

POETRY

THE FUGITIVE

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The Fugitive I

1

Darkly you sweep on, Eternal Fugitive, round whose bodiless rush stagnant space frets into eddying bubbles of light.

Is your heart lost to the Lover calling you across his immeasurable loneliness?

Is the aching urgency of your haste the sole reason why your tangled tresses break into stormy riot and pearls of fire roll along your path as from a broken necklace?

Your fleeting steps kiss the dust of this world into sweetness, sweeping aside all waste; the storm centred with your dancing limbs shakes the sacred shower of death over life and freshens her growth.

Should you in sudden weariness stop for a moment, the world would rumble into a heap, an encumbrance, barring its own progress, and even the least speck of dust would pierce the sky throughout its infinity with a nun bearable pressure.

My thoughts are quickened by this rhythm of unseen feet round which the anklets of light are shaken.

They echo in the pulse of my heart, and through my blood surges the psalm of the ancient sea.

I hear the thundering flood tumbling my life from world to world and form to form, scattering my being in an endless spray of gifts, in sorrowing sand songs.

The tide runs high, the wind blows, the boat dances like thine own desire, my heart!

Leave the hoard on the shore and sail over the unfathomed dark towards limitless light.

2

We came hither together, friend, and now at the cross-roads I stop to bid you farewell.

The Fugitive

*Your path is wide and straight before you, but my call comes up by ways from the unknown.
I shall follow wind and cloud; I shall follow the stars to where day breaks behind the hills; I
shall follow lovers who, as they walk, twine their days into a wreath on a single thread of
song, "I love."*

3

*It was growing dark when I asked her, "What strange land have I come to?"
She only lowered her eyes, and the water gurgled in the throat of her jar, as she walked away.
The trees hang vaguely over the bank, and the land appears as though it already belonged to
the past.
The water is dumb, the bamboos are darkly still, a wristlet tinkles against the water-jar from
down the lane.*

*Row no more, but fasten the boat to this tree,—for I love the look of this land.
The evening star goes down behind the temple dome, and the pallor of the marble landing
haunts the dark water.
Belated wayfarers sigh; for light from hidden windows is splintered into the darkness by
intervening wayside trees and bushes. Still that wristlet tinkles against the water-jar, and
retreating steps rustle from down the lane littered with leaves.
The night deepens, the palace towers loom spectre—like, and the town hums wearily.
Row no more, but fasten the boat to a tree.*

*Let me seek rest in this strange land, dimly lying under the stars, where darkness tingles with
the tinkle of a wristlet knocking against a water-jar.*

4

*O that I were stored with a secret, like unshed rain in summer clouds—a secret, folded up in
silence, that I could wander away with.
O that I had someone to whisper to, where slow waters lap under trees that doze in the sun.*

The Fugitive

*The hush this evening seems to expect a footfall, and you ask me for the cause of my tears.
I cannot give a reason why I weep, for that is a secret still withheld from me.*

5

*For once be careless, timid traveller, and utterly lose your way; wide-awake though you are,
be like broad daylight enticed by and netted in mist.
Do not shun the garden of Lost Hearts waiting at the end of the wrong road, where the grass
is strewn with wrecked red flowers, and disconsolate water heaves in the troubled sea.
Long have you watched over the store gathered by weary years. Let it best ripped, with
nothing remaining but the desolate triumph of losing all.*

6

*Two little bare feet flit over the ground, and seem to embody that metaphor, “Flowers are
the footprints of summer.”
They lightly impress on the dust the chronicle of their adventure, to be erased by a passing
breeze.
Come, stray into my heart, you tender little feet, and leave the everlasting print of songs on
my dreamland path.*

7

*I am like the night to you, little flower.
I can only give you peace and a wakeful silence hidden in the dark.
When in the morning you open your eyes, I shall leave you to a world a—hum with bees, and
songful with birds.
My last gift to you will be a tear dropped into the depth of your youth; it will make your smile
all the sweeter, and be mist your outlook on the pitiless mirth of day.*

8

Do not stand before my window with those hungry eyes and beg for my secret. It is but a tiny stone of glistening pain streaked with blood-red by passion.
What gifts have you brought in both hands to fling before me in the dust?
I fear, if I accept, to create a debt that can never be paid even by the loss of all I have.
Do not stand before my window with your youth and flowers to shame my destitute life.

9

If I were living in the royal town of Ujjain, when Kalidas was the king's poet, I should know some Malwa girl and fill my thoughts with the music of her name. She would glance at me through the slanting shadow of her eyelids, and allow her veil to catch in the jasmine as an excuse for lingering near me.
This very thing happened in some past whose track is lost under time's dead leaves.
The scholars fight to-day about dates that play hide-and-seek.
I do not break my heart dreaming over flown and vanished ages: but alas and alas again, that those Malwa girls have followed them!
To what heaven, I wonder, have they carried in their flower-baskets those days that tingled to the lyrics of the king's poet?
This morning, separation from those whom I was born too late to meet weigh son and saddens my heart.
Yet April carries the same flowers with which they decked their hair, and the same south breeze fluttered their veils as whispers over modern roses.
And, to tell the truth, joys are not lacking to this spring, though Kalidas sing no more; and I know, if he can watch me from the Poets' Paradise, he has reasons to be envious.

10

Be not concerned about her heart, my heart: leave it in the dark.

What if her beauty be of the figure and her smile merely of the face? Let me take without question the simple meaning of her glances and be happy.

I care not if it be a web of delusion that her arms wind about me, for the web itself is rich and rare, and the deceit can be smiled at and forgotten.

Be not concerned about her heart, my heart: be content if the music is true, though the words are not to be believed; enjoy the grace that dances like a lily on the rippling, deceiving surface, whatever may lie beneath.

11

Neither mother nor daughter are you, nor bride, Urvashi.² Woman you are, to ravish the soul of Paradise.

² The dancing girl of Paradise who rose from the sea.

When weary-footed evening comes down to the folds whither the cattle have returned, you never trim the house lamps nor walk to the bridal bed with at remulous heart and a wavering smile on your lips, glad that the dark hours are so secret.

Like the dawn you are without veil, Urvashi, and without shame.

Who can imagine that aching overflow of splendour which created you!

You rose from the churned ocean on the first day of the first spring, with the cup of life in your right hand and poison in your left. The monster sea, lulled like an enchanted snake, laid down its thousand hoods at your feet.

Your unblemished radiance rose from the foam, white and naked as a jasmine.

Were you ever small, timid or in bud, Urvashi, O Youth everlasting?

Did you sleep, cradled in the deep blue night where the strange light of gems plays over coral, shells and moving creatures of dreamlike form, till day revealed your awful fulness of bloom?

Adored are you of all men in all ages, Urvashi, O endless wonder!

The world throbs with youthful pain at the glance of your eyes, the ascetic lays the fruit of his austerities at your feet, the songs of poets hum and swarm round the perfume of your presence. Your feet, as in careless joy they flit on, wound even the heart of the hollow wind with the tinkle of golden bells.

When you dance before the gods, flinging orbits of novel rhythm into space, Urvashi, the earth shivers, leaf and grass, and autumn fields heave and sway; the sea surges into a

frenzy of rhyming waves; the stars drop into the sky—beads from the chain that leaps till it breaks on your breast; and the blood dances in men's hearts with sudden turmoil.

You are the first break on the crest of heaven's slumber, Urvashi, you thrill the air with unrest. The world bathes your limbs in her tears; with colour of her heart's blood are your feet red; lightly you poise on the wave-tossed lotus of desire, Urvashi; you play forever in that limitless mind wherein labours God's tumultuous dream.

12

You, like a rivulet swift and sinuous, laugh and dance, and your steps sing as you trip along. I, like a bank rugged and steep, stand speechless and stock-still and darkly gaze at you. I, like a big, foolish storm, of a sudden come rushing on and try to rend my being and scatter it parcelled in a whirl of passion. You, like the lightning's flash slender and keen, pierce the heart of the turbulent darkness, to disappear in a vivid streak of laughter.

13

You desired my love and yet you did not love me. Therefore my life clings to you like a chain of which clank and grip grow harsher the more you struggle to be free. My despair has become your deadly companion, clutching at the faintest of your favours, trying to drag you away into the cavern of tears. You have shattered my freedom, and with its wreck built your own prison.

14

I am glad you will not wait for me with that lingering pity in your look.

*It is only the spell of the night and my farewell words, startled at their own tune of despair,
which bring these tears to my eyes. But day will dawn, my eyes will dry and my heart; and
there will be no time for weeping.*

Who says it is hard to forget?

The mercy of death works at life's core, bringing it respite from its own foolish persistence.

*The stormy sea is lulled at last in its rocking cradle; the forest fire falls to sleep on its bed of
ashes.*

*You and I shall part, and the cleavage will be hidden under living grass and flowers that
laugh in the sun.*

15

Of all days you have chosen this one to visit my garden.

But the storm passed over my roses last night and the grass is strewn with torn leaves.

*I do not know what has brought you, now that the hedges are laid low and rills run in the
walks; the prodigal wealth of spring is scattered and the scent and song of yesterday are
wrecked.*

Yet stay a while; let me find some remnant flowers, though I doubt if your skirt can be filled.

The time will be short, for the clouds thicken and here comes the rain again!

16

I forgot myself for a moment, and I came.

*But raise your eyes, and let me know if there still linger some shadow of other days, like a
pale cloud on the horizon that has been robbed of its rain.*

For a moment bear with me if I forget myself.

The roses are still in bud; they do not yet know how we neglect to gather flowers this summer.

*The morning star has the same palpitating hush; the early light is enmeshed in the branches
that over brow your window, as in those other days.*

That times are changed I forget for a little, and have come.

I forget if you ever shamed me by looking away when I bared my heart.

*I only remember the words that stranded on the tremor of your lips; I remember in your dark eyes sweeping shadows of passion, like the wings of a home-seeking bird in the dusk.
I forget that you do not remember, and I come.*

17

*The rain fell fast. The river rushed and hissed. It licked up and swallowed the island, while I waited alone on the lessening bank with my sheaves of corn in a heap.
From the shadows of the opposite shore the boat crosses with a woman at the helm.
I cry to her, "Come to my island coiled round with hungry water, and takeaway my year's harvest."
She comes, and takes all that I have to the last grain; I ask her to take me.
But she says, "No"—the boat is laden with my gift and no room is left for me.*

18

*The evening beckons, and I would fain follow the travellers who sailed in the last ferry of the ebb-tide to cross the dark.
Some were for home, some for the farther shore, yet all have ventured to sail.
But I sit alone at the landing, having left my home and missed the boat: summer is gone and my winter harvest is lost.
I wait for that love which gathers failures to sow them in tears on the dark, that they may bear fruit when day rises anew.*

19

On this side of the water there is no landing; the girls do not come here to fetch water; the land along its edge is shaggy with stunted shrubs; a noisy flock of saliks dig their nests in the steep bank under whose frown the fisher-boats find no shelter.

The Fugitive

*You sit there on the unfrequented grass, and the morning wears on. Tell me what you do on
this bank so dry that it is agape with cracks?*

She looks in my face and says, "Nothing, nothing whatsoever."

On this side of the river the bank is deserted, and no cattle come to water.

*Only some stray goats from the village browse the scanty grass all day, and the solitary
water-hawk watches from an uprooted peepal aslant over the mud.*

You sit there alone in the miserly shade of a shimool, and the morning wears on.

Tell me, for whom do you wait?

She looks in my face and says, "No one, no one at all!"

The Fugitive II

I

“Why these preparations without end?”—I said to Mind—“Is someone to come?”

Mind replied, “I am enormously busy gathering things and building towers. I have no time to answer such questions.”

Meekly I went back to my work.

When things were grown to a pile, when seven wings of his palace were complete, I said to Mind, “Is it not enough?”

Mind began to say, “Not enough to contain—” and then stopped.

“Contain what?” I asked.

Mind affected not to hear.

I suspected that Mind did not know, and with ceaseless work smothered the question.

His one refrain was, “I must have more.”

“Why must you?”

“Because it is great.”

“What is great?”

Mind remained silent. I pressed for an answer.

In contempt and anger, Mind said, “Why ask about things that are not? Take notice of those that are hugely before you,—the struggle and the fight, the army and armaments, the bricks and mortar, and labourers without number.”

I thought “Possibly Mind is wise.”

II

Days passed. More wings were added to his palace—more lands to his domain.

The season of rains came to an end. The dark clouds became white and thin, and in the rain-washed sky the sunny hours hovered like butterflies over an unseen flower. I was bewildered and asked everybody I met, "What is that music in the breeze?"

A tramp walked the road whose dress was wild as his manner; he said, "Hark to the music of the Coming!"

I cannot tell why I was convinced, but the words broke from me, "We have not much longer to wait."

"It is close at hand," said the mad man.

I went to the office and boldly said to Mind, "Stop all work!"

Mind asked, "Have you any news?"

"Yes," I answered, "News of the Coming." But I could not explain.

Mind shook his head and said, "There are neither banners nor pageantry!"

III

The night waned, the stars paled in the sky. Suddenly the touchstone of the morning light tinged everything with gold. A cry spread from mouth to mouth—

"Here is the herald!"

I bowed my head and asked, "Is he coming?"

The answer seemed to burst from all sides, "Yes."

Mind grew troubled and said, "The dome of my building is not yet finished, nothing is in order."

A voice came from the sky, "Pull down your building!"

"But why?" asked Mind.

"Because to-day is the day of the Coming, and your building is in the way."

IV

The lofty building lies in the dust and all is scattered and broken.

Mind looked about. But what was there to see?

Only the morning star and the lily washed in dew.

And what else? A child running laughing from its mother's arms into the open light.

"Was it only for this that they said it was the day of the Coming?"

"Yes, this was why they said there was music in the air and light in the sky."

"And did they claim all the earth only for this?"

"Yes," came the answer. "Mind, you build walls to imprison yourself. Your servants toil to enslave themselves; but the whole earth and infinite space are for the child, for the New Life."

"What does that child bring you?"

"Hope for all the world and its joy."

Mind asked me, "Poet, do you understand?"

"I lay my work aside," I said, "for I must have time to understand."

The Fugitive III

.....

1

*Come, Spring, reckless lover of the earth, make the forest's heart pant for utterance!
Come in gusts of disquiet where flowers break open and jostle the new leaves!
Burst, like a rebellion of light, through the night's vigil, through the lake's dark dumbness,
through the dungeon under the dust, proclaiming freedom to the shackled seeds!
Like the laughter of lightning, like the shout of a storm, break into the midst of the noisy town;
free stifled word and unconscious effort, reinforce our flagging fight, and conquer death!*

2

*I have looked on this picture in many a month of March when the mustard is in bloom—this
lazy line of the water and the grey of the sand beyond, the rough path along the river-bank
carrying the comradeship of the field into the heart of the village.
I have tried to capture in rhyme the idle whistle of the wind, the beat of the oar-strokes from
a passing boat.
I have wondered in my mind how simply it stands before me, this great world: with what fond
and familiar ease it fills my heart, this encounter with the Eternal Stranger.*

3

The ferry-boat plies between the two villages facing each other across the narrow stream.

The water is neither wide nor deep—a mere break in the path that enhances the small adventures of daily life, like a break in the words of a song across which the tune gleefully streams.

While the towers of wealth rise high and crash to ruin, these villages talk to each other across the garrulous stream, and the ferry-boat plies between them, age after age, from seed-time to harvest.

4

In the evening after they have brought their cattle home, they sit on the grass before their huts to know that you are among them unseen, to repeat in their songs the name which they have fondly given you.

While kings' crowns shine and disappear like falling stars, around village huts your name rises through the still night from the simple hearts of your lovers whose names are unrecorded.

5

In Baby's world, the trees shake their leaves at him, murmuring verses in an ancient tongue that dates from before the age of meaning, and the moon feigns to be of his own age—the solitary baby of night.

In the world of the old, flowers dutifully blush at the make—believe of fairy legends, and broken dolls confess that they are made of clay.

6

My world, when I was a child, you were a little girl-neighbour, a loving timid stranger. Then you grew bold and talked to me across the fence, offering me toys and flowers and shells.

The Fugitive

Next you coaxed me away from my work, you tempted me into the land of the dusk or the weedy corner of some garden in mid-day loneliness.

At length you told me stories about bygone times, with which the present ever longs to meet so as to be rescued from its prison in the moment.

7

How often, great Earth, have I felt my being yearn to flow over you, sharing in the happiness of each green blade that raises its signal banner in answer to the beckoning blue of the sky!

I feel as if I had belonged to you ages before I was born. That is why, in the days when the autumn light shimmers on the mellowing ears of rice, I seem to remember a past when my mind was everywhere, and even to hear voices as of playfellows echoing from the remote and deeply veiled past.

When, in the evening, the cattle return to their folds, raising dust from the meadow paths, as the moon rises higher than the smoke ascending from the village huts, I feel sad as for some great separation that happened in the first morning of existence.

8

My mind still buzzed with the cares of a busy day; I sat on without noting how twilight was deepening into dark. Suddenly light stirred across the gloom and touched me as with a finger.

I lifted my head and met the gaze of the full moon widened in wonder like a child's. It held my eyes for long, and I felt as though a love-letter had been secretly dropped in at my window. And ever since my heart is breaking to write for answer something fragrant as Night's unseen flowers—great as her declaration spelt out in nameless stars.

9

The clouds thicken till the morning light seems like a bedraggled fringe to the rainy night.

*A little girl stands at her window, still as a rainbow at the gate of a broken-down storm.
She is my neighbour, and has come upon the earth like some god's rebellious laughter. Her
mother in anger calls her incorrigible; her father smiles and calls her mad.
She is like a runaway waterfall leaping over boulders, like the top most bamboo twig rustling
in the restless wind.
She stands at her window looking out into the sky.
Her sister comes to say, "Mother calls you." She shakes her head.
Her little brother with his toy boat comes and tries to pull her off to play; she snatches her
hand from his. The boy persists and she gives him a slap on the back.
The first great voice was the voice of wind and water in the beginning of earth's creation.
That ancient cry of nature—her dumb call to unborn life—has reached this child's heart and
leads it out alone beyond the fence of our times: so there she stands, possessed by eternity!*

10

*The kingfisher sits still on the prow of an empty boat, while in the shallow margin of the
stream a buffalo lies tranquilly blissful, its eyes half closed to savour the luxury of cool
mud.
Undismayed by the barking of the village cur, the cow browses on the bank, followed by a
hopping group of saliks hunting moths.
I sit in the tamarind grove, where the cries of dumb life congregate—the cattle's lowing, the
sparrows' chatter, the shrill scream of a kite overhead, the crickets' chirp, and the splash
of a fish in the water.
I peep into the primeval nursery of life, where the mother Earth thrills at the first living clutch
near her breast.*

11

*At the sleepy village the noon was still like a sunny midnight when my holidays came to their
end.*

My little girl of four had followed me all the morning from room to room, watching my preparations in grave silence, till, wearied, she sat by the doorpost strangely quiet, murmuring to herself, "Father must not go!"

This was the meal hour, when sleep daily overcame her, but her mother had forgotten her and the child was too unhappy to complain.

At last, when I stretched out my arms to her to say farewell, she never moved, but sadly looking at me said, "Father, you must not go!"

And it amused me to tears to think how this little child dared to fight the giant world of necessity with no other resource than those few words, "Father, you must not go!"

12

Take your holiday, my boy; there are the blue sky and the bare field, the barn and the ruined temple under the ancient tamarind.

My holiday must be taken through yours, finding light in the dance of your eyes, music in your noisy shouts.

To you autumn brings the true holiday freedom: to me it brings the impossibility of work; for lo! You burst into my room.

Yes, my holiday is an endless freedom for love to disturb me.

13

In the evening my little daughter heard a call from her companions below the window.

She timidly went down the dark stairs holding a lamp in her hand, shielding it behind her veil.

I was sitting on my terrace in the star-lit night of March, when at a sudden cry I ran to see.

Her lamp had gone out in the dark spiral staircase. I asked, "Child, why did you cry?"

From below she answered in distress, "Father, I have lost myself!"

When I came back to the terrace under the star-lit night of March, I looked at the sky, and it seemed that a child was walking there treasuring many lamps behind her veils.

*If their light went out, she would suddenly stop and a cry would sound from sky to sky,
“Father, I have lost myself!”*

14

*The evening stood bewildered among street lamps, its gold tarnished by the city dust.
A woman, gaudily decked and painted, leant over the rail of her balcony, a living fire waiting
for its moths.
Suddenly an eddy was formed in the road round a street-boy crushed under the wheels of a
carriage, and the woman on the balcony fell to the floor screaming in agony, stricken with
the grief of the great white-robed Mother who sits in the world’s inner shrine.*

15

*I remember the scene on the barren heath—a girl sat alone on the grass before the gipsy
camp, braiding her hair in the afternoon shade.
Her little dog jumped and barked at her busy hands, as though her employment had no
importance.
In vain did she rebuke it, calling it “a pest,” saying she was tired of its perpetual silliness.
She struck it on the nose with her reproving forefinger, which only seemed to delight it the
more.
She looked menacingly grave for a few moments, to warn it of impending doom; and then,
letting her hair fall, quickly snatched it up in her arms, laughed, and pressed it to her heart.*

16

*He is tall and lean, withered to the bone with long repeated fever, like a dead tree unable to
draw a single drop of sap from anywhere.
In despairing patience, his mother carries him like a child into the sun, where he sits by the
roadside in the shortening shadows of each forenoon.*

The world passes by—a woman to fetch water, a herd-boy with cattle to pasture, a laden cart to the distant market—and the mother hopes that some least stir of life may touch the awful torpor of her dying son.

17

If the ragged villager, trudging home from the market, could suddenly be lifted to the crest of a distant age, men would stop in their work and shout and run to him in delight.

For they would no longer whittle down the man into the peasant, but find him full of the mystery and spirit of his age.

Even his poverty and pain would grow great, released from the shallow insult of the present, and the paltry things in his basket would acquire pathetic dignity.

18

With the morning he came out to walk a road shaded by a file of deodars, that coiled the hill round like importunate love.

He held the first letter from his newly wedded wife in their village home, begging him to come to her, and come soon.

The touch of an absent hand haunted him as he walked, and the air seemed to take up the cry of the letter: "Love, my love, my sky is brimming with tears!"

He asked himself in wonder, "How do I deserve this?"

The sun suddenly appeared over the rim of the blue hills, and four girls from a foreign shore came with swift strides, talking loud and followed by a barking dog.

The two elder turned away to conceal their amusement at something strange in his insignificance, and the younger ones pushed each other, laughed aloud, and ran off in exuberant mirth.

He stopped and his head sank. Then he suddenly felt his letter, opened and read it again.

19

The day came for the image from the temple to be drawn round the holy town in its chariot.

The Queen said to the King, "Let us go and attend the festival."

Only one man out of the whole household did not join in the pilgrimage. His work was to collect stalks of spear-grass to make brooms for the King's house.

The chief of the servants said in pity to him, "You may come with us."

He bowed his head, saying, "It cannot be."

The man dwelt by the road along which the King's followers had to pass. And when the Minister's elephant reached this spot, he called to him and said, "Come with us and see the God ride in his chariot!"

"I dare not seek God after the King's fashion," said the man.

"How should you ever have such luck again as to see the God in his chariot?" asked the Minister.

"When God himself comes to my door," answered the man.

The Minister laughed loud and said, "Fool! 'When God comes to your door!' Yet a King must travel to see him!"

"Who except God visits the poor?" said the man.

20

Days were drawing out as the winter ended, and, in the sun, my dog played in his wild way with the pet deer.

The crowd going to the market gathered by the fence, and laughed to see the love of these playmates struggle with languages so dissimilar.

The spring was in the air, and the young leaves fluttered like flames. Agleam danced in the deer's dark eyes when she started, bent her neck at the movement of her own shadow, or raised her ears to listen to some whisper in the wind.

The message comes floating with the errant breeze, with the rustle and glimmer abroad in the April sky. It sings of the first ache of youth in the world, when the first flower broke from the bud, and love went forth seeking that which it knew not, leaving all it had known. And one afternoon, when among the amlak trees the shadow grew grave and sweet with the furtive caress of light, the deer set off to run like a meteor in love with death.

It grew dark, and lamps were lighted in the house; the stars came out and night was upon the fields, but the deer never came back.

My dog ran up to me whining, questioning me with his piteous eyes which seemed to say, "I do not understand!"

But who does ever understand?

21

Our Lane is tortuous, as if, ages ago, she started in quest of her goal, vacillated right and left, and remained bewildered forever.

Above in the air, between her buildings, hangs like a ribbon a strip torn out of space: she calls it her sister of the blue town.

She sees the sun only for a few moments at mid-day, and asks herself in wise doubt, "Is it real?"

In June rain sometimes shades her band of daylight as with pencil hatchings. The path grows slippery with mud, and umbrellas collide. Sudden jets of water from spouts overhead splash on her startled pavement. In her dismay, she takes it for the jest of an unmannerly scheme of creation.

The spring breeze, gone astray in her coil of contortions, stumbles like a drunken vagabond against angle and corner, filling the dusty air with scraps of paper and rag. "What fury of foolishness! Are the Gods gone mad?" she exclaims in indignation.

But the daily refuse from the houses on both sides—scales of fish mixed with ashes, vegetable peelings, rotten fruit, and dead rats—never rouse her to question, "Why should these things be?"

She accepts every stone of her paving. But from between their chinks sometimes a blade of grass peeps up. That baffles her. How can solid facts permit such intrusion?

On a morning when at the touch of autumn light her houses wake up into beauty from their foul dreams, she whispers to herself, "There is a limitless wonder somewhere beyond these buildings."

But the hours pass on; the households are astir; the maid strolls back from the market, swinging her right arm and with the left clasping the basket of provisions to her side; the air grows thick with the smell and smoke of kitchens. It again becomes clear to our Lane that the real and normal consist solely of herself, her houses, and their muck-heaps.

22

The house, lingering on after its wealth has vanished, stands by the wayside like a madman with a patched rag over his back.

Day after day scars it with spiteful scratches, and rainy months leave their fantastic signatures on its bared bricks.

In a deserted upper room one of a pair of doors has fallen from rusty hinges; and the other, widowed, bangs day and night to the fitful gusts.

One night the sound of women wailing came from that house. They mourned the death of the last son of the family, a boy of eighteen, who earned his living by playing the part of the heroine in a travelling theatre.

A few days more and the house became silent, and all the doors were locked.

Only on the north side in the upper room that desolate door would neither drop off to its rest nor be shut, but swung to and fro in the wind like a self-torturing soul.

After a time children's voices echo once more through that house. Over the balcony-rail women's clothes are hung in the sun, a bird whistles from a covered cage, and a boy plays with his kite on the terrace.

A tenant has come to occupy a few rooms. He earns little and has many children. The tired mother beats them and they roll on the floor and shriek.

A maid-servant of forty drudges through the day, quarrels with her mistress, threatens to, but never leaves.

Every day some small repairs are done. Paper is pasted in place of missing panes; gaps in the railings are made good with split bamboo; an empty box keeps the boltless gate shut; old stains vaguely show through new whitewash on the walls.

The magnificence of wealth had found a fitting memorial in gaunt desolation; but, lacking sufficient means, they try to hide this with dubious devices, and its dignity is outraged.

They have overlooked the deserted room on the north side. And its forlorn door still bangs in the wind, like Despair beating her breast.

23

In the depths of the forest the ascetic practised penance with fast-closed eyes; he intended to deserve Paradise.

But the girl who gathered twigs brought him fruits in her skirt, and water from the stream in cups made of leaves.

The days went on, and his penance grew harsher till the fruits remained untasted, the water untouched: and the girl who gathered twigs was sad.

The Lord of Paradise heard that a man had dared to aspire to be as the Gods. Time after time he had fought the Titans, who were his peers, and kept them out of his kingdom; yet he feared a man whose power was that of suffering.

But he knew the ways of mortals, and he planned a temptation to decoy this creature of dust away from his adventure.

A breath from Paradise kissed the limbs of the girl who gathered twigs, and her youth ached with a sudden rapture of beauty, and her thoughts hummed like the bees of a rifled hive.

The time came when the ascetic should leave the forest for a mountain cave, to complete the rigour of his penance.

When he opened his eyes in order to start on this journey, the girl appeared to him like a verse familiar, yet forgotten, and which an added melody made strange. The ascetic rose from his seat and told her that it was time he left the forest.

“But why rob me of my chance to serve you?” she asked with tears in her eyes.

He sat down again, thought for long, and remained on where he was.

That night remorse kept the girl awake. She began to dread her power and hate her triumph, yet her mind tossed on the waves of turbulent delight.

In the morning she came and saluted the ascetic and asked his blessing, saying she must leave him.

He gazed on her face in silence, then said, “Go, and may your wish be fulfilled.”

For years he sat alone till his penance was complete.

The Lord of the Immortals came down to tell him that he had won Paradise.

“I no longer need it,” said he.

The God asked him what greater reward he desired.

“I want the girl who gathers twigs.”

They said that Kabir, the weaver, was favoured of God, and the crowd flocked round him for medicine and miracles. But he was troubled; his low birth had hitherto endowed him with a most precious obscurity to sweeten with songs and with the presence of his God. He prayed that it might be restored.

Envious of the repute of this outcast, the priests leagued themselves with a harlot to disgrace him. Kabir came to the market to sell cloths from his loom; when the woman grasped his hand, blaming him for being faithless, and followed him to his house, saying she would not be forsaken, Kabir said to himself, "God answers prayers in his own way."

Soon the woman felt a shiver of fear and fell on her knees and cried, "Save me from my sin!" To which he said, "Open your life to God's light!"

Kabir worked at his loom and sang, and his songs washed the stains from that woman's heart, and by way of return found a home in her sweet voice.

One day the King, in a fit of caprice, sent a message to Kabir to come and sing before him. The weaver shook his head: but the messenger dared not leave his door till his master's errand was fulfilled.

The King and his courtiers started at the sight of Kabir when he entered the hall. For he was not alone, the woman followed him. Some smiled, some frowned, and the King's face darkened at the beggar's pride and shamelessness.

Kabir came back to his house disgraced, the woman fell at his feet crying, "Why accept such dishonour for my sake, master? Suffer me to go back to my infamy!"

Kabir said, "I dare not turn my God away when he comes branded with insult."