

A novel

THE NEW YORK TIMES
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A Suitable Boy

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—JONATHAN TARDY, *Washington Post Book World*

VIKRAM SETH
AUTHOR OF *Two Lives*

HARPERPERENNIAL



MODERNCLASSICS

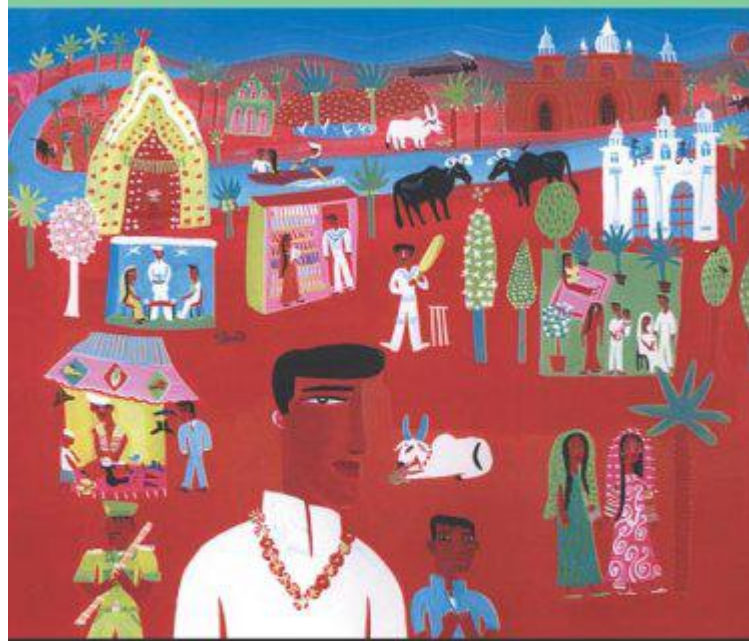
A
SUITABLE
BOY



VIKRAM
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'Make time for it. It will keep you company
for the rest of your life'
The Times

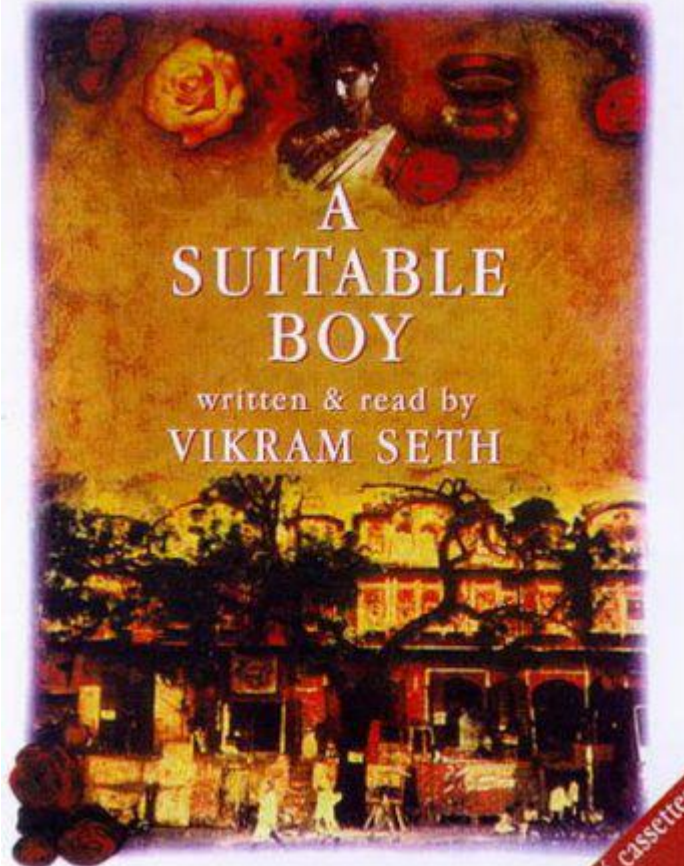
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VIKRAM SETH
A Suitable Boy

A BBC RADIO 4 FULL-CAST DRAMATISATION

THE NUMBER ONE BEST SELLER



A
SUITABLE
BOY

written & read by
VIKRAM SETH

CASSETTES



A novel

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1.1

‘YOU too will marry a boy I choose,’ said Mrs Rupa Mehra firmly to her younger daughter.

Lata avoided the maternal imperative by looking around the great lamp-lit garden of Prem Nivas. The wedding guests were gathered on the lawn. ‘Hmm,’ she said. This annoyed her mother further.

‘I know what your hmms mean, young lady, and I can tell you I will not stand for hmms in this matter. I do know what is best. I am doing it all for you. Do you think it is easy for me, trying to arrange things for all four of my children without His help?’ Her nose began to redden at the thought of her husband, who would, she felt certain, be partaking of their present joy from somewhere benevolently above. Mrs Rupa Mehra believed, of course, in reincarnation, but at moments of exceptional sentiment, she imagined that the late Raghbir Mehra still inhabited the form in which she had known him when he was alive : the robust, cheerful form of his early forties before overwork had brought about his heart attack at the height of the Second World War. Eight years ago, eight years, thought Mrs Rupa Mehra miserably.

‘Now, now, Ma, you can’t cry on Savita’s wedding day,’ said Lata, putting her arm gently but not very concernedly around her mother’s shoulder.

‘If He had been here, I could have worn the tissue-patola sari I wore for my own wedding,’ sighed Mrs Rupa Mehra. ‘But it is too rich for a widow to wear.’

‘Ma!’ said Lata, a little exasperated at the emotional capital her mother insisted on making out of every possible circumstance. ‘People are looking at you. They want to congratulate you, and they’ll think it very odd if they see you crying in this way.’

Several guests were indeed doing namasté to Mrs Rupa Mehra and smiling at her ; the cream of Brahmpur society, she was pleased to note.

‘Let them see me!’ said Mrs Rupa Mehra defiantly, dabbing at her eyes hastily with a handkerchief perfumed with 4711 eau-de-Cologne, ‘They will only think it is because of my happiness at Savita’s wedding. Everything I do is for you, and no one appreciates me. I have chosen such a good boy for Savita, and all everyone does is complain.’

Lata reflected that of the four brothers and sisters, the only one who hadn’t complained of the match had been the sweet-tempered, fair-complexioned, beautiful Savita herself.

‘He is a little thin, Ma,’ said Lata a bit thoughtlessly. This was putting it mildly. Pran Kapoor, soon to be her brother-in-law, was lank, dark, gangly, and asthmatic.

‘Thin ? What is thin ? Everyone is trying to become thin these days. Even I have had to fast the whole day and it is not good for my diabetes. And if Savita is not complaining, everyone should be happy with him. Arun and Varun are always complaining: why didn’t they choose a boy for their sister then ? Pran is a good, decent, cultured khatri boy.’

There was no denying that Pran, at thirty, was a good boy, a decent boy, and belonged to the right caste. And, indeed, Lata did like Pran. Oddly enough, she knew him better than her sister did - or, at least, had seen him for longer than her sister had. Lata was studying English at Brahmipur University, and Pran Kapoor was a popular lecturer there. Lata had attended his class on the Elizabethans, while Savita, the bride, had met him for only an hour, and that too in her mother's company.

'And Savita will fatten him up,' added Mrs Rupa Mehra. 'Why are you trying to annoy me when I am so happy? And Pran and Savita will be happy, you will see. They will be happy,' she continued emphatically. 'Thank you, thank you,' she now beamed at those who were coming up to greet her. 'It is so wonderful - the boy of my dreams, and such a good family. The Minister Sahib has been very kind to us. And Savita is so happy. Please eat something, please eat: they have made such delicious gulab-jamuns, but owing to my diabetes I cannot eat them even after the ceremonies. I am not even allowed gajak, which is so difficult to resist in winter. But please eat, please eat. I must go in to check what is happening: the time that the pandits have given is coming up, and there is no sign of either bride or groom!' She looked at Lata, frowning. Her younger daughter was going to prove more difficult than her elder, she decided.

'Don't forget what I told you,' she said in an admonitory voice.

'Hmm,' said Lata. 'Ma, your handkerchief's sticking out of your blouse.'

'Oh!' said Mrs Rupa Mehra, worriedly tucking it in. 'And tell Arun to please take his duties seriously. He is just standing there in a corner talking to that Meenakshi and his silly friend

from Calcutta. He should see that everyone is drinking and eating properly and having a gala time.'

'That Meenakshi' was Arun's glamorous wife and her own disrespectful daughter-in-law. In four years of marriage Meenakshi's only worthwhile act, in Mrs Rupa Mehra's eyes, had been to give birth to her beloved granddaughter, Aparna, who even now had found her way to her grandmother's brown silk sari and was tugging it for attention. Mrs Rupa Mehra was delighted. She gave her a kiss and told her :

'Aparna, you must stay with your Mummy or with Lata Bua, otherwise you will get lost. And then where would we be?'

'Can't I come with you ?' asked Aparna, who, at three, naturally had views and preferences of her own.

'Sweetheart, I wish you could,' said Mrs Rupa Mehra, 'but I have to make sure that your Savita Bua is ready to be married. She is so late already.' And Mrs Rupa Mehra looked once again at the little gold watch that had been her husband's first gift to her and which had not missed a beat for two-and-a-half decades.

'I want to see Savita Bua!' said Aparna, holding her ground.

Mrs Rupa Mehra looked a little harassed and nodded vaguely at Aparna.

Lata picked Aparna up. 'When Savita Bua comes out, we'll go over there together, shall we, and I'll hold you up like this, and

we'll both get a good view. Meanwhile, should we go and see if we can get some ice-cream ? iffëél like some too.'

Aparna approved of this, as of most of Lata's suggestions. It was never too cold for ice-cream. They walked towards the buffet table together, three-year-old and nineteen-year-old hand in hand. A few rose-petals wafted down on them from somewhere.

'What is good enough for your sister is good enough for you,' said Mrs Rupa Mehra to Lata as a parting shot.

'We can't both marry Pran,' said Lata, laughing.

1.2

THE other chief host of the wedding was the groom's father, Mr Mahesh Kapoor, who was the Minister of Revenue of the state of Purva Pradesh. It was in fact in his large, C-shaped, cream-coloured, two-storey family house, Prem Nivas, situated in the quietest, greenest residential area of the ancient, and - for the most part - over-populated city of Brahmpur, that the wedding was taking place.

This was so unusual that the whole of Brahmpur had been buzzing about it for days. Mrs Rupa Mehra's father, who was supposed to be the host, had taken sudden umbrage a fortnight before the wedding, had locked up his house, and had disappeared. Mrs Rupa Mehra had been distraught. The Minister Sahib had stepped in ('Your honour is our honour'), and had insisted on putting on the wedding himself. As for the ensuing gossip, he ignored it.

There was no question of Mrs Rupa Mehra helping to pay for the wedding. The Minister Sahib would not hear of it. Nor had he at any time asked for any dowry. He was an old friend and bridge partner of Mrs Rupa Mehra's father and he had liked what he had seen of her daughter Savita (though he could never remember the girl's name). He was sympathetic to economic hardship, for he too had tasted it. During the several years he had spent in British

6jails during the struggle for Independence, there had been no one to run his farm or his cloth business. As a result very little income had come in, and his wife and family had struggled along with great difficulty.

Those unhappy times, however, were only a memory for the able, impatient, and powerful Minister. It was the early winter of 1950, and India had been free for over three years. But freedom for the country did not mean freedom for his younger son, Maan, who even now was being told by his father :

‘What is good enough for your brother is good enough for you.’

‘Yes, Baoji,’ said Maan, smiling.

Mr Mahesh Kapoor frowned. His younger son, while succeeding to his own habit of fine dress, had not succeeded to his obsession with hard work. Nor did he appear to have any ambition to speak of.

‘It is no use being a good-looking young wastrel forever,’ said his father. ‘And marriage will force you to settle down and

take things seriously. I have written to the Banaras people, and I expect a favourable answer any day.'

Marriage was the last thing on Maan's mind; he had caught a friend's eye in the crowd and was waving at him. Hundreds of small coloured lights strung through the hedge came on all at once, and the silk saris and jewellery of the women glimmered and glinted even more brightly. The high, reedy shehnai music burst into a pattern of speed and brilliance. Maan was entranced. He noticed Lata making her way through the guests. Quite an attractive girl, Savita's sister, he thought. Not very tall and not very fair, but attractive, with an oval face, a shy light in her dark eyes and an affectionate manner towards the child she was leading by the hand.

'Yes, Baoji,' said Maan obediently.

'What did I say ?' demanded his father.

'About marriage, Baoji,' said Maan.

'What about marriage ?'

Maan was nonplussed.

'Don't you listen ?' demanded Mahesh Kapoor, wanting

to twist Maan's ear. 'You are as bad as the clerks in the Revenue Department. You were not paying attention, you were waving at Firoz.' C V

Maan looked a little shamefaced. He knew what his father thought of him. But he had been enjoying himself until a couple of minutes ago, and it was just like Baoji to come and puncture his light spirits.

‘So that’s all fixed up,’ continued his father. ‘Don’t tell me later that I didn’t warn you. And don’t get that weak-» willed woman, your mother, to change her mind and come telling me that you aren’t yet ready to take on the responsibilities of a man.’

‘No, Baoji,’ said Maan, getting the drift of things and looking a trifle glum. j

‘We chose well for Veena, we have chosen well for Pran, ; and you are not to complain about our choice of a bride for you.’

Maan said nothing. He was wondering how to repair the puncture. He had a bottle of Scotch upstairs in his room, and perhaps he and Firoz could escape for a few minutes before the ceremony - or even during it - for refreshment.

His father paused to smile brusquely at a few wellwishers, then turned to Maan again.

‘I don’t want to have to waste any more time with you today. God knows I have enough to do as it is. What ha happened to Pran and that girl, what’s her name? It’s getting late. They were supposed to come out from opposite j ends of the house and meet here for the jaymala five i minutes ago.’ f

‘Savita,’ prompted Maan.

‘Yes, yes,’ said his father impatiently. ‘Savita. Your superstitious mother will start panicking if they miss the correct configuration of the stars. Go and calm her down. | Go ! Do some good.

And Mahesh Kapoor went back to his own duties as a host. He frowned impatiently at one of the officiating priests, who smiled weakly back. He narrowly avoided being butted in the stomach and knocked over by three

children, offspring of his rural relatives, who were careering joyfully around the garden as if it were a field of stubble. And he greeted, before he had walked ten steps, a professor of literature (who could be useful for Pran’s career two influential members of the state legislature from the Congress Party (who might well agree to back him in his perennial power-struggle with the Home Minister) ; a judge, the very last Englishman to remain on the bench of the Brahmipur High Court after Independence ; and his old friend the Nawab Sahib of Baitar, one of the largest landowners in the state.

1.3

LATA, who had heard a part of Maan’s conversation with his father, could not help smiling to herself as she walked past.

‘I see you’re enjoying yourself,’ said Maan to her in English.

His conversation with his father had been in Hindi, hers with her mother in English. Maan spoke both well.

Lata was struck shy, as she sometimes was with strangers, especially those who smiled as boldly as Maan. Let him do the smiling for both of us, she thought.

‘Yes,’ she said simply, her eyes resting on his face for just a second. Aparna tugged at her hand.

‘Well, now, we’re almost family,’ said Maan, perhaps sensing her awkwardness. ‘A few minutes more, and the ceremonies will start.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Lata, looking up at him again more confidently. She paused and frowned. ‘My mother’s concerned that they won’t start on time.’

‘So is my father,’ said Maan.

Lata began smiling again, but when Maan asked her why she shook her head.

‘Well,’ said Maan, flicking a rose-petal off his beautiful tight white achkan, ‘you’re not laughing at me, are you?’

‘I’m not laughing at all,’ said Lata. ‘Smiling, I meant.’

‘No, not at you,’ said Lata. ‘At myself.’

‘That’s very mysterious,’ said Maan. His good-naçtred face melted into an expression of exaggerated perplexity.

‘It’ll have to remain so, I’m afraid,’ said Lata, almost laughing now. ‘Aparna here wants her ice-cream, and I must supply it.’

‘Try the pistachio ice-cream,’ suggested Maan. His eyes followed her pink sari for a few seconds. Good-looking ‘ girl - in a way, he thought again. Pink’s the wrong colour for her complexion, though. She should be dressed in deep green or dark blue ... like that woman there. His attention veered to a new object of contemplation.

A few seconds later Lata bumped into her best friend, Malati, a medical student who shared her room at the student hostel. Malati was very outgoing and never lost her tongue with strangers. Strangers, however, blinking into her lovely green eyes, sometimes lost their tongues with her.

‘Who was that Cad you were talking to ?’ she asked Lata eagerly.

This wasn’t as bad as it sounded. A good-looking young man, in the slang of Brahmpur University girls, was a Cad. The term derived from Cadbury’s chocolate.

‘Oh, that’s just Maan, he’s Fran’s younger brother.’

‘Really! But he’s so good-looking and Fran’s so, well, not ugly, but, you know, dark, and nothing special.’

‘Maybe he’s a dark Cad,’ suggested Lata. ‘Bitter but sustaining.’

Malati considered this.

‘And,’ continued Lata, ‘as my aunts have reminded me five times in the last hour, I’m not all that fair either, and will therefore find it impossible to get a suitable husband.’

‘How can you put up with them, Lata?’ asked Malati, who had been brought up, fatherless and brotherless, in a circle of very supportive women.

‘Oh, I like most of them,’ said Lata. ‘And if it wasn’t for this sort of speculation it wouldn’t be much of a wedding

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10for them. Once they see the bride and groom together, they’ll have an even better time. Beauty and the Beast.’

‘Well, he’s looked rather beast-like whenever I’ve seen him on the university campus,’ said Malati. ‘Like a dark giraffe.’

‘Don’t be mean,’ said Lata, laughing. ‘Anyway, Fran’s very popular as a lecturer,’ she continued. ‘And I like him. And you’re going to have to visit me at his house once I leave the

hostel and start living there. And since he'll be my brother-in-law you'll have to like him too. Promise me you will.'

'I won't,' said Malati firmly. 'He's taking you away from me.'

'He's doing nothing of the sort, Malati,' said Lata. 'My mother, with her fine sense of household economy, is dumping me on him.'

'Well, I don't see why you should obey your mother. Tell her you can't bear to be parted from me.'

'I always obey my mother,' said Lata. 'And besides, who will pay my hostel fees if she doesn't? And it will be very nice for me to live with Savita for a while. I refuse to lose you. You really must visit us - you must keep visiting us. If you don't, I'll know how much value to put on your friendship.'

Malati looked unhappy for a second or two, then recovered. 'Who's this?' she asked. Aparna was looking at her in a severe and uncompromising manner.

'My niece, Aparna,' said Lata. 'Say hello to Malati Aunty, Aparna.'

'Hello,' said Aparna, who had reached the end of her patience. 'Can I have a pistachio ice-cream, please?'

'Yes, kuchuk, of course, I'm sorry,' said Lata. 'Come, let's all go together and get some.'

1.4

LATA soon lost Malati to a clutch of college friends, but before she and Aparna could get much further, they were captured by Aparna's parents.

ii 'So there you are, you precious little runaway,' said the resplendent Meenakshi, implanting a kiss on her daughter's forehead. 'Isn't she precious, Arun? Now where half you been, you precious truant?'

'I went to find Daadi,' began Aparna. 'And then I found her, but she had to go into the house because of Savita Bua, but I couldn't go with her, and then Lata Bua took me to have ice-cream, but we couldn't because -' 'But Meenakshi had lost interest and had turned to Lata. « } 'That pink doesn't really suit you, Luts,' said Meenakshi. 'It lacks a certain - a certain -'

'Je ne sais quoi?' prompted a suave friend of her husband's, who was standing nearby.

'Thank you,' said Meenakshi, with such withering charm that the young fellow glided away for a while and pretended to stare at the stars.

'No, pink's just not right for you, Luts,' re-affirmed Meenakshi, stretching her long, tawny neck like a relaxed cat and appraising her sister-in-law.

She herself was wearing a green-and-gold sari of Banaras silk, with a green choli that exposed more of her midriff than Brahmpur society was normally privileged or prepared to see.

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‘Oh,’ said Lata, suddenly self-conscious. She knew she f didn’t have much dress sense, and imagined she looked rather drab standing next to this bird-of-paradise.

‘Who was that fellow you were talking to?’ demanded her brother Arun, who, unlike his wife, had noticed Lata | talking to Maan. Arun was twenty-five, a tall, fair, intelli- f gent, pleasant-looking bully who kept his siblings in place by pummelling their egos. He was fond of reminding them that after their father’s death, he was ‘in a manner of speaking’, in loco parentis to them. ‘That was Maan, Fran’s brother.’ ‘Ah.’ The word spoke volumes of disapproval. Arun and Meenakshi had arrived just this morning by overnight train from Calcutta, where Arun worked as one of the few Indian executives in the prestigious and largely white firm of Bentsen & Pryce. He had had neither the ;

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time nor the desire to acquaint himself with the Kapoor family - or clan, as he called it - with whom his mother had contrived a match for his sister. He cast his eyes balefully around. Typical of their type to overdo everything, he thought, looking at the coloured lights in the hedge. The crassness of the state politicians, white-capped and effusive, and of Mahesh Kapoor’s contingent of rustic relatives excited his finely-tuned disdain. And the fact that neither the brigadier from the Brahmpur Cantonment nor the Brahmpur representatives of companies like Burmah Shell, Imperial Tobacco, and Caltex were represented in the crowd of invitees blinded his eyes to

the presence of the larger part of the professional elite of Brahmpur.

‘A bit of a bounder, I’d say,’ said Arun, who had noticed Maan’s eyes casually following Lata before he had turned them elsewhere.

Lata smiled, and her meek brother Varun, who was a nervous shadow to Arun and Meenakshi, smiled too in a kind of stifled complicity. Varun was studying - or trying to study - mathematics at Calcutta University, and he lived with Arun and Meenakshi in their small ground-floor flat. He was thin, unsure of himself, sweet-natured and shiftyeyed; and he was Lata’s favourite. Though he was a year older than her, she felt protective of him. Varun was terrified, in different ways, of both Arun and Meenakshi, and in some ways even of the precocious Aparna. His enjoyment of mathematics was mainly limited to the calculation of odds and handicaps on the racing form. In winter, as Varun’s excitement rose with the racing season, so did his elder brother’s ire. Arun was fond of calling him a bounder as well.

And what would you know about bounding, Arun Bhai ? thought Lata to herself. Aloud she said: ‘He seemed quite nice.’

‘An Aunty we met called him a Cad,’ contributed Aparna.

‘Did she, precious ?’ said Meenakshi, interested. ‘Do point him out to me, Arun.’ But Maan was now nowhere to be seen.!

‘I blame myself to some extent,’ said Arun in a voice which implied nothing of the sort; Arun was not capable of blaming

himself for anything. ‘I really should have done something,’ he continued. ‘If I hadn’t been so tied up with work, I might have prevented this whole fiasco. But once Ma got it into her head that this Kapoor chap was suitable, it was impossible to dissuade her. It’s impossible to talk reason with Ma ; she just turns on the waterworks.’ * *’ t

What had also helped deflect Arun’s suspicions had been the fact that Dr Pran Kapoor taught English. And yet, to Arun’s chagrin, there was hardly an English face in this whole provincial crowd.

‘How fearfully dowdy!’ said Meenakshi wearily to herself, encapsulating her husband’s thoughts. ‘And how utterly unlike Calcutta. Precious, you have smut on your nose,’ she added to Aparna, half looking around to tell an imaginary ayah to wipe it off with a handkerchief.

‘I’m enjoying it here,’ Varun ventured, seeing Lata look hurt. He knew that she liked Brahmpur, though it was clearly no metropolis.

‘You be quiet,’ snapped Arun brutally. His judgment was being challenged by his subordinate, and he would have none of it.

Varun struggled with himself; he glared, then looked down.

‘Don’t talk about what you don’t understand,’ added Arun, putting the boot in.

Varun glowered silently.

‘Did you hear me ?’

‘Yes,’ said Varun.

‘Yes, what ?’

‘Yes, Arun Bhai,’ muttered Varun.

This pulverization was standard fare for Varun, and Lata was not surprised by the exchange. But she felt very bad for him, and indignant with Arun. She could not understand either the pleasure or the purpose of it. She decided she would speak to Varun as soon after the wedding as possible to try to help him withstand - at least !

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internally - such assaults upon his spirit. Even if I’m not very good at withstanding them myself, Lata thought.

‘Well, Arun Bhai,’ she said innocently, ‘I suppose it’s too late. We’re all one big happy family now, and we’ll have to put up with each other as well as we can.’

The phrase, however, was not innocent. ‘One big happy family’ was an ironically used Chatterji phrase. Meenakshi Mehra had been a Chatterji before she and Arun had met at a cocktail party, fallen in torrid, rapturous and elegant love, and got married within a month, to the shock of both families.

Whether or not Mr Justice Chatterji of the Calcutta High Court and his wife were happy to welcome the non-Bengali Arun as the first appendage to their ring of five children (plus Cuddles the dog), and whether or not Mrs Rupa Mehra had been delighted at the thought of her first-born, the apple of her eye, marrying outside the khatri caste (and to a spoilt supersophisticate like Meenakshi at that), Arun certainly valued the Chatterji connection greatly. The Chatterjis had wealth and position and a grand Calcutta house where they threw enormous (but tasteful) parties. And even if the big happy family, especially Meenakshi's brothers and sisters, sometimes bothered him with their endless, unchokable wit and improvised rhyming couplets, he accepted it precisely because it appeared to him to be undeniably urbane. It was a far cry from this provincial capital, this Kapoor crowd and these garish light-in-the-hedge celebrations - with pomegranate juice in lieu of alcohol !

‘What precisely do you mean by that ?’ demanded Arun of Lata. ‘Do you think that if Daddy had been alive we would have married into this sort of a family ?’

Arun hardly seemed to care that they might be overheard. Lata flushed. But the brutal jint was well made. Had Raghbir Mehra not died in his forties but continued his meteoric rise in the Railway Service, he would - when the British left Indian government service in droves in 1947 - certainly have become a member of the Railway Board. His excellence and experience might even have made him the Chairman. The family would not have had to struggle,

as it had had to for years and was still forced to, on Mrs Rupa Mehra's depleted savings, the kindness of friends and, lately, her elder son's salary. She would not have had to sell most of her jewellery and even their small house in Darjeeling to give her children the schooling which she felt that, above

everything else, they must have. Beneath her pervasive sentimentality - and her attachment to the seemingly secure physical objects that reminded her of her beloved husband - lay a sense of sacrifice and a sense of values that determinedly melted them down into the insecure, intangible benefits of an excellent English-medium; boarding-school education. And so Arun and Varun had continued to go to St George's School, and Savita and Lata had not been withdrawn from St Sophia's Convent.

The Kapoors might be all very well for Brahmpur society, thought Arun, but if Daddy had been alive, a constellation of brilliant matches would have been strewn at the feet of the Mehras. At least he, for one, had overcome their circumstances and done well in the way of in-laws. What possible comparison could there be between Pran's brother, that ogling fellow whom Lata had just been talking to - who ran, of all things, a cloth shop in Banaras, from what Arun had heard - and, say, Meenakshi's elder brother, who had been to Oxford, was studying law at Lincoln's Inn, and was, in addition, a published poet ? I

Arun's speculations were brought down to earth by his daughter, who threatened to scream if she didn't get her ice-cream. She knew from experience that screaming (or even the threat of it) worked wonders with her parents, and after all, they sometimes screamed at each other, and often at the servants. ,

Lata looked guilty. 'It's my fault, darling,' she said to Aparna. 'Let's go at once before we get caught up in something else. But you mustn't cry or yell, promise me that. It won't work with me.' Aparna, who knew it wouldn't, was silent. But just at that moment the bridegroom emerged from one side of the house, dressed all in white, his dark, rather |

nervous face veiled with hanging strings of white flowers; everyone crowded forward towards the door from which the bride would emerge; and Aparna, lifted into her Lata Bua's arms, was forced to defer once again both treat and threat.

1.5

IT was a little untraditional, Lata couldn't help thinking, that Pran hadn't ridden up to the gate on a white horse with a little nephew sitting in front of him and with the groom's party in tow to claim his bride; but then Prem Nivas was the groom's house after all. And no doubt if he had followed the convention, Arun would have found further cause for mockery. As it was, Lata found it difficult to imagine the lecturer on Elizabethan Drama under that veil of tuberose. He was now placing a garland of dark red, heavily fragrant roses around her sister Savita's neck and Savita was doing the same to him. She looked lovely in her red-and-gold wedding sari, and quite subdued; Lata thought she might even have been crying. Her head was covered, and she looked down at the ground as her mother had doubtless instructed her to do. It was not proper, even when she was putting the garland round his neck, that she should look full in the face of the man with whom she was to live her life.

The welcoming ceremony completed, bride and groom moved together to the middle of the garden, where a small platform, decorated with more white flowers and open to the auspicious stars, had been erected. Here the priests, one from each family, and Mrs Rupa Mehra and the parents of the groom sat around the small fire that would be the witness of their vows.

Mrs Rupa Mehra's brother, whom the family very rarely met, had earlier in the day taken charge of the bangle ceremony. Arun was annoyed that he had not been allowed to take charge

of anything. He had suggested to his mother after the crisis brought on by his grandfather's inexplicableIt.

But it was too late for the wedding to Calcuttavo'sces rose to the skies and Quite drowned out the irrelevant it- at' and she would not hear ochant of the ceremonies.

Now that the exchange of t** Lata, however, stood close by and watched with an

Paid no great attention to f. ands was over, the crowd attentive mixture of fascination and dismay. The two bare-

would go on for the better C aCf wedding rites. These chested priests, one very fat and one fairly thin, both

milled and chattered round h" 1 ^ ^Ur Wm*e the guest! apparently immune to the cold, were locked in mildly

laughed; they shook hand C fwjiso^^rem Nivas. Their insistent competition as to who knew a more elaborate

heads ; they coalesced into 1 "I or them to their fore- ^orm ^ the service- So, while the stars stayed their courses

women there; they warmed' ^ S' the men herertitt m order to keep the auspicious time in abeyance, the

“fried clay stoves placed str * em!, es at the charcoal- Sanskrit
wound interminably on. Even the groom’s parents

while their frosted, gossip-lad ^‘h* around the garden were
asked ^ the fat Priest to rePeat something after him.

they admired the multicol ^n br£ath rose into the air’ Mahesh
Kapoor’s eyebrows were quivering; he was about

Photographer as he murmured” s7 A ‘ ^ Smiled for *« l° W°W
hi§ rathef sh°rt fuse“

they breathed deeply the see f fl P ase! in English; Lata tried to
imagine what Savita was thinking. How

cooked spices; they exchanged °h’ L Wers and Perfume and
cou^ sne nave agreed to get married without knowing this

tics and scandal under the h’ £ i \$ ^ deatns and poli- man?
Kind-hearted and accommodating though she was,

at the back of the garden b”g ^coloured cloth canopy she did
have views of her own. Lata loved her deeply and

rood had been laid out; the^* ,wmc^ ‘ong tables of admired
her generous, even temper; the evenness was

chairs with their plates full *A** ,own exhaustedly on
certainly a contrast to her own erratic swings of mood.

Servants, some in white liv ^ tU in inexhaustibly. Savita was free from any vanity about her fresh and lovely

around fruit juice and tea a “dT’ ff “^ “” knaki’ Bought looks ; but didn’t she rebel against the fact that Pran would

who were standing in the H ^ snacks to those fail the most lenient test of glamour ? Did Savita really

Jaddus, gulab-jamuns, barfis and , Samosas kachauris, accept that Mother knew best ? It was difficult to speak to

consumed and replenished al ° ga?a,f and ice-cream were Savita, or sometimes even to guess what she was thinking.

°f vegetables. Friends who h°H PU“S and Slx kinds Since Lata had Sone to college, it was Malati rather than

months fell upon each Qther na^ n°t met each other for her sister who had become her confidante. And Malati, she

met only at weddings and fu™ l C”es’ relatives who knew’ would never have agreed to be married off in this

exchanged the latest news nff-j embraced tearfully and summary manner by all the mothers in the world

Lata’« “rougiit •«««»•”» ^m «’“

“•-”nv i.v-wi,i a&amoi u« , i^» .i. mat i i^ii wuiiu who were standing in the A sn^ks to those fail the most lenient test of glamour ? Did Savita really laddus. p-nl'ik ; , _ garden: samosac !,,,,,! • ir he was returning her affectionate look. It was too much.

Lata forgot that she had been defending Pran to Mala(just a short while ago, and began to discover things t(irritate herself with.

‘Prem Nivas’ for a start: the abode of love. An idioti^ name, thought Lata crossly, for this house of arrange! marriages. And a needlessly grandiloquent one: as if i were the centre of the universe and felt obliged to make i philosophical statement about it. And the scene, looked a. objectively, was absurd : seven living people, none of then stupid, sitting around a fire intoning a dead language thai only three of them understood. And yet, Lata thought, ha mind wandering from one thing to another, perhaps this little fire was indeed the centre of the universe. For here il burned, in the middle of this fragrant garden, itself in the heart of Pasand Bagh, the pleasantest locality of Brahmpur, which was the capital of the state of Purva Pradesh, which lay in the centre of the Gangetic plains, which was itself the heartland of India ... and so on through the galaxies to the outer limits of perception and knowledge. The thought did not seem in. the kast trite to Lata; it VitVpêà rier control her irritation at, indeed resentment of, Pran. |

‘Speak up ! Speak up ! If your mother had mumbled like you, we would never have got married.’

Mahesh Kapoor had turned impatiently towards his dumpy little wife, who became even more tongue-tied as a result.

Pran turned and smiled encouragingly at his mother, and quickly rose again in Lata's estimation.

Mahesh Kapoor frowned, but held his peace for a few minutes, after which he burst out, this time to the family priest :

'Is this mumbo-jumbo going to go on for ever ?' j

The priest said something soothing in Sanskrit, as if [

»

blessing Mahesh Kapoor, who felt obliged to lapse into an irked silence. He was irritated for several reasons, one of which was the distinct and unwelcome sight of his arch political rival, the Home Minister, deep in conversation with the large and venerable Chief Minister S.S. Sharma. What could they be plotting? he thought. My stupid wife insisted on inviting Agarwal because our daughters are friends, even though she knew it would sour things for me. And now the Chief Minister is talking to him as if no one else exists. And in my garden !

His other major irritation was directed at Mrs Rupa Mehra. Mahesh Kapoor, once he had taken over the arrangements, had set his heart on inviting a beautiful and renowned singer of ghazals to perform at Prem Nivas, as was the tradition whenever anyone in his family got married. But Mrs Rupa Mehra, though she was not even paying for the wedding, had put her foot down. She could not have 'that sort of person' singing love-lyrics at the wedding of her daughter. 'That sort of person' meant both a Muslim and a courtesan.

Mahesh Kapoor muffed his responses, and the priest repeated them gently.

‘Yes, yes, go on, go on,’ said Mahesh Kapoor. He glowered at the fire.

But now Savita was being given away by her mother with a handful of rose-petals, and all three women were in tears.

Really! thought Mahesh Kapoor. They’ll douse the flames. He looked in exasperation at the main culprit, whose sobs were the most obstreperous.

But Mrs Rupa Mehra was not even bothering to tuck her handkerchief back into her blouse. Her eyes were red and her nose and cheeks were flushed with weeping. She was thinking back to her own wedding. The scent of 4711 eau-de-Cologne brought back unbearably happy memories of her late husband. Then she thought downwards one generation to her beloved Savita who would soon be walking around this fire with Pran to begin her own married life. May it be a longer one than mine, prayed MrsI

Rupa Mehra. May she wear this very sari to her own daughter’s wedding. \

She also thought upwards a generation to her father and this brought on a fresh gush of tears. What the septuagenarian radiologist Dr Kishen Chand Seth had taken offence at, no one knew: probably something said or done by his friend Mahesh Kapoor, but quite possibly by his own daughter; no one could tell for sure. Apart from repudiating his duties as a host, he had

chosen not even to attend his granddaughter's wedding, and had gone furiously off to Delhi 'for a conference of cardiologists', as he claimed. He had taken with him the insufferable Parvati, his thirty-five-year-old second wife, who was ten years younger than Mrs Rupa Mehra herself.

It was also possible, though this did not cross his daughter's mind, that Dr Kishen Chand Seth would have gone mad at the wedding had he attended it, and had in fact fled from that specific eventuality. Short and trim though he had always been, he was enormously fond of food; but owing to a digestive disorder combined with diabetes his diet was now confined to boiled eggs, weak tea, lemon squash, and arrowroot biscuits.

I don't care who stares at me, I have plenty of reasons to cry, said Mrs Rupa Mehra to herself defiantly. I am so happy and heartbroken today. But her heartbreak lasted only a few minutes more. The groom and bride

f

«noititK lasted

„ ~ *v.w minutes more. The groom and bride walked around the fire seven times, Savita keeping her head meekly down, her eyelashes wet with tears ; and Pran and she were man and wife.

After a few concluding words by the priests, everyone (rose. The newly-weds were escorted to a flower-shrouded bench near a sweet-smelling, rough-leaved harsingar tree in white and orange bloom ; and congratulations fell on them and their

parents and all the Mehras and Kapoors present as copiously as those delicate flowers fall to the ground at dawn.

Mrs Rupa Mehra's joy was unconfined. She gobbled the congratulations down like forbidden gulab-jamuns. She looked a little speculatively at her younger daughter, who

appeared to be laughing at her from a distance. Or was she laughing at her sister? Well, she would find out soon enough what the happy tears of matrimony were all about !

Fran's much-shouted-at mother, subdued yet happy, after blessing her son and daughter-in-law, and failing to see her younger son Maan anywhere, had gone over to her daughter Veena. Veena embraced her; Mrs Mahesh Kapoor, temporarily overcome, said nothing, but sobbed and smiled simultaneously. The dreaded Home Minister and his daughter Priya joined them for a few minutes, and in return for their congratulations, Mrs Mahesh Kapoor had a few kind words to say to each of them. Priya, who was married and virtually immured by her in-laws in a house in the old, cramped part of Brahmpur, said, rather wistfully, that the garden looked beautiful. And it was true, thought Mrs Mahesh Kapoor with quiet pride : the garden was indeed looking beautiful. The grass was rich, the gardenias were creamy and fragrant, and a few chrysanthemums and roses were already in bloom. And though she could take no credit for the sudden, prolific blossoming of the harsingar tree, that was surely the grace of the gods whose prized and contested possession, in mythical times, it used to be.

Her lord and master the Minister of Revenue was meanwhile accepting congratulations from the Chief Minister of Purva Pradesh, Shri S.S. Sharma. Sharmaji was rather a hulking man with a perceptible limp and an unconscious and slight vibration of the head, which was exacerbated when, as now, he had had a long day. He ran the state with a mixture of guile, charisma and benevolence. Delhi was far away and rarely interested in his legislative and administrative fief. Though he was uncommunicative about his discussion with his Home Minister, he was nevertheless in good spirits.

Z3s 'g tly nasal voice to Mahesh if™ Rudnia he said in hbeen an active member of the Muslim League ; and though 50 you're cultivating a rural P°or: he had not lived to see the birth of Pakistan, that above all

Ma°hnS h c°nstituency for tlte^omil, was what he had dedicated his life to.

fro a ^ Kapoor smiled. Ever ' ^ne ta^' grey-headed Nawab Sahib, noticing four eyes

grak same urban constitue ^^ I537 ^e nad stooion nim' gravely raised his cupped hand to his forehead in

M %pu? ~ a constituency i-ha/"^ i"1 ^e neart of CH Ponte salutation, then tilted his head sideways with a quiet farm and f" ^ °f the s^e trade^^ mUch of W smile' as if to congratulate his old friend. m "and his knowledge of n.^irrtly-Desnire hi, T°U havent seen Firoz and Imtiaz anywhere, have

mover ings ir

“”^ Knowledge of rural « Clty-uespite hi You naven’t seen Mr

^^toabo^^f^-^wa.the^youî’ he asked Mahesh In the stafP _ .v
_ge and IWprodiirr;,,» l~ jVT*‘r

5^-^j5=>><<2-^

z and Imtiaz anywhere, have Kapoor, after walking slowly

rural constituen

no

cy- By way Of

‘Ose to

, nis Sectoral home and Y glnable that he Wouij ‘No, no - but I
haven’t seen my son either, so I rural constituency. By way of
^ *° COntest from assume....’

Lh?^! t,he nandsome black LIT^T’ he indicated hi, The Nawab
Sahib ralsed his hands slightly, palms for“gnt of-white m; .
acnkan he was ,,,,,,·_ Vs ,,,,r^ ir, , TM<t,r^ <f l,»i^i»eo<>>^

« h ;,,,,—’

Pyjamas, and he was wearing the war-‘ m a gesture of helplessness, I their ,,,, . . onlliantlv emr,r^;5’ After a while he said : ‘So Pran

.. -..^ L-ujnandy embroidered

^ juus with their up-turned toes would present an

incongruous picture in a rice field.

‘Why, nothing is impossible in politics,’ said Sharmaji slowly. ‘After your Zamindari Abolition R-’ -

you will berr,rr,~ - ‘

After a while he said: ‘So Pran is married, and Maan is next. I would imagine you will find him a little less tractable.’

‘Well, tractable or not, there are some people in Ba-

you u -H k y ^arnmdari Ah r • ia ^narrnail well’ tractaDle or not, tftere are some people m K

choJ C°me a hero throueho, /T“ B’J1 goes through naras l have been talking to” said Mahesh Kapoor in

Sharni ^ C°Uld bec°me Chief JU countryside. If you determined tone. ‘Maan has met the father. He’s also

his eyeJlf^ner°UsJy and warily fTT^ ^Y n°t?’ said ^ cl°th business’ We’re making enquiries. Let’s see. Ai

srrnlr; i °n the Nawab Sak’k6 °°ke~ around, anr) what about your twins ? A joint wedding to two sisters ?’

court“8 beard and Looking of «aitar, who was s see’ let’s see” said the Nawab Sahib- thinki,

added’ you might lose a friend or r° Perplexedjy- ‘Of rather sadly about his wife’ buried these many year

j^j L wo in the process ‘ he ‘Inshallah, all of them will settle down soon enough.’

^15^r“—:s:r/—‘i

^f^*S^^ ‘if my father h ^ ImtiaZ Iau8hed’

more. Oh GodF O” behalf °f tw° People^And?*8 ** Shut “P’ b°th °f y°U” Sa’d F’r°Z’ attemPting to aPPear

‘What - v e ‘ 1ater ft more annoyed than he was ; he had had enough of this sort

asked Firoz half.3 if lsnt gating you marri^ a • , of nonsense-
Tm g°ing down- At)ta will be wondering

‘Well, the buff Sy e“ a smile andTfro “ Ci where °n earth
we’ve g0t tO” And s° will your father’ And

disconsôlatelv “w” Z°ne disaPpeared tonight ^“-j ! besides,
we ought to find out if your brother is formally

‘No, no thank Vean0ther” * * ** married yet - and whether
you really do now have a

enjoyed his d ^ u St’^ ^ave Plenty ‘ said P’ * l beautiful sister-
in-law to scold you and curb your

father would with a «lightly e,,i]fv /“?’ F’ro: excesses-‘

the happy hourTi!”0^611 Jess than Maan? «t ^ h’i ‘M ri§ht’
a11 ri8ht’ we’U a11 8° down“ said Maan

‘God knows j ‘ 3 d uncertainly. when| genially. ‘Maybe some
of the bees will cling to us too. And

‘At the firs/r ŪjS- 3t the enquiry stage ‘ said)U I if we get
stung to the heart, Doctor Sahib here can cure us.

For some teas’ Imt’aZ added’ ‘ “ I Cant y°U’ Imtiaz? A11
y°u would have to do would be to

readingF he ren3501!} ^”s de^ghted Maan ‘A f, I app’y a
rose“Peta”to r^e wound isn’t that so ?’ third reading i A j’
‘^ell, let’s hope it n^ ^rsl ‘As ‘ong as t^lere are no contra-
indications,’ said Imtiaz

withholds his ass r’ ^ ‘f if do“” that th” ? tO thl seriouslyHe
laueheH ss^nt- e * resident| ‘No centra-indications,’ said
Maan, laughing as he led

,k~,... .._ ë 3nd took a Connie «f!_... . I thr wav Hnwn fbp
stairs

: plenty,’ slightly ;

«aid Maai

«id Firoz. FirV

-^-^ «.nu rook a couple of long swigs. ‘And what! about your
marriage ?’ he demanded of Firoz. I

Firoz looked a little evasively around the room. It was asl bare
and functional as most of the rooms in Prem Nivas -1 which
looked as if they expected the imminent arrival of a I herd of
constituents. ‘My marriage !’ he said with a laugh. I Maan
nodded vigorously. M

‘Change the subject,’ said Firoz. •

‘Why, if you were to go into the garden instead of* drinking here in seclusion -‘ I

‘It’s hardly seclusion.’ •

‘Don’t interrupt,’ said Maan, throwing an arm around f him. ‘If you were to go down into the garden, a good- | looking, elegant fellow like you, you would be surrounded within seconds by eligible young beauties. And ineligible I ones too. They’d cling to you like bees to a lotus. Curly I Jocks, curly locks, will you be mine ?’ ‘

Firoz flushed. ‘You’ve got rhf ~::~it-

c-j.VI ‘»’

...v,, uccs to a lotus. Curly .vo, vuny locks, will you be mine ?’

Firoz flushed. ‘You’ve got the simile slightly wrong,’ he said. ‘Men are bees, women lotuses.’ Maan quoted a couplet from an Urdu ghazal to the

‘ -“

“en lotuses a couplet from a

besides, we ought to find out if your brother is formally married yet - and whether you really do now have a beautiful sister-in-law to scold you and curb your excesses.'

'All right, all right, we'll all go down,' said Maan genially. 'Maybe some of the bees will cling to us too. And if we get stung to the heart, Doctor Sahib here can cure us. Can't you, Imtiaz? All you would have to do would be to apply a rose-petal to the wound, isn't that so?'

'As long as there are no contra-indications,' said Imtiaz seriously.

'No contra-indications,' said Maan, laughing as he led the way down the stairs.

'You may laugh,' said Imtiaz. 'But some people are allergic even to rose-petals. Talking of which, you have one sticking to your cap.'

'Do I?' asked Maan. 'These things float down from nowhere.'

'So they do,' said Firoz, who v/as walking down just behind him. He gently brushed it away.

1.8

BECAUSE the Nawab Sahib had been looking somewhat lost without his sons, Mahesh Kapoor's daughter Veena had drawn him into her family circle. She asked him about his eldest child, his daughter Zainab, who was a childhood friend of hers

but who, after her marriage, had disappeared into the world of purdah. The old man talked about her rather guardedly, but about her two children with transparent delight. His grandchildren were the only two beings in the world who had the right to interrupt him when he

was studying in his library. But now the great yellow,

ancestral mansion of Baitar House, just a few minutes

walk from Prem Niwas, was somewhat run down and the

library too had suffered. 'Silverfish, you know,' said the

Nawab Sahib. 'And I need help with cataloguing. It's a

gigantic task, and in some ways not very heartening. Some

of the early editions of Ghalib can't be traced now; and

some valuable manuscripts by our own poet Mast. M.

brother never made a list of what he took with him when he

Pakistan 'j

At the word Pakistan, Veena's mother-in-law, withered old Mrs Tandon, flinched. Three years ago, her whole family had had to flee the blood and flames and unforgettable terror of Lahore. They had been wealthy, 'propertied people, but almost everything they had owned was lost and they had been lucky to escape with their lives. Her son Kedarnath, Veena's husband, still had scars on his hands from an attack by rioters on his refugee convoy. Several of their friends had been butchered. .

The young, old Mrs Tandon thought bitterly, are very resilient: her grandchild Bhaskar had of course only been! six at the time; but even Veena and Kedarnath had not let* those events embitter their lives. They had returned here to Veena's hometown, and Kedarnath had set himself up in a small way in - of all polluting, carcass-tainted things - the shoe trade. For old Mrs Tandon, the descent from a decent | prosperity could not have been more painful. She had been f willing to tolerate talking to the Nawab Sahib though he | was a Muslim, but when he mentioned comings and goings from Pakistan, it was too much for her imagination. She felt ill. The pleasant chatter of the garden in Brahmipur was amplified into the cries of the blood-mad mobs on the streets of Lahore, the lights into fire. Daily, sometimes hourly, in her imagination she returned to what she still thought of as her city and her home. It had been beautiful before it had become so suddenly hideous ; it had appeared completely secure so shortly before it was lost for ever.

The Nawab Sahib did not notice that anything was the matter, but Veena did, and quickly changed the subject

I

even at the cost of appearing rude. 'Where's Bhaskar ?' she asked her husband.

'I don't know. I think I saw him near the food, the little frog,' said Kedarnath.

'I wish you wouldn't call him that,' said Veena. 'He is your son. It's not auspicious '

'It's not my name for him, it's Maan's,' said Kedarnath with a smile. He enjoyed being mildly henpecked. 'But I'll call him whatever you want me to.'

Veena led her mother-in-law away. And to distract the old lady she did in fact get involved in looking for her son. Finally they found Bhaskar. He was not eating anything but simply standing under the great multicoloured cloth canopy that covered the food tables, gazing upwards with pleased and abstract wonderment at the elaborate geometrical patterns - red rhombuses, green trapeziums, yellow squares and blue triangles - from which it had been stitched together.

1.9

THE crowds had thinned; the guests, some chewing paan, were departing at the gate; a heap of gifts had grown by the side of the bench where Pran and Savita had been sitting. Finally only they and a few members of the family were left - and the yawning servants who would put away the more valuable furniture for the night, or pack the gifts in a trunk under the watchful eye of Mrs Rupa Mehra.

The bride and groom were lost in their thoughts. They avoided looking at each other now. They would spend the night in a carefully prepared room in Prem Nivas, and leave for a week's honeymoon in Simla tomorrow.

Lata tried to imagine the nuptial room. Presumably it would be fragrant with tuberose; that, at least, was Malati's confident opinion. I'll always associate tuberose with Pran, Lata thought. It was not at all pleasant to follow her imagination further. That Savita would be sleeping with Pran tonight did not bear thinking of. It did!

not strike her as being at all romantic. Perhaps they would be too exhausted, she thought optimistically. 'What are you thinking of, Lata?' asked her mother; i

'Oh, nothing, Ma,' said Lata automatically. * f

'You turned up your nose. I saw it.' Lata blushed.

'I don't think I ever want to get married,' she said emphatically.

Mrs Rupa Mehra was too wearied by the wedding, -to* ;t

exhausted by emotion, too softened by Sanskrit, too cum

bered with congratulations, too overwrought, in short, to

do anything but stare at Lata for ten seconds. What on earth had got into the girl ? What was good enough for her mother and her mother's mother and her mother's mother's; mother should be good enough for her. Lata, though, had* always been a difficult one, with a strange will of her own! quiet but unpredictable - like that time in St Sophia's! when she had wanted to become a nun! But Mrs Rupaf Mehra too had a will, and she was determined to have her| own way, even if she was under no illusions as to Lata's j pliability. I

And yet, Lata was named after that most pliable thing, a I vine, which was trained to cling : first to her family, then f to her husband. Indeed, when she was a baby, Lata's \ fingers had had a strong and coiling grasp which even now f came back with a sweet vividness to her mother. Suddenly Mrs Rupa Mehra burst out with the inspired remark :

‘Lata, you are a vine, you must cling to your husband !’

It was not a success.

‘Cling?’ said Lata. ‘Cling?’ The word was pronounced with such quiet scorn that her mother could not help bursting into tears. How terrible it was to have an ungrateful daughter. And how unpredictable a baby could be.

Now that the tears were running down her cheeks, Mrs Rupa Mehra transferred them fluidly from one daughter to the other. She clasped Savita to her bosom and wept loudly. ‘You must write to me, Savita darling,’ she said. ‘You must write to me every day from Simla. Pran, you are

P

30

like my own son now, you must be responsible and see to it. Soon I will be all alone in Calcutta - all alone.’

This was of course quite untrue. Arun and Varun and Meenakshi and Aparna would all be crowded together with her in Arun’s little flat in Sunny Park. But Mrs Rupa Mehra was one who believed with unformulated but absolute conviction in the paramountcy of subjective over objective truth.

1.10

THE tonga clip-clopped along the road, and the tongawallah sang out :

‘A heart was shattered into bits - and one fell here, and one fell there ‘

Varun started to hum along, then sang louder, then suddenly stopped.

‘Oh, don’t stop,’ said Malati, nudging Lata gently. ‘You have a nice voice. Like a bulbul.’

‘In a china-china-shop,’ she whispered to Lata.

‘Heh, heh, heh.’ Varun’s laugh was nervous. Realizing that it sounded weak, he tried to make it slightly sinister. But it didn’t work. He felt miserable. And Malati, with her green eyes and sarcasm - for it had to be sarcasm - wasn’t helping.

The tonga was quite crowded: Varun was sitting with young Bhaskar in the front, next to the tonga-wallah; and back-to-back with them sat Lata and Malati - both dressed in salwaar-kameez - and Aparna in her ice-creamstained sweater and a frock. It was a sunny winter morning.

The white-turbaned old tonga-wallah enjoyed driving furiously through this part of town with its broad, relatively uncrowded streets - unlike the cramped madness of Old Brahmpur. He started talking to his horse, urging her on.

Malati now began to sing the words of the popular film song herself. She hadn't meant to discourage Varun. It was pleasant to think of shattered hearts on a cloudless

morning.

Varun didn't join in. But after a while he took her hand

in his hands and said, turning around : I

'You have a - a wonderful voice. ' I

It was true. Malati loved music, and studied classical

singing under Ustad Majeed Khan, one of the finest singers

in north India. She had even got Lata interested in Indian!

classical music during the time they had lived together in

the student hostel. As a result, Lata often found herself

humming some tune or other in one of her favourite raags. I

Malati did not disclaim Varun's compliment. •

‘Do you think so?’ she said, turning around to look»

deeply into his eyes. ‘You are very sweet to say so.’ I

Varun blushed to the depths of his soul and was speech-1

less for a few minutes. But as they passed the Brahmpur»

Race-course, he gripped the tonga-wallah’s arm and cried: I

‘Stop F •

‘What’s the matter ?’ asked Lata. B

‘Oh - nothing - nothing - if we’re in a hurry, Jet’s go •

on. Yes, let’s go on.’ •

‘Of course we’re not, Varun Bhai,’ she said. ‘We’re only I
going to the zoo. Let’s stop if you want.’ •

After they had got down, Varun, almost uncontrollably I
excited, wandered to the white palings and stared through. I
‘It’s the only anti-clockwise race-course in India other F than
Lucknow,’ he breathed, almost to himself, awestruck. ‘They
say it’s based on the Derby,’ he added to

young Bhaskar, who happened to be standing next to him.

‘But what’s the difference?’ asked Bhaskar. ‘The distance is the same, isn’t it, whether you run clockwise or anticlockwise?’

Varun paid no attention to Bhaskar’s question. He had started walking slowly, dreamily, by himself, anti-clockwise along the fence. He was almost pawing the earth. Lata caught up with him : ‘Varun Bhai ?’ she said.

‘Er - yes ? Yes ?’

‘About yesterday evening.’

\

‘Yesterday evening ?’ Varun dragged himself back to the two-legged world. ‘What happened ?’

‘Our sister got married.’

‘Ah. Oh. Yes, yes, I know. Savita,’ he added, hoping to imply alertness by specificity.

‘Well,’ said Lata, ‘don’t let yourself be bullied by Arun Bhai. Just don’t.’ She stopped smiling, and looked at him as a shadow crossed his face. ‘I really hate it, Varun Bhai, I really hate seeing him bully you. I don’t mean that you should cheek

him or answer back or anything, just that you shouldn't let it hurt you the way that - well, that I can see it does.'

'No, no -' he said, uncertainly.

'Just because he's a few years older doesn't make him your father and teacher and sergeant-major all rolled into one.'

Varun nodded unhappily. He was too well aware that while he lived in his elder brother's house he was subject to his elder brother's will.

'Anyway, I think you should be more confident,' continued Lata. 'Arun Bhai tries to crush everyone around him like a steamroller, and it's up to us to remove our egos from his path. I have a hard enough time, and I'm not even in Calcutta. I just thought I'd say so now, because at the house I'll hardly get the chance to talk to you alone. And tomorrow you'll be gone.'

Lata spoke from experience, as Varun well knew. Arun, when angry, hardly cared what he said. When Lata had taken it into her head to become a nun - a foolish, adolescent notion, but her own - Arun, exasperated with the lack of success of his bludgeoning attempts at dissuasion, had said: 'All right, go ahead, become a nun, ruin your life, no one would have married you anyway, you look just like the Bible - flat in front and flat at the back.' Lata thanked God that she wasn't studying at Calcutta University; for most of the year at least, she was outside the range of Arun's blunderbuss. Even though those words were no longer true, the memory of them still stung.

‘I wish you were in Calcutta,’ said Varun. ‘Surely you must have some friends -’ said Lata. ‘Well, in the evening Arun Bhai and Meenakshi Bhabhi are often out and I have to mind Aparna,’ said Varun, smiling weakly. ‘Not that I mind,’ he added.

‘Varun, this won’t do,’ said Lata. She placed her hand

firmly on his slouching shoulder and said: ‘I want you to

go out with your friends - with people you really like and:

who like you - for at least two evenings a week. Pretend

you have to attend a coaching session or something.’ Lata*

didn’t care for deception, and she didn’t know whether

Varun would be any good at it, but she didn’t want things ;

to continue as they were. She was worried about Varun, \

He had looked even more jittery at the wedding than when

she had seen him a few months previously. j

A train hooted suddenly from alarmingly close, and the tonga horse shied. \

‘How amazing,’ said Varun to himself, all thoughts of J

everything else obliterated. i

He patted the horse when they got back into the tonga. [

‘How far is the station from here ?’ he asked the tonga- (

wallah. j

‘Oh, it’s just over there,’ said the tonga-wallah, indicating vaguely the built-up area beyond the well-laid-out gardens of the race-course. ‘Not far from the zoo. ‘

I wonder if it gives the local horses an advantage, Varun said to himself. Would the others tend to bolt? What difference would it make to the odds ?

1.11

WHEN they got to the zoo, Bhaskar and Aparna joined forces and asked to ride on the children’s railway, which, Bhaskar noted, also went around anti-clockwise. Lata and Malati wanted a walk after the tonga ride, but they were overruled. All five of them sat in a small, post-box-red ‘ compartment, squashed together and facing each other this I time, while the

little green steam engine puffed along on its p one-foot-wide track. Varun sat opposite Malati, their knees

I

almost touching. Malati enjoyed the fun of this, but Varun was so disconcerted that he looked desperately around at the giraffes, and even stared attentively at the crowds of schoolchildren, some of whom were licking huge bobbins of pink spun candy. Aparna's eyes began to shine with anticipation.

Since Bhaskar was nine, and Aparna a third of his age, they did not have much to say to each other. They attached themselves to their most-favoured adults. Aparna, brought up by her socialite parents with alternating indulgence and irritation, found Lata reassuringly certain in her affection. In Lata's company she behaved in a less brat-like manner. Bhaskar and Varun got on famously once Bhaskar succeeded in getting him to concentrate. They discussed mathematics, with special reference to racing odds.

They saw the elephant, the camel, the emu, the common bat, the brown pelican, the red fox, and all the big cats. They even saw a smaller one, the black-spotted leopard-cat, as he paced frenziedly across the floor of his cage.

But the best stop of all was the reptile house. Both children were eager to see the snake pit, which was full of fairly sluggish pythons, and the glass cases with their deadly vipers and kraits and cobras. And also, of course, the cold, corrugated crocodiles onto whose backs some schoolchildren and visiting villagers were throwing coins while others, as the white, serrated mouths opened lazily far below, leaned over the

railings and pointed and squealed and shuddered. Luckily Varun had a taste for the sinister, and took the kids inside. Lata and Malati refused to go in.

‘I see enough horrifying things as a medical student,’ said Malati.

‘I wish you wouldn’t tease Varun,’ said Lata after a while.

‘Oh, I wasn’t teasing him,’ said Malati. ‘Just listening to him attentively. It’s good for him.’ She laughed.

‘Mm - you make him nervous.’

‘You’re very protective of your elder brother.’

‘He’s not - oh, I see - yes, my younger elder brother.’

35 Well, since I don’t have a younger brother, I suppose I’ve

given him the part. But seriously, Malati, I am worried

about him. And so is my mother. We don’t know what

he’s going to do when he graduates in a few months. He

hasn’t shown much aptitude for anything. And Arun bullies

him fearfully. I wish some nice girl would take him in charge. ‘

‘And I’m not the one ? I must say, he has a certain feeble charm. Heh, hehF Malati imitated Varun’s laugh. •;

‘Don’t be facetious, Malati. I don’t know about Varun, I but my mother would have a fit,’ said Lata. ‘•

This was certainly true. Even though it was an impossible j proposition geographically, the very thought of it would have given Mrs Rupa Mehra nightmares. Malati Trivedi, apart from being one of a small handful of girls among the t almost five hundred boys at the Prince of Wales Medical I College, was notorious for her outspoken views, her partici- | pation in the activities of the Socialist Party, and her love [

affairs - though not with any of those five hundred boys, I

whom, by and large, she treated with contempt. I

‘Your mother likes me, I can tell,’ said Malati. I

‘That’s beside the point,’ said Lata. ‘And actually, I’m L

quite amazed that she does. She usually judges things by J

influences. I would have thought you’re a bad influence on 1

me.’ I

But this was not entirely true, even from Mrs Rupa I

Mehra’s viewpoint. Malati had certainly given Lata more 1

confidence than she had had when she had emerged wet- 1

feathered from St Sophia’s. And Malati had succeeded in I

getting Lata to enjoy Indian classical music, which (unlike I

ghazals) Mrs Rupa Mehra approved of. That they should I

have become room-mates at all was because the govern- I
ment medical college (usually referred to by its royal title) I
had no provision for housing its small contingent of women 1
and had persuaded the university to accommodate them in I
its hostels. JL

Malati was charming, dressed conservatively but attrac- V
tively, and could talk to Mrs Rupa Mehra about everything T

from religious fasts to cooking to genealogy, matters that I

36

Her own westernized children showed very little interest in. She was also fair, an enormous plus in Mrs Rupa Mehra's subconscious calculus. Mrs Rupa Mehra was convinced that Malati Trivedi, with her dangerously attractive greenish eyes, must have Kashmiri or Sindhi blood in her. So far, however, she had not discovered any.

Though they did not often talk about it, the bond of paternal loss also tied Lata and Malati together.

Malati had lost her adored father, a surgeon from Agra, when she was eight. He had been a successful and handsome man with a wide acquaintance and a varied history of work : he had been attached to the army for a while and had gone to Afghanistan ; he had taught in Lucknow at the medical college; he had also been in private practice. At the time of his death, although he had not been very good at saving money, he had owned a fair amount of property - largely in the form of houses. Every five years or so he would uproot himself and move to another town in U.P. Meerut, Bareilly, Lucknow, Agra. Wherever he lived he built a new house, but without disposing of the old ones. When he died, Malati's mother went into what seemed like an irreversible depression, and remained in that state for two years.

Then she pulled herself together. She had a large family to take care of, and it was essential that she think of things in a practical way. She was a very simple, idealistic, upright

woman, and she was concerned more with what was right than with what was convenient or approved of or monetarily beneficial. It was in that light that she was determined to bring up her family.

And what a family! - almost all girls. The eldest was a proper tomboy, sixteen years old when her father died, and already married to a rural landlord's son; she lived about twenty miles away from Agra in a huge house with twenty servants, lichi orchards, and endless fields, but even after her marriage she joined her sisters in Agra for months at a time. This daughter had been followed by two sons, but they had both died in childhood, one aged five, the other three. The boys had been followed by Malati herself,

37who was eight years younger than her sister. She also grew up as a sort of boy - though not by any means like the tomboy her sister was - for a variety of reasons connected with her infancy: the direct gaze in her unusual eyes, her boyish look, the fact that the boys' clothes were at hand, the sadness that her parents had experienced at the death of their two sons. After Malati came three girls, one after another; then another boy; and then her father died. I

Malati had therefore been brought up almost entirely among women; even her little brother had been like a little sister; he had been too young to be treated as anything different. (After a while, perhaps out of perplexity, he had gone the way of his brothers.) The girls grew up in an atmosphere where men came to be seen as exploitative and threatening; many of the men Malati came into contact with were precisely that. No one could touch the memory of her father. Malati was determined to become a doctor like him, and never allowed his instruments to rust. She intended one day to use them. I

Who were these men ? One was the cousin who did them out of many of the things that her father had collected and used, but which were lying in storage after his death. Malati's mother had cleared out what she had seen as inessentials from their life. It was not necessary now to have two kitchens, one European and one Indian. The china and fine cutlery for western food was put away, together with a great deal of furniture, in a garage. The cousin came, got the keys from the grieving widow, told her he would manage matters, and cleaned out whatever had been stored. Malati's mother never saw a rupee of the proceeds. 'Well,' she had said philosophically, 'at least my sins have lessened.'

Another was the servant who acted as an intermediary for the sale of the houses. He would contact property agents or other prospective buyers in the towns where the houses were located, and make deals with them. He had something of a reputation as a cheat.

Yet another was her father's younger brother, who still lived in the Lucknow house, with his wife downstairs and

38a dancing girl upstairs. He would happily have cheated them, if he had been able to, over the sale of that house. He needed money to spend on the dancing girl.

Then there was the young - well, twenty-six-year-old but rather sleazy college teacher who had lived downstairs in a rented room when Malati was fifteen or so. Malati's mother wanted her to learn English, and had no compunction, no matter what the neighbours said (and they said a great deal, not much of it charitable) about sending Malati to learn from him - though he was a bachelor. Perhaps in this case the neighbours were right. He very soon fell madly in love with Malati, and requested her mother for permission to marry her.

When Malati was asked by her mother for her views on the matter, she was amazed and shocked, and refused point-blank.

At the medical college in Brahmipur, and before that, when she had studied Intermediate Science in Agra, Malati had had a lot to put up with : teasing, gossip, the pulling of the light chunni around her neck, and remarks such as ‘She wants to be a boy.’ This was very far from the truth. The remarks were unbearable and only diminished when, provoked by one boy beyond endurance, she had slapped his face hard in front of his friends.

Men fell for her at a rapid rate, but she saw them as beneath her attention. It was not as if she truly hated men ; most of the time she didn’t. It was just that her standards were too high. No one came near the image she and her sisters had of their father, and most men struck her as being immature. Besides, marriage was a distraction for someone who had set her sights upon the career of medicine, and she was not enormously concerned if she never got married.

She over-filled the unforgiving minute. As a girl of twelve or thirteen, she had been a loner, even in her crowded family. She loved reading, and people knew better than to talk to her when she had a book in her hands. When this happened, her mother did not insist that she help with cooking and housework. ‘Malati’s reading,’ was enough for people to avoid the room where she lay or sat

39crouched, for she would pounce angrily on anyone who dared disturb her. Sometimes she would actually hide from people, seeking out a corner where no one would be likfiy to find her. They got the message soon enough. As the years passed, she guided the education of her younger sisters. Her

elder sister, the tomboy, guided them all - or, rather, bossed them around - in other matters.

Malati's mother was remarkable in that she wished her daughters to be independent. She wanted them, apart from their schooling at a Hindi medium school, to learn music and dancing and languages (and especially to be good at English) ; and if this meant that they had to go to someone's house to learn what was needed, they would go - regardless of what people said. If a tutor had to be called to the house of the six women, he would be called. Young men would look up in fascination at the first floor of the house, as they heard five girls singing along undemurely together. If the girls wanted ice-cream as a special treat, they would be allowed to go to the shop by themselves and eat it. When neighbours objected to the shamelessness of letting young girls go around by themselves in Agra, they were allowed occasionally to go to the shop after dark instead which, presumably, was worse, though less detectable. Malati's mother made it clear to the girls that she would give them the best education possible, but that they would have to find their own husbands. *

Soon after she came to Brahmpur, Malati fell in love ! with a married musician, who was a socialist. She remained involved with the Socialist Party even when their affair ended. Then she had another rather unhappy love affair. I At the moment she was unattached. |

Though full of energy most of the time, Malati would ' fall ill every few months or so, and her mother would | come down from Agra to Brahmpur to cure her of the evil i eye, an influence that lay outside the province of western i medicine. Because Malati had such remarkable eyes herself,]\ she was a special target of the evil eye.

A dirty, grey, pink-legged crane surveyed Malati and Lata with its small, intense red eyes; then a grey filmblinked sideways across each eyeball, and it walked carefully away.

‘Let’s surprise the kids by buying some of that spun candy for them,’ said Lata as a vendor went past. ‘I wonder what’s keeping them. What’s the matter, Malati? What are you thinking of?’

‘Love,’ said Malati.

‘Oh, love, what a boring subject,’ said Lata. ‘I’ll never fall in love. I know you do from time to time. But -’ She lapsed into silence, thinking once again, with some distaste, of Savita and Pran, who had left for Simla. Presumably they would return from the hills deeply in love. It was intolerable.

‘Well, sex then.’

‘Oh please, Malati,’ said Lata looking around quickly. ‘I’m not interested in that either,’ she added, blushing.

‘Well, marriage then. I’m wondering whom you’ll get married to. Your mother will get you married off within a year, I’m sure of it. And like an obedient little mouse, you’ll obey her.’

‘Quite right,’ said Lata.

This rather annoyed Malati, who bent down and plucked three narcissi growing immediately in front of a sign that read, Do not pluck the flowers. One she kept, and two she handed to

Lata, who felt very awkward holding such illegally gotten gains. Then Malati bought five sticks of flossy pink candy, handed four to Lata to hold with her two narcissi, and began to eat the fifth.

Lata started to laugh.

‘And what will happen then to your plan to teach in a small school for poor children ?’ demanded Malati.

‘Look, here they come,’ said Lata.

Aparna was looking petrified and holding Varun’s hand tightly. For a few minutes they all ate their candy, walking towards the exit. At the turnstile a ragged urchin looked longingly at them, and Lata quickly gave him a small coin. He had been on the point of begging, but hadn’t yet done so, and looked astonished.

One of her narcissi went into the horse’s mane. The

4itonga-wallah again began to sing of his shattered heart. This time they all joined in. Passers-by turned their heads as the tonga trotted past.

The crocodiles had had a liberating effect on Varun. But when they got back to Fran’s house on the university campus, where Arun and Meenakshi and Mrs Rupa Mehra were staying, he had to face the consequences of returning an hour late. Aparna’s mother and grandmother were looking anxious.

‘You damn irresponsible fool,’ said Arun, dressing him down in front of everyone. ‘You, as the man, are in charge, and if you say twelve-thirty, it had better be twelve-thirty, especially since you have my daughter with you. And my sister. I don’t want to hear any excuses. You damned idiot.’ He was furious. ‘And you -’ he added to Lata, ‘you should have known better than to let him lose track of the time. You know what he’s like.’

Varun bowed his head and looked shiftily at his feet. He was thinking how satisfying it would be to feed his elder brother, head first, to the largest of the crocodiles.

1.12

ONE of the reasons why Lata was studying in Brahmipur was because this was where her grandfather, Dr Kishen Chand Seth, lived. He had promised his daughter Rupa when Lata first came to study here that he would take very good care of her. But this had never happened. Dr Kishen Chand Seth was far too preoccupied either with bridge at the Subzipore Club or feuds with the likes of the Minister of Revenue or passion for his young wife Parvati to be capable of fulfilling any guardian-like role towards Lata. Since it was from his grandfather that Arun had inherited his atrocious temper, perhaps this was, all in all, not a bad thing. At any rate, Lata did not mind living in the university dormitory. Far better for her studies, she thought, than under the wing of her irascible Nana. Just after Raghbir Mehra had died, Mrs Rupa Mehra

42-and her family had gone to live with her father, who at that stage had not yet remarried. Given her straitened finances, this seemed to be the only thing to do ; she also thought that he might be lonely, and hoped to help him with his household affairs. The experiment had lasted a few months, and had been

a disaster. Dr Kishen Chand Seth was an impossible man to live with. Tiny though he was, he was a force to reckon with not only at the medical college, from which he had retired as Principal, but in Brahmpur at large : everyone was scared of him and obeyed him tremblingly. He expected his home life to run on similar lines. He overrode Rupa Mehra's writ with respect to her own children. He left home suddenly for weeks on end without leaving money or instructions for the staff. Finally, he accused his daughter, whose good looks had survived her widowhood, of making eyes at his colleagues when he invited them home - a shocking accusation for the heartbroken though sociable Rupa.

The teenaged Arun had threatened to beat up his grandfather. There had been tears and yells and Dr Kishen Chand Seth had pounded the floor with his stick. Then Mrs Rupa Mehra had left, weeping and determined, with her brood of four, and had sought refuge with sympathetic friends in Darjeeling.

Reconciliation had been effected a year later in a renewed bout of weeping. Since then things had jolted along. The marriage with Parvati (which had shocked not just his family but Brahmpur at large because of the disparity of age), Lata's enrolment at Brahmpur University, Savita's engagement (which Dr Kishen Chand Seth had helped arrange), Savita's wedding (which he had almost wrecked and from which he had wilfully absented himself) : all these were landmarks along an extremely bumpy road. But family was family, and, as Mrs Rupa Mehra continually told herself, one had to take the rough with the smooth.

Several months had now passed since Savita's wedding. Winter had gone and the pythons in the zoo had emerged from hibernation. Roses had replaced narcissi, and had been replaced in their turn by the purple-wreath creeper, whose five-bladed flowers helicoptered gently to the ground

43 in the hot breeze. The broad, silty-brown Ganga, flowing due east past the ugly chimneys of the tannery and the marble edifice of the Barsaat Mahal, past Old Brahmpur { with its crowded bazaars and alleys, temples and mosques, past the bathing ghats and the cremation ghat and the Brahmpur Fort, past the whitewashed pillars of the Subzipore Club and the spacious estate of the university, had shrunken with the summer, but boats and steamers still plied busily up and down its length, as did trains along the parallel railway line that bounded Brahmpur to the south.

Lata had left the hostel and had gone to live with Savita and Pran, who had descended from Simla to the plains very much in love. Malati visited Lata often, and had grown to like the lanky Pran, of whom she had formed such an unfavourable first impression. Lata too liked his decent, affectionate ways, and was not too upset to learn that Savita was pregnant. Mrs Rupa Mehra wrote long letters to her daughters from Arun's flat in Calcutta, and complained repeatedly that no one replied to her letters either soon enough or often enough.

Though she did not mention this in any of her letters for fear of enraging her daughter, Mrs Rupa Mehra had tried - without success - to find a match for Lata in Calcutta. Perhaps she had not made enough effort, she told herself: she was, after all, still recovering from the excitement and exertion of Savita's wedding. But now at last she was going back to Brahmpur for a three-month stint at what she had begun to call her second home: her daughter's home, not her father's. As the train puffed along towards Brahmpur, the propitious city which had yielded her one son-in-law already, Mrs Rupa Mehra promised herself that she would make another attempt. Within a day or two of her arrival she would go to her father for advice.

IN the event, it was not necessary to go to Dr Kishen Chand Seth for advice. He drove to the university the next day in a fury and arrived at Pran Kapoor's house.

44»

It was three in the afternoon, and hot. Pran was at the department. Lata was attending a lecture on the Metaphysical Poets. Savita had gone shopping. Mansoor, the young servant, tried to soothe Dr Kishen Chand Seth by offering him tea, coffee or fresh lime juice. All this was brushed brusquely aside.

'Is anyone at home? Where is everyone?' asked Dr Kishen Chand Seth in a rage. His short, compressed and very jowly appearance made him look a little like a fierce and wrinkled Tibetan watchdog. (Mrs Rupa Mehra's good looks had been the gift of her mother.) He carried a carved Kashmiri cane which he used more for emphasis than for support. Mansoor hurried inside.

'Burri Memsahib?' he called, knocking at the door of Mrs Rupa Mehra's room.

'What?... Who?'

'Burri Memsahib, your father is here.'

'Oh. Oh.' Mrs Rupa Mehra, who had been enjoying an afternoon nap, woke into a nightmare. 'Tell him I will be with

him immediately, and offer him some tea.'

'Yes, Memsahib.'

Mansoor entered the drawing room. Dr Seth was staring at an ashtray.

'Well ? Are you dumb as well as half-witted ?' asked Dr Kishen Chand Seth.

'She's just coming, Sahib.'

'Who's just coming ? Fool !'

'Burri Memsahib, Sahib. She was resting.'

That Rupa, his mere chit of a daughter, could ever somehow have been elevated into not just a Memsahib but a Burri Memsahib puzzled and annoyed Dr Seth.

Mansoor said, 'Will you have some tea, Sahib? Or coffee?'

'Just now you offered me nimbu pani.'

'Yes, Sahib.'

'A glass of nimbu pani.'

‘Yes, Sahib. At once.’ Mansoor made to go.

‘And oh -‘

‘Yes, Sahib?’

45’ Are there any arrowroot biscuits in this house ?’

‘I think so, Sahib.’

Mansoor went into the back garden to pluck a couple of limes, then returned to the kitchen to squeeze them into juice.

Dr Kishen Chand Seth picked up a day-old Statesman in preference to that day’s Brahmipur Chronicle, and sat down to read in an armchair. Everyone was half-witted in this house.

Mrs Rupa Mehra dressed hurriedly in a black and white cotton sari and emerged from her room. She entered the drawing room, and began to apologize.

‘Oh, stop it, stop it, stop all this nonsense,’ said Dr Kishen Chand Seth impatiently in Hindi.

‘Yes, Baoji.’

‘After waiting for a week I decided to visit you. What kind of daughter are you ?’

‘A week ?’ said Mrs Rupa Mehra palely.

‘Yes, yes, a week. You heard me, Burri Memsahib.’

Mrs Rupa Mehra didn’t know which was worse, her father’s anger or his sarcasm.

‘But I only arrived from Calcutta yesterday.’

Her father seemed ready to explode at this patent fiction when Mansoor came in with the nimbu pani and a plate of arrowroot biscuits. He noticed the expression on Dr Seth’s face and stood hesitantly by the door.

‘Yes, yes, put it down here, what are you waiting for?’

Mansoor set the tray down on a small glass-topped table and turned to leave. Dr Seth took a sip and bellowed in fury-

‘Scoundrel !’

Mansoor turned, trembling. He was only sixteen, and was standing in for his father, who had taken a short leave. None of his teachers during his five years at a village school had inspired in him such erratic terror as Burri Memsahib’s crazy father.

‘You rogue - do you want to poison me ?’

‘No, Sahib.’

‘What have you given me ?’

46

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‘Nimbu pani, Sahib.’

Dr Seth, jowls shaking, looked closely at Mansoor. Was he trying to cheek him ?

‘Of course it’s nimbu pani. Did you think I thought it was whisky ?’

‘Sahib.’ Mansoor was nonplussed.

‘What have you put in it ?’

‘Sugar, Sahib.’

‘You buffoon! I have my nimbu pani made with salt, not sugar,’ roared Dr Kishen Chand Seth. ‘Sugar is poison for me.’

I have diabetes, like your Burri Memsahib. How many times have I told you that ?

Mansoor was tempted to reply, 'Never,' but thought better of it. Usually Dr Seth had tea, and he brought the milk and sugar separately.

Dr Kishen Chand Seth rapped his stick on the floor. 'Go. Why are you staring at me like an owl ?'

'Yes, Sahib. I'll make another glass.'

'Leave it. No. Yes - make another glass.'

'With salt, Sahib.' Mansoor ventured to smile. He had quite a nice smile.

'What are you laughing at like a donkey ?' asked Dr Seth.
'With salt, of course.'

'Yes, Sahib.'

'And, idiot -'

'Yes, Sahib?'

'With pepper too.'

‘Yes, Sahib.’

Dr Kishen Chand Seth veered around towards his daughter. She wilted before him.

‘What kind of daughter do I have ?’ he asked rhetorically. Rupa Mehra waited for the answer, and it was not long in coming. ‘Ungrateful!’ Her father bit into an arrowroot biscuit for emphasis. ‘Soggy !’ he added in disgust.

Mrs Rupa Mehra knew better than to protest.

Dr Kishen Chand Seth went on :

‘You have been back from Calcutta for a week and you haven’t visited me once. Is it me you hate so much or your stepmother ?’

47 Since her stepmother, Parvati, was considerably younger than herself, Mrs Rupa Mehra found it very difficult to think of her other than as her father’s nurse and, later, mistress. Though fastidious, Mrs Rupa Mehra did not entirely resent Parvati. Her father had been lonely for three decades after her mother had died. Parvati was good to him and (she supposed) good for him. Anyway, thought Mrs Rupa Mehra, this is the way things happen in the « world. It is best to be on good terms with everyone.

‘But I only arrived here yesterday,’ she said. She had told him so a minute ago, but he evidently did not believe ‘

her.

‘Hunh!’ said Dr Seth dismissively.

‘By the Brahmipur Mail.’

‘You wrote in your letter that you would be coming last

week.’

‘But I couldn’t get reservations, Baoji, so I decided to stay in Calcutta another week.’ This was true, but the pleasure of spending time with her three-year-old granddaughter Aparna had also been a factor in her delay.

‘Have you heard of telegrams?’

‘I thought of sending you one, Baoji, but I didn’t think it was so important. Then, the expense....’

‘Ever since you became a Mehra you have become completely evasive.’

This was an unkind cut, and could not fail to wound. Mrs Rupa Mehra bowed her head.

‘Here. Have a biscuit,’ said her father in a conciliatory

manner.

Mrs Rupa Mehra shook her head.

‘Eat, fool!’ said her father with rough affection. ‘Or are you still keeping those brainless fasts that are so bad for

your health?’

‘It is Ekadashi today.’ Mrs Rupa Mehra fasted on the eleventh day of each lunar fortnight in memory of her

husband.

‘I don’t care if it’s ten Ekadashis,’ said her father with some heat. ‘Ever since you came under the influence of the Mehras you have become as religious as your ill-fated

48mother. There have been too many mismatched marriages in this family.’

The combination of these two sentences, loosely coupled in several possible wounding interpretations, was too much for Mrs Rupa Mehra. Her nose began to redden. Her husband’s family was no more religious than it was evasive. Raghubir’s brothers and sisters had taken her to their heart in a manner both affecting and comforting to a sixteen-year-old bride, and still, eight years after her husband’s death, she visited as many of them as possible in the course of what her children called

her Annual Trans-India Rail Pilgrimage. If she was growing to be 'as religious as her mother' (which she was not - at least not yet), the operative influence was probably the obvious one: that of her mother, who had died in the post-First-World-War influenza epidemic, when Rupa was very young. A faded image now came before her eyes: the soft spirit of Dr Kishen Chand Seth's first wife could not have been more distant from his own freethinking, allopathic soul. His comment about mismatched marriages injured the memory of two loved ghosts, and was possibly even intended as an insult to the asthmatic Pran.

'Oh don't be so sensitive!' said Dr Kishen Chand Seth brutally. Most women, he had decided, spent two-thirds of their time weeping and whimpering. What good did they think it did? As an afterthought he added, 'You should get Lata married off soon.'

Mrs Rupa Mehra's head jerked up. 'Oh? Do you think so?' she said. Her father seemed even more full of surprises than usual.

'Yes. She must be nearly twenty. Far too late. Parvati got married when she was in her thirties, and see what she got. A suitable boy must be found for Lata.'

'Yes, yes, I was just thinking the same,' said Mrs Rupa Mehra. 'But I don't know what Lata will say.'

Dr Kishen Chand Seth frowned at this irrelevance.

'And where will I find a suitable boy?' she continued 'We were lucky with Savita.'

‘Lucky - nothing! I made the introduction. Is she preg

I

‘Pregnant? No one tells me anything,’ said Dr Kishen Chand Seth. I

‘Yes, Baoji.’ •

Dr Seth paused to interpret the yes. Then he said: ‘It’s | about time. I hope I get a great-grandson this time.’ He f paused again. ‘How is she ?’ A

‘Well, a bit of morning sickness,’ began Mrs Rupa I Mehra. »

‘No, idiot, I mean my great-granddaughter, Arun’s , child,’ said Dr Kishen Chand Seth impatiently. !

‘Oh, Aparna ? She’s very sweet. She’s grown very at- ‘\ tached to me,’ said Mrs Rupa Mehra happily. ‘Arun and ? Meenakshi send their love.’ j

This seemed to satisfy Dr Seth for the moment, and he ! bit his arrowroot biscuit carefully. ‘Soft,’ he complained. I ‘Soft.’ •

Things had to be just so for her father, Mrs Rupa Mehra knew. When she was a child she had not been allowed to drink water with her meals. Each morsel had to be chewed twenty-four

times to aid digestion. For a man so particular about, indeed so fond of, his food, it was sad to see him reduced to biscuits and boiled eggs.

‘I’ll see what I can do for Lata,’ her father went on. ‘There’s a young radiologist at the Prince of Wales. I can’t remember his name. If we had thought about it earlier and used our imaginations we could have captured Fran’s younger brother and had a double wedding. But now they say he’s got engaged to that Banaras girl. Perhaps that is just as well,’ he added, remembering that he was supposed to be feuding with the Minister.

‘But you can’t go now, Baoji. Everyone will be back soon,’ protested Mrs Rupa Mehra.

‘Can’t? Can’t? Where is everyone when I want them?’ retorted Dr Kishen Chand Seth. He clicked his tongue impatiently. ‘Don’t forget your stepmother’s birthday next week,’ he added as he walked to the door.

Mrs Rupa Mehra looked wistfully and worriedly from the doorway at her father’s back. On the way to his car he paused by a bed of red and yellow cannas in Fran’s front

5° garden, and she noticed him get more and more agitated. Bureaucratic flowers (among which he also classified marigolds, bougainvillaea and petunias) infuriated him. He had banned them at the Prince of Wales Medical College as long as he had wielded supreme power there; now they were making a comeback. With one swipe of his Kashmiri walking-stick he lopped off the head of a yellow canna. As his daughter tremblingly watched, he got into his ancient grey Buick. This noble machine, a Raja among the rabble of Austins and

Morris was that plying the Indian roads, was still slightly dented from the time when, ten years ago, Arun (on a visit during his vacation from St George's) had taken it for a catastrophic joyride. Arun was the only one in the family who could defy his grandfather and get away with it, indeed was loved the more for it. As Dr Kishen Chand Seth drove off, he told himself that this had been a satisfying visit. It had given him something to think about, something to plan.

Mrs Rupa Mehra took a few moments to recover from her father's bracing company. Suddenly realizing how hungry she was, she began to think of her sunset meal. She could not break her fast with grain, so young Mansoor was dispatched to the market to buy some raw bananas to make into cutlets. As he went through the kitchen to get the bicycle key and the shopping bag, he passed by the counter, and noticed the rejected glass of nimbu pani: cool, sour, inviting.

He swiftly gulped it down.

1.14

EVERYONE who knew Mrs Rupa Mehra knew how much she loved roses and, particularly, pictures of roses, and therefore most of the birthday cards she received featured roses of various colours and sizes, and various degrees of copiousness and blatancy. This afternoon, sitting with her reading-glasses on at the desk in the room she shared with Lata, she was going through old cards for a practical purpose, although the project threatened to overwhelm her with its resonances of ancient sentiment. Red roses, yellow roses, even a blue rose here and there combined themselves with ribbons, pictures of kittens and one of a guilty-looking puppy. Apples and grapes and roses in a basket ; sheep in a field with a foreground of roses ; roses in a misty pewter mug with a bowl of strawberries

resting nearby; violetflushed roses graced with unrose-like, unserrated leaves and mild, even inviting, green thorns : birthday cards from family, friends and assorted well-wishers all over India, and even some from abroad - everything reminded her of everything, as her elder son was apt to remark.

Mrs Rupa Mehra glanced in a cursory manner over her piles of old New Year cards before returning to the birthday roses. She took out a small pair of scissors from the recesses of her great black handbag, and tried to decide which card she would have to sacrifice. It was very rarely that Mrs Rupa Mehra bought a card for anyone, no matter how close or dear the person was. The habit of necessary thrift had sunk deep into her mind, but eight years of the deprivation of small luxuries could not reduce for her the sanctity of the birthday greeting. She could not afford cards, so she made them. In fact she enjoyed the creative challenge of making them. Scraps of cardboard, shreds of ribbon, lengths of coloured paper, little silver stars and adhesive golden numerals lay in a variegated trove at the bottom of the largest of her three suitcases, and these were now pressed into service. The scissors poised, descended. Three silver stars were parted from their fellows and pasted (with the help of borrowed glue - this was the only constituent Mrs Rupa Mehra did not, for fear of leakage, carry with her) onto three corners of the front of the folded blank white piece of cardboard. The fourth corner, the northwest corner, could contain two golden numerals indicating the age of the recipient.

But now Mrs Rupa Mehra paused - for surely the age of the recipient would be an ambivalent detail in the present case. Her stepmother, as she could never cease to remember, was fully ten years younger than she was, and the

5iaccusing '35', even - or perhaps especially - in gold, could be seen - would be seen - as implying an unacceptable disparity, possibly even an unacceptable motivation. The golden numerals were put aside, and a fourth silver star joined its fellows in a pattern of innocuous symmetry.

Postponing the decision of illustration, Mrs Rupa Mehra now looked for assistance in building up a rhyming text for her card. The rose-and-pewter card contained the following lines :

May the gladness you have scattered

Along life's shining way And the little deeds of kindness

That are yours from day to day And the happiness you've showered

On others all life through Return to swell your blessings

In this birthday hour for you.

This would not do for Parvati, Mrs Rupa Mehra decided. She turned to the card illustrated with grapes and apples.

'Tis a day for hugs and kisses,

For cakes and candles too, A day for all who love you

To renew their love anew, A day for sweet reflection

Along life's shining way, And a day for all to tell you :

Have the wonderfulest day.

This showed promise but there was something wrong with the fourth line, Mrs Rupa Mehra instinctively felt. Also, she would have to alter 'hugs and kisses' to 'special greetings' ; Parvati might very well deserve hugs and kisses but Mrs Rupa Mehra was incapable of giving them to her.

Who had sent her this card ? Queenie and Pussy Kapadia, two unmarried sisters in their forties whom she had not met for years. Unmarried ! The very word was like a knell.

53Mrs Rupa Mehra paused in her thoughts for a moment, and moved resolutely on.

The puppy yapped an unrhymed and therefore unusable text - a mere 'Happy Birthday and Many Happy Returns'

- but the sheep bleated in rhymes identical to, but sentiment marginally distinct from, the others:

It's not a standard greeting

For just one joyful day But a wish that's meant to cover

Life's bright and shining way To wish you all the special things

That mean the most to you So that this year and every year

Your fondest dreams come true.

Yes! Life's shining way, a concept dear to Mrs Rupa Mehra, was here polished to an even finer lustre. Nor did the lines commit her to any deep protestation of affection for her father's second wife. At the same time the greeting was not accusably distant. She got out her black and gold Mont Blanc fountain pen, Raghubir's present to her when Arun was born - twenty-five years old and still going strong, she reflected with a sad smile - and began to write.

Mrs Rupa Mehra's handwriting was very small and well-formed, and this presented her in the present instance with a problem. She had chosen too large a size of card in proportion to her affection, but the silver stars had been stuck and it was too late to change that parameter. She now wished to fill as much space as possible with the rhymed message so that she would not have to inscribe more than a few words in her own right to supplement the verse. The first three couplets were therefore laid out with as much white space in between as would not appear too obvious - on the left hand side; an ellipsis of seven dots spooed across the page in a semblance of suspense; and the concluding couplet was allowed to crash down with thunderous blandness on the right.

'To dear Parvati - a very happy birthday, much love,

Rupa,' wrote Mrs Rupa Mehra with a dutiful expression. Then, repenting, she added 'est' to the 'Dear'. It looked a little cramped now, but only a careful eye would perceive it as an afterthought.

Now came the heartbreaking part : not the mere transcription of a stanza but the actual sacrifice of an old card. Which of the roses would have to be transplanted ? After some thought, Mrs Rupa Mehra decided that she could not bear to part with any of them. The dog, then? He looked mournful, even guilty - besides, the picture of a dog, however appealing his appearance, was open to misinterpretation. The sheep perhaps - yes, they would do. They were fluffy and unemotional. She did not mind parting with them. Mrs Rupa Mehra was a vegetarian, whereas both her father and Parvati were avid meat-eaters. The roses in the foreground of the old card were preserved for future use, and the three sheared sheep were driven carefully towards new pastures.

Before she sealed the envelope Mrs Rupa Mehra got out a small writing pad, and wrote a few lines to her father :

Dearest Baoji,

Words cannot express how much happiness it gave me to see you yesterday. Pran and Savita and Lata were very disappointed. They did not get the chance to be there, but such is life. About the radiologist, or any other prospect for Lata, please pursue enquiries. A good khatri boy would be best of course, but after Arun's marriage I am capable of considering others. Fair or dark, as you know, one cannot be choosy. I have recovered from my journey and remain, with much affection,

Your everloving daughter, -, Rupa

The house was quiet. She asked Mansoor for a cup of tea, and decided to write a letter to Arun. She unfolded a green inland letter form, dated it carefully in her minute and lucid script, and began.

55My darling Arun,

I hope you are feeling much better and the pain in your back as well as the toothache is much less. I was very sad and upset in Calcutta as we did not have much time to spend at the station together due to the traffic on Strand and Howrah Bridge and you having to leave before the train left because Meenakshi wanted you home early. You don't know how very much you are in my thoughts - much more than words can say. I thought maybe the preparations for the party could have been postponed by ten minutes but it was not to be. Meenakshi knows best. Anyway whatever it all was the net result was that we didn't have long at the station and tears rolled down my cheeks due to disappointment. My dear Varun also had to go back because he came in your car to see me off. Such is life one doesn't often get the things one wants. Now I only pray for you to get well soon and keep good health wherever you are and have no more trouble with your back so that you can play golf again which you are so fond of. If it be God's will we will meet again very soon. I love you lots and wish you all the happiness and success you well deserve. Your Daddy would have been so proud to see you in Bentsen and Pryce, and now with wife and child. Love and kisses to darling Aparna.

The journey passed peacefully and as planned, but I must admit I could not resist having some mihidana at Burdwan. If you had been there you would have scolded me, but I could not resist my sweet tooth. The ladies in my Ladies' Reserve

compartment were very friendly and we played rummy and three-two-five and had a good chat. One of the ladies knew the Miss Pal we used to visit in Darjeeling, the one who was engaged to the army captain but he died in the War. I had the set of cards that Varun gave me for my last birthday in my bag, and they helped to while away the journey. Whenever I travel I remember our saloon days with your Daddy. Please give him my love and tell him to study hard in the i good traditions of his father.

56r

Savita is looking very well, and Pran is a first-class husband except for his asthma and most caring. I think that he is having some difficulty with his department but he does not like to talk about it. Your grandfather visited yesterday and could have given him some medical advice but unfortunately only I was at home. By the way it is the birthday of your step-grandmother next week, and maybe you should send her a card. Better late than sorry.

I am suffering some pain in my foot but that is expected. Monsoons will be here in two three months and then my joints will play up. Unfortunately Pran cannot afford a car on his lecturer's salary and the transport situation is not good. I take a bus or tonga to go here and there and sometimes I walk. As you know, the Ganges is not far from the house and Lata also goes walking quite a lot, she seems to enjoy it. It is quite safe as far as the dhobi-ghat near the university, though there is a bit of a monkey menace.

Has Meenakshi had Daddy's gold medals set yet? I like the idea of a neck-pendant for one and the lid of a little cardamom-container for the other. That way you can read what is written on both sides of the medal.

Now Arun mine, do not be cross with me for what I am saying, but I have been thinking a lot about Lata lately, and I think you should build up her confidence which she is lacking despite her brilliant record of studies. She is quite afraid of your comments, sometimes even I am afraid of them. I know you do not mean to be harsh, but she is a sensitive girl and now that she is of marriageable age she is super-sensitive. I am going to write to Mr Gaur's daughter Kalpana in Delhi - she knows everyone, and may help us find a suitable match for Lata. Also I think it is time for you to help in the matter. I could see how busy you were with work, so I mentioned it very rarely when I was in Calcutta but it was always on my mind. Another covenanted boy from a good family, does not have to be khatri, would be a dream come true. Now that the college year is almost

57over Lata will have time. I may have many faults but I think I am a loving mother, and I long to see all my children well settled.

Soon it will be April and I am afraid I will again be very depressed and lonely at heart because that month will bring back memories of your father's illness and death as if they happened only the other day and it is eight long years that have gone by and so much has happened under the bridge in this period. I know there are thousands who have had and are having much more to suffer but to every human being one's own sufferings seem the most and I am still very much human and have not risen very much above the usual feelings of sorrow and disappointments. I am trying very hard though believe me to rise above all this, and (D.V.) I will.

Here the inland letter form ended, and Mrs Rupa Mehra began to fill in - transversely - the space left blank near the head of the letter :

Anyway space is short so my darling Arun I will end now. Do not worry at all about me, my blood sugar level is OK I am sure, Pran is making me go for a test at the university clinic tomorrow morning, and I have been careful about my diet except for one glass of very sweet nimbu pani when I arrived tired after my journey.

Here she went on to write on the non-adhesive flap :

After I have written to Kalpana I will play a game of patience with Varun's cards. Lots and lots of love to you and to Varun and a big hug and lots of kisses to my little sweetheart Aparna, and of course to Meenakshi also.

Yours everloving, Ma

Fearing that her pen might run out during the course of her next letter, Mrs Rupa Mehra opened her handbag and

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took out an already opened bottle of ink - Parker's Quink Royal Washable Blue - effectively separated from the other contents of the handbag by several layers of rags and cellophane. A bottle of glue she habitually carried had once leaked from its slit rubber cap with disastrous consequences, and glue had thenceforth been banished from her handbag, but ink had so far caused her only minor problems.

Mrs Rupa Mehra took out another inland letter form, then decided that this would be a false economy in the present case, and began writing on a well-husbanded pad of cream-coloured cambric bond :

Dearest Kalpana,

You have always been like a daughter to me so I will speak from the heart. You know how worried I have been about Lata this last year or so. As you know, since your Uncle Raghubir died I have had a hard time in many ways, and your father - who was so close to Uncle during his lifetime - has been as good to me after his sad demise. Whenever I come to Delhi which is sadly not often of late I feel happy when I am with you, despite the jackals that bark all night behind your house, and since your dear mother passed away I have felt like a mother to you.

Now the time has come to get Lata well settled, and I must look all out for a suitable boy. Arun should shoulder some responsibility in the matter but you know how it is, he is so occupied with work and family. Varun is too young to help and is quite unsteady also. You my dear Kalpana are a few years older to Lata and I hope you can suggest some suitable names among your old college friends or others in Delhi. Maybe in October in the Divali holidays - or in December in the ChristmasNew Year holidays - Lata and I can come to Delhi to look into things? I only mention this to mention it. Do please say what you think ?

How is your dear father ? I am writing from Brahmipur where I am staying with Savita and Pran. All is well but

59the heat is already very delapidating and I am dreading April-May-June. I wish you could have come to their wedding but what with Pimmy's appendix operation I % can understand. I was worried to know she had not been well. I hope it is all resolved now. I am in good health and my blood sugar is fine. I have taken your J advice and had new glasses made and can read and|H write without strain. •

Please write soonest to this address. I will be here • throughout March and April, maybe even in May till I Lata's results for this year are out. jB

With fondest love, H

Yours ever, V

Ma (Mrs Rupa Mehra) m

p.s. Lata sometimes comes up with the idea that she • will not get married. I hope you will cure her of such *| theories. I know how you feel about early marriage after what happened with your engagement, but in a different way I also feel that 'tis better to have loved and lost etc. Not that love is always an unmixed blessing.

p.s. Divali would be better than New Year for us to come to Delhi, because it fits in better with my annual travel plans, but whichever time you say is fine.

Lovingly, Ma

Mrs Rupa Mehra looked over her letter (and her signature - she insisted on all young people calling her Ma), folded it neatly in four, and sealed it in a matching envelope. She fished out a stamp from her bag, licked it thoughtfully, stuck it on the envelope, and wrote Kalpana's address (from memory) as well as Fran's address on the back. Then she closed her eyes and sat perfectly still for a few minutes. It was a warm afternoon. After a while she took out the pack of playing cards from her bag. When Mansoor came in to take away the tea and to do the accounts, he found she had dozed off over a game of patience.

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601.15

THE IMPERIAL BOOK DEPOT was one of the two best bookshops in town, and was located on Nabiganj, the fashionable street that was the last bulwark of modernity before the labyrinthine alleys and ancient, cluttered neighbourhoods of Old Brahmipur. Though it was a couple of miles away from the university proper it had a greater following among students and teachers than the University and Allied Bookshop, which was just a few minutes away from campus. The Imperial Book Depot was run by two brothers, Yashwant and Balwant, both almost illiterate in English, but both (despite their prosperous roundness) so energetic and entrepreneurial that it apparently made no difference. They had the best stock in town, and were extremely helpful to their customers. If a book was not available in the shop, they asked the customer himself to write down its name on the appropriate order form.

Twice a week an impoverished university student was paid to sort new arrivals onto the designated shelves. And since the bookshop prided itself on its academic as well as general stock, the proprietors unashamedly collared university teachers who wandered in to browse, sat them down with a cup of tea and a couple of publishers' lists, and made them tick off titles that they thought the bookshop should consider ordering. These teachers were happy to ensure that books they needed for their courses would be readily available to their students. Many of them resented the University and Allied Bookshop for its entrenched, lethargic, unresponsive and high-handed ways.

After classes, Lata and Malati, both dressed casually in their usual salwaar-kameez, went to Nabiganj to wander around and have a cup of coffee at the Blue Danube coffee house. This activity, known to university students as 'ganjing', they could afford to indulge in about once a week. As they passed the Imperial Book Depot, they were drawn magnetically in. Each wandered off to her favourite shelves and subjects. Malati headed straight for the novels, Lata went for poetry. On the way, however, she paused by the

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science shelves, not because she understood much science, but, rather, because she did not. Whenever she opened a scientific book and saw whole paragraphs of incomprehensible words and symbols, she felt a sense of wonder at the great territories of learning that lay beyond her - the sum of so many noble and purposive attempts to make objective sense of the world. She enjoyed the feeling; it suited her serious moods; and this afternoon she was feeling serious. She picked up a random book and read a random paragraph :

It follows from De Moivre's formula that $z^n = m (\cos n + i \sin n)$. Thus, if we allow complex number z to describe a circle of radius r about the origin, z^n will describe n complete times a circle of radius m as z describes its circle once. We also recall that r , the modulus of z , written $|z|$, gives the distance of z from O , and that if $z' = x' + iy'$, then $|z - z'|$ is the distance between z and z' . With these preliminaries we may proceed to the proof of the theorem.

What exactly it was that pleased her in these sentences she did not know, but they conveyed weight, comfort, inevitability. Her mind strayed to Varun and his mathematical studies. She hoped that her brief words to him the day after the wedding had done him some good. She should have written to him more often to bolster his courage, but with exams coming up she had very little time for anything. It was at the insistence of Malati - who was even busier than she was - that she had gone ganjing at all.

She read the paragraph again, looking serious. 'We also recall' and 'with these preliminaries' drew her into a compact with the author of these verities and mysteries. The words were assured, and therefore reassuring: things were what they were even in this uncertain world, and she could proceed from there.

She smiled to herself now, not aware of her surroundings. Still holding the book, she looked up. And this was how a young man, who had been standing not far from

her, was included, unintentionally, in her smile. He was pleasantly startled, and smiled back at her. Lata frowned at him and looked down at the page again. But she could not concentrate on it, and after a few moments, replaced it on the shelf before making her way to Poetry.

Lata, whatever she thought of love itself, liked love poetry. 'Maud' was one of her favourite poems. She began to flip through a volume of Tennyson.

The tall young man, who had (Lata noticed) slightly wavy black hair and very good, rather aquiline, looks, seemed to be as interested in poetry as in mathematics, because a few minutes later Lata was aware that he had shifted his attention to the poetry shelves, and was glancing through the anthologies. Lata felt that his eyes were on her from time to time. This annoyed her and she did not look up. When, despite herself, she did, she noticed him innocently immersed in his reading. She could not resist glancing at the cover of his book. It was a Penguin : Contemporary Verse. He now looked up, and the tables were turned. Before she could glance down again, he said : 'It's unusual for someone to be interested in both poetry and mathematics.'

'Is that so ?' said Lata severely.

'Courant and Robbins - it's an excellent work.'

'Oh ?' said Lata. Then, realizing that the young man was referring to the mathematics book she had picked randomly off the shelf, she said, 'Is it?' by way of closure.

But the young man was eager to continue the conversation.

'My father says so,' he went on. 'Not as a text but as a broad introduction to various, well, facets of the subject. He teaches maths at the university.'

Lata looked around to see if Malati was listening. But Malati was intent on her browsing in the front of the shop. Nor was anyone else eavesdropping; the shop was not busy at this time of year - or this time of day.

‘Actually, I’m not interested in mathematics,’ said Lata with an air of finality. The young man looked a littledowncast before he rallied and confided, genially: ‘You know, nor am I. I’m a history student myself.’

Lata was amazed at his determination and, looking straight at him, said, ‘I must go now. My friend is waiting for me.’ Even as she was saying this, however, she could not help noticing how sensitive, even vulnerable, this wavy-haired young man looked. This appeared to contradict his determined, bold behaviour in speaking to an unknown, unIntroduced, girl in a bookshop.

‘I’m sorry, I suppose I’ve been disturbing you?’ he apologized, as if reading her thoughts.

‘No,’ said Lata. She was about to go to the front of the shop when he added quickly, with a nervous smile, ‘In that case, may I ask you your name?’

‘Lata,’ said Lata shortly, though she didn’t see the logic of ‘in that case’.

‘Aren’t you going to ask me mine?’ asked the young man, his smile broadening amiably.

‘No,’ said Lata, quite kindly, and rejoined Malati, who had a couple of paperback novels in her hand.

‘Who’s he ?’ whispered Malati conspiratorially.

‘Just someone,’ said Lata, glancing back a bit anxiously. ‘I don’t know. He just came up to me and began a conversation. Hurry up. Let’s go. I’m feeling hungry. And thirsty. It’s hot in here.’

The man at the counter was looking at Lata and Malati with the energetic friendliness he showered on regular customers. The little finger of his left hand was searching for wax in the crevices of his ear. He shook his head with reproving benevolence and said in Hindi to Malati:

‘Exams are coming up, Malatiji, and you are still buying novels ? Twelve annas plus one rupee four annas makes two rupees altogether. I should not allow this. You are like daughters to me.’

‘Balwantji, you would go out of business if we did not read your novels. We are sacrificing our examination results at the altar of your prosperity,’ said Malati.

‘I’m not,’ said Lata. The young man must have disap-

peared behind a bookshelf, because she couldn’t see him anywhere.

‘Good girl, good girl,’ said Balwant, possibly referring to both of them.

‘Actually, we were going to get some coffee and came into your shop unplanned,’ said Malati, ‘so I didn’t bring - ‘ She left the sentence unfinished and flung a winning smile at Balwant.

‘No, no, that is not necessary - you can give it later,’ said Balwant. He and his brother extended terms of easy credit to many students. When asked whether this wasn’t bad for business, they would reply that they had never lost money trusting anyone who bought books. And, certainly, they were doing very well for themselves. They reminded Lata of the priests of a well-endowed temple. The reverence with which the brothers treated their books supported the analogy.

‘Since you suddenly feel famished, we are going straight to the Blue Danube,’ said Malati decisively once they were outside the shop. ‘And there you will tell me exactly what happened between that Cad and you.’

‘Nothing,’ said Lata.

‘Hah!’ said Malati in affectionate scorn. ‘So what did you two talk about?’

‘Nothing,’ said Lata. ‘Seriously, Malati, he just came up and started talking nonsense, and I said nothing in reply. Or monosyllables. Don’t add chillies to boiled potatoes.’

They continued to stroll down Nabiganj.

‘Quite tall,’ said Malati, a couple of minutes later.

Lata said nothing.

‘Not exactly dark,’ said Malati.

Lata did not think this was worth responding to either. ‘Dark’, as she understood it, referred in novels to hair, not skin.

‘But very handsome,’ persisted Malati.

Lata made a wry face at her friend, but she was, to her own surprise, quite enjoying her description.

‘What’s his name?’ continued Malati.

‘I don’t know,’ said Lata, looking at herself in the glass front of a shoe shop.

Malati was astonished at Lata’s ineptness. ‘You talked to him for fifteen minutes and you don’t know his name?’

‘We did not talk for fifteen minutes,’ said Lata. ‘And I hardly talked at all. If you’re so keen on him, why don’t you go back to the Imperial Book Depot and ask him his name? Like you, he has no compunctions about talking to anyone.’]

‘So you don’t like him?’ 1

Lata was silent. Then she said, ‘No, I don’t. I’ve no reason to like him.’ 1

‘It’s not all that easy for men to talk to us, you know,!’ said Malati. ‘We shouldn’t be so hard on them.’ ‘

‘Malati defending the weaker sex!’ said Lata. ‘I never thought I’d see the day.’

‘Don’t change the subject,’ said Malati. ‘He didn’t seem the brazen type. I know. Trust my five-hundredfold experience.’

Lata flushed. ‘It seemed pretty easy for him to talk to me,’ she said. ‘As if I was the sort of girl who ...’

‘Who what?’

‘Who can be talked to,’ ended Lata uncertainly. Visions of her mother’s disapproval floated across her mind. She made an effort to push these away.

‘Well,’ said Malati, a little more quietly than usual as they entered the Blue Danube, ‘he really does have nice looks.’

They sat down.

‘Nice hair,’ continued Malati, surveying the menu.

‘Let’s order,’ said Lata. Malati appeared to be in love with the word ‘nice’.

They ordered coffee and pastries.

‘Nice eyes,’ said Malati, five minutes later, laughing now at Lata’s studied unresponsiveness.

Lata remembered the young man’s temporary nervousness when she had looked straight at him.

‘Yes,’ she agreed. ‘But so what? I have nice eyes too, and one pair is enough.’

661.16

WHILE his mother-in-law was playing patience and his sister-in-law was fending off Malati’s leading questions, Dr Pran Kapoor, that first-class husband and son-in-law, was battling with the departmental problems he was reticent about burdening his family with.

Pran, though a calm man by and large, and a kind man, regarded the head of the English Department, Professor Mishra, with a loathing that made him almost ill. Professor O.P. Mishra was a huge, pale, oily hulk, political and manipulative to the very depths of his being. The four members of the syllabus committee of the English Department were seated this afternoon around an oval table in the staff

room. It was an unusually warm day. The single window was open (to the view of a dusty laburnum tree), but there was no breeze; everyone looked uncomfortable, but Professor Mishra was sweating in profuse drops that gathered on his forehead, wet his thin eyebrows, and trickled down the sides of his large nose. His lips were sweetly pursed and he was saying in his genial, high-pitched voice, 'Dr Kapoor, your point is well taken, but I think that we will need a little convincing.'

The point was the inclusion of James Joyce on the syllabus for the paper on Modern British Literature. Pran Kapoor had been pressing this on the syllabus committee for two terms - ever since he had been appointed a member - and at last the committee had decided to agree whether to consider it.

Why, Pran wondered, did he dislike Professor Mishra so intensely? Although Pran had been appointed to his lectureship five years ago under the headship of his predecessor, Professor Mishra, as a senior member of the department, must have had a say in hiring him. When he first came to the department, Professor Mishra had gone out of his way to be gracious to him, even inviting him to tea at his house. Mrs Mishra was a small, busy, worried woman, and Pran had liked her. But despite Professor Mishra's open-armed avuncularity, his Falstaffian bulk and charm,

67Pran detected something dangerous: his wife and two young sons were, so it seemed to him, afraid of their father.

Pran had never been able to understand why people loved power, but he accepted it as a fact of life. His own father, for instance, was greatly attracted by it: his enjoyment in its exercise went beyond the pleasure of being able to realize his ideological principles. Mahesh Kapoor enjoyed being Revenue Minister, and he would probably be happy to become either

Chief Minister of Purva Pradesh or a Minister in Prime Minister Nehru's Cabinet in Delhi. The headaches, the overwork, the responsibility, the lack of control over one's own time, the complete absence of opportunity to contemplate the world from a calm vantage point: these mattered little to him. Perhaps it was true to say that Mahesh Kapoor had contemplated the world sufficiently long from the calm vantage point of his cell in a prison in British India, and now required what he had in fact acquired: an intensely active role in running things. It was almost as if father and son had exchanged between themselves the second and third stages of the accepted Hindu scheme of life: the father was entangled in the world, the son longed to separate himself into a life of philosophical detachment.

Pran, however, whether he liked it or not, was what the scriptures would call a householder. He enjoyed Savita's company, he basked in her warmth and care and beauty, he looked forward to the birth of their child. He was determined not to depend on his father for financial support, although the small salary of a department lecturer zoo rupees per month - was barely enough to subsist on 'to subside on', as he told himself in moments of cynicism. But he had applied for a readership that had recently fallen open in the department; the salary attached to that post was less pitiful, and it would be a step up in terms of the academic hierarchy. Pran did not care about titular prestige, but he realized that designations helped one's designs. He wanted to see certain things done, and being a reader would help him do them. He believed that he deserved the

68job, but he had also learned that merit was only one criterion among several.

His experience of the recurrent asthmatic illness that had afflicted him since childhood had made him calm. Excitement

disturbed his breathing, and caused him pain and incapacitation, and he had therefore almost dispensed with excitability. This was the simple logic of it, but the path itself had been difficult. He had studied patience, and by slow practice he had become patient. But Professor O.P. Mishra had got under his skin in a way Pran had not been able to envisage.

‘Professor Mishra,’ said Pran, ‘I am pleased that the committee has decided to consider this proposal, and I am delighted that it has been placed second on the agenda today and has at last come up for discussion. My main argument is quite simple. You have read my note on the subject’ - he nodded around the table to Dr Gupta and Dr Narayanan - ‘and you will, I am sure, appreciate that there is nothing radical in my suggestion.’ He looked down at the pale blue type of the cyclostyled sheets before him. ‘As you can see, we have twenty-one writers whose works we consider it essential for our B.A students to read in order for them to obtain a proper understanding of Modern British Literature. But there is no Joyce. And, I might add, no Lawrence. These two writers -‘

‘Wouldn’t it be better,’ interrupted Professor Mishra, wiping an eyelash away from the corner of his eye, ‘wouldn’t it be better if we were to concentrate on Joyce for the moment ? We will take up Lawrence at our session next month - before we adjourn for the summer vacation.’

‘The two matters are interlinked, surely,’ said Pran, looking around the table for support. Dr Narayanan was about to say something when Professor Mishra pointed out :

‘But not on this agenda, Dr Kapoor, not on this agenda.’ He smiled at Pran sweetly, and his eyes twinkled. He then placed his huge white hands, palms down, on the table and said, ‘But what were you saying when I so rudely interrupted ?’

Pran looked at the large white hands emanating from

the grand pulp of Professor Mishra's round body, and thought, I may look thin and fit, but I am not, and this man, for all his slug-like pallor and bulk, has a great deal of stamina. If I am to get agreement on this measure I must remain calm and collected.

He smiled around the table, and said: 'Joyce is a great , writer. This is now universally acknowledged. He is, for 1 instance, the subject of increasing academic study in] America. I do think he should be on our syllabus too.' *

'Dr Kapoor,' the high voice responded, 'each point in the universe must make up its own mind on the question of acknowledgement before acknowledgement can be considered to be universal. We in India pride ourselves on our Independence - an Independence won at great expense by the best men of several generations, a fact I need not emphasize to the illustrious son of an even more illustrious father. We should hesitate before we blindly allow the American dissertation mill to order our priorities. What do you say, Dr Narayanan ?'

Dr Narayanan, who was a Romantic Revivalist, seemed to look deep into his soul for a few seconds. 'That is a good point,' he said judiciously, shaking his head sideways for emphasis.

'If we do not keep pace with our companions,' continued Professor Mishra, 'perhaps it is because we hear a different drummer. Let us step to the music that we hear, we in India. To quote an American,' he added.

Pran looked down at the table and said quietly: 'I say Joyce is a great writer because I believe he is a great writer, not because of what the Americans say.' He remembered his first introduction to Joyce: a friend had lent him *Ulysses* a month before his Ph.D. oral examination at Allahabad University and he had, as a result, ignored his own subject to the point where he had jeopardized his academic career.

Dr Narayanan looked at him and came out suddenly in unexpected support. ' "The Dead", ' said Dr Narayanan. 'A fine story. I read it twice.'

Pran looked at him gratefully. Professor Mishra looked at Dr Narayanan's small, bald head almost approvingly. 'Very good, very good,' he said, as if applauding a small child. 'But' - and his voice assumed a cutting edge - 'there is more to Joyce than "The Dead". There is the unreadable *Ulysses*. There is the worse than unreadable *Finnegans Wake*. This kind of writing is unhealthy for our students. It encourages them, as it were, in sloppy and ungrammatical writing. And what about the ending of *Ulysses*? There are young and impressionable women whom in our courses it is our responsibility to introduce to the higher things of life, Dr Kapoor - your charming sister-in-law for example. Would you put a book like *Ulysses* into her hands?' Professor Mishra smiled benignly.

'Yes,' said Pran simply.

Dr Narayanan looked interested. Dr Gupta, who was mainly interested in Anglo-Saxon and Middle English, looked at his nails.

‘It is heartening to come across a young man - a young lecturer’ - Professor Mishra looked over at the rank-conscious reader, Dr Gupta - ‘who is so, shall I say, so, well, direct in his opinions and so willing to share them with his colleagues, however senior they may be. It is heartening. We may disagree of course; but India is a democracy and we can speak our minds....’ He stopped for a few seconds, and stared out of the window at the dusty laburnum. ‘A democracy. Yes. But even democracies are faced with hard choices. There can be only one head of department, for example. And when a post falls open, of all the deserving candidates only one can be selected. We are already hardpressed to teach twenty-one writers in the time we allot to this paper. If Joyce goes in, what comes out?’

‘Flecker,’ said Pran without a moment’s hesitation.

Professor Mishra laughed indulgently. ‘Ah, Dr Kapoor, Dr Kapoor ...’ he intoned,

‘Pass not beneath, O Caravan, or pass not singing. Have

you heard That silence where the birds are dead yet something
pipeth

like a bird ?

7iJames Elroy Flecker, James Elroy Flecker.’ That seemed to settle it in his mind.

Fran’s face became completely impassive. Does he believe this ? he thought. Does he really believe what he is implying ? Aloud he said, ‘If Fletcher - Flecker - is indispensable, I

suggest we include Joyce as our twenty-second writer. I would be pleased to put it to the committee for a vote.’ Surely, thought Pran, the ignominy of being known to have turned Joyce down (as opposed to merely having deferred the decision indefinitely) would be something that the committee would not be willing to face.

‘Ah, Dr Kapoor, you are angry. Do not get angry. You want to pin us down,’ said Professor Mishra playfully. He , turned his palms up on the table to display his owni helplessness. ‘But we did not agree to decide the matter at 1 this meeting, only to decide whether to decide it.’ 1

This was too much for Pran in his present mood, though 1 he knew it was true. j

‘Please do not misunderstand me, Professor Mishra,’ he ‘ said, ‘but that line of argument may be taken by those of us not well-versed in the finer forms of parliamentary byplay to be a species of quibbling.’

‘A species of quibbling ... a species of quibbling.’ Professor Mishra appeared delighted by the phrase, while both his colleagues looked appalled at Pran’s insubordination. (This is like playing bridge with two dummies, thoughts Pran.) Professor Mishra continued: ‘I will now order! coffee, and we will collect ourselves and approach the issues calmly, as it were.’

Dr Narayanan perked up at the prospect of coffee. Professor Mishra clapped his hands, and a lean peon in a threadbare green uniform came in.

‘Is coffee ready ?’ asked Professor Mishra in Hindi.

‘Yes, Sahib.’

‘Good.’ Professor Mishra indicated that it should be served.

The peon brought in a tray with a coffee pot, a small jug of hot milk, a bowl of sugar, and four cups. Professor Mishra indicated that he should serve the others first. The

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peon did so in the usual manner. Then Professor Mishra was offered coffee. As Professor Mishra poured coffee into his cup, the peon moved the tray deferentially backwards. Professor Mishra made to set down the coffee pot, and the peon moved the tray forward. Professor Mishra picked up the milk jug and began to add milk to his coffee, and the peon moved the tray backwards. And so on for each of three spoons of sugar. It was like a comic ballet. It would have been merely ridiculous, thought Pran, this display of the naked gradient of power and obsequiousness between the department head and the department peon, if it had only been some other department at some other university. But it was the English Department of Brahmipur University - and it was through this man that Pran had to apply to the selection committee for the readership he both wanted and needed.

This same man whom in my first term I considered jovial, bluff, expansive, charming, why have I transformed him in my mind into such a caricature of a villain ? thought Pran looking into his cup. Does he loathe me ? No, that is his strength: he doesn't. He just wants his own way. In effective politics hatred

is just not useful. For him all this is like a game of chess - on a slightly vibrating board. He is fifty-eight - he has two more years until he retires. How will I be able to put up with him for so long ? A sudden murderous impulse seized Pran, whom murderous impulses never seized, and he realized his hands were trembling slightly. And all this over Joyce, he said to himself. At least I haven't had a bronchial attack. He looked down at the pad on which he, as the junior member of the committee, was taking the minutes of the meeting. It read simply :

Present: Professor O.P. Mishra (head) ; Dr R.B. Gupta; Dr T.R. Narayanan; Dr P. Kapoor.

i. The Minutes of the last meeting were read and approved.

73 We have got nowhere, and we will get nowhere, he thought.

A few well-known lines from Tagore came into his head in Tagore's own English translation :

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into

the dreary desert sand of dead habit; Where the mind is led forward by Thee into ever-widening

thought and action -

Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.

At least his own mortal father had given him principles, thought Pran, even if he had given him almost no time or company when he was younger. His mind wandered back home, to the small whitewashed house, to Savita, her sister, her mother - the family that he had taken into his heart and that had taken him into theirs; and then to the Ganges flowing close by the house. (When he thought in English, it was the Ganges, rather than the Ganga, to him.) He followed it first downstream to Patna and Calcutta, then upstream past Banaras till it divided at Allahabad; there he chose the Yamuna and followed it to Delhi. Are things as closed-minded in the capital? he asked himself. As mad, as mean, as silly, as rigid? How will I be able to live in Brahmipur all my life? And Mishra will doubtless give me an excellent report just to see the back of me.

1.17

BUT now Dr Gupta was laughing at a remark of Dr Narayanan's, and Professor Mishra was saying, 'Consensus - consensus is the goal, the civilized goal - how can we vote when we might be divided two votes against two? There were five Pandavas, they could have voted if they chose, but even they did everything by consensus. They

74even took a wife by consensus, ha, ha, ha ! And Dr Varma is indisposed as usual, so we are only four.'

Pran looked at the twinkling eyes, the great nose, the sweetly pursed lips with reluctant admiration. University statutes required that the syllabus committee, like departmental committees of any kind, should consist of an odd number of members. But Professor Mishra, as head of the department, appointed the members of each committee within his purview in such a way as always to include someone who for reasons

of health or research was likely to be indisposed or absent. With an even number of members present, committees were more reluctant than ever to bring things to the climax of a vote. And the head, with his control over the agenda and the pacing of a meeting, could in the circumstances gather even more effective power into his hands.

‘I think we have, as it were, expended enough time on item two,’ said Professor Mishra. ‘Shall we go on to chiasmus and anacoluthia?’ He was referring to a proposal, put forward by himself, that they eliminate too detailed a study of traditional figures of speech for the paper in Literary Theory and Criticism. ‘And then we have the question of symmetrical auxiliaries proposed by the junior member of the committee. Though this will, of course, depend upon other departments agreeing to our proposals. And finally, since the shades of night are falling,’ continued Professor Mishra, ‘I think we should, without prejudice to items five, six, and seven, wind up the meeting. We can take up those items next month.’

But Pran was unwilling to be dissuaded from pressing on with the unresolved question of Joyce. ‘I think we have now collected ourselves,’ he said, ‘and can approach the issue under discussion quite calmly. If I were willing to accept that Ulysses might be a bit, well, difficult for B.A students, would the committee agree to include Dubliners on the syllabus as a first step? Dr Gupta, what do you think?’

75Dr Gupta looked up at the slowly circulating fan. His ability to get speakers on Old and Middle English invited to the departmental seminar depended upon Professor Mishra’s goodwill: outside speakers entailed incidental expenses, and funds had to be approved by the head of the department. Dr Gupta knew as well as anyone what ‘as a first step’ implied. He looked up at Pran and said, ‘I would be willing -‘

But he was swiftly interrupted in his sentence, whatever that might have been. 'We are forgetting,' Professor Mishra cut in, 'something that even I, I must admit, did not bear in mind earlier in this discussion. I mean that, by tradition, the Modern British Literature paper does not include writers who were living at the time of the Second World War.' This was news to Pran, who must have looked astonished, because Professor Mishra felt compelled to explain: 'This is not altogether a matter for surprise. We need the distance of time objectively to appraise the stature of modern writers, to include them in our canon, as it were. Do remind me, Dr Kapoor ... when did Joyce die?'

'1941,' said Pran sharply. It was clear that the great white whale had known this all along.

'Well, there you are ...' said Professor Mishra helplessly. His finger moved down the agenda.

'Eliot, of course, is still alive,' said Pran quietly, looking at the list of prescribed authors.

The head of the department looked as if he had been slapped across the face. He opened his mouth slightly, then pursed his lips together. The jolly twinkle appeared again in his eyes. 'But Eliot, Eliot, surely - we have objective criteria enough in his case - why, even Dr Leavis -'

Professor Mishra clearly responded to a different drummer from the Americans, reflected Pran. Aloud he said, 'Dr Leavis, as we know, greatly approves of Lawrence too'

‘We have agreed to discuss Lawrence next time,’ Professor Mishra expostulated.

Pran gazed out of the window. It was getting dark and the leaves of the laburnum now looked cool, not dusty. He went on, not looking at Professor Mishra : ‘... and, besides,

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Joyce has a better claim as a British writer in Modern British Literature than Eliot. So if we -‘

‘That, my young friend, if I may say so,’ cut in Professor Mishra, ‘could be considered a species of quibbling.’ He was recovering quickly from his shock. In a minute he would be quoting Prufrock.

What is it about Eliot, thought Pran irrelevantly, his mind wandering from the subject at hand, that makes him such a sacred cow for us Indian intellectuals ? Aloud he said: ‘Let us hope that T.S. Eliot has many more years of life, of productive life. I am glad that, unlike Joyce, he did not die in 1941. But we are now living in 1951, which implies that the pre-war rule you mentioned, even if it is a tradition, could not be a very ancient one. If we can’t do away with it, why not update it ? Surely its purpose is that we should revere the dead above the living - or, to be less sceptical, appraise the dead before the living. Eliot, who is alive, has been granted a waiver. I propose we grant Joyce one. A friendly compromise.’ Pran paused, then added : ‘As it were.’ He smiled: ‘Dr Narayanan, are you for “The Dead” ?’

‘Yes, well, I think so,’ said Dr Narayanan with the faintest of responding smiles, before Professor Mishra could interrupt.

‘Dr Gupta ?’ asked Pran.

Dr Gupta could not look Professor Mishra in the eye.

‘I agree with Dr Narayanan,’ said Professor Gupta.

There was silence for a few seconds. Pran thought, I can’t believe it. I’ve won. I’ve won. I can’t believe it.

And indeed, it seemed that he had. Everyone knew that the approval of the Academic Council of the university was usually a formality once the syllabus committee of a department had decided matters.

As if nothing in the least untoward had occurred, the head of the department gathered together the reins of the meeting. The great soft hands scuttled across the cyclostyled sheets. ‘The next item ...’ said Professor Mishra with a smile, then paused and began again : ‘But before we go on to the next item, I should say that I personally have

77always greatly admired James Joyce as a writer. I am delighted, needless to say -‘

A couple of lines of poetry came terrifyingly unbidden to Fran’s mind :

Pale hands I loved beside the Shalimar,

Where are you now ? Who lies beneath your spell ?

and he burst into a fit of sudden laughter, incomprehensible even to himself, which went on for twenty seconds and ended in a spasm of coughing. He bent his head and tears streamed down his cheeks. Professor Mishra rewarded him with a look of unfeigned fury and hatred.

‘Sorry, sorry,’ muttered Pran as he recovered. Dr Gupta was thumping him vigorously on the back, which was not helpful. ‘Please continue - I was overcome - it sometimes

happens ‘ But to offer any further explanation was

impossible.

The meeting was resumed and the next two points discussed quickly. There was no real disagreement. It was dark now; the meeting was adjourned. As Pran left the room Professor Mishra put a friendly arm around his shoulder. ‘My dear boy, that was a fine performance.’ Pran shuddered at the memory. ‘You are clearly a man of great integrity, intellectual and otherwise.’ Oh, oh, what is he up to now ? thought Pran. Professor Mishra continued : ‘The Proctor has been badgering me since last Tuesday to submit a member of my department - it’s our turn, you know - to

join the student welfare committee of the university ‘

Oh no, thought Pran, there goes one day every week. ‘... and I have decided to volunteer you.’ I didn’t know the verb was transitive, thought Pran. In the darkness - they were now walking across the campus - it was difficult for Professor Mishra entirely to disguise the active dislike in his high voice. Pran could almost see the pursed lips, the specious twinkle. He was silent, and that, to the head of the English Department, implied acceptance.

‘I realize you are busy, my dear Dr Kapoor, what with your extra tutorials, the Debating Society, the Colloquium,

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putting on plays, and so on ‘ said Professor Mishra.

‘The sort of thing that makes one deservedly popular with students. But you are comparatively new here, my dear fellow - five years is not a long time from the perspective of an old fogey like me - and you must allow me to give you a word of advice. Cut down on your unacademic activities. Don’t tire yourself out unnecessarily. Don’t take things so seriously. What were those wonderful lines of Yeats?

She bid me take life easy as the leaves grown on the tree, But I being young and foolish with her did not agree.

I’m sure your charming wife would endorse that. Don’t drive yourself so hard - your health depends on it. And your future, I dare say.... In some ways you are your own worst enemy.’

But I am only my metaphorical enemy, thought Pran. And obstinacy on my part has earned me the actual enmity of the formidable Professor Mishra. But was Professor Mishra more dangerous or less dangerous to him - in this matter of the readership, for instance, now that Pran had won his hatred ?

What was Professor Mishra thinking, wondered Pran. He imagined his thoughts went something like this: I should never have got this uppity young lecturer onto the syllabus committee. It's too late, however, to regret all that. But at least his presence here has kept him from working mischief in, say, the admissions committee ; there he could have brought up all kinds of objections to students I wanted to bring in if they weren't selected entirely on the basis of merit. As for the university's selection committee for the readership in English, I must rig this somehow before I allow it to meet -

But Pran got no further clues to the inner working of that mysterious intelligence. For at this point the paths of the two colleagues diverged and, with expressions of great mutual respect, they parted from each other.

791.18

MEENAKSHI, Arun's wife, was feeling utterly bored, so she decided to have her daughter Aparna brought to her. Aparna was looking even more pretty than usual: round and fair and black-haired with gorgeous eyes, as sharp as those of her mother. Meenakshi pressed the electric buzzer twice (the signal for the child's ayah) and looked at the book in her lap. It was Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, and it was unutterably dull. She didn't know how she was going to get through another five pages of it. Arun, delighted though he normally was with her, had the irksome habit of throwing an improving book her way now and then, and Meenakshi felt his

suggestions were more in the way of subtle commands. ‘A wonderful book. ...’ Arun would say some evening, laughing, in the company of the oddly flippant crowd they mixed with, a crowd that Meenakshi felt convinced could not possibly be more interested than she was in Buddenbrooks or any other such clotted Germanic construct. ‘... I have been reading this marvellous book by Mann, and I’m now getting Meenakshi involved in it.’ Some of the others, especially the languid Billy Irani, would look from Arun to Meenakshi in momentary wonderment, and the topic would pass to office matters or the social world or racing or dancing or golf or the Calcutta Club or complaints about ‘these bloody politicians’ or ‘these brainless bureaucrats’, and Thomas Mann would be quite forgotten. But Meenakshi would now feel obliged to read enough of the book to convey an acquaintance with its contents, and it seemed to make Arun happy to see her do so.

How wonderful Arun was, thought Meenakshi, and how pleasant it was to live in this nice flat in Sunny Park, not far from her father’s house on Ballygunge Circular Road, and why did they have to have all these furious tiffs? Arun was incredibly hotheaded and jealous, and she had only to look languidly at the languid Billy for Arun to start smouldering somewhere deep inside. It might be wonderful to have a smouldering husband in bed later,

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Meenakshi reflected, but such advantages did not come unadulterated. Sometimes Arun would go off into a smouldering sulk, and was quite spoilt for love-making. Billy Irani had a girlfriend, Shireen, but that made no difference to Arun, who suspected Meenakshi (quite correctly) of harbouring a casual lust for his friend. Shireen for her part occasionally sighed amidst her cocktails and announced that Billy was incorrigible.

When the ayah arrived in answer to the bell, Meenakshi said, 'Baby lao!' in a kind of pidgin Hindi. The aged ayah, most of whose reactions were slow, turned creakingly to fulfil her mistress's behest. Aparna was fetched. She had been having her afternoon nap, and yawned as she was brought in to her mother. Her small fists were rubbing her eyes.

'Mummy!' said Aparna in English. 'I'm sleepy, and Miriam woke me up.' Miriam, the ayah, upon hearing her name spoken, although she could understand no English, grinned at the child with toothless goodwill.

'I know, precious baby doll,' said Meenakshi, 'but Mummy had to see you, she was so bored. Come and give - yes - and now on the other side.'

Aparna was wearing a mauve dress of flouncy fluffy stuff and was looking, thought her mother, inexcusably enchanting. Meenakshi's eyes went to her dressing-table mirror and she noticed with a surge of joy what a wonderful mother-and-child pair they made. 'You are looking so lovely,' she informed Aparna, 'that I think I will have a whole line of little girls.... Aparna, and Bibeka, and Charulata, and -'

Here she was cut off by Aparna's glare. 'If another baby comes into this house,' announced Aparna, 'I will throw it straight into the waste-paper basket.'

'Oh,' said Meenakshi, more than a little startled. Aparna, living among so many opinionated personalities, had quite early developed a powerful vocabulary. But three-year-olds were not supposed to express themselves so lucidly, and in

conditional sentences at that. Meenakshi looked at Aparna and sighed.

‘You are so scrumptious,’ she told Aparna. ‘Now have

81 your milk.’ To the ayah she said, ‘Dudh lao. Ek dum !’ And Miriam creaked off to get a glass of milk for the little girl.

For some reason the ayah’s slow-moving back irritated Meenakshi and she thought: We really ought to replace the T.C. She’s quite needlessly senile. This was her and Arun’s private abbreviation for the ayah and Meenakshi laughed with pleasure as she remembered the occasion over the breakfast table when Arun had turned from the Statesman crossword to say, ‘Oh, do get the toothless crone out of the room. She quite puts me off my omelette.’ Miriam had been the T.C ever since. Living with Arun was full of sudden delightful moments like that, thought Meenakshi. If only it could all be that way.

But the trouble was that she also had to run the house, and she hated it. The elder daughter of Mr Justice Chatterji had always had everything done for her - and she was now discovering how trying it could be to handle things on her own. Managing the staff (ayah, servant-cum-cook, parttime sweeper, part-time gardener; Arun supervised the driver, who was on the company payroll) ; doing the accounts; buying those items that one simply couldn’t trust the servant or the ayah to buy; and making sure that everything fitted within the budget. This last she found especially difficult. She had been brought up in some luxury, and though she had insisted (against her parents’ advice) on the romantic adventure of standing after marriage entirely on their own four feet, she had found it impossible to curb her taste for certain items (foreign soap, foreign butter, and so on) that were intrinsic to the fabric of a civilized life. She was very conscious of the fact that Arun helped support

everyone in his own family and often commented to him about the fact.

‘Well,’ Arun had said just recently, ‘now that Savita’s married, that’s one less, you’ll agree, darling.’ Meenakshi had sighed, replying in a couplet :

‘Marry one - and what’s my fate ? Every Mehra on my plate.’

82. Arun had frowned. He had been reminded once again of the fact that Meenakshi’s elder brother was a poet. It was from long familiarity - almost obsession - with rhyme that most of the younger Chatterjis had learned to improvise couplets, sometimes of surpassing puerility.

The ayah brought the milk and left. Meenakshi turned her lovely eyes back to Euddenbrooks while Aparna sat on the bed drinking her milk. With a sound of impatience Meenakshi threw Thomas Mann onto the bed and followed him there, closed her eyes and went off to sleep. She was awakened with a shock twenty minutes later by Aparna, who was pinching her breast.

‘Don’t be horrid, Aparna precious. Mummy’s trying to sleep,’ said Meenakshi.

‘Don’t sleep,’ said Aparna. ‘I want to play.’ Unlike other children of her age, Aparna never used her name in the Caesarean third person, though her mother did.

‘Darling sweetheart, Mummy is tired, she’s been reading a book and she doesn’t want to play. Not now, anyway. Later,

when Daddy comes home, you can play with him. Or you can play with Uncle Varun when he returns from college. What have you done with your glass ?’

‘When will Daddy come home ?’

‘I’d say in about an hour,’ replied Meenakshi.

‘I’d say in about an hour,’ said Aparna speculatively, as if she liked the phrase. ‘I want a necklace too,’ she added, and tugged at her mother’s gold chain.

Meenakshi gave her daughter a hug. ‘And you shall have one,’ she said, and dismissed the subject. ‘Now go to Miriam.’

‘No.’ ‘ .

‘Then stay here if you want. But do be quiet, darling.’

Aparna was quiet for a while. She looked at Buddenbrooks, at her empty glass, at her sleeping mother, at the quilt, at the mirror, at the ceiling. Then she said, ‘Mummy ?’ tentatively. There was no response.

‘Mummy ?’ Aparna attempted a few notches louder.

‘Mmm ?’

‘MUMMY !’ yelled Aparna at the top of her lungs.

83 Meenakshi sat bolt upright and shook Aparna. ‘Do you want me to spank you ?’ she asked.

‘No,’ replied Aparna definitively.

‘Then what is it ? Why are you shouting ? What were you going to say ?’

‘Have you had a hard day, darling?’ asked Aparna, hoping to arouse a response to her imitative charm.

‘Yes,’ said Meenakshi shortly. ‘Now, darling, pick up that glass and go to Miriam at once.’

‘Shall I comb your hair ?’

‘No.’

Aparna got down reluctantly from the bed and made her way to the door. She toyed with the idea of saying, 'Til tell Daddy!' though what she could have complained about was left unformulated. Her mother meanwhile was once again sleeping sweetly, her lips slightly parted, her long black hair spread across the pillow. It was so hot in the afternoon, and everything tilted her towards a long and languorous sleep. Her breasts rose and fell gently, and she dreamed about Arun, who was handsome and dashing and covenanted, and who would be coming home in an hour. And after a while she began to dream about Billy Irani, whom they would be meeting later that evening.

When Arun arrived, he left his briefcase in the drawing room, walked into the bedroom, and closed the door. Seeing Meenakshi asleep, he paced up and down for a while, then took off his coat and tie, and lay down beside her without disturbing her sleep. But after a while his hand moved to her forehead and then down her face to her breasts. Meenakshi opened her eyes and said, 'Oh.' She was momentarily bewildered. After a while she asked, 'What's the time?'

'Five-thirty. I came home early just as I promised - and I found you asleep.'

'I couldn't sleep earlier, darling. Aparna woke me up every few minutes.'

'What's the programme for the evening?' 'Dinner and dancing with Billy and Shireen.'

84 'Oh yes, of course.' After a pause Arun continued: 'To tell you the truth, darling, I'm rather tired. I wonder whether we shouldn't simply call it off tonight ?'

'Oh, you'll revive quickly enough after you've had a drink,' said Meenakshi brightly. 'And a glance or two from Shireen,' she added.

'I suppose you're right, dear.' Arun reached out for her. He had had a little trouble with his back a month ago, but had quite recovered.

'Naughty boy,' said Meenakshi, and pushed his hand away. After a while she added, 'The T.C has been cheating us on the Ostermilk.'

'Ah ? Has she ?' said Arun indifferently, then swerved off to a subject that interested him - 'I discovered today that we were being overcharged sixty thousand on the new paper project by one of our local businessmen. We've asked him to revise his estimates, of course, but it does

rather shock one No sense of business ethics - or

personal ethics either. He was in the office the other day, and he assured me that he was making us a special offer because of what he called our long-standing relationship. Now I find, after talking to Jock Mackay, that that's the line he took with them as well - but charged them sixty thousand less than us.'

'What will you do ?' Meenakshi asked dutifully. She had switched off a few sentences ago.

Arun talked on for five minutes or so, while Meenakshi's mind wandered. When he stopped and looked at her questioningly, she said, yawning a little from residual sleepiness :

‘How has your boss reacted to all this ?’

‘Difficult to say. With Basil Cox it's difficult to say anything, even when he's delighted. In this case I think he's as annoyed by the possible delay as pleased by the definite saving.’ Arun unburdened himself for another five minutes while Meenakshi began to buff her nails.

The bedroom door had been bolted against interruption, but when Aparna saw her father's briefcase she knew that he had returned and insisted upon being admitted. Arun

opened the door and gave her a hug, and for the next hour or so they did a jigsaw featuring a giraffe, which Aparna had seen in a toyshop a week after being taken to the Brahmipur Zoo. They had done the jigsaw several times before, but Aparna had not yet tired of it. Nor had Arun. He adored his daughter and occasionally felt it was a pity that he and Meenakshi went out almost every evening. But one simply couldn't let one's life come to a standstill because one had a child. What, after all, were ayahs for? What, for that matter, were younger brothers for ?

‘Mummy has promised me a necklace,’ said Aparna.

‘Has she, darling?’ said Arun. ‘How does she imagine she's going to buy it ? We can't afford it at the moment.’

Aparna looked so disappointed at this latest intelligence that Arun and Meenakshi turned to each other with transferred adoration.

‘But she will,’ said Aparna, quietly and determinedly. ‘Now I want to do a jigsaw.’

‘But we’ve just done one,’ protested Arun.

‘I want to do another.’

‘You handle her, Meenakshi,’ said Arun.

‘You handle her, darling,’ said Meenakshi. ‘I must get ready. And please clear the bedroom floor.’

So for a while Arun and Aparna, banished to the drawing room this time, lay on the carpet putting together a jigsaw of the Victoria Memorial while Meenakshi bathed and dressed and perfumed and ornamented herself.

Varun returned from college, slid past Arun into his tiny box of a room, and sat down with his books. But he seemed nervous, and could not settle down to studying. When Arun went to get ready, Aparna was transferred to him; and the rest of Varun’s evening was spent at home trying to keep her amused.

The long-necked Meenakshi turned numerous heads when their party of four entered Firpos for dinner. Arun told Shireen she was looking gorgeous and Billy looked with soulful languor at Meenakshi and said that she looked divine, and things went wonderfully well and were followed

86by some pleasantly titillating dancing at the 300 Club. Meenakshi and Arun were not really able to afford all this - Billy Irani had independent means - but it seemed intolerable that they, for whom this kind of life was so obviously intended, should be deprived of it by a mere lack of funds. Meenakshi could not help noticing, through dinner and beyond, the lovely little gold dangles that Shireen was wearing, and that hung so becomingly from her little velvety ears.

It was a warm evening. In the car on the way back home Arun said to Meenakshi, 'Give me your hand, darling,' and Meenakshi, placing one red nail-polished fingertip on the back of his hand, said, 'Here!' Arun thought that this was delightfully elegant and flirtatious. But Meenakshi had her mind on something else.

Later, when Arun had gone to bed, Meenakshi unlocked her jewellery case (the Chatterjis did not believe in giving their daughter great quantities of jewellery but she had been given quite enough for her likely requirements) and took out the two gold medals so precious to Mrs Rupa Mehra's heart. She had given these to Meenakshi at the time of her wedding as a gift to the bride of her elder son. This she felt was the appropriate thing to do; she had nothing else to give, and she felt that her husband would have approved. On the back of the medals was engraved: 'Thomasson Engineering College Roorkee. Raghubir Mehra. Civil Engg. First. 1916' and 'Physics. First. 1916' respectively. Two lions crouched sternly on pedestals on each medal. Meenakshi looked at the medals, then balanced

them in her hands, then held the cool and precious discs to her cheeks. She wondered how much they weighed. She thought of the gold chain she had promised Aparna and the gold drops she had virtually promised herself. She had examined them quite carefully as they hung from Shireen's little ears. The danglers were shaped like tiny pears.

When Arun rather impatiently called her to bed, she murmured, 'Just coming.' But it was a minute or two before she joined him. 'What are you thinking of, darling?' he asked her. 'You look dangerously preoccupied.' But

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Saeeda Bai’s accompanists were a study in contrast. Both were about twenty-five, and both were devoted and skilled musicians. Both were fond of each other, and deeply attached - by economics and affection - to Saeeda Bai. But beyond that the resemblance ended. Ishaq Khan, who bowed his sarangi

with such ease and harmoniousness, almost self-effacement, was a slightly sardonic bachelor. Motu Chand, so nicknamed because of his plumpness, was a contented man, already a father of four. He looked a bit like a bulldog with his large eyes and snuffling mouth, and was benignly torpid, except when frenziedly drumming his tabla.

They were discussing Ustad Majeed Khan, one of the most famous classical singers of India, a notoriously aloof man who lived in the old city, not far from where Saeeda Bai had grown up.

‘But what I don’t understand, Saeeda Begum,’ said Motu Chand, leaning awkwardly backwards because of his paunch, ‘is why he should be so critical of us small people. There he sits with his head above the clouds, like Lord Shiva on Kailash. Why should he open his third eye to burn us up?’

‘There is no accounting for the moods of the great,’ said Ishaq Khan. He touched his sarangi with his left hand and went on, ‘Now look at this sarangi - it’s a noble instrument - yet the noble Majeed Khan hates it. He never allows it to accompany him.’

Saeeda Bai nodded; Motu Chand made reassuring sounds. ‘It is the loveliest of all instruments,’ he said.

‘You kafir,’ said Ishaq Khan, smiling twistedly at his friend. ‘How can you pretend to like this instrument? What is it made of?’

‘Well, wood of course,’ said Motu Chand, now leaning forward with an effort.

‘Look at the little wrestler,’ laughed Saeeda Bai. ‘We must feed him some laddus.’ She called out for her maid, and sent her to get some sweets.

Ishaq continued to wind the coils of his argument around the struggling Motu Chand.

145 ‘Wood !’ he cried. ‘And what else ?’

‘Oh, well, you know, Khan Sahib - strings and so on,’ said Motu Chand, defeated as to Ishaq’s intention.

‘And what are these strings made of?’ continued Ishaq Khan relentlessly.

‘Ah!’ said Motu Chand, getting a glimpse of his meaning. Ishaq was not a bad fellow, but he appeared to get a cruel pleasure from worsting Motu Chand in an argument.

‘Gut,’ said Ishaq. ‘These strings are made of gut. As you well know. And the front of a sarangi is made of skin. The hide of a dead animal. Now what would your brahmins of Brahmipur say if they were forced to touch it ? Would they not be polluted by it ?’

Motu Chand looked downcast, then rallied. ‘Anyway, I’m not a brahmin, you know ...’ he began.

‘Don’t tease him,’ said Saeeda Bai to Ishaq Khan.

‘I love the fat kafir too much to want to tease him,’ said Ishaq Khan.

This was not true. Since Motu Chand was of an alarmingly equable bent of mind, what Ishaq Khan liked more than anything else was to upset his balance. But this time Motu Chand reacted in an irksomely philosophical manner.

‘Khan Sahib is very kind,’ he said. ‘But sometimes even the ignorant have wisdom, and he would be the first to acknowledge this. Now for me the sarangi is not what it is made of but what it makes - these divine sounds. In the hands of an artist even this gut and this skin can be made to sing.’ His face wreathed with a contented, almost Sufi, smile. ‘After all, what are we all but gut and skin ? And yet’ - his forehead creased with concentration - ‘in the hands of one who - the One....’

But the maid now came in with the sweets and Motu Chand’s theological meanderings halted. His plump and agile fingers quickly reached for a laddu as round as himself and popped it whole into his mouth.

After a while Saeeda Bai said, ‘But we were not discussing the One above’ - she pointed upwards - ‘but the One

146to the West.’ She pointed in the direction of Old Brahmipur.

‘They are the same,’ said Ishaq Khan. ‘We pray both westwards and upwards. I am sure Ustad Majeed Khan would not take it amiss if we were mistakenly to turn to him in prayer one evening. And why not?’ he ended ambiguously. ‘When we

pray to such lofty art, we are praying to God himself.' He looked at Motu Chand for approval, but Motu appeared to be either sulking or concentrating on his laddu.

The maid re-entered and announced: 'There is some trouble at the gate.'

Saeeda Bai looked more interested than alarmed.

'What sort of trouble, Bibbo ?' she asked.

The maid looked at her cheekily and said, 'It seems that a young man is quarrelling with the watchman.'

'Shameless thing, wipe that expression off your face,' said Saeeda Bai. 'Hmm,' she went on, 'what does he look like?'

'How would I know, Begum Sahiba?' protested the maid.

'Don't be troublesome, Bibbo. Does he look respectable ?'

'Yes,' admitted the maid. 'But the street-lights were not bright enough for me to see anything more.'

'Call the watchman,' said Saeeda Bai. 'There's only us here,' she added, as the maid looked hesitant.

'But the young man ?' asked the maid.

‘If he’s as respectable as you say, Bibbo, he’ll remain outside.’

‘Yes, Begum Sahiba,’ said the maid and went to do her bidding.

‘Who do you think it could be?’ mused Saeeda Bai aloud, and was silent for a minute.

The watchman entered the house, left his spear at the front entrance, and climbed heavily up the stairs to the gallery. He stood at the doorway of the room where they were sitting, and saluted. With his khaki turban, khaki uniform, thick boots and bushy moustache, he was corn-

pletely out of place in that femininely furnished room. But he did not seem at all ill at ease.

‘Who is this man and what does he want?’ asked Saeeda Bai.

‘He wants to come in and speak with you,’ said the watchman phlegmatically.

‘Yes, yes, I thought as much - but what is his name?’

‘He won’t say, Begum Sahiba. Nor will he take no for an answer. Yesterday too he came, and told me to give you a message, but it was so impertinent, I decided not to.’

Saeeda Bai's eyes flashed. 'You decided not to ?' she asked.

'The Raja Sahib was here,' said the watchman calmly.

'Hmhm. And the message ?'

'That he is one who lives in love,' said the watchman impassively.

He had used a different word for love and had thus lost the pun on Prem Nivas.

'One who lives in love ? What can he mean ?' remarked Saeeda Bai to Motu and Ishaq. The two looked at each other, Ishaq Khan with a slight smirk of disdain.

'This world is populated by donkeys,' said Saeeda Bai, but whom she was referring to was unclear. 'Why didn't he leave a note? So those were his exact words? Neither very idiomatic nor very witty.'

The watchman searched his memory and came out with a closer approximation to the actual words Maan had used the previous evening. At any rate, 'prem' and 'nivas' both figured in his sentence.

All three musicians solved the riddle immediately.

‘Ah!’ said Saeeda Bai, amused. ‘I think I have an admirer. What do you say ? Shall we let him in ? Why not ?’

Neither of the others demurred - as, indeed, how could they ? The watchman was told to let the young man in. And Bibbo was told to tell Tasneem to stay in her room.

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2.13

MAAN, who was fretting by the gate, could hardly believe his good fortune at being so speedily admitted. He felt a surge of gratitude towards the watchman and pressed a rupee into his hand. The watchman left him at the door of the house, and the maid pointed him up to the room.

As Maan’s footsteps were heard in the gallery outside Saeeda Bai’s room, she called out, ‘Come in, come in, Dagh Sahib. Sit down and illumine our gathering.’

Maan stood outside the door for a second, and looked at Saeeda Bai. He was smiling with pleasure, and Saeeda Bai could not help smiling back at him. He was dressed simply and immaculately in a well-starched white kurtapyjama. The fine chikan embroidery on his kurta complemented the embroidery on his fine white cotton cap. His shoes - slip-on jutis of soft leather, pointed at the toe were also white.

‘How did you come ?’ asked Saeeda Bai.

‘I walked.’

‘These are fine clothes to risk in the dust.’

Maan said simply, ‘It is just a few minutes away.’

‘Please - sit down.’

Maan sat cross-legged on the white-sheeted floor.

Saeeda Bai began to busy herself making paan. Maan looked at her wonderingly.

‘I came yesterday too, but was less fortunate.’

‘I know, I know,’ said Saeeda Bai. ‘My fool of a watchman turned you away. What can I say ? We are not all blessed with the faculty of discrimination ‘

‘But I’m here today,’ said Maan, rather obviously.

‘Wherever Dagh has sat down, he has sat down ?’ asked Saeeda Bai, with a smile. Her head was bent, and she was spreading a little white dab of lime on the paan leaves.

‘He may not quit your assembly at all this time,’ said Maan.

Since she was not looking directly at him, he could look at her without embarrassment. She had covered her head with her sari before he had come in. But the soft, smooth

skin of her neck and shoulders was exposed, and Maan found the tilt of her neck as she bent over her task indescribably charming.

Having made a pair of paans she impaled them on a little silver toothpick with tassels, and offered them to him. He took them and put them in his mouth, pleasantly surprised at the taste of coconut, which was an ingredient Saeeda Bai was fond of adding to her paan.

‘I see you are wearing your own style of Gandhi cap,’ said Saeeda Bai, after popping a couple of paans into her mouth. She did not offer any to Ishaq Khan or Motu Chand, but then they seemed to have virtually melted into the background.

Maan touched the side of his embroidered white cap nervously, unsure of himself.

‘No, no, Dagh Sahib, don’t trouble yourself. This isn’t a church, you know.’ Saeeda Bai looked at him and said, ‘I was reminded of other white caps one sees floating around in Brahmipur. The heads that wear them have grown taller recently.’

‘I am afraid you are going to accuse me of the accident of my birth,’ said Maan.

‘No, no,’ said Saeeda Bai. ‘Your father has been an old patron of the arts. It is the other Congress-wallahs I was thinking of.’

‘Perhaps I should wear a cap of a different colour the next time I come,’ said Maan.

Saeeda Bai raised an eyebrow.

‘Assuming I am ushered into your presence,’ Maan added humbly.

Saeeda Bai thought to herself: What a well-brought-up young man. She indicated to Motu Chand that he should bring the tablas and harmonium that were lying in the corner of the room.

To Maan she said, ‘And now what does Hazrat Dagh command us to sing?’

‘Why, anything,’ said Maan, throwing banter to the winds.

‘Not a ghazal, I hope,’ said Saeeda Bai, pressing down a

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key on the harmonium to help the tabla and sarangi tune up.

‘No?’ asked Maan, disappointed.

‘Ghazals are for open gatherings or the intimacy of lovers,’ said Saeeda Bai. Til sing what my family is best known for and what my Ustad best taught me.’

She began a thumri in Raag Pilu, ‘Why then are you not speaking to me?’ and Maan’s face brightened up. As she sang he floated off into a state of intoxication. The sight of her face, the sound of her voice, and the scent of her perfume were intertwined in his happiness.

After two or three thumris and a dadra, Saeeda Bai indicated that she was tired, and that Maan should leave.

He left reluctantly, showing, however, more good humour than reluctance. Downstairs, the watchman found a five-rupee note pressed into his hand.

Out on the street Maan trod on air.

She will sing a ghazal for me sometime, he promised himself. She will, she certainly will.

2.14

IT was Sunday morning. The sky was bright and clear. The weekly bird market near the Barsaat Mahal was in full swing. Thousands of birds - mynas, partridges, pigeons, parakeets - fighting birds, eating birds, racing birds, talking birds - sat or fluttered in iron or cane cages in little stalls from which rowdy hawkers cried out the excellence and cheapness of their wares.

The pavement had been taken over by the bird market, and buyers or passers-by like Ishaq had to walk on the road surface, bumping against rickshaws and bicycles and the occasional tonga.

There was even a pavement stall with books about birds. Ishaq picked up a flimsy, blunt-typed paperback about owls and spells, and looked idly through to see what uses this unlucky bird could be put to. It appeared to be a book of Hindu black magic, *The Tantra of Owls*, though it was printed in Urdu. He read :

151 Sovereign Remedy to Obtain Employment Take the tail-feathers of an owl and a crow, and burn them together in a fire made from mango wood until they form ash. Place this ash on your forehead like a caste-mark when you go to seek employment, and you will most certainly obtain it.

He frowned and read on :

Method of Keeping a Woman in Your Power If you want to keep a woman in your control, and wish to prevent her from coming under the influence of anyone else, then use the technique described below :

Take the blood of an owl, the blood of a jungle fowl and the blood of a bat in equal proportions, and after smearing the mixture on your penis have intercourse with the woman. Then she will never desire another man.'

Ishaq felt almost sick. These Hindus! he thought. On an impulse he bought the book, deciding that it was an excellent means of provoking his friend Motu Chand.

‘I have one on vultures as well,’ said the bookseller helpfully.

‘No, this is all I want,’ said Ishaq, and walked on.

He stopped at a stall where a large number of tiny, almost formless grey-green balls of stubbly flesh lay imprisoned in a hooped cage.

‘Ah!’ he said.

His look of interest had an immediate effect on the white-capped stall-keeper, who appraised him, glancing at the book in his hand.

‘These are not ordinary parakeets, Huzoor, these are hill parakeets, Alexandrine parakeets as the English sahibs say.’

The English had left more than three years ago, but Ishaq let it pass.

‘I know, I know,’ he said.

‘I can tell an expert when I see one,’ said the stall-keeper

152.in a most friendly manner. ‘Now, why not have this one? Only two rupees - and it will sing like an angel.’

‘A male angel or a female angel ?’ said Ishaq severely.

The stall-keeper suddenly became obsequious.

‘Oh, you must forgive me, you must forgive me. People here are so ignorant, one can hardly bear to part with one’s most promising birds, but for one who knows parakeets I will do anything, anything. Have this one, Huzoor.’ And he picked out one with a larger head, a male.

Ishaq held it for a few seconds, then placed it back in the cage. The man shook his head, then said :

‘Now for a true fancier, what can I provide that is better than this ? Is it a bird from Rudhia District that you want ? Or from the foothills in Horshana? They talk better than mynas.’

Ishaq simply said, ‘Let’s see something worth seeing.’

The man went to the back of the shop and opened a cage in which three little half-fledged birds sat huddled together. Ishaq looked at them silently, then asked to see one of them.

He smiled, thinking of parakeets he had known. His aunt was very fond of them, and had one who was still alive at the age of seventeen. ‘This one,’ he said to the man. ‘And you know by now that I will not be fooled about the price either.’

They haggled for a while. Until the money changed hands the stall-keeper seemed a bit resentful. Then, as Ishaq was about to leave - with his purchase nestled in his handkerchief - the

stall-keeper said in an anxious voice, ‘Tell me how he is doing when you come by next time.’

‘What do they call you ?’ asked Ishaq.

‘Muhammad Ismail, Huzoor. And how are you addressed ?’ ‘-

‘Ishaq Khan.’

‘Then we are brothers!’ beamed the stall-keeper. ‘You must always get your birds from my shop.’

‘Yes, yes,’ agreed Ishaq, and walked hurriedly away. This was a good bird he had got, and would delight the heart of young Tasneem.

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ISHAQ went home, had lunch, and fed the bird a little flour mixed with water. Later, carrying the parakeet in his handkerchief, he made his way to Saeeda Bai’s house. From time to time he looked at it in appreciation, imagining what an excellent and intelligent bird it potentially was. He was in high spirits. A good Alexandrine parakeet was his favourite kind of parrot. As he walked towards Nabiganj he almost bumped into a hand-cart.

He arrived at Saeeda Bai’s house at about four and told Tasneem that he had brought something for her. She was to try and guess what it was.

‘Don’t tease me, Ishaq Bhai,’ she said, fixing her beautiful large eyes on his face. ‘Please tell me what it is.’

Ishaq looked at her and thought that ‘gazelle-like’ really did suit Tasneem. Delicate-featured, tall and slender, she did not greatly resemble her elder sister. Her eyes were liquid and her expression tender. She was lively, but always seemed to be on the point of taking flight.

‘Why do you insist on calling me Bhai?’ he asked.

‘Because you are virtually my brother,’ said Tasneem. ‘I need one, too. And your bringing me this gift proves it. Now please don’t keep me in suspense. Is it something to wear?’

‘Oh no - that would be superfluous to your beauty,’ said Ishaq, smiling.

‘Please don’t talk that way,’ said Tasneem, frowning. ‘Apa might hear you, and then there will be trouble.’

‘Well, here it is ‘ And Ishaq took out what looked

like a soft ball of fluffy material wrapped in a handkerchief.

‘A ball of wool! You want me to knit you a pair of socks. Well, I won’t. I have better things to do.’

‘Like what ?’ said Ishaq.

‘Like ...’ began Tasneem, then was silent. She glanced uncomfortably at a long mirror on the wall. What did she do ? Cut vegetables to help the cook, talk to her sister, read novels, gossip with the maid, think about life. But before

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she could meditate too deeply on the subject, the ball moved, and her eyes lit up with pleasure.

‘So you see -‘ said Ishaq, ‘it’s a mouse.’

‘It is not -‘ said Tasneem with contempt. ‘It’s a bird. I’m not a child, you know.’

‘And I’m not exactly your brother, you know,’ said Ishaq. He unwrapped the parakeet and they looked at it together. Then he placed it on a table near a red lacquer vase. The stubbly ball of flesh looked quite disgusting.

‘How lovely,’ said Tasneem.

‘I selected him this morning,’ said Ishaq. ‘It took me hours, but I wanted to have one that would be just right for you.’

Tasneem gazed at the bird, then stretched out her hand and touched it. Despite its stubble it was very soft. Its colour was

very slightly green, as its feathers had only just begun to emerge.

‘A parakeet ?’

‘Yes, but not a regular one. He’s a hill parakeet. He’ll talk as well as a myna.’

When Mohsina Bai died, her highly talkative myna had quickly followed her. Tasneem had been even lonelier without the bird, but she was glad that Ishaq had not got her another myna but something quite different. That was doubly considerate of him.

‘What is he called?’

Ishaq laughed. ‘Why do you want to call him anything ? Just “tota” will do. He’s not a warhorse that he should be called Ruksh or Bucephalas.’

Both of them were standing and looking at the baby parakeet. At the same moment each stretched out a hand to touch him. Tasneem swiftly drew her hand back.

‘You go ahead,’ said Ishaq. ‘I’ve had him all day.’

‘Has he eaten anything ?’

‘A bit of flour mixed with water,’ said Ishaq.

‘How do they get such tiny birds ?’ asked Tasneem.

Their eyes were level, and Ishaq, looking at her head, covered with a yellow scarf, found himself speaking without paying any attention to his words.

155 ‘Oh, they’re taken from their nests when they’re very young - if you don’t get them young they don’t learn to speak - and you should get a male one - he’ll develop a lovely rose-and-black ring around his neck - and males are more intelligent. The best talkers come from the foothills, you know. There were three of them in the stall from the same nest, and I had to think quite hard before I decided -‘

‘You mean, he’s separated from his brothers and sisters ?’
Tasneem broke in.

‘But of course,’ said Ishaq. ‘He had to be. If you get a pair of them, they don’t learn to imitate anything we say.’

‘How cruel,’ said Tasneem. Her eyes grew moist.

‘But he had already been taken from his nest when I bought him,’ said Ishaq, upset that he had caused her pain. ‘You can’t put them back or they’ll be rejected by their parents.’ He put his hand on hers - she didn’t draw back at once - and said :
‘Now it’s up to you to give him a good life. Put him in a nest of cloth in the cage in which your mother’s myna used to be kept. And for the first few days feed him a little parched gram flour moistened with water or a little daal soaked overnight. If he doesn’t like that cage, I’ll get him another one.’

Tasneem withdrew her hand gently from under Ishaq's. Poor parakeet, loved and unfree! He could change one cage for another. And she would change these four walls for a different four. Her sister, fifteen years her senior, and experienced in the ways of the world, would arrange all that soon enough. And then -

'Sometimes I wish I could fly ' She stopped,

embarrassed.

Ishaq looked at her seriously. 'It is a good thing we can't, Tasneem - or can you imagine the confusion ? The police have a hard enough time controlling traffic in Chowk - but if we could fly as well as walk it would be a hundred times worse.'

Tasneem tried not to smile.

'But it would be worse still if birds, like us, could only walk,' continued Ishaq. 'Imagine them strolling up and down Nabiganj with their walking-sticks in the evenings.'

156 Now she was laughing. Ishaq too started laughing, and

the two of them, delighted by the picture they had conjured

* up, felt the tears rolling down their cheeks. Ishaq wiped his

away with his hand, Tasneem hers with her yellow dupatta.

Their laughter sounded through the house.

The baby parakeet sat quite still on the table-top near the red lacquer vase ; his translucent gullet worked up and down.

v^ Saeeda Bai, roused from her afternoon nap, came into *the room, and in a surprised voice, with something of a stern edge, said : ‘Ishaq - what’s all this ? Is one not to be permitted to rest even in the afternoon?’ Then her eyes alighted on the baby parakeet, and she clicked her tongue in irritation.

‘No - no more birds in this house. That miserable myna of my mother’s caused me enough trouble.’ She paused, then added: ‘One singer is enough in any establishment. Get rid of it.’

2.16

NO ONE spoke. After a while Saeeda Bai broke the silence. ‘Ishaq, you are here early,’ she said.

Ishaq looked guilty. Tasneem looked down with half a sob. The parakeet made a feeble attempt to move. Saeeda Bai, looking from one to the other, suddenly said :

‘Where is your sarangi anyway ?’

Ishaq realized he had not even brought it. He flushed.

‘I forgot. I was thinking of the parakeet.’

‘Well ?’

‘Of course I’ll go and get it immediately.’

‘The Raja of Marh has sent word he will be coming this evening.’

‘I’m just going,’ said Ishaq. Then he added, looking at Tasneem, ‘Shall I take the parakeet ?’

‘No, no -‘ said Saeeda Bai, ‘why should you want to take it ? Just get your sarangi. And don’t be all day about it.’

157Ishaq left hurriedly.

Tasneem, who had been close to tears, looked gratefully at her sister. Saeeda Bai, however, was far away. The business of the bird had woken her up from a haunting and peculiar dream involving the death of her mother and her own earlier life - and when Ishaq left, its atmosphere of dread and even guilt had surged back over her.

Tasneem, noticing her sister suddenly sad, held her hand.

‘What’s the matter, Apa?’ she asked, using the term of endearment and respect she always used for her elder sister.

Saeeda Bai began to sob, and hugged Tasneem to her, kissing her forehead and cheeks.

‘You are the only thing I care for in the world,’ she said. ‘May God keep you happy ‘

Tasneem hugged her and said, ‘Why, Apa, why are you crying? Why are you so overwrought? Is it Ammi-jaan’s grave you are thinking of?’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Saeeda Bai quickly, and turned away. ‘Now go inside, get the cage lying in Ammi-jaan’s old room. Polish it and bring it here. And soak some daal some chané ki daal - for him to eat later.’

Tasneem went in towards the kitchen. Saeeda Bai sat down, looking a bit dazed. Then she held the small parakeet in her hands to keep him warm. She was sitting like this when the maidservant came in to announce that someone had arrived from the Nawab Sahib’s place, and was waiting outside.

Saeeda Bai pulled herself together and dried her eyes. ‘Let him in,’ she said.

But when Firoz walked in, handsome and smiling, gripping his elegant walking-stick lightly in his right hand, she gave a startled gasp.

‘You ?’

‘Yes,’ said Firoz. ‘I’ve brought an envelope from my father.’

‘You’ve come late I mean, he usually sends someone

in the morning,’ murmured Saeeda Bai, trying to still the confusion in her mind. ‘Please sit down, please sit down.’

158 Until now the Nawab Sahib had sent a servant with the monthly envelope. For the last two months, Saeeda Bai remembered it had been just a couple of days after her period. And this month too, of course....

Her thoughts were interrupted by Firoz, who said : ‘I happened to bump into my father’s private secretary, who was coming -‘

‘Yes, yes.’ Saeeda Bai looked upset. Firoz wondered why ••y^his appearance should have distressed her so much. That many years ago there must have been something between the Nawab Sahib and Saeeda Bai’s mother - and that his father continued to send a little something each month to support the family - surely there was nothing in this to cause her such agitation. Then he realized that she must have been upset even before his arrival by something quite different.

I have come at a bad time, he thought, and decided to go.

Tasneem walked in with the copper birdcage and, seeing him, suddenly stopped.

They looked at each other. For Tasneem, Firoz was just another handsome admirer of her sister’s - but startlingly so.

She lowered her eyes quickly, then looked at him again.

She stood there with her yellow dupatta, the birdcage in her right hand, her mouth slightly open in astonishment perhaps at his astonishment. Firoz was staring at her, transfixed.

‘Have we met before?’ he asked gently, his heart beating fast.

Tasneem was about to reply when Saeeda Bai said, ‘Whenever my sister goes out of the house she goes in purdah. And this is the first time that the Nawabzada has graced my poor lodgings with his presence. So it is not possible that you could have met. Tasneem, put the cage down, and go back to your Arabic exercises. I have not got you a new teacher for nothing.’

‘But...’ began Tasneem.

‘Go back to your room at once. I will take care of the bird. Have you soaked the daal yet?’

‘I...’

159’Go and do so immediately. Do you want the bird to starve?’

When the bewildered Tasneem had left, Firoz tried to orient his thoughts. His mouth was dry. He felt strangely disturbed. Surely, he felt, even if we have not met on this mortal plane, we have met in some former life. The thought, counter to the religion he nominally adhered to, affected him the more powerfully for all that. The girl with the birdcage had in a few

short moments made the most profound and unsettling impression on him.

After abridged pleasantries with Saeeda Bai, who seemed to be paying as little attention to his words as he to hers, he walked slowly out of the door.

Saeeda Bai sat perfectly still on the sofa for a few minutes. Her hands still cradled the little parakeet gently. He appeared to have gone off to sleep. She wrapped him up warmly in a piece of cloth and set him down near the red vase again. From outside she heard the call to evening prayer, and she covered her head.

All over India, all over the world, as the sun or the shadow of darkness moves from east to west, the call to prayer moves with it, and people kneel down in a wave to pray to God. Five waves each day - one for each namaaz ripple across the globe from longitude to longitude. The component elements change direction, like iron filings near a magnet - towards the house of God in Mecca. Saeeda Bai got up to go to an inner room where she performed the ritual ablution and began her prayers :

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate

Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all Being, the All-Merciful, the All-Compassionate,

the Master of the Day of Doom. Thee only we serve ; to Thee alone we pray for succour.

Guide us in the straight path, the path of those whom Thou hast blessed,

not those against whom Thou art wrathful,

nor of those who are astray.

160But through this, and through her subsequent kneelings and prostrations, one terrifying line from the Holy Book recurred again and again to her mind :

And God alone knows what you keep secret and what you publish.

‘«_»• t in six months. Sanitation, drinking water, electricity, paving, civic sense - it was simply a question of making sensible decisions and having the requisite facilities to implement them. Haresh was as keen on ‘requisite facilities’ as he was on his ‘To Do’ list. He was impatient with himself if anything was lacking in the former or undone in the latter. He also believed in ‘following things through’.

Oh yes; Kedarnath’s son, what’s his name now, Bhaskar! he said to himself. I should have got Dr Durrani’s address from Sunil last night. He frowned at his own lack of foresight.

But after lunch he collected Bhaskar anyway and took a tonga to Sunil’s. Dr Durrani looked as if he had walked to Sunil’s house, reflected Haresh, so he couldn’t live all that far away.

Bhaskar accompanied Haresh in silence, and Haresh, for his own part, was happy not to say anything other than where they were going.

Sunil's faithful, lazy servant pointed out Dr Durrani's house, which was a few doors away. Haresh paid off the tonga, and walked over with Bhaskar.

4.10

A tall, good-looking fellow in cricket whites opened the door.

'We've come to see Dr Durrani,' said Haresh. 'Do you think he might be free?'

'I'll just see what my father is doing,' said the young

man in a low, pleasant, slightly rough-edged voice. 'Please come in.'

A minute or two later he emerged and said, 'My father will be out in a minute. He asked me who you were, and I realized I hadn't asked. I'm sorry, I should introduce myself first. My name's Kabir.'

Haresh, impressed by the young man's looks and manner, held out his hand, smiled in a clipped sort of way, and introduced himself. 'And this is Bhaskar, a friend's son.'

The young man seemed a bit troubled about something, but did his best to make conversation.

‘Hello, Bhaskar,’ said Kabir. ‘How old are you ?’

‘Nine,’ said Bhaskar, not objecting to this least original of questions. He was pondering what all this was about.

After a while Kabir said, ‘I wonder what’s keeping my father,’ and went back in.

When Dr Durrani finally came into the drawing room, he was quite surprised to see his visitors. Noticing Bhaskar, he asked Haresh :

‘Have you come to see one of my, er, sons ?’

Bhaskar’s eyes lit up at this unusual adult behaviour. He liked Dr Durrani’s strong, square face, and in particular the balance and symmetry of his magnificent white moustache. Haresh, who had stood up, said:

‘No indeed, Dr Durrani, it’s you we’ve come to see. I don’t know if you remember me - we met at Sunil’s party.

‘Sunil ?’ said Dr Durrani, his eyes scrunched up in utter perplexity, his eyebrows working up and down. ‘Sunil ... Sunil ...’ He seemed to be weighing something up with great seriousness, and coming closer and closer to a conclusion. ‘Patwardhan,’ he said, with the air of having arrived at a

considerable insight. He appraised this new premise from several angles in silence.

Haresh decided to speed up the process. He said, rather briskly :

‘Dr Durrani, you said that we could drop in to see you. This is my young friend Bhaskar, whom I told you about. I

think his interest in mathematics is remarkable, and I felt he should meet you.’

Dr Durrani looked quite pleased, and asked Bhaskar what two plus two was.

Haresh was taken aback, but Bhaskar - though he normally rejected considerably more complex sums as unworthy of his attention - was not, apparently, insulted. In a very tentative voice he replied :

‘Four?’

Dr Durrani was silent. He appeared to be mulling over this answer. Haresh began to feel ill at ease.

‘Well, yes, you can, er, leave him here for a while,’ said Dr Durrani.

‘Shall I come back to pick him up at four o’clock?’ asked Haresh.

‘More or less,’ said Dr Durrani.

When he and Bhaskar were left alone, both of them were silent. After a while, Bhaskar said :

‘Was that the right answer ?’

‘More or less,’ said Dr Durrani. ‘You see,’ he said, picking up a musammi from a bowl on the dining table, ‘it’s rather, er, it’s rather like the question of the, er, sum of the angles in a - in a triangle. What have they, er, taught you that is ?’

‘180 degrees,’ said Bhaskar.

‘Well, more or less,’ said Dr Durrani. ‘On the, er, surface of it, at least. But on the surface of this, er, musammi, for instance -‘

For a while he gazed at the green citrus, following a mysterious train of thought. Once it had served his purpose, he looked at it wonderingly, as if he could not figure out what it was doing in his hand. He peeled it with some difficulty because of its thick skin and began to eat it.

‘Would you, er, like some ?’ he asked Bhaskar matter-offactly.

‘Yes, please,’ said Bhaskar, and held out both hands for a segment, as if he were receiving a sanctified offering from a temple.

An hour later, when Haresh returned, he got the sense

301 that he was an unwelcome interruption. They were now both sitting at the dining table, on which were lying among other things - several musammis, several peels of musammis, a large number of toothpicks in various configurations, an inverted ashtray, some strips of newspaper stuck together in odd-looking twisted loops, and a purple kite. The remaining surface of the dining room table was covered with equations in yellow chalk.

Before Bhaskar left with Haresh, he took with him the loops of newspaper, the purple kite, and exactly sixteen toothpicks. Neither Dr Durrani nor Bhaskar thanked each other for the time they had spent together. In the tonga back to Misri Mandi, Haresh could not resist asking Bhaskar:

‘Did you understand all those equations ?’

‘No,’ said Bhaskar. It was clear from the tone of his answer, however, that he did not think this mattered.

Though Bhaskar did not say anything when he got home, his mother could tell from one glance at his face that he had had a wonderfully stimulating time. She took his various objects off him and told him to wash his gummy hands. Then, almost with tears in her eyes, she thanked Haresh.

‘It’s so kind of you to have taken this trouble, Haresh Bhai. I can tell what this has meant to him,’ Veena said.

‘Well,’ said Haresh with a smile, ‘that’s more than I can.

4.11

MEANWHILE, the brogues were sitting on their lasts in Jagat Ram’s workshop. Two days passed. On the appointed day at two o’clock, Haresh came to collect the shoes and the lasts. Jagat Ram’s little daughter recognized him, and clapped her hands at his arrival. She was entertaining herself with a song, and since he was there, she entertained him too. The song went as follows :

302Ram Ram Shah, Ram Ram Shah,

Alu ka rasa, Gravy made from spuds,

Mendaki ki chatni- Chutney made from female frog-

Aa gaya nasha! Drink it, and you’re drunk!

Haresh looked the shoes over with a practised eye. They were well made. The uppers had been stitched excellently, though on the simple sewing machine in front of him. The lasting had been carefully done - there were no bubbles or wrinkles. The

finishing was fine, down to the coloration of the leather of the punched brogue. He was well pleased. He had been strict in his demands, but now he gave Jagat Ram one-and-a-half times as much as he had promised him by way of payment.

‘You will be hearing from me,’ he promised.

‘Well, Haresh Sahib, I certainly hope so,’ said Jagat Ram.
‘You’re really leaving today? A pity.’

‘Yes, I’m afraid so.’

‘And you stayed on just for this?’

‘Yes, I would have left in two days instead of four otherwise.’

‘Well, I hope they like this pair at CLFC.’

With that they parted. Haresh did a few chores, made a few small purchases, went back to Sunil’s, returned his brogues, packed, said goodbye, and took a tonga to the station to catch the evening train to Kanpur. On the way he stopped at Kedarnath’s to thank him.

‘I hope I can be of some help to you,’ said Haresh, shaking his hand warmly.

‘You already have, Veena tells me.’

‘I meant, by way of business.’

‘I certainly hope so,’ said Kedarnath. ‘And, well, if I can help you in any way -‘

They shook hands.

‘Tell me -‘ said Haresh suddenly. ‘I have been meaning to ask you this for several days now - how did you get all those scars on the inside of your hands ? They don’t look as if they’ve been caught in a machine - they’d be scarred on both sides if they had.’

Kedarnath was silent for a few seconds, as if adjusting

303to a change of thought. ‘I got those during Partition,’ he said. He paused and continued, ‘At the time that we were forced to flee from Lahore, I got a place in a convoy of army trucks and we got into the first truck - my younger brother and I. Nothing, I thought, could be safer. But, well, it was a Baluchi regiment. They stopped just before the Ravi Bridge, and Muslim ruffians came from behind the timber yards there and started butchering us with their spears. My younger brother has marks on his back and I have these on my palms and my wrist - I tried to hold onto the blade of the spear.... I was in hospital for a month.’

Haresh’s face betrayed his shock. Kedarnath continued, closing his eyes, but in a calm voice :

‘Twenty or thirty people were slaughtered in two minutes - someone’s father, someone’s daughter By the

greatest of luck a Gurkha regiment was coming from the other side and they began to fire. And, well, the looters fled, and I'm here to tell you the story.'

'Where was the family ?' asked Haresh. 'In the other trucks ?'

'No - I'd sent them on by train a little earlier. Bhaskar was only six at the time. Not that the trains were safe either, as you know.'

'I don't know if I should have asked these questions,' said Haresh, feeling atypically embarrassed.

'No, no - that's all right. We were fortunate, as these things go. The Muslim trader who used to own my shop here in Brahmipur - well.... Strange, though - after all that happened there, I still miss Lahore,' said Kedarnath. 'But you'd better hurry or you'll miss your train.'

Brahmpur Junction was as crowded and noisy and smelly as ever: hissing clouds of steam, the whistles of incoming trains, hawkers' shouts, the stench of fish, the buzz of flies, the scurrying babble of passengers. Haresh felt tired. Though it was past six o'clock it was still very warm. He touched an agate cuff-link and wondered at its coolness.

Glancing at the crowd, he noticed a young woman in a light blue cotton sari standing near her mother. The English

304teacher whom he had met at Sunil's party was seeing them off on the down train to Calcutta. The mother's back was turned towards Haresh, so he could not get a proper glimpse of her. The daughter's face was striking. It was not classically beautiful - it did not catch at his heart as did the photograph he kept with him - but it had a quality of such attractive intensity that Haresh stopped for a second. The young woman seemed to be determinedly fighting back some sadness that went beyond the normal sadness of parting at a railway platform. Haresh thought of pausing for a little to re-introduce himself to the young lecturer, but something in the girl's expression of inwardness, almost despair, stopped him from doing so. Besides, his train was leaving soon, his coolie was already quite far ahead of him, and Haresh, not being tall, was concerned that he might lose him in the crowd.

305Part Five5.1

SOME riots are caused, some bring themselves into being. The problems at Misri Mandi were not expected to reach a point of violence. A few days after Haresh left, however, the heart of Misri Mandi - including the area around Kedarnath's shop - was full of armed police.

The previous evening there had been a fight inside a cheap drinking place along the unpaved road that led towards the tannery from Old Brahmpur. The strike meant less money but more time for everyone, so the kalari's joint was about as crowded as usual. The place was mainly frequented by jatavs, but not exclusively so. Drink equalized the drinkers, and they didn't care who was sitting at the plain wooden table next to them. They drank, laughed, cried, then tottered and staggered out, sometimes singing, sometimes cursing. They swore undying friendship, they divulged confidences, they imagined insults. The assistant of a trader in Misri Mandi was in a foul mood because he was having a hard time with his father-in-

law. He was drinking alone and working himself into a generalized state of aggressiveness. He overheard a comment from behind him about the sharp practice of his employer, and his hands clenched into a fist. Knocking his bench over as he twisted around to see who was speaking, he fell onto the floor.

The three men at the table behind him laughed. They were jatavs who had dealt with him before. It was he who used to take the shoes from their baskets when they scurried desperately in the evening to Misri Mandi - his employer the trader did not like to touch shoes because he felt they would pollute him. The jatavs knew that the breakdown of the trade in Misri Mandi had particularly hurt those traders who had overextended themselves on the chit system. That it had hurt themselves still more, they also knew - but for them it was not a case of the mighty being brought to their knees. Here, however, literally in front of them, it was.

The locally-distilled cheap alcohol had gone to their

309heads, and they did not have the money to buy the pakoras and other snacks that could have settled it. They laughed uncontrollably.

‘He’s wrestling with the air,’ jeered one.

‘I bet he’d rather be doing another kind of wrestling,’ sneered another.

‘But would he be any good at it ? They say that’s why he has trouble at home -‘

‘What a reject,’ taunted the first man, waving him away with the airy gesture of a trader rejecting a basket on the basis of a single faulty pair.

Their speech was slurred, their eyes contemptuous. The man who had fallen lunged at them, and they set upon him. A couple of people, including the owner or kalari, tried to make peace, but most gathered around to enjoy the fun and shout drunken encouragement. The four rolled around on the floor, fighting.

It ended with the man who had started the fight being beaten unconscious, and all of the others being injured. One was bleeding from the eye and screaming in pain.

That night, when he lost the sight of his eye, an ominous crowd of jatavs gathered at the/Govind Shoe Mart, where the trader had his stall. They/round the stall closed. The crowd began to shout slogans, then threatened to burn the stall down. One of the other traders tried to reason with the crowd, and they set upon him. A couple of policemen, sensing the crowd’s mood, ran to the local police station for reinforcements. Ten policemen now emerged, armed with short stout bamboo lathis, and they began to beat people up indiscriminately. The crowd scattered.

Surprisingly soon, every relevant authority knew about the matter : from the Superintendent of Police of the district to the Inspector-General of Purva Pradesh, from the Home Secretary to the Home Minister. Everyone received different facts and interpretations, and had different suggestions for action or inaction.

The Chief Minister was out of town. In his absence and because law and order lay in his domain - the Home Minister ran things. Mahesh Kapoor, though Revenue

310 Minister, and not therefore directly concerned, heard about the unrest because part of Misri Mandi lay in his constituency. He hurried to the spot and talked with the Superintendent of Police and the District Magistrate. The SP and the DM believed that things would blow over if neither side was provoked. However, the Home Minister, L.N. Agarwal, part of whose constituency also lay in Misri Mandi, did not think it necessary to go to the spot. He '5, received a number of phone calls at home and decided that something by way of a salutary example needed to be provided.

These jatavs had disrupted the trade of the city long enough with their frivolous complaints and their mischievous strike. They had doubtless been stirred up by union leaders. Now they were threatening to block the entrance of the Govind Shoe Mart at the point where it joined the main road of Misri Mandi. Many traders there were already in financial straits. The threatened picketing would finish them off. L.N. Agarwal himself came from a shopkeeping family and some of the traders were good friends of his. Others supplied him with election funds. He had received three desperate calls from them. It was a time not for talk but for action. It was not merely a question of law, but of order, the order of society itself. Surely this is what the Iron Man of India, the late Sardar Patel, would have felt in his place.

f. But what would he have done had he been here ? As if

B| in a dream, the Home Minister conjured up the domed IL and severe head of his political mentor, dead these four ^B months. He sat in thought for a while. Then he told his ^B

personal assistant to get him the District Magistrate on the ^B phone.

^B The District Magistrate, who was in his mid-thirties, TM: was directly in charge of the civil administration of Brahmipur District and, together with the SP - as the Superintendent of Police was referred to by everyone - maintained law and order.

The PA tried to get through, then said: ‘Sorry, Sir, DM is out on the site. He is trying to conciliate -‘

311 ‘Give me the phone,’ said the Home Minister in a calm voice. The PA nervously handed him the receiver.

‘Who ? ... Where ? ... I am Agarwal speaking, that’s who ... yes, direct instructions ... I don’t care. Get Dayal at once. ... Yes, ten minutes ... call me back. ... The SP is there, that is enough surely, is it a cinema show ?’

He put down the phone and grasped the grey curls that curved like a horse-shoe around his otherwise bald head.

After a while he made as if to pick up the receiver again, then decided against it, and turned his attention to a file.

Ten minutes later the young District Magistrate, Krishan Dayal, was on the phone. The Home Minister told him to guard the entrance of the Govind Shoe Mart. He was to disperse any pickets forthwith, if necessary by reading out Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code - and then firing if the crowd did not disperse.

The line was unclear but the message disturbingly clear. Krishan Dayal said in a strong voice, but one which was fraught with concern: 'Sir, with respect, may I suggest an alternative course of action. We are talking with the leaders of the crowd -'

'So there are leaders, are there, it is not spontaneous?'

'Sir, it is spontaneous, but there are leaders.'

The Home Minister said that it was puppies of the ilk of Krishan Dayal who used to lock him up in British jails. He said, calmly :

'Are you being witty, Mr Dayal?'

'No, Sir, I -'

'You have your instructions. This is an emergency. I have discussed things with the Chief Secretary by phone. I understand that the crowd is some three hundred strong. I want the SP to get the police stationed everywhere along the main road of Misri Mandi and to guard all entrances Govind Shoe Mart, Brahmipur Shoe Mart, and so on - you just do the needful.'

There was a pause. The Home Minister was about to put down the phone when the DM said :

‘Sir, we may not be able to spare such a large number of police at short notice. A number of policemen are stationed

f

312.at the site of the Shiva Temple in case of trouble. Things are very tense, Sir. The Revenue Minister thinks that on Friday -‘

‘Are they there at the moment? I did not notice them this morning,’ said L.N. Agarwal in a relaxed but steely tone.

‘No, Sir, but they are in the main police station in the Chowk area, so it is sufficiently close to the temple site. It is best to keep them there for a true emergency.’ Krishan Dayal had been in the army during the war, but he was rattled by the Home Minister’s calm air of almost dismissive interrogation and command.

‘God will take care of the Shiva Temple. I am in close touch with many members of the committee, do you think I do not know the circumstances?’ He had been irked by Dayal’s reference to ‘a true emergency’ as much as by his mention of Mahesh Kapoor, his rival and - as abrasive chance would have it - the MLA from the constituency contiguous to his own.

‘Yes, Sir,’ said Krishan Dayal, his face reddening which luckily the Home Minister could not see. ‘And may I know how long the police are to remain there?’

‘Until further notice,’ said the Home Minister and put down the phone to pre-empt further backchat. He did not like the

way these so-called civil servants answered back to those above them in the chain of command - who were besides, twenty years older than them. It was necessary to have an administrative service, no doubt, but it was equally necessary that it should learn that it no longer ruled this country.

5.2

ON Friday at the midday prayer the hereditary Imam of the Alamgiri Mosque gave his sermon. He was a short, plump man with short breath, but this did not stem his jerky crescendos of oratory. If anything, his breathlessness gave the impression that he was choked with emotion. The

313 construction of the Shiva Temple was going ahead. The Imam's appeals to everyone from the Governor down had fallen on deaf ears. A legal case contesting the Raja of Marh's title to the land contiguous to the mosque had been instituted and was at present going through the lowest court. A stay order on the construction of the temple, however, could not be immediately obtained - indeed, perhaps could not be obtained at all. Meanwhile the dungheap was growing before the Imam's agonized eyes.

His congregation was tense already. It was with dismay that many Muslims in Brahmpur had, over the months, seen the foundations of the temple rising in the plot to the west of their mosque. Now, after the first part of the prayers, the Imam gave his audience the most stirring and inflammatory speech he had given in years, very far removed from his ordinary sermon on personal morality or cleanliness or alms or piety. His grief and frustration as much as their own bitter anxiety called for something stronger. Their religion was in danger. The barbarians were at the gates. They prayed, these infidels, to their pictures and stones and perpetuated themselves in

ignorance and sin. Let them do what they wanted to in their dens of filth. But God could see what was happening now. They had brought their beastliness near the very precincts of the mosque itself. The land that the kafirs sought to build on - why sought? were at this very moment building on - was disputed land - disputed in God's eyes and in man's eyes - but not in the eyes of animals who spent their time blowing conches and worshipping parts of the body whose very names it was shameful to mention. Did the people of the faith gathered here in God's presence know how it was planned to consecrate this Shiva-linga? Naked ash-smearing savages would dance before it - naked! These were the shameless, like the people of Sodom, who mocked at the power of the All-Merciful.

... God guides not the people of the unbelievers.

314 Those - God has set a seal on their hearts, and their hearing, and their eyes,

I and those - they are the heedless ones ;

| Without a doubt, in the world to come they

will be the losers.

They worshipped their hundreds of idols that they claimed were divine - idols with four heads and five heads and the heads of elephants - and now the infidels who held power •* “» in the land wanted Muslims, when they turned their faces westwards in prayer to the Kaaba, to face these same idols and these same obscene objects with their heads bowed. ‘But,’ continued the Imam, ‘we who have lived through hard and

bitter times and have suffered for our faith and paid for our faith in blood need only remember the fate of the idolaters :

I And they set up compeers to God, that

- they might lead astray from His way.

H Say : “Take your joy! Your homecoming I shall be -the Fire!””

I

ī A slow, attentive, shocked expectation filled the silence

- L that followed.

^B ‘But even now,’ cried the Imam in renewed frenzy, half^H gasping for air, ‘even as I speak - they could be hatching ^B their designs to prevent our evening devotion by blowing IK their conches to drown out the call to prayer. Ignorant they may be, but they are full of guile. They are already getting rid of Muslims in the police force so that the community of God will be left defenceless. Then they can attack and enslave us. Now it is too clear to us that we are living not in a land of protection but a land of enmity. We have appealed for justice, and have been kicked down at the very doors where we have gone pleading. The Home Minister himself supports this temple committee - and its guiding spirit is the debauched buffalo of Marh! Let it not happen that our holy places are to be polluted by the proximity of filth - let it not happen - but what can save us now that we are left defenceless before the sword of our

315enemies in the land of the Hindus, what can save us but our own efforts, our own' - here he struggled for breath and emphasis again - 'our own direct action - to protect ourselves. And not just ourselves, not just our families but these few feet of paved earth that have been given to us for centuries, where we have unrolled our mats and raised our hands in tears to the All-Powerful, which are worn smooth | by the devotions of our ancestors and ourselves and - if I God so wills - will so be by our descendants also. But have] no fear, God does so will, have no fear, God will be with!

you: i

Hast thou not seen how thy Lord did with Ad, 1

Iram of the pillars, 1

the like of which was never created in the land, |

and Thamood, who hollowed the rocks in the valley, 1

and Pharaoh, he of the tent-pegs, 3

who all were insolent in the land J

and worked much corruption therein? 1

Thy Lord unloosed on them a scourge of chastisement;

surely thy Lord is ever on the watch. j

O God, help those who help the religion of the Prophet 1
Muhammad, peace be upon Him. May we also do the “ same.
Make those weak, who weaken the religion of Muhammad.
Praise be to God, the Lord of all Being.’

The plump Imam descended from the pulpit, and led the
people in more prayer.

That evening there was a riot.

5.3

BECAUSE of the instructions of the Home Minister, the
greater part of the police was stationed at sensitive points in
Misri Mandi. There were only about fifteen policemen left in
the main police station in Chowk by evening. As the call for
prayer from the Alamgiri Mosque trembled across the evening
sky, by some unfortunate chance or possibly

316I

intentional provocation, the sound of a conch was heard
interrupting it several times. Normally such a thing might have
been angrily shrugged off, but not today.

No one knew how the men who were gathering in the narrow
alleys of the Muslim neighbourhood that lay on one side of

Chowk became a mob. One moment they were walking individually or in small groups through the alleys towards the mosque for evening prayer, then they had coalesced into larger clusters, excitedly discussing the ominous signals they had heard. After the midday sermon most were in no mood to listen to any voice of moderation. A couple of the more eager members of the Alamgiri Masjid Hifaazat Committee made a few crowd-rousing remarks, a few local hotheads and toughs stirred themselves and those around them into a state of rage, the crowd increased in size as the alleys joined into larger alleys, its density and speed and sense of indistinct determination increased, and it was no longer a collection but a thing wounded and enraged, and wanting nothing less than to wound and enrage. There were cries of 'Allah-u-Akbar' which could be heard all the way to the police station. A few of those who joined the crowd had sticks in their hands. One or two even had knives. Now it was not the mosque that they were headed for but the partly constructed temple just next to it. It was from here that the blasphemy had originated, it was this that must be destroyed.

Since the Superintendent of Police of the district was occupied in Misri Mandi, the young District Magistrate, Krishan Dayal, had himself gone to the tall pink edifice of the main police station about an hour earlier to ensure that things would remain stable in the Chowk area. He feared the increased tension that Friday often brought. When he heard about the Imam's sermon, he asked the kotwal - as the Deputy Superintendent of Police for the City was called - what he planned to do to protect the area.

The kotwal of Brahmipur, however, was a lazy man who wanted nothing better than to be left alone to take his bribes in peace.

317 'There will be no trouble, Sir, believe me,' he assured the District Magistrate. 'Agarwal Sahib himself has phoned me. Now he tells me I am to go to Misri Mandi to join the SP - so I must be off, Sir, with your leave, of course.' And he bustled off in a preoccupied sort of way, taking two other lower officers with him, and leaving the kotwali virtually in the charge of a head constable. 'I will just be sending the Inspector back,' he said in a reassuring manner. 'You should not stay, Sir,' he added ingratiatingly. 'It is late. This is a peaceful time. After the previous troubles at the mosque we have defused the situation, I am glad to say.'

Krishan Dayal, left with a force of about twelve constables, thought he would wait until the Inspector returned before he decided whether to go home. His wife was used to him coming back at odd hours, and would wait for him; it was not necessary to phone her. He did not actually expect a riot; he merely felt that tension was running high and that it was not worth taking a chance. He believed that the Home Minister had his priorities wrong where Chowk and Misri Mandi were concerned; but then the Home Minister was arguably the most

powerful man in the state next to the Chief Minister, and he himself was just a DM.

He was sitting and waiting in this unworried but uneasy frame of mind when he heard what was to be recalled by several policemen at the subsequent inquiry - the inquiry by a senior officer that is required to be held after every magisterial order to fire. First he heard the coinciding sounds of the conch and the muezzin's call to prayer. This worried him mildly, but the reports he had had of the Imam's speech had not included his prescient reference to a conch. Then, after a while, came the distant murmur of shouting voices interspersed by high cries. Even before he could make out the individual syllables, he could tell what was being shouted by the direction from which it came and the general shape and fervour of the sound. He sent a policeman to the top of the police station - it was three storeys high - to judge where the mob now was. The mob

318itself would be invisible - hidden as it was by the intervening houses of the labyrinthine alleys - but the direction of the heads of the spectators from the rooftops would give its position away. As the cries of 'Allah-u-Akbar! Allah-uAkbar!' came closer, the DM urgently told the small force of twelve constables to stand with him in a line - rifles at the ready - before the foundations and rudimentary walls of the site of the Shiva Temple. The thought flashed through his mind that despite his training in the army he had not learned to think tactically in a terrain of urban lawlessness. Was there nothing better he could do than to perform this mad sacrificial duty of standing against a wall and facing overwhelming odds?

The constables under his effective command were Muslims and Rajputs, mainly Muslims. The police force before Partition was very largely composed of Muslims as the result of the sound imperialist policy of divide and rule: it helped the British that the predominantly Hindu Congress-wallahs should

be beaten up by predominantly Muslim policemen. Even after the exodus to Pakistan in 1947 there were large numbers of Muslims in the force. They would not be happy to fire upon other

Muslims.

Krishan Dayal believed in general that although it was not always necessary to give effect to maximum force, it was necessary to give the impression that you were prepared to do so. In a strong voice he told the policemen that they were to fire when he gave the order. He himself stood there, pistol in hand. But he felt more vulnerable than ever before in his life. He told himself that a good officer, together with a force on which he could absolutely rely, could almost always carry the day, but he had reservations about the 'absolutely' ; and the 'almost' worried him. Once the mob, still a few alleys away, came round the final bend, broke into a charge, and made straight for the temple, the patently, pathetically ineffective police force would be overwhelmed. A couple of men had just come running to tell him that there were perhaps a thousand men in the mob, that they were well-armed, and that -

319judging by their speed - they would be upon them in two or three minutes.

Now that he knew he might be dead in a few minutes^ dead if he fired, dead if he did not - the young DM gave his wife a brief thought, then his parents, and finally an old schoolmaster of his who had once confiscated a blue toy pistol that he had brought to class. His wandering thoughts were brought back to earth by the head constable who was addressing him urgently. 'Sahib!' 'Yes - yes?'

‘Sahib - you are determined to shoot if necessary?’ The head constable was a Muslim ; it must have struck him as strange that he was about to die shooting Muslims in the course of defending a half-built Hindu temple that was an affront to the very mosque in which he himself often prayed.

‘What do you think?’ Krishan Dayal said in a voice that made things quite clear. ‘Do I need to repeat my orders?’

‘Sahib, if you take my advice -‘ said the head constable quickly, ‘we should not stand here where we will be overpowered. We should stand in wait for them just before they turn the last bend before the temple - and just as they turn the bend we should charge and fire simultaneously. Th&y, WOT,’^ %3(tfw ham many we are, ana they won’t know what’s hit them. There’s a ninety-nine per cent chance they will disperse.’

The astonished DM said to the head constable: ‘You should have my job.’

He turned to the others, who appeared petrified. He immediately ordered them to run with him towards the bend. They stationed themselves on either side of the alley, about twenty feet from the bend itself. The mob was less than a minute away. He could hear it screaming and yelling; he could feel the vibration of the ground as hundreds of feet rushed forward.

At the last moment he gave the signal. The thirteen men roared and charged and fired.

The wild and dangerous mob, hundreds strong, faced

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If with this sudden terror, halted, staggered, turned and fled. It was uncanny. Within thirty seconds it had melted away. Two bodies were left in the street: one young man had been shot through the neck and was dying or dead; the other, an old man with a white beard, had fallen and been crushed by the retreating mob. He was badly, perhaps fatally, injured. Slippers and sticks were scattered here and there. There was blood in several places in the alley, so it was apparent that there had been other injuries, possibly deaths. Friends or members of their families had probably dragged the bodies back into the doorways of neighbouring houses. No one wanted to be brought to the attention of the police.

The DM looked around at his men. A couple of them were trembling, most of them were jubilant. None of them was injured. He caught the head constable's eye. Both of them started laughing with relief, then stopped. A couple of women were wailing in nearby houses. Otherwise, everything was peaceful or, rather, still.

5.4

THE next day L.N. Agarwal visited his only child, his married daughter Priya. He did so because he liked visiting her and her husband, and also to escape from the panicstricken MLAs of his faction who were desperately worried about the aftermath of the firing in Chowk, and were making his life miserable with their misery.

L.N. Agarwal's daughter lived in Old Brahmpur in the Shahi Darvaza area, not far from Misri Mandi where her childhood friend Veena Tandon lived. Priya lived in a joint family which included her husband's brothers and their wives and children. Her husband was Ram Vilas Goyal, a lawyer with a practice concentrated mainly in the District Court - though he did appear in the High Court from time to time. He worked mainly on civil, not criminal cases. He was a placid, good-natured, bland-featured man, sparing with his words, and with only a mild interest in politics.

32.1 Law and a little business on the side was enough for him ; that and a calm family background and the peaceful ratchet of routine, which he expected Priya to provide. His colleagues respected him for his scrupulous honesty and his slow but clear-headed legal abilities. And his father-in-law the Home Minister enjoyed talking to him : he maintained confidences, refrained from giving advice, and had no passion for politics.

Priya Goyal for her part was a fiery spirit. Every morning, winter or summer, she paced fiercely along the roof. It was a long roof, since it covered three contiguous narrow houses, connected lengthways at each of the three storeys. In effect the whole operated as one large house, and was treated as such by the family and the neighbours. It was known locally as the Rai Bahadur's house because Ram Vilas Goyal's grandfather (still alive at eighty-eight), who had been given that title by the British, had bought and restructured the property half a century ago.

On the ground floor were a number of store-rooms and the servants' quarters. On the floor above lived Ram Vilas's ancient grandfather, the Rai Bahadur; his father and stepmother; and his sister. The common kitchen was also located on this floor as was the puja room (which the unpious,

even impious Priya rarely visited). On the top floor were the rooms, respectively, of the families of the three brothers; Ram Vilas was the middle brother and he occupied the two rooms of the top floor of the middle 'house'. Above this was the roof with its washing lines and water tanks.

When she paced up and down the roof, Priya Goyal would picture herself as a panther in a cage. She would look longingly towards the small house just a few minutes' walk away - and just visible through the jungle of intervening roofs - in which her childhood friend Veena Tandon lived. Veena, she knew, was not well off any longer, but she was free to do as she pleased : to go to the market, to walk around by herself, to go for music lessons. In Priya's own household there was no question of that. For a daughter-in-law from the house of the Rai Bahadur to be

322. seen in the market would have been disgraceful. That she was thirty-two years old with a girl of ten and a boy of eight was irrelevant. Ram Vilas, ever placid, would have none of it. It was simply not his way ; more importantly, it would cause pain to his father and stepmother and grandfather and elder brother - and Ram Vilas sincerely believed in maintaining the decencies of a joint family.

Priya hated living in a joint family. She had never done so until she came to live with the Goyals of Shahi Darvaza. This was because her father, Lakshmi Narayan Agarwal, had been the only son to survive to adulthood, and he in his turn had only had the one daughter. When his wife died, he had been stricken, and had taken the Gandhian vow of sexual abstinence. He was a man of spartan habits. Although Home Minister, he lived in two rooms in a hostel for Members of the Legislative Assembly.

‘The first years of married life are the hardest - they require the most adjustment,’ Priya had been told ; but she felt that in some ways it was getting more and more intolerable as time went on. Unlike Veena, she had no proper paternal - and more importantly, maternal - home to run away to with her children for at least a month a year - the prerogative of all married women. Even her grandparents (with whom she had spent the time when her father was in jail) were now dead. Her father loved her dearly as his only child ; it was his love that had in a sense spoiled her for the constrained life of the Goyal joint family, for it had imbued her with a spirit of independence; and now, living in austerity as he did, he could not himself provide her with any refuge.

If her husband had not been so kind, she felt she would have gone mad. He did not understand her but he was understanding. He tried to make things easier for her in small ways, and he never once raised his voice. Also, she liked the ancient Rai Bahadur, her grandfather-in-law. There was a spark to him. The rest of the family and particularly the women - her mother-in-law, her husband’s sister, and her husband’s elder brother’s wife - had done their best to make her miserable as a young bride, and she

could not stand them. But she had to pretend she did, every day, all the time - except when she paced up and down on the roof - where she was not even permitted to* have a garden, on the grounds that it would attract mon-* keys. Ram Vilas’s stepmother had even tried to dissuade her from her daily to-ing and fro-ing (‘Just think, Priya, how will it look to the neighbours?’), but for once Priya had refused to go along. The sisters-in-law above whose heads she paced at dawn reported her to their mother-in-law. But perhaps the old witch sensed that she had driven Priya to the limit, and did not phrase her complaint in a direct manner again. Anything indirect on the matter Priya chose not to understand.

L.N. Agarwal came dressed as always in an immaculately starched (but not fancy) kurta, dhoti and Congress cap. Below the white cap could be seen his curve of curly grey hair but not the baldness it enclosed. Whenever he ventured out to Shahi Darvaza he kept his cane handy to scare away the monkeys that frequented, some would say dominated, the neighbourhood. He dismissed his rickshaw near the local market, and turned off the main road into a tiny side-lane which opened out into a small square. In the middle of the square was a large pipal tree. One entire side of the square was the Rai Bahadur's house.

The door below the stairs was kept closed because of the monkeys, and he rapped on it with his cane. A couple of faces appeared at the enclosed wrought-iron balconies of the floors above. His daughter's face lit up when she saw him ; she quickly coiled her loose black hair into a bun and came downstairs to open the door. Her father embraced her and they went upstairs again.

'And where has Vakil Sahib disappeared?' he asked in Hindi.

He liked to refer to his son-in-law as the lawyer, although the appellation was equally appropriate to Ram Vilas's father and grandfather.

'He was here a minute ago,' replied Priya, and got up to search for him.

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‘Don’t bother yet,’ said her father in a warm, relaxed voice.
‘First give me some tea.’

For a few minutes the Home Minister enjoyed home comforts : well-made tea (not the useless stuff he got at the MLA hostel) ; sweets and kachauris made by the women of his daughter’s house - maybe by his daughter herself; some minutes with his grandson and granddaughter, who preferred, however, to play with their friends in the heat on the roof or below in the square (his granddaughter was good at street cricket) ; and a few words with his daughter, whom he saw rarely enough and missed a great deal.

He had no compunction, as some fathers-in-law had, about accepting food, drink and hospitality at his son-inlaw’s house. He talked with Priya about his health and his grandchildren and their schooling and character; about how Vakil Sahib was working far too hard, a little about Priya’s mother in passing, at the mention of whom a sadness came into both their eyes, and about the antics of the old servants of the Goyal household.

As they talked, other people passed the open door of the room, saw them, and came in. They included Ram Vilas’s father, rather a helpless character who was terrorized by his second wife. Soon the whole Goyal clan had dropped by - except for the Rai Bahadur, who did not like climbing stairs.

‘But where is Vakil Sahib?’ repeated L.N. Agarwal.

‘Oh,’ said someone, ‘he’s downstairs talking with the Rai Bahadur. He knows you are in the house and he will come up as soon as he is released.’

‘Why don’t I go down and pay my respects to the Rai Bahadur now?’ said L.N. Agarwal, and got up.

Downstairs, grandfather and grandson were talking in the large room that the Rai Bahadur had reserved as his own - mainly because he was attached to the beautiful peacock tiles that decorated the fireplace. L.N. Agarwal, being of the middle generation, paid his respects and had respects paid to him.

‘Of course you’ll have tea?’ said the Rai Bahadur.

‘I’ve had some upstairs.’ ‘Since when have Leaders of the People placed a limit on their tea-consumption?’ asked the Rai Bahadur in a creaky and lucid voice. The word he used was ‘Neta-log’, which had about the same level of mock deference as ‘Vakil Sahib’.

‘Now, tell me,’ he continued, ‘what is all this killing you’ve been doing in Chowk?’

It was not meant the way it sounded, it was merely the old Rai Bahadur’s style of speech, but L.N. Agarwal could have done without direct examination. He would probably get enough of that on the floor of the House on Monday. What he would have preferred was a quiet chat with his placid son-in-law, an unloading of his troubled mind.

‘Nothing, nothing, it will all blow over,’ he said.

‘I heard that twenty Muslims were killed,’ said the old Rai Bahadur philosophically.

‘No, not that many,’ said L.N. Agarwal. ‘A few. Matters are well in hand.’ He paused, ruminating on the fact that he had misjudged the situation. ‘This is a hard town to manage,’ he continued. ‘If it isn’t one thing it’s another. We are an ill-disciplined people. The lathi and the gun are the only things that will teach us discipline.’

‘In British days law and order was not such a problem,’ said the creaky voice.

The Home Minister did not rise to the Rai Bahadur’s bait. In fact, he was not sure that the remark was not delivered innocently.

‘Still, there it is,’ he responded.

‘Mahesh Kapoor’s daughter was here the other day,’ ventured the Rai Bahadur.

Surely this could not be an innocent comment. Or was it? Perhaps the Rai Bahadur was merely following a train of thought.

‘Yes, she is a good girl,’ said L.N. Agarwal. He rubbed his perimeter of hair in a thoughtful way. Then, after a pause, he added calmly: ‘I can handle the town; it is not the tension that disturbs me. Ten Misri Mandis and twenty Chowks are nothing. It is the politics, the politicians - ‘

The Rai Bahadur allowed himself a smile. This too was

3z6somewhat creaky, as if the separate plates of his aged face were gradually reconfiguring themselves with difficulty.

L.N. Agarwal shook his head, then went on. 'Until two this morning the MLAs were gathering around me like chicks around their mother. They were in a state of panic. The Chief Minister goes out of town for a few days and see what happens in his absence! What will Sharmaji say when he comes back? What capital will Mahesh Kapoor's faction make out of all this? In Misri Mandi they will emphasize the lot of the jatavs, in Chowk that of the Muslims. What will the effect of all this be on the jatav vote and the Muslim vote? The General Elections are just a few months away. Will these votebanks swing away from the Congress? If so, in what numbers? One or two gentlemen have even asked if there is the danger of further conflagration - though usually this is the least of their concerns.'

'And what do you tell them when they come running to you?' asked the Rai Bahadur. His daughter-in-law - the arch-witch in Priya's demonology - had just brought in the tea. The top of her head was covered with her sari. She poured the tea, gave them a sharp look, exchanged a couple of words, and went out.

The thread of the conversation had been lost, but the Rai Bahadur, perhaps remembering the cross-examinations for which he had been famous in his prime, drew it gently back again.

'Oh, nothing,' said L.N. Agarwal quite calmly. 'I just tell them whatever is necessary to stop them from keeping me awake.'

‘Nothing?’

‘No, nothing much. Just that things will blow over ; that what’s done is done; that a little discipline never did a neighbourhood any harm; that the General Elections are still far enough away. That sort of thing.’ L.N. Agarwal sipped his tea before continuing : ‘The fact of the matter is that the country has far more important things to think about. Food is the main one. Bihar is virtually starving. And if we have a bad monsoon, we will be too. Mere

317 Muslims threatening us from inside the country or across the border we can deal with. If Nehru were not so softhearted we would have dealt with them properly a few| years ago. And now these jatavs, these’ - his expression’ conveyed distaste at the words - ‘these scheduled caste people are becoming a problem once again. But let’s see, let’s see. ...’

Ram Vilas Goyal had sat silent through the whole exchange. Once he frowned slightly, once he nodded.

‘That is what I like about my son-in-law,’ reflected L.N. Agarwal. ‘He’s not dumb, but he doesn’t speak.’ He decided yet again that he had made the right match for his daughter. Priya could provoke, and he would simply not allow himself to be provoked.

5.5

MEANWHILE, upstairs, Priya was talking to Veena, who had come to pay her a visit. But it was more than a social visit, it was an emergency. Veena was very distressed. She had come

home and found Kedarnath not merely with his eyes closed but with his head in his hands. This was far worse than his general state of optimistic anxiety. He had not wanted to talk about it, but he had eventually discovered that he was in very grave financial trouble. With the pickets and the stationing of the police in Chowk, the wholesale shoe market had finally ground from a slowdown to a complete halt. Every day now his chits were coming due, and he just did not have the cash to pay them. Those who owed him money, particularly two large stores in Bombay, had deferred paying him for past supplies because they thought he could not ensure future supplies. The supplies he got from people like Jagat Ram, who made shoes to order, were not enough. To fulfil the orders that buyers around the country had placed with him, he needed the shoes of the basket-wallahs, and they did not dare come to Misri Mandi these days.

But the immediate problem was how to pay for the chits

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that were coming due. He had no one to go to; all his associates were themselves short of cash. Going to his father-in-law was for him out of the question. He was at his wits' end. He would try once more to talk to his creditors - the moneylenders who held his chits and their commission agents who came to him for payment when they were due. He would try to persuade them that it would do no one any good to drive him and others like him to the wall in a credit squeeze. This situation would surely not last long. He was not insolvent, just illiquid. But even as he spoke he knew what their answer would be. He knew that money, unlike labour, owed no allegiance to a particular trade, and could flow out of shoes and into, say, cold storage facilities without retraining or compunction or doubt. It only asked two questions : 'What interest?' and 'What risk?'

Veena had not come to Priya for financial help, but to ask her how best to sell the jewellery she had got from her mother upon her marriage - and to weep on her shoulder. She had brought the jewellery with her. Only a little had remained from the traumatic days after the family's flight from Lahore. Every piece meant so much to her that she started crying when she thought of losing it. She had only two requests - that her husband not find out until the jewellery had actually been sold; and that for a few weeks at least her father and mother should not know.

They talked quickly, because there was no privacy in the house, and at any moment anyone could walk into Priya's room.

'My father's here,' Priya said. 'Downstairs, talking politics.'

'We will always be friends, no matter what,' said Veena suddenly, and started crying again.

Priya hugged her friend, told her to have courage, and suggested a brisk walk on the roof.

'What, in this heat, are you mad?' asked Veena.

'Why not? It's either heat-stroke or interruption by my mother-in-law - and I know which I'd prefer.'

'I'm scared of your monkeys,' said Veena as a second

3*9line of defence. 'First they fight on the roof of the daal factory, then they leap over onto your roof. Shahi Darvaza should be renamed Hanuman Dwar.' »

'You're not scared of anything. I don't believe you,' said Priya. 'In fact, I envy you. You can walk over by yourself any time. Look at me. And look at these bars on the balcony. The monkeys can't come in, and I can't go out.'

'Ah,' said Veena, 'you shouldn't envy me.'

They were silent for a while.

'How is Bhaskar?' asked Priya.

Veena's plump face lit up in a smile, rather a sad one. 'He's very well - as well as your pair, anyway. He insisted on coming along. At the moment they are all playing cricket in the square downstairs. The pipal tree doesn't

seem to bother them I wish for your sake, Priya, that

you had a brother or sister,' Veena added suddenly, thinking of her own childhood.

The two friends went to the balcony and looked down through the wrought-iron grille. Their three children, together with two others, were playing cricket in the small square. Priya's ten-year-old daughter was by far the best of them. She was a fair bowler and a fine batsman. She usually managed to avoid the pipal tree, which gave the otheis endless trouble.

‘Why don’t you stay for lunch?’ asked Priya.

‘I can’t,’ said Veena, thinking of Kedarnath and her mother-in-law, who would be expecting her. ‘Tomorrow perhaps.’

‘Tomorrow then.’

Veena left the bag of jewellery with Priya, who locked it up in a steel almirah. As she stood by the cupboard Veena said :
‘You’re putting on weight.’

‘I’ve always been fat,’ said Priya, ‘and because I do nothing but sit here all day like a caged bird, I’ve grown fatter.’

‘You’re not fat and you never have been,’ said her friend. ‘And since when have you stopped pacing on the roof?’

330 ‘I haven’t,’ said Priya, ‘but one day I’m going to throw myself off it.’

‘Now if you talk like that I’m going to leave at once,’ said Veena and made to go.

‘No, don’t go. Seeing you has cheered me up,’ said Priya. ‘I hope you have lots of bad fortune. Then you’ll come running to me all the time. If it hadn’t been for Partition you’d never have come back to Brahmpur.’

Veena laughed.

‘Come on, let’s go to the roof,’ continued Priya. ‘I really can’t talk freely to you here. People are always coming in and listening from the balcony. I hate it here, I’m so unhappy, if I don’t tell you I’ll burst.’ She laughed, and pulled Veena to her feet. ‘I’ll tell Bablu to get us something cold to prevent heat-stroke.’

Bablu was the weird fifty-year-old servant who had come to the family as a child and had grown more eccentric with each passing year. Lately he had taken to eating everyone’s medicines.

When they got to the roof, they sat in the shade of the water-tank and started laughing like schoolgirls.

‘We should live next to each other,’ said Priya, shaking out her jet black hair, which she had washed and oiled that morning. ‘Then, even if I throw myself off my roof, I’ll fall onto yours.’

‘It would be awful if we lived next to each other,’ said Veena, laughing. ‘The witch and the scarecrow would get together every afternoon and complain about their daughters-in-law. “O, she’s bewitched my son, they play chaupar on the roof all the time, she’ll make him as dark as soot. And she sings on the roof so shamelessly to the whole neighbourhood. And she deliberately prepares rich food so that I fill up with gas. One day I’ll explode and she’ll dance over my bones.”’

Priya giggled. ‘No,’ she said, ‘it’ll be fine. The two kitchens will face each other, and the vegetables can join us in complaining about our oppression. “O, friend Potato, the

khatri scarecrow is boiling me. Tell everyone I died miserably. Farewell, farewell, never forget me.”

“O friend

331Pumpkin, the bania witch has spared me for only another two days. I’ll weep for you but I won’t be able to attend your chautha. Forgive me, forgive me.” ‘ ,

Veena’s laughter bubbled out again. ‘Actually, I feel quite sorry for my scarecrow,’ she said. ‘She had a hard time during Partition. But she was quite horrible to me even in Lahore, even after Bhaskar was born. When she sees I’m not miserable she becomes even more miserable. When we become mothers-in-law, Priya, we’ll feed our daughters-in-law ghee and sugar every day.’

‘I certainly don’t feel sorry for my witch,’ said Priya disgustedly. ‘And I shall certainly bully my daughter-in-law from morning till night until I’ve completely crushed her spirit. Women look much more beautiful when they’re unhappy, don’t you think?’ She shook her thick black hair from side to side and glared at the stairs. ‘This is a vile house,’ she added. ‘I’d much rather be a monkey and fight on the roof of the daal factory than a daughter-in-law in the Rai Bahadur’s house. I’d run to the market and steal bananas. I’d fight the dogs, I’d snap at the bats. I’d go to Tarbuz ka Bazaar and pinch the bottoms of all the pretty prostitutes. I’d ... do you know what the monkeys did here the other day?’

‘No,’ said Veena. ‘Tell me.’

‘I was just going to. Bablu, who is getting crazier by the minute, placed the Rai Bahadur’s alarm clocks on the ledge. Well, the next thing we saw was three monkeys in the pipal tree, examining them, saying, “Mmmmmmm”, “Mmmmmmm”, in a high-pitched voice, as if to say, “Well? We have your clocks. What now?” The witch went out. We didn’t have the little packets of wheat which we usually bribe them with, so she took some musammis and bananas and carrots and tried to tempt them down, saying, “Here, here, come, beautiful ones, come, come, I swear by

Hanuman I’ll give you lovely things to eat “ And they

came down all right, one by one they came down, very cautiously, each with a clock tucked beneath his arm. Then they began to eat the food, first with one hand, like this - then, putting the clocks down, with both hands.

332-Well - no sooner were all three clocks on the ground than the witch took a stick which she had hidden behind her back and threatened their lives with it - using such filthy language that I was forced to admire her. The carrot and the stick, don’t they say in English? So the story has a happy ending. But the monkeys of Shahi Darvaza are very smart. They know what they can hold up to ransom, and what they can’t.’

Bablu had come up the stairs, gripping with four dirty fingers of one hand four glasses of cold nimbu pani filled almost to the brim. ‘Here!’ he said, setting them down. ‘Drink! If you sit in the sun like this, you’ll catch pneumonia.’ Then he disappeared.

‘The same as ever?’ asked Veena.

‘The same, but even more so,’ said Priya. ‘Nothing changes. The only comforting constant here is that Vakil Sahib snores as loudly as ever. Sometimes at night when the bed vibrates, I think he’ll disappear, and all that will be left for me to weep over will be his snore. But I can’t tell you some of the things that go on in this house,’ she added darkly. ‘You’re lucky you don’t have much money. What people will do for money, Veena, I can’t tell you. And what does it go into? Not into education or art or music or literature - no, it all goes into jewellery. And the women of the house have to wear ten tons of it on their necks at every wedding. And you should see them all sizing each other up. Oh, Veena -‘ she said, suddenly realizing her insensitivity, ‘I have a habit of blabbering. Tell me to be quiet.’

‘No, no, I’m enjoying it,’ said Veena. ‘But tell me, when the jeweller comes to your house next time will you be able to get an estimate? For the small pieces - and, well, especially for my navratan? Will you be able to get a few minutes with him alone so that your mother-in-law doesn’t come to know? If I had to go to a jeweller myself I’d certainly be cheated. But you know all about these things.’

Priya nodded. ‘I’ll try,’ she said. The navratan was a lovely piece; she had last seen it round Veena’s neck at Pran and Savita’s wedding. It consisted of an arc of nine

333square gold compartments, each the setting of a different precious stone, with delicate enamel work at the sides and even on the back, where it could not be seen. Topaz, white ‘ sapphire, emerald, blue sapphire, ruby, diamond, pearl, catseye and coral: instead of looking cluttered and disordered, the heavy necklace had a wonderful combination of traditional solidity and charm. For Veena it had more than that: of all her mother’s gifts it was the one she loved most.

‘I think our fathers are mad to dislike each other so much,’ said Priya out of the blue. ‘Who cares who the next Chief Minister of Purva Pradesh will be?’

Veena nodded as she sipped Jier nimbu pani.

‘What news of Maan?’ asked Priya.

They gossiped on : Maan and Saeeda Bai ; the Nawab Sahib’s daughter and whether her situation in purdah was worse than Priya’s ; Savita’s pregnancy ; even, at secondhand, Mrs Rupa Mehra, and how she was trying to corrupt her samdhins by teaching them rummy.

They had forgotten about the world. But suddenly Bablu’s large head and rounded shoulders appeared at the top of the stairs. ‘Oh my God,’ said Priya with a start. ‘My duties in the kitchen - since I’ve been talking to you, they’ve gone straight out of my head. My mother-in-law must have finished her stupid rigmarole of cooking her own food in a wet dhoti after her bath, and she’s yelling for me. I’ve got to run. She does it for purity, so she says though she doesn’t mind that we have cockroaches the size of buffaloes running around all over the house, and rats that bite off your hair at night if you don’t wash the oil off. Oh, do stay for lunch, Veena, I never get to see you!’

‘I really can’t,’ said Veena. ‘The Sleeper likes his food just so. And so does the Snorer, I’m sure.’

‘Oh, he’s not so particular,’ said Priya, frowning. ‘He puts up with all my nonsense. But I can’t go out, I can’t go out, I can’t

go out anywhere except for weddings and the odd trip to the temple or a religious fair and you know what I think of those. If he wasn't so good, I would go completely mad. Wife-beating is something of a common

334sport in our neighbourhood, you aren't considered much of a man if you don't slap your wife around a couple of times, but Ram Vilas wouldn't even beat a drum at Dussehra. And he's so respectful to the witch it makes me sick, though she's only his stepmother. They say he's so nice to witnesses that they tell him the truth - even though they're in court! Well, if you can't stay, you must come tomorrow. Promise me again.'

Veena promised, and the two friends went down to the room on the top floor. Priya's daughter and son were sitting on the bed, and they informed Veena that Bhaskar had gone back home.

'What? By himself?' said Veena anxiously.

'He's nine years old, and it's five minutes away,' said the boy.

'Shh!' said Priya. 'Speak properly to your elders.'

'I'd better go at once,' said Veena.

On the way down, Veena met L.N. Agarwal coming up. The stairs were narrow and steep. She pressed herself against the wall and said namasté. He acknowledged the greeting with a 'Jeeti raho, bed', and went up.

But though he had addressed her as ‘daughter’, Veena felt that he had been reminded the instant he saw her of the ministerial rival whose daughter she really was.

5.6

‘is the Government aware that the Brahmpur Police made a lathi charge on the members of the jatav community last week when they demonstrated in front of the Govind Shoe Mart?’

The Minister for Home Affairs, Shri L.N. Agarwal, got to his feet.

‘There was no lathi charge,’ he replied.

‘Mild lathi charge, if you like. Is the Government aware of the incident I am referring to?’

The Home Minister looked across the well of the great circular chamber, and stated calmly :

335’There was no lathi charge in the usual sense. The police were forced to use light canes, one inch thick, when the unruly crowd had stoned and manhandled several members of the public and one policeman, and when it was apparent that the safety of the Govind Shoe Mart, and of the public, and of the policemen themselves was seriously threatened.’

He stared at his interrogator, Ram Dhan, a short, dark, pockmarked man in his forties, who asked his questions in

standard Hindi but with a strong Brahmपुरi accent with his arms folded across his chest.

‘Is it a fact,’ continued the questioner, ‘that on the same evening, the police beat up a large number of jatavs who were peacefully attempting to picket the Brahmपुर Shoe Mart nearby?’ Shri Ram Dhan was an Independent MLA from the scheduled castes, and he stressed the word ‘jatavs’. A kind of indignant murmur rose from all around the House. The Speaker called for order, and the Home Minister stood up again.

‘It is not a fact,’ he stated, keeping his voice level. ‘The police, being hard pressed by an angry mob, defended themselves and, in the course of this action, three people were injured. As for the honourable member’s innuendo that the police singled out members of a particular caste from the mob or were especially severe because the mob consisted ‘largely or members of that caste, “I would advise him to be more just to the police. Let me assure him that the action would have been no different had the mob been constituted differently.’

Limpet-like, however, Shri Ram Dhan continued: ‘Is it a fact that the honourable Home Minister was in constant touch with the local authorities of Brahmपुर, in particular the District Magistrate and the Superintendent of Police?’

‘Yes.’ L.N. Agârwal looked upwards, having delivered himself of this single syllable and as if seeking patience, towards the great dome of white frosted glass through which the late morning light poured down on the Legislative Assembly.

‘Was the specific sanction of the Home Minister taken

336by the district authorities before making the lathi charge on the unarmed mob? If so, when? If not, why not?’

The Home Minister sighed with exasperation rather than weariness as he stood up again : ‘May I reiterate that I do not accept the use of the words “lathi charge” in this context. Nor was the mob unarmed, since they used stones. However, I am glad that the honourable member admits that it was a mob that the police were facing. Indeed, from the fact that he uses the word in a printed, starred question, it is clear that he knew this before today.’

‘Would the honourable Minister kindly answer the question put to him?’ said Ram Dhan heatedly, opening his arms and clenching his fists.

‘I should have thought the answer was obvious,’ said L.N. Agarwal. He paused, then continued, as if reciting: ‘The developing situation on the ground is sometimes such that it is often tactically impossible to foresee what will happen, and a certain flexibility must be left to the local authorities.’

But Ram Dhan clung on. ‘If, as the honourable Minister admits, no such specific sanction was taken, was the honourable Home Minister informed of the proposed action of the police? Did he or the Chief Minister give their tacit approval?’

Once again the Home Minister rose. He glanced at a point in the dead centre of the dark green carpet that covered the well. ‘The action was not premeditated. It had to be taken forthwith in order to meet a grave situation which had suddenly

developed. It did not admit of any previous reference to Government.'

A member shouted: 'And what about the Chief Minister?'

The Speaker of the House, a learned but not normally very assertive man who was dressed in a kurta and dhoti, looked down from his high platform below the seal of Purva Pradesh - a great pipal tree - and said: 'These short-order starred questions are addressed specifically to the honourable Home Minister, and his answers must be taken to be sufficient.'

337Several voices now rose. One, dominating the others, boomed out: 'Since the honourable Chief Minister is present in the House after his travels in other parts, perhaps he would care to oblige us with an answer even though he is not compelled by the Standing Orders to do so? I believe the House would appreciate it.'

The Chief Minister, Shri S.S. Sharma, stood up without his stick, leaned with his left hand on his dark wooden desk and looked to his left and right. He was positioned along the curve of the central well, almost exactly between L.N. Agarwal and Mahesh Kapoor. He addressed the Speaker in his nasal, rather paternal, voice, nodding his head gently as he did so: 'I have no objection to speaking, Mr Speaker, but I have nothing to add. The action taken call it by what name the honourable members will - was taken under the aegis of the responsible Cabinet Minister.' There was a pause, during which it was not clear what the Chief Minister was going to add, if anything. 'Whom I naturally support,' he said.

He had not even sat down when the inexorable Ram Dhan came back into the fray. 'I am much obliged to the honourable

Chief Minister,' he said, 'but I would like to seek a clarification. By saying that he supports the Home Minister, does the Chief Minister mean to imply that he approves of the policy of the district authorities?'

Before the Chief Minister could reply, the Home Minister quickly rose again to say: 'I hope that we have made ourselves clear on this point. It was not a case of prior approval. An inquiry was held immediately after the incident. The District Magistrate went into the matter fully and found that the very minimum force which was absolutely unavoidable was used. The Government regret that such an occasion should have arisen, but are satisfied that the finding of the District Magistrate is correct. It was accepted by practically all concerned that the authorities faced a serious situation with tact and due restraint.'

A member of the Socialist Party stood up. 'Is it true,' he asked, 'that it was on the prodding of members of the bania trading community to which he belongs that the

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honourable Home Minister' - angry murmurs rose from the Government benches - 'let me finish - that the Minister subsequently posted troops - I mean police - throughout the length and breadth of Misri Mandi?'

'I disallow that question,' said the Speaker.

'Well,' continued the member, 'would the honourable Minister kindly inform us on whose advice he decided on the placing of this threatening body of police?'

The Home Minister grasped the curve of hair under his cap and said : ‘Government made its own decision, bearing the totality of the situation in mind. And in the event it has proved to be effective. There is peace at last in Misri Mandi.’

A babble of indignant shouts, earnest chatter and ostentatious laughter arose on all sides. There were shouts of ‘What peace?’ ‘Shame!’ ‘Who is the DM to judge the matter?’ ‘What about the mosque?’ and so on.

‘Order! Order!’ cried the Speaker, looking flustered as another member rose to his feet and said :

‘Will the Government consider the advisability of creating machineries other than the interested district authorities for making inquiries in such cases?’

‘I do not allow this question,’ said the Speaker, shaking his head like a sparrow. ‘Under Standing Orders questions making suggestions for action are not permissible and I am not prepared to allow them during Question Time.’

It was the end of the Home Minister’s grilling on the Misri Mandi incident. Though there had been only five questions on the printed sheet, the supplementary questions had given the exchange the character almost of a cross-examination. The intervention of the Chief Minister had been more disturbing than reassuring to L.N. Agarwal. Was S.S. Sharma, in his wily, indirect way, trying to palm off full responsibility for the action onto his second-in-command? L.N. Agarwal sat down, sweating slightly, but he knew that he would have to be on his feet immediately again. And, though he prided himself on

maintaining his calm in difficult circumstances, he did not relish what he would now have to face.

3395.7

BEGUM ABIDA KHAN slowly stood up. She was dressed in a dark blue, almost black, sari, and her pale and furious face riveted the house even before she began to speak. She was the wife of the Nawab of Baitar's younger brother, and one of the leaders of the Democratic Party, the party that sought to protect the interests of the landowners in the face of the impending passage of the Zamindari Abolition Bill. Although a Shia, she had the reputation of being an aggressive protector of the rights of all Muslims in the new, truncated Independent India. Her husband, like his father, had been a member of the Muslim League before Independence and had left for Pakistan shortly afterwards. Despite the powerful persuasion and reproach of many relatives, she, however, had chosen not to go. 'I'll be useless there, sitting and gossiping. Here in Brahmampur at least I know where I am and what I can do,' she had said. And this morning she knew exactly what she wanted to do. Looking straight at the man whom she considered to be one of the less savoury manifestations of humankind, she began her questioning from her list of starred questions.

'Is the honourable Minister for Home Affairs aware that

at least five people were killed by the police in the morning

near Chowk last Friday?'

The Home Minister, who at the best of times could not

stand the Begum, replied : ‘Indeed, I was not.’

It was somewhat obstructive of him not to elaborate,
but he did not feel like being forthcoming before this pale
harridan.

Begum Abida Khan veered from her script. ‘Will the
honourable Minister inform us exactly what he is aware
of?’ she inquired acidly.

‘I disallow that question,’ murmured the Speaker. ‘What
would the honourable Minister say was the death

toll in the firing in Chowk?’ demanded Begum Abida
Khan.

‘One,’ said L.N. Agarwal.

340 Begum Abida Khan’s voice was incredulous : ‘One?’ she
cried. ‘One?’

‘One,’ replied the Home Minister, holding up the index finger of his right hand, as if to an idiot child who had difficulty with numbers or hearing or both.

Begum Abida Khan cried out angrily : ‘If I may inform the honourable Minister, it was at least five, and I have good proof of this fact. Here are copies of the death certificates of four of the deceased. Indeed, it is likely that two more men will shortly -‘

‘I rise on a point of order, Sir,’ said L.N. Agarwal, ignoring her and addressing the Speaker directly. ‘I understand that Question Time is used for getting information from and not for giving information to Ministers.’

Begum Abida Khan’s voice continued regardless : ‘- two more men will shortly be receiving such certificates of honour thanks to the henchmen of the honourable Minister. I would like to table these death certificates - these copies of death certificates.’

‘I am afraid that that is not possible under the Standing Orders....’ protested the Speaker.

Begum Abida Khan waved the documents around, and raised her voice higher: ‘The newspapers have copies of them, why is the House not entitled to see them? When the blood of innocent men, of mere boys, is being callously shed -‘

‘The honourable member will not use Question Time to make speeches,’ said the Speaker, and banged his gavel.

Begum Abida Khan suddenly pulled herself together, and once again addressed L.N. Agarwal.

‘Will the honourable Minister kindly inform the House on what basis he came to the total figure of one?’

‘The report was furnished by the District Magistrate, who was present at the time of the event.’

‘By “present” you mean that he ordered the mowing down of these unfortunate people, is that not so?’

L.N. Agarwal paused before answering:

‘The District Magistrate is a seasoned officer, who took whatever steps he considered the situation required. As the

341 honourable member is aware, an inquiry under a more senior officer will shortly be made, as it is in all cases of an order to fire; and I suggest to her that we wait until such time as the report is published before we give vent to speculation.’

‘Speculation?’ burst out Begum Abida Khan. ‘Speculation? Do you call this speculation? You should be - the honourable Minister’ - she emphasized the word maananiya or honourable - ‘the honourable Minister should be ashamed of himself. I have seen the corpses of two men with these very eyes. I am not speculating. If it were the blood of his own co-religionists that was flowing in the streets, the honourable Minister would not “wait until such time”. We know of the overt and tacit

support he gives that foul organization the Linga Rakshak Samiti, set up expressly to destroy the sanctity of our mosque -‘

The House was getting increasingly excited under her oratory, inappropriate though it may have been. L.N. Agarwal was grasping his curve of grey hair with his right hand, tense as a claw, and - having cast his calm demeanour to the winds - was glaring at her at every scornful ‘honourable’. The frail-looking Speaker made another attempt to stem the flow :

‘The honourable member may perhaps need reminding that according to my Question List, she has three starred questions remaining.’

‘I thank you, Sir,’ said Begum Abida Khan. ‘I shall come to them. In fact I shall ask the next one immediately. It is very germane to the subject. Will the honourable Minister of Home Affairs inform us whether prior to the firings in Chowk a warning to disperse was read out under Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code? If so, when? If not, why not?’

Brutally and angrily L.N. Agarwal replied:

‘It was not. It could not have been. There was no time to do so. If people start riots for religious reasons and attempt to destroy temples they must accept the consequences. Or mosques, of course, for that matter -‘

But now Begum Abida Khan was almost shouting. ‘Riot?’

342. Riot? How does the honourable Minister come to the conclusion that that was the intention of the crowd? It was the time of evening prayer. They were proceeding to the mosque -

‘From all reports, it was obvious. They were rushing forward violently, shouting with their accustomed zealotry, and brandishing weapons,’ said the Home Minister.

There was uproar.

A member of the Socialist Party cried : ‘Was the honourable Minister present?’

A member of the Congress Party said: ‘He can’t be everywhere.’

‘But this was brutal,’ shouted someone else. ‘They fired at point-blank range.’

‘Honourable members are reminded that the Minister is to answer his own questions,’ cried the Speaker.

‘I thank you, Sir -’ began the Home Minister. But to his utter amazement and, indeed, horror, a Muslim member of the Congress Party, Abdus Salaam, who happened also to be Parliamentary Secretary to the Revenue Minister, now rose to ask: ‘How could such a grave step - an order to fire - have been taken without either giving due warning to disperse or attempting to ascertain the intention of the crowd?’

That Abdus Salaam should have risen to his feet shocked the House. In a sense it was not clear where he was addressing the question - he was looking at an indeterminate point somewhere to the right of the great seal of Purva Pradesh above the Speaker's chair. He seemed, in fact, to be thinking aloud. He was a scholarly young man, known particularly for his excellent understanding of land tenure law, and was one of the chief architects of the Purva Pradesh Zamindari Abolition Bill. That he should make common cause with a leader of the Democratic Party - the party of the zamindars - on this issue, stunned members of all parties. Mahesh Kapoor himself was surprised at this intervention by his Parliamentary Secretary and turned around with a frown, not entirely pleased. The Chief Minister scowled. L.N. Agarwal was gripped with

343 outrage and humiliation. Several members of the House were on their feet, waving their order papers, and no one, not even the Speaker, could be clearly heard. It was becoming a free-for-all.

When, after repeated thumps of the Speaker's gavel, a semblance of order was restored, the Home Minister, though still in shock, rose to ask :

‘May I know, Sir, whether a Parliamentary Secretary to a Minister is authorized to put questions to Government?’

Abdus Salaam, looking around in bewilderment, amazed by the furore he had unwittingly caused, said: ‘I withdraw.’

But now there were cries of: ‘No, no!’ ‘How can you do that?’ and ‘If you won't ask it, I will’.

The Speaker sighed.

‘As far as procedure is concerned, every member is at liberty to put questions,’ he ruled.

‘Why then?’ asked a member angrily. ‘Why was it done? Will the honourable Minister answer or not?’

‘I did not catch the question,’ said L.N. Agarwal. ‘I believe it has been withdrawn.’

‘I am asking, like the other member, why no one found out what the crowd wanted? How did the DM know it was violent?’ repeated the member.

‘There should be an adjournment motion on this,’ cried another.

‘The Speaker already has such a notice with him,’ said a third.
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Over all this rose the piercing voice of Begum Abida Khan :
‘It was as brutal as the violence of Partition. A youth was
killed - who was not even part of the demonstration. Would
the honourable Minister for Home Affairs! care to explain how
this happened?’ She sat down and glared.

‘Demonstration?’ said L.N. Agarwal with an air of foreboding triumph.

‘Crowd, rather -‘ said the battling Begum, leaping up | again and slipping out of his coils. ‘You are not going to deny, surely, that it was the time of prayer? The demonstra-

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tion - the demonstration of gross inhumanity, for that is what it was - was on the part of the police. Now will the honourable Minister not take refuge in semantics and deal with the facts.’

When he saw the wretched woman get up again, the Home Minister felt a stab of hatred in his heart. She was a thorn in his flesh and had insulted and humiliated him before the House and he now decided that, come what may, he was going to get back at her and her house - the family of the Nawab Sahib of Baitar. They were all fanatics, these Muslims, who appeared not to realize they were here in this country on sufferance. A calm dose of wellapplied law would do them good.

‘I can only answer one question at a time,’ L.N. Agarwal said in a dangerous growl.

‘The supplementary questions of the honourable member who asked the starred questions will take precedence,’ said the Speaker.

Begum Abida Khan smiled grimly.

The Home Minister said: ‘We must wait till the report is published. Government is not aware that an innocent youth was fired upon, let alone injured or killed.’

Now Abdus Salaam stood up again. From around the House outraged cries rose: 'Sit down, sit down.' 'Shame!' 'Why are you attacking your own side?'

'Why should he sit down?' 'What have you got to hide?' 'You are a Congress member - you should know better'.

But so unprecedented was the situation that even those who opposed his intervention were curious.

When the cries had died down to a sort of volatile muttering, Abdus Salaam, still looking rather puzzled, asked: 'What I have been wondering about during the course of this discussion is, well, why was a deterrent police force - well, maybe just an adequate police force - not maintained at the site of the temple? Then there would have been no need to fire in this panicky manner.'

The Home Minister drew in his breath. Everyone is looking at me, he thought. I must control my expression.

345'Is this supplementary question addressed to the honourable Minister?' asked the Speaker.

'Yes, it is, Sir,' said Abdus Salaam, suddenly determined. 'I will not withdraw this question. Would the honourable Minister inform us why there was not a sufficient and deterrent police force maintained either at the kotwali or at the site of the temple itself? Why were there only a dozen men left to maintain law and order in this grievously disturbed area, especially after the contents of the Friday sermon at the Alamgiri Mosque became known to the authorities?'

This was the question that L.N. Agarwal had been dreading, and he was appalled and enraged that it had been asked by an MLA from his own party, and a Parliamentary Secretary at that. He felt defenceless. Was this a plot by Mahesh Kapoor to undermine him? He looked at the Chief Minister, who was waiting for his response with an unreadable expression. L.N. Agarwal suddenly realized that he had been on his feet for a long time, and wanted very badly to urinate. And he wanted to get out of here as quickly as possible. He began to take refuge in the kind of stonewalling that the Chief Minister himself often used, but to much shabbier effect than that master of parliamentary evasion. By now, however, he hardly cared. He was convinced that this was indeed a plot by Muslims and so-called secular Hindus to attack him - and that his own party had been infected with treason.

Looking with calm hatred first at Abdus Salaam, then at Begum Abida Khan, he said : 'I can merely reiterate - wait for the report.'

A member asked : 'Why were so many police diverted to Misri Mandi for a totally unnecessary show of force when they were really needed in Chowk?'

'Wait for the report,' said the Home Minister, glaring around the House, as if challenging the members to goad him further.

Begum Abida Khan stood up. 'Has the Government taken any action against the District Magistrate responsible for this unprovoked firing?' she demanded.

346 'The question does not arise.'

‘If the much-anticipated report shows that the firing was uncalled for and irregular, does Government plan to take any steps in this regard?’

‘That will be seen in due course. I should think it might.’

‘What steps does Government intend to take?’

‘Proper and adequate steps.’

‘Has Government taken any such steps in similar situations in the past?’

‘It has.’

‘What are those steps that have been taken?’

‘Such steps as were considered reasonable and proper.’

Begum Abida Khan looked at him as she would at a snake, wounded but still evading the final blow by twisting its head from side to side. Well, she was not done with him yet.

‘Will the honourable Minister name the wards or neighbourhoods in which restrictions have now been placed with regard to the possession of cold steel? Have these restrictions been placed as the result of the recent firing? If so, why were they not placed earlier?’

The Home Minister looked at the pipal tree in the great seal, and said :

‘Government presumes that the honourable member means by the phrase “cold steel” objects such as swords, daggers, axes, and similar weapons.’

‘Household knives have also been wrested by the police from housewives,’ said Begum Abida Khan in more of a jeer than a statement. ‘Well, what are the neighbourhoods ?’

‘Chowk, Hazrat Mahal, and Captainganj,’ said L.N. Agarwal.

‘Not Misri Mandi?’

‘No.’

‘Although that was the site of the heaviest police presence?’ persisted Begum Abida Khan.

‘Police had to be shifted in large numbers to the real trouble spots-’ began L.N. Agarwal.

347He stopped abruptly, realizing too late how he had exposed himself by what he had started to say.

‘So the honourable Minister admits -’ began Begum Abida Khan, her eyes gleaming triumphantly.

‘The Government admits nothing. The report will detail everything,’ said the Home Minister, appalled by the confession she had elicited from him.

Begum Abida Khan smiled contemptuously, and decided that the reactionary, trigger-happy, anti-Muslim bully had just condemned himself out of his own mouth sufficiently for much further skewering to be productive. She let her questions taper away.

‘Why were these restrictions on cold steel imposed?’

‘In order to prevent crimes and incidents of violence.’

‘Incidents?’

‘Such as riots by inflamed mobs,’ he cried out in weary rage.

‘How long will these restrictions continue?’ asked Begum Abida Khan, almost laughing.

‘Till they are withdrawn.’

‘And when does the Government propose to withdraw these restrictions?’

‘As soon as the situation permits.’

Begum Abida Khan gently sat down.

There followed a notice for adjournment of the House in order to discuss the issue of the firing, but the Speaker disposed of this quickly enough. Adjournment motions were only granted in the most exceptional cases of crisis or emergency, where discussion could brook no delay; to grant them or not was in the Speaker's absolute discretion. The subject of the police firing, even had it been such a subject - which, to his mind, it was not - had been sufficiently aired already. The questions of that remarkable, almost unreinable woman had virtually become a debate.

The Speaker went on to the next items on the day's business : first, the announcement of bills passed by the state legislature that had received the assent of the Governor of the state or the President of India; next, the most

348important matter on the agenda for the entire session : the continuing debate on the Zamindari Abolition Bill.

But L.N. Agarwal did not stay to listen to discussions on the bill. As soon as the notice for an adjournment motion had been rejected by the Speaker, he fled - not directly across the well to the exit but along an aisle to the perimeter gallery, and then along the dark, wood-panelled wall. His tension and animus were palpable in the way he walked. He was unconsciously crushing his order papers in his hand. Several members tried to talk to him, to sympathize with him. He brushed them off. He walked unseeingly to the exit, and made straight for the bathroom.

L.N. AGARWAL undid the draw-string of his pyjamas and stood at the urinal. But he was so angry that he was unable to urinate for a while.

He stared at the long, white-tiled wall and saw in it an image of the packed chamber, the taunting face of Begum Abida Khan, the furrowed academic expression of Abdus Salaam, Mahesh Kapoor's uninterpretable frown, the patient but condescending look on the face of the Chief Minister as he had fumbled pathetically through the poisonous swamp of Question Time.

There was no one in the lavatory except a couple of sweepers, and they were talking to each other. A few words of their conversation broke in upon L.N. Agarwal's fury. They were complaining about the difficulties of obtaining grain even at the government ration shops. They talked casually, not paying any attention to the powerful Home Minister and very little attention to their own work. As they continued to talk, a feeling of unreality descended upon L.N. Agarwal. He was taken out of his own world, his own passions, ambitions, hatreds and ideals into a realization of the continuing and urgent lives of people other than himself. He even felt a little ashamed of himself.

349The sweepers were now discussing a movie that one of them had seen. It happened to be Deedar.

'But it was Daleep Kumar's role - oh - it brought tears to my eyes - he always has that quiet smile on his lips even when singing the saddest songs - such a good-natured man - blind himself, and yet giving pleasure to the whole world -'

He began humming one of the hit songs from the movie - 'Do not forget the days of childhood '

The second man, who had not seen the movie yet, joined in the song - which, ever since the film had been released, was on almost everyone's lips.

He now said : 'Nargis looked so beautiful on the poster I thought I would see the movie last night, but my wife takes my money from me as soon as I get my pay.'

The first man laughed. 'If she let you keep the money, all she would see of it would be empty envelopes and empty bottles.'

The second man continued wistfully, trying to conjure up the divine images of his heroine. 'So, tell me, what was she like? How did she act? What a contrast - that cheap dancing girl Nimmi or Pimmi or whatever her name is and Nargis - so high-class, so delicate.'

The first man grunted. 'Give me Nimmi any day, I'd rather live with her than with Nargis - Nargis is too thin, too full of herself. Anyway, what's the difference in class between them? She was also one of those.'

The second man looked shocked. 'Nargis?'

'Yes, yes, your Nargis. How do you think she got her first chance in the movies?' And he laughed and began to hum to himself again. The other man was silent and began to scrub the floor once more.

L.N. Agarwal's thoughts, as he listened to the sweepers talking, turned from Nargis to another 'one of those' Saeeda Bai - and to the now commonplace gossip about her relationship with Mahesh Kapoor's son. Good! he thought. Mahesh Kapoor may starch his delicately embroidered kurtas into rigidity, but his son lies at the feet of prostitutes.

350 Though less possessed by rage, he had once again entered his own familiar world of politics and rivalry. He walked along the curved corridor that led to his room. He knew, however, that as soon as he entered his office, he would be set upon by his anxious supporters. What little calm he had achieved in the last few minutes would be destroyed.

'No - I'll go to the library instead,' he muttered to himself.

Upstairs, in the cool, quiet precincts of the library of the Legislative Assembly, he sat down, took off his cap, and rested his chin on his hands. A couple of other MLAs were sitting and reading at the long wooden tables. They looked up, greeted him, and continued with their work. L.N. Agarwal closed his eyes and tried to make his mind blank. He needed to establish his equanimity again before he faced the legislators below. But the image that came before him was not the blank nothingness he sought, but the spurious blankness of the urinal wall. His thoughts turned to the virulent Begum Abida Khan once more, and once more he had to fight down his rage and humiliation. How little there was in common between this shameless, exhibitionistic woman who smoked in private and screeched in public, who had not even followed her husband when he had left for Pakistan but had immodestly and spouselessly remained in Purva Pradesh to make trouble - and his own late wife, Priya's mother, who had sweetened his life through her years of selfless care and love.

I wonder if some part of Baitar House could be construed as evacuee property now that that woman's husband is living in Pakistan, thought L.N. Agarwal. A word to the Custodian, an order to the police, and let's see what I am able to do.

After ten minutes of thought, he got up, nodded at the two MLAs, and went downstairs to his room.

A few MLAs were already sitting in his room when he arrived, and several more gathered in the next few minutes as they came to know that he was holding court. Imperturbable, even smiling slightly to himself, L.N. Agarwal now held forth as he was accustomed to doing. He calmed

35idown his agitated followers, he placed matters in perspective, he mapped out strategy. To one of the MLAs, who had commiserated with his leader because the twin misfortunes of Misri Mandi and Chowk had fallen simultaneously upon him, L.N. Agarwal replied:

'You are a case in point that a good man will not make a good politician. Just think - if you had to do a number of outrageous things, would you want the public to forget them or remember them?'

Clearly the answer was intended to be 'Forget them,' and this was the MLA's response.

'As quickly as possible?' asked L.N. Agarwal.

‘As quickly as possible, Minister Sahib.’

‘Then the answer,’ said L.N. Agarwal, ‘if you have a number of outrageous things to do is to do them simultaneously. People will scatter their complaints, not concentrate them. When the dust settles, at least two or three out of five battles will be yours. And the public has a short memory. As for the firing in Chowk, and those dead rioters, it will all be stale news in a week.’

The MLA looked doubtful, but nodded in agreement.

‘A lesson here and there,’ went on L.N. Agarwal, ‘never did anyone any harm. Either you rule, or you don’t. The British knew that they had to make an example sometimes - that’s why they blew the mutineers from cannons in 1857. Anyway, people are always dying - and I would prefer death by a bullet to death by starvation.’

Needless to say, this was not a choice that faced him. But he was in a philosophical mood.

‘Our problems are very simple, you know. In fact, they all boil down to two things : lack of food and lack of morality. And the policies of our rulers in Delhi - what shall I say? - don’t help either much.’

‘Now that Sardar Patel is dead, no one can control Panditji,’ remarked one young but very conservative MLA.

‘Even before Patel died who would Nehru listen to?’ said L.N. Agarwal dismissively. ‘Except, of course, his great Muslim

friend - Maulana Azad.'

352-He clutched his arc of grey hair, then turned to his personal assistant. 'Get me the Custodian on the phone.'

'Custodian - of Enemy Property, Sir?' asked the PA.

Very calmly and slowly and looking him full in the face, the Home Minister said to his rather scatterbrained PA: 'There is no war on. Use what intelligence God has given you. I would like to talk to the Custodian of Evacuee Property. I will talk to him in fifteen minutes.'

After a while he continued: 'Look at our situation today. We beg America for food, we have to buy whatever we can get from China and Russia, there's virtual famine in our neighbouring state. Last year landless labourers were selling themselves for five rupees each. And instead of giving the farmers and the traders a free hand so that they can produce more and store things better and distribute them efficiently, Delhi forces us to impose price controls and government godowns and rationing and every populist and unthought-out measure possible. It isn't just their hearts that are soft, it is their brains as well.'

'Panditji means well,' said someone.

'Means well - means well -' sighed L.N. Agarwal. 'He meant well when he gave away Pakistan. He meant well when he gave away half of Kashmir. If it hadn't been for Patel, we wouldn't even have the country that we do. Jawaharlal Nehru has built up his entire career by meaning well. Gandhiji loved him because he meant well. And the poor, stupid people love

him because he means well. God save us from people who mean well. And these well-meaning letters he writes every month to the Chief Ministers. Why does he bother to write them? The Chief Ministers are not delighted to read them.’ He shook his head, and continued: ‘Do you know what they contain? Long homilies about Korea and the dismissal of General Mac Arthur. What is General MacArthur to us? - Yet so noble and sensitive is our Prime Minister that he considers all the ills of the world to be his own. He means well about Nepal and Egypt and God knows what else, and expects us to mean well too. He doesn’t have the least idea of administration but he talks about the kind of food committees we

353 should set up. Nor does he understand our society and our scriptures, yet he wants to overturn our family life and our family morals through his wonderful Hindu Code Bill ‘

L.N. Agarwal would have gone on with his own homily for quite a while if his PA had not said, ‘Sir, the Custodian is on the line.’

‘All right then,’ said L.N. Agarwal, with a slight wave of his hand, which the others knew was a signal to withdraw. ‘Til see you all in the canteen.’

Left alone, the Home Minister talked for ten minutes to the Custodian of Evacuee Property. The discussion was precise and cold. For another few minutes the Home Minister sat at his desk, wondering if he had left any aspect of the matter ambiguous or vulnerable. He came to the conclusion that he had not.

He then got up, and walked rather wearily to the Assembly canteen. In the old days his wife used to send him a tiffin-

carrier containing his simple food prepared exactly the way he liked it. Now he was at the mercy of indifferent cooks and their institutional cooking. There was a limit even to asceticism.

As he walked along the curved corridor he was reminded of the presence of the central chamber that the corridors circumscribed - the huge, domed chamber whose height and majestic elegance made almost trivial the frenetic and partisan proceedings below. But his insight did not succeed, except momentarily, in detaching his mind from this morning's events and the bitterness that they had aroused in him, nor did it make him regret in the least what he had been planning and preparing a few minutes ago.

5.9

THOUGH it had been less than five minutes since he had] sent off the peon to fetch his Parliamentary Secretary,! Mahesh Kapoor was waiting in the Legal Remembrancer's Office with great impatience. He was alone, as he had sent

354the regular occupants of the office scurrying about to get various papers and law-books.

'Ah, Huzoor has brought his presence to the Secretariat at last!' he said when he saw Abdus Salaam.

Abdus Salaam did a respectful - or was it ironical? adaab, and asked what he could do.

Til come to that in a moment. The question is what you've done already.'

'Already?' Abdus Salaam was nonplussed.

'This morning. On the floor of the House. Making a kabab out of our honourable Home Minister.'

'I only asked -'

'I know what you only asked, Salaam,' said his Minister with a smile. 'I'm asking you why you asked it.'

'I was wondering why the police -'

'My good fool,' said Mahesh Kapoor fondly, 'don't you realize that Lakshmi Narayan Agarwal thinks I put you up to it?'

'You?'

'Yes, me!' Mahesh Kapoor was in good humour, thinking of this morning's proceedings and his rival's extreme discomfiture. 'It's exactly the kind of thing he would do so he imagines the same of me. Tell me' - he went on 'did he go to the canteen for lunch?'

'Oh, yes.'

‘And was the Chief Minister there? What did he have to say?’

‘No, Sharma Sahib was not there.’

The image of S.S. Sharma eating lunch seated traditionally on the floor at home, his upper body bare except for his sacred thread, passed before Mahesh Kapoor’s eyes.

‘No, I suppose not,’ he said with some regret. ‘So, how did he appear?’

‘You mean Agarwal Sahib? Quite well, I think. Quite composed.’

‘Uff! You are a useless informant,’ said Mahesh Kapoor impatiently. ‘Anyway, I’ve been thinking a little about this. You had better mind what you say or you’ll make things difficult for both Agarwal and myself. At least restrain

yourself until the Zamindari Bill has passed. Everyone needs everyone’s cooperation on that.’

‘All right, Minister Sahib.’

‘Speaking of which, why have these people not returned yet?’ asked Mahesh Kapoor, looking around the Legal Remembrancer’s Office. ‘I sent them out an hour ago.’ This was not quite true. ‘Everyone is always late and no one values time in this country. That’s our main problem Yes, what is it? Come in, come in,’ he continued,

hearing a light knock at the door.

It was a peon with his lunch, which he usually ate quite late.

Opening his tiffin-carrier, Mahesh Kapoor spared half a moment's thought for his wife, who, despite her own ailments, took such pains on his behalf. April in Brahm-pur was almost unbearable for her because of her allergy to neem blossoms, and the problem had become increasingly acute over the years. Sometimes, when the neem trees were in flower, she was reduced to a breathlessness that superficially resembled Fran's asthma.

5.14

WHEN they got to the Chief Minister's house fifteen minutes later, they were immediately admitted to his office, where he was working late.

After the usual salutations, they were asked to sit down. Murtaza Ali was sweating - he had been bicycling as fast as he could, considering the safety of his cargo. But Hassan looked cool and crisp in his fine white angarkha, if a little sleepy.

'Now to what do I owe this pleasure?'

The Chief Minister looked from the six-year-old boy to the Nawab Sahib's thirty-year-old secretary while nodding his head slightly from side to side as he sometimes did when tired.

Murtaza Ali had never met the Chief Minister in person. Since he had no idea how best to approach the matter, he simply said: ‘Chief Minister Sahib, this letter will tell you everything.’

The Chief Minister looked over the letter only once, but slowly. Then in an angry and determined voice, nasal but with the unmistakable ring of authority, he said:

‘Get me Agarwal on the phone!’

While the call was being connected, the Chief Minister ticked off Murtaza Ali for having brought the ‘poor boy’ with him so long past his bedtime. But it had clearly had an effect on his feelings. He would probably have had harsher things to say, reflected Murtaza Ali, if I had brought Abbas along as well.

When the call came through, the Chief Minister had a

378few words with the Home Minister. There was no mistaking the annoyance in his voice.

‘Agarwal, what does this Baitar House business mean?’ asked the Chief Minister.

After a minute he said :

‘No, I am not interested in all that. I have a good understanding of what the Custodian’s job is. I cannot have this sort of thing going on under my nose. Call it off at once.’

A few seconds later he said, even more exasperatedly :

‘No. It will not be sorted out in the morning. Tell the police to leave immediately. If you have to, put my signature on it.’ He was about to put down the receiver when he added : ‘And call me in half an hour.’

After the Chief Minister had put the phone down, he glanced at Zainab’s letter again. Then he turned to Hassan and said, shaking his head a little:

‘Go home now, things will be all right.’

5.15

BEGUM ABIDA KHAN (Democratic Party) : I do not understand what the honourable member is saying. Is he claiming that we should take the government’s word on this as on other matters? Does the honourable member not know what happened just the other day in this city - in Baitar House to be precise - where on the orders of this government, a gang of policemen, armed to the teeth, would have set upon the helpless members of an unprotected zenana and, if it had not been for the grace of God -

The Hon’ble the Speaker: The honourable member is reminded that this is not germane to the Zamindari Bill that is being discussed. I must remind her of the rules of debate and ask her to refrain from introducing extraneous matter into her speeches.

Begum Abida Khan : I am deeply grateful to the honourable Speaker. This House has its own rules, but God too judges us from above and if I may say so without disrespect

379to this House, God too has his own rules and we will see which prevails. How can zamindars expect justice from this government in the countryside where redress is so distant when even in this city, in the sight of this honourable House, the honour of other honourable houses is being ravished?

The Hon'ble the Speaker: I will not remind the honourable member again. If there are further digressions in this vein I will ask her to resume her seat.

Begum Abida Khan: The honourable Speaker has been very indulgent with me, and I have no intention of troubling this House further with my feeble voice. But I will say that the entire conduct, the entire manner in which this bill has been created, amended, passed by the Upper House, brought down to this Lower House and amended drastically yet again by the government itself shows a lack of faith and a lack of responsibility, even integrity, with respect to its proclaimed original intent, and the people of this state will not forgive the government for this. They have used their brute majority to force through amendments which are patently mala fide. What we saw when the bill - as amended by the Legislative Council - was undergoing its second reading in this Legislative Assembly was something so shocking that even I - who have lived through many shocking events in my life - was appalled. It had been agreed that compensation was to be paid to landlords. Since they are going to be deprived of their ancestral means of livelihood, that is the least that we can expect in justice. But the amount that is being paid is a pittance - half of which we are expected, indeed enjoined, to accept in government bonds of uncertain date!

A member: You need not accept it. The treasury will be happy to keep it warm for you.

Begum Abida Khan : And even that bond-weakened pittance is on a graduated scale so that the larger landlords many of whom have establishments on which hundreds of people depend - managers, relatives, retainers, musicians -

A member: Wrestlers, bullies, courtesans, wastrels -

Begum Abida Khan : - will not be paid in proportion to

380;

the land that is rightfully theirs. What will these poor people do? Where will they go? The Government does not care. It thinks that this bill will be popular with the people and it has an eye on the General Elections that will be taking place in just a few months. That is the truth of the matter. That is the real truth and I do not accept any denials from the Minister of Revenue or his Parliamentary Secretary or the Chief Minister or anyone. They were afraid that the High Court of Brahmputr would strike down their graduated scale of payment. So what did they do at a late stage of the proceedings yesterday - at the very end of the second reading ? Something that was so deceitful, so shameful, yet so transparent, that even a child would be able to see through it. They split up the compensation into two parts - a non-graduated so-called compensation - and a graduated so-called Rehabilitation Grant for zamindars and passed an amendment late in the day to validate this new scheme of payment. Do they really think the court will accept that the compensation is 'equal treatment' for all - when by mere jugglery the Revenue Minister and his Parliamentary Secretary have transferred three-quarters of the

compensation money into another category with a long and pious name - a category where there is blatantly unequal treatment of the larger landlords ? You may be assured that we will fight this injustice while there is breath in our bodies -

A member : Or voice in our lungs.

The Hon'ble the Speaker : I would request members not to interrupt needlessly the speeches of other members.

Begum Abida Khan : But what is the use of my raising my voice for justice in a House where all we meet with is mockery and boorishness ? We are called degenerates and wastrels but it is the sons of Ministers, believe me, who are the true proficient of dissipation. The class of people who preserved the culture, the music, the etiquette of this province is to be dispossessed, is to be driven through the lanes to beg its bread. But we will bear our vicissitudes with the dignity that is the inheritance of the aristocracy. This chamber may rubber-stamp this bill. The Upper Chamber

381 may give it another cursory reading and rubber-stamp it. The President may sign it blindly. But the courts will vindicate us. As in our fellow-state of Bihar, this pernicious legislation will be struck down. And we will fight for justice, yes, before the bench and in the press and at the hustings - as long as there is breath in our bodies - and, yes, as long as there is voice in our lungs.

Shri Devakinandan Rat (Socialist Party) : It has been very enlightening to be lectured to by the honourable member. I must confess that I see no likelihood of her begging for her bread through the lanes of Brahmpur. Perhaps for cake, but I doubt that too. If I had my way she would not beg for her

bread, but she and those of her class would certainly have to work for it. This is what simple justice requires, and this is what is required also by the economic health of this province. I, and the members of the Socialist Party, agree with the honourable member who has just spoken that this bill is an election gimmick by the Congress Party and the government. But our belief is based on the grounds that this is a toothless bill, ineffectual and compromised. It does not go anywhere near what is needed for a thorough overhaul of agricultural relations in this province.

Compensation for the landlords! What? Compensation for the blood that they have already sucked from the limbs of a helpless and oppressed peasantry ? Or compensation for their God-given right - I notice that the honourable member is in the habit of invoking God whenever His assistance is required to strengthen her weak arguments their God-given right to continue to gorge themselves and their useless train of unemployed relations on the ghee of this state when the poor farmer, the poor tenant, the poor landless labourer, the poor worker can hardly afford half a sip of milk for his hungry children ? Why is the treasury being depleted? Why are we writing ourselves and our children into debt with these promised bonds when this idle and vicious class of zamindars and taluqdars and landlords of all kinds should be summarily dispossessed without any thought of compensation - of the lands that

38zthey are sitting on and have been sitting on for generations for the sole reason that they betrayed their country at the time of the Mutiny and were richly rewarded for their treason by the British ? Is it just, Sir - is it reasonable that they should be awarded this compensation ? The money that this government in its culpable so-called generosity is pouring into the laps of these hereditary oppressors should go into roads and schools, into housing for the landless and land reclamation, into clinics and agricultural research centres, not into the luxurious

expenditure which is all that the aristocracy is accustomed to or capable of.

Mirza Amanat Hussain Khan (Democratic Party) : I rise to a point of order, Sir. Is the honourable member to be permitted to wander off the subject and take up the time of the House with irrelevancies ?

The Hon'ble the Speaker : I think he is not irrelevant. He is speaking on the general question of the relations between the tenants, the zamindars, and the government. That question is more or less before us and any remark which the honourable member now offers on that point is not irrelevant. You may like it or not, I may like it or not, but it is not out of order.

Shri Devakinandan Rai : I thank you, Sir. There stands the naked peasant in the hot sun, and here we sit in our cool debating rooms and discuss points of order and definitions of relevancy and make laws that leave him no better than before, that deprive him of hope, that take the part of the capitalist, oppressing, exploiting class. Why must the peasant pay for the land that is his by right, by right of effort, by right of pain, by right of nature, by right, if you will, of God ? The only reason why we expect the peasant to pay this huge and unseemly purchase price to the treasury is in order to finance the landlord's exorbitant compensation. End the compensation, and there will be no need for a purchase price. Refuse to accept the notion of a purchase price, and any compensation becomes financially impossible. I have been arguing this point since the inception of the bill two years ago, and throughout the second reading last week. But at this stage of the proceedings

383 what can I do ? It is too late. What can I do but say to the treasury benches : you have set up an unholy alliance with the

landlords and you are attempting to break the spirit of our people. But we will see what happens when the people realize how they have been cheated. The General Elections will throw out this cowardly and compromised government and replace it with a government worthy of the name : one that springs from the people, that works for the people and gives no support to its class enemies.

5.16

THE NAWAB SAHIB had entered the House during the earlier part of this last speech. He was sitting in the Visitor's Gallery, although, had he wished to, he would have been welcome in the Governor's Gallery. He had returned from Baitar the previous day in response to an urgent message from Brahmipur. He was shocked and embittered by what had happened and horrified that his daughter had had to face such a situation virtually on her own. His concern for her had been so much more patent than his pride in what she had done that Zainab had not been able to help smiling. For a long time he had hugged her and his two grandchildren with tears running down his cheeks. Hassan had been puzzled, but little Abbas had accepted this as a natural state of affairs and had enjoyed it all - he could tell that his grandfather was not at all unhappy to see them. Firoz had been white with anger, and it had taken all of Imtiaz's good humour when he arrived late that afternoon, to calm the family down.

The Nawab Sahib was almost as angry with his hornet of a sister-in-law as with L.N. Agarwal. He knew that it was she who had brought this visitation upon their heads. Then, when the worst was over, she had made light of the police action and was almost cavalier in her assumption that Zainab would have handled things with such tactical courage. As for L.N. Agarwal, the Nawab Sahib looked down onto the floor of the House, and saw him talking

384very civilly with the Revenue Minister, who had wandered over to his desk and was conferring with him on some point, probably floor management with respect to the impending and critical vote later this afternoon.

The Nawab Sahib had not had the opportunity to talk to his friend Mahesh Kapoor since his return, nor to convey his heart-felt thanks to the Chief Minister. He thought that he would do so after today's session in the Assembly was over. But another reason why he was present in the House today was that he realized - as did many others, for the press and public galleries were all crowded - that it was a historic occasion. For him, and for those like him, the impending vote was one that would - unless halted by the courts - spell a swift and precipitous decline.

Well, he thought fatalistically, it has to happen sooner or later. He was under no illusions that his class was a particularly meritorious one. Those who constituted it included not only a small number of decent men but also a large number of brutes and an even larger number of idiots. He remembered a petition that the Zamindars' Association had submitted to the Governor twelve years ago : a good third of the signatories had used their thumbprints.

Perhaps if Pakistan had not come into existence, the landowners would have been able to parlay their way into self-preservation : in a united but unstable India each power-bloc might have been able to use its critical strength to maintain the status quo. The princely states, too, could have wielded their weight, and men such as the Raja of Marh might well have remained Rajas in fact as well as in name. The ifs and buts of history, thought the Nawab Sahib, form an insubstantial if intoxicating diet.

Since the annexation of Brahmipur by the British in the early 1850s the Nawabs of Baitar and other courtiers of the erstwhile royal house of Brahmipur had not even had the psychological satisfaction of serving the state, a satisfaction claimed by many aristocracies widely separated in space and time. The British had been happy to let the zamindars collect the revenue from land-rent (and were content in

385 practice to allow them whatever they obtained in excess of the agreed British share) but for the administration of the state they had trusted no one but civil servants of their own race, selected in, partially trained in, and imported from England - or, later, brown equivalents so close in education and ethos as made no appreciable difference.

And indeed, apart from racial mistrust, there was, the Nawab Sahib was compelled to admit, the question of competence. Most zamindars - himself, alas, perhaps included - could hardly administer even their own estates and were fleeced by their munshis and money-lenders. For most of the landlords the primary question of management was not indeed how to increase their income but how to spend it. Very few invested it in industry or urban property. Some, certainly, had spent it on music and books and the fine arts. Others, like the present Prime Minister of Pakistan, Liaquat Ali Khan, who had been a good friend of the Nawab Sahib's father, had spent it to build up influence in politics. But for the most part the princes and landlords had squandered their money on high living of one kind or another : on hunting or wine or women or opium. A couple of images flashed irresistibly and unwelcomely across his mind. One ruler had such a passion for dogs that his entire life revolved around them : he dreamed, slept, woke, imagined, fantasized about dogs ; everything he could do was done to their greater glory. Another was an opium addict who was only content when a few women were thrown into his lap

; even then, he was not always roused to action ; sometimes he just snored on.

The Nawab of Baitar's thoughts continued to oscillate between the debate on the floor of the Assembly and his own meditations. At one point there was a brief intervention by L.N. Agarwal, who made a few amusing comments - at which even Mahesh Kapoor laughed. The Nawab Sahib stared at the bald head ringed with a horseshoe of grey hair and wondered at the thoughts that must be seething under that layer of flesh and bone. How could a man like this deliberately, indeed happily, cause so much misery to him and to those he held so dear? What satisfaction could it have given him that the relatives of someone who had worsted him in a debate would be dispossessed of the home in which they had spent the greater part of their lives?

It was now about half-past four, and there was less than half an hour before the division of votes. The final speeches were continuing and the Nawab Sahib listened with a somewhat wry expression as his sister-in-law circumscribed the institution of zamindari with a luminous purple halo.

Begum Abida Khan : For more than an hour we have been listening to speech after speech from the government benches, filled with the most odious self-congratulation. I did not think that I would wish to speak again, but I must do so now. I would have thought that it would be more appropriate to let those people speak whose death and burial you wish to preside over - I mean the zamindars, whom you wish to deprive of justice and redress and the means of livelihood. The same record has been going on and on for an hour - if it is not the Minister of Revenue it is some pawn of his who has been trained to sing the same song: His Master's Voice. I may tell you that the music is not very pleasant: it is monotonous without being soothing. It is not the voice of reason or

reasonableness but the voice of majority power and self-righteousness. But it is pointless to speak further on this.

I pity this government that has lost its way and is trying to find a path out of the swamp of its own policies. They have no foresight, and they cannot, they dare not keep their eyes on the future. It is said that we should 'Beware of the day that is to come', and in the same way I say to this Congress government: 'Beware of the time that you are about to bring upon yourself and upon this country.' It is three years since we obtained Independence but look at the poor of the land: they have neither food to eat nor clothes to wear nor shelter to protect themselves from the sky. You promised Paradise and green gardens under which rivers flow, and gulled the people into believing that the cause of their pitiable condition was zamindari. Well, zamindari will go, but when your promises of these green gardens prove to be false, let us see then what the people say about you and do to you. You are dispossessing eight lakh people, and openly inviting communism. The people will soon find out who you are.

What are you doing that we did not do? You are not giving them the land, you are renting it out just as we did. But what do you care about them? We lived for generations together, we were like their fathers and grandfathers, they loved us and we loved them, we knew their temperament and they knew ours. They were happy with whatever we gave them, and we were happy with whatever they gave us. You have come between us and destroyed what was hallowed by the bonds of ancient emotion. And the crimes and oppressions you blame on us, what proof do these poor people have that you will be any better than you claim we are? They will have to go to the venal clerk and the gluttonous Sub-Divisional Officer, and they will be sucked dry. We were never like that. You have separated the nail from the flesh, and you are happy with the result

As for compensation, I have said enough already. But is this decency, is this a just provision - that you should go to someone's shop and tell him: 'Give me this and this at such and such a price' and if he doesn't agree to sell it, you take it anyway? And then when he pleads with you at least to give him what you promised him, to turn around and you then say, 'Here is one rupee now, and the rest you will get in instalments over twenty-five years'?

You may call us all kinds of names and invent all manner of miseries for us - but the fact is that it is we zamindars who made this province what it is - who made it strong, who gave it its special flavour. In every field of life we have made our contribution, a contribution that will long outlive us, and that you cannot wipe away. The universities, the colleges, the traditions of classical music, the schools, the very culture of this place were established by us. When foreigners and those from other states in our country come to this province what do they see - what do

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they admire? The Barsaat Mahal, the Shahi Darvaza, the Imambaras, the gardens and the mansions that have come down to you from us. These things that are fragrant to the world you say are filled with the scent of exploitation, of rotting corpses. Are you not ashamed when you speak in this vein? When you curse and rob those who created this splendour and this beauty? When you do not give them enough compensation even to whitewash the buildings that are the heritage of this city and this state? This is the worst form of meanness, this is the grasping attitude of the village shopkeeper, the bania who smiles and smiles and grasps without any mercy -

The Hon'ble the Minister for Home Affairs (Shri L.N. Agarwal) : I hope that the honourable member is not casting imputations upon my community. This is getting to be common sport in this House.

Begum Abida Khan : You understand very well what I am saying, you who are a master at twisting words and manipulating the law. But I will not waste my time arguing with you. Today you have made common cause with the Minister of Revenue in the shameful exploitation of a scapegoat class, but tomorrow will show you what such friendships of convenience are worth - and when you look around for friends everyone will have turned their face away from you. Then you will remember this day and what I have said, and you and your government will come to wish that you had behaved with greater justice and humanity.

There followed an extremely long-winded speech by a socialist member; and then the Chief Minister S.S. Sharma talked for about five minutes, thanking various people for their role in shaping this legislation - particularly Mahesh Kapoor, the Minister of Revenue, and Abdus Salaam, his Parliamentary Secretary. He advised the landowners to live in amity with their erstwhile tenants when the divestiture of their property took place. They should live together like brothers, he stated mildly and nasally. It was an opportunity for the landlords to show their goodness of heart.

389 They should think of the teachings of Gandhiji and devote their lives to the service of their fellow-men. Finally Mahesh Kapoor, the chief architect of the bill, got the chance to round off the debate in the House. But time was too short for him to say more than a few words :

The Hon'ble the Minister of Revenue (Shri Mahesh Kapoor) : Mr Speaker, I had hoped that my friend from the socialist benches who talked so movingly of equality and a classless society and took the Government to task for producing an impotent and unjust bill, would be a just man himself and would confer some equality on me. It is the end of the last day. If he had taken a little less time for his speech I would have had a little more. As it is I now have barely two minutes to speak. He claimed that my bill was a measure created with the intention merely of preventing revolution - a revolution that he believes to be desirable. If that is so, I would be interested to see which way he and his party vote in a couple of minutes. After the honourable Chief Minister's words of thanks and advice which I sincerely hope will be taken by the landlords - I have nothing to add except a few further words of thanks - to my colleagues in this section of the House and, yes, in that section too, who have made the passage of this bill possible, and to the officers of the Revenue Department and the Printing Department and the Law Department, in particular the drafting cell and the Office of the Legal Remembrancer. I thank them all for their months and years of assistance and advice, and I hope that I speak for the people of Purva Pradesh when I say that my thanks are not merely personal.

The Hon'ble the Speaker : The question before the House is that the Purva Pradesh Zamindari Abolition Bill of original date 1948 as passed by the Legislative Assembly, amended by the Legislative Council and further amended by the Legislative Assembly, be passed.

The motion was put and the House passed the bill by a large majority, consisting mainly of the Congress Party,

390 whose numbers dominated the House. The Socialist Party had to vote, however reluctantly, in favour of the bill on the grounds that half a loaf was better than none, and despite the

fact that it somewhat assuaged the hunger that would have allowed them to flourish. Had they voted against it they would never have lived it down. The Democratic Party voted against it unanimously, also as expected. The smaller parties and Independents voted predominantly for the bill.

Begum Abida Khan : With the permission of the Speaker I would like a minute's time to say something.

The Hon'ble the Speaker: I will give you a minute's time.

Begum Abida Khan: I would like to say on behalf of myself and the Democratic Party that the advice given by the pious and honourable Chief Minister to the zamindars - that they should maintain good relations with their tenants - is very valuable advice, and I thank him for it. But we would have maintained such excellent relations anyway regardless of his excellent advice, and regardless of the passage of this bill - this bill which will force so many people into poverty and unemployment, which will utterly destroy the economy and culture of this province, and which will at the same time grant not the least benefit to those who -

The Hon'ble the Minister of Revenue (Shri Mahesh Kapoor) :
Mr Speaker, what sort of occasion is this for speech-making?

The Hon'ble the Speaker: I gave her permission merely to make a short statement. I would request the honourable member -

Begum Abida Khan: As a result of its unjust passage by a brute majority we are left at this time with no other constitutional means of expressing our displeasure and sense of injustice other than to walk out of this House, which is a constitutional recourse, and I therefore call upon the members of my party to stage a walk-out to protest the passage of this bill.

391 The members of the Democratic Party walked out of the Assembly. There were a few hisses and cries of 'Shame!' but for the most part the Assembly was silent. It was the end of the day, so the gesture was symbolic rather than effective. After a few moments, the Speaker adjourned the House until eleven o'clock the next morning. Mahesh Kapoor gathered his papers together, looked up at the huge, frosted dome, sighed, then allowed his gaze to wander around the slowly emptying chamber. He looked across at the gallery and his eye caught that of the Nawab Sahib. They nodded at each other in a gesture of greeting that was almost entirely friendly, though the discomfort of the situation - not quite an irony - was lost on neither of them. Neither of them wished to talk to the other just yet, and each of them understood this. So Mahesh Kapoor continued to put his papers in order, and the Nawab Sahib, stroking his beard in thought, walked out of the gallery to look for the Chief Minister.

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ARRIVING at the Haridas College of Music, Ustad Majeed Khan nodded absently to a couple of other music teachers, grimaced with distaste at two female kathak dancers who were carrying their jangling anklets into a nearby practice room on the ground floor, and arrived at the closed door of his room. Outside the room, in casual disarray, lay three sets of chappals and one pair of shoes. Ustad Majeed Khan, realizing that this meant that he was forty-five minutes late, sighed a half-irritated and half-exhausted 'Ya Allah', took off his own peshawari chappals, and entered the room.

The room that he entered was a plain, rectangular, highceilinged box with not very much natural light. What few rays came in from outside were provided by a small skylight high on the far wall. On the wall to the left as he entered was a long cupboard with a rack where a number of tanpuras were resting. On the floor was a pale blue unpatterned cotton rug; this had been quite difficult to obtain, as most of the rugs available on the market had floral or other designs of one kind or another. But he had insisted on having a plain rug so that he would not be distracted in his music, and the authorities had very surprisingly agreed to find him one. On the rug facing him sat a short, fat young man whom he had never seen; the man stood up as soon as he entered. Facing away from him were seated a young man and two young women. They turned when the door opened, and immediately they saw it was him, got up respectfully to greet him. One of the women - it was Malati Trivedi - even bent down to touch his feet. Ustad Majeed Khan was not displeased. As she got up he said reprovingly to her :

'So you've decided to make a reappearance, have you ? Now that the university is closed I suppose I can expect to see my classes fill up again. Everyone talks about their devotion to music but during examination time they disappear like rabbits into their burrows.'

The Ustad then turned to the stranger. This was Motu

395Chand, the plump tabla player who as a rule accompanied Saeeda Bai. Ustad Majeed Khan, surprised to see someone whom he did not immediately recognize in place of his regular tabla player, looked at him sternly and said, 'Yes ?'

Motu Chand, smiling benignly, said, 'Excuse me, Ustad Sahib, for my presumption. Your regular tabla player, my wife's sister's husband's friend, is not well and he asked me if I would stand in for him today.'

'Do you have a name ?'

'Well, they call me Motu Chand, but actually -'

'Hmmh!' said Ustad Majeed Khan, picked up his tanpura from the rack, sat down and began to tune it. His students sat down as well, but Motu Chand continued standing.

'Oh-hoh, sit down,' said Ustad Majeed Khan irritably, not deigning to look at Motu Chand.

As he was tuning his tanpura, Ustad Majeed Khan looked up, wondering to which of the three students he would give the first fifteen-minute slot. Strictly speaking, it belonged to the boy, but because a bright ray from the skylight happened to fall on Malati's cheerful face Ustad Majeed Khan decided on a whim to ask her to begin. She got up, fetched one of the smaller tanpuras, and began to tune it. Motu Chand adjusted the pitch of his tabla accordingly.

‘Now which raag was I teaching you - Bhairava ?’ asked Ustad Majeed Khan.

‘No, Ustad Sahib, Ramkali,’ said Malati, gently strumming the tanpura which she had laid flat on the rug in front of her.

‘Hmmm!’ said Ustad Majeed Khan. He began to sing a few slow phrases of the raag and Malati repeated the phrases after him. The other students listened intently. From the low notes of the raag the Ustad moved to its upper reaches and then, with an indication to Motu Chand to begin playing the tabla in a rhythmic cycle of sixteen beats, he began to sing the composition that Malati had been learning. Although Malati did her best to concentrate, she was distracted by the entrance of two more students -

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^’•both girls - who paid their respects to Ustad Majeed Khan before sitting down.

Clearly the Ustad was in a good mood once again; at one point he stopped singing to comment: ‘So, you really want to become a doctor ?’ Turning away from Malati, he added ironically, ‘With a voice like hers she will cause more heartache than even she will be able to cure, but if she wants to be a good musician she cannot give it second place in her life.’ Then, turning back to Malati he said, ‘Music requires as much concentration as surgery. You can’t disappear for a month in the middle of an operation and take it up at will.’

‘Yes, Ustad Sahib,’ said Malati Trivedi with the suspicion of a smile.

‘A woman as a doctor!’ said Ustad Majeed Khan, musing. ‘All right, all right, let us continue - which part of the composition were we at?’

His question was interrupted by a prolonged series of thumps from the room above. The bharatnatyam dancers had begun their practice. Unlike the kathak dancers whom the Ustad had glared at in the hall, they did not wear anklets for their practice session. But what they lost in tinkling distraction they more than compensated for in the vigour with which they pounded their heels and soles on the floor directly above. Ustad Majeed Khan’s brows blackened and he abruptly terminated the lesson he was giving Malati.

The next student was the boy. He had a good voice and had put in a lot of work between lessons, but for some reason Ustad Majeed Khan treated him rather abruptly. Perhaps he was still upset by the bharatnatyam which sounded sporadically from above. The boy left as soon as his lesson was over.

Meanwhile, Veena Tandon entered, sat down, and began to listen. She looked troubled. She sat next to Malati, whom she knew both as a fellow-student of music and as a friend of Lata’s. Motu Chand, who was facing them while playing, thought that they made an interesting contrast: Malati with her fair, fine features, brownish hair, and

397slightly amused green eyes, and Veena with her darker, plumper features, black hair, and dark eyes, animated but anxious.

After the boy came the turn of a cheerful but shy middle-aged Bengali woman, whose accent Ustad Majeed Khan enjoyed mimicking. She would normally come in the evenings, and at present he was teaching her Raag Malkauns. This she would sometimes call 'Malkosh' to the amusement of the Ustad.

'So you've come in the morning today,' said Ustad Majeed Khan. 'How can I teach you Malkosh in the morning?'

'My husband says I should come in the morning,' said the Bengali lady.

'So you are willing to sacrifice your art for your marriage ?' asked the Ustad.

'Not entirely,' said the Bengali lady, keeping her eyes down. She had three children, and was bringing them up well, but was still incurably shy, especially when criticized by her Ustad.

'What do you mean, not entirely ?'

'Well,' said the lady, 'my husband would prefer me to sing not classical music but Rabindrasangeet.'

'Hmnh!' said Ustad Majeed Khan. That the sickly-sweet so-called music of Rabindranath Tagore's songs should be more attractive to any man's ears than the beauty of classical khyaal clearly marked such a man as a buffoon. To the shy Bengali

woman, the Ustad said in a tone of lenient contempt: ‘So I expect he’ll be asking you to sing him a “gojol” next.’

At his cruel mispronunciation the Bengali lady retreated entirely into a flustered silence, but Malati and Veena glanced at each other with amusement.

Ustad Majeed Khan, apropos of his earlier lesson, said: ‘The boy has a good voice and he works hard, but he sings as if he were in church. It must be his earlier training in western music. It’s a good tradition in its own way,’ he went on tolerantly. Then, after a pause, he continued, ‘But you can’t unlearn it. The voice vibrates too much in the

398 wrong kind of way. Hmm.’ He turned to the Bengali woman : ‘Tune the tanpura down to the “ma” ; I may as well teach you your “Malkosh”. One should not leave a raag half-taught even if it is the wrong time of day to sing it. But then I suppose one can set yogurt in the morning and eat it at night.’

Despite her nervousness, the Bengali lady acquitted herself well. The Ustad let her improvise a little on her own, and even said an encouraging ‘May you live long!’ a couple of times. If the truth be told, music mattered more to the Bengali lady than her husband and her three wellbrought-up sons, but it was impossible, given the constraints of her life, for her to give it priority. The Ustad was pleased with her and gave her a longer lesson than usual. When it was over, she sat quietly to one side to listen to what was to follow.

What followed was Veena Tandon’s lesson. She was to sing Raag Bhairava, for which the tanpura had to be retuned to ‘pa’. But so distracted was she by various worries about her husband and her son that she began to strum it immediately.

‘What raag are you studying ?’ said Ustad Majeed Khan, slightly puzzled. ‘Isn’t it Bhairava ?’

‘Yes, Guruji,’ said Veena, somewhat perplexed herself.

‘Guruji ?’ said Ustad Majeed Khan in a voice that would have been indignant if it had not been so astonished. Veena was one of his favourite pupils, and he could not imagine what had got into her.

‘Ustad Sahib,’ Veena corrected herself. She too was surprised that in addressing her Muslim teacher she had used the title of respect due to a Hindu one.

Ustad Majeed Khan continued : ‘And if you are singing Bhairava, don’t you think it would be a good idea to retune the tanpura ?’

‘Oh,’ said Veena, looking down in surprise at the tanpura, as if it were somehow to blame for her own absence of mind.

After she had re-tuned it, the Ustad sang a few phrases of a slow alaap for her to imitate, but her performance

399 was so unsatisfactory that at one point he said sharply to her: ‘Listen. Listen first. Listen first, then sing. Listening is fifteen annas in the rupee. Reproducing it is one anna - it’s the work of a parrot. Are you worried about something ?’ Veena did not think it right to speak of her anxieties before her teacher, and Ustad Majeed Khan continued: ‘Why don’t you

strum the tanpura so that I can hear it ? You should eat almonds for breakfast - that will increase your strength. All right, let's go on to the composition Jaago Mohan Pyaare,' he added impatiently.

Motu Chand started the rhythmic cycle on the tabla and they began to sing. The words of the well-known composition lent stability to Veena's unsteady thoughts and the increasing confidence and liveliness of her singing pleased Ustad Majeed Khan. After a while first Malati, and then the Bengali woman got up to leave. The word 'gojol' flashed through the Ustad's mind and it dawned upon him where he had heard of Motu Chand before. Wasn't he the tabla player who accompanied the ghazals of Saeeda Bai, that desecrater of the holy shrine of music, the courtesan who served the notorious Raja of Marh ? One thought led to another; he turned abruptly towards Veena and said, 'If your father, the Minister, is bent upon destroying our livelihood, at least he can protect our religion.'

Veena stopped singing and looked at him in bewildered silence. She realized that 'livelihood' referred to the patronage of the great rural landlords whose lands the Zamindari Abolition Bill was attempting to snatch away. But what the Ustad Sahib meant by a threat to his religion, she could not comprehend at all.

'Tell him that,' continued Ustad Majeed Khan.

'I will, Ustad Sahib,' said Veena in a subdued voice.

'The Congress-wallahs will finish Nehru and Maulana Azad and Rafi Sahib off. And our worthy Chief Minister and Home Minister will sooner or later suppress your father as well. But while he has some political life, he can do something to help

those of us who depend on the likes of him for protection.
Once they start singing their bhajans

400 from the temple while we are at prayer, it can only end
badly.'

Veena realized that Ustad Majeed Khan was referring to the
Shiva Temple being constructed in Chowk, only a couple of
lanes away from Ustad Majeed Khan's house.

After humming to himself for a few seconds the Ustad paused,
cleared his throat and said, almost to himself: 'It is becoming
unlivable in our area. Apart from Marh's madness, there is the
whole insane business of Misri Mandi. It's amazing,' he went
on : 'the whole place is on strike, no one ever works, and all
they do is yell slogans and threats at each other. The small
shoemakers starve and scream, the traders tighten their belts
and bluster, and there are no shoes in the stores, no
employment in the whole Mandi. Everyone's interests are
harmed, yet no one will compromise. And this is Man whom
God has made out of a clot of blood, and to whom he has
given reason and discrimination.'

The Ustad finished his comment with a dismissive wave of his
hand, a wave that implied that everything he had ever thought
about human nature had been confirmed.

Seeing Veena look even more upset, an expression of concern
passed over Majeed Khan's face. 'Why am I telling you this?'
he said, almost in self-reproach. 'Your husband knows all this
better than I do. So that's why you are distracted - of course, of
course.'

Veena, moved though she was by this expression of sympathy from the normally unsympathetic Ustad, was silent, and continued to strum the tanpura. They resumed where they had left off, but it must have been obvious that her mind was not on the composition or the rhythmic patterns - the 'taans' - which followed. At one point, the Ustad said to her: 'You're singing the word "ga", "ga", "ga", but is that really the note "ga" you are singing? I think you have too much on your mind. You should leave such things with your shoes outside this room when you come in.'

He began to sing a complex series of taans, and Motu Chand, carried away by the pleasure of the music, started

401to improvise a pleasant filigree of rhythmic accompaniment on the tabla. The Ustad abruptly stopped.

He turned to Motu Chand with sarcastic deference. 'Please go on, Guruji,' he said.

The tabla player smiled embarrassedly.

'No, do go on, we were enjoying your solo,' continued Ustad Majeed Khan.

Motu Chand's smile became unhappier still.

'Do you know how to play a simple theka - the plain unornamented rhythmic cycle ? Or are you in too high a circle of Paradise for that ?'

Motu Chand looked pleadingly at Ustad Majeed Khan and said, 'It was the beauty of your singing that carried me away, Ustad Sahib. But I won't let it happen again.'

Ustad Majeed Khan looked sharply at him, but he had intended no impertinence.

After her lesson was over, Veena got up to leave. Normally she stayed as long as she could, but this was not possible today. Bhaskar had a fever and wanted her attention ; Kedarnath needed cheering up ; and her mother-in-law had just that morning made a hurtful comment on the amount of time she spent at the Haridas College of Music.

The Ustad glanced at his watch. There was still an hour before the noon prayer. He thought of the call to prayer which he heard every morning first from his local mosque and then at slightly staggered intervals from other mosques across the city. What he particularly liked in the morning call to prayer was the twice-repeated line that did not appear in the azaan later in the day : 'Prayer is better than sleep.'

Music too was prayer to him, and some mornings he would be up long before dawn to sing Lalit or some other early morning raag. Then the first words of the azaan, 'Allah-u-Akbar' - God is Great - would vibrate across the rooftops in the cool air and his ears would lie in wait for the sentence that admonished those who attempted to sleep on. When he heard it, he would smile. It was one of the pleasures of his day.

If the new Shiva Temple was built, the sound of the

402muezzin's early cry would be challenged by that of the conch. The thought was unbearable. Surely something must be done to prevent it. Surely the powerful Minister Mahesh Kapoor - who was taunted by some in his party for being, like the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, almost an honorary Muslim - could do something about it. The Ustad began meditatively to hum the words of the composition that he had just been teaching the Minister's daughter - Jaago Mohan Pyaare. Humming it, he forgot himself. He forgot the room he was in and the students still waiting for their lessons. It was very far from his mind that the words were addressed to the dark god Krishna, asking him to wake up with the arrival of morning, or that 'Bhairava' the name of the raag he was singing - was an epithet of the great god Shiva himself.

6.2

ISHAQ KHAN, Saeeda Bai's sarangi player, had been trying for several days to help his sister's husband - who was also a sarangi player - to get transferred from All India Radio Lucknow, where he was a 'staff artist', to All India Radio Brahmpur.

This morning too, Ishaq Khan had gone down to the AIR offices and tried his luck by talking to an assistant producer of music, but to no avail. It was a bitter business for the young man to realize that he could not even get to state his case properly to the Station Director. He did, however, state his case vociferously to a couple of musician friends he met there. The sun was warm, and they sat under a large and shady neem tree on the lawn outside the buildings. They looked at the cannas and talked of this and that. One of them had a radio - of a newfangled kind that could be operated by batteries - and they switched it on to the only station they could receive clearly, which was their own.

The unmistakable voice of Ustad Majeed Khan singing Raag Miya-ki-Todi filled their ears. He had just begun

403singing and was accompanied only by the tabla and his own tanpura.

It was glorious music : grand, stately, sad, full of a deep sense of calm. They stopped gossiping and listened. Even an orange-crested hoopoe stopped pecking around the flowerbed for a minute.

As always with Ustad Majeed Khan, the clean unfolding of the raag occurred through a very slow rhythmic section rather than a rhythmless alaap. After about fifteen minutes he turned to a faster composition in the raag, and then, far, far too soon, Raag Todi was over, and a children's programme was on the air.

Ishaq Khan turned off the radio and sat still, deep more in trance than in thought.

After a while they got up and went to the AIR staff canteen. Ishaq Khan's friends, like his brother-in-law, were staff artists, with fixed hours and assured salaries. Ishaq Khan, who had only accompanied other musicians a few times on the air, fell into the category of 'casual artist'.

The small canteen was crowded with musicians, writers of programmes, administrators, and waiters. A couple of peons lounged against the wall. The entire scene was messy, noisy and cosy. The canteen was famous for its strong tea and delicious samosas. A board facing the entrance proclaimed that no credit would be given ; but as the musicians were perennially short of cash, it always was.

Every table except one was crowded. Ustad Majeed Khan sat alone at the head of the table by the far wall, musing and stirring his tea. Perhaps out of deference to him, because he was considered something better than even an A-grade artist, no one presumed to sit near him. For all the apparent camaraderie and democracy of the canteen, there were distinctions. B-grade artists for instance would not normally sit with those of superior classifications such as B-plus or A - unless, of course, they happened to be their disciples - and would usually defer to them even in speech.

Ishaq Khan looked around the room and, seeing five

404empty chairs ranged down the oblong length of Ustad Majeed Khan's table, moved towards it. His two friends followed a little hesitantly.

As they approached, a few people from another table got up, perhaps because they were performing next on the air. But Ishaq Khan chose to ignore this, and walked up to Ustad Majeed Khan's table. 'May we?' he asked politely. As the great musician was lost in some other world, Ishaq and his friends sat down at the three chairs at the opposite J end. There were still two empty chairs, one on either side of Majeed Khan. He did not seem to register the presence of the new arrivals, and was now drinking his tea with both hands on the cup, though the weather was warm.

Ishaq sat at the other end facing Majeed Khan, and looked at that noble and arrogant face, softened as it appeared to be by some transient memory or thought rather than by the permanent impress of late middle age.

So profound had the effect of his brief performance of Raag Todi been on Ishaq that he wanted desperately to convey his appreciation. Ustad Majeed Khan was not a tall man, but seated either on the stage in his long black achkan - so tightly buttoned at the neck that one would have thought it would constrict his voice - or even at a table drinking tea, he conveyed, through his upright, rigid stance, a commanding presence; indeed, even an illusion of height. At the moment he seemed almost unapproachable.

If only he would say something to me, thought Ishaq, I would tell him what I felt about his performance. He must know we are sitting here. And he used to know my father. There were many things that the younger man did not like about the elder, but the music he and his friends had just listened to placed them in their trivial perspective.

They ordered their tea. The service in the canteen, despite the fact that it was part of a government organization, was prompt. The three friends began to talk among themselves. Ustad Majeed Khan continued to sip his tea in silence and abstraction.

Ishaq was quite popular in spite of his slightly sarcastic nature, and had a number of good friends. He was always

405willing to take the errands and burdens of others upon himself. After his father's death he and his sister had had to support their three young brothers. This was one reason why it was important that his sister's family move from Lucknow to Brahmipur.

One of Ishaq's two friends, a tabla player, now made the suggestion that Ishaq's brother-in-law change places with

another sarangi player, Rafiq, who was keen to move to Lucknow.

‘But Rafiq is a B-plus artist. What’s your brother-in-law’s grade?’ asked Ishaq’s other friend.

‘B.’

‘The Station Director won’t want to lose a B-plus for a B. Still, you can try.’

Ishaq picked up his cup, wincing slightly as he did so, and sipped his tea.

‘Unless he can upgrade himself,’ continued his friend. ‘I agree, it’s a silly system, to grade someone in Delhi on the basis of a single tape of a performance, but that’s the system we have.’

‘Well,’ said Ishaq, remembering his father who, in the last years of his life, had made it to A, ‘it’s not a bad system. It’s impartial - and ensures a certain level of competence.’

‘“Competence”!’ ‘it was*UstaàMà]eeà”R!han spea’kmg. The three friends looked at him in amazement. The word was spoken with a contempt that seemed to come from the deepest level of his being. ‘Mere pleasing competence is not worth having.’

Ishaq looked at Ustad Majeed Khan, deeply disquieted. The memory of his father made him bold enough to speak.

‘Khan Sahib, for someone like you, competence is not even a question. But for the rest of us ‘ His voice trailed off.

Ustad Majeed Khan, displeased at being even mildly contradicted, sat tight-lipped and silent. He seemed to be collecting his thoughts. After a while he spoke.

‘You should not have a problem,’ he said. ‘For a sarangi-wallah no great musicianship is required. You don’t

need to be a master of a style. Whatever style the soloist has, you simply follow it. In musical terms it’s actually a distraction.’ He continued in an indifferent voice : ‘If you want my help I’ll speak to the Station Director. He knows I’m impartial - I don’t need or use sarangi-wallahs. Rafiq or your sister’s husband - it hardly matters who is where.’

Ishaq’s face had gone white. Without thinking of what he was doing or where he was, he looked straight at Majeed Khan and said in a bitter and cutting voice :

‘I have no objection to being called a mere sarangi-wallah rather than a sarangiya by a great man. I consider myself blessed that he has deigned to notice me. But these are matters about which Khan Sahib has personal knowledge. Perhaps he can elaborate on the uselessness of the instrument.’

It was no secret that Ustad Majeed Khan himself came from a family of hereditary sarangi players. His artistic strivings as a vocalist were bound up painfully with another endeavour: the attempt to dissociate himself from the demeaning sarangi tradition and its historical connection with courtesans and prostitutes - and to associate himself and his son and daughter with the so-called 'kalawant' families of higher-caste musicians.

But the taint of the sarangi was too strong, and no kalawant family wanted to marry into Majeed Khan's. This was one of the searing disappointments of his life. Another was that his music would end with himself, for he had never found a disciple whom he considered worthy of his art. His own son had the voice and musicianship of a frog. As for his daughter, she was musical all right, but the last thing that Ustad Majeed Khan wanted for her was that she should develop her voice and become a singer.

Ustad Majeed Khan cleared his throat but said nothing.

The thought of the great artist's treason, the contempt with which Majeed Khan, despite his own undoubted gifts, had treated the tradition that had given him birth continued to enrage Ishaq.

'Why does Khan Sahib not favour us with a response?' he went on, oblivious to his friends' attempts to restrain

407him. 'There are subjects, no matter how distanced he is today, on which Khan Sahib can illuminate our understanding. Who else has the background? We have heard of Khan Sahib's illustrious father and grandfather.'

‘Ishaq, I knew your father, and I knew your grandfather. They were men who understood the meaning of respect and discrimination.’

‘They looked at the worn grooves on their fingernails without feeling dishonoured,’ retorted Ishaq.

The people at the neighbouring tables had stopped talking, and were listening to the exchange between the younger and the older man. That Ishaq, baited himself, was now doing the baiting, attempting to hurt and humiliate Ustad Majeed Khan, was painful and obvious. The scene was horrible, but everyone seemed to be frozen into immobility.

Ustad Majeed Khan said slowly and passionlessly : ‘But they, believe me, would have felt dishonoured if they had been alive to see their son flirting with the sister of an employer, whose body his bow helps sell.’

He looked at his watch and got up. He had another performance in ten minutes. Almost to himself and with the utmost simplicity and sincerity, he said, ‘Music is not a cheap spectacle - not the entertainment of the brothel. It is \ikeprayer.’

Before Ishaq could respond he had started walking towards the door. Ishaq got up and almost lunged towards him. He was gripped by an uncontrollable spasm of pain and fury, and his two friends had to force him bodily down into his chair. Other people joined in, for Ishaq was well-liked, and had to be prevented from doing further damage.

‘Ishaq Bhai, enough’s been said.’

‘Listen, Ishaq, one must swallow it - whatever our elders say, however bitter.’

‘Don’t ruin yourself. Think of your brothers. If he talks to the Director Sahib ‘

‘Ishaq Bhai, how many times have I told you to guard your tongue!’

408 ‘Listen, you must apologize to him immediately.’

But Ishaq was almost incoherent :

‘Never - never - I’ll never apologize - on my father’s grave - to that - to think, that such a man who insults the memory of his elders and mine - everyone creeps on all fours before him - yes, Khan Sahib, you can have a twenty-five-minute slot - yes, yes, Khan Sahib, you decide which raag you will sing - O God ! If Miya Tansen were alive he would have cried to hear him sing his raag today - & that God should have given him this gift - ‘

‘Enough, enough, Ishaq ‘ said an old sitar player.

Ishaq turned towards him with tears of hurt and anger :

‘Would you marry your son to his daughter? Or your daughter to his son ? Who is he that God is in his pocket ?

- he talks like a mullah about prayer and devotion - this man who spent half his youth in Tarbuz ka Bazaar -‘

People began to turn away in pity and discomfort from Ishaq. Several of Ishaq’s well-wishers left the canteen to try and pacify the insulted maestro, who was about to agitate the airwaves in his own great agitation.

‘Khan Sahib, the boy didn’t know what he was saying.’

Ustad Majeed Khan, who was almost at the door of the studio, said nothing.

‘Khan Sahib, elders have always treated their younger like children, with tolerance. You must not take what he said seriously. None of it is true.’

Ustad Majeed Khan looked at the interceder and said: ‘If a dog pisses on my achkan, do I become a tree ?’

The sitar player shook his head and said, ‘I know it was the worst time he could have chosen - when you were about to perform, Ustad Sahib....’

But Ustad Majeed Khan went on to sing a Hindol of calm and surpassing beauty.

6.3

IT had been some days since Saeeda Bai had saved Maan from suicide, as he put it. Of course it was extremely

409unlikely - and his friend Firoz had told him so when he had complained to him of his lovelorn miseries - that that happy-go-lucky young man would have made any attempt even to cut himself while shaving in order to prove his passion for her. But Maan knew that Saeeda Bai, though hard-headed, was - at least to him - tender-hearted ; and although he knew she did not believe that he was in any danger from himself if she refused to make love to him, he also knew that she would take it as more than a merely flattering figure of speech. Everything is in the saying, and Maan, while saying that he could not go on in this harsh world without her, had been as soulful as it was possible for him to be. For a while all his past loves vanished from his heart. The dozen or more 'girls of good family' from Brahmipur whom he had been in love with and who in general had loved him in return, ceased to exist. Saeeda Bai - for that moment at least - became everything for him.

And after they had made love, she became more than everything for him. Like that other source of domestic strife, Saeeda Bai too made hungry where most she satisfied. Part of it was simply the delicious skill with which she made love. But even more than that it was her nakhra, the art of pretended hurt or disaffection that she had learnt from her mother and other courtesans in the early days in Tarbuz ka Bazaar. Saeeda Bai practised this with such curious restraint that it became infinitely more believable. One tear, one remark that implied - perhaps, only perhaps implied - that something he had said or done had caused her injury - and Maan's heart would go out to her. No matter what the cost to himself, he would protect her from the cruel, censorious world. For minutes at a time he would lean over her shoulder and kiss her neck, glancing every

few moments at her face in the hope of seeing her mood lift. And when it did, and he saw that same bright, sad smile that had so captivated him when she sang at Holi at Prem Nivas, he would be seized by a frenzy of sexual desire. Saeeda Bai seemed to know this, and graced him with a smile only when she herself was in the mood to satisfy him.

410She had framed one of the paintings from the album of Ghalib's poems that Maan had given her. Although she had, as far as was possible, repaired the page that the Raja of Marh had ripped out of the volume, she had not dared to display that particular illustration for fear of exciting his further fury. What she had framed was 'A Persian Idyll', which showed a young woman dressed in pale orange, sitting near an arched doorway on a very pale orange rug, holding in her slender fingers a musical instrument resembling a sitar, and looking out of the archway into a mysterious garden. The woman's features were sharp and delicate, unlike Saeeda Bai's very attractive but unclassical, perhaps not even beautiful, face. And the instrument that the woman was holding - unlike Saeeda Bai's strong and responsive harmonium - was so finely tapered in the stylized illustration that it would have been entirely impossible to play it.

Maan did not care that the book might be considered damaged by having the painting thus plundered from its pages. He could not have been happier at this sign of Saeeda Bai's attachment to his gift. He lay in her bedroom and stared at the painting and was filled with a happiness as mysterious as the garden through the archway. Whether glowing with the immediate memory of her embraces or chewing contentedly at the delicate coconut-flavoured paan that she had just offered to him at the end of a small ornamented silver pin, it seemed to him that he himself had been led by her and her music and her affection into a paradisaal garden, most insubstantial and yet most real.

‘How unimaginable it is,’ said Maan out loud rather dreamily, ‘that our parents also must have - just like us -‘

This remark struck Saeeda Bai as being in somewhat poor taste. She did not at all wish her imagination to be transported to the domestic love-making of Mahesh Kapoor - or anyone else for that matter. She did not know who her own father was: her mother, Mohsina Bai, had claimed not to know. Besides, domesticity and its standard concerns were not objects of fond contemplation for her. She had been accused by Brahmipur gossip of destroying

411 several settled marriages by casting her lurid nets around hapless men. She said a little sharply to Maan :

‘It is good to live in a household like I do where one does not have to imagine such things.’

Maan looked a little chastened. Saeeda Bai, who was quite fond of him by now and knew that he usually blurted out the first thing that came into his head, tried to cheer him up by saying :

‘But Dagh Sahib looks distressed. Would he have been happier to have been immaculately conceived ?’

‘I think so,’ said Maan. ‘I sometimes think I would be happier without a father.’

‘Oh ?’ said Saeeda Bai, who had clearly not been expecting this.

‘Oh, yes,’ said Maan. ‘I often feel that whatever I do my father looks upon with contempt. When I opened the cloth business in Banaras, Baoji told me it would be a complete failure. Now that I have made a go of it, he is taking the line that I should sit there every day of every month of every year of my life. Why should I?’

Saeeda Bai did not say anything.

‘And why should I marry?’ continued Maan, spreading his arms wide on the bed and touching Saeeda Bai’s cheek with his left hand. ‘Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?’

‘Because your father can get me to sing at your wedding,’ said Saeeda Bai with a smile. ‘And at the birth of your children. And at their mundan ceremony. And at their marriages, of course.’ She was silent for a few seconds. ‘But I won’t be alive to do that,’ she went on. ‘In fact I sometimes wonder what you see in an old woman like me.’

Maan became very indignant. He raised his voice and said, ‘Why do you say things like that? Do you do it just to get me annoyed? No one ever meant much to me until I met you. That girl in Banaras whom I met twice under heavy escort is less than nothing to me - and everyone thinks I must marry her just because my father and mother say so.’

Saeeda Bai turned towards him and buried her face in

412.his arm. ‘But you must get married,’ she said. ‘You cannot cause your parents so much pain.’

‘I don’t find her at all attractive,’ said Maan angrily.

‘That will merely take time,’ advised Saeeda Bai.

‘And I won’t be able to visit you after I’m married,’ said Maan.

‘Oh ?’ said Saeeda Bai in such a way that the question, rather than leading to a reply, implied the closure of the conversation.

6.4

AFTER a while they got up and moved to the other room. Saeeda Bai called for the parakeet, of whom she had become fond. Ishaq Khan brought in the cage, and a discussion ensued about when he would learn to speak. Saeeda Bai seemed to think that a couple of months would be sufficient, but Ishaq was doubtful. ‘My grandfather had a parakeet who didn’t speak for a whole year and then wouldn’t stop talking for the rest of his life,’ he said.

‘I’ve never heard anything like that,’ said Saeeda Bai dismissively. ‘Anyway, why are you holding that cage in such a funny way ?’

‘Oh, it’s nothing really,’ said Ishaq, setting the cage down on a table and rubbing his right wrist. ‘Just a pain in my wrist.’

In fact it was very painful and had become worse during the previous few weeks.

‘You seem to play well enough,’ said Saeeda Bai, not very sympathetically.

‘Saeeda Begum, what would I do if I didn’t play ?’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said Saeeda Bai, tickling the little parakeet’s beak. ‘There’s probably nothing the matter with your hand. You don’t have plans to go off for a wedding in the family, do you ? Or to leave town until your famous explosion at the radio station is forgotten ?’

If Ishaq was injured by this painful reference or these

413 unjust suspicions, he did not show it. Saeeda Bai told him to fetch Motu Chand, and the three of them soon began to make music for Maan’s pleasure. Ishaq bit his lower lip from time to time as his bow moved across the strings, but he said nothing.

Saeeda Bai sat on a Persian rug with her harmonium in front of her. Her head was covered with her sari, and she stroked the double string of pearls hanging around her neck with a finger of her left hand. Then, humming to herself, and moving her left hand onto the bellows of the harmonium, she began to play a few notes of Raag Pilu. After a little while, and as if undecided about her mood and the kind of song she wished to sing, she modulated to a few other raags.

‘What would you like to hear ?’ she asked Maan gently.

She had used a more intimate 'you' than she had ever used so far - 'turn' instead of 'aap'. Maan looked at her, smiling.

'Well ?' said Saeeda Bai, after a minute had gone by.

'Well, Saeeda Begum ?' said Maan.

'What do you want to hear?' Again she used turn instead of aap and sent Maan's world into a happy spin. A couplet he'd heard somewhere came to his mind :

Among the lovers the Saki thus drew distinction's line,
Handing the wine-cups one by one: 'For you, Sir';

'Yours' ; and 'Thine'.

'Oh, anything,' said Maan, 'Anything at all. Whatever you feel is in your heart.'

Maan had still not plucked up the courage to use 'turn' or plain 'Saeeda' with Saeeda Bai, except when he was making love, when he hardly knew what he said. Perhaps, he thought, she just used it absent-mindedly with me and will be offended if I reciprocate.

But Saeeda Bai was inclined to take offence at something else.

‘I’m giving you the choice of music and you are returning the problem to me,’ she said. ‘There are twenty different

414things in my heart. Can’t you hear me changing from raag to raag ?’ Then, turning away from Maan, she said :

‘So, Motu, what is to be sung ?’

‘Whatever you wish, Saeeda Begum,’ said Motu Chand happily.

‘You blockhead, I’m giving you an opportunity that most of my audiences would kill themselves to receive and all you do is smile back at me like a weak-brained baby, and say, “Whatever you wish, Saeeda Begum.” What ^ghazal ? Quickly. Or do you want to hear a thumri instead of a ghazal ?’

‘A ghazal will be best, Saeeda Bai,’ said Motu Chand, and suggested ‘It’s just a heart, not brick and stone,’ by Ghalib.

At the end of the ghazal Saeeda Bai turned to Maan and said : ‘You must write a dedication in your book.’

‘What, in English ?’ asked Maan.

‘It amazes me,’ said Saeeda Bai, ‘to see the great poet Dagh illiterate in his own language. We must do something about it.’

Til learn Urdu!’ said Maan enthusiastically.

Motu Chand and Ishaq Khan exchanged glances. Clearly they thought that Maan was quite far gone in his fascination with Saeeda Bai.

Saeeda Bai laughed. She asked Maan teasingly, ‘Will you really ?’ Then she asked Ishaq to call the maidservant.

For some reason Saeeda Bai was annoyed with Bibbo today. Bibbo seemed to know this, but to be unaffected by it. She came in grinning, and this re-ignited Saeeda Bai’s annoyance.

‘You’re smiling just to annoy me,’ she said impatiently. ‘And you forgot to tell the cook that the parakeet’s daal was not soft enough yesterday - do you think he has the jaws of a tiger? Stop grinning, you silly girl, and tell me what time is Abdur Rasheed coming to give Tasneem her Arabic lesson ?’

Saeeda Bai felt safe enough with Maan to mention Tasneem’s name in his presence.

415Bibbo assumed a satisfactorily apologetic expression and said:

‘But he’s here already, as you know, Saeeda Bai.’

‘As I know ? As I know ?’ said Saeeda Bai with renewed impatience. ‘I don’t know anything. And nor do you,’ she added. ‘Tell him to come up at once.’

A few minutes later Bibbo was back, but alone.

‘Well ?’ said Saeeda Bai.

‘He won’t come,’ said Bibbo.

‘He won’t come? Does he know who pays him to give tuition to Tasneem? Does he think his honour will be unsafe if he comes upstairs to this room ? Or is it just that he is giving himself airs because he is a university student ?’

‘I don’t know, Begum Sahiba,’ said Bibbo.

‘Then go, girl, and ask him why. It’s his income I want to increase, not my own.’

Five minutes later Bibbo returned with a very broad grin on her face and said, ‘He was very angry when I interrupted him again. He was teaching Tasneem a complicated passage in the Quran Sharif and told me that the divine word would have to take precedence over his earthly income. But he will come when the lesson is over.’

‘Actually, I’m not sure I want to learn Urdu,’ said Maan, who was beginning to regret his sudden enthusiasm. He didn’t really want to be saddled with a lot of hard work. And he hadn’t expected the conversation to take such a practical turn so suddenly. He was always making resolutions such as, ‘I must learn polo’ (to Firoz, who enjoyed introducing his friends to the tastes and joys of his own Nawabi lifestyle), or ‘I must

settle down' (to Veena, who was the only one in the family who was capable of ticking him off to some effect), or even 'I will not give swimming lessons to whales' (which Pran considered illjudged levity). But he made these resolutions safe in the knowledge that their implementation was very far away.

By now, however, the young Arabic teacher was standing outside the door, quite hesitantly and a little disapprovingly. He did adaab to the whole company, and waited to hear what was required of him.

416'Rasheed, can you teach my young friend here Urdu ?' asked Saeeda Bai, coming straight to the point.

The young man nodded a little reluctantly.

'The understanding will be the same as with Tasneem,' said Saeeda Bai, who believed in getting practical matters sorted out quickly.

'That will be fine,' said Rasheed. He spoke in a somewhat clipped manner, as if he were still slightly piqued by the earlier interruptions to his Arabic lesson. 'And the name of the gentleman ?'

'Oh yes, I'm sorry,' said Saeeda Bai. 'This is Dagh Sahib, whom the world so far knows only by the name of Maan Kapoor. He is the son of Mahesh Kapoor, the Minister. And his elder brother Pran teaches at the university, where you study.'

The young man was frowning with a sort of inward concentration. Then, fixing his sharp eyes on Maan he said, 'It will be an honour to teach the son of Mahesh Kapoor. I am afraid I am a little late already for my next tuition. I hope that when I come tomorrow we can fix up a suitable time for our lesson. When do you tend to be free?'

'Oh, he tends to be free all the time,' said Saeeda Bai with a tender smile. 'Time is not a problem with Dagh Sahib.'

6.5

ONE night, exhausted from marking examination papers, Pran was sleeping soundly when he was awakened with a jolt. He had been kicked. His wife had her arms around him, but she was sleeping soundly still.

'Savita, Savita - the baby kicked me!' said Pran excitedly, shaking his wife's shoulder.

Savita opened a reluctant eye, felt Pran's lanky and comforting body near her, and smiled in the dark, before sinking back to sleep.

'Are you awake?' asked Pran.

417'Uh,' said Savita. 'Mm.'

'But it really did!' said Pran, unhappy with her lack of response.

‘What did ?’ said Savita sleepily.

‘The baby.’

‘What baby ?’

‘Our baby.’

‘Our baby did what ?’

‘It kicked me.’

Savita sat up carefully and kissed Fran’s forehead, rather as if he were a baby himself. ‘It couldn’t have. You’re dreaming. Go back to sleep. And I’ll also go back to sleep. And so will the baby.’

‘It did,’ said Pran, a little indignantly.

‘It couldn’t have,’ said Savita, lying down again. ‘I’d have felt it.’

‘Well it did, that’s all. You probably don’t feel its kicks any more. And you sleep very soundly. But it kicked me through your belly, it definitely did, and it woke me up.’ He was very insistent.

‘Oh, all right,’ said Savita. ‘Have it your way. I think he must have known that you were having bad dreams, all about chiasmus and Anna - whatever her name is.’

‘Anacoluthia.’

‘Tes, and I was “having good dreams and he didn’t want to disturb me.’

‘Excellent baby,’ said Pran.

‘Our baby,’ said Savita. Pran got another hug.

They were silent for a while. Then, as Pran was drifting off to sleep, Savita said :

‘He seems to have a lot of energy.’

‘Oh ?’ said Pran, half asleep.

Savita, now wide awake with her thoughts, was in no mood to cut off this conversation.

‘Do you think he will turn out to be like Maan?’ she asked.

‘He?’

‘I sense he’s a boy,’ said Savita in a resolved sort of way.

‘In what sense like Maan ?’ asked Pran, suddenly remem-

418 Bering that his mother had asked him to talk to his brother about the direction of his life - and especially about Saeeda Bai, whom his mother referred to only as ‘woh’ that woman.

‘Handsome - and a flirt ?’

‘Maybe,’ said Pran, his mind on other matters.

‘Or an intellectual like his father ?’

‘Oh, why not?’ said Pran, drawn back in. ‘He could do worse. But without his asthma, I hope.’

‘Or do you think he’ll have the temper of my grandfather ?’

‘No, I don’t think it was an angry sort of kick. Just informative. “Here I am; it’s two in the morning, and all’s well.” Or perhaps he was, as you say, interrupting a nightmare.’

‘Maybe he’ll be like Arun - very dashing and sophisticated.’

‘Sorry, Savita,’ said Pran. ‘If he turns out to be like your brother, I’ll disown him. But he’ll have disowned us long

before that. In fact, if he's like Arun, he's probably thinking at this very moment: "Awful service in this room; I must speak to the manager so that I can get my nutrients on time. And they should adjust the temperature of the amniotic fluid in this indoor swimming pool, as they do in fivestar wombs. But what can you expect in India? Nothing works at all in this damned country. What the natives need is a good solid dose of discipline." Perhaps that's why he kicked me.'

Savita laughed. 'You don't know Arun well enough,' was her response.

Pran merely grunted.

'Anyway, he might take after the women in this family,' Savita went on. 'He might turn out to be like your mother or mine.' The thought pleased her.

Pran frowned, but this latest flight of Savita's fancy was too taxing at two in the morning. 'Do you want me to get you something to drink?' he asked her.

'No, mm, yes, a glass of water.'

Pran sat up, coughed a little, turned towards the bedside

table, switched on the bedside lamp, and poured out a glass of cool water from the thermos flask.

'Here, darling,' he said, looking at her with slightly rueful affection. How beautiful she looked now, and how wonderful

it would be to make love with her.

‘You don’t sound too good, Pran,’ said Savita.

Pran smiled, and passed his hand across her forehead. ‘I’m fine.’

‘I worry about you.’

‘I don’t,’ Pran lied.

‘You don’t get enough fresh air, and you use your lungs too much. I wish you were a writer, not a lecturer.’ Savita drank the water slowly, savouring its coolness in the warm night.

‘Thanks,’ said Pran. ‘But you don’t get enough exercise either. You should walk around a bit, even during your pregnancy.’

‘I know,’ said Savita, yawning now. ‘I’ve been reading the book my mother gave me.’

‘All right, goodnight, darling. Give me the glass.’

He switched off the light and lay in the dark, his eyes still open. I never expected to be as happy as this, he told himself. I’m asking myself if I’m happy, and it hasn’t made me cease to be so. But how long will this last ? It isn’t just me *but my wife an., Mahesh Kapoor.

‘Yes, yes, yes! Get to the point. They realize no doubt that our son is too good for their daughter and want to call the whole thing off.’

Sometimes wisdom lies in not taking an ironical remark as ironical. Mrs Mahesh Kapoor said: ‘No, quite the opposite. They want to fix the date as quickly as possible - and I don’t know what to reply. If you read between the lines it seems that they even have some idea about well, about “that”. Why else would they be so concerned?’

‘Uff-oh!’ said Mahesh Kapoor impatiently. ‘Do I have to hear about this from everyone? In the Assembly canteen, in my own office, everywhere I hear about Maan and his idiocy! This morning two or three people brought it up. Is there nothing more important in the world to talk about?’

But Mrs Mahesh Kapoor persevered.

‘It is very important for our family,’ she said. ‘How can we hold our heads up in front of people if this goes on? And it is not good for Maan either to spend all his time and money like this. He was supposed to come here on business, and he has done nothing in that line. Please speak to him.’

‘You speak to him,’ said Mahesh Kapoor brutally. ‘You have spoilt him all his life.’

Mrs Mahesh Kapoor was silent, but a tear trickled down her cheek. Then she rallied and said: ‘Is it good for your public image either? A son who does nothing but spend his time with that kind of person? The rest of the time he lies down on his bed and stares up at the fan. He

449 should do something else, something serious. I don't have the heart to say anything to him. After all, what can a mother say ?'

'All right, all right, all right,' said Mahesh Kapoor, and closed his eyes.

He reflected that the cloth business in Banaras was, under the care of a competent assistant, doing better in Maan's absence than it had been doing when he was there. What then was to be done with Maan ?

At about eight o'clock that evening he was about to get into the car to visit Baitar House when he told the driver to wait. Then he sent a servant to see if Maan was in the house. When the servant told him that he was sleeping, Mahesh Kapoor said :

'Wake up the good-for-nothing fellow, and tell him to dress and come down at once. We are going to visit the Nawab Sahib of Baitar.'

Maan came down looking none too happy. Earlier in the day he had been exercising hard on the wooden horse, and now he was looking forward to visiting Saeeda Bai and exercising his wit, among other things.

'Baoji ?' he said enquiringly.

'Get into the car. We're going to Baitar House.'

‘Do you want me to come along?’ asked Maan.

‘Yes.’

‘All right, then.’ Maan got into the car. There was, he realized, no way to avoid being kidnapped.

‘I am assuming you have nothing better to do,’ said his father.

‘No Not really.’

‘Then you should get used to adult company again,’ said his father sternly.

As it happened, he also enjoyed Maan’s cheerfulness, and thought it would be good to take him along for moral support when he went to apologize to his old friend the Nawab Sahib. But Maan was less than cheerful at the moment. He was thinking of Saeeda Bai. She would be expecting him and he would not even be able to send her a message to say that he could not come.

4506.15

AS they entered the grounds of Baitar House, however, he cheered up a little at the thought that he might meet Firoz. At polo practice Firoz had not mentioned that he would be going out for dinner.

They were asked to sit in the lobby for a few minutes.

The old servant said that the Nawab Sahib was in the

P. library, and that he would be informed of the Minister's

* arrival. After ten minutes or so, Mahesh Kapoor got up

from the old leather sofa and started walking up and

down. He was tired of twiddling his thumbs and staring at

photographs of white men with dead tigers at their feet.

A few minutes more, and his patience was at an end. He told Maan to come with him, and walked through the high-ceilinged rooms and somewhat ill-lit corridors towards the library. Ghulam Rusool made a few ineffectual attempts at dissuasion, but to no effect. Murtaza Ali, who was hanging around near the library, was brushed aside as well. The Minister of Revenue with his son in tow strode up to the library door and flung it open.

Brilliant light blinded him for a moment. Not only the mellower reading lights but the great chandelier in the middle of the library had been lit. And at the large round table below - with papers spread out around them and even a couple of buff leather-bound law-books lying open before them - sat three other sets of fathers and sons : The Nawab Sahib of Baitar and

Firoz; the Raja and Rajkumar of Marh; and two Bony Bespectacled Bannerji Barristers (as that famous family of lawyers was known in Brahmpur).

It would be difficult to say who was most embarrassed by this sudden intrusion.

The crass Marh snarled : ‘Speak of the Devil.’

Firoz, though he found the situation uncomfortable, was pleased to see Maan and went up to him immediately to shake his hand. Maan put his left arm around his friend’s shoulder and said: ‘Don’t shake my right hand - you’ve crippled it already.’

45 !The Rajkumar of Marh, who was interested in young men more than in the jargon of the Zamindari Bill, looked at the handsome pair with a little more than approval.

The elder Bannerji (‘P.N.’) glanced quickly at his son (‘S.N.’) as if to say, ‘I told you we should have had the conference in our chambers.’

The Nawab Sahib felt that he had been caught redhanded, plotting against Mahesh Kapoor’s bill with a man whom he would normally have shunned.

And Mahesh Kapoor realized instantly that he was the least welcome intruder imaginable at this working conference - for it was he who was the enemy, the expropriator, the government, the fount of injustice, the other side.

It was, however, Mahesh Kapoor who broke the ice among the elder circle by going up to the Nawab Sahib and taking his hand. He did not say anything, but slowly nodded his head. No words of sympathy or apology were needed. The Nawab Sahib knew immediately that his friend would have done anything in his power to help him when Baitar House was under siege - but that he had been ignorant of the crisis.

The Raja of Marh broke the silence with a laugh:

‘So you have come to spy on us! We are flattered. No mere minion but the Minister himself.’

Mahesh Kapoor said :

‘Since I was not blinded by the vision of your gold number-plates outside, I could hardly have known you were here. Presumably, you came by rickshaw.’

‘I will have to count my number-plates before I leave,’ continued the Raja of Marh.

‘If you need any help, let me send my son with you. He can count till two,’ said Mahesh Kapoor.

The Raja of Marh had become red in the face. ‘Was this planned?’ he demanded of the Nawab Sahib. He was thinking that this could well be a plot by the Muslims and their sympathizers to humiliate him.

The Nawab Sahib found his voice. 'No, Your Highness, it was not. And I apologize to all of you, especially to you,

452. Mr Bannerji - I should not have insisted that we meet here.'

Since common interest in the impending litigation had thrown him together with the Raja of Marh anyway, the Nawab Sahib had hoped that by inviting the Raja to his own house he might get the chance to talk to him a little about the Shiva Temple in Chowk - or at least to create the possibility of a later talk. The communal situation * j among the Hindus and Muslims in Brahmpur was so troubling that the Nawab had swallowed his gorge and a little of his pride in order to help sort things out. The move had now backfired.

The elder of the Bony Bespectacleds, appalled by what had gone before, now said in a rather finicky voice: 'Well, I think we have already discussed the main lines of the matter, and can adjourn for the moment. I will inform my father by letter of what has been said by all sides, and I hope I can persuade him to appear for us in this matter if and when it is necessary.'

He was referring to the great G.N. Bannerji, a lawyer of legendary fame, acumen, and rapacity. If, as was now almost inevitable, the amended bill went through in the Upper House, obtained the President of India's signature, and became law, it would certainly be challenged in the Brahmpur High Court. If G.N. Bannerji could be persuaded to appear on behalf of the landlords, it would considerably improve their chances of having the act declared unconstitutional, and therefore null and void.

The Bannerjis took their leave. The younger Bannerji, though no older than Firoz, had a flourishing practice already. He was intelligent, worked hard, had cases shovelled his way by his family's old clients, and thought of Firoz as rather too languid for life at the Bar. Firoz admired his intelligence but thought him a prig, a little along the lines of his finicky father. His grandfather, the great G.N. Bannerji, however, was not a prig. Though he was in his seventies, he was as energetic erect on his feet in court as erect off his feet in bed. The huge, some would say unscrupulous, fees he insisted on before he accepted a

453case went to support a scattered harem of women ; but he still succeeded in living beyond his means.

The Rajkumar of Marh was a basically decent and not bad-looking but somewhat weak young man who was bullied by his father. Firoz loathed the crude, Muslimbaiting Raja : 'black as coal with his diamond buttons and ear-tops'. His sense of family honour made him keep his distance from the Rajkumar as well. Not so Maan, who was inclined to like people unless they made themselves unlikable. The Rajkumar, quite attracted by Maan, and discovering that he was at a loose end these days, suggested a few things that they could do together, and Maan agreed to meet him later in the week.

Meanwhile the Raja of Marh, the Nawab Sahib, and Mahesh Kapoor were standing by the table in the full light of the chandelier. Mahesh Kapoor's eyes fell on the papers spread out on the table, but then, remembering the Raja's earlier jeer, he quickly turned his gaze away.

'No, no, be our guest, Minister Sahib,' sneered the Raja of Marh. 'Read away. And in exchange, tell me when exactly you plan to vest the ownership of our lands in your own pocket.'

‘My own pocket ?’

A silverfish scurried across the table. The Raja crushed it with his thumb.

‘I meant, of course, the Revenue Department of the great state of Purva Pradesh.’

‘In due course.’

‘Now you are talking like your dear friend Agarwal in the Assembly.’

Mahesh Kapoor did not respond. The Nawab Sahib said :
‘Should we move into the drawing room ?’

The Raja of Marh made no attempt to move. He said, almost equally to the Nawab Sahib and the Minister of Revenue : ‘I asked you that question merely from altruistic motives. I am supporting the other zamindars simply because I do not care for the attitude of the government - or political insects like you. I myself have nothing to lose. My lands are protected from your laws.’

454 ‘Oh?’ said Mahesh Kapoor. ‘One law for men and another for monkeys ?’

‘If you still call yourself a Hindu,’ said the Raja of Marh, ‘you may recall that it was the army of monkeys that defeated the

army of demons.’

‘And what miracle do you expect this time ?’ Mahesh Kapoor could not resist asking.

‘Article 362. of the Constitution,’ said the Raja of Marh, gleefully spitting out a number larger than two. ‘These are our private lands, Minister Sahib, our own private lands, and by the covenants of merger that we rulers made when we agreed to join your India, the law cannot loot them and the courts cannot touch them.’

It was well known that the Raja of Marh had gone drunk and babbling to the dour Home Minister of India, Sardar Patel, to sign the Instrument of Accession by which he made over his state to the Indian Union, and had even smudged his signature with his tears - thus creating a unique historical document.

‘We will see,’ said Mahesh Kapoor. ‘We will see. No doubt G.N. Bannerji will defend Your Highness in the future as ably as he has defended your lowness in the past.’

Whatever story lay behind this taunt, it had a signal effect.

The Raja of Marh made a sudden, growling, vicious lunge towards Mahesh Kapoor. Luckily he stumbled over a chair, and fell towards his left onto the table. Winded, he raised his face from among the law-books and scattered papers. But a page of a law-book had got Tom.

For a second, staring at the Tom page, the Raja of Marh looked dazed, as if he was uncertain where he was. Firoz,

taking advantage of his disorientation, quickly went up to him, and with an assured arm led him towards the drawing room. It was all over in a few seconds. The Rajkumar followed his father.

The Nawab Sahib looked towards Mahesh Kapoor, and raised one hand slightly, as if to say, 'Let things be.' Mahesh Kapoor said, 'I am sorry, very sorry' ; but both he and his friend knew that he was referring less to the

455 immediate incident than to his delay in coming to Baitar House.

After a while, he said to his son: 'Come, Maan, let's go.' On the way out, they noticed the Raja's long black Lancia with its solid gold ingot-like licence-plates stamped 'MARH i' lurking in the drive.

In the car back to Prem Nivas, each was lost in his own thoughts. Mahesh Kapoor was thinking that, despite his explosive timing, he was glad that he had not waited still longer to reassure his friend. He could sense how affected the Nawab Sahib had been when he had taken his hand.

Mahesh Kapoor expected that the Nawab Sahib would call him up the next day to apologize for what had happened, but not offer any substantial explanations. The whole business was very uncomfortable: there was a strange, unresolved air to events. And it was disturbing that a coalition - however volatile - of former enemies was coming into being out of self-interest or self-preservation against his long-nurtured legislation. He would very much have liked to know what legal weaknesses, if any, the lawyers had found in his bill.

Maan was thinking how glad he was that he had met his friend again. He had told Firoz that he would probably be stuck with his father the whole evening, and Firoz had promised to send a message to Saeeda Bai - and if necessary to take it there personally - to inform her that Dagh Sahib had been detained.

6.16

‘NO; be careful; think.’

The voice was slightly mocking, but not without concern. It appeared to care that the task should be done well - that the neatly lined page should not become a record of shame and shapelessness. In a way, it appeared to care about what happened to Maan as well. Maan frowned, then wrote the character ‘meem’ again. It looked to him like a curved spermatozoon.

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‘Your mind isn’t on the tip of your nib,’ said Rasheed. ‘If you want to make use of my time - and I am here at your service - why not concentrate on what you’re doing?’

‘Yes, yes, all right, all right,’ said Maan shortly, sounding for a second remarkably like his father. He tried again. The Urdu alphabet, he felt, was difficult, multiform, fussy, elusive, unlike either the solid Hindi or the solid English script.

v ‘I can’t do this. It looks beautiful on the printed page, *but to write it -‘

‘Try again. Don’t be impatient.’ Rasheed took the bamboo pen from his hand, dipped it in the inkwell, and wrote a perfect, dark blue ‘meem’. He then wrote another below it: the letters were identical, as two letters rarely are.

‘What does it matter, anyway?’ asked Maan, looking up from the sloping desk at which he was sitting, crosslegged, on the floor. ‘I want to read Urdu and to write it, not to practise calligraphy. Do I have to do this?’ He reflected that he was asking for permission as he used to when he was a child. Rasheed was no older than he was, but had taken complete control of him in his role as a teacher.

‘Well, you have put yourself in my hands, and I don’t want you to start on shaky foundations. So what would you like to read now?’ Rasheed inquired with a slight smile, hoping that Maan’s answer would not be the predictable one once more.

‘Ghazals,’ said Maan unhesitatingly. ‘Mir, Ghalib, Dagh.

‘Yes, well -‘ Rasheed said nothing for a while. There was tension in his eyes at the thought of having to teach ghazals to Maan shortly before going over passages of the Holy Book with Tasneem.

‘So what do you say?’ said Maan. ‘Why don’t we start today?’

‘That would be like teaching a baby to run the marathon,’ Rasheed responded after a few seconds, having found an analogy ridiculous enough to suit his dismay.

457 ‘Eventually, of course, you will be able to. But for now, just try that meem again.’

Maan put the pen down and stood up. He knew that Saeeda Bai was paying Rasheed, and he sensed that Rasheed needed the money. He had nothing against his teacher; in a way he liked his conscientiousness. But he rebelled against his attempt to impose a new infancy on him. What Rasheed was pointing out to him was the first step on an endless and intolerably tedious road; at this rate it would be years before he would be able to read even those ghazals that he knew by heart. And decades before he could pen the love-letters he yearned to write. Yet Saeeda Bai had made a compulsory half-hour lesson a day with Rasheed ‘the little bitter foretaste’ that would whet his appetite for her company.

The whole thing was so cruelly erratic, however, thought Maan. Sometimes she would see him, sometimes not, just as it suited her. He had no sense of what to expect, and it ruined his concentration. And so here he had to sit in a cool room on the ground floor of his beloved’s house with his back hunched over a pad with sixty aliphs and forty zaals and twenty misshapen meems, while occasionally a few magical notes from the harmonium, a phrase from the sarangi, a strain of a thumri floated down the inner balcony and filtered through the door to frustrate both his lesson and him.

Maan never enjoyed being entirely by himself at the best of times, but these evenings, when his lesson was over, if word came through Bibbo or Ishaq that Saeeda Bai preferred to be alone, he felt crazy with unhappiness and frustration. Then, if

Firoz and Imtiaz were not at home, and if family life appeared, as it usually did, unbearably bland and tense and pointless, Maan would fall in with his latest acquaintances, the Rajkumar of Marh and his set, and lose his sorrows and his money in gambling and drink.

‘Look, if you aren’t in the mood for a lesson today....’
Rasheed’s voice was kinder than Maan had expected, though there was rather a sharp expression on his wolflike face.

458 ‘No, no, that’s fine. Let’s go on. It’s just a question of self-control.’ Maan sat down again.

‘Indeed it is,’ said Rasheed, reverting to his former tone of voice. Self-control, it struck him, was what Maan needed even more than perfect meems. ‘Why have you got yourself trapped in a place like this?’ he wanted to ask Maan. ‘Isn’t it pathetic that you should be sacrificing your dignity for a person of Saeeda Begum’s profession?’

Perhaps all this was present in his three crisp words. At 1 any rate, Maan suddenly felt like confiding in him.

‘You see, it’s like this -‘ began Maan. ‘I have a weak will, and when I fall into bad company -‘ He stopped. What on earth was he saying? And how would Rasheed know what he was talking about? And why, even if he did, should he care?

But Rasheed appeared to understand. ‘When I was younger,’ he said, ‘I - who now consider myself truly sober - would spend my time beating people up. My grandfather used to do so in our village, and he was a well-respected man, so I thought that beating people up was what made people look up

to him. There were about five or six of us, and we would egg each other on. We'd just go up to some schoolfellow, who might be wandering innocently along, and slap him hard across the face. What I would never have dared to do alone, I did without any hesitation in company. But, well, I don't any more. I've learned to follow another voice, to be alone and to understand things - maybe to be alone and to be misunderstood.'

To Maan this sounded like the advice of a good angel; or perhaps a risen one. In his imagination's eye he saw the Rajkumar and Rasheed struggling for, his soul. One was coaxing him towards hell with five poker cards, one beating him towards paradise with a quill. He botched another meem before asking :

'And is your grandfather still alive ?'

'Oh yes,' said Rasheed, frowning. 'He sits on a cot in the shade and reads the Quran Sharif all day, and chases the village children away when they disturb him. And soon

459he will try to chase the officers of the law away too, because he doesn't like your father's plans.'

'So you're zamindars ?' Maan was surprised.

Rasheed thought this over before saying: 'My grandfather was, before he divided his wealth among his sons. And so is my father and so is my, well, my uncle. As for myself -' He paused, appeared to look over Maan's page, then continued, without finishing his previous sentence, 'Well, who am I to set myself up in judgment in these matters ? They are very happy,

naturally, to keep things as they are. But I have lived in the village almost all my life, and I have seen the whole system. I know how it works. The zamindars - and my family is not so extraordinary as to be an exception to this - the zamindars do nothing but make their living from the misery of others; and they try to force their sons into the same ugly mould as themselves.' Here Rasheed paused, and the area around the corners of his mouth tightened. 'If their sons want to do anything else, they make life miserable for them too,' he continued. 'They talk a great deal about family honour, but they have no sense of honour except to gratify the promises of pleasure they have made to themselves.'

He was silent for a second, as if hesitating; then went on:

'Some of the most respected of landlords do not even keep their word, they are so petty. You might find this hard to believe but I was virtually offered a job here in Brahmpur as the curator of the library of one such great man, but when I got to the grand house I was told - well, anyway, all this is irrelevant. The main fact is that the system of landlords isn't good for the villagers, it isn't good for the countryside as a whole, it isn't good for the country, and until it goes....' The sentence remained unfinished. Rasheed was pressing his fingertips to his forehead, as if he was in pain.

This was a far cry from meem, but Maan listened with sympathy to the young tutor, who appeared to speak out of some terrible pressure, not merely of circumstances.

460 Only a few minutes earlier he had been counselling care, concentration, and moderation for Maan.

There was a knock on the door, and Rasheed quickly straightened up. Ishaq Khan and Motu Chand entered.

‘Our apologies, Kapoor Sahib.’

‘No, no, you’re quite right to enter,’ said Maan. ‘The time for my lesson is over, and I’m depriving Begum Sahiba’s sister of her Arabic.’ He got up. ‘Well, I’ll see you v tomorrow, and my meems will be matchless,’ he promised ^Rasheed impetuously. ‘Well ?’ he nodded genially at the musicians, ‘Is it life or death ?’

But from Motu Chand’s downcast looks he anticipated Ishaq Khan’s words.

‘Kapoor Sahib, I fear that this evening - I mean the Begum Sahiba asked me to inform you ‘

‘Yes, yes,’ said Maan, angry and hurt. ‘Good. My deep respects to the Begum Sahiba. Till tomorrow, then.’

‘It is just that she is indisposed.’ Ishaq disliked lying and was bad at it.

‘Yes,’ said Maan, who would have been very much more concerned if he had believed in her indisposition. ‘I trust that she will recover rapidly.’ At the door he turned and added: ‘If I thought it would do any good, I would prescribe her a string of meems, one to be taken every hour and several before she retires.’

Motu Chand looked at Ishaq for a clue, but Ishaq's face reflected his own perplexity.

'It's no more than she has prescribed for me,' said Maan.
'And, as you can see, I am flourishing as a result. My soul, at any rate, has avoided indisposition as successfully as she has been avoiding me.'

6.17

RASHEED was just picking up his books when Ishaq Khan, who was still standing by the door, blurted out :

'And Tasneem is indisposed as well.'

Motu Chand glanced at his friend. Rasheed's back was

461 towards them, but it had stiffened. He had heard Ishaq Khan's excuse to Maan; it had not increased his respect for the sarangi player that he had acted in this demeaning manner as an emissary for Saeeda Bai. Was he now acting as an emissary for Tasneem as well ?

'What gives you that understanding ?' he asked, turning around slowly.

Ishaq Khan coloured at the patent disbelief in the teacher's voice.

‘Well, whatever state she is in now, she will be indisposed after her lesson with you,’ he replied challengingly. And, indeed, it was true. Tasneem was often in tears after her lessons with Rasheed.

‘She has a tendency to tears,’ said Rasheed, sounding more harsh than he intended. ‘But she is not unintelligent and is making good progress. If there are any problems with my teaching, her guardian can inform me in person or in writing.’

‘Can’t you be a little less rigorous with her, Master Sahib?’ said Ishaq hotly. ‘She is a delicate girl. She is not training to become a mullah, you know. Or a haafiz.’

And yet, tears or no tears, reflected Ishaq painfully, Tasneem was spending so much of her spare time on Arabic these days that she had very little left for anyone else. Her lessons appeared to have rectified her even from romantic novels. Did he really wish her young teacher to start behaving gently towards her?

Rasheed had gathered up his papers and books. He now spoke almost to himself. ‘I am no more rigorous with her than I am with’ - he had been about to say ‘myself’ with anyone else. One’s emotions are largely a matter of self-control. Nothing is painless,’ he added a little bitterly.

Ishaq’s eyes flashed. Motu Chand placed a restraining hand on his shoulder.

‘And anyway,’ continued Rasheed, ‘Tasneem has a tendency to indolence.’

‘She appears to have lots of tendencies, Master Sahib.’

Rasheed frowned. ‘And this is exacerbated by that halfwitted parakeet which she keeps interrupting her work to

462•*#•• *‘‘•*

feed or indulge. It is no pleasure to hear fragments of the Book of God being mangled in the beak of a blasphemous bird.’

Ishaq was too dumbstruck to say anything. Rasheed walked past him and out of the room.

‘What made you provoke him like that, Ishaq Bhai ?’ said Motu Chand after a few seconds.

‘Provoke him ? Why, he provoked me. His last remark -‘

‘He couldn’t have known that you had given her the parakeet.’

‘Why, everyone knows.’

‘He probably doesn’t. He doesn’t interest himself in that kind of thing, our upright Rasheed. What got into you? Why are you provoking everyone these days ?’

The reference to Ustad Majeed Khan was not lost on Ishaq, but the subject was one he could hardly bear to think of. He said :

‘So that owl book provoked you, did it? Have you tried any of its recipes? How many women has it lured into your power, Motu ? And what does your wife have to say about your new-found prowess ?’

‘You know what I mean,’ said Motu Chand, undeflected. ‘Listen, Ishaq, there’s nothing to be gained by putting people’s backs up. Just now -‘

‘It’s these wretched hands of mine,’ cried Ishaq, holding them up and looking at them as if he hated them. ‘These wretched hands. For the last hour upstairs it has been torture.’

‘But you were playing so well -‘

‘What will happen to me? To my younger brothers? I can’t get employment on the basis of my brilliant wit. And even my brother-in-law won’t be able to come to Brahmipur to help us now. How can I show my face at the radio station, let alone ask for a transfer for him ?’

‘It’s bound to get better, Ishaq Bhai. Don’t distress yourself like this. I’ll help you -‘

This was of course impossible. Motu Chand had four small children.

‘Even music means agony to me now,’ said Ishaq Khan

463to himself, shaking his head. ‘Even music. I cannot bear to hear it even when I am not on duty. This hand follows the tune by itself, and it seizes up with pain. If my father had been alive, what would he have said if he had heard me speaking like this ?’

6.18

‘THE BEGUM SAHIBA was very explicit,’ said the watchman. ‘She is not seeing anyone this evening.’

‘Why ?’ demanded Maan. ‘Why ?’

‘I do not know,’ said the watchman.

‘Please find out,’ said Maan, slipping a two-rupee note into the man’s hand.

The watchman took the note and said : ‘She is not well.’

‘But you knew that before,’ said Maan, a bit aggrieved. ‘That means I must go and see her. She will be wanting to see me.’

‘No,’ said the watchman, standing before the gate. ‘She will not be wanting to see you.’

This struck Maan as distinctly unfriendly. 'Now look,' he said, 'you have to let me in.' He tried to shoulder his way past the watchman, but the watchman resisted, and there was a scuffle.

Voices were heard from inside, and Bibbo emerged. When she saw what was happening, her hand flew to her mouth. Then she gasped out : Thool Singh - stop it ! Dagh Sahib, please - please - what will Begum Sahiba say ?'

This thought brought Maan to his senses, and he brushed down his kurta, looking rather shamefaced. Neither he nor the watchman was injured. The watchman continued to look entirely matter-of-fact about the whole incident.

'Bibbo, is she very ill ?' asked Maan in vicarious pain.

'Ill ?' said Bibbo. 'Who's ill ?'

'Saeeda Bai, of course.'

'She's not in the least ill,' said Bibbo, laughing. Then, as she caught the watchman's eye, she added : 'At least not

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until half an hour ago, when she had a sharp pain around her heart. She can't see you - or anyone.'

'Who's with her ?' demanded Maan.

‘No one, that is, well, as I’ve just said - no one.’

‘Someone is with her,’ said Maan fiercely, with a sharp stab of jealousy.

‘Dagh Sahib,’ said Bibbo, not without sympathy, ‘it is not like you to be like this.’

‘Like what?’ said Maan.

‘Jealous. Begum Sahiba has her old admirers - she cannot cast them off. This house depends on their generosity.’

‘Is she angry with me ?’ asked Maan.

‘Angry ? Why ?’ asked Bibbo blankly.

‘Because I didn’t come that day as I had promised,’ said Maan. ‘I tried - I just couldn’t get away.’

‘I don’t think she was angry with you,’ said Bibbo. ‘But she was certainly angry with your messenger.’

‘With Firoz ?’ said Maan, astonished.

‘Yes, with the Nawabzada.’

‘Did he deliver a note ?’ asked Maan. He reflected with a little envy that Firoz, who could read and write Urdu, could thereby communicate in writing with Saeeda Bai.

‘I think so,’ said Bibbo, a little vaguely.

‘And why was she angry ?’ asked Maan.

‘I don’t know,’ said Bibbo with a light laugh. ‘I must go in now.’ And she left Maan standing on the pavement looking very agitated.

Saeeda Bai had in fact been greatly displeased to see Firoz, and was annoyed at Maan for having sent him. Yet, when she received Maan’s message that he could not come on the appointed evening, she could not help feeling disappointed and sad. And this fact too annoyed her. She could not afford to get emotionally attached to this light-hearted, light-headed, and probably light-footed young man. She had a profession to keep up, and he was definitely in the nature of a distraction, however pleasant. And so she began to realize that it might be a good thing if he stayed away for a while. Since she was entertaining a patron this

465 evening, she had instructed the watchman to keep everyone else - and particularly Maan - away.

When Bibbo later reported to her what had happened, Saeeda Bai’s reaction was irritation at what she saw as Maan’s interference in her professional life: he had no claim on her time or what she did with it. But later still, talking to the parakeet, she said, ‘Dagh Sahib, Dagh Sahib’ quite a number

of times, her expression ranging from sexual passion to flirtatiousness to tenderness to indifference to irritation to anger. The parakeet was receiving a more elaborate education in the ways of the world than most of his fellows.

Maan had wandered off, wondering what to do with his time, incapable of getting Saeeda Bai out of his mind, but craving some, any, activity that could distract him at least for a moment. He remembered that he'd said he would drop by to see the Rajkumar of Marh, and so he made his way to the lodgings not far from the university that the Rajkumar had taken with six or seven other students, four of whom were still in Brahmpur at the beginning of the summer vacation. These students - two the scions of other petty princedoms, and one the son of a large zamindar were not short of money. Most of them got a couple of hundred rupees a month to spend as they liked. This would have been just about equal to Fran's entire salary, and these students looked upon their unwealthy lecturers with easy contempt.

The Rajkumar and his friends ate together, played cards together, and shared each other's company a good deal. Each of them spent fifteen rupees a month on mess fees (they had their own cook) and another twenty rupees a month on what they called 'girl fees'. These went to support a very beautiful nineteen-year-old dancing girl who lived with her mother in a street not far from the university. Rupvati would entertain the friends quite often, and one of them would stay behind afterwards. This way each of them got a turn once every two weeks by rotation.

466 On the other nights, Rupvati was free to entertain any of them or to take a night off, but the understanding was that she would have no other clients. The mother would greet the boys very affectionately; she was very pleased to see them, and

often told them that she did not know what she and her daughter would have done if it hadn't been for their kindness.

Within half an hour of meeting the Rajkumar of Marh and drinking a fair amount of whisky, Maan had spilt out all his troubles on his shoulder. The Rajkumar mentioned Rupvati, and suggested that they visit her. Maan cheered up slightly at this and, taking the bottle with them, they began to walk in the direction of her house. But the Rajkumar suddenly remembered that this was one of her nights off, and that they would not be entirely welcome there.

'I know what we'll do. We'll visit Tarbuz ka Bazaar instead,' said the Rajkumar, hailing a tonga and pulling Maan onto it. Maan was in no mood to resist this suggestion.

But when the Rajkumar, who had placed a friendly hand on his thigh, moved it significantly upwards, he shook it away with a laugh.

The Rajkumar did not take this rejection at all amiss, and in a couple of minutes, with the bottle passing between them, they were talking as easily as before.

'This is a great risk for me,' said the Rajkumar, 'but because of our great friendship I am doing it.'

Maan began to laugh. 'Don't do it again,' he said. 'I feel ticklish.'

Now it was the Rajkumar's turn to laugh. 'I don't mean that,' he said. 'I mean that taking you to Tarbuz ka Bazaar is a risk

for me.’ „

‘Oh, how ?’ said Maan.

‘Because “any student who is seen in an undesirable place shall be liable to immediate expulsion.” ‘

The Rajkumar was quoting from the curious and detailed rules of conduct promulgated for the students of Brahmpur University. This particular rule sounded so

467vague and yet at the same time so delightfully draconian that the Rajkumar and his friends had learned it by heart and used to chant it in chorus to the lilt of the Gayatri Mantra whenever they went out to gamble or drink or whore.

6.19

THEY soon got to Old Brahmpur, and wound through the narrow streets towards Tarbuz ka Bazaar. Maan was beginning to have second thoughts.

‘Why not some other night - ?’ he began.

‘Oh, they serve very good biryani there,’ said the Rajkumar.

‘Where ?’

‘At Tahmina Bai’s. I’ve been there once or twice when it’s been a non-Rupvati day.’

Maan’s head sank on his chest and he went off to sleep. When they got to Tarbuz ka Bazaar, the Rajkumar woke him up.

‘From here we’ll have to walk.’

‘Not far?’

‘No - not far. Tahmina Bai’s place is just around the corner.’

They dismounted, paid the tonga-wallah, and walked hand in hand into a side alley. The Rajkumar then walked up a flight of narrow and steep stairs, pulling a tipsy Maan behind him.

But when they got to the top of the stairs they heard a confused noise, and when they had walked a few steps along the corridor they were faced with a curious scene.

The plump, pretty, dreamy-eyed Tahmina Bai was giggling in delight as an opium-eyed, vacant-faced, redtongued, barrel-bodied, middle-aged man - an income tax clerk - was beating on the tabla and singing an obscene song in a thin voice. Two scruffy lower division clerks were lounging around, one of them with his head in her lap. They were trying to sing along.

468The Rajkumar and Maan were about to beat a retreat, when the madam of the establishment saw them and bustled quickly towards them along the corridor. She knew who the Rajkumar

was, and hastened to reassure him that the others would be cleared out in a couple of minutes.

The two loitered around a paan shop for a few minutes, then went back upstairs. Tahmina Bai, alone, and with a beatific smile on her face, was ready to entertain them.

First she sang a thumri, then - realizing that time was * getting on - she fell into a sulk.

‘Oh, do sing,’ said the Rajkumar, prodding Maan to placate Tahmina Bai as well.

‘Ye-es -‘ said Maan.

‘No, I won’t, you don’t appreciate my voice.’ She looked downwards and pouted.

‘Well,’ said the Rajkumar, ‘at least grace us with some poetry.’

This sent Tahmina Bai into gales of laughter. Her pretty little jowls shook, and she snorted with delight. The Rajkumar was mystified. After another swig from his bottle, he looked at her in wonderment.

‘Oh, it’s too - ah, ah - grace us with some - hah, hah poetry!’

Tahmina Bai was no longer in a sulk but in an ungovernable fit of laughter. She squealed and squealed and held her sides and

gasped, the tears running down her face.

When she was finally capable of speech, she told them a joke.

‘The poet Akbar Allahabadi was in Banaras when he was lured by some friends into a street just like ours. He had drunk quite a lot - just like you - so he leaned against a wall to urinate. And then - what happened ? - a courtesan, leaning out from a window above, recognized him from one of his poetry recitals and - and she said - ‘Tahmina Bai giggled, then started laughing again, shaking from side to side. ‘She said - Akbar Sahib is gracing us with his poetry!’ Tahmina Bai began to laugh uncontrollably once more, and to Maan’s fuddled amazement he found himself joining in.

469But Tahmina Bai had not finished her joke, and went on : ‘So when he heard her, the poet made this remark on the spur of the moment :

“Alas - what poor poetry can Akbar write

When the pen is in his hand and the inkpot upstairs ?” ‘

This was followed by squeals and snorts of laughter. Then Tahmina Bai told Maan that she herself had something to show him in the other room, and led him in, while the Rajkumar took another couple of swigs.

After a few minutes she emerged, with Maan looking bedraggled and disgusted. But Tahmina Bai was pouting sweetly. She said to the Rajkumar: ‘Now, I have something to show you.’

‘No, no,’ said the Rajkumar. ‘I’ve already - no, I’m not in the mood - come, Maan, let’s go.’

Tahmina Bai looked affronted, and said: ‘Both of you are - are - very similar ! What do you need me for ?’

The Rajkumar had got up. He put an arm around Maan and they struggled towards the door. As they walked into the corridor they heard her say :

‘At least have some biryani before you leave. It will be ready in a few minutes -‘

Hearing no response from them, Tahmina Bai let fly :

‘It might give you strength. Neither of you could grace me with your poetry!’

She began to laugh and shake, and her laughter followed them all the way down the stairs into the street.

6.20

EVEN though he had not done anything as such with her, Maan was feeling so remorseful about having visited such a low singing girl as Tahmina Bai that he wanted to go to Saeeda Bai’s again immediately and beg her forgiveness. The Rajkumar persuaded him to go home instead. He took him to the gate of Prem Nivas and left him there. Mrs Mahesh Kapoor

was awake. When she saw Maan so drunk and unsteady she was very unhappy. Though she did not say anything to him, she was afraid for him. If his father had seen him in his present state he would have had a fit.

Maan, guided to his room, fell on his bed and went off to sleep.

The next day, contrite, he visited Saeeda Bai, and she was glad to see him. They spent the evening together. But she told him that she would be occupied for the next two days, and that he should not take it amiss.

Maan took it greatly amiss. He suffered from acute jealousy and thwarted desire, and wondered what he had done wrong. Even if he could have seen Saeeda Bai every evening, his days would merely have trickled by drop by drop. Now not only the days but the nights as well stretched interminably ahead of him, black and empty.

He practised a bit of polo with Firoz, but Firoz was busy during the days and sometimes even during the evenings with law or other work. Unlike the young Bespectacled Bannerji, Firoz did not treat time spent playing polo or deciding on a proper walking-stick as wasted; he considered these activities proper to the son of a Nawab. Compared to Maan, however, Firoz was an addict to his profession.

Maan tried to follow suit - to do a bit of purchasing and to seek a few orders for the cloth business in Banaras - but found it too irksome to pursue. He paid a visit or two to his brother Pran and his sister Veena, but the very domesticity and purposefulness of their lives was a rebuke to his own. Veena told him off roundly, asking him what kind of an example he

thought he was setting for young Bhaskar, and old Mrs Tandon looked at him even more suspiciously and disapprovingly than before. Kedarnath, however, patted Maan on the shoulder, as if to compensate for his mother's coldness.

Having exhausted all his other possibilities, Maan began to hang around the Rajkumar of Marh's set and (though he did not visit Tarbuz ka Bazaar again) drank and gam-

4?ibled away much of the money that had been reserved for the business. The gambling - usually flush, but sometimes even poker, for which there was a recent craze among the more self-consciously dissolute students in Brahmipur took place mainly in the students' rooms, but sometimes in informal gambling dens in private houses here and there in the city. Their drink was invariably Scotch. Maan thought of Saeeda Bai all the time, and declined a visit even to the beautiful Rupvati. For this he was chaffed by all his new companions, who told him that he might lose his abilities permanently for lack of exercise.

One day Maan, separated from his companions, was walking up and down Nabiganj in a lovesick haze when he bumped into an old flame of his. She was now married, but retained a great affection for Maan. Maan too continued to like her a great deal. Her husband - who had the unlikely nickname of Pigeon - asked Maan if he would join them for coffee at the Red Fox. But Maan, who would normally have accepted the invitation with alacrity, looked away unhappily and said that he had to be going.

'Why is your old admirer behaving so strangely?' said her husband to her with a smile.

‘I don’t know,’ she said, mystified.

‘Surely he’s not fallen out of love with you.’

‘That’s possible - but unlikely. Maan Kapoor doesn’t fall out of love with anyone as a rule.’

They let it go at that, and went into the Red Fox.

6.21

MAAN was not the only target of old Mrs Tandon’s suspicions. Of late, the old lady, who kept tabs on everything, began to notice that Veena had not been wearing certain items of her jewellery: that though she continued to wear her in-laws’ pieces, she had ceased to wear those that came from her parents. One day she reported this matter to her son.

472-Kedarnath paid no attention.

His mother kept at him, until eventually he agreed to ask Veena to put on her navratan.

Veena flushed. ‘I’ve lent it to Priya, who wants to copy the design,’ she said. ‘She saw me wear it at Fran’s wedding and liked it.’

But Veena looked so unhappy with her lie that the truth soon came out. Kedarnath discovered that running the household

cost far more than she had told him it did ; he, domestically impractical and often absent, had simply not noticed. She had hoped that by asking him for less household money she would reduce the financial pressure on his business. But now he realized that she had taken steps to pawn or sell her jewellery.

Kedarnath also learned that Bhaskar's school fees and books were already being supplied out of Mrs Mahesh Kapoor's monthly household money, some of which she diverted to her daughter.

'We can't have that,' said Kedarnath. 'Your father helped us enough three years ago.'

'Why not?' demanded Veena. 'Bhaskar's Nani is surely allowed to give him those, why not? It's not as if she's supplying us our rations.'

'There's something out of tune with my Veena today,' said Kedarnath, smiling a bit sadly.

Veena was not mollified.

'You never tell me anything,' she burst out, 'and then I find you with your head in your hands, and your eyes closed for minutes on end. What am I to think ? And you are always away. Sometimes when you're away I cry to myself all night long; it would have been better to have a drunkard as a husband, as long as he slept here every night.'

'Now calm down. Where are these jewels ?'

‘Priya has them. She said she’d get me an estimate.’

‘They haven’t yet been sold then ?’

‘No.’

‘Go and get them back.’

‘No.’

473 ‘Go and get them back, Veena. How can you gamble with your mother’s navratan ?’

‘How can you play chaupar with Bhaskar’s future ?’

Kedarnath closed his eyes for a few seconds.

‘You understand nothing about business,’ he said.

‘I understand enough to know that you can’t keep “over-extending” yourself.’

‘Over-extension is just over-extension. All great fortunes are based on debt.’

‘Well we, I know, will never be greatly fortunate again,’ burst out Veena passionately. ‘This isn’t Lahore. Why can’t we guard what little we have?’

Kedarnath was silent for a while. Then he said :

‘Get the jewellery back. It’s all right, it really is. Haresh’s arrangement with the brogues is about to come through any day, and our long term problems will be solved.’

Veena looked at her husband very dubiously.

‘Everything good is always about to happen, and everything bad always happens.’

‘Now that’s not true. At least in the short term something good has happened to me. The shops in Bombay have paid up at last. I promise you that that is true. I know I’m a bad liar, so I don’t even attempt it. Now get the navratan back.’

‘Show me the money fast’.

Kedarnath burst out laughing. Veena burst into tears.

‘Where’s Bhaskar?’ he asked, after she had sobbed for a bit and subsided into silence.

‘At Dr Durrani’s.’

‘Good. I hope he stays there a couple of hours more. Let’s play a game of chaupar, you and I.’

Veena dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief.

‘It’s too hot on the roof. Your mother won’t want her beloved son to turn black as ink.’

‘Well, we’ll play in this room, then,’ said Kedarnath with decision.

Veena got the jewellery back late that afternoon. Priya was

474not able to give her an estimate; with the witch hanging around the gossipy jeweller every minute of his previous visit, she had decided to subjugate urgency to discretion.

Veena looked at the navratan, gazing reminiscently at each stone in turn.

Early the same evening, Kedarnath went over with it to his father-in-law, and asked him to keep it in his custody at Prem Nivas.

‘What on earth for?’ asked Mahesh Kapoor. ‘Why are you bothering me with these trinkets?’

‘Baoji, it belongs to Veena, and I want to make sure she keeps it. If it’s in my house, she might suddenly be struck with noble

fancies and pawn it.’

‘Pawn it ?’

‘Pawn it or sell it.’

‘What madness. What’s been going on? Have all my children taken leave of their senses ?’

After a brief account of the navratan incident, Mahesh Kapoor said :

‘And how is your business now that the strike is finally over ?’

‘I can’t say it’s going well - but it hasn’t collapsed yet.’

‘Kedarnath, run my farm instead.’

‘No, but thank you, Baoji. I should be getting back now. The market must have opened already.’ A further thought struck him. ‘And besides, Baoji, who would mind your constituency if I decided to leave Misri Mandi ?’

‘True. All right. Fine. It’s good that you have to go back because I have to deal with these files before tomorrow morning,’ said Mahesh Kapoor inhospitably. ‘Til be working all night. Put it down here somewhere.’

‘What - on the files, Baoji ?’ There, was nowhere else on the table to place the navratan.

‘Where else then - around my neck? Yes, yes, on that pink one: “Orders of the State Government on the Assessment Proposals”. Don’t look so anxious, Kedarnath, it won’t disappear again. I’ll see that Veena’s mother puts the stupid thing away somewhere.’

4756.22

LATER that night in the house where the Rajkumar and his friends lived, Maan lost more than two hundred rupees gambling on flush. He usually held onto his cards far too long before packing them in or asking for a show. The predictability of his optimism was fatal to his chances. Besides, he was entirely un-poker-faced, and his fellowplayers had a shrewd idea of how good his cards were from the instant he picked them up. He lost ten rupees or more on hand after hand - and when he held three kings, all he won was four rupees.

The more he drank, the more he lost, and vice versa.

Every time he got a queen - or begum - in his hand, he

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allowed to see so rarely these days. He could sense that even when he was with her, despite their mutual excitement and

affection, she was finding him less amusing as he became more intense.

After he had got completely cleaned out, he muttered in a slurred voice that he had to be off.

‘Spend the night here if you wish - go home in the morning,’ suggested the Rajkumar. ‘No, no -’ said Maan, and left.

tfe. wyj/teit-i wra Vî, S-att-iit Çra/s, Tfcc/ûmg -stnrre pu^rry
on the way and singing from time to time.

It was past midnight. The watchman, seeing the state he was in, asked him to go home. Maan started singing, appealing over his head to Saeeda Bai :

‘It’s just a heart, not brick and stone, why should it then

not fill with pain ?

Yes, I will weep a thousand times, why should you

torture me in vain ?’

‘Kapoor Sahib, you will wake up everyone on the street,’ said the watchman matter-of-factly. He bore Maan no grudge for the scuffle they had had the other night.

Bibbo came out and chided Maan gently. ‘Kindly go

476home, Dagh Sahib. This is a respectable house. Begum Sahiba asked who was singing, and when I told her, she was most annoyed. I believe she is fond of you, Dagh Sahib, but she will not see you tonight, and she has asked me to tell you that she will never see you in this state. Please forgive my impertinence, I am only repeating her words.’

‘It’s just a heart, not brick and stone,’ sang Maan.

‘Come, Sahib,’ said the watchman calmly and led Maan gently but firmly down the street in the direction of Prem Nivas.

‘Here, this is for you - you’re a good man -’ said Maan, reaching into his kurta pockets. He turned them inside out, but there was no money in them.

‘Take my tip on account, ‘ he suggested.

‘Yes, Sahib,’ said the watchman, and turned back to the rose-coloured house.

6.23

DRUNK, broke, and far from happy, Maan tottered back to Prem Nivas. To his surprise and rather unfocused distress, his mother was waiting up for him again. ‘When she saw him, tears rolled down her cheeks. She was already overwrought because of the business with the navratan.

‘Maan, my dear son, what has come over you ? What has she done to my boy ? Do you know what people are saying about you ? Even the Banaras people know by now.’

‘What Banaras people?’ Maan inquired, his curiosity aroused.

‘What Banaras people, he asks,’ said Mrs Mahesh Kapoor, and began to cry even more intensely. There was a strong smell of whisky on her son’s breath.

Maan put his arm protectively around her shoulder, and told her to go to sleep. She told him to go up to his room by the garden stairs to avoid disturbing his father, who was working late in his office.

477But Maan, who had not taken in this last instruction, went humming off to bed by the main stairs.

‘Who’s that ? Who’s that ? Is it Maan ?’ came his father’s angry voice.

‘Yes, Baoji,’ said Maan, and continued to walk up the stairs.

‘Did you hear me?’ called his father in a voice that reverberated across half of Prem Nivas.

‘Yes, Baoji,’ Maan stopped.

‘Then come down here at once.’

‘Yes, Baoji.’ Maan stumbled down the stairs and into his father’s office. He sat down on the chair across the small table at which his father was sitting. There was no one in the office besides the two of them and a couple of lizards that kept scurrying across the ceiling throughout their conversation.

‘Stand up. Did I tell you to sit down?’

Maan tried to stand up, but failed. Then he tried again, and leaned across the table towards his father. His eyes were glazed. The papers on the table and the glass of water near his father’s hand seemed to frighten him.

Mahesh Kapoor stood up, his mouth set in a tight line, his eyes stern. He had a file in his right hand, which he slowly transferred to his left. He was about to slap Maan hard across the face when Mrs Mahesh Kapoor rushed in and said :

‘Don’t - don’t - don’t do that-‘

Her voice and eyes pleaded with her husband, and he relented. Maan, meanwhile, closed his eyes and collapsed back into the chair. He began to drift off to sleep.

His father, enraged, came around the table, and started shaking him as if he wanted to jolt every bone in his body.

‘Baoji!’ said Maan, awoken by the sensation, and began to laugh.

His father raised his right arm again, and with the back of his hand slapped his twenty-five-year-old son across the face. Maan gasped, stared at his father, and raised his hand to touch his cheek.

478 Mrs Mahesh Kapoor sat down on one of the benches that ran along the wall. She was crying.

‘Now you listen, Maan, unless you want another of those - listen to me,’ said his father, even more furious now that his wife was crying because of something he had done. ‘I don’t care how much of this you remember tomorrow morning but I am not going to wait until you are sober. Do you understand?’ He raised his voice and repeated, ‘Do you understand?’

Maan nodded his head, suppressing his first instinct, which was to close his eyes again. He was so sleepy that he could only hear a few words drifting in and out of his consciousness. Somewhere, it seemed to him, there was a sort of tingling pain. But whose?

‘Have you seen yourself? Can you imagine how you look? Your hair wild, your eyes glazed, your pockets hanging out, a whisky stain all the way down your kurta -’

Maan shook his head, then let it droop gently on his chest. All he wanted to do was to cut off what was going on outside his head: this angry face, this shouting, this tingling.

He yawned.

Mahesh Kapoor picked up the glass and threw the water on Maan's face. Some of it fell on his own papers but he didn't even look down at them. Maan coughed and choked and sat up with a start. His mother covered her eyes with her hands and sobbed.

'What did you do with the money? What did you do with it?' asked Mahesh Kapoor.

'What money?' asked Maan, watching the water drip down the front of his kurta, one channel taking the route of his whisky stain.

'The business money.'

Maan shrugged, and frowned in concentration.

'And the spending money I gave you?' continued his father threateningly.

Maan frowned in deeper concentration, and shrugged again.

'What did you do with it? I'll tell you what you did with

479it - you spent it on that whore.' Mahesh Kapoor would never have referred to Saeeda Bai in such terms if he had not been driven beyond the limit of restraint.

Mrs Mahesh Kapoor put her hands to her ears. Her husband snorted. She was behaving, he thought impatiently, like all three of Gandhiji's monkeys rolled into one. She would be clapping her hands over her mouth next.

Maan looked at his father, thought for a second, then said, 'No. I only brought her small presents. She never

asked for anything more ' He was wondering to himself

where the money could have gone.

'Then you must have drunk and gambled it away,' said his father in disgust.

Ah yes, that was it, recalled Maan, relieved. Aloud he said, in a pleased tone, as if an intractable problem had, after long endeavour, suddenly been solved :

'Yes, that is it, Baoji. Drunk - gambled - gone.' Then the implications of this last word struck him, and he looked shamefaced.

'Shameless - shameless - you are behaving worse than a depraved zamindar, and I will not have it,' cried Mahesh Kapoor. He thumped the pink file in front of him. 'I will not have it, and I will not have you here any longer. Get out of town, get out of Brahmipur. Get out at once. I will not have you here. You are ruining your mother's peace of mind, and your own life, and my political career, and our family reputation. I give you money, and what do you do with it ? - you gamble with it or spend it on whores or on whisky. Is debauchery your

only skill ? I never thought I would be ashamed of a son of mine. If you want to see someone with real hardships look at your brother-in-law he never asks for money for his business, let alone “for this and for that”. And what of your fiancée? We find a suitable girl from a good family, we arrange a good match for you - and then you chase after Saeeda Bai, whose life and history are an open book.’

‘But I love her,’ said Maan.

‘Love ?’ cried his father, his incredulity mixed with rage. ‘Go to bed at once. This is your last night in this house. I

480 want you out by tomorrow. Get out! Go to Banaras or wherever you choose, but get out of Brahmipur. Out!’

Mrs Mahesh Kapoor begged her husband to rescind this drastic command, but to no avail. Maan looked at the two geckos on the ceiling as they scurried about to and fro. Then - suddenly - he got up with great resolution and without assistance, and said:

‘All right. Goodnight! Goodnight! Goodnight! I’ll go! I’ll leave this house tomorrow.’

And he went off to bed without help, even remembering to take off his shoes before he fell off to sleep.

THE next morning he woke up with a dreadful headache, which, however, cleared up miraculously in a couple of hours. He remembered that his father and he had exchanged words, and waited till the Minister of Revenue had gone to the Assembly before he went to ask his mother what it was they had said to each other. Mrs Mahesh Kapoor was at her wits' end: her husband had been so incensed last night that he hadn't slept for hours. Nor had he been able to work, and this had incensed him further. Any suggestion of reconciliation from her had met with an almost incoherently angry rebuke from him. She realized that he was quite serious, that Maan would have to leave. Hugging her son to her she said :

‘Go back to Banaras, work hard, behave responsibly, win back your father’s heart.’

None of these four clauses appealed particularly to Maan, but he assured his mother that he would not cause trouble at Prem Nivas any longer. He ordered a servant to pack his things. He decided that he would go and stay with Firoz; or, failing that, with Pran; or, failing that, with the Rajkumar and his friends; or, failing that, somewhere else in Brahmipur. He would not leave this beautiful city or forgo the chance to meet the woman he loved because his disapproving, desiccated father told him so.

481 ‘Shall I get your father’s PA to arrange your ticket to Banaras ?’ asked Mrs Mahesh Kapoor.

‘No. If I need to, I’ll do that at the station.’

After shaving and bathing he donned a crisp white kurta-pyjama and made his way a little shamefacedly towards Saeeda Bai’s house. If he had been as drunk as his mother

seemed to think he had been, he supposed that he must have been equally so outside Saeeda Bai's gate, where he had a vague sense of having gone.

He arrived at Saeeda Bai's house. He was admitted. Apparently, he was expected.

On the way up the stairs, he glanced at himself in the mirror. Unlike before, he now looked at himself quite critically. A white, embroidered cap covered his head; he took it off and surveyed his prematurely balding temples before putting it on again, thinking ruefully that perhaps it was his baldness that Saeeda Bai did not like. 'But what can I do about it?' he thought.

When she heard his step on the corridor, Saeeda Bai called out in a welcoming voice, 'Come in, come in, Dagh Sahib. Your footsteps sound regular today. Let us hope that your heart is beating as regularly.'

Saeeda Bai had slept over the question of Maan and had concluded that something had to be done. Though she had to admit to herself that he was good for her, he was getting to be too demanding of her time and energy, too obsessively attached, for her to handle easily.

When Maan told her about his scene with his father, and that he had been thrown out of the house, she was very upset. Prem Nivas, where she sang regularly at Holi and had once sung at Dussehra, had become a regular fixture of her annual calendar. She had to consider the question of her income. Equally importantly, she did not want her young friend to remain in trouble with his father. 'Where do you plan to go?' she asked him.

‘Why, nowhere!’ exclaimed Maan. ‘My father has delusions of grandeur. He thinks that because he can strip a million landlords of their inheritance, he can equally easily order his son about. I am going to stay in Brahmpur - with friends.’ A sudden thought struck him. ‘Why not here?’ he asked.

‘Toba, toba!’ cried Saeeda Bai, putting her hands to her shocked ears.

‘Why should I be separated from you? From the town where you live?’ He leaned towards her and began to embrace her. ‘And your cook makes such delicious shami kababs,’ he added.

Saeeda Bai might have been pleased by Maan’s ardour, but she was thinking hard. ‘I know,’ she said, disengaging herself. ‘I know what you must do.’

‘Mmh,’ said Maan, attempting to engage himself again.

‘Do sit still and listen, Dagh Sahib,’ said Saeeda Bai in a coquettish voice. ‘You want to be close to me, to understand me, don’t you?’

‘Yes, yes, of course.’

‘Why, Dagh Sahib?’

‘Why?’ asked Maan incredulously.

‘Why ?’ persisted Saeeda Bai.

‘Because I love you.’

‘What is love - this ill-natured thing that makes enemies even of friends ?’

This was too much for Maan, who was in no mood to get involved in abstract speculations. A sudden, horrible thought struck him : ‘Do you want me to go as well ?’

Saeeda Bai was silent, then she tugged her sari, which had slipped down slightly, back over her head. Her kohlblackened eyes seemed to look into Maan’s very soul.

‘Dagh Sahib, Dagh Sahib!’ she rebuked him.

Maan was instantly repentant, and hung his head. ‘I just feared that you might want to test our love by distance,’ he said.

‘That would cause me as much pain as you,’ she told him sadly. ‘But what I was thinking was quite different.’

She was silent, then played a few notes on the harmonium and said:

‘Your Urdu teacher, Rasheed, is leaving for his village in a few days. He will be gone for a month. I don’t know how to

arrange for an Arabic teacher for Tasneem or an

483 Urdu teacher for you in his absence. And I feel that in order to understand me truly, to appreciate my art, to resonate to my passion, you must learn my language, the language of the poetry I recite, the ghazals I sing, the very thoughts I think.'

'Yes, yes,' whispered Maan, enraptured.

'So you must go to the village with your Urdu teacher for a while - for a month.'

'What?' cried Maan, who felt that another glass of water had been flung in his face.

Saeeda Bai was apparently so upset by her own solution to the problem - it was the obvious solution, she murmured, biting her lower lip sadly, but she did not know how she could bear being separated from him, etc. - that in a few minutes it was Maan who was consoling her rather than she him. It was the only way out of the problem, he assured her : even if he had nowhere to live in the village, he would sleep in the open, he would speak think - write - the language of her soul, he would send her letters written in the Urdu of an angel. Even his father would be proud of him.

'You have made me see that there is no other way,' said Saeeda Bai at length, letting herself be convinced gradually.

Maan noticed that the parakeet, who was in the room with them, was giving him a cynical look. He frowned.

‘When is Rasheed leaving ?’

‘Tomorrow.’

Maan went pale. ‘But that only leaves tonight!’ he cried, his heart sinking. His courage failed him. ‘No - I can’t go - I can’t leave you.’

‘Dagh Sahib, if you are faithless to your own logic, how can I believe you will be faithful to me ?’

‘Then I must spend this evening here. It will be our last night together in a - in a month.’

A month ? Even as he said the word, his mind rebelled at the thought. He refused to accept it.

‘It will not work this evening,’ said Saeeda Bai in a practical tone, thinking of her commitments.

484 ‘Then I won’t go,’ cried Maan. ‘I can’t. How can I ? Anyway, we haven’t consulted Rasheed.’

‘Rasheed will be honoured to give you hospitality. He respects your father very much - no doubt because of his skill as a woodcutter - and, of course, he respects you very much - no doubt because of your skill as a calligrapher.’

‘I must see you tonight,’ insisted Maan. ‘I must. What woodcutter?’ he added, frowning.

Saeeda Bai sighed. ‘It is very difficult to cut down a banyan tree, Dagh Sahib, especially one that has been rooted so long in the soil of this province. But I can hear your father’s impatient axe on the last of its trunks. Soon it will be Tom from the earth. The snakes will be driven from its roots and the termites burned with its rotten wood. But what will happen to the birds and monkeys who sang or chattered in its branches? Tell me that, Dagh Sahib. This is how things stand with us today.’ Then, seeing Maan look crestfallen, she added, with another sigh: ‘Come at one o’clock in the morning. I will tell your friend the watchman to make the Shahenshah’s entry a triumphal one.’

Maan felt that she might be laughing at him. But the thought of seeing her tonight cheered him up instantly, even if he knew she was merely sweetening a bitter pill.

‘Of course, I can’t promise anything,’ Saeeda Bai went on. ‘If he tells you I am asleep, you must not make a scene or wake up the neighbourhood.’

It was Maan’s turn to sigh :

‘If Mir so loudly goes on weeping, How can his neighbour go on sleeping?’

But, as it happened, everything worked out well. Abdur Rasheed agreed to house Maan in his village and to continue to teach him Urdu. Mahe’sh Kapoor, who had been afraid that Maan might attempt to defy him by staying in Brahmipur, was

not altogether displeased that he would not be going to Banaras, for he knew what Maan did not that the cloth business was doing pretty well without him.

485 Mrs Mahesh Kapoor (though she would miss him) was glad that he would be in the charge of a strict and sober teacher and away from 'that'. Maan did at least receive the ecstatic sop of a last passionate night with Saeeda Bai. And Saeeda Bai heaved a sigh of relief tinged only slightly with regret when morning came.

A few hours later a glum Maan, fretting and exasperated at being so neatly pincered by his father and his beloved, together with Rasheed, who was conscious for the moment only of the pleasure of getting out of congested Brahmipur into the openness of the countryside, were on board a narrow-gauge train that swung in a painfully slow and halting arc towards Rudhia District and Rasheed's home village.

6.25

TASNEEM did not realize till Rasheed had gone how much she had enjoyed her Arabic lessons. Everything else she did was related to the household, and opened no windows onto a larger world. But her serious young teacher, with his insistence on the importance of grammar and his refusal to compromise with her tendency to take flight when faced with difficulties, had made her aware that she had within herself an ability for application that she had not known. She admired him, too, because he was making his own way in the world without support from his family. And when he refused to answer her sister's summons because he was explaining a passage from the Quran to her, she had greatly approved of his sense of principle.

All this admiration was silent. Rasheed had never once indicated that he was interested in her in any way other than as a teacher. Their hands had never touched accidentally over a book. That this should not have happened over a span of weeks spoke of deliberateness on his part, for in the ordinary innocent course of things it was bound to have occurred by chance, even if they had instantly drawn back afterwards.

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Now he would be out of Brahmipur for a month, and Tasneem found herself feeling sad, far sadder than the loss of Arabic lessons would have accounted for. Ishaq Khan, sensing her mood, and the cause for it as well, tried to cheer her up.

‘Listen, Tasneem.’

‘Yes, Ishaq Bhai ?’ Tasneem replied, a little listlessly.

‘Why do you insist on that “Bhai” ?’ said Ishaq.

Tasneem was silent.

‘All right, call me brother if you wish - just get out of that tearful mood.’

‘I can’t,’ said Tasneem. ‘I’m feeling sad.’

‘Poor Tasneem. He’ll be back,’ said Ishaq, trying not to sound anything but sympathetic.

‘I wasn’t thinking of him,’ said Tasneem quickly. ‘I was thinking that I’ll have nothing useful to do now except read novels and cut vegetables. Nothing useful to learn -‘

‘Well, you could teach, even if not learn,’ said Ishaq Khan, attempting to sound bright.

‘Teach?’

‘Teach Miya Mitthu how to speak. The first few months of life are very important in the education of a parakeet.’

Tasneem brightened up for a second. Then she said: ‘Apa has appropriated my parakeet. The cage is always in her room, seldom in mine.’ She sighed. ‘It seems,’ she added under her breath, ‘that everything of mine becomes hers.’

‘Til get it,’ said Ishaq Khan gallantly.

‘Oh, you mustn’t,’ said Tasneem. ‘Your hands -‘

‘Oh, I’m not as crippled as all that.’

‘But it must be bad. Whenever I see you practising, I can see how painful it is from your face.’

‘What if it is ?’ said Ishaq Khan. ‘I have to play and I have to practise.’

‘Why don’t you show it to a doctor ?’

‘It’ll go away.’

‘Still - there’s no harm in having it seen.’

‘All right,’ said Ishaq with a smile. ‘I will, because you’ve asked me to.’

487 Sometimes when Ishaq accompanied Saeeda Bai these days it was all he could do not to cry out in pain. This trouble in his wrists had grown worse. What was strange was that it now affected both his wrists, despite the fact that his two hands - the right on the bow and the left on the strings - performed very different functions.

Since his livelihood and that of the younger brothers whom he supported depended on his hands, he was extremely anxious. As for the transfer of his brother-in-law : Ishaq had not dared to try to get an interview with the Station Director - who would certainly have heard about what had happened in the canteen and who would have been very unfavourably disposed towards him, especially if the great Ustad himself had made it a point to express his displeasure.

Ishaq Khan remembered his father saying to him, 'Practise at least four hours every day. Clerks push their pens in offices for longer than that, and you cannot insult your art by offering less.' Ishaq's father would sometimes - in the middle of a conversation - take Ishaq's left hand and look at it carefully ; if the string-abraded grooves in the fingernails showed signs of recent wear, he would say, 'Good.' Otherwise he would merely continue with the conversation, not visibly but palpably disappointed. Of late, because of the sometimes unbearable pain in the tendons of his wrists, Ishaq Khan had been unable to practise for more than an hour or two a day. But the moment the pain let up he increased the regimen.

Sometimes it was difficult to concentrate on other matters. Lifting a cage, stirring his tea, opening a door, every action reminded him of his hands. He could turn to no one for help. If he told Saeeda Bai how painful it had become to accompany her, especially in fast passages, would he be able to blame her if she looked for someone else?

'It is not sensible to practise so much. You should rest and use some balm,' murmured Tasneem.

'Do you think I don't want to rest - do you think it's easier for me to practise -'

488 'But you must use proper medicine : it is very unwise not to,' said Tasneem.

'Go and get some for me, then -' said Ishaq Khan with sudden and uncharacteristic sharpness. 'Everyone sympathizes, everyone advises, no one helps. Go - go -'

He stopped dead, and covered his eyes with his right hand. He did not want to open them.

He imagined Tasneem's startled face, her deer-like eyes starting with tears. If pain has made me so selfish, he thought, I will have to rest and restore myself, even if it means risking my work.

Aloud, after he had collected himself, he said : 'Tasneem, you will have to help me. Talk to your sister and tell her what I can't.' He sighed. 'I'll speak to her later. I cannot find other work in my present state. She will have to keep me on even if I cannot play for a while.'

Tasneem said, 'Yes.' Her voice betrayed that she was, as he had thought, crying silently.

'Please don't take what I said badly,' continued Ishaq. 'I'm not myself. I will rest.' He shook his head from side to side.

Tasneem put her hand on his shoulder. He became very still, and remained so even when she took it away.

'Til talk to Apa,' she said, 'Should I go now ?'

'Yes. No, stay here for a while.'

'What do you want to talk about ?' said Tasneem.

‘I don’t want to talk,’ said Ishaq. After a pause he looked up and saw her face. It was tear-stained.

He looked down again, then said : ‘May I use that pen ?’

Tasneem handed him the wooden pen with its broad split bamboo nib that Rasheed made her use for her calligraphy. The letters it wrote were large, almost childishly so; the dots above the letters came out like little rhombuses.

Ishaq Khan thought for a minute while she watched him. Then, drawing to himself a large sheet of lined paper - which she used for her exercises - he wrote a few lines with some effort, and handed them to her wordlessly even before the ink was dry :

489Dear hands, that cause me so much pain, When can I gain your use again ?

When can we once again be friends ? Forgive me, and I’ll make amends.

Never again will I enforce My fiat, disciplined and coarse

Without consulting both of you On any work we need to do,

Nor cause you seizure or distress But win your trust through gentleness.

He looked at her while her lovely, liquid eyes moved from right to left, noticing with a kind of painful pleasure the flush that came to her face as they rested on the final couplet.

6.26

WHEN Tasneem entered her sister's bedroom, she found her sitting in front of the mirror applying kajal to her eyelids.

Most people have an expression that they reserve exclusively for looking at themselves in the mirror. Some pout, others arch their eyebrows, still others look superciliously down their noses at themselves. Saeeda Bai had a whole range of mirror faces. Just as her comments to her parakeet ran the gamut of emotions from passion to annoyance, so too did these expressions. When Tasneem entered, she was moving her head slowly from side to side with a dreamy air. It would have been difficult to guess that her thick black hair had just revealed a single white one, and that she was looking around for others.

A silver paan container was resting among the vials and phials on her dressing table and Saeeda Bai was eating a

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couple of paans laced with the fragrant, semi-solid tobacco known as kimam. When Tasneem appeared in the mirror and their eyes met, the first thought that struck Saeeda Bai was that she, Saeeda, was getting old and that in five years she would be forty. Her expression changed to one of melancholy, and she turned back to her own face in the mirror, looking at herself in the iris, first of one eye, then of the other. Then,

recalling the guest whom she had invited to the house in the evening, she smiled at herself in affectionate welcome.

‘What’s the matter, Tasneem, tell me,’ she said - somewhat indistinctly, because of the paan.

‘Apa,’ said Tasneem nervously, ‘it’s about Ishaq.’

‘Has he been teasing you?’ said Saeeda Bai a little sharply, misinterpreting Tasneem’s nervousness. ‘I’ll speak to him. Send him here.’

‘No, no, Apa, it’s this,’ said Tasneem, and handed her sister Ishaq’s poem.

After reading it through Saeeda Bai set it down, and started toying with the only lipstick on the dressing table. She never used lipstick, as her lips had a natural redness which was enhanced by paan, but it had been given to her a long time ago by the guest who would be coming this evening, and to whom she was, in a mild sort of way, sentimentally attached.

‘What do you think, Apa?’ said Tasneem. ‘Say something.’

‘It’s well expressed and badly written,’ said Saeeda Bai, ‘but what does it mean? He’s not going on about his hands, is he?’

‘They are giving him a lot of pain,’ said Tasneem, ‘and he’s afraid that if he speaks to you, you’ll ask him to leave.’

Saeeda Bai, remembering with a smile how she had got Maan to leave, was silent. She was about to apply a drop of perfume to her wrist when Bibbo came in with a great bustle.

‘Oh-hoh, what is it now ?’ said Saeeda Bai. ‘Go out, you wretched girl, can’t I have a moment of peace ? Have you fed the parakeet ?’

491 ‘Yes, Begum Sahiba,’ said Bibbo impertinently. ‘But what shall I tell the cook to feed you and your guest this evening ?’

Saeeda Bai addressed Bibbo’s reflection in the mirror sternly :

‘Wretched girl, you will never amount to anything even after having stayed here so long you have not acquired the slightest sense of etiquette or discrimination.’

Bibbo looked unconvincingly penitent. Saeeda Bai went on : ‘Find out what is growing in the kitchen garden and come back after five minutes.’

When Bibbo had disappeared, Saeeda Bai said to Tasneem :

‘So he’s sent you to speak to me, has he ?’ ‘No,’ said Tasneem. ‘I came myself. I thought he needed help.’

‘You’re sure he hasn’t been misbehaving ?’

Tasneem shook her head.

‘Maybe he can write a ghazal or two for me to sing,’ said Saeeda Bai after a pause. ‘I’ll have to put him to some sort of work. Provisionally, at least.’ She applied a drop of perfume. ‘I suppose his hand works well enough to allow him to write?’

‘Yes,’ said Tasneem happily.

‘Then let’s leave it at that,’ said Saeeda Bai.

But in her mind she was thinking about a permanent replacement. She knew she couldn’t support Ishaq endlessly - or till some indefinite time when his hands decided to behave.

‘Thank you, Apa,’ said Tasneem, smiling.

‘Don’t thank me,’ said Saeeda Bai crossly. ‘I am used to taking all the world’s troubles onto my own head. Now I’ll have to find a sarangi player till your Ishaq Bhai is capable of wrestling with his sarangi again, and I also have to find someone to teach you Arabic -‘

‘Oh, no, no,’ said Tasneem quickly, ‘you needn’t do that.’

‘I needn’t do that?’ said Saeeda Bai, turning around to face not Tasneem’s image but Tasneem herself. ‘I thought you enjoyed your Arabic lessons.’

492. Bibbo had bounced back into the room again. Saeeda Bai looked at her impatiently and cried, 'Yes, yes, Bibbo? What is it? I told you to come back after five minutes.'

'But I've found out what's ripe in the back garden,' said Bibbo enthusiastically.

'All right, all right,' said Saeeda Bai, defeated. 'What is there apart from ladies' fingers? Has the karela begun?'

'Yes, Begum Sahiba, and there is even a pumpkin.'

'Well, then, tell the cook to make kababs as usual shami kababs - and some vegetable of her choice - and let her make mutton with karela as well.'

Tasneem made a slight grimace, which was not lost on Saeeda Bai.

'If you find the karela too bitter, you don't have to eat it,' she said in an impatient voice. 'No one is forcing you. I work my heart out to keep you in comfort, and you don't appreciate it. And oh yes,' she said, turning to Bibbo again, 'let's have some phirni afterwards.'

'But there's so little sugar left from our ration,' cried Bibbo.

'Get it on the black market,' said Saeeda Bai. 'Bilgrami Sahib is very fond of phirni.'

Then she dismissed both Tasneem and Bibbo, and continued with her toilette in peace.

The guest whom she was expecting that evening was an old friend. He was a doctor, a general practitioner about ten years older than her, good-looking and cultivated. He was unmarried, and had proposed to her a number of times. Though at one stage he had been a client, he was now a friend. She felt no passion for him, but was grateful that he was always there when she needed him. She had not seen him for about three months now, and that was why she had invited him over this evening. He was bound to propose to her again, and this would cheer her up. Her refusal, being equally inevitable, would not upset him unduly.

She looked around the room, and her eyes fell on the framed picture of the woman looking out through an archway into a mysterious garden.

493By now, she thought, Dagh Sahib will have reached his destination. I did not really want to send him off, but I did. He did not really want to go, but he did. Well, it is all for the best.

Dagh Sahib, however, would not have agreed with this assessment.

6.27

ISHAQ KHAN waited for Ustad Majeed Khan not far from his house. When he came out, carrying a small string bag in his hand, walking gravely along, Ishaq followed him at a distance. He turned towards Tarbuz ka Bazaar, past the road leading to the mosque, then into the comparatively open area

of the local vegetable market. He moved from stall to stall to see if there was something that interested him. It was good to see tomatoes still plentiful and at a tolerable price so late in the season. Besides, they made the market look more cheerful. It was a pity that the season for spinach was almost over; it was one of his favourite vegetables. And carrots, cauliflowers, cabbages, all were virtually gone till next winter. Even those few that were available were dry, dingy, and dear, and had none of the flavour of their peak.

It was with thoughts such as these that the maestro was occupied that morning when he heard a voice say, respectfully :

‘Adaab arz, Ustad Sahib.’

Ustad Majeed Khan turned to see Ishaq. A single glance at the young man was sufficient to remove the ease of his meditations and to remind him of the insults that he had had to face in the canteen. His face grew dark with the memory; he picked up two or three tomatoes from the stall, and asked their price.

‘I have a request to make of you.’ It was Ishaq Khan again.

‘Yes?’ The contempt in the great musician’s voice was unmistakable. As he recalled, it was after he had offered

494his help to the young man in some footling matter that the whole exchange had occurred. ‘I also have an apology to make.’ ‘Please do not waste my time.’

‘I have followed you here from your house. I need your help. I am in trouble. I need work to support myself and my younger brothers, and I cannot get it. After that day, All India Radio has not called me even once to perform.’ The maestro shrugged his shoulders. ‘I beg of you, Ustad Sahib, whatever you think of me, do not ruin my family. You knew my father and grandfather. Excuse any mistake that I may have made for their sakes.’ ‘That you may have made?’

‘That I have made. I do not know what came over me.’ ‘I am not ruining you. Go in peace.’ ‘Ustad Sahib, since that day I have had no work, and my sister’s husband has heard nothing about his transfer from Lucknow. I dare not approach the Director.’

‘But you dare approach me. You follow me from my house -‘

‘Only to get the chance to speak to you. You might understand - as a fellow musician.’ The Ustad winced. ‘And of late my hands have been giving me trouble. I showed them to a doctor, but -‘

‘I had heard,’ said the maestro dryly, but did not mention where.

‘My employer has made it clear to me that I cannot be supported for my own sake much longer.’

‘Your employer!’ The great singer was about to walk on in disgust when he added: ‘Go and thank God for that. Throw yourself on His mercy.’

‘I am throwing myself on yours,’ said Ishaq Khan desperately.

‘I have said nothing for or against you to the Station Director. What happened that morning I shall put down to an aberration in your brain. If your work has fallen off, that is not my doing. In any case, with your hands, what do you propose to do? You are very proud of your long hours of practice. My advice to you is to practise less.’

495 This had been Tasneem’s advice as well. Ishaq Khan nodded miserably. There was no hope, and since his pride had already suffered through his desperation, he felt that he could lose nothing by completing the apology he had begun and that he had come to believe he should make.

‘On another matter,’ he said, ‘if I may presume on your further indulgence - I have been wishing for a long time to apologize for what I know is not forgivable. That morning, Ustad Sahib, the reason why I made so bold as to sit at your table in the canteen was because I had heard your Todi just a little earlier.’

The maestro, who had been examining the vegetables, turned towards him slightly.

‘I had been sitting beneath the neem tree outside with those friends of mine. One of them had a radio. We were entranced, at least I was. I thought I would find some way of saying so to you. But then things went wrong, and other thoughts took over.’

He could not say any more by way of apology without, he felt, bringing in other matters - such as the memory of his own father, which he felt that the Ustad had demeaned.

Ustad Majeed Khan nodded his head almost imperceptibly by way of acknowledgment. He looked at the young man's hands, noticing the worn groove in the fingernail, and for a second he also found himself wondering why he did not have a bag to carry his vegetables home in.

'So - you liked my Todi,' he said.

'Yours - or God's,' said Ishaq Khan. 'I felt that the great Tansen himself would have listened rapt to that rendering of his raag. But since then I have never been able to listen to you.'

The maestro frowned, but did not deign to ask Ishaq what he meant by that last remark.

'I will be practising Todi this morning,' said Ustad Majeed Khan. 'Follow me after this.'

Ishaq's face expressed complete disbelief; it was as if heaven had fallen into his hands. He forgot his hands, his pride, the financial desperation that had forced him to speak to Ustad Majeed Khan. He merely listened as if in a

496dream to the Ustad's further conversation with the vegetable seller :

'How much are these ?'

‘Two-and-a-half annas per pao,’ replied the vegetable seller.

‘Beyond Subzipur you can get them for one-and-a-half annas.’

‘Bhai Sahib, these are not the prices of Subzipur but of Chowk.’

‘Very high, these prices of yours.’

‘Oh, we had a child last year - since then my prices have gone up.’ The vegetable seller, seated calmly on the ground on a bit of jute matting, looked up at the Ustad.

Ustad Majeed Khan did not smile at the vendor’s quips. ‘Two annas per pao - that’s it.’

‘I have to earn my meals from you, Sir, not from the charity of a gurudwara.’

‘All right - all right -’ And Ustad Majeed Khan threw him a couple of coins.

After buying a bit of ginger and some chillies, the Ustad decided to get a few tindas.

‘Mind that you give me small ones.’

‘Yes, yes, that’s what I’m doing.’

‘And these tomatoes - they are soft.’

‘Soft, Sir?’

‘Yes, look -’ The Ustad took them off the scales. ‘Weigh these ones instead.’ He rummaged around among the selection.

‘They wouldn’t have gone soft in a week - but whatever you say, Sir.’

‘Weigh them properly,’ growled the Ustad. ‘If you keep putting weights on one pan, I can keep putting tomatoes on the other. My pan should sink in the balance.’

Suddenly, the Ustad’s attention was caught by a couple of cauliflowers which looked comparatively fresh, not like the stunted outriders of the season. But when the vegetable seller named the price, he was appalled.

‘Don’t you fear God?’

‘For you, Sir, I have quoted a special price.’

497 ‘What do you mean, for me? It’s what you charge everyone, you rogue, I am certain. Special price -’

‘Ah, but these cauliflowers are special - you don’t require oil to fry them.’

Ishaq smiled slightly, but Ustad Majeed Khan simply said to the local wit :

‘Huh ! Give me this one.’

Ishaq said : ‘Let me carry them, Ustad Sahib.’

Ustad Majeed Khan gave Ishaq the bag of vegetables to carry, forgetful of his hands. On the way home he did not say anything. Ishaq walked along quietly.

At his door, Ustad Majeed Khan said in a loud voice: ‘There is someone with me.’ There was a sound of flustered female voices and then of people leaving the front room. They entered. The tanpura was in a corner. Ustad Majeed Khan told Ishaq to put the vegetables down and to wait for him. Ishaq remained standing, but looked about him. The room was full of cheap knick-knacks and tasteless furniture. There could not have been a greater contrast to Saeeda Bai’s immaculate outer chamber.

Ustad Majeed Khan came back in, having washed his face and hands. He told Ishaq to sit down, and tuned the tanpura for a while. Finally, satisfied, he started to practise in Raag Todi.

There was no tabla player, and Ustad Majeed Khan began to sense his way around the raag in a freer, less rhythmic but more intense manner than Ishaq Khan had ever heard from him before. He always began his public performances not with a free alaap such as this but with a very slow composition in a long rhythmic cycle which allowed him a liberty that was almost, but not quite, comparable. The flavour of these few

minutes was so startlingly different from those other great performances that Ishaq was enraptured. He closed his eyes, and the room ceased to exist; and then, after a while, himself; and finally even the singer.

He did not know how long he had been sitting there when he heard Ustad Majeed Khan saying :

‘Now, you strum it.’

498 He opened his eyes. The maestro, sitting bolt upright, indicated the tanpura that was lying before him.

Ishaq’s hands did not cause him any pain as he turned it towards himself and began to strum the four wires, tuned perfectly to the open and hypnotic combination of tonic and dominant. He assumed that the maestro was going to continue his practice.

‘Now, sing this after me.’ And the Ustad sang a phrase.

Ishaq Khan was literally dumbstruck.

‘What is taking you so long ?’ asked the Ustad sternly, in the tone known so well to his students at the Haridas College of Music.

Ishaq Khan sang the phrase.

The Ustad continued to offer him phrases, at first brief, and then increasingly long and complex. Ishaq repeated them to the best of his ability, at first with unmusical hesitancy but after a while entirely forgetting himself in the surge and ebb of the music.

‘Sarangi-wallahs are good at copying,’ said the Ustad thoughtfully. ‘But there is something in you that goes beyond that.’

So astonished was Ishaq that his hands stopped strumming the tanpura.

The Ustad was silent for a while. The only sound in the room was the ticking of a cheap clock. Ustad Majeed Khan looked at it, as if conscious for the first time of its presence, then turned his gaze towards Ishaq.

It struck him that possibly, but only just possibly, he may have found in Ishaq that disciple whom he had looked for now for years - someone to whom he could pass on his art, someone who, unlike his own frog-voiced son, loved music with a passion, who had a grounding in performance, whose voice was not displeasing, whose sense of pitch and ornament was exceptional, and who had that additional element of indefinable expressivity, even when he copied his own phrases, which was the soul of music. But originality in composition - did he possess that - or at least the germ of such originality ? Only time would tell - months, perhaps years, of time.

‘Come again tomorrow, but at seven in the morning,’ said the Ustad, dismissing him. Ishaq Khan nodded slowly, then stood up to leave.

500Part Seven

V.,7.1

LATA saw the envelope on the salver. Arun's servant had brought the mail in just before breakfast and laid it on the dining table. As soon as she saw the letter she took in her breath sharply. She even glanced around the dining room. No one else had yet entered. Breakfast was an erratic meal in this household.

Lata knew Kabir's handwriting from the note that he had scribbled to her during the meeting of the Brahmpur Poetry Society. She had not expected him to write to her, and could not think how he had obtained her address in Calcutta. She had not wanted him to write. She did not want to hear from him or about him. Now that she looked back she saw that she had been happy before she had met him: anxious about her exams perhaps, worried about a few small differences she may have had with her mother or a friend, troubled about this constant talk of finding a suitable boy for her, but not miserable as she had been during this so-called holiday so suddenly enforced by her mother.

There was a paper-knife on the salver. Lata picked it up, then stood undecided. Her mother might come in at any moment, and - as she usually did - ask Lata whom the letter was from and what it said. She put the knife down and picked the letter up.

Arun entered. He was wearing a red-and-black striped tie over his starched white shirt, and was carrying his jacket in one hand and holding the Statesman in the other. He draped the jacket across the back of his chair, folded the newspaper to give him convenient access to the crossword, greeted Lata affectionately, and riffled through the post.

Lata wandered into the small drawing room that adjoined the dining room, got out a large volume on Egyptian mythology that no one ever read, and inserted her envelope in it. Then she returned to the dining room and sat down, humming to herself in Raag Todi. Arun frowned. Lata stopped. The servant brought her a fried egg.

503 Arun began whistling 'Three Coins in a Fountain' to himself. He had already solved several clues of the crossword puzzle while in the bathroom, and he filled in a few more at the breakfast table. Now he opened some of his mail, glanced through it and said:

'When is that damned fool going to bring me my bloody egg? I shall be late.'

He reached out for a piece of toast, and buttered it.

Varun entered. He was wearing the Tom kurta-pyjama that he had obviously been sleeping in. 'Good morning. Good morning,' he said. He sounded uncertain, almost guilty. Then he sat down. When Hanif, the servant-cumcook, came in with Arun's egg, he ordered his own. He first asked for an omelette, then decided on a scrambled egg. Meanwhile he took a piece of toast from the rack and buttered it.

'You might think of using the butter-knife,' growled Arun from the head of the table.

Varun had extracted butter from the butter-dish with his own knife to butter his toast. He accepted the rebuke in silence.

‘Did you hear me?’

‘Yes, Arun Bhai.’

‘Then you would do well to acknowledge my remark with a word or at the very least a nod.’

‘Yes.’

‘There is a purpose to table manners, you know.’

Varun grimaced. Lata glanced sympathetically in his direction.

‘Not everyone enjoys seeing the butter encrusted with crumbs from your toast.’

‘All right, all right,’ said Varun, driven to impatience. It was a feeble protest, and it was dealt with promptly.

Arun put down his knife and fork, looked at him, and waited.

‘All right, Arun Bhai,’ said Varun meekly.

He had been undecided as to whether to have marmalade or honey, but now decided on marmalade, since negotiating with the honey spoon was bound to bring reproof down

504on his head. As he spread the marmalade, he looked across at Lata, and they exchanged smiles. Lata's was a halfsmile, very typical of her these days. Varun's was rather a twisted smile, as if he was not sure whether to be happy or despairing. It was the kind of smile that drove his elder brother mad and convinced him that Varun was a hopeless case. Varun had just got a Second in his mathematics B.A., and when he told his family the result, it was with exactly this kind of smile.

Soon after the term was over, instead of getting a job and contributing to expenses, Varun had, to Arun's annoyance, fallen ill. He was still somewhat weak, and started at loud sounds. Arun told himself that he really had to have a frank talk with his younger brother in the next week or so about how the world did not owe one a living, and about what Daddy would have said had he been alive.

Meenakshi came in with Aparna.

'Where's Daadi?' asked Aparna, looking around the table for Mrs Rupa Mehra.

'Grandma will be coming in a moment, Aparna precious,' said Meenakshi. 'She's probably reciting the Vedas,' she added vaguely.

Mrs Rupa Mehra, who recited a chapter or two from the Gita very early each morning, was in fact dressing.

As she came in, she beamed around the table. But when she noticed Aparna's golden chain, which Meenakshi in an unthinking moment had put around her neck, the smile died on

her lips. Meenakshi was blithely unaware of anything being the matter, but Aparna asked a few minutes later:

‘Why are you looking so sad, Daadi?’

Mrs Rupa Mehra finished chewing a bite of fried tomatoes on toast and said: ‘I’m not sad, darling.’

‘Are you angry with me, Daadi?’ said Aparna.

‘No, sweetheart, not with you.’

‘Then with who?’

‘With myself, perhaps,’ said Mrs Rupa Mehra. She did not look at the medal-melter, but glanced across at Lata, who was gazing out of the window at the small garden.

505 Lata was more than usually quiet this morning, and Mrs Rupa Mehra told herself that she had to get the silly girl to snap out of this mood. Well, tomorrow there was a party at the Chatterjis, and, like it or not, Lata would have to go-

A car horn sounded loudly outside, and Varun flinched.

‘I should fire that bloody driver,’ said Arun. Then he laughed and added: ‘But he certainly makes me aware when it’s time to leave for the office. Bye, darling.’ He swallowed a gulp of coffee and kissed Meenakshi. ‘I’ll send the car back in half an

hour. Bye, Ugly.’ He kissed Aparna and rubbed his cheek against hers. ‘Bye, Ma. Bye, everyone. Don’t forget, Basil Cox will be coming for dinner.’

Carrying his jacket over one arm and his briefcase in the other, he walked, rather, strode out to the little sky-blue Austin outside. It was never clear until the last moment whether Arun would take the newspaper with him to the office; it was part of the general uncertainty of living with him, just as were his sudden switches from anger to affection to urbanity. Today, to everyone’s relief, he let the newspaper remain.

Normally Varun and Lata would both have made a grab for it, and today Varun was disappointed when Lata did not. The atmosphere had lightened since Arun’s departure. Aparna now became the focus of attention. Her mother fed her incompetently, then called for the Toothless Crone to handle her. Varun read bits of the news to her, and she listened with a careful pretence at comprehension and interest.

All Lata could think of was when and where, in this household of two-and-a-half bedrooms and no privacy to speak of, she would find time and space to read her letter. She was thankful that she had been able to take possession of what (though Mrs Rupa Mehra would have disputed this) belonged to her alone. But as she looked out of the window towards the small, brilliantly green lawn with its white tracery of spider-lilies, she thought of its possible contents with a mixture of longing and foreboding.

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7.2

MEANWHILE there was work to be done in preparation for the evening's dinner. Basil Cox, who would be coming over with his wife Patricia, was Arun's department head at Bentsen & C Pryce. Hanif was dispatched to Jagubazaar to get two chickens, a fish, and vegetables, while Meenakshi - accompanied by Lata and Mrs Rupa Mehra - went off to New Market in the car, which had just returned from Arun's office.

Meenakshi bought her fortnightly stores - her white flour, her jam and Chivers Marmalade and Lyle's Golden Syrup and Anchor Butter and tea and coffee and cheese and clean sugar ('Not this dirty ration stuff) - from Baboralley, a couple of loaves of bread from a shop in Middleton Row ('The bread one gets from the market is so awful, Luts'), some salami from a cold store in Free School Street ('The salami from Keventers is dreadfully bland, I've decided never to go there again'), and half a dozen bottles of Beck's beer from Shaw Brothers. Lata tagged along everywhere, though Mrs Rupa Mehra refused to enter either the cold store or the liquor shop. She was astonished by Meenakshi's extravagance, and by the whimsical nature of some of her purchases ('Oh, Arun is bound to like that, yes, I'll take two,' said Meenakshi whenever the shopkeeper suggested something that he thought Madam would appreciate). All the purchases went into a large basket which a ragged little boy carried on his head and finally took to the car. Whenever she was accosted by beggars, Meenakshi looked straight through them.

Lata wanted to visit a bookshop on Park Street, and spent about fifteen minutes there while Meenakshi chafed impatiently. When she found that Lata hadn't in fact bought anything, she thought it very peculiar. Mrs Rupa Mehra was content to browse timelessly.

Upon their return home, Meenakshi found her cook in a flap. He was not sure about the exact proportions for the soufflé, and as for the hilsa, Meenakshi would have to instruct him about the kind of fire it needed to be smoked

507on. Aparna too was sulking because of her mother's absence. She now threatened to throw a tantrum. This was too much for Meenakshi, who was getting late for the canasta which she played with her ladies' club - the Shady Ladies - once a week, and which (Basil Cox or no Basil Cox) she could not possibly miss. She got into a flap herself and shouted at Aparna and the Toothless Crone and the cook. Varun locked himself in his small room and covered his head with a pillow.

'You should not get into a temper for nothing,' said Mrs Rupa Mehra unhelpfully.

Meenakshi turned towards her in exasperation. 'That's a big help, Ma,' she said. 'What do you expect me to do ? Miss my canasta ?'

'No, no, you will not miss your canasta,' said Mrs Rupa Mehra. 'That I am not asking you to do, Meenakshi, but you must not shout at Aparna like that. It is not good for her.' Hearing this, Aparna edged towards her grandmother's chair.

Meenakshi made an impatient sound.

The impossibility of her position suddenly came home to her. This cook was a real incompetent. Arun would be terribly, terribly angry with her if anything went wrong this evening. It was so important for his job too - and what could she do ? Cut out the smoked hilsa ? At least this idiot Hanif could handle

the roast chicken. But he was a temperamental fellow, and had been known even to misfry an egg. Meenakshi looked around the room in wild distress.

‘Ask your mother if you can borrow her Mugh cook,’ said Lata with sudden inspiration.

Meenakshi gazed at Lata in wonder. ‘What an Einstein you are, Luts!’ she said, and immediately telephoned her mother. Mrs Chatterji rallied to her daughter’s aid. She had two cooks, one for Bengali and one for western food. The Bengali cook was told that he would have to prepare dinner in the Chatterji household that evening, and the Mugh cook, who came from Chittagong and excelled in European food, was dispatched to Sunny Park within the

508half-hour. Meanwhile, Meenakshi had gone off for her canasta lunch with the Shady Ladies and had almost forgotten the tribulations of existence.

She returned in the middle of the afternoon to find a rebellion on her hands. The gramophone was blaring and the chickens were cackling in alarm. The Mugh cook told her as snootily as he could that he was not accustomed to being farmed out in this manner, that he was not used to working in such a small kitchen, that her cook-cum-bearer had behaved insolently towards him, that the fish and chickens that had been bought were none too fresh, and that he needed a certain kind of lemon extract for the soufflé which she had not had the foresight to provide. Hanif for his part was glaring resentfully, and was on the verge of giving notice. He was holding a squawking chicken out in front of him and saying: ‘Feel, feel its breast - Memsahib - this is a young and fresh chicken. Why should I work below this man ? Who is he to boss me around

in my own kitchen ? He keeps saying, “I am Mr Justice Chatterji’s cook. I am Mr Justice Chatterji’s cook.” ‘

‘No, no, I trust you, I don’t need to -‘ cried Meenakshi, shuddering fastidiously and drawing back her red-polished fingernails as her cook pushed the chicken’s feathers aside and offered its breast for her to assay.

Mrs Rupa Mehra, while not displeased at Meenakshi’s discomfiture, did not want to jeopardize this dinner for the boss of her darling son. She was good at making peace between refractory servants, and she now did so. Harmony was restored, and she went into the drawing room to play a game of patience.

Varun had put on the gramophone about half an hour earlier and was playing the same scratchy 78-rpm record again and again: the Hindi film song ‘Two intoxicating eyes’, a song that no one, not even the sentimental Mrs Rupa Mehra, could tolerate after its fifth repetition. Varun had been singing the words to himself moodily and dreamily before Meenakshi returned. In her presence Varun stopped singing, but he continued to rewind the gramophone every few minutes and hum the song softly to

509himself by way of accompaniment. As he put away the spent needles one by one in the little compartment that fitted into the side of the machine, he reflected gloomily on his own fleeting life and personal uselessness.

Lata took the book on Egyptian mythology down from the shelf, and was about to go into the garden with it when her mother said :

‘Where are you going ?’

‘To sit in the garden, Ma.’

‘But it’s so hot, Lata.’

‘I know, Ma, but I can’t read with this music going on.’

Til tell him to turn it off. All this sun is bad for your complexion. Varun, turn it off.’ She had to repeat her request a few times before Varun heard what she was saying.

Lata took the book into the bedroom.

‘Lata, sit with me, darling,’ said Mrs Rupa Mehra.

‘Ma, please let me be,’ said Lata.

‘You have been ignoring me for days,’ said Mrs Rupa Mehra.
‘Even when I told you your results, your kiss was half-hearted.’

‘Ma, I have not been ignoring you,’ said Lata.

‘You have, you can’t deny it. I feel it - here.’ Mrs Rupa Mehra pointed to the region of her heart.

‘All right, Ma, I have been ignoring you. Now please let me read.’

‘What’s that you’re reading ? Let me see the book.’

Lata replaced it on the shelf, and said: ‘All right, Ma, I won’t read it, I’ll talk to you. Happy ?’

‘What do you want to talk about, darling?’ asked Mrs Rupa Mehra sympathetically.

‘I don’t want to talk. You want to talk,’ Lata pointed out.

‘Read your silly book!’ cried Mrs Rupa Mehra in a sudden temper. ‘I have to do everything in this house, and no one cares for me. Everything goes wrong and I have to make peace. I have slaved for you all my life, and you don’t care if I live or die. Only when I’m burned on the pyre will you realize my worth.’ The tears started rolling down her cheeks and she placed a black nine on a red ten.

510 Normally Lata would have made some dutiful attempt

to console her mother, but she was so frustrated and

* annoyed by her sudden emotional sleight-of-hand that she

did nothing. After a while, she took the book down from

the shelf again, and walked into the garden.

‘It will rain,’ said Mrs Rupa Mehra, ‘and the book will get spoiled. You have no sense of the value of money.’

‘Good,’ thought Lata violently. ‘I hope the book and S-W-everything in it - and I too - get washed away.’

7.3

THE small green garden was empty. The part-time mali had gone. An intelligent-looking crow cawed from a banana tree. The delicate spider-lilies were in bloom. Lata sat down on the slatted green wooden bench in the shade of a tall flame-of-the-forest tree. Everything was rainwashed and clean, unlike in Brahmipur where each leaf had looked dusty and each blade of grass parched.

Lata looked at the envelope with its firm handwriting and Brahmipur postmark. Her name was followed immediately by the address ; it was not ‘care of anybody.

She pulled out a hairpin and opened the envelope. The letter was only a page long. She had expected Kabir’s letter to be effusive and apologetic. It was not exactly that.

After the address and date it went :

Dearest Lata,

Why should I repeat that I love you ? I don't see why you should disbelieve me. I don't disbelieve you. Please tell me what the matter is. I don't want things to end in this way between us.

I can't think about anything except you, but I am annoyed that I should have to say so. I couldn't and I can't run off with you to some earthly paradise, but how could you have expected me to ? Suppose I had agreed to your crazy plan. I know that you would then have discovered twenty reasons why it was impossible to

5“carry it out. But perhaps I should have agreed anyway. Perhaps you would have felt reassured because I would have proved how much I cared for you. Well, I don't care for you so much that I'm willing to abdicate my intelligence. I don't even care for myself that much. I'm not made that way, and I do think ahead a bit.

Darling Lata, you are so brilliant, why don't you see things in perspective ? I love you. You really owe me an apology.

Anyway, congratulations on your exam results. You must be very pleased - but I am not very surprised. You must not spend your time sitting on benches and crying in future. Who knows who might want to rescue you. Perhaps whenever you're tempted to do so, you can think of me returning to the pavilion and crying every time I fail to make a century.

Two days ago I hired a boat and went up the Ganges to the Barsaat Mahal. But, like Nawab Khushwaqt, I was so much grieved that my mind was upset, and the place was sordid and sad. For a long time I could not forget you though all possible

efforts were made. I felt a strong kinship with him even though my tears did not fall fast and furious into the fragrant waters.

My father, though he is fairly absent-minded, can see that there is something the matter with me. Yesterday he said, 'It's not your results, so what is it, Kabir ? I believe it must be a girl or something.' I too believe it must be a girl or something.

Well, now that you have my address why don't you write to me? I have been unhappy since you left and unable to concentrate on anything. I knew you couldn't write to me even if you wanted to because you didn't have my address. Well, now you do. So please do write. Otherwise I'll know what to think. And the next time I go to Mr Nowrojee's place I will have to read out some stricken verses of my own.

With all my love, my darling Lata,

Yours, Kabir

5ii7.4

FOR a long while Lata sat in a kind of reverie. She did not at first re-read the letter. She felt a great many emotions, but they pulled her in conflicting directions. Under ordinary circumstances the pressure of her feelings might have caused her to shed a few unselfconscious tears, but there were a couple of remarks in the letter which made that impossible. Her first sense was that she had been cheated, cheated out of something that she had expected. There was no apology in the letter for the pain that he must have known he had caused her. There were declarations of love, but they were not as fervent

or untinged with irony as she had thought they would be. Perhaps she had given Kabir no opportunity to explain himself at their last meeting, but now that he was writing to her, he could have explained himself better. He had not addressed anything seriously, and Lata had above all wanted him to be serious. For her it had been a matter of life and death.

Nor had he given her much - or any - news of himself, and Lata longed for it. She wanted to know everything about him - including how well he had done in his exams. From his father's remark it was probable that he had not done badly, but that was not the only interpretation of his remark. It might simply have meant that with the results out, even if he had merely passed, one area of uncertainty had been closed as a possible explanation for his downcast - or perhaps merely unsettled - mood. And how had he obtained her address? Surely not from Pran and Savita? From Malati perhaps? But as far as she knew Kabir did not even know Malati.

He did not want to take any responsibility for her feelings, that was clear. If anything it was she who according to him - should be the one to apologize. In one sentence he praised her intelligence, in another he treated her like a dunce. Lata got the sense that he was trying to jolly her along without making any commitment to her

513beyond 'love'. And what was love ?

Even more than their kisses, she remembered the morning when she had followed him to the cricket field and watched him practising in the nets. She had been in a trance, she had been entranced. He had leaned his head back and burst out laughing at something. His shirt had been open at the collar; there had been a faint breeze in the bamboos; a couple of mynas were quarrelling; it had been warm.

She read through the letter once again. Despite his injunction to her that she should not sit crying on benches, tears gathered in her eyes. Having finished the letter, she began, hardly conscious of what she was doing, to read a paragraph of the book on Egyptian mythology. But the words formed no pattern in her mind.

She was startled by Varun's voice, a couple of yards away.

'You'd better go in, Lata, Ma is getting anxious.'

Lata controlled herself and nodded.

'What's the matter?' he asked, noticing that she was or had been - in tears. 'Have you been quarrelling with her?'

Lata shook her head.

Varun, glancing down at the book, saw the letter, and immediately understood who it was from.

'Til kill him,' said Varun with timorous ferocity.

'There's nothing to kill,' said Lata, more angrily than sadly. 'Just don't tell Ma, please, Varun Bhai. It would drive both of us crazy.'

WHEN Arun came back from work that day, he was in excellent spirits. He had had a productive day, and he sensed that the evening was going to go off well. Meenakshi, her domestic crisis resolved, was no longer running around nervously; indeed, so elegantly collected was she that Arun could never have guessed she had been in the least distraught. After kissing him on the cheek and giving

‘ him the benefit of her tinkly laugh, she went in to change. Aparna was delighted to see her father and bestowed a few kisses on him too but was unable to convince him to do a jigsaw puzzle with her.

Arun thought that Lata looked a bit sulky, but then that was par for the course with Lata these days. Ma,

•j»# well, Ma, there was no accounting for her moods. She looked impatient, probably because her tea had not come on time. Varun was his usual scruffy, shifty self. Why, Arun asked himself, did his brother have so little spine and initiative and why did he always dress in tattered kurta-pyjamas that looked as if they had been slept in? ‘Turn off that bloody noise,’ he shouted as he entered the drawing room and received the full power of ‘Two intoxicating eyes’.

Varun, cowed down though he was by Arun and his bullying sophistication, occasionally raised his head, usually to have it brutally slashed off. It took time for another head to grow, but today it happened to have done so. Varun did turn off the gramophone, but his resentment smouldered. Having been subject to his brother’s authority since boyhood, he hated it - and, in fact, all authority. He had once, in a fit of anti-imperialism and xenophobia, scrawled ‘Pig’ on two Bibles at St George’s School, and had been soundly thrashed for it by

the white headmaster. Arun too had bawled him out after that incident, using every possible hurtful reference to his pathetic childhood and past felonies, and Varun had duly flinched. But even while flinching before his well-built elder brother's attack, and expecting to be slapped by him at any moment, Varun thought to himself: All he knows how to do is to suck up to the British and crawl in their tracks. Pig! Pig! He must have looked his thoughts, for he did get the slap he expected.

Arun used to listen to Churchill's speeches on the radio during the War and murmur, as he had heard the English murmur, 'Good old Winnie!' Churchill loathed Indians

and made no secret of it, and spoke with contempt of Gandhi, a far greater man than he could ever aspire to be ; and Varun regarded Churchill with a visceral hatred.

'And change out of those crumpled pyjamas. Basil Cox will be coming within an hour and I don't want him to think I run a third-class dharamshala.'

Til change into cleaner ones,' said Varun sullenly.

'You will not,' said Arun. 'You will change into proper clothes.'

'Proper clothes!' mumbled Varun softly in a mocking tone.

'What did you say?' asked Arun slowly and threateningly.

'Nothing,' said Varun with a scowl.

‘Please don’t fight like this. It isn’t good for my nerves,’ said Mrs Rupa Mehra.

‘Ma, you keep out of this,’ said Arun, bluntly. He pointed in the direction of Varun’s small bedroom - more a store-room than a bedroom. ‘Now get out and change.’

‘I planned to anyway,’ said Varun, edging out of the door.

‘Bloody fool,’ said Arun to himself. Then, affectionately, he turned to Lata: ‘So, what’s the matter, why are you looking so down in the mouth?’

Lata smiled. ‘I’m fine, Arun Bhai,’ she said. ‘I think I’ll go and get ready as well.’

Arun went in to change too. About fifteen minutes before Basil Cox and his wife were due to arrive, he came out to find everyone except Varun dressed and ready. Meenakshi emerged from the kitchen where she had been doing some last minute supervising. The table had been laid for seven with the best glassware and crockery and cutlery, the flower arrangement was perfect, the hors-d’oeuvre had been tasted and found to be fine, the whisky and sherry and Campari and so forth had been taken out of the cabinet, and Aparna had been put to bed.

‘Where is he now?’ demanded Arun of the three women.

‘He hasn’t come out. He must be in his room,’ said Mrs Rupa Mehra. ‘I do wish you wouldn’t shout at him.’

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‘He should learn how to behave in a civilized household. This isn’t some dhoti-wallah’s establishment. Proper clothes indeed!’

Varun emerged a few minutes later. He was wearing a clean kurta-pyjama, not Tom exactly, but with a button missing. He had shaved in a rudimentary sort of way after his bath. He reckoned he looked presentable.

Arun did not reckon so. His face reddened. Varun noticed it reddening, and - though he was scared - he was quite pleased as well.

For a second Arun was so furious he could hardly speak. Then he exploded.

‘You bloody idiot!’ he roared. ‘Do you want to embarrass us all?’

Varun looked at him shiftily. ‘What’s embarrassing about Indian clothes?’ he asked. ‘Can’t I wear what I want to? Ma and Lata and Meenakshi Bhabhi wear saris, not dresses. Or do I have to keep imitating the whiteys even in my own house? I don’t think it’s a good idea.’

‘I don’t care what you bloody well think. In my house you will do as I tell you. Now you change into shirt and tie - or - or -’

‘Or else what, Arun Bhai?’ said Varun, cheeking his brother and enjoying his rage. ‘You won’t give me dinner with your Colin Box? Actually, I’d much rather have dinner with my own friends anyway than bow and scrape before this box-wallah and his box-walli.’

‘Meenakshi, tell Hanif to remove one place,’ said Arun.

Meenakshi looked undecided.

‘Did you hear me?’ asked Arun in a dangerous voice.

Meenakshi got up to do his bidding.

‘Now get out,’ shouted Arun. ‘Go and have dinner with your Shamshu-drinking friends. And don’t let me see you anywhere near this house for the rest of the evening. And let me tell you here and now that I won’t put up with this sort of thing from you at all. If you live in this house, you bloody well abide by its rules.’

Varun looked uncertainly towards his mother for support.

Si? ‘Darling, please do what he says. You look so much nicer in a shirt and trousers. Besides, that button is missing. These foreigners don’t understand. He’s Arun’s boss, we must make a good impression.’

'He, for one, is incapable of making a good impression, no matter what he wears or does.' Arun put the boot in. 'I don't want him putting Basil Cox's back up, and he's perfectly capable of doing so. Now, Ma, will you stop these water-works? See - you've upset everyone, you blithering fool,' said Arun, turning on Varun again.

But Varun had slipped out already.

7.6

ALTHOUGH Arun was feeling more venomous than calm, he smiled a brave, morale-building smile and even put his arm around his mother's shoulder. Meenakshi reflected that the seating around the oval table looked a little more symmetrical now, though there would be an even greater imbalance between men and women. Still, it was not as if any other guests had been invited. It was just the Coxes and the family.

Basil Cox and his wife arrived punctually, and Meenakshi made small talk, interspersing comments about the weather ('so sultry, so unbearably hot it's been these last few days, but then, this is Calcutta -') with her chiming laugh. She asked for a sherry and sipped it with a distant look in her eyes. The cigarettes were passed around; she lit up, and so did Arun and Basil Cox.

Basil Cox was in his late thirties, pink, shrewd, sound, and bespectacled. Patricia Cox was a small, dull sort of woman, a great contrast to the glamorous Meenakshi. She did not smoke. She drank quite rapidly however, and with a sort of desperation. She did not find Calcutta company interesting, and if there was anything she disliked more than large parties

it was small ones, where she felt trapped into compulsory sociability.

Lata had a small sherry. Mrs Rupa Mehra had a nimbu pani.

Hanif, looking very smart in his starched white uniform, offered around the tray of hors-d'oeuvre: bits of salami and cheese and asparagus on small squares of bread. If the guests had not so obviously been sahibs - office guests - he might have allowed his disgruntlement with the turn of affairs in his kitchen to be more apparent. As it was, he was at his obliging best.

Arun had begun to hold forth with his usual savoir-faire and charm on various subjects: recent plays in London, books that had just appeared and were considered to be significant, the Persian oil crisis, the Korean conflict. The Reds were being pushed back, and not a moment too soon, in Arun's opinion, though of course the Americans, idiots that they were, would probably not make use of their tactical advantage. But then again, with this as with other matters, what could one do ?

This Arun - affable, genial, engaging and knowledgeable, even (at times) diffident - was a very different creature from the domestic tyrant and bully of half an hour ago. Basil Cox was charmed. Arun was good at his work, but Cox had not imagined that he was so widely read, indeed better read than most Englishmen of his acquaintance.

Patricia Cox talked to Meenakshi about her little pearshaped earrings. 'Very pretty,' she commented. 'Where did you get them made ?'

Meenakshi told her and promised to take her to the shop. She cast a glance in Mrs Rupa Mehra's direction, but noticed to her relief that she was listening, rapt, to Arun and Basil Cox. In her bedroom earlier this evening, Meenakshi had paused for a second before putting them on - but then she had said to herself: Well, sooner or later Ma will have to get used to the facts of life. I can't always tread softly around her feelings.

Dinner passed smoothly. It was a full four-course meal: soup, smoked hilsa, roast chicken, lemon soufflé. Basil Cox tried to bring Lata and Mrs Rupa Mehra into the conversation, but they tended to speak only when spoken to. Lata's mind was far away. She was brought back with

519a start when she heard Meenakshi describing how the hilsa was smoked.

'It's a wonderful old recipe that's been in our family for ages,' said Meenakshi. 'It's smoked in a basket over a coal fire after it's been carefully de-boned, and hilsa is absolute hell to de-bone.'

'It's delicious, my dear,' said Basil Cox.

'Of course, the real secret,' continued Meenakshi knowledgeably - though she had only discovered this afternoon how it was done, and that too because the Mugh cook had insisted on the correct ingredients being supplied to him 'the real secret is in the fire. We throw puffed rice on it and crude brown sugar or jaggery - what we in this country call "gur" -' (She rhymed it with 'fur'.)

As she prattled on and on Lata looked at her wonderingly.

‘Of course, every girl in the family learns these things at an early age.’

For the first time Patricia Cox looked less than completely bored.

But by the time the soufflé came around, she had lapsed into passivity.

After dinner, coffee and liqueur, Arun brought out the cigars. He and Basil Cox talked a little about work. Arun would not have brought up the subject of the office, but Basil, having made up his mind that Arun was a thorough gentleman, wanted his opinion on a colleague. ‘Between us, you know, and strictly between us, I’ve rather begun to doubt his soundness,’ he said. Arun passed his finger around the rim of his liqueur glass, sighed a little, and confirmed his boss’s opinion, adding a reason or two of his own.

‘Mmm, well, yes, it’s interesting that you should think so too,’ said Basil Cox.

Arun stared contentedly and contemplatively into the grey and comforting haze around them.

Suddenly the untuneful and slurred notes of ‘Two intoxicating eyes’ were followed by the fumbling of the key in the front door. Varun, fortified by Shamshu, the cheap but

52.0effective Chinese spirits that he and his friends could just about afford, had returned to the fold.

Arun started as if at Banquo's ghost. He got up, fully intending to hustle Varun out of the house before he entered the drawing room. But he was too late.

Varun, tilting a little, and in an exceptional display of confidence, greeted everyone. The fumes of Shamshu filled the room. He kissed Mrs Rupa Mehra. She drew back. He trembled a little when he saw Meenakshi, who was looking even more dazzlingly beautiful now that she was so horror-struck. He greeted the guests.

'Hello, Mr Box, Mrs Box - er, Mrs Box, Mr Box,' he corrected himself. He bowed, and fumbled with the button-hole that corresponded to the missing button. The draw-string of his pyjamas hung out below his kurta.

'I don't believe we've met before,' said Basil Cox, looking troubled.

'Oh,' said Arun, his fair face beet-red with fury and embarrassment. 'This is, actually, this is - well, my brother Varun. He's a little, er - will you excuse me a minute?' He guided Varun with mildly suppressed violence towards the door, then towards his room. 'Not one word!' he hissed, looking with fury straight into Varun's puzzled eyes. 'Not one word, or I'll strangle you with my bare hands.'

He locked Varun's door from the outside.

He was his charming self by the time he returned to the drawing room.

‘Well, as I was saying, he’s a little - er, well, uncontrollable at times. I’m sure you understand. Black sheep and all that. Perfectly all right, not violent or anything, but -‘

‘It looked as if he’d been on a binge,’ said Patricia Cox, suddenly livening up.

‘Sent to try us, I’m afraid,’ continued Arun. ‘My father’s early death and so on. Every family has one. Has his quirks : insists on wearing those ridiculous clothes.’

‘Very strong, whatever it was. I can still smell it,’ said Patricia. ‘Unusual too. Is it a kind of whisky ? I’d like to try it. Do you know what it is ?’

‘I’m afraid it’s what’s known as Shamshu.’

52.1 ‘Shamshu?’ said Mrs Cox with the liveliest interest, trying the word out on her tongue three or four times. ‘Shamshu. Do you know what that is, Basil?’ She looked alive again. All her mousiness had disappeared.

‘I don’t believe I do, my dear,’ said her husband.

‘I believe it’s made from rice,’ said Arun. ‘It’s a Chinese concoction of some kind.’

‘Would Shaw Brothers carry it ?’ asked Patricia Cox.

‘I rather doubt it. It ought to be available in Chinatown,’ said Arun.

In fact Varun and his friends did get it from Chinatown, from a hole-in-the-wall sort of place at eight annas a glass.

‘It must be powerful stuff, whatever it is. Smoked hilsa and Shamshu - how marvellous to learn two entirely different things at dinner. One never does, you know,’ Patricia confided. ‘Usually, I’m bored as a fish.’

Bored as a fish ? thought Arun. But by now Varun had started singing to himself inside his room.

‘What a very interesting young man,’ continued Patricia Cox. ‘And he’s your brother, you say. What is he singing ? Why didn’t he join us for dinner ? We must have all of you around sometime soon. Mustn’t we, darling?’ Basil Cox looked very severely doubtful. Patricia Cox decided to take this for assent. ‘I haven’t had so much fun since I was at RAD A. And you can bring a bottle of Shamshu.’

Heaven forbid, thought Basil Cox.

Heaven forbid, thought Arun.

THE guests were about to arrive at Mr Justice Chatterji's house in Ballygunge. This was one of the three or four grand parties that he took it upon himself to give at short notice during the course of the year. There was a peculiar mixture of guests for two reasons. First, because of Mr Justice Chatterji himself, whose net of friendship and acquaintance was very varied. (He was an absent-minded

52.2.man, who picked up friends here and there.) Secondly, because any party of this kind was invariably treated by the whole Chatterji family as an opportunity to invite all their own friends as well. Mrs Chatterji invited some of hers, and so did their children; only Tapan, who had returned for his school holidays, was considered too young to tag on his own list of invitees to a party where there would be drinking.

Mr Justice Chatterji was not an orderly man, but he had produced five children in strict alternation of sex: Amit, Meenakshi (who was married to Arun Mehra), Dipankar, Kakoli, and Tapan. None of them worked, but each had an occupation. Amit wrote poetry, Meenakshi played canasta, Dipankar sought the Meaning of Life, Kakoli kept the telephone busy, and Tapan, who was only twelve or thirteen, and by far the youngest, went to the prestigious boarding-school, Jheel.

Amit, the poet, had studied Jurisprudence at Oxford, but having got his degree, had not completed, to his father's exasperation, what should have been easy enough for him to complete: his studies for the Bar at Lincoln's Inn, his father's old Inn. He had eaten most of his dinners and had even passed a paper or two, but had then lost interest in the law. Instead, on the strength of a couple of university prizes for poetry, some short fiction published here and there in literary magazines, and a book of poetry which had won him a prize in England

(and therefore adulation in Calcutta) he was sitting pretty in his father's house and doing nothing that counted as real work.

At the moment he was talking to his two sisters and to Lata.

'How many do we expect ?' asked Amit.

'I don't know,' said Kakoli. 'Fifty?'

Amit looked amused. 'Fifty would just about cover half your friends, Kuku. I'd say one hundred and fifty.'

'I can't abide these large parties,' said Meenakshi in high excitement.

'No, nor can I,' said Kakoli, glancing at herself in the tall mirror in the hall.

52.3 'I suppose the guest-list consists entirely of those invited by Ma and Tapan and myself,' said Amit, naming the three least sociable members of the family.

'Vereeeee funneeeee,' said (or, rather, sang) Kakoli, whose name implied the songbird that she was.

'You should go up to your room, Amit,' said Meenakshi, 'and settle down on a sofa with Jane Austen. We'll tell you when dinner is served. Or better still, we'll send it up to you. That way you can avoid all your admirers.'

‘He’s very peculiar,’ said Kakoli to Lata. ‘Jane Austen is the only woman in his life.’

‘But half the bhadralok in Calcutta want him as a match for their daughters,’ added Meenakshi. ‘They believe he has brains.’

Kakoli recited :

‘Amit Chatterji, what a catch ! Is a highly suitable match.’

Meenakshi added :

‘Why he has not married yet ? Always playing hard to get.’

Kakoli continued’

‘Famous poet, so they say. “Besh” decent in every way.’

She giggled.

Lata said to Amit : ‘Why do you let them get away with this ?’

‘You mean with their doggerel ?’ said Amit.

‘I mean with teasing you,’ said Lata.

‘Oh, I don’t mind. It runs off my back like duck’s water,’ said Amit.

Lata looked surprised, but Kakoli said, ‘He’s doing a Biswas on you.’

‘A Biswas?’

‘M’ Biswas Babu, my father’s old clerk. He still comes around a couple of times a week to help with this and that, and gives us advice on life. He advised Meenakshi against marrying your brother,’ said Kakoli.

In fact the opposition to Meenakshi’s sudden affair and marriage had been wider and deeper. Meenakshi’s parents had not particularly cared for the fact that she had married outside the community. Arun Mehra was neither a Brahmo, nor of Brahmin stock, nor even a Bengali. He came from a family that was struggling financially. To give the Chatterjis credit, this last fact did not matter very much to them, though they themselves had been more than affluent for generations. They were only (with respect to this objection) concerned that their daughter might not be able to afford the comforts of life that she had grown up with. But again, they had not swamped their married daughter with gifts. Even though Mr Justice Chatterji did not have an instinctive rapport with his son-in-law, he did not think that that would be fair.

‘What does Biswas Babu have to do with duck’s water?’ asked Lata, who found Meenakshi’s family amusing but confusing.

‘Oh - that’s just one of his expressions. I don’t think it’s very kind of Amit not to explain family references to outsiders.’

‘She’s not an outsider,’ said Amit. ‘Or she shouldn’t be. Actually, we are all very fond of Biswas Babu, and he is very fond of us. He was my grandfather’s clerk originally.’

‘But he won’t be Amit’s - to his heart-deep regret,’ said Meenakshi. ‘In fact, Biswas Babu is even more upset than our father that Amit has deserted the Bar.’

‘I can still practise if I choose to,’ said Amit. ‘A university degree is enough in Calcutta.’

‘Ah, but you won’t be admitted to the Bar Library.’

‘Who cares?’ said Amit. ‘Actually, I’d be happy editing a small journal and writing a few good poems and a novel or two and passing gently into senility and posterity. May I offer you a drink? A sherry?’

‘I’ll have a sherry,’ said Kakoli.

52-5’Not you, Kuku, you can help yourself. I was offering Lata a drink.’

‘Ouch,’ said Kakoli. She looked at Lata’s pale blue cotton sari with its fine chikan embroidery, and said: ‘Do you know, Lata - pink is what would really suit you.’

Lata said : ‘I’d better not have anything as dangerous as a sherry. Could I have some - oh, why not? A small sherry, please.’

Amit went to the bar with a smile and said: ‘Do you think I might have two glasses of sherry ?’

‘Dry, medium or sweet, Sir?’ asked Tapan.

Tapan was the baby of the family, whom everyone loved and fussed over, and who was even allowed an occasional sip of sherry himself. This evening he was helping at the bar.

‘One sweet and one dry, please,’ said Amit. ‘Where’s Dipankar?’ he asked Tapan.

‘I think he’s in his room, Amit Da,’ said Tapan. ‘Shall I call him down ?’

‘No, no, you help with the bar,’ said Amit, patting his brother on the shoulder. ‘You’re doing a fine job. I’ll just see what he’s up to.’

Dipankar, their middle brother, was a dreamer. He had studied economics, but spent most of his time reading about the poet and patriot Sri Aurobindo, whose flaccid mystical verse he was (to Amit’s disgust) at present deeply engrossed in. Dipankar was indecisive by nature. Amit knew that it would be best simply to bring him downstairs himself. Left to his own devices, Dipankar treated every decision like a spiritual crisis. Whether to have one spoon of sugar in his tea or two, whether to come down now or fifteen minutes later, whether to

enjoy the good life of Ballygunge or to take up Sri Aurobindo's path of renunciation, all these decisions caused him endless agony. A succession of strong women passed through his life and made most of his decisions for him, before they became impatient with his vacillation ('Is she really the one for me?') and moved on. His views moulded themselves to theirs while they lasted, then began to float freely again.

5z6Dipankar was fond of making remarks such as, 'It is all the Void,' at breakfast, thus casting a mystical aura over the scrambled eggs.

Amit went up to Dipankar's room, and found him sitting on a prayer-mat at the harmonium, untunefully singing a song by Rabindranath Tagore.

'You had better come down soon,' Amit said in Bengali. 'The guests have begun to arrive.'

'Just coming, just coming,' said Dipankar. 'I'll just finish this song, and then I'll... I'll come down. I will.'

'I'll wait,' said Amit.

'You can go down, Dada. Don't trouble yourself. Please.'

'It's no trouble,' said Amit. After Dipankar had finished his song, unembarrassed by its tunelessness - for all pitches, no doubt, stood equal before the Void - Amit escorted him down the teak-balustraded marble stairs.

7.8

‘WHERE’S Cuddles?’ asked Amit when they were halfway down.

‘Oh,’ said Dipankar vaguely, ‘I don’t know.’

‘He might bite someone.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Dipankar, not greatly troubled by the thought.

Cuddles was not a hospitable dog. He had been with the Chatterji family for more than ten years, during which time he had bitten Biswas Babu, several schoolchildren (friends who had come to play), a number of lawyers (who had visited Mr Justice Chatterji’s chambers for conferences during his years as a barrister), a middle-level executive, a doctor on a house call, and the standard mixture of postmen and electricians.

Cuddles’ most recent victim had been the man who had come to the door to take the decennial census.

The only creature Cuddles treated with respect was Mr

527Justice Chatterji’s father’s cat Pillow, who lived in the next house, and who was so fierce that he was taken for walks on a leash.

‘You should have tied him up,’ said Amit.

Dipankar frowned. His thoughts were with Sri Aurobindo. 'I think I have,' he said.

'We'd better make sure,' said Amit. 'Just in case.'

It was good that they did. Cuddles rarely growled to identify his position, and Dipankar could not remember where - if at all - he had put him. He might still be ranging the garden in order to savage any guests who wandered onto the verandah.

They found Cuddles in the bedroom which had been set aside for people to leave their bags and other apparatus in. He was crouched quietly near a bedside table, watching them with shiny little black eyes. He was a small black dog, with some white on his chest and on his paws. When they had bought him the Chatterjis had been told he was an Apso, but he had turned out to be a mutt with a large proportion of Tibetan terrier.

In order to avoid trouble at the party, he had been fastened by a leash to a bedpost. Dipankar could not recall having done this, so it might have been someone else. He and Amit approached Cuddles. Cuddles normally loved tVie îarriiVy, but today Vie was jittery.

Cuddles surveyed them closely without growling, and when he judged that the moment was ripe, he flew intently and viciously through the air towards them until the sudden restraint of the leash jerked him back. He strained against it, but could not get into biting range. All the Chatterjis knew how to step back rapidly when instinct told them Cuddles was on the attack. But perhaps the guests would not react so swiftly.

‘I think we should move him out of this room,’ said Amit. Strictly speaking, Cuddles was Dipankar’s dog, and thus his responsibility, but he now in effect belonged to all of them - or, rather, was, accepted as one of them, like the sixth point of a regular hexagon.

‘He seems quite happy here,’ said Dipankar. ‘He’s a

5z8living being too. Naturally he gets nervous with all this coming and going in the house.’

‘Take it from me,’ said Amit, ‘he’s going to bite someone.’

‘Hmm. ... Should I put a notice on the door : Beware of Dog?’ asked Dipankar.

‘No. I think you should get him out of here. Lock him up in your room.’

‘I can’t do that,’ said Dipankar. ‘He hates being upstairs when everyone else is downstairs. He is a sort of lapdog, after all.’

Amit reflected that Cuddles was the most psychotic lapdog he had known. He too blamed his temperament on the constant stream of visitors to the house. Kakoli’s friends of late had flooded the Chatterji mansion. Now, as it happened, Kakoli herself entered the room with a friend.

‘Ah, there you are, Dipankar Da, we were wondering what had happened to you. Have you met Neera ? Neera, these are my berruthers Amit and Dipankar. Oh yes, put it down on the bed,’ said Kakoli. ‘It’ll be quite safe here. And the bathroom’s through there.’ Cuddles prepared for a lunge. ‘Watch out for the dog - he’s harmless but sometimes he has moods. We have moods, don’t we, Cuddlu? Poor Cuddlu, left all alone in the bedroom.

Darling Cuddles, what to do When the house is such a zoo!’

sang Kakoli, then disappeared.

‘We’d better take him upstairs,’ said Amit. ‘Come on.’ Dipankar consented. Cuddles growled. They calmed him down and took him up. Then Dipankar played a few soothing chords on the harmonium to reassure him, and they returned downstairs.

Many of the guests had arrived by now, and the party was in full swing. In the grand drawing room with its grand piano and grander chandelier milled scores of guests in full summer evening finery, the women fluttering and flattering and sizing each other up, the men engaging

52.9themselves in more self-important chatter. British and Indian, Bengali and non-Bengali, old and middle-aged and young, saris shimmering and necklaces glimmering, crisp Shantipuri dhotis edged with a fine line of gold and hand-creased to perfection, kurtas of raw off-white silk with gold buttons, chiffon saris of various pastel hues, white cotton saris with red borders, Dhakai saris with a white background and a pattern in the weave - or (still more elegant) a grey background with a white design, white dinner-jackets with

black trousers and black bowties and black patent leather Derbys or Oxfords (each bearing a little reflected chandelier), long dresses of flowery-printed fine poplin chintz and finely polka-dotted white cotton organdy, even an off-the-shoulder silk dress or two in the lightest and most summery of silks : brilliant were the clothes, and glittering the people who filled them.

Arun, who considered it too hot for a jacket, was wearing a stylish cummerbund instead - a maroon monochrome sash with a shimmering pattern through the weave - and a matching bow-tie. He was talking rather gravely to Jock Mackay, a cheerful bachelor in his mid-forties who was one of the directors of the managing agency of McKibbin & Ross.

Meenakshi was dressed in a striking orange French chiffon sari and an electric blue backless choli tied on around her neck and waist with narrow cloth bands. Her midriff was gloriously exposed, around her long and fragrant neck was clasped a Jaipur enamel choker in blue and orange with matching bracelets on her arms, her already considerable height was enhanced by stiletto heels and a tall bun, large earrings dangled deliciously below her chin, the orange tika on her forehead was as huge as her eyes, and most striking and ornamental of all was her devastating smile.

She advanced towards Amit, exuding a fragrance of Shocking Schiaparelli.

But before Amit could greet her, he was accosted by a middle-aged, accusing woman with large, popping eyes whom he did not recognize. She said to him :

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‘I loved your last book but I can’t say I understood it.’ She waited for a response.

‘Oh - well, thank you,’ said Amit.

‘Surely that’s not all you’re going to say?’ said the woman, disappointed. ‘I thought poets were more articulate. I’m an old friend of your mother’s though we haven’t met for many years,’ she added, irrelevantly. ‘We go back to Shantiniketan.’

‘Ah, I see,’ said Amit. Although he did not much care for this woman, he did not move away. He felt he ought to say something.

‘Well, I’m not so much of a poet now. I’m writing a novel,’ he said.

‘But that’s no excuse at all,’ said the woman. Then she added : ‘Tell me, what is it about ? Or is that a trade secret of the famous Amit Chatterji ?’

‘No, no, not really,’ said Amit, who hated to talk about his current work. ‘It’s about a moneylender at the time of the Bengal Famine. As you know, my mother’s family comes from East Bengal -‘

‘How wonderful that you should want to write about your own country,’ said the woman. ‘Especially after winning all those prizes abroad. Tell me, are you in India a lot?’

Amit noticed that both his sisters were standing near him now and listening in.

‘Oh yes, well, now that I’ve returned I am here most of the time. I’m, well, in and out -‘

‘In and out,’ repeated the woman wonderingly.

‘Back and forth,’ said Meenakshi helpfully.

‘Off and on,’ said Kakoli, who was incapable of restraint.

The woman frowned.

‘To and fro,’ said Meenakshi.

‘Here and there,’ said Kakoli.

She and Meenakshi started giggling. Then they waved to someone at the far side of the huge room, and instantly disappeared.

Amit smiled apologetically. But the woman was looking

531 at him angrily. Were the young Chatterjis trying to make fun of her ?

She said to Amit: 'I am quite sick of reading about you.'

Amit said mildly: 'Mmm. Yes.'

'And of hearing about you.'

'If I weren't me,' said Amit, 'I would be pretty sick of hearing about myself.'

The woman frowned. Then, recovering, she said: 'I think my drink's finished.'

She noticed her husband hovering nearby, and handed him her empty glass, which was stained with crimson lipstick around the rim. 'But tell me, how do you write ?'

'Do you mean -' began Amit.

'I mean, is it inspiration ? Or is it hard work ?'

'Well,' said Amit, 'without inspiration one can't -'

'I knew, I just knew it was inspiration. But without being married, how did you write that poem about the young bride ?'

She sounded disapproving.

Amit looked thoughtful, and said : ‘I just -‘

‘And tell me,’ continued the woman, ‘does it take you long to think of a book ? I’m dying to read your new book.’

‘So am I,’ said Amit.

‘I have some good ideas for books,’ said the woman. ‘When I was in Shantiniketan, the influence of Gurudev on me was very deep ... you know - our own Rabindranath ‘

Amit said, ‘Ah.’

‘It could not take you long, I know ... but the writing itself must be so difficult. I could never be a writer. I don’t have the gift. It is a gift from God.’

‘Yes, it seems to come -‘

‘I once wrote poetry,’ said the woman. ‘In English, like you. Though I have an aunt who writes Bengali poetry. She was a true disciple of Robi Babu. Does your poetry rhyme ?’

‘Yes.’

‘Mine didn’t. It was modern. I was young, in Daqeeling.

53 I wrote about nature, not about love. I hadn’t met Mihir then. My husband, you know. Later I typed them. I showed them to Mihir. Once I spent a night in a hospital bitten by mosquitoes. And a poem came out suddenly. But he said, “It doesn’t rhyme.” ‘

She looked disapprovingly at her husband, who was hovering around like a cupbearer with her refilled glass.

‘Your husband said that ?’ said Amit.

‘Yes. Then I never had the urge again. I don’t know why.’

‘You’ve killed a poet,’ said Amit to her husband, who seemed a good enough fellow.

‘Come,’ he continued to Lata, who had been listening to the last part of the conversation, ‘Til introduce you to a few people, as I promised. Excuse me for a minute.’

Amit had made no such promise, but it enabled him to get away.

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7.9

‘WELL, whom do you want to meet ?’ said Amit to Lata.

‘No one,’ said Lata.

‘No one ?’ asked Amit. He looked amused.

‘Anyone. How about that woman there with the red-and-white cotton sari ?’

‘The one with the short grey hair - who looks as if she’s laying down the law to Dipankar and my grandfather ?’

‘Yes.’

‘That’s lia Chattopadhyay. Dr lia Chattopadhyay. She’s related to us. She has strong and immediate opinions. You’ll like her.’

Though Lata was unsure about the value of strong and immediate opinions, she liked the look of the woman. Dr lia Chattopadhyay was shaking her finger at Dipankar and saying something to him with great and apparently affectionate vigour. Her sari was rather crushed.

‘May we interrupt?’ asked Amit.

‘Of course you may, Amit, don’t be stupid,’ said Dr lia Chattopadhyay.

‘This is Lata, Arun’s sister.’

‘Good,’ said Dr lia Chattopadhyay, appraising her in a second. ‘I’m sure she’s nicer than her bumptious brother. I was telling Dipankar that economics is a pointless subject. He would have done far better to study mathematics. Don’t you agree?’

‘Of course,’ said Amit.

‘Now that you’re back in India you must stay here permanently, Amit. Your country needs you - and I don’t say that lightly.’

‘Of course,’ said Amit.

Dr lia Chattopadhyay said to Lata: ‘I never pay any attention to Amit, he always agrees with me.’

‘lia Kaki never pays any attention to anyone,’ said Amit.

‘No. And do you know why? It’s because of your grandfather.’

‘Because of me?’ asked the old man.

‘Yes,’ said Dr lia Chattopadhyay. ‘Many years ago you told me that until you were forty you were very concerned about what people thought of you. Then you decided to be concerned about what you thought of other people instead.’

‘Did \ say that?’ said old Mr Qnatterji, surprised.

‘Yes, indeed, whether you remember it or not. I too used to make myself miserable bothering about other people’s opinions, so I decided to adopt your philosophy immediately, even though I wasn’t forty then - or even thirty. Do you really not remember that remark of yours? I was trying to decide whether to give up my career, and was under a lot of pressure from my husband’s family to do so. My talk with you made all the difference.’

‘Well,’ said old Mr Chatterji, ‘I remember some things but not other things these days. But I’m very glad my remark made such a, such a, well, profound impression on you. Do you know, the other day I forgot the name of my last cat but one. I tried to recall it, but it didn’t come to

me.

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‘Biplob,’ said Amit.

‘Yes, of course, and it did come back to me eventually. I had named him that because I was a friend of Subhas Bose - well, let me say I knew the family. ... Of course, in my position as a judge, a name like that would have to be,er-‘

Amit waited while the old man searched for the right word, then helped him out.

‘Ironic ?’

‘No, I wasn’t looking for that word, Amit, I was - well, “ironic” will do. Of course, those were different times, mm, mm. Do you know, I can’t even draw a map of India now. It seems so unimaginable. And the law too is changing every day. One keeps reading about writ petitions being brought up before the High Courts. Well, in my day we were content with regular suits. But I’m an old man, things must move ahead, and I must fall back. Now girls like lia, and young people like you’ - he gesticulated towards Amit and Lata - ‘must carry things forward.’

‘I’m hardly a girl,’ said Dr lia Chattopadhyay. ‘My own daughter is twenty-five now.’

‘For me, dear lia, you will always be a girl,’ said old Mr Chatterji.

Dr lia Chattopadhyay made an impatient sound. ‘Anyway, my students don’t treat me like a girl. The other day I was discussing a chapter in one of my old books with a junior colleague of mine, a very serious young man, and he said, “Madam, far be it for me, not only as your junior but also as one who is appreciative of the situation of the book in the context of its time and the fact that you have not many years remaining, to suggest that -” I was quite charmed. Remarks like that rejuvenate me.’

‘What book was that ?’ asked Lata.

‘It was a book about Donne,’ said Dr lia Chattopadhyay.
‘Metaphysical Causality. It’s a very stupid book.’

‘Oh, so you teach English!’ said Lata, surprised. ‘I thought you were a doctor - I mean, a medical doctor.’

‘What on earth have you been telling her?’ said Dr lia Chattopadhyay to Amit.

535 ‘Nothing. I didn’t really get the chance to introduce you properly. You were telling Dipankar so forcefully that he should have dropped economics that I didn’t dare to interrupt.’

‘So I was. And so he should have. But where has he got to?’

Amit scanned the room cursorily, and noticed Dipankar standing with Kakoli and her babble-rabble. Dipankar, despite his mystical and religious tendencies, was fond of even foolish young women.

‘Shall I deliver him back to you?’ asked Amit.

‘Oh, no,’ said Dr lia Chattopadhyay, ‘arguing with him only upsets me, it’s like battling a blancmange ... all his mushy ideas about the spiritual roots of India and the genius of Bengal. Well, if he were a true Bengali, he’d change his name back to Chattopadhyay - and so would you all, instead of continuing to cater to the feeble tongues and brains of the British Where are you studying?’

Lata, still a little shaken by Dr lia Chattopadhyay's emphatic energy, said: 'Brahmpur.'

'Oh, Brahmpur,' said Dr lia Chattopadhyay. 'An impossible place. I once was - no, no, I won't say it, it's too cruel, and you're a nice girl.'

'Oh, do go on, lia Kaki,' said Amit. 'I adore cruelty, and Y in sui c Lala can lake aiiyi' ifmg y va 'rurvt tu Tay.'

'Well, Brahmpur!' said Dr lia Chattopadhyay, needing no second bidding. 'Brahmpur ! I had to go there for a day about ten years ago to attend some conference or other in the English Department, and I'd heard so much about Brahmpur and the Barsaat Mahal and so on that I stayed on for a couple of extra days. It made me almost ill. All that courtly culture with its Yes Huzoor and No Huzoor and nothing robust about it at all. "How are you ?"

"Oh, well, I'm alive." I just couldn't stand it. "Yes, I'll have two

florets of rice, and one drop of daal " All that subtlety

and etiquette and bowing and scraping and ghazals and kathak. Kathak ! When I saw those fat women twirling around like tops, I wanted to say to them, "Run! Run! don't dance, run!"

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‘It’s a good thing you didn’t, lia Kaki, you’d have been strangled.’

‘Well, at least it would have meant an end to my suffering. The next evening I had to undergo some more of your Brahmpuri culture. We had to go and listen to one of those ghazal singers. Dreadful, dreadful, I’ll never forget it ! One of those soulful women, Saeeda something, whom you couldn’t see for her jewellery - it was like staring into the sun. Wild horses wouldn’t drag me there again ... and all those brainless men in that silly northern dress, the pyjama, looking as if they’d just got out of bed, rolling about in ecstasy - or agony - groaning “wah! wah!” to the most abjectly self-pitying insipid verse - or so it seemed to me when my friends translated it. ... Do you like that sort of music ?’

‘Well, I do like classical music,’ began Lata tentatively, waiting for Dr lia Chattopadhyay to pronounce that she was completely misguided. ‘Ustad Majeed Khan’s performances of raags like Darbari, for instance ‘

Amit, without waiting for Lata to finish her sentence, stepped swiftly in to draw Dr lia Chattopadhyay’s fire.

‘So do I, so do I,’ he said. ‘I’ve always felt that the performance of a raag resembles a novel - or at least the kind of novel I’m attempting to write. You know,’ he continued, extemporizing as Vie went along, ‘first you take one note and explore it for a while, then another to discover its possibilities, then perhaps you get to the dominant, and pause for a bit, and it’s only gradually that the phrases begin to form and the tabla joins in with the beat ... and then the more brilliant improvisations and diversions begin, with the main theme returning from time to time, and finally it all speeds up, and the excitement increases to a climax.’

Dr lia Chattopadhyay was looking at him in astonishment. 'What utter nonsense,' she said to Amit. 'You're getting to be as fluffy as Dipankar. Don't pay any attention to him, Lata,' continued the author of *Metaphysical Causality*. 'He's just a writer, he knows nothing at all about literature. Nonsense always makes me hungry, I must get

537some food at once. At least the family serves dinner at a sensible hour. "Two florets of rice" indeed!' And, shaking her grey locks emphatically, she made for the buffet table.

Amit offered to bring some food on a plate to his grandfather, and the old man acquiesced. He sat down in a comfortable armchair, and Amit and Lata went towards the buffet. On the way, a pretty young woman detached herself from Kakoli's giggling, gossiping group, and came up to Amit.

'Don't you remember me?' she asked. 'We met at the Sarkars'

Amit, trying to work out when and at which Sarkars' they might have met, frowned and smiled simultaneously.

The girl looked at him reproachfully. 'We had a long conversation,' she said.

'Ah.'

'About Bankim Babu's attitude towards the British, and how it affected the form as opposed to the content of his writing.'

Amit thought : Oh God ! Aloud he said : ‘Yes ... yes ‘

Lata, though she felt sorry for both Amit and the girl, could not help smiling. She was glad she had come to the party after all.

The girl persisted : ‘Don’t you remember ?’

Amit suddenly became voluble. ‘I am so forgetful -‘ he said; ‘- and forgettable,’ he added quickly, ‘that I sometimes wonder if I ever existed. Nothing I’ve ever done seems to have happened....’

The girl nodded. ‘I know just what you mean,’ she said. But she soon wandered away a little sadly.

Amit frowned.

Lata, who could tell that he was feeling bad for having made the girl feel bad, said :

‘Your responsibilities don’t end with having written your books, it seems.’

‘What?’ said Amit, as if noticing her for the first time. ‘Oh yes, oh yes, that’s certainly true. Here, Lata. Have a plate.’

ALTHOUGH Amit was not too conscientious about his general duties as a host, he tried to make sure that Lata at least was not left stranded during the evening. Varun (who might otherwise have kept her company) had not come to the party; he preferred his Shamshu friends. Meenakshi (who was fond of Lata and normally would have escorted her around) was talking to her parents during a brief respite in their hostly duties, describing the events in the kitchen yesterday afternoon with the Mugh cook and in the drawing room yesterday evening with the Coxes. She had had the Coxes invited this evening as well because she thought it might be good for Arun.

‘But she’s a drab little thing,’ said Meenakshi. ‘Her clothes look as if they’ve been bought off the hook.’

‘She didn’t look all that drab when she introduced herself,’ said her father.

Meenakshi looked around the room casually and started slightly. Patricia Cox was wearing a beautiful green silk dress with a pearl necklace. Her gold-brown hair was short and, under the light of the chandelier, curiously radiant. This was not the mousy Patricia Cox of yesterday. Meenakshi’s expression was not ecstatic.

‘I hope things are well with you, Meenakshi,’ said Mrs Chatterji, reverting for a moment to Bengali.

‘Wonderfully well, Mago,’ replied Meenakshi in English. ‘I’m so much in love.’

This brought an anxious frown to Mrs Chatterji's face.

'We're so worried about Kakoli, she said.

'We?' said Mr Justice Chatterji. 'Well, I suppose that's right.'

'Your father doesn't take things seriously enough. First it was that boy at Calcutta University, the, you know, the-

'The commie,' said Mr Justice Chatterji benevolently.

'Then it was the boy with the deformed hand and the strange sense of humour, what was his name ?'

539'Tapan.'

'Yes, what an unfortunate coincidence.' Mrs Chatterji glanced at the bar where her own Tapan was still on duty. Poor baby. She must tell him to go to bed soon. Had he had time to snatch a bite to eat ?

'And now ?' asked Meenakshi, looking over at the corner where Kakoli and her friends were nattering and chattering away.

'Now,' said her mother, 'it's a foreigner. Well, I may as well tell you, it's that German fellow there.'

‘He’s very good-looking,’ said Meenakshi, who noticed important things first. ‘Why hasn’t Kakoli told me?’

‘She’s quite secretive these days,’ said her mother.

‘On the contrary, she’s very open,’ said Mr Justice Chatterji.

‘It’s the same thing,’ said Mrs Chatterji. ‘We hear about so many friends and special friends that we never really know who the real one is. If indeed there is one at all.’

‘Well, dear,’ said Mr Justice Chatterji to his wife, ‘you worried about the commie and that came to nothing, and about the boy with the hand, and that came to nothing. So why worry? Look at Arun’s mother there, she’s always smiling, she never worries about anything.’

°BaDa,“ saia Meenakshi, “

“that’s simp’iy not true, s’ne’ s t’ne biggest worrier of all. She worries about everything - no matter how trivial.’

‘Is that so?’ said her father with interest.

‘Anyway,’ continued Meenakshi, ‘how do you know that there is any romantic interest between them?’

‘He keeps inviting her to all these diplomatic functions,’ said her mother. ‘He’s a Second Secretary at the German Consulate

General. He even pretends to like Rabindrasangeet. It's too much.'

'Darling, you're not being quite fair,' said Mr Justice Chatterji. 'Kakoli too has suddenly evinced an interest in playing the piano parts of Schubert songs. If we're lucky, we may even hear an impromptu recital tonight.'

'She says he has a lovely baritone voice, and it makes

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her swoon. She will completely ruin her reputation,' said Mrs Chatterji.

'What's his name ?' asked Meenakshi.

'Hans,' said Mrs Chatterji.

'Just Hans ?'

'Hans something. Really, Meenakshi, it's too upsetting. If he's not serious, it'll break her heart. And if she marries him she'll leave India and we'll never see her again.'

'Hans Sieber,' said her father. 'Incidentally, if you introduce yourself as Mrs Mehra rather than as Miss Chatterji, he is liable to seize your hand and kiss it. I think his family was originally Austrian. Courtesy is something of a disease there.'

‘Really ?’ breathed Meenakshi, intrigued.

‘Really. Even lia was charmed. But it didn’t work with your mother; she considers him a sort of pallid Ravana come to spirit her daughter away to distant wilds.’

The analogy was not apt, but Mr Justice Chatterji, off the bench, relaxed considerably the logical rigour he was renowned for.

‘So you think he might kiss my hand ?’

‘Not might, will. But that’s nothing to what he did with mine.’

‘What did he do, Baba ?’ Meenakshi fixed her huge eyes on her father.

‘He nearly crushed it to pulp.’ Her father opened his right hand and looked at it for a few seconds.

‘Why did he do that ?’ asked Meenakshi, laughing in her tinkling way.

‘I think he wanted to be reassuring,’ said her father. ‘And your husband was similarly reassured a few minutes later. At any rate, I noticed him open his mouth slightly when he was receiving his handshake.’

‘Oh, poor Arun,’ said Meenakshi with unconcern.

She looked across at Hans, who was gazing adoringly at Kakoli surrounded by her circle of jabberers. Then, to her mother’s considerable distress, she repeated :

‘He’s very good-looking. Tall too. What’s wrong with him? Aren’t we Brahmos supposed to be very open-

541minded ? Why shouldn’t we marry Kuku off to a foreigner ? It would be rather chic.’

‘Yes, why not ?’ said her father. ‘His limbs appear to be intact.’

Mrs Chatterji said: ‘I wish you could dissuade your sister from acting rashly. I should never have let her learn that brutal language from that awful Miss Hebel.’

Meenakshi said: ‘I don’t think anything we say to one another has much effect. Didn’t you want Kuku to dissuade me from marrying Arun a few years ago ?’

‘Oh, that was quite different,’ said Mrs Chatterji. ‘And besides, we’re used to Arun now,’ she continued unconvincingly. ‘We’re all one big happy family now.’

The conversation was interrupted by Mr Kohli, a very round teacher of physics who was fond of his drink, and was trying to avoid bumping into his reproving wife on his way to the bar.

‘Hello, judge,’ he said. ‘What do you think of the verdict in the Bandel Road case?’

‘Ah, well, as you know, I can’t comment on it,’ said Mr Justice Chatterji. ‘It might turn up in my court on appeal. And really, I haven’t been following it closely either, though everyone else I know appears to have been.’

Mrs Chatterji had no such compunctions, however. All the newspapers had carried long reports about the progress of the case and everyone had an opinion about it. ‘It really is shocking,’ she said. ‘I can’t see how a mere magistrate has the right -‘

‘A Sessions Judge, my dear,’ interjected Mr Justice Chatterji.

‘Yes, well, I don’t see how he can possibly have the right to overturn the verdict of a jury. Is that justice? Twelve good men and true, don’t they say? How dare he set himself up above them?’

‘Nine, dear. It’s nine in Calcutta. As for their goodness and truth -‘

‘Yes, well. And to call the verdict perverse - isn’t that what he said-?’

‘Perverse, unreasonable, manifestly wrong and against

542-the weight of the evidence,’ recited the bald-headed Mr Kohli with a relish he usually reserved for his whisky. His

small mouth was half open, a little like that of a meditative fish.

‘Perverse, unreasonably wrong and so on, well, does he have a right to do that? It is so - so undemocratic somehow,’ continued Mrs Chatterji, ‘and, like it or not, we live in democratic times. And democracy is half our trouble. And that’s why we have all these disorders and all this bloodshed, and then we have jury trials - why we still have them in Calcutta when everyone else in India has got rid of them I really don’t know - and someone bribes or intimidates the jury, and they bring in these impossible verdicts. If it weren’t for courageous judges who set these verdicts aside, where would we be? Don’t you agree, dear?’ Mrs Chatterji sounded indignant.

Mr Justice Chatterji said, ‘Yes, dear, of course. Well, there you are, Mr Kohli; now you know what I think. But your glass is empty.’

Mr Kohli, bewildered, said, ‘Yes, I think I’ll get another.’ He looked quickly around to make sure the coast was clear.

‘And please tell Tapan he should go to bed at once,’ said Mrs Chatterji. ‘Unless he hasn’t eaten. If he hasn’t eaten, he shouldn’t go to bed at once. He should eat first.’

‘Do you know, Meenakshi,’ said Mr Justice Chatterji, ‘that your mother and I were arguing with each other so convincingly one day last week that the next day by breakfast we had convinced ourselves of each other’s points of view and argued just as fiercely as before?’

‘What were you arguing about ?’ said Meenakshi. ‘I miss our breakfast parliaments.’

‘I can’t remember,’ said Mr Justice Chatterji. ‘Can you ? Wasn’t it something to do with Biswas Babu ?’

‘It was something to do with Cuddles,’ said Mrs Chatterji.

‘Was it? I’m not sure it was. I thought it was - well,

543 anyway, Meenakshi, you must come for breakfast one day soon. Sunny Park is almost within walking distance of the house.’

‘I know,’ said Meenakshi. ‘But it’s so difficult to get away in the morning. Arun is very particular about things being just so, and Aparna is always so taxing and tedious before eleven. Mago, your cook really saved my life yesterday. Now I think I’ll go and say hello to Hans. And who’s that young man who’s glowering at Hans and Kakoli ? He’s not even wearing a bow-tie.’

Indeed, the young man was virtually naked: dressed merely in a standard white shirt and white trousers with a regular striped tie. He was a college student.

‘I don’t know, dear,’ said Mrs Chatterji.

‘Another mushroom ?’ asked Meenakshi.

Mr Justice Chatterji, who had first coined the phrase when Kakoli's friends started springing up in profusion, nodded. 'I'm sure he is,' he said.

Halfway across the room, Meenakshi bumped into Amit, and repeated the question.

'He introduced himself to me as Krishnan,' said Amit. 'Kakoli knows him very well, it seems.'

'Oh,' said Meenakshi. 'What does he do?'

'I don't know. He's one of her close friends, he says.'

'One of her closest friends?'

'Oh no,' said Amit. 'He couldn't be one of her closest friends. She knows the names of those.'

'Well, I'm going to meet Kuku's Kraut,' said Meenakshi with decision. 'Where's Luts? She was with you a few minutes ago.'

'I don't know. Somewhere there.' Amit pointed in the direction of the piano, to a dense and voluble section of the crowd. 'By the way, watch your hands when watching Hans.'

'Yes, I know,' said Meenakshi. 'Daddy warned me too. But it's a safe moment. He's eating. Surely he won't set down his plate

to seize my hand ?’

‘You can never tell,’ said Amit darkly.

‘Too delicious,’ said Meenakshi.

5447.11

MEANWHILE Lata, who was in the thickest part of the party, felt as if she was swimming in a sea of language. She was quite amazed by the glitter and glory of it all. Sometimes a half-comprehensible English wave would rise, sometimes an incomprehensible Bengali one. Like magpies cackling over baubles - or discovering occasional gems and imagining them to be baubles - the excited guests chattered ! on. Despite the fact that they were shovelling in a great deal of food, everyone managed to shovel out a great many words.

‘Oh, no, no, Dipankar ... you don’t understand - the fundamental construct of Indian civilization is the Square the four stages of life, the four purposes of life - love, wealth, duty, and final liberation - even the four arms of our ancient symbol, the swastika, so sadly abused of late ... yes, it is the square and the square alone that is the fundamental construct of our spirituality ... you will only understand this when you are an old lady like me ‘

‘She keeps two cooks, that is the reason, no other. Truly - but you must try the luchis. No, no, you must have everything in the right order ... that is the secret of Bengali food ‘

‘Such a good speaker at the Ramakrishna Mission the other day ; quite a young man but so spiritual ... Creativity in an Age of Crisis ... you really must go next week : he will be talking about the Quest for Peace and Harmony ‘

‘Everyone said that if I went down to the Sundarbans I’d see scores of tigers. I didn’t even see a mosquito. Water, water everywhere - and nothing else at all. People are such dreadful liars.’

‘They should be expelled - stiff exam or no stiff exam, is that a reason for snatching papers in the examination hall ? These are commerce students of Calcutta University, mind you. What will happen to the economic order without discipline ? If Sir Asutosh were alive today what would he say ? Is this what Independence means ?’

545’Montoo is looking so sweet. But Poltoo and Loltoo are looking a little under par. Ever since their father’s illness, of course. They say it is - that it is, you know ... well, liver ... from too much drink.’

‘Oh, no, no, no, Dipankar - the elemental paradigm - I would never have said construct - of our ancient civilization is of course the Trinity ... I don’t mean the Christian trinity, of course ; all that seems so crude somehow - but the Trinity as Process and Aspect - Creation and Preservation and Destruction - yes, the Trinity, that is the elemental paradigm of our civilization, and no other ‘

‘Ridiculous nonsense, of course. So I called the union leaders in and I read them the riot act. Naturally it took a little straight talk for them to come into line again. Well, I won’t say there

wasn't a payment to one or two of the most recalcitrant of them, but all that is handled by Personnel.'

'That's not Je reviens - that's Quelques-fleurs - all the difference in the world. Not that my husband would know the difference. He can't even recognize Chanel!'

'Then I said to Robi Babu: "You are like a God to us, please give me a name for my child," and he consented. That is the reason why she is called Hemangini. Actually, the name was not to my liking, but what could I do?'

'If the mullahs want war, they can have one. Our trade with East Pakistan has virtually come to a halt. Well, one happy side-effect is that the price of mangoes has come down! The Maldah growers had a huge crop this year, and they don't know what to do with them. ... Of course it's a transport problem too, just like the Bengal Famine.'

'Oh, no, no, no, Dipankar, you haven't got it at all - the primeval texture of Indian philosophy is that of Duality ...

yes, Duality The warp and weft of our ancient garment,

the sari itself - a single length of cloth which yet swathes our Indian womanhood - the warp and weft of the universe itself, the tension between Being and Non-being - yes, indubitably it is Duality alone that reigns over us here in our ancient land.'

546'I felt like crying when I read the poem. They must be so proud of him. So proud.'

‘Hello, Arun, where’s Meenakshi ?’

Lata turned around and saw Arun’s rather displeased expression. It was his friend Billy Irani. This was the third time someone had spoken to him with the sole intention of finding out where his wife was. He looked around the room for her orange sari, and spied her near the Kakoli crowd.

‘There she is, Billy, near Kuku’s nest. If you want to meet her, I’ll walk over with you and detach her,’ he said.

Lata wondered for a second what her friend Malati would have made of all this. She attached herself to Arun as if to a life-raft, and floated across to where Kakoli was standing. Somehow or other Mrs Rupa Mehra, as well as an old Marwari gentleman clad in a dhoti, had infiltrated the crowd of bright young things.

The old gentleman, unconscious of the gilded youth surrounding him, was saying, rather fussily, to Hans :

‘Ever since the year 1933 I have been drinking the juice of bitter gourds. You know bitter gourd ? It is our famous Indian vegetable, called karela. It looks like this’ - he gesticulated elongatedly - ‘and it is green, and ribbed.’

Hans looked mystified. His informant continued :

‘Every week my servant takes a seer of bitter gourd, and from the skin only, mark you, he will make juice. Each seer will

yield one jam jar of juice.’ His eyes squinted in concentration. ‘What they do with the rest I do not care.’

He made a dismissive gesture.

‘Yes ?’ said Hans politely. ‘That makes me so interested.’

Kakoli had begun to giggle. Mrs Rupa Mehra was looking deeply interested. Arun caught Meenakshi’s eye and frowned. Bloody Marwari, he was thinking. Trust them to make a fool of themselves in front of foreigners.

Sweetly oblivious of Arun’s disapproval, the gourd-proponent continued :

‘Then every morning for my breakfast he will give me one sherry glass or liqueur glass - so much - of this juice. Every day since 1933. And I have no sugar problems. I can

eat sweetmeats without anxiety. My dermatology is also very good, and all bowel movements are very satisfactory.’

As if to prove the point he bit into a gulab-jamun which was dripping with syrup.

Mrs Rupa Mehra, fascinated, said: ‘Only the skin?’ If this was true, diabetes need no longer interpose itself between her palate and her desires.

‘Yes,’ said the man fastidiously. ‘Only the skin, like I have said. The rest is a superfluity. Beauty of bitter gourd is only skin deep.’

7.12

‘ENJOYING yourself?’ Jock Mackay asked Basil Cox as they wandered out onto the verandah.

‘Well, yes, rather,’ said Basil Cox, resting his whisky precariously on the white cast-iron railing. He felt lightheaded, almost as if he wanted to balance on the railings himself. The fragrance of gardenias wafted across the lawn.

‘First time I’ve seen you at the Chatterjis. Patricia’s looking ravishing.’

‘Thanks ... she is, isn’t she ? I can never predict when sb/t’s “guvwi 1» tjT.nt IL -gCAvi ViTwt. tk yetti kwew, -«Wri \ Wd to come out to India, she was most unwilling. She even, well.

Basil, moving his thumb gently across his lower lip, looked out into the garden, where a few mellow golden globes lit up the underside of a huge laburnum tree covered with grape-like clusters of yellow flowers. There appeared to be a hut of sorts under the tree.

‘But you’re enjoying it here, are you ?’

‘I suppose so Puzzling sort of place, though Of

course, I've been here less than a year.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, what's that bird for instance that was singing a moment ago - pu-puuuuuu-pu ! pu-puuuuu-pu ! higher and higher. It certainly isn't a cuckoo and I rather wish it was.*

Disconcerting. And I find all these lakhs and crores and annas and pice quite confusing still. I have to re-calculate things in my head. I suppose I'll get used to it all with time.' From the expression on Basil Cox's face it didn't look likely. Twelve pence to the shilling and twenty shillings to the pound was infinitely more logical than four pice to the anna and sixteen annas to the rupee.

'Well, it is a cuckoo, as a matter of fact,' said Jock Mackay, 'it's the hawk-cuckoo - or brainfever bird ... didn't you know that? It's hard to believe, but I've got so used to it that I miss it when I'm back home on leave. The song of the birds I don't mind at all, what I can't abide is the dreadful music Indian singers make ... awful wailing stuff. ... But do you know the question that disconcerted me most of all when I first came here twenty years ago and saw all these beautiful, elegantly dressed women?' Jock Mackay cheerfully and confidently jerked his head towards the drawing room. 'How do you fuck in a sari?'

Basil Cox made a sudden movement, and his drink fell over into a flowerbed. Jock Mackay looked faintly amused.

'Well,' said Basil Cox, rather annoyed, 'did you find out?'

‘Everyone makes his own discoveries sooner or later,’ said Jock Mackay in an enigmatic manner. ‘But it’s a charming country on the whole,’ he continued expansively. ‘By the end of the Raj they were so busy slitting each other’s throats that they left ours unslit. Lucky.’ He sipped his drink.

‘Well, there doesn’t seem to be any resentment - quite the opposite, if anything,’ said Basil Cox after a while, looking over into the flowerbed. ‘But I wonder what people like the Chatterjis really think of us.... After all, we’re still quite a presence in Calcutta. We still run things here commercially speaking, of course.’

‘Oh, I shouldn’t worry if I were you. What people think or don’t think is never very interesting,’ said Jock Mackay. ‘Horses, now, I often wonder what they’re thinking ‘

‘Well, I had dinner with their son-in-law the other day -

549yesterday, as a matter of fact - Arun Mehra, he works with us - oh, of course, you know Arun - and suddenly his brother tumbles in, drunk as a lord and singing away and reeking of some fearsome Shimsham fire-water - well, I’d never in a hundred years have guessed that Arun had a brother like that. And dressed in crumpled pyjamas !’

‘No, it is puzzling,’ agreed Jock Mackay. ‘I knew an old ICS chap, Indian, but pukka enough, who, when he retired, renounced everything, became a sadhu and was never heard of again. And he was a married man with a couple of grown-up children.’

‘Really ?’

‘Really. But a charming people, I’d say: face-flattering, back-biting, name-dropping, all-knowing, self-praising, law-mongering, power-worshipping, road-hogging, spittlehawking. ... There were a few more items to my litany once, but I’ve forgotten them.’

‘You sound as if you hate the place,’ said Basil Cox.

‘Quite the contrary,’ said Jock Mackay. ‘I wouldn’t be surprised if I decided to retire here. But should we go back in ? I see you’ve lost your drink.’

7.13

‘DON’T think of anything serious before you are thirty,’ young Tapan was being advised by the round Mr Kohli, who had managed to free himself of his wife for a few minutes. He had his glass in his hand, and looked like a large, worried, almost disconsolate teddy-bear in a slow hurry ; his huge dome - a phrenological marvel - glistened as he leaned over the bar ; he half closed his heavily lidded eyes and half opened his small mouth after he had delivered himself of one of his bon mots.

‘Now, Baby Sahib,’ said the old servant Bahadur firmly to Tapan, ‘Memsahib says you must go to bed at once.’

Tapan began laughing.

‘Tell Ma I’ll go to bed when I’m thirty,’ he said, dismissing Bahadur.

55°‘People are stuck at seventeen, you know,’ continued Mr Kohli. ‘That’s where they imagine themselves ever afterwards - always seventeen, and always happy. Not that they’re happy when they’re actually seventeen. But you have some years to go still. How old are you?’

‘Thirteen - almost.’

‘Good - stay there, that’s my advice,’ suggested Mr

Kohli.

‘Are you serious?’ said Tapan, suddenly looking more than a little unhappy. ‘You mean things don’t get any

better?’

‘Oh, don’t take anything I say seriously,’ said Mr Kohli. He paused for a sip. ‘On the other hand,’ he added, ‘take everything I say more seriously than what other adults

say.’

‘Go to bed at once, Tapan,’ said Mrs Chatterji, coming up to them. ‘What’s this you’ve been saying to Bahadur? You won’t

be allowed to stay up late if you behave like this. Now pour Mr Kohli a drink, and then go to bed at once.’ *

7.14

‘OH, no, no, no, Dipankar,’ said the Grande Dame of Culture, slowly shaking her ancient and benevolent head from side to side in pitying condescension as she held him with her dully glittering eye, ‘that’s not it at all, not Duality, I could never have said Duality, Dipankar, oh dear me, no - the intrinsic essence of our being here in India is a Oneness, yes, a Oneness of Being, an ecumenical assimilation of all that pours into this great subcontinent of ours.’ She gestured around the drawing room tolerantly, maternally. ‘It is Unity that governs our souls, here in our

ancient land.’

Dipankar nodded furiously, blinked rapidly, and gulped his Scotch down, while Kakoli winked at him. That’s what she liked about Dipankar, thought Kakoli : he was the only serious younger Chatterji, and because he was such a

551gentle, accommodating soul, he made the ideal captive listener for any purveyors of pabulum who happened to stray into the irreverent household. And everyone in the family could go to him when they wanted unflippant advice.

‘Dipankar,’ said Kakoli, ‘Hemangini wants to talk to you, she’s pining away without you, and she has to leave in ten minutes.’

‘Yes, Kuku, thanks,’ said Dipankar unhappily, and blinking a little more than usual as a result. ‘Try to keep her here as long as you can ... we were just having this

interesting discussion Why don’t you join us, Kuku ?’

he added desperately. ‘It’s all about how Unity is the intrinsic essence of our being ‘

‘Oh, no, no, no, no, Dipankar,’ said the Grande Dame, correcting him a trifle sadly, but still patiently : ‘Not Unity, not Unity, but Zero, Nullity itself, is the guiding principle of our existence. I could never have used the term intrinsic essence - for what is an essence if it is not intrinsic ? India is the land of the Zero, for it was from the horizons of our soil that it rose like a vast sun to spread its light on the world of knowledge.’ She surveyed a gulab-jamun for a few seconds. ‘It is the Zero, Dipankar, represented by the Mandala, the circle, the circular nature of Time itself, that is the guiding principle of our civilization. All this’ - she waved her arm around the drawing room once more, taking in, in one slow plump sweep the piano, the bookcases, the flowers in their huge cut-glass vases, the cigarettes smouldering at the edges of ashtrays, two plates of gulab-jamuns, the glittering guests, and Dipankar himself - ‘all this is Non-Being. It is the Non-ness of things, Dipankar, that you must accept, for in Nothing lies the secret of Everything.’

7.15

THE Chatterji Parliament (including Kakoli, who normally found it difficult to wake up before ten) was assembled for breakfast the next day.

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All signs of the party had been cleared away. Cuddles had been unleashed upon the world. He had bounded around the garden in delight, and had disturbed Dipankar's meditations in the small hut that he had made for himself in a corner of the garden. He had also dug up a few plants in the vegetable garden that Dipankar took so much interest in. Dipankar took all this calmly. Cuddles had probably buried something there, and after the trauma of last night merely wanted to reassure himself that the world and the objects in it were as they used to be.

Kakoli had left instructions that she was to be woken up at seven. She had to make a phone call to Hans after he came back from his morning ride. How he managed to wake up at five - like Dipankar - and do all these vigorous things on a horse she did not know. But she felt that he must have great strength of will.

Kakoli was deeply attached to the telephone, and monopolized it shamelessly - as she did the car. Often she would burble on for forty-five minutes on end and her father sometimes found it impossible to get through to his house from the High Court or the Calcutta Club. There were fewer than ten thousand telephones in the whole of Calcutta, so a second phone would have been an unimaginable luxury. Ever since Kakoli had had an extension installed in her room, however, the unimaginable had begun to appear to him almost reasonable.

Since it had been a late night, the old servant Bahadur, who usually performed the difficult task of waking the unwilling Kuku and placating her with milk, had been told to sleep late. Amit had therefore taken on the duty of waking his sister.

He knocked gently on her door. There was no response. He opened the door. Light was streaming through the window onto Kakoli's bed. She was sleeping diagonally across the bed with her arm thrown across her eyes. Her pretty, round face was covered with dried Lacto-calamine, which, like papaya pulp, she used to improve her complexion.

553 Amit said, 'Kuku, wake up. It's seven o'clock.'

Kakoli continued to sleep soundly.

'Wake up, Kuku.'

Kakoli stirred slightly, then said what sounded like 'choo-moo'. It was a sound of complaint.

After about five minutes of trying to get her to wake up, first by gentle words and then by a gentle shake or two of the shoulders, and being rewarded with nothing but 'choo-moo', Amit threw a pillow rather ungently over her head.

Kakoli bestirred herself enough to say: 'Take a lesson from Bahadur. Wake people up nicely.'

Amit said, 'I don't have the practice. He has probably had to stand around your bed ten thousand times murmuring, "Kuku Baby, wake up; wake up, Baby Memsahib," for twenty minutes while you do your "choomoo".'

‘Ungh,’ said Kakoli.

‘Open your eyes at least,’ said Amit. ‘Otherwise you’ll just roll over and go back to sleep.’ After a pause he added, ‘Kuku Baby.’

‘Ungh,’ said Kakoli irritably. She opened both her eyes a fraction, however.

‘Do you want your teddy-bear ? Your telephone ? A glass of milk ?’ said Amit.

‘Milk.’

‘How many glasses ?’

‘A glass of milk.’

‘All right.’

Amit went off to fetch her a glass of milk.

When he returned he found that she was sitting on the bed, with the telephone receiver in one hand and Cuddles tucked under the other arm. She was treating Cuddles to a stream of Chatterji chatter.

‘Oh you beastie,’ she was saying; ‘oh you beastly beastie - oh you ghastly, beastly beastie.’ She stroked his head with the telephone receiver. ‘Oh you vastly ghastly mostly beastly beastie.’ She paid no attention to Amit.

‘Do shut up, Kuku, and take your milk,’ said Amit

554irritably. ‘I have other things to do than wait on you, you know.’

This remark struck Kakoli with novel force. She was well-practised in the art of being helpless when there were helpful people around.

‘Or do you want me to drink it for you as well?’ added Amit gratuitously.

‘Go bite Amit,’ Kakoli instructed Cuddles. Cuddles did not comply.

‘Shall I set it down here, Madam?’

‘Yes, do.’ Kakoli ignored the sarcasm.

‘Will that be all, Madam?’

‘Yes.’

‘Yes what ?’

‘Yes, thank you.’

‘I was going to ask for a good-morning kiss, but that Lactocalamine looks so disgusting I think I’ll defer it.’

Kakoli surveyed Amit severely. ‘You are a horrible, insensitive person,’ she informed him. ‘I don’t know why women swoooooon over your poetry.’

‘That’s because my poetry is so sensitive,’ said Amit.

‘I pity the girl who marries you. I reeeeeally pity her.’

‘And I pity the man who marries you. I reeeeeeeally pity him. By the way, was that my future brother-in-law you were going to call ? The nutcracker ?’

‘The nutcracker ?’

Amit held out his right hand as if shaking it with an invisible man. Slowly his mouth opened in shock and agony.

‘Do go away, Amit, you’ve spoilt my mood completely,’ said Kakoli.

‘What there was to spoil,’ said Amit.

‘When I say anything about the women you’re interested in you get very peeved.’

‘Like who ? Jane Austen ?’

‘May I make my phone call in peace and privacy ?’

‘Yes, yes, Kuku Baby,’ said Amit, succeeding in being both sarcastic and placatory, ‘I’m just going, I’m just going. See you at breakfast.’

5557.16

THE Chatterji family at breakfast presented a scene of cordial conflict. It was an intelligent family where everyone thought of everyone else as an idiot. Some people thought the Chatterjis obnoxious because they appeared to enjoy each others’ company even more than the company of others. But if they had dropped by at the Chatterjis for breakfast and seen them bickering, they would probably have disliked them less.

Mr Justice Chatterji sat at the head of the table. Though small in size, short-sighted, and fairly absent-minded, he was a man of some dignity. He inspired respect in court and a sort of obedience even in his eccentric family. He didn’t like to talk more than was necessary.

‘Anyone who likes mixed fruit jam is a lunatic,’ said Amit.

‘Are you calling me a lunatic?’ asked Kakoli.

‘No, of course not, Kuku, I’m working from general principles. Please pass me the butter.’

‘You can reach for it yourself,’ said Kuku.

‘Now, now, Kuku,’ murmured Mrs Chatterji.

‘I can’t,’ protested Amit. ‘My hand’s been crushed.’

Tapan laughed. Kakoli gave him a black look, then began to look glum in preparation for a request.

‘I need the car today, Baba,’ said Kuku after a few seconds. ‘I have to go out. I need it for the whole day.’

‘But Baba,’ said Tapan, ‘I’m spending the day with Pankaj.’

‘I really must go to Hamilton’s this morning to get the silver inkstand back,’ said Mrs Chatterji.

Mr Justice Chatterji raised his eyebrows. ‘Amit?’ he asked.

‘No bid,’ said Amit.

Dipankar, who also declined transport, wondered aloud why Kuku was looking so wistful. Kuku frowned.

Amit and Tapan promptly began an antiphonal chant.

‘We look before and after, and pine for what is -‘

‘NOT!’

556’Our sincerest laughter with some pain is -‘

TROT!’

‘Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest -‘

‘THOT !’ cried Tapan jubilantly, for he hero-worshipped Amit.

‘Don’t worry, darling,’ said Mrs Chatterji comfortingly; ‘everything will come out all right in the end.’

‘You don’t have any idea what I was thinking of,’ countered Kakoli.

• ‘You mean who,’ said Tapan.

‘You be quiet, you amoeba,’ said Kakoli.

‘He seemed a nice enough chap,’ ventured Dipankar.

‘Oh no, he’s just a glamdip,’ countered Amit.

‘Glamdip ? Glamdip ? Have I missed something ?’ asked their father.

Mrs Chatterji looked equally mystified. ‘Yes, what is a glamdip, darling ?’ she asked Amit.

‘A glamorous diplomat,’ replied Amit. ‘Very vacant, very charming. The kind of person whom Meenakshi used to sigh after. And talking of which, one of them is coming around to visit me this morning. He wants to ask me about culture and literature.’

‘Really, Amit ?’ asked Mrs Chatterji eagerly. ‘Who ?’

‘Some South American ambassador - from Peru or Chile or somewhere,’ said Amit, ‘with an interest in the arts. I got a phone call from Delhi a week or two ago, and we fixed it up. Or was it Bolivia ? He wanted to meet an author on his visit to Calcutta. I doubt he’s read anything by me.’

Mrs Chatterji looked flustered. ‘But then I must make sure that everything is in order -’ she said. ‘And you told Biswas Babu you’d see him this morning.’

‘So I did, so I did,’ agreed Amit. ‘And so I will.’

‘He is not just a glamdip,’ said Kakoli suddenly. ‘You’ve hardly met him.’

‘No, he is a good boy for our Kuku,’ said Tapan. ‘He is so shinsheer.’

This was one of Biswas Babu’s adjectives of high praise. Kuku felt that Tapan should have his ears boxed.

557 ‘I like Hans,’ said Dipankar. ‘He was very polite to the man who told him to drink the juice of bitter gourds. He does have a good heart.’

‘O my darling, don’t be heartless. Hold my hand. Let us be partless,’

murmured Amit.

‘But don’t hold it too hard,’ laughed Tapan.

‘Stop it!’ cried Kuku. ‘You are all being utterly horrible.’

‘He is good wedding bell material for our Kuku,’ continued Tapan, tempting retribution.

‘Wedding bell ? Or bedding well ?’ asked Amit. Tapan grinned delightedly.

‘Now, that’s enough, Amit,’ said Mr Justice Chatterji before his wife could intervene. ‘No bloodshed at breakfast. Let’s talk about something else.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Kuku. ‘Like the way Amit was mooning over Lata last night.’

‘Over Lata ?’ said Amit, genuinely astonished.

‘Over Lata ?’ repeated Kuku, imitating him.

‘Really, Kuku, love has destroyed your brain,’ said Amit. ‘I didn’t notice I was spending any time with her at all.’

‘No, I’m sure you didn’t.’

‘She’s just a nice girl, that’s all,’ said Amit. ‘If Meenakshi hadn’t been so busy gossiping and Arun making contacts I wouldn’t have assumed any responsibility for her at all.’

‘So we needn’t invite her over unnecessarily while she’s in Calcutta,’ murmured Kuku.

Mrs Chatterji said nothing, but had begun to look anxious.

‘Til invite whoever I like over,’ said Amit. ‘You, Kuku, invited fifty-odd people to the party last night.’

‘Fifty odd people,’ Tapan couldn’t resist saying.

Kuku turned on him severely.

‘Little boys shouldn’t interrupt adult conversations,’ she said.

Tapan, from the safety of the other side of the table, made a face at her. Once Kuku had actually got so incensed

558she had chased him around the table, but usually she was sluggish till noon.

‘Yes,’ Amit frowned. ‘Some of them were very odd, Kuku. Who is that fellow Krishnan? Dark chap, south Indian, I imagine. He was glaring at you and your Second Secretary very resentfully.’

‘Oh, he’s just a friend,’ said Kuku, spreading her butter with more than usual concentration. ‘I suppose he’s annoyed with me.’

Amit could not resist delivering a Kakoli-couplet :

‘What is Krishnan in the end ? Just a mushroom, just a friend.’

Tapan continued :

‘Always eating dosa-iddly, Drinking beer and going piddly !’

‘Tapan!’ gasped his mother.

Amit, Meenakshi and Kuku, it appeared, had completely corrupted her baby with their stupid rhyming.

Mr Justice Chatterji put down his toast. ‘That’s enough from you, Tapan,’ he said.

‘But Baba, I was only joking,’ protested Tapan, thinking it unfair that he should have been singled out. Just because I’m the youngest, he thought. And it was a pretty good couplet too.

‘A joke’s a joke, but enough’s enough,’ said his father. ‘And you too, Amit. You’d have a better claim to criticizing others if you did something useful yourself.’

‘Yes, that’s right,’ added Kuku happily, seeing the tables turning. ‘Do some serious work, Amit Da. Act like a useful member of society before you criticize others.’

‘What’s wrong with writing poems and novels?’ asked Amit. ‘Or has passion made you illiterate as well?’

‘It’s all right as an amusement, Amit,’ said Mr Justice Chatterji. ‘But it’s not a living. And what’s wrong with the law?’

559'“Well, it's like going back to school,' said Amit.

'I don't quite see how you come to that conclusion,' said his father dryly.

'Well,' said Amit, 'you have to be properly dressed that's like school uniform. And instead of saying "Sir" you say "My Lord" - which is just as bad - until you're raised to the bench and people say it to you instead. And you get holidays, and you get good chits and bad chits just like Tapan does: I mean judgments in your favour and against you.'

'Well,' said Mr Justice Chatterji, not entirely pleased by the analogy, 'it was good enough for your grandfather and for me.'

'But Amit has a special gift,' broke in Mrs Chatterji. 'Aren't you proud of him?'

'He can practise his special gifts in his spare time,' said her husband.

'Is that what they said to Rabindranath Tagore?' asked Amit.

'I'm sure you'll admit there's a difference between you and Tagore,' said his father, looking at his eldest son in surprise.

'I'll admit there's a difference, Baba,' said Amit. 'But what's the relevance of the difference to the point I'm making?'

But at the mention of Tagore, Mrs Chatterji had entered a mode of righteous reverence.

‘Amit, Amit,’ she cried, ‘how can you think of Gurudev like that?’

‘Mago, I didn’t say -’ began Amit.

Mrs Chatterji broke in. ‘Amit, Robi Babu is like a saint. We in Bengal owe everything to him. When I was in Shantiniketan, I remember he once said to me -’

But now Kakoli joined forces with Amit.

‘Please, Mago, really - we’ve heard enough about Shantiniketan and how idyllic it is. I know that if I had to live there I’d commit suicide every day.’

‘His voice is like a cry in the wilderness,’ continued her mother, hardly hearing her.

‘I’d hardly say so, Ma,’ said Amit. ‘We idolize him more than the English do Shakespeare.’

‘And with good reason,’ said Mrs Chatterji. ‘His songs come to our lips - his poems come to our hearts -’

‘Actually,’ said Kakoli, ‘Abol Tabol is the only good book in the whole of Bengali literature.’

The Griffonling from birth 'V^ Is indisposed to mirth.

To laugh or grin he counts a sin And shudders, "Not on earth."

Oh, yes, and I like The Sketches of Hutom the Owl. And when I take up literature, I shall write my own: The Sketches of Cuddles the Dog.'

'Kuku, you are a really shameless girl,' cried Mrs Chatterji, incensed. 'Please stop her from saying these things.'

'It's just an opinion, dear,' said Mr Justice Chatterji, 'I can't stop her from holding opinions.'

'But about Gurudeb, whose songs she sings - about Robi Babu -'

Kakoli, who had been force-fed, almost from birth, with Rabindrasangeet, now warbled out to the tune of a truncated 'Shonkochero bihvalata nijere apoman' :

'Robi Babu, R. Tagore, O, he's such a bore! Robi Babu, R. Tagore, O, he's such a bore !

O, he's su-uch a bore.

Such a, such a bore.

Such a, such a bore,

O, he's such a, O, he's such a, O, he's such a bore. Robi Babu, R. Tagore, O, he's such a bore!'

'Stop ! Stop it at once ! Kakoli, do you hear me ?' cried Mrs Chatterji, appalled. 'Stop it! How dare you! You stupid, shameless, shallow girl.'

'Really, Ma,' continued Kakoli, 'reading him is like trying to swim breaststroke through treacle. You should

hear lia Chattopadhyay on your Robi Babu. Flowers and moonlight and nuptial beds....'

'Ma,' said Dipankar, 'why do you let them get to you ? You should take the best in the words and mould them to your own spirit. That way, you can attain stillness.'

Mrs Chatterji was unsoothed. Stillness was very far from her.

'May I get up ? I've finished my breakfast,' said Tapan.

'Of course, Tapan,' said his father, 'I'll see about the car.'

'lia Chattopadhyay is a very ignorant girl, I've always thought so,' burst out Mrs Chatterji. 'As for her books - I think that the

more people write, the less they think. And she was dressed in a completely crushed sari last night.'

'She's hardly a girl any more, dear,' said her husband. 'She's quite an elderly woman - must be at least fifty-five.'

Mrs Chatterji glanced with annoyance at her husband. Fifty-five was hardly elderly.

'And one should heed her opinions,' added Amit. 'She's quite hard-headed. She was advising Dipankar yesterday that there was no future in economics. She appeared to know.'

'She always appears to know,' said Mrs Chatterji. 'Anyway, she's from your father's side of the family,' she added irrelevantly. 'And if she doesn't appreciate Gurudev she must have a heart of stone.'

'You can't blame her,' said Amit. 'After a life so full of tragedy anyone would become hard.'

'What tragedy?' asked Mrs Chatterji.

'Well, when she was four,' said Amit, 'her mother slapped her - it was quite traumatic - and then things went on in that vein. When she was twelve she came second in an exam. ... It hardens you.'

'Where did you get such mad children?' Mrs Chatterji asked her husband.

'I don't know,' he replied.

'If you had spent more time with them instead of going to the club every day, they wouldn't have turned out this way,' said Mrs Chatterji in a rare rebuke; but she was overwrought.

56zThe phone rang.

'Ten to one it's for Kuku,' said Amit.

'It's not.'

'I suppose you can tell from the kind of ring, hunh, Kuku?'

'It's for Kuku,' cried Tapan from the door.

'Oh. Who's it from ?' asked Kuku, and poked her tongue out at Amit.

'Krishnan.'

'Tell him I can't come to the phone. I'll call back later,' said Kuku.

'Shall I tell him you're having a bath ? Or sleeping ? Or out in the car ? Or all three ?' Tapan grinned.

‘Please, Tapan,’ said Kuku, ‘be a sweet boy and make some excuse. Yes, say I’ve gone out.’

Mrs Chatterji was shocked into exclaiming: ‘But, Kuku, that’s a barefaced lie.’

‘I know, Ma,’ said Kuku, ‘but he’s so tedious, what can I do?’

‘Yes, what can one do when one has a hundred best friends?’ muttered Amit, looking mournful.

‘Just because nobody loves you -‘ cried Kuku, stung to fierceness.

‘Lots of people love me,’ said Amit, ‘don’t you, Dipankar?’

‘Yes, Dada,’ said Dipankar, who thought it best to be simply factual.

‘And all my fans love me,’ added Amit.

‘That’s because they don’t know you,’ said Kakoli.

‘I won’t contest that point,’ said Amit; ‘and, talking of unseen fans, I’d better get ready for His Excellency. Excuse me.’

Amit got up to go, and so did Dipankar ; and Mr Justice Chatterji settled the use of the car between the two main claimants, while keeping Tapan's interests in mind as well.

5^37.17

ABOUT fifteen minutes after the Ambassador was due to arrive at the house for their one hour talk, Amit was informed by telephone that he would be 'a little late'. That would be fine, said Amit.

About half an hour after he was due to arrive, Amit was told that he might be a little later still. This annoyed him somewhat, as he could have done some writing in the meantime. 'Has the Ambassador arrived in Calcutta ?' he asked the man on the phone. 'Oh, yes,' said the voice. 'He arrived yesterday afternoon. He is just running a little late. But he left for your house ten minutes ago. He should be there in the next five minutes.'

Since Biswas Babu was due to arrive soon and Amit did not want to keep the family's old clerk waiting, he was irritated. But he swallowed his irritation, and muttered something polite.

Fifteen minutes later, Senor Bernardo Lopez arrived at the door in a great black car. He came with a lively young woman whose first name was Anna-Maria. He was extremely apologetic and full of cultural goodwill ; she on the other hand was brisk and energetic and extracted a pocketbook from her handbag the moment they sat down.

During the flow of his ponderous and gentle words, all slowly weighed, deliberated and qualified before they could be expressed, the Ambassador looked everywhere but at Amit: he looked at his teacup, at his own flexed or drumming fingers, at Anna-Maria (to whom he nodded reassuringly), and at a globe in a corner of the room. From time to time he would smile. He pronounced 'Very' with a 'b'.

Caressing his pointed bald head nervously and gravely, and conscious of the fact that he was an inexcusable forty-five minutes late, he attempted to come straight to the point :

'Well, Mr Chatterji, Mr Amit Chatterji, if I may make so bold, I am often called upon in my official duties, as you know, being Ambassador and so on, which I have been for about a year now - unfortunately, with us it is not permanent, or indeed definite ; there is an element of, I

564

!might even say, or it would perhaps not be unfair to say (yes, that is better put, if I might be allowed to praise myself for a locution in another language) that there is an element of arbitrariness in it, in our stay in a particular place, I mean ; unlike you writers who ... but anyway, what I meant was that I would like to put to you one question directly, which is to say, forgive me, but as you know I have arrived here forty-five minutes in tardiness and have taken up forty-five minutes of your good time (of your good self, as I notice some say here), partly because I set out very tardily (I came here directly from a friend's home here in this remarkable city, to which I hope you will come some time when you are more at leisure - or to Delhi needlessly - by which I mean rather, needless to say, to our own home - though you must of course tell me if I am imposing myself on you) but I asked my secretary to inform

you of that (I hope he did, yes ?), but partly because our driver led us to Hazra Road, a, I understand, very natural mistake, because the streets are almost parallel and close to each other, where we met a gentleman who was kind enough to redirect us to this beautiful house - I speak as an appreciator of not just the architecture but the way you have preserved its atmosphere, its perhaps ingenuity, no, ingenuousness, even virginity - but as I said I am (to come to the point) late, and indeed forty-five, well, what I must now ask you as I have asked others in the course of my official duties, although this is by no means an official duty but one entirely of pleasure (though I indeed do have something to ask of you, or rather, ask you about), I have to ask you as I ask other officials who have schedules to keep, not that you are official, but, well, a busy man: do you have any appointment after this hour that you have allotted me, or can we perhaps exceed ... yes ? Do I make myself clear ?

Amit, terrified that he might have to face more of this, said hastily : ‘Alas, Your Excellency will forgive me, but I have a pressing engagement in fifteen minutes, no, forgive me, five minutes now, with an old colleague of my father’s.’

565 ‘Tomorrow then ?’ asked Anna-Maria.

‘No, alas, I am going to Palashnagar tomorrow,’ said Amit, naming the fictitious town in which his novel was set. He reflected that this was no more than the truth.

‘A pity, a pity,’ said Bernardo Lopez. ‘But we still have five minutes, so let me ask simply this, a long puzzlement to me: What is all this about “being” and birds and boats and the river of life - that we find in Indian poetry, the great Tagore unexcluded? But let me say in qualification that by “we” I mean merely we of the West, if the South may be subsumed in

the West, and by “find” I mean that which is as if to say that Columbus found America which we know needed no finding, for there were those there for whom “finding” would be more insulting than superfluous, and of course by Indian poetry, I mean such poetry as has been made accessible to us, which is to say, such as has been traduced by translation. In that light, can you enlighten me ? Us ?

‘I will try,’ said Amit.

‘You see?’ said Bernardo Lopez with mild triumph to Anna-Maria, who had put down her notebook. ‘The unanswerables are not unanswerable in the lands of the East. Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas, and when it is true of a whole nation, it makes one marvel the more. Tī’ùV/ -wtitTi \ came Vitit «nt -yeai ago \ Viad a sense -‘

But Bahadur now entered, and informed Amit that Biswas Babu was waiting for him in his father’s study.

‘Forgive me, Your Excellency,’ said Amit, getting up, ‘it appears as though my father’s colleague has arrived. But I shall give earnest thought to what you have said. And I am deeply honoured and grateful.’

‘And I, young man, though young here is merely to say that the earth has gone around the sun less often since your inception, er, conception, than mine (and is that to say anything at all?), I too will bear in mind the result of this confabulation, and consider it “in vacant or in pensive mood”, as the Poet of the Lake has chosen to express it. Its intensity, the urgings I have felt during this brief interview, which have led me upwards from nescience to science - yet

566is that in truth an upward movement? Will time even tell us that ? Does time tell us anything at all ? - such I will cherish.'

'Yes, we are indebted,' said Anna-Maria, picking up her notebook.

As the great black car spirited them away, no longer running behind time, Amit stood on the porch step waving slowly.

Though the fluffy white cat Pillow, led on a leash by his grandfather's servant, crossed his field of vision, Amit did not follow it with his eyes, as he normally did.

He had a headache, and was in no mood to talk to anyone. But Biswas Babu had come specially to see him, probably to make him see sense and take up the law again, and Amit felt that his father's old clerk, whom everyone treated with great affection and respect, should not be required to sit and cool his heels longer than necessary - or rather, shake his knees, which was a habit with him.

7.18

WHAT made matters slightly uncomfortable was that though Amit's Bengali was fine and Biswas Babu's spoken English was not, he had insisted - ever since Amit had returned from England 'laden with laurels' as he put it on speaking to him almost exclusively in English. For the others, this privilege was only occasional ; Amit had always been Biswas Babu's favourite, and he deserved a special effort.

Though it was summer, Biswas Babu was dressed in a coat and dhoti. He had an umbrella with him and a black bag. Bahadur had given him a cup of tea, which he was stirring thoughtfully while looking around at the room in which he had worked for so many years - both for Amit's father and for his grandfather. When Amit entered, he stood up.

After respectful greetings to Biswas Babu, Amit sat down at his father's large mahogany desk. Biswas Babu was

567sitting on the other side of it. After the usual questions about how everyone was doing and whether either could perform any service for the other, the conversation petered out.

Biswas Babu then helped himself to a small amount of snuff. He placed a bit in each nostril and sniffed. There was clearly something weighing on his mind but he was reluctant to bring it up.

'Now, Biswas Babu, I have an idea of what has brought you here,' said Amit.

'You have?' said Biswas Babu, startled, and looking rather guilty.

'But I have to tell you that I don't think that even your advocacy is going to work.'

'No ?' said Biswas Babu, leaning forward. His knees started vibrating rapidly in and out.

‘You see, Biswas Babu, I know you feel I have let the family down.’

‘Yes ?’ said Biswas Babu.

‘You see, my grandfather went in for it, and my father, but I haven’t. And you probably think it is very peculiar. I know you are disappointed in me.’

‘It is not peculiar, it is just late. But you are probably making hail while the sun shines, and sowing oats. That is why I have come.’

‘Sowing oats ?’ Amit was puzzled.

‘But Meenakshi has rolled the ball, now you must follow it.’

It suddenly struck Amit that Biswas Babu was talking not about the law but about marriage. He began to laugh.

‘So it is about this, Biswas Babu, that you have come to talk to me ?’ he said. ‘And you are speaking to me about the matter, not to my father.’

‘I also spoke to your father. But that was one year ago, and where is the progress ?’

Amit, despite his headache, was smiling.

Biswas Babu was not offended. He told Amit :

‘Man without life companion is either god or beast.

568 Now you can decide where to place yourself. Unless you are above such thoughts ‘

Amit confessed that he wasn't.

Very few were, said Biswas Babu. Perhaps only people like Dipankar, with his spiritual leanings, were able to renounce such yearnings. That made it all the more imperative that Amit should continue the family line.

‘Don't believe it, Biswas Babu,’ said Amit. ‘It is all Scotch and sannyas with Dipankar.’

But Biswas Babu was not to be distracted from his purpose. ‘I was thinking about you three days ago,’ he said. ‘You are so old - twenty-nine or more - and are still issueless. How can you give joy to your parents ? You owe to them. Even Mrs Biswas agrees. They are so proud of your achievement.’

‘But Meenakshi has given them Aparna.’

Obviously a non-Chatterji like Aparna, and a girl at that, did not count for much in Biswas Babu's eyes. He shook his head and pursed his lips in disagreement.

‘In my heart-deep opinion -‘ he began, and stopped, so that Amit could encourage him to continue.

‘What do you advise me to do, Biswas Babu ?’ asked Amit obligingly. ‘When my parents were keen that I should meet that girl Shormishtha, you made your objections known to my father, and he passed them on to me.’

‘Sorry to say, she had tinted reputation,’ said Biswas Babu, frowning at the corner of the desk. This conversation was proving more difficult than he had imagined it would. ‘I did not want trouble for you. Enquiries were necessary.’

‘And so you made them.’

‘Yes, Amit Babu. Now maybe about law you know best. But I know about early life and youth. It is hard to restrain, and then there is danger.’

‘I am not sure I understand.’

After a pause Biswas Babu went on. He seemed a little embarrassed, but the consciousness of his duty as an adviser to the family kept him going.

‘Of course it is dangerous business but any lady who

569cohabits with more than one man increases risks. It is but natural,’ he added.

Amit did not know what to say, as he had not got Biswas Babu's drift.

'Indeed, any lady who has the opportunity to go to second man will know no limits,' Biswas Babu remarked gravely, even sadly, as if admonishing Amit in a muted way.

'In fact,' he ruminated, 'though not admitted in our Hindu society, lady is more excited than man as a rule, I will have to say. That is why there should not be too much difference. So that lady can cool down with man.'

Amit looked startled.

'I mean,' continued Biswas Babu, 'difference in age of course. That way they are commensurate. Otherwise of course an older man is cool in later years when his wife is in the prime of lusty life and there is scope for mischief.'

'Mischief,' echoed Amit. Biswas Babu had never talked in this vein to him before.

'Of course,' thought Biswas Babu aloud, glancing in a melancholy way at the rows of law-books around him, 'that is not true in all cases. But you must not leave it till you are more than thirty. Do you have headache?' he asked, concerned, for Amit looked as if he was in pain.

'A slight headache,' said Amit. 'Nothing serious.'

‘An arranged marriage with a sober girl, that is the solution. And I will also think about a helpmeet for Dipankar.’

They were both quiet for a minute. Amit broke the silence.

‘Nowadays people say that you should choose your own life-partner, Biswas Babu. Certainly, poets like myself say that.’

‘What people think, what people say, and what people do are two different things,’ said Biswas Babu. ‘Now I and Mrs Biswas are happily married for thirty-four years. Where is the harm in an arrangement like that? Nobody asked me. One day my father said it is fixed.’

‘But if I find someone myself - ‘viii-

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