

# THE LOAF OF BREAD.

A TALE OF EMANCIPATION

*(Extracted from the Diary of a Fresh-man.)*

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I had just entered into my teens when I matriculated from a village school and went to the district town to avail myself of the advantages of higher education. Up till then I had never gone beyond the limits of my native village excepting occasional excursions to another village, eight miles off, lying in an out of the way part of the country. To a green youth like me fresh from his native woodlands wild, the difference between the quiet country-life I had heretofore led and the thousand and one refinements of town life, was simply overwhelming. The talk of my school-mates and mess-mates, full of flashes of boyish wit or of gay reminiscence of boyish pranks, the spruce way in which they were dressed, the jaunty air with which they carried their heads like parrots, the slang they talked with such ease and gusto, the ready familiarity with which they talked of their studies and their teachers,—all those things startled me by their novelty ; I felt a strange exhilaration of spirits

as with new wine intoxicated,' my veins tingled, my brain reeled, and I was lifted off my feet.

Born of a high-class Bramhin family, I had been trained in the usual round of ceremonial observances and habits of personal cleanliness. During the first six months of my sojourn in the town I followed my usual practice in these matters with scrupulous regularity, in spite of the jeers of my more refined chums. I took good care never to eat off a plate or drink of a glass defiled by a *Sudra*. We had a Moslem class-fellow, and I kept as far from him as the arrangements of the class-room permitted, and even when we were called upon to stand round the Professor's chair, I insulated myself so completely as to avoid all contact with the gaberdine of my unhallowed class-fellow. But at the end of the first half-year of my town-life, 'a change came over the spirit of my dream. My early training began to loosen its hold upon me and I was more and more fascinated by the glamour of the refined manners of my companions. The old garment of orthodoxy burst in more places than one, and at last it slipped off like the cast-off skin of a snake. But let me tell my little story and stop this moralising vein.

On my way to and from college, I had to pass by a baker's stall. A smell, not altogether unpleasant, came from the stall when I hurried to college, and many a time and oft I slackened my steps, while passing by the stall, in order to catch a fuller breath of it. Oh ! how it did bring back to my boyish memory the smell of wild-flowers hidden away from the eyes of passers-by in the quick-set hedge round my native fields in a clear spring-morning ! I came at last to perceive that it was the smell of fresh

leavened bread. But greater wonders were still in store for me. One day I saw the baker put his loaves into the oven and I watched them for a while. I was delighted at the sight of the loaves getting brown slowly under the genial heat, and gently swelling up—at least so it seemed to my boyish fancy—like lovely lotus belong on the limpid stream, the rich brown of the hard crust contrasting beautifully with the mottled white of the kissing-crust. When college was over, I returned by the same road and saw the loaves ranged in a row and exposed for sale on the counter. What strange shapes ! some looked like huge ostrich-eggs or rather like the eggs of the 'roc' that I had recently read of in the *Arabian Nights* ; others appeared like miniature pagodas, broad-based and flat-topped, and some again could readily be mistaken for over-fat mice with their tails laid right across their back ! I felt a genuine admiration for the oddness of their shapes and the symmetry of their arrangement, and I often detected myself in casting 'a longing, lingering look behind' as I marched past that spot. The admiration, however, inspired in the hearts of my companions was less Platonic than mine. I often found them approaching the counter, buying of the bearded vendor a half-anna-loaf, or an anna-loaf and quietly depositing it into their pocket. Once or twice I remonstrated with them on their scandalous conduct. Some felt small, hung their heads down and shunned my flashing eyes ; but the bolder among them twitted me on my rustic breeding and silly prejudices. One, the boldest and hardiest of the set—he was town-born and town-bred—had the audacity of actually offering me a slice of it to taste—O abomination—and quite provokingly asked me to reserve judgment till I had tried it. I pished and pshawed, stared and gasped, spat and stamped in boyish indignation

—and scampered off, the emancipated town-bred youngsters jeering at me all the while for my crude village notions.

But that insidious suggestion had wrought its effect. The seed had been sown and it had fallen on no stony soil. The smell ever after haunted me like a passion, and the vision of the brown loaves flashed upon my inward eye at odd hours of the day. No longer could I pass by that shop (and I had to go that way twice daily) without feeling a moistening of the nether lip and an unholy craving in my mind, a craving not to be put by. In vain I busied myself over my books during college hours. I caught my mind wandering up the high street that ran past the college, and baiting at the baker's stall. One day—that day I read no more—the fit was stronger than usual ; unable to resist the temptation, I at last took the honest resolution of tasting of the forbidden food before that day's sun went down. With this end in view, I did not join my companions after college hours, but walked up and down the college grounds till the coast was clear. I then started at a round trot and very soon came alongside of the baker's shop—but what ailed me then ? I came to a stand-still, my limbs gave way, I was like one in a trance. After a time—the interval seemed quite an age to me—with a mighty effort I set my legs free, and strode on to the bearded worth standing behind the counter. Another pause—I thought the eyes of all the world were upon me, I felt my companions were dogging me at my heels, every sound appalled me and made my flesh creep. At length, I asked for a loaf of bread, a middlesized one, in a voice faltering like that of a gentle maiden confessing her love, shaking and husky like that of a drunkard.

Fortunately or unfortunately, the baker had not read poetry, especially English poetry of a particular type, and so he never suspected the tempest raging in my breast from the peculiarity of my voice. I turned blue to the roots of my hair—that was my way of blushing—when the loaf was handed over to me by old beardie in the ordinary way of business. I looked round to see that nobody was watching me, secreted it into my coat-pocket after having first of all felt that the pocket *had* a bottom, and flew fast like an arrow shot from a Tartar's bow.

The deed was done. The Rubicon was crossed. But fresh trouble vexed my over-wrought mind. Where should I taste of the tempting morsel ? Coming straight to my quarters was out of the question. I could not face my jeering friends. Should I despatch it on the college grounds ? No, the servants will see me at these nasty doings, and I shall come down in their estimation. To convert the baker's shop into a regular dining-hall—that was not to be thought of for a moment. I was in a bad fix.

At last I hit upon a plan. There was a deserted house lying in ruins in the vicinity of the College. That was the likeliest spot, thought I, for the celebration of such orgies as mine. It was a winter afternoon, and it was getting dark—an hour propitious for the work I had before me. I had dallied long with hope, the anticipation of an untasted joy ; the keen appetite of fourteen was also upon me. I flung my books aside, pulled off my shoes ( I had not yet lost orthodoxy ), squatted down upon some old stone in a by-nook to screen myself from the gaze of casual lookers-in, and fell to. I tore off a large slice of the loaf and sent it down my throat, crust

and all. The shades of my Bramhin forefathers wept for shame in the regions above, if souls can weep in bliss; but I was now 'possessing joys not promised at my birth.' A thrill of ecstasy, the delight of consummation, shot through my veins; it was felt through the blood and felt along the heart. I had a foretaste of celestial ambrosia, a vicarious participation in the manna of the desert, a reminiscence of the delicious taste of those 'sciential apples' with which our first parents gorged themselves in the happy garden; 'such delight, till then, as seemed in food I never tasted.'

Often and often have I since tasted of the 'staff of life,' toasted with butter, dipped in jelly, soaked in gravy or sopped in milk or honey—but nothing can restore to me the delicious taste, the freshness of a dream, of that dry loaf of bread which 'I greedily ingorged without restraint', the pulpy crumbs feeling like lamb's wool to the touch and tasting like powdery ambrosia; 'the very teeth were invited to their share of the pleasure at this banquet in overcoming the coy, brittle resistance of the hard but not over-hard crust. Fain would I sing with the poet—

Oh, cease to affirm that man, since his birth  
From Adam till now, has with wretchedness strove,  
Some portion of Paradise still is on earth  
And Eden revives *at the touch of the loaf.*