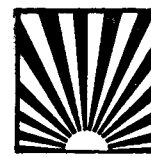
ROMONI'S DAUGHTERS

A STORY OF INDIA

BY

D. S. BATLEY

AUTHOR OF
"SHUSHILA," "A DOWERLESS DAUGHTER," ETC.



LONDON:

The Zenith Press

19/21, SOUTHAMPTON STREET, FITZROY SQUARE, W.1.

MADE AND PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY PURNELL AND SONS
PAULTON (SOMERSET AND LONDON

PREFACE

THIS is a melancholy little story, so much so that its sadness seems to call for some apology. It is a work of fiction, and in a world where fact is often depressing we like our fiction to be cheerful. Moreover, the situation in the East provides us with much real ground for optimism. We hear on all sides stories of the education and emancipation of India's womanhood. We know that laws for their protection have been passed, and that the legal age for marriage has been raised to fourteen years.

For all these things we are and ought to be profoundly thankful, but we must remember that at present they affect only an exceedingly small proportion of the population. In the less advanced towns and the innumerable villages of India, women are neither educated nor emancipated, and the law concerning the age of marriage is at present practically a dead letter; indeed, fresh laws are being contemplated in an endeavour to make it operative.

The tragic episodes in this story, and the heroic episodes also, are all founded on facts, and facts which are not of an exceptional nature.

The writer does not wish to suggest for a moment that true stories, equally tragic, equally heroic, or equally discreditable to Society, could not be written about Western lands, but she *does* suggest that the

only remedy for the crying evils of East and West is to be found in the establishment of the Kingdom of Christ. The battle in the slums of Europe's great cities, and in the towns and villages of India is the same battle, and if it is to be victorious it must be fought under the same standard. There is a comparatively large force engaged on the "Western front", though God knows it ought to be far larger. On the Eastern front the line is very feebly held, and the foe is very daring.

"Who is on the Lord's side?" Who will "come over and help us?"

D.S.B.

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CHAPTER I

STORY-TELLING

A WAXING half moon, riding directly over the heads of Romoni Dass and her three daughters, poured its steady, pure light upon their white-clad figures, and cast deep blue shadows on the tidy square court-yard in which they sat.

The work of the day was over: the last meal had been cooked and eaten, the last brass plate polished, and the last speck of dust swept away. The month was May, and the land Bengal. All day the wind had been furnace-hot, but now a cool breeze had begun to blow from a not far distant river. Reviving crickets chirruped, and from a neighbouring mango grove a black cuckoo, silent by day, uttered its shrill and cheerful cry. Little owls screamed and chattered at intervals, and a far-away party of jackals hailed one another with weirdly melancholy invitations to good fighting or good hunting.

After hot, weary hours of strenuous labour—for the Indian housewife is always busy—the space of moonlit leisure, during which she could listen to the chatter of her children and satisfy their demands for "a story," was very grateful to the tired mother. Romoni could neither read nor write, but, like many Indian women, she was an accomplished teller of

stories. Sometimes she drew on her imagination for fairy tales crowded with fantastic marvels. Sometimes her narratives concerned the wonderful mythology of India: then they were carefully selected, told with reverence and fervour, and listened to with gravity and faith.

Romoni had never aspired to educate her daughters, but in the large village where she lived there was a Mission Day School, an off-shoot from a large mission centre in a distant town, which she had allowed them to attend until they were ten years old. Of reading, writing and arithmetic they knew more than their mother. She loved her children, however, with a love that encompassed their innocent souls as well as their fair bodies, and, even when she told them fairy stories, that love was instinctively at work, striving to ennoble and beautify their characters.

To-night they had listened, not for the first time, to the story of Sabitri, the peerless daughter of an old-time monarch, for whom a worthy bridegroom could not be found. Bidden by her father to choose her own mate, she went forth, royally attended, to seek him, and gave her heart to a forest prince, the son of a blind and banished ruler; a goodly youth, who supported his aged father by working as a wood-cutter.

The maiden's father (so gloriously unmercenary is Eastern legend), approved her choice, but the court soothsayer strove to pour poison into the cup of joy. He announced that the god of Death had placed his mark on the young woodsman: Sabitri must not marry a man fated to perish within a year. The royal parents flinched at such a prospect, but the

heroic girl never wavered. She averred that twelve months of bliss with the man she loved would outweigh for her the sorrow of a lifelong widowhood.

Sabitri had her way, and when the happy year was past, and Yama, god of Death, grim, red-eyed and inexorable, came to claim his victim, he was faced by a love so courageous, resourceful and indomitable, that he was constrained at last to restore her husband to the arms of this faithful and fearless wife.

"Oh, Mother, would that I were Sabitri!" exclaimed Monika, the second daughter, as the story ended.

She sat on the ground, hugging her knees and rocking to and fro in her excitement. Her eyes were wide and shining, and her parted lips showed her white teeth. The moonlight glistened on her glossy black hair, and emphasised the fairness of her upturned face.

"You would not allow us to go to the forest, and hunt for banished princes, would you, Mother?" asked the youngest girl, and her laugh had in it a suspicion of discontent.

Lotika was between eleven and twelve years old: she was of a darker complexion than her sisters, and accordingly considered less beautiful. All the same she had pleasing features and fine eyes with long lashes. She was an observant child, and sometimes startled her mother by her shrewd speeches. From school she had brought back good reports and many prizes. Her friends said of her that she was not much to look at, but that she had "a head."

Then the eldest daughter, Nilima, spoke.

"If there are princes written on our foreheads, they will come here and fetch us, will they not, Mother?" she said, with her slow, sweet smile.

"You deserve a forest prince, Didi[1]!" exclaimed Monika impulsively. "I am sure you are as beautiful and as good as Sabitri!"

Romoni's eldest daughter was indeed a lovely creature, fair as a water-lily, and with an abundance of wavy raven-black hair. She was taller and more developed than her slender young sisters. Face and figure were nearly perfect and her expression was gentle and good-humoured. Even if her only school prize had been for good conduct, she more than made up for her lack of "head" by her sweetness and simplicity of disposition.

"These are idle words," said Lotika impatiently. "It is certain that no princes are written on *our* foreheads, for we are poor!"

Her mother sighed, and they all sat silent for a minute.

"Do you think that there is really *anything* written here by Fate?" said Monika at last, rubbing her smooth brow with a humorous gesture. "Of course I know there are frowns of rage sometimes on Loti's forehead and mine, and there are lines of love and laughter on yours, Mother dear."

She was sitting close to her mother, and as she spoke she rubbed a cheek against her face, with a kitten-like gesture.

Romoni's ready laugh lit up her face with tenderness. Life had not looked on her with smiles, yet she had somehow contrived to smile bravely upon life. She was the child of poor but upper-class parents, and her mother had died when she was but ten years old. She had gallantly cooked and kept house for

[1] Elder sister.

an exacting father and two hungry brothers for a couple of years. Then a harsh step-mother had roughly deposed her from her position, and at the age of thirteen she had been married to a widower, three times as old as herself.

To his sore disappointment she had borne him no sons, and his property, when he died of diabetes after only five years of married life, had all gone to his younger brother, on whom his widow and three little girls were left dependent for their support. Romoni's own father had also died, and her brothers were not well off, who did nothing for her, but her brother-in-law, Atol Chandra Dass, who was the postmaster of the village in which the family lived, had more than fulfilled his legal obligations to his dead brother's wife. He made her a small but sufficient allowance, and had even built her a little mud house adjoining his own, instead of requiring her to occupy the position of an unpaid servant to his wife, as many men would have done. He was a kind-hearted man, and his wife also was good-natured, and treated her poor relations well. She was perhaps a little patronising, being herself the proud mother of four sons and only one daughter, and by her manner sometimes allowed her sister-in-law to feel the reproach of her sonless widowhood.

The reproach, however, sat lightly on Romoni. She had been a faithful servant rather than a devoted wife to her domineering and ill-tempered husband, and her heart was not broken when he died. She was sorry, of course, not to have had a son, but it certainly never occurred to her to cherish her three children the less because they happened to be daughters.

All the love of an affectionate nature was lavished on them, and as a woman she felt closer to girl-children than she could have felt to boys.

Being a high-caste widow, she was obliged to fast often, and to eat the coarsest rice, but personal deprivations which left her more money to be spent on wholesome dishes for her darlings, troubled her little. To woo their laughter she remembered how to laugh, and as they grew in beauty and stature, as well as in sympathy and understanding, her joy and pride grew also, and she was not ashamed, despite her widowhood, to own herself a happy mother.

"We must get rid of the frowns if we want to find the princes, Moni," she said, caressing the dark head pressed against her own.

"I know I do not deserve a prince," said Monika, "and I am not sure that I want to cook for such a grand gentleman, but Didi has no frowns on her forehead, and she never spoils the curries. Do you know, Mother, to-day I left the frying potatoes on the fire while I ran to catch the kitten! They would all have been burned if Didi had not come like an arrow to save them. I asked her not to tell you about it, but now I want you to know."

"I am glad my treasure does not want to hide anything from me," said Romoni simply, "and I am glad my Nilima is good to her careless little sisters."

"If the potatoes had been burned Didi herself would not have enjoyed eating them," said Lotika dryly.

"That is quite true," Nilima agreed smiling, but Monika turned quickly on her younger sister.

"You would have made more fuss than any one," she exclaimed, "though you were quite near, and

might just as well have lifted them from the fire. I wish they had been burned as black as coals, and that you had had to eat them all!"

"I am quite sure Sabitri never spoiled her lord's breakfast while she played with kittens," retorted Lotika.

"Oh, I am not like Sabitri, and you are not in the least like her," exclaimed Monika. "It is only Didi who deserves to have a prince, and I only wish he would come quickly."

"You are in a hurry to part with me," said Nilima, laughing, but her mother sighed.

Nilima was nearly fourteen, and she was tall and well developed. The Hindu religion required that she should be married, and that speedily. The Brahmans had already begun to talk of fines and expiatory sacrifices, which would be demanded if her nuptials were much longer delayed. Fatherless girls, with no prospect of heavy dowries, are not easily mated in India, and the problem of the future of her daughters weighed often on their mother's mind. Their natural advantages (and the remarkable beauty of the two elder ones was beyond dispute), would weigh little against their pecuniary handicap. Romoni had often spoken to her brother-in-law about Nilima's future, and he had made enquiries in various directions, but so far no bridegroom had been forthcoming. The girls heard and understood the quickly suppressed sigh.

"Why can't you send Didi to the forest to look for a husband?" said Lotika. "Sabitri was a model of virtue, and yet she was allowed to go. We are shut up in this yard like prisoners."

"Sabitri was accompanied by servants and sages," said Romoni smiling. "We have no one to send with our Nilima, and I am sure she would be afraid to go to the forest alone."

"Oh, I should be terrified," said Nilima. "I am not brave like Sabitri." With a yawn she added, "I am so sleepy, Mother. Will it not soon be bedtime?"

"Didi would be content to remain princeless till her life's end," said Lotika. "I cannot understand such patience."

"Why should I be in a hurry to leave such a dear mother?" said Nilima, yawning again. "I certainly do not mean to go in search of a husband. If one is written on my forehead, he will come."

CHAPTER II

A SUITOR FOR NILIMA

On the following day Romoni and her three daughters were invited to the house of her sister-in-law, to help her in cooking food for some visitors, and then to share a meal. The girls were pleased: life at home, now that all three had been pronounced too old to go to school, was sometimes monotonous. Their Aunt Bona always provided very good food, and their cousin, Belarani, was glad to welcome companions of her own age.

On their way to the women's quarters they passed their Uncle Atol, who was accompanied by two young men. Romoni decorously veiled her face with her sari, and Nilima followed her mother's example. Monika was too much of a child to feel shy, and she looked with interest at the strangers. One of the two returned her gaze, and treated her to a mischievous little smile. He was tall and fair, and his glossy curls were carefully arranged on his forehead. His features were good, if rather girlish, and Monika felt much attracted by his appearance. When they had passed she touched Lotika's arm.

"There goes a man who might be fit to marry Didi," she whispered.

"I only saw a monkey in a blue coat," murmured Lotika, who also had not scrupled to use her eyes.

"There are two of them: the one I mean has a coat of tussore silk. Take a look behind you before it is too late."

Both girls turned their heads, and observed, with slight confusion, that the youth in the tussore coat had turned also, and was gazing after them. Monika snatched a glance at the "monkey in blue", and saw that he had a stooping figure, thick lips and a protruding chin.

"No, your tussore-coated man is not bad-looking," Lotika admitted, and then both children hurried after their mother. A minute later they were squatting demurely in the kitchen, preparing vegetables and spices for the coming feast. In the presence of their aunt they dared ask no questions, and they were given no information concerning the two young men.

They quickly noticed, however, that their cousin Bela, a plump, coarse-featured girl, of about Monika's age, was taking no part in the cooking. She was wearing a fine, gold-embroidered sari: her hair had been elaborately dressed, and her feet freshly adorned with crimson dye. Presently her mother called her, and bade her carry brass drinking-vessels full of coco-nut milk to the visitors. Monika and Lotika exchanged glances as Bela went off on this errand, but Nilima, intent on her work, remained unconcerned. She was a deft little cook, and could be trusted to prepare the delicate Indian pastries that her sisters' clumsier hands were not allowed to touch.

After a while Atol Dass came across from the men's sitting-room and beckoned to his sister-in-law. The girls could see him, in an inner room, talking

to her earnestly, in lowered tones. As their aunt had also left the cook-house, their tongues were loosened.

"Didi, are you not excited? I am certain a suitor has come for you," whispered Monika.

Nilima lifted her head in genuine surprise. "How can you say such silly things?" she asked.

"Have you no eyes?" cried both the sisters. "Did you not see that there were two young gentlemen talking with uncle?"

"I noticed that he had visitors, so I veiled myself."

"Oh, you are too good to live, Didi!" exclaimed Lotika. "Well, we saw them, and there is one who might be fit for you."

"The other might make a good match for Bela," said Monika. "They are something alike: at least both are ugly."

In the meantime their uncle was explaining the situation to Romoni.

"Two vessels of marriage have come to see me," he said eagerly. "They are both of suitable family and means. One of them is negotiating for my daughter Bela, but I have not forgotten Nilima's need. If you wish it I will send her in to offer them spices wrapped in leaves, and later, when the feast is ready, she and Bela can serve them."

"Might I see the young men?" asked Romoni. Her heart was beating fast. Atol's news seemed almost too good to be true, and yet it brought her an acute sense of apprehension.

"Oh, certainly," he said, and paused to clear his throat. "Certainly you may see them," he repeated, "but one thing I must explain to you. Nirod Dey

is the better-looking of the two, but his father expects his bride to receive fifteen hundred rupees' worth of ornaments, besides a large sum of money. Nirod's father is a wealthy and respected landlord, and he himself is a failed B.A. We may possibly take him for Bela. She is our only girl, and we must not grudge a heavy outlay. Besides, when our sons marry we shall get good dowries with their wives. He is out of the question for Nilima."

"I see," said Romoni meekly, and she suppressed a sigh. It was hard that her lovely daughter should not have as much right to an eligible husband as her plain-featured niece. She made no complaint, however. The thing was inevitable.

"What about the other young man?" she asked quietly.

Atol's face brightened.

"I think he may suit your Nilima well," he replied with animation. "He says he requires a fair bride, and your girl has a complexion that might satisfy a Raja. He would like a big dowry, of course, but when he knows that is out of the question he may become reasonable. He is a clever lawyer, and quite well-off, if not wealthy. I will give Nilima one or two ornaments, and she will, I suppose, have most of your wedding jewels."

Romoni saw the two young men, and her heart grew a little heavy within her.

The contrast between them was so very marked. Nirod Dey was of good figure, had a frank, kindly expression, and pleasing manners. The young lawyer, Gonesh Bose, was not merely narrow-chested and unhealthy-looking, but there was something repellent

about his face, with its receding forehead, and thick-lipped, tightly-closed mouth.

Still the poor mother knew that she must make the best of any bridegroom whom her brother-in-law was able to provide. Gonesh Bose was not aged or deformed. His complexion was moderately fair, and he was in a position to support a wife.

"Well, what shall we do? Are you satisfied?" asked Atol, when they were once more alone together.

"What can I say?" she answered, with a resigned smile. "Nilima can have no dowry, beyond what you are generous enough to provide. Do not let her see the other young man. She is a good girl and will be satisfied with your choice."

Atol returned contentedly to the men's sitting-room, but he found his younger guest in a dissatisfied frame of mind. Nirod Dey had inspected Belarani without enthusiasm. Now he bluntly asked if his host had not any other daughters.

"No," he replied, "if Bela were not my only girl I could not afford to meet the large demands made by your father."

"But I *saw* another girl: I saw three of them," the boy persisted. He was an only son, and his parents had indulged him, and allowed him much of his own way.

Atol Babu stiffened: he thought the young man impertinent.

"I have some relations in the house," he said coldly. "They are fatherless and very poor."

He decided that Romoni had been very sensible in her suggestion that Nilima should not see this

other young man, and resolved at all costs to carry out her wish.

"They may be very poor, but they are also very pretty," muttered the boy, and after this remark he relapsed into a sulky silence. Presently he took his leave, abruptly declining the meal that had been so carefully prepared for him, and went off, remarking casually that his father would write if there was anything to write about.

Gonesh Babu sat down with his host and two of his sons to the feast, and was waited on by Nilima and her aunt and mother. Lotika, to her secret disgust, was summoned to fan the guest. Later on, when the girls discovered from their mother that the nice-looking youth in the tussore coat was only eligible for their cousin, and that Nilima's suitor was the "monkey in the blue coat", they were both loud in their protests.

Poor Romoni was surprised and distressed by their vehemence. The young man was well dressed and not too bad-looking. He was well off too, and so, though vaguely disappointed, she had been acquiescent in her brother-in-law's choice. The disfavour of the young people, and especially Lotika's outspoken expressions of disgust, bewildered and shocked her.

"Hush, children," she said at last. "Let me hear no more words such as these. We cannot be sure that the match will be arranged, but if it is, we must submit to it. Nilima will join us in a minute or two. I entreat you both, I command you, to say nothing to distress or prejudice her."

Tears stood in her eyes, and the children were instantly repentant. They kissed her, and Monika promised fervently to respect her wishes.

"Can I trust you also, Loti?" said her mother gravely.

"Why, yes, I suppose so," grumbled the child, with a disdainful grimace. "If poor Didi has a monkey husband on her forehead, the only thing to do is to persuade her that he is a prince. I daresay it will not be difficult. There was never any one more easily pleased."

When Nilima rejoined her sisters she was flushed and smiling, and when they questioned her playfully, she answered them with her usual contented simplicity.

"Yes, of course I saw the stranger," she said. "He sat at Uncle's right side. He enjoyed his food, and many a time had I to re-fill his plate. I noticed that he ate many of the pancakes that I had prepared. I put fish on his plate three times. No, he did not speak to me, but he asked Uncle who had done the cooking. What was he like? Why, you saw him yourself, Loti, for you were fanning him. I did not lift my eyes to his face, but I know he wore green socks and brown shoes, and he had a seal ring on one of his fingers, and his coat was blue, with black buttons."

Monika suddenly threw her arms round Nilima's neck.

"Perhaps he is to be your bridegroom, and yet you never stole a glance at his face," she said. "Oh, you best of Didis, if he is to be your prince, may he love you as Sabitri's husband loved her."

Lotika sat in silence, biting her lip. Her mother hoped that Nilima would not look in her direction. Certainly she noticed nothing amiss as she returned Monika's caresses.

"Probably he will not like me," she said. "Do you know, when I was called to wait on him I was wearing the sari in which I had been cooking, and it was stained with yellow turmeric!"

Gonesh Bose did not apparently notice the turmeric. He did, however, observe the girl's graceful figure, beautiful arms and lovely, modest face.

A day or two later Atol Dass came to tell his sister-in-law, with great pride, that everything had been settled.

"He has been quite reasonable," he said, "and only asks for clothes and ornaments for the bride. I am fixing up Nilima's wedding even before that of my own daughter," he added virtuously. "Nirod's father suggests a postponement of that affair until the boy has taken his degree. Of course Bela is much younger than Nilima: I am glad that your child will be married first."

Atol did not know that it was the young man, and not his father, who had insisted on the postponement of the wedding. On reaching home he had announced decisively that he would not marry Belarani.

"Why, what are your objections?" asked his father.

"Oh, I have plenty of objections," said Nirod. "Her nose is one. It is far too broad. Then her eyes are too small, and her neck is too short, and she is an ugly shape."

"It is a pity that you don't like the girl," said his father, "for her father is a good man, and she will have a respectable dowry."

"I will marry into the family if you will let me

take a niece," said Nirod. "A girl with a face like a lily and eyes like stars." But his father, having discovered that the niece in question had no dowry, advocated the postponement of the marriage until the lad should have taken his degree.

In the meantime the arrangements for Nilima's wedding went forward speedily. Her mother's jewels and pretty clothes were shared among the sisters. Nilima was unwilling to take more than her fair share. Her uncle, with whom she was a favourite, gave her half a dozen gold bangles, a necklace and a silk sari or two. Nilima was delighted with everything, and looked forward to her wedding with interest and serenity. She trusted her mother and her uncle completely, and had no misgivings regarding the future.

Monika also threw herself with child-like zest into the preparations for the ceremony. She had forgotten her early prejudice against the bridegroom, and looked forward to a merry time. The young sisters of a bride are privileged to joke with and play tricks on a new brother-in-law, and Monika was full of plans for offering him faked and inedible dishes, and otherwise making him look foolish. She rather alarmed Nilima.

"You must be careful, Moni," said she. "It would be terrible if you annoyed him. He might become angry with me."

"Oh, it is against all rules for bridegrooms to show annoyance," replied Monika, "and you and mother will have to see that there is plenty of real food for him to eat when he has had enough of my make-belief dainties."

Lotika could not shake off her uneasiness. When she was alone with Monika she unburdened her heart.

"Didi will have a terrible shock at the time of the blessed view," she said, referring to the moment when a veil is thrown over the heads of a newly-wedded couple, and they are bidden to look at one another and exchange garlands. In olden days this was often their first opportunity for mutual inspection, but a modern Indian bridegroom prefers to have a previous peep at his destined partner for life.

Lotika continued: "I wish she had looked at more than his shoes and socks the other day. She would have been a little prepared for her horrible destiny."

"Oh, don't make a linseed into a palm-tree, Loti," said her sister. "He is not beautiful, but I don't believe Didi will mind that, so long as he is kind to her."

"Does he look kind?" said Lotika. "If he had merely the ugliness of Bela, I should not mind. She looks good-natured, but his mouth is cruel, and the look in his eyes makes me shudder. However, since he appears to be written on poor Didi's forehead, as you say, it is useless to complain."

The hot weather had given place to the rains when the date and hour fixed by the readers of horoscopes for the ceremony, arrived. There was no hot wind now, and the sun seldom showed its face. When rain was not falling the air was steamy and oppressive. Human energy flags during the rains, and the endurance of mother and daughters was severely taxed as they prepared the wedding feast.

On the auspicious day Nilima fasted punctiliously, went about carrying nutmegs in her mouth, and conformed to various other curious and tiring customs, supposed to be conducive to good luck. She even refused the fruit and milk surreptitiously brought to her by Monika, though even Brahman orthodoxy "winks at" some light refreshment for a child bride. Nilima, however, was anxious to keep every rule, lest she should run any risk of offending the bridegroom. Once her mother found her quietly crying, but it was not from fear of marriage, only from child-like sorrow at the prospect of leaving her dear ones. Romoni clasped her in her arms, and their tears mingled: it was not an easy day for the mother.

"You will soon be back with us, my golden girl," she whispered. "Your husband's parents are dead, and his sister will perform the ceremonies of welcome to your new home. As soon as they are over, you will come back to us again."

A young wife's first ceremonial visit to her husband's house is almost always a short one, but as soon as he chooses he may send for her a second time, and keep her as long as he likes.

"I wish there had been a mother-in-law," said Nilima.

"And yet," said her mother, "she might have beaten you, my darling."

Nilima shivered.

"Do you think my lord will beat me?" she whispered.

"Why should any one beat my good, obedient, gentle daughter?" said Romoni. "Never withstand

his wishes, and look well to his cooking. Few men can brook an ill-prepared meal."

"Indeed I will try hard to please him in all things," said Nilima fervently. "He shall never have an ill-cooked meal, and he shall be like a god to me."

There was nothing calculated to attract worship about the bridegroom, when he arrived with his friends and relations, amid the flaring lights, discordant music, and coloured paper decorations, that are required to swell the gaiety of a bridal procession in India. This particular procession was not very gay, as rain was descending in torrents. The coloured paper was sodden, the musicians were shivering, and most of the lights had gone out. Gonesh himself was smartly dressed, but his appearance was not imposing. His features were certainly unpleasing, and others beside Lotika were repelled by the expression on his sullen face.

The bride, of course, did not see him, as she was not permitted to share in the ceremonies of welcome. She sat apart in her wedding finery, and listened from afar to the shouting and laughter, and to the sad, weird blasts of the conch-shell trumpets that hailed the arrival of the bridegroom's procession. Her mother, too, as a widow, was not permitted to share in the ceremonies, half playful and half religious, to which Gonesh was subjected, and to which he submitted with a very bad grace.

At last the moment arrived for the blindfolded bride to be carried seven times round the groom, and then in the half darkness of the sheltering veil, to look into his face and place her garland round his neck. Nilima was spared the shock that Lotika had

feared for her. She tried to raise her eyes, but shyness and modesty overcame her. Her fingers trembled so much that she could not disengage her garland, and Gonesh had to take it himself from her neck.

This seemed to Nilima an act of great condescension on his part, and she felt quite happy. Gonesh probably made up by the length and intensity of his scrutiny for her failure to take advantage of the "blessed view", but of this she was unconscious.

After this, in an atmosphere blue with incense smoke, the religious part of the ceremony was completed by a bald and wrinkled priest, who muttered Sanscrit incantations with incredible rapidity. The bride's uncle and the bridegroom made various declarations. The bride, a "chattel" only throughout the whole proceedings, sat heavily veiled and with bowed head, facing her new possessor. At last the wedding was over, and merry-making again commenced. Bride and bridegroom, both famished after twenty-four hours of fasting, had food pressed between their lips by the fingers of innumerable well-wishers.

Soon came the hour of departure. The damp procession was reformed. The three hired bands, playing three different tunes, struck up their discordant tumult. The bridegroom, enthroned on a gilded chair, was borne on a small platform by half a dozen grunting and sweating coolies, and at the rear of the procession more coolies carried a box-like palanquin, tightly shuttered. In this sat Nilima, weeping from very weariness, and a woman-servant, who fanned her vigorously with a palm-leaf fan.

CHAPTER III

A GLIMPSE OF ROMANCE

THE house seemed very lonely without Nilima. Romoni's customary cheerfulness failed her: Monika fretted openly, and even Lotika's eyelids were red and swollen on the morning after her sister's departure. The weather was not comforting. Rain continued to descend in torrents, at frequent intervals. Grass, weeds, creepers, and lusty young trees sprang up everywhere, and especially in unusual and undesirable places, such as paved courtyards, roofs and chinks in walls. One evening Monika killed a small poisonous snake in the sleeping-room, and on another occasion Uncle Atol and his man-servant had to be summoned to deal with an aggressive hooded cobra that had established itself in a corner of the kitchen.

Monika and her sister sparred and squabbled more then usual, and their mother seemed to lack her usual power to control and pacify them. Only when she mentioned Nilima did they grow quiet: to a certain extent they shared the vague forebodings with which she counted the hours till the return of her first-born.

No disaster, however, befell Nilima. She returned within a week, looking pale and tired certainly, but smiling and animated. She had plenty of stories to

tell her sisters: of her wearying journey, and arrival among strangers, of the ceremonies with which her sister-in-law had greeted her, and of the feast at which she had been obliged to place the rice with her own fingers on the plate of every guest. This feast is a necessary part of a marriage celebration; by eating from the bride's hands the relations of her husband recognised her formally as a member of the family.

Only when her stories were finished and she sat in silence, did her lips droop pensively, and her big eyes grow clouded, as with some unspoken disappointment or fear.

"She has seen his face," thought Lotika, observing the expression, "and learned what it is like to have an ugly ape for a husband."

When alone with Romoni, Nilima asked wistfully one day, "How long were you allowed to stay at home after your wedding, Mother dear?"

"About three months," was the answer, "but I did not mind when they sent for me. My step-mother treated me unkindly."

"Only three months," Nilima repeated, and her mother felt her tremble.

"Some brides are allowed to stay with their parents for a year or more," she said consolingly, though she knew that in the case of a bride of over fourteen years, such a long respite was improbable. Nilima heaved a sigh of relief.

"Oh, it will be lovely if I may stay with you for a whole year," she said, and added seriously, "When I go I will be very good, and very meek, and I will cook food fit for gods."

After a pause she added softly, "I will be very brave, too."

Romoni asked no questions, but clasped her daughter tightly to her breast. Presently Nilima looked up with a smile.

"Were you not very happy and very fond of me, when I was your first, very own little baby, Mother dear?"

"You are still my first, very own little baby," replied Romoni, with a sob in her voice, and then both sat in silence for a space.

Presently Romoni roused herself and exclaimed, "Run, Nilima, and call your sisters. They are climbing on that palm trunk again. They will fall and break their necks one of these days."

A recent gale had uprooted an ancient coco-nut palm tree, and thrown it, at rather a steep angle, against the courtyard wall. Lotika and Monika had dared one another to walk up the round slippery trunk. They were very sure-footed on their little bare toes, but their mother did not encourage their gymnastic feats.

On this occasion Lotika had essayed mounting the trunk with an earthern water-vessel balanced on her head, and before Nilima could reach her she had swayed to one side. The jar fell with a tremendous crash, and Lotika toppled after it. Monika, who had urged on her younger sister to attempt the feat, sprang conscience-stricken to her aid. She broke her fall, but slightly sprained her own wrist in the process, and Lotika was somewhat bruised and scratched by the broken earthenware. She burst into angry tears and screams, accusing her sister of trying

to kill her. Monika's compunction gave place to wrath.

"I hurt myself to save you, luck-forsaken one," she exclaimed. "You are only a little scratched, but with your huge weight you have nearly broken my hand off."

It was all that Nilima could do to prevent her sisters from hitting one another. She hastily fetched rags and cold water, and bound their wounds, with many a soothing word of sympathy. Lotika made such a fuss that Belarani came running from the next house, to ask if anyone had been killed. The humiliating details had to be explained, and Bela remarked that to hear Loti scream you would think her to be only six years old. This criticism was not unjust. Lotika had always been a curious mixture of precocity and childishness, and had not yet learned the elements of self-control.

At Bela's remark she howled more loudly than ever, but Monika's indignation became directed against her cousin. She had plenty of family loyalty, and was not slow to remind Bela of how she had heard her scream "like the whistle of a steam-engine" at the mere sight of a scorpion, a few days previously.

Nilima, having administered all necessary first-aid, now suggested further consolation in the form of hot sweetmeats. Clouds quickly vanished, and the sisters, accompanied by Bela, repaired amicably to the cook-house to prepare them.

"Oh, what shall we do when you go to your husband's house, Didi?" exclaimed Monika. "Life was intolerable while you were away."

"We shall quarrel all day and all night," said

Lotika. "When he sends for you the only thing to do will be to bar the gate."

Nilima said nothing: the smile had died suddenly out of her eyes.

. . . . .

In less than three months Gonesh Babu arrived abruptly to take away his bride. As he had not written previously, none of the usual preparations for feasting a son-in-law had been made. A hasty meal was prepared, but Monika found no opportunity for practical joking. As a matter of fact, even she would not have dared to play tricks on such a grim-looking brother-in-law.

When Nilima heard her husband's voice, as he entered the courtyard, her face, as Lotika expressed it, "withered". In a moment however, she regained her composure, and having veiled herself, went out calmly, "to take the dust off his feet." Then she busied herself in helping to prepare his meal. She already knew his favourite dishes, and measured accurately the amount of hot spice that he liked with his curry.

When the time for parting came, she did not cry aloud, nor make any attempt to prolong her farewells. She disengaged herself firmly from her sisters' clinging arms, whispering that she must not keep him waiting.

"Write to us often," they entreated. "Let us know if you are not well or not happy, and we will ask Uncle to fetch you home."

"Hush, hush," she whispered. "He will hear. Why should I not be well? Of course I will write,

and do you write to me. Take care of Mother, and do not let her do all the work."

Gonesh called to her to make haste, and she ran to obey him. For a moment she clung to her mother's feet (the old-fashioned gesture of parting from a parent); then, with her face completely veiled, she climbed into the hired carriage. Her husband followed her, and closed the shutters. The driver whipped up his scraggy ponies, and they drove rapidly away.

Romoni broke down then and wept, and the children, who had seldom seen their mother in tears, sobbed and lamented aloud.

"I am glad Didi did not cry," said Monika at last, wiping her eyes on her mother's sari.

"Are you?" said Lotika sharply. "I am not. Poor Didi was afraid to cry."

They received a short, ill-spelled letter, announcing their sister's safe arrival at her new home, and sending dutiful salutations to all her relations, but after that for many months her family heard no news of Nilima.

. . . . .

In November, when the rains had ceased, and the sun, cheerful but not intolerably hot, was drying the sodden plains, Nirod Dey lost his father. One dark night the old man stepped on a small snake and was bitten, but the pain was so slight that he did not realise at first what had happened. Within less than an hour convulsions set in, and before midnight he was dead, and his only son had inherited his large estate.

Nirod was convinced, probably correctly, that he was incapable of passing his B.A. Examination. It was, indeed, unnecessary for him to do so, as he was now a rich man, and he abandoned his studies with satisfaction. He immediately left College, and came home to attend to the business connected with the property. His mother had long been an invalid, and he found life at home depressing. As soon as the funeral ceremonies were over he sought consolation among his young friends, but he agreed with his mother and guardians when they advised him to marry and settle down.

Belarani's name was again suggested, and rejected with scorn. Two or three other well-dowered damsels were offered on approval, but none of them satisfied the fastidious youth. One day Nirod, on his own initiative, called on Atol Chandra Dass. He had dressed himself with care and looked a very fine fellow. He had been obliged to shave his head, in connection with the mourning ceremonies, and he had a short crop, which suited him better than the scented curls that had been his pride. He was accorded an effusive welcome. Hope springs eternal, and a private message was promptly sent to Bela's mother to prepare the girl for inspection. Nirod, however, speedily destroyed all Atol's castles in the air.

"I have come in the hope of seeing your nieces," he explained frankly. "I remember them as very beautiful. My father has left me plenty of money, and I can afford to marry whom I will. There is no need for me to demand a dowry."

"Do your mother and your uncles share your views?" asked poor Atol, rather coldly.

Nirod laughed, and flicked with his slender walking-stick at a passing hornet. The gesture suggested that the views of his relations were of little importance in his eyes.

"My mother wants me to be happy," he said, "and I am sure you want to find husbands for your brother's daughters."

"My eldest niece has already been suitably espoused to Mr. Gonesh Bose, a gentleman whom you met in my house."

"I remember him, a sulky-faced fellow. Never mind, there are two more girls of an age to marry, and one of them is even prettier than her elder sister."

"You are very observant, Nirod Babu," said Atol with a dry smile.

He realised that he had better make the best of the situation. If he could not get this most eligible partner for his daughter, it would be a fine thing to secure him for one of his dowerless nieces. Monika was nearly thirteen, well above the average age for marriage in Bengal.

"Some faces compel observation," said Nirod quietly.

"Very well, please wait here for a few moments, while I consult my sister-in-law," said his host, now all smiles once more.

Romoni could scarcely believe her ears when Atol gave her his message. Romance tastes as sweet in the East as it does in the West: sweeter perhaps, since those spicy breezes and palmy plains make for it an alluring setting. Yet romance, or at any rate legitimate romance, is rare in India, and seldom concerns itself with matrimony. Parents and grand-

parents, who have generally forgotten their own youth, arrange the nuptials of their descendants. They are guided by expediency or, possibly, cupidity, and drive the best possible bargain, and when all is settled, they expect both bridegroom and bride to acquiesce unmurmuringly in the arrangement made. There is no suspense, no anxious yet alluring courtship, no delicious wooing and winning. The astonishing thing to an onlooker seems to be, not that there are many unhappy marriages in India, but that there are so many happy ones.

Here, however, to the humble, secluded little household of Romoni Dass, came suddenly the sweet and glorious presence of Romance.

A beautiful, well-born and wealthy youth, having seen for a few moments the face of a girl—and that girl Romoni's own daughter—had rejected the charms of heiresses, and come to request the maiden's hand in honourable wedlock!

Romoni, though her face was lined with many sorrows, was not yet herself thirty years old. It was not wonderful that, as she listened, she seemed to renew her youth like an eagle. Her eyes glowed, and her cheeks grew warm. Atol stared at her surprised, and realised, perhaps for the first time, whence his nieces had inherited their good looks. A wistful thought of her first-born momentarily clouded her happiness, but she told herself that Nilima should come to this wedding—if, indeed, it ever took place. Unselfish Nilima would assuredly rejoice in her little sister's happiness.

Monika was summoned, but she was not decked out in silks and satins and red dye. Her mother

knew well how unnecessary, in her case, were such adornments. Clad in a clean but perfectly plain cotton garment, with her thick hair flowing loose, for she had lately bathed, she ran across to her uncle's house, having been told merely that he wanted to see her. She was quite free from self-consciousness, therefore, when she entered the men's sitting-room carrying the glasses of sherbet with which her aunt had intrusted her for Atol and his guest. Her eyes met Nirod's with frank and friendly interest. She recognised him at once, and wondered why Bela had not been sent with the sherbet instead of herself. Probably, she reflected, Bela was not ready. Her toilet, on the occasion of the former visit, had been very elaborate.

"Aunt bade me ask if you would like more sugar in your sherbet," she said demurely, as Nirod took his glass.

"No, it is very nice. Did you make it yourself?" asked the young man, looking at her with the bright smile that she remembered.

"No, my aunt made it, but I could have done so. Sherbet is very easy to prepare."

"Is it?" said Nirod, "I suppose curries and pancakes and sweetmeats are not so easily made? Tell me, are you a good cook?"

"I have learned how to cook," said Monika, "but Mother does not let me cook much, because my curries have a way of getting burnt."

Nirod laughed, as if much amused. He had a very pleasant laugh, and his eyes shone with merriment.

"Where there are plenty of Brahman cooks, the

ladies of the house do not need to make curries," he said.

This remark puzzled Monika.

"We have no hired cook," she said. "But my mother never burns a curry nor spoils any dish."

In her heart she was asking, "Oh, why could not Didi have had this charming bridegroom? He is far too good for Bela!"

"There," said Nirod, returning the empty glass. "Ask your aunt if she has any more of this excellent sherbet. I am still thirsty."

When she came back with the re-filled glass, however, he seemed in no hurry to drink. He continued the conversation, while Atol Dass, sitting quietly by, sipped meditatively.

"You have confessed that you cannot cook well," said Nirod. "Now tell me, can you read and write? Do you know any English?"

"Yes—no," said Monika. "I can read Bengali but not English. I can write a little. Why do you want to know?"

Having asked the careless question, she suddenly wished that she had not done so. Something in his eyes gave her her answer, and she felt her face grow hot as she looked away.

"Who taught you?" he asked. "Have you been to school?"

"Yes, to a Mission School, but we did not learn English there. I learned to sing and sew, and I can do sums, but very badly."

"Oh, you do sums badly," said Nirod, laughing again. "Then if you should ever marry, you would not be able to keep the *bazar* account?"

The sudden reference to marriage confused Monika, but only for a moment. She threw Nirod a mischievous side-glance, from under her long lashes, and said gravely, "I daresay I could manage to keep *bazar* accounts. I would certainly try my very best."

Having said this she made her escape from the room, forgetting to wait for the empty glasses.

When she had gone, Nirod turned smiling to Atol Dass.

"That is the girl I mean to marry," he exclaimed. "She is just as I remember her, or if possible more beautiful. I will supply her whole outfit, and two thousand rupees' worth of jewels. She will never need to do her own cooking, and as for English, that I will teach her myself!"

Monika, meantime, ran fleetly home, and told her mother and sister about her experiences. At least she told them something about them, though she may not have mentioned that last side-long glance, nor her remark concerning *bazar* accounts. Her bright eyes and excited speech filled in some gaps perhaps, though she ended by explaining, for Lotika's special benefit, "Of course he has come to see Bela. It is too bad. He would have been the very man for Didi."

"As it is too late for him to marry Didi, I expect you would like him for yourself," said Lotika thoughtfully, "and it is certainly funny that he should have asked you all those questions—if he has simply to arrange a marriage with Bela. You are lucky, with your fair skin. No one but a bogey will ever want to marry me!"

"Don't talk such nonsense," exclaimed Monika. "Rich men always marry rich girls, don't they,

Mother? If our fair, good Didi only got a man like Gonesh because we are poor, is it likely that Nirod Dey would marry me? As soon as he finds that none of us will get dowries he will fix up a match with Belarani."

CHAPTER IV

THE MARRIAGE OF MONIKA

ROMONI spent the next few days in almost breathless suspense. Young men are proverbially fickle, and this one had tried to act without the approval of his elders. Would mature counsels prevail, and the golden blossom of her hope be nipped in the bud? She discouraged her daughters from talking about Nirod Dey, but he occupied most of her own thoughts. Often the girls seemed to read what was passing in her mind.

"I wish you would tell us your happy secret," coaxed Monika one day. "It peeps out of your eyes, even though you have padlocked your lips."

"Probably," said Lotika dryly, "Mother is thinking about Belarani's approaching wedding."

Only when young Nirod, after one or two more visits, came accompanied by an uncle, and provided with sweetmeats and presents, did Romoni shake off her fears, and openly welcome Romance to her home. Having been officially informed that Nirod's relations approved his choice, she went to call Monika.

"I have news for you, my little one," she said, "and something to show you."

Perhaps the very greatness of her gratitude had solemnized her. Her voice quivered and Monika saw that she was trembling.

"What is it?" she asked alarmed. "Something about Didi?"

"No, no, my darling. This is good news—at least for you."

"Oh Mother, Mother," cried Monika, trembling in her turn, while she clasped her hands above her throbbing heart. "It is not—surely it cannot be—Nirod Dey!"

"Hush, hush, my child. You must no longer speak of him by name." (An orthodox Hindu bride thinks it immodest to mention her husband's name).

Monika stared at her mother for a moment. Then she understood, and buried her face against Romoni's shoulder.

"It can't be true," she whispered. "It must be a dream. I have no money, no jewels, no English! You must be mistaken, Mother dear."

"Come and see what he has brought for you, and tell me if I am mistaken," cried Romoni, almost a child again in her joy and pride. "I have been talking to him, and he spoke to me as though I were his mother. Already I feel towards him as though he were my son. I hope—I think—he will be kind to you, my precious treasure."

"Oh, you need not be afraid," said Monika, laughing against her mother's neck. "I know he will be kind. He is just like Sabitri's Prince. He could not be anything but good to me. Mother, my breast is breaking with joy. I could not tell you before, but every night I have gone to sleep thinking of him, and every night I have seen him in my dreams."

The gifts were displayed—a costly sari of embroidered sea-green silk, perfumes, sweetmeats, bangles, and a lovely, jewelled hair ornament.

"He is waiting to see you," Romoni explained, rather shyly. "I suggested that he should wait for the blessed view, but he laughs at our old customs. You must put on the sari, and go and take the dust of his feet."

"May I make a garland to hang round his neck?" asked Monika. A garland is an offering symbolic of reverence and devotion.

"No, my child," said Romoni. "We must not keep him waiting. Besides, it would hardly be modest to garland him before the wedding."

"I must tell Lotika," cried Monika, springing from her mother's lap, and clapping her hands above her head. She danced rather than ran to the cook-house, where Lotika had been left in sole charge of the evening meal.

"Loti, Loti, come and help me to put on my lovely new sari. One whose name I must not mention has sent it for me. He wants to marry me, though I have no dowry and no jewels. He wants me for myself! But Loti, I wish he had a twin brother for you."

"I wish there had been three of him—one for Didi also," said Lotika. "Still we could not all leave poor Mother at the same time. Besides," she added, for she could not long maintain so high a level of unselfishness, "who but an ogre will ever marry burnt-faced Lotika!"

As soon as the horoscope reader permitted, the marriage of Nirod and Monika took place. Monika wrote to Nilima, and her uncle wrote to Gonesh Babu, begging permission for the girl to come home for her sister's wedding. No answer was received to either letter. Romoni was troubled, but she was too busy

to fret. Up to the day of the marriage she hoped that Nilima and her husband would arrive in time for the event.

Beautiful and costly presents were lavished by the bridegroom and his family on the lucky bride. He was most considerate in every way, and even sent enormous fish from his tanks, and generous supplies of vegetables and clarified butter from his estate, in order that the expenses of the wedding feast might not tax the resources of the widowed mother. He apologised for these gifts, explaining that he meant to bring a good many companions, and that they all possessed enormous appetites.

The so-called "cold weather" had come, a pleasant season which resembles that rarity, a fine English summer. Weather conditions were perfect, and the fact that midnight was the indicated astrological hour for the ceremony, rather added to its gaiety. A splendid moon was shining when the gorgeous procession arrived, and even its brilliance could not drown the glory of the forest of fairy trees (the glass fruits of which contained dazzling jets of acetylene gas), which preceded and followed the bridegroom's garishly decorated motor-car.

Nirod brought with him an army of hilarious and rather boisterous friends. It was a very different occasion from Nilima's rain-soaked and depressing wedding. The house rang with laughter, and all the time-honoured little ceremonies were made the occasion of jests. Even the religious formalities were perfunctorily observed, and interrupted by remarks in English by the young men, which Romoni uneasily felt would have shocked her if she had understood

them. Custom decreed that as a widow, she should take a back place, while Bela's mother, with other married relatives and friends, prepared the bridegroom, and girl-friends dressed the bride.

Everybody was merry, but Romoni, an earnest Hindu, would have liked to see more reverence and gravity. The gods had been unusually kind, she reflected, and common gratitude suggested that their worship should not be curtailed or slurred over. No one appeared to share her uneasiness. Monika and Lotika were radiant. The "blessed view" passed off happily for both boy and girl. Nirod's eyes were full of admiration and tenderness, and Monika's eager, uplifted face shone with the love and joy that she made no effort to conceal.

Of course there were tears when the hour of parting came, but they were not unhappy tears. Nirod promised to take great care of his bride, and to bring her safely back within a week. When the music and shouting of the bridal procession had died away in the distance, and she and Lotika sat alone in the dark, quiet cottage, Romoni had leisure to be sorrowful. Resolutely she had refused to think about Nilima: now her heart cried out for her first-born, and would not be comforted. It was in vain that she attempted to assume cheerfulness for Lotika's sake.

"You need not pretend to laugh, Mother, when you want to cry," said the girl. "Indeed, I feel like howling myself. The house is miserable without Monika. I have no one to quarrel with."

"You had better go next door, and start an argument with Belarani," said her mother smiling.

"Of what use would that be?" exclaimed Lotika,

scornfully. "Why, she is too stupid to answer back! But take courage, Mother. Moni will come back to us in a few days, as happy as a queen."

"I hope so," said Romoni. "I was not thinking about Moni."

"I understand," said Lotika. "You are fretting for Didi. Why was she not allowed to come to the wedding? Mother, it may be wrong, but I cannot help it! Though Gonesh Babu is my brother-in-law, yet I hate him with all my heart!"

"Hush, hush, Loti. Do not take such words into your mouth. He may not have received our letters, or he may have so many clients and law-suits to attend to, that he cannot leave his work."

At the end of a week Monika returned home, and almost the first thing that she did was to discard all her fine clothes and ornaments, put on her oldest garment, and climb the slanting palm trunk! Having descended unscathed, she sat down in the cook-house, snatched the stone rolling-pin from her mother, and began to crush spices.

"Oh, how tired I am of being a bride," she exclaimed. "My anklets were too tight, and my silk clothes were too hot, and my hair ornaments made my head ache! My mother-in-law was very kind, but she is weakly, and lolls on cushions all day, and she liked me to do the same. I had to sit for hours, with my head bent—so—and my hands folded—so—till I thought I should turn into an earthen image! Unless someone asked me a question I was not expected to speak. At intervals some old lady would come and lift my veil and stare at me. They said nice things about me certainly, and some of them gave me orna-

ments, as if I had not enough heavy gold hung about me already! Oh, how glad I am to be at home again."

"I was afraid," said Lotika, "that you would despise this mud hut. What is your new home like?"

"Oh, it is beautiful," said Monika, with a happy sigh. "It is three storeys high, and the rooms are ever so big, and I wish you could see the carved bedsteads, and the big wardrobes, and the pictures."

"You will soon fret to go back to your palace," said Lotika.

"Don't talk like a great ass! I wanted you and Mother, and—and Didi all the time. You would love the garden! It is full of flowering shrubs, and there is a big tank, with six sets of steps going down to it, and coco-nut palms planted round it. I was allowed to bathe in it, and the water was so cool. Then I sat on the bank and watched the birds. I never saw such brilliant king-fishers."

"Did many guests eat of the bride's rice?" asked Romoni.

"Oh, thousands, I should think! I enjoyed that day, because I had something to do, besides sitting on a cushion with my head bent."

"I suppose you were busy in the kitchen?" asked her sister.

"Oh no, there are crowds of servants, men and women. I did not do any cooking, and I shall never need to do so. As for the *bazar* accounts, they will be easy, for they hardly have to buy anything. There are big, fat cows, and we had quantities of milk, and curds, and clarified butter. I could not count the oxen and the goats. They grow all their own rice

and pulse and vegetables, and eat fish out of their own tanks. All I had to do at the feast was to put food on the plates of the guests. Even that kept me pretty busy, but they were all so kind and cheerful that I enjoyed myself."

"The gods have been very good to my little girl," said Romoni softly. "I hope you will not forget their sacrifices, or the Brahmans' dues, or the feeding of the poor."

Monika and her sister exchanged glances.

"I hope my husband will feed the poor," said Monika, "for that, I am sure, pleases God. But I do not think he cares very much about religion."

After a moment's silence she added, with a sudden burst of confidence: "There is just one thing that makes me a little uneasy. He and his friends drink things that intoxicate them!"

"Impossible! Why, they are gentlefolk," cried ignorant Lotika. "Only out-castes and savages squat in the toddy booths, and have fermented palm-sap poured down their throats."

"Oh, they do not go to the toddy booths," said Monika, smiling. "My husband's friends do not mix with out-castes."

"Then how can they get *drunk*?" asked Lotika, pronouncing the last word in tones of extreme contempt and disgust.

"You need not speak of them as though they were snakes or toads," exclaimed Monika. "I wish I had not mentioned the matter. They drink wine and brandy—gentlefolks' drinks. You know sahibs[1] sometimes become intoxicated, don't they, Mother?"

[1] Englishmen.

Romoni had listened in silence hitherto, dismay at her heart. Now she spoke quietly, but with a sadness that cut more sharply than Lotika's disgust.

"I do not wish to judge the Sahibs," she said, "but your husband is not a Sahib. He is a Bengali gentleman. To become intoxicated is to disgrace himself."

Monika bit her lip, and tears welled up in her eyes.

"I was afraid you would feel like that, Mother," she said, "but I think you do not understand. Have you not told me that my husband is to be in the place of a god to me? How can I think of him as disgracing himself? You have always lived in a village, and you do not understand what goes on in the world. My husband's friends are all well-born and well educated. Some of them have been to England. You cannot expect them to follow all the rules of their grandfathers."

Poor Romoni was silent, bewildered and distressed. Certainly she must say nothing to lower Monika's lord and master in her eyes. Yet, the idea of drunkenness—associated in her mind with the eating of the flesh of cows and pigs—was unutterably loathsome.

"What do they do when they are drunken?" asked Lotika curiously. "The out-castes dance and sing, and sometimes beat one another."

"How should I know what they do?" said Monika, impatiently. "Do you suppose that I sit with them while they are drinking? I saw the wine bottles, and I wondered for whom they had been bought. An old maidservant explained the matter. I have heard them singing too, from the men's parlour. They generally sing English songs."

This slightly improved the situation in Lotika's

eyes. Out-castes and savages did not sing in English when intoxicated!

There was a short pause, and then Monika heaved a sigh, and lifting her eyes to her mother's face, smiled wistfully.

"My husband loves me very much," she said. "He has told me so, and he is very kind to me. Some day I shall tell him that it makes me sad when he drinks wine, and I believe that for my sake he will give up doing so."

There was a light of pride and determination in her eyes, and she looked older than her thirteen years. Lotika stared at her with a kind of awe, but her mother sighed. Better than her daughter, she realised the power of the enemy.

"We will pray to the gods also," she said, "and offer gifts."

Again Monika and her sister exchanged glances.

"Mother," said Lotika, "do you remember that when we went to the Mission School, we all three learned about Jesus Lord?"

"Of course I remember," said Romoni, uneasily. "At Mission Schools all the children are taught about Him. There is no harm in it."

"I think there is a great deal of good in it," said Monika, boldly. "He hears our prayers and helps us when we are in trouble."

"He is the Sahibs' God, not ours," replied he mother.

"They say He is everybody's God. We do not talk about Him much, for we do not want to vex you and Uncle, but we all pray to Him."

"Perhaps that is the reason of all our troubles,"

said Romoni, with sudden bitterness. "Why should we pray to the Sahibs' God?"

"He was not a Sahib," said Monika. "He did not live in their land, but in a land nearer to our own. He was—and is—good, and pure, and gentle and forgiving."

"Why are the gods of your fathers not enough for you?" said Romoni.

"They are not so kind as He is," Monika replied.

"Yes, children, I do not doubt that He was kind," said Romoni. Already she repented of her harsh words. Bigotry was foreign to her gentle nature, but Monika's news had embittered her.

"I have never forbidden you to give worship to Jesus," she added, "but I do not think we need the gods of the English, for have we not over thirty-three thousand of our own?"

CHAPTER V

THE HOME-COMING OF NILIMA

THE short winter gave place to spring, which is too hot a season to be really pleasant in India. A few flowers had appeared on the earth, and many on the ponds and lakes. The latter—white, pink and crimson water-lilies—were very beautiful, and so were the cotton-trees, which were laden with huge scarlet and black blossoms. Fruit trees were also in bloom, but mostly with heavily-scented spikes of greenish flowerets, which were not conspicuously lovely. The trees of India are never bare, but tender green and pink leaves were pushing last year's shabby foliage off the boughs, and woods and orchards were renewing their youth.

The birds were busy and noisy. Crows and kites, bulbuls and orioles, mynahs and sparrows, all were house-building, and all were chattering, screaming or singing to their mates. One morning Lotika stood watching with amusement a pair of blue jays which had nested in a hole in a tree, outside the court-yard wall. The young birds had hatched out, and she could see them thrusting forth their bare heads and gaping yellow-tipped beaks, for the food which their devoted parents kept pushing down their throats. Her attention was distracted by the arrival of the post-man, in his khaki tunic and turban, and great was

her excitement when he produced a letter from his yellow canvas bag.

She ran with it to her mother, exclaiming: "It is from Didi—I know her big, untidy hand-writing!"

The envelope was unstamped, and the address scrawled in pencil. Nilima had never got beyond the rudiments of education. The letter itself was short and badly spelled.

> "Honoured Mother," it ran, "accept my salutations. How is your body, and those of my sisters? I have become ill, and unhappy. I desire to see you, but unless my honoured uncle can fetch me, I cannot do so. The end. Nilima."

Romoni's face grew pale as Monika spelled out this letter to her. She knew well that her patient and unselfish child, who hated to give pain to anyone, would never have written thus without the very gravest reason. With the letter in her hand she hurried to her brother-in-law's house.

She arrived at an auspicious moment. Atol Dass had just completed a marriage arrangement for his daughter. The bridegroom was perhaps not quite so wealthy as Nirod Dey, but he was older and wiser, and had a Government post, a good salary, and the prospect of a pension. Atol felt well satisfied with his morning's work.

He took the paper and read the pathetic little scrawl with knitted brows. Nilima had always been his favourite niece, and he felt responsible for having arranged the match.

"I'm sorry to hear the child is not well," he said.

"She was never one to complain about a trifle. Gonesh Babu ought to have let her come to her sister's wedding. But do not be anxious. I will go, as she suggests, and fetch her. She will see my Bela married. A good girl she is, and a capital cook."

"May you live long," said Romoni, with tears of gratitude in her eyes.

"That's all right," he said kindly. "I'm fond of Nilima: I won't listen to a refusal. She's had six months with her husband, and it's time she saw her mother again. I'll go to-morrow morning, and bring her straight back with me."

That night Romoni made vows and offerings to many gods, and Monika and her sister put up silent petitions to the Lord Jesus that their uncle's quest might prove successful. The journey was not a long one. A two-mile drive to a railway station, and an hour's journey by train brought Atol Dass to his destination.

He made his way unannounced into the verandah where Gonesh Babu was interviewing clients, and his reception was not a cordial one. Wisely he refrained from mentioning that pitiful little unstamped letter, but urged the approaching marriage in his house as a reason for taking his niece back with him. Gonesh heard him out with a discouraging scowl on his face. Then he sat in thought for a few moments, eyeing his visitor suspiciously.

"You seem to think that I need no one to cook my food," he said at last. "However, I may as well tell you that the girl is sickly. I have no idea what is the matter, but if I had known she would be so weak I would not have made the match. Perhaps

it will be as well for you to take her back with you at once for a time. I will send for her."

Atol was much relieved, and when Nilima appeared, muffled in a large shawl, he was fain to take quite a cordial farewell of her husband.

"The girl may whine a bit," said that gentleman confidentially, drawing him aside. "You know what girls are—a pack of liars. Take no notice of any stories she may invent. I shall soon fetch her back to look after my cooking."

"Of course," said Atol Babu. "As soon as the wedding in my family is over, I will bring her back myself when you send for her."

He had not seen the face of his niece when he made this promise. Nilima sat huddled in the hired cab. She seemed to have shrunk in size. When her uncle spoke to her she answered in a whisper. At the station he put her into a railway carriage reserved for women, where, there being plenty of room, she lay down.

At home her mother and sisters were waiting in suspense, and when they heard the carriage draw up, they eagerly opened the court-yard gate.

"She has come! Didi has come!" exclaimed the girls joyfully. As they pressed forward to embrace her, she staggered and fell almost fainting into her mother's arms.

"She is tired. Give her some food and put her to bed," said her uncle, as he paid the driver, and then went off to his own house.

When Romoni, having half carried Nilima indoors, unwrapped her shawl, she was horrified by the girl's appearance. All her pretty plumpness had gone:

her eyes were sunken, and there were lines of suffering about her mouth. She might almost have been an old woman, and there was a scared, hunted expression in her eyes, which was very pitiful to see.

"My little, little girl, is it you?" gasped Romoni, choking down a sob. "What on earth has happened to you?"

"What is wrong with our Didi?" Monika exclaimed in dismay, and Lotika, with clenched fists, muttered between her teeth, "Oh how I hate him—my wicked, wicked brother-in-law!"

Nilima attempted a smile, and wiped her mother's eyes with the border of her sari.

"I am your little girl all right," she said. "I have been ill, that is all, and it seems too wonderful to be true that I am at home again. Let me lie down for a time and I shall be all right."

"Run to the kitchen, Loti, and make some milk very hot for your sister," said Romoni, and then she gently put the exhausted girl to bed.

"All your bones are sticking out," she said. "Have you been ill long? And what are these dark marks on your arms and shoulders?"

"Nothing, nothing! I fell down," whispered Nilima, with a frightened glance at Monika, but when her sister had been sent away to light a lamp (for evening was coming on), she said to her mother, "Do not tell the girls or my uncle, but oh, Mother, those marks did not come from a fall—he beats me nearly every day!"

Romoni pressed her lips together, and asked no further questions that night. Nilima drank her hot milk, said it was very good, and soon fell peacefully

asleep; and the younger girls had to eat the good things that they had prepared for Didi's supper. It was not a very cheerful meal, but they consoled one another with the hope that their love and care would soon make their sister fat and strong again.

After a night's rest, Nilima looked a little more like herself, and was able to listen with interest and pleasure to the story of Monika's romance. She had never received any letters or news from home. "I expect he tore up all you wrote," she said, sighing.

To her sisters she spoke little of her experiences, but to her mother she confided her pathetic story. From the first her husband had treated her unkindly, and as her health began to suffer, his roughness and cruelty had increased. Evidently she had struggled on uncomplainingly as long as she could.

"I did so hope that if I smiled, and tried to look nice, and cooked his food as he liked it, he would treat me better," she explained. "Just at first I thought he liked me—in a way; and—and—I had another hope that helped me to be patient. You understand?"

"Yes, my poor little girl—and now?" asked Romoni gently.

"Oh, for a long time now I have had no hopes, except sometimes the hope of death. As I was not allowed to write to you I despaired of coming home, and seeing your dear face again."

"I cannot understand it at all," said Romoni sadly. "You, of all my children, have least deserved such treatment. I am certain you have not been disobedient or impertinent. Why has he treated you so?"

"I have seen him ill-treat his dog and his servants," said Nilima. "They were never impertinent nor disobedient. No one would dare to disobey him. He seems to take a pleasure in causing fear. He was specially angry with me for becoming ill, and when I could not work he brought another girl to the house."

"My poor child, how you have suffered," moaned Romoni. "If I had only known!"

"I am so glad that you did not know, Mother dear. At first I resolved to suffer all in silence, but one day I found an envelope, and then I took a pencil from his desk while he was away. I put it back again. I could not overcome my longing to see you. That day he had beaten me, and he bolted me into the cook-house at night. There were rats there. I was afraid of going mad. I had to write."

"I thank the gods that I got your letter," said her mother brokenly.

. . . . .

Nilima revived amid the love and tenderness of her dear ones, but she did not recover wholly. Romoni watched her anxiously for a few days; then she asked her brother-in-law's leave to take her to the Mission Hospital in the neighbouring town. At first he opposed the idea, and suggested consulting a doctor in the place, "who could give her medicine without seeing her face, as her husband might object to that." The anxious mother, however, pressed her point. Quite possibly her child's life hung in the balance. She pointed out that the Zenana

Hospital was strictly "*purdah*"[1] and the doctor was an Englishwoman. She persuaded Atol that his idea that it was undignified for gentlefolk to send their women to hospital, was out of date.

At length he gave his consent.

"I have heard," he acknowledged, "that the Mem doctor is very clever. Let her look at the child's hand (i.e. feel her pulse), and give her medicine, but do not leave her there to listen to the words of the foreign religion."

Romoni herself was in some dread of the foreign religion that had gained such a hold on the faith of her children, but her dread of losing her first-born overcame all other scruples.

Nilima offered no objection. In early childhood she had lost all fear of "Mems"[2] and of their teaching.

While mother and daughter awaited their turn for interviewing the doctor, they listened to a talk from a tall, fair Bible-woman. She told them frankly that she had once been a Hindu, but that she had found peace and pardon in Jesus Christ. Romoni fidgeted uneasily, and wished that Nilima would show less devoted attention to the speaker. A little story, however, of how the Christians' God, when He visited the earth in human form, had once healed a poor leper, arrested her own attention. The teacher showed a picture of Jesus, touching the diseased man. "If You wish to cleanse me You can do it, Lord," the poor creature had exclaimed.

And the answer came promptly, as that pure hand was placed on the defiled head—"I do wish it. Be clean," and the leper was instantly healed.

[1] Secluded—for women only. [2] Englishwomen.

Nilima looked at her mother with shining eyes. "I, too, shall become well if I have faith," she whispered.

Her mother did not contradict her. Her own religion taught her that all things are possible to faith, and if her darling could be restored, did it matter who healed her?

The lady doctor was gentle and sympathetic. Hearing that Nilima's age was only fourteen, she murmured some words of indignation.

"You will have to leave the child here," she said. "With regular care and treatment I can cure her, but if you take her home I cannot."

Not for a moment did Romoni hesitate. Her brother-in-law's disapproval seemed a small matter, the foreign teaching even less important. She did not like parting from her suffering child, but the Mem had said, "I can cure her," and that was enough for the mother.

Nilima was comfortably established in a clean bed, in a clean, bright and airy ward, and a gay red-and-white quilt was spread over her. Romoni went home with a lightened heart, and Nilima's condition quickly showed improvement. Skilled treatment, good food, rest, kindness and perhaps above all, the comfortable words of the "Jesus teaching," wrought wonders for the girl.

"How changed Number 12 is," the doctor remarked one day to the Sister-in-Charge. "What a haggard little wreck she was when she came in! Now she is positively beautiful, and she always has a smile on her face."

"Number 12 has true faith," answered the

Biblewoman. "She drinks in the teaching like water, and I know that she constantly prays to Jesus."

"Poor little girl," said the doctor, "How I wish she could stay with us altogether. But I suppose as soon as she is discharged she will have to go back to that brute of a husband. She still carries the scars of his ill-treatment on her body."

The day of Nilima's return home was a joyful one for her family.

"You are our old Didi once more," exclaimed Monika.

"You will never go away from us again," Loti added.

Nilima made no answer, but her mother said, with a note of defiance in her voice, "No one shall take you from me, my jewel of gold."

Nilima spoke, shyly but eagerly, of the teaching that she had received, and her mother, seeing what comfort it had brought to her, did not forbid her to do so.

"I have been thinking," said the girl one day, "of how much the Lord Jesus—that perfectly Blessed One—had to suffer. He was beaten and abused and mocked, and great iron nails were hammered through His hands and feet. His devoted servants have suffered too. He told them that they would have to carry a wooden cross as He did. I think I understand a little more than I did at first why I have had to suffer, and may perhaps be called on to suffer again."

Her sisters heard these words, and afterwards discussed them anxiously.

"Didi speaks as though she expected that man to come back for her," said Monika. "It will be terrible if he does so."

"She is such a saint that I believe she will go like a kid to be offered in sacrifice."

"But do you think that Mother and Uncle will let him take her?"

"Who can say?" Lotika set her teeth. "I only know that I would strangle him with my own hands before I let him touch her."

CHAPTER VI

COURAGE

On the very day after this conversation Gonesh Bose arrived, and, going first to the house of Nilima's uncle, announced that he had come to fetch his wife. Now Atol Dass had seen his niece's suffering face and emaciated figure before she went into Hospital, and his feelings towards Gonesh were not very cordial.

"You say you want to fetch your wife," he said, "but do you realise that she was half-dead when I brought her home?"

"I know she is a poor, weakly creature," was the reply, "but I have given her a long rest. Surely she is all right by this time."

"She was not weakly before marriage, Babu. I remember her as a beautiful and healthy girl. The treatment that she had in your house injured her health," said Atol decisively. "I really do not feel that I can compel her to return to you."

"Well, if she does not come now, she shall never come," retorted Gonesh. "Do you want her to be a burden and a disgrace to you and to her widowed mother to the end of her days?"

Atol wavered. A rejected wife, thrown back penniless on her parent, *is* regarded with contempt in India, and her life is, if possible, even more joyless than that of the child widow.

"Will you treat her properly if we consent to her going with you?" he asked. "Will you give her the position that she is entitled to as your legal wife?"

"Oh, she has been telling tales, I suppose," said Gonesh with an uneasy laugh. "That other girl has run away, if you must know everything, and that is one reason why I must have Nilima back. My food has been uneatable lately. She need have nothing to fear."

"Well," said Atol rising, "I will not prevent you from seeing your wife and her mother, but I really cannot promise that she will consent to go with you. I cannot compel her to return to a life of misery."

"Why should she be miserable?" said Gonesh, with a scoffing laugh.

"No one who is constantly beaten and ill-used can be happy," said Atol.

"Oh, every husband gives his wife a blow or two occasionally," said Gonesh. "But you can tell her she has nothing to fear."

The two men went across to Romoni's house.

Coming suddenly out of the kitchen, with her head uncovered, and her hair hanging loose, Nilima found them standing in the courtyard. Her face whitened on the instant, and she stepped back abruptly into the shadow. Then her mother came out, her face set and angry, and told Lotika to set stools for the visitors. She did so, and saluted her uncle respectfully, but cast a glance of unconcealed repulsion at his companion. Romoni coldly enquired why he had honoured her humble home by a visit.

"You must have expected me surely," he answered. "I have come to fetch my wife."

"Sir," said Romoni, "my daughter was a beautiful and healthy girl when she was married to you. She returned to my house half-dead. You call her 'wife,' but she has been treated as if she were an animal. How can I let her go back to you?"

"How can you prevent me from claiming her?" he retorted. "If she does not come now, I shall never take her. She will have no further claim on me to the end of her life."

"It will be better so," said Romoni firmly. "I cannot give her up."

"Better so?" repeated Gonesh, with a sneer. "Is she then so wealthy that she can scorn the support that her husband is prepared to give her, and choose to face the shame and reproach of a rejected wife? If she disobeys me now I shall marry another girl, and never see her face again till her life ends."

"We are poor," said Romoni. "My daughter has no money, but I would rather see her starve than send her back to your house."

Atol cleared his throat, and looked from one to the other.

"We must consider this question quietly," he said. "Gonesh Babu has acknowledged to me that he has not treated Nilima properly in the past, but he is willing to give her the position due to her in future. You and I will not live for ever. What will be her fate when we are gone?"

"She can live with me," cried Monika. "My husband is wealthy."

"Be silent," said her uncle. "I am not myself prepared to compel Nilima to go with her husband, but let us call her and see what she says."

Romoni was silent: she knew well that all her neighbours would agree with her brother-in-law, and aver that the past should be forgotten, and the favourable opportunity seized for returning the young wife to her lawful and slightly repentant husband. While she hesitated, Nilima herself came out of the cookhouse. She had pinned up her hair, and was modestly veiled, but Gonesh instantly noticed the improvement in her appearance.

"Why, she has grown fat again," he said, and added to the girl—"I have come to fetch you home. I think you will come, and not choose to stay here to be a disgrace and burden to your friends to the end of your life."

"Be brave, Didi, be brave," whispered Lotika, as Nilima appeared to waver. "Do not listen to him. Stay with those who love you!"

Nilima lifted her eyes to her uncle's face.

"I do not wish to be a disgrace and a burden to my loved ones," she said quietly. "Uncle, I am willing to go with my husband."

Her very lips were white as she said the words, but there was a dignity and firmness in her manner that silenced her sisters.

"You were always a good girl, Nili," said her uncle cheerfully. "Now go to the cookhouse, and prepare a meal for your husband."

"I do not wish to eat here," interrupted Gonesh, ungraciously. "Let her put her things together and come with me immediately."

No one spoke: Nilima went obediently into the house, and her mother and sisters followed her. Something of her unearthly endurance communicated

itself to them. Tears fell on the rolled-up bundle of clothes and bedding which was all that she had brought and all that she took away with her, but they were silent tears.

Only Lotika whispered brokenly: "Why will you go, Didi? Why were you not brave enough to say 'No'?"

"Brave enough to say 'No'!" Nilima repeated the question with a wan smile. "That word would not have asked for courage, little sister. But He Whom you and I worship suffered, and bids us suffer, with patience and courage."

Preparations were soon complete. Nilima kissed her sisters, and clung for a second or two to her mother. Then she "took the dust" of her uncle's and her mother's feet, and followed her husband into the hired carriage. He closed the shutters and they drove rapidly away.

CHAPTER VII

LOTIKA'S MARRIAGE

MONIKA's husband kindly allowed her to stay with her mother until she was nearly fourteen years old. Then his mother, who had ailed ever since his father's death, died after a short illness, and soon afterwards he fetched away his wife.

"I really need someone to comfort me and look after my house," he explained to Romoni, with his attractive smile. "You must spare her to me now. I will be very good to her, and I hope you will come and visit her in my house. You will be very welcome."

"Of course, I will spare her. Her place is with her husband," said Romoni, "and gladly do I trust her to you, my dear son. Her cooking is not so good as it ought to be, but I am sure she will try to please you."

"She will have plenty of servants; I shall not let her work hard," said Nirod, with an affectionate smile at his wife.

"Forgive me, dear boy, if I speak one word to you," said Romoni, courageously. "Sahibs and—and coolies sometimes destroy their health by drinking intoxicants, but the gentlefolk of Bengal have not that custom."

Nirod seemed momentarily surprised: then he laughed.

"Has my little bride been shocking you with her stories, Mother?" he asked. "Times have changed, and English wine is not like toddy. The Sahibs are a strong race, and they drink stuff that warms and strengthens them. I have to set wine before my friends, but I do not drink enough myself to do me any harm."

Romoni sighed, but she had, perforce, to be satisfied with this assurance.

Nirod had come in his motor-car to fetch his bride, and presently they drove off together, sitting side by side, and smiling happily.

"Cheer up, little sister," were Nirod's last words to Lotika, who looked decidedly downcast. "I will find a bridegroom for you."

Lotika had indeed more than reached the marriage age, though neither she nor her mother quite realised it.

"I don't want a burnt-to-ashes bridegroom," said the girl crossly, when the motor had vanished in a cloud of dust. "Horrid man! He has made our Monika glad to leave us."

"Hush," said Romoni. "The gods have been good to send such a son-in-law. We shall miss our Monika, but we must rejoice in her happiness."

Lotika found this form of rejoicing unsatisfactory, but she was not really selfish at heart, and exerted herself to help and cheer her mother.

It was not very long before Nirod fulfilled his promise and found a suitor for her. Among his large assortment of friends he discovered a young man in search of a wife. Nirod sang the praises of his own bride, and confided to Upendranath Sarkar that she

had a beautiful and clever younger sister. Young Upen reported the fact to his parents. They were not averse to the match, having taken it for granted that a sister-in-law of Nirod Roy would be well dowered. The bride had been inspected and approved (in spite of her disappointing complexion), and preliminary arrangements had been made, before the business part of the transaction was definitely approached. When Upen's parents discovered that the proposed bride would bring no dowry with her they tried to back out of the bargain. Nirod, however, brought pressure to bear on his friend. He had lent Upen money to pay gambling debts, and he threatened that, if the match were broken off, he would press for repayment. Upen was scared, and persuaded his father to allow the marriage, and as his mother, (having recently married off a daughter) required help in the kitchen, consent was accorded, though grudgingly, to the union, and in due course it took place.

Romoni was not particularly prepossessed in favour of her new son-in-law. He was a weedy-looking youth with a receding chin. Still, there was nothing cruel or churlish in his aspect, and privately she hoped that Lotika would be able to manage him. As for the girl herself, she knew that wedlock is the inevitable destiny of the Hindu maiden, and accepted the situation with philosophy.

"If he should turn out like Didi's ogre, I can tie a brass jar round my neck and drown myself," she said to her mother one day.

"Oh, my jewel," exclaimed Romoni in distress, "do you think that there is any danger of that?

His face appears very different from that of Gonesh Babu."

"Yes, he is more like a young hen than an ape," Lotika agreed calmly. She had subjected her suitor to keen scrutiny through the folds of her thin sari. "I can never worship him," she added, "as Moni worships her Nirod, but I will do my best to cook nicely for him."

"And you must rule well your tongue, my darling. Let him never hear impertinence from your lips."

"Oh, he looks to me," said Lotika, "as if he might be the better for a little impertinence. However, I will be careful, Mother dear."

The wedding passed off creditably. Good-natured Nirod sent a bullock-wagon full of garden produce, besides some huge fish for the feast. The bridegroom's procession was meagrely decorated, and accompanied by only one inferior band. Upen's family were determined not to waste money on their son's impecunious bride. His friends were a cheerful crowd, however, and joking and merriment prevailed.

Monika was present, as well as her husband. She looked very lovely in her rich silken clothes and glittering jewels, but she had grown thinner and older-looking, and at times her expression was wistful and weary. Lotika questioned her, as she sat on the ground, gazing into a mirror, while Monika, sitting behind, braided her hair before the ceremony.

"Moni," she said, "you do not look happy. Is anything wrong?"

Her sister assured her that she was perfectly happy, if sometimes a little home-sick.

"I have been thinking," said Loti, "that Mother

will be lonely when I am away, and will fret over Didi. Has not Nirod often suggested that she should pay you a visit? Could you not take her back with you?"

"I would love to have her," said Monika sighing, "but I do not know if it would be wise. I am afraid she might not be happy."

"Why not?" said Lotika, turning her head sharply, and disarranging a plait. "Don't tell me that *he* ill-treats you? Are all men ogres? What horrible trap am I about to enter?"

"Silly child. Keep still or I shall run hair-pins into you! And if you dare to call my husband an ogre, you and I will quarrel."

"Oh, Moni, would you not enjoy a good quarrel? I should!"

"Not on your wedding-night anyhow," laughed Monika.

"Well, tell me," persisted Lotika, "why Mother would not be happy at your beautiful home, with your charming Nirod?"

"My husband has still his old friends," said Monika, lowering her voice, "and—and they have still their old habits. Wine and brandy are horrible things, Loti: I think they are as bad as palm-toddy. I have tried so hard to persuade him to give it up, and sometimes for two or three days he does not touch it for my sake. It is very wonderful that he should love a poor ignorant girl like me."

"Do not speak vain words," Lotika interrupted. "At least you have not a face like a crow as I have. Why does he not give it up altogether, if he really loves you?"

"It gains power over a man," said Moni, "and besides, his companions laugh at him, and that he cannot bear. Then he drinks more than ever, till he does not know what he is doing."

"He doesn't beat you, surely?" cried Loti, and again she jerked her plaits out of place.

"Hush, hush, if he has been rough with me, he is always very sorry afterwards."

"The brute! I hate him, and I shall tell him so."

"Loti, if you should ever breathe a word of what I have told you either to him or to Mother, I should never forgive you. Mother has enough to sadden her, but it was a relief to speak to someone. Surely I can trust you to keep your lips closed?"

"You can trust me," said Loti. "Let go of my hair. I want to kiss you. What saints you and Didi are! I am the only sinner. I wonder if my master drinks wine? I will smash the bottles if I find any about!"

Then Monika was called away, and Lotika had to sit in hungry state till the time arrived for her to be carried blind-fold round the bridegroom, and then to peer at him from under her shawl.

The ceremony was unaccompanied by thrills of any kind. Upen approved of her bright eyes and really attractive if somewhat dark-complexioned face, and she had seen him before, and did not shrink from him.

Both were resigned rather than rejoiced, and the happiest person present was probably Atol Dass. The burden of his fatherless nieces had weighed on his mind. It was a relief to feel that all three were

married, and that no heavy demands had been made on his pocket.

. . . . .

Upen was not addicted to strong drink, and was altogether a very inoffensive young man. Unfortunately, however, he possessed a very formidable mother, "worse," as poor Lotika told herself, "than any number of husbands." Her own husband was afraid of her, and her eldest son, Upen, did not dare to open his mouth in her presence. Her own daughter had been only too ready to escape from her tongue and hand, to face the unknown ills of her father-in-law's home. She had one other son, an ugly, gawky boy of fifteen, whom she acknowledged to be a little weak in the head, but whom a doctor would have pronounced mentally deficient. Lotika privately designated him "that horrid idiot."

Curiously, he was the only person to whom the mistress of the house showed attachment. She was a large, stout woman, who would have been handsome if her expression had been more agreeable. Though she ruled her relations and her servants with a rod of iron, she indulged this boy's every wish, and made no attempt to discipline him.

When Upen brought home his bride, his mother performed the usual ceremonies of welcome, in rather perfunctory fashion. She spoke no word of kindness to the child, merely telling her, in rather harsh tones, what to do and what not to do. She scolded the servants continuously, and Lotika was startled to hear her upbraiding her husband, when he accidentally knocked over a jar of water.

The girl felt very ill at ease in such an atmosphere. Romoni had always addressed her servants in quiet tones. Even when they did wrong, it was her habit to remonstrate with rather than to rate them. She had trained her daughters to be gentle and patient towards their inferiors, and to sympathise with them when they were sick or troubled.

"My mother-in-law talks to the maids as if they were dogs," thought Lotika, as she sat in the bridal attitude of humility, listening to the tumult around her. "If she treats me like a dog I shall want to bite."

A little later, when Upen happened to spill some clotted cream on his new coat, he came in for a scolding. Lotika tingled with suppressed rage, when she heard his mother ask him why not content with bringing a penniless bride to the house, he was trying to ruin his family by spoiling his clothes?

The girl had not been twenty-four hours in the house before she began to receive her share of abuse. She had to help in cooking the bride's rice, and to use vessels bigger than those to which she was accustomed at home. Consequently she was awkward in her movements, and in draining the water from a big pot of rice she spilled a quantity on the kitchen floor. Upen's mother flew into a passion.

"Leave the cooking to those who can use their hands, Burnt-face!" she exclaimed. "In your rich home no doubt your widowed mother can afford to throw away good rice, though you came like a beggar to your husband's home. Begone into the house, and sit there with your hands folded like a queen. You cannot cook, and I do not want you in my kitchen."

Lotika, inwardly seething, obeyed, and her new brother-in-law came and squatted down in front of her. He pulled aside her veil that he might stare at her face, and began to ask her questions. Lotika wanted to be kind to poor Bonkim, but she could not help shrinking from him.

"Who are you?" he asked, "and why did you want to spill our rice?"

"I am your new sister-in-law," said Lotika. "The pot was too heavy for me. I did not spill it on purpose."

"My mother will beat you—so—if you spill our rice," said Bonkim, suiting action to word by giving her hand a smart smack. He laughed mockingly as she drew herself indignantly away.

"She may beat me, but you shall not do so," she exclaimed.

"Oh, I do what I like," said the boy, with another shrill laugh.

At this moment Upen entered the room, and found Lotika crying with vexation, and his half-witted brother mocking her.

"Here, Bonkim," he said, "take these *pice*[1] to the sweet-shop, and buy yourself some syrup-balls."

This errand suited the boy: he grinned broadly, snatched the money, and shambled off to the shop. Lotika rubbed her eyes with her sari.

"Do not cry," said Upen uneasily. "Bonkim is rude, but you must not mind him. He is not right in the head. Why do you sit here alone?"

"Your mother ordered me out of the kitchen. She says I cannot cook."

[1] *pice*—small coins.

"She is a very good cook herself," said Upen. "You will learn from her, and when you do everything perfectly, she will not order you out of the kitchen any more."

"I am not the kind of person that can ever learn to do anything perfectly," said Lotika mournfully. "Then, too, she scolds me for being poor, and bringing you no dowry. That makes me angry, for it was not my fault."

"You must not be angry," said Upen anxiously. "That she will never stand. And do not cry; if she finds you in tears she will scold more than ever. That is her nature."

Saying this he hastily left the room, fearing that he might get a share of the scolding, if he were found talking to his bride.

Lotika reflected that her mother-in-law's nature was a very horrible one. She began to reckon up the number of hours remaining, before she would be allowed to return to her own mother. Her one consolation was the thought that since she disliked her so heartily, her mother-in-law would not wish to keep her long or send for her often.

CHAPTER VIII

A VAIN QUEST

It was about this time that Atol Babu one day received a letter from an acquaintance, who lived in the same town as Nilima's husband. The envelope contained a folded scrap of paper, a fly-leaf torn from an old book. Accompanying this paper was a note explaining that a serving-maid had brought it to the writer's wife, and that she believed it to be a genuine message, and one which should receive immediate attention.

Atol unfolded the morsel of paper. On one side were scrawled his name and address, with the added words: "Have mercy, and send this to my uncle."

On the other side, in Nilima's childish hand-writing was the message: "If you ever wish to see me again, come and fetch me."

Atol was perplexed and not a little distressed. That Nilima had not written without sufficient reason he felt no doubt. If he went to Gonesh Bose's house, however, a second time, and fetched his niece away by force, an unpleasant situation would arise. It was very unlikely that any subsequent reconciliation would be possible. He consulted his wife, who advised him to say nothing to Romoni.

"She is all alone," she pointed out, "and Nilima is her favourite child. She will fret herself crazy if she hears about this." Atol agreed.

"I will go there to-morrow," he decided, "and call in a friendly way. I won't mention this note, but I will ask to see Nilima. If she appears really ill, I will persuade him to let her come home."

Accordingly on the following day Atol called at the house of Gonesh Bose. He found the men's sitting-room empty, and the court-yard door barred from within. He shouted, knocked and rattled the chain in vain. At length he appealed to a neighbour, who was watching with interest from the house next door, and asked whether the master of the house were at home.

"He may have gone to the law-courts," was the answer. "If you call at five o'clock this evening you will find him in."

Atol went off to see the gentleman who had forwarded Nilima's letter.

"Come in and sit down, sir," said he. "I am glad to see you. I am afraid your niece is not at all well. My wife was a relation of Gonesh's mother, and she used to go and see the bride. She always told me what a pretty, well-mannered, modest girl she was. I need not tell you (for you took her home before when she was ill), that her husband has not been—well—very considerate. After she came back, recovered, my wife again tried to visit her, but Nilima seemed cowed and terrified, and would not let her sit down. She said that her husband had forbidden her to receive any visitors! A little later my latest grandson was about to partake of his first rice, and I wrote and asked Gonesh to let his wife be present at the ceremony. My letter remained unanswered. That happened more than two months ago. We heard nothing

more until the other day, when a maid brought the note that I forwarded to you. She said her mistress was very weak, and that she did not think she would live long."

Atol and his friend discussed the situation over their hookah pipes. They decided to call at Gonesh's house together, at five o'clock that evening. They found some clients in the men's sitting-room, and these reported that the "pleader Babu" had gone out, just before their arrival. Atol half suspected that he had decamped on seeing them coming along the road. They knocked at the court-yard door, and rattled its chain, in vain. They waited until night fell and the disappointed clients had taken their leave, but Gonesh Bose did not re-appear.

At last the neighbour who had spoken to Atol earlier in the day, came out of his house and beckoned to them.

"I think you are waiting for the master of the house?" he said confidentially. "I am afraid he does not want to see you. He is indoors now. From my back court-yard I can hear his voice. He has been swearing at his wife, and a few minutes ago I heard her scream."

Atol Babu clenched his hands.

"Do you often hear her scream?" he asked abruptly.

The man glanced at him eagerly, and yet cautiously.

"You are not by any chance her father?" he asked.

"I am her uncle, her dead father's brother."

"Then I thank the gods that you have come, in time, I hope, to save that poor girl's life."

"Is it as bad as that?" said Atol, his face paling.

"That man is an ogre in his house," was the answer. "He is a devil, and yet people come to him with their law-suits! He locks his wife into one room, and will let no one see her. My wife talks to her over the wall while he is away. She says she is so weak that she can scarcely carry a water-jar, and if she fails to cook everything to his liking, he beats her."

"What can I do?" cried Atol, beginning to pace up and down the verandah. "May I go into your yard, and call out to him over the wall?"

"I fear it would be useless," was the reply. "He would not answer, and his suspicions would be aroused. I advise you to go to the police and get a warrant for entering the house."

"Surely that is not necessary," said poor Atol, starting backwards. "He would be furious, and think of the publicity!"

"His fury will hurt no one if you can once remove your niece from the house. There will certainly be marks of violence on her body, and he will not dare to risk a prosecution by refusing to let you take her."

"There will be no possibility of future reconciliation if I take so extreme a step."

"Can you wish for one? If I had known your address I would have written to you earlier to tell you of the girl's danger."

Very reluctantly Atol took the advice of his companions, and the three went together to the neighbouring police-station. They found that money would be required, and also documentary evidence of his right to interfere, as uncle and guardian of Gonesh Bose's lawful wife. The police sergeant added that

it would be as well if the mother of the girl also appeared in person as there was no train back to his own village that night, the friend who had forwarded Nilima's appeal for help gave him a meal and a bed, and early the next morning he returned sorrowfully home.

It was no longer possible to conceal the truth from Romoni. She listened very quietly to her brother-in-law's story. It was a comfort that Nilima's sisters were not present to weep and howl as they would certainly have done at the recital.

"I am advised," said Atol, when he had told everything, "to get a police warrant for entering the house. Do you wish that? It will make the whole wretched affair public."

"Yes, I am afraid so," said Romoni, "but what other course can we follow? A little disgrace can be borne: besides, it is not on *us* that it will fall."

"Will you come with me? The police wish it, but it will be a horrible experience for you."

"Do you think it will be so horrible as it would be to do nothing? When can we start?"

"I have to provide the money and get the required certificates. If you can be ready we can start to-morrow at day-break."

"There is a train to-day. We must take that."

"It starts in an hour or so. We cannot catch it."

"Of course we can catch it, and we must do so. Time is precious."

Atol and his wife protested in vain. Romoni's quiet persistence prevailed. Papers and money were collected, and the station reached in ample time for

the train. In due course they arrived at the police-station, in a motor-car. It had been Romoni who had insisted, for the sake of speed, on hiring the one ramshackle taxi at the railway station, in preference to a common hackney carriage. The papers were examined, and after some delay, a policeman, armed with a warrant, seated himself beside the driver. In silence they drove to Gonesh Babu's house.

The men's sitting-room was fastened and locked from the outside, so was the door of the court-yard. The sympathetic neighbour came running out of his house to explain the situation. He said that the pleader, with his wife and a good deal of baggage, had left the house at dawn. No address had been given: a message had been left for enquiring clients that the master of the house was taking a brief holiday and would return in a week.

"You are quite sure," asked Romoni, "that my daughter was with him? There is no chance that she is shut up in that house? We could easily break the padlocks."

The neighbour shook his head sadly.

"I heard the noise next door," he explained, "and looked out of my window. I saw her being placed in the hired carriage. She—she—I am afraid she was not very strong."

"Tell me what you saw," said Romoni quietly.

"She could not walk," the man admitted reluctantly. "Her husband and the driver of the carriage had to carry her between them. I did not see her move or speak at all."

Then Romoni's head fell back with a thud against the side of the car. She had fainted away.

CHAPTER IX

LOTIKA'S HOME-COMING

THE long days of Lotika's first sojourn in her father-in-law's house dragged to a close. The feast of the "bride's rice" passed off without any mishap. The food was abundant and excellent, for Upen's mother was a good housekeeper and cook. There was, however, no geniality, much less jollity, about the festivities. The voice of wrath and nagging was seldom silent: not merely the members of the household, but the very guests themselves were cowed and subdued.

Lotika was frightened and miserable, and at times furiously angry. She succeeded in keeping her temper, for she knew that to lose it would spell disaster, but she was thankful that custom permitted her to hide her face beneath her thick silk sari. In her nervousness and half-blindness, however, she was clumsy and awkward, and came in for her full share of the general vituperation.

It was a tremendous relief to find herself at long last in the bullock-wagon which was to take her home. She pictured to herself her mother's welcome, and rehearsed the stories that she would have to tell her. She promised herself a good cry on her mother's shoulder.

"Monika would probably pretend she had been happy," she reflected, "but I can't be such a saint

as all that. I must have a little comforting after all that scolding. Mother will be pleased because I have kept my temper, and depend upon it, I shall not be sent for again for ages. Mother-in-law hates me so that she cannot look at me with either eye, and I feel the same toward her."

It was dark when the slowly-moving wagon reached the house. Lotika sat alone in it, while an old man-servant walked behind. His mother had told Upen that it was entirely unnecessary for him to see his "beggar bride" back to her home, and he had, of course, acquiesced in her wishes.

Lotika, calling joyfully to her mother, sprang out of the cart, but to her surprise she received no answer, and she found the court-yard and house in darkness. No lamp had been lit, and no cheerful glow of fire came from the cook-house. After a wild search through the empty dwelling, Lotika threw herself down on the verandah, and began to howl at the top of her voice. For a week she had bottled up feelings not easily kept under control: now it was some slight relief to make a loud noise.

Her aunt soon heard her wails, and came hurriedly across to explain the situation.

"Your uncle has gone to fetch Nilima home," she said, "and he was obliged to take your mother with him. We had no news that you were expected. Come into my house, and have some food."

"Is Didi coming home? That will be splendid," exclaimed Lotika. "But what made Mother go to fetch her? Why, she never stirs from this house! Do you think Didi is ill again?"

"She is not very well, I fear," said Bela's mother,

and again she invited Lotika to come home with her.

Lotika refused.

"Perhaps mother and Didi will return to-night," she said. "I must light a fire and cook for them. I can do everything for myself: I do not need help."

Her aunt insisted on leaving a maid with her, and made her promise to come to her house to sleep if the travellers did not arrive.

The last train, however, brought Atol and his sister-in-law home. Romoni had recovered from her fainting-fit, but seemed dazed and weak. She had to be helped out of the carriage, and stumbled over the threshold of the court-yard. Suddenly she felt a pair of warm arms round her neck, and a soft cheek pressed against her own.

"Mother, Mother, you have come home at last," cried a trembling voice. Romoni clasped the child to her heart.

"Is it my precious Lotika?" she said slowly, and gave a long sigh. Then with a gallant effort she threw off the stupor that had oppressed her, and rallied all the self-forgetting impulse of her motherhood.

"Did my little girl arrive in the dark," she said, "and find no mother to kiss her? Thank you, Atol, you have been very kind. Go home and rest now: my Lotika will look after me."

The question, "Where is Didi?" had sprung to Lotika's lips, but she saw her mother's face in the flickering lantern light, and did not put it. She took Romoni's cold hand, and led her toward the kitchen.

"Mother, I have made such nice pancakes for you," she said, "and I have cooked rice and curry

for myself. You will eat something, won't you?" And from sheer love the poor woman forced herself to swallow a mouthful or two.

A day or two later Atol Dass received a letter from Gonesh. It announced, with all the correct expressions of sorrow, the untimely death of his wife. As she had been unwell he had taken her for a change of air, he wrote, but his efforts to save her had been unavailing. "She expired on Sunday last," he concluded (it was the very day after he had removed her from his house), "and the cremation took place that evening. I enclose a doctor's certificate."

Romoni, when her brother-in-law read this printed epistle to her, gave one faint moan, and then sat in silence, staring before her with unseeing eyes. Mercifully Lotika did not question the accuracy of the certificate: all the same her grief was mingled with anger.

"She must have been ill a long time," she wailed, "and he never told us. She had no one to love and care for her when she was dying."

In Eastern fashion she thumped her head against the wall, and not noticing the rough corner of a door-post broke the skin of her forehead.

Perhaps for her mother's sake, she could not have done anything better. Romoni was sitting like one in a trance, when Atol touched her arm.

"Look, sister, look," he said, "the child's head is bleeding."

Romoni lifted her head, and her stony eyes slowly softened.

"My silly child," she said. "Do you want to kill yourself and crush your mother's broken heart?"

Atol left her bathing Lotika's forehead.

"Loti," asked Romoni later, "can you bear to write and tell Monika, or shall I ask your uncle to do so?"

Lotika considered the question for a minute.

"I will write myself, Mother," she said firmly. "I can put in some words of comfort."

For a long time she bent over her sheet of paper, and the ink was often blurred by tear-drops. Once she left her corner to unlock the tin box, where she kept her school prizes. When the letter was finished, she came and sat down beside her mother, and asked if she might read out what she had written. Romoni made a gesture of assent.

"Dear Monika Didi," read Lotika. "I have to cause you to hear very sad words. Our dear Nilima Didi has left this world of sorrows. Her husband wrote and told us that she died of chest trouble. At first I could not bear to think of how she was all alone with that merciless man until she died. Now a good thought has come into my mind. Didi was not alone, for was she not devoted to Jesus, and did He not say to His worshippers, 'I am with you every day until the end of the ages'? How greatly He suffered we know, and Didi also suffered. She followed Him, and He was with her. Did we not learn at school 'Take up My yoke and carry it, and you shall find rest for your souls'? Also we learned, 'The one who believes on Me, even if he dies shall live.' Our dear Didi, after her suffering, is in great peace. Therefore do not weep, dear sister. Convey my devoted respects to my brother-in-law. The end. From your little sister Lotika."

"Those are indeed good words," said Romoni

slowly; "but faith is needed. Are we not told that our souls pass from body to body?"

"Our gentle Nilima's soul has passed to peace," said Lotika, with an assurance that somehow carried conviction.

"Indeed, indeed, it may be so," said her mother. "Read me again those honey-sweet words that you have written."

As she listened her tears flowed freely. Lotika in distress tried to wipe them away, but she need not have sorrowed. Hitherto Romoni had clutched her cruel sorrow dry-eyed to her breast. Her first hope of healing was in those tears.

CHAPTER X

DISGRACE

THE days passed quietly. Lotika did most of the cooking and housework. She was very gentle and very industrious during that time. Her mother knew that it comforted the child to be busy, and her own head and hands had lost something of their wonted strength and skill. She performed her usual acts of devotion, fasting often, and repeating the names of the gods, as she had done daily since her husband's death, but often she asked Lotika to read aloud to her words of comfort from her "Jesus Scripture." Sometimes, as though involuntarily, while counting her beads, she whispered His Name instead of that of Sri-Krishna.

Then abruptly one morning, to the child's utter dismay, Upen arrived, to take his wife back to her father-in-law's house. A maid-servant, falling on the slippery steps beside the tank, had broken her leg. Help was required in the kitchen, and why pay a servant when a daughter-in-law was available? Lotika had reckoned on twelve months at home; for her own sake and her mother's she was overwhelmed by the summons. There could be no question, however, of disregarding it. In the intervals of cooking a great feast for Upen, who graciously

allowed himself to be entertained, she sent an urgent letter to Monika.

"I have to go to the house of ogres and tigers," she wrote. "If Mother is left alone she will die, for she only lives on for your sake and mine. Persuade your husband to let you stay with her till I return."

Nirod was a man of generous impulses. He had been distressed at the news of Nilima's death, and he was fond of his gentle mother-in-law. At the cost of real self-denial he brought Monika to her mother's house and left her there.

Lotika went quietly but sorrowfully away with her husband. He was not rough or unkind to her: in fact, his manner was shy and almost apologetic. He knew that he was taking her to a house where she would not be happy.

"I believe I could be quite a good wife to him," poor Lotika reflected. "I could not worship him, of course—who could give worship to a young hen? Why has he such a tigress for a mother? Shall I ever be able to bear her behaviour with patience? I must remember dear Didi, and the Master Whom she followed; I must try my hardest to be good."

. . . . .

Poor Lotika ! In the weeks that followed she certainly strove very hard to be meek and obedient, but for a high-spirited and clever girl of thirteen—one, moreover, who had been ruled all her life by kindness—existence in her mother-in-law's house proved wellnigh intolerable. She was expected to work like a slave from dawn till late at night, with never

a word of praise to cheer her labours. She was constantly taunted with the poverty, or parsimony (for so Upen's mother chose to regard it), which had sent her dowerless to her husband's home. Sometimes she had her ears boxed, and her mother-in-law's fat hand was a heavy one. Sometimes unjust complaints were brought against her to her husband or father-in-law. The curry was always cold before her turn came to eat, and the choicer dishes never fell to her share. Sometimes, indeed, she went hungry, not from lack of food, but from lack of time in which to eat it.

Greatest of all her trials was the persecution to which she was subjected by her half-witted brother-in-law. Lotika was not at all a cowardly girl, but Bonkim somehow possessed the power to fill her with fear. He quickly discovered this, and took a Puck-like pleasure in teasing and terrifying her. He would creep up behind her, as she was tossing the uncooked rice in the air to separate it from dust and chaff, and jerk the sifting basket out of her hands. Or he would suddenly and sharply pinch her arm, as she was carrying a jar of water. One day he threw a handful of sand into her plate of curry. On this occasion Lotika's patience deserted her. She sprang to her feet and ran in search of her mother-in-law. She found her sitting with a looking-glass before her, having her hair brushed by a maid-servant. It was one of Lotika's grievances that easier and more honourable tasks were assigned to the maid, and the roughest work fell to her share. "Not that I want to oil the plaits of that she-wolf," she would say to herself, as an afterthought.

Now she broke into excited speech, careless of consequences.

"Bonkim has ruined my food: he poured sand on to my plate. I cannot eat it and I am very hungry. You must prevent him from tormenting me like this! I cannot bear it any longer."

"Is that a way to speak to me, you luck-forsaken chit?" said her mother-in-law. "What is the good of complaining of the boy? He is weak in the head. He does not understand what he is doing."

"He would understand a good whipping!" cried Lotika. "If no one else will punish him, I shall do it myself."

"Be quiet, Coal-face, be quiet," shouted Upen's mother. "Get out of my sight. Your husband shall silence your impudent tongue. And if you ever dare to lay a finger on Bonkim you will be beaten out of this house with a broom."

Lotika retired, fairly choking with anger and shame. Instead of returning to the kitchen, where she had left her plateful of sandy rice on the floor, she went into the sleeping-room and lay down in a corner, rolling herself up in a quilt. Presently her mother-in-law entered the kitchen and found the fire out, the place untidy, and a dog with its nose in one of her precious brass dishes. In a towering passion she called Upen from the men's sitting-room, where he sat reading the morning paper. Lotika could hear her loud voice as she pushed her son toward the sleeping-room. She quailed beneath her quilt.

"It is your own fault, Upen, that the girl is a lazy, good-for-nothing slut. What she needs is the stick,

and plenty of it! It is your duty to whip the wickedness out of her. Here is your cane. Take it, can't you? Do as I tell you, or I will never cook a pancake for you again."

"What has she done, Mother?" said Upen, in a meek but reluctant tone.

"Done! What has she not done? She has just been most rude to me, and threatened to beat poor, simple Bonkim. She has brought unclean dogs into the kitchen, to eat the good food we give her. Go in and whip her until she screams for mercy, or never speak to me again."

Very unwillingly Upen entered the bedroom, while his mother hastened to the kitchen, which had now been invaded by several hungry crows. Lotika felt as though this were the last drop of bitterness in her cup. To be smacked by her hefty mother-in-law was unpleasant enough, but that the weakly, timid husband, whom she half-liked and half-despised, should have been bidden to beat her, was a humiliation too intolerable for words.

"Get up," said the unhappy Upen. "Surely you are not asleep? Did you not hear what Mother said to me?"

Lotika neither moved nor spoke.

"Why do you lie there and say nothing?" asked the young man, almost plaintively. "Mother has told me to beat you. It was very foolish of you to speak rudely to her. You might have known that this would happen. It is very unpleasant."

"It is indeed," exclaimed Lotika, sitting up abruptly. "Even you could not have borne patiently all that

I have had to bear. Your brother Bonkim makes my life miserable. Why do you never beat *him* ?"

"You know perfectly well that I am forbidden to touch him. I may not even scold him, and I have been bidden to beat you."

Upen heaved a heavy sigh, and looked at his bride as though he expected her sympathy. Lotika's sufferings had not broken her spirit, nor entirely quenched her sense of humour. The comic side of the situation struck her, and she smiled ruefully.

"It seems to me that it is I who should sigh and not you," she said.

With a guilty air, Upen closed the door of the room.

"Look here," he said confidentially, "I will not hurt you, but you must scream as if you were being murdered."

This time Lotika laughed outright, and Upen anxiously gestured to her to be quiet.

"All right," she said, "there is nothing that I want to do more than to scream as if I were being murdered."

Upen, accordingly, started to whack the mattress with a good will, and Lotika screamed and sobbed, and begged for mercy most realistically. They continued the farce for two or three minutes.

"There," said Upen at last, "that is enough I am sure. Hush, she must not hear us laughing! Now go back to the kitchen, and padlock your lips, as you value your life."

"How can I go back to the kitchen?" said Lotika. "Not only am I faint with hunger, but I am quite unfit for work after the thrashing you have given

me. I am going to lie down here for the rest of the day, and groan if your mother comes near me."

She suited action to word, and curled up under her quilt for a good sleep. Later in the morning Upen smuggled some of his lunch in to her, and she felt a little less miserable than she had done for many days.

The respite, alas, was a short one. In a few hours her sorrows and humiliations re-commenced. Bonkim became more spiteful and malicious daily, and Lotika's nerves became affected: she wanted to scream aloud whenever he came near her. One day he shook a leaf-full of stinging ants over her neck, and she threatened him that if he would not leave her alone she would retaliate.

"I'll never leave you alone," he said with his cunning grin. "Even when you are asleep I'll come and pinch you. If you run away I'll follow you and put a scorpion down your neck."

Poor Lotika believed him. Her fear had in it something of superstition. She was certain that Bonkim had an "evil eye" and could injure her even from a distance. She hardly dared to go to sleep at night, and when she dozed she dreamed of her tormentor.

A few days later the crisis came. Bonkim got hold of a pair of scissors, and stealing up behind Lotika he snipped off a lock of her hair. He dangled it before her eyes, and then threw it into the fire. Lotika was panic-stricken. She thought perhaps he had some magic power by which he could destroy her body as he had destroyed her hair. With a cry of anger she leapt up and tried to wrench the scissors from his hand. He jabbed at her with them and drew blood

from her arm. With a scream of pain she sprang at him, and with one hand at his throat pushed him back against the wall, while with her other hand she smacked his face with all her might. Bonkim writhed and scratched and spat, and yelled for his mother, and in a few seconds she hurried into the room to find the pair struggling with one another.

. . . . .

Romoni and Monika were sitting quietly in their court-yard, polishing brass dishes, when a vehicle drew up at their gate. It stopped for a few seconds, and then was driven away again. A minute afterwards the chain of the court-yard door was timidly rattled. Monika called out to ask who was there.

"It is Lotika," a muffled voice answered softly.

Monika sprang up, and ran eagerly to unbar the gate, and her sister came slowly in. She was wearing a soiled and torn sari: her feet were bare, her hair dishevelled and her eyes swollen with crying. Her tin trunk and roll of bedding lay beside her, where they had been thrown from the carriage into the dusty road. Monika hastily dragged them inside and re-fastened the gate. Then she anxiously turned to question her sister, but Lotika burst into a storm of tears and wails. When her mother and sister tried to touch her, she pushed them away.

"Whatever can have happened?" cried Monika. "Surely she has not become a widow! Speak, Loti, can't you? Is your husband dead?"

"No, no," howled Lotika, "but I wish he were, and his mother too, and most of all I wish that I were dead! Why was I ever born to be disgraced

like this? I have been turned out of the house, with every sort of insult. They have sworn never to look on my face again. Sinner that I am, I will go and drown myself. Oh, it were far better to be a widow than to be insulted and abused as I have been!"

Gradually they drew from her the story of her misery and shame. She acknowledged herself to have been to blame for attacking Bonkim.

"I know I had been forbidden to touch him," she sobbed, "but he was driving me mad. Look at the mark on my arm, where he stabbed me with scissors, and that is the place where he scratched my wrist. She found me beating him—I hardly knew what I was doing—and she went mad with rage. How she beat me with her shoe, and kicked me, and abused me, using horrible words! You, too, she abused, Mother, and my dead father. I wished she had killed me outright. My husband heard the noise and came in, and he never lifted a finger to help me. My mother-in-law told him that I had tried to strangle Bonkim, and she told me to go and strangle myself. I wanted to do so, but my father-in-law stopped me, and locked me into an empty store-room. Early this morning they sent me away in the charge of a man-servant, and they have sworn, every one of them, that I shall never re-enter their house."

"Who wants you to re-enter such a house?" exclaimed Monika, while Romoni clasped the sobbing child to her breast, and, stroking her hair, whispered again and again, "My jewel, my little jewel, you are safe with me."

Presently Lotika's sobs subsided.

"It is like heaven to be here," she whispered, "and that place is like hell; but oh, Mother, what will life be like for me henceforward? This is worse than widowhood. Every one who sees me will mock me. I shall be a burden and a disgrace on you and uncle, as long as my miserable life shall last. Never, never, can I have a baby of my own, and there is nothing for me to look forward to except death!"

Romoni did not know what to say; Lotika had not exaggerated the misery of her situation.

When her uncle heard the story he was very angry at the way in which she had been treated. He wrote to her father-in-law to expostulate. He asked for an adequate reason for Lotika's expulsion, and added, "Unless I receive an explanation from you I shall take your son's wife back to the house where she has a right to stay."

In due course he got a reply, but the writer refused to give any explanation.

"The girl can tell you why she has been cast out," he wrote. "If she is ever brought back to this house, she will be beaten from the door with a broom."

The sentiments in this letter were obviously those of Upen's mother, but alas, the hand-writing, with shame be it confessed, was that of Upen himself!

Atol Babu, seething with righteous wrath, consulted a lawyer, who thought that a legal claim for Lotika's support might be made on her husband's family, but suggested that it would only bring further disgrace on the family. Indian gentlefolk hate to bring the names of their daughters into law-suits, or to make requests from their sons-in-law, and Atol was no exception to this rule. Reluctantly he let

the matter drop. Dishonour was written on Lotika's forehead. The blame was partly her own: she would have to bear it.

The half-witted boy Bonkim, however, had sworn revenge, declaring that he would follow her home and kill her. He actually turned up at the house one day, having travelled without a ticket, as the deformed and deficient in India usually do. The door was not unbarred to him, and Atol found him wandering round and round, trying to get in. He took him to his own house, and locked him into a room with barred windows. Then he wrote to the boy's father.

"Your mad son is here: I think he has come to try to injure your daughter-in-law. In spite of the way in which you have treated her, I have given him shelter and will supply him with food, until you come to fetch him away."

This letter soon brought Bonkim's father to the house. He was humble and apologetic.

"I know you have a just grievance, sir," he confessed, "but alas, I can do nothing. My wife hates the girl, and if you sent her back by force, I believe she would kill her."

Atol well knew that such a contingency was not impossible, and he wanted no more murders in his family circle.

"Well, this was evidently written on the poor girl's forehead," he said with a sigh, and he bade Upen's father a courteous if formal farewell.

CHAPTER XI

MONIKA'S HOME

WHEN Lotika heard that Bonkim had actually followed her to her village home, she was panic-stricken, and clung like a little child to her mother, begging to be saved from his cruel power. Even when assured that he had been bolted into a room with barred windows, she refused to be comforted. In her state of nervous prostration she believed, superstitiously, that his hatred could reach her in spite of all barriers between them. She slept not at all, and could with difficulty be persuaded to take any food.

When Bonkim (somewhat subdued by his two days of solitary confinement) had been finally removed, Monika took her sister to task.

"Look here, child," she said, "you have got to leave off sitting howling in a corner, with a face like a black cooking-pot."

Lotika made no reply, and merely turned her back on her sister.

"Have you no pride, Loti?" cried Monika. "You are not a widow. You ought to wear clean clothes, and the ornaments that mother gave you."

"I know I am not a widow," muttered Lotika. "I know I have no right to shave my head, or wear sacred beads and a plain white garment. I haven't even the right to cry! I am an object of mockery,

not of pity, and so I shall remain till the end of my wretched life."

"For shame, Loti. Didi had a far worse burden to carry than you have, and yet how patiently she bore it!"

"Didi was a saint," said Lotika sullenly. "I am the most contemptible of sinners."

(An Indian girl in sorrow calls herself a "sinner" in ironical reference to her misdeeds in a previous incarnation.)

"After all, your case is not hopeless," said Monika. "Your mother-in-law will not live for ever, and your husband——"

"Don't speak to me of my husband," interrupted Lotika. "He wrote that letter threatening me with a broom!"

"Don't think I am not sorry for you," said Monika sighing. "Yours is a sad lot, but I feel you are acting selfishly. Every day Mother cooks your favourite dishes with her own hands, and you refuse to touch them. Her heart is broken, and yet when she cries she does not let us see her tears. My own heart is not too happy, and yet I eat my food, and you do not hear me howling in a corner."

Lotika turned, and looked for the first time into her sister's face. It was pale, and something of sadness and conflict lurked in her eyes, and in the curve of her lips.

"What is your trouble, Didi?" she said. "You have no mother-in-law, a beautiful home, and a husband who loves you."

"Sometimes I think that the worst mother-in-law would be better than the loneliness of fear," con-

fessed Monika, lowering her voice. "You must never repeat to Mother what I am saying to you, but my home is not happy. Mother loves my husband as if he were her son, and her one consolation is the thought of my successful marriage. It is true that my lord loves me, and I love him," and her lips trembled. "But, Lotika, when he was drunken . . . as you fear that horrible Bonkim, so I am forced to fear the man that I should honour as a god! Is that an easy burden to carry? There was a time when a great hope came to me,—the greatest hope of woman-kind; but"—she dropped her voice to a whisper—"one night he came home drunken and threw me downstairs."

"Oh, Moni, how terrible! Why, he is an ogre like that brute Gonesh."

"No, oh no, Loti. He was sorry and ashamed the next day. With his own hand he rubbed oil on my bruises. It was easy to forgive him—but my sweet hope was lost."

"Oh, why is the world so miserable?" sobbed Lotika. "Why were we ever born into such a place?"

"The world itself is beautiful, and full of good things," said Monika thoughtfully. "Through sin it is spoiled for us, but I think it is a kind of school. We come here to learn to read the books of patience and courage. Mother has learned, and Didi learned, and I am trying to learn. Our Master, Jesus, when He suffered, never opened His mouth in complaint."

"It is only wretched Lotika who has not begun to read her letters," said the child, with a feeble smile. "Well, Didi, I will try, but oh, it is a difficult book!"

It was rather pitiful to see Lotika trying to spell patience. Her health and nerves had suffered seriously, and when she forced herself to eat she felt sick. At night, though she lay in silence, she could not sleep. From time to time her uncle brought her some opium, but though it soothed her for a time, her eyes grew more hollow, and her distaste for food greater than before.

Then one day Nirod Dey arrived, in his Ford car, to fetch his wife.

His eyes were puffy, and his complexion unhealthy; and Monika was afraid that her mother would read his ignoble secret in his face. She did ask, solicitously, whether he had been ill.

"No," he said lightly, "I have been fretting for the mistress of my house. Servants do not look after one like a wife. Can you spare her to me, Mother, do you think?"

"Of course I can spare her: you have been most generous in lending her for so long. Take her with my blessing, and will you let her little sister accompany her? She has been very far from well, and a change of air and scene may restore her appetite."

This suggestion came as a surprise to the girls, and Lotika protested that she would not leave her mother. Nirod, however, fell in with it with eager generosity.

"You look like a withered flower," he said. "We will feed you up, and send you back with flesh on your bones."

"But Mother will be all alone," said Lotika again.

"Mother will be all right," said Romoni firmly. "She wishes you to go, jewel, and will look forward to seeing you looking better when you return."

So it was settled. Monika whispered to her sister that she would find her presence a comfort and help, and Lotika was child enough to brighten up at the prospect of seeing the beautiful house and estate of which she had heard so much.

Monika had not exaggerated the charms of her husband's home. They drove past a fine orchard, and large vegetable and flower gardens, before they reached the handsome old court-yard gate, which was thrown open by a grey-headed servant, who smiled broadly, and bowed deeply to his master and mistress. On the verandah, rose-bushes and gay-leaved crotons in pots, made a brave show.

A yellow-crested cockatoo, in a handsome cage, greeted the party with cheerful shrieks. An English terrier came to meet his master, wagging his undocked tail, and two women servants welcomed their youthful "mother" Monika, with much touching of the feet.

Their coming had been announced, and a meal was being prepared for them, but before they ate it Lotika had to be conducted over the house. It was very large, but parts of it were in such disrepair as to be uninhabitable. Several large rooms, however, were in good condition, and well furnished. Lotika was impressed by the sight of the gay pictures, heavy, carved wooden beds, and glass-fronted cupboards full of earthenware figures and ornaments. The women's quarters of even well-to-do people in Bengal are often furnished only with a few shabby mats, and wooden beds resembling low, ramshackle tables, but Monika's sitting-room contained rugs and stools and cushions, a sewing-machine, and even a tiny harmonium. The men's sitting-room was palatial, being provided with

chairs and tables, and a showy gramophone, with a huge green trumpet. Lotika only peeped into this apartment: though it was empty she had no wish to enter it, for it smelt of stale tobacco and spirits.

The hot meal being ready, the two girls waited on Nirod, though he good-naturedly protested that they must be hungry, and ought to eat at the same time as himself. Monika and Lotika, however, had had a careful old-fashioned upbringing, and would not dream of touching food till the master of the house was satisfied. After he had finished his supper, and gone to his sitting-room to smoke, Monika took her food from his unwashed brass plate, this being the custom of a dutiful wife. Before he went he told her to sleep with her sister, as he was going out, and might return late.

After their meal Monika had accounts to do with the old gate-keeper.

"Gopal is so good," she explained. "He buys all the household things, and keeps the money carefully. My husband is very careless, I am afraid."

Later on Lotika was introduced to the fat, well-kept cows and calves, and looked also, from a respectful distance, at the big bulls and oxen.

"They are lovely," she exclaimed. "If anybody but you had owned them I should have eaten my head with envy!"

Monika made no reply, but her smile was rather a sad one. The tired girls went early to rest, and slept side by side on a big, soft bed in a large upper room, through which the night breeze blew pleasantly. At midnight Lotika was awakened by sounds of shouting

and laughter. She sat up startled, and clutched the arm of Monika, who was already awake.

"What is it?" she whispered. "Are there ghosts in this house?"

"No, no, lie still. Go to sleep again," said Monika quietly. "You will hear these sounds very often while you are here."

Lotika understood, and lay down, shuddering. It was in the very early morning that she heard a hoarse voice, which she hardly recognised as that of Nirod, grumbling and scolding. Another voice, probably old Gopal's, spoke soothingly, as to a fractious child. Presently there came a louder shout, and then a crash and clatter of broken glass.

"I wonder whether I ought to go to him," whispered Monika anxiously.

"Oh, don't leave me," said Lotika, clinging to her. "Don't go near him. It isn't safe to go near a drunken man."

"Safe!" echoed Monika. "There are other things besides safety to consider in life, little sister."

They listened quietly, till the sounds of excited speech died away in indistinct mutterings, to be followed presently by loud snoring.

"He will not stir till morning now," said Monika. "Gopal is with him, and you and I can sleep in peace."

The next day it was late before Nirod appeared. He refused his rice, and complained of a headache, and his eyes were dull and heavy. Lotika felt a curious sense of repulsion toward him, though he spoke to her kindly enough.

It was market-day, and he went out presently, to

superintend the sale of a couple of young bullocks. The sisters amused themselves with the harmonium. Monika had had lessons, and she began to teach Lotika the notes. Hours passed, and Nirod did not re-appear. Toward nightfall the old servant came in search of Monika, carrying a small heavy bundle, tied up in a duster. He explained that it contained money.

"The master sold the calves for fifty-four rupees," he said. "Afterwards he was tired and wanted some refreshment. I waited for him a long time. Then I went into the house where he was sitting and asked him to come home, but he would not do so. His bag was open, and his money was scattered on the table and the floor. I have only found forty-two rupees. I thought I had better bring them to you."

"You have done well," said Monika quietly. "I will lock up the money and do you return to your master."

When they were alone again, she looked at her sister with a bitter smile.

"Twelve rupees he has lost—or thrown away on drink," she said. "Do you still envy me, Loti? What a cursed thing is this brandy!"

"You ought not to bear this," said Lotika. "Tell him that you will not stay with him unless he becomes sober. It is disgusting for a gentleman to madden himself with strong drink like a coolie."

"Sometimes Gopal cannot control him, and then he needs me," said Monika quietly. "I should not like to leave him long alone."

"Oh, it is not right," persisted Lotika. "A drunken man is like a dangerous animal. Tell him you will

leave him, unless he swears to touch that stuff no more."

"He swears readily enough," said her sister sighing, "but he forgets all his oaths when he sees a brandy bottle."

Late that evening Nirod was brought home by the faithful Gopal and another servant. He could be heard declaring that he had been robbed, and threatening to beat the flesh off the bones of the thief. In vain Gopal tried to persuade him to go upstairs to bed. He sat in the men's parlour, and began to call for his wife.

"I must go to him," said Monika, standing up, pale but resolute.

Lotika vainly entreated her to wait until his excitement had subsided.

"No," she said, "he wants me, and he may injure himself if he is not pacified."

"I'll go with you, if you must go," said Lotika.

"Very well, he may be ashamed of himself, and become calmer if he sees you. Do not show any fear, but if he should become violent you must run away."

Together they entered the room, where Nirod lolled in a chair, beating the table in front of him with his fists.

"Where is my wife? Send my wife to me!" he kept repeating angrily.

"I am here," said Monika, stepping toward him. "What do you want?"

"Why did you not come earlier?" he cried. "I have been robbed. All my money has been stolen. I sold something—I forget what."

"You sold two young white bullocks."

"Yes, yes, and all the money was paid in silver, and now it has been stolen. I will strangle the thief with my own hands."

"Hush, you dropped the money and Gopal picked it up."

"Gopal would not rob me. He is a good fellow. Why—there is the thief, I see the wretch—hiding by the doorway behind you."

He sprang unsteadily to his feet, and pointed at Lotika, who, in spite of her sister's warning, was cowering in fear behind a curtain. To her horror she saw Nirod take a heavy stick from the table, and lift it unsteadily above his head.

"There's the thief," he muttered. "Stand aside. I'll beat his brains out, and smash all his bones."

"Run, Lotika, bolt yourself into your room," exclaimed Monika, sharply, and she quietly faced her husband.

"Are you mad?" she asked him. "Do you take my sister for a thief?"

Lotika did not wait to hear the answer to this question. She fled for her life, despising herself for her cowardice as she did so, and fastened herself into her room as she had been bidden. She stood beside the door, however, with her hand on the bolt, ready to draw it back in a moment if she heard her sister's footstep. Some time passed before Monika came slowly up the stairs, and whispered a request for admission. She came in, looking white and weary, and carrying the stick with which Nirod had threatened Lotika. With a sigh she sat down on the bed.

"Is he pursuing you?" asked Lotika as she re-bolted the door.

"Oh no," replied her sister. "He has gone to sleep, lying on the floor of the sitting-room. I could not coax him to come up to bed."

"He is better downstairs," said Lotika shuddering. "I hope you have locked the door."

"No, that might annoy him. Gopal is with him, and will give him a cushion, and bring him water if he needs it. I am very tired. Let us go to bed."

Before daybreak a loud knocking was heard on the bedroom door.

"Mother," shouted the voice of old Gopal, "come to the master. He has fallen on the stairs and his head is bleeding."

"Oh, must you go?" cried Lotika as her sister sprang out of bed. "Is it safe? Shall I come with you?"

"No, no, stay where you are," said Monika, hastily arranging her sari. She picked up the dimly burning lamp, gave Lotika a reassuring smile and unbolted the door. When she had gone Lotika rebolted it.

"I am worse than a worm," she said angrily to herself, for her teeth were chattering. "I am a hindrance, not a help to Didi. Bonkim was horrible, but at least he was not drunken. The sight of Nirod, and the things he says, make my blood run cold."

In the morning one of the maids brought her some hot milk, and told her that the master was in bed, and the mistress sitting beside him and fanning him. Later on old Gopal came to tell her that his master wished to see her. Lotika refused to go.

"If he remembers that lost money he may try to kill me," she thought.

An hour afterwards Monika appeared, looking quite cheerful.

"Do come to my husband, Loti," she said, "he keeps asking for you. He is perfectly sober now, but he will not sleep until he has seen you."

Lotika, comforting herself with the reflection that the great stick was safely out of the way, followed her sister. Nirod, white-faced, and with bandaged forehead, lay on his bed.

"Come in, Lotika," he said smiling. "Are you afraid of me?"

"I was afraid of you in the night," said Lotika, keeping at a distance, and fixing resentful eyes on his face.

"I took a drop of wine last night," he answered, "to celebrate the sale of two bullocks, and in the dim lamp-light I seem to have mistaken you for a thief. You must forgive me. Afterwards I fell down and hurt myself. Why did you not come to me when I sent for you?"

"I was afraid that you might try to kill me again," said Lotika bluntly. She did not feel very forgiving.

"You are foolish," said Nirod, "and I was injured and in pain. Would you refuse to help me when I was ill?"

"You were not ill. You only hurt yourself because you were drunken," said Lotika, in tones of disgust, her courage coming back in a flood.

"Your sister was not afraid to come to me," said Nirod, smiling affectionately at Monika, who returned his loving glance.

"Oh, my sister is a saint," said Lotika. "I have not her courage or her devotion. If you really care

for her, will you not give up drinking that horrible brandy for her sake? Some day in your drunkenness you will *kill* her, and then what will become of you?"

"The gods forbid that I should kill her," said Nirod, the tears of easy emotion in his eyes. "You are right, Lotika, spirits are my curse. I will never drink another drop of the miserable stuff, as long as I live."

"You have made that promise before," said Lotika. "How long have you kept it?"

Nirod's eyes shifted from her face to that of his wife.

"Your sister is hard on me," he said. "But you love me too well to reproach me, do you not?"

Monika looked at him steadily for a moment, and her eyes filled with tears.

"It is because she loves you so that you ought to be ashamed to break her heart," said Lotika firmly.

"I *am* ashamed," exclaimed Nirod. "The accursed thing is too strong for me."

Monika fell on her knees beside the bed, sobbing aloud.

"The Lord Jesus would help you, if you would pray to Him," she whispered.

Nirod bent over her, caressing her bowed head with trembling hands.

"Pray to Him for me, goddess of my heart," he said.

CHAPTER XII

THE DEATH OF ROMONI

For two or three days after this episode Nirod remained sober, and during this time he was kind and courteous. He often set the gramophone going for Lotika's benefit, and as the country-bred child had had no previous acquaintance with this miraculous musical-box, she was duly amazed and delighted. Sometimes for a brief space she forgot her own troubles, but when the recollection swept over her that she was a disgraced and rejected wife, it seemed all the more bitter, after the respite.

One day Nirod took his wife and sister-in-law for a long drive in his car. They visited a neighbouring town and saw a circus, sitting, of course, in the curtained seats set apart for ladies. To Lotika, it was like making a trip to fairy-land: mediocre acrobatic performances thrilled her with delicious terror, and miserable and mangy performing animals, with astonishment and admiration.

Alas, Nirod, separated from his women-folk, fell in with some dissipated companions, and after the show he was in an unfit state to drive the car. He steered from side to side of the road, bent a mudguard against a tree-trunk, and nearly ran into a pond.

Monika, realising the situation, insisted on stopping at a garage, where they were able to hire a

driver. Fortunately, when only slightly intoxicated, Nirod allowed himself to be directed and controlled by his wife. They reached the house in safety, but all Monika's efforts could not avail to keep him at home that night. The fatal thirst was upon him again, and muttering something about an appointment with a friend, he went off without his evening meal. The faithful Gopal brought him back at midnight too nearly insensible at first to be violent, but later on Monika had to go to him, and when Lotika next saw her, she had an ugly bruise on her forehead, and one eye was dark and swollen.

"Didi," exclaimed Lotika with tears, "I fall at your feet. I beg, I entreat you not to stay in this house. Sooner or later Nirod will kill you."

"Quite probably," said Monika, spreading her hands with a resigned gesture. "What can I do? If death is written on my forehead it will come."

"It will be death by murder," said Lotika indignantly. "Though you have married a rich man you are living in hell!"

Monika's sad mouth softened to a wistful smile.

"If I die, the murderer will be brandy, not my poor husband," she said. "What you call hell is tolerable to me because I love him. I would not exchange this life of danger for a peaceful existence with Mother. He might hurt himself in my absence if I ran away."

"He hurts himself when you are present," muttered Lotika.

"I have saved him many times," was the quiet reply. "If I *am* to die young, I would rather perish at his hand than in any other way."

"I hate to see you waste your life on a selfish drunkard," maintained Lotika, but Monika raised her eyebrows in grave protest.

"It does not seem to me that if I devote my life to my duty I can waste it," she said. "Besides, I pray for my husband, and I have told him about our Master, the Lord Jesus, as well."

"And is he not angry, when you speak that Name?"

"Never, Loti. Sometimes he sighs and says that I am right, and that whatever we may say about Christians, the God Whom they worship is a great saint."

"How does he know about Him?" asked Lotika.

"He, too, when quite young, went to a Mission School," answered Monika, "and he has not quite forgotten the teaching. But also, one of his great friends, a clerk in a Government office, has become a Christian, and though he seldom sees him now, they correspond regularly. He used to be like Nirod, and now he tries to help him. God grant that he may."

Nirod certainly appeared very much subdued after this outbreak. Instead of asking to see Lotika he avoided her for some time.

One day he said to her abruptly: "I expect you are longing to go home."

Lotika hesitated. She was nervous and unhappy certainly, but she felt that her presence was a comfort to Monika.

Nirod was quick to interpret her silence. "Of course, you are miserable in the house with me," he said. "You had better take your sister with you when you go. I am not fit to have a wife—not such

a wife! It would be a good thing for her if I were dead."

"She would die of grief if you died," said Lotika. "Oh, elder brother, why will you not give up that poison, and fill her loving heart with joy?"

He was silent for a minute, and she saw the tears gather in his eyes.

"She is praying for me, little sister," he said at last. "Do you pray also, and stay a little longer, for her sake."

. . . . .

A day or two after this, however, a letter arrived from Atol Babu. "Your mother is unwell," he wrote. "It will be well if Lotika can return quickly."

Monika begged to accompany her sister: her uncle's letter alarmed her. Nirod was disappointed, but when sober he was always generous. He promised at once to take the sisters back to their home on the morrow. That night he remained indoors, and was so gentle and affectionate towards his wife that Lotika's wrath gave place to a kind of sorrowful envy. The next morning, soon after day-break, they set out in the car, and on arrival they were welcomed by the maid-servant from their uncle's house, whom Bela's mother had kindly sent in to look after the invalid.

"Your mother is better," she reported. "She is expecting you, and has been telling me what to cook for you."

With lightened hearts the girls hurried to their mother. She was sitting up on her mat, and she stretched out eager arms to welcome them.

"Come in, come in," she said. "Are you both there, my treasures? Is that my son, Nirod? Can you spare your wife for a few hours to her selfish old mother?"

When they stooped to kiss her they found that her lips were dry and hot. Her eyes were bright, and her voice strong, but she spoke jerkily. The girls soon realised that she was still very ill. Her strength was that of high fever, and she drew her breath rapidly and with evident pain. Romoni's body had always been frail, and the austerities of widowhood had emaciated it. In her, cheerfulness and courage had always taken the place of physical strength, and even now they did not desert her.

"Loti," she said, "run to the kitchen, my jewel of gold. Prepare some hot pancakes for your brother-in-law. That woman does not know how to cook, and I am not very strong to-day."

"Your mother tried to go to the cook-house," explained the maid, "but she fell on the threshold. I had to drag her back to her mat."

"Yes, I have caught cold, and my chest troubles me a little," Romoni acknowledged. "Hasten, Lotika. You will find flour and clarified butter in the kitchen."

"It is not needful," exclaimed Nirod. "Rice will do for me."

"No, no. It shall never be said that my best of sons-in-law came to his old mother's house, and was given nothing but rice."

To satisfy her Lotika hurried to the cook-house, while Romoni lay back exhausted, and whispered to Monika to fan her. Her weakness appeared to

be increasing, and as soon as she found an opportunity, Monika went in search of her uncle.

"Has Mother been seen by any doctor?" she asked.

"No," he replied. "She has prepared some herbal remedies for herself. She will not be seen or touched by a man."

"Let us send for the lady doctor from the Mission," said Monika. "My husband can fetch her in his car."

"The fee will surely be high if she comes so far," protested her uncle. "Your mother has only a cough, and she is better to-day."

"She does not appear to me to be better," said Monika. "My husband will pay the necessary fee, I am sure."

Nirod was perfectly willing to undertake the errand. The idea of driving the skilful English lady doctor, whose fame was wide-spread, in his car, attracted him, and he readily promised to meet the expenses involved. Romoni would not let him leave the house until he had eaten a good meal. Then she called him to her and blessed him, thanking him again for his kindness.

"I am coming back, Mother," he explained. "I will not say farewell. I am going to fetch a doctor."

"There is no need," said Romoni, smiling. "The sight of my children has healed me. When Nilima comes I shall be quite well."

Nirod realised that her mind was beginning to wander, and he set off as speedily as possible for the hospital, which was situated in a town five miles away.

"Go and eat, my daughters," said Romoni, after he had gone. "Your rice is cooked. Do not let it get cold."

The girls protested that they would rather stay with her, but she would not be satisfied until they had gone, one at a time, to the kitchen for a little food. Her breathing, meantime, became more laboured. She complained that there was no air in the room, and asked to be raised in the bed. Then she began to call for Nilima, talking to her as though she were a little girl.

"Come to your mother, soul's treasure," she pleaded. "I have sweetmeats and playthings for you."

Suddenly she began to moan, "Oh, oh, my Nili cannot come to me. That cruel, cruel man will not let her come to her mother."

Bending over her Monika whispered, "Nilima is safe with Jesus."

Romoni looked up at her and smiled.

"My child," she said, "I am going to Nilima, and I have nothing to leave to you but my blessing. May that good teacher, Jesus, Whom you worship, take care of you."

She closed her eyes once more, and Monika touching her hands and feet noticed that they were cold, though her body still burned with fever. In alarm she sent for her uncle. Romoni recognised him at once.

"Brother," she whispered, "I am going to leave you. You have been good to me. Be good to my girls. Moni has a kind husband, but my Lotika I must leave in your charge, until her husband relents and sends for her."

"That he will never do," said Atol sadly. "Only yesterday I heard that he has been married again. The bride they say is ugly, but her father has money. The fact of the former marriage was hushed up. It is a shameful business, but we can do nothing."

Lotika gave a cry of dismay. Hope, unacknowledged, had reserved a place in her heart until that moment. Her uncle's words tore it out by the roots. Romoni's face, too, became troubled. Monika had tried to stop her uncle from blurting out such sad news at such a time, but he had not noticed her signs.

"Lotika shall always have a home in my house," said Atol.

"In mine also," exclaimed Monika. "My husband looks on her as if she were his own sister."

The troubled look left Romoni's face. She smiled peacefully.

"My Nilima is coming to me," she whispered. "Her face is happy,"

For a time she lay still, murmuring words of endearment. Then her breathing became more difficult.

"Where are you, my children?" she whispered. "Moni, Loti, come and hold my hands."

"We are holding you, Mother," said Monika, "and the good Lord Jesus is holding you too."

Suddenly Romoni sat up, and stretched out her arms.

"Oh, adorable God!" she exclaimed, and her face changed as she fell back unconscious.

"Let us carry her outside," said Atol, who shared the Hindu superstition that death must not be allowed to take place within four walls. Hastily

they seized the corners of the mat, and carried it, with its frail burden, into the court-yard.

"We must not let the sun shine on her face," said Lotika.

"It will not hurt her," said her uncle. "She is gone."

CHAPTER XIII

THE TESTING OF KALI

WHEN the doctor drove up to the house, the sound of wailing quickly informed her that she had come too late. She asked a few questions, and told Monika that her mother had evidently died of pneumonia following influenza, a disease which was causing much mortality at the time. She expressed her sympathy, and asked after Nilima, who had been so long in the Hospital.

"She is dead too," said Monika, between her sobs.

"Dead!" exclaimed the doctor. "But I discharged her cured."

"She had to go back to her wicked husband," explained Monika. "We never saw her again. I think it was partly sorrow for her that has killed my mother."

"Poor child," said the doctor. "Do not cry so bitterly. Did Nilima ever tell you about the One of Whom she learned in the Hospital, Who comforts the broken-hearted?"

"You mean the Lord Jesus?" said Monika. "She worshipped Him with all her heart. I believe she is with Him now."

"You believe in Him also?" said the doctor. "Come, let us kneel and pray to Him, before I go."

Monika looked round for Lotika, but she was nowhere to be seen.

"Let me first just call my sister," she said, and went into the house. She found Lotika huddled in a dark corner, with her head bowed. Only when she called her loudly did the child lift her face, and the expression in her eyes frightened Monika.

"Loti, what is the matter with you? You are ill!" she exclaimed.

"Did you hear what Uncle told Mother before she died?" Lotika asked slowly. "My husband has taken another wife. Mother has left me, and I will not live to be a burden on my uncle or on Nirod. I have just swallowed opium."

"Opium," Monika repeated in horror. "Where did you get it? How much did you take?"

"Oh, enough," said Lotika, indicating with her fingers that she had swallowed a good-sized pill. "Soon I shall sleep and not waken."

Monika, white to the lips, rushed into the courtyard.

"Doctor Mem!" she cried. "Come to my sister! Oh, come at once. She has taken opium to kill herself."

Lotika staggered to her feet and tried to run away, but a firm hand on her shoulder brought her to a standstill.

"Is it true that you have swallowed opium? Where did you get it?"

"My uncle gave me a few grains daily at a time when I could not sleep. I did not like it—it made me dream—so I kept it, because I thought some day I should need it all at once," muttered Lotika,

struggling to escape. "I have nothing to live for. I have the right to die."

"Indeed you have not, my dear," said the doctor. "Fetch my bag from the court-yard, Monika, and tell your maid to make some water hot at once. You are only a little child, Lotika; your life belongs to God Who gave it, and with His help I am not going to let you die."

Lotika submitted to the voice of authority. Her own act had begun to frighten her, and happily not much time had elapsed since she had taken the poison. An emetic was administered, more or less successfully, but the girl remained half stupefied and much collapsed.

The doctor decided to take her to the Hospital, and she allowed Monika to come too. The car was still waiting at the gate: Nirod drove fast, and they soon reached "the House of Hope," as the roomy, well-appointed Zenana Hospital was called. Lotika was placed on one of the pretty clean beds, and an English Sister and two Bengali nurses hurried to her side. All three were soon doing everything possible for her recovery, while Monika, who was not required, sat quietly crying on the verandah.

Presently, as she tried to pray, a sense of peace came to her. She felt quite sure that God had sent the doctor just in time to save Lotika's life. As for her mother, her worn-out body was lifeless indeed, but she was convinced that the sweet, patient soul of her loved one was not dead. When she closed her eyes she saw in fancy, her mother resting in a garden full of flowers, with Nilima clasped in her arms. Presently she heard herself called.

"You may come in now," said the Sister. "The little girl will not die; you may sit by her and fan her, and call one of the nurses if she appears faint or sick."

Lotika slept peacefully that night, but the next day, with consciousness and memory fully restored, she was extremely miserable. In the afternoon the busy doctor found time to come and sit beside her for a while. Monika on the other side of the bed, listened to their conversation.

"Do you think we were very cruel to bring you back to life again, yesterday?" the doctor asked with a smile.

"Yes, I do," Lotika whispered, steadily returning her gaze.

"You did not give yourself life," said the doctor, gently. "It was not yours to destroy."

"My mother gave it me," said Lotika, "and she is dead."

"No, my child," said the doctor, "it was not your mother, but God, Who gave you this wonderful body, with its eyes and ears and tongue, and the more wonderful soul that lives in it. You have no right to destroy the beautiful work and gift of your loving Heavenly Father."

"Do you think," said Lotika earnestly, "that if the poor wounded bird of my soul had flown to Him yesterday, out of all its miseries and disgrace, my loving Father would have refused to shelter it, where He has sheltered my mother and sister?"

Tears filled the doctor's eyes, and she answered very gently, "Even though He would not have refused you shelter, do you not think that He would

have asked with disappointment why you had run away from the place in which He had put you? Are fathers pleased when their children run away from school?"

"School?" Lotika repeated slowly. "Monika also calls this world a school. Nilima was killed by her ogre husband. Monika's life is often in danger, and I am kept alive to be a burden and a disgrace. Mem, God's school is a very hard one."

Tears filled the missionary's eyes. She could not answer, but inwardly she murmured, "How long, O Lord, how long?"

Monika broke the silence. "Nilima did not run away," she said.

"No," Lotika conceded, "and when she was going with that ogre she smiled and spoke of Him Who suffered patiently for us. And you have not run away, Monika. You have been a good scholar."

"And Lotika is going to be as brave as her sisters," said the doctor. "She knows her Father in Heaven loves her, and to please Him she will stay in the class where He has placed her."

. . . . .

Apparently Monika must have inhaled an influenza germ, for, next morning she was found to have developed a cough which, though not serious, made a reason for keeping her in hospital for a few days. She lay in the bed next to Lotika, and day by day the kind-faced Biblewoman told them both the ever-new story of Jesus and His Love—the only story which suggested a solution to that problem of suffering with which they had both so early become acquainted.

One day Lotika told the Bible woman that she

wished to become a Christian, and "sit for ever at the feet of Jesus."

The Bible-woman replied that she was not of age, and must obtain her guardian's leave, but she repeated the conversation to the doctor, who had a long talk with the two girls, and became convinced of their sincerity. She explained that no patient could be taken straight from Hospital into one of the Missions where enquirers were prepared for baptism.

"People would say that we made sick people into Christians against their will," she explained. "You must go back to your uncle's house and bear your witness there. As your parents are dead, and your husband has deserted you, we will not refuse to receive you if you come to us from there, unhelped, and of your own free will. You will have to learn to work for your living."

"That is what I want to do," Lotika interrupted. "I want to be a nurse or a school teacher."

"Ah, but you will not be able to choose your work. You may have to weave or sew, or to make chutney, or do any task to which you are set. You will have to mix with women from lower castes than your own, and to treat them with respect."

"All these things do not frighten me," said Lotika. "I want to sit at the feet of Jesus."

"Will Lotika have to eat cows' flesh?" Monika asked shyly.

"Not unless she wishes to," said the doctor smiling, "but she will have to be friendly with people who *do* eat it, and to remember that it is not what we put into our mouths that defiles us. The evil, cruel words that come out of them can make us unclean."

A few days after this conversation the two girls received their discharge.

"You saved my sister's life," said Monika, clinging to the doctor's feet.

"God saved her life," replied the doctor, putting her hand gently on Lotika's head. "That life is precious to me and it is precious to Him. May it be used for His service."

Nirod came late one afternoon to fetch the sisters away in his car, taking them first to their uncle's house, where certain memorial ceremonies for their mother had to be performed.

He thanked the doctor and nurses gratefully for all that they had done. Lotika, who felt ashamed of herself, feared that he would reproach her, but his manner was gentle and sympathetic. There was a difference, too, in his appearance. He looked healthier, and more animated.

"I suppose you two have prayed often to the Christians' God, while you have been in their Hospital?" he asked, when they were on the way.

"Certainly we prayed often to the Father of us all," said Monika. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I think He has been listening to your prayers," said Nirod. "Do you know I have touched neither wine nor brandy since the day on which your mother died?"

Lotika glanced at her sister. Monika's eyes were lifted towards the sunset sky; they were shining like two stars.

. . . . .

It was at their uncle's house that Lotika performed what was probably the bravest deed of her life.

Bela's mother was a punctilious Hindu. One small room in her house was set apart as a shrine. Here, incense was burned twice a day, and flowers and fruits were offered before an image of Kali. This black idol, with its lolling scarlet tongue, and terrible, staring eyes, often exercises a strange fascination on its worshippers. Lotika confided to her sister that, though she was determined to follow Jesus, she was still afraid of Kali.

"She follows me about with her eyes," she said, "as though she knew my secret and meant to punish me."

"The Christians say that she is only a painted doll," said Monika.

"The Brahmans say that there is a spirit in the image," said Lotika. "However I do not mean to worship that spirit. I am determined to put Kali to the test."

"What will you do?" asked Monika, in rather startled tones.

"I will go into the worship-house when no one is there, take the flowers that have been offered to her in front of Kali, and trample them under my feet."

Monika drew in her breath and shuddered.

"Are you not afraid?" she whispered. "I would not dare to do it."

"If Kali's spirit is in the image," said Lotika steadily, "she will never brook such an insult. Perhaps she will kill me: my body will die, but the bird of my soul will find a refuge. If nothing happens, why, I shall know for certain that she is nothing but a painted doll."

Lotika carried out her heroic resolve. What it

cost her to put Kali to the test, it is difficult for a western mind to measure. The terrible spell of Kali's stare exercises its mesmeric power even over Christians and Europeans. This Hindu child braved the terror in loneliness, and defied the greatest and most feared of the deities of her forefathers.

"O Kali," she said, as she crushed the flowers under her heels, "behold what I am doing to your offerings. If you have power, avenge the insult before the sun sets. If you do nothing to me, I shall know you for a painted image only."

She felt sick and faint as she left the shrine, and wondered whether her last hour had come. All that day she fasted: the constant anticipation of calamity made it physically impossible for her to swallow food. Mingled with her fear, however, was a curious sense of exaltation. When the sun had completely set, she sought out Monika, and threw her arms round her neck.

"She has not touched me," she whispered. "I have proved her to be nothing but a doll."

Then she "ate her meat, with gladness and singleness of heart."

After this, she took an early opportunity of speaking to her uncle about her desire to become a Christian. Atol Dass was not so formidable as Kali, but he had been much disturbed by his niece's attempt to commit suicide. He had succeeded with difficulty in keeping all knowledge of it from the police and the village generally.

Lotika felt, however, after her return from Hospital, that she was regarded by her uncle and his family rather as though she were a dangerous animal. No

one scolded her—a reproof, they feared, might be followed by results that would drag the family name into publicity and disgrace—but all avoided her or treated her with constraint. Lotika tried to be gentle and submissive, but she felt her position in the house to be increasingly intolerable.

Atol was enjoying his hookah pipe when she boldly entered the men's sitting-room, and asked if she might speak to him. He nodded, and Lotika made her request to the accompaniment of a gentle bubbling sound. First of all she apologised for having swallowed the opium, and her uncle took his pipe from his mouth.

"I felt no anger," he said, "only sorrow. I thank the gods that they spared your life."

"God was very merciful to me," said Lotika. "The life which He has spared, I wish to devote to Him. Uncle, it is my desire to join the Christians. I have taken the Lord Jesus as my spiritual Guide, and if I live with His disciples I shall earn my own living and be a burden to no one."

"What are you saying, child?" exclaimed her uncle, putting down his pipe. "To join the Christians will be a greater disgrace than swallowing opium. The Brahmans will out-caste the whole family."

"Many in these days have become Christians and yet live in friendship with their families," said Lotika. "Monika knows of my wish. It is her hope that she and her husband may also one day embrace the feet of Jesus."

"Monika's husband may do what he will," said her uncle. "His parents are dead, and his relations enlightened. I know that those in big cities may worship as they please, but we live in an ignorant

village. For myself, I do not believe all the evil tales that are told about Christians. I was taught as a boy in a mission school, and I have a great veneration for Jesus Christ. It is Society that I fear, not the religion of Jesus. We shall be boycotted if you join the Christians, and ours is an old and honourable family."

Lotika hung her head in silence. Her determination did not waver, but she knew not what to say. Her last wish was to bring further disgrace on the family of relatives to whom she owed a large debt of gratitude. Her uncle resumed his pipe.

After a pause he spoke again, slowly.

"If you carry out your wish, you must go secretly. Your aunt and the people of the village must not guess the truth."

Lotika's face lit up: never had she dared to hope for sympathy like this.

"Dear Uncle! You will allow me to go!" she exclaimed.

He looked at her with a rather sad smile.

"I realise as well as you do, Lotika," he said, "and perhaps better, that your future prospects as a Hindu are not bright. You have not even the religious protection of widowhood. If I died you would be not merely destitute, but in danger. The missionaries will protect you, and find some means for you to earn your living respectably. I have no personal prejudice against them. I have thought of a plan. It is time for Monika to return to her husband's house. What can be more natural than that you should accompany her? I myself will take you to the Hospital, and leave you in the lady doctor's

charge. Your aunt and the neighbours will, however, think that you are with your sister. If you do not return, they will think you are dead: indeed, since your dear mother's death, you have looked more dead than alive."

Lotika could only fall at her uncle's feet and sob out her gratitude.

The plan worked smoothly. Bela's mother bade the girls a kindly farewell, but she was not really ill-pleased to see the last of them. She wanted the use of their thatched cottage as an extra cow-house. She was not inclined to believe in Nirod's power to reform.

Lotika tried to persuade her sister to come with her.

"If Uncle Atol and the Doctor Mem knew that your life is often in danger," she said, "I am sure they too, would urge you to leave Nirod."

"I should not listen to them," said Monika. "My place is with my husband. Even if my life should be in danger, that would not move me. But he has acknowledged his weakness, and he believes in the power of prayer. Jesus, our Master, Who cast out demons, can make my husband whole."

Lotika said no more. The sisters embraced one another, and Monika drove away, still smiling bravely, and ready to face the future without flinching, in the happy confidence of her faith and love.

Atol drove with Lotika to the Hospital, and asked to see the lady doctor. She was delighted when he told his errand. Not many guardians have the courage to come in person and deliver over their wards to missionaries. He asked that Lotika's baptism might be postponed for a few months, and that before it

took place she might be given the opportunity to return to her Hindu friends if she wished to do so.

The doctor readily complied, and explained that a year of preparation often preceded baptism. Atol left a little money for his niece, and bade her a kind farewell. With dim eyes she watched him drive away: then the doctor took her hand, and led her into the Hospital.

Lotika had a cross to carry in the Industrial Home to which she was sent. She experienced many new difficulties, and many unexpected trials, at the hands of those who, being Christ's servants in name, lacked His spirit of lowliness and love. High-spirited Lotika often wept, and sometimes felt tempted to throw down her cross, but she was never forsaken in the hour of trial, and patience slowly began to have her perfect work in her heart. She received cheering letters from Monika, who told her that Nirod was struggling bravely to overcome his cruel enemy; and that his friend, the Christian clerk, had returned to live near them again, and often came to spend the evening, reading the Bible with him, and discussing the teachings of Christ.

"I am very happy, little sister," she wrote. "Jesus Lord is answering our prayers."

. . . . .

Six months later Atol Dass received a letter from Lotika.

> "I am not yet baptised," she wrote, "and the Mems have told me that I am at liberty to leave the Mission and go back to you if I wish to do

so. Dear Uncle, that is not my wish. I thank you for all your kindness to me, and I am not ungrateful. It is, however, my steadfast desire and resolve to remain at the sacred Feet of Jesus, until my life's end."

Atol Babu tore this letter into little pieces, and carefully burned the fragments, but though he sighed as he did so, in his heart of hearts he was content with the decision of his niece.

THE END

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19/21 Southampton Street
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