Rupa knocked on the door of room nineteen with a report from her office. Bhashkar waved his unlit pipe toward a chair. He read the note quickly; then he stared before him in an abstracted way. He was not looking at her, Rupa knew; he was looking beyond her, beyond the wall, at something that was not of her world. Visions of his own. Steel for a new type of submachine gun. Alloy for an inch-thick plating of armor. But the weariness in his face! What was troubling him since she was here last?

That day, too, she had seen the abstracted look; but his expression had changed to pleasure. He had given her the warm smile she loved.

"It's good to see you, Rupa. There's peace in your presence."
"Peace?" That was not the reaction she wanted.
"You can make me forget my problems."
"For two moments."

Laughing, he reached out across the table and took her hand. "You have the fingers of an artist." Their eyes met, but she looked away. Could he not read her and understand her? He did not have to make love to her fingers alone. But that was all he did. His hand withdrew, and she whom he had enthroned for two moments was reduced to nothingness.

Not quite. As she was ready to leave, he came to her side of the table, standing behind her. His fingers held her chin and tilted her face upward, then crossed the half-open mouth and trailed along the upper lip with its feel of down. "Strange!" he spoke in a murmur, as if to himself. "You could be Mary Ann!"
At that remark she had wanted to withdraw from his touch; she hated to remind him of a woman he had known, in America, obviously, and to be compared. But she had no power to decline his caress. She sat quiet, face bowed, while his hand slipped to the curve of her throat, tracing it to the crescent of the collar-bone. Her breath came faster and her breasts ached expectantly. It was at that moment that the telephone had to ring. He ignored it for a time. She felt the slow, caressing descent of his hand, and the ache grew. But the telephone was persistent. He picked it up in exasperation. His face changed in an instant. “Yes, yes, I’ll be there in five minutes.” And to her, vibrant in every limb: “Rupa, there’s been a breakdown at the Structuralis. It will be disastrous unless I rush off.” She could not lift her bowed head for a minute even after he was gone. Then she had to struggle with herself lest she snatch up the blue-painted receiver and hurl it against the floor.

Today, elbows propped on the table and face cupped in her hands, she waited for his change of mood. There’s a limit to one’s capacity for physical strain, she was thinking. He had passed that limit and must pay the price. If he would only give her a chance. She could take him out of himself and renew his endurance in that process.

“Rupa—”

Startled by the tone of gravity, she waited.

“We are in a state of war, Rupa.”

“War?”

“Expansion. We have to take Gandhigram in our stride. Our natural line of advance, from the technical point of view. It doesn’t make sense to leave out this site and turn in some other direction. But there’s a second reason why Gandhigram must be annexed. Its whole outlook is contrary to ours. It is what we’ve got to fight all over India.”

She nodded without answer. He was not talking to her, she knew; he was simply thinking aloud.

“The conflict could have waited, but Ladakh has given it a great urgency. And Ladakh also brings into sharper focus a strange man named Satyajit. He does not believe in armed might. Not that he loves his country’s freedom a whit less than
any of us. He has other ideas about defending freedom. He is
going to make a dramatic—"

The voice broke off. The face filled with brooding until the
anger showed in the hardening of the eyes. "It’s Satyajit we have
to fight, Rupa."

That explained his weariness. Not steel, but something
stronger. The renowned leader of Gandhigram would be fully
prepared to meet the challenge from Steeltown.

"This report you’ve brought from your office—it’s mainly
about Satyajit. For more than a week he’s been going to the
City Library, collecting material on Ladakh out of books, maps.
He has to know the ground."

"Why does he have to know Ladakh?"

He turned away from that question.

"Satyajit is the very soul of Gandhigram. He is Gandhigram.
Without his guidance the structure of ideas he’s been building
will topple like a thing of sand. The others on the village coun-
cil, men like Krishnamurti, are of much smaller dimensions. If
only Satyajit could be destroyed—"

Rupa gave a gasp. "Destroyed?"

"I am thinking of the inner man. The man of crystal purity.
The man who abhors vice. Vice in his own reckoning, of course.
Let him fall from his moral height, and he will declare himself
unworthy of leadership."

Rupa shook her head. "That can’t happen."

She watched the saddening of his face, and her heart grew
troubled. But he resumed hopefully:

"I have also thought so, and yet I am somewhat cynical
about ascetics. You may have read the Tagore story Attainment.
Tagore takes an ancient legend and gives it a new coloring."

She was silent a long minute, gazing at the glass pane of the
window misted with rain. It’s going to rain all day, she thought.
The monsoon had started earlier than expected. All night there
had been a heavy downpour, with repeated thunderclaps. She
had slept fitfully.

He also was silent. Then he was speaking again, but to
himself:

"Ascetics have fallen—in spirit—from their high pedestal.
If only that happens to Satyajit!"
"What then?"

"As soon as he becomes aware that his inner self has been stained . . . Gandhi in his early youth had a somewhat similar experience. Writing about it, he said that, though nothing happened, 'the carnal desire was there and it was as good as the deed.'"

She looked down, her face red. Bhashkar laughed.

"Don't tell me, Rupa, that you suffer from prudery. Do you? Then let's drop this subject." Adding, apologetic: "Just wishful thinking. I shouldn't have imposed it on you. And—how stupid of me! To imagine that something that didn't happen in all the past years could happen overnight."

There was a slight twitch in her face over one cheekbone, the restiveness of a tiny nerve. She had been unprepared for his solemn mood. His hand was now reaching out toward her, but she recoiled in curious alarm. He was far from her in his thoughts; he would make love to her fingers, her fingers alone. At this moment she could not bear that. She rose abruptly to her feet.

"Time to get back to my office."

She paused at the door, turned and flung, "What chance has Mary Ann today against one ascetic?"

What did she mean? he pondered in amazement as she hustled off. She did have a likeness to Mary Ann.

Life had been harsh to Rupa. She was six years old when her mother went away. She went to America, where she belonged. And Rupa went to boarding school, then to college. After graduation she took secretarial training. But on a whim she answered an advertisement and found herself in the uniform of an air hostess.

All this she had revealed to him one day. She had looked unhappy, and he had wanted to know the reason. She had spoken out, needing an outlet for pent-up feelings. But why did the hostess quit her job? When he asked that question, a look came upon her face as if she saw something fearful. Her mouth set tight; the faint down on her upper lip turned darker in hue—that was a play of light on the averted face. He hastened to say, "Don't tell me, if it hurts." A minute went by. He had a longing to share in her sorrow. He wanted to reach into the depths of
her mind. But the cloud of hurt lifted from her face as if at the touch of a magic wand. She turned to him with a brilliant smile. She picked up her pencil and bent over her pad. "Shall we proceed? The last sentence reads . . ."

That image faded into another. The Peace Mission—Sumita trudging the Himalayan desolation from which perhaps there would be no return. Bhashkar felt his blood grow asire. Satyajit had no right to make his daughter a sacrificial offering simply to vindicate his own moral grandeur. The tremendous ego! If he could only be destroyed—but not by hunger or cold or a Chinese bullet!

In the next hour Rupa sat sunk in deep contemplation in her room.

Wishful thinking, he had said. But . . . couldn't it be that the ascetic of Gandhigram had a weak link somewhere in his heavy moral armor? The carnal desire was there and it was as good as the deed. Mere desire, the feeling and the thought, could stain a man's inner self.

The idea came upon her in a flash: What if I become his test?

Laughing, she dismissed the idea. She was not the right person to play such a role. She had nothing of the mental equipment. Or the physical, for that matter.

Had not men who looked at her once seemed eager to look again? And the desire in their eyes was barely concealed.

The idea returned to her and grew in her mind while she worked. After an hour had passed, the idea became a compulsion. The experiment would be amusing, if nothing else. She would not tell Bhashkar. If success came, this service to him would be her unacknowledged gift. If she failed, it would not matter anyway. But she would have to begin immediately. Who could tell when Satyajit would stop coming to the City Library?

He would be all by himself in the third-floor room kept in reserve for scholars. She could offer him assistance. She would have to be absent from the office—that was no problem, with the fortnight's leave due.

She felt a wave of excitement. Presently she was working out the details of her plan. These clothes wouldn't do; sari-clad,
she might strengthen inhibitions in the ascetic. One of the Western dresses she had occasionally worn abroad would serve her purpose better. They would turn her into the very image of her mother, Rupa reflected, recalling a portrait in the old album. The portrait was more vivid than the picture in her memory.

On what rock had the marriage foundered? Father had answered the question with, “She—she had to be happy.” “Then why didn’t you make her happy?” But he had withdrawn into his silence.

Rupa had not seen much of him, either. He had not married again, but back home on vacations she faced a stranger. Did he see her mother in her . . . and hate her? A constant reminder of wreckage. Rupa had longed to draw closer to him, but he was unreachable in his walled-up shelter.

“What do I care?” she had said to herself, in tears.

Luck that the Airways had selected her for the job. Luck?

For a time it was wonderful. She began her career on the Calcutta-Tokyo route. A year later it was Calcutta-Cairo. And then came John Wakefield. John was a co-pilot, his home in Britain. Dancing at the Great Eastern in Calcutta, he said, “Why didn’t I see you three years earlier?” There was sorrow in his voice. She answered him. “Three years back I would have been too young for a date with you. I would have been afraid of a man from an unknown land.” He saw the point, but the unhappy look stayed. And they dated in other cities, outside India. John was alternately gay and morose. Somewhere in his life there was a tragedy, Rupa felt sure.

Several months passed before the revelation came. One evening they dined at the Nile Hilton and watched the floor show. John grew restless, moody. Close on midnight he suggested a drive—he always had a borrowed car in Cairo. They went out and drove to the desert’s edge, to Giza Pyramid. Arm in arm, they walked around the Pyramid, picking their way by a fading flashlight. They paused for a brief while to gaze at the Sphinx. The cunous thought came upon her that in the last few days John had become as inscrutable as the Sphinx.

Presently the flashlight battery died, and the darkness enveloped them.

It was near dawn when she was back in the city, utterly
exhausted in body and mind. The young girl in the uniform of an air hostess had become a mature woman.

When she woke at noon, a letter from John was waiting for her. It would tell her where they would meet in the evening—he had not wanted to disturb her sleep. But that was not what the note said.

He was leaving immediately—there was a posting order. He did not know how to express his pain for what had happened in the night. It looked preplanned but wasn’t. Life would have taken a different course for them both if he weren’t married.

John Wakefield was married.

She had been fool enough not to understand the words he had spoken: Why didn’t I see you three years earlier?

The aircraft that used to be filled with the blueness of the sky became a suffocating metal capsule. She gave up her job. For several weeks she kept herself buried in a hotel room in Calcutta, not going out, seeing no one. Then her wound healed. A new Rupa emerged out of her chastened self. One closer to her American mother. One released mentally from Indian roots. Her new career began in a travel agency. When she had made the sales manager’s head swirl, she resigned abruptly. Two or three other jobs followed. Then she came to Steeltown. Barely a week passed before she discovered the dominant figure there. And as chance would have it, she had to take confidential notes from her office to Room Nineteen, and jot down replies.

But her calculations were all upset. She who had felt secure in the knowledge that she had become immune to feelings of a certain kind . . . she, Wakefield-insulated . . . Her task today should be amusing enough. A man nearly fifty—they were all too vulnerable at that age. An ascetic was an unknown factor, though. If he addressed her as Rupa-Mother, all would be lost. But he wouldn’t if he saw her in the garb and person of a foreigner.

Later, in her lodging, wearing a green pleated skirt and white low-necked blouse, Rupa gave a glance at her mother looking back at her from the glass. Where was she? Had she found what she had wanted? Was there any love in her still for the child she had left behind years ago, the child who had once been part of her body, who had lain on her milk-filled breast?

This was no time for such thoughts, and Rupa pulled her-
self away from them. The final smear of red on a mouth somewhat wide. The loose-cut blouse flared as she bent forward.

One day she had gone to Room Nineteen in this blouse, but the sari was there as usual with its enveloping, concealing fold. The fold slipped off her shoulder while she was scribbling on her pad, and she, aware, paid no heed. She wrote on, unconcerned. But she held her breath as she saw Bhashkar rise from his chair. He came round to her side of the table, gently picked up the fold of sari and replaced it, and all this while the dictation went on uninterrupted.

How her face had burned!

Her expectations from him were small. Let him amuse himself, with a little playacting added, the Wakefield way. That would make her content. That was all she asked.

Rupa took a cab. In the library she sat awhile in the reading room, thinking. It might be useful to know more about Satyajit before she met him. All that she knew of him—of the inner man—was contained in Bhashkar’s brief remarks. She should glance through one or two of the books he had written. And the Tagore story, *Attainment*, could be a revelation.

She walked to the stacks, and found the volumes she needed. Back at her seat, she began to read.

Lost in penance in the deep forest, the ascetic was bent on winning immortality. A young girl of the wood gatherers who lived at the edge of the forest brought him, every day, fruit and water in leaf cups. She placed flowers before him. All her gifts went unheeded. At midday she stood beside the ascetic, shielding him with the corner of her sari against the strong sun. He took no notice.

But the gods took notice of the ascetic. Earthbound, he was striving to attain deathlessness by the might of his suffering. Indra, king of the gods, was enraged by the audacity of a mere mortal, and he bade the heavenly dancer Menaka descend to Earth and break the power of the ascetic’s meditation. Menaka was hesitant. To employ an *apsara* for the defeat of a mortal—wouldn’t that be a defeat of Heaven? The fatal instrument for use was on Earth itself. Woman. And Indra understood.

So it happened that by Indra’s will the girl of the wood
gatherers acquired enchantment. The ascetic, now resolved to move deeper into the forest and make his penance yet harder, turned his eyes upon the girl and saw her as a person known yet unknown. She, hearing of his wish, begged that he stay where he was, so she could at least have the bliss of looking at him every day. Strangely, the ascetic, for the first time, granted her prayer.

His compliance came upon the girl as a shock. She had barred the way of his attainment, and he had yielded to her will. She became afraid of herself. Presently, the ascetic was accepting fruit and water from her hand.

Her happiness was washed off in tears. One day, resolved to withdraw from the ascetic her own evil power, she bade him farewell—she was leaving for a place afar. He gave her his blessing. "Go, then, and be fulfilled."

When at last his hard penance was completed, Indra appeared before the ascetic, conceding victory, offering godlike immortality. But he no longer desired the boon. "What is it that you ask?" said Indra in astonishment. The answer came, "I ask for the girl of the wood gatherers."

No Indra would give her enchantment, Rupa thought to herself, closing the book; she would have to make the best use of what she possessed. Would that bring about the spiritual fall of the ascetic upstairs? Would it make him reject Attainment when it was within reach?

Satyajit was watching the fury of the storm as it swung past by the half-open window—it looked like a hurricane. He could still recall how in his youth nature in its aspects of fury used to move him strongly, as if touching some wildness in himself. In his Cambridge days he was sometimes carried away by that wildness, which took various forms. Bireswar called it a necessary and healthy outlet, but Satyajit could not accept that view. It was an outlet, he agreed, but so was an open drain. An open drain carried away the city's filth in a putrid flow. His objection was to the filth itself.

He had sternly chastised his body after each lapse, fasting for days together. On those days he pored over the pages of The
Imitation of Christ, his favorite book. He had thought each time that it was to be his last defeat. But the defeats had continued with varying intervals.

Strength had been growing in him, though, all the time, and he knew that the defeats would one day be over. Then perhaps he could become a Buddhist monk and find the inward peace he craved.

He did not have to be a monk. The Gandhian way offered deliverance. The renunciation in which he found release was not a denial of the world. Its code was harder to follow, calling forth greater moral resources.

He turned his chair toward the meadow and let his mind grow attuned to the wind’s hiss and shriek. A long time ago he had once gone rushing out into the rain, feeling it slap his body, exulting. That was in Santiniketan. Just before Suruchi came into his life. Suruchi was a bridge between two of his lives.

The knock on the door escaped his ears until it was repeated the third time. As he turned round, about to answer, the door slowly opened. The face of a stranger peered in. It was a woman.

“May I come in, sir?” said Rupa as she stood framed in the doorway.

He studied her for some moments.

“This cannot be the room you’re looking for,” he said, rising to his feet politely.

“Sir, I am to assist you in your work. I can get a typewriter from the library office. The notes you’ve taken—or any other material—”

He gazed at her in bewilderment.

“I thought you were a foreign tourist.”

“I am employed at Steelhouse. You are apparently writing a new book—there has been none since The Conquest of Violence. And she added, haltingly, with a lovely grimace, “I know I can be a nuisance. In that case you have only to send me away.”

“I don’t understand—” In the years past he had received many facilities in the library, but they had not included the service of a typist. And this young woman knew his books.

“Maybe, sir, you don’t want anyone from Steelhouse to work for you. I understand your feeling.”

He gave her a long glance. She was wrong if she thought
he had any feeling of bitterness. It would be most helpful if his memorandum was typed in his presence.

"When do you wish to start? Tomorrow?"

"Why tomorrow, sir? Why not right away?" Briskly she came into the room and closed the door behind her. "Let me first tidy up the table—the typewriter will need some space." She grew busy with the mess of papers. He watched her in silence. This is the point of danger, Rupa was thinking. Let him address me as Mother and it's all over.

The heavy shadow of clouds had filled the room, but Satyajit had not turned on the table lamp; he had seen her in the light from the corridor. He couldn't have been working. Dreaming of—Attainment? Even now, it was she who had to turn on the switch. Would he, like Bhashkar, look at her while he was actually looking far beyond her? What chance would she have then?

"Sir, why did you think of me as a tourist?"

"You are not Indian."

"My mother came from Boston. She married an Indian student at the University. But I haven't told you my name yet. Rupa."

"Rupa... what?"

"Just Rupa. No one in Steeltown uses my surname."

"Why?"

Her eyes gazed into his, and the greenish pupils were as bright as polished gems.

"Maybe they like the name!"

Rain came bursting into the room with a sudden change in the course of the wind. Papers flew about. Satyajit rose, unhurried, walking toward the window. Rupa was there already. Two pairs of hands met as they struggled to close the glass pane against hard pressure. What long and powerful fingers, Rupa thought, as he finally pushed up the iron bolt. Rain began to beat on the glass. Through the wind's clamor the sound of aircraft could be heard; there was an airdrome twenty miles away. Landing would not be easy with visibility nil.

Normally she could have seen from here the five-storied bulk of Steelhouse. Room Nineteen was on the second floor, and she could have spotted it, too—a corner room, west-north. The man there would be busy, as always, with no time even to look at the
storm. Dedicated to the endless files. The files meant machinery; they meant a great body of workers; they were the heart that pumped blood, the lungs that kept every limb, the tiniest cell, supplied with fuel. It was only she, Rupa, who could get nothing from the files, and was denied in every cell of her being. . . . Why couldn’t she be the girl of the wood gatherers whose one wish the ascetic had granted? That girl could always stand beside the ascetic, her eyes filled with his presence. She, Rupa, had no right to that much bliss. There were papers to bring to Room Nineteen only twice or thrice a week.

“Let’s get on with the work if you want to be helpful.” Satyajit’s voice had sharpened. There was a strange look in his face—anger? What was he angry about?

She started to pick up the papers scattered all over the floor. As she bent down she felt his glance upon her, and remembered the blouse. Her own downward glance turned for an instant to her exposed figure. No sense of impending victory came upon her, though. She had suddenly lost interest in her mission. If only she could be in Room Nineteen—fruit and water in leaf cups . . .

There in Room Nineteen the assault of the blouse had failed. What matter if it gained a victory that would not change the course of her fate? It was now making her burn, as once before, in defeat.

She swung round on her heels as she went on collecting the papers, and when the sheets were all on the table she murmured: “Shall I bring the typewriter? The library will remain open another two hours, and in any event you cannot leave until the heavy rain has stopped.”

“Yes,” he agreed, his voice curiously empty. “Bring the typewriter . . . Rupa.”
Several hours after Rupa had left, Bhaskar walked to the window and wiped clear an area of the pane. The rain had shrunk to a thin drizzle. He could go to the meadow for one final look at the house; tomorrow it would be open to the judgment of Gandhigram. Would the house fail him, fail to be the instrument of his dream? He mustn’t lose his conviction before it was tested. Only a day.

The sky was a great mass of thick black cloud, and even at midafternoon little daylight was left. Rain had made pools by the roadside. Beyond Section Twelve a large brown sheet of water covered a stretch of lowland, and children were wading in it, floating paper boats. In the meadow air hung the heavy scent of wet earth.

He was not ready for the surprise—even from the jeep he could see the white-garbed girl squatting on the veranda floor. She was busy with what looked like electric wires, the man by her side apparently giving her instructions. As he caught the sound of the jeep’s engine he jumped to his feet.

“What’s happening here?” Bhaskar demanded.

Embarrassment struck her as she looked up. “All this”—she made a vague gesture—“to light the house.”

“I know.”

The man in overalls came to her rescue.

“Sir, she has a technician’s mind. In three days she’s learned how to do the wiring. The first day she stood by, watching us. The next day she asked questions and wanted to handle this stuff.”
“What fascinating work!” she cried, happy. “I’m learning fast!” She touched the galvanometer with a caressing hand.

The electrician picked up his equipment and went away—the day’s work was over. Bhashkar turned to the girl, and as she saw him frown she grew more flustered. He spoke: “You have been here several times?”

“You disapprove? I haven’t done any damage; I can tell you that.”

“You’ve been coming at a time when I was not likely to be here. Even today I wouldn’t have come at this hour except for the break in the rain. I’d never have known about your visits, your contribution to the wiring of this house.”

“Would you have forbidden me?”

“Sumita, you are letting down Gandhigram. This evil, this contamination. Your father has kept it away from the village.”

She shook her head with vehemence. “He has no objection to knowledge. All knowledge is sacred, he says. The fact that I am learning something—”

“The electric switch, that small button, may eventually bring about the end of Gandhigram.”

She was speechless for a minute, a tiny crease of thought on her brow. “It isn’t as simple as all that.” Pausing again, then resuming: “What’s good for Lohapur may not be good for us. There’s nothing evil in electric power itself. Why, it’s a marvel! It’s—” Words failed her, but the shining eyes spoke.

He was amazed. The mixture of contradictions she was. The ease with which she could resolve all contradictions in her mind. Machines were the enemy. Yet she was fascinated by the very life spark in machines—electricity. The life spark, the energy that had begotten the new century, the new civilization. How would she react to the iron turbines producing this power?

“Come to see our turbogenerators,” he offered. “They give us ninety thousand kilowatts, and we are about to set up a new unit. These wires are only the channel of distribution. Power in itself is a small part of the picture. Steelmaking—that’s the picture. Iron ore turned into steel ingots. And there’s the strip mill, the blooming mill. Giant machines working day and night like bondslaves.”

“Our boys saw all that,” she said musingly. “A truckload
of them. They talked of nothing else for days on end. One boy—"
She cut herself short and broke into a laugh.
"One boy?" Bhashkar prompted.
"Nepu—that's his name—he was impressed most of all by an elevator. He had been allowed to press a button. 'What a machine!' he went on crying for several days."
"There was an old man in the party—a man with a fierce kind of moustache—"
"Great-Uncle! He imposed himself on the boys. When they saw him climb up on the truck, they said, 'Hey, Great-Uncle, this trip isn't for elders!' He answered gruffly: 'Who will keep you all in check? Who will hold you back from mischief? What if you bring shame on the village?' Then one boy lost his temper and spoke sharply, 'You can go to Steeltown all by yourself. We are going home.' Great-Uncle, alarmed lest the trip be canceled, became as meek as a mouse. He cried, pleading: 'Brother, let me be. I won't be in your way. Just forget my presence. Why, even an old man needs fun once in a while.'"
Bhashkar laughed. "What a lovely character!" A perplexed look came to his face. "This I don't understand. Why did you let the boys go? You could have stopped them. They are well disciplined, I know."
"How could we stop them? Are we tyrants? And why should we have done that?"
"I see."
"Will you invite me? Let me see everything? The electric saw cutting steel bars—"
He answered with a grin. "Lohapur captures Satyajit's daughter. There can be no greater gain."
"When can I go?" The thrill in the voice made it husky. "Any time you wish."
"Any time?" The tone grew demanding. "Yes, Sumita." If she only knew how he would love to take her to the town.
"Right now?"
"Why not? The rain's stopped—"
But the answer came, a rumble in the sky, and alarm broke from Sumita's lips. She clapped her fingers to her ears.
He looked up at the sky. "The monsoon gets stronger. I
think your trip will have to be postponed. Tomorrow is the big
day at Meadow House.” As he spoke he was listening to the
voice of the wind, a sharp whistling. He grew anxious. “What if
the weather does not change tomorrow? Everything will be
upset.”

She shared his concern. She hated the storm—not wind or
rain, but flashes of lightning, followed by the horror of thun-
derclaps.

“I’d better go home.”

“Tomorrow, then. I wish I could show you in Steeltown
something as meaningful as . . . what I saw in your village.”

“Meaningful? In our village?”

“The timeless creation on a slab of stone. We’ve noth-
ing like that in Lohapur. All that we have dates quickly and
must be replaced by something more recent.”

“That sculpture . . .” Her words were lost in the sudden
lash of rain; driven by high wind it came slapping to the veranda
in a solid sheet. Her umbrella with its bamboo handle stood
propped against the wall. She picked it up, and the two hurried
into an adjoining room. An open window swayed, slammed, and
shattered glass flew. Rapid fingers were beating on the roof as
on a drum.

Let the sky be emptied of all its rain so that we may have
fine weather tomorrow, he prayed in his heart. But how would
Sumita go home? She had come prepared for rain, but not for
a deluge. It could be hours before the havoc ceased.

“I love walking in rain,” she answered. “I’ll start in a
minute.”

He dismissed the idea with a wave of his hand.

“Walk? Absurd! You’ll go home in the jeep.”

“No. Please don’t bother.”

“It isn’t rain alone. The wind! It looks like a hurricane.
Lightning, thunder. It’s dark already—long before sunset.”

Her face was pale. She saw herself walking all alone in the
meadow, and the thunderbolt came crashing on a tall palm tree,
turning it in an instant to deadwood. He noted her fear, and
smiled.

“Come—Sumita. Leave your umbrella; it will be a hin-
drance.”
He walked to the door, holding it open for her to pass. The sheet of driven rain enveloped them head to foot as they crossed the veranda. “The steps!” he cried warningly. Too late. Lightning flared, a writhing fire snake, and, bedazzled, she missed her footing. Down she went. Almost instantly his arms were about her waist. He helped her to her feet. She clung to him as the gale came bursting across the meadow, a frenzied maniac.

“Hold on to me. The jeep’s barely fifty paces away.”

They confronted a barrier, invisible yet solid. He forced her forward, all his strength called to the struggle. Hardly had they gone ten paces when the thunderclap came shatteringly, and with a shrill cry she stopped dead. He drew her inert figure toward him, bracing himself to meet the advancing fury, and, feet firmly planted, he bore the full thrust of her, the grip of his arms tight. Her rain-soaked hair touched his chin and mouth, and he felt her body tremble.

The maniac, whirling about, held them united limb on limb, and screamed as though with perverse pleasure. Then, all at once, it was gone. There was no thrusting force. But the two were curiously unaware. One was still limp in the other’s tight clasp, frozen. Her jacket had come unbuttoned at the top and the dip between gently swelling curves was exposed.

He spun her round to him with an abrupt, almost rough, gesture, and then she saw the rage of emotion in his face. Instinct was as good as knowledge; struggling for strength, she pulled back a step.

He, demanding, was about to reach for her when the thought struck him that his tender relationship with this strange girl might break under the impulse of a stupid moment.

“Let’s move on, Sumita.”

He walked slowly, wanting the journey prolonged, wanting the return of the gale. She breathed with relief as he helped her into the jeep, and then broke into a moan. “My ankle!”

Would that it were a fracture—the unkind thought crossed his mind; she would then be unfitted for the peace march, and left behind.

Jeep wheels churned water. There were few landmarks left. At last the wooden post came into sight, but the lamp had been
blown away. A minute later the road gained height. Danger was gone.

"We've been lucky. The jeep could have skidded, turned over."

But she cried, unhappy, "Good-bye to the trip to Steeltown!"
He consoled her. "Plenty of time. Come as soon as your foot is better."

"No Meadow House for me tomorrow."
"I'll send you transport, Sumita."
She considered that, and shook her head. "There's the oxcart."

The jeep pulled up.
"Your father's away, I know. I haven't met your mother, and this is a good opportunity."

"Mother must be at the schoolhouse."

She shuffled off the seat, placed one foot on the ground and then the other, and winced with pain. But his arm was there around her waist. She walked limping across the vegetable patch to the veranda flooded with rain. The door to the inner room stood unlocked as usual. This was the study with its narrow string cot. Her bare feet left clear prints on the floor beside the marks of sodden shoes. When she sat down on a chair, he dropped to his knees, took the mud-stained foot in his hands. She cried out at the touch of probing fingers.

"No fracture. I wish—"
He was gazing at her, and she, entranced, saw the tumult again, and trembled. Her face lowered, and then she grew aware of the unbuttoned jacket. Startled hands flew up. He saw the flush of shame, but for a long moment his eyes would not withdraw.

He rose to his feet. "I must get you a towel, and clothes. Where can I find them?"

She nodded toward the adjoining room, and he said as he turned to the door, "So much hair to be dried with a towel—is it possible?"

She spoke with quick concern: "It's you who must change at once. I'm used to getting rain-drenched."

"But you are not used to thunder."
"I've been such a nuisance."
"You've been lovely!" He whisked to her, and there was
the tumult renewed, a stark imprint. As he stood motionless she could not take her glance away from his face. Then, abruptly, he turned and was gone.

She rose, languorous, moving to the rack where her father’s clothes hung, picking up a dhoti, vest, and tunic. She laid them out on the string cot with its embroidered cover, and returned to her chair. A minute later Bhashkar appeared with his arms full.

“How could I know what you’d need? So I’ve brought you these.” He indicated the white pile. “You know the Ramayana story? Rama lay wounded on the battlefield, and Hanuman, the great monkey, was delegated to fetch certain herbs from a mountain where they grew. He couldn’t recognize the right herbs; so he pulled up the mountain and carried it on his back to Rama. And now, this great monkey here—”

She gave the great monkey a bashful glance and pointed to the clothes on the bed.

“If the Chief Engineer falls ill, what will happen to Lohapur?”

“Nothing. His assistant will take over. In the world of machines every individual is expendable.” He took the clothes and turned to the door. “Will you call me when you’re ready?”

He left the room, closing the door behind him, but Sumita did not start taking off her wet things. She sat like a piece of stone . . . and about her the hurricane blew. As she relived the moments she felt a curious misery come sweeping upon her, and a strong urge to cry, to wash off the misery in a flood of tears. It was hard to control the impulse. She could not understand herself, and needed help, and yet would have shrunk from help. If only she could be alone awhile; if only he would leave!

But she did not want him to leave. And when he did not return after what seemed a long time, she cried his name in a desperate wail:

“Mr. Roy!”

He must have been right by the door, for it opened instantly. He said in astonishment: “You’re still in wet clothes! Then why did you call me?” And in his eyes, as they lay fastened on her, the hunger returned.

He was dressed in Satyajit’s clothes, and they fitted him perfectly. The white homespun woven out of the yarn from
Gandhi's spinning wheel. She stared, fascinated, at those clothes, and the flood of strange feelings came to an abrupt end, as though barred by a straddling mountain range.

Satyajit had come to the rescue of his daughter!
But it was a long minute before she spoke.

"I have been thinking." Her voice was steady, her face tranquil. "Will you give me some more time?"
LETTER FROM THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS MARKED IMMEDIATE had tied the CE down to his desk at the last moment, but he sent his secretary with instructions to ring him at the appropriate time. Satyajit had written to say he would not be able to attend the function—he had work at the library—but all the others in Gandhiram would be there, as expected.

The arrangements were in good hands. Mullick was no novice in public-relations work. The invited guests would be taken round the house, room to room, and all their questions answered. Lantern slides of Steeltown would have been shown next, but with a bare week left, the CE gave a new order. No slides for this occasion. A cultural program instead. That would build a more congenial atmosphere.

"Song and dance, all at a folk level," he advised the PRO. "The Institute gave an open-air show some time back—remember? No lack of talent among the mill people. Those items are right there for your use."

Good idea, Mullick thought. Of course, the weather had to be considered. But he could keep a canvas awning ready in case of need; if the sky grew overcast the canvas would be set up quickly. He turned to his wife for help with the program, explaining that it was Bhashkar's show—he would be there in person, though usually he never went anywhere. Leena spent hours trying to select the items, and then an idea struck her—it gave her face an excited gleam. At that stage she imposed a condition for her help: everything was to be left entirely in her hands. She would not divulge her thoughts even to her husband. But
Number Two, it appeared, saw them by some intuition, and there was the gleam on her face as well. She barged forthwith into Leena’s preparations. The show, to Leena’s great regret, became inescapably a joint venture.

No canvas could have survived the deluge that struck on the eve of the appointed day, but all traces of the havoc disappeared overnight. The hard earth sucked up the rainwater that had turned the meadow into a vast lake. Only flooded potholes remained. And on this day the sky was without a smear of cloud. All was well. At night, Meadow House would be awash with neon lights. Even a field telephone had been installed for communication with the city.

The telephone in Bhashkar’s room started to ring.

“My report, sir. All Gandhigram has come to Meadow House. The people have been received by Number Two—sorry, sir, I mean—”

“I understand, Mrs. Mehra. Go on.”

“She even folded her hands to them in greeting—that was under strong persuasion from Mrs. Mullick. Both were particularly sweet to the village council. Trayfuls of betel were passed, as was also the milk of coconuts in their shells. Some of the young men played table tennis after Leena and I had given a demonstration. The children’s room drew breathless cries from the mothers. One of whom rode the rocking horse, and loved it. But what impressed most is the smartness of our young girls; they were looking beautiful in party dress.”

“Party dress?”

“Silk, chiffon, brocade. Whatever a society girl must wear at a party. The plain people of Gandhigram have never seen such clothes, and they are overwhelmed.”

Bhashkar spoke sharply: “That isn’t the kind of impression we want to make. I hope our millhands haven’t vaunted their clothes. Gaudy bush shirts and the like.”

“Millhands, sir? There are none in this party. It’s a function of Lohapur Club, isn’t it?”

He was staggered. What had Lohapur Club to do with it? Mrs. Mehra explained.

“The dancers, the singers, all belong to the Club. That’s
as it should be. All our guests will have nothing else to talk about in the days to come. The contrast that is Sumita—Satyajit’s daughter. She wears the white garb of a widow.”

His voice snapped, “Widows don’t have a monopoly on white garb, Mrs. Mehra.”

“What’s wrong with prettily dyed fabric? Or at least, a nice border on the sari?” She stopped, hearing an abrupt click.

Mrs. Mehra raised her eyebrows in surprise. Why was the CE so touchy about Sumita’s clothes?

Half an hour later, Bhashkar appeared at the gate of Meadow House. It was time for the show to start. The audience was seated on great areas of cotton carpet. Two women greeted Bhashkar as he stepped into neon light.

“Everything has gone according to plan,” Leena cried, gushing. “Let this be your second home, dear sisters, we said to them. You could see they were simply carried away.”

“We do our best to spoil the plain people, don’t we?” Number Two’s gruff voice followed disapprovingly. “One hopes for a scrap of gratitude in return, but it isn’t there.”

Bhashkar was surveying the audience. Mrs. Mehra was right. No millhands. Steeltown was represented by its women alone, women from the higher regions of the social pyramid. Silk and chiffon and brocade. Sumita must have had a good laugh. She would have a second good laugh when, on the stage, the Club girls in their glamour broke into the peasants’ harvest song.

He was moving off toward the audience when his two escorts tried to stop him. “We need you behind the wings—we have chairs there.” Brusquely he declined the invitation. He must sit with the guests. He walked on and found a place in the back row. Like all the others he sat with legs crossed. He was dressed in simple garments like Satyajit’s, but not homespun.

The two women were stunned. They stood in silence a long minute. Number Two was the first to recover. “Come!” Her angry steps swept toward the stage door. Mrs. Mehra was standing by, watching, and she suppressed her amused smile. At sight of her, Number Two stopped, and so did Leena. The same thought had struck the minds of both.

“You’ll sit with us behind the wing?”
“You'll let us explain the dances to you?”

Mrs. Mehra let herself be hustled forward. She took the chair offered behind the cardboard wing.

“Iced lemonade?” Leena held out a glass.

“Chocolate?” Number Two produced a big slab.

The taped background music stopped dead. Five girls were walking to the stage from the opposite wing—the greenroom was on that side. The curtain rose to the strain of united voices. It was a folk-song of olden times. The modern touch came from the music pouring from various complicated instruments.

As it was time for the next item on the mineographed program, Leena became curiously tense. It was a solo dance. A young girl in red clothes came light-footedly forward. The red orb of spotlight holding her on the darkened stage, she was a moving flame.

“You recognize her, Mrs. Mehra?”

“How can she recognize her with so much makeup on her face?” Number Two snapped. “Hard to tell where the paint ends and the face begins.”

“My daughter, Meenakshi. You saw her at the Club the day you won a snowball.

“A beautiful girl.” Mrs. Mehra nodded with a smile.

Leena felt overwhelmed. “I'll explain to you the significance of the movements and gestures,” she said, trying to control her voice. “Pity that Bhashkar will not understand. He couldn't have seen Indian dances in America.”

“You should have included a Western ballet in the program,” Number Two said sharply. “My Lotika took lessons from a French teacher in Calcutta. But then you insisted that there should be nothing but folk art. That was Bhashkar's wish, you said. And there he sits watching, and understands nothing, poor man!”

Mrs. Mehra was now aware of her role as the CE's substitute. He had upset the calculations and gone his own way, but all was not lost. His substitute was not to be scorned.

Let him approve my Meenakshi, Leena was praying fervently in her heart. She was truly a beautiful girl. Why, she looked like the very spirit of fire as it leaped up and moved around.
"You see those expressive hand gestures my Meenakshi is making? They are based on a treatise of dramatical art which is fifteen hundred years old. Those gestures—"

Number Two interposed. "It will be better if Mrs. Mehra looks at the stage instead of listening to your voice, Leena."

"She can do both," Leena answered sweetly, but the challenge was unmistakable.

Mrs. Mehra saw the heart of the matter: this show was simply meant to be a bride-showing party. A trap set for the CE—he had no option but to see the daughters of Leena and Number Two. One prospective bride shown, it would soon be the other's turn.

The curtain was hardly down when it was rising again. Mrs. Mehra felt the excited nudge of Number Two's thick elbow.

"Look!" She was pointing to the stage.

A young hunter came gliding, hands holding an imagined bow with arrow strung, wary feet tracking a beast of the jungle. The face with its streak of painted moustache was all tension, the well-formed body charged with the heat of pursuit.

Number Two started her well-rehearsed piece.

"The hunter has figured in our people's fancy from times immemorial. Note the vigor of expression. A realistic evocation far from the conventional sophistry that's become almost ritualistic—"

Leena cried in faint protest, "The hunter dance also has its prescribed technique."

"Please don't interrupt," snapped Number Two, clutching at her memorized text. "The down-to-earth motif gives this dance a sense of life exceeding what you see in the more classical forms."

Number Two's voice halted as the question came to her mind: Shall I tell her—now—that it's my Lotika? Or wait until my Lotika reaches the climax, the arrow released from the bow striking the heart of the target?

At that moment Mrs. Mehra yielded to malice.

"A beautiful boy!" she said casually.

A minute passed before Number Two saw the implication of the remark. Beautiful boy! That wasn't the impression Lotika was meant to convey! Number Two felt a sudden chill. Was it
an error to have let her Lotika be cast in the hunter's role? An error Leena had contrived with cool calculation?

Beautiful boy! Boy!

Number Two's broad face filled with darkness. And it thickened all the time the hunter was filling the stage with dramatic, dynamic male energy. When the next item started—a group dance—she took Leena's thin forearm in a tight grasp. Her chest was heaving.

"Come, we'll go to the greenroom for a minute."

Leena looked at Number Two's face, reading it as clear as print, and she grew pale. She had overshot her mark and brought peril on her husband; he had warned her not to step on Number Two's toes! As she yielded to the pull on her arm and walked off toward the back of the stage, she looked helpless and forlorn. Mrs. Mehra, watching, saddened on her account. But Number Two's outburst of wrath would be useless. Leena had negated her daughter's rival by an amazingly simple device—presenting her as a boy! The moustache was an inspired touch, and so was the turban with which the long hair was concealed. All the same, the trick was wasted. The CE was not going to marry a girl of the Club set. He hated the social frontiers, and took every chance to cross them. He had often been seen chatting with common workers, his friendly hand on the shoulder of a man in an overall. He was approachable to everyone, at office or home, except to the Club women. Strange man, the CE. He deserved a bride sharing his ideas, his outlook on life.

Mrs. Mehra felt sorry for the thin, pale-faced woman who had fought so hard to find her daughter a suitable husband.

There she was at last. She looked upset, and she tried to keep her voice from faltering.

"A slight change in the program. An added item before we come to the end. It's Devadasi—temple dancer."

Two more group dances followed, and then the tall, slender girl was walking to the stage, ankle bells speaking softly as she moved. To think that the hunter's guise had hidden so much feminine charm! No wonder that Leena had gone to such lengths to withhold that charm from Bhashkar. Now she looked woe-begone. And Number Two was formidable in her victory. She took the field and went straight to the point.
“You see her, my Lotika? She takes lessons not only in Western ballet but in our own dances.” Turning sharply to Leena: “Maybe you’d like to tell Mrs. Mehra what it’s all about, Leena dear. I’m no good at that kind of talk. Don’t forget the good English word cheerio . . . no, choreo—choreo something.”

“The choreography of this dance is based on the classical techniques, but adjustments have been made for the modern stage.” And now that she had betrayed her daughter for the sake of her husband, she would go all out to help him over the hurdle beyond which his prospects of promotion lay. “As you see, Mrs. Mehra, Lotika is a true Devadasi! In her is revealed a complex of the otherworld quality and earthy passion—it’s on that combination that the temple gods are supposed to be insistent!”

Here at last was the instrument of his dream, forged and ready for use, reflected Bhashkar, gazing at the cream-and-red structure of Meadow House illumined by strong light. He had been prepared to give up his career rather than be denied that instrument. Now that it was in hand, would his dream remain unrealized?

A bad beginning. But a beginning was not the end. There were lessons to learn. The incomprehension of Steeltown. You could not blame the women. They had been true to the accepted beliefs. Humble peasants, drawn out of darkness into glare and glamour, would readily let their old roots be severed.

A startling thought followed. Was that not in a way his own idea turned inside out?

That was true only up to a point, he reasoned. Steeltown had the right economic values, after all. India needed the big machines, not spinning wheels. Change, not tradition. Not the heritage of philosophic inanity, but the dynamism of technological progress even with all its inevitable chaos. Yet—all that could be oversimplification. Would he let Sumita be transmuted into the dancer in red garb—the person behind the dancer? He did not know who she was. But he knew the type. He knew the pattern and all the other patterns in Steeltown—at every level. Section Twelve longing to be Eleven . . . and Ten. Insatiety, frustration, intrigue, graft. Mrs. Mullick must have had visions of herself turning into the woman nicknamed Number Two. And
he, the Chief Engineer, would one day be troubled by the wish to sit atop the pyramid.

Satyajit had no wish to be bigger than he was. Except on the moral plane. There, on that plane, he would be fulfilled.

Was there a woman in Steeltown ready to go on a peace march, the reward of which would be nothing but suffering and possibly death? Would Steeltown even understand such dedication?

Voices in the row beside him broke upon his wandering thoughts.

"Chittaranjan, what do you think of all this?"

"I? Let's listen to Swami-ji."

"Swami-ji?"

Pause, and then: "I shall speak with Gandhi's voice."

"You always do, brother."

"This is what Gandhi said: 'No culture can live if it tries to be exclusive. I do not want my house to be walled on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want all cultures to flow freely about my house. Mine is not a religion of the prison-house.' You know those words, Krishnamurti?"

"Yes. That is why we have accepted this invitation. It applies to our young men, most of all. They must not feel as if they live in a prison-house."

"No less meaningful are the words that follow: 'I refuse to be blown off my feet, though I do not propose merely to feed on the ancient cultures of our land; we have to enrich our old traditions with the experience of the new times. But the alien elements in their turn will have to be affected by the spirit of the soil. One dominant culture absorbing the rest—that cannot make for harmony; that will be an artificiality and forced unity. That we do not want.' So Ghandi spoke."

"Satyajit has gone one step further, hasn't he? He said the other day: 'Steeltown belongs to the present, Gandhigram to the future. Steeltown must do its work. But when that work is done, when the material benefits of production have been fully attained, Steeltown, decrepit and soulless, will have to seek new moorings. Then it will be Gandhigram's turn to come forward.'"

"What is involved in the two areas parted by a stretch of
meadowland is not a plain local problem; it's a complex problem for all the world to face."

"True. In fact the problem is far more acute for the highly developed countries of the Western world than for us. We still have time. Those others have no time at all. The spirit in us can wait to be appeased until the body is fed. The well-fed body of those others can no longer bear the spirit's starvation."

"But we cannot dissociate ourselves from the other countries. Body and spirit must be fed together, not turn by turn."

"Satyajit quoted a line from Tagore the other day: 'Perhaps the new dawn will come from this horizon, from the East where the sun rises.'"

Taped music swept upon the audience, and the voices stopped. It would be good to hear what the youths of the village, the rank and file, had to say, Bhashkar mused. But those close to him were quiet. All this parade of beauty. Youths could hardly be immune to this lure—even with the spell cast by Satyajit. Even in Gandhi’s hermitage there had been lapses.

Lapses? That was not what he would ask for, Bhashkar reminded himself. Not to destroy the dedication, but to turn it through a new channel of expression to Steeltown. Those hundred youths watching the stage show must be fired with the wish to become part of a new life. Then they would overthrow Satyajit as a matter of course.

Satyajit did not know that eighteen thousand babies were born in his country every day and had to be fed, brought up, given the material that would turn them into civilized citizens.

Voices could be heard once more—this time they came from the row before him.

"Oh-ray! It's that pig of a grandson! He's again a hunter!"

"Great-Uncle! You don't imagine—"

"They gave him a silver medal that time. The sight of that hunter fellow could make bird and beast tremble!"

"Great-Uncle! Now you do need glasses! Where’s your grandson? Not that one on the stage, surely!"

"Then where is he? Tell me that, since you know everything."

"Not here. Not a single working man or woman. This is what’s called high society—understand, Great-Uncle? They
couldn’t have your grandson here—oil and water don’t mix. But maybe your grandson doesn’t care about that, since he has gone to them and accepted their ways.”

“Lohapur gave him a silver medal, don’t you understand? A man called See-ee. The one who sent us letters. Mark my words, boys: that pig there is my own pig of a grandson. Same face, same nose, same ears. The ears I have pulled a hundred times—those I should know!”

“Great-Uncle, where are the ears in the village that you haven’t pulled?”

“Even yours, my son? I don’t remember—”

“It’s better so. Lest you be tempted again.”

Bhashkar’s mind went back to the Institute show. He recalled the youth to whom he had given a medal. Good to know that the youth had once belonged to Gandhigram! He could surely be useful to Meadow House—he would have to be approached. Every rebel was welcome. Every crack in the structure needed to be widened. If only the peace march could be delayed. Abandoned by Gandhigram, would not Satyajit give up the march as futile?

Let him go alone if he must. Let not his reckless egoism destroy Sumita.

A longing he had held back all this while filled Bhashkar’s heart to the brim. To see Sumita for a minute. He would have to wait until the show was over. How was she reacting to his apparent defeat? Meadow House ineffectual in its impact, as she had predicted.

She would feel no exultation—that would be yielding in thought to himsa, violence. You could not rejoice when your adversary was foiled; you had to heal his hurt with a balm. But balm from Sumita’s hand would only strengthen him to fight harder.

Seated on her haunches, legs crossed, Sumita watched the group of dancers with a strange fascination, and asked herself an odd question: How does it feel to wear such clothes?

The rhythmic gyrations of an adorned body held in a spotlight. Crimson silk wound in tight folds revealing the slimness of the waist and the soft curves beneath. The bare zone between
the waistline and the fringes of a close-fitting jacket. Clothes did something to the body; that was beyond doubt. And the body did something to the clothes.

Her own coarse homespun was self-sufficient—it was just drapery. It concealed you. There had been no thought ever in your head that the sari could be more than that, more purposeful.

Dancing feet gained eloquence as a finger of light played on them to accentuate rapidity, grace, intricacy. Ankles lined at the edges with red lac dye, the traditional way—they could be pretty. Sumita let her hand slide to her own. The sole was hard with callus; that was because she had never worn shoes or slippers. Feet did not have to be cracked, darkly stained, meant only to walk on. And her hand fled as though it had touched something ugly.

A man had stooped over that ankle, his fingers probing for injury. Had he not felt repulsion?

By her side, Mother changed her cramped posture, uncrossing her legs, holding one foot upright. It was smooth, shapely. You could touch it caressingly. Her feet could have belonged to a dancer.

The sari she wore—its plainness was redeemed by the green border, and by the jacket, also dyed dark green. What if she were to be garbed like her daughter? No, Sumita told herself firmly; she would never let Mother wear all-white.

The stage faded from her view, and she saw herself in the grip of the hurricane. Thrust, held pressed against her companion. But she was hardly aware of his arms around her, intent as she was on the struggle to keep on her feet. Until something queer was happening to her; through her limbs she was feeling the flow of a strange new pleasure. It was slight at first, but it grew until the intensity of it made her tremble.

That was the time he made her turn round toward him, and she could gaze at his face, only inches away, marked by a strange expression. She saw that expression again when he was kneeling before her, the injured foot in his hands. And yet again . . .

He had left abruptly, not returning to the room. She had stripped off her wet clothes and was drying herself with the towel when she heard the jeep engine start. Naked, she could
not rush out to call him. And as the sound of the engine died away, she felt a sudden emptiness in every limb, and in a minute it was as though her body had been squeezed till it was a hollow shell.

She tried to see herself with clear vision. A man had apparently gained some mysterious power over her in the space of minutes. It was such a power that the instant he was gone the need for his presence came upon her in throbs of longing.

She had felt lone when, a year back, Father went away to Sevagram for a week. And again, when Mother went abroad for a fortnight. But there had not been this sense of longing, ever.

Anger had risen in her. Why should she give way to stupidity? Why should she submit to a power that could bring evil?

Evil?

Something within her had made impassioned protest. There could be no evil in the warmth that surged out to her limbs and flooded all of her.

Yet she needed relief from this warmth itself. It made her suffer.

Relief came a few minutes later. Hardly had she put on fresh clothes and gone to her room when Mother rushed in with a shuffle and swish. At sight of Sumita she could not control herself; she dropped down to the floor, gazing, as if fearing it was not Sumita but an illusion!

"I was scared to death." She spoke between gasps. "I thought you were caught in the gale. The terrible thunderbolt! I saw a big tree uprooted—"

"Mother, you are drenched to the skin. Dry yourself and then we'll talk."

"No. First tell me. You returned home before the gale struck?"

"I was caught in rain and wind. But nothing happened, as you see. Only, I fell and hurt my ankle."

The mother, anxious, bent over the injured foot.

"Nothing serious," she said. "Turmeric and lime will ease the swelling. You'll have to walk with a stick." She rose. "While I change, tell me where you went, what happened."

But there was so much that Sumita had to withhold. The space of time when she was journeying to the jeep could be
shared with no one; and no framework of words could be found for those moments.

"Bhashkar wearing your father's clothes!" Suruchi laughed. "How did he look?" She tried to picture him, and laughed again. "For an instant he looked just like Father."

It was midnight when Sumita woke in bed, restless, and there was the gale blowing and the lashing downpour. Back into fantasy! But through the sounds of the storm there came the deep breathing of Mother sleeping peacefully a yard away. Sumita, in shame, pushed away the memory.

She had to stay at home the next day because of her ankle. Her pupils came from school and kept her busy. Toward evening the oxcart was waiting at the door. The invitation from Meadow House.

... The show was over. The audience rose as the national anthem was sung. "Hold on to my arm," said Mother. They had gone only a few paces when Mother said, "There they come—our hosts. We must give them our thanks."

But Sumita had no wish to face Bhashkar—his eyes filled with the dancers in their loveliness. No, she could not bear to stand before him, ungainly in her plain garb. He would look at her ankles with eyes that had seen the dancing feet.

"Mother, you can speak to them. I'll be in the cart."

Hardly had she climbed into the cart drawn up at the gate of Meadow House, with the oxen yoked and ready to move, when Bhashkar came into sight again. Mother was walking on one side of him, the imperious woman on the other. The woman bent her thick neck, peering into the cart.

"We want to take you home, Sumita. Your mother won't come with us, though."

"It's kind of you, indeed. But this oxcart will do." The coldness in her tone was obvious.

"Sumita, why don't you come to town once in a while? You feel suffocated staying in that rathole, don't you?" A beringed finger pointed villageward.

The challenge flared. "I'm happy in that 'rathole.'"

The woman shook her head in honest disbelief.

"You haven't seen any other life. Look, Sumita. I would love to have you to my house for dinner, you and your mother.
Your father won’t come, I know. He hates us. We steel people are monsters in human form, he thinks.”

The answering voice had a sharp edge. “Men of Gandhigram are incapable of hate. Hate is the vice of city people.”

The woman was taken aback, silenced, but Bhashkar burst into laughter. He stopped himself quickly and his grave voice came: “Then teach us not to hate. Help us that way. We need you. Don’t deny us. Don’t stand worlds apart.”

From the darkness of the cart Sumita gave him an intent look. The strong, firm-lipped, assured face. Hard to think it had been so charged, so tense.

The imperious woman cried in annoyance: “We city people have no reason to hate. Hate implies envy, doesn’t it? We have no grounds for envy. We know how to live well, make full use of all that we possess.”

Bhashkar was speaking again: “I am grateful that you came, Sumita. This house is dedicated to you all. We only hope you will use it.” He turned to help the mother get into the cart. As the wheels turned, his joined palms made the gesture of farewell.

There he stood, bathed in the neon light at the gate, gazing toward the cart as it receded, and Mother kept looking at him thoughtfully until there was a sharp bend in the road. Her eyes then moved to her daughter.

“Nice boy,” she said.

“Boy? Oh, Mother!”

“Then—nice man.” And after a brief pause, “I wish they hadn’t let him down. I wish it hadn’t been that kind of show.”

Sumita gave her a wondering glance. What did she know about Bhashkar and his purpose? The purpose for which Meadow House had been built. Mother had the gift of intuitive understanding.

The sun was pouring into the room. Her parents had let her sleep, and had gone on their daily tasks in the village at the usual time. With a stick for support she went limping to the well. Seated on the raised brick rim, she scrubbed the soles of her feet hard. Ten minutes later, back in her room, she stood before recessed shelves in the wall, gazing at the saris that lay neatly folded. Presently she turned, moved off to the veranda, and sat down with a book. Her mind escaped from the printed
page. She rose, went back to the clothes, and, yielding to her impulse, picked up a sari, the same green-bordered kind Mother had worn at Meadow House. She found a dark-green jacket. Holding the clothes clasped against her, she yielded moment by moment to her new urge, and at last took off her white garb. She stood in her chemise of rough fabric and was hesitant again, almost afraid.

The mirror was a foot-wide slab of glass in its wooden frame. When you did your hair, seated on the floor with legs crossed, the mirror had to stand tilted against the wall. That way you could not see all of yourself, though. The need to see all your person had never before arisen. But now—

She took the mirror to the other room, leaned it against a pile of fat volumes on Father’s writing desk, and moved two steps back, looking.

The glass showed bright, excited eyes. Color suited her. She was a changed person.

And now that she had set out on a journey, she might as well go all the way. She returned to the shelves and picked up a set of bangles, jet black, unworn for years. Her hands were bigger than Mother’s—she was such a small person! Two bangles broke as she forced them, but at last her wrists were adorned.

The slippers also were undersized. They wearied her feet as she walked, first in the room, then down to the garden and back. But her resolve was unchanged. Feet had to be well cared for, smooth and pretty, ready for ankle bells!

Mother used to wear the red mark of adornment on her brow years back, and a phial of the liquid, half empty, stood on a shelf. Sumita pulled the cork out and looked again in the glass.

She gazed at herself—and at the stone woman in the ancient temple.

Outwardly, one had nothing in common with the other, not face, nor form, nor gesture, nor poise, and yet there was some mark of identity. The living figure . . . the hewn stone . . .

The startled eyes in the glass dilated with fear. But she gazed on, fascinated by the fear itself: to bear in her person even a remote suggestion of the stone image!

It was unreal, she knew; a figment of her distorted fancy. Still, she would like to see the sculpture again, and make sure.
Chapter Eighteen

History had rushed to the help of Satyajit, Rupa was thinking, her face pensive. The month-long negotiations for border settlement had ended in failure. The Chinese had made new, fantastic claims, and would not relinquish an inch of the land they had taken. Now that the politicians had been thwarted and there was a deadlock—no one knew how it could be resolved—the field lay invitingly open for the Peace Mission. Moral pressure. The heart and spirit would prevail where arguments had failed. The significance of the Peace Mission had overnight grown a hundredfold.

Time was the essence of the problem. The stormclouds in the Himalayan sky could quickly become a vast enveloping mass, so that the light of reason faded away and total darkness came.

But the Peace Mission could not enter Ladakh at this stage unless permission was granted by India’s Foreign Office. That was why Satyajit was busy on a memorandum that he personally would hand over to the authorities in the capital. The memorandum would give the route of the peace march and state other details. It had to be ready the next day, and then Satyajit would leave for New Delhi. A day. Time was the essence of the problem for Rupa also. The memorandum could do no good. The Peace Mission would end up a fiasco. That was certain. But meanwhile it would do some damage. The Indian doctrine of nonviolence could well be China’s ally. Exciting false hope, hushing the call for armed resistance, Satyajit could become a danger to the nation. And here was she, Rupa, typing the document, acting as an accessory.
Her fingers faltered. But what could she do? Her campaign had apparently ended even before it began. She could now see the utter absurdity of the idea, and it made her laugh. Why, the ascetic had hardly looked at her all these days as he had scribbled. He had not spoken to her except in cold formality. He filled sheets of paper with his neat, close-spaced script and passed them across the table—that was all. Rupa was merely a typing apparatus. The girl of the wood gatherers had no existence except in myth.

That girl at least had had time on her side. Four days, now almost gone, had been of no avail.

Rupa could feel the ache of a periodic longing. To be in Room Nineteen one whole day. Typing. Looking up from her work whenever she felt like it, and Bhashkar would be there, the pipe in his hand unlit. . . . She wants to hear his voice; she has not heard it in a long while. “Sir, how is this big word spelled?” She wants the space of yards between them reduced—the typist’s desk has to be at the far end of the room. Notebook in hand, she crosses over the blue carpet, stands by his side. He stops his work, waits. “Sir, is this what you said?”—reading out the doubtful sentence.

The fatigue is heavy in his face. He needs a respite. What’s to be done? A diversion—how? He can get it at will. Even if all he permits himself is to hold her hand. Let him come over and hold her left hand, standing by her side, looking at the script. His face is not far from hers. . . .

She had failed to keep her decision not to tell him that she would be giving reality to his wish-thought. For a day the secret lay in her stomach like a lump, and then she yielded to the urge to change her mind. But she could not talk about it face to face. She phoned him from the library.

His voice was astounded. “No!” he cried sharply. “I don’t like it at all. When I spoke of those things, it was far from my intention that you take such a role upon yourself. Look, Rupa, it’s absurd!”

She answered him sweetly yet mockingly: “Why, he doesn’t even have to hold my hand, as you do. It would be enough if his mind is touched. Maybe he will unclothe me in his imagination.”
“Rupa, stop!”

Her thoughts paused, interrupted; her eyes on the notes stared in disbelief. Satyajit had selected his daughter as one of the party of six in the peace march!

Sumita was her name. Rupa had never seen her. But the barefooted girl was now a subject of talk in Lohapur. She was beautiful; everyone said that. Her coarse white garb was meant to negate her looks. A dedicated woman had no use for the body’s attractiveness; that could well be a hindrance. Nuns in ancient India often had their hair shorn, especially under the Buddhist impact.

“A young girl looks her best with a shaven head,” a renowned hermit in Maharashtra had proclaimed the other day. Rich tresses of hair fell under the barber’s razor soon after he had spoken.

Not that Sumita was dedicated to a religious system. But the social ideas she stood for had become a cult. No cult in this country was far from religion itself. It could well be that Sumita was more possessed by Satyajitism than even Satyajit.

Rupa returned to the peace march. Her typed script gave her a clear view.

The party would go by railway to Pathankot, the terminus at the foot of the Kashmir Valley, then proceed by bus on the mountain road to Srinagar, the State capital. From Srinagar they would go again by bus toward Leh as far as the motor road went. Then the march afoot would start. Up the high mountain track. In three weeks the party could hope to reach Ladakh’s main township. Leh was simply a collection of scattered hamlets. There they would get provisions, then push ahead. They would make toward the Aksai-Chin Road. This was the new motor road with which the Chinese had pierced the outthrust belly of Ladakh, connecting their province of Sinkiang with Tibet. It cut off twelve thousand square miles of Indian territory.

Peking had apparently made the encroachment by mistake, India’s Prime Minister thought. After all, India had not established checkpoints all along the border, and even patrols visited the area only at long intervals. Nehru pointed out the mistake to Chou En-lai.

“This area is uninhabited, mountainous territory of an alti-
tude varying from fourteen thousand to twenty thousand feet above sea level, with the peaks going up much higher. Because of this, and because we did not expect any kind of aggression across our frontiers, we did not think it necessary to establish checkpoints right on the international boundary.”

The Chinese answer said: “This area is the only traffic artery linking Sinkiang and western Tibet, because to its northeast lies the great Gobi Desert through which direct traffic with Tibet is almost impossible. This Aksai-Chin area is easily passable and, therefore, forms the only route linking Sinkiang and western Tibet. To the west, between this region and Ladakh, is the towering Karakoram Mountain Range, which is extremely difficult to pass through.”

That was the heart of the matter. Because the Chinese needed the region for their use as an easy route between Sinkiang and western Tibet, they claimed the right to take the area as their own, even if it meant the expropriation of thousands of square miles of Indian land!

Delhi’s trust in Peking was still unshaken. The Chinese had not admitted that it was a mistake; but the call of friendship, the much proclaimed warmth—was that not as real as geographical factors?

“The Government of India is concerned at the report of the violation of the Indian frontier. They would not like to believe that unilateral action had been taken by the Government of the People’s Republic of China, with whom their relations are of the friendliest, to enforce alleged territorial claims in that region.”

That was the shape of events in the winter of 1959. History in the subsequent year had moved fast. The old mask of friendship on the Chinese face had been replaced by one that scowled. If India valued the goodwill of her neighbor, she must accept all Chinese claims. The claims were mounting steadily. Along the trans-Himalayan snowland, extending over a length of two thousand miles, Chinese frontier troops pierced Indian borders wherever these were unguarded, and established strongpoints. A calculated plan, obviously. Chinese claims now extended to the mountain passes of great strategic value for an invader: Jara,
Shipki, Mana. The claims were easy to establish. It was just a matter of issuing new maps.

Each mountain pass changing hands could be a pistol pointed at the heart of India. It was not the pistols alone. Behind them were the troops—the reports said that their number exceeded a hundred thousand. A hundred thousand "frontier guards"—that was the Chinese term—armed for warfare under Arctic conditions, faced by a bare hundredth of their number on the other side of the shifting line.

That was in southern Tibet, where Yatung was the main headquarters. But the frontier guards were a mere fraction of the number based in other parts of Tibet, as well as in Sinkiang. The total was believed to exceed half a million. And eighteen airstripes had already been built by Tibetan forced labor.

Snow curtains hid vast army movements. Words hid them even more effectively—protestations of eternal friendship. The voice of Peking fell upon the land like ceaseless rain.

Satyajit’s copious notes covered all this ground. He saw it all in the perspective of plain facts. He had no wish to escape from truth; he had no use for any kind of self-delusion. Yet—this curious gesture of a Peace Mission.

He might as well start a hunger strike, he and his five followers! Proclaim that they would fast unto death unless the soldiers of China withdrew from the disputed land!

She would speak to him, seeking explanation. She had to know his point of view.

"Sir—"

"Yes, Rupa?"

"Why do you expect a change of heart in the Chinese? Their aims and objectives are clear in your notes."

His answer was interrupted by a knock on the door. It was the waiter from the canteen bringing food. Rupa had ordered for two. The day before, Satyajit had eaten nothing except a few nuts and raisins he had brought with him. He had sent Rupa down to the canteen for her meal. His own time was too short to be whiled away there. But if an order was brought to his room?

Rupa let in the serving boy and cleared a space on the book-strewn table. Satyajit watched in surprise.
“Who asked for food?”
“You think a woman can bear to see a man go hungry?”
She took the sandwich she had ordered for herself.
“Why this distinction? So much food for me and almost
nothing for you.”
“It’s all vegetarian,” she assured him. “I have sense enough.”
“Of sense you have more than enough,” he said.
“Sir, is that sarcasm?”
“No, it’s the truth, Rupa.”
“I am grateful for the compliment.” Adding, after a
moment’s pause, “Were you always a vegetarian? You lived
abroad for years.”
His face grew amused. “I suppose you have found out all
my antecedents.”
“Only the surface facts. What more can a book of reference
say?”
He gave her an intent look. “What else is there to know?”
“Everything. How can a man be assessed by his biographical
data?”
He broke into laughter. “Rupa, do you have to assess me?”
Nodding gravely, she turned away from the subject. “Your
food is getting cold. If there’s anything else you want—”
Arms extended over the table, he was piling her plate with
food from his own.
“No... no...” Pleadingly she grasped his hand.
He stopped, looking down at the slim white hand as it
tightened its grip in supplication. A sudden helplessness came
upon his face. His gaze as it lifted to hers was troubled, as
though haunted by something inscrutable.
Her hand lingered on his, unrelaxed, relentless. And her
greenish eyes, touched by his, were deep and ruthless.
She had seen that look on other faces. It was the sign she
had prayed for. The memorandum of the Peace Mission might
yet be assigned to the scrap heap.
Then her eyes, which were the eyes of her foreign mother,
grew abashed and dropped; but the hand stayed a few more
moments, pale white waxwork against the other’s brownness.
At the end of those moments the ascetic had withdrawn
himself from the girl of the wood gatherers. His voice came
gravely: "Why expect a change of heart in the Chinese? you asked. Let me explain. No, let me recite a poem to you. Listen." He paused, clearing his throat, then began:

"'Stand ye calm and resolute,
Like a forest close and mute,
With folded arms and looks which are
Weapons of unvanquished war....

'And if then the tyrants dare,
Let them ride among you there,
Slash, and stab, and maim, and hew,—
What they like, that let them do.

'With folded arms and steady eyes,
And little fear, and less surprise,
Look upon them as they slay,
Till their rage has died away.

'Then they will return with shame
To the place from which they came,
And the blood thus shed will speak
In hot blushes on their cheek."

"You know who wrote those lines?"
She shook her head in silence.
"The English poet Shelley. *The Mask of Anarchy* is the poem. Gandhi-ji loved the lines, and I heard him recite them. Now listen to his own words: 'Human nature is in its essence one, and therefore the aggressor unfailingly responds (in the end) to the advances of love.'... Again: 'No power on earth can stand before the march of a peaceful, determined, and God-fearing people. Nonviolence is more powerful than all the armaments in the world.' And this: 'If blood be shed, let it be our blood. Cultivate the quiet courage of dying without killing.' I could go on quoting Gandhi-ji's words endlessly. You cannot cast out Satan by Satan; you cannot end violence by more violence—that is the essence of all his ideas. The human spirit, which is stronger than
armaments, must ultimately prevail. That was the belief behind all his actions. And he led us to our freedom.”

Satyajit paused, dream in his face. A minute passed. Then, abruptly, he said: “Let’s finish our meal quickly. The memorandum must be completed tomorrow. I cannot leave for Delhi the day after unless I have the typescript.”

The girl of the wood gatherers had not been hard pressed for time, Rupa mused. Even so, there’s the long afternoon ahead, and there’s another day...
At the day's end Satyajit was walking the meadow with long quick strides. The memorandum was well advanced. Tomorrow it would be completed. Then the journey to New Delhi. Hard work lay ahead in the capital. Strong forces would be arrayed against the project. Had the men in authority abjured the instrument of their own rise to power? The freedom struggle had been won without a single shot fired by its soldiers, no hand lifted in anger. Nonviolence, the quiet courage—"If blood be shed, let it be our blood"—had brought the world's greatest empire to its end. What a contrast to scenes elsewhere: Vietnam—Algiers—Indonesia—

India had the power to change the destiny of man. All international conflicts could be resolved by moral force. Something more potent was needed than the United Nations. The united conscience of all peoples. Men determined to abjure violence. Men ready to make themselves a buffer between armies on a field of battle. A hundred thousand men prepared to die, so that thousands of millions could live. A generation ready to sacrifice itself so that the greatest crisis in civilization could be resolved and world peace attained for all time.

Lost in the vision, Satyajit reached home sooner than he had expected. Suruchi was waiting for his return. Sumita was not yet back from the schoolhouse. He washed, then settled to his daily chore with the spinning wheel.

"All set to leave for Delhi?" Suruchi dropped down to the floor and sat facing him.

He said, not looking up: "You will have to bear many re-
sponsibilities when we are both gone. Sumita’s work on top of your own. The school will be entirely in your charge.”
“Will she go? Who can tell?” Her voice held a kind of challenge.
His perplexed eyes lay on her face. “I don’t see what you mean.”
“She may change her mind.”
He laughed at the absurdity of her thought. “You mean she may get scared?”
“Not that. But a girl of her age changes fast. She is one person today, another tomorrow. Her new colored clothes—what do you think of that?”
“Just clothes.”
“The beauty mark on her forehead. Just a dot of color?”
He saw then that she also was wearing that decoration, and it made a strange difference in her face. Recollection came to him with the impact of surprise: she had always worn the red dot in the years after marriage. And he realized suddenly what a light touch the passage of time had left on Suruchi. The young girl became a mother, and the mother grew older—only up to a point; then time came to a stop. But the red mark she was wearing today took her all the way back to the years when Sumita was an infant.

At that point an incongruous image interposed.
A Western woman in Indian garb wearing that mark. That was in Cambridge. Harriet Green. He had met her at a party. She did not know how to put on a sari, and something was wrong with the folds. He told her that, and she answered gravely, “Show me the right way.” She took him by the arm and led him to a room on the upper floor and turned on the light. Standing in her underclothes, she handed the sari to him. He had no idea how a sari was worn, but he would not admit his ignorance. He tried various ways, draping, undraping. “Are you sure you know?” she asked him in her slow drawl. “Have you ever seen an Indian woman dress?” At last he cried, as though satisfied, “There!” But it was still wrong, the sari making a graceless lump at the waist. “Fine,” she said, dubious. She left it at that, and her finger pointed to the mark on her forehead. “I made this with lipstick. Is it right?”
Later, when intimacy had come, he told her the plain truth about the sari, and she said, laughing, "I knew!" "You knew? Then why...?" She answered with a flash of gay mockery, "You enjoyed those minutes, didn't you? You certainly prolonged them."

The thread broke on the spinning wheel, and he gave a start. What had made him ruminate on his wild, shameful days? They had possessed him for some moments—after half a lifetime was gone! Time measured, not in years alone, but in inner progress.

Suruchi rose. "It's getting dark—how can you see the yarn?" She walked away, returning with a bean-oil lamp. "There!" She hurried off—the evening meal had to be cooked. And watching her as she went, he saw again the girl who had stepped into his life at the age of nineteen, vested with grace of face and spirit. That girl had endured, unprotesting, the hard impositions he had made.

Those Christmas cards in Santiniketan. They were not repeated in the years that followed. Just as well. Remembrance was no pleasure. She did not repeat her question, ever. Just as well. He would not have withheld the truth. The truth would have hurt her, and done no good.

... He had fasted for three days to get Harriet Green out of his system. It was now the end of term, and he left for London. A day spent at the Reading Room of the British Museum. A hurried lunch at an A.B.C. Back at his place, he found a neighbor at the adjoining table. She turned her face to him for an instant. He was resolved not to look at her, at any woman, for that matter. But it was she who spoke to him two hours later. She wanted to know where the tearoom was—this was her first visit to the museum. He, too, needed a cup of tea. He offered to take her along.

That was how he came to know Stella Johnson. They left their books on the table with the usual reservation slips—she was reading works on music—and next day they were neighbors again. They had lunch in a small Greek place off Museum Street.

He could recall their first evening together. They met just after dark near the entrance of Hampstead Underground and
started walking toward the Pond. Halfway down Spaniards Road they turned toward the woods. Night grew darker. When they had walked a good way they sat down on the ground, fallen autumn leaves crackling under them. A gust of cold wind blew, and she nestled close to him for warmth. As he took her face between his hands, she closed her eyes with a small sigh.

She was older than he by two or three years. He did not know she was married—she told him only a fortnight later. He was shocked and unhappy because of his Hindu inhibitions. He would have to make the longest fast he had so far undertaken. Enraptured, helpless, he put off penance over and over.

. . . . The thread lay broken again on the wheel, and his hands felt limp. In a spasm of restlessness he rose. He walked off to the kitchen beyond the courtyard.

"Ruchi—"

Seated on the floor beside the oven, she turned round in surprise. The oil lamp high up in a niche of the wall laid a ruddy glare on his face and illumined the lines of stress. Alarm struck her. "Something has happened. Sumita—"

"No. It's only that I— I—"

"You—what?"

He had simply felt lone, isolated, away there in the veranda away from her—how tell her that? How demolish the wall of reticence built over the years? And at a time when he was about to leave. But she was not waiting for his answer.

"Better walk down to the schoolhouse," she urged.

He turned to go, but stopped. The front door had slammed. That must be Sumita.

"Here I am." She was standing beside her father. "I can see Mother's been worried. What will she do when I've gone to Ladakh?"

But Suruchi would not think of Sumita gone. She would savor to the full the happiness Sumita was now giving her. The gold chain was still on her neck. This was the only gold in the house—Suruchi had not given it away, since it was her mother's last gift. The girl had gone to bed with the chain around her neck. At dawn Suruchi had stood by the bedside, gazing down joyously; the locket set with rubies had slipped toward the armpit. Jewelry gained a new beauty on Sumita's person.
“Father disapproves!” said the girl, holding the locket fondly between her fingers.

“Oh, no!” the mother cried quickly. “He approves of all you do. For twenty years he’s been spoiling you.”

“He didn’t try to spoil you?”

“Of course. He tried, and failed.”

Satyajit stared at his wife. In smiling, her mouth dipped at the corners. Strange that he had not noted that expression for years—how it used to fascinate him at one time! He had loved it in the moments of their first meeting in Santiniketan.

The rice was boiling over in the earthen pot covered with a saucer. Suruchi took the pot down, holding the rim with a napkin. Satyajit walked off, but returned unexpectedly in a minute. He had the wooden wheel in his arms. Amazed glances met him—he had always preferred to be alone when spinning—and he answered, “Let me sit here in the kitchen, and work.”

“We won’t disturb you,” Sumita said. “We’ll be quiet.”

“No. Let me hear you talk.” There was something more he wanted to say, but he stopped.

What’s happening to me? he asked himself, troubled by memory, images from a past experience, and then he saw Rupa across the desk, her pink-nailed fingers dancing on the keys of the Remington, and there was Stella somewhere in her body, and there was Harriet! . . . Rain beat on the windowpane, and Rupa stooped to the floor, collecting papers scattered about. . . .

That was it—the thought burst with the dazzle of strong light. Rupa had done this to him. She had called back his youth from its graveyard. She had taken the inner poise he had attained in years of hard effort, made those years futile. And he was helpless, as helpless now as in those Cambridge days.

The three sat down to supper, Satyajit between his daughter and his wife.

As he gulped milk out of a brass bowl, he saw Sumita looking at him, and in a moment she was laughing.

“What is it?”

“Your moustache! Gone white! Like a baby with milk stains on his mouth.”

“Babies have white moustaches?”

“No. I mean—”
Suruchi said, “Sumita, don’t try to explain.” And it troubled Satyajit strangely as he saw the corners of her mouth dip again in the mysterious smile. His limbs grew feverish.

Silent, he ate with eyes fixed on his plate. That was a mood the other two knew, and respected. Neither spoke a word.

When the meal was nearly over, Suruchi felt his hand clasp her upper arm for an instant. That conveyed no meaning to her. But the gesture was soon repeated, a quick sharp squeeze. She now turned to him, staring in astonishment. What she saw had once been familiar and was now nearly forgotten—she took time to understand. The blood heaved to her face. His glance upon her did not falter; something stronger than he held him in its compulsion. Until he saw the flushed face harden, then fill with a wave of scorn, revulsion. He felt as though he had been slapped across the cheek. He got to his feet, stood uncertain, and then walked away.

Suruchi sat with her head bowed, her breath quick.

The sheath of virginity she had been made to wear over the long years would not slip off at a mere gesture.

But an hour later, close on midnight, she pushed open the study door. The room was in darkness. “Ruchi!” the surprised, humble, grateful voice came from the direction of the bed.

“A moment,” she said, and as in the times long gone she turned round to the door and closed the wooden bolt.
All in the village noted Sumita’s sudden transformation with fond approval—except for the two white-garbed girls. Vijayanti and Radha were first bewildered, then angry. Sumita had let them down; she had not even given them an inkling of what she was about to do.

“Unthinkable!” one cried.
“Plain betrayal,” the other answered.
“Is this the beginning of the end? The end of all she has stood for?”
“The end,” the other agreed, fuming.

But Vijayanti had nursed her anger for a bare hour when she heard the astounding news: Sumita was to be a member of the Peace Mission along with four men of the village council. It was Vijayanti’s father, Krishnamurti, who made the revelation after she had said: “Meadow House has won her over. She belongs now to Steeltown.”

“For shame, girl. If only you knew.”
“There’s nothing else to know. She has betrayed the principles she has so often proclaimed. She used to call her white garb an emblem; that emblem has no meaning for her today.”

“Listen, Vijayanti. Sumita will be with us on the peace march. Four men and a woman. It may be that she will never return.”

Vijayanti stood dazed. Then she burst into tears.
To have misjudged her dear companion and friend, to have called her a traitor! Radha, guilty likewise, must know at once, and repent.
On the way to Radha’s house she met a group of women clustered near the large well in excited talk.

“Henceforth we can wear color without feeling shamed. All these days we’ve been crows in peacock plumes, the one with the true plumage wearing a drab disguise.”

“Even in that disguise she has been an image of grace. And now—” The homage was in the words left unsaid.

“This is what worries me. Sumita has to borrow her mother’s saris and jackets. But there can’t be enough for both. Why don’t we give her some clothes? If we all get busy spinning—”

“Let’s not go to her individually with the gifts; she will decline them. We’ll all go to her in a group. She cannot turn down our united wish.”

“In the past half month I’ve spun enough yarn for a new sari, but it’s yet to be woven.”

“Then dyed. That also takes time.”

“We have to hurry. What if she changes her mind again?”

“That’s it. Once she gets used to wearing color, she won’t go back to her white garb. Her mother’s saris have only colored borders. Those we give will be dyed all over.”

At that point Vijayanti made a proposal: “We can collect her clothes and get each and every piece dyed—red, blue, green. Then she won’t have a chance to wear white.”

Good idea, the others agreed, surprised by the change in Vijayanti, wondering if she too would give up her white garb. But first of all they must take their gifts to Sumita at the earliest moment. Four saris and jackets.

If only they knew Sumita would be gone soon, Vijayanti thought to herself. Her father had bidden her keep this a secret—she could speak to Radha alone. And Vijayanti fought to hold back tears. What woe that she had called Sumita names!

So the girls of Gandigaram applied themselves to the pleasurable task. Word spread fast, and the number of those who offered a helping hand grew hour by hour. Thirty spinning wheels worked as never before. Four weavers handled the yarn as it came. The dyer added his contribution.

At dawn on Saturday thirty girls walking in a procession stopped in front of Sumita’s house. And there she was at the
gate, as if awaiting them. But she was looking toward the meadow, deeply absorbed. She was away at Meadow House, seated on a porch step, listening to the bamboo flute as Bhashkar played a tune she loved.

Every day he sat there at this time, Gopal had reported. Smoking his pipe, gazing straight before him at nothing, and playing on the flute intermittently. What did he think about, seated on the dusty steps? This house meant much to him. This house was a great deal more than its brick, wood, glass. It was his hand extended toward Gandhigram—in friendship. He had dedicated the house to the village. I only hope you’ll use it, he had said.

True, behind the invitation was a challenge. Be it so. Gandhigram must expose itself to every wave of thought, the full force of the modern age, yet stand rocklike in its unshakable strength of conviction. Isolation was no answer. Isolation meant fear of defeat. There was no such fear in Satyajit’s heart. Had he not said often that men and women must both be subjected once in a while to a fire test?

“Sumita!”

Startled, she turned her head and saw the girls striding up, Savitri ahead of all, a package in the crook of her arm. “There!” She held it out.

“Take it, Sumita,” they urged.

“Open and see!” they cried.

Intrigued, she took off the newspaper wrapping, and was struck dumb.

The women spoke excitedly, clamorously: “What color do you like most, Sumita? We have been arguing that point. Beena says—”

“Green, I say. Right, Sumita-Sister?”

“Blue. She has the fairness of a seashell. She will look her best in blue. Let her put this sari on and you will see.”

“Brick red—this one here. It will make her look like a nymph of Heaven.”

“As if the nymphs of Heaven wear clothes!”

“They don’t? They go about naked?”

A burst of merry laughter. Sumita joined in it, and then it was too late for protest. She turned round to call her mother,
but there she was, standing on the veranda—she had heard the voices and come out.

"Mother—" This was the time to make her protest. But Mother exclaimed, "I am so happy—so happy—" A glisten of tears in her eyes. And she went on, "Years and years I have prayed to all the gods that they make my Sumita love nice clothes, like all other girls of her age."

She saw in a flash the face of her husband, and heard him say: Just clothes. Just a red mark on the brow. He knew nothing about a woman's mind. It would be too late when eventually he learned.

The girls had resumed their talk.

"Let's see how Sumita looks in one of these four saris. Whichever she likes to wear first. Then we'll celebrate the auspicious day."

"What shall we do?"

A thoughtful pause. Each girl was racking her head for an answer. It came from Sumita on a spur of inspiration.

"We'll start planning for a show. Our own folk songs. Our village dances. Our recital from the epics. We'll invite women from the steel mill. Workingwomen."

Good idea, the girls agreed. But the big house they were building had no roof yet. Even if every hand helped it would be two months or more before the house was completed.

What Sumita had in mind was Meadow House. Let Gandhigram use it. Later, in due course, Steeltown would be invited to the big house in the village.

"Why don't we make our plans right on the spot?" Her eager suggestion followed.

"Sumita, you still walk with a stick."

"I can manage. You'll have to keep slow pace and not leave me behind."

"When do we go there?"

"Right now! Oh, wait a minute." She turned, and disappeared. The girls looked at Suruchi in bewilderment. She said, smiling: "How do I know? Let's wait and see. Maybe she will put on her gold neck chain."

"She must wear lac bangles," said Nargis. "Such graceful arms!"
"Yes. We should have thought of that. But—time enough."
"The peace march cannot be far away."
"Why should the peace march include a woman? It's a job for menfolk."
"Hush, Savitri!" Alarmed eyes turned to Suruchi. A thoughtless remark could be hurtful. But Suruchi said, "Maybe she won't join the peace march."
"She won't?" There was an excited clamor.
"Listen. Let her get preoccupied with Meadow House. Let her make herself responsible for its success, and she will sink herself in it with all the intensity of her devotion. Her own peace march in a way!"
"True."
"Let her take full charge of the show we're going to arrange."
"We'll persuade her to be in a dancing group."
"She will turn the head of Steeltown."

There she was, coming out of the room, wearing a new sari. Red. But she did not stop on the veranda; she went down the steps. "Come! Hurry!" She walked with a slight limp. This would be a surprise for the CE of Steeltown, she was thinking. His offer to Gandhigram accepted so promptly—only five days had passed since the show. But they had to reach the meadow before he went away. Hurry!

A jeep stood parked at the gate of Meadow House. The girls wanted to stop. Someone from Steeltown. Better wait until he was gone.

But Sumita spoke firmly: "That house is ours. Anyone from the city is welcome—as a guest. Come along." Her ankle hurt because of the exertion, but it made no difference in her hurried pace.

On the dusty steps of the porch, Bhashkar sat brooding, drawing on his pipe slowly, absently.

This house, intended to fulfill his dream, would have no time to achieve its aim or even to be tested—the time had gone all too suddenly. Another round of talks between New Delhi and Peking had ended in failure. These talks were a mere smoke screen for China. What was happening behind that screen could
do no good to India. In the past two days the voice of Radio Peking had become a growl of anger, malice, hatred; its capacity to pour venom was endless.

India had no option but to get ready for the worst. Steeltown must play its part in full measure; its industrial complex must reach a high level of growth in the nearest future. Peking had settled the fate of Gandhigram, and it was too late for the slow way of persuasion. Time lost on sentimental grounds would hurt national interests. India could speak to Peking only from a position of strength. Idealism... humanism... universal brotherhood... world peace—those were empty bubbles. Peking's neoimperialism made use of those words only to serve its unclean purpose.

Rupa had spoken on the phone.

"I arrived as usual at eight thirty. Satyajit hadn't come yet, though he was always so punctual. He came half an hour late and went straight to his work. His face was fatigued and unhappy. When ten minutes were gone, he looked up and said, 'Forgive me.' 'What for?' 'Forgive me for all my impositions, Rupa-Mother.' 'What impositions?' I asked, but his face was unhappy, and he didn't give an answer. One thing, though: he had called me 'Rupa-Mother!'" The voice from the receiver stopped. Several moments passed before it was heard again. "He left soon after midday. He had to catch the Delhi Express."

Satyajit was absorbed in his delusion—the peace march. Would he be content to have the march at the expense of Gandhigram itself? New Delhi could hardly fulfill every wish of his. The Minister Without Portfolio was a man of reason. Bhashkar recalled their meeting in Washington. "India needs men like you," he had said. How would he react when he received an urgent appeal from a man to be trusted?

There was no other way but to make that appeal. The acquisition of Gandhigram by eminent domain.

Sumita would get a shock. She had accepted the Meadow House as a fair test and challenge. But peaceful penetration was now to be replaced by the violence of aggressive action. Sumita had her belief. Gandhigram was a citadel of the spiritual values the world badly needed: values crucial to the destiny of man.
He would not quarrel with Sumita's belief. But let the village be taken elsewhere, transplanted.

Hard to bear the thought of Sumita vanishing out of his life, even though she cared nothing about what he felt and wanted. Unattached, self-complete, with none of the common needs of a woman. She was a flame that would be extinguished by a Chinese bullet. She would leave a gap in his life never to be filled. Yet he was grateful to life that he had known Sumita even briefly. It was as if he had gone back to the ancient times and seen the youthful princess who had left the king's palace and, hair shorn, had given herself to the stern monastic order founded by Gautama Buddha.

He looked beyond the gate. Shading his eyes against the sun, he looked, intent. People were coming this way in a group. Women. The one who walked with a stick could be Sumita, but she was dressed in red. It was Sumita! Where was her white garb? The white in key with the intrinsic purity of body and spirit?

Curious, that the flame of her was best contained in an earthen lamp, not one of bright metal.

Her visit at the head of a group—was this a decisive step in her acceptance of Meadow House? One day, soon, he would have to tell her that Meadow House had ceased to be linked to his purpose. It might well be a second "Institute," but that was not the objective for which it had been built.

So what? Let Gandhigram get attached to this city symbol. That might make its absorption of an accomplished fact easier, smoother, less fraught with pain, and the transplantation itself might become needless.
Delhi Express was late, as usual. Bireshwar Basu, waiting for its arrival, walked up and down the length of the platform, and stopped each time he was face to face with a passing tea vendor. The first sip of tea scalded his tongue, but because of his pressing need he drank the rest poured into the saucer, little by little. His fourth cup was in hand when the bell rang at last, and all at once the near-empty platform was a seething mass of excited people. When the train stopped he elbowed his way through the crowd from the engine to the guard’s van at the rear and then decided that his friend had let him down—he had not arrived by that train. He would have to be the subject of a verse; that was inescapable. In the last year or two Bireshwar had been expressing all his criticism of life in verse form, eight-line pieces with a sting at the tail end. The line with the sting was the first to be composed, acting as a peg for the lines preceding it.

A voice calling his name halted his poetic musings and, looking round, he saw the tall figure in front of a third-class compartment. A shout of joy, and in a moment the tall figure was in the grasp of long thin arms, hugged close to a spare frame.

“The verse dies, and no regrets,” Bireshwar said to himself, tightening his arms happily. Relaxing his hold with an abrupt gesture, he drew his friend toward the exit.

“My baggage!” Satyajit mildly protested.


They turned back to the suitcase and bedroll lying neglected.
on the platform. Presently they were swept up in the surging tide of people, parted from each other, and Bireswar yelled to his friend over the shoulders intervening between them: "Don't get pushed about. Don't forget what happened to you that day at the boat race in Cambridge!"

Satyajit smiled indulgently. Why had Bires given up his felt hat, his Western clothes?

A taxi drew up. "North Avenue. M.P.s' quarters," Bireswar said loudly to the driver.

"Now we can talk." He squeezed his friend's hand when they were seated. "Where were we? In Cambridge. Han, I can still see you chastising yourself in the manner of the medieval saints. Fasting and all that nonsense. The body's purification after a lapse from virginity."

Satyajit pleaded, "Look, Bires—"

"I have never made poetry out of a man's moral downfall—I mean that kind. So you have nothing to worry about, brother."

Satyajit gave his friend an assessing look. The hair had turned gray. That was appropriate for a Member of Parliament. How did he get elected as an independent, with no party machine to help at the polls? Was the electorate carried away by his sharp-edged verses? He might have made fun of the people whose votes he demanded at the meetings. Barbed fun touching raw spots in you and yet making you ask for more.

"Bires, I should tell you right away why I am here in Delhi. It's the Chinese troops in Ladakh—"

"Oh-ho! What about Ladakh?" Face and voice were anxious.

"Bires, you have visited China as a member of a cultural delegation. You have no political ax to grind. So let me ask you a plain question. What do you think of that country?"

It was a new Bireswar who now spoke.

"First of all, look at the bare facts of history. The background of modern Peking. The revolution building up over a long stretch of years. Sacrifice, renunciation, heroic endurance—the elements that have gone into revolutionary struggles everywhere. Next, we take a long jump over a space of time. What do we see? Kuomintang, an apparatus of the middle classes, liberated the country from the imperial throne, but it failed to
give the common man what he needed above all else: an acre of earth to till, a bowl of rice to eat. The peasantry had to live on under the same feudal conditions. Hunger raged as before. No human dignity for the masses of the people. The twentieth century was forced to stop at China's dooryard. And then came the victory of the Liberation Army."

"You saw the new China—"

"I saw the new China. All land redistributed. Fast-paced industrialization, with massive Soviet help. The people's eyes turned toward new horizons." Biresar leaned back in the cushioned seat while he continued: "The new horizons are very far away, but the Long March has started. The destiny of seven hundred million men and women is involved."

"What next?"

"That's the moot question. The tragedy is that the trusted leaders of this new Long March have betrayed the human values they once stood for. They are taking the people toward what may be the end of all values. In Peking I heard the roar of five hundred thousand united voices demanding world peace, the abolition of war for all time. Ten years have passed since. That demand is now treason. The leaders of China stand today as the world's only expansionists. What a contradiction!" Biresar's voice sharpened. "But, maybe it's no contradiction! It's the old Trotskyist theory of world revolution at the point of the bayonet. But there will be no bayonet. There will be only nuclear fire."

"Mao is ready to take that risk," Satyajit pointed out. "I don't have to remind you of his simple arithmetic."

"It's much too simple. The population of China, decimated, will keep on growing toward the old level—that is true. But the mothers will be giving birth to monsters, so the nuclear scientists predict. The effect of nuclear radiation on the procreative system. Two-headed, one-eyed, four-armed monsters. Can you imagine such creatures building a new socialist world? It's more reasonable to assume that the very concept of socialism will have turned to ash!"

Satyajit nodded. "Have you thought of another possibility? That the common people of China will not see the arithmetic, the columns of figures; they will see sons and daughters, wives and husbands. The men may still hanker for the glory of Asian
leadership. Not the women. The women of China will be the country’s salvation.”

With an abrupt gesture Bireswar turned and shook hands with his friend.

“That’s just the point! The women of China are drunk with emancipation. Except in the matter of sex. Curious, isn’t it, that the early stages of a Communist order have to be an era of sex repression? That happened in Soviet Russia. But that country has outgrown the stage of socially enforced celibacy.” Bireswar stopped, cheeks puffed up in a kind of grimace. “Today,” he resumed, “it is easy to make love to a Russian woman. After all, it’s stupid to go against human nature. Even the Chinese are realizing that, I think.”

Satyajit smiled indulgently. Bires could move from frivolity to seriousness and back to frivolity with athletic ease. But he had to be stopped before he went further.

“Look, Bires—”

“I can tell you about a night in Hotel Peking. I was on the dance floor with a young Chinese woman. No Chinese dance—plain foxtrot. The woman was attractively shaped under her frock of green silk.”

“Our taxi driver may be listening,” Satyajit warned with a nudge of his elbow.

Bireswar glared at the back of the large turbaned head before him. “Sardar-ji!” he called softly to the Sikh.

“Ji?”

“You have enjoyed my talk?”

“Good talk.” The red turban nodded twice in assent. “Pray continue. We are only a minute from North Avenue.”

“You hear him, Satyajit? He wants me to continue. Shall I?”

“No!” A sharp retort.

Bireswar looked helpless. “Sardar-ji,” he cried, “I am sorry!” Satyajit said, “Now, Bires, you still have no idea why I have come to Delhi. I have to meet—”

“I can guess.” Bireswar was grave-faced again. “You will meet the right person. After lunch. I’ll arrange the time on the phone. Having revealed your thoughts to the Minister Without
Portfolio, you can come to the House. Even if you hate debate as I do.”

“What else are you there for?”

“I? Well, you will hear a speech of mine. But it’s in verse form, the usual eight lines. Come to the House at three-thirty. I’ll give you a card for the visitors’ gallery.”

North Avenue was a series of one-storied, detached bungalows assigned to Members of Parliament. “Aren’t you dying for a cup of tea?” said Bireswar. “I am.” And he shouted for the servant. “Roghual! Hey, brother—”

When Satyajit returned to the living room after washing, Bireswar was intent on his tea. It was apparently too hot, and he was drinking it from the saucer. The mood of seriousness was back again; he fixed grave eyes on his friend and said:

“What would have happened to the world if Jenghiz Khan had had the efficiency of a telephone? Tolstoy asked that question and couldn’t find an answer. We are now close to the answer. For, Jenghiz Khan has at last acquired a telephone!”

The memorandum covered two typed pages. The Minister Without Portfolio was taking his time. Pencil in hand, he was marking lines here and there. Satyajit watched the face across the table. Its chiseled strength had been the joy of sculptors until the relentless hard work, even more than the weight of age, cast its imprint of fatigue. That had also happened to a greater man—the Prime Minister.

The Minister Without Portfolio had been close to Gandhi, as close as Nehru himself. Satyajit had recollections of him in Sevagram. Why—he, Satyajit, could be sitting today on the other side of this green-topped office table; the suggestion had come from the Prime Minister during the last elections. He had declined the offer. Had he been wrong? Could he have served the country better from the pedestal of authority? But—there was the other work started by Gandhi-ji. Freedom in Gandhi-ji’s reckoning was not the ultimate aim; it was only a step toward the aim. To wipe every tear from every eye—that alone counted. It was more than a material aim. You could not achieve it from New Delhi. Seated here in this office, with three telephones by your side, you saw, not faces, but a placid human sea.
He smiled as he found himself thinking in Bireswar’s terms. That was it. That was what had happened in Peking to men of the Long March. The telephone stood between them and their people. That instrument at the heart of efficiency was a symbol of contradictions. It vested you with still larger means of world conquest, but all the while you were slipping within yourself from defeat to defeat. One day, maybe, the people would break open your door and snatch the telephone from your hand.

That was the undeclared intent of this memorandum, the unwritten words between the lines of typescript. With his logical mind, the Minister was sure to see the point.

The Minister, perhaps for that very reason, seemed on the defensive.

“We were the first non-Communist country to give recognition to the People’s Republic of China,” he began, and he could have been thinking aloud over a balance sheet. “Year after year we tried to bring them into the United Nations. We didn’t resist their occupation of Tibet—on the face of it an anomalous, an opportunist act—but nonresistance was, we honestly believed, the only practical answer. The United Nations would not have fought for Tibet as they fought for South Korea. Besides, we had word from Chou En-lai that Tibet would be an autonomous province and that its culture would be respected. A compromise on our part, we thought, would be of more value to the Tibetan people than angry words spoken on the floor of the United Nations and a paper resolution that could not change the course of history. You see the point, Satyajit?”

“The path of truth is not one of compromise. There should have been no compromise with aggression.”

“This Mission of yours—isn’t it a compromise, in effect?”

“No! It’s a challenge. Its weapons are aimed at the aggressor’s inmost spirit. We have to touch the spirit of the Chinese people so that we may be brothers again.”

‘Brothers’ means to them that we accept Chinese leadership and become a bridgehead for a Chinese advance to all South Asia and to Africa. That will never happen, and the men of Peking have learned to admit the fact. They are dead set against
the Soviet concept of peaceful coexistence, which they call re-
visionism. And neutralism provokes their mirthless laughter; the 
third path is a myth, they say. They are determined to prove this 
in action. They want to build up circumstances in which India 
will have no option but to give up nonalignment and enter the 
Western bloc. India gone, the nonaligned world will be so en-
feebled that it will actually become a myth. Then China, at the 
head of the numerous countries of Asia and Africa, dominating 
a thousand million people, will become the world’s mightiest 
force. That is part of Marshal Lin Pao’s renowned thesis.”

Satyajit pondered for a time before he spoke.

“It’s not easy for me to lose faith in the Long March. Somewhere in Chinese consciousness the Long March must linger 
still, even if it has died in the hearts of the rulers in Peking.”

The Minister smiled faintly, and the lines of fatigue in his 
face grew deeper.

“Try to see it this way. China today is as self-centered, as 
chauvinistic, as Britain used to be in the hey-day of its colonial 
expansionism. Read the diplomatic notes we’ve been receiving 
from Peking—the arrogance in them is sheer vulgarity.”

Satyajit shook his head sadly. “You are speaking a language 
that has no word in common with mine.”

“Satyajit, I don’t enjoy speaking this language. Nothing 
would make me happier than to be proved wrong. Your faith 
that the ultimate goodness of the human spirit must prevail in 
all circumstances—if that faith is the reality and all else il-
usion—”

“Then . . . ?” Satyajit, hopeful, bent forward over the table.

“Then the world is safe from the nuclear peril. But history 
has dashed our hopes repeatedly. May I use a metaphor? The 
other day I was going to Simla in a glass-fronted diesel rail car. 
We plunged into a long straight tunnel; it was dark, but through 
the glass wall we could see ahead of us a brilliant orb of sunshine 
at the tunnel’s mouth, and beyond that a backdrop of bright 
greenery. As we sped up to the orb of light, beyond the greenery 
was the pitch-dark mouth of another tunnel.”

Silence, as both were seeing the tunnels, and then the tele-
phone rang.
The Minister picked up the receiver with a listless hand. 
But as the words poured into his ear, his face grew startled. And 
across its weariness a shadow spread. It was as though the 
Minister had emerged hopefully from a tunnel and then plunged 
again into utter darkness.

He put the receiver back. He did not speak for a while. 
He seemed to have forgotten his visitor’s presence. But he 
hadn’t.

“Satyajit, news has just come that Chinese armed forces 
have encircled our checkpoint in Galwan Valley.”

“Galwan Valley? But surely they don’t claim that?”

“They’ve cut our supply line. The checkpoint can be kept 
alive only by air-dropped supplies. And what if they try to shoot 
down our aircraft?”

“You think that may happen?”

“After all, Galwan Valley is India—there can be no dispute 
about that. We have to rush relief to our soldiers at the check-
post. You see what that may bring about? An armed clash.”

Silence again for a minute. Satyajit fixed anxious eyes on 
the Minister. A minute passed before the Minister came to the 
question he was expected to answer.

“Satyajit, your march would be plain suicide. The Chinese 
would not understand what it was all about. You can’t even 
blame them for that. If only you knew something about their 
ruthlessness—”

“We’ll be prepared for that.”

“Let me remind you. Gandhi-ji wanted the whole people 
to be involved in a struggle of this kind. A disciplined national 
force with complete faith in nonviolence. Nonviolence, much 
more than violence, demands mass action.”

Satyajit would not agree. There had been several instances 
when Gandhi-ji took upon his own shoulders alone the entire 
load of a mass struggle. He became the symbol of a whole people.

The Minister stared, his eyes curious. Satyajit knew the 
meaning of that glance. It was not for him to play that Gandhian 
role. True enough. But when there was no one else . . . An army 
would not give up fighting even when its great commander was 
dead.
“There’s one concession I am ready to make,” the Minister resumed. “Let a hundred men and women answer your call. Then we’ll reconsider the question.”

“Just reconsider . . . ?”

“Just that. The situation is fluid. I cannot make a promise. I hate to think of innocent lives being sacrificed. All for an ideal that has no chance. No chance at all in a situation where human life has no value whatever.”