

## INDIAN SCENE

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*Collected Short Stories*

*of*

FLORA ANNIE STEEL

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## INTRODUCTION

**I**N the spring of 1929 my mother, then eighty-two years of age, had nearly finished her autobiography, was at work on a book 'The Gates of Pearl,' and was planning a collected volume of her Indian stories. The tale of 'The Gates of Pearl' will never be told; in her 'Garden of Fidelity' can best be found that of her whole life and work, of what has been called the 'unquenchable vitality which enformed her character and achieved her career.'

Here I can only give a brief account of the personality and the experience that lie behind this *Indian Scene* which contains, I think, what she herself would wish to have put into it.

Flora Annie Steel came to India at the age of twenty as the wife of an Indian Civilian posted to the Punjab.

Intensely active in body, mind, and spirit, she set herself to work—as indeed she would have done sixty years later—to learn everything she could about this new and strange environment, and to establish friendly and vivid contacts with every living thing she came across. It was not possible for her either then or at any time to be uninterested in any moment of her life, neither have I ever seen her in any company East or

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West in which she was not a magnetic centre, giving of her best and drawing from others what they had to give.

She learned to speak, read, and write the various Indian languages and dialects which came her way, and was equally at home with the speech of the peasants and with the polished ceremonial periods of the talk to be heard in the tall houses of the towns where the high-born women live secluded. Then, with knowledge, there came to my mother the desire and the power to help. She began to give simple remedies to the women and children who flocked to her. } Unsecluded women these, daughters of the soil. 'If the Mother of Mercy has no time to give a medicine to-day—seeing there are so many of us—will she write her name on a piece of paper and I will give it to my child instead,' said one woman to her.

Behind the purdah it was more difficult to make headway. The only direct sketch from life in this volume, 'The Reformer's Wife,' shows how difficult this was. Yet from that very town, three years later, the women in seclusion gave each some part of a jewel constantly worn to be made up into a keepsake for the beloved *mem-sahib* to wear as a 'Token of friendship.'

And once a hundred stalwart peasants asked her to take up 30,000 acres of the land newly opened up by the Chenáb irrigation scheme. 'We will move there with our wives and families, oxen, sheep, ploughs. We will build our own village and you and the *sahib* a fine house, and you shall be our Begum, and we

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promise never to go to law but to refer all disputes to you.' This offer, however, the wife of the District Officer had, regretfully, to refuse.

Then my mother interested herself in education. She started girls' schools in several places, and finally became the first Inspectress of all the girls' schools in the Punjab, having first persuaded the authorities that one was required. Soon after this she was engaged in fighting an intricate system of corruption in the University examinations, and found herself in conflict both with its authors and with those in high places who wished to avoid a scandal. In order to give what help they could, four hundred scholars and teachers of her own schools 'set a watch' for her, sitting up all night to spin cotton for a 'robe of protection' which they afterwards dyed, wove and embroidered for her. The fight, I may add, ended in a complete victory for straightforward justice.

I give these instances of the way my mother was regarded by her Indian friends in order that it may be realized on what is based her claim as an interpreter of the East to the West.

One special point should be noted. No man can know the intimate life of the Indian peoples. He cannot even enter the heart of India—the women's quarters—much less gain the confidence and affection of their inmates. At different times my mother lived in the houses of her Indian women friends—some of whom wanted to take her disguised as a fair Kashmiri woman on a pilgrimage with them to Benares. In



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Indian dress she would have looked the part, and her quick intuitions and mimetic powers would, I daresay, have carried her through.

As a young girl I was with my father and mother in their camping tours in the districts. My mother was then collecting folk tales from the lips of the people, and round our camp fire at night wonderful tales were told, many of them come down from the early Aryan wanderers, and told to this day in nearly the same form along the Baltic coasts. It was then, I think, that began my mother's love for that mysterious India of the past, glimpses of which are only to be seen by those who have eyes to see.

During the twenty-two years of my mother's time in India she was too busy with life to write books. She was gifted with an extraordinarily vivid and accurate pictorial memory, and all that she had seen she could recall at will, and describe, or even draw or paint, down to the smallest detail. For her hands were infinitely clever at all crafts, and she loved using their skill and quick response to eye and brain.

But when she came to England, she felt the need of expression and started to write and to re-create her Indian experiences, or rather to use them to corroborate her own creative imaginings. Then the desire came to her to interpret that tragedy of East and West, that breathing 'On the Face of the Waters' that was the Great Mutiny; and she went out East again to collect the definite, accurate, historical knowledge that is the basis of that book. Of all the verdicts passed on it my

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mother most prized one letter that she had. It was from a man who wrote: 'My wife died in the Mutiny. After forty years you have taught me to forgive.'

Readers in this *Indian Scene* of 'Shub'rât' and 'The Perfume of the Rose' may understand why.

The stories in this collection were written at different times over a number of years—all after my mother had left India. She kept, however, constantly in touch with things Indian; the clash of old and new and its problems are reflected in many of the tales. Much has changed in India, but the springs of life that my mother knew so well remain the same. And in the villages and behind the purdah even the externals of life are little changed.

In 1929 when the Simon Commission was touring India—which was 'seething with excitement and resentment' we were told—one of those who have done more for the welfare of India than all the politicians East and West put together, rode in the ordinary course of his work, through the same South Punjab country and halted in the same villages as my father had done when my mother and I toured with him. Those who would like to know about Rural India to-day should read the book he has written.<sup>1</sup> No one seemed to have heard of the Simon Commission nor to care a jot about politics. The old customs remained, the old clash between moneylender and peasant, the women grinding at the millstone, the well with its turning

<sup>1</sup> *Rusticus Loquitur*, by M. Lyall Darling, I.C.S.

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oxen ; all the old sights and sounds. Peasant women in the fields, and in the enclosed high walls still the secluded women.

And it is this India that gets perhaps too little attention to-day.

I should like to end this introduction to the *Indian Scene* with some words of my mother's addressed to would-be travellers Eastwards.

'India is multitudinous as the sands of the sea. Look down into the depths as you approach her shores. What are those snaky restless brown forms, seen—half seen—turning, intertwining, through which each traveller has to forge his way? To the practical scientific eye it is the zone of seaweed set in motion by microscopic animalculæ. To the old navigators and to the eye of faith nowadays it is the zone of sea serpents, the zone of sea guardians between the outside world and enchanted India. And those who can see nothing but seaweed will never find India, they will only find their own imported ideas. But those who can see in that clear-obscure something which appeals to the imagination, which tells of hidden treasures, half-forgotten secrets, may go on. For them the gates are open. They will find and love India as I do.'

MABEL WEBSTER.