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# Portrait of a Memsahib

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### **Abstract**

Our supreme lady, Memsahib Freda, was what you could call a goodnatured, kind-hearted soul, that is, if you chose to believe the stories that all who remember her would tell you. They would tell you many things. They would tell you, for instance, that when Memsahib smiled, as she so often did, you could hardly see the eyes for the wrinkles. So purely, like a baby, would she smile that you would nervously glance behind you to make sure that it was really at you that the smile was directed. Her face, they would tell you, would just crumble into a million lines that rushed in to seize her little face from all directions, making it look like the hide of some little animal, that somebody had folded and put aside to be thrown away sometime.

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Nobody seems to have ever seen her young. But most of the time Memsahib seemed quite cheerful, as cheerful as a small girl whose greatest desire in life is to be friends with the whole world, even despite her old age and her apparent loneliness. What had happened to her husband, only she herself seemed to know. But it was something she was not telling anybody and over which she did not show much distress; her contentment in the face of a lack of a husband seemed especially intended as a lesson to women, that denying one a husband was the least of the punishments a god could deal a woman.

Memsahib Freda lived atop a little hill in a big big shining house surrounded by a fence tall as the sky, cool shades and the greenest lawn you ever saw, all by herself, with her dog, if you had the kind of humour, that is, to regard as a companion a senile, toothless dog the size of a calf.

As for her coffee farm, it spread for miles and miles, but it was said this was merely the little finger of a vast fortune she controlled. Since she was white, however, nobody bothered to speculate, as would have been the case otherwise, on the source of her astonishing rumoured wealth, or even how she came to deserve so much from her god.

You would be told that our distinguished white lady usually drove around in a big dragon of a car, the kind that you could not find

anywhere these days. She would be swallowed up in the car, so completely that the only indication you were given that the car was not being driven around by some invisible spirit, was the milk-white tip of Memsahib's hair as her head bobbed up and down with the car on the bumps. The children, seeing her coming, would dance up and down, driven by some wild devil in their blood, and they would scream at the top of their voices: Mamsa Pirida! Mamsa Pirida! (that being what we called the dear old lady, her real name being somewhat difficult for the tongue and the lips to grab hold of if you had not been to school).

This was the only time anybody dared call our supreme, white lady by the name, loudly, forgetting oneself. Otherwise nobody, including the children, was bold enough to put forth any sign of familiarity with the old lady. It was only when she was in such metallic motion with all of her whiteness, except the tip of her gray head, swallowed up in the big car, that the children came forward to pretend they were chums with her.

On hearing the children's cries, Memsahib would instantly stop, whatever the mission that had that day drawn her out of the big house. The dust would roll over the squirming children, Memsahib would roll down her window with a smile and the children would scramble madly for the sweets and other eatables that their kind white grandmother would shower on them.

She had long come to regard the whole thing as some kind of ritual in which she played a priestly role. It was not only an honour. The way she saw it, it was more of an obligation. The children had to be kept happy, and the parents likewise. Only then could one keep peace with the populace in general. She must have kept in her car sacks upon sacks of sweets and the other good things, for in one trip alone, from her domicile to wherever it was she happened to be going, she could be stopped by the cries no less than a dozen times.

She had no children herself, as far as we could tell, and it could safely be assumed that it did fulfil her little white soul in no small measure, the spectacle of so many pairs of young eyes turned to her in breathless expectation, yes, even despite the prudent scepticism that she noticed in the parents of these same children as they silently eyed the passage of the big car with its lone precious passenger. This distant attitude on the part of people whose children she was showing a motherliness she was sure they lacked at home, she clearly could not comprehend. Wretched ingratitude, she put it down to. It was odd really, she would let it be known, how she was being repaid, considering her many benevolent years with us.

Sometimes the children, being children, would follow the great white

lady home, arriving there long after the dust from the big car had settled away all along the road leading to Memsahib's house. They were no doubt itching to find out whether there at the big shining house, there could be found more of the sweetness encountered at the roadside.

In the foolishness of their desires they would for the moment totally forget their fear of the harsh glitter of Memsahib's residence and the soul-stirring greenness surrounding it. But they would not have gone far in their confidence before the sight of the place they were headed for broke in upon them and instantaneously stopped them short of their objective, first the fence, then the unapproachable serenity within, quickly emptying their hearts of their folly.

They would then just content themselves to hang around, dusty little black boys in patched tatters suddenly reminded of the ringworms, the jiggers and the lice eating them alive. They would peep through the fence, it being tight but not tight enough to keep out little boys' adventurous eyes.

And there she would be, their loving white grandmother, in her rocking chair beneath her favourite guava tree, now so gone away from this world of little boys into that of a book she would be reading, with only the gigantic, sadly useless dog as her companion in all that vastness of a lawn.

They would watch her rock herself to sleep over her book, so unaccountable now in her lofty calmness, so coolly and easily away from them and their filth and their petty greed, that they would be left wondering where all the sweetness had gone to, and just how it was possible for the woman to so completely and suddenly change herself from the inviting warmth of the roadside into the magnificent coldness they were staring at.