

Sara's Numbers

It happened long, long ago, long before time could be counted. In that countless world, just north of the hard-edged snow mountains, innumerable cattle foraged knee-deep in the lush grass of the steppes, while horses ran wild among them. On the margins of these vast herds lived small communities of the *Jana*, the people, who tamed some horses and bred and milked the cattle. They lived in leather yurts, as they had always done, with an open smoke hole in the middle, and palings held together with woven horse-hair ropes to strengthen the sides. All the members of one family put their yurts within one thorny enclosure, for they were of one blood, and kept their cattle and horses within that cow-pen, when the herds were not out grazing with the boys. When the boys grew to be men, they had to look for women in some other cow-pen, and thus these wise herds-people kept their own blood-lines strong. They ate mostly beef, which was cured in long strips during the brief summer to last them through the harsh winters to follow. During the hot days, they feasted on wild-sown barley meal and cider, and on thick mare-milk curds; and during the very long cold days, they hunkered down in some narrow protecting valley, south of the snow mountains, which was reached through a high pass. There they ate their own male cattle, and sometimes even their horses, if the blizzards lasted till they were too weak to move.

When the Sun, their main God, strengthened, they knew he had subjugated all the other gods once again, the God of Wind, the God of Thunder, the God of the Dark-Blue Sky. The Goddess of waters at his command broke through the head of the God of Snow and rushed out to the steppes, and cattle, and barley and horses were born again. What horses they were! Short, sturdy, hairy, but horses that would tirelessly carry them forever, horses that helped them round up their herds and take them to new pastures. The wisest woman among the *Jana* chose the King of horses, who would be let loose to wander where he liked. The pasture he chose would be their camping area for the summer till the God of Wind blew cold from the darkening north, and they had to turn back towards their winter shelter valley somewhere beyond the snow ridge, through a high pass.

That late autumn, when days and years were not yet counted, the *Jana* were happy, for it had been a glorious summer, and they had fed well and long. It had been so hot that men, and women had dressed in nothing but simple flaxen shirts like children. The women had time to make thick woolen coats and leggings for winter, and the boys had foraged as far north as possible with their herds. Most had returned with their fat cattle, ready for the trek south, though a few, who had adventured to the outermost northern limits, up to the brown hills, in search of fresh pasture, had not yet returned. But there was no cause for alarm. In that hot weather wolves had plenty of deer, rabbits, and marmosets to prey on, and would leave the big herds well alone. What was more, the northernmost herd was under the care of two of the toughest brothers, Arjuna and Bheema, both not yet grown to manhood, but already fearless and tireless, and well-practiced with bow, arrow and lance, to protect their animals.

The girls lazed by the lake, much to the annoyance of the older women who would call them back from their games to sew, cook, darn, or fetch wood. But Sara was spared, for she was a

dreamer, and in her dreams many messages came from the Sun God, which led them, when properly interpreted by Gaya, the Clan Mother, to new pastures, to apple groves, to fresh lakes, and away from the haunt of wolves. Sara was not yet a woman, and her light clear voice spread balm on tired hearts, and even old men smiled into their cups of cider when she sang. What she had done that summer was already legend among the *Jana*, and messengers from other tribes came to listen, wonder, and try and learn.

She and her sisters played often by the lakeshore, when they were not swimming. They would pick up smooth round coloured pebbles and make necklaces out of them. Or they would toss them up into the air and catch them all before they fell to the ground. Few boys could match the dexterity of the girls, and none among the girls was as agile or swift as Sara. A favourite game was for each girl to collect pebbles all of the same colour, toss them up, and try and catch not only all her own pebbles, but the coloured pebbles of other girls. She who captured the most won, and generally it was Sara who won. Boys tried to play a similar game snatching cattle from each other's herds, but when they played rough and hurt each other, the wise women warned that violence was a sin that the Sun God would punish with death on all.

One sunny warm afternoon, Sara chose a large egg-shaped white pebble, held it up glistening in the sun, and gave it a name.

"This is Eka, my pebble," she said with complete conviction. "She will bring forth many, many children. And every new child will be cleverer than the rest."

Lachi held up a round spotted pebble like a plover's egg. "This is my pebble, what shall I call it?" she asked a little uncertainly.

"She can also be an Eka, when she is all alone," said Sara slowly. "But bring her close, and let us hold them together. Now she becomes Dva, for Eka her mother is close and warm, and she gains from the strength of her mother, and of course she has her own."

The girls played this game with other pebbles of different shapes and colours, till Sara tired of it. She held up a red squarish stone.

"Now the soul of Eka is in this, for the red stone is all alone, but look when I bring it close to another, it changes to Dva, for the soul of Dva enters it when it is no longer all alone!" All the girls clapped at discovering this new game. "But wait, when the old Dva comes – Lachi bring the old Dva next to this red stone – it cannot any longer be Dva, for the soul of Dva goes back to Lachi's pebble, and this red one becomes Tri!"

All this was getting tiring for the some of the girls, and a few went away to play an old game. But a few stayed with Sara, eyes sparkling, and asked if the souls of Eka, Dva, Tri could enter other things?

"Eka, Dva, Tri, are the new young children of the Sun God," said Sara seriously, "and they can enter anything, animal, or even person!" The girls were a little scared at this thought, but Sara

was calm. “ Look, I ask the soul of Eka to enter me, and now I am Eka! Lachi, come close and all will see Dva has entered you!” Lachi bravely stood by Sara.

“ And I will be Tri!” shouted little Maya and ran up to hug Sara. All the girls clapped. Then they all went around pointing to cattle, or horses, or even yurts, and naming them Eka, Dva, and Tri. It was a very happy time. Soon, running about they came to the cow-pen of Gaya, the Clan Mother. It was large and strong, with a large wooden post in the direction of the rising Sun, and another opposite where the Sun set, and a post to the north, and a post to the south. The post towards the rising Sun was Eka the girls shouted in unison, that to the north was Dva, and that to the south was Tri. What of the post to the west?

“ The spirit of Chatura is there,” said Sara, as they returned to their homes.

The next day, Sara thought of a new game. She and Lachi would hide as Eka and Dva, while Maya and her friend, Lali, would come along thinking they were Eka and Dva; but when Sara and Lachi sprang out at them, they would turn into Tri and Chatura. There was much laughter and squealing, till their mothers came out and told them to be quiet.

Sara led them far away not to disturb the elders. All the girls wanted to join in the fun. So, Sara named them all, Pancha, Shasta, Sapta, Ashta, Nava, Dasha.

“ What about me, me, me,!” cried little Gyana. “ You are Dasha and Eka,” said Sara mysteriously, and would not change her opinion.

The girls seemed to go wild with their new game. They counted everything. They made Dasha batches of the herd, and said with great accuracy which cow-pen had more, and by how many more. They used their slim forearms as a measure for Eka, and could tell the height of people, horses, yurts. They even counted the Great God Sun. Sara said he was the Eka soul of all Ekas till he reached the top of Gaya’s yurt. By the time He was directly overhead, he had turned into the soul of all Panchas, and he went to sleep as a Dasha soul. Sara could predict how many times the Sun God would rise from his sleep before a distant herd returned, and how many marches it would cover. When the women scolded the girls to do something useful, Sara looked up at the tallest and said gravely: “This knowledge is the greatest gift of the Great God Sun, for now we see things not only as they appear, but as their souls really are. Under His Light, all is revealed, and there are no more secrets. Now we know how much yarn we need for a dress, how much grain to store for how many days; and how far a wolf pack is and how fast a young girl should run to reach safety.”

Many women were unhappy with all the confusion that the new measures brought into their lives, so they met in high conclave with Gaya, the Clan Mother. After carefully sending Sara out of earshot, Gaya said, “ When she was born all the moving stars lined up over her bed. When she was seven months old she sang her first song, and I heard the music of the Spring Sun in her voice, and yet I did not understand. She is the betrothed of Brahm, the creator, who made the earth under the ever watchful eyes of the Sun, for then He was so anxious He never slept at all. She does not know it yet, but she is the foretold Goddess of Learning, brought to life by the Sun Himself, who is pleased with us. From her loins will spring one day a race that will go south of the snow mountains to a new land. She will be the mother of a great new clan of the Sun, and a

great God Rama will be born in it. In that land, I will be remembered everyday. I know now, for Sara helped me know, I am the Pancha Gaya to repeat the magical mantra in praise of the Sun, with all its Dva and Tri-Dasha sounds!”

The women wondered but said nothing, and went their ways, but kept respectful watch over young Sara. The old men wondered, was the earth and everything in it to be so measured and counted? But if it was the Will of the Sun it must be good.

A *yaga* in thankful praise was offered to the Sun, several fat cattle were slaughtered and all the *Jana* gathered to eat the sacrificial feast. After the prayers, and offerings had been distributed, people broke into joyous laughter, and told stories to each other. “What if there is no Eka, no Dva, no Pancha, or no Dasha, what then, Sara?” asked the ever inquisitive Maya. “Hush!” warned her mother, afraid some impiety might have been committed. “There is always something, the Sun provides for all, always.”

“Not always, dear mother,” said Sara slowly. “Sometimes there is no thing, like the gap between stars. That is when the Sun takes all into Himself. And then when we see a hole where something should be, we see Sunya, who with the first-born Eka gives birth to the all-powerful Dasha.” And thus the numbers of the first people, the *Jana*, came into the light of the Sun Himself.

The news spread fast, and many wise women came to learn from faraway tribes, and all went away even wiser. That had been a special year, and the *Jana* gloried in their happiness and their wisdom as it drew into a fecund autumn. All their herds but one were in, and time now could be reckoned with ease when to turn south to the narrow sheltering valley beyond the high passes of the snow mountain to the south.

“If Arjun and Beema do not appear within three more days, I shall have to berate them for their laziness,” said the chief herdsman with self-conscious importance at his new knowledge. “The Sun help these youngsters! In my day, I would have had my herd in its cow-pen all fat and accounted for by now.”

“In your day, Granddad,” laughed a cheeky boy, “no one accounted for anything!” All laughed, the old herdsman the heartiest.

A cloud of dust rose to the north, out of the dry earth, and soon two boys could be seen spurring hard to reach the community of cow-pens. The people gasped a few minutes later, when they could see Arjun and Beema, without their other companions, without their herds, their clothes red with dried blood. The boys flung themselves down from their saddles, and lay on the ground gasping in exhaustion, their eyes rolling with fear.

Gaya, the Clan Mother, came up gravely. “Shame to my magic, and shame to my art, that my children show fear. You are now safe, and no wolf would dare attack you here!”

Stung to the quick, Arjun got up with a shout. “I have no fear for myself. But, yes, I fear for the *Jana*. And no, no wolf attacked us, but the others, the cruel *Rahu*. They came quietly up to our

camp, and even as we were preparing to make them welcome, they killed my brothers, and took our cattle. I dared not hit at them for you, great Clan Mother, have taught us that the Great God Sun hates all violence. Yet, life was sweet, and not wishing to be killed, Beema and I escaped and rode home as fast as we could to warn you all!”

At the satanic tidings all cried out and stopped their ears. The Clan Mother dipped a leaf in blessed water and sprinkled it in all the cardinal directions to stave off the wrath of the Sun. Then the Clan Mother swept the women away to strike the yurts for a rapid march south. The elder herdsmen, those who had stayed home, and the other boys, gathered round Arjun to gather more news. Soon it was clear from the rapidly told story that the un-people had come over the brown hills at the dead of night as the boys were sleeping, and done their terrible deed before any could cry out. Sleeping far to the south on the edge of the camp, ever watchful for wolves, Arjun and Bheema had made good their escape. None could fight the *Rahu*, even if fighting were not sinful. But could the *Jana* escape south? It was all too late, said the elders. It was the time of death, not of a sickly babe or of an old crone, but of all, all the *Jana*. It was time they prepared in solemn dignity to be gathered to the Sun.

Sara being a young girl was allowed nowhere near the conclave of elders, and stood far off, all alone, on the windswept steppe, but the excited voices carried to her in the still air. She heard the grim news with a beating heart, and then closing her eyes thought back in time to the *Jana*'s last visit to the brown hills. She had been a toddler then, but in her mind's eye she saw the Sun rise and fall several times, as her tribe marched back leisurely to where they were now. She carefully counted the days. Then she thought of fast horses traversing that same distance, and again carefully counted that time. Lastly, she counted the time the *Jana* would take to reach the snow mountains, and pass through them to the safety of the hidden valleys.

Sara marched slowly up to the elders. “ Reverent elders, I have asked the Sun through the new knowledge He has given us, and He has told me there is time for us to escape. But we must abandon our yurts, and take to the fastest horses without delay. We must scatter our herds before we leave, and the *Rahu* will waste time trying to catch a few animals. The wisest amongst the herds may find their way to our valley if we call to them in our dreams.”

Dharma, the oldest herdsman, came up to Sara, and lifting her chin in a knurled hand, looked full into her eyes. Something he saw there made up his mind. “ We will do as the child says. Saddle the fastest horses and scatter the herds. Tell the women to mount immediately, leaving all behind, except the sacred pots in which we make offerings to the Great God. We shall cross that stream to the East within – within one hour,” he said, with a little smile in Sara's direction. “ Then the fastest will sweep clear all our hoof-marks on the farther bank and rejoin us as we double back towards the snow mountains. May the Great Sun God protect us!”

But that night it looked as if the God was angry with the *Jana* for some transgression, for it got very cold, and a blizzard started as they huddled miserably together for a brief rest, the people and the horses all in a great circle. The wind strengthened into a great gale and blew straight into their faces from the south, but there was no time to be lost, and they struggled on, the people and the horses with bent heads, towards the snow mountains. They were exhausted when a pale dawn broke, with no sign of the blizzard letting up, and all the *Jana* gave up hope till the Clan Mother

shouted across the wind: “ The God has saved us, for this wind will keep the *Rahu* in their tents till we reach safety!”

As they made their way through the high passes, the steep mountain sides protected them, and warmth returned to their bones. In a narrow secret valley, with the Great God peeping down benignly at them from between storm clouds, they made their new home. Cutting down some spruce trees, they built themselves rough shelters, hidden from view by a dense blue copse. They ate the dried strips of beef they had packed in their saddlebags, and lived on the meager small game of the woods. Three full moons had risen and set, before they heard the lowing of a small herd coming from the twisting entrance to the valley, and the women ran out to greet Gauri, the wisest and best among their cows. They made a garland of grasses for her, and happily led the animals to the safety of their camp.

But fear of the wicked *Rahu* dwelt in their hearts, and the boys were sent to high ridges every day and night to look out over the steppes and see if any of the un-people had found a path to their retreat. One clear wintery afternoon, when Arjun and Bheema were on watch, they spied far away in the distance a scouting troop of the *Rahu*, who were patiently following the faint trail left by Gauri’s herd. The blizzard had swept away most of the markings, but the *Rahu* were great hunters, and prided themselves on never losing their quarry, whether human or animal. Arjun’s heart tightened into a fast-beating knot. The *Rahu* would find the trail and the opening to the valley, and slaughter them like cattle, at leisure, since the people had no other way to escape. Why was it forbidden to kill killers? He remembered that terrible night at the camp by the brown hills. He saw once again in his mind’s eye that baby-faced *Rahu* leader, with the glaring eyes of a tiger, that other enemy chief who blinked like an owl, and grinned as he killed, and the third one, who looked like he was in a dream, but was the worst of all. Why was it a sin to kill men like them? The people killed animals that did them no harm – he remembered that far-off childhood day when he had wept inconsolably at the slaughter of his pet calf, and not all the talk of the Way of the Great God had stemmed his tears. Surely, the Great God who protected the people would want these un-people to be killed. He could kill these scouts easily with his arrows. He could send up the dark souls of the *Rahu* to be destroyed forever by the Sun God. Most probably other people had already killed a few, for did the people not see occasionally a darkness come and go near the face of the Sun? If other people could kill the *Rahu* it could not be a sin for him to kill them also. He tried his strong bow in readiness.

“Yes, my brother,” said Bheema, as if reading his thoughts. “ Let them come, I shall break their stupid heads with my stick, all, all of them. I will raid their camp, and end this evil forever. It will be the Fight to End All Fights!”

Feeling strangely tired, Sara had lain down in her new hut to sleep away that afternoon. She dreamt of wolves, a long white horde of them, whose leader came over to her, and licked her face. She was strangely unafraid, and patted his great head, and pulled his ears as if he were a lamb.

That evening Sara smiled softly when Arjun and Bheema related their exciting story: “There the *Rahu* scouts were, spread in a wide arc, and looking intently for spoors, when a large white wolf pack broke ground, and pulled down at least two, or maybe more immediately. The others ran for

their horses, and galloped off to regroup, but the wolves were hungry and in hot pursuit. I don't think we will see the *Rahu* again this winter, or ever again," said Arjun excitedly. And then he added, rather slowly in a lower key, as an after-thought: "We were saved from some very bad thoughts, Clan Mother, I am ashamed to admit."

The Clan Mother looked at the boys intently. "It is the Great God the Sun's Will," she said simply, at last.