

XI

The Wonder-Worker of Benares

My wonderings in Bengal must hasten into the limbo of unrecorded experience, and my unexpected contacts near Buddha-Gaya with three Tibetan lamas, who proffer an invitation to their mountain monastery, must likewise follow suit, for I am eager to enter the sacred city of Benares.

The train thunders across the great iron bridge near the city, its noise heralding, no doubt, modernity's further invasion of an antiquated and static form of society. The holy Ganges can hardly remain holy much longer when alien and infidel men send snorting fire-chariots across its greyish-green waters.

So this is Benares! A huge crowd of pilgrims jostle each other while I pass out of the station and step into a waiting carriage. As we drive along the dusty road, I become aware of a new element in the atmosphere. I try to ignore it but, with increasing insistence, it forces itself upon my attention.

So this is India's holiest city! Well, it possesses a most unholy smell! Benares is reputed to be the oldest populated town in India. Its odour fully confirms its reputation. The unsavoury air seems insupportable. I begin to lose courage. Shall I order the driver to take me back to the station? Is it not better to be an arrant infidel and breathe clean air than acquire piety at such a monstrous price? And then I reflect that time will somehow acclimatize one even to this air, as it acclimatizes one to more unfamiliar things still in this stale land. But Benares! you may be the hub of Hindu culture, yet please learn something from the infidel whites and temper your holiness with a little hygiene!

I learn that the stench arises partly because the roads are paved with a mixture of cow-dung and earth, and partly because the old moat which surrounds the city has been used by the people of many generations as a convenient refuse heap.

If Indian chronicles can be credited, Benares was an established city as long ago as twelve hundred years before the Christian Era. Just as pious Englishmen journeyed to the holy

city of Canterbury in the Middle Ages, so have Indians flocked from every part of their country to the holy city of Benares. Hindus come in their wealthy state or poverty-stricken condition to receive its blessing, while the ailing come to eke out their last days, for death here will take the soul straight into Paradise.

The next day I wander afoot through old Kashi—as the Hindus prefer to call their city—and explore the labyrinth of crooked streets which compose it. There is a purpose behind my aimless wandering, for I bear in my pocket a paper which describes the location of the house of a Yogi wonder-worker, whose disciple I met in Bombay.

I pass through stuffy streets along which a carriage would be too wide to pass. I make my way through crowded bazaars, where seethe the people of a dozen different races, and where mangy dogs and innumerable flies add to the bustle. Old women with grey hair and shrunken breasts; young women with supple figures and smooth, brown limbs; pilgrims fingering their rosaries and muttering the same sacred words which they have already repeated perhaps fifty thousand times; the gaunt figures of ash-besmeared elderly ascetics; all these and other types throng the narrow ways. Among a tangle of streets which are full of turmoil, noise and colour, I come accidentally upon the Golden Temple, which is famed among the orthodox throughout India. Ash-bedabbled ascetics, whose uncouth appearance is repellent to Western eyes, crouch around the entrance. Worshippers flow in and out in an endless stream. Several carry lovely flower garlands and thus give a gay colour to the scene. The pious touch the stone door-posts with their foreheads as they leave the temple and then, turning, start in momentary surprise on beholding the white infidel. I become conscious again of the invisible barrier between these men and myself.

Two domes, made of thick sheets of gold, glisten in the quivering sunlight; screeching parrots swarm on the nearest tower. The Golden Temple is given over to the god Shiva. Where is he now, I wonder, this god to whom these Hindus cry, before whom they pray, and to whose stone representations I have seen them offer scented flowers and cooked rice?

I move on and stand near the threshold of another temple, where I watch the god Krishna being worshipped. Lighted

camphor burns before a golden idol; the temple bells peal out their insistent calls for his attention; and the sounds of conch horns stray up to his unhearing ears. A lean and austere priest comes out and looks questioningly at me, and I proceed upon my way.

Who can count the multitude of images and idols which teem within the temples and houses of Benares? Who can explain these serious-looking Hindus—so often childish, yet sometimes so profoundly philosophical?

Through the dark alleys I thread my way, afoot and alone, seeking the house of the wonder-worker. At length I emerge from the swarming streets into wider roads. A straggling, ragged column of little boys, thin youths and a few men, swing past me in single file. Their leader carries a makeshift banner, with something indecipherable inscribed upon the flag. They shout queer catchwords and occasional snatches of song. They look at me with hostile faces and scowling eyes as they go by, so that I sense the political nature of this motley procession. Last night, in a packed bazaar, with no European or policeman anywhere in sight, someone behind me hisses out a threat to shoot me. At once I wheel round—only to behold a crowd of bland faces, for the young fanatic (I guess his youth by the sound of his voice) has disappeared around a corner into the darkness. And so I gaze with pity upon this ragged procession which now disappears down the road. Politics, that deceptive siren who promises everybody everything, has gathered a few more victims into her insidious arms.

I come at last to a street where the houses are large and well built and where the compounds are spacious and trimly kept. I quicken my pace until I reach a gate, upon whose post the name VISHUDHANANDA is inscribed on a stone tablet. I enter the compound, for this is the house which I seek, and approach someone who lounges on the veranda. He is a young man with an unintelligent face. I ask him in Hindustani: "Where is the teacher?" but he shakes his head and gives me to understand that no such person is known here. I utter the teacher's name, but again receive a negative reply. The result is disappointing, but I am determined not to be beaten. An inward monitor warns me that the young man thinks no European can possibly have any business here, and that he has jumped to the conclusion I am really seeking some other house. I look again at

his face and write him down as stupid. Ignoring his gesticulations, I walk straight into the house.

In an inner room I come upon a semicircle of dark faces. A group of well-dressed Indians squat around the floor. A bearded old man reclines upon a couch at the far end of the room. His venerable appearance and seat of honour are enough to inform me that here is the object of my quest. I raise my hands in salutation, palms touching.

"Peace, master!" I make the conventional Hindustani greeting.

I proffer my introduction and present myself as a writer travelling in India, yet withal a student of their native philosophy and mysticism. I make it clear that the disciple whom I encountered was careful to explain that his teacher never made a public exhibition of his wonderful powers, and that even under the shadow of privacy he rarely displayed them to strangers. Nevertheless, in view of my deep interest in their ancient wisdom, I crave their indulgence and beg to be treated as an exception.

The students stare blankly at each other and then turn towards the teacher, as if in wonderment at his response. Vishudhananda is a man of more than seventy years of age, I judge. A short nose and a long beard adorn his face. I am struck by the large size of his eyes, which are deeply pouched. The sacred thread of a Brahmin hangs around his neck.

The old man fixes his eyes coldly upon me, as though I were a specimen to be studied under a microscope. I feel something weird and uncanny touch my heart. Indeed, some strange force seems to pervade the whole room, and I feel slightly uneasy.

At length he addresses some words, in a dialect which I recognize as Bengalee, to a disciple, who turns and informs me that no audience can be granted unless I bring Pundit Kavirj, who is Principal of the Government Sanskrit College, to act as interpreter. The pundit's perfect knowledge of English, combined with his long standing as a disciple of Vishudhanada, perfectly fits him to act as a medium between us.

"Come with him to-morrow afternoon," says the teacher. "I shall expect you at the hour of four."

I am forced to retreat. On the road I hail a passing carriage and drive through the winding streets to the Sanskrit College. The Principal is not there. Someone thinks he may be at home,

so I drive on for another half-hour until I find him at last in a tall, ancient house with a projecting upper storey, whose appearance is strangely like that of a medieval Italian building.

The pundit sits on the floor of a top room, surrounded on every side by small hills of books, papers and scholastic paraphernalia. He has the Brahmin's typical high brow, thin nose and lighter complexion. His face is refined and scholarly. I explain my errand: there is a slight hesitation on his part; and then he agrees to accompany me next day. The appointment fixed, I withdraw.

I ride down to the Ganges and dismiss the carriage. I saunter along the river bank which, for the benefit of bathing pilgrims, is built into long rows of stone steps. The feet of many centuries have worn down the steps until they are rugged and uneven. How untidy and irregular is the water-front of Benares! Temples tumble into the water; glistening domes are neighbours to squat, square, decorated palaces which rise to varying heights; while the whole hotch-potch of buildings mingles the ancient and the modern indiscriminately.

Priests and pilgrims swarm everywhere. I come across some pundits teaching their pupils in small, open rooms. The walls are plainly white-washed; the teachers sit on rugs; and the pupils squat respectfully around, absorbing the cobwebbed doctrines of their creed.

A bearded ascetic's appearance causes me to make enquiries. He has rolled over and over in the dust for four hundred miles. A strange way to make one's pilgrimage to Benares! Farther on I meet another weird-looking individual. He has held one arm aloft for years. The sinews and ligaments of his unfortunate limb have almost withered, while the flesh which covers it has shrivelled to parchment. How account for such futile austerities, unless, indeed, the unending tropical sun has made the minds of these men a trifle mad? It may be that existence in a temperature of one hundred and twenty degrees in the shade has helped to unbalance these unfortunate members of a race which is already so prone to religious hysteria.

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The next day, precisely at four o'clock, Pundit Kavirj and I

drive into the courtyard of the teacher's house. We enter the large room and greet him. About six other disciples are present.

Vishudhananda asks me to come a little closer, so I squat down a few feet away from his couch.

"Do you desire to see one of my wonders?" is his first question.

"If the master wishes to grant this favour, I shall be extremely pleased."

"Give me your handkerchief, then. If you have a silk one, so much the better," translates the pundit. "Any scent which you desire will be created for you, with nothing but a lens and the sun's rays as equipment."

Fortunately I do carry a silk handkerchief and pass it to the wonder-worker. He takes out a small burning lens and then explains that he wishes to concentrate the sun's rays but, owing to the orb's present position and the sheltered aspect of the room, that cannot be done with directness. The difficulty will easily be overcome, however, by sending one of the disciples outside into the courtyard. The man will use a hand mirror, catch the rays, and then reflect them through an open window into the room.

"I shall now create a scent for you out of the air!" announces Vishudhananda. "Which would you like?"

"Can you produce white jasmine?"

He takes up my handkerchief in his left hand and holds the burning lens above it. For the brief space of two seconds, a gleaming ray of sunlight hovers upon the silken fabric; then he puts down the lens and hands back the handkerchief. I put it to my nose, and am rewarded with the delightful fragrance of white jasmine!

I examine the handkerchief but can discover no trace of moisture, no evidence that some liquid perfume has been dropped on it. I am puzzled and look half-suspiciously at the old man. He offers to repeat the demonstration.

The second time I choose attar of roses. I watch him narrowly during the further experiment. Every move which he makes, every bit of space around him is scrutinized with all the care I can muster. I examine his puffy hands and his spotless white robe with critical eyes, but can detect nothing suspicious. He repeats his former procedure and evokes the perfume of attar of roses, which strongly impregnates another corner of

the handkerchief.

My third choice is violets. Here again he is equally successful.

Vishudhananda is quite emotionless about his triumph. He treats the whole demonstration as a sort of everyday affair, as a mere minor event. His grave face never once relaxes.

"And now I shall choose the scent," he unexpectedly declares. "I shall create the perfume of a flower which grows only in Tibet." He concentrates some sunlight upon the last, unscented corner of the handkerchief and lo! it is done; he has evoked a fourth perfume, which I fail to recognize.

Slightly bewildered, I put the piece of white silk into my pocket. The feat appears to border on the miraculous. Has he concealed the perfumes upon his person? Has he hidden them in his robe? Then he would need to carry a formidable stock because, until I spoke, he could not know which scent I should choose. His simple robe could hardly contain such an ample stock as would be requisite. Besides, not once has his hands disappeared into the folds of his robe.

I ask for permission to inspect the lens. The latter proves to be quite an ordinary magnifying glass, set in a wire frame with a small wire handle. I can see nothing suspicious about it.

There is an additional safeguard, for what it is worth, in the fact that Vishudhananda is being watched, not only by me but also by the half-dozen disciples around us. The Pundit has already informed me that, without a single exception, they are all men of high standing, good education and responsibility.

Hypnotism offers a possible explanation. The value of this explanation can be simply tested. When I return to my quarters, I shall show the handkerchief to other persons.

Vishudhananda has another and greater piece of wonder-working to show me. It is one he seldom performs, though. He tells me that he needs strong sunlight for this second feat; now, the sun is sinking and evening is approaching. So I am to come again at high noon of a later day of the week. He will then display his amazing feat of temporarily restoring life to the dead!

I leave him and drive home, where I show the handkerchief to three persons. Each one finds that it still bears strong traces of the perfumes. The feat, therefore, cannot be accounted for on the hypothesis of hypnotism. Nor is it much easier to regard

the whole affair as a piece of trickery.

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Once again I am in the house of the magician. The latter tells me that he can restore life only to a small animal, usually he experiments with a bird.

A sparrow is strangled and left exposed to our gaze for about an hour, so that we can assure ourselves that it is really dead. Its eyes are motionless, its body sad and stiff; I cannot discover a single sign which might betray the presence of life in the little creature.

The magician picks up his magnifying glass and concentrates a ray of sunlight into an eye of the bird. I wait while a few minutes pass uneventfully. The old man sits bent over his strange task, his large eyes fixed in a glassy stare, his face cold, emotionless and non-committal. Suddenly, his lips open and his voice breaks out into a weird, crooning chant in some language which is unknown to me. A little later the bird's body begins to twitch. I have seen a dog twitch its suffering frame in the same manner, when the spasms of approaching death have overtaken it. Then comes a slight fluttering of the feathers and within a few minutes the sparrow is on its legs, hopping around the floor. Truly the dead have come to life!

During its next phase of this strange existence, the bird gathers sufficient strength to fly up into the air, where it busies itself for a while in finding new perching points as it flies around the room. The thing seems so incredible that I pull body and wits together, in an effort to reassure myself that everything and everyone surrounding me is real, tangible and not hallucinatory.

A tense half-hour passes, while I watch the fluttering efforts of the revived creature. At last a sudden climax provides me with a fresh surprise. The poor sparrow falls through the air and lies motionless at our feet. It remains there without stirring. An examination reveals it as breathless and quite dead.

"Could you have prolonged its life still further?" I ask the magician.

"That is the most I can show you at present," he replies, with a slight shrug. The Pundit whispers that greater things are hoped for from future experiments. There are other things his

master can do, though I must not over-use his indulgence and make him play the part of a street showman. What I have seen already must satisfy me. I feel once again the pervading sense of mystery which fills the place. The stories of Vishudhananda's other powers only heighten this feeling.

I learn that he can bring fresh grapes seemingly out of the air and deliver sweatmeats out of sheer nothingness; that if he takes a faded flower in his hand it will soon regain its pristine freshness.

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What is the secret of these apparent miracles? I try to elicit some hint and receive an extraordinary reply. It is one of those explanations which do not really explain. The real secret still remains hidden behind the square forehead of the Benares wonder-worker, and he has so far not revealed it even to his closest disciple.

He tells me that his birthplace was in Bengal. At the age of thirteen he was bitten by a poisonous animal. His condition became so serious that his mother despaired of his life and took him down to the Ganges to die. According to the Hindu religion, there can be no holier or happier death than beside this river. He was carried into the sacred stream while the mourning family gathered on the banks for the funeral ceremonies. He was lowered into the water. And then a miracle happened. The deeper they dipped him the more the water sank around his body. When he was raised again, the water rose upward in harmony until it reached its normal level. Again and again he was dipped; again and again the waters sank of their own accord. In short, the Ganges refused to receive the boy as its dying guest!

A Yogi sat on the banks of the river and watched the proceedings. He got up and predicted that the boy was reserved to live and achieve greatness, and that his destiny was most fortunate, inasmuch as he would become a famous Yogi. The man then rubbed some herbs on the poisoned wound and went away. Seven days later he returned and told the parents that the boy was now quite cured, and indeed it was so. But during the interim a strange thing had happened to the child. His entire mentality and character had changed, and instead of being

content to remain at home with his parents, he thirsted to become a wandering Yogi. Henceforth he worried his mother constantly until, a few years later, she granted him permission to leave home. He went forth in quest of the Yoga adepts.

He made his way to Tibet, that trans-Himalayan land of mystery, in the hope of finding his destined teacher among its reputed miracle-working hermits. For it is an idea strongly inherent in the Indian mind that the aspirant must become a personal disciple of someone who has himself mastered the mysteries of Yoga, if he is to succeed in the same quest. The young Bengalee sought for such a man among the solitary hermits who dwell in huts or caves, sometimes when the mountains were swept by howling, icy blizzards, but he returned home disappointed.

Years passed uneventfully, yet his desire found no abatement. Once more he crossed the border and wandered the bleak wastes of Southern Tibet. In a simple habitation among the mountain fastnesses he discovered a man who proved to be the long-sought teacher.

I hear, next, one of those incredible statements which might once have moved me to satiric laughter, but now actually startles me. For I am solemnly assured that this Tibetan master is no less than one thousand two hundred years old! The assertion is made as calmly as a prosaic Westerner might mention that he is forty.

This amazing legend of longevity has cropped up at least twice before. Brama, the Yogi of the Adyar river, once told me that his master in Nepal was over four hundred years old, while a holy man whom I encountered in Western India said that there was a Yogi living in an almost inaccessible mountain cave on the Himalayas who was so old—over one thousand years was the figure given me—that the lids of his eyes actually drooped heavily with age! I had dismissed both these assertions as being too fantastic, but now I must again entertain a repetition of them, for this man before me hints at being on the track of the elixir of life.

The Tibetan teacher initiated young Vishudhananda into the principles and practices of the Yoga of Body Control. Under this rigorous training, the disciple developed powers of body and mind which were supernormal. He was also initiated into a strange art which he calls Solar Science. For twelve years,

despite the hardships of life in a snowbound region, he continued his pupilage at the feet of the Tibetan possessor of immortal life. His training finished, he was sent back to India. He crossed the mountain passes, descended into the plains, and in due course himself became a teacher of Yoga. He settled for a while at Puri, on the Bay of Bengal, where he still maintains a large bungalow. The flock of disciples which gathered around him belong exclusively to the higher class of Hindus. They comprise wealthy merchants, rich landowners, Government officials and even a Rajah. I get the impression—perhaps I am wrong—that humbler folk are not encouraged.

“How did you perform those wonders you showed me?” I ask bluntly.

Vishudhananda crosses his plump hands.

“What you have been shown is not the result of Yoga practice. It is the result of a knowledge of Solar Science. The essence of Yoga is the development of will power and mental concentration on the part of the Yogi, but in Solar Science practice those qualities are not required. Solar Science is merely a collection of secrets and no special training is necessary to make use of them. It can be studied in exactly the same way that any of your Western material sciences are studied.”

Pundit Kavirj supplements the hint that this strange art is more akin to the science of electricity and magnetism than to any other.

I feel as much in the dark as before, so the master vouchsafes some further information.

“This Solar Science which now comes from Tibet is nothing new. It was well known to the great Yogis of India in very ancient times. But now, except for a rare few, it has almost been lost to this country. There are life-giving elements in the sun’s rays, and if you knew the secret of separating or selecting those elements, you, too, could do wonders. And there are etheric forces in sunlight which have a magic power, once you get control of them.”

“Are you teaching these Solar Science secrets to your disciples?”

“Not yet, but I am preparing to do so. Certain disciples will be selected and the secrets imparted to them. Even now we are building a large laboratory where study classes, demonstrations

and experiments will be carried on."

"Then what are your disciples learning at present?"

"They are being initiated into Yoga."

The Pundit takes me to inspect the laboratory. It is a modern structure several storeys high and distinctly European in design. The walls are built of red brick and large gaps take the place of windows. These gaps await the coming of huge sheets of plate glass, for the research work to be conducted in the laboratory will involve the reflection of sunlight through red, blue, green, yellow and colourless glass.

The Pundit tells me that no Indian works can make glass of the size required to form the giant windows, and therefore the edifice cannot be completed. He asks me to make enquiries in England, but emphasizes that Vishudhananda wants his specifications to be adhered to completely. These include the condition that the makers should guarantee their glass to be absolutely free from air bubbles, and that the coloured glass should be quite transparent. Each sheet is to measure twelve feet in length, eight feet in width and one inch in thickness.¹

The laboratory building is surrounded by spacious gardens, which are girdled and screened from prying eyes by rows of feather-branched palm trees.

I return to the wonder-worker and sit down before him. The disciples have thinned out; only two or three are left. Pundit Kavirj squats beside me, his study-worn face fixed in devoted regard of his master.

Vishudhananda momentarily glances at me and then studies the floor. Dignity and reserve mingle in his manner; his face is preternaturally solemn, and the faces of his disciples reflect his solemnity. I attempt to penetrate his mask of gravity, but can perceive nothing. The mind of this man is as impenetrable

The teacher does not answer me. He relapses into silence, but glances at Kavirj, town. He is steeped in the strange lore of Oriental magic. I feel strongly that though he has shown me his wonders even before I express a second request, nevertheless he has put up a psychic barrier between us which I shall never cross. My welcome is but a surface one; Western investigators and Western disciples are not wanted here.

He drops an unexpected remark quite suddenly.

"I could not initiate you as my own pupil unless I secure

permission beforehand from my Tibetan master. This is a condition under which I have to work."

Has he read the thoughts which run through my brain? I gaze at him. His slightly bulging forehead betrays a faint pucker. Anyway, I have expressed no desire to become his disciple. I am in no undue hurry to become anyone's disciple. But of one thing I feel sure—such a request would bring forth a negative answer.

"But how can you communicate with your master if he is in far-off Tibet?" I query.

"We are in perfect touch upon the inner planes," he replies. I am conscious of listening, but not of comprehending. Yet his unexpected remark has turned my mind away from his miracles for a while. I fall into a pensive mood. Unwittingly I find myself asking:

"Master, how can one find enlightenment?"

Vishudhananda does not reply; instead, he puts me another question.

"Unless you practise Yoga, how can you obtain enlightenment?"

I think the matter over for a few seconds.

"Yet I am told that without a teacher it is extremely difficult to understand Yoga, let alone practise it successfully. Genuine teachers are hard to find."

His face remains indifferent and imperturbable

"When the seeker is ready, the master always appears."

I express my doubts. He spreads out a plump hand.

"A man must first make himself ready; then, no matter where he is, he will eventually find a teacher. And if the master does not come in the flesh, he will appear to the inward eye of the seeker."

"How shall one begin, then?"

"Mark off a part of your time every day to sit in the simple posture which I shall show you. That will help to prepare you. Take care also to curb anger and control passion."

Vishudhananda proceeds to show me the Lotus posture, with which I am already familiar. Why he calls this a simple posture, with its intertwined and folded legs, I cannot understand.

"What adult European can achieve such a contortion!" I exclaim.

"The difficulty lies only in the early attempts. It becomes easy if practised every morning and evening. The important thing is to fix an exact time of the day for this Yoga practice, and to keep regularly to that time. At first five minutes' effort is enough. After one month, you can lengthen the time to ten minutes; after three months, to twenty minutes, and so on. Take care to keep the spine straight. This exercise will enable a man to acquire physical poise and mental calmness. Calmness is necessary for the further practice of Yoga."

"Then you teach the Yoga of Body Control?"

"Yes. Do not imagine that the Yoga of Mind Control is superior to it. Just as every human being both thinks and acts, so these must be training for both sides of our nature. The body acts on the mind, and the mind interacts on the body; they cannot be separated in practical development."

I become aware once again of an inner reluctance on the part of this man to submit to further questioning. A mental coldness fills the atmosphere. I decide to withdraw soon, but fling a last question at him.

"Have you discovered whether there is any goal, any purpose, in life?"

The disciples break their gravity and smile at my simplicity. Only an infidel, ignorant Westerner could ask such a question. Do not all the sacred Hindu books, without exception, indicate that God holds this world in His hand for His own purpose?

The teacher does not answer me. He relapses into silence, but glances at Lavirj, who thereupon supplies the answer.

"Certainly there is a purpose. We have to attain spiritual perfection, to unite with God."

And then, for the next hour, the room remains silent. Vishudhananda fingers the large pages of a thick book, whose paper cover is printed in Bengalee. The disciples stare, sleep or meditate. A soothing, mesmeric influence begins to steal so bright as in the tropical sky. I continue to gaze fixedly at the twinkling points of some kind of a trance, so I pull my faculties together, thank the teacher, and take my departure.

After a light meal I pick my way through tortuous alleys in this motley city, which seems to attract saints and sinners alike. It lures the pious from all over the land into its crowded homes, but it also draws the impious, the ruffianly and the vicious, to say nothing of the priestly parasites.

The jingling temple bells along the bank of the Ganges peal out their call to evening worship. Night is advancing rapidly on the greying sky. Sunset adds another to its own sounds, for the muezzins call to the followers of the Prophet to come to prayer.

I sit on the bank of this ancient river, this much-revered Ganges, and listen to the rustling fronds of palms, which sway slightly in the temporary breeze.

An ash-besmeared beggar approaches me. He halts and I gaze at him. He is some sort of holy man, for something that is not of this world glows in his eyes. I begin to realize that I have not succeeded in understanding this old India so well as I thought. I grope among the few coins in my pocket, wondering the while whether we can leap across the abyss of civilization which separates us. He takes the alms with a quiet dignity, raises his hands to his ash-covered brow in salutation, and withdraws.

I have mused for long over the mystery of the wonder-worker, who plays tricks with the ether and restores fleeting life to dead birds. His plausible but brief exposition of Solar Science does not capture me. Only a thoughtless man would deny that modern science has not fully explored the possibilities latent in the sun's light; but there are features in this case which incline me to look elsewhere for an explanation.

For, in Western India, I had learnt of the existence of two Yogis who could perform one of Vishudhanandas's feats, namely, the extraction of different scents from the air. Unfortunately for my investigation, both those persons died towards the close of last century, but the source of my information seemed reliable enough. In both cases a fragrant, oily essence was made to appear on the palm of the Yogi's hand, as though it exuded through the skin. Sometimes the perfume was strong enough to scent the room.

Now, if Vishudhananda possesses the same strange gift, he can easily transfer some scent from his palm to the handkerchief, whilst appearing to fumble with the magnifying

lens. In short, the whole performance of concentrating the sunlight may be nothing more than a piece of play-acting to cover the transference of the magically produced scent. Another point which favours this view is the fact that the wonder-worker has failed to reveal the secret to a single one of his disciples so far. Their hopes have been kept up, meanwhile, by the protracted building of costly laboratories. Even this work has come to a standstill because of the impossibility of procuring the giant sheets of glass in India. And so they wait on and hope.

What process has Vishudhananda really used, if the concentration of sunlight is merely a blind? It may be that the production of fragrant odours is another of the Yoga powers which can be developed by personal effort, but I do not know. Nevertheless, though I cannot provide a tenable theory to account for the wonder-worker's feats, I need not jump at the theory of Solar Science which he offers. Why trouble my head further? My duty is but to play the scribe and record these happenings, not to explain the inexplicable. Here is a side of Indian life which must remain sealed, for even if the plump little wonder-worker, or some chosen disciple, demonstrates this strange art to the outside world and engages the astounded attention of scientists, it is unlikely that the secret will be made known. I think I have read so far into his character, at least.

An inner voice asks me: How has he revived the dead bird? And what about this legend of a perfected Yogi's ability to extend indefinitely the duration of his life? Have some Eastern men really discovered the secret of protracted age?

I turn my head away from the inner questioner and wearily look up at the heavens. The imponderable immensity of the star-filled sky awes me. Nowhere are the stars so bright as in the tropical sky. I continue to gaze fixidly at the twinkling points of light . . . When I look around again at my fellow-creatures and at the amorphous mass of houses, I begin to feel deeply the recondite mystery of this world. Tangible things and ordinary objects recede quickly into unreality, and the blend of shadowy, moving figures, slowly gliding boats and a few bright lamps, turn both night and environment into some enchanted land of the dream world. The old Indian philosophical doctrine that the universe is but phantom-like in its real nature drifts into my mind and begins to abet this destruction of my sense of

reality. I become ready for the strangest experiences that this planet, which hurries so swiftly through the abysses of space, can bring me.

But some creature of the earth world breaks rudely into my heavenly dream by giving loud voice to the monotonous rhythm of an Indian song, and I return rapidly to that pot-pourri of uncertain pleasures and unexpected sorrows which men call life.

I I wrote to the largest manufacturers of plate glass in Great Britain, but they refused to undertake the task because the technical conditions laid down by Vishudhananda were impossible of fulfilment. They declared that it was beyond the wit of any manufacturer to devise a process which would guarantee the absence of any air bubbles in the sheets; that the glass could not be coloured without diminishing its transparency to the sun's rays; that plate glass could not be made satisfactorily thicker than one quarter of an inch; and that the sheets would have to be made in halves if breakage on the long journey to Benares was to be avoided.

XII

Written in the Stars!

The cupolas quiver with light in the dazzling sunshine, the bathers fill the air with the sounds of their matutinal ablution, and the jumbled, Oriental pageant of the water-front at Benares shows itself anew to my alien gaze. I idle down the Ganges in a heavy junk, whose prow is carved like a cobra's head. I sit on the roof of a cabin, while the three rowers who are below pull their quaint oars.

A merchant from Bombay is my companion and, as he sits next to me, he tells me that he intends to retire from trade when he returns to that city. He is an extremely pious but equally practical man. While laying up treasure in heaven, he has not omitted to lay up treasure in the bank. I have known him for about a week and find him an amiable, genial and friendly person.

"I am retiring at the very age which Sudhei Babu predicted it would happen," he says, eager to explain.

This odd remark causes me, metaphorically, to prick up my ears.

"Sudhei Babu—who is he?"

"Do you not know? He is the cleverest astrologer in Benares."

"Oh, just an astrologer!" I grunt back a little scornfully.

For I have seen the breed squatting in the dust of Bombay's great open space, the Maidan; sitting in sultry booths at Calcutta; and foregathering wherever travellers pass through every little town I have visited. Most of them are dirty-looking creatures, with wild locks of unkempt hair. The recognizable print of superstition and ignorance rests upon their faces. Their stock-in-trade usually consists of two or three greasy, well-fingered books and some vernacular almanac filled with incomprehensible signs. I have often cynically thought of their eagerness to direct the fortunes of other persons, when they themselves seemed outside the pale of good fortune.

"I am somewhat surprised at you. Is it safe for a business

man to trust himself to the twinkling of the stars? Don't you think common sense is a better guide?" I add, in the tone of one giving good advice.

The other man half-shakes his head and smiles tolerantly at me.

"How, then, do you explain the prediction of my retirement? Who could have guessed that I would give up trade at such an exceptionally early age, for as you know I am only a year past forty?"

"Coincidence, perhaps."

"Very well; let me tell you a little story. Some years ago I met a great astrologer in Lahore and started a large business negotiation on his advice. At that time I was in partnership with an older man. My partner asserted that the affair was far too risky and he refused to agree with me. Because he would not enter into the transaction we dissolved partnership. I carried the business through alone. It was a startling success and brought me a small fortune. Yet unless the Lahore astrologer had strongly supported me, I, too, would have feared to enter into the affair."

"Then you hold the opinion that "

My companion finishes the sentence for me.

"Our lives are ruled by destiny and that destiny is shown by the positions of the stars!"

I slip my objections to his statement upon the thread of an impatient gesture.

"The astrologers I have seen in India are such an illiterate, stupid-looking lot, that I cannot imagine what beneficial advice they can give anyone."

"Ah, you must not confuse a learned scholar like Sudhei Babu with those ignorant men you have encountered. Truly, those men are charlatans, but he is a highly intelligent Brahmin who lives in a large house of his own. He has made a deep study of the subject for many years and possesses many volumes of great rarity."

It suddenly occurs to me that my companion is no fool. He belongs to that type of modern Hindu who is enthusiastically practical and who does not hesitate to avail himself of the latest resources of Western invention. He is even ahead of me in some ways. He carries a magnificent moving-picture camera on the boat, whereas I can boast of nothing better than a humble

pocket Kodak; his servant produces a thermos flash and pours out a cooling drink, thus rebuking my lamentable forgetfulness of an excellent travelling requisite; and I know from his talk that he makes more use of the telephone when in Bombay than I have ever cared to do when in Europe. And yet he believes in astrology! I puzzle over the incongruous elements which compose his character.

"Let us understand each other. You fully accept the theory that every man's career and every worldly event is controlled by stars whose distance from our planet is so great that it beggars imagination?"

"Yes, I do," he answers quietly.

I shrug my shoulders, not knowing what to say.

He assumes an apologetic air.

"My dear sir, why not go and try him for yourself? You say in your country, 'The proof of the pudding is in the eating.' Find out what Sudhei Babu can discover about you. I have no use for the cheap charlatan myself, but I believe in that man's genuineness."

"H'm. I am sceptical about those who make a business of foretelling. Still, I shall take you at your word. Will you take me to this astrologer?"

"Certainly. Come and have tiffin¹ with me to-morrow and then we shall visit him."

We continue to float by broad palaces and old temples and little shrines bespattered with yellow flowers. I look indifferently at the broad stone steps crowded with bathing pilgrims and reflect that, though science rightly flatters itself with having put a check to superstition, I have yet to learn that a scientific attitude should put a check to investigation. If my companion can produce some evidential facts for the marked feeling of fatalism which he shares in common with most of his countrymen, I shall study them with an open mind.

†

The next day my amiable acquaintance brings me to a narrow archaic street which runs through a heap of flat-topped houses. We stop before a rambling, old, stone-built structure. He leads the way through a dark, low-roofed passage and then we climb several stone steps, which are no wider than a man's

body. We pass through a narrow room and find ourselves on the veranda of a spacious inner courtyard, around which the house has been built.

A chained dog sights us and furiously barks a challenge. An array of large pots, each holding some tropical flowerless plant, spread along the veranda. I follow my companion into a dark, frowning room and nearly fall over some broken flagstones at the threshold. As I stoop, I notice that loose earth lies sprinkled in the room as freely as it is sprinkled on the veranda floor. Does the astrologer find relief from his starry studies in plant-growing, I wonder?

The other man shouts for the astrologer, whose name is echoed back to us by the ancient walls. We wait for two or three minutes and assist the dog, by further calls for the astrologer, to punctuate the silence of this seemingly deserted building. I begin to think that we have come on a fruitless errand, when the sound of someone stirring descends from an upper floor. Soon after I hear shuffling steps approach our room.

The figure of a slight man, carrying a candle in one hand and jangling a bunch of keys in the other, appears on the threshold. There follows a brief conversation in the semi-gloom and the astrologer unlocks another door, through which we all pass. He draws aside two heavy curtains and opens the shutters which cover tall balcony windows.

The astrologer's face is suddenly illuminated by the light which falls through the opened windows. I see a man who seems more like a figure from the ghost world than one of flesh and blood. Never before have I seen anyone so "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought." His death-like countenance, incredibly lean body and unearthly slow movements combine to produce a weird effect. The whites of his eyes are so pronounced as to heighten this impression, their whiteness offering a strong contrast to the jet-black pupils.

He takes his seat at a large table, whose surface is littered with papers. I discover that he speaks tolerably good English, yet it is only after some persuasion that I can induce him to carry on a direct conversation without the aid of a third party as interpreter.

"Please understand that I come as an enquirer, not as a believer," I begin.

He nods his thin head.

"Yes, I shall cast your horoscope and then you must tell me if you are satisfied."

"What is your fee?"

"I have no fixed charge. Some people of good position pay me sixty rupees; others pay me twenty rupees. I leave the amount to you."

I proceed to make it clear to him that, before we bother about the future, I want to test his knowledge of the past. He agrees.

For a while he busies himself with calculations over my birth date. After ten minutes he stoops to the floor behind his chair and searches among a disorderly pile of yellowed papers and palm-leaf manuscripts. Finally he draws out a little bundle of oblong, time-stained slips. He sketches a queer diagram on a sheet of paper and says:

"This is a chart of the heavens at the time you were born. And these Sanskrit texts explain the meaning of every part of the chart. Now I shall tell you what the stars declare."

He scrutinizes the diagram with minute care, refers to one of the slips, and speaks again, in that low, emotionless voice which befits his personality so well.

"You are a writer from the West? Am I correct?"

I nod in agreement. He tells me thereafter about my youth and describes, in quick succession, a few happenings of the earlier years of my life. In all, he gives me seven important points about my past. Five of them are broadly correct, but the other two are utterly wrong. Thus I am able to check up on the value or worthlessness of his powers. The honesty of the man is transparent. I am already convinced that he is incapable of deliberate deception. A 75 per cent success in an initial test is startling enough to show that Hindu astrology calls for investigation, but it also indicates that the latter is no precise, infallible science.

Once again Sudhei Babu burrows among his scattered papers and then describes my character with a fair degree of accuracy. After that he pictures the mental capacities which have brought me to follow a profession congenial to them. Here, again, when he lifts his intellectual head and asks, "Have I read correctly?" I cannot dispute his words.

He shuffles his papers, silently studies the diagram, and begins to speak of the future.

"The world will become your home. You shall travel far and wide, yet always you will carry a pen and do your writing work." And in his strain he discourses of what is yet to be. But I can run no investigating rule over his prophecies, so I am content to leave them where I find them—written in the stars!²

With his last words he again asks if I am satisfied. His fairly correct description of my past forty years on this amazing planet; his almost completely successful effort to show me my mental self—these things silence the criticisms which I have come prepared to utter.

I want to ask myself, "Is this man merely drawing a bow at a venture? Is he doing nothing more than a bit of smart guess-work?" but I must candidly confess that his prognostications impress me. Yet time alone can tell whether there is any worth in them or not.

Is my Western attitude toward the dark question of fate to tumble about me like a house of thin cards? What can I say about the matter? I move over to the window and stand there, staring out at the opposite house and jingling the silver rupees in my pocket. Finally I return to my seat and question the astrologer.

"Why should it seem impossible to you that such distant stars can influence the lives of men?" he rejoins softly. "Do not the tides respond to the distant moon in their ebb and flow? Does not the body of a woman undergo a change every lunar month? Does not the absence of the sun make men more liable to depressed moods?"

"Quite so. But that is a far cry from asserting the claims of astrology. Why should Jupiter or Mars care two annas whether I meet with ship-wreck or not?"

He looks at me with an unruffled face.

"It is better that you regard the planets as being only symbols which stand in the sky; it is not they which really influence us, but our own past," he replies. "You will never understand the reasonable nature of astrology unless you accept the doctrine that man is born again and again, and that his fate follows him with every birth. If he escapes the results of his evil actions in one birth, they will punish him in his next; and if he does not receive a due reward for his good actions in one lifetime, he will surely receive it in the next. Without this doctrine of the continued return of man's soul to this earth

until such time as it becomes perfect, the changing fortunes of different persons would seem the result of mere chance or blind luck. How can that be allowed by a just Deity? No—it is our belief that when a man dies, his character, desires, thoughts and will continue to exist until they enter a body of flesh once more and come among us in the form of a new-born baby. The good or evil actions committed in the former birth will be suitably rewarded or punished in the present or even future births. This is how we explain fate. When I said that you would be shipwrecked one day and in grave danger of drowning, that is the fit destiny which God, in His hidden justice, has portioned out to you because of something wrong which you did in a former birth. It is not the planets which force you into shipwreck, but the inescapable results of your former actions. The planets and their positions only act as a record of this destiny; why they should do so I cannot say. No man's brain could ever have invented astrology; it came to us from long ago, when it was revealed from man's benefit by the great seers of ancient times."

As I listen to this plausible pronouncement, I hardly know what comment to make. He would bind one's soul and fortune to the stake of fate, but no healthy Westerner will let himself be despoiled of the prized possession of free will. What inhabitant of the energetic Occident can wax enthusiastic over this belief that it is destiny, and not choice, which directs him to take his steps? I gaze in bewilderment at this lean dreamer, this fallow wanderer through remote signs of the zodiac. "Do you know," I tell him, "that in some parts of the South the astrologers rank next to the priests, and that nothing of any magnitude can be done without previously consulting them? We Europeans would laugh at such a position, for we do not look kindly upon predictive methods. We like to think that we are free individuals and not the hapless victims of an inexorable destiny."

The astrologer shrugs his shoulders.

"In one of our old books the *Hitopadesa*, it is declared: 'No one is capable of opposing the predestinations of fate, which are written on the foreheads of men.' " He lets his words sink in. Then he continues:

"What can you do? We must bear with the fruit of our actions."

But I am dubious about this statement and express my feelings.

The prophet of personal fortunes rises from his chair. I take the hint and prepare to leave him. He murmurs musingly:

"All is in the power of God. Nothing can escape Him. Who of us is really free? Whither can we go where God is not?"

At the door he adds hesitatingly:

"If you wish to come again we may talk further on these matters."

I thank him and accept the invitation.

"Very well. I shall expect you to-morrow, after the sun has gone down, about the hour of six."

†

Next day I return with the dusk to the astrologer's house. I have no intention of accepting all that he tells me, but neither have I formed any plans for rejection. I come to listen, possibly to learn, though the latter rests on how far his statements can be verified by experiment. And at this time I am ready enough to make experiments, but only if sufficiently strong reasons can be given for them. Yet Sudhei Babu's reading of my horoscope has stirred me to the perception that Hindu astrology is not superstitious nonsense, and that it may well warrant a deeper investigation. That thought represents the limit of my present attitude.

We sit facing each other at his large writing-table. A paraffin lamp throws a dim light upon the scene. Millions of other Indian homes are being lit to-night in the same way.

"I have fourteen rooms in this house," the astrologer tells me. "They are filled with ancient manuscripts, which are mostly written in Sanskrit. That explains why I need such a large house, although I live alone. Come and see my collection."

He removes the hanging lamp and leads the way into another room. Open boxes are ranged around the walls. I peer inside one of them and find it full of books and papers. Even the floor of the room is hidden under a multitude of papers, bundles of palm-leaf manuscripts and books whose covers are discoloured with age. I take a small bundle in my hand; each leaf is covered with incomprehensible, faded characters. We go

from room to room and find the same scene everywhere. The astrologer's library appears to be in a state of hopeless disorder, but he assures me that he is familiar with the whereabouts of every book and paper. It seems to me that his house has gathered the wisdom of Hindustan. Surely much of the strange lore of India is contained in the almost undecipherable pages of these ancient rolls of manuscript and in these Sanskrit books?

We return to our chairs and the other man informs me:

"Nearly all my money has been spent in buying those manuscripts and books. Many of them are very rare and cost me large sums. So it is that I am very poor to-day."

"What subjects do they deal with?"

"They deal with human life and divine mysteries, while many are concerned with astrology."

"Then you are also a philosopher?"

His thin mouth relaxes into a half-smile.

"A man who is not a good philosopher will make a poor astrologer."

"If you will pardon me for saying so, I hope you do not over-study all those books. I was shocked at your pallor when I first met you."

"That is not surprising," he replies calmly. "I have not eaten for six days."

I express my concern.

"It is not a question of money. The woman who comes every day to cook for me is away ill. She has been away for six days."

"Then why not call in another woman?"

He shakes his head firmly.

"No. My food must not be cooked by a lower caste woman. I would rather not eat for a month than permit that to happen. I must wait till my servant's health is restored. But I expect her to return in a day or two."

I peer at him intently and notice that he wears the sacred thread of "The Sons of Brahma." The triple cord of woven linen which nestles under his chin is placed around the neck of every Brahmin baby and is never to be removed till death. So he is a Brahmin.

"Why trouble yourself with a superstitious caste restriction," I urge. "Surely your health is more important than

that?"

"It is not superstition. Everyone gives out a magnetic influence which is quite real, even though the instruments of your Western science have not yet discovered it. The cook who prepares food throws her influence into it, unconsciously of course. A cook of low character will thus taint the food with bad magnetism, which passes into the person who eats the food."

"What a strange theory!"

"But it is true."

I change the subject.

"How long have you been an astrologer?"

For nineteen years. I took up the profession after my marriage.

"Ah, I understand."

"No, I am not a widower. Shall I explain? When I was a youth of thirteen I prayed often to God for knowledge, and so was led to various people who taught me and to different books. I became so fascinated by study that I would sit up reading all day and far into the night. My parents arranged a marriage for me. A few days after we were married, my wife got angry with me and said: 'I have married a human book!' On the eighth day she ran away with the man who used to drive our carriage!"

Sudhei Babu pauses. I cannot help smiling at his wife's caustic comment, though her speedy elopement must have created a sensation in conservative India. But the ways of women are tortuous and beyond the compass of a man's mind.

"After a while I recovered from the shock," he continued, "and forgot her. All my emotions were blotted out. I went deeper than ever into the study of astrology and the divine mysteries. It is then that I took up my greatest study, the book of Brahma Chinta."

"Perhaps you will tell me what the book is concerned with?"

"The title can be translated as *Divine Meditation*, or as *The Quest of Brama*, or even as *God-Knowledge*. The entire work contains several thousand pages, but the part I study is only a section. It took me nearly twenty years to collect even that, because it exists only in scattered parts here and there. I have slowly obtained these different parts through agents in the

various provinces of India, there are twelve chief divisions among its subjects, and many subdivisions. The chief topics are philosophy, astrology, Yoga, life after death, and other deep matters."

"Do you know if there is any English translation of the book?"

He shakes his head.

"I have never heard of one. Few, even, are the Hindus who know of the existence of the book. Hitherto, it has been jealously guarded and kept secret. It came originally from Tibet, where it is looked upon as very sacred and only chosen students are allowed to study it."

"When was it written?"

"It was composed thousands of years ago by the sage Bhṛigu, who lived so long ago that I cannot give you the date. It teaches a method of Yoga which is quite different from all others which exist in India. You are interested in Yoga, are you not?"

"How do you know that?"

For answer, Sidheī Babu quietly produces the chart which he has constructed around my birth-date, and moves his pencil among the strange glyphs which represent planetary configurations and zodiacal signs.

"Your horoscope surprises me. It is out of the ordinary for a European, and not even a common one for an Indian. It shows that you will have a great tendency to study Yoga and that you will enjoy the favour of sages who will help you to delve deeply into the subject. Yet you will not limit yourself to Yoga alone, but become versed in other mystic philosophies."

He pauses and looks at me straight in the eyes. I receive the subtle impression that he is about to make a statement which will be tantamount to a revelation of his inner life.

"There are two kinds of sages: those who selfishly keep their knowledge to themselves, and those who, after obtaining enlightenment, share it freely with others who are seeking for it. Your horoscope shows that you are almost at the gate of illumination and therefore my words will not fall on deaf ears. I am ready to impart my knowledge to you!"

I am taken aback at this strange turn of affairs. I first come to Sudheī Babu to check up on the claims of Indian astrology; I come again to listen to his further defence of its basic postulate

And now he unexpectedly offers to become my teacher in Yoga!

"If you will practise the methods of Brahma Chinta you will need no teacher," he continues. "Your own soul will become your teacher."

I suddenly realize my mistake and wonder whether he has read my thoughts.

"You take me by surprise!" is all I can say.

"I have already instructed a few persons in this knowledge but I never regard myself as their master—only as their brother or friend. So I do not undertake to become your teacher in the ordinary sense. The spirit of the sage Bhṛigu will simply use this body and mind of mine to *communicate* his teachings to you."

"I do not understand how you can combine the profession of astrology with the teaching of a Yoga system?"

His thin hands spread themselves upon the table.

"The explanation is this. I live in the world and serve it through my work, which happens to be astrology. Secondly, I refuse to be looked upon as a teacher of Yoga, because in our Brahma Chinta the only teacher acknowledged is God. He is the only preceptor we acknowledge. He, as the universal soul, is in us, and will teach us. Look on me as brother, if you wish, but do not look on me as a spiritual preceptor. Those who have a teacher are too apt to lean on him and to depend on him instead of their own soul."

"And yet you depend on astrology for guidance," I retort quickly, "instead of your own soul."

"You are not right. I never look at my own horoscope now—in fact I tore it up many years ago."

I express astonishment at this statement. He replies:

"I have found the light and do not need astrology to guide me, but those who still walk in darkness find it helpful. I have placed my life entirely in the Lord's hands. I carry that act to its proper conclusion by giving up all care about future or past. Whatever the Lord sends, that I accept as His will. I have given my whole self—body, mind, actions and feelings—to the will of the Almighty."

"Suppose you are threatened with death by a murderous ruffian, would you do nothing and accept that as God's will?"

"When any danger arises I know that I have only to pray and instantly to receive His protection. Prayer is necessary but

fear is not. I pray frequently and the Lord has marvellously protected me. Yet I have been through great troubles. Through all of them I was conscious of His help and I trust Him fully under every event. One day you, too, will disregard the future and become indifferent to it."

"There will have to be a remarkable change in me before that happens," I observe drily.

"That change will surely come."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes, you cannot escape your destiny. This spiritual rebirth is an event which comes from God, whether one looks for it or not."

"You say strange things, Sudhei Babu."

The idea of Deity is the unknown factor which enters into so many of my conversations in this land. The Hindus are essentially religious and I am often tantalized by the familiar way in which they introduce mention of God. Is it possible for them to appreciate the view-point of a doubting Westerner, who has surrendered simple faith for complex reasons? I realize that it will be unavailing and suit no practical purpose to throw up this question of Deity into argument with the astrologer. I have no taste for partaking of any theological diet which he will probably place before me, so I turn the subject back to less controversial ground.

"Let us talk of other matters, for God and I have never met."

He looks at me fixedly, his peculiar black and white eyes searching my soul.

"The chart of your horoscope cannot be wrongly drawn or I might keep back my knowledge from an unready mind. But the stars move without fault; what you are unable to grasp to-day will linger in your thoughts for a time and then return with double force. I tell you again that I am ready to impart the way of Brahma Chinta to you."

"And I am ready to learn it."

†

Evening after evening I visit the old stone house of the astrologer and receive my lessons in Brahma Chinta. The pale lamplight throws flickering patterns upon his narrow face as he

initiates me into the arcana of this primitive Tibetan-Yoga system³ At no time does he adopt the attitude of spiritual superiority or egoistic tutorship. He is humility personified and usually prefaces his instruction with the phrase, "In this teaching of Brahma Chinta it is said—"

"What is the supreme object, the final goal of this Yoga of Brahma Chinta?" I ask him one evening.

"We seek the condition of sacred trance, for in that condition man obtains perfect proof that he is a soul. Then it is that he frees his mind from his surroundings; objects fade away and the outside world seems to disappear. He discovers the soul as a living, real being within himself; its bliss, peace and power overwhelm him. All he needs is a single experience of this kind to obtain the proof that there is a divine and undying life in himself; never again can he forget it."

A shred of doubt prompts my enquiry:

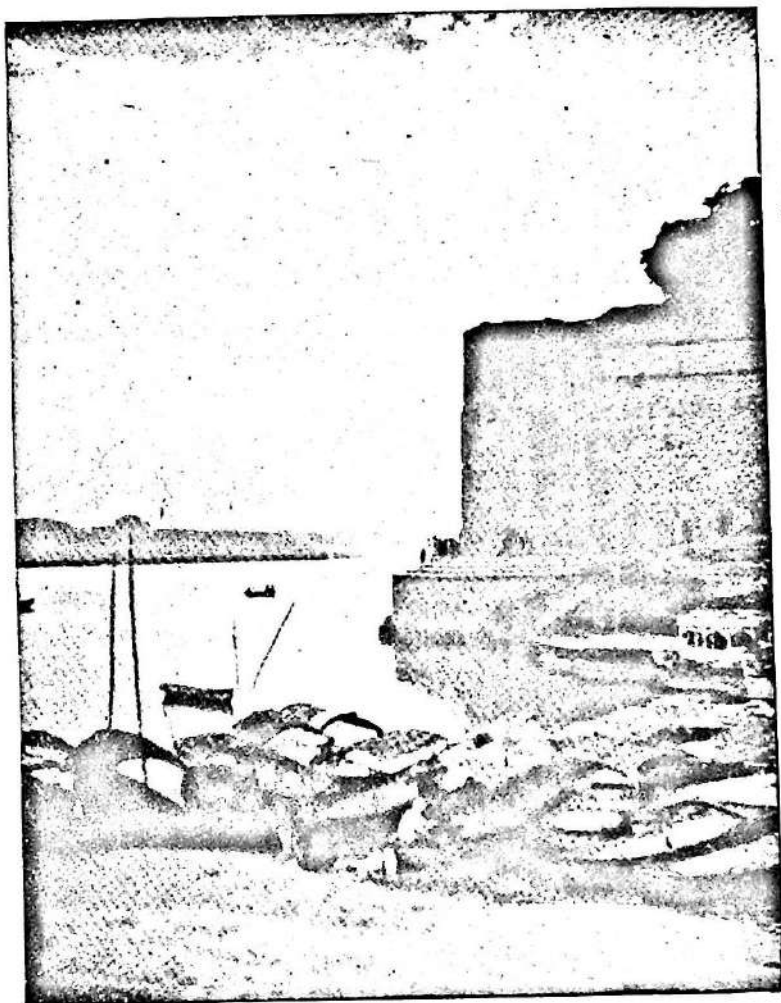
"Are you sure that all this is not a deep form of auto-suggestion?"

A ghost of a smile curls around his lips.

"When a mother gives birth to a child, is it possible that she can doubt, even for a single moment, what is happening? And when she comes to look back on that experience, could she ever think that it was only an auto-suggestion? And when she watches her child grow up beside her year after year, can she hesitate at any time and disbelieve in its existence? In the same way, the labour of spiritual rebirth comes as such a tremendous event in one's life that it cannot be forgotten; it changes everything for one. When one enters into the sacred trance, a kind of vacuum is created within the mind; God—or, as you do not seem to care for the word, the soul, the higher power, shall I say, enters and fills that vacuum. When that happens, it is impossible to avoid becoming filled with intense happiness. One also feels a great love for the whole of creation. The body will appear to an observer to be not only in a trance, but apparently dead, for all breathing stops when the deepest point is attained."

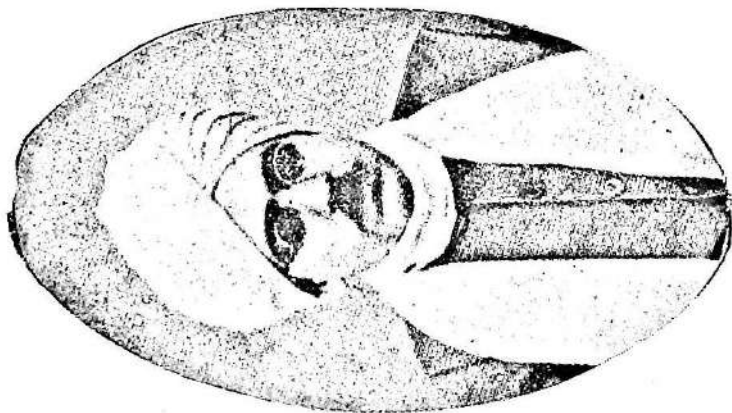
"Is that not dangerous?"

"No. The trance is attained in complete solitude or a friend may be permitted to watch over one. I frequently enter into the sacred trance and can always emerge from it whenever I wish. I usually stay in it for two or three hours, and fix the time of its

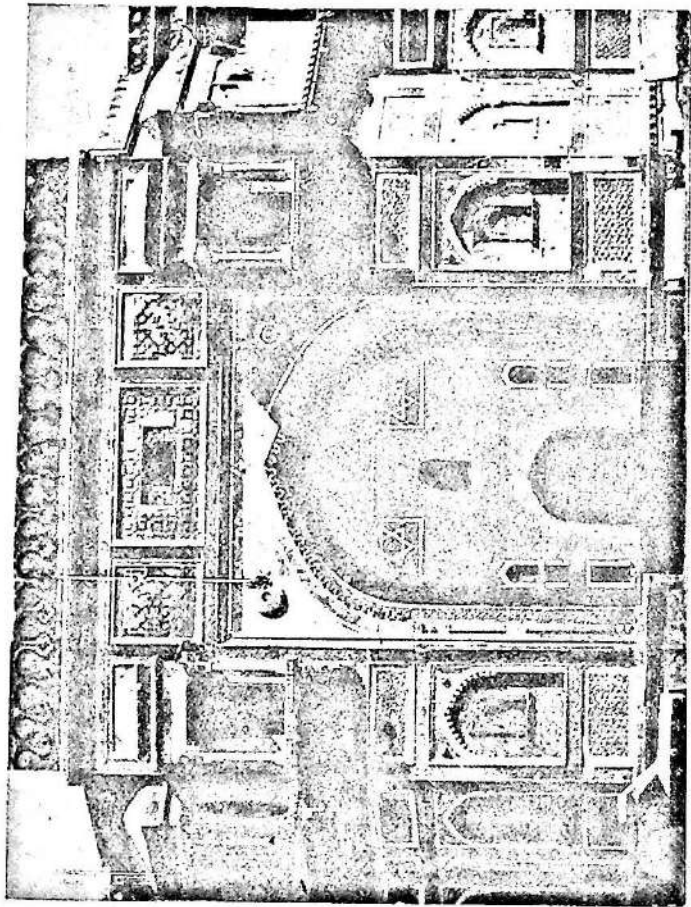


TWILIGHT OVER THE JUMNA

'The river reflects the last red light of sunset. All nature, dumb at the lovely sight, seems to have come to momentary rest.'



SAHABJI MAHARAJ
 'Master of over one hundred
 thousand people who practise
 a mysterious form of Yoga.'
 See page 226.



THE GATEWAY TO JEHANGIR'S PALACE, AGRA
 'We explore colourful edifices where once the seductive favourites of kings
 flaunted their olive-skinned beauty upon marble balconies and in
 golden baths.'

ending beforehand.

It is a wonderful experience because what you see as the universe I see again within myself! That is why I say that all you need to learn can be learnt from your own soul. After I have communicated the complete Yoga of Brahma Chinta to you, no master will be necessary; you will need no outside guidance."

"You have never had a teacher yourself?"

"None. I have never looked for one since I discovered the secrets of Brahma Chinta. Nevertheless, some great masters have come to me from time to time. This has happened when I have entered the sacred trance and become conscious in the inner world. These great sages have appeared before me in their psychic forms and placed their hands on my head in blessing. Therefore I say again, trust the guidance of your own soul and teachers will come unbidden to you in the inner world."

For the next two minutes there is a brooding silence. The other man seems to be caught up in a cloud of thoughts. Then, very quietly, very humbly, this strange tutor says;

"Once, during the sacred trance, I saw Jesus."

"You mystify me!" I exclaim.

But he does not hasten to explain. Instead, he suddenly rolls the whites of his eyes upwards in a most alarming manner. There is another minute of intense silence, and only when he brings his eyes back to their normal appearance am I reassured.

When he addresses me again a faintly enigmatical smile hovers once more around his lips.

"Such is the greatness of the sacred trance that death cannot catch a man while he is in it. There are some Yogis on the Tibetan side of the Himalayas who have practised to perfection this path of Brahma Chinta. Because it pleases them to do so they have secluded themselves in mountain caves, where they have entered the profoundest degree of the sacred trance. In that condition, the pulse stops, the heart no longer beats and the blood does not flow through the unmoving body. Anyone finding them would think that they are dead. Do not imagine that they have gone into a kind of sleep, because they are as fully conscious as you or I. They have entered the inner world, where they live higher lives. Their minds have become released from the limits set by the body and they discover the whole universe within themselves. One day they will come out

of their trance, but then they will be many hundreds of years old!"

So once again I hear this incredible tradition of perennial human life. Apparently it will follow my feet wherever I go under this Eastern sun. But shall I ever track down one of these legendary immortals and behold him face to face? And will the West ever discover and accept, as a scientific and psychological contribution, this ancient magic cradled in thybleak climate of Tibet? Who knows?



My last lesson in the fantastic doctrines of the Yoga of Brahma Chinta comes to an end.

I persuade the sedentary astrologer to venture out of his house, which he rarely leaves, and give his limbs a little exercise. We wander through narrow alleys, in an effort to avoid the packed bazaars which bar our way to the river. With all its ancient squalor and unhygienic overcrowding, Benares nevertheless presents a variety of colourful sights to the man who wanders its streets afoot.

It is afternoon and my companion carries an open, flat parasol on his shoulder so as to keep off the sun's rays. His frail figure and weary languid movements do not conduce to quick progress, and I change our route in order to shorten our journey.

We pass into the Street of the Brass Workers. The air rings with the hammers of bearded craftsmen, and their products, shining brazen vessels, gleam in the sunlight. Here, too, are multitudes of little brass images—earthly representations of the chief gods in the Hindu pantheon.

An old man crouches in the shade by the roadside in another street. He looks up at me with feeble eyes and pathetic face. His fear removed, he begs for alms.

We drift through the Street of the Merchants of Grain, where little wooden platform exhibit piles of red and golden grains. The shopkeepers sit on folded legs or squat on haunch and heel beside their goods. They throw a few glances at the odd couple that passes by, and then resume their patient waiting for customers.

Odours mingle indiscriminately in the other streets. As we

approach the river, we walk right into a region which seems to be a hunting ground for those who seek alms. Lean beggars drag themselves along the dusty road. One of them comes near to me and looks inquiringly into my eyes. He possesses a face of unspeakable melancholy. My heart is moved embarrassingly.

Farther on I nearly stumble over a fleshless old woman, whose body is a bunch of hanging skin and protruding bones. She, too, glances into my eyes. There is no reproach, only dull acceptance. I bring out my purse. Immediately she becomes an animated creature once again. She extends a skinny arm and takes the proffered coins.

I tremble at my own good fortune in having plenty of food, good clothes, proper shelter and other desirable things. When I think of the haunting eyes of those unfortunate wretches, I feel guilty. By what right do I enjoy the possession of so many rupees, so many annas, when those poor beggars own nothing more than rags? Suppose, by some accident of birth or fluke of fate, I had been born in the place of one of them? I play for a while with this ghastly thought, but horror eventually causes me to send it into oblivion.

What is the meaning of this mystery of chance, which, by the mere fortune of birth, puts one man in dirt-stained rags upon this road and another in silken robes in yonder river-side palace? Life is truly a dark enigma; I cannot comprehend it.

"Let us sit down here," says the astrologer, when we reach the Ganges. We sit in the shade and look down the river upon the stretch of broad stone steps, rambling terraces and jutting platform. Little groups of pilgrims are constantly coming and going.

The shapely forms of two slender minarets soar gracefully into the pearly sky to a height of nearly three hundred feet. They mark the charming Mosque of Aurungzeeb, that Muhammedan anachronism in this most Hindu of Hindu cities.

But the astrologer has noted my sad preoccupation with beggars, for he turns his sallow face towards me and says:

"India is a poor country." His voice is somewhat apologetic. "Its people have been sunk in inertia. The English race possesses some fine points and I believe that God brought them to our country for its benefit. Before they came life was unsafe; law and justice were often set aside. It is my hope that the English will not leave India; we need their help, but it

should be given in friendship now, and not by force. However, the destiny of both nations must fulfil itself."

"Ah, your fatalism returns again!"

He ignores my comment and falls into silence. At length he asks:

"How can the two peoples avoid God's will? Day is ever followed by night, and night is ever followed by day. So is it with the history of nations. Great changes brood over the world. India has been sunk in sloth and inertia, but she will change until she becomes filled with desires and ambitions, which ever precede activity. Europe burns with practical activities, but the strength of its materialism will pass away and it will turn its face towards higher ideals. It will seek out the inner things. And the same will happen to America."

I listen in silence.

"For this reason the philosophic and spiritual teachings of our land will travel towards the West like a wave of the ocean," he continues gravely. "Scholars have already translated some of our Sanskrit manuscripts and sacred books into Western languages, but many texts are hidden away in cave libraries in out-of-the-way parts of India, Nepal, and Tibet. Those, too, must eventually be made known to the world. The time will come before long when the ancient philosophies and inner knowledge of India shall unite with the practical sciences of the West. The secrecy of past times must give way to the needs of this century. I am glad that all this will happen."

I stare into the greenish water of the Ganges. The river is so strangely tranquil that it hardly seems to flow. Its surface shimmers in the sunlight.

He addresses me yet again:

"The destiny of each race of people must be realized, just as the destiny of every person must be fulfilled. The Lord is omnipotent. Men and nations cannot escape from their self-earned fate, but they may be protected throughout their troubles and even saved from great dangers."

"And how does one obtain such protection?"

"By prayer, by keeping a child-like nature when one turns towards the Almighty, and by remembering Him not on one's lips, but in one's heart, especially before one begins any action. In happy days try to enjoy them as a blessing of God, and in troubles try to think that it is very much like a medicine to heal

your inner disease. Fear him not, as He is all merciful."

"You do not believe that God is remote from this world, then?"

"No. God is a Spirit which is hidden in people and throughout this universe. If you see any beauty in Nature, a beautiful landscape, for instance, do not worship it for its own sake, but remember that it is beautiful because of the Deity present in it. See the Divinity in objects and people, and do not be so captivated by the outer forms that you forget the inner Spirit which gives them life."

"You mingle your doctrines of fate, religion and astrology in a peculiar manner, Sudhei Babu."

He gazes solemnly at me.

"Why so? These doctrines are not of my creation. They have descended to us from the most distant ages of the past. The tremendous power of destiny, the worship of our Creator and the lore of planetary influences were known to the earliest peoples. They were not such savages as you Westerners imagine. But have I not prophesied? The West will rediscover before this century closes how real are these invisible forces which enter into the lives of all men."

"It will be extremely hard for the West to give up its inborn notion that a man's will is free to make or mar his own life."

"Whatever happens is by His will and what seems like free will really works by His power. The Almighty returns to men the good or evil fruits of their thoughts and deeds in earlier bodies. It is best to accept His will, but one will not tremble under sorrows if one looks to Him for the strength to endure them."

"Let us hope that you are right, for the sake of those unfortunate beggars whom we have just encountered."

"That is the only answer I can make," he rejoins shortly. "If you would follow the path into your own soul, the way of Brahma Chinta which I have shown you, these problems would clear themselves."

I realize that he has now conducted me to the limits of his argumentative possibilities and that I must find my own way henceforth.

One of my coat pockets hides a fatetui telegram, that bids me whisk myself into a train out of Benares. In another pocket there reposes a folding kodak. I ask the astrologer to pose for

his photograph. He politely declines.

I press him more insistently.

"But why?" he remonstrates. "My ugly face and shabby clothes?"

"Please! Your photograph will remind me of you in later years when I may be in distant lands."

"The best reminder," he replies gently, "will be holy thoughts and unselfish deeds."

I yield to his objection reluctantly, and the camera disappears again into my pocket.

When he rises to return at last and I begin to follow him, I discover close by, a seated figure, who has taken shelter from the terrific sun under a huge, round, bamboo umbrella. His face is fixed in rapt meditation and I perceive by the ochre colour of his robe that he is a holy man belonging to a superior order.

We go a little way and find a cow—possibly a member of the sacred variety which abounds in Benares—sleeping in that strange posture familiar to its kind. It lies across our track with legs doubled back under its abdomen.

We reach the shop of a money-changer, where I hail a carriage and then our ways part.

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I indulge in an orgy of travelling during the next few days. I spend my nights in wayside rest houses put up by a paternal government for travelling officials and other persons who have to journey into the interior.

One of these rest houses possesses no amenities worth mentioning, but I discover that it has a plentiful population of ants. After two hours' slow torture and vain efforts to repel their attacks, I decide to leave the bed and spend the night in a chair.

Time trickles by unpleasantly until my thoughts let go of their surroundings and fasten themselves upon the fatalistic philosophy of the Benares astrologer.

Simultaneously I remember the wretched beggars who dragged their hungry bodies along the road. Life does not let them live and does not let them die. The wealthy Marwari money-lender may pass them in his ornate, comfortably-sprung carriage, but they accept him as they accept their misery, with a

complete submission to the will of God. In this land of burning sky, even the pitiful leper seems content with his lot. Such is the narcotic fatalism which creeps into the bones of so many Indians!

I realize how vain it is for the Occidental partisan of free will to argue with the Oriental advocate of an all-powerful destiny. To the latter there is but one side to the problem, the side which unquestioningly accepts the dogma that there is no problem! Fate rules his roost and there is nothing more to be said.

What self-reliant Westerner likes to hear that we are but marionettes which dangle from the strings of fate, and which move up and down or from right to left at the bidding of an unseen hand? I remember that remarkable outburst of Napoleon before his army's brilliant dash across the Alps:

"Impossible? There is no such word in my dictionary!"

But I have studied and re-studied the fascinating records of Napoleon's entire life, and memory brings back to me strange lines which he wrote down at St. Helena, where his colossal brain raced again and again over the past.

"I was always a fatalist. What is written in the heavens is written. . . . My star grew dim; I felt the reins slip from my hands and yet I could do nothing."

The man who held such paradoxical, contradictory beliefs could not have solved the mystery and one doubts whether anyone has ever completely solved it. It may be that ever since the brain of man commenced to function, this ancient problem has been discussed by people all the way from the North Pole to the south. The cocksure, as usual, have settled it to their satisfaction. The philosophical still enter up the account of pros and cons but hesitate to strike a balance.

I have not forgotten the astrologer's surprisingly correct interpretation of my horoscope. At odd moments I have mused over it, until I wonder whether some of this Oriental fatalistic foolishness has crept into my head. Whenever I have remembered how this man of modest assumptions read my past, how he recalled the fluttering phenomena of bygone events back to temporary existence, I hesitate and feel tempted to collect material for a fat treatise upon this hoary problem of fate and free will. But I know that it will be a useless task to let my pen play with the thought of destiny and that I may

probably finish up in the same abysmal darkness with which I begin. For the problems of astrology will need to be brought in and my task will become complicated beyond my power. Yet such are the gigantic strides of modern invention, that the day when we shall take Cook's tours to the distant planets may not be far off! It will then be possible to discover whether the starry frame possesses any real significance in our lives. Meanwhile, one may test the powers of an astrologer or two, bearing in mind Sudhei Babu's warning about their fallibility and about the fragmentary nature of that portion of astrology which has been revealed to the world.

And yet, even assuming and admitting that in some strange fourth-dimensional manner the future already exists, is it desirable to learn those secrets of personal destiny which are curtained from one's eyes?

On this questioning note, my musings come to a dead end and sleep overtakes me.

A few days later I am in a town several hundred miles away from Benares, when the news comes of startling riots in the latter city. It is the unpleasant story of Hindu-Moslem strife, which usually begins in a petty way, but is used by ruffians who want a pseudo-religious pretext for their looting, maiming and murdering.

A reign of terror rules the city for several days. That lamentable period brings the usual tale of broken heads, tortured bodies and indiscriminate slaying. I feel concerned for the astrologer's safety, but it is impossible to get into touch with him. The postmen are too scared to venture into the streets and no private letter or telegram can be delivered.

I am compelled to wait until King Mob is dethroned in Benares, and then despatch one of the first wires which penetrate the unhappy city. Back comes a simple letter of thanks in which the astrologer ascribes his safety to "the protection of the Almighty." And upon the reverse side of the paper he has inscribed ten rules of practice of the Yoga of Brahma Chinta!

1 Light afternoon tea.

2 One of his predictions, which I had instantaneously and sceptically dismissed as a ridiculous impossibility, has now received ample confirmation. But a second event has failed to mature at the date he gave for it. The others still wait for time's comment.

3 I do not care to commit the details of this system to print, nor would Western readers derive any benefit even if I did so. Its essence is a series of meditations which aim at creating what the tutor described as "the vacuum mind!" There are six different paths of practice to be studied, and there are ten stages of attainment upon the principal path. It is neither right nor necessary for the average European to take up the practice of a method which is fit only for jungle retreats or mountain monasteries, and which might even prove dangerous. Insanity lies around the corner for Western amateurs who dabble in such practices.

XIII

The Garden of the Lord

Out of the scurrying of my feet hither and thither over the face of North India, two tracks converge upon a unique, little-known colony, which is housed in a town that bears the poetical name of Dayalbagh, the Garden of the Lord.

One of the tracks starts in Lucknow, where I have the good offices of Sunderlal Nigam as guide, philosopher and friend during my stay in that picturesque city. We roam the city together and talk philosophy as we roam. He is, I suppose, not more than twenty-one or twenty-two, but, like many of his Indian brothers, he has matured early.

We wander through the old Moghul palaces and muse upon the inexorable fate which has overtaken the vanished kings. I fall in love anew with the glorious Indo-Persian architecture, whose graceful curves and delicate colourings reveal the refined taste of its creators. How shall I ever forget these bright days when I idled among the orange trees of the royal pleasure-gardens which grace Lucknow?

We explore colourful edifices where once the seductive favourites of the old kings of Oudh flaunted their olive-skinned beauty upon marble balconies and in golden baths. Now these palaces are empty of royal flesh and hold only memories.

I return again and again to a beautiful mosque which stands near the quaintly named Monkey Bridge. Its exterior is white throughout and gleams in the sunlight like a fairy palace. The shapely minarets seem to rise in perpetual prayer to bright heaven. Peeping inside, I see a crowd of worshippers prostrating themselves upon the ground and rhythmically invoking Allah. The scene receives accentuated charm from the brightly coloured little rugs upon which the devout perform their prostrations. None can doubt the fervour of these followers of the Prophet, for their religion seems a living force to them.

Amid all these excursions and peregrinations I become gradually impressed by certain characteristics belonging to my young guide. His shrewd remarks, his exceptional

intellectuality and his matter-of-fact attitude towards mundane affairs, are somehow blent with the depth and mysticism of a student of Yoga. It is only after repeated meetings and ardent discussions, during which I become aware that he is sounding and probing my own beliefs and ideas, that he reveals himself to be a member of a semi-secret fraternity called the Radha Soamis.

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I pick up the second track which leads me to Dayalbagh from Mallik, another member of the same brotherhood. He comes within my orbit at another place and time. As Indians go, he is a fine, fair-skinned fellow. For centuries his people have had as neighbours, wild frontier tribes, who keep covetous eyes on their neighbour's possessions. But the wise British Government is taming these restless fire-eaters, not by recourse to the old methods of endless fighting, but by taking them into its service and pay.

Mallik is superintending some of the fierce tribesmen who have submitted to the more pacific and useful occupations of making roads across hill and desert, constructing bridges, and building defence forts and barracks. Many of these wild-looking persons carry their rifles—more perhaps from old habit than from present need. They are at work all along this stretch of the North-West Frontier, making new routes for traders and new defences for soldiers.

Mallik works hard and well near Dera Ismail Khan, that frontier outpost of Empire. His character harmoniously couples a sturdy self-reliance and intense practicality with nobility of character and profound thought. I am impressed by the careful balance of his qualities.

After a strong initial reticence which is in accord with all the ancient traditions of Yoga, he reluctantly yields to my enquiries and admits that he has a master whom he periodically visits, whenever his service leaves permit him to do so. His master, whose name is Sahabji Maharaj, is head of the Radha Soamis. And I learn for the second time that his master has conceived the astonishing and interesting notion of combining a Yoga discipline with a daily life based on Western ways and ideas.

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The friendly efforts of these two men, Nigam and Mallik, bear fruit at last. I am to be the guest of His Holiness Sahabji Maharaj, who is uncrowned king of the Radha Soamis' own town of Dayalbagh.

I motor the few, dusty miles of road from Agra to the colony.

Dayalbagh—the Garden of the Lord! If my early impression is correct, the founder is striving to keep the town true to its beautiful name.

I am taken to a building which houses the master's private office. The waiting-room is furnished in an attractive European style. From my restful easy chair I can appreciate the nicely painted walls and the refined simplicity of the furniture.

Here is Westernization with a vengeance! I have encountered Yogis in bare, drab bungalows, in lonely mountain caves and in gloomy, thatched huts on river banks, but never have I expected to find one of the tribe housed in such a modern environment. What manner of man is the leader of this unusual fraternity, I wonder?

I am not left long in doubt, for the door slowly opens and he himself walks in. His figure is of medium height. His head is wrapped in a spotless white turban; his features are refined, though not typically Indian; with a slightly paler skin he might have passed for a quiet American. A pair of large spectacles cover his eyes and a short moustache adorns his upper lip. He wears the high-necked many-buttoned long coat which is the Indian tailor's adaption of our Western style.

His bearing, as he approaches, is modest and gentle. He welcomes me with courtly dignity.

Our greetings over, I wait till he has settled down in his chair and then venture to compliment him on the artistic decorations of the room.

A row of brilliant teeth gleams across his mouth as he smiles his reply:

"God is not only love, but beauty. As man begins to express the Spirit within him, he should express more beauty—not only in self but in surroundings and environments."

His English is noticeably well spoken. The voice is quick