The Empty Tower

By Jean Bothwell
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October Morning

The long North India rainy season was over. Dawns were clear and bright. The ground was beginning to dry on top and crack a little. There was a different feeling in the air that had been hot and damp all summer. The children could play running games again. They even needed a bit of thin covering at night.

Premi Singh sat in the middle of her bed one morning in early October, watching day come to the
The Empty Tower

school called Charity Abide.

Light had already broken in the east and was shining beyond the trees and over the yard wall when she awoke. The sky was pink through the branches, and there were puffy little white clouds with gold tips at the edge of the pink part. Higher, above the trees, it was blue like the frocks Miss Stanton Miss Sahib wore. Not that anyone ever used that long title when speaking of the principal. It was much easier to say Missa very fast, and everybody knew whom it meant.

All about Premi, the school still slept in its rows of beds set on the verandas of the three buildings that formed the sides of the dormitory yard. Beyond the low roof of the kitchen, which made the fourth side, with the matron’s room and the storerooms, Premi could see the red tile of the principal’s house where Missa lived and had the school office.

At the right, over the roof of the big girls’ dormitory, were the yellow plaster walls and tower of the schoolhouse.

The whole place was so quiet that the voices from the kitchen could be heard all the way across the great open square where games went on after school. The cooks, and the big girls whose turn had come to bake the breakfast bread, had begun their work. Their words ran together and made a low, continuing sound, rising once in a while when somebody laughed.

One bed in the second class row on the veranda of
Middle House was empty this morning. It was next to Premi’s and belonged to Bittu Kundan Lal, who had gone away in September to stay a while at her father’s house in the hills. She was the only hill girl in school this year. Everyone else came from families of the plains.

Beyond Bittu’s bed Kamla lay in hers, one arm thrown over her eyes. On the other side Lila too was still asleep. Both would miss the beginning of this beautiful day. If Lila had been awake, she would certainly ask, “What makes it beautiful? How can you tell?”

Premi smiled and lay down again to consider the question without being asked. The answer was all around her. There was the color in the sky, for one thing, her favorite pink.

And there was hunger, though Lila would look doubtful and frown if Premi counted that. But it was a good feeling to be hungry, if one knew that hunger was to be satisfied with warm rounds of bread when the gong sounded. Another half hour must pass before that happened. Then, in the same way that a red clay water jar fell in bits when it was struck with something hard, the quietness would break. There would be nothing but pieces of stillness left between the hammerings of the gong.

Something to look at and something to feel. But there was more, Premi thought. Being at Charity Abide was all of it, really, for Premi herself at least.
She repeated a verse in a low whisper.

“May Trust and Truth and Charity
Abide within these gates.
If each who comes
Bring even one of these,
All good shall be
And happiness and peace.”

The man who had originally owned the school place had had those words carved on his gate post. How had he thought of such perfect ones? Missa said they had been in his heart first.

“If each who comes.” What did the children bring to Charity Abide? The big girls had won a cup for playing basketball. It stood in the assembly hall in the schoolhouse, on a tall teakwood pedestal. It was not a very large cup, but they had won it a second time and a third, so now they could keep it always. Playing basketball for the school was wonderful. But what did the younger girls bring? Nothing. And there wasn’t anything they could do, either.

Premi wished again that there was something real she could have a part in for Charity Abide. She had talked it over many times with Kamla and Lila and the others in second class. It was too long to wait to grow up and play basketball. She wanted to do something now. But the talking usually ended with Kamla’s deciding words.

“We don’t have to do anything, Premi,” she had
said once. “Missa doesn’t want us to. She wants us to enjoy school. That’s enough for now. But just wait until I get big. I’ll be a teacher then, and I’ll come back here and look after all of you for her. That’ll be my something for Charity Abide.”

“But Kamla,” they told her, “we’ll be big then, too,” and Kamla didn’t like it at first when they laughed. Then she too saw how funny it was and joined in, until they forgot what they had been talking about. Most of them did. Premi learned not to mention her greatest desire every time she thought of it. She thought of it now while the light grew and the time for the gong came nearer. Perhaps doing something for Missa herself could mean it was done for the school as well. There were so many things Missa did not have that Premi felt she needed, or the school did. It was difficult sometimes to separate those needs.

There was a motor car for one thing. Though other people had them, Missa went about in an old open carriage hitched to a fat, sleepy white horse and driven by a shabby coachman. And though there was a tower on the schoolhouse, there was no bell to hang in it. Perhaps the motor car was not important to Missa, but Premi knew that she did want a bell. She had said it more than once.

Premi sighed. How could little girls help with such big things? Most of the children came from homes like her own, in small villages. The fathers worked in the fields to raise wheat and cotton and vegeta-
bles. Sometimes the mothers worked with them, and older boys and girls, if there were any. Not all children were sent to school. Her own father worked very hard, but much depended on the harvest. There was usually enough money for the plain, straight frocks that she and Shanti, her elder sister, wore and for their white cotton head scarfs. But not for shoes or school fees. Premi did not mind that so much. Few of the children had shoes and many did not pay. But perhaps if everybody helped... if all the fathers and mothers knew...

She did not finish that thought. She would talk it over with Bittu when she came. There would be a great deal to tell Bittu. She had missed her very much. She had known Lila and Kamla longer, but her feeling for Bittu was different, though Bittu was ten, a year older than she, and a hill girl.

The school cat had had new kittens. Mamma-ji had said Middle House could have one to call their own when it got big enough. Missa’s birthday had been last week. Premi had saved some of the sweets, but they would be too hard if Bittu did not come soon. Dr. Jamna Das had made everybody be vaccinated. Missa had been done first, to show the smallest children that it would not hurt. Premi made a face, remembering. Her own had hurt a little. It would take much talking to tell Bittu everything.

Premi lifted her sheet, letting a lot of air blow in under it with the morning breeze, so that it puffed up
like a tent. Then she let it fall again with a little snap, and the sheet lay limp above her slender body. The movement sent the heavy gold bracelet on her arm sliding up and down, and she stopped playing with the sheet to admire it.

Because it was the only one she owned, there was no tinkling sound of metal chiming against other metal. But she did not care. She would not mind if she never had another bracelet. This lovely thing was better than having many plain glass ones or even three slender silver bangles, and it held a big place in her heart.

There had been a pair of the bracelets, carved alike in the beautiful three-petaled lily pattern, that had belonged first to Bittu’s mother. Then they had been left for the little girl, and Bittu had given Premi one of them before going to the hills for her visit home. It had not been off Premi’s arm since, not even for washing.

Premi traced the carving with her finger now, in and out of the delicate flower petals.

She could hear Bittu’s words as clearly as if they were only just now being spoken. “Hold out your hand, Premi,” Bittu had said, and she had slid the cool, smooth gold over Premi’s folded-in thumb and onto her wrist. “Now we are Bracelet-Bound,” Bittu had added. “Whatever one asks of the other, that will she do, because we are friends.” Premi repeated that too, softly, though she need not be so quiet now. Here and there, heads were popping up from other
Nine-year-old Premi loves being a student at Charity Abide, and she wants to contribute something meaningful to the school. She has an idea to surprise Missa, their principal, by giving her something she has always desired—a bell for their empty bell tower. Bells are expensive, and it isn’t easy for little children in India to raise money. Premi comes up with a plan that will require the help of the whole school and community. Her selfless determination and faith show that no matter how different people may be, great things can be accomplished when they come together.

“Born in 1892, Jean Bothwell, a very gifted, award-winning writer, wrote dozens of wonderful books set in India—a land that she knew and loved from her years as a missionary and her experience as a history teacher. Her book The Empty Tower is just the kind of gentle, beautiful book that fills our children’s minds with knowledge, great messages, and beautiful language.” —Jenny Phillips