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THIS IS HOW IT IS

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We lived in the house now for only three months but already the children come. We are careful, living in India, because we are not prepared to battle the diseases strange to our bodies and so we must sometimes inhibit our love for the children until we are stronger. We are strangers to the country but not to the hunger and yearning on the faces of the children. The children are all from one family, and our favorite is the wild little five-year-old girl named Sakri. But aside from this slight preference we laugh and run with her two older brothers, Ramchander and Deysha, and the older and beautiful sister, Mutelly. The tiny baby, Thumpully, doesn't count but only bounces along first on one hip, and then another. This is a family of Untouchables and although the constitution makes them equals the Laws of the Heart do not as yet.

The children have no school and so they have no English. We cannot speak Hindi, Telegu, or Urdu but it doesn't seem to matter because we all get along on our looks. Once a month Sakri's mother washes her in a pail and picks the lice from her wild hair before she greases it and then sends her up to our house on the rock so Sakri can smile and show off. At first all the children came to beg when we walked by because ancient tradition would not permit them anywhere near either us or our house. When people have had no dignity, or worth in the family for thousands of years, you do not build such exquisite temples in one generation. And so Sakri and her gang smiled and waved from a distance but we could not resist her excitement. Soon my own children had them all by the hand and now, in three months, they are at the house.

They came to beg but such transactions are one-way and there is no worth involved. Personal price is not fixed with a coin and you cannot buy people, not even the little beggar, Sakri. We have a small lawn, and many potted plants, and we pass out bowls and pails to this tiny mob and they water our patch of garden for us. They set Thumpully under the outside faucet so she gets cleansed with each watering and thus she is the cleanest of the children. Ramchander is the oldest

(1) Dr. Neil Lamper has recently returned to the campus of Western Michigan University after a ten-months stay in India.

boy and he fills the bowls and the others line up and then carry the pails on their heads to where they dump them on the grass. When the work is done, we pay them each a few paise and now they know how to work for a living, and you can *read* the new feelings on their faces.

This is the best reading of all but we wondered about the other, even though these children will never go to school. The government has schools but these Little Ones are lost in the press of five hundred million others and it is something of a miracle that they even live. That they do live is more the result of small, unscheduled fractions of human contact than of any government plan. Somehow Sakri's family is a small unit of humanity huddled under rags against a wall in central India; and somehow we have flown halfway around the world and live in this house perched on a rock alongside this same wall. Whereas we see it as a miracle they see it as God's will. Well, we are not given to argue either with miracles, or God's will, and when Sakri comes with her gang to our door there is nothing to do but to resign ourselves to the beauty and excitement of such an accident of friendship.

Sakri will not come alone into the house and I take her by one hand and she drags in the chain of the three others. Thumpully bounces along in-between anywhere she can ride for free. If we try to take Sakri alone, her eyes fill with fear and she whimpers and pulls away, and then gallops out of the house in full flight like some kind of escaped gazelle.

There is no friendship without trust and after the watering is done we wonder if something more can be done with the trust. Sakri found a rubber ball and bounced it and nothing like this ever happened in her life and she squealed and looked at the ball with a kind of reverence. When I saw the awe on her face, I saw how maybe religions begin and I suppose a ball is as worshipful as anything else. But then my children pushed a small table into the middle of the room and on the table they put huge sheets of paper. They bring with them from our culture an ecstasy of crayons, and colors and they write stories to each other and make little books. And Sakri and her followers stood around ranged in a half-circle, and on their faces was the envy of being left out. Then my oldest daughter smiled and made a place for them and the four brown bodies fell to and filled the sheets with the same kind of thing, and they did it all with an ease and exactness that puzzled us. We thought how even imitation may be a kind of gross learning, and we could hear these children pick up the sounds of our voices and in one day use words like, "bucket,"

“water,” and “grass.” We gave each one a pencil, there, and in less time than the telling they copied and spoke whole sentences and now we stood amazed in a half-circle. The world is filled with picture-vocabularies and words are pictures and here were the children writing whole sentences in cursive script, and then learning to read them and use them in scraps of conversation the next day.

If you ask me about the mystery I must stop and think. From my rooftop all Hyderabad spreads out to the edge of the world. Each night the sun streaks the sky with bright red and soft purple sarees, and these lines of God’s linen are hung from the tips of the four dark minarets of Charminar, poked dark up into the wealth of sky-cloth. From this rooftop we look down into the well of our neighbor’s yard, the well built in the time of Abraham and we watch the servant grind the spices with a rock roller on a slab of stone. Down around the corner of the wall of the compound Sakri plays now with her brothers and sisters, and it is from their voices that the answer comes to me.

Sakri and Ramchander and Deysha and the Beautiful Mutelly have excitement. No matter what they do they bring to it everything that they are. They run and bounce and roll and laugh and call out and they are fixed firmly to the earth. They have a freedom to be that is not inhibited by any standardized process seeking to hammer them into anything other than what they are. This is the beginning of wisdom, of all knowledge: to live in a universe that affirms them. If later the children wish to change, to learn new habits and ways of living, such coin will be the interest paid on back savings inherited and carried in the safety deposit boxes of their genes. This excitement and verve is infectious and if others around them handle it with care everything is possible. Sakri is pretty, and I tell her so and the first words in English she learns to speak are, “Pretty Sakri.” She writes them large with a blazing, red crayola from America, and this is the best of foreign aid. None other is of any value, either to nations, or individuals and even Mutelly blossoms gently into a woman under the warm eyes of those who love her and think her beautiful. Like God, these children begin with I Am, and then everything else possible to man can be added unto them. If you seek first the kingdom of the heart all other things follow and that is the basic mystery.

And I learn it all from my rooftop bathed in Indian skies and when I call down, Sakri raises her face and laughs and her white teeth flash and we both know about these things, and that’s how it is. And it is all a gift to me.