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# **Bubbles of the Foam**

F. W. (Francis William) Bain

# Imprint

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## BUBBLES OF THE FOAM

*So Life's sad Sunset prizes  
What Life's gay Dawn despises,  
And always Winter wise is  
When Summer is no more:  
While Love than lightning fleeter  
Turns all he touches sweeter,  
To leave it incompleter  
Behind him, than before.  
Amara*

*Years, looking forward, all too slow,  
Yet looking back, too fast,  
What is your joy, what is your woe,  
But scented ash that used to glow,  
A sandalwood of long ago,  
A camphor of the past?  
Sulochana*

*What! Mortal taste Immortal? Earth, kiss Heaven?  
Confusion elemental!, ah! beware!  
Somadewa*

DEDICATED  
TO  
LADY GLENCONNER



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## INTRODUCTION

Four things are never far from you, in old Hindoo literature: underfoot, all round you, or away on the horizon, there they always are: the Forest, the Desert, the River, and the Hills.

It is never very easy, to understand the Past that really is a past: and the age of Forests, like that of chivalry, is gone. But in the case of ancient India, the chief obstacle to understanding arises from our bad habit of always looking at the map with the North side up. Why this inveterate apotheosis of the North? Would you understand the old Hindoos, you must turn the map of India very nearly upside down, so as to get Peshawar at the bottom, and the Andaman Islands exactly at the top. And then, history lies all before you, right side up, and you get your intellectual bearings, and take in the early situation, at a glance. Entering, like those old nomads, through the Khaibàr, you find yourself suddenly in the Land of Streams: and as you drift along, you go, simply because you must, straight on, down the River "ganging on" (*Gangá*) towards the rising sun, "ahead," (which is the Sanskrit term for East,) all under the colossal wall of Hills, the home of Snow, where the gods live, on your left (*uttara*, the North, the heights;) while on the South, (the *right* hand, *dakshina*, the Deccan) you are debarred, not by Highlands, but by two not less peremptory rebutters: first, by the Desert, *Marusthali*, the home of death: and then again, a little farther on, by the Forest of the South: the vast, mysterious, impenetrable Wood, of which the *Rámáyana* preserves for us the pioneering record and original idea, with its spell of the Unknown and the Adventure (like the Westward Ho! of a later age) with its Ogres and its Sprites, its sandal trees and lonely lotus-tarns, its armies of ugly little ape-like men, and its legendary Lanka (Ceylon) lost in a kind of halo of shell-born pearls, and gems, and their Ten-headed Devil King, *Ráwana*, away, away, at the very end of all: so distant, as to be little more than mythical, little better than a dream. No! Those who wish to see things with the eyes of old Hindoos must not begin, as we did, and do still, with Ceylon, and the adjacent coasts of Coromandel and Malabar. That is the wrong, the *other* end: it is like starting English history from "the peak in Darien."

But our particular concern, in these pages, is with the Desert. The conventional notion of a desert, as a colourless and empty flat of sand, is curiously unlike the thing itself, which is a constantly changing, kaleidoscopic sea of colour, made up of rainbow stripes, black, golden, red, dazzling white, and blue, with every kind of lights and shadows, strange hazes, transparencies, and gleams. True, the ground you actually tread upon is bare: but it is clothed with raiment woven by that magic artist, Distance, out of cloud and heat and air and sky. And so, when these old Hindoo people came to make a closer acquaintance with the Desert, so dangerous to enter, so difficult, as Mahmood subsequently found, to cross, they discovered, that over and above the plain prosaic danger, this Waste of Sand laid, like a very demon, goblin snares for the unwary traveller's destruction, in the form of its Mirage. Ignorant of "optical phenomena," they gazed at this strange illusion, these phantom trees and water, these mocking semblances of cities that vanished as you reached them, with astonishment, and even awe. It struck their imagination, and they gave to it a name scarcely less poetical than the thing: calling it "*deer-water*," or the "*thirst of the antelope*." [1] Nor was this all. For the apparition was a kind of symbol, made as it were expressly for their own phenomenology: it contained a moral meaning that harmonised precisely with all their philosophical ideas. What could be a better illustration of that *Máyá*, that metaphysical Delusion, in which all souls are wrapped, which leads them to impute Reality to the Phantasms, the unsubstantial objects of the senses, and lures them on to moral ruin as they wander in the waste? And accordingly, we find the poets constantly recurring to this *thirst of the gazelle*, as an emblem of the treacherous and bewildering fascination of the fleeting shadows of this lower life (*ihaloka*;) the beauty that is hollow, the Bubble of the World. And thus, Disappointment is of the essence of Existence: disappointment, which can only come about, when hopes and expectations have been founded on a want of understanding (*awiweka*;) a blindness, born of Desire, that sets and keeps its unhappy victims hunting, in vain, for what is not to be found.

Especially, essentially, in love: love, which has its origin in Dream, its acme in Ecstasy, and its catastrophe in Disillusion: love, which is life's core and kernel and epitome, the focus and quintes-

sence of existence. A life that is without it has somehow missed its mark: it is meaningless and plotless, "a string of casual episodes, like a bad tragedy." For what, after all, is Love? Who has given an account of it? Plato's fable, which makes Love the child of Satiety and Want, or Poverty and Plenty, is a pretty piece of fancy: it is clever: but like mathematics, an explanation of the brain rather than the heart. Something is missing. For Plato, almost always delicate and subtle, is never tender: the reason is, that he was atrophied on the feminine side: he does not consequently understand sex, being himself only half a man: that is, only man and nothing more. But all the really great imaginative men are bi-sexual: they have a large ingredient of woman in their composition, which gives to their divination an extra touch of something that others cannot reach. And so, with equal poetry, yet with a pathos infinitely deeper, our Milton makes Love the child of Loneliness: [2] a parentage evinced by the terrible melancholy of Love when he cannot find his proper object, and the blank desolation and despair of the frightful void and blackness left behind, when he has lost it. But now, it is just this intolerable loneliness which makes him idealise the commonplace, and see all things in the light of his own yearning, creating for himself visions of unimaginable happiness, which presently vanish, to resolve his Eden into nothing, and leave him, with no companion but the horror of his own intensified isolation, in the sand. A situation, which hardly any lover that really is a lover can endure, without going mad. They are very shallow theologians, who by way of pandering to sentimental prejudices make the essence of the Deity to consist in Love. Poor Deity! his life would be a Hell, past all human imagination: an everlasting Loneliness, with no prospect of release. For it is precisely to escape from this hell that so many forlorn lovers take refuge in the tomb: a resource not available to those who cannot die. Death is not always terrible: sometimes he is kind.

Such then is the theme of *Bubbles of the Foam*: a little love-story, whose title, like that of all her elder sisters, has in the original a double application, by reason of the ambiguity of the last word, to Love, and to the Moon. We might also render it, *A Heavenly Bubble*, or, *Love is a Bubble*, or *Nothing but a Bubble*, or *A Bubble of the World*, [3] thinking either of Love or the Moon. For the Moon, like the goddess of Love, rose originally from the sea: and they retain traces of

their origin, both in their essence and their appearance. For what is more like a great Foam-Bubble than the Moon? and what is more like the delusion of love than a bubble of the foam, so beautiful in its play of colour, while it endures: so evanescent, so hollow, leaving behind it when it bursts and disappears nothing but a memory, and a bitter taste of brine? And as love is but a bubble, so are all its victims merely bubbles of a bubble: for this also is mirage.

Mirage! mirage! That is the keynote of the old melancholy Indian music; the bass, whose undertone accompanies, with a kind of monotonous solemnity, all the treble variations in the minor key. The world is unreal, a delusion and a snare; sense is deception, happiness a dream; nothing has true being, is absolute, but virtue, the sole reality; that which most emphatically IS, [4] attainable only through knowledge, the great illuminator, the awakener to the perception of the truth. We move, like marionettes, pulled by the strings of our forgotten antenatal deeds, in a magic cage, or Net, of false and hypocritical momentary seemings: and bitter disappointment is the inevitable doom of every soul, that with passion for its guide in the gloom, thinks to find in the shadows that surround it any substance, any solid satisfaction; any permanent in the mutable; any rest in the ceaseless revolution; any peace which the world cannot give. Who would have peace, must turn his back upon the world; it lies the Other Way. Three are the Ways: the Way of the World, the Way of Woman, the Way of Emancipation.

Does anyone in Europe care about this last, this Way of Emancipation? No: it is Liberty that preoccupies the European, who about a century ago seemed, like the old Athenian, suddenly to catch sight of Liberty in a dream. [5] And yet, who knows? For Europe also is disappointed: there seems, after all, to be something lacking to this Liberty, something wrong. With her Utopias ending in blind alleys, or issues unforeseen: with her sages discovered to be less sages than they seemed: with her Science turning superstitious, her Literature wallowing in the gutter, and her women descending from the pedestal of sex to play the virago in the contamination of the crowd: with so many other things, not here to be considered, to raise a doubt, whether this Liberty is taking her just where she wished to go, what wonder if even Europe should begin to meditate on means of emancipation, even if only from vulgarity, and steal a furtive

glance or two towards the East, to see, whether, by diligently raking in the ashes of ancient oriental creeds, she might not discover here and there a spark, at which to rekindle the expiring candle of her own. For there seems to be some curious indestructible *asbestos*, some element of perennial, imperturbable tranquillity and calm, away in India, which is conspicuous only by its absence, in the worry of the West. Where does it come from? What does it consist in? Is there a secret which India has discovered, which Europe cannot guess? Is there anything in it, after all, but barbaric superstition, destined to fade away and disappear, in the sunrise of omniscience?

I cannot tell: but well I recollect a fugitive impression left on me by an early morning in Benares, now many years ago. I threaded its extraordinary streets, narrower than the needle's eye, and crowded with strange, lithe, nearly naked human beings, with black, straight, long wet hair, and brown shining skins, jostled at every step by holy bulls or cows, roaming at their own sweet will with large placid lustrous eyes, in an atmosphere heavy with the half-delicious, half-repulsive odour of innumerable flowers, mostly yellow, that lay about everywhere in heaps, fresh and rotten, till I came out finally upon the river bank. A light steamy mist, converted by the low sun's horizontal rays into a kind of reddish-golden veil, hung in the quiet air, lending an almost magical effect to the long row of great temples, whose steps run down into the river, along the northern bank: half of them in ruins, and looking as if they must presently slide away into the water and disappear. And as I floated slowly down, I watched with curiosity, half wondering if I was dreaming, the throng of devotees, sitting, lying, gliding here and there, like an antique procession on an old Greek frieze or vase; some muttering and praying, others bathing, others again standing motionless as statues in the stream, buried in a sort of *samádhi* meditation: every outline of every attitude, in that clear Indian air, as sharp as if cut with scissors out of paper. And lying close beside, cheek by jowl with the bodies still alive, the ashes of dead bodies just burned or still burning on the Ghát. Life and Death touching, running into one another, and nobody amazed: all as it should be, and a matter of course!

England and India, bureaucracy, democracy, sedition, education, politics and Durbars:—the world with all its tumult and its roaring

passes clean over their heads, unheeded, unobserved: for them the noise and bustle do not matter, do not trouble: they do not hear, they do not listen, they do not even care. It is curious, this peace, this indifference, this calm: it does not seem reality; it is like a thing looked at in a picture, like a dream. And, somehow, as I gazed at it, mechanically there came into my mind, as it were of its own accord, a story I had read in some old navigator's "yarn," of the albatross, sleeping on the great South Sea, in the fury of a storm, with its head beneath its wing.

Ceylon, 1912

I

## A SPOILED CHILD

I

## A SPOILED CHILD

### **Benediction**

*A bow to the mystical evening dance of the Rider on the Mouse, [6] who whirling round his elephant trunk, smeared with wet vermilion, suddenly shoots it straight up into the purple sky, and stands for a single instant still, poised in the yellow twilight, as if to make a coral handle for the white umbrella of the laughing Moon.*



# I

There is, in the western quarter, a land of lonely desolation, that resembles a very sea, but of sand instead of brine, and rightly named Marusthali, being a very home of death, sending back to the midday sun rays hotter than his own, and challenging the midnight sky, with silent ashy laughter, as though to say: What am I but the rival and reflection of thyself, with bones instead of stars, and tracks of wasted skeletons instead of a Milky Way. And there, upon a day, it came about that Maheshwara was roaming with Párwatí in his arms. And as they floated swiftly on, over the dusty waste, they watched their own huge shadows sweeping like the forms of clouds across the burning sand, exactly underneath, for it was noon: and the surface of the desert shook and quivered in the stillness, as if the wind, asleep, had, like a tired traveller, sought refuge from the fury of the sun above their heads. And all at once, the Daughter of the Snow exclaimed: See, there is the mirage! Let us descend, and sit for a little while upon the sand: for I love to watch this wonder, which resembles in its far faint blue the colour of a dream. And accordingly, to do her pleasure, Maheshwara sank softly to the earth, settling on it like a cloud gently resting on a hill.

So as they looked, after a while, that slender goddess said again: Surely it is a shame, and well may the poor antelopes be mistaken and deceived. For who could believe yonder water to be only an illusion? And when the eyes of even gods are bewildered by the cheat, how much more the eyes of thirsty and unreflecting little deer!

Then the Moony-crested deity said slowly: O Daughter of the Snow, thy own reflection on this beautiful illusion is the truth. And yet, well were it for the world, were its illusion limited only to its eyes, not extending, as it actually does, to its understanding also. For this deceptive picture on the sand is far inferior in power and importance to the bewildering delusion of this world below, fluttering about whose shifting dancing light, like moths about a wind-blown torch, men singe their silly souls, and burning off their wings, drop helpless, maimed and mutilated, into the black gulf of birth and death, and lose emancipation; till, after countless ages,

their wings begin to sprout and grow again, under the influence of works. Yet they who after all emerge, and soar away, unburdened even by an atom of the guilt that weighs them down, and brings them back into the vortex of rebirth, are very few. And yonder bones, now lying in the sand, could they but rise and speak, would be a proof of what I say.

And the goddess looked, and saw, close by, a little heap of bones, that lay half-buried in the sand. And she said with curiosity: Whose are the bones, and how are they a proof of thy consideration?

And Maheshwara replied: These are bones, not of a man, but of a camel, that perished in the desert long ago. For into this body of a camel fell the soul of which I spoke, in punishment of crimes committed in the birth before, in the body of a man; who, blinded by passion, slew three of his fellow mortals; as, if thou wilt, I will tell thee while we sit, watching the illusion of the senses, that so closely represents the illusion of the souls of the lovers in the tale.

## II

Know, then, that once upon a time, long ago, all the gods had assembled in the hall of Indra's palace, to listen to a singing competition that took place among the Gandharwas. And all sat listening attentively, till at length, all at once, came a pause in the performance. And in the silence, while all the heavenly singers rested, it so fell out, by the decree of destiny, that the flowery-arrowed god, [7] striving to recollect a cadence that had pleased him, hummed it, as well as he could, over again, aloud; and like the unskillful imitator that he was, played havoc with his model, stumbling at the quarter tones, and singing fiat. And out of delicacy and politeness, the gods all turned away their faces, hiding their smiles, except Brahma, [8] whose face never moved. But Kámadewa, looking up suddenly, caught the vestige of a smile, hovering, just before it disappeared, on the corner of the lips of Saraswati, as if it were unwilling to leave a resting-place so unutterably sweet as that lovely lady's mouth. And instantly, he turned red and pale alternately, with rage that followed shame: so little does he who delights in making others blush like doing it himself. And suddenly taking fire, he cried aloud: Ha! dost thou turn me into ridicule, O thou malapert blue-stocking? [9] Then will I curse thee for thy pains. Fall instantly into a lower birth, and suffer anguish in the form of a mortal woman, for thy presumption and ill-mannered mirth.

And instantly, all the other gods, hearing him, broke out into a very storm of indignation. And buzzing like infuriated bees around one who seeks to rob them of their honey, they swarmed about that god of love, exclaiming all together: What! shall Heaven be bereft, even for a very little while, of the very crest-jewel of its brow, because of thy loss of self-control, and a fault on her part which was not a fault at all, but only the appropriate reproof of thy ill-advised endeavour to play the musician without possessing the necessary skill? And there arose a tumult in the hall; and finally, they made me arbitrator to settle the dispute, knowing that Ananga was afraid of me, as well might he be [10]. And so, after all were silent, I spoke. And I said, very slowly: O bender of that bow, whose string is a row of bees, thou art surely altogether inexcusable, first for thy singing, and secondly for thy loss of temper, and finally for thy curse. For

who could be so harsh as to strike Saraswati, even with a *shirisha* petal? But now, the mischief is utterly beyond repair, and once spoken, the curse cannot be recalled. [11] And whether she will or no, she must now go to earth, and leave us for a time, till thy curse has spent its force. And yet, for all that, it is not right that the doer of injustice such as thine should escape scot-free. Therefore now I will give thee curse for curse, and thou shalt eat the fruit of thy own tree. Fall then, immediately into the body of a man, and suffer that mortality which thou hast laid upon Saraswati. And thy fortune shall be interwoven with her own, so that thy curse shall be determined by the quality and period of hers.

And then, as he listened to my doom, Kámadewa turned paler than the ashes to which I had reduced him long ago, finding himself punished for his insolence by me, for the second time. But the gods all exclaimed, with approbation and delight: Victory to Maheshwara! who has once more bitten the biter, and condemned him, by a sentence even more merciful than he deserved. For what could be more intolerable than even Heaven without Saraswati, unless it be the curse that is about to produce such a melancholy condition of affairs?

And then, those two deities disappeared suddenly from Heaven, and descended to be born as man and woman on the earth. [12]