

The talk drifts into the domain of general matters. Soon after, our meeting disperses. The first thing I do on getting back to my quarters is to light a cigarette, thus atoning for the one forbidden me, and then watch its fragrant smoke rise erratically upward.



I witness a curious spectacle in the early evening. The stars have just begun to twinkle faintly, the day is not quite dead, and in this queer half light a few oil lanterns glow palely. Meher sits inside his cave while a motley crowd, composed of disciples, visitors and people from the nearby village of Arangaon, gather in horseshoe fashion around the entrance.

A ceremony which is repeated every evening wherever Meher may be at the time is about to take place. A devotee holds aloft a shallow metal bowl which serves as a lamp, its wick being dipped in oil which is strongly perfumed with sandalwood. He waves it seven times around the saintly head of his master. The assembled audience thereupon break into a vigorous chorus of chants and prayers. Through the intonations of their Mahratti dialect, I catch the name of Baba several times. It is obvious that the chants are hyperboles of adulation for their master. Everyone looks at him with adoring eyes. Meher's younger brother sits at a small portable harmonium, and makes a wailing kind of music to accompany the singers.

During the course of the ceremony, each devotee files up to the cave in turn, prostrates himself before Meher and kisses his uncovered feet. Some are so overwrought with pious emotion that they prolong the act of osculation to a full minute! I am told that this act is deemed extremely beneficial spiritually, since it brings Meher's blessing upon the devotee and automatically washes away some of his sins.

I walk back to my quarters, wondering what the next day will bring forth. Somewhere across the fields and out in the jungle a jackal bays and breaks the night's silence.

The next day I gather the secretary and some of the English-speaking disciples outside one of their wooden bungalows. We sit in a half circle. Those who do not understand English stand a little distance away and watch us with smiling faces and interested eyes. I proceed to extract from all these

collective minds and memories such facts about their amazing master's career as I do not already know.

His personal name is Meher, but he calls himself Sadguru Meher Baba. Sadguru means "perfect master," while Baba is simply a term of affection in common use among some of the Indian peoples, and it is by this name alone that his disciples usually address him.

Meher Baba's father is a Persian² who is an adherent of the Zoroastrian creed, and who emigrated to India as a poor youth. Meher was his first son and was born in 1894 at Poona City. The boy was put to school at five, proved good at his studies, and passed the matriculation examination at seventeen. He then entered Deccan College in Poona and received a good modern education for two years.

Now began the tortuous and incomprehensible phase of his career. He was cycling back from school one evening and was about to pass the dwelling-place of a well-known Muhammedan woman faqueer. Her name was Hazrat Babajan, and she was reputed to be over a century old. She was reclining on a long couch which stood upon a railed veranda outside her humble wooden one-roomed house. When the cycle drew abreast of her, the old woman rose and beckoned to the boy. He dismounted and approached her. She clasped his hands and embraced him and then kissed his forehead.

What happened afterwards is not very clear. I gathered that the youth reached his home in a dazed mental state, and that during the following eight months his mental faculties progressively weakened until he became unable to study properly. In the end he had to bid a final farewell to his college, because he could not longer follow his lessons.

Thereafter young Meher fell into a semi-idiotic condition and was hardly able to look after himself. His eyes became dull and lifeless, and he lacked the intelligence to perform the most elementary duties of a human being, such as taking food, washing oneself, attending to the calls of nature, and so on. When his father said "Eat!" he took his food in a mechanical manner; otherwise he did not understand why the food was put before him. In short he became a human automaton.

A young man of twenty, whose parents have to care for him like a child of three, seems a case of mental regression, and the distracted father concluded that he had overworked his mind

while cramming for an examination. Meher was taken to various doctors, who diagnosed mental breakdown and gave him injections. In nine months' time improvement in his lamentable condition set in and gradually increased, until he was able to understand his environment intelligently and to act more normally.

After his recovery it was discovered that his character had changed. His scholastic ambitions were gone, his ambitions for a wordly career had disappeared, while his interest in games and sports had collapsed. All these things were replaced by a deep thirst for the religious life and by a continuous aspiration to spiritualize himself.

Because he believed that these changes took their root in the kiss which the Muhammedan woman faqueer had bestowed on him, Meher approached the old lady for advice about his future. She directed him to find a spiritual teacher. He inquired where this boon was to be obtained. She waved her hand vaguely into space for reply.

He visited several holy men of repute in the locality. Then he went farther afield to the villages within a hundred miles of his native Poona. One day he walked into a little stone-built temple near Sakori. It was a poor humble shrine but it was the abode of a very holy man, or so the villagers said. And so, when Meher came face to face with Upasani Maharaj, he felt that he had found his master.

The young aspirant for holiness made periodic excursions from home to Sakori. He usually spent a few days at a time with his teacher, but once he remained for four months. Meher asserts that during this period he was being perfected, made ready for his mission. One evening he collected thirty of his old schoolmates and boyhood friends, gave them mysterious hints of an important meeting, and brought them to the little temple in Sakori. The doors were locked and Upasani Maharaj, the stern-looking holy man who lived there, rose and addressed the gathering. He spoke to them about religion, told them to seek virtue, informed them that he had made Meher the spiritual inheritor of his own mystic powers and knowledge, and finally announced to the surprised young men that Meher had attained divine perfection! He strongly advised them to become followers of their Parsee friend, for then they would receive great spiritual benefit, both in this life and in that to come.

Some his listeners took his advice and others remained sceptical. About a year later, when Meher had reached the age of twenty-seven, the young Parsee announced to his small flock that he had become conscious of a divine mission which he was to carry out, and that God had given him a work of colossal importance to mankind. He did not straightaway reveal the precise nature of that mission, but within a few years he let the secret emerge. He was destined to become a messiah!

In 1924 Meher left India for the first time. He embarked on a journey to Persia with a company of half a dozen disciples, telling them that he would tour the country of his ancestors. When the ship touched port at Bushire, he suddenly changed his mind and left the place by the homeward boat. Three months later rebel forces captured Teheran, the Persian capital, and deposed the old regime. A new Shah came to the throne.

Meher Baba then turned to his followers and said:

"Now you see the result of my mystic workings during my visit to Persia!"

His disciples told me that Persia was a happier land under the new ruler, and that Muhammedans, Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians were living amicably together, whereas there had been constant strife and cruel outrages among them under the old regime.

Some years after this mysterious excursion, Meher Baba began a curious educational institution. At his suggestion a disciple purchased the colony's present site near the village of Arangaon. Several rough bungalows were constructed, together with many thatch-and-pole huts. A free boarding school was then declared open, the teachers being recruited from the families of devotees or their friends. No fees were charged for tuition, while even board and lodging were free. In addition to the usual secular subjects, there was special instruction in undenominational religion by Meher himself.

On such attractive terms it was an easy matter to collect nearly one hundred boys. A dozen of them arrived from distant Persia. The boys were taught the moral ideals which are more or less common to most religions, and the life stories of the great prophets were unfolded to them. The class on religion gradually became the central feature of the curriculum, and Meher Baba led the older boys into a devotional mysticism which appears to have been of a somewhat watery nature. They

were taught to regard him as a sacred personage, even to worship him. A few boys began to manifest signs of religious hysteria in the sequence. Strange scenes occurred among them every few days.

A noticeable feature of this unusual school was that the pupils belonged to varying castes, races and creeds. Hindus, Muhammedans, Indian Christians and Zoroastrians mingled freely, but Meher Baba wanted a still wider enrolment. He sent his chief disciple on a mission to England to find a few white pupils. The emissary, however, encountered much difficulty because the white parents were unwilling to entrust their children to a stranger, who wanted to haul the latter off to a school in distant Asia. Moreover, the idea of a school combining all religions did not mean much to them. There are plenty of schools in England where pupils of different creeds forgather in a natural spontaneous manner without the fuss that is made of it in a creed-ridden country like India.

One day the emissary from India met an Englishman who straightaway became converted to acceptance of the Parsee messiah after a conversation or two. The man was possessed of an enthusiastic temperament, and having rapidly travelled through all the cults which honeycomb London, he was ready for what seemed to be the loftier message of Meher Baba. So he assisted in the quest for white pupils and found three children, whose poverty-stricken parents were willing to ease their own burdens at the price of parting with them. At this stage the India Office bestirred itself into activity, investigated the matter, shook its official head and put a ban on the project. The children did not sail. The representative of the Parsee messiah returned to India, accompanied by the Englishman and the latter's wife and sister-in-law. Five or six months after their arrival, Meher Baba sent them back to England at the expense of his chief disciple.

I learnt from Meher that his object in founding this school was twofold. First, he wanted to break down the racial and religious barriers among the pupils; secondly, he sought to train a selected number of them as future ambassadors for his spiritual cause. When the years had sufficiently ripened them and the time came for public announcement of his own mission, he would send them out to all the five continents to act as apostles and helpers in his destined work of spiritualizing

mankind.

Another activity developed into being alongside the school. A primitive hospital was opened and ardent disciples were sent out to collect the blind, the ailing and the crippled from the locality. The latter were given free medical treatment, food and accommodation, while the Parsee holy man provided them with spiritual consolation. Five lepers were cured by his mere touch, says an enthusiastic devotee. Alas, I am a trifle sceptical, for no one knows who they are, where they are or how to find them now. 'Tis a piece of Oriental exaggeration, I fear. Surely one of the lepers would have attached himself to Meher Baba's train of disciples in sheer gratitude? Surely the news would have spread like a prairie fire across leprosy-ridden India, and all the stricken souls of the country would have eagerly flocked to the hospital near Arangaon?

There grew up a large camp-following of devotees, visitors and hangers-on from nearby villages. The population of this unusual colony reached into hundreds; intense religious fervour pervaded the whole place; and Meher Baba was, of course, the centre of the whole picture.

Eighteen months after the colony was founded, it was suddenly closed down and all these activities were abandoned. The boys were sent back to their parents and the patients to their homes. Meher Baba vouchsafed no reason for this move on his part. I learnt that sudden inexplicable impulses of this kind were a regular feature of his conduct.

In the spring of 1929 he sent out his first missionary disciple, a man named Sadhu Leik, who was bidden to go on tour round India. The latter was told as a parting injunction:

"You have the advantage of a messiah to work for. Be cosmopolitan and do not run down any religion. Be sure that I will know all about you. Do not be disheartened by the remarks of others. I will lead you, and follow none but me."

From the information which I picked up it was obvious that the poor fellow was physically unfitted for a wandering life. He was able to create a small following in Madras, but soon sickened on the way and then returned to die.

Such is a rapid outline of the Parsee holy man's career.

I have had several fugitive talks of a chatty nature with Meher Baba, but I want to hear something more definite about his self-appointed mission to the world. So I seek and obtain my final interview with him.

He wears a soft blue scarf to-day and the alphabet board rests upon his knees in readiness for our conversation. The disciples present form an admiring audience and provide the requisite background. Everyone smiles at everyone else until I shoot a sudden question through the silence.

"How do you know that you are a messiah?"

The disciples look aghast at my temerity. The master moves his bushy eyebrows. But he is not disconcerted, for he smiles at the enquiring Westerner and quickly answers:

"I know! I know it so well. You know that you are a human being, and so I know that I am a messiah! It is my whole life. My bliss never stops. You never mistake yourself for some other person; so I cannot mistake who I am. I have a divine work to do and I will do it."

"What really happened when the Muhammedan woman faqueer kissed you? Can you remember?"

"Yes. Until then I was as worldly as other youths. Hazrat Babajan unlocked the door for me. Her kiss was the turning point. I felt as though the universe was receding into space; and I was left entirely alone. Yes—I was alone with God. For months I could not sleep. And yet I grew no weaker but remained as strong as before. My father did not understand; he thought I was going mad. He called in one doctor and then another. They gave me medicines and tried injections, but they were all wrong. I was with God and there was nothing to cure. Only, I had lost hold of normal existence and it took me a long time to get back. Do you understand?"

"Quite. Now that you have got back, when will you let the public know?"

"My manifestation will happen in the near future, but I cannot give you the exact date."

"And then—?"

"My task on this earth will last for thirty-three years. Afterwards I shall undergo a tragic death. My own people, the Parsees, will be responsible for my violent end. But others will continue my work."

"Your disciples, I presume?"

"My circle of twelve selected disciples, of whom one will become a master at the appointed time. It is for their sake that I fast often and observe silence, for this wipes their sins away and will enable them to become perfect spiritually. They have all been with me in past births, and I am bound to help them. There will also be an outer circle with forty-four members. They will be men and women of lower spiritual grade; their duty will be to assist the twelve chief disciples, after the latter have attained perfection."

"There are other claimants to messiahship?"

Meher laughs in deprecation of those absurd persons.

"Yes. There is Krishnamurti—Mrs. Besant's protege. The Theosophists deceive themselves. Their chief wire-pullers are supposed to be somewhere on the Himalayas in Tibet. You will find nothing but dust and stones in their supposed abodes. Besides, no real spiritual teacher ever required someone else's body to be prepared and trained for his use. That is ridiculous."

Other strange statements emerge from this final conversation; a curious jumble of assertions, which come through slim fingers flickering from letter to letter . . . "America has a great future; she will become a spiritually-minded nation . . . I am aware of every one who puts his faith in me, and he is always helped. . . . Do not try to read my actions, you will never fathom them . . . Once I visit a place and stay there, however short a time, its spiritual atmosphere becomes greatly elevated . . . The general spiritual push that I shall give the world will soon put right all material problems—economic, political, sexual, sociological—for selfishness will be destroyed and brotherhood will replace it . . . Shivaji, the chieftain who built up the Mahratta empire in the seventeenth century, is also here (he points to himself; the meaning is that Meher is a reincarnation of Shivaji) . . . Some of the planets are inhabited; they resemble this globe in culture and material advancement, but spiritually our earth is most advanced . . ."

One observes that Meher suffers from no modesty when discussing his claims. I am a little startled, however, when he communicates a command to me at the finish of the interview.

"Go to the West as my representative! Spread my name as that of the coming divine messenger. Work for me and my influence, and you will then be working for the good of

mankind."

"The world will probably scout me as a madman," I reply uneasily, for such a task staggers my imagination.

Meher disagrees.

I answer that nothing short of working a series of miracles will convince the West that anyone is a spiritual superman, let alone a messiah, and that since I cannot perform miracles I cannot undertake the job of being his herald.

"Then you shall perform them!" is his comforting assurance.

I remain silent. Meher misconstrues my silence.

"Stay with me and I shall confer great powers on you," he urges. "You are very fortunate. I will help you to obtain advanced powers, so that you will render service in the West."

†

It is unnecessary to describe the remainder of this incredible interview. Some men are born great, some achieve greatness, and others appoint a press agent. Meher seems to favour the latter course.

Next day I prepare to leave. I have imbibed sufficient pious wisdom and prophetic forebodings to suffice me for the time. I have not wandered to distant parts of the world merely to hear religious assertions or declarations of grandeur. I want facts, even if they are to be facts of a strange, uncommon kind, and I want reliable evidence; better still, something personal, something to which I can testify for my own satisfaction.

My kit is packed, I am about to leave. I go to Meher and bid him a polite farewell. He informs me that within a few months he will be in residence at his central headquarters, which are situated near the town of Nasik. He suggests that I should visit him there and stay for a month.

"Do this. Come when you can. I will give you wonderful spiritual experiences and enable you to know the real truth about me. You will be shown my inner spiritual powers. After that, you will have no more doubts. You will be able to prove by your own personal experiences what I claim. Then you can go to the West and win many people for me."

I decided to return at my leisure and spend a month with him. Despite the theatrical character of the Parsee holy man

and the fantastic nature of his mission, I decided to investigate the whole thing with an open mind.

†

A brief return to the stir of city life in Bombay, and then I entrain for Poona. My wanderings around this ancient land are about to begin.

The old Muhammedan holy woman, whose sudden intervention started Meher Baba off on his queer tangent, engages my interest. I deem a short visit to her will not come amiss. I have already made a few preliminary enquiries about her in Bombay, where I learn from former Judge Khandalawalla, who has known her for fifty years, that her age is really about ninety-five. I remember that Meher's followers informed me that it is one hundred and thirty, but I generously ascribe this exaggeration to the heat of their enthusiasm.

The Judge briefly tells me her story. She is a native of Baluchistan, that vague territory situate between Afghanistan and India, and she ran away from home quite early. After long and adventurous wanderings afoot, she arrived at Poona about the beginning of this century and has never moved from the city since. At first, she made her home under a neem tree, where she insisted on remaining in all seasons. Her reputation for sanctity and strange powers spread throughout the Muhammedan people in the vicinity, until even the Hindus came to treat her with due reverence. Some Muhammedans eventually built a wooden shelter under the tree for her, since she refuses to live in a proper house. This gives her the semblance of a home and provides some protection against the inclemencies of the monsoon season.

I ask the Judge for his personal opinion. He replies that he does not doubt but that Hazrat Babajan is a genuine faqueer. The Judge happens to be a Parsee, so I make some judicious enquiries about Meher Baba, who is well known to him. What I learn is unlikely to make me more favourable to the Parsee messiah. I ask him finally about Upasani Maharaj, who is now the inspirer of Meher. My informant, a shrewd discerning old man of vast experience in these and worldly matters, enters into a lengthy account of his own unfortunate contact with him. I give two instances:

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"Upasani has made ghastly mistakes. He once induced me to go to Benares, where he was staying at the time. After a while, I got a premonition of death and wanted to return to Poona, where my family was living. Upasani prevented me from going by repeatedly prophesying that everything would be all right. Nevertheless, two days later I received a telegram saying that my son's wife had given birth to a child, and that it died within a few minutes. In the other case, Upasani told my son-in-law, who was thinking of going on the Bombay Stock Exchange, that such a move would prove extremely fortunate for him. Acting on this advice, he embarked on the Exchange and was almost ruined!"

Judge Khandalawalla impresses me with the independence of his outlook. He debunks Upasani Maharaj, whom Meher Baba has described to me as "one of the greatest spiritual personalities of this age," yet he does not hesitate to admit that Meher himself is honest and really believes in his spiritual attainment, although this attainment remains unproven.

I reach Poona, put up at a hotel in the cantonment, and then drive straight to the abode of Hazrat Babajan. A guide, who knows her personally and who will eke out my little Hindustani as an interpreter, accompanies me.

We find her in a narrow street, whose lighting is a quaint mixture of gaudy little oil lamps and electric globes. She lies, in full view of passers-by, upon a low divan. A fenced veranda rail separates it from the street. Above the wooden shelter rises the shapely outline of a neem tree, whose white blossoms make the air slightly fragrant.

"You must take off your shoes," my guide warns me. "It is considered disrespectful to wear them when you enter." I obey him and a minute later we stand by her bedside.

She lies flat on her back, this ancient dame. Her head is propped by pillows. The lustrous whiteness of her silky hair offers a sad contrast to the heavily wrinkled face and seamed brow.

Out of my slender store of newly-learned Hindustani I address a phrase of self-introduction to the old lady. She turns her aged head, stretches out a skinny, bony forearm, and then takes one of my hands in her own. She holds it tightly, staring up at me with unworldly eyes.

Those eyes puzzle me. They seem to be quite

uncomprehending, entirely vacant. She silently grips my hand for three or four minutes and continues to look blankly into my own eyes. I receive the feeling that her gaze penetrates me. It is a weird sensation. I do not know what to do . . .

At last she withdraws her hand and brushes her forehead several times. Then she turns to my guide and says something to him, but it is in the vernacular and I cannot grasp its meaning.

He whispers the translation:

"He has been called to India and soon he will understand."

A pause, and then she croaks forth another sentence, but its meaning were better kept in my memory than in print.

Her voice is extremely feeble; her words emerge slowly and with much difficulty. Is it possible that this aged and decrepit fleshly frame, this haggard and huddled figure, contains the soul of a genuine faqueer with wondrous powers? Who can say? It is not always easy to read the pages of the soul by the letters of the body.

But the woman is nearing her century. I have been warned that continued conversation with her is not permissible, owing to her enfeebled condition. I prepare to withdraw quietly, strongly impressed by one thought. I think that the vacancy of her eyes is a signal that she is near the gate of death. The mind is parting from the worn-out body, but drags itself back now and again to pay a feeble attention to this world through strange eyes.³

In the hotel, I sum up my feelings. That some deep psychological attainment really resides in the depths of her being, I am certain. Respect rises unbidden within me. I find that the contact has diverted my normal thought currents and raised up an inexplicable sense of that element of mystery which surrounds our earthly lives, despite all the discoveries and speculations of the scientists. I see with unexpected clarity that those scientific writers, who profess to reveal the fundamental secrets of the great world puzzle, profess what is nothing more than surface scratching. But I cannot understand why a brief contact with the woman faqueer should so sap at the very base of my confident mental certainties.

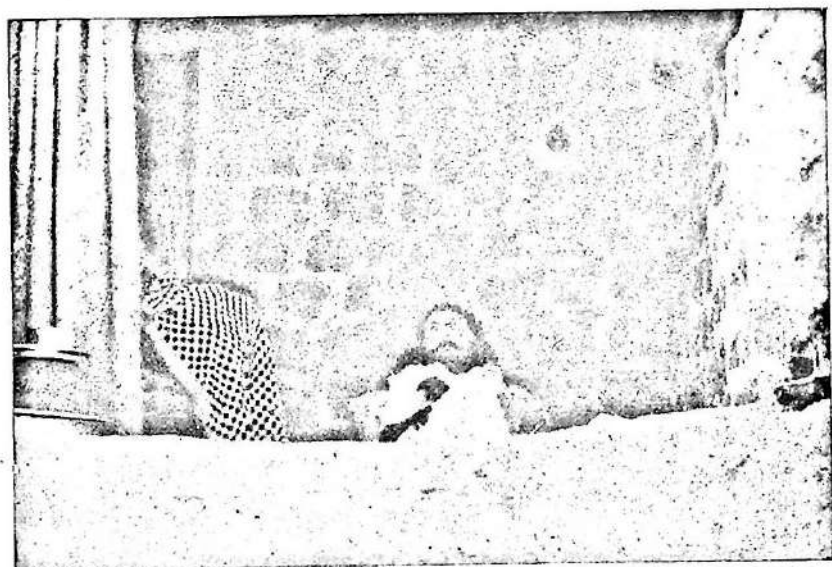
The cryptic prophecy she made recurs to my mind. I am unable to grasp its meaning. No one has called me to India; have I not gone freely of my own whim? . . . Only now, as I write these lines, long after the event, do I believe that I begin dimly

to understand. 'Tis a strange world, my masters!

1 See also Chapter XIV.

2 Hence the appellations *Parsee*.

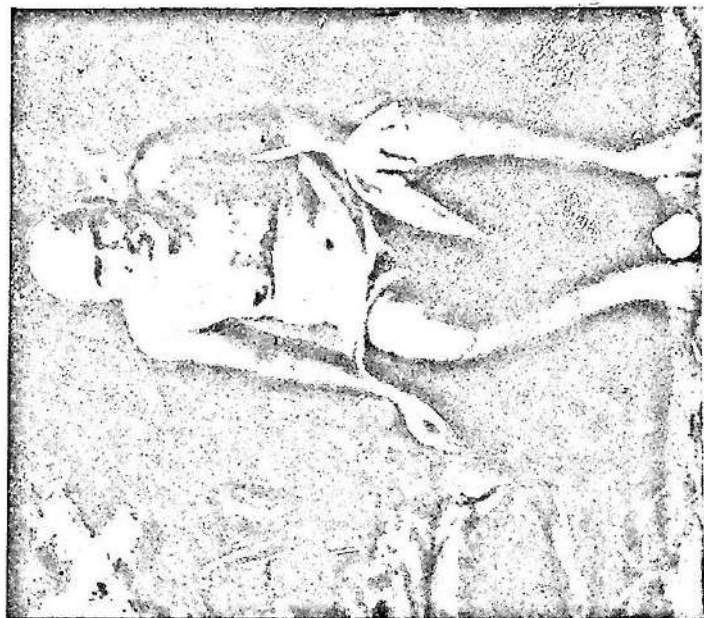
3 I visited her again some months later. The impression of her near decease was confirmed. She died soon after.



Above : THE CAVE HOME OF SHRI SADGURU MEHER BABA
 Below : THE 'NEW MESSIAH'
 This Parsee holy man is doubtless a great lover of Nature, for he has
 set his retreat in a scene of aloof, untroubled peace.
 See page 35.



HAZRAT BABAJAN, THE WOMAN FAQUEER
 'Is it possible that this aged and decrepit fleshly frame, this
 baggard and huddled figure, contains the soul of a genuine
 faqueer with wondrous powers? Who can say?'
 See page 53.



UPASANI MAHARAJ
 'And so, when Meher came face to face with Upasani Maharaj,
 he felt that he had found his master.'
 See page 44.

V

The Anchorite of the Adyar River

The hands race around my watch, the weeks move across the face of my calendar, while I work my way southwards across the Deccan plateau. I visit several remarkable places, but find few remarkable men. Some inscrutable, impelling force—which I cannot understand, but which I blindly obey—hurries my pace so that sometimes I rush onwards as though I am a tourist.

At last I am on the train to Madras, where I intend to halt and establish myself for a while. During the long night journey, when sleep is difficult to procure, I take count of the invisible gains which I have reaped during these travels in Western India.

I force myself to confess that so far I have not tracked down any Yogi, about whose discovery I can feel unduly elated; as for the thought of finding a Rishee, that now lies in the remote depths of my mind. On the other hand, I have seen enough of the gross superstitions and suffocating customs of sleepy India to make me realize that the scepticism and warnings of some chance Bombay acquaintances are well justified. I realize, too, that my self-imposed task will be difficult of fulfilment. Pious men are here in all their fifty-seven varieties, but they do not provide sufficient attraction. One wanders by temples whose mysterious interior seems to promise much. I cross the sacred precincts and stand at the threshold. I peep inside and behold the fantastic worshippers, who toll a bell as they pray, that their prayers may not escape the ears of their chosen deity!

I am glad to reach Madras, whose straggling and colourful appearance appeals to me, and I settle in a charming suburb about two miles outside the city so as to get easier contact with the Indian, rather than the European, element. My house is in the Street of the Brahmins. The road is choked with a thick layer of sand, into which my shoes readily sink; the sidewalk is made of beaten earth: everything is free from the improving touch of the twentieth century. The whitewashed houses have pillared porches and open verandas. In the interior of mine,

there is a tiled courtyard, around which runs a covered gallery. Our water is hauled up by a bucket from an old well.

The luxuriant tropical scenery which unfolds as soon as one gets away from the two or three streets which compose this suburb affords me perpetual delight. Soon I discover that the Adyar River is less than half an hour's walk away. There are several shady palm groves near this wide stream, and they take my fancy. I spend my spare time loitering among them or walk for a few miles beside the languid water.

The Adyar River flows down to Madras, of which city it forms the southern boundary, and then joins the ocean amid the ceaseless rise and fall of the Coromandel surf. Alongside this beautiful stream I slowly amble one morning, accompanied by a Brahmin acquaintance who learns where my interests lie. After some time he suddenly seizes my arm.

"Look!" he exclaims. "Do you see that young man who is approaching us? He is known to be a Yogi. He would interest you, but, alas! he never talks to us."

"Why not?"

"I know where he lives, but he is the most reserved man in the whole district."

By this time the stranger has almost reached us. He possesses an athletic figure, and I judge him to be about thirty-five. He is slightly above medium height. What strikes me most, however, is the negroid character of his face. The skin has darkened to a shade of black, and the broad flat nose, the thick lips and muscular frame, all betoken non-Aryan blood. His long neatly-plaited hair is gathered around the crown of his head in a sort of top-knot. He wears a peculiar kind of large earring. A white shawl is wrapped around his body and then flung across the left shoulder. The legs are bare and the feet uncovered.

He completely ignores us and paces onwards with slow steps. His eyes are downcast, as though intent on searching the ground. One gathers the impression that the mind behind those eyes is pondering over some matter. What, I wonder, is the subject of this walking meditation?

He piques and arouses my interest still further. An intense desire to break down the barriers which separate us grips me suddenly.

"I want to talk to him. Let us turn back," I suggest.

The Brahmin protests firmly.

"It is useless."

"At least I can try," I answer.

The Brahmin again endeavours to dissuade me.

"That man is so inaccessible that we know hardly anything of him. He keeps himself quite aloof from his neighbours. We must not interfere with him."

But I am already moving in the reputed Yogi's direction and my companion has perforce to follow me.

We are soon behind the other man, who gives no sign of his awareness of our presence, but continues to pace slowly onward. We follow with parallel steps.

"Please ask if I may converse with him," I tell my companion. The latter hesitates, and then shakes his head.

"No—I dare not," he declares weakly.

The unpleasant possibility that I might be missing a valuable contact stirs me to further effort. There is no alternative but to address the Yogi myself. I throw all conventions—Hindu and European—to the wind, stand directly in his path and face him. I try a brief sentence out of my slight stock of Hindustani. He looks up; there is a half-smile around his mouth, but he makes a negative gesture of the head.

At this time I know only a single word of Tamil, which is the vernacular of Madras, and doubtless the Yogi knows even less of English. Few people know Hindustani in the South, but of this fact I am not yet aware. Fortunately, the Brahmin begins to feel that he cannot leave me so helpless, and advances to the rescue.

In a hesitant, apologetic voice, he says something in Tamil.

The Yogi does not reply. His face hardens, the eyes become cold and unfriendly.

The Brahmin looks at me embarrassed. A prolonged pause follows. Neither of us knows what to do. I realize ruefully what a difficult task it is to help hermits to find their tongues. They dislike being interviewed, and they do not wish to talk to strangers about their intimate experiences. They dislike, especially, being asked to break their chronic silence for the sake of a sun-helmeted white man, who is tacitly assumed to possess neither sympathy with nor understanding of the subtleties of Yoga.

This feeling is succeeded by another. I become strangely

aware of a penetrating inspection on the Yogi's part. Somehow, I sense that he is mentally probing my innermost thoughts. Yet outwardly he remains aloof, indifferent. Am I mistaken?

But I cannot shake off this weird feeling that I have become a kind of human microscopical specimen.

The Brehmin becomes very nervous and nudges me as a hint to be off. Another minute and I shall yield to his silent importunity and go away defeated.

The Yogi makes a sudden gesture of his hand, leads us towards a tall palm tree close by, and silently bids us sit down at its foot. He then drops to the ground himself.

He addresses some Tamil words to the Brahmin. I notice that he possesses a peculiar resonance and a quality which is almost musical.

"The Yogi says that he is willing to converse with you," my companion interprets, and then volunteers the statement that the other man has peregrinated an unfrequented part of the river for some years.

The first thing I ask is the man's name, whereupon I hear such a lengthy string of appellations that I immediately christen him anew. It appears that his first name is "Bramasuganandah," that he possesses four other names all equally long or longer, and that the only useful thing to do seems to be to call him Brama. If I am to give all five of the names, the words would stretch right across this page, so many letters are there in each name! I am both awed and appalled at the length of the young man's patronymic.¹ It is, therefore, better to maintain a discreet silence about them, and make matters easier for unacclimatized readers by referring to him henceforth as Brama, the shorter name which I bestow on him in conversation.

"Please tell him that I am interested in Yoga and wish to know something about it," I say.

The Yogi nods his head on hearing the translated statement.

"Yes, I can see that," he replies with a smile. "Let the sahib ask questions."

"What kind of Yoga practice do you follow?"

"Mine is the system of Body Control. It is the most difficult of all the Yogas. Body and breath must be fought as though they were obstinate mules, and they must be conquered.

Thereafter the nerves and mind are more easily controlled."

"What benefit do you get from it?"

Brama gazes across the river.

"Health of the body, strength of the will, length of years- these are a few benefits," he says. "The Yogi who has become a master in the training which I follow, brings the flesh to iron-hard endurance. Pains do not move him. I know one who submitted to an operation at the hands of a surgeon, when no sleep-giving drug could be used. He endured it without a murmur. Such a one can also experience in his unprotected body the most intense cold, yet receive no hurt."

I whip out my note-book, for I perceive that our conversation is likely to prove more interesting than I anticipated. Brama smiles again at my stenography, but does not object.

"Tell me more about your Yoga system," I beg of him.

"My master has lived on the open mountains of the Himalayas, surrounded by snow and ice and wearing a cinnamon-coloured robe for his only comfort. He can sit down for several hours at a stretch in a place where it is so cold that water instantly freezes. Yet he will feel no distress. Such is the power of our Yoga."

"You are a disciple, then?"

"Yes. There are still many hills to climb. I have given twelve years of unceasing effort to practise our exercises every day."

"And you have attained some unusual powers—?"

Brama nods his head, but maintains a stolid silence.

I am intrigued more and more by this strange young man.

"Is it permissible to ask how you became a Yogi?" I query, somewhat uncertainly.

At first there is no answer. We three continue to squat under the fronded palm. I hear the hoarse cries of errant crows among a group of coconut trees on the opposite bank of the river. Mingling with this noise comes the fitful chatter of a few monkeys, who explore the tree-tops. From the shore rises the quiet splash of the water.

"Most willingly!" comes Brama's sudden reply. I think he realizes that my questions are prompted by something deeper than mere academic curiosity. He hides his hand beneath his shawl, fixes his gaze upon some object on the other side on the river, and begins to speak:

"I was a quiet and lonely child; there was no pleasure for me in the usual habits of children. I did not care to play with the others but liked to wander alone in the gardens or in the fields. Few people understand a brooding boy, and I cannot say that I was happy with life. About the age of twelve I happened, by mere chance, to overhear the conversation of some older persons, and it was through their talk that I first discovered the existence of Yoga. This event aroused in me a desire to learn more of the matter. I began to enquire into it among several people and in this way was able to get a few books in Tamil, which revealed many interesting things about the Yogis. As a horse riding through a desert thirsts for water, so did my mind thirst for still further knowledge about them. But I came to a point where it seemed impossible to get to know more. One day I re-read, as if by chance, a sentence in one of my books. It was: 'To succeed on the path of Yoga, one must have a personal teacher.' These words now made a tremendous impression on me. I felt that only by leaving home and travelling about could I find a suitable teacher. To this course, my parents would not give permission. Not knowing what else to do, I began to practise in secret some breathing exercises, about which I had collected some scraps of information. These practices did not help me; instead, they injured me. I did not then realize that without the guidance of an expert teacher, it is not safe for anyone to do them. But my eagerness was such that I could not wait till I met a teacher. Within a few years the effect of these breathing exercises showed itself. A small rupture made its appearance on the top of my head; it seemed that the skull was broken in its weakest spot. Anyway, blood streamed from the wound and my body became cold and numb. I thought I was dying. Two hours later a strange vision crossed my mind's eye. I seemed to see the figure of a venerable Yogi who addressed me, saying: 'You now see what a dangerous condition you have brought yourself into by these forbidden practices. Let this be a severe lesson to you.' The vision disappeared and, peculiarly enough, from that moment my state grew better and I completely recovered. But the scar remains still."

Brama bends his head so as to show the crown to our eyes. A tiny rounded scar is plainly visible on his poll.

"After this unfortunate experience I gave up breathing exercises and waited for some years until home ties were

looser," he goes on. "When my opportunity for freedom came, I left home and went out in search of a teacher. I knew that the best way to test a teacher is to live with him for a few months. I found several teachers and divided my time between staying with them for a while and retiring home disappointed. Some were the heads of monasteries; others were the chiefs of institutions of spiritual learning, but somehow none of them satisfied me. They gave me plenty of philosophy, but little from their own experience. Most of them could only repeat what the books said; they could offer no really practical guidance. I did not want book theories so much as practical experience of Yoga. Thus I visited no less than ten teachers, but they did not seem to be the real Yoga masters. I did not despair, though. My youthful eagerness burnt more strongly, for rebuffs only increase my determination to succeed.

"I was now at the gate of manhood. I resolved to leave the home of my fathers for ever, to renounce the worldly life and to search till death for a true master. I then set out from home on my eleventh wandering or pilgrimage. I moved about until I came to a large village in the district of Tanjore. I went down to the river-side for my morning bath and afterwards walked along the bank. Soon I came to a small shrine built of red stone, or rather, it was a miniature temple. I peered inside out of curiosity and was surprised to see a number of men gathered in a circle around a man who was almost nude; in fact he was wearing only a cod-piece.² The men were looking at him with expressions of the utmost respect. There was something venerable, dignified and mysterious in the face of the central figure. I remained at the entrance, awed and fascinated. I soon gathered that the little meeting was receiving some kind of instruction and I had a strong feeling that the man in the centre was a real Yogi, a genuine master and not merely a book-filled scholar. I cannot explain why I felt that.

"Suddenly, the teacher turned his face towards the door and our eyes met. I then obeyed my inner urge and walked into the temple. The teacher greeted me warmly, bade me sit down, and said: "Six months ago I was directed to take you as a pupil. Now you have come." I remembered with a pleasant shock that it was exactly six months since I left home to begin my eleventh journey. However, it was thus that I met my master. Thereafter, I accompanied him wherever he travelled.

Sometimes he would go into the towns; sometimes he would withdraw into secluded forests or lonely jungles. With his help I began to make good progress upon the path of Yoga, and I was satisfied at last. My teacher was a Yogi of great experience, thought the path he followed was that of Body Control. There are several systems of Yoga; they are very different in their methods and exercises; and the system I was taught is the only one which begins with the body instead of the mind. I was also taught how to obtain breath control. On one occasion I had to fast for forty days, to prepare myself to receive one of the Yogic powers.

"You may imagine how surprised I was one day when my teacher sent for me and said: 'The life of total withdrawal from the world is not yet for you. Go back to your people and live a normal life. You will marry and have one child. At the age of thirty-nine certain signs will be given you, and after that you will find yourself free to retire from the world again. You will then go to the forests and practise solitary meditation until you reach the goal which every Yogi seeks. I shall be waiting for you and you can return to me.'

"I obeyed his commands and returned to my native place. In due course I married a faithful and devoted woman, who bore me one child, exactly as my teacher had predicted. But not long after, my wife died. My parents were no longer living, so I left my native town and came here to stay in the house of an old widow who also comes from there and who knew me as a child. She looks after my domestic needs and yet, because the years have made her discreet, she permits me to live the reserved existence which the rules of our school enjoin."

Brama ceases talking and I am so impressed by his narrative that my questioning tongue is likewise stilled. There are two or three minutes of complete silence and then the Yogi rises, turns his face homewards, and begins to walk slowly. The Brahmin and myself follow him.

Our path leads through lovely palm groves and through pretty clumps of casuarina. The river shines in the bright sunlight and an hour or so is passed pleasantly as we stroll along its wide banks. Anon, we begin to enter the haunts of men. Fisher folk wade into the water to carry on their work in the ancient way. For they fish neither from boats nor from the shore, but stand waist high in the stream and hold their nets and

baskets.

The beauty of the scene is enhanced by the brightly-plumed birds which flutter down to the river. The air is slightly scented by a gentle breeze, which blows pleasantly in our faces from the direction of the sea. We reach a road, where I leave the river regretfully. A herd of squeaking pigs passes us. They are under the care of a grey-haired, low caste woman, who hits unfortunate stragglers with a bamboo stick.

Brama turns eventually to bid us farewell. I express the hope that I may be allowed to see him again. He assents. I then venture to ask whether I may have the honour of a visit from him. To the great surprise of my Brahmin companion, the Yogi readily agrees to call in the evening.

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With the fall of dusk I await Brama's arrival somewhat eagerly. Several questions tumble over each other in my mind. His brief autobiography has intrigued me, while his strange character has puzzled me.

When the servant announces him, I descend the few steps which lead from the veranda and hold up my hands, with palms touching, as a token of welcome. The symbolism of this common Hindu greeting, which I have soon learnt, will appear quaint to the Western mind. For the gesture indicates, "My soul and yours are one!" The Hindus delight to receive it from a European, which reveals the rarity of that event, though it is nothing more than the Indian substitute for shaking hands. I want to be accepted as one with friendly intent, and therefore I try to respect the Indian customs and conventions, so far as I am aware of them. This does not mean that I am going to turn "native"—I have no such purpose—but that I believe in treating others as I would have them treat me.

Brama accompanies me into the large room and immediately squats cross-legged on the floor.

"Will you not sit on the divan?" I ask him, through the interpreter. "It is well cushioned and extremely comfortable." But no—he prefers the hard floor! And Indian floors are laid with tiles, not boards.

I express my gratitude for his visit and offer him some food, which he accepts and eats in silence.

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I express my gratitude for his visit and offer him some food, which he accepts and eats in silence.

After the meal I feel that I must tell him something about myself, something that will explain my sudden intrusion into his existence. And so I enter into a brief account of the forces which drew me to India. At its close, Brama emerges from the bulwark of aloofness behind which he has so far hidden, and puts his hand on my shoulder in a friendly was.

"That such men should exist in the West it is pleasant to hear. You have not wasted your journey, for you shall learn much. It is a happy day for me that destiny brought our feet to the same spot. Whatever you wish to know, ask, and, so far as my oaths permit me, I shall gladly tell you."

This sounds like good luck, indeed! I ask him about the nature of his Yoga system, its history and its aims.

"Who dare say how old is the system on Body Control which I have studied? Our secret texts declare that it was revealed by the god Shiva to the sage Gheranda. From his lips it was learnt by the sage Marteyanda, who then taught it to others, and thus it came down in a continuous line through thousands of years; but how many thousands we neither know or care though we believe that it is the last of the Yoga sciences that were born in antiquity. Such was the decline of man even in those days, that the gods had to give him a way of spiritual salvation which led purely through the body. The Yoga of Body Control is little understood except by the adepts who have mastered it, and the common people possess the most false notions of our ancient science. And since such adepts are, alas! so infrequently to be found to-day, the most foolish and distorted practices pass as our system without hindrance among the multitude. Go to Benares and you will see a man who sits all day and sleeps all night on a bed of sharp spikes; and in another place you will see a man who holds one arm aloft in the air until it is half withered from misuse and until the nails are several inches long. You will be told that they are men who practise our system of Yoga, but it is not so. Such men bring shame on it, rather. Our aim is not to torture the body in foolish ways for the sake of public wonder; these self-torturing ascetics are ignorant men who have picked up by hearsay, or from some friendly person, a few exercises in the forced contortion of the body. But since they know not what are our objects, they distort these practices and prolong them unnaturally. Yet the common people venerate such fools and

bestow food and money upon them."

"But are they to blame? If the real Yogis make themselves so scarce and keep their methods so secret, then misunderstandings will surely arise." I object.

Brama draws up his shoulders and a scornful expression passes across his mouth.

"Does a Rajah keep his jewels on the highway for public display?" he asks. "No, he hides them in the treasure chambers deep in the vaults of his palace. The knowledge of our science is one of the greatest treasures a man can have. Is he to offer it in the bazaar for all and sundry? Whoever desires to grasp this treasure—let him search for it. That is the only way, but it is the right way. Our texts enjoin secrecy again and again, while our masters will reveal the important teachings only to tested disciples who have been faithful to them for several years at least. Ours is the most secret of all the Yogas; it is full of grave dangers, not only to the disciple himself, but to others. Think you that I am allowed to reveal any but its most elementary doctrines to you, or even those without extreme discretion?"

"I see."

"But there is a branch of our science about which I may talk to you more freely. It is that wherein we strengthen the will and improve the body of beginners, for only so can they be fit to attempt the difficult practices of real Yoga."

"Ah, that would interest the West!"

"We have nearly a score of body exercises which strengthen the different parts and organs, and remove or prevent certain diseases. Some of them are postures which press upon special nerve centres; these in turn affect certain organs which are not working properly, and help to put them right."

"Do you use medicines?"

"Certain herbs, plucked under a waxing moon, are used if necessary. We have four kinds of exercises or methods to accomplish this early work of putting the body's health in good order. First, we learn the act of repose so that the nerves may be soothed. For that, there are four suitable exercises. Then we learn the 'stretches,' which are exercises copied from the natural stretching of healthy animals. Third, we clean the body thoroughly by a variety of methods which may seem very curious to you, but which are indeed excellent in their effect. Lastly, we study the art of breathing and its control."

I express a desire to receive a demonstration of some exercises.

"There is no dark secret in those which I shall show you now," Brama smiles. "Let us begin with the art of repose. We learn something of this matter from the cat. Our master places a cat in the circle of his pupils and gets them to notice how graceful the animal becomes when in repose. He instructs them to observe it carefully when the midday heat sends it to sleep. He tells them to watch it closely when it crouches in front of a mouse hole. He makes it clear to them that the cat sets a perfect example of true rest, and that it knows how to snore and keep every bit of strength. You imagine that you know how to rest, but really you do not. You sit in that chair for a while, then move from side to side, then fidget, and then sprawl out your legs. Though you do not rise from the chair and outwardly seem to be at ease, one thought after another races through your brain. Can you call that repose? Is it not a way of still being active?"

"That is a point of view which has never occurred to me," I say.

"Animals know how to rest themselves, but not many men have this knowledge. This is because animals are guided by instinct, which is the voice of Nature, while men are guided by their thoughts. And since men largely lack control over their brains, their nerves and bodies are affected as a result; there is little real repose for them."

"What must we do, then?"

"The first thing you must learn is nothing more than the Oriental form of sitting! Chairs may indeed be useful in the cold rooms of your Northern countries, but you must learn to do without them during the times of exercises which shall prepare you for Yoga. Our way of sitting is really most restful. After working or walking, it gives peace to the entire body. The easiest way for you to learn it is to place a small rug or mat before the wall of your room; sit upon this as comfortably as you can and use the wall to support your back. Or you can place the mat in the centre of the room, and then use a couch or chair to lean against. After that, bend the legs inwards at the knees and cross the feet. There need be no feeling of strain and you must not tighten the muscles. So your first exercise will be to sit like that and keep your body quite still, except for the

effort of gentle breathing. And having got into that position, you must promise yourself that you will withdraw your thoughts from all worldly burdens and affairs; just rest your mind on a beautiful object, a picture or a flower."

I leave my easy chair and drop on the floor, facing Brama, assuming the attitude he has just described. It is the position of an old-time tailor sitting cross-legged at his work.

"Yes, you do it easily," observes Brama. "but other Europeans may not find it comfortable, because they are not accustomed to it. You have one fault—keep your backbone straight, not bent. Let me show you another of our exercises."

Brama proceeds to raise his knees towards his chin, though still keeping his feet crossed. This position draws his feet away somewhat from the trunk. He clasps his hands around the front of his knees.

"This position is very restful after you have been standing on your legs for a long time. Be careful to throw most of the body's weight upon the seat. You may practise this for a few minutes, whenever you feel very tired. It will soothe important nerve centres."

"It is extremely simple, anyway."

"We need nothing complicated to learn the art of repose; in fact, our easiest exercise gives excellent results. Lie flat on your back, legs stretched out side by side. Turn the toes outward. Let your hands be extended and rest them alongside the body. Relax every muscle. Close the eyes. Give your whole weight to the floor. You cannot do this exercise properly in a bed, as it is important to keep the backbone perfectly flat. Use a rug laid upon the floor. In this attitude, Nature's healing forces will rest you. We call this the corpse position. By practise, you may learn to rest in any of these attitudes for an hour, if you wish. They take away tension of muscle and soothe nerves. Repose of muscle comes before repose of mind."

"Really, your exercises seem to consist of nothing more than sitting in some form or other!"

"Is that nothing? You Westerners thirst to be active, but is repose to be despised? Do calm nerves possess no meaning? Repose is the beginning of all Yoga, but it is not our need alone; it is also the need of the world."

Brama's words are not without justification.

"Those exercises are enough for this evening," he adds. "I

must go."

Gathering his white shawl around his shoulders, he touches the palms in farewell and is gone. I am left to ruminate upon the interesting conversation which has so abruptly ended.

I meet the Yogi again on many occasions. At his desire I intercept him on his morning walks, but when I can cajole him indoors, he spends his evenings with me. Those evenings prove extremely fruitful for me and my quest, because he unfolds a more arcane knowledge when the moon displays herself than he is willing to unfold under a high sun.

A little enquiry enables me to solve a point which has puzzled me for a while. I have been under the impression that the Hindus are a brown race. Why, then, is Brama's skin dark to the point of negroid blackness?

The answer is that he belongs to an indigenous population which appears to be India's first inhabitant. When the Arayns—India's earliest invaders—broke through the mountains in the first inhabitant. When the Aryans—India's earliest invaders—broke through the mountains in the of Dravidians and drove them into the South. These Dravidians remain a separate people to this day, except that they have absorbed the religion of their conquerors. The fiery tropic sun has pigmented their skins almost black, which, together with other evidences, makes certain ethnologists think that they primally arose out of some African stock. As in those early days of their undisputed sway over the entire country, the dravidians still wear their hair days of their indisputed sway over the entire country, the Dravidians still wear their hair tongues, of which the most important is Tamil.

Brama makes the confident assertion that the brown invaders took their knowledge of Yoga from his own race, just as they took certain other things in addition. But scholarly Hindus to whom I mention this claim deny it as absurd; I, therefore, leave the less important question of origin to settle itself!

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Because I am not writing a thesis around the subject of Yogic physical culture, I do fixed bodily attitudes, which appears to be so prominent a feature of the Yoga of Body Control. The twenty or more postural methods which Brama

demonstrates, either in a palm-fringed grove or in my more prosaic quarters, involve strangely contorted attitudes, and, to Western eyes at least, must appear either ludicrous or impossible, or both. Some of them require balancing on both knees with feet upturned, or balancing the entire weight of the body upon the tips of one's fingers; others take the arms behind the back and somehow bring the hands to the front again on opposite sides; others again tie up all the limbs in a complicated knot; still others put the legs round the neck or over the shoulders, in acrobatic manner; while a fifth group twist and turn the trunk in the queerest imaginable style. It is while watching Brama perform some of these feats that I begin to perceive how difficult will this art of Yoga be.

"How many of these exercises comprise your system?" I enquire.

"There are eighty-four postures in the Yoga of Body Control," replies Brama. "though I do not know more than sixty-four at present." Even as he speaks he practises one of these postures and sits in it as comfortably as I sit in a chair. Indeed, he tells me that this is his favourite posture. It is not a difficult one, this, but it does seem uncomfortable. His left foot is tucked into the groin and the heel of the other foot is placed under the base of the body, the right leg being doubled back so as to carry most of the weight.

"What is the use of such a posture?" I ask again.

"If a Yogi enters into it and then practises a certain breathing exercise, he will become more youthful."

"And that breathing exercise—?"

"I am not permitted to reveal it to you."

"What is the object of all these postures, then?"

"The mere fact of sitting or standing for regular periods in certain fixed postures may seem of small importance in your eyes. But the concentration of attention and will power upon the chosen posture is so intense—if success is to be gained—that sleeping forces awaken within the Yogi. Those forces belong to the secret realms of Nature; therefore they are seldom fully aroused until our breathing exercises are also practised, for the breath possesses deep powers. Though the wakening of such forces is our real aim, no less than a score of our exercises are capable of being used for benefiting one's health or to remove certain diseases; while others will drive impurities out of the

body. Is this not of great use? Still other postures are intended to assist our effort to get control over the mind and soul, for it is a truth that the body influences thought no less than thought influences the body. In the advanced stages of Yoga, when we may be plunged for hours in meditation, the proper posture of the body not only enables the mind to remain undistracted in its efforts, but actually assists its purpose. Add to all these things the tremendous gain in will power which comes to the man who perseveres in these difficult exercises, and you may see what virtues there are in our methods."

"But why all this twisting and turning?" I object.

"Because there are many nerve-centres scattered throughout the body, and each posture affects a different centre. Through the nerves we can influence either the organs of the body or the thoughts in the brain. Those twists enable us to reach nerve centres which otherwise might remain untouched."

"I see." The basis of this Yogic physical culture beings to shape itself a little more clearly in my mind. It is interesting to ascertain how it compares with the basic principles of our European and American systems. I tell Brama about the existence of the latter.

"I do not know your Western systems, but I have seen white soldiers being drilled at the great camp near Madras. By watching them I have understood what their instructors wished to do. Strengthening the muscles seems to have been their first object, because you Westerners find your highest virtues in being bodily active. Therefore, you make much use of the limbs in a most energetic manner, repeating those movements again and again. You spend energy vigorously, so that you may build up the muscles and receive greater strength in return. That is a good thing to do in the cold countries of the North, doubtless."

"What is the chief difference between the methods, as you see it?"

"Our Yoga exercises are really poses and require no further movements after the pose has been taken up. Instead of seeking more energy with which to be active, we seek to increase the power of endurance. You see, we believe that though the development of the muscles may be useful it is the power which is behind them that is of greater value. Thus, if I tell you that standing on your shoulders in a particular way will wash the

brain with blood, soothe the nerves and remove certain weaknesses, you as a Westerner would probably do the exercise for a moment and repeat it several times with a rush. You may strengthen the muscles which are called into action by this exercise, but you would get little of the benefits which a Yogi gets by doing it in his own way."

"And what may that be?"

"He will do it slowly, with deliberation, and then maintain the position as steadily as he can for some minutes. Let me show you this All-Body posture, as we call it."

Brama lies flat upon his back, hands at sides and legs together. He raises his legs into the air, keeping the knees quite straight, until they have attained about two-thirds of a right angle with the floor. He supports his back with his hands, resting the elbows on the floor. The body is then tilted completely upward, his trunk and hips becoming vertical. The chest is brought forward to touch the chin. The hands form a bracket which supports the trunk. The weight of the body is supported by the shoulders and the back of the neck and head.

After maintaining this upside-down position for about five minutes the Yogi gets up and explains its value.

"This posture brings blood flowing-down to the brain by its own weight for a few minutes. In the ordinary position the blood has to be forced upwards by the pumping action of the heart. The difference between the two ways is shown by the soothing effect of the posture upon the brain and nerves. For men who work with their minds, thinkers and students, the quiet practice of this all-body posture brings quick relief when their brains are tired. This is not its only virtue. It strengthens the sex organs. But these benefits come only if the exercise is done in our way and not in your hasty Western manner."

"If I am not mistaken, you mean that the Yoga attitudes keep the body fixed in a state of poised stillness, whereas our Western exercises violently agitate it?"

"Even so," agrees Brama.

A further exercise which I select from Brama's repertory as being more within the compass of Western limbs, is one which should quickly yield to patience and practice. In this posture, the Yogi sits with extended legs, raises both arms over his head and crooks the first fingers. He bends his trunk forward, exhaling the breath while doing so, and grasps the big toes of his

feet inside the hooked fingers. The right toe is caught by the right index finger, and so on. Then he slowly bends his head forward until it falls between his outstretched arms and the forehead lies flat against his thighs. He keeps this curious position for a little while and then gradually returns to a normal attitude.

"Do not try to do all this at once," he warns me. "Try to bring the head a little closer to the knees little by little only; even if it takes a few weeks to succeed in this posture, once you have mastered it, it will be yours for years."

I learn that this exercise strengthens the spine, as indeed one might expect it to do; that it removes nervous troubles caused through spinal weakness; and that it will work wonders with the blood circulation.

In the next posture, Brama sits on the floor and then doubles his legs up underneath him; thus the soles of his feet come under the base of his body. He drops the trunk backward until his shoulders touch the floor. He crosses his arms underneath the back of the head, which is then cushioned upon them. Each hand now grasps the opposite shoulder joint. He remains in this not unshapely pose for some minutes. On emerging from it, he explains that nerve centres situate in the neck and shoulders, as well as in the legs, are favourably affected by the exercise; and that even the chest is benefited.

The average Englishman is so apt to regard the average Indian as a weakling, as an enervated product of tropic sun and under-feeding, that it surprises one to learn that such a carefully thought out native system of physical culture has existed in India since antiquity. If our Western systems possess such a usefulness that no one would dream of disputing their value at this day, this is not to say that they are consequently complete and that they have pronounced the last word on bodily development, health preservation and the eradication of disease. Perhaps if the West, with its thorough methods of scientifically directed research, would pick some dust-covered practices out of the traditional teaching of Yoga, we might arrive at a completer knowledge of our bodies and a fuller regime for the healthy life.

Yet I know that perhaps not more than a round dozen of the Yoga postures are easy enough to be worth our time and trouble. The seventy-odd postures which compose the

remainder of the system are hardly likely to yield to any except the most enthusiastic, and that only if they are young enough to have flexible limbs and supple bodies.

Brama himself admits:

"I have practised hard each day for twelve years; only in this way could I master the sixty-four postures which I know. And then I was fortunate enough to begin while young, for a man of mature years could not even attempt these postures without feeling much pain. Bone, muscle and flesh settle down into stiffened positions in a grown man and can be disturbed only with difficulty and with pain. Yet even then it is remarkable how the postures can be conquered by continued efforts."

I do not doubt Brama's assertion that anyone may master these exercises by persistent practice, only the slow breaking-in of limbs, joints and muscles to the novel positions into which they are introduced must necessarily be such a dilatory process as to embrace the years. He has the advantage of beginning these postures when hardly out of his teens, and the value of this early beginning cannot be over-estimated. Just as successful acrobats are usually those who have been trained in childhood, so it is obvious that successful Yogis of the school of Body Control must start their training before the growing period ends, say before twenty-five. I certainly do not know how it is possible for any adult European to adventure with the scores of intricate postures which comprise most of their system without breaking a bone or two in the undertaking. When I argue this with Brama, he grants only a partial agreement and stubbornly maintains that continued efforts may succeed in many cases, though not in all. But he agrees that Europeans may have a harder task.

"We Orientals have the advantage of having learnt to sit with folded legs from childhood. Can a European bend his legs and sit steadily for two hours without pain? Yet the crossing of the legs with intertwined ankles forms but the beginning of several of our postures. We look upon it as one of the best. Shall I show it?"

Thereupon Brama assumes that position which has been made familiar to the Western world by the numerous pictures and images of the Buddha. Sitting perfectly erect, he folds the right leg so as to tuck the foot into the left groin. Then he folds

the other leg and brings his left leg across to the right thigh, where its heel touches the lower corner of the abdomen. The soles of his feet are turned up. It is an artistic and balanced pose; the thought occurs to me that such an attractive posture may be worth trying.

I try to imitate him and am rewarded for my labours with excruciating pains in the ankles. I complain that I cannot achieve this position even for a single moment. How picturesquely exotic has this Buddha seat seemed to me in the past, when I have seen it exemplified in some attractive bronze figure which is placed in the window of a curio shop! But how unnatural does this twisting of the lower limbs now seem to me in India, when I attempt to exemplify it in my own person! Brama's smiling encouragement fails to reassure me. I tell him that I must postpone my efforts.

"Your joints are stiff," he observes. "Rub a little oil into the ankles and knees before you practice it again. You are so accustomed to sitting in chairs that the posture will put some strain on your limbs. A little practice every day will slowly remove the difficulty."

"I doubt whether I could ever do it."

"Say not that it is impossible. It will take you a long time, but you shall surely master it. Success will take you by surprise one day; it comes suddenly."³

"It is so painful that it feels like a new torture!"⁴

"But the pain will lessen, and though it may take a much longer time than it will to reach success, you will reach a point where the posture brings no pain with it."

"But is it worth while for me to attempt it?"

"Assuredly. The Lotus posture—for that is what we name it—is so important that none of our novices are permitted to miss it, however much he is allowed to avoid other postures. It is the chief attitude in which advanced Yogis perform their meditations. One reason is that it gives a solid base to the body, which is unlikely to topple over should the Yogi pass into a deep trance—an event which sometimes occurs unexpectedly, though the adepts can pass into trance at will. You see, the Lotus posture locks the feet together and holds the body quiet and steady. A restless and irritated body will disturb the mind, but in the Lotus posture one feels poised and self-controlled. In this attitude it becomes easier to win the power of mind

concentration, which is so greatly prized among us. Lastly, we practice our breathing exercises mostly when sitting in this posture, for the combination arouses the spirit-fire which sleeps in the body. When this unseeable fire awakens, all the blood in the body is redistributed afresh, while the nerve force is sent with great keenness to certain important points."

With this explanation I remain content and bring our talk of postures to a close. For Brama has earlier thrown himself into a large number of fearful contortions and convulsive postures for my edification, just to show me something of his mastery over flesh and bone. What Westerner has the patience to go through all these complicated exercises and master them? What Westerner has even the time to do so?

1 Tamil, the vernacular of South-eastern India, is similar to German in the ease with which it forms lengthy compound words. With the result that a train will carry you past a railway station called Kulasekharapatnam, and—but I had better stop my pen in time!

2 A semi-loincloth.

3 I state the fact for what it is worth that, lured by the attractiveness of the Buddha position, I succeeded, after sporadic and painful efforts, in achieving it eight months later. Thereafter the difficulty disappeared.

4 It is necessary to warn amateur dabblers in these Yoga posturings against the grave risks they incur. A surgeon to whom I described them said that a strained ankle or a broken tendon are likely injuries.

VI

The Yoga which Conquers Death

Brama expresses a wish that I shall visit his dwelling. He tells me that he does not actually stay in the house, but has erected a roomy hut in the garden at the rear so as to keep his freedom and preserve his independence.

Accordingly—and, I must confess, with some eagerness—I call at the house one afternoon. The building stands in a dusty street, which bears a desolate and neglected air. I stand for a moment outside the ancient whitewashed structure and survey its wooden upper storey, whose projecting window is so reminiscent of our medieval European houses. I push open the heavy old door which confronts me, an act which sends a rattling echo through the rooms and passages.

An old woman, whose motherly smile stretches broadly across her face, appears almost at once and bows repeatedly before me. She leads me through a long darkened passage until we emerge through a kitchen into the back garden.

The first thing I notice is a spreading peepul tree and then, under the protective shade of its branches, an old-fashioned well. The woman guides me to a hut on the other side of the well and close-enough to it to receive some of the tree's shade. It is lightly built of bamboo posts, thin wooden cross beams and a thatched grass roof.

The dame, whose face is as black as Brama's, becomes visibly excited and bursts out into a series of trembling Tamil sentences, apparently addressed to the hut. A musical voice answers from within, the door slowly opens, the Yogi appears and then affectionately draws me into his simple hermitage. He omits to close the door. The widow remains in the entrance for the next few minutes, her eyes glued upon me, her face exuding indescribable happiness.

I find myself in a plain room. A low cushionless divan stands along the farther wall and a rudely made wooden bench, which is littered with papers, fills a corner. A heavily chased brass water-pot hangs by a cord from one of the roof beams.

The floor is covered with a large piece of matting.

"Seat yourself!" says Brama, waving a hand towards the floor. "We have no chairs to offer you; I am sorry."

We all squat around the mat—Brama, myself, and a young student-teacher who has attached himself to me and is now acting as interpreter. Within a few minutes the old widow departs, only to return later with a pot of tea, which is served upon the mat in lieu of a table. She departs again and reappears with biscuits, oranges and plantain fruits, which are heaped upon brass dishes.

Before we begin to take these pleasant refreshments, Brama produces a garland of yellow marigolds and hangs it around my neck. I am astonished and protest strongly, for I know that this Indian custom is usually reserved for distinguished persons and I have never classed myself in that sublime category.

"But, brother--," he pleads smilingly. "You are the first European to visit my abode and the first to become my friend. I must express my delight, and the delight of this lady here, by honouring you in this way."

My further protests prove of no avail. I have perforce to sit on the floor with a wreath of marigolds draped ceremoniously over my jacket. I am indeed glad that Europe is sufficiently far away for none of my friends to notice this odd sight and laugh at me!

We drink our tea, eat the fruit and chat pleasantly for a while. Brama informs me that he built the hut and made the rude furniture with his own hands. The sight of the papers on the corner bench arouses my curiosity, and I beg him to tell me their *raison d'être*. For I observe that the papers are all of a pink colour and that they have been written on in green ink. Brama picks up a handful, which I perceive are written in quaint characters, easily recognizable as Tamil. The student-teacher examines the documents but finds them hard to read and harder to understand. He informs me that they are written in an obsolete form of Tamil which was the literary form of early centuries, but is nowadays understood only by few persons. He adds that the great classics of Tamil philosophy and literature are unfortunately written in this archaic form of language, which is called high Tamil, and which presents more difficulties for those only familiar with the modern living vernacular than medieval English presents to the average present-day

English-knowing person.

"These papers are written by me mostly at night," Brama explains. "Some of them are accounts of my Yoga experiences written in verse, and some are lengthy poems where I let my heart speak its religion. There are a few young men who call themselves my pupils, who often come here to read these writings aloud."

Brama picks up an artistic-looking document, which consists of a few pages of pink paper written on in red and green inks and tied with a green ribbon, and smilingly presents it to me.

"I have written this especially for you," he declares.

The young interpreter finds it to be a poem of eighty-four lines. It opens and closes with a mention of my name, but beyond this the young man can hardly travel. He deciphers occasional words and tells me that the poem evidently contains some kind of personal message, but it is written in such high Tamil that he is not competent to render a proper translation of it. However, I am extremely pleased to receive this unexpected gift, especially as it is an expression of the Yogi's good will.

After the celebrations of my visit are finally over, the old lady departs and we settle down to serious talk. I plunge anew into that matter of breathing which seems to play so important a part in Yoga, and which is wrapped in such secrecy. Brama regrets that he can show me no further exercises for the present, but he is willing to tell me a little more of his theories.

"Nature has measured out 21,600 breath-rhythms to every man, which he must use up daily and nightly from one sunrise till the next. Quick, noisy and tumultuous breathing exceeds this measure and therefore shortens one's life. Slow, deep and quiet breathing economizes this allowance, and so lengthens life. Every breath which is saved goes to build up a great reserve, and out of this reserve a man can draw extra years for living. Yogis do not take so many breaths as other men; nor do they need to for—but, alas! how can I explain further without transgressing my oaths?"

This reserve of the Yogi tantalizes me. Is it possible that a knowledge which is hidden away with so much pains cannot have something of real worth in it? If that is really the case, then one can understand why these strange men cover up their tracks and conceal the treasure of their teachings in order to

ward off the superficially curious, the mentally unready and perhaps the spiritually unworthy. Is it likely that I, too, may come within one of these latter classifications and eventually leave the country with little more than my trouble for reward?

But Brama is speaking again:

"Have not our masters the keys to the powers of breath? They know how close is the connection between the blood and the breath; they understand how the mind, too, follows the path of the breath; and they have the secret of how it is possible to awaken awareness of the soul through workings of the breath and thought. Shall I not say that breath is but the expression in this world of a subtler force, which is the real sustainer of the body? It is this force which hides in the vital organs, though it is unseeable. When it leaves the body the breathing stops in obedience and death is the result. But through the control of breath it is possible to get some control over this unseeable current. But though we bring our body under extreme control—even to the point of controlling the beats of the heart—do you think that our ancient sages had only the body and its powers in view when they first taught our system?"

Whatever I think about the ancient sages and their purpose, disappears in the intense curiosity which is suddenly aroused in my mind.

"You can control the working of your heart?" I exclaim in surprise.

"My self-acting organs, the heart, the stomach and the kidney, have been brought to some degree of obedience," he answers quietly, without a trace of boastfulness.

"How do you do that?"

"One gains the power by practising certain combinations of posture, breathing and will-power exercises. Of course, they belong to the advanced degrees of Yoga. They are so difficult that few persons can ever do them. Through these practices I have conquered somewhat the muscles which work the heart; and through the heart muscles, I have been able to go on and conquer the other organs."

"This is indeed extraordinary!"

"You think so? Place your hand upon my chest, just over the heart, and keep it there." With that, Brama changes his position, takes up a curious posture, and closes his eyes.

I obey his command and then wait patiently to see what is going to happen. For some minutes he remains as steady as a rock, and almost as motionless. Then the beating of his heart begins to diminish gradually. I am startled to feel it become slower and slower. A thrill of eeriness spreads over my nerves as I distinctly feel his heart completely stop its rhythmic functioning. The pause lasts for about seven anxious seconds.

I try to pretend that I am hallucinated, but my nervousness is such that I know the attempt is useless. As the organ returns to life from its seeming death, relief seizes me. The beats begin to quicken and normality is safely reached at length.

The Yogi does not emerge from his motionless self-absorption till some minutes later. He slowly opens his eyes and asks:

"Did you feel the heart stop?"

"Yes. Most distinctly." I am certain that there was no hallucination about the feat. What other strange Yogi tricks can Brama play with his internal mechanism, I wonder?

As if in answer to my unspoken thought, Brama says:

"It is nothing compared with what my master can achieve. Sever one of his arteries, and he is able to control the flow of blood; yes, even to stop it! I, too, have brought my blood under some measure of control, but I cannot do that."

"Can you show me that control?"

He requests me to take his wrist and grip it where I can feel the flow of blood through his artery. I do so.

Within two or three minutes I become aware that the curious rhythm which beats under my thumb is lessening. Soon it comes to a definite halt. Brama has brought his pulse to a stop!

I anxiously await the resumption of circulation in his artery. A minute passes but nothing occurs. A second minute, during which I am acutely conscious of each second, likewise ticks itself away in my watch. The third minute, is equally fruitless. Not until half-way through the fourth minute do I become conscious of a faint return to activity within the artery. The tension is relieved. Before long, the pulse beats at its normal rate.

"How strange!" I exclaim involuntarily.

"It is nothing," he modestly replies.

"This seems to be a day of strange feats, so will you not

show me another?"

Brama hesitates.

"Only one more," he says at length, "and then you must be satisfied."

He looks thoughtfully at the floor and then announces:

"I shall stop the breath!"

"But then you will surely die!" I exclaim nervously.

He laughs but ignores the remark.

"Now hold your hand flat under my nostrils."

I obey him hesitantly. The warm caress of exhaled air touches and retouches the skin of my hand. Brama closes his eyes; his body becomes statuesque in its steadiness. He appears to fall into a kind of trance. I wait, continuing to hold the back of my hand immediately under his nose. He remains as still and as unresponsive as a graven idol. Very slowly, very evenly, the caress of his breath begins to diminish. Ultimately it completely ceases.

I watch his nostrils and lips; I examine his shoulders and chest; but in no single case can I discover any external evidence of respiration. I know that these tests are not final and wish to make a more exhaustive test, but how? My brain works rapidly.

There is no hand-mirror in the room but I find an excellent substitute in a small polished brass dish. I hold the dish under his nostrils for a while, and again in front of his lips. Its shining surface remains unmarred by any dullness or moisture.

It seems impossible to believe that in this quiet conventional house near a quiet conventional city, I have established contact with something significant, something that Western science may one day be forced to recognize against its will. But the evidence is there, and it is indubitable. Yoga is really more than a worthless myth.

When Brama ultimately emerges from his trance-like condition, he seems a little tired.

"Are you satisfied?" he asks, with a fatigued smile.

"I am more than satisfied! But I am at a loss to understand in what way you can do it."

"It is forbidden me to explain. The restraint of breath is a practice which is part of advanced Yoga. To a white man it may seem a foolish thing to strive for, yet to us it is of much importance."

"But we have always been taught that man cannot live

without breathing. Surely that is not a foolish idea?"

"It is not foolish; nevertheless it is not true. I can hold my breath for two hours, if I wish. Many times I have done that, but I am not yet dead, you see!" Brama smiles.

"I am puzzled. If you are not permitted to explain, perhaps you can throw a little light upon the theory behind your practices?"

"Very well. There is a lesson we can draw from watching certain animals, which is a favoured method of instruction with my master. An elephant breathes much more slowly than a monkey, yet it lives much longer. Some of the large serpents breathe far more slowly than a dog, yet they live far longer. Thus, creatures exist which show that slowness of breathing may possibly prolong age. If you can follow me so far, the next step will be easier for you to grasp. Now, in the Himalayas, there are bats which go into winter sleep. They hang suspended in the mountain caverns for weeks, yet they do not draw a single breath until they again awaken. The Himalayan bears, too, will sometimes sink into trance throughout the winter, their bodies apparently without life. In deep burrows of the Himalayas, when food cannot be found during the winter, there are hedgehogs which pass into sleep for some months, a sleep in which breathing is suspended. If these animals cease to breathe for a time, and yet live, why should not human beings be able to do the same?"

His statement of curious facts is interesting, but it is not so convincing as his demonstration. The common notion that breathing is an essential function in every condition of life is not to be thrown aside at a few minutes' notice.

"We Westerners will always find it difficult to understand how life can continue in a body unless breathing continues also."

"Life always continues," he answers cryptically. "Death is but a habit of the body."

"But surely you cannot mean that it may be possible to conquer death?" I enquire incredulously.

Brama looks at me in a strange manner.

"Why not?" There is a tense pause. His eyes search me, but they do it in a kindly way.

"Because there are possibilities in you, I shall tell you one of our old secrets. But I must first demand your agreement to

one condition."

"And that—?"

"You shall not attempt to practise any breathing exercise as an experiment, except those which I may teach you later."

"I agree."

"Keep your word, then. Now you have hitherto believed that the complete stoppage of breathing brings death?"

"Yes."

"Is it not reasonable to believe, also, that the complete holding of the breath within one's body keeps life within us for so long as the breath is held, at least?"

"Well—?"

"We claim no more than that. We say that an adept in breath control, who can completely retain his breath at will, thereby retains his life current. Do you grasp that?"

"I think so."

"Imagine, now, an adept in Yoga who can keep the locked breath, not merely for a few minutes as a curiosity, but for weeks, for months and even for years. Since you admit that where there is breath there must be life, do you not see how the prospect of prolonged life opens up for man?"

I am dumb. How can I dismiss this assertion as preposterous? Yet how can I accept it? Does it not recall to memory the idle dreams of our European alchemists of medieval times, dreamers who sought an elixir of life, but who succumbed to the sickle of death one by one? But if Brama is not self-deceived, why should he seek to deceive me. He has not sought my company and he makes no effort to acquire disciples.

A strange fear touches my brain. What if he is merely mad? No—he seems to sensible and rational in other matters. Would it not be better to regard him as mistaken? Yet something in me doubts even that conclusion. I am bewildered.

"Can I not convince you?" He speaks again. "Have you not heard the story of the faqueer who was buried by Ranjeet Singh in a vault at Lahore? The burial of the faqueer took place in the presence of English army officers, while the last of the Sikh kings watched it himself. The living tomb was guarded by soldiers for six weeks, but the faqueer emerged healthy and alive. Enquire into this story, for I have been told that it is written somewhere in the records of your Government. This

facqueer had brought his breathing under great mastery and could stop it at will without danger of dying. Yet he was not even an adept in Yoga, for I have heard from an old man who knew him when he was alive that his character was not good. His name was Haridas and he lived in the North. If this man could live in an airless space for such a long time without breathing, how much more can be done by the true masters of Yoga, who practice in secret and will not perform these marvels for gold?"¹

A pregnant silence follows our conversation.

"There exist other strange powers which can be acquired by the way of our Yoga, but who, in these degenerate days will pay the heavy price to obtain them?"

There was another pause.

"We who live and work in the everyday world have sufficient to do without seeking such powers," I venture, in defence of my epoch.

"Yes," agrees Brama, "this path of Body Control is only for the few. Therefore the teachers of our science have kept it a silent secret through the centuries. It is not often that they seek after pupils; pupils must seek after them."



The next time we meet, Brama visits my quarters. It is evening and we soon adjourn for dinner. After the meal and a short rest, we go out on the moonlit veranda where I plant myself in a deck chair, while the Yogi finds a mat on the floor more comfortable.

For several minutes we silently enjoy the bright radiance of the full moon.

As I have not forgotten the astonishing events of our last meeting, it is not long before I broach anew this incredible matter of men who snap their fingers at death.

"Why not?" Brama asks his favourite question. "There is an adept in our Yoga of Body Control who is hidden among the Neilgherry Hills, here in the South. He never stirs from his retreat. In the North, there lives another whose home is a cave upon the Himalayas. These men you cannot meet, for they disdain this world, yet their existence is a tradition among us and we are told that they have extended their lives to hundreds

of years."

"You really believe this?" I exclaim in deferential doubt.

"Without a doubt! Have I not the visible example of my own master?"

A question which has been on my mind for many days, presses itself to the fore again. Hitherto I have hesitated in voicing it, but now that our friendship has come so close I decide to give the query a bold outlet. I look earnestly at the Yogi and ask him:

"Brama, who is your master?"

For a while he returns my gaze, but yields no answer. He looks at me hesitatingly.

When he speaks, his voice is slow and grave:

"He is known to his Southern disciples as Yerumbu Swami, meaning The Ant Teacher."

"What a curious name!" I exclaim involuntarily.

"My master always carries a bag of rice powder from which he feeds the ants wherever he may be. But in the North and among the Himalayan villages where he sometimes stays, he bears another name."

"Is he, then, perfect in your Yoga of Body Control?"

"Even so."

"And you believe that he has lived—?"

"I believe that he is over four hundred years old!" Brama quietly finishes the sentence for me.

There is a tense pause.

I stare at him in bewilderment.

"Many a time he has described to me what happened during the reigns of the Moghul Emperors," supplements the Yogi. "And he has told me stories of the days when your English India Company first came to Madras."

Sceptical Western ears are unable to accept these statements.

"But any child who has read a history book could tell you such things," I counter.

Brama ignores my remark. He goes on.

"My master remembers clearly the first battle of Panipat² and he has not forgotten the days of the battle of Plassy.³ I recollect how he once referred to a brother disciple, one Beshudananda, as a mere child of eighty years!"

In the clear moonlight I notice that Brama's swarthy,