

SHE MUSES ON HEAVEN

Golden streets? Well, maybe I don't know That I want golden streets, I'd think it queer To see gold streets, or apples bending low On golden boughs, when Christmas wasn't near.

IT WAS WRITTEN IN THE SAND

Nobody knew why she was called "Mother Pretzel," or when she had first come to Simla. She was as much of an institution as Brown of the theatre, or the Monkey Fakir of Jakko.

It was growing dark, and we set off, the old man leading, and myself and the bearer with a lantern following him. It was freezing cold, with a wind from the ice-fields beyond the Shali blowing the snow in our faces.

There was a charboy and a few bits of rickety furniture, and little else except two things worth my name. I wrote the words "my friend" deliberately—when two men have been the only sahibs in a place for three uninterupted years, an attitude wards each other of friendship, hatred or supreme indifference must inevitably ensue.

It was a queer night. I was kept busy, as Mother Pretzel was undoubtedly "verree bad," and by the time I had done what I could, it was too late and snowing too heavily for me to go home; also, I dared not leave her. She needed a nurse, but I had no one to send.

Next day Mother Pretzel was a little better, and she refused to have a nurse. "Noa, noa," she cried in her odd, deep voice. "I won't have any girl from Calcutta or Sanawar peeping round my things. If you bring such a one here, Doctor Sahib, she will be verree ill."

"I didn't know if she really intended to carry out her threats, but I was doubtful if any nurse would stay in that queer house, so I consented to give instructions to an ayah in a dirty sari, who appeared from nowhere and was evidently acolyte at some of the witch's mysteries, for she seemed to know a fair amount about nursing, and eventually, between the two of us, we pulled Mother Pretzel through pneumonia.

I shall suffer again. I could foresee no happiness, and I had too much faith in Mother Pretzel's queer power to want to hear of misfortune from her. I thanked her, and then hesitated. She seemed to understand for she put out her little hand and patted my arm.

"No matter, Doctor Sahib. I shall not tell. But I will give this gift," And she pressed into my hand the Mogul painting which I had so often looked at as I came into the room. It was an exquisite piece of work, a seventeenth-century hunting-scene, full of jewel-colored figures and curvetting horses, with every detail of dress and caparison drawn with meticulous care.

There was no doubt of his having dark blood in his veins, and that all the world over carries with it a certain stigma. Otherwise he was all that a man should be—intellectual, amusing, with a decidedly ironic sense of humor and the most courteous of manners in the world. This courtliness, combined with a certain dignity and the darkness of his hair and skin, often gave strangers the impression that he belonged to some good French or Spanish family—but Ang-Frensch, that ugly busybody, soon disillusioned them, and despite his unmistakable air of breeding, he was labeled "Country," and though society received him, it was with reservations.

It was a history of the Moguls, not of the great emperors, but of those princelings who succeeded Aurangzeb, and who had sapped of strength and power. He presented not the dry bones of history, but rather the decomposing flesh of an empire shrouded in rich splendor, the court intrigue and the gradual fall of a great dynasty.

"Well, what do you think of it?" he said, when he had outlined the tale. "I think it's even greater than you realize it to be," I answered. "If you can perfect it, it'll be as great a book as Tod's Rajasthan. It is amazing to me that you should have such insight into mentality of the well-born Indian."

He dropped his head between his hands, and the bitterness in his voice hurt me. During all the years of our friendship he never had spoken of his heritage before. "But you don't know—" I said. "That's just it—I don't, I don't know much about my father, except that he was a blackguard and died in jail—a fact which is hardly comforting. Oh, he came of decent stock, I knew, so decent that they would never mention him."

"I never learned what caused it, for his name was never mentioned, and of my mother I knew even less. My grandfather had me taken away from her by a fellow clergyman, and to judge by myself and what apparently is other people's opinion of me, she was an Indian and probably a bad lot—and low caste. "There's the rub. I may be the descendant of a line of sweepers. It makes me sick. I don't suppose my father married her—I gathered from the silences of his family that matrimony would hardly have appealed to him."

"Kahaun hai? Who is there?" His cry roused Mother Pretzel, and her little odd figure appeared at the door. "Khaun hai? Who is it?" Then, as I took my hat off, she chuckled gaily and came forward. "Aha, the Doctor Sahib; that is verree good, not to be forgotten. Yes, yes, and a friend too. Come in, there is too much light here."

"Do not grieve for what has been," she said dreamily. "It was written, and you can never rub it out." As she ceased speaking, she turned away quickly and clapped her hands. "But now you gentlemen must take refreshment. Cups of tea you shall drink," I began to protest. "Noa, noa; when you come to this old one's house so seldom it would be a great shame to refuse her entertainments. Bring tea," she commanded the bearer, as he stood saluting by the door.

"I told her," she said it over slowly two or three times, and I noticed that the fingers of her hand, which were still raised, trembled very slightly. There was a long minute during which they looked at each other. Neivison was completely, charmingly at his ease, in a situation which would have made most men, even the very self-possessed, a little uncomfortable.

feet. She motioned us to sit in two chairs close to the door opening on the veranda. Then, as if she cast from her everything European, she made a gesture and squatted native fashion on the floor, pouring the fine sand into a pool and smoothing it flat with her small, delicate hands, while she murmured something, I suppose a charm, under her breath. With a pointed stick she drew squares and characters on the sand, and stared in front of her all the time, her great black eyes filling her face. I watched the pupils contract to pin-points as she said the names of the seven spirits. Then, when she had finished the invocation and dropped her eyes and looked at the sand. There was a pause before she began to speak in her deep, curiously resonant voice.

"The name—and the eyes, gray like water. Ah, what blindness." She swayed, stared at Neivison, and then her exquisite hands, grown suddenly predatory, clawlike, swept out and violently erased the signs, scattering the sand over our feet. "I shall not tell you. Noa, noa, I shall not say." The mynah shrieked the words after her, and she got up, looking very old, shrunken and gray.

"The rains were nearly over, and his book had come back from the publisher. It was, as he had expected, impossible to publish so large and expensive a work unless he was willing to put down \$800 himself. He was bitter and wretched, feeling that his years of toil had been fruitless, and in his maddening pride he would not consent to borrow from me.

"I wonder why she wants us both," said Neivison, as we put on our mackintoshes. She was lying in bed, looking smaller than ever, with her great eyes shining like lamps on either side of her little hawk nose. There were broken chairs on each side of the bed, and she motioned us to sit down. "Mother Pretzel," I said, "Mr. Neivison had better wait in the next room while you tell me what is the matter with you." I took her clawlike hand. It was icy-cold, with a very slow pulse.

"Noa, noa, Doctor Sahib, arl the things in your black bag are no good now. It was written in the sand

that I should go soon. Tonight is an auspicious good time, and tonight I will go out. It is no good to take temperatures, Doctor Sahib, and to bring out drugs and arl. It is my will to die, and in an hour from now. When an Indian, or one so near the Indian as Mother Pretzel, makes up his or her mind to die, all treatment is useless. I have found it so over and over again. It is the will to live that preserves life. Neivison was watching my face; he understood at once, and with his quick, tender impulsiveness he took the old woman's hands, and his voice shook a little as he said: "Why won't you live, Mother Pretzel? Why do you want to leave us?" She patted his sleeve. "For the young, living is good, but for the old, death is better. Sit down, Doctor Sahib. I have many things to say, and there is not verree long."

She slipped back, and lay watching our faces. "Kindlee give me water. I have so much to tell." Her words came with difficulty, and then an idea struck her. She smiled. "I will not speak Angreji, it is so ugly. I will speak my own way." When she had sipped the water she spoke again, but in the beautiful slow phrases of court Urdu, which is half Persian and the loveliest in the East. Sometimes her mind wandered. She told us irrelevant incidents of her youth, and as she remembered the past a great dignity came to her, so that we felt as if we were subjects watching by the bed of a queen.

"It was long ago—when my people had been banished from Nucklaor after the madness of the Black Year, and we dwelt in the house by the river, in the city of Calcutta. There, in the hot season, was I born of my mother, Badama, the third daughter of the Nawab of Murshidabad, and the third wife of King of Oudh. "Being born upon a Wednesday, I was named Sitara, daughter of the stars, and at the casting of the horoscope it was foretold that I should be given strange wisdom. Yes, I could see the paths of life, and from the age of five years the ladies of the household would bid me blacken the palms of my hands and stare into them, seeing the answers to their questions as it were in a mirror. Also I had knowledge of births and deaths and the rulings of the stars, and I could see into men's minds and watch the shuttle of their thoughts weaving.

"It was soon known amongst the ladies of many households that I was possessed of these gifts, but though they were eager enough to use my wisdom, they were unwilling to take me as a daughter-in-law. "At the age of seventeen I was betrothed and unsought, and there was a shame laid upon our house. My father spoke harsh words to me, and the ladies of the house reproached me, wherefore I was unhappy and my heart was heavy. "It was our custom in the hot season to drive in a carriage at the time of sunset, when there was some breeze to stir the curtains which shut out prying eyes from the carriage windows. For I was purdah nashin in those days, Doctor Sahib, and they would have slain you slowly if they had found you seated as you are now. And I was very fair. Did they not call me Gulab-dill, Heart's Rose?" She laughed softly to herself.

Yea, in the cool of the evening I drove with my women, and Eblis, the Evil One, sent a swift gust of wind which snatched at the purdah and blew it away so that it flew like a white crane into the trees, leaving me shameless and unveiled. Aye, shameless, for I never covered my face with my chudder. I was bewitched, staring into the eyes of one who stood an arm's length from the carriage door. A sahib, tall and gray-eyed, with a sword at his side. He smiled on me, as I on him, but we said no word. Then one of the women cast a garment over the window and bade the saice drive on. Two days later Huneefa the mud-wadeen (go-between) came to the house bringing rich stuffs from Benares, and whilst the trader waited below she praised his wares, knowing she would be given money on all that she sold. My mother Badama was there, and my aunt Ameena, and my sister Miriam, she who was to be married on the twelfth day of that month. She was four years younger than I, and she mocked me, calling me ill-omened. "Then they all reproached me," saying that I was accursed and no man should ever take me—and I should die barren and unwed. So they said. Then, laughing among themselves, they made Huneefa undo the bales, and decked themselves in the saris and golden cloths which she had brought. But I turned my face to the wall and wept, for I was unloved and accursed. Then Huneefa made pretense of showing me a waistcoat of woven silver, came to my side and said, speaking low: "Do not weep, Bergum Sahiba, for there is one more valliant than Rustum himself, who is not blind, having seen the daughter of the stars. He bade me bring you this." She dropped at my feet a letter sewn into a square of silk. All through two nights I had lain sleepless, thinking of the gray eyes and the smile of the Feringerie—the white man. "I was afraid—I dared not touch the letter. Do not fear, Bergum Sahiba," she whispered. "He is mad with love. Did he not seek me out and fill my hands with silver, bidding me find a letter-writer to whom he could say sweet words, not knowing how to