One evening I was lounging in an easy chair in my bedroom and thinking lazily of the condition of Indian womanhood. I am not sure whether I dozed off or not. But, as far as I remember, I was wide awake. I saw the moonlit sky sparkling with thousands of diamond-like stars, very distinctly.

All on a sudden a lady stood before me; how she came in, I don't know. I took her for my friend, Sister Sara.

“Good morning,” said Sister Sara. I smiled inwardly as I knew it was not morning, but starry night. However, I replied to her, saying, “How do you do?”

“I am all right, thank you. Will you please come out and have a look at our garden?”

I looked again at the moon through the open window, and thought there was no harm in going out at that time. The men-servants outside were asleep just then, and I could have a pleasant walk with Sister Sara.

I used to take my walks with Sister Sara when we were at Darjeeling. Many a time did we walk hand in hand and talk light-heartedly in the Botanical gardens there. I fancied Sister Sara had probably come to take me to some such garden, and I readily accepted her offer and went out with her.

When walking I found to my surprise that it was a fine morning. The town was fully awake and the streets alive with bustling crowds. I felt very shy, since I was walking in the street in broad daylight, but there was not a single man visible.

Some of the passers-by made jokes at me. Though I couldn't understand their language, yet I felt sure they were joking. I asked my friend, “What do they say?”

“The women say that you look very mannish.”

“Mannish?” said I, “What do they mean by that?”

“They mean that you are shy and timid like men.”

“Shy and timid like men?” It was really a joke. I became very nervous, when I found that my companion was not Sister Sara, but a stranger. Oh,
what a fool had I been to mistake this lady for my dear old friend, Sister Sara!

She felt my fingers tremble in her hand, as we were walking hand in hand. “What is the matter, dear, dear?” She said affectionately.

“I feel somewhat awkward,” I said in a rather apologising tone, “as being a purdahnashin b woman, I am not accustomed to walking about unveiled.”

“You need not be afraid of coming across a man here. This is Ladyland, free from sin and harm. Virtue herself reigns here.”

By and by I was enjoying the scenery. Really it was very grand. I mistook a patch of green grass for a velvet cushion. Feeling as if I were walking on a soft carpet, I looked down and found the path covered with moss and flowers.

“How nice it is,” said I.

“Do you like it?” asked Sister Sara. (I continued calling her “Sister Sara,” and she continued calling me by my name.)

“Yes, very much; but I do not like to tread on the tender and sweet flowers.”

“Never mind, dear Sultana. Your treading will not harm them; they are street flowers.”

“The whole place looks like a garden,” said I admiringly. “You have arranged every plant so skilfully.”

“Your Calcutta could become a nicer garden than this, if only your countrymen wanted to make it so.”

“They would think it useless to give so much attention to horticulture, while they have so many other things to do.”

“They could not find a better excuse,” said she with [a] smile.

I became very curious to know where the men were. I met more than a hundred women while walking there, but not a single man.

“Where are the men?” I asked her.

“In their proper places, where they ought to be.”

“Pray let me know what you mean by ‘their proper places.’”

“O, I see my mistake, you cannot know our customs, as you were never here before. We shut our men indoors.”

“Just as we are kept in the zenana?”

“Exactly so.”

“How funny,” I burst into a laugh. Sister Sara laughed too.

“But dear Sultana, how unfair it is to shut in the harmless women and let loose the men.”

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b One who practises purdah.