

Long-Forgotten, Far-off Things

By Chanan Singh B.A.

Tap.....Tap.....Tap.

I heard this as if in a mist and tossed and turned and twisted in my bed and bolstered up my pillow. It was the soporific early morning of the Punjab dog days, and sleep laid his heavy hand on me again.

Bang.....Bang.....Bang.

I was startled out of my sleep. Still on the borders of Land of Nod, I wobbled in the direction of the door.

‘You, lazy bones, still in bed? The cuckoo calls, the cloud calls, and oh, the call of the clover.’

Bare-foot and with nothing for my head-gear, I streamed downstairs and shot after Manhar in the direction of our mango plantation, where we reached after trampling under foot many a dew-drop pearl glistening on maize-leaf emerald; and started on our hunt for the simple bird that thinks two notes a song! Not a tree that we did not ransack, but the sight of the songster proved to be inviolable though its song permeated the whole of the atmosphere. Thus thwarted in our efforts to satisfy the yearning of our souls, we like a tyro on the path of mysticism, fell down to earth broken-winged; we were attracted by the little orbs, all fire and gold, which shown like daylight stars against the black background of luxuriant green foliage.

Like a squirrel, I scrambled up a tree and started voraciously to feast myself on the lush mangoes. Manhar, who had never learnt how to shoot into the space, stood on the ground, beseeching me to shake a branch; but every entreaty of his brought to the ground the stone and the rind of another mango that I had eaten. This incensed him and he threatened to break away with me. I shook a branch; and Manhar, like a greyhound falling on a rabbit, made a dash for the mangoes that fell to the ground thick and fast.

After we had our fill of mangoes, we heard the distant bleat of the goats and the shepherd playing a pathetic tune on his flageolet, which was ravishing. We made a dash in the direction from which the tune came. When we had reached a dip thick with brambles, briars and rushes, we saw a sandy young man with a weather-beaten face, squatting in the shade of an acacia tree, with his goats all round him nibbling at the bushes. Seeing us, he struck up a melancholy song describing Ranjah’s chagrin when he heard that Hir, his sweetheart, had been gone away in marriage to another man. Our hearts melted and tears welled up in our eyes.

Soon clouds began to bank up in the northern sky and they spread and thickened till they were like a formidable host charging the sky. There was elemental sighing and a storm burst. There was crashing and roaring as of the earth splitting. Lightning ran from one

end of the sky to the other, and the whole sky appeared to be ablaze. But this did not daunt us. We stood close to the trunk of a huge banyan tree, down which water came rushing like a torrent.

Towards eventide, the storm died down and St. Swinthin took pity on the two tiny tots, all bedraggled and knocked into a cocked hat by the blinding rain. Soaked to the skin, we wended our way home.

Mother was furious to see me in this condition, but the lamb-like look on my face softened her heart and she ran to embrace me. As soon as her warm lips touched my cheek, I found myself cooped up in a small room in the top storey of a mammoth heap of stone and cement, in the centre of Nairobi.