A DAUGHTER OF THE ZENANA.

BY A. CHRISTINA ALBERS.

[The author has lived in India for many years and has become greatly attached to the land and its people. In this little sketch she describes the typical life of a Hindu woman of high caste portraying faithfully her childhood, courtship, wedding, her married life and finally her death. If some details appear to the more prosaic western mind almost too mystical to be true, we can only say that the light in which the story is told tallies closely with Hindu conceptions, and thus renders the narrative the more genuine.—Ed.]

SHE was a little sun-kissed maiden, with a complexion soft and mellow like the Champack blossom that fills the air with fragrance in the Baisak\(^1\) month when the young year appears, and she had a pair of eyes, this maiden, black and lustrous and fathomless like the midnight sky at the time of Kali Poojah.\(^2\) You could look at them and look forever, and yet it would seem you never saw all that they tried to reveal. They spoke of a great deep soul that had seen ages and ages of pilgrimage, they spoke of a strong life that throbs and heaves with the effulgence of being and holds so much within itself that it would fill many a page to write all its lore; and again they laughed so merrily, these raven orbs, that they seemed like merry ripples on a great still lake.

She was a little Brahmin girl, only very little. But she was the daughter of an old, old family, that hailed from the venerable, ancient district of Nadia where still there are men and women who even in these degenerate days see the eternal face to face. They glory in fasting and austerities, and their days are long in the land.

Fourteen generations of hereditary training had moulded the sons and daughters of the house to which Shikorbashini Devi\(^3\) belonged, and fourteen generations of hereditary culture had not failed to put their stamp deeply on this daughter of old Indian blood—only

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\(^1\) May.

\(^2\) The annual Kali festival which is celebrated during new moon.

\(^3\) Devi is a title given to the women of the highest castes.
one of the many that the venerable house claimed. But the daughters of an Indian family are so numerous, one can never, never know them all; let us then be content with Shikorbashini alone.

She was five years old at the time of which we are speaking, but she was very slight and appeared to be less than four. But her dignity would have been sufficient for many a maid of twenty. The correctness of her gait, the calm grace of her movements were apt to evoke a smile from an onlooker, they were so far beyond her years. She had not practised any physical exercises, she knew not even what they were. But her ancestors had sat in meditation on the Divine, with head erect, firm and motionless, and were doing so still. For in this ancient land ancestors are not at all a thing of the past. The patriarch may look down on five generations, and yet not consider it a very extraordinary occurrence.

This little maiden presented a typical sight when with book in hand she squatted down to read—with back erect as the palm tree that grows by yonder lake; her finely modeled head, so perfectly placed on these little shoulders, bending slightly over the book; her plastic little legs crossed under her, securely covered by her loose, flowing gown, one tiny crimson-tinted toe perhaps peeping mischievously from under the jealous folds that tried to hide it—it seemed she was a poem and a little statue both in one.

She lived in a large house; it was the Calcutta residence of the family—a house surrounded by a court with a high brick wall around it, which gave it the appearance of a convent. In the house itself there were the outer apartments and then the inner house. In the center was a large open court, around which shading balconies cooled the adjoining rooms. The house was very old and cracked, it had seen many of Shikorbashini’s ancestors, and that is saying a good deal. But it teemed with life, and from within came the patter of little feet, and the sound of many youthful voices. This ancient roof harbored many children, sixteen in all—all brothers and sisters. They might be called cousins in western lands, second and third cousins perhaps. But the Hindu does not indulge in such terms, they sound too cold, too far away from the heart. Were they not all of one common ancestor? Why then make such distinctions?

When after the heat of the day these little ones played together in the large yard they had merry times; or when with two or three little maids like herself, Shikorbashini sought a corner on the broad flat roof of the house, telling stories and laughing merrily, until the naughty *dadas*¹ appeared and spoiled it all for them, as brothers will

¹ Elder brothers.
the whole world over. She rose early in the morning, but when the sun was high, when the streets were deserted under the noonday heat, when even the inevitable black crow sought the shade, and the big kite alone soared upward into the hot still sky sending its weird melancholy cry down to the world below, at that hot hour we find our little maiden in a cool corner of the house, cuddled closely up to the dear form of her mother, oblivious to heat, sky, kite and all. And again, when the hour of twilight comes, that strange hour, when the drooping sun sends mystery into the atmosphere, we see our little heroine on her mother’s lap, with many little ones around her, all listening to a tale from one of India’s great epic poems, the Ramayana, a story such as was told to little Indian daughters a thousand years ago, from which they have drawn logic for many centuries, and which have done much to mould the character of the race. Or later, when her father, tired after a long day’s work, found comfort in the cool embrace of home, we see our little maiden on his lap, with eyes aglow, narrating the incidents of the day, until the worries of life seem all so little, seem all to melt away in the light of those glorious eyes.

As little Shikorbashini grew to be nearly seven years old, there was a consultation between her parents one evening, and they agreed their little daughter must be sent to school. Accordingly, the proposition was laid before her grandmother the next day, who consented after a long discussion, and our little heroine was sent. The school carriage called for her every day to take her to the Mahakali Path-shala where officiated the venerable Maharani Mataji, that austere sanyasini, who founded schools on strictly national lines, to retain in the women of India that fine old character that has moulded the race, and which modern education is not half careful enough to preserve.

Here she learned the mysteries of the Sanskrit alphabet, and to repeat slokas orotund and rhythmic, in that ancient tongue which is the language of the gods, the root of all Aryan languages and the only one which is not ephemeral. She learned a little of reading and writing in her mother tongue and a little less of figures. But she learned that which is worth infinitely more than all the rest. She learned that daughters of her race have to fill a mighty place, and that they can attain to it only by self-sacrifice and service. Ah! here lies a great part of the secret of India’s strength. And ye of the West, who would condemn the systems of this land, would do well to learn first to understand the principles that have gone to build them.
She made many new friends at this school, but one which touched the heart more deeply than all others—Rani they called her, and thus their friendship came about. Rani brought a new pencil box to school one day and showed it around with great glee. Shikorbashini saw it, and in her naturally witty little way called out:

"You need not be so proud of your old box; it costs five pice."

"Ha, five pice," came out the quick rejoinder, "you are going to have a five pice father-in-law."

That was a dreadful insult, and with tear-stained eyes the little insulted girl told her tale to the Head Pandit. Now the father-in-law's house is a standing joke among little Indian girls, and the learned Pandit, with a twinkle in his eyes and a desperate effort to appear serious, informed them both that if they would only study well and be good little girls, they would each have a rupee father-in-law. Then he made them sit beside each other for the remainder of the day and told them to try and make friends. That worked like magic. The father-in-law incident was soon forgotten, and two little tongues kept busy, while two sweet young lives blended together in a friendship deep and lasting. And so deep became the bond between them in time that they promised the vow of Shokipadha to each other, that is to say, the friendship that is never broken, and the vow that can be given between two only. Two hearts joined in that vow know no secret from each other, and not even death has the power to sever it.

Thus the days passed sweetly and lengthened into years, and three happy years passed by before the little friends realized it.

But, alas, poor Shikorbashini, this is a world of many tears, and into your sweet young life sorrow is about to enter. For she whom you have chosen as life's fondest friend, has been doomed to remain a few years only on this dust-clad star; the gods are calling her home to the place whence she came.

Little Rani stepped up to her mother one day with a strange tale. "Mother, I have read a new story from the Ramayana; come, let me tell it to you."

"Not to-day, my child, I shall be busy. You may tell it another time."

"But I cannot wait, mother, I am going to remain with you a short time only. Only three more days, and I shall be taken from you."

The unfortunate mother was overcome by consternation. She took her child into her arms and tried to make her promise never to

* School.
say such a thing again. But little Rani was not to be persuaded, and as she had prophesied, so it came to pass. On the following day her frail form was seized by a violent fever, and on the third day the house was merged in sorrow, and the death wail arose in the room where little Rani closed the lids over her beautiful black eyes never to open them more.

This tale may sound strange to the reader, but it is a strange land, this India. Like the snow-clad range of the mighty Himalayas that seem to float in mid-air, so does this land of Ind seem floating in the ether, midway between this world and that other that we dream of. Strange, too, it seemed to the writer of these lines; it filled her heart with awe at the soul of this child, for she knew the maiden well and loved her. Nor does this strange story end here. On the days following Rani's death, her little sister was seen standing in isolated places, speaking with somebody no one could see. And she was heard to promise, "On the day after to-morrow I will join you." And thus it happened. When the day came little Buri was seized by a violent spasm, and before evening another little form was taken from the house to the Ganga riverside, where the flame was kindled that consumed her sweet young body, while her soul was left free to roam through the realms of space together with the sister she had so longed to join.

And little Shikorbashini, how did she receive the news of the first great sorrow that her young life knew? It was her mother who told her. Taking her little one away to a quiet place, she took her on her lap, and resting that sweet young head against her heart, the mother told her child that little Rani was for the world no more. And against her mother's tender heart Shikorbashini wept—wept the tears of her first grief, a grief that lingered and that would follow her into the years to come.

She was so very sad that even the naughty dadas stopped teasing her, but held her hand and spoke tenderly to her. Her parents feared the grief might undermine her health. They could not, of course, send her to school for a long time, for there she would feel the absence of her friend the more. And so the mother got ready to take her little family to their Mamar Bari.

And what is Mamar Bari? Ah, that is the place than which there is none more dear to an Indian child. It is the maternal uncle's house. The mother was born and raised there, and her little ones spend half their sunny childhood within its walls. Here they are ever welcome, it is their second home, and it is a refuge, a haven of rest throughout all life. This Mamar Bari is the terror
of the modern educationists, for they find their pupils, particularly the girls, half the time absent from school on account of it. Moreover, the government schools under the present regulation must send their candidates for annual examination, girls as well as boys. And the ambitious Memsahib, who after much weary labor hopes to have her candidates ready to shine on that auspicious day, arrives in school one morning to learn to her consternation that her most brilliant lights have absented themselves, perhaps just a month before this important event is to occur. And where are they? They are eating sweetmeats in Mamar Bari, and as to your examinations, Madam,—well, they are your affair, you may take care of them.

It is difficult to adjust the oriental idea of education to that which the West of the present day is producing. The Hindu would call the latter a system of memorizing. Education, according to eastern ideas, is something that is to draw the whole nature nearer to the Eternal, to develop a deep-rooted logic that can conceive the why and wherefore of being; an unfolding of the heart to understand the world the more, to understand spiritual existence the better and to draw into its sympathy all life. Reading and writing may or may not be added. Thus were educated the women of the old school, who exercised great influence over their communities. But this is a world of change, and science is to do the work, transmit the knowledge, that was at one time transmitted through the rock temples and the pyramids, through the ancient epic poems and traditions. And now these people, ever slow to move and to yield to new impulses, are standing at a cross-road—India is in a state of transition. The education of women at this critical period is dangerous work. The educator must beware lest in the giving he may not cause more to be lost than he gives. To Westernize India's daughters would mean ruin to the race. And yet the old school is practically gone. What is wanted is a system combining the old heart culture with the head culture of the West: this is the problem that confronts the modern educationist.

But to return to Shikorbashini—she was taken to this Mamar Bari, this blissful retreat. And here she was petted and indulged and overfed with sweetmeats until she became fretful, and got boils; and when through over-feeding and over-indulgence these little tyrants become quite unmanageable, Mamar Bari sends them home to recuperate and get ready for the next visit. Thus amid affection and sweetmeats and terms of fond endearment the little Indian girl spends the sunny days of her childhood.

But there were serious discussions in Shikorbashini's maternal
uncle’s house this time. Her grandmother looked at her long and earnestly and then consulted with her husband and her sons and her daughters and daughters-in-law and her cousins and the many neighbors who came to visit her, and finally wound up by calling the Ghotki, that inevitable individual that cannot be dispensed with when a girl passes her tenth year, for she it is who makes the matches.

But it is not an easy task to find a husband for a girl. All the male and female relatives on both sides of the house have to take steps in the matter. And so it happened that our little heroine was nearly twelve years old before the matter was finally decided. Not that there was any want of suitors, but there was invariably something wrong. In one case the grandmother had a cancer, in another one of the mother’s brothers did not bear a good character, again the young suitor had failed in last year’s examinations. One there was who might have stood the test, but, poor boy, he had no mother. “How can I send my daughter into a motherless house?” called out Shikorbashini’s mother in despair, “who will pet my child, who will train her, if she has no mother-in-law?” These Indian ladies are pretty hard to please, and willing or not willing, the men must yield.

On one occasion one of Shikorbashini’s father’s cousins mentioned the name of a widower who was a gentleman of good standing and substantial means. But there was such an outcry in the Zenana that he was glad to get away and say no more on the subject. A man must be very poor and have many daughters before his wife will consent to give her child to one who has already known love. On another occasion, when all seemed favorable, the ladies discovered that he had a flat nose, and the suitor was again refused.

But after a long and weary search one was found who was satisfactory. There had been no hereditary ailments in his family for five generations; for five generations there had not been a member of the house who could not stand the severe Indian criticism as regards character; personally he was intellectual, good-looking and young. As regarded his social position there was no question about it, no Hindu can marry his daughter into a family beneath him in rank; marriages are always made in the same caste division. He had father and mother and sisters and brothers, so the whole system was complete.

Evolution is collective in this land. Marriages are not so much a question of promoting personal happiness as of adding to the well-being of the community, and the first consideration is supposed to
be to keep that pure. The individual is trained to merge his personality into the whole and sacrifice his private interests to the caste to which he belongs.

At last arrived the eventful day when the prospective father-in-law, accompanied by several friends, came to the house to see the little bride. And we now find the little heroine of our tale at the important task of having her toilet made. Her grandmother, and her mother, assisted by her aunts and several other ladies, were busy at decking her sweet form with pretty garments. And fair indeed she looked, this little damsel, in her flowing silken robes and rich gold ornaments. Women must be dressed as their rank demands. It is a religious duty devolving on the Indian house-holder to secure for wife and daughters suitable ornaments. And woe betide him who fails in this duty, for is it not written in Manu's Law that a house in which women are not honored will surely fall?

But Shikorbashini received that which is vastly more precious than silk or gold. She received words of counsel and admonition which fell deep into her soul. "My daughter," said the grand-dame, "you stand now at the threshold of your new life. The house in which you were born is not your real home, a woman must follow her husband. Remember, you are the daughter of an ancient race, fourteen generations look down upon you. Among them there has not once been a woman who has failed in the performance of her duty, who has not served her husband and his people till she drew her last breath, ever praying for the boon to precede husband and sons into death. Let the noble blood of your ancestors assert itself in you." And then there came a number of examples hoary with age, of women of the past who had attained to great spiritual heights because no task had been too heavy to secure the well-being of those they loved, until Shikorbashini's young spirit rose with pride and determination to be second to none in nobility of life.

It is on these lines that the character of the Indian race evolves. The duties before them may be great, the etiquette is always rigid, but one must know these women at forty to see the result. They cast around them a strong sense of self-respect that is not conscious of personal merit, but which has been developed by years of discipline in which not once the severe rules that regulate their lives have been broken. Theirs is not a life of servitude, but one of self-sacrifice and cheerful service, such as only a soul trained in the Hindu religion can grasp, and which has prepared for the race a highly superior type of womanhood. It is the women upon whom has devolved the task of preserving the nationality of the land; but for them the
Hindus would have ceased to be a nation through these dark cycles of suffering and hardships.

But where is Shikorbashini? Ah, she is ready—ready to appear before her father-in-law. Filled with inspiration of the future before her, the flush of youth on her fair young face blending softly with the maidenly shyness that lingered on her drooping lashes, she looked almost too fair for this world. A cloud-fairy, it would seem, had slid down on a silver beam to see this earth just once.

She entered with palpitating heart and was told to seat herself on a rug. She was already known to the visitors, having visited in their houses. They observed her closely, however, and decided in their minds that her features were regular—the nose aquiline, the mouth well curved, forehead not too high, etc., etc. The Hindus are severe critics of beauty, and that makes the selection of a bride often very difficult work.

All being agreeable, the prospective father-in-law wound up by saying that he would consult his elder brother about the matter, and he consenting, the arrangements would be made and word be sent in a day or two. And word was sent in due time, and all was settled.

Next the horoscopes of the two young people were consulted, and it was found that their characters were fitted for each other. They were both Dev-gan. Shikorbashini was Beebra-burna, that is to say, one whose touch meant blessing, and who would attain to great spirituality, a Brahmini of the soul as well as by right of birth.

Now began a lively time in the house. The goldsmith was sent for, and orders were given for ornaments. The sari woman came daily with a new supply, and each time selections were made. Cosmetics and perfumes and a hundred smaller toilet articles were procured. The guests began to arrive from the interior, for the wedding was to take place within a few days. Presents were exchanged daily between the two houses, servants, numbering as high as twenty, arrived carrying brass trays on their heads, which contained gifts of sweetmeats, fruits, saris, veils, etc. They received their meals each time they came, and oh, how busy everybody was. Then came the day of the ceremonial bath, for which her future mother-in-law sent the unguents. This day preceded the wedding-day. Meanwhile

*The Indian astrologers divide characters into three divisions, Dev-gan, Nur-gan and Rakush-gan. Of these Dev-gan is the highest. People belonging to different divisions will not agree in marriage.*
little Shikorbashini was half giddy with excitement in the expectation of the life before her.

The wedding-day is a very trying one for the little bride, at least so it would appear to an onlooker. But the little Indian girl takes great pride in all the ceremonies which she has to perform and the fast through the day that dare not be broken. Nothing could induce her to take the smallest particle of solid food. And Shikorbashini went through the ordeal with as much cheerfulness and as much pride as any little bride ever did. Up with the dawn she rose, and the day seemed not a bit too long for her.

At nine o'clock in the evening excitement reached its height. "The bridegroom is coming!" this joyous shout electrified the house. Everybody rushed to take a peep—everybody but the poor little bride herself, who must sit complacently in a corner and wait and wait and practise patience.

And gorgeously arrayed came the new son-in-law. Preceded by torchbearers and a band playing the bridal tune, he was himself seated on a large platform borne on the shoulders of over a hundred coolies. He was received by the bride's father and conducted to the seat of honor, where he remained quietly seated until the auspicious moment arrived. The day of the marriage as well as the hour in which the nuptial tie is to be bound, is always set by the astrologer, and the latter is invariably late in the evening, sometimes past midnight. It was 11 o'clock in our Shikorbashini's case. The ceremony is very long, lasting usually some hours. It begins with the bridegroom and the bride's father, but the most impressive part of it commences when the little bride appears.

And so appeared our charming little heroine, seated on a small square wooden board, on which in Sanskrit words of good augury were written. She was clad in rose colored silk and gauze from the top of her stately head to the tip of her little crimson tinted toes.

The bridegroom stood erect facing the East, and the ladies—seven in number, all relatives of the bride—now took part in the ceremony. They walked around the bridegroom in procession headed by the bride's mother, all carrying little bundles of sticks burning with a bright flame, and looked as if they were going to set their gauzy garments on fire at any moment. But they did not, nor do they ever, for although it looks dangerous—this fire in the hands of chatting, smiling little ladies—the Indian women have such an easy way of moving about, that the Vedic fire is quite safe in their hands.

And now at last came the little bride's turn. Carried by three
of her relatives she was borne around the bridegroom seven times. Then came the great moment of her life, for now for the first time they who were to walk the road of life together, were to look into each others' eyes. A large shawl was suspended over their heads, held at each corner by an attendant. The bride's maternal uncle held a candle so that they might see each other well, and joked, of course, while he did so, for they must stand it all on their wedding-day, and neither of them dares say a word.

And how did our little Indian maiden feel at this first glance? At first she was quite timid, she dared not lift her eyes, but being urged on by him who held the candle, she looked up. Yes, she looked up, and she saw gazing into her own two deep black eyes that seemed to speak to her of ages long ago, when in other forms she had walked this earth again and again—again and again to be united to him who stood before her as her husband now. A thrill of delight went through the maiden's young heart, she saw the future stretched out before her smiling and happy, for he was no stranger to her, he was the Lord of her soul, part of her being. It was the training of the Hindu character that asserted itself. It is not a question of discovering mutual attraction by previous contact, but that love must find its own in the depth of the soul. And he who gazed at her, what did he experience? How often in after-life did he not tell her all that he had felt that moment, that he had discovered in her as she did in him, the comrade of the soul throughout all ages until the Great Silence is reached.

This ceremony over, they returned to the priest, who performed again numerous rites, each of which had reference to one of the different stages of life that are to be passed through. When they rose, their garments were knotted together, and thus they went to the inner apartment. Here they were received by the female guests who greeted them and met the bridegroom with unveiled faces, for this is the day on which there is no restraint.

This marriage is, however, only a betrothal, and the young people are not left without a chaperone during the short time that they are together, and they must observe the strictest etiquette.

Little Shikorbashini went through it all with downcast eyes. On the day following the marriage, she was taken to her new home to be formally introduced to her husband's people—now her own. Again that picturesque ride on the canopied platform, carried on the shoulders of coolies. This time they sat together, whose young lives had been joined.

A more charming picture cannot be imagined than that of a
young bride being taken to her father-in-law's house. Veiled in gauze and silk, adorned with rich jewelries, she sits on an artistic throne beside her young husband. It seems the doors of fairyland had opened—a Cinderella outfit indeed. But modesty must be her greatest jewel, and the little girl-bride looks the more charming because of her drooping lashes and slightly bent head. The band precedes as on the day of the bridegroom's coming; and slowly the procession moves.

It was nearly evening before Shikorbashini's marriage procession reached its destination, and it was her eldest sister-in-law, her husband's eldest brother's wife, who received her. The conveyance having entered the court, away from the gaze of the curious crowd, she came and carried her new little sister-in-law into the house; for the bride who enters her new home must not cross the threshold unaided. Would she be so little welcome as to have to walk into the house? Here again numerous ceremonies awaited her, all indicative of the life before her.

There were festivities and many guests in her honor, and it seemed as if the gaieties would never end. The following day the little bride sat in state, and many visitors came to see her. All blessed her and called on heaven for her future happiness, while ever she sat with downcast eyes and spoke not, her veil drawn over her pretty face.

The elder ladies had the privilege of lifting the veil; the ceremony of lifting the veil from a bride's face is a charming one. Often compliments are showered upon her who stands with downcast eyes, but the national training must here, as in all other cases, assert itself. She dare not grow vain who is thus complimented, but she must try the harder to make her heart as pure as her face is fair. And if she be plain—then there is always a time-honored story, a maxim to indicate that the face matters but little if the heart be pure. So whether pretty or plain, it is always the inner nature that gives true beauty.

"And now, daughter-in-law, look up and let us see your eyes," said her new mother to Shikorbashini. She lifted her long silken lashes, and the light of a thousand stars shone on the one who looked. "Yes, those are the right eyes," came the reply, and there was the ghost of a smile around the bride's pretty lips.

Meanwhile, the maid-servant, whom Shikorbashini's mother had sent along with the procession, sat in the middle of the room and took care that the conversation did not lag. These old factotums are great historians; they know everybody in the community to the
third and fourth generation, and can tell you all manner of details about them. Woe betide him who stinted at either his son's or his daughter's marriage, for Hori Dasi7 will repeat it of him to the end of her days and transmit the knowledge to her grandchildren.

It is a remarkable thing that in this land of caste there exists a democracy so broad that it would put the average western socialist agitator to shame. The caste works like a great unit. Even as the different members of the body have each their function to perform and yet could never be separated from the whole, so different caste divisions each perform their work. In his place every caste member is respected, his rights no power in the land can break.

But to return to our little bride. After a few days she went again to her parental home, busy, oh so busy, telling all the new things she had seen, and the new impressions she had received. But the time of courtship had commenced, and the two young people must meet often. And oh, the excitement when the son-in-law visited, or again when the young bride went to her father-in-law's house for several days at a time.

At first Shikorbashini felt quite shy in her new home, but everybody was so kind to her, so cheerful that she soon felt quite at ease. The training commenced now in good earnest, however: the young bride dared no longer jump about, but must walk with quiet, measured step; she dared not look about her carelessly this way and that, but must walk about with drooping lashes; her head must no longer be uncovered; shoes could no more be worn, and the shindu, that crimson mark just above the forehead where the hair is parted, which most of all denotes wifehood, must never be omitted, it would mean bad luck to go without it. She had always to show due respect to her husband's parents, salute them with joined palms, never sit down in their presence, etc., etc.

Her husband had four brothers elder than himself, so Shikorbashini was the fifth daughter-in-law, and the five sisters-in-law had cheerful times together. Together they chatted and told each other those tender secrets that stir the heart at youth, for there is much romance behind those stern gray walls, and the zenana rings with courtship.

Of course she made numerous mistakes in her new surroundings, which did not a little to heighten the merriment of the house, while the old joined in the frolic with the young and even the father-in-law heard of it to his great amusement. There was a merry twinkle in his eyes when he spoke to her one day, but Shikorbashini saw it not.

7A name commonly given to the women of the serving caste.
"Well, little daughter-in-law, how do you like the ways of our house?"

A pout around her lips indicated that her little ladyship was not quite pleased.

"But remember, you are my daughter now," and Shikorbashini felt the touch of a tender palm on her head. "You know you are not your father's child any more. You will always live in my house, you must get accustomed to its ways."

This was confidence inspiring. Meanwhile, the mother-in-law gave orders that the new little daughter was not to be made to do anything that seemed as yet too new to her. "She is young, let her become used to our ways gradually." These words indeed contain mainly the reason why Hindu parents want the son's wives when they are young. Furthermore, it devolves on the mother-in-law to see that the young wife's character is moulded to suit her husband's, so there will be no cry of incompatibility of character later on.

But we have never yet seen our Shikorbashini with her young lover.

There was a long veranda that led to the family worship-room. The waning day brings darkness quickly in this land, for twilight is short in the vicinity of the equator. Our little bride reserved for herself the task of dusting this worship-room in the evening. She walked the long veranda quite fearlessly, bearing a small lantern to light the way. She opened the heavy lock, and it fell to the floor with a loud sound. But why should it fall just that way every evening? What does it mean?

What does it mean? Hark the call of the wood-dove to its mate through the quiet woodland in the evening hour; lo, the twin-stars on the nightly sky, that shed their light and seem lost in each other—what does it all mean but the call of soul to soul? Below was the study room, and from it disappeared a stately youth, soon to emerge from the stairs near the takur ghor. I do not know his name, nor does it matter, for Shikorbashini will never pronounce it, nor will he hers, for those names are too sacred to be pronounced. In fact, the necessity for it is absent, for husband and wife are one, and separate names need not be employed.

But he came, and they met, and it took a long time to brush the room. He dared not enter it, because before entering that sacred place one must bathe and wear a silk garment. So the little maiden had the better of him. She went inside while he sat on the threshold and dared him catch her if he could. The moonbeams glistened

*Worship-room.
through the vine-clad lattice that screened the veranda ere they returned, and at the threshold they still lingered, and then departing both went their way sedately and with downcast eyes.

And in those balmy nights when whispering winds breathe languorous love, nights such as the mystic Orient alone knows, then when the house was still and sleep rested on its inmates, often two quiet figures would steal aloft until they reached the broad terrace. And there alone by the moon-kissed leaves of the quivering vine that scaled the balconies and found its way to the very roof, they stood silently together and gazed into the outstretched world of space, and their souls soared upward until all sense of separateness was lost, and heart gave unto heart those sacred vows that youth and the moonlight know so well. And naught was near save the great Eternal Presence, and the mysterious black nightbird that soared through the moonlit stillness, was the only earthly thing that saw, or did not see. For all is so wrapt in the brooding on the eternal verity in this strange land that even beast and bird are drawn unconsciously into that which makes one forget the world below. And oft they lingered till the east shed crimson tints, and the caw of the relentless crow heralded the break of day.

But there were other and less dreamy times. There was a party which Shikorbashini and two of her sisters-in-law attended. Her mother-in-law arranged her hair and dressed her, and oh, the pride the Indian mother takes to have her son’s wife outshine all the others. Shikorbashini, being still young, was specially entrusted to the care of her eldest sister-in-law. The reception at the party was most cordial and compliments were lavishly bestowed. “Whose pretty daughter-in-law is this?” It is never “Whose wife is this?” Ah, it is a proud position that of daughter-in-law. If fate is ever so cruel as to throw a young wife back into her parental home, her position in society is much lowered, and she becomes an object of general pity. But in her husband’s father’s house she rules and is honored.

In due time Shikorbashini and her sisters-in-law returned home. On entering the house they saw a youthful figure standing near, and Shikorbashini lingered behind. Would he not admire her in her beautiful attire; would she not tell him first all she had seen at the party? But courtship is a very private affair in India; to show affection before others would seem repulsive or even lewd in Hindu eyes. And yet romance is ever active, but the Hindu is sensitive to delicate impressions. What ecstasy the young lover feels when he sees the crimson footprints made by the newly tinted lotus-feet
of the maiden he adores! In western lands the lover sends a timid glance to the ivy-clad window, but the Hindu spices the crimson imprint of her feet, and his young heart laughs.

Over twenty minutes elapsed before she arrived upstairs, and she found the whole family awaiting her with wistful smiles upon their faces.

"What does this mean?" exclaimed her father-in-law with feigned surprise. "Did I not send you under the protection of my eldest daughter-in-law? And has she gone off and left you to come home alone?" Meanwhile the little bride stood with drooping lashes, delightfully tantalized, a charming combination of smiles and lace and gauze and blushes. One must have seen these exquisite little girl-brides, to understand the patriarch when he stands threatening at the zenana door. "We want none of your western ways, our women suit us as they are."

Thus passed the days in peaceful happiness and lengthened into months and these into years. But Shikorbashini knew it not, for youth and courtship do not record numbers; she only felt that time was passing sweet. Three years went by unnoticed, and our little heroine had entered on her sixteenth year. There was an atmosphere of dignity around her as in the twilight hour she sat on the cool veranda, and the light that shone from the midnight lustre of her glorious eyes bore witness that a new experience had stirred her soul. The hour had come to her to which the Hindu woman looks forward with most ardent anticipations, the keynote of her life had been sounded, for Shikorbashini was now a mother. How Madonna-like looked this youthful mother in her flowing robes, her infant boy resting upon her arm—the gift of the gods, who would be her mainstay through life, for between mother and son there is no separation in India. But he would more than comfort and support her; he would perform for her the sacred rites long after her soul had quitted its fleshy abode.

Two months later she dressed him in red garments and put marks of sandal wood paste upon his pretty face, for the name-giving ceremony. The feast was prepared, the invited friends and relatives arrived, and the family priest performed the ceremony, while the little one laughed and received the blessings of the elders and the caresses of the young.

Duties increased with motherhood, and every night saw Shikorbashini at the shrine, performing her religious duties, now no longer playfully as in the days of her courtship, but with earnest devotion, often spending a long time in prayer and meditation.
She took many vows—the vow of Savitri, the perfect wife, the vow of the faithful daughter-in-law, and others. On those days she ate nothing but silently dedicated her inner life to the object in view, until in the evening the priest performed the ceremony and told her that the gods had accepted her prayer.

Thus moved the days, as all zenana days do, quietly, uneventfully, with less occupation than the western woman has but more of the contemplative life.

But sorrow came, and her child, her heart's idol, became ill and grew worse from day to day. Her mother-in-law applied her own remedies, and when they no longer availed, called a physician. Still the fever abated not, and the case became more serious. Then Shikorbashini in her agony went to the temple of Kali. There she poured out her soul in ardent prayer, she wounded her chest and let the blood drop out at the feet of the goddess, and when her little one recovered, after days of tender nursing, she always felt sure within herself that it was the votive offering of her heart's blood that had saved him.

And in the course of time sons and daughters were given her whom she reared as she herself had been reared, always with tenderness and words of reason. Between husband and wife the tie grew ever stronger until their lives became so blended that separation even for a day seemed impossible to bear. He came to her for advice in all the affairs of his outer life, for woman's counsel is highly prized in this land. She attended to her many social duties, her charities and her household with strict compunction and assisted her husband in the management of his estate. In time she became the head of her house, where she ruled with quiet dignity, ever serving as she ruled. And thus she lived until her hair grew gray, and the relentless hand of time knocked heavily at the door.

And did it find her unready, did she fear to face the future? The Hindu smiles at what the world calls death. Do we not know when the shadows lengthen and the western sky grows scarlet, that even has come and night is near? And when the body feels the touch of age, knows not man that the evening of his life has come, and that sleep will heal his eyes ere long? For is it not all in accordance with Eternal Law? A child alone shrinks from the inevitable.

Thus Shikorbashini knew her time was coming. Still the prayer never left her lips, "Let me precede him into death." An illness seized her, she knew it was her last. Husband and sons called doctors, and remedies were given. But the strong woman smiled
and only repeated what she had told them before, "My time has come to leave this earth."

She set the day which would be her last, and calm and with unaltering voice gave orders for the last rites to be performed. And husband and sons obeyed her bidding. They performed the religious ceremony as prescribed by their caste. The night that followed found her awake but calm and peaceful, and when the soft dawn kissed the still sleeping earth, a strong soul went hence in perfect consciousness and without struggle. It was Purnema\(^9\) day, a day auspicious for those who enter the realms of space. And ere two hours had elapsed, a body was taken to the Ganges riverside, and after the form had been cremated the ashes were committed to the Ganga's sin-laden flood, to be carried to the main.

And those who wept felt strength coming from the very tears they shed, for she who had gone hence had left them a rich legacy. She had taught them how to live, she had taught them how to die, and all who had known her prayed to be able to face that hour as she had faced it.

Thus did she live and die, this strong Hindu woman. And thus are there many who live their lives behind the gray zenana walls. The world knows them not, but they have kept a great race alive. As they live, even so do they face death, calmly ready to proceed on the great journey that leads the soul on its mysterious path through the fields of space, through many lives on many stars until the Great Silence is reached.

\(^9\) The day that precedes the full-moon night.