

jungle-like struggle; when God recedes into shadowy nothingness; and when man's own existence seems nothing more than a fitful passage across this small, transient fragment of the universe which we call Earth.

We drive out of Chingleput under an indigo sky gemmed with start I listen to palms majestically waving their branches over the water's edge in an unexpected breeze.

My companion suddenly breaks the silence between us.

"You are indeed lucky!"

"Why?"

"Because this is the first interview which His Holiness has granted to a European writer."

"Well—?"

"That brings his blessing upon you!"

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It is nearly midnight when I return home. I take a last glimpse overhead. The stars stud the vast dome of the sky in countless myriads. Nowhere in Europe can one see them in such overwhelming numbers. I run up the step leading to the veranda, flashing my pocket torch.

Out of the darkness, a crouching figure rises and greets me.

"Subramanva!" I exclaim, startled. "What are you doing here?" The ochre-robed Yogi indulges in one of his tremendous grins.

"Did I not promise to visit you, sir?" He reminds me reproachfully.

"Of course!"

In the large room, I fire a question at him.

"Your master—is he called the Maharishee?"

It is now his turn to draw back, astonished.

"How do you know sir? Where could you have learnt this?"

"Never mind. To-morrow we both start for his place. I shall change my plans."

"This is joyful news, sir."

"But I shall not stay there long, though. A few days, maybe."

I fling a few more question at him during the next half-hour, and then, thoroughly tired, go to bed. Subramanya is quite content to sleep on a piece of palm matting which lies on

the floor. He wraps himself up in a thin cotton cloth, which serves at once as a mattress, sheet and blanket, and disdains my offer of more comfortable bedding.

The next thing of which I am aware is suddenly awakening. The room is totally dark. I feel my nerves strangely tense. The atmosphere around me seem like electrified air. I pull my watch from under the pillow, and by the glow of its radium-lit dial, discover the time to be a quarter to three. It is then that I become conscious of some bright object at the foot of the bed. I immediately sit up and look straight at it.

My astounded gaze meets the face and form of His Holiness Shri Shamkara. It is clearly and unmistakably visible. He does not appear to be some ethereal ghost, but rather a solid human being. There is a mysterious liminosity around the figure which separates it from the surrounding darkness.

Surely the vision is an impossible one? Have I not left him at Chingleput? I close my eyes tightly in an effort to test the matter. There is no difference and I still see him quite plainly!

Let it suffice that I receive the sense of a benign and friendly presence. I open my eyes and regard the kindly figure in the loose yellow robe.

The face alters, for the lips smile and seem to say:

"Be humble and then you shall find what you seek!"

Why do I feel that a living human being is thus addressing me? Why do I not regard it as a ghost, at least?

The vision disappears as mysteriously as it has come. It leaves me feeling exalted, happy and unperturbed by its supernormal nature. Shall I dismiss it as a dream? What matters it?

There is no more sleep for this night. I lie awake pondering over the day's meeting, over the memorable interview with His Holiness Shri Shankara of Kumbakonam, the Hierarch of God to the simple people of South India.

1 The title is derived from Sanskrit. *Maha* means great: *Rishees* means sage or seer. Hence, the Great Sage.

IX

The Hill of The Holy Beacon

At the Madras terminus of The South Indian Railway, Subramanya and I board a carriage on the Ceylon boat train. For several hours we roll onwards through the most variegated scenes. Green stretches of growing rice alternate with gaunt red hills, shady plantations of stately coconut trees are followed by scattered peasants toiling in the paddy fields.

As I sit at the window, the swift Indian dusk begins to blot out the landscape and I turn my head to muse of other things. I begin to wonder at the strange things which have happened since I have worn the golden ring which Brama has given me. For my plans have changed their face; a concatenation of unexpected circumstances has arisen to drive me farther South, instead of going farther East as I have intended. Is it possible, I ask myself, that these golden claws hold a stone which really possesses the mysterious power which the Yogi has claimed for it? Although I endeavour to keep an open mind, it is difficult for any Westerner of scientifically trained mind to credit the idea. I dismiss the speculation from my mind, but do not succeed in driving away the uncertainty which lurks at the back of my thoughts. Why is it that my footsteps have been so strangely guided to the mountain hermitage whither I am travelling? Why is it that two men, who both wear the yellow robe, have been coupled as destiny's agents to the extent of directing my reluctant eyes towards the Maharishee? I use this word destiny, not in its common sense, but because I am at a loss for a better one. Past experience has taught me full well that seemingly unimportant happenings sometimes play an unexpected part in composing the picture of one's life.

We leave the train, and with it the main line, forty miles from Pondicherry, that pathetic little remnant of France's territorial possessions in India. We go over to a quiet, little-used branch railroad which runs into the interior, and wait for nearly two hours in the semi-gloom of a bleak waiting-room. The holy man paces along the bleaker platform outside, his tall figure

looking half-ghost, half-real in the starlight. At last the ill-timed train, which puffs infrequently up and down the line, carries us away. There are but few other passengers.

I fall into a fitful, dream-broken sleep which continues for some hours until my companion awakens me. We descend at a little wayside station and the train screeches and grinds away into the silent darkness. Night's life has not quite run out so we sit in a bare and comfortless little waiting-room, whose small kerosene lamp we light ourselves.

We wait patiently while day fights with darkness for supremacy. When a pale dawn emerges at last, creeping bit by bit through a small barred window in the back of our room, I peer out at such portion of our surroundings as becomes visible. Out of the morning haze there rises the faint outline of a solitary hill, apparently some few miles distant. The base is of impressive extent and the body of ample girth, but the head is not to be seen, being yet thick-shrouded in the dawn mists.

My guide ventures outside, where he discovers a man loudly snoring in his tiny bullock cart. A shout or two brings the driver back to this mundane existence, thus making him aware of business waiting in the offing. When informed of our destination, he seems but too eager to transport us. I gaze somewhat dubiously at his narrow conveyance—a bamboo canopy balanced on two wheels. Anyway, we clamber aboard and the man bundles the luggage after us. The holy man manages to compress himself into the minimum space which a human being can possibly occupy; I crouch under the low canopy with legs dangling out in space; the driver squats upon the shaft between his bulls with his chin almost touching his knees, and the problem of accommodation being thus solved more or less satisfactorily, we bid him be off.

Our progress is anything but rapid, despite the best efforts of a pair of strong, small, white bullocks. These charming creatures are very useful as draught animals in the interior of India, because they endure heat better than horses and are less fastidious in the matter of diet. The customs of the quiet villages and small townships of the interior have not changed very much in the course of centuries. The bullock carts which transported the traveller from place to place in *B.C. 100*, transport him still, two thousand years after.

— Our driver, whose face is the colour of beaten bronze, has

taken much pride in his animals. Their long, beautifully curved horns are adorned with shapely gilt ornaments; their thin legs have tinkling brass bells tied to them. He guides them by means of a rein threaded through their nostrils. While their feet merrily jog away upon the dust-laden road, I watch the quick tropic dawn come on apace.

An attractive landscape shapes itself both on our right and left. No drab flat plain this, for heights and hillocks are not long absent from the eyes whenever one searches the horizon's length. The road traverses a district of red earth dotted with terrains of scrubby thorn-bush and a few bright emerald paddy fields.

A peasant with toil-worn face passes us. No doubt, he is going out to his long day's work in the fields. Soon we overtake a girl with a brass water pitcher mounted upon her head. A single vermilion robe is wrapped around her body, but her shoulders are left bare. A blood-coloured ruby ornaments one nostril, and a pair of gold bracelets gleam on her arms in the pale morning sunlight. The blackness of her skin reveals her as a Dravidian—as indeed most of the inhabitants of these parts probably are, save the Brahmins and Muhammedans. These Dravidian girls are usually gay and happy by nature. I find them more talkative than their brown countrywomen and more musical in voice.

The girl stares at us with unfeigned surprise and I guess that Europeans rarely visit this part of the interior.

And so we ride on until the little township is reached. Its houses are prosperous-looking and arranged into streets which cluster around two sides of an enormous temple. If I am not mistaken, the latter is a quarter of a mile long; I gather a rough conception of its architectural massiveness a while later when we reach one of its spacious gateways. We halt for a minute or two and I peer inside to register some fleeting glimpses of the place. Its strangeness is as impressive as its size. Never before have I seen a structure like this. A vast quadrangle surrounds the enormous interior, which looks like a labyrinth. I perceive that the four high enclosing walls have been scorched and coloured by hundreds of years of exposure to the fierce tropical sunshine. Each wall is pierced by a single gateway, above which rises a queer superstructure consisting of giant pagoda. The latter seems strangely like an ornate sculptured

pyramid. Its lower part is built of stone, but the upper portion seems to be thickly-plastered brickwork. The pagoda is divided into many storeys, but the entire surface is profusely decorated with a variety of figures and carvings. In addition to these four entrance towers, I count no less than five others which rise up within the interior of the temple. How curiously they remind one of Egyptian pyramids in the similarity of outline!

My last glimpse is of long roofed cloisters, of serried ranks of flat stone pillars in large numbers, of a great central enclosure, of dim shrines and dark corridors and many little buildings. I make a mental note to explore this interesting place before long.

The bullocks trot off and we emerge into open country again. The scenes which we pass are quite pretty. The road is covered with red dust; on either side there are low bushes and occasional clumps of tall trees. There are many birds hidden among the branches, for I hear the flutter of their wings, as well as the last notes of that beautiful chorus which is their morning song all over the world.

Dotted along the route are a number of charming little wayside shrines. The differences of architectural style surprise me, until I conclude that they have been erected during changing epochs. Some are highly ornate, over-decorated and elaborately carved in the usual Hindu manner, but the larger ones are supported by flat-surfaced pillars which I have seen nowhere else but in the South. There are even two or three shrines whose classical severity of outline is almost Grecian.

I judge that we have now travelled about five or six miles, when we reach the lower slopes of the hill whose vague outline I had seen from the station. It rises like a reddish-brown giant in the clear morning sunlight. The mists have now rolled away, revealing a broad skyline at the top. It is an isolated upland of red soil and brown rock, barren for the most part, with large tracts almost treeless, and with masses of stone split into great boulders tossed about in chaotic disorder.

"Arunachala! The sacred red mountain!" exclaims my companion, noticing the direction of my gaze. A fervent expression of adoration passes across his face. He is momentarily rapt in ecstasy, like some medieval saint.

I ask him, "Does the name mean anything?"

"I have just given you the meaning," he replies with a smile.

"The name is composed of two words, 'Aruna' and 'Achala,' which mean red mountain, and since it is also the name of the presiding deity of the temple, its full translation should be 'sacred red mountain.'"

"Then where does the holy beacon come in?"

"Ah! Once a year the temple priests celebrate their central festival. Immediately that occurs within the temple, a huge fire blazes out on top of the mountain, its flame being fed with vast quantities of butter and camphor. It burns for many days and can be seen for many miles around. Whoever sees it, at once prostrates himself before it. It symbolizes the fact that this mountain is sacred ground, overshadowed by a great deity"

The hill now towers over our head. It is not without its rugged grandeur, this lonely peak patterned with red, brown and grey boulders, thrusting its flat head thousands of feet into the pearly sky. Whether the holy man's words have affected me or whether for some unaccountable cause, I find a queer feeling of awe arising in me as I meditate upon the picture of the sacred mountain, as I gaze up wonderingly at the steep incline of Arunachala.

"Do you know," whispers my companion, "that this mountain is not only esteemed holy ground, but the local traditions dare to assert that the gods placed it there to mark the spiritual centre of the world!"

This little bit of legend forces me to smile. How naive it is!

At length I learn that we are approaching the Maharishee's hermitage. We turn aside from the road and move down a rough path which brings us to a thick grove of coconut and mango trees. We cross this until the path suddenly comes to an abrupt termination before an unlocked gate. The driver descends, pushes the gate open, and then drives us into a large unpaved courtyard. I stretch out my cramped limbs, descend to the ground, and look around.

The cloistered domain of the Maharishee is hemmed in at the front by closely growing trees and a thickly clustered garden; it is screened at the back and side by hedgerows of shrub and cactus, while away to the west stretches the scrub jungle and what appear to be dense forest. It is most picturesquely placed on a lower spur of the hill. Secluded and apart, it seems a fitting spot for those who wish to pursue profound themes of meditation.

Two small buildings with thatched roofs occupy the left side of the courtyard. Adjoining them stands a long, modern structure, whose red-tiled roof comes sharply down into overhanging eaves. A small veranda stretches across a part of the front

The centre of the courtyard is marked by a large well. I watch a boy, who is naked to the waist and dark-skinned to the point of blackness, slowly draw a bucket of water to the surface with the aid of a creaking hand windlass.

The sound of our entry brings a few men out of the buildings into the courtyard. Their dress is extremely varied. One is garbed in nothing but a ragged loin-cloth, but another is prosperously attired in a white silk robe. They stare questioningly at us. My guide grins hugely, evidently enjoying their astonishment. He crosses to them and says something in Tamil. The expression of their faces changes immediately, for they smile in unison and beam at me with pleasure. I like their faces and their bearing.

"We shall now go into the hall of the Maharishee," announces the holy man of the yellow robe, bidding me to follow him. I pause outside the uncovered stone veranda and remove my shoes. I gather up the little pile of fruits which I have brought as an offering, and pass into an open doorway.

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Twenty faces flash their eyes upon us. Their owners are squatting in half-circles on a red-tiled floor. They are grouped at a respectful distance from the corner which lies farthest to the right hand of the door. Apparently everyone has been facing this corner just prior to our entry. I glance there for a moment and perceive a seated figure upon a long white divan, but it suffices to tell me that here indeed is the Maharishee.

My guide approaches the divan, prostrates himself prone on the floor, and buries his eyes under folded hands.

The divan is but a few paces away from a broad high window in the end wall. The light falls clearly upon the Maharishee and I can take in every detail of his profile, for he is seated gazing rigidly through the window in the precise direction whence we have come this morning. His head does

not move, so, thinking to catch his eye and greet him as I offer the fruits. I move quietly over to the window, place the gift before him, and retreat a pace or two.

A small brass barziera stands before his couch. It is filled with burning charcoal, and a pleasant odour tells me that some aromatic powder has been thrown on the glowing embers. Close by is an incense burner filled with joss sticks. Threads of bluish grey smoke arise and float in the air, but the pungent perfume is quite different.

I fold a thin cotton blanket upon the floor and sit down, gazing expectantly at the silent figure in such a rigid attitude upon the couch. The Maharishi's body is almost nude, except for a thin, narrow loin-cloth, but that is common enough in these parts. His skin is slightly copper-coloured, yet quite fair in comparison with that of the average South Indian. I judge him to be a tall man; his age somewhere in the early fifties. His head, which is covered with closely cropped grey hair, is well formed. The high and broad expanse of forehead gives intellectual distinction to his personality. His features are more European than Indian. Such is my first impression.

The couch is covered with white cushions and the Maharishi's feet rest upon a magnificently marked tiger skin.

Pin-drop silence prevails throughout the long hall. The sage remains perfectly still, motionless, quite undisturbed at our arrival. A swarthy disciple sits on the floor at the other side of the divan. He breaks into the quietude by beginning to pull at a rope which works a punkah-fan made of bamboo matting. The fan is fixed to a wooden beam and suspended immediately above the sage's head. I listen to its rhythmic purring, the while I look full into the eyes of the seated figure in the hope of catching his notice. They are dark brown, medium-sized and wide open.

If he is aware of my presence, he betrays no hint, gives no sign. His body is supernaturally quiet, as steady as a statue. Not once does he catch my gaze, for his eyes continue to look into remote space, and infinitely remote it seems. I find this scene strangely reminiscent. Where have I seen its like? I rummage through the portrait gallery of memory and find the picture of the Sage Who Never Speaks, that recluse whom I visited in his isolated cottage near Madras, that man whose body seemed cut from stone, so motionless it was. There is a curious similarity in

this unfamiliar stillness of body which I now behold in the Maharishee.

It is an ancient theory of mine that one can take the inventory of a man's soul from his eyes, but before those of the Maharishee I hesitate, puzzled and baffled.

The minutes creep by with unutterable slowness. First they mount up to half-hour by the hermitage clock which hangs on a wall. This too passes by and becomes a whole hour. Yet no one in the hall seems to stir; certainly no one dares to speak. I reach a point of visual concentration where I have forgotten the existence of all save this silent figure on the couch. My offering of fruits remains unregarded on the small carved table which stands before him.

My guide has given me no warning that his master will receive me as I had been received by the Sage Who Never Speaks. It has come upon me abruptly, this strange reception characterized by complete indifference. The first thought which could come into the mind of any European, "Is this man merely posing for the benefit of his devotees?" crosses my mind once or twice but I soon rule it out. He is certainly in a trance condition, though my guide has not informed me that his master indulges in trances. The next thought which occupies my mind, "Is this state of mystical contemplation nothing more than meaningless vacancy?" has a longer sway but I let it go for the simple reason that I cannot answer it.

There is something in the man which holds my attention as steel filings are held by a magnet. I cannot turn my gaze away from him. My initial bewilderment, my perplexity at being totally ignored, slowly fade away as this strange fascination begins to grip me more firmly. But it is not till the second hour of the uncommon scene that I become aware of a silent, resistless change which is taking place within my mind. One by one, the questions which I have prepared in the train with such meticulous accuracy drop away. For it does not now seem to matter whether they are asked or not, and it does not seem to matter whether I solve the problems which have hitherto troubled me. I know only that a steady river of quietness seems to be flowing near me, that a great peace is penetrating the inner reaches of my being, and that my thought-tortured brain is beginning to arrive at some rest.

How small seem those questions which I have asked myself

with such frequency! How petty grows the panorama of the lost years! I perceive with sudden clarity that the intellect creates its own problems and then makes itself miserable trying to solve them. This is indeed a novel concept to enter the mind of one who has hitherto placed such high value upon intellect.

I surrender myself to the steadily deepening sense of restfulness until two hours have passed. The passage of time now provokes no irritation, because I feel that the chains of mind-made problems are being broken and thrown away. And then, little by little, a new question takes the field of consciousness.

"Does this man, the Maharishee, emanate the perfume of spiritual peace as the flower emanates fragrance from its petals?"

I do not consider myself a competent person to apprehend spirituality, but I have personal reactions to other people. This dawning suspicion that the mysterious peace which has arisen within me must be attributed to the geographical situation in which I am now placed, is my reaction to the personality of the Maharishee. I begin to wonder whether, by some radio-activity of the soul, some unknown telepathic process, the stillness which invades the troubled waters of my own soul really comes from him. Yet he remains completely impassive, completely unaware of my very existence, it seems.

Comes the first ripple. Someone approaches me and whispers in my ear, "Did you not wish to question the Maharishee?"

He may have lost patience, this quondam guide of mine. More likely, he imagines that I, a restless European, have reached the limit of my own patience. Alas, my inquisitive friend! Truly I came here to question your master, but now . . . I, who am at peace with all the world and with myself, why should I trouble my head with questions? I feel that this ship of my soul is beginning to slip its moorings; a wonderful sea waits to be crossed; yet you would draw me back to the noisy port of this world, just when I am about to start the great adventure!

But the spell is broken. As if this infelicitous intrusion is a signal, figures rise from the floor and begin to move about the hall, voices float. Up to my hearing, and—wonder of wonders!—the dark brown eyes of the Maharishee flicker once

or twice. Then the head turns, the face moves slowly, very slowly, and bends downward at an angle. A few more moments, and it has brought me into the ambit of its vision. For the first time the sage's mysterious gaze is directed upon me. It is plain that he has now awakened from his long trance.

The intruder, thinking perhaps that my lack of response is a sign that I have not heard him, repeats his question aloud. But in those lustrous eyes which are gently staring at me, I read another question, albeit unspoken.

"Can it be—is it possible—that you are still tormented with distracting doubts when you have now glimpsed the deep mental peace which you—and all men—may attain?"

The peace overwhelms me. I turn to the guide and answer:

"No. There is nothing I care to ask now. Another time—"

I feel now that some explanation of my visit is required of me, not by the Maharishee himself but by the little crowd which has begun to talk so animatedly. I know from the acciybts of my guide that only a handful of these people are resident disciples, and that the others are visitors from the country around. Strangely enough, at this point my guide energetically in Tamil, using a wealth of gesture while he explains matters to the assembled company. I fear that his explanation is mixing a little fable with his facts, for it draws cries of wonder.



The midday meal is over: The sun unmercifully raises the afternoon temperature to a degree I have never before experienced. But then, we are now in a latitude not so far from the equator. For once I am grateful that India is favoured with a climate which does not foster activity, because most of the people have disappeared into the shady groves to take a siesta. I can therefore approach the Maharishee in the way I prefer, without undue notice or fuss.

I enter the large hall and sit down near him. He half-reclines upon some white cushions placed on the divan. An attendant pulls steadily at the cord which operates the punkah-fan. The soft burr of the rope and the gentle swish of the fan as it moves through the sultry air sound pleasantly in my ears.

The Maharishee holds a folded manuscript book in his

hands; he is writing something with extreme slowness. A few minutes after my entry he puts the book aside and calls a disciple. A few words pass between them in Tamil and the man tells me that his master wishes to reiterate his regrets at my inability to partake of their food. He explains that they live a simple life, and never having catered for Europeans before do not know what the latter eat. I thank the Maharishee, and say that I shall be glad to share their unspiced dishes with them; for the rest, I shall procure some food from the township. I add that I regard the question of diet as being far less important than the quest which has brought me to his hermitage.

The sage listens intently, his face calm, imperturbable and noncommittal.

"It is a good object," he comments at length.

This encourages me to enlarge upon the same theme.

"Master, I have studied our Western philosophies and sciences, lived and worked among the people of our crowded cities, tasted their pleasures and allowed myself to be caught up in their ambitions. Yet I have also gone into solitary places and wandered there amid the loneliness of deep thought. I have questioned the sages of the West; now I have turned my face towards the East. I seek more light."

The Maharishee nods his head, as if to say, "Yes, I quite understand."

"I have heard many opinions, listened to many theories. Intellectual proofs of one belief or another lie piled up all around me. I am tired of them, sceptical of anything which cannot be proved by personal experience. Forgive me for saying so, but I am not religious. Is there anything beyond man's material existence? If so, I realize it for myself?"

The three or four devotees who are gathered around us stare in surprise. Have I offended the subtle etiquette of the hermitage by speaking so brusquely and boldly to their master? I do not know; perhaps I do not care. The accumulated weight of many years' desire has unexpectedly escaped my control and passed beyond my lips. If the Maharishee is the right kind of man, surely he will understand and brush aside mere lapses from convention.

He makes no verbal reply but appears to have dropped into some train of thought. Because there is nothing else to do and because my tongue has now been loosened, I address him for

the third time:

"The wise men of the West, our scientists, are greatly honoured for their cleverness. Yet they have confessed that they can throw but little light upon the hidden truth behind life. It is said that there are some in your land who can give what our Western sages fail to reveal. Is this so? Can you assist me to experience enlightenment? Or is the search itself a mere delusion?"

I have now reached my conversational objective and decide to await the Maharishee's response. He continues to stare thoughtfully at me. Perhaps he is pondering over my questions. Ten minutes pass in silence.

At last his lips open and he says gently:

"You say I. *I, I* want to know. Tell me, who is that *I, I*?"

What does he mean? He has now cut across the services of the interpreter and speaks direct to me in English. Bewilderment creeps across my brain.

"I am afraid I do not understand your question," I reply blankly.

"Is it not clear? Think again!"

I puzzle over his words once more. An idea suddenly flashes into my head. I point a finger towards myself and mention my name.

"And do you know him?"

"All my life!" I smile back at him.

"But that is only your body! Again I ask, 'Who are *you*?' "

I cannot find a ready answer to this extraordinary query.

The Maharishee continues:

"Know first that *I* and then you shall know the truth."

My mind hazes again. I am deeply puzzled. This bewilderment finds verbal expression. But the Maharishee has evidently reached the limit of his English, for he turns to the interpreter and the answer is slowly translated to me:

"There is only one thing to be done. Look into your own self. Do this in the right way and you shall find the answer to all your problems."

It is a strange rejoinder. But I ask him:

"What must one do? What method can I pursue?"

"Through deep reflection on the nature of one's self, and through constant meditation, the light can be found."

"I have frequently given myself up to meditation upon the

truth, but I see no signs of progress."

"How do you know that no progress has been made? It is not easy to perceive one's progress in the spiritual realm."

"Is the help of a master necessary?"

"It might be."

"Can a master help a man to look into his own self in the way you suggest?"

"He can give the man all that he needs for this quest. Such a thing can be perceived through personal experience."

"How long will it take to get some enlightenment with a master's help?"

"It all depends on the maturity of the seeker's mind. The gunpowder catches fire in an instant, while much time is needed to set fire to the coal."

I receive a queer feeling that the sage dislikes to discuss the subject of masters and their methods. Yet my mental pertinacity is strong enough to override this feeling, and I address a further question on the matter to him. He turns a stolid face towards the window, gazes out at the expanse of hilly landscape beyond, and vouchsafes no answer. I take the hint and drop the subject.

"Will the Maharishree express an opinion about the future of the world, for we are living in critical times?"

"Why should you trouble yourself about the future?" demands the sage. "You do not even properly know about the present! Take care of the present; the future will then take care of itself."

Another rebuff! But I do not yield so easily on this occasion, for I come from a world where the tragedies of life press far more heavily on people than they do in this peaceful jungle retreat.

"Will the world soon enter a new era of friendliness and mutual help, or will it go down into chaos and war?" I persist.

The Maharishree does not seem at all pleased, but nevertheless he makes a reply.

"There is One who governs the world, and it is His look-out to look after the world. He who has given life to the world knows how to look after it also. He bears the burden of this world, not you."

"Yet if one looks around with unprejudiced eyes, it is difficult to see where this benevolent regard comes in," I

object

The sage appears to be still less pleased. Yet his answer comes:

"As you are, so is the world. Without understanding yourself, what is the use of trying to understand the world? This is a question that seekers after truth need not consider. People waste their energies over all such questions. First, find out the truth behind yourself; then you will be in a better position to understand the truth behind the world, of which yourself is a part."

There is an abrupt pause. An attendant approaches and lights another incense stick. The Maharishee watches the blue smoke curl its way upward and then picks up his manuscript book. He unfolds its pages and begins to work on it again, thus dismissing me from the field of his attention.

This renewed indifference of his plays like cold water upon my self-esteem. I sit around for another quarter of an hour, but I can see that he is in no mood to answer my questions. Feeling that our conversation is really at an end, I rise from the tiled floor, place my hands together in farewell, and leave him.



I have sent someone to the township with orders to fetch a conveyance for I wish to inspect the temple. I request him to find a horsed carriage, if there is one in the place, for a bullock cart is picturesque to look at, but hardly as rapid and comfortable as one could wish.

I find a two-wheeled pony carriage waiting for me as I enter the courtyard. It possesses no seat, but such an item no longer troubles me. The driver is a fierce-looking fellow with a soiled red turban on his head. His only other garment is a long piece of unbleached cloth made into a waistband, with one end passing between his thighs and then tucking into his waist.

A long, dusty ride and then at last the entrance to the great temple with its rising storeys of carved reliefs, greets us. I leave the carriage and begin a cursory exploration.

"I cannot say how old is the temple of Arunachala," remarks my companion in response to a question, "but as you can see its age must extend back hundreds of years."

Around the gates and in the approaches to the temple are a

few little shops and gaudy booths, set up under overhanging palms. Beside them sit humbly dressed vendors of holy pictures and sellers of little brass images of Shiva and other gods. I am struck by the preponderance of representations of the former deity, for in other places Krishna and Rama seem to hold first place. My guide offers an explanation.

"According to our sacred legends, the god Shiva once appeared as a flame of fire on the top of the sacred red mountain. Therefore the priests of the temple light the large beacon once a year in memory of this event, which must have happened thousands of years ago. I suppose the temple was built to celebrate it, as Shiva still overshadows the mountain."¹

A few pilgrims are idly examining the stalls, where one can buy, not only these little brass deities, but also gaudy chromo-lithographs picturing some event from the sacred stories, books of a religious character, blotchily printed in Tamil and Telegu languages, and coloured paints wherewith to mark on one's forehead the fitting caste or sect symbol.

A leprous beggar comes hesitatingly towards me. The flesh of his limbs is crumbling away. He is apparently not certain whether I shall have him driven off, poor fellow, or whether he will be able to touch my pity. His face is rigid with his terrible disease. I feel ashamed as I place some alms on the ground, but I fear to touch him.

The gateway, which is shaped into a pyramid of carven figures, next engages my attention. This great towered portico looks like some pyramid out of Egypt with its pointed top chopped off. Together with its three fellows, it dominates the countryside. One sees them miles away long before one approaches them.

The face of the pagoda is lined with profuse carvings and quaint little statues. The subjects have been drawn from sacred myth and legend. They represent a queer jumble. One perceives the solitary forms of Hindu divinities entranced into devout meditation, or observes their intertwined shapes engaged in amorous embraces, and one wonders. It reminds one that there is something in Hinduism for all tastes, such is the all-inclusive nature of this creed.

I enter the precincts of the temple, to find myself in part of an enormous quadrangle. The vast structure encloses a labyrinth of colonnades, cloisters, galleries, shrines, rooms,

corridors, covered and uncovered spaces. Here is no stone building whose columned beauty stays one's emotions in a few minutes of silent wonder, as do those courts of the deities near Athens, but rather a gloomy sanctuary of dark mysteries. The vast recesses awe me with their chill air of aloofness. The place is a maze, but my companion walks with confident feet. Outside the pagodas have looked attractive with their reddish stone colouring, but inside the stonework is ashen grey.

We pass through a long cloister with solid walls and flat, quaintly carved pillars supporting the roofs. We move into dim corridors and dark chambers and eventually arrive at a vast portico which stands in the outer court of this ancient fane.

"The Hall of a Thousand Pillars!" announces my guide as I gaze at the time-greyed structure. A serried row of flat, carved, gigantic stone columns stretches before me. The place is lonely and deserted; its monstrous pillars loom mysteriously out of the semi-gloom. I approach them more closely to study the old carvings which line many of their faces. Each pillar is composed of a single block of stone and even the roof which it supports is composed of large pieces of flat stone. Once again I see gods and goddesses disporting themselves with the help of the sculptor's art; once again the carved faces of animals familiar and unfamiliar stare at me.

We wander on across the flagstones of these pillared galleries, pass through dark passages lit here and there by small bowl-lamps, whose wicks are sunk in castor oil, and thus arrive near a central enclosure. It is pleasant to emerge once again in the bright sunshine as we cross over to the enclosure. One can now observe the five shorter pagodas which dot the interior of the temple. They are formed precisely like the pyramidal towers which mark the entrance gateways in the high-walled quadrangle. I examine the one which stands near us and arrive at the conclusion that it is built of brick, and that its decorated surface is not really stone-carved, but modelled out of baked clay or some durable plaster. Some of the figures have evidently been picked out with paint, but the colours have now faded.

We enter the enclosure and after wandering through some more long, dark passages in this stupendous temple, my guide warns me that we are approaching the central shrine, where European feet may not walk. But though the holy of holies is forbidden to the infidel, yet the latter is allowed to catch a

glimpse from a dark corridor which leads to the threshold. As if to confirm his warning I hear the beating of drums, the banging of gongs and the droning incantations of priests mingling into a monotonous rhythm that sounds rather eerie in the darkness of the old sanctuary.

I take my glimpse, expectantly. Out of the gloom there rises a golden flame set before an idol, two or three dim altar lights, and the sight of a few worshippers engaged in some ritual. I cannot distinguish the forms of the priestly musicians, but now I hear the conch horn and the cymbal add their harsh, weird notes to the music.

My companion whispers that it would be better for me not to stay any longer, as my presence will be decidedly unwelcome to the priests. Thereupon we withdraw into the somnolent sanctity of the outer parts of the temple. My exploration is at an end.

When we reach the gateway one more, I have to step aside because an elderly Brahmin sits on the ground in the middle of the path with a little brass water-jub beside him. He paints a gaudy caste mark on his forehead, holding a broken bit of mirror in his left hand. The red-and-white trident which presently appears upon his brow—sign of an orthodox Hindu of the South—gives him, in Western eyes, the grotesque appearance of a clown. A shrivelled old man, who sits in a booth by the temple gates and sells little images of holy Shiva, raises his eyes to meet mine and I pause to buy something at his unuttered request.

Somewhere in the far end of the township I espy the gleaming whiteness of a marble minaret, so I leave the temple and drive to the local 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. How well it has been planned, for its vaulted height inevitably elevates one's mood! There are a few worshippers present; they sit, kneel or prostrate themselves upon their small, colourful prayer rugs. There are no mysterious shrines here, no gaudy images, for the Prophet has written that nothing shall come between a man and God—not even a priest! All worshippers are equal before the face of Allah. There is neither priest nor pundit, no hierarchy of superior beings to interpost themselves in a man's thoughts

when he turns towards Mecca.

As we return through the main street I note the money-changers' booths, the sweetmeat stalls, the cloth merchant's shop and the sellers of grain and rice—all existing for the benefit of pilgrims of the ancient sanctuary which has called the place into being.

I am now eager to get back to the Maharishee, and the driver urges his pony to cover the distance which lies before us at a rapid pace. I turn my head and take a final glimpse of the temple of Arunachala. The nine sculptured towers rise like pylons into the air. They speak to me of the patient toil in the name of God which has gone into the making of the old temple, for it has undoubtedly taken more than a man's life-time to construct. And again the queer reminiscence of Egypt penetrates my mind. Even the domestic architecture of the streets possesses an Egyptian character in the low houses and thick walls.

Shall a day ever come when these temples will be abandoned and left, silent and deserted, to crumble slowly into the red and grey dust whence they have emerged? Or will man find new gods and build new fanes wherein to worship them?

While our pony gallops along the road toward the hermitage which lies on one of the slopes of yonder rock-strewn hill, I realize with a catch in my breath that Nature is unrolling an entire pageant of beauty before our eyes. How often have I waited for this hour in the East, when the sun, with much splendour, goes to rest upon its bed of night! An oriental sunset holds the heart with its lovely play of vivid colours. And yet the whole event is over so quickly, an affair of less than half an hour.

Those lingering autumnal evenings of Europe are almost unknown here. Out in the west a great flaming ball of fire begins its visible descent into the jungle. It assumes the most striking orange hue as a prelude to its rapid disappearance from the vault of heaven. The sky around it takes on all the colours of the spectrum, providing our eyes with an artistic feast which no painter could ever provide. The fields and groves around us have entered into an entranced stillness. No more can the chirruping of little birds be heard. The chatter of wild monkeys has come to an end. The giant circle of red fire is quickly fading into some other dimension. Evening's curtain falls thicker yet

and soon the whole panorama of thrusting tongues of flame and outspread colours sinks away into darkness.

The calmness sinks into my thoughts, the loveliness of it all touches my heart. How can one forget these benign minutes which the fates have portioned us, when they make us play with the thought that, under the cruel face of life, a benevolent and beautiful power may yet be hiding? These minutes put our commonplace hours to shame. Out of the dark void they come like meteors, to light a transient trail of hope and then to pass away from our ken.

†

Fireflies whirl about the hermitage garden, drawing strange patterns of light on the background of darkness, as we drive into the palm-fringed courtyard. And when I enter the long hall and drop to a seat on the floor, the sublime silence appears to have reached this place and pervaded the air.

The assembled company squats in rows around the hall, but among them there is no noise and no talk. Upon the corner couch sits the Maharishee, his feet folded beneath him, his hands resting unconcernedly upon his knees. His figure strikes me anew as being simple, modest; yet withal it is dignified and impressive. His head is nobly poised, like the head of some Homeric sage. His eyes gaze immovably towards the far end of the hall. That strange steadiness of sight is a puzzling as ever. Has he been merely watching through the window the last ray of light fade out of the sky, or is he so wrapt in some dreamlike abstraction as to see naught of this material world at all?

The usual cloud of incense floats among the wooden rafters of the roof. I settle down and try to fix my eyes on the Maharishee, but after a while feel a delicate urge to close them. It is not long before I fall into a half sleep, lulled by the intangible peace which, in the sage's proximity, begins to penetrate me more deeply. Ultimately there comes a gap in my consciousness and then I experience a vivid dream.

It seems that I have become a little boy of five. I stand on a rough path which winds up and around the sacred hill of Arunachala, and hold the Maharishee's hand; but now he is a great towering figure at my side, for he seems to have grown to giant's size. He leads me away from the hermitage and, despite

the impenetrable darkness of the night, guides me along the path which we both slowly walk together. After a while the stars and the moon conspire to bestow a faint light upon our surroundings. I notice that the Maharishee carefully guides me around fissures in the rocky soil and between monstrous boulders that are shakily perched. The hill is steep and our ascent is slow. Hidden in narrow clefts between the rocks and boulders or sheltered by clusters of low bushes, tiny hermitages and inhabited caves come into view. As we pass by, the inhabitants emerge to greet us and, although their forms take on a ghostly appearance in the starlight, I recognize that they are Yogis of varying kinds. We never stop for them, but continue to walk until the top of the peak is reached. We halt at last, my heart throbbing with a strange anticipation of some momentous event about to befall me.

The Maharishee turns and looks down into my face; I, in turn, gaze expectantly up at him. I become aware of a mysterious change taking place with great rapidity in my heart and mind. The old motives which have lured me on begin to desert me. The urgent desires which have sent my feet hither and thither vanish with incredible swiftness. The dislikes, misunderstandings, coldnesses and selfishness which have marked my dealings with many of my fellows collapse into the abyss of nothingness. An untellable peace falls upon me and I know now that there is nothing further that I shall ask from life.

Suddenly the Maharishee bids me turn my gaze away to the bottom of the hill. I obediently do so and to my astonishment discover that the Western hemisphere of our globe lies stretched out far below. It is crowded with millions of people; I can vaguely discern them as masses of forms, but the night's darkness still enshrouds them.

The sage's voice comes to my ears, his words slowly uttered:

"When you go back there, you shall have this peace which you now feel. But its price will be that you shall henceforth cast aside the idea that you are this body or this brain. When this peace will flow into you, then you shall have to forget your own self, for you will have turned your life over to THAT!"

And the Maharishee places one end of a thread of silver light in my hand.

I awaken from the extraordinarily vivid dream with the sense of its penetrating sublimity yet upon me. Immediately the Maharishee's eyes meet mine. His face is now turned in my direction, and he is looking fixedly into my eyes.

What lies behind that dream? For the desires and bitternesses of personal life fade for a while into oblivion. That condition of lofty indifference to self and profound pity for my fellows which I have dreamt into being, does not take its departure even though I am now awake. This is a strange experience.

But if the dream has any verity in it, then the thing will not last; it is not yet for me.

How long have I been sunk in dream? For everyone in the hall now begins to rise and to prepare for sleep. I must perforce follow the example.

It is too stuffy to sleep in that long, sparsely ventilated hall, so I choose the courtyard. A tall, grey-bearded disciple brings me a lantern and advises me to keep it burning throughout the night. There is a possibility of unwelcome visitors, such as snakes and even cheetahs, but they are likely to keep clear of a light.

The earth is baked hard and I possess no mattress, with the result that I do not fall asleep for some hours. But no matter—I have enough to think over, for I feel that in the Maharishee I have met the most mysterious personality whom life has yet brought within the orbit of my experience.

The sage seems to carry something of great moment to me, yet I cannot easily determine its precise nature. It is intangible, imponderable, perhaps spiritual. Each time I think of him to-night, each time I remember that vivid dream, a peculiar sensation pierces me and causes my heart to throb with vague, but lofty expectations.

†

During the ensuing days I endeavour to get into closer contact with the Maharishee, but fail. There are three reasons for this failure. The first arises naturally out of his own reserved nature, his obvious dislike of argument and discussion, his stolid indifference to one's beliefs and opinions. It becomes perfectly obvious that the sage has no wish to convert anyone

to his own ideas, whatever they may be, and no desire to add a single person to his following.

The second cause is certainly a strange one, but nevertheless it exists. Since the evening of that peculiar dream, I feel a great awe whenever I enter his presence. The questions which would otherwise have come chatteringly from my lips are hushed, because it seems almost sacrilege to regard him as a person with whom one can talk and argue on an equal plane, so far as common humanity is concerned.

The third cause of my failure is simple enough. Almost always there are several other persons present in the hall, and I feel disinclined to bring out my private thoughts in their presence. After all, I am a stranger to them and a foreigner in this district. That I voice a different language to some of them is a fact of little import, but that I possess a cynical, sceptical outlook unstirred by religious emotion is a fact of much import when I attempt to give utterance to that outlook. I have no desire to hurt their pious susceptibilities, but I have also no desire to discuss matters from an angle which makes little appeal to me. So, to some extent, this thing makes me tongue-tied.

It is not easy to find a smooth way across all three barriers; several times I am on the point of putting a question to the Maharishee, but one of the three factors intervenes to cause my failure.

My proposed week-end quickly passes and I extend it to a week. The first conversation which I have had with the Maharishee worthy of the name is likewise the last. Beyond one or two quite perfunctory and conventional scraps of talk, I find myself unable to get to grips with the man.

The week passes and I extend it to a fortnight. Each day I sense the beautiful peace of the sage's mental atmosphere, the serenity which pervades the very air around him.

The last day of my visit arrives and yet I am no closer to him. My stay has been a tantalizing mixture of sublime moods and disappointing failures to effect any worth-while personal contact with the Maharishee. I look around the hall and feel a slight despondency. Most of these men speak a different language, both outwardly and inwardly; how can I hope to come closer to them? I look at the sage himself. He sits there on Olympian heights and watches the panorama of life as one

apart. There is a mysterious property in the man which differentiates him from all others I have met. I feel, somehow, that he does not belong to us, the human race, so much as he belongs to Nature, to the solitary peak which rises abruptly behind the hermitage, to the rough tract of jungle which stretches away into distant forests, and to the impenetrable sky which fills all space.

Something of the stony, motionless quality of lonely Arunachala seems to have entered into the Maharishee. I have learnt that he has lived on the hill for thirty years and refuses to leave it, even for a single short journey. Such a close association must inevitably have its effects on a man's character. I know that he loves this hill, for someone has translated a few lines of a charming but pathetic poem which the sage has written to express this love. Just as this isolated hill rises out of the jungle's edge and rears its squat head to the sky, so does this strange man raise his own head in solitary grandeur, nay, in uniqueness, out of the jungle of common humanity. Just as Arunachala, Hill of the Sacred Beacon, stands aloof, apart from the irregular chain of hills which girdles the entire landscape, so does the Maharishee remain mysteriously aloof even when surrounded by his own devotees, men who have loved him and lived near him for years. The impersonal, impenetrable quality of all Nature—so peculiarly exemplified in this sacred mountain—has somehow entered into him. It has segregated him from his weaker fellows, perhaps for ever. Sometimes I catch myself wishing that he would be a little more human, a little more susceptible to what seems so normal to us, but so like feeble failings when exhibited in his impersonal presence. And yet, if he has really attained to some sublime realization beyond the common, how can one expect him to do so without passing beyond man, without leaving his laggard race behind for ever? Why is it that under his strange glance I invariably experience a peculiar expectancy, as though some stupendous revelation will soon be made to me?

Yet beyond the moods of palpable serenity and the dream which stars itself in the sky of memory, no verbal or other revelation has been communicated to me. I feel somewhat desperate at the pressure of time. Almost a fortnight gone and only a single talk that means anything! Even the abruptness in the sage's voice has helped, metaphorically, to keep me off

This unwonted reception is also unexpected, for I have not forgotten the glowing inducements to come here with which the yellow-robed holy man plied me. The tantalizing thing is that I want the sage, above all other men, to loosen his tongue for me, because a single thought has somehow taken possession of my mind. I do not obtain it by any process of ratiocination; it comes unbidden, entirely of its own accord.

"This man has freed himself from all problems, and no woe can touch him."

Such is the purport of this dominating thought.

I resolve to make a fresh attempt to force my questions into voice and to engage the Maharishee in answer to them. I go out to one of his old disciples, who is doing some work in the adjoining cottage and who has been exceedingly kind to me, and tell him earnestly of my wish to have a final chat with his master. I confess that I felt too shy to tackle the sage myself. The disciple smiles compassionately. He leaves me and soon returns with the news that his master will be very pleased to grant the interview.

I hasten back to the hall and sit down conveniently near the divan. The Maharishee turns his face immediately, his mouth relaxing into a pleasant greeting. Straightway, I feel at ease and begin to question him.

"The Yogis say that one must renounce this world and go off into secluded jungles or mountains, if one wishes to find truth. Such things can hardly be done in the West; our lives are so different. Do you agree with the Yogis?"

The Maharishee turns to a Brahmin disciple of courtly countenance. The latter translates his answer to me.

"The life of action need not be renounced. If you will meditate for an hour or two every day, you can then carry on with your duties. If you meditate in the right manner, then the current of mind induced will continue to flow even in the midst of your work. It is as though there were two ways of expressing the same idea; the same line which you take in meditation will be expressed in your activities."

"What will be the result of doing that?"

"As you go on you will find that your attitude towards people, events and objects will gradually change. Your actions will tend to follow your meditations of their own accord."

"Then you do not agree with the Yogis?" I try to pin him

down. But the Maharishee eludes a direct answer.

"A man should surrender the personal selfishness which binds him to this world. Giving up the false self is the true renunciation."

"How is it possible to become selfless while leading a life of worldly activity?"

"There is no conflict between work and wisdom."

"Do you mean that one can continue all the old activities in one's profession, for instance, and at the same time get enlightenment?"

"Why not? But in that case one will not think that it is the old personality which is doing the work, because one's consciousness will gradually become transferred until it is centred in That which is beyond the little self."

"If a person is engaged in work, there will be little time left for him to meditate."

The Maharishee seems quite unperturbed at my poser.

"Setting apart time for meditation is only for the merest spiritual novices," he replies. "A man who is advancing will begin to enjoy the deeper beatitude, whether he is at work or not. While his hands are in society, he keeps his head cool in solitude."

"Then you do not teach the way of Yoga?"

"The Yogi tries to drive his mind to the goal, as a cowherd drives a bull with a stick, but on this path the seeker coaxes the bull by holding out a handful of grass!"

"How is that done?"

"You have to ask yourself the question, Who am I? This investigation will lead in the end to the discovery of something within you which is behind the mind. Solve that great problem, and you will solve all other problems thereby."

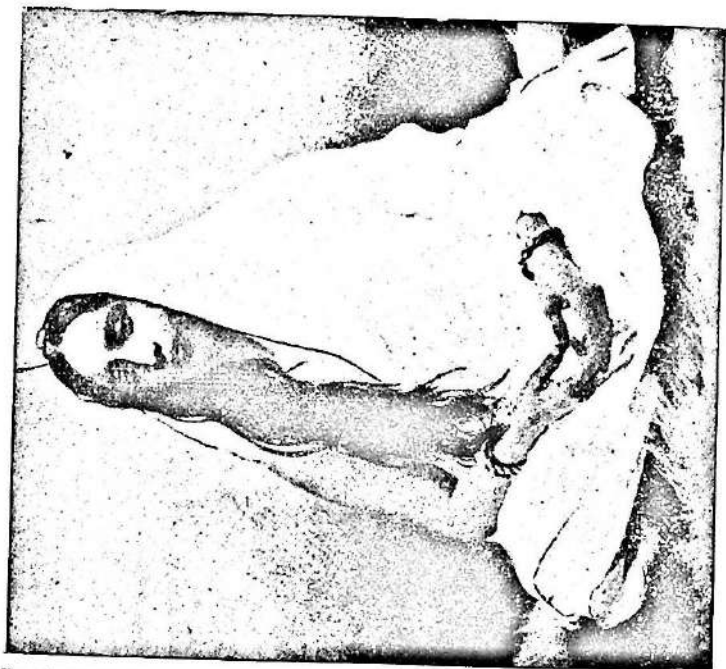
There is a pause as I try to digest his answer. From the square-framed and barred hole in the wall which does duty as a window, as it does in so many Indian buildings, I obtain a fine view of the lower slopes of the sacred hill. Its strange outline is bathed in the early morning sunlight.

The Maharishee addresses me again:

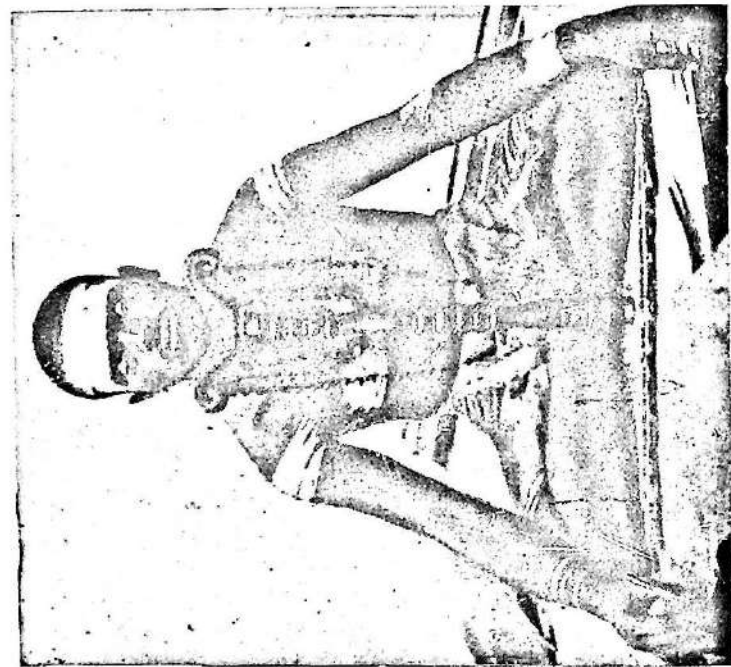
"Will it be clearer if it is put in this way? All human beings are ever wanting happiness, untainted with sorrow. They want to grasp a happiness which will not come to an end. The instinct is a true one. But have you ever been struck by the fact that



THE MASTER MAHASAYA
 'A patriarch has stepped from the pages of the Bible, and a figure from Mosaic times has turned to flesh.'
 See page 176.

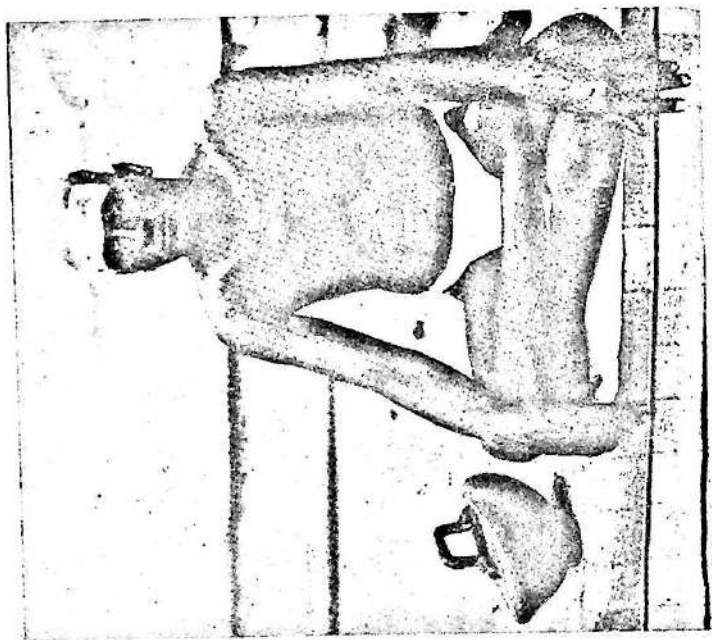


SARADA DEVI, 'THE HOLY MOTHER'
 She was the wife of Ramakrishna. The latter was the spiritual guide of Mahasaya, and one of the last of India's Rishies, or spiritual supermen.
 See page 177.



BADREENATH SATHU

A fakcer who claims extraordinary occult powers. Here he is seen in a mystic trance wherein the eyeballs turn upon their axis. Note the chin-rest.



EESWARA SWAMI

Once a pupil of the Maharishee, but now an adept in his own turn, lives in a temple and instructs his own group of disciples.

they love their own selves most?"

"Well?"

"Now relate that to the fact that they are ever desirous of attaining happiness through one means or another, through drink or through religion, and you are provided with a clue to the real nature of man."

"I fail to see—"

The tone of his voice becomes higher.

"Man's real nature *is* happiness. Happiness is inborn in the true self. His search for happiness is an unconscious search for his true self. The true self is imperishable; therefore, when a man finds it, he finds a happiness which does not come to an end."

"But the world is so unhappy?"

"Yes, but that is because the world is ignorant of its true self. All men, without exception, are consciously or unconsciously seeking for it.

"Even the wicked, the brutal and the criminal?" I ask.

"Even they sin because they are trying to find the self's happiness in every sin which they commit. This striving is instinctive in man, but they do not know that they are really seeking their true selves, and so they try these wicked ways first as a means to happiness. Of course, they are wrong ways, for man's acts are reflected back to him."

"So we shall feel lasting happiness when we know this true self?"

The other nods his head.

A slanting ray of sunshine falls through the unglazed window upon the Maharishee's face. There is serenity in that unruffled brow, there is contentment around that firm mouth, there is a shrine-like peace in those lustrous eyes. His unlined countenance does not belie his revelatory words.

What does the Maharishee mean by these apparently simple sentences? The interpreter has conveyed their outward meaning to me in English, yes, but there is a deeper purport which he cannot convey. I know that I must discover that for myself. The sage seems to speak, not as a philosopher, not as a pundit trying to explain his own doctrine, but rather out of the depth of his own heart. Are these words the marks of his own fortunate experience?

"What exactly is this self of which you speak? If what you

say is true, then there must be another self in man."

His lips curve in a smile for a moment.

"Can a man be possessed of two indentities, two selves?" he makes answer. "To understand this matter it is first necessary for a man to analyse himself. Because it has long been his habit to think as others think, he has never faced his 'I' in the true manner. He has not a correct picture of himself; he has too long identified himself with the body and the brain. Therefore, I tell you to pursue this enquiry, Who am I?"

He pauses to let these words soak into me. I listen eagerly to his next sentences

"You ask me to describe this true self to you. What can be said? It is That out of which the sense of the personal 'I' arises, and into which it shall have to disappear."

"Disappear?" I echo back "How can one lose the feeling of one's personality?"

"The first and foremost of all thoughts, the primeval thought in the mind of every man, is the thought 'I'. It is only after the birth of this thought that any other thoughts can arise at all. It is only after the first personal pronoun 'I' has arisen in the mind, that the second personal pronoun 'You' can make its appearance. If you could mentally follow the 'I' thread until it leads you back to its source, you would discover that, just as it is the first thought to appear, so is it the last to disappear. This is a matter which can be experienced."

"You mean that it is perfectly possible to conduct such a mental investigation into oneself?"

"Assuredly! It is possible to go inwards until the last thought 'I' gradually vanishes."

"What is left?" I query. "Will a man then become quite unconscious, or will he become an idiot?"

"Not so! On the contrary, he will attain that consciousness which is immortal, and he will become truly wise, when he has awakened to his true self, which is the real nature of man."

"But surely the sense of 'I' must also pertain to that?" I persist.

"The sense of 'I' pertains to the person, the body and brain," replies the Maharishhee calmly. "When a man knows his true self for the first time, something else arises from the depths of his being and takes possession of him. That something is behind the mind; it is infinite, divine, eternal. Some people call

it the kingdom of heaven, others call it the soul, still others name it Nirvana, and we Hindus call it Liberation; you may give it what name you wish. When it happens a man has not really lost himself; rather, he has found himself."

As the last work falls from the interpreter's lips there flashes across my mind those memorable words which were uttered by a wandering Teacher in Galilee, words which havypuzzled so many good persons: *Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it.*

How strangely similar are the two sentences! Yet the Indian sage has arrived at the thought in his own non-Christian way, through a psychological patch which seems exceedingly difficult and appears unfamiliar.

The Maharishee speaks again, his words breaking into my thoughts.

"Unless and until a man embarks upon this quest of the true self, doubt and uncertainty will follow his footsteps throughout life. The greatest kings and statesmen try to rule others, when in their heart of hearts they know that they cannot rule themselves. Yet the greatest power is at the command of the man who has penetrated to his inmost depth. There are men of giant intellects who spend their lives gathering knowledge about many things. Ask these men if they have solved the mystery of man, if they have conquered themselves, and they will hang their heads in shame. What is the use of knowing about everything else when you do not yet know who you are? Men avoid this enquiry into the true self, but what else is there so worthy to be undertaken?"

"That is such a difficult, a superhuman task," I comment.

The sage gives an almost imperceptible shrug of his shoulders.

"The question of its possibility is a matter of one's own experience.

The difficulty is less real than you think."

"For us, who are active, practical Westerners, such introspections—?" I begin doubtfully and leave my sentence trailing in mid-air.

The Maharishee bends down to light a fresh joss stick, which will replace one whose red spark is dying out.

"The realization of truth is the same for both Indians and

Europeans. Admittedly the way to it may be harder for those who are engrossed in worldly life, but even then one can and must conquer. The current induced during meditation can be kept up by habit, by practising to do so. Then one can perform his work and activities in that very current itself; there will be no break. Thus, too, there will be no difference between meditation and external activities. If you meditate on this question, Who am I?—if you begin to perceive that neither the body nor the brain nor the desires are really you, then the very attitude of enquiry will eventually draw the answer to you out of the depths of your own being; it will come to you of its own accord as a deep realization.”

Again I ponder his words.

“Know the real self,” he continues, “and then the truth will shine forth within your heart like sunshine. The mind will become untroubled and real happiness will flood it, for happiness and the true self are identical. You will have no more doubts once you attain this self-awareness.”

He turns his head and fixes his gaze at the far end of the hall. I know then that he has reached his conversational limit. Thus ends our last talk and I congratulate myself that I have drawn him out of the shell of taciturnity before my departure.

†

I leave him and wander away to a quiet spot in the jungle, where I spend most of the day among my notes and books. When dusk falls I return to the hall, for within an hour or two a pony-carriage or bullockcart will arrive to bear me away from the hermitage.

Burning incense makes the air odorous. The Maharishree has been half-reclining under the waving punkah as I enter but he soon sits up and assumes his favourite attitude. He sits with legs crossed, the right foot placed on the left thigh and the left foot merely folded beneath the right thigh. I remember being shown a similar position by Brama, the Yogi who lives near Madras, who called it “The Comfortable Posture.” It is really a half-Buddha posture and quite easy to do. The Maharishree, as is his wont, holds his chin with his right hand and rests the elbow on a knee; next he gazes attentively at me but remains quite silent. On the floor beside him I notice his gourd-shell water-jug

and his bamboo staff. They are his sole earthly possessions, apart from the strip of loin-cloth. What a mute commentary on our Western spirit of acquisitiveness!

His eyes, always shining, steadily become more glazed and fixed; his body sets into a rigid pose; his head trembles slightly and then comes to rest. A few more minutes and I can plainly see that he has re-entered the trance-like condition in which he was when I first met him. How strange that our parting shall repeat our meeting! Someone brings his face close to mine and whispers in my ear, "The Maharishee has gone into holy trance. It is useless now to talk."

A hush falls upon the little company. Thy minutes slowly pass but the silence only deepens. I am not religious but I can no more resist the feeling of increasing awe which begins to grip my mind than a bee can resist a flower in all its luscious bloom. The hall is becoming pervaded with a subtle, intangible and indefinable *power* which affects me deeply. I feel, without doubt and without hesitation, that the centre of this mysterious power is no other than the Maharishee himself.

His eyes shine with astonishing brilliance. Strange sensations begin to arise in me. Those lustrous orbs seem to be peering into the inmost recesses of my soul. In a peculiar way I feel aware of everything he can see in my heart. His mysterious glance penetrates my thoughts, my emotions and my desires; I am helpless before it. At first this disconcerting gaze troubles me; I become vaguely uneasy. I feel that he has perceived pages that belong to a past which I have forgotten. He knows it all, I am certain. I am powerless to escape; somehow, I do not want to, either. Some curious intimation of future benefit forces me to endure that pitiless gaze.

And so he continues to catch the feeble quality of my soul for a while, to perceive my motley past, to sense the mixed emotions which have drawn me this way and that. But I feel that he understands also what mind-devastating quest has impelled me to leave the common way and seek out such men as he.

There comes a perceptible change in the telepathic current which plays between us, the while my eyes blink frequently but his remain without the least tremor. I become aware that he is definitely linking my own mind with his, that he is provoking

my heart into that state of starry calm which he seems perpetually to enjoy. In this extraordinary peace, I find a sense of exaltation and lightness. Time seems to stand still. My heart is released from its burden of care. Never again, I feel, shall the bitterness of anger and the melancholy of unsatisfied desire afflict me. I realize deeply that the profound instinct which is innate in the race, which bids man look up, which encourages him to hope on, and which sustains him when life has darkened, is a true instinct, for the essence of being is good. In this beautiful, entranced silence, when the clock stands still and the sorrows and errors of the past seem like trivialities, my mind is being submerged in that of the Maharishree and wisdom is now at its perihelion. What is this man's gaze but a thaumaturgic wand, which evokes a hidden world of unexpected splendour before my profane eyes?

I have sometimes asked myself why these disciples have been staying around the sage for years, with few conversations, fewer comforts and no external activities to attract them. Now I begin to understand—not by thought but by lightning-like illumination—that through all those years they have been receiving a deep and silent reward.

Hitherto, everyone in the hall has been hushed to a deathlike stillness. At length, someone quietly rises and passes out. He is followed by another, and then another, until all have gone.

I am alone with the Maharishree! Never before has this happened. His eyes begin to change; they narrow down to pinpoints. The effect is curiously like the "stopping-down" in the focus of a camera lens. There comes a tremendous increase in the intense gleam which shines between the lids, now almost closed. Suddenly, my body seems to disappear, and we are both out in space!

It is a crucial moment. I hesitate—and decide to break this enchanter's spell. Decision brings power and once again I am back in the flesh, back in the hall.

No word passes from him to me. I extrovert my faculties, look at the clock, and rise quietly. The hour of departure has arrived.

I bow my head in farewell. The sage silently acknowledges the gesture. I utter a few words of thanks. Again, he silently nods his head.

I linger reluctantly at the threshold. Outside, I hear the tinkle of a bell. The bullock-cart has arrived. Once more I raise my hands, palms touching.

And so we part.

I We Westerners may regard these deities as fantastic personifications of religious ideas, but the Hindus themselves do not doubt they really exist as real beings.

X

Among the Magicians and Holy Men

Space and time, those deliant enemies of man, hurry this pen again. My feet must once more take giant strides on this eastward trek, while my pen sets down a few salient things that are worth a written memorial.

It is true that the faqueer of a few tricks, the magician of the streets, holds for me, as for everyone else, a natural interest. Yet mine is only a fleeting interest, for he can throw little light on the great mysteries of human life which are aline worthy of a man's deepest thought. Still his presence is a diversion and I turn aside on occasions to enquire after him.

I want to picture a few of the types who come into the orbit of my wandering, to point my pen at widely differing men. One of them looms up in memory, though he is but an insignificant trickster whom I meet at Rajahmundry, a quiet town in the north-eastern part of Madras Presidency.

An aimless stroll takes me though a place where my shoes sink into the soft sand which covers the ground. Eventually I arrive at a narrow street which leads to a bazaar. As I walk along in the sultry air, old men squat in open doorways, children play amid the dirt, and a stark-naked youngster dives out of a house—only to disappear again on catching sight of the stranger.

In the long, bustling bazaar itself, elderly merchants sit in their little shops and stroke their beards expectantly while I pass; the sellers of food and grain squat beside their open booths, while an army of flies is busy attacking their wares. In course of time I come to the somewhat gaudy structure of a temple, where a little group of men and women stirs out of the dust at my approach. The leprous, the crippled and the destitute make their rendezvous near the temples and the stations of most Indian cities, that they may gather alms of the pious and the strangers. Worshippers walk noiselessly into the building, their bare feet treading the dust on the stones. Shall I, too, wander into the building and watch the ministrations of

the priests? I debate the question and decide in the negative.

I proceed on my protracted ramble until I observe a youth striding along before me. He is dressed in a European shirt worn, as is the custom, back to front, and a flowing waistband, while his right arm clasps a bundle of cloth-bound books. When I overtake him, he instinctively turns his head; our eyes meet—and our acquaintance begins!

The exigencies of my profession have taught me to serve the conversations whenever one can, but to dispense with them whenever they stand between one and an objective. I like travel, but usually in an unconventional way; hence my Indian wanderings will hardly be a model for the Cook's tourist or unbohemian traveller.

The youth proves to be a student at a large local college, and he possesses an air of general intelligence which is quite attractive. Moreover, he seems to have a care for the ancient culture of his land, and when I tell him of my interest in the subject, his delight knows no bounds. I discover, too, that he has not yet succumbed to the hysteria for politics which has attacked most of the young students in the towns, though India is now in the throes of the long turmoil which Gandhi has aroused into being in his effort to disturb the relations between white rulers and brown ruled.

Half an hour later he is guiding me to an open space where a little crowd has gathered in expectant mood. There is a man in the centre who is bawling something at the top of his voice. The youth informs me that this loud declaration consists mainly of a list of wonderful Yogic powers which the man claims to possess.

The self-proclaimed Yogi is powerfully built; he has an elongated head, thick-set shoulders, and an abdomen which has begun to bulge through the piece of cotton cloth wrapped about his loins which constitutes part of his dress. For the rest he wears a long loose white robe. I feel that there is little too much bravado about the man, but when he offers to perform the mango-tree feat, if sufficient financial inducement is forthcoming, I join with a few others in throwing some coins at his feet.

He begins by placing a capacious earthenware pot in front of him and then proceeds to squat on the ground. The pot is filled with reddish brown earth. He shows us a little mango

stone and plants it in the earth. After that he produces a large cloth out of his travelling bag, and spreads it over the pot, his folded knees and his thighs.

For several minutes we are treated to some mystic incantations, which the Yogi chants in a monotonous voice, and then he withdraws the cloth. The first bud of a mango plant peeps its head above the earth!

Once again he covers both pot and legs, picks up a reed pipe, and emits a weird noise which is presumably to be taken for music. After some more minutes, he takes up the cloth to show us that the little plant has grown a few inches higher. This procedure of covering and uncovering, with due intervals of pipe music, is repeated until a small mango bush has emerged from the earth. It is about nine or ten inches high. Hardly a tree! But nevertheless a small yellowish gold mango fruit hangs from the top of the plant.

"All this tree has sprung from the seed which you saw me bury in the earth!" announces the Yogi triumphantly.

My mental constitution does not permit me to accept his statement too readily. I feel, somehow, that the feat was a piece of mere jugglery.

The young man delivers his opinion:

"Sahib, that man is a Yogi. Such men can do wonderful things."

But I am not satisfied. Trying to comprehend the mystery, I decide that the man is more likely a member of the Maskelyne and Devant fraternity. Yet how can one be certain about the matter?

The Yogi closes his bag and continues to crouch on his hams, while watching the crowd slowly disperse.

An idea comes suddenly. When we are alone, I approach the Yogi, pull out a five-rupee note, and say to the student:

"Tell him that he can have this money, if he will show me how the thing is done."

The youth obediently translates my request. The man makes a show of refusal, but I catch the gleam of desire in his eyes.

"Offer him seven rupees, then."

Still the crouching man scorns my attempt to negotiate.

"Very well, tell him that we bid him farewell"

We proceed to walk away, though I purposely take slow

steps. Within a few seconds the Yogi shouts and recalls us.

"If the sahib will give one hundred rupees, the Yogi promises to tell all."

"No! Seven—or he can keep his secret. Come!"

Once again we move away. Soon there is another shout. We return.

"The Yogi says he will accept the seven rupees." And the explanation duly comes forth.

The man opens his travelling bag and produces the paraphernalia with which his mystifying feat has been performed. It consists of a mango stone in bud and three slips of mango plant, each longer than the previous one.

He compresses the shortest slip into a mussel shell. The plant bends round into this cramping position, the shell is closed and buried in the earth. To produce the first bud, the man has only to dig his fingers into the earth and remove the lid of the shell, when the plant will once more stand erect.

The longer slips of plant are hidden within his cotton waist-wrap. During the intervals of waiting, chanting and music making, he raises the cloth cover once or twice to see how the growth is proceeding, without, however, permitting anyone else to do the same. Under cover of these movements, he deftly takes a longer slip from his waist-cloth, plants it in the earth, removes the shorter plant and replaces it in his dress. Thus, the illusion of a growing plant is created.

I walk away a little wiser, 'tis true, but I begin to wonder whether my last illusions about these Yogis will fall from me like bronze leaves off the trees in autumn.

And then I remember the warning given me by Brama, the Yogi of the Adyar river, that faqueers of a low order and pseudo Yogis give performances in the streets that are nothing but conjuring feats. Such men bring the name of Yogi into discredit with the younger people and educated classes, he has informed me.

This man who makes mangoes grow in less than half an hour is no real Yogi; he is a pretender.

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Nevertheless the faqueers who practise a true magic do exist. One comes to me during a halt at Berhampur, while I go