

EMPTY HOUSES AND LONELY COUPLES

BY MANOHAR SINGH GILL

WE were sitting in a group with the conversation drifting from one thing to the other. The bank manager casually mentioned his doctor son, now settled in the U.S.A. "My other two sons have followed him", he said with a tinge of sadness. "Once gone they never come back."

The famous Sportsman-turned-Administrator smiled, and said as if in confirmation: "I got a phone call from my son in Vancouver last week. He wanted my permission to marry a Swedish girl. What could I say? I gave my consent for whatever it was worth."

A bond of understanding was instantaneously established, and the conversation continued for some time over the problem of lonely Chandigarh parents with all their children abroad. The Punjabis are an adventurous and travelling people. They will follow opportunity to the ends of the world.

THE REGIMEN

The farmers and landless labourers of the Doaba have found their way to the U.K. The sons of the more affluent, having had education, are to be seen in the U.S.A., Canada and even Latin America. They are mostly professional people working as doctors and engineers. According to a U.N. survey, 15 per cent of Indian doctors are abroad.

It is the parents of these people who lead lonely lives in palatial Chandigarh houses. When building such houses the wives insist on separate rooms for each child, as if they were going to be with them for ever. But in today's world the young eagles fly away very soon. One sees, therefore, again and again, the dismal picture of old couples tending vast houses, without servants and sans enthusiasm. They have, however, to live on, and their routine is well established — long walks in the early morning; a reading of *The Tribune* from cover to cover; perhaps a game of cards in the evening; and the nightly circuit of the many-roomed house, to bolt all doors and windows against the fear of thieves.

There is, of course, the daily excitement of the postman's arrival. Maybe, a letter from Australia or Canada or the U.S.A. The day a picture of an unseen grandson arrives the old people are jubilant. Wistfully, they look forward to the visit of the exiles, maybe for a week, next year, when they can see the grandchildren. But essentially they lead lonely lives, tied by a tenuous link of affection to children



7,000 miles away.

There is the Brigadier with two daughters, both abroad, and neither wanting his house after he is gone. Behind my house in Sector 7 I see a huge rambling bungalow in a big plot in Sector 8. The children of the lane say it is haunted. They even go there to play cops and

robbers. Now this house is being demolished. The story goes that it belonged to a retired couple whose children were settled in the U.S.A. The wife died early and the old man lived alone. Then he too passed away.

Slowly, people began to take away bits and pieces of the house since there were no claim-

ants. Perhaps it has now been bought by a businessman who intends to demolish it and build a new one.

What was the choice before such old couples? The bank manager said his wife was anxious to migrate to the U.S.A. to be with the children, but he was opposed to this. He visualised the sterile and lonely routine of old couples in the U.S.A. — T.V. and beer, locked up in empty houses, with the young people away to work and with no company of one's own peers.

"I would much rather stay alone here", he said: "At least I can go for walks on the Lake, sit in my garden, chat with neighbours, and enjoy the winter sun with saag and makki ki roti."

The Sportsman was even more emphatic: "My family wants me to take early retirement and migrate to Canada. But I have told my wife that if she likes she can go. I will stay here. I do not mind going in the summers for a short visit, which I can combine with coaching assignments, but I do not wish to be locked up in the lonely cold of a Canadian winter in my old age."

It is a new problem, this loneliness of affluent couples in old age. I have seen old people who have gone abroad to be with their children in the U.K. I can never forget the mother of a leading eye specialist in England who used to beg of me in chaste Punjabi: "Beta, take me home with you to Jullundur. In this climate I am getting water in my knees, and there is no one to talk to here. I long for my village in Nakodar."

EAST AND WEST

This from a lady whose son had a Rolls and nothing wanting in the way of money. The fact is that the West belongs to the young while the East belongs to the old. In the West people are almost ashamed of old age, and while the State does arrange material assistance, such as pensions and Old People's Homes, it cannot provide affection and company. These can come only from one's social environments.

The West, therefore, is great fun in one's youth, but in old age, perhaps, there is nothing like India, where wisdom is synonymous with years. The older a person gets the more respect and authority he enjoys as a patriarch.

But, sadly for many of the Chandigarh old couples, this is changing now. While the patriarchs remain here, the flocks of the young have flown away.