

**THE SAGE OF VASISHTHA GUHA —
THE LAST PHASE**

by
SWAMI NIRVEDANANDA

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DEDICATION

***What is Thine own, O Master!
I offer unto Thee alone***



त्वदीयं वस्तु हे नाथ
तुभ्यमेव समर्पये ॥

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Preface

THE Sage of Vasishtha Guha, the Most Revered Swami Purushottamanandaji Maharaj, attained Mahasamadhi in the year 1961. This little volume covers the last two years of his sojourn on earth and is being presented to the readers as a complement to "The Life of Swami Purushottamananda," published in 1959. More than twelve years have elapsed since Swamiji's Mahasamadhi and it is only now that details could be collected and put in the form of a book. Since long there has been an insistent demand for this from the disciples and devotees of Swamiji, but it was only a year ago that the work could be commenced.

Much time was needed to collect the details about Swamiji's journey to various places and also about his last days. The absence of any record of events and the blurring of memories with the passage of time made it particularly difficult to gather information.

I confess my incompetence to write a book of this kind. Yet I have had to make an attempt because no one else has come forward to do this so far. Though I am fully conscious of the deficiencies of this work, there is one satisfaction : the details of Swamiji's life have been put on record. This and the previous book together will give a fairly adequate picture of Swamiji's life. These may perhaps provide the source material for any competent author to write an enlarged biography at a future date.

As in the earlier book, care has been taken to avoid exaggerations. In spite of it, if some chapters seem hyperbolic, I am helpless for, just as the sun cannot be thought of minus his brilliance, a Mahatma sans his greatness is also quite unimaginable. So in a book on the life of a Mahatma, mention of at least some of his great qualities are unavoidable.

As far back as 1953 Dr. K. M. Munshi visited Vasishtha Guha and what he wrote of Swamiji may be of interest to the readers. To quote a few lines from his work :

"He is, I discovered, a deep Vedantin and his ways are simple, innocent, almost child-like; he smiles and smiles all the time. Loneliness, starvation and a hundred other aches mean nothing to him; he lives a real life, possessed of God

which gives him perpetual Joy and Peace. He has won this state after years of sadhana.

“Before we parted, he admonished me. He asked, had I not had enough of life? It was high time I realised what I really was. ‘I wish I could,’ I replied.

“Such knights-errant of the Spirit are to be found in all countries, but perhaps more in India than anywhere else. Whatever the modern world may say, such men will continue to be found in all ages, men who, not content with their everyday life, will insist on climbing the Everest of the Spirit with cheerful confidence. While we search for the mirage of happiness, they seek the Holy frail with courage and faith; and they are the men who convert the rose of the world into the mystic rose that Dante sang of.”

(City of Paradise & Other Kulapati's Letters — P. 69)

Swamiji's Birthday Message of 1959 and two poems composed by him are also included in this book, in the Appendix. Of the two poems included, one is in original; the other one is a translation of his Malayalam work. The short introductory note to each poem gives the period, place, etc. of these compositions. It is hoped that these will be welcomed by the readers.

“The Life of Swami Purushottamananda” was written by me under the pseudonym, ‘A Disciple’. It not only evoked a curiosity in the minds of disciples and devotees of Swamiji to know who the author was, but created some misunderstanding also. Someone else who was presumed to be the author was criticised, for what some people felt were omissions and commissions. To avoid all such confusion, I have thought it wise to give out my name in this book and to disclose the identity of ‘A Disciple’ through these lines, although my ardent wish was to remain anonymous.

I offer my grateful thanks to all those who co-operated with me in this venture by supplying information, offering suggestions, etc., and also to the friend who very willingly went through the manuscript and improved it.

May Sri Swamiji's blessings be upon them all!



SWAMI PURUSHOTTAMANANDAJI MAHARAJ

CHAPTER I

THE COMPASSIONATE GURU

ज्ञान्ता महन्तो निवसन्ति सन्तो

बसन्तवल्लोकहिमं चरन्तः ।

तीर्णाः स्वयं भीष्मवार्णवं जना-

नरेकुमन्यामपि तारयन्तः ॥

There are good souls, calm and magnanimous, who do good to others as does the spring, and who, having themselves crossed this dreadful ocean of birth and death, help others also to cross the same, without any motive whatsoever!

— Vivekachudamani, Sl. 37

YES, there are good souls — Mahatmas — whose compassion knows no bounds. A passing glance of theirs is enough to convert even a confirmed sinner. And what to say of the faithful ones! Such great souls are to be found all over the land: only some are known far and wide; others remain in an obscure corner. The Sage of Vasishtha Guha, Swami Purushottamanandaji Maharaj, was one such Mahatma whose love and compassion mitigated the miseries of many a troubled heart, and kindled hope and a new enthusiasm in the spiritually dejected. There are many amongst us who, even today, after more than a decade of Swamiji's leaving the physical frame, feeling his loving hand of protection in every walk of life and uplifting touch in the spiritual path. One often hears the accusation that Mahatmas shower their love only on their favoured ones. This allegation has no meaning, for a Mahatma is a great soul whose compassion knows no limits. Such allegations are often the result of a limited understanding of the human intellect. Instances are not wanting of people approaching saints and sages without any introduction or recommendation, and deriving immense benefit. Let us look at a few such instances that reflect Swami Purushottamanandaji's love for his disciples, grace for a devotee and compassion for an afflicted stranger :

1 Tr. by Swami Madhavananda (Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati)

After his birthday celebrations in November 1958 Swami Purushottamanandaji was leading a quite life in Vasishtha Guha. Every year he used to go to Lucknow and other places during winter but that year he had decided not to go anywhere. Not knowing his intentions, devotees in Lucknow were making arrangements for his stay. They had found that the building on Shukla Ghat was usually crowded with devotees and Swamiji did not get enough comfort and solitude. Therefore they were erecting a grass hut, adjacent to the building, where Swamiji could stay peacefully. In the meantime they came to know of Swamiji's decision. Some devotees wrote letters praying that he should grace the new hut; others felt that it would be a great blow to many of them if Swamiji did not pay his usual visit and so on in that vein. These appeals and telegrams moved him and finally he started on a tour. Leaving Vasishtha Guha on the 1st of January 1959, he spent a week in Delhi. From there he proceeded to Lucknow. The joy of the devotees knew no bounds. As usual, devotees from Sitapur, Bara Banki and other towns came to Lucknow to have Swamiji's darshan and to serve him.

A young disciple of Swamiji, an Auditor in the Defence Accounts Department, posted in Poona, had come to Kanpur on official duty. When he read in the newspapers that Swamiji had arrived at Lucknow, he rushed there for having his darshan. At Swamiji's bidding he stayed there for a Bhagavata-Saptaha.¹ He was to be the 'Vyasa'². He had once done the Saptaha reading — the first in his life — during the Birthday celebrations of Swamiji at Vasishtha Guha only a few weeks before. His clear pronunciation, accent, etc. were appreciated by everyone, including Swamiji. For all that he was not a professional 'Kathavachak'². But he had a fair knowledge of Sanskrit; in addition he had a devotional temperament too.

The truth of the saying, 'मूक ऋगेति वाचात्मम्'³ was experienced by him on that occasion for, as he narrated later, he had not read beyond three or four cantos of the book before.

¹ Reading of the whole of the Bhagavata within a week.

² i.e., the 'Pundit' who reads and explains the Puranas.

³ (The Lord's grace) makes the mute eloquent.

So it was not only his first Saptaha reading, but it was also his first reading of the complete book ! It was only Swamiji's grace that enabled him to acquit himself so creditably on his maiden performance. And for all that he was then neither a disciple of Swamiji nor a long-standing devotee. He had first visited Vasishtha Guha only two or three weeks before the Birthday celebrations commenced. He was there only for a few hours, but that was enough for Swamiji to divine his temperament and knowledge. And when Swamiji asked him to come again for the Bhagavata-Saptaha he became nervous as he had no previous experience of doing this. But Swamiji assured him that everything would be all right, and that gave him enough strength and courage to undertake the job. That day he returned to Meerut, where he was then working and came again just in time for the Saptaha. And it was only after the conclusion of the Bhagavata-Saptaha that he received initiation from Swamiji. This incident is narrated to show how a Mahatma's grace works wonders.

Now, when Swamiji bade him to do the Saptaha in Lucknow also he considered it a blessing and carried out the job with Sraddha and devotion under his guidance. Swamiji had a busy programme there. Satsang was held every day. The devotees took him to their houses and there were Bhajan — Kirtan programmes in some places. After spending three weeks there, Swamiji returned to Vasishtha Guha in the first week of February. The devotees of Lucknow and neighbouring towns felt blessed by Swamiji's darshan.

(ii)

Now let us turn to witness an example of Swamiji's compassion for an afflicted stranger :

It was the summer of 1959. One day in the hot sun a well-built person of dark complexion came to Vasishtha Guha for Swamiji's darshan. He looked like a poor peasant or a labourer, and he had an awkward look on his face. He was suffering from piles and was wandering desparately in the hills. Swamiji advised him to go to the hospital run by a well-known Ashrama in Rishikesh where he would be attended to. The man left then, but was back again after a day. The surgeon after examining him,

sent him away as it was not ripe for surgical-operation. He said he was desparate because of acute pain, etc. and did not want to go anywhere. He wanted to stay in the Ashrama and do some **Seva** (service). He believed that service to the Mahatmas alone would cure his ailment. He would not listen to any advice, and was adamant. He knelt down before Swamiji and implored him to be allowed to do Seva. Swamiji, laughing, asked one of his disciples, the present author, to fetch a stick lying nearby, as if to beat him. The man immediately offered his own heavy **lathi** and bent down to receive the blow. Swamiji simply laughed and laughed. It looked as if he enjoyed the play. He ordered the disciple to bring an orange from his room, and then began peeling it himself. When the man extended his palms to receive the prasada, Swamiji, by gestures, asked him to open his mouth. When he did so, Swamiji put a piece of the fruit into his mouth. When he had eaten it, another piece was put. Thus he put three or four more pieces of the fruit into his mouth. While doing so, Swamiji's face was beaming with love and affection. Then the man prostrated himself before Swamiji and went away as advised. This time there was no pleading from him for being allowed to stay in the Ashrama. On reaching the road, he started clapping his hands and dancing with joy, uttering, "I am blessed," "I am cured," and so on. What was it that this absolute stranger received from Swamiji? Nothing but compassion and unalloyed love !¹

¹ For an instance of Swamiji's feelings for even plants, etc. the reader may see 'The Life of Swami Purushottamananda', Pp. 203-4.

CHAPTER II

A SANNYASA CEREMONY

SWAMIJI had not given Sannyasa in the usual manner to anyone in Vasishtha Guha during the years of 1957 and '58. On the 29th of November '58, however, he gave Sannyasa Mantra and ochre robes to a lady disciple, Brahmacharini Krishnapriya, in Vasishtha Guha and renamed her Swami Subhadrananda. But there had been no regular Sannyasa ceremony with Viraja Homa, etc. during the two years.

There were some Brahmacharins in the Ashrama, qualified for Sannyasa. One of them, Madhusudan, had received initiation from Sri Swami Sankaranandaji Maharaj, President, Sri Ramakrishna Math and Mission, and the others were Swamiji's own disciples. There was one more candidate in Rishikesh — a well-known scholar, writer and poet of Kerala, whose life had been dedicated to learning and teaching of Sanskrit and Vedantic texts. A bachelor aged 64, he had come to Rishikesh the previous year in pursuit of further knowledge in Vedanta and was studying some texts on the subject at Kailas Ashrama. He used to visit Vasishtha Guha every now and then and discuss the subject with Swamiji. During the latter half of 1958 Swamiji had initiated him into the vows of Naishthika Brahmacharya and given the name, Rama Chaitanya. Now Swamiji decided to take them a step higher and the opportunity came soon. Mahasivaratri, which fell on the 7th March 1959, was the day selected. On that day the Brahmacharins were made to undergo all the preliminary rites connected with Sannyasa. And, on that night (i.e., in the early hours of 8th March — about 3 A.M.), the fires of Viraja Homa were lit again in Vasishtha Guha after a lapse of two years. After performing Viraja Homa and other Sannyasa rites the Brahmacharins received ochre robes and new names from Swamiji, as is customary. Those who received Orders on that day were :

- | | | |
|-----------------------|---|-----------------------|
| 1. Br. Vedagiri | — | Swami Nirvedananda |
| 2. Br. Raghava Das | — | Swami Raghuveerananda |
| 3. Br. Rama Chaitanya | — | Swami Rameswarananda |
| 4. Br. Madhusudan | — | Swami Shambhavananda |

Three days later, i.e., on the 11th March, on the auspicious occasion of Sri Ramakrishna Jayanti, Swamiji initiated six inmates of the Ashrama into Naishtika Brahmacharya. They were :

Ramakrishna Das, Gopal Das, Umesh Chaitanya, Manoj Chaitanya, Deva Chaitanya and Krishna Chaitanya.

CHAPTER III

PUBLICATION OF BIOGRAPHY

ONE of the notable events of 1959 was the publication of Swamiji's biography in English. Swamiji was reticent about his spiritual struggles and achievements. He was averse to publicity also. Yet he wrote a book on his life in Malayalam, entitled **Atma-Katha Athava Iswara Karunyam**. This he did with some hesitation so as to keep the promise given to the devotees of Kerala who had entreated him to write an autobiography when he visited Kerala in 1951-52. Since then, the devotees of Northern India had been praying for an English version of the book as they did not know the Malayalam language. At long last, spiritual aspirants the world over were all favoured. Swamiji commanded a monastic disciple to render the '**Atma-Katha**' into English, but the latter felt it was beyond his capacity to make a verbatim translation. So with Swamiji's permission he wrote a 'Life', based mostly on the '**Atma-Katha**'. And Swamiji was pleased to give his

permission and blessings to publish the book, which came out during the last quarter of 1959. The book, entitled "The life of Swami Purushottamananda",¹ was received with enthusiasm everywhere. Spiritual aspirants considered it a boon that they could get at least a glimpse of the Sage's life. It was indeed a gracious act of Swamiji to have given permission to publish the book for, as everyone knows, he was averse to publicity.

The book was reviewed by newspapers and periodicals and this brought in more seekers to Vasishtha Guha. Many a spiritual aspirant received guidance or initiation from Swamiji. His eighty-first birthday, celebrated on the 8th December 1959, was attended by more people than ever before. As on previous occasions, there was a Bhagavata-Saptaha which culminated on that day, followed by a Havan for world-peace. Then Swamiji delivered his message² — an extempore speech — which was listened to attentively by the vast multitude. Then there was a grand feast in which a large number of visitors — Sadhus and house-holders — were fed sumptuously. People who had come for the function from Delhi, Lucknow, Allahabad and other places started leaving for their homes from the following day and within a week's time Vasishtha Guha was once again the quiet haven of peace it used to be.

¹ Abbreviated to 'L.O.S.P.' in the following pages.

² See Appendix for the text of the speech.

CHAPTER IV

ARDHA-KUMBHA AT PRAYAG

माधुनां दर्शनं पुण्यं तीर्थभृता हि साधवः ।
तीर्थं फलति कालेन तत्रः साधुममागमः ॥

The 'darshan' of Mahatmas is meritorious for they have become one with Holiness. Pilgrimage to Tirthas (holy places) bears fruit in due course of time (i.e., in another birth), but association with saints confers its result immediately (in this very birth).

THE Kumbha Mela at Prayag is a well-known festival, occurring every twelfth year. Ardha-Kumbha is a mid-term festival occurring on the sixth year after a Kumbha. It is 'Ardha' (half) only in name : The number of pilgrims reaching there for a holy bath during the period and for darshan of Mahatmas; Sannyasins and Sadhus of various denominations such as Vairagis, Udasins, Naths, etc. that congregate; shops, exhibitions etc. that are put up in the Mela area, and the arrangements made for the Mela, are all on the same scale as for a Poorna-Kumbha. The congregation of Mahatmas is a special feature in such Melas. Ardha-Kumbha was due in 1960 and devotees of Swamiji reminded him about it. He consented to visit Prayag for the occasion. Accordingly, someone went ahead to Prayag to make arrangements for his stay on the Mela grounds. And Swamiji left Vasishtha Guha on the 1st of January 1960 for Delhi where he stayed for a week. Whenever he visited Delhi, Swamiji stayed with his disciple, Sri B. K. Kaul, I.C.S. This time also he was put up with him. Sri Kaul, his mother and all members of his family were devoted to him and they always provided the maximum comfort to Swamiji and to those who accompanied him. As usual, many people came for Swamiji's darshan and some of them took him to their houses also for Bhiksha or Satsang. A lady who used to visit him for darshan and Satsang invited him to Agra, where her husband was the District and Sessions Judge. Swamiji readily accepted the invitation and directed her to inform a particular disciple in Agra to make arrangements. When he received the information

the disciple was flabbergasted for, he had no place of his own. His sister's house where he was put up, was damp and therefore unfit for Swamiji's stay. Mrs. R. Kakkar, who was the Regional Inspectress of Girls' Schools, was a devotee of Swamiji. When he informed her of Swamiji's programme, she expressed her eagerness to serve him and within an hour or two she made all arrangements to accommodate Swamiji in her spacious bungalow. In the meantime, the Judge made arrangements in his bungalow also. When Swamiji reached Agra after a busy week in Delhi, he stayed with the Judge. He visited Mrs. Kakkar's place also and made her happy. An interesting story is narrated by a lady disciple of Swamiji about his visit to Agra. To quote her :

“Arrangements had been made for his stay in the bungalow of the Judge Saheb and Mrs. Kakkar's place. But I had an earnest desire that he stayed in our place . . .

“My brother, Mrs. R. Kakkar, her brother and certain others, were awaiting Swamiji's car near a bridge in the hope of welcoming him and conducting him to the bungalow. But Sri Guru Maharaj's car came and stopped in front of our house ! My daughter and I were the first ones to be favoured with his darshan. He was gracious enough to step into the house and spend a few minutes. Our house was sanctified. Then he asked me to take him to the bungalow of the Judge Saheb. My daughter and I accompanied him in the same car.

“On Guru Maharaj's bidding my daughter sang some Bhajans. In the meantime, a friend of my son, finding our house locked, reached the bungalow. He was surprised to find that Sri Maharaj had already arrived and that we too were there, whereas my brother and others were still waiting for him on the Delhi Road ! Soon he rushed and brought them to the bungalow. They were all astonished as to how Sri Guru Maharaj managed to give the slip to all of them and reached our house first. I am unable to recollect the date, etc. All that I do remember is Guru Maharaj's grace”.¹

¹ Translated and edited by the author from a letter received in Hindi.

The above incident is cited to show how the compassionate Guru favours sincere devotees even though their prayers remain unexpressed.

After spending a couple of days in Agra, Swamiji proceeded to Brindavan. Brindavan was not a new place to him : he had spent a number of days in that holy place years ago. After visiting some important places of worship, he left for Kanpur. After two or three days' stay there, he left for Prayag.

Arrangements had been made for his stay on the bank of Ganga. The Mela authorities provided accommodation and all other facilities, free of charge. Some of his monastic and lay disciples stayed with him. It is a general practice with pilgrims to have a holy dip in the Ganga or Triveni Sangam (confluence of Ganga, Yamuna and Sarasvati) and go round the camps to have darshan of Mahatmas. Apart from such casual pilgrims, sincere aspirants came to Swamiji for spiritual instructions. Many Sadhus who had heard about Swamiji, also came morning and evening for it was not possible for everyone to go to Vasishtha Guha for his darshan. Thus, Swamiji's camp was always crowded with visitors. So to say, there was perpetual Satsang in the camp. Yes, sincere aspirants are never tired of Satsang (association with Holy Personages) for that is an essential part of Sadhana. Is it not said, "प्रथम भक्ति संतन कर संग" ?¹

Not only in the Kumbha Mela camp, but wherever Swamiji went, the programme of Kirtan, reading of religious texts, and Satsanga was there. Devotees approached him with their doubts regarding spiritual matters and got elucidation; some others needed guidance in the path, and certain others came for mere darshan. This programme of Satsanga has been referred to in many chapters of this book. Some of the lay readers are likely to become eager to know the value of it. To satisfy their curiosity we give a free rendering of a famous poem of Bhartrihari, on the glory of Satsanga :

¹ *Ramacharitamanasa, Aranyakanda.*

Ignorance, it does remove;
Truthfulness, it brings in speech,
Elevates the mind and sets at naught
All sinfulness.

Confers Peace of mind on you
And spreads your fame in all quarters.
Tell me what is not attained
By men at large thro' Satsanga.

During the period of Mela there was a Religious Conference arranged by a certain organization on Makara Sankranti Day. Many Sadhus were invited and our Swamiji was also requested to address the gathering. Swamiji delivered a short speech in English, exhorting the audience to be sincere in spiritual Sadhana and devotion. As there were many who did not know the English language, Swamiji's speech was rendered into Hindi by his disciple, Swami Bhoomananda.

The hubbub of the Mela, however, was to much for Swamiji; Therefore, after the main bathing day, he left the Mela grounds and stayed with his disciple, Sri R. K. Vatal at Lukerganj, a quiet locality, for a short period. From Allahabad he moved on to Lucknow. A week's stay there and thence he returned to Vasishtha Guha during the first week of February, 1960.

CHAPTER V

A NEW KUTIR

EVER since March 1957 Swamiji had been staying in the terrace-room of the building constructed after the October '56 floods. The open terrace in front of the room afforded ample sitting accommodation whenever visitors came in large numbers. The view of the Ganga and the hill on the other bank of the river was grand and charming. Sitting on the terrace one could very soon forget the surroundings and dive deep into meditation, viewing the Ganga. Despite all these and other advantages, the room suffered from some disadvantages too, the foremost one being the exposure to the chill winter blast. Another inconvenience was that Swamiji had to come down in the early hours of the morning to answer the calls of nature, etc. which obviously meant a lot of discomfort during the winter season. But Swamiji was oblivious to all these, and had he wished, better arrangements could have been made. Even though he was now in his eighties, he considered these discomforts trifling because he had undergone many a hardship during his days of Sadhana. As Dr. K. M. Munshi, the then Governor of Uttar Pradesh, who paid a visit to Swamiji in the year 1953 observes, "Loneliness, starvation and a hundred other aches mean nothing to him; he lives a real life, possessed of God which gives him perpetual Joy and Peace."¹

Although that was his real secret, devotees could not remain passive spectators. An octogenarian disciple of Swamiji, Sri Ram Chandra Khanna, who was staying in the Ashrama during the winter of 1959-60, was witnessing the trouble that Guruji was undergoing day after day. An old man himself, it pained him much. One day he made a resolve to construct a new Kutir for Swamiji with bath-room facilities, and approached him for permission. Noticing the earnestness of the disciple, Swamiji consented to the proposal and himself selected the site for the purpose. Construction work started soon and the new Kutir, with a bath-room just in its front, was ready before the summer of 1960.

¹ See "City of Paradise & Other Kulapati's Letters" (1955), P. 69. (Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan, Bombay).

Since then Swamiji started using the new Kutir also. The construction of a Kutir, in itself, may not appear to be of any importance to the readers. Why mention has been made of this is that this new Kutir gained prominence early next year as Swamiji attained Mahasamadhi in this very Kutir. And soon after, it became a temple where a photograph of Swamiji was placed on a pedestal and regular worship started. Thus, this Kutir has become doubly sacred to Swamiji's disciples and devotees.

CHAPTER VI

ON A TOUR TO THE SOUTH

A significant event took place during the summer of 1960. That was Swamiji's sudden decision to visit Kanyakumari and other places in the South. Summer months are hot everywhere, whether North or South. And in Kerala it rains heavily during July — August, making travel most inconvenient. Not that Swamiji was unaware of these things : Yet he decided on a journey to the South. As it turned out, this happened to be his farewell visit to his land of birth. Did he venture the journey in that odd season fully knowing that he would be leaving the world within a few months ? His devotees, no doubt, consider so. They say in one voice that their Gurudev, an embodiment of love and compassion, out of his grace and magnanimity, came all the way from the Himalayas only to bless them all. And they have good reasons to say so : He did not prolong his stay in any one place, save Kanyakumari; but at the same time he did not omit any

familiar place from the itinerary, thus affording an opportunity for every devotee to visit him. So to say, he hopped from place to place. The reader will observe this fact as he goes through the following pages. Another striking point was that hardly two years had elapsed since his previous visit to Kerala and Kanyakumari and he was starting again so soon.

The decision itself during that period of the year was unusual. What was more, he announced to his disciples in the Ashrama that whosoever wanted to accompany him was welcome; only three or four of them were barred — they had to stay behind to look after the Ashrama. When such an open offer was made, who would not love to join him? The next day, i.e. the 25th June 1960, Swamiji boarded the train from Hardwar for Lucknow, on the first lap of his journey, accompanied by six or seven members of the Ashrama — Sannyasins and Brahmacharins. Normally, he did not take more than one or two disciples with him. This time there were so many! And from Lucknow the band was augmented by some house-holder disciples also, including two aged women in the group.

At Lucknow, Swamiji and party stayed at the usual place, Shukla Ghat, on the Gomati. When devotees were told that Swamiji would be there for three or four days only as he had to be in Kerala for Guru Poornima, which was on the 8th of July, they decided to celebrate it then itself when Gurudev was in their midst. Every year a few of them visited Vasishtha Guha for the occasion. Now that Swamiji was on tour they would miss the opportunity if they waited for the actual day.

“अवध तहाँ जहाँ राम निवास”¹

— says Goswami Tulsidas

In the same manner, when Guru Maharaj was in Shukla Ghat that was Vasishtha Guha for devotees, and Gomati was Ganga. And, any^{day} was Guru Puja day for them. Therefore, they informed their co-disciples in the neighbouring towns like Sitapur, Bara Banki, etc. and they all gathered for the function. Guru Puja was conducted by them on a grand scale. They all considered themselves blessed for it was not convenient for everyone to reach Vasishtha Guha for the occasion. On the same evening Swamiji left for

¹ That is Ayodhya where Sri Rama lives.

Madras by train, accompanied by monastic and house-holder disciples.

At Madras some devotees had made arrangements for their stay. On former occasions Swamiji used to stay in the Ramakrishna Math, but this time he had a number of people with him and therefore a few local devotees had decided to accommodate Swamiji and party elsewhere. When Swamiji was apprised of the arrangements on arrival at Madras Central Station his reaction was not favourable at first, but subsequently he approved of it. Mandavali in Mylapore area where Swamiji camped, was a quiet residential locality. Swamiji was accommodated in 'Sarada Kutir', a small cottage type of house belonging to a devotee of Sri Ramakrishna. The monks and house-holders accompanying him were housed in two different houses on the opposite row. During his three days' stay there, many spiritual aspirants visited him. There was regular Satsang everyday, after which some young spiritual aspirants put intelligent and searching questions. This was a regular feature whenever Swamiji visited Madras. Swamiji cleared their doubts and satisfied them all.

One day he visited Sri Ramakrishna Math. The senior monks and others were happy to see him. After spending some time with them he returned. One day he went to the sea for bathing. He was fond of sea-bath, but during that visit he could go only once. After an early morning bath in the sea he spent some time on the beach, meditating. A few devotees who had accompanied him, also sat at a distance and meditated. After three days at Madras, Swamiji and party left for Ottapalam by train.

CHAPTER VII

OMKARASHRAMA

THE next morning they arrived at Ottapalam, in Kerala State. Swamiji and his monastic disciples stayed in Sri Ramakrishna-Niranjan Ashrama, while the others were accommodated in an adjoining house belonging to a retired District & Sessions Judge who was a Bhakta of Sri Ramakrishna and a disciple of Swami Nirmalanandaji.¹ During their brief stay there, many people from nearby places came for Swamiji's darshan as well as spiritual advice. Guru Poornima was fast approaching and he had to reach Desamangalam for the occasion. Therefore, after two day's stay, Swamiji and party left Ottapalam by car and reached Omkarashrama at Desamangalam, within a couple of hours.

A few words about Omkarashrama may not be out of place here. The Ashrama was founded by Swami Sambananda, a disciple of Swamiji. It is situated on the left bank of the famous river of Malabar, the Bharatapuzha. The river flows northwards at Desamangalam. Swami Sambananda had been to Vasishtha Guha during the year 1956 when he explained the situation of the place to Guru Maharaj and sought his guidance and blessings to found an Ashrama there. His day-dream was to take Swamiji to Kerala where he could stay in the new Ashrama for the rest of his sojourn in this world. But Swamiji was indifferent to such proposals. However, he gave Rupees One hundred and one as his contribution and blessed the disciple's venture. The latter had plans to install marble idols of Sri Radha and Sri Krishna in the Ashrama. He informed Swamiji about his plans when the Ashrama was under construction, but Swamiji advised him to install only a symbol of Pranava. Accordingly an ॐ made of Panchaloha² was installed. And the installation ceremony was performed by Swamiji himself on Sri Ramakrishna's Tithi Puja day (birth-day) in February 1958.

¹ About whom see the *L.O.S.P.*, Chapter VIII & c.

² Panch-loha or Pancha-dhatu is a combination of five metals, namely, Gold, Silver, Copper, Brass and Lead.

A month before starting on the present tour, namely, in the month of May 1960, Swamiji bade a disciple, Swami Sadasivananda, to proceed to Omkarashrama to assist the founder who was getting old. To 'assist' was only a pretext. In fact Swamiji was sending him to 'succeed' the founder, as later events proved. Leaving Vasishtha Guha as per Gurudev's advice, the Swami reached Desamangalam on the 23rd of May. And, to his surprise, the founder, Swami Sambananda, had passed away three days earlier — on the 20th ! The local devotees had conveyed the news to Swamiji and had requested him to depute a monk to manage the Ashrama and, lo ! even before their message reached Vasishtha Guha, Swamiji's nominee had arrived to relieve them of their anxiety ! This increased their faith in Swamiji.

To revert to our story: Swamiji reached Omkarashrama on the 7th of July. The Ashrama had been decorated beautifully and it had a festive appearance. The next day, i.e. the Guru Poonima Day, a large number of local devotees arrived for the function. Swami Paresananda, a disciple of Swamiji, also arrived from Kanyakumari to perform Pada Puja to Gurudev and to conduct him to Kanyakumari. After Guru Puja, Havan and other functions Swamiji entered the sanclum sanctorum and ordered the doors to be closed. He spent some time there all alone. Afterwards he himself offered Puja and performed Arati to the Pranava. Everyone believes that during those few moments Swamiji was charging the atmosphere with spiritual currents for the well-being of the Ashrama. On that sacred day, Sri Koru Nair and his daughter received initiation from Swamiji. It was he who had made a free gift of land for the construction of the Ashrama. He had also made a gift of some agricultural land for the maintenance of the Ashrama. After the conclusion of the Puja and other items, a feast was arranged. After taking food Swamiji and party left for Guruvayur.

TOWARDS KANYAKUMARI

GURUVAYUR has played an important role in Swamiji's life. Therefore he never missed the place whenever he visited Kerala. In the earlier book¹, apart from a whole chapter on Guruvayur, mention has also been made of Swamiji's love and awe for that place, rather the Lord of that place, in various other chapters. Hence no elaboration of this here. Suffice it to say that in spite of heavy rains, Swamiji spent three days there. Besides visiting the temple every day for darshan of the Lord, he gave spiritual instructions to many devotees.

Here Swamiji's party was divided into various groups. He sent away some of his monastic disciples to different places, later to join him at Kanyakumari. The house-holders were advised to spend some more days at Guruvayur. They were also to join him at some place to be specified later. But transport services were disorganized owing to heavy rains. Added to that, the postal employees were on a strike. This made it difficult for them to contact Swamiji. They were all from North India and were new to the place. They did not get any communication from Swamiji either, because of the strike. So to say, they were stranded. But they had faith in Swamiji. Therefore they did not lose heart. After waiting for a few days, and not getting any message from Swamiji, they left Guruvayur and reached Kanyakumari where Swamiji had already arrived.

As for Swamiji, he proceeded from Guruvayur to Trichur thence to Kaladi, the birth-place of Bhagavan Sri Sankaracharya. There were only three or four people with him. From Kaladi he went to Haripad. A disciple there had invited him to visit his house where a Bhagavata-Saptaha had been arranged in connection with his mother's Shashtiabdapoorti (completion of sixty years) celebrations. Swamiji graced the house by paying a visit and blessed the old lady. Then, visiting some places here and there, he reached Trivandrum on the 14th of July.

¹ Viz., the L.O.S.P.

Whenever he visited Trivandrum he used to stay with his boyhood friend Narayana Pillai, a renowned Ayurvedic physician, at his 'Dhanwantari Matham'. Now the friend had passed away, but the members of his family were also devoted to him and they requested him to stay on. In the meantime, an invitation came. It was from Capt. (now Lieut.—Col.) P. G. Nair whose father (Swami Paresananda) had taken Sannyasa from Swamiji only a couple of years before. Swamiji readily accepted the invitation and, after spending a day or two at 'Dhanwantari Matham' he went to P. G. Nair's quarters at Poojapura.

'Blue House', the official residence of Capt. Nair, had been dressed up nicely to receive the august guest. From the main gate on the road-side right upto the house there were arches, decorated with bunches of plantains, mango leaves, etc. And the whole distance was spread with beach sand — a substitute for red carpet! — and water was sprinkled on it throughout. Everything was arranged in the traditional Kerala fashion. Swamiji was received at the gate by Captain and Mrs. Nair with due honours and conducted to the house. They performed Pada Puja also before Swamiji stepped into the house. He stayed there for five days. One day Capt. Nair received Mantra Deeksha from Swamiji. Swami Paresananda's elder sister, an aged lady, also received initiation. Many devotees came and took him to their houses in different parts of the town. Many of them were given initiation also.

Trivandrum is known for the temple of Sri Padmanabha. Here the Lord is reclining on Ananta (Seshanaga). The town derives its name from the Deity and is called 'TIRUVANANTA-PURAM'¹ in local language, and 'Trivandrum' is a corrupt form of this in English. Swamiji visited this temple to have darshan of Sri Padmanabha. He had an invitation from Abhedashrama situated near the temple. On his way back from the temple Swamiji paid a visit to that Ashrama also. Swami Abhedanandaji, the Chief of the Ashrama, is widely known for his propagation of Lord's name. He is a great Bhakta and a good Sankirtanist also. He had visited Vasishtha Guha a few years before and he knew Swamiji very well. He received him with love and respect.

¹ The split-up is : Tiru-Ananta-Puram. 'Tiru' is synonymous with 'Sri'.

After spending some time there, Swamiji returned to 'Blue House'. There were regular Bhajan, Kirtan and other religious programmes there. Apart from these, Swamiji held Satsang also for the benefit of the devotees.

From Trivandrum Swamiji proceeded to Kanyakumari, the southern-most tip of India. It is a beautiful place surrounded by sea on three sides : the Bay of Bengal on the east, the Indian Ocean on the south and the Arabian Sea on the west — a confluence of three seas ! He reached there on the 21st of July. There were many members in his party. Most of those who separated at Guruvayur had, by then, joined him. Swami Parasnananda had come earlier, leaving Swamiji at Trivandrum, to make arrangements in his Ashrama at Kanyakumari. Here also the Ashrama — 'Shanti Nilayam' — had been decorated beautifully with plantain bunches, etc.

Kanyakumari was the culminating point of Swamiji's journey. He had great love for that place, even as his own Guru, Swami Brahmanandaji, had. Talking of his Guru's love for Kanyakumari, Swamiji used to say : "He was not at all willing to leave Kanyakumari. He once told me, 'Bhakta, I do not want to go back to Calcutta at all. Ah ! I wish I could get a small Kutir (hut) and live here the rest of my life!'"

So, whenever Swamiji visited South India, he did not miss Kanyakumari. This time he stayed there for twenty-four days — the longest stay in any one place during his journey. It was a festival at Shanti Nilayam. There was Satsang both morning and evening. Many were the visitors who came for spiritual guidance and initiation. Some Sannyasins of Sri Ramakrishna Ashramas, as also of other Ashramas, came to see him from different places. Many of them knew Swamiji from his earlier days in the Ashramas in Kerala and they had great love and regard for him. Many devotees also came from far and near and took him to their houses. He accepted Bhiksha in some houses, conducted Satsang at others and in some places he listened to Bhajans and Kirtan conducted by devotees. Everyone was happy. They all felt that their houses were purified by the visit of Swamiji.

¹ See the L.O.S.P., P. 67.

Swamiji was very fond of sea-bath. His daily routine consisted of an early morning bath in the sea after which he, along with his disciples, visited the temple and had darshan of Goddess Kanyakumari. And, often he spent some time in meditation on the beach, near the local Ganapati temple, just outside the Devi's. Others also meditated sitting behind him and derived much benefit.

'Shanti Nilayam' was buzzing with activity. Visitors were coming day in and day out. Swami Paresananda was all attention to make Gurudeva's stay comfortable. He felt very happy that Guru Maharaj gave him such an opportunity to serve him. Ever since he first visited Vasishtha Guhu in his Pooivashrama days and had darshan of Swamiji, he had great regard and admiration for him. When he visited again in 1955, he found that Swamiji's 'Atma Katha' had almost been completed. He prayed that he be given the privilege of publishing it. Swamiji agreed and with his permission and blessings, he brought the manuscript and published it from Trivandrum, thus endearing himself to Swamiji.

Let us digress a little to say a few words more about him and his Sannyasa :

Major-General V. N. Parameswaran Pillai, O.B.E., as he was known in pre-monastic life, had a distinguished career in the army. He retired from service as G.O.C., Travancore-Cochin State Forces. After retirement he was living in Kanyakumari, away from home, leading the life of a Vanaprastha, since 1950. When Swami Purushottamanandaji visited the place in 1958, he stayed with the General for ten days. One day during that period Gen. Pillai apprised Swamiji of the course of Sadhana he was following, his mode of living since retirement in 1950, and also that he had already received Mantra Deeksha from Swami Sivandaji Maharaj of Rishikesh. And now he was eager to be initiated into the Order of Sannyasa. A few days earlier, two others had also approached Swamiji for Sannyasa. Of them one was a Brahmacharin of Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama at Pudukad, whom the Mahant of the Ashrama had recommended, and the other, Sri Damodara Menon, formerly a lawyer, was leading the life of a Vanaprastha. He was a Bhakta of Sri Ramana Maharshi and

was running a religious institution called 'Vijnana Ramaneeyam' at Palghat. Swamiji had visited that place in 1952 and conducted satsang. When Gen. Pillai also prayed for Sannyasa, Swamiji advised him to call those two others also. He consulted the almanac (Panchangam) and fixed the day: the Full Moon Day of Chaitra ('Meenam', according to Malayalam calendar), corresponding to the 4th April 1958. That was the day of 'Panguni Uttaram' festival and Hanumat Jayanti in South India. On that auspicious day Swamiji gave Sannyasa to all of them. When Viraja Homa and all other formalities were over, he gave them ochre robes and new names as shown below :—

- | | | |
|----------------------------|---|---------------------|
| 1. Br. Kesavan | — | Swami Narendrananda |
| 2. Sri Parameswaran Pillai | → | Swami Paresananda |
| 3. Sri Damodara Menon | → | Swami Sureshananda |

Now, to return to our narrative, Swami Paresananda made arrangements for Gurudev's stay in his 'Shanti Ashrama' also for a few days during his present visit (1960). It was a small Kutir, adjacent to Shanti Nilayam. Swamiji liked that Kutir very much. Swami Paresananda not only served Guru Maharaj wholeheartedly but also took the maximum advantage of his stay by seeking advice on various topics connected with spiritual life. He knew the technique as taught by the Gita, viz., 'तद्विद्भिः प्रणिशते न परिप्रश्नेन सेवया'; The teachings imparted by Gurudev have been recorded by Swami Paresananda in his **Akhila Bharata-Kailasa Teerthatanam**, a work in Malayalam, published in 1969.

! In North India Hanumat Jayanti is observed on Naraka-Chaturdasi day.

CHAPTER IX

THE RETURN JOURNEY

BEFORE leaving Kanyakumari, Swamiji sent away some members of his party to other places. Some of the householders, having come all the way from North India, wished to make a pilgrimage to Rameswaram also. It is a life-long desire of every orthodox Hindu of North India to go on a pilgrimage to Rameswaram, at least once in his life-time, even as his South Indian counterpart longs to visit Varanasi. Among the four important places of pilgrimage (Chatur-Dhamas), Rameswaram is the southern one — the other three being Dwaraka in the west, Badrinath in the north and Puri in the east. They expressed their desire to Swamiji and with his permission and blessings they left for Rameswaram, whence they returned home direct. Thus his party became smaller. After spending more than three weeks in Kanyakumari — the most happy and memorable days for Swami Paresananda — Gurudev and the remaining members of his party started on their return journey on 15th August 1960 along with Sri and Srimati V. G. G. Nayar, his disciples, in their two cars.

On their way to Kundara, they made a brief halt at Trivandrum. Here Swamiji laid the foundation for a new house which Sri Nayar was going to construct. From there they proceeded to Kundara where Sri Nayar was then the General Manager of a large industrial concern. Swamiji stayed in his spacious house for four or five days. The hosts were all attention to Swamiji. Bhajan, Satsang, etc. were held every day. All were happy. One day Swamiji conducted Vidyarambha of their young daughter. It was performed in a characteristic way. Swamiji asked the child to put her tongue out and wrote some mystic syllable or Mantram on it with a golden ring. Thus the child was initiated into real vidya : other traditional methods were secondary.

Leaving Kundara by car Swamiji reached Haripad where they camped at Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama for a day. It might be remembered that it was at this Ashrama that Gurudev received Mantra Deeksha from Swami Brahmanandaji Maharaj, way back in 1916. The Swamis in the Ashrama were all happy to see him again on his return journey.

CHAPTER X

THE CRUISE ON THE PAMPA

लोकोत्तराणां चेतासि
को हि विज्ञातुमर्हति ।

*Who indeed can fathom the mind of those
who have transcended the world ?*

— Bhavabhuti

GREAT souls move about in the world like ordinary men. Some of their actions may even appear to be strange at times, but every action of theirs has a deep meaning behind it. A common man hardly grasps it, whereas one endowed with Sraddha and devotion understands it either at the time or later. Our Swamiji's actions were no exceptions, and they had a lesson for devotees and others. Here is an incident :

On reaching Haripad, Swamiji thought of a cruise on the river Pampa, a spiritual excursion to visit the famous temple of Sri Parthasarathi (Sri Krishna in his role as charioteer of Arjuna) at Aranmula. The boats of Aranmula are not ordinary ones. They are huge boats having a length of 150 feet, or even more, with the stern rising to the sky to a height of 50 feet or so. They are kept in huge sheds on land, protected from sun and rain, and taken to the waters only when needed. It requires as many as one hundred persons to take a boat to the waters, for rowing in the river and to take it back to the shed for parking. About a hundred oarsmen, divided into two, sit on either side. In the centre there will be nearly twenty persons to sing the special 'Boat Songs' with their drums and other accompaniments. Every year a Boat Race is held a couple of days after 'Onam', the most important festival of Kerala, during August-September. Some twenty or twenty-five such boats, some even bigger, take part in the race and prizes are distributed in the end. Visitors in thousands, including foreigners and distinguished guests, throng to witness the race. These few words can give a rough idea about boating at Aranmula.

As was his practice, this decision of Swamiji was also taken on the spur of the moment. There was no previous planning. Indeed Paramahansas have no planning at all. Yet, how his wish was carried out despite various handicaps is better described in the words of Swami Sadasivananda :—

“On the day we reached Haripad, Guru Maharaj called me at 3 P.M. and said. ‘Aranmula boating. Tomorrow — 8 A.M. The sudden command made me dumbfounded for I knew the procedure. If a boat is to be hired one has to deposit a certain amount, at least a week before, in the office of the Association which controls the affairs. Then only they will be able to arrange the party to take the boat to the waters. There are certain other regulations also. These hurdles flashed in my mind as soon as the sudden command came from Maharaj, and perplexed me. I did not know what to say or do. I prostrated myself before Guru Maharaj. He patted me on the back and said, ‘Everything will be all right. Go,’ and handed me ten rupees. His assurance gave me strength and I immediately proceeded to Nedumprayar, my Poorvashrama place. The sun had set when I reached the place. I approached some people and discussed the matter with them. They said the complications and hurdles in arranging at such a short notice — not even twelve hours — were many, but they would try their best. Yes, they had heard about Maharaj, so they were eager to carry out his wish and be recipients of his blessings. Some people went from house to house the whole night to muster enough strength for the boating.

“Next morning at 7.30 Guru Maharaj and party arrived from Haripad and reached my Poorvashrama house”.

“‘Hey ! What is the position ?’ he asked.”

“Attempts are going on, Maharaj”, said I.

“‘Oh, if it is difficult, better drop the programme,’ saying this he took his seat. Little children were doing Bhajan and Kirtan. Maharaj spent two hours in their midst. In the meantime people, men and women, young and old, of different castes and creeds, flocked to the place. It was a sea of humanity.

"Then Maharaj enquired about the next programme. I replied that food was ready and after Bhiksha we could have boating. Guru Maharaj agreed. The moment he said 'Yes', the whole crowd rushed to the boat jetty. When we reached the jetty after Bhiksha, everything was ready. We all got into the boat and Maharaj occupied the chair specially provided for him. At ten O'clock the boat moved. The boatmen sang **Kuchela-Vrittam** (the story of Sudama) in the 'boat-song metre' to the accompaniments of drums, cymbals, etc. On reaching the temple ghat we had darshan of the Lord. Then the boat returned. By 2 P.M. we were back at Nedumprayar jetty. Guru Maharaj was happy throughout and we all felt blessed.

"It is beyond my capacity to explain how this was made possible at such a short notice. I, on my part, fully believe that the boating programme was intended to teach me through experience that everything takes place as per His Wish and that human pride has no place anywhere; and that what is impossible for ordinary men becomes possible for the Sage by a mere wish I am fully convinced about this."¹

Translated and edited by the author from details furnished in Matayalam by Swami Sadasivananda.

VISIT TO THE HOUSE OF BIRTH

AFTER spending about an hour at Nedumprayar, Swamiji and party motored to Pullad. Vaidyan Narayana Panikkar and all members of his family were devoted to Swamiji. They all felt blessed by his visit. By evening he reached Tiruvalla and drove straight to Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama. The Swamis there were happy to see him and they received him cordially. Most of them were his Guru-bhais and they had lived together during their earlier days as Brahmacharins. Although they were all happy to receive Swamiji, a problem arose about accommodation. There was a lady in Swamiji's party and the accommodation available in the Ashrama, and perhaps their rules, did not permit lady guests to stay. The male members, however, stayed there for the night. After spending some time in the Ashrama, Swamiji and party proceeded to the temple of Sri Vallabha for darshan. While a young boy, it was his daily routine to visit this temple and spend many hours there doing Japam, meditation, reading of Bhagavatam, etc. As such, he did not miss darshan of Sri Vallabha whenever he visited Tiruvalla. Then they went to 'Sankaraveli House' situated near the temple. It will be remembered that the then 'senior lady' of this house had great love and affection for Swamiji during his younger days and she became a second mother to him. The present senior lady, the daughter of the previous lady, was delighted to see Swamiji. (The daughter succeeding the mother as the head of the family is in accordance with the Law of Matriarchy prevailing among certain communities in Kerala). All members of the family had great regard for him. The lady accompanying Swamiji was accommodated there. And for himself? Although they requested him to stay — and the house was large enough with ample facilities —, Swamiji did not agree. He had thought of another place — the house where he was born. Accordingly, he went to his Poorvashrama house, 'Kuzhiyil Parambil Veedu', for the night. His sister's daughter, Parukutty Amma, was overcome with joy and was beside herself. On previous occasions, she used to have Swamiji's darshan whenever he visited Tiruvalla, but she had never even dreamt that he would be so pleased as to spend a night

in the house. She considered herself highly blessed. Perhaps that was the first time and the last as it turned out to be later, that Swamiji stayed in his Poorvashrama house after embracing Sannyasa. A cot was provided and he slept in the open courtyard. Parukutty Amma felt that the house was sanctified.

CHAPTER XII

GOOD-BYE TO THE SOUTH

THE next day Swamiji left Tiruvalla. Visiting Kaladi, Guruvayur and other places, he reached Desamangalam by car. The gentleman who had donated the land for Omkarashrama, and other devotees had requested Swamiji to make some arrangement for the running of the Ashrama. The local devotees gathered as soon as Swamiji arrived. A piece of agricultural land adjoining the Ashram property was purchased and donated for the Ashrama by Swami Paramananda, a disciple of Gurudev, who lived in a nearby place. As per Swamiji's instructions, a committee of five members was formed to manage the Ashrama, Of them, four were house-holders; Swami Sadasivananda was the Sannyasin member. He was to stay in the Ashrama and run the institution on proper lines. After a day's stay there, Swamiji moved on.

He made a brief halt at Ottapalam and thence went to Palghat where Swami Sureshanānda had arranged for a Satsang. His 'Vijnana Ramaneeyam' was crowded with devotees. Swamiji spoke to them a few words on religious matters and then proceeded to Coimbatore, where a devotee had invited him.

While at Coimbatore, he paid a surprise visit to the house of Sri V. R. Krishna Pillai, the Assistant Collector of Customs. Mrs. Pillai is a daughter of Maj.-Gen. Parameswaran Pillai (later Swami Paresananda), who had talked about them to Swamiji. Although the couple were taken by surprise, they welcomed Swamiji and party in a fitting manner. After partaking of their hospitality, Swamiji left for Madras by train. Now he had only one or two disciples with him.

Swamiji had been on tour for more than two months and he was eager to return to his favourite abode, Vasishtha Guha. Therefore he did not stay in Madras for long. After a couple of days there, he bade good-bye to the South and boarded the train for Lucknow.

CHAPTER XIII

RISHIKESH — VASISHTHA GUHA

SWAMIJI halted at Lucknow only for three days. While there, he received a telegraphic message from Rishikesh saying that the road to the Cave was breached at many places owing to heavy rains and that there was no vehicular traffic. But, in spite of that, he left Lucknow on the third day of his arrival and reached Rishikesh on the morning of 6th September, 1960.

At Rishikesh, Swamiji had to stay for two days. It was not the hill section road alone that had been damaged, but even in Rishikesh a considerable length of the road had been washed away by the river Chandrabhaga on the Muni-Ki-Reti side of the bridge. Therefore there was no vehicular traffic on the road leading to Vasishtha Guha and Swamiji had to stay there for a

couple of days. This was a 'blessing in disguise' for the people of Rishikesh. Men and women gathered for his darshan and for Satsang. When he went to the Ganga for bathing, a large number of people followed him, doing Kirtan. It was a virtual procession.

Swamiji was staying in a Dharmasala. There was a lot of inconvenience there and his stay was far from being comfortable. Yet he had to put up with them. On the 8th of September, the General Manager of the Motor Owners' Corporation arranged a bus for him. The road had not been repaired fully. Consequently, the bus had to be run very slowly with great care. With great difficulty they reached Shivpuri. The road further up was worse and the bus could not proceed. From there Swamiji and others had to walk more than three miles. Towards evening Swamiji reached Vasishtha Guha, after being away for two and a half months.

CHAPTER XIV

TWO SANNYASA CEREMONIES

SWAMIJI's starting on a tour of South India in the month of June was termed as an unusual event of 1960. But that was not the only instance. Yet another unusual event of that year was the two Sannyasa ceremonies witnessed in Vasishtha Guha.

A young spiritual aspirant had come in contact with Swamiji when he was in Kanyakumari during the year 1958. When Swamiji found that he was inclined towards monastic life, he had advised the youth to come to the Cave. A year later the aspirant, Sri Krishnan Potti, left home and after visiting vari-

couple of days. This was a 'blessing in disguise' for the people of Rishikesh. Men and women gathered for his darshan and for Satsang. When he went to the Ganga for bathing, a large number of people followed him, doing Kirtan. It was a virtual procession.

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AT THE DEATH-BED OF A DISCIPLE

THE Guru is an 'Ocean of mercy'. His grace knows no reason; it has no discrimination. Only, the disciple has to bow down to receive it. अहेतुकदयासिन्धुः बन्धुरात्मतां सताम'

— that is how Sri Sankaracharya describes an ideal Guru. We have already described one instance of Swami Purushottamanandaji Maharaj's grace on a devotee and compassion for an absolute stranger.¹ We will now narrate an instance of the gracious Guru's love for a dying disciple.

Swami Bhoomananda, a member of the Ashrama, fell ill during the month of October 1960. He was a young man of erudition and dispassion. Born in the year 1933 in a scholarly Brahmin family of Jaunpur in Uttar Pradesh, Sasibhushan Dutt Misra (that was his former name) had his early education in Jaunpur. Later, he joined the Allahabad University from where he passed the M.A. examination very creditably. Sanskrit was his subject. Even during his school days he showed signs of a bright future. He was almost a **Srutidhar**² even in those days — a trait derived perhaps from a paternal uncle. He was of an analytical mind and tried to fathom the mysteries of life through reasoning. When his class-mates were playing or studying, Sasibhushan would be sitting all alone under a tree near the cremation ground, far away from home, pondering over abstruse metaphysics. Not getting a satisfactory answer to his problems from 'Pundits' he fled from home — once for Calcutta and another time for South in search of a solution. But the religious institutions did not attract him and he did not stay in any place. He turned back and continued his studies. On passing the M.A. examination, he was offered the post of a Lecturer in Sanskrit by the Allahabad University. He accepted the offer, but served for only one term. His dispassion drove him again — this time to the Himalayas.

1 See Chapter I

2 i.e., one who is gifted with the power of retaining in one's memory what one has heard only once.

When he reached Rishikesh, he heard of Vasishtha Guha and trekked to that place. And there he found the peace he was hankering after! At the very sight of Swamiji he felt he had found the Guru who would 'deliver the goods'. That was in the year 1956. During the winter of the same year Swamiji was pleased to initiate him into the Order of Sannyasa, along with another disciple. Sasibhushan was given the name, Swami Bhoomananda. The other disciple, Br. Kumaran, became Swami Gitananda.

Swami Bhoomananda had frequent attacks of malaria since 1958 and had been hospitalised more than once. This time also, i.e., in October '60, it was thought that it was a recurrence of the malignant disease and he was admitted to the Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama (hospital) at Kankhal. The disease was diagnosed as typhoid. The disease was treated and brought under control. But, however, the after-effects of the drugs were not pleasant. He felt dizzy and fell down twice. On the 3rd of November, Swamiji deputed a disciple — the author of these lines — to Kankhal, bidding him to report on Swami Bhoomananda's condition and to stay there to attend on him. Bhoomananda's condition was serious. He was restless and did not get sleep. He was getting non-stop hiccups also. Physically he was very weak and his power of memory was fading too. At times he talked incoherently. On getting this news two co-disciples visited him in the hospital the next evening. Perhaps Swami Bhoomananda had a premonition of his impending death. He was saying that he would not survive and was pleading to have darshan of Guru Maharaj. One of the Guru-bhais returned immediately and halted at Rishikesh for the night. The following morning he reached Vasishtha Guha and gave a first-hand report and also conveyed Bhoomananda's prayer for Gurudev's darshan. Everyone in the Ashrama became anxious. Swamiji thought for a moment and enquired if he had brought any conveyance. "Yes, Maharaj. Knowing that the bus timings are most inconvenient, Govind Singhji¹ has brought his jeep and is waiting on the road," replied the disciple. Swamiji started immediately and reached Kankhal Sevashrama by 10-30 A.M., accompanied by the same disciple and Sri Govind Singh. He went straight to where Swami Bhoomananda lay. After making some kind enquiries to him,

1 The General Manager of the Motor Owners' Corporation, Rishikesh.

Swamiji asked all those present to chant 'Om' loudly and repeatedly, himself also chanting 'Om' all the while. Was he thereby showering his final benediction on his beloved disciple? Or was he aiding the disciple to remember the sacred Pranava at that critical juncture? He alone knew. Then he blessed his dying disciple by gently stroking his head with his right hand. Ah! the tender affection! It touched the heart of everyone present. The present writer, who was standing on the head-side of Swami Bhoomananda's cot, could not control his feelings: tears rolled down from his eyes and his throat was choked. Even now he could not bring that scene to his memory without a thrill passing over his body. Here the author would like to quote from his diary:

"He (Guru Maharaj) asked me to recite Vishnu-Sahasranama Stotram. A few minutes later he was going to visit the shrine (Sri Ramakrishna temple in the Sevashrama). He called me aside (to the verandah) and said: 'Not more than two days. You remain here and return after the final disposal,' and gave me the new woollen shawl which was on his shoulders, with the words, for 'अन्तिम यात्रा' and with gestures indicating that it was to be used as shroud."

Swami Bhoomananda's final desire was fulfilled. He had darshan of Guru Maharaj and he received his blessings also. The gracious Guru came all the way from Vasishtha Guha to Kankhal, a distance of more than fifty kilometres, to bless his young disciple! That night Swami Bhoomananda had sound sleep — a great relief after three restless nights. By 9 A.M. the next day, i.e., the 6th November 1960, he was found to be in a state of coma, and by 1 P.M. he passed away peacefully. His smiling lips and peaceful countenance indicated that Guru Maharaj's blessings had conferred on him eternal peace and happiness. Whosoever heard about Swamiji's visit to Kankhal was moved, and everyone praised the Guru for his unbounded love towards his disciples. Yes, there is none greater than the Guru - 'गुरोः परतरं नास्ति'.

1 i.e., Last journey.

CHAPTER XVI

THE LAST TOUR

SWAMIJI's eighty-second birthday was close by. It fell on the 28th November 1960, but he was not in a mood to allow a grand celebration. Swami Bhoomananda had passed away on the 6th and on the sixteenth day a few Sannyasins were fed, as is the custom. The Bhagavata reading should have commenced on that day if a Saptaha were to be conducted, so as to culminate on the 28th November. But there was no such programme that year. Reasons were many: Apart from the fact that a young disciple had passed away only a few days ago, Swamiji had been receiving distressing news from devotees in Lucknow. There the river Gomati was in spate from the first week of October and a large number of people were affected by it. Some of his devotees were also stranded or marooned for a few days. All these and other distressing news of the devastating flood moved Swamiji so much that he became averse to a grand celebration. He forbade the devotees from coming to the Cave for the occasion and, instead of spending money on celebrations, he remitted some amount for relief work in Lucknow — 'परतामत् द्रवते

सतां मनः' — (The heart of a saint melts when others are in distress). The birthday, however, was observed in Vasishtha Guha on an austere note.

When he forbade the devotees of various places from visiting the Guha, he had promised a visit to those places at a later date. To fulfill that promise Swamiji started on a tour within a week after his birthday. Leaving the cave on the 3rd December, he arrived at Lucknow the next day. There his usual camping place, Shukla Ghat, was not fit for stay owing to the damage caused by the flood. So he was accommodated in Shah-en-Shah Ghat. A large number of people came for darshan and some of them received initiation also. As on other occasions, there were Satsang, Kirtan and other programme every day. Many devotees took him to their houses. A young disciple, a doctor, had arranged for the Vidyarambha of his daughter. Swamiji visited his place and asked him to bring his second child also. When the doctor said that the child was running fourth year and they had no plan for her Vidyarambha, Swamiji brushed the objection

aside, saying, "Oh, No. You bring her." The child was still sleeping as it was a chilly December morning. She was awakened and brought before Swamiji. Here also he adopted his own method as he did earlier in Kundara and initiated both the children into learning by writing some mystic syllable or Mantram on their tongue with his own finger. Only after two months did the young couple realise the secret and significance of Guru Maharaj's action : He wanted to bless his disciples' children then and there for he knew that he would be leaving the body shortly !

After spending a week in Lucknow, Swamiji proceeded to Delhi. There also he had a busy programme of discourses, visits and so on. At the request of the organizer of Yogoda Satsang (Ladies' Section), he addressed their members one day at Kashmere Gate.

From Delhi Swamiji moved to Allahabad where he stayed a few days and thence returned to the Cave. When his train halted at Lucknow, a large number of devotees met him on the platform. He was all love. Nobody could ever imagine that Swamiji was taking final leave of them all. In all the places that he visited on that tour, Swamiji showered his blessings abundantly on devotees. Everywhere the devotees felt his extra-ordinary love and grace, and they all were happy. But nobody then knew that Gurudev was on his final tour. After an absence of just three weeks Swamiji returned to the Cave on 24th December.

CHAPTER XVII

MAHASAMADHI & AFTER

THE days rolled on and the year was out. The New Year (1961) dawned. The first month passed on without any spectacular event. Visitors came as usual for darshan, advice, etc. In other words, things were going on smoothly in Vasishta Guha. During the month of February, however, a change came. On Tuesday, the seventh, Swamiji developed symptoms of illness. Towards the evening of that day, all of a sudden, he had high temperature coupled with severe vomiting. This made him weak. Some first-aid was given by the Ashramites (disciples) and, by midnight, his condition improved.

The next day, the disciples wanted to bring a physician from Rishikesh, but Swamiji did not allow them to do so. During the day there was no relapse of the fever but his physical condition was weak and he looked exhausted. The weather had changed : it was cloudy and there was drizzling off and on since two days. The sun was not visible at all. This aggravated the chillness of the season and hampered the early recovery of Swamiji's health. In the evening his temperature rose again and he spent another restless night.

The Ashramites became more concerned as they did not find any improvement in Gurudev's health. The weather also continued to be damp and cloudy. Swamiji gave instructions to send a telegram to a particular disciple in Delhi about his being unwell. The words "seriously ill" were not approved by Swamiji. The telegram was redrafted saying, "Maharaj unwell." On receipt of the telegram the disciple started immediately and reached the Cave on the morning of the 10th February. Just before getting the telegram he had received a letter from Swamiji. It was written on the 7th February, a few hours prior to his falling ill. In that letter Swamiji had written, "It is raining and raining — quite unusual. We do not know what all are in store for us. Thy will be done —" Was this a foreboding of his impending Mahasamadhi ? Another point, the following conversation that Swamiji had with this disciple of Delhi on the day of his arrival, namely the 10th, is also of importance. Swamiji enquired whether the latter had a Panchangam with him and when replied, in the affirmative, asked him to bring it. Then the following conversation ensued :

Swamiji : "See when is Ekadasi."

Disciple (after consulting the Panchang) : "Tomorrow is Ekadasi, Maharaj."

Swamiji : "And, Mahasivaratri ?"

Disciple : "It is on Monday, the 13th."

Swamiji (after a little pause) : "You know I am 82. The body does not co-operate."

Perhaps Swamiji was giving a hint that he wanted to give up the body. But all that the disciple could guess was that Swamiji was talking about the illness he was suffering from.

In the meantime, the Ashramites brought a physician from Rishikesh. He examined Swamiji and prescribed some medicines.

An important event took place on Saturday, the eleventh. That day was Ekadasi. Not minding his illness, Swamiji took bath in the early morning. Then he called all the inmates of the Ashrama to his room. He enquired whether everyone had had his ablutions, etc. and asked those who had not, to wash their face, feet, etc. and come. When everyone arrived, he asked them to sit erect in some posture (Padmasana, etc.), without touching each other. Swamiji himself was seated on his couch. Then he asked them to recite certain Slokas and hymns. After some time he gave a few words of advice. It was a sermon on the ever-pure Atman. He also stressed the importance of complete surrender to God and depending on Him for everything. He cited his own life as an example of Divine grace, namely, how the Ashrama was being run without the least effort or anxiety on his part, and so on. Another point of emphasis in his advice was to be sincere in everything, to pray to the Lord with a sincere heart and to live with mutual love. And to some of his disciples living far away, he gave certain instructions through letters which were written by others at Swamiji's instance. He was very particular that his illness should not be mentioned to anyone. So he asked them to read out every letter and when he found that a hint about his illness had been made in a letter or two, he asked them to destroy those letters and re-write strictly according to his instructions. Therefore, although the Ashramites desired to inform some Guru-bhais who were away at the time, and for whom they had even drafted telegrams earlier without the knowledge of Swamiji, they refrained from sending the message. Apart from general advice, Swamiji gave individual instructions also to some of those present. Then he exhorted them not to lose courage when everything was over — meaning, when he would have left the physical frame — but to be strong. He also blessed them — some of them with a pat on the shoulder when they knelt down before him. The servant boy who lived as a member of the Ashrama, was also a recipient of his grace on that day. This is reminiscent of what his own Guru, Swami Brahmanandaji, did during his last days. Says his biographer :

“Then he called all the disciples and devotees who were present to his side. For each he had a blessing and an affectionate word.

“‘Ah, my children’, he told them tenderly: ‘never forget God, and you will realise the highest good. Don’t grieve. I shall be with you always.’”¹

Swamiji also directed by gesture that his body should be consigned to Mother Ganga. All throughout he was not speaking fluently: he would utter a word or two and then express himself by signs. Even in normal days he was a person of few words. On that day he spoke more through gestures than words. All were listening attentively. Pin-drop silence prevailed. A minute or two passed and Swamiji was sitting erect and motionless, his eyes gazing afar. Everyone could guess what it meant: Swamiji was getting ready to leave the body. At that juncture, unable to control his emotion, a disciple cried aloud: “O Maharaj, what will we do without you?” and so on.

A few minutes passed. The interruption seemed to have disturbed Swamiji. Slowly a change came over his face. He reverted to his normal posture and asked everybody to leave the room. Apparently he wanted to leave the body at that very moment. But when someone cried aloud in spite of his advice on spiritual matters, he was perhaps disturbed and he gave up the idea for the time being. Although only one among them cried aloud, tears were flowing from the eyes of most of those present and gloom was writ large on their face. Asking them to leave, he relaxed on the bed. From that time onward he spoke very little and remained indifferent to everyone. Was he giving them a practical lesson on detachment because they had so much attachment for his body despite his instructions? Later during the day when someone went to his room, Swamiji said: “Hey, take out the Panchangam. See when Sivaratri is.” This he said again to another disciple, and also on the next day. Every time he was told that Mahasivaratri was on Monday, the 13th. Was he waiting for that day to leave the body? The events which followed confirmed this apprehension.

Swamiji’s physical condition remained weak. During the day, two doctors, a practising Homoeopath and an Allopath, were brought from Rishikesh. They were of the opinion that Swamiji’s

¹ See “*The Eternal Companion*” by Swami Prabhavananda, P. 108 — III edition, 1961 (Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras).

heart was weak. They gave some medicines and returned. Although they did not express it, they felt that during the night his health may turn critical. During the night Swamiji had no proper sleep and he spent yet another restless night.

The following day, i.e., Sunday, the 12th February, Swamiji's condition did not show any improvement. He was feeling restless. The weather was quite cold. In spite of that, he was feeling very hot — perhaps owing to the drugs. It was decided to bring a heart specialist from Dehradun or somewhere and somebody proceeded to Rishikesh for the purpose. At Rishikesh he came to know that the Civil Surgeon of Narendranagar was a heart specialist and that he had come to Rishikesh on that day. The doctor himself was planning to go to Vasishtha Guha for Swamiji's darshan. He did not know that Swamiji was indisposed. So when he was approached, he readily consented. The two other doctors were also brought along with the specialist. The two doctors had no hope of seeing their patient alive and as such they were surprised beyond measure. They examined Swamiji and the Civil Surgeon also opined that his heart was weak. He said that Swamiji should be given complete rest and that he should not even talk as that would strain the heart. But Swamiji was not the person to care. He energetically talked to them lovingly for quite some time and gave them advice on spiritual matters. He gave them **prasad** and also a copy each of his "Spiritual Talks" before their departure. The specialist felt highly blessed that he could get Swamiji's darshan and hear a few words of advice from him, for which he was longing. They gave some medicines to be administered and, after saluting Swamiji, they all left for Rishikesh.

Swamiji's physical restlessness continued during that night also. He was tossing from side to side and throwing away the quilt and blanket covering him, due to unbearable heat in the body. The disciples covered him again and again. Somehow that night also passed.

On Monday, the 13th February 1961, the fateful day dawned. It was Mahasivaratri day — a day dedicated to Lord Siva. People observe the day by fasting and worshipping. The day is of special importance to Sannyasins also, and they keep vigil the whole night.

Swamiji was up early in the morning and had his bath in warm water. The weather which had become damp and cloudy a week before, turned worse on that day. Occasional drizzling and dampness increased the cold. A chilly wind was blowing. It was now a week since the sun had not been seen. Nature appeared gloomy.

Although Swamiji had asked everybody to keep away, someone remained in the room or outside, just near the door. By turn the Ashramites kept vigil day and night to attend on Swamiji from the day he fell ill.

In the morning Swamiji asked a disciple to sit near the door and read the eighth chapter of **Srimad-Bhagavad-Gita** (entitled 'The Discourse on Immortal Brahman') and the eleventh chapter of **Sri Durga Saptasati** (designated 'Devi Stuti' or the praise of the Goddess).

That day being Mahasivaratri, some people from the nearby villages visited Vasishtha Guha, after bathing in the Ganga. It was a general practice with them to have a dip in the Ganga and have darshan of Swamiji and the Cave on auspicious days like Mahasivaratri, Sri Rama Navami, Janmashtami, etc. That year also some people visited, despite the unusually chill weather. One among them was an aged Brahmin woman from the village, Lorsi. This woman had great faith in Swamiji. She was kind-hearted too. Whenever Swamiji gave Sannyasa to some disciples in Vasishtha Guha, it was her privilege to offer Bhiksha to the new monks on the first day. They would go to Lorsi and collect Bhiksha from her house. It was this very same lady who, way back in 1929, offered him the first Bhiksha when Swamiji went round the village to collect food-grains¹. That was when he came to settle down in Vasishtha Guha. It was again this lady's son, then a young lad, who gave him a handful of salt in the absence of elders in the house². Swamiji never forgot such incidents. He recollected many such acts of help rendered to him even during his boyhood days and felt grateful to those who had helped in unforeseen circumstances. Even a casual reading of his life will reveal his feelings for such benefactors. When the woman came

¹ See the *L.O.S.P.* — P. 147

² *ibid* — P. 152

and saluted him, Swamiji spoke to her tenderly and asked a Brahmacharin-disciple to bring a new jari (gold-lace)-bordered dhoti and give it to her. He also bade the disciple to give her two rupees. The lady would not accept the gifts. Then Swamiji signalled to her to take and she accepted them gratefully as 'prasada'. Perhaps Swamiji was recollecting the old incidents and giving her his final gifts. After some time a Brahmin from the same village came for darshan and to him also Swamiji gave two rupees.

There was not much rest for him during the day. Everyone in the Ashrama was anxious. And slowly the day faded into night. Swamiji drank a little milk. After a while he had a dose of medicine also. At about 10 O'clock when a disciple went to give him a sleeping pill, Swamiji said, laughing, "Oh ! Who needs it ? You take it." The disciple pleaded that doctors had said that rest was very essential for him and as such he should take the pill. All the while Swamiji was lying on left lateral position, facing the wall. A few seconds after the disciple's pleadings, he turned to his right and said, "Hey, hurry up. Be quick. I am going to sleep for ever." Then he took the tablet and swallowed it. Who ever knew the significance of his utterance ? Lately he had been speaking in such a vein. Less than a month before, on the 21st January, his Sannyasini disciple who had come from Rishikesh, was returning. While taking leave, she saluted Swamiji and said that she would come again on Mahasivaratri day. Immediately he retorted, "Who knows where I will be on Mahasivaratri day ? Who knows where I will be on that day ?" He said like this many times, but neither she nor others who were present could imagine that Swamiji was hinting at his own departure from the physical plane. No wonder the Brahmacharin who gave the sleeping pill, also could not guess the seriousness of Swamiji's words. A few months earlier, in a letter to a householder disciple in Lucknow, dated 11th October 1960, Swamiji had written, "What all are going to happen in 1961 ? Forget not the Lord." Was this also a hint about his own Mahasamadhi ? This disciple is a man of absolute faith in Swamiji. Swamiji would have foreseen that the disciple would be put to great agony when he left the body and hence this warning and advice not to forget the Lord. That is how the disciple interprets it. One could guess about these writings and utterances only later.

To come back to our story. After administering the tablet, the Brahmacharin went out. Another disciple was sitting outside the room to attend on Swamiji. He was reciting some slokas, etc. in a low tone. After quite some time a disciple entered the room to observe whether Swamiji was sleeping or not. He found him quiet. He also noticed that Swamiji's eyes were looking blank. He raised a cry and all the others rushed to the room. They found that his heart had stopped beating. Others symptoms also proved that the body was lifeless but it was still warm. Swamiji had attained Mahasamadhi at 10-50 P.M.

That was a significant time for, it happens to be the second quarter (Prahara) of Mahasivaratri (night). Of the four Praharas, the second is considered to be the most important one as the midnight Sandhya (junction) occurs at the end of this quarter. Again, this particular time happens to be the auspicious seventh Muhoorta¹ (also termed "Lingodbhava Muhoorta"), for, it is said that it was during this period that Paramesvara (the formless Supreme Brahman) manifested Himself in the form of Jyotirlinga. So, in common parlance, that was most auspicious time for Swamiji to leave his body. But, of this, later.

II

The Leela (play) is over. The instrument of this Leela lay motionless on the bed. Everyone present realised the gravity of the situation. The Master unto whom they had surrendered themselves and to whom they looked for spiritual guidance would not be available any more. He was not only a Master to them but a Father, Mother and Master — all combined. He loved them as a mother would her children. Naturally, their sorrow knew no bounds and they felt orphaned.

Gradually they composed themselves and discussed together about the action to be taken immediately. Telegrams to many

¹ 48 minutes constitute a Muhoorta. The seventh Muhoorta is between 10-25 and 11-13 P.M., approx.

disciples and devotees in various parts of the country were drafted; a list of articles to be purchased in connection with Mahasamadhi was drawn. And, by 2 A.M., undaunted by the dark night, chill weather and the distance (22 kilometres), two Ashramites trekked to Rishikesh. They reached the town before dawn and the news of the Mahasamadhi of 'Vasishtha Guha-wale Maharaj ji' spread like wild fire. After purchasing the articles needed, they returned by bus. Telegrams flashed to Allahabad, Delhi, Lucknow, Kanpur, Trivandrum and many other places.

Tuesday, the 14th February, 1961 :

By 9 A.M. the sky was clear and the sun appeared brilliantly — a great relief after a week of damp weather. In Rishikesh the shop-keepers closed their business in honour of Swamiji and many of them proceeded to Vasishtha Guha to pay homage to the revered Sage. A large number of Sannyasins also arrived from Rishikesh. People from nearby villages poured in too. Those who have visited the place would appreciate the difficulties in reaching the cave : viz., a distance of 22 kilometres from Rishikesh, inadequate transport facilities during those days, the one-way traffic system prevailing then, the bad weather prevailing for a week and various other handicaps. And, many people had fasted the previous day and kept vigil the whole night. In spite of all these difficulties, by noon, a few hundred had gathered to pay their last homage.

Arrangements for the disposal of the physical frame that encased the sage were complete by 2 P.M. As Swamiji had already instructed on Ekadasi day that the body should be offered to Ganga, the disciples had not to think of the other method, namely, burying the body in a sitting posture — interring in Samadhi — as is the general practice from ancient times in disposing of the body of a Sannyasin after Mahasamadhi. In North India, however, the custom of immersing the body in the Ganga and certain other sacred rivers is also prevalent. Swamiji had great reverence for Mother Ganga and he had expressed a preference for this method. After giving a bath and draping with new ochre robes, the body was brought from the room to the entrance of the cave and seated on the **gadi**. This was his familiar seat, sitting where he used to conduct Satsang, take meals, etc. This enabled one and all to pay last respects to their beloved and revered

Maharaj. No one could believe that Swamiji had attained Mahasamadhi : the face had not faded and the limbs were pliant even though sixteen hours had elapsed after Mahasamadhi. The sacred ashes (Vibhuti) on the broad forehead gave an appearance of freshness. Who would believe that a lifeless body was seated there? Burning incense sticks were emanating sweet aroma. The body was bedecked with flower garlands; flower petals were strewn all round. The whole atmosphere was charged and solemn.

By 3 P.M. the body was transferred to a decorated chair and carried to the Ganga, followed by the crowd. They were singing the Kirtan : **"Hare Rama Hare Rama, Rama Rama Hare Hare !"** All along the route flowers were showered on the body. On reaching the bank the body was removed from the chair and seated on a flat rock. There the final worship befitting a sage was performed. Abhisheka was done with milk, honey, rose-water, attar, Gangajal and so on; flowers were offered, Arati was performed with burning camphor.

A few words about this procedure may not be out of place here. There are no 'last rites' for a Sannyasin as are done for ordinary men. The Sruti declares, 'नाशौचं नाग्नि कार्यं च न पिबेन्नोदकक्रिया...' namely, 'No impurity', no rites with fire, no offering of rice-balls, nor any rite with water², for a Sannyasin. Therefore, in the case of a Sannyasin, there is only worship and no 'last rites'.

After Puja the body was seated on a thick cotton sheet with a heavy marble slab to give weight. The corners of the sheet were brought to the head and wrapped round. Amidst shoutings of "Guru Maharaj ji ki Jai" and so on it was transferred to an improvised raft and rowed to the mid-stream. There the body was lowered and placed on the lap of Mother Ganga. Thus the sage's mortal coil also disappeared from the physical vision of onlookers.

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1. Pollution for ten days etc. observed by near relatives of a deceased person. No such observance is necessary when a Sannyasin leaves the body.
 2. Ceremonies performed for the welfare of the departed soul — Homa, Pinda-dana, Jalanjali, annual Sraaddha etc. These are ruled out for a Sannyasin.

A Sloka composed by a disciple, Swami Raghuveerananda, on the Mahasamadhi of Guru Maharaj, is given below :

नगविश्वसुषिपक्षैः सम्मिते विक्रमाब्दे
शशिदिनशिवरात्रेः सप्तमे सम्मुहूर्त्ते ।
उपगतजनवृन्दं सास्त्वयन् सुपदेशैः
परमषट्मवाप्नोदुन्तमः पूरुषोऽयम् ॥

(Having given his last sermon to the assembled disciples, this Sage, the paragon among men, attained total liberation (Videhamukti) during the auspicious seventh Muhoortha of Mahasivaratri on Monday, in the Vikrama Samvat 2017.)

III

Many devotees in different towns had strange experience on that Mahasivaratri night. Various people narrated their experiences when they gathered in Vasishtha Guha to participate in the special Puja conducted on the sixteenth day of Swamiji's Mahasamadhi. All those details have not been recorded. However, we will cite one incident which will be of interest to devotees.

A disciple in Himachal Pradesh was meditating in his Puja room on Mahasivaratri night. He had unquestionable faith in Swamiji. He was facing a photograph of Swamiji, which was kept in a Mandap. A lamp was burning near the photo. That night he had very deep meditation, the like of which he had not known before. After meditation when he opened his eyes he noticed the curtain of the Mandap suddenly jerking, as if blown by a strong wind. One corner of it came in contact with the flame of the ghee-lamp and caught fire. He extinguished it at once, but became perplexed about the incident because this happened in a closed room, where he did not feel any sudden breeze that could have moved the curtain. He felt something ominous, the significance of which he understood only on the following day when he received the telegraphic message from Vasishtha Guha. A notable feature in this incident is that it had taken place about the same time as Swamiji entered Mahasamadhi !

Apparently Swamiji had originally chosen Ekadasi for Mahanirvana. Some people contend that his choice was Mahasivaratri for, apart from the day being auspicious by itself, there were other features too. It was a Monday, there was 'Pradosha' at dusk and Chaturdasi later. All these are considered sacred for Lord Siva. The combination of these is very rare and it had occurred that year (1961). These are views expressed by common folk. The truth is that the sage has no such consideration for discarding the body. This has been emphatically declared by Sri Sankaracharya in his famous treatise, Vivekachudamani, (sl. 557), thus :

सदात्मनि ब्रह्मणितिश्रुतो मुने :
 पूर्णाद्भयानन्दमयात्मना सदा ।
 न देशकालाद्युचित प्रतीक्षा
 त्वङ्कृमांश्विष्ट पिण्डविसर्जनाय ॥

"The sage who always lives in the Reality — Brahman — as Infinite Bliss, the One without a second, does not depend upon the customary considerations of place, time, etc. for giving up this mass of skin, flesh and filth.

*(He may give up the body any time he pleases, for it has served its purpose.)"*¹

IV

The next few days were full of activity in the Ashrama. The Ashramites, as well as the other disciples who started arriving everyday, seemed lifeless. Yet they had to plan and arrange for the **Shodasi** (the sixteenth day function). A bulletin announcing the passing away of The Great Sage was released to the Press. The news appeared in many newspapers and periodicals. The Trivandrum station of All-India Radio, on receipt of the news, included it in their evening news broadcast and the Malayalam-speaking world became grief-stricken. Almost all the

1. Tr. & Notes by Swami Madhavananda (Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati).

Malayalam dailies of Kerala published the news, and articles with photographs appeared in many periodicals in that language.

Printed cards intimating the passing away of the Master were despatched to disciples and devotees all over the country. The **Shodasi** was on the 28th February. A Havan was performed on that day for world peace. Another important item was the worshipping of sixteen Sannyasins. They were presented with various articles like cloth, a copy of Bhagavad-Gita, a garland of Rudraksha, etc. This was followed by a grand feast in which a large number of Sadhus and more than a thousand householders took part. The Master's disciples and devotees had arrived from various parts of the country; people from Rishikesh and from the hills had also gathered. It was a grand function befitting the Master's greatness. By Swamiji's grace everything went off well and thus the last function connected with the Mahasamadhi also came to a close.

CHAPTER XVIII

VASHISHTA GUHA ASHRAMA TODAY

THE Master has left his physical frame. His disciples and devotees decided that the sacred memory of the Master should be perpetuated in the place where he spent more than three decades. Vashishtha Guha was his abode of penance for many years. Swamiji used to say that the Cave has solved many problems for him. The moment he sat in meditation inside the Cave, he used to say, all troubles vanished like darkness before light. Slowly an Ashrama had sprung up and the disciples desired that the Ashrama should continue to be run as before so that householders could come and spend a few days whenever possible and practice Sadhana. Moreover, they could all gather together on festival occasions like his birthday and live in the

thoughts of their Guru Maharaj, talk about their reminiscences of him and hear about him from other co-disciples — ' तद्विचिन्तयन् तत्कथनं अन्वेषणं तत्प्रबोधनम् ' Proposals and counter-proposals as to the shape of the arrangements were placed and discussed. As is generally found everywhere, misgivings, misunderstandings and differences raised their heads in the minds of some disciples. At long last, a Private Religious Trust was formed and the deed registered in the month of December 1962 to manage the affairs of the Ashrama.

The primary aim of the Trust is to perpetuate the sacred memory of the Master. And to fulfil this a temple is being constructed in the Ashrama where a marble statue of Swamiji will be installed. Devotees will be able to sit and meditate there and feel the presence of the Master. May Sri Guru Maharaj's grace be showered upon all ! May everyone attain peace !

APPENDIX

(A)

BIRTHDAY MESSAGE

MESSAGE delivered by Swami Purushottamanandaji Maharaj on his eighty-first birthday celebrated on 8th December, 1959 :

ॐ

मय्यावेश्य मनो ये मा नित्ययुक्ता उभासते ।

श्रद्धया परयोपेतास्ते मे युक्ततमा मता : ॥

The object of all these — this Kirtan, this Bhajan, Puja — is to take the mind to the Lord. The mind is always going out. It is very difficult to control it. So these are the means to take the mind inside. As lovers think of their beloved while eating, drinking or playing, and as the misers think of their wealth, those who want to advance spiritually, must think of the Lord in the same way. They must think of the Lord and Lord alone. There should be no room for any other thought. Place a signboard : “No entry. The door is closed.”

For all these, what is required is strength. ‘नायमात्मा बलहीनेन लभ्यः’ — This Aiman is not for the weaklings, this is for the strong men. How to accumulate strength? There is a pot which has got five holes and you keep water in it and go to sleep. When you wake up you will find not even a drop of water in it. Whose mistake is it? It is your own. You should have closed these five holes and then if you had filled the pot with water it would have stayed there. Our body is the pot and the five holes are the five senses — (पञ्चेन्द्रिय) Through these we have to collect strength and through these very **Indriyas** the strength also goes away. When we hear Bhajan, stories about the Lord and good music, we get strength through the ears; and when we see the Ganga and holy persons we get strength through the eyes. When we talk about good things, read the Bhagavatam, Ramayanam, etc., we get strength through the tongue. So these are the means if we use them properly; otherwise all the strength

goes away. So collect and collect strength. A weakling has no place here or anywhere. Strength is life. We have got this human body. Many many bodies we have already taken — they say eighty-four lakhs — and then we have got this human birth. This must be utilised well. This is the boat to cross the ocean of Maya. We have got the boat and if we do not utilise it to cross the ocean, then we are committing the greatest suicide — atmaha ya. So utilise every second in the best way possible if you want to become masters. Nobody wants to become a slave; everybody wants to become a master — “I”, “I”, “I”, — and this is the way. But you are taking wrong ways. Now take the right way. Know for certain that happiness is not outside. All the happiness you are getting is from inside but you think you are getting it from outside. It is all **inside** and **inside** alone. The treasure-house of happiness is inside; so go **inside** and **inside** and be happy. And you get Shanti — perfect calmness. You are all happy now. Why? Because the mind is not going here and there and the mind is perfectly quiet. So **this** is the way to get happiness.

Truly speaking, I had no mind to celebrate the birthday. Whose birthday? I was not at all willing to give trouble to you all in this cold weather, but somehow or other it has come off like this. You know the great Swami Vivekanandaji. He has written in a book¹: “O, Mother, make me a Man.” Likewise let us all become real Men and not beasts. **आहार, निद्रा, मभ, भेषुन** (Food, sleep fear and sex) — these are common to beasts also. If you are indulging in these actions only, you are worse than beasts. Why? The beasts have no common-sense and discrimination but we have got them. So utilise this common-sense and discrimination and go above and above and be settled, be fully established in the Atman, the all-pervading Atman. May Lord bless us all!

ॐ शान्ति : शान्ति : शान्ति : ।

1. **Modern India**, vide Complete Works Vol. IV, P. 480 (Tenth edition).

(B)

P O E M S

(i)

[The following poem was unearthed by me in an old note book of Guru Maharaj, lying in a corner of the cave along with some waste material. This was the only 'complete' work in it. The book was partly destroyed by worms and as such some words were not clear. However, I copied it and approached Maharaj for clarification when he returned from South India in September 1960. He was surprised at the discovery for he thought it must have been destroyed long ago. Maharaj asked me to read it and he also recited the whole poem along with me. He remembered it although it was written about thirty years before. He was pleased to supply the words that were not clear and also the last two lines of the last stanza. He said that he was inspired to compose this poem in line with Swami Vivekananda's "The Song of the Sannyasin" when he was in Brahmapuri (1929 or '30).

Maharaj had not given a caption to the poem. Upon my request, one of his guru-bhais, Brahmasri P. Seshadri Iyer, a pious man and a well-known linguist of Kerala, suggested the present title.]

ADMONITIONS OF THE SANNYASIN

Hear Ye great ones and think no more
You are bodies frail of flesh and bones;
Nor mind you are which fleets and decays
But above mind and body both.
Know you are for ever and sure
And say with voice so clear and high
I'm the Self eternal ever pure

Hari Om Tat Sat.

When troubles come and disasters bother
Deny flatly what these are !
Can these have sway over me the pure
Bliss, Intelligence, all-knowing, free.
Reach that height and teach the world
Hungry and poor as they are,
I'm the Self eternal ever pure

Hari Om Tat Sat.

The world may praise and blame at times,
But be ye fixed in the central Truth.
The sun is always bright and luminous
In him no day or night.
No clouds can veil or mar him least
The brilliant sun; and what you are !
Sun of sun and Moon of moon
And know this Truth with grace of Lord
I'm the Self eternal ever pure

Hari Om Tat Sat.

The body may or may not live
It may vanish sooner or late
The whole world is in the jaws of death
And What ! your body silly thing :
Be not cowards, be heroes
Face the death with all thy might
Kick him down and jump over him
Knowing thine own nature true
I'm the Self eternal ever pure

Hari Om Tat Sat.

Many a birth and death you had;
 In many a body you had been.
 Again you are blindly thinking
 I am Mr. So — and — so.
 Off this idea, be ever fixed
 I'm the Self eternal ever pure

Hari Om Tāt Sat.

(ii)

(There is an interesting story behind the poem that follows. During his visit to Kerala in 1952, Swami Purushottamanandaji went to Pullad to see his boyhood friend, Vaidyan Narayana Panikar. The Vaidya, his wife and all members of the family were his disciples and they had great devotion for him. When he visited the place, he saw little girls doing "Tiruvatirakkati" (Ardra dance). This is a folk dance of Kerala, in which the participants form a circle, going round and round singing songs and keeping time by clapping the hands. When the dance was over, Swamiji called the lady of the house and said, "Here is another song. Note it down," and composed it impromptu. He called it 'JNANAKKUMMI'. This song has become very popular in Kerala and is sung everywhere during Bhajan-Kirtan.

This song has been included in Swamiji's 'Atma Katha' When the manuscript of 'The Life of Swami Purushottamananda' was presented for his approval, Swamiji asked me why this song was not there. The difficulty of translating the song was explained and it was suggested that it could be included in some other work at a later date. And he agreed. During Swamiji's final tour in December 1960, I was inspired to translate the work. I placed the translation when he returned, but had not the good fortune of eliciting his opinion on it as I left the Guha on pilgrimage and returned only after his Mahasamadhi. A couple of years later I showed this also to the famous linguist of Kerala, Sri P. Seshadri Iyer, who made valuable suggestions and improved the translation. Now it is being included in this book.)

S. N.

THE SONG OF WISDOM

Ye folks ! to attain the supreme goal of life
 By dwelling on the Blessed beneficent blue-hued Lord,
 And His divine Leelas that free you from sorrows,
 Why do you hesitate ?

Wasting not the precious moments,
Mediate on the full form
of Radha's Lord, Charmer of Lakshmi, born of the ocean of
milk.
And say adieu to vanity, delusion and the rest of the ills.

Service unto the great ones, rendered with Sraddha,
A sovereign remedy to cure all ills.
Bringing in its train purity of mind,
Delivers unto thee untainted Bhakti and Mukti.

The delusion 'I am the body'
Which turns everything topsy-turvy;
Knowing not the Truth of the Self, alas!
Fools are caught in unceasing birth and death.

To throw off the burden of Samsara,
It's easy if you but possess
Child-like nature and non-attachment,
Know it soon, my dear ones.

Be no more a 'frog in the well',
Reach the height of the Infinite.
Peace of mind for ever and aye
Can be attained with utmost ease.

Become a Krishna yourself
By thinking on His form and Leelas.
Desires vanish with all their train
And you'll behold the Lord in all.

"Thou, Narayan, Hari, the One dispeller of sorrows,
O, Madhusudana, giver of Moksha"
Reverently recite His name ever with devotion
Eternal bliss will come to you.

Sincere devotion, the only path
To reach the lotus feet of Lord.
Resting all hopes in Him, the Lord of lords,
Attain your natural blessed state.

To secure Yogakshema¹ to those
Who worship Him with guileless heart,
Kamsa's foe, the charioteer of Partha,
Is ever nearest of all.

this

Knowing the human birth to be
The result of virtues of many lives,
Regain the Knowledge Immortal
By seeking the Sadguru's lotus-feet.

Yearning to realise Atmaswaroop,
Intensified day by day
"Brahman is Real, false all else"
Will reveal in the heart most brilliantly.

You'll gain a state of unwavering
Even in the midst of 'quakes violent;
Meditate with real understanding
"Tat-Tvam-Asi"² and other great Vedic Texts.

Alas ! Alas ! many a day,
I wandered in delusion of mind.
The grace of the Sadguru shed
Pure Bliss³ and Peace on Purusha.

Translated by Swami Nirvedananda

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1. Gain and safety.
 2. Thou art That.
 3. The word in the original is 'NIRMAL-ANANDA'. The last two lines of the original are so ingeniously composed as to serve also as a tribute to Swami Nirmalanandaji, who moulded the composer's spiritual career.