

I was up early, dressing quietly while Chandra still slept. All traces of the wedding had disappeared, and the house and courtyard were bare and unfamiliar. When I looked about for even the small comforts of my own home, a worn rug or a lumpy cushion, there were none to be seen.

My sass was scooping rice from a pan into a bowl. "Stir the rice while I take this to Hari," she said.

"I could take it to . . ." I paused. Husband was too serious a word, and it would have been unseemly of me to call him by his name.

She gave me a sharp look. "I will see to Hari. Don't let the rice burn."

Mr. Mehta, my sassur, left early in the day for

the school where he taught. Chandra took the washing to the nearby river. Hari stayed in his room. I was left alone with Sass, who found one task after another for me. I took the bowls to the well in the courtyard and scoured them with ashes and sand. I returned to scour them a second time when Sass found a bit of stickiness on one of the bowls. "How were you brought up, girl?" she scolded, not even calling me by my name. I led the cow out to the field in the morning and brought her back in the afternoon for my sass to milk, but the cow was so thin, I could not see how there would be much milk. Late in the afternoon Sass went off to the village to get medicine for Hari, saying she could not trust a girl my age to get what was needed.

"You're not to bother Hari," she said as she left. "He needs his rest. I'll be gone only a short time."

When I heard Hari cough, I knew he must be awake. It did not seem fair to keep a wife from her husband. Chandra was busy in the courtyard carrying water from the well to the small vegetable

garden, where squashes and melons were creeping about, looking for room to grow. There was a mango tree with fragrant flowers in the courtyard. Though Chandra warned me not to, I gathered a handful of the blossoms and took them to Hari's room.

Hari was sitting up in bed. Sprinkled all around the bed were leaves from the healing neem tree. He was looking very pale, but he seemed pleased to see me. "I brought you these," I said, laying the blossoms on his bed. As my eyes grew accustomed to the dim room, I noticed with amazement that pinned onto the mud-brick walls was an endless array of butterflies and bugs. There must have been a hundred of them, all different. I walked about looking at the butterflies' bright colors and the bugs' strange shapes. "Where did they all come from?" I asked.

Proudly he said, "They are my collection. When I was well, I gathered them. Since I have been sick, people bring them to me. I know the name of every one. If you see a bug or a butterfly, you must bring it to me."

"I could bring you bugs, though I don't like to

pick them up. But I wouldn't want to stick butterflies to the wall."

"You have to do what I tell you because you are my wife, and besides I'm not well."

"Are you very sick?"

He was holding one of the blossoms, touching the petals. "Yes," he said. His voice was hoarse from coughing. He gave me a sulky look. "They shouldn't leave me alone with no one here to fetch me something if I need it." He peered at me from under his long eyelashes. When I did not reply, he said, "I heard the doctor say I will die."

"I don't believe you!" My heart was pounding, though, for I did believe him. Lying there in his bed without his wedding garments, he looked thin as a willow twig and very weak. I was sure he had a fever, for though the day was cool, his hair lay in damp curls on his forehead, and there was a red spot high on each cheek.

"They're going to take me to Varanasi," Hari said. "They think bathing in the Ganges will make me well. I don't think anything will make me well."

"How can you say that?" I asked. I felt myself

trembling. How could he speak so calmly about his death?

Hari went on, "If I am very lucky, I will die in Varanasi so that my ashes will be scattered over the holy Ganges River; then my spirit will be free." His whole body shook with coughing.

"I'll be right back," I said, and fled the room. Part of me wanted to escape Hari's shocking words, and part of me wanted to find a way to help him. I remembered how my maa had given me honey and ginger when I had a bad cold. I found a ginger root to grate. I had to stick my fingers in several jars before I discovered the honey. It was hidden away in the back of the cupboard.

Hari took three spoonfuls of the honey and ginger. After a few minutes, when the coughs grew fewer, he smiled at me.

"Tell me about your home," he ordered. It seemed that all his requests were commands.

I brought my quilt, climbing on Hari's bed the better to show it to him. "This is my maa and baap and my brothers and our cow, which we had to sell

so I could marry you. This is our marketplace, where my baap has a stall to write letters." I showed him the spice merchants and the vegetable stalls and the man with the basket of cobras. I was so lost in amusing Hari with the pictures on my quilt, I didn't hear his maa come into the room.

"What are you doing here, girl! Get off Hari's bed! Why have you stolen the honey?" She flung the quilt at me and snatched the blossoms from the bed. "You have torn the mango flowers from the tree." While I stood there trembling, she counted the blossoms. "There are six of them. Six blossoms that will never be fruit. You have robbed us of six mangoes. I will remember that when we share out the fruit."

Hari gave his maa a sullen look. "Koly brought me the flowers to cheer me. No one else has brought flowers. She was telling me stories of her home, and she gave the honey to me for my cough. It made it better."

Hari's maa looked closely at him. "I doubt it is the honey, but I can give it to you as well as she

can." She turned to me. "Leave the boy, now. He needs rest. You can make the fire for our dinner." Her voice was not so angry. She could see for herself that Hari was coughing less.

I found Hari's sister, Chandra, soaking the lentils for dinner.

"Chandra," I whispered, hardly daring to speak the terrible words aloud. "Is it true Hari is going to die?"

She answered in an even quieter whisper. "It's what the doctor warns us of. There is no medicine that can cure him." There were tears in her sad eyes.

"It's why Maa and Baap are taking him to Varanasi. They hope the Ganges will make him better."

"Will you and I go to Varanasi too?" I had heard of the holy city all of my life. It would be a great thing to see. But after I asked, I was ashamed to think I wanted pleasure from so unhappy a trip.

"No. Only Maa and Baap will go. They have friends to stay with, but the railway fare is expensive."

"Chandra, I don't understand why they let Hari get married to me when he was so sick. Why did

they lie to my parents about his age? Hari can't be sixteen."

Chandra looked over her shoulder to be sure we were alone. In a voice so quiet I had to lean close to her to hear, she said, "My parents needed money for the doctor and money to take Hari to Varanasi. They believe the Ganges is his last hope. A dowry was the only way they could get the money."

It was not I who was wanted at all. It was the money. I felt as if I were tangled like a small fly in the web of a cunning spider. If Hari died, what would become of me? I would be a widow whom no one would want. I had been told stories of terrible days long ago when widows were thrown on the burning funeral pyres of their husbands. I couldn't imagine that Sass would do such a thing, but the thought made me shiver.

I was very angry at the Mehtas, but after listening all day to Hari's terrible coughing, I began to think that if the Ganges could cure Hari, our wedding would not be such a bad thing.

That evening, when Hari's baap returned home, there was a terrible quarrel in Hari's room. I heard

Hari's voice and then his maa's and his baap's. Everyone was shouting. When Hari began coughing, his maa began to cry. Suddenly there was a loud crash.

I jumped. "What was that?" I asked Chandra.

"It's only Hari throwing something. He always does that when he doesn't get his way."

"Do your parents allow such behavior?"

"They never scold him. They let him have his way because he is their only son and he is so sick."

We could hear the angry voices through the thin walls. "Hari, listen to reason," his maa said. "She would only be in the way, and we cannot afford it."

"I won't go without her," Hari shouted in a hoarse voice. "She's my wife now. It's her money that is taking us."

Hari's baap tried to quiet his wife. "All this arguing is very bad for Hari. It must stop. We can take a child's pass on the railway for the girl, and she won't eat much."

"Tell her to come and see me," Hari said.

Hari's maa sounded tired. "You've had your

way. That's enough. Now you must rest."

"I want to see her." There was another crash.

A moment later Hari's maa stood beside me.

"Go to your husband," she said in a cross voice.

He was sitting up in his bed, the two spots on his cheeks redder than ever. He had a sly look on his face. "I fixed it so you can come with us," he said. "You must tell me more stories about your village and the people who live there. You must obey me."

I wanted to tell him that he was only my age and in bed besides. I did not see how he could make me do something unless I wanted to. But I was grateful to him for making his parents take me to Varanasi. Besides, I was afraid that if I answered him back, Hari would start coughing or throw something.

I settled cross-legged on the floor beside his charpoy and began the story of the man who came to ask my baap to write to the government because the government's train killed his cow. As everyone knows, cows are sacred to Hindus, so it was a

serious thing. The man was upset. Letters went back and forth. After many weeks the government sent a letter saying they must have proof that the cow had been killed. The man said he would send the cow's bones. The government said how could they tell whose bones the cow's were? The bones of someone else's cow might be sent. The man was so angry with the government for doubting his honesty that he wouldn't send them any more letters. Two years later a man from the government came to the village bringing a fine cow for the man, but the man said the government had insulted him, and he refused to take the cow.

Hari laughed so at the story that his coughing became worse, and his maa sent me angrily from the room.

Later in the day a doctor came. After he examined Hari, he stood in the courtyard with Hari's maa and baap. I crept close to listen. "Do as you like," the doctor said, "but if it were my son, I would not subject him to such a journey." The doctor's voice was very solemn. "I cannot hold out much hope for

him: His tuberculosis is of a new kind that does not respond to medication. Still, with complete rest he may have weeks, perhaps months to live."

After the doctor left, Hari's maa asked in an impatient voice, "Are we to listen to such a man when the waters of the Ganges River are waiting?"

Hari's baap said, "The doctor is a learned man. He must know of what he speaks."

"He may be learned about his medicine, but what does he know of the healing power of the Ganges?"

As in everything, Hari's baap allowed his wife to make the decision. That night the bhagat, the local healer, came and chanted over Hari while brushing him with the leaves of a neem tree to give him strength for our trip to Varanasi the following morning.