Chapter One

She stirred in the cozy depths of her inclined seat, opening sleep-rimmed eyes, and the air hostess paused in her hurried flight down the passageway, leaned over and said, “An extra blanket, Madam?”

“No, thanks. I am warm enough.”

The sari-clad hostess bent sideways and picked up a pillow that had slipped to the floor carpet, tucking it carefully under the stooping mound of hair. “We are over the Himalayas . . .” Face to face, she spoke in a whisper lest she waken other passengers. “Care to move over to the window seat? If you want to see—”

“Himalayas?” Wonderment in the voice. “Which part?”

“We are flying close to”—the tone rising, faintly dramatic—“Ladakh!”

The hostess hustled off along the dim corridor, and Suruchi held her glance on the trim receding figure until it was gone. This girl had some likeness to her own daughter, hadn’t she? No, that must be mere fancy. Or, maybe . . . the eyes! The way the black pupils deepened when touched with meaning! Yes, that was it. Sumita never wore collyrium, though, nor any other makeup. And this one was not even a girl of Bengal.

Suruchi gave a sigh. She had been lone, away from her daughter for ten days in a far-off land, and now the first sari-draped figure to cross her vision had to be related to the familiar image. It was good to be back home after a journey. Sumita would be waiting at New Delhi’s airport. Maybe Satyajit also. Why did he have to make her go on this delegation—to Moscow?
The plane gave a shudder. Suruchi clutched an armrest. As the aircraft steadied to an even keel she recalled: Ladakh. She half rose, and shuffled to the window seat on her left. The seat had been taken at Moscow's Vnukovo airport by a Russian, and as he was leaving at Tashkent, three hours later, he had turned to her with palms folded together, bidding farewell the Indian way. "Namasthey!"

"Dasudanyia!" she had answered him in Russian with a proud tilt of her head. Not for nothing had she spent ten busy days in the Soviet capital!

The Himalayan ranges were washed in strong moonlight. The snow on rugged rock tops glittered, and even the dark spaces between them were mellow with the sheen. Somewhere on the terrain were names that had sprung into the news—Ladakh, and Aksai-Chin Road, a motorway the Chinese had built to link up their frontier province of Sinkiang with the Tibetan tableland; that road ran across India's map over a wide sector.

The startling news had not made headlines until the day she took off from Delhi, and she read it only after she was on the plane, or else in the airport lounge she would have turned to her husband for enlightenment. With his faith in the Chinese people he would have eased the prick of misgivings she had felt. Of course, the news had been there in a minor key for well over a year. The creeping, probing fingers of China, reaching out of Sinkiang to Indian territory. Her husband had calmly explained that it was all a matter of wrong maps. That was what Chou En-lai had said to India's Prime Minister when they met in New Delhi, he had pointed out: The maps were old, drawn during the regime of Chiang Kai-shek. "Let me show you something, Ruchi!" He had walked to a big pile of magazines on a rack at a corner of the east wall, returned with one, and flipped the pages until he found what he wanted.

"Look at those two!" He thrust a long forefinger at a press photograph of the two men of destiny, arm in arm. The friendly grin, the apparent exuberance of love with which Mr. Chou was looking at Nehru. "How can one doubt human nature?" he asked pointedly.

But the news that morning had contained an ominous note. Indian checkpoints had reported that behind the creeping, prob-
ing fingers were advancing troops armed with automatic rifles. And the troops had fanned out well away from the Aksai-Chin Road, bypassing several checkpoints, marching across Indian land as though it were their own.

Suruchi had turned her glance to the other Indian delegates on the airliner. Nine men, whom she had seen already in the airport lounge—three of them were well known to her. They all had the morning paper in their hands. The faces of all bore marks of strain. In the aisle seat nearest her, Sanghamitra, the saffron-robed Buddhist monk, rested his fingertips on the big headline with his eyes closed, as though prayer would change its content! Behind him, P. K. Menon of the National Congress spoke with half-suppressed heat to the Communist by his side, Balwant Singh. These men and the six others, each with roots all his own, were linked by a dream they shared: world peace. What else would one expect from delegates to a Peace Congress?

Later, in Moscow, Suruchi had tried to draw them into talk. But they had apparently decided not to discuss Ladakh. They would black out the painful news. Delegates from other countries followed that lead. All through the five-day session of the Peace Congress, Ladakh was a forbidden word. Suruchi could see the reason. Nothing was ever gained by prodding a fire. Maybe the fire would die down, the tension taper off into a new understanding.

Suruchi looked out the plane window. Now that ten days were gone, what was the situation like? Beyond a splash of white mist the terrain was in clear view, a fairyland of snow and moonlight. No people inhabited that vast vision of beauty. But there were the Indian checkpoints. Mere dots, scores of miles from each other. Scant means of mutual contact.

Eyes closed, relaxed on the aircraft seat, Suruchi’s thoughts returned to Moscow. Committee meeting of the women delegates. They were discussing the task of women in the struggle to preserve world peace. Listening, Suruchi wandered off in her mind to a shop in Gorky Street. Wax dolls. She would love to buy the one with wide frilled skirts and strange headgear. An idle wish! Where was the right place in her humble mud house for such a pretty thing. Even so . . .

The nasal twang of a voice pulled her back to the commit-
tee room, and she held surprised eyes on the speaker. It was old Mrs. Tung Pao from Peking—portly, her face wrinkled with the lines of care that grandmothers have the world over. Suruchi had met her in a toshop close to the hall of the Peace Congress. Mrs. Tung Pao was buying engines, painted bright red. "For my grandchildren," she had explained with a soft smile; "I have a big gang of grandchildren." Her English was halting but good.

"We in the People's Republic of China have one thought, one program, one plan of action," she was now shrilling in her own tongue while an interpreter, a young girl with nickel-rimmed glasses, rendered each sentence into English. "Strike at the imperialists; strike the death blow," the voice rising to a pitch of shrillness. "Out of the blazing cinders of the old world, the new world of eternal peace will arise. Coexistence is a fairy tale for children. Cast off your illusion, dear comrades from many lands. Get used to this hard reality: Peace, everlasting peace, cannot be won without war. War is the only way to world peace. War to end all wars."

"No!" Suruchi exclaimed, anguish in voice and face. She drew a sharp breath, wanting to say something more, but hesitated. Necks craned toward her from all sides, but no comment followed. Silence lay heavy in the room—the Chinese woman was hushed by the interruption. A minute passed. Then the angry growl came—in clear English.

"The delegate from India does not agree with me. No wonder. Her country has sold its newly won freedom to the imperialist powers and become their helpless stooge. Her people are beggars who live on scraps of alms thrown as aid."

Suruchi concealed her hurt with a forced smile and answered calmly: "Every developing country has needed aid. The massive Soviet aid given to the People's Republic of China over so many years—without that, its industries, its economic life . . ."

The old woman was visibly trembling with rage. The growl came again, and it was now based deeper down in her throat: "Shameless lackey of Anglo-American capitalism!" Her hefty arm with its thick clenched fist cleaved the air like a bludgeon. But in that instant a voice from the back of the room snapped a Chinese word. Mrs. Tung Pao stared before her and turned into wood. Motionless, swallowing the words close to her lips,
swallowing emotion. Then, to the surprise of all, she staggered off the platform and went to her seat.

The meeting broke up, the committee room emptied; but Suruchi sat hunched, her head bowed, thoughts awhirl. War-mongering in the World Peace Congress! This was a shock for which she was not prepared. The implications were sheer horror to contemplate. If the People's Republic of China, a quarter of mankind, felt that way—if a grandmother did not shrink from the passionate wish that half the world be reduced to radioactive ash—

She had not heard the approaching feet. "Listen—" and she looked up, startled, at a Chinese face. She had never before seen this woman. Young, chic, the woman swung round as if to make sure they were alone, and under the split bright-green skirt the smooth creamy texture of a finely shaped leg was revealed.

"Listen, dear sister from India"—the voice had no nasal twang, and the accent was almost American—"Mrs. Tung Pao used the wrong words. She had no business to speak scornfully of our Indian brethren."

Suruchi drew her breath in relief. "Then you agree with me?" she cried, wistful. "The words of your fellow delegate violate the spirit of this Peace Congress."

The answering voice was grave and firm: "Let's come to the heart of the matter, dear sister. What concerns you and me is this, above all else. Two great Asian peoples have lived side by side for years beyond count. Parted by the Himalayan wall, with no chance of intermingling. Today the great barrier is gone. Geography has been defeated by science."

Suruchi, happy, responded in a rush: "The great barrier is gone. But let me remind you: even when it was there, it could not hold us apart. Our missionaries crossed the mountains and passed through the deserts of Sinkiang where the cave temples dedicated to the Buddha still stand. And though many died, it was a two-way traffic—our ancient universities, like Nalanda, were graced by the presence of men like Hsuan-tsang and I-tsing."

A smile formed on the handsome Chinese face; the narrowed eye slits were thick black crayon lines.

"That's it, dear sister from India. Your Nehru has written:
'Again India and China look toward each other, and past memories crowd in their minds; again pilgrims of a new kind cross or fly over the mountains that separate them, bringing messages of cheer and goodwill, and creating fresh bonds of friendship.' You know the words?"

Suruchi clasped the stranger's hand, a thin brittle hand, the fingers beringed.

"There's a sad misunderstanding between the two countries. Maybe you don't know yet. It's absurd, really! Just before I left India from New Delhi's airport—"

The young woman withdrew her hand from the other's grasp; she placed both her hands on the shoulders of the other and leaned over. Her face was now rigid.

"The imperialist powers miss no chance of misrepresenting our motives. Their propaganda machines are strong. But you and I have to know the truth. We in China are determined to set you free from the iron chains of imperialism. We will give you real freedom. We will help you to overthrow your slave government, crush your bourgeoisie, set up the rule of the people." She paused for a bit, watchful. "Yes," she resumed with a sharp ring in her voice, "we have this historic role to play in your country and we accept full responsibility."

Suruchi stared, dumbfounded. She felt the slender hands grow heavy and hard on her shoulders. When she spoke at last her voice was small, muted.

"But then—" she began.

"We in China will turn liberated India into a new heaven. We love your people; you know that!" A smile started at the corners of the rosebud mouth. "Your people with their great ancient culture . . . inspired by the Gandhian ideal of nonviolence . . ." The smile climbed the high cheekbones, slipped into each eye slit. "The people of India will be our dear friends and brothers for the next ten thousand years."

"B'tit—"

"Hindi-Cheeni bhai bhai! Indians and Chinese are brothers! . . . Brothers! A poet of your great country created that slogan in a moment of insight." Her hands withdrew; she straightened up with a quick jerk. "We will meet again, soon, dear sister. Maybe—in India!" She turned, walked off briskly toward the exit.
On this moon-flooded night, gazing down at Ladakh from the sky, Suruchi was filled with remembrance of that face with metal under its coating of beauty. She had looked for her in the hall of the Peace Congress with several questions in her mind. But the woman was not a delegate. Wife of an embassy official? Inquiry yielded no result. She had faded away; she could well have been plain fantasy!

. . . The sudden blaze of strong light hurt her eyes as she opened them—she had fallen asleep. The voice came over the intercom: “We are approaching New Delhi. Please fasten your seat belts.” The air hostess was gliding down the passageway, collecting Customs declaration forms. “You need help at New Delhi’s airport?” Under the complexion cream her face showed a smudge of fatigue.

“You should have more sleep,” Suruchi wanted to tell her. She gave a warm glance to the girl who had some likeness to her Sumita, bidding wordless farewell. No, she wouldn’t need help at New Delhi. Sumita would be there. She would be coming all the way from Gandhigram to meet her mother: eighteen hours’ journey by railroad, twice the span of time of this Moscow-Delhi flight. And this would be Sumita’s first visit to Delhi!

Her feet grew impatient in the long queue at Passport Control. She would have no worry at the Customs. There was nothing to declare, not even a wax doll. She would not have to keep Sumita waiting.

“Letter for you, Madam, sent in our care”—a white-uniformed Air India official approached her with his hand extended. Sumita’s writing! Suruchi felt her mouth go dry. Sumita was not in the airport, then. Something had gone wrong . . . with Satyajit? The airbag, heavy with pamphlets, dragged at the flesh of her shoulder. She pulled back the zip, fumbling for her reading glasses. His heart trouble?

The tension eased. It wasn’t Satyajit. The village! Gandhigram was in trouble. The steel town newly risen beyond the three-mile stretch of meadow was threatening to spread. It would swallow the meadow, pastureland for cattle, and come sweeping upon the village.

“We won’t let this happen,” Sumita wrote. “That means hard struggle against powerful people making their plans fast. I
have to stand beside Father; I cannot leave Gandhigram even for two or three days, and I feel wretched. You know, this unexpected trouble is mainly due to Ladakh, so we hear..."

A shimmer of moon haze on snow-crested rock. And how was it that something happening there had touched a village a thousand miles away?
The mud house in which Satyajit Sen lived with his wife and daughter was not unlike the two hundred others scattered on the face of the village—walls of split-bamboo framework with sumptuous layers of soft clay hardened into plaster, and a foot-deep straw thatching overhead.

The village stood well apart from its neighbors with their centuries of history—its roots did not reach beyond Freedom Year. Not that it had no existence before that date. But its transmutation then meant rebirth. Even the name was changed fittingly. Gandhi would not have let a village be named after him, but he was gone from the scene, the target of an assassin’s bullet.

That bullet had hit more than mere flesh—it had pierced a banner: the banner of love and nonviolence that had been the undoing of a proud empire. But a frail old man, bespectacled and with a sharply pointed beard, now arose with dramatic suddenness, picked up the fallen emblem of love, and continued the work of spiritual reconstruction. He walked the country with a few chosen followers, walked thousands of miles, and, as insatiable as the Buddha twenty-five hundred years before, he bade the people renounce, renounce whatever they could, renounce all. He bade the landed gentry give a portion of their earth to the landless. He, nonviolent neo-Marx, sought a redistribution of wealth through the instrument of the heart, the inherent goodness of the human spirit!

Strangely, the instrument did work, within limits. Seized by some unaccountable urge, a number of the Haves gave of their

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free will. Village councils sat in a daze of bewilderment, apportioning the gifts of earth to the landless. Sometimes a zamindar gave away an entire village. One such village was donated with the hope that it would not be just land changing hands; it would be a replica of Sevagram, the "village of service" that the Father of the Nation had founded.

The small old man gave the village its present name, left it in charge of a younger fellow worker from Sevagram, and hurried off to another projected walk of a thousand miles.

Satyajit Sen had come to live in Sevagram ten years earlier, soon after the war in Europe had taken a decisive turn. He was then already dedicated to a life of service, but in a different context. He had gone to Cambridge with a scholarship, and back in India after three years he paid a visit to Santiniketan, the country home of Rabindranath Tagore. Here the poet had founded his world university and was now engaged in the task of village reconstruction.

"What happens to India," Satyajit asked pointedly, "if we get stuck in one village—"

We. Tagore took note of that, and smiled. His eyes sharpened on the tall thin youth who, he knew, had won laurels at Cambridge.

"Don't think of India," he said. "Let's make a start with one village. If we succeed with one village, a model for the whole of India will be established." And he turned to his ideas of social service. Economic uplift was not all. There were other values no less vital.

"Want of happiness rather than want of riches—that is our problem," he said, countering a stock belief. "Happiness cannot compete with wealth in its list of materials. But happiness is creative; it has a source of riches within itself. It is fullness of life that makes one happy, not fullness of possessions."

Could Santiniketan give him that fullness of life? Satyajit would have liked to know. Material possessions had always meant little to him. It was inner satisfaction that had counted. He had been restless at Cambridge, shaken by storms within. At one time he had been obsessed by the idea of becoming a Buddhist monk and living in a monastic abode—in Ceylon maybe, or Thailand. Eagerly he slid into the simple yet gracious life that had for its
model India’s ancient forest universities.

There could hardly be a more attractive setting. Santiniketan was away from the distractions of cities. It was a land of red earth and fierce gales, and a tiny streamlet passed meandering not far from the campus edge. There were groves of fruit trees, and sweet-scented shrubs and flowering creepers broke the sternness of the scene. Classes were held in tree shade, the boys and girls seated on their own reed mats, and the teacher on a foot-high pedestal. It was not rare for a class to stop when a songbird started warbling in the branches overhead; the pupils would get more from that voice than from the teacher.

Santiniketan was meant to be home and temple in one. But there was also a real temple, one of glass, open on all sides to the flooding sunlight. It was the school chapel, without altar or image. Here the poet or one of the teachers gave a weekly discourse. No dogmatic teaching. The poet believed in a world religion—he called it the Religion of Man.

Satyajit Sen lent a hand in rural development work, but he was a teacher as well. The first time he took a class, the girl pupils brought him flowers—each offered a scented white bunch. As he acknowledged the gifts with palms folded together, his eyes paused on one face. The girl, abashed, turned round and sat in a back row, half concealing herself behind the trunk of a banyan. Her neck and arms were slender, and her complexion was gold-brown.

He could not keep her off his mind, his eyes returning to her over and again. Long after class he remained seated on his small brick platform, reflective. Here was an astonishing fact. The fullness of life of which the poet had spoken seemed to have taken shape before his eyes, sari-draped on a reed mat!

Next day, when the hour was about to end, he learned the girl’s name. Suruchi—that was her name. Suruchi.

There was no economics to teach on Friday, and Satyajit Sen felt denied. He stretched himself on a canvas armchair in the deep verandah of the guesthouse where he had a room, and tried to read the University magazine. Once in a while he looked up, and kept his eyes for long intervals on a two-storied building beyond the avenue of broad-leaved sal trees, the dormitory for women. Slippered feet coming up the veranda steps cut into his
absorption, and he pulled himself upright. Two girls were crossing the veranda’s length, and one of them was Suruchi! ... As the girls joined their palms in salutation, he forgot to give response until several moments were gone.

They were on a curious mission. Christmas had passed, and the teachers had received greetings from friends. The girls were collecting the cards; they would remove the inscription sheets and give the cards to children in the village.

“We want bright, colorful cards,” one girl explained—Romola was her name, Satyajit Sen recalled. “They will give pleasure to the little ones, sir. You haven’t thrown yours away?”

“Not yet.”

“You must have received lovely cards from abroad—”

He was waiting for Suruchi to speak. But she had nothing to say. She was much too quiet. Several times in the class he had asked her questions only for the pleasure of hearing her voice—low, with a husky note. At break of class he had seldom missed the chance to see her rise from her reed mat with a languid grace. Short-statured—as she stood before him now, in her slippers, she barely reached his shoulder. Gazing at the face, he searched in vain for the secret of its fascination. Her eyes met his for a bare instant, then dropped. Her companion, bolder, smiled dimly, as if knowingly.

Satyajit Sen hurried off to his room. When he came back, Romola nudged at her friend with her elbow, bidding her take the sheaf of cards offered. But Suruchi kept her hand plastered to her side. Romola gave her a scowl, nudged again, harder—in vain.

“Here they are, Romola.”

The interim between one economics period and the next dragged interminably. Satyajit Sen explored every possibility of having a glimpse of Suruchi at other times. Rich reward, he soon discovered, could be his if he awoke at early dawn. That was the time when a group of twelve, boys and girls in equal number, formed into a procession and went round the residential quarters, singing a verse in unison, wakening the inmates of the campus. That was a daily chore. A week had gone by before Satyajit stepped out to the veranda to look at the singers passing the guesthouse. Then, with a start, he saw Suruchi in the group.
To have missed his chance all these days!

So it happened that before sunrise every day he would wait in bed for the chorus to draw nearer, gaining volume, and he would then hasten to the veranda and stand by a pillar near the steps. The group went down the red gravel path beyond the strip of lawn. He could not see Suruchi’s full face—she never turned it in his direction. But what he saw was enough. He could even pick out her voice; the husky note was unmistakable.

His day started well. He was content—content to wait for the class to begin at midday in tree shade.

Two months later, as the class was breaking up at the end of its hour, he addressed Suruchi and asked her to wait awhile—he would have a word with her. Wondering glances touched the girl as her friends moved on, and Romola gave her a meaningful nudge as she passed. It was not until they were alone that he stepped up and stood looking at his pupil a silent minute.

“Ruchi,” he spoke at last, using that abbreviation of her name for the first time. “Ruchi . . . will you . . . marry me?”

Her startled eyes lifted to his for an instant. There was no great surprise on her face, though. He noted that. A woman had her premonitions. His concern for her was no secret, anyway.

“Will you marry me, Ruchi?” he repeated softly.

“I . . . you . . .” The stuttering voice stopped.

“Yes. I need you, Ruchi.”

This is a marriage proposal! Suruchi said to herself. Scenes flashed before her eyes out of books. This is different. All cut-and-dried . . . like a question in the economics class. Can you explain the law of demand with reference to indifference curves?

At that moment he took her hand in his large fist.

“Ruchi—”

“My parents—” she began faintly. She was only nineteen.

“Yes, I will speak to them. We don’t belong to the same caste. But caste has no meaning here in Santiniketan. I will speak to Tagore.”

“It all depends on him.” She was helping the other, almost thoughtlessly.

His grave, intent face brightened. “Then there’s no worry.”

He takes the poet’s approval for granted, Suruchi noted to herself. He knows what he wants and is sure of getting it.
“What happens to Nancy King?” she cried abruptly.
“Who?” The thick brows drew together.
“And Harriet Green... Stella Johnson...”
“Where did you get those names?”
She met his perplexed glance. “You gave us a bunch of Christmas cards, remember?”
His face cleared; he burst into laughter.
“We removed the inner sheets with their inscriptions,” she explained. “One couldn’t help noticing—”
“And then—wondering!”
She spoke gravely. “Stella Johnson added to the words in print: ‘With all my love.’”
“That troubles you?”
He felt her slim fingers moist against his palm.
“No-o!” she managed to say. “Why should it trouble me?”
But her voice had no ring of conviction.
He nodded to her, smiling. “Those words on the card mean nothing.”
“Nothing?”
“Not what’s on your mind. Not love.”
“All my love...”
“Plain formality. Empty words.” A curious strain grew on his face, but it escaped her notice. “Empty words,” he repeated sharply by way of emphasis.
“How can a woman send her love to a man only as a matter of formality?”
The wrinkle between his brows deepened, and the answer came haltingly: “They do... often... in foreign countries.”
But she was looking at him in silence, as though unconvinced.
“Stella Johnson is a married woman,” he said as if that should settle the doubt in her mind decisively.
“The other two?”
He was silent for a time. He made a gesture with his left hand, brushing away some cobwebs of memory. He spoke with forced joviality.
“Those two will fight each other tooth and nail for the great privilege of becoming my wife—that’s what you think?”
“No... But—”
“I have a wife already.”
Her hand pulled away from the grip of his fist. Her breath quickened visibly with a slight flare of the well-shaped nostrils. Satyajit Sen filled his eyes with the spectacle of her emotion before he spoke again.
“A wife named Suruchi. Su-ru-chi!”
Love grew in her heart in the days and months after her marriage. No man deserved more to be loved, she was then ready to say. How could she have hesitated, felt unsure, when he made his abrupt proposal under the banyan tree? But then—had she, really?
Tagore had allotted to them the “Tree House” where he himself had once lived. This was an old structure built around the trunk of a pipal tree with the lower branches cut. The leaves higher up enveloped the house like a canopy. Nesting birds wakened them with their morning warble. Suruchi planted an oleander in the backyard, and in a surprisingly short span of time it began to put forth profuse red blossoms. She plucked a few blossoms every day to wear on her hair, long and beautiful and knotted low on her neck.
Never did she mention the Christmas cards to her husband, though several times she was close to questioning. She could sense his reluctance to speak out. Let his yesterdays remain hidden from her. Today alone counted. As also tomorrow, all the tomorrows.
Sumita was born two years later. She had just started to toddle when Satyajit Sen found himself once more in the grip of restlessness. He could no longer contain himself within this idyll.
Gandhi came to Santiniketan at this time on one of his periodic visits—he had then already founded Sevagram. One day, after the evening prayer he conducted, he placed his hand on Satyajit’s shoulder, and said, “I have been thinking of you in the past months.”
“You’ve been thinking of . . . me?” Such honor was beyond his reckoning.
“Sevagram has need of you. I have often felt that. And today I can see you also have your need of Sevagram.”
That was all. Next day Gandhi was about to leave for Cal-
cutta by the noon train. At the railway station his eyes rested on Satyajit a long moment.

"May I come to Sevagram—in a week?" Satyajit answered the silent query.

"You know what it means to be there? At Sevagram we don't try to teach the people; we become one with them. Our thoughts reach them through action alone."

He revealed his decision to Suruchi, adding: "You don't have to accept that hard life. Better for you to stay here in Santiniketan. At least for a time—"

She lifted her eyes to his and asked, "How can I live away from you?"

A week afterward, they set out with only a few of their belongings—all the rest had to be discarded. The mud house assigned to you at Sevagram would need no modern furnishings; you sat on a流动 mat, slept on a string cot. Your clothes would be woven out of yarn produced on a spinning wheel, preferably your own. Kitchen gadgets were out of place—the food had to be the simplest peasant’s fare. Money itself was a needless burden. So were several of your thought patterns, and you dropped them in the course of your long journey by train; you made your mind a clean slate before you entered the village, covering the eight miles of roadway from Wardah station by a one-horse tandem.

Time went by, year on year. In Freedom Year little Sumita started to learn the alphabet. She exhibited her knowledge by making copious chalk marks on the gray mud walls. Then there was uprooting again with the creation of Gandhigram several hundred miles away, even if it meant only a change of place. The climate of living was almost the same—Sevagram reproduced on the new earth. A fact to note was that, before entering the new village, Satyajit Sen discarded his surname denoting caste affiliation. As simply Satyajit he would be casteless. Somewhat like the Yogis who renounced the world. The Yogis, however, discarded name as well as surname; they made themselves not only casteless but rootless.

Suruchi had willingly passed through every stage of readjustment, and remained tranquil. She could have been clay in
Satyajit’s hand! But she was not prepared for the new challenge she soon had to face.

Satyajit’s study in the new abode was also his bedroom—there stood at one corner a string cot with a thin mattress and a white cover of homespun cloth on which Suruchi had made floral designs with colored thread. Suruchi herself shared an adjoining room and a bed with her child. When Satyajit wanted her any night, he would give her hand a quick squeeze after supper in the kitchen at sundown. That was an accepted signal. Suruchi would put the child to bed and slip into the room with its book-lined walls. “Here I am!”... But the familiar signal did not come for weeks, for well over a month.... Wanting him, she gave him every chance. She could have gone to his room, slipped into bed unasked; but the shame was strong in her even after so many years of marriage. Something seemed to have gone wrong. Once or twice she caught him looking at her with the expression she knew, and her heart thumped. But even as she waited he hurried out of the house, closing the bamboo gate behind him, and returned hours after, deep in the night, and passed into his room in silence.

Once, resolved to see it through, she sat up waiting for him to return. He came and stood on the veranda like a statue, gazing into the deep enveloping night. She drew close, nestling to him, and felt him tremble. Why did he, her husband, have to be a stranger? She took his hand and laid it on her breasts. With quick, determined fingers she unbuttoned her jacket and thrust her bare breasts against his large hand.

He came to life instantly. He crushed her in his arms. He drew her to his room, to bed. He overwhelmed her with his demand.

“Well?” she cried, happy, trying to see his face in the dark. With all that passion stored up in him, why did he have to deny himself?

He moved off without a word and sat at the edge of the cot for a minute while she lay on her back, wanting to touch him soothingly, make him lie down and sleep. He rose to his feet and went out the door in a hurry. His slippered feet passed shuffling down the veranda steps.
She was dazed at first; then shame came flooding upon her. The lovely half hour lay destroyed. She pulled her sari back to her body, rose, and staggered off to her room. Tears were welling to her eyes. What had she done to deserve this insult?

When they met in the morning each acted as if nothing had happened between them. Sumita was sent off to school. Then Satyajit turned to his wife, who was waiting for this moment. She had to know the truth.

"A word with you, Ruchi."
She drew closer to his side.

"Ruchi," he said, "do you remember what I suggested to you before we left Santiniketan? That you should stay back? That you would not be happy——"

"Years have passed since, and I haven't been unhappy."

"Try to understand me." Strain gave his voice a ring of brittleness. "Help me. Without your help I shall get lost. I shall——" He paused, and his eyes grew haunted. Haunted by some mysterious dread!

"You have only to ask me," she said. "Don't you know me after all these years?" She saw the melancholy graven on his face in deep lines, and felt her heart ache. Could she not wipe off that sorrow?

"I know you, I know your inner richness. That is why I dare ask for . . . your help."

"Tell me."

"Two years have passed since Gandhi-ji left us."
She nodded, and waited.

"The obligation on us to uphold the ideas he lived for is stronger than ever before. Yet we are moving away from him every day."

Silent, she waited again.

"One such idea is brahmacharya, complete chastity of body and even of thought. It is, Gandhi-ji believed, a great source of spiritual strength. He never asked his followers to take that vow, but his expectations were clear. You know that, Ruchi?"

Yes, she knew. She knew also that not many in the hermitage at Sevagram had lived up to those expectations. She recalled Dharam Vir and Kumari. They had been in the ashram for about two years when they declared their decision to enter
into marriage. Gandhi himself conducted the simple ceremony he had formulated—no ritual, only prayer. At the end of the ceremony, to the surprise of all, the married couple announced that they had taken that day the brahmacharya vow. And—what came out of that vow? A bare twelvemonth was gone when Kumari was very obviously pregnant.

Satyajit was speaking.

“Gandhi-ji wrote: ‘Those who perform national service . . . must have a celibate life, whether married or unmarried. I do not think that in our conception of marriage our lusts should enter.’”

She knew those words, but had never understood how one’s dedication to national service could gain strength from the state of celibacy. And as she waited for her husband to continue, her eyes, resting on his face, grew agitated. What he intended to say stood clear.

It could not be. . . . Not so early in their life—

He was visibly struggling to be more direct, and it was far from easy.

“Ruchi, listen. While I feel this compulsion, I cannot impose my ideas on you. That would be against the very spirit of nonviolence. That would be against Gandhi-ji’s lifelong teaching. There’s only one way.”

She stared, fascinated, at the man striving to build himself after the image of greatness. And he was comparing her to Kasturba, she felt sure. Kasturba had always walked beside her husband. Ever since their struggle for the downtrodden in South Africa. She, Suruchi, was no Kasturba, though. She was weak and commonplace, and wanted what most women asked for. Fear came upon her in a rush. Was he determined to force this suffering on them?

“There’s only one way for you,” he repeated, and fell into silent brooding, the melancholy on his face deepening. Then the words came explosively:

“Take your freedom.”

“My freedom?” The puzzlement in her voice was also pain.

“What shall I do with my freedom?”

“Marry again.”

He heard her gasp, and paused, but only for an instant.
Firmly he continued: "Marry, this time, someone who isn’t a madcap like me. You are young, in your twenty-ninth year. Marry someone who will give you true happiness."

"Happiness?" The husky voice was huskier—with sudden tears.

Head bowed, she was crying, the tears pouring down her face without restraint. He let her emotion be spent. A long minute passed.

"It hurts me as much as it hurts you. That is why I say: Without your help I shall get lost."

She dried her tears with a corner of her sari, but they started spilling again. Between bursts of sobbing she breathed, "By ‘help’... you mean... my freedom? That’s the help you are asking for?"

"Ruchi," he said, "how dare I ask for the other kind?"

Her sobbing ceased. Her face began to clear. And the compassion was close to pity as she said in a murmur, "You can ask anything from me."

He would not understand what her denial would mean. What did that matter? She would be his companion in ideas even if they were so very strange.

But she did not yet know the full meaning of her denial, the suffering to come. The suffering of the woman and the mother. It was not enough to have only one child, and she had lived long on the edge of expectation. Two sons—

All the same, in those days, her faith in the stone god was strong and her surrender complete. Or nearly so.

There were rare moments, more and more rare as the years went by, when the tormented stone god lost his iron restraint and, seized by something tempestuous, he drew Suruchi to him and made love. Suruchi struggled to remain passive while the mother in her clutched at those moments as hungrily as the woman.

No baby came out of the rhapsody. Over and again she nursed a desperate hope in her heart until she knew the truth, and grieved.

Time passed; time passed fast. Still, once in a while in course of the years hastening her through the twilight of youth,
she felt lone for her unborn sons. She had even given them their names. Ajoy and Sanjoy.

Even today, when she was well into middle age and Sumita twenty, Ajoy and Sanjoy came jostling sometimes into her thoughts, and the yearning on her face was then vivid. Once, Sumita saw that expression, and cried out in surprise, “What is it?”

The answer was curious—it came as a question.

“Sumita, don’t you wish you had . . . a brother? Two brothers?”

The girl’s eyes kindled. “Yes! Of course!”

“Sumita—” She stopped. “Sumita”—the hardness came into her voice as she forced herself to continue—“remember this: When you marry, make up your mind to have many children. Let nothing stand in your way. Nothing.”

The girl stared. What’s come upon my mother? she thought, watching the excited face, and it was moments before the accustomed calm returned.

“Your mother is somewhat mad, don’t you think so, Sumita? She tells things that should rather be left unsaid!”
Sumita stood at the house gate, waiting, ready to set out with Satyajit on their daily chore of an early-morning round of the village. As she saw him come down the veranda steps, she spoke the thought heavy on her mind, "Poor Mother! Not to have found me at the airport—a letter instead, with bad news."

She would have loved the sight of Mother stepping down from the big aircraft. How did it feel to touch Indian earth as you returned from abroad? Mother had been away ten days, but that short span was now a page of history!

"Two hours ago, she was flying over Ladakh!" said Satyajit. He looked bemused as he closed the bamboo gate behind them, with sudden recollection that the day before her departure Suruchi had given the drab dusty gate a coat of green paint. She had prepared the paint out of certain materials she had found in the village, and the effect was surprisingly bright.

"Ladakh," Sumita echoed. "Isn’t that part of Kashmir?" She had looked it up in geography books, but there was not a line on Ladakh. An obscure area of no importance, now caught in a strong spotlight!

The tall man gazed straight ahead of him at the horizon and a thousand miles beyond. "Look!"—he lifted an arm, fist clenched—"this hand; it’s India’s northernmost region, Kashmir, with the capital city Srinagar. A road from Srinagar"—he traced a line with the other hand—"a road from Srinagar climbs the jagged brown mountains of eastern Kashmir to the area called Ladakh. At twelve thousand feet stands the township of Leh. A
lifeline by air connects Ladakh with the rest of India. Almost nothing is available in the vast desolation.”

“Leh’s the limit of our territory?”

“Oh, no. Ladakh goes up to the Chinese borders in Sinkiang and Tibet, over masses of mountain-locked valleys. Routes climb to posts held by our frontier guards at a height of twenty thousand feet. Those posts depend entirely on air-dropped supplies.”

She saw the frontier guards in their lone tents in the bitter cold of what could well be the Arctic region, though so close to the sun-baked plains of India. Groups of men in widely separated pockets. Ten miles of the mountain space were far more of a barrier than a thousand miles of plateau. Nothing could save those men if their lifeline was cut. Nothing to do but watch the snow-piled skyline. Suffocated by the massive silence. Hermits all.

Nothing to do? They were the watchmen of India’s freedom. Would that freedom ever be in peril? What if hostile hands struck out from beyond the silence . . . from Sinkiang? But that could never happen.

New Delhi had sent a protest note to Peking, pointing out the obvious error in Chinese troop movements. An error—it could be nothing else. No reply had come officially, but Radio Peking had spoken: Chinese frontier guards had simply moved into territory belonging to their People’s Republic. Indian check-posts must be withdrawn over a wide sector. The question settled that way, the two great peoples of Asia would be the best of friends for the next ten thousand years.

Radio Peking had been speaking those words in the past five or six days, repeatedly.

What now?

Satyajit gave his answer.

“Sumita, this is my belief. Let men from New Delhi and Peking meet, discuss. Both are committed to the Five Principles laid down in the memorable conference of Asian countries at Bandung. Bandung—that’s a city in Indonesia. The Principles include mutual respect for territorial integrity and nonaggression under all circumstances. With goodwill on either side—of that there’s more than enough—the borders will be demarcated justly and honorably.”
They had now reached Main Road. The village lay spread to the left and right—mud houses, each with a vegetable patch behind a hedge and a bamboo gate. A jeep was running ahead of them, a hundred yards away; in a minute it was lost to sight at a bend of the road.

"Men from Steeltown," said Satyajit.

"So it seems. Today they've come much too early. They must be in a great hurry."

Jeeploads of men from Lohapur had been seen moving in the stretch of meadow, measuring it with long metal tapes, making notes, and in the last four or five days they had been probing the village. Engineers from the steel mill, Sumita knew. Men with no understanding. Men with no idea what Gandhigram meant. Four square miles of farmland that could be acquired by a cash payment—that was what they thought. It wouldn't be long before the deluded ones learned a lesson. They would at last find things that would not resolve into money value!

There were other values Gandhigram stood for—Lohapur would have to realize that. The apparently insignificant village was building up a model for the whole of India. The new community of people was creating a social order in which all were truly equal. All land belonging to the cooperative. Food from the fields distributed according to needs. Other needs met by small industries based locally; economic self-sufficiency was the set aim. There were the weavers who produced on handlooms every yard of the cloth the village consumed. Two blacksmiths forged plowshares, cartwheel rims, and the pots and pans the householders needed. Two men turned sugarcane into jaggery—the brown unrefined jaggery was a better diet than factory-made sugar. An artisan made paper out of pulp drawn from certain trees in the adjoining woods. Three men pressed the crop of mustard seed.

The women had their share in the productive work. They husked the rice, ground their own flour. And above all else they spun the yarn with which cloth was woven. Every house in the village had its spinning wheel.

Gandhi had spoken a thousand times about khadi, the cloth handwoven from homespun yarn. He had called it the sun of the village solar system: "The planets are the various industries
that can support khadi in return for the heat and sustenance they derive from it. Without it, the other industries cannot grow. But without the revival of the other industries, khadi could not make further progress. Village life must be touched at all points."

The frail old-world wheel of wood set against the giant machines of the modern age.

The fight was with the system that welded human beings to the machines. But that was not all. Mechanization, Gandhi had said, was inevitable when there was dearth of labor. It became needless and an evil when there was a surplus of hands. The problem in India was not how to find leisure for the teeming millions in its villages, but how to utilize their idle hours. Gandhi was not against the kind of machine that helped an individual to add to his efficiency without turning him into its helpless slave.

They saw the jeep again as they reached the bend of the road; it was standing under a tree.

"Let me have a look"—Satyajit strode off on his long legs. Should she follow him? Sumita felt unsure. Her steps slowed and her thoughts returned to Ladakh. There was a radio set at the schoolhouse, and at sundown, after an early meal, the village assembled in the facing playfield to be entertained by song and speech. Last night Sumita had listened to Radio Peking. The language it used was arrogant and even abusive.

Satyajit saw the man at the jeep’s wheel, his head bent over an office file. Off the road, in the clump of mango trees, two surveyors were at work with instruments on tripods.

"What’s all this?" Satyajit demanded sharply.

The man in the jeep looked up, frowning because of the interruption, but as he saw the other his expression changed at once to respect. His hands rose in salutation.

"I know you, sir, from press photographs." He threw the file aside and stepped out.

"What’s happening there?"

"Those men? Our fourth blast furnace will be built on that site." He indicated the mango trees with a broad sweep of his hand.

"Blast furnace?"

"I am Bhashkar Roy, Chief Engineer of Lohapur Steel Company. You may have heard about our expansion project. I would
have called on you as soon as the surveying was done. It's a pleasure to—"

Satyajit interrupted. "Haven't you taken too much for granted?"

"I plead guilty. But where's the alternative? Our hand has been forced. We have to complete our project at great speed."

"Who has forced your hand?"

"Ladakh," said Bhashkar, a hardening in his voice.

Satyajit waited.

"We couldn't be wrong in taking your approval for granted—you know how things stand. Our troops must have modern arms. Much of the equipment they now have is old, obsolete. And steel is the core of all armament."

"Why this preoccupation with armament?"

Bhashkar stared, astonished.

"Do I have to tell you all about Ladakh, sir?"

"This idea of yours is much older than the news from Ladakh, isn't it? Ladakh has become a good excuse."

The answering voice was a bemused murmur. "Oversimplification! Steel means economic progress. Machine tools, tractors, big industrial plants, locomotives. Steel to fight poverty and hunger. But steel has gained a second meaning. It stands for our country's freedom. That is an inescapable fact, not to be changed by wishful thinking. Development plus defense—a compulsion of our current history. To meet the demands is far from easy. We have no choice, though."

"Look, Mr. Roy—"

"Why not call me Bhashkar?" The bemused face was abruptly warm. "In fact, I am not as old as I look!"

For the first time now, Satyajit saw the man behind the menace. Well built, about his own height. Dressed in the Western way, the sleeves of his white shirt rolled up. Square-jawed, self-assured. The kind of man who fought hard for whatever he wanted. He wanted Gandhigram apparently. He would not get it. Even if he made a fetish out of Ladakh and played on excited feelings.

Bhashkar also gave a measuring glance. Hair graying at the temples—though only fifty, according to the Indian Who's Who. He was the soul of Gandhigram, but no mere echo of the great
one whose name the village had adopted. A social philosopher in his own right, he was going forward from the point where Gandhi had left off. Wouldn’t he realize what was at stake? Was he really hoping that the feet of aggression would be halted, automatically?

“Baba!”

The jeep had concealed the girl from them while she was walking up. She came into view when hardly ten steps away.

“Bhashkar, this is Sumita, my daughter.”

Her glance touched the stranger’s face for a moment. This was the man Father had spoken about. The strong man of Steel-town who wanted Gandhigram destroyed. By what means? By what manner of violence? Had he not heard of the nonviolent resistance that had blunted the sharp weapons of the world’s mightiest empire?

Satyajit was relating to his daughter what he had just heard. A blast furnace would be built on the site of the mango grove. “What symbolism!” he added, his smile ironic, and that provoked an instant retort from Bhashkar.

“There is no room today for that kind of sentimentality. It’s a question of our survival. We have to get steel, more and more, at any price. The pace of production must quicken.”

“Any price?” The girl’s calm eyes returned to the stranger. “What about human obligations?”

He met the challenge of her look. Eyes too big and insipid, he decided. The eyes of a cow. But nothing cowlike in her demeanor.

“Even human obligations must yield ground to national interest.”

“Listen, Bhashkar”—Satyajit was speaking—“we also work for national interest, in our own humble way.”

“Who in India does not know that?” He was all respect again. “You have given yourself to your ideals. But that is beside the point, sir. Here is a simple question of accelerated production. Know-how. Latest techniques. Planning. Blueprints. You have to stand aside and let us do our job.”

“We are by no means opposed to production. We have our own method.”
Bhashkar broke into laughter, but stopped himself almost instantly.

"The fact is that our machines can produce in a minute the sum total of whatever you make with your hands in a year. Why, you even turned down our offer to supply you with current. Electricity is banned in this village."

He turned to Sumita again with open appraisal. She holds herself in cool dignity, an aloofness that makes her seem self-enclosed—is that the truth about her, or is it simply the effect of her clothes, the coarse all-white homespun? Not a trace of decoration, no color anywhere on her person. Her chapped underlip could carry a touch of red with profit!


Ends justify means."

Satyajit shook his head. "You can never attain good through evil. That was the essence of all that Gandhi-ji had to say."

Bhashkar shrugged his shoulders.

"There's no getting away from mass production. It's the only way to get fast-paced production."

"What about the by-products?" Satyajit roughly demanded, an accusing finger pointed at the other, daggerlike.

"By-products?"

"Vice. Various brands."

Lips pressed, Bhashkar was silent for a time—he could be laughing within himself. He heard Satyajit resume:

"Must you try to bring the contamination to Gandhigram? Vice, almost endemic in your blueprints—"

"What's wrong with vice?" The unexpected query came flashing.

Satyajit, taken aback, had no ready reply.

"Let me tell you, sir: Vice is the darkness that gives value to light. No darkness, and light is hurtful. Let there be some virtue, some vice. Let them be juxtaposed, balanced." Satyajit had no comment still, and the hard voice ground on: "Virtue and vice together give life its color, savor. That's what I've experienced personally. One without the other could easily destroy us."
There is something Gandhian about such a confession, thought Satyajit, in astonishment. But the words he spoke had a contrary note.

"No, my friend. Virtue is creative, while—"

"So is vice. Within limits. With restraint. Vice may well be a way of self-realization. It may be . . ." He stopped with another shrug of his broad shoulders. "You will not understand that, sir. Let's not discuss vice—ever again."
Chapter
Four

The siren poured the commanding shrillness of its call upon the dark hour, pausing, starting anew, and Bhashkar Roy, in the massive concrete-and-glass structure named Steelhouse, looked up at the electrical wall clock in surprise. Time already for the third shift. Time had flown on fast wings. Midnight. Sixteen hours gone. His backbone was aching under the strain; his buttocks felt cramped. Would he keep on working? Why not? Each tick of the clock meant an opportunity used or lost. Each five ticks—or it could be four—signaled the birth of an Indian child. A child to be fed, clothed, reared, educated; given cultural fare, given employment, given his due share of the human heritage. Sixteen hours—that was nearly sixty thousand ticks of the clock. More than twelve thousand babies born in that span of time between the Himalayas and the Cape. Had production risen over that period to meet the newborn demand? If not . . .

Hard work came easy to him—America had seen to that! America had been unsparing in its demand; and he in turn had taken greedily all he could get. Even at the age of twenty he had known what he wanted. He had not wanted a safe post as an engineer and the cozy warmth of self-satisfaction. America would be an adventure. His parents understood him, and blessed his spirit. They let him leave college halfway through the course, book a cheap passage on a freighter, and sail away.

He was ready for struggle—that also came easy to him. He took any employment he could get. At the year’s end he was a mechanic in a Pittsburgh garage. Then luck came his way and led him to the big steel mill. The doorway was low, but he
stooped willingly, and it was from this point that America's demand on him grew, and his own on America grew too. His rise was steady and fast.

He absorbed America with all his senses. Not know-how alone. He absorbed much of the human scene. He drank hard with the men. He dated with the women. He was now very far from his homeland—in something other than mileage. Yet it could well be that within him India remained as real as ever before. That, maybe, was the reason why, even after a stay of twelve years, he could cut the strong pull of America all at once and fly back home.

The decision was a matter of minutes. At an embassy party in Washington he met a visiting minister from New Delhi, and in course of talk heard him say: “You see, ours is a problem of sheer survival. We are on the edge of a precipice and we stand dizzied. Mind you, this is not just a figure of speech. Any day we may go hurtling to our doom—literally. How old were you when the famine struck?”

“Thirteen.”

“We pulled out of it with two million dead. But death meant release from misery. It was much worse for those who lived on: the dead-alive.” He gave his young listener a piercing glance. “Hard for you to understand that! You have lived so long in a paradise. You earn a lot of money; you enjoy complete safety.”

Safety? Bhashkar knit his brow. Had he ever asked for safety? But here it was, holding him enmeshed. The adventure had ended. He might just as well marry and have a house of his own with a hundred gadgets acquired by hire-purchase. Presently a fond father . . .

He made a gesture of scorn with his hand, wiping off the prospect, and at that moment it came upon him that adventure could still be his for the asking—India would be an adventure. He flung a question to which he knew the answer:

“What’s to be done?”

“Rapid industrialization,” the Minister said.

“Why don’t we get on with it?”

“You think it’s as easy as all that?”

“Easy?” Sharply. “Why does it have to be easy?”
Their glances met, and each searched the other’s mind for a point of contact. The visitor’s face became happy. He looked down reflectively into his glass and took several sips before he spoke again.

“Come to India,” he said. “We need men like you.”

“What shall I do in India?” But the decision was already made; the adventure had begun.

“I’ll send you word after I return to New Delhi. Meanwhile, get ready.”

“I don’t have to get ready, sir. I am not as good a citizen of paradise as you seem to think!”

The cabled message came two months later.

So here he was in the new Steeltown, a machine among the machines, all working at top gear to make four hundred million lives a little more livable. And almost a year was gone—

The pace of progress had been set. But somewhere a note of complacency had stolen in. The country had every potential resource to pull itself away from the edge of the precipice. Ten years more, two other Five-year plans, fifty million kilowatts of hydropower, new-found oil gushing generously from the desert sands of Gujarat and Rajasthan, reserves of uranium yielding atomic power for peaceful use—

Then came Ladakh.

Bhashkar, faced by the news, nodded to himself. I can see how your mind works, Mr. Mao. India, making economic progress at this rate, will become a roadblock on your path of imperialist expansion. Not expansion of territory—that’s an outdated concept. Power. You need power over Asia. Then—onward to the African continent. Mr. Mao, the graph of your aspirations is no Chinese puzzle!

He had cast his mind forward over the years. Aggression in the Himalayas would force this country to begin a massive buildup of the armed forces lest freedom be imperiled. The limited resources, the potential for economic progress, would have to be hugely diverted to nonproductive effort. Soldiers or technicians—that was the option. India could not afford to have both in a big way. Military expansion would keep the country poor. The masses of the people would have to remain at the subsistence level. And the Army, unsupported by an adequate
industrial base, would become more and more enfeebled.

The siren shrilled its last call, and its voice trailed off into quiet. Bhaskar signed a letter, pushed it to the tray at his left. Rising, he took four long strides over the deep-blue carpet. Hot air swept past his face into the air-conditioned room as he flung open the windowpane. There lay the steel town—ten thousand orbs of light on the streets made various geometrical designs. Two miles away, the blaze of an open-hearth furnace gave the air a flame wash. Two hundred tons of steel ingots in each round of smelting: the means of life for two hundred newborn babies. The babies would not eat steel. But steel was the spine of the economy. Steel was food and clothing and dwelling. Steel was culture and art and ritual. And steel was soon to be the honor of the people, the shield of their freedom.

The telephone was buzzing. He turned round. Who could possibly know he was here so late in the night? Had something gone wrong and were they looking for him everywhere? At this time a stoppage or even a slowdown would be disastrous.

"Sir," the voice came, "may I bring you a cup of coffee?"

He took time to recover from his surprise.

"Coffee, Mrs. Mehra? You know the time?"

"You had nothing for supper."

"How do you know? Didn't you leave the office at the usual hour?"

"Yes. But your cook, Ramlal, came to my house and told me. He brought your supper in a container. You ate two or three spoons of tomato soup and half a piece of toast, and sent back all the other food. You must be—"

He supplied the word. "Hungry." He went on, "Why did that man go and tell you what I had eaten? That's not part of his duty!"

The voice from the receiver was almost a whisper: "Sir, I left instructions."

That was it. His personal secretary kept her eye on him even when she was not in the office. She was now waiting at the other end of the line for his decision about coffee. In that instant he felt the emptiness in his stomach.

"When will you come? Where do you live?"
“Sir, I’m right here in my room. I can come over in a moment.”

She had not worried about his decision! She knew his mind. “O.K.,” he said, and waited.

She had a Thermos in one hand, a large breakfast cup and a jug of milk in the other. Tilting the Thermos over the cup, she said, “You like it white, I know.”

“What else do you know? . . . Sugar?”

She smiled in answer, and her hand plunged into the neck of her white blouse, returning with a cellophane package of sugar.

What a storage place! thought Bhashkar in surprise. Mrs. Mehra was tall, hefty, thirtyish. Her husband was a foreman at the coke-oven battery. How would he regard this benevolent mission?

Her hand dived again to the storage place and emerged with another packet. Three slices of cake!

“Fruitcake,” she said coaxingly. “It’s homemade, sir.”

“Your husband does not mind?” He was stirring the coffee.

“Mind? What’s there to mind?”

“You know what I mean.”

She recalled the scene at home a half hour before. She had thrown a scarf about her shoulders, ready to go out, when he stood in her way. “Mrs. Sarojini Mehra!”—that was his fond way of addressing his wife—“is it proper for you to go and see a man at this late hour?” “Man? What man? He is like a son to me.” “Big son—your own age!” “Even so. A woman may find her son in a person older than she. What do you know about women?” “Nothing. But then, Mrs. Sarojini Mehra, you may have heard one or two tales about our respected Chief Engineer.” “All false. Malice must wag its long tongue. So young and holding such a big post. Twelve years in the land of beauties, and he comes back home without a spouse. What more could you ask for?” “Here in Lohapur—the other day—” “Hush! Don’t believe a word of what you’ve heard. The mother of a girl of marriage age tried to entrap him. That’s all.” “Indeed?” “Yes. Midnight has struck and there he is still in Room Nineteen. He came as usual at eight-thirty in the morning, and has scarcely left his chair since. His noon meal came to him on a tray, and
he only sniffed at it. No supper. His fellow officers have all gone
to a big party at the club. They’ve eaten good food, and now they
must be dancing the twist and cha-cha with the gaily dressed
girls of the town. And there sits the CE in an empty building
without a bite of food, making notes for a project report. Twelve
years in the land of fabulous wealth, and he comes back empty-
headed. He is a saint, I tell you.” “Why, he must be just stupid.
If I had the chance—” “You don’t have to tell me. I know what
you would have done in America. That’s why it’s wise for you
to keep your mouth shut. The less said, the better for everyone
concerned. Now pick up your bicycle and go on your night
duty. The siren has blown three times. . . .”

The Chief Engineer’s mouth was full of cake. “Or maybe
you don’t know what I mean?” he blurted. His eyes showed a
twinkle.

She ignored his words. “More coffee?” She tilted the bottle
again. “When you are ready, sir, I’ll take dictation. The report
on Gandhigram.”

His regretful glance swept the pile of papers on his spacious
desk.

“Not ready yet. If I keep working two hours more—” He
looked at Mrs. Mehra, and saw alarm rush to her face. “You
don’t have to stay,” he added softly. “After all, I can’t pay you
overtime at this hour!”

An idea entered her head. It might work or it might not.
She could try.

“I may as well stay in this building—until daybreak,” in a
murmur, as if to herself.

“Oh, no!”

“To walk back home at this time of night on payday! So
many drunkards about—”

He smiled at her. “Harmless people. With drink in their
heads they wander in a world of their own.” Reminiscence made
him smile again, to himself. New Year’s Eve in Pittsburgh . . .
If only Mrs. Mehra had seen him then!

“On payday last week a young woman was riding a bicycle.
An hour after midnight—” There was drama in her voice, but
she stopped short. She shook her head expressively. “Better that
I sit in my room and wait for the night to end. A woman must
seek safety. I have some typing on hand and I can get busy."

"No. You must go home and sleep. Tomorrow there will be heavy work for you."

"But... sir..."

He was thinking. With a quick glance she tried to read his face. She saw his hand rise to his mouth, stifling a yawn, and felt hopeful. A crumb of cake lay on the greenish drapery of the table, and she picked it up and threw it into the wastebasket. She screwed the red plastic cap on the Thermos.

"I'll be in my room, sir—" She took two steps doorward.

"Wait a minute, Mrs. Mehra. I think I've worked hard enough. I'll go home. If you want a lift... You live in Section Eight?"

"That would be too much trouble for you, sir. Drunkards may be harmless, as you say. Even though that young woman was—" Again she stopped.

Regret filled his eyes as they rested awhile on the heaped files. The project report couldn't wait. Every file was marked "Immediate." But how could he let Mrs. Mehra be ravished by drunkards? The risk lay only in her imagination, but then she had braved the fancied peril of the night on his account.

... Sarojini Mehra beamed with honest pleasure. Her little scheme had worked. The CE was going back home to bed. And here she was in the jeep beside him on the front seat, and he was silent as he drove fast, sunk in thought. He was back to his files, she knew. Back to Gandhigram and the new blast furnace. Not more steel alone. Products of steel. That meant arms. That was Top Secret. She had to know every Top Secret in the files marked Confidential and kept apart from all other files in a special safe. It was rumored that there were enemy agents about. Security measures had been tightened at various levels. She, Sarojini Mehra, mother of three children, was vested with full trust, high responsibility; since Ladakh there had been a Top Secret almost every day.

The streets lay empty until the blooming mill was reached. Here, men of the last shift were passing through the gateway; the rest of the night they would melt the huge steel ingots and give them shape... Another five minutes' drive and there was Section Eight. Bhashkar went up to Mrs. Mehra's house door.
"We didn't see the drunkards," he said, with the twinkle she knew.

He did not turn back; he drove on eastward, beyond the shabbier residential quarters, beyond the long rows of workers' tenements in Section Twelve, until the streetlamps grew fewer—the last one marked out the meadow's edge. The jeep went bumping along a deeply rutted track. At the end of the third mile the meadow was fringed by palm trees, mud houses nestling between them unobtrusively. That was where Gandhigram began. The jeep's wheels came to a grinding halt.

He leaned back in his seat, gazing into the darkness of the village. A furlong away was the dim flicker of a single oil lamp perched on a squat wooden post. Gandhigram lay fast asleep.

A growing city had to absorb its hinterland. Lohapur could not be an exception. What was Gandhigram but an idea? The idea could be transplanted to some other soil! The men of the village would get full compensation. Each peasant of Gandhigram could buy elsewhere twice the measure of land he now had under plow. Each mud house could be exchanged for a brick house. And as for those toy workshops out of the eighteenth century—

That strange girl he had met early in the day. White-garbed like a widow, and walking barefoot. The only Indian girl of her age who wore no adornment, not even glass, nor the customary red mark on the brow. Eyes too big for the face and too calm to be attractive. But attractive, maybe, for some people.
The material of the white sari and jacket in which Sumita always draped herself was the cotton fabric woven out of yarn she produced with her own spinning wheel. The wheel had once belonged to Gandhi, and Satyajit had received it from him as a gift. For years he had not let it be worked by any hand other than his own. Even Suruchi was not to touch that precious possession. But when Sumita reached her fourteenth year, Satyajit gave the charka to her as a birthday present. The girl turned embarrassed eyes to her mother. And the mother, having noted the placid expression on her husband’s face, concealed her hurt. Had not Sumita always meant more to him than she?

The other hurt was not easy for Suruchi to conceal: the girl, adoring her father, drawing closer to him with each passing year. If only she had remained a child, helpless without her mother! Suruchi had shared a bed with her until she was six, and tall for her age. Then Sumita had asked for a bed of her own. It was not too bad, though; one cot touched the other, and Suruchi had only to reach out an arm to feel the child’s presence. Often at night she drew to the edge of her bed, close to Sumita, and held her clasped round the small waist as she slept. But Sumita would sometimes roll off to the other side of the cot; the mother’s arm would then be denied and lone as it lay outstretched.

She wore no gold or silver on her person—there was no place for costly jewelry in Gandhigram—but she would have loved to see her child’s person adorned. Every peasant girl—and woman—wore colored glass. These decorations could not be produced
in the village, and had to be bought in the city market. The Council of Five who had charge of the village affairs had discussed the problem. Here was something that went against the concept of self-sufficiency. But the village people seated in a circle around the council—its meetings were open to all—struck a contrary note.

"Women can do without food, but not without trinkets of this kind or that."

"Even if such things don’t really add to their grace."

"Why, comely arms do deserve a few pieces of churi."

"A red bead chain looks happy and beaming on a young woman's neck."

Then came Satyajit’s voice of dissent: "We have no place for nonessentials. Besides, such things will encourage frivolity. Once a loophole is created—"

In the silence that followed, he looked from face to face. "What do you think?" he asked his colleagues, and they in turn looked at the people who sat around. The silence held.

"You seem to disagree."

"The people have set us thinking. You heard what they said."

A quiet minute went by.

"If that’s your decision—" The council had rejected his guidance for the first time, and he gave way.

But Suruchi, true to Satyajit’s ideas, kept her arms bare. Vijayanti’s mother spoke to her one day—she was about her own age, just over thirty. "The village women hate to see your arms bare. They’ve sent you this gift." Two white conch-shell wristlets lay on her palm. So well polished and neat—Suruchi gazed fascinated. But she cried quickly, "No, oh no!" She turned a curious glance on Vijayanti’s mother. Only a year back she had given birth to a baby, her second child. Her husband, though a member of the Council of Five, did not share in all of Satyajit’s beliefs, apparently. Satyajit stood in lone splendor!

"You don’t wish"—the answer came sharply—"that all of us in the village break every bangle we have and snap the thread of every bead chain?"

"Why? Why should you?"
“That will happen if you deny us.”

So Suruchi wore the white wristlets. Later, she acquired colored glass bangles for her daughter, and as the years passed these had to be changed for a larger size. But one day, while the girl, then in her sixteenth year, was busy with the spinning wheel, Suruchi noticed her arms and was struck with surprise. Barel! The bangles were gone, every piece. The beads as well.

She understood. The defeat rankled. Angry with herself, she struggled to strip her own arms—they had become more plump, and the wristlets were tight. Sumita was holding a mirror before her mother, and it contained the image of her unworthiness. Eyes filled with that image, she walked out to the vegetable patch between house and roadway, found a piece of stone, and, seated on bare earth, she struck at the ornaments. Her body winced with pain, and the skin reddened, but she did not give up.

She had broken one wristlet and was attacking the other when she heard a voice say, “No, no, don’t do that!”

Startled, she looked up, and there was Bireswar Basu standing beyond the bamboo gate, a neat figure in his gray felt hat and faultless Western clothes. Her husband’s college friend in Cambridge. He had been visiting with them every year, for a fortnight.

Strange that two close friends could be such worlds apart! Bireswar made mock of all Satyajit’s beliefs. Even the spinning wheel drew barbed remarks. Satyajit in turn laughed at his friend. He said: “Bires never means what he says. A queer fellow. You know, Suruchi, he never wore a hat in Cambridge, but as soon as he returned to India he bought one!” “True,” the other agreed. “In Cambridge I didn’t have to bear any Western stamp. I could have worn a loincloth.” “And here in India you have to be more Western than the Westerner?” “True again. Lest I get sucked into the sixteenth century. Like you.” “Sixteenth century? That was the time of Akbar the Great. A golden age in our history. You’d have enjoyed that period, Bires!” And the two friends started to laugh—you could see how they enjoyed each other’s banter. In his friend’s company Satyajit shed his years and his gravity.

Here was Bireswar again on a visit. The bamboo gate opened and he stepped up. He heard Suruchi speak a word in greeting even while the stone in her hand struck twice.
“Why? Suruchi . . . ?”

She looked up a moment, and could not bear the intensity of his downbent glance. That made her angry with herself. She forced a smile to her face, saying, “I’m too old to wear trinkets.”

“Too old? You?”

The tone of his voice troubled her. Sumita was sixteen, she reminded him. But he gave a curious rejoinder. “Will you grow old—ever?” It was as though he spoke in resentment.

She did not know what to say. She saw him stoop, pick up the fragments of conch shell and slip them into his inner pocket. “A symbol of this strange moment,” he said. And that was the time when Sumita came clamoring out of the house door.

“Bires-Uncle!”

Next year, as the time for his usual visit drew near, he wrote to say that he could not come. “As you know, Satyajit, I am now a Member of Parliament. There is so much to do.” And he gave the same excuse in the years that followed.

She did have a glimpse of him at Delhi airport, but not while she was waiting for the flight to Moscow to be announced. She had passed the Customs and was proceeding toward the tarmac when she saw him at the rope barrier. Their eyes met and he smiled—he smiled, so it seemed to her, in a pathetic way. Why had he not come earlier? He had avoided her, obviously. Would he do that again when she passed this way on her return from Moscow? That was beyond doubt.

So it was that, Sumita’s letter in hand, she was sure there would be no one to receive her at the airport. Alone, she would go to the railway station, where she must spend the whole day waiting for the train. But—the surprise! Bireswar stood at the door of the Customs hall.

“You didn’t turn your glance this way even once!” he said with the grin she knew.

Happiness came upon her. “I didn’t expect you! If only—”

She stopped. There was a girl by his side, watching eager-eyed.

“Nandini, my niece,” Bireswar said, introducing her. “She’s been looking forward to meeting you. A great admirer of Satyajit—she has read his books.”

“Nandini, you must be Sumita’s age.”

“Almost. I’ll catch up with her in less than a year!” She
was too thin, the collarbone bare; and the face was delicately shaped over the longish neck that added an extra inch to her height. Her hair was clipped short, not reaching beyond the shoulder line.

"We are going to Nandini's house," Bireswar resumed. "Her father is in the Army—a brigadier. And her mother"—the grin came again—"she is a major general!"

"Major general indeed!" Nandini dimly smiled.

"That house will be quite a change for you, Suruchi, after the Peace Congress! You can have a bath and breakfast and some rest, if the two ladies in the house give you a chance. In the evening I'll come and take you to the railway station. I have to be in the House meanwhile; there will be a late session. The Prime Minister will make a statement on Ladakh."

He had not let her down, staying away from the airport; all the same, he would keep his distance from her. Was that not unnecessary? She gave him a wondering glance. How long had he kept those fragments of her bangle? The symbol of a strange moment, he had said. What did he know about that moment?

The questions he asked as the three set out in a cab were impersonal. Did they discuss Ladakh at the Peace Conference? Did she have a talk with any delegate from Peking? Could she make out what, exactly, the Chinese wanted?

"Not a word about Ladakh was spoken," she told him.

"That's understandable."

"What's the feeling here in India? I should like to know that."

"Utter bewilderment. A state of shock. What are all those troops for? Troops marching on Indian territory. Nehru has known for years what's been happening in Aksai-Chin. But he's been steadfast in his belief that everything will be settled in a friendly way. He kept this problem a close secret for years lest anger grow in India and chances of understanding be swept away."

"And—what now?"

He echoed pensively, "What now." He was silent for a few moments. "It's up to history to answer that question, Suruchi."

Then she told him about the Chinese woman, the one who had wanted war: war to end all wars. The Chinese would come
to India as liberators. To link those words with the happening in Ladakh—that was a terrible thought! No, the woman must have been speaking only for herself.

"Let's not rush to any kind of conclusion," he commented. "Let's wait and see."

Nandini's father was really a brigadier. And the major general—that, of course, was one of Bireshwar's jokes. Nandini asked many questions about Sumita. "How I wish she could come to Delhi for a holiday!" she cried yearningly.

It was hours later, when the train was about to start and he was standing on the platform beside the window, that Bireshwar stepped at last to the personal plane.

"I wish I was going with you. But you haven't asked me, Suruchi. I could come just as I am, with no preparation."

She met his glance and her eyes did not waver.

"Come. Come just as you are. And don't think twice about it."

His face brightened but only for some moments. "You hear the guard's whistle? It's too late!"

Her voice took on a queer note of urgency. "No, no. You only have to step in through the carriage door."

"Too late, Suruchi!" The train had started to move. She thrust out her hand through the window with its glass down; she kept it waving to him, barely aware that the platform had passed, until she heard a voice:

"Husband—or elder brother?"

She swung round to face her two fellow passengers on the bench opposite. One, a boy of about twelve, was shelling peanuts—he had a big packet of them. The other, a gray-headed woman loaded with age, probably over eighty, was gazing at her intently. Her answer to the old one was somewhat brusque:

"Husband's brother." Having spoken, she wondered why she had not said "elder brother." But she fled, as always, from such inward proddings.

"Husband's Brother looked upset, poor man, knowing the danger." The aged face was very serious.

"What do you mean?" cried Suruchi, startled.

"Robbers!"

"What!"
Explanation came. Railway trains were unsafe these days. Robbers moved about freely. No woman should travel without escort. She herself never did, the aged one added pointedly.

“I don’t see your escort, Grandma.”

“You don’t?” A gnarled finger rose, pointing to the boy. He was lanky and wore glasses.

“He?”

“A month back, when we were on this train, he caught a robber fellow in the next car. I gave him a silver rupee for reward. Tell this lady all about it, boy.”

“What robber?” The youngster gave an unexpected snap.

“The one you caught on this train. He had a sharp cutlass.”

“I saw no robber fellow with sharp cutlass.”

“You caught him!”

“No!” The eyes behind the glasses blinked.

The aged face grew bewildered until understanding came, and approving nods. One could not be boastful before a stranger. Suruchi said: “Grandma, let’s go to sleep. Your brave escort will keep guard.”

“He will keep guard. Let’s sleep.” She laid herself down, and in a minute she was fast asleep.

“Keep your eyes wide open for robbers,” Suruchi said to the boy in a tight voice. “Catch one, and a silver rupee will again be yours.”

The boy looked out the window in stiff-lipped silence.

Stretched on her bench, eyes closed, Suruchi contemplated the dream interim that was about to end.

Why had her husband suggested that she go to the Peace Congress in his stead? “What good shall I be?” she had cried in alarmed protest. “They know you; they’ve read your books. They want you. You will make a real contribution to the debate.”

His answer had rung strange in her ears: “Why do you underrate yourself?”

He had at last seen some worth in her. But she continued her protest.

“I shall be out of place. I shall look stupid.”

“Let the World Peace Congress hear the voice of an Indian mother.”

Be it so. She would be Satyajit in Moscow. She would relay
Satyajit’s ideas to the Congress. But that was not what he wanted. He refused to write out for her the address she was to deliver. Or even the message for the inaugural session.

“Speak from your heart. Speak as a mother must. A mother who sees fifty million children facing thermonuclear doom. You can’t go wrong then.”

The delegates had been courteous. They had received her brief, halting speech with warm applause. She did not have to be Satyajit. Just a woman, just Suruchi. Even though, back home, she would again become a shadow or an echo.

A shadow or an echo—like Sumita.

Tall and fair and shapely but quite unadorned—her father’s wish was law for Sumita. Even if she had to be unwomanly.

In Moscow, Suruchi had felt the familiar ache in her heart. How well the bracelet of garnets at the big department store would have suited Sumita’s arm! She had almost bought that bracelet: she had the rubles, the fee for a talk on Radio Moscow. But at the last moment she had overcome the temptation and put the bracelet back in its case. Sumita had no use even for colored beads; how expect her to wear garnets? She would be sorry for her mother. In vain had her mother spent years in Gandhi’s hermitage. In vain had she shared in the life of Satyajit.

Shared? That was not the right word. She was part of Satyajit. The nail on his toe. A strand of hair on his scalp. And it had needed distance for her to find herself—after long years had passed.

Yet it was true that she still believed in his ideals. They had become part of herself. She was as much Gandhigram as he.

The village with its two hundred mud houses, seeking to build a set of values. Values to be lived, to be expressed in terms of deed. Complete equality. Unreserved fraternity. Limitless non-violence, as much in thought as in action. Slogans glibly voiced everywhere; in Gandhigram they had to be real. The Gandhian village was not its mud walls alone. It was spirit. The spirit of man striving to transcend the physical.

Ten years—a mere speck of time. And where was the measuring tape for inner achievements? You could be reasonably sure of the elderly folk. They had lived their old lives, and were eager
material for the new dedication. But all the others? The teenagers who came to Gandhigram and passed into youth?

Discipline was imposed from early childhood. Boys and girls bathed together in the village pond—that was Satyajit's idea, derived, as so much else, from a Gandhian experiment. It would be helpful in sublimating certain impulses. The core of bramacharya was not escape, but self-conquest. One renounced life, not in the emptiness of the jungle, but amidst all the bonds of domestic bliss.

Four other men besides Satyajit gave guidance, and all except one had been direct disciples of Gandhi. Gandhi was the rainbow, and these men were five of the rainbow colors. Satyajit, the intellectual aspect of the Master. Swami-ji, the man of religion in Gandhi. Krishnamurti, social worker dedicated to welfare work. Chittaranjan Ghose was the fiery politician, twelve years of his life buried in British prisons. And Madhab-Uncle—he was just the human side of Gandhi, whom the people of India had loved as Bapu-ji, Father. Four men came to the village from the outer world, but Madhab-Uncle had been there before its rebirth, a true link in its continuity over the ages. And while the others were often away, spreading their ideas elsewhere, building other units and cells, Madhab-Uncle was firmly fixed to the village earth.

Satyajit towered over all the others. He was unequaled among the equals. With each passing year he had shut himself up more and more in a loneliness where none could enter. Except Sumita—she knocked on the door of that loneliness, and it opened for her, briefly, to be closed again.

Satyajit, a continuation of the man of Sevagram.

Suruchi saddened. Here was a question she was not prepared to face. But it could well be that the question would one day become a menace. If, one day, the big challenge came, the supreme test.

She felt pinpricks in her heart. Compassion—and it was close to pity. But one day the pinpricks might become a sword thrust.

She withdrew from that hurtful vision to a pleasing one. There went the Heralds of Morn, a group of twelve, youths and maids in equal number, forming a procession and singing a verse
in unison. All round the residential quarters of the village they went at early dawn, wakening the people.

A feature of the village life for which she alone was responsible, a page out of the Santiniketan story. Satyajit had been part of that story. She could still visualize him standing on the guesthouse veranda, waiting for the singers to come and pass by, looking—looking at her, she knew, though she did not have to turn her head to see.

Had she not touched a chord of remembrance in him when, three years back, she offered to form the Heralds of Morn in Gandhigram and teach them to sing? Having listened, he had sat abstracted for a minute, and then: “It’s a good idea, Ruchi. We’re all for close communion between the youths and girls. I don’t have to tell you that.”

True enough. Yet the expectation was that there would be no awareness of sex between the two units. Just companionship. Just as it had been at the colony Gandhi had set up in South Africa a half century ago—Tolstoy Farm it was called. But there was once a lapse, and Gandhi had taken the task of atonement upon himself; he had undergone a five-day fast.

It had happened likewise in Gandhigram, two years back, and Satyajit had fasted for five days.

She recalled the youth involved—he worked at the forge. The village knew him as Great-Uncle’s grandson. He had not been moved to repentance by Satyajit’s fast, but, jilted by the girl, he had left the village, gone away to Steeltown, and become a millhand.

And the girl, named Jhanak. Her full-throated voice had dominated the chorus of twelve, and so it did still.

Eyes closed, ready for sleep, Suruchi saw the youths and maids as they went in a column past her house gate and she heard:

“Arise, it is dawn.
Where is the night that thou still sleepest?”

The lowered signal arm with its green eye of light let the train through, and Gandhigram was soon within view.
She stood at the doorway of the slow-gliding train—it stopped at the village for a minute on request—and the platform came crawling up to meet her, seething with people who had garlands of jessamine in their hands. Not an unusual sight; national celebrities visited Gandhigram often. Who was it today? The Congress President? He was expected about this time, wasn’t he? She felt a regret that Sumita and her father would be lost to her until the ritual of greeting was done. The first lovely moments of homecoming would be thrown away. Should she stand watching at the platform’s end? No. She would blend herself with the busy crowd and pay welcome to the visitor.

Her coach was close to the engine, which had passed the hundred-foot platform before the grind of wheels ceased. She descended on gravel beside the track, suitcase in one hand, flight bag slung on her shoulder. The crowd was surging this way. She walked up the platform’s incline, heard the cries of jubilation, and cast her eyes about for a glimpse of the visitor. A garland came slapping down on her own neck! Garland after garland—her neck could not hold any more. Dazed, she turned. What was all this? Where was her husband? Where was her daughter?

There he was, his head above the crowd, smiling down at her. He strode forward. “I have no flowers to give you. But . . . welcome home!” In the next instant a garland descended again, and it was from Sumita’s hand! “Welcome home!” she breathed.

So much happiness was hard to bear!

“Let me take those off your neck,” said Sumita. “More to come; there has to be room!” And after a pause, “Oh, Mother, if only I could have seen you step down from the big plane!”

“What’s all this about, Sumita—the threat against the village?”

“You will know in a while.”

The other four men of the Council were coming forward. First to greet Suruchi was the old farmer, and he had a garland, not of flowers, but of colored yarn.

“Why did you have to take this trouble, Madhab-Uncle? Your leg—”

“The whole village is here, welcoming you, Suruchi. How could this old one sit at home nursing his gouty leg?”

Then it was Swami-ji. Colored yarn again.
“Sir, you make me feel shamed.”
“No, Suruchi, this is my privilege.”

Out of the station gate, down the road, the village women trailing close behind while most of the men went their way. Beena’s grandma carried the blue bag marked AIR INDIA with a swagger. There was a murmur of comments:
“The new touch of brightness in her face! The sun and air of foreign lands have done her good.”
“But she is happy, back in her humble abode.”
“What wonder? She is our own blood-and-bone.”
“She looks fatigued after the long journey. She deserves rest. No chance!”
“We should have been patient. She could come to the schoolhouse tomorrow.”
“Too late to think of that. In an hour the village will be crowding up at the schoolhouse, waiting for her.”

Sumita was telling her mother about the new unexpected trouble, the menace from Steeltown. The village stood prepared to meet aggression. It was still to be seen what precise form that would take. Bhashkar Roy believed he was acting in the national interest. He had the rapt look of the dedicated.

“Bhashkar Roy?”
“Their Chief Engineer. We happened to meet him yesterday near the mango grove, the proposed site for a blast furnace. He has such curious ideas!”
“For instance?”
“He said virtue and vice together give life its color, savor. You need both. Can you understand that?”
“He said so? He has brave thoughts! How old is he?”
“Quite young. The youngest person of his age to hold such a post, Father says.”
“What does he look like?”
“He is as tall as Father.”
“Oh? And as handsome?”
Sumita considered that. “Yes,” she decided. “As handsome.”
“Then he would be Satyajit’s worthy opponent.”
“What does he know about the power of nonviolence? The lesson will not be pleasant.”
"That is true. Poor Bhashkar Roy."

"Poor Bhashkar Roy? Oh, Mother!"

But the mother’s face grew pensive, and there was nothing more she wanted to say on that subject.

Four or five minutes later they reached the house gate. Suruchi turned, inviting the women to come to the house. But Beena’s grandma passed the flight bag to her, saying: "You have a bare hour in which to get ready. We’ll wait for you at the school, Suruchi." Then they were walking off.

Suruchi gave her daughter a bewildered look.

Sumita explained. "The village will assemble at sunset to hear your story about the World Peace Congress."

"What! I have to tell them?"

"Of course!"

"No-oh! . . . Sumita!"

"You cannot hide yourself any longer. Your speech was reported in our papers. What acclaim!"

"How dreadful!"

"Hurry. Only an hour left. To the schoolhouse at sunset."

Suruchi emptied her flight bag. "Proceedings of the Congress." And while the two grew absorbed in the documents, she washed herself with water drawn from the well in the rear courtyard, and changed her sari. Freshened, she came back to the veranda and sat on the floor mat. Fruits and nuts were waiting for her on a brass plate, along with a glass of cool water.

"You have to hurry!" Sumita looked aside from her reading for a quick instant.

"Something that happened at the Peace Conference weighs on my mind." Her appealing glance touched her husband’s face as she ate. He pulled himself away from the reported words of Jean-Paul Sartre.

The Congress, representing more than fifty nations, had given a clear call for world peace, for coexistence of contrary ideas and social systems. Then why was Suruchi troubled by the memory of a single differing voice? A young woman with a pretty mouth and immense arrogance? She had not spoken with the blunt passion of the older woman, Mrs. Tung Pao, who had bought toy engines for her grandchildren in Peking. Yet it was
as though her cool words had contained the latent heat of ice! Satyajit listened intently as his wife told her experience. He remained thoughtful for a time. Then his face cleared.

“That woman wasn’t a delegate. She must have been speaking for herself. Perhaps she was trying to be subversive! An agent of some kind—she wanted to wreck the Congress.”

“But . . . the power she had over the Chinese delegate—”

“Whatever she was, why read a hidden meaning in her words?”

Suruchi felt unsure.

“I don’t know. She said Chinese and Indians will be brothers for the next ten thousand years. That isn’t a new thought. We in this country have always believed in brotherhood between the two peoples. Yet there’s this trouble in Ladakh.”

“Must we see an evil motive? The Himalayan border is well demarcated. Local Chinese guards have acted wrongly on their own initiative. What both the sides need is a cool dialogue to settle this petty dispute. Let the maps speak.” He turned to his daughter for her view. “Sumita?”

That absolute faith of hers in her father’s wisdom. He couldn’t be wrong. The mother’s eyes rested on the girl a long minute. She should have been at the Congress. The dream interim, the release, should have been hers.

“Another point worth considering,” Satyajit resumed. “What matters more for the Chinese—those barren rocks of Ladakh or the hearts of millions of Indians? Common sense gives a clear answer.”

“True,” Suruchi agreed.

“What warmth of feeling we’ve had for our brethren across the Himalayas! Ruchi, you have seen in Santiniketan the fruits of Tagore’s concern about China. Anxious to revive the old cultural link, he visited China forty years ago, at a time when the world had nothing but scorn for that country. He even set up in his university a Chair of Chinese Culture. A library of a hundred thousand Chinese volumes. A visiting professor from Canton.”

“There’s Chitta-Uncle striding up,” Sumita announced, looking toward the roadway. “He is coming to escort us to the schoolhouse. The village must have assembled there already.”
The sun had not set, but daylight was fading fast. Suruchi rose to her feet. She would make a speech—the second time in her life. The first was at the Peace Congress. As the scheduled time had drawn close, she had felt her heart flutter. Her voice, she had been sure, would tremble or even be gone. But nothing of that kind had happened.

The audience was seated on the grass. Chittaranjan would preside.

“Ladakh was the subject of my talk to them a few days back,” Suruchi heard her husband whisper to her. “There should be good news soon; news of a round-table conference that will settle the dispute.” His voice dropped still lower. “You don’t have to mention that mystery woman in Moscow.”

“Suruchi!” Chittaranjan called.

She made her speech with ease and grace, recapturing the scene of the Peace Congress. Her interest had been centered on the women delegates from all parts of the world, the wives and mothers who were the ultimate hope for world peace. Ten or twelve minutes passed before she came to the two women in the committee room, the old one who wanted war as the means to end all wars, and the beautiful one who had other, equally strange, things to say. Her glance swept over her husband’s face, and she noted his surprise and concern, but went on heedless.

“We shall not rush to a conclusion,” was her final comment. “We shall give our Chinese sister the full benefit of doubt. At the same time, we shall keep our eyes open to realities. We cannot afford to live in a paradise where we think all’s bound to be well.” She paused. “Facts will speak—in a few months or in a few weeks, maybe. Then the riddle of our beautiful Chinese sister will stand solved.”

When she sat down, there was a minute’s amazed hush. Then Chittaranjan said, smiling, “Even Satyajit has never given us a better talk.”

Suruchi cried in embarrassed protest, “Chitta-Uncle!”

“It is true!” There was a chorus of clamorous affirmation.

“We’ll soon be listening to her again—and again!”

“Satyajit knew! That’s why he sent her to Moscow.”

“Always she has been our happiness, and now she is our great pride!”
And Sumita, face radiant, said to her mother: "You see? What did I tell you? Never again will you be able to keep yourself in hiding!" She stopped. Someone had turned on the radio. _Here is the news._ The familiar voice from New Delhi.

It burst upon the audience like a bombshell.

"We regret to announce that Chinese armed forces in the region of Kongka Pass, Ladakh, close to Hot Springs, opened fire on an Indian patrol team of twenty men, without any provocation whatsoever. The firing continued until nine of the border guards lay dead. The others in the group were taken prisoner."
CHAPTER
SIX

THAT'S THE TROUBLE WITH YOU, BHASHKAR. YOU ARE IN America still—in your mind and heart.”

“So what?” The answering voice had a clear ring of impatience.

The two men were strolling an area of the meadow that served as pastureland, heedful of the long-horned kine, who with heads lowered absorbed half-dried grass and hot sunlight. A cowherd boy, cross-legged in the shade of a fig-tree, stopped playing on a bamboo flute at sight of the “Ironfolk,” seldom seen in this region close to the village.

“You have to leave America, don’t you see?” Behind blue sunglasses the General Manager’s eyes wore a look of anxious appeal. “You have to play football under the rules followed in this country.”

“We can also play baseball under Indian rules,” the other archly suggested.

Rangaswamy tried to see through that remark, and as understanding came he began to laugh. Short and thick-set, he was perspiring profusely in the muddy heat that seemed to leave Bhashkar unaffected.

“In plain words, we must Indianize the American techniques. Well, Bhashkar, why not? We don’t have the same tempo of living. I cannot talk to you on the details of steelmaking; I am a civil servant and not an engineer. All I can do is to give you a piece of general advice, and it’s this: Get used to our Indian sun.”

“If I can have no place under that sun—”
Rangaswamy stopped walking, and his appeal grew sharper.  
"Look, Bhashkar. You are young. In this country it’s rare for a person of your age to hold a post like yours. I know it’s different in the States."

There was an edge of scorn in the other voice: "In this country youth stands nowhere. Age alone counts. One becomes wiser under the sheer weight of one’s years."

"There is honest reasoning behind that, I can tell you, Bhashkar. Youth’s apt to be sentimental. Youth’s impulsive. We in India cannot afford to be either at this stage of our national development. The day will come for youth—"

Bhashkar was smiling again. "A hundred years hence?"

Rangaswamy lifted a forefinger. "There! Impulsive youth hitting out. Anyhow, be assured that you will have all my support, up to a point."

Bhashkar weighed the crucial words. Up to a point. And where was the point? It couldn’t be far ahead, he felt sure. Beyond that, he would have to fight his battle single-handed. Impulsive youth. Not to be vested with power until he came of age. In India you came of age when you reached your fiftieth year. That would be seventeen years more to wait. Having waited all that time, would he have in him any relics of the old urge for battle? Asian history would not wait all that time. Even in a narrower perspective . . . even if there were no further villainy in the Himalayas . . . The nine soldiers had not died in vain. They were the first recruits for Steeltown in its fight to annex Gandhigram. To annex, not a village, but an entire way of life. There couldn’t be two Indias, back to back, gazing at opposite horizons, ready to march off and get further and further apart.

Rangaswamy had taken his glasses off and was intent on a sketch map he had in hand that showed the meadow and the village beyond. Bhashkar pursued his own thoughts. The basic issues could not be written into sketches or blueprints; they would begin when Gandhigram’s life as a village had ended. The truth stood out that Gandhigram could be merged into Lohapur’s pattern with no severe strain. (Let the name itself be retained, as the name of the eastern area of the enlarged Steeltown.) The village craftsmen, well skilled in their own fashion, would find it easy to learn the new techniques. As for the tillers of the soil,
they would become unskilled millhands, and that would be no problem, either. Was not the entire working class of India drawn from the peasantry of only yesterday, and was not the process continuing today, hour on hour? Besides, there was one good reason why the change of occupation would be easy for these peasantfolk—they were all literate. That was Gandhigram's one remarkable gain.

The mud houses would go where they belonged—to the feudal past of India. A colony with blocks of new dwellings would be built on the meadow's left side; brick and mortar, supplied with current, water on tap day and night. Becoming one with the city, these people would at last learn how to live.

Vice—Satyajit had warned. A zest for living—that was vice! A bottle of wine. A date with a woman. An hour of gay abandon. Vice in this country lay choked in taboos, inhibitions—the rickety props of spiritual India! There was more of the truly spiritual in the world beyond. The modern State with its accent on equality; the same opportunities given to the elevated and the depressed; the social services. Yes, that was modern materialism. Let India receive its full share. Let life be easier, freer, happier.

Gandhigram, burdened with the ideas of a neo-saint, did not know what it missed. There would have to be new windows through which it could look upon the pageantry of life. Revolt would then come as a natural development. That was the best way. For, there was no individual ownership of land in that village; all land belonged to the community under a deed of grant. The community as a whole made every decision. Let the people end their isolation of their own free will. Let the neo-saint be swept off in a tide he would be unable to resist.

"Pity that you don't believe in the line of least resistance." Rangaswamy was speaking. "The village on our western side could have been acquired with the utmost ease. But it's Gandhigram, nothing but Gandhigram, that you want."

"As I have explained in my memo—"

Rangaswamy recalled the memo. The Board of Directors did not see eye to eye with Bhashkar—that was to be expected. Bhashkar did not withdraw his memo, but telegraphed his resignation. "What will you do if they accept, as they must?" Rangaswamy had asked, sympathetic, and Bhashkar had an-
answered, "There's a big world outside India." But the wonder happened: the Board reversed its decision and accepted the memo—not the resignation!

"We don't have to return to all that. It's the house in the meadow that's brought us here today," Rangaswamy jabbed a thick finger on the sketch he held. "This is the proposed site—"

Bhashkar turned his gaze to the meadow's end. As he spoke he could have been thinking aloud.

"There lies the village, behind the wall of Satyajit's ideas! Steeltown has to break that wall. We'll build a place like the Institute for our millhands—a center of social communion. We'll invite the village to share the new-built house with our own workers. The village will see modern amenities that have become part of the city's everyday life. They will compare the two ways of living. The conclusion they draw is bound to be in our favor. We have to capture the spirit of Gandhigram, not merely the acres of earth."

"When will you start building your Meadow House?" asked Rangaswamy.

"Tomorrow."

"And when will it be completed?"

"In thirty days."

"Thirty days? You can't be serious!"

"That is too long?"

"Too long!"

"You really think—oh!" He had seen the sarcasm. "The meadow is State property, of course; by immemorial custom the village enjoys the right of grazing kine there. We have acquired from the revenue authorities a plot of ground on a thirty-year lease—the site for Meadow House. Plans and blueprints are ready. The work will proceed round the clock. Thirty days—we can hardly afford to take longer."

"Hardly!" agreed Rangaswamy, his eyes blinking behind his sunglasses. He himself had no will for such a drive, a frantic race against time, but he would let his young assistant make use of all the fire in him—while it lasted. Yes, while it lasted.

"The new Institute will be a showpiece, apparently. What else will it do besides providing social communion?"

Bhashkar hesitated. He could not reveal to the GM the
heart of the matter: that he had taken a weapon from Satyajit's own hand. The weapon that was nonviolence. Satyajit knew how to resist violence but not nonviolence! The GM would not understand such things. He could be given, not the root idea about Meadow House, only the surface facts.

"There will be audiovisual publicity of what we stand for. First, the national context. The defense-oriented program of steel production. With the Himalayan wall gone, we stand exposed to attack from the north as never before in our history. Second, the personal context. Life is earnest, but it has to be good fun as well. It's . . . well, I suggest that you leave it all to me, sir. I'll have a word with the Public Relations Officer."

The GM looked relieved.

"We'll have an opening ceremony," Bhashkar added. "All the people in the village will be invited."

"What if Satyajit keeps his people away?"

"He won't do that. He believes in nonviolence no less in thought and feeling than in action. To decline our invitation will be violence."

"When will you send the invitation?"

"Ten days in advance. That will give the village time to think."

"What if the house isn't ready according to plan?"

"It will be ready in thirty days."

Rangaswamy added, chuckling, "Unless there's an earthquake!"

When he had departed in the big staff car, Bhashkar relit his pipe and looked around. The cowherd boy had returned to his bamboo flute, and was playing well. Why not have a closer view of the young musician?

He walked slowly. Could it be that grazing the kine was intrinsic to the Gandhian Basic Education Scheme the village had adopted? Its philosophy included the idea of learning from one's physical and social environments as apart from book knowledge. "Education for life through life," Gandhi had called it. And it was training of the head through the training of the hands. Basic Education was craft-centered, and there was what was called correlated teaching—the teaching of school subjects through the particular crafts being taught. That brought into
focus the little village workshops—the smithy, the carpentry, the oil press, the paper “factory”—each of them became a schoolroom with its accredited pupils. There was the schoolhouse, of course, but its functions were in a way secondary, supplementary.

Bhashkar was standing before the boy in the fig-tree shade. But the youngster played on unheeding, as if challenging. When at last he stopped, Bhashkar spoke.

“You play well. Where did you learn?”
“I?”

Bhashkar sat down on a convenient stone slab. “Who taught you?” he asked.
“Didi taught me.”
“Oh! Good to have such a gifted elder sister.”
“All of us village fellows call her Didi. Her father is a great man. Her spinning wheel is a gift from Gandhi-ji. Yes, sir, from Gandhi-ji himself.”

That must be Sumita, Bhashkar thought. Inexplicably, she had been coming into his mind often these two days, since he had met her for some minutes. That was because she was such a curious type. Here, for instance, was a contradiction: Who would expect the girl in widow’s apparel to indulge in this frivolity of a bamboo flute?

“May I have your flute for a minute?”
Alarmed, the boy hid his treasure in a fold of his clothes. The Iron Man was annoyed at being crossed; he would snatch away the instrument of offense. The boy, about to spring to his feet, heard the Iron Man speaking again.
“I had one when I was your age.”

Taken aback, the boy studied the stranger’s face and saw the friendliness. But then, their instruments of music were of other kinds; you heard them on the radio.
“I only want to make sure that I can still draw a tune from a bamboo flute.”

Fear gone, the boy was yet hesitant.
“I touched it with my mouth, sir. It’s to be washed, but where is water?”

“So what? How can you play on the flute unless it’s touching your mouth?”
Disarmed, the boy parted with his treasure. Bhashkar played the tune of a folksong with a fast, merry beat. When it had ended, the boy cried happily, "Didi loves that kind of tune!" He was about to say something more, but stopped and watched with bulging eyes as the flute gave way to a curved dark-brown contraption, and presently, out of the Iron Man's mouth, smoke poured! The boy had never before seen a pipe.

Didi again, and more contradiction, thought Bhashkar. This was not music of the kind one would expect Sumita to love! How could she go beyond the old devotional songs known in every village household and repeated with unbroken monotony!

He turned to the boy. "There's a question I haven't asked yet. Maybe you can guess."

The boy was thinking hard. "About Gandhigram?" he asked.

"No."
"India?"
"No."
"Ladakh!" triumphantly. "Every tongue talks of nothing else. I know the answer. In the far Himalayas—"
Bhashkar shook his head. "Shall I ask that question?"
"Please, sir."
"What's your name? That's the big question."
The boy giggled. Bhashkar waited.
"Gopal. That's the big answer!" the boy said.
"Listen, Gopal. From tomorrow this site will be all bustle. A house is to be built—the kine will have to move off a way. You'll know everything in due course. Now, tell me. Ever had a ride in a motor vehicle?"
He nodded: "Big one!"
"Big one? Oh, the bus!"
"Big red bus!"
Bhashkar noted the recaptured thrill on the youngster's face. "Well?" He wanted to hear more.

Gopal was a little breathless as he related his great experience. Several times on holidays he had walked to the highway at the edge of Steeltown and watched the big red bus as it came trundling to a stop and picked up the bunch of waiting passengers. The conductor always gave him a friendly grin; he
was a man in gray coat and trousers. One day he said, "Boy, you want a ride? Come along." The magic half hour that followed! At a certain stop the bus drew up beside another from the reverse direction, and the conductor arranged Gopal's return trip. With a parting slap on the back he said, "Enjoyed yourself?"

"Real adventure, wasn't it?" said Bhashkar with understanding.

So it was. How the boys in Gandhigram envied his great luck! A number of them began to go to the bus stop in the hope that they also would catch the conductor's eye. They returned with long faces.

Why not give the village boys a bus ride on the highway? Better still, let them ride to Lohapur, skirting the meadow, and then see the steel plant. Let them see how the big machines work. Easy to imagine their excitement. A new world of which they had never dreamed. And Steeltown would get fifty recruits at one sweep!

Gopal would have the leadership. He was the right kind.

"Look. You can ride in my jeep to the meadow's end, then walk back. I have something to say to you." He waited. "Coming?"

The answer was a silent nod of the head. Gopal was too excited for speech. Then Bhashkar remembered the cattle.

"Your friends?" He pointed with a finger. "When they see you're gone—"

"They have sense; they know I cannot go home without them. They'll graze—and wait."
The country had been struck first with horror, then grief, and when, after negotiations, a helicopter landed at New Delhi with the remains of nine uniformed bodies preserved in Himalayan ice, there was an explosion of great fury. The funeral pyre consuming dead flesh also burned off the bhai-bhai slogan that had lived in millions of hearts in city and country, factory and farm, mansion and hovel. A little ash alone remained of the page on which a great friendship had been inscribed.

Satyajit felt the full brunt of the horror, but his grief was as much for the page that was destroyed as for the men. Could it be that the brotherhood of a thousand million people was gone for all time? How would civilization survive such a shock? What was today a mere ripple could become a deluge.

The hour of twilight was the time when, the day’s work done, he could be alone with his thoughts, he could let his thoughts wander freely and take shape. His hands plied the spinning wheel—an everyday chore in all the twenty years past, a Gandhian inheritance. The wheel that turned cotton into yarn had been in Gandhi’s hand an instrument of social philosophy, and so it was still in Satyajit’s reckoning. That wheel was the common man’s answer to power-fed machines. It was an emblem of unity between all classes of the people; the manual effort of plying the wheel was an obligation for all. And in the days before freedom, alien Authority had looked upon the wheel with immense dread and hatred.

The wheel would take Satyajit back to his master, and he would recapture the richness of bygone years. In the set hour
every day the communion between the two would be complete. And the need for that communion was now intense.

What would you have done, confronted by Ladakh? Satyajit asked the invisible presence. Day after day he waited for an answer. It had to come out of his own heart, he knew—the wheel was not an oracle! The wheel helped him to sink into his own deeper self. He found several half answers, and discarded them one by one. Then at last the great idea came in a flash. The hand turning the wheel shook; the frail thread snapped. Face tight, he picked up more cotton, then paused. He looked out the veranda where he sat on the bare mud floor and watched the sky grow flushed with sunset. Sumita in the bedroom was chanting the lines of an ancient Sanskrit verse which Gandhi-ji had used as a daily prayer:

"From the unreal, lead me to the real.
From darkness lead me to light.
From death lead me to immortality!"

Yes, it was a great idea indeed, Satyajit felt convinced. He would take a Peace Mission, Shanti Sena, to the Himalayan snowlines, traveling first by railroad and bus to Kashmir’s capital city, then marching afoot. Across Ladakh to the disputed territory close to Aksai-Chin. The Shanti Sena would be armed with the lost slogan of brotherhood between two nations. Its proclamation would reach well beyond the Himalayas, beyond Sinkiang and the Great Wall. It would be heard in Peking!

Exposed to attack. In death the Peace Mission would become deathless. And if it survived . . .

That was the simple Gandhian way. In his younger days Gandhi-ji had first discovered the way in far-off South Africa. That was a strange tale. Later, passive resistance became in India the means of mass upheavals, and brought about the country’s freedom. But the glory of its small beginning . . .

Satyajit cast back his eyes across the space of an ocean and a half century.

South Africa!
There is indentured labor of Indian immigrants in the coal
mines and on the sugar plantations of Natal and the Transvaal. A law is passed: All Indians, men and women, must pay a poll tax, remitted so long as they remain tethered to a contract. A vast reservoir of cheap labor, an ingenious imposition of slavery.

But the insult that follows surpasses the injury. Marriages not performed in the Christian Church and registered in South Africa are null and void! Wives of Hindu and Muslim settlers are no wives, and their children are illegitimate.

A young lawyer from India has been practicing in the country for a decade. Champion of his people, he has bared himself to the venom of racial hatred: his lean body has been pounded by enraged fists; kicked at; several times he has been close to death. His indomitable spirit has forced him to stay on in the foreign land. His wife is his spiritual companion.

Gandhi . . . and Kasturba.

He has new strange ideas. A band of devoted followers has clustered around him in the settlement he has named Tolstoy Farm—he is, through letters, in contact with the mind of the great Russian. Simple living, voluntary poverty, self-help, celibacy—those are the basic compulsions. They ripen into the idea of using moral force as a weapon with which to combat evil. That implies an infinite capacity to bear suffering and to die rather than retaliate.

He acts when the insult to the honor of Indian womanhood attains the sanctity of law. He will make a demonstration by breaking another law: one that forbids Indians to enter the Transvaal without permits. The pioneers in the “army of peace” are to be, fittingly, a group of women inmates of Tolstoy Farm.

Thousands have answered the call. The leader’s command is specific and stern. The marchers in the army of peace must regard themselves as homeless and ready to lose all. They must carry with them nothing more than wearing apparel and blankets. . . . Streams of “pilgrims” come pouring to Charlestown—many wives and children—all with bundles on their heads. A child dies of cold on the way. Another falls from its mother’s arms as she is crossing a stream, and is drowned. . . . There they come, trudging twenty miles a day from Charlestown, taking eight days to reach Tolstoy Farm. Authority watches lynx-eyed
but takes no preventive action. Let the crazy ones be beaten by their self-imposed sufferings.

Then the second stage of the march—more than two thousand men and women are on the road to the Transvaal, the miners strengthened by residents of Tolstoy Farm. It is a strange procession: some of the men are in Western dress, but most wear loincloths. They live on starvation rations. At Volkhurst they cross the border into Transvaal under the eyes of the mounted police. Then they lose their leader—he is under arrest.

The army of peace follows the leader to prison. That is the signal for an explosion. Twenty thousand men in Natal strike work. They are answered by shootings and mass floggings. The strikers stand firm, unprovoked into retaliation. The movement spreads fire-like, down the coast from Durban to Isipingo.

India watches the amazing struggle of its countrymen in far-off South Africa. Tagore, the Nobel Prize just conferred on him, writes to the unknown Indian leader, paying tribute to the “steep ascent of manhood, not through the bloody path of violence but that of dignified patience and heroic self-renunciation.” In London The Times declares that the march of these Indian laborers must live in the memory as one of the most remarkable manifestations in the history of the spirit of passive resistance.

Gandhi is released. As penance for the crime of the policemen who have shot down the strikers at the mines, he takes a triple vow of self-suffering to be observed until victory is won: He will wear a loincloth like the poorest laborer; walk barefoot; and have only one meal in a day. And on the first day of the New Year, “All of us should be ready again to suffer battle, again to suffer imprisonment.”

That proves needless. General Smuts concedes victory to Gandhi. The heinous law is withdrawn. India’s honor is vindicated.

He led other armies of peace later, in India, for over a quarter century. thought Satyajit on the veranda floor. But he was then a world figure, walking in splendor, each footfall illumined by a pursuing orb of light. And the men and women who answered his call were numbered in millions.
He is gone, but the idea lives, and it must live for all time. Will it not find dramatization in the new crisis facing the country today, fifteen years after freedom was gained? Through another man of that kind? But a Gandhi is not born more than once in a century!

I have been blessed by close contact with Gandhi-ji over the years, said Satyajit to himself. In this crisis I will act as he would have acted, even though I am less than his shadow. I will tread on the footprints he has left.

It does not have to be a big army of peace. A mission of ten people or even less? Like the one Gandhi-ji took to East Bengal?

That was the time when freedom was nearly gained. But the outburst of genocide in East Bengal dyed freedom itself with the color of fresh blood. While politicians fitted themselves into the robes of Authority, Gandhi-ji announced his peace plan; he would go to East Bengal and travel on foot over the countryside where brutality had left its crimson trail. He, a Hindu, would face millions of the anti-Hindu, alone, armed only with moral force.

 Alone? Not quite. With him went a small group of devotees as ready to die under attack as their leader. Satyajit did not have the honor to be taken in that group; there were more deserving men than he. All the same, he had walked with that group often in his mind. Gandhi-ji, trudging the hostile land where madness raged, a stick in his hand for support, watched over by History.

A man not fit even to be the great one's shadow would walk the perilous path, and History would be watchful again. Even more watchful than before. For, the issue at stake—peace or war—would cast on all humanity its light or its darkness.

The spinning wheel started to hum again. Satyajit's hands worked mechanically while he was sunk in his vision. Presently, out of his absorption, he was chanting softly to himself, "From the unreal, lead me to the real—'

Strong exultation clutched his heart; and his eyes, fixed straight ahead as though on the face of immortality, hardened to gray stone chips.

"From death lead me to immortality!" he repeated, his voice low, halting, and tense.