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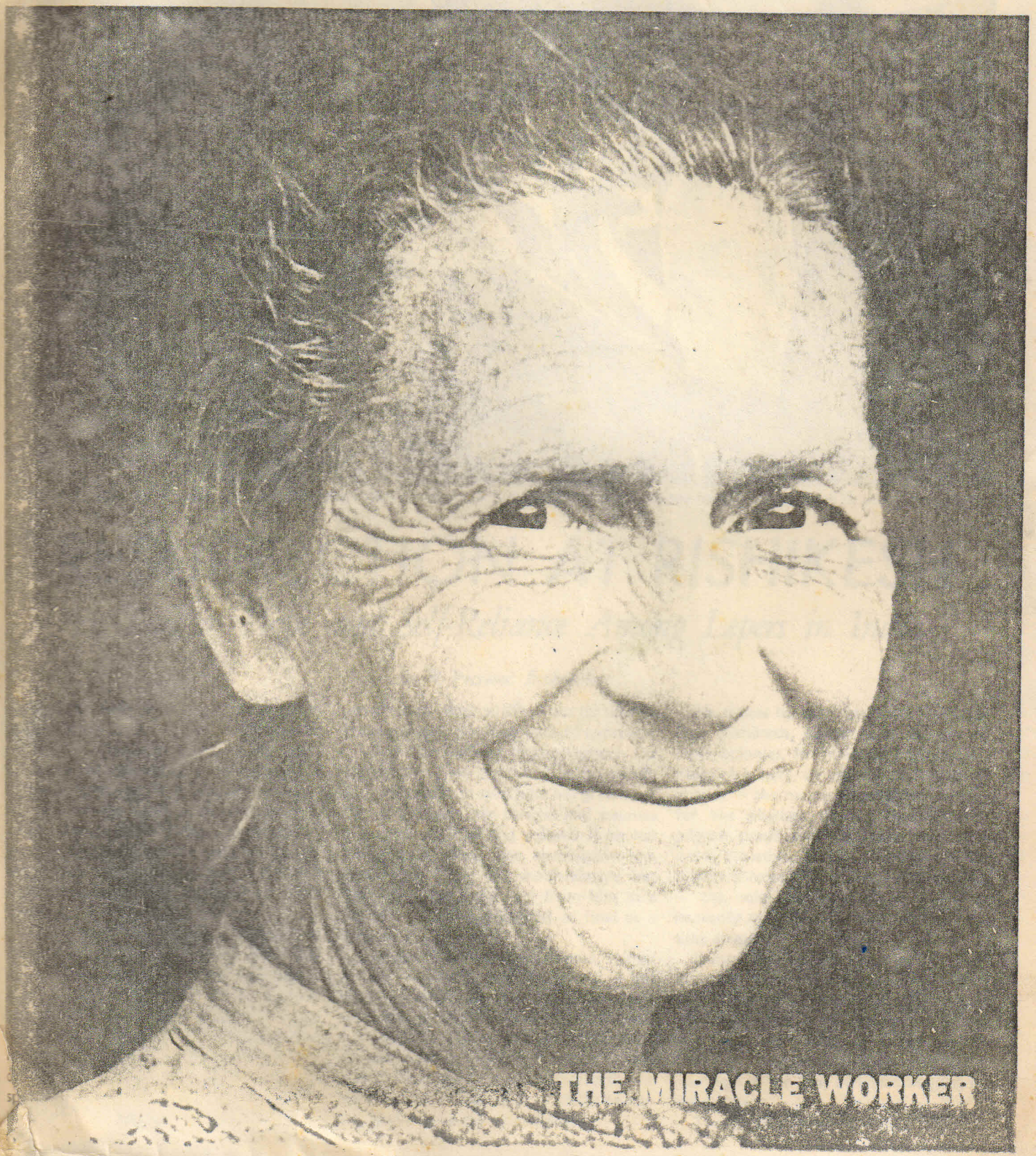


THE MIRACLE WORKER

With solicitous tenderness, former European fashion designer Simonetta swabs ulcerated hand of leper from Brahampuri colony

RESURRECTION AT RISHIKESH

A Tale of Hope and Self-Reliance Among Lepers in India

By R. Prawer Jhabvala

RISHIKESH is a very holy town in North India. It lies at the foot of the Himalayas and is the gateway to some of the most sacred places of Hindu pilgrimage. It is also the gateway to one of the most backward areas in India. About 5000 villages lie scattered among these mountains and so deeply embedded within them that not much light of progress has managed to break through.

Every year some ten or twelve people leave these villages and wind their way down into Rishikesh. They are lepers who, on account of their affliction, have been turned out of their homes.

It is generally believed in India that leprosy is the punishment of a crime — committed in a previous birth — so unspeakably vile that not only the leper himself but any person who dares approach him must suffer from its terrible consequences. So none dare to approach.

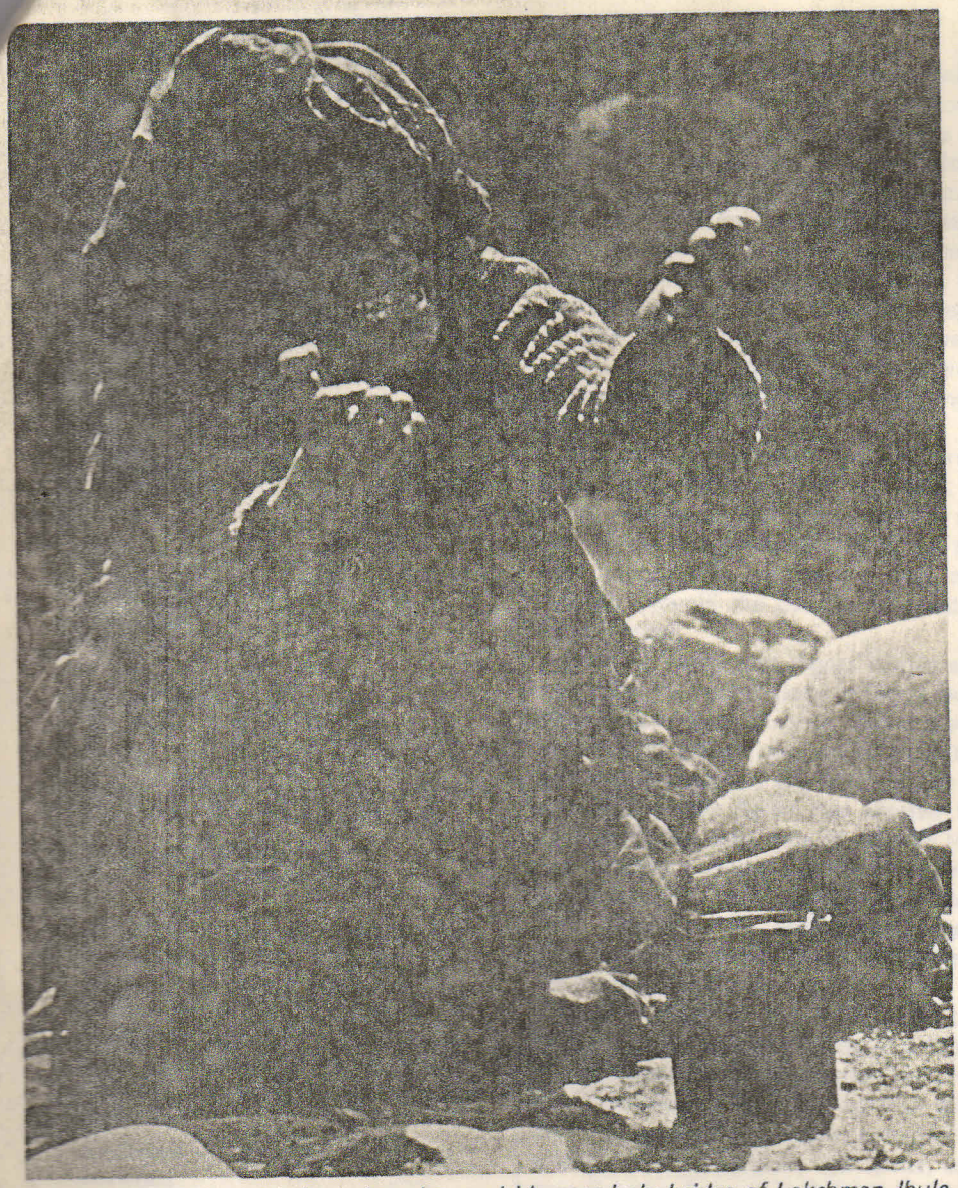
When the signs of leprosy appear, the patient must say good-bye to his family and the village in which he has grown up. His wife breaks her bangles and assumes the white garb of the widow. If he has loving sons, they may accompany him some way down the mountainside but then they too must part from him in a farewell that is considered as final as a funeral.

Leprosy is not a killing disease. It rots a man — slowly, even painlessly — but usually allows him a full life-span. But what sort of life? The old one is finished — there is no family left, no community, no means of livelihood, however skilled a craftsman he may be. Henceforth the only human beings among whom he can find acceptance are other lepers.

He makes his way down the mountain into Rishikesh, where there are several leper colonies. In Rishikesh he still has a place, for here he can be an object of charity — the means of acquiring merit — for the pilgrims passing through. The pilgrim prays and the leper begs: each needs the other. The leper whines and the pilgrim throws him — from a safe distance — the coin that will ensure the giver heavenly rewards, or a fine life the next time round.

Swami Chidananda came to Rishikesh in 1943. Today he is one of India's spiritual leaders, the head of the Divine Life Society, but then he was just a young neophyte with nothing much to do. Every day he went for a walk and ran the gauntlet of the line of lepers begging by the roadside.

They didn't expect anything from him



Hands upraised (above), leper begs by roadside near holy bridge of Lakshman Jhula
Below: eyes of young woman with leprosy and paralysis are dulled by hopelessness

— an anchorite in saffron robe and sandals — but became his friends instead. He was the first person who saw them not as objects of charity but as human beings who were hungry, outcast, sick and suffering. And this suffering inspired him with a compassion that has never died. Although he is now deeply immersed in his work of spiritual uplift, his concern for lepers has remained — as one of his devotees put it — his *one weakness*: that is, the one pull there still is to tug him back into this world.

Thanks to his efforts, a leprosy relief association was for the first time formed in the district. Funds were made available to provide free rations for the lepers — but on condition that they should not show themselves in Rishikesh. They were sent to live six miles up in the mountains at a place called Brahampuri, which was specially cleared for them.

There were now two alternatives open to the lepers of Rishikesh: charity at Brahampuri, or begging at Lakshman Jhula. It was at this point, in 1962, that Agnes Kunze came to India.

SHE was a social worker from Munich who had spent many years working among the most hopeless cases she could find in post-war Germany. When these were no longer hopeless, she looked round for others who still were. She approached an Indian bishop who was attending a conference in Munich and asked him to let her come to India to work for leprosy relief. He said she could, if she paid her own fare. So she did.

The bishop had just acquired a piece of land in Dehra Dun, about 30 miles from Rishikesh. It lay beyond the Christian cemetery — land for leper colonies is traditionally at the outskirts of town, beyond the cemetery or burning-ground — and Miss Agnes persuaded him to let her live there. She also persuaded 30 lepers who had their begging pitch outside the bishop's house to come and join her on that piece of derelict land.

She and those 30 lived there together under some trees. Her problem was how to employ them. After some trial and error, she began to train them in spinning and weaving. Now, 11 years later, that colony of 30 lepers and Miss Agnes Kunze has grown into a flourishing little handloom industry, called the KKM Hand-weaving Society, who produce carpets, towels and table-linen for the Indian and foreign markets. Fifty of the 120 leper inmates are self-supporting, and there is a net income of about US$4,700. So here was a third alternative to the unhappy begging of Lakshman Jhula and the charity of Brahampuri: the proud self-

reliance of Dehra Dun.

Simonetta was a leading Italian designer with her own fashion-house in Rome. In the 1950s, when Italian fashions led the world, she became an international figure — rich, successful, sought-after. In the 1960s she opened another house in Paris. But at this point her life began to change. It lost its satisfaction and she looked round for other things. She began to take Yoga lessons and became a vegetarian. Then she went to a lecture given by Swami Chidananda in Paris. It changed her life.

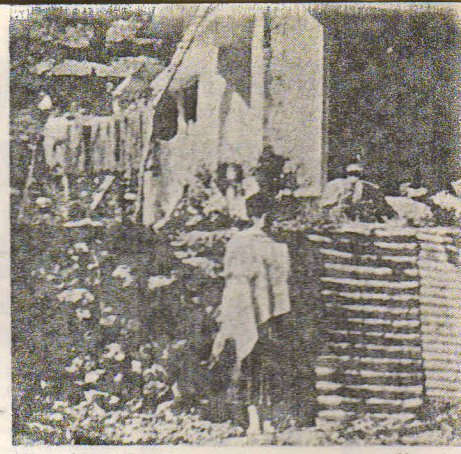
She sold her business and her properties and followed him to India. A woman of energy and action, she felt she had to do something to relieve the terrible misery she saw around her, and through Swamiji she became involved in leprosy relief.

Both of them met Agnes Kunze and saw the work she had done in Dehra Dun. Simonetta realised at once that this was the path to follow: she would offer the lepers of Brahampuri the same chance of self-reliance that Agnes had created for them in Dehra Dun. One of Agnes's former helpers, a young Frenchman named Pierre Reyniers, was recalled from Paris and installed in Brahampuri. Here Simonetta now spends much of her time, her energy, and her money.

Swamiji lives in the *ashram* of the Divine Life Society at the top of a flight of stairs opposite the Meditation Hall. His reception-room is long and narrow, with diamond-patterned linoleum, commercial calendars picturing gods and saints, and strip lighting. Swamiji is chatting in Hindi with some other saffron-robed ascetics; they are discussing a wedding they have attended and all the people who were there. A plump European girl in a sari is perched on the end of a bench near Swamiji. She sits completely still with her eyes fixed on him as if in a trance.

He is small, thin, shaven-headed. Sitting on his chair at the end of the room with his legs drawn up, he seems the centre of energy where all activity is concentrated. He is able to deal with several people and problems simultaneously, at once grasping any question that is put to him and, after a moment's thought, giving a very precise and practical reply. He smiles a lot and speaks a somewhat old-fashioned English very fluently.

When he speaks of the lepers he found here in Rishikesh in '43, I am reminded of that phrase: *his one weakness.* His voice trembles a little with — could it be indignation? "The only medical attention available for these poor people was a little tincture of iodine given to them by a fellow dispensing *ayurvedic* medicine and



Weaving displayed along stone wall; des

making money out of distilling potent liquor. It was all. Then when I came, Master put me in charge of the dispensary here in the *ashram.*"

Master — Swami Sivananda, his predecessor as head of the Divine Life Society — was too devoted to spiritual life to interest himself in charitable work, but he allowed Swamiji to treat the lepers at his dispensary and distribute free medicine to them: "It was my habit to attend to them before all the other patients. This was the policy on my part because if the other patients had seen them they would have driven them away. So it is amongst us — people are most terribly afraid of leprosy, they fear it with all their being. . ."

When he managed to interest the state government in leprosy relief, a trained leprosy-worker was sent to help: "You will not believe the joy and gratitude of these people. Such a thing had never before happened to them — that someone should come for them alone — that someone should be there to care for *them.* 'An angel,' they cried. 'It is an angel come for us!' "

UNFORTUNATELY, however, when the lepers were moved to the new colony of Brahampuri in 1959, there was room for only 90 of them. The remaining 30 were left behind at their old camp. "What could they do, poor fellows? They had to go back to begging. Don't think they liked to beg; don't believe that. They are tired of it. Who likes to beg, to sit in all weathers and hold out his hand?"

Now he himself has undertaken to feed these lepers who were left behind, and once a month he goes down to their camp to distribute their rations. He has taken over that charge, but Brahampuri he has left entirely to Simonetta. Sometimes he goes there on a visit, not to bring them alms but just to give them something, he says, "to buck them up. Something here — for their hearts". He reaches out for a Divine Life Society pamphlet

ve grown bolder under influence of Simonetta

which begins: "Beloved Friend, Radiant and Immortal Soul!" He opens a golden box and takes out a sweet – "to sweeten your mouth," he says. He also gives one to the European girl motionless on her bench. She flings herself at his feet in gratitude.

Simonetta, describing the first time she heard Swamiji speak in Paris, says: "It was like a blow – here," and she gives herself a hard blow on the chest. "Such vibrations! I had never known anything like it before – never. From that moment I was his."

She followed, even pursued him everywhere. He was giving talks in California while she was on a promotion trip to New York. She cancelled all her press interviews and television programmes and flew out to join him in San Francisco. It was a new life for her. "I was used to big hotels, but where Swamiji was – the motels where he stayed – well, they were quite nice and clean but they were the sort of places where you have to pay in advance." She laughs and makes a paying gesture by rubbing two fingers together (she is full of gestures).

We are in her room in the *ashram* in Rishikesh. The room is like all the other *ashram* rooms – a cement floor and walls that need plastering – but on the pallet on the floor on which she sleeps she has spread fashionably-patterned sheets, and her clothes hang festooned around the walls: a fur-lined cloak, a cream-coloured parasol, a padded morning robe. There are photographs of her son and daughter in Rome, and of various gurus; also a variety of French skin-creams. A tape is playing Bach. "Before I came to India, only Beethoven and Tchaikovsky; now I cannot *hear* Beethoven and Tchaikovsky."

She changes out of her quite stylish meditation robe into a long Rajasthani skirt that swings around her ankles as she walks. She is quick and light on her feet and difficult to keep up with. We go to a local hospital to get medicines for her Brahampuri lepers. She spies the doctor she wants from far off: "Dr Singh! Dr Singh! I'm here again! Don't try to run away!"

She juggles around with prescriptions and collects the powders, some white, some red: "This is for Charan Dass and this for Phul Devi – no, *this* for Phul Devi and this for Charan Dass. . ." Everything gets rather mixed up; the prescriptions are in Hindi, which she cannot read. Dr Singh sympathises with her difficulties and says one day he will come up to Brahampuri and spend at least two hours in her dispensary there. She pounces: "Will next Sunday suit you? At eight? Very good! I shall fetch you next Sunday morning at eight! Thank you, Dr Singh, how terribly kind. . ."

Back in the car on our next errand, to deliver yarn for spinning, she explains that she has always had this tremendous physical energy which she had to work off in outward activity. But it is nothing, she says, compared with the tremendous *spiritual* energy which, thanks to the influence of Swamiji, has been let loose within her.

Yes, she wants to work for the lepers – with all her strength, with everything she is and everything she has – but above all she wants to develop herself: to reach those heights of awareness towards which he has opened the first doors. But there are other gurus elsewhere who can lead her on further and she will search for them all over India, wherever she hears of them.

Next month she is going to Darjeeling to meet two more gurus and take part in their meditation courses. "Note!" she cries. "Not one guru but two, two! Everything in my life is big! Double! Always double!" She thrusts two passionate fingers in my face. "Money – success – love – suffering: always double!"

Swamiji has sent two of his devotees to take me to the leper beggars at their colony of Lakshman Jhula. The site must be one of the most desirable in the world: perched on the mountainside with a clear view over the foaming green river, the gay pink temples on the banks, the wooded mountains reaching up into the sky. The mud-huts are clustered tightly together with narrow lanes in between.

When it is learned that we have come from Swamiji, we are received with the utmost courtesy. "Swamiji is our god," they say. I am invited to enter one of the huts. It is very low so that one has to crawl in. The walls are blackened from the cooking fire. There is only one string-cot, and a battered cooking-pot, and a rag of cloth on the floor.

It is a cool morning so they are wearing most of their rags – an astonishing collec-

Blinded by his disease, leper's bell above right hand, victim at Brahampuri stares sightlessly at world that has rejected him

tion of tattered strips of rotted cloth hang about them. All the lepers here are badly marked by their disease. No one has any hands, only stumps with open sores and ulcers. They hold them continuously in front of them — not to beg now, but to do us courtesy in the Indian style of greeting.

I start doling out the coins with which Swamiji has provided me. They receive them with polite gratitude, saying that it would buy them one glass of tea each. There are not many people here, for most have gone out to work: that is, to beg down by the holy bridge of Lakshman Jhula. I am escorted to meet them there. We wend our way down the mountainside past an adjoining colony of beggars with whom, I am told, the lepers are at perpetual strife (the beggars consider themselves superior in status).

THE lepers are squatting in orderly file at one side of the holy bridge. At first they set up their professional whine, but cease it at once when they are told we have come from Swamiji. I am led down the line to distribute Swamiji's coins. Occasionally I come to a person who has already received his coin in the colony and who at once tells me to pass him over.

The headman watches sternly: there is strict discipline in the colony, and any breach might lead to expulsion, which is greatly dreaded (because then where can you go?). Some don't have any stumps left, so their money has to be thrown into a tin. There are several one-eyed and several blind people — it is very obvious here that leprosy is injurious to the eyes. Some have no noses — in fact, faces and bodies seem in a state of complete disintegration, as tattered as their shreds of ragged clothing.

One woman is white with leprosy and blind. She has her head up and seems to be smiling, though perhaps it is an effect of her lips having fallen away. Although leprosy is an anaesthetic disease, some patients have recurrent pains in the joints; they last for a few days and then pass off till the next time. There is one such case here — is it a man or a woman? impossible to tell — and they have carried him down to the bridge to lie there writhing and moaning with stumps of legs drawn up and clutching at them as if trying to relieve some unendurable agony.

It seemed to me that this was the lowest point to which human suffering could be brought. I did not think that from here there could be, ever again, any way up.

But on the site near the Christian cemetery in Dehra Dun, where Miss Agnes Kunze settled 11 years ago with her ex-beggars, there is now a flourishing, self-sufficient little workers' settlement of 120 people. Some are trained weavers, some are tailors, and there are masons and carpenters who have built this orderly colony of workshops, storage-rooms and whitewashed cottages.

All of them are lepers and all of them

Arms and legs rotting with sores, turbaned leper hides face from sun — and despair

are marked by the disease. They wear very good clothes woven by themselves. They appear busy and normal – even the badly-mutilated ones, for whom jobs have been found commensurable with their disabilities.

Not all of them are cured of leprosy, and many of them suffer from one or more of the concomitant diseases: T.B. – the most frequent and dangerous – gastric ulcers, infected sores, and eye disease. At 11 o'clock a bell rings and patients go to the dispensary for treatment by the trained medical assistant who is himself a cured leper. They do not usually avail themselves of the services of local hospitals, although there are several doctors who are summoned by Miss Agnes in case of special need.

Within the limits of their affliction, these people lead as normal a life as possible. But they have not severed their connections with other leper colonies. They have to find husbands and wives and can usually do so only within their own leper caste. One of Miss Agnes's weavers wanted to marry a cured leper girl and, after some grape-vine inquiry, such a one was found for him among the leper beggars of Lakshman Jhula. Now the couple live in one of the whitewashed cottages at Dehra Dun and have a little girl who is doing very well at school. The wife's mother is still at Lakshman Jhula and sometimes they go to visit her where she sits begging by the bridge.

Miss Agnes no longer lives under a tree but in a crowded little bed-sitter which also serves as her office. There are books (the Upanishads in a German translation, and Teilhard de Chardin), a gramophone, hand-loomed covers and a thick pall of cigarette smoke. Miss Agnes continuously smokes very cheap Indian cigarettes, and her broad, rough hands are stained with nicotine. I don't think she eats much: she looks frail, even emaciated. She has the paper-white, very lined and crinkled skin typical of Europeans who have lived long in India, strong features, and luminous eyes. When something amuses her, she squirms shyly like a little girl.

She repeats often: "We don't say that hand-weaving is the *only* way. But it turned out the best way for us." When she found herself sitting there with her 30 lepers, wondering what to do, she received plenty of suggestions. One was to grow food, but that turned out to be impractical because in agricultural work the lepers kept opening up their footsores. Also there was no water. Lack of electricity ruled out any attempt at industrial manufacture. The spinning and weaving of attractive articles of everyday wear or use remained the most practical solution.

Miss Agnes tends to wave aside the fact that she is now the "marketing manager" of a hand-loom society with international connections. It may be miraculous, but it is not the achievement she had aimed at: *her* miracle was to get these people from the point to which they had sunk to the point at which they are now. Besides that, everything else is, to her, almost irrelevant.

She keeps emphasising the *inward* change that was so necessary for them. It was only by learning to consider themselves as fully human again that they could begin to teach the people around them to do so too.

She tells the story of one of her patients who had contracted T.B. He boarded a bus to the T.B. hospital but, when he was discovered to be a leper, he was thrown off. A week later he was found delirious by the roadside and brought back to the colony (Miss Agnes says that in his delirium he kept insisting that he had *paid* his fare on the bus).

Such an incident, although not yet impossible, would be less likely to happen now. The inmates of her colony – or rather, the workers of the KKM Hand-weaving Society – are known in Dehra Dun as people who have jobs and earn money and are respected accordingly. They are usually allowed in the main post office – there *have* been incidents in the sub-office – and shopkeepers are not averse to having them spend some of their earnings in the local shops.

Anyway, barriers are coming down, fears are decreasing: the lepers are less afraid to go into the town, and the townspeople are less afraid to have them there. "Or at least," Miss Agnes says, "even when they are afraid – when they shrink away – there are some who try to overcome this fear: to move, even in spite of themselves, just a little step nearer. That is already something." She appears to value this something more than all the orders coming in for hand-loom carpets.

"PLEASE *don't* compare us with Agnes," Simonetta begs. "She has been going for 11 years, we not even one."

She has brought me up to Brahampuri, the leper-colony which Swamiji has left to her for development. It is six miles up into the mountains, perched among trees and sky with the river shining below. Simonetta swings along in a Tibetan tunic, hailing the lepers cheerfully: *"Hari Om!"* she sings out (with the same inflection as *"Bonjour, Monsieur, Madame!"*) and they join their stumps at her in greeting.

She introduces me to Pierre, the young

A chain-smoker, Sister Agnes Kunze kneels

Frenchman who was Agnes's assistant and who is now in charge of making Brahampuri into another Dehra Dun. He too says, "Don't compare us with Agnes." I suggest that perhaps it is here now as it was with Miss Agnes 11 years ago. Pierre too lives, as she did, among the lepers on the same principle of "working from within". He has taken over an abandoned little outhouse for himself. It contains a string-cot, a tiny petroleum-stove, a lot of workshop paraphernalia, cartons of cigarettes and huge tins of Nescafe. There is no bathroom or lavatory; like everyone else, he goes into the woods.

Pierre explains that his problems here are quite different from those Agnes had. She was able to start from scratch, but he came into an established community. The lepers of Brahampuri have been here since 1959 and were used to a life of idleness and boredom. Their rations were delivered to them every month and they made some extra money by keeping goats and growing tobacco. Some of them managed to keep more goats than others and they became the money-lenders and so the most powerful men of the community.

Caste laws here are strictly observed. The lower-caste lepers live segregated on the dark side of the mountain, and at times of community feasts they have to eat separately from the upper-caste lepers – and only after these have finished. There is a council of five to make sure that all the regulations are observed and to impose fines for any breach. No one welcomed Pierre into this set-up.

"They were used to pious people coming with sweets for them and then going away again quickly," he says. "I didn't bring any sweets and I didn't go away." He laughs sardonically. He is a very sardonic young man; he smokes incessantly, shrugs a lot, and looks rather scornful.

counting problem in settlement at Dehra Dun

His problem is to get people used to the idea of work. At first no one was interested, but slowly he managed to get first one, then two, then more on his side. He sat in his outhouse and spun and they sat with him and learned from him. He paid them for what they did, and so more were attracted and more came. "But only for money," he says. "Always for money."

Still, they got going. One man was sent for training to Dehra Dun and came back to Brahampuri with yarn and spinning-wheels. Two weeks later Brahampuri was able to supply Dehra Dun with its first spun yarn, two weeks after that with its first dyed yarn. Then Dehra Dun sent up three weaving-looms and, in December last year, four months after his arrival, Pierre delivered the first two woven rugs made in Brahampuri.

Simonetta shows me round the workshop that is still in process of construction. She has also built a dispensary and is now having Pierre's old outhouse extended to include an office, a store-room, and what she calls her *salon*. She opens a big tin trunk and draws out her first Brahampuri designs, executed by the Brahampuri workers.

It is an astonishing collection: she has transformed the usual rather drab mats into smart drawing-room rugs glowing in pink and black, cream and orange. She becomes very excited as she exhibits her creations, holding them up in the best light, fitting two woven strips of turquoise to the side of a beige rug to demonstrate how it can be extended. She models a sort of African kimono, to show how *chic*. She tells me that a boutique in Rome has ordered the kimonos, and she has cornered the entire Indian market in meditation carpets. "Fantastic!" she cries.

I want to buy one of her rugs and she sells it to me very quickly, at the same time pressing on me some colour-samples to show to friends in Delhi and collect orders. Pierre grumbles that he can't spare that rug, that his weaver is sick, that he has to send down to Dehra Dun. He and Simonetta argue. She turns to me: "He is exactly like my *directrice* in Paris. Everything I sold: 'But Madame — Madame —' as if I were snatching her baby out of her arms. But I want to sell! Only sell!" Pierre gives a bitten-off smile.

Pierre shows me round the Brahampuri living-quarters. They are a row of hutments which were built in 1959. They are in a terrible state. I peer into one and find it a blackened den with a string-cot and a rusty tin and nothing else. Pierre says that he has asked people to whitewash and repair their own quarters but they refuse to do so unless he pays them for it. "Always the same," he says. "Only money."

Almost every payday they go on strike and demand more. They sit in their dark quarters and brood and whisper and plot. He trained a boy to use the pedal carding-machine for cleaning wool — a skilled job — and paid him according to his output, but the others got hold of him and incited him to ask for more, and when Pierre refused the boy ran away.

Some of the leaders, who are also money-lenders, see their hold on people slipping now that more and more of them are earning, and consequently they do all they can to make trouble for Pierre. He is very unpopular with them; and he is of course also an outcast.

"In all the time I have been here," he says, "only one person has even given me a cup of tea. He was a dying man and I did something to help him so he offered me tea. Then he died and there are those who say this happened because he gave me tea and broke his caste-law." Pierre laughs and throws away his cigarette. I have to strain to understand what he is saying: it is not only his French accent but he tends to swallow his words as if he were angry with them.

"Pierre, don't you get lonely?"

"Sometimes there is that problem." He turns aside his face and looks bitter and hurt.

But Pierre does have a friend. This is his foreman Kartar Singh, who, after six years in a leprosy hospital, came to Brahampuri just a short while before Pierre did.

He was the first man to take an interest in the work and has ever since been Pierre's closest and most loyal collaborator. He is a small man in a cotton cap and with a vermilion mark painted on his forehead. His face is badly marked by leprosy: "That's why I can't send him into Rishikesh," Pierre says. "If he tries to go into a shop, they throw him out." Once Pierre took him to a tea-stall, but both of them got thrown out. The people of Rishikesh have not yet advanced by that something Agnes spoke of in Dehra Dun.

Kartar Singh also has trouble with the other inmates of the colony who resent his position of pre-eminence and his friendship with Pierre. He used to live alone in one of those dark quarters but now he has a companion — a boy who was recently brought to the colony. I meet this boy — he is washing wool under a tap by beating it about with a stick. He swings his stick joyfully and grins and gesticulates and leaps into the air. Pierre says: "People call him an idiot. But he does a job of work."

DOING a job of work is what Pierre evidently values most. We pass the people sitting around outside their derelict quarters. They have been sitting there since 1959. Many of them are in rags as tattered and rotted as those worn by the beggars of Lakshman Jhula. There is one old man who hasn't any feet left; he is hobbling around on two staffs with bells attached to them (his old beggar's prop — the leper's bell). Perhaps after all these years some of them are no longer fit to do a job of work? Pierre shrugs: perhaps. But he is here to rescue those who are.

Whenever I ask him any more general questions about the leprosy problem, he turns away from me: "I don't know. I know only this." He is completely one-pointed, one-directed. Then it strikes me that all of them are. Their directions may be different — God-realisation for Swamiji, self-realisation for Simonetta, moral rehabilitation for Agnes, work for Pierre — but the determination is the same. They are all of them very strong people. This would seem to be necessary. I remember the lepers at the bridge and realise that only a very strong person would dare to hope for them.

It is a question not only of raising human outcasts from out of their degradation, but also from out of their own acceptance of it: to make them — in spite of themselves and their society and traditions — consent to be resurrected.

"Everyone here is always talking of the will of God," Agnes says. "They say it is the will of God that this suffering should come. So I answer: 'But what if it should be the will of God that you should not accept it but say no — I won't, I will get up again? What if *that* should be His Will?'" ■