

The City of Roses

By P. C. Mozoomdar

WITHIN five hundred miles of the mud and steamy moisture of Calcutta there are historical and picturesque spots on both banks of the Ganges, fine dry townships and meadowlands full of the wealth of old associations. Ghazipur is just such a township. It is four hundred and fifty miles to the northwest of the metropolis, high on the riverside, built here and there on heaps of brick-red ruins, some of the old walls and structures still remaining intact. It is a Mohammedan town mostly, the name Ghazipur signifying the City of the Martyrs. An Islamite fanatic and martyr is a Ghazi, who still flourishes in the frontier provinces of the northwest, rushing occasionally into British territories to kill or to be killed, which means the same thing to him, and to be translated into paradise immediately by an immediate downrush of Ferishtas (angels) both male and female. The Ghazi is a very shaggy and fierce individual, with hair, beard, mustache, at full length, dressed and turbaned in loose blue cloth, generally carrying no other weapon but a sharp knife, which never fails of its deadly purpose. He is not to be met with at Ghazipur now, or indeed in any settled British province,

but he is still extant and held in great reverence by every faithful follower of the Prophet. When the Ghazi founded Ghazipur no one can tell.

The town is sparsely populated, having large fields and pastures, large mosques in every stage of decay, big tanks half dry, and gardens ancient and mediæval, growing wild, but still inclosed in crumbling walls. In the interspaces of the extensive meadows dividing groups of population they cultivate roses and one or two other flowers, the roses always predominating. No less than one thousand acres are under rose cultivation, yielding daily about one hundred thousand roses per acre. The cultivators are almost all of them Hindus, men, women, boys, girls, who stir very early in the morning, before the first gleam of sunshine has dried a drop of dew on the petals of the flowers. The flowers are not large, nothing like the traditional Rose of Sharon, or the product of the gardener's hot-house; they belong to the species known as the Rosa Damascena; but the scent is so sharp as to be almost intoxicating, and penetrates the atmosphere, not to speak of the house or the place of manufacture. It is quite a scene to find your way into

one of the plantations in twilight in the genial months of March or April. The roses never bloom before or after those spring months. The loud, piercing notes of the *papia*, the bird of the spring, are in the air, besides other minor choir; the morning breeze creeps up from the west; the swaying tree-tops, merry laughter, and excited shouts greet your ears from all sides, and as you are in the middle of the field heaps of crisp, fresh roses are before you in baskets, in swelling waist-cloths, or still unplucked on the dark bushes around; the color and perfume almost bewilder you. Remember, no human beings under a civilized government are so crushed with poverty as the Indian cultivator, especially in the western and northwestern provinces. Millions of them never have a full meal in the day, and whenever drought occurs and famine breaks out they are the first victims, dying by thousands. Nearly a hundred and fifty years of British rule have not improved their lot. And these rose cultivators of Ghazipur belong to that unfortunate class. But the first and most significant thing you find on entering the plantation of a morning is the wonderful good humor and remarkable courtesy of the people. There is no gloom of the fatalist on their faces, there is no evil-smelling squalor of pauperism about them. Pleasure and enthusiasm mark their movements. Is it the adaptation that is natural between trade and temperament, or is it the very genius of the Hindus of all classes? Why should the civilization of free and wealthy races teach us wants which they do not care to supply, and which we, hard workers as we are, cannot find the means to remove? Leave us alone with our humble cheerfulness, that is enough. These cultivators strive to explain every detail of their work in their simple, rude *patois*, and make liberal presents of their rose-buds. The plants stand in long rows in a light, loamy soil; they are not manured, but kept scrupulously clean and plentifully watered from the open wells that lie in their midst. Practically the harvest time is the two spring months. If the wind steadily blows from the west, the flower unfolds its petals slowly and economically, and yields the

right amount of *atar* (essential oil). But if the east wind makes its unwelcome visit, the flowers open prematurely in large masses, nor is the yield of *atar* up to the mark. The cultivator has little trouble with the plants, which would stand on the ground for years; he has only to keep out the weeds and pump out the water.

My host, one of the first men at Ghazipur, was a manufacturer of rose-water and *atar*. I was sometimes invited to witness the processes. The distillation, like the gathering in the fields, must commence very early in the morning, before the sun is in the sky and when everything is in pureness and coolness. The lady of the house really presides over the operation; the gentleman only supervises. She has to dress in well-washed white garments, and seat herself on a low stool before the immense boiling pot, which is plastered up to the neck with a thick coating of clean, finely ground earth. A glowing hot fire of dry, plentiful fuel, free from smoke or dirt of every kind, burns underneath. On all important occasions, when any responsible work has to begin, the Hindu instinctively assumes a solemn ceremonial mood, as if there is a Presence to be propitiated. Roses and religion, in fact flowers of all kinds, have a necessary relation to the Hindu mind, and he hesitates to tread upon—nay, even to touch with his foot—a bright blooming flower, as if it had a life and a mission! Fully one thousand roses are crammed and crushed into the boiling pot in an almost sacrificial spirit, while we all silently stand round, and the heavy lid is pressed down and pasted round thickly and firmly. It seems like a massacre of the innocents, but the fragrant steam soon makes its way through the complicated tubes of the still into another huge pot immersed in cold water. All day the distillation goes on; the next day another thousand roses are put in the already distilled water; the day after another thousand again. After this third distillation is concluded, the real Ghazipur rose-water is bottled and sent to the market. If, instead of the rose-water, *atar*, the essential oil of roses, has to be extracted, the thrice-distilled water is exposed over night

in shallow, wide-faced basins, and by the morning the cream, in a very thin crust, floats on the surface. At the very break of day it is gathered carefully with a soft downy feather and the scanty, golden semi-fluid is stored in a crystal phial. It is a ghastly sight at the close of day to look at the colorless lump cast out of the boiling pot—that is the only

remnant of the thousands of bright, beautiful roses crushed into it. But their beauty, sweetness, life, and use are now changed into new, higher, and more ethereal forms for larger and better use. Sacrifice, hard, hot, cruel sacrifice, is the only process by which mortal virtue can ever be perpetuated in immortal life!

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