CHAPTER
THIRTY

BRIGHT CACTUS BLOOM ON THE VILLAGE EARTH—THAT WAS
the impress Jhanak was making of late on the people's awareness.
Her dark body shaped to perfection, her vitality spilling over as
she walked with a swing of hips or laughed in utter abandon,
lips wetly ashine, or squatted on the grass in front of the cow-
shed, milking the big-horned buffalo, crying: "You're as black
as Jhanak—so what? Jhanak's as black as you—so what?"—
chanting the words in the rhythm of an incantation. But the
bright lusciousness of this flowering thornshrub was alien to the
soil, fit only to be stripped away.

Admonition from the council had only stiffened her re-
sistance, and it was now open revolt. She had crossed the meadow
in the company of a youth from Steeltown and gone to a movie.
She made no secret of that, but spoke out pridefully. A foreign
movie—many youths, many women. You saw the women almost
bare-bodied on the beach. A certain feeling grew in the young
hearts . . . and . . . It was at this point that even Jhanak felt
compelled to stop. Her listeners pleaded, but she would not say
more. Later, when she was alone, Sudha caught hold of her arm
and begged: "Tell me, Jhanak. What happened? What did you
see that you can't even talk about?" Jhanak gave the other an
intent look. The coal-hued pupils in heavy-lidded eyes grew
suddenly amused, and with a quick gesture she drew Sudha into
her arms, planting a kiss on her mouth, first gently, then long
and hard. As Sudha stood speechless in a daze, Jhanak explained, “This happened. Now you know!”

Sudha found her voice and breathed, “Girl kissing girl?”

“Oh, no, stupid! You have to think of me as a boy!” And her face brooded, her voice was impassioned and bitter as she complained, “Why wasn’t I born in a foreign land?”

The strangeness was not so much that she had gone to the movie but that her companion was none other than Great-Uncle’s grandson. The village people knew him only by that name, all except his kinfolk and Jhanak. Girish had once been jilted by her—that was why he had gone away in misery to Steel-town. There he had done well for himself. He was planning to marry the second daughter of a man in the L. D. Steel Converter. Then, happening to visit Meadow House, he had seen Jhanak again. Three years were gone since they had met last.

The feelings he had suppressed took hold of him in an instant. He felt so overpowered that he could not even speak a word to Jhanak. He saw her eyes turn to him in merry, mocking approval, as though she now saw in him a new man, not the one who forged cartwheel axles in the village workshop. Even so, struck at the same time by the old diffidence he had outgrown, he kept his distance from the girl.

Then, almost overnight, Meadow House was gone—except as a structure. Sumita had left for Delhi. New pressures had risen out of the Chinese attack. Girish was unhappy. He ached with remorse that he had let slip his opportunity of making up with Jhanak. Even the chance of seeing her from a distance was gone.

She set his mind afire. She became an obsession. At last, in a desperate mood, he decided to act boldly.

The sun was about to set as he entered the village. Jhanak’s mud house was a furlong off, at the crossing of two laneways. His pace slowed. What next? He could hardly step in and say that he had come to meet Jhanak. It looked as though he must go back even without having caught a glimpse of her. With sinking heart he passed the bamboo fence of the house, and then he heard the voice he knew. Ears pricked, he turned the corner quickly, and there, in the backyard, Jhanak was squatting before her buffalo, milking. Her sari was pulled up, tucked at the waist, leaving the legs bare well beyond the knees.
"Jhanak's as black as you—so what? . . . You're as black as Jhanak—so what?" The challenge had become an every-day habit, a set ritual.

The echo burst from his throat: "So what?" And having cried out impulsively, he was struck by fear. He waited for the cold crushing ring in the voice he had not forgotten.

Her fingers froze on the swollen teat of the animal, and she turned round. But there was no anger in her face, not even surprise. It could well be that she had known he would come!

"You!" she cried, and her glance held him in frank appraisal. He knew at once that it was now or never. She hated boyish timidity—a man had to be a man—and he had lost her once because of his default. He had to take this woman by storm with a new revelation of himself, or else crawl back, slapped across the face, tail between the legs.

There was a narrow gap in the fence, and he squeezed in.

"You're not surprised—han? You've been thinking of me—han?"

"Why should I?" And her astonished eyes grew more intent. "Such fine legs could well belong to a woman of the West!"

He was gazing pointedly.

She turned to her bareness for an instant but did nothing to change it, while her interest in him grew visibly. "White woman with legs black?" she murmured.

"White, black—the same attractiveness. The white women I saw on a cinema screen, bathing in the sea, donning two strips of a kind of kerchief. I saw them—I saw you. Strange!"

She agreed. "Strange!" Adding after a bit, "Because you have never seen me that way."

"What way?"

"Kerchiefs on. Just kerchiefs."

He grew bolder, staking everything. "That is how I saw you in my dream last night, Jhanak. You had two kerchiefs on, each a palm's width. You came swinging out of the sea, glistening all over with water and salt. On your fine long legs you came striding over the sand—more heavy at the hips than the others who also came . . . that made you the choicest."

Her eyes were wide, eager to believe. But she shook her head, laughing. "Liar!" she cried, but her voice was friendly.
“Black grape tastes as sweet as white!” he pursued his aggressive theme. Let nothing be left of the dumb adoration she had once hated.

With an abrupt gesture she turned back to her task. Her hand patted the buffalo’s milk-heavy udder. “You’re as black as Jhanak—so what?” She adjusted her position to hold the pail between her knees.

“So what?” the gay echo answered again.

A minute’s silence. Girish felt discomfort. Someone might be watching from the mud house. Or there might be passers-by on the road. Now that he had mounted the hard steps and hadn’t slipped, what next? Jhanak herself settled that problem.

She cried, wistful, “What wouldn’t I give to see the white women in the movies.”

He clutched at his chance. “Come to the city tomorrow. That picture is still on. Come, well before sundown. Meet me at the meadow’s end, at the city’s outskirts.” And as he watched Jhanak weigh the invitation, he added, “From that point you will not have to walk. You’ll ride a rickshaw!”

“No,” she declined.

“No?” This was all Jhanak’s playacting, the slap across his face to follow.

“To be pulled along in a kind of cart by a man instead of oxen!”

The revived expectation filled him like bliss. “These rickshaws are attached to cycles. The man doesn’t have to pull; seated in comfort, he plies the pedal.”

Still she shook her head, dubious.

“How the man must gasp with the effort!”

This girl, seemingly centered on herself, had such feelings for humble folk. He would indeed like a rickshaw ride with her. The seat space was barely enough for two, and they would get slightly squeezed. Each bump would be welcome—the road through Section Twelve badly needed repair. But then, was it all settled? Or was she, as the saying went, helping him to climb a tree with a stepladder, and would take the ladder away when he was perched atop?

“Tomorrow. The show starts at six, remember.” And he was silent for some moments, calculating the time. “Better that
I leave the mill a bit early—the foreman is a good friend. Better that we meet near Meadow House. That will give me an extra half hour with you. Is it settled, Jhanak?"

The milk pail was three-quarters full. "Let there be enough for the poor hungry calf"—a quick glance at the animal tethered to a nearby tree, watching mournfully.

So it was that Jhanak went to a movie in Steeltown. She sat for two hours beside a youth named Great-Uncle’s grandson. She walked back with him across the meadow—there was no moon, only starlight. She had told her parents that she was going for a meal with Sudha; but, surprisingly, the very next day she admitted the falsehood and let the facts be known to the village. That was the measure of her challenge.

Cityfolk saw no ill in a boy and girl going to a movie together or walking the meadow. Free companionship. Interchange of partners. The question of marriage could come only after one knew the other well enough. Those were the ideas on which the city increasingly set store. Ideas that had blown in with winds from the West.

They were alien to the mind of a half-million Indian villages. But Gandhigram was far apart from that half-million because of its own individual belief. It had no place for the old segregation. Its objection to boy-and-girl love was more basic, and related to the physical aspect.

What was likely to happen when a rebellious one laid stress on that aspect? When she wanted to be—just woman?

The council as it faced the problem grew bewildered and helpless. There was great need for Satyajit’s guidance, and he was away. Should they withhold action until he returned? What could they do, anyhow? Moral action was all that Gandhigram knew. Could all the people go into a three-day fast and pray for Jhanak? That might touch her conscience and bring redemption.

"Let Suruchi take charge; let the final decision be hers," said Chittaranjan. Eager approval came from his colleagues. The council heaved a sigh of relief.

But it was far harder for Suruchi.

She had felt attuned to Jhanak. She had once pleaded for her. Yet, today, could she give her blessing to the rebel? Could she flout by that gesture all that she herself had lived for?
True that she had not accepted Gandhigram in its entirety. But she had not rejected it, either. Or else the current threat to its existence would not have been so hard to bear. She would even have welcomed it with arms extended—it could easily mean a new understanding with her husband, and the old relationship recaptured.

She grew pensive with the thought that Bhashkar had taken his aggressive stand because of his limited horizon. He could not see values that lay beyond—values that Steeltown would do well to possess. The great city with its giant machines had something vital to gain from the small center of spiritual life. Productive power needed the balancing force of self-abnegation. Or else the rot of corruption would prevail. Materialism, the gospel of unlimited accumulation, could never be self-sufficient.

Nor, for that matter, could Gandhigram afford to turn itself into a secluded hothouse where, behind the thick sheets of glass, exotic values bloomed. It was not to be wondered at that within the walls of the hothouse there was the alien burgeoning of Jhanak!

Suruchi felt the renewal of an ache. With what great expectations had she noticed the signs of Sumita’s new awareness—it had seemed like an awakening. And Bhashkar’s interest in her was unconcealed. There could be no better life partner for Sumita. Position, money—those did not count. He had something big to live for. He had dedication.

The anguished look on his face when he knew that Sumita was gone! But he controlled himself. He was not one to mope, brokenhearted; he had in him sources of great strength.

Who could blame him if he used all that strength to strike harder at Gandhigram?

Satyajit had said in his letter that the only resistance he could make was an extended fast. That would be his means of appeal to the country. Let the people speak out. They did that when Gandhi lay in bed foodless, moving closer and closer to death. One such fast was for the social rights of the Untouchables.

Her thoughts whirled back to Jhanak. Strange that a girl of the Untouchables had to defy Gandhigram. She could even de-
stroy it from within, as Bhashkar could from without. Bhashkar would find in her a worthy ally.

Suruchi smiled wanly to herself. She would like to tell Bhashkar about this new force in Gandhigram trying to fulfill his purpose. Jhanak had means other than crude coercion.

Who could hold her back from her urge, a woman’s primal urge to be nothing but a woman?

There was one way left for Gandhigram. It must make readjustments. That would mean acceptance of life in its totality. But not the Steeltown way; that also was denial of life deep under the surface. Let license be chastened by restraint. Let restraint find its right level by a leavening of freedom. Let there be a meeting ground of the two extremes; let each shed some of its content and yet remain true to itself.

Pensive, she shook her head. Why hadn’t she had these thoughts years back, before the assault came from without? That assault was no accident. It would have come from some other direction if there were no Steeltown. Jhanak herself was, unconsciously, the spirit of the age. Even as Satyajit was, consciously, the spirit of another age, in part long gone, in part unborn.

Suruchi stared at the spinning wheel she plied. The gift from Gandhi-ji to her husband. She had not drawn from it ever before a single tola of yarn. But it had to be used every day for an hour; that was the unwritten law, and in the absence of its owner and of Sumita she had to be a stopgap. A stopgap—that had been her assigned role over the years. Humble, self-effacing, she had accepted that role without complaint. An ideal wife. Ideal, indeed!

No, she would not stop Jhanak, who had something she herself had never possessed: courage; the resolve to grasp life between her hands; and the boldness to fight tooth and nail to secure whatever she deeply wanted.
A new tide of emotion was washing over the country. Men from sun-baked plains had been sent to high altitudes and stood exposed to bitter weather no less cruel than gunfire. Army Headquarters had made an appeal to the nation for help by way of home-knit woolens—supplies from the market were under heavy strain. Thousands of anxious women all over the land were devoutly knitting jerseys and pullovers and socks.

Lohapur Club was doing its share. Even Number Two’s hands always held a needle and a ball of wool. Her husband was now acting for the General Manager, away on leave, and she had to bear the weight of leadership in the crisis.

The message came from the State capital that a Deputy Minister would soon come to Lohapur to give his support to the National Defense Fund. A call had gone for donations on a large scale. Authority was touring the land with collection bowls.

A Deputy Minister was all Lohapur was good for, Number Two said sourly to herself. She had sense enough not to expect a visit from the Chief Minister of the State, but there were his fourteen cabinet colleagues.

Presently she saw reason. Deputy Ministers also were VIP’s of a kind. Lohapur must give its guest a worthy reception. That is, Lohapur Club must.

Number Two, thinking hard, awoke suddenly to a new facet of the question. This was just the chance she might have been
waiting for! Strange that the idea had not struck her earlier. But there was still time enough if she hurried.

Let an exhibition of woolens be held in the dance hall on the day of the Deputy Minister’s visit. The best-knit jersey would win a certificate signed by the Presence himself. The prospect of an award would enthuse the Club women to ply their knitting needles with replenished energy.

Number Two herself must compete. More, she must get the award. Not for her own sake. Morale! One who holds the reins of leadership must always come out on top. But what chance had she? Unless . . .

That was it. National interest tilted the scales against a petty scruple.

So the question was resolved, and Number Two hurried at once to the fashionable store on Nehru Avenue. She bought a pattern book and two pounds of the best four-ply wool—it had to be gray, the soldier’s uniform. Back in her bungalow she handed the package of wool to the servingmaid and sent her off with precise instructions to Section Twelve. A woman there, a millhand’s wife, was reputed for her knitting skill. She would be paid generously for her labor—and her vow of complete secrecy.

Then followed the harder task of tackling Muthuswamy.

Muthuswamy was two in one. As clerical assistant in Steelhouse, he was a nobody. But he was also the local correspondent of the press. He could use his pen with great effect, even sending off press telegrams. Hence the need to win his goodwill. But the point at issue was this: Should Number Two sit in her car parked outside Steelhouse and send for the clerk, speaking to him as he stood by the car door? Or should she ask him to her bungalow and treat him as an equal, or nearly so?

Some intense thinking, and the second choice prevailed. Let Muthuswamy be overwhelmed by kindness. That would give a grateful glow to his report to the press. The gesture of kindness would be worthwhile.

But Muthuswamy wore an air of studied indifference. It was plain that he could read the mind of his hostess and was determined to be on his guard. Even a cup of tea and a plateful of cream crackers failed to arouse his zeal. He ate only one
cracker, though he could have helped himself liberally. Number Two let him take his time. It was after he had declined a second cup of tea that she said in a casual way:

“My third daughter, Lotika, has made up her mind to give her jewelry to the Defense Fund. Don’t you think that will serve as a fine example to Steeltown?”

“Fine,” Muthuswamy agreed, and added, “all her jewelry?”

Number Two felt a shock. Not all, surely. But she could not say that. “This daughter of mine!” She clicked her tongue with the fondness of a mother. “She has an iron will of her own. She will do just what she thinks to be right. So long as she sets an example for all the others to follow—”

“Han,” came the brief response. Then, catching Number Two’s expectant glance, he continued:

“Hundreds in the city are waiting to give their gold. Those who have no gold, the working people, are eager to give whatever silver trinkets they own, even heirlooms. An aged widow has a small thatch-roof cottage—she lives in one room and rents the other two for her living—she waits the chance to donate this, her only property. The millhands have announced through their union that they will give a tenth of their wages every month to the fund. Rickshaw men have decided to give every Sunday’s earnings. Countless thousands stand ready to donate—up to the point where it will hurt, and well beyond. The common man will answer the call to the nation with his lifeblood, if needed.”

Number Two’s eyes had a touch of annoyance as she held them fixed on the small dark man, a mere eighty-rupee clerk at Steelhouse. Regret came upon her that she had not spoken to him from the car seat while he stood by humbly. It was bad policy to pamper one who was not of your status. And harsh words came to her tongue. But, on second thought, she restrained herself.

“Look,” she said reflectively. “How can we expect the Deputy Minister to collect silver trinkets? He is coming to Lohapur just for a half day. In his honor the Club will hold a function. There will be an exhibition of home-knit woolens, and an award will be made. Then lunch. The guest will give a speech, and that will surely take at least half an hour—it may easily take an hour. My speech—er, my husband’s—will follow. An-
other half hour gone. Next, my Lotika will walk up to the Deputy Minister, remove all the gold on her person and hand it over, piece by piece. Donations from Club members are the next item. As for what the rest of Lohapur is willing to give—that must wait. A day or two later I’ll go personally from door to door with a bag slung from my shoulder, making the collection. Thatch-roof cottages and all.”

“Han,” the brief response again.

“A man from Ideal Studio will be at the Club to take pictures,” Number Two continued. “The two highlights. First, the award for the best exhibit. Second, my Lotika’s giving away her jewelry—that supreme moment, pictured and framed, will be my Lotika’s happiness and pride in all her years to come.”

Muthuswamy ignored the veiled suggestion. He did not offer to send the photograph of the supreme moment to the newspaper he represented.

As soon as he was gone, Lotika flew into the room.

“I’ve heard every word. Do I donate my bank account along with all my ornaments? I have more than a thousand rupees.” She looked at her mother hopefully.

The mother’s eyebrows lifted in sharp alarm, and she stuttered: “Who talks of cash? Who talks of your bank account that is kept in reserve to meet part of your marriage expense? Why, who talks even of all your ornaments?” She started to count on her fingers: “Two pairs of bangles, the old-fashioned ones. A pair of earrings. The thin neck chain you were given at your Naming Ceremony. That’s the lot you are going to donate.”

“Look, Mother—”

The mother misunderstood her protest for reluctance to give at all.

“Don’t be selfish, Lotika. Our soldiers are shedding their life-blood in the country’s defense, and the fund is intended to provide them with necessaries.” Sadness came into her heart. If only young people had the idealism, the selflessness, of their elders.

On the set day Lohapur Club was crowded. Even Bhashkar had turned up—to stay away would have been a breach of protocol. The Deputy Minister was a stocky, round-faced man wearing on his head a white cap of homespun cloth. When the
time came for the exhibits to be judged, he stepped into the hall where the jerseys and pullovers and socks formed a long gray line. He walked slowly, looking down. Halfway along the line he stopped before an exhibit. Number Two had nothing to worry about—she knew the capacity of every woman in the Club. But looking over the shoulder of the guest, she almost gave a gasp. Where had that come from? It must have been placed there after she had made her inspection. The label bore the name “Meenakshi”! Leena’s daughter. Who would have thought she was so clever at this work? Leena was close behind, her face excited, and, looking at her, Number Two felt a sinking in the pit of her stomach. Her little device was going to fail. Could it be that Leena had used the same trick? That the Section Twelve woman had taken a second assignment?

The Deputy Minister walked along until there was the moment Number Two had been waiting for. He stopped, he stood watching—longer than before; when he moved on, his face had the mark of approval. He must go to the end of the line, though there was little else to see. In a minute he would begin to retrace his steps, his choice made, and he would stop once more before Number Two’s exhibit.

But he passed on. He was now walking hurriedly. He came to the jersey labeled “Meenakshi.”

“This is the best,” he announced.

A hundred pairs of hands started to clap hard. Number Two stood transfixed, thunder on her face. And as the din began to subside, she could hear the undertone of a concerted giggle.

*Deputy Minister!* she hissed inside her. It would have been a different story if the Chief Minister had come. Or even one of the fourteen others with cabinet rank. *Deputy Minister!*

“This is Meenakshi,” said Bhashkar’s voice, introducing the girl to the visitor. “Her brother is an officer in Gurkha Rifles. He graduated from the Military Academy a few months back and is now posted in Ladakh.”

“In Ladakh? Then it’s doubly appropriate that the sister wins the award!” The Deputy Minister gave a smiling nod. Bending over, he scribbled Meenakshi’s name on a blank space in the certificate and added his signature at the bottom.
There had to be a change in the program. Let the donations come before lunch, the visitor suggested. That would whet—or kill—his appetite; Lohapur Club held him at its mercy.

The scene shifted to the wide veranda set with rows of cane-seated chairs. The PRO whispered to the guest and he responded happily, "That beats my expectation!" He called Lotika's name through the microphone on the green cane table. "I hear you’ll give your gold ornaments, my daughter. My congratulations on your patriotic resolve."

She came forward, resplendent in her mauve sari, slipped the gold bangles over her wrists, and laid them before the visitor who was now on his feet. The earrings stuck in the pierced lobes, and took much more time to be stripped. That was apparently all. The mother, standing ten yards away, shook her head in disapproval. Stingy! She hadn’t worn the slim neck chain lest she had to part with it. Bangles, earrings—more than enough, she had reckoned.

"I can see another piece, my daughter." A plump finger rose, pointing to her neck. "It’s beautiful. Your offer is to give all you have on your person—"

Number Two, astounded, cast an intent look at her daughter’s throat, and her eyes grew startled. Almost concealed in the sari fold was the pearl collar, seven strings knit together, the most expensive piece of jewelry Lotika owned. But how could it be? The pearls had not been on her before; that was certain. Not when she set out from home. Not in the past hour. It was impossible not to have noticed the necklace.

Her puzzlement stopped in face of the crisis. The Deputy Minister’s fingers had gone to the nape of Lotika’s neck, fidgeting with the clasp. In a moment Lotika would jerk her head away from the threatening hand and all the effect of her donation would be thrown away. There would be barely hushed titters.

"I know you will not deny me, my daughter." Having failed to unclasp the ornament, he was now appealing for Lotika’s help.

With her agile mind Number Two made a lightning decision. She nodded to her daughter, who had turned helpless eyes on her, nodded to affirm, "Yes, yes!" And Lotika took the hint and smiled faintly in answer. She stripped off the pearl collar,
laid it on the demanding palm, and joined her hands in a grace-
ful namastay.

That was the chance for the man from Ideal Studio to click
his camera for the third time. The mother's agitated heart eased
to its accustomed rhythm. Disaster was averted, though at a
heavy cost. She turned to Muthuswamy to read his reaction, but
saw an inscrutable visage.

The girl's face showed no regret, no mark of loss, but a
pleased, amused smile. It was as if she had enjoyed herself. She
must have carried the ornament in her handbag and put it on
at the last moment. There seemed to be no other explanation.
But why had she done that? To have actually wanted to give
the pearls away—horrid thought! She had kept her resolve well
hidden and duped her mother. That helpless look! Forcing her
mother into approval. Why all that playacting? Stupid girl. She
had to be more patriotic than her mother. Conceit. It would
serve her right if the pearls were not replaced. That would teach
her a lesson.

But... couldn't it be that she was playing for big stakes?
No better way to draw upon herself more limelight.

Bhashkar had to see. He could not fail to be impressed this
time. Any Section Twelve girl could knit a good woolen jersey.
Who else in Lohapur could give such pearls to the fund? Not
Leena's daughter. It was still to be seen what she was going to
donate.... Lotika, glamorous in mauve, and Bhashkar a bare
yard from her, seated beside the Deputy Minister.

The Deputy Minister's voice was booming from the mike
while his glance swept all over the audience.

"A fine example has been set. Now for all the rest of you.
Every mother—every daughter—"

They walked up one by one, placing donations on the table.
Gold. Cash. Checks. At last the big voice came again:

"The last country in the world from whom we could expect
a stab in the back was China. That is why we left our frontiers
in the north almost unguarded. We never saw the need of
raising a single mountain division of infantry. We built no roads
in that terrain. And now we have this shameful attack on our
freedom, our democratic values, our philosophy of international
peace and progress—and, above all else, our fight against poverty, our hard struggle to build up the country’s economy. A supreme effort alone can meet the challenge. That effort is going to be made. The soul of the people has been stirred to a new awakening.”

A uniformed messenger came up to the PRO seated close to the visitor and handed him a grayish envelope, obviously a telegram. Absorbed in the speech, Mullick let the envelope lie on the table, unopened.

“The enemy has no scruples whatever. Let me tell you about an incident that happened on the first day of the attack. A Chinese patrol in Namka Chu Valley yelled across a deep chasm to our soldiers entrenched on the other side: ‘Hindi-Cheeni bhai bhai!’ The familiar slogan of brotherhood that used to be on every tongue in India for a decade. The effect was magical. In an instant our soldiers sprang out of the trench and answered in one voice, ‘Hindi-Cheeni bhai bhai!’ War between the two peoples was a myth! . . . Then the rifles were barking from beyond the chasm. Our men were the easiest of targets.”

Anguished horror burst in a cry from the audience. At that moment Leena, looking at her husband, saw the deathly pallor on his face bent over a pink sheet of paper. The dreadful thought that struck her was a piercing knife blade.

“No!” she breathed to herself, trembling from head to foot. “No!”

The fingers clutching the pink sheet writhed as if in uncontrollable agony. The words from the teleprinter said:

“The Government of India regrets to inform you that Lieutenant N. Mullick of the Gurkha Rifles is reported missing in Ladakh and believed killed in action.”
Chapter

Thirty-Two

BHASHKAR HAD FOUGHT HIS PRIVATE BATTLE WITH MAO TSE-TUNG. HOW COULD HE PERMIT THIS WORSHIP IN HIS HOUSE? THE PORTRAIT WAS NOT MERELY PAPER AND COLORED INK. IT WAS FEELING. IT WAS IDEOLOGY.

THE INCONGRUOUS THOUGHT CAME UPON HIM THAT GANDHI WOULD NOT HAVE FORBIDDEN THE WORSHIP—IN HIS RECKONING THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN VIOLENCE. BUT BHASKAR WAS NOT AVERSE TO VIOLENCE.

SOMETHING APART FROM PHILOSOPHY TIED HIS HANDS. HE COULD NOT BEAR TO SEE THE CHILDREN HURT. HOW COULD HE MAKE THEM UNDERSTAND?

HE SPOKE TO RUPA, SEEKING HER ASSISTANCE TO RESOLVE THE PROBLEM.

RUPA SAID: "THOSE CHILDREN DO WHAT THEY’VE BEEN TAUGHT FROM INFANCY; LIKE MILLIONS OF OTHERS IN CHINA AND OUTSIDE. WHY SHOULD THAT BOTHER YOU?"

"THERE ARE SUCH THINGS AS SYMBOLS. CERTAIN SYMBOLS ARE REPULSIVE."

"MAO TSE-TUNG POSES AS A SYMBOL OF GOODNESS. HE SITS ENTHRONED IN A SANCTUM FROM WHICH THE ANCIENT GODS HAVE BEEN OUSTED. THAT’S NOT FOR US TO QUESTION. IT’S CHINA’S OWN HEADACHE."

"THOSE CHILDREN ARE ON INDIAN SOIL. INDIA IS AT WAR WITH CHINA."

RUPA SMILED. "YOU’RE NOT AT WAR WITH THE FIVE GIRLS. THEY’VE BEEN BROUGHT UP IN A CERTAIN ORTHODOX FAITH. ATTACK THAT FAITH, AND THEY WILL SIMPLY DESPISE YOU. IT’S BETTER THAT YOU ARE WINNING THEIR LOVE. LOVE IS MORE POTENT THAN ROUTINE RITUAL IMPOSED BY A
cult. One day you will be more to those children than Mao Tse-
tung.” She stopped. “You are laughing at me, I know.”
“There’s something that makes me wonder.”
Rupa waited.
This was the time for the question to be asked, one that had
been in his thoughts for several days. “The twins call you
Mother?”
She gave him an intent look. “Unmarried mother—that
troubles you? No wonder! What if I have those for my own?”
“I don’t understand—”
“Aadopt them.”
He stared at her. She couldn’t be serious. “Not both!” He
spoke in lighthearted banter.
“Why not? Since both love me, both call me Mother.”
“Ah To may have his own ideas about his children. He will
be back from detention any day.”
“Five children. He cannot object to the little ones finding
a mother. They are so helpless, poor things!”
“Not an Indian mother.” The jesting voice now contained
a note of concern. Rupa could be so imponderable.
He saw the darkness that now lay upon the vast masses of
two neighboring peoples, enveloping both; it had seeped into
this household. The five children kneeling in prayer to Mao
Tse-tung, becoming aliens by that gesture. He had tried to make
his anger a bludgeon with which to beat off his fondness. But the
fondness had grown to be a tenderness.
A new insight had come—he had begun to understand
Satyajit. Some of the things he stood for.
But Rupa—she could not be complete with that one tender-
ness alone. There had to be other things in a woman’s life. When
she married . . .
“What’s wrong with an Indian mother?” Rupa demanded.
“Ah To, surely, wants to see his children happy.”
“Your husband-to-be—he may not like your adopted
children.”
“What husband!” she said scornfully, and tiny wrinkles
grew under her eyelids. “Not to like such children.” Her glance
on his face was intent. “There’s a surprise for you.”
“Surprise—for me?”
“Listen. Yesterday I discovered that Erh-ku had scratched out her name on the cover of all her exercise books. In its place she had written—” A dramatic pause!

“Middle Finger,” Bhashkar supplied. “That’s no surprise.”

“Erh-ku Roy!” Rupa breathed.

“Roy?”

“In a child’s simple way Erh-ku has changed her identity. She has turned herself into one of us. I had to talk with her when we were alone. She told me she would like to go back to school. Even though her elder sisters wouldn’t. ‘What if the girls sneer at you?’ I asked. She answered. ‘No-o!’ I said, ‘You mean they won’t sneer at you? How can you be so sure?’ ‘As Erh-ku—yes. As Erh-ku Roy—no!’ That was what she said.”

In astonishment, Bhashkar recalled the girl. She had become attached to him, he knew. Every day after sunset she stood at the gate of the bungalow, waiting for his return. He would stop the car, open the front door. “Get in.” She sat nestling against him, content with the brief ride along the driveway.

The portrait of Mao Tse-tung could have no real meaning for a girl named Erh-ku Roy!

“Those children—the twins don’t count—they no longer have their old solidarity,” Rupa resumed. “Chang-ngo and Nu-hsin still try to maintain what may be called their heritage, the influence of their home life. Erh-ku has her roots more in India than in China, and her attachment to you makes those roots stronger. She will be real trouble for her father in the years ahead.” Rupa saddened. “Suffering will be her lot when she’s older.”

Those last words of Rupa’s moved Bhashkar strongly. He did not want Erh-ku to suffer because of her new-found loyalty.

Next day, in the office, Mrs. Mehra came to the subject of the five children.

“I went to see Ah To in prison,” she remarked as she was leaving his room with the contents of the out tray. “You know, sir, the poor fellow was not very happy about the arrangements for his children. ‘The CE has no wife,’ he said.”

Mrs. Mehra had kept her lynx eyes turned upon his house, Bhashkar felt sure. To have done one good deed, to have found shelter for the children, could not be enough. It was likely that
Ramlal came to Steelhouse every day—but not with the Thermos alone; he came loaded with the day’s news.

“That’s understandable, Mrs. Mehra. I, in Ah To’s place—”

“You have his place, sir. So I told Ah To. The children have found in you a second father. It’s good to be a father, sir. I don’t have to tell you that.”

“You don’t,” he agreed. “I know all about it. The feelings of a proud father of five children.”

She beamed. “That’s it, sir. After all, you advertised for a bride, and went over all the replies in their condensed, tabulated form.”

“Go on.” He encouraged her with a nod.

“You kept them on your table a long time, trying to make up your mind. Then something happened, and I had to destroy that file.”

“What happened?”

Her face grew pensive. “Something happened and yet it hardly happened.”

“That’s crystal clear.” He waited for her to continue. What did she mean? Was she thinking of Sumita? Sumita had given her books to read, writings of Gandhi and Satyajit. Mrs. Mehra had passed them on to him. The midnight hours he had spent on them were far from fruitless.

“Poor Ah To!” she cried irrelevantly. “He had wanted sons, but every time it was a daughter. Two daughters together—the final touch—and then the wife gone.”

Restlessness seized him when Mrs. Mehra had left—these days he suffered often from that malady. His mind would not focus on his work. He tried hard, and was foiled. Exasperated, he sat back in his chair and made it swivel, left and right, left and right. The clock in the tower struck; it was four-thirty. Only four-thirty, and he was utterly exhausted. Steelhouse closed at five, but he seldom left his desk until two hours later. The clock struck again, and he gave up the struggle. He walked out of his office. Scores of men as they poured out of Steelhouse looked at him in wonder. This was so unlike the CE! But his face bore marks of heavy strain.

It was after he had started the car that he made his decision. He would see Sumita’s mother. That would do him good, he felt
sure. That would also be a chance to return Sumita's books—they had been with him long enough. They had to be collected from his bungalow.

He drew up at the porch. When he returned with the volumes in hand, there was Erh-ku standing by, gazing at the big blue car wistfully. She would love to be taken out for a drive.

"Erh-ku Roy!" He opened the car door. "Come along! No, first go and tell your sisters that you'll be away for two hours."

The car made a detour along the highroad, avoiding the rough track of the meadow. Nestling close, her glance arching toward Bhashkar intermittently, Erh-ku let his contemplative mood be undisturbed.

Sumita had to leave, he was thinking. It was entirely his fault.

The stone woman, mature in her feelings and her knowledge, had cast her spell briefly upon a young girl, forcing an arousal when she was totally unprepared. The reaction had to come, and it was shame, self-reproach, revulsion. She had had to escape then, and Satyajit was a convenient gateway.

The father fixation would henceforth gain further strength from the flight.

His fault? Whatever for?

He had held himself in stern restraint—and that was no part of his nature. He had taken good care not to hurt her sensitivity. But there was a limit. He was prepared to make every allowance. But . . . was she not a woman, after all?

He could absolve himself from guilt, but the pain remained.

The schoolhouse at the eastern end of Main Road—the mother was likely to be here at this time of the day.

Hearing the car, Suruchi came out of the classroom, surprised.

"Bhashkar!"

"This is Erh-ku," he said.

"Erh-ku—what a beautiful name!"

"She is beautiful in every way."

"Have you ever plied a spinning wheel, Erh-ku? No? Come to our spinning class and take your first lesson."

Back in a minute by herself she led Bhashkar to a patch of green facing the schoolhouse. They sat down on the grass.
It was a new Suruchi, not the gentle, soft-eyed woman he had addressed the other day as Mother. She, like Sumita, seemed to have gone over to Satyajit; she was confronting a bailiff who had come to take away all that the village possessed. But she was under the stress of suffering; that was obvious. He understood her, and spoke humbly:

"Why not redeem us, Mother, with the cleansing spirit of the Gandhian village? We are not far away from you."

"Your action belies your words. How can we help you when you won't let us coexist?"

"Coexist—behind impregnable walls?"

A minute's silence; then the resistance with which she was facing him crumbled away.

"Bhashkar, the walls are about to fall! And—I rejoice!"

"You, Mother?"

Silence again. Then, abruptly, she was recounting Jhanak's story. Her revolt against Gandhigram. The dilemma in which Suruchi herself was caught. At heart she was in sympathy with Jhanak.

She saw disbelief in his face, rose abruptly, and moving to the veranda's edge, called, "Jhanak!" and again, "Jhanak!"

The dark girl appeared at the classroom door, looking perplexed.

"Step down, Jhanak. This is the CE of Steeltown. You have heard of him."

She nodded. He was a man of whom Great-Uncle's grandson had spoken with deep respect. "A real man," he had said.

"We have this understanding, you and I: you can go to Steeltown at your will. In course of time other girls will follow your example. The Meadow will cease to be a wall. All this I repeat for the CE to hear. This is what he wants to happen."

The girl nodded, silent, and the doubt she had felt before found voice from Bhashkar.

"The village council cannot accept this position. It cannot let one of its basic principles be violated."

"Then I must disagree with the village council."

"You will disagree with Satyajit?"

She gave affirmation with a smile.

But he persisted: "Satyajit is something more than an in-
dividual; he is a symbol of one element of India. The strident revivalism. How are you going to oppose him, Mother?"

"With another symbol. With Jhanak."

Why not with Sumita? he would have liked to ask her. Why had she not thought of that? Or had she? That was it. She never had a hand in molding Sumita's mind and her destiny. She had been a mere onlooker in all the years past, watching Sumita turn more and more into the image conceived by Satyajit.

So it had to be Jhanak. Satyajit meant nothing to Jhanak.

He turned and faced the dark girl, a large red hibiscus tucked in her pile of sooty hair. Her eyes met his and did not drop. There was a kind of smoldering in the depths of those eyes, he felt. Jhanak would want a great deal from life, and she would stop at nothing to fulfill her demands. That way she was Steeltown! Curious, that a Steeltown figure stood here in the Gandhian village and was ready to act decisively.

"Are you sure of your choice, Jhanak? He who is called Great-Uncle's grandson?"

Her answer confirmed what he had almost instinctively felt.

"He!"

That one word was all she spoke, but the glint in her eye was half amusement, half contempt. Great-Uncle's grandson would not find life easy with Jhanak for his spouse. Life did not have to be easy, anyway. You experimented, and lost. Experienced, and became enriched. That was the modern age. But was Suruchi aware of what she had brought about?

She saw Bhashkar turn to her, and spoke on as though there had been no interruption: "This I believe: An ascetic woman is a contradiction in terms. It's taken me years to realize that plain truth." Her voice grew edged. "How could the village council know about a woman's feelings?"

He stared at her in amazement. If that was how she felt... even Satyajit would be powerless against his wife. His only hope was Sumita. Sumita would stand by his side even if she had to be a contradiction in terms.

Bhashkar wished things had taken a different turn. What drama could arise, with the forces changing sides! Suruchi was the natural ally of Satyajit, not Sumita.

"You and I seem to be on the same side in this combat!"
His smile was warm. How hard it must be for her to go against both her husband and her daughter!

But, to his surprise, she shook her head firmly. "I have to be against you too, Bhashkar. For me, this is a three-cornered fight."

He saddened for her. The loneliness of it all, the unshared pain, the perpetual heartbreak.

Erh-ku emerged from the doorway with a spinning wheel in her hands.

"This they gave me," she announced, pride in her voice and face.

With a quick change of mood, Suruchi cried blithely: "The spinning wheel enters the bungalow of the CE of Steeltown. Bhashkar, beware!"

Then Bhashkar remembered the books on the car seat. "A moment." He hurried off, and returned with the volumes.

"They are Sumita's. They came to me from Mrs. Mehra's hands."

"I have written to her, Bhashkar. I have explained everything."

His answer was a slight shrug of his shoulders, and his heart was bitter.

He drove back toward the highroad. "Going home?" Erh-ku asked, the spinning wheel on her lap.

"As you wish." He waited for her decision.

She gave one uncertain glance at the wheel and one at the road.

He laughed. "We can go along the road another time. I see how you feel about your new treasure. Have they given you some cotton also?"

There it was, in a pocket of her frock.

Not even an hour had passed when the big car was again at the porch. Erh-ku dashed away, the spinning wheel pressed against her body. Bhashkar walked toward his bedroom—he would lie down for a while. He pushed the door open, and stood still. An amazing sight met his eyes. Rupa lay face up on his bed, with no clothes on except her panties, her arms spread-eagled as though she were poised for flight like a bird. Nu-hsın was pressing the exposed limbs, and as her hands roughly
kneaded the belly with its threat of a curve, Rupa gave a small cry. The cry trailed off into a gasp—she had seen Bhashkar at the doorway!

She tried to cover herself with her hands. Knowing the inadequacy of the gesture, she rolled over, face flaming, and pushed deep into the pillow. Then Nu-hsin turned grave eyes upon the intruder.

"Go—sir," she commanded.

But he could not take his eyes from Rupa. He seemed entranced.

"My bedroom, my bed—"

"Go, sir, for two minutes, so that Rupa-Sister can get up and dress."

Surprisingly, Rupa offered a compromise. Her mouth lifted an inch from the pillow it had stained, and she cried, softly: "He only has to turn round. I'll slip into the bathroom with my clothes."

The scent on his bed was accounted for, he thought, as he stood with his face turned away. A woman scent—this wasn't the first time Rupa had lain on that bed, almost naked. As he felt in his limbs the rush of heat, he heard the door behind him bang.

The voice from the bathroom had a slight tremor: "I'm sorry your bed's been contaminated. I'll change the sheets in a minute."

He sat down at the edge of the bed and let his breath be filled with contamination! The Rupa scent. The urge to see her again without her clothes made him whirl toward the closed door. I can't . . . I won't wait—he felt the rage of his demand, and took two steps forward. Why had he waited all these days?

Then he saw the children quietly gazing at him, and stopped, frowning, wishing they were gone. Why wouldn't they walk out, leave him alone? In that instant the door opened, and there she was, wearing a plain white cotton sari, her face tranquil. Tranquil, as though nothing had happened. She walked to the bed and bent over, starting to pull off the pillowcase.

"Don't, Rupa!"

She turned to him, bewildered. What did he mean?

Then, in a flash, she knew.
They stared at each other, and at the bare-limbed one lying flat on her back, trying to cover herself with her hands. Color splashed to her face. The scent came in a stronger whiff, the Rupa scent.

He wanted to reach out and crush her in his arms. He could hardly contain himself.

"Rupa—"

Her eyes dropped; the color in her face lingered and deepened. But she looked up in a moment, and there was a peculiar sadness in her glance. And the thought struck him that this was not the way she had wanted to make her impact. The bare-limbed one on the bed lay between her and himself—a bridge for him but for her a barrier.

It was up to him to make of the barrier a bridge for her, too.

A thin voice broke upon his fantasy. It was Tzu-chun. She was waddling to the bedside, crying, "Throw!" Finding no response, she made pantomime with arms upflung. "Throw . . . throw!"

Absently, mechanically, he picked up Tzu-chun and threw her in the air. Screaming with excitement, she went up and dropped thumping on the soft spring bed.

"More!" This had become an everyday game with her: "More!"

Ting-ling stood close by, watching with indifference. In a minute she grew impatient. "Face!" her voice came. "Make a face!" He turned to her in sharp anger. He needed to be alone with Rupa. The older girls were gone now. Only the little ones remained.

Her eyes shone blackly with the ecstasy of expectation. He watched, and his anger melted away. He warmed toward the child, ready for her command. He started to make faces.

Ting-ling giggled, trying to copy his expression. And this time it was Tzu-chun who was unimpressed; she sat grave-eyed and quiet.

"Rupa, your turn. Can you make faces like that?" But those were hardly the words he wanted to say.

"I can try," Rupa offered.

It was no good. No one laughed. She makes herself only
more lovely, he thought. He was restless again, wanting her. Let the children leave the room. Then ... then .

The twins climbed to Rupa's lap, one on each side of her, and seated themselves firmly.

The Rupa scent hung on in the air a while yet and then it was dissipated.
THE IMMENSE GRANITE SPUR SEEMED TO OVERHANG THE SMALL town. Down below was the thickly carpeted Kangra Valley edging over to naked rugged foothills. The road curving upward was lined with tall rhododendrons in full blossom and crowded with Tibetans—saffron-clad lamas, nomads in rags, Khambu warriors with high boots and battered hats. Visitors came constantly to the quiet mountain town to seek the blessing of His Holiness. The Dalai Lama lived appropriately in this scene of beauty and peace that could well be a backyard of his own homeland, Tibet itself. Not quite. For beauty and peace are inseparably mixed. When peace dies, beauty also must cease. In his moods of reminiscent gloom, the Dalai Lama was chilled by the vision of the many deaths in Tibet—death by violence—not of people alone, nor of faith and the five freedoms alone. The death of a hundred earthbound social values. The death of a thousand elementary decencies, part of the civilized conscience of humanity.

Such was the impression Satyajit carried with him after he had met His Holiness several times in the sprawling bungalow on the hillcrest, Swarg Ashram, Celestial Abode. His heart had warmed toward this youth—vested with divinity in his own land, he was unpretentious, almost humble. He had asked many questions about Gandhi, speaking with knowledge, expressing the wish that he had met the greatest man of the age. He felt sure that, had Gandhi been alive today, he would have launched a
nonviolent movement for the liberation of the people of Tibet. The Dalai Lama himself had striven to be a true Buddhist fully committed to nonviolence. That had not been easy for him when the Chinese invaded his country. Even his own people had not shared his disapproval of armed self-defense.

It was toward the end of their first half hour together that the Dalai Lama had spoken bluntly:

"Now that India also faces this peril, will there be more understanding of what the unfortunate people of Tibet have borne? Will the world begin to give response?"

Satyajit’s answer had been hesitant: "You have revealed yourself well in your writings. Even so, our doubts are not dispelled. What has alienated us from the Tibetan way of life is the semifeudal pattern of society. A relic of the old world cannot live within the shell of the new; under the hard pressures it’s bound to be crushed into pulp."

"You are right, sir," the Dalai Lama agreed. "But you must take note of the fact that we were at a point of departure, ready for a new beginning, when the Chinese invaded our land. The reforms we were about to initiate had to come slowly, though; the Tibetan people were not ready for a total uprooting from the traditions on which so much of their life history as a nation was based. Slow adjustment to new realities seemed to us the best way."

The Tibetan who was interpreting His Holiness in English—Kusung Phodrang was his name—could not help adding his own sharp comment: "Those arch-hypocrites who have cynically betrayed Karl Marx even while they pretend to be Marxists! Their forefathers had taken Tibet by military conquest; therefore, that country and its people are China’s legitimate inheritance. They would own Tibet body and soul, and destroy both. They would commit genocide on a stupendous scale, replacing the dead Tibetans by Han settlers from China."

The Dalai Lama nodded assent—he had made good progress learning English—and continued the topic: "India’s Prime Minister has said: ‘We had taken it almost for granted that this type of aggression had become a thing of the past.’ He meant aggression against India. But—" His Highness paused, a melancholy smile on his face. Obviously, he felt that it would be
unseemly to make any strong comment on the generous host who had given him political asylum. That grant of asylum was said to be the root of India’s present trouble: it had brought upon the country the vengeful wrath of Peking. But it could hardly be so very simple. The Dalai Lama or his physical embodiment, which the Chinese leaders wanted to seize and destroy, was not so very important. They could not have thrown away the friendship of four hundred million people except for a far stronger reason.

“I firmly believe that as long as the Chinese remain in occupation of Tibet, there will be a threat to the peace and progress of countries in Southeast Asia,” His Holiness said. Hastening to add: “But believe me, sir, I have not the least ill-feeling toward the common people of China—there are no better people. I fully realize that a nation cannot be held responsible for the crimes committed by a group of individuals.”

Yes, in spite of the atrocities he had witnessed, he had kept his heart free of bitterness. What else was there for a Buddhist? In later interviews he had kept clear of politics and spoken only of the religious life of his people. Nowhere else in the world was Buddhism a living faith for an entire nation. The basic teachings of the Buddha were the core of that faith; the commentaries that Tibetan scholars had added in the course of the ages had made no meaningful alteration.

Satyajit, about to leave the mountain resort, felt that his two weeks had been well spent. In these last few hours here, walking down toward the Civil Station, he would have liked to be alone. To rest his eyes on the towering rock wall of the Dhaulah Dhar and lose himself! But Bireswar, back for a day, companioning him, claimed his thoughts—thoughts that had no relation to the eternal values. Bireswar was anxious to give his friend the latest news from the battlefront.

Hard-pressed Indian troops had not yet been able to stop the Chinese advance on any sector, but they had scored local successes by counterattacking. Peking had rejected President Nasser’s four-point formula aimed at settling the conflict. The enemy was massing heavily in the Pangong Lake area for a major onslaught on Chushul, India’s main base in southern Ladakh, with an airstrip at a height of fourteen thousand feet. They had
already taken positions on the surrounding hills, set up machine-gun nests to fire on Indian supply planes using the airstrip. They were now bringing tanks and field guns for a frontal attack.

There was one surprising item of news: Peace-loving China had launched a major propaganda offensive aimed at stiffening Cuban resistance to unconditional withdrawal of Soviet missiles from the island!

“We’ve had heated discussions in the lobby of the House,” Bireswar said. “Could it be that the Chinese launched their attack on India while expecting Cuba to explode within a space of days into nuclear war? The United States, tied down to the struggle for its own survival, could not possibly come to India’s aid. The timing of the attack points to that conclusion. A month more, and the mountain passes in the eastern sector will begin to get snow-blocked.”

“So the military decision has to be a matter of weeks—isn’t that it?”

“Yes. Chinese anger over the Soviet peace move in Cuba becomes understandable in this context. The Russians have let them down, upset their grand Asian design by avoiding a nuclear war.”

Satyajit clutched at the last straw of disbelief. “Are you fully convinced that they want a great deal more than a new border demarcation—a few thousand square miles of barren rock? Can’t you give them at least the benefit of doubt? We have so much to gain through accommodation. Our history in the ages to come hangs on that fragile thread.”

“Wishful thinking could not help us in the past years. We cannot alter facts by the simple device of ignoring them. Reliable reports say that about a sixth of the total number of motor trucks on the Chinese mainland are committed to this invasion. Think of the enormous cost. All that, simply to pull down Nehru’s prestige a peg or two? Or punch holes in the McMahon Line? No. This invasion must be part of a far-flung design.”

He waited for Satyajit’s comment, but there was none. He resumed:

“Trotsky has come to Peking. That way, you may say, it isn’t a simple repetition of the old-world imperialism. But even Trotsky wouldn’t approve of Mao Tse-tung; the ultra-chauvinism,
the naked self-interest that's at the back of China's expansionism. They have great faith in the power of propaganda to turn a black lie into truth. They have been beaming fourteen English and three Hindi broadcasts to India every day, in the hope of winning over some of the leftist elements—they've had success in Indonesia. The Chinese Embassy in New Delhi is playing its part in full measure. Yet, as you know, even the Communist Party of India has denounced the aggression."

Satyajit turned his face to look eastward. The hinterland was almost a stone's throw away. Ladakh was not far either, except for the cliff walls. If you were a bird—

Bireswar was speaking again.

"Two other views—less dramatic—have been heard in the House. One: China will do everything in its power to stop our economic progress lest it become the strongest argument for democracy in Asia. Two: China will try hard to break Afro-Asian solidarity, while professing to swear by that concept. Unless India is discredited, China cannot set up its grand puppet show in Asia and Africa!" He cut short, ears pricked, listening to far voices. Presently, both of them were looking valleyward.

The chorus of shouting voices grew stronger: Chou En-lai, hai hai! ... Chou En-lai, hai hai!

A minute passed before the procession came into view, having turned a corner on the road below as it climbed out of the tree-clad valley and ran parallel twenty feet down. Teen-age boys and girls with the semi-Mongoloid faces and eyes of the northern hill tribes. Sons and daughters of working people, as their shabby clothes indicated—the boys wore dyed cotton trousers ending halfway between knee and ankle, and the girls had quilted jackets. Placards on tall bamboo poles proclaimed, "Hands off our sacred frontier!" ... "Chinese, get off our Indian earth!" The boys beat their chests in a united demonstration of grief, and their bodies shook in the gust of lamentation. The faces of the girls had smudges of tears; their hair was unbound and streaming down. But the amazing sight was the centerpiece. Six young people carried a bier on which a round-faced boy with stronger Mongol features than the others lay motionless on his back, eyes closed.

"Dead?" Satyajit cried in alarm.
Bireshwar broke into laughter. For in that instant the boy had opened his eyes, peering up at them on the road above. Quickly he dropped his eyelids, but the fleeting grin on his face was unmistakable.

"He is Chou En-lai, poor fellow. Why, the likeness is there—do you see that, Satyajit?" They were walking in step with the procession. "Oh, I remember. This is Defense of India Day. There will be hundreds of street processions and meetings all over the country. But who would have expected such originality in this sleepy town!"

"Those words—hai-hai?"

"The traditional exclamation of grieving. They grieve for the friendship with China that’s dead and gone. The bier with our young Chou En-lai is an emblem of what’s been lost." He stopped. "Look, Satyajit!"

One of the bearers had moved out and had lighted a country cigarette. He gave it two deep pulls and stuck it in the mouth of the youngster on the bier. The two grinned at each other. Then the pallbearer returned to his place.

"We mustn’t be unkind to Chou-jí," he said to his companions. "Eyes closed. Nothing to do. Let his throat feel soothed."

Protest came from the others. "How do you know Chou-jí smokes? He must not be pushed into a bad habit at the age of sixty or seventy!"

"Kindness—he doesn’t understand that. He thinks it’s our Indian weakness. He gloats, more ready to show his big fist. Isn’t that true?"

"True. Take the smoke out of his mouth."

Bireshwar, peering down, saw the desperate glow of the cigarette as the boy gave it pull after pull; but he need not have panicked.

"Let Chou-jí think what he will," came a dissident voice. "We are what we are. We cannot be what he is. We in this country are no big-fisted bullies!"

Silence, and then a hum of assent. "Let Chou-jí enjoy his smoke." The marching feet passed on.

Bireshwar was speaking thoughtfully: "Kindness, weakness—are they the same word? Could Christ have emasculated his fol-
lowers when he bade them love their enemies? They had no option later but to disobey. Could the Buddha have opened the gates of India to hordes of alien invaders when he preached his gospel of the universal brotherhood of man?"

Satyajit smiled. "That isn’t your true belief, Bires!" But Bireswar had stepped back to the third century before Christ.

Emperor Asoka was clad in the yellow garb of a Buddhist monk. The sword he had wielded years back, extending the empire by a fierce act of aggression, lay sheathed for all time. The heavy slaughter on the Kalinga battlefield had been followed by an anguish of repentance. The message of the Buddha had healed the hurt spirit and vested it with more richness than any king in history ever possessed. Compassion replaced state-craft. Moral grandeur hustled out armed power—the power that the founder of the dynasty, Chandragupta Maurya, had created.

"All men are my children, and just as I desire for my children that they may obtain every kind of welfare and happiness both in this world and the next, so I desire for all men."

Saffron-clad monks walked thousands of miles bearing the new humanism—across the seas to Pegu and the Eastern Archipelago, across the mountains to Central Asia, to Greek-rulled Egypt and Syria. Demetrios with his tall Bactrian warriors; the Greeks had held Punjab, India’s northernmost province, for a moment of historic time. In the next moments of time there were the Sakas, the Indo-Parthians, the Kushans, and other foreign hordes, one after the other.

Invaders had come before Asoka. When Chandragupta Maurya was on the throne, Seleucus, a general of Alexander the Great, had pounded on India’s door. Chandragupta had defeated him, made him buy peace in exchange for Greek territory and the hand of Helen, his young daughter. The lesson learned, the Greeks had left India alone. But then, Chandragupta’s grandson, Asoka the Great, the supreme Buddhist of all time, he who called all men on earth his children . . .

The drone of an aircraft engine pulled Bireswar back from the Asokan age. A lone helicopter was passing in the sky, flying at a low speed toward the great blue mass of the Dhaula Dhar.

"It should gain height," Satyajit’s anxious voice came, "or else it may hit the mountainside—"
"Those steel hawks know their way about." But the face shadowed quickly. "Could it be that the pilot of that helicopter—"

Satyajit waited. "What about the pilot?"

Bireswar was gazing skyward. A minute passed before he spoke again. The plane was now lost to view in a bank of fleecy cloud.

"Just before I left New Delhi I heard that Debes had received a posting order. Because of the critical turn in the war, the balance of his leave had been canceled. My sister spoke to me on the phone. She was no longer the major general! Simply an anxious mother."

"That's understandable, Bires."

"Later in the day I had a talk with Sumita. It was a new Sumita I saw. She was . . . she was strangely like her mother . . . Like Suruchi."

Satyajit's voice was curiously humble. "The new Sumita—she is like her mother? In what way, Bires?"

He gave no answer. He seemed far away.

"Bires!"

Startled, he turned to the other. "Yes, Satyajit?"

"Tell me."

"Tell you what? Oh, of course." Pause again. The look of abstraction faded slowly. "The new Sumita is in love with life. She is as her mother must have been at twenty. About the time she married you. Now, it so happens that Sumita—"

Satyajit interrupted. It was Suruchi he wanted to talk about.

"Do you think . . . Suruchi . . . is still what you call in love with life? In the sense you mean?"

"Try to understand her. All these years you have forced upon her a heavy guiding hand. It's time now that you gave her a chance. Let the guiding hand be hers. Surrender yourself to her, completely. Then all will be well, Satyajit."

"Bires—" Satyajit's agitated fingers clasped his friend's arm. But the words he wanted to say stuck in his throat. And Bireswar was again looking skyward. The little plane had cleared the cloudbank. It was close to the mountain mass, apparently seeking a gap between the two peaks.

"I thought it was Debes up there." Bireswar shook his head,
having realized the absurdity of his thought. "Stupid of me! There are scores of helicopters in the Indian Air Force. Perhaps hundreds. Hundreds of our young pilots must be flying their machines this way to the Himalayan battlefield."

All the same, his eyes under the graying brows held onto the lone shape in the sky, as though in expectation of some positive response.