

**MAKI**

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Maki by R. J. Minney

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**R. J. MINNEY**

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### I

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**I**T was a late August evening. The monsoon was almost at the end of its career. There were infrequent showers, followed by that freshness and glory that always follow tropical rains. The air was clear and still. There was little of it in the congested native quarter and still less filtered through the lattice of Maki's little window. A square yard of sky, and that infringed upon by the lattice bars, was all the world that Maki knew, unless she stood a-tiptoe on a stool, when she could see below, down the five stories of ugly brick and mortar on to an unedifying gully, which for her held a wealth of charm and interest in its varying panorama of humanity. At intervals passed a bullock cart, a broken-down hackney cab, dawdling forms of men and women, swinging lax arms through

laziness and day dreaming. At the corner of the street sat an old woman selling *pan*,<sup>1</sup> fulfilling thus the duties of public house and tobacconist for the average Indian. From a shed below—Maki could not see its occupant—issued soft pleading strains on a reed pipe, played with pathos and feeling. And all this for Maki was Calcutta. She saw nothing more. From above the surrounding house-tops came all the din of the main Indian thoroughfare, the clang-clang of the tram-cars in Harrison Road, the screech of the taxi-driver's horn or hooter, the grating crash of gears being changed, the yells of the cab-men, the wails of beggars, the quarrels of husbands and wives, for domestic broils are always brought out into the public thoroughfares.

Maki's father was a man of great wealth. Like all Indians, he concealed this by dressing unpretentiously. Indians can rarely be shabby; they only wear one garment, and that is merely drapery. They are either clean or dirty; all except the meanest strive to keep clean. But, whereas some wealthy Indians aspire to silks and satins and be-

<sup>1</sup> Betel-nut, a substance that Indians chew incessantly.



coming headgear, Toton Babu was quite content not to be looked up to as a Rajah. He kept no carriage, used the tram that his daughter could just hear from her window, and humbled himself before everybody as a poor man. Riches bring power. That he knew. But riches also bring envy. He feared being envied. Toton Babu was superstitious. Besides, there was a wave of hooliganism in Burra Bazaar, and wealthy men were every night made victims of burglaries and dacoities. But if Toton Babu thought he could deceive his neighbours by poor living he was mistaken. People contrive to find out a great many things about each other, particularly in native India, where gossip plays a far bigger part in daily life than it does elsewhere. Everybody knew Toton Babu was a rich man, and strange stories were whispered about his wealth and his miserliness.

Maki was her father's only child. Her mother was dead, and she was brought up by an aged ayah, toothless and ugly, but the soul of generosity, who worshipped the girl and spared herself no pains to satisfy every whim of the child's fancy. There were no

other females in the house. Toton's brothers and sisters, and their families, did not live with him—as is commonly done in the joint family system followed by Indians. They had their own home, the ancestral home in the *muffasil*.<sup>1</sup> They lived idly on the wealth that had been left them. But Toton was more aspiring. As a middleman in jute, Bengal's staple product, he had in the space of a few years made more money than could be told in one breath. Maki was indulged. She had silk *saris* and all the scents that Coolootollah could supply. She often bathed in rose-water. But all that was in the harem. Nobody knew what happened in the harem except the old ayah, and as she was always going to the outer world she doubtless gossiped. His neighbours, as a result, respected Toton Babu. His house, by some good fortune, was not touched by the burglars. Only the Europeans were off-hand in their treatment of him. He appeared to be no different from any other caller who came round as jute-broker. There was nothing in his dress or manner to warrant that they should stand up when he entered

<sup>1</sup> Country.

and offer him a chair. They let him wait while they scribbled or glanced through price lists for a new waterproof. They told him to "go to the devil" when they were busy. He did not mind; so long as he made his money. What he meant to do with the wealth he was amassing he was possibly not himself certain. One never is certain of such things, and still less are Indians who have hoarded millions which are never spent, never invested, and scarcely ever even enjoyed. Maki was his only heir. She was fifteen and still unmarried. An old maid almost according to Indian standards, but it was her parent's affection that kept her with him till so late in life. She was betrothed though; and as a concession Toton had consented that the following year her boy husband could come and claim her.

Maki had never seen her betrothed. Indian girls never do. Marriages are made-up affairs, the concern of the parents more than of the parties involved. A parent decides almost at the time of the child's birth, and girl babies and boy babies are tied together before they are old enough to toddle. There never is any romance. The girl is expected