Chapter
THIRTY-FOUR

The Brigadier's wife had lost interest in her benevolent mission at the canteen soon after her encounter with the jawans.

One batch of men who came half an hour after she had taken charge were mere roadbuilders. That made her unhappy. The next to appear—it was late in the afternoon—was a unit of the medical field service. But Mrs. Chatterjee still hoped for the best, and turned her energies to improving the look of the canteen itself. Nandini was as sloppy as ever. Things lay helter-skelter. Why, there were not even proper tables on which to keep the bowls of food; wooden planks placed on columns of brick had to serve the purpose. Tablecloths should have been there anyway—they would have made all the difference. Having vented her disapproval, Mrs. Chatterjee decided that she would give two or three of her own tablecloths to the canteen, even though they were the best of linen. She would also bring a vase of flowers to add a little color. Tomorrow—

"Tomorrow?" Nandini stared at her mother when she had spoken. Hard to believe Mother would come again. But then, Mrs. Chatterjee had not given up hope that "real jawans" would soon be passing through Delhi Station and that they would be here in the canteen for a meal. She was not discouraged even when the day's last arrivals turned out to be maintenance men for motor vehicles. Tomorrow the real jawans would come.

So they did. Air Force ground crew. They would report at Palam and be flown forthwith to high-altitude airstrips beyond

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long stretches of snowfields, vast glaciers. They had only a half hour in which to have a hurried meal.

Mrs. Chatterjee took up her deferred task of orientation.

“One day you may find yourselves in Daulat Baig Oldi!” She beamed at the row of real jawans—twenty of them—after they had taken a second helping of bread and lentils.

They paused in their eating and gave her a look of surprise. Mrs. Chatterjee hurried to explain, “I mean DBO, of course!” A name often lost itself in its accepted abbreviation.

The men were looking at one another questioningly. All had a perplexed air. Not one of them had heard of DBO, it appeared.

Their officers were to blame. To have neglected to tell the men about the great achievement of the Indian Air Force!

“Our most remote bastion on the western sector of Ladakh, close to the Karakoram Pass, to which the Chinese have already gained access—” Mrs. Chatterjee began. She went on to explain the significance of DBO. Here stood the world’s highest airstrip, seventeen thousand feet above sea level. Infantrymen posted at DBO had lived in almost complete isolation for long stretches—to reach the area by mountain routes was itself a feat. Parachutes made a one-way traffic. Packet aircraft had been operating on advanced landing grounds, but fourteen thousand feet was the limit imposed by the piston engines.

“And how did the Air Force solve the problem?” Her proud glance swept over the line of soldiers as though they were boys in a classroom. “They decided on a bold experimental measure. A Packet aircraft was sent to the big factory in Bangalore and fitted with a ‘jet pack’ manufactured there. Sounds simple enough! Would it work in practice? Installed with the jet engine in addition to its pistons, the Packet went to DBO and made a safe landing on the airstrip that had been prepared. It could easily have crashed. Then the takeoff. Presently, what had been adventure became routine work, and Packets started a regular service between their base and the highest airstrip in the world.” Mrs. Chatterjee’s voice contained a tone of wonderment. “The highest—remember that,” she stressed.

Twenty heads nodded in slow assimilation of the fact. Yes, they would remember that. DBO, several voices muttered, making the name sink into their memory. D—B—O!
“You knew all that, Sumita?” Nandini said, whispering to her friend.

And Sumita returned under her breath, “No!”

“I didn’t, either. Never heard of DBO.”

Mrs. Chatterjee’s alert ears had caught the whispers, and her face was horror-struck. The shame! Especially for one who had a brother in the Air Force! Nandini was fit for nothing better than this canteen. Work that could be done by a paid hand for a small salary. And Mrs. Chatterjee decided that she was wasting her own time. With so much real war work to be done. The National Council of Women seeking her guidance in their share of that work. A central committee of all the women’s associations in the city to be set up and a program formulated. A play to be staged, the proceeds to go to the help of disabled soldiers.

All the same, how deny that the twenty men with Air Force insignia on their uniforms were real jawans? How deny, again, that her time had been well employed in imparting knowledge as essential as military equipment itself? And Mrs. Chatterjee turned to the men once more.

“Take good care not to get frostbitten. Your officers must have told you that much, if nothing else. Up there you'll feel as though you were squeezed between two huge slabs of ice. Take care to have all the warm clothing you can get.”

One of the jawans spoke.

“Heat enough for us up there. The heat of battle! That will keep us warm.”

She shook her head in pity. You could not draw heat from a metaphor! But another jawan had now started to speak:

“This much we know. Evil hands reach out toward our country, our Mother. Only one thing for us to do—hit hard at the evil. Nothing else counts. We don’t look for comfort. Even to think of comfort”—over the moustache the nostrils flared with quick-drawn breath—“when the honor of our Mother—” The blue-capped head shook with vehemence.

Mrs. Chatterjee remained speechless until the men were ready to depart. And the word of farewell she returned to the men was somewhat toneless.

That was the moment Debes chose to make his appearance
—he had been waiting on the crowded side of the platform where a train was soon due, seemingly absorbed in the books and magazines at a stall.

“Sumita has yet to see the Kutb Minar,” he cried brightly. “What luck that you’re here again today, Mother!”

Her answer was stern. “I’m leaving in a minute. And you, Debes, you’re coming with me.”

“I? But . . .”

“You want to know the reason? One: An officer in uniform is out of place here. It’s not his job to run a canteen for passing soldiers. Two—”

“I have no intention of staying here, Mother. I have to show the Kutb Minar to Sumita. Yesterday there wasn’t time enough after the Red Fort. Today we’ll go straight to the tower.”

“Tower? Sumita has no business to go sight-seeing when the country is in a state of emergency. She is not a tourist. In these days she must employ her time usefully.”

He pondered briefly. “That’s it! I’d better take her to—”

“You are not taking her anywhere. She will be here in the canteen, working. And you’ll come with me, Debes. Right now. Those two women don’t want you here, messing around. Do you want him, Nandini?”

“No,” Nandini affirmed.

“Maybe Sumita does.” Debes looked to her hopefully.

“She doesn’t,” his mother snapped, turning to pick up the flower vase she had placed on an improvised stand. “Ready, Debes?” She gave him the vase to carry.

Nandini cried, “You are not taking the flowers away?”

“Yes. You want to know the reason? One—”

“No, no! Take the flowers, Mother. They are out of place here.”

A minute later, mother and son were walking off. The blue-uniformed back on which Sumita held her eyes seemed to stoop a little as it receded down the station platform.

Then Nandini began to laugh, her hand clapped to her mouth in an accustomed gesture.

Sumita looked at her, bewildered. “What is it?”

The laughter ceased as abruptly as it had started.

“Sumita!” The voice had a new ring of intensity.
Eyes on Nandini, Sumita waited. Her heart missed a beat. Why had Nandini become so grave-faced, all at once?

"Tell me, have you—have you ever been in love?"

"Never!" But she grew hesitant with a flash of thought. "How . . . how do I know?" she hastened to add. "Tell me about yourself."

"Have I ever been out of love?" said Nandini, pensive.

Surprised, Sumita demanded: "What do you mean? You met Ashok only four months back, so you've told me. Well, then?"

"I was not born four months back!" Nandini laughed. "Before I met Ashok I was in love with three people—at the same time. I didn't know whom I loved most. Awkward, wasn't it? Ashok settled the problem. All three faded away at his appearance. It seemed to have happened in a moment."

Sumita interposed. "Three people—that couldn't have been love."

"Why not? Love of a kind. There's no precise definition of love, is there? This I must admit, though. When Ashok came on the scene I heard an inner voice say, 'This is the beginning of the end. The end of many loves. Henceforth there will be one, just one.' " She paused, her eyes sharpening on Sumita's face. "Now you know all about me. I know nothing about you. Who was there before Debes?"

"Debes?" Her face was startled. "You don't mean that I . . . ."

"Why not? Debes also seems to be in love."

Sumita was smiling. "Three at a time, or more? How many pillion-riders at present?"

There was something ruthless in Nandini's grave words as she replied: "Debes will have to decide. But why should he? As in my case, no decision is needed, really. A terrific wave will come one day and sweep him away on its crest—helpless."

Sumita hung her head and gave no answer for a long minute. But when she looked up, the cloud in her face had cleared.

"Thank you, Nandini, for telling me," she said humbly. "Yes, you are right. I—I am not for him that terrific wave!"

Nandini smiled at her. "Don't read such a lot of meaning
in my words. How dare I suggest that? How much do I know, after all? What I mean to say is something like this: Any love—yes, any love—is worthwhile in a way. So long as you’re prepared to wait. For, one day, the terrific wave will seize you too, Sumita! Then you will be carried away, helpless, like myself.”

Sumita answered archly: “So much wisdom in that head of yours! Who would think you are no older than twenty!”

The lean face with its wide mouth filled with a grin that made it look impish. “Don’t hesitate to call me overgrown for my years. You can be sure I won’t mind that in the least—I may even take that as a compliment.”

In the days that followed, Sumita tried to look at life with the new vision she had gained. Nandini had touched her mind with the utmost ease, and filled it with her own philosophy. The philosophy should have come to her from Mother, Sumita mused. Strange that she had not helped. Yet her compassion for one like Jhanak was evident. To have let her daughter be isolated, walking a narrow lane blindfolded...

Forgotten moments stirred in her memory, belying the accusation.

One day when she was about fourteen years of age, Mother saw her return from her morning bath in tears. Alarmed, she wanted to know what had happened. Sumita wouldn’t say. She couldn’t. Mother let her cry in silence, holding her protectively in her arms, not pressing the question. Presently she drew back—even at that age she was as tall as Mother—and the tears stopped.

“I hate those—why must I have those?” Two angry fingers jabbed at her growing breasts, and her look was bitter.

The alarm receded from Mother’s face and it filled with love and seemed to become more beautiful than ever.

“Sumita,” she said, “you cannot remain a child for all time. You cannot remain boylike, either. A girl as she grows up faces the law of life. That is nothing to fear. The physical change is only a part of it; equally important is the change within. You’ll get confused and hurt under the force of new-grown feelings, Sumita. But it wouldn’t do to try to stop them.”

She cried sharply, “I don’t want such feelings, Mother.”

“You cannot deny nature! What you’ll need is to understand. To know every urge but not to give in. To be responsive
to the force, and fully controlled. As the days pass, you'll see more and more of what I'm trying to tell you." She gave her daughter a long, thoughtful look. "Maybe you'll never come to me with your problems. You won't even want me to know. You'll wish to be left alone."

"Did you have that kind of problem, Mother?" she had asked. "When you were growing up?"

Mother became abstracted, and swift emotions were stark on her face. At first it was a warm, smiling happiness. But tension replaced that. Tension grew until it was something palpable; you could touch it with your fingers around the sensitive mouth, the pressed lips. And when Sumita could not bear the sight of Mother's pain, she cried, "You don't have to tell me anything, Mother!"

There it had ended.

The other moment was spaced off by several years, even though in recollection the two moments stood close together.

It was her eighteenth birthday. Early in the morning the three sat together on a floormat in Father's room. He did not wish her happiness in the customary way, but spoke an ancient prayer invoking bliss on every created object, animate and inanimate. He asked the honey of bliss to envelop all. His daughter was not entitiled to a private happiness of her own, but she could have a share in what was to be universal and cosmic.

Then it was Mother's turn. She placed her hand on the head bowed before her and, eyes closed, spoke a prayer in her mind, her lips moving in silence. When she opened her eyes they seemed to hold a kind of self-accusation, and she spoke curious words:

"Time for us to realize you are eighteen!"

"Eighteen, of course," said Father.

"Is that all you have to say? You see no meaning in the fact that she is eighteen?" She did not wait for his answer, but with a slightly dramatic gesture turned to a book that lay beside her and from between its pages she took several small slips of paper.

"There!" she cried happily.

"What is it?" Sumita picked up a slip. It was a newspaper clipping, an advertisement. Father also was reading one. Sumita turned to Mother for explanation.
"Each one seeks a bride very much like our daughter. Tall, slim, fair-complexioned. That is the modern style. In our days tall girls used to have trouble finding a groom. If only... if only Sumita had a photograph."

Father understood at last.

"Ruchi," he said, "haven't you realized yet that Sumita wants a life of dedication?"

"No girl wants a life of dedication," Mother countered. "Every girl thinks of a husband and a home of her own."

"Sumita stands apart from the others. The every-girl category does not apply to her." He hastened to add: "I don't say she shouldn't marry. But it will have to be one who shares in her dedication."

"How will you find such a boy? There is no one in this village. She never goes anywhere, not even to Lohapur. Where is the chance—"

"Mother," Sumita interposed, "in this country every girl gets married—there is hardly any exception. What if I don't follow the set path? What if I prefer to be different?"

Suruchi smiled at her daughter, and spoke softly: "No, Sumita, you are not different; you cannot be!" She turned to her husband, and the smile lingered. "You've molded me into something that you have wanted me to be. Now it's the turn of your daughter!"

He stared at her musingly. "I cannot believe that you haven't fulfilled yourself in the new mold, you who have known Gandhi-ji for so many years, you who have helped to create Gandhigram, you who—"

"You are too much of an egoist to understand what you're talking about." He was silenced. Sumita wanted to rush to his side. Father, whose life story was one of endless self-sacrifice, an egoist? Bewildered, she could find nothing to say. A gust of wind blew in through the open window and scattered the press clippings about the floor. No one moved to recover them.

Then Mother rose abruptly to her feet. "The kettle must have started singing on the oven. I'll bring you tea in a minute."

The voice was level, yet Sumita could sense the undertone of deep sadness—was it an acceptance of defeat? She felt an ache
for Mother, and would have followed her out of the room, but Father was speaking again.

"Choose your own way, Sumita. I don’t enjoy feeling guilty! Perhaps your Mother is right."

She returned to him instantly; he needed her, and there was nothing that she could withhold.

"I have chosen my way. I am old enough to know my mind. I don’t have to seek the great glory that belongs to our hundred million housewives."

Years had to pass before she gained a new vision, and it was a gift from—Nandini. But that was because so much had happened to her of late, outweighing the cool self-satisfaction in which she had lived. The dedication gone, leaving a vacuum.

If only Mother had known about it!

The new vision made her relations with Debes easier; companionship was all. There were also the other officers at the Defense Services Club where he took her on most evenings. So many replicas of Debes! Each, apparently, was well supplied with pillion-riders. Those riders did not always keep to the same pillions. Sumita, avid for experience of the new world, absorbed this pattern of life. There was no question for her to approve or disapprove. All that she wanted was to see, to know, to understand. Later, back in Gandhigram, she would sort out the facts and weigh them in the balance of values. Unless, meanwhile, that balance had broken down!

Back in Gandhigram—when would that be? Father was still away in the hill town. Could it be that his ordeal was deferred for the duration of the war? That Bhashkar would stay his hand? It was hard to say how long the war would continue. Months? Years? But Father must return home soon. She, also. A matter of days, maybe.

It was not likely that she would face Bhashkar ever again. The brief temple scene was now easy to understand in the context of her Delhi experience. Delhi and Lohapur were alike in spirit. A scooter instead of a jeep. She had tried hard to know the city so that she could, through a proxy as it were, know Bhashkar.

Deep depression clutched her heart because of her newly
gained knowledge of life. She had no idea about Bhashkar's other "pillion-riders." Had he taken them also to the abandoned temple and shown them the stone lovers? A view of reality—that's what he had said to her the first time, and she had not known what he meant. To think that it was she who had led him to the reality!

There was a curious burning in her heart as she saw Bhashkar's "pillion-riders," who stood one by one in the alcove and grew fused with the image they faced. She fought off the ache, working hard all day in the canteen, losing herself in the early hours of the night in the pattern of Club life. Tired, she fell asleep as soon as she went to bed. But once in a while, when sleep would not come, the burning in her heart grew fierce, and consumed all else.

The visit to the Minar had not come off yet. Next Sunday was the date set. But the day before, Debes came hurrying down the platform, his face unusually excited. He stepped up to Sumita and with a quick, unexpected gesture pulled a steel pin from her pile of braided hair. Dropping the pin in his pocket, he answered her astonished look with: "We in the Air Force are a superstitious lot, you know? We have our faith in tokens."

"What a token!" said Nandini, scoffing.
"I can't think of one more precious."
"Why this hurry to get a token, anyway!"
"There's a hurry, Nandini. My leave's been canceled. I fly to the front at early dawn—tomorrow."
Chapter

THIRTY-FIVE

WHAT! NOT READY YET?” RUPA CAME HUSTLING INTO THE four-bed room at the bungalow’s east corner and saw the children, faces washed and hair tidy, still busy with their clothes. She sat down on the bed which the twins shared. “The circus starts at six-thirty. You mustn’t miss Item One: tiger tamer with her pet animal.”

Excitement athrob in her voice—was that because of the pleasure she was about to give to the children? Seats had been booked for them in advance. For the ayah too. They could not leave the ayah alone in the house because of her temper; the day before, she had had a fight with Ramlal in the kitchen. The cook in a mood of mischief had taunted her for serving a “Cheeni spy.” She had said in answer that her sole concern was the children—and all children were creatures of innocence. Ramlal dropped other mocking words, and the ayah, roused at last, darted toward him, brandishing a faggot in her hand. He sprang away from the attack. “Cheeni temper comes with Cheeni pay!” he taunted as he fled, not returning until a half hour later, when he could be sure that the ayah was not waiting for him in the kitchen.

The circus had met with opposition before its arrival in Steeltown. The city council had decided that such entertainment was not proper in wartime. There was apparently nothing improper in the cinema, though! A compromise was suggested by the worried circus proprietor: He would donate to the National
Defense Fund a percentage of his takings every day. Good idea, that, everyone agreed. It would swell Lohapur’s contribution to the fund—the easiest way; and with strong patriotic support the net earnings of the circus would remain unaffected.

Forefinger, the first to be ready, moved to Rupa’s side. “A new scent!” she cried at once, her nostrils dilating. This was a richer perfume than the one Rupa usually wore. Forefinger’s remark had an instant effect, and the other girls hurried up, sniffing. But Ting-ling had to locate the exact spot from which the scent came. She climbed on Rupa’s knees and continued her exploration. The face. The bare arms—for Rupa wore a sleeveless jacket. Under the sari fold the jacket had a low neckline. Ting-ling drew deep breaths, pressing her nose to an area under the neckline—there the scent was strongest. Then the others started smelling her, drawing deep breaths with cries of delight. This aroma was lovely!

“Since you enjoy me so much, there’s no need to take you out to a show!”

They arrived well before six thirty, but the circular four-tier gallery was already full. Ten rows of chairs covered the wide floor space, and Rupa had booked seats next to the arena itself.

Thumb disapproved of that. “Money wasted. The gallery’s good enough.”

“Money is meant to be wasted. Don’t be stingy, Thumb.”

Forefinger spoke in support of her sister, but for a different reason: “To sit so close to the animals! What if a tiger loses his temper? He’ll pounce on those nearest him, won’t he?”

“He will eat me!” said Middle Finger. There was more fat on her than on the others.

Rupa said: “He won’t have the chance. Even after he leaves the cage he will be in an enclosure of tall iron bars.”

The argument stopped, for the tiger was being wheeled into the arena, and the outer bars were being set up. Presently the beast with striped coat and amber eyes sauntered out the cage door. Facing him was a woman with a whip. Dark-skinned, wiry, she wore pink breeches and jacket. It was hard to tell her age, but she could be near thirty. The whip cracked; the tiger crouched in obedience. Again—and the tiger lay supine on his
back, legs clawing the air; then he rolled over and over like a playful dog. Up on his feet, he gave an unexpected growl. The whip cracked; his answer was a snarl. The whip touched him like a snake striking; the snarl dropped. The woman, satisfied, sat astride his back and rode him around the enclosure, a triumphant arm uplifted.

"She looks like a queen!" cried Thumb, awestruck.

Forefinger scoffed. "You have heard of a queen riding a tiger?"

"In Africa—yes."

"Africa! All fib." Then she remembered. "No tigers in Africa! Only lions. Chang-ngo, you didn’t know!"

"Hush!" said Thumb, her eyes on the enclosure. The great moment was about to come.

The tiger sat on his haunches, mouth wide open in a yawn. The woman thrust her head into the cavern. Against the bun of her hair tied low at the nape of her neck the tiger's side teeth glinted whitely.

The twins, who sat on either side of Rupa, sidled up to her and she felt them shiver. "Nothing to fear." She clutched an arm of each. "He is as tame as a dog, don’t you see?"

Cage and beast gone, a clown started his pranks. Rupa looked at her watch, and grew restless. The audience roared with laughter, but Rupa saw nothing, heard nothing. There was a kind of struggle in her face. She resolved it, saying: "Look, children. Time for me to go. I'll be back before the show ends at nine o'clock. The ayah will look after you. But don’t leave until I’m back."

Thumb was the only one to hear what Rupa said. She cried in astonishment: "You’re going away! But the show has just started. I don’t understand, Rupa-Sister."

Rupa grew flustered. "I—I have to meet someone. Yes, Chang-ngo, it's important." She craned her neck toward the ayah, repeating what she had already said.

"Go," said the ayah, showing no surprise. She gave Rupa a long glance and a smiling, warmly approving nod. It was as though she knew—intuitively!

Rupa hurried along the passageway between lines of chairs,
walked to the gate, and hailed a cycle rickshaw. "CE's bungalow," she ordered. The man turned at once, giving her a long glance and a nod.

Let them all know. What did she care? Things had worked according to plan. She would simply have to wait for Bhashkar's return.

But he was back already! He was seated on the veranda, and Ramlal had just brought the tea.

"Rupa . . . The children?"

"They're at the circus. In the ayah's charge."

"Oh!"

Had not he himself wanted this? Resented the children's perpetual presence. Yet, the barrier gone, he felt a strange restraint.

She was pouring tea. Her hand shook, tea spilling into the saucer. She rose, saucer in hand, walked to the veranda's edge, and threw out the slop. She stood gazing at the twilight enveloping the lawn. A swarm of birds came flying in formation and broke up, scattering into thick-leaved trees in the compound, their home for the night. A cricket burst into harsh cry. Every evening for two weeks Rupa had listened to the ceaseless metallic cry and wondered how it could come from so small an insect.

Back in her seat, she saw the second cup on the cane table. Ramlal had come and gone.

"You look thoughtful, Rupa."

That was a challenge. She needed just that challenge.

"I was recalling the first time I met you. In Room Nineteen."

He cast his mind back. Several moments passed before he spoke again. "I expected someone like Mrs. Mehra to turn up. Plump and motherly. I wasn't prepared for what I saw!"

She saw the man in Room Nineteen turn in his swivel chair as she entered and closed the door. She stood against the door, a sheaf of files in hand, and heard him say, "You're the new girl in the Security Office?" She nodded, still speechless. "I don't know your name, though." "Rupa." "Rupa . . . what?" "Just Rupa." "Just Rupa?" He laughed. And as she stepped forward and placed her burden on the table, "You needn't have carried all that lot. You could have given it to a messenger boy." "I'm
used to carrying things, sir.” "Really?" "I’ve worked as an air hostess." "Oh! But plastic lunch trays are lighter than office files!" Now at last she felt at ease and returned his bantering tone, "The food isn’t plastic!"

.... He placed an elbow on the cane table and leaned forward. "Well?"

"You could have seen me long before I set foot in Room Nineteen. Once I passed within a yard of you in a corridor, but I could have been transparent."

"What stupidity!"

"I was once leaving the GM’s room when you entered."

"How could I have looked at you in the GM’s presence?"

She shook her head with a pensive smile.

"So many years you lived in the West, absorbing its life, becoming part of that life. Yet, back home, you were sucked at once into five thousand years of Indianism!"

"I don’t understand, Rupa—"

"Deep down in him an Indian remains what he was in the times of yore. Gandhi was no accident of history—he was the quintessence of all our present and all our past! But . . . how could I know? One day you spoke to me about Gandhigram—such brave words! You said it was what you’d have to fight all over the country. I believed you. Enough of America had gone into you to sustain that kind of fight, so I believed."

He put his cup down and lighted his pipe. Rupa waited until he released a whiff of smoke.

"The truth is that America as a whole has meant nothing to you. You brought back the industrial know-how. Not the know-how of life! This is the case with every Indian. He goes West and becomes a new person. He returns home and at once he is a complete Indian. In the past month or two I’ve understood something that’s puzzled me ever since I learned to think. I’ve understood my American mother. The reason she had to go away."

That was why her mother had had to go away. She couldn’t stand the Indianism. Rupa was her mother all over, not in looks alone.

"Technical knowledge is your only link with the West."
She returned to the point from which she had deviated. “Where that knowledge ends, the spinning wheel begins. And the outcome? Sheer contradiction!”

His teacup was empty. She started to fill it again. He was smoking, thinking. Was that the truth? Gandhigram installed within his own self? With its physical form destroyed, its second habitation would be more secure. A harsh truth, if it were truth!

“Yet, strangely, you said to me one day: ‘India needs women of your type as much as it needs the Western machines.’ You said that. And: ‘You’ll destroy the stability of our social life. You’ll create chaos. But you will give us something dynamic. You will restore the youth of the nation.’ How I thrilled to those words of yours!”

Yes, he had spoken those words in honest belief. You had to accept industrial civilization in its entirety. You could not have a rejuvenated body with an old man’s head on the shoulders. Or a young head on an age-shrunken frame. He was about to speak when Rupa stopped him with a gesture of her hand.

“Western women have thrilled to the image of the Indian as depicted by their storytellers. The Indian sheik! The Oriental supercharged with sex! That was a Western discovery. They found him first in the Arab countries. Then the sheik appeared in India wearing a new garb. Woman, his food and drink! This character could be set into bygone times or the present age. He could be a maharaja or a peasant. The same image, always! Illustrations out of the Hindu classic, *Kamashashtra*!”

He seemed amused. “The sheik is good reading. You must have enjoyed his amorous exploits.”

Her face had a sour look.

“Yes. Until I saw the fake. Then the illusion broke. This character in real life—he is inhibited by his long history. He stands for conventions that the world beyond has discarded. He is misplaced in modern times. He is absurd, he is—” She cut herself short, and a deep sigh of weariness came out of her parted lips. She felt her eyelids grow heavy and would have liked to close them for a bit. She would have liked to be emptied of all thought, all feeling.

Smoke poured out of Bhashkar’s mouth—the pipe lay held
between his teeth. Rupa watched, a burning in her eyes. Her hand rose, reached toward the curved stem of wood, and pulled it away.

He stared, amazed. The way she held the pipe between her lips—he could have laughed. And she started to cough, as he had expected.

“There!” Reproachfully. He took the pipe back from her relaxed fingers.

Her penciled brows pulled together in self-reproach. Why did she have to behave like a teen-ager? If a pipe could help, there were twenty of them arrayed in three rows on his bedside table. Why did she have to create this fuss? The struggle, the decision, the preparation . . . and the teen-ager stuff, the acrid smoke in the throat!

Her breast under the low neckline of the blouse heaved suddenly. She would have to speak. Now or never.

“Is it so very hard for you to regain something of what you found in the West?”

Color, savor. The words came instantly to his mind. Virtue and vice give life its color, savor. He had said that to Satyajit when they met the first time. Words meant to be a challenge. It was months ago, but it could be yesterday! That was also the first time he met Sumita. Eyes too big for her face, he had decided. Cowlike eyes. Later he knew that nothing in her was cowlike. Were it otherwise . . .

“Don’t you ever recall the women who contributed to your joy of living?”

“Rupa, I cannot do you wrong. I am much too fond of you. You know that?”

But . . . not much time had passed since the day he had been close to making love to her. After he had seen her without clothes. Had the children been away—

“Wrong?” Her voice was mocking. “How typically Indian! What wrong did you do to the women of America? Did any of them think you were doing her wrong?” She was gazing at him, eyes brimmed with a hard lucency.

He cried, pleading, “Must you be so vengefully Western?”

Which was the true Rupa? Looking at her the other day,
he had seen sadness in the depths of her eyes. She had not wanted him to love her bare form alone. Yet . . . what had taken hold of her today?

She spoke strange words. "Must you be dominated by Satyajit? The Satyajit within you?"

Never before had he seen himself in that light! Could it be that even his ideas about vice had changed? Vice used to be a harmless word. You were entitled to your private vice, so long as it hurt no one and pleased a few.

"Why shouldn't I be like one of those women you used to know? They came into your life and went away. They were mere moments in your life. That's all I want to be. A moment in your life."

She would never be content with so little, whatever she might say on an impulse. Could he make her understand that? Searching for words, he saw the green luster in her eyes fade off mistily; and vivid on her slackened mouth was the look he had known on a score of mouths.

"Bhashkar!"

Her cream-complexioned arm moved toward him, and her voice had a hollow note. "You think and think and think! You think too much, Bhashkar!"

His defenses crumbled away in one explosive instant. He rose from his chair.

"Come . . . Rupa!"
Chapter

Thirty-Six

This menace is not only to Assam or Ladakh or India alone; it is a menace to Asia and a menace to the entire world. The grossest form of imperialism..."

It was the voice of India’s Prime Minister.

The war had taken a dangerous turn. Outnumbering the Indian troops six or seven times, the Chinese were sweeping down like an avalanche. Logistic advantage was all on their side. But even more important was their military intelligence work done over the years—unknown Indian territory in the Assam region had been mapped out in great detail—and this led to the fall of Sela Pass. While the pass at a height of fifteen thousand feet was subjected to a fierce frontal assault, a strong column took a secret jungle route and outflanked the defending garrison, which had to retreat over the trackless mountainsides to escape complete encirclement.

Bireshwar returned home late in the night and knocked on Satyajit’s door. He had to give his friend the latest news.

“They are now sixty-five miles from the foothills of Assam. Tea plantations are being evacuated. Tejpur is now a mere shell of a city. Assam will be cut from the rest of India. The oil fields will be lost. Unless we counterattack with massive strength. We don’t have the weapons. The U.S. Government has promised us modern rifles and transport aircraft. Peking has reacted violently to that. ‘The United States is determined to prolong the Sino-Indian conflict,’ said Marshal Chen Yi, the Foreign Min-

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ister. To help a country defend itself against aggression—that’s warmongering!”

“What about the Soviet Union?”

“All through the past fortnight Radio Peking has been pouring abuse on the Russians. It isn’t only that the Cuban settlement has upset the Chinese applecart. There are reports that Moscow has been exerting pressure on Peking, asking that the dispute be settled peacefully.”

Satyajit sank into a vision.

It was World War Two. The Japanese had stormed through defensive rings on the Assam border, and Allied forces had fallen back to other positions. What if those also broke down? It was in this crisis that Gandhi started to forge his weapon of resistance. The world would have known a new kind of conflict, had not the tide of battle turned against the Japanese and had they not been flung back into Burma.

Today the ground was ready again for Gandhi.

The Chinese would be ruthless. Yet the struggle would continue. Even as war had continued after great battles in which tens of thousands lay dead. Humanity had to prevail over self-annihilating folly. The goodness of the inner spirit had to overpower the raging brute. Let the experiment reach its decisive point in one country, and it would generate a worldwide current!

“What are you thinking, Satyajit?”

The words came bursting from his lips:

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

Bireswar saddened on his friend’s account. “You will have a dozen followers,” Bireswar resumed. “You can count myself as one of them.”

“You, Bires? You have no faith in nonviolence, either as a moral force or as a practical measure. Why should you wish—”

“To die for the cause? It’s your personal magnetism, Satyajit! I cannot let you down in the hour of need. But remember
this: You and I and the few others—we’ll be ineffectual angels! You have heard of men setting fire to their oil-soaked clothes in protest against some kind of injustice. We’ll be doing something like that. Poets will write verses on us. Will that help India to retain her freedom?"

"Certain values transcend freedom."

"Certain values—for instance?"

"Gandhi-ji was not born in freedom. All his life, except for a few months, lay within the framework of colonial rule. A good part of that life lay buried in prison cells. Yet he was always the free man, while those who held him imprisoned were the unfree ones."

Later in the night, eyes closed but sleepless, Satyajit tried to come to grips with reality. Freedom, in Gandhi’s reckoning, was only the means with which to reach targets further away. Those targets were now as remote as ever before.

Economic planning. Core projects. Higher per capita income. He, Cambridge-trained economist, should love all that! India could not stay away from world forces. Independence was a bridge for interdependence. All the same, it was in India that Gandhi was born. Nor was he unique in this country. He had simply added a new link to the chain of inner obligations reaching out of the ancient age.

Chain? The word made Satyajit wonder. Could you apply that word to inner obligations? Bhashkar would; so would others of his way of thinking. But here was a curious fact. He, Satyajit, had called inner obligations a chain!

Disciplined living could be a chain, admittedly. A useful chain. But... a chain was good only when it served a good purpose. There was the chain tied to a ship’s anchor. What happened when the anchor got stuck? The chain became a danger. It had to be cut asunder.

In the wake of that thought came Suruchi, her face shining in the dark, illumined, and with her slim hands she was pulling at an anchor chain! The hard effort made her breath quick, and she was wet with perspiration. Yes, the chain had got stuck!

"Let me help you, Ruchi"—and he saw her face grow pleased and heard the husky note of her laugh.

"Guess!” Eyes snapping in fun.
“Guess what?”
“Boy or girl?”

His glance rested, reflective, on the swelling curvature of her body as she came to bed in her nightgown, lying flat on her back. The curvature looked somewhat absurd on the neat, slender form, but there was no suggestion of shapelessness. Her flesh had expanded as if in an overblown lotus, but the unity of her body was not lost; the rhythm was retained. A kind of awe came upon him as he reached out and rested his palm on top of the peak, wondering how much higher it would rise in the month that still remained. When his hand was sliding to the under-slope, her fingers caught hold of it, halting its progress, drawing it back to the summit. There she let it stay.

“Boy or girl?” she was demanding again.
“Girl. I’ve given her a name.”
“Will you take my son away from me?”
“My daughter—”
“Next time! Tell me what name you’ve given her.”
“Sumita.”
“I’ve named my son—”

He interrupted. “This one here”—his fingers tapping gently—“this one within you is Sumita. Have a girl to start with. Don’t you care for a girl?”

“Don’t I!” The face tight, visibly warm. “Sumita . . . !”
“You like the name, I can see.”
“What if she has a tall nose like yours?”
“She has your nose, eyes, face. She is you in miniature.”
“You have nothing to give her?” She thought for a bit, and cried in alarm: “What if she has your cleverness? She will think her mother stupid. What then?”

On the thirtieth day of the invasion the Chinese recorded one of history’s surprises. They proclaimed a ceasefire.

It was a unilateral move. Chinese forces had left the Himalayan wall behind them and were trundling toward the foothills. All at once they halted, then started to pull back. Peking had ordered a withdrawal to the McMahon Line, or thereabouts.

Satyajit, hearing the news, grew dazed with happiness. His faith was vindicated. Chinese humanity had asserted itself—even before the forces of nonviolence had been marshaled.
But when he went to the House he heard in the lobby other interpretations of the withdrawal.

Winter, about to descend, would block up the mountain passes with immense masses of snow, and the lines of supply and reinforcement would be cut. Retreat, if necessary, would be out of the question. A month hence the Chinese would be isolated, unsupported from their base, and facing counterattack.

“A Dunkirk or a Pearl Harbor is never the end of the story,” a Whip of the ruling party pointed out. One phase of the war was over; the next was about to start. The surprise element was gone; the Indian Army was ready to regroup, strike back. The Chinese, realists that they were, knew their limitations. To withdraw in the moment of victory would be a grand gesture! It would impress the world with the image of a peace-loving Peking. On the propaganda front it was a masterstroke.

Rumors were echoing in the lobby. The Soviet Union had put strong pressure on the Chinese. The American Seventh Fleet was moving to the Bay of Bengal, its aerial arm ready to strike. There was no way to confirm such rumors, though.

The stage was now set for his own battle, Satyajit reflected. Now that the national emergency had eased, the demand of Steeltown would soon be granted.

His mind went back to Gandhi’s numerous fasts.

The last one, “addressed to the conscience of all,” asked for communal peace in India and Pakistan, peace based on the belief that Hindus and Muslims and Sikhs were brothers. On fervent reassurance from all quarters, he terminated the fast. Two days afterward, a bomb was thrown at him in a prayer meeting, but he was unhurt. Nine more days passed, and three shots fired from an automatic pistol found their mark.

That night, over the radio, the Prime Minister spoke out of his grieving heart:

“The light has gone out of our lives. Yet I am wrong. A thousand years hence that light will still be seen in this country, and the world will see it.”

Would not a dim flicker of that light be seen today in a meek lamp of clay?

“Satyajit—”

Bireswar stood in the deserted lobby, stooping with misery.
What could have happened? The ceasefire gone, the invasion resumed?

“It’s Ashok—”

Ashok? Satyajit felt a rush of apprehension. Not killed in action just as the fighting came to its end? How could Nandini bear such a terrible shock?

Captain Ashok Bannerjee was holding an observation post against a heavy barrage of artillery and mortar fire. The Chinese attacked in great strength, but Ashok, with his men, kept on defending the position. All the six soldiers were killed. Ashok dropped unconscious with a severe head injury. Later, he was picked up by Indian troops, and evacuated.

Satyajit felt an overwhelming relief. “Wounded,” he breathed.

Bireswar’s voice was strained. “His eyes—”

“Yes?”

“They may be lost.”

The misery flooded back. To be blinded at twenty-five. His mother had given him a big birthday party only the other day.

“Nandini?” It was hard to frame the question, but Bireswar understood.

“She knows all the facts. She wants to get married to Ashok at the military hospital, by registration. Her father said, ‘Nandini, you can’t do that.’ She answered him, ‘When I gain the right to call him my husband, I shall be fully prepared for whatever may happen.’ And she wasn’t speaking out of impulse. She was the most tranquil person in that house.”

Satyajit said, “Nandini will marry Ashok, knowing . . .”

“Yes. Nandini is like that. You wouldn’t suspect it, looking at the lighthearted girl with her great capacity for fun. She will fly tomorrow to Kashmir.”

“Let Sumita go with her, if that will help.”

“No. She has to be alone. All the strength she needs can come from only one source—from herself.”
Mrs. Mehra came to Rupa’s room, a letter in hand. Ah To had written from prison. Chinese nationals had been given the option of being repatriated to their country—a ship was waiting for them at a South Indian port. Ah To had communicated his wish to leave. His shop would be taken over by another shoemaker on Nehru Avenue. He was grateful to Mrs. Mehra that she had done so much for his children. Now they would happily return to their homeland.

“I saw him in prison a week back,” Mrs. Mehra said. “I told him the children were lucky—there was someone taking a motherly interest in them. You don’t mind that I said ‘motherly’?” She did not wait for a reply, but continued. “We’ve done our duty. The CE has given the children shelter. You have given them love. All that has to come to an end. That’s inevitable.” Mrs. Mehra foresaw Sumita’s return from Delhi—news of the ceasefire had just come. There could easily be complications unless . . . And Rupa also had to be protected from heartbreak. Obviously she knew nothing about Sumita. Sad, that she had no mother, none to find her a groom. If only—Mrs. Mehra sighed—if only she could help!

“Rupa.”

“Yes, Mrs. Mehra?”

She hesitated. She recalled the exquisite grace on Rupa’s face as she came out of Room Nineteen. In the exuberance of
her feelings Rupa had planted a kiss on her cheek! But it was pointless to let her get even more hurt.

"Remember the Air India post advertised? Air hostess?"

"You mean..."

"Yes. If I were you... Why, it's a lovely life."

Rupa sank in thought. Mrs. Mehra was right. Mrs. Mehra always did the right thing instinctively.

"Too late."

"They've called you to an interview. The result is not hard to guess."

Rupa looked confused. "I didn't apply. How could they send for me?"

Mrs. Mehra's hand plunged into the neck of her blouse and she drew from that storage place a long envelope. "There! Let me tell you a secret. I wrote out an application on your behalf. I gave them my home address. The reply has come this morning, in the same mail that brought Ah To's letter." She watched Rupa's face, which still looked confused. "It was wrong of me to have signed your name. Even so... Think it over, Rupa. They want you in Calcutta next Thursday. Plenty of time to make up your mind." She paused again for some moments. "Meanwhile, no harm in telling them you'll come for the interview. May I use your typewriter?" And she did not wait for affirmation.

This was the best way, Rupa mused as the typewriter clicked. Her mind went back to the evening she had created for herself and Bhashkar. But—what had she wanted? As he led her to his room the question had come throbbing into her mind: What do you want? An act of love when there's no love—can you endure that? Can you?

She had been possessed by the obsession that she needed him. His self-control had broken down, she had seen that already. This room. This bed. Had the children left them alone that night... The night of the circus there was no barrier between them. Yet, face to face with him, she had been caught between two contrary forces. Was it true that she wanted to be a mere moment in his life, as she had just told him? Like Mary Ann and all the other women he had known and discarded? What would she leave in him except scorn?
The Indianism in him, briefly suppressed, would have the last word; and it was sure to be a stern verdict.

John Wakefield had been untroubled by inner hesitations. A wiser man!

A curious thought followed. Was there in her the same Indianism with another label? Mary Ann would not have been troubled the way she was troubled. Mary Ann would have seized the moment with senses ablaze, not caring about the outcome. But she, Rupa . . .

She was for him not Rupa but any woman. She was all body, which nature had made seductive. But she did not want to be reduced to that. There had to be something more.

On the threshold of fulfillment she resisted him with a sudden new strength. For a while he was taken aback; he had not expected such contradiction. How was he going to meet it? He turned off the light switch. Deep darkness enveloped them. His arms took her again. He unbuttoned her jacket. His mouth met her breast.

The blood grew delirious in her veins, and she could not stand it any more. She was on the point of surrender. But she hated to be Mary Ann. Mary Ann lay between them, a new barrier. And other faceless women. After this night she would become as faceless as each one of them. She held herself in a tight grip, denying him. And time passed. And several points of surrender passed. Until the dream words that had rung in her ears over and over again became real: “I love you . . . Rupa!” After that, there was nothing else that counted, neither body nor mind, nor pleasure nor pain.

She had given herself no chance since that night to see him again. For the dream words spoken in the heat of passion, words that shone in the thick dark of seclusion like jewels, had turned in broad daylight into bits of colored glass. He had spoken these words of love to a score of women. No, she could not be content as a Mary Ann. Never.

Mrs. Mehra turned round and held out a typed sheet.

“This time you’d better sign. Don’t worry—I made a perfect job of forgery on your application. Now I must hurry off, Rupa. Keep in touch—”

After Mrs. Mehra had gone, Rupa slipped a new sheet into
the machine. Her letter of resignation. She regretted she could not give due notice, and hoped to be excused. Her fingers felt numb, and stopped on the keyboard, but she forced herself to continue. She kept the letter unsealed on her desk, and turned a lingering glance around the room. A small room that had become her second home. The table draped with green baize; the files in steel shelves. An earthen water pitcher stood in a corner on a low stool, a tumbler on its long neck. She filled the tumbler, and drank. "Farewell!" she said to the room as she stepped out, closing the door softly. She did not take the elevator, but walked down the stairs, four flights of them, her hand sliding on the polished brass rail. She picked up her bicycle from the stand, smiling at the man in charge; and at the big iron gate she stopped to look back at the massive structure. Farewell, Steelhouse!

As she went down the empty streets she made up her mind. Ah To would take away the children tomorrow. Why not leave before they were gone? She could pack a suitcase in half an hour. She had remained the light-traveling air hostess of three years before—all else could be left in Mrs. Mehra's hands. Good to think she was going back to the Airways. Flying between airport and airport. Sleeping always in hotels. She would be the first glimpse of India for many passengers from abroad. She would give them coffee and help them fasten their seat belts, and the middle-aged ones would keep their eyes on her, wondering about her Indian figure under the sari—was she like the sculpture the Airways had advertised?

She would again meet John Wakefield—that was certain. Not the one she had known, but another. Maybe she would seek diversion with him. When fierce germs consumed your blood you had to take antibiotics no less fierce, even if the reaction hurt.

She had no regrets. Not about John Wakefield. Nor about Bhaskar.

He, too, need have no regrets.

Her feet slowed on the pedal as a blur of tears covered her eyes. She let the tears fall. A car was coming in her direction, but she did not care. It went past slowly, then stopped with a sudden screech of brakes. The man at the wheel had obviously seen the tears running down her cheeks. She pushed the pedal
hard, harder. The man would look back in wonderment, unsure
what to do, but in a minute he would be going his way.

A new thought struck her. Why let this torture be pro-
longed? Why not leave . . . today? There was a train for Calcutta
at six fifteen. It was not too late . . .

Quickly she made up her mind. There was still time to bid
farewell to the children. She turned the bicycle and entered a
side street. Ten minutes' ride brought her to the bungalow.

First, the big news to deliver. Ah To would be out of prison
tomorrow. The children would go back home the same day. Soon
after, they would all leave for China. A sea voyage to Hong Kong;
a journey by railroad to Canton, and beyond.

It was an attractive picture that she drew. "So exciting for
you!" she concluded, watching the faces of her listeners. This
bond between her and the children, this agony, had to end
quickly. And she resumed, speaking in a breathless rush, telling
them about her plan. She also was leaving Steeltown. In two
hours' time she would be on the Calcutta Express.

Having spoken, she heaved a sigh of relief. Her life story
in Steeltown had come to its conclusion.

Chang-ngo and Nu-hsin hid their feelings—that was their
Chinese heritage. The twins had a puzzled look; they under-
stood nothing. It was Erh-ku who broke down utterly. She
covered her face with her hands, while heavy sobs shook her body.

Let the misery drain out of her in tears, Rupa thought.
Suppression would only make it worse. The tears she herself had
shed had helped.

This was the end of Erh-ku Roy!

She recalled the spinning wheel the girl had brought from
Gandhigram. She had even made Bhashkar take a turn at plying
the wheel. Every time the thread broke in Bhashkar's hand, she
had laughed. Such a big engineer could not spin thread! Bhash-
kar, though shamed, devoted a half hour every day to the wheel.
Would it simply be a mechanical gesture? Or would he gain
from that gesture some element of the spirituality with which the
simple wooden implement was vested?

Then there was the girl's return to school.

She had insisted on return. Against the will of her sisters
she had pressed her decision on Bhashkar. He had said, "You don’t like your Rupa-Sister to teach you?" But she had been firm in her demand. She would go back. Even though she had no valid reason to offer. "What if they sneer at you again? You will be all alone. It will be hard for you, don’t you see?" She continued to be stubborn. Then Bhashkar saw the experimental aspect. How would the schoolgirls behave, the roused passion gone? Since Erh-ku was sure of herself and her friends—

So she went to school. Bhashkar himself took her. The bell had not rung yet, and the girls were loitering about, some of them playing hopscotch. He saw the sudden doubt on the child’s face, the tension and the fear. He descended, picked her up, and put her down on her feet. He gave her an encouraging pat on the back. "Go ahead!" He had high regard for a fighter. He waited at the porch to see what would happen. Several girls had already seen her and were now coming forward. "Erh-ku!" they cried. "Where were you all these days, Erh-ku?" The word spread like magic, and more girls crowded up. "Where’s Chang-ngo? Where’s Nu-hsin? Why don’t they come to school?" . . . "They have to join next Sunday’s picnic by the riverside. Will you tell them, Erh-ku?"

That was that—Bhashkar breathed a sigh of relief. He had a glimpse of Erh-ku as he returned to the car seat. Face bright, she was waving at him. He waved back. The brave girl had won her battle.

All that, Rupa had heard from Bhashkar in the evening. She knew, too, that a chauffeur had taken the car back to school. Erh-ku had come home with several presents in her schoolbag: transfer pictures, a piece of red ribbon, a portrait of Christ.

It would be a bare week before she was returning to China.

And the twins—would there be someone ever again to throw Tzu-chun in the air and make faces at Ting-ling?

The pain wouldn’t be theirs alone. Bhashkar, too, would suffer

Chang-ngo interrupted her thoughts. She spoke in a small voice. "I have cooked fish for you, Rupa-Sister."

"Come. We’ll eat." She put an arm around Erh-ku.

Ramlal served the fish. They ate in a stupor. After the brief
meal was over, Nu-hsin spoke, her eyes cast down on the food plate.

"Rupa!" Sometime during the past week she had stopped saying Rupa-Sister. She loved to say just Rupa.

Rupa turned her face, still holding the chopsticks the children had taught her to use.

"Will you . . . will you let me give you a massage, the last time?"

Rupa smiled. "Come!"

Down the long passage, the children following in a row. She entered the corner room at the other end, took her clothes off as usual, and laid herself down on the bed.

Nu-hsin's hands drummed on the slight curve of the smooth white stomach. A month more and it would have become nicely trim. But there were only minutes left!

Eyes closed, Rupa absorbed the familiar bed with all her senses. She felt Bhashkar's presence until it enveloped her. Then she was lost. With fierce vividness she plunged into recollection. She trembled, and Nu-hsin, kneading a small fold on the hips, cried, "I hurt you, Rupa?"

Sweat lay beaded on her upper lip with its faint down. The children were watching her, but she did not care. She lost herself in fantasy. In the days to come, fantasy would be her friend.

"Hot?" asked Chang-ngo. "I'll turn on the fan."

The ceiling fan whirred.

I own nothing that's belonged to him, Rupa thought. What shall I take from this room? Handkerchief? Necktie? Her eyes wandered about and met the-pipes, three rows of them on the bedside table. She reached out for one with a curved stem. Why must I behave like a teen-ager? she asked herself, as once before, and yet she slipped the pipe into her handbag:

The watchful eyes showed no change of expression. But Chang-ngo gave a secret sign, and the girls trooped out of the room, all except Nu-hsin, absorbed in her work—she had done with the midriff and had moved to the legs.

"Such lovely shape your legs have, Rupa!" She had said that many times before, but this was to be the last.

Rupa said, "Will you sometimes think of me when you are in China?"
Nu-hsin answered with sudden passion: "Rupa, when we are no longer here, you'll think of us as your enemy!"
"You... an enemy?"
"My people attacked your country. How will you forget that, ever? I feel shamed. Chang-ngo also. When we are back home, we'll become in your eyes—not Thumb, nor Forefinger, only Chinese. People with guns. We know all that, Rupa!"

Spearpoint against spearpoint!—Rupa recalled the picturesque phrase of Mao Tse-tung. But it was just that phrase or some equivalent that had become in Robert Clive's hand the means with which to build an empire! Now it was not the white man—it was Asian against Asian. It was Asian neo-Napoleonism. But more atavistic, more ruthless, more dedicated. Where was the chance of the people's freedom? Bandung had become nothing but a name.

Nu-hsin, watching Rupa's face, noted the melancholy silence. She cried: "Don't talk about this, Rupa, if it hurts. But we've gone over this among ourselves and we say in our inner heart: We have been happy in this house. More happy than ever before. We'll not be so happy ever again. We who had no mother found a mother. We found a sixth sister. We found a second father. All that love and joy and... I don't know the words, Rupa, but maybe you understand—all that feeling has gone into our bone and blood. When we are back in China and people ask us about India, we will tell them the truth, Rupa."
"Oh, no, Nu-hsin," Rupa cried in alarm. "It's best for you to forget."
"Forget?"
"Forget everything about us. How can you, mere children, resist a gigantic tide?"

Nu-hsin's rosebud mouth smiled. "We'll not always remain mere children, Rupa!" And there was already the grown-up woman in her young face as she stared gravely. "Rupa," she said, "never distrust us."
"I will never distrust you," Rupa answered. "I will always wait hopefully for the bright dawn when this shadow, this stupid hostility, will be wiped away."
"Those words—I will not forget, ever. And when I have
told my sisters, they also will not forget them, ever. We have to wait a few years before we can tell the twins and they are able to understand.”

The other children were now coming back to the room. Each had something in her hand. They stepped up to the foot of the bed and, palms folded, made the gesture of a votive offering.

Rupa sat up, eyes wide.

Small gifts lay on the bed. The girls in a row dropped to their knees and folded their palms again. Rupa recalled at that moment the scene Bhashkar had described to her—the girls kneeling before the oleograph of Mao Tse-tung. The same attitude, the same gestures . . .

And those gestures, she knew, would be repeated to Bhashkar.

Nu-hsin was on her feet, about to leave the room. Rupa read her mind.

“Don’t go!”

The girl stopped.

“Then take this, Rupa!” She picked out of her hair a steel pin with a tiny blue glass duck at its head. And she also dropped to her knees beside the others.

“What can I give you in return?”

Chang-ngo answered: “You have already given us what we’ve needed most. There’s nothing better you can give.”

Rupa glanced at her watch. She must leave at once. A quarter-hour’s ride on the bicycle. There was just time enough to get her things down from her room and rush off to the railway station in a taxi. Slipping out of bed, she hurried to put on her sari. By this time the ayah and Ramlal also knew, and they were waiting on the veranda, faces woeful. Rupa said, smiling, “Feed your master with good care, Ramlal.” And she clasped the ayah’s arm for some silent moments; the ayah did not know the children would be going away so soon to a far land—she had been almost their foster-mother. Cool, composed, Rupa took her bicycle from where she had left it leaning against the house wall.

The children stood again in a row, palms folded, and Ramlal and the ayah stood by their side in the same attitude. No one
spoke a word. Rupa did not turn back and look as she went down the circular, sloping path. But the bicycle bell clanged twice at the wide gateway as though to say, "Farewell . . . farewell."
Chapter
Thirty-Eight

Six days after the proclamation of the ceasefire, Satyajit returned to the village with his daughter.

Headlines had already conveyed the news of his challenge, announced within an hour of the official verdict against Gandhigram. "I have to resist your decision with my life," he had written to the Government. "The only way I can do so is by declaring a fast unto death. The fast will cease if, during its progress, the Government of its own motion or under the pressure of public opinion revises its decision and withdraws its scheme. I regret the decision I have taken. I have no other course left open to me. It may be that my judgment is warped and I am wholly in error. If so, I am not likely to be right in reference to other parts of my philosophy of life. In that case, my death by fasting will be a penance for my error."

Press comments had stressed the fact that Satyajit had copied word for word what Gandhi had written to the British Government on one occasion. Was this reflex action, steeped as he was in Gandhian thought? Or had he deliberately used the same words as a prelude to the same technique of challenge, even though directed against the Indian Government?

Satyajit had communicated his wish that his arrival in Gandhigram was not to disturb its daily flow of life. The men of the council had accordingly arranged that they alone would meet him on the station platform, with Suruchi.

Suruchi faced her husband and daughter as they stepped off
the footboard. But this was not the white-garbed girl she had expected to see. Sumita was wearing city clothes. *Just clothes?*

"Mother!" Sumita's arm was encircling her.

"Sumita—you have grown taller by another inch. Now I don't reach even to your chin." She turned to her husband: "Your daughter has taken after you in everything, even to your height."

"She has your looks, Ruchi. Isn't that enough?"

He was gazing at her with a fascination that was part fear. Had he in the past years given her nothing but futility and pain? Laden the scales for her with sorrow after sorrow, and nothing on the other side of the balance? And he felt fear that she had grown acclimatized to the hurt, that she had nothing left to ask for... to demand... to command... He was prepared to make up for everything. Everything.

But where was the time? Death was on his doorstep. He had no wish to die, but that was beside the point. If he broke down and changed his decision, would he be able to give her whatever she wanted? He would be dying every moment for the rest of his days because of his loss of self-respect. She would have nothing to ask of him then.

She also was gazing at him, eyes brimming with tenderness.

It was her misfortune that she had the power to see through his outward self as through clear glass, she reflected. He had known that power in her and had tried, always, to keep the inner man out of sight behind strident belief, the nobility of courage, the unflinching deed. He had tried to be—multi-armored. Here, in this supreme hour of his test, he would be prepared to exceed himself. He would go all the way that Gandhi would have gone. But Gandhi would have gone his way with absolute peace of mind; he was capable of accepting self-imposed death without the least ripple in his equanimity. Satyajit would be battling hard every hour, every minute; battling against the inner man, the common man whom he wanted to be uncommon. Was not the struggle itself a commentary on the lack of preparation? The struggle should have ended years before.

Compassion filled her heart. If only she could help! There was no one else who knew him truly; no one could help him except she.
The men of the council had stood apart for a minute. Now they came forward. Each in turn took Satyajit in his arms. The face of each showed pride, mixed with humility in the presence of greatness. The National Movement, with its destiny fulfilled, with its goal of the country’s independence reached, had let itself become moribund. There was no leadership left in the realm of the spirit. Except for Satyajit trying to fill the immense void.

Krishnamurti spoke: “Words written by Romain Rolland come to my mind: ‘If the India of nonviolence were to go down in the battle, it is Christ himself who will be pierced by it, with a supreme lance thrust, on the Cross. And this time there would be no resurrection!’”

“It isn’t fair that Satyajit alone undergoes the fast,” said Chittaranjan. “Let it be a mass endeavor. Let Gandhigram rise to the need of the hour. Let twenty men or thirty—”

“No!” Satyajit’s answer was firm. “Never before has that happened. It was always Gandhi bearing the entire burden for all his people. You have only to recall the dozen fasts that punctuated his years.”

Swami-ji said, half agreeing: “Gandhi never gave his support to mass fasting, even when hard pressed. But why not all the Council of Five? There could be no objection to that, Satyajit. It would be appropriate.”

Satyajit held back his answer, saying, “Let’s move along.”

The party passed the exit where men of the station staff stood waiting reverentially. Manik . . . Gora . . . Ananda . . . Satyajit greeted them one by one. It was not until he was on the village road that he spoke the word for which the others had tensely waited.

“Be it so.”

Exultation broke from the men of the council, but Satyajit stopped them with a gesture of his hand.

“However, let us follow the line of individual resistance. The line laid down by Gandhi in the days when Japanese soldiers were pounding into the Assam Valley. He had no wish to embarrass the alien Government facing crisis; to take the least advantage of your adversary’s misfortune is to be untrue to nonviolence. Resistance would be offered by one person at a time, Gandhi decided. As soon as that person went to prison, another
would take his place, then another. Today we cannot think of
imposing any kind of strain on a Government headed by
Jawaharlal Nehru. Yet we cannot flinch from the struggle thrust
upon us. We shall therefore follow the path of individual re-
sistance. When I am gone from the scene, one of you will replace
me. Resistance will continue on this basis until Gandhigram is
saved."

Faces fell but there was no word of protest.
"When does your fast begin, Satyajit?"
"At sunset."
"Not today?"
"Today."

There was silence again. Sunset was only two hours ahead.
Madhab-Uncle could not keep pace with the others. Sumita
took his arm. The old man gratefully accepted the help.
"What do you think of this fast, Sumita? Is it really neces-
sary?" The voice contained sorrow.
"There's no other way, Madhab-Uncle. Unless Steeltown
withdraws its threatening hand."
"Tell me. I want to understand. Which has more worth—
the life of this village or of Satyajit? The village can rise again.
It can be destroyed, not from outside, only from inside. But
Satyajit will be gone forever."

"He also can rise again. So it has happened in our history.
And in the history of every nation on earth."

Madhab-Uncle was thoughtful for a minute. "Will Gandhi-
ji arise?" he spoke wonderingly.

Sumita answered: "The Buddha has not risen, but there
have been a hundred lesser Buddhas, and their combined work
may have equaled the work of Gautama. We cannot sit still and
wait for the Messiah to come. If we do, we shall be sitting on
our haunches forever. Even when the Messiah comes to our door-
step we'll not see him, for our eyes will be fixed expectantly on
the far horizon. And the Messiah will go back unanswered like
a lone beggar."

When Satyajit had bathed and changed his clothes, Suruchi
brought him a brass plate filled with food. He declined; he could
not have a big meal just before his fast started. Only milk and
fruit.
Suruchi cried huskily: "I have spent hours preparing this meal for you. There may not be another chance, ever."

Satyajit was gazing at her, the expression on his face tight, absorbed, and his answer came after a minute's silence:

"I will have everything that you condescend to give me, Ruchi."

Surprised by his easy acquiescence she cried, "Condescend? Why do you say that?"

"All these years I have deserved nothing from you, and yet my demands have been limitless. At last I see it all with clear sight. And it is too late."

Tears could have burst from her eyes, but she fought and held them back, lips clenched. The wonder that he could now see it all! If only it was not too late for a new beginning. The beginning could not go far back through the years. That was not what she wanted or was prepared for. The past years, too, had brought enrichment, and she could not negate them, throw them away. And she would hate to see Satyajit cast himself adrift. She would like her husband to be Satyajit in one part of his being and someone else in another. That someone else—it was Bireswar! Yes, he could be both. That was the image in which she would want him. That was the image in which she could lose herself completely and be fulfilled. But—it was too late.

Squatting on the bare floor she gazed at him mistily while he ate in silence as usual. He did not look up until his plate was empty. This was not the Gaudhian way to begin a fast, but he felt no regret. Having washed his hands at the well, he went to the outer garden and sat on a reed mat with his spinning wheel. Winter daylight was fading fast. A crowd of people had gathered on the road, waiting in silence, but he kept his mind away from them. He had no message to give.

Then Sumita sat beside her father, and started to recite the ancient verses he loved:

"'O Will, remember, that which was done, remember!
O Will, remember, that which was done, remember!'"

The chanting voice as it rose acted as a signal. The village, assembled on the roadside, felt the thrill of the approaching
moment, and pressed forward to the bamboo gate. There was no outburst of emotion. Men and women, flowers in hand, formed themselves in a line, and when it became certain that the sun had set and the fast commenced, the line began to creep through the gate. Pausing before Satyajit, laying flowers at his feet, moving on. He accepted the offerings with his hands joined at his chest in salutation.

And there was no faltering in Sumita's voice as she chanted: "The end and the beginning of beings are unknown. We see only the intervening states. Then what cause is there for lament?"

A motor horn sounded on the road, and a car came up to the gate. A hush of expectation. Emissary from Steeltown? An offer to end the conflict? But the man who descended from the car had come apparently from a distance. He had a suitcase with him. Having paid off the driver, he made his way through the crowd.

"Too late!" He shook his head sadly. "The fast has started."

"Bires! It's good to see you again, brother," hailed Satyajit.

"Suruchi"—Bires was gazing at her—"have you any food in the house? My involuntary fast began even before Satyajit's, and I hate to miss a single meal. It's been the busiest day in my life; and there was just time to rush off to the airport." His eyes turned toward Sumita. "Aren't you pleased to see me again, my dear?" He was about to say something more, but stopped. The tension in Sumita's face was easy to read.

"Nandini . . . Ashok . . ." Her voice was muted.

"Ashok had an operation. The result will be known very soon."

"The chances?"

"The specialist who did the job is hopeful that the eyes will be saved. Happy, Sumita? Now let me give another piece of good news. Satyajit's fast has become unnecessary. In fact, I have come here to convey that message."

An excited cry arose from the assembled people.

"The Government has withdrawn its decision?" asked Sumita, breathless. "Gandhigram is safe?"

"In a way."

"In what way, Bires?" Satyajit coldly demanded.
“Delhi Secretariat has been all agog, as though there’s a new national emergency. And this is the outcome.”

He related the main facts. A private estate taken over by the Government under the rule against big individual holdings could be the site for a new Gandhigram. There were no tenant farmers to displace—this land was being worked by a cooperative. The soil was good. Various other resources were at hand—teakwood, for instance. Self-sufficiency would be easily attained. A canal from the nearest River Valley Project would provide ample irrigation. The highroad was only a few miles away. Railway trains did not stop near the village, but a substation could be opened after the new arrangements had been completed.

Satyajit spoke sharply: “Bires, you have wasted your time. You should have known better. You acted out of desperation and lost your bearings—I can understand that.”

“What! You don’t mean—”

“Gandhigram cannot be moved like a stretch of paddies.”

“Why not? Gandhigram isn’t the earth it stands on. It’s the Idea. It’s the people. The Idea can migrate; the people can migrate. Not a long way to go—a hundred miles. Not a soul will be left here for Steeltown to absorb. The people will take with them everything they own. Scores of trucks will be provided for their use. Every workshop can be easily transplanted. Even the mud houses, if there’s something sacred about them! All, except the earth itself and the trees and the village sky.”

“The roots, Bires?”

“Roots?”

“The roots of life. You cannot dig them out and place them in wooden cases for transport.”

“Why not? Well, those roots are not so very old anyhow. Twelve years ago there was no Gandhigram. Look, Satyajit. This is a small price to pay for a big settlement. The dispute will be ended—”

“Dispute? I don’t like the word. Let’s call it—challenge. The challenge isn’t just between Gandhigram and Steeltown. It’s between two contrary thoughts, two contrary ways of life. The spinning wheel set against the steel mill! They”—an outstretched finger pointed meadowward—“they have no illusion in this regard. They know what they want. History favors them. Yet, it
may be that we shall touch something dormant in the national consciousness and bring about an arousal. If that happens . . . But enough of this talk, Biresh. Suruchi must be waiting for you with food. Go to the kitchen and eat."

Midnight had fallen, and the villagefolk were gone, but no one in the house was in bed yet.

Bireshwar rose abruptly to his feet. "Come, Satyajit. Let's take a walk. Just the two of us. We'll wander about in the battlefield."

"Battlefield?"

"The meadow. Sumita told me everything—in Delhi. I have a clear picture of the phenomenon called Bhashkar Roy. Phenomenon, I say—do I have to explain?"

They were silent until they had passed the village. Bireshwar pursued his trend of thought:

"You and he, facing each other like night and day"—his voice had a curious intensity. "Night and day in the hour before the sun rises and in the hour of sunset. The eternal clash—light against darkness and darkness against light. Could we have one and not the other? Could we sleep if it is only light? Or waken if darkness is without end? You who think of yourself as the light, Satyajit, you are futile without Bhashkar."

Satyajit smiled dimly. "You are in a poetic mood, Biresh. Anyhow, night and day don't stand together; one follows the other. What is it to be in India today?"

"Both," the answer flashed. "This hour in India's national life has to be one of conscious amalgam. It's the hour of both dawn and twilight; the two are alike in content. So are the two flesh-and-blood symbols! There's Bhashkar deep within you, Satyajit! And there's you somewhere in Bhashkar, of that also I am sure."

"You are sure of everything. Are you planning to meet Bhashkar, by any chance?"

"Why not?"

"Don't, Biresh."

"You are yielding to violence, Satyajit. In your spirit. Gandhi always offered every possible opportunity to his adversary to win. His own personal stand was never important. It was
always truth, truth, and truth again. You must give truth a chance, Satyajit."

Satyajit smiled. "Bhashkar can have every chance to win," he said. "For us an empty victory will be worse than defeat. It's the confrontation that strengthens our spirit."

"You can't have the heat of battle all the time. The constructive processes have to take over at some point. Look, Satyajit. This fast will be construed as emotional blackmail. Even though that is far from your intention. Have you looked at it from that angle?"

"Gandhi faced that charge. He answered that charge."

"Let's not start an ideologic dialogue, Satyajit. You must give up this fast; that's all I have to say."

Satyajit felt warm toward his friend. Having striven hard, Bires was now facing the sorrow of defeat. This was, Satyajit recalled, what he himself had faced along with the others in Sevagram when Gandhi announced one of his fasts. Each fast could have brought about the termination of the most precious life on earth. It was a miracle that Gandhi had survived every struggle.

Was there no way to help Bireswar?

But Bireswar spoke now more out of anger than pain:

"Can you recall your series of fasts in Cambridge, Satyajit? Every time you yielded to the charms of a woman—and you placed no limits on your physical response—you chastised yourself. With what result? What good did it do? The net result was that you traveled from temptation to temptation, always offering surrender, while steadfast love with no reservations of any kind would have made you less promiscuous, and spiritually more fulfilled."

Even in the darkness he could see the startled look on his friend's face. He paused. Let the words sink deep. Let Satyajit recall all his wildness in Cambridge. Why—he, Bireswar, was a medieval saint in comparison! Satyajit in the grip of passion had acted every time like a man possessed. And the women—what had he given them except unhappiness? How each of them must have hated him afterward for his sudden desertion! A rake could not have acted more harshly, inhumanly.

That passion in him was now transmuted into something
different but no less explosive. This fast was a continuation of the old ones. As purposeless. As futile. As uncivilized. All the same, he had the strength in him to go on until the end.

The anger eased. The pain started anew. Hopeless, growing, corrosive. How stand by and see him suffer? Even—die, maybe?

"Satyajit!"
"Bires?"

"Has life lost all its enchantment for you that you’re ready to cast it away? Think of its wonders. Think of the wonder in your house. She who has undergone every conceivable sacrifice on your account. When we were on the mountains I had a feeling that you were ready to remold yourself, to be suitably adapted. What would be her destiny after you’re gone? She would be vested with the saintliness trailing from you! She would be hailed by millions of our people as the Mother Supreme! For you will be greater, more powerful, in afterlife than in your earthly existence. And she, forced to wear the cloak of glory you’d leave behind—"

Satyajit turned to his friend a look of pure compassion. But before he could speak Bireswar rushed on:

"It may turn out to be a different tale, though. Maybe she will have the courage to throw away that cloak of glory and waken to the needs and demands of a new life—you gone, her inhibitions will be gone. If that happens, I shall not be far away from her, Satyajit; you can be sure of that!"

Satyajit threw his arm around his friend’s shoulder.

"Now that you have made use of every tool you have, Bires, let your heart be at ease. Must you grieve so much on my account? Must you torture yourself, struggling to break my will, knowing it’s hopeless?"
Chapter
Thirty-Nine

Rupa's abrupt departure came upon Bhashkar as a shock. Even if she had no option but to leave, a few minutes in Room Nineteen, their last minutes together, could have done no harm. She could have told him at least about her plan for the future; he hated to have it at second hand. "She has wings, that girl," Mrs. Mehra had added a comment to the news she had given. "She can't stay long in one place. Like a bird, she must fly and fly. Almost a year in Steeltown—much too long."

That was not the reason why she had to leave, Bhashkar brooded.

All her talk about being Mary Ann was illusory. The image in which she had seen herself did not exist outside her fancy. That was something he had known almost instinctively. But she had carried him off in the tide of her will. She had given every chance to her self-delusion. It could be that for a brief space she was fulfilled, happy. Later, looking backward, she must have seen the bare truth. She must have hated herself then. Hated herself, not for the experience of the night but for her innate incapacity to be what she wanted to be—there was no room for doubt in regard to that discovery.

Like a bird, she must fly and fly—what wonder? As a child she grew up with no home life, no love of a mother, no assurance that she had a place in the sun. There was no stability for her, no anchorage. Passing into youth and beauty, she could easily have become a wanton. Transient, living for the moment. Hard,
predatory. Every circumstance worked toward that end. Yet, strangely, she disproved a rule of life by turning into an exception.

He had kept her at a distance. He had hardly touched her even when the demand was stark on her face, easy to read. Until the five children came. Truer to say, until Sumita went away. The nearness Sumita created between him and Rupa was not of space alone.

The children also would be gone in a few days. Ah To was out of prison, winding up his business, and a boat was waiting at the southern port to take Chinese nationals back to their country.

Almost immediately after Rupa went away Ah To had appeared at the house with Mrs. Mehra. The children had come rushing to their father. After the first flush of reunion he had asked them to get ready—he would take them home.

They stood voiceless, with heads bowed. Ah To, surprised, turned first to Mrs. Mehra, then to Bhashkar.

"I told you, didn’t I?" Mrs. Mehra spoke gravely. "Children are quick in their love."

"But—"

Ah To was wondering how there could be such a complete transfer of loyalties. All these years his children had been devoted to him, and they were brokenhearted when the police van took him away. Circumstances forced them to live in a stranger’s house but this... this attachment...

Erh-ku was gazing at her father in silence through the dimness of unshed tears, and as he returned her glance the tears started to fall. He cried out to her in bewildered concern, but the girl seemed not to hear, and it was Chang-ngo who spoke in her stead. Erh-ku did not want to go. Not to China. She would stay here in this house. Yes, for all time. That was what Erh-ku wanted.

And the others too, Mrs. Mehra said to herself, and she gave the astounded father a pitying look.

"Let them have a little time to get ready. Let them stay on in this house until the hour of the journey."

Ah To remained speechless a long while, but nothing in his face showed the trend of his thoughts. When he spoke at last, his voice had not lost its composure. He turned to Bhashkar,
saying, "Sir, I had no idea . . . no idea that you had come to mean so much to them. To Erh-ku in particular."

"Ah To, I am really sorry—"

He shook his head. "No. Why should you be sorry?" He was about to say something more, but stopped.

Not once in the half hour Ah To spent in the house did Bhashkar think of him as an enemy agent. The human problem put all else in the shade. A fond father hurt by his children's apparent desertion. And Ah To made no accusation; he did not even show displeasure.

In the next three days Erh-ku was seldom away from Bhashkar when he was home. For her sake he returned from the office earlier than before; she would be waiting patiently at the gate, and the brief ride in the car along the driveway to the porch would follow. He tried to waken the child to the thrill of travel and the excitement of a new life in a new land. Erh-ku listened; intent on his voice, he thought, but not on his words, the tears still welling to her eyes once in a while—she wiped them repeatedly with the back of her hand. When he gave her a handkerchief, she kept it always in her closed fist. Even when she slept she clung to that handkerchief, so Chang-ngo reported.

What have I done to deserve so much love? Bhashkar asked himself in wonder, and felt humble. He could recall many lapses on his part. There was, for instance, his unfulfilled promise to take the children in a fisherman's barge down the river to Saraju, thirty miles away.

He gave the twins their treat as often as he could—throwing Tzu-chun in the air and making faces at Ting-ling. But the excited scream of the one and the amused laughter of the other seemed to have become somewhat subdued. They could not understand what was about to happen; yet, maybe, they intuitively knew.

Then the day came, fit to be black-circled on the face of the calendar. The newspapers proclaimed Satyajit's fast. And Ah To appeared, ready to take his children away; the southward train would be leaving in an hour.

Ah To stood by, witnessing a strange ritual. But it was no ritual. His impassive face yielded for once to surprise, his narrow eyes grew wide.
The five children were down on their knees in a row before Bhashkar; eyes closed, palms cupped in the gesture of a votive offering; and each pair of joined palms held flowers.

It was the way they used to kneel before the oleograph of Mao Tse-tung. With an Indian touch added—flowers!

The attitude was all. No word was spoken. But Erh-ku’s lips were moving in silence. It was as though she was saying a prayer. Tears spilled from the corners of her eyes. Her sisters dropped their folded palms, and rose. Erh-ku knelt still; absorbed, lost; the tears, now copious, making streaks down each cheek.

Bhashkar drew her up. Erh-ku’s arms went around him and her sobbing became unrestrained. Bhashkar felt his eyes smart, and to conceal his feelings he broke into activity, swinging down to the porch, half-dragging the child. “Hurry, all of you; or else the train will be gone.”

Ah To, before he stepped into the waiting cab, turned warmly to Bhashkar, and the barriers between them ceased to count as his hands drew together in an Indian salute.

Among the children’s baggage, he knew, was Erh-ku’s precious possession—the spinning wheel.

The storm had been brewing for several days. Bhashkar was not unaware of it—the Security Office had kept him informed. So had Mrs. Mehra.

She had crossed the meadow every day to spend some time with Satyajit. In the first two days of the fast Satyajit had been active as usual. He had kept up his daily routine and gone round the village. Trouble showed at the end of the third day. Fits of nausea. They grew in violence hour by hour.

A friend from Delhi had come with the purpose of stopping the fast. He had failed. He declared that he could not enjoy his meals in a house where a man was sinking slowly from self-imposed starvation. So he went back. The truth was that he, a Member of Parliament, would be fighting hard to force the Government into a change of decision. He would challenge Steeltown on the floor of the House—and outside.

The strong man of Steeltown would remain undaunted, Mrs. Mehra knew. Which has more value—the life of an individual, however eminent, or the national interest? If a crucial decision
had to be altered under the pressure of a hunger strike or under the pressure of a warm emotion. It could well be that the CE's thoughts were now full of Sumita, and if that was to be the cause of his surrender—

Why not? Mrs. Mehra scowled at the unseen accuser. But she knew the answer. The CE would never let a personal feeling pull him away from the path of his duty.

There was a new hardness in his face. He was toiling in the office with demonic energy, and forcing his staff to keep pace. He had even threatened one or two easygoing men with dismissal. He never smiled these days, never spoke in his light-hearted way, never relaxed. His eyes had the weary heat of sleeplessness.

There was the other report to give, though Security must have given one already. The millworkers were agitated over the fast. Satyajit had not meant much to them all these years; but with the strangeness of a sudden discovery they now saw in him the light of Gandhi-ji! The words he had written to the Government—Bireswar quoted them in a powerful speech in the House—made a strong impact: I have to resist your decisions with my life. The only way I can do so is by declaring a fast unto death. . . . I have no other course left open to me. There was the second course, though. The Government could be compelled to revise its decision under the pressure of the people's will.

The people's will was being stirred all over India. The press carried reports of mass meetings, impassioned speeches. "You who call yourselves Gandhists—return to Gandhi!" Bireswar's voice had thundered. Yet it could well be that by the time the people's demand gained momentum Satyajit would be gone from the scene, a victim of the callousness of his own countrymen. And Steeltown would directly share the blame. It was Steeltown's assault on the Gandhian village that had given rise to the crisis. How could the ten thousand men of the steel mill be exonerated? Even though they had no hand in policy-making.

The workers assembled in the playing field facing the Institute, and slogans took almost instant shape: Hands off Gandhigram! . . . We have no quarrel with the spinning wheel! . . . Gandhi-ji, arise! . . . Soul force, not brute force! . . . Men of Gandhigram, we are your brothers!
It was in this curious circumstance that one of Bhashkar’s dreams was fulfilled: Steeltown began to move toward Gandhigram! Scores of millhands, both men and women, stood anxious-eyed near Satyajit’s house, waiting for the latest news on his health. Silent, or else speaking in low tones to the villagefolk who crowded up to them. There could be no easier intermingling. Satyajit filled the thoughts of all. But it was only a step from the person to what he stood for: the village itself. Eager villagefolk took the visitors around—to the fields now ready for the winter crop, to the small workshops, the schoolhouse, and finally the mud dwellings. When the visitors had crossed the threshold of the homes, all barriers between city and village were gone. The slogan of brotherhood, enriched with emotional content, became real.

The surprising fact was that the village still retained all its habitual calmness. Its likely extinction and the end of Satyajit’s life—the twin shadows of impending disaster—were not visible anywhere. With complete dispassion the village council had drawn up its program of individual resistance—the fast unto death. The four other men of the council, one by one, in the appropriate order of precedence. But there were scores of others eager to offer themselves. Both men and women. Both old and young. Even Jhanak, the mutinous one, who longed to be part of Steeltown. The divisions were gone. Gandhigram was a frieze carved on one slab of rock. And it was rock that lived! And would make itself deathless through death!

Mrs. Mehra tried to read Bhashkar’s face as she gave her report, and saw nothing but inscrutable hardness. The curious thought struck her then that he too had his full share of the spiritual force of the Gandhian village. He could lay down his life with as much ease as Satyajit. But who else in Steeltown could follow in his wake? There were two men in the ammonia plant. Two others in the pipe mill. . . . It was the leadership of those men that had turned the roused feelings into something solid. Active resistance. Direct action. But in what precise shape?

Deliberations bore fruit. Satyajit had then fasted already for seventeen days, taking only water and salt.

Satyajit felt a new sense of release. He had forced himself into a Gandhian stance and gained victory over himself. And
now, if perchance he were to live, he would not have to step on each footprint of the Master's striding gait.

The fact would remain unrevealed that his fast was not primarily on Gandhigram's account. It was no act of penance, either. It was his challenge to the flesh, his vindication of the spirit's supremacy over the flesh. It was his Nirvana, the state of self-annihilation that men in India had always craved.

You let a million cells in your flesh starve and die every hour, and you would carry on until there were no more cells with which the functions of the body could be sustained. Then you would fall into wakeless sleep.

It had been hard at the beginning. The fourth day was perhaps the worst. Or the seventh. The physical torments were not all that had to be borne. Each million of the cells as they died made their violent, million-voiced protest to the inner being which in turn gave way to a whine: Not this, not this! As the days went by the whine eased off and stopped at last. When a fortnight was gone you were completely at peace; you even started to enjoy your physical state. You would, maybe, cling to life several weeks yet, but time had ceased to exist.

Suruchi continued to give her husband his diet of water and salt.

She would be vested with saintliness after he was gone: Satyajit recalled his friend's words. The Mother Supreme! The supreme insult!

Suruchi was an urge for him to live, relive . . . and not on the Gandhian plane. His newly won release would seek expression in the honest acceptance of every human need. But the years of his life had passed much too quickly and . . . it was too late?

Too late, Ruchi? The silent question in his glance pierced her armor of control, and she started to cry. She wiped her eyes with her sari, but they filled again . . . and again.

He saw in that instant the young woman who had cried in the same way when he had made a ruthless proposal, and he heard her voice say, "You can demand anything from me."

And he found himself wishing for the first time that she had spurned his demand; that she had given him resistance, not surrender; that she had not wiped out her entity for his sake.

Or else, later, she could have gone away to Bireswar.
Gone away...? The idea made his enfeebled body shudder.

Mrs. Mehra’s face was marked with anguish. But the CE seemed curiously happy—after ages. He looked refreshed with untroubled sleep. He looked radiant!

“What more could one ask for?” he exclaimed, content, as though some prayer of his inmost heart had been answered.

The call had gone forth, and a large crowd of millhands would assemble at Meadow House at the fall of dark. They would form a procession and turn back in the direction whence they had come, oil-soaked rag torches alight in their hands. Marching from Section to Section and street to street, crying the slogans of their new-found faith, stopping at the gates of the CE’s bungalow.

“Hands off Gandhigram!... We have no quarrel with the spinning wheel. ... Gandhi-ji, arise! ... Victory, victory to Satyajit!”

“Sir, this may easily lead to violence,” Mrs. Mehra pointed out anxiously. “The people in the procession may throw stones at the glass in your windows. They may even give a few slaps to your servants who happen to show their faces.”

He frowned. “You think they’ll defeat Satyajit even while they proclaim his victory?”

She saw what he meant, yet continued: “Sir, it’s better that you stay away from your bungalow tomorrow evening. Or even the whole night. We’ll fix a bed for you in Steelhouse.”

He seemed to agree. “I shouldn’t be in the bungalow when the procession arrives.”

“Maybe Security have already sent you the same suggestion.”

“So they have, Mrs. Mehra.”

He did not tell her what Security feared most. The call for direct action could lead to a strike. A total strike.

“And you...” Mrs. Mehra’s anxious eyes rested on his face. “I have told them I shall be miles away from my house.”

She gave a small sigh of relief, but it was half regret. This was not the fighting man she knew and adored.

The regret was to turn to worship at Meadow House the next day.

A thousand men and women stood formed in a procession,
ready to march. As the word was spoken the torches sprang to life. They rose aloft in unison to the battle cry: Victory, victory to Satyajit! Then came a hush of surprise. A jeep had pulled up, and out of it descended the CE himself.

He stepped forward, neither angry nor smiling, neither assured nor hesitant, and it was as if he was coming on one of his inspections. Would he try to stop the demonstrations? How could he? Had he prepared himself for the insult that was certain? And some of the men felt sorry for the CE, and some resented his audacity. He might as well have stayed in his bungalow. Or away from it if he was afraid.

"Victory—victory to Satyajit!" a thousand throats cried challenge.

A strange thing happened then. The CE smiled broadly. His face filled with plain happiness! His eyes swept the line of the procession, searching, and he spotted a man he knew. He walked quickly to him and said, "May I join you all?"

The response was stiff. "Join us?"

"Let's be quick and move along. We can reach the village in twenty minutes."

"The village? We..."

"Let's not waste precious minutes. We'll ask Satyajit to break his fast at once."

A clamor grew, angry but somewhat puzzled.

"He can't do that until his demand is met."

Bhashkar said, "The workers in Steeltown have expressed their united will. That will must prevail."

He had not lifted his voice. He had spoken almost casually. But the words went hurtling along the rows of the procession. The silence that followed was unbroken for a minute. Then:

"You mean Gandhigram will stand as it is?"

"Gandhigram will live as long as it has vitality within."

"The expansion project?"

"There will be changes in the project. Time will be lost, but we'll work very hard, all of us in the mill, and make up. The changes are taking shape in my mind."

Yes, time would be lost, but far less time than a total strike in the mill would consume. He needed that argument in his inward conflict between what he wished for and what duty
ordained. He could also use the strike threat as leverage in his new suggestions to the Board.

Waves of murmurings swept over the long line. Bhashkar resumed, his voice rising to a higher pitch:

“One thing I must ask of you. Don’t move away from Gandhigram——after the passion of the moment is spent. You will have to be with those people, always. Try to see what they stand for. Give them a chance to understand what we are striving to attain.”

The murmurings had died down, but in a minute they were again beating about. All the people seemed to be speaking at the same time.

“He has always been our friend. He has known our mind, our feelings. What wonder that he stands by us tonight?”

“If only everyone in that big structure, Steelhouse, was made of the same metal!”

“One day I was having trouble with my electrical welding set. The CE came on his usual round; he stood by watching. After a while he took the set from my hand. The next half hour he worked, forgetting all else. And the welding was done! Then he turned to me and said, “There! If I lose my present job I can easily get one like yours.” He said that in an honest matter-of-fact way, as if that could easily happen!”

“Now we must hurry,” Bhashkar’s tone was urgent. He was stepping into the line when a familiar voice said, “Sir, your place is at the forefront of the procession.”

It was Mrs. Mehra. She was standing by his side, panting a little with obvious excitement.

Many voices rose in assent. “You must be at our forefront.” The cry leaped from row to row. “We want the CE at our forefront.”

Mrs. Mehra gave an imperative toss of her head. “Sir—”

He obeyed her bidding and started to walk forward with her. After they had gone a few paces, he said: “So you too were ready to march against the CE’s bungalow? That’s why you asked me to keep away?”

“Sir,” demurely, “would you have liked it to be otherwise? Would you have liked it if I kept well away from the people?”

“And you’d have thrown stones at my windows. You’d have
given a few slaps to my servants who happened to show their faces.”

“Sir—” she began, but her throat was choked.

When he reached the front of the line someone gave him a blazing torch to hold. He turned his steps toward the village, and the procession moved on, passing into the darkness and rending it with a thousand fiery fingers. All at once a voice yelled, “Victory, victory to the CE!” and a thousand voices built up the echo. And then—“Victory, victory to Satyajit!”

As the squat lamppost came into sight he had a new thought. How would Gandhigram react to this demonstration, not knowing what it meant? Better that word be sent to them in explanation. He spoke to Mrs. Mehra, and she gave quick assent.

Three men raced off toward Satyajit’s house. The procession slowed its pace and paused, waiting, at the meadow’s edge.

Bhashkar stared into the night. There lay the village that had forced upon him a revision of his mental attitudes. Satyajit had had his share. And Suruchi. But more than either—Sumita. She went away, but the power that she was remained.

He recalled his first impression of Sumita. He had not liked her. The coarse white garb, the eyes too big and calm. She was far from his idea of an attractive woman. And later, when he had known her at close range, he had felt repelled by his glimpse of the father image.

Strange, then, that she became a fixation in his mind! He could not have believed that such a thing might happen. It happened against his conscious will. When she went away, even in his utter forlornness he felt a kind of relief: relief at the thought that none of his values would have to be changed.

But deep within him Sumita was still supreme. And revolt was futile. He had tried to lose himself in Rupa, but it was no use. And Rupa instinctively knew. She had gone away.

Sumita would always remain afar—like the evening star. So what? Could you possess the evening star, have it all for yourself? It should be enough if she did not shrink away from him, did not hold him miles apart.

There she was, emerging from the darkness, a hurricane lamp swinging in her hand as she walked. She would accept on
behalf of her people the friendly hand of Steeltown. With long quick strides he went forward to meet her.

She stood before him, her face caught in the flare of his torch, and they gazed at each other for a silent minute. Then he spoke:

"You know our purpose." It was a statement, not a question. She smiled enchantingly. "I know."

His fingertips ached for a touch of her cheek where it dented.

"Let's hurry." Turning, he gestured to the marchers behind him to proceed.

"I have dreamed of this." There was a swell of emotion in her throat so that her voice was almost choked. Her steps faltered a little, and the lamp in her hand shook.

Dreamed. Hope had been lost in desperation, and yet day after day, hour after hour, she had dreamed of this moment. She had seen this moment in a multitude of guises, some plausible, some fantastic, but none as dramatic. The sudden end of her tense waiting took her breath away.

"Lead us." He gave her the torch to hold as they stepped into the village, while he took her lantern.

The astonishing thought came to him that this was not the Sumita he knew. Not the one he had met on the village road. Not the one he had held protectively against the gale. Not even the one who had walked out of the temple, more knowing than a few minutes before. He could not say what it was that had transmuted her; he could only sense that there was in her today some new wonder!

"How was New Delhi, Sumita?"

"Just marvelous!"

"Would it be as marvelous here in Gandhigram?"

"Yes. And—there!" The torch in her hand swung in a wide arc toward Steeltown.

"There?" he questioned, unsure.

But her words were borne away in the clamorous cry of the marching people. "Victory, victory to Satyajit! . . . Victory, victory to the CE!"

"Well?" he demanded of her. "Do you hear?"
She nodded, and the smile dented her cheek again. "Yes. And I understand."

His tone sharpened. "You understand everything! But do you, really?"

She replied, after a minute's pause, "Remember your promise?"

"What promise, Sumita?"

"You will take me to Steeltown and show me everything. You said that on the day of the storm. But maybe you have forgotten that day."

"I will take you to Steeltown."

Could it be that the truth stood revealed? Satyajit, towering in the new glory he had gained, honored by the nation as a figure of history, held his daughter no longer in his relentless power! She was free, free at last.

The realization as it flashed upon him made his nerves quiver. But he had no inkling of the thought that filled Sumita's mind in that instant:

*Is this the terrific wave Nandini spoke about? The wave that sweeps you away on its crest—helpless?*