

*Fifteen*

## *The Family*

A TRAVELLER in Morocco noticed that in the evening when the flocks of ewes and the flocks of lambs were brought together after having been separated all day, the good creatures ran eagerly here and there as if they were looking for something. In fact, each ewe was looking for its lamb, each lamb was looking for its mother.

A monkey had young ones and she loved them, but her love was like a fountain, giving drink not only to her own children, but pouring out on all. She found other little monkeys and was kind to them. Not only that, she took puppies and kittens with her as if she had adopted them. And when she had food to give, she shared it between her own little ones and the ones she had adopted.

The mother bird sits on her eggs to keep them warm and the father bird goes in search of food for her and her brood.

The gorilla of Africa lives with his mate and his offspring as a real family. Chimpanzees do the same and the father makes a rough nest in a tree to shelter the mother and her children, and he watches through the night to protect his family from the prowling leopard.

If our animal kindred can show affection for their young and protect them, it is no wonder that even primitive men form groups or families consisting of a man, a woman and children.

When does the mother begin to love her child? At the beginning of his life.

When does the child begin to love his mother? Not at the same time. First he must learn to feel, to think and act. Then he learns to love his mother and his father as well.

We are told about a little girl of seventeen months who ran

## Words of Long Ago

to meet her father when he returned after a few days' absence, and stroked and kissed his face and gave him all her toys.

People are always happy to receive gifts. We read in the history of the Muslims that Caliph Mamun gave his wife a golden carpet on which he poured a heap of pearls; and after her ladies had each taken a pearl there still remained a sparkling pile of these precious gems.

And what does the mother give to her child? She gives him good health, straight limbs, the power of speech, the power to love what is right.

For if a mother neglects her child, his health will suffer, his legs will be crooked, his tongue will not speak good words and he will not learn to behave well and think well. And are not all these gifts infinitely more precious than a golden carpet and many pearls?

The mother who gives these beautiful presents to her child feels that her own life is in her son or daughter. And just as her heart is full of joy when her child is well, so it is full of sorrow when he is sick or when he dies. Listen to the voice of a mother in a Tamil song:

*He lives in my heart; where has he fled?*

*Alas, my child, my child!*

*Who has taken my idol of gold?*

*Alas, my child, my child!*

*In a pretty voice he called me Amma,*

*Alas, my child, my child!*

*I have never seen such a pretty face,*

*Alas, my child, my child!*

*He played gracefully on my lap,*

*Alas, my child, my child!*

*His father lifted him up with delight,*

*Alas, my child, my child!*

*On his brow were the lines of good fortune,*

*Alas, my child, my child!*

*Oh, evil on the evil eye that looked at him!  
Alas, my child, my child!  
Stay, my child, or let me go with you,  
Alas, my child, my child!  
Come back, come back, do not leave me alone,  
Alas, my child, my child!*

The good father's heart also lives in the life of his child and is wounded by his death.

How cruelly Mohammed suffered when he lost his little son Ibrahim. The old books say that the child died at the age of fifteen or sixteen months.

But there is a very famous play called *Hasan and Husain* in which Ibrahim seems older. In this play, Azrael the Angel of Death comes to Mohammed's house and asks for the child.

"I beg," says the Prophet in deep distress, "that he may stay with me until tomorrow."

So the angel waits a little. And just then the little boy's voice is heard at school, reading these words from the Koran:

"I fly unto Allah for refuge from the evil one. In the name of Allah the All-Merciful, O thou soul who art at rest, return unto thy Lord well-pleased and well-pleasing, enter among my servants and enjoy my paradise."

How sweet to the ears of Mohammed is the voice of his child!

How sweet to parents are the voices of boys and girls who repeat their lessons! I shall not describe the rest of the scene of Ibrahim's death. I only wish to tell how his mother Mary watches over him lovingly, how affectionately his sister Fatimah speaks to Ibrahim, how Husain, the Prophet's grandson, places the child's head on his lap, and how his father weeps when Ibrahim is no more.

\*  
\* \*

## Words of Long Ago

Do parents only love bright and clever children? No, their arms enfold them all.

One day I went into a village shop. The father, a cobbler, was nailing a sole on to an old shoe. The mother was cleaning the kitchen. They paused in their work to speak to me about their son. The poor boy was almost dumb. I could not understand what he was saying, but his parents knew the meaning of his inarticulate cries. He had so little reason that he could neither dress nor feed himself alone. His parents had to watch over him all day lest he should hurt himself or hurt other children. They had done this for seven or eight years; and they loved him in spite of all this trouble.

In the Ramayana the poet speaks of the father's love for all his children: "The father has a number of children, each different in temperament and character. One is a student, another a teacher who fasts, another a doctor, another a soldier, or a skilful worker, or a monk. The father feels the same affection for them all. Another, who may be very slow to learn, is yet devoted in word, thought and deed to his father, and this is the son whom the father loves as his own soul."

The dear mother has eyes that see more deeply than other eyes. She will often see the gift and the skill of her child where others see nothing.

Thus Queen Kausalya, the mother of Rama, had a vision of her son's glory. For one day he was changed in her eyes. The moment before he was a small child, and suddenly ten thousand stars shone on every hair of his body, suns and moons glittered on his limbs, and around him were high mountains, rivers, oceans, and many lands, and all the powers of Nature were gathered upon the wonderful boy.

Joining her hands in prayer, the queen said not a word. With closed eyes, she knelt at his feet until he resumed the form of a little child.

We have seen that parental love exists in a simple way in animals, that the father and mother love their child from

the beginning of his life, that they love him whether he is healthy or sick, clever or deficient, and that the mother especially has a penetrating eye which detects the good qualities of his soul.

The family is something very precious to mankind. It is the true home. For neither wood nor stone nor the cloth of a tent nor the marble of a palace make a home, but the love that unites young and old in the family just as the hen gathers her chicks under her wings.

\*  
\* \*

A pious Muslim used to kiss his mother's feet every day before going out to join his companions.

One day he arrived late and they asked him why.

"I lingered with pleasure," he said, "in the gardens of Paradise, for I have heard that Paradise lies at the feet of the Mother."

It is also written in the book of Al-Mostatraf that when Moses spoke with God, the Most High uttered 3500 words. At the end of the conversation, Moses said, "O my Lord God, give me a rule of conduct."

The Lord replied:

"I bid you be good to your mother."

These words were repeated seven times, and Moses assured him that he would remember them.

Then the Lord added:

"Yes, Moses. When your mother is happy with you, I am also happy, and if she is angry, I am angry."

The love of the mother and father expresses itself to the child in charming words.

An Arab woman caressed her child and said, "I love him as the miser loves his money."

But if the parents' love goes out towards the child, will not the child's love go towards his parents?

## Words of Long Ago

Shall we not return love for love?

There are countless sons and daughters all over the world who lavish affection on their good parents and help them. It would need a book bigger than all the books written by the poets of India to tell of all the affection shown by children to their fathers and mothers.

Here I shall tell you only of one of these countless examples. It is a story from ancient Greece.

Old King Oedipus was blind. He had offended the gods and had to lead the life of a traveller wandering from village to village, from town to town. Kind folk would give him shelter and food, but no one could give him back his sight. And who was to lead him from place to place? Who but his daughter Antigone? She guided his steps along the roads; she begged the strangers whom they met to take pity on him. She carried his messages. When Antigone left him for a moment, old Oedipus was sad. Great was his joy when she returned; and when he touched her hand again he said:

*I have all  
That's precious to me; were I now to die  
Whilst you are here, I should not be unhappy.*

At last the gods looked kindly on him. He felt that the time had come for him to die, but he was to go to the dwelling-place of the Shining Ones. Blind as he was, he made his way alone to a valley surrounded by high rocks. There he took a bath and dressed himself in fine garments. A clap of thunder was heard. And old Oedipus disappeared from sight. He had joined the gods. Antigone wept at his departure:

*Oh, I was fond of misery with him:  
E'en what was most unlovely grew beloved  
When he was with me.*

He had indeed lived in misery, but how much more he would

have suffered if he had not been comforted by his daughter's love.

\*  
\* \*

We have spoken of the love of parents for their children and of children for their parents. If someone asked you what makes a family, what would you reply?

I asked a child the other day and he replied, "Two." He meant the husband and the wife.

I asked another child and he replied, "Three," thinking of the father, the mother and the child.

And yet we can see that the family is very often larger than these three. Suppose, for example, that there are four: father, mother and two children. Then a new idea, a new friendship comes into play, the friendship of brother and sister. In this friendship, we do not look up, as to a parent, or down, as to a child. We are attached to a friend who is more on our own level, who is in a way our equal, or nearly our equal in age. And so brotherly affection adds a new gem to the wealth of the household.

\*  
\* \*

When Rama returned to the city of Ayodhya with his bride Sita of the lotus eyes, his brother Lakshman shared in the joy. Tents were set up for entertainments, the streets were planted with mango, betel-nut and banana-trees. The bazaars were bright with flowers and drapery; flags waved; drums rolled; all kinds of music played sweetly. People cheered, "Rama, Rama!" and Rama's heart was happy.

And so was the heart of Lakshman; brother shared the joy of brother.

A day came when the sky of life was clouded and no music was heard. The old king of Ayodhya had made known the terrible decree that Rama must go into exile for fourteen years.

## Words of Long Ago

When Lakshman heard this cruel order his body shook with sorrow, his eyes filled with tears; he ran and kissed Rama's feet, and for a moment he could not speak a word.

"Brother," said noble Rama, "let not your soul be troubled. All will be well in the end. You cannot come with me. You must stay in Ayodhya to help my father and the people."

"No," replied Lakshman, "no, my brother, not so. I am devoted to you alone. I tell you with all my heart that where you go, there I too must go."

Then Rama raised up his brother, embraced him and said:

"Go and say farewell to your mother, and then come with me to the forest and to exile."

And Lakshman was full of joy.

Brothers and sisters protect each other.

In the Bhratriditiya festival, sisters in Hindu families mark the foreheads of their brothers with sandalwood powder, give them sweetmeats and if they can, a gift of cloth. In this way they hope to ward off the coming of Yama, the Lord of Death. And they recite:

*On my brother's brow I have made the mark,  
On Yama's door the bolt has fallen.*

It is not sandalwood but love that protects and blesses, the love of sister for brother and brother for sister.

\*  
\* \*

But we can widen the limits of the family and include in it the dear grandparents, the uncles and aunts and cousins.

We can widen it still further.

I mean the men and women who are not of the same blood as the family, but who help in the house by washing, cleaning, cooking and in many other ways. I mean the servants. They also form part of the family. In ancient Rome, when a patrician spoke

of his family, he was not thinking only of his wife and children, but also of his slaves.

Let me tell you a scene from the play *Hasan and Husain* which is so much admired by the Muslims of Persia.

Noble Husain, who was killed on the battlefield of Karbala in Babylonia, was about to fight his last combat. All his comrades of war were slain. He stood alone like the last palm-tree standing in an oasis. The women of his family were mourning their dead and also Husain, who was surely about to die at the hands of the enemy.

One by one he bade farewell to all, to his wife Umm Lailah, to Zainab his sister, to his other sister Kulsum and his daughter Sukainah.

An old negress approached the great captain. "Master," she said, "my heart grieves at the thought that I shall be separated from you. I am very old and I have nothing more to live for. I wish only one thing: forgive me, I beg you, for all the faults I have committed.

Husain, the warrior in his coat of mail, who in a few short hours would lie martyred on the plain of Karbala, looked gently at the old negress and said:

"Yes, you have served us a very long time. You have toiled at the household tasks for my mother. You have threshed the corn. How often you have rocked me in your arms! Your face is black, but you have a pure white heart. Today I shall leave you. I owe you many more thanks than I can count. I beg your forgiveness for any action which may have been thoughtless or unkind."

\*  
\* \*

But we have not yet found out how wide the family circle is. Are there not other servants, both two-footed and four-footed, who add to the pleasure of the home? Are there not birds who entertain us with their chirping and singing? Are there not pets

## Words of Long Ago

who play in our rooms and domestic animals who work for us on our farms? Should not animals, the tame helpers, be counted as members of the family?

The whole world knows that the people of India are friendly with the animals who live in the same land. But they are not the only ones who have kindly feelings towards our brothers the animals. In the North where the sea is frozen into thick ice and the ground is nearly always white with snow, lives a people known as the Eskimos.

In this land, a white or polar bear once saved the lives of three men. They had fallen into the sea and had caught hold of a bear as he swam, and he carried them to the shore. They were very grateful and wished to repay their debt.

“Thank you,” said the bear, “I don’t need anything for the moment. But if ever you are out hunting with other men and you catch me, would you please ask them to spare my life? You will recognise me by my bald head.”

So saying, he dived into the sea and swam away.

Next winter, the Eskimos of the same tribe saw a bear on the ice and set off in pursuit. Among the hunters were the three men whose lives had been saved by the bald-headed bear. They discovered that it was the same animal. They begged their companions to leave him alone. What is more, they prepared a good meal for him and spread it out in front of him on the ice. He ate heartily and lay down on the ice to sleep; no one harmed him and the children played around him without fear. When he awoke he went down towards the sea, dived in and swam away. The Eskimos never saw him again, but they always remembered their friend the bear.

\*  
\* \*

So in our idea of the family let us include father, mother, child, brother, sister, grandparents, servants, and the animals that help man.

Of course, the ways and customs of families are not the same in every country of the world. You will find it interesting to hear from travellers or read in books or learn from your teachers about the family customs of Japan, China, Persia, Egypt, Europe and America. And you will find many differences. But in all of them, love rules in their hearts and affection is the law. It may happen that the members of a family do not love one another, but then they are not a true family.

A man may act in an inhuman way, but then he is not a true man.

\*  
\* \*

*Rangananda and his father*

In the year 1831 a twelve-year old Hindu boy knocked at the door of the district judge of Chittur. He was the son of a farmer who had been put in prison for not paying his rent. The farmer had taken some Government land, but the harvest failed and under the law which was then in force, he had to go to prison.

While the father was in jail, his birthday came and the mother wept because he could not be at home. That is why his son Rangananda ran to Chittur and knocked at the judge's door.

The judge listened to the boy's story and said:

"I cannot let your father go unless I have some security, some pledge that he will return to finish his sentence."

"We have no money," the boy replied, "but I shall be the pledge myself and I shall stay in prison in my father's place."

The judge's heart was touched. He signed an order for the father's release. Swift as a deer, Rangananda ran to the prison. Father and son joyfully set out for their home and reached it that night.

Rangananda was later known as Rangananda Shastri. He could read and speak fifteen languages.

\*  
\* \*

## Words of Long Ago

### *The white elephant (A fable)*

A herd of 80,000 elephants roamed the jungles of the Himalayas, led by a mighty white beast whom they were proud to acknowledge as their king.

The king's mother was blind.

If ever he wandered with the herd into remote parts of the forest, he still had loving thoughts for his mother and sent her messengers with fruit.

Alas, the messengers ate the fruit themselves and the loving gifts never reached the blind mother. When he discovered this deceit the king resolved to leave the herd and to feed and protect his mother himself. So he led her to a cave in Mount Chandorana, near to a lake, and they lived together in peace.

One day a man from the city of Benares lost his way in the jungle and wandered in despair for seven days.

The elephant-king knelt down and invited the lost man to climb on to his back; then he took him to the path which led to Benares and showed him the way.

Alas, the man's heart was wicked. He told the King of Benares what a fine white elephant was to be found in the cave of Chandorana, and the King sent him with many helpers to catch the royal elephant. The hunters saw the white king standing in a lake. They seized him and he did not resist, they took him to Benares.

The blind mother was sad when her son did not return.

"Ah," she sighed, "the frankincense tree still grows and the Kutaja, grass and ferns, lilies and bluebells; but my son, where is he?"

The white elephant was in a stable all bright with flowers, and the King himself came to feed him. But the elephant would eat nothing.

"My mother is not here," he said.

"Come, come," said the King of Benares, "eat and let us be friends."

“Ah, the poor blind one mourns in the cave of Chandorana.”

“Whom do you mean?” asked the King.

“My mother mourns for me.”

So the King commanded his people to set the elephant free, and the great creature ran swiftly away from the city into the jungle; he drew water from a pool, hurried to the cave and showered his blind mother with the cool water.

She cried, “It is raining! Alas, my son is not here to take care of me.”

“Mother,” he said, “it is I, your son. The King has sent me home.”

Then they were happy together.

The mother died and was burnt, and in time the white elephant also died. The King made a stone image of him; and from every part of India people gathered each year for the Festival of the Elephant.