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LOOSE ENDS

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LOOSE ENDS

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THE STRANGE CASE OF MRS. BANISTER

Knock! Knock!

"Come in, Mira," Mrs. Sen called without looking up from the little dress she was mending.

"Mummy, I've told you so often my name is not Mira; it's Mrs. Banister."

"I forgot," Mrs. Sen apologized to her diminutive daughter. "Won't you please sit down, Mrs. Banister," and, after the child had sedately taken her seat, "Where are your children today, Mrs. Banister?"

"Oh, I think I told you. Mr. Banister won't let them go out anymore. He keeps saying they're too weak to play with other children and they should stay in the darkened room where we can look after them better. I do say, I don't know why he insists on that. Men are funny aren't they?"

Putting aside the mended frock and eyeing one of Mr. Sen's buttonless shirts, Mrs. Sen agreed with Mrs. Banister that, yes, men were very strange.

"Yesterday when Mr. Banister went to the drug store for some medicine I opened the shutters in the children's room so the poor dears could see the lovely sunset. But unfortunately Mr. Banister arrived before I remembered to close the windows and he was terribly upset. I'll never forget how he scolded me and said I was going to be the death of the poor things. I cried terribly but that made him worse. But, oh, how the children loved the sunset."

For more than a year Mrs. Sen had bravely tolerated her daughter's wild imagination but all this seemed a bit much. After all, Mira had been Mrs. Banister for three months now and every day it was the same story—how Mr. Banister kept the children shut up, how she (Mrs. Banister) tried to give them life and happiness and how Mr. Banister then accused her of trying to kill the children and stressed the importance of leaving their care solely to him.

She couldn't imagine where Mira got these wild ideas. Certainly it wasn't from anything she had seen at home and they were very careful about being sure the pictures were fit for children before taking her to a cinema. Mira wasn't interested in playing with other children so she couldn't have picked it up that way. But, although the whole thing escaped explanation, there it was: Mira had been and lived Mrs. Banister

ever since they had moved to this new locality. Mrs. Sen couldn't even think of where Mira picked up that name.

Oh well, the books on child psychology said to play along with the child in order not to stunt its imagination which may portend actual genius.

"And why did Mr. Banister go to the drug store? Were the children ill?" she continued as she bit off the thread after sewing on a button.

"Oh, I told you the other day. Mr. Banister says he doesn't want the children to go out until they're strong so he gives them some powders in their tea both in the morning and the afternoon. He says it will make them stronger but it seems to me they're getting weaker all the time."

Mrs. Sen put her things back into the sewing basket and told Mira to wash her face and hands so they could have lunch. Mira skipped off.

Every morning about the same time—lunch—Mira joined her mother wherever the day's task had taken her and poured into her ears the woes of Mrs. Banister. The story was always so vivid Mrs. Sen could hardly believe that a child of four could dream it up. But, then, children these days were very clever indeed.

Finally one day the story changed slightly. Mira came running breathlessly to her mother and said, "Mummy, I've decided I'm going to be a lady doctor when I grow up."

Mrs. Sen's eyes formed a slightly wistful smile at her tiny daughter and she said, "Yes, Mira, that would be very nice. I should be quite proud if you were a lady doctor."

"And I'm going to be a beautiful lady doctor, too," added the confident Mira.

Happy to be away from Mrs. Banister who was a sad, sober woman, Mrs. Sen laughed and said, "Unfortunately, Mira, not many lady doctors are pretty."

"Oh, but I'm going to look like that lady doctor who rides in Mr. Gupta's car every morning."

It was a moment or so before Mrs. Sen realized Mira had mistaken Mr. Gupta's stenographer for a doctor. "But, Mira, darling, that's Miss Baker. She works in Mr. Gupta's office. That's why he gives her a lift every morning in his car."

"But she's a lady doctor on Sundays and that's what I'm going to be," and off pranced Mira Sen, would-be lady doctor.

Nothing more was said about Miss Baker but what Mrs. Sen considered to be a ghost of her appeared in Mira's Mrs. Banister stories.

"Last Sunday the doctor told Mr. Banister that from his description of my condition I, too, was going weak like the children so he must give me some powders in my tea also."

"It is very nice of Mr. Banister to be so very considerate of your health," absently replied Mrs. Sen who was actually remembering the day Mr. Sen played golf all day when she had the flu.

"Sometimes I don't think he really worries about me or the children at all," meditated Mrs. Banister.

"Well, you must admit it is nice of him to have the doctor in to see you."

"Oh, he never brings the doctor to see us. Oh, no! He meets her every Sunday morning and takes her into a room on the opposite corner of the house."

She had relaxed into the roll of Mira and this strange truth-fiction combination was something new to Mrs. Sen.

She tried to draw her daughter out, "How do you know this, Mira?"

"Because I follow and listen."

Then, straightening herself up into Mrs. Banister, she added, "And also because when he comes to my room after he has seen the lady doctor he always tells me he has seen the doctor who believes my condition is very serious and therefore I must not see the children at all and I mustn't leave my bed."

She immediately lapsed into Mira and, letting her little body slump, gave a quizzical look at her mother and said, "It must be awful to have to stay in bed all day and never go to the cinema or to parties or play in the garden."

After that Mira was rather moody for several days and preferred to sit and think after her morning's play. Mrs. Sen tried to draw her out by referring to her as Mrs. Banister but Mira didn't respond.

The only remark she made, and this she made at least once a day, was, "Mr. Banister keeps repeating over and over again that I'm killing the children. But, honestly, I haven't raised a window in over a fortnight; they're so weak, you know."

One day Mrs. Sen was taking a letter out of the mail box when she saw Mira coming up the drive. She dragged one foot along and then the other; her tiny hands twisted her belt and her head was down.

Thinking she would give the child's spirits a lift, Mrs. Sen called out, "Hello, Mrs. Banister, how nice of you to call. Do tell me, how are your dear little children?"

"They died last night," was the sorrowful reply.

Thank God, thought Mrs. Sen who assumed a role of grief and said, "Not both of them!"

"Yes, both," was the mournful reply.

Try as she may Mrs. Sen could get nothing more out of Mira the rest of the day. She chatted during lunch, had some special cakes brought in for tea and offered to play paper dolls but Mira was definitely dejected. She just sat quietly brooding.

Best follow the book, thought Mrs. Sen, and leave her to herself until she's over it.

The next day Mira moped around the house as if she really had lost two children. Mrs. Sen tried to cheer her up but the only response she got from Mira was, "I guess I really am going mad. Mr. Banister says I am and I guess he's right because I'm sure I didn't murder my babies although he constantly tells me I did."

That afternoon Mrs. Sen arranged to have tea served on the front veranda because Mira loved sitting there sipping her tea where she could watch the older children walking home from school.

Although she had baked some things herself to try to please her little daughter, Mira didn't even notice and she scarcely touched her food. As they sat thus brooding—Mrs. Sen over Mira and Mira over her imaginary children—a procession rounded the corner just down the street and started past their house.

Mrs. Sen noticed that it was a hearse followed by several cars. It was a small procession and Mrs. Sen said, quite absently, "I wonder who could have died?"

"My two children, of course," rebuked Mrs. Banister.

Sure enough, through the etched glass windows of the hearse Mrs. Sen saw two tiny caskets.

Neither of them could finish their tea. Mira began to kick moodily at the bricks outlining the flower beds and Mrs. Sen decided that this was too vivid an imagination to suit her.

For several days Mira did not leave the house, nor did she talk or eat. Mrs. Sen consulted Mr. Sen whose solution was that the child needed a good worming.

Mrs. Sen looked at the book again and it said to distract the child's attention, give her a new interest.

Perhaps it was moving to this strange place that had upset her daughter. Neither of them had any friends here and since Mr. Sen had needed the car at the factory she hadn't taken Mira anywhere. They both needed a little change.

Mrs. Sen wrote a note to Mrs. Kripalani and asked her to bring Sheila over and spend the day. She sent the servant off with the note and rushed to tell Mira the news. But Mira, who normally adored Sheila mainly because Sheila was a year Mira's senior, wasn't interested.

By the morning Sheila and her mother arrived Mira was excited and seemed almost her old self again. She screeched when Sheila jumped out of the car and the two of them raced off to play in the garden.

Mrs. Sen took Mrs. Kripalani onto the south veranda where it was cool and they began to catch up on their gossip. Since their husbands worked together, they discussed the other office wives and this eventually led to more and more juicy information.

When Mrs. Kripalani finally stopped to catch her breath, Mrs. Sen laughingly said she was so glad Mrs. Kripalani had

come to see her since she was so out of things since they had moved.

Mrs. Kripalani asked if Mrs. Sen had made friends with anyone in the neighborhood and she said she didn't know anyone except the Guptas who lived some distance away and who had dropped in once.

"Speaking of the Guptas," said Mrs. Kripalani, warming to the subject, "I believe you also live near the Banisters, don't you?"

The name sent an electric shock up her spine, "Why, I don't know. Who are the Banisters?"

"You don't know? My, you are far behind on the news. Mr. Banister came out from England during the war to work in the government's steel allocation section. It seems he did very well for himself but not so well for the government. The British didn't bother about it during the war and, apparently not wanting him on their hands, transferred him bag and baggage with the department when they withdrew from India.

"You know the new government had a great deal of respect for those so-called experts so they kept him on for some time. However, his tactics were too obvious to be ignored and eventually he was caught and the government told him to get out of India.

"Not many people knew Mrs. Banister because he seldom took her out at all. Everyone said she wasn't well and that she preferred to stay home with the children. They had two girls between the time they came to India and the time of independence.

"Actually the government did not have ample proof to kick him out until a little over a year ago so by that time both children were in school. My oldest girl was in the same school

and she saw them daily. They were intelligent, healthy children but they were very quiet.

"Anyway, when Mr. Banister was told to go back to England he suddenly withdrew the children from school and told the teachers that they were in bad health. He then informed the government that he wouldn't be able to go at the expiration of his term of employment since his children weren't able to make the journey.

"They were very nice and allowed him to stay on although he was dismissed from the service. Apparently he had done all right in his job because he rented that lovely big house on Theatre Lane and they've been there now for about a year."

Mrs. Sen said she remembered the house but she had thought it was vacant since there was never anyone around.

"Yes," continued the well-informed Mrs. Kripalani, "Mr. Banister said his wife was very nervous because of the children and they didn't want any visitors or servants. So he did all the shopping and apparently Mrs. Banister kept that enormous house herself—that is, what they used of it.

"No one ever saw her or the children after they moved in and apparently the entire family cut themselves off socially—that is, all except Mr. Banister," smirked Mrs. Kripalani.

With the tiniest bit of encouragement she went on. "As you know, Mr. Gupta became big friends with Mr. Banister in order to get his steel contracts through at the end of the war. In fact, they were such close friends that Mr. Banister dropped in freely for chats at Mr. Gupta's house.

"At about the time they were the thickest, old Mrs. Baker, the mother of Mr. Gupta's secretary, died. Mrs. Gupta felt so sorry for the girl she did everything she could to help her get

over it. She invited her to the house as often as she could and every time they went out they took the girl with them.

"She's very pretty, you know, that Miss Baker."

Mrs. Sen agreed that Miss Baker was very, very pretty.

"Well, it didn't take long for Mr. Banister to notice her and then his impromptu calls became more and more frequent. And, needless to say, after Mr. Banister met Miss Baker, Mrs. Banister was never seen again.

"Everyone said Mr. Banister took that huge house to be nearer the Guptas. Certainly they didn't need such a mansion with only two children and they never entertain."

Mrs. Kripalani stopped talking but Mrs. Sen, still a bit dazed, encouraged, "Go on, please."

"That's all, I guess. Mr. Banister sees Miss Baker as much as he can without rousing anyone's suspicions—he thinks. They say they spend their Sundays together in some unknown hide-away. I guess he would like to marry her but I'm sure he would never be able to get a divorce in England because certainly Mrs. Banister has been a model wife and, what with two children, I think he realizes it's useless. Therefore, they seem to make themselves content with these surreptitious meetings."

"Did you know," ventured Mrs. Sen, "that their two children died last Thursday?"

"No!" gasped Mrs. Kripalani as she sat forward. "How do you know?"

Mrs. Sen was so glad to be able not only to explain to herself the queer habits of her daughter but to tell the whole frightening story to an eager, receptive ear.

"But how could she know all this—if it is true?" asked Mrs. Kripalani who never liked to peddle unverified gossip.

"I don't know. But it fits in so perfectly with what you've told me that I know Mira has merely been reliving what she has either seen or heard. And I know that from the intensity with which she suffered the loss of the two children she must have experienced this herself; it was not something someone else told her."

So the women talked throughout the day, passing from one subject to another but always returning to the same thing—Mrs. Kripalani for the sake of a tellable story and Mrs. Sen because she was so worried about Mira.

When Mrs. Kripalani and Sheila left after tea Mrs. Sen asked her friend to check and make sure that the funeral she had seen was the one they had discussed. The two women parted on a conspiratorial note and the two little girls waved happily as long as they could see each other.

The next morning Mrs. Kripalani telephoned Mrs. Sen and said, "You were right, my dear, those were the two poor little Banister girls. No one knows what they died of—apparently didn't have a doctor. They say she was doctoring them herself. Strange, their both passing away at the same time."

Mrs. Sen agreed.

".....Oh, yes" remembered Mrs. Kripalani at the end of the call, "Sheila told me that while they were playing yesterday Mira took her to a mansion down the road and led her through what she called a secret tunnel to a place where they sat and listened to a man and a woman talk in the adjoining room. She doesn't remember what they said because she was anxious to go back and play with Mira's toys. But I'm sure the mansion was youknowwhose."

Mrs. Sen didn't think much about the horrible implications at all because she was terribly glad to have assured herself

of her daughter's sanity. But she must do something to keep Mira from going to that place since that was what upset her.

Incidentally, where was Mira? She asked the servants but no one knew. The last time anyone had seen her she had been playing at the far end of the garden by the gate.

Mrs. Sen strolled out to look for Mira but she wasn't to be seen. Thinking she might have stepped out of the compound, Mrs. Sen started toward the gate.

Suddenly she heard familiar, hysterical sobbing and she ran through the gate in the direction of her daughter's voice.

"Oh, Mummy, Mummy, he's going to kill me I'm sure. Mr. Banister is going to kill me."

Mrs. Sen tried to calm her child but clearly Mira was so upset she couldn't even hear her mother.

"He keeps telling me over and over again that I murdered my babies and that I'm losing my mind. I can't stand it any longer; I wish he would kill me and get it over with."

One of the servants ran out and helped Mrs. Sen carry Mira inside the house. The child sat hunched over on the edge of the settee sobbing her heart out.

Mrs. Sen managed to dissolve a tablet and made the girl take it in hopes it would calm her nerves. Soon the child stopped sobbing but she sat for a long time hugging her mother while Mrs. Sen soothed her and begged her not to think about such things and definitely not to go outside the garden wall again.

After Mira went to sleep Mrs. Sen realized the seriousness of the thing she and her daughter had walked into unknowingly. She knew that it was her moral and civic responsibility to do something about it. She dare not tell Mr. Sen, however, or he would recommend an emitic for both of them.

She telephoned Mrs. Kripalani and, without offering any explanation, told her to come at once and to bring an official from the police.

Mrs. Kripalani's efficiency proved as thorough as her social knowledge and she was there within an hour with Inspector Sinha of the police department.

Trembling with fear, Mrs. Sen told him the whole story of her child's experience while the only-too-obliging Mrs. Kripalani filled in the other part.

When they finished they did not have to tell the experienced Inspector the urgency of the matter. He called headquarters and within a few minutes a van filled with policemen arrived. Mrs. Sen directed them to the mansion where the Banisters lived and then, with all the police and excitement out of the house, Mrs. Sen and Mrs. Kripalani decided to have a cup of tea.

It was only then that they realized that both Mira and Sheila were missing. They looked in the playroom and the library but the little girls weren't there. The servants were called but none of them had seen the children.

It was Mrs. Kripalani who screeched, "They've gone back to that horrible house! They'll be hurt if there's any trouble!"

The two women raced down the stairs, out of the house, the length of the garden and through the gate. Just as they reached the corner, the police cars were coming back. Mr. Banister was hunched over in the van while in the car behind a pale, frightened skeleton of a woman leaned on the seat beside Inspector Sinha.

As the two women stopped momentarily to watch the cars pass they heard familiar calls.

"Mummy, Mummy, isn't it wonderful! They've taken my wretched husband away to jail!"

Sheila chimed in, "And they're going to take Mrs. Banister to the hospital where a *real*, honest-to-goodness doctor will look after her. We heard it all from the secret tunnel."

Mrs. Sen and Mrs. Kripalani pretended it was of no concern to them whatsoever and suggested they all four go back and have that cup of tea.

Mira never mentioned Mrs. Banister again. However, several times when Mrs. Sen was reading in a garden chair while Mira played nearby, Mira would run up to her mother and say, "Don't you think it's nicer to be dead than not to be able to run and play in the sunshine?"

SULHANA AND HIS WONDERFUL CARPET

In Kashmir the common people, although extremely poor, are very, very honest. A man can forget and leave his samovar or hukka on the shikara landing all night and it will be waiting for him early the next morning. But while a Kashmiri will not steal, he assumes he is entitled to anything he gains by his wits.

Among those who live entirely by their unscrupulous wits is the shopkeeper who sits hawk-eyed from season to season waiting to pounce on the unsuspecting tourists. And all the time he has one thing in mind: to get as much as he can for nothing.

Tourists, of course, are an unreliable source of income; sometime they come and sometime they don't. Therefore, the hawkers and shopkeepers have learned they must hit hard and hit fast for the opportunity may not come again. Also, since most tourists are Americans or Europeans, chances are they will only pass through Kashmir once, so why be so terribly honest?

Sulhana was such a merchant. His father and grandfather had reaped their harvest from the tourist trade in the days of the British rule when times were stable and foreigners visited Kashmir with full pockets. They had amassed enough money to marry many wives, build several beautiful houses and houseboats and—as is the dream of every Kashmiri merchant—to buy a showroom on the Bund convenient to all the wealthy visitors.

Sulhana grew up in his father's showroom and learned the trade very fast. He saw that the merchants who were somewhat honest were not so wealthy but that those who weren't so scrupulous in their dealings soon amassed great fortunes. Young Sulhana was ambitious.

Of course he went to the mosque at Hazrat Bagh every Friday. But he considered the Quran a thing for old age and certainly religion and its teachings didn't apply to his dealings with, say, rich Americans.

When the shop finally passed into Sulhana's hands he did very well indeed. Since most of the tourists were Americans or British or rich Indians living on the plains, wealth came easily. A rich American, for instance, would come to his shop for a look and, after a cup of finely spiced Persian tea with fancy cakes, would spot the very thing he wanted—say a solid walnut desk—and, since the price was so low, would want to buy it. Then the wily Sulhana would lift his hands

to Allah and say how sorry he was this desk was already sold. But, not to worry, he could have an identical one made and shipped to sahib at his home in America. Sahib, pleased with his purchase, would pay the cost of the furniture plus charges for packing, shipping, insurance, etc.

But the only thing Sulhana ever sent out of Kashmir was explanations. Since he didn't mail the desk or carpet or blankets or whatever was ordered, people would write and demand an explanation. But Sulhana could always fall back on someone else. "But, Sahib, I mailed the items six months ago. Something must have happened. You had better check with the post office."

And so Sulhana became more rich and more fat and bought more houses, more houseboats and more wives.

One day a party of Kazaks came to Kashmir. Escaping from Russia, they had crossed the Himalayas to find refuge in India. Some of them were poor and found their way to the plains and employment but others were rich and stayed on to live in the beautiful Kashmir Valley. In order to live well they sold many of the things they had brought from Russia and of their many lovely possessions it was Sulhana's good fortune to buy a beautiful Bokhara carpet. Having taken the carpet as part payment for one of his old, dilapidated houses, he felt it had cost him nothing and of that he was very proud.

He hung the carpet in his shop on the Bund after some time and, smiling at his eldest son who was learning the trade as he had, he said, "Now, Gulama, I will show you how one carpet can make a fortune for the clever man."

The next afternoon Gulama was preparing his father's hukka when the servant in charge of one of their houseboats rushed in and whispered to Sulhana that the plane had brought many Americans and three had moved onto his boat. "Take

my best shikara," ordered the merchant, "and see that they don't go to any other shop. Give them everything they want."

As was expected, a few hours later the tourists were herded in by the faithful servant. Being a clever businessman, Sulhana made them very comfortable and, not rushing them into anything, brought out his stock of shawls. Americans cannot resist the Kashmir wool and embroidery so his efforts paid well.

Before he wrote the bill, he smiled, "You must see the Mughal gardens while you are here. I'll have my car pick you up tomorrow morning and take you to Shalimar, Nishat Bagh, Chashma Shahi. Never mind about lunch. You will have lunch with me, nothing but the best Persian food, 23 courses. You must do me this honour."

As the pleased Americans were leaving, one of them stopped by the rug, lifted one corner and said, "This is a nice carpet. How much?"

"Only Rs. 3,000, Sahib. But I have many more. Better than this. I will take you to my factory. I will send my tonga."

"Never mind," said the American. "This is the carpet I want. I'll bring the money when we come to lunch tomorrow."

That was the first time Sulhana sold the carpet. And besides that he sold some walnut furniture, especially designed for the fine carpet. After a week the Americans left, but Sulhana's wonderful carpet never did.

Two weeks later Sulhana sold the carpet to another American and, soon after that, to a Britisher who counted its knots and examined it with the caressing touch of a connoisseur. But Sulhana's wonderful carpet stayed on his wall.

The carpet was sold twice more before the season ended and when the winter snows came Sulhana told Gulama to roll

the carpet up and put it carefully away for it would be a shame for such a wonderful asset to be damaged.

With the coming of the tourists, a sure sign of spring, the carpet was again stretched on the wall and as Sulhana, fatter still from his months of hibernation, eyed it, he rubbed his chilled hands together and said, "Yes, Gulama, it is the most beautiful carpet in Kashmir and it is very lucky. Surely it will make us rich."

Several merchants tried to buy the carpet from Sulhana, offering him even as much as it was worth, a rare thing for them. But Sulhana always refused and, taking refuge in the last receipt he had issued for its sale, would vow that he was sending it off as soon as Banihal Pass was opened.

Unfortunately the tourist trade was very bad that year. Americans didn't go to Kashmir and the few British and Europeans who trickled in were not rich enough to pay Sulhana's prices so things were very difficult. A number of rich Indians enquired about the carpet but Sulhana always discouraged them. After all, Indians lived so close they might, if they got suspicious enough, come back to Kashmir to see why the carpet hadn't been shipped. They might even demand it if they came back to investigate and at that stage Sulhana was determined not to part with his wonderful carpet ever.

Yes, the season was terribly bad. In fact, when Sulhana felt the first chill of the winter he noticed that he had only sold the carpet twice. Hardly believable since it was such a wonderful buy.

But after most of the tourists had gone back across the pass and merchants were thinking of storing their goods, one lone American girl came to Kashmir. It was too cold to stay on a houseboat so she took a room at the hotel.

Merchants throughout the valley sensed the presence of an American and quickly goods were retrieved from storage and stretched out on counters and every businessman sent a hawker to stand at the hotel gate in case she dared venture out. Sulhana, the cleverest of them all, sent his smartly dressed Gulama in a nice big car.

Poor Gulama spent several days waiting in the shiny car outside the hotel gate but the lady didn't venture out. He watched her walk across for breakfast, sit in the garden all morning, have lunch, sit in the garden until tea time and then retire to the welcome fire in her room.

Finally Gulama complained to his father who reminded him, "Americans cannot help buying; it is in their blood. She must come out eventually. Just be patient."

He was right, of course, and one warm morning after breakfast the girl strolled outside the gate, out of the safe no-man's-land of the hotel compound, straight into the arms of the hawkers. "Want a shikara, Miss Sahib? I take you to see nice gardens." "I'm tailor, Lady Sahib, I make you nice skirt." "You interested in stones, Miss Sahib?" "I show you fine old Tibetan jewelry, Miss Sahib."

Hampered by dozens of the hawkers, she finally reached the curb where the suave Gulama invited her to please take his car and see the sights of Kashmir. Who could resist? She stepped into the car and was whisked away to the waiting Sulhana who was screaming at the servants to make the carved, unseasoned walnut shine more brightly.

"Come in. Have a look, Miss Sahib. You don't have to buy. Please have a cup of Persian tea." Before Sulhana had covered the bare sofa with a shah tosh shawl she had spotted the

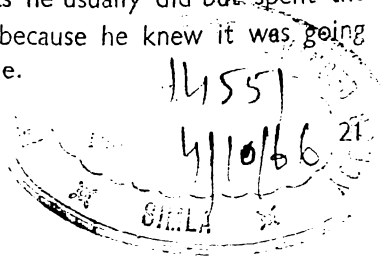
carpet. But, as is the custom, she patiently let him show her all his wares and then casually asked the price of the rug.

Shortly her name and address were faithfully recorded in Sulhana's order book and the receipt she demanded set out exactly the price she had paid for the carpet plus the extra charges. Sulhana was so pleased he rushed out of the shop a moment to send a servant for some sweets to celebrate. While he was out the girl, having heard that the Kashmiri dealers often switch items, selling you one and sending you another, took a red pencil from her pocket and carefully printed her initials on the back: MEB.

When this last tourist left Kashmir, again Sulhana carefully rolled up and stored his wonderful carpet and as he did so he again experienced the peculiar feeling he had when the American girl had told him she was employed by a construction company in Delhi. He knew it was bad to sell things to people living so near and he had scrupulously avoided letting anyone buy that carpet who lived in India. However, he told himself for the hundredth time, she was just a working girl and this would probably be the only time she would ever have the money to get to Kashmir. He dismissed the problem from his mind.

Spring was late in coming but with it came a flood of tourists such as Kashmir had not seen since the war. Every merchant was happy and even salaamed the river people as they went to work in the morning. Truly it was to be a great season.

Before the monsoons set in, the happy Sulhana had sold the carpet three times. During the monsoons the happy Sulhana didn't complain about the rains as he usually did but spent the entire time laying in new stocks because he knew it was going to be the best season in a long time.



When the sun came out again the flood of tourists was greater than even he had expected. All his houseboats were full and he had to go around making deals with the keepers of other houseboats so they would send their occupants to him. He had to hire four extra shikaras, two more tongas and, since his car was always busy, he hired taxis to take his prospective customers about. He had never done so much business. And, of course, it was a lot of trouble because when he had to hire new hawkers he never knew when they might send the customers to another merchant who would give more commission. Things had come to such a stage you couldn't trust anyone anymore.

Sulhana had promised Abdullah, the son of a man who owned three houseboats, a handsome commission if he would send all their people to him. Abdullah's father was honest and had tried to train his son but, at the same time, any boy likes to earn an extra rupee.

One day a young American man came to Kashmir in his own car and rented one of Abdullah's boats. Besides serving him, the young boy also acted as a guide, taking the tourist to see the gardens, making pony treks to Gulmarg, Sonamarg and Pahalgam and guiding him on shopping sprees.

One day the two of them passed Sulhana's shop and Abdullah said, "This shop has some nice things. Would you like to see them?" And in they went. As they entered, the American ran his fingers over the wonderful carpet but, having been in Kashmir before, he didn't ask the price. He bought a few bits of old brass and, on his way out, stopped and examined the carpet more carefully.

That night after dinner Abdullah and his father sat around the fire talking to the American who casually asked Abdullah, "How much does Sulhana want for that carpet hanging in his shop?"

Abdullah's father flew into a rage and blasted at his son in Kashmiri. The American stopped him with, "What's wrong?"

The old man said, "Sulhana is the worst merchant in all Kashmir. His wares are junk. And as for that carpet, he has sold it to no less than a dozen tourists. I've told Abdullah so many times not to let our guests go to that man's shop. We don't want you to take away a bad impression of our beautiful land."

"Never mind. I know Kashmiri merchants very well. But I also know something about carpets and that happens to be the best I have ever seen."

"All right. Tomorrow I'll find out the price. But if you buy it, you take it then. Don't leave it even to turn your back or you will never get your carpet."

The next morning Abdullah left soon after breakfast and returned shortly to report that the carpet cost Rs. 3,000 and crating and shipping charges, Rs. 50. "Let's go get that carpet," said the American.

They parked the car behind Sulhana's shop and walked up the stairs, along the Bund and into Sulhana's waiting arms. Tea was served while the American examined the carpet more closely and then, taking out his check book, he announced that he would buy the carpet.

"Ah, you have good taste, Sahib. You have bought the best carpet in all Kashmir. That will be Rs. 3,050, Sahib. Rs. 50 for packing and mailing."

"O.K., I'll make the check for Rs. 3,000. You see, I have my car so I'll take the carpet with me."

Sulhana hardly blinked as he said, "All right, Sahib. I will have it crated and send it to your houseboat some time tomorrow."

"That isn't necessary. I have my car with me. I'll take the carpet now."

"But, Sahib," halted the cautious Sulhana, "the carpet has become dusty from hanging in my shop. I will have it cleaned nicely and crated and you will have it by 4:00 o'clock this afternoon. Better still, you go do your shopping and come back here for lunch. I will give you the best Persian food, 23 dishes. Then you take the carpet."

"I don't think you understand, Sulhana. I have paid for the carpet and I want it. Now."

What could Sulhana do? Almost in tears he told Gulama to take the wonderful carpet off the wall and roll it up. Then he followed them to the car and saw his wonderful carpet folded into the back seat. Truly his heart was heavy that day.

In Delhi the young American was called George Shelton. He was an architect working for Adams Construction Co. He had rented a neat bachelor flat in one of the buildings he built and was very anxious to decorate it. He stayed home the morning the carpet was laid and, once it was on his floor, he admired it from every angle. The furniture he had designed for the flat was moved in after a few days and the place looked so nice George decided to hold a house-warming. After all, he owed the office staff a party.

Everyone employed by Adams Construction Co. was invited, including an American consultant named Mary E. Bryant. Each guest in turn on his arrival complimented the flat and raved about George's taste, especially in carpets. Mary admired the flat but at the same time she was somewhat reticent about the carpet.

As the party wore on someone said, "Tell us, George, where did you get such a wonderful carpet? It is the best one I've ever seen."

"I bought it from a rogue named Sulhana in Kashmir." He looked up just in time to see Mary almost drop her glass.

"I think I've seen this carpet before. Do you mind if I turn up the corners and look at them?" she asked.

"Why not?" her host said, setting his glass down to help her.

The second corner they turned up revealed the red letters MEB. "You see, George, I bought the same carpet. But, tell me, how in the world did you ever get it away from Sulhana?"

George related his story and Mary told hers. Everyone got a kick out of it and it turned out to be the big joke of the evening.

But the next morning George went straight to Mary's office. "Look, I feel badly about that carpet. I couldn't sleep last night knowing that you had bought it first. I left instructions for the servants to roll it up and I'm having it delivered to your flat. After all, it's your carpet, not mine."

Mary argued that she was the one who had been duped and he had been cleverer and therefore it was his carpet. They argued for a while but George was firm. He ended by saying, "No. I have decided. You take the carpet; I'll take that dirty Sulhana's skin." With that he returned to his office to telephone his lawyer.

A few days later a Kashmiri police official called at Sulhana's shop to serve papers on him. "What is it this time?" gloated the self-assured Sulhana.

"This time," explained the official, "you've gone too far. I know, you've been able to buy yourself off from all the previous cases filed against you but this time you're for it. You see, the government has a new policy. Kashmir must rely on tourists for survival and when someone does bad business or

cheats it gives Kashmir a bad name and slowly the tourists stop coming. Now the government has decided to take a firm step and see that justice is given to each tourist who has been cheated. I'm afraid, Sulhana, that your day is over."

Sulhana tried his charms, his influence, his persuasion, his bribes but the official was steadfast. "I'm sorry, Sulhana. For the sake of our country we must see that tourists are not hurt. Therefore we must bring merchants like you to justice. That's all."

Sulhana didn't drink the tea Gulama brought for him but he sat hunched over his hukka, looking rather sad. "What's wrong, Father?" asked the boy.

"Gulama, I guess we'll have to bring the real carpet out of storage and sell it now in order to get ourselves out of this mess."

DISENCHATED

Marsha was 30, confused, undecided.

She stretched lazily in bed and only her childhood memories remained clear.

When she was five her mother presented her with a stuffed monkey for Christmas. Marsha named him Jingo. He had a silly face topped by a little red pillbox hat and his smile emerged pale pink from his brown, furry velveteen body. His funny tail curled upward and his hands and feet were the same pink as his face. He was stuffed with soft straw that made him cuddly and nice and his slightly crooked legs either curled around her as she hugged him close for comfort or they supported him as he sat patiently waiting for her to come home from school.

Marsha adored Jingo. He was everything in the world to her. He was her companion, her partner; into his floppy

ears she poured all her childish plans. Later, as she grew older, it was he to whom she whispered the troubles of a little girl grown too sophisticated to confide in parents.

And throughout the years Jingo remained constant, secure, faithful. He became dirty; Marsha washed him and for several hours he would be a soggy, matted Jingo but the same Jingo nevertheless. He never learned to talk or walk or answer Marsha's questions. But he was always her ever-true Jingo

When Marsha was 12 she went away to summer camp. She didn't take Jingo. "The other girls will laugh at a big girl like you sleeping with a cuddle toy," warned her mother. So Jingo stayed behind, waiting patiently for his beloved Marsha.

Camp life was good for Marsha. She developed independence, self-sufficiency, maturity. She returned home a changed person, a young girl, no longer a child. And her outlook had changed too.

It wasn't repulsion she felt when she saw Jingo lounging against the pillows on her bed. No, it was the mature recognition of something dear but outgrown, like a fashion-conscious woman suddenly confronted with last year's wardrobe. She saw it as something from which the present had developed but at the same time something which had remained static while she had grown on.

In an effort to recall the lost emotions—for she was too young to understand that the loss was a gain—Marsha lay down beside Jingo and fondled his worn ears and broken tail. But somehow he didn't respond.

Marsha didn't dare discard Jingo. She didn't want to hurt his feelings. She didn't want him to know that she had changed. Her mother suggested giving him to a charity

collection of old toys for poor children the next Christmas but Marsha wouldn't part with him. It wasn't jealousy. It was a sense of faithfulness bereft of emotion. He remained a part of the fixtures of her room, of her tenderness, of her life. A silent, outgrown, unparticipating, faithful part.

Marsha tried to remember when Jingo had been consigned to the attic. Oh, yes, after she married John.

As John stirred in her memory, so he stirred in the bed beside her and, in that stage between sleep and waking, threw his leg over her thighs. Good, sweet, dependable John.

She had met John when she was only 20. He was her ideal, her strength, her girlhood dreams fulfilled, her beloved. They were married six months later.

Suddenly, as John lay heavily beside her, she was no longer confused. She understood. Her thoughts went back to Jingo.

HAVE YOU PLAYED HOUSE LATELY?

There were a great many people at the party and, not liking my fellow human beings in large numbers, I drifted to the fringe of the crowd to nose along the titles on the bookshelves.

Slowly a door at the side of the bookcase cracked open and a snaggletoothed little smile invited, "Would you like to come play with me?" This being the most charming invitation I had had in a long time, I said I would and let myself be led into the room by a girl I took to be nine-ish.

The room was fluffy and frilly and miniature and I immediately felt worlds apart from the coarse bigness of the other room.

"Come here. I want to show you something," urged the rosy face and I followed my hostess to a tiny blue chest. Quickly

she peeked inside, brought out a box and displayed a tea set. The cups looked like thimbles with diminutive curls stuck on for handles and the pot, cream pitcher and sugar bowl were scaled to size.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" tempted my tiny hostess.

"From this?" I almost said but caught myself as I realized the seriousness of the offer. "Why, yes, I think that would be nice," I unbelievably uttered.

The plump legs raced across the room, chubby fingers dialed the knobs on the chest of drawers and a toothy smile informed me: "I'm putting the water on to boil."

Apparently sensing my wonder at the whole affair, she asked politely, "Would you like to play house with me?"

Searching for an answer, my mind raced back through the tumbling years. I could remember how to bake a cake, how to write a short story, how to ride a bicycle but I couldn't for the life of me fathom the 30 years that had passed since I last used those words myself. However, I valiantly answered, "Yes, I would. But I'm afraid you'll have to tell me what to do."

Politely disregarding my ignorance, she countered, "All right. You be Mrs. Smith and I'll be Mrs. Jones."

At this Mrs. Jones skipped across the room, waved toward two tiny chairs flanking a wee table and said, "If you'll sit down here, Mrs. Smith, I'll see if the water is hot."

I quickly measured the chair, my derriere and the seriousness of Mrs. Jones' face and realized I was faced with a most difficult problem. I hinted that the chair was too small but she countered that even though it was small it was very strong. I then indicated that the arms of the chair were a bit confining and that too much pastry had made the feat quite impossible.

Grasping the situation without dropping her dignity, she waved magnanimously toward a vast open space and said, "Then please sit in this chair, Mrs. Smith. I think you'll find it most comfortable."

Determined not to lag behind in imagination, I squatted yoga fashion on the bare floor and faced my hostess who was sitting in a similar chair opposite me.

Then, in order that her guest might not be bored while the water boiled, she suddenly asked if I would like to see her jewels. I could think of no nicer pastime, I assured her, and she flounced away to the chest of drawers, on top of which, I recalled, the water was boiling.

She rushed back with a faded envelope bag and apologized for the fact that her mother had broken the zipper last year but she smilingly confided that that was how she came in possession of it.

Turning the bag upside down, she emptied her treasures on the floor for me to admire.

Suddenly broken clips, rhinestone buttons, unstrung beads and pin-less brooches became priceless jewels before my eyes. In this little girl the single earring—such a useless thing to grownups—had found its own. She lovingly showed me each precious jeweled item, confiding its life story. She told me how mother or grandmother or some endearing aunt had worn this or that to a big party and looked so beautiful but eventually the thing had broken and they had given it to her.

Some of the jewelry she had repaired herself and these were the most precious of all. Beads were strung together in asymmetric processions along gaudy bits of string. Broken parts were tied together with tags of ribbon or pieces of thread and sometime she had used huge globs of glue or strips of scotch tape to strengthen weak spots.

Occasionally she came across a partially filled bottle. Shrieking with delight, she insisted I try this perfume since it was even nicer than the last. The fact that numerous scents overlapped had no ill effect on her aesthetic senses so I let myself be doused.

Sachet was also added and, of course, I had to try the broken, smeared lipsticks which she dug out with the end of her finger. I wondered vaguely how the Shocking Pink, Jungle Red, Bravo and other shades mingled on my lips.

In the midst of this treasure exhibition, Mrs. Jones suddenly remembered the boiling water. Grabbing all the jewels with none of the tender care she had just shown them, she jammed them back into the faded bag and rushed them toward the "stove." Poking them into a drawer, she called back that the tea was almost ready.

Placing the thimble-cups on postage-stamp sized saucers, she chatted away about how her baby had cried all morning and what a worthless ayah she had. I was lurching through this make-believe when she jolted me with, "Will you take sugar and lemon?"

I said I would have a little of each thank you and she went through the motions of serving tea. Then, with Mrs. Jones facing me, we settled down in our non-existent chairs and sipped the ethereal elixir.

Then into the midst of this tranquil scene bounded a clumsy, happy puppy. Mrs. Jones screamingly retrieved her tea set, securing it in her brief skirt, and shrieked that he was always trying to break her lovely dishes.

Sorrowfully she showed me huge cracks down the middle of each cup and accusingly reported that every time she had someone in to tea the dog behaved this way and had broken all her dishes. Her mother, she said, had mended them beautifully.

As she abused the puppy, he stood by, tongue lolling floorward and the corners of his mouth tipped up in an obviously mischievous grin. I felt he had purposefully broken our nice spell.

Having vented her feelings and put away the tea set, my hostess unabashedly asked if I would like to play lady. I was a bit shocked and wondered if that was exactly the question for a little girl to ask an adult female of my age, morals and social position. But, longing for her refreshing escape, I again rushed back to make-believe and said I would.

Mrs. Jones skipped to the tiny chest and began throwing out clothes. A sari landed in the middle of the floor and was quickly followed by a tattered pink lace evening gown. "Shall we be Indian ladies or American ladies?" asked Mrs. Jones from the depths of the treasure chest.

"In view of our background," I suggested, "why don't we just be American Indians?" This brought a quizzical little head around the corner of the door and I knew immediately that I had almost spoiled the enchantment.

At that moment the other, larger door that opened onto the big party where grown-ups were discussing adult problems and not having much fun, opened and the spell was completely gone.

In rushed Mrs. Jones' mother who obviously didn't realize the stature of Mrs. Jones for she said, "Don't you think it's time little girls were in bed?"

Mrs. Jones suddenly dropped about 20 years and asked if she couldn't stay up just a little longer and pleaded toward me with her huge eyes. But Mrs. Jones' mother was determined that Mrs. Jones go to bed and we had to accept the decision.

As I left the room, the snaggletoothed smile begged, "Please come back and play with me again."

I said I would and added, "Good night. I think you're a very sweet little girl."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Jones. "I think you're a very sweet little girl too."

THE GREEN EVENING DRESS

The year before Mrs. Hargrove joined her husband in India she had made a trip to Paris and among other purchases she made was a green dress with a girdle of gold sequins.

As she weeded through her clothes to see what she could use in the heat of the subcontinent, she decided the green dress didn't look so bad. Of course, it had taken quite a bit of wear since she had only purchased six gowns for the busy continental social season. Nevertheless, it looked quite decent and besides it was sleeveless which made it almost the only thing that wouldn't have to be altered for the hot Indian evenings. Into the trunk it went.

Mrs. Hargrove's figure was not what it had been during that European holiday because in the meantime she had borne a son. Therefore on shipboard and during the first few months in India the green evening dress with its full skirt and ample bodice was her most faithful standby. She was glad she had invested her money wisely in an expensive but well cut gown.

In fact, Mrs. Hargrove felt rather smug in her exclusively designed gown among the women who had lived in India long enough to have their evening dresses either ruined by cleaners or replaced by made-over saris. But Mrs. Hargrove had not been here long enough to know about gossipers.

Mrs. Dickson, the wife of another director in Mr. Hargrove's firm, dropped in to have coffee one morning with Mrs. Hargrove. "My dear," she cooed with arsenic sweetness, "I do wish I could find a dress as smart and reliable as that lovely green creation you wore last night. I'm sure I've seen you wear it ten or twelve times in the few months you've been in India. I declare, it's certainly more lasting than the ones I buy here."

Mrs. Hargrove had chosen the green gown because it set off her bobbed red hair which now stood on end. The low drape of the neck had been chosen as a compliment to her aristocratic features and Roman nose, the nostrils of which now flared and literally flamed.

Mrs. Hargrove felt like pouring strychnine into Mrs. Dickson's coffee but she hadn't gone to finishing school for nothing so she purred, "My dear, that's probably because you haven't any proper Parisian designers here since no one can afford them."

After a few forced politenesses Mrs. Dickson bid Mrs. Hargrove a fond farewell and they both lied that they looked forward to meeting each other soon.

Mrs. Hargrove was shocked because she knew Mrs. Dickson (whose husband was junior to Mr. Hargrove) would never have said such a brazen thing had it not been the general gossip of Calcutta's social set. "Well, you certainly wouldn't expect that narrow attitude in this mid-Victorian, hick town! After all, they cling to their Victorianisms and it was my very own Victorian mother who taught me to buy wisely so things would last long. Well!" huffed Mrs. Hargrove to no one in particular.

She vented her spleen on her husband who sipped his burra peg and said he was glad dinner jackets only changed style every fifty years but he hoped the American fashion of evening shorts for men would hurry and hit India since his trousers were getting a bit thin in the knees.

The next day found Mrs. Hargrove in the bazaar eyeing saris for what prospects they had of being shaped into evening dresses. That afternoon she saw her dressmaker and so began a series of fittings, drappings and working one's appointments in so that one's life centred around the tailor.

The green evening gown slowly edged its way to the back of the almirah and, with really hot weather, found itself at the bottom of a huge trunk. There it stayed for more than a year.

Mrs. Hargrove detested flimsy materials and home-made gowns. Everytime she dressed to go out she thought wistfully of the green evening dressed and hated Mrs. Dickson more and more.

The next time cool weather came and the invitations to dinners, cocktails, receptions, lectures, exhibitions, etc.

piled up on her desk, Mrs Hargrove decided enough time had passed to bring out the green dress again.

Out it came. It was definitely not the same. The gold sequin girdle which had been its original elegance had gone a bit tarnished. The cleaners brightened it a little and Mrs. Hargrove wore the dress by draping a gold Banaras stole over her shoulders, thus hiding the front of the girdle. But the back was exposed.

Finally Mrs. Hargrove had to face it: Her green evening gown had reached the end of its rope—unless she could use the material to make one of the new, short, cocktail dresses by simply cutting the girdle out.

She hung it on the veranda near the kitchen and made a note to send for the dressmaker the next day.

The cook had worked for Mr. Hargrove long before the memsahib arrived and since she came things had not gone so well with him. She was a stickler about the bazaar book and it had got to where he could scarcely make an honest rupee by padding the accounts.

That is why the cook consented so easily to his new friend's proposition. The friend pointed out that things were just as bad for him, therefore the cook should let himself be doped by the new friend who would then slip into the house through the kitchen and relieve the rich, imperialistic Hargroves of some of their wealth.

He didn't want much, of course, but whatever he got he would split 50-50 with the cook. The cook, by letting himself be doped by his friend, would, of course, have a perfect alibi and thus would neither be connected with the crime nor lose his job.

That night the cook locked the kitchen door and then made his bed in the adjoining room where he always slept. He opened the window and the friend slipped in. Together they broke the kitchen lock and then the cook stretched out on his pallet and let his friend waft him to sleep with the fumes of some sort of incense.

The friend eased the door open, slipped onto the veranda and began opening the door which led to the Hargrove's bedroom. The Hargroves were sound asleep but the baby, who hadn't been sleeping well due to an upset stomach, began to scream.

The friend was scared out of his wits and ran back toward the kitchen. On his way, as is the custom of men of that profession, he grabbed whatever was handy so his mission would not be completely fruitless.

He ran through the door with the broken lock, leaped over the doped cook and jumped out the window.

It wasn't until he was clear across Calcutta in his own bustee that he dared look at his trophy. And all it was was a green evening dress. Wouldn't you know, something his wife couldn't even use.

Krishan had been dealing in second hand goods all his life and he had a keen eye for quality. Also he treated his customers with utmost respect. After all, if you were nice to a buyer and gave him the right terms he would be back.

One thing Krishan had learned also in his little booth in Malik Bazaar was that you mustn't ask questions of those who brought wares to sell. You merely paid the price you felt was right and left it at that.

The bazaar was open from 5:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. for sales but the buying was done early in the morning when the "procurers" could go in and out freely without being

recognized by the customers. Therefore, Krishan was at his booth around 7:00 a.m. every day to see what could be bought.

That morning as he unlocked his door he saw one of his most faithful procurers standing near with a green bundle under his arm. He hurriedly opened the door and let the man through.

When the green bundle was unrolled it turned out to be an old evening dress which had once been quite beautiful. Even old Krishan could tell that the lines and design were rare for his sort of business and he thought to himself what a pity it was the girdle had tarnished because otherwise he could have got a neat price for it.

None of this satisfied appraisal appeared on Krishan's face which continued to scowl at the wrinkled gown. "Where did you get it?" growled Krishan.

"My wife is ayah for a big family and the memsahib gave it to her because it does not fit anymore."

"I'll give you a rupee for it," bid Krishan.

The man shook the dress indignantly in Krishan's face and so began the normal business transaction. After a great deal of haggling while Krishan threatened on one hand to check the authenticity of the man's story and the man continued to swear to it on his life, other shopkeepers and other "procurers" started coming in. The man who was still clutching the dress handed it over and took the Rs. 2/- held out to him by Krishan.

As the slippery little man sneaked through the small opening at the end of the shed, Krishan ran his experienced hands over the fine crepe and looked forward to doing a big business with this dress. Too bad the girdle was tarnished!

Mary had seen better days. Much better. The British had always reserved favourable positions for Anglo-Indians

and her father had a good job with the railways. However, he died when Mary was young and her mother had tried to raise her and her sisters the best she could.

They went to school and got a little education but since they were beautiful girls their principal training had come outside of school.

Mary met a handsome police sergeant who lived down the street and when she was only 15 he proposed to her. It wasn't until too late that she discovered he had not meant to marry her. After the sergeant started going around with her younger sister, Mary decided to get revenge so she went out with anyone who would ask her. A lot of boys asked Mary because she was pretty and liked to have a good time.

Mary soon found out that certain boys and most older men were very generous. They would give a girl the things she wanted but couldn't afford and they didn't expect much in return. All they wanted was company and affection. Mary had plenty of that so why not cash in while the going was good. She could always marry. After all, most of them asked her to marry them but she wasn't ready to settle down. No, she wanted more and more things before she was tied down with a family.

By the time Mary was 23 the boy friends began to taper off and the presents became less expensive. Also the fellows didn't hang around so long as they used to; in fact, some of them only came one night and never returned. Also her clothes were shabby and she couldn't afford a perm. Maybe that was the reason for their coolness, Mary consoled herself.

Since her mother and younger sisters kept screaming for the money she used to give them and complaining if she

expected them even to feed her, she had to take a job. She worked several places for short times and finally had to work as a nanny. She didn't mind it because she could live in fine houses and she liked kids.

Mary continued to have boy friends on her days off and the current one was Chuck.

Chuck was an American sailor and Mary absolutely adored him. He was only 19 and sometime terribly silly but he loved to have a good time and Chuck really was the guy to show a girl the town.

Mary looked forward to the times when Chuck's ship came in because he always brought her nice presents from America. Oh, how she wished Chuck would marry her and take her to that wonderful land! Let all her friends rave about the Queen and going back Home to live; no, Mary would gladly settle for Chuck and America!

Of course, she had admitted to herself that she was a little old for Chuck—but not too much. After all, by putting on a little more makeup she looked almost as young as he did.

Certainly she had not admitted her age to him. But she thought he knew and understood or didn't care. After all, the night they met there had been a joke about it.

Mary and some of her girl friends had dropped into a bar because they heard an American ship was in. Sure enough, there were a lot of sailors around and Chuck came over to their table with several more of the boys. The fellows introduced themselves and then asked the girls their names. When Mary's turn came Chuck laughed and said, "Named after the Virgin, Baby?"

"No, the Queen," thoughtlessly quipped Mary.

One of the other boys laughed and said, "That's another vintage and what a relief it is from all the Margarets and Elizabeths of today." Everyone laughed but Mary who knew she had been dated.

But Chuck ran his hand along her arm and said in an intimate voice, "Never mind, I like my liquor aged."

After that she was marked as Chuck's girl and it made her tingle inside to be called that.

Mary had received a letter from Chuck which said he would be landing in Calcutta on Saturday. This was the first time he had been to Calcutta in six months and the very first time he had come on a Saturday night.

Oh, how wonderful it would be for him to take her out and she could show all the girls and fellows in town what a handsome, rich boy friend she had. Then they would know she wasn't a has-been. She was thrilled beyond words.

She knew she could get the night off because the sahib hadn't been well and they had cancelled all their engagements for a week. Therefore it would be easy for her to get Saturday off instead of Thursday and since the family liked to play on Sunday mornings they wouldn't care if she came a little late. Oh, she could hardly wait!

But what would she wear?

Every girl in town wore a new party dress on Saturday night and she didn't have anything. What would she do? It was terrible! She would love to have a beautiful party dress but that was impossible.

Finally she decided she would ask the Indian girl who worked next door if she could borrow one of her saris. She had worn a sari once before when Chuck came and

he had hugged her so tight her choli nearly split and said, "Gee, Queenie (that was her name after the Mary joke), you really look quaint." But actually Mary didn't like the idea at all. After all, one had to keep up one's standard.

So Mary yearned and pondered until Friday.

After she put the baby to bed Friday night the memsahib told her she could go home since she was no use to her anyway the way she was moping about over her boy friend. The memsahib laughed when she said it so Mary lost no time in getting her things together and going home.

It was fun being with Mummy and her sisters because they all looked up to her as if she were a goddess because it isn't every girl who has an American sailor for a boy friend—that is, one who keeps coming back. She told them she didn't have a dress for Saturday night but they agreed she would look beautiful in a sari—just this once—and she could tell her friends it was because Chuck wanted her to wear it.

By the time the ship docked and Chuck got to town it was nearly lunch time. When he drove up in the big taxi in front of her block of flats, heads popped out of every window to watch the couple run out, their arms around each other, and jump into the cab.

Another boy was in the taxi and Chuck explained that this was Jerry, a new gob who was a platter fiend. Mary knew that meant he liked gramophone records. However, he wasn't interested in new ones but he had heard there was a market where you could get old, second hand ones. Mary laughed and said that must be Malik Bazaar since you could get anything there but it wouldn't be open until 5:00.

Jerry was disappointed and finally they decided to stop by just to see if maybe they were open a little early on Saturday or maybe they could find the dealer even if it wasn't open.

The gates to the huge shed were ajar so the three slipped through and in the dim light finally found a record shop. The dealer was asleep on a mat but the sailors soon had him half awake, grinding away at the ancient manual gramophone while they dug through stacks of dusty, chipped records.

Mary had learned to take such American eccentricities in her stride and after showing the required amount of enthusiasm she wandered off toward the open end of the shed.

Suddenly, before Mary's eyes hung a dream—a dream in fine green crepe, handsomely draped around a band of bronze colored sequins. Oh, it was beautiful!

Mary grabbed it off the hanger and rushed toward the open door so she could see it in the light. Yes, the material was the finest she had ever seen. She held it up to her and it looked as if it was an exact fit. Oh, it was beautiful!

She rushed back to the sleepy, dazed Krishan and blurted out, "Where did you get it? How much is it? Can I pay in installments? Well, answer me!"

Krishan eyed the thickly made-up Mary and the two noisy sailors and mumbled out something about Rs.10/-. But Mary, keeping her voice low enough for Chuck not to hear, began to bargain. She had Rs.4/- in her purse.

Just as she got him down to Rs.6/- the gramophone ran down and the two sailors looked up to see what all the bargaining was about. Chuck ambled over to Mary and said, "What's up, Queenie, having trouble with the old man?"

Mary had to tell him what she wanted. Chuck laughed and said, "What's wrong, kid, ain't cha got no glad rags at home?"

"Sure, I have plenty of clothes. It's just that I like this one and thought if this miser would let me have it for a decent price I'd take it."

"But look," said quality-conscious Chuck, "the belt's gone all bad."

"I can polish it up before tonight," assured Mary.

"Never mind, Baby, I'll keep my arm around that part of you anyway. Howmuchyawant?"

Chuck counted out the Rs. 6/- while Krishan folded the dress. Then he ambled back toward Jerry who had got the gramophone going again.

"Look," Krishan said in an aside to Mary, "after the boy friend leaves if you don't want the dress I'll buy it back at half price."

"Huh," laughed the confident Mary, "What do you take me for, an easy number?" and she walked haughtily off with the dress under her arm.

The green evening dress made Mary look younger and fresher so she wore it the next two times Chuck came to town. He liked to wrap both arms around her in a pretence of covering the tarnished sequins and then he would snuggle his head in the soft drape of the neck without any pretence.

But soon Chuck stopped coming and again Mary found herself and her dreams alone. She knew she would never get to America now and suddenly she knew she would never need an evening dress any more as badly as she needed the money.

Krishan was only too glad to give her Rs.3/- for the dress.

Mrs. Sen told her husband the night before that Ayesha had been invited to a costume party Johnnie's mother was giving him. Mr. Sen said that was all right: Ayesha could wear the glowworm costume she wore last month. Mrs. Sen said no she couldn't because the same children would be there so Ayesha would have to wear something new.

This made the frugal Mr. Sen very angry and he said a lot of things about how expensive a five-year-old daughter was and how foolish it was to spend so much money on a stupid costume for a silly party for babies and why did Ayesha have to go to the party anyway.

The patient Mrs. Sen pointed out that as long as Mr. Sen insisted on sending Ayesha to the best schools where she could get the best education and mix with the best children, he would have to spend money on her social life as well as her education.

This made Mr. Sen furious but he finally consented to the expenditure of Rs.10/- for Ayesha's costume, pointing out that it would be her last, her very last, party.

Now Mrs. Sen was looking around to see what she could make for Ayesha to wear. She had been all over the market but materials were so expensive and so sort of unimaginative that she hadn't been able to get any ideas. Therefore, she had decided to stop by the second hand shops while the car went to fetch Mr. Sen from the office. It would stop for her on the way back home. In the meantime she hoped to find something.

There were a lot of dresses in the shops but they were either skimpy, torn or soiled so Mrs. Sen was just about to give up when she saw a bit of green crepe sticking out of a trunk.

"What is that?" she asked Krishan.

He explained it was a lovely frock which had just been brought in by a rich memsahib who dealt with him exclusively. He pulled the wrinkled green evening dress from the trunk and spread it out on the dirty floor.

Mrs. Sen tried to show her lack of interest and asked the price, figuring the huge skirt could be cut up easily and made into a Peter Pan outfit while the sequin girdle could be used as tiny wings.

"Rs.15/-," answered the brazen Krishan after appraising Mrs. Sen's jewels.

Mrs. Sen turned on her heels and walked briskly toward the door. It worked. Krishan went running after her with the wrinkled gown in his fist. "What will you give, memsahib? What will you give?"

"Rs.5/- is my limit!"

"All right. Take it. But I'm only doing this because you are a fine lady and will come back the next time you want a dress.

"Honestly, memsahib, I'm letting you have this at exactly my cost price. I'm even losing money."

Mrs. Sen handed him a note, took the wilted green gown and reached the front of the shed only a few minutes before her husband came from the office.

Ayesha made a charming Peter Pan, dressed in green crepe tights from head to toe. And her tiny gold sequin wings captured everyone. Little Johnnie had a new space suit and the two of them kept jumping off tables, divans, etc. in order to be in character.

The children had loads of fun at the party and when it was all over and a dissheveled Peter Pan was carried away by her ayah, little Johnnie Hargrove's mother had not even recognized her elegant Paris creation. Neither had Johnnie's nanny, Mary, but the gold sequin wings had recalled to her memory a lost dream.

Mrs. Sen's only problem was whether or not she could persuade the man at the bazaar to buy a slightly used Peter Pan costume.

THE VILLAGE ROAD

Bhilpur was quite a distance from the big road leading into Calcutta and the only link between the little village and the highway was a fair weather trail.

Because of this, Bhilpur never flourished and its citizens, though hardworking men of the soil, often lacked the actual necessities of life.

Such a man was Anil. Although he was 34 he could not remember a single year in his life when there was enough food, enough clothing, enough shelter. Having struggled constantly for life's necessities, he scarcely knew of its luxuries.

Like the other men of Bhilpur, Anil knew little of education except that it was another thing he had been denied but its importance appeared insignificant when compared to his other problems. Anil had grown up by the side of his father, working in the fields by day and around the hut by night, absorbing the knowledge of the land passed down by his forefathers.

Anil's father had known the strenuous requirements of life and had taught his son well the need for hard work, devotion to the soil and the miseries that follow laziness.

The day Anil returned from the final rites after his father's death, he thought of the legacy his father had left and he knew that the faithful devotion to his tiny plot of land was his most valuable lesson and that his father's most blessed gift was Anil's patient wife.

Sushila was the sole ray of sunshine in Anil's life and he realized from day to day that it was for her that he worked, that it was to feed, clothe and protect her that made his life of toil worth while. And in return she gave him laughter and happiness, love and peace.

They were but children when their parents performed their marriage ceremony; thus, it seemed their whole life had been spent in working together.

When Sushila first came to live in Anil's house she was strong and healthy, a mere girl whose laughter and energy filled the tiny hut and spurred Anil on as it drifted to him in the fields. As his sisters married off and his parents died, it was Sushila who had filled the empty gaps with her merriment and understanding. For several years now they had lived in their little hut alone.

Too much alone, for Sushila bore no children. This had not worried them so long as others were in the house but as the place became empty they wished for a child.

Twice Sushila had been pregnant and as her body filled with the developing child, their hearts filled with happiness. The first pregnancy ended in miscarriage and the second child was stillborn.

With these two experiences Sushila's health had greatly deteriorated. A doctor from a nearby village once visited Bhilpur and Anil took him to see Sushila. The doctor said she had suffered from neglect at the time of those two mis-haps and that it was too bad they were cut off from the big city for there she could have received the care and attention she needed.

But there was no road to the city and during the monsoon even the lane was impassable and following the monsoon it could only be used for foot traffic.

Such was their position and the doctor was sorry and went away leaving the couple in despair.

For some time the men of Bhilpur had met together and talked about the necessity of building a road to the highway but this was only a dream for such a poor community. But when they took these times to dream they visualized the wealth that would come to their village if they could build a road and export their foodstuffs and bring in seeds, equipment, etc. from Calcutta.

Anil carried these dreams with him as he tilled his land and to him this dream road became the symbol of all one could desire in life. He soon was positive that if there were a road from Bhilpur to Calcutta, life would be entirely different not only for him but for all the people of his village.

Then one day an engineer came from the government and he called all the citizens together. Anil was afraid to go since government agents usually meant bad luck in the form

of taxation and food collection. But it was his duty, as Sushila told him, so he went.

All the villagers were there and, for Bhilpur, it was a large gathering. But it was easy to pick out the government engineer and his associates because they were clean, well dressed and, as Anil noticed with envy, fat.

The villagers sat on the ground while the agent opened his files and began to talk. He asked them how they would like to have a road linking their village with the highway.

"This is some trick," thought Anil but he began to notice the man's words more than his paunch and he heard the man say strange things, some he understood and some he did not.

The agent told the villagers of the advantages of having a road and what it would do for their village. He talked of all the things Anil had thought of as well as some others he did not understand, such as economics, hygiene, communications, education.

Anil drifted along with the talk for awhile and then he grew skeptical and said to himself, "This is some new trick they have figured out to get more from us. Either that or else the man is mad for how can we afford such a road when we can't even afford the clothes we need?"

But the agent kept talking and when he finished he asked their reactions. Of course they wanted a road, the men of Bhilpur agreed, but how could they afford such a project when even a hand plough was beyond their resources. Some muttered curses that this man was merely keeping them from their work to fill the heads of the younger men with wild ideas.

The more pessimistic ones stood up to go but the agent urged them to wait because he had a scheme whereby they could have their road at no cost to the good citizens of Bhilpur.

This startled them into hearing him out. He explained that the government had allotted sufficient funds for construction materials for the road and it was up to the villagers themselves to provide the labor, either by employing it from outside or by donating their own energy.

As he explained the project, he had to talk louder because the men were audibly excited. The agent outlined the project and asked them if they were prepared to cooperate.

Anil was the first to stand up and volunteer his labor. He promised to give the construction crew every moment he could possibly spare from his fields; he vowed to see the sun rise and set on his work until the road was finished. The others outshouted him in their enthusiasm to volunteer.

The agent was pleased at their response and as he gathered his flunkies and files together he promised to return in a week with the material and equipment. In the meantime one of his men would come the following day to take down the names of the volunteers and assign their initial duties.

Anil was breathless when he ran into the hut and the words raced over each other in such a jumble that Sushila didn't know what he was saying. Then, as the full realization came to her, she just sat back and stared with her wide, black, sensitive eyes for she, too, had shared Anil's dreams.

Sushila stood in line with Anil when the villagers registered for work and were assigned duties. She, too,

volunteered for they had decided this was their road and they both should have a part in it.

Anil was strong and volunteered to help carry the material and equipment to the village from the last vehicular point on the trail. Sushila was assigned to carry dirt from the high points where it was being dug out to the areas to be filled in.

After they registered, they mingled with the other villagers and returned to their hut, declaring it had been a wonderful day.

Each morning they rose long before the sun and Anil set out at a fast pace to the supply dump while Sushila went to collect her basket and join the other women. As she worked Sushila dreamed of their future life and, toward sunset, looked down the rough lane in order not to miss the first sight of Anil and his rich load. As Anil and the other carriers brought their burdens into the local supply office, they were received as heroes. Thus the work went on.

When all the equipment and material were finally collected, Anil was commended for his work and offered an easy assignment but he asked that he be given something hard for he wanted to hurry the road.

The engineers told the villagers that if they worked hard throughout the winter months the road would be completed and packed down by the time the devastating monsoon hit. If the road was well built, the monsoon would not hurt it; but in those places where the road was not correctly constructed, the monsoon would bring its toll.

Anil dug through the hard clay in the high areas but often he heard the men say that the engineers were upset over the filling in of the low spots for it seemed that these

were the test points. But these things he did not understand; he only understood that he was building his road.

One day while Anil was resting, one of the engineers came along and stopped for awhile to chat with the men. He explained that the hard clay areas where they were working were not much worry but that if this excess clay they were moving to the low, marshy areas was not firmly packed, the monsoon would wash it all away. He said every precaution was being taken to see that each layer was small enough and sufficiently rolled to integrate the clay with the mud and that if anything occurred it would merely be because the men neglected the details in their eagerness to finish the road. They laughed at this, sharing the joke of their impatience with the engineer.

Then Anil returned to his work. Sushila came many times a day to take the baskets of clay away and, although it was improper to show such affection before the other villagers, Anil always greeted her with an adoring smile. But the shy Sushila modestly hid her head behind her basket and steadied her steps in spite of her racing heart.

It was not until after her job was complete and the engineers had dismissed most of the women workers that she told Anil she was expecting a baby.

He was so happy he could hardly make his fury at her having worked in that condition ring true. He warned her that the doctor had said that since she had had two unpleasant experiences the next time would be even more difficult. He vowed to double his energy so he could take care of his fields, do his work on the road and take care of her too.

That night they talked long about how they might one day take their son to the big city and how they would proudly travel down their road with him by their side.

Then, for the first time in their lives, they visualized sending their child over their road to Calcutta so he could be educated like the engineers and thus be able to build roads to other villages.

All such hopes and dreams filled their lives for the next few months and Sushila, although Anil would not allow her to work, each morning followed him to his place of duty on the road and made some excuse to be nearby in the evening as he left his work.

Some days it was necessary for Anil to tend to his land and on those days Sushila would go to the fields with him and they would talk incessantly of their life to come and the blessings that the road would bring them. Thus the weeks passed.

The day the road was finished some government officials came and held a special ceremony. The villagers who had worked on the road were praised in glowing terms by the officials as well as by the engineers who had worked with them. A great many things were said but little was of importance to the villagers except the future of Bhilpur.

Although Sushila stood with the women and Anil was with the men, their hearts were linked and when the officials or engineers referred to "the government's road," Sushila and Anil corrected the phrase in their hearts to "our road."

Soon bullock carts were crawling along the road and trucks, at first a novelty, soon became an everyday occurrence. A few flashy city cars passed and occasionally when one stopped in the village all the little children huddled around it. As Anil and Sushila gazed at these cars, they thought of the further wonders the big city must hold and they could hardly wait for the day when they would take their son to Calcutta.

Some of the villagers now made the journey to the big city and told strange tales on their return. They tried to describe the tall buildings, the trams, cinemas, colored lights on the streets. But their means of expression were limited and the impression in the listeners' minds was never clear. Anil and Sushila only listened and grew more impatient.

As the heat and humidity of the Bengal summer grew more and more oppressive the villagers looked for signs in the sky of the monsoon. And with the hope that the monsoon would relieve them, they also had anxiety over what it would do to the road.

The engineers made a few visits to Bhilpur and assured the people that the surface was firmly packed and that all should go well. But the villagers had such a possessive attitude toward the road that they could not help being worried.

Finally the monsoon broke but was not severe and the villagers were glad. Most of the huts leaked because the men and women had been too busy working on the road through the winter to bother about patching their damaged roofs. And even now their only worry was the road.

Days passed without any special significance and the coming of their child took second place to the glories of the road in the tiny hut of Anil and Sushila. Sushila had been busy making little garments out of old saris, patching things here and there, borrowing from women whose babies were older. Now she was ready for her child and their impatience made each day an eternity.

Late one evening when Sushila had just finished clearing the hut after their meal, Anil noticed that the monsoon had increased and there was a strong wind. Sushila put some

pots on the floor to catch the dripping water while Anil tried to tighten the door against the wind.

While they were working a neighbor called to Anil and asked him to go with them to see the road. A traveler had told someone the road was weakening at one point. Anil rushed out to join the men and they walked to the point of greatest danger, some two miles from Bhilpur.

To their untrained eyes there was no indication that anything was wrong but they decided to wait awhile and see if the road would be all right.

The wind and rain increased and the men tried to shelter themselves under a nearby tree but their curiosity wouldn't let them stay away from the weak point in the road. The water was rushing down from the high areas and welling up on the upper side of the road. The clay base formed a dam but the water was increasing and if there had been light the men could have seen that the angry waters were gnawing savagely at the mud under the clay dam.

At first they stayed under the tree and sent frequent patrols to see if all was well but as the wash of the water increased they couldn't stay away any longer but grouped together on the road, waiting for signs of danger.

Anil was sure every heart was as full of prayer as was his for every man in Bhilpur felt the same way about the road. He knew that each man's dream was centered on this stretch of roadway and that their lives depended on its holding out against the fury of the monsoon.

They milled about, talking to keep up their hopes, assuring each other that all would be well, vainly speculating on the fact that the monsoon might let up at any moment.

When it finally came they hardly knew it until it was all over. The ground simply crumbled under them. They were all thrown into the released wake of the lake of water and they tumbled down the marshland like the clumps of clay from the road, being bruised by them, frightened by them but mixed with them as had been their dreams and hopes throughout the winter months.

No one was seriously injured and for that alone they should have been grateful for it was a horrible experience. But no man was grateful, for what pleasure would life hold for them now that their road—and their dreams—had washed away?

It had taken them more than an hour to save themselves from the rushing torrent of water and clay and to once again assemble on the edge of the broken strip. By then the dim rays of morning enabled the men to see the extent of the devastation. The road was completely washed out for a long way and, more serious, to a great depth. It meant they were shut off again from the big road which led to the city, that they were almost back where they started.

Some of the men stayed on but Anil didn't want to look at it any more. It was like looking at the bloody stump of one's own freshly amputated arm. It made him sick and sad and he wanted to turn his back on the road and everything it had promised him. He turned toward home.

The monsoon had quietened and its slow drizzle mingled with the tears that finally found their way down Anil's sunken cheeks. He tried to fight them back but it was more useless than trying to fight back the terror of the storm the night before. He finally gave in as his body

had given in to the crumbling road. The tears flowed freely into the monsoon-filled air.

By the time Anil reached the outskirts of the village the light of a dismal monsoon day bathed the miserable huts and the villagers were setting about their work, unmindful of the sadness they had in store. Anil talked to no one. He couldn't tell anyone until he had seen Sushila.

But how could he tell her? Should he ruin all her dreams at this dangerous time? She was the one who had spurred him on with her hopes, her plans, her imagination. If he told her now perhaps things would not go well with her, perhaps her happiness and the little strength she had regained during the months of hope would disappear.

But if he didn't tell her she would soon learn, for once word reached the village it would be the one consuming thought. He couldn't bear to have someone else tell her. No, it was his responsibility and he would have to be very gentle with her.

He walked dolefully down the tiny lane to his hut, dragging each step out, remembering the way he had hurried home from work during the winter.

Just as he started to pull the door open, the midwife slipped through the small opening and, putting her hand on Anil's arm, said, "Don't go in just yet. I want to talk to you."

The road and all its implications vanished from Anil's mind as he stared at the anguish written on the old woman's face.

"Anil," she faltered, "last night something happened...."



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