

THE MIRACLE OF PURAN DASS

There was once a man in India whose name was Puran Dass and who was Prime Minister of the largest independent State in the northern part of India. He was a Brahmin and his father before him had been a high official in the gay-colored, old fashioned Hindu Court. But as Puran Dass grew up he felt that the old order of things was changing, and that if anyone wished to get on in the world he must stand well with the English, and imitate all that the English believed to be good. At the same time a native official must keep his own master's favor. This was a difficult game, but the quiet, close mouthed young Brahmin helped by a good English education at a native university, played it coolly, and rose step by step, to be the Prime Minister of the kingdom.

When the old Maharajah who was suspicious of the English, their railways and telegraphs, died, Puran Dass stood high with his young English-tutored successor, and between them, though he always took care that his master should have the credit, they established schools, made roads, and started State dispensaries and shows of agricultural products and published a yearly blue-book on the "Material Progress of the State", and the Foreign Office and the Government of India were just delighted. The Prime Minister became the honored friend of Viceroy, and Governors, missionaries, and English officers as well as of whole hosts of tourists who travelled up and down India in the cold weather, showing how things ought to be managed. In his spare time he would endow scholarships and write letters to the Pioneer, the greatest Indian daily paper.

At last he went to England on a visit. In London he met and talked with every one worth knowing - men whose names go all over the world. He was given honorary degrees by learned universities, and he made speeches and talked of Hindu social reform to English ladies in evening dress, till all London sung his praises and cried, "This is the most fascinating man we have met since the empire was established."

When he returned to India there was a blaze of glory, for the Viceroy himself made a special visit to confer upon the Maharajah the Grand Cross of the Star of India, all diamonds and ribbons and at the same ceremony, while the cannon boomed, Puran Dass was made a Knight Commander of the Order of the Indian Empire; so that his name stood Sir Puran Dass, K.C.I.E.

That evening, at dinner in the big Viceregal tent, he stood up with the badge and the collar of the Order on his breast, and replying to the toast of his master's health, made a speech no Englishmen could have bettered.

Next month, when the city had returned to its sunbaked quiet, he did a thing no Englishman would have dreamed of doing; for, so far as the world's affairs went, he disappeared. The jewelled order of his knighthood went back to the Indian Government, and a new Prime Minister was appointed to the charge of affairs, and a great game of transferring Posts began in all the subordinate appointments. The priests knew what had happened, and the people guessed; but India is the

one place in the world where a man can do as he pleases and nobody asks why; and the fact that His Excellency Sir Puran Dass, K.C.I.E., had resigned position, palace, and power, and taken up the begging-bowl and ochre-colored dress of a Sannyasi was considered nothing extraordinary. He had been, as the Old Law recommends, twenty years a youth, twenty years a fighter, and twenty years head of a household. He had used his wealth and his power for what he knew both to be worth; he had seen men and cities far and near, and men and cities had stood up and honored him. Now he let these things go, as a man drops the cloak he no longer needs.

Behind him, as he walked through the city gates, an antelope skin and brass-handled crutch under his arm, and a begging-bowl in his hand, barefoot, alone, with eyes cast on the ground, behind him they were firing salutes in honor of his happy successor. Puran Dass nodded. All that life was ended; and he bore it no more ill-will or good-will than a man bears to a passing dream of the night. He was a Sannyasin, a houseless wanderer, depending on his neighbors for his daily bread; and so long as there is a morsel to divide in India, neither priest nor beggar starves. He had never in his life tasted meat. A five-pound note would have covered his personal expenses for food through any one of the many years in which he had been absolute master of tens of millions of money. Even when he was being lionized in London, he had held before him his dream of peace and quiet - the long, white, dusty Indian road, printed all over with bare feet.

When the time came to make that dream true, the Prime Minister took the proper steps, and in three days you might more easily have found a bubble in the great Pacific Ocean than find Puran Dass among the roving millions of India.

At night his antelope skin was spread where the darkness overtook him, sometimes in a Sannyasi monastery by the roadside; sometimes by a mud shrine, where the Yogis would receive him; sometimes on the outskirts of a little Hindu village, where the children would steal up with the food their parents had prepared. It was all one to Puran Dass. Earth, people, and food were all one. But unconsciously his feet drew him away northward and eastward; till one day he saw the far line of the great Himalayas.

"Yonder," said Puran Dass, "Yonder I shall sit down and get knowledge." And the cool wind of the Himalayas whistled about his ears as he trod the road that led up the long approaches to the heavenly peaks.

The last time he had come that way it had been in state, with a clattering cavalry escort, to visit the gentlest of Viceroys. This time Puran Dass paid no calls.

He followed the Himalaya-Tibet road, the little ten-foot track that is blasted out of solid rock. And he met Tibetan herdsmen with their dogs and flocks of sheep, and wandering wood-cutters, and cloaked and blanketed Lamas from Tibet, coming into India on pilgrimage; or else for a long, clear day he would see nothing more than a black bear grunting below in the valley. When he first started, the roar of the world he had left still rang in his ears, as the roar of a tunnel rings long after the train has passed through; but when he had put

a few mountain passes behind him, that was done, and Puran Dass was alone with himself, walking, wondering, and thinking, his eyes on the ground, and his thoughts with the clouds.

One evening he crossed the highest pass he had met till then - it had been a two days climb - and came out on a line of snow-peaks that banded all the horizon, mountains from fifteen to twenty thousand feet high, looking almost near enough to hit with a stone, though they were fifty or sixty miles away. The pass was crowned with dense, dark forest - pine, walnut, wild cherry, wild olive, but mostly the Himalayan cedar; and under the shadow of the cedars stood a little aged, abandoned shrine to the Mother Goddess Kali.

Puran Dass swept the stone floor clean, smiled at the grinning statue, made himself a little mud fireplace at the back of the shrine, spread his antelope skin on a bed of fresh pine-needles, tucked his brass-handled crutch under his armpit, and sat down to rest.

Immediately below him the hillside fell away, clean and clear for fifteen hundred feet, where a little village of stonewalled houses clung to the steep tilt. All round it tiny terraced fields and cows no bigger than beetles grazed between the smooth stone circles of the threshing-floors. A few bands of scattered clouds strung up and down the valley, catching on a shoulder of the hills. "Here I shall find peace," said Puran Dass.

Now, a Hill-man makes nothing of a few hundred feet up or down, and as soon as the villagers saw the smoke in the deserted shrine, the village priest climbed up the terraced hillside to welcome the stranger.

When he met Puran Dass's eyes - the eyes of a man used to controlling thousands - he bowed to the earth, took the begging-bowl without a word, and returned to the village, saying, "We have at last a holy man. Never have I seen such a man. He is of the Plains - but a Brahmin of the Brahmins." Then all the housewives of the villages said, "Think you he will stay with us?" and each did her best to cook the most savory meal for the Holy Man. Hill-food is very simple, but with buckwheat and Indian corn, and rice and red pepper, and honey from the hives in the stone walls, and dried apricots, and tumeric, and wild ginger, a devout woman can make good things, and it was a full bowl that the priest carried to Puran Dass. Was he going to stay? asked the priest. Would he need a chela - a disciple - to beg for him? Had he a blanket against the cold weather? Was the food good?

Puran Dass ate, and thanked the giver. It was in his mind to stay. That was sufficient, said the priest. Let the begging-bowl be placed outside the shrine, in the hollow made by those two twisted roots, and daily the Bhagat, as they called him, would be fed; for the village felt honored that such a man - he looked timidly into Puran Dass's face - that such a man should dwell among them.

That day saw the end of Puran Dass's wanderings. He had come to the place appointed for him - the silence and the space. After this, time stopped, and he, sitting at the mouth of the shrine, could not tell whether he was alive or dead; a

man with control of his limbs, or a part of the hills and the clouds. He would repeat a Holy Name softly to himself a hundred, hundred times, till, at each repetition, he seemed to move more and more out of his body, sweeping up to the doors of some tremendous discovery; but, just as the door was opening, his body would drag him back and, with grief, he felt he was locked up again in the flesh and bones of Puran Dass.

Every morning the filled begging-bowl was laid silently in among the twisted roots outside the shrine. Sometimes the priest brought it; sometimes a trader, lodging in the village, and anxious to get merit, trudged up the path; but, more often, it was the woman who had cooked the meal overnight; and she would murmur, hardly above her breath: "Speak for me before the gods, Bhagat. Speak for me and my family."

Now and then some bold child would be allowed the honor, and Puran Dass would hear him drop the bowl and run as fast as his little legs would carry him, but the Bhagat never came down to the village. It was laid out like a map at his feet. He could see the evening gatherings held on the circle of the threshing-floors, because that was the only level ground; could see the wonderful green of the young rice, the indigo blues of the Indian corn, and the red bloom of the amaranth and buckwheat.

When the year turned, the roofs of the huts were all little squares of purest gold, for it was on the roofs that they laid out their cobs of corn to dry. Hiving and harvesting, rice-sowing and husking, passed before his eyes, all embroidered down there on the many-sided plots of fields, and he thought of them and wondered what and where all this led to at long last.

Even in populated India a man cannot a day sit still before the wild things run over him as though he were a rock; and in that wilderness very soon the wild things, who knew Kali's Shrine well, came back to look at the stranger who had intruded into their shrine. The langurs, the big gray-whiskered monkeys of the Himalayas, were, naturally, the first, for they are alive with curiosity; and when they had upset the begging-bowl, and rolled it round the floor, and tried their teeth on the brass-handled crutch, and made faces at the antelope skin, they decided that the human being who sat so still was harmless. At evening, they would leap down from the pines, and beg with their hands for things to eat, and then swing off in graceful curves. They liked the warmth of the fire, too, and huddled round it till Puran Dass had to push them aside to throw on more fuel; and in the morning, as often as not, he would find a furry ape sharing his blanket. All day long, one or other of the tribe would sit by his side, staring out at the snows, crooning and looking unspeakably wise and sorrowful.

After the monkeys came the barasingh, the big deer. He wished to rub off the velvet of his horns against the old stones of Kali's statue, and stamped his feet when he saw the man at the shrine. But Puran Dass never moved, and little by little, the royal stag edged up and nuzzled his shoulder. Puran Dass slid one cool hand along the hot antlers, and the touch soothed the beast. The deer bowed his head and Puran

Dass very softly rubbed off the velvet that had coated his horns. Afterward, the barasingh brought his doe and fawn - gentle things that mumbled on the holy man's blanket - or the singh would come alone at night, his eyes green in the fire-flicker, to take his share of fresh walnuts. At last, the musk-deer, the shyest and almost the smallest of the deerlets, came too, her big rabbit ears erect; for she too must find out what the light in the shrine meant, and drop her moose-like nose into Puran Dass's lap. He called them "my brothers," and his low call of "Bhai! Bhai!" would draw them from the forest at noon if they were within earshot. The Himalayan black bear Sona, moody and suspicious, passed that way more than once; and since the Bhagat showed no fear, Sona showed no anger, but watched him, and came closer, and begged a share of the caresses, and a dole of bread or wild berries

Nearly all hermits and holy men who live apart from the big cities have the reputation of being able to work miracles with the wild things, but all the miracle lies in lovingly welcoming every guest with an open and generous heart, but all this silently and inwardly, while outwardly never making a hasty movement, and for a long time, at least, never looking directly at a visitor. The villagers saw the outline of the barasingh stalking like a shadow through the dark forest behind the shrine; they saw the Himalayan pheasant, blazing in her best colors before Kali's statue; and the langurs, the monkeys on their haunches, inside playing with the walnut shells.

Some of the children too, had heard Sona, the big bear, singing to himself, bear fashion, behind the fallen rocks, and the Bhagat's reputation as a miracle worker stood firm.

Yet nothing was farther from his mind than miracles. He believed that all things were one big Miracle, and when a man knows that much he knows something to really go on. He knew for a certainty that there was nothing great and nothing little in this world; and day and night he strove to think out his way into the heart of things, back to the place whence his soul had come.

So thinking, his untrimmed hair fell down about his shoulders, and the place between the tree trunks, where the begging-bowl rested day after day, sunk and wore into a hollow and each beast knew his exact place at the fire. The fields changed their colors with the seasons; the threshing-floors filled and emptied, and filled again and again; and again and again. There were few changes in the village. The priest was older, and many of the little children who used to come with the begging-dish sent their own children now; and when you asked of the villagers how long their holy man had lived in Kali's Shrine at the head of the pass, they answered, "Always."

Then came such summer rains as had not been known in the hills for many seasons. Through three good months the valley was wrapped in cloud and soaking mist, steady, unrelenting downfall, breaking off into thunder-shower after thunder-shower. Kali's Shrine stood above the clouds, for the most part, and there was a whole month in which Puran Dass never caught a glimpse of his village. It was packed away under a white floor of cloud that swayed and shifted and

rolled on itself and bulged upward.

All that time he heard nothing but the sound of a million little waters, overhead from the trees, and underfoot along the ground, soaking through the pine needles, dripping from the fern, and spouting in muddy channels down the slopes. Then the sun came out, and drew forth the good incense of the cedars and the rhododendrons, and that far-off, clean smell which the Hill people call "the smell of the snows."

The hot sunshine lasted for a week, and then the rains gathered together for their last downpour, and the water fell in sheets that flayed the skin off the ground and leaped back in mud. Puran Dass heaped his fire high that night, for he was sure his brothers would need warmth; but never a beast came to the shrine, though he called and called till he dropped asleep, wondering what had happened in the woods.

It was in the black heart of the night, the rain drumming like a thousand drums, that he was roused by a plucking at his blanket, and, stretching out, felt the little hand of a langur. "It is better here than in the trees," he said sleepily, loosening a fold of blanket; "take it and be warm." The monkey caught his hand and pulled hard. "Is it food, then?" said Puran Dass. "Wait awhile, and I will prepare some." As he kneeled to throw fuel on the fire the langur ran to the door of the shrine, crooned, and ran back again, plucking at the man's knee.

"What is it? What is thy trouble, Brother?" said Puran Dass, for the langur's eyes were full of things that he could not tell. "Unless one of thy caste be in a trap - but then no one sets traps here - No, I will not go into that weather. Look, Brother, even the barasingh comes for shelter."

The deer's antlers clashed as he strode into the shrine, clashed against the grinning statute of Kali. He lowered them in Puran Dass's direction and stamped uneasily, hissing through his half-shut nostrils.

"Hai! Hai! Hai!" said the Holy Man, snapping his fingers, "Is this payment for a night's lodging?" But the deer pushed him toward the door, and as he did so Puran Dass heard the sound of something opening with a sigh, and saw two slabs of the floor draw away from each other, while the sticky earth below smacked its lips.

"Now I see," said Puran Dass. "No blame to my brothers that they did not sit by the fire tonight. The mountain is falling. And yet, why should I go?" But then his eye fell on the worn begging-bowl, and his face changed. "They have given me good food daily since I came, and if I am not swift, tomorrow there will not be one mouth in the valley. Indeed, I must go and warn them below. Back there, Brother! Let me get to the fire."

The barasingh backed unwillingly as Puran Dass drove a pine torch deep into the flame, twirling it till it was well lit. "AH! YE CAME TO WARN ME," he said, rising. "Better than that we shall do; better than that. Out, now, and lend me thy neck, Brother, for I have but two feet."

He clutched the withers of the barasingh with his right hand, held the torch away with his left, and stepped out of the shrine into the desperate night. There was no breath of

wind, but the rain nearly drowned the flare as the great deer hurried down the slope, sliding on his haunches.

As soon as they were clear of the forest more of his brothers joined them. He heard, though he could not see, the langurs pressing about him, and behind them the 'Uhh! Uhh!' of Sona. The rain matted his long white hair into ropes; the water splashed beneath his bare feet, and his yellow robe clung to his frail old body, but he stepped down steadily, leaning against the barasingh. He was no longer a holy man but Sir Puran Dass, K.C.I.E., Prime Minister of a major State, a man accustomed to command, going out to save life.

Down the steep, splashy path they poured all together, the Bhagat and his brothers, down and down till the deer's feet clicked and stumbled on the wall of a threshing-floor, and he snorted because he smelt Man. Now they were at the head of the one crooked village street, and the Bhagat beat with his crutch on the barred windows of the blacksmith's house, as his torch blazed up in the shelter of the eaves. "Up and out!" cried Puran Bhagat; and he did not know his own voice, for it was years since he had spoken aloud to a man. "The hill falls! The hill is falling! Up and out, oh you within!"

"It is our Bhagat," said the blacksmith's wife. "He stands among his beasts. Gather the little ones and give the call."

The alarm was passed from house to house, while the beasts, cramped in the narrow way, surged and huddled round the Bhagat, and Sona puffed impatiently.

The people hurried into the street - they were no more than a few hundred souls all told - and in the glare of the torches they saw their Bhagat holding back the terrified barasingh, while the monkeys plucked piteously at his skirts, and Sona sat on his haunches and roared.

"Across the valley and up the next hill!" shouted Puran Dass. "Leave no one behind! Go quickly! We will follow!"

Then the people ran as only Hill folk can run, for they knew that in a landslide you must climb for the highest ground across the valley. They fled, splashing through the little river at the bottom, panted up the terraced fields on the far side, while the Bhagat and his brethren followed. Up and up the opposite mountain they climbed, calling to each other by name - the roll call of the village - and at their heels toiled the big barasingh, weighted by the failing strength of Puran Dass. At last the deer stopped in the shadow of a deep pine-wood, five hundred feet up the hillside. His instinct that had warned him of the coming slide, told him he would be safe here.

Puran Dass dropped, fainting by his side, for the chill of the rain and that fierce climb were killing him. But first, he called to the scattered torches ahead, "Stay and count your numbers"; then, whispering to the deer as he saw the lights gather in a cluster: "Please, Brother, please stay with me. Please stay till I go!"

There was a sigh in the air that grew to a mutter, and a mutter that grew to a roar, and a roar that passed all sense of hearing, and the hillside on which the villagers stood was hit in the darkness, and rocked to the blow. Then a note as steady, deep, and true as the deep C of the organ drowned

everything for perhaps five minutes, while the very roots of the pines quivered to it.

It died away, and the sound of the rain falling on miles of hard ground and grass changed to the muffled drum of water on soft earth. That told its own tale.

Not a villager - not even the priest - was bold enough to speak to the Bhagat who had saved their lives. They crouched under the pines and waited till the day. When it came, they looked across the valley and saw that what had been forest, terraced field and grazing ground was one raw, red smear with a few trees flung head-down. That red ran high up the hill of their refuge, damming back the little river, which had begun to spread into a brick-colored lake. Of the village, of the road to the shrine, of the shrine itself, and the forest behind, there was no trace. For one mile in width and two thousand feet in sheer depth, the mountainside had come away bodily, planed clean from head to heel.

And the villagers, one by one, crept through the wood to pray before their Holy Man. They saw the barasingh standing over him, who fled when they came near, and they heard the langurs wailing in the branches, and Sona moaning up the hill; but their Bhagat was dead, sitting cross-legged, his back against a tree, his crutch under his armpit, and his face turned to the northeast.

The priest said: "Behold a miracle for in this very attitude must all Sannyasis be buried! Therefore, where he is now we will build the temple to our Holy Man."

They built the temple before a year was ended - a little stone and earth shrine - and they called the hill the Bhagat's hill, and they worship there with lights and flowers to this day. But they do not know that the saint of their worship is His Excellency, the late Sir Puran Dass, Knight Commander of the Indian Empire, Ph.D., L.L.D., once Prime Minister of the most progressive and enlightened State of India and distinguished honorary member of more learned and scientific societies than will ever do any good in this world or the next.

(Extracted from Rudyard Kipling's 'Jungle Book')

THE DIRGE OF HIS MONKEY FRIENDS

That night we knew the earth would move,
And when the crashing hillside broke,
And all our world fell down in rain,
We saved him, we the little Folk.
We saved him, but lo, he won't come again.
We went and plucked him by the hand,
Because we loved him.
We loved him with a love
That only love can understand.
Mourn ye, Brothers, Mourn ye, for he will not awake.
Mourn ye, Brothers, Mourn ye, for his sake.
Mourn ye, for he's gone to stay.
And now his own kind drives us away!