

CHAPTER I

Friend or Foe?

We sat on the running board of our car, and contemplated the village across the road. We had chosen Karimpur as being reasonably typical of the villages in our section of the United Provinces. We had secured credentials from higher quarters, and had been officially introduced to the *patwari*, the village accountant in the employ of the government. We had found an old mango grove, and therein had set up tents for our helpers, ourselves, and our two small sons. Now we were ready to study the village. But would the village permit itself to be studied? Certainly it gave no sign of welcome.

The irregular high, rain-furrowed mud walls which faced us might have been mistaken for a deserted fortress. No door-yards, no windows were there to give glimpses of family life. Nothing but blank walls and more walls, so joined that it was often difficult to tell where one man's house ended and his neighbor's began. Dark doorways, patted into shape by hand, were the chief indications of separate dwellings. Directly opposite the entrance to our grove was a high-arched doorway,

once imposing, now about to collapse. Behind it were more blank walls. The only other breaks in the weather-beaten barrier were narrow lanes leading back into the village. These too were bordered by walls. A welcome variation in the picture was the pond which separated half of our grove from the village. It had been dug to furnish mud for walls and was now filled with water from the recent rains. On it two white geese drifted, making trails through the green scum. At one side a small semicircle of clear water indicated that here the washerman beat the village clothes. Beyond the far end of the pond we could see carpenters at work in a lane. A few extraordinarily thin cows wandered in from the fields and disappeared through the dark doorways, or down the narrow lanes. After some time a woman emerged from one of the doorways, a water jar on her head and another on her hip. She slunk close to the wall and hurried around a corner as though afraid of attracting our attention. We wished we could take upon ourselves the guise of lean cows. How else were we to pass the barriers? It began to rain, a cold, autumn rain. We retired to the dining tent for a conference on methods of approach.

Our assistant brought in the news that after observing our camp, and considering the various rumors that had arrived in advance, the leaders of the village had concluded that the Sahib must be the settlement officer come to check landholdings and revise rents. They knew that he was not the district magistrate nor a deputy; neither was he a police official. There had been missionaries here before, and he might be classified as such. But he had secured land maps of the area and had access to records of landholdings. Who would want these but someone interested in taxes? Our assistant had tried to assure them that we were here on a helpful mission. But rumor was against him. They would watch and learn for themselves. They were running no risks with unlabeled strangers.

Less sophisticated members of the community, especially the women, were more than suspicious. They were terrified lest we approach them or their animals or their children. It was obvious that no one was pining for our acquaintance. And yet our work depended on the cooperation of these, our neighbors. We had to win their confidence and friendship, or roll up our tents and move on.

Early the next morning, a tall figure carrying a closely wrapped bundle appeared from the corner of the village where untouchables lived, and ventured across the muddy road. He was a Christian. He had heard somewhere that we were missionaries, and he knew from experience that missionary visitors in tents were not to be feared. He brought his baby, suffering from dysentery, for treatment. We had a medical kit for family emergencies from which we gave him medicine for the baby, along with a bit of homely advice on feeding. As he recrossed the road, neighbors peered from several doorways, waiting to see him or his child collapse, as they have laughingly confessed to us since.

As soon as our first caller had departed, the Sahib made his first trip into the village. He had chosen the least personal item on our list—the testing of the water of the then eighteen village wells. He followed the line of walls which faced our camp until he reached the first well. He might not have recognized it as a well had not a woman been stooping over it, drawing up a clay jar filled to the brim with water. There was no curb to protect the well or to save children from falling in. Yet well accidents, we learned, were rare. As the woman raised her carefully covered head and spied the Sahib, she snatched her water jar and her baby, and escaped. Across the narrow lane from the well, a goldsmith sat on his mud veranda blowing through a long brass tube into the embers of his miniature clay furnace. He puffed on as though unaware of the presence of a stranger. Beyond the well a group of carpenters were fitting spokes into the solid hub of a cart wheel.

They salaamed dutifully, and one of them offered to draw water for the sample bottle. If the Sahib had let a jar down into the well himself, he would have polluted its water. They were obviously worried by his visit, and relieved when he moved on.

The second well, still further down this outer lane, was reserved for Brahmans. All around it Brahman farmers were chopping fodder and feeding their animals in the leisure of a rainy morning when fields do not demand watering. Here, too, there was no gesture of welcome beyond perfunctory salaams. Polite monosyllables were apparently the limit of their vocabulary. Their welcome was very unlike the cordiality to which we were accustomed from Indian friends in Mainpuri. Even the dogs yapped and the donkeys escaped as fast as their hobbles would allow.

The search for other wells led the Sahib down twisting narrow lanes through the heart of the village. More walls, broken only by irregular doorways, lined these lanes. An occasional high, gaily decorated gateway, topped with protecting grass eaves and bordered by smoothed walls, indicated the coming of prosperity to some household. But most of the walls were sadly eroded. Where families had dwindled to numbers too small to maintain earlier pretensions, sections of the outer walls had been allowed to crumble. And where families had died out, the Sahib looked through gaping doorways at rough mounds of earth where secluded courtyards once had been. In other sections, particularly down what we later called Humble Lane, walls were more neighborly, and women visited in the lane while their children made mud carts. All vanished at the sight of the stranger. Thus the Sahib went the round of the wells—the shepherds' well, the wells used by farmer castes, the Muslims' well, the wells reserved for the various craftsmen, and those for the serving castes, the leather workers' well, and the wells of other untouchable groups. While waiting for someone of proper caste to produce a jar with which to draw

water for his sample bottles, the Sahib explained to the men who salaamed him that he was interested in studying the village water supply and that he hoped to correct any deficiencies which might be the cause of ill-health. Everywhere his explanations were greeted with noncommittal monosyllables. His bottles were filled with well water for testing, but the experiment had failed as a friendly overture.

The *patwari* provided us with the names of the four men who could help us most, if they chose. The Sahib called on these and was greeted with hospitable offers of milk, fuel, and even beds. But to his intimations of a social survey, there was a guarded response. We had not before realized how difficult it would be to explain the purpose of a study to a practical villager. The same difficulty has since arisen in trying to explain political events. After hearing an explanation of dominion status, the villager will ask, "How will it benefit me? Will it give me full ownership of my fields? Will I get consolidated holdings? Will I get canal water? Will we get a decent road through the village? Will some of us get jobs?" Such questions challenge one's theories. And they must be answered honestly before one can win the questioner's support. Our introduction from district officials could secure for us every physical comfort but not the cooperation we desired. Experience has taught the villager to conceal his wealth and to avoid any revelation of his true status, lest it be used later to his disadvantage. A direct question at once rouses his suspicion. And without his confidence we could hope only for distortions of the truth.

We set ourselves the task of turning opposition into confidence, and fear into friendship. We had not known it, but the Christian father with his child was our first step. His baby did not die, as anticipated by neighbors, but improved. On the following morning we found three daring fathers with ailing children at our tent door. On the following day there were ten, then twenty, then fifty. Half of the office tent was trans-

formed into a dispensary. The previous summer in the hills, the Memsahiba had heard a lecture on medical helps for those working in villages. The notes from this lecture were brought out and used until the pages were in tatters. Our medical supplies were rapidly exhausted and had to be replenished by frequent trips to town. We acquired another tent to be used as a dispensary, and established a young villager in it with instructions for simple treatments, while we occasionally withdrew to the office for study.

At times the survey threatened to be swamped by prolonged hours of amateur medical service. But these hours served our purpose as few activities could have done. Fathers, and the few mothers who dared come, became communicative, voluble. Opportunities for questioning rapidly increased, although weariness and pity for unnecessary suffering often blotted out our desire to seek information. First aid and home nursing had not appeared in our survey schedule or budget. But they proved our greatest asset—and expense. They will remain necessary items in any effort at village service, until village folk learn to protect themselves from the preventable diseases which now travel freely from town to town and house to house.

The District Medical Officer, at first amused, later keenly interested, drove out to our camp on Sunday mornings for special cases. On one visit he removed a disfiguring tumor from the side of a small girl's nose. Her parents refused to send her to the hospital, and yet they begged us to help her. We turned our baby's play pen upside down under a mango tree and used it as an operating table. The doctor's assistant gave the anesthetic and the Memsahiba acted as nurse. Gasoline was the antiseptic wash, and tire-mending solution was painted over the wound afterward. The operation was successful, and has become one of the village legends. In our second year the Medical Officer was unable to continue his services. But he had visited us often enough to disprove to the

villagers many of the rumors of hospital terrors. Since then one of our Mission doctors has made fortnightly visits to our village—at great personal inconvenience—first from Kasganj and now from Fatehgarh, each about forty-five miles away.

Although after our first test case the dispensary continued to draw our neighbors to us, they were still unwilling to have us come to them, inside their homes. Someone had to be desperate to risk this, and the desperate one was a Brahman tortured by maggots up his nose. A fortnight after our arrival a youth came with the request that the Memsahiba come to see his father. As she followed him through the village she realized that she had much to do to win friends. Children running gaily out of doorways shrieked and disappeared. The women who peeped out did not smile in welcome. She was invited to enter a doorway higher and wider than most doorways in the village. It was set in an entrance white-washed into startling contrast to the crumbling mud walls which flanked it. On either side of the doorway was a vertical row of niches painted a vivid blue; and above it, broken bits of mirror plastered into the mud were glittering in the sunshine. Inside, she was led across a long narrow room with emptied clay troughs ranged along one side. The earth floor was littered with cow dung not yet gathered up by the women of the family. Beyond this room she entered a large courtyard deserted save for stacks of fodder and neat mounds of dung cakes. The walls had not been built up nor mud plastered for many seasons. The Memsahiba learned later that few families could boast this extra courtyard for the animals. It was evidence of the high position once held by this household, now transferred to more thrifty neighbors.

Beyond this courtyard in a long narrow room like the one first entered, she found the patient on a rope-strung cot. Close beside him a calf was tied. He had been ill for weeks and had not been moved during that time. Neither had the quilts which served him as bedding been changed. He was buried

under a thick quilt with not a hair nor a toe exposed. Thus he escaped the flies and wasps which swarmed about him. When he pushed back his covering the stench was nauseating. His son and his brother fled. The much-worn lecture notes supplied instructions for treatment, and with their help and a pair of tweezers the Memsahiba attacked the maggots. As one after another was drawn out the men returned, fascinated, and three women came slowly from the inner family courtyard with their noses carefully covered. The Memsahiba asked the brother of the patient to fan away the flies while she worked. He shouted the order to someone else. The fan appeared as she was about to depart. Several visits with tweezers and a strong prescription, disposed of the maggots.

The Brahman was exceedingly grateful both for relief from the maggots and for the prescribed change of clothes and bedding. He was dying from syphilis, and the maggots had been an added torment. When we learned later that his body was being burned, we expected to hear that the Memsahiba had caused his death by her inauspicious presence. But not even his son intimated this. It had been his fate to die, and maggots and memsahibas were irrelevant.

The story of the maggots spread. The faces which looked out from the shadows as the Memsahiba passed were less hostile. When daily visits to the house of the sick Brahman were almost over, there came a smothered call of "Memsahiba" from a doorway. She responded gladly. Inside the family courtyard, behind the long narrow stable room she found a group of women hovering over a wailing baby. She did her best to help. On her second call in this home the women were sufficiently relieved of worry over the child to turn their attention to her. And the questions began—shy but direct. How many sons had she? Did she nurse her own babies or turn them over to a wet nurse as they had heard? Did she prepare the Sahib's food with her own hands? Neighbor women congregated on the roof of the store-

room at the side of the courtyard. One or two descended by the courtyard ladder to join the questioners. Every question had to be repeated and every answer gone over many times in many forms before comprehension dawned. One neighbor appointed herself interpreter, announcing that she had once talked with a foreign woman and could understand the Memsahiba's English—and the Memsahiba had been using her most grammatical Hindustani. Someone called down from the roof inviting the Memsahiba next door. Next door the same questions were gone over, with more added.

On the following day there was a further invitation with calls to neighbors still farther on. The Medical Officer's impromptu nose operation had been made on the girl of the headman of the village. This gave the Memsahiba an invitation to his home. And when once accepted there, she was accepted by the village. Sometimes she was called to see ill mothers or babies. Often it was curiosity developing into a desire for friendship which prompted the women to send for her. Questions became increasingly personal, until there was little left to excite curiosity. Mutual adjustments in vocabulary and pronunciation made conversation more natural. The strain of unfamiliarity gradually relaxed until here, behind uninviting mud walls, the Memsahiba found herself among friends who were ready to ask her help in time of need, and who in turn were ready to help her to understand their ways and their lives. A notebook and pencil would have alarmed them into speechlessness. Any information to be recorded had to wait until she returned to camp.

In those early days we made a rule for ourselves never to enter a house until some member of the household first invited us to come in. The hospitality with which we have consistently been met has rewarded us for keeping this rule at times when our desire to see and hear tempted us to intrude. Holding to it during our five years in the village, we now go freely and naturally into any but two or three homes,

the Sahib stopping at the men's quarters and the Memsahiba going among the women. By continually demonstrating our desire to be neighbors we finally made it clear that there was only goodwill in our camp. We might be foolish in our questionings, but not malicious. As good neighbors we were accessible at any time to those in need. When two men once came to ask our help at midnight, our helpers tried to send them away. Their reply was comforting: "We know that if the Sahib hears our voices, he will not turn us away."

We shared our car in season and out of season. Whenever we passed any of our neighbors trudging to or from Mainpuri we offered them a lift. At first some of the older men were reluctant. But now the slowing of the engine is a signal for any Karimpurite to start running down the road and climb in, or perch on the running board if there is no more room inside. When we return to the car after it has been standing outside our Mainpuri bungalow, or a bazaar shop, we are never surprised to find village friends waiting patiently beside it. They take for granted that we will have room for them somewhere, for the drive home. During the first year whenever the car stirred, village youngsters came flying. They swarmed over every available bit of running board and fender, shouting and singing, and holding on tight while we carried them to the first mile post. Now that the car is a part of everyday village life, the rides to the mile post occur only when a crowd of youngsters happens to be on hand looking for something to do. They, like the grownups, take for granted that the ride is theirs for the asking. When eighteen small boys and girls board an already loaded car, the occasion is hilarious—for all but the driver.

Just as we shared the car, our small sons shared their carts and tricycle, and the games which could be played in the sunshine. We depended on the sun and profuse use of disinfectants to save us all from smallpox, and the boys from ringworm and other skin infections accepted as inevitable in

the village. The article which we shared most gladly was soap. We were relieved to find that caste rules forbade the sharing of our food. At least here was a limit set for us without any breach of neighborliness.

One night when the village singers, accompanied by the village band, were energetically entertaining themselves, the Sahib got out his violin. It had always been popular with city friends and might be equally so here. When he offered to join the band he was accepted politely, but reluctantly. However, when they realized that there was no trick in his offer and no intention of laughing at their music, they welcomed him with enthusiasm. The band was composed of an old hand-bellows harmonium, manipulated by one of the goldsmiths, a *dholak* (a small barrel-shaped drum which is struck sharply and rhythmically with the fingers at one end and the palm of the hand at the other), a pair of long iron tongs fitted with a ring of iron to be jangled, and a pair of castanets two inches in diameter. A violin was a welcome addition, especially when the player could carry any of their tunes. Thereafter, when special guests were to be entertained, the Sahib was called over to the village to assist. On such occasions, players and audience were packed close together on the floor of the goldsmith's workshop, or on the headman's veranda. The performance lasted until the singers, usually one of the village elders or his satellites, had exhausted their repertoire and voices. Due to his success with the violin, the Sahib was invited to join wedding parties going from the homes of our leaders to other villages. He traveled, slept, and ate with the bridegroom and his relatives, and left them with nothing to suspect or fear.

For the sake of those who still persisted in associating us with the evil eye, we tried to keep nothing hidden. In camp this is easily accomplished. Our cooking has always been done in the open where any passerby might stop and observe. Our boys' baths are open to inspection at any time. When

youngsters peer into the dining tent at meal times, we do not drive them away. Their own home training usually sends them scampering from the food of another. And if some child has no such scruples, there are sure to be others present to remind him. They have watched us wash dishes, and have marveled at our loaves of bread and cakes. Even oranges, grown a few miles away, are regarded as curiosities. Our sleeping room is our retreat when curtains are drawn. But even its contents are familiar to the boys and girls. There is nothing concealed and therefore nothing to fear. Our office with its typewriter is as lasting a mystery as any. Here we often let the children come, and any grown-up is free to enter and stand over us or squat comfortably beside the desk. The flaps are seldom down. A friend accustomed to locked doors in a large city once visited our camp. After two days of unexclusive living, she exclaimed "I don't see how you stand having them on top of you all of the time. I'd go wild."

When we first pitched our camp beside the village we took for granted that we would study village life disinterestedly and move on. But something far different has happened. The villagers refuse to believe that we might move on, and press us to build a bungalow to establish our permanence. We have lost the disinterested attitude to such an extent that we cannot plan our own future, apart from the village. When we came back for our second camping season, missionary friends warned us that the village folk would very likely resent our return. Curiosity was gone, and our welcome would probably go with it.

Our experience has been to the contrary. Each year has bound us closer to the life of the community. Some of our neighbors have grasped the idea of our survey and are willing to cooperate in its preparation. Others have accepted us simply as friends. They urge us to stay and take our place among them. Their difficulty is in finding the place. Every member of village society has his special function, and the

maintenance of the group depends on the proper functioning of each member. No one can be carried along who does not contribute. And what is our particular contribution? They have tried to make it medical service, and this is satisfactory as long as cases are simple. But when there is serious trouble we call in, or go to, a doctor. Some of our staunchest friends among the village elders have expressed their annoyance at our limitations. We have a dispensary. Then why run off to someone else when we could function best? They have finally accepted our service as a form of village last resort, or emergency bureau. They know that when the village prescriber can do nothing more for a sick child, or a spirit controller fails to cure a buffalo, they can fall back on us to secure the proper help. If the police watchman goes too far in his oppressions, the Sahib will speak for them. If there is some difficulty with records, the Sahib will consult the proper authority. We may study if we choose, but these other irregular services are our real share in the common burden. They justify our retaining a place in the village regime.

In our district a man does not speak of his wife as "my wife," or "Mrs. Ram Lal," but as *mere ghar ki* ("of my house"). In the same way he may refer to other members of his immediate family or to anything belonging to his household as "of my house," or simply "of the house." Our village friends now speak of us as "the Sahib and Memsahiba of our house," "the small sons of our house," and even, "the car of our house," thereby drawing us into their village family. Once we were regarded as foes. Now our appearance in a village lane neither rouses hostility nor excites curiosity. We are simply members of the village family performing our tasks, even as the carpenter and the farmer perform theirs.