

Chapter Thirty-eight

DEPTH BUT NOT TUMULT



OF all the cities of India Benares left the worst impression on me, so many things exaggeratedly extolled do not live up to expectations I never encountered more confusion of religious symbols—the Temple of Gold, the Monkey Temple, the Snake Temple—quite out of place in a holy city I did not like temples They made me feel queer in the middle, so smelly and such relics of ages gone by Worshipers bowed low, resting their foreheads on the wet and slimy floors where thousands of people were walking in and out Around the doors were beggars—blind, maimed, diseased In the grounds were animals of every kind—monkeys, oxen, buffaloes, goats for the sacrifice, vultures and crows were flying overhead

Most foreigners disliked the Ganges, floating with horrors, but I found it at dawn comparatively clean, and by far the most attractive thing there We had risen early to see the Brahmins, the first-comers, men and women, old and young, bathing in the holy water Mourners were sitting on a hillock some twenty feet away from a burning ghat, still aflame, waiting until the fire died down and the ashes could be swept into the river This seemed to me a more wholesome manner of dealing with the dead than the Western custom of burial

Later Joseph, whose cough was increasing, led us through the narrow streets to the bazaars Screaming mobs of vendors lured you towards lace shops or to buy brasses or silks They came up

to offer you cards If you took one, competitors shouted and yelled, "He's a liar, a thief, a robber, don't go with him! His goods are fake!" Although some of the wares were exquisite, this ferocity again did not coincide with my conception of a holy city

Allahabad was more like a college town, and there I visited Mrs Ranjit Sitaram Pandit, the sister of Jawaharlal Nehru, whom I had met in London Her home was old and spacious, a nucleus of intellectual thought and activity

She sponsored a meeting to which about six hundred students came It was inspiring to see fine young people attempting to weave together your philosophy and theirs They were extremely sensitive—more than most audiences, I think But, as was the case with youth elsewhere, they made light of anything that could be made light of After the meeting free literature was announced, and in two minutes it was a regular football rush We had to throw the pamphlets over their heads to keep them from stampeding the platform in their headlong scramble

At the Purdah Club the audience, of course, was entirely women, many, in their early twenties, already had large families They were little accustomed to frank examination of such subjects, but, on the other hand, did not want mere theories By the time questions were in order they had recovered from their giggling and were ready to talk seriously As usual, some came up afterwards to query me personally on matters that could better and more profitably have been discussed with all

On reaching Agra we reserved the Taj Mahal for sunset Fortunately, only a few people were there, so that the quiet was intensified Words are inadequate to describe its dignity and chastity, it seemed to breathe the essence of beauty It was not overwhelming, as were some of the world's wonders, but it had a perfect simplicity I stayed until the sun sank, and in the afterglow the marble shone in a mystic effulgence, like something in another dimension reflected in the still, translucent pool There was not a cloud in the sky, just radiance everywhere Before daybreak I climbed again to the top of the gate tower and watched the rising sun cast its shadow on the dome With reluctance I turned away to catch the train for Baroda

After a long journey we arrived at the capital at three in the morn-

ing I had been invited as a state guest, and, in spite of the hour, we were met by the secretary under a handsome hat of red and gold and black. Immediately you felt a touch of Paris in the way clothes were worn in Baroda.

Arrangements had been made for my audience with the Gaekwar, who had been put on the throne by the British Government. He was a most progressive ruler for his two and a half million subjects, aiming at compulsory education and the abolition of caste restrictions. In the immense anteroom of the Palace were ten or fifteen tall Indians with gorgeous turbans, who must have been more than just ordinary officials. The Gaekwar, short, vigorous, alert, shook hands and recalled that he had been President of the World Fellowship of Faith at Chicago, which he said had been the greatest honor of his life, and that he remembered my talk there.

"Her Highness wishes to meet you this afternoon. She is beginning to spend much time on health work and you must get her interested in what you are doing. She will be a good friend to you."

At the appointed hour I went to see the Maharani, quite different from her husband, very grave, only recently out of purdah and still keeping a separate palace. She knew hardly anything about birth control, but maintained a welfare center for mothers and infants.

I had heard from many sources that this class, that class, and the other class would welcome or oppose birth control, none of which statements had hitherto proved to be accurate. The State Medical Officer, who was very close to the Maharani, had a further thesis which he stated as he was taking me to the Maharani's settlement, a little place where forty or fifty women, each one with a child, were sitting. "These women have been brought up to the duty of having children and are so shy and modest that they would not listen to anything on birth control."

He sounded as though he were antagonistic, but he was merely indicating the difficulties as he saw them. I replied that I had never yet encountered women who, when the subject was put to them in a way they could understand, were not eager to hear more. I suggested, "There's a Mohammedan who has a sickly baby. How old is she?"

"Twenty."

"How many children has she?"

“Three ”

“Did she have more?”

“Two died ”

“How old is this one?”

“Five or six months ”

“Wouldn't she prefer to wait until this baby is strong and well before she has any more?”

The woman had no opportunity to answer. The whole flock moved up. “I do! We do! Has this lady something like that? That's what we want!”

The medical officer was genuinely astonished. “I must tell this to her Highness.” When I myself saw the Maharam for the second time she spoke far more favorably of birth control.

Eventually I was on my way to Trivandrum, capital of Travancore, to lend whatever support I could towards the resolution for birth control at the All-India Women's Conference. The larger part of the population of this semi-independent southern state was of Dravidian origin, among whom child marriage scarcely existed. Here widows were allowed to remarry, divorce was permissible for either party, and women occupied a unique position because property descended to the children of a man's sister rather than to his own.

Some of the other state guests had already arrived. One charming girl especially attracted me. She was warm-hearted, kindly, longing to serve humanity, and prepared to dedicate her life to Gandhi's teachings. When I asked her to what she intended to devote herself, she answered, “Show the depressed classes that women of my type can clean their latrines. If I can do it, then they will see that it is not such an unworthy occupation after all.”

Believing this futile, I said, “Don't you think perhaps you're wasting your efforts? Why not do something constructive, teach the mothers to wash and feed their children properly?”

She was determined, however, to sacrifice herself. “Gandhi wants the latrines cleaned.”

The Maharam of Travancore, Sethu Parvathi Bai, was titular head of the Conference, but the guiding spirit was a Parsee from Hyderabad, Mrs. Rustomji Feridoonji, a woman in her fifties, hair almost white, a scholar with command of English, German, and

French, with the polish of India and the West as well, alert and aware of everything going on in the world. She and several like her were an inspiration to others of the East and could put to shame many Westerners in their courage and vision. They had seen immediately the necessity of having the movement under the control of public health. In what was virtually a form of socialized medicine municipalities were already sending out midwives, nurses, and doctors to the poor classes. Wherever vaccination went, the birth control advocates planned to follow with contraceptive information. With Mrs. Feridoonji and the rest of the committee I helped to draw up a resolution to this effect.

The second afternoon the Maharani entertained at a garden party. Fountains were splashing, lakes and pools were lustrous in the sunlight. The dancing was executed by children and older girls, the couples moving round and round, precise little steps this way and that and up to each other without apparently lifting their feet from the ground.

The Maharani and I took a short stroll together and she asked me particularly to come to her palace the next morning at seven o'clock. I had really no idea why she wanted to see me, and was uneasy, because the debate over our resolution was to begin at nine. Nevertheless, I obeyed her behest. We started our conversation with a pleasant chat about bringing up children, especially when they were alone in the family without playmates. I realized she was hesitating over coming to the point. All the time the minutes were slipping by.

Eventually she took the plunge, her situation as President of the Congress was very delicate. She had been warned that the Catholics would withdraw from the Conference if the resolution were passed, and hoped, therefore, I would not find it necessary to speak for it.

"But," I protested, "I've been invited especially to present this question."

"You could substitute another subject which might be of greater importance to India."

"But what?" I asked.

"Well," she suggested, "why not brothels? It's a disgrace to have brothels in India—mind you, there are none in Travancore. Indian

women won't mention them, but you're an American—you can What we need most is to do away with brothels ”

I could readily see the Maharani's position Her social secretary was a Catholic, and large numbers of her Eurasian subjects were of the same faith But I said the needs of millions of women in India were more urgent than the demands of a few Catholic missionaries She took it beautifully and agreed “I shall stay here because I feel the discussion ought to be full and free,” she said “I only want you to tell Mrs Feridoonji to give your opponents two speakers for every one on your side ”

There was considerable heat No Indian women were against it, only converted Eurasians, all mothers were for it and all those against it were unmarried Never had I heard so much talk of the lusts and passions of men as from the latter They put forth the same old arguments, absolutely as though a phonograph record had been sent around the world Nothing could have been more monotonous, repeated as they were from press, platform, and books You might challenge them, break them down, correct them, but to no avail The greater the vehemence, the more brilliant the opposition thought it had been You had to ask yourself, “How did I phrase that answer twenty years ago?” We were utterly tired out when the vote was at last counted, we had won by eighty-four to twenty-five The Catholics kept their word None came back that afternoon But, since it was the end of the Conference, this also did not matter

The following day I was off to lecture in Madras, Anna Jane to visit in Ceylon The solicitous Joseph intimated he was needed more to pick up after her than after me “All right,” I agreed “But you don't have to take the luggage with you Put it in my compartment ” Joseph, however, made a mistake and established me on the wrong train, it went no further than Madura The next morning about eleven everybody was told to get out, and there I was with seventeen pieces of luggage of my own and as many more of Anna Jane's

It so happened that a young doctor of Calicut, Manjeri Sundaram, had at Trivandrum invited me to speak in his city When I had replied that I could not at this juncture, he had pleaded, “I'll go wherever you go I must talk to you lots and lots and lots Whenever you're not sleeping if you'll allow me please to come with you

and talk to you " I had discouraged him in a most thorough manner, but now he came up to help with my luggage and secured coolies to sit on it while we saw some thirty acres of temple

At Madras, in the Tamil country, the turbanless natives were much darker, the costumes white and uninteresting. Sir Vepa Ramasan took me in charge. He was a retired judge of the High Court, a very imposing man of means who had devoted much of his wealth to a little Malthusian magazine and stirred things up ever since 1930. As was customary, the meeting he had arranged was from five to six, a period which by Occidentals is spent ordinarily over tea, cocktails, or aperitifs, but put by the Indians to good use. The men had left their offices by that time, it was cooler and still they could get home for dinner.

Sir Vepa, handsome, dominant, erect in bearing, not at all appearing his age, was chairman. Once my forty-minute talk was over, he called for questions in his rich, clear voice. A man produced one I thought was simple, but Sir Vepa eyed him severely, "That is not allowed!"

"I'll ask it in a different way " And he did so

"I still say it is not allowed!"

"May I ask another?"

"Let me hear it "

Sir Vepa heard it, and dismissed it "That's in the same category—argument!"

The man jumped up and protested loudly "Sit down!" roared Sir Vepa, and the man sat as though he had been hit on the head.

Someone else, five or six seats off, brought up a new question, which also seemed easy enough to answer. But again Sir Vepa ruled, "That does not belong to the subject!"

The man wilted.

Now the first questioner was passing a paper over his shoulder to a third Indian who shook his head violently, he declined to be mixed up in it.

Query after query was disallowed. Finally a weak voice on the side asked about the French birth rate. Sir Vepa turned on him and said, "You look like an intelligent person, but if you have sat for forty minutes listening to this address, and you have not under-

stood it, then you are not intelligent enough to warrant a lady's coming ten thousand miles and wasting her breath!"

The audience was laughing at Sir Vepa's judicial sternness. I, on the other hand, was rather depressed. As we were leaving I said to him, "I wish you had let me reply to them."

His expression held surprise. "I've been answering them and battling with these same people for twenty-five years. They only come to confuse. They are enemies of the cause and I give them no quarter!"

That settled the situation in Madras.

Since I was no more than an hour by motor from Adyar, the former home of Annie Besant, who had been such an influence in the movement, I made a pilgrimage there. As I walked down winding pathways under huge banyans, cocoanuts, and bananas, ever and again glimpsing the lovely water of the Bay in the distance, I imagined I caught an echo of her words reaching across the decade since I had heard her explain the philosophy of reincarnation: the more you have evolved here on earth, the less certain it is that you will have to return to undo your mistakes—best clear them up as you go along.

Annie Besant, as soon as she had become a Theosophist, had withdrawn her books on population. I was interested to find out the attitude of present Theosophists towards birth control, and discovered that those at Adyar were persuaded of its importance. Among their beliefs was that great souls did not reincarnate unless the bodies of parents, their vehicles for birth, were perfect. If they were to perform their missions, they must wait for purity in their physical vestures.

I had determined to take advantage of Paul Brunton's offer and visit Sri Ramana Maharshi, the sage of Arunachala, the quondam Hermit of the Hill of the Holy Beacon, and one of the last of Hindustan's race of noble rishis. Consequently, one evening a little after six, the train came around the bend and I beheld the sacred mountain, according to ancient lore the heart center of the god Siva and, therefore, of the world. I knew it must be *the* mountain even without being told so. The sun had just set, and the afterglow gave a lovely, serene effect.

The Maharshi's secretary, Shastri, met me, and we walked through the gathering dusk to the guest house about a half-mile away, a simple room with veranda in front. Paul Brunton had not been able to come because it was the Maharshi's birthday and thousands of devotees had to be fed. Shastri was very loquacious, and wanted me to realize that the apparent success I was having was only with the educated classes, the masses knew nothing of it. This, I said, would come in time.

After breakfast I looked out at the great tamarind trees on the lawn, up and down which monkeys ran. Often twenty, from babies up to grandparents, were in sight all at once. The windows had to be barricaded at night to shut them out of your room, they especially loved bananas but did not disdain cakes of soap.

While I was watching them scamper about, Paul Brunton pedaled up on a bicycle accompanied by a tonga for me. The driver cried out continually, "Haiee! Haiee!" which seemed to mean both for people to get out of the road and for the white bullock to move faster, he shouted himself hoarse at other drivers, who went higglety-pigglety this way and that through the streets. We stopped at the market for a few bananas as a gift for the Maharshi, he preferred food to flowers, because this he could give away. Then we trotted along through the thickly settled village, always hearing far and near the rumbling of the carts and the screeching of the drivers, "Haiee! Haiee!"

At last we reached the *ashram* at the bottom of the Hill. Shastri gathered up the bananas in his hands, but no sooner had he turned to help me out of the tonga than a temple monkey leaped from a neighboring tree, snatched two of them, and as quick as a flash had the skins off and had gobbled them down with no concern whatsoever as to the ethics of his conduct. Instead, he peered around for another grab.

Shoes and sandals were left outside the *ashram*, and Shastri went ahead to announce my arrival. I bowed in the entrance and took my place on the floor just within, crossed my legs under my skirt, and looked about me to feel and sense the atmosphere. The Maharshi, naked save for a loin cloth, was sitting cross-legged on a silk-covered couch, pillows behind him and a leopard skin thrown over

the foot. A small charcoal fire and incense, which attendants kept burning all day, sweetened and made heavy the air. The Maharshi's luminous eyes were fixed in a trance, although sometimes his fan lifted a bit and his stare widened.

At first it was nicely quiet, then some women began to sing in a high-pitched tone, much through the nose and head, doubtless good for the pineal gland, once supposed to be the seat of the soul. The men chanted aloud and someone played a stringed instrument.

Towards eleven the Maharshi shared his gifts among those who sat in reflection, and shortly afterwards a man from Kashmir, six feet tall and massively built, entered, prostrated himself as hundreds had done already, falling full length, hands outspread above him on the floor, touching his brow three times. As he rose again his whole body shook, tears streamed down his cheeks. To see women cry from excess of emotion did not bother me, but when a man of such a type as this, in no sense a weakling, went into paroxysms of ecstasy, it was beyond my comprehension. With no critical intent, but curious to know why he had been so moved, we asked what had happened to him.

"When I came into the Maharshi's presence it was as though electricity had passed through my body. I felt when I bowed I would be calmed, yet when I looked into those eyes, he was like a flame."

This pilgrim had come with financial problems, illness in his family, and other troubles, but two or three hours of contemplation had wiped them out, he knew they were insignificant and trivial in contrast to his regeneration. In faith, the people in the *ashram* were comparable to those who cast away their crutches at some miracle-working shrine, except that they had come for inner illumination rather than healing for bodily ailments. They visited the Maharshi to receive the radiance of his soul, just as we sought the sun to be warmed.

Only when children or babies were made to prostrate themselves did the Maharshi smile, somewhat skeptically it seemed to me. He appeared amused when a boy of three or four began a prayer in Tamil but forgot the rest. Otherwise he remained apart from it all. He was gradually withdrawing himself and letting go material

things He wanted spiritually to fade away, leaving the shell behind

The second day the Maharshi slept, nothing save an occasional singer broke into the hush, or a monkey had the temerity to dash in and seize an orange

For the third day I attended the *ashram* Now the meditation was like a linking up of mind and emotion, where even breathing was stilled I could understand why the yogis went into the silence Even the noises next door, the clatter of dishes, sounded remote and very far away It was a state of consciousness rather like that which precedes sleep

I regretted that I did not feel the Maharshi's power His utter indifference—sitting all day in a semi-trance, engaging in no activity—seemed to me a waste Nevertheless, I was most grateful to Paul Brunton for the experience, and understood the Indians better thereafter They saw within and beyond the external appearance, this was at the very basis of their character, akin to the sensitivity of the grapevine telegraph All people in the Orient spoke of it Something happened to you or to me and before you could get to another place by the fastest conveyance it was known Perhaps it was a primitive function of mind, this form of thought transference, but it existed there

Dr Sundaram, who popped up again when I returned to Madras, was still insistent that I go to Calicut, and I finally gave in I was glad I had done so, because this city of forty thousand, ringed around a bay on the Malabar Coast and caressed by gentle breezes, was a beautiful spot with forests of palms The almost-black women wore saris of vari-colored blues and greens, violets and yellows, with garlands of jasmine about their necks, plump, formal bouquets of roses in their hands, and in the center of every forehead was a circular red caste mark

The meeting was held in the courtyard of a Buddhist temple The sun was setting and part of the shell-pink sky was melting into deep carmine, like a flower Directly in front sat three priests, each with shaved head, orange robe, and thick stave Hundreds of rooks were chattering and other birds twittering in the trees, children were shouting at their games, the shrill chant of pilgrims walking through the streets saturated the dust-filled dusk Mainly you heard

the tinkling of the bullocks going up and down the road The audience sat in utter silence surrounded by all these sounds

Two days later we motored through the heavy woods to Mysore Joseph, still coughing until it racked his frame, had rejoined me I took my little drug shop and administered Vitamin A and D tablets, curing him and achieving thereby a reputation Other Indians began hunting up colds and asthma and pains, and coming to me to give them some American medicine, in which they had much faith

Soon I was on the train to Bangalore, again as state guest The Dewan of Mysore, Sir Mirza Ismail, knew everybody in Europe, was well informed on Western methods of health, and was full of ideas about public buildings, roads, streets, industries, and the great dam which was to furnish electricity for the state He was the first person in India who inquired after Katherine Mayo I had been expecting to meet antagonism because of *Mother India*, which I myself now considered misleading Certainly the conditions when I was there seemed vastly different from those she had depicted only a few years earlier

The British believed every word true, but most of the Indians I saw looked upon Miss Mayo as having gone into their homes and then betrayed their confidences They claimed she was definitely prejudiced, and, like the clever craftsman she was, had fixed her statistics For example, when she discussed the age of marriage, she made sweeping statements and quoted on page so and so of such and such a report, you turned there and they were correct, and that was the reason for the astounding acceptance of her book Nevertheless, she had violated the spirit, because two pages further in the same report followed an explanation of, or exception to, her conclusions

Mirza Ismail, a Mohammedan, thought she had benefited Indians by shaking them awake, and that the facts she had brought out, even if not true of all the country, should be corrected, that India had to defend herself was good for her

After visiting Hyderabad, which was pleasant and social, and after seeing this startling landscape in which the mountains seemed to have been smashed by a giant maul into enormous pieces, I started

towards home India was a land of dramatic contrasts—the highest mountains, the hottest plains, the densest jungles, the most violent rains The loveliest architecture in the world was set against a background of nauseating squalor Wealth beyond calculation existed alongside poverty that was living death, dazzling mental attainments beside an ignorance utterly abysmal I could not tell precisely what the results of the trip had been, these rarely came immediately And, if you had to hammer away and hammer away for years in the United States, you had to do it ten times over in India

A terrific change in temperature froze me at Hong Kong, the poor huddled around little fires in the streets Dr Arthur Woo, a Rockefeller Foundation protégé, enthusiastic, full of energy, like magic procured quarters for me in one of the crowded hotels on the top floor, quiet and restful but, oh, how cold!

According to my schedule I was to remain twenty-four hours, into which were to be crammed a lunch, a tea, a lecture, a Chinese supper, and a public meeting Then I decided to stay over a day for a medical gathering Ho Kum Tong, a wealthy Chinese, provided another luncheon in his beautiful home

In Hong Kong I heard rumors of a practical scholar in eugenics, in which the Chinese were very much interested He was said to have, in addition to a wife, thirty concubines, by each of whom he had had three children One of the Negro offspring—tall, kinky-haired, and oblique-eyed—was a most extraordinary-looking youth, he did not appear to belong anywhere The daughters were much larger of stature than the average Chinese, all were educated and doing excellent work Not only the features of the cultured types on the Island, but even those of the coolies, the longshoremen, struck me as growing less Oriental and more Anglo-Saxon, the foreheads fuller, the eyes less slanting

When I reached Japan I found that Westernization had leaped ahead Tokyo was not the same city I had seen in 1922—automobiles and wide-paved streets, many bicycles, many men and small children in European dress Everywhere also was an atmosphere of tenseness on account of the assassination of the cabinet members about ten days before Telephone communication in English was forbidden, people in Yokohama were unable to get to Tokyo because all

transportation was cut off War seemed inevitable Baroness Ishimoto told me the activities of her organization had been curtailed, but articles and discussion and the spreading of knowledge had continued The dissemination now was as it had been in France—from house to house, family to family, by word of mouth instead of under proper auspices

At the end of a dismal voyage to Honolulu, I had hardly registered at the hotel when I heard a feminine voice in my ear, "Are you Mrs Sanger?"

"Yes "

Dr Muriel Cass, as this welcoming committee turned out to be, knew that I was recently out of a hospital, and disappeared for a few moments to telephone for a doctor When he arrived she said, "All we want of you is to give Mrs Sanger something to keep her going She's got eight lectures to deliver "

I felt like a poor old war horse being fed the last measure of oats I had a horrible memory of two weeks of fog and rain and cold at Memorial Hospital in Hong Kong, and now here I was to die in Honolulu

But Dr Cass, an efficient, self-sacrificing manager, did the most amazing things for me She ordered the telephone operator to switch every call to her There I was, quite alone Nobody could see me or even talk to me, I must conserve my strength for the meetings Repeatedly she rushed me to and from halls, put me in cars, and trundled me off to bed Really I was better after each lecture than I had been before When I left Honolulu she herself was so worn out she had to take a vacation, but I was nearly well

The hospitality and luxuriance of this Pacific paradise were almost indescribable Hula-hulas at the hotels, bathing on the beaches, outriggers swooping in, the native women in great flowered Mother Hubbards twining leis, the songs they sang, the air of leisure and fun and play, these made Honolulu a city apart It was the sounding board of the Orient, people going, people coming back, but all there to enjoy themselves

In Honolulu I repacked and, to save space, stuffed Grant's tiger skin in the trunk around my box of Darjeeling tea When, four weeks later, I ripped off the cover at Willow Lake, it was reeking with cam-

phor I tried to aerate the leaves, dry them out, fumigate them with sunshine, but it remained moth ball tea One package I had given away before I discovered the tragedy Its receipt was ignored No thank-you letter, no mention of it The other friends to whom I had planned to present this choice gift had to go without

I spent the summer at Willow Lake and in the winter, remembering Arizona from the time I had been there with Stuart, went out again in response to the summons of the desert My husband and I found a house near Tucson of adobe, trimmed in blue The mountains, not distant or aloof or towering over all, reached into the sky, but they were also somehow intimate, cupping the town gently on all four sides

You settled there in the Catalina foothills and felt such a part of the whole The first thing when you opened your eyes, before actual dawn, you beheld the gold and purple and then the entire sky break into color In the evening the sunsets were reflected on the mountains in pink-lavender shades, sometimes the glow sprayed from the bottom upward, like the footlights of a theater, until the tips were aflame Sunset vanished as quickly as sunrise, never lingering long

When the marvel of spring came to the desert, you saw the cactus and the flowering, saw the brown floor change to delicate pale yellow, stood in awe of nature daring to live without water You were reminded of the futility of wearing out your life merely providing food and raiment Like the challenge of death, which so many of the people there were gallantly facing, the desert itself was a challenge