SeveErAl TiMes iN tHe PaSt MoNth Sarojini Mehra had let her thoughts dwell on Rupa as a likely bride for Bhashkar. Rupa had great attractiveness. She put to shade all the beauties in the green folder. Yet there was a point against her. She was too full of the West. Her mother was an American. And where was the mother? Rupa didn’t know. Why had the divorce happened? That also she didn’t know. Not once in the course of a year had her father come to Steeltown to see how Rupa lived. Not once had the girl gone home to spend a vacation. This sad background was not all that mattered. Rupa was no novelty for Bhashkar. He must have known a hundred Rupas in America, and they had left him untouched. Would this girl succeed where the others had stumbled? Would Lohapur score over Pittsburgh and Chicago?

Illumination came one day. Mrs. Mehra was about to enter Room Nineteen when the door opened and Rupa stepped out, smiling to herself in an absorbed way. One glance at her, and Mrs. Mehra’s heart gave a thud. This girl was in love! The expression on her face proclaimed the fact. Nothing but love could make that grace and that radiance.

“Rupa,” she greeted her as the door closed, “you look happy.”

Without reply, Rupa gave her a smacking kiss on one cheek! Mrs. Mehra was so surprised that the files dropped from her hands. No Indian woman would ever do that: kiss in public, in broad daylight! Kiss another woman—an Indian woman wouldn’t do that under any circumstances. Rupa was built a different
way. It could well be that she would not hesitate even to kiss the CE on the cheek, impulsively. What would he do in such a predicament? Alone in the room and helpless.

It would have been an easy solution if he also were in love. After Rupa had walked away down the corridor, Mrs. Mehra rubbed the lipstick off her face, then turned the doorknob. She walked in with her intuition alert; one glance, and she would know the truth.

There was no mark of feeling on the CE's face. This was not a man who had been with his beloved a moment ago. Even Mr. Mehra, seated on that chair, would have worn a different look if his wife had just come and gone. The CE's face, stooping over a letter, was wooden. His mind alone was visible; there was no sign of the heart anywhere in his look.

Mrs. Mehra saddened on Rupa's account.

A week had gone by when the second truth came into her consciousness, and it was a real surprise. The ceremony at Meadow House. Two mothers vying to hook a son-in-law. The show over, bidding farewell to the guests, the CE walked up to Sumita in the oxcart and his face shone unmistakably. Mrs. Mehra could not miss that look. It had lingered until the oxcart moved away.

Later, at home, Mrs. Mehra saw the meaning of it all. The girl from Gandhisgram had made a strong impact on the CE of Steeltown. But they lived worlds apart. She belonged to a hermitage, and to imagine her as the CE's wife was fantastic!

How could a man who was all modernity be drawn toward Sumita when Rupa was there with her dazzling beauty and her heart full of love?

It was hard to believe. Had her eyes deceived her? She would ask her husband. He had come cycling to Meadow House toward the end of the show to take her home, and he must have noted everything.

Next day, before supper, she opened the subject.

"Rupa . . . or Sumita?" she flung at her husband as he was combing his hair after a bath. Her fingers pointed to them both—an imaginary Rupa on one side and Sumita on the other. "What do you think?" she demanded.

Used to her cryptic queries, he waited for her to resume.
“Who gets preference?”
“What for?”
“As a bride. A likely bride.”
He pondered.
“If you want my personal preference . . . whom I would fancy . . .”
“You? No question of personal preference—you’d fancy not one but both. Don’t I know every bone in your body, Mr. Mehra?”
“Why trouble to ask me, since you know?”
“I’m thinking of a wife for the CE, not one for you,” Mrs. Mehra hissed.
He saw the need to placate her.
“Mrs. Sarojini Mehra, when did you lose your keen sense of humor? Can’t you see a joke as a joke?”
“It isn’t a good joke, filling your mind with women. What if I, likewise—”

The unspoken words were obvious. The hand with the comb paused. “You can’t do that, Sarojini. I’d die of heartbreak.”
She scanned his smooth, clean-shaven face for a hiding grin, but saw only the mask of sadness. She relented instantly. “As if I could!”
“This is the end of my life. And what fate for the three children!”
“Now tell me—”
“Chumki, already twelve, to be married in five or six years. But who will marry the daughter of a wanton?”
“Look. Let me say two words.”
“The boys to be motherless at such a young age. Ho Lallu! Ho Premnath!”
“Now, tell me: Who doesn’t see a joke as a joke—you or I?”
“Joke! In your imagination you install two other fellows as husband. This is supposed to be a joke. Two fellows—I think I know them both. You will have to make your choice, though.”
She thrilled to his evident concern, and would have liked to prolong it, but it wouldn’t do to let him go too far. She stopped him with her plump fingers clapped to his mouth.
“What ugly thoughts sit in your head, Mr. Mehra! The children are reading in the other room. Who knows if they’ve
heard this talk?” She turned and darted to the blue-flowered cotton screen of the communicating door. She pushed the screen aside. All three were reading aloud, the murmur of voices enhanced by low-pitched crooning from a small transistor radio placed on the table.

“Children,” she called, “you haven’t heard what your father’s been saying in this room?”

“No,” Chumki answered promptly. “How can we hear chit-chat beyond the door when we’re reading aloud?”

“What’s he been saying, Mother?” Lallu lifted a questioning face, all innocence.

But Premnath, the six-year-old, wagged his head up and down, and cried gravely, “I heard. I heard everything. Han!”

Chumki snapped at him. “What! You have a third ear? Where’s that ear—show us!”

And Lallu said, glaring. “Fool! Braggart!”

Mrs. Mehra, reassured, gave a smiling nod to the children. “Read your books with full concentration.” She closed the door softly.

The point at issue was lost in the deviation. But she might as well leave it at that. What did it matter anyway? No question of choice remained. There was one plain fact, and that was all. The CE had set his heart on Sumita.

What was her duty? She should know Sumita’s mind, shouldn’t she? No question of her mind. No maid, anywhere in the country, would refuse the CE’s proffered hand. The point was that Sumita would need a measure of orientation. It would be no easy passage from Gandhigram to Steeltown!

In the week that followed, Mrs. Mehra decided on her plan of action. Early one morning she set out on her bicycle, but not officeward. She came pedaling to the meadow, crossing it along the cart track. Strange to think it was her first visit to Gandhigram. Luck that there were passersby on their way to work, and they directed her to the right door. Mother and daughter were about to go out; they took classes at the schoolhouse. Mrs. Mehra went straight to the purpose of her visit. She would like Sumita to spend an hour or two in the city.

“Bhashkar has asked you to see us?”
Mrs. Mehra read the mother’s thoughts, and smiled. “Yes and no,” she said.

“I don’t understand.” It struck her that the visitor had come on a bicycle and that there was no transport for Sumita.

But Mrs. Mehra would not explain the riddle. She said: “Each and every minute of the CE’s time is dedicated to his work. What responsibility! Our production target has been raised to more than two million tons of ingot steel. Each and every ton depends on one man. No wonder he cannot do all he has in mind. He has to leave a few things to his PS. Two million tons—that’s stupendous. And the Chinese have forced us to hasten our pace. We have to complete three years’ work in half the time.” She turned wistfully to Sumita. “You will have to understand all that. Easy, when you’ve read a few books—I’ll give them to you. I’ll show you blueprints, charts, other materials. That’s why I’m taking you to Steeltown.”

“Bhashkar wants her to read such things?”

Mrs. Mehra’s telltale glance met the mother’s questioning eyes, and conveyed more than words.

“Don’t bother about your history class, Sumita. I’ll give the children some work to do. You must go with Mrs. Mehra.” The pleasure on the mother’s face was unconcealed.

“But... how?”

Mrs. Mehra pointed to her bicycle.

“You will sit on the carrier over the back wheel.”

“Impossible! I’m no featherweight!”

Merry wrinkles came under Mrs. Mehra’s eyes. “Sumita,” she said, her voice sweet, “you have yet to know my prowess!”

All three burst into laughter.

A few minutes later the bicycle with its two passengers passed the lamppost in the meadow. The ground grew bumpy, and Sumita, seated sidesaddle, tightened her grip. It was hard work for Mrs. Mehra. Though she continued her discourse on steel, her words grew increasingly spaced because of her panting breath. Presently, she became silent. Perspiration made a glistening smear on the nape of her neck.

“Mrs. Mehra, please stop. Let’s walk a bit.”

Mrs. Mehra pressed on: “You... don’t... know my”—and explosively—“prowess!”
At last the meadow was left behind. The smooth black asphalt road made progress easier. The road led to a wide street full of traffic. There was a long steep slope ahead, and Mrs. Mehra cried: "Hold tight and don't be afraid. We'll go flying like birds!" And Sumita felt a scream rise in her throat as the bicycle narrowly avoided cars, trucks, rickshaws, all racing madly. The anxiety ended only when the dip on the road gave way to a climb. The bicycle slowed almost to a stop. Mrs. Mehra applied the brake.

"We're getting down. We'll walk for a bit—you can manage? Right in front of us, on top of the incline, stands Steelhouse—you see? I'll take you to the roof, and you'll have a view of the whole city."

"Gate Pass?" A Steelhouse guard was barring Sumita's way.

"Receptionist—" Mrs. Mehra jerked her head toward a room ten yards off. "Everyone who wants to enter this building must have a pass," she explained to Sumita. "It won't take a minute."

"Pass? What for?"

"Or else loiterers will walk in, don't you see?" Mrs. Mehra was busy filling out a form. "Put your signature down at the bottom." She handed Sumita a pen.

They climbed the steps and passed into a spacious hall. An elevator took them to the rooftop. It was a breathtaking view. Masses of concrete structure stretched away for miles in well-ordered formations. Tall fingers of brick rose skyward, emitting smoke. There were gigantic skeletonsof red-painted steel. The white, sunlit face of a clock on a tower...

"You see our blast furnace Number One?" Mrs. Mehra pointed to a blaze. "Its glory is lost in daytime. At night it's terrible." She resumed the discourse she had started at the beginning of the journey from Gandhigram. There would have been no modern civilization without this metal. India needed Steeltowns. Successive plans would raise total production to fifteen million tons. When that target was reached, the modern industrial revolution would be in full swing.

"Wouldn't you like to be part of that revolution?" she asked.

"That revolution will end at a certain milestone. We intend to go well beyond."
"We?"
"Gandhigram."
"You don't mean, Sumita, that having attained our industrial targets we must return to the spinning wheel?"
"Return? There can be no return. Feed your spirit while you feed your body, or else the spirit will not survive. You can't do this one by one."

Mrs. Mehra nodded with pleasure. The CE's bride had a thinking mind. She was no Lohapur Club decorative piece. She would be her husband's intellectual companion. With that thought Mrs. Mehra felt a rush of apprehension. The CE did not want Gandhigram to exist. It was, he said, a roadblock on the path of progress. Steeltown could easily extend over other neighbors—west, north, south—they would be willingly liquidated for a good price. But the assault on Gandhigram was ideologic, not economic.

"I must know all about your father's ideas," she told Sumita. "Maybe you will teach me. Fair exchange for what I have to teach you."

Sumita cried happily, "When we meet next I'll give you one or two of my father's works—they are known the world over."

Back to the elevator. The CE's war against the Gandhian village was now reaching a new phase, Mrs. Mehra reflected. Part of himself had gone over to the other side. One part would be struggling against another. What would be the result? Alarm came rushing upon her. What if the CE sacrificed his heart's need to his stern sense of duty? He could be a man of iron.

The elevator stopped at the second floor. In the corridor, Mrs. Mehra pointed to a door ahead, the numeral 19 brass-plated on a polished panel. "The CE's room. Next to it is that of his PS."

The secretary's room was a picture of neatness. Various gadgets lay on the dark-green baize of the table beside the typewriter and two telephones. Steel shelves lined the walls. An open, revolving bookcase stood at a corner. Sumita walked to the bookcase and examined the titles.

Mrs. Mehra dropped to her seat, unlocked a drawer, and pulled out a green folder. Now at last it was time to kill the file marked Matrimonial. A sudden urge came upon her to show the contents to Sumita before doing away with them.
“Sumita!”
“Hi’m?”
Absorbed in the books, Sumita did not turn round. A minute passed. That minute eased the urge Mrs. Mehra had felt. It would not be fair to reveal the CE’s secret to his bride. She was sure to ask him embarrassing questions. He need not have advertised for a bride when she was right there on the other side of the meadow. But here was the point: When had he seen Sumita for the first time? It must have happened after the advertisement appeared.
Where had he met her? How often had they met since?
Mrs. Mehra felt annoyed that she had not done her duty; she had let vital things happen without keeping track of them. A telephone started to buzz. Sumita turned round, startled.
“CE!” said Mrs. Mehra. “I’ll tell him you are here in my room.”
“No!” Sumita cried, hot in the face. She was not prepared to meet Bhashkar amid all this sophistication. Mrs. Mehra nodded approval. The CE’s bride had no business to step into Room Nineteen.
“Back in a minute.” She walked off to the door.
Sumita felt a prick of dismay. She would have liked to see Room Nineteen, the sanctum. No pretty PS for the CE, but such a highly efficient one. Could she herself ever be as good, if she tried? Fantastic thought!
The door opened, and a voice called, “May I come in, Mrs. Mehra?” And in the next instant, “Oh, I’m sorry!”
The visitor stepped in. Mrs. Mehra had just gone to the CE’s room, Sumita told her, and answered an unspoken question, “I come from Gandhigram.”
“Then you must be Satyajit’s daughter,” Rupa cried with interest. “I couldn’t go to Meadow House that evening. It’s nice meeting you. My name’s Rupa.”
“You are so beautiful!” Sumita exclaimed. “I have seen no one like you.”
Rupa laughed. “You have only to see yourself!”
“You—you are also the CE’s secretary?”
“Not quite.”
Mrs. Mehra hurried in. She nodded to Rupa, saying: “Too late. He has gone to the General Manager’s room, and in ten
minutes he'll be leaving for the iron-ore mines. Some kind of breakdown has happened—the news has just come.”

“That's a hundred miles away,” Rupa said. “He cannot possibly return today.”

“No. In fact, he may have to spend several days down there. It all depends on the trouble itself. But you know how good he is with machines.”

Sumita felt her heart beat faster. He would be away several days. Sadness filled her. Why had she not accompanied Mrs. Mehra to Room Nineteen? She saw Mrs. Mehra’s eyes fasten on her face, as if trying to read her thoughts, and turned round to the bookcase in embarrassment.

Mrs. Mehra’s eyes moved off to Rupa and then to a copy of the previous day's Tribune on the desk. Bending over, she flipped the pages. Situations Vacant. A passage was marked with red pencil.

“Have you seen this, Rupa? Air India wants hostesses.”

Rupa was not interested.

“It’s a wonderful life, isn’t it?” Mrs. Mehra pursued. “Hard to understand how you could exchange that life for the drabness of Steeltown. If I were young—your age—”

“You would have made a wonderful hostess,” Rupa agreed. Adding with a slight smile, “But then there would have been no Mr. Mehra.”

“So what? He isn’t the only man on earth.” And coaxingly, “One always makes inner adjustments, Rupa.”

“And no Chumki, Lallu, Premnath.”

“Chumki, Lallu, Premnath—they would have been there, be sure.”

“But”—Rupa began, confounded by the answer, then gave it up. She turned to the other prospect she had envisaged. “You with no Mr. Mehra. That would be like... like a clock with dial but no works inside; or the works intact but no dial.”

“Rupa, make up your mind. Am I the clock’s dial or the works?”

“You are both. So is Mr. Mehra. But—turn by turn. One without the other is futile, nonexistent!”

“Hush!” said Mrs. Mehra, her face beaming. “What would Sumita think of such silly talk?”
Tell me . . .” Bireswar paused, pouring a drink into the single glass on the cane table and lifting the glass to his lips. He gave his friend a speculative look. “Why—Why does it have to be Sumita? The obvious choice, one would think, is her mother.”

Satyajit’s thoughts beat upon the problem that had been constantly in his mind since his hour of self-oblivion. Penance. Fast of purification. Seven days, not less. The longest fast he had undertaken. But where was the chance? With so much on hand he could not stay foodless in bed. The peace march had to come first. But how undertake the march until purified in body and mind? Yet, how explain a fast at this stage of the country’s crisis? It would be misconstrued as plain inaction. It would affect the march itself.

Bireswar noted his friend’s abstracted look, and his own face grew absorbed. He saw Suruchi forsaken, forlorn in her abode, and felt the anger rise in him. He raised the glass to his mouth, emptying it at one gulp, then turned again to the bottle. He had an irresistible impulse to get drunk . . . and with it an impulse to rid himself of a burden that had suddenly begun to hurt, hurt unbearably.

“Years, years back, I fell in love with her.” The long-suppressed secret came bursting out of its dark recess.

“With whom?” Satyajit turned to his friend in great surprise.

A curious violence was in the tone of the answering voice: “How old was she then? She had just reached her thirtieth year. I saw in her a marvel of creation.”
Satyajit stared, eyes wide, unbelieving.

"Even a born philanderer may lose himself just once in his lifetime," Bireshwar continued. "That happened to me. Before it happened, I had never taken women seriously, as you know. Those days in Cambridge—you tried to smother your youth under a sandbag of penance. Those days companioned me through the later years. Until there came the incredible, shattering experience. For the first time I found myself in love! In love with a woman in her entirety—not just her face, her shape, her voice. . . . Well, I was in love with all that, and in addition with the invisible, the innermost . . . I had never before imagined such an absurdity could happen to me, of all people. I became lost in Suruchi. All my past life stood before me in stark futility and all my future."

Satyajit’s voice had a hollow ring: "And—she?"

Bireshwar had a kind of hurt grin on his face. "That’s why all my future grew futile—died."

"She didn’t care?"

"There was a time when I used to be an annual visitor in your house, remember? Through the space of fifty weeks I would wait, wait for that one fortnight of bliss. I watched each day pass across the calendar."

"She—she knew?"

"Women are said to have their intuitions. If Suruchi knew, she gave no sign that she knew. The faintest response from her, a mere smile of understanding, and I would have launched a hard battle. Maybe, then, you would have lost your wife. I have few inhibitions and fewer moral scruples. I firmly believe in getting what I need."

"Even at the cost of other people’s misery?"

He nodded affirmation. "Even at that cost." And the hurt grin came again to his face. "How hard I try to keep myself away from unhappiness! It does not agree with my temperament."

Satyajit spoke sharply: "Maybe you idealize her. You see in Suruchi more than the reality. You re-create her with your dream—dramatize her."

Bireshwar ignored the comment. "Tell me, Satyajit," he said. "Would you have found it hard to bear Suruchi’s loss? She was
for you just a wife, a role that any other woman could have played with equal success—"

The face of the other showed a stiffening.

"You would have destroyed Gandhigram. Struck at its roots."

Bireswar broke into an amused chuckle. "Gandhigram is more to you than Suruchi. You would have bewailed her loss only because of its moral effect on Gandhigram. You wouldn't have been destroyed... as I was!"

There was a long minute's silence.

"Strange that I had to make this confession! All on the spur of the moment. Sumita is to be your companion in the peace march. You wish to see Sumita destroyed, don't you?"

"Destroyed? Sumita?"

"In case the peace mission comes to grief. No, don't contradict me. Even during my brief weeks in your house I saw the depth of your love for your daughter. She means as much to you as Gandhigram. That's why you have had to equate her identity with Gandhigram's—they must submerge into each other, blend, become of one piece. There's something more. All love has in it a secret streak of cruelty. You are cruel toward Sumita. You have been cruel toward Gandhigram."

Satyajit said, "There's one thing I could never be—cruel toward either."

"Not consciously. It slips into love's mysterious pattern; some thread worked into the intricacy of the texture."

"What have you to say about Suruchi's feelings?"

Bireswar was silenced. He fell into a long brooding. Satyajit watched, a saddening in his face along with the puzzlement: Why does he tell me his soul story at this eleventh hour?

Bireswar found the answer he sought.

"Sumita, not Suruchi, is to be your companion in this peace march. What does it point to? The gap Suruchi has created between you and herself. What a loss for you—if only you knew that, Satyajit!"

"Look, Bires. You blame me for the gap, don't you? Yet you say—"

Bireswar was chuckling again. "Brother, a woman like Suru-
chi could have made you a dog on a leash. You would have hopped and jumped at her bidding—if she had wanted that. But she chose to leave you alone; she let you go your own stupid way. That was cruel of her. She denied you. She deprived you of the wealth that lay within your grasp.” The voice dropped to a whisper. “But—the wealth is not for anyone else, either.”

“Bires—listen—”

“No, you don’t have to feel pity for me,” he snapped. He glanced up at the wall clock, then rose quickly to his feet. “Past midnight. Go to bed, brother. Sleep well. You have to address a press conference in the morning at nine thirty, remember?”

Satyajit, in a stupor, went to his room.

What need was there for this revelation? It could serve no purpose. Bires would feel the heat of embarrassment when they were face to face again.

A grieving for his friend came upon him as he lay in bed. To have remained homeless, with no deep attachment for any woman, and then to fall in love—belatedly, hopelessly. The effort, the struggle, to keep his feeling secret. Three years had passed since he stopped coming to Gandhigram. Why had he stopped? Perhaps he had wearied of the struggle. Perhaps he feared he might give himself away in an unguarded moment.

Then Satyajit was thinking of her, vested with a new element of mystery because of Bireswar’s revelation of his love. And a longing for her seized him overwhelmingly.

Sleepless, he imagined a renewal of the gone-by hour. The passage of years had not changed her in the least detail. Each intimate gesture of her body . . . each reaction . . . He felt the sweat break out on his limbs, and his heart flutter.

Fists clenched, he struggled with himself, the self he believed he had suppressed. But a long time had to pass before he regained command.

He had no vision of the woman, sleepless in that hour of night, exulting because of his fall and wanting to push it to its ruthless conclusion.

Somewhere a bell struck the hour. Two o’clock. And a bell struck within him. He needed to think quietly. His address to the press conference was due in a few hours. He had to make the points clear in his mind. The drastic change in his plans under
the compulsion of the Ladakh news. Galwan Valley overrun by Chinese armed forces.

It would not be a Peace Mission of four men and a woman. A call would go through the press for a hundred volunteers. That was the demand of the new situation. A big peace force marching toward India's destiny.

The pressmen came with bad news. The diplomatic dialogue between New Delhi and Peking had ceased to serve any useful purpose. A dead end had been reached. The latest note from Peking contained abusive language. Headlines in the day's papers read: CHINESE SPOILING FOR MILITARY SHOWDOWN? . . . AID RUSHED TO GALWAN POST. . . . CHINESE CONTINUE TO OUTFLANK OUR MEN. And the Prime Minister had alerted the nation.

The pressmen asked pointed questions: Was there room in the present world for such idealism as the peace march embodied? Would the Chinese understand any language other than that of strength?

Satyajit answered with words he had spoken before. Violence had always hurt its perpetrator as much as its victim—that was a fact of history. In the final reckoning, moral resistance alone could be creative. Tibet as an arsenal for Asian domination was a picturesque idea, and nothing more. The spirit of man in Asia, as everywhere else, was indomitable. As for foreign aid, it was true that the United States could not afford to sit still and let India become a Chinese satellite; but did that mean America was prepared to make an all-out war on India's account?

Satyajit expressed the hope—it no longer had the firmness of belief—that the current aggression was only a border conflict with political overtones. The more India sought foreign aid, even though the arms were paid for, the wider would be the cracks in its nonaligned structure. "Did not Soviet Russia accept American military equipment during World War II?" a pressman asked, but the question was a statement that needed no answer. And the alternative to peaceful coexistence was nonexistence—that also was obvious.

It was at the end of the hour-long talk that Satyajit revealed the new decision he had reached. Why should he call for a hundred volunteers only? Why not let the number be unlimited?
Let the men come in their thousands. Let the idea receive its test of fire. A war without weapons. The ultimate fate of mankind decided on the Himalayan snows. The victory of the Idea would mean the end of war for all time. The end of the nightmare that all mankind would one day turn into radioactive ash.

He would not go back to Gandhigram. Here in the capital city he would wait for the volunteers to arrive. When the number was large enough, they would set out. First by train, then in buses and trucks. Having reached Ladakh, they would begin their march toward the frontier, toward Sinkiang.

The headlines to come flashed before his eyes. satyajit’s call . . . unlimited volunteers summoned to peace march. It was no unfamiliar call for India. Gandhi had summoned its people more than once to meet brute force with soul force in a struggle against the mightiest of empires.

A slow, tense week had gone past.

“The river’s a bare furlong off; let’s get to the other side of the street, and don’t be knocked down!” Bireswar thrust an arm in his friend’s and led him into the thick of traffic. Halfway through, he stopped abruptly, crying, his voice sharp with urgency: “This you’ve got to realize, Satyajit. A Gandhi, and none else, should make a Gandhian gesture.” As a car came screechingly to a stop a yard away, he turned glaring eyes on the man at the wheel. “You own all the Delhi streets—so you think, my friend, don’t you?”

Safe on the other pavement, Satyajit weighed the words: A Gandhi, and none else . . . He knew what the remark implied. Not even fifty men had answered his call, ready to make the supreme sacrifice.

Gandhi could have gone on a peace march with a few chosen men, and thousands would have come in his wake—the common people for whom the Father of the Nation was their own blood and bone. Like disciplined soldiers, they would have laid down their lives if called upon, no questions asked, no reason sought.

All the same, Bireswar’s remark was a half-truth. A Gandhi could not live forever, physically. His spirit could. That spirit had to bestride the land as powerfully as the frail, bespectacled
man in loincloth. It did not have to find expression through one person, one figure alone. The combined strength of a whole mass of people could supplant that figure. Buddhism had its real beginning several centuries after the Buddha had attained Nirvana. The apex of Christianity came long after Christ. Gandhi would not let his ideas be made into an "ism." "I do not want to leave any sect after me," he had said to his co-workers. "I have nothing to teach the world. Nonviolence is as old as the hills." Even so, an idea lived anew from age to age by its dynamic reorientation.

Not the theory, but its application to a problem of the day—that was the crux of it all. Gandhi had bidden oppressed peoples fight the tyrant with the old-new weapon. Armed with nonviolence, they could be stronger than the tyrant. The tyrant would be lost when faced by a multitude who stood ready to be slaughtered.

Where was the assurance of success?

Soldiers gave their lives in battle even when there was little hope of victory. Nonviolence had just as much chance as violence—no more, no less.

"Even Gandhian gestures made by the Great Soul himself were often wingbeats in the void," he heard Bireswar say.

"There was no void," he countered, "with millions of men and women engaged in the struggle for the country’s freedom."

Bireswar looked at his friend, and smiled sadly.

"Tell me: Did we ever accept nonviolence as a creed? It was only an instrument. Gandhi understood that, and more than once he stepped back from leadership in disillusion and let his followers go their own way. He had no wish to see his spiritual vision become a material means like the bullet. A handful of years after freedom was won, we’ve released ourselves from the architect of that freedom by giving him a shrine on the bank of the Jamuna River. We place wreaths on the holy spot in Rajghat. Foreign dignitaries who come to New Delhi follow the set ritual and feel assured of India’s devotion to the departed leader, or maybe they don’t. But there’s something that amuses me—"

He started to laugh.

"What amuses you?"

"My friend Jhunjhunia, a big businessman. He deals in
wheat. Every time he makes a fortune by a shady transaction—
it may mean hunger for a thousand men and women—he comes
to Rajghat with flowers. In the bygone days of empire he used
to take his flowers to a temple.” Bireshwar was laughing again.
“And it was Gandhi who dreamed of wiping every tear from
every eye.”

Satyajit went back to his reflections. For him the great idea
had never been a thing of material worth. Its inner meaning
alone had counted. He had lived for it, hadn’t he? And here
was the time for the idea to be put to the test. But what good
would it be if he acted single-handed? Mass response—all his
power had to be based on the combined power of thousands.
He had issued the call, and felt sure of eager support. A week
was gone and there were many answers. But only a few had
offered themselves. The others had urged that the peace march
be abandoned. The country was not prepared for that kind of
action, they said. What if the marchers were shot down by the
Chinese? Sino-Indian relations would be far worse then.

He hung his head and saw the work of a lifetime turn to
dust and ash. He might have achieved more as a teacher at
Santiniketan. Without pretensions. Aware of the limits of his
capacity and accepting them gracefully. Not a molehill wanting
to be a mountain. Not Aesop’s frog!

“Listen, Satyajit. There’s something I have to tell you. Some
bad news.” Bireshwar’s voice was heavy.

Satyajit nodded. “I know. They’ll forbid the peace march.
The Minister seemed dubious about it, and he had been one of
Gandhi’s lifelong followers. It’s just as well. Since the call has
failed—”

“No, this is something different. Confidential. I wish I
didn’t have to tell you.”

“Go ahead.” Biresh, of course, had news sources in the cor-
ridors of power.

“Steeltown is determined to take over Gandhigram. The
Steel people have telegraphed a request to the Government that
eminent domain be used in the national interest.”

Satyajit gave a start of surprise. “You really believe the
Government will take such a drastic measure?”

“The point is that Gandhigram can do nothing to contain
the threat of Chinese expansionism. Even your proposed peace
march—you know how it’s been received by the press. They’ve
blacked it out after the first headlines. The Government must
have taken note of that, also. On the other hand, Steeltown,
given time and facilities, can supply the armed forces with the
military hardware so badly needed. And Steeltown must have
its pound of flesh as payment.” He stopped, watching the face
before him as it turned stricken, and lifted his hand in pity to
his friend’s shoulder. But Satyajit must be left to his inner
strength. He needed it as never before.

They had reached the white-painted outer gate, from which
ran a long pathway paved with red stone and flanked by a wide
expanse of lawns and blazing flowerbeds. To the left one could
see the horizon, rust-colored with the great span of the Jamuna
bridge. Closer, pearl-gray minarets leaned against a bank of
fleecy cloud.

“From this point you must go by yourself. A pilgrim must
walk alone. I’ll sit on the grass and make a verse on my friend
Jhunjhunia’s flower offerings.”

He stood still for a time, eyes fixed on the striding figure
with its slight stoop. He had not noticed that stoop before. After
a long minute had passed, he shook his head sadly. “Poor boy,”
he said to himself, as he had said often in the Cambridge days.
He had always felt years older than Satyajit.

An image slid into his vision as he turned toward the gar-
den: Suruchi breaking her bangles with a piece of stone. She was
breaking more than decorative conchshell. And Satyajit had no
knowledge of the gesture—or the reality. Gandhigram gone, he
might regain something far more precious. If only he would
understand.

Suruchi was in Satyajit’s mind also as he walked. Would it
please her if Gandhigram were to vanish? How could that be?
She had sent her roots into the new earth. She was as much
Gandhigram as he. Even though she had changed since her
Moscow trip. For the first time after many years she seemed to
be back in her mind at Santiniketan. She had spoken to him
wistfully of the Tree House. “Do you think it is still there?”
He had forgotten that house where they spent their first few
years of married life. Forgotten? No! Strange how recollections
came flooding back. And it was he who had reminded her of the oleander she had planted in the backyard. When the red flowers came, she plucked a few of them every day to wear on the large mound of hair worn low on the neck. Was her hair still as long and as beautiful as in those days? He would like to make sure; he would like to see her hair unbound, flowing down her back to the waist, and beyond.

As he walked with long quick steps he had the feeling that Suruchi was helping him absorb the shock he had just received. Except for her presence within him, the shock would have been unbearable. She was now leading him forward—to Santiniketan, to the point where his life with her had started. With sudden power she had overwhelmed him, and he was half dreaming of a new life that she alone would fill.

Was this because of Bireswar's confession of his love?

But that was a question to which he did not know the answer.

The paved path ended in an archway and high-walled enclosure. At its center was a sepulcher of polished black marble, white-metal lettering at the top—**Hai Ram!** Those words—O God!—had burst from Gandhi's lips as the three shots hit his body at the prayer meeting attended by thousands. The great of the world had stood in bare feet at this spot hallowed by the fire that had consumed Gandhi's earthly remains.

A group of men and women were now walking around the sepulcher, their foreheads bent to the stone after each round. Satyajit stood by, watching, communing, and all at once his thoughts were in a tumult.

Was he not betraying him? Accepting the end of Gandhigram, with no will for resistance, was he not belittling all that he had lived for?

The new realization hit him like the hard blow of a cudgel.

Where was the root of his defeat? Was it not the breach of a basic principle, a weakness he had tacitly accepted? **Brahmacharya**—control over the senses, observed in thought as much as in deed. It was harmful to suppress the body, Gandhi had said, if the mind was allowed to go astray. "Where the mind wanders, the body must follow sooner or later. . . . It is better to enjoy through the body than to be enjoying the thought of it."
Yes, he had let his mind be corrupted. That incident of a single
night was not all; it had lost its isolation and was merely one
strand in the evil cobweb enveloping his senses.

The agony he felt was throbbing in him like a wound. Spent,
he leaned back against the low wall and stood still with eyes
closed.

Where was the path of redemption? Who would show him
the path?

Illumination burst upon him with a terrific impact. There
was the other Gandhian instrument, which even lesser men
could use.

As the idea took hold of him, he felt his body shudder.

"From death lead me to immortality—" He spoke the
enchanted words haltingly, under his breath.
Uruchi had felt a surge of relief at Satyajit’s call to the nation. She had watched its effect on her daughter, whose face was first thoughtful, then troubled. That was as it should be. Let her see the new picture in clear perspective.

“Mass response to the Call may be taken for granted,” she had said to her. “Good-bye to the party of six. This struggle is not, after all, Satyajit’s household problem. Or even a Gandhi gram problem. The whole of India has to be involved. And now the people will take charge. Every decision will rest in their hands.”

All the same, there must be a leader, Sumita pointed out; no one could conceivably replace Satyajit. But leadership, Suruchi said, came only at the outset. Then the masses, the rank and file, ceased to be led; they took command. It had happened more than once that even Gandhi had no option left but to yield to the swift tide behind him, a tide of his own creating, and his plan to cry halt at a certain point of the national struggle was swept away.

“Satyajit follows the footprints left by Gandhi on history; and history will repeat itself. This you have to understand, Sumita. The people are greater than an individual. Any individual.”

Perplexed, dismayed, Sumita was now facing the truth that her assigned place beside Satyajit was gone. That place was to be taken by a seething mass of men and women, each of them no less worthy than she herself. She was invisible in that crowded landscape. So was Satyajit—almost.
Suruchi wanted the girl to take her time and not be rushed into realities that were hurtful. She turned abruptly to another topic. “A word about the program for Meadow House. Don’t forget the bamboo flute. It will fascinate the people from Steel-town.”

“Their CE plays on the bamboo flute.”

“How wonderful! You two should play a duo on the flute. I can give you the tune. I heard it in Santiniketan, and it’s in my mind even after all these years. I even remember the girl and the youth—flute in hand—”

Maloti and Probir. They were the most attractive pair in Santiniketan. Maloti went to the school of music, and Probir was engaged in research work. Their marriage was a foregone conclusion; it took place, Suruchi recalled, about the time she first met Satyajit.

Sumita was looking at her mother in surprise. She had been reluctant, always, to speak of her days in Santiniketan. Once, when pressed, she had said: “That part of my life belongs to a past existence. I cannot relate myself to it. It’s storybook stuff.” And now she moved quickly from the personal factor to the idea that simple folk music was worth no less than the classical melodies. That was Tagore’s firm belief. Integration—that was the poet’s lifelong quest: integration of the simple and the sophisticated; the ancient and the modern; city and village; East and West.

“Keep this in mind, Sumita. The poet didn’t believe, as many do, that uniformity has to be the bedrock basis of unity.”

“Mother, you never went back to Santiniketan, even on a brief visit. Strange! With all your remembrance—”

She who had always fled from such a question seemed to welcome it. “Maybe, Sumita, we’ll be there soon, you and I.”

“Not Father?”

“Maybe he also. It remains to be seen.”

“When? When do we go?”

The restlessness she felt! But, almost instantly, self-reproach stung her. She was betraying the peace march. She had no business to look beyond the peace march.

Next day, both were on edge for the newspapers to come.
They had to know the extent of the people’s response to the Call.

The front pages had big headlines concerning Ladakh: CHINESE FLANKING MOVEMENT CONTINUES. . . . GALWAN POST RECEIVES AIR-DROPPED AID. . . . But matching those were headlines on Cuba. The Americans had spotted Soviet missile installations on the island, and demanded their removal. The cold war was moving toward a new crisis.

Was the peace march assigned to another page? No, not a word anywhere. Was it too early yet to expect reactions? A fateful decision took time to mature. Supreme sacrifice was involved, nothing less. Maybe the papers a few days hence would convey all there was to know.

The days went by, and there was no word. The Call could well have been a myth.

It was Sunday, and Suruchi was in the garden feeding peanuts to squirrels as they crowded up to her feet. A jeep stopped on the road. She turned, hearing the gate open, and saw the tall figure, palms joined together in salutation.

“Bhashkar! You are back! One whole week you have been away.”

“We’ve had real trouble at the iron-ore mines. Our blast furnaces could easily have become starved. I should have sent you word, Mother—”

She could be hardly ten years older than he, but he had no hesitation in calling her Mother. And she felt no surprise.

“We know you had an anxious time. Mrs. Mehra kept us informed.”

“Mrs. Mehra? She’s everywhere.”

“She came to us twice in the past week. She’s a wonderful person.”

He now rushed to the main point of the visit. “I’ve been worried about the peace march. The newspapers are silent. What could have happened?”

“A mass movement of that kind cannot grow overnight, don’t you see? The Call has been a big surprise. The original plan was different, as you know.”

“Is there news from Delhi?”

“A letter is overdue.”
"I saw the postman crossing the meadow. Maybe he has something for you in his bag." Adding quickly, "Sumita still clings to her decision?"

"She cannot let Satyajit down."
He was hesitant before he resumed: "Mother, it's not easy for me to say what I must say. The position has changed. Sumita will be needed much more here in Gandhigram than in the peace march."

"Why, Bhashkar?"
She could see tension grow in his face as he answered, "Sumita and you will have to stand by the village as it faces the crisis."

"Crisis? Why, it has been more than a month already."
His forehead was lined with a heavy frown. He looked away for a long minute, then turned back abruptly.

"Gandhigram will cease to exist—in the near future."

"What makes you so sure?"
He was gazing at her, his frown dissolving into sympathy. He searched for the right words, not wanting to hurt her.

"So far we've hoped there could be a normal, natural process of transition. That is why we built Meadow House. But that process would be long-drawn; it might take years. We haven't all that time. The cold war thrust on us by China may lead to armed conflict. A realistic appraisal makes their intentions clear enough. We have to act quickly, then. We have taken an extreme step. We have telegraphed an appeal to New Delhi. The Government has special powers it can exercise in the national interest—eminent domain."

He waited for impassioned protest. But there was no anger in her face, only thought.

"That was a hard decision for you to take."
"Hard," he affirmed. Too hard, he would have liked to say. Night after night he had been sleepless.

"Don't say anything to Sumita yet," she cried in sharp concern.

"But—"
"Don't stand before her in hostile garb! Not now when she hardly knows you. Why not work with her for the show at Meadow House?"
“Meadow House has ceased to count.”

“Listen, Bhashkar. Take Sumita out. Tell her that the program on which she has set her heart will come to nothing without her presence. In Ladakh she will be one among hundreds. Here she is indispensable. Make her see the point. As for your appeal to the Government—wait, Bhashkar, till she knows you well enough not to misunderstand.”

“The decision will be made public in a month, maybe.”

“A month is a long time.”

He nodded gravely. “Cuba! Who knows what the world will look like a month hence?”

Sumita was in the backyard, laundering clothes, her hands full of lather. She looked up from the bucket, saw Bhashkar behind Mother, and her heart gave a leap of pleasure. But pleasure became mingled with self-consciousness; she was so untidy! She pushed a strand of hair off her face and the lather left a streak. As Bhashkar broke out laughing, she wiped her face with the other hand, and the streak spread. Suruchi stepped forward. Her palm rested on the girl’s head in the gesture of blessing. Her eyelids started to flutter. She regained her calm in a few moments, and spoke lightly:

“Sumita, you are three inches taller than I am. What will happen if you keep growing at this rate?”

“I’ll become a monster.”

“Who will marry you then?”

“No one, thank heavens!”

Suruchi turned to Bhashkar. “Have you ever heard this kind of talk? A big girl—twenty-one next birthday. Have you ever before seen one like her?”

He shook his head gravely, wanting to reply, but checked himself. A minute before he had wondered in what garb he would see Sumita. Had she gone back to white? The white suited her calm beauty. But here she was, wearing dark blue, and looking even more attractive! Hair undone and lather on her face, she was unique! Yes, that was the right word: unique.

“Why do I have to be like other girls?” demanded Sumita.

The mother spoke as if to herself: “That’s the trouble. If you were like others—”

“Then what?”
The mother’s face grew pensive. “Then you would have a chance to be happy.”

“Why does one have to be happy? There are more important things in life.”

Suruchi let that pass. “Bhashkar wants to take you out.”

The answer was a surprise: “A long way?”

“As long a way as you care for,” said Bhashkar.

Abruptly she spun round on her heels and was gone. Suruchi saw Bhashkar’s perplexed look, and explained: “You don’t want to take out a gypsy girl. Let her make herself tidy.”

The jeep sped off toward the highroad, but they had scarcely gone a mile when Bhashkar changed his mind. That road would be full of traffic at this time. Why not drive slowly through the quiet countryside? Sumita would have liked to go rushing along the smooth black road at fifty miles an hour or more, but she noted her companion’s look of sudden aloofness as he swung into a lane, and she kept quiet.

His eyes were fixed afar on a white mountain track. The immense waste of rock and snow. The peace marchers trudging like phantoms. Sumita has grown thin, the big eyes now bigger in her face; the starved face is filled with the pair of eyes. Chinese snipers watch from mountaintops. Rifles bark, and two men fall. The snipers come down the slope to take captives.

It was a vision that had haunted his loneliness at the iron mines. He had suffered. Helpless, he had felt maddened.

“What is it?” Sumita said. The sudden sorrow on her companion’s face troubled her, and she felt a new ache grow heavy in her heart. She could have pressed her face to the gray fabric of his coat, and cried.

His voice was tense: “You don’t belong to us. You belong to history, with others of your kind. They will burn you at the stake, and then you will live again.”

Tears pricked her eyelids, and in a moment they would spill over, she knew. But she saw her companion’s face change, the sorrow give way to something hard—anger? She would like to wipe out his anger no less than his sorrow. She would like to touch the roots of all his feelings.

It was self-reproach rather than anger. To give way to senti-
mentality. To speak the language of raw, romantic youth. The true way of fulfillment for any woman was as a woman, not as a figure burnt into history. The mother understood that; but how could one fight a fixation? Nothing could change Sumita except the life force itself. Would she ever submit to life?

The jeep had just passed the abandoned temple. With a gust of recollection he stepped on the brake, then started to reverse. He pulled up before the doorless entrance.

"Sight-seeing," he answered Sumita's glance. "We've been here before—remember?"

He saw with amazement the rush of blood to her face. It could be shame! But . . . shame? She had seen the sculptured love and had seen only stone. She was getting down, leaning on the stick. He jumped out, came quickly to her side, and, snatch- ing the stick from her hand, flung it away.

Her eyes widened. "Are you angry at sight of a cripple?"

"Cripple!" he fumed. She had no need of the stick; it had become a habit, like so much else. "Where was that stick when you were caught in the fury of the gale?" he demanded.

"Stick in hand, I wouldn't have slipped and fallen."

Hard words came to his lips; but, looking at her face, he caught the lurking amusement, and stopped himself. Watching her, he broke into a broad smile. "Come, Sumita." He offered her his arm.

He led her through the entrance. They passed the friezes on the walls and several bas-reliefs, and she glanced at the sanctum from which the god was gone. They walked along until they were facing the big sculptured piece.

"What art!" he breathed in appreciation, as before. "What life!" he added slowly.

Her glance moved over the two figures, saw the large hand holding the round breast. She turned away, but in an instant she looked again, the gathering flush a rose stain on her cheeks, her eyes wide open and curiously avid.

His hand was on her shoulder, its hold first light, then hard; she felt a heavy lassitude spread over her body like sweat.

"Sumita!"

He pulled her to him, and she gave one more glance at the stone lovers before she closed her eyes with a faint sigh.
Five minutes before, they had been like the big bas-relief, Bhashkar brooded, one hand on the jeep wheel, the other moving between the wheel and the supine fist by his side. Sumita was seated away from him, silent, and only her hand made a link. She was unlike any other woman he had known, and could not be related to the context of his experience.

In the temple, to his vast surprise, she had stood defenseless and as though transformed. He had felt on her face the heat he knew. Her mouth was set tight, and averted from his, but all at once she had given way to his insistence. And at that point he had forced himself to pause. The amazing thought had struck him that she had never before known even this primal caress—and she in her twenty-first year! Presently, as he returned to her, he felt her flinch at a touch of his hand, and he withdrew and paused again. He had no wish to shock her, to violate her reserve.

In the years past he had gone from experience to experience, all inhibitions cast aside, as free in feelings as a Western man, and it had been worthwhile indeed. But after a time a queer discontent had come. He was, he thought, journeying from exhaustion to exhaustion. Moments that lived briefly, futility mounting from day to day, year to year. It was as though he had been scribbling on a sheet of paper with a pen dipped in clear water—the curious image came to his mind—the water dried and the words were gone.

Intensity of experience could have dyed that water with its own color; but there had been nothing of that. Nothing except a ritual. Like the morning ritual of fruit juice and cereals.

Yet, behind all that, there had always been a quest of which he was half aware, a quest he had not tried to analyze, understand. It was only after his return to India that, in retrospect, he had seen what he had wanted. Values that could outlive moments. Values that could assuage some hidden hunger in him. In those years abroad he had submerged his restlessness in hard work. The body's various hungers were appeased—that was all. A man who made huge iron machines toil at his bidding could pay no heed to things that were not tangible. Things that could not be expressed as blueprint. Let poets and philosophers indulge in that kind of sentimental luxury!

He could now see the contradictions in his feelings. He,
apostle of modernism, was himself disillusioned, seeking something beyond. Yet he who wanted release from a built-in habit of the new civilization would have it thrust on others! On India. On the India of Satyajit, where Sumita belonged.

Normalcy was what she needed, he had told himself. Having attained that, she was sure to revolt against Gandhigram, against a philosophy that denied men and women their common birthright of life's earthy pleasures.

The polarization of ideas. Could there be no meeting point where they would blend?

Five minutes before, they had been figures in a bas-relief. So close, ready for each other, yet as apart as figures hewn on a stone slab. As out of reach, destined to stay unfulfilled.

In the half-gloom of the sanctum he had seen this with clear vision. He might lose her in the very moment he gained her. He could not afford that risk. He had to be wary. For his own sake. For Sumita's sake. Time alone could make a bud full-petaled and ready to open. To force it into the state of a flower could easily be destructive.

Time was not on his side, though.

There had been a call from New Delhi yesterday—the Minister Without Portfolio was on the line. The telegraphed Steeltown appeal was under consideration, he said. But was there no other way for Steeltown to expand? he wanted to know. There were other ways, Bhashkar admitted, but to change the project at this stage would mean labor wasted. Each day lost would react on preparations for defense, the need for which was getting more and more urgent. The Minister said it was not as bad as that. The Chinese had made some withdrawal from the Galwan Valley checkpoint, and it was no longer encircled. That might be the beginning of a change of heart. It would be rash to take for granted that the Chinese wanted a military decision. Good sense might at last prevail. Of greater concern at the moment was Cuba. The Chinese were sure to be worrying about Cuba.

"We'll watch the situation for a while," the Minister said before he rang off. "If it remains static, you may as well take time and find other ways of expansion. But if—" He hesitated, hating to put the other picture into words, it seemed. "In any
case,” he went on, “the decision will take time. At best a month. There are the legal aspects to be checked—”

Bhashkar had laughed to himself. New Delhi’s old delusion about Peking! Friendship died hard. Withdrawal in Galwan Valley? That must be a ruse. It was serving its purpose, giving New Delhi a new hope, a false sense of security. As for the Cuban crisis, it was a Chinese dream come true. America, facing the threat of nuclear war, could hardly be expected to rush to India’s help.

A month. At the end of a month the fate of Gandhigram would be settled. As also Sumita’s destiny.

She had traveled far from her old self. If only the peace march would not take her away.

He would not let her go. His hand grew possessive, squeezing the fingers it held, harder than he knew, and she gave a small hurt cry. Her face turned to him, questioning. Instantly he was all concern.

“This rough Iron Man!” he reproached himself.

The tenderness hurt even more, and she burst into sudden tears. He understood. He let her cry. The tears came pouring down her cheeks. She was crying for the spirit’s innocence she was about to lose. She would have to cry over and over again while the transition lasted.

He clasped her fingers again, but lightly, as though holding a handful of jasmine. He passed his handkerchief to her while he let the jeep crawl toward her house, now in sight. He stopped when the bamboo gate was still twenty yards ahead. Turning, he took her face between his hands, and her mouth was ready for his demand.

A queer thought struck him. Her chapped lips needed a touch of red, he had once decided. How wrongly!

He waited until the gate had opened and closed.

Sumita saw the jeep turn and move off. She was not yet ready to face her mother, busy in the kitchen, baking bread. She sat down on the veranda, trying to think.

It was as though within her a whirlwind had passed.

Was this what was known as vice?

Hot words were spoken about Jhanak. The village council sent for her the other day. She was seen returning from the inter-
view in tears. Only Mother, just back from Moscow, took a contrary view. She could not speak out to the council, but strong words had passed between her and Father. Sumita had not wanted to listen, but their voices were raised as they spoke, and reached her in the adjoining room through the thin partition wall.

“What right have you to sit as judges, knowing nothing about a young girl’s mind? Jhanak is just normal. That’s all.”

“Ruchi, look. If we give way to our normal instincts, life will become a fearful mess. The kind of civilized life we’re trying to build is based on inner discipline. Let that discipline be relaxed and the whole structure will fall. You don’t want that to happen.”

“What I want is of no account. Not to you, not to anyone else. But I hate to see young minds being twisted out of shape.”

“Listen. Let your ideas remain yours alone. Let not Sumita—”

“Have I ever interfered? She is your daughter. I gave her birth; that was all. What I think means nothing to her.”

At that point Sumita had rushed away from her room—she had heard enough. Later, she had wanted a clearer view of Mother’s mind, but it was not easy to ask. It was not easy to admit what she had overheard.

She would tell Mother about her visit in the temple.

Shame swept upon her at that thought. What could she say? “Mother, we stopped at the old temple as we were driving by; we walked to the sanctum.” That was all she could possibly say. Meager material out of which to build a scene. But would not Mother understand? She who could understand Jhanak?

Sumita felt a longing for Mother, and rose to her feet. Passing into their room, she almost gave a scream. Mother sat in bed, her face bent, her body set stiffly.

“Sumita—” The voice had a hollow ring.

“Mother!” The thought came flashing that Mother knew. Waiting at the gate, watching the road, she saw the jeep stop twenty yards away. . . .

“Sumita, there’s a letter.”

“Father? What is it? Tell me.”
“Read and you will know.” Her hand reached out with the white sheet.

In a minute she knew, and all her joy of the past hour drained away. She bent over the letter and read it again.

Steel town had sent an appeal to the Government asking that Gandhigram be acquired by their special power—in the national interest. The request was sure to be granted. There was only one way to fight the decision. A Gandhian way. An unlimited fast.

Words out of the past rang in her ears: Meadow House is an instrument of love. It would lead the village to willing surrender. That was what he sought. Fair encounter. He was certain of his victory. Yet he had changed weapons—love to violence!

That violence was inherent in his nature. All else was a pose. Plain deceit. A twofold deceit: he had not divulged his intention to her; he had kept up his false pretenses as a façade. Trusting him, she had been living in a fool’s paradise, and he had enjoyed the sight!

The light that had briefly illumined her life was lost in utter darkness.

Her place was beside her father.

She fought off the bitter pain, trying to think calmly. Yes, she must leave for the capital. Father would need no one as much as her in his self-imposed ordeal.

“Tomorrow I leave for Delhi.”

Mother received the words in silence. Sumita waited.

“I also,” the response came at last. The elements of revolt had lost all value. Her place was beside her husband.

But Sumita gave her a cold glance. “No, Mother. You have to be here in charge of the school. What will you do in Delhi, anyway?” She met the bewildered stare, and her voice hardened: “You don’t approve at heart, do you? Father’s single-handed struggle to save the village. You’d rather see it wiped away.”

Pain lay on Mother’s face like a dark smudge. Sumita did not relent. “Let’s look at the blunt truth,” she said. “What good is it deceiving ourselves in a moment of transient emotion?”

Blunt truth!

What did this girl know about truth? The truth about her father? Where would he be, if years ago he had been face to face
with his wife's resistance? In that confrontation, could he have made his passage to—Satyajit?

The revolt came whirling back.

And the thought struck her for the first time with great force that she had done no good to him, helping him to be Satyajit.

What else could she have done? Knowledge, self-identification came much too late.

But... was it really too late?
STORM PETREL!

Stepping off the train, Sumita heard the crisp, familiar voice call over the people crowding the platform, and she saw the hand rise in greeting, waving ecstatically. Storm petrel—who but Bires-Uncle would think of calling her that! He hadn't changed in the past three years, hadn't grown old despite the profusion of gray hair.

"You couldn't have timed your arrival better, my girl. You know?" His face was tight, cheeks puffed, a look she remembered.

Yes, she knew. She had been four hours on the train when the news broke at a wayside stop. Like lightning it flashed along the long line of carriages, engine to guard's van, and produced a state of shock. People turned bewildered eyes to one another, seeking affirmation for doubt, disbelief. A practical joke, a perverted sense of fun. That was it. But at the next halt there was the same news, more specific, more detailed. As the train crossed the great stretch of alluvial earth with its tall paddy stalks and sense of peace, Sumita looked out the window, attracted by the din of aircraft. Jets were shrilling past. Boxlike planes flew at a low altitude, perhaps carrying soldiers and arms.

The all-out attack had come like a surprise explosion. Chinese, in vast numbers, had struck at points on the frontier a thousand miles apart.

"Father?"

He hadn't come. Had he already started his hunger strike? Bireswar noted her worry

"You are mistaken, Sumita. Surely he won't go on fast in
Delhi. The right place is Gandhigram. Anyhow, he won't have his opportunity for some time yet."

"Opportunity?"

"Martyrdom. Thanks to Steeltown. It will have to wait, though. No one has time now to think of long-term projects—a blast furnace or an arms factory isn't built overnight. The official decision will be taken only after conditions have returned to something near normal."

Voiceless with the shock of relief, she heard Bireshwar answer. Satyajit was in the House of the People, in the packed visitors' gallery, absorbed in the proceedings. The President's proclamation of a state of emergency had been read out. The Prime Minister had spoken. "This is an invasion of India," he had declared in deep sorrow, and looked his age or older, not as always before, ten years younger.

"What a blow for Father!"

He stared at her with curious eyes. "... for Nehru" would have been more appropriate. This girl's focal point was her father—he was the hero. Had Satyajit always lived up to the image he had given himself? How tiresome to be always on a pedestal. If only Suruchi had taken him by the hand and helped him to earth.

"I'm sorry, Biresh-Uncle, that you had to leave the House for my sake. A half-hour thrown away. Just drop me at your place, then rush off."

"Not my place. I share my apartment with another Member of Parliament; your father has the one spare room. You'll stay with Nandini, my niece."

"Nandini!" Sumita echoed with pleasure. Mother had spent a day with Nandini when returning from Moscow, she recalled.

"Nandini is about your age, and she's engaged to an Army officer. Her father is a brigadier. Maybe you know? Two sons—the elder one is in the Air Force, the younger at a residential school. And the mother—oh, she's a major general!"

"No!" cried Sumita.

"What! You disbelieve what I say about my own sister? You'll see for yourself, anyway. Now, remember this: Don't fall in love with one of the numerous Army officers you are sure to meet in that house."
“Bires-Uncle!”
“Not that I mind. I think a big scar in your heart is very much overdue.”
“Let Father hear this talk!”
He burst into laughter. “Let him! It will do him good, poor boy.”
“This means I shall be away from Father,” she complained.
“That will do you good, Sumita.”
It was not until their taxi was close to the Red Fort that Sumita, watching the crowded streets, spoke again: “Is it really war, Bires-Uncle? One hates to think—”
“They’ve just shot down a helicopter carrying wounded men. A news flash came as I was leaving the House.”
Smashed bodies conveyed to the base hospital, then sent home. A mother moaning over the living remains of her once strong, healthy son. A wife stunned by the deformity that was her husband. For him, a hundred deaths, day after day. No. Chinese gunfire had eliminated those fearful prospects; the helicopter with its dismal cargo was gone. You couldn’t help feeling fury, feeling hate.
Hate? Sumita pulled herself up. Hate?
Bireswar was speaking: “The report goes that the Chinese have thrown thirty thousand troops into battle at one sector of the eastern front. They’ve crossed Namka-chu River, four miles south of the McMahon Line. That’s a thousand miles away from Ladakh. In Ladakh our troops have had to abandon several posts under massive attack. Sumita, you must listen to Radio Peking.”
“Yes?”
“India has invaded China. Chinese frontier guards are fighting heroically to repel the aggressor. That’s the theme. And there’s the language of the gutter poured in a ceaseless stream on Nehru, the arch-villain of the piece. One wishes the language at least were civilized. But that, for Maoists, would be bourgeois hypocrisy.”
She shook her head. “This is beyond my understanding. Why should they make war on us? A few thousand square miles of barren rock—is that so precious? Set off against the alienation of millions of Indian hearts? Even I, taught from childhood to
love the people of China, to believe that their ancient wisdom is still a living force—"

He interrupted. "The new regime?"
"It's both good and bad, so I've been taught. Though we in Gandhigram disbelieve that any good is ever done by violence—" She paused. "But this horrid feeling—" She stopped again, pensive.

"What feeling, Sumita?"
"Hate. This is the first time I've felt hate. When you mentioned casualties—men killed—"
"Millions the world over have died fighting; killing and getting killed. Who has the right to hate?"

She pondered that.
"I was three years old when the Second World War came to its end. This is my first experience of war touching my country." She looked out the car window, as though expecting to see a thick dark shadow cast on the streets of the capital city, but there was only bright sunshine over the flow of traffic. A lone horse-drawn cart was plying amid hundreds of fast-moving cars. Not a single soldier was in sight—strange! She laughed at her stupidity; soldiers would not be on the streets of Delhi during a national emergency.

"Oddly"—Bireswar was speaking again—"some people still believe this is only a border dispute. How I wish it were true! But the time has passed when we can overlook grim realities. Too much is at stake."

"No, Bires-Uncle. It may still be a petty thing."
"Look at the motorways they've built along mountainsides. Those are no trade routes to India! Defensive need? To contain Indian aggression? For argument's sake, let's assume that India is expansionist. There are other, far weaker neighbors in closer proximity. Burma used to be part of India until the other day. Rice, teak, oil! But we, stupid expansionists, prefer to cast our greedy eyes on Tibetan mountains that offer only snow and scenery. A wilderness that leads nowhere; not even to China proper, far away behind other mountain walls. And in this amazing enterprise we calmly provoke armed conflict with the strongest military power in Asia. In that process we bid good-bye to our wide-ranging development plans designed to fight the ever-
present menace of unemployment and hunger.” He paused, noting Sumita’s abstracted look.

“You’re not listening.” He laughed. “You could well be an Hon’ble Member of the House!”

She cried, protesting, “Bires-Uncle, please don’t stop. I love to hear you speak.”

“Really? Then you cannot become an Hon’ble Member.”

“They may pretend not to listen,” she consoled him. “They listen, all the same.”

“Oh, no! And that’s why every speech I make is just an eight-line verse!”

“Those legendary verses! Father has told me you once made a cricket commentary on the radio in blank verse.”

“I could have. They stopped me after the first stanza, and I had to use drab prose.”

“The menace of unemployment and hunger—that’s where you left off.”

“Yes. Let’s look at the other picture. The Chinese have been turning their frontier into a chain of fastnesses—not meant for defense! They’ve been spending millions of rupees through the Bank of China’s Indian branches to build up nests of espionage. Not to speak of the activities of the hugely staffed Chinese Embassy in New Delhi and consulates in other cities. They’ve persuaded many Chinese, long settled in this country, to do fifth-column work. I have heard from people who should know that they have their eye on our big industrial plants. Sabotage—”

“Bires-Uncle,” she chided, “you mustn’t believe every silly rumor you hear. You know how such stories grow like pumpkins on the vine. Especially when there’s some kind of trouble brewing.”

Annoyed, he was ready with a reply, when he caught the suppressed laughter in her face. In that instant his mood changed. Suruchi must have looked like this one—at twenty. But prettier, because of her gold-brown complexion. The only complexion that could match a certain grace peculiar to the women of Bengal.

“Angry, Bires-Uncle?” She was regretting her rudeness. “Listen. I didn’t mean it. It was stupid of me.”
What woe for those three sisters—what disgrace for us all!” Mrs. Mehra spoke moodily under her breath while she slowly collected a pile of papers from the out tray.

That was her indirect approach to a subject, Bhashkar knew. “Not your girls?” He looked up with quick concern, but recalled in a moment that she had only two daughters and a son.

“Children of Ah To.”

“Ah To?”

“Our Chinese shoemaker.”

His eyes turned downward to Ah To’s handiwork on his feet. The shoes were high-priced but good value. The shop was on fashionable Nehru Avenue.

“Why do you say disgrace for us all?”

“Sir, those three girls read in St. Joseph’s Convent School. The eldest, eleven years of age, Chang-ngo, is a classmate of my Chumki. That’s how I know what happened. The younger ones are nine and six. There are also the twins. Two years and some months. The mother died at their birth.”

He emptied the bowl of his pipe and started to pack it with tobacco from the pouch.

“The history of our shoemaker’s family—is it so very important for this office?”

She stiffened. “This concerns us all. The children of aliens—why must they suffer for the deeds of their people in a far-off land? The newspapers have given a casualty list. Both officers and men. This is something for which we haven’t been prepared. All the same—”
“Yes, Mrs. Mehra?” He urged her to continue.

“A girl in Standard Six saw her second cousin’s name on a list. She spoke in tears to her friends, and they went mad. Their anger came crashing down on the three Chinese heads. Someone uttered the ugly phrase Cheeni Devil—and twenty girls took it up in one voice. The teachers tried in vain to restore discipline. Finally, the ‘devils’ were put into the school bus and sent home.”

Bhashkar stared at his secretary. “What?”

“‘Cheeni devil!’ shrilled the blue-uniformed girls crowded at the outer courtyard where the statue of St. Francis stands on a brick pedestal. What have they done, those three children? It’s like one of those schoolbook fables. The tiger and the shepherd boy having a drink of water at the stream.”

“Mrs. Mehra”—he spoke sharply—“that’s the way of the world. You ought to know. Tell me what kind of life our Indian children in China are going to have. There are a number of them living in that country.”

“Sir, this much I know: The daughters of Ah To have done no wrong. We cannot punish Geeta for the crime of Seeta. Those children will have to stay away from school.”

He plunged back into work. He would not let Mrs. Mehra’s sentimentality create a digression. He could feel the woman’s hard glance, and it was a relief when at last she walked out of the room with the sheaf of papers she had collected. The bang with which she closed the door behind her bespoke a rare burst of temper. Do-gooder! He looked up, scowling. A do-gooder could easily become a source of danger. Especially in wartime.

The do-gooder had nothing more to say. But the next day:

“Sir—”

Her face was easy to read. The arrest of the Chinese shoemaker early that morning was already the talk of the town. Ah To was suspected of being an informer; he would be held in judicial custody pending further investigation.

“Mrs. Mehra, we can do nothing for Ah To. Do I have to tell you that?”

“I am not thinking of Ah To,” she said. “It’s his poor daughters. They’ve done no wrong. They shouldn’t be made to suffer. They are mere children.”

“I don’t follow your logic. Should the police keep their
hands off every criminal who has young children lest the innocent suffer?"

She pondered this for a while. "I don’t mean that. Ah To phoned me before the police came, and he begged me to keep an eye on his children. They have an ayah who has taken care of them for years, but she is old and helpless."

"Look, Mrs. Mehra—"

"I know what you’re thinking, sir. But Ah To cannot be called an ordinary criminal, even if the case against him is proved. He is well off. He couldn’t have worked as an informer for mere personal gain. He must have thought he was doing a patriotic duty to his people in China. Of course, he must pay for that."

"I see!"

She continued on a more hopeful note: "Had there been other Chinese families in town, our responsibility would have ceased."

Bhashkar gave way. "Do as you please. Only, don’t waste my time." His glance touched the work heaped on his desk, and he felt desperate.

Her face beamed. "Am I really free to do as I please, sir?"

"Go ahead."

It was now almost lunchtime, and Mrs. Mehra asked for leave for the rest of the day; her assistant would take care of the work. She gave no indication of her plans, and Bhashkar had no wish to know.

When he was at home at the usual time in the evening, Ramlal brought him a drink. "What can I give them to eat?" the cook mumbled to himself as he placed the tray on a wicker table.

"Give whom?"

"Do they eat our kind of food?"

"Who?"

"Chinese food is not like ours."

Chinese food! So, that was it! *Am I really free to do as I please?* And Mrs. Mehra had made good use of her freedom. All at another person’s expense. The five sisters were lodged in this house, the ayah told him. Why not, with so many rooms lying vacant? The CE’s enormous salary could bear the burden.
Let me understand fully what I'm in for, Bhashkar said to himself. Let me have a look at those five.

It was a long time before they appeared at the living-room door—under hard persuasion, apparently. As they stood clustered, unwilling to enter, the old ayah's voice prodded them from behind, urging them to step forward.

"What is there to fear? The kind master has given you shelter. Two big rooms to live in, and all the food you can eat."

Mrs. Mehra had done the job with her accustomed thoroughness, Bhashkar reflected. Wisely, she had kept away lest there be accusations to face. And there before him stood the girls for whom he felt no compassion. Daughters of a suspected agent. The girls left their sandals near the doormat and moved barefoot across the carpeted floor. They stopped, and as he gazed at their faces he saw no trace of emotion, neither of anger nor of fear or hurt. The faces were impassive, molded in china clay.

"Will you sit down?" He pointed to the divan of yellow raw silk.

They remained standing until one of them gave a signal, and then they all sat on the divan together, huddling close, the three girls with legs tucked up, the twins sheltered between them. They were neatly dressed in Western-style frocks cut from the same material. A pleasing group. Bhashkar addressed the one who seemed to be the oldest.

"Perhaps you'll have to stay in this house a long time. You know that?"

A faint assent.

"You don't want to go to school?"

"No... sir!" The voice barely audible, yet firm.

How hold her to blame? Cheeni devil. Her thin arm emerging from the sleeve of the blue cotton frock made a protective circle for the little one near to her, another Cheeni devil!

She was gazing at him as though close to speech, but hesitant. And, after a silence, "Sir, we can help with housework... earn our keep." Feeling broke on her face at last. Alarm. Alarm lest her offer be declined.

"What can you do?"

"I can cook, sir."

"You want poor Ramlal sacked?"
She had not thought of that. Ramlal had been kind to them. But a solution of the problem appeared.

"I can be Number Two Cook, sir. Chinese dishes—" She paused in hot confusion.

His quick response was a surprise even to himself. He had seldom before given thought to his food. "Good idea!" he said.

"Yes, sir. My two sisters will do some housework. Only the little ones are too little—"

"First, let me know your names. Then we'll decide who will do what for a living!"


"Chang-ngo," he said after her.

She shook her head. "It's Chang-ngo," she corrected him. Ashamed of her impudence, she turned quickly to her sisters and her rounded chin gave an encouraging jerk.

"Nu-hsin."

"Erh-ku."

The twins kept silent. Chang-ngo spoke to them in Chinese, coaxing, and then one twin blurted, "Tzu-chun."

"Ting-ling," the other followed instantly.

The eldest girl now turned to Bhashkar. "Will you repeat the names, please?"

"And make you laugh?"

"No, sir! How can we laugh?"

An idea struck him. "What if I rename you all?" he suggested brightly.

"Rename us?" Their faces fell.

"Not a good idea?"

"We'll forget our new names in a minute."

"You can't forget them. They are very simple." His right hand lifted, fingers outspread. "You are these five fingers."

The girls stared.

"Fingers? Each of us a finger?"

"Each finger has a name. First, Thumb—that's you, Chang-ngo. Next, Forefinger. Then Middle Finger, Ring Finger, Little Finger."

There was a long, tense pause.

"No good?" He shook his head with understanding. "Well, I wouldn't like to lose my name either."
Chang-nge interposed, slapping her chest theatrically with her palm, crying blithely, "Thumb!" She turned a quick commanding look to her sisters, and each followed with a like gesture. "Forefinger!" A slap on the chest. "Middle Finger!" "Ring Finger!"

But the other twin was silent, tight-lipped, as though she disapproved. "Tzu-chun fears she'll forget her new name," Thumb hurried to explain. "Let her remain Tzu-chun. But she mustn't mind my pronunciation."

"She is such a baby!" cried Forefinger, grave-faced, cuddling the child in the narrow span of her lap. "Father's favorite one!"

Father! There he sat behind the iron grille of a black van, and at that vision the children's eyes filled with tears, bright and spilling.

"Thumb!" Bhashkar called, trying to ward off the sorrow. "Your sisters also will do things for this household, you said. Let's get that straight. What can Forefinger do?" His glance invited an answer.

But the spell was broken. The five girls went on crying softly in unison, faces covered with their hands. All at once the twins burst into a loud concerted wail.

Daughters of Ah To, possibly an enemy agent—why this urge in him to give them solace, to lighten their misery? He could not understand himself as he rose from his chair, moving toward the divan. The façade of calm courage had crumbled, and the children were lost in their desperation, utterly forlorn.

After they had pulled themselves together and wiped the tear stains off their faces, he felt himself free to think of the days ahead. The children would not go to school. That was understandable. Their education must not suffer, though. It was his responsibility. A private tutor? . . . Who?

Sumita!

The thought possessed him for some moments. The bus takes the children across the meadow to Sumita's house. She
gives them lessons to prepare them for the village school with its special curriculum. She is seated on the veranda floor, the twins on her lap, the other three nestling close, and she reads out of a storybook.

The reverie faded, and he felt emptiness.

He had gone to meet Sumita again—that was the day of the launching of massive Chinese aggression. He had wanted to take her out for another drive and this time tell her about his appeal to the Government. He had abided by the mother’s will: “Wait, Bhashkar, till she knows you well enough not to misunderstand.” The bond newly created between them had no relevance to time, but it would be an instrument of communion. It would be easier for her now to see the compulsion behind his appeal; for what had been only a menace even yesterday was now a grim reality, a fact of history. No one could deplore more than he the step he had taken, but events had proved that he was right.

“Sumita!” He had shouted her name excitedly from the house gate. “Sumita!” he had called again, striding on. The front door opened and Mother came out. Strangely, her face was marked with sorrow!

“Sumita has gone to Delhi.”

He echoed stupidly, “‘Gone to Delhi’!” She had given him not even a hint of her projected trip.

“She left at dawn. There was a letter from her father.”

So it was the letter that had induced the hurried trip. Satyajit knew about the Steeltown appeal. The revelation as it came from him was something for which Sumita had been totally unprepared. She had trusted a man who spoke of honest conflict. But behind his proclaimed purpose he had had recourse to unfair, underhanded means. He was two-faced. And Sumita, stricken, fled in misery to her father.

Bhashkar addressed the mother. “Is there nothing else you have to say?”

“Only this much: Satyajit will fight the Steeltown demand, and it will not be easy for you.”

He must accept the inevitable. He wished only that Sumita knew all the facts. The mother obviously read his thoughts, for
she said: "Sumita will have to know the truth. I must write and tell her. I'll tell her how I stopped you from speaking out to her—a sad error of judgment."

That could help. But would it? Whatever form the struggle might take, Sumita's place would be beside Satyajit.

... Heavyhearted, Bhashkar returned to the children facing him. A private tutor. Who?

Rupa!

With quick decision he picked up the telephone, dialed the number at the hostel. She was taken aback, and her voice carried her confusion. "Teach Chinese girls? It?"

"They can't go back to school. They must have lessons at home. You'll make a better teacher than anyone else I can think of."

The response was somewhat breathless. "You mean—you mean, I'm to come to your bungalow?"

"There may be some unpleasant gossip. You don't care about that, do you?"

"Every day?" demanded Rupa, still out of breath.

"Say No and I'll understand."

"Starting tomorrow?"

"If you're ready."

A long silence. Then her voice came again: "Tomorrow."

Almost in a whisper.

"The terms—" he began, for those had to be settled, but he was answered by an abrupt click.
Chapter

Twenty-Seven

The Chinese had overwhelming superiority in numbers and firepower. Their infantry was armed with automatic weapons. Attacking in successive waves supported by heavy mortars, they used the human-sea technique, as in Korea. Indian troops defended every inch of the ground; but, as a foreign correspondent said, they had little to fight with except great courage.

It was hard for a nation conditioned to the ways of peace suddenly to be challenged by the necessities of a large-scale conflict, Nehru had said, but no price was too big for the preservation of the country's independence; and he called for total mobilization of all available resources to meet the aggression.

Satyajit had left the city—his friend had taken him to the mountain resort where the Dalai Lama lived, a night's journey by railroad. Sumita had met her father for only a brief while on the day of her arrival, when Bires-Uncle took her to his quarters. Father, even while he patted her on the head in the habitual gesture, seemed remote, preoccupied. "This is war, Sumita," he said in a murmur, and his face looked haunted. She could sense his feelings but had nothing to say. Forlorn, he stood amid the debris of his broken dreams in a world of his own, and Sumita was alarmed lest he get swallowed in that wreckage. He, apostle of nonviolence, was facing the great dilemma. India was under invasion, and what could the answer be? Armed resistance. Violence against violence. Had he, Satyajit, a second answer? Had he a clear alternative to conflict?

Riding a cab from Delhi Station, her eyes scanning the streets for military symbols, Sumita had felt surprise that no
soldier was in sight. It was then beyond her reckoning that she would have to be at the station every day, helping to manage a food canteen for streams of uniformed men in transit.

The canteen on Platform Six began in a small way, with only tea and biscuits, but it became obvious on the first day that the real demand was for full meals. The station restaurant could not stretch its services beyond a limit, and the canteen had to step in. It would be far from easy for two pairs of hands, filling endless platters with bread and lentils and curry.

"Where would I be without you?" Nandini cried, for the canteen idea was hers, and she wiped gravy off her excited face. She had once helped with a booth at her annual college fete, but that had been child's play.

"Why, Nandini, I didn't exist for you before I arrived in this city, and that was only four days ago."

Nandini said, "Four days may easily be a long time, while four years may be nothing. Watch for the next four days."

"What for, Nandini?"

"The barefooted beauty is going to see herself in a new mirror."

"Mirror?"

But Nandini shook her head. That was all she was prepared to say.

Sumita grew pensive. New facts had been facing her almost from the moment of her arrival in the capital city, and she did not know how to cope with them.

On her first day in the house, Brigadier and Mrs. Chatterjee came for lunch. "So this is what you look like!" the big-built man said to her, eyes twinkling in his broad, handsome, thick-moustached face. "So different from the picture Bireswar gave us." She had wanted to know what kind of picture that was, and he had told her. Wrapped in asceticism, top to toenail. A true daughter of Satyajit. Anti-life—Bireswar had used that curious word. All wrong, Brigadier Chatterjee remarked, adding that it was obviously Bireswar's curious sense of fun. His idea was to mislead them so that later they could be surprised.

Nandini said, when her father had left the room, "Anti-life—you? Bires-Uncle knows nothing, in case he meant what he said. We'll show him, show everybody, what you truly are."
“Look, Nandini. This girl has been placed in my charge. I have accepted full responsibility. You have no business trying to initiate her into your kind of life. And don’t forget, you are not even her age.”

“Hardly a year younger.” Adding sweetly: “So, Mother, you have your plans for Sumita? I can guess what they are. You will, for instance, take her to your cookery class where society girls learn to make *vol-au-vent!*”

“What are your ideas, may I know?”

Nandini started to count them on her fingers.

“One: She will be second in command at the canteen. Two: I’ll take her to the Defense Services Club, where all the boys will come flocking to her. Three—”

The mother interrupted. “She will go to the Club barefooted? Or will you get her shoes? At least a pair of brocade sandals.”

Horror showed on Nandini’s face. Mother had a perverted mind!

“Have I gone mad? Brocade sandals for Sumita! Barefoot, she will make her impact.”

Sumita cried, embarrassed: “Nandini, I have nothing against shoes. The fact is that our peasantry are too poor to buy footwear, and I try to live as they do. Here in Delhi I must adjust myself to city life.”

Nandini shook her head. “No, Sumita, you must remain as you are. You mustn’t make any compromise. You don’t have to copy others. Let others copy your ways. After all, everyone knows”—the voice dropped a tone respectfully—“whose daughter you are, Sumita.”

Mrs. Chatterjee started to laugh. “Do they have a Defense Services Club in Gandhigram?” She turned mocking eyes on her daughter. “Do they dance the Shake? Do the boys there come flocking to Sumita? What nonsense!” And as Nandini was about to answer her, she hurried on: “No, Sumita will have my company. I know what’s good for her. She must do war work. I have it all planned.”

“So have I.” The voice was decisive. “Tomorrow I’m going to start a canteen at Delhi Station—everything is ready. We’ll feed the soldiers in transit. If this idea doesn’t appeal to you,
Mother, why not put the case before Bires-Uncle? Let him say what's best for Sumita. Canteen or what you call war work!"

Mrs. Chatterjee yielded in face of the stern challenge. She had no wish to appeal to Bireswar, who was as mad as this daughter of hers.

"As for company," Nandini resumed, "let my brother come home from his mess to visit us, and he'll stick to this house until the CO talks to him about negligence of duty. He may even fly his helicopter over, hoping to catch a glimpse of the barefooted girl."

Sumita felt grateful to Nandini—the suggestion of war work had chilled her. The canteen, of course, was just service to the soldiers. At dinner that evening she knew why Bires-Uncle had nicknamed his sister Major General.

Bad news had been coming all day from the battlefronts. Several checkpoints in Ladakh had been submerged and lost in the massive attacks. In the eastern sector a two-pronged offensive had started. The situation was obviously grave. But Mrs. Chatterjee turned a bright face to her husband as he toyed with his food.

"What you need is to entrap the Chinese forces in a pincer movement."

He was in no mood to disagree. "Pincer," he echoed nonchalantly.

She doubted the force of his assent. "Let me explain what I mean. The Chinese will pour down the mountain slopes like a torrent gone mad. They will plunge ahead, borne by their terrific momentum. We fall back all this while. We make an orderly retreat. But we keep building up the pincers in secrecy, lengthening the two arms under cover of dense jungle. It's like this—"

She started to demonstrate, pink fingernail tracing lines on the tablecloth. "Here's the base of one arm, near Tejpur, creeping forward. The other arm begins at the neck of land adjoining Bhutan—here!"

"Yes...yes," the brigadier agreed as he watched. "Good strategy!"

But his wife was undeceived.

"First see what I mean, then call it good or bad. May I have your box of matches?"

He said, passing her the box, "Great idea, the pincer."
“You’ve got to be fully convinced—and you aren’t. I’m no
fool!” She was arranging the matches on the table to illustrate
her theme, and a minute had passed before she resumed. “The
euple sweeps forward. The tea of Assam Valley! The oil fields
with their output vastly enlarged under our Second Five-Year
Plan. Eyes hooded by greed, the enemy fails to see the danger on
his flanks. The crucial hour approaches. The two extended
pincers begin to narrow down—so!—until their claws meet. So!”
Plump arms rose off the table and reached forward, hands
clutched together. “So-oh!” The forearms were edging close,
muscles straining. “Squeeze!”—soft, smooth, blue-veined flesh
quivering—“Squee-ee-zeel!”

“Good strategy,” the brigadier repeated placidly. “Three
enemy divisions trapped, captured.” Then, as if with sudden
doubt, “How many divisions do we use for the outflanking
movement?”

Mrs. Chatterjee’s arms went slack, and dropped to the table.
“How many? Now, don’t try to trap me, Mr. General! You
should know how many. Matter of detail, isn’t it? The staff in
Operational Command could work it out. You’re concerned
with the broad lines of strategy.”

“You also,” Nandini’s voice piped up. Her mother ignored
the interruption.

“It’s the main strategic content that makes all the difference
in warfare, I don’t have to tell you that. One of Napoleon’s
biographers has pointed out—”

“Bread?” The brigadier held up the blue-painted cane
platter.

“No, thanks,” said his wife. “You will have a slice, Sumita?
Or do you fancy home-made chapati?” Her mind was far away
from food, though. “I should tell you something about Brigadier
Chatterjee,” she went on, addressing the girl. “He was in the
Eighth Army, which defeated Rommel’s Afrika Korps. First came
the recapture of Tobruk. Strategy again! As General Mont-
gomery’s right-hand man—”

The brigadier made a mild protest. “I was only an acting
captain in those days. How could I—”

His wife was unshaken. “Who won the medal?” she de-
manded. “You or I?”
“You, Mother!” said Nandini’s half-whispering voice.
Mrs. Chatterjee scowled heavily. “That’s not very funny, Nandini.”
“Sorry, Mother.”
“Mr. General loves to pretend he is a nobody. Humility is a virtue—but only within certain limits. It cannot help where the Army’s morale is involved. Let our men know what happened at Bengasi. Let them hear about the hammerblow on El Alamein. The epic battle at Tobruk! But the medal had to wait until Masrah—fifteen hundred miles across the desert, where Rommel had fallen back on a fortified line. The peak of the fierce offensive proved a turning point in the whole war.”
“Mother, are you sure that’s the right chronology?”
Mrs. Chatterjee did not flinch. “Chronology! Bengasi before Tobruk or Tobruk before Bengasi—what does it matter? Tripoli was the climactic point of the war in North Africa—do you deny that? Do you deny that your father was decorated with the medal for his heroic deed at the gates of Tripoli?”
“Deny? Oh, no!” She gave an arch glance at her father, and saw the twinkling of his eyes. “To have such a hero for one’s father!” she gravely added.
“Do I have to give you details?” The mother doubted the honesty of her daughter’s faith.
Sumita said, “I would love to hear—”
The brigadier laid down knife and fork, and leaned back in his chair.
“Sumita, there are better things for you to hear. What’s happening on our Himalayan battleground today? Listen to this, for instance. Yesterday, after heavy bombardment, the Chinese forces launched an attack on our company post at Razengola in Ladakh in overwhelming strength and in successive waves. The first waves of the attack were beaten back, but the company suffered heavy casualties. The company commander was seriously wounded. Seeing that it was no longer possible to hold the position with a handful of men, he ordered withdrawal from the post. As the men, one of them a lance corporal, were carrying the wounded company commander, they came under heavy machine-gun fire. The officer asked all his men to leave him
where he was and withdraw, save their lives. But the lance corporal insisted on staying back with his commander.”

Breathless, Sumita asked, “What happened to them?”

“Who knows? We have listed them both as missing.”

There was a long minute’s silence.

“This is the point I want you all to remember: There is often as much heroism in quiet courage as in dramatic action. I salute that lance corporal of the Kumaon Regiment.”

Silence again.

“Keep this in mind when you start your canteen at Delhi Station: Among the men who take food from your hand, there may be a few who will become India’s true heroes.”

“Yes, Father.”

Mrs. Chatterjee’s troubled glance fretted over her daughter.

“I wish Ashok didn’t have to go to Ladakh in such a rush.”

Nandini was engaged to the boy.

“He had orders,” Nandini said. “His company moved to the front.”

“Orders!” Her head jerked meaningfully toward her husband.

He stiffened. “You don’t expect me to interfere with Army orders?”

She saw her error. “What I mean is this.” She tried to soothe his feelings. “That boy has brains. He can work out ideas, operational plans. He will be an asset at HQ.”

“That’s for his CO to decide.”

Nandini said: “Father, this much I can tell you. Ashok would have hated to stay back in Delhi, tied to a desk job. When his posting order came—oh, he was thrilled! Never before had he felt such excitement.”

Ten minutes later, with the elders gone from the room, Nandini started to tell her new friend about the canteen they were going to open. The decision to have Sumita as co-worker had come flashing upon her at the dinner table. Used to having her own way, she had taken Sumita’s assent for granted. That assent came readily. The details were still to be worked out, and as they were deep in discussion the door leading from the veranda slowly swung open.

Nandini jumped to her feet. “Brother!” she cried happily,
and with a quick look turned to Sumita—"My elder brother." Flying Officer Debes Chatterjee walked into the room. Thin, and of medium height, he wore the blue Air Force uniform. He caught sight of the stranger at the table, and stopped.

"It's Sumita! Couldn't you guess?" Nandini laughed.
"You told me—when you rang yesterday, you told me—"
"What did I say?"
"Ascetic from top to toenail, you said."
"So she is! Can't you see?"
Baffled, he shook his head. "You used a curious word that I can't recall—"
"'Anti-life.'"
"My God!" Debes exclaimed, voice and face awestruck.
Nandini cried with some vehemence, "If Sumita is anti-life, it's because she hasn't seen our kind of life. Let her decide for herself, but only after she has seen... experienced...
Sumita could have laughed. Bires-Uncle had given her an absurd label. His peculiar sense of fun. But these were nice people, both sister and brother. How quickly had they pushed aside the screen that always hung between strangers!

"I've heard a fairy tale, so it seems to me." His eyes were on Sumita in un concealed homage.
But Nandini interposed, saying, "Take one look at her feet!"
He said, eager, "May I?" and moved to Sumita's side of the table and went on his knees.
Her face colored. In that instant she was transported to a mud house lashed by thunder and rain. Bhaskar knelt. His fingers probed. "No fracture," he said; "only a sprain." And the aching ankle, with its lump, felt soothed by his touch. But there was shame, too, that he saw the ugliness. The ugliness was gone. But he too was gone. He had made a fool of her. She would not let herself be troubled even by memory. She would wipe off the memory.

"Such feet are meant to be concealed in leather," said Debes as he rose.
"She will start a new fashion!" Nandini clapped her hands.
But Debes was not so sure.
"Will you discard your shoes?" he questioned his sister.
"The scores of pairs you have. When you stop buying shoes,
and all else that goes with them, the household budget will at last begin to balance."

That was a point on which Nandini was still unsure. Coarse white apparel? A prick of doubt again. Debes, reading her mind, said pointedly, "In case you decide to follow Sumita's example—"

His sister saddened. She shook her head. "You don't have to compare me with Sumita. She is beautiful even without—"

And Debes supplied, gravely, "Clothes."

"Pretty clothes. Cosmetics." She saw embarrassment on Sumita's face. "Enough of our bad manners. Let's stop being personal. Let's make our plans for tomorrow night and for the nights to follow."

"Until I take off in my helicopter."

She said, big-eyed, "You mean—"

"It won't be long before I'm off on operational assignment. I'll take a good look at the Chinese from the Himalayan sky. Great—isn't it?"

"Mother knows?"

"Not yet. I came rushing to give you all a surprise. I had no idea a surprise would be waiting for me." His glance returned to Sumita, and he watched her thoughtfully.

The plans were set down, and Sumita did not have to give her assent—it was taken for granted. As Debes Chatterjee was about to leave the room, he said, "Sumita, it's been lovely meeting you." He repeated, "Lovely!" And the look of honest pleasure on his face added its own emphasis.

So it came about that Sumita began to see herself in a new mirror, as Nandini had foretold. It was an experience that frightened her; yet, unconsciously, she had been ready for the image she saw. Meanwhile, work at the canteen grew harder each passing day with the quickening tempo of troop movements. And while handing food to the men coming through, with their haversacks and rifles, her glance was often intent on the faces—not in search of the heroes of tomorrow, but with a bewildered question in her heart: What next? What next?
Chapter

Twenty-Eight

The five girls came trooping to the living-room door, each with hands full. Flowers! Flowers arranged in improvised vases—one was a thick foot-long section of green bamboo. Bhashkar, sprawled on a couch, reading, turned to look, and his face grew astonished.

Thumb stepped inside while the others waited, clustering just beyond the doorsill. Then, at a gesture of her hands, they moved up, arms thrust forward to Bhashkar, and in each round face the eyes, anxious almonds, were expectantly bright.

“Lovely!” He reached out for the gift.

Each almond hid happily in a slit. Something curious happened next. Forefinger, moving over briskly behind the couch, laid her hands on Bhashkar’s temples. He twisted round in surprise, but his face was caught in an unflinching grasp.

“Head!” breathed Forefinger as her hands worked. The girl was taller than the eldest sister, and her fingers were slim and long.

Thumb spoke. “Massage, sir. She’s learned it from our mother. Let someone’s head begin to ache—”

“My head doesn’t ache.”

Thumb pursed her small mouth. “Sir, ache or no ache, head feels fine after massage. Wait four or five minutes, then talk.”

The slim fingers made a swift drumbeat over the scalp. Bhashkar relaxed into surrender and silence. His eyelids felt heavy.

“Enough? No more?” Five minutes had passed.
“Enough. Thank you.”

But the massage was not over. The hands slipped to eyelids, pressing gently, soothing away fatigue. Presently they descended to an upper arm, and there was the swift drumbeat again.

“Good?”

“Good. Thank you.”

The girl took the other arm. Next, she dropped to her knees and started to untie Bhashkar’s shoestrings.

“Look . . .” He tried to pull his foot away.

“Leg!” Forefinger’s voice was firm as she took possession. Relaxed minutes went by again. Bhashkar lay helpless until there was a sharp cry of surprise from the door, which the girls had left ajar. He sat up.

“This is sabotage, Rupa!” He tried to screen his embarrassment with gay talk. Rupa had arrived a half hour earlier than the time set.

“Sabotage?”

“Massage! Sleeping pills! What will happen to the files lying in the other room, and the stenographer due any minute?”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” Rupa said.

“Put a stop to this absurdity,” he begged. And the great idea flashed upon him. “Forefinger,” he said, turning to the girl, “have you thought of paying your honorable tutor? Do you know how to pay her?”

Forefinger shook her head, and mist grew in her eyes. Mist grew in all the Chinese eyes. They had no money. They could not pay tuition fees.

“It’s easy. Pay her with massage. Your tutor needs it badly. She has a fear she may grow—er—too buxom. There are the early signs—you can see?” His glance turned to Rupa, chiseled in the ample way of Hindu sculpture.

“Well?” A challenging toss of her head.

With a smile he turned back to the Chinese girl. “Arms, legs—make your tutor feel fine.”

Forefinger, hesitant, looked at their tutor, then at Thumb for guidance. Answered with a grave nod, she started to move across the carpet, edging up to Rupa.

“There!” She pointed to the deep-cushioned couch Bhashkar had just vacated.
“Massage every day.” Rupa’s voice had a tone of unabashed pleasure. But in a moment her face turned serious.

“Look, Chang-ngo.” She pronounced the name the right Chinese way. “Duty, above all else. I am your tutor, and I can’t afford to lose my job, yielding to temptation.”

Bhashkar laughed. “I had no idea, Rupa, that you were so badly in need of extra work. Even the terms are yet to be settled. I was coming to that point when you hung up. Shall we say—”

“Say nothing,” she spoke firmly. “No double payment, please. Massage will be more than enough.”

He said, disapproving, “You must have a tuition fee.”

“I’m getting fat, as you said—so polite of you to use the word ‘buxom.’” And as if with sudden thought, “What was Mary Ann like?” But she did not wait for answer. Turning to Forefinger, she spoke in a stern voice:

“He doesn’t like it. He hates it. For him a massage is no payment but sheer torture. Good payment for me, though, your honorable tutor. Leave him alone.” And her eyes as they flashed on Bhashkar were nakedly possessive. “Is that understood?” she demanded of her astonished pupil.

“Understood,” came the meek reply, and it was the voice of Thumb.

That was how the plinth was laid for Bhashkar’s new household.

The impossible had happened—warm communion with the daughters of an enemy agent. A communion deepening with each passing day. At nightfall the five girls in their neat attire would stand waiting on the veranda for Bhashkar’s return. When he arrived, descended from his car, and dropped tiredly into an armchair, Forefinger would relieve his feet of shoes and socks. Thumb would bring platefuls of relishes—fried cashew nuts and cheese fritters. The twins would stand gaping at Bhashkar until he gave response to their look, and then the smoothness of each chubby face would break into creases.

Bhashkar tried to make the girls share the tea with him.

“No!” Thumb looked shocked.

“Why not?”

“Not done.”
"Not in China, maybe. In India—yes."
Thumb disagreed. "In India—no."
"In an old-fashioned household menfolk eat first, wives and daughters follow. But in a modern home?"
"Old-fashioned home, this," Forefinger said brusquely.
Bhashkar left it at that. But one day he pulled Ting-ling to him and made her sit on his knees. The other twin, Tzu-chun, at once sidled up and climbed, unbidden. Bhashkar slipped roasted cashew nuts into each mouth.
The twins ate. Their jet eyes glinted challenge to the elders. The solidarity of the clan was gone. That had a curious result. The hands of the other three reached out to the plates, and they also started to eat, as if at that cost of compromise a new base of solidarity had to be built.
But Forefinger was uneasy that she had accepted the little ones' lead; she had to do something by way of return.
"You think those two are alike? Two peas in a shell?" she asked Bhashkar.
"Yes." But he knew the points of difference. Tzu-chun was a little more chubby than the other. Her eyes were narrower than Ting-ling's, and almost disappeared when she laughed. Even the two noses, though equally small . . .
"Then—look!" Forefinger dropped down to her knees and grasped Ting-ling's ankle over the shoes. "Nice leg of chicken! I will eat," she cried, and smacked her lips.
Ting-ling giggled. "Eat." She thrust her leg toward her sister's mouth.
Forefinger made a face. "All bone!" And she turned quickly to Tzu-chun, clutching her ankle in a firm fist. "This leg of chicken's good and fat!" She smacked her lips again.
Tzu-chun screamed, and burst into tears. "No!" she cried hysterically. "No!"—until she felt Bhashkar's protective arm around her.
"You see?" Forefinger spoke in triumph. "Yet this Tzu-chun is the tough one. And Ting-ling is the opposite. "Chicken's leg!" she flung again before she loosened her fist. Bhashkar's arm tightened.
The two older ones could be really tough!
"Master!" Ramlal came panting to Bhashkar one night
when he was deep in his office work. He frowned and looked up.
"Haven't I bidden you—"
"They—they're killing each other, sir!"
"Killing? Who's killing whom?"

But Ramlal was gone, racing fast on his thick legs. Bhashkar sprang to his feet, followed the cook down the inner corridor and across the stone-paved courtyard. He looked through the open door of the kitchen where Ramlal had disappeared. An unexpected sight: Thumb and Forefinger were on the cement floor, locked in combat, pounding each other with angry fists. They fought like creatures without mercy. The other three children stood aside in cool quiet, along with the ayah, watching.
"Stop!" Bhashkar shouted.

Forefinger, who was on top, landed a blow on Thumb's nose, while Thumb grasped fistfuls of her sister's hair and tugged viciously. No cry of pain came from either.
Bhashkar whirled, facing the ayah. "You can stop this, can't you?"
The old woman's face broke into a hundred wrinkles.
"Let them have their game." Her head was nodding encouragement.
"Game?" Bhashkar exploded.
"Years and years I see them fight. Let them have their fun."
"Fun!" Bhashkar exploded again. He leaned over, catching hold of Forefinger, wrenching her away. As he lifted her she went limp in his arms. He carried her out of the kitchen. In the courtyard he set her down on her feet near the faucet.
"Wash!" He pointed to the blood on her face.
Forefinger stood with head bowed, her chest heaving under the blue cotton frock. In a moment the three noncombatants crowded up to her, faces impassive. Behind them, feet dragging, snub nose twice its normal size, came Thumb.
"Well?" Bhashkar demanded.
Silence. He repeated his question, his voice rough. Then Thumb said, quietly, "Sir, it's nothing."
"Nothing?"
"Nothing for you to worry about."
"You two fighting like cats gone mad!"
Middle Finger spoke: "Thumb says only she earns her keep
cooking good things for you; Forefinger cannot give you massage —you hate it—and she earns nothing. And Forefinger says in answer only she deserves to have Rupa-Sister. Thumb loses her temper, and then Forefinger also, and they fight like cats gone mad, as you say.”

“Rupa-Sister? She asked you all to address her that way?”

“The twins—they call her Mother. Just Mother.”

“What!”

“Rupa tells the twins she loves to be called Mother.”

“She isn’t old enough for that.”

“She can be Mother of two-year-olds. Why not?”

Bhashkar was silenced. Rupa was a riddle. Looking at her, one would hardly see a mother complex within. He had even feared that, the novelty wearing off, Rupa would tire of her assignment. But she was now tied to the children with feeling. Curious, Mary Ann had also had that kind of contrariness. One afternoon, walking with her in a park—it was summertime and she wore a blue jersey and white shorts—they passed a small child seated all by himself on a bench under a tree. His nose was flowing profusely. Mary Ann stopped. She took a lace handkerchief out of her handbag and wiped the child’s nostrils. “Blow, son,” she said to him, “blow hard!” And her face, bent upon the unknown child, was the face of a mother.

The strange new household was a lone isle of interracial amity, with events moving fast, hordes of Chinese blasting their way across the Himalayas toward Indian earth. “The cruel and crude invasion,” as Nehru called it, stirred a great spasm of national passion. “History has taken a new turn in Asia and perhaps in the world, and India has to bear the brunt of it and fight this menace to its freedom,” Nehru said. But his humanistic vision was not misted over by war fever. His clear warning rang:

“I would like to stress that I do not want that aspect of the cold war or hot war which leads to hatred of a whole people. I hope no such emotion will rise in our country. We have nothing against the Chinese people. We must not transfer our anger and bitterness at what has been done by the Chinese Government to the Chinese people.”

Bhashkar let his glance rest fondly on the alien inmates of
his household, and the idea struck him that the five Chinese girls were at war, too! Slender and small, they were fighting the battle of humanity which their vast, powerful country had already lost. Their victory over a minute area of the spirit had to make up for all the inner poverty that the leaders of their ancient race were showing today.

Then the hard blow fell.

One day Bhashkar left his office early with a headache that the usual tablet had failed to assuage; he was going home to rest. On the way it occurred to him that Forefinger's massaging skill would perhaps help. He must ask her. So he went straight to the children's room in the bungalow's east wing. The door was open. Low voices came in a united hum. Surprised, he peered in and saw the five girls in a row, kneeling, their eyes closed and hands folded on their laps in the attitude of prayer to the gods, chanting reverentially. And before them, propped against the wall, was a framed oleograph... a Chinese face... the face of Mao Tse-tung!
Chapter
TWO-NINE

The men in battle dress who squatted around the canteen and ate out of leaf plates jumped to their feet and saluted the young officer as he approached. He returned the salute, took note that the men belonged to a Rajput regiment, and grinned sheepishly at the two astonished women in the canteen. Nandini, in a burst of alarm, cried, “Something has gone wrong!” She pressed her hand to her pounding heart as she waited for answer, and in that moment Sumita felt a surge of sympathy for her new-found sister. The façade of carefree jollity hid the ever-present strain of a consuming fear—Ashok had gone to the battlefront.

“Nothing wrong,” he assured her quickly. “I—I want to take a look at your canteen. You—er—you need help. Don’t you think so, Nandini?”

Her hand dropped to her side. Her glance traveled from him to Sumita and back to him, and she spoke under her breath, “You’re asking for court-martial?”

“What!”

“You should be on duty at this time of day. It’s a state of emergency—”

“Oh,” he said placidly, “that!”

“Exactly.”

The men had eaten their food. They folded up their leaf platters and dumped them into a bin. Having bowed to their two hostesses, they walked off toward the faucet, where they lined up for a drink of water.

Debes now revealed the true purpose of his visit.
“Look, Nandini. You can’t do this to Sumita. This is her first visit in Delhi, and she has seen nothing of the city yet. She must see Red Fort, Kutb Minar, the old bazar in Chandni Chowk. Along with the sixteenth century she must see the twentieth: New Delhi, a hybrid creation of yesterday.”

“The great mass of Hotel Ashoka—one of Asia’s best. Yes?”

“Good idea. We’ll drop in there for a cup of tea.”

“Father won’t lift a finger to help you at the court-martial: you can be sure of that.”

“Oh,” again with disinterest, “that!”

Nandini turned to her friend. “What do you think of this grand project, Sumita? To see India’s capital with this wonderful guide?”

“You can ride on my scoooter, Sumita. Can’t you?” And after a dubious glance at her, “We can, of course, take a cab.”

Sumita spoke gravely: “Impossible. I cannot leave the canteen. How will Nandini manage it just by herself?”

Nandini glared at her brother. “You heard that? Don’t you think you should go back to Palam Airport before charges are filed against you?”

For a minute he stood bemused, and then: “Nandini is right—as always.” He gave her a military salute. “I’m off. We’ll meet again in a while.”

“Evening,” corrected his sister in a firm voice.

The three had been going out together in the evenings. For the first time in her life Sumita had stood in a ballroom, on Saturday night at the Imperial. “At home, tomorrow, I’ll show you the steps,” Debes had offered. But Sumita shook her head. “Why not?” “Shoes”—her glance was downward. She had borrowed a pair from Nandini, and luckily they were her size. But it would be several days or even weeks before she became accustomed to shoes.

That night, she was dressed in Nandini’s clothes as well. Nandini had inwardly disapproved even while she had asked Sumita to take whatever she fancied. Wearing gold-bordered silk, and hot in the face because of her awkwardness, Sumita had become a changed person, Nandini thought. The new vivacity in the calm eyes. Serenity replaced by exuberant verve. Yet the plain truth was that, transformed, she had lost as much
as she had gained. She had lost Gandhigram, the core of her being. She who had been peerless now blended into a galaxy.

Debes gone, the two girls returned to their work, cleaning up, getting ready for the next batch of men due to arrive soon by a military special. Hardly half an hour had passed and they were gaping in astonishment—Debes was back, and with him was his mother!

Mrs. Chatterjee stood still for a while, arms akimbo, her gaze surveying the bowls of food. Peering into a large brass pot filled with curry, she wrinkled her nose in faint disgust. Nandini could well have taken the help of the cookery class and offered the soldiers something palatable. She dipped a spoon into the pot, scooped up some curry, and tasted it with the tip of a darting tongue. Her face showed honest surprise. Not bad! As she tilted the spoon to her mouth, her daughter’s angry voice came:

“I don’t understand. Why is he here again?”—a sharp glance at her brother. “He is inviting trouble. His hours of duty—”

Mrs. Chatterjee said, “Surely he has told you, Nandini?”

“There’s nothing to tell me. His idea is to take Sumita sight-seeing. And you, Mother—”

“Hasn’t he told you he is on leave? Ten days. Then he goes”—the voice grew heavy—“he goes to the front. He received the order this morning.”

“I see!”

“He wants me to give you a helping hand while he shows Sumita something of Delhi.”

Nandini fumed. “Mother, you said No when I asked for your help. You were too busy, you didn’t have a moment to spare. And as soon as this son of yours has a bright idea—”

“Debes has more sense than you, Nandini. He wants me not only to fill soldiers’ platters with bread and curry, but also to talk to them. It would do good, he says. And he should know.”

Nandini gave her brother a stern glance, and saw him blink in discomfort.

“What will you talk about? Father’s heroic deeds in Libya?”

“Maybe I’ll tell them about Captain Ashok Bannerjee!”

Nandini grew pale with apprehension. “What is it, Mother?” she breathed.
"The news has just come. Your father spoke to me on the phone." There was a dramatic pause.
"Mother—" Nandini was on edge.
"You should hear it all from his mouth. Wait till evening."
"Mother—" Voice and eyes pleaded.
"Must I tell you? What do you think, Debes?"

Debes promptly began: "Captain Bannerjee was detailed to lead a patrol to a position outflanking the Chinese forces in the area and to act as Forward Observation officer for a period of three days. The aim of the patrol was to bring down observed artillery fire on the enemy positions—"

Mrs. Chatterjee's voice snatched at the story:
"And to gain maximum information about the concentration and moves of the enemy forces." She stressed each word as though the meaning otherwise might be lost. "The patrol of twenty men and an officer traveled over very difficult terrain, operating at a height of fifteen thousand feet. It spent two nights behind the enemy positions and collected valuable information. On the return journey the patrol was ambushed." She stopped, and her face looked strained. Nandini's hand flew back to her wildly beating heart.

Debes interposed: "A numerically superior Chinese force. And the patrol—"

Mrs. Chatterjee pounced again on the tale, and recaptured it: "The patrol found its way barred. Three times it assaulted the enemy, and was driven back each time by gunfire. But there was the vital need of informing Brigade Headquarters about the enemy's presence on our flanks. Captain Bannerjee decided to fight his way through to the base. All night he kept the remnants of the patrol on the move over rugged, almost impassable terrain. Four men and their officer reached the base."

Nandini drew a deep breath and released it with a small cry. He was safe. She now became aware of Sumita's arm around her waist. "Such is war, Sumita!" Nandini exclaimed.

Sumita echoed, "Such is war!"

The dead were lucky. But the wounded... not the Indians alone. The Chinese, thousands of miles away from home. Sumita could see those men. They were no different from the men who
came to the canteen every day. Killing and being killed. What for? Was it not possible to settle the issue by peaceful means? Was human life so much cheaper than acres of uninhabited mountainside?

An incongruous image came to her mind. A Chinese waiter in a restaurant in Calcutta—Father in his student days went there often for a late meal at night. His name was Chang. Father, curious about strange people, talked with him often, and Chang was happy to dwell on his children. They complained, he said with a tender smile, that he came home so late, when they were fast asleep. They wanted their father to spend the evenings with them, like other fathers. Chang said he was to have a month's vacation soon, and then the children's wish and his own would be fulfilled at last. . . . Next day he was killed in a street accident when going back home from the restaurant.

Mrs. Chatterjee had now resumed:

"When our men who are about to go to Ladakh hear of such deeds, you can well imagine how their morale will mount sky-high. This I am going to tell them: Push the Chinese off Indian soil. But that won't be enough. Push them across their own borders, deep into Sinkiang, into the Gobi Desert. But don't stop there. Push on relentlessly, and don't stop until you've reached the gates of Peking. There you will plant the tricolor flag."

Debes burst into laughter. "Mother, let this be reported to Peking, and its propaganda-makers will love the words. Radio Peking will relay them to the freedom-loving peoples of Afro-Asia and say, "Look! Who are the imperialists?"

Though Mrs. Chatterjee felt uneasy for a moment, she regained her poise, and explained: "Debes, you don't understand. This advance is the best way to make the Chinese see reason. To say that we want even an inch of Chinese soil amounts to sedition and sin in Indian eyes. We want them to vacate the area of their aggression and become our good neighbors. May I not say even that much to our soldiers?"

"Who's going to stop the major general?" Debes demanded. He had great need to placate his mother and take Sumita out for the day.
“Major general, indeed!” The tone of self-mockery barely concealed her pleasure. She was proud of that nickname, even though it had been given to her in fun.

Debes grew serious. “Why not make the soldiers talk? You’ll learn a lot from them. Do that, Nandini.”

She said: “They talk to us while they eat. They ask us about our children. When we tell them we aren’t married, they sadden on our account. The proud father of a six-month-old informed us that the little one had four teeth already. These are the men of peasant stock. We have also seen city-bred ones.”

“No soldier has spoken a word about the battles ahead,” said Sumita.

Debes nodded understandingly. “The battles will come as a matter of course. Nothing to talk about. The kind of advice Mother has just given us will be lost on our men. You do your job; you carry out your assigned task; you die if a bullet finds you. What’s unusual about all that? So the soldiers think.”

Nandini gave her mother a belligerent look. “You understand? You don’t have to lecture our soldiers on the way they should do their duty. You don’t have to stir up their martial spirit, Mother! Do you think you will really enjoy giving a helping hand at this canteen?”

Sumita would have to sit sidesaddle. She hesitated, but there was no option. He was waiting on the seat, the engine spluttering.

“Clutch my shoulder, and for God’s sake, don’t fall off!” he warned. “This being the first time you’re riding pillion—”

“I once rode on the back of a bicycle,” she told him as they set off.

“What kind of man was he—the cyclist?”

“A woman. Her name’s Mrs. Mehra.”

She could feel his shoulder shake beneath her hand as he laughed.

“Sumita,” he cried, “you’re wonderful!”

What was wonderful about riding with a woman cyclist? she would have liked to ask, but he was laughing again. He was inches away from her, bent forward over the handlebars, clad in blue woolen. She saw that his scalp was marked by a welt.
A birthmark? No. But he must have had it for years, perhaps since childhood. He had climbed a tree, slipped, and a thin branch struck him at the back of his head during the descent. But would one climb a tree in a city? He must have lived always in cantonment cities where his father was posted. Or he could have gone to a private school somewhere in the hills. Until he went to the Academy.

She knew so little about Debes, apart from his vocation. And what did she know about Bhashkar? She had even doubted his honesty. If Mother hadn’t written and explained, she would not have known the truth. All the same, the fact remained that Gandhigram was to him a mere tract of earth. And on that reckoning she was a mere woman, any woman.

Tears had sprung to her eyes because of the insult. Was it insult alone? She had turned away from that query in anger. Yet there was one fact she had to admit to herself, almost gratefully: He had made her conscious of what she was under the trappings: within, she was Jhanak!

Facing the truth, she felt displaced, pulled up from the roots of her inner self, and terribly confused. For there was the question ringing in her ears: Was it wrong to be Jhanak? And the Jhanak within her had leaned on the words spoken by Mother: Jhanak is just normal, that’s all; I hate to see young minds getting twisted out of shape. Father’s answering voice had pleaded: “Let your ideas remain yours alone. Let not Sumita . . .”

She should have stood listening and heard Mother’s reply and put a plain question to her afterward: You think I should act Jhanak’s way lest my mind gets twisted?

The answer to that question had come already, but not from Mother.

Her visit in Delhi was filled with that answer:

She felt a faint shock, recalling that the urgency that had brought her here had lost its force. But then, the prospect of the fast had receded, hadn’t it? Delhi, anyhow, would not be the scene of this struggle. So, she could well afford to be more concerned with her own Being. With her own Becoming.

Her line of thinking snapped as the magnificent red sandstone wall of the Fort came into view. The scooter pulled up in front of Lahore Gate.
“Fort with Palace,” Debes informed her. “Built by one of the Great Mughals who reigned in India for almost two centuries.” He tried to recall which one it was—Babar, Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan, Aurangzeb—then gave up the effort. Curious slip of memory—it was only yesterday that he had read a tourist book on Delhi to equip himself with knowledge.

“We’ll take a quick look round,” he suggested.

There was the Diwani-i-Am, Hall of Public Audience, with its fine pillars. Next, the Hall of Private Audience where the Peacock Throne used to stand. Built of white marble, the walls and ceiling inlaid with precious stones. On the outer arch at the end of the Hall was an inscription in Persian. Debes translated:

“If there be a Paradise on the face of the earth,
It is this, it is this, it is this!”

Sumita was walking as if in a dream, listening to the eager boyish voice as it tried to impress upon her the splendor of India’s medieval times. While he saw the Great Mughals she saw only him. Barely four or five years older than she. He flew the queer-shaped aircraft often visible in the Delhi sky. He would have liked to fly jets, he had told her. But these aerial oxcarts were no less useful than jets, and he had to be content.

In the Museum he pointed to a glass case full of exhibits, and his guidebook voice came:

“See that red velvet robe? Worn by Empress Nur Jahan, Light of the World. Her romantic husband, Jahangir, was helpless in the snare of her great beauty, and he let himself become a figurehead while Nur Jahan ruled the empire. All he wanted, he said, was a flask of wine and some sheets of paper on which to write poems so long as Nur Jahan looked after State affairs. The Empress broke the bonds of a Muslim harem, and discarded the veil. She had a sharp intellect and an iron will.” Debes stopped for breath but quickly resumed. “She hunted on horseback and was an excellent shot and, a leader of fashion, she designed lovely clothes.”

“A dangerous woman!” Sumita was gazing at the red, jewel-studded robe with its intricate gold embroidery, more than three
hundred years old, and the color not too faded. “All beautiful women are dangerous!”

“Not all.”

Startled by the tone of gravity, she turned her face and they looked at each other a quick instant. He was too young to have met many beautiful women, she thought. But one could not be sure. Here in the city, life was fast-paced and could easily become packed with experience. The blood came splashing to her face as she recalled a solitary moment in her own life. A moment in an abandoned temple. With memory she felt a sudden restlessness, and cried, “Let’s go!”

He looked at her in surprise. “There’s much else to see. The Pearl Mosque. The Royal Baths—”

“Let’s get away from medievalism!”

He yielded, asking no question, though he felt sad that so much of the knowledge he had garnered was going to be wasted. Back to the archway, back to the scooter. He drove slowly away.

“I thought I should take you to another monument before we return to our modern times. But you don’t care for history—”

“What kind of monument?” Tranquillity had returned.

“Kutb Minar. Fourteenth century. It’s a great stone tower, with three hundred and seventy-nine steps leading to the summit. You get a magnificent view of Delhi.”

She would like to see the great tower, Sumita said, and he sped off. There was the entire length of the city to cross, and he drove fast, much too fast.

“This isn’t an airplane,” she reminded him, tightening her grip on his shoulder.

“Sorry.” The speed dropped. “You’ve done better than everyone else who sat there the first time.”

How many? she wondered. Ten? Twenty? Sophistication, gay, glib talk, good companionship. All the same, he was spending the precious hours of his leave with a dull country-bred girl. And with that thought grim recollection came: The helicopter lost in the first hours of the invasion. Debes had known the pilot of that aircraft—they had been cadets together at the Air Force training center in Jodhpur. When Nandini’s brother’s leave was over and he was gone, the chill fear she often felt—she concealed it with care—would grow twofold. Dejection came upon Sumita
with the knowledge that the fear and the suffering would not be for Nandini alone to bear... or only the kinfolk....

Sternly, Sumita took hold of herself. She must not betray her fear or even her concern. That was one thing the officers hated. But let there be music and gaiety and color, not antiquity, not the massive stone shapes on which time had laid its fingerprint.

"Look!" she called. "We'll go to the big hotel. If it isn't out of the way—"

The scooter slowed.

"Are you sure? You would enjoy seeing the Minar, I think." Knowledge was to be wasted again.

"Please," she begged, curiously agitated. "I—" She stopped lest she be betrayed by her voice.

His blue peaked cap nodded twice in assent, but he did not ask why she had so abruptly changed her mind the second time. "The Minar will have to wait, then." And he turned to the inner rim of Connaught Circus, to which several streets were riveted like black-enameled spokes.