances, wherein God had placed him. He

goes out to interfere and pull and drag one's legs into the narrow confines of his own outlook."

"So then what shall we do?"

"We shall do no more than just help him grow naturally in his own way, as a flower blossoms under the open sky. We shall be careful to keep our ideas, convictions, likes and dislikes away so that their influence may not cast a shadow on him. We won't be his teacher, but a helper and a servant during his young years and his friend when he is grown up."

"I don't quite understand what you mean, for I've never heard like this, but it seems there's something in what you say. If I had grown up like that, freely without imposition of faith and of some definite ideas of living on me, before I could think and understand, I wouldn't have got confused later. Different influences have worked on my mind and different ways have been shown to me, which have made me doubtful, nervous and hesitant at every step. Now and then I'm thrown into distracted mood, when I feel sad and helpless and look to others for instruction and guidance. This is my malady, I understand, but I can't help. When the feeling comes I'm overcome and I get into hysteric fits. Doctor gives me medicine, but when I come to normal and recall how the mood had come before the fit I understand that the medicines I had swallowed were not the medicines for my malady and they had done no good. You don't know how I suffer because of a struggle that often

rages in the mind between a wish or an urge and the effort to overcome it."

"That sort of struggle is bound to arise because what you think to be right or wrong is not actually your belief, but that of some one else infused into your mind. Naturally, an imposed belief like that will be disagreeable to your nature and incompatible with your physical and mental make up."

She was hardly listening. Her mind had turned to her own thoughts. She looked away vacantly and her arms hung down loosely on her lap. Ramen feared that she was going to have a relapse of fit, which she didn't have all these months. Affectionately he put his arm round her and said "Now you can no more have any struggle like that, for you're now free and happy in the open without any strain on the mind."

She turned her head and relaxed it on his breast and looked up to his eyes "Yes, I'm so happy when I rest like this on you. I feel so full and satisfied. And I'm looking forward to the joy of holding my son on my arms. Yet, at times, you know, a shadow comes and frightens me. I begin to doubt again if I've come the right way. And, as I doubt, a fearful impulse comes—" she stopped and circled her arms round him, hid her face in the folds of the shirt on his chest, and warm tears rolled down her cheeks.

"What impulse, dear? Can't you trust God's

guidance which you received directly from Him in your dream?"

"O, it's a dreadful impulse—the impulse to destroy my son that is coming, the son born of my sin, and go back to the Convent and pray for forgiveness."

She lost all control and cried and loosened her weight in his embrace. He got frightened to hear this, but to comfort her he drew her more in his embrace and said "What a sinful thought! Your son is certainly not born of sin. He will be born of purest virtue and with the blessing of God. Was Jesus born of sin? Did Mary ever get an impulse like that? She took up the holy child on her arms for the glory of mankind. You'll do the same. Every child is a child of God, and like Jesus it brings joy and brightness to home and glory and a message to the world. Your womanhood will be blessed by him and so I shall be blessed too. The fulfilment of the union of man and woman is in the child. Don't you see that mentally, physically, temperamentally and in every way man and woman are so made as to fit to each other, and the natural love and attraction between them are meant for their union, the fruit of which is the child. And so they have to remember that the fruit to be good and great, and noble and divine there must be no doubt, no evil, no insincerity, no lack of mutual respect and confidence in their mind."

She was comforted and her face beamed with returning joy and satisfaction.

"Hasn't our union been like that?" tenderly she asked.

"Do you doubt it, dear?"

XVI

The son was born. Pauline forgot herself, her duty, work, household responsibility, everything. She even forgot often the prayer time, and when she remembered she cut down the time, and her eyes turned from the Cross to the baby, who lay by her side. On the baby her mind, attention, thoughts and care remained centred the whole time. Washing, feeding, dressing, putting him to sleep, and when awake to rock him on arms, and to smile and smile again to get her smile reflected from his staring eyes—all this occupied her full time. Ramen would say "If you so cover his face with kisses there will be left not an inch where I could give him one." She would smile and imprint another kiss on the little one.

One morning they were returning from the market. On the way they met Sister Michael with another nun, whom Pauline did not know. Both sides were greatly surprised. Between Pauline and Michael the relation was not simply closer, more frank and confiding than between other nuns, but it was also more affectionate. If anyone

in the Convent had missed Pauline it was Michael, to whom she used to take her troubles, worries and doubts when she fell into a bad mood. She looked on her as her elder sister and Michael did have sisterly affection for her. Pauline had resolved to keep away ever from the nuns, before whom she felt she could not appear, but now as she met Michael she rushed up to her and said "How have I longed to meet you."

"And how have I missed you, Pauline? But I'm so glad to see you happy."

Pauline looked gratefully to her and said "It's due to your prayer. Do you still pray for me?"

"I do every day."

"I've so much to tell you and so much to ask."

Ramen said to Michael "Won't you come to our house?"

"Where is it? I shall try, but not now. I'm out on work. We've opened a branch here with six nuns at present and I'm in charge. I shall come on my way back, if possible, otherwise another day."

"I shall better come in the afternoon and take you with me."

Pauline didn't want to go to the Convent. She was afraid that she might meet there some nuns who had known her. Besides Michael she didn't want to face any one, not even Mother Regina. So, Ramen went alone to bring Michael whom she told on the way from the Convent "Pauline couldn't

come, but is eagerly waiting for you. She asked me to explain to you and to request you to excuse her for not coming to the Convent to take you. You can understand her hesitation to come."

"Yes, she's is very sensitive and sentimental. Convent wasn't the place for her. She had entered hastily and impulsively."

Pauline was waiting at the door with her son on her arms. When Michael entered she stretched out her arms and said "Bless him, Sister, and include him in your prayer too."

Michael took the baby and kissed him on the forehead. "God bless him. How lovely, pure and innocent. Child is the emblem of God, from whom he carries a message to us, the message of love, purity and goodness."

Pauline was delighted to hear and tears of joy came to her eyes. "Sister, I've often thought of you whenever I had doubts and fear."

"What doubts, what fear? Haven't I told you, Pauline, that there can be no fear, no doubt when you remember and call the Lord. Whatever you fear, sin, wrong, error, want or trouble—they all melt away in the shine of His holy light. Fear and doubt come when we doubt Him and hide away from Him."

"Mother must be very angry with me, and the nuns must have—"

Michael cut her short. "Pauline don't think of the condemnation of others; think only of the

condemnation of the Lord. To Him and to none else we have to explain."

"Sister, when I look up to Him fear and doubt go and in the inside of my heart I don't feel guilty. I've come the way He had shown me in the dream in the night when I was sick and very miserable. He had appeared on the horizon with the Cross raised over His shoulder. I was frightened, but He came with a smile of assurance. Behind Him was Ramen Babu whom He signed to come forward and take my hand. I woke from the dream and sat up in the darkness and prayed, but the vision had vanished and I didn't understand what it meant. I wished to ask you, but you were in Nagpur. Next day Gopia asked me to come to help him and not knowing what I was doing I came. Ever since I've thought of you and looked for you whenever I've been agitated and thrown into doubt. Sometimes, I've thought of leaving the child and going back to the Convent and pray for forgiveness."

"Pauline, what sinful thought is that? You'll leave this child, this lovely, blessed gift of God?"

The baby was on Michael's lap. She raised him to her breast and bending her head gave a soft kiss on his lips. And then said "Yes, you'd need to pray for forgiveness if you discard him but that forgiveness you won't get. Pauline, you should pray to Him not for forgiveness, but to thank Him for having shown to you the path by which you acquired this gift of Him. Your woman-

hood has attained fulfilment through this child, who has made you mother and has filled your heart with that sublime and sacred love, which only a mother's breast holds. Didn't Jesus make Mary holy?"

Pauline's eyes filled with tears and turned on the face of her son, whom Michael held fast over her breast. Michael's breast heaved out a sigh, and her face wore an absent look, with a film of sad distraction spread over it. Ramen came in with a cup of tea. She hadn't noticed him till he came in front and placed the cup on the table.

"O, why this?" She said with an effort to call her mind to attention.

"You look tired and, naturally, after the morning's strenuous duties. I shouldn't have brought you this time."

"You did very well. I'm not tired, I'm refreshed."

She hugged the baby to her breast and laid her head sideways on her head and then she jerked up with an overcoming emotion, which brought a flush to her face. "I must go now. I had forgotten about it". She stretched out her arms with the baby to Pauline, "The nuns must be waiting for me. The child makes you forget, forget the world. Pauline, yes, I shall pray for you as ever, but won't you pray for me? Do."

She stood up and moved towards the door. Ramen accompanied her out. Silently they walked

side by side. He didn't understand the agitation that had seized her, and tried to divert her.

"How do you like Bhopal?"

Dryly she replied "It's the same to us, Bhopal, Nagpur or Raipur. Our work is the same and to that we must confine ourselves. We must remember that and guard against any diversion."

"Yes, your's is dedicated life, selfless and holy."

She made no reply and kept her eyes down on the street.

"Is Mother Regina likely to come here on a visit?"

"I don't know."

"She's a wonderful woman, so high and holy that I don't feel worthy to touch her feet."

She didn't raise her eyes nor answer. They came to the cross-road. Her Convent was on the road to the left, but she walked on straight as she was coming. Ramen halted and said "Sister, you've to turn to the left."

She stirred up from a reverie in which she was absorbed "O yes, I hadn't noticed. The cross-road is always confusing. You lose direction."

He didn't understand what was at the back of her mind, which had brought that reflective remark, nor could he guess what that remark could imply. So, in a simple way, he said "Well, Sister, I shall come along and accompany you to the Convent."

"O no, you must go back and help Pauline and

take the baby to let her attend to the household. And, when you go back, give the baby a kiss for me."

She turned away, crossed the road and walked off. He stood watching and reflecting. He had never seen Michael in such a distracted and reflective mood. Pauline was sentimental and moody, but not so Michael. She had appeared to be full of enthusiasm in her work and in her life, satisfaction in which kept her spirits up. But, beyond the depths of the calm blue sky, there could be raging cross-currents of winds which could bring forth clouds to overcast the peace of the sky. And beneath the depths of the human mind there could also be currents, which could burst through the cover of discipline and the subduing pressure of faith and belief imposed on it.

NO THIRD BETWEEN THE TWO

Subodh and Renu were married after a comparative check of their horoscopes, as was customary, by a good priest-astrologer. The horoscopes had matched well and the astrologer had pronounced the match of the horoscopes as *raj-jotak*, which meant perfect and very desirable, but in a couple of years it appeared to be otherwise. On the whole their nature and temperament seemed to agree well, but their approach, after sometime, to a not very important matter was so sharply different that it led to their separation. The cause of this was Renu's mother.

Subodh's family was small, consisting of his widow mother and a younger unmarried sister. His income including salary from a bank where he worked and fees from private tuitions, which he did in the evening, comfortably accommodated his expences. Renu, however, had come from a bigger family, consisting of old parents, four brothers and three sisters. All the four brothers were working and three of them were married. One sister was also married, and the other, younger to her, had reached the age of eighteen, which made her parents very anxious for her marriage. Marriage proposals were coming through friends, relatives and brokers, and some of the proposals were very desirable but for the dowry demand, which her father could not straight away accept without support from his sons. The married sons

offered only meagre fractions of the amount on the plea that they had their own growing family to maintain. The unmarried son was prepared to contribute more, but his income was small. Her mother, secretly, without the husband's knowledge, had approached her eldest daughter for help but she had pleaded that she had three children and therefore she had to be careful to build her own family economy. So, finally, Renu's mother turned to her for help. She knew that her mother-in-law was careless about money, and though Subodh placed his income every month in her hand she didn't handle money herself. She just kept the money in an open wooden cash-box, from which he spent as required, and so she was not at all likely to know and object if he gave any money to his wife for helping her parents. Renu, however, did not approve her mother's proposal and thought that it was not right that she should ask her husband to help her father, whose own sons were indifferent. But her mother's persistence and her father's difficulties continued to work on her mind till one night, overcoming her hesitation and clearing her throat, she said to her husband

"You know that my sister is to be married, but my brothers are unwilling to contribute to the expences which my father is unable to meet. So it'll be good if you help. I don't mean that you give a gift; it could be by way of a loan to him."

"It won't be good to have a loan transaction

with the father-in-law," he replied indifferently, evincing no interest in the proposal.

In spite of her otherwise simple nature she was somewhat excitable, particularly when she was shown indifference, and then she could flare up and become stiff and obstinate on her point.

"If you think like that then it could be like this. You haven't been giving me any personal allowance nor have I asked for it. Nevertheless it has been falling due every month. You can pay up the amount now. You understand, I hope, my feelings for my parents. Don't you?"

He was surprised to hear the argument and, being sentimental, was hurt also by his virtual submission that he owed his wife, by way of marriage contract, a regular monthly allowance, an idea repugnant to married relationship in India, where marriage was held as a sacramental union and not as a contract in which duties and obligations between husband and wife were defined and stipulated. With evident irritation in his voice he replied

"That point hadn't struck me, but, now that you mention it you can speak to my mother and ask from her."

"Why should I ask her? I know you and not her. She's related to me through you."

Subodh was very sensitive to any disrespectful remark about his mother. He sat up on the bed and said "I had thought that I got related to you because of her selecting you as the bride.

She had settled the marriage. You remember how we met as strangers on the wedding day. The more you remember that the sweeter and stronger our union will be."

"Which means that I've to approach you through her for anything that I may want. Is that what you mean to say?"

"Don't willfully misinterpret me. Remember but one thing. If you make mother happy with you her blessing will make you happy and all will be well. She has been, as you know, very unfortunate and unhappy in her life. It's for you to see that his eyes are turned away from the past and are thrown forward on the future which it is for you to create."

She was then in a mood when good sentiments go under and anger and stubbornness swell up. In another mood his words could have impressed her, but now she found in them nothing to her liking. She snapped

"If that means that it's not for me to follow your sermons. I come of a respectable family and am not a beggar. I'm not going to beg money from your mother. I can claim it from you."

He was surprised again at the definiteness in her tone. He gazed silently at her face, which she turned to the wall, on which, in the dimness of the bedroom light, he saw, as he thoughtfully reflected, signs of a crack in his married life. A sullen silence hung between them as they sat on the bed with a pillow separating them. She tried to ad-

just herself to the recoil from the shot which she had fired at him while he tried to control an angry impulse to reply. She made a move to get down from the bed. That triggered the explosion.

"I've no money; all money belongs to my mother. Whatever I bring I hand over to her, as you see every month."

"If my father had known that he wouldn't have married me to a pauper. I know it now and so I shall go from here to earn my living."

II

Early the next morning, before the house was up, she left for her father's house.

When Subodh's mother asked "Where's Bowma" he said "She has gone to her father's place" and to avoid further questions he went into the bath-room.

So they had separated. It was the hand of Destiny which did it, or the frown of bad luck, or twist of circumstances, or short temper, or pride and obstinacy,—one could give different explanations and try to account for what happened in so many ways, but the fact was that they were separated. She went to her parents, intending from there to find a job and lead an independent life; and he left for another town to divert himself to a new life. But it was not easy to get a job and get started in a new place.

Subodh looked for private tuition for meeting

immediate expences while at the same time he tried for a better job. His degree in mathematics helped him to get a tuition in a well-to-do family, where his pupil was to be an eighteen years old girl, who was preparing for the Intermediate Science examination. She was tall and fair, had a well-cut face and bright, intelligent and lovely black eyes. He was shy and this was the first time that he had to face a girl of eighteen across a table and give her lessons and answer her questions. She too was hesitant in approach and she kept her eyes down when she pushed the book to him and pointed with a pencil the questions and sums which he was to explain. Keeping his eyes down also he explained and worked out the sums. Gradually through days and weeks their shyness and hesitation wore off and their approach became easier. She asked and discussed and he answered and elaborated. Besides mathematics she brought into discussion other subjects also and would often start a new discussion towards the end of the tuition hour which prolonged the sitting, but none minded it. Her father would sometime come in and say "Well, Bani, you've detained him more than half an hour but haven't prehaps given him a cup of tea even." Without regretting she would joyfully get up and say "Please, Sir, wait a little; I'm coming."

In a few minutas she would return with a dishful of sweets and a cup of tea.

"No, no, —"

"No no-no, Sir, this is my jurisdiction where you've to listen to me as I listen to your lessons."

He lowered his eyes from her beaming face to the dish. She sat in front, her enamoured gaze covering his face, which she used to see in her dreams in the night and which often used to break her concentration when she listened to his explanation of problems in statics and dynamics. She sat still as he ate slowly and silently from the dish, unmindful of a host's courtesy to ask if he would have something more. He felt uncomfortable under the focus of her staring eyes, which he could perceive on his skin, and also in the silence which improperly prevailed in the room where a teacher and his pupil sat across a table to do lessons and to ask and explain. What would anybody entering the room think, he wondered. Steps were heard in the corridor, which shook him out of the ecstatic emotion which her love had stirred in him. He pulled up and raised his head to resume the unfinished explanation, but started out of the context which he failed to catch. Her gaze remained on him as before, but she showed no response to what he tried to explain. She hardly listened; the unfinished explanation had gone out of her mind.

That's how it often went in the evening. In the afternoon she would sit by the window looking out for her tutor and watching the distressingly slow advent of the evening when he was to come. And he on the other hand strolled in the near-by

park wondering and judging if it would be right and proper to go in a little earlier than the time for tuition.

III

Bani's mother one night asked her husband

"What are you going to do? Bani and her tutor love each other. I've watched them from behind the screen. Now either stop this tuition or let them be married. As it is it mustn't go on like this."

"Are you sure that they love each other?"

"There's nothing to be sure about. I knew this would happen, though you had disagreed. A youngman and a young woman sitting together in the evening and looking at each other,—well, what else could happen? You're busy outside the whole day and have no time to think about it. But I'm mother; I've to keep my eyes on the daughter. So, I've stood behind the screen to watch them. He's a good and well-behaved boy, and Bani is good too. But nature works and none can overcome its urgings."

"So what should we do?"

"Get them married."

That night Subodh lay awake on bed. Bani's attraction had seized him. But, by the side of Bani's face, stood before his unclosed eyes, in the darkness of the room, the image of his wife Renu.

Bani was tall and fair; her face with red lips, perfect nose, smooth forehead and intelligent eyes was charming. His wife was short and not fair, and her face, well shaped with plump cheeks, lacked, however, the fascination of Bani's. His vision turned and re-turned from one to another and so his mind. Thinking of Bani's love he said to himself "Why, it wasn't my fault. Renu left me without a word and discarded my love and affection. All these two years she has not cared to enquire how and where I was, how I lived and suffered alone. She must be happy herself in the way she had wanted to be. Why should I then spurn the love of Bani and deprive myself? Bani feels for me, for my loneliness, and has come with the offer of her love, of her sympathetic understanding, and with earnestness to unite her life with mine through days and nights, summer and winter, success and failure, and joys and sorrows."

He turned on the bed to the other side with confidence and ease in the mind, from which hesitation and indecision were gone. He closed his eyes for sleep, and in the drowsiness which came and cooled his nerves the face of Bani floated before his sleepy eyes. But later in midnight he had a dream in which he saw his wife Renu and felt her affectionate embrace. In the morning when he opened his eyes the dream was still so vivid and clear in the mind that he closed his eyes again to catch it and continue in it. The fullness of faith and dependence on his wife, the natural under-

standing and familiarity between them, and the completeness of satisfaction in their embrace came so vividly to his mind that he sat up agitated on the bed and looked out through the window as if he expected Renu to appear there. He felt that he needed his wife Renu to be with him, to comfort him, to give him that enduring trustful love which the charms of Bani or of another woman could not do and give.

That was how he felt, and so, when later in the morning Bani's father came and delicately proposed his daughter's marriage with him, he promptly answered "But I'm married."

Bani's beauty and her romantic charms had excited his fancy, desire and imagination and had carried him a long distance to finalising a decision to accept her love and satisfy his burning longing for it, but still there remained a gap between this longing and the repeating memory of his wife and himself entangled in intimate embrace. His fancy for her had tickled his desire but could not efface the image of his wife, which had the dignity of marriage, and break the tie between them which had the sanctity, force and strength which marriage alone could give.

The same evening, instead of going to tuition, he left the place and went to his old home.

IV

Renu had gone to her father's place. Her mother asked "Well,—"

"Well what? This it what you had wanted."

Her mother stared at her flushed face and waited in suspense. Renu bitterly said "Yes, you wanted money and here I am to earn you money."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what I've said and you know that. One doesn't send her daughter to father-in-law's house to bring money. The daughter is given away with dowry and money. That's the custom and tradition, and that's what should be. If I couldn't bring money from there I've come to earn you the money you require."

She was over-excited. The break from her husband had done it. Her future with all that it meant,—husband, children, home, respect, honour, security and confidence—had turned backward and crashed into the gloom of the lost. She was angry and bitter with everybody and everything, with parents on this side and husband on the other. She wished to leave both and forge a way out of the mesh wherein she found herself by ignoring and breaking conventions, taboos, social disapproval and religious no's, as she would care and as would suit her.

She went to Delhi for a career and to live freely and independently. She knew a cousin

sister there to whose place she went for the time being. Her cousin was a teacher in a girl's school and her brother-in-law was a superintendent in a government office. They offered to try to get her a job.

"What sort of job will you prefer?"

"Any job."

"Will you do nursing?"

"Anything."

She became a nurse in a hospital. Putting on the uniform she stood before a mirror and surveyed herself. She looked smart. New work, new acquaintances, new enthusiasm raised a new horizon before her, below which her yesterday went down. Her approach to patients was sympathetic and whole-hearted. Doctors were pleased with her promptness and readiness for any assignment; elder nurses liked her willingness to share their work; patients felt comfort and loved to have her by their side; only some junior nurses grew jealous of her popularity. But she ignored the latter and the mean tales and gossips which they started against her. Convalescent patients she took out for a stroll in the verandah or on the lawn, giving them her arm in support. When they left the hospital they gratefully remembered her sympathy and kindness. They gave her presents and invited her to their homes, where their people expressed their gratitude to her. The propriety of going with a male to his house did not bother her. The rebellious spirit against her husband was still alive in

her. "Why must I deprive myself of the diversion, which patients give me by taking me to their house? Why and for whom" she told herself if she heard from the verandah a remark by a fellow nurse or if her own mind felt uneasy when going to a friend's house. She liked the pleasure which a reactionary mind enjoyed for a time when a convention was broken or something unusual and uncustomary was done. She didn't mind taking her seat in a car by the side of a patient-friend who took her to his house to meet his people. Sometime she even sat behind the rider on a scooter and waved her hand to passing acquaintances to display the free life she was having. "Perhaps my husband is living as freely with girl friends" was her answer to stop internal scruples and external criticism.

Khagen, a relation of her cousin's husband, who had been a patient in the hospital under her care, was attracted to her by something more than gratitude and appreciation of her sympathetic nursing. He became a frequent caller at her quarter and if she was free he took her to his house, where his mother, brother and brother's wife always expressed their gratitude to her for her having been very kind and attentive to him while he was in the hospital. His mother often invited her on Sundays to dinner, after which in the afternoon Khagen would take her to a picture along with his brother's wife. It so happened sometimes that his brother's wife could not accom-

pany them, in which case he looked hesitantly at his guest. But Renu would say "Well, let's go if she can't go. Why waste the tickets which you've purchased?" She had burning inside her the same defiant spirit with which she had left her husband's and her parent's home. Khagen misunderstood this spirit in her, which made her indifferent to likely social remarks on her going singly to pictures with him and to sit at his back on the scooter. He took this as an encouragement to his love, which was expressed timidly in his behaviour to her.

Coming out of a picture one night he was taking her on his scooter to her quarter in the hospital. On the way he said "Didi, I feel for you. You're lonely."

"No, I've got used to it. Besides, I get so much company in the hospital. I'm full the whole time in fact."

"But that company isn't enough in life."

"Why not? It could be even more than enough, for it gives diversion, recreation and work too, and yet brings no responsibility, no disappointment, no uncertain expectation."

But she hadn't scented the way he was driving.

"But such company can't give fullness to one's life, which can only come from closer and more intimate companionship."

Yet she did not suspect.

"What do you mean by fullness?" she asked.

"Fullness in life can come only from fullness of discharge of duties. When I nurse a patient and see a look of comfort on his face I feel so happy and full."

Not that inspite of what she said now she didn't have an aching gap in her heart, which in the night, when she lay on her bed in the dark, turned her wakeful eyes to her husband's room and his bed, and made her breast and arms long for the warmth of his embrace the feel of which had remained as fresh on her skin as two years ago, but she was out to disown it. She was out to defy her weakness; she was out to retaliate against her husband; she was out to have fun and pleasure as much to divert herself as to show that she was not bound by the conventions of behaviour which are imposed on a married woman.

Khagen became gradually more expressive. With sentimental emotion in his voice he said

"But I feel so lonely."

"Because you're idle."

"No, Didi, because I've no companion. I've friends, you may say, but I've no partner in life."

"Tell your mother, she'll get you a wife."

"But I don't want a wife that way. I want one whom I've known to have understanding of my sentiments, one who'll be sympathetic and responsive to what I feel for her."

She laughed and said "You then better advertise or go on pilgrimage to find one of your description and requirement. May be you may meet

one like that sitting and waiting for you at a temple door or by a river-side on a bathing-ghat."

He stopped the scooter and got down under a tree and looked serious. She stood two steps away, rather uneasy. He was excited and that gave him the bold impulse to say "I've been to a pilgrimage and have found her. It was in the hospital when I lay with fever on and you with your soft and warm hand rubbed my temple."

His face was flushed with violently agitated emotion. Looking fixedly at her he stretched out his arm to hold her hand. Stung as by a wasp she gave a stiff blow to his hand and, her teeth gnashing, she snapped in anger

"I'm married. My husband is always with me."

She swept away, leaving him overcome by the fear of having misjudged and of having committed a great indiscretion. From there she no more turned to the hospital. Her legs moved fast and firm towards the railway station, where without a thought, she took the first train to her husband's place.

V

It was evening when she re-entered her home, her husband's home, which she now realized as never before to be her home and the only home to live in. The mother-in-law was in the kitchen.

Renu knelt down and put her forehead on the old woman's feet. The mother-in-law affectionately placed her right palm on her head to bless. With tears coming to her eyes she rose and went upstairs to her husband's room. Subodh stood up surprised. She rushed forward on him with open arms and clasped him tight and tighter as she hid her face in the folds of the shirt on his chest.

Both had turned back from sharp bends and united again. They had become one in wed-lock, which they could not break and face a stranger.

The two is only good and ever good, and strong and beautiful, and healthy and elevating, and secure and satisfying, and sacred and blissful.

HE WOULD EAT WELL

He was a senior clerk in an engineering firm which had its office in Dalhousie Square Calcutta. His monthly salary, inclusive of allowances, was, at the time, Rs. 260/-. He was living for the last twelve years in a three-roomed house near the Tollygunge Tram Depot at a rent of Rs. 30/- per month. His family consisted of wife, two sons and three daughters. He had his nineteen years old eldest son fixed up as an apprentice in the same firm on a starting allowance of Rs. 30/- per month. The next son was in school. Of the daughters the eldest had completed seventeen years and so she was causing worry to her parents regarding her marriage.

Sachin Babu had always been a careful economist, who would take any trouble and would go any distance to save on a purchase. Not that he would go for inferior stuff, but he would have the better thing at a cheaper price, for which he would visit different markets for comparing rates. Better things for him actually meant better things to eat, for he was not very particular about other things of life. His dress was shabby, his shoes worn, his house unclean and short of accomodation for the growing family. He kept no maid-servant, and all washings, kitchen work, etc. were done by his wife, who was not of strong health, assisted partly by her daughters. But the savings he made that

way were mostly consumed to satisfy his taste for good food. Usually his daily tiffin bill in his office canteen was between Rs. 1/50 and Rs. 2/-, and not unoften he failed to check himself from going over the limit if he saw someone eating something with relish.

From his office in the evening he would go the opposite way to the wholesale markets in Burra Bazar to buy spices, nuts, ghee and also potato at wholesale rates, and, as he walked back with bag-full of purchases to Dalhousie to take the tram for Tollygunge, he would look out and if there was any fruit or vegetable going cheap on the street pavement he would halt and fill his weighty bag more with whatever he could get at a bargain. The heavy bag became heavier requiring change of arms to carry it, but he didn't mind that pleased as he was with the precious contents of the bag.

When he knocked at the door and his wife came out to open it and take the burden from his hand he looked exhausted and his wife would say "Why do you bring all this from Burra Bazar to save a few annas? It's better to eat less than to take so much trouble to eat better. I shall manage with whatever you will bring easily from the local market in the morning, but you won't listen. Both morning and evening you go to market and exhaust yourself. I'm so worried about your health."

But Sachin Babu won't heed her and would sit down on an wooden stool near the kitchen door, where the bag he had brought was unloaded

by his wife and the contents were sorted out by her daughters. "They charge one anna more per kilogram on potato in Tollygunge bazar and the spices which I've brought from Burra Bazar are not only better and cleaner but also much cheaper."

His wife would bring him a cup of tea which would refresh him and he would get up and go for wash and change with a look of satisfaction on his face. "Make potato chops to-morrow. Champa likes chops" he said as he fondly patted his youngest daughter on her back who was watching the contents of the bag being taken out.

In the morning when handing him the big bazar bag his wife would say "Don't bring cut pona fish: that's very dear. Bring small size fish, —lobster, punti, tangra or bata. They will be cheaper and fresher too than the imported iced big fish." But he would bring big pona or Ganges hilsa and would ask her "Why not make that curry of pona with cabbage which you made on Saturday last."

"But why do you bring cabbage now? Wait for the winter when cabbage will be cheap. In September the imported cabbage, which you buy, is not good in taste also."

"But it's new at this time when you don't get many varieties of vegetables. And, so, when I saw Naresh Babu purchasing a few I also went to buy."

"But Naresh Babu is a rich man; what he can buy you can't."

This reference to his limited means depressed him, noticing which she said "Well, it doesn't matter if you bought to-day, but don't follow Naresh Babu. His case is different. We've to live within our means."

"Yes, that's what I've always been trying to do. You know how economically I manage. I spend so little on clothes; I travel in second class tram to save on the fare; I go to Burra Bazar to buy dal, spices, potato and whatever else I get cheaper there. And in the morning too I go to cheaper markets for fish and vegetables."

"But I don't like that you should do marketing both morning and evening. It's telling on health and I'm so anxious. When you return in the evening with a heavy load you look weak and tired, seeing which I become so anxious that I think I would eat less and save thereby the money that you save by visiting different markets. You never consider what will happen if your health breaks down."

There that talk would end to be resumed in the same way with similar beginning and similar ending the next morning. And so it was every day. His wife's increasing anxiety and her warning against his overwork and neglect of health could leave no more than a thin impression on him which wore off after a tasteful meal and disappeared within a minute of his stretching his tired limbs on the bed. The next day he would go out as usual with two bags in hand, one for vegetables

and the other for fish, eggs or meat as he fancied that morning and in the evening, after office, he would go to Burra Bazar or Jogu Babu's market or some other market where he thought he would get what he had in his mind that evening somewhat cheap. Towards the end of the month as the balance in the small cash box dwindled a sag came in his enthusiasm for visiting different markets morning and evening, but with the new month new enthusiasm came with fresh vigour.

"We've to save for the marriage of our daughters. Jaya is seventeen now, her marriage can't be put off even for a day. But where's the money? You forget that when you go with your bags to the market" his wife would say in the night.

"Sushil's* thirty rupees you can save. There's nothing left out of my salary at the end of the month."

"But Sushil has his own expenses,—conveyance, tiffin, etc. He is seldom able to give me more than five rupees in the month for the household. Sometimes he's unable to pay that if he has to purchase clothes or other requirements."

"But what can I do? We can't starve."

"I don't mean that. But surely if you don't go for big cut fish and for imported vegetables which are dear, we can save much."

He would turn to the other side on the bed

* His Son.

without replying. His tongue could not belie its taste for good food, which caused his wife increasing anxiety and which was gradually telling on his health and on his means of subsistence in the days to come.

II

That morning it was still raining. The return monsoon had arrived the evening before. Rain had stopped in the night but had started again in the morning. There was no indication of a possible break in the banks of darkish clouds which were ascending up one behind another on the sky and discharging their watery load. Sachin Babu had to go to office and so he couldn't wait on. He took his two bags in one hand and an umbrella in the other. His wife protested "Are you mad? No, I won't let you go. There's enough in the house for the morning, potatos, brinjals and green bananas. They will do. Don't go to the market and get wet again. Yesterday evening you returned with your clothes soaked with water and in the night you felt cold and shivered the whole night."

"But I feel well now. I'll only go for fish and not for vegetables."

So saying he went out bare-feet for there was ankle deep water at several spots on the way to the market.

The weather cleared in the afternoon and the

sun emerged in all glory. Sachin Babu looked out through the window by which was placed his desk in the office. So it would be possible to go to Burra Bazar in the evening after office, he thought. He had something to look for and purchase there.

He did go and over-loaded his bag with his purchases. By change of hands he carried it from Burra Bazar to Dalhousie and dragged it inside a crowded second class tramcar. Some passengers protested against the load being taken in to their inconvenience, but the tram-conductor, an old man who had known this regular passenger who boarded the tram every evening this time with his extra big bag, helped him to get into the backside of the car. It had started drizzling again, but he had just got home in the tram almost if not entirely dry. He was happy with this evening's purchase. On account of inclement weather customers were few and the prices were down.

After forty-five minutes slow going the tram reached the Tollygunge depot. He waited for other passengers to get down and then dragged his treasure-full bag over the car floor to the gate. He was tired and was feeling weak. He had caught cold the evening before and now for an hour he had damp shirt on his body, which made him feel cold. Moreover, he hadn't gone out for tiffin in the day due to rain and had only taken some *muri* with a cup of tea. The old tram-conductor gave him a helping hand, but yet in getting down on the wet slippery ground he

slipped and fell with the holding loop of the bag in his firm grip. He shrieked in pain and was unable to get up. The tram driver and conductors came to help him up. His right thigh was fractured and the fingers of his right hand were twisted under the weight of the bag. People collected and carried him home. His wife rushed out and cried "What happened?" One man said "Let's take him to hospital" and he went to the tram depot office to phone for an ambulance. Sachin Babu groaned in pain. When the ambulance arrived he looked out for the bag and called Jaya "Where's the bag, Jaya?" His wife in tearful exasperation exclaimed "Let the bag also go to hospital. Morning and evening one sits down for sometime to do puja, but you only thought of *pet** puja. What will you eat now and how will you go to bazar?"

The accident was serious enough. Three fingers of his right hand were gone and his right leg became an inch short. Unable to write he lost his job. His provident fund account showed five thousand and some odd rupees to his credit, two thousand out of which was immediately needed for the wedding of Jaya which had been fixed for the next month. He used crutches for walking and often went to the market side with only a small bag and a thin purse. He watched Naresh Babu purchase the good things and asked him the prices. There was satisfaction in satisfying the

* Pet-stomach.

curiosity, but when his wife served him a dishfull of coarse rice and a cup of watery dal and a vegetable curry made of a combination of some cheapest vegetables with little more than a touch of oil he looked up miserably to his wife, who held her tears and turned back sharply into the kitchen.

HE LOVED HIS CHILD LATE

(My friend, who very feelingly gave me the following retrospect of his married life, does not wish to disclose his name, one particular reason being that he does not want his daughter to know how he feels about her.)

“You were the least handsome of the men in the party” said my wife when we returned home from a wedding in the night. She was going to say, it seemed, the ugliest of all, but the word ugliest stuck in her mouth. Her eyes were on my face, but mine came down on the floor of the bedroom where we stood, unable in shame to meet hers. My head inclining down, my arms hanging loose, and my legs stiff on the knees, I stood quiet, unable to withdraw, yet uneasy under the critical stare of my newly married wife.

It was a fortnight that we were married, and, shy by nature as I was, my shyness to my wife had not yet altogether gone. But she was forward in approach even though she had had no higher than half-finished school education, and in spite of an un-established middle-class family, which she came from. A year before our marriage her father, Naren Babu, had arrived from East Bengal to prospect for luck in Calcutta. He was no doubt pushing and enterprising and within a short time of his migration he had secured a job for himself, an apprenticeship in a workshop for his son, and

two bridegrooms for two of his four daughters. For the third he had approached my uncle through a broker with a marriage proposal with me. The broker's description of the girl, reinforced by a charming photograph, so impressed my uncle that he sent the photograph to me for an inspection. My fixed gaze on it for half an hour that night so fired my youthful imagination that the whole night it floated before my dreamy eyes.

The next day my uncle returned happy after seeing the bride and suggested to me that I could also go and see her. Shyly I turned away, just hinting that if he had approved I had nothing to say. For a boy to go and see the bride was not a popular procedure in our family, though it was not altogether disapproved. If the guardians agreed marriage followed and the bride and the groom saw each other's eyes on the wedding night. The custom had come into vogue when early marriage prevailed, but I was twenty-six and she had also crossed over from her teens. I felt, however, rather shaky at the thought of going to inspect an unknown young woman and open a conversational acquaintance with her. To me there was no necessity for that, either for the face that I had seen in the picture had decided me in the choice of my wife.

After the marriage I discovered that my father-in-law's principal passport to the upper society in the big city of Calcutta, where he was an unrecommended stranger, was his social wife,

who, inspite of age, had a good face and a bright complexion, and the catching beauty of his daughters. Naren Babu freely admitted neighbours, relations and new acquaintances to his house, where his smart daughters provided attractive welcome. But though he readily took all the social and economic advantages which the visitors competed with one another to offer to win a glance of his daughters he always excercised a sharp judgement in assessing their social and property credit. A son-in-law must own a house besides having a good income—was his working formula. I understood that it was my new house which had attracted him, but that did not matter when I had got a wife who charmed me.

On the third day after the marriage, it was a Monday, I returned home in the evening, eager and impatient, after a day's absent-minded work in the office, to meet my new wife. Turning into the street on which our house stood I strained my eyes from distance at the balcony abutting on the street, and, as I had expected, I saw her there. My steps quickened. She didn't notice me; her eyes were casting furtive glances at the adjoining and opposite houses where I saw some youngmen leaning over railings or standing behind window bars and staring at her. She was evidently conscious of the eyes fixed on her from different angles, but, instead of being embarrassed, she was rather interested in drawing their gaze more on her by a carefully careless display of her charms. A de-

pression came clouding on the rushing enthusiasm with which I had come to meet my married love, but struggling it down I went to give her a pleasant surprise. She perceived me and half-turning to me asked "I suppose you won't mind if some friends come to see me."

Her voice was dry and unsentimental. It seemed more so to me because I was expecting some endearing words from her after my whole day's absence.

"Why should I?" I just answered, but she added "They may be males."

I couldn't help showing surprise on my face seeing which she explained "My father always kindly received our neighbours, who were so good and helpful. Some university students came to help me in learning English, and one of them, pleased with my progress, presented me this ring. Another bought me a saree. They asked me when I came here if they could come and help me here too."

I saw a thin gold-washed ring on her little finger, and then momentarily I looked at her face and then across the street on the opposite house where I noticed a Law College student staring at her. I went inside the room saying softly "I don't know; ask my uncle."

I dreamt that night but how differently from what I had been dreaming recently. At times my wife would drop some nice words and would flash a sparkling smile also, but I could see a breach

between that smile and her sentiments, which to my awakening knowledge, were not towards me.

Such was the beginning of my married life, the tenure of which dragged on for eight months, interrupted now and then by long and short spells of her absence to her father's house. She would receive a letter and go the same evening. What depressed me most was to see her go happily but return moodily. Last time she was overdue a fortnight and I went to enquire. "She has gone to a relation's house" her younger sister told me; but it transpired that she had gone to make a relation with a youngman from whom she was not to return to me. Frankly speaking, I wasn't much upset, thanks to the way she had been preparing me for a happening like this. But a definite reaction in me was an aversion to womanly beauty, which had stung my mind. I outright opposed a second marriage, which my mother, uncle and aunt proposed. I wouldn't listen and two years passed, but my mother looked sad. I told her one day that if I must marry I would marry this time one who would not be proud and showy of her beauty. I meant that I would marry one of dark complexion and unseemly appearance.

And so I did. When my new wife came it was not just her unattractiveness, but a roughness smeared on her face which staggered me. But I told myself that this time our relation would be pleasant and stable. I was mistaken. It is not beauty which makes a woman proud and fanciful,

but her nature. Though my this wife was without fascination she was not soft and considerate, nor affectionate either. I found this particularly when a girl was born and she neglected her and often left her crying on the cradle. It was no use telling her, for she had a sharp temper and a sharp tongue. My daughter thus came more and more on my hands and in my care. Her mother felt relieved and frequented her visits to her mother, her brothers and sisters.

The girl resembled her mother in many ways, except in her unaffectionate nature. My close watch and nursing of her revealed to me her ins and outs and drew more than a father's affection from me to her. Previously my mind was all turned to my wife or rather, I should admit, to the woman in her who excited my desires without bringing in any thought for the offspring to be born in due course. Both times that I went for marriage my thought and concern were only about a woman, but now I preceived that it was the child that was increasingly coming close to me while the woman's charm was weakening. My love, affection, worry and anxiety, more and more centred on my daughter. While her good points exhilarated me her defects and shortcomings, her faults and weaknesses made me sad and gloomy. More so because I held myself responsible for all that she lacked. I had gone from one woman, who left me embittered to beauty, to another who, I expected, would give all the rest of a wife's rela-

tionship save the smack which the first had given. But neither time the thought of the child had entered my calculation of the incidences and concomitants of married life.

My daughter, Nina (this is not her actual name), grew up. She was darkish in skin, cock-eyed, thick-lipped and long-faced. Her hair was bushy and short, her height was below mark, and there was a little stammering in her speech when excited. But for all this awkwardness and defects my love went the more flowingly to her to try to set her right in the eyes and estimate of others. As she grew she became day by day conscious of herself. She brought home from school the derision and slight which she received there from other girls. I could give her nice dress but that did not dress up and cover what she lacked or rather what she had in abundance of physical uncouthness and mental backwardness. I sat silently to share her disappointment and dejection.

From her face, her movements and her unsuccessful efforts in life my vision stretched into the future where I saw collecting failure and assembling disappointments round her body and mind, her aim and desire, her ambition and outlook. When I brought my eyes back on her I couldn't match them against hers. She looked, open-eyed, helplessly at me, but I had no help to give to make her present or future good and purposeful. It seemed to me that underneathe her appealing gaze there was the sharp focus of an accusation which

went down to my conscience to ask if it was right of me to go all for fancy and desire-fulfilment, unmindful of their consequences which were to visit her life. Truly, I hadn't loved my child till late in the day when the glory of the dawn had faded and the shade of the afternoon had started lengthening. I can do little now to change the course of her life, which originated in the faults and defects of the body and mind and in the discipline, unrestraint and self-indulgence of her parents. All my love, wish and anxiety now stood still and ashamed before her innocent and helpless looks. She came crawling up to me; held my knees to stand up; looked for my applauding smile and caressing squeeze of her cheeks. And, as she grew up taller and stronger day by day and month by month, my love for her rose higher and higher too, but I felt miserable in the thought that it was of no good to her. It had come too late. It should have started before she was born. I should have thought of her when I adventured out for pleasure and romance, which were in effect only to be instrumental in the introduction of the more romantic romance of the birth of a new life, the birth of my child, my little Nina, whom I love but ineffectually now. How late indeed do I realize that the union of man and woman is a creative process, which is important to each, but what is supremely more important is the creation that comes through it. If that creation proves true and good it is not merely that each has discharged a great responsi-

bility to the other, and that each one's conscience is clear to the child, but their mutual love becomes more delicious and their attraction to each other becomes closer and sweeter.

I reflect like this when I see my Nina, in the freshness of her youth, lonely and unappreciated, deficient and unsuccessful. She sits in the evening at her desk turning over the pages of a book to keep her mind diverted from her life, her age and the world that is unmindful of her. I wish she was not born yet and I went to get her the mother who would combine so with me as to give her a better start and a better chance in life. If well matched, husband and wife could be complementary to each other, supplying each other's deficiencies, strengthening each other's weaknesses and giving each other that devoted love which could ensuringly bless the birth of the child. For the better matching what is needed is that the man should not go just by the physical fascination of the woman and the woman by the weight of the man's purse or by the situation he holds in service and society and none should let judgement be thrown off by the fury of hungry desire. "I adore you" and "You are my heart's beloved"—such dramatic declarations under a tree-shade in the evening loneliness neither make the union firm nor productive of the best fruits of the union. The parties as they listen to those overwhelming words and look into each other's amorous eyes, must keep their distance to judge their mutual compati-

bility and adjustability constitutionally, temperamentally and sentimentally. Faults and shortcomings, this or that, must be in all, but sincerity, earnestness and devotion between them can do so much to mitigate and harmonise them. Out of such harmony come beauty and goodness, of body and mind, which descend to children. If you say that that is not possible and that it is attempting to disobey the urge of youth, then do what is possible and follow the impulse which decontrols you, only to regret later and to be ashamed to face your child, as I am to-day, after the short term of a thrilling experience which you are after now.

THE LEAN LAMB

It was Rahim's eighth birthday. His father Majid reared sheep and goats and supplied the same to Calcutta market. He had a small field in his native village, twenty miles from Arrah in Bihar. But the field produce, a few varieties of cereals, was not enough for his growing family consisting of his old mother, wife and seven children, of whom Rahim was the fifth. His main income came from the sheep business, which was profitable. He purchased young sheep and goats, and reared sheep also in his fold.

That morning Rahim in his new birth-day dress was going about in the fold, where his father was counting the sheep that was ready to be despatched to Calcutta. The Calcutta trader's agent was due in an hour's time. In the meantime a villager came with a lean lamb, which he wanted to sell.

"Why do you want to sell it? It's so young and thin. You won't get good price for it. Better feed and fatten it and let it grow a year older and then it will fetch you much more" said Majid to him.

"Yes, I know, but I can't help. My little son is sick. I've no money for medicine; so, Brother, give me whatever you like for it."

Majid paid him four rupees.

Rahim came along. The little lamb was lovely with black and white skin.

"Give me this lamb, Ba-ba, said Rahim, as he put his hand on its long ears and took possession from the seller, "I shall name him Karim and let to-day be his birth-day as it is mine."

So saying he took off his new birth-day green cap from his head and fixed it on the longish head of the goat.

"But on his birth-day give him food first before you give him a birth-day cap. He must be hungry. He's lean and weak."

Rahim gently pulled the lamb by the ear and took him to the field, where he notched tender green grass and held before his mouth. So he fed him everyday.

Rahim was Majid's most favourite son. Majid was at first rather surprised at Rahim's special fancy for this lamb out of the many he had in the fold, but he was pleased to see him happy with the new goat. Rahim fed him, washed him, played with him by making him run behind him, and if it rained and the fold roof leaked he took him to his room and made him lie by his bed side.

Karim grew and fattened. Majid watched with interest. Another few months and he would be a good sale. He already weighed more than lambs of his age. A year passed and Rahim's ninth birth-day arrived.

The night before Majid's wife had asked "What about the ceremonies and the feast to-

morrow. I've invited my brother. He will come with his wife and children."

"You can take a sheep for the feast."

"But don't give an old sheep. The meat would be tough."

In the morning Majid went to the fold with his wife, who pointed to Karim, the fat lamb of tender age. Majid had already contracted with a trader to sell Karim at a good price, but his wife said "Let the man choose another sheep. On Rahim's birth-day we must have the best one for the feast."

Majid's brother-in-law arrived in the morning. He had brought presents for Rahim,—a red-striped shirt and a green cap to match, which had a little shining white crescent on the front. Rahim was delighted with the cap and taking it in his hand said "It'll fit Karim very well."

He put on the new clothes and went out with the cap in hand calling out "Karim, Karim".

"Ma-a, Ma-a" came the response. Then Ma-a, Ma-a came weaker and then it stopped. Rahim quickened his steps.

Majid in the meantime had gripped the lamb and tied him for slaughter. He had the shining knife in his right hand, which he was lifting. Rahim saw and rushed and cried "Ba-ba, Ba-ba." Perhaps Majid did not understand what his son meant or did not consider it important. The guests had come and he was in hurry. He lifted the knife to striking height. Rahim jumped over

Karim in a flash. Majid's raised arm with the heavy knife came down. He was dazed by the suddenness of Rahim's jump over the sheep and couldn't hold the descending arm. Perhaps it came down with less thrust than it would have come over the sheep, but the thrust was enough to sever the right arm of Rahim from the shoulder. Majid cried out "Rahim, Rahim." The knife stuck in the flesh and muscles of the unconscious boy. Majid's wife, brother-in-law and all the rest from the house rushed in. Majid had laid his head over the drooping head of Rahim and cried out louder and louder to call his dearest son. His brother-in-law separated him and lifted up Rahim to carry to the little village hospital. Majid stood up and took the knife again and madly shrieked, as he lifted it over the shivering lamb "It was for you", and his arm came down with the ferocity of the devil's arm and severed the head of Karim, over which Rahim had run to fix his new cap, from the fat body which Majid had coveted.

After the whole day's shrieks and wails Majid had lain down semi-conscious on the field away from the house, from the family, from the children. The night was dark, and no breeze blew. It was breathless, pulseless, cold and lonely like the other world. He drowsed as the agitation and agony of the mind softened in utter fatigue, and then woke in another world, in the light of a fresh morning. It was a different world, so strange, so beautiful, with green valleys and a murmuring

stream, by the side of which he saw goats, sheep, deer and so many animals and birds grazing or drinking water happily and fearlessly. Majid wondered why he saw no man there. He looked around, and then saw in the distance a lamb with a green cap on head coming out of the valley and behind him he saw his Rahim without the right arm. He tried to call, but his voice did not come out; he tried to run, but his legs did not move. He looked impatiently for them to come nearer, but they turned away, Rahim making Karim chase him as he used to do when in play on Majid's field by the side of the fold. Rahim was so happy. Then Majid saw some more boys and men coming and going, but they were all without the right arm. They went near the birds and animals, who remained unconcerned at their approach and who even exchanged happy glances with the men whom they had feared on the world where Majid lived but did not fear in that new world. Majid wondered what place was that. He wanted to ask but could not speak. He gazed on in wonder. He hadn't seen a place lovelier than this where every creature was happy, only all men were without the right arm with which man loved to hit and strike and kill animals, the little beautiful birds and his own species too for fun, sport, food and economy.

When Majid woke under a glaring sun all the pain and agony, which his own act had brought, returned as violently and bitterly as before. He

closed his eyes and wished to go back to the world he had seen in his vision in the night, the paradise of animals where men could enter only without the right arm and without the greed, anger and hatred which made him raise that arm to strike and kill.

THE LEGEND OF LAKHYA-HIRA

Her name was Lakhya-Hira, meaning a hundred thousand diamonds, a name rather incorrectly given, because her devotion to husband was easily worth much more than a mere hundred thousand diamonds.

Her name has come down through centuries as bright and fresh as ever and is familiarly known to housewives throughout the Indian sub-continent. Indeed, it is more than just remembered with reverence; her example inspires Indian women and steadies and glorifies their devotion to husband. In India devotion to husband has been accepted without question as the most meritorious virtue of a woman, and a husband has believed that nothing else, beauty or accomplishment, than the devotion of wife could ensure his and the family's happiness, well-being and prosperity. Modern trends in society with their challenge to traditions descending through ages, and with their enfeebling influence on people's mental steadiness have shaken the foundation of that faithful devotion. Whether this has been for the better or for the worse, whether the wife, the husband and the family have in the changing order gained or lost, have become happier and more content or not,—is a question which present-day housewives should better judge themselves; but, all the same, in spite of the number decreas-

ing, there are still examples of wife's devotion, which could approach in merit and elegance the divine example of Lakhya-Hira. Not only in India, a land where wife's devotion has been proverbial, but in all countries there must be and must have been examples, though unsung and unrecorded, of wife's faithful devotion to husband which have excited man's emotional admiration for woman. Woman's heart, her sentiments, her fidelity and steadiness are her characteristics, which can not be confined to one country or another as demarcated by race, language or politics. Man is essentially the same all over the globe inspite of what political propagandists and narrow-minded nationalists say and want us to accept.

The legend of Lakhya-Hira, therefore, will appeal to all women (and men too) and will make them look up, when distracted by scenes of husbands and wives shouting and wrangling over respective rights, obligations and share of work, duties and income, etc. to a dreamland, where the image of Lakhya-Hira ever shines and where under her wings ever abides the bliss of supremely happy conjugal relation.

Lakhya-Hira was young when she was married to a Brahmin, who had descended from pious ancestors but who had neglected to follow and practise in his life the traditional rules and customs prescribed for a Brahmin. At pre-dawn prayer time he slept having gone to bed late, and at twilight prayer time he would usually be out

in quest of love in disreputable quarters. He ate as and when he liked and did not care to discriminate between food which a Brahmin could take and that which he was forbidden to eat. He had taken to drink also.

But all that did not matter to Lakhya-Hira. He was her husband all the same, the husband who was the gift of Lord Siva to her after years of her devoted worship of Him before marriage, as unmarried girls traditionally did and do. And to her husband with traditional faith she had surrendered everything, her body, mind, heart and soul, and her love, devotion, service, faith, confidence and unquestioning admiration. He was all good, all true, all everything to her. If he neglected to work on the field which maintained the family she worked harder on it; if he stayed out in the evening and returned late in the night she would sit at the door and wait, leaving the food uneaten in the kitchen. And when he returned she would never express displeasure but would quickly get up to attend him, to give him water for wash and clothes for change, after which she would serve him food in the kitchen. Sometimes he would return drunk when she would make him sit, wash his face and wave a palm-leaf fan over his head to cool down the intoxication. She would not ask and grumble 'Where had you been?'

But the effects and consequences of the loose life he led did not wait for her enquiry. They

came in due course and overwhelmed him. Foul diseases they were, which crippled him. With all her devoted care and vigilant nursing she could not help and he became worse. He could not stand up and walk. Day and night she served him. She washed the sores on his body, bathed and fed him and encouraged and cheered him, but he lay in physical pain and mental distress. Sexual hankerings, which had driven him to other women and brought his physical break-down, had remained as before, and in the evenings his eyes glistened and excited desire made him miserable. Lakhya-Hira was anxious, but she did not know that his hankering was for a woman in another village where he used to visit her. If she asked him what she could do to dispell his depression he hesitated to speak out. But she insisted "Tell me what you want, what will remove your misery and make you comfortable and happy. I shall bring it from anywhere, at any risk, at any cost. Tell me, my Lord, what shall I do for your satisfaction."

He hesitated. His sinful tongue had uttered many harsh words to her in moments of drunkenness, but it faltered to speak out the harshest thing that a husband could say to his wife. She insisted "Tell me, my Lord" as she waved a fan over his flushed face and smoothly rubbed the heated arteries on his temple. The words came up to his mouth, but sank back in fear and shame. "There's nothing that I can't do for you" she repeated, her eyes remaining earnestly fixed on his face. He

slantingly eyed at her serene, faithful eyes. His desire, which was furiously excited, battered his patience and good sense. His eyes dropped, then slowly the words came out of his mouth "I want Kamini."

She stared in surprise; she hadn't heard of her.

"Who's she? Where does she live?"

"She lives in the next village."

"I shall go and bring her and make a bed for her by your side."

A gleam of hope and joy sparkled on his pale face. "She won't come to this village. I visited her in night's darkness, but I can't go any more. I can't walk."

"But I shall carry you to her."

She went and brought a basket, put a rug in it and lifting him from the bed put him in it as well as she could. Then she covered him with a cloth so that people might not see and ask questions. It was night and cold. The village way was lonely. She lifted the basket over her head and walked, sweating and breathing hard. Her bare feet were hurt and cut by projected stones here and there on the way. It was dark, but she kept straight on the path as he directed. Kamini's room was on the outskirts of the next village. Lakhya-Hira's husband was excited and impatient, and so was she to reach him to his lover. Her legs shook, her back bent under the load, but

devotion and earnestness gave her the strength to trudge on.

Arriving at Kamini's door she went down on her knees to put the basket down on the threshold. In impatience and under over-excitement he tried to take his legs out of the basket and put them on the ground, but in so doing fell out of it. She tenderly helped him to sit and dusted off the dirt. The sound of the fall woke Kamini, who opened the door and looked at them in surprise. She was beautiful indeed, slim, tall and fair with lovely black eyes. She stared at Lakhya-Hira, who was exhausted and was breathing hard. From her she turned her eyes disdainfully to her lover, who was now a physical wreck. Lakhya-Hira explained "He loves you; I beseech you make him happy."

"Make this wretched, filthy creature happy?" said Kamini as she stepped back in disgust, but Lakhya-Hira appealed again "With you he'll be happy and then he'll be well again. I shall pray to Siva to make you both happy."

She stretched out her hand imploringly to grasp Kamini's who was withdrawing into her room, but then she swooned and fell at the feet of her husband, to whom Kamini's contemptuous rejection had brought disillusionment. As that disillusionment came to him the scene changed. The darkness of the night lifted, dawn broke and streaks of gold sparkled on the east. Lakhya-Hira opened her eyes, which fell anxiously on her husband whom she had not attended while she had

lain unconscious. But he needed her nursing no more. He had become hale and bright and looked in perfect health. She rubbed her eyes in wonder. Was it a dream?

He bent down and affectionately put the palm of his hand on her forehead and then caressingly on her cheeks. She sat up, still in surprise. He circled his arm round her and said "Lakhya-Hira, you have healed me, healed all the diseases of my body and mind, and have opened my eyes. Your virtue, your devotion have done this all. Make me worthy of you."

She put her head on his chest and relaxed, surrendering herself as wholly as she had ever surrendered her love, thoughts and devotion. And they were ever happy and devoted as no husband and wife have ever been.
