Chapter Eight

Once a week, an hour at the schoolhouse was assigned to a dialogue; the young women of the village who were not regular students assembled in the Big Room and asked questions that Sumita had to answer. The questions related to matters of common interest, and were usually simple. Sometimes they were a little stupid. "Steeltown is said to have a warmer climate than our village—isn't it because of the electricity they use for street lighting?" The class had greeted this query from a peasant woman with suppressed smiles. Once in a while Sumita's knowledge failed her, and she had to summon her mother for help. Suruchi would leave her pupils for a minute and step into the question class, but it could well be that the answer eluded her too. Then it would be Satyajit's turn. This was his idea, after all. He wanted to make the womenfolk think. The compulsion to frame questions would act on the mind as a stimulus, so he believed.

It was indeed a compulsion. For Sumita, perched on a low wooden seat, would let her eyes wander over the rows of figures on the bare earthen floor, call one by name, and say, "What have you to ask today?" A moment to dread if the mind was void of questions. Better come to the class prepared. This was not always true—sudden inspiration also worked! There was the time when Beena, hearing her name called, gulped hard, looked down at her palm as though she would find a query scribbled in its lines, twisted her neck this way and that, gazed out the window at the sky, and then blurted, "Why is the sky blue?" The class started laughing. Someone asked, "Beena, why
is your hair black?” And another voice came, “How can the sky help being blue if it has no cloud?”

Beena was shamed and hushed. But Sumita spoke gravely: “This is a good question: Why is the sky blue? Equally good is the other: Why is Beena’s hair black? To say that the sky is blue because there’s no cloud is no answer. By the same reckoning one may say the hair is black because gray ones have not yet appeared.” And she started to explain: How dust in the sunlit air created blueness in the sky. The mystery of pigmentation in the human body. While she spoke Beena looked beaming at those who had laughed at her as if to say, “Well . . . ?”

All at once questions became easy to find. That was because of Ladakh. Each day’s news posed new puzzles. Chinese Bring Tanks to Ladakh. Tanks—what were they? Paratroopers Move into Tibet. Those were soldiers who flew down from the sky—with mechanical wings? A War of Nerves. What did that mean, precisely?

The deeper meaning of the Chinese attitude was not easy for Sumita herself to understand. Her father’s faith in the neighbor beyond the Himalayas was unshaken. This was only a border question. It was, as Peking said, the result of the aggressive policy of British imperialism. But—had not New Delhi refuted that statement, showed that the British had extended their authority only over those territories that were historically and traditionally parts of India? Far from extending into Tibet or into the Sinkiang region, the British had actually helped the Chinese to consolidate their authority in those regions. That was because of the British fear of Czarist Russia; the Chinese were to be a wall, a buffer. The men of Peking called the border dispute a historic legacy; but there was nothing to show that a Sino-Indian boundary question had ever existed in the past. The only legacy left by history in this respect was an unbroken tradition of friendship between the two countries, based on mutual respect for a delimited boundary.

Her father waved aside the legalistic attitude of New Delhi. He was all for a new understanding. Friendship of the Chinese people was worth more than a bleak wasteland between snow-clad cliffs!

Anyhow, such questions were not for the village women to
discuss. They were concerned only with the human aspect. All fighting was hateful. None more hateful than fighting between neighbors. India had to stand for peace. In this village, as in all others, every ritual—at birth, marriage, funeral—ended with the words proclaimed by Vedic sages three thousand years ago: Peace and Peace and always Peace!

Two neighbors, India and China. Two neighbors again, Gandhigram and Steeltown. And the city planning to annex the village, not acres of earth alone but a way of life, an inner spirit.

Here also was ground for puzzlement and a stimulus for questions. The questions were halfhearted, though, the answers already known and clear. For the answers had been given by Gandhi himself. The factory or mill was ugly, repressive. It uprooted masses of people from a healthy rural environment. Simplicity had to give way to sophistication. The craze for speed grew, speed for its own sake, an end in itself. And the glamour of endless gadgets.

There was a harder bedrock of reason: India could not afford to wait until large-scale industry absorbed her enormous manpower. Small hand-worked machines, such as the spinning wheel, available to all, had to be the answer.

The village would not be deflected from its chosen path. Satyajit commanded the loyalty of the young as much as of the old. Yet, what had he to give save the hardship of disciplined living?

What had Gandhi given? Or Jesus Christ? Or Gautama Buddha? Had not people the world over borne happily the brunt of self-immolation for a cause in which they believed?

There were one or two exceptions—deserters to Steeltown. They came to the village once in a while and spoke of the wonders of city life only a stone's throw away. The villagefolk listened and smiled, unimpressed.

Except for one or two. There was Jhanak, seated in the classroom at the extreme rear, her back against the wall, oddly picturesque.

How could Jhanak matter when there were the hundred others? And among the hundred, four or five were marked for leadership. There they were among the women in the Big Room, blending with them, not distinguished from the rest by looks or
by demeanor. Radha, daughter of Chittaranjan Ghose, who had once occupied a prison cell next to Gandhi's—that was just after the historic Salt March. Vijayanti, who came here from her distant home in the South; her father, a famed social worker, had felt himself drawn irresistibly by the magnet that was Satyajit. Those two, like Sumita, were resolved to live always in this village, not to marry and go away. Vijayanti had consoled her disapproving mother with: "What's new about it in our country? Has there ever been a lack of dedicated women? Dedicated to religion, you will say. Yes, and Gandhigram is a religion—essentially."

Radha and Vijayanti were white-garbed like Sumita herself. But the others looked askance at the white clothes. Saraju said a woman had no business to try to look unattractive; she did not have to be as simply dressed as the menfolk whose ideals and struggles she shared. Kalyani adorned her brow with the red beauty mark. And Nargis wore gaudy lac bangles, given to her by one with whom she had nothing in common—Jhanak!

Jhanak—the girl of the Untouchables—Sumita turned to her a long glance. There had been a small colony of Untouchables in this village at the time Gandhigram began. They lived in hovels or shacks at the meadow's edge, isolated, and earned their daily bread by curing the skin of dead cattle. When the new leadership put an end to untouchability, the casteless were given homesteads beside those of the top hierarchy. But then, caste terms were meaningless in the new context. All men in Gandhigram were casteless; all were equal in status.

They had been playmates in early childhood, Sumita and Jhanak. Alien in temperament, they soon drifted apart. Jhanak began to take an earthy interest in the village lads. Sumita became more and more her father's spiritual companion.

Formed as though out of a kind of black earth, attractive in a strange fashion, Jhanak drew more youths to her than any other village maid. Restless and flighty, she turned her eyes mostly to youths whose forebears had sat high on the caste pedestal; there was perhaps an atavistic urge in her, a desire to be avenged on the men of the past who had upheld the social divisions. Easy to see that, easy to sympathize; how could the downtrodden be washed of their centuries-old hatred in the space of a decade?
The tyrants of yesterday had to pay... pay even when their progeny had accepted new social values!

“Sumita-Mother!”

The voice from the schoolhouse door broke into her musings. It was Great-Uncle. Strange that he had to appear just when she was thinking of Jhanak! His grandson had been one of her suitors. But something happened between them, and he left the village.

She went to the door. What could have brought Great-Uncle to the schoolhouse?

He flaunted a yellow envelope in his hand. “Letter from that pig of a grandson who’s gone to Lohapur. The housefolk all away on errands—who will read it out to me?” A note of hesitation came to his voice. “You...?”

Great-Uncle—everyone, young or old, called him by that name. Near seventy when Gandhigram came into being, he would not join the night classes for adults. The only man in the village who could not read. A lone relic of bygone days.

“Of course, Great-Uncle.”

“Private letter, this. For my hearing only.” And he pointed a finger toward the empty playground. “Come!”

“No collect postage had to be paid,” he said proudly when they had reached seclusion. “No skinflint, that young pig. Look at the two nice bits of postal picture—one blue, one green. Man in a field with plow and oxen, that’s the blue one. The green—”

“Let me read it out.”

“Wait. Private letter, this, understand? Not for your hearing. First clap your forefingers to your ears—hard—so that no word can get in. Hold the fingers pressed hard.” He indicated the way. “So...!”

Catching the idea, she broke into laughter. But she stopped herself quickly. Her hands went up, obeying, to her ears.

“What now? The letter? Have I three hands, Great-Uncle?”

“I will hold each sheet before your face. So...!?” He peered, making sure her ears were closed, then gestured to her to proceed.

A minute’s reading brought Sumita to the core of the letter:

“I love it here at the steel mill, Great-Uncle. Good wages! Hard work, though. What heat—molten steel flows in a stream
like water or oil! I think of the time when I was a village blacksmith. Then it is hard not to laugh. It's not all hard work here, Great-Uncle. Such fun! Our CE—young and yet a big shot—he has brought ideas with him from foreign lands. He has given us workers an Institute where we meet in the evenings. We play games. We read newspapers, books. All at the Company's expense. The Company runs its own movie house. Admission for all millhands free—not quite, but almost free, you see? To go back to the place called Institute. It has two wings, one for men, one for women. But there are common rooms where they mix free and easy. Good chance to get a spouse for yourself, one who fits your fancy! Better than the way when you cannot tell beforehand what's coming to you from another village, lamb or tigress—why, you may not have seen the creature until you are at the altar, pith-and-tinsel crown on your head! . . . What do you think of all this, Great-Uncle?"

"Pig!" he cried, eyes snapping under bushy white brows. "What was good for all our forebears—" He cut it short to give a sharp look to the fingers on Sumita's ears. He nodded with satisfaction—she had not heard the bilge she had read out. Bah!

"To go back to the Institute. It has a teacher who gives lessons in folk dance to men as well as women. They dance in mixed groups—you understand? I can dance like several other fellows in Steeltown. We gave a big show to the public; our CE was the guest of honor. Yes, sir, I was very much in that show! One item, hunter dance, received big applause, and the CE announced two silver medals—for me, the hunter, and for the hunter's wife, a maid of seventeen named Jamuna. She—"

"Pig!" Great-Uncle cried again, interrupting, and shook a clenched fist in the air. Enough of this letter, he thought. Stop the reading before the girl was overcome with curiosity and her forefingers on the ears slackened their pressure or even withdrew!

Great-Uncle hobbled away leaning on his bamboo stick. Sumita, pensive, walked back on slow feet. One rebel there—Great-Uncle's grandson. One rebel here—Jhanak. Would they matter? Could the weight of a negligible few tilt the scales against all others who had the richness and strength of belief?

She returned to the Big Room with her face tranquil, reassured by the answer she had found.
There in the small room the city library had set aside for scholars, Satyajit had written *The Conquest of Violence*. Three years had passed since, but the conquest had remained a vision as remote as a planet. And in each of the volumes piled on the table, the face of violence was maskless.

Those were reports on Tibet.

That high plateau behind the Himalayas was peopled by a distinct race with no ethnological kinship with any other in Asia. Its culture was all its own and inbred, for within the isolation imposed by geography was the spirit’s solitude nurtured with deep care, anxiously guarded. Its people were apart from their neighbors—China in east and north, India in the south—in looks, language, tradition, custom. India, more than a thousand years back, had given them Buddhism and the alphabet—there was no indigenous Tibetan script. But the links with India, too, snapped in the course of time. So did the lesser links with China. Life rotated around religion, monastery-based, one out of every ten men and women a monk or nun.

Emperors of China had more than once invaded Tibet and occupied the land for brief spells, the tide of the people’s revolt sweeping aggression away. Late in the series was the Manchu attack early in the present century; and the Dalai Lama, spiritual and temporal head of the people, fled to India and was deposed. The Revolution of 1911 led by Sun Yat-sen ended Manchu rule. The Tibetans seized the opportunity to drive out the occupation forces. The Dalai Lama returned to Lhasa, his capital, and proclaimed his country’s independence. In the four decades to fol-
low, Tibet remained a sovereign state. Until the shadow of Mao Tse-tung came advancing from Peking.

Tibet was China’s inheritance from Imperial ancestors, a fruit of their conquest. Who would dispute the claim? The Dalai Lama made frantic appeals to the United Nations. But—to expect the Great Powers to fight China for the preservation of Tibetan freedom!

India’s Prime Minister tried the way of diplomacy, and made use of his friendship with Peking. Let the full autonomy of Tibet be guaranteed. Let its culture remain untouched. Let the people live in peace as before, even if Tibetan windows must be flung open to breezes from the north and east.

The Chinese gave assent.

Reports went that they demanded total subservience from the defeated people. But the spirit of freedom was not dead in Tibet. As the iron fist struck harder, the people rose in hopeless, suicidal battles. Three million people arrayed against more than two hundred times their number! Sticks and knives hurling challenge to machine guns and cannon! Blood tainted the mountain snows. Hordes of Chinese colonizers replaced the massacred. It looked as though in the course of the next decade there would be many more Chinese in the country than Tibetans.

The Dalai Lama fled again for his life, made a dramatic escape over the mountains to India, seeking political asylum. He spoke of the terror in his country, of Chinese artillery turned on Lhasa in reprisal. “Useless, wanton devastation, merciless slaughter of thousands of people,” the Dalai Lama said. But he spoke also of the Chinese artillery officer whose disapproval of his country’s aggressive action had led him to join the Tibetan guerrilla forces.

Satyajit saddened at the thought that human nature was so complex, so inexplicable. For, there had been another side: the rise of Mao Tse-tung and his men to power against heavy odds, and that was a story of great self-denial and a willing acceptance of grim suffering. The Kuomintang was a ruthless foe. Driven first out of the cities and then from mountain strongholds in Hunan, Kiangsi, and Kwantung, Mao and his followers
made the Long March to Shensi in the northwest, six thousand miles away. That was adventure of the most heroic order—on the physical plane and on the plane of the human spirit. And India, thrilled, gave the warmest salute to the brave. Having reached the friendly region, Mao established his government in Yenan. Later, he was forced to withdraw into Manchuria. At that point came massive Soviet support. Industrial potential and vast quantities of arms seized by the Russians from the Japanese changed hands and gave the Liberation Army a new, immense striking power. Rebuilt, assisted by Soviet strategists, the Army began to roll southward. Opposition crumbled fast. The triumphant Red Army entered Peking in January, 1949, crossed the Yangtse in April, and by midyear Chiang Kai-shek, admitting defeat, left the mainland with half a million troops and settled in Taiwan. And Mao Tse-tung proclaimed the People’s Republic from the balcony of the Tien An Men, the Gate of Heavenly Peace in Peking.

The new rulers gave the country peace after the anguish of age-long chaos, and they redistributed the land to the starved masses of peasants and they gave the people a passionate urge for a new life to be built with their hands and hearts. Russian aid on a stupendous scale took the country over many hurdles and set it on the path of massive industrialization.

India watched the rebirth of a nation. India was all warmth for China’s new way of life, even though it was not her way. India believed in many paths leading to one goal—human happiness. Those many paths had to coexist. Universal brotherhood was the ultimate value. So India stood for enlightened neutralism. That was Nehru’s gift to his people; in its long-range meaning it was a gift for many peoples.

Satyajit watched the unfolding of history on the Chinese land, and the hot upsurge of life that he saw stirred in him a response and an elation. A long-suffering nation has at last reached the end of its travail and come to its tryst with destiny. So has India.

Eyes closed, he leaned over the table, savoring the elation, holding it tight in his mind’s grasp. Not for long. It began to wear off; in a minute nothing of it was left.
Jenghiz Khan was arisen from his grave. The Manchus were back on their throne. The Han warriors were marshaled in battle order.

This khan wore none of the old trappings. His cheap cotton shirt was torn at the cuffs. His shoes were without polish. He spoke slowly, moved slowly; his face had a look of friendliness.

And yet...

Satyajit opened his eyes to glance at the works of Mao Tsetung—the Library had acquired them at his request. The selected works were in an English translation issued by India’s Communist Party. Mao had written: “The whole world can be re-modeled only with the gun. War can be abolished only through war. To get rid of the gun, we must first grasp it in our hands.”

Had not Suruchi heard an echo of those words at the Peace Congress in Moscow?

The new Jenghiz Khan, building efficiency and discipline into his people’s life, was determined to have the world’s most gigantic military instrument. Behind him lay the annals of China marked on many pages by the expansionist urge. The same urge that later roused European imperialism under which China itself suffered, Satyajit recalled. The People’s Republic had to be true to the past! That was a mockery of Karl Marx. But it was Maoism that interested Mao, not Marxism!

As Tibet, buffer state between China and India, became a Chinese possession, the question of borders arose between the two countries over a stretch of two thousand miles.

Existing borders were a myth. British imperialism had nibbled at Tibet, taken bits and pieces away. Those must be returned to the Tibetan province of the Chinese empire.

So there came the new maps. Each succeeding map advanced the frontiers of China over the Himalayan ranges, the snow-bound desolation, a hundred to three hundred miles in depth. There could be no milestones, no clear pen mark of demarcation over the ridges. But there were specific agreements between India and Tibet—India’s archives contained enough documentary material that belonged to history. What history? British imperialism. And Tibet, conquered by China, had no right to enter into treaties with a foreign power.

Behind the agreements was the geographical factor, the
principle of demarcation by the well-defined watershed ridges of the High Himalayan Range. The mountain crest was nature's dividing line between the Tibetan plateau in the north and the submontane region in the south. Along with that went centuries-old tradition. But the Chinese had no use for geography, history, tradition, or usage.

In slow stages they had surreptitiously annexed sixteen thousand square miles of territory that had been an integral part of India. Their claims were mounting still; they wanted fifty thousand square miles at the eastern end of the frontiers, south of the so-called McMahon Line, a demarcation that had simply formalized the traditional and customary boundary accepted over the ages. That meant incorporation of the western part of the Himalayan wall into Tibet. That meant China's military might arrayed on the edge of the Indian plains. What would India's security be worth then? The hard-won freedom?

Satyajit, delving into history's material, calculated every possible bias and gave China every benefit of doubt. There must be some valid basis for the way they had acted. New Delhi could have made a mistake and taken a position from which it was now difficult to withdraw. But the facts as they stood countered that conclusion. He grew increasingly unhappy in the face of the inescapable truth. It came upon him with a shock that this was much more than a problem of the border. It was India's China problem—for all time. And it could easily become a world problem.

Did aggression have to be met by armed resistance? Even if peace came after the guns had spoken, forced settlement could never be final. Two great neighbors, a thousand million people, chauvinism against chauvinism, a state of everlasting cold war.

What would Gandhi-ji have done under this menace?

A world balancing armed might on a knife's edge. But India had given it the concept of nonalignment, of dynamic neutralism. In the current crisis, what had India to offer—to itself and to all humankind?

What had Peking's expansionism to do with the Chinese masses? True, they gave their rulers full support. But that was inevitable. Their rulers had given them material benefits and much else. They had won for the common man his lost self-
respect. They made his life bearable as never before. And there had to be national discipline.

The rulers were the Dragon, not the people. The people of China were like people everywhere. The richness of the spirit of man knew no barriers of race and color or even of historic development!

At a turn of the wheel of history a new young leadership might arise in China: peace-oriented; believing in life; believing in give-and-take. Coexistence would then become for that country a creative force.

Indian nationalism, at fever heat under extreme provocation, might stand in the way of such leadership taking shape in Peking.

What would Gandhi-ji have done?

"Not to believe in the possibility of permanent peace is to disbelieve in the godliness of human nature," Gandhi-ji had said. "If even one nation were unconditionally to perform the supreme act of renunciation, many of us would see in our lifetime visible peace established on earth."

Satyajit closed his eyes in harassed thought.
A liveried messenger boy crossed the meadow on his bicycle and descended on the village road, a leather bag strapped to his bony shoulder. He hailed an aged passerby hobbling along with a stick in hand.

"I am looking for Satyajit’s residence," he said.

The passerby stopped, narrowed his eyes, and surveyed the boy from head to foot.

"A new postman. Our Radhanath is gone. Queer clothes."

"I'm not a postman," said the youngster, making a face.

"What! Bellyful of letters in your bag."

"Letters, but a different kind."

"Letters are of many kinds, I know that, brother. Cards. Covers with postal pictures . . . Letters, all, anyway. How many will you deliver in this village?"

"Nearly two hundred."

The old man chuckled toothlessly.

"Two hundred. Then there must be one for me. Why, only eight days or ten have gone since that pig of a grandson sent me a letter."

"Name?" The boy plunged his hand into the pile.

"Great-Uncle."

"Great-Uncle?" The boy examined the names on the envelopes arranged in alphabetical order. His face grew perplexed. He could find no such name.

The old man suggested thoughtfully, "Maybe they have used the other name."

"Other name?"

"Kedar Mandal."
"There!"
The eyes under gray brows peered intently. "Not for Great-Uncle." He shook his head, crestfallen. "For Satyajit. Handsome covers come to him from the ten directions of the wind."

"There's one for Satyajit, to be sure. And for everyone. Now tell me—"

"What's there to tell when you're looking at his house—almost?" Walking a few paces up the road, the old man called, "Sumita-Mother!"

She was close to the bamboo gate, digging. She paused. "Great-Uncle?"

"New postman fellow."
The messenger boy stepped up. "Invitation letter." He held out an envelope. "From Lohapur."

"Lohapur?"

It was the opening ceremony of the Meadow House, still in construction—the date was ten days ahead. Gopal had been giving an excited report every day.

"Postman-Brother has invitations for all of us in the village," Great-Uncle informed. "What! The Institute comes to our doorway, the one that the pig writes about!" His gray brows bunched up in heavy disapproval. "What! We are to dance there, men and women together, tah dhin-dhin, tah dhin-dhin!"

The messenger boy started to giggle at the vision of Great-Uncle dancing on the Meadow House floor, stick in hand for support. Quickly he straightened his face and regained his dignity.

"Think of the honor," he spoke gravely. "You will be guests of the CE! Maybe you don't understand CE. Chief Engineer! Big man! His name's at the end of each letter—see?"

Great-Uncle was beaming at the youngster.

"What has happened to our postman Radhanath? Maybe he is canceled, like a used stamp!"

"I'm not a postman. I told you." The boy made a face again. Great-Uncle nodded to himself. "A different kind. One in blue coat-pantaloons, like a saheb. Times are changing."

"Haven't I told you already—"

Sumita intervened. "Great-Uncle, will you help this boy deliver his letters? He's a stranger in this place."
"I will, if Postman-Brother wants my help."
The boy blinked in anger. "The fourth time!"
Sumita tried to appease him.
"Great-Uncle is jealous of you—don't you see? He himself
would love to carry a bagful of letters from village to village.
That way he could see a bit of the world."
The new "postman" would go crazy doing a round of the
village with Great-Uncle, Sumita thought, laughing inwardly.
She laid the envelope over the broad leaves of a brinjal plant,
and resumed her work with the shovel.
Lohapur—once again. This morning Father had taken a
hurried meal and left for the city to read in the public library.
He would be there several hours, he said. His mind was visibly
preoccupied. The strange new gleam in his eyes—it was happi-
ness. She had seen that gleam once before. One day, dusting the
bookshelves, she had found a letter between the pages of *The Imita-
tion of Christ*. She read the signature—Rabindranath Tagore.
What a lovely hand! As she handed the letter to her father, she
saw his pleasure—he had given it up for lost.
She was walking with him to the meadow's edge, breathless
as she tried to keep pace with his long strides. Absorbed in
thought, he had not spoken a word until she was about to turn
back. Then he had given her a glance, and there lay the question
on her face, plain enough to read; but he had shaken his head.
"Not today. You will know later."
"You really feel as happy as you look?"
He was taken aback. "I—" He cut himself short and shook
his head again. Vaguely, not knowing that his eyes betrayed him.
"Why don't you let me come to the library? I could take
down notes for you."
"Today I shall study maps."
"Maps?"
"Now I have given away my secret."
Her face looked perplexed. "Ladakh! I know. But there are
so many sketch maps in the papers. What other maps do you
want?"
He dismissed her with a gesture of his hand. "Go home,
Sumita." Yet she kept standing for a minute, watching him
stride away. He might look back. . . . He didn't. He had forgotten
her. He was far away—in Ladakh or Sinkiang. But why should he study maps? Ideas were his domain, not geographical facts.

He had been taking the news from Ladakh with apparent calm, while within him a storm had raged. It could not be hidden from eyes that knew him. The tightening of the mouth; restless pacing of the study floor; a deep hurt in the eyes as clear as a stain. All that was now gone. He had regained his tranquillity. He was happy. Was it because of the messages passing between New Delhi and Peking? Talks for border demarcation were in progress, so the reports went.

Yes, that was why he was going to the City Library, Sumita felt sure. He would trace the Himalayan frontier mile by mile. Not Ladakh alone. Away on the east was the McMahon Line, a sore spot again. A frontier astride heights where the snow never melted.

There had been the other worry as well. A man had descended on the village with his stern demand. He would make steel here at any cost. Couldn’t he make steel somewhere else? Lohapur could surely expand in some other direction? But he wanted to destroy Gandhigram. The end of Gandhigram would mean much more than the end of one village.

The expected assault had not come. Instead, a house was being built in the meadow, close to Gandhigram’s dooryard. Machines were busy at the site, each doing the work of scores of hands. Gopal had been making excited reports. This house would belong jointly to the village and to Steeltown, and it would be their meeting ground. How interpret this change of attitude? It could hardly mean an end of the attack. Even Satyajit had felt confounded.

Then Suruchi said one day: “This is what I think, Sumita. We’ve been mistaken about Bhashkar Roy. He will not take any aggressive action against us. He will not use any kind of force.”

“What Father fears is that he may make an appeal to the Government. They have power to requisition any land or house in what they call the national interest.”

“That will be plain violence.”

“So what? Bhashkar Roy has nothing against the use of violence, has he?”

“His objective stands. But it’s to be achieved by peaceful
penetration. Meadow House has been conceived with that purpose. A conquest by nonviolence."

Sumita was struck dumb. Was that possible? Mother had a kind of intuitive understanding. . . . Yes, it could be that she had hit the truth. An astounding truth! It revealed Bhashkar Roy in an altogether new light. He attained a new dimension. The idea behind his action had something in it of Satyajit himself.

The shovel loosened in the grip of her fingers as she worked. Presently she dropped it to the ground and picked up the letter she had placed on top of a brinjal plant. The invitation was ten days ahead. In ten days the house in the meadow would stand completed. Why not take a look at it? Right now.

With quick decision she went through the house gate. In a minute she was on the track leading to the meadow.

Mother had said: "Nonviolence on two conflicting fronts. Never before has this happened in all our history. Churchill should have thought of it before he struck out at Gandhi."

Bhashkar Roy was going to make a bold experiment. A unique experiment. He hadn't the slightest chance of success, poor man. Gandhigram would withstand that new kind of attack.

It would, all the same, be a fair attack.

Like the attack on the minds of the village boys. Two big buses would come and take them to the steel mill, and they would be shown all the wonders there. Gopal had brought the message. He was organizing the trip. The boys were counting the hours for the great day to come. Next Saturday.

The cattle were grazing in the meadow, as usual, but there was no sign of Gopal. A jeep stood parked beside a canvas enclosure. Her heart missed a beat. Not the jeep she had seen that day? But there must be scores of jeeps in Steeltown. Walking on, she gave a gasp, and stopped dead. Out of the canvas tent a man came, and it was he!

She was poised for flight. But he had seen her. Hand shielding his eyes against the sun, he was looking at her, perhaps to make sure. Then he was walking toward her with long quick strides.

Strange, Bhashkar was thinking. Three weeks were gone since he had happened to meet Sumita. He had been in the
village several times since, cruising about, expectant, but there had been no sign of her. Busy, maybe, at the schoolhouse. He would have liked to see her once more. He had had no experience of a young woman dedicated to stern austerities. But she also was subject to curiosity, or else she would not be here in the half-built Meadow House!

"This unexpected visit," he said, smiling as he drew close.
"I—I thought Gopal would be here—" Her voice faltered.
"He must be. He has lost his flute—you know?"
"Lost?" Gopal had given it away out of gratefulness, she knew.

"In a way."
Her eyes as they met his were wistful. She said, "The surprise, that you play on a bamboo flute, and so well!"
"Surprise? Why?"
That was a hard question. She began, "Who would think that—" then gave up. And he supplied the unspoken words:
"—an Iron Man—Gopal’s picturesque term—dabbles in music. Easier for a rhinoceros to take dancing lessons."

She broke into a ripple of laughter. "A rhinoceros . . ." She saw the picture, and another ripple followed. Her teeth have the sheen of pearls, Bhashkar thought. He could take a photograph of her face and win a prize in one of those toothpaste contests. Pity, all the more, about the chapped lips. As he turned and led her toward the building, his eyes dropped to her bare feet. Beneath the sari’s unbordered edges the slim ankles were laden with red dust.

She noted the direction of his glance, and was unabashed. Do you know that eighty or more out of every hundred of our people walk barefoot most of the time? she wanted to say. They do that not out of choice. Shoes are a luxury. What do you know of such things, big man of Steelhouse?

Bricklayers were at work. Doorframes stood fixed on the rising structure. Mounds of red and green floor tiles lay ready for use. Working women moved about briskly, straight-backed, baskets of materials balanced on their heads.

"What wall color do you fancy?" he asked.
"I . . . I don’t know!"
"Yellow? Light blue?"
“Yes.”
“A two-color house. Not a bad idea.”
They went from room to room. He explained. This was where the men would have indoor games. That was where the women would be given knitting lessons by an expert. A children’s room with picture books and a rocking horse . . . At the end of an inner corridor he stopped before a table piled with blueprints and ledgers.

“Can you imagine the shape of a house from its plan?” He turned to his companion. “This is what the façade will look like.”

He was still giving her the details as they walked back to the front of the structure. “We’ll install a big water cooler. Ice-cold water will always be on tap. A real need in this grueling weather.” Then it occurred to him that all this while Sumita had hardly spoken ten words by way of comment. “What do you think of it all?” he asked her sharply.

She turned her head and gave him a steady look.

“When our people see this house—what do you expect to happen?”

“The natural instinct will come to the fore.”

“What instinct is that?”


She shook her head. “It isn’t as simple as that.”

Human nature had to be the same everywhere, he told her. Gandhigram could be no exception. Whatever was artificial, imposed from without by a dominating personality, had no chance of permanence.

Nothing in Gandhigram was imposed from without, she wanted to say; but what use, since he would not understand?

“This meadow will be transformed,” he went on. “The whole area will be awash with light. What a contrast to the darkness of the village! And the light will be symbolic. This no-man’s land, dead for countless centuries, will become overnight a part of modern civilization.”

She grew a little bewildered. “You think . . . we in the village are outside that civilization?”

“Voluntary poverty is no answer to our country’s problems. True, as things stand we have nothing to give to the people,
nothing to distribute except poverty. With industrial progress we'll attain higher standards within a short span of time. We have big resources in men, materials. What we need is application, energy. We've been sitting tight over the ages. Let's start moving along. Let's mobilize all the resources we possess. And let's not be distracted by wrong ideology, a view of life that can only—"

A concrete mixer by their side started to work, and its loud *chug-chug* swept off his last words. He scowled at the machine.

"Shall we move on?"

He was looking again at her bare feet as they walked. She might tread on a nail or sharp-edged stone and get hurt. What could he do about that? Her voice pulled him away from his anxious concern.

"We also believe in action," she said. "We are trying to build a new social order."

His answer flashed in quick impatience: "It's as if a country place in New York State tried to return to the age of Plato! You are out of context in history."

"Maybe we live ahead of the times. Maybe we live in an age yet unborn."

"You believe in that myth?"

The smile that dented her cheek startled him by its loveliness. He felt a curious annoyance arise in him, and demanded, "You—are you happy? Happy to be as you are?"

"Happy, indeed!" and there was the dent again.

Small wonder, he reflected. She had not known any other life. No hand had touched her in intimate caress. No demanding mouth had closed upon hers. A woman in the body's full ripening, yet not knowing what experience meant. Sing the purity of Indian womanhood. Sing the glory of unawakening.

"Your happiness also is a myth," he said to her sharply. A sudden change had come upon him, and he was cold and aloof. Watching him, she held her breath, her big black eyes astounded, while he continued:

"Satyajit is a sage out of the ancient *Ramayana*. Reborn after three thousand years, and filled with remembrance. With no idea of time having gone by. And you, you are, so to say, his alter
ego!” He paused briefly as he saw the shrinking in her face, then resumed, ruthless:

“Let him live in the ancient past and in the future yet unborn. Such luxury is not for the masses of our people to enjoy. They have to live in the present and struggle for bare survival. We are now doing reasonably well on the economic front. That does not suit China’s neoimperialism. The men in Peking are determined to create a second front for us. Defense. Even if they don’t attack us massively, they’ll keep us strained. And the mounting demand of defense will hamper development. Under the stress of cold war our burdens, heavy enough already, will grow manyfold until the back of our economy breaks. Peking counts on that. It’s the grand Chinese strategy.”

She answered at last, softly, pleadingly: “That’s one way of thinking. There is another way.”

“Yes. The Satyajit way. The way of dangerous delusion.”

But you have accepted that way in part, she wanted to say. Even when violence was the easier method. And sadness came upon her, sadness on his account. Why was it that two men of complete dedication had to face each other with challenge, and one or the other must bear the pangs of defeat? The thought of Satyajit’s defeat was unbearable. And the alternative . . .

She felt his eyes rest upon her face, and, alarmed lest he look within and read, she spun round abruptly and was walking away. He was taken aback awhile. Then he started following her, somewhat ashamed of his outburst. “Forgive me for my hard words . . . and come again.”

She gave no response, and walked along.

He stopped, his shoulders lifting in the habitual shrug. Those hard words might do her good. They might shake up her fixed belief and make her rethink. The flush in her face suited her—it was perhaps the only color she had ever worn! And that image of her stayed in his eyes a long time, even after he had gone back to Steelhouse and to his files.
Chapter
Eleven

That file looked different from all others. No typed sheets with marginal notes. Every line written by hand. Letters. The one on top was addressed to Box No. 1243, Hindusthan. “This is with reference to your advertisement . . .”

Bashkar glanced quickly through the file in its thick green folder. Each letter began the same way. This shouldn’t have come to his desk. Annoyed, he picked up the phone and spoke a word.

Mrs. Mehra stood before him in a minute.

“Maybe you can explain—” Bashkar drummed impatient fingers on the offending file.

“Those are the answers to your advertisement,” she said curtly.

He looked surprised. “What have I advertised for? Why hasn’t it gone through the proper channel?”

“Sir, you told me nothing about it. This is a private matter.”

“Private?” His eyes dropped to the sheaf of letters. “What do they say?”

“You advertised for a bride. These are the answers.”

“A bride? For whom?”

Mrs. Mehra shook her head almost accusingly. “That I don’t know.”

He gave her a scowl. “Now, Mrs. Mehra, will you be a little more informative? As you know, I have hardly any time to waste gossiping. Will you—” He waved to a chair at the desklside.

Mrs. Mehra sat down. “The letters were forwarded by the paper in a large envelope addressed to the Chief Engineer.
Fifteen of them in that file. From fathers or uncles of eligible brides; one from an elder brother. To save time I have prepared a note summing up the main facts given. You will find that note in the file, sir.”

He interrupted. “You’ve said nothing about the boy. Who is he? The Chief Engineer is supposed to have advertised—for whom?”

“Each letter makes a reference to that advertisement. I have looked through back issues of the paper and made a clipping. It’s attached to my note in the file.”

“What does it say?”

“It says: ‘Very fair, tall, well-educated bride wanted for handsome, high-salaried Company executive (33). America returned, with ultramodern outlook. Bride must have similar outlook. Race, caste, language, social status of no account.’ That’s all, sir.”

Bhashkar mused, his hand stuffing tobacco into the bowl of his pipe. It was some time before illumination burst upon him.

“What!” he cried, startled.

“Yes, sir,” Mrs. Mehra nodded affirmation.

He gave her an intent look. “You say you know nothing else about this fantastic business?”

Her voice accused him again: “You didn’t tell me. How could I know your mind, sir? I—”

“Who paid for it?”

“There’s a bill you have to settle. It’s attached to my note. The advertisement appeared in three consecutive issues.”

“I see.”

Mrs. Mehra tried to console him. “It’s only a small amount. They have a cut rate for the matrimonial column. I suppose the Company won’t pay for this, sir. But in case you want me to send the bill to the Accounts Department—”

“You know well enough, Mrs. Mehra, that you can’t do that. The Company doesn’t bear the expense of its officers advertising for brides.”

She agreed. “That’s why I have placed your checkbook in that file. I’ve written a check for you to sign.” Her plump face was beaming. “Shall I leave you to go over the note I have prepared? Of course, you have to read the original letters as well. . . .
One party has submitted the bride's photo, unasked. She looks beautiful—"

Bhashkar dismissed her with a gesture she knew. As she was about to close the door behind her, his voice came sharply:

"Just one more word. Why have you placed the Immediate tag on this file? What's immediate about it?"

"Marriage!" she breathed, eyes round, the brief word packed with intimations of sanctity.

He leaned back in his swivel chair. What could this mean? His father . . . ? He—and Mother—had suggested more than once that he should marry, have a proper home life. Race, caste, language, social status of no account—that pointed to Father's liberal mind. "Have you a fiancée in the States?" he had asked in a letter a month back. "If so, why not let her come to India and marry you? Nothing stands in your way."

No, it couldn't be Father. He would have given the paper his own address in Calcutta. And he would have given his son an advance notice of his intention. Mother would have written one more letter full of pleading. He was their only son—

A friend? He had few contacts beyond Lohapur. It could be someone in this city. But what motive? Nothing serious. A practical joke. The bill left for him to settle—that was part of the joke. There would be plenty of hilarious talk when he went to the Club.

Sadly, though, the practical joke had drawn into it an unsuspecting third party. The eligible brides. Or, rather, their parents. Fifteen letters. All aimed at a target that didn't exist.

The irony of it all. So many women had come into his life and had gone, leaving no permanent impress. At last an arranged marriage. Examine the data given, make a tentative selection, ask for a photograph. The bride-showing to follow in due time. In a case like this (the ultramodern outlook) there would be less convention than usual. Bride and groom could meet in public places—several times—until they decided one way or the other. It would be far from the American custom of dating, though. The parental shadow from behind would keep both shielded.

He began to laugh under his breath. To imagine that this could easily be his destiny. He who called himself a born bachelor.
A knock on the door. Ramlal bringing his lunch—it was already one thirty. While he ate he would look into this absurd business of the letters. The in tray was empty, and so it must remain for an hour, since Mrs. Mehra had gone for her meal. Seldom would she let his desk be so unburdened with files. Unaware, she had left him no option but to turn to these letters!

He signed the check in the file, then went over the note. With her practical mind, Mrs. Mehra had arranged the data in the form of a table. The columns went under the heads Age, Looks, Education, Father’s Occupation, Special Remarks. The entries were numbered one to fifteen. A footnote said, “Please tick the numbers whose photos are to be sent for.”

He looked for the photo Mrs. Mehra had mentioned. Yes, an attractive face. Too young. Why must there be an arranged marriage for her? How many times would this picture have to travel through the post, submitting itself to hard scrutiny, before it found acceptance? Acceptance indeed! To have to give herself, body and soul, to an unknown man and live with him for all time. Fear . . . dream . . . fulfillment . . . disenchantment . . . desperation . . . the straining for adjustments . . . hopelessness . . . Bhashkar felt an ache of tenderness for the girl in the picture. Let there be a good husband for her. Let her be happy.

But this was not the right way, this gambling with the innermost feelings. When would we catch up with the West? Not until the big machines had taken over. Production, more production—economic revolution leading to a revolution of the mind. Society forced to accept the man and woman of the new age.

Mrs. Mehra did not go home for her midday meal. She had a strong urge to meet her husband. When working on a day shift he usually ate at Canteen Four. That was ten minutes’ bicycle ride from Steelhouse. Mrs. Mehra set out on the tarred sun-baked road, her ample buttocks spilling over the spring seat. She had to hurry lest her husband finish his meal, and leave. As she pushed the pedals her plump thighs worked like steam-driven propellers, and beads of sweat broke out on her nose and upper lip.

The canteen was now half empty. Mrs. Mehra looked
around with anxious eyes. There—he was at a corner table. A secluded place in the eating hall, and that was just what she wanted. He was now halfway through the meal. Let him eat in peace while she bought a plate of vegetable curry and some bread at the counter. . . . As she approached the table, tray in hand, her husband looked up in surprise.

"Ho—Mrs. Sarojini Mehra!"

It was rarely that, as private secretary, she condescended to visit one of the canteens attached to the various units of the Steelworks. Not good enough for the CE's PS! Apparently there was something serious on her mind.

She sat quiet, eating. It was as if nothing had happened. A mere whim had brought her to the canteen, that was all. But Mr. Mehra had his suspicion.

"Let me bring a bowl of curds," he offered.

"After a while."

"I have to leave you in six or seven minutes."

"Time enough." But she grew doubtful, and came quickly to the point. "I showed you a press cutting—remember?"

"That advertisement? Matrimonial . . . ?"

"Yes. There was no name, only a box number. We both concluded that the groom was none other than our CE—remember?"

"So you concluded."

"All doubts are now gone."

"Truly? How has this happened?"

"A bunch of letters came to our office this morning, forwarded by the newspaper. Answers from parents of maids of marriage age. Fifteen letters in all. Also a photograph—"

"The CE himself sent that advertisement?"

"He says No."

"What then?"

"It's plainly the work of some good friend of his. Someone anxious to see him married and settled in that big bungalow. A twelve-room house occupied by one man!"

He gave a grunt of disapproval.

"Good friend, indeed! Why couldn't that owl mind his own business? Why did he have to interfere? Now everyone in Lohapur will know. Assured that the CE is looking for a bride, the
mothers will renew their bait with energy doubled, trebled. So far there’s been some talk that the CE doesn’t really intend to be saddled with a wife. He is a—a—bohemian—"

“You don’t have to call him names,” Mrs. Mehra flashed. “You are more credulous than womenfolk. Bohemian, indeed! People are jealous. That’s all.”

“Calling him a bohemian, I am paying him a compliment. I, in his position—”

“You don’t have to tell me. You have told me a hundred times. You have no loyalty, Mr. Mehra, no moral sense. No woman answers the wink of your eye and that alone keeps you from the path of evil. Don’t I know?”

He laughed. “What’s good for the CE is bad for a lesser fellow, han? You have a double standard. That isn’t fair, I tell you.”

“Let him get married and he will be a changed man. He will be the most devoted of husbands.”

“Shh!” warned the other. “Don’t raise your voice. The people at that table over there—they’re trying hard to catch our words. How they’re lengthening their ears!”

“Let them listen. What do I care? What’s there to hide?” But her voice dropped several tones as she continued: “When children come to him—like our own Chumki and Lallu and Premnath—"

“People with ultramodern outlook don’t have many children.”

“It may be true that he is what you call a bohemian. All the more reason why he must have a home. After a certain age bachelors give up their big ideas, marry just any girl within reach. The CE is close to the danger point. Something must be done. That’s why I’ve taken this step—” She stopped, clapping her hand quickly to her mouth.

“You? . . . You?”

She hung down her head, silent, struck dumb. Were there tears in her eyes? Mehra watched her with alarm lest she make a scene in the canteen. But she looked up in a minute, and her face was bright.

“The big load’s off my chest!”

He gave her a slow, slow nod of comprehension.
She went on musingly: "The files in Room Nineteen have so many top secrets. Not one of them will ever pass my lips, not even if I'm tortured, hacked up limb by limb. But this . . . this . . ." Her hand swung from side to side, and her voice trailed off into sadness. "One like this is too much for a woman to endure!"

He seemed a little confounded.

"Did you really send that advertisement to the paper? You?"

"There was no choice. The CE has a mother; you know that. That mother hasn't cared so far whether her son gets married or not. It means nothing to her that her son lives just by himself in the twelve-room bungalow. What good are all the hundred lights in that sprawling house with its high, red-tiled roof? Without a woman and without children there is only darkness."

Mehra said: "This is why you have come rushing to this canteen. To make a confession. Couldn't it wait until this evening?"

Her face grew pensive. "You are laughing at me. You don't understand women."

He agreed. "I don't." Bending over his plate of food, he dipped bread into chili-hot gravy. "I don't," he repeated as he munched. "Speaking generally. With one exception. One woman—"

"One woman? Just one?" She was taut, with gaping mouth, hanging on his answer.

No word followed, but the broad wink that came instead conveyed all that there was to say. Mrs. Mehra, watchful, felt her heart bulge with feeling.

"What greater luck for a woman than such . . . understanding?" Her voice was a husky whisper. And she looked at her husband with sudden resolve, and for the first time in all these years she responded to him with the flash of a gesture, the telltale motion of an eyelid!
THE VILLAGE ALSO WAS BUILDING A HOUSE.

The half-acre site beside the meadow was a projecting tongue of wasteland, the soil so rocky and barren that not even grass grew; there was no vegetation except a patch of cactus. This land had always lain unused. When the village council decided to replace the old schoolhouse with a bigger one and started to look for a building site, the barren tract became the obvious choice. It could never be reclaimed to produce food-crops. It was too out of the way to be added to the residential area. Yet, with the new purpose, it could serve the community and redeem itself. And the green cactus with its thick fleshy stem was to be left where it was, an emblem of hardy life in the gray, sapless desolation.

This also was to be a mud house with straw-thatched roof, and in addition to the classrooms it would have one large hall, where the people would assemble after sunset and listen to readings from books, ancient or modern. Village bards would recite the poems they had composed. The radio set would be installed in the new abode. And here the men of distinction who came on visit, drawn by Satyajit's far-flung renown, would be entertained.

So it had been planned, a year back, and six months had already gone into the construction. The men, donating their leisure hours in alternate batches, had leveled the ground, dug a deep well, laid the plinth of the house, and built pillars to hold the roof—even Satyajit had lent a hand. Then the womenfolk had taken over. They had constructed the split-bamboo frame-
work between pillars, and the next stage was to lay the plaster. The men would be back on the job when the thatching was to be done.

There were the young and the old. Saris tucked up at the waist, brown legs bared to the knees, the young did the harder work of digging up earth from the fields, bringing it in basketfuls to the site. Some of them drew water from the well and poured it on the alluvial earth, then added paddy straw. The older women laid big chunks of this mud plaster on the split-bamboo framework of the walls and smoothed up the lengthening surface.

So they had been working for hours, this afternoon. Suruchi came from the schoolhouse to take her turn—Sumita would be joining later. Eager voices hailed from every side.

"Tuck up your sari, sister," cried a peasant wife as Suruchi was about to dip her hands into clay.

She smiled and shook her head. She was not young enough to bare her legs. She had just passed her fortieth year, hadn’t she?

"You look as young as ever before. You look as if you are Sumita’s sister."

The women were drawing closer to Suruchi. She had already answered a hundred and one questions from them, but they had five hundred more to ask. These came tumbling on each other.

"Start from the airplane. Is it like a flying railway coach? With benches to sit on and windows you can open?"

"The airplane must tilt this way and that, struck by wind currents. Don’t the passengers topple to the floor in helpless heaps?"

"The thundering noise—we hear it even when an airplane passes the village high up in the sky. Yet the passengers can talk, hear each other’s voice?"

"How do they keep still? That I cannot understand. Hurled at such speed from sky to sky!"

"I’ve heard this: When an airplane is in trouble and there’s great danger, the passengers are given rubber carpets to sit on and the carpets go floating down to earth, landing safely. Is that true? It’s like a fairy tale!"

"Speaking for myself, I would rather stay on the airplane,
come what may, than float from the sky on a strip of carpet. What if I roll off the edge?"

"Why, Grandma, you can still hang on to a frill of the carpet and descend in a standing posture. It's easy."

"Such acrobatics—at my age!"

Suruchi started to speak. Her hands went on working mechanically with the clay while she described the aircraft. She pictured the richly decorated interior; the passengers, mainly those from India; the feelings she had known as she rose above the frozen sea of cloud—a sense of detachment and a state of bliss. Then the hostess who had reminded her of Sumita—that was on the homeward flight. On that second flight she had given a good look at the Himalayas at early dawn. To Ladakh in particular. At that time who knew there would be the murderous attack?

"The Indian girl—she is really like our Sumita? As comely?"

"As comely."

"Yet she works for her living, she does not marry!"

Suruchi winced. The oppressive thought that was often in her mind these days possessed her with renewed power. Will Sumita ever marry? When will she marry? Visitors came to this village from every part of the country, and among them were youths, too. Dedicated, eager to fashion themselves after Satyajit. What if one of those men caught Sumita's fancy? And the mother felt a rush of alarm. She could not let that happen. She could not let her own life be repeated in Sumita. All these years she had stood aside in humility, resigned and helpless. She had felt too small even before her daughter. The journey to Moscow had changed all that—she had faced the World Congress and received its acclaim. She had discovered unknown sources of power in herself. But how employ that power? What use would it be, flung against the great one secure in his splendor?

Her thoughts stopped, interrupted by voices as they called out, "Sumita—there she comes!"

Suruchi looked round. Her daughter was walking up with eight or ten girls from the schoolhouse, and all had baskets on their arms. Earth from the fields. Reaching the construction site, they poured out the soft earth on a large heap and started work.
"You have dropped a letter, Sumita." A woman pointed with a movement of her head. "Still to be slit open."
The girl picked up the envelope and gave it to her mother. "Yours. Postman-Brother brought it to the schoolhouse." And she was crying in the next moment, "Oh, Mother!"
"What?"
"You're blushing. You look lovely!"
And Suruchi said with a faint sigh, "Blushing, indeed! At my age! What ideas you sometimes get in your head, Sumita."
"Why don't you open the envelope? Such a fat one!"
"It can wait till we are back home. You know the writing? Your Bires-Uncle. All he has to say is that he can't come this year, either. Too busy. Work of national importance. Member of Parliament!"
"It used to be great fun when he visited with us."
"He pulled your leg all the time. He even made fun of your sacred spinning wheel."
"All his talk about Cambridge. He had been there with Father years back, and he would start every story with, 'In Cambridge, the other day—'."
Suruchi opened the envelope, her face averted from her daughter's eyes. But there was no letter. Press clippings. He was as impersonal as ever. In Delhi he had taken shelter behind Nandini—he brought her to the airport. The wonder was that he did not take her to the railway station also—an error he must have regretted later. How shamed he must have felt that for a moment he had yielded to emotion and wanted to board the train as it was about to leave.
"You can keep this rubbish, Sumita."
"Clippings—so many! All about your Moscow address."
But Suruchi spoke in a temper. "Stale, after all this time. He could have sent them more promptly, couldn't he?"
Sumita was staring at her mother. "You are ungrateful. Bires-Uncle needn't have bothered at all."
"Who asked him? What do I care?"
Mother had become a riddle since her journey to Moscow, Sumita was thinking. Within her there was some new discontent, and once in a while it broke to the surface. What was she un-
happy about when she could well be proud of herself and satisfied?

"Father will enjoy these clippings. I haven't told you yet—he's coming this way."

"This way?"

"I had a glimpse of him as he walked fast. He waved at me. In a minute he will be here. I would have waited for him, but there was the load I was carrying."

"Why has he left the library so early in the day? He works there usually till sunset."

Sumita was not sure. "Maybe he wants to give me a hand."

"Maybe he is just passing along."

Then he wouldn't have turned in this direction away from Main Road, Sumita pointed out. She had seen him take the pathway starting from the clump of date palm.

The women were waiting for Suruchi to return to her story.

"The big airplane descends on a foreign city and folds up its mighty wings," they supplied the lost clue. "City called Moscow. You meet a madwoman who wants war. You told us about her at the schoolhouse."

Suruchi had an abstracted look. It was as if she was back in Moscow.

"Two questions keep on troubling my mind. That old woman—was she speaking for herself or on behalf of her people? And the beautiful one—what was the source of her obvious authority?"

It was the woman of beauty who was troubling her more than the other. Behind the attractiveness was something hard, ruthless, almost sinister! Satyajit knew how his wife felt and he had prescribed for her an extra hour at the spinning wheel, the surest way to regain tranquillity and balance.

"Look, Mother!"

Satyajit stood fifty yards away, beckoning with his hand. As the two women hurried toward him they saw the alien look clear on his face. It was excitement. It was also a kind of elation. The ever-present serenity was gone. Something extraordinary must have happened. Sharp tension knit them as they walked homeward with him, Sumita on his right, Suruchi on his left, waiting for
him to speak. But it was not until they had gone a hundred paces or more that the revelation came.

"I have reached a decision. About Ladakh."

"Ladakh?" echoed Sumita, adding excitedly: "You will write a book? You must let me help you collect the materials."

"No, Sumita, it isn't a book."

Suruchi said: "You have a mind to visit Peking. That's it! But it will have to be an international delegation. What do you think?"

"I will take a Shanti Sena—to the disputed regions in Ladakh."

An astonished gasp came in unison, and feet stopped dead. Satyajit smiled. "Let's walk along." And as the two fell in step with him he spoke:

"The Peace Mission will pass across the mountain ranges, along the deep valleys, and reach the frontier between India and China. It may be the frontier at Tibet or it may be Sinkiang—I don't know yet. The demand for peace will be our only weapon. And faith in the spirit of man our only shield."

The two women were dumb with shock. But Satyajit was waiting for their response. When Suruchi found her voice it had a tremor of panic.

"You cannot walk hundreds of miles in the mountain heights. You had heart trouble only five months back."

He waved away her fear with a gesture of his hand. "That was nothing."

"What kind of Peace Mission will it be? Big or small?"

"It will have to be a small one. We must carry on our backs whatever we'll need. Of course, border guards will help us out as we pass them."

Suruchi said, "The members of the Mission will be drawn from all over India?"

"No. I have thought over that. Gandhigram alone will create this Peace Mission, the first one of its kind. In due time hundreds of villages and cities all over the country will follow up and send their peace brigades to Ladakh—if necessary. Other countries also—the response will become international. That's how a world moral force will bestride Ladakh. No brute force
can prevail against that power, the roused conscience of man. And at the end of it all . . . two great Asian peoples will find back their lost heritage of friendship. The brief aberration will be forgotten."

Suruchi felt a doubt rise to her lips. She suppressed it and asked, "You are sure that you will get the right men in Gandhi-gram? And—how many?"

He gave no answer for a while. Perhaps the final selection was still to be made? But there was no hesitation in his tone as he resumed:

"The village council with the exception of Madhab, who is too old and ailing."

The three men of his choice came into his mind's vision: Chittaranjan Ghose, hardened by many sufferings and prepared to bear more; Krishnamurti, with his perpetual dream of a world society in which basic human values were to prevail over the demands of wealth and power politics; and Swami-ji, repository of Gandhi's sayings, his life based on the conviction that God dwelt not in temple or mosque or church but in the living image of mankind.

"Four? Only four?" asked Suruchi.

"Four men and a woman."

"A woman?" Surumi cried in surprise. But Satyajit was again lost in silence.

"Who?" she demanded, knowing the answer. Her excited glance went quickly to her mother, who was to receive the unique honor.

"You, Sumita."

"It!"—in startled exclamation. Joy burst upon her heart and held her spellbound for some moments. The flood receded as fast as it had come, the emotion itself changed. The eyes as they lay upon her mother were shadowed with compassion.

"No, no. Mother—she alone—"

"She won't disapprove," Satyajit answered with a smile. "You may be sure of that." Self-satisfaction came upon him. Was not Suruchi perfectly adapted to the mold he had set?

Sumita slowed her pace and moved to her mother's side, clasping her arm, fingers gripping tight, more eloquent than
speech. But Suruchi was too stunned to think or even to feel. It was not until they were about to enter their house gate that the anger came surging upon her benumbed senses and its bitter tide drowned her lifelong forbearance. In the grip of the unaccustomed revolt Suruchi felt her limbs tremble.
Chapter

Thirteen

Sarojini Mehra was enjoying herself immensely. Two fat brown envelopes had come, each with a dozen or more smaller envelopes. The contents had to be tabulated, then pondered over. Some could be eliminated at one stroke of the pen.

There you go, mere Matriculate. The CE has made it plain that he wants an educated wife, and that means a person who’s passed the portals of a college. A Bachelor’s degree is the least to ask for. Why—Sarojini Mehra nodded to herself—even she had that degree and secretarial training in addition. Even more important is a good fund of general knowledge. Imagine the CE’s wife not knowing the difference between Tokyo and Kyoto, or Chou En-lai and Chop Suey, or not being able to tell the name of the President of the French Republic.

There you go, Medium Complexion. Very fair—that’s the term the CE used. Not that a very fair girl’s always more pleasing to a man’s eye than one somewhat darker—a point Mr. Mehra has often stressed. The too white skin seems to him insipid, lacking the quality of depth. The dusky face has an aura of mystery. Yes, all these are words Mr. Mehra has spoken. But then, poor man, he’s never gone to Western lands. A taste in complexion, as in food, dress, and all else, develops in accord with one’s background.

Off with the parent wanting to know the advertiser’s caste and mother tongue. His girl is uncommonly pretty, she is educated, and she is of the right height. But the CE has been explicit about the modern outlook. A father concerned with caste must have fed his daughter with the stuff of orthodoxy. A twelve-year-
in-America man to have an old-world spouse! The incompati-

bility!

Off you go, snooty one. To call oneself a man of property
and offer a big dowry! The CE is not in need of his wife’s money;
he is not in the marriage market with a price tag on his forehead.
Not for nothing has he said that social status is of no account.

Several photographs had come. The parties were apparently
in a hurry to expedite the matter—one way or the other. A few
outright rejections would be easy to make. The Mongoloid nose
—she might have come from China. Some people would fall for
that nose, but not the CE of Lohapur Steel. The big girl claim-
ing to be twenty but looking very much older—she stood against
a painted blackcloth of heavy-fronded palms. Better find a sen-
sible photographer. . . . The thin girl with sharp-cut features—
her face is a four-bladed knife. . . . The others . . .

The others were good. One was glamorous. Another, grace-
ful. Large eyes with tenderness in them . . . A face exquisitely oval
. . . Hard to know what kind of beauty the CE fancied. There
was a limit up to which his secretary would help. The final
decision would have to be his own. Rightly worded notes would
make his task easier, though.

Sarojini Mehra made her notes and sent them on with the
letters, each file labeled Immediate. They did not come back
from the out tray, not even after three days. Sneaking in when
the CE was absent, she found all these files heaped on one side
of the table with the Immediate tag removed. She smiled with
understanding. You cannot select your mate in all that hurry.
Take your time. Look well at each photograph, look again and
again, until one, just one, gets etched on your heart, never to be
deleted.

But the real fun was yet to start.

A week had gone by. One morning Mrs. Mehra had hardly
reached her desk when the telephone rang. She let it ring for a
while before she picked up the receiver.

“CE’s office—”

It was a woman. She gave her name and stated her business.
She wanted to ask the CE to dinner—all appointments, private
or otherwise, had to be made through his secretary. But the CE
had given a standing order that there should be no social en-
gagements for him in the month ahead; he did not have the time. No dinner, no cocktails, not even a Sunday lunch. In the past week no invitation had come. Here was the first one that had to be declined.

The phone rang again a few minutes later. Once more a woman's voice—harsh, mannish. She was not ready to take No for an answer. That was because she was the wife of the Deputy General Manager, Lohapur's second-in-command.

"He is engaged tomorrow night, you say? Whose dinner, d'you mind telling me?" The anxiety in the voice was barely concealed.

"No dinner, Madam. The CE will be working on the file for a new slag granulation plant to be installed."

The woman at the other end spoke with plain relief.

"Then make it the day after."

"Sorry, Madam. That evening is scheduled for the thirty-thousand-kilowatt generator. A new part has to be ordered."

"Thursday. That's settled."

Mrs. Mehra used firm words. "The fact is that the CE's evenings are all booked with work, hard work, for weeks ahead. No social engagements. That's his order."

"Let me speak to him. If you give me the line—"

"Sorry, Madam. The CE will not take any private call. I am helpless." And she added sweetly, "Why not ring him up at his residence in the late evening? Say, after eleven—"

"The phone at his residence is disconnected, that's why."

Mrs. Mehra smiled to herself. As if she didn't know that! "Then, Madam, I am quite helpless," she added even more sweetly.

That was the gist of several other talks also. Mrs. Mehra felt perplexed at this sudden rise in the CE's popularity. It was after she had answered the tenth call from a woman that illumination flashed on her. She turned quickly to the names of the callers she had scribbled down on her shorthand pad. Tapping her pencil on her firm white teeth, she pondered over the names.

The mystery lay cleared. The fact stood out that all the high-placed callers had girls of marriage age.

A leak! There had been a leak of the secret. Everyone in
Steeltown apparently knew that Box No. 1243 was none other than their Chief Engineer! The revelation had been made to only one person, and he was not a man to babble. Then how had this happened?

She would never know, Mrs. Mehra felt sure. The way a top secret leaked was undiscernable. And now the unpleasant fact had to be faced. Unpleasant for one reason: The CE must not have a Lohapur maid for his bride. Mrs. Mehra couldn’t have explained her decision, but there it lay in her mind, immovable.

Let the mothers ring up day after day. Mrs. Mehra knew how to hold the fort that was Room Nineteen. This was fun. All the elite of Lohapur on one side, and she, just by herself, on the other. The elite who would normally look on her as on a mouse, a caged mouse.

The mouse was going to have her day. Let the fun last a good long while. *Sorry, Madam, the CE cannot accept any social engagements.*

But it was going to be even better fun than what Mrs. Mehra had known up to this point.

The eleventh call came late in the afternoon. Mrs. Mehra was about to drop the set words into the receiver when she stopped.

“Madam, do you mind repeating what you said?”

“I am Mrs. Mullick. Will you have dinner with me tonight at the Club, Mrs. Mehra?”

“You mean the CE?”

“I mean you, Mrs. Mehra. We’d love to have you with us this evening. My husband is the Public Relations Officer—perhaps you know?”

“Of course.”

The other voice went on: “There’s a dinner-dance at the Club. Please excuse this short notice. I wasn’t sure that I would go . . . or . . . yes, there’s Housie also—some people call it Bingo. Have you played that game?”

“Oh, yes, Mrs. Mullick. But I’ve never had any luck.”

“You may, this time. Who knows? There’s a snowball. You may win. It isn’t the money that matters, but—such excitement!”
Pause, and then for the first time in her life Mrs. Mehra was stuttering on the phone.

"Are you sure... you... want me?"

"Of course I'm sure. Otherwise why should I ask you? It will be a real pleasure for us to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Mehra. Shall I send my car to your place? If you give me your address—"

"You don't have to send your car. I'll take a taxi. Eight o'clock?"

That was that!

Lohapur Club was much older than Steeltown itself, and had its origin at a time long before Freedom. Collieries dotted the surrounding region, and their owners had founded the Club exclusively for their own people. No Indian could have a place on its list of membership, not even the maharaja from whom the coal-bearing land had been obtained on lease. Then, with British exodus from the country, it appeared that the Club would have to go into liquidation. However, as the Steeltown built with Indian capital arose a few miles away, the Club's affairs took a new turn. The Steel Company bought up the Club's assets and gave it back all its old glory and some of the snobbery. Only officers of the steel mill and a few other citizens of high status were entitled to be members. The Club was a long, sprawling red-tiled bungalow with ten acres of grounds, a well-laid-out garden, a swimming pool, two tennis courts, and a guesthouse. A six-instrument band formed by local talent supplied Western dance music once a fortnight. Some emblems of the old still remained. From the high walls of the lounge large mounted stag heads, donated by British hunters, gazed down glassy-eyed in between big colored portraits of British personalities. And the magazines on an oval table at one corner, close to the bar, included *Blackwood's* and *Vogue*.

Mrs. Mehra, cycling in the countryside with her husband, had passed the tall wrought-iron gates, and her feet had gone dead on the pedals. Deck chairs lay on the spacious lawn, and behind a screen of decorative trees was a large swimming pool. A world apart from all that Mrs. Mehra had known: the drabness of the street where she lived; the dull stretch of buildings holding machinery. Even the Institute, a year old, was already
wearing a faded look—there was no money for a new coat of whitewash. Maybe one day a letter would come to Room Nineteen, marked Urgent and Top Secret, when the CE was away at a Club luncheon. . . . That letter would have to be delivered by herself. Take a staff car, rush off to the Club, go right through the gates. Send your name, wait in the lounge. . . . He comes, reads the letter. . . . He offers you a glass of pineapple juice from the frigidaire because it’s a hot, sultry day.

An unfulfilled dream—the circumstance she asked for was yet to materialize. And now—this sudden miracle! She would be a guest in the Club, an equal among equals. But what if the CE took it into his head to come to the Club tonight? How embarrassing for both! No, that was far from likely. He would go home loaded with files, all marked Very Urgent.

Back home, when she gave the news to her husband, he cried, “Mrs. Sarojini Mehra, you are going to be a society lady, han?”

“Just for one evening. You don’t mind?”

He beamed at her. “Go and enjoy yourself. While I go to the Institute and play table tennis.”

“Since this will be my first time at the Club, and the last . . .” Worry crossed her face. “You know, I have to take a taxi—I can’t barge in on my bicycle.”

“Take a taxi. Don’t forget to tip the driver.”

She wailed, “Five miles in a taxi—what a waste of money! And you suggest more waste!”

He handed her a ten-rupee note. “Keep this in your purse. The tip is a must. You’re going to a big place. Act as an officer’s wife. There’s a saying: One must wear painted plumes in the company of peacocks!”

“I have the whip hand!” Mrs. Mehra proudly announced.

“Whip hand?”

“Don’t you understand why I’ve been invited? That Mullick woman wants to make friends with me. The only way to get into the well-guarded fort—Room Nineteen!”

“Uh-huh!”

“They think I am the CE’s guardian! True, in a way of speaking. They did their best to get to the CE. With what result? And now they’ve changed their tactics.”
So Mrs. Mehra put on her best sari and found herself conveyed out of the city in a taxi. Her anxious glance lay fixed on the meter. Money was burning. At last there was the iron gate illumined with tube lighting for the festive night. A liveried porter opened the car door and stood aside with a smart salute.

Mrs. Mullick was hovering nearby. "Hello, hello, hello, Mrs. Mehra!" She cooed exuberantly. "Such a great pleasure—"
She was middle-aged, short and thin, with plaits of hair done together in a knot low on her neck.

"My pleasure. The fact is that—"

The band struck up at this moment and drowned the rest of her words. Mrs. Mullick led her guest through the aisle of a hall. "Our badminton court," she said. "Once a fortnight it's turned into a dance floor."

They came out on a long, deep, pillared veranda, bougainvillea creepers at ten-foot intervals splashing a blaze of color.

"Why don't you keep the two separate? Dancing and badminton on the same floor?" The tone seemed to carry condemnation.

"We are too poor to be able to afford such luxury," Mrs. Mullick admitted. "Even our band is engaged only once a fortnight."

"Really?" The condemnation was now more apparent.

"The heavy taxes eat up all we earn. I don't have to tell you that."

Mrs. Mehra agreed, yet disagreed.

"Yes, but we all have our duty to the State, haven't we? Our third Five-Year Plan has started. It needs big funds. We cannot hope to survive as a nation unless we attain high production targets both in the public and private sectors. You don't object to the public sector, Mrs. Mullick? To the socialist slant of our economy?"

"Public sector?" Mrs. Mullick had a blank expression.

"State-owned industries. Our Government has formulated an industrial policy assigning separate lists to the two sectors. At the same time there's a concurrent list. Steel, for instance. There's the State-owned Bhilai Steel with its rated capacity of one and a half million tons a year; and here in Lohapur we have the private sector forging ahead at a fast rate of growth."
“Is this your guest, Leena?” A big-built woman stood in their path. “We’ve spoken to each other on the phone, I think.”

Mrs. Mehra knew that mannish voice: the second-in-command. She felt alarmed, but only for a moment. After all, it was a matter of years, perhaps four or five, for the CE to become Deputy General Manager, she reminded herself. The youngest officer of that rank in India. Then he would be GM—perhaps at the age of forty-two. And this woman would have retired from service long before—that is, her husband would have—and become a nobody.

Leena had already introduced them. “We were discussing our industrial setup,” Mrs. Mehra said brightly. “We were about to move on to the subject of inflation, the need to hold the price line, mop up surplus purchasing power.”

The second-in-command turned her disapproving eye on the PRO’s wife.

“Leena, I didn’t know you worried about such things. Price power and whatnot!”

Leena felt wretched. She could not annoy one or the other. “I . . .” she began. “The fact is that I . . .”

“Housie!” cried a voice at the mike. “Get ready for Housie and buy your cards.”

Leena felt relief. “My guest has come here for the first time. Let me take her round. Then we’ll sit for Housie.” She nudged Mrs. Mehra with her elbow. They passed on.

“Everyone calls her Number Two. That’s because—”

“Yes, I know.” Mrs. Mehra laughed softly.

“The GM’s wife seldom lives here—she prefers Madras. So Number Two is all in all.” And Leena interrupted herself, saying, “This is our lounge.” People in the large carpeted room were clustered in small groups. “Look—there’s Meenakshi, my eldest daughter. People say she looks somewhat like me.” She amended her words in the next breath: “She isn’t like me at all; she’s pretty. Don’t you think so? You’ll talk to her later. She knows all about your Five-Year plans.”

They passed the group. Meenakshi smiled at her mother. That was the one responsible for her invitation to the Club, Mrs. Mehra reflected. An attractive face. But her ears were somewhat
large. Why didn’t she hide them with a different hairdo, revealing just the pierced lobes with gold rings?

“Chilly!” Leena said. “I don’t like so much air conditioning. Do you?”

“One gets used to it. Then it becomes indispensable. Like so many other luxuries we could do without.”

“A frigidaire, for instance,” Leena said. “We bought our first frigidaire only five years back. And now it seems we’ve had one all our life.”

“We become helpless slaves of our so-called needs. It’s all part of the human comedy!”

“You mean—tragedy?”

Mrs. Mehra simply smiled in answer. Their progress continued. Voices were calling Leena, but she hurried on. Mrs. Mehra knew the reason. Leena would not share her guest with any other woman in the Club. She would not risk losing the fruit of her clever enterprise.

But Mrs. Mehra could not know that it was Leena who had cleared the mystery of the advertiser, Box No. 1243, pointing out to the Club that it was none other than Bhashkar. Later, she had deplored that she had not kept her discovery secret. That was stupidity, indeed.

“The bridge room—take a look from the door. A sacred spot for my husband. There he is, at the fourth table from this end. Blue suit, striped tie.”

And big round patch of baldness at the top of his head, Mrs. Mehra added in her mind. It was as if a barber had shaven off a large area as a joke, leaving the surrounding hair untouched. She had seen the PRO once or twice in Room Nineteen. Every officer at the Steelworks came to that room, and not just because the CE was the CE. He was a man of ideas. He was like electric current giving light, heat, every kind of energy—and also shock. And he was completely free in spirit. It was an open secret that he always carried a letter of resignation in his breast pocket.

Mrs. Mehra recalled his tussle with the Board. One day he started dictating a telegram. How her hand shook over her pad! No, not this . . . she would have liked to cry out. Life is all compromise. One yields a bit here and gets it back elsewhere. But
how dare she give him advice? A career of great promise to turn to ash!

The telegram went on its way. Mrs. Mehra passed sleepless nights. She prayed to all the gods. And her prayer was answered.

The boom came again from the mike: "Please buy your Housie cards."

"Let's go to the lawn or we'll miss the first Housie," said Leena. "Later, I'll show you the swimming pool. After dinner we'll sit at the poolside and talk. Just by ourselves."

So the talk was to begin after dinner—Mrs. Mehra smiled with her knowledge, and felt a little sad for her host. She followed Leena to the brightly illumined lawn and they took seats at a far end, somewhat aloof from all others. Eager hands had beckoned, but Leena had pretended not to notice. "Away from the crowd we can concentrate better on the numbers," she said. She bought two cards and gave one to her guest along with a small pencil. "Five numbers on each line, and there are three lines, as you see. Ten rupees for each line, fifty for the full house. Now—good luck."

"Good luck."

"Eyes down!" The master of ceremonies cried into the mike. The numbers came. Two little ducks—22. All by itself, Number 9 . . . Top of the house, blind 90 . . . One and six, sweet 16 . . . Number 12, that's my age!

"Line!" someone called out. Not a single number on Mrs. Mehra's card stood canceled.

The second line went after ten more calls with a box of tricks, Number 6. By that time Mrs. Mehra had crossed out only four numbers. The third line went, and after some fifty calls a woman's voice came shrilling, "House!" Mrs. Mehra tore up her card.

"Good fun even if you don't win," Leena consoled. "We'll try again."

In the five-minute interval Mrs. Mehra cast her eyes about, surveying the display of saris and jackets, not knowing that she was at the moment the theme of talk at several tables.

"Her husband—what is he?"

"Just nobody. She being only a PS—"
"An officer's wife may work as PS to make an independent income."

"I have looked her up in the phone book. She's there. But no Mr. Mehra."

"Why not take Leena aside and ask?"

"I tried to catch her eye. She ignored me. Apparently she doesn't want us to meet her guest."

"As if our daughters are out to catch Bhashkar through his office secretary!"

"As if Bhashkar has authorized her to act as his matchmaker!"

"He advertised. It's as much his business to look for the bride as it's ours to find the groom."

"The honest thing for him would be to see all the girls, then decide. If he wants to keep himself in hiding, why has he advertised for a bride? It doesn't make sense."

"Maybe he doesn't want to marry a Lohapur girl."

"What's wrong with a Lohapur girl? Tell me that. Just two or three months back he was a different person. He would dance till two thirty. He would put his arm around the waist of this girl and that, even away from the dance floor."

"Why, he was seen taking a girl—I won't name her—down the garden path. It was a moonless night."

"Someone complained to the Club committee about his too free manner of dancing the twist. Of course I'm broad-minded; I've traveled in Europe and seen cabarets and nightclubs."

"We all had to give warnings to our daughters, didn't we?"

"Some of the girls laughed at their mothers."

"That's the worst part of it. Bhashkar is handsome. He has winning ways. He can turn a girl's head."

"What luck, he has at last decided on a decent home life. He should have told us his wish instead of advertising in a paper. We'd have been glad to help."

"We're happy anyway that sense has dawned on him at last. He has realized that here in India he cannot have the gay bachelor's life he must have known in America. It's taken him a year to understand that simple fact."
“He’s lost a precious year of home life. He could have been a father by this time.”

“Plenty of time yet for him to be a father. I hope he will make a good husband. Once a taste for something is created—you know how young people in America live.”

“That will depend very much on the wife. If he marries my . . . Well, what I mean is that if he loves his wife she’ll become his whole world. Our husbands, for instance.”

“Second Housie!” the loudspeaker boomed. “Buy your cards, please. This time we are having a snowball. If you can cancel all your numbers in the first sixty-five calls, you get two hundred rupees. Please hurry up. After this we’ll go in for dinner.”

So the game started again. The first line went. Two other lines. The calls continued. Mrs. Mehra crossed out her numbers mechanically with no real hope. Suddenly she grew tense. In the last seven calls five of her numbers had gone! Now there were just two left on the card. But maybe someone was waiting with only one number, and would cry out House any moment.

“Unlucky for some, Number 13,” the master of ceremonies went on. But not unlucky for Mrs. Mehra. Now she had just one number to cross out. She could hear the pounding of her heart. She placed her pencil on the number, her lips moving in silent prayer, “Four and six . . . four and six . . .”

The announcer called out, “This is the last number for snowball: four and six—”

The voice that gave response was almost a shriek.

A hundred pairs of eyes turned to the direction of that cry.

“Maybe there’s a mistake,” Mrs. Mehra whispered to Leena, who had craned her neck to see her guest’s card. “Maybe I’ve canceled a wrong number.”

“Please come over to this table,” called the master of ceremonies from the far end of the lawn.

She edged her way across the lawn between the clusters of chairs and tables. Her heart thumped as the numbers on her card were being checked. There could be an error, and then the MC would say into the mike, “Bogie!” The audience would burst into laughter and echo the word “Bogie.” But the MC said,
"House correct." He picked up a sheaf of ten-rupee bills and held them out. "Congratulations!"

As she took the bills, her husband came into her vision, and she nodded to him with: Wait till I come home—you'll enjoy the tale. I have worn the painted plumes, but that's not all. The hundred peacocks—I have beaten them at their own Club game!
The jeep as it passed down the avenue slowed to a crawl because of the traffic jam, and Bhashkar caught sight of a figure on the balcony of the City Library, bending over the wooden rail, looking out. Satyajit! What had brought him there so early in the day? Bhashkar put out his hand and waved a greeting. But Satyajit’s eyes were not on the street; they were fixed somewhere afar—the balcony commanded a panoramic view of Steeltown. Had he with some inner sensitivity felt the impact of the night’s tragic happening, though he couldn’t possibly know yet? His condemnation of the machine lay vindicated by the mangled mass of what had once been a human form.

The machine had taken its victim toward the end of the night. The message had come to Bhashkar in bed, and he had risen at once, dressed in a minute, and rushed off to the rolling mill. But there was nothing for him to do. The body lay on a stretcher, covered with a gray sheet, the feet sticking out; a tall man, apparently. Young; his age was on record as twenty-four. Word had gone to his wife soon after the accident, and there she sat on the cement floor, her knees touching the stretcher, and she was more a girl than a woman in spite of the bigness of her belly; she must be seven months gone.

“She hasn’t shed one drop of tear since she came,” said the Labor Officer. “She hasn’t spoken or moved or shown any other sign of life. She seems as dead as the body by her side.”

“She has none else in her home? A mother . . .”

“None.”

“What compensation will the Company pay?”
It wasn’t a big amount; it couldn’t last even up to the time the baby learned to toddle. The Company had no obligation to pay more.

“We can raise a subscription for her,” Bhashkar suggested.
“I’ll give a month’s salary. Let everyone else—”
The Labor Officer had an astonished look.
“There’s no precedent for such action.”
“The donations will be voluntary. Any small amount will help. A half-day’s wages—”
The Labor Officer said: “It will create a precedent, sir. Not only for our Company but for all others in India. The trade unions will make use of it on all future occasions.”
“So what? When a man dies in the performance of his duty—”
“It was perhaps his own carelessness. Or—”
“Yes?”
“Some loophole of danger left overlooked.”
“In that case the Company must pay.”
“But not more than what’s laid down by law.”
Strange, the Labor Officer was thinking. The CE had a reputation for ruthlessness. There was, for instance, his action against the junior engineer who thought he could break discipline. After repeated warnings the CE had gone to the GM and demanded the officer’s dismissal. The GM had hesitated. But the CE’s will had prevailed. Yet here was his softness for a common worker, who had paid the price of his own negligence.

Bhashkar had turned his glance to the woman. Cry, cry your heart out lest you go mad, he wanted to tell her. Suddenly he felt an immense wave of exhaustion come sweeping over him so that his knees almost sagged. I’m getting old, he said to himself. What good shall I be to the world if I get old? And now that the machine has turned against me—

That was plain sentimentality, something he couldn’t afford. Would he give way even before the battle had begun? He cast one more lingering look at the mother-to-be, with a prayer, with a blessing, then spun round and strode away. He went out the gate and climbed into his jeep. It was now eight o’clock. The night shift had just ended, and the siren was screaming, calling the men for the first shift of the new day. As he drove off, staring
straight ahead, he had an idea that the exhaustion was within him, a kind of emptiness that heavy work had left unfilled.

He tried to come to grips with the reality. Loneliness within? Such luxuries were not for a man who had a vast work to do in these crucial moments of the nation’s life. It was surely the body reacting on the mind. His body had never thrived on asceticism. Where was the necessity? Rupa...

Twice or thrice a week Rupa came to Room Nineteen with a confidential file from the Security Unit, and if it was something urgent she would take down a reply. Her greenish eyes could flash a look all too familiar. You would not see that look, that flash, in Indian eyes, but Rupa was half American. He had said to her the other day, “India needs women of your type, Rupa, as much as it needs the Western machines.” “My type? What type is that?” she had asked in astonishment. He had answered: “You’ll destroy the stability of our social life; you’ll create chaos; but you will give us something dynamic. You will restore the youth of the nation.” At that, the greenish pupils had glinted mischievously. “Not the stability of Room Nineteen,” she had said.

Sumita and Rupa. The spinning wheel and the turbine. India of the epic age and India-to-be. His own preference left no doubt whatever. Yet a sudden impulse took hold of him as he passed the gates of the library and saw Satyajit leaning over the balcony rail. With no second thought he swerved sharply to a side street, and after several turns in small lanes he was speeding toward the meadow. He hardly slackened on the rough track. When he reached the wooden post of the oil lamp, he applied the brake. He rested his arms over the steering wheel and dropped his head on them.

He would like her to reach into broad sunlight, away from the light that radiated from her father and enveloped her in its unhealthy glow. Unhealthy, for it would not let her be fulfilled—as a woman.

She should have a friend strong enough to release her from the cocoon of taboos she had built around herself; soon the fine-spun case would be too strong, and the full-grown moth, powerless to break loose, would be suffocated.

He could not be that friend. She was far apart from the
type he fancied. A woman for him had to be adult, experienced, uninhibited. But there was something refreshing about Sumita.

He could be with her in a minute—he had only to drive on. She must have forgiven him in the past four days for his hard words. It was not likely that she would nurse a bitter feeling in her heart.

An undeniable happiness came upon him as he started the jeep with a jerk. He pulled up in front of the house he knew. He hesitated, then blew the horn, blew again. She came out. She saw the jeep on the road, and stepped across the vegetable patch and out of the bamboo gate.

"Father's gone to Lohapur."

The engine was still running when he jumped out.

"I know. I saw him standing on the balcony of the library."

"Then?"

"Then what?"

She laughed under her breath and gave it up.

He said: "This isn't a business call. I'm out on a holiday. Sight-seeing."

"This isn't Sunday or some sort of holiday."

"Holiday for me. At least for an hour."

"Sight-seeing in this village? We have nothing to show you, Mr. Roy."

She saw the look of dismay, and hastened to add: "Unless you care for old temples. We have one at the other end of the village."

"I've heard of it. If I could have Gopal as guide—"

"He can't leave school." She paused, hesitating. "Am I good enough? I don't have to take a class for some time yet."

"Wonderful!" His face beamed. He turned quickly to help her into the jeep, as if he feared she might change her mind. As soon as she had settled herself, he hurried round to the other side and climbed up and changed gear.

"The fact is," he said in a low murmur, as if to himself, "I've felt restless. I couldn't work. I had to take an hour off."

"You... restless?"

"Am I a machine? A thing of steel?"

"Not steel. Steel cannot think."
“Perhaps I am a kind of steel that can think. A computer. But I can’t feel. That’s it.”

She shook her head vehemently. “Your rich feeling for India. For the modern age. For the industrial revolution.” And sharply, as the jeep raced. “Slow! First to the left. There.”

“Now tell me—” He changed the topic. “There are people working in the fields and they can see you. What will they say?”

Her answer carried plain astonishment: “They see me all the time. What is there to say?”

“Seated in a jeep with a stranger.”

“You’re no stranger.”

“Driving along with a man from Steeltown.”

“Is that wrong?”

“It’s permissible! Gandhigram is as advanced as all that?”

“Advanced? What’s advanced about it?”

He had used the wrong word, he knew. “The old segregation,” he explained. “Men and women kept apart. In every village that’s the rule.”

“Not in Gandhigram.”

“Really? And it doesn’t lead to complications?”

“Complications?” She gave him a quizzical look.

Were they all Sumitas in this village? Hard to believe. He made a new approach. “Why do you take this trouble for a man you hate?”

The question in her eyes changed to puzzlement. “Hate?” she breathed. “Hate you?”

“A man with evil designs on Gandhigram. Who wants to build a blast furnace in the mango grove. How can you help hating him?”

She was silent, as if she acquiesced; then her voice came in a slow murmur: “We will resist you. We will die rather than lose ourselves. But no hate will be involved. Yesterday Father was speaking to our village about the menace from Steeltown. He warned us: To give hate for hate is only to make the evil grow stronger. To hate is to be defeated in the moral struggle.”

Struck by her words—and even more, by the feeling behind them—he cried impulsively, “I do want to understand you, Sumita.”
Sumita! He had called her by her name!

He was now speaking fast: "How will you counter the Chinese propaganda that you hear on the radio for hours every night? They've set up a station close to our borders, and use a high-powered transmitter. They slander our leaders; they throw mud on Nehru; they speak malicious lies all the time. They've turned lying into an art. What should we do in return? Sing the praises of our dear brethren? Chant the glory of the ancient culture of China?"

Eyes averted to the sweeping fields tilled and ready for the monsoon rains about to come, Sumita reflected for a moment before she gave her answer.

"We have believed in that culture for almost two thousand years, haven't we? That belief cannot be negated by the words of a paid propagandist. To lay bare an obvious lie we don't have to use other lies, or even half-truths."

The wide grin on Bhashkar's face made him look younger than his age.

"Your own words?"

"What do you mean?"

"Not borrowed words?"

In an instant she was miles away from him, withdrawn.

"There's no difference," she cried sharply. "Father thinks for me. That's my privilege, not my shame. I know he cannot go wrong. I know—" She swung away from the topic, saying in a low murmur, "We don't have to draw him into this talk."

"No," he meekly agreed, recalling what had happened when they met last.

The brief communion was lost. If only she had a friend who could break the father image, Bhashkar mused. Was there no one to play that role?

"Please turn off the road. That's another meadow. The village beyond it is named Ranighat."

How could a man be so completely unaware of the blossoming richness under his roof, even though that richness belonged to his daughter? Would not the sight of youth recall to his mind his own youth and his wife's? Had he no memory that he could relive?

"You see the temple?"
Absorbed in thought, he had seen it with sightless eyes. A dilapidated stone structure black with the time it had absorbed. The jeep pulled up in the front yard.

"There’s nothing to see, really. But then you have to waste a precious hour of yours—sight-seeing!"

"Let’s go in."

The walls, once smooth, looked roughened by weather. The tapering top ended in what could once have been a wheel—half of it was broken. There was no door at the entrance; someone who needed the wood had taken it, perhaps two hundred years ago. And, strangely, the sanctum was empty, it had no god or goddess. It was as though the idol, hating the loneliness and the ruin, had walked away.

As his eyes grew used to the dim interior, he looked around. Friezes covered the walls, depicting episodes out of mythology. Echoes of motifs in some of India’s famed temples. A large sculpture in an alcove struck Bhashkar’s eye, and he stepped close. A stone woman sat astride the knees of a man, one melon-round breast cupped in his large hand. It was like a well-known piece in Khajuraho—or was it Konarak? A surprisingly good copy. But Bhashkar was less intent on the stone woman than on the one by his side. She was not conscious of the eroticism, not abashed. Not conscious of her companion gazing at sculptured love.

“What do you think of that, Sumita?”

“I know nothing about the art of sculpture.”

Unasked questions lay on his tongue. It has no meaning for you? You do not see there a real man, a real woman? He had no business to pry into Sumita’s inner life. Hard, though, not to think of the new loveliness that could have marked her face at the touch of... shame.

He turned away, annoyed with himself, and strode abruptly out of the temple. A moment later she joined him in the jeep.

“Didn’t I tell you there was nothing to see?” They were racing down the road.

“A view of life.” He could be speaking to himself.

“Life?”

“The sculpture. You saw it.”
"That!" She clicked her tongue with honest incomprehension.

His own incomprehension was equal to hers. It was hard for him to believe that any woman could remain untouched by the sight of the hand on the breast, both so faithfully rendered. Sumita must have seen that sculpture many times in the course of years; yet, today, in the fullness of youth, how could she fail to see the reality she had missed before, and react appropriately? But there was her prompt dismissal of it with a click of her tongue.

Be it so—he felt a kind of relief. His halfhearted duty was done. He did not have to make the limestone figure feel, breathe. But with relief there was regret. Regret not simply on Sumita’s account. She was India, wasn’t she? The India of Satyajit. The India that had to be transformed. It wasn’t enough to fight Satyajit on the economic front. The battle must touch every facet of living. The machine age swept over the country could give no quarter to repressions.

One kind of blindness linked up with other kinds in a chain. No wonder that Sumita failed to see the dark menace from beyond the mountains. Satyajitism, working at several levels, was all of a piece. Delusion—and more delusion!

His thoughts filled with that menace.

“We were talking of Radio Peking, Sumita. This is what the Chinese said last night: ‘What if there is a war? Half of mankind will perhaps perish, but the other half will survive. Time will pass; the women will bear children, and world population will return to the old level.’”

“Radio Peking said that?” Those words could have been spoken by the enigmatic woman at the Peace Congress.

“They don’t mind losing two or three hundred million of their people. A mere half century has to pass before the old number is reached again. What is that in terms of historic time?”

Sumita said, “Let me tell you a secret.” She stopped, a sudden flush on her face, her black eyes intense.

She should always wear that look, he thought, wanting to stop the jeep and sit gazing at her. And it struck him that no other clothes could suit her so perfectly as the coarse white garb. His glance bent to the loveliness of bare feet covered with red dust...
"Tell me," he coaxed as she remained silent. A word of
endearment had almost passed his lips. What was the matter
with him? Stupid man!
They need a change of heart. God dwells in them as in all
others. That God has to be roused."
"Yes?" He was eager to understand, to find the truth, to
change, if need be, his philosophy of life.
So it is that Father has decided to take a Peace Mission
to Ladakh. He hasn't announced his plan yet. Only Mother and
I know. And you—"
He was aghast. He could hardly believe his ears.
"Peace Mission . . . to Ladakh?"
"The effect will be historic. The soul of the Chinese people
will be touched. All that is good in them, all the nobility of the
human spirit."
His voice interrupted sharply. "Of whom will the Peace
Mission be composed?"
"Four men. And . . . a woman."
"A woman?"
Her face saddened. "I wish it were Mother—"
His words were a whiplash. "I have no such wish." He
controlled himself, and said, "The woman's already chosen?"
"Yes."
"You know who she is?"
"Yes."
"Well?" He waited.
"Myself."
Horror struck him. The hand on the steering wheel grew
limp, and the jeep skidded off the road, bumping over a large
pothole. In the long silence that followed, the horror turned to
bitter fury.
She cried in honest wonder, "What is it?"
"Nothing."
"I know I don't deserve this honor."
He made no comment. The exhaustion he had felt at the
rolling mill an hour before came sweeping back. He longed to
be alone, submerged in work within the walls of his sanctuary,
or . . . or . . . submerged in Rupal