

## **I YOUNG NAREN**

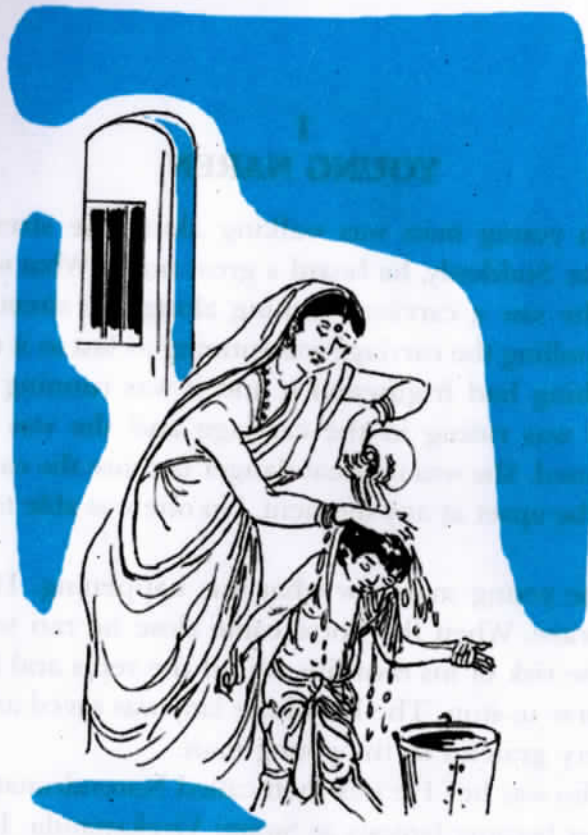
ONCE a young man was walking along the streets of Calcutta. Suddenly, he heard a great noise. What was it? Then he saw a carriage rushing along the street. The horse pulling the carriage was running as fast as it could. Something had frightened it and it was running away. A lady was riding in the carriage and she was badly frightened. She was in great danger because the carriage might be upset at any moment. No one was able to help her.

The young man saw what was happening. He was very brave. When the horse came close he ran towards it at the risk of his own life, seized the reins and forced the horse to stop. The life of the lady was saved and she was very grateful to the young man.

Who was he? He was then called Narendranath, but he later became famous as Swami Vivekananda. He was born in a famous Datta family who lived in the Simla section of Calcutta. Sri Viswanath Datta was a lawyer. He had studied many things and was respected by everyone. His wife was Bhuvaneshwari Devi. She was like a queen in appearance as well as behaviour. Everyone loved and respected her.

On the 12th of January, 1863, their first son was born. They named him Narendranath.

Naren was a naughty child, and sometimes Bhuvaneshwari Devi found it extremely hard to control him.



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However, she found that even when Naren grew extremely restless, if cold water was poured on his head at the same time chanting the name of Shiva in his ear, the child would quiet down. Indeed, at times this was the only method with which to bring him under control.

Young Naren learned many things from his mother, and she told him stories from the Mahabharata and the



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Ramayana. Naren loved to hear the story of Sri Rama. He bought a small clay image of Sita-Rama and worshipped it with flowers. He liked to listen to the reading of the Ramayana. Once he stayed in a banana grove for a long time, hoping to see Sri Hanumana, for he had heard that that was a favourite place of this heroic devotee of Rama.



He also liked to play at meditation. He would take one or two of his friends to a lonely place and they would sit in front of an image of Sita-Rama or Shiva. Then Naren would meditate and would think about God. He would get lost in his thoughts about God and for a time he would not see or feel anything around him. Once a cobra came gliding along the ground. The other boys were frightened and ran away, but Naren stayed where he was. They shouted at him but he did not hear them. After some time the snake went away. Later, his parents asked Naren why he had not run away. He replied, "I did not know anything about the snake. I was feeling very happy."

Naren was happy when Sadhus visited their house. He sometimes gave them valuable things. Once he gave a piece of new cloth which he was wearing to a Sadhu. After that his parents locked him up whenever Sadhus came to the house. But when Naren saw the Sadhus he would throw things to them through the window. Now and then he said that he would become a Sadhu himself some day.

Naren's father, as we have said, was a lawyer. Many people came to see him. He entertained them and offered them tobacco to smoke. There were different pipes for the different castes. But caste was a great mystery to Naren. Why was a member of one caste not allowed to eat with members of other castes? Why were there different tobacco pipes for the different castes? There was a pipe for the Muslims also. What would happen if he smoked from all the pipes? Would there be an explosion? Would the roof fall down? Naren

decided to find out for himself. He took a whiff from one pipe. Nothing happened. He tried all the pipes in turn and took a whiff from each of them. Still nothing happened. Just then his father walked into the room and asked him what he was doing. Naren replied, "O father, why, I was trying to see what would happen if I broke caste." His father laughed and went into his study.

## II

### YOUNG NAREN AT SCHOOL AND AT PLAY

WHEN he was six years old Naren began his studies. He did not go to school at first as his parents got a teacher for him. He quickly learned to read and write. His memory was very good and he could understand a lesson after hearing his teacher read it once.

When he was seven Naren was sent to the Metropolitan Institution. This school was started by Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. Narendranath was very intelligent and learned his lessons quickly. He became a leader among the boys. He enjoyed games very much. He would eat his lunch quickly and would be the first to run to the playground. Some of the games were jumping, running, boxing and playing with marbles. Sometimes he invented new games.

Sometimes Naren turned the classroom into a playground. He would talk to his friends and tell them stories even while the teacher was present. Once the teacher saw them talking. He turned to Naren and his



friends and asked them to repeat the lesson. All were silent except Naren, who was able to listen to the lesson and talk to his friends at the same time. He was able to answer correctly all the questions put by the teacher. Then the teacher asked them who had been talking. The boys pointed to Naren. The teacher did not believe them and made them stand up as a punishment. Naren stood up also. The teacher told him that he need not stand, but Naren continued to do so. He said, "I must, for it was I who was talking."

One of Naren's favourite games was "King and Court". Naren, of course, was always the King. The Court was held on a flight of stairs leading from the courtyard to the worship room. Naren took the highest step for his royal throne. He would then appoint his officials. One boy would be made Prime Minister and another the Commander-in-chief of the armies. Some were made Tributary Princes or other government officers. Then they took their places on the lower steps according to their rank. In this way Naren, the King, held his Court. As King he gave orders, settled disputes, or put down rebellions. No one was allowed to disobey the King's orders. Sometimes he would order severe punishment to be given to a supposed rebel. The rebel would try to escape but the King's men would chase him around the house and would finally capture him amidst much noise and excited shouting.

Naren liked animals very much and he would play with the family cow. He also kept pet animals and birds. Among these were a monkey, a goat, a peacock, some pigeons and two or three guinea-pigs.



*But Naren and one or two of his friends stayed to help the sailor.*

The coachman was a special friend of Naren, and he would often be found having intimate talks with him. Naren also thought that the syce or groom was a very grand person. He sat in the front of the carriage wearing a big turban and swinging a whip. Naren sometimes said that when he grew up he would like to be a syce.

He tried his hand at many games. Once in a while he played at cooking also. He bought vegetables and



spices and cooked various dishes. He was really a good cook. Another time he organized a group of boys to stage plays. Then he became interested in physical exercise. He first started a gymnasium in his own courtyard, and later joined the gymnasium of a neighbour. He took lessons in fencing, lathi-play, wrestling and other sports.

Once, Naren and his friends were trying to set up a heavy trapeze. It was a difficult job for young boys, but though many people gathered to watch no one offered to help them. Naren noticed a strong British sailor in the crowd. He went to him and asked him to help them. The sailor agreed. He started to help them, but suddenly the trapeze slipped and hit the sailor. He fell down unconscious. Most of the people thought the sailor had been killed and ran away from the scene, but Naren and one or two of his friends stayed to help the sailor. Naren tore his dhoti to make bandages. He bandaged the wound and then sprinkled water on the sailor's face and fanned him gently. After some time the sailor regained consciousness. Naren then helped him to go to a neighbouring school-house where he could stay, and then sent for a doctor. After a week the sailor recovered and went away. Before he left Naren collected some money from his friends and gave it to the sailor.

### III

#### NAREN AND HIS FRIENDS

NAREN and his friends went to see many interesting places in Calcutta. One day Naren and a group of boys

visited the Nawab's Zoological Gardens at Metiaburuz, near Calcutta. They went by boat. As they were returning one of the boys got sick and dirtied the boat. The boatmen became angry and ordered the boys to clean the boat. They refused, and instead offered to pay double the fare. The boatmen would not accept the offer. When they reached the ghat they would not allow the boys to go ashore. They threatened and abused the boys. Naren, however, was able to jump ashore. He found two British soldiers walking nearby and asked them for help. They went with him. They guessed what was happening and shouted at the boatmen, ordering them to release the boys. The boatmen got frightened and at once set the boys free.

Once, when Naren was about eleven, a British man-of-war (a warship) visited the port of Calcutta. Many people went to see the ship and Naren and his friends also wanted to see it. In order to do so they had to obtain a pass from an important British official. Naren filled in an application form and went to the building where the official stayed. Many people were going in, but the doorkeeper thought that Naren was too young and would not let him go in. Naren stood outside wondering what to do. He saw that all the people were going to a certain room on the first floor. He thought that perhaps there was another entrance, so he walked round to the back of the building, where he found a staircase. There was no doorkeeper there, so he went up to the first floor. He pushed aside a curtain and found himself in the room where the other people were waiting. He took his place in the queue and the British





*A Brahma-daitya lives there. If you disturb him he will break your necks. Beware that you don't climb that tree again.*

official signed his application without question. Naren went out by the main entrance. The doorkeeper was surprised to see him leave. He said, "How did you get in?" Naren replied, "Oh, don't you know that I am a magician?"

There was a flowering tree in the compound of one of Naren's friends. Naren and his friends used to climb this tree and swing from the branches. Naren would hang from a branch by his legs, swing back and forth and finally somersault to the ground. An old man lived at that house, and he did not like to see them swinging in the tree, for it was risky. One day he called Naren and his friends and said, "Look, don't you know there is a ghost in that tree? A Brahma-daitya lives there. If you disturb him he will break your necks. Beware that you don't climb that tree again."

This was enough to frighten the other boys, but not Naren. As soon as the old man was out of sight Naren went and climbed the tree again. His friends asked, "How do you dare do that, Naren? Didn't you hear what the old man said?"

Naren laughed and said, "Oh what fools you are! I have climbed this tree so many times. If the old man's story were true my neck would have been broken long ago."

#### IV NAREN GROWS UP

As Naren grew older he took more interest in reading books and did not play games so much. He did well in his school work, but his father took him away from Calcutta for two years and he stopped going to school. When he returned he had to do three years' work in one year. When the time for examination drew near he

studied very hard. He passed the Entrance Examination in the first division. He was the only student from his school to do so that year. He then went to the Presidency College for one year. The next year he joined the General Assembly's Institution, now known as the Scottish Church College. The professors at the latter college were surprised to see how intelligent Naren was. The Principal, Prof. W. W. Hastie, said that he had never seen another boy like Naren. Naren studied hard and read many books of all kinds and on all subjects. He passed the First Arts Examination in 1881 and obtained his B.A. degree in 1884.

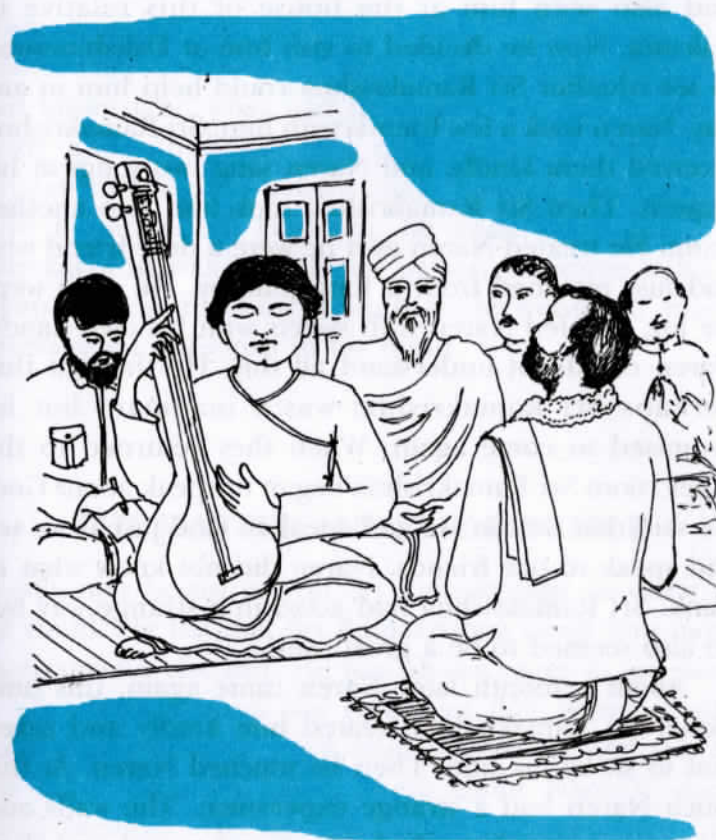
Naren also studied music for four or five years. He learned to play several instruments, and he became known as a very good singer also. Because he sang well he was often invited to parties. He enjoyed the fun at parties, but he found more pleasure in intellectual discussions. He would often argue about serious subjects with his friends and sometimes with older people. He was very good at argument and few people could match his skill.

At this time Naren became interested in the problems of religion. Like many other young men at that time Naren became a member of the Brahmo Samaj and attended the lectures of Sri Keshab Chandra Sen. He was often asked to sing songs at the Samaj. But the question which troubled him most was whether there is a God or not and whether anyone had seen Him. He visited many religious leaders, including Maharshi Devendranath Tagore, for an answer to this question, but none could satisfy his doubts.

## V

**NAREN MEETS SRI RAMAKRISHNA**

NAREN was interested in religion, but he had lost faith in many of the teachings of Hinduism. He did not know what to believe. He had gone to many religious people, but they could not help him. One day he decided to visit Sri Ramakrishna. Sri Ramakrishna was a great



*Naren sang two songs at his request*



Hindu saint. He came from a village called Kamarpukur in the Hooghly District. At that time he was living at the Kali Temple of Dakshineswar, near Calcutta. He lived a life of prayer and meditation and thought always of God. Many people came to him and he solved their spiritual problems.

Naren had heard about Sri Ramakrishna from his teacher, Prof. Hastie, and from one of his relatives. He had also seen him at the house of this relative in Calcutta. Now he decided to visit him at Dakshineswar, to see whether Sri Ramakrishna could help him in any way. Naren took a few friends with him. Sri Ramakrishna received them kindly, and Naren sang two songs at his request. Then Sri Ramakrishna took him into another room. He treated Naren as if he were a dear friend who had just returned from a long journey. He even wept for joy, and fed Naren with sweets with his own hands. Naren could not understand all this. He thought that perhaps Sri Ramakrishna was a madman, but he promised to come again. When they returned to the other room Sri Ramakrishna began to speak about God. He said that we can see and speak to God just as we see and speak to our friends. Naren did not know what to think. Sri Ramakrishna had acted in a strange way but he also seemed to be a great saint.

About a month later Naren came again, this time alone. Sri Ramakrishna treated him kindly and asked him to sit by his side. Then he touched Naren. At this touch Naren had a strange experience. The walls and the room seemed to whirl round and round and then vanish. He thought that he was about to die and he

became frightened. He cried out, "What is this that you are doing to me? I have my parents at home."

Sri Ramakrishna laughed and began to stroke Naren's chest. He said, "All right, let it rest now. Everything will come in time." At his touch the strange experience was gone and Naren found everything the same as it had been before.

A similar thing happened when Naren visited Sri Ramakrishna for the third time. He again lost consciousness at the touch of Sri Ramakrishna. He could not understand what had happened. He had a strong body and mind, but this saint could do with him whatever he liked by a mere touch. He could not explain how it happened. However, he understood that Sri Ramakrishna was no ordinary person. He came to have deep respect for him though there were still many unanswered questions in his mind.

## VI THE MASTER AND THE DISCIPLE

NAREN now began to visit Sri Ramakrishna as often as he could. He felt that Sri Ramakrishna loved him more than anyone else did. He was always eager to see him.

Sri Ramakrishna was confident that Naren would some day become a great man. He mentioned this to his other devotees telling them about Naren's many good qualities. He said that other devotees were like stars, but Naren was like the sun. He said that Naren was a liberated soul who had been born to help other





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people. Sri Ramakrishna had great confidence in Naren; he knew that he could never do anything wrong.

Naren also felt deep love for Sri Ramakrishna. Although busy with his studies he often went to Dakshineswar. Sri Ramakrishna was delighted with Naren's songs and often went into Samadhi listening to them. Naren had an independent mind; he would not

believe anything unless he could understand it for himself. Many times he would argue with Sri Ramakrishna if what he said was not logical to him. Once Sri Ramakrishna said, "If you do not accept my views why do you come to me?"

Naren replied, "I come because I love you. But that does not mean that I will accept your words without thinking for myself." Instead of being annoyed Sri Ramakrishna was pleased to hear this; he was glad that Naren was so independent-minded.

And so time went on. Naren became more and more devoted to Sri Ramakrishna, who gave him various instructions which he followed. Sri Ramakrishna taught him how to meditate, and he became more and more interested in meditation and other spiritual practices.

But Naren had to pass through a time of great trouble. Early in 1884 his father died. Naren was the eldest son and so he became the head of the family. His father had never saved any money and Naren found it difficult even to get enough food for the family to eat. He often went without food so that his family might have more. He began to look for a job, but without success. Later, he worked in a lawyer's office, as a school teacher and at other such jobs. They were not permanent and he had difficulty in supporting his family. In spite of these difficulties they at least had a house to live in. But some dispute arose over this also. Some of his relatives chose this time to claim a large part of the house as theirs. The case went to court where it dragged on for a long time. Luckily the case was decided in favour of Naren's family.



## **VII**

### **AT THE COSSIPORE GARDEN-HOUSE**

NAREN'S life had been completely upset by his father's death. His mind was in a turmoil. He found peace only at the feet of Sri Ramakrishna. In 1885 Sri Ramakrishna began to suffer from a sore in his throat. It became worse and worse and finally it was learned that he had cancer, a terrible disease. His disciples and devotees came forward to help him. A garden-house was rented for him at Cossipore. He moved there and many of his young disciples began to stay there and nurse him.

Naren was one of those who spent most of their time at Cossipore. He sometimes had to go to Calcutta on family business, but he spent the rest of his time with Sri Ramakrishna. Naren and the other disciples devoted themselves to the service of their Master. Naren was their leader. When they had time they would gather together and sing, study, or discuss the great qualities of Sri Ramakrishna. Naren wanted very much to realize God, to see God, for he felt that this was the only purpose of life. Sri Ramakrishna gave him many hints about how to meditate, and he spent much time in meditation. He had wonderful experiences during meditation; sometimes he would completely forget the outside world.

Once Naren and Sri Girish Chandra Ghosh, the great poet and dramatist, sat under a tree for meditation. Girish tried to meditate, but there were too many mosquitoes. They buzzed around his head and bit him and he could not meditate. He wondered if Naren was able to meditate, so he opened his eyes to see what he was doing. He was

surprised to see that mosquitoes covered Naren's body like a blanket. But Naren did not seem to feel anything since he was lost in meditation.

One evening Naren had the highest spiritual experience. While meditating he forgot the outside world and even his own body. He thought of nothing but God and God alone. His mind was literally filled with God. He felt great joy and happiness. This experience is called Samadhi.

Sri Ramakrishna began to prepare Naren for the work he was to do later. He asked Naren to look after the other young devotees and to see that they continued to practise meditation. One day Sri Ramakrishna asked them to beg their food from door to door as the Sadhus do. The food they collected was offered to Sri Ramakrishna. He ate it with great joy and said that such food was pure. He also gave ochre robes to the boys and in this way initiated them as monks.

The end came all too soon. On August 16, 1886 Sri Ramakrishna passed away, leaving his disciples full of sorrow. Some stayed at the Cossipore garden-house for a time and others returned home and began to study: Naren, however, started to organize them into a monastic brotherhood.

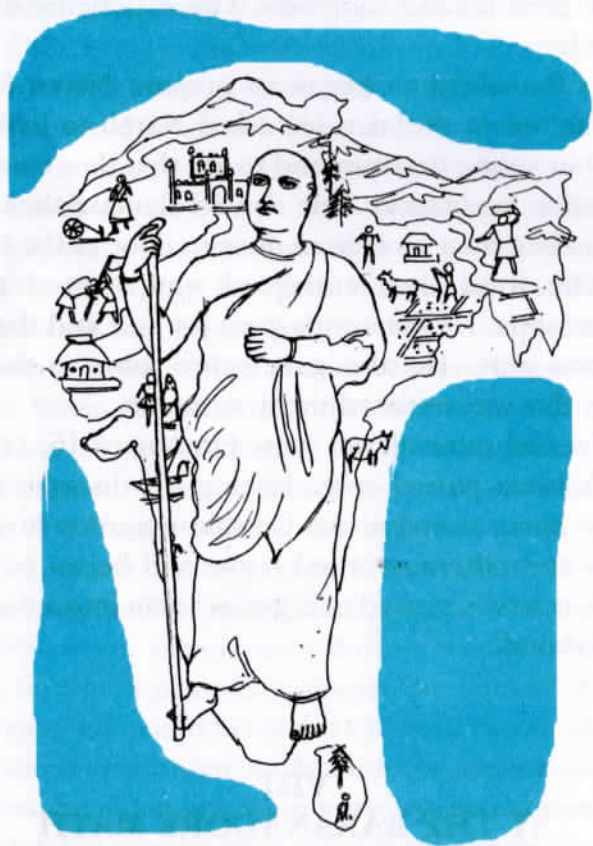
## **VIII**

### **AT THE BARANAGORE MATH**

THE young monks could not stay at Cossipore for long, since the rent of the house was too high, but with the



help of a devotee they rented a smaller house at Baranagore. Here they established the first monastery of the Ramakrishna Order. The house was old and decayed; the garden was full of weeds; cobras lived under the ground floor of the house and local people believed there were ghosts in the house. It was a strange place, but the young monks lived there because the rent was



*Swamiji went to Banaras and many other places and then wandered through the Himalayas.*

cheap. It was also quiet and peaceful. They were very poor. There were hardly enough clothes and their food was not good. For months they had nothing to eat but rice and some boiled leaves.

Naren and the others cared nothing for this. They thought only of God. Naren was the leader. He went to those boys who had returned home and persuaded them to join the monastery. Naren looked after them and inspired them to think of God. They meditated for long hours. They sang songs. They discussed the religious ideas of all sects and religions. They tried to follow everything that Sri Ramakrishna had taught them.

During this period they took the monastic vows of sannyasa. They also took new names. Naren, however, did not take a permanent name, and when he wandered through India he changed his name now and then. Sometimes he used the name 'Swami Vividishananda' and sometimes other names. When people speak of him now they often call him 'Swamiji'.

## IX WANDERING DAYS

SWAMIJI (Naren) stayed at the Baranagore Math for two years. Some of the other monks left the Math and began to wander from one place to another. Hindu monks have been doing this for thousands of years. Swamiji also became restless. In 1888 he left the Math and went to Banaras for a week. While there, he met two famous saints—Trailanga Swami and Swami Bhaskarananda.