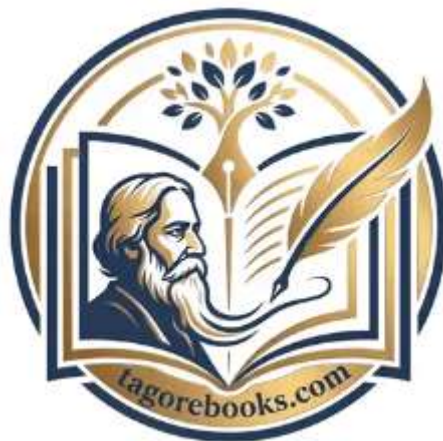




CHATURANGA

Rabindranath Tagore



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CHAPTER I

UNCLE

I

When I first met Satish he appeared to me like a constellation of stars, his eyes shining, his tapering fingers like flames of fire, his face glowing with a youthful radiance. I was surprised to find that most of his fellow-students hated him, for no other fault than that he resembled himself more than he resembled others. Because with men, as well as with some insects, taking the colour of the surroundings is often the best means of self-protection.

The students in the hostel where I lived could easily guess my reverence for Satish. This caused them discomfort, and they never missed an opportunity of reviling him in my hearing. If you have a speck of grit in your eye it is best not to rub it. And when words smart it is best to leave them unanswered.

But one day the calumny against Satish was so gross that I could not remain silent.

Yet the trouble was that I hardly knew anything about Satish. We never had even a word between us, while some of the other students were his close neighbours, and some his distant relatives. These affirmed, with assurance, that what they said was true; and I affirmed, with even greater assurance, that it was incredible. Then all the residents of the hostel bared their arms, and cried: 'What impertinence!'

That night I was vexed to tears. Next day, in an interval between lectures, when Satish was reading a book lying at full length on the grass in College Square, I went up to him without any introduction, and spoke to him in a confused manner, scarcely knowing what I said. Satish shut his book, and looked in my face. Those who have not seen his eyes will not know what that look was like.

Satish said to me: 'Those who libel me do so, not because they love to know the truth, but because they love to believe evil of me. Therefore it is useless to try to prove to them that the calumny is untrue.'

'But,' I said, 'the liars must be---'

'They are not liars,' interrupted Satish.

'I have a neighbour,' he went on, 'who has epileptic fits. Last winter I gave him a blanket. My servant came to me in a furious temper, and told me that the boy only feigned the disease. These students who malign me are like that servant of mine. They believe what they say. Possibly my fate has awarded me an extra blanket which they think would have suited them better.'

I asked him a question: 'Is it true what they say, that you are an atheist?'

He said: 'Yes.'

I bent my head to the ground. I had been arguing with my fellow-students that Satish could not possibly be an atheist.

I had received two severe blows at the outset of my short acquaintance with Satish. I had imagined that he was a Brahman, but I had come to know that Satish belonged to a Bania family, and I in whose veins flowed a bluer blood was bound duly to despise all Banias. Secondly, I had a rooted belief that atheists were worse than murderers, nay, worse even than beef-eaters.

Nobody could have imagined, even in a dream, that I would ever sit down and take my meals with a Bania student, or that my fanatical zeal in the creed of atheism would surpass even that of my instructor. Yet both these things came to pass.

Wilkins was our professor in the College. His learning was on a level with his contempt for his pupils. He felt that it was a menial occupation to teach literature to Bengali students. Therefore, in our Shakespeare class, he would give us the synonym for 'cat' as 'a quadruped of the feline species.' But Satish was excused from taking notes. The Professor told him: 'I will make good to you the hours wasted in this class when you come to my room.'

The other less favoured students used to ascribe this indulgent treatment of Satish to his fair complexion and to his profession of atheism. Some of the more worldly-wise among them went to Wilkins's study with a great show of enthusiasm to borrow from him some book on Positivism. But he refused, saying that it would be too hard for them. That they should be held unfit even to cultivate atheism made their minds all the more bitter against Satish.

II

Jagamohan was Satish's uncle. He was a notorious atheist of that time. It would be inadequate to say that he did not believe in God. One ought rather to say that he vehemently believed in no God. As the business of a captain in the navy is rather to sink ships than to steer, so it was Jagamohan's business to sink the creed of theism, wherever it put its head above the water.

The order of his arguments ran like this:

(1) If there be a God, then we must owe our intelligence to Him.

(2) But our intelligence clearly tells us that there is no God.

(3) Therefore God Himself tells us that there is no God.

'Yet you Hindus,' he would continue, 'have the effrontery to say that God exists. For this sin thirty-three million gods and goddesses exact penalties from you people, pulling your ears hard for your disobedience.'

Jagamohan was married when he was a mere boy. Before his wife died he had read Malthus. He never married again.

His younger brother, Harimohan, was the father of Satish. Harimohan's nature was so exactly the opposite of his elder brother's, that people might suspect me of fabricating it for the purpose of writing a story. But only stories have to be always on their guard to sustain their reader's confidence. Facts have no such responsibility, and laugh at our incredulity. So, in this world, there are abundant instances of two brothers, the exact opposites of one another, like morning and evening.

Harimohan, in his infancy, had been a weakly child. His parents had tried to keep him safe from the attacks of all maladies by barricading him behind amulets and charms, dust taken from holy shrines, and blessings bought from innumerable Brahmans at enormous expense. When Harimohan grew up, he was physically quite robust, yet the tradition of his poor health lingered on in the family. So nobody claimed from him anything more arduous than that he should continue to live. He fulfilled his part, and did hold on to his life. Yet he never allowed his family to forget for a moment that life in his case was more fragile than in most other mortals. Thus he managed to divert towards himself the undivided attention of all his aunts and his mother, and had specially prepared meals served to him. He had less work and more rest than other members of the family. He was never allowed to forget that he was under the special protection, not only of his aforesaid mother and aunts, but also of the countless gods and goddesses presiding in the three regions of earth, heaven, and air. He thus acquired an attitude of prayerful dependence towards all the powers of the world, both seen and unseen,--sub-inspectors, wealthy neighbours, highly placed officials, let alone sacred cows and Brahmans.

Jagamohan's anxieties went altogether in an opposite direction. He would give a wide berth to men of power, lest the slightest suspicion of snobbishness should cling to him. It was this same sentiment which had greatly to do with his defiance of the gods. His knees were too stiff to bend before those from whom favour could be expected.

Harimohan got himself married at the proper time, that is to say, long before the time. After three sisters and three brothers, Satish was born. Everybody was struck by his resemblance to his uncle, and Jagamohan took possession of him, as if he were his own son.

At first Harimohan was glad of this, having regard to the educational advantage of the arrangement; for Jagamohan had the reputation of being the most eminent scholar of that period.

He seemed to live within the shell of his English books. It was easy to find the rooms he occupied in the house by the rows of books about the walls, just as it is easy to find out the bed of a stream by its lines of pebbles.

Harimohan petted and spoilt his eldest son, Purandar, to his heart's content. He had an impression that Purandar was too delicate to survive the shock of being denied anything he wanted. His education was neglected. No time was lost in getting him married, and yet nobody could keep him within the connubial limits. If Harimohan's daughter-in-law expressed any disapprobation of his vagaries in that direction,

Harimohan would get angry with her and ascribe his son's conduct to her want of tact and charm.

Jagamohan entirely took charge of Satish to save him from similar paternal solicitude. Satish acquired a mastery of the English language while he was still a child, and the inflammatory doctrines of Mill and Bentham set his brain on fire, till he began to burn like a living torch of atheism.

Jagamohan treated Satish, not as his junior, but as his boon companion. He held the opinion that veneration in human nature was a superstition, specially designed to make men into slaves. Some son-in-law of the family wrote to him a letter, with the usual formal beginning:

'To the gracious feet of----'

Jagamohan wrote an answer, arguing with him as follows:

MY DEAR NOREN--Neither you nor I know what special significance it gives to the feet to call them 'gracious.' Therefore the epithet is worse than useless, and had better be dropped. And then it is apt to give one a nervous shock when you address your letter only to the feet, completely ignoring their owner. But you should understand, that so long as my feet are attached to my body, you should never dissociate them from their context.

Next, you should bear in mind that human feet have not the advantage of prehensibility, and it is sheer madness to offer anything to them, confounding their natural function.

Lastly, your use of the plural inflection to the word 'feet,' instead of the dual, may denote special reverence on your part (because there are animals with four feet which have your particular veneration) but I consider it my duty to disabuse your mind of all errors concerning my own zoological identity.--Yours, JAGAMOHAN.

Jagamohan used to discuss with Satish subjects which are usually kept out of sight in conversation. If people objected to this plainness of speech with one so young, he would say that you can only drive away hornets by breaking in their nest. So you can only drive away the shamefulness of certain subjects by piercing through the shame itself.

When Satish had completed his College course, Harimohan tried his best to extricate him from his uncle's sphere of influence. But when once the noose is fixed round the neck, it only grows tighter by pulling at it. Harimohan became more and more annoyed at his brother, the more Satish proved recalcitrant. If this atheism of his son and elder brother had been merely a matter of private opinion, Harimohan could have tolerated it. He was quite ready to pass off dishes of fowl as 'kid curry.' [Footnote: In Bengal kid curry is often eaten without blame. But fowl curry would come within the prohibitions.] But matters had now become so desperate that even lies became powerless to whitewash the culprits. What brought things to a head was this:

The positive side of Jagamohan's atheistic creed consisted in doing good to others. He felt a special pride in it, because doing good, for an atheist, was a matter of unmitigated loss. It had no allurements of merit and no deterrents of punishment in the hereafter. If he was asked what concern he had in bringing about 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number,' he used to answer that his best incentive was that he could expect nothing in return. He would say to Satish:

'Baba, [Footnote: A term of endearment, literally 'father.'] we are atheists. And therefore the very pride of it should keep us absolutely stainless. Because we have no respect for any being higher than ourselves, therefore we must respect ourselves.'

There were some leather shops in the neighbourhood kept by Muhammadans. The uncle and nephew bestirred themselves with great zeal in doing good to these Muhammadans and their untouchable leather workers! [Footnote: As leather is made from the hides of dead animals, those who work in leather are regarded as unclean by orthodox Hindus. Only the very lowest castes are tanners.] This made Harimohan beside himself with indignation. Since he knew that any appeal to Scriptures, or to tradition, would have no

effect upon these two renegades, he complained to his brother concerning the wasting of his patrimony.

'When my expenditure,' his brother answered, 'comes up to the amount you have spent upon your full-fed Brahman priests, we shall be quits.'

One day Harimohan's people were surprised to find that a preparation was going on in Jaga-mohan's quarters for a grand feast. The cooks and waiters were all Mussulmans. Harimohan called for his son, and said to him angrily:

'I hear that you are going to give a feast to all your reverend friends, the leather workers.'

Satish replied that he was far too poor to think of it. His uncle had invited them. Purandar, Satish's elder brother, was equally indignant. He threatened to drive all the unclean guests away. When Harimohan expressed his protest to his brother, he answered:

'I never make any objection to your offering food to your idols. You should make no objection to my offering food to my gods.'

'Your gods!' exclaimed Harimohan.

'Yes, my gods,' his brother answered.

'Have you become a theist all of a sudden?' sneered Harimohan.

'No!' his brother replied. 'Theists worship the God who is invisible. You idolaters worship gods who are visible, but dumb and deaf. The gods I worship are both visible and audible, and it is impossible not to believe in them.'

'Do you really mean to say,' cried Harimohan, 'that these leather workers and Mussulmans are your gods?'

'Indeed, they are,' said Jagamohan; 'you shall see their miraculous power when I put food before them. They will actually swallow it, which I defy your gods to do. It delights my heart to see my gods perform such divine wonders. If you are not morally blind, it will delight your heart also.'

Purandar came to his uncle, and told him in a high-pitched voice that he was prepared to take desperate measures to stop the proceedings. Jagamohan laughed at him, and said:

'You monkey! If you ever try to lay hands on my gods, you will instantly discover how powerful they are, and I shall not have to do anything to defend them.'

Purandar was even a greater coward than his father. He was a tyrant only where he was sure of receiving submission. In this case he did not dare to pick a quarrel with his

Muhammadian neighbours. So he came to Satish, and reviled him. Satish gazed at him with those wonderful eyes of his, and remained silent.

The feast was a great success.

III

Harimohan could not take this insult passively. He declared war. The property on whose income the whole family subsisted was a temple endowment. Harimohan brought a suit in the law court against his brother, accusing him of such grave breaches of propriety as made him unworthy of remaining the trustee of a religious endowment. Harimohan had as many witnesses as ever he wished. The whole Hindu neighbourhood was ready to support him.

Jagamohan professed in open court that he had no faith in gods or idols of any description whatever; that all eatable food was for him food to be eaten; that he never bothered his head to find out the particular limb of Brahma from which the Muhammadans had issued, and therefore he had not the smallest hesitation in taking food in their company.

The judge ruled Jagamohan to be unfit to hold the temple property. Jagamohan's lawyers assured him that the decision could be upset by an appeal to the higher Court. But Jagamohan refused to appeal. He said he could not cheat even the gods whom he did not believe in. Only those who had the intelligence to believe such things had the conscience to cheat them.

His friends asked him: 'How are you going to maintain yourself?'

He answered: 'If I have nothing else to eat, I shall be content to gulp down my last breath.'

After this, a partition was made of the family house. A wall was raised from the ground floor to the upper storey, dividing the house into two parts.

Harimohan had great faith in the selfish sanity of prudence in human nature. He was certain that the savour of good living would tempt Satish into his golden trap, away from the empty nest of Jagamohan. But Satish gave another proof that he had neither inherited his father's conscience nor his sanity. He remained with his uncle.

Jagamohan was so accustomed to look upon Satish as his own that he was not surprised to find him remaining on his side after the partition.

But Harimohan knew his brother's temperament very well. He went about talking to people, explaining that the reason why Jagamohan did not let go his hold on Satish was that he expected to make a good thing out of Satish's presence, keeping him as a kind of hostage.

Harimohan almost shed tears while he said to his neighbour: 'Could my brother ever imagine that I was going to starve him? Since he is cunning enough to concoct this diabolical plot against me, I shall wait and see whether he is cleverer than I am.'

Harimohan's talk about Satish reached Jaga-mohan's ears. Jagamohan was surprised at his own stupidity in not anticipating such a turn of events.

He said: 'Good-bye, Satish.'

Satish was absolutely certain that nothing could make Jagamohan change his mind, so he had to take his leave, after having spent his eighteen years of life in his uncle's company.

When Satish had put his books and bedding on the top of the carriage, and driven away, Jagamohan shut the door of his room, and flung himself on the floor. When evening came, and the old servant knocked at the door with the lighted lamp, he got no answer.

Alas for the greatest happiness of the greatest number! The estimate in number is not the only measure of human affairs. The man who counts 'one' may go beyond all arithmetic when the heart does the sum. When Satish took his departure, he at once became infinite to Jagamohan.

Satish went into a students' lodging to share a room with one of his friends. Harimohan shed tears while meditating on the neglect of filial duties in this god-forsaken age. Harimohan had a very tender heart.

After the partition, Purandar dedicated a room in their portion of the house to the family god. It gave him a peculiar pleasure to know that his uncle must be execrating him for the noise raised every morning and every evening by the sacred conches and prayer gongs.

In order to maintain himself, Satish secured a post as a private tutor. Jagamohan obtained an appointment as head master of a high school. And it became a religious duty with Harimohan and Purandar to persuade parents and guardians to take away their boys from the malign influence of the atheist Jagamohan.

IV

One day, after a very long interval of absence, Satish came to Jagamohan. These two had given up the usual form of greeting [Footnote: This greeting in Bengal is for the younger to touch the feet of the elder.] which passes between elder and younger.

Jagamohan embraced Satish, led him to a chair, and asked him for the news.

There was news indeed!

A girl named Nonibala had taken shelter with her widowed mother in the house of the mother's brother. So long as her mother lived, there was no trouble. But a short time ago her mother had died. Her cousins were rascals. One of their friends had taken away this girl. Then, suspecting her of infidelity, after a while he made her life a constant torture. This had happened in the house next to the one where Satish had his tutorship. Satish wanted to save her from this misery, but he had no money or shelter of his own. Therefore he had come to his uncle. The girl was about to give birth to a child.

Jagamohan, when he heard the story, was filled with indignation. He was not the man to calculate coldly the consequence of his deeds, and he at once said to his nephew: 'I have the room in which I keep my books. I can put the girl there.'

'But what about your books?' Satish asked in surprise. Very few books, however, were now remaining. During the time when he had been unable to secure an appointment, he had been obliged to eke out a living by selling his books.

Jagamohan said: 'Bring the girl at once.'

'She is waiting downstairs,' said Satish. 'I have brought her here.' Jagamohan ran downstairs, and found the girl crouching in the corner, wrapped in her _sari_, looking like a bundle of clothes.

Jagamohan, in his deep bass voice, said at once: 'Come, little Mother, why do you sit in the dust?'

The girl covered her face, and burst into tears. Jagamohan was not a man to give way to emotion, but his eyes were wet as he turned to Satish and said: 'The burden that this girl is bearing is ours.'

Then he said to the girl: 'Mother, don't be shy on my account. My schoolfellows used to call me "Mad Jagai," and I am the same madcap even now.'

Then, without hesitation, he took the girl by both her hands, and raised her. The veil dropped from off her face.

The girl's face was fresh and young, and there was no line of hardness or vice in it. The inner purity of her heart had not been stained, just as a speck of dust does not soil a flower. Jagamohan took Nonibala to his upper room, and said to her: 'Mother, look what a state my room is in! The floor is all unswept. Everything is upside down; and as for myself, I have no fixed hour for my bath or my meals. Now that you have come to my house, everything will be put right, and even this mad Jagai will be made respectable.'

Nonibala had never felt before, even when her mother lived, how much one person could be to another; because her mother had looked upon her, not so much as a daughter, but as a young girl who had to be watched.

Jagamohan employed an elderly woman servant to help Nonibala. At first Noni was afraid lest Jagamohan should refuse to take food from her hand because of her impurity. But it turned out that Jagamohan refused to take his meals unless they were cooked and served by Noni.

Jagamohan was aware that a great wave of calumny was about to break over his head. Noni also felt that it was inevitable, and she had no peace of mind. Within a day or two it began.

The servant who waited on her had at first supposed that Noni was Jagamohan's daughter. But she came one day, saying hard things to Noni, and resigned her service in contempt. Noni became pale with fear, thinking of Jagamohan.

Jagamohan said to her: 'My little Mother, the full moon is up in the horizon of my life, so the time is ripe for the flood-tide of revilement. But, however muddy the water may become, it will never stain my moonlight.'

An aunt of Jagamohan's came to Harimohan's quarters, and said to him:

'Jagai, what a disgrace, what a disgrace! Wipe off this stain of sin from your house.'

Jagamohan answered: 'You are pious people, and this advice is worthy of you. But if I try to drive away all relics of sin, what will become of the sinner?'

Some old grandmother of a woman came to him, and said: 'Send this wench away to the hospital. Harimohan is ready to bear all the cost.'

Jagamohan said: 'But she is my mother. Because some one is ready to pay expenses, should I send my mother to the hospital?'

The grandmother opened her eyes wide with surprise and said: 'Who is this you call your mother?'

Jagamohan replied: 'Her who nourished life within her womb, and risks her life to give birth to children. I cannot call that scoundrel-father of the child "Father." He can only cause trouble, keeping himself safely out of it.'

Harimohan's whole body shrank with the utter infamy of the thing. That a fallen woman should be sheltered only on the other side of the wall, and in the midst of a household sacred to the memory of generations of mothers and grandmothers! The disgrace was intolerable.

Harimohan at once surmised that Satish was mixed up in this affair, and that his uncle was encouraging him in his shameful conduct. He was so sure of his facts that he went about spreading the news. Jagamohan did not say a single word to contradict him.

'For us atheists,' he said, 'the only heaven waiting for good deeds is calumny.'

The more the rumour of Jagamohan's doings became distorted, the more he seemed to enjoy it, and his laughter rang loud in the sky.

Harimohan and respectable people of his class could never imagine that the uncle could go so far as to jest openly on such a subject, and indulge in loud unseemly buffoonery about it with his own nephew.

Though Purandar had been carefully avoiding that part of the house where his uncle lived, he vowed that he would never rest till he had driven the girl away from her shelter.

At the time when Jagamohan had to go to his school he would shut up all access to his quarters, and he would come back the moment he had any leisure to see how Noni was faring.

One day at noon Purandar, with the help of a bamboo ladder, crossed the boundary wall and jumped down into Jagamohan's part of the house. Nonibala had been resting after the morning meal. The door of her room was open. Purandar, when he saw the sleeping figure of Noni, gave a great start, and shouted out in anger: 'So _you_ are here, are you?'

Noni woke up and saw Purandar before her. She became pale as death, and her limbs shrank under her. She felt powerless to run away or to utter a single word.

Purandar, trembling with rage, shouted out: 'Noni!'

Just then Jagamohan entered the room from behind, and cried: 'Get out of this room.'

Purandar's whole body began to swell up like an angry cat.

Jagamohan said: 'If you don't get out at once, I will call in the police.'

Purandar darted a terrible glance at Noni, and went out. Noni fainted.

Jagamohan now understood the whole situation. By questioning, he found out that Satish had been aware that Purandar had seduced Noni; but, fearing an angry brawl, he had not informed Jagamohan of the fact.

For days after this incident Noni trembled like a bamboo leaf. Then she gave birth to a dead child.

One midnight Purandar had driven Noni away from her room, kicking her in anger. Since then he had sought her in vain. When he suddenly found her in his uncle's house, he was seized with an uncontrollable passion of jealousy. He was sure that Satish had enticed her away from him, to keep her for his own pleasure, and had then put her in the very next house to his own in order to insult him. This was more than any mortal man could bear.

Harimohan heard all about it. Indeed, Purandar never took any pains to hide these doings from his father, for his father looked upon his son's moral aberrations with a kindly indulgence. But Harimohan thought it contrary to all notions of decency for Satish to snatch away this girl whom his elder brother, Purandar, had looked upon with favour. He devoutly hoped that Purandar would be successful in recovering his spoil.

It was the time of the Christmas holidays. Jagamohan attended Noni night and day. One evening he was translating a novel of Sir Walter Scott's to her, when Purandar burst into the room with another young man.

When Jagamohan was about to call for the police, the young man said:

'I am Noni's cousin. I have come to take her away.'

Jagamohan caught hold of Purandar by his neck, and shoved him out of the room and down the stairs. He then turned to the other young man and said: 'You are a villain and a scoundrel! You assert this cousin's right of yours to wreck her life, not to protect her.'

The young man hurried away. But when he had got to a safe distance, he threatened Jagamohan with legal steps in order to rescue his ward.

Noni said within herself: 'O Earth, open and swallow me up!'

[Footnote: The reference is to Sita in the Ramayana, who uttered this cry when in extreme trouble.]

Jagamohan called Satish, and said to him: 'Let me leave this place and go to some up-country town with Noni. It will kill her if this is repeated.'

Satish urged that his brother was certain to follow her when once he had got the clue.

'Then what do you propose?' said Jagamohan.

'Let me marry Noni,' was the answer.

'Marry Noni!'

'Yes, according to the civil marriage rites.'

Jagamohan stood up and went to Satish, and pressed him to his heart.

Since the partition of the house, Harimohan had not once entered the house to see his elder brother. But that day he came in, dishevelled, and said:

'Dada, [Footnote: Elder brother.] what disaster is this you are planning?'

'I am saving everybody from disaster,' said Jagamohan.

'Satish is just like a son to you,' said Harimohan, 'and yet you can have the heart to see him married to that woman of the street!'

'Yes,' he replied, 'I have brought him up almost as my own son, and I consider that my pains have borne fruit at last.'

'Dada,' said Harimohan, 'I humbly acknowledge my defeat at your hands. I am willing to write away half my property to you, if only you will not take revenge on me like this.'

Jagamohan started up from his chair and bellowed out:

'You want to throw me your dirty leavings, as you throw a dog a bone! I am an atheist--remember that! I am not a pious man like you! I neither take revenge, nor beg for favours.'

Harimohan hastened round to Satish's lodgings. He cried out to him:

'Satish! What in the world are you going to do? Can you think of no other way of ruining yourself? Are you determined to plunge the whole family into this hideous shame?'

Satish answered: 'I have no particular desire to marry. I only do it in order to save my family from hideous shame.'

Harimohan shouted: 'Have you not got the least spark of conscience left in you? That girl, who is almost like a wife to your brother--'

Satish caught him up sharply: 'What? Like a wife. Not that word, sir, if you please!'

After that, Harimohan became wildly abusive in his language, and Satish remained silent.

What troubled Harimohan most was that Purandar openly advertised his intention to commit suicide if Satish married Noni. Purandar's wife told him that this would solve a difficult problem--if only he would have the courage to do it.

Satish sedulously avoided Noni all these days, but, when the proposed marriage was settled, Jagamohan asked Satish that Noni and he should try to know each other better before they were united in wedlock. Satish consented.

Jagamohan fixed a date for their first talk together. He said to Noni:

'My little Mother, you must dress yourself up for this occasion.'

Noni bent her eyes to the ground.

'No, no,' said he, 'don't be shy, Noni. I have a great longing to see you nicely dressed, and you must satisfy my desire.'

He had specially selected some Benares silk and a bodice and veil for Noni. He gave these things to her.

Noni prostrated herself at his feet. This made Jagamohan get up hurriedly. He snatched away his feet from her embrace, and said:

'I see, Noni, I have miserably failed in clearing your mind of all this superstitious reverence. I may be your elder in age, but don't you know you are greater than I am, for you are my mother?'

He kissed her on her forehead and said:

'I have had an invitation to go out, and I shall be late back this evening.'

Noni clasped his hand and said:

'Baba, I want your blessing to-night.'

Jagamohan replied:

'Mother, I see that you are determined to turn me into a theist in my old age. I wouldn't give a brass farthing for a blessing, myself. Yet I cannot help blessing you when I see your face.'

Jagamohan put his hand under her chin, and raised her face, and looked into it silently, while tears ran down her cheeks.

VI

In the evening a man ran up to the place where Jagamohan was having his dinner, and brought him back to his house.

He found the dead body of Noni, stretched on the bed, dressed in the things he had given her. In her hand was a letter. Satish was standing by her head. Jagamohan opened the letter, and read:

Baba, forgive me. I could not do what you wanted. I tried my best, but I could never forget him. My thousand salutations to your gracious feet.--NONIBALA, the Sinner.

CHAPTER II

SATISH

I

The last words of Jagamohan, the atheist, to his nephew, Satish, were:

'If you have a fancy for funeral ceremony, don't waste it on your uncle,--reserve it for your father.'

This is how he came by his death.

When the plague first broke out in Calcutta, the poor citizens were less afraid of the epidemic than of the preventive staff who wore its badge. Satish's father, Harimohan, was sure that their Mussulman neighbours, the untouchable leather-dealers, would be the first to catch it, and thereupon defile him and his kith and kin by dragging them along into a common end. Before he fled from his house, Harimohan went over to offer refuge to his elder brother, saying: 'I have taken a house on the river at Kalna, if you '

'Nonsense!' interrupted Jagamohan. 'How can I desert these people?'

'Which people?'

'These leather-dealers of ours.'

Harimohan made a grimace and left his brother without further parley. He next proceeded to his son's lodgings, and to him simply said: 'Come along.'

Satish's refusal was equally laconic. 'I have work to do here,' he replied.

'As pall-bearer to the leather-dealers, I suppose?'

'Yes, sir; that is, if my services be needed.'

'Yes, sir, indeed! You scamp, you scoundrel, you atheist! If need be you're quite ready to consign fourteen generations of your ancestors to perdition, I have no doubt!'

Convinced that the Kali Yuga [Footnote: According to the Hindu Shastras the present age, the Kali Yuga, is the Dark Age when Dharma (civilisation) will be at its lowest ebb.] had touched its lowest depth, Harimohan returned home, despairing of the salvation of his next

of kin. In order to protect himself against contamination he covered sheets of foolscap with the name of Kali, the protecting goddess, in his neatest handwriting.

Harimohan left Calcutta. The plague and the preventive officials duly made their appearance in the locality; and for dread of being dragged off to the plague hospital, the wretched victims dared not call in medical aid. After a visit to one of these hospitals, Jagamohan shook his head and remarked: 'What if these people are falling ill,--that does not make them criminals.'

Jagamohan schemed and contrived till he obtained permission to use his own house as a private plague hospital. Some of us students offered to assist Satish in nursing: there was a qualified doctor among our number.

The first patient in our hospital was a Mussulman. He died. The next was Jagamohan himself. He did not survive either. He said to Satish:

'The religion I have all along followed has given me its last reward. There is nothing to complain of.'

Satish had never taken the dust [Footnote: Touching the feet of a revered elder, and then one's own head, is called taking the dust of the feet. It is the formal way of doing reverence.] of his uncle's feet while living. After Jagamohan's death he made that obeisance for the first and last time.

'Fit death for an atheist!' scoffed Hari-mohan when he first came across Satish after the cremation.

'That is so, sir!' agreed Satish, proudly.

II

Just as, when the flame is blown out, the light suddenly and completely disappears, so did Satish after his uncle's death. He went out of our ken altogether.

We had never been able to fathom how deeply Satish loved his uncle. Jagamohan was alike father and friend to him,--and, it may be said, son as well; for the old man had been so regardless of himself, so unmindful of worldly concerns, that it used to be one of the chief cares of Satish to look after him and keep him safe from disaster. Thus had Satish received from and given to his uncle his all.

What the bleakness of his bereavement meant for Satish, it was impossible for us to conceive. He struggled against the agony of negation, refusing to believe that such absolute blankness could be true: that there could be emptiness so desolate as to be void even of

Truth. If that which seemed one vast 'No' had not also its aspect of 'Yes,' would not the whole universe leak away through its yawning gap into nothingness?

For two years Satish wandered from place to place,---we had no touch with him. We threw ourselves with all the greater zeal into our self-- appointed tasks. We made it a special point to shock those who professed belief in any kind of religion, and the fields of good work we selected were such that not a good soul had a good word left for us. Satish had been our flower; when he dropped off, we, the thorns, cast off our sheaths and gloried in our sharpness.

III

Two years had passed since we lost sight of Satish. My mind revolted against harbouring the least thing evil against him, nevertheless I could not help suspecting that the high pitch at which he used to be kept strung must have been flattened down by this shock.

Uncle Jagamohan had once said of a Sannyasin: 'As the money-changer tests the ring of each coin, so does the world test each man by the response he gives to shocks of loss and pain, and the resistance he offers to the craze for cheap salvation. Those who fail to ring true are cast aside as worthless. These wandering ascetics have been so rejected, as being unfit to take part in the world's commerce,--yet the vagabonds swagger about, boasting that it is they who have renounced the world! The worthy are permitted no loophole of escape from duty,--only withered leaves are allowed to fall off the tree.'

Had it come to this, that Satish, of all people, had joined the ranks of the withered and the worthless? Was he, then, fated to leave on the black touchstone of bereavement his mark of spuriousness?

While assailed with these misgivings, news suddenly reached us that Satish (our Satish, if you please!) was making the heavens resound with his cymbals in some out-of-the-way village, singing frenzied kirtans [Footnote: The kirtan is a kind of devotional oratorio sung to the accompaniment of drums and cymbals, the libretto ranging over the whole gamut of human emotions, which are made the vehicle for communion with the Divine Lover. As their feelings get worked up, the singers begin to sway their bodies with, and finally dance to, the rhythm.] as a follower of Lilananda Swami, the Vaishnava revivalist!

It had passed my comprehension, when I first began to know Satish, how he could ever have come to be an atheist. I was now equally at a loss to understand how Lilananda Swami could have managed to lead him such a dance with his kirtans.

And how on earth were we to show our faces? What laughter there would be in the camp of the enemy,--whose number, thanks to our folly, was legion! Our band waxed mightily wroth with Satish. Many of them said they had known from the very first that there was no rational substance in him,--he was all frothy idealism. And I now discovered how much I really loved Satish. He had dealt his ardent sect of atheists their deathblow, yet I could not be angry with him.

Off I started to hunt up Lilananda Swami. River after river I crossed, and trudged over endless fields. The nights I spent in grocers' shops. At last in one of the villages I came up against Satish's party.

It was then two o'clock in the afternoon. I had been hoping to catch Satish alone. Impossible! The cottage which was honoured with the Swami's presence was packed all round with crowds of his disciples. There had been _kirtans_ all the morning; those who had come from a distance were now waiting to have their meal served.

As soon as Satish caught sight of me, he dashed up and embraced me fervidly. I was staggered. Satish had always been extremely reserved. His outward calm had been the only measure of his depth of feeling. He now appeared as though intoxicated.

The Swami was resting in the front room, with the door ajar. He could see us. At once came the call, in a deep voice: 'Satish!'

Satish was back inside, all in a flurry.

'Who is that?' inquired the Swami.

'Srivilas, a great friend of mine,' Satish reported.

During these years I had managed to make a name for myself in our little world. A learned Englishman had remarked, on hearing one of my English speeches: 'The man has a wonderful --.' But let that be. Why add to the number of my enemies? Suffice it to say that, from the students up to the students' grandparents, the reputation had travelled round that I was a rampaging atheist who could bestride the English language and race her over the hurdles at breakneck speed in the most marvellous manner.

I somehow felt that the Swami was pleased to have me here. He sent for me. I merely hinted at the usual salutation as I entered his room,--that is to say, my joined hands were uplifted, but my head was not lowered.

This did not escape the Swami. 'Here, Satish!' he ordered. 'Fill me that pipe of mine.'

Satish set to work. But as he lit the tinder, it was I who was set ablaze within. Moreover, I was getting fidgety, not knowing where to sit. The only seat in the room was a wooden bedstead on which was spread the Swami's carpet. Not that I confessed to any qualms about

occupying a corner of the same carpet on which the great man was installed, but somehow my sitting down did not come off. I remained standing near the door.

It appeared that the Swami was aware of my having won the Premchand-Roychand [Footnote: The highest prize at the Calcutta University. scholarship.] 'My son,' he said to me, 'it is good for the pearl diver if he succeeds in reaching the bottom, but he would die if he had to stay there. He must come up for the free breath of life. If you would live, you must now come up to the light, out of the depths of your learning. You have enjoyed the fruits of your scholarship, now try a taste of the joys of its renunciation.'

Satish handed his Master the lighted pipe and sat down on the bare floor near his feet. The Swami leant back and stretched his legs out towards Satish, who began gently to massage them. This was more than I could stand. I left the room. I could, of course, see that this ordering about of Satish and making him fetch and carry was deliberately directed at me.

The Swami went on resting. All the guests were duly served by the householder with a meal of kedgerree. From five o'clock the kirtans started again and went on till ten in the night.

When I got Satish alone at last, I said to him: 'Look here, Satish! You have been brought up in the atmosphere of freedom from infancy. How have you managed to get yourself entangled in this kind of bondage to-day? Is Uncle Jagamohan, then, so utterly dead?'

Partly because the playfulness of affection prompted it, partly, perhaps, because precision of description required it, Satish used to reverse the first two syllables of my name and call me Visri.

[Footnote: Ungainly, ugly.]

'Visri,' he replied, 'while Uncle was alive he gave me freedom in life's field of work,--the freedom which the child gets in the playground. After his death it is he, again, who has given me freedom on the high seas of emotion,--the freedom which the child gains when it comes back to its mother's arms. I have enjoyed to the full the freedom of life's day-time; why should I now deprive myself of the freedom of its evening?'

Be sure that both these are the gift of that same uncle of ours.'

'Whatever you may say,' I persisted, 'Uncle could have nothing to do with this kind of pipe-filling, leg-massaging business. Surely this is no picture of freedom.'

'That,' argued Satish, 'was the freedom on shore. There Uncle gave full liberty of action to our limbs. This is freedom on the ocean. Here the confinement of the ship is necessary

for our progress. That is why my Master keeps me bound to his service. This massaging is helping me to cross over.'

'It does not sound so bad,' I admitted, 'the way you put it. But, all the same, I have no patience with a man who can thrust out his legs at you like that.'

'He can do it,' explained Satish, 'because he has no need of such service. Had it been for himself, he might have felt ashamed to ask it. The need is mine.'

I realised that the world into which Satish had been transported had no place for me, his particular friend. The person, whom Satish has so effusively embraced, was not Srivilas, but a representative of all humanity,--just an idea. Such ideas are like wine. When they get into the head any one can be embraced and wept over--I, only as much as anybody else. But whatever joys may be the portion of the ecstatic one, what can such embrace signify to me, the other party? What satisfaction am I to get, merely to be accounted one of the ripples on a grand, difference-obliterating flood,--I, the individual I?

However, further argument was clearly useless. Nor could I make up my mind to desert Satish. So, as his satellite, I also danced from village to village, carried along the current of _kirtan_ singing.

The intoxication of it gradually took hold of me. I also embraced all and sundry, wept without provocation, and tended the feet of the Master. And one day, in a moment of curious exaltation, Satish was revealed to me in a light for which there can be no other name than divine.

IV

With the capture of two such egregious, college-educated atheists as we were, the fame of Lilananda Swami spread far and wide. His Calcutta disciples now pressed him to take up his headquarters at the metropolis.

So Swami Lilananda came on to Calcutta. Shivatosh had been a devoted follower of Lilananda. Whenever the Swami visited Calcutta he had stayed with Shivatosh. And it was the one delight of Shivatosh's life to serve the Master, together with all his disciples, when they thus honoured his house. When he died he bequeathed all his property to the Swami, leaving only a life-interest in the income to his young childless widow. It was his hope that this house of his would become a pilgrim-centre for the sect.

This was the house where we now went into residence.

During our ecstatic progress through the villages I had been in an elated mood, which I now found it difficult to keep up in Calcutta. In the wonderland of emotion, where we had

been revelling, the mystic drama of the courting of the Bride within us and the Bridegroom who is everywhere was being played. And a fitting accompaniment to it had been the symphony of the broad grazing greens, the shaded ferry landing-places, the enraptured expanse of the noonday leisure, the deep evening silences vibrant with the tremolo of cicadas. Ours had been a dream progress to which the open skies of the countryside offered no obstacle. But with our arrival at Calcutta we knocked our heads against its hardness, we got jostled by its crowds, and our dream was at an end.

Yet, was not this the same Calcutta where, within the confines of our students' lodgings, we had once put our whole soul into our studies, by day and by night; where we had pondered over and discussed the problems of our country with our fellow-students in the College Square; where we had served as volunteers at the holding of our National Assemblies; where we had responded to the call of Uncle Jagamohan, and taken the vow to free our minds from all slavery imposed by Society or State? Yes, it was in this self-same Calcutta that, in the flood-tide of our youth, we had pursued our course, regardless of the revilement of stranger and kindred alike, proudly breasting all contrary currents like a boat in full sail. Why, then, should we now fail, in this whirlpool of suffering humanity, ridden with pleasure and pain, driven by hunger and thirst, to keep up the exaltation proper to our tear-drenched cult of emotional Communion?

As I manfully made the attempt, I was beset with doubts at every step. Was I then a mere weakling: unfaithful to my ideal: unworthy of strenuous endeavour? When I turned to Satish, to see how he fared, I found on his countenance no sign to show that Calcutta, for him, represented any geographical reality whatsoever. In the mystic world where he dwelt, all this city life meant no more than a mirage.

V

We two friends took up our quarters, with the Master, in Shivatosh's house. We had come to be his chief disciples, and he would have us constantly near his person.

With our Master and our fellow-disciples we were absorbed day and night in discussing emotions in general and the philosophy of spiritual emotion in particular. Into the very thick of the abstruse complexities which thus engaged our attention, the ripple of a woman's laughter would now and again find its way from the inner apartments. [Footnote: The women's part of the house.] Sometimes there would be heard, in a clear, high-toned voice, the call 'Bami!'--evidently a maid-servant of that name.

These were doubtless but trivial interruptions for minds soaring, almost to vanishing point, into the empyrean of idea. But to me they came as a grateful shower of rain upon a parched and thirsty soil. When little touches of life, like shed flower petals, were blown

across from the unknown world behind the wall, then all in a moment I could understand that the wonderland of our quest was just there,--where the keys jingled, tied to the corner of Bami's sari; where the sound of the broom rose from the swept floor, and the smell of the cooking from the kitchen,--all trifles, but all true. That world, with its mingling of fine and coarse, bitter and sweet,--that itself was the heaven where Emotion truly held sway.

The name of the widow was Damini. We could catch momentary glimpses of her through opening doors and flapping curtains. But the two of us grew to be so much part and parcel of the Master as to share his privilege, [Footnote: Women do not observe _purdah_ with religious ascetics.] and very soon these doors and curtains were no longer barriers in our case.

Damini [Footnote: Damini means Lightning.] was the lightning which gleams within the massed clouds of July. Without, the curves of youth enveloped her in their fulness, within flashed fitful fires. Thus runs an entry in Satish's diary:

In Nonibala I have seen the Universal Woman in one of her aspects,--the woman who takes on herself the whole burden of sin, who gives up life itself for the sinner's sake, and in dying leaves for the world the balm of immortality. In Damini I see another aspect of Universal Woman. This one has nothing to do with death,--she is the Artist of the Art of Life. She blossoms out, in limitless profusion, in form and scent and movement. She is not for rejection; refuses to entertain the ascetic; and is vowed to resist the least farthing of payment to the tax-gathering Winter Wind.

It is necessary to relate Damini's previous history.

At the time when the coffers of her father, Annada, were overflowing with proceeds of his jute business, Damini was married to Shivatosh. So long, Shivatosh's fortune had consisted only in his pedigree: it could now count a more substantial addition. Annada bestowed on his son-in-law a house in Calcutta and sufficient money to keep him for life. There were also lavish gifts of furniture and ornaments made to his daughter.

Annada, further, made a futile attempt to take Shivatosh into his own business. But the latter had no interest in worldly concerns. An astrologer had once predicted to Shivatosh that, on the happening of a special conjunction of the stars, his soul would gain its emancipation whilst still in the flesh. From that day he lived in this hope alone, and ceased to find charm in riches, or even in objects still more charming. It was while in this frame of mind that he had become a disciple of Lilananda Swami.

In the meantime, with the subsidence of the jute boom, the full force of the adverse wind caught the heavy-laden bark of Annada's fortune and toppled it over. All his property was sold up and he had hardly enough left to make a bare living.

One evening Shivatosh came into the inner apartments and said to his wife: 'The Master is here. He has some words of advice for you and bids you attend.'

'I cannot go to him now,' answered Damini. 'I haven't the time.'

What? No time! Shivatosh went up nearer and found his wife seated in the gathering dusk, in front of the open safe, with her ornaments spread out before her. 'What in the world is keeping you?' inquired he.

'I am arranging my jewels,' was the reply.

So that was the reason for her lack of time. Indeed!

The next day, when Damini opened the safe, she found her jewel-box missing. 'My jewels?' she exclaimed, turning inquiringly to her husband.

'But you offered them to the Master. Did not his call reach you at the very moment?--for he sees into the minds of men. He has deigned, in his mercy, to save you from the lure of pelf.'

Damini's indignation rose to white heat.

'Give me back my ornaments!' she commanded.

'Why, what will you do with them?'

'They were my father's gift to me. I would return them to him.'

'They have gone to a better place,' said Shivatosh. 'Instead of pandering to worldly needs they are dedicated to the service of devotees.'

That is how the tyrannical imposition of faith began. And the pious ritual of exorcism, in all its cruelty, continued to be practised in order to rid Damini's mind of its mundane affections and desires.

So, while her father and her little brother were starving by inches, Damini had to prepare daily, with her own hands, meals for the sixty or seventy disciples who thronged the house with the Master. She would sometimes rebelliously leave out the salt, or contrive to get the viands scorched, but that did not avail to gain her any respite from her penance.

At this juncture Shivatosh died: and in departing he awarded his wife the supreme penalty for her want of faith,--he committed his widow, with all her belongings, to the guardianship of the Master.

VI

The house was in a constant tumult with rising waves of fervour.

Devotees kept streaming in from all quarters to sit at the feet of the Master. And yet Damini, who had gained the Presence without effort of her own, thrust aside her good fortune with contumely.

Did the Master call her for some special mark of his favour she would keep aloof, pleading a headache. If he had occasion to complain of some special omission of personal attention on her part, she would confess to have been away at the theatre. The excuse was lacking in truth, but not in rudeness.

The other women disciples were aghast at Damini's ways. First, her attire was not such as widows [Footnote: Hindu widows in Bengal are supposed to dress in simple white (sometimes plain brown silk), without border, or ornamentation.] should affect. Secondly, she showed no eagerness to drink in the Master's words of wisdom. Lastly, her demeanour had none of the reverential restraint which the Master's presence demanded. 'What a shame,' exclaimed they. 'We have seen many awful women, but not one so outrageous.'

The Swami used to smile. 'The Lord,' said he, 'takes a special delight in wrestling with a valiant opponent. When Damini has to own defeat, her surrender will be absolute.'

He began to display an exaggerated tolerance for her contumacy. That vexed Damini still more, for she looked on it as a more cunning form of punishment. And one day the Master caught her in a fit of laughter, mimicking to one of her companions the excessive suavity of his manner towards herself. Still he had not a word of rebuke, and repeated simply that the final denouement would be all the more extraordinary, to which end the poor thing was but the instrument of Providence, and so herself not to blame.

This was how we found her when we first came. The denouement was indeed extraordinary. I can hardly bring myself to write on further. Moreover, what happened is so difficult to tell. The network of suffering, which is woven behind the scenes, is not of any pattern set by the Scriptures, nor of our own devising. Hence the frequent discords between the inner and the outer life--discords that hurt, and wail forth in tears.

There came, at length, the dawn when the harsh crust of rebelliousness cracked and fell to pieces, and the flower of self-surrender came through and held up its dew-washed face. Damini's service became so beautiful in its truth that it descended on the devotees like the blessing of the very Divinity of their devotions.

And when Damini's lightning flashes had matured into a steady radiance, Satish looked on her and saw that she was beautiful; but I say this, that Satish gazed only on her beauty, failing to see Damini herself.

In Satish's room there hung a portrait of the Swami sitting in meditation, done on a porcelain medallion. One day he found it on the floor,--in fragments. He put it down to his pet cat.

But other little mischiefs began to follow, which were clearly beyond the powers of the cat. There was some kind of disturbance in the air, which now and again broke out in unseen electric shocks.

How others felt, I know not, but a growing pain gnawed at my heart. Sometimes I thought that this constant ecstasy of emotion was proving too much for me. I wanted to give it all up and run away. The old work of teaching the leather-dealers' children seemed, in its unalloyed prose, to be now calling me back.

One afternoon when the Master was taking his siesta, and the weary disciples were at rest, Satish for some reason went off into his own room at this unusual hour. His progress was suddenly arrested at the threshold. There was Damini, her thick tresses dishevelled, lying prone on the floor, beating her head on it as she moaned: 'Oh, you stone, you stone, have mercy on me, have mercy and kill me outright!'

Satish, trembling from head to foot with a nameless fear, fled from the room.

VII

It was a rule with Swami Lilananda to go off once a year to some remote, out-of-the-way place, away from the crowd. With the month of Magh [Footnote: January-February.] came round the time for his journey. Satish was to attend on him.

I asked to go too. I was worn to the very bone with the incessant emotional excitement of our cult, and felt greatly in need of physical movement as well as of mental quiet.

The Master sent for Damini. 'My little mother,' he told her, 'I am about to leave you for the duration of my travels. Let me arrange for your stay meanwhile with your aunt, as usual.'

'I would accompany you,' said Damini.

'You could hardly bear it, I am afraid. Our journeying will be troublesome.'

'Of course I can bear it,' she answered. 'Pray have no concern about any trouble of mine.'

Lilananda was pleased at this proof of Damini's devotion. In former years, this opportunity had been Damini's holiday time,--the one thing to which she had looked forward through the preceding months.

'Miraculous!' thought the Swami. 'How wondrously does even stone become as wax in the Lord's melting-pot of emotion.'

So Damini had her way, and came along with us.

VIII

The spot we reached, after hours of tramping in the sun, was a little promontory on the sea-coast, shaded by cocoa-nut palms. Profound was the solitude and the tranquillity which reigned there, as the gentle rustle of the palm tassels merged into the idle plash of the girdling sea. The place looked like a tired hand of the sleepy shore, limply fallen upon the surface of the waters. On this open hand stood a bluish-green hill, and inside the hill was a sculptured cave-temple of bygone days, which, for all its serene beauty, was the cause of much disquiet amongst antiquarians as to the origin, style, and subject-matter of its sculptures.

Our intention had been to return to the village where we had made our halt, after paying a visit to this temple. That was now seen to be impossible. The day was fast declining, and the moon was long past its full. Lilananda Swami at length decided that we should pass the night in the cave.

All four of us sat down to rest on the sandy soil beneath the cocoa-nut groves fringing the sea. The sunset glow bent lower and lower over the western horizon, as though Day was making its parting obeisance to approaching Night.

The Master's voice broke forth in song--one of his own composition:

_The day has waned, when at last we meet at the turning;

And as I try to see thy face, the last ray of evening fades into the night._

We had heard the song before, but never with such complete rapport between singer, audience, and surroundings. Damini was affected to tears. The Swami went on to the second verse:

_I shall not grieve that the darkness comes between thee and my sight,---

Only, for a moment, stand before me, that I may kiss thy feet and wipe them with my hair._

When he had come to the end, the placid eventide, enveloping sky and waters, was filled, like some ripe, golden fruit, with the bursting sweetness of melody.

Damini rose and went up to the Master. As she prostrated herself at his feet, her loose hair slipped off her shoulders and was scattered over the ground on either side. She remained long thus before she raised her head.

IX

(FROM SATISH'S DIARY)

There were several chambers within the temple. In one of these I spread my blanket and laid myself down. The darkness pent up inside the cave seemed alive, like some great black monster, its damp breath bedewing my body. I began to be haunted by the idea that this was the first of all created animals, born in the beginning of time, with no eyes or ears, but just one enormous appetite. Confined within this cavern for endless ages it knew nothing, having no mind; but having sensibility it felt; and wept and wept in silence.

Fatigue overpowered my limbs like a dead weight, but sleep came not. Some bird, or perhaps bat, flitted in from the outside, or out from the inside,--its wings beating the air as it flew from darkness to darkness; when the draught reached my body it sent a shiver through me, making my flesh creep.

I thought I would go and get some sleep outside. But I could not recollect the direction in which the entrance was. As I crawled on my hands and knees along the way which appeared the right one, I knocked against the cave wall. When I tried a different side, I nearly tumbled into a hollow in which the water dripping through the cracks had collected.

I crawled back to my blanket and stretched myself on it again. Again was I possessed with the fancy that I had been taken right into the creature's maw and could not extricate myself; that I was the victim of a blind hunger which was licking me with its slimy saliva, through which I would be sucked and digested noiselessly, little by little.

I felt that only sleep could save me. My living, waking consciousness was evidently unable to bear such close embrace of this horrible, suffocating obscurity--fit only for the dead to suffer. I cannot say how long after it came upon me,--or whether it was really sleep at all,--but a thin veil of oblivion fell at last over my senses. And while in such half-conscious state I actually felt a deep breathing somewhere near my bare feet. Surely it was not that primeval creature of my imagining!

Then something seemed to cling about my feet. Some real wild animal this time,--was my first thought. But there was nothing furry in its touch. What if it was some species of serpent or reptile, of features and body unknown to me, of whose method of absorbing its

prey I could form no idea? All the more loathsome seemed the softness of it,--of this terrible, unknown mass of hunger.

What between dread and disgust, I could not even utter a cry. I tried to push it away with ineffectual thrusts with my legs. Its face seemed to be touching my feet, on which its panting breath fell thickly. What kind of a face had it, I wondered. I launched a more vigorous kick as the stupor left me. I had at first supposed there was no fur, but what felt like a mane now brushed across my legs. I struggled up into a sitting posture.

Something stole away in the darkness. There was also a curious kind of sound. Could it have been sobbing?

CHAPTER III

DAMINI

I

We are back in our quarters in the village, near a temple, in a two-storeyed house belonging to one of the Swami's disciples, which had been placed at our disposal. Since our return we see but little of Damini, though she is still in charge of our household affairs. She has made friends with the neighbouring women, and spends most of her spare time in going about with them from one house to another.

The Swami is not particularly pleased. Damini's heart, thinks he, does not yet respond to the call of the ethereal heights. All its fondness is still for earthen walls. In her daily work of looking after the devotees,--formerly like an act of worship with her,--a trace of weariness has become noticeable. She makes mistakes. Her service has lost its radiance.

The Master, at heart, begins to be afraid of her again. Between her brows there darkens a gathering frown; her temple is ruffled with fitful breezes; the loosening knot of her hair lowers over her neck; the pressure of her lips, the gleams from the corner of her eye, her sudden wayward gestures presage a rebellious storm.

The Swami turned to his kirtans with renewed attention. The wandering bee, he hoped, would be brought to drink deep of the honey, once enticed in by its fragrance. And so the short cool days were filled to the brim with the foaming wine of ecstatic song.

But no, Damini refused to be caught. The exasperated Swami laughed out one day: 'The Lord is out hunting: the resolute flight of the deer adds zest to the chase: but succumb she must, in the end.'

When we had first come to know Damini, she was not to be found among the band of devotees clustering round the Master. That, however, did not attract our notice then. But now, her empty place had become conspicuous. Her frequent absences smote us tempestuously.

The Swami put this down to her pride, and that hurt his own pride. As for me,--but what does it matter what I thought?

One day the Master mustered up courage to say in his most dulcet tones: 'Damini, my little mother, do you think you will have a little time to spare this afternoon? If so '

'No,' said Damini.

'Would you mind telling me why?'

'I have to assist in making sweetmeats at the Nandi's.'

'Sweetmeats? What for?'

'They have a wedding on.'

'Is your assistance so indispensably ----- ?'

'I promised to be there.'

Damini whisked out of the room without waiting for further questioning.

Satish, who was there with us, was dumbfounded. So many men of learning, wealth, and fame had surrendered at the feet of the Master, and this slip of a girl,--what gave her such hardihood of assurance?

Another evening Damini happened to be at home. The Master had addressed himself to some specially important topic. After his discourse had progressed awhile, something in our faces gave him pause. He found our attention wandering. On looking round he discovered that Damini, who had been seated in the room, sewing in hand, was not to be seen. He understood the reason of our distraction. She was not there, not there, not there,--the refrain now kept worrying him too. He began to lose the thread of his discourse, and at last gave it up altogether.

The Swami left the room and went off to Damini's door. 'Damini,' he called. 'Why are you all alone here? Will you not come and join us?'

'I am engaged,' said Damini.

The baffled Swami could see, as he passed by the half-open door, a captive kite in a cage. It had somehow struck against the telegraph wires, and had been lying wounded when Damini rescued it from the pestering crows, and she had been tending it since.

The kite was not the only object which engaged Damini's solicitude. There was a mongrel pup, whose looks were on a par with its breeding. It was discord personified. Whenever it heard our cymbals, it would look up to heaven and voice forth a prolonged complaint. The gods, being fortunate, did not feel bound to give it a hearing. The poor mortals whose ears happened to be within reach were woefully agonised.

One afternoon, when Damini was engaged in practising horticulture in sundry cracked pots on the roof-terrace, Satish came up and asked her point-blank: 'Why is it you have given up coming over there altogether?'

'Over where?'

'To the Master.'

'Why, what need have you people of me?'

'We have no need,--but surely the need is yours.'

'No, no!' flung out Damini. 'Not at all, not at all!'

Taken aback by her heat, Satish gazed at her in silence. Then he mused aloud: 'Your mind lacks peace. If you would gain peace'

'Peace from you,--you who are consumed day and night with your excitement,--where have you the peace to give? Leave me alone, I beg and pray you. I was at peace. I would be at peace.'

'You see but the waves on the surface. If you have the patience to dive deep, you will find all calm there.'

Damini wrung her hands as she cried: 'I beseech you, for the Lord's sake, don't insist on my diving downwards. If only you will give up all hope of my conversion, I may yet live.'

II

My experience has never been large enough to enable me to penetrate the mysteries of woman's mind. Judging from what little I have seen of the surface from the outside, I have come to the belief that women are ever ready to bestow their heart where sorrow cannot but be their lot. They will either string their garland of acceptance [Footnote: In the old days, when a girl had to choose between several suitors, she signified her choice by putting a garland round the neck of the accepted one.] for some brute of a man who will trample it under foot and defile it in the mire of his passions, or dedicate it to some idealist, on whose neck it will get no hold, attenuated as he is, like the dream-stuff of his imaginings.

When left to do their own choosing, women invariably reject ordinary men like me, made up of gross and fine, who know woman to be just woman,--that is to say, neither a doll of clay made to serve for our pastime, nor a transcendental melody to be evoked at our master touch. They reject us, because we have neither the forceful delusions of the flesh, nor the roseate illusions of fancy: we can neither break them on the wheel of our desire, nor melt them in the glow of our fervour to be cast in the mould of our ideal.

Because we know them only for what they are, they may be friendly, but cannot love us. We are their true refuge, for they can rely on our devotion; but our self-dedication comes so easy that they forget it has a price. So the only reward we get is to be used for their purposes; perchance to win their respect. But I am afraid my excursions into the region of psychology are merely due to personal grievances, which have my own experience behind them. The fact probably is, what we thus lose is really our gain,--anyway, that is how we may console ourselves.

Damini avoids the Master because she cannot bear him. She fights shy of Satish because for him her feelings are of the opposite description. I am the only person, near at hand, with whom there is no question either of love or hate. So whenever I am with her, Damini talks away to me of unimportant matters concerning the old days, the present times, or the daily happenings at the neighbours' houses. These talks usually take place on the shaded part of the roof-terrace, which serves as a passage between our several rooms on the second storey, where Damini sits slicing betel-nuts.

What I could not understand was, how these trifling talks should have attracted the notice of Satish's emotion-clouded vision. Even suppose the circumstance was not so trifling, had I not often been told that, in the world where Satish dwelt, there were no such disturbing things as circumstances at all? The Mystic Union, in which personified cosmic forces were assisting, was an eternal drama, not an historical episode. Those who are rapt with the undying flute strains, borne along by the ceaseless zephyrs which play on the banks of the ever-flowing Jamuna of that mystic paradise, have no eyes or ears left for the ephemeral doings immediately around them. This much at least is certain, that before our return from the cave, Satish used to be much denser in his perception of worldly events.

For this difference I may have been partly responsible. I also had begun to absent myself from our kirtans and discourses, perhaps with a frequency which could not elude even Satish. One day he came round on inquiry, and found me running after Damini's mongoose,--a recent acquisition,--trying to lure it into bondage with a pot of milk, which I had procured from the local milkman. This occupation, viewed as an excuse, was simply hopeless. It could easily have waited till the end of our sitting. For the matter of that, the best thing clearly would have been to leave the mongoose to its own devices, thus at one stroke demonstrating my adherence to the two principal tenets of our cult,--Compassion for all creatures, and Passion for the Lord.

That is why, when Satish came up, I had to feel ashamed. I put down the pot, then and there, and tried to edge away along the path which led back to self-respect.

But Damini's behaviour took me by surprise. She was not in the least abashed as she asked: 'Where are you off to, Srivilas Babu?'

I scratched my head, as I mumbled: 'I was thinking of joining the ----'

'They must have finished by this time. Do sit down.'

This coming from Damini, in the presence of Satish, made my ears burn.

Damini turned to Satish. 'I am in awful trouble with the mongoose,' she said. 'Last night it stole a chicken from the Mussulman quarters over there. I dare not leave it loose any longer. Srivilas Babu has promised to look out for a nice big hamper to keep it in.'

It seemed to me that it was my devotion to her which Damini was using the mongoose to show off. I was reminded how the Swami had given orders to Satish so as to impress me. The two were the same thing.

Satish made no reply, and his departure was somewhat abrupt. I gazed on Damini and could see her eyes flash out as they followed his disappearing figure; while on her lips there set a hard, enigmatic smile.

What conclusion Damini had come to she herself knew best; the only result apparent to me was that she began to send for me on all kinds of flimsy pretexts. Sometimes she would make sweetmeats, which she pressed on me. One day I could not help suggesting: 'Let's offer some to Satish as well.'

'That would only annoy him,' said Damini.

And it happened that Satish, passing that way, caught me in the act of being thus regaled.

In the drama which was being played, the hero and the heroine spoke their parts 'aside.' I was the one character who, being of no consequence, had to speak out. This sometimes made me curse my lot; none the less, I could not withstand the temptation of the petty cash with which I was paid off, from day to day, for taking up the role of middleman.

III

For some days Satish clanged his cymbals and danced his _kirtans_ with added vigour. Then one day he came to me and said: 'We cannot keep Damini with us any longer.'

'Why?' I asked.

'We must free ourselves altogether from the influence of women.'

'If that be a necessity,' said I, 'there must be something radically wrong with our system.'

Satish stared at me in amazement.

'Woman is a natural phenomenon,' I continued, undaunted, 'who will have her place in the world, however much we may try to get rid of her. If your spiritual welfare depends on ignoring her existence, then its pursuit will be like the chasing of a phantom, and will so put you to shame, when the illusion is gone, that you will not know where to hide yourself.'

'Oh, stop your philosophising!' exclaimed Satish. 'I was talking practical politics. It is only too evident that women are emissaries of Maya, and at Maya's behest ply on us their blandishments,--for they cannot fulfil the design of their Mistress unless they overpower our reason. So we must steer clear of them if we would keep our intellect free.'

I was about to make my reply, when Satish stopped me with a gesture, and went on: 'Visri, old fellow! let me tell you plainly: if the hand of Maya is not visible to you, that is because you have allowed yourself to be caught in her net. The vision of beauty with which she has ensnared you to-day will vanish, and with the beauty will disappear the spectacles of desire, through which you now see it as greater than all the world. Where the noose of Maya is so glaringly obvious, why be foolhardy enough to take risks?'

'I admit all that,' I rejoined. 'But, my dear fellow, the all-pervading net of Maya was not cast by my hands, nor do I know the way to escape through it. Since we have not the power to evade Maya, our spiritual striving should help us, while acknowledging her, to rise above her. Because it does not take such a course, we have to flounder about in vain attempts to cut away the half of Truth.'

'Well, well, let's have your idea a little more clearly,' said Satish.

'We must sail the boat of our life,' I proceeded, 'along the current of nature, in order to reach beyond it. Our problem is, not how to get rid of this current, but how to keep the boat afloat in its channel until it is through. For that, a rudder is necessary.'

'You people who have ceased to be loyal to the Master,--how can I make you understand that in _him_ we have just this rudder? You would regulate your spiritual life according to your own whims. That way death lies!' Satish went to the Master's chamber, and fell to tending his feet with fervour.

The same evening, when Satish lit the Master's pipe, he also put forward his plaint against Maya and her emissaries. The smoking of one pipe, however, did not suffice for its adjudication. Evening after evening, pipe after pipe was exhausted, yet the Master was unable to make up his mind.

From the very beginning Damini had given the Swami no end of trouble. Now the girl had managed to set up this eddy in the midst of the smooth course of the devotees' progress. But Shivatosh had thrown her and her belongings so absolutely on the Master's hands that he knew not how or where to cast her off.

| *What made it more difficult still was that he harboured a secret fear of his ward.*

And Satish, in spite of all the doubled and quadrupled enthusiasm which he put into his _kirtans_, in spite of all the pipe-filling and massaging in which he tried to rest his heart, was not allowed to forget for a moment that Maya had taken up her position right across the line of his spiritual advance.

One day some _kirtan_ singers of repute had arrived, and were to sing in the evening at the temple next door. The _kirtan_ would last far into the night. I managed to slip away after the preliminary overture, having no doubt that, in so thick a crowd, no one would notice my absence.

Damini that evening had completely thrown off her reserve. Things which are difficult to speak of, which refuse to leave one's choking throat, flowed from her lips so simply, so sweetly. It was as if she had suddenly come upon some secret recess in her heart, so long hidden away in darkness,--as if, by some strange chance, she had gained the opportunity to stand before her own self, face to face.

Just at this time Satish came up from behind and stood there hesitating, without our being aware of it at the moment. Not that Damini was saying anything very particular, but there were tears in her eyes,--all her words, in fact, were then welling up from some tear-flooded depth. When Satish arrived, the _kirtan_ could not have been anywhere near its end. I divined that he must have been goaded with repeated inward urgings to have left the temple then.

As Satish came round into our view, Damini rose with a start, wiped her eyes, and made off towards her room. Satish, with a tremor in his voice, said: 'Damini, will you listen to me? I would have a word with you.'

Damini slowly retraced her steps, and came and sat down again. I made as though to take myself off, but an imploring glance from her restrained me from stirring. Satish, who seemed to have made some kind of effort meanwhile, came straight to the point.

'The need,' said he to Damini, 'which brought the rest of us to the Master, was not yours when you came to him.'

'No,' avowed Damini expectantly.

'Why, then, do you stay amongst his devotees?'

Damini's eyes flamed up as she cried: 'Why do I stay? Because I did not come of my own accord! I was a helpless creature, and every one knew my lack of faith. Yet I was bound

hand and foot by your devotees in this dungeon of devotion. What avenue of escape have you left me?'

'We have now decided,' stated Satish, 'that if you would go to stay with some relative all your expenses will be found.'

'You have decided, have you?'

'Yes.'

'Well, then,--I have not!'

'Why, how will that inconvenience you?'

'Am I a pawn in your game, that you devotees should play me, now this way, now the other?'

Satish was struck dumb.

'I did not come,' continued Damini, 'wanting to please your devotees. And I am not going away at the bidding of the lot of you, merely because I don't happen to please you!'

Damini covered her face with her hands and burst out sobbing as she ran into her room and slammed the door.

Satish did not return to the kirtan singing. He sank down in a corner of the adjoining roof-terrace and brooded there in silence.

The sound of the breakers on the distant seashore came, wafted along the south breeze, like despairing sighs, rising up to the watching star clusters, from the very heart of the Earth. I spent the night wandering round and round along the dark, deserted village lanes.

IV

The World of Reality has made a determined onslaught on the Mystic Paradise, within the confines of which the Master sought to keep Satish and myself content by repeatedly filling for us the cup of symbolism with the nectar of idea. Now the clash of the actual with the symbolic bids fair to overturn the latter and spill its emotional contents in the dust. The Master is not blind to this danger.

Satish is no longer himself. Like a paper kite, with its regulating knot gone, he is still high in the skies, but may at any moment begin to gyrate groundwards. There is no falling off as yet in the outward rigour of his devotional and disciplinary exercises, but a closer scrutiny reveals the totter of weakening.

As for my condition, Damini has left nothing so vague in it as to require any guess-work. The more she notices the fear in the Master's face, and the pain in Satish's, the oftener she makes me dance attendance on her.

At last it came to this, that when we were engaged in talk with the Master, Damini would sometimes appear in the doorway and interrupt us with: 'Srivilas Babu, would you mind coming over this way?' without even condescending to add what I was wanted for.

The Swami would glance up at me; Satish would glance up at me; I would hesitate for a moment between them and her; then I would glance up at the door,--and in a trice I was off the fence and out of the room. An effort would be made, after my exit, to go on with the talk, but the effort would soon get the better of the talk, whereupon the latter would stop.

Everything seemed to be falling to pieces around us. The old compactness was gone.

We two had come to be the pillars of the sect. The Master could not give up either of us without a struggle. So he ventured once more to make an overture to Damini. 'My little mother,' said he, 'the time is coming for us to proceed to the more arduous part of our journey. You had better return from here.'

'Return where?'

'Home, to your aunt.'

'That cannot be.'

'Why?' asked the Swami. 'First of all,' said Damini, 'she is not my own aunt at all. Why should she bear my burden?'

'All your expenses shall be borne by us.'

'Expenses are not the only burden. It is no part of her duty to be saddled with looking after me.'

'But, Damini,' urged the Swami in his desperation, 'can I keep you with me for ever?'

'Is that a question for me to answer?'

'But where will you go when I am dead?'

'I was never allowed,' returned Damini icily, 'to have the responsibility of thinking that out. I have been made to realise too well that in this world I have neither home nor property; nothing at all to call my own. That is what makes my burden so heavy to bear. It pleased you to take it up. You shall not now cast it on another!'

Damini went off.

'Lord, have mercy!' sighed the Swami.

Damini had laid on me the command to procure for her some good Bengali books. I need hardly say that by 'good' Damini did not mean spiritual, of the quality affected by our sect. Nor need I pause to make it clear that Damini had no compunction in asking anything from me. It had not taken her long to find out that making demands on me was the easiest way of making me amends. Some kinds of trees are all the better for being pruned: that was the kind of person I seemed to be where Damini was concerned.

Well, the books I ordered were unmitigatedly modern. The author was distinctly less influenced by Manu [Footnote: The Hindu law-giver.] than by Man himself. The packet was delivered by the postman to the Swami. He raised his eyebrows, as he opened it, and asked: 'Hullo, Srivilas, what are these for?'

I remained silent.

The Master gingerly turned over some of the pages, as he remarked for my benefit that he had never thought much of the author, having failed to find in his writings the correct spiritual flavour.

'If you read them carefully, sir,' I suddenly blurted out, 'you will find his writings not to be lacking in the flavour of Truth.' The fact is, rebellion had been long brewing within me. I was feeling done to death with mystic emotion. I was nauseated with shedding tears over abstract human feelings, to the neglect of living human creatures.

The Master blinked at me curiously before he replied: 'Very well, my son, carefully read them I will.' He tucked the books away under the bolster on which he reclined. I could perceive that his idea was not to surrender them to me.

Damini, from behind the door, must have got wind of this, for at once she stepped in and asked: 'Haven't the books you ordered for me arrived yet?'

I remained silent.

'My little mother!' said the Swami. 'These books are not fit for you to read.'

'How should you know that?'

The Master frowned. 'How, at least, could you know better?'

'I have read the author: you, perhaps, have not.'

'Why, then, need you read him over again?'

'When you have any need,' Damini flared up, 'nothing is allowed to stand in your way. It is only I who am to have no needs!'

'You forget yourself, Damini. I am a _sannyasin_. I have no worldly desires.'

'You forget that I am not a _sannyasin_. I have a desire to read these books. Will you kindly let me have them?'

The Swami drew out the books from under his bolster and tossed them across to me. I handed them over to Damini.

In the end, the books that Damini would have read alone by herself, she now began to send for me to read out to her. It was in that same shaded veranda along our rooms that these readings took place. Satish passed and repassed, longing to join in, but could not, unasked.

One day we had come upon a humorous passage, and Damini was rocking with laughter. There was a festival on at the temple and we had supposed that Satish would be there. But we heard a door open behind, through which Satish unexpectedly appeared and came and sat down beside us.

Damini's laughter was at once cut short. I also felt awkward. I wanted badly to say something to Satish, but no words would come, and I went on silently turning over page after page of my book. He rose, and left as abruptly as he had come. Our reading made no further progress that day.

Satish may very likely have understood that while he envied the absence of reserve between Damini and me, its presence was just what I envied in his case. That same day he petitioned the Master to be allowed to go off on a solitary excursion along the sea-coast, promising to be back within a week. 'The very thing, my son!'

acquiesced the Swami, with enthusiasm.

Satish departed. Damini did not send for me to read to her any more, nor had she anything else to ask of me. Neither did I see her going to her friends, the women of the neighbourhood. She kept her room, with closed doors.

Some days passed thus. One afternoon, when the Master was deep in his siesta, and I was writing a letter seated out on our veranda, Satish suddenly turned up. Without so much as a glance at me, he walked straight up to Damini's door, knocking as he called: 'Damini, Damini.'

Damini came out at once. A strangely altered Satish met her inquiring gaze. Like a storm-battered ship, with torn rigging and tattered sails, was his condition,--eyes wild, hair dishevelled, features drawn, garments dusty.

'Damini,' said Satish, 'I asked you to leave us. That was wrong of me. I beg your forgiveness.'

'Oh, don't say that,' cried the distressed Damini, clasping her hands.

'You must forgive me,' he repeated. 'I will never again allow that pride to overcome me, which led me to think I could take you or leave you, according to my own spiritual requirements. Such sin will never cross my mind again, I promise you. Do you also promise me one thing?'

'Command me!' said Damini, making humble obeisance.

'You must join us, and not keep aloof like this.'

'I will join you,' said Damini. 'I will sin no more.' Then, as she bowed low again to take the dust of his feet, she repeated, 'I will sin no more.'

V

The stone was melted again. Damini's bewildering radiance remained undimmed, but it lost its heat. In worship and ritual and service her beauty blossomed out anew. She was never absent from the _kirtan_ singing, nor when the Master gave his readings and discourses. There was a change in her raiment also. She reverted to the golden brown of plain tussore, [Footnote: The tussore silk-worm is a wild variety, and its cocoon has to be used after the moth has cut its way out and flown away, thus not being killed in the process of unwinding the silk. Hence tussore silk is deemed specially suitable for wear on occasions of divine worship.] and whenever we saw her she seemed fresh from her toilet.

The severest test came in her intercourse with the Master. When she made her salutation to him, I could catch the glint of severely repressed temper through her half-closed eyelids. I knew very well that she could not bear to take orders from the Master; nevertheless, so complete was her self-suppression, that the Swami was able to screw up the courage to repeat his condemnation of the obnoxious tone of that outrageously modern Bengali writer. The next day there was a heap of flowers near his seat, and under them were the torn pages of the books of the objectionable author.

I had always noticed that the attendance on the Master by Satish was specially intolerable to Damini. Even now, when the Master asked him for some personal service, Damini would try to hustle past Satish and forestall him. This, however, was not possible in every case; and while Satish kept blowing on the tinder to get it into a blaze for the Master's pipe, Damini would have much ado to keep herself in hand by grimly repeating under her breath, 'I will sin no more. I will sin no more.'

But what Satish had tried for did not come off. On the last occasion of Damini's self-surrender, he had seen the beauty of the surrender only, not of the self behind it. This time Damini herself had become so true for him that she eclipsed all strains of music, and all

thoughts of philosophy. Her reality had become so dominant that Satish could no longer lose himself in his visions, nor think of her merely as an aspect of Universal Woman. It was not she who, as before, set off for him the melodies which filled his mind; rather, these melodies had now become part of the halo which encircled her person.

I should not, perhaps, leave out the minor detail that Damini had no longer any use for me. Her demands on me had suddenly ceased altogether. Of my colleagues, who used to assist in beguiling her leisure, the kite was dead, the mongoose had escaped, and as for the mongrel puppy, its manners having offended the Master's susceptibilities, it had been given away. Thus, bereft both of occupation and companionship, I returned to my old place in the assembly surrounding the Master, though the talking and singing and doing that went on there had all alike become horribly distasteful to me.

VI

The laboratory of Satish's mind was not amenable to any outside laws. One day, as he was compounding therein, for my special benefit, a weird mixture of ancient philosophy and modern science, with reason as well as emotion promiscuously thrown in, Damini burst in upon us, panting: 'Oh, do come, both of you, come quick!'

'Whatever is the matter?' I cried, as I leapt up.

'Nabin's wife has taken poison, I think,' she said.

Nabin was a neighbour, one of our regular kirtan singers--an ardent disciple. We hurried after Damini, but when we arrived his wife was dead.

We pieced together her story. Nabin's wife had brought her motherless younger sister to live with them. She was a very pretty girl, and when Nabin's brother had last been home, he was so taken with her that their marriage was speedily arranged. This greatly relieved her elder sister, for, high caste as they were, a suitable bridegroom was not easy to find. The wedding-day had been fixed some months later, when Nabin's brother would have completed his college course. Meanwhile Nabin's wife lit upon the discovery that her husband had seduced her sister. She forthwith insisted on his marrying the unfortunate girl,--for which, as it happened, he did not require much persuasion. The wedding ceremony had just been put through, whereupon the elder sister had made away with herself by taking poison.

There was nothing to be done. The three of us slowly wended our way back, to find the usual throng round the Master. They sang a kirtan to him, and he waxed ecstatic in his usual manner, and began to dance with them.

That evening the moon was near its full. One corner of our terrace was overhung by the branch of a _chalta_ tree. At the edge of the shadow, under its thick foliage, sat Damini lost in silent thought. Satish was softly pacing up and down our veranda behind her. I had a hobby for diary-writing, in which I was indulging, alone in my room, with the door wide open.

That evening the _koil_ could not sleep; stirred by the south breeze the leaves too were speaking out, and the moonlight, shimmering on them, smiled in response. Something must also have stirred within Satish, for he suddenly turned his steps towards the terrace and went and stood near Damini.

Damini looked round with a start, adjusted her _sari_ [Footnote: A formal recognition of the presence of an elder.] over the back of her head, and rose as if to leave. Satish called, 'Damini!'

She stopped at once, and turning to him appealingly with folded hands she said, 'My Master, may I ask you a question?'

Satish looked at her inquiringly, but made no reply.

Damini went on: 'Tell me truly, of what use to the world is this thing with which your sect is occupied day and night? Whom have you been able to save?'

I came out from my room and stood on the veranda.

Damini continued: 'This passion, passion, passion on which you harp,--did you not see it in its true colours to-day? It has neither religion nor duty; it regards neither wife nor brother, nor the sanctuary of home; it knows neither pity nor trust, nor modesty, nor shame. What way have you discovered to save men from the hell of this cruel, shameless, soul-killing passion?'

I could not contain myself, but cried out: 'Oh yes, we have hit upon the wonderful device of banishing Woman right away from our territory, so as to make our pursuit of passion quite safe!'

Without paying any heed to my words, Damini spoke on to Satish: 'I have learnt nothing at all from your Master. He has never given me one moment's peace of mind. Fire cannot quench fire. The road along which he is taking his devotees leads neither to courage, nor restraint, nor peace. That poor woman who is dead,--her heart's blood was sucked dry by this Fury, Passion, who killed her. Did you not see the hideous countenance of the murderess? For God's sake, my Master, I implore you, do not sacrifice me to that Fury. Oh, save me, for if anybody can save me, it is you!'

For a space all three of us kept silent. So poignant became the silence all around, it seemed to me that the vibrating drone of the _cicadas_ was but a swoon-thrill of the pallid sky.

Satish was the first to speak. 'Tell me,' said he to Damini, 'what is it you would have me do for you?'

'Be my _guru_! I would follow none else. Give me some creed--higher than all this--which can save me. Do not let me be destroyed, together with the Divinity which is in me.'

Satish drew himself up straight, as he responded: 'So be it.'

Damini prostrated herself at his feet, her forehead touching the ground, and remained long thus, in reverential adoration, murmuring:

'Oh, my Master, my Master, save me, save me, save me from all sin.'

VII

Once more there was a mighty sensation in our world, and a storm of vituperation in the newspapers--for Satish had again turned renegade.

At first he had defiantly proclaimed active disbelief in all religion and social convention. Next, with equal vehemence, he had displayed active belief in gods and goddesses, rites and ceremonies, not excluding the least of them. Now, lastly, he had thrown to the winds all the rubbish-heaps both of religious and irreligious cults, and had retired into such simple peacefulness that no one could even guess what he believed, or what he did not. True, he took up good works as of old; but there was nothing aggressive about it this time.

There was another event over which the newspapers exhausted all their resources of sarcasm and virulence. That was the announcement of Damini's marriage with me. The mystery of this marriage none will perhaps fathom,--but why need they?

CHAPTER IV

SRIVILAS

I

There was once an indigo factory on this spot. All that now remains of it are some tumble-down rooms belonging to the old house, the rest having crumbled into dust. When returning homewards, after performing Damini's last rites, the place, as we passed by it, somehow appealed to me, and I stayed on alone.

The road leading from the river-side to the factory gate is flanked by an avenue of sissoo trees. Two broken pillars still mark the site of the gateway, and portions of the garden wall are standing here and there. The only other memento of the past is the brick-built mound over the grave of some Mussulman servant of the factory. Through its cracks, wild flowering shrubs have sprung up. Covered with blossoms they sway to the breeze and mock at death, like merry maidens shaking with laughter while they chaff the bridegroom on his wedding-day. The banks of the garden pool have caved in and let the water trickle away, leaving the bottom to serve as a bed for a coriander patch. As I sit out on the roadside, under the shade of the avenue, the scent of the coriander, in flower, goes through and through my brain.

I sit and muse. The factory, of which these remnants are left, like the skeleton of some dead animal by the wayside, was once alive. From it flowed waves of pleasure and pain in a stormy succession, which then seemed to be endless. Its terribly efficient English proprietor, who made the very blood of his sweating cultivators run indigo-blue,--how tremendous was he compared to puny me! Nevertheless, Mother Earth girded up her green mantle, undismayed, and set to work so thoroughly to plaster over the disfigurement wrought by him and his activities, that the few remaining traces require but a touch or two more to vanish for ever.

This scarcely novel reflection, however, was not what my mind ruminated over. 'No, no!' it protested. 'One dawn does not succeed another merely to smear fresh plaster [Footnote: The wattle-and-daub cottages of a Bengal village are cleaned and renovated every morning by a moist clay mixture being smeared by the housewife over the plinth and floors.] over the floor. True, the Englishman of the factory, together with the rest of its abominations, are all swept away into oblivion like a handful of dust,--but my Damini!'

Many will not agree with me, I know. Shan-karacharya's philosophy spares no one. All the world is _maya_, a trembling dewdrop on the lotus leaf. But Shankaracharya was a _sannyasin_. 'Who is your wife, who your son?' were questions he asked, without understanding their meaning. Not being a _sannyasin_ myself, I know full well that Damini is not a vanishing dewdrop on the lotus leaf.

But, I am told, there are householders also, who say the same thing. That may be. They are mere householders, who have lost only the mistress of their house. Their home is doubtless maya, and so likewise is its mistress. These are their own handiwork, and when done with any broom is good enough for sweeping their fragments clean away.

I did not keep house long enough to settle down as a householder, nor is mine the temperament of a _sannyasin_,--that saved me. So the Damini whom I gained became neither housewife nor _maya_. She ever remained true to herself,--my Damini. Who dares to call her a shadow?

Had I known Damini only as mistress of my house, much of this would never have been written. It is because I knew her in a greater, truer relation, that I have no hesitation in putting down the whole truth, recking nothing of what others may say.

Had it been my lot to live with Damini, as others do in the everyday world, the household routine of toilet and food and repose would have sufficed for me as for them. And after Damini's death, I could have heaved a sigh and exclaimed with Shankaracharya: 'Variegated is the world of _maya_!' before hastening to honour the suggestion of some aunt, or other well-meaning elder, by another attempt to sample its variety by marrying again. But I had not adjusted myself to the domestic world, like a foot in a comfortable old shoe. From the very outset I had given up hope of happiness,--no, no, that is saying too much; I was not so non-human as that. Happiness I certainly hoped for, but I did not arrogate to myself the right to claim it.

Why? Because it was I who persuaded Damini to give her consent to our marriage. Not for us was the first auspicious vision [Footnote: At one stage of the wedding ceremony a red screen is placed round the Bride and Bridegroom, and they are asked to look at each other. This is the Auspicious Vision,] in the rosy glow of festive lamps, to the rapturous strains of wedding pipes. We married in the broad light of day, with eyes wide open.

II

When we went away from Lilananda Swami, the time came to think of ways and means, as well as of a sheltering roof. We had all along been more in danger of surfeit than of starvation, with the hospitality which the devotees of the Master pressed on us, wherever we went with him. We had almost come to forget that to be a householder involves the

acquiring, or building, or at least the renting of a house, so accustomed had we become to cast the burden of its supply upon another, and to look on a house as demanding from us only the duty of making ourselves thoroughly comfortable in it.

At length we recollected that Uncle Jagamohan had bequeathed his share of the house to Satish. Had the will been left in Satish's custody, it would by this time have been wrecked, like a paper boat, on the waves of his emotion. It happened, however, to be with me; for I was the executor. There were three conditions attached to the bequest which I was responsible for carrying out. No religious worship was to be performed in the house. The ground floor was to be used as a school for the leather-dealers' children. And after Satish's death, the whole property was to be applied for the benefit of that community. Piety was the one thing Uncle Jagamohan could not tolerate. He looked on it as more defiling even than worldliness; and probably these provisions, which he facetiously referred to in English as 'sanitary precautions,' were intended as a safeguard against the excessive piety which prevailed in the adjoining half of the house.

'Come along,' I said to Satish. 'Let's go to your Calcutta house.'

'I am not quite ready for that yet,' Satish replied.

I did not understand him.

'There was a day,' he explained, 'when I relied wholly on reason, only to find at last that reason could not support the whole of life's burden. There was another day, when I placed my reliance on emotion, only to discover it to be a bottomless abyss. The reason and the emotion, you see, were alike mine. Man cannot rely on himself alone. I dare not return to town until I have found my support.'

'What then do you suggest?' I asked.

'You two go on to the Calcutta house. I would wander alone for a time. I seem to see glimpses of the shore. If I allow it out of my sight now, I may lose it for ever.'

As soon as we were by ourselves, Damini said to me: 'That will never do! If he wanders about alone, who is to look after him? Don't you remember in what plight he came back when he last went wandering? The very idea of it fills me with fear.'

Shall I tell the truth? This anxiety of Damini's stung me like a hornet, leaving behind the smart of anger. Had not Satish wandered about for two whole years after Uncle Jagamohan's death,--had that killed him? My question did not remain unuttered. Rather, some of the smart of the sting got expressed with it.

'I know, Srivilas Babu,' Damini replied. 'It takes a great deal to kill a man. But why should he be allowed to suffer at all, so long as the two of us are here to prevent it?'

The two of us! Half of that meant this wretched creature, Srivilas! It is of course a law of the world, that in order to save some people from suffering others shall suffer. All the inhabitants of the earth may be divided into two such classes. Damini had found out to which I belonged. It was compensation, indeed, that she included herself in the same class.

I went and said to Satish: 'All right, then, let us postpone our departure to town. We can stay for a time in that dilapidated house on the river-side. They say it is subject to ghostly visitations. This will serve to keep off human visitors.'

'And you two?' inquired Satish.

'Like the ghosts, we shall keep in hiding as far as possible.'

Satish threw a nervous glance at Damini,--there may have been a suggestion of dread in it.

Damini clasped her hands as she said imploringly: 'I have accepted you as my guru.

Whatever my sins may have been, let them not deprive me of the right to serve you.'

III

I must confess that this frenzied pertinacity of Satish's quest is beyond my understanding. There was a time when I would have laughed to scorn the very idea. Now I had ceased to laugh. What Satish was pursuing was fire indeed, no will-o'-the-wisp. When I realised how its heat was consuming him, the old arguments of Uncle Jagamohan's school refused to pass my lips. Of what avail would it be to find, with Herbert Spencer, that the mystic sense might have originated in some ghostly superstition, or that its message could be reduced to some logical absurdity? Did we not see how Satish was burning,--his whole being aglow?

Satish was perhaps better off when his days were passing in one round of excitement,--singing, dancing, serving the Master,--the whole of his spiritual effort exhausting itself in the output of the moment. Since he has lapsed into outward quiet, his spirit refuses to be controlled any longer. There is now no question of seeking emotional satisfaction. The inward struggle for realisation is so tremendous within him, that we are afraid to look on his face.

I could remain silent no longer. 'Satish,' I suggested, 'don't you think it would be better to go to some _guru_ who could show you the way and make your spiritual progress easier?'

This only served to annoy him. 'Oh, do be quiet, Visri,' he broke out irritably. 'For goodness' sake keep quiet! What does one want to make it easier for? Delusion alone is easy. Truth is always difficult.'

'But would it not be better,' I tried again, 'if some _guru_ were to guide you along the path of Truth?'

Satish was almost beside himself. 'Will you never understand,' he groaned, 'that I am not running after any geographical truth? The Dweller within can only come to me along my own true path. The path of the _guru_ can only lead to the _guru's_ door.'

What a number of opposite principles have I heard enunciated by this same mouth of Satish! I, Srivilas, once the favourite disciple of Uncle Jagamohan,--who would have threatened me with a big stick if I had called him Master,--had actually been made by Satish to massage the legs of Lila-nanda Swami. And now not even a week has passed but he needs must preach to me in this strain! However, as I dared not smile, I maintained a solemn silence.

'I have now understood,' Satish went on, 'why our Scriptures say that it is better to die in one's own _dharma_ rather than court the terrible fate of taking the _dharma_ of another. All else may be accepted as gifts, but if one's _dharma_ is not one's own, it does not save, but kills. I cannot gain my God as alms from anybody else. If I get Him at all, it shall be I who win Him. If I do not, even death is better.'

I am argumentative by nature, and could not give in so easily. 'A poet,' said I, 'may get a poem from within himself. But he who is not a poet needs must take it from another.'

'I am a poet,' said Satish, without blenching.

That finished the matter. I came away.

Satish had no regular hours for meals or sleep. There was no knowing where he was to be found next. His body began to take on the unsubstantial keenness of an over--sharpened knife. One felt this could not go on much longer. Yet I could not muster up courage to interfere. Damini, however, was utterly unable to bear it. She was grievously incensed at God's ways. With those who ignored Him, God was powerless,--was it fair thus to take it out of one who was helplessly prostrate at His feet? When Damini used to wax wroth with Lilananda Swami, she knew how to bring it home to him. Alas, she knew not how to bring her feelings home to God! Anyhow, she spared no pains in trying to get Satish to be regular in satisfying his physical needs.

Numberless and ingenious were her contrivances to get this misfit creature to conform to domestic regulations. For a considerable space Satish made no overt objection to her

endeavours. But one morning he waded across the shallow river to the broad sand-bed along the opposite bank, and there disappeared from sight.

The sun rose to the meridian; it gradually bent over to the west; but there was no sign of Satish. Damini waited for him, fasting, till she could contain herself no longer. She put some food on a salver, and with it toiled through the knee-deep water, and at last found herself on the sand-bank.

It was a vast expanse on which not a living creature of any kind was to be seen. The sun was cruel. Still more so were the glowing billows of sand, one succeeding the other, like ranks of crouching sentinels guarding the emptiness. As she stood on the edge of this spreading pallor, where all limits seemed to have been lost, where no call could meet with any response, no question with any answer, Damini's heart sank within her. It was as if her world had been wiped away and reduced to the dull blank of original colourlessness. One vast 'No' seemed to be stretched at her feet. No sound, no movement, no red of blood, no green of vegetation, no blue of sky,--but only the drab of sand. It looked like the lipless grin of some giant skull, the tongueless cavern of its jaws gaping with an eternal petition of thirst to the unrelenting fiery skies above.

While she was wondering in what direction to proceed, the faint track of footsteps caught Damini's eye. These she pursued, and went on and on, over the undulating surface, till they stopped at a pool on the farther side of a sand-drift. Along the moist edge of the water could be seen the delicate tracery of the claw-marks of innumerable water-fowl. Under the shade of the sand-drift sat Satish.

The water was the deepest of deep blue. The fussy snipe were poking about on its margin, bobbing their tails and fluttering their black-and-white wings. At some distance were a flock of wild duck quacking vigorously, and seeming never to get the preening of their feathers done to their own satisfaction. When Damini reached the top of the mound, which formed one bank of the pool, the ducks took themselves off in a body, with a great clamour and beating of wings. Satish looked round and saw Damini. 'Why are you here?' he cried.

'I have brought you something to eat,' said Damini.

'I want nothing,' said Satish.

'It is very late' ventured Damini.

'Nothing at all,' repeated Satish.

'Let me then wait a little,' suggested Damini. 'Perhaps later on ---- ?'

'Oh, why will you-----' burst out Satish, but as his glance fell on Damini's face he stopped short.

Damini said nothing further. Tray in hand she retraced her steps through the sand, which glared round her like the eye of a tiger in the dark.

Tears had always been rarer in Damini's eyes than lightning flashes. But when I saw her that evening,--seated on the floor, her feet stretched out before her,--she was weeping. When she saw me her tears seemed to burst through some obstruction and showered forth in torrents. I cannot tell what it felt like within my breast. I came near and sat down on one side.

When she had calmed herself a little I inquired: 'Why does Satish's health make you so anxious?'

'What else have I to be anxious about?' she asked simply. 'All the rest he has to think out for himself. There I can neither understand nor help.'

'But consider, Damini,' I said. 'When man's mind puts forth all its energy into one particular channel, his bodily needs become reduced correspondingly. That is why, in the presence of great joy or great sorrow, man does not hunger or thirst. Satish's state of mind is now such that it will do him no harm even if you do not look after his body.'

'I am a woman,' replied Damini. 'The building up of the body with our own body, with our life itself, is our _dharma_. It is woman's own creation. So when we women see the body suffer, our spirit refuses to be comforted.'

'That is why,' I retorted, 'those who are busy with things of the spirit seem to have no eyes for you, the guardians of mere bodies!'

'Haven't they!' Damini flared up. 'So wonderful, rather, is the vision of their eyes, it turns everything topsy-turvy.'

'Ah, woman,' said I to myself. 'That is what fascinates you. Srivilas, my boy, next time you take birth, take good care to be born in the world of topsy-turvydom.'

IV

The wound which Satish inflicted on Damini that day on the sands had this result, that he could not remove from his mind the agony he had seen in her eyes. During the succeeding days he had to go through the purgatory of showing her special consideration. It was long since he had freely conversed with us. Now he would send for Damini and talk to

her. The experiences and struggles through which he was passing were the subject of these talks.

Damini had never been so exercised by his indifference as she now was by his solicitude. She felt sure this could not last, because the cost was too much to pay. Some day or other Satish's attention would be drawn to the state of the account, and he would discover how high the price was; then would come the crash. The more regular Satish became in his meals and rest, as a good householder should, the more anxious became Damini, the more she felt ashamed of herself. It was almost as if she would be relieved to find Satish becoming rebellious. She seemed to be saying: 'You were quite right to hold aloof. Your concern for me is only punishing yourself. That I cannot bear!--I must,' she appeared to conclude, 'make friends with the neighbours again, and see if I cannot contrive to keep away from the house.'

One night we were roused by a sudden shout: 'Srivilas! Damini!' It must have been past midnight, but Satish could not have taken count of the hour. How he passed his nights we knew not, but the way he went on seemed to have cowed the very ghosts into flight.

We shook off our slumbers, and came out of our respective rooms to find Satish on the flagged pavement in front of the house, standing alone in the darkness. 'I have understood!' he exclaimed as he saw us.

'I have no more doubts.'

Damini softly went up and sat down on the pavement. Satish absently followed her example and sat down too. I also followed suit.

'If I keep going,' said Satish, 'in the same direction along which He comes to me, then I shall only be going further and further away from Him. If I proceed in the opposite direction, then only can we meet.'

I silently gazed at his flaming eyes. As a geometrical truth what he said was right enough. But what in the world was it all about? 'He loves form,' Satish went on, 'so He is continually descending towards form. We cannot live by form alone, so we must ascend towards His formlessness. He is free, so His play is within bonds. We are bound, so we find our joy in freedom. All our sorrow is because we cannot understand this.'

We kept as silent as the stars.

'Do you not understand, Damini?' pursued Satish. 'He who sings proceeds from his joy to the tune; he who hears, from the tune to joy. One comes from freedom into bondage, the other goes from bondage into freedom; only thus can they have their communion. He sings and we hear. He ties the bonds as He sings to us, we untie them as we hear Him.'

I cannot say whether Damini understood Satish's words, but she understood Satish. With her hands folded on her lap she kept quite still.

'I was hearing His song through the night,' Satish went on, 'till in a flash the whole thing became clear to me. Then I could not keep it to myself, and called out to you. All this time I had been trying to fashion Him to suit myself, and so was deprived.--O Desolator! Breaker of ties! Let me be shattered to pieces within you, again and again, for ever and ever. Bonds are not for me, that is why I cannot hold on to bonds for long. Bonds are yours, and so are you kept eternally bound to creation. Play on, then, with our forms and let me take my flight into your formlessness.--O Eternal, you are mine, mine, mine!--Satish departed into the night towards the river.

After that night, Satish lapsed back into his old ways, forgetful of all claims of rest or nourishment. As to when his mind would rise into the light of ecstasy, or lapse into the depths of gloom, we could make no guess. May God help her who has taken on herself the burden of keeping such a creature within the wholesomeness of worldly habit....

V

It had been stiflingly oppressive the whole day. In the night a great storm burst on us. We had our several rooms along a veranda, in which a light used to be kept burning all night. That was now blown out. The river was lashed into foaming waves, and a flood of rain burst forth from the clouds. The splashing of the waves down below, and the dashing of the torrents from above, played the cymbals in this chaotic revel of the gods. Nothing could be seen of the deafening movements which resounded within the depths of the darkness, and made the sky, like a blind child, break into shivers of fright. Out of the bamboo thickets pierced a scream as of some bereaved giantess. From the mango groves burst the cracking and crashing of breaking timber. The river--side echoed with the deep thuds of falling masses from the crumbling banks. Through the bare ribs of our dilapidated house the keen blasts howled and howled like infuriated beasts.

On such a night the fastenings of the human mind are shaken loose. The storm gains entry and plays havoc within, scattering into disorder its well-arranged furniture of convention, tossing about its curtains of decorous restraint in disturbing revealment. I could not sleep. But what can I write of the thoughts which assailed my sleepless brain? They do not concern this story.

'Who is that?' I heard Satish cry out all of a sudden in the darkness.

'It is I,--Damini,' came the reply. 'Your windows are open, and the rain is streaming in. I have come to close them.'

As she was doing this, she found Satish had got out of his bed. He seemed to stand and hesitate, just for a moment, and then he went out of the room.

Damini went back to her own room and sat long on the threshold. No one returned. The fury of the wind went on increasing in violence.

Damini could sit quiet no longer. She also left the house. It was hardly possible to keep on one's feet in the storm. The sentinels of the revelling gods seemed to be scolding Damini and repeatedly thrusting her back. The rain made desperate attempts to pervade every nook and cranny of the sky.

A flash rent the sky from end to end with terrific tearing thunder. It revealed Satish standing on the river brink. With a supreme effort Damini reached him in one tempestuous rush, outvying the wind. She fell prone at his feet. The shriek of the storm was overcome by her cry: 'At your feet, I swear I had no thought of sin against your God! Why punish me thus?' Satish stood silent.

'Thrust me into the river with your feet, if you would be rid of me. But return you must!'

Satish came back. As he re-entered the house he said: 'My need for Him whom I seek is immense,--so absolutely, that I have no need for anything else at all. Damini, have pity on me and leave me to Him.'

After a space of silence Damini said: 'I will.'

VI

I knew nothing of this at the time, but heard it all from Damini afterwards. So when I saw through my open door the two returning figures pass along the veranda to their rooms, the desolation of my lot fell heavy on my heart and took me by the throat. I struggled up from my bed. Further sleep was impossible that night.

Next morning, what a changed Damini met my eyes! The demon dance of last night's storm seemed to have left all its ravages on this one forlorn girl. Though I knew nothing of what had happened, I felt bitterly angry with Satish.

'Srivilas Babu,' said Damini, 'will you take me on to Calcutta?'

I could guess all that these words meant for her; so I asked no question. But, in the midst of the torture within me, I felt the balm of consolation. It was well that Damini should take herself away from here. Repeated buffeting against the rock could only end in the vessel being broken up.

At parting, Damini made her obeisance to Satish, saying: 'I have grievously sinned at your feet. May I hope for pardon?'

Satish, with his eyes fixed on the ground, replied: 'I also have sinned. Let me first purge my sin away, and then will I claim forgiveness.'

It became clear to me, on our way to Calcutta, what a devastating fire had all along been raging within Damini. I was so scorched by its heat that I could not restrain myself from breaking out in revilement of Satish.

Damini stopped me frenziedly. 'Don't you dare talk so in my presence!' she exclaimed. 'Little do you know what he saved me from! You can only see my sorrow. Had you no eyes for the sorrow he has been through, in order to save me? The hideous tried once to destroy the beautiful, and got well kicked for its pains.--Serve it right!--Serve it right!--' Damini began to beat her breast violently with her clenched hands. I had to hold them back by main force.

When we arrived in the evening, I left Damini at her aunt's and went over to a lodging-house, where I used to be well known. My old acquaintances started at sight of me. 'Have you been ill?' they cried.

By next morning's post I got a letter from Damini. 'Take me away,' she wrote. 'There is no room for me here.'

It appeared that her aunt would not have her. Scandal about us was all over the town. The Pooja numbers of the weekly newspapers had come out shortly after we had given up Lilananda Swami. All the instruments for our execution had been kept sharpened. The carnage turned out to be worthy of the occasion. In our _shastras_ the sacrifice of she-animals is prohibited. But, in the case of modern human sacrifice, a woman victim seems to add to the zest of the performers. The mention of Damini's name was skilfully avoided. But no less was the skill which did away with all doubt as to the intention. Anyhow, it had resulted in this shrinkage of room in the house of Damini's distant aunt.

Damini had lost her parents. But I had an idea that her brother was living. I asked Damini for his address, but she shook her head, saying they were too poor. The fact was, Damini did not care to place her brother in an awkward position. What if he also came to say there was no room?

'Where will you stay, then?' I had to inquire.

'I will go back to Lilananda Swami.' I could not trust myself to speak for a time,--I was so overcome. Was this, then, the last cruel trick which Fate had held in reserve?

'Will the Swami take you back?' I asked at length.

'Gladly!'

Damini understood men. Sect-mongers rejoice more in capturing adherents than in comprehending truths. Damini was quite right. There would be no dearth of room for her at Lilananda's, but-----

'Damini,' I said, just at this juncture. 'There is another way. If you promise not to be angry, I will mention it.'

'Tell me,' said Damini.

'If it is at all possible for you to think of marrying a creature, such as I am ---- '

'What are you saying, Srivilas Babu?' interrupted Damini. 'Are you mad?'

'Suppose I am,' said I. 'One can sometimes solve insoluble problems by becoming mad. Madness is like the wishing carpet of the Arabian Nights. It can waft one over the thousand petty considerations which obstruct the everyday world.'

'What do you call petty considerations?'

'Such as: What will people think?--What will happen in the future?--and so on, and so forth.'

'And what about the vital considerations?'

'What do you call vital?' I asked in my turn.

'Such as, for instance: What will be your fate if you marry a creature like me?' said Damini.

'If that be a vital consideration, I am reassured. For I cannot possibly be in a worse plight than now. Any movement of my prostrate fortune, even though it be a turning over to the other side, cannot but be a sign of improvement.'

Of course I could not believe that some telepathic news of my state of mind had never reached Damini. Such news, however, had not, so far, come under the head of 'Important'--at least it had not called for any notice to be taken. Now action was definitely demanded of her.

Damini was lost in silent thought.

'Damini,' I said, 'I am only one of the very ordinary sort of men,--even less, for I am of no account in the world. To marry me, or not to marry me, cannot make enough difference to be worth all this thought.'

Tears glistened in Damini's eyes. 'Had you been an ordinary man, it would not have cost me a moment's hesitation,' she said.

After another long silence, Damini murmured: 'You know what I am.'

'You also know what I am,' I rejoined.

Thus was the proposal mooted, relying more on things unspoken than on what was said.

VII

Those who, in the old days, had been under the spell of my English speeches had mostly shaken off their fascination during my absence; except only Naren, who still looked on me as one of the rarest products of the age. A house belonging to him was temporarily vacant. In this we took shelter.

It seemed at first that my proposal would never be rescued from the ditch of silence, into which it had lumbered at the very start; or at all events that it would require any amount of discussion and repair work before it could be hauled back on the high road of 'yes' or 'no.'

But man's mind was evidently created to raise a laugh against mental science, with its sudden practical jokes. In the spring, which now came upon us, the Creator's joyous laughter rang through and through this hired dwelling of ours.

All this while Damini never had the time to notice that I was anybody at all; or it may be that the dazzling light from a different quarter had kept her blinded. Now that her world had shrunk around her, it was reduced to me alone. So she had no help but to look on me with seeing eyes. Perhaps it was the kindness of my fate which contrived that this should be her first sight of me.

By river and hill and seashore have I wandered along with Damini, as one of Lilananda's kirtan party, setting the atmosphere on fire with passionate song, to the beat of drum and cymbal. Great sparks of emotion were set free as we rang the changes on the text of the Vaishanava poet: _The noose of love hath bound my heart to thy feet_. Yet the curtain which hid me from Damini was not burnt away.

But what was it that happened in this Calcutta lane? The dingy houses, crowding upon one another, blossomed out like flowers of paradise. Verily God vouchsafed to us a miracle. Out of this brick and mortar He fashioned a harp-string to voice forth His melody. And with His wand He touched me, the least of men, and made me, all in a moment, wonderful.

When the curtain is there, the separation is infinite; when it is lifted, the distance can be crossed in the twinkling of an eye. So it took no time at all. 'I was in a dream,' said Damini. 'It wanted this shock to wake me. Between that "you" of mine and this "you" of

mine, there was a veil of stupor. I salute my Master again and again, for it is he who dispelled it.'

'Damini,' I said,'do not keep your gaze on me like that. Before, when you made the discovery that this creation of God is not beautiful, I was able to bear it; but it will be difficult to do so now.'

'I am making the discovery,' she replied,'that this creation of God has its beauty.'

'Your name will go down in history!' I exclaimed. 'The planting of the explorer's flag on the South Pole heights was child's play to this discovery of yours. "Difficult" is not the word for it. You will have achieved the impossible!'

I had never realised before how short our spring month of Phalgun is. It has only thirty days, and each of the days is not a minute more than twenty-four hours. With the infinite time which God has at His disposal, such parsimony I failed to understand!

'This mad freak that you are bent on,' said Damini; 'what will your people have to say to it?'

'My people are my best friends. So they are sure to turn me out of their house.'

'What next?'

'Next it will be for you and me to build up a home, fresh from the very foundations, that will be our own special creation.'

'You must also fashion afresh the mistress of your house, from the very beginning. May she also be your creation, with no trace left of her old battered condition!'

We fixed a day in the following month for the wedding. Damini insisted that Satish should be brought over.

'What for?' I asked.

'He must give me away.'

Where the madcap was wandering I was not sure. I had written several letters, but with no reply. He could hardly have given up that old haunted house, otherwise my letters would have been returned as undelivered. The chances were that he had not the time to be opening and reading letters.

'Damini,' said I, 'you must come with me and invite him personally. This is not a case for sending a formal invitation letter. I could have gone by myself, but my courage is not equal to it. For all we know, he may be on the other side of the river, superintending the

preening of ducks' feathers. To follow him there is a desperate venture of which you alone are capable!

Damini smiled. 'Did I not swear I would never pursue him there again?'

'You swore you would not go to him with food any more. That does not cover your going over to invite him to a repast!'

VIII

This time everything passed off smoothly. We each took Satish by one hand and brought him along with us back to Calcutta. He was as pleased as a child receiving a pair of new dolls!

Our idea had been to have a quiet wedding. But Satish would have none of that. Moreover, there were the Mussulman friends of Uncle Jagamohan. When they heard the news, they were so extravagantly jubilant that the neighbours must have thought it was for the Amir of Kabul or the Nizam of Hyderabad, at the very least. But the height of revelry was reached by the newspapers in a very orgy of calumny. Our hearts, however, were too full to harbour any resentment. We were quite willing to allow the blood-thirstiness of the readers to be satisfied, and the pockets of the proprietors to be filled,--along with our blessings to boot.

'Come and occupy my house, Visri, old fellow,' said Satish.

'Come with us, too,' I added. 'Let us set to work together over again.'

'No, thank you,' said Satish. 'My work is elsewhere.'

'You won't be allowed to go till you have assisted at our house-warming,' insisted Damini.

This function was not going to be a crowded affair, Satish being the only guest. But it was all very well for him to say: 'Come and occupy my house.' That had already been done by his father, Harimohan,--not directly, but through a tenant. Harimohan would have entered into possession himself, but his worldly and other-worldly advisers warned him that it was best not to risk it,--a Mussulman having died there of the plague. Of course the tenant to whom it was offered ran the same spiritual and physical risks, but then why need he be told?

How we got the house out of Harimohan's clutches is a long story. The Mussulman leather-dealers were our chief allies. When they got to know the contents of the will, we found further legal steps to be superfluous.

The allowance which I had all along been getting from home was now stopped. It was all the more of a joy to us to undertake together the toil of setting up house without outside assistance. With the seal of Premchand-Roychand it was not difficult for me to secure a professorship. I was able to supplement my income by publishing notes on the prescribed text--books, which were eagerly availed of as patent nostrums for passing examinations. I need not have done so much, for our own wants were few. But Damini insisted that Satish should not have to worry about his own living while we were here to prevent it.

There was another thing about which Damini did not say a word. I had to attend to it secretly. That was the education of her brother's son and the marriage of his daughter. Both of these matters were beyond the means of her brother himself. His house was barred to us, but pecuniary assistance has no caste to stand in the way of its acceptance. Moreover, acceptance did not necessarily involve acknowledgment. So I had to add the sub-editorship of a newspaper to my other occupations.

Without consulting Damini, I engaged a cook and two servants. Without consulting me, Damini sent them packing the very next day. When I objected, she made me conscious how ill-judged was my attempted consideration for her. 'If I am not allowed,' she said, 'to do my share of work while you are slaving away, where am I to hide my shame?'

My work outside and Damini's work at home flowed on together like the confluent Ganges and Jumna. Damini also began to teach sewing to the leather-dealers' little girls. She was determined not to take defeat at my hands. I am not enough of a poet to sing how this Calcutta house of ours became Brindaban itself, our labours the flute strains which kept it enraptured. All I can say is that our days did not drag, neither did they merely pass by,--they positively danced along.

One more springtime came and went; but never another.

Ever since her return from the cave-temple Damini had suffered from a pain in her breast, of which, however, she then told no one. This suddenly took a turn for the worse, and when I asked her about it she said: 'This is my secret wealth, my touchstone. With it, as dower, I was able to come to you. Otherwise I would not have been worthy.'

The doctors, each of them, had a different name for the malady.

Neither did they agree in their prescriptions. When my little hoard of gold was blown away between the cross-fire of the doctors' fees and the chemist's bills, the chapter of medicament came to an end, and change of air was advised. As a matter of fact, hardly anything of changeable value was left to us except air.

'Take me to the place from which I brought the pain,' said Damini. 'It has no dearth of air.'

When the month of Magh ended with its full moon and Phalgun began, while the sea heaved and sobbed with the wail of its lonely eternity, Damini, taking the dust of my feet, bade farewell to me with the words:

'I have not had enough of you. May you be mine again in our next birth.'