

Seven Stories to Delight Your Spirit

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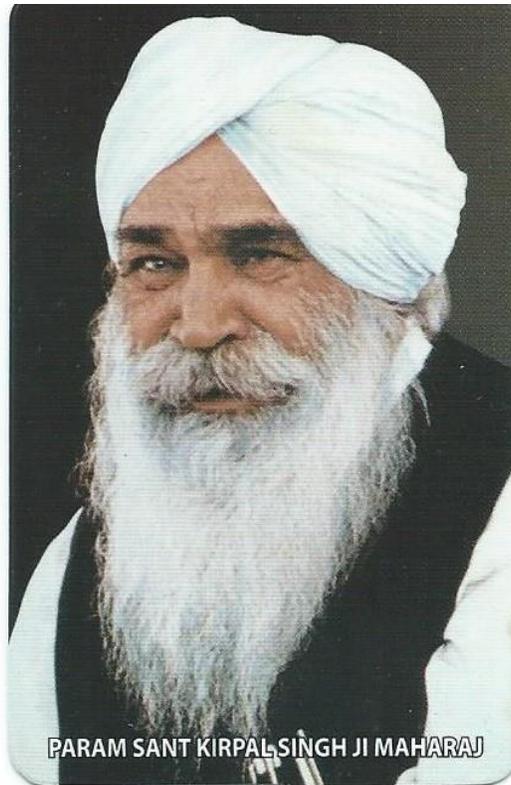


Tracy Leddy was initiated into Surat Shabd Yoga by Sant Kirpal Singh in 1969. The following stories appeared in early editions of *Sat Sandesh* magazine and are dedicated to the Beloved Master.



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Sant Kirpal Singh Ji Maharaj
"The Beloved Master"
1894-1974



1. The Snake Charmer

Indeed, everyone agreed he was a most unusual snake charmer. He carried no baskets of trained cobras with him as he traveled up and down the world and would accept no money for his performances, yet he seemed able to charm away more snakes than anyone else. No one knew where he came from or where he had been; no one could predict when he would arrive or disappear. He came when he was called, he told someone once, merrily, that's all.

And he was a strange-looking fellow, too; thin and tall and very dark. He wore a ragged woolen cloak that had once been white and a tattered turban that had suffered a similar fate. His shoes were long and pointed; one sole was partly separated from the rest of the shoe and it made a curious flapping sound, almost like birds' wings, whenever he took a step. When he wasn't playing his flute he was smiling like a small child. People everywhere loved to see him coming; once they saw him they completely forgot all about his odd appearance and only listened to his music which was unlike any other music in the world.

Few people ever really noticed his deep-set eyes under the black curls and tattered turban but those who did never forgot them. I shall tell you about three who saw.

It happened that the snake charmer arrived one summer's day in a small mountain village that nestled into a steep hillside just under another range of mountains. It was a surprisingly fertile place and very peaceful; the people there lived in considerable harmony and were generally kind to strangers.

As word of his coming passed quickly from house to house, the villagers began to gather to hear the snake charmer play. The women left their sweeping and washing; the men left their scythes and carts, their dreams and papers and came out of the fields and shops to listen. As he made his way slowly up the steep and narrow cobbled street, the music he played sounded so sweetly upon his listeners' ears that old men in tea shops found themselves weeping and little children stood motionless at their games.

Two old women sat knitting in the sunlight by the side of the road. One had been complaining very bitterly for the hundredth time about her nearest neighbor but the sound of the approaching procession interrupted her gossip. When she looked up, the snake charmer was standing before her and staring straight into her eyes. His music grew sweeter and sweeter still; there were voices in it now and they seemed to be calling to the woman from somewhere very far away. With a joy and terror she had never known, the old woman stuffed her knitting into the bib of her long black apron and scrambled to her feet. As soon as she stood up, snakes began to appear from under her hair and from beneath her tongue, little ones, swiftly moving, black and livid green.

For just moments they were visible to the horrified villagers and the old woman and then they were wriggling into the snake charmer's pockets and gone. The snake charmer took his flute out of his mouth and smiled at the old woman. Unable to resist, she in turn looked steadily back into his eyes. But she saw no ordinary eyes with iris and pupil; she saw only light, the most brilliant light she had ever seen, far brighter than the sun and much warmer. As she continued staring, she felt that warmth envelop her, fill her down to the inside of her wrinkled old toes. Silently she bowed her head.

Suddenly she was moved to look up; she caught sight of her neighbor's face in the hushed and wondering crowd. She burst into tears and pushed her way through the villagers until she could embrace the other woman. "I'm a wretched old crone," she sobbed, "forgive me, sister, I'll never speak ill of you again." The other woman was too surprised to answer but she felt some of her neighbor's inexplicable warmth and sat down with her and comforted her.

The snake charmer put his flute to his lips and walked on.

Further along the road stood an abandoned temple and beside it, a house with a very beautifully decorated facade. The doors were of sandalwood, richly carved and the walls were painted with lions and peacocks. It belonged to the wealthiest man in the village, a widower whose only daughter had looked after his household for many years. As the snake charmer stepped lightly along the cobblestones, one shoe flapping like birds' wings, the daughter's shrill voice could be heard above the music, scolding the servants at their tasks as usual. She was a proud girl who would have been beautiful had she not been so lonely and dissatisfied with her life.

In a moment of domestic silence, the snake charmer's music struck her ears for the first time. It was merry and joyful and spoke of great happiness to come. Feeling curiously drawn to it, the girl stood out on the balcony in all her fine clothes to watch the snake charmer pass by. But when he came abreast of the house, instead of continuing on his way he stopped and, playing with all his heart, he stared straight up at her. The girl hung over the balcony to hear the music more clearly and suddenly she was astonished to hear a hissing sound all around her. All her jewelry, earrings, necklace, bracelets and bangles had turned into tiny snakes, white ones and brilliant red and gold ones. She and the villagers watched, thunderstruck, as they all slithered over the pierced balustrade and into the snake charmer's pockets where they were seen no more.

The snake charmer took his flute out of his mouth and smiled up at the rich man's daughter. Strangely relieved and happy for the first time in her life, she looked back steadily into the snake charmer's eyes. She saw no ordinary eyes with iris and pupil; she saw only stars in a clear night sky, stars more brilliant than any she had ever seen from her father's roof. And, like the old woman, she too was suddenly filled with warmth from her shining black hair to her sandaled feet. "I must go and help them in the kitchen," she said to herself, "perhaps I've been too harsh with them. Perhaps they don't understand what it is I want them to do." And she danced down the stairs and out into the garden to pick flowers for her father's table at lunch.

The snake charmer put his flute to his lips and walked on. A smiling, silent crowd followed him. As he passed one poor dwelling near the edge of the village, a tapping, shuffling sound could be heard coming from a flight of stone stairs inside. The snake charmer stopped once more and stood quietly by the door, playing and playing, his long fingers quick as butterflies on his hollow flute. The tune was sad now, at once haunting and pleading and full of promises of great joy.

After a few minutes a pale young boy stumbled out of the doorway. One of his legs was withered and he leaned upon a crudely-made crutch. A murmur of approval bubbled through the crowd for the boy was well-known in the village. He had a good heart and spent most of his time playing with the little children. He never complained about his withered leg or about his absent mother; he had done his best to look after his old father until he died, just a few weeks before. And more than one of the villagers had remarked on the still, distant look that often crossed his face. He limped straight toward the snake charmer and fell at his feet. "I've been waiting for so long," he said, weeping, "I thought you would never come."

The snake charmer stopped playing. He stooped down and lifted the boy gently to his feet with one strong brown arm. "Catch hold of my cloak," he cried merrily, "and off we'll go!" And again the snake charmer began to play.

A man stood on his roof waving a stick at some monkeys in a banyan tree next to his house. "They are stealing my guavas," he grumbled to the bystanders and then, as the strains of the snake charmer's music floated back to him, he grinned a little foolishly and put down his stick. "I guess there are enough for all of us, my brothers," he said and went back inside.

Some of the children laughed to see the monkeys leap with a clatter from tin rooftop to rooftop, the ripe green fruits bulging from their mouths. But not the crippled boy. He had eyes only for the snake charmer and ears only for his music. He held on tightly to the snake charmer's cloak and followed him right out of the village.

The crowd watched the boy limp off with the snake charmer and many are sure they saw the crutch disappear, black and wriggling, into the snake charmer's pocket and the boy's stride become steadier and steadier as they walked along into the mists.

High up in the mountains the snake charmer stopped to rest. He turned to look the boy full in the face. The boy stared back straight into his eyes. At first he could see only the bluest of skies, but as he looked deeper inside them, he could see the snake charmer himself sitting in a ring of fire, playing his flute.

"Do you want to see more?" asked the snake charmer with a smile. "Oh yes!" answered the boy without hesitation. And the snake charmer began again to play. As he played, it seemed to the boy that the snake charmer began to grow. He grew and grew until at last he blotted out the entire landscape, the mountains, the valley and the sky and always he played, bending closer and closer to the enraptured boy. Then the music became a wind, a whirling cone of sound which pulled and pulled at the boy until finally he found himself deep, deep inside the snake charmer's flute and walking joyfully toward the snake charmer in the ring of fire who would play for him forever.

Then the snake charmer put his flute to his lips and walked on. (August, 1971)



2. Nathan

Nathan had no idea what force or power had drawn him to this out-of-the-way spot, but here he was, walking slowly up a nameless dirt road in a far corner of the country, admiring deep woods radiant with October foliage on either side of him and feeling more wonderfully excited than he had ever felt in his life. At the turn in the road, he made his way rather shyly past the throngs of people near the old farmhouse and turned his steps toward the lane at one side of the house which ran down a small slope to an open space and a little pond. His inexplicable excitement mounted still higher when he saw the wooden house by the edge of the water; it looked so simple and comfortable, like a cottage built for a king. He joined some others who were sitting quietly on the grassy bank and his feeling of eager expectancy grew. He had spoken to no one, he had recognized no one, yet he felt completely at home in this peaceful place.

Eventually the door of the house opened and a Man came out to greet the people waiting for him. Nathan studied him as he did most people he met and quickly decided he had never seen such a warm, compassionate face in all his many wanderings. The Man was so natural and at the same time so dignified. Nathan found himself folding his hands and bowing with the others to return the Man's greeting. As the Man began to speak, Nathan became aware of how hushed his surroundings had become. No wind stirred the dry leaves in the cold, bright air; the clouds seemed to have stopped moving altogether. The very sky seemed to have come closer to the earth to listen to the Man's soft words. He was saying:

“Once we all lived in the lap of God and now we are here on earth, imprisoned in the human form and unable to find our way back to our true home. What we need is someone who has freed himself from this earthly prison, someone who can also free us and guide us back to the lap of God who is all bliss, all light and all joy.”

With the Man's first sentence, a wrenching pain entered Nathan's heart and remained there. He listened and listened, afraid to move, afraid to breathe for fear of missing one precious syllable of the words he had been so inexorably drawn to hear. And his heart grew sore within him. When the Man's eyes, which roamed ceaselessly over all the faces upturned before him, alighted on Nathan, it seemed to him that a rainbow grew out of them and attached itself to his own eyes, immediately establishing a bond far stronger than the cord which had once bound him to his mother.

And in that moment, Nathan's heart was lost forever to that power manifest in the Man. “I am yours; do with me what you will,” he said in his heart to the Man. “Whatever you ask of me, no matter how difficult, I will obey. There is no other way for me to live, now.”

The Man gazed long into Nathan's eyes and then continued speaking: “God says, ‘I am the secret treasure within you. Why don't you come and find me out?’” Nathan said again in his heart. “Whatever you say, that shall be my work.”

As he sat staring up at the Man, it seemed to Nathan that the Man sat in front of an open door, a huge door which opened onto the only real world behind him. Some old, old words were spoken deep inside him: “I am the way, the truth, and the light. No man cometh unto the Father but by me.” Nathan bowed his head to the ground, his face wet with tears.

The next morning the Man showed Nathan a glimpse of that treasure of which he had spoken, so that Nathan would be sure of what he was seeking. And it was as if a great stone had been rolled away from the center of a mountain and the splendor of many suns could be seen. Nathan's breath was quite taken away. When the vision had passed, Nathan's heart was wrung again inside him and he vowed, "I will seek that light, all my life if I have to, but I will dig it out." He took leave of the Man after thanking him for his gift and went back into the world to begin his work.

Nathan's life changed dramatically. Not that he had ever been strongly attached to the pleasures of this world, but now he would eat only the simplest food; he would read only the lives of other treasure-seekers. He didn't care what he did for work in the world to make his living; he kept to himself as much as possible, his attention on the wonderful light within him and on the man who had helped him to see it. When he had to be among people, he did his best to be friendly and helpful and loving, like the man who had helped him.

But it was a long, slow process. Most of the time there was no light, just a memory of it; there seemed to be a lithic density and heaviness to the darkness within him. He felt like a miner confronting an enormous mountain with only an ice pick and his bare hands... a mountain of desire, of seemingly endless self-deception, the mountain of himself. The digging was discouraging work. At times the mountain seemed impenetrable and he would cry out in anguish to the Man for help. Each time he did so, some words would come singing into his heart to soothe him:

"Be patient, Rome was not built in a day. You know there is light at the end of the tunnel. Don't despair. Take heart and dig deeper. Seek and ye shall find." And there would be a feeble ray, a glimmering of light through all the heavy rock and stone and he would remember the glorious light he had seen and would continue with greater fervor than before.

At one point, Nathan did discover that he had one other tool at his disposal, his attention. He found that the more keenly he bent his attention toward the work before him, the more deeply he penetrated into the mountain. It was like a laser beam in its effect.

For years Nathan dug and dug. His tunnel into the mountain of himself began to widen. He began to find the strength to lift obstructing boulders more and more easily. He also found that the more help he asked from the Man, the easier his task became. But even as he worked, even as the way opened slowly before him, Nathan felt no closer to the light. Something was wrong, somewhere. Some immovable barrier seemed to block his way; and his awareness of the situation distressed him greatly and kept him from any lasting peace.

Once it happened that he revisited a place and some people he had left under unhappy circumstances some years before. He found himself reacting to the situation as he would have before he met the Man. He found himself filled with selfishness, with anger, resentment and pain.

An old friend told him. "You see, Nathan, your present life may have changed but these things are very deep-seated. You must examine them, discover their causes and then, with all your heart, forgive anyone who may have offended you in the past." Nathan wept and told his companion, "These things are so deep-seated I do not understand them. They must be rooted near the very heart of the mountain. How can I ever hope to chisel them out?"

In his misery, his thoughts turned to the Man and some of the words he remembered: "You must be true to your own self, to the God within you, who sees all and knows all. How long will you carry this pain around inside you, thinking no one sees?" And some other words also came to him at this time: "God resides in every heart. If you know this, really know this in your heart of hearts, now can you hurt the feelings of anyone? "

Sometime later that night, when Nathan returned in very low spirits to his own home, he had a strange dream. He dreamed he was a small child who stood with his father outside the shimmering gate of a vast, golden palace. The child was weeping inconsolably. The father was loving, but firm. "But I don't want to go," pleaded the child miserably. "I love it here and I see you quite often." "There is no choice, my son," the father replied. "Even this palace is not your true home. I want you to come all the way back to stay with me forever and this is the only way you can do that." "How long must I be gone?" sobbed the child. "I'm afraid I won't be able to live away from here and you." "I will grant you two boons, child. Illusion will quickly wear thin for you down there and a striving heart will hasten the journey."

Abject, but obedient, he clung to his father's hands and took one last look at the radiant splendor he had called home for so long. "Go," he told him, gently releasing his hands. "The stars arc fixed, the family chosen, the pattern laid down. At the end of the pattern you will begin your return. Do not tarry, my son. I will be waiting for you." And as the child looked, his father's face outshone all the glory around them. He took one last breath of that fragrant, ringing air, tore his eyes from his father's face, hurled himself into the dark well which lay at their feet and was born into the physical world.

Nathan awoke in a paroxysm of pain. Great cries of rage rent the air. "I didn't want to be born! Oh God, I really did not want to be born!" Beside himself with all this never-released emotion, Nathan threw on some clothes and flung himself out of the house and into the woods surrounding it. He ran through the bushes, not caring if his sleeves were torn or his boots became muddy. His head was in a frenzy; so much insight was coming to him at once.

Frequently he stopped and screamed at the top of his lungs. The pain and anger seemed to come all the way up from his toes. He saw clearly for the very first time the buried feelings of hatred and resentment toward God and man that he had carried around in his heart and had tried to conceal from himself, from God and from others for so long. He felt sick, he acknowledged how he had used them to withdraw from the world and his fellow men in a most unnatural way. And he realized with mounting horror that any such feelings were always against God, not man, and he trembled to see the depths of his wilful separation.

With another great cry Nathan threw himself on the ground and lay there, sobbing his heart out. He understood he must now joyfully embrace the whole creation, for God's sake, just as he had wilfully rejected it in the past for his own. With his face against the earth, he begged the Man to intercede for him, to forgive him his folly and grant him the gift of forgiveness for others. And soon his whole being was bathed, yes, one might even say baptized with the waters of total forgiveness and love.

And in the mountain of himself, the last great stone was rolled away forever with a sound like thunder and Nathan beheld the light of many suns once more. The walls which had confined it seemed to vanish into nothingness and all was light, all around him. With great relief and joy Nathan entered into the light and embraced it and became one with it thereafter. (April, 1973)

3. Set Your House in Order

Partway up the mountainside, the Pilgrim lay sprawled in the rubble. Trembling, miserable, unable to go any further, he was too exhausted even to move his face in the dirt. He lay there, trying with all his might to dispel the shadows before his eyes which had caused his fall. But the shadows would not go away. They clung to his eyes, to the space behind his eyes; they held him fast. At length the Pilgrim groaned and cried aloud, "Lord, what is to become of me? I am besieged - I cannot move!"

Suddenly there was a great stillness around him and a great warmth. Something touched his outstretched hand. The Pilgrim slowly roused himself and looked up, squinting through the ceaseless flow of shadows around his head. His Lord stood before him, a man like any other man, except for the great stillness, except for the great warmth which surrounded him. On his face was a look of such profound understanding and compassion, the Pilgrim wept anew to see it.

"I wanted so much to come to You," he sobbed. "I started out so boldly, with such zeal..."

"What of your house?" asked the Lord.

"Oh, that place! I left it long ago." The Pilgrim shuddered at the memory of it. "It was too dark and gloomy and cold."

The look of compassion deepened on the Lord's face. "Dear friend," He murmured, "obviously it hasn't left you. Matters are not at rest there or you would not be beset by shadows now. You must set your house in order before you can come to me."

"Oh no!" moaned the Pilgrim. "I don't want to go all the way back down there! It's so far behind me now and - and - there are rooms in it I have never entered. Please help me to continue on my way up the mountain; don't send me back down there!"

"Beloved friend, there is no other way," replied the Lord. "Your house must be in order, completely in order, before you can come to me. Look what a paltry self you bring me - a weak and fearful creature who stumbles at shadows! Is it not said, 'Thou shalt love thy Lord with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy mind, and with all thy strength'? Come to me in fullness - not in fear! Go and open all those doors, one by one; fill the place with light; sweep out every corner until there is no darkness anywhere. When the task is done, I myself will come and get you."

The Pilgrim wept and stormed and begged and wrung his hands, to no avail. His Lord's words were hard, the very last words he had wanted to hear. But instead of sympathizing, the figure before him grew stern and commanded him: "I tell you, set your house in order or journey not toward me." And with this final pronouncement, He was gone.

Teeth chattering and limbs shaking, but fire burning in his heart, the Pilgrim made his way slowly back down the mountainside. The air around him became increasingly dense with shadows until he found himself flailing his arms continuously to keep any open vision as he retraced his steps toward home.

Wearily he turned out the key from its hiding place in an old flowerpot, unlocked the front door, went in and sat down. Fresh tears fell as he looked around him at the dust, the cobwebs, the cold hearth. But, "Lo! I am with you always!" sang to him suddenly out of the fire in his heart and the Pilgrim knew, even though at the moment he hated being here, that he had come to the right place and that somehow everything would be all right.

It took months for the Pilgrim to do even the most superficial cleaning. He had always thought he kept a decent house but closer examination revealed many unexpected messes he had never noticed before.

And it took nearly a year before the Pilgrim had gained enough courage to stand in front of the first of the four unopened doors, knowing now that he was strong enough to open it and enter the room and face and conquer, nay, even befriend whatever awaited him there.

Shadows crowded around him, in front of his eyes, in the space behind his eyes, and suddenly he was seized with terror, shaking and choking with it; and from the depths of his heart came the cry, "I'm scared! I'm so scared!" And with the strength of this cry he opened the door and rushed inside. Instantly all the shadows vanished and he saw to his amazement a shadowy figure, very like himself, cowering and quaking and sniveling in the middle of a dismal empty room. The Pilgrim's heart went out to the poor creature. "Come," he said, "you shall sup with me tonight." And he took it by the hand and led it back along the corridor into the central chamber in the house where there was a long table set in front of a blazing fire.

And then he went back to the first room and opened all the windows and lit all the lamps and washed and scrubbed and scoured until there wasn't the shadow of a shadow of the fear that had lived in there so long.

The Pilgrim lived with fear for some time and they became intimate friends, until there was nothing the Pilgrim did not know about fear. But strangely enough, the longer their friendship continued, the fainter the shadowy figure became until one day, in the bright sunlight which came through the huge skylight in the central chamber, fear was not there at all. And the Pilgrim set his jaw and turned his attention and his footsteps toward the second door.

He stood in front of this one, knowing that he now had the strength to open it and enter the room and face and conquer, yes, even befriend whatever awaited him there. But again shadows crowded around him, in front of his eyes, in the space behind his eyes, and suddenly he was filled with pain, every muscle, every nerve, every organ in his body was shrieking, "I hurt! Oh, I hurt!" and with the strength of this cry, he opened the door and rushed inside.

Immediately all the shadows vanished and he found to his surprise a shadowy figure, very like himself, doubled up and writhing on the bare floor. It was clutching its stomach as though it had a spear or an arrow in it which it was struggling to remove. "Oh you poor thing!" gasped the Pilgrim, "come along out of here and let me try to help you." He put his arms gently around the creature and led it into the light and warmth of the great central chamber in which he spent most of his time.

Then the Pilgrim went back to the second room and opened all the windows and lit all the lamps and dusted and swept and polished until there wasn't the shadow of a shadow of the pain that had lived in there so long.

Pain and the Pilgrim spent much time together. They too became intimate friends until there was no sorrow, no anguish in this world the Pilgrim did not know. But strangely enough. The longer their friendship continued, the fainter the shadowy figure became until one day, as evening light shone through the sparkling window on the western side of the fireplace, pain was not there at all. And the Pilgrim took a deep breath and made his way toward the third door.

This time the shadows assailed him in the corridor and raged around his head until he almost lost his courage, thought he was going mad, and turned to flee into the safe familiarity of the central chamber. But – “Stop!” sang the voice in the depths of his burning heart, “have you forgotten I am with you always? Who do you think, Beloved, is really doing all this work?”

Both ashamed and heartened, the Pilgrim reset his steps grimly toward the third door. The heat was overpowering, and it was nothing like the warmth of the Lord. It was a red-hot blast, a passionate fury which engulfed him as he stood there. From his fingertips, his toes, his bowels, his entire being, he felt the violence boiling up and, opening his throat and roaring with total anger, he threw the door open and strode inside. The heat stopped abruptly. The shadowy leonine figure which looked just like him snarling and pacing the floor in the dimly lighted room did not surprise the Pilgrim. “Come on,” he said bravely, taking a firm grip on the creature’s arm, “you and I will have much to talk about.”

Well, it took a longer time than either fear or pain did, but the Pilgrim eventually made friends with anger, too. And at last the shadowy figure that was the Pilgrim’s anger disappeared from his house in much the same way as fear and pain.

This left only one more unopened door, but it was many years before the Pilgrim could bring himself to face it. One day he was thinking of his Lord and remembering that He had said the house must be completely in order before anything really good could happen and, as the fire in his heart burned particularly brightly that day, he found himself stiffening his shoulders for this last, most difficult foray.

The shadows were more than shadows which clung to his eyes, to the space behind the eyes, this time they were shapes, moving, sinuous, twining shapes, like temple reliefs, like old frescoes and paintings, like words from books given bodies; and he felt his skin prickle and go hot and the rest of his body throbbed with delicious, delightful sensations.

“Oh,” he groaned, “I want it, I need it, I love it!” and he threw himself into the room. A shadowy figure, half male, half female, opened its arms to him from an enormous bed. “Yes,” he said, gazing at the figure with infinite pity, “finally you and I will become friends too.” And he drew the amorous creature forth from the shadows and into the clear light of the great central chamber.

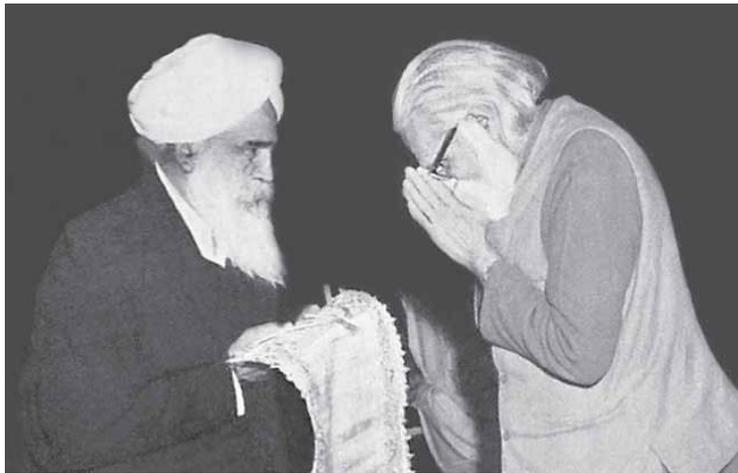
No one knows how long the Pilgrim’s friendship with physical desire lasted; but let it be known that he learned all that he needed to learn. And when the shadowy creature that was the Pilgrim’s own sensuality finally disappeared into the bright air as the others had before it and the house had no darkness in it anywhere at all, the Pilgrim was at peace and thought his task was done.

It was not so. The Pilgrim lay in front of the hearth one night and in a dream he saw a small door opening and a long bony hand reaching around to grasp his hand. In this dream the Pilgrim tried to close that door but there had been no lock on it and the bony hand had reached for him again.

The Pilgrim awakened in a cold sweat with his heart pounding. “It was Death,” he said to himself. “Fool that I am, I have not yet made a friend of Death!” And without a moment’s hesitation, he scrambled up into an old forgotten attic on one end of the house and opened the fifth and very last door.

But instead of bony fingers and the dampness of the tomb, there was a familiar stillness and a singing light. “It is I, Beloved,” said the Lord. “I promised I would come for you when your house was completely in order and so I have.”

His face radiant with the fullness of his understanding and his heart filled with love and trust, the Pilgrim went back up the mountainside in the company of his Lord. (April, 1974)



4. Helping Each Other Find God

“Charity Begins at Home”

There were once two companions, a man and a woman, and they loved each other truly. At one time in their long life together, the woman received a summons, an imperious call to begin a long, long journey to a Place Far Away. The One who called her was waiting for her there; He would send His two servants, Light and Music, to guide her on her way. The woman started off; she had no choice. She loved both music and light and she knew that she was going to love the One who called for her more than all the world. The man, however, had received no call. Nor did he understand anything about the One who called or about His two servants, Music and Light. But, because he loved the woman truly, he decided to accompany her on her journey.

Immediately, difficulties arose between them. The woman became so intoxicated by the prospect of the journey and by the two guides and became so involved in her own dreams of what awaited her in the Place Far Away that she sorely neglected her companion and eventually, because her mind was such, she began to consider him a positive impediment on the way. The man, in turn, became very angry. It seemed he was losing his beloved companion to something he understood nothing about. He began to say wounding things to her; he began to try to pull her back from making the journey. But she would look behind her and start in terror; to her eyes nothing was there - an empty space, an airy mist. For her the road opened only before her; there was no going back. They quarreled bitterly. The man threatened to leave. The woman pretended not to care but her heart was heavy within her all the same. She resolved to continue on, even if she were left alone.

Then the One who had sent for her from the Place Far Away appeared before her in a vision. His beautiful face was very stern and by His manner she knew He was far from pleased. “What are you doing, traveling alone?” He asked the woman. “Have you no companion?”

“I had one,” she whispered, awe-struck at the sight of Him and terribly frightened at having so displeased Him, “but he went away.” “Go back to him, then,” He told her abruptly. “The needs of your companion come first. Make him happy and then you may continue the journey. All you have to do is love him. And remember, the more you grow in love for each other, the more you will grow in love for me.” And He was gone.

Filled with remorse for all her wrong-headedness and filled also with the desire to obey the One who had sent for her at any cost, the woman hastened back to where the man sat, dreaming by a river. “I haven't been able to see you very well for a while,” she said softly, “I'm so sorry I hurt you; I've had such blinders on. I think they're gone, now.” She went and knelt at his feet and looked up into his face. “I still love you truly,” she said. The man looked down at her, his brow darkened with pain. “I don't believe you,” he said. “You'll have to show me. Only time will prove the truth - or falsehood - of what you say.”

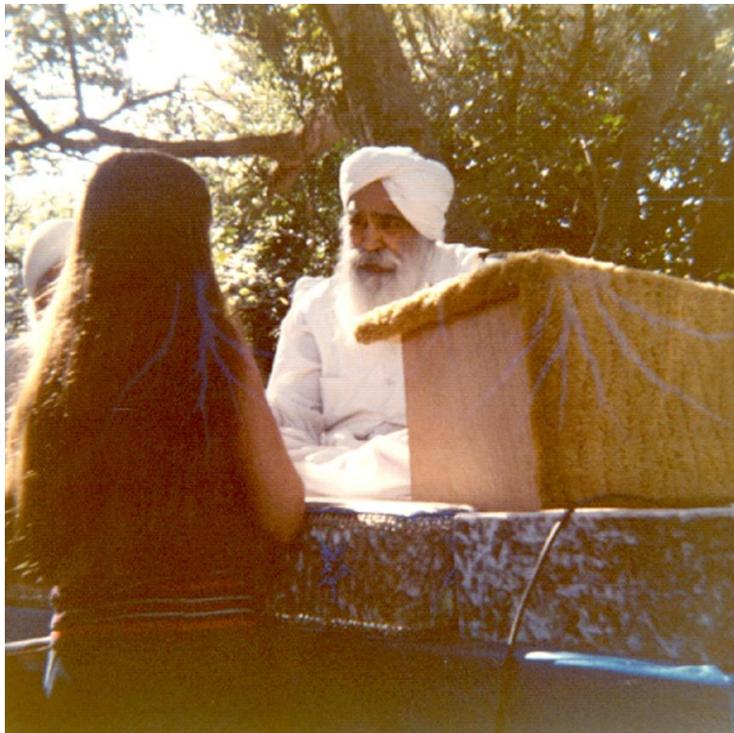
And they began their life together once more. The woman knew that somehow she was still on the journey, but she went nowhere and the man became increasingly trustful and content. If the woman did occasionally lapse into her old dreams, the man snatched her out of them, sometimes angrily, sometimes sorrowfully. “We must always be completely open toward each other,” he told her. “I need you to be here with me, not off in a dream.” Often she cried in a curious combination of pain and thanksgiving; it seemed she was far from her journey to see the One whom she had come to love more than all the world, and yet she understood that her companion

was helping her to make the journey by forcing her to obey His wishes. And she wanted to obey; even when her foolish mind rebelled, her heart wanted to obey. The woman understood that she did not get away with anything. If she faltered at all, the man was there to chastise her, to demand changes, to push her forward again.

This process went on for some time. As the woman's attention became more and more focused on her companion and less and less focused on herself, the realization came to her that her companion was none other than the One who had sent for her Himself, in another form, and she was overcome, overwhelmed with feelings of thankfulness for such a great gift; without her companion, she could not have begun the journey at all. And if she had, she would have made many wrong turns, often unwittingly, without him. Over and over again it was his criticism, his perception which kept her on the main road. All his prodding and pushing had been to open her up to the true beginning - passage through the first gate - to find the One standing there, arms outstretched, His face streaming rays of love and joy.

"I've brought her," says the man.

"You've done well, my son," replies the One. "Now, each of you take one of my hands; we will make the rest of the journey together." (July, 1973)



5. Before the Wedding

It was the feast of their betrothal and everyone was happy. The husband to be sat like a king on a throne and all the guests thronged around him, admiring. The bride to be was young and very shy: she stole many a glance at this man she was to marry, thinking all the while, "How is it that I of all people am fortunate enough to marry this great one; see how beautiful he is and how kind! How lucky I am!" And the husband to be, as though he could read her thoughts, returned all those glances, feeding fire with far greater fire.

Once during the festivities, he called her to his side and heaped gifts upon her. One gift was three gowns which fit over one another. The outer one was a magnificent, long robe made of heavy red brocade. It was embroidered richly with gold and silver threads and with pearls and precious stones. The second was a simpler gown of soft, grey satin. It, too, was long and rich-looking, but it had no ornaments on it. The third, the innermost garment, was a plain, short silk shift of dazzling whiteness.

When she was dressed in these and came hesitantly before him again, he filled her arms with ripe fruit and laughed into her eyes. "I think you have everything you need now," he said merrily. Then the little bride to be became intoxicated, over-flowing with love and joy, and the fire in her grew and grew. "All I want is to be with him," she told herself fervently; "All I want in the world is to be with him, forever." And she danced her joy before him. It was such a happy time.

Then the bride to be thought to herself, "But he has said nothing yet about our marriage plans; when will that be?" And she plucked at his sleeve and murmured, "...and our marriage?" "Soon, soon," he replied easily, "I'll be around." And with this vague reply the bride to be had to be satisfied.

He was around; she saw him from time to time and each time she was with him his glances kindled her more. But the times of separation grew increasingly painful for the bride to be and she longed for some definite word of their marriage.

Once when they were together and she was weeping over the length of their most recent separation, he took her on his lap and comforted her like a small child. He told her, "There is a way to be with me all the time if you really want to be. There is a secret stairway leading to my home. When you really want to be with me forever, climb that stair. It is one hundred steps high and very, very narrow and you must leave everything behind and climb all the way to the top without thinking once of anything else but me." He stroked her hair and smiled down at her, his face radiant with love. "I'll be waiting for you there," he said, "Rest assured of that."

She heard his words, but she didn't pay close attention, it was enough that she was with him again for that time and that the fire in her steadily grew and grew.

He was around, I say; they saw each other more or less frequently and then one day, without any warning at all, the bride to be received word that her beloved had suddenly gone home.

She was bereft; she was inconsolable. She could not sleep or eat; she wept continuously. It seemed to her that all the light, all the reason for living had gone out of the world. Could it be that he did not want to marry her, after all, she wondered. No, no; the memory of his countless radiant glances and of all his loving care assured her that could not be true. Well then, could it be

that he didn't think she cared enough to want to marry him? That thought was even more painful to her than the first.

For a time she wandered around in this sad world with a broken heart, wondering where "home" was to her beloved and how she could possibly follow him there. And then one day, in all her misery and loneliness, she finally remembered what he had told her that time when he had held her and comforted her like a small child. He had told her the same thing at other times, too, she realized, but she had been forgetful, so forgetful! There was a stairway, one hundred steps high, very narrow – if she wanted to see him she had to climb the entire stair and think of nothing but him.

All the time he had been around she could have been with him in this way but it had not seemed so important, then. Now, now that there was no other way to see him.

She sat down very, very quietly, and suddenly, through her tears, she saw the stair. And it was very narrow and it was very steep; she could not see the top of it, but the memory of her beloved's glances seized and held her and the fire inside her burned and burned. She thought to herself for the millionth time, "All I want is to be with him; all I want in the world is to be with him, forever." And she began to climb.

It was not easy. In fact, it was the most difficult thing she had ever attempted. She soon found that, for all her love, other matters kept crowding into her mind causing her to slip and slide back down the stairs over and over again. But her love was strong and ever-growing and she would not be discouraged. After all, had he not assured her repeatedly that he was waiting for her at the top of the stair?

Gradually she began to forget all that was going on in the world around her as she bent more and more concentrated attention toward learning to climb that stair. And little by little, love crowded out all other thoughts in her mind until she was left at last with only memories of her beloved's radiant face in her mind and a burning desire to see him again in her heart.

And the day finally came when she did attempt the stairway and managed to climb all the way to the top without thinking of anything at all – even once – but her beloved.

Lo and behold, at the one hundredth step a door opened and light streamed out. There he stood like a king at a palace gate, his arms opened wide. "I knew you would come one day," he said, laughing into her eyes as he drew her toward himself inside the door. Then he turned and signaled for the marriage ceremony to begin. (January, 1975)



6. Maeve

Having been born a princess, Maeve always had everything her heart desired. Up to the age of eighteen she had literally danced her way through life with a constant smile and a never-faltering step until one night something happened to her which changed her, completely.

It was after a great festival. Maeve had played songs of her own composition before her father, the king, and all his court. She had danced all night with many partners and had been celebrated as having the most beautiful face in the kingdom. The court had whispered of marriage for her soon.

Maeve had gone to bed, tired but elated with a sense of her growing fame. But this night the hours went by and she could not sleep. The noises in the palace around her gradually diminished until they ceased altogether. All was silent and still the princess could not sleep. She tossed and turned, trying to recapture the gaiety of the evening, her companions' faces, her music, anything, all to no avail.

Then she began to hear one sound, the sound of someone sobbing bitterly. The voice was muffled, as though it came from very far away. Maeve lay still, wondering. Where was it coming from, this heartbroken weeping, where? And then, with a start which caused her to sit bolt upright in bed, Maeve recognized the origin of the sound. It was coming from somewhere deep, deep inside her own body. Heart pounding, she sat and listened with all her might.

“Let me out!” cried the voice, “Let me out!”

“Who are you?” whispered Maeve in a fright.

“I’m your Self,” cried the voice despairingly, “Oh, won’t you please let me out!”

“Don’t be silly,” said Maeve to the voice, “I’m myself. All I have to do is look in the mirror and I can see myself quite clearly.”

“Oh, no you can’t,” said the little voice, “You’re just an endless collection of false faces. Let me out and I’ll show you who you really are.”

“Don’t talk such nonsense,” said Maeve, “Go away and leave me alone. I’m very tired and I just want to go to sleep.”

“You hear me now, dear princess,” the voice persisted, “and sleep will not come to you until you let me out. I will be heard!” And the voice grew very loud and let out a piercing wail.

Maeve covered her ears in horror and thought, “If this continues, I shall surely go mad. I must leave the palace until I get rid of this wretched creature and then I will return.” She crept out of bed, dressed quickly in a long loose robe, drew a woolen cloak over that and stole barefoot through the quiet halls, down the great stairs, out into the deserted palace gardens and through a little gate into the forest beyond.

Fortunately, there was a moon, but if there hadn't been Maeve could have found her way. She knew the forest as well as the palace, having spent years exploring both. She knew trails and bowers, thickets and copses and this night was on her way to a favorite haunt, an old ruined tower at the far end of the forest. It was a neglected place; she had come upon it one day looking for shelter in a sudden storm. No one would think to look for her in such a forgotten corner.

At last Maeve was able to distinguish the large moss-covered rocks marking the entrance of the tower. She stepped toward them and sat down in the dark entrance facing the forest. "Now then," she said to her Self, "What is it that you want me to do?"

The voice cried out, louder than ever, "Let me out!"

"How can I do that?" Maeve asked. "You must find a way, you must, you must!" cried the voice, and suddenly, as though a floodgate had been opened, it began in a torrent of words to tell the princess how long it had been a prisoner and how dreadfully it had suffered.

"Stop, stop!" Maeve cried after a time, "I've never heard such a sad story and I cannot bear to hear another word of it. Is there no one to help me to help you?" And she threw herself on the ground and sobbed and sobbed.

An unusual stillness pervaded the forest as a strange image suddenly passed before the princess' inner eye. She had become a castle and her face was the topmost tower. A long stair wound down and down through the tower to the most secret dungeon in the castle. A tiny figure of light lay inside that dungeon, a figure in chains, crumpled and sad. The figure was sobbing in despair when from outside the tower a long arm reached in and turned the key in the dungeon door. The figure rose and struggled to the door. It pushed the door open and stood, heavily laden, at the foot of the stair. Then it began to cry, "Let me out! Let me out!"

The long arm from outside began to tear down bricks one by one from the front of the tower and as each brick fell, a link in the shining figure's chain fell also; turned into a butterfly and flew away. The bricks fell, the figure climbed, until it reached the top of the stair where it stood, freed from all its chains, in the emptiness of the fallen bricks. At that precise moment, the entire castle melted into nothingness and all that remained in the vision of the princess was the figure of light.

At dawn a rustling in the intense stillness broke in upon Maeve's tears and she looked up. Seated directly across from her in the shadows of an oak was an old man dressed in white whose face shone like the sun. His eyes were warm and wise as he looked at the princess. "Well met, Maeve," he said, "Your Self is indeed at the foot of the stair. That was no dream. Now, shall we begin?"

"Who are you?" whispered Maeve, awed at such a visitor in the most remote part of her father's forest.

The old man chuckled. "I am my Self," he replied.

"That voice which calls itself my Self says I am only false faces," said Maeve. "He says that he is real and I am not. How can I find out if this is true?"

"Wait and see," said the old man. "Here, I'll show you." He scooped up a handful of earth from the ground in front of the princess. Immediately a shallow pool of clear water filled in the space.

Not a ripple broke its surface. “Now look at your face, Maeve,” he directed, “and tell me what you see.”

Maeve leaned forward, looking into the pool at her reflection. What she saw was not the shining figure of her vision, nothing like it. Nor was it like the image she was used to admiring in any number of mirrors in the palace. What she saw in the pool was an expression, one of many hundreds that flitted across her features every day. “Oh!” she said, “I look so greedy. I look as though all I wanted was more chocolates when I’d already eaten half the box.”

“Do you like to look like that?” asked the old man.

“No,” murmured Maeve with tears in her eyes.

“Well then, take that expression off,” said the old man.

Maeve put her hands up to her face and pulled and pulled. Nothing happened. “You are making fun of me,” she said to the old man.

“Not at all,” he replied, “You might ask me to help.”

Maeve bowed her head. “Please help me,” she said. “Obviously I cannot do this alone.”

The old man reached forward across the pool and barely touched the princess’ face. A mask thin as onionskin fell into his palm, curled up and withered like a dead leaf which he blew away. “Now Maeve,” he said quietly, “Look again into the pool. What do you see?”

Maeve leaned forward as she had before and studied her reflection in the pool. “Oh,” she said, “I look so lazy! I look as though I had done nothing all day long and was now unwilling to get up even to greet my father, the king.”

“Do you like to look like that?” the old man asked.

“No,” murmured Maeve with tears in her eyes.

“Well then, take that expression off too,” said he.

“You do it please,” Maeve begged him, “I know now I can do nothing without your help.”

Again the old man reached forward across the pool. He barely touched the princess’ face. Another mask thin as onionskin fell into his palm, curled up and withered like a dead leaf which he blew away.

“You must eat now before we continue,” said the old man, handing her a small basket of fruit and cheese and bread and nuts which he had taken from behind the tree. Maeve took the food gratefully and ate. Her companion sat, lost in his own thoughts, and waited for her to finish. Without a word Maeve handed the empty basket back to him and without a word he placed it behind the tree. Then, “Look again into the pool, Maeve,” he directed, “and tell me what you see.”

Days went by and each one followed the same pattern. When Maeve awoke in the morning, the old man was always there waiting for her. He would bring out the little basket filled with food and wait patiently while she ate. He would then direct her attention to her reflection in the pool. As soon as she recognized each expression, he lifted it from her face. The work was exhausting; she could see only a few expressions a day. When she tired, the old man would tell her to sleep; their work would begin again in the morning.

One night, in her mind's eye Maeve saw the image of the castle again. The tower was crumbling at a great rate and the figure of light was more than halfway up the stair. She awoke that morning happier than she had been in a long time.

But the expressions she saw in the pool became more and more subtle and therefore correspondingly difficult to identify. And soon there came a day when the old man watched with concern as she prepared to look into the pool. With good reason; she saw there an expression she had never seen before or imagined could exist in anyone. It was a ferocious look, a look of naked hatred and pride. It was her own face, stripped of all the outer masks, and it was dreadful to behold.

The reflection held her and held her. A great shudder went through her body and she began to tremble violently. With all her strength she pulled her attention away from the hypnotic reflection and, after staring for a moment straight into the old man's eyes, she closed her own. Then three extraordinary things happened, all at the same time. The voice within her cried out louder than ever before, "Let me out!" and her own voice cried out "I do not want to die!" and the old man reached across the pool and touched her forehead and her head dropped like an overripe apple and splashed into the pool in front of her.

"Now I am nothing!" the princess shrieked, feeling only a great wind where her ears should have been.

"Not at all," said the old man as he removed the princess' head from the pool. "Look again, Maeve, and see who you really are."

And Maeve leaned forward once more to look into the pool and she saw only the figure of light staring back at her and his face shown like the sun. "But we're the same then, you and I," she gasped and stared at the old man.

"Of course we are," he chuckled, for it is written, 'He it is that desireth in thee and He it is that is desired. He is all and He doth all if thou might see Him.'"

And the two sat, no one knows for how long, oblivious and absorbed, smiling into each other's faces.

"What is that clamor I hear, my father?" asked Maeve, "It is louder than all the noises of the forest."

"It is the cry of all the other prisoners in the world, begging to be released," answered the old man. "My daughter, you must go to them now and tell them what to do." (March, 1972)



7. The Road

We were all sitting on the edge of the road, playing. I looked up and saw our father coming down the road toward us. I said to the others, "Oh, look, our father has come for us!" They also looked up, stared, and then laughed at me. "Don't be so silly," they said, "Nobody's there." And they went back to their games. But I saw him beckon and I heard him say, "Come, now. It's time for you to go home." And without another word to my friends, I stood up and took his outstretched hand and went away with him, walking slowly back up the road.

The others were very angry with me for leaving and threw dirt after me; they threatened me and jeered at me and called me names. I tried not to listen, not to care, and kept right on walking beside our father, my hand in his.

After a long while, my favorite companion ran up breathlessly and tried to catch hold of my other hand. I looked up at our father, "Is it all right?" "Yes," he said, "It's all right." I gladly took one of my companion's hands in my free hand and then he was able to see our father, too. So the three of us continued walking up the road.

Eventually, all our friends came up, one by one, until we were all holding hands and smiling and walking slowly together up the road with our father. (September, 1975)



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