MOTHER'S CHRONICLES

BOOK TWO

MIRRA THE ARTIST

SUJATA NAHAR

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MIRRA THE ARTIST

by

Sujata Nahar

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To pull her out of that tomb
was somehow our ambition.

Sujata – Satprem

April 30, 1984

A Word With You, Please!

Greetings, friends! It is a pleasure to have you join me for another stretch of Mother's road.

I imagine we have already met and you know me. But just in case this is our first meeting, let me say that I am now an 'elderberry' lady, as a friend of mine wants me known, with a score of sixty runs. Yet I was only nine when I first saw Sri Aurobindo and Mother.

And I was but four years old when my father P.S. Nahar took his family to Santiniketan, the educational establishment of the Poet Tagore.

The Nahars' acquaintance with the Tagores was of long standing. My grandfather Puran Chand Nahar was one among the train-load of people who went from Calcutta to Santiniketan in November 1913 to felicitate the Poet on his being awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.

My father, Prithwisingh, was a very fine sitarist. He was equally conversant with both Indian and European music. But it was his literary talents and appreciation of art that brought him closer to the Tagores and on more intimate terms with them. He was in the group of young talented writers of *Sabuj Patra*, a magazine which had very close links with the Tagores.

From the end of 1929 up to the end of 1934 we spent our impressionable ages surrounded by trees. The *Nichu Bangla* area, where we lived, was like a big orchard with just a few small houses dotted here and there. The houses had neither

electricity nor tap water. But who cared! Petromax and hurricane lanterns lighted the houses. A well provided water. Everyone was welcome to draw the water he needed. Even I insisted on drawing water for my bath—that is, I tipped the tiny bucket over my head—for I must do as my brothers did!

What wonderful times we had! So many pictures were taken by a child's eye for the album of her adulthood. Always the shutter was clicked by a surprise or a wonder. Like walking along with Father on the narrow earthen ridges between paddy fields, my small hand grasped firmly in his strong one. I can almost smell the refreshing odour of ripening paddy, see whole fields dappled by the sun's golden light and swaying in waves as the breeze ran gently over them. At the end of the road was C.F. Andrews whom Father was going to meet.

We were a happy family. I don't remember even one heated argument between Father and Mother! We did have our ears tweaked by Father, for none among his brood was goody-goody. So there we were. Father, mother, the five elder brothers, me and my young sister who had not yet learned to speak. Suprabha, our youngest sister, was born about a year later.

My brothers—Dhir, Bir, Noren and Nirmal—joined the school as students. Abhay, the youngest, ran wild. Agile as a monkey, he was always on the topmost branches of mango trees or guava trees, or . . . or chasing squirrels. He also made friends with the *Santals*, the local inhabitants. He went to their houses, which were always spick and span, and drank the fresh palm-juice the tribals had collected. Later, when he was old enough, he too went to school.

As was the prevailing custom, exactly at the age of five

I was initiated to the world of learning by writing the first letters of the Sanskrit alphabet. It was my father who taught me Bengali. Very soon I could read fluently. Then, instead of reading himself the Indian epics, as he used to do, he began asking me to read the books aloud to him. I never went to any school.

After our mother died in 1932, my father often went travelling. So as soon as I was seven, he put me in the Art section, the *Kalabhavan*. Acharya Nandalal Bose was its Principal.

Art and culture were not abstract ideas in Santiniketan in those days; their refinement—beauty in daily living—became ingrained in us. A clean living, clean thoughts and a clean body were an essential part of life. Good health. Cleanliness.

That is why when I first saw the high cleanliness that was the Ashram's norm under Mother's care, I liked it very much. And I was charmed by the simple elegance of those houses all washed in pearl-grey.

Enough of introductions.

Quickly on the track of Mirra.

Mirra's tracks will yield us a collection of clues to Mother.

Prologue

The Fish.

Manu, the Father of men, opened his eyes and saw the little Fish. It was being chased by a very big fish.

A faint sound had stirred Manu's deep meditation. It was the cry for help of the little Fish.

Manu took the tiny little Fish in his palms and put it in a small pot.

To Manu's astonishment, the next day, the little Fish had grown too big for the little pot. So he put it in a small pond.

To Manu's amazement, the Fish grew too large for the small pond.

Manu put the Fish in a great big lake. The Fish grew bigger than the big lake.

Manu put it in the Ganges. The Fish outgrew the Ganges.

So finally, Manu took the Fish to the Ocean.

The Fish then told Manu that *Pralaya*, the Deluge, was imminent; that he should get a boat ready with the seeds of all things, and take the seven great Rishis, *saptarshi*, with him.

In seven days the Fish returned. It was bigger than ever and had grown a horn on its head. A rope attached to the boat was tied to its horn. And the great Fish towed

the boat and all in it through the tumultuous waters of the Flood.

Indian tradition considers this Fish as the first avatar or incarnation of Vishnu.

Mirra was a Piscean.

She had this same characteristic trait of always growing bigger than her milieu.

1

"I Knew a Painter"

Thus Mirra Alfassa and Henri Morisset were married on October 13, 1897.

They went to live at N°15 Rue Lemercier.

A different life began for Mirra.

Not only the life of a housewife, but the life of an artist as well. Mirra plunged into the world of art and artists. For ten years she was to know this life intimately.

Once, in 1951, someone asked Mother why modern art was so ugly. In reply, Mother, in her inimitable way, told us the following story.

"I knew a painter who was a student of Gustave Moreau's." Gustave Moreau (1826-98) had his first success in the Salon of 1864; he, Puvis de Chavanne and Redon are considered as the principal exponents of Symbolism in painting.

Puvis de Chavannes' (1824-98) style was marked

by a classical serenity and balance; it flowered in his numerous oil paintings. His mural paintings were distinguished for their harmony of composition and sober colours. Interestingly, at the Congress of the History of Religion held in Paris in August 1900, when Swami Vivekananda gave his lecture in the Sorbonne's great amphitheatre, he had as backdrop *The Sacred Grove*, a mural by this artist. The painting had received high praise from Mother.

Matisse, the leader of the 'Fauve' group, Marquet, Rouault, Desvallière were some of the students in Moreau's studio. Redon, Dali and a few others were greatly influenced by Gustave Moreau.

Mother said: "I knew a painter who was a student of Gustave Moreau's, truly he was a very good artist, he knew perfectly well his technique, but then ... he went hungry, he did not know how to make both ends meet, and he lamented. One day, a friend, wishing to help him, sent him an art dealer. When the dealer entered his studio, the poor man said to himself, 'Here's my chance, at last,' and showed him the best of his works. The art dealer pulled a long face. He looked about, he prowled about, and began to

rummage in every corner, when he suddenly found. . . . Ah! I must explain to you," sighed Mother; for most of us there were such ignoramuses that Mother had to go into the details of every subject to give us a glimmer of understanding. So then Mother explained that an artist after his day's work has a mixture of colours left over on his palette. As these colours cannot be used the next day, for they get dry, the artist scrapes off all these colours with a spatula and plasters them on a canvas. As a good many colours are all mixed up, the picture that emerges is most unexpected. Mother took up her story once more. "In one corner stood such a canvas, on which the artist used to put his palette-scrapings. The dealer suddenly comes across it and cries out, 'Here! You are gifted, my friend, this is a miracle, it is this that must be shown! Look at this richness of hues, this variety of forms, and what an imagination!' The poor hungry man said timidly, 'But, Mister, these are my palette-scrapings!' And the art dealer came down upon him, 'Silly man, you shouldn't speak so!' And he added, 'Give it to me, I take it upon myself to sell it. Give me as many as you wish—ten, twenty, thirty a month—I'll sell them all and

make a name for you.' Well, as I was saying, his stomach was clamouring; he wasn't happy, but said, 'All right, take it, I'll see.' Then the landlord comes demanding the rent; the paint-man comes demanding payment for the previous unpaid bill; the purse is as empty as can be, so what is to be done? Well, he did not exactly make pictures with palette-scrapings but made something that gave imagination a wide scope—where the forms weren't too clear-cut, where the colours were all mixed up and brilliant and one didn't know too well what one was seeing—and as one didn't know what one was seeing, people who understood nothing of the matter would exclaim, 'How beautiful!' That's what he used to give to his art dealer. He never made a name for himself with his painting, which was really very fine—truly fine, he was a very fine artist—but he gained a world-wide reputation with those horrors! It happened right at the beginning of modern painting, way back at the Universal Exhibition of 1900. Were I to tell you his name you would all recognize him."

Mother then proceeded to give us a little background history of art. With Mother we got a rounded education.

"The story began with . . . the one who did still life and whose plates were never round . . . Cézanne! He started it off. . . ."

Mother pondered a little, then added: "It must be said that the art about the end of last century, the art of the Second Empire, was bad. This was the era of businessmen, specially the era of bankers, of financiers; and the taste, precisely, had gone down very low."

If we walk down the road of History and halt at the European 'Inn of the 1800s,' we can watch the road and see the march of Time. Shall we?

There goes Napoleon Bonaparte. From being the First Consul of the First Republic—established after the French Revolution of 1789 which abolished monarchy—he has crowned himself Emperor in 1804. Emperor Bonaparte's armies run all over Europe; and Napoleon sows everywhere the new ideas that had sprouted with the Revolution: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. But his astuteness is not limited to the battlefield only. He is a great codifier. He gives France its Common Law, its prefects (the chief administrative officers of French departments), its universities and Audit Office, founds the Bank of France, and so forth.

All these institutions stand right up to this day, testifying to the broad range of Napoleon's genius. We may say, in a word, that Napoleon is the bringer of Order to his country, the giver of Law.

Law paves the way for her sister, Science.

Science rides triumphant. "Horses of steam were bitted and the lightnings made a team to draw our chariots,"[1] to borrow from a poem of Sri Aurobindo's.

This is the age of Positivism. Science is cold denial. From her "searching gaze mysticism shrank out-mystified."[1]

> One dreamed and saw a gland write Hamlet . . .
> A committee of hormones on the Aegean's brink
> Composed the Iliad and the Odyssey.
> A thyroid, meditating almost nude
> Under the Bo-tree, saw the eternal Light . . .
> A brain by a disordered stomach driven
> Thundered through Europe, conquered, ruled and fell . . .
> Thus wagged on the surreal world, until
> A scientist played with atoms and blew out
> The universe before God had time to shout.[2]

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1. *A Vision of Science.*
2. *A Dream of Surreal Science.*

For the meantime Great Britain's star is on the ascendancy. The British spread the ideal of commercialism. Utilitarianism rules the waves.

In the wake of science's triumphant march comes a rapid industrialization. Pretty soon the merchant middle class amasses fortunes. And art, catering to the demand of the new industrial bourgeoisie, the nouveau riche which wants a status symbol, becomes "entirely commercial, obscure and ignorant from the beginning of the last century to its middle," as Mother told us one day in 1953. "It became very commercial and completely removed from the true sense of art."

In France it was during the Second Empire that important banks like Crédit Lyonnais and Société Générale were founded (1860s) and the telegraph began to function; new department stores such as the *Bon Marché* sprang up in Paris. The rise of Paris as a capital of luxury and fashion was seen to denote the Empire achievements. But the construction of the Suez Canal in 1869 by Ferdinand de Lesseps was actually the crowning glory of the Second Empire. However, it may not have been its luxury and fashion that had attracted Mira Ismalun to Paris. In all likelihood its attraction

lay elsewhere: Paris had become the cultural centre of Europe. This was celebrated by the Universal Exhibitions in 1867 and 1889, the year the Eiffel Tower was built, and Buffalo Bill came to Paris and little Mirra met her Red Indian friend.

Nevertheless, as the new captains of industry pressed on with their technical progress, the quickening pace of industrialization tore apart the balance between city and country. Uprooted people flocked into the towns. Industrial society created new working proletarian masses who stormed the barricades. The Franco-Prussian war in 1870 was followed by the Siege of Paris in which 36,000 people died of famine. On its heels came the Commune Uprisings of 1871, during which 30,000 people were executed.

By this time revolt was brewing among the writers and the artists against this age of intense bourgeoisie and utilitarianism. So now, Europe, with its resources depleted, looked to its art and literature to show the way.

In France, it was painters such as Corot, Millet and the Barbizon School who left the ravaged and overpopulated cities for the countryside. Landscape

painting took on a new role and the Impressionists set out to thoroughly explore the subject. Breaking through the opaque surface of things, they proclaimed the supremacy of light. Monet and Degas rid their pictures of any literary meaning, thus smashing the accepted convention that all art should have a strong narrative content. To the Impressionists it was not form or content that mattered, but light. Light that spans eternity.

It was with their first group show in Paris in 1874 that the great names of Degas, Monet, Pissaro, Renoir and Sisley became known to the French public.

Generally speaking, the mid-nineteenth century in France was itself an era of great change. Revolution was in the air.

While the artists were bringing about a revolution in artistic approach and technique, the writers and poets in their turn were revolutionizing literature. The first half of the nineteenth century was the era of Alexandre Dumas, of Victor Hugo and Flaubert; the second half was dominated by Guy de Maupassant, Jules Verne, the father of science fiction, Émile Zola, famed for his *I accuse* letter—to name but a few. They

enriched the French language so much that it became, in Sri Aurobindo's words, "the greatest store-house of fine prose among the world's languages." The poet Charles Baudelaire was followed by Stéphane Mallarmé who was the founder of a new trend of poetry, impressionist and symbolist, himself followed in varying degrees, and not by any means in the same way, by Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud, both of them poets of great fame.

A fresh spirit was abroad.

The very atmosphere was surcharged with a revolt against the old classical values—the legacy of the Renaissance and the Baroque.

As a matter of fact, Hugo, Baudelaire, Zola had all leapt to the defence of Manet when he was attacked from all sides for his revolutionary painting. Baudelaire's critical work *L'Art romantique* (1868) is considered the fountainhead of modern artistic sensibility. Zola had actually met Manet in 1866 and had immediately set about championing the Impressionist cause. In his novel *L'Œuvre*, one of the principal characters is an amalgam of Manet and Cézanne.

The First Impressionist Group Exhibition, held

on April 15, 1874, at the studio of the photographer Nadar, on the corner of the Boulevard des Capucines, was the first warning blow against the establishment. There were thirty exhibitors.

The battles the Impressionists fought in their time were the major battles of modern art—to break through the prejudices and assumptions of socially accepted art.

As Mother said, "The art of the Second Empire was bad. This lasted till about the end of the last century, round about 1875. Afterwards the reaction set in. Then there was an entire period which was most beautiful (I am not saying this just because I myself used to paint!), but all the artists I knew then were true artists, they were serious and did wonderful things. It was the era of the Impressionists; it was the era of Manet, it was a brilliant era, they did beautiful things."

Yes, they left us the marvellous, light-soaked shimmering visions of landscape that never seem to dim in their brilliance.

2

And India?

And India?

While France was undergoing those upheavals and exploding into light, was she still slumbering, our India?

No. A great awakening was taking place.

India was struggling to be free of all the bonds that shackled her: bonds self-woven by her past, bonds imposed from outside by her foreign rulers. These bonds were caused by "a great decline which came to a head in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries," wrote Sri Aurobindo.[1] "Undoubtedly there was a period, a brief but very disastrous period of the dwindling of that great fire of life, even a moment of incipient

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1. The words of Sri Aurobindo in this chapter are to be found in *The Renaissance in India* and *The Significance of Indian Art*, unless otherwise mentioned.

disintegration, marked politically by the anarchy which gave European adventure its chance, inwardly by an increasing torpor of the creative spirit in religion and art—science and philosophy and intellectual knowledge had long been dead or petrified into a mere scholastic Punditism—all pointing to a nadir of setting energy, the evening-time from which, according to the Indian idea of the cycles, a new age has to start."

Inherent in the reawakening was this promise of a new age.

Bengal, in the person of *Ramakrishna Paramahansa* (1833-86), rediscovered the spiritual fountain of India. This discovery was taken to the West by his disciple *Swami Vivekananda* (1862-1902).

The newly emancipated Indian mind looked upon its past with a clear and discerning eye and saw that the past of India was not wholly or solely its spirituality. For, although it was the master key of the Indian mind, yet ancient India knew that "spirituality does not flourish on earth in the void, even as our mountain-tops do not rise like those of an enchantment of dream out of the clouds without a base."

It may not be amiss here to cast a glance at India's past.

Thanks to archaeologists, we know that some five thousand years ago India was trading the fine superfluity of her wealth, her gold and copper for example, for ornaments of lapis lazuli and other items from Akkad, the pre-Chaldean Semitic kingdom. The sands of Mesopotamia have revealed traces of Harappan seals with the figure of zebu and Indus Valley script. Dilmun (Bahrain Island) was most probably the main port of call for the Indian ships that crossed the seas.

Recent marine archaeological research off the Saurashtra coast in Gujarat and radiocarbon dating have fixed the date as 1400 B.C. when Dwaraka of Sri Krishna was submerged by the rising sea. Thus confirming the facts as given in the epic *Mahabharata.*[1]

The Maurya empire (approx. 322-182 B.C.) brings us into historical period. Takshila and Benares were

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1. A team of archeologists, led by Dr S.R. Rao, began in 1979 off- and on-shore explorations which have revealed that Dwaraka was indeed a major port specialising in overseas trade, metal, shell and other crafts, defence architecture, etc., and served as a gateway to the Indian subcontinent. This discovery may well one day mean to the *Mahabharata* what Schliemann's discovery of ancient Troy meant to the *Iliad.*

renowned international universities, where students came from far-flung countries like China. The Maurya emperors took great care to spread learning among their subjects. The cities were well-planned and beautiful. The governing system was minutely worked out: farmers paid tax at the rate of one quarter or one sixth of the grains produced, depending on the quality of the soil and its yield.

The Gupta empire (end of the third to the sixth century A.D.) had cultural and commercial relations with far eastern countries like Java, Sumatra, Cambodia. It was during the Gupta period that everywhere in India, as on her soil, so in her works, there was a teeming of a superabundant energy of life. She created lavishly, with an inexhaustible many-sidedness, sciences and arts and poems and all kinds of monuments and public works, systems of politics and administration, trades, industries, fine crafts—the list is endless and in each item there was a plethora of activity.

One thing is certain. The ideal of the Indian mind was not charity; it believed in human dignity. "It was the first to assert a divinity in the people and could

cry to the monarch at the height of his power, 'O king, what art thou but the head servant of the demos?' "

Very recent excavations on the bank of the Noyyal river in Tamil Nadu in South India have revealed the existence of a flourishing cottage industrial centre for making coral, shell, onyx, jasper, beryl, moonstone, transparent quartz beads and bangle shells, dating back to the second century B.C. More important still is the discovery of what appears to be the earliest iron foundry for melting iron from iron ore along with precision instruments used by the artisans. Archaeologists of various countries had already narrowed down to South India the source of supply of innumerable iron pieces found by them from many excavation sites spread over Egypt and other Mediterranean countries and dating from the beginning of the Christian era.

There were many powerful dynasties in the Dravidian land, whose reign spanned centuries. The Cholas ruled from 400 B.C. to A.D. 1400. During the reign of Rajendra (1012-44), the Cholas with their formidable naval flotilla extended their empire over Sri Lanka and the Nicobar Islands, as well as many

parts of modern Indonesia and Malaysia. The Cholas established the administrative system of elected representatives to govern the land. This was quite an elaborate system.

Mind you, these kings and emperors were not only great fighters and conquerors, they were builders too; they were not only statesmen and administrators of great ability, they were also poets and writers of standing.

South of the Vindhya range, along the banks of the Godavari and Cauvery, the Krishna and Tungabhadra, many powerful dynasties have left their mark on our land: the Satabahanas, Pallavas, Pandyas, Badami Chalukyas, Cheras of Kerala and others. They are our bridge to the past.

But although some of us may have an inaccurate or incomplete idea of India's past and of the integral meaning of its civilization and the spirit that animated it, most of us have forgotten or are completely unaware of what this great past was.

Roughly speaking, there were three great ages of India's greatness: the spiritual, the intellectual and the classical.

In Sri Aurobindo's words: "The first age of India's greatness was a spiritual age when she sought passionately for the truth of existence through the intuitive mind and through an inner experience and interpretation both of the psychic and the physical existence." The age of the Rishis. "The stamp put on her by that beginning she has never lost, but rather always enriched it with fresh spiritual experience and discovery at each step of the national life. Even in her hour of decline it was the one thing she could never lose.

"The second long epoch of India's greatness was an age of the intellect, the ethical sense, the dynamic will in action enlightened to formulate and govern life in the lustre of spiritual truth. . . . After the Veda and Upanishads, the heroic centuries of action and social formation, typal construction and thought and philosophy, when the outward forms of Indian life and culture were fixed in their large lines and even their later developments were being determined in the seed.

"The great classical age of Sanskrit culture was the flowering of this intellectuality into curiosity of detail in the refinements of scholarship, science, art,

literature, politics, sociology, mundane life."

In actual fact, there is no historical parallel for such an intellectual labour and activity before the invention of printing and the facilities of modern science; yet all that mass of research and production and curiosity of detail was accomplished without these facilities and with no better record than the memory and for an aid the perishable palm-leaf.

"But the old spirituality reigned behind all this mental and all this vital activity, and its later period, the post-classical, saw a lifting up of the whole lower life and an impressing upon it of the values of the spirit."

It was certainly this 'old spirituality,' which has always maintained itself even in the decline of the national vitality, that saved India at every critical moment of her destiny. Any other nation under the same pressure would have long ago perished soul and body.

Then came her evening of decline. India's mind and life were petrified in the relics of the forms which a great intellectual past had created. This is a strange fact of life that if we but reduce our ideal to a system it at once begins to fail.

"Spirituality remains but burns no longer with the large and clear flame of knowledge of former times, but in intense jets and in a dispersed action which replaces the old magnificent synthesis and in which certain spiritual truths are emphasised to the neglect of others."

But what brought on her decline?

Sri Aurobindo goes on to explain: "This diminution amounts to a certain failure of the great endeavour which is the whole meaning of Indian culture, a falling short in the progress towards the perfect spiritualisation of the mind and the life. The beginnings were superlative, the developments were great, but at a certain point where progress, adaptation, a new flowering should have come in, the old civilisation stopped short, partly drew back, partly lost its way. The essential no doubt remained and still remains in the heart of the race and not only in its habits and memories; but in its action it was covered up in a great smoke of confusion."

It was at this moment of confusion that the European wave swept over India.

India's creative spirit which lay in torpor felt the

pressure of a superimposed European culture. And the reawakening became necessary. A giant Shakti awakened into a new world.

For long the eyes were not clear. For long the Indian mind was misled by an alien education, view and influence. But now the new mind of India was returning to a sound and true idea of its past and future.

The reawakened eye, clear at last, looking at the past of India, was struck by "her stupendous vitality, her inexhaustible power of life and joy of life, her almost inimaginable prolific creativeness."

This vitality was much in evidence in the renascent India of the latter half of the last century. There was not a single walk of life which did not have its giver of a new direction. Given the situation that prevailed in the country, most of these Pathfinders were reformers. Social reformer, religious reformer, scientist, educationist, industrialist and journalist, poet and artist, writer and politician ... inexhaustible was India's power of life. Each Renovator was a man of various gifts, containing in himself India's own diversity, as it were.

As many parts of the country send their streams to mingle with Ganga, the great river of India, and enrich it, so did now every corner of the country send forth its streams to mingle with the mainstream of India's life. Let us pick out a few at random.

From Bengal, where Ganga widens to plunge into the ocean's heart after her long trek, came:

– *Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar* (1820-91), the educationist. He was the great social reformer whose tireless effort made the Widow Marriage Act of 1856 possible.
– *Keshav Chandra Sen* (1838-84) was a religious reformer. He founded the *Brahmo Samaj*.

It was Kathiawar (Gujarat), that land of rocks and hills, whose fair and robust humanity hears the voice and the puissance of the sea that flings itself upon those coasts and, hearing, becomes instinct with a fresh and primal vigour, that gave birth to the puissant renovator and new-creator,

– *Dayananda Saraswati* (1827-83). In the words of Sri Aurobindo, "He brought back an old Aryan element into the national character. He seized on the Veda as India's Rock of Ages and had the daring conception to build on it a whole education of youth, a whole manhood and

a whole nationhood." Sri Aurobindo is referring to the *Arya Samaj* founded by Dayananda.

The West coast, lapped by the Arabian Sea, is the home of the Parsees. Hounded out by the Muslim conquerors from their age-old homeland in Persia, these followers of Zarathustra had taken refuge on the hospitable shores of India. It was in the middle of the seventh century that they first landed in Diu, an islet in Gujarat, where its king, Jayadeva, made them feel at home. The Parsee community's contribution to the nation is considerable.

- *Sir Jamsetji N. Tata* (1839-1904) is perhaps the best known figure among his Parsee brethren of the time. As an industrialist he set standards and traditions far in advance of his days when, in 1869, he laid the first foundation stone of the present Tata industrial empire, Tata & Sons. It is his grandson, Jehangir Ratan Dadabhai Tata (J.R.D. – 1904), a legendary figure of our time, who has made the Tatas what they are today.
- *Feroz Shah Mehta* (1845-1915) was one of the founding fathers of the Indian National Congress.
- *Dadabhai Naoroji* (1825-1917) began his career as an educationist but later turned to politics. He was the first Indian to be elected a member of the British Parliament.

From the land of Shivaji came the Maharashtrians. "The Maratha race, as their soil and their history have made them, are a rugged, strong and sturdy people, democratic in their every fibre, keenly intelligent and practical to the very marrow, following in ideas, even in poetry, philosophy and religion the drive towards life and action, capable of great fervour, feeling and enthusiasm, like all Indian peoples, but not emotional idealists . . . in life simple, hardy and frugal, in their temperament courageous, pugnacious, full of spirit, yet with a tact in dealing with hard facts and circumventing obstacles, shrewd yet aggressive diplomats, born politicians, born fighters."

– *Mahadev Govind Ranade* (1852-1904) was an economist, a reformer and an erudite scholar. He gave a new orientation to the country's reform movement. His wife, *Ramabai Ranade* (1862-1924) was a pioneer in promoting female education and social service by women.

– *Bal Gangadhar Tilak* (1857-1920) embodied in himself, with a singular and eminent completeness, the spirit of the Maratha race. Tilak did not love the do-nothingness of the Congress and, when still an isolated leader of a handful of enthusiasts in a corner of the country, he set out to do what the Congress would not do—a national

agitation in the country to make the Congress movement a living and acting force. He was the leader of the 'extremist' group at Surat in 1907 when the first split occured in the National Congress. He was "one of the two or three leaders of the Indian people who were in their eyes the incarnations of the national endeavour and the God-given captains of the national aspiration." He was the Lokamanya Tilak. A politician, a lawyer, an educationist, a social reformer, a journalist and an erudite writer—Tilak was all this and more.

The land of the five rivers sent:

– *Lala Lajpat Rai* (1868-1928), the fiery politician. He was called the Lion of Punjab.

From Bengal, which produced so many idealists, came:

– *Bipin Chandra Pal* (1858-1932), the great orator and journalist who worked with Sri Aurobindo. Along with Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Lala Lajpat Rai, Bipin Pal formed the famous trinity of Indian politics, Lal-Bal-Pal.

Uttar Pradesh (the erstwhile United Provinces), where the daughters of the Himalayas come dancing down and first touch the plains of India, is a land replete with ancient lore. Here are Hardwar and Rishikesh, Kedarnath and Badrinath where pilgrims

flock. Here are the age-old towns that stand dreaming of the past glory: Ayodhya of Rama of the Raghus, Mathura and Vrindaban of Krishna, Sarnath of Buddha, Allahabad where Ganga the daughter of Himavan meets Yamuna the daughter of the Sun, Agra with its Tajmahal like a teardrop on the cheeks of Time. And here lies its brightest jewel, Benares, where Shiva the Godhead reigns as Vishwanath, the Lord of the Universe.

This land gave us:

- *Pandit Madan Mohan Malavya* (1861-1946). He established the Benares Hindu University (1915). An advocate, a scholar, a journalist, he was also a politician of all-India calibre.
- *Motilal Nehru* (1861-1931), who, as one of the foremost lawyers in India, had a fabulous earning and whose luxurious life style was a byword, earned the respect of his countrymen by sacrificing everything at the altar of patriotism. He and his wife and their three children were repeatedly imprisoned by the British, including his granddaughter Indira Gandhi. Three generations participating in a country's freedom movement is a rare event in history.

Bengal in India, like France in Europe, is the

land of clear and keen intellect. From there came:

- *Sir Asutosh Mukherjee* (1864-1924). Vice-Chancellor of the Calcutta University for four consecutive terms, then Chief Justice of the Calcutta High Court, he wrote a strongly worded letter to Lord Litton, then Viceroy of India (1876-80), vehemently protesting against the Vernacular Press Act of 1878 passed to muzzle the Indian vernacular newspapers' criticism of the British rulers in handling the famine that had then broken out. For this letter he came to be known as the Tiger of Bengal. His able son, *Shyama Prasad* (1901-53), was also an educationist (it was him that Mother invited as the Chief Guest-cum-Speaker when she founded the Ashram's Centre of Education in 1951); but he soon turned into a fearless, frank-spoken politician of all-India calibre. In 1953, he died in prison in Kashmir.
- *Sir Jagadish Chandra Bose* (1864-1937), the internationally renowned physicist and plant physiologist. He proved scientifically to the Western world that plants too have life. A fact rooted in the Indian mind.
- *Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy* (1861-1944). That renowned chemist and science teacher, who wrote primary science textbooks in Bengali and who foresaw the role of science in the social and economic fields, gave practical shape to his patriotic sentiments by starting his company *The Bengal Chemical & Pharmaceutical Works* in 1893. His sympathies were with those who followed the cult of the

bomb against the British rulers.

– *Romesh Chandra Dutt* (1848-1909), that many-sided Bengali, is perhaps best remembered for his English renderings of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, which familiarized the average readers in England with the stories of these epics.

– *Rakhaldas Banerjee* (1886-1930), the renowned numismatist and archaeologist. It was he who discovered the ancient Indus Valley civilization while engaged in excavation work in Mohenjodaro in 1922.

At the confluence of Ganga and Sone stands Patna, the capital of Bihar. This is the Pataliputra of yore. This was the capital of the Maurya empire whose founder Chandragupta (reign: 322 to 298 B.C.) left everything at the height of his power, went down south to Sravanabelgola (Karnataka), and became a Jain monk. His grandson Asoka was the emperor who proclaimed, "All men are my children." The boundaries of the Maurya empire stretched from the river Brahmaputra to the east to the Arabian Sea to the west, and included Kabul, Kandahar, Herat, Kashmir, as well as some portions of Nepal. Just as his forefathers, through their colonies, had spread India's arts and epics and creeds in the Archipelago (the Aegean

Sea), so now the message of Buddha which Asoka sent conquered China and Japan and spread westward as far as Palestine and Alexandria, and the figures of the Upanishads and the sayings of the Buddhists were re-echoed on the lips of Christ.

Pataliputra has played an important role in the history of ancient India. And Guru Govind Singh, the tenth guru of the Sikhs, was born there in 1669. Fittingly enough then,

> – *Dr Rajendra Prasad* (1884-1963), the first President of independent India, hailed from there. He was an eminent advocate, a scholar of no mean repute as well as an essayist.

The South, which was not repeatedly mauled by invaders as was India's North, has conserved for us all its magnificent temples, its sculpture in stone and its bronzes. The great temples of the South of India are the signs, the architectural self-expression of an ancient spiritual and religious culture. "Indian temple, to whatever godhead it may be built, is in its inmost reality an altar raised to the divine Self, a house of the Cosmic Spirit, an appeal and aspiration to the Infinite." Take the stone carvings of the Chalukya

period, for instance, with its turn towards grace and beauty and rapture and an outburst of lyric ecstasy and movement. Or what of the marvellous genius and skill in the treatment of the cosmic movement and delight of the dance of Shiva? India's south has preserved for the whole of mankind an assured history of two millenia of accomplished sculptural creation, which is a rare and significant fact in the life of a people. This greatness and continuity of Indian sculpture is due to the "close connection between the religious and philosophical and the aesthetic mind of the people." From such a land came:

- *Subramaniam Bharati* (1882-1921), the great Tamil poet, whose mind was familiar with eternal things, who was capable of cosmic vision. He lit a fire of love for the Motherland in the Dravidian heart.
- *Sir C. V. Raman* (1888-1970) was awarded the Nobel Prize for physics in 1930. His discovery is known as the Raman effect: the appearance of additional lines in the spectrum of light when scattered by the molecules of a substance.

Strictly speaking, Bengal not only epitomized the renascent India but was in the vanguard of the national movement. And for sheer 'prolific activity' she led the whole of India. This was very much visible in the fields

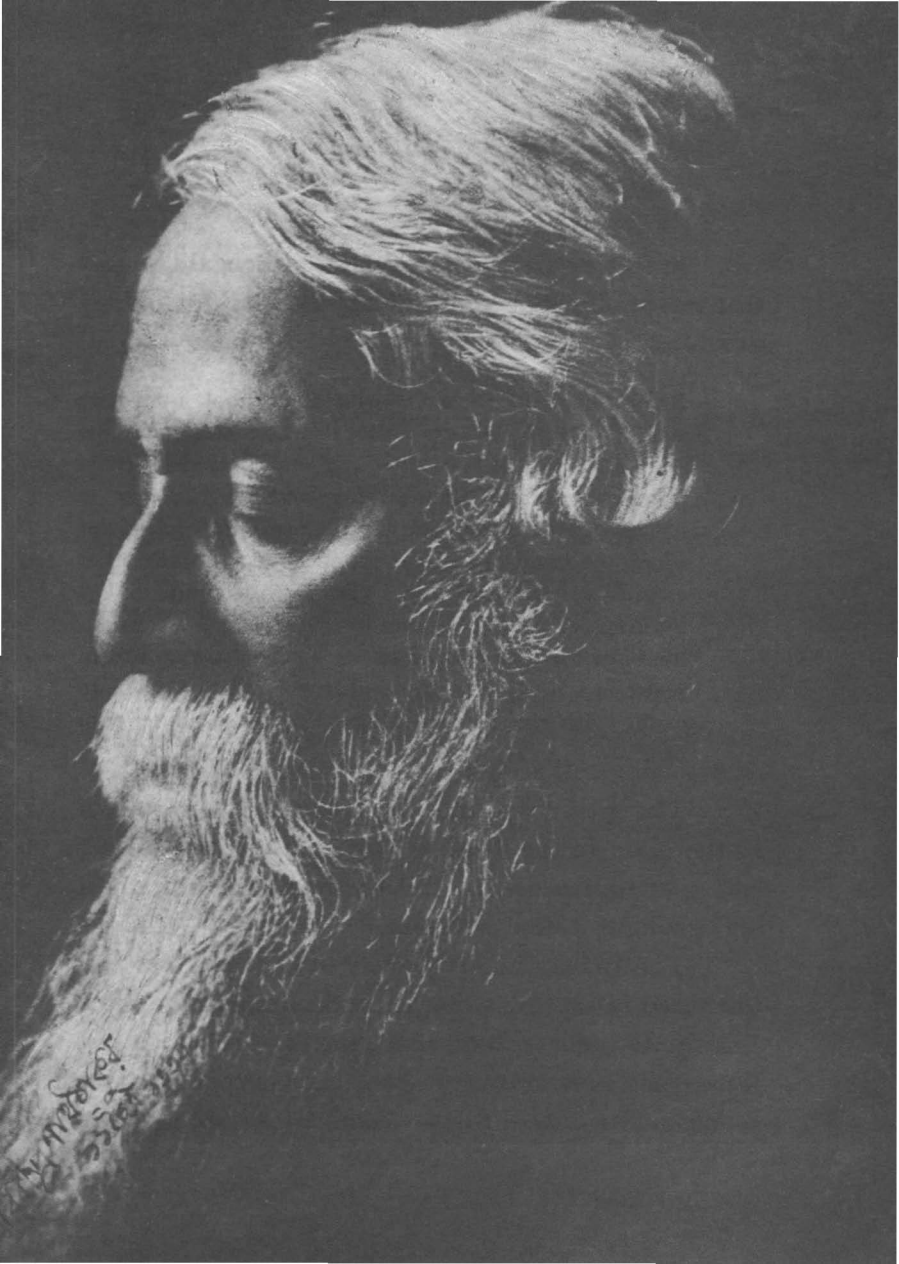
of politics (of which later), and art and literature. In fact it was from the early nineteenth century that Calcutta, the capital of British India, became the centre of the new-found culture of the country.

– *Bankim Chandra Chatterjee*[1] (1838-98), the first graduate of Calcutta University, remoulded the Bengali language. "It was Bankim's first great service to India that he gave the race which stood in its vanguard such a perfect and satisfying medium of expression." Thus commented Sri Aurobindo in 1907. Bankim's second great service to the country was that he pointed out to it the way of salvation. "He, first of our great publicists, understood the hollowness and inutility of the method of political agitation which prevailed in his time.... He bade us leave the canine method of agitation for the leonine. The Mother of his vision held trenchant steel in her twice seventy million hands and not the bowl of the mendicant." He was the Rishi, the Seer. "The third and supreme service of Bankim to the nation was that he gave us the vision of our Mother." He was the political guru who gave the mantra which became the national anthem of united India. "In a sudden moment of awakening from long delusions the people of Bengal

1. Sri Aurobindo's comments on Dayananda, Tilak, Ranade and Bankim are from his *Bankim-Tilak-Dayananda*.

looked round for the truth and in a fated moment somebody sang *Bande Mataram*. The mantra had been given and in a single day a whole people had been converted to the religion of patriotism. The Mother had revealed herself."

- *Sarala Debi Chowdhurani* (1873-1945). It was she who sang *Bande Mataram* 'in a fated moment.' She was a poetess and ably edited *Bharati*, a magazine run by the Tagores. This formidable lady had close links with India's revolutionary activities and knew well Barindra Kumar Ghose, Sri Aurobindo's brother.
- *Upendra Kishore Roy Chowdhuri* (1863-1915) brought about a revolution in children's literature. The versatile *Satyajit Ray* (1921), the world-renowned film-maker, is his grandson. The members of this illustrious family have greatly contributed to the Bengali literary and cultural life.
- *Dwijendra Lal Roy* (1863-1913), a magistrate who used his pen to write historical dramas and satirical songs. His son *Dilip Kumar Roy* (1897-1980) was a novelist and a renowned musician. Warm, refined and a gentleman, his extensive correspondence with Sri Aurobindo stands testimony to their relationship.
- *Sarat Chandra Chatterjee* (1876-1938), was an artist with words. The themes in his novels dealt with the social conditions of his times. He shone like the full moon in the sky of Bengali literature.



In fact a galaxy of writers graced Bengal's literary firmament. But outshining them all, like the midday sun, was:

– *Rabindranath Tagore* (1861-1941). He took up where Bankim left off. He was a poet in whom there was "the double seeking of the truth and reality of the eternal self and spirit in man and things and the insistence on life. He gave us more of this discovery and fusion for which the mind of the age was in quest than any other creative writer of the time." Thus Sri Aurobindo in *The Future Poetry*. And he sums up, "His work is a constant music of the over-passing of the borders, a chant-filled realm in which the subtle sounds and lights of the truth of the spirit give new meanings to the finer subtleties of life."

The artists were not far behind. But we owe it in the main to the Tagores, who bathed in the well-spring of Indian culture, for the revival of Indian art and giving it a new direction.

The Industrial Art Society of Calcutta was first instituted in 1854 by a few art enthusiasts, Indian and British. It ran a school of Industrial Art which was later (between 1872 and 1876) converted into the Calcutta Art School (or Government Art School). In

its early years the School had developed on the lines of a British art school of the time. But soon the Indian artists discarded copying the Western style. Leaving the beaten track they cut out their own path. The leaders of this new direction were Rabindranath's nephews: Abanindranath Tagore (Aban Thakur, 1871-1951) and his elder brother Gaganendranath Tagore (1867-1938). It was the help of Ernest Benfield Havell, who was the Art School's Principal from 1896 to 1906 and who recognized that the whole basis of Indian artistic creation is directly spiritual and intuitive, that made this new thrust possible. Havell persuaded Aban Thakur to become the Art School's Vice-Principal; Gagan Thakur became its energetic General Secretary.

– *Ramananda Chatterjee's* (1876-1938) practical help in this field is inestimable. He founded the two monthlies *Prabasi* (Bengali) and *Modern Review* (in 1901). It is difficult to overestimate the role of these two magazines in putting across the new art and educating the public in it.

Sri Aurobindo had said, "Bengal art has found its way at once at the first step, by a sort of immediate intuition." And we can be grateful to the Tagores for it. Abanindranath's role in the rebirth of taste and

understanding and the release of creativity in the world of Indian art is uncontested. He had his roots deep and widespread in the mind of Bengal, of India, in the life and culture of her people. Aban Thakur's work and influence spread all over India directly as well as through his pupils and, if we may say so, his grand-pupils. From Lahore to Madras, from Dacca to Baroda, from Karachi to Calcutta, the new movement spread and developed in a diversity of ways.

As Sri Aurobindo stated, "This art is a true creation and we may expect that the artistic mind of the rest of India will follow through the gates thus opened."

The artistic mind of India did follow through

the opened gates, leaving no room for doubt that in the sphere of creative art and culture the whole of India was once integrated into one unit through the influence of Abanindranath Tagore. It had become United India.

In all fairness, it must be said that utilitarianism was not the sole commodity exported by Britain. She spread the language of Shakespeare, of Shelley and Keats. True, the general run of the officers, who practised the oppressive policies of their government, left much to be desired. Yet many from the British Isles, in their individual capacities, greatly helped the people. A few are universally known, some others are less known, while still others have sunk into oblivion.

Sister Nivedita, the Irish disciple of Swami Vivekananda, and Justice John Woodroff, who made a deep study of Indian tantrism and wrote under the pen name of Arthur Avalon, tremendously encouraged Abanindranath. In this they were joined by the great Japanese artist Kakuzo Okakura, Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), the renowned Sinhalese art connoisseur and critic, and by Ordhendu Coomar Gangoly (1881-1974) who wrote illuminating articles on

'modern' Indian painting. Aban Thakur had supporters in his huge ancestral home, Jorasanko. He always acknowledged that his uncle Rabindranath was his chief mentor. He also shared to some extent his uncle's literary gift.

But it is indeed hard for us in this late twentieth century to realize the difficulties the pioneers of the time had to face, for India was as yet only vaguely awake to the truth of itself; the mass of Indian action was still proceeding under the impress of the European motive and method. Only in a few directions was there some clear light of self-knowledge. The new Indian art could be cited as a striking example. But here too the dominant theme was an all-absorbing passion for the Mother and her service. For, had not the Motherland revealed herself to the eye of the mind as something more than a stretch of earth or a mass of individuals? Had she not taken shape in a form of beauty that seized the hearts of her sons?

Indeed, the first decade of the twentieth century was a stirring time in India. Curzon's effort to divide Bengal in 1905—the State of Bengal then consisted of the present West Bengal, Bangladesh, Bihar,

Chota Nagpur and Orissa—inflamed the nationalistic sentiments of the people on a hitherto unprecedented scale and gave rise to the Swadeshi[1] movement. The Indian intelligentsia realized that unless they went back to their roots and discovered their cultural ethos, and faced their challenges against the background of their history, they would never be able to hold their own against the foreign rulers. To use the words of O.C. Gangoly, "Running like a thread through the varying forms of unrest with which India is tormented is a spirit of revolt against the denationalisation of a proud and sensitive people."

Revolt and revolution were in the air.

Naturally.

For it was the era of Sri Aurobindo.

1. Literally: indigenous. The Swadeshi movement encouraged indigenous goods and industries and the boycott of foreign goods.

3
Master-Mashai

Sri Aurobindo wrote: "The whole power of the Bengal artists springs from their deliberate choice of the spirit and hidden meaning in things rather than their form and surface meaning as the object to be expressed. It is intuitive and its forms are the very rhythm of its intuition; it leans over the finite to discover its suggestions of the infinite and inexpressible; it turns to outward life and nature to found upon it lines and colours and rhythms, and embodiments which will be significant of the other life and other nature than the physical which all that is merely outward conceals."

If there is one man who personified this 'power of the Bengal artists,' it is none other than Nandalal Bose.

Nandalal Bose (1882-1966) was Abanindranath's

first student. It was in 1905, that crucial year for India, that he joined the Art School and became a direct student of its Vice-Principal, Abanindranath Tagore. His classmates were great artists like Asit Kumar Haldar, who later became the Principal of the Lucknow Art School, and K. Venkatappa whose Nilgiri series captured on the canvas the bygone beauty of these hills. But Nandalal was the greatest. He found himself in the thick of the national awakening and bathed in the light of a new consciousness. The artist in him blossomed in this radiant atmosphere.

Persuaded by Sister Nivedita and Aban Thakur, he joined in 1909, along with three of his classmates, the team of Lady Harringham to assist her in copying the frescoes in the rock-cut retreats of Ajanta. Here was his first major exposure to ancient mural painting. Before him was a work with a warmth and beauty and glory of colour exceeding all that he had previously seen. Fired as he was to unearth the clues to an indigenous art language this lavish delight of beauty loomed as a whole lexicon. Immense were its range and its scale; joyous were its beautiful shapes and the coloured radiances of existence; and a certain calm strength which is founded

on the Spirit was a revelation of a subtle spiritual emotion in which the soul and the sense were at harmony. He was never to forget this experience.

In 1910-11, after completing his studies, he declined an offer to teach at the Government Art School, preferring to work with his guru at Jorasanko for a monthly stipend of sixty rupees. There he assisted Dr A.K. Coomaraswamy in cataloguing the collection of art and artefacts of the Tagores; also did some illustrations for a book jointly written by Coomaraswamy and Sister Nivedita; and in between he taught a few art classes in the Nivedita Girls' School. Later Nandalal was requested by his guru to take charge of the classes at the Indian Society of Oriental Art, founded in 1907. Finally, Rabindranath wrote to his nephew to spare Nandalal for Visva Bharati: "I had faith in Nandalal and we need him for the country. According to me, he alone can create the atmosphere for propagation of the new spirit of art that is so vital to the country as a whole.... I have no claim on him. I know you are his guru and he will do whatever you wish." So in 1920 Aban Thakur relieved Nandalal, who moved to Santiniketan. Then in 1922 he became

the Principal of Kala Bhavan.

Nandalal's decision to come to Santiniketan turned out to be a crucial event in his own life as well as for the institution he was to build up over the years. The peaceful landscape and rural setting of Santiniketan suited his temperament and his quiet and simple living habits. His being flowered in the

Sri Nandalal Bose
Santiniketan 29.9.34

freedom and his creative personality was able to evolve a potential vocabulary for modern Indian art.

There was complete affinity between Nandalal's creative urge and the Poet's iconoclastic ideas about education. Since the days of Swadeshi, the constant refrain of Gurudev, as Rabindranath was generally known in India, had been on self-reliance. And in Santiniketan he set out to give a rounded education. Art, in all its facets, was of vital importance in his scheme of things. Nandalal felt that "Loss of the sense of beauty not only cuts off a large source of emotional uplift and enjoyment, but leads to an impairment of mental and even physical health." And the Poet felt that we had to consciously cultivate a sense of beauty, of art in our lives, and that good taste is not confined to painting alone. So, under the overall supervision of Gurudev, Nandalal, along with a group of promising young talents, experimented with various art forms which included graphic arts, sculpture and even architecture. Artists and traditional artisans were invited from various parts of the country and abroad. For instance, in 1923, the French artist, Madame Andrée Karpelès, demonstrated the art of wood-engraving in

which she was an expert. In the same year came Mr Fryman, a Mexican connoisseur. Also in the twenties came the Austrian, Madame Liza Von Pott, who was the first instructor in sculpture. She was followed by Madame Millward, an English student of the great Bourdelle; let us recall that the Belgian was a student of Rodin's. In 1927 was invited Nara Singhlal Mistri, a Jaipuri mural technician. In the meantime, in the Poet's company, Nandalal had visited Burma, China, Japan, Java, Bali, etc. During his travels, he picked up, among other things, the art of batik. Not only did he indianize it but he greatly simplified the traditional onerous process.

During the tenure of Nandalal, which lasted for about thirty years, Kala Bhavan became the most dynamic art centre of the land.

Indeed, Rabindranath and Nandalal interacted and gave an image of Santiniketan to the world at large.

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When I arrived on the scene, Master-Mashai, as Nandalal was affectionately called by everyone, was

in his forties. For some reason best known to my father, he enrolled me to Kala Bhavan, though all my five elder brothers were already school students of several years' standing. One day, towards the end of 1932, Father took me to the Registrar of Visva Bharati. There I heard for the first time that my name was Sujata! I was known to everyone by my pet name. "Her age?" asked the Registrar. "Seven," replied my father. The next day Father took me to the newly constructed Kala Bhavan building and handed me over to Master-Mashai. He in turn took me to his daughter, Jamuna, and his son's betrothed, Nivedita, who were senior art students. I became their pet, and the three of us shared the same room from then on. But mind you, I was never asked for any admission tests!

Master-Mashai, as I remember him, was a man of medium height. He was pleasantly dark-complexioned, with a cluster of black curly hair always cut short, a well-trimmed moustache and a pair of spectacles with thick lenses. He was always impeccably dressed in white khadi shirt and dhoti. His only concession to fancy was perhaps the gold buttons on his shirt.

During the next two years as his student, I saw

Master-Mashai apply himself with equal ease to various fields of creativity in art; he was endowed with that kind of sensibility and technical mastery that this needed. He would squat on the floor and draw *alpanas*, to show us how the village maidens draw designs on the floor with their fingers dipped in a bowl of rice paste. And he would repeat to us the observation of *his* guru: "The village maidens, when they draw the traditional *alpana* designs for the performance of *Basundhara Brata* [the Earth worship], depict the earth as a single bubble of water on a lotus leaf." He would take his students to paint frescoes on the walls of the hospital; my role consisted in stirring egg yolks in the paints held in coconut shells! We students were encouraged to feel that Santiniketan was our own nest, and we took part in building it ourselves. Teachers and students were travelling the same path.

Picnics formed an essential portion of the art curriculum, for there was a speaking relationship between art and the environment. A senior student would be put in charge, and Master-Mashai would smilingly carry out the job assigned to him. The most modest and unassuming of men, no job was beneath

his dignity—he would even joyfully sweep the camp-site after the picnic. Cleanliness was a part of the art of living.

The life we lived there was always fresh and wonderful, as though the *Gandharva Loka* itself, the very land of art and grace and beauty, had descended in Santiniketan. Poems were recited, the air was full of songs, and plays were staged. Celebrations of various festivals, like tree-planting or welcoming the rains, were done with simple movements and gentle steps. It was Master-Mashai who designed the costumes and stage decors for Gurudev's dance-dramas and, with the help of his students, made the costumes and decorated the stage. Let me add here that my two classmates were superb dancers and, along with Nandita (Gurudev's granddaughter), were given the leading roles. Master-Mashai's novel ways of decorating stages and platforms and other places for various functions in Santiniketan with the restricted use of seasonal flowers, fruits and leaves, with products of rural handicrafts and the few colours that could be found around in nature, taught his students to appreciate aesthetic values in the simplest things. He made no concession to public taste

but tried to refine it: "Art should never degrade itself to the low level of the general public's use or understanding. It is they who ought to be raised to the level of necessary health and plenitude where art is meant for the wise and the strong." In his day, Master-Mashai had envisioned that "The future art of India will look at the world with the vision of Truth and create anew."

"For Nandalal," wrote Gurudev, "Art is a living entity which he apprehends by touch and sight and feeling. That is why to be in his company is an education. I consider them fortunate who have had the opportunity of coming close to him as his pupils; and there is not one among them who has not realised and admitted it." He was truly an unusual teacher. He gave his students absolute freedom and never insisted on academic rigidity. He was always true to himself and therefore to others. He had no pettiness in him and never deprived others of what they deserved. Even when he did not hold the same opinion he never withheld his help. Master-Mashai translated into reality Gurudev's dictum, "The building of man's true world—the living world of truth and beauty—is the function of art."

We children were part and parcel of an environment that was continuously evolving. Life was simple. Many teachers, including Master-Mashai, lived in thatched, mud cottages. Truly, the simple life, the open air, the affection of one and all and the sense of belonging in Santiniketan are indescribable today. Master-Mashai's kind heart and affection, his softly spoken words and simplicity of bearing made all the children feel that he was one of them.

As my brother Noren one day narrated to us: "Nandalal Bose's simplicity was remarkable. I remember, one day as a student, suddenly I got an inspiration." Noren was then a shy boy of twelve or so, and very handsome with his clear-cut features and lips like Cupid's bow. "I had an autograph book. I took it to him and asked him, 'Please draw something.' He was doing some work at the time, but it never occurred to me that I was disturbing him. He smiled and took the book. He just kept quiet for a minute, looking at the horizon. There was a Santal village. So he just put a few strokes with his brush, and a picture emerged: a Santal girl with a *dhāmā* [a flat rattan tray used for winnowing rice]. The picture came out of his brush in

hardly a minute! That's some mastery!"

Nandalal's brush.... As Rabindranath put it, "His brush is a traveller on the road that leads away from its own past. All creation sets out on its tryst along that road at the call of the Infinite." He was a true creator, our Master-Mashai. Not only his brush but, as an art critic puts it, "There are countless pen and ink or drypoint drawings, executed with masterly economy, power, expressiveness, sympathy and the tautness of bow that one finds only in great masters like Rembrandt, Dürer or Rodin."

But affection was a general characteristic of all the teachers. I remember that Gurudev would send the theme for a new dance-drama from Calcutta or elsewhere, which would be evolved by Santideb Ghose and Pratima Debi, the Poet's daughter-in-law; they also gave preliminary training to the dancers. As a child I was greatly attracted to dance and would tag along with my friends who were all older by several years. Neither Santideb nor Pratima Debi ever forbade me to be present and dance with my friends. Then when the Poet himself came to Santiniketan, there would be rehearsals every evening in the great hall of Udayan.

He would watch and correct or indicate the changes he saw were required. Well, I would simply walk in and sit in a corner of the big hall, and watch; or if the fancy took me I would join the singers' group. Santideb, who was the leader (how beautifully he played the esraj!) and teacher of this musical group, never forbade me to join them. God only knows what I sang or how!! Truly everyone belonged.

This sense of belonging stemmed from Gurudev himself. The children felt free to go to him. My brother Abhay—extremely lively and good-looking, then under ten—often went to Uttarayan, the Poet's residence, taking offerings of *keora* (Pandanus) flowers to Gurudev. Now, Gurudev's precept was: freedom. He believed that a child could grow into a FULL person only in an atmosphere of freedom. He therefore encouraged children in all sorts of outdoor activities, to getting drenched in the rain, to climbing difficult trees . . . and coming to grief in their fall. But when he saw all the scratches on that fair little body and the scraped knees of the little boy, Gurudev's gentle heart would melt and immediately he would write a whole poem in the autograph book held out to him by Abhay.

We could say that Rabindranath Tagore epitomized the Indian mind as defined by Sri Aurobindo: "The Indian mind is not only spiritual and ethical, but intellectual and artistic . . . it returns always towards some fusion of knowledge it has gained and to a resulting harmony and balance in action and institution." All around us was this rule of a harmonising intellect and a rhythm of beauty. And was I delighted when later I came to know that to Mother, "It is through Beauty that the Divine manifests in the physical."

To be candid, I was much too young to understand the implication of what I was living; I took everything as a matter of course. Then, years later, the inherent meaning of one incident or another would suddenly dawn on me, making it clear that the many snapshots taken by the child's eye had remained unfaded.

For example, Master-Mashai often dropped in to see how his students were getting on or if they needed any help. One day, when he came, my two roommates showed him their sketch books. They were engaged in making head studies. Master-Mashai talked

to them on some points in his soft voice. Then he asked me to sit on the low window-sill. And in less time than it takes to tell all this, lo and behold, there was my face looking out from the pages of one of the sketch books.

I have no idea what Master-Mashai saw in my face, but right at the beginning of my studentship (1932-34), and for a number of days, he called me to his own studio. Bidding me sit on a *mora* (a low cane stool) some dozen or more steps away from his easel, he would go on painting for half an hour or more (may I be excused! I had no sense of time at all). One day, after the sitting was over, he called me to his side and asked me to look at the picture he was painting. It had never occurred to me that I could look. Then he asked . . . my opinion! Was he not modesty personified? Anyway, I don't know what opinion I pronounced from my wisdom of seven years.

Probably none, for I was not a talkative child. He told me that the picture was of a goddess. Which goddess? To this day I don't know.

But that he was genuinely fond of the child I was leaves no room for doubt.

Santiniketan is in the district of Birbhum (literally, land of heroes), a land of laterite. There we lived in the big house at *Nichu Bangla*, in the property of Gurudev's eldest brother. Every morning and afternoon I walked to Kala Bhavan which was about one kilometre away. Having the choice of several routes, I would follow the promptings of my feet. In those days we used our god-given vehicles. As a matter of fact, cars were a rare sight, noisy motorcycles were non-existent, only bicycles were seen now and then. Sometimes I would cut across fields, sometimes take the red gravel road which skirted the Nichu Bangla area and, naturally, always bare-footed; at other times I would go through the school area where, under a shade-giving tree, sat the students on the ground in a semi-circle around their teacher, who was seated on a *mora*.

Now, one morning, as I reached Kala Bhavan, I found it all silent and empty, and not a soul to be seen

anywhere. So I came back, but along another route. This time I passed in front of the old Library House. There I found groups of onlookers standing around, all facing the building. I stood behind them and looked. Master-Mashai was there with several others, including my two mates, all busy putting finishing touches to the decorations on the verandah. As I was looking interestedly at what was going on I was startled to hear Master-Mashai exclaiming, "Ah! There's Rani." That was my pet name. He called me, "Rani, Rani, come here." So I went up to him. He told me that Frontier Gandhi (Abdul Gaffar Khan) was coming. Gurudev had gone in his car to fetch him and they would be here in a few minutes. Then handing me a garland of flowers he said, "You see, Poupée there will garland Frontier Gandhi when he and Gurudev come and stand here. You put the garland round Gurudev's neck. Then you come back here among us." I nodded. Poupée (Nandini) was Pratima Debi's daughter and, like most of the Tagores, very fair.

Barely had Master-Mashai finished instructing me when a car brought the two leaders. They got down and walked up to the platform. The Poet was

tall enough (six feet or so), but the Pathan leader topped him by almost a head. Badshah Khan was very, very tall and spare. But Rabindranath, although in his seventies and slightly stooping, was a beautiful person. What with his flowing, white beard, his white hair falling in a wave onto his shoulders, his extremely fair complexion set off by an orange *alkhalla*[1] with black piping that reached to his ankles, his noble bearing and calm expression, he looked like a Rishi, like a Seer from the Upanishadic age. As they stood side by side, Gurudev's gracefulness was much in evidence in contrast to the Pathan politician's stiff bearing.

Poupée and I went to our respective persons. Poupée stood on a small stool, garlanded the tall Pathan and went to her side of the wing. While I . . . I stood before Gurudev with upraised arms and did not have enough reach to slip the garland over his head. There wasn't any stool for me to add to my small height. Poupée had been chosen earlier, so her role was foreseen and arrangements made accordingly. But as I was a last moment's recruit, nothing had been

1. A kimono-like long loose robe.

foreseen for me. Also I was eight or nine and short, whereas Poupée was already much taller than I at twelve or thirteen. Anyway, there was the great Poet absorbed in the speech he was going to deliver impromptu, and there was that little girl holding a garland in her upraised arms, but stretch as she might, even on the tips of her toes, she could not reach high enough. But almost instantly he realized that something was amiss. He saw me thus, understood my predicament, smiled sweetly and . . . bowed his head.

Quickly then I garlanded him, and went to stand in the wing where the waiting group broke out into the song of 'Jana-Gana-Mana' (now our national anthem).

The picture remained deeply engraved in my heart.

Decades later, it suddenly dawned on me: Greatness.

Who else but a truly great person could bow like that to a child?

What else but Greatness has that simplity?

And Rabindranath was great enough to recognize greatness in others. That his admiration for Sri Aurobindo knew no bounds is universally known.

About Master-Mashai Gurudev said glowingly: "I have seen Nandalal as man and artist at close quarters. Such a combination of intelligence, warm-heartedness, skill, experience and insight as one finds in him is rarely to be seen." So perfectly true. And added, "He does not care for praise such as this, but I have felt an inner prompting to write these words." Indeed, Master-Mashai's disdain to discuss himself, to talk about himself, left me puzzled. For I never understood why, if I could speak good of others, I should not speak good of myself! What's the difference between me and others!?

In his assessment of the Artist, the Poet was warm-hearted: "The artist's distinctive aristocracy is to be found in his character and his way of life. We have had continual proof of this in Nandalal's case. . . . His natural aristocracy has another trait: his unruffled composure. . . ." So very true. Because even the unjust criticism of a friend did not disconcert him. But . . . I saw his composure ruffled. Once. Thereby hangs a tale.

One day in 1934 an aeroplane landed in an open field a little outside Santiniketan. Now, in those days of the thirties, this was quite an event. All the young and not-so-young ran pell-mell to the landing ground.

Our eyes were like saucers when we saw the huge flying machine with its outspread wings. We were so awe-struck that the great admiration for the man who had flown it took some time to break out of our throats. Then the collected crowd chorussed, "Sadhu, sadhu. . . ." (We didn't clap but said *sadhu,* 'bravo,' in Santiniketan.) The pilot was escorted by the grown-ups to meet Gurudev. The children lingered on. They inspected the great flying machine, and I wondered if this bird from the skies was a kinsman of Garuda, Lord Vishnu's mount? Or of Jatayu, who fought in vain the demon-king of Lanka to save Rama's queen, Sita? I had no knowledge of history or geography, but Father had told us stories from the Ramayana and Mahabharata.

Near me stood a knot of boys and girls of mixed ages talking about the pilot.

"He is French, you know," said one of the big boys who seemed to know everything.

"French? What's that?" came from a very young fellow.

"He comes from France."

"France? Where's that?"

"France? Is it far away like Calcutta?" asked another young one.

"It's a country across the seas, in Europe."

There was a collective "Ah."

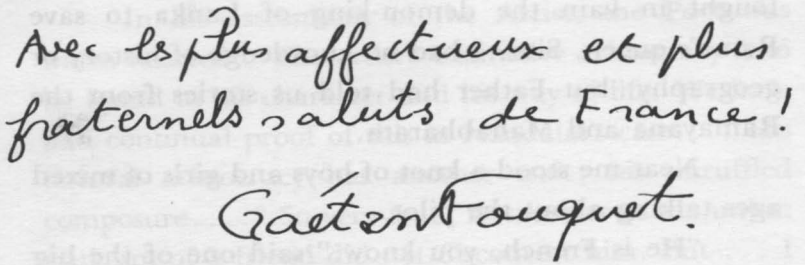
"His name?" many wanted to know.

"Mon-si-o...." Then answering the others' mute question, he explained, "It means *Mashai.*"

"Mon-si-o means Mashai," everyone repeated.

"His name is Mon-si-o Fouquet."

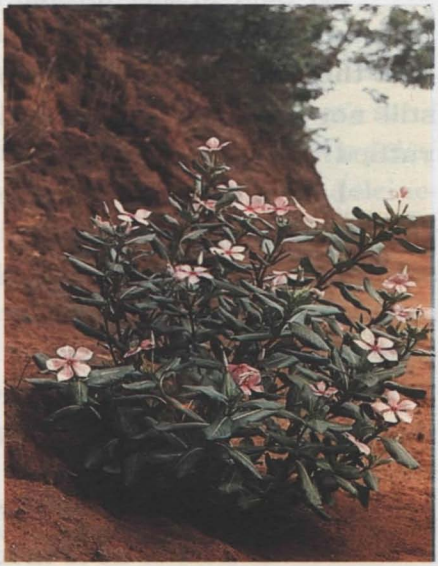
Then in twos and threes the students straggled back to their interrupted classes. I went to Kala Bhavan.



With most affectionate and
fraternal greetings from France!
Gaétan Fouquet
Santiniketan 24.11.34

After some time had elapsed, Master-Mashai came into our studio. All the three of us—Jamuna, Nivedita and I—were there. He said to me, "Rani, go to Uttarayan. Gurudev is calling you." I went out leaving the others behind me in that room, and set off at my leisurely pace.

I set off. Yes. But I had taken some two dozen steps or so when my eyes were drawn to a green shrub with glossy leaves, standing alone on the red ground. Its starry flowers were inviting. So I squatted by the bush and began studying the flowers. The petals were painted pink and sort of rounded, and all the five of them were spread round a narrow tube, looking like a dish on a stand. The buds looked funny,



for the petals were all tightly wrapped round each other, as though a stick were standing on another stick![1] And so absorbed did I become that I clean forgot everything else.

"What! You are still here?" the agitated voice of Master-Mashai brought me briskly down to earth.

"Go, go. Go quickly. Gurudev is waiting for you."

I ran.

My poor Master-Mashai had hurried from Uttarayan in a blazing midday sun to give me that message and there was I, even after twenty minutes or more, still not on my way! No wonder his usual calm was ruffled.

I ran and reached the big hall of Udayan from the garden side. As I entered the hall I saw Gurudev standing, talking to our morning's pilot. Not another soul was to be seen. Evidently all the ceremonies were over and everybody had gone away.

As I walked in, Gurudev turned and looked at me. I stopped shyly at a little distance from them. He

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1. Many years later I learned that this was known as 'Madagascar Periwinkle' (*Vinca*). Mother gave it the significance 'Progress,' by which she meant, "The reason why we are on earth."

beckoned me to come nearer. I went and stood near him. He then said something to Monsieur Fouquet. I don't know whether he talked in English or in French, because I knew neither. Therefore, gentle Reader, I cannot tell you why Gurudev had called me!!

At any rate, 'Mon-si-o Fouquet' was my first acquaintance with the French. But not so for Gurudev. He had visited France several times. He had also translated Molière and Victor Hugo into Bengali. He not only knew famous men like Romain Rolland and Silvain Lévy, but his family was very intimate with the Karpelès family. Rathindranath Tagore, the Poet's son, wrote about their visit there in 1920: "Andrée Karpelès took us to an art dealer's shop in Place de la Madeleine where, I believe, for the first time a considerable collection of impressionist and post-impressionist paintings was exhibited. The effect on us was overwhelming." And Suzanne Karpelès, an authority on Indo-Chinese culture, whom Mother called Bharatidi, remained a life-long friend of Pratima Debi Tagore.

AND....

And in 1916, Rabindranath Tagore had met Mirra.

4

Mirra among the Artists

In the last three decades of the nineteenth century, European consciousness and sensibility were radically changed. Mirra grew up breathing that air of change.

The Impressionists had paved the way for the Post-Impressionists, the Expressionists, the Fauves, the Pointillists, all leading to modern art.

By the time Mirra came among the artists, some tenets of the Impressionists had become well established: Truth to sensation, Light governs all, etc. But Truth and Light were Mirra's natural elements. No truth, no reality escaped her. Mirra, we have seen, was someone who observed, who studied. As Mother puts it: "There was an intense vital[1] development during this period

1. Vital: Sri Aurobindo and Mother have made a classification of the being. Roughly, the vital comprises all our sensations, emotions and feelings. But to get a clear idea the Reader should turn to Mother's and Sri Aurobindo's works.

of my life . . . and it all centred on studies: study of sensation, study of observation, study of technique, comparative studies, and so on; even the study of taste, of smell, of hearing, with an entire scale of observations. I mean, a kind of classification of experiences."

Nothing was beyond the pale of Mirra's study. If she had to go out for one reason or another, in the street she would watch how this one walked, how the other moved, how the light reacted upon that object, how that little tree there suddenly made the landscape beautiful, how . . . the thousand and one things we meet with in our daily lives and ignore. A mere nothing would open up a whole field of knowledge. "I remember I once had" Mother told us, "when I was simply walking in the street—a kind of revelation, because a woman was walking in front of me, and she really knew how to walk. How lovely it was! She had a magnificent gait! I saw this and all of a sudden I saw the origin of the entire Greek culture: how those forms came down towards the world to express beauty —just because a woman knew how to walk!"

Never a dull moment for Mirra!

And how keenly she observed those famous

artists: "I lived for ten years among artists and I found them to be mostly a fallow ground. I mingled with all the great artists of the time, and I was like their kid sister—it was the end of the last century, the beginning of this one, with the Universal Exhibition of 1900; and they were the leading artists of the epoch. So I was by far the youngest, much younger than any of them—they were all over thirty, thirty-five, forty years old, whereas I was nineteen or twenty. Well, I was far, far ahead of them in their own domain—not in what I was producing (I was a perfectly ordinary artist), but from the standpoint of consciousness: observation, experience, study."

Mother always said that she was a mediocre artist. We wonder. Using a simple combination of lines, an unpretentious harmony of colours, she could raise this medium to suggest profound truths with perfection. In the Ashram she did not have much time to sit and paint, but she did a lot of rapid sketches of people. Anyway, I have seen how with a stroke or two of the brush Mother would help a painter to see what they had done wrong.

When I was around eleven, for several months I

'My smile,' Mother called her

stayed in my father's room in the Ashram's main compound. A lady then wanted to do my portrait in oils. So every day I went up to Pavitra's bedroom to give sittings. Mother came daily to see how it was progressing; then taking a brush she would put strokes on the canvas with a sure and deft hand. Then she would take me towards her own quarters, open her frigidaire and ply me with fruits!

Mother's granary was full of every conceivable grain. Out she would come with one grain of story or another to illustrate with a concrete example the subject under discussion. For example, once Mother was explaining the vital's craving to be lauded; she said that unfortunately the vital is famished, of even a badly spoilt food, and it is such a glutton that it is ready to accept laudation from even those who are incompetence personified. "This reminds me," said Mother, "of the annual opening of the Salon of Painting at Paris, when the President of the Republic inspects the pictures, discovering with acumen that this is a landscape and that is a portrait, making insipid remarks with an air of knowing the very soul of painting. The painters are perfectly aware of the

stupidity of these remarks; they however never lose an opportunity to bring up the testimonial to their genius given by the President." Mother's conclusion was: "For such indeed is the vital in human beings—ravenously hungry for fame."

Nothing escaped those eyes. Her sharp humour would scrape off people's veneer and lay bare what was underneath. "Which reminds me of a story that occurred in Paris," said Mother, "when I was seventeen or eighteen years old. A charity bazaar was held. In this charity bazaar worldly people bought and sold all sorts of things, and the sales proceeds went to charity works (it was more to have fun than to do good, but anyway, charities benefitted). The fashionable set, the cream of high society had gathered there. Now, the bazaar was very well laid out, but the structure was of a temporary nature, because it was to last three or four days only. The roof was made of a painted tarpaulin hung overhead. Everything was illumined by electricity; the work was more or less properly done, but of course they thought it was just meant for a few days. A short-circuit occurred, everything started to go up in flames; the roof caught fire and in an

instant crashed down, burying people underneath. As I said, the élite of the society was there; for them, from the human standpoint, this was a frightful catastrophe. People near the exit were trying to flee; others, set on fire, were also trying to flee by reaching the door. It was a real free-for-all! All those elegant, refined people, who normally had such good manners, started to scuffle around like street urchins. There was even a Count of something or other, very well-known, a poet, perfectly elegant, who had a cane mounted with a silver knob, and he was caught in the act of striking women on their heads with his cane so that he could pass before them! Anyway, it was a fine spectacle, something very elegant!" Mother said in a sarcastic tone. "Afterwards, lamentations in the society, great funerals, and lots of fuss. Now, a Dominican friar, a well-known orator, was asked to deliver a sermon over the tomb of the unfortunate ones who had perished in the fire. He said something like this: 'Serves you right. You do not live according to the law of God, so He has punished you by burning you.' "

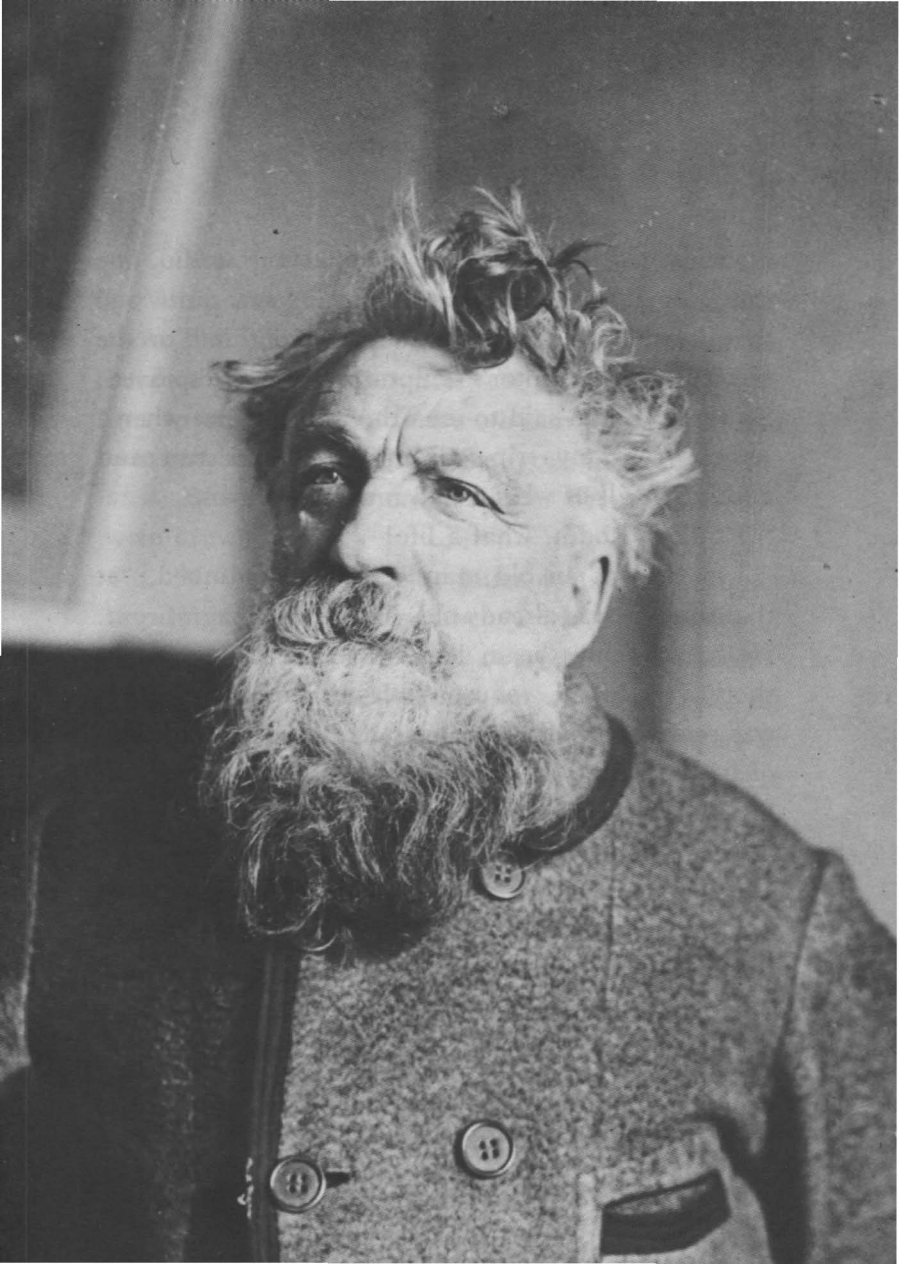
As though that infinite Lover of man would stoop to such crudeness! Really!

Mirra watched the artists—at work, at home—and saw that very few lived art in their lives. Some were strict moralists: "I lived for ten years among artists, and I met many who were bourgeois to the core; they were married and established, good fathers, good husbands, and lived in conformity with the strictest moral views as to what should or should not be done."

Others were vulgar or even cruel: "For example, I was pondering on all the artists I have known—I have known all the greatest artists of the last century and the beginning of this century, and they truly had a sense of beauty—but morally some were very cruel. When you saw the man at home, he had a pretty limited contact with the artist he was; and generally he turned into quite a vulgar man, quite ordinary." Mother paused and added, "Many, I am sure. But those who were unified—in the sense that they lived their art—not they: they were good and generous."

This 'good and generous' reminded Mother of Auguste Rodin (1840-1917). "I remember a very funny story told me by Rodin. Do you know Rodin (not him, but his work)?" Some of us did! "One day, Rodin put a question to me," Mother pursued her tale, "he asked

me, 'How do you prevent two women from being jealous of one another?' " We all roared with laughter; after we subsided, Mother continued: "I said to him, 'That's a real problem! But do you mind telling me why?' So he told me: 'You see, I do the bulk of my work in clay—at least a great many—before hewing them in stone or casting them in bronze. Well, what befalls me is as follows. Sometimes I go on a trip for one day or two days or three days. I leave my clays covered with wet rags, otherwise if the clay dries it cracks and then all the work is lost, another one has to be made.' " Mother added: "All sculptors know this. And here's what happened to the poor man. He had a wife and he had his favourite model who was perfectly . . . very much at home in the house, she went in as she pleased. She was the model he used for making his sculptures. Well, the wife wanted to be the wife. So when Rodin was away, she would enter the studio early every morning and sprinkle all the rags, all the faces and bodies, everything—it was all covered, enveloped in damp clothes: you spray water on them as you would spray plants. So she would come and spray water. Next, some time later—two or three hours later—the



model would come; she had a key to the studio. She would open the studio and spray. She saw quite well that it was all damp, but she was entitled to the upkeep of the sculptor's sculptures—and she sprayed. 'So then,' Rodin said to me, 'the result is that when I return from my trip, all my sculptures run and nothing at all of what I had made remains.' "

Poor Rodin, what a life!

"He was an old man," Mother continued, "at that time he was already old, but he was magnificent. He had a faun's head, like a Greek Faun's. He was short, very broad, robust; with mischievous eyes. He was remarkably ironic and a bit.... He got fun out of it, but, after all, he would have preferred to find his sculptures intact!" When asked what her reply was, Mother said: "I don't remember any more.... Perhaps I replied with a pleasantry. No, I remember one thing, I asked him, 'But why don't you say, it is this one who will spray?' Upon which he tore the little hair remaining on his head and told me, 'But that would mean war to the knife!' "[1]

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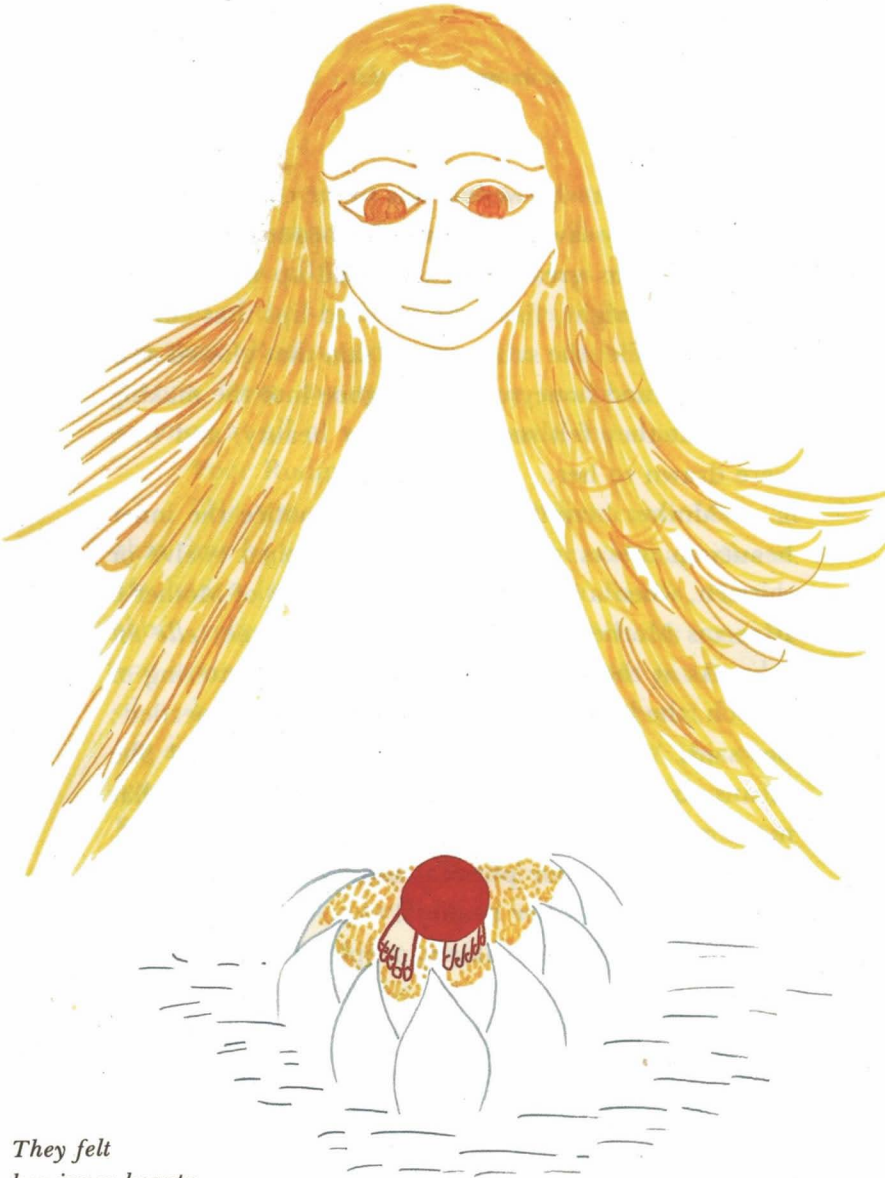
1. Of interest: Auguste Rodin met Swami Vivekananda in August 1900, when Swamiji was in France for the Universal Exhibition.

Yes, those who were artists to the core felt drawn to Mirra. They saw her beauty, for beautiful she was: those luminous great eyes, the piled-up hair on her head, the straight, fine nose, the red lips that curved in a wide smile, the satin smooth skin that glowed as if rose petals and honeysuckle had gone into the making of it. But they felt more her inner beauty, and they were drawn to her.

Mother herself never failed to notice the inner beauty in others. I remember, I was then twelve or thirteen, when a lady told me of a remark of Mother's. It seems Mother had said to her about me, *elle est jolie*. As at the time I knew but a bare smattering of French, the lady thought an explanation was needed; she said, "Mother doesn't mean you are jolly! She means your inside is beautiful." I nodded. And that made me love Mother the more. For, I told myself, anyone can see your physical beauty, but how many care to see your inner beauty?!

But generally speaking, people's sense of beauty —what is termed as such—is . . . ah, well. . . . Let us hear what Mother says. "If you speak to Europeans, for instance, they tell you there's nothing more beautiful



They felt
her inner beauty....

than Europe. I knew Frenchmen—not one, but hundreds—who used to say: in the world you'll not find women more beautiful than French women! I also knew a Negro who did all his studies in France, and when asked who the most beautiful woman is, he would say, 'No woman is more beautiful than a Negress.' It was quite spontaneous, you see."

That is how it goes when we are wrapped up in a local consciousness, a national consciousness—the consciousness of a country. What is beautiful in one country is not necessarily considered beautiful in another.

"The sense of beauty differs." Mother then alluded to the African student just mentioned. "For example (I can make you laugh with a story), in Paris I knew the son of the King of Dahomey." Dahomey is a tiny country in West Africa, on the Gulf of Guinea. It is hemmed in by Nigeria to its east and Togo to its west. "He was a Negro, his father was a Negro. The son had come to Paris to study Law. He spoke French like a Frenchman. But he had remained Negro, you see. He was asked—he used to tell a lot of stories about his student life—someone asked him in front of me:

'Well, when you marry, with whom will you get married?' 'Ah! With a girl of my country, naturally; only they are beautiful. . . .' " We—most of those listening were Indians—laughed. "Now," Mother said pointedly, "for people who are not Negroes, it's difficult to see Negro beauty! And yet it was absolutely spontaneous. He was fully convinced that there were no two ways of thinking about it, impossible. . . ! 'The only beautiful women are from my country.' " She then said thoughtfully: "Everywhere it's the same. Only those who have developed some artistic taste and travelled a lot, seen a lot of things, have enlarged their consciousness and are no longer so sectarian. . . . Therefore, to know true beauty, independent of all form, you have to rise above all form. And once you have known beauty beyond all form, you can recognize it in any form, regardless. Then it becomes very interesting."

And what is our lot when we remain boxed in in the mentality of the average human being? Because, isn't the average man even now as crude and undeveloped in his inward existence as was the bygone primitive man in his outward life? "We circle in an unending round," Mother warned us. "Sometimes it is an iron

ring, sometimes a golden ring—but we circle and we circle and we circle in a round, as our children will circle in a round and our grandchildren will circle in a round—and it will go on endlessly."

Thank god for the exceptions! For the rare thinker, poet or artist who can achieve a harmony of the inner and the outer life and make them one in fullness. Thank god for a Rodin.

Rodin must have instinctively felt an affinity with this young lady. Although there was almost a difference of forty years between them, Rodin was at ease with Mirra; he could open his heart to her. Under that serious look did not the twinkling eyes reveal an ever-present humour! Yes, Mirra understood.

5

Rue Lemercier

Mirra's life flowed along, breaking into new banks.

Her intimate mingling with the artists was opening up many new vistas; but her personal life also went on gathering both rich or poor harvest—the variegated experience of life.

The next year, after her marriage with Morisset, she gave birth to her only child, a son, André. He was born on August 23, 1898.

After their marriage, the Morissets, we already know, were living in Rue Lemercier. The street is in Paris' 17th arrondissement. They had rented a first-storey flat in N°15. The house had a large garden at its back and, in the middle of the garden, a big studio with a glass roof. A foot-bridge linked the flat to the studio and reaching the studio became a staircase

which led down to ground level.

Now, very soon after André's birth, Mirra fell ill. "My floating kidney," wrote Mirra to André in 1925, "dates from very soon after your birth." She had to lie in bed for several months. Even then Mirra never wasted her time; she started 'educating' herself.

Once, in 1963, I wrote to Mother a 'dream' I had: I had gone visiting Sri Aurobindo and remembered a fair amount of details. The next day Mother told Satprem, "She has had a nice memory. Very often she goes there at night, very often; but people do not remember."

Mother expounded: "Quite simply it's a lack of education. If you educate yourself you remember very well. There are small holes in the consciousness—holes—so when you pass through a hole, you forget." Mother then cautioned: "Only it takes a lot of time to educate oneself; you shouldn't be in a hurry, you shouldn't be busy. I did it at a time when I was confined to my bed for five months. I had nothing to do; one can't read all the time—during those five months I read almost eight hundred books . . . no, nine hundred and fifty! But the eyes get tired. So for the rest of the time—one

can't sleep either when one is lying in bed all the time—I educated myself. That's when I learned to have completely conscious nights. But it is a training."

That is not the only thing that Mirra learned. She had not forgotten her gifted Red Indian friend who had come to France with Buffalo Bill. So she spent another part of her time doing exercises to develop other faculties. Mother was telling Satprem that if we developed our inner senses we could know infinitely more things than we ordinarily do; even physically, just using our inner senses.

Satprem asked, "But what is the method?"

Mother replied: "Oh, the method is very easy. There are various rules. It depends." She gave an example: "For the subtler senses, the method is to create an exact image of what you want." Mother then told him how she had 'educated' herself when she was afflicted with the floating kidney, while living in Rue Lemercier. "You practise seeing through an object. . . . Here's an example: I was once bedridden for a long time—several months—and I found it quite boring. I wanted to see. I lived in a room and it led to another small room, which in turn led to a kind of

bridge." This small room was a drawing room which could be reached either through the flat or through the studio. "In the middle of the garden, the bridge changed into a flight of stairs, and went down to a spacious and beautiful studio built in the middle of the garden. I wanted to go and see what was happening in the studio—for I was getting bored in my room! So I stayed very still, closed my eyes, and gradually sent out my consciousness, little by little, little by little. I did this day after day, doing the exercise regularly at a set hour." She created for herself an exact image of the studio, and practised. Her persistence paid off. "After some time, I sensed physically, distinctly, that my vision was moving: I followed it and saw things going on downstairs of which I knew absolutely nothing. Later I would verify; in the evening I would ask, 'Did it happen like this? Was that how it was?' "

Through sheer intensity of concentration, months of patient and stubborn practice, Mirra got a response. She obtained an extension to one of her physical senses.

Then, one by one, Mirra took up the education of her other senses.

6
Illnesses

The 'floating kidney' was not the only malady that laid up Mirra. The list is long.

To begin with, she had her adenoids removed in her childhood. It had left a weakness. "It's an old complaint," Mother told Satprem in 1962, "dating from the removal of adenoids in my childhood; the way it was operated on left a kind of small cavity, which was nothing in itself, except that occasionally it would give me a cold. But as a result of overwork it came back in the form of an ulcer." Talk of 'overwork'! Naturally, if Mother rested a bare two hours out of twenty-four, and that too in her chaise-longue—no lying down properly in bed for her—and this for a number of years, what else can we expect? As Mother explained: "It was originally brought on by overwork when I was going to the Playground and resting only two hours

out of twenty-four, which wasn't enough, a sort of ulcer formed between my nose and throat." But she had cured it once, when another bout of overwork brought it back again. And this ulcer "gave me artificial colds; so sour and corrosive, a terrible irritation in the throat and nose." It had got much worse when Mother was taking classes in the Playground. Then she began her own yogic treatment. "It was over in a week, and for three years there was no further sign of it. Recently—the last two or three months—I felt it trying to come back, for exactly the same reason of overwork." But as was her wont Mother made light of her ailment. "It did come back. It gave me one of those stupid colds—sneezing, coughing. It's not quite over yet. But it's nothing." She added laughingly, "It just gives me an excuse to tell people I am still not quite well!"

Although Mother made light of it, it was a right royal cold, I can assure you: hoarse voice, swollen face, watering eyes, an almost continuous sneezing and coughing, to say nothing of the accompanying fever. That is the type of cold Mother used to have, I saw for years. I noticed also that she caught colds quite frequently. Except perhaps the last year or

two when I don't remember seeing her with any cold.

In the same letter of the 6th April 1925 to André, apart from her 'floating kidney' Mother also mentions her liver: "As for my liver, it started complaining in 1901, and has never stopped since then."

Her first taste of measles as well: "The first time I was down with measles in Paris, you were three or four years old." She had measles a second time, in Japan. But Japan is another story. We shall come to that later. Let us simply say for now that her body had lived through terrible tensions and serious illnesses during her four years' stay in Japan.

"When I came here [to Pondicherry from Japan in 1920] I was not worth much," wrote Mother, "and did not give myself many months to live."

Tuberculosis, rhumatism, influenza, filariasis and neuritis, a flurrying heart . . . you name it and she had it.

But—yes, there is a big BUT. We do not know of any illness of Mother's, during her ninety-five years upon this earth, through which she did not go the entire length. AND she always got well.

Through it all Mother found out that any illness,

or any accident for that matter, is the result of a break in equilibrium. She would delve deep and find the root cause of the break, which in most cases was a falsehood. Then she would set about uprooting the underlying falsehood, and cure herself. Illness, after all, is a kind of falsehood of the body, I dare say.

Illness, like every other subject, was a field of study for Mirra—mainly through those that occurred in her own body. As always, her study was thorough. Mother once gave us a talk on illnesses, their causes and their cures. She said that "There is nothing fundamentally incurable. It all depends." She sketched out rapidly, but comprehensively, the numerous possible causes of an illness. But aren't microbes what cause illnesses? To which Mother replied that microbes are essentially a vibratory mode: "What people assume to be a microbe is quite simply the materialization of a vibration." She added: "To be able to cure an illness you have to know its cause, not its microbe. Because, it so happens (excuse me, I hope there are no doctors here!), it so happens that when there are microbes the doctors find splendid remedies to kill those microbes, but while curing some, these remedies make others

even more ill! Nobody knows why.... Perhaps I know the why." Mother said modestly.

Maybe because "The doctor aims a drug at a disease; sometimes it hits, sometimes it misses," as Sri Aurobindo noted?

But microbes are always there hovering around us, everywhere, are they not? So what makes some catch them while others remain immune? "Fear," answers Mother.

"Yes, I knew someone who had such a fear that he caught cholera!" Mother shared with us a grain from her own vast store of experience. "There was cholera in the next house, and this person got into such a blue funk that he caught cholera, without any other reason; there was no other reason for him to catch it; it was solely out of fear." Mother summed up: "It's a very common thing; the majority of cases in an epidemic is that."

So fear is at the root of contagious diseases? But fear is not the only emotion that helps spread contagion. Other strong emotions can act in the same way. "I knew a person who got a wound through a kind of horror at the sight of another person's wound." Mother

exclaimed, "He managed it!"

To return to Mother's story on epidemics. "I have seen just the opposite," She hastened to add. "I have seen here, in this country, villagers whose drinking water was no longer water, it was nothing but mud. I saw it with my own eyes. It was a yellowish mud in which cows had bathed and done all the rest, and wherein people had walked after loitering on the road. They threw their rubbish in it and everything was in there! Well, I saw those people. They went in —it was yellow mud, and over there, at the end, there was a little water: it was not water, it was yellowish, you see—they bent like this, scooped up the water and drank. Some even didn't let the water settle. Some knew what to put in, what herbs, to make the water settle and become slightly clearer if left undisturbed long enough. But others knew nothing at all, and they drank it. So then I made inquiries. There was, as it happened, an epidemic of cholera all around. I asked, 'Are there still people left alive in this village with such water?' They replied, 'We haven't a single case of cholera.' They were used to it, so they were immunized."

Ignorance, they say, is bliss. But ignorance can also be microbe-resistant, perhaps!

Anyhow, we are sure that had but one person in the village caught this cholera microbe, the entire village would have been wiped out . . . through the entry of fear. And no doctor with all his microbe-resistant drugs could have saved anyone.

There are doctors and doctors. Some are great psychologists. They understand that "It is not the medicine that cures so much as the patient's faith in the doctor and the medicine," as Sri Aurobindo said. "Many years ago," narrated Mother, "we had here an epidemic of cholera; it was very severe. But the Director of the hospital [the General Hospital] was a very energetic man. He decided to vaccinate everybody. While sending people off after vaccination, he would tell them, 'You have been vaccinated, nothing will happen to you; but had you not been vaccinated, you would certainly have died!' He told them this very authoritatively. In general, this type of epidemic lasts a long time and is very hard to check, but in fifteen days, I think, this doctor succeeded in eradicating it; anyway it was miraculously quickly done. But he knew

very well that the best effect of his vaccinations was the confidence it gave to people."

Mother was perhaps sometimes sarcastic towards some doctors, but she was appreciative of others. As for instance, "A doctor friend I knew in France, some forty or fifty years ago," she told us in 1956, "would say to all his patients, 'Take the medecine while it is in vogue, for that's when it will cure you.' There you are." We all laughed and Mother joined us.

As we know that there is nothing like laughter to keep any illness, any disorder or any doctor at bay, let us listen to a story from Mother's granary.

"I knew a doctor, a neurologist, who treated stomach diseases. He maintained that all stomach diseases were caused by a more or less weak state of nerves. He was a rich people's doctor; rich and idle people went to him. Well then, they would come and say, 'I have stomach-ache, I can't digest,' and this and that. They had atrocious pains, they had headaches, they had . . . well, all the symptoms. And he would listen to them very gravely." Mother's eyes twinkled. "I knew a woman who went there and to whom the doctor said: 'Ohh! Your case is very serious. But on which

storey do you live? On the ground floor! Good. Now then, here's what you have to do to cure your stomach ailment. Take a bunch of very ripe grapes. Don't take breakfast, because breakfast upsets your stomach. Just take a bunch of grapes. Hold it in your hand, like this, very carefully. Then you must arrange to go out—but not through the door, you must never go out through the door! You must climb out of the window. Install a pair of steps. Climb out of the window. Go to the street, and walk there eating one grape every two steps—no more! Above all, no more, or you'll get stomach-ache! One grape every two steps. Take two steps, eat one grape, and continue till no grape is left. Don't turn back, go on straight ahead until not a single grape remains. You will need a big bunch. And when you have finished, you may return quietly. But don't take a car! Come back on foot. Otherwise all the pain will return. Come back quietly, and I promise you that if you do this every day, you'll be cured in three days.' " Thus advised the doctor at great length. "And cured she was, the woman." Mother ended her story amid our uproarious laughter.

7
Mother's Remedies

Sri Aurobindo observed: "Medical Science is well-meaning and its practitioners often benevolent and not seldom self-sacrificing; but when did the well-meaning of the ignorant save them from harm-doing?"

Mother did not have any ignorance to contend with. She who had cured herself of every conceivable illness ranging from a severe sun-stroke to typhoid and even cholera—"the cholera had just been caught; it had entered but was not yet established, and it was completely cured"—she who always went to the root of everything, knew. She KNEW. Didn't she say, "Perhaps I know the why"?

To the utter consternation of some medical practitioners, Mother used not a few strange methods to cure herself. One day, when talking with Satprem

about *pranayama,*[1] she described the way she had practised it; and as a passing reflection said what a practical cure it was for hiccups! But she admitted: "It's difficult to breathe in slowly and hold all that air. . . . And exhale slowly—that's very difficult—taking care to empty out all the top parts of the lungs, because these parts don't empty easily and stagnated air remains. This seems to be one of the most frequent causes of coughs and colds. I learned this when I had bronchitis; I learned to empty out the air completely. Moreover I knew singing so I was accustomed to the working—you hold the air, then slowly, slowly you let it out in order to keep on singing nonstop."

Doctors were not infrequently confounded by Mother's 'strange' prescriptions. Needless to say, her remedies depended not only on the nature of the ailment but, more importantly, on the individual.

One fine day, I badly sprained my ankle, just when our very first annual athletic competitions had started. In those early days Mother took keen interest in all our doings, and watched each of us during the

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1. *Pranayama*: See *Mother's Agenda*, 24 February 1962.

competitions. Quite naturally I didn't want to miss out on it. But on the other hand, with that take-off ankle in such a bad shape, what kind of performance could I put up? When I met Mother in the morning I said ruefully, "*Petite Mère* [Little Mother], today our item is long jump." Showing her my swollen ankle, I asked, "What should I do?" She glanced at my ankle, then smiling at me she said, "It doesn't matter. Go ahead. Compete." Therefore, in the evening I did my long jump. Jumping consistently I was leading, when at the very last jump another girl beat me to the first place.

The next day I merely said to her, "Today we have high jump." "Good," replied Mother. Now, I had learned the basics of these jumps in my late twenties. Long jump was a kind of running and taking-off skill, hop-step-and-jump was fun, and throwing javelin had a meaning. But high jump did not figure among my favourite items, seeing that I was no good at it with my heavy body. So in the evening, not caring what happened, I did my jumps. I thought I'd be out of the competition at the very first try. But to my intense surprise, there seemed to be a spring in my foot, and

I went on clearing the bar until not another competitor was left! I was the most astonished person there. Later, the X-rays revealed a crack of the ankle bone.

Sometimes, it sufficed to just inform Mother about what was bothering our bodies and, hey presto, it would disappear.

We were still living in Calcutta and occasionally going to Pondicherry. In 1936, my brother Abhay, then twelve or so, often made the long train journey all alone. But alone or with others, before leaving he always seemed to catch a cold, accompanied by high fever and a nasty cough. Nothing deterred, he went to Pondicherry all the same. No sooner had he reached his destination than he became quite cured and normal! "When the same thing repeated itself thrice before I set off for Pondicherry," wrote Abhay, "I decided to inform the Mother about it. Hearing this, the Mother said, 'Now that you have informed me about your sickness, so, in future, your health will remain normal during your journey here.' Following this I had no sickness before my departure from Calcutta for Pondicherry."

Abhay had several experiences of the different

methods used by Mother to cure people. In the fifties hard-working Abhay was unwell. "I had fever and no appetite. I continued to work and play vigorously." He was then one of the best tennis players in the Ashram and practised hard in the hot afternoon sun of Pondicherry; he was also a first division player in the Ashram's ball games, such as football, basketball, etc. He was, at the same time, in complete charge of running the Workshop, which was a big affair with car services and all. So he used to see Mother several times a day, to consult or inform her of something or other that always cropped up. She, too, often called him to give him some instructions. Let Abhay speak now: "In the evenings, when Mother returned from the Playground, I used to see her in the corridor upstairs. One evening, I told her that I had fever and no appetite. As soon as she heard about my fever she turned away her face and went away without a word. The same thing happened for three days running. So I decided that I had nothing and started my routine work and went to play tennis at 3 pm. After the game, I felt very weak and went to my sisters' for a cup of milk." We all lived in different houses and

had our different activities. "Suddenly I felt giddy and immediately sat down on the floor. Then with great difficulty, and after taking a rest on the footpath six or seven times, I reached my room and went straight to bed.... And to sleep." He slept. "During the night I saw yellow smoke coming out of my body. In the morning I felt much better. I went to Dr Sanyal and he told me that I had jaundice." There are doctors and doctors. Dr Sanyal simply diagnosed Abhay's trouble, cautioned him about food, but didn't prescribe any medicine. "But what was strange was that I felt quite normal, and all weakness and giddiness disappeared completely. When I met the Mother I told her all that had happened in the night. She listened to me with love and explained that the poison of the jaundice had evaporated from the body, and that was why I was cured. She said that it was a very interesting case and she was satisfied with my experience.

Why had Mother turned away her face, in the first place, and walked away? Could it be because she wanted Abhay to have this interesting experience and get cured? Who knows! Inscrutable were Mother's ways.

Whatever the case, and in every case, it is her motherly love for us that is sure. One time, my sister began losing her hair. She was alarmed and reported it to Mother, who said at once, "Sumitra, when you take your bath, pour a lot of water on your head, then dry your hair in the sun. Part your hair and see that the roots are properly dried." Sumitra faithfully followed Mother's instructions and in no time at all her hair regained its original lustre and luxuriance.

During the Second World War, at one period I became a cougher. I would cough and cough and cough. This went on for months, till others had had enough of hearing it constantly. Someone told Mother about it. That very day she gave me a jar of honey. "My child," she said, "just before going to bed, drink a glass of hot milk adding a spoonful of this honey to it." I did as she told me, and by the time the jar was empty my long time bosom friend had left me. But what wonderful honey that was, my friends! Lotus honey. No less. Its taste still lingers in my mouth and mind and heart.

Talking of honey, to this day Satprem cherishes the taste of the honey Mother gave him: "A thing of

wonder!" It was royal honey, offered to the Mother by the Maharaja of Nepal, late King Nahendra, when towards the end of 1965 he had come with his queen and the prince, to pay their respects to Mother. She had kept aside that jar of golden honey for Satprem. Was this Mother's way of telling us to "turn all things to honey; this is the law of divine living"?

Please don't think that Mother took care only of a few special ones. No. She took care of everyone equally.

Once a teen-age boy was writhing in pain. Alarmed, his friends called the Ashram's general practitioner. He gave the boy a morphia injection. Then the doctor sent his report to Mother. His diagnosis was: gallstones; and according to him the teenager needed urgently to be operated on. Hearing this, Mother gazed into space, then looking at the secretary who had brought the report, she said she could not give her assent to an operation without the consent of the boy's parents. The secretary was in a dilemma: the boy's parents lived far away but the patient needed urgent treatment. So what was to be done? Mother smiled sweetly and said, "Give the boy

boiled okra. Let him eat the vegetable with a little salt." Mother's prescription worked wonders. The pasty pulp wrapped the stones and evacuated them without causing any internal injury. That boy is now in his mid-fifties and, so far as we know, has not needed any operation for this ailment.

Do you remember how Mother loved to play tennis? It was her 'passion.' Well, many of us liked to be present at the tennis court by the seashore, and watch her play. Two young men were stationed at either end of the court to retrieve balls. I had given myself the job of catching the dead ball thrown by one and throw it to the other one. A nice pretext for me to stand near the net, beside the umpire's chair, and get a good view of the games.

Occasionally Mother called me to play a set with her. What a joyous occasion for me! She always had the same partner. Her opponents were generally a pair of young men, or, less frequently, a mixed pair. She herself chose the couple she wanted to play with. The young men with whom she played regularly, more or less daily, were our best tennis players with a good control over the ball. These lads would come

and eagerly await their chance. We also noticed that at certain periods she would call the same person every day, while some others were not called for a long period.

Brother Abhay, being among the top players, got his chance fairly often. Then . . . . Let's hear Abhay himself. "Once, during 1957 or '58, for months the Mother had not called me to play with her. So I decided not to be present in the tennis court when she came. I went for a game of football or for a swim in the sea." Thus he absented himself for about a week. Then one evening, when Mother returned from the Playground and went upstairs, "Suddenly she firmly caught hold of my hands and asked me the reason for my absence from the tennis court," recalls Abhay with a catch in his voice. "I told her that as for months she had not been calling me to play with her I thought she was no longer interested in playing with me. That's why I was absent. Then the Mother looked deep and long into my eyes, and said: 'You see, my child, I don't play tennis merely for the sake of exercise. I play because with each stroke, each return, I can send some good atmosphere and bring down light and

peace to remove the depression or the psychological problems of the players in the opposite court. And to those who are physically unwell, I send strength and energy with each ball, so that they may recover their health.' Then Mother added, 'Also, with each stroke, I remove their mental and vital difficulties of ego and desire. Thus, you see, even in tennis I am helping each one to solve his difficulties and to grow towards progress and perfection.' "

That's how Mother took care of her children, young and old.

How unstintedly she poured her love on all of us!

8

The Guardian of the Treasure

The Morissets were not terribly rich, rather the opposite. As Mother said in 1958: "When I was young, I was very hard up, as stony-broke as can be! As an artist, I was sometimes obliged to go out in society —artists are obliged to. I had patent leather ankle-boots which were cracked . . . and I painted them so that it wouldn't show! That's telling you," Mother said to Satprem, "the condition we were in—stony-broke. Well, one day, in a shop window. . . ." She interrupted herself to explain. "The fashion of the day was a long skirt trailing on the ground, and I didn't have a petticoat to go with such things; I didn't care a halfpenny, it was perfectly immaterial to me. But as Nature had told me that I would always have whatever I needed, I wanted to make an experiment." She resumed her story: "I saw in a shop's window a very pretty petticoat, much in fashion in those days—with laces, ribbons,

etc. So I said, 'Well, I'd very much like to have a petticoat to go with those gowns.' I got five!" Mother exclaimed, "They came from all sides!" Truly speaking, she had noticed that "For me personally Nature always gives me everything in profusion."

Mother had related this incident to Satprem with these opening words: "I asked myself the question this morning: Is money truly controlled by Nature?"

Now, several years before, a young girl had put a question to Mother. (When this girl ran across the tennis court chasing a ball, she looked exactly like a gazelle in motion!) To the girlish question: "It is often said in fairy tales that treasure is guarded by serpents. Is it true?" Mother had replied: "Yes, but it is not a physical serpent, it's a vital serpent. The key to treasures is found in the vital world and is guarded by a huge, black serpent, it is colossal—ten times, fifty times bigger than an ordinary serpent. He guards the doors to the treasure. He is black, magnificent, always erect and vigilant." She then told us the story of her own encounter with the serpent. "Once it so happened that I found myself in front of him. Those beings usually obey me when I give them an order. I

said to him, 'Let me pass.' He replied, 'I would willingly let you pass, but if I were to let you pass, they would kill me. So I cannot let you enter.' "

What made Mother meet the serpent? As always, she was more explicit when speaking with Satprem. "When I first came here, I discussed with Sri Aurobindo about what should be done for *the* Work; he told me (he wrote it to me also) that three powers were needed to be certain of the realization of the Work. One was the power over health; the second was the power over government; and the third was the power over money." After dealing with the first two points, she continued: "As for the last, money, he told me, 'I don't yet know on what exactly it depends.' So one day I entered into trance with this idea; then after a certain journey, I reached a spot like an underground cavern, which was the source, the place of money, and the power over money. I was about to step into this cavern—a kind of internal cave—when I saw before me an immense serpent, coiled and erect, like a completely black python, colossal, big as a seven-storey house, who told me:

'You cannot pass!'

'Why not? Let me pass.'

'I would let you pass, but were I to do so, "they"

would destroy me immediately.'

'Who are "they"?'

'They are the asuric forces who reign over money. They have put me here to guard the entrance, precisely so that you may not enter.'

'And what should be done to obtain the power?'

So he told me something to this effect:

'I have heard it said' (that is, he himself had no direct knowledge, but it was something he had heard from his masters, those who ruled over him), 'I heard it said that the person having a complete power over human sexual impulses' (not merely in himself but a universal power, which means he will be able to control these everywhere, in all men), 'that person will have the right of entry.' In other words, these forces cannot prevent him from entering."

Mother said ponderingly: "If what the serpent said was right, if this is truly what will overcome the adverse forces that rule over money, well then, the condition has not been fulfilled."

She remarked: "It's an affair between the Asuras and the human species." Rather an insoluble affair, we may say!

But Mother did give a solution: "The only solution

left to the species is to transform itself, thereby stripping the asuric forces of the power of ruling over it."

Alas for the human species! Alas for its freedom! Alas for the unfulfilled condition! Perhaps never before since Man has walked the earth has the species as a whole been such a total slave to the asuric forces and their perversity. Everything is now raked out into the light of common day. Nobody can remain blind to the havoc wrought by the misuse of money power.

A Day shall come when all the wealth of this world, freed at last from the enslavement to the anti Divine forces, offers itself spontaneously and fully to the service of the Divine's Work upon earth.

6.1.55

9

The Valley of the Loire

Who has not heard of Joan of Arc, the Maid of Orleans? She liberated the town from British occupation in 1429. Orleans is situated on the banks of the Loire. If we follow the river downstream, some twenty-five kilometres to the south-west of Orleans, we reach the small town of Beaugency.

My brother Noren went there in December 1976 for a short visit. He discovered that Mother had stayed there in N°42 Rue du Pont. The street is thus called because it leads to a river spanned by a bridge (*pont* in French means bridge). The bridge is still there. And Noren sent a picture postcard of it to André Morisset, Mother's son. This brought back some very early memories to André. A month later he wrote back to Noren: "I have a vivid memory of the bridge which, according to your card, has not changed at

all. Probably the house has not changed either." The house fronted the street. The street door opened onto a passage. The passage led to a stone-flagged courtyard, across which was a pocket-size kitchen garden. It had seemed very big to the little boy. There André was photographed with Mother.

André was living there with his grandfather, Édouard Morisset, and Édouard's daughters; and of course his nurse. His foster sister Geneviève completed the household. Quite naturally the boy would look forward to his parents' visits. They would drive down from Paris in their motor-car. Beaugency is some 140 kilometres to the south-west of Paris. Now, this car of

the young Morissets did not require a number plate, because . . . why, because it could not do more than thirty kilometres per hour! It was a Richard-Brasier, so we heard. A friend of mine went to a lot of trouble and gleaned the following facts: This make of cars came into the market in 1902; the production stopped in 1905 when the partnership was dissolved; in between, for two years running—in 1904 and 1905—the Richard-Brasier cars won the Gordon-Bennett Cup, thus winning the trophy for France and renown for the make. Obviously it was not a racing model that the Morissets had!

At any rate, whatever the model, we can reasonably suppose that Mirra, practical as she was, would be certain to take a precaution or two against some eventualities on their long drive from Paris. Right we are, for Henri and Mirra had a couple of bicycles stowed away in the car. "As a matter of fact," André recalled, "on the first trip to Beaugency from Paris, the steering gear broke after fifty kilometres, at Étampes, and the car stopped inside a bakery." The Morissets made use of their cycles to visit the locality. Of interest were the ancient houses, a twelfth-century

dungeon and eleventh- to sixteenth-century churches. They passed the night at Étampes and left the next day, after their motor-car had been repaired by the local blacksmith.

The Loire is France's longest river. Taking birth at an altitude of 1,400 metres, it treks through 1,012 kilometres—covering almost a fifth of the country—before throwing itself into the wide embrace of the Atlantic in a tumultuous ecstasy. The valley of the Loire is probably best known for its historical buildings.

So, when in Beaugency, the artists would go visiting these historical sites. Among the many places they visited was Blois, which is a little over thirty kilometres south of Beaugency. Shall we too pay a short visit to Blois? It can boast a château whose oldest part was built in the twelfth century; the following centuries saw some additions: Louis XII rebuilt a wing in 1498, which now houses the town's Museum of Fine Arts. François I built its famous staircase. Blois has some interesting twelfth- and thirteenth-century churches, as also some mansions from the Renaissance period. It is a flourishing town with various industries, plus a chocolate factory for

chocolate lovers. As for the wine the Blesois make!

"They make Anjou wine at Blois," said Mother. But let us recall that by this time Mirra had chosen to become a vegetarian and had lost the habit of drinking wine or liquors as the French do. But she was in the company of artists, so: "I never drank anything other than water or herbal tea. But there was a lunch and we were served Anjou wine—so sparkling, and which looked so light!" Mirra drank. "Afterwards we visited the museum. I was sparkling with wit, it seems. I stopped suddenly before a painting of . . . now, who was it? Coué. . . . No, Clouet! The Princess by Clouet. One of the princesses." Was the portrait that of Princess Marguerite de Valois, by François Clouet, son of Jean Clouet? Both father and son were painters in the Court of François I (1494-1547), King of France. The younger Clouet had stayed on with the monarchs of the House of Valois-Angoulême. His many portraits of the Royalties of his time can be seen in various museums. That of Marguerite de Valois is now in Paris' National Library, in the section 'Cabinet des Estampes.'

The 'princesses' Mother mentions are Elisabeth de Valois and her younger sister Marguerite de Valois

(1552-1615). They were the daughters of Catherine de Medici and Henri II, son of François I and Claude of France.

A suppressed merriment lit up Mother's face. "And I started making remarks aloud (it took me a while to realize that people were listening). 'But look, look!' I was saying, 'Just look at this fellow, see what he has done to me! How he has portrayed me! It wasn't at all like this.' The picture in itself was beautiful, but I wasn't in the least happy about it. 'See how he has portrayed me!' I was saying. 'See, he has done this, but it wasn't like this, it was LIKE THAT!' Details," Mother said to Satprem with a ripple of laughter. "And then I noticed—physically I wasn't much too aware—I noticed people standing around me and listening. So I got a grip on myself, didn't utter a word more, and left. But I told them, 'Listen, it was positively me! That was MY portrait. That was ME.' "

And no wonder. For on several occasions when talking to Satprem about her past lives, Mother had said: "I have had many, many items of information about Joan of Arc, many. And then, of such striking accuracy! Perfectly, perfectly interesting. But I won't

repeat them because now I don't remember accurately, and without accuracy they have no value." She had added, "For the Italian Renaissance as well: Leonardo da Vinci and Mona Lisa; and for the French Renaissance: François I and Marguerite de Valois."

Significantly, Leonardo da Vinci had come to the Court of François I as soon as the latter became King of France in 1515. This monarch was a great patron of art and literature, and gave his full support to the French Renaissance. François I left his mark in other spheres also. In the field of economics, he created the port of Le Havre and developed the silk industry; he replaced Latin in all law-courts by French; founded the Collège de France, and established the National Press. Under the influence of his sister Marguerite de Navarre (1492-1549), his religious outlook had become very tolerant.

The queen of Navarre not only encouraged tolerance in her younger brother but in her own châteaux at Pau and Nérac received Humanists, suspected heretics. A mystic, she nevertheless published storybooks also.

Marguerite de Valois, otherwise known as Queen

Margot, was her grand-niece. Margot's husband was the future Henri IV of the House of Navarre, the first Bourbon king. Margot, like her great-aunt, had literary gifts, and has left us her *Memoirs* and *Poems*.

Why all this history of bygone ladies? Well, while writing this chapter, some of the things that Mother had said seemed to fall into place. "At certain times there were four simultaneous emanations." She had specifically mentioned the time of the Italian and the French Renaissance, and she had named Marguerite de Navarre, Mona Lisa, Queen Elizabeth I of England. They were almost contemporaries. Between 1533 and 1549 three of them were alive; only Marguerite de Valois was born some three years after the death of her great-aunt.

All the four of them were no ordinary women. All the four have helped shape history.

Did not Mother write: "Since the beginning of the earth, wherever and whenever there was the possibility of manifesting a ray of the Consciousness, I was there"?

"I was there"

10
Mural at Pau

The Morissets did not simply wander about admiring the châteaux and churches of old; they also worked. They worked to add some beauty to a small church in France.

One day Mother fell to talking about religions in general, and about some of the priests she had met. Which reminded her of a priest at Pau, Soubielle.

"Oh, yes! I remember. In Pau lived a curé, a good man. He was an artist and wanted to have his church decorated."

Pau is a town in the south-west of France. It nestles in the northern foothills of the Pyrenees Mountains, on the river Pau's bank. We have seen that Marguerite de Navarre used to welcome the Humanists there, in her château.

The church was actually "a very small cathedral

which the priest wished to get decorated. He asked a local anarchist to do it. This anarchist was a great artist, and he knew both André's father and me. He said to the priest, 'I recommend those people to do the painting.' He himself was decorating some murals. There were some eight panels, I think. 'For the painting I recommend these people, because they are true artists.' So I worked on one of the panels. The church was dedicated to Saint James of Compostella."

Saint James the Greater, as he is usually known, was the elder brother of Saint John. He was one of those privileged to be admitted to the room where Jesus raised the daughter of Jairus to life. He was also one of the three apostles, along with St Peter and St John, who accompanied Jesus when he retired to the mountain in the spring of A.D. 29, and witnessed the transfiguration of Christ. Apostle of Spain, his body reposes at Compostella in Spain, it is claimed, which has become one of the great pilgrimage centres of Christendom. In art, St James is sometimes portrayed with a sword.

"He played a part in Spain's history." Mother described the story they painted. "He had appeared

during a battle between the Christians and the Moors and, because he appeared, the Moors were vanquished. He was magnificent! He had appeared in a golden light, on a white horse—almost like Kalki here."

According to Indian tradition, KALKI will be the tenth and the last incarnation of Vishnu. From age to age, Vishnu the Godhead descends directly into the stuff of humanity and takes up its moulds and assumes human nature, to assist humanity in its evolutionary ascent. Kalki will appear riding a white, two-winged Horse, holding a discus in one hand and, in the other, a sword like a flaming comet. He will slay Kali,[1] the Iron Age, and reestablish the Age of Truth.

"All the slain Moors were at the bottom," Mother specified, "and I painted the slain or the struggling Moors, the reason being," she smiled, "that I could not climb to the top of the ladder to paint, it was much too difficult! So I painted what was at the bottom. Anyway, everything went off well, we had brought paints to the church and kept them handy. Naturally, the priest then received us and, along with the anar-

1. Kali is the presiding deity of the Iron Age, and should not be confused with Kālī, the goddess.

The mural at Pau

chist, invited us to dinner. He was so nice! Oh, a real good man. I was already a vegetarian, and I didn't drink either. So he scolded me very gently, saying, 'But all this is given to us by Our Lord, so why don't you take it!'... I found him charming, he was charming. Whenever he looked at the paintings he would pat Morisset on the shoulder and tell him (Morisset was an unbeliever), 'Say whatever you like' (with the accent of southern France), 'Say whatever you like, but you know Our Lord, otherwise you could never have painted like that!' Well, there you are." Mother smiled at Satprem.

In this church at Pau, the alert visitor can still see these murals. Look for the signature: H. Morisset, 1898.

Mother concluded her interview: "In short, I have known people everywhere, I have been everywhere, I have seen everything, I have heard everything.... It was so strange, so strange. And not done on purpose, but just because ... the Lord willed it.

"So many experiences.

"There, my child, I must be off now, I have talked in torrents!"

11
Of Priests

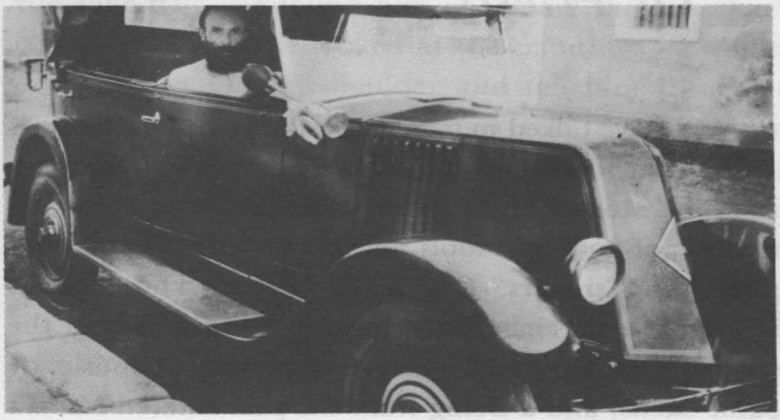
"I have talked in torrents!" Mother had exclaimed.

That was one of those conversations with Satprem in which Mother had spoken at length about her experiences: of gods and idols, of temples and churches, of priests and 'sinners.' Our reader already knows about Mother's experience in a Jewish temple, when the second best organ of Paris was playing a music by Saint-Saëns, and a Being from the past entered Mirra's own being, because of the aspiration inherent in the music. But this proved to be more an exception than the rule. Most of Mother's experiences in churches or temples were painful.

In India, for instance, she had quite a few disagreeable encounters.

Once, Mother went to Ariankuppam, near Pondicherry. In those days—late 1920s and early 1930s—

she went out pretty regularly in the evenings for a long drive. The car, a 1925, six-cylinder Lorraine, was given to Mother by a French couple, the Potels. Pavitra was her chauffeur.



"Something happened to me in a fishing village on the seashore, near Ariankuppam. There is a temple dedicated to Kālī—a terrible Kālī."

In the Indian popular belief, there are many Kālīs, each with a particular function. All of them are a portion of Mahākālī. Actually speaking, Mahākālī along with Maheshwari, Mahālakshmi and Mahāsaraswati (mahā = Great) are the Divine Mother's four

great leading Powers: Strength, Wisdom, Harmony and Perfection. However, in spite of their different functions, all the Kālīs have certain similar characteristics. The Kālī idols and images depict a dark-hued woman (although Mahākālī herself is golden-hued), completely naked, with long luxuriant hair covering a part of the body; her three arms hold different weapons and her fourth gives assurance; a garland of human heads hangs from her neck; she is red-eyed, and her red tongue sticks out to soak up all blood. Only the stout of heart is reassured and dare worship Shakti, the Mighty One, as she is often called. Mahākālī is the Warrior of the Worlds. The lesser Kālīs also never shrink from giving battle to the hostile powers, the Asuras, who strive to limit and obstruct man's high and mounting movement. Cutting off the Asura's head, Kālī laps up the flowing blood so that no drop may fall on the earth and multiply the breed. Kālī is a blood-thirsty goddess.

Mother described her encounter with this particular Kālī of the fishing village. "I don't know what befell her, but she got buried, just her head was sticking above-ground. A fantastic yarn. I didn't know the

story, I knew nothing. I was going in a car from Ariankuppam to the temple when, midway, appeared a black figure which, greatly agitated, rushed towards me, asking for my help: 'I offer you all, all I have, all my power, all the worship of the people, but come and help me become almighty.' Of course I answered her as she deserved! Later on, when I asked who was this person, I was told that some sort of misfortune had befallen her and she got buried, except the head which remained above-ground. And every year in that fishing village they hold a festival and slaughter thousands of chickens—she loves chicks! Thousands of chickens. They pluck them on the spot—the place is covered with feathers. And then after offering the blood and performing the sacrifice, people, naturally, eat them all up. I had happened along when this had taken place that very morning—a litter of feathers! It was disgusting. And she was asking for my help!" Mother shook her head. Anyhow, as a result of this sight, for years together Mother could not take even chicken soup, let alone eat those birds.

Mother said reflectively: "But what's strange is that they are beings—beings of the vital world—but

aware of what is happening in the physical world. I knew nothing, neither the person nor the story, nor about her head sticking out – she wanted me to pull her out of there." These beings sense the atmosphere; but what they understand best is vital power. We can take the case of the Asura in a *math* (a monastery with attached temple) in Mailam, a village not far from Pondicherry, who trembled on his pedestal when Mother entered the temple's sanctum.

Mother once visited this *math*. She was introduced as a great saint by a very esteemed person. She was therefore given an exceptional welcome and taken to the sanctum sanctorum by the Head Priest himself. This is an extremely rare honour in India. Let us hear from Mother herself what happened. "I was taken right up to the main altar where, generally, people are not allowed to enter. And what do I see there? An Asura[1] – oh, not very high-ranking, a Rākshasa[2] rather – but such a monster! Hideous. So then I went wham! *(Mother gives a slap)* I expected something to

1. *Asura:* Titan.
2. *Rākshasa:* Giant, ogre, or the devourer of the world.

happen. . . . But this entity came, he moved towards me and tried to intimidate me—but, you understand, he saw it was useless. He then offered to strike a pact with me: 'Say nothing, do nothing, and I'll share with you everything I receive.' I sent him packing." This Rākshasa too wanted to make Mother his ally! But, of course, her POWER was felt by all and quite often attracted entities of all shades and colours. Life for Mother was not easy.

But an interesting point emerged from this story: the entities in the idols are in the image of the priests that worship them. The head of the *math* in question was a most cruel man, absolutely merciless. "And what a creature!" Mother frowned. "As asuric as the god he worshipped!" Evidently, she kept quiet, "I said nothing, I didn't let on who their god was. I didn't betray my thoughts."

But perhaps the above-cited Indian Head Priest was beaten hollow by the other priest Mirra saw in Venice. It was one of her most terrible experiences and each time Mother spoke about it you could feel her indignation coming alive. "Yet again, when younger, I was in Italy, at Venice, painting in a corner of the

Saint Mark cathedral; it's a marvellous place, of great beauty."

Saint Mark's is a magnificent church built by the Doge Domenico Contarini (who was Doge from 1043 to 1070), for Venice's patron saint. It dominates the main piazza bearing the same name. Its immensity is staggering. A combination of Byzantine and Gothic in its architectural style, Saint-Mark's has a richly decorated façade which, however, perpetuates in part the Roman tradition. Its coloured mosaics and marble are no less splendid than the arrangement of domes and arches. The marble columns number over five hundred. The famous *Pala d'Oro*—a magnificent block of fine, hammered gold, enamelled and inlaid with precious stones—is above the main altar. In a word, as said Mother, "a marvellous place, of great beauty." The cathedrals in Venice are "so beautiful, oh, so magnificent!"

But let us return to Mother's story. "It so happened that I was seated very near a confessional. They had let me settle there to paint. One day, there I was painting away, when I saw the priest come and get inside the confessional—that man...." Mother

spoke grimly of 'that man.' "Completely black, oh! A tall man, young, couldn't be more than thirty, very thin, with razor-sharp features, the very face of viciousness, hardness—pitilessly vicious. He shut himself in there. A little later a woman of mature age came, around thirty, gentle, sweet—not intelligent but very sweet—and dressed all in black. She went into the box. He was already shut inside, and could not be seen. They spoke with a wire-netting between them." Mother interposed to comment: "I must say that everything is far more mediaeval there than in France; it was really . . . it was almost theatrical." Then went on: "She kneeled down there, I could see the long gown trailing outside. She was talking; I couldn't hear her as she was whispering. Anyway, they were both speaking in Italian—although I understand Italian. The voices were barely audible, there was no sound. Well then, suddenly I heard the woman, sobbing—she had convulsions and was sobbing. . . . The poor woman there was so very miserable. Oh, with such a dreadful sense of sin, so piteous! She was weeping bitterly, and the other one's voice—harsh, curt. . . . And this went on, when all of a sudden, a collapse—she

had crumpled in a heap on the floor. Then that man, that monster of hardness, opened the door, shoving aside her body with the door, and strode away without a backward glance." Mother could not speak for a moment. "You know," she told Satprem, "I was young, but if I could I would have killed him. He had just committed an atrocious act . . . and he was going away—it was a piece of steel going out."

After a silence, Mother said pensively, "I don't know why, but so often I have had the same experience, so often: either a hostile force lurks behind sucking up everything, or else man—man, ruthlessly abusing the Power."

Mother's eyes shadowed, filled with the pain of the whole world.

Then they flashed. "In fact, I have seen the same thing all over the world. I have never been on very good terms with religions—neither in Europe, nor in Africa, nor in Japan, nor even here."

12
And Religions

"I have never been on very good terms with religions," said Mother.

It was the militant sectarian outlook in religions that revolted her. Indeed, the narrow mentality that asserts the illogical idea of a single religion for all mankind is ludicrous to a degree. "That narrow absurdity prances about as the one true religion," wrote Sri Aurobindo in *The Foundations of Indian Culture,* "which all must accept on peril of persecution by men here and spiritual rejection or fierce eternal punishment by God in other worlds. . . . This grotesque creation of human unreason is the parent of so much intolerance, cruelty, obscurantism and aggressive fanaticism."

Mother was against religions as humans practise them. She had NO quarrel with the Bringers of Light,

in whose names religions are founded. She knew only too well what burden THEY have to assume.

Once Mother met a person. The chap expressly put his hands on her shoulders, which caused her to make a wry face, because she was not expecting anything of the kind. Shortly afterwards, she was asked about her feeling, her 'experience,' in the hope no doubt of hearing a wondrous tale! Mother made no reply. Years later she told Satprem: "I still remember my experience." Which was not at all intellectual, mind you. "Exactly the impression of something like what Christ must have suffered when he felt the weight of the cross. It was the weight of a mass of obscurity, of ignorance, a universal ill-will, a total incomprehension, you know, something. . . . Truly, it was like that, as though I were carrying a dreadful weight—which was dreadful not because of its weight, but because of its obscurity. I then told myself, 'Well, well! Christ must have felt like this when they put him on the cross.' "

Mirra had witnessed far too much wretchedness and misery caused in the name of religion to be on good terms with it. Take, for example, the case of her fellow artist.

"She was a fellow student in the studio. For years we had painted together. Also, she was a very gentle girl, older than I, very serious, and a very good painter. During the last years of my stay in Paris, I often met her and spoke to her of things occult and of the 'Cosmic Philosophy' in the beginning, and then later of what I knew about Sri Aurobindo." Mother interposed, "I had a 'group' there, and I used to explain certain things." More about this 'group' in due course. "And she used to listen with wide comprehension—she understood, she adhered. Now, one day I went to her house and she told me that she was in great torment. When she was awake she had no doubts, she understood well, she felt the limitations and obscurities of religion." Mother filled us in on her studio mate's background: "She came from a family with several archbishops, a cardinal—well, one of those 'old French families.' Then she told me, 'But at night, I wake up suddenly with such an anguish, and something (it must be in my subconscient) which tells me, "But after all this, what if you go to hell?" ' And she repeated to me: 'When I am awake it has no force, but at night when it comes up from the subconscient

it chokes me.' I looked then," declared Mother, "and saw over the earth this huge octopus-like formation of the Church—of hell—by which they keep their hold on people. The fear of hell."

Could Mirra possibly tolerate a religion whose means of action is fear? How degrading!

"That brought home to me the magnitude of the problem—it is terrestrial."

This stray example out of the many incidents which Mother recounted to Satprem will give us an inkling of the kind of impression they left her with. These impressions were piled upon those already created by the stories of the Inquisition (poor Christ, who preached the gospel of Love!)—that barbaric persecution which drew a long, red and hideous stain across the religious history of Europe.

And how does a religion come into being? Many years ago, Mother had explained: "The occasion for its birth is the coming of a great Teacher into the world. He comes and reveals and is the incarnation of a divine Truth. But men seize upon it, trade upon it, make an almost political organization out of it. The religion is equipped by them with a government and

policy and laws, with its creeds and dogmas, its rites and ceremonies, all binding upon its adherents, all absolute and inviolable." An elaborate machinery for the salvation of mankind. A Church. The first spontaneous and potent attempt to convert the whole life into spiritual living yields up its place to the dominance of the outer machinery. The sheltering structure becomes a tomb.

If Buddha were "to come back and see what has been made of his teaching, he would immediately run back to Nirvana!" And if Jesus were to return and see the forms imposed on his teaching, "he would not be able to recognise what he taught."

An *achalāyatan.*[1]

As for Christ, Sri Aurobindo said clearly: "Christ came into the world to purify, not to fulfil. He himself foreknew the failure of his mission and the necessity of his return with the sword of God into a world that had rejected him."

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1. *Achalāyatan*, a play by Tagore. Its theme is the return of the Guru to his old haunts only to find that his disciples have turned everything into rigid laws from which nobody is allowed to deviate even a hair's breadth. The guru brings in fresh air, and breaks that tomb-like structure.

But while speaking about the negative sides of a religion Mother would say in the same breath, "This is but ONE ASPECT of that religion." Both she and Sri Aurobindo never tired of saying that "There are no true and false religions, but rather all religions are true in their own way and degree."

Yet again, all this never prevented Mother from carrying on her studies—she studied everything, as we know—of comparative religion. Whichever the continent and whatever the religion, she would always visit the local religious sanctuary, then note and compare what she had seen and felt in each of them.

I am tempted to share with you some of her findings. For Mother never ceases to bring into view the rest of the country that lies hidden behind the surface.

—"In the Protestant temples," she noted, "it stopped with the mind, there was nothing else—nothing, dry, dry. A mind, and behind, nothing."

—"As for the Catholics," she observed, "it all depends a great deal upon the church or the cathedral—the place. Mixed."

—"The Buddhist temples are VERY GOOD," Mother declared. "Evidently nihilist, but the atmos-

phere is always very concentrated—concentrated and SINCERE. A sincere effort."

—The temples in India? "Oh! I have met all sorts of things—many little devils—but all sorts. Here, it has been really very interesting." We have met some of the devils that Mother encountered; we hope to meet the other 'sorts' soon.

But all lowness and narrowness and shallowness were anathema to Mira Ismalun's granddaughter. "Throughout the whole human history," Mother told us, "those who came with special capacities, a special grace, and who tried to pull men out of their ordinary rut, were more or less persecuted, martyred, burnt alive, put on the cross." The common herd seems driven by a kind of rancour for what exceeds it.

To illustrate her remark, the great narrater opened her granary and pulled out a grain for us.

"I knew Abdul Baha a lot. He was the successor to Baha-Ullah, the founder of the Bahai religion. Abdul Baha was his son; born in prison, he lived in prison up to the age of forty, I think. When he came out of prison, his father was dead and he began preaching his father's religion. He recounted to me

the story of his life and what happened in Persia in the early days of this religion. And I remember him saying, with what intense joy, with what sense of the Divine presence and Divine force those people went to the sacrifice." History informs us that Islam's reforms were fraught with sacrifice. All the first adherents paid their change of religion with their lives. In Persia, their persecution beggars all description.

"He always spoke to me," Mother continued, "about a person who was a great poet it seems, and who was arrested as a heretic because he followed the Bahai religion. They took him away to kill him—burn him or hang him or crucify him, I don't quite know, the kind of death in fashion then. And as he gave voice to his faith and said that he would gladly suffer anything for his faith and his God, people thought up the idea of sticking small stubs of candles over his body, on his arms, his shoulders, and lighting the stubs. As is natural, the candles melted, spreading scalding wax all over, till the candle wicks burned the skin. When they were torturing this man, Abdul Baha was there, apparently; and as they came to the place where they were going to kill the man, Abdul Baha

drew near him to tell his affection to the man . . . who was in an ecstasy of joy. Abdul Baha spoke to him about his sufferings, the man replied, 'Suffer! This is one of the finest hours in my life.' "[1]

Really, "How much hatred and stupidity men succeed in packing up decorously and labelling 'Religion'!" had exclaimed Sri Aurobindo.

Isn't it strange that the cradle of the three great religions that dominate the world—Judaism, Christianism, Islamism—coincides with the cradle of terrorism!

"Basically," Mother summed up, "the only thing required is to abolish all limits."

She loved to tell the story of "the first-born Asura, who challenged the Supreme Lord. The Asura said, 'I am as great as Thou!' The reply was, 'I wish you would become greater than I, then there will be no more Asura.' "

1. The persecution of the Bahais in Iran continues unabated to this day, in the form of denial of employment to Bahais in the government and of education to their children, confiscation of their properties, etc.—a calculated onslaught in the name of Islam against these 'heretics,' culminating in the murders of many Bahai leaders with official blessings.

13

"I Am Fond of You"

Life is not linear.

A human frame contains a mind to receive thoughts, a heart to express emotions, a belly full of desires, and a body with its woes and ills. But seated behind, and well hidden from view, is the Driver. He it is who drives us from experience to experience. We, the humans in general, thus get a line or two of life's experiences. But a few come with a surpassing richness of nature. Their Driver sits in front. The scope of their experience is wide as the earth itself and as contradictory. They climb peak after snow-clad peak and cross burning deserts; they till fields to nourish us, their groves give us shade; they dig deep and long to bring the heavenly waters to quench our earth's thirst; they weather storms in the high seas to bring us to a safe harbour. They 'keep a bower quiet for us.'

Mother was one such.

Her eyes had seen through the forms of the idols and met the forces that hide behind. She could recognize them for what they were, because she was familiar with the real gods. The 'other sorts.'

One day in 1961, Mother was talking to Satprem about the existence of these presences in the images or idols. She remarked that Europeans generally do not have an inner perception. "To them everything is a surface—not even that, a film *of* surface. There's nothing behind. So they can't perceive. But it's a fact, an absolutely real fact that the Presence is there, I can vouch for it," Mother declared. "People have given me some small things, in metal, in wood or ivory, representing certain gods; I have only to take them in my hand for the god to be there." A fond smile played on Mother's lips, "I have Ganesh—I have been given many Ganesh—I take him in my hand, look at him for a minute, and he is there. I have one by my bedside (where I work, where I eat and meditate) tiny like this, given to me."

For readers unacquainted with Ganesh, we can introduce him as the first son of Parvati, Shiva's

consort. He presides over material realizations, particularly money, is a remover of obstacles and a giver of knowledge. To dictate the Mahabharata, Veda Vyasa chose him as his scribe. Ganesh is depicted with an elephant's head and trunk, and a pot-belly; in his lower left hand he is seen holding a pot of sweets while his trunk has already lifted one. Ganesh is very fond of sweetmeats.

Mother's acquaintance with Ganesh dated back to some thirty years. "We had a meditation in the room where 'Prosperity' is now distributed." This refers to the first of every month when she gave the disciples their daily necessities for the month, such as soaps, toothpaste and so forth. In pre-war days, we children received French bonbons, chocolates, etc. "We were eight or ten, I think," Mother said. "We used to make sentences with flowers; I would arrange some flowers and each one made out a sentence from [the significances of] the flowers I had put there. One day, when the subject of prosperity or wealth, or what I don't know, came up, I thought—it is always said that Ganesh is the god of money, of fortune, of earthly possessions—I thought, 'All this story about this god

with an elephant's trunk, isn't that a mere human imagination?' Whereupon we meditated. And whom should I see coming in and parking himself in front of me, but a living being! Absolutely alive and luminous, with a trunk long like this—and smiling! So in my meditation, I said, 'Ah, then it is true that you exist!'

" 'Of course I exist! And you have but to ask me whatever you want, naturally from a monetary viewpoint, and I shall give it to you.' "

Mother became very fond of Ganesh. There is an Indian story to say why. One day both Ganesh and his younger brother, Kartik, were seated with their mother Parvati. She was explaining to them the mystery of the universe saying that the three worlds are but her body. When she had finished, the two brothers fell into an argument, as brothers are apt to do! They finally challenged each other to a race.

"Oh, I will beat you hollow, Brother," said the proud rider of the peacock to Ganesh.

"All right. We will see who wins," retorted the rider of the mouse.

"When you return you will find me seated here, near our Mother, after I have completed the ride

through the three worlds," Kartik said banteringly and rode off at breakneck speed on his peacock.

Ganesh smiled. He sat on where he was, enjoying his mother's company, while time glided by like a brook. Parvati had listened with amusement to her sons' sparring. Seeing that the elder boy gave no sign of moving, she presently asked, "Aren't you going to start, son?"

"Yes, Mother." Ganesh got up. He prostrated himself before her, then circumambulated his mother three times. And quietly sat down on his seat.

Kartik returned, panting but exultant, sure that he had beaten his brother by a very good margin. His triumphant smile faded on his lips as he saw Ganesh sitting there so very quietly.

"Haven't you left yet, Brother?"

"I finished the race long ago, little Brother."

"Impossible," cried Kartik unbelievingly.

"I did," returned Ganesh.

"How could you?" Kartik was incredulous. "I didn't see you overtaking me. Besides, my peacock has raced so fast, certainly your mouse cannot reach that speed!"

"You are right, Kumar," Ganesh assented. "But you seem to have forgotten what our Mother had just told us. Didn't she say that her body contains the three worlds? So while you were riding through them, I went round our Mother three times."

Kartik hung his six heads and accepted defeat.

Mother spoke of her fondness for Ganesh. "Once, I myself blended some nail polish, and before applying it on my nails, I applied some on Ganapati's[1] forehead, on his stomach and on his fingertips. We are on very good terms, very friendly."

Mother had other 'small things' like Nandi, Shiva's Bull, and Garuda, Narayana's mount. And a Narayana. "It comes from the Himalayas, from Badrinath," Mother told Satprem. "I use both Ganesh and Narayana as paperweights for my handkerchiefs. On a stool beside my bed, I keep the handkerchiefs, and on top of them I have Ganapati and Narayana. No one touches them but I. I pick them up, insert the fresh handkerchief and put them back on top. Narayana

1. Another name of Ganesh. Indian gods are designated by various names, depending on the aspect invoked.

came first. I put him there and told him to stay and be happy. After some time, someone brought me a very nice Ganapati. So I asked Narayana—I didn't ask his permission, but said to him—'Look, you are not going to get angry, I am going to give you a companion. I am very fond of you both, there is no preference; the other one is much nicer looking, but you, you are Narayana.' I flattered him! I told him pleasant things. He was perfectly happy."

Hmph. Not always. Gods, like humans, love to be flattered. But when they were unduly criticized, they came to chide Mother.

At the time Satprem was reading to Mother his manuscript of *The Adventure of Consciousness*. And he asked questions. She always gave him a full explanation of those mystifying matters. Thus one day, when she was telling him that the zones of artistic creation being in the highest reaches of the human consciousness, Art could be a wonderful instrument for spiritual progress, she happened to make an observation, "This world of creation is also the world of the gods; but the gods, I regret to say, don't at all have a taste for artistic creation." The gods protested.

"As soon as you had gone, they came," Mother reported to Satprem the next time they met. "In fact, it's not that I remembered, but they reminded me! There was Saraswati who told me, 'What about my sitar?' Then there was Krishna who said, 'And my flute?' Another one came also, I don't now recall who. They were not happy! They told me at once, 'What are you talking about! We LOVE music.' Good. I said, 'That is well.' " Mother laughed. "It's true. Krishna is a great musician, while Saraswati is the perfection of expression." With a twinkle in her eyes she looked at Satprem, "Now that we have acknowledged their qualities," she bowed, "continue with your reading."

From 1959 Mother appointed me her organ-keeper. Whenever I could, I recorded her music. Mind you, she never played the same tune twice. But how enchanting it all was! Once she played a very lively tune for the birthday of a lovely child of ten. We listened raptly to the cascade of lightness and joy, like a dance of fairies; Mounou and I didn't want it to end. But alas! Mother had other things to do beside playing for her two children!

Anyway, Satprem and I noticed that whenever she sat at the organ, Mother closed her eyes and let her fingers run over the keys to the strain of the music her ears heard. Some musically minded gods even vied with each other to take a leading role. "There was a conflict between Krishna on the one side—he came and played, I saw him—and some kind of spirit coming out of Shiva. The two of them were constantly quarrelling! One wanted it like this: it was roseate-hued; the other wanted it like that: it was all in blues and silvers. Then while I was playing—I had started off with Krishna and it was going on very well—abrubtly came a blow on my arm, like a fist striking, you know, vrrm!" That startled Mother so much that she was almost knocked off balance. She showed us a mark on her arm.

Shiva in India is known as the supreme dancer, Nataraja; he is also the greatest singer in the universe, Bhairava.

Now Narada, who always strutted about with his *veena* on the earth and in the heavens, fancied himself a great singer, if not the greatest! One day, as he came out of his heavenly abode, he saw some

beautiful young people lying on the roadside. But. . . . But what was the matter with them? Narada caught his breath. All were lame or crippled or mutilated. What had happened? Their groans wrenched at Narada's heart.

"Why are you all like this? Who did this to you?"

"Revered sir," moaned one youth, "our woes are due to one named Narada."

Narada was flabbergasted. "What did he do to you?"

"You see, sir, he fancies himself a great singer. But he always sings the notes wrong," murmured a weak voice.

"But what has his singing to do with your condition?" Narada asked in a strangled voice.

"Well, sir, you may not know us, but we are the thirty-six Ragas and Raginis. It is the constant wrong singing of notes by Narada that has maimed us."

"All these beautiful young people maimed by me!" thought Narada with distress. With tears in his eyes, he said, "You do not know me. I am that Narada. Please, please, pardon me. And do tell me if there

is a way to make all of you whole again."

Thirty-six pairs of beautiful, sad eyes looked at him. "We can regain our lost limbs only if someone sings the pure notes."

Narada vowed to redeem himself. He went to Brahma the Creator. Narrating his tale, he asked him if he would sing the pure notes and restore to those unfortunate youths their limbs. The Creator shook his four heads. "I am not a singer. Go to Vishnu."

To Vaikuntha went Narada. The Preserver listened attentively. He said, "I too am not the right person. Go to Mahadeva."

To Mount Kailash sped Narada. Shiva was seated on a tiger skin. His face was grand and still. A mountain of matted hair was coiled on that deathless head. A sickle moon, blue and pale, stretched afar its finger of still light. Narada tremulously asked him, "Will you, Lord, sing?"

"I can, but only . . ." Shiva paused. "Only if there is someone who can appreciate true music."

Narada winced, more and more humiliated. Back he went to Brahma and Vishnu and brought them to Kailash. As soon as the two great gods were

seated, Mahadeva[1] began his great song. Over the still face came a quiver and a colour of crimson flame.

Listening with his whole being to the song of Rudra[1] the Destroyer, Vishnu entered the diamond heart wherein the undraped fires burn. In that brazier of gold he melted.

Brahma had sat there watching the proceedings, unable to fathom the Destroyer's song. But when the Creator saw that the Preserver was melting, he gathered up the waters in his water-pot, the *kamandalu.*

As Shankara,[1] the Curer, sang the notes in their purity, the disfigured Ragas and Raginis became whole and beautiful again.

And Ganga was born.

Mahadeva sang. Narayana melted. Brahma gathered the waters. And Ganga was born.

There, in heaven, the Pure Song lingered through eons, rapt in a white desire. Until Bhagirath came and called down on our earth, Ganga, the Purifier.

That is another story.

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1. Other names for Shiva.

And Ganga was born

14

To Know, Know, KNOW!

Mirra was not one to linger through eons. No, not in this time-bound world. Her calm exterior hid an impetuous force. The hurricane within was gathering itself to break all barriers, all limitations.

Mirra was finding her life limited.

True, her married life, away from Mathilde, had brought her a greater freedom and a wider sphere of activity. But it did not live up to the dreams she had cherished. "I always dreamt of a great shared love which would be free from all animal activity; something that could reproduce physically the great love which is at the origin of the worlds." Thus speaks the Artist in Mother's drama *Towards the Future*. "It is this dream that was responsible for my marriage. But it has not been a happy experience. I have loved much, very sincerely, very intensely, but my love did

not meet with the response it had hoped for."

Mirra could not possibly turn to religion. "Religion has always tried to set up a dogma." Evidently no dogma ever led anywhere but simply compounded the confusion. However, this seems to be a widespread, general process. Otherwise, had there been only Masters and disciples, people with a superior learning and an exceptional experience, all would be well. "But as soon as the Master is gone, what happens is that the knowledge given by him is changed into a religion. Rigid dogmas are laid down, religious rules come into being, and you can only bow to the Tables of the Law. Whereas at the beginning it wasn't like that. You are told, 'This is true, that is false, the Master has said. . . .' After some time, the Master becomes a god and you are told, 'God has said.' "

Mother was telling all this to us, the young and the old of the Ashram seated in front of her. And I remember with what hope she had ended this talk, addressing us directly. "Mind you," she said, "I am telling you this because I know that you all here are free from religions." And now, some thirty years later, with a pang in my heart I remember today her

last sentence: "Fortunately for all of you, you don't have any religion. And I hope that you never will —because it's the door closed to all progress."

And today? Without Mother what has the Ashram become? No, Christ is not the only one to have been betrayed by his own disciple. The Judases of this world are many. Christ still hangs on the cross in Jerusalem. But he is not alone.

True, mingling closely with the artists had widened her horizon. And Mirra, who did not want to be stamped as belonging to a specific period or a specific school, had studied the art of every country, under all its forms—Eastern as well as Western. And although she learned far more easily by looking at pictures than reading the printed pages of a book, and although she never forgot what she had seen but once—landscape, human figure or painting—yet was she left dissatisfied. She longed to go beyond the forms of material nature, but lacked a knowledge, a vision that could take her beyond. She had also found the artists to be 'mostly a fallow ground.' Even the best among them were unable or unwilling to expand their horizons.

"I remember an artist with whom I had talked of the possibility of immortality, who had asked me what the new world would be like. I told him that, for example, things would be self-luminous and there wouldn't be any more this kind of reflected light which comes here, on the earth, from the sun. And as I went on speaking, I saw his face getting longer, more and more serious; then he said to me: 'But then, how is one going to paint pictures without the shadow which brings out the light in things?' I told him," Mother said, "'You have given exactly the key to the problem.' "

Mirra found the artists' horizon to be equally limited. By now, she had outstripped them all in the domain of observation, of study and experience.

Her own experiences—bizarre they were, to say the least—had continued unabated. And there was no one who could give her any explanation. How can you explain, for instance, her growing two centimetres taller overnight, after an experience she had?

"I have had so many, so many experiences in my life to give me proof that ALL is possible," Mother stated to Satprem. "For example, one night, when I

was twenty-two, after an experience I had in the night (I don't now remember all the details)—yes, in those days we wore gowns that just grazed the floor without trailing on it," Mother indicated the floor level—"well, in my night's experience I had grown taller, and in the morning, between the gown and the floor there was a difference of two centimetres! Which means," Mother averred, "that the body had grown by two centimetres. WITH THE NIGHT'S EXPERIENCE."

Such material proofs were needed to make Mirra sure. True enough, she was born and bred in the age of Positivism, but she could not very well dispute a material fact, could she?

This kind of material proof also helped convince Mirra's body. When she was between fifteen and seventeen she had discovered—mostly to her dismay—many 'ancestral gifts' in herself. But not all were dismaying. "My father and mother were chosen very practical, with a very concrete material honesty, and no mysticism."

So, on the one hand there were these undeniable experiences, and on the other hand there was simply nobody who could give her ANY rational explanation.

And her thirst was growing sore. Her thirst to KNOW. Her NEED to know.

"I remember, when I was eighteen years old," Mother's voice was taut, "I had in me such an intense need to KNOW. Because experiences I had—I have had all kinds of experiences—but due to the milieu in which I lived, I never had any chance to obtain an intellectual knowledge which would have given me the sense of all that—I could not speak about them. I have had experiences upon experiences. For years together, at night, I had experiences—but I was careful not to breathe a word about them!" Her mother would have shut her up and her father did not care one bit. "All sorts of memories of past lives, all sorts of things, but without any basis of intellectual knowledge." Mother hastened to point out that, "The advantage was of course that my experiences were not a mental fabrication, they came absolutely spontaneously. But I had such a NEED to know in me. To know, know, KNOW! You see, I knew nothing, but nothing, except the things of ordinary life: the external knowledge. Whatever was given to me to learn, I learned: I learned not only what I was taught, but

also what my brother was taught—the higher mathematics and all the rest! And I learned and I learned and I learned—and it was NOTHING. Nothing explained anything to me—nothing. I could not understand anything!" Mother was quiet.

"To know!..." Mother's voice trailed off.

Mirra had come to an impasse.

15

The Vision

Mirra had come to an impasse.

Then suddenly several things happened. Events now came crowding thick and fast upon her.

First of all an experience made her know of an inner discovery to be made. "The first time I knew—and nobody told it to me, I knew it through an experience—the first time I knew that there was a discovery to be made within myself, ah, well, it was THE MOST IMPORTANT thing; it had to come before all else."

Next. She met an Indian, an ardent devotee of the Gita.[1] And a lover of silence. But he spoke to Mirra. "I met a man," Mother told us. "I was, I think, perhaps twenty-one years old—either twenty or twenty-

1. We believe his name was Gnan Chakravarty.

one. I met a man who was Indian and came from India. He spoke to me about the Gita. A translation existed (rather a bad one) and he advised me to read it. And he gave me the key to it—his key, it was his key. He told me, 'Read the Gita.' " Mother said in an aside, "That translation of the Gita was not worth much, but at any rate it was the only one in French; in those days I wouldn't have undertood anything in any other language. Besides, the English translations are as bad; and I didn't have . . . Sri Aurobindo had not yet written his [*Essays on the Gita*]!" Mother again took up the thread of her story: "He said, 'Read the Gita, and take Krishna as the symbol of the Immanent God, the God within.' That's all he told me. He said to me, 'Read it with this knowledge that, in the Gita, Krishna represents the Immanent God, the God who is within you.' "

Mother was telling all this to the flower of the Ashram's youth. "How many years have you been here . . . half asleep?" Some had been there almost since their babyhood; now their ages ranged from late teens to late twenties. "I am even surprised that you don't feel this intense need: how to know your inner self?"

But Mirra was not even a quarter asleep, oh no! Her need to know was intense and she dived into the inner quest. "Between eighteen and twenty," Mother said again, "I had obtained a conscious and constant union with the Divine Presence." And she told those sitting before her, "And you! Everything has been explained to you, half the work has been done for you, you have been helped not only with words but in every possible manner, you have been put on the road to this inner discovery . . . and then you let yourselves live 'just like that': it will come when it will come. . . . If you think of it at all!"

Mirra was made of another stuff. This constant union with the inner Divine Presence "I did it ALL ALONE, I had ABSOLUTELY NOBODY to help me, not even books."

But just after receiving the hint from the devotee of the Gita, Mirra came across a book. "When I had in my hands (a little bit later) Vivekananda's *Raja-Yoga*, it seemed such a marvellous thing to me, no, that somebody could explain something to me!" But she never met Vivekananda. "This made me gain in a few months what otherwise I might have taken years to do."

It was beyond Mother to understand how "knowing that you have a divine consciousness within you, you can still go on sleeping night after night and playing day after day . . . and not be . . . not be in a state of ACUTE enthusiasm and will to come into contact with you!—with you, yes, with yourself, there, inside *(Mother indicates the middle of the chest)*. That, that is beyond me!"

Mirra did not waste a second. No, never. "And when, as I said, a book or a man crossed my path, just to give me a small indication, to tell me: 'Here, if you do like this, the way will open up before you,' why, I rushed headlong like a . . . like a cyclone."

Like a cyclone.

"And nothing could have stopped me."

Mirra was one of those who cannot stop until they have found the Fountain from which springs the Water of Life.

*
* *

This union with the inner Divine—or the 'psychic being' to use the evolved terminology of Mother—bore

a precious fruit. "Once you have found your psychic being—instantaneously, do you hear—you get the sense of immortality."

Precious, because "From the time I had the experience of psychic immortality—of the immortality of consciousness—which was in 1902 or 3 or at the latest in 1904 (some sixty years ago)," Mother told Satprem in 1964, "all fear of death was gone."

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* *

But Mirra's 'thirst to know' was not quenched. True enough, she now understood a lot of things which had puzzled her before, but ALL was not understood. It was not for nothing that she was born in the age of Reason, when Science strode the earth in its first flush of triumph, exploring all, denying all. Mirra had to know *the* reason of things.

The rational explanation was to come soon. A person spoke to her of Théon and his teaching. It was Thémanlys, a young man and a friend of Matteo's. "When I was first told, 'The Divine is within, there,' "

Mother strikes her breast, "then at once I felt, 'Yes, that's it.' "

Max Théon and his wife, Madame Théon, were both occultists. They were the first to open the doors of Knowledge to Mirra. "Ah, I am not mad!"

*
* *

A third thing happened.

It was around this time that Mirra had a series of dreams.

"Just when I started to work with . . . not with Théon personally, but with someone who knew him —a boy who was a chum of my brother's. Well, at that time I had a series of visions, several of those visions. Mark you," Mother said frankly to Satprem, "I knew nothing about India, nothing—just as Europeans know nothing: it's a country where people have certain habits and some religions, with a confused and hazy history, and where many 'extraordinary' things are said to have happened. There, you see! It means that I knew nothing." She then described to

him her visions about which she had never uttered a word to anybody before. "Well then, I saw . . . I saw Sri Aurobindo in these visions, exactly as he was physically, but more glorious. I mean, the same man as I was to see the first time I met him: almost thin, with that golden-bronze hue, that clear-cut profile, the unruly beard, the long hair, dressed in *dhoti* with one end thrown over his shoulder, arms bare, a part of the body also bare, and bare-footed." Mirra had never seen such dress. "At the time I thought it to be a 'vision attire'! Which is to say that I knew nothing about India; I had never seen an Indian dressed in the Indian way."

They were not mere dreams. "I saw him therefore. They were symbolic visions and at the same time spiritual FACTS—absolutely decisive spiritual experiences and facts of meeting and of a united perception of the Work to be accomplished." Mother's voice travelled a long, long way. "And in those visions I did something which I had never done: I prostrated myself, and in the Hindu way." But Mirra was perplexed, "I did it, and at the same time the external being wondered, 'What's all this!' "

At the time Mirra was unaware of the existence of Sri Aurobindo. She thought she was seeing Sri Krishna of the Gita. Understandably she never mentioned this to anyone. But she had noted down that series of visions, all the same. "Only, I got the feeling that it was premonitory, and that one day something like this would happen."

'Something like this' to 'happen' took some ten years. Then these visions became a material fact. Mirra had to exhaust the exploration of the field of Occultism before she would be ready to begin her 'Work' with Sri Aurobindo.

"And this had remained in the background of the consciousness . . . constantly."

Then Mirra will meet Sri Aurobindo.

Then, together, the Cyclone and the Volcano will set out to

"Break the seals of Matter's sleep,
Break the trance of the unseen height."

End of Book Two

Table of Illustrations

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ERRATUM

On page 114 (line 2), please read the name of the King of Nepal as:

King Mahendra

Who is Mother?

I can hear you, dear Reader, wondering. You ask, "What is so interesting in the story of Mother?"

Let *me* ask you: Do you like thrillers that take you hunting for the hidden treasure? Do you like historical novels that take you back in time? Do you like space odysseys that take you forward in time? Do you like science fiction stories that break all bounds of space and time? Do you like scientific discoveries in which scientists painstakingly gather proof after proof and note meticulously their findings? Do you like the story of evolution? Evolution that never stops, evolution that has produced you and me—mankind. And finally, who does not like love stories, of love so fierce and absolute that it descends into inferno and confronts death in order to retrieve the beloved?

Dear Reader, if you like any or many or all of these things, then come with me. Let us walk together in Mother's Geography and find out.

Then, perhaps, we shall know: Who is MOTHER.

S. N.

MIRRA THE ARTIST is *book two* in MOTHER'S CHRONICLES. Beginning with Mirra's marriage when she was nineteen, it describes her life among the artists at the turn of the century, a crucial transitional period for Europe as well as India. It also tells us Mirra's experiences with illnesses, religions etc., all of which fuel her thirst to know, but leave her at an impasse.

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