

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

It has been my fortune to have seen the poet from very near for more than thirty years. It lies on me to speak of what I have seen. Let the memory of what I saw prevent me from the excesses of my own words and lend my speech dignity.

We all know that many a lofty ideal can be found in the poet's works. But only those of us who were lucky enough to come near him know how real all those ideas were in the poet's actual life. Today he is far away and one thinks all the more of the deep unity between his writing and his own conversation, his laughter, all the little details of his daily life. That we have apprehended the full beauty of Tagore's *oeuvre* in his own life, that is our good fortune. His work is a stupendous affair, a thing for rapt and long contemplation. Today I only bear witness to the great and wonderful life I had seen.

Very early in his life, the poet came to know the hymns of the Upanishads. These hymns formed the bed-rock of his life. That is why we find in his *Sadhana* the tranquility and the solemnity of the Upanishads. There is no excess there. I had heard from him that in the early days he used to incant the *Gayatree Mantram*, but later on the words for his meditation were simply *Shantam Shivam Advaitam* (the calm, the benevolent, the undivided)

In his life too his path was always straight and simple. He wrote once in a letter :

"To me religion is too concrete a thing, though I have no right to speak about it. But if ever I have somehow come to realize God, or if the vision of God has ever been granted to me, I must have received the vision through this world, through men, through trees

and birds and beasts ; the dust and the soil... I feel his touch in the sky, in the air, in water, everywhere I feel it. There are times when the whole world speaks to me."

Again and again he sang of this :

My heart sings at the wonder of my place
 in this world of light and life ;
 at the feel in my pulse of the rhythm of creation
 candenced by the swing of endless time
 I feel the tenderness of the grass in my forest walk
 the wayside flowers startle me.
 that the gifts of the infinite are strewn
 in the dust
 wakens my song in wonder
 I have seen, have heard, have lived ;
 in the depth of the known have felt the truth
 that exceeds all knowledge which fills
 my heart with wonder and I sing.

Again and again he declared :

Once again I wake up when the night has waned,
 when the world opens all its petals once more,
 and this is an endless wonder.

Perhaps it was only the sunlight on the leaves at the sight of which he would sing out :

How one likes the light dancing from leaf to leaf.

In May or June, whether in Calcutta or Bolpur, even in the burning heat and glare of midday, he would never shut the doors and windows. I had also seen him with windows open to the moonsoon so that, as the song goes, the sweet smell of the rain might come freely in windy gusts. When younger, he would saunter forth against the stormy wind on the open Bolpur fields with *Kalbaisakhi* clouds darkening the sky. Throughout the year, he would love to sit out on the open terrace from the afternoon on. He never liked the closed windows in England during winter ; he would say, "I don't like this, my soul gaps."

The external world really fascinated him. That is why at the time of writing he used to sit, away from the window. When he was at our Alipore house, his room had windows on the east, which looked out on a number of palm trees and then a stretch of open lawn against a background numerous big trees like Banyans and Asokas. He used to turn his table round when he sat down to write and would turn his back to the window. In our Baranagar house, in the very small corner-room which he called *Netrakona* (literally : eye-corner, also the name of a town in East Bengal), he used to place his table away from the window between two walls. He used to say : "I won't be able to write if I sit by the open window. My mind will roam far out there." And when his work was finished he would sit still, gazing out for hours on end.

I spent two months at Santiniketan before the fiftieth birthday celebrations. At that time he was staying in the eastern room on the first floor of the building that later became the guest-house. It was the smallest room leading to the open terrace. I put up in the western room across. In those days there were few visitors. The poet lived very simply. After a meagre dinner before sunset, we would sit out on the terrace, Now and then some of the teachers of the asram would come. Then the evening would darken. The teachers would leave one by one. And I would find him at 11 or 12 sitting in the silent darkness. I would go to bed and when I rose before dawn, I would find him *sittina rapt*, facing the east.

On certain days, sometimes he would go out when it was still dark and sit on the eastern verandah of the Temple (or the Prayer Hall). Two or three men would gather behind him, he would speak a few words at sunrise. Many of the sermons in the volumes called *Santiniketan* were spoken like this.

I have seen him like this for more than thirty years. There never was any break in this habit except during his

last days when he lay unconscious on his sickbed. Even in illness, he would wait for the dawn, and when dawn came, say repeatedly : It is dawn, please lift me up. And he always preferred to have the eastern room wherever he was, so that the first rays of the sun could fall on his face he would never shut the windows. He used to say, "Every day I get up early and try to merge myself in the big 'I' away from my small 'I'. It is not quite that I can't do it, but it takes some time". We would object, "It would be better to have a little more rest." But he would say, "I've found that it is easier in the early hours of the morning when it is quiet."

Funny things happened over this early rising when he went abroad. When we were in Norway, his bed room was next to ours with a door between. On the first day it was late when we went bed after the meetings and the receptions and deep at night we woke up at the sound of knocks on the door and we heard the poet saying, "How long will you sleep? It is quite late!" Black curtains were hanging all round the room. I put the lights on and saw that it was three o'clock. It was summer, when in Norway, the sun rises at midnight. The poet had drawn the curtains off before he went to bed and at midnight the room was filled with the light, and he had got up. However, I explained to him that it was only three and that in Norway one could not rise with the sun. In the morning, at the tea-table, he laughed over this.

He has sung and spoken of the glory of the dawn : "the honour that morning lights confers."

Just as in the morning, at night too he would sit silent, before going to bed. He used to say, "I want to wash off all the petty details of the day and, bathed clean, go to bed." There was no showing off in this. As a matter of fact, he never used to feel at ease even to speak of this habit of meditation to strangers, in case they made light of what

was so real to him. When he felt oppressed, he would at times go on singing to himself. Twenty years ago, at the time of the Seventh Pous Festival, he was depressed over some family matter. I had reached Santiniketan on the 6th. He was living in a new small house with only two rooms, later on called *Prantik* (on the edge). I was asked to stay there and the writing-table was removed to make room for my bed. At midnight, I woke up and beyond the curtain between the rooms, I heard him singing, "To the blind give light, to the dead life" (there is a gramophone record of this song sung by him). The song went on again and again throughout the night. Again and again those words: "To the blind give your light." It had been a cloudy day but towards morning it cleared up. In the morning after the service in the temple I said, "You had no sleep the whole night." He said with a smile, "I sang, I was so oppressed. But in the morning it cleared up, like the sky."

The poet had declared many a time how his 'daimon' had given its directions through many major and minor incidents in his life. Quite a number of his poems and songs speak of this. Many a time, as has been our experience, plans arrangements were suddenly changed, at times even against his own wish. What appeared a mistake at first, later on proved beneficial.

Soon after his fiftieth birthday celebrations he wanted to go abroad. It was arranged that he was to leave Calcutta by a City Line steamer. He was to start very early in the morning. On the previous day there were lots of visitors at the Jorasanko house to bid him farewell. When it was past ten at night, I touched his feet in farewell and said, "I had better go straight to the docks tomorrow." He said, "Yes, at least that is how the arrangements stand." But there was a doubt somewhere in my mind. I thought, on my way home, "Why did he say that? Is it that the journey might not take place? I decided that the next

morning I would go to his house first and not to the steamerghat.

Early in the dawn, before the street lamps were put out, I went up to his bedroom on the second floor at the Jorasanko house and found that he was indisposed. The trip to England was postponed. It was not a serious illness, but he was very tired and depressed. It was decided that he would have rest for some time, outside Calcutta. He went to Silaidah and, to while away the time, he translated some of his songs into English. That is how the English *Gitanjali* was composed. Sometime after this, the poet went to England. What happened after this is well-known. It was through the English *Gitanjali* that he had a wider introduction to the world. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for this book. The poet had no doubts that his visit to England had to be postponed in order to give him the opportunity of writing the English version of the *Gitanjali*.

Things happened the other way as well. In 1928, during the centenary celebrations of the Brahmo Samaj, he was to conduct the service at the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj Mandir. But the poet was quite ill. We had brought him back to Calcutta from Colombo on his way to Europe. His illness increased in Calcutta and the doctors had to stop interviews with his visitors. On the day before the festival, he was in the same condition. It was taken for granted that he would not be able to conduct the service. But when I went to see him very early on the centenary day itself, he said at once, "Take me to the Mandir, I want to go." We somehow brought him and he not merely conducted the prayers but on his own began to sing, "Thou wakest me up thyself with thy living touch." And at the time of the sermon, he spoke with deep feeling of all that he had to say of Ram Mohun Roy. He spoke with a great deal of passion but it did not affect his health in the least, On the contrary, in the afternoon,

he said "It was good that I went to the Mandir, even physically, I feel well."

He had for Rammohun Róy a profound respect and admiration and felt bound to him with a kind of personal bond. In this connexion I may tell of another incident. The poet was in Europe when the non-cooperation movement was started in India. He was receiving numerous letters from home. His countrymen wanted him to join the movement and he left for India. He was, we learnt, not going to stay a single day in Bombay, nor was he coming to Calcutta, but was going straight to Santiniketan via Burdwan. I went up to Burdwan the previous evening and spent the night at the station. At dawn, his train came. I found him grave and his first words were: "Prasanta, I come back to the country where Rammohun is called a pigmy." Then, he said, "While in Europe, I was getting letters from Andrews, Suren and others and was thinking that I would do my part when I came back home. All through the voyage on the steamer I had been preparing myself. And at Bombay, even before I had landed on the soil of our land, a newspaper came into my hand. Rammohun Roy was a pigmy because he had learnt English—that was the first news of India. I cannot forget this." I knew, from the look on his face that day that the expected participation in the non-cooperation movement would never be realized.

The reason he explained in the two lectures he gave in Calcutta, shortly after that, on "Unity through Education", and "The Challenge of Truth." The unity between the people of one country and another can be brought about only through education and culture. India has always invited all humanity on the level of the Universal Man. Rammohun also had carried this message and had built anew the bridge between the universal man and India through English education. The poet himself founded the Visva-Bharati to realise the same ideal. This is why his

heart did not agree with the idea of rejecting Western education.

To talk of another day. It was at the time of the foundation of the Visva-Bharati, In Bengal the non-cooperation movement was in full swing. People wanted him to write, particularly against the arrests and lathi-charges by the police in Calcutta. Important leaders went to Santiniketan and requested him to write and he agreed.

I reached Santiniketan the same evening. I was told that he was engaged on that writing in the little room on the first floor of "Dehali". He said. "Do you know what happened today? I agreed with them when they came that I would write. I sorted out my ideas but the whole afternoon I wasted lazily. In the evening I thought, no, I must write it down. I rehearsed the whole thing in my mind, how to make it effective. But just as I drew the paper and took up the pen, my hand turned limp. After a shake-up, I tried again but the pen dropped down from my hand. Never in my life has such a thing happened to me. Since then I have been sitting quiet. I can't write it, I realize."

There was a lot of displeasure over this. There was more adverse criticism too. But the poet had no doubt that his presiding deity had saved him from doing something which was not according to his will.

As in major affairs, so I have seen the same thing happen in trivial things as well. Even he himself could never say when he would go to some place or what he would do and when. We have seen again and again how all arrangements had to be cancelled. At least on five occasions his visit to Europe was cancelled. Once he was going to Madras and came back from Kharagpur (only a short distance from Calcutta). Once I remember his luggage had been sent already to Howrah Station and as he himself was going to Howrah, near the bridge, the traffic police signalled. The car stopped

and he said, "Turn the car back." We came back to the house.

I remember, the day, when in 1926 we were to leave Budapest. The first destination was Constantinople, so I reserved berths in the Orient Express going east. After a while he changed his mind for Paris, and so I booked our seats for the Orient Express going west. But Constantinople won again. Luckily, the booking office was on the ground floor of our hotel building. I explained to them the poet's moods and booked seats both ways. And whenever the poet would change his mind I would go down and come back to tell him that it was all arranged. Of course, I had to wire and phone Paris a number of times. Both the Orient Expresses arrive at Budapest at about ten at night and so we packed up and sat for dinner, when somebody came and insisted that the poet must go to Zagreb in his country Croatia. We travelled neither east nor west, but boarded at the last moment the southern train for Zagreb. It was very crowded but somehow out of respect for the poet, seats were found. However, this journey brought him in direct touch with people in Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey.

Again and again, arrangements had to be altered in this way. He himself used to comment, "Why should one have to accept a thing just because it is all fixed?" May be, it was all a poet's moods. But he himself used to say, that his presiding deity guided his life as in the major so in these minor events. In an essay he wrote in 1903, he dealt at length with this idea.

He also believed that he had signs and hints to get ready before a disaster or danger. It was not like knowing the future and that sort of thing. But a kind of mental preparation for some unknown danger or death without knowing what exactly was impending. He once told me how during the year his wife died, seven months before the actual event, on New Year's Day, he felt a great sorrow

or parting was coming. It was so real to him that he wrote of it to his wife to keep themselves ready.

I have found him feel like this about himself as well. In 1940, the night before he was leaving Calcutta for Kalimpong I saw him at the Jorasanko house, sitting in the western room, with a cheerless look. Bauthan (daughter-in-law, Pratima Devi) had gone up to Kalimpong and the poet did want to join her there. Yet there was some discord in his mind, as he told me, "I don't feel like going up mountains. It won't be good this time. But every thing is settled, Bauma has gone and I don't want to upset anything. But there is a feeling against it, inside me." A few days later in Kalimpong he became ill. We had to bring him down to Calcutta in an unconscious state. It was his last illness.

In 1941, in July, I went to Santiniketan when talks were going on about the operation. But the poet did not approve at all. Later on, however, he agreed. I myself had all along been against the operation. Even on the day of the operation, in the morning I begged the doctors to stop. Since then when one thinks of the terrible things happening all over the world and of the evil days gathering round India, particularly Bengal, one feels that perhaps it was good after all that the poet had agreed to the operation, inspite of his own feelings.

He realized in his own life the truth of his words: "Good and evil whatever comes, accept reality with easy grace." As he used to say, "Reality is more important than good and evil, Hence our prayer *Asato ma satgamaya* (from the false or the unreal lead us to the real or the true).

It was this true vision which gave him his calm of mind even during a great bereavement. He would say, "As life is real, so is death, Grief it brings but without death life loses its quality. Just as fulfilment of love means little without the sense of the insatiable. Why

exaggerate the grief? Life's claims are more urgent than death's."

The poet never liked clinging to souvenirs after a dear one's death. I remember the days when he was writing "Unregenerate Grief", "Seventeen Years", "First Grief", "Release", etc., all contained in *Lipika*. One day I was sitting near him on the verandah by his bedroom on the second floor at Jorasanko. It was evening, above the western sky was still red, below, the lane leading to his house was getting dark and one or two street-lamps were being lit. Maharshi's death had taken place exactly on the top of the first floor room where the poet died. As a child I had come to look at the Maharshi. On the south wall there used to hang a picture of a church with a real clock in its tower. As I was very young, my eyes dwelt on it. And that was the only thing left in the room which spoke of those days, I spoke of these things to the poet. After a while he said, "Father was very ill at that time in the Sudder Street house. We never expected he would recover and then one day he called for me and spoke to me: 'I asked for you as I have to say something special. I do not wish to have my picture or sculpture or any such thing at Santiniketan. You must not keep any. And see that nobody else does'.

The poet added, 'I know that father was worried that there might be excesses to keep alive his memory, and he knew that he could depend on me. So he asked for me.' After a pause he said, "Do you know, at times I think that it was wise of Rammohun Roy to die in England. You never know with our country here. There might have been a great fuss over him, if he himself had not stopped it before. I also think at times that it would be better for me to die abroad."

The poet had told me more than once what Maharshi had told him at the Sudder Street house. At the Santiniketan asram, there was no portrait or figure of the

Maharshi ; it was forbidden. Not only that, many people had wished to keep apart, as a memorial, the room at the Jorasanko house where the Maharshi died, but the poet never agreed. He used it like any other living room, and the room did not even contain the Maharshi's picture.

He never kept anybody's photo. Not that he objected to photos or portraits. He had given photos of his own with his autograph to innumerable people who had asked for them. But he himself never felt the need of keeping any. In 1914 or 1915, the poet spent a few days at Allahabad in the house of his nephew Satya Prasad Ganguli. I heard from him how there he had come across an old photograph of his Natun Bauthan (Jyotirindranath's wife) to whom he addressed his poem "Chhabni" (The picture) in *Balaka* where he says :

In thousand streams rush the wild fountain
of life ringing the anklets of death.

It was only a few days after "Chhabi" that he wrote "Shahjahan" :

The mausoleum
Does not stand still
Lying on the dust of the earth
Under the shroud of memory tenderly covering death
who can withhold life ?
Every star beckons to her from the sky
Her invitation is in world after world
To ever-new sunrise hills, from light to light.

This he was spoken of again and again, in songs and in poems. And I have seen repeatedly how in actual life he accepted death.

It was the summer of 1918. His eldest daughter Bela was ill, in the house of her husband Sarat Chandra. The poet was at Jorasanko and every morning I used to take him to visit his daughter. He would go up, while I would wait below. The patient was slowly going down. One

day, as usual, we went and that day within a few moments he came down and got into the car, and just as I looked at his face, he said simply, "She left before I came. They told me as I was going up the stairs and so I came down."

While in the car, he did not speak. When we reached Jorasanko he said as on other days, "Let us go up." I followed him to his bed-room on the second floor. After some time he spoke, "After all, I could do nothing. I had known for a long time that she would leave, yet every morning. I went and sat with her head in my lap. When a child, she used to say : Father, tell me a story. As in her childhood, during her illness, too, she used to say now and then : Father, tell me a story. I used to tell her whatever would come into my head. That too is at an end."

Then he sat silent in calm repose. That same day in the evening he had some work in hand. I asked if there should be any alteration in the arrangements. He said, "No, why ? No need for that." And then he added in explanation, "Such things have happened before." And then he talked of the time when his second daughter's death took place.

Many visitors used to come every day for important discussions, among them being Ramendra Sundar Trivedi. On the day the poet's daughter died it got very late with the talks. Before leaving, standing on the stairs, Trivedi Mahasaya asked the poet, "How is she today ?" The reply was simple, "She is dead." Trivedi Mahasaya, it is said, only stared at the face of the just bereaved father and, without a word, walked down.

Let me record what I heard of the days when his youngest son died at Monghyr of cholera. The poet reached at the last moment. It was he who had to console the distracted host. I had heard from Jagadananda Babu how he came back to Santiniketan. The telegram was brief, he was coming back, nothing more, Jagadananda Babu

and others thought that he was bringing Sami back. So they went to the station with a bullock-cart, the transport of those days. The poet stepped down from the train alone. They did not realize at the time from his face that Sami was dead. Nothing was changed from his usual programme at Santiniketan.

Immediately after Sami's death, on the occasion of Maghotsab, he spoke of the Great King of Sorrows.

Though, at the time of Sami's death, no one saw him in grief, yet years after, one day, I saw his eyes fill with tears as he spoke of his youngest son. He had fever and was in the Jorasanko house. It was summer. Rathi Babu had gone out of Calcutta. There was no one in the great house. In the evening, I went up and heard him reciting quite loudly. He smiled shyly and explained, "You see, there is a little fever. Perhaps the brain is a little excited, and I felt like reading out loudly."

Samindra was in his thoughts that evening. He said, "It with like this with Sami. He was very small when his mother died. I brought him up myself. His make-up was like mine. Like me, he loved poetry. And could sing. At times, I would find him walking about restlessly or reciting loudly, and I would know he had fever. And would bring him to bed. Even now, in old age, such things happen with me."

After a pause, he went on, "I wrote a lot of poems for him, Sami used to say, 'Father, tell me a story'. I would write a poem and he would learn it by heart. He used to recite with his whole body and head swaying just like my own childhood days. How he used to roam about on the terrace. He had so much play in his mind, all by himself. Looked like me, too." His eyes were wet.

I also remember the time when, twenty years ago, I was at the Alipore Meteorological Observatory and he was with us, one day news came that his brother

Satyendranaths' illness had taken a bad turn. He went to Ballygunge and when he came back, he looked grave, but nothing more. He said, "It is over", and then went up to his room and turned to his work as on other days. I had another guest in the house, an Englishman, Sir Gilbert Walker. That evening, I asked the poet if he would like to meet a foreign guest. "I'll come to the dining-room," he said. Conversation did not lag at the dinner-table. I remember a long talk after dinner on Indian and European music. My guest told me before going to bed, "I had heard of him for years. I have known his books. Today I have come to know him in a big way."

Let me speak of another day. It was August 1932. He was in our Baranagar house. His only grandson Nitu was in England and was very ill. Andrews had taken his mother, Mira, to bring him back home as early as possible. One day, a letter came from Andrews that Nitu was a little better. The next morning, the poet said to Rani (Mrs. Mahalanobis), "Though Sahib writes that Nitu is better, yet my mind feels heavy." He spoke on death, and concluded, "I got up at dawn, and looked out at your trees, your garden and have been trying since then to tune myself to them. How refreshed they look with the monsoon. Their mind knows no fear. Their joy is that they live. When you spread yourself out in harmony with great nature, how the mind revives, even like those trees."

I, in the meantime, opened the newspapers and found a Reuter cable—Nitu was no more. I rang up Rathi Babu at Khardah. He came over and went up to his father, "There is Nitu's news." At first the poet said, "What news? Better?" Rathindranath replied in the negative. He understood by Rathindranath's silence, and turned all so still. Just two drops of tears—nothing more. After a pause, he said; "Duri (Nitu's sister) is alone. Let Bowma go to Santiniketan today. I go with you tomorrow." He sat still for a time but only for a time. That very day he

wrote the poem, "By the Pool," which is included in *Punascha* dedicated to Nitu. The next day he went to Santiniketan where preparations were going on for the Barsa-mangal, or the Monsoon Song Festival. There was a proposal to cancel it for Nitu's death. But he didn't allow that, and took part in it himself. It was at that time that he wrote in a letter to Mira :

"In the midst of all our lapses and omissions, all our troubles and sorrows, the major fact is that we have loved. From the outside, the tie may snap, but if you had been deprived of the relation within, then that lack would have been a great void. We have come to our human world. We have united in many a relationship, and then when the time comes, we have to drift apart. Again and again this has happened, and will happen again. Life is fulfilled with this happiness, and this sorrow. Whenever there has been a gap in the world of my life. the larger life, I find, exists, it moves, and I must keep step with it with an undisturbed mind.....I loved Nitu much ; besides, for you, an enormous sorrow weighed with me. But one feels ashamed to expose one's sorrows to others' gaze.....There was a suggestion to stop *Barsa-Mangal* in deference to my grief. I said, no, I shall bear my share of grief. I have done my usual work in the usual way.....The night Sami left, I said with all my heart, let him have free movement in the great universe. Let not my grief drag him a jot. Similarly. since I came to know of Nitu's death, I had been repeating to myself, I have no more responsibility. Now I can only wish him well in the Great where he moves now.....The night after Sami's death on the train, I saw the sky flooded with moonlight. My soul prompted that nothing fell short, everything continued to remain in the whole, even I had my place therein. I was yet to complete my task towards that whole—and my work should continue without interruption as long as I lived. May I have courage, may not weariness overpower me, may not any link snap anywhere—let me accept whatever has happened with

He never had contempt for the least important of men. Whoever wrote to him, and thousands wrote to him always, all got replies in his own hand, so long as he was capable of writing himself. He never drove away anyone who came to see him and innumerable people came. And this, even if he happened to be unwell, even if he had important work to finish. He would be vexed if he came to know that we had refused somebody, because he had some work in hand. "If a person is pleased only with a few words, only a visit, can't I do that much for him?" he would say.

His sympathy extended to the animal world as well. Particularly for those who are neglected. He never had the hobby of keeping birds or tame animals. But we have seen helpless animals used to come to him for protection. At Santiniketan, there used to be a bowl of water for the birds in front of his room. And he himself used to give them their food. All sorts of birds used to collect round him. Even the common crows sometimes would join. In the poem "Bird Feast" in *Akaaspradeep* he talks about these crows and how he accepted even these. In the same book, he has another poem about a peacock. There was one at Santiniketan. It used to take shelter behind the poet's chair, whenever there was a move to put him in its cage. It just would not budge, with the servants about, until he told the servant to leave it alone, and then it would stalk forth.

Latterly, a rufous dog used to come, which he named Laloo (Lal means red). It was only a street dog. But it had more of his sympathy than Rathi Babu's pedigreed dog. He used to give it food from his own plate. And the dog was quite an interesting animal. It used to be the model of self-control, while sitting near him. It would sit with its head turned away, till the end of his meal, and would turn back when called to have its dinner. And if some one commented that it was a greedy dog shamelessly

waiting for food, it would walk away. The poet used to say, "A street dog, but he has real aristocracy." In *Arogya* he writes about it.

Every morning this admirer a dog
Sits still near my chair
Until I accept his company
With a touch of my hand....
The pathetic expression of his wordless gaze
Reveals an intelligence which he cannot convey,
Conveys to me though—man's true place in life.

During his last illness when he was staying on the first floor of Uttarayan, he asked that Laloo should not be prevented from coming upto him once a day.

When he put up with us, we saw how our pet dog would do something wrong and at once go to the protection of his chair or near his feet, knowing full well our helplessness in such a situation, He would notice how the dog would get restless when we went out and he would say, "I don't like this. You people suddenly leave and come back, poor fool, he does not quite understand and gets quite sad."

The poet was greatly attracted by plants which people do not usually take care of. Once, when he lived in the house callee Konarka at Santiniketan, he grew a regular garden of wild thorny plants, collected from various places. He used to water them himself and would call us and point out, "Look, what thorny flowers!" He gave his own names to these nameless wild beauties—Gold-drop, Wood-joy, Gold-cluster, Spring-time. It was not for nothing that he wrote that famous essay on the women who have been neglected in our classical literature. These unnamed flowers figure in his poetry, sung for the first time.

The fact is that all his life, his sympathies streamed for the insignificant, for the scorned. The luckless of this world. the oppressed always moved him, Early in

youth in his great poem "Let me turn back," he had written :

.....Obese contempt
 Sucks the blood from helpless breasts
 And drinks, hydra-mouthed. Insolent inequity
 Laughs at pain in selfishness....
 To these dumb pale beings
 We must give speech, these broken dry hearts
 We must cheer up with hope.

And it was not merely in verse that he pleaded for the poor and the oppressed. In his life he helped such people in various ways. That is shown even in his management of his family estates. In this connexion I might mention an incident. Five or six years ago we were going to the village Hijlabat by boat from Kushita. The elderly boatman told us on enquiry that he belonged to the Tagore estates. I asked in curiosity if he had seen Rabindranath. His face brightened up and he said, "Oh ! yes, I've seen him. Many a time he passed through our village. I also saw him at the Cutchery house. What looks ! Not like a human being, rather like a god. Such looks are rarely to be seen. And what kindness ! We had free access to him. Nobody could stop us. That was his order. And whenever we would complain to him of our troubles he would remedy them."

There was a talk of the poet's coming on a trip to Hijlabat. When the boatman heard that he exclaimed, "Oh I'd like to look at him again. When is he coming ? Please let us know, we will all come to see him." It was strange how this old boatman, who had seen him forty years ago had not forgotten him. His face brightened up to hear of the poet and he went on repeating, "Such a man one rarely sees. Such a man is rare."

The poet was pleased when he told him of this humble boatman. He said, "They really loved me. I remember when as quite a young man I took charge of the estates how

an old Muslim tenant came to me. That year the harvest was bad and the tenants had come for remission of rent. I did my best and they were pleased. But this old tenant came up and said, "You are remitting a lot of money, won't the old master scold you? You are young. Think well and then act." He was so fond of me, that he was worried that my elder brothers might scold me."

He had again and again spoken of village reforms and the motive of all that as well as his own activities in that direction had one end in view: how to brighten up the life of the poor and the deprived. That explains why Sriniketan came to form a major part of Visva-Bharati. He himself had tried in practice the big ideals he wrote about both during the period of this management of the family estates as also the Swadeshi movement. He utilized the entire amount he received from the Nobel Award for an agricultural bank to help the farmers. Up to his last days he was preoccupied with how the common man of our country could have a little more food, and better living conditions. He never deceived himself or others with ture of big ideals. On the contrary, he was always, on the alert not to allow words to cover up real action. As he wrote in one of his poems:

I wait in eagerness for the words

Of the poet who is a partner in the kisan' life,...

Who is close to the soil.

He had wonderful patience and tolerance for all sorts of men. And he never interfered in anybody's freedom whether in opinions or personal matters. nor did he put any pressure from above.

He was ever alert that there were no lapses, as far as fundamental ideal of Santiniketan was concerned. Beyond that he allowed complete freedom. Many a time there had been talks in Santiniketan against his own ideals and aims, there had been even, one might say, moves in the matter. There had been demonstrations of the kind he did not like.

We would often lose patience, and tell him to put a stop to such activities. But he, with his forbearance, would never agree. He would say that nothing much is gained by imposing an order from outside. For ten years I was intimately connected with the Visva-Bharati's organizational work, having acted as the Secretary. At times, we had differed, he had been displeased or sorry, but he never issued orders on me in executive matters.

He had the strangest generosity towards those who had criticised him unfairly or attacked him, or had tried to do damage to him. I remember some twenty two years ago, I was sitting one evening on the verandah at the Jorasanko Red House, when a well-known writer of those days came to see him. This gentleman had indulged for months on end in attacking the poet with ridicule. He had done his best to stop the poet's fiftieth birthday celebrations in Calcutta. For years, he had nothing to do with the poet, and so I was surprised when he came. However, after a few preliminary words he informed the poet that he was bringing out an annual publication and wanted the poet to contribute to it. The poet had a fine piece in hand, which he gave away at once. When the man had gone, I said "You contribute even for him?" With a smile he replied, "I gave it so easily because, it was him. That he criticizes me is his sweet will. That he ridicules me or abuses me may perhaps increase his fame. But now he has come to me for his own need. Why deprive him there? What does it matter to me?"

This sort of thing was quite common. I know of one writer who spread in cold print some false scandal, which cannot be even mentioned, relating to the poet's personal life. He was shocked. He was also disturbed that such horrible misrepresentation might be accepted in future, without protest as a fact of history. But a libel suit could not be brought against the man as even that would be humiliating for the poet. Yet this same literary gentle-

man was received with grace when later on he came to see Rabindranath.

I had heard from him of another poet who held an eminent position in the fields of Bengali letters and politics. He used to act hostilely in various ways, but for a long period he went on receiving fifty rupees a month from the poet. As he used to say, "What I fear is that I might expect a return from a man whom I help."

He had faith in everybody, as he choose to look for the better part in the make-up of everything. After the great Bengal earthquake, he received a letter from Rajshahi, which said that it was from a widow, who had lost her home by the earthquake and who with her children, was utterly stranded. Monthly help began to be sent to her. Then later on, when he went to Rajshahi, he enquired after this family, and came to know that there was no such widow, but a good-for-nothing young man had been living on his money. But even then the donation did not stop at once and then he called for the young man and got him provided for.

On account of his faith in the basic goodness of man, he had been cheated quite often. I had heard from him how while on a trip on a ferry-steamer, a boy came up to his wife and called her his mother of a previous life and said that his great desire was to drink the sanctified water touched by her feet every morning. The history of the previous life was laughed away, but the youth came to stick to the Jorasanko household. He announced that he had been admitted to a college. So, he had free board and lodging and money for his college fees, for books to be brought. The poet gave him charge of his own library. After a time, a number of books could not be found. He had faint thoughts of suspicion, but he felt quite ashamed for that. However, he called the young man, and asked him to make a search to find out the books. After a few days he came and told the poet that he had found out the

reasons why books were getting lost. What was the reason? The youth replied with a solemn face that Suren Babu, Sudhi Balu, Babu Balu—they all had free access to the library. The poet could not at first realize the connexion between his nephews' visits to the library and the loss of books. When he did, he himself felt quite uncomfortable that anyone could utter such a thing. But he told his nephews, who naturally were furious. And they found out on enquiry that the young man, far from being a college student, was not even a matriculate. The second-hand book shop was also found out, and some of the books were even recovered. But even after this young man came to him and said, "Father, (in the heavy Sanskrit address) I am guilty," the poet could not drop him. Some arrangements were made even for him.

So many persons had cheated him like this. But it was really a kind of choosing the liability to be cheated, as he himself would say, "I don't want to lose my faith in man. If I can keep it up at the cost of my own loss, even that would be good. You people don't understand. I have a suspecting sort of mind. As you know, there is a streak of insanity in our family and one of the symptoms of madness is the passion of suspicion. That is why I have to be all the more on guard against unfair suspicion against anybody. I do have suspicions, perhaps more than most people and that is why I have to shed them off again and again."

Not that was never angry or vexed with people. But he never would nourish such feelings, because, as he used to say, it meant that he himself forgot himself, and that would be a shame. When his second daughter was mortally ill he took her to Almora. But the illness turned worse and he had to hurry back to Calcutta. There was no proper transport. With his daughter in the *dandi*, he had to walk the long mountain-path down to the railway station. Midway, on the train, he found that the purse containing

two hundred rupees was missing from the bench. The poet told me, "At first it was anger with the unknown thief." Then I tried to persuade myself that the man must have needed the money badly. Perhaps his home was in some danger greater than mine. Then I tried to think that I have made a gift to him of the money. He was not a thief, I gave it to him. The moment I thought like that I regained calm of mind."

The poet used to say, "It is the injunctions of religious books which say : Do not do this evil deed, do not do that. God never had such strictures. His one wish he had declared to be ; Express yourself, reveal yourself. That is his one order—to the Sun, to the Earth, to Man. All over the universe this is his one command : Express yourself." The poet never judged a man according to rules of 'should' or 'should not'. Man was always man to him. He had no puritanism. In his works, one finds this attitude revealed quite often.

That is why people whom the moralists would keep away came to him freely. He never could bear with any falsehood or with meanness or pettiness, but he never believed that any lapse from the customary code should make a man an outcast. Nor did he ever hold the children guilty for the social mistakes of their parents. To quote his own words, "The important thing to consider is not the mistakes a man commits, but the man that he is."

Some seventeen years ago when preparations were on for the performace of a play by the Visva-Bharati, the poet called for a girl who was an excellent actress. He asked her to take a part in his play and coached her for days. It so happened that the girl had a bad reputation in our usual social world, she was an outcast. Objections arose over acting with her. And he was forced to leave her out, but he was sorry. And he never could forget that he had to accept this for the sake of others.

When his story *Laboratory* was first published, he was ill and had to be brought down from Kalimpong. When I

went to see him in the evening, I was told that he had been enquiring after me since the afternoon. He pointed to the story at once and asked, "Have you read it?" I said, "I liked it very much, a really powerful story." He said, "Oh! Yes, you of course will like it. But what do the others say? I won't be able to show my face! Rabi Thakur has lost his head at eighty, how else could he write about a girl like Sohini!" With a smile he added, "I have done it deliberately. What sort of a person Sohini is, her strong mind, her loyalty, that was the main consideration—the episode of her bodily affairs is secondary. Neela will pass quite easily in society, but Sohini will be difficult to accept. Yet I have shown with emphasis the great difference in the mental make-up between the mother and the daughter."

The mind of man—that was his preoccupation. The externals were secondary. Let me tell you here of a play which never came to be written. I heard from him that at the time of *Kacha and Devayani*, *Chitra* and all those Mahabharata stories, he was moved by the idea of another episode—when a plundering horde stole and took away the Yadu women (Krishna's clan), even old Arjuna could not stop them. At first he thought he would write this play in fourteen lettered verse, but as he had done in a number of pieces during those days, he postponed it. Then after a decade or so when he wrote the *King of the Dark Chamber* and the *Immovable Establishment*, he thought he would make a prose-play out of this theme. One day he gave me his idea of the play. Krishna, the five Pandava brothers and the heroes of the clan of Yadu were engrossed in big wars, big talk, big ideals and had no time to devote to their women. Women were there only for their household work. But they were not satisfied with that. In the meantime, the non-Aryan dasyus who were men of the earth used to come and talk to the women, sing to them and the women were drawn to them. It was the women who destroyed the weapons of the Pandavas so that the robbers could easily

abduct them. Arjuna went out to resist and found that his great Gandiva's string was cut. He understood but it was too late. This play somehow was never written. But he used to talk of it now and then and used to laugh, "My readers will be furious if I write the play,"

He had gone preaching from country to country in writing and in lectures the ideal of man beyond nationalities. But it was not mere words with him. How pleased he used to be when a foreigner came as his guest, and he would build up a kind of kinship. From Norway came Professor Stem Konow, who came to be known as Kanva (the paternal sage in Sakuntala). A girl from Denmark acquired the name, Haimanti. Somebody else would be called Basanti and so on. While abroad, he used to say, "When people in foreign countries came to me, gives me things to love, do this or that for my comfort, then I realize deeply that I am a human being, blessed in my man's life." He wrote ;

Woman, thou hast made my days of exile
tender with beauty,
and hast accepted me to thy nearness
with a simple grace
that is like the smile with which the
unknown star welcomed me
when I stood alone at the balcony and
gazed upon the southern night.
There come the voice from above : "We know
you, for you come as our guest from the
dark of the infinite, the quest of light."
Even in the same great voice thou hast carried
to me : "I know you,"
And thought I know not thy tongue, Woman,
I have heard it uttered in thy music,—
"You are ever our guest on this earth,
poet. the guest of love."

And it was not merely the foreign faces, the men and women. In South America, he wrote :

O foreign flower, when I asked you,
 What is you name,
 You swayed your head smiling
 And I knew what is in a name !
 Enough that your smile identified you.....
 O foreign flower, when I ask you, tell me
 Will you forget me ?
 You smile and swing your head, and I know
 I know you will think of me always,
 Two days hence
 I shall go to another land
 and you will know me in dreams of distance—
 And you won't forget. (*Purabi*)

He had declared in *Gitanjali*,

“Thou hast made me known to friends whom I know not. Thou hast given me seats in homes not my own. Thou hast brought the distant near and made a brother of the stranger.”

This was literally true in his own life.

In November, 1926, when we were going from Serbia to Bulgaria, the train stopped at the frontier at the dead of night. The sky was flooded with moonlight and some one came up in front of the poet's compartment and began to play on the flute. The melody was a little strange to us, though it had in it something common with our music. The music went on even when the train started again. We never knew who the flute-player was nor did he meet the poet. His only reward was that he played for the poet who was moved.

Bent as he was on admiring the best in foreigners, he never could tolerate that the power of arms should stop the march of humanity. He went to Italy at Mussolini's invitation. He was surrounded day and night by die-hard fascists. And when the poet wrote, he praised Mussolini's

regime. The other side of the picture he came to know when he had left Italy. At Villeneuve, he met Romain Rolland and Duhamel and then Madam Salvadori, Madam Salvamini, Angelica Balbanoff and others, all exiles from Italy. He realized his mistake and was restlessly eager to undo it. He started to write afresh on the state of things in Italy. We typed all day but could not cope with his urgent flow. He would write and then scrap the whole thing, nothing came up to his satisfaction. He would not take his meals, almost lost his sleep and became quite ill. We brought him from Villeneuve to Zurich and then to Innsbruck, to Vienna and then to Paris. The best medical help of Europe was of no avail. He was restless. Then he finished the statement and sent it to the *Manchester Guardian*, and he regained his calm and was well.

It was like this to the end of his life. When fascist Germany invaded Norway, the news came in the evening over the radio and he turned grave and said, "The demons are now at Norway's throat. They won't leave anybody untouched." And I remember how for days he went on talking of Norway, the people of Norway.

In 1940, in September, he had to be brought down unconscious from Kalimpong. A few days after that, when he was still very weak and could only speak with difficulty, I was told that he had asked to see me. I arrived a little late and he said at once, "I had been asking for you, the way the Chinese are fighting...", his words became indistinct. He stopped and then said, "Why are you so late? I can't say well what I want to. A little while before, it was quite distinct". His weak health, I saw, had not been able to stand the excitement and I waited for him to recover. Then, in broken phrases, haltingly he spoke, "The people of China have always considered war to be barbarous. But now they are compelled to fight against the mad aggressor. It is to their honour, they are fighting against wrong. There is no shame even

in their defeats. Their glory is that they have resisted oppression."

I understood what he wanted to say. Long ago he had written :

Where tolerance is weakness,
 O Terrible, let me be ruthless.
 At your bidding, let true words flash
 From my mouth, like a sword
at your signal.

And at eighty, in the midst of his serious illness he could not forget China. He could not even sit up in his bed, but never could he forget that protest there must be against wrong. He wrote :

Give me power, O awful Judge,
 sitting on the throne of Great Time
 give me strength
 give me the voice of thunder.

Just three months before his death he wrote in *Crisis of Civilization* :

"As I look around I see the crumbling ruins of a proud civilization strewn like a vast heap of futility. And yet I shall not commit the grievous sin of losing faith in Man. I would rather look forward to the opening of a new chapter in his history after the cataclysm is over and the atmosphere rendered clean with the spirit of service and sacrifice. Perhaps that dawn will come from this horizon, from the East where the sun rises. A day will come when unvanquished Man will retrace his path of conquest, despite all barriers, to win back his lost human heritage."

He never lost this faith. He had profound confidence in Russia. When the Germans invaded Soviet Union, during the last days of his illness, he waited eagerly every day for news of Russia. Again and again, quite simply, he used to say, "My greatest happiness will be in Russia's victory." Every morning he looked forward for good

news. How pale he looked and how he would throw away the newspaper, if that day the news was bad for Russia. His last words to me, spoken, half an hour before his operation, were, "Tell me the news about Russia." When I told him that the war had taken a better turn, his face brightened and he said, "Won't it? It has got to turn better. They can do it and they shall do it."

Those were his last words to me. I am fortunate, indeed, that in the light of his face that day I beheld the worship of Man.