

broadnosed countenance remains peculiarly unmoved while he utters these strange words. How can my brain, nurtured in the strict methods of inquiry which modern science has called forth, entertain such assertions? After all, Brama is a Hindu and must possess some of the legend-swallowing ability of his people. It is useless to contend with him; I shall remain silent.

The Yogi continues:

"For more than eleven years my master was spiritual adviser to one of the old Maharajahs of Nepal, the State which lies between India and Tibet. There he is known and loved by some of the village people, who dwell among the Himalayan mountains. They revere him as a god when he visits them, yet he talks to them in a kindly way, in the manner of a father talking to his children. He gives no heed to caste rules, and he eats neither fish nor meat."

"How is it possible for a man to live so long?" My thoughts involuntarily voice themselves again.

Brama looks away, seems to forget my presence.

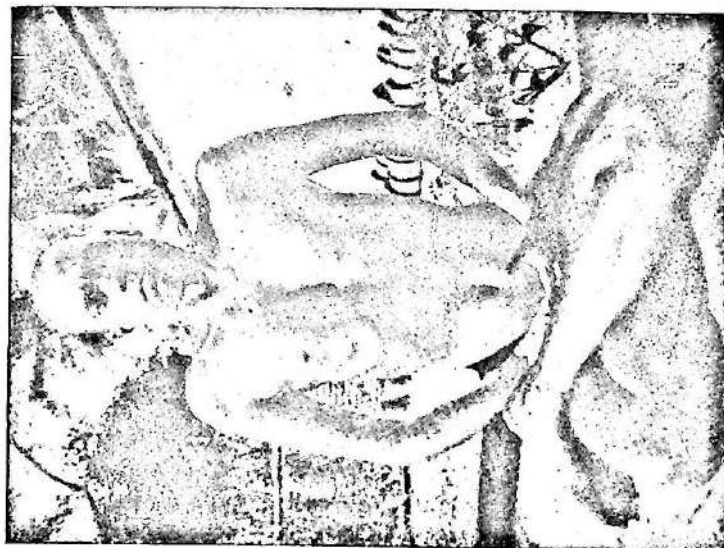
"There are three ways in which this is possible. The first is to practise all the postures, all the breathing exercises and all the secret exercises which comprise our system of Body Control. This practice must take place until one is perfect, which can be done only under a proper master who can show you in his own body what he teaches. The second way is to partake regularly of some rare herbs which are known only to the adepts who have studied this matter. These adepts carry the herbs secretly, or hide them in their robes when travelling. When the time arrives for the final disappearance of such an adept, he selects a worthy disciple, makes the secret known to him, and presents him with the herbs. To none else are they given. The third way is not easy to explain." Brama stops abruptly.

"Will you not try?" I urge.

"It is possible that you will laugh at my words."

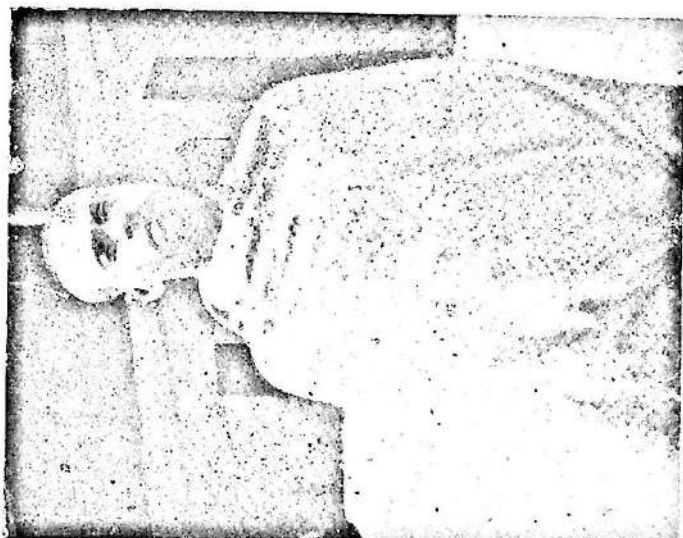
I assure him that, on the contrary, I shall treat his explanation with due respect.

"Very well. There exists a tiny hole inside the brain of man.⁴ Within this hole dwells the soul. There is also a kind of valve which protects this hole. At the bottom of the spine there comes into being the unseeable life-current which I have mentioned to you more than once, The constant loss of this



BRAMA SITTING IN HIS FAVOURITE YOGA POSTURE.

'If a Yogi enters into such a posture and then practises a certain breathing exercise, he will become more youthful.'



THE ANCHORITE OF THE ADYAR RIVER.
'One gathers the impression that the mind behind those eyes is pondering over some matter.'
See page 56.



SHRI SHANKARA, THE SPIRITUAL HEAD OF SOUTH INDIA
'His noble face, pictured in grey and brown, takes an honoured place in the long portrait gallery of my memory.'
See page 117.

current causes the body to grow old, but its control fills the flesh with new life and perpetuates it. When a man has conquered himself, he can begin to get this control by certain practices which are known only to advanced Yogis of our school. And when he can withdraw this life-current up his spine, he may then try to concentrate it into the hole in the brain. But, unless he finds a master who will assist him to open the protecting valve, he cannot succeed. If he finds a master who is willing to do this, then the unseeable current will enter the hole and turn into the Nectar of Longevity, as we name it. It is no easy task, for ruin waits in ambush for the man who attempts it alone. But the man who succeeds can induce a condition similar to death whenever he pleases, and so obtains the victor's power when real death seeks him out. In fact, he can choose the exact moment of his death at any time, and to the severest examination he will appear to have died naturally. One who has all these three methods at his command can live for many hundred years. So have I been taught. Even when he dies, the worms will refrain from attacking his body. A century later his flesh will still be free from decay."

I thank Brama for his explanation, but I wonder. I am profoundly interested, but I am not convinced. Anatomy does not know this current of which he talks, and it has certainly never known his Nectar. Are these stories of physiological marvels mere superstitious misunderstandings? With them one returned to the age of fable, the ancient days of long-lived wizards and magicians who hold the elixir of life. Yet the demonstrations of breath and blood control which Brama has given me provide some assurance that Yogic powers are not mere chimeras, that these powers can undoubtedly be responsible for the performance of feats which must appear fabulous to the uninitiated. Beyond this point I find it difficult to walk with him.⁵

I remain respectfully silent, careful not to allow my intellectual struggles betray themselves on my face.

"Such powers as these would be much desired by men who are nearing the grave," Brama resumes, "but forget not that the way to them is full of danger. Can you wonder that our masters say of these exercises: 'Keep them as secret as you would keep a box of diamonds.'"

"So you are unlikely to reveal them to me?"

"Those who wish to become adepts should first learn to walk before they try to run?" he replies, with a faint smile.

"A last question, Brama."

The Yogi nods.

"Where is your master now living?"

"He has entered a temple retreat in the mountains of Nepal, on the yonder side of the Terai jungle."

"Is he likely to return to the plains again?"

"Who can foretell his movements? He may remain in Nepal for many years, or he may begin his travels again. He likes Nepal best because our school of Yoga flourishes better there than in India. You see, even the teaching of Body Control differs with different schools. And ours is the Tantra school, which is better understood in the atmosphere of Nepal than among the Hindus."

Brama reverts to silence. I guess that he is dwelling in devoted thought upon this enigmatic figure of his master. Ah! if these things I have heard to-night are more real than legendary, then, indeed, one may catch a glimpse of what is around the corner—Man, Ageless and Immortal!

†

If I do not hurry my pen, this chapter will never be brought to a close. Therefore I shall endeavour to transfix the last memorable scene of my association with the Yogi of the five names.

The Indian night comes quickly on the heels of evening; there are no lingering sunsets as in Europe. And as the swift dusk begins to descend on his garden hut, Brama lights an oil lantern and suspends it by a cord from the roof. We settle down anew.

The old widow discreetly slips away and leaves me alone with the Yogi and the student-teacher who translates our words. The odour of burning incense touches the room with a mystical atmosphere.

This evening sad thoughts of parting steal over me. I try to brush them off, but fail. I cannot clearly tell this man, through the irritating barrier of speaking through a third person, what is in my heart. How far the novel facts and strange theories he has put forward are correct, I am little able to say, but I have

appreciated his readiness to let me enter his solitary existence; I have felt at times that our hearts have drawn sympathetically near to each other; and I know now what it has meant to him to break his habitual reserve.

To-night I have made a last attempt, under the shadow of impending departure, to induce him to reveal his deeper secrets.

"Are you ready to abandon the life of cities and to retire into a solitary place in the hills or the jungle for some years?" he asks me, searchingly.

"I must first think this out, Brama."

"Are you ready to give up all other activities, all your work, renounce your pleasures and put your whole time into the exercises of our system—and that not merely for a few months, but for several years?"

"I do not think so. No—I am not ready. One day, perhaps—"

"Then I can take you no farther. This Yoga of Body Control is too serious to become the mere sport of a man's leisure hours."

I see my chances of becoming a Yogi fade swiftly into nothing. I regretfully realize that the full system, with its many years of difficult training, its rigorous and austere discipline, is not for me. But there is something else which is closer to my heart than strange powers of the flesh. I confide in the anchorite.

"Brama, these powers—they are wonderfully fascinating. One day I would really like to go more deeply into your training, yet, after all, how much lasting happiness do they bring? Is there not something finer still in Yoga? Perhaps I do not make myself clear?"

Brama nods his head and says:

"I understand."

We both smile.

"Our texts say that the wise man will follow up his practice of the Yoga of Body Control with the Yoga of Mind Control," he remarks, slowly. "It can be said that the first prepares the way for the second. When our ancient masters received the principles of our system from the god Shiva, they were told that the final goal was not to be purely material. They understood that the conquest of the body was to be looked upon as a step towards the conquest of the mind, and this again

as a way to becoming spiritually perfect. So you see that our system deals with things close at hand, indeed, with the body, but only as an indirect means of penetrating to the spirit. Therefore, my master has taught me: 'First run your course in Body Control; then you can take to the kingly science, the Mind Control.' Remember that a body which is mastered ceases to distract the mind; only a few can plunge straight into the path of holding the thoughts. Yet if a man feels strongly drawn to the way of Mind Control we do not interfere; for that, then, is his path."

"And that is a purely mental Yoga?"

"Even so. It is a training to make the mind like a steady light, and then that light is turned on to the abode of the spirit."

"How can one start such training?"

"For that again, it is necessary to find a master."

"Where?"

Brama shrugs his shoulders.

"Brother, people who are hungry look eagerly for food; those who are starving, however, will search like madmen. When you want a master as much as a starving man wants to eat, you will surely find one. Those who search sincerely will most assuredly be led towards him at the appointed hour."

"You believe that there is a destiny about the matter?"

"You speak truly."

"I have seen some books—"

The Yogi shakes his head.

"Without a master, your books are mere pieces of paper. Our word for him, *guru*, means: 'One who dispels darkness.' The man whose efforts and destiny favour him sufficiently to find a real teacher, steps quickly into a state of light, for the master uses his own higher gifts to benefit the disciple."

Brama moves away to his bench of littered papers and presently returns with a large document, which he hands to me. It is covered with an orderly arrangement of cabbalistic signs, peculiar symbols and Tamil characters drawn in red, green and black inks. The top of the sheet is adorned with a large hieroglyphic symbol patterned like a scroll, in which I recognize representations of the sun, moon and the human eyes. All the sketches and writings fall around a central blank space.

"Last night, I spent some hours preparing this," says Brama. "When you get back, paste one of my photographs in the centre."

He informs me that if I will concentrate my mind upon this queer but not inartistic document for five minutes before going to sleep at night, I shall dream clearly and vividly of him.

"Even if five thousand miles separate our bodies, place your thoughts upon this paper and our spirits shall meet at night," he asserts confidently. And he explains that these dream meetings will be as actual and as real as our physical meetings have been so far.

This brings me to mention that my trunks are all but packed, and that I shall soon be off; I am doubtful when and where I may see him again.

He replies that he does not doubt that whatever destiny has been allotted us, must be fulfilled. And then he confides in me:

"I leave this place in the spring, when I shall go to the Tanjore district, where two students await me. As for what will happen thereafter who can say, for, as you know, I hope one day to receive the call from my master."

There is a long silence, which Brama eventually breaks by addressing me in a voice which is lowered to a hushed whisper. I turn to the student-teacher, preparing myself to receive some new revelation.

"Last night my master appeared to me. He spoke to me about yourself. He said: 'Your friend, the sahib, is eager for knowledge. In his last birth he was among us. He followed Yoga practices, but they were not of our school. To-day he has come again to Hindustan, but in a white skin. What he knew then, has now been forgotten; yet he can forget for a while only. Until a master bestows his grace upon him he cannot become aware of this former knowledge in this body. Tell him that soon he shall meet a master. Thereafter, light will come to him of its own accord. This is certain. Bid him cease his anxiety. Our land shall not be left by him until this happens. It is the writing of fate that he may not leave us with empty hands.'"

I draw back astounded.

The lamp throws its beams of light upon the little assembly. My young interpreter's face seems stricken with awe in that yellowish glare.

"Did you not tell me that your teacher was in distant

Nepal?" I demand reproachfully.

"Indeed, he remains there still!"

"Then how on earth can he travel twelve hundred miles in a single night?"

Brama smiles cryptically.

"My master is ever present to me, though India's span lies between our bodies. I receive his message without letter or bearer. His thought speeds through the air. It reaches me and I understand."

"Telepathy?"

"If you wish!"

I rise, for it is time to go. We wander out on our last moonlight walk together, and pass the ancient walls of the temple which stands not far from Brama's house. The moon filigrees through the many-branched trees as we halt at a lovely group of palms which borders the road.

Whilst he is bidding me farewell, Brama murmurs:

"You know that I have but few possessions. This is the last thing I value most. Take it."

He grasps the fourth finger of his left hand, and pulls at it. He holds forward the palm of his right hand. I see a golden ring glistening in the centre under the rays of the moon. Eight slender claws grip a round green stone, whose face is veined with reddish-brown markings. Brama puts it in my hand as we clasp in farewell. I attempt to return the unexpected gift, but he meets my refusal by pressing it more determinedly upon me.

"One who enjoys great wisdom in yoga gave this to me. In those days I was travelling far and wide for knowledge. Now—I beg you to wear it."

I thank him and enquire, half jokingly:

"Will it bring me good fortune?"

"No, it cannot do that. But there is a powerful charm within the stone, which will help you penetrate to the company of secret sages, and which will help you awaken your own mystic powers. This you will realize by experience. Wear it when you need these things."

There is a final and friendly parting, and we go our ways.

I walk slowly away, my head filled with a strange medley of thoughts. I muse over the extraordinary message from Brama's far-off master. It is too extraordinary for me to dispute. I remain silent before it while belief and scepticism fight a fantastic conflict in my heart.

I glance at the golden ring and ask myself, "How can a mere ring possess any real efficacy in these matters?" I do not understand how or why it can influence me or others in any mental or spiritual manner. The belief savours of superstition. Yet Brama seems so confident of the reality of its fanciful properties. Is it possible? I feel almost impelled to answer: In this strange land all things may be possible! But intellect rushes to the rescue and puts up a barricade of question marks.

I fall into a fit of musing abstraction, so that I move away, startled, when I stumble against something and knock my forehead. Looking up, I behold the poetic silhouette of a palm tree and the fireflies making a myriad dancing points of light between the branches.

The night sky is deep blue. Venus—a point of intense brightness—seems quite close to our planet. Infinite peace broods over the road as I walk. A mysterious stillness entralls me. Even the large bats which occasionally appear and sweep over my head move their wings silently. The scene charms me. I

stop for a moment. The moon diffuses a light which turns a man, who is approaching me, into a flitting ghost.

When I reach my quarters, I find that wakefulness lingers late this night. Close to dawn sleep comes at last, drowning my whirl of thoughts into forgetfulness.

1 I have since verified this reference and find that the actual episode occurred in 1837 at Lahore. The faqueer was buried in the presence of King Ranjit Singh, Sir Claude Wade, Dr. Honigberger, and others. A guard of Sikh soldiers watched the grave day and night to prevent fraud. The faqueer was dug up alive forty days later. Fuller particulars can be found in the archives at Calcutta.

2 In 1526, the invading army of Baber, a descendant of the ruthless Tamerlane, and the forces of the King of Agra met in conflict at Panipat.

3 This famous battle, which opened the British path to power in India, occurred in 1757.

4 It is possible that Brama refers to the cavity caused by the four intercommunicating ventricles of the brain, but I am not sure.

5 The entire conversation, with its amazing statements and cool assertions, now seems like a fantastic dream. My attempt to transfer it to paper is a task which, more than once, makes me contemplate omitting it completely from this book as I have perforce to omit many other conversations. I do not doubt but that it will cause many superior European lips to curl in contempt of Asiatic superstition. If I finally let it pass into publication, it is at the bidding of other judgments than mine.

VII

The Sage who Never Speaks

I must break the chronological character of this record; and wander backwards in time for a week or so, if I am to catch the record of a not uninteresting encounter.

During my stay in the suburb outside Madras, I have not neglected to pursue diligent enquiries within Indian circles in the city itself, with reference to the existence of outstanding figures of the kind in whom I am interested at the time. I talk to judges, lawyers, teachers, business people and even one or two pious notables. I interview the interviewers and spend a few pleasant hours with men of my own profession. I discover an assistant editor who tells me privately that he was a keen student of Yoga in his younger days. He sat then at the feet of one whom he still regards as being indubitably an adept in the science of Mind Control, but this master died ten years ago.

The erstwhile pupil is a charming and highly intelligent Hindu, but alas! he does not know where high-grade Yogis can now be found.

Aside from this, I meet with little more than vague tales, foolish legends and positive rebuffs. It is true that I meet with one holy man whose Christlike face and robes would have created a sensation in prosaic Piccadilly, but he, too, tells me that he is wandering the land in search of a higher life. He has renounced an estate of good farming land to become a gypsy, a holy beggar. He offers me this estate, provided that I shall settle down and serve benighted, suffering Indians. Alas, I too am a benighted, suffering mortal. His munificent offer is passed on elsewhere.

Word is brought me one day concerning a reputed Yogi. He lives about half a mile outside Madras, yet, because he discourages acquaintance, appears to be known to few persons. My curiosity is quickly excited and I determined to have an audience with him.

The house is hidden behind tall bamboo poles which fence a square compound, and which stands completely isolated in

the centre of a field.

My companion points to the compound.

"I am told that the Yogi is immersed in trance most of the day. It is unlikely that he will hear us even if we rattle the gate or shout his name; even if we did those things, it would be thought rude."

A rough gate gives entrance to the enclosure, but as it is strongly padlocked I begin to wonder how we are to get into the house. Complete silence pervades the scene. We wander around the field, turn away from a piece of adjoining waste land, and eventually meet a boy who knows where to find the residence of the Yogi's attendant. A circuitous walk brings us to the place.

The man proves to be a hired servant. His wife and many children come outside to see us and trail behind his heels. We tell him our desire, but he refuses to help us. He firmly declares that the Sage Who Never Speaks is not on view to stray visitors, but lives in strict seclusion. The Sage's days are spent in deep trances and he would be highly offended if all and sundry were allowed to break in on his privacy.

I beg the attendant to make an exception in my favour, but he is adamant. It becomes necessary for my friend to threaten Government interference, if we are not admitted forthwith—a totally unjustifiable procedure, of course, but one which I illegally reinforce, though our eyes wink towards each other. There ensues an animated discussion. I supplement our threats by the lure of liberal baksheesh and it is not long before the attendant reluctantly yields and brings out his keys. My companion informs me that it is clear the man is no more than a paid servant, because if he were a personal disciple of the Sage, neither threats nor money could have moved him.

We march back to the gate of the compound and unlock a massive iron padlock. The servant informs us that the Sage's belongings are so few that they do not include a key. He is locked in the compound from the outside and has no means of egress until the attendant's visits, which takes place twice daily. We learn further that the Sage is occupied with his trances throughout the day, but in the evening he partakes of some fruit, sweetmeats, and a cupful of milk. There have been many evenings, however, when the food has remained untouched. The fall of darkness sometimes brings the recluse out of his

cottage, though a walk around the fields is the only exercise he takes.

We cross the compound and arrive at a modern cottage. It is solidly built of stone slabs and painted timber posts. The attendant produces another key and unlocks a heavy door. I express surprise at all these precautions, for did not the servant tell us that the Sage's belongings are very few? Thereupon the man tells us a brief explanatory story.

Some years earlier the silent Sage lived in the cottage without the protection of any locks or fastenings upon the entrances. But one unfortunate day there came a man who was drunk with toddy liquor, and who took advantage of the defenceless state of the Sage to attack him. The drunkard pulled his beard, belaboured him with a stick and shouted disgusting epithets.

Chance intervened to draw some young men into the field, intent upon playing a ball game. The noise of the assault drew their attention. They entered the cottage and rescued the Sage from his assailant, while one of them ran off to the nearest houses to inform all the sundry. Before long a group of excited people gathered together, Indian fashion, and began to mishandle the drunken ruffian who had dared attack a revered holy man. There was a likelihood that the man who was so dastardly would be lynched.

Throughout this episode the Sage had maintained his usual stoic calmness and endurance. Now he intervened and wrote down the following message.

"If you beat this man, it is the same as beating me. Let him go, for I have forgiven him."

Since the Sage's word was unwritten law, his request was unwillingly obeyed and the miscreant set free.

†

The attendant peers into the room and then warns us to be perfectly quiet, because the Sage is sunk in trance. I unlace my shoes and leave them behind on the veranda, in obedience to the inexorable dictates of Hindu custom. As I bend my head I notice a small flat stone in the wall. Its face is inscribed with Tamil characters. "The Abode of the Sage Who Never Speakes," translates my companion.

We enter the one-roomed cottage. It is lofty, well-roofed and scrupulously clean. A raised marble dais, which is about one foot high, is built into the floor's centre. Its surface is covered with a richly patterned Persian rug. Upon this rug sits the entranced figure of the silent Sage.

Imagine a handsome man, whose skin shines with a tawny blackish colour, whose body is finely erect, and who sits in a peculiar attitude which I immediately identify as one of the Yoga postures which Brama has shown me. The left leg is doubled back so that the foot is under the base of the body, and the right leg is swung across the left thigh. The Sage's back, neck and head form a perfectly straight line. His hair falls in long black strands almost to his shoulders, and hangs thickly around his head. There is a sweeping black beard upon his chin. His hands are clasped over his knees. I notice that the trunk is remarkably well developed; it is very muscular and he is clearly in a healthy condition. The only covering he wears is a loin cloth.

His face photographs itself immediately in my memory as the face of a man who smiles in triumph over life, a man who has conquered the frailties which we, feeble mortals that we are, harbour willingly or unwillingly. The mouth is slightly stretched—as though about to break into a smile. The nose is short and straight, almost Grecian in type. The eyes are wide open; they stare straight ahead in a fixed and unblinking gaze. The man sits like a carved rock and never moves.

My informant has earlier told me that the silent Sage is without doubt deeply immersed in an entranced communion wherein the human part of his nature is presumed to be sunk into temporary abeyance, and that he is quite unaware of his physical surroundings. I watch the Sage steadily but can find no room for doubt that he is in a cataleptic trance. The minutes add up into hours but he remains motionless.

What impresses me most is that throughout that time he never blinks his eyes. I have never before met any human being who could sit down and look steadily ahead for two hours without the flicker of an eyelid. Little by little, I am compelled to conclude that if the recluse's eyes are still open, they are nevertheless quite unseeing. If his mind is awake, it is not to this sublunary world. The bodily faculties seem to have gone to sleep. Occasionally, a tear drop falls from his eyes. It is clear

that the fixation of the eyelids prevents them carrying out their usual office on behalf of the tear ducts.

A green lizard descends from the roof, creeps across the carpet, crawls over one of the sage's legs, and then passes behind the marble dais. Yet, had it crawled over a stone wall it would not have found a steadier surface than that leg. From time to time flies settle upon his face and journey over his swarthy skin, but no muscular response can be observed. Had they alighted upon the face of a bronze statue, precisely the same effect might be observed.

I study the figure's breathing. It is extremely gentle, almost imperceptible, quite inaudible but quite regular. It is the only sign he provides that life has not parted from the body.

While we are waiting I decide to use the time to take a photograph or two of this impressive figure. I slip my folding camera out of its leather case and focus the lens upon him from my seat on the floor. The lighting of the room is not good; therefore I give a couple of time exposures.

I look at my watch. Two hours have passed. The Yogi still shows no signs of emerging from his long trance. The sculptural rigidity of his form is remarkable.

I am prepared to stay all day in order to achieve my object, to interview this strange man. But the attendant now comes up to us and whispers that it is useless to wait any longer. Nothing will be gained by doing so. If we will come again in a day or two, better fortune might be ours; nevertheless, he cannot promise anything definitely.

We leave the place, temporarily defeated as we are, and turn our steps toward the city. My interest has not waned; on the contrary, it has heightened.

During the next two days I endeavour to collect some information relative to the Sage Who Never Speaks. This endeavour involves a scattered and discursive investigation, which varies from a lengthy cross-examination of his attendant to a brief interview with a police inspector. In this way I succeed in piecing together a fragment of the Sage's story.

Eight years ago he arrived in Madras district. No one knew who he was, what he was or whence he came. He took up his residence on the piece of waste land which now adjoins the field containing his cottage. Inquisitive inquirers who addressed him received no reply for their pains. He spoke to

none, heeded no sounds and no persons, and could not be drawn even into the most casual conversation. He begged a little food occasionally by holding out his coconut-shell bowl.

Day after day he persisted in squatting amid these unattractive surroundings, despite his exposure to the relentless rays of a burning sun, to the heavy downpours of the monsoon season, and to dust and unpleasant insects. Never at any time did he make any effort to seek shelter, but always remained serenely oblivious of external circumstances. There was no protection for his head and no covering for his body, except for a narrow loin cloth.

He never changed for any other the Yoga posture in which he sat. Now, the outskirts of a large city like Madras were hardly suitable for a hermit who wished to seat himself in the open air and in full public gaze in order to plunge his mind into abstracted meditations for lengthy periods. Such conduct would have won great respect in ancient India, but the modern Yogi can find favourable conditions for his mystic practices only in sparse jungle spaces, forests retreats, mountain caves or in the seclusion of this room.

Why, then, did this strange hermit choose such an unsuitable spot for his meditations? An unpleasant occurrence provided the curious explanation.

One day a band of youthful and ignorant hooligans came across the lonely Yogi by chance and began to persecute him. They left the city with reprehensible punctuality to engage in a daily campaign of stone-throwing, dirt-flinging and abusive jeering. The hermit continued to sit quietly, and patiently endured his trials, although he was stalwart enough to be able to give them a second thrashing. He did not even rebuke them because he was under a vow of silence.

Nothing stopped the young brutes until a man happened to pass by when they were busy with their usual persecution of the Yogi. The stranger was shocked at seeing a holy man so ill-treated. He went back to Madras and gave information to the police, from whom he demanded help on behalf of the voiceless Yogi. The help was forthcoming and the despicable band was dispersed with severe warnings.

After this event a police officer decided to make some enquiries about the hermit, but he was unable to find a single person who knew anything about him. So he was compelled to

question the Yogi, which he did with all the authority of the law. After much hesitation the Yogi wrote a brief statement upon a slate. This is what he scribbled:

"I am a pupil of Marakayar. My master directed me to cross the plains and go south to Madras. He described this piece of ground and explained where I would be able to find it. He told me to take up my abode here and to continue in the steady practice of Yoga until I have made myself perfect in it. I have given up the worldly life and desire only to be left alone. I have no interest in the affairs of Madras and seek nothing more than to follow my spiritual path."

The police officer was quite satisfied that the man was a genuine faqueer of a superior type, so he withdrew after promising protection against the hooligans. He recognized the name of Marakayar as being that of a famous Muhammedan faqueer who had recently died.

"Out of evil cometh good," runs the old proverb. The upshot of this unpleasant affair was that the presence of the recluse became known to a wealthy and pious citizen of Madras. The latter endeavoured to tempt him into the city with the lure of residence in a fine house, but the hermit would not disobey his master's instructions. In the end the newly-found patron had to build a stone-and-timber bungalow near the ground which the Yogi refused to leave. The latter consented to occupy it and, as it was properly roofed, he was thenceforth adequately protected against the inclemencies of changing seasons.

His patron also appointed a personal attendant for the Yogi. It was now no longer necessary for the latter to beg, as all his food was brought to him by the attendant. Whether his master Marakayar had foreseen such a pleasant consequence of an unpleasant experience or not, it remained that the last condition of his pupil was much better than the first.

I learn that the Sage Who Never Speakes had not even one pupil. He seeks none and accepts none. He is one of those solitaries who prefer to live in isolation in order to achieve their own "spiritual liberation." If there is any value in the latter then their attitude is apparently a selfish one, judged by our Western lights. And yet, when one remembers the sages' profound considerateness towards the drunkard and his refusal to retaliate against the young hooligans, one wonders whether

he can be so very selfish after all.

†

Accompanied by two other persons, I make my second attempt to interview the Sage Who Never Speaks. One is my interpreter, while the second man is none other than the Yogi who has taught me so much — Brama, "the Adyar anchorite," as I affectionately call him. Brama never cares to enter the city, but when I make known the object of my visit and desire him to accompany me, he agrees without demur.

At the compound we meet another visitor, who has left a large car on the roadside and walked across the fields to the same objective. He, too, is desirous of seeing the silent sage. He tells me during a brief conversation that he is a brother of the Queen of Gadwal, a small state which is tributary to the Nizam of Hyderabad. He informs me that he also is a patron of the Sage, inasmuch as he insists on making a regular contribution towards the cost of maintaining the shelter. He has come on a brief visit to Madras, but cannot leave the town without paying his respects to the Sage, and perchance receiving his blessing. What the latter is worth, I learn from a story which the visitor narrates.

A lady at the Court of Gadwal has a child who suffered from some dread ailment. By some odd coincidence she hears of the existence of the Sage Who Never Speaks. Such is her anxiety that she journeys to Madras and begs the hermit to grant his blessing and heal the little boy. The blessings is given and from the date the child makes a marvellous recovery. The incident comes to the notice of the Queen, who also visits the hermit. Her Highness presents him with a purse of six hundred rupees, which he refuses to accept. She presses him until he writes a message saying that the money can be used to improve his shelter by fixing a fence around the cottage, so that he shall secure more privacy. The Queen arranges to have this done and thus the bamboo fence comes into being.

The attendant again admits us into the cottage, where we find the recluse sunk in the same trance-like condition which he maintained throughout my first visit.

We squat upon the floor in silence and wait patiently before the tall majestic, black-bearded figure on the marble dais.

About half-way through the second hour we perceive the first signs of returning activity in the Sage's body. His breathing becomes deeper and then more audible. The eyelids move, the eyeballs roll alarmingly upwards until the whites glare and then come down to normal. A slight swaying movement becomes perceptible in his trunk.

Five minutes later the expression in the Sage's eyes changes in such a way that we know he has become aware of his physical environment. He looks attentively at the interpreter, turns his head abruptly and looks at Brama and then at the other visitor, turns again and looks at me.

I seize the opportunity and place a pencil and pad of paper at his feet. He hesitates awhile, takes up the pencil and writes in large flourishing tamal characters:

"Who came here the other day and tried to take pictures?"

I am compelled to admit to this activity. As a matter of fact, the effort had been useless, for I had under-exposed the films.

He writes again:

"When you go again to Yogis who are in deep trance, never disturb them by such actions. Do not attempt to break in abruptly upon their meditations. In my own case it did not matter, but I tell you this to guide your future actions when you try to see other Yogis. Such interruption may be dangerous to them and they might put a curse upon you."

It is evidently looked upon as a minor act of sacrilege to penetrate the solitude of such a man, so I express my regrets.

The Queen of Gadwal's brother now proffers his devotion to the Sage. When he has finished I venture to introduce myself as one deeply interested in the ancient wisdom of India. I have heard across the seas, I inform him that India still possesses a few men who have made remarkable attainments in Yoga and I seek to discover them. Will the Sage give me such enlightenment as he thinks fit?

The hermit remains statuesque, impassive; his face betrays no responsive change of expression. For fully ten minutes he gives no sign that he has heard my request. I begin to fear that I have drawn a blank, that he regards the materialistic Westerner as unfit even for the slightest degree of enlightenment. Possibly my clumsy outrage with the camera has repelled him. Am I not expecting too much, when I expect this reserved member

of a reclusive species to break his trance for the sake of an infidel member of an alien race? A sense of chagrin rises up in me.

My disappointment is too premature. The sage takes the pencil at length and scrawls something upon the paper. When he has finished I lean over and push the pad to our interpreter.

"What is there to understand?" he slowly translates. The writing is difficult to decipher.

"The universe is full of problems?" I rejoin, disconcerted.

I fancy that a slightly derisive smile now begins to play around the lips of the Sage.

"Since you do not understand even your own self," he asks, "how can you hope to understand the universe?"

He looks straight into my eyes. I feel that behind his steady gaze there is some deep knowledge, some store of secrets which he is guarding with relentless care. I cannot account for this queer impression.

"Yet I am much bewildered," is all I can bring myself to say next.

"Why, then, do you go about like a bee which sucks mere drops of the honey of knowledge, when the heavy mass of pure honey awaits you?"

This answer tantalizes me. It is, no doubt, all-sufficient to an Oriental mind. Its mystic vagueness charms me as a piece of poetry, but blurs me when I look for a useful contribution that will solve some of life's problems.

"But where shall one look?"

"Seek your own self, and you shall know the Truth which is deep hidden therein," comes the reply.

"But I find only the emptiness of ignorance," I persist.

"The ignorance exists within your thoughts alone," he writes laconically.

"Pardon me, master, but your answer plunges me into still further ignorance!"

The Sage actually smiles at my temerity. He hesitates awhile, screws up his eyebrows, and then writes:

"You have thought yourself into your present ignorance; now think yourself back into wisdom, which is the same as self-understanding. Thought is like a bullock cart which carries a man into the darkness of a mountain tunnel. Turn it backwards and you will be carried back to the light again."

I ruminate over his words, which still puzzle me a little. Seeing this, the Sage beckons for the pad, poises the pencil in the air for a few moments, and explains:

"This backward-turning of thought is the highest Yoga. Now do you understand?"

A very dim light begins to dawn on me. I feel that, given sufficient time in which to meditate on the matter, we shall be able to understand each other; therefore, I resolve not to press the point too much.

I am so intent on watching him that I have not noticed the arrival of a fresh visitor, who has taken advantage of the opened gate to enter and join us. I become aware of his presence only when he breathes a strange remark into my ear, for he is sitting immediately behind me. Whilst I am puzzling over a reply of the Sage, feeling slightly disappointed at the cryptic character of his works, a mysterious murmur reaches me, its words phrased in excellent English:

"My master can give you the answer for which you are waiting."

I turn my head and look at the intruder.

He is a man not older than forty, dressed in the ochre-coloured robe of a wandering Yogi. The skin of his face shines like polished brass. He is well built and broad shouldered—a powerful looking figure. His nose is thin, prominent and beaked like a parrot's. His eyes are small and seem to be wrinkled in perpetual laughter. He squats upon his haunches and grins broadly at me when our eyes meet.

But I cannot perpetrate the rude action of entering into desultory conversation with the stranger, so I turn back and fix my attention again upon the Sage.

Another question comes to the forefront of my mind. It is possibly too daring or too impertinent.

"Master, the world needs help. Is it right for the wise ones, such as yourself, to be lost to it in solitary retirement?"

A quizzical expression crosses the calm face of the hermit.

"My son," he replies, "when you do not know yourself, how can you dream of understanding me? It is of little avail to discuss the things of the spirit. Strive to enter into your inner self through the practice of Yoga. You must work hard upon this path. Then your problems will solve themselves of their own accord."

I make a last attempt to draw him.

"The world needs a deeper light than it possesses. I would like to find it and share it. What shall I do?"

"When you know the Truth you will know exactly what to do to serve mankind best, nor will you lack the power to do so. If a flower possesses the honey, the bee will find it out of its own accord. If a man possesses spiritual wisdom and strength, he need not go in search of people; they will come unasked to him. Cultivate you inner self until you know it fully. No other instruction is necessary. This is the only thing to do."

He then informs us that he wishes to close the interview, so as to resume his trance.

I ask for a final message.

The Silent Sage gazes over my head into seeming space. A minute later he pencils a reply and pushes the pad towards me. We read:

"I am very pleased because you came here. Take this as my initiation."

I hardly finish taking in the purport of his answer when I suddenly feel a strange force entering my body. It pours through my spinal column and stiffens the neck and draws up the head. The power of will seems raised to a superlative degree. I become conscious of a dynamic urge to conquer myself and make the body obey the will to realize one's deepest ideals. And I feel intuitively that those ideals are but voices of my best self, which alone can promise me lasting happiness.

A queer thought comes to me that some current is being projected to me from the sage, some invisible telepathic current. Can it be that he is thus vouchsafing to me an inkling of his own attainment?

The eyes of the recluse become fixed and the far-off look again enters them. His body becomes taut as he settles down more firmly into his familiar posture. I plainly perceive that he is withdrawing his attention into depths which may possibly be deeper than thought, that he is plunging his consciousness into inner recesses which he loves better than this world.

Is he then a true Yogi? Is he engaged on mysterious inward explorations which, I begin to suspect, may be fraught with some meaning to humanity? Who knows?

When we emerge from the compound, Brama, the Adyar anchorite, turns to me and says, in a quiet voice:

"This Yogi has reached a high state, although not the final goal. He possesses occult gifts, but is keener to perfect his spirituality. His fine bodily condition I attribute to his long practice of the Yoga of Body Control, though I now observe that he has advanced into the art of Mind Control. I knew him before."

"When?"

"I discovered him some years ago near here, when he lived in the open field without a cottage. I recognized him for what he was—a practising Yogi following my path. I shall also tell you that he informed me—through writing, of course—that in early life he was a Sepoy in the army. After his period of service came to an end, he wearied of this worldly life and embraced solitude. It was then that he met the renowned faqueer Marakayar an; became his disciple."

We proceed in silence across the fields and then rejoin the dusty road. I do not mention to anyone the unexpected and inexplicable experience which came to me in the cottage. I want to muse over it while its echoes are yet sounding fresh within me.

I never see the sage again. He does not wish me to intrude upon his secluded life and I must respect his wish. I leave him to his lonely meditations; wrapped in his mantle of impenetrability. He has no desire to found a school or collect a following, and his ambitions seem to stretch no farther than passing unobtrusively through life. He has nothing to add to what he has already said to me. He does not make an art of conversation for its own sake, as we do in the West.

VIII

With the Spiritual Head of South India

Someone draws up to my side before we reach the end of the road which is to take us into Madras. I turn my head. The yellow robed Yogi—for it is he—rewards me with a majestic grin. His mouth stretches almost from ear to ear, and his eyes wrinkle into narrow slits.

"You wish to speak to me?" I enquire.

"I do, sir," he replies quickly, and with a good accent to his English. "May I ask what you are doing in our country?"

I hesitate before this inquisitiveness, and decide to give a vague reply.

"Oh! just travelling around."

"You are interested in our holy men, I believe?"

"Yes—a little."

"I am a Yogi, sir," he informs me.

He is the heftiest-looking Yogi I have ever seen.

"How long have you been one?"

"Three years, sir."

"Well, you look none the worse for it, if you will pardon my saying so!"

He draws himself proudly together and stands at attention. Since his feet are naked, I take the click of his heels for granted.

"For seven years I was a soldier of His Majesty the King-Emperor!" he exclaims.

"Indeed!"

"Yes, sir. I served with the ranks in the Indian Army during the Mesopotamian campaign. After the war I was put into the Military Accounts Department because of my superior intelligence!"

I am compelled to smile at this unsolicited testimonial to himself.

"I left the service on account of family trouble and went through a period of great distress. This induced me to take to the spiritual path and become a Yogi."

I hand him a card.

"Shall we exchange names?" I suggest.

My personal name is Subramanya; my caste name is Aiyar," he quickly announces.

"Well, Mr. Subramanya, I am waiting for an explanation of your whispered remark in the house of the silent Sage."

"And I have been waiting all this time to give it to you! Take your questions to my master, for he is the wisest man in India, wiser even than the Yogis."

"So? And have you travelled throughout all India? Have you met all the great Yogis, that you can make such a statement?"

"I have met several of them, for I know the country from Cape Comorin to the Himalayas."

"Well?"

"Sir, I have never met anyone like him. He is a great soul. And I want you to meet him."

"Why?"

"Because he has led me to you! It is his power which has drawn you to India!"

This bombastic statement strikes me as being too exaggerated and I begin to recoil from the man. I am always afraid of the rhetorical exaggerations of emotional persons, and it is obvious that the yellow-robed Yogi is highly emotional. His voice, gesture, appearance and atmosphere plainly reveal it.

"I do not understand," is my cold reply.

He falls into further explanations.

"Eight months ago I came into touch with him. For five months I was permitted to stay with him and then I was sent forth on my travels once more. I do not think you are likely to meet with another such man as he. His spiritual gifts are so great that he will answer your unspoken thoughts. You need only be with him a short time to realize his high spiritual degree."

"Are you sure he would welcome my visit?"

"Oh, sir! Absolutely. It is his guidance which sent me to you."

"Where does he live?"

"On Arunachala—the Hill of the Holy Beacon."

"And where is that?"

"In the North Arcot territory, which lies farther south. I will constitute myself your guide. Let me take you there. My master will solve your doubts and remove your problems,

because he knows the highest truth."

"That sounds quite interesting," I admit reluctantly, "but I regret that the visit is impossible at present. My trunks are packed and I shall soon be leaving for the North-east. There are two important appointments to be fulfilled, you see."

"But this is more important."

"Sorry. We met too late. My arrangements are made and they cannot be easily altered. I may be back in the South later, but we must leave this journey for the present."

The Yogi is plainly disappointed.

"You are missing an opportunity, sir, and—"

I foresee a useless argument, so cut him short.

"I must leave you now. Thanks, anyway."

"I refuse to accept your refusal," he obstinately declares. "To-morrow evening I shall call upon you and I hope then to hear that you have changed your mind."

Our conversation abruptly finishes. I watch his strong, well-knit, yellow-robed figure start across the road.

When I reach home, I begin to feel that it is possible I have made an error of judgment. If the master is worth half the disciple's claims, then he is worth the troublesome journey into the southern tip of the peninsula. But I have grown somewhat tired of enthusiastic devotees. They sing paeans of praise of their masters, who prove on investigations to fall lamentably short of the more critical standards of the West. Furthermore, sleepless nights and sticky days have rendered my nerves less serene than they should be; thus, the possibility that the journey might prove a wild goose chase looms larger than it should.

Yet argument fails to displace feeling. A queer instinct warns me that there may be some real basis for the Yogi's ardent insistence on the distinctive claims of his master. I cannot keep off a sense of self-disappointment.

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About the time of tiffin, that is, tea and biscuits, the servant announces a visitor. The latter proves to be a fellow member of the ink-stained fraternity, to wit, the writer Venkataramani.

Several letters of introduction lie where I have thrown

them, at the bottom of my trunk. I have no desire to use them. This is in response to a curious whim that it might be better to tempt whatever gods there be to do their best—or worst. However, I used one in Bombay, preparatory to beginning my quest, and I used another in Madras because I have been charged to deliver a personal message with it. And thus, this second note has brought Venkataramani to my door.

He is a member of the Senate of Madras University, but he is better known as the author of tallented essays and novels of village life. He is the first Hindu writer in Madras Presidency, who uses the medium of English, to be publicly presented with an inscribed ivory shield because of his services to literature. He writes in a delicate style of such merit as to win high commendation from Rabindranath Tagore in India and from the late Lord Haldane in England. His prose is piled with beautiful metaphors, but his stories tell of the melancholy life of neglected villages.

As he enters the room I look at his tall, lean person, his small head with its tiny tuft of hair, his small chin and bespectacled eyes. They are the eyes of a thinker, an idealist and a poet combined. Yet the sorrows of suffering peasants are reflected in their sad irises.

We soon find ourselves on several paths of common interest. After we have compared notes about most things, after we have pulled politics to pieces and swung the censers of adoration before our favourite authors, I am suddenly impressed to reveal to him the real reason of my Indian visit. I tell him with perfect frankness what my object is; I ask him about the whereabouts of any real Yogis who possess demonstrable attainments; and I warn him that I am not especially interested in meeting dirt-besmeared ascetics or juggling faqueers.

He bows his head and then shakes it negatively.

"India is no longer the land of such men. With the increasing materialism of our country, its wide degeneration on one hand and the impact of unspiritual Western culture on the other, the men you are seeking, the great masters, have all but disappeared. Yet I firmly believe that some exist in retirement, in lonely forests perhaps, but unless you devote a whole lifetime to the search, you will find them with the greatest difficulty. When my fellow Indians undertake such a quest as

yours, they have to roam far and wide nowadays. Then how much harder will it be for a European?"

"Then you hold out little hope?" I ask.

"Well, one cannot say. You may be fortunate."

Something moves me to put a sudden question:

"Have you heard of a master who lives in the mountains of North Arcot?"

He shakes his head.

Our talk wanders back to literary topics.

I offer him a cigarette, but he excuses himself from smoking. I light one for myself and while I inhale the fragrant smoke of the Turkish weed, Venkataramani pours out his heart in passionate praise of the fast disappearing ideals of old Hindu culture. He makes reference to such ideas as simplicity of living, service of the community, leisurely existence and spiritual aims. He wants to lop off parasitic stupidities which grow on the body of Indian society. The biggest thing in his mind, however, is his vision of saving the half-million villages of India from becoming mere recruiting centres for the slums of large industrialized towns. Though this menace is more remote than real, his prophetic insight and memory of Western industrial history sees this as a certain result of present day trends. Venkataramani tells me that he was born in a family with a property near one of the oldest villages of South India, and he greatly lamented, the cultural decay and material poverty into which village life had fallen. He loves to hatch out schemes for the betterment of the simple village folk, and he refuses to be happy whilst they are unhappy.

I listen quietly in the attempt to understand his viewpoint. Finally, he rises to go and I watch his tall thin form disappear down the road.

Early next morning I am surprised to receive an unexpected visit from him. His carriage rushes hastily to the gate, for he fears that I might be out.

"I received a message late last night that my greatest patron is staying for one day at Chingleput," he bursts out.

After he has recovered his breath, he continues:

"His Holiness Shri Shankara Acharya of Kumbakonam is the Spiritual Head of South India. Millions of people revere him as one of God's teachers. It happens that he has taken a great interest in me and has encouraged my literary career, and of

course he is the one to whom I look for spiritual advice. I may now tell you what I refrained from mentioning yesterday. We regard him as a master of the highest spiritual attainment. But he is not a Yogi. He is the Primate of the Southern Hindu world, a true saint and great religious philosopher. Because he is fully aware of most of the spiritual currents of our time, and because of his own attainments, he has probably an exceptional knowledge of the real Yogis. He travels a good deal from village to village and from city to city, so that he is particularly well informed on such matters. Wherever he goes, the holy men come to him to pay their respects. He could probably give you some useful advice. Would you like to visit him?"

"That is extremely kind of you. I shall gladly go. How far is Chingleput?"

"Only thirty-five miles from here. But stay—?"

"Yes?"

"I begin to doubt whether His Holiness would grant you an audience. Of course I shall do my utmost to persuade him. But—"

"I am a European!" I finish the sentence for him. "I understand."

"You will take the risk of a rebuff?" he asks, a little anxiously.

"Certainly. Let us go."

After a light meal we set out for Chingleput. I ply my literary companion with questions about the man I hope to see this day. I learn that Shri Shankara lives a life of almost ascetic plainness as regards food and clothing, but the dignity of his high office requires him to move in regal panoply when travelling. He is followed then by a retinue of mounted elephants and camels, pundits and their pupils, heralds and camp followers generally. Wherever he goes he becomes the magnet for crowds of visitors from the surrounding localities. They come for spiritual, mental, physical and financial assistance. Thousands of rupees are daily laid at his feet by the rich, but because he has taken the vow of poverty, this income is applied to worthy purposes. He relieves the poor, assists education, repairs decaying temples and improves the condition of those artificial rain-fed pools which are so useful in the riverless tracts of South India. His mission, however, is primarily spiritual. At every stopping-place he endeavours to

inspire the people to a deeper understanding of their heritage of Hinduism, as well as to elevate their hearts and minds. He usually gives a discourse at the local temple and then privately answers the multitude of querents who flock to him.

I learn that Shri Shankara is the sixty-sixth bearer of the title in direct line of succession from the original Shankara. To get his office and power into the right perspective within my mind, I am forced to ask Venkataramani several questions about the founder of the line. It appears that the first Shankara flourished over two thousand years ago, and that he was one of the greatest of the historical Brahmin sages. He might be described as a rational mystic, and as a philosopher of first rank. He found the Hinduism of his time in a disordered and decrepit state, with its spiritual vitality fast fading. It seems that he was born for a mission. From the age of eighteen he wandered throughout India on foot, arguing with the intelligentsia and the priests of every district through which he passed, teaching the doctrines of his own creation, and acquiring a considerable following. His intellect was so acute that, usually, he was more than a match for those he met. He was fortunate enough to be accepted and honoured as a prophet during his lifetime, and not after the life had flickered out of his throat.

He was a man with many purposes. Although he championed the chief religion of his country, he strongly condemned the pernicious practices which had grown up under its cloak. He tried to bring people into the way of virtue and exposed the futility of mere reliance on ornate rituals, unaccompanied by personal effort. He broke the rules of caste by performing the obsequies at the death of his own mother, for which the priests excommunicated him. This fearless young man was a worthy successor to Buddha, the first famous caste breaker. In opposition to the priests he taught that every human being, irrespective of caste or colour, could attain to the grace of God and to knowledge of the highest Truth. He founded no special creed but held that every religion was a path to God, if sincerely held and followed into its mystic inwardness. He elaborated a complete and subtle system of philosophy in order to prove his points. He has left a large literary legacy, which is honoured in every city of sacred learning throughout the country. The pundits greatly treasure

his philosophical and religious bequest, although they naturally quibble and quarrel over its meaning.

Shankara travelled throughout India wearing an ochre robe and carrying a pilgrim's staff. As a clever piece of strategy, he established four great institutions at the four points of the compass. There was one at Badrinath in the North, at Puri in the East, and so on. The central headquarters, together with a temple and monastery, were established in the South, where he began his work. To this day the South has remained the holy of holies of Hinduism. From these institutions there would emerge, when the rainy seasons were over, trained bands of monks who travelled the country to carry Shankara's message. This remarkable man died at the early age of thirty-two, though one legend has it that he simply disappeared.

The value of this information becomes apparent when I learn that his successor, whom I am to see this day, carries on the same work and the same teaching. In this connection, there exists a strange tradition. The first Shankara promised his disciples that he would still abide with them in spirit, and that he would accomplish this by the mysterious process of "overshadowing" his successors. A somewhat similar theory is attached to the office of the Grand Lama of Tibet. The predecessor in office, during his last dying moments, names the one worthy to follow him. The selected person is usually a lad of tender years, who is then taken in hand by the best teachers available, and given a thorough training to fit him for his exalted post. His training is not only religious and intellectual, but also along the lines of higher Yoga and meditation practices. This training is then followed by a life of great activity in the service, of his people. It is a singular fact that through all the many centuries this line has been established, not a single holder of the title has ever been known to have other than the highest and the most selfless character.

Venkataramani embellishes his narrative with stories of the remarkable gifts which Shri Shankara the Sixty-sixth possesses. There is an account of the miraculous healing of his own cousin. The latter has been crippled by rheumatism and confined to his bed for many years. Shri Shankara visits him, touches his body, and within three hours the invalid is so far better that he gets out of bed; soon, he is completely cured.

There is the further assertion that His Holiness is credited

with the power of reading the thoughts of other persons; at any rate, Vankataramani fully believes this to be true.

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We enter Chingleput through a palm-fringed highway and find it a tangle of whitewashed houses, huddled red roofs and narrow lanes. We get down and walk into the centre of the city, where large crowds are gathered together. I am taken into a house where a group of secretaries are busily engaged handling the huge correspondence which follows His Holiness from his headquarters at Kumbakonam. I wait in a chairless ante-room while Vankataramani sends one of the secretaries with a message to Shri Shankara. More than half an hour passes before the man returns with the reply that the audience I seek cannot be granted. His Holiness does not see his way to receiving a European; moreover, there are two hundred people waiting for interviews already. Many persons have been staying in the town overnight in order to secure their interviews. The secretary is profuse in his apologies.

I philosophically accept the situation, but Vankataramani says that he will try to get into the presence of His Holiness as a privileged friend, and then plead my cause. Several members of the crowd murmur unpleasantly when they become aware of his intention to pass into the coveted house out of his turn. After much talk and babbling explanations, he wins through. He returns eventually, smiling and victorious.

"His Holiness will make a special exception in your case. He will see you in about one hour's time."

I fill the time with some idle wandering in the picturesque lanes which run down to the chief temple. I meet some servants who are leading a train of grey elephants and big buff-brown camels to a drinking-place. Someone points out to me the magnificent animal which carries the Spiritual Head of South India on his travels. He rides in regal fashion, borne aloft in an opulent howdah on the back of a tall elephant. It is finely covered with ornate trappings, rich cloths and gold embroideries. I watch the dignified old creature step forward along the street. Its trunk coils up and comes down again as it passes.

Remembering the time-worn custom which requires one to

bring a little offering of fruits, flowers or sweetments when visiting a spiritual personage, I procure a gift to place before my august host. Oranges and flowers are the only things in sight and I collect as much as I can conveniently carry.

In the crowd which presses outside His Holiness's temporary residence, I forget another important custom. "Remove your shoes," Venkataramani reminds me promptly. I take them off and leave them out in the street, hoping that they will still be there when I return!

We pass through a tiny doorway and enter a bare ante-room. At the far end there is a dimly lit enclosure, where I behold a short figure standing in the shadows. I approach closer to him, put down my little offering and bow low in salutation. There is an artistic value in this ceremony which greatly appeals to me, apart from its necessity as an expression of respect and as a harmless courtesy. I know well that Shri Shankara is no Pope, for there is no such thing in Hinduism, but he is a teacher and inspirer of a religious flock of vast dimensions. The whole of South India bows to his tutelage.



I look at him in silence. This short man is clad in the ochre-coloured robe of a monk and leans his weight on a friar's staff. I have been told that he is on the right side of forty, hence I am surprised to find his hair quite grey.

His noble face, pictured in grey and brown, takes an honoured place in the long portrait gallery of my memory. That elusive element which the French aptly term *spirituel* is present in this face. His expression is modest and mild, the large dark eyes being extraordinarily tranquil and beautiful. The nose is short, straight and classically regular. There is a rugged little beard on his chin, and the gravity of his mouth is most noticeable. Such a face might have belonged to one of the saints who graced the Christian Church during the Middle Ages, except that this one possesses the added quality of intellectuality. I suppose we of the practical West would say that he has the eyes of a dreamer. Somehow, I feel in an inexplicable way that there is something more than mere dreams behind those heavy lids.

"Your Holiness has been very kind to receive me," I

remark, by way of introduction.

He turns to my companion, the writer, and says something in the vernacular. I guess its meaning correctly.

"His Holiness understands your English, but he is too afraid that you will not understand his own. So he prefers to have me translate his answers," says Venkataramani.

I shall sweep through the earlier phases of this interview, because they are more concerned with myself than with this Hindu Primate. He asks about my personal experience in the country; he is very interested in ascertaining the exact impressions which India people and institutions make upon a foreigner. I give him my candid impressions, mixing praise and criticism freely and frankly.

The conversation then flows into wide channels and I am much surprised to find that he regularly reads English newspapers, and that he is well informed upon current affairs in the outside world. Indeed, he is not unaware of what the latest noise at Westminster is about, and he knows also through what painful travail the troublous infant of democracy is passing in Europe.

I remember Venkataramani's firm belief that Shri Shankara possesses prophetic insight. It touches my fancy to press for some opinion about the world's future.

"When do you think that the political and economic conditions everywhere will begin to improve?"

"A change for the better is not easy to come by quickly," he replies. "It is a process which must needs take some time. How can things improve when the nations spend more each year on the weapons of death?"

"There is nevertheless much talk of disarmament to-day. Does that count?"

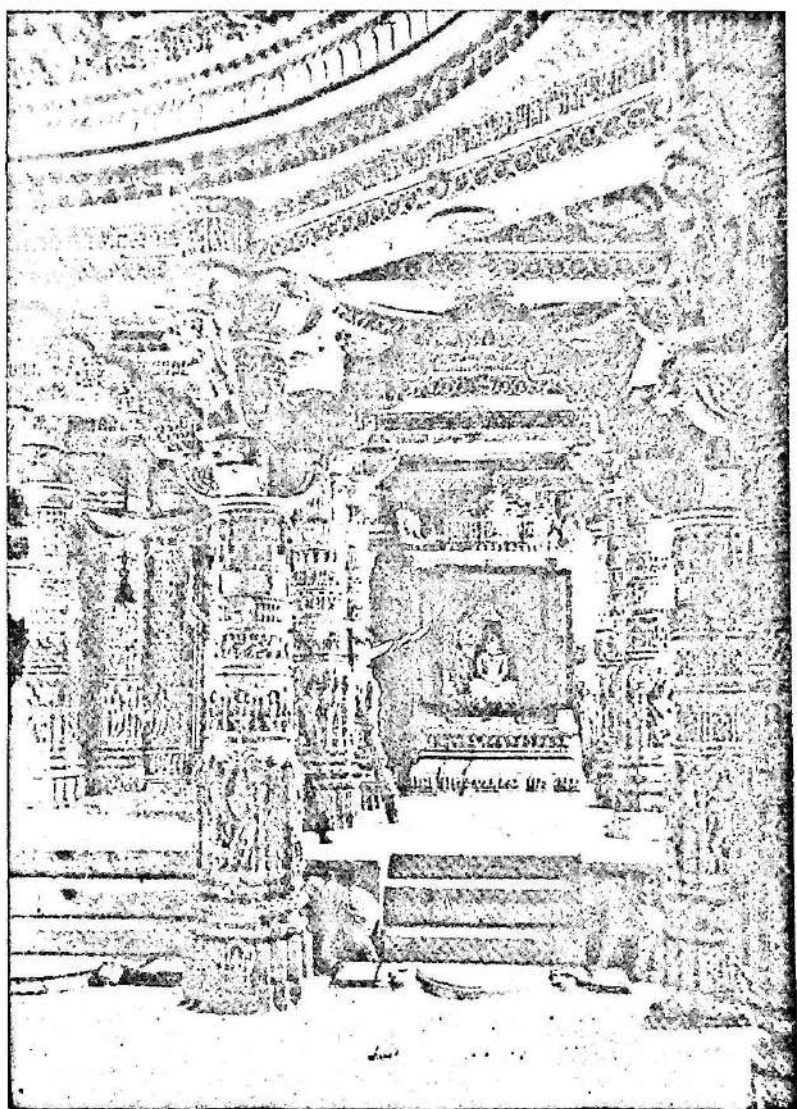
"If you scrap your battleships and let your cannons rust, that will not stop war. People will continue to fight, even if they have to use sticks!"

"But what can be done to help matters?"

"Nothing but spiritual understanding between one nation and another, and between rich and poor, will produce good will and thus bring real peace and prosperity."

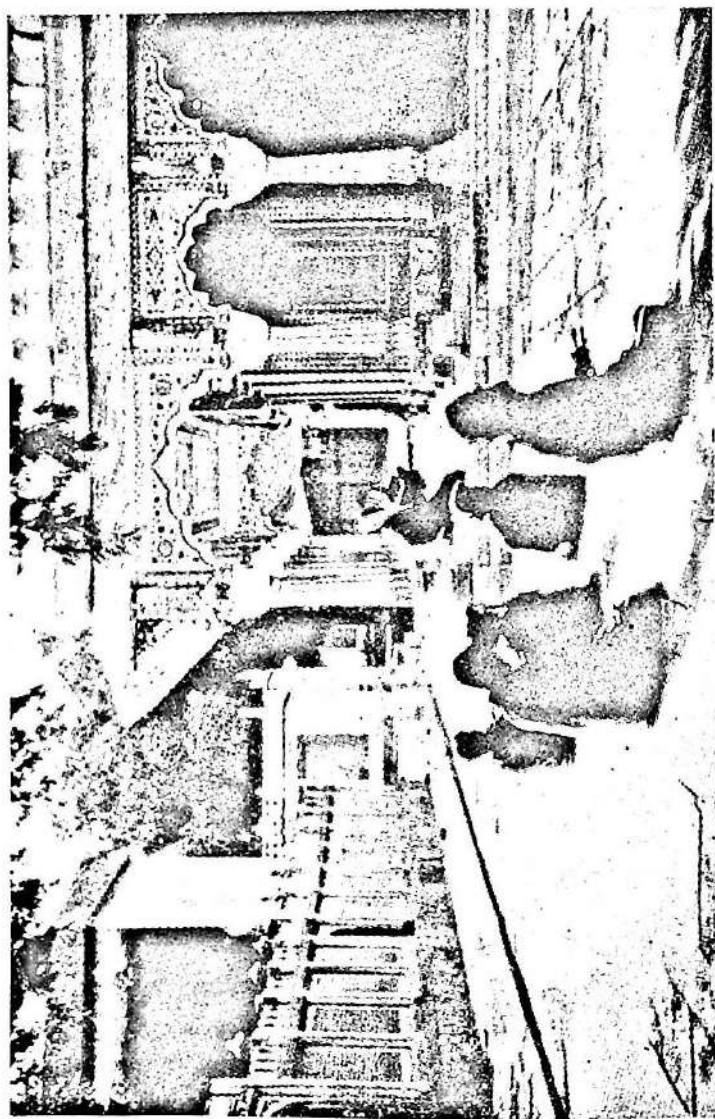
"That seems far off. Our outlook is hardly cheerful, then?"

His Holiness rests his arm a little more heavily upon his staff.



INTERIOR OF DILWARA TEMPLE

'The tradition of my office requires that I give a spiritual discourse in the local temple.'



IN THE MUHAMMEDAN MOSQUE

'Something inside me always thrills to the graceful arches of a mosque and to the delicate beauty of cupolas. Once again I remove my shoes and enter the charming white building.'

"There is still God," he remarks gently.

"If there is, He seems very far away," I boldly protest.

"God has nothing but love towards mankind," comes the soft answer.

"Judging by the unhappiness and wretchedness which afflict the world to-day, He has nothing but indifference," I break out impulsively, unable to keep the bitter force of irony out of my voice. His Holiness looks at me strangely. Immediately I regret my hasty words.

"The eyes of a patient man see deeper. God will use human instruments to adjust matters at the appointed hour. The turmoil among nations, the moral wickedness among people and the suffering of miserable millions will provoke, as a reaction, some great divinely inspired man to come to the rescue. In this sense, every century has its own saviour. The process works like a law of physics. The greater the wretchedness caused by spiritual ignorance, materialism, the greater will be the man who will arise to help the world."

"Then do you expect someone to arise in our time, too?"

"In our century," he corrects. "Assuredly. The need of the world is so great and its spiritual darkness is so thick, that an inspired man of God will surely arise."

"Is it your opinion, then, that men are becoming more degraded?" I query.

"No, I do not think so," he replies tolerantly. "There is an indwelling divine soul in man which, in the end, must bring him back to God."

"But there are ruffians in our Western cities who behave as though there were indwelling demons in them," I counter, thinking of the modern gangster.

"Do not blame people so much as the environments into which they are born. Their surroundings and circumstances force them to become worse than they really are. That is true of both the East and West. Society must be brought into tune with a higher note. Materialism must be balanced by idealism; there is no other real cure for the world's difficulties. The troubles into which countries are everywhere being plunged are really the agonies which will force this change, just as failure is frequently a sign-post pointing to another road."

"You would like people to introduce spiritual principles into their worldly dealings, then?"

"Quite so. It is not impracticable, because it is the only way to bring about results which will satisfy everyone in the end, and which will not speedily disappear. And if there were more men who had found spiritual light in the world, it would spread more quickly. India, to its honour, supports and respects its spiritual men, though less so than in former times. If all the world were to do the same, and to take its guidance from men of spiritual vision, then all the world would soon find peace and grow prosperous."

Our conversation trails on. I am quick to notice that Shri Shankara does not decry the West in order to exalt the East, as so many in his land do. He admits that each half of the globe possesses its own set of virtues and vices, and that in this way they are roughly equal! He hopes that a wiser generation will fuse the best points of Asiatic and European civilizations into a higher and balanced social scheme.

I drop the subject and ask permission for some personal questions. It is granted without difficulty. "How long has Your Holiness held this title?"

"Since 1907. At the time I was only twelve years old. Four years after my appointment I retired to a village on the banks of the Cauvery, where I gave myself up to meditation and study for three years. Then only did my public work begin."

"You rarely remain at your headquarters in Kumbakonam, I take it?"

"The reason for that is that I was invited by the Maharajah of Nepal in 1918 to be his guest for a while. I accepted and since then have been travelling slowly towards his state in the far north. But see!—during all those years I have not been able to advance more than a few hundred miles, because the tradition of my office required that I stay in every village and town which I pass on the route or which invites me, if it is not too far off. I must give a spiritual discourse in the local temple and some teaching to the inhabitants."

I broach the matter of my quest and His Holiness questions me about the different Yogis or holy men I have so far met. After that, I frankly tell him:

"I would like to meet someone who has high attainments in Yoga and can give some sort of proof or demonstration of them. There are many of your holy men who can only give one more talk when they are asked for this proof. Am I asking too

much?"

The tranquil eyes meet mine.

There is a pause for a whole minute. His Holiness fingers his beard.

"If you are seeking initiation into real Yoga of the higher kind, then you are not seeking too much. Your earnestness will help you, while I can perceive the strength of your determination; but a light is beginning to awaken within you which will guide you to what you want, without doubt."

I am not sure whether I correctly understand him.

"So far I have depended on myself for guidance. Even some of your ancient sages say that there is no other god than that which is within ourselves," I hazard.

And the answer swiftly comes:

"God is everywhere. How can one limit Him to one's ownself? He supports the entire universe."

I feel that I am getting out of my depth and immediately turn the talk away from this semi-theological strain.

"What is the most practical course for me to take?"

"Go on with your travels. When you have finished them, think of the various Yogis and holy men you have met; then pick out the one who makes most appeal to you. Return to him, and he will surely bestow his initiation upon you."

I look at his calm profile and admire its singular serenity.

"But suppose, Your Holiness, that none of them makes sufficient appeal to me. What then?"

"In that case you have to go on alone until God Himself initiates you. Practise meditation regularly; contemplate the higher things with love in your heart; think often of the soul and that will help to bring you to it. The best time to practise is the hour of waking; the next best time is the hour of twilight. The world is calmer at those times and will disturb your meditations less."

He gazes benevolently at me. I begin to envy the saintly peace which dwells on his bearded face. Surely, his heart has never known the devastating upheavals which have scarred mine? I am stirred to ask him impulsively:

"If I fail, may I then turn to you for assistance?"

Shri Shankara gently shakes his head.

"I am at the head of a public institution, a man whose time no longer belongs to himself. My activities demand almost all

my time. For years I have spent only three hours in sleep each night. How can I take personal pupils? You must find a master who devotes his time to them."

"But I am told that real masters are rare, and that a European is unlikely to find them."

He nods his assent to my statement, but adds:

"Truth exists. It can be found."

"Can you not direct me to such a master, one who you know is competent to give me proofs of the reality of higher Yoga?"

His Holiness does not reply till after an interval of protracted silence.

"Yes. I know of only two masters in India who would give you what you wish. One of them lives in Benares, hidden away in a large house, which is itself hidden among spacious grounds. Few people are permitted to obtain access to him; certainly no European has yet been able to intrude upon his seclusion. I could send you to him, but I fear that he may refuse to admit a European."

"And the other—?" My interest is strangely stirred.

"The other man lives in the interior, farther south. I visited him once and know him to be a high master. I recommend that you go to him."

"Who is he?"

"He is called the Maharishee¹. His abode is on Arunachala, the Mountain of the Holy Beacon, which is in the territory of North Arcot. Shall I provide you with full instructions, so that you may discover him?"

A picture flashes suddenly before my mind's eye.

I see the yellow-robed friar, who has vainly persuaded me to accompany him to his teacher. I hear him murmuring the name of a hill. It is: "The Hill of the Holy Beacon."

"Many thanks Your Holiness," I rejoin, "but I have a guide who comes from the place."

"Then you will go there?"

I hesitate.

"All arrangements have been made for my departure from the South to-morrow," I mutter uncertainly.

"In that case I have a request to make."

"With pleasure."

"Promise me that you will not leave South India before you

have met the Maharishee."

I read in his eyes a sincere desire to help me. The promise is given.

A benignant smile crosses his face.

"Do not be anxious. You shall discover that which you seek."

A murmur from the crowd which is in the street penetrates the house.

"I have taken up too much of your valuable time," I apologise. "I am indeed sorry."

Shri Shankara's grave mouth relaxes. He follows me into the ante-room and whispers something into the ear of my companion. I catch my name in the sentence.

At the door I turn to bow in farewell salutation. His Holiness calls me back to receive a parting message:

"You shall always remember me, and I shall always remember you!"

And so, hearing these cryptic and puzzling words, I reluctantly withdraw from this interesting man, whose entire life has been dedicated to God from childhood. He is a pontiff who cares not for worldly power, because he has renounced all and resigned all. Whatever material things are given to him, he at once gives again to those who need them. His beautiful and gentle personality will surely linger in my memory.

I wander about Chingleput till evening, exploring its artistic, old-world beauty, and then seek a final glimpse of His Holiness before returning home.

I find him in the largest temple of the city. The slim, modest, yellow-robed figure is addressing a huge concourse of men, women and children. Utter silence prevails among the large audience. I cannot understand his vernacular words, but I can understand that he is holding the deep attention of all present, from the intellectual Brahmin to the illiterate peasant. I do not know, but I hazard the guess that he speaks on the profoundest topics in the simplest manner, for such is the character I read in him.

And yet, though I appreciate his beautiful soul, I envy the simple faith of his vast audience. Life, apparently, never brings them deep moods of doubt. God is; and there the matter ends. They do not appear to know what it means to go through dark nights of the soul, when the world seems like the grim scene of a