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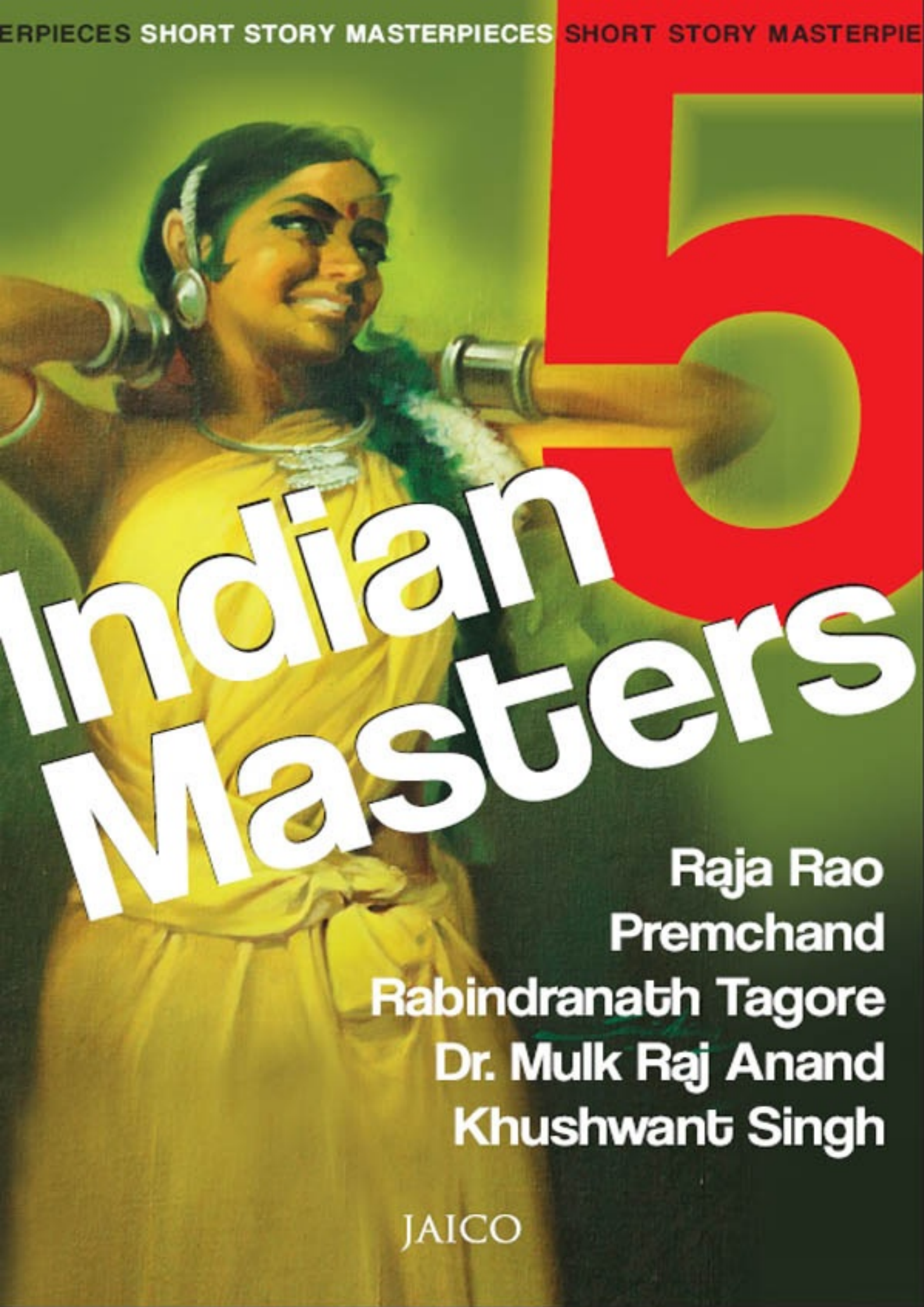

5 Indian Masters

Raja Rao
Premchand
Rabindranath Tagore
Dr. Mulk Raj Anand
Khushwant Singh

JAICO

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JAICO PUBLISHING HOUSE

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Acknowledgements

For *The Serpent and the Rope*

This excerpt is from The *Serpent and the Rope* as published in Raja Rao: Fictions in 1998 by Katha, a registered, nonprofit society devoted to enhancing the pleasures of reading. The excerpt was taken from *The Serpent and the Rope*, published by John Murray, London (1960). The copyright for the story is held by the author.

For *The Cat and Shakespeare*

These excerpts are from *The Cat and Shakespeare* as published in Raja Rao: Fictions in 1998 by Katha, a registered, nonprofit society devoted to enhancing the pleasures of reading. These excerpts were taken from *The Cat and Shakespeare: A Tale of Modern India*, published by Macmillan, New York (1965). An earlier version was published as *The Cat* in the Chelsea Review (New York) in 1959. The Copyright for the story is held by the author.

For *The Chessmaster and his Moves*

This excerpt is from *The Chessmaster and his Moves* as published in Raja Rao: Fictions in 1998 by Katha, a registered, nonprofit society devoted to enhancing the pleasures of reading. The excerpt was taken from *The Chessmaster and his Moves*, published by Vision Books, New Delhi (1988). The original punctuation has been retained. The copyright for the story is held by the author.

Raja Rao

1 The Serpent and the Rope

I was born a Brahmin – that is, devoted to Truth and all that. “Brahmin is he who knows Brahman,” etc, etc…But how many of my ancestors since the excellent Yagnyavalkya, my legendary and Upanishadic ancestor, have really known the Truth excepting the Sage Madhava, who founded an empire, or, rather, helped to build an empire, and wrote some of the most profound of Vedantic texts since Sri Sankara. There were others, so I’m told, who left hearth and riverside fields, and wandered to mountains distant and hermitages “to see God face to face,” And some of them did see God face to face and built temples. But when they died – for indeed they did “die” – they too must have been burnt by tank or grove or meeting of two rivers, and they too must have known they did not die. I can feel them in me, and know they knew they did not die. Who is it that tells me they did not die? Who but me.

So my ancestors went one by one and were burnt, and their ashes have gone down the rivers.

This excerpt is from the beginning of The *Serpent and the Rope* (1960).

Whenever I stand in a river I remember how when young, on the day the monster ate the moon and the day fell into an eclipse, I used with til and kusha grass to offer the manes my filial devotion. For withal I was a good Brahmin. I even know grammar and the Brahma Sutras, read the Upanishads at the age of four, was given the holy thread at seven – because my mother was dead and I had to perform her funeral ceremonies, year after year, my

father having married again. So with wet cloth and an empty stomach, with devotion, and sandal paste on my forehead, I fell before the rice-balls of my mother and I sobbed. I was born an orphan, and have remained one. I have wandered the world and have sobbed in hotel rooms and in trains, have looked at the cold mountains and sobbed, for I had no mother. One day, and that was when I was twenty two, I sat in a hotel – it was in the Pyrenees – and I sobbed, for I knew I would never see my mother again.

They say my mother was very beautiful and very holy. Grandfather Kittanna said, “Her voice, son, was like a vina playing to itself, after evensong is over, when one has left the instrument beside a pillar in the temple. Her voice too was like those musical pillars at the Rameshwaram temple – it resonated from the depths, from unknown space, and one felt God shone the brighter with this worship. She reminded me of Concubine Chandramma. She had the same voice. That was long before your time,” grandfather concluded, “it was in Mysore, and I have not been there these fifty years.”

Grandfather Kittanna was a noble type, a heroic figure among us. It must be from him I have this natural love of the impossible – I can think that a building may just decide to fly, or that Stalin may become a saint, or that all the Japanese have become Buddist monks, or that Mahatma Gandhi is walking with us now. I sometimes feel I can make the railway line stand up, or the elephant bear its young one in twenty four days; I can see an aeroplane float over a mountain and sit carefully on a peak, or I could go to Fatehpur Sikri and speak to the Emperor Akbar. It would be difficult for me not to think, when I am in Versailles, that I hear the uncouth voices of Roi Soleil, or in Meaux that Bossuet rubs his snuff in the palm of his hand, as they still do in India, and offers a pinch to me. I can sneeze with it, and hear Bossuet make one more of his funeral orations. For Bossuet believed – and so did Roi Soleil – that he never would die. And if they’ve died, I ask you, where indeed did they go?

Grandfather Kittanna was heroic in another manner. He could manage a horse, the fiercest, with a simplicity that made it go where it did not wish to go. I was brought up with the story of how Grandfather Kittanna actually pushed his horse into the Chandrapur forest one evening – the horse, Sundar, biting his lips off his face; the tiger that met him in the middle of the jungle; the leap Sundar gave high above my Lord Sher, and the custard apples that splashed on his back, so high he soared – and before my grandfather knew where he was, with sash and blue Maratha saddle, there he stood, Sundar, in the middle of the courtyard. The lamps were being lit, and when stableman Chowdayya heard the neigh he came and led the steed to the tank for a a

swish of water. Grandfather went into the bathroom, had his evening bath – he loved it to be very hot, and Aunt Seethamma had always to serve him potful after potful – and he rubbed himself till his body shone as the young of a banana tree. He washed and sat in prayer. When Atchakka asked, “Sundar is all full of scratches…?” Then grandfather spoke of the tiger, and the leap. For him, if the horse had soared into the sky and landed in holy Brindavan he would not have been much surprised. Grandfather Kittanna was like that. He rode Sundar for another three years, and then the horse died – of some form of dysentery, for, you know, horses die too-and we buried him on the top of Kittur Hill, with fife and filigree. We still make an annual pilgrimage to his tomb, and for Hyderabad reasons we cover it up with a rose-coloured muslin, like the Muslims do. Horses we think came from Arabia, and so they need a Muslim burial. Where is Sundar now? Where?

The impossible, for grandfather, was always possible. He never – he, a Brahmin – never for once was afraid of gun or sword, and yet what depth he had in his prayers. When he came out, Aunt Seethamma used to say, “He has the shine of a Dharmaraja”.

But I, I’ve the fright of gun and sword, and the smallest trick of violence can make me run a hundred leagues. But once having gone a hundred leagues I shall come back a thousand, for I do not really have the fear of fear. I only have fear.

I love rivers and lakes, and make my home easily by any waterside hamlet. I love palaces for their echoes, their sense of never having seen anything but the gloomy. Palaces remind me of old and venerable women, who never die. They look after others so much – I mean, orphans of the family always have great aunts, who go on changing from orphan to orphan – that they remain ever young. One such was Aunt Lakshamma. She was married to a minister once, and he died when she was seven or eight. And since then my uncles and their daughters, my mother’s cousins and their grandchildren, have always had Lakshamma to look after them, for an orphan in a real household is never an orphan. Lakshamma preserved, all the clothes of the young in her eighteenth century steel and sheesham trunk, in the central hall, and except when there was a death in the house these clothes never saw the light of the sun. Some of them were fifty years old, they said. The other day – that is, some seven or eight years ago – when we were told that Aunt Lakshamma, elder to my grandfather by many years, had actually died, I did not believe it. I thought she would live three hundred years. She never would complain or sigh. She never wept. We never wept when she died. For I cannot understand what death means.

My father, of course, loved me. He never let me stray in to the hands of Lakshamma. He said, “Auntie smells bad, my son. I want you to be a hero and a prince.” Some time before my mother died, it seems she had a strange vision. She saw three of my past lives, and in each one of them I was a son, and of course I was always her eldest born, tall, slim, deep voiced, deferential and beautiful. In one I was a prince. That is why I had always to be adorned with diamonds – diamond on my forehead, chest and ears. She died, they say, having sent someone to the goldsmith, asking if my hair-flower were ready. When she died they covered her with white flowers – jasmines from Coimbatore and champaks from Chamundi – and with a lot of kumkum on her they took her away to the burning ghat. They shaved me completely, and when they returned they gave me Bengal gram, and some sweets. I could not understand what had happened. Nor do I understand now. I know my mother, my Mother Gauri, is not dead, and yet I am an orphan. Am I always to be an orphan?

That my father married for a third time – my stepmother having died leaving three children, Saroja, Sukumari, and the eldest, Kapila – is another story. My new stepmother loved me very dearly, and I could not think of a home without her bright smile and the song that shone like copper vessels in the house. When she smiled her mouth touched her ears – and she gave me everything I wanted. I used to weep, though, thinking of my own mother. But then my father died. He died on the third of the second moon month when the small rains had just started. I have little to tell you of my father’s death, except that I did not love him; but that after he died I knew him and loved him when his body was such pure white spread ash. Even now I have dreams of him saying to me, “Son, why did you not love me, you, my Eldest Son?” I cannot repent, as I do not know what repentance is. For I must first believe there is death. And that is the central fact – I do not believe that death is. So, for whom shall I repent?

Of course, I love my father now. Who could not love one that was protection and kindness itself, though he never understood that my mother wanted me to be a prince? And sine I could not be a prince – I was born a Brahmin, and so how could I be a king? – I wandered my life away, and became a holy vagabond. If grandfather simply jumped over tigers in the jungles, how many tigers of the human jungle, how many accidents to plane and car have I passed by? And what misunderstandings and chasms of hatred have lain between me and those who first loved, and then hated, me? Left to myself, I became alone and full of love. When one is alone one always loves. In fact, it is because one loves, and one is alone, one does not die.

I went to Benares, once. It was in the month of March, and there was still a

pinch of cold in the air. My father had just died and I took Vishalakshi, my second stepmother, and my young stepbrother Sridhara – he was only eleven months old – and I went to Benares. I was twenty two then, and I had been to Europe; I came back when father became ill. Little Mother was very proud of me – shed said, “He’s the bearing of a young papal tree, tall and sacred, and the serpent-stones around it. We must go round him to become sacred.” But the sacred Brahmins of Benares would hear none of this. They knew my grandfather and his grandfather and his great-grandfather again, and thus for seven generations – Ramakrishnayya and Ranganna, Madhavaswamy and Somasundarayya, Manjappa and Gangadharayya and for each of them they knew the sons and grandsons (the daughters, of course, they did not quite know), and so, they stood on their rights. “Your son, “they said to Little Mother, “has been to Europe, and has wed a European and he has no sacred thread. Pray, Mother, how could the manes be pleased?” So Little Mother yielded and just fifty silver rupees made everything holy. Some carcassbearing Brahmins – “We’re the men of the four shoulders,” they boast – named my young brother Son of Ceremony in their tempestuous high and low of hymns – the quicker the better, for in Benares there be many dead, and all the dead of all the ages, the successive generations of manes after manes, have accumulated in the sky. And you could almost see them layer on layer, on the night of a moon-eclipse, fair and pale and tall and decrepit, fathers, grandfathers, great-grandfathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, nephews, friends, king, Yogis, maternal uncles – all, all they accumulate in the Benares air and you can see them. They have a distanced, dull-eyed look and they ask – they beg for this and that, and your round white rice-balls and sesame seed give the peace they ask for. The sacred Brahmin too is pleased. He has his fifty rupees. Only my young brother, eleven months old, does not understand. When his mother is weeping – for death takes a long time to be recognized – my brother pulls and pulls at the sari fringe. I look at the plain, large river that is ever so young, so holy – like my mother. The temple bells ring and the crows are all about the white rice-balls. “The manes have come, look!” say the Brahmins. My brother crawls upto them saying “Caw-caw,” and it’s when he sees the monkeys that he jumps for Little Mother’s lap. He’s so tender and fine limbed, is my brother. Little Mother takes him into her lap, opens her choli and gives him the breast.

The Brahmins are still muttering something. Two or three of them have already washed their feet in the river and are coming up, looking at their navels or their fine gold rings. They must be wondering what silver we would offer. We come from far and from grandfather to grandfather, they knew that everyone in the family had paid, in Moghul gold or in rupees of the East India Company, to the more recent times with the British Queen buxom and small-

faced on the round, large silver. I would rather have thrown the rupees to the begging monkeys than to the Brahmins. But Little Mother was there. I took my brother in my arms, and I gave the money, silver by silver, to him. And gravely, as though he knew what he was doing, he gave the rupees to the seated Brahmins. He now knew too that father was dead. Then suddenly he gave such a shriek as though he saw father near us not as he was but as he had become, blue, transcorporeal. Little Mother always believes the young see the dead more clearly than we the corrupt do. And little Mother must be right. Anyway, it stopped her tears, and now that the clouds had come, we went down the steps of the Harishchandra Ghat, took a boat and floated down the river.

I told Little Mother how Tulsidas had written the Ramayana just there, next to the Rewa Palace, and Kabir had been hit on the head by Saint Ramanand. The Saint had stumbled on the head of the Muslim weaver and had cried Ram-Ram, so Kabir stood up and said, “Now, My Lord, be Thou my Guru and I Thy disciple.” That is how the weaver became so great a devotee and poet. Farther down, the Buddha himself had walked and had washed his alms-bowl – he had gone up the steps and had set the Wheel of Law a-turning. The aggregates, said the Buddha, make for desire and aversion, pleasure and ill, and one must seek that from which there is no returning. Little Mother listened to all this and seemed so convinced. She played with the petal-like fingers of my brother and when she saw a parrot in the sky, “Look, look, little one,” she said, “that is the Parrot of Rama.” And she began to sing:

O parrot, my parrot of Rama

and my little brother went to profoundest sleep.

My father was really dead. But little Mother smiled. In Benares one knows death is an illusory as the mist in the morning. The Ganges is always there – and when the sun shines, oh, how hot it can still be …..

I wrote postcards to friends in Europe. I told them I had come to Benares because father had died, and I said the sacred capital was really a surrealist city. You never know where reality starts and where illusion ends; whether the Brahmins of Benares are like the crows asking for funereal rice-balls, saying “Caw-caw”, or like the Sadhus by their fires, lost in such beautiful magnanimity, as though love were not something one gave to another, but what one gave to oneself. His trident in front of him, his holy books open, some saffron cloth drying anywhere – on bare bush or on broken wall, sometimes with an umbrella stuck above, and a dull fire eyeing him, as though the fire in Benares looked after the saints, not the cruel people of the

sacred city – each Sadhu sat, a Shiva. And yet when you looked up you saw the lovely smile of some concubine, just floating down her rounded bust and nimble limbs, for a prayer and a client. The concubines of Benares are the most beautiful of any in the world, they say; and some say too, that they worship the wife of Shiva, Parvathi herself, that they may have the juice of youth in their limbs. That is why Damodhara Gupta so exaltedly started his book on bawds with Benares. “O Holy Ganga, Mother Ganga, thou art purity itself, coming down from Shiva’s hair,” When you see so many limbs go purring and bursting on the ghats by the Ganges, how can limbs have any meaning? Death makes passion beautiful. Death makes the concubine inevitable. I remembered again grandfather saying, “Your mother had such a beautiful voice. She had a voice like Concubine Chandramma. And that was in Mysore, and fifty years ago.”

I could not forget Madeleine – how could I? Madeleine was away and in Aix-en-Provence. Madeleine had never recovered in fact she never did recover from the death of Pierre. She had called him Krishna till he was seven months old. Then when he begain to have those coughs, Madeleine knew; mothers always know what is dangerous for their children. And on that Saturday morning, returning from her college Madeleine knew, she knew that in four weeks, in three and in two and in one, the dread disease would take him away. That was why from the moment he was born – we had him take birth in a little, lovely maternity home near Bandol – she spoke of all the hopes she had in him. He must be tall and twenty three; he must go to an Engineering Institute and build bridges for India when he grew up. Like all melancholic people, Madeleine loved bridges. She felt Truth was always on the other side, and so sometimes, I told her that next time she must be born on the Hudson. I bought her books on Provence or on Sardinia, which had such beautiful ivy-covered bridges built by the Romans. One day she said, “Let’s go and see this bridge at Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port,” that she had found in a book on the Pays Basque. We drove through abrupt, arched Ardèche and passing through Cahors I showed her the Pont de Valentŕe. She did not care for it. It was like Reinhardt’s scenario at Salzburg, she said. When we went on to the Roman bridge of Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port she said, “Rama, it makes me shiver,” She had been a young girl at the time of the Spanish Civil War, so we never could go over to Spain. Then it was we went up to some beautiful mountain town perhaps it was Pau, for I can still see the huge chateau, the one built by Henri IV – and may be it was on that night, in trying to comfort Madeleine, that Krishna was conceived. She would love to have a child of mine, she said and we had been married seven months.

At that time Madeleine was twenty six, and I was twenty one. We had first

met at University of Caen. Madeleine had an uncle – her parents had died leaving her an estate, so it was being looked after by Uncle Charles. He was from Normandy, and you know what that means.

Madedeine was so lovely, with golden hair – on her mother's side she came from Savoy and her limbs had such pure unreality. Madeleine was altogether unreal. That is why, I think, she had never married anyone in fact she had never touched anyone. She said that during the Nazi occupation, towards the end of 1943, a German Officer had tried to touch her hair; it looked so magical, and it looked the perfect Nordic hair. She said he had brought his hands near her face, and she had only to smile and he could not do anything. He bowed and went away.

It was the Brahmin in me, she said, the sense that touch and untouch are so important, which she sensed; and she would let me touch her. Her hair was gold, and her skin for an Indian was like the unearthed marble with which we built our winter palaces. Cool, with the lake about one, and the peacock strutting in the garden below. The seventh-hour of music would come, and all the palace would see itself lit. Seeing oneself is what we always seek; the world, as the great Sage Sankara said, is like a city seen in a mirror. Madeleine was like the Palace of Amber seen in moonlight. There is such a luminous mystery – the deeper you go, the more you know yourself. So Krishna was born.

The bridge was never crossed. Madeleine had a horror of crossing bridges. Born in India she would have known how in Malabar they send off gunfire to frighten the evil spirits, as you cross a bridge. Whether the gunfire went off or not, Krishna could never cross the bridge of life. That is why with some primitive superstition Madeleine changed his name and called him Pierre from the second day of his illness. "*Pierre tu es, et sur cette Pierre…*" she quoted. And she said – for she, a Frenchwoman, like an Indian woman was shy, and would not call me easily by my name – she had said, "My love, the gods of India will be angry, that you a Brahmin married a non-Brahmin like me; why should they let me have a child called Krishna? So sacred is that name," And the little fellow did not quite know what he was to do when he was called Pierre. I called him Pierre and respected her superstition. For all we do is really superstition. Was I really called Ramaswamy, or was Madeleine called Madeleine?

The illness continued. Dr. Pierre Marmoson, a specialist in child medicine especially trained in America gave every care available. But bronchopneumonia is bronchopneumonia, particularly after a severe attack of chickenpox. Madeleine, however, believed more in my powers of healing

than in the doctor's. So that when the child actually lay in my arms and steadied itself and kicked straight and lay quiet, Madeleine could not believe that Pierrre was dead. The child had not even cried.

We were given special permission by the Prefet des Bouches-du-Rhône to cremate Pierre among the olive trees behind the Villa Sainte-Anne. It was a large Villa and one saw on a day of the mistral the beautiful Mont-Sainte-Victoire, as Cezanne must have seen it day after day, clear as though you could talk to it. The mistral blew and blew so vigorously; one could see one's body float away, like pantaloon, vest and scarf, and one's soul sit and shine on the top of Mont Sainte-Victoire. The dead, they say in Aix, live in the cathedral tower, the young and the virgins do – there is even a Provencal song about it – so Madeleine went to her early morning Mass and to vespers. She fasted on Friday, she a heathen, she began to light candles to the Virgin, and she just smothered me up in tenderness. She seemed so far that nearness was further than any smell or touch. There was no bridge – all bridges now led to Spain.

So when my father had said he was very ill, and wished I could come, she said, "Go, and don't you worry about anything. I will look after myself." It seemed wiser for me to go. Madeleine would continue to teach and I would settle my affairs at home. Mother's property had been badly handled by the estate agent Sundarayya, the rents not paid, the papers not in order; and I thought I would go and see the University authorities too, for a job was being kept vacant for me. The Government had so far been very kind and my scholarship continued. Once my doctorate was over I would take Madeleine home, and she would settle with me – somehow I always thought of a house white, single-storied, on a hill and by a lake and I would go day after day to the University and preach to them the magnificence of European civilization. I had taken history, and my special subject was the Albigensian heresy. I was trying to link up the Bogomilites and the Druzes, and thus search back for the Indian background – Jain or may be Buddisht of the Cathars. The "Pure" were dear to me. Madeleine, too, got involved in them, but for a different reason. Touch, as I have said, was always distasteful to her, so she liked the untouching Cathars, she loved their celibacy. She implored me to practice the ascetic Brahmacharya of my ancestors, and I was too proud a Brahmin to feel defeated. The bridge was anyhow there, and could not be crossed. I knew I would never go to Spain.

Walking back and forth in my Kensington room that day – it was a Thursday, I clearly remember, the day of Jupiter – I thought of the letter I should write to Pratap. For how could I have gone to Cambridge and seen so much of Savithri without dropping him a line, some concatenation of words

(and images) that might give him hope? For hope he certainly could have. Savithri always talked of Pratap as one talks of one's secretary – it must have come from the atmosphere of palaces – as an inevitable support in all contingencies, a certainty in a world of uncertainty. If she talked of him with a touch of condescension it was not because of social differences; it was just because she liked being kind to something, something inevitable, unknown, such as a lame horse in the stable or it might be an old bull, fed in the palace yard till it die; but meanwhile being treated as an elder, a palace bull, given the best of Bengal gram and the choicest of green grass. And when it died, for it would "die", it would be given a music and flower funeral and have orange trees planted over its grave. And one day some virgin would light a lamp and consecrate it, and every day from that time on the sanctuary would be lit with an oil lamp, as dusk fell over the palace grove…

The excerpt which follows occurs towards the middle of *The Serpent and the Rope* and describes, among other things, Savithri's ritual "marriage" with Ramaswamy.

To speak the truth, I hated this attitude of Savithri's. I felt she was so truly indifferent, so completely resigned to her fate like all Hindu women – that for her, life was like a bullock-cart wheel: it was round, and so it had to move on night after night, and day after day, smelling chilli or tamarind, rice or coconut, over rut and through monsoon waters purring at the sides to the fairs in the plains; or to the mountains, high up there, on a known pilgrimage. What did it matter, she would ask, whether the sun scorched or the rain poured, or you carried tamarind or saffron? Life's wheel is its own internal law. Nobody could marry Savithri, nobody could marry a soul, so why not marry anyone? And why should not that anyone be stump Pratap? It certainly could not be Hussain Hamdani; and thank heavens his vanity and self-interest took him to Pakistan and a good job – and Pratap was, anyway, so very clean, so gentle, so sincere. If one should have a husband at all, said Savithri, Pratap was the very best.

"What do you think" she had asked me one evening, a day or two before my departure from Cambridge. We were not by the river, which was reserved for us, for our conjoint intuitions of poetry and history – of a song of Mira's and again may be of some historical character from Avignon, Nimes, Carcassonne, Albi or Montpellier. But when we came out into the open street light we could talk of anything, of Nehru's Government, of father's despair at having three elephants instead of eight, a tradition which had come down from Rajendra Simha III, in the sixteenth century. Finally, in the heart of this extrovent world one can always dig a hollow, make oneself comfortable in a bus shelter, an ABC, or with hot coffee at the Copper Kettle one can sit and talk of Pratap.

“There’s such goodness in him. I have never seen anyone so good in life. Not even you,” she had said, in mock severity.

“I never said I was good.”

“Of course not,” she teased, “but you want to be called a saint.”

“You say so,” I laughed, “and that is your responsibility.” I could hear the bells ring the hour on Trinity Tower, so gathering her notes we had jumped into a taxi at the Market Square and rushed off to deposit her safely at the gate of Girton.

“It’s me,” she said, with that enchanting voice, and even the gatekeeper did not seem to mind very much. “Am I very late?”

He had looked at the clock first, and then at me. “Well, Miss Rathor, the world does not always function by the clock, does it?” he said with a wink.

She laid the red rose I had bought her on his table, saying, “This is for Catherine,” and turning to me she had added, “She’s such a nice girl, seven years old; we’re great friends. Good night, Ramaswamy, good night, Mr. Scott. Good night.”

Back in the taxi I said to myself, “Catherine or Pratap, for Savithri it makes no difference. Both are dear because both are familiar, innocent, and inevitable in her daily existence.”

Thinking over all this, my letter to Pratap never got written. It was a damp day and I did not go to the British Museum for my work, but as it was already long past three, I took a stroll by the river.

What an imperial river the Thames is – her colour may be dark or brown, but she flows with a majesty, with a maturity of her own knowledge of herself, as though she grew the tall towers beside her, and buildings rose in her image, that men walked by her and spoke inconsequent things – as two horses do on a cold day while the wine merchant delivers his goods at some pub, whispering and frothing to one another – for the Londoner is eminently good. He is so warm, he is indeed the first citizen of the world. The mist on the Thames is pearly, as if Queen Elizabeth the First had squandered her riches and femininity on ships of gold, and Oberon had played on his pipe, so worlds, gardens fairies and grottoes were created, empires were built and lost, men shouted heroic things to one another and died, but somewhere one woman, golden, round, imperial, always lay by her young man, his hand over her left breast, his lip touching here in rich recompense. There’s holiness in

happiness, and Shakespeare was holy because Elizabeth was happy. Would England not see an old holiness again.?

For me, as I have said already, the past was necessary to understand the present. Standing on a bridge near Chelsea, and seeing the pink and yellow lights of the evening, the barges floating down to some light, the city feeling her girth in herself, how I felt England in my bones and breath; how I reverenced her. The buses going high and lit; the taxis that rolled about, green and gentlemanly; the men and women who seemed responsible, not for this Island alone, but for whole areas of humanity all over the globe; strollers – some workman, who had stolen a moment on his way to a job, some father who was showing London to his little daughter, two lovers arm hooked to arm – how with the trees behind and the water flowing they seemed to make history stop and look back at itself.

London was esoteric and preparing for the crowning of another Queen; and Englishmen felt it would be a momentous insight of man into himself. The white man, I felt, did not bear his burden, but the Englishman did. For, after all, it was the English who founded the New World, yet now it was America that naively, boastfully, was proclaiming what every English man and woman really felt – that the dominion of man, the regulation of habeas corpus or the right delivery of some jute bales on Guadalcanal Island in the Pacific, was the business of these noble towers, clocks, balances, stock-books, churring ships, and aeroplanes above, and that there would be good government on earth, and decency and a certain nobility of human behaviour, and all because England was. That I, an Indian who disliked British rule, should feel this only revealed how England was recovering her spiritual destiny, how in anointing her Queen she would anoint herself.

It was nearing six by now and knowing that about this hour Julietta would be at the Stag, I dropped in, took an orangeade and sat waiting for her. Julietta was a great friend of Savithri's. She had left Girton the year before and though I had met her only once I felt I could talk to her about anything.

Julietta and a whole generation of young English people who had either fought in the war or matured during it – Julietta was eighteen in 1945 – were fascinating to me. That is why for an outsider pub life seemed so valuable – he saw the new England, even when the English men and women he met were not particularly young. But England herself had become young and sovereign. Young Englishmen looked so open, so intellectually keen, and the girls seemed so feminine, so uninhibited. It was all so far from the world of Jane Austen of Thackeray, or even from the world of Virginia Woolf. Boys and girls met and mated and helped each other through life with, as one girl

remarked to Savithri, the facility of eating an apple. “In fact I was eating an apple,” said Marguerite Hoffiner,” when he did it to me. What is there in it, anyway, to talk about so much? Indeed it was explained to me that the coupling of male and female had gone on more and more normally, and that a modern Lady Chatterley would not have to go so far as a gamekeeper, but would find her man beside her in a theatre, on Chelsea Bridge, or in a pub. I only knew the foulsmelling bistros in France, and almost never went to any – could you imagine Madeleine at the Café des Marroniers or in the Rencontre des Pecheurs? – but the pub, the Stag, was so civilized.

Julietta came in, accompanied by Stephen, a Logical Positivist with a curve of sparse golden hair, a high forehead and lilting green eyes. In his opinion Aristotle had proved that the world was very real; he could not understand how one could doubt one’s self.

“And who doubts the doubter?” I asked.

“The doubter.”

“Who sees the doubter?”

“My mind,” he answered.

“Can my mind see itself?” I pressed.

“Of course. Why not?”

“Can you have two thoughts at a time?” I continued.

“Come, come,” he said, waving his glass and feeling very happy, “you don’t want me to grow mystical, do you?

“No,” I said, “I am talking to Aristole.”

“Well, Aristole has decided on the nature of syllogisms.”

“Why, have you never heard of the Nyaya system of Indian logic?”

“Nyaya fiddlesticks,” said Stephen good-humouredly.

“Come, come,” said Julietta, with womanly tenderness, pushing back Stephen’s golden hair. Her hands, I noticed, were not as elegant as the sensitivity of her face.

“Can light see itself?” I asked.

“Obviously not,” said Stephen.

“Then how can the mind see itself”?

“I told you,” shouted Stephen, “not to talk mysticism to me!”

“He’s talking sense – and you, nonsense,” said Julietta, chivalrously.

“And you my love.” He said, kissing her richly before everyone, “you own the castle of intelligence, and I am the Lord.” He was obviously getting drunk. I stopped, bought them each a drink and sat down. There was by now a gay crowd of artists in patched elbows, old stockbrokers with indecipherable females, landlords with their dogs, writers who talked, their noses in the air, as though publishers belonged to the tanners’ or the drummers’ caste-writers, of course, being Brahmins – and there were silent, somnolent painters carrying the tools of their trade, with canvases hidden under some cover, chatting with the bartender. “Half of bitter, please,” came the refrain, gently and gruff, elegant and cockney, and the whole place filled with smoke, silence and talk. The smell of perfumes mingled with other smells of females and men, making one feel that the natural man is indeed a good man – *lo naturale e’ sempre senza errore* – that logic had nothing to do with life. Life was but lovely, and loveliness had golden hair and feminine intimacy, while the Thames flowed.

“One last question,” I said, bringing more beer to Julietta and Stephen. “The brain is made of matter….” “That is so, my inquisitor,” said Stephen, laughing.

“…so the brain is made of the same stuff as earth?”

“That is so, my Indian Philosopher.”

“Then how can the earth be objective to the earth – understand the earth?”

“It’s just like asking—I beg pardon, Julietta – If I copulate with Julietta, as I often and joyfully do and the nicer, the better when there’s drink – then how do I understand Julietta? The fact is I don’t understand Julietta. I never will understand Julietta. I don’t know that I love her – even when I tell her sweet and lovely things. I’m happy and that’s all that matters. I’m a solipsist,” he concluded laughing.

Julietta was pursuing her own thoughts, seemingly undisturbed by his statements. “I’m reviewing a book on the subject,” she broke in, “which says God is because evil is. Is that what you mean?”

“I don’t know what you mean by God. But it needs a pair of opposites to make a world. Only two things of different texture and substance can be

objective to one another. Otherwise it's like two drops of mercury in your hand, or like linking the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea – they are both water and the same. I ask you, how can the mind, made of the same stuff as the earth, be *positive* about the earth? Water is not positive to water – water is positive to nothing. Water is. So something is. And since is ness is the very stuff of that something, all you can say is, Is is."

"I knew Indians were mad, that Gandhi was mad. And now, now I have the proof," said Stephen. "I'm an old anarchist. I believe that matter is true, that Julietta is true, that I am true, and you also my friend, who stands me drinks, and spends nine pence each time on me and nine pence on Julietta. Now, go and get me another. This time I don't want a half. I want the whole damn thing, and long live Pandit Nehru."

People from the counter turned to look and lifted their glasses to India, to me. How wonderful to be in an English pub, I thought. Such humanity you would get in France only amongst the working classes, never among the dark-faced, heaving, fingering bourgeois. The sensuality of the bourgeois is studied, it is a vice, because he was defeated before he went to it: Baudelaire was already defeated by his stepfather and his smelly mother before he went to his Negress. You see the dark because you want to prove yourself the light; dialectic is on the lip of the rake. But in this young England, which I knew so little, I felt man was more primary and innocent, more inexhaustible. He did not have a "judas" on his door – he did not cultivate the concierge yet. Flowers grew in his gardens, red fluorescent lights lit the top of the buildings, and beneath them, the Thames flowed. White cliffs of chalk begird the isle at the estuary, and you could see seagulls rising with the ferry lights and returning to the night. Soon I'd have to be back in France, and I shivered to the bottom of my spine. Lord, would that I could make the moment stay, and make the world England.

Walking beside Savithri the next day, towards the evening – we were on the Embankment – I told her of my premonition of England, of this new island, knowing she was going to have a Queen: the King was already a little not there, he was so ill, and the leaves and the water in Hyde Park, the very sparrows and doves and dogs seemed to feel that there was something new happening to England, that the Regency was going soon to end.

"What Regency?" asked Savithri, with the air of a pupil to her teacher.

"Why, don't you see, ever since the death of King George the Fifth. Ever since the abdication of Edward the Eighth – that new King Hal who could have created his own Falstaff, and which a fat and foolish bank clerk

civilization drove into exile – this country, which chose her own church because her King preferred to choose his own wives – having become big, with an Empire and all that involves: and she became so afraid of the Stock Exchange, and of what Mrs. Petworth would say in Perth or Mr. Kennedy would say in Edmonton, Alberta – for remember it's all a question of wool shares or the London-Electic – this mercantile country drove away what might have been her best King, or at least the best loved, since Henry the Fifth. Do you remember those broken French sentences addressed to his Kate: *Donc vostre est France, et vous estes miennes?* And England put in his place of noble Bharatha who apologized every time he spoke, saying. You think I am your King, but I am only brother to the King; I tremble, I hesitate, I wish my brother were here. And he ruled the land with the devotion of a Bharatha, worshipping the sandal of his loved brother placed on the throne."

"Kingship is an impersonal principle; it is life and death, it knows no limitations. It is history made camate, just as this Thames is the principle of water made real. And when a king apologizes for being a king he is no king; he establishes a duality in himself, so he can have no authority. The King can do no wrong, comes from the idea that the Principle can do no wrong, just as the communists say, the Party can do no wrong. Talking of the communists the other day in Cambridge, I forgot to say that communism must succeed; happily for us, to be followed by kingship. Look at the difference between Hitler and Stalin. Stalin, the man of iron, the mystery behind the Kremlin, the impersonal being; to whom toture, growth or death are essentials of an abstract arithmetic. As the Catholics looked for omens in the Bible, Stalin looked to impersonal history for guidance. Stalin lives and dies, in history as history, not outside history. Hitler, on the other hand, lived in his dramatic Nuremberg rallies, visible, concrete, his voice the most real of real; his plans personal, demoniac, his whims astrological, his history Hitlerian-Germanic, if you will – dying a hero, a Superman; Zarathustra. Duality must lead to heroism, to personality development, to glory. The dualist must become, saintly, must cultivate humility, because he knows he could be big, great, heroic and personal, an emperor with a statue and a pediment."

Here, silently Savithri led me on to Chelsea Bridge; and looking down at the river, I continued:

"But the impersonal is neither humble nor proud who could say whether Stalin was humble or proud? But one can say so easily and so eminently of another Cathar, another purist, Trotsky – that noble revolutionary of perfect integrity – that he was vain. He would gladly have jumped into the fire, down the *campo di cremates*, smiling and singing, I am incorruptible, I am pure, I am the flame. Stalin would have the Kremlin guarded with a thousand

sentries, a few thousand spies, killing each one when he knew too much, first a Yagoda, then a Yezhov. For him history killed them, just as an Inca chief believed his god, not himself, wanted a sacrifice. Stalin bore no personal enmity to Trotsky, for this was real history. Even if Stalin the man was jealous of Trotsky, the flame of pure Revolution (and Stalin might have admitted this), Stalin who is history, had to kill Trotsky the anti-history. The pure, the human, the vainglorious leader's personal magic was an unholy impediment to the movement of history. In the same was Marshal Toukhachesvsky had to die – the impersonal cannot allow that any man be a hero. Stalin was no hero: he was a king, a god."

"How well you hold forth," teased Savithri, tugging my arm. She wanted me to look at the barges as they floated down, or at the clear moon that played between the clouds and delighted Savithri as it might have a child.

"Moon, moon, Uncle Moon," I chanted a Kanarese nursery rhyme, "Mama, Chanda-mama," and then we went back to history.

"The Superman is our enemy. Look what happened in India. Sri Aurobindo wanted, if you please, to improve on the Advaita of Sri Sankara – which was just like trying to improve on the numerical status of zero. Zero makes all numbers, so zero begins everything. All numbers are possible when they are in and of zero. Similarly all philosophies are possible in and around Vedanta. But you can no more improve on Vedanta than improve on zero. The zero, you see, the sunya, is impersonal; whereas one, two, three and so on are all dualistic. One always implies many. But zero implies *nothing.* I am not one, I am not two, I am neither one, nor two: Aham nirvikalpi nirakara rupih. I am the I. So, to come back to Sri Aurobindo, he shut himself in Pondicherry and started building a new world. If you can build a house of three storeys, you can build one of five, eight, ten or twelve storeys – and go as high as the Empire State Building or any other structure, higher and yet higher. And just as aeroplanes at first went fifty miles an hour, then eighty, then a hundred, two hundred, three, and now go far beyond the speed of sound, similarly you can build any number of worlds, can make the mind, the psyche so athletic that you can build world after world, but you cannot go beyond yourself, your impersonal principle. And just as the materialism of Stalin and not his impersonal sense of history, but his material interpretation of history made him end up like the Egyptians in being embalmed and made immortal as history, Sri Aurobindo tried to make this perishable, this chemical, this historical body, this body of eighteen aggregates, an Nagarjuna called it, *permanent.* Moralism and materialism must go together. The undying is a moral concent – for death is a biological phenomenon, an anti-life phenomenon, against the nature of the species. Not to die, to drink the elixir

of life, is moral it is to transcend the phenomenal as celibacy is the transcending of nature. The moral end in mummification and the pyramid."

"I am breathless," said Savithri, "you take me too far and too quickly."

"Just a moment," I begged, "I'll soon finish. The Superman is the enemy of man – whether you call him Zarathustra, Sri Aurobindo, Stalin, or Father Zossima."

"That's a new gentleman in history," laughed Savithri.

"Oh," I remarked, a little irritated by her disturbance, "it's a saintly character in Dostoevsky: he smells – he decomposes – when he dies, and thus disturbs the odour of sanctity his miracles had brought to him. When Sri Aurobindo died his disciples must have felt the same: the deathless master, who wanted to consecrate his body, consign it to immortality, died like any other. His breath must have stopped, his eyes must have become fixed in their sockets, but being a Yogi he may have been sitting in a lotus posture, and that would have given him beauty and great dignity."

"And now?" begged Savithri. The damp of the river was rising, "I am a biological phenomenon, and food and warmth are necessary. Besides, "she added, pulling her sari over her breast as though it was she who would suffer, "besides, I am terrified of your lungs." So I obeyed and we slowly strolled along the Embankment.

"You know," I said, "Julietta is probably at the Stag."

"Ah," she burst out laughing, "so you remember geography and biography, do you? Come, let us go."

"Oh, never never!" I shouted. "You, Savithri, in a pub?

"Pub or no pub, take me anywhere, my love," she said, so gently, so dedicatedly and with such a pressure of her fingers on my arm that the whole world rose up into my awareness renewed; "take me anywhere, and keep me warm." Was it I, the foolish schoolteacher, this miserable five foot eleven of Brahmin feebleness, this ungainly, myopic over-bent creature to whom she had said those two tender, commonplace but perfect words? It was the first time she ever said them to me, and perhaps she had never said them to anyone else. History and my mind vanished somewhere, and I put my arms round that little creature – she hardly came to my shoulder – and led her along alleyways and parkways, past bus stop, bridge and mews to a taxi.

"Let's go to Soho," I said, and as I held her in my arms, how true it seemed

we were to each other, a lit space between us, a presence – God. *"Dieu est loge dans I'intervalle entre les homes,"* I recited Henri Frank to her.

"Yes, it is God," she whispered, and we fell into the silence of busy streets. After a long moment, she whispered again, "Take me with you, my love."

"Will you come, Savithri?"

"Take me with you my love, anywhere."

"Come," I said "this minute, now….."

"No, I cannot. I must go back. I must go back to Pratap."

I pressed her against me ever more tenderly. "Come, I'll take you," I persisted.

"To God," she said and fell into my lap. I touched her lips as though they were made with light, with honey, with the space between words of poetry, of song. London was no longer a city for me, it was myself: the world was no longer space for me, it was a moment of time, it was now.

At Barbirolli's I ordered a Chianti, and said, as though it had some meaning," And now you must learn Italian.

Io ritornai dalla santissima onda
Rifatto si come piante novella
Renovellate di novella fronda
Puro e disposto a salire alle stelle,"

I recited, "You must learn Italian, for God has texture in that language. God is rich and Truscan, and the Arno has a bridge made for marriage processions."

"So has Allahabad," she added, somewhat sadly. "And appropriately it is called the Hunter Bridge."

"May I go on with my Superman?" I begged.

"The biological sense of warmth having come back to me and how nice this Chianti is" – she raised her glass – "I can now follow any intricacy of thought. I like to play chess with you in history."

"The Minister is the Superman," I started.

"And the King?"

“The Sage. The Vedantin, himself beyond duality, is in himself, through duality and nonduality.”

“That’s too difficult with Chianti. I wish, Rama – shall I call you that from now? I wish you could sing me a song, and I would lie on your lap, far away where there is no land or road, no river or people, no father, fiancé, filigree, palace or elephants – perhaps just a mother – and on some mountain….”

“In Kailasa….” I said.

“You would sit in meditation”

“And you?”

“Pray, that you might awaken and not burn the world with that third eye-that eye which plays with history,” she laughed.

“And parrots would sing, and the mango leaf be tender, be like copper with morning sunshine.”

“And I would go round you three times, once, twice, thrice, and fall at your ash-coloured feet, begging that the Lord might absorb me unto himself….. I am a woman,” she added hesitantly, “a Hindu woman.”

Meretho Giridhara Gopala….,
Mine the mountain-bearing Krishna,
My lord none else than He.”

History, Stalin and the Superman had vanished. Trying to solve the puzzle of history, like some hero in a fable, I had won a bride. A princess had come out of the budumekaye, but the moment I had entered the world of the seven sisters the Prime Minister’s son had led a revolution in the palace, had imprisoned the other six, and put us two under arrest. King Mark of Tintagel awaited his Iseult. I would have to give her to him, but having drunk the potion the potion of Granval I would meet her by brooks and forests; I would be torn by dragons, but someday we would lie in the forest, the sword between us. Some day love would be strong enough to shatter the rock to fragments, and we should be free to wander where we would, build an empire if we cared.

“And we shall have a bambino,” she said, and laughed as though she had caught my thought.

‘Two,” I added. “One is Ganesha and the other Kumara.”

“And we shall throw colours on each other at Holi under the mountain moon. Our Indian Eros shoots with a flower, so why burn him?”

“Why not?” I asked. “The third eye opens when the attraction has ended. I hope you are not attracted by me?”

“Oh, no,” she said. “If I were attracted by attraction, there would be no one like Hussain. He looks like someone from a Moghul painting, lovely with a long curve of eyebrow, a thin waist, very long gentle hands and inside here,” she pointed to her head, “all empty. His heart is filled with popped rice, curly and white and isolated. Muslims know how to please a woman,” she finished, rather sadly.

“And a Hindu?”

“A Hindu woman knows how to worship her Krishna, her Lord. When the moon shines over the Jumma and lights are lit in the households, and the cows are milked, then it is Janaki’s son plays on the banks of the Yamuna in Brindavan. The cattle tear their ropes away, the deer leave the forests and come leaping to the groves, and with the peacocks seated on the branches of the asoka, Krishna dances on the red earth. What Gopi, my Lord, would not go to this festival of love? Women lose their shame, and men lose their anger, for in Brindavan Krishna the Lord dances. We women are bidden to that feast. Come,” she said, as though it was too much emotion to bear.

As we wandered down the streets, Piccadilly with its many coloured lights, the Tube entrances and the bus queues gave us a sense of reality. Finally I took her to some women’s hostel off Gower Street – where she always had rooms reserved for her and where she was looked after by her friend Gauri from Hyderabad, round as Savithri herself, but loquacious, big and protective. I was always so afraid of Savithri getting lost. It was not only a matter of bringing back her glasses or pen, but one always felt one had to bring Savithri back to Savithri.

“Ah, I m very real,” she protested. “And tomorrow you will see how clever I am at taking buses. I’ll jump into a 14 at Tottenham Court Road and be in Kensington at ten precise,” she promised as I left her. I knew that at ten she would still be talking away to Gauri about some blouse pattern or somebody’s marriage in Delhi. I knew I would have to telephone and ask her if she knew the time. “I promise you, you need not telephone. Tomorrow I will be punctual as Big Ben.” With Savithri the profound and the banal lived so easily side by side.

I touched her hand at the door, to know I could touch her, and carried the

feel of it home. It was like touching a thought, not just a thought of jug or water, or a pillow or a horse, but a thought as it leaps, as it were, in that instant where the thought lights itself, as the meteor its own tail, I felt it was of the substance of milk, of truth, of joy seen as myself.

Next day, when I was washed and dressed and had meditated and rested – I was in a muslin dhoti and kurtha – there was still no sign of Savithri at ten or at ten past ten. Not long after, she entered in a South Indian sari of a colour we in Mysore call: “colour of the sky,” with a peacock-gold choli, and a large kumkum on her forehead. She looked awed with herself, and full of reverence. As I went to touch her I refrained – something in her walk was strange.

“I have been praying.”

“To whom?”

“To Shiva,” she whispered. Then she opened her bag and took out a sandal-stick. Her movements were made of erudite silences. “Please light this for me,” she begged.

By the time I had lit the sandal-stick in the bathroom and come out she had spread her articles of worship about her. There was a small silver censer, with the camphor. There was a silver kumkum-box. She had a few roses, too, fresh and dripping with water.

“Bring me some Ganges water in this.”

I put some plain water in her silver plate. She put kumkum into the water.

“Will you permit me?” she asked. “Permit this, a woman’s business?”

“Oh, no!” I protested.

“But it was you who told me at home a man obeys a woman, that it’s Hindu dharma”

“I obey,” I said.

Then she knelt before me, removed one by one my slippers and my stockings and put them aside gently-distantly. She took flower and kumkum, and mumbling some song to herself, anointed my feet with them. Now she lit camphor and placing the censer in the middle of the kumkum-water she waved the flame before my face, once, twice and three times in arathi. After this she touched my feet with the water, and made aspersions of it over her

head. Kneeling again and placing her head on my feet, she stayed there long, very long, with her breath breaking into gentle sobs. Then she gently held herself up. Taking the kumkum from the box I placed it on her brow, at the parting of her hair, and there where her bosom heaved, the abode of love. I could not touch her any more, nor could she touch me, and we stood for an isolate while. Then suddenly I remembered my mother's toerings.

"Stop where you are for a moment," I begged.

"I can go nowhere," she answered, "I belong to you."

Gently, as if lost in the aisles of a large temple, I walked about my room, opened my trunk and slowly removed the newspaper cover, then the coconut, the betel nuts, the kumkum that Little Mother had destined for her daughter-in-law. "I, too, had come prepared for this morning," I said.

"Really?" she smiled, for in me nothing astonished her.

"Yes, but it was a preparation made a very long time ago – a long, long time, Savithri. Not a life, not ten lives, but life upon life….."

"Yes," she said. "This Cambridge undergraduate, who smokes like a chimney and dances to barbarian jazz, she says unto you, I've known my Lord for a thousand lives, from Janam to Janam have I known my Krishna….."

"And the Lord knows himself because Radha is, else he would have gone into penance and sat on Himalaya. The Jumna flows and peacock feathers are on his diadem, because Radha's smiles enchant the creepers and the birds, Radha is the music of dusk, the red earth, the meaning of night. And this, my love, my spouse," I whispered, "is from my home. This is coconut, this is betel nut, this is kumkum and these the toerings my Mother wore, and left for my bridal." Slowly I anointed her with kumkum from my home, offered her the coconut and the betel nuts – there were eight, round and auspicious ones. "And now I shall place the toerings on your feet."

"Never," she said angrily. "You may be a Brahmin for all I know. But do you know of a Hindu woman who'd let her Lord touch her feet?"

"What a foolish woman you are!" I said, laughing. "And just by this you show why a Brahmin is necessary to educate you all, kings, queens, peasants and merchants. Don't you know that in marriage both the spouse and the espoused become anointed unto godhead? That explains why in Hindu marriages the married couple can only fall at the feet of the Guru and the

Guru alone – for the Guru is higher than any god. Thus, I can now place them on your feet."

So much theology disturbed and convinced her, and she let me push the toerings on to her second toes, one on the left and other on the right. The little bells on them whisked and sang: I was happy to have touched Savithri's feet.

The toerings were the precise size for her. Little Mother was right: for Madeleine they would have been too big.

Savithri sat on my bed, and the sun who had made himself such an auspicious presence fell upon her clear Rajput face as she sang Mira.

Sadhu matha ja … Sadhu matha ja …
O cenobite, O cenobite, do not go.
Make a pyre for me, and when I burn,
Put the ashes on your brow,
O cenobite, do not go.

We were at Victoria by nine o'clock. We were so happy and so sad altogether, as though no one could take us away from each other and nobody marry us again. We were not married that morning, we discovered, we had ever been married – else how understand that silent, whole knowledge of one another?

"My love, my love, my love," she repeated, as though it were a mantra, "my love, and my Lord."

"And when will Italy be, and the bridge on the Arno, and the bambino?" I asked.

She put her head out of the window of the train, and for the first time I noticed the collyrium that tears had spread over her checks and face.

"I promise you one thing," she said.

"And what, Princess, may that be?" I replied, laughing.

"Parvathi says she will come to Shiva, when Shiva is so lost in meditation that were he to open his eyes the three worlds would burn."

"Meaning?" I was so frightened that my voice went awry and hollow.

"I'll come when you don't need me, when you can live without me, O cenobite." I knew the absolute meaning of it, the exactitude, for Savithri could

never whisper, never utter but the whole of truth, even in a joke. But it was always like a sacred text, a cryptogram, with different meanings at different hierarchies of awareness.

“I understand and accept,” I answered, with a clear and definite navel deep voice. I can hear myself saying that to this day.

“Italy is,” she continued, relentless, ‘when Shivoham, Shivoham is true.”

“Meanwhile?”

“Meanwhile I go back to Allahabad and become Mrs. Pratap Singh.”

“And run the household of the new Governor,” I added, to hide any acknowledgement and pain. For by now Pratap had become Personal Secretary to His Excellency the Governor of some Indian Province. “Palace or Government House, they’re equal and opposite,” I laughed.

“And what will the learned historian do?” she asked.

“Finish the history of the Cathars, and well-wed and twice-wed, become Professor of Medieval European History at some Indian University. India is large and very diverse,” I pleaded.

“I shall always be a good pupil,” she joked. The train whistled, and took her away.

I took a taxi, went back to the Stag or the Bunch of Grapes, for I do not remember exactly and stood a drink to some bearded painter who talked abstract art and had a beautiful face. Holy is a pub when one is holy oneself.

2 The Cat and Shakespeare

Mother cat sits in cage between the office table and the almirah. In the office there are thirteen clerks. And the boss Bhoothalinga Iyer sneezes from his room. His office is partitioned off and has a swinging door. Every time anyone goes in to answer the boss's calls the cat seems to rise up. There's a painful irritating grating – the hinges have not been oiled. When the boss calls and the hinges creak, the cat sits up on her haunches, then lies down again. When Govindan Nair lifts her cage (for it's a she; after all, one discovered it) mother cat lifts up her head and says "meowmeow." Then, bending down, Govindan Nair gives his pen nib to her and she chews it. "Ah, she chews the origin of numbers," says Govindan Nair, to whom every mystery seems to open itself. If Lavoisier, as textbooks say, divided oxygen and hydrogen after years of experimentation, our Govindan Nair born in France would only have to stand and say, "Water, show thyself to me!" And hydrogen would have stood to one side somewhat big and bellied, and oxygen would have curled herself shy at his knees and suddenly gone shooting like a mermaid into the big sky. And he would not have lost his head at the Revolution. The British, too, chopped of their kings' heads. A king chops off your head, or you chop his, but the police state is different from the state Truth policed. The fact is that when the mother cat carries you across the wall and to anywhere, there is nothing but space. Space is white and large and free. Why don't you go there? Sir, you will say, kneading your snuff, but there is a wall. To which Govindan Nair make answer: Like Usha, why don't you put stones one over the other, and standing under the bilva tree, you can speak to Shridhar. You can say:

That is why Shridhar died. Usha spoke over the wall and the cat carried him away. Funny, sir, that a child is carried away by a cat. Anyway, tell me where is Shridhar gone? He has gone to house three storeys hight. “Is that what you say, mother cat?”Asks Govindan Nair. The mother cat says “meow”. Govindan Nair cannot keep her in the cage any longer. He opens the cage and the cat leaps onto his lap. It is a trained cat. It knows what is right from what is wrong.

This excerpt is from *The Cat and. Shakespeare: A Tale of Modern India* (1965). An earlier version was published as *The Cat* in the *Chelsea Review* (New York) in 1959.

Children below were playing hide-and-seek among the rice bags. The ration shop was also their playground. While the mothers waited, the children played among the bags. Govindan Nair wanted to go down and play with the children, but there was this Ummathur file and seventeen sacks lost. Who had stolen the sacks? Was it a gang of poor men or was it merchants’ marauders? Stroking the cat, his pen in his mouth, Govindan Nair was contemplating. When he thinks in this manner it means he wants to do something mechanical. He always carried a pen knife with him, for sharpening pencils and such other things (including rose twigs). He usually took this out pulled out the blade and started rubbing it up and down the edge of table. Just where he worked on his files, he had written, or rather carved, many names – his own, the name of his boss, and Usha’s (I was surprised once when I went to visit him to find Usha’s name there, but it was there). Sharpening the knife, he started humming to himself.

“Hey nonny, nonny, nonny …”

GOVINDAN NAIR: What a kind thought, Abraham. Whoever it is that had the idea. I was thinking this morning. There are so many rats at home. There are so many rats in the office. You remember the Sidpur file? It might have been the rats. Big ones like bandicoots, they be. And then, at home there are so many. Even they seem to have famine. A country at war has rations. A rationed country has little food. When there is little grain to eat, the rats become so courageous. They will bite off anything. Even the nose of a man. *(He looks around him and speaks to John.).* So, I say, thank you for having had such a kind thought, Mr. John *(Everybody bursts out laughing again. The boss also sneezes.)* Thank you, Mr. John, for this wonderful gift. A cat, sir, a cat.

Now, now let me make a speech in the manner of Hamlet.

To be or not to be. No, No. *(He looks at the cat.)*

A kitten sans cat, kitten being the

diminutive for cat. *Vide* Prescott

Of the great grammatical fame.

A kitten sans cat, that is the

Question. (He *turns the cage round and round*.)

To live is not difficult

sir, for flesh is the form of

existence, and man in his journey to

the ultimate knows that

to yield to the flesh is to

grow grain. To yield to the pipe

is to blow flame. Asthma is

the trouble that Polonius reveals

for fool; he did behind the curtain

asthamatic.

John:	And what happened to him?
Govindan Nair:	Sir, Lady, by now I pierce *(he makes as if he pierces something with the right arm)* the veil, and the ashthamatic falls *(A thud)*
John:	Murder, murder.
Govindan Nair:	Rank muder.
	Rank murder and dark desolation. For Ophelia
Syed Sahib:	Go, get thee to a nunnery.
John:	Why, Abraham, that’s the place for you. Isn’t that so?
Syed	To the nunnery, maid (*looking at the cat)*

Sahib :

Govindan Nair: To the rank growth I go,

Hey nonny, nonny

To the slipping world I go,

Hey nonny, nonny

I tell you what, sir. In the kingdom of Denmark there's one blessed thing. Whatever they are they are not made *(Lets the cat out of the cage. It leaps on a desk familiar, affectionate, but distant. It licks its front paw.)* The kingdom of Denmark is just like a ration office.

John: How so, Mr. Nair? That's a great idea – Shakespearean, I should say.

Govindan Nair: Shakespeare knew every mystery of the ration shop. Here however we haven't to murder a brother to marry his wife. Here we marry whom we like. The ration card marries. You are married even when there is no wife. You are married without looking at horoscopes. The dead are not buried in ration shops. There will be no grave scene. Ophelia will die but she will have no skull left for Hamlet, a future Hamlet, to see. We slip, sir, from sleep to wake from wake to sleep. We marry the wife in dream, and we wake up king of Denmark. We marry Ophelia in dream and wake up having a Polonius to bury. We live in continual mystery. In fact I ask you, John, my friend *(sharpening his knife on the table)*, when one commits murder in a dream, is that murder or not?

John: *(very clever)* That's jurisprudence. I'm only a clerk, Y.P. John is only a clerk.

Govindan Nair: I ask you, what is dream? Are you sure you are not in dream (laughing)? As asthamtic cough, with the cry of children under the creak of balance, and the cat, a Persian cat on the table of Ration Office No.66. Is it a dream or is it real?

John: Every bit is real, but the whole is not. So it is not a dream

Govindan Nair: In the dream the whole is real.

Abraham: The Boss is worried about the Ummathur file.

Govindan Nair: Are you are sure the wagon did not go to Coimbatore? Or did it go to Cannore? Both have C in them. Even when awake we make such an error. The reason, sir, why I ask you "are you in dream or in waking state?" is simple. In dream the dead appears.

John: That is so. *(The cat comes and lies before Nair, It seems to be listening carefully to what Nair is saying.)*

Govindan Nair: In ration offices, as we all know, the dead have numbers. Killing be no murder.

John: *(addressing himself to Abraham)* What ho, Horatio.

Now, Govindan Nair walked straight over to John's table. Perhaps he just wanted to consult a file.

"John," he said, while the mother cat stood behind him.

"Yes, mister," said John, very sure of himself.

"John, this is a cat," he said, lifting up the cat and placing it on John's table. The whole office stopped work. Even Bhoothalinga seemed involved in this silence.

"What's that? Cried Abraham, and came over to John's table.

"Oh, I am only talking to him about the cat."

"What cat? said Syed, his hand on Govindan Nair's shoulders.

"Why, man, cat. There's cat only. All cats belong to one speices-cat. Call it cat or call it marjara which is Sanskrit or better still poochi which is Malayalam, it's the same – isn't that so, John?"

"Yes, my lord," said John, rising from his seat.

"So, gentlemen, I wanted to know how much zoology our friend knew. What is a Persian cat called in Latin? In fact what is the Latin name for a cat?"

"Felinus," said Abraham, remembering his church instructions.

"Then *Felinus Persiana* would be a Persian cat," said Govindan Nair, who knew of course everything.

“Yes,” said Abraham dubiously.

“And man?”

“*Humanus.*”

“And I?” he said

“Ego.”

“Make me a Latin sentence, Abraham. *Ego esse humanus malabario et lux esse felinus persiana, or some such thing..*”

“I don’t know that much Latin,” said Abraham.

The curious thing was that the boss did not call. The cat continued to raise her tail and bunch herself to be caressed. Govindan Nair still held the penknife in the other hand as if it were his pencil. Man must hold something with his hands, otherwise how could he know what he is about? If you carry a penknife like a pencil in your hand you are a clerk. Is there any doubt about it? “Speaking biologically,” Govindan Nair used to say “a hundred generations of clerks will secrete lead from their bowels and clerks’ fingers will bear capillaries like those in the new office pencils. You write morning, noon, and night. You could even write in your dreams.”

“What is clerk in Latin?”

“*Clericus* is Latin itself.”

“Ha, Ha,” said Govindan Nair. Seeing the whole office around him, and the boss silent – it was a hot morning – he added: “Define the cat, Mr. John.”

“Mr. Govindan Nair, a cat is a feline being.”

“What are its characteristics?” Govindan Nair started making a firm and rapid movement with his knife (back and forth), as if he were sharpening the pencil on the beautiful skin of the cat.

“Its characteristics are – its characteristics are,” mumbled John, and as somebody said, he had cleared his bladder audibly. It poured an acrid smell in to the room. Bhoothalinga Iyer had a bad cold, and one could hear him snuff in snuff. There was such silence in the office (but for the burring sound of Govindan Nair who always burred anyway) that Bhoothalinga Iyer was sure everybody was at work. There was suddenly silence even in the ration shop. And this was the sort of silence which sometimes rises like a temple pillar from earth to heaven; all creation seems still, as if the universe pondered:

What next?

“First of all, it’s of the same family as the lion,” said Rama Krishna, a young clerk. He had joined them only three months ago, fresh from college.

“Then?” asked Govindan Nair.

“Then,” said Abraham, getting very anxious, ‘it goes in and out of one’s house as not even a man can.”

“What very intelligent colleagues I have,” remarked Govindan Nair, smiling. “Then?”

“At cat is the purest animal in the world.”

“Why so? Hey, there, Syed, what does your Muslim theology say about it?

“In Muslim theology only the chameleon is evil. It betrayed Muhammed. And the hog. But the cat, it is sacred.”

“No, man, I know your theology better. The cat is not sacred in Islam. It is sacred in Egypt. It was called Bastet.”

“And it wore a crown?” said John, a little reassured that all this was a joke.

Govindan Nair quickly made a paper crown; he cut the three sides of a triangle and gave it a point, and placed it on the head of the cat and said: “Hey, Bastet, you are sacred, don’t you understand?”

“And, Syed, what is it your people do when what is sacred is treated as what is sacred?”

“We kneel and touch the ground and ask for Allah’s blessing.”

“Now, Mr. John, you understand. Here is Bastet. You have brought a very God to our poor ration office. You be the priest.”

“Oh, no,” said John. He knew Govindan Nair had something up his sleeve.

“Kneel!” shouted Govindan Nair, “Kneel, man!” And he brandished his knife, holding the cat firmly with his left hand. “Or say: No sir, I am a low-born, I am a coward. Kneel!” he shouted. Bhoothalinga Iyer’s chair creaked. “You don’t insult a cat like this, stuffing a cat in to a rat cage.”

John knelt devoutly.

“There, once again,” shouted Govindan Nair.

John knelt again, crossing himself. Syed had his hands brought together. All the office was one noumenal silence.

“Kiss it,” shouted Govindan Nair again.

John kissed the cat. Bhoothalinga Iyer came and stood behind the crowd. He thought some file was being tampered with.

“Govindan Nair!” he shouted.

“Yes, sir,” And Govindan Nair went toward his boss. The cat jumped down the table and everybody gave way to the cat. By now she’s lost her crown. Rubbing against his legs it cried “meow, meow” and Govindan Nair lifted her up and placed her on his shoulder with his right hand. His knife was still in the left.

“What is this?” asked Bhoothalinga Iyer.

“We’ve being discussing the Latin formation for Persian cat.

Do you know it, sir?”

“In Sanskrit it is called marjoram,” he said as if he were saying it with only the tip of his tongue. “And for Persian cat there’s no word in ancient Sanskrit.”

“In Malayalam it is called poochi-poochi,” said Govindan Nair, as he went back with the boss to the inner office.

The boss sat down in his chair.

The cat jumped on to Bhoothalinga Iyer’s table. It saw another tassel of a file and started playing with it. Bhoothalinga Iyer, seeing all the eyes of the office (for everybody, as it were, came to see what was happening), wanted to shout: Get out! Get away! But his tongue would not say it. How can you say with what is not what is? How can you shape words that cannot come from yourself? What do you do you do if you find yourself a prisoner? You want to escape. Govindan Nair laid the knife on the table and said Bhoothalinga Iyer. “Sir, tell me a story.”

“What story?”

“Any story.”

“I know no story.”

“I’ll tell you a story,” said Govindan Nair, and lifted the cat and placed her on his shoulder.

“Once upon a time,” he began, and before he could go on, the cat jumped onto Bhoothalinga Iyer’s head. Bhoothalinga Iyer opened his eyes wide and said, “Shiva, Shiva” and he was dead. He actually sat in his chair as if he could not be moved.

Govindan Nair rushed back home with the beautiful Persian cat in the cage and let it loose in the house. Then it was he went to Bhoothalinga Iyer’s funeral. Bhoothalinga Iyer’s wife, Lakshamma was moved, deeply moved, by all the consoling words Govindan Nair spoke to her. He spoke of death and birth and such things. He too was weeping. His boss had died. Bhoothalinga Iyer had asthma. And asthmatics have weak hearts. And the snuff did not help, did it – said the Brahmins at the door of the temple.

For some strange reason, everybody came to console Govindan Nair at his office as if he had lost something. Kunni Krishna Menon from the next house came and spoke as though Govindan Nair needed condolence. Perhaps he would be promoted to his boss’s place – there was such a rumour. Then he could not run down and play with the children, remarked Abraham. An officer could not do it. “Then you be boss, Abraham,” said Govindan Nair, hugging him.

The excerpt on the following page is the famous climactic Court Scene from The Cat and Shakespeare.

The white-clad judge, Mr. Gopala Menon, said in the palace like court by the railway line which every advocate knows so well – the name boards of the advocates look like coconuts on a tree, there are so many in the building across: Vishwanatha Iyer, BSc., LLB; Ramanujan Iyengar, MA ML Advocate High Court; Mr. Syed Mohammed Sahib, Advocate; P. Gangadharan Pillai, High Court advocate; Sr. Rajaram Iyer, Advocate; etc., etc – the judge said: “I cannot follow your argument, sir. Will you repeat?”

“Mr. Bhoothalinga Iyer, of blessed memory,” Govindan Nair started, “used to visit certain places whose names are not mentioned in respectable places.” (“Ho, ho!” shouted one or two persons in the gallery.) “If I do not mention the name, it is because many persons whose faces I see before me now, if I may say so, betake themselves there.”

“My Lord, such insinuations are not to be permitted in open court,” shouted a member of the bar.

“The sun shines on the good and on the wicked equally, like justice. Please

go and close the sunshine before you say: this should not be discussed in open court."

"Court: The Accused is free to do what it likes."

"I was only saying: Whether you close the door and sit like photographers in the dark room or you come out, the sun is always open. The Maharaja of Travancore, sir –"

"Say His Highness."

"Yes, His Highness the Maharaja of Travanocore is there, whether his subjects – say some fellow in the hill tribes – knows his name or not."

"So?"

"So what is real ever is."

'That is so, cried the Government Advocate.

"Yes, but we never want to see it. For example that a worthy man like Bhoothalinga Iyer (of blessed memory) used to visit places of little respectability."

"So?"

"So, he met there, one day, a lady of great respectability."

"Your statements are so contradictory."

"Your Lordship, could I say Your Lordship without the idea of an Accused? Could I say respectable without the ideas of unrespectable coming into it? Without saying, I am not a woman, what does the word man mean?

"Yes, let us get back to Bhoothalinga Iyer."

"Mr. Iyer used to visit such a place."

"And then?"

"One day after visiting such a place, he met me at the door."

"Yes, go on. Did he?"

"Of course. I went there regularly. My wife will tell you."

"Oho," exclaimed Advocate Tirumalachar from the bar table.

“And, at the door he said: Every time I commit a sin, I place a rupee in the treasure pitcher of the sanctuary. I tell my wife this is for me to go to Benares one day. But the treasure pitcher is tightly fixed with scaling wax. There is here in this place a respectable woman. I like her and she likes me. When I went in, as usual, this time, however, a new woman, a Brahmin women, I think an Iyengar woman, came. She said her husband was dead. I knew I was going to die soon, being old. But I was in a hurry. So I told her: Do not worry, lady. I will go and tell your husband everything. He will understand. She became naked and fell on the bed. Her breasts were so lovely.”

“This is sheer pornography,” said an elderly advocate with a big nose.

“I am quoting evidence, sir,” continued Govindan Nair.

“And she played with her necklace that lay coyly on her bosom.”

“And what did he do?” asked a counsel for the Government

“He did nothing.”

“Ha, ha, ha,” laughed many of the advocates.

“The dignity of the Court demands better behaviour,” said the Government Advocate. He had never had to argue against so strange a man. He got terrifically interested in his opponent.

“He not only did nothing, sir. Mr. Bhoothalinga Iyer was a man of generous heart –”

“To propose immorality as a generous thing!” mumbled Advocate Tirumalachar. Tirumalachar, who looked fiftyish and fair, was known for his deep religious sympathies. He was president of the Radha Sami Sangh, Trivandrum.

“What do advocates defend?” asked the judge.

“Morality,” said Tirumalachar, rising and adjusting his turban.

“You defend man,” said the Government Advocate. “But law says we defend the Truth. The law is right.”

“The Government Advocate has said the right thing. Now, Accused, continue.”

“My Lord, I was saying: One day after the whole office was empty and Bhoothalinga Iyer was alone, he said: Govindan Nair, stay there, I have a job

for you. And he produced the Benares pot that he had hidden deeply in the sample rice sack. There was one sack always in the office. Who would look into it? So he produced the Benares pot and said: Go to Mutthalinga Nayak Street and in the third house right by the temple mandap there must be a widow called Meenakshiamma. Please hand over this one hundred and nine rupees. That is all there is in it. I told my wife yesterday to go to the cinema with my son-in-law. She went. I stole this and came here. I opened the office. I had the key. Today I have sent her to the zoo with my son-in-law. Then there is Pattamal's music at the Victoria Jubilee Hall. Therefore they will come late, but I must return home quietly. I know you are a man with a big heart, so please do this service for me. She will wait for you."

"In English you call this a cock-and-bull story," said Tirumalachar.

"You could, if you so want, call it a hen-and heifer story," said Govindan Nair, and laughed.

"Who then was the witness?"

"As one should except in such a cock-and bull story, a cat, sir, a cat," said Govindan Nair seriously.

The judge rose and dismissed the court, He called the accused, and said: "Please speak the Truth."

And Govindan Nair, with tears running down from his big black eyes answered: "Your Lordship, I speak only the Truth. If the world of man does not conform to Truth, should Truth suffer for that reason? If only you knew how I pray every night and say: Mother, keep me at the lotus feet of Truth. The judge can give a judgement. The Government Advocate can accuse. Police Inspector Rama Iyer can muster evidence. But the accused alone knows the Truth."

"How right you are," said the judge, flabbergasted. He had never thought of this before. "Tell me then, Mr. Govindan Nair, how can a judge know the Truth?"

"By being it," said Govindan Nair as if it were such a simple matter. After all, he had cut a passage in the wall where Shridhar used to talk to Usha. After all, who could say Bhoothalinga Iyer had not gone to Coimbatore? For example, Abraham could not, as he would lose his job (and with it his green BSA bicycle) if the boss returned. Suppose Shantha's child were really Bhoothalinga Iyer reborn? Who could know? The cat could, was Govindan Nair's conviction.

“Tomorrow I’ll bring the cat to court,” he said, as if asking the judge’s permission. Of course what wrong could Govindan Nair have done? Could you ever see a man so innocent? Anybody could see he played with children and the scale. And when one side was heavy, he put two kids on the other side to make the balance go up. Then he brought the needle to a standstill, holding it tight. Thus the balance was created among men. When two things depend on each other for their very existence, neither exists. That is the Law of law.

“The cat, sir, will do it,” he said. The judge consented.

Next day I sent Usha with Shantha (the baby was left at home with Tangamma to look after him). The cat was carried in a big cage.

When the court opened its deliberations, the Government Advocate said: “My Lord, we are facing judgment against judgment. We must be careful. We have, as witness, a cat.”

“Why not? We are in Travancore.”

“I thought so too, Your Lordship. Why should we follow the proceedings of any other court of the world, were it His Majesty’s Privy Council in London? If a cat could be proved to prove any evidence we might set a precedent.”

“My Lord,” said Govindan Nair, rising. Crowds had gathered at the courthouse. Such a thing had never happened before. It was not even a political case. (There was no Gandhi in it.) Women were somehow convinced Govindan Nair was an innocent man. Some of them had seen him in the ration shop. Others had gone to have ration cards issued. Some had noticed him give way to ladies when the bus was overcrowded. Such things are never forgotten by women. They always feed the child in their womb whether the child be there or not. Who knows, someday …

“My Lord, I am not sure this copy of my signature is correct. Could I have the original?”

“The original is in the files,” said the court clerk.

“How could it be wrong?”

The cat escaped from Shantha’s hand and ran all over the court. Nobody wanted to stop the proceedings or to laugh. Either would be acknowledging that the cat was there. It went right over the Government advocate and sat in front of him as if it were going toward itself. The silence was so clear, one could see the movement of the cat’s whiskers. One had no doubt the cat was there. And it knew everything, Each movement was preceded by a

withdrawal, recognition, and then the jump. The cat jumped straight onto the judge's table. And before the attendants could brush it away, it leaped down and fell over one of those huge clay office inkpots kept under tables, and turning through the back door, went into the record room. The court clerk was looking at the file. The cat did nothing. It stood there. The attendants came and stood watching the cat. Then the cat lay on the floor and started licking its fur. Govindan Nair was burring something in the court. The attendants, seeing the cat doing nothing, went back to the court.

The cat suddenly jumped onto the shoulder of the clerk and started licking his neck. He felt such sweetness in this, he opened file after file. The cat now jumped over to the table and sat. Usha came from the back, led by an attendant, and took the cat in her arms. The clerk had indeed found the paper.

"May I see it, Your Lordship?" asked Govindan Nair.

"Yes, here it is," said the judge, but at the last moment he held it back. For just as he was handing the paper over, the light from the ceiling – a sunbeam, in fact – pierced through the paper, or maybe it was just electric light. Underneath the signature was another signature. When the judge had read it, he handed it over to the Government Advocate. He read it and said: "Bhoothalinga Iyer himself signed this. How did this happen?"

"Yes, sir. That is how it was. Rama Iyer made a slight mistake. After all Bhoothalinga Iyer and he are both Brahmins. He wanted to save Bhoothalinga Iyer. It is plain as could be."

"Then why did you admit all that you have admitted?"

"I have in all honesty admitted nothing."

"Oho," shouted Tirumalachar.

"Go on," said the judge.

"Sir, why do we admit then that a chair is a chair?"

"Why, have you not seen a chair?"

"Ho, ho!" shouted the crown.

"Has anyone seen a chair?" asked the judge.

"Nobody has," said the Government Advocate. He was plainly taking sides with the accused.

The judge said: “I sit on a chair.”

“Who?” asked Govindan Nair.

The judge in fact rose up to see who sat on the chair. He went round and round the table looking at who? There was such silence, the women wept. The cat jumped onto the dais. The attendants said nothing. The Government Advocate was chatting happily with Govindan Nair. Who said there was a case? The clerk was looking for the file to put back the paper. Usha put a garland around the neck of Govindan Nair.

That was the fact. Govindan Nair was not set free. He was free. Nobody is a criminal who has not been proven criminal. The judge had to find himself, and in so doing, he lost his seat. Who sits on the judge’s seat became an important subject of discussion in Travancore High Court. Since then many learned treatises have been written on the subject.

It was all due to Govindan Nair. He had, while in prison, written out a whole story to himself. Bhoothalinga Iyer had signed the paper. It had nothing to do with ration permits. It had to do with Bhoothalinga Iyer’s extramarital propensities. In this business he came across virtue. So instead of going to Benares he gave the money to the widow of a Brahmin, an Iyengar woman in fact. (The breasts and other things were added to make the story comply with film stories.) The story came true as he wrote it. He was sure that it was a fact. He told himself again and again and told it in the court again and again. At Night the prison wardens were surprised to see him talking to himself. Actually he thought he was addressing the court. He even made and remade the necessary gestures. Wardens could think he was practicing acting. He recited his prose precisely till he knew every situation by heart. That is why he was so cocksure in the open court. After all, only a story that you write yourself from nowhere can be perfect. You can do with it what you want to do with it. (Abraham wrote romantic poetry and he said it did with him what it wanted. So, eventually he married Myriam, etc.) But Govindan Nair had the liberty the judge did not have. Only the Government Advocate knew everything. A fact is a prisoner. You are free, or you become the prisoner, and the fact is free, etc. etc. So the Government Advocate knew the Accused was no Accused. He was one with the Accused. That showed why the cat went to the Government Advocate first. The cat also kissed the clerk on the neck.

Bhoothalinga Iyer’s signature was revealed by a sunbeam. Was Bhoothalinga Iyer then in Coimbatore?

Mr. Justice Gopala Menon was the son of the late Peshkar Rao Bahadur Parameshwara Menon, and he had only three months of service before

retirement. He took leave preparatory to retirement and went to the Himalayas, so people said. Govindan Nair laughed and remarked “You no more find the truth in the Himalayas than you find in the *Indian Law Register.* You may find it on your garden wall and not know it was it. You must have eyes to see,” he said desperately to me.

3 The Chessmaster and His Moves

I was in a dispirited mood that whole afternoon, as it were, half asleep and half awake, but my mind absolutely clear, sparking for an adventure. Unable, however, to work, I went to the salon, where there were always logs burning at the fireplace, – summer not being official yet – the coffee ever ready, to awaken me. I was standing warming myself by the mantelpiece, prodding the sugar to melt into my coffee, when who should I see but Michel Irene, the secretary, had brought him to me. Michel looked grim, almost unfriendly.

"Bon jour, patron," he said, somewhat ironically.

"*Bon jour camarade,"* I laughed to unfreeze him a little.

With his thick glasses, his short stature, his clothes ever awkward, he seemed incongruous in this magnificent salon, with so many candelabras, gilt-edged fire-shields, and the thick Persian carpet shining with mythology, transmuting shimmering colours, and deep ancientness. I showed him a comfortable seat and myself chose a stiff chair, for I always thought more logically with my spine against a straight background. We did not speak for a long time.

The excerpt is from The *Chessmaster and His Moves* (1988) and contains the famous conversation between the Brahmin and the Jew. The original punctuation has been retained.

"I have come" he said, finally seating himself on the plush sofa, green with yellow stripe, the flames from the fireplace playing on his face, giving it a

sudden nobility, “I have come on *une* enterprise grave.” Yes, those were the very words he used, as he crossed his legs, his heavy hunch, looking more like an archaeological lump then than a physical one. “I am a strange creature, not an Indian, of course not, and not Asian or African. Hitler has told you we are not European either. But we may call ourselves, if you will, Asiatique, Oriental, something kin or kins of the Pharaohs, of your Vedic ancestors, of the Chinese, but not in species. A race somewhat forgotten maybe, but it has not forgotten itself, despite Mr. Toynbee. He thinks we are an archaic society to be dumped between the interstices of History. Sir, I am a Jew.” He had come obviously to say just that. I had an instant shudder, a tremor, as if he were not a human speaking, but a geophysic event, a volcanic sputter through time’s rude holes. He seemed, that evening, to be made as if of steel, but alchemically turned back from gold, so to say – not a steel of today, but an ancient metal, encrusted perhaps in the depths of the Pacific, from Lemuria, where legends say gold and steel were made from each other, for the benefit of primal man. It was a voice firm, dead, stomachal, but yet spoke, if you understand what I mean. It spoke not for himself, but, as it were, for the species, a whale upsurging in the ocean, leaping, cavorting, white-breasted, diving back, its mammal face prehistoric, but its movements contemporary. “You said the other day,” he continued, the neighbours of the apartment opposite and above, playing some loud raucous music, and yet his voice was distinct, finite, irreversible – each word just a fact. “You said the other day, how could I laugh, how could I joke?”

“Yes, I did,” I agreed.

“Now, I understand. I understand. But the truth is – and I say it as Moses must have, when he spoke to God: Who, my friend, can see my face, *our* face? – Is there anyone on earth who dare look on not merely the nazi stripes, broken rib-ends, gun-butt marks-holes, chunkless dimples, bumps – but the stripes and stigmata we bear from Assyrians, the Romans. The Romans even they took away our ancient city of Jerusalem, the holy, and made it their provincial headquarters. And again, what stripes from the wirewhips the Zoroastrians gave us in Babylon, and earlier still the pharaohs’ eunuchs in Egypt. We are a simple, people, we never were meant for war or government, the Moshe Dayans or the Rothschilds, as one of our great scientists, but himself an aide to Moshe Dayan, told us recently. We were made for books – for the Book and the Torah. We are a procession. We were always a procession. The nazi trains have always existed. We are ever on departure and arrival. In fact, sometimes on arrival before departure. Or on at once both. If so, and here my friend, may I say we would agree with your Vedanta – the world, in fact, a dire illusion. Going from the ghetto to the train, and from the

train to a railway siding – you see, it being war, the Wehrmachi has so many trainloads of soldiers and material to carry to the Front-nach Stalingrad, *nach* Leningrad, *nach* Moskau-and then again, the train starts. And we come to another railway siding, the same evening, the next day, the day after, who can remember? We spit, squat, squeeze, dung, vomit, scratch, shout, fistfight, and sometimes even make love in corners, and fight again. And then suddenly, the train stops. Even it, the long train, seems tired. It really stops. And now the loudspeaker howls, yells, *Schnell, schnell,* jump down, get out, quick, quick. So man, woman and child, grandchild, granduncle, we all jump down, for we are just being transported. Taken, because of war conditions in Poland, from one town to the other, away, from the great battle to be, and for the convenience of troop movements. Then when we arrive at another railway siding, then again another, with rubble and barbed wire and snarling dogs. The stations all look alike, skies' spittle, bombstruck, monumental. *Schnell, schnell.* And now a shout again. Enter, go back. And we leap, like circus animals, back to the opened-in-wagons. There is, however, no audience to clap hands. Tickets sold out. There is an SS man, and he closes our doors, seals them. And we enter our permanent night again. There's, do not forget, there is always an SS man in history, Egyptian, Iranian, Roman, the Roman legionnaires. Why, for ought I know, there might even have been Indian, Buddist or Mughal SS men. Who knows, who knows? And *schnell, schnell* again. We leap out. And now we are marched off, all of us, bundles, children, grandfathers with canes, caftans, halts and shoes, to the lager, large as a hanger. They now tell you, you have just to undress, have yourself shaven, and there's guard with whom to leave your treasures-wallets, jewels, eyeglasses, talismans – and they even give you back a certificate, you understand, a real receipt, stamped and all that in good german with Heil Hitler seals. Now, you men go this way, and you women go that way – it's meant only for registration. And then naked and fresh, the number, your number, is tattooed on the arms, and once you are numbered, you now become a real man, a woman, why even a child. We become mathematical entities. When a man is no man, yet a man, he is a real man, the superman, you understand. Now you march, you march to music, listen to fine music, to Bach, Beethoven, Richard Wagner, played by excellent musicians, and some may be even famous-music played by our own people, and through a corridor, in which you find geraniums, in pots, on either aisle," he said, did Michel, and crossed his leg from one side to the other. "Never, never forget the geraniums," he said, and abruptly crossed his leg again to the other side. I was aghast. Aghast at the simplicity, the truth of the human animal. So this is man. Such is man. From the caverns of the Dordogne to the Gobi desert and beyond, man, exists, and tells his story, the same, long, hun story.

“So, since we are what we are, and we know what has happened – and will happen, and remember, there was an Attila before Genghis Khan, Rasputin before Hitler, so we Jews, we laugh,” said Michel, and burst into a sob. It was not a loud sob, but like in death’s early agony, there’s an intake and outflow of breaths, which is like a rattle, a slight miss in rhythm. “Since we die, and we are dead – and we are always dead, remember, since Job, oh that good, good Job,” and he laughed, did Michel, this time a good grave laugh, somewhat like the Africans do, that would seem, as if, the tree or the stone laughed, and Michel added, “The good Job carried God’s dirt pail, *la merde de Dieu, tu comprends.* You see, our Job was young. Thus he did not become a regular musalman. He was taken to work for the masters, to clean laboratories, factories, real ones, and for the very young like me – for I was only thirteen – we were separated efficiently, at the end of the geraniums – to dig trenches, trenches to push the dead into, the dead that died of cold, or starvation, on the bunkers. They were too costly to be sent to the crematorium. There were already too many there. Now, you understand. Now, this task had its fortunate side. Sometimes a gold tooth fell out, and this could buy things, many things on the blackmarket – the SS and the Kapos ran this – you could buy there, at this black-exchange, soap, shirts, tobacco and what not. Even a woman sometimes – for, on the other side of our camp was, so to say, Odin’s harem. Yes, that is it, you understand. And thus the woman had somehow direct contact with the golden-haired gods, and knew what was happening to Rommels in Africa, to General Paulus in Stalingrad, to our own Rommels and Ludendorffs, outside and inside, the women knew more than we did. Thus God dispensed his justice, without stint, and he never, never failed.”

“So, sometimes we did not carry corpses, we carried man’s muckpails. I am sure you have never carried anything so heroic,” and he laughed at me again, somewhat contemptuously. “You are not an untouchable. You are a Brahmin, a Nazi. Only untouchables carry pails of human dung in your country. I know it, because an uncle of mine told me so. And what my uncle said, the good Rabbi Zeev Moshe Fervan, God bless his soul, was ever true. He never told a lie, never hurt a bee.”

“So, the Jews have carried God’s dirt, along with footways of history. You know, it’s heavy, very heavy, the pail is. After all, it is God’s. And he is a big man, we say to him, God, you have chosen us to carry this burden. So here we are waiting for you to come out of your WC. Then it’s all there, big, fermenting bubbles. And it’s so heavy, I tell you, and we’ve to carry it to the dumping ground. And it’s a long, long way, I tell you, had you phthisis, typhus, diphtheria. You see, “said Michel, rubbing his thick back against the sofa, as if it were painful, painful to bear the burden, to talk. “You see, God

forgot us. That's the truth. But we remain over, like those dead bodies – and how many, many, many I've seen of these – they grow nails and hair, even after the man is sweaty, clod and dead. He also, this time, is to be carried, not on a stretcher steady eyed, but in a sack, if it's available, if not, we roll him like one does a log, and dump him finally, with a push and kick and there it goes, the man. Yes, it's all a part of Job's song, you understand."

"Remember, I was saying, God forgot us. Thus, as dead bodies grow hair and nail, as I have said, we go on mechanically carrying the dirt pail, like we did in Birkenau. Dead but alive, you understand. That's better, I tell you, than anything else. For if you're still alive, you can rise, rise-because you see the ghouls are tearing the air shouting in fear, like animals, and they run. They even speak Deutsch, you know, as they decamp. The world is bloody mad. So you rise from the dead, because you were not dead, but they thought you dead, ha, ha! Thus they dumped you down there. That's our own men, the Haftings, who had dumped us. You have typhus, diphtheria, dysentery, infectious sores, so you are dead, you understand. But you are not. At least for once, you are not. And night and day commingle to make your stay among the dead comfortable. It's just like sleep. Then you suddenly awaken, and you jump up and out and see there's no one, no one at all, anywhere around. None. Just gone, gone, gone, the Germans are gone. Yes they are gone. Then you see a broken home, somewhere, anywhere, far, far, for remember, by now the barbed wires are out. Who cut them? No one knows. Someone has done this, maybe many, many. The werewolves did it all. The watchtowers too are silent, dead silent, if one can say so. The dogs are gone too, those hounds of hell. You slip through the same pathways, between the lagers, by broken trees, the hanged men, their neat caps still on them, but their faces and hands covered with files and sparrows, and then line after line of cement-tubes, meant for that gigantic rubber factory to be – the Germans will win because they are Germans, and will make synthetic rubber, you understand, you Frenchies, Yankees, Mr. Churchill & Co. We are a great nation, we believe in our fuehrer. He is no mortal, you know. So make synthetic rubber, and we'll make wheels for our aeroplanes, for our jeeps, for our gas chambers, Zyklon B. Now finally, you come to an abandoned home, a wretched home, you understand. And you crouch like a rabbit, a young hog. You can see from where you are, a dog's pen, a dump of hay. So now you slowly crouch and move, crawl like soldiers in a trench. The back door is open, you enter to see if it's all real. You realize there are no humans around. In the kitchen may be, there's still bread, and fish and eggs in the larder. The cattle too are there, nervously munching their foods, between shivers, urinating, and calling for their young ones – for they too have lost something, something true, familiar, noises known. This abrupt silence is stultifying. What to make of it, you bull,

you horse, you fluttering, foolish, foolish hen? Oh, how the hens are horrored by these sounds of new human, and the cattle too. You see. So you now crawl, on your belly and along the floor, curled under some table, absolutely alone, for this time God will come, yes, God himself will come. God Illych will come, and he will not touch us. The Russians are our brothers. Everything is alive, see, everything says back, I table, I pillar, I picture, one two, three – river, wood, men, medals. Yet no one, no one is there. So the good God Illych will come. He will take us in his troika, across the Polish lands to the princess who awaits us. Yes, the princess. And she awaits us, open-armed, the bitch!"

"But now let me tell you a story. A true story. A true story for me, since then, is always false. So, history is false. It is just a chronicle of human truths, of newspaper cuttings, etc, etc. You understand?"

My mind was too benumbed to speak. So he started again after a moment's deep-breath silence.

"You are a sensitive, gently, highly civilized fellow. A Brahmin, a mathematician, and soon to be member of the Royal Society, etc. And who knows, you may even win the Nobel Prize."

"Absurd," I spat. "Don't be too absurd."

"Absurd, sir," shouted Michel, sitting up straight, and small.

"Who is absurd, those pedestrians of Paris, the clerk at the Credit Lyonnais, the professors at the Sorbonne, the minister of De Gaulle – I will, for the moment, leave the great man, as much as your comfort as for my own – for withal, he is a good man, but for how long, who knows, who knows? Good becomes bad overnight, like milk left at night becomes curd next morning – does it or does it not?

"Yes, it does."

"Well, I spoke it, because I had read it in one of your Buddisht books. You see I am not mad. I am sane. I am Michel, all right," and he rose, came to me as if a little drunk, patted me on the back and said :

"Oh, *mon frere*,"

"*Oui*, Michel."

"You are too innocent. You do not know hell. I do."

"Yes, I know you do."

“When you’ve *tripote* so many dead, and have been *tripote* by so many dead, what do you think you become? You leap out, that’s if you are still alive and young fifteen, run to an abandoned house, and lie amidst the silences between the gunfire – for God has at last come. God reveals you an empty abandoned house, with a rich larder – how do you like that? Between bombs, machine gun ticktacks, Mauser rifle-shots. You see, a true, true fairy tale, better than any writ by the great Andersen.”

“You’re right. Andersen never knew hell.”

“Because,” continues Michel, following his own monologue, “because you see, the good Germans, grandfather, mother, children, who sat on the other side of Birkenau camp, ran – they who would visit the SS men’s family, with meat gardens, fresh clothes, and after a chat and a cup of tea, they would stroll the perambulator, and peep through those innocent windows, you know, and see the musulmans all entire, without a cry, abjuration or disdain, but tied to their God, as the exiles were in the old days of the czar, going to Siberia, hand-to-hand tied, a never ending line, on the snows, white, pure, but singing-listen. I can still remember, a song my great-grandfather is supposed to have sung coming back from the land of the snows – for he was caught in some minor misdeed done to the name of the czar, or of his henchmen and this is the song,” said Michel, and standing on a chair, as if he were performing in a drama, he sang, clapping his hands.

“Yes, the Russian God is coming, the sickle in his mouth,” added Michel, showing his teeth, “the machine gun in hand,” and here he jumped down from the chair, and started showing how the machine gun went, in this direction and that, “Tock, tock, tock-and tock. And now, sitting beneath a table – “and here Michel sat back on his chair, and held his hand forward as if he were taking something from the table in front of him, “So my friend, you sit under a table in the kitchen, munching, munching, dead beef – after all, there is something to eat – and to laugh, to laugh at yourself, so that’s where I learnt laughter.” And Michel laughs curve by curve, into the falling evening, and as I light my cigarette, he starts: “The miracle is you laugh, and laugh again. It is so thrilling, thrilling to laugh. By next morning, as you go down to the larder, there are one, two, three skeletons like you, wondering how you could be there, and you wonder where they came from. Of course, one thinks suddenly – for thoughts come slowly, and then abruptly, as if we were children again – of course others came, one, two and three – the same way I came. Maybe there is a fourth and fifth, still not known, hiding in a big dog-kennel.”

“But I was going to tell you a fairy tale, the tale of a princess and true.”

“Now I will tell you. There was a madman in my town, crazy, crazy. He too had read books, too many, many of all religions, and though his father was a good hasid, a rabbi, too. And this young man, who for convenience we’ll call Isae, his real name though was different. His mother, a widow, was a laundress. Yes, and a very good laundress in Lvov. Being an important town, and she having a reputation, she made money laundering for the rich. And the Polish rich in those days were rich, rich. He, Isae knew them well as a boy, so my mother told me. For as a boy, he played with things electrical like wires, bulbs, brackets, sockets, etc, because his uncle, his mother’s brother, had an electrical shop, in the richer part of the town. Isae was a very clever boy, so everybody told me. And at school, he was very bright. Since he wanted to be an engineer, his mother said, son, go to Warsaw. There you will have teachers such as you will not find here. Your sister will stay to look after me. But Mother, said the good Isae, you will be alone. I am the only man in the house. Father died so long ago. Since your father died, said Isae’s mother, your father entered me, and I have become him, and she put her chin forward to show how manly she had become. When one has lost a husband, while young, and you have children to bring up, you become a man, work, earn, fight, pray, die, you understand. Anyway, Isae’s mother, dreamt her son would become an engineer in Warsaw, and she would make for him a good wedding her brother had told her of Simon Katz and Manes Satorsky, who became famous engineers, despite government obstructions raised against the Jews, became rich men and even lived in villas. And why would not Isae, her son, Isae, build a villa in Poskya Street, off the great boulevards. So her bother had told her, for her brother too hoped, if his nephew became rich, he too could open a bigger shop and in Warsaw. This you see the world is round, round” laughed Michel, good-heartedly. “Don’t ask me,” he continued. “if the mother wanted to be rich, or if the brother of the mother wanted the nephew to be rich, maybe he wanted to be rich to make his wife think better of him, for she same, said my mother, from a family of apothecaries. Who knows, who knows? You know the world is full of Suzanne Chantereuxs.” I did not understand why he said what he said, and then after a moment’s silence, he continued: “Well, well, my Isae, our Isae, being a bright boy – my mother told me he looked just like me, broad and short, and with thick glasses, but of course I never was very bright in mathematics, or in anything, nor did I have an uncle who ran an electrical appliances shop. My father wrote petitions for the unlettered: Your Excellency, the Prefet, the Magistrate, the Count, etc, etc. For there were may counts. And we have even a count in my story.

“Well, well, Isae went to Warsaw. But, like an untouchable, sat at a separate table, at the University of Warsaw, for remember, that was how we were treated, even under Marshal Pilsuduski, so I was too. And our Isae read all the

electricity which could be read, finally wore a gown and became an engineer, and was given a minor post in Warsaw municipality. But by now, his real interests were elsewhere. He never wanted to be a rabbi, even when very young, that his mother knew, and he knew. He wanted, however, to save mankind. Remember, we are all like that. We Jews are. If some Tahitian say, Tahiti, is dying of venereal disease – a venereal disease, as you knew only one virtue, and that is to be a woman – so this white man gave the disease to a woman, and that woman to a Tahitian, and he is, the Tahitian is, covered with small and big boils. And somebody, another white man, a good Pole, maybe, because he had heard of the beauty of Tahitian women, goes there, you know, like Gaugin went, but this time, not to paint, but to enjoy, to enjoy the thick juicy richness of Tahitian women – and there it comes, the news to say, Isae. And he will say, *Tiens, tiens,* someone, some people, in Tahiti are suffering from venereal disease. So I will study medicine. Become a doctor. And then go to Tahiti and help the Tahitians get better. How do you like that?" smiled Michel, slapping his thighs with both hands.

"So that our Isae was involved in trying to help mankind in every way – therefore, he joined the Theosophcal Society. Do you know that organization at all? It is something to do with your country. It's sort of Gurdjieff, with Tibet and Mongolia and the Himalayas, and all that. And saints of course, many, many saints, and masters several thousand years old, sitting on top of your Himalayas which guide mankind etc, etc."

"Well, I knew something about it, just a little," I said.

"So my Isae studied theosophy. And when one studies anything so outlandish as all that, you always meet – especially in faraway Poland people of the upper classes – like, say, at the Rotary Club in Paris today. So, my Isae met many counts and countesses, studying, you understand, esoteric, yes, esoteric philosophy." And by now Michel was exhausted, he asked for a glass of water, and I went to my room to fetch him some cool nice water. And when I returned, he sat there, silent as a rock, as solid and natural as the rock of the Trocadero hill, which rose in front of us, across the garden.

"So to go on with my story, my Isae fell in love with a countess, with a real countess, a highborn lady. He was five-foot-three-and-a-half and hunchbacked like I am – his back was like an accordion, my mother used to say, and therefore, when he spoke, it was like music like some psalm. He spoke not words, but long musical syllables; and many were often like words from the Bible. He lisped – he did not talk – as a child does or a dumb person, and so it carried rich meanings. Says my mother. But let me go on with the story. He was hunchbacked like me. I told you he had fallen from a tree when

young, like I had from a colt-and though I had never seen him, but it's as if I know him, even sometimes I feel I am him. Since he is not alive, I'd even believe in your theory of reincarnation and cry I am Isae, I am he indeed, our Isae," said Michel, and laughed again, tenderly, as if he had no reason to hurt me.

"Whether you believe it or not, it might still be true, like in the Middle Ages, whether you thought the earth was flat and the sun went round the earth or not, for which Galileo had to be burned at the stake, the sun still was the centre of our planetary system."

"May be you are right. Often what we suspect to be true turns out true. Why, the reincarnation theory might even explain the story I am going to tell you. Listen."

"Yes, I will."

"I said, Isae fell in love with the countess, but to be true, it's the countess who fell in love with him. She thought him a genius and perhaps he was one, who knows? The countess was from a famous Polish family, with castles in Silesia, on one side Greek and on another German, and she was at least a palm-wide taller than he was. But he had a mind, my mother tells me, so brilliant, the rabbis refused to discuss with him. As I have said before, maybe he was a genius, a new Spinoza."

"Now, now," I protested, "Spinozas are not born so often. Please?

"But, said my mother," continued Michel, without listening to my own remarks, he spoke in biblical Polish, as I have said before, or sometimes, Yiddish, with a touch of softness that made one think he loved vocables, he loved to pronounce vocables, like a good rabbi. And he must have spoken sweet things, to the countess, and she must have adored him, much, much. She said, the countess said, I would wed you today were it not I have two daughters to marry. If you can wait a year or two we will surely get married. But she boldly, openly, for she was a courageous woman, became his mistress. She took an apartment in the city and moved him there. And spent evenings with him, as much as she liked."

"A beautiful story," I said.

"But wait, wait. So my Isae said, as all good Poles thought at that time, I will go to Paris, like Madame Curie had gone, or like the good Chopin, and I will make money, so that I may keep my Helen, for that was her name, Countess Helena Volonsky, I will make my Helen happy. And so to Paris he

went. His mother, thinking her son was going to Paris to make money for them, said, Oh what a fine son I have, he thinks of us, of me, of his sister Liza. And he will build us a nice house here in Lvov – after all, we still have land there that Maximilian, my husband, had bought outside the town for a nice house. And that was when he was working at the grain-exchange. And we shall have a grand marriage for his daughter."

"Just like in India."

"All the world is India, sir," he said somewhat in mockery. One always felt, talking to him, or in fact with any Jew, as if there was a sort of supernal rivalry between the Hebraic and the Hindu. Of course, we the Hindus, especially the Brahmins, always felt we were the eldest beings of creation. And the Jews of course were the "chosen people." So, who would decide? God would. But he did not exist. So?

"She was, Helen was," he started, "Some sort of a shekina."

"Now, what's that? It sound almost Indian." And he laughed again, somewhat compassionately, and added, "Oh, why, as I have said before, all that's good comes from India, does it not, *mon cher ami?"* and he came over and once again patted me on the shoulder good-humouredly.

"Well, well maybe," and I joined him in laughter, as though it were a private joke.

"So, she was his, Isae's shekina."

"Now, now, Michel," I said, smiling within myself, "what's all that?"

"Well, if God is a He, the feminine aspect of God is, of course, a She."

"Lime Sakti and Shiva," I said to understand.

"Yes, more or less so," and he laughed again. "And if God is a He," and this time he laughed so loud, loud enough for the whole building to hear, and even the concierge must have heard, and as if in sympathy, the fire in the hearth shot up, or so it seemed.

"How is it Michel," I asked very grave, "how is it you can laugh at God in that manner. I thought you shouldn't even pronounce his holy name,"

"That, my friend, is the trick. God, Dieu, is not the unpronounceable. Because it is Latin and not Hebrew. You know, pandit," he added smiling, "I think we are prisoners of our language. So it is that I have become involved in

linguistics, one notes there is no plural in Chinese. Those chinois are so materialistic, for them their object, *la chose,* is very, very real. So real they can see only thing at a time. In our linquistic laboratories, when we have to choose the computer for the chinois, we are in a fix. So we have to give to Chinese letters a plus, an algebraic symbol like x or p. Yes, we are prisoners of language, for example, the Jews have no vowels. We too in our own way love objects, because we use consonants. God is beyond, therefore we have no vowels, so you explained to me once, you remember, and I think that is precise."

"But –"

"No, no, let us get back to my Isae and his shekina. Now I have said to you already, all that I say is pure legend, the legend of the ghettos. You know, when the Germans entered my country, Poland, they created a ghetto government, so to say, and they named a fuehrer for us, and our fuehrers could be as terrifying as the one you know, all fuehrers, can, were they even Hindus –"

"Now, now Michel, don't be so hard on us."

"No, sir," he said, sitting up and crossing his legs, "we are all *les etres humains.* And I am speaking of *La Condition Humaine."*

"Well. Let us go on."

"In the ghettos of Lvov, the legend of Isae was one of the most enchanting. It was like some ancient fairy tale. Our parents sat on their frontsteps on summer evenings, listening to our grannies talk. So, we would, had we more time, have written a ballad, an epic poem, like Roland, to extol the exploits of our Isae le Bossu. And Isae le Bossu would have become tall, bent and noble as a rabbi. His words were so clear, they could sound Talmudic. He was a saint, there was no doubt of it. For the story said, he made so much money, Isae did, in the very first year of Paris, taking patent after patent, so his mother is supposed to have said – and that was in the good golden days before this heionous war – that our Isae made much, much money, and sent her enough money to live in peace, and even put aside some in the bank for his sister's marriage-"

"So he had a sister?"

"Yes, a sister, I told you so, and she studied pharmacy. She was already engaged to a young man, even before Isae went over to France, and that must have been around 1930 or 1931."

“Oh, as long ago as that?”

“Yes, does it not all sound prehistoric!” Anyway, our Isae then made so much money, but he would not send too much home, lest our government get suspicious, as to how a laundress had so much money, and we Jews have prudence in our fingernails, so to say, you understand, counting our rosaries – turning the pages of the Talmud,” and he laughed again. And this time, I understood his nerves had become so frail, he had to laugh, laugh and laugh, at himself, at his own people. “Thus our Isae then made so much money, so his mother said again to my aunt, or to my aunt’s aunt, or my aunt’ aunt’s aunt, who cares. She told it all to my mother, and Isae in two years’ time had bought a home on the outskirts of the Bois de Boulogne. But I, in my own way, made enquiries here in Paris and found through a Russian, a restaurant keeper, that had helped him in the beginning – the Russian, survived because he was some sort of prince before the revolution, so the Hitler people spoilt him and the Russian talks of Isae with contempt, for he did not know who I was, and he said, A house, a house! That Yuopin lived in Clichy, in a hotel with a gasring. True, he was generous with all his friends. *Tenez.* He said, he gave me money to bet on horses. And if I lost, I said to him, Isae, I will not live, if you do not give me any money, and I will hang myself, like I’ve done once before, you remember, and Isae would give me another fifty or a hundred francs – and in those days it was a grand sum, and I would go betting again. In fact, he helped two or three refugee girls from Lithuania, Latvia – good girls who did not want to go on the streets to make money. Yes, he was a man of heart, the Russian concluded, and clapped his hands, as if he was paying off a debt to Isae, and took the bill of the next customer. Yes, that’s how I made enquiries everywhere.”

So, to go on with my story, my Isae had indeed taken many patents. I, I went out of curiosity to the patent office here, and found that he had in true fact taken some twenty two patents in a year. That must have brought him a lot of money. And despite the Russian prince, Isae must have lived in comfort. And here we come to the last part of the story.”

“Our Isae then decided it would soon be time, in a year or two, to get married to Helen because her two daughters were by now engaged. And I found on enquiries from other Jews here, who knew him then but did not know the story, that he had bought an apartment on rue dcs Sts Peres, no 7 or 9,. I do not remember a comfortable one. It’s now an office. And he waited and he waited, like Balzac did, his shekina, who, as you know, was a Polish countess, and all that.”

“No, I did not know that.”

“However, the apartment once found, the shekina had to come. And here the story becomes complex, tragic. She’s supposed to have written one day, imagine, to this anxious, all awaiting Jew, that she had met a famous count, elegant, tall, and an admirable dancer – met him at a party, and they danced the evening away of course it was in Warsaw. He was so exquisite a dancer, they danced down till almost the light of day, and this shekina is supposed to have said, I went and married him as soon as the papers were ready. I am sorry, very sorry, to have done this to you. I am really sorry. You know I am a woman of impulse, Polish to the core. But don’t come here, she seemed to have added, for Victor knows everything about you. He said he would shoot you if he saw you. So please do not come. Yet I love you, I love you, etc.”

“But, but Michel, why are you telling me this story?”

“Well, you will see why. Just wait. I thought Hindus had a lot of patience, because, with you, time is cyclic and all that. Any way, our Isae, then, heroic, charismatic, brilliant, had only one thing to do. A good Jew he would understand anything. He would forgive anyone – even a former prisoner, a murderer whom he is supposed to have befriended in Paris, and gave him money – to live in honour. So, he took the first train to Warsaw, and a short tacko to the castle, some seventy miles or so away, and presented himself. Yes, presented himself, like Rolland before the Saracen, and at the castle door. He knew the guards would never let him in, so he pretended he was a county engineer who had come on government inspection. And he looked intelligent, well-groomed, and efficient. So, they let him in. And once up and inside the castle, he just said, he wanted to see the countess, to ask about the electrical repairs. He had learnt about such matters from his uncle. And imagine what a shock it was, she in her nuptial splendour, so to say, before hunchbacked Jew, here in this fifteenth century castle.”

“Yes. I understand – it’s like when I visit Jayalakshmi in her palace at Vilaspur “

“Well, well, the Brahmin of India is not quite the Jew of Poland. But you understand what I mean. Then openly, quietly, she went and told her husband what had happened. And believe me, and I have been assured of this here by two or three Polish noblemen in exile – impoverished and humble, now polishing hotel floors, running lifts – and they say the story is true that the count came out and said in his chest high and mustached manner. Well, engineer, what is it you want? – You know who I am; I have come to settle some business with you. – Business in the castle is done by the bailiff – and he almost walked away. Yes, I know, but I have another business, and the legend says, so sweet was the voice of Isae, so true, and may be the count did

not want to offend his new bride, the two men settled down to business together. Isae said he loved his shekina so totally, he would only wish for her happiness. He said he had become, while in Warsaw, a liberal catholic priest, so even more did he understand love. Thus, in the name of God, His son, and the Holy Ghost and here Isae, must have sincerely crossed himself, and in the name of the Trinity, can we make a pact. And he had asked for Helen to be present. And Helen came out, trembling ashamed, proud, heroic, while all the maids and butlers were amazed at this historic confrontation. A Jew, and this is how the count talks to him! Well, human nature is magical. Yes a hasid, I tell you, a zadik, can work miracles, prayer can. Then Isae said, and this was in the large hall of the castle with the portraits of all the count's ancestors in armour gold and ermine, looking down on him in pride and protection, So make a promise to me: If she is happy, she stays with you. If not, if not, – Yes, if not? – If not, she come to me. And the count, a real chevalier, was so moved, and Helen, so proud of her Isae, they shook hands ceremonially, had lunch together, and he, Isae, left for Paris by the evening train." Here Michel stopped, mopping his head, perspiring, and went over to the coffee machine, which was still blinking red, took a cup of coffee, came back and sat down. And I sat there, of course, thinking of Jaya. How could I not have? If I went to Raja Ashok and told him the same, then what would he say? He might say: "*Mon vieux,* or old chap. Let us wait and see. She is not yet mine, and when she is mine and if ever, we can always settle the accounts!" He would use, I was sure, I am sure, the same expression, having been brought up in the Anglo-Saxon, the upper-class, background, that is, a European background. So, it's all a common story, you see. Then why is Michel shifting about his legs so often? One has to wait and see. The evening had not yet set in, and all one heard was the Orpheus singing out the waters to the naiads below. It sounded so much like his own story too. He and Eurydice, and all that, as Suzanne had explained to me – a barbarian from India who did not know Greek mythology. "For the European, the French, he who does not know Greek mythology is indeed a barbarian," she had said one evening on rue des Bonnes Soeurs, au 7e, and added with a passionate kiss, "but I love my barbarian Brahmin prince." "Yes, my queen," I had said and smiled thinking of Jaya of course.

Alas there was but one queen for me, one shekina so to say, and squeeze as I might Suzanne, under my power-led loins, in my tight gripped arms, begging her for more of *that,* all she gave was so thin now, so dry, so melancholic. Jaya's simple touch of hand had more wealth than all this psychodrama. Suzanne was even as Hermione, stiff, theatrical, mental. Her mind rules her, and as such Gurdjieff. She seemed so Germanic to me, will absolute will, the Herr with the knout, her lord. Yet she wanted so much to be

a woman. And obviously, I was not her Herr. I wondered if she had showed any of her privileges to Michel yet. The smell of her pubic hair, for example, or the big black mole on her left breast-Suzanne's well-shapen breast-the mole big as a small ring, black and pick, was to be touched only by the highly privileged, and I was, she had assured me, at the moment, and, was forever to remain, the only privileged one. And I felt so jealous; I know how the count could and might have killed Isae.

"You may wonder why I tell you all this." He must have read my thoughts. "You Indians-Indian thought as such-since the eighteenth century – has usurped our place. We were the priests of the western world. Ever suppressed, pogromed against, they knew and we, of course, knew, we were ultimately to be the victors. The west belongs to the Jew. We the God-carriers of the Mediterranean, if you remember what Mediterranean is, despite Paul Valery and his boasted Latinism. The Mediterranean man includes Ramases II, the great Gilgamesh, and of course, Abrahaim. Yes, that is what Mediterranean means. I have told you the Greeks were Asian Aryans. They had a sense of the occult, of mystery, orphic, dionysian, but no prophets – of the unpronounceable!". And he let his second foot down and stood up, as if to feel his own true stature, "Moses on Sinai, that's the only metaphor of man to his maker. All your neutral it, and so on, is *c'est la fantasie mon vieux"*, and he came and patted me on the back with what seemed, at once, contempt and affection, a father to a son. The Jew, the Father of the World. And every one not his children – only the Jew can be the child of the Jew – the others just his farm worker, farm workers of the lord.

"You have taken our place, "continued Michel, with almost anger, I might even have said hatred, and he went to the glasswindow to see the rocks of the garden, as it were. The atmosphere was at least as angry and vibrant, I am sure, as when Isae might have faced the count. Christianity, especially Catholicism, was even more Green than Jewish – Saint Paul had done his job – thus the Christian was a sort of Indian of the West. And so the ghetto and the incinerators. History smells bad, you know, Attila and Hitler, they are all the same.

The hasid, he worked on the Garden of Eden. His language was prayer. From his prayer grew fruits and forests, and the cattle to slay. He, the hasid, even invented a knife, so gently, it would cut his goat or cow without pain, or almost so. I was now the goat before Michel. I was now his Isaac. He seemed in prayer. I had heard he too had thaumaturgical power—he had healed people. There was no doubt he was a zadik. How could, otherwise, he have come out of the dead?

“From now the story is simple,” he said, going back and taking his seat opposite me. There was no Paris and Poland that evening. No world – two humans face to face, in what seemed an eschatological drama. No Helen of Troy, no Suzanne the problem. It was whether the sacred ship from Delos had come into the harbour or not. Then Socrates would have to take his poison and die. Such the laws of history.

Of course,” exclaimed-Michel, “of course, a count who could be such a good dancer, even were it only the mazurka, could not have satisfied our Helen. This Isae was a Jew and a Hasid. He had seen the Maker face to face. He gave her, Isae gave her, his powerful God. She was infatuated. Under the hitlerian law, she would have been shorn in public, marched in front of people naked, and taken to the firing squad, with the pancarte hanging from her neck: I commingled with a Jew. This is just to set an example, you know. Hitler then had no such power. But Isae knew, for he knew his God well, that she would come to him. And of course she came back to him. The count was a man of his word. He belonged to a different order of nobility than of the French or of the Germans today. The Polish counts were servants of the Black Madonna. They were first Christian, and then Polish. They died fanatically on the field of battle, even as recent history shows us. There could be no Hitler in Poland. A house painter becomes dictator! Impossible. Even a Hindu could become a dictator, a Brahmin,” he laughed, “Could become a dictator, but never a polish house painter.” And Michel smiled at his own joke.

“So, our Isae said to his Helen, not of Troy but of Warsaw, shall we say, and remember she was part Greek too, he said to her: Come my love and we’ll go to India.”

“What?” I said almost standing up in astonishment.

“Yes, he said, did our Isae, India is all peaceful and beautiful and he dreamt of it, a hasid, as his Garden of Eden, you, see that’s our obsession, where everything is positive and good. So thither, my friend, he took her, to his Gandhi and all that. They say he invented many things in India, became a monk.”

“What a Hindu monk? A bizarre story.”

“Yes, a bizarre, story. A Jew first, then a theosophist, then a Christian, finally a Hindu monk –”

“Now tell me, how did this happen, according to your legend?

“I asked some men of your country, working at the CNRS. They told me

little, they knew little. One man amongst them had a father who was a theosophist. And he heard of Isae. Zimmeramn and his monkship. Yes, and a disciple of Krishnamurti, a devotee of one Ramana Maharishi, and finally a worker with Gandhi. So I've heard. Have you not heard of him?

"Zimmeramn, Zimmeramn," I said, never. Besides my father was on the British side. How would he have known of someone with Gandhi?

"Anyhow, and again I've heard, it was Gandhi's last spinning wheel, a great invention – an Indian one – was one of Isae Zimmeraman's make. And our Indian at the CNRS, whose father is a minister in some state in India, in Madras I think, even said, Mahatma Gandhi had given his elegant instrument of spinning one of the first, rare ones, a gift to Chiang Kai-shek. So, who knows, if this polish Jew's spinning machine is not singing away with some of Mao's comrade maidens in Szechwan. Thus, life, my friend, with his hasid life."

"But Helen – what happened to her? You never completed that story."

"In this paradise of his, this Eden of the World, India, people certainly are angels – as Suzanne and her mother never stop discoursing to me. For these two ladies, you are only next to God, you understand. Well, well, let us leave that part out."

"Yes, let us!"

"Anyway, evidently the Hindus do not know much of microbes. So, this Isolde, in the land of enchantment, drank no magical potion, but water from an infected well. She had typhoid. Nobody had told her to take an inoculation against such an event."

"So?"

"So, she had typhoid. And Isae duly telegraphed to the count. He had, the count had, even in those days, an aero plane company. So he hopped and hopped to India in four or five days – you know in those days, there was no night flying. And he reached Bangalore."

"Oh, Bangalore. I know Bangalore."

"Well, so much the better. However, the lady lay flat in her bed, in the outskirts of Isae's factory – for he was the first to start an electrical factory in India – the British did not like it, but there was a good and strong maharaja, a saint, I am told, who gave Isae all the money he needed to build a factory –"

“But I thought Isae was with Gandhi –”

“That was later. So, Helen, like a tolstoyan heroine, lay on one side, the hunchbacked thaumaturgical Jew, and on the other, the elegant polish count, whose family had fought many battles, including the one at Sadowa, in the fourteenth century with the Russians and between the two, she gave up her Ghost, as the fairy tales would say. And she was cremated. And her ashes later thrown into the Ganga. The count now took the two daughters back to Poland – war was still far away – Hitler had only marched to the Rhine, you understand, and the French panicked and ran –”

“Oh, yes, but the French show extreme courage when faced with real danger, never with near danger – like we Hindus do,” I said. “When the Japs were coming we were all so frightened – we ran from Madras for our lives. But the Japs never came –”

“But Hitler marched into Poland – and you know the rest of the story. At that time, I was happily just over twelve.”

“Why happily?”

“Because later they took from the ghetto all the very old and the very young. They left me because I was thirteen and took Sasha, my brother, seven years of age –”

“What did they do with them?”

“You innocent,” he said, very angry. “They sent them to the gas chamber immediately. Thus my uncle and my younger brother, Sasha, preceded us into paradise….”

“And Isae, what happended to him, at that time?”

“He must have sat in rapt meditation, in holy harmony, as the Hasidim say – before one of your many saints, maybe talking of the brotherhood of man, of non-violence, and what not. Later, so my count in Paris told me, his mother and sister went to Birkenau, like I did where the count’s brother-in-law worked, in a chemical factory”

“What happended to the count?”

“His time too must have come. One never heard of him either.”

“So ends the story,” said Michel, stamping his feet, as if all was said.

“One more thing, please?”

“Yes –”

“Well, well, in this paradise he found that there were thieves too. So some poor fellow, whose good Indian habit was to steal, I suppose one day coming home, thus I’ve heard from one of your countrymen who’d read it in one of your Indian newspapers – so Isae coming home and finding his rupees gone – is rupee the money in India?”

“Yes, it is.”

“ – his rupees gone, Isae in a nice bourgeois manner slapped his servant. So, the poor fellow whose habit was to steal, I imagine, cried and howled. Confessed he had done it. So that our Isae, who’d read a lot of Tolstoy – you know, we Poles read Russian very well – Isae, the saint, then said unto him, Pardon me, brother? And not able to sleep night after night, after night, went, so I was told, to a nearby Hindu temple, a temple of Shiva, donned the ochre coloured robeand so became a Hindu monk. Could one become a Hindu monk so easily? No ordination, etc.?”

“I don’t think it’s so easy.”

“Well, anyway, that’s the legend. He knew his mother was dead and his sister as well. They had some news through the underground which worked between India and Eastern Europe.”

“Oh, was there such an organization?”

“Well, if you Mireille, worked in Greece, and communicated with England this too was possible between India and Poland, especially through Persia and Soviet Russia –”

“And then?”

“And then came the deluge. We were swept away till Stalingrad. Then we were cooked, you understand, cooked as lamb or hen. And when we had turned into ash, my dear fellow, it grew potatoes. Potatoes and turnips, all over Germany today. You could ask a potato: How much chemical from the Levi and the Katz do you have? It might sit up, the potato might, as in a cartoon, and say: Why, I have 0.3% of the Levi’s and all of the Katz’s and does it taste good, you ask of Herr Gobolodo Kommin, and Goboldo Kommin will say: it tastes schon, schon. Heavenly, Yes, that’s our Europe. Yes, that’s it.”

“Thus, he, Isae, went back to the source,” I said in mischief, smiling.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because Hasidism, from what little I know of it and of what you have said, came late to Judaism.”

“Not quite. But if it were so?”

“Anyway, your Scholem says it.”

“Perhaps. But I do not remember.”

“So Hasidism was influenced by the Christian mystics.”

“Maybe.”

“And Christian mysticism, I repeat, by Plotinus.”

“So?”

“And the roots of Plotinus?”

“Of course, India, “ he snarled with bitterness.

“Thus–”

“He went back to the source!”

“Does Hinduism alone contain the Truth?”

“No.”

“No. Then what does?”

“The Truth.”

“Are you a Hindu?”

“No.”

“Then what are you?”

“A seeker, a simple seeker. But who knows maybe. Truth is peruvain.” And we both laughed.

“Then what is true Hinduism?”

“He who goes beyond Hindusim, like –”

“Yes, like –”

“a true Christian, one who has gone beyond theology, like Jakob Boehme, like Eckhart, and –”

“And –”

“Like the Sufis in Islam – like Rumi – could you say the same thing, of your Jews?”

“Maybe not – but of the Hasidim, yes.”

“So, you see, we meet again.”

He was kicking the coffee table, pushing it back and forth, Sisyphus style. Not to hear what the coffee table was saying, but to say what his shoe would like to say to the coffee table.

“The goys,” he said, “are never so dead serious as you and I.” And after a moment of tense silence, he continued, “There was, you know, once upon a time, a great Russian prophet. He did not like the Jews either. But he had faced the gallows, therefore love oozed out of him, so to say. So our Feodor Dostoevsky has called Europe – and not Russia, because Russia is holy – Stalin is now a czarevitch, etc, etc – well, well, Dostoevsky has called Europe, a cemetery.” The he stopped, did Michel, and with commiseration asked: “How did you land in this cemetery?”

“A good question, Michel. But, I will answer it another time. It is getting late. You know the princess and my sister are waiting for me. At home.”

“Well, of course!” And as we rose together, Michel suddenly put his head against me gently, and sobbed and sobbed. Wiping his tears, he said : “I had to tell all this to someone. Who is there I can say it to? For that Isae might have been me. It’s the legend which I have told to myself again and again, on the bunkers of Birkenau and in the Kabe, the hospital, even on the last day before the Russians came. I have told this story often to my bunker fellows, that they too could dream of a countess and a noble count, and of the Jews who went to Paradise. India then meant for us paradise indeed – with Mahathma Gandhi – we believed in him then.”

“Yet, my good Michel, just three years later, our Hindus and Muslims massacred each other, two million of them, the same way, may be in a less methodical mode, not being Germanic. We did not even have the gas chambers to dispose of people – in a civilized way. They, the Hindu and the Muslim, cut the throats, the breast – their heads smashed, their penis severed, bodies stoned, the women, their babies gouged out of the their pregnant

bellies, yes, noses cut, the Hindu and the Muslim did this to one another in our paradise –”

“So you mean there is no paradise!”

“None. None. None, despite Madame La Fosse and her great guru, Rene Guenon.”

“So you mean we shall never find what we seek.”

“Never. Never the way we seek it. Indeed there is no paradise. But-but-there must be – the Truth.”

And this time we both stood still, staring at pure, concentric space. And Michel then ran his fingers on my back, enfolding me, with a tenderness, a concern, I had never known before, and never known since, of any man.

“I wonder what is happening to Isae now?” I said, to break the silence. “Maybe he is dead.”

“Nonsense, my friend. Saints do not die so easily,” he remarked, and laughed as usual, releasing me from his embrace. “Saints live very long, you know.”

“Then you mean he must be in India now?”

“Of course, a swami, like one of those thousands in your country, maybe receiving the homage of innocent people, sitting under a tree, a hasid. How much his thaumaturgical powers, healing people – maybe even bring back the cadaver to life – ten rupee a dead body, how do you like that?”

“Maybe not.”

“And again, being an inventor, I am sure he could invent for the good Hindu, a machine gun, a bomb, a nonviolent atom bomb, to kill without killing, your wicked neighbour of Pakistan–”

“Now, now, Michel, don’t be so facetious. Why has no one written about him?”

“The only man who might have written about him is – would have been – Papa Buber. But he wouldn’t have approved of this devotee of Gandhi –”

“Why not?”

“Because Gandhi was against the Jew.”

“Nonsense. Gandhi was against no man. Never.”

“But you know what Gandhi said to Buber. The Poles who fought against the Germans and the Russins were sort of non-violent, but we, the Jews, who did not fight, we were – I don’t know what he called us –”

“The jews went to their death in prayer,” I said, “in pure non-violence, non-violence. The true Jews, I mean, I honour them for their truth.”

“Like uncle Dinka.”

“Wonderful.”

“Then go and speak that to your Indians. Tell them the true Gandhians, the Jews of Poland, of Brikenau, the true, the true” and Michel stood up against the mantelpiece, as if in grave contemplation of the dying fire.

Then coming straight at me, and holding me by the lapel, he shouted: “The jews love God – love God, you know, and with passion.”

“But, but,” I remarked, smiling, “Gods need man to be.”

“or, man needs God–”

“It’s not the same. Man invented a superman – thus sprach Zarathustra. Heil Gott!”

“Yes.”

“So, man made God.”

“What then the answer, Brahmin sir?” He became suddenly polite again.

“The nondual – pure Liberty.”

“La *Foutaise,*” he spat, looking down with contempt. “The non cannot exist with *Nous.* That much even I know.”

“You must realize, Michel, we invent language.”

“I know. Don’t I Remember I am in linguistics. Anyway, give me an example.”

“Like God, Dieu, etc, etc.”

“Yahweh,” he pronounced, intrepid.

“Isvara, in Sanskrit.”

“Not the same,” he declared decisively. “Imagine Abraham speaking Sanskrit or Manu speaking Hebrew. Impossible!”

“I am sure Manu would happily *sprach* Hebrew”

“But Abraham will never sprach Sanskrit.”

“Yet Isaac is to be saved. The impossible will be made possible. That’s where your God is. You crawled out of the dead, Michel. But I, want to crawl out into –”

“into – ?”

“I do not know what.”

“Into eternity!”

“No, Michel, that still smells time.”

“Then Heaven?”

“That smells Hell.”

“A saint, then?”

“Never, I have a horror of good men. Or for that matter of good women – and by your leave, may I say, like Suzanne….”

“But evil, then,?”

“Evil, the non-recognition of the nondual.”

“You see, there’s duality then,”

“But tell me, dear, dear Michel -”

“Yes, dear, dear Siv-”

‘-in your non-recognitions is there cognition- or *nicht!”*

“Yes, there is.”

“Then is not the cognition of the non-cognition the dissolution of cognition.”

“Into what?”

“Into knowledge, of course. To what else!”

“But then, Siv, my friend, how to get there then? That is the question.” He put his hand warmly on my shoulder this time. We were getting somewhere.

“Yes, of course, that’s the question of questions.”

Then he walked toward the window and stood there gazing intently at the garden, shimmering with the evening breezes. And suddenly turning back, he asked : “What is eveil then?”

“A lesser good,” and he seemed so under shock, I added, “en *une facon on de parler.”*

“Well, well. If evil then the lesser good, where, sir, does less come from? Once again the non in the *Nous,* the fish in the water.”

“It’s all a metaphor – a metaphor, just a way of looking at things.”

“For–”

“For, from the Plenum, you see, there’s nothing but the good.”

“Oh!”

“And not our good at that!”

“Beyond good and evil, then. From there you go straight to the madhouse in Basel. And finally end up on the Berlin bunker, this time with St.Eva. Oh, my poor, poor friend,” he said in compassionate irony. I shuddered.

“Every jew is an Isaac. The lamp may not appear. So God eats man. The potato is born,” I said deliberately, and in utter desperation.

“Oh, *mon pauvre* Ivan.”

“Quel Ivan?” I said looking straight at him, angry.

“Of course, Ivan Karamazov,” and both laughed together.

“And you, Michel, are you Alyosha then?”

“Every, Jew an Alyosha – but, but, minus chastity, please!”

“*Le mal c’est le limitrophe du bien.”*

“Oh, you benighted Hindus!”

“Not so bad,” I retorted, angry again at his superciliousness.

“We had Hitler,” he spat finally.

“We had Ravana.” He now looked at me, smiling, stretching out his hands. He had understood something then and there. So peace had happened.

And I left him there and went over to have a wash. I was exhausted. It was getting late. And I had to be back home.

Rabindranath Tagore

4 The Cabuliwallah

My five-year old daughter Mini cannot live without chattering. I really believe that in all her life she has not wasted a minute in silence. Her mother is often vexed at this, and would like to stop her prattle, but I would not. For Mini to be quiet is unnatural, and I cannot bear it long. And so my own talk with her is always lively.

One morning, for instance, when I was in the midst of the seventeenth chapter of my new novel, my little Mini stole into the room, and putting her hand into mine, said: “Father! Ramdayal, the door-keeper, calls a crow a krow! He doesn’t know anything, does he?”

Before I could explain to her the difference between one language and another in this world, she had embarked on the full tide of another subject. “What do you think, Father? Bhola says there is an elephant in the clouds, blowing water out of his trunk, and that is why it rains!”

And then, darting off anew, while I sat still, trying to think of some reply to this: “Father! What relation is Mother to you?”

With a grave face I contrived to say: “Go and play with Bhola, Mini! I am busy!”

The window of my room overlooks the road. The child had seated herself at my feet near my table, and was playing softly, drumming on her knees. I was hard at work on my seventeenth chapter, in which Pratap Singh, the hero,

has just caught Kanchanlata, the heroine, in his arms, and is about to escape with her by the third-storey window of the castle, when suddenly

Mini left her play, and ran to the window, crying: ‘A Cabuliwallah! A Cabuliwallah!’ And indeed, in the street below, there was a Cabuliwallah, walking slowly along. He wore the loose, soiled clothing of his people, and a tall turban; he carried a bag on his back, and boxes of grapes in his hand.

I cannot tell what my daughter’s feelings were when she saw this man, but she began to call him loudly. ‘Ah!’ thought I; ‘he will come in, and my seventeenth chapter will never be finished!’ At that very moment the Cabuliwallah turned, and looked up at the child. When she saw this, she was overcome by terror, and running to her mother’s protection, disappeared. She had a blind belief that inside the bag, which the big man carried, there were perhaps two or three other children like herself. The pedlar meanwhile entered my doorway and greeted me with a smile.

So precarious was the position of my hero and my heroine that my first impulse was to stop and buy something, since Mini had called the man to the house. I made some small purchases, and we began to talk about Abdur Rahman, the Russians, the English, and the Frontier Policy.

As he was about to leave, he asked: ‘And where is the little girl, sir?’

And then, thinking that Mini must get rid of her false fear, I had her brought out.

She stood by my chair, and looked at the Cabuliwallah and his bag. He offered her nuts and raisins, but she would not be tempted, and only clung closer to me, with all her doubts increased.

This was their first meeting.

A few mornings later, however, as I was leaving the house, I was startled to find Mini, seated on a bench near the door, laughing and talking, with the great Cabuliwallah at her feet. In all her life, it appeared, my small daughter had never found so patient a listener, save her father. And already the corner of her little *sari* was stuffed with almonds and raisins, the gift of her visitor. ‘Why did you give her those?’ I said, and taking out an eight-anna piece, I handed it to him. The man accepted the money without demur, and put it into his pocket.

Alas, on my return, an hour later, I found the unfortunate coin had made twice its own worth of trouble! For the Cabuliwallah had given it to Mini; and

her mother, catching sight of the bright round object, had pounced on the child with: ‘Where did you get that eight-anna piece?’

‘The Cabuliwallah gave it me,’ said Mini cheerfully.

‘The Cabuliwallah gave it you!’ cried her mother greatly shocked. ‘O Mini! How could you take it from him?’

I entered at that moment, and saving her from impending disaster, proceeded to make my own inquiries.

It was not the first or the second time, I found, that the two had met. The Cabuliwallah had overcome the child’s first terror by a judicious bribe of nuts and almonds, and the two were now great friends.

They had many quaint jokes, which amused them greatly. Mini would seat herself before him, look down on his gigantic frame in all her tiny dignity, and with her face rippling with laughter would begin:

‘O Cabuliwallah! Cabuliwallah! What have you got in your bag?’.

And he would reply, in the nasal accents of the mountaineer: ‘An elephant!’ Not much cause for merriment, perhaps; but how they both enjoyed the fun! And for me, this child’s talk with a grown-up man had always in it something strangely fascinating.

Then the Cabuliwallah, not to be behindhand would take his turn: ‘Well, little one, and when are you going to your father-in-law’s house?’

Now nearly every small Bengali maiden had heard long ago about her father-in-Iaw’s house; but we were a little newfangled, and had kept these things from our child, so that Mini at this question must have been a trifle bewildered. But she would not show it, and with ready tact replied: ‘Are *you* going there?’

Amongst men of the Cabuliwallah’s class, however, it is well known that the words *father-in-laws house* have a double meaning. It is a euphemism for *jail,* the place where we are well cared for, at no expense to ourselves. In this sense would the sturdy pedlar take my daughter’s question. ‘Oh,’ he would say, shaking his fist at an invisible policeman, ‘I will thrash my father-in-law!’ Hearing this, and picturing the poor discomfited relative, Mini would go off into peals of laughter in which her formidable friend would join.

These were autumn mornings, the very time of year when kings of old went forth to conquest; and I, without stirring from my little corner in Calcutta,

would let my mind wander over the whole world. At the very name of another country, my heart would go out to it, and at the sight of a foreigner in the streets, I would fall to weaving a network of dreams – the mountains, the glens, and the forests of his distant land, with his cottage in their midst, and the free and independent life, or far away wilds. Perhaps scenes of travel are conjured up before me and pass and repass in my imagination all the more vividly, because I lead an existence so like a vegetable that a call to travel would fall upon me like a thunderbolt. In the presence of this Cabuliwallah, I was immediately transported to the foot of arid mountain peaks, with narrow little defiles twisting in and out amongst their towering heights. I could see the string of camels bearing the merchandise, and the company of turbaned merchants, some carrying their queer old firearms, and some their spears, journeying downward towards the plains. I could see but at some such point Mini's mother would intervene, and implore me to 'beware of that man.'

Mini's mother is unfortunately very timid. Whenever she hears a noise in the streets, or sees people coming towards the house, she always jumps to the conclusion that they are either thieves, or drunkards, or snakes, or tigers, or malaria, or cockroaches, or caterpillars. Even after all these years of experience, she is not able to overcome her terror. So she was full of doubts about the Cabuliwallah, and used to beg me to keep a watchful eye on him.

If I tried to laugh her fear gently away, she would turn round seriously, and ask me solemn questions:

Were children never kidnapped?

Was it not true that there was slavery in Cabul?

Was it so very absured that this big man should be able to carry off a tiny child?

I urged that, though not impossible, it was very improbable. But this was not enough, and her dread persisted. But as it was a very vague dread, it did not seem right to forbid the man the house, and the intimacy went on unchecked.

Once a year, in the middle of January, Rahman, the Cabuliwallah, used to return to his own country, and as the time approached, he would be very busy, going from house to house collecting his debts. This year, however, he could always find time to come and see Mini. It might have seemed to a stranger that there was some conspiracy between the two, for when he could not come in the morning, he would appear in the evening.

Even to me it was a little startling now and then, suddenly to surprise this tall, loose-garmented man laden with his bags, in the corner of a dark room; but when Mini ran in smiling, with her ‘O Cabuliwallah! Cabuliwallah!’ and the two friends, so far apart in age, subsided into their old laughter and their old jokes, I felt reassured.

One morning, a few days before he had made up his mind to go, I was correcting proof-sheets in my study. The weather was chilly’. Through the window the rays of the sun touched my feet, and the slight warmth was very welcome. It was nearly eight o’clock, and early pedestrians were returning home with their heads covered. Suddenly I heard an uproar in the street, and, looking out saw Rahman being led away bound between two policemen, and behind them a crowd of inquisitive boys. There were bloodstains on his clothes, and one of the policemen carried a knife. I hurried out, and stopping them, inquired what it all meant. Partly from one, partly from another, I gathered that a certain neighbour had owed the pedlar something for a Rampuri shawl, but had denied buying it and that in the course of the quarrel Rahman ‘had struck him. Now, in his excitement, the prisoner began calling his enemy all sorts of names, when suddenly in the verandah of my house appeared my little Mini, with her usual exclamation: ‘O Cabuliwallah! Cabuliwallah!’ Rahman’s – face lighted up as he turned to her. He had no bag under his arm today, so that she could not talk about the elephant with him. She therefore at once proceeded to the next question: ‘Are you going to your father-in-law’s house?’ Rahman laughed and said: ‘That is just where I am going, little one!’ Then seeing that the reply did not amuse the child, he held up his fettered hands. ‘Ah!’ he said, ‘I would have thrashed that old father-in-law, but my hands are bound!’

On a charge of murderous assult, Rahman was sentenced to several years’ imprisonment.

Time passed, and he was forgotten. Our accustomed work in the accustomed place went on, and the thought of the once free mountaineer spending his years in prison seldom or never occurred to us. Even my light-hearted Mini, I am ashamed to say, forgot her old friend. New companions filled her life. As she grew older, she spent more of her time with girls. So much, indeed, did she spent with them that she came no more, as she used to do, to her father’s room, so that I rarely had any opportunity of speaking to her.

Years had passed away. It was once more autumn, and we had made arrangements for our Mini’s marriage. It was to take place during the Puja holidays. With Durga returning to Kailas, the light of our home also would

depart to her husband's house, and leave her father's in shadow.

The morning was bright. After the rains, it seemed as though the air had been washed clean and the rays of the sun looked like pure gold. So bright were they that they made even the sordid brick-walls of our Calcutta lanes radiant. Since early dawn the wedding-pipes had been sounding, and at each burst of sound my own heart throbbed. That wail of the tune, *Bhairavi*, seemed to intensify the pain I felt at the approaching separation. My Mini was to be married that night.

From early morning noise and bustle had pervaded the house. In the courtyard there was the canopy to be slung on its bamboo poles; there were chandeliers with their tinkling sound to be hung in each room and verandah. There was endless hurry and excitement. I was sitting in my study, looking through the accounts, when someone entered, saluting respectfully, and stood before me. It was Rahman, the Cabuliwallah. At first I did not recognize him. He carried no bag, his long hair was cut short and his old vigour seemed to have gone. But he smiled, and I knew him again.

'When did you come, Rahman?' I asked him. 'Last evening,' he said, 'I was released from jail.'

The words struck harshly upon my ears. I had never before talked with one, who had wounded his fellow-man, and my heart shrank within itself when I realized this; for I felt that the day would have been better-omened had he not appeared.

'There are ceremonies going on,' I said, 'and I am busy. Perhaps you could come another day?'

He immediately turned to go; but as he reached the door he hesitated, and said, 'May I not see the little one, sir, for a moment?' It was his belief that Mini was still the same. He had pictured her running to him as she used to do, calling 'O Cabuliwallah! Cabuliwallah!' He had imagined too that they would laugh and talk together, just as of old. Indeed, in memory of former days, he had brought, carefully wrapped up in a paper, a few almonds and raisins and grapes, obtained somehow or other from a countryman; for what little money he had, had got.

I repeated: 'There is a ceremony in the house, and you will not be able to see anyone today.'

The man's face fell. He looked wistfully at me for a moment, then said' Good morning,' and went out.

I felt a little sorry, and would have called him back, but I found he was returning of his own accord. He came close up to me and held out his offerings with the words: ‘I have brought these few things, sir, for the little one. Will you give them to her?’

I took them, and was going to pay him, but he caught my hand and said: ‘You are very kind, sir! Keep me in your memory. Do not offer me money! You have a little girl: I too have one like her in my own home. I think of her, and bring this fruit to your child – not to make a profit for myself.’

Saying this, he put his hand inside his big loose robe, and brought out a small and dirty piece of paper. Unfolding it with great care, he smoothed it out with both hands on my table. It bore the impression of a little hand. Not a photograph. Not a drawing. Merely the impression of an ink-smeared hand laid flat on the paper. This touch of the hand of his own little daughter he had carried always next to his heart, as he had come year after year to Calcutta to sell his wares in the streets.

Tears came to my eyes. I forgot that he was a poor Cabuli fruit-seller, while I was – but no, what was I more than he? He also was a father.

That impression of the hand of his little Parvati in her distant mountain home reminded me of my own little Mini.

I sent for Mini immediately from the inner apartment. Many difficulties were raised, but I swept them aside. Clad in the red silk of her wedding-day, with the sandal paste on her forehead, and adorned as a young bride, Mini came and stood modestly before me.

The Cabuliwallah seemed amazed at the apparition. He could not revive their old friendship. At last he smiled and said: “Little one, are you going to your father-in-law’s house?”

But Mini now understood the meaning of the word ‘father-in-law’, and she could not answer him as of old. She blushed at the question, and stood before him with her bridelike face bowed down.

I remembered the day when the Cabuliwallah and my Mini had first met, and I felt sad. When she had gone, Rahman sighed deeply and sat down on the floor. The idea had suddenly come to him that his daughter too must have grown up, while he had been away so long, and that he would have to make friends anew with her also. Assuredly he would not find her as she was when he left her. And besides, what might not have happened to her in these eight years?

The marriage-pipes sounded, and the mild autumn sunlight streamed round us. But Rahman sat in the little Calcutta lane, and saw before him the barren mountains of Afghanistan.

I took out a currency note, gave it to him, and said: ‘Go back to your daughter, Rahman, in your own country, and may the happiness of your meeting bring good fortune to my child!’

Having made this present, I had to curtail some of the festivities. I could not have the electric lights I had intended, nor the military band, and the ladies of the house were despondent about it. But to me the wedding-feast was all the brighter for the thought that in a distant land a long-lost father had met again his only child.

5 Price of a Head

The ruler of Koshala was known far and wide as a friend of the helpless and poor.

The King of Kashi was sick with jealousy. “My subject considers him greater than me. He has intrigued to capture their hearts by pretence of charity. Shameless daring! Soldiers, prepare for battle! The sword shall be the test of greatness!”

The battle was soon over. Defeated, the ruler of Koshala fled to the jungles. The victor said: “Charity behoves none but him who has the might of arms.”

The country was stricken with grief. Men said that the doom of the world was near, for God’s justice had ceased and the righteous suffered.

The King of Kashi was mad with anger.

“Why do they grieve for him? Am I nothing to them? Is it all part of a conspiracy? The enemy seeks to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. Listen, my messengers, let it be known all over my land, that whoever captures the King of Koshala and brings him to my palace shall receive a hundred pieces of gold.”

Messengers carried the proclamation from door to door. But people shrank from them, and shut their ears.

The fallen King wandered in the jungle as a solitary ascetic.

One day a traveller met him and said: “Tell me, forestdweller, which is the way to the Kingdom of Koshala?”

“What sends you to that kingdom, friend?”

The traveller replied: “I am a merchant by caste. My ship has foundered in a storm, leaving me a penniless beggar. The King of Koshala is a friend of the helpless. He will be moved by my plight.”

The ascetic smiled to hide his tears. He thought for a while, sighed and murmured: “Come with me. I shall take you to him who will fulfil your desire.”

The ascetic entered the palace and bowed before the King of Kashi.

“I was the ruler of Koshala. You have promised a hundred pieces of gold to him who brings me as a captive to your palace. Give that reward to my companion, King, and redeem your vow.”

The courtiers looked on in dumb silence, and even the soldiers fought to kill emotion in their hearts.

The King gazed at the stranger for a long while, then rose to his feet and laughed.

“Prisoner, you seek to conquer me through death? I will break your fond hopes. Today the victory will be mine.” He paused, then added: “Take back Koshala, O King, and with it take my heart.”

He seized the hands of the ascetic, led him to the throne and placed the jewelled crown on his dusty hair.

6 Guru Govinda

Govinda, the fallen chief of the Sikhs, was recalling his own past. Hopes cherished in youth had died. His mind ached with a thousand doubts, questionings. Had he achieved naught but futility? Sad and weary, Govinda was sunk in thought when a man of the fiery race of Pathans came to him and demanded payment for a horse.

“Leave me now, brother. I shall pay you tomorrow.”

“No, I must have it at once,” the Pathan cried angrily, and seizing the Sikh’s hand he called him a thief.

A naked sword flashed like lighting, and the Pathan fell lifeless on the ground.

The Sikh chief mused gloomily on what he had done in a moment of mad anger.

“I have shed blood uselessly,” he said to himself. “My sword has plunged me into sin. The rest of my life I must pass in atonement. “

He sent for the Pathan’s child, began to rear him up as his own, and taught him the use of arms. His followers said:

“We are afraid, Sire. Who has ever tamed a tiger’s cub? When the Pathan boy grows up he will be like his father.”

“What is all my teaching worth if it fails to make a tiger’s cub grow to be a tiger? the Chief answered.

The boy grew up. He loved the Chief as his own father and followed him about like a shadow. The old Chief’s sons had all died in battle, and the Pathan filled their place. One day the grown-up boy touched the Chief’s feet and said: “I have learnt the use of arms. Permit me now to become a soldier in the King’s army and earn my own living.”

Govinda said: “I shall test your valour. Follow me, sword in hand.”

They walked in silence through the forest and reached a rivulet. The water, knee-deep, shone like crystal.

Darkness was spreading over the sky. Govinda stopped and said: “Mahmud, come here and dig in this place.”

A large piece of stone came out from the sand. Govinda said: “See these red stains? It’s your father’s blood. Here I severed his head instead of paying for a horse he had sold me. Take vengeance, Pathan, and quench with blood the thirst of your father’s ghost.”

There was a cry of fierce anger and Mahmud sprang on the chief like a wounded beast. Govinda was calm and smiling. The Pathan flung the weapon at his feet and sobbed in anguish:

“Do not play with the Devil; I have forgotten my father’s murder and learnt to love you even as I loved the dead one. Do not rouse the sleeping snake. Let it starve and die!”

Since that day the Pathan kept apart from the Chief. He never came to him with a weapon. One evening Govinda invited him to play chess. Mahmud lost game after game. He was pondering over a move when the Chief flung at his head a piece from the chessboard and laughed mockingly:

“A coward who plays chess with his father’s murderer – what can he expect but defeat?”

Quick as lightning the Pathan seized a dagger that lay near at hand, and drove it into Govinda’s heart.

The dying chief smiled contentedly and said: “Oh, my son, at last you have known a brave man’s way of avenging himself for a wrong.”

7 The Ungrateful Sorrow

At dawn she took her farewell.

The mind tried to console me saying, “Everything is an illusion!”

I was resentful, I said, “There is the table with her sewing-box on it, those flowerpots on the balcony, the fan on the bed bearing her name – surely they are real!”

The mind explained, “Yes, and yet try and think!”

I answered back, ‘There is nothing to think – just see – there is the novel that is lying with her hairpin stuck in the middle of the pages, still waiting to be finished. If these are only illusions, is she then to be even a greater illusion than all these?

The mind kept silent. A friend came over and consoled me, “What is good is true, it never fades. The living world preserves it like the rare gem of a necklace on its breast!”

I got furious and said, “How do you know? Do you mean to say that the body is no good? Why then the body must perish?”

Like a child in a temper who keeps hitting at its mother, I tried to hurt every little refuge that I had in the whole world in the same manner. I complained, “The world is treacherous!”

Suddenly I gave a start. I seemed to hear somebody say, “How ungrateful!”

Looking out through the window, just behind the tamarisk tree, I saw the moon just three days old, it were, as if, the laughter of the one who had departed, playing hide and seek! A voice of censure came through the star-sprinkled dark night, “I gave myself to you, was that treachery? – and now when I am shadowed, is it there that you place your tremendous faith?”

Premchand

8 Box of Jewels

Chander Prakash had no choice after passing his B.A. except to take up a job as a private tutor. His mother had died when he was still quite young. The father also closed his eyes on the world the year Prakash passed his B.A. With his father's death, all his dreams of a successful career vanished from the horizon. He had held a high office and with his assistance, Chander Prakash was certain of a promising career. The father's death put an end to all his hopes and his ambitions. Married as he was to an educated girl fond of good living, Chander Prakash found the meager thirty rupees that he got as tuition fee, not even sufficient for a bare living. But the Thakur Sahib whose son he taught provided him with a free furnished house next to his. This, to some extent, compensated for the low salary; for, a house like that itself would have cost Prakash at least twenty rupees a month. The work was also light. He taught the boy only for two hours a day. The Thakur and the Thakurain were both very fond of Prakash and considered him almost as a member of the family. There was no household matter on which he was not consulted.

It was evening. Prakash had just finished his lessons with his ward, Virendra, and was about to leave when the Thakurain came in and said, "Don't go just yet son, there is something I have to consult you about." Prakash wondered what it could be which even Virendra was not supposed to know. Taking him aside, Umadevi, the Thakurain, said, "I have received a very good offer for Viroo. Should we get him married?" Prakash smiled and said, "This is a matter which Viroo Babu alone can decide, I am afraid." "No, I want your opinion," said the Thakurain. Prakash hesitated for a moment and

then said, “What can I say? Undoubtedly, he is already twenty and is therefore of a marriageable age. But if he gets married he will not be able to study any longer.” “So in your opinion,” observed the Thakurain, “he ought not to get married as yet.” “You are the best judge of this,” replied Prakash, “I have put before you both the pros and the cons.” “In that case we had better get him married,” said the Thakurain, “I am afraid that if he is left alone for long he may fall into bad company.” “There is no such danger,” said Prakash, “so long as I am here but there is no harm in getting him married either if you think that he ought to.” “You will have to make all the arrangements,” said the Thakurain. Prakash smiled and nodded assent.

The marriage was fixed and preparation began for it. Thakur Sahib was one of those people who completely lacked confidence in himself. In his eyes Prakash’s degree was worth much more than his sixty years of experience. The entire arrangements for the marriage were therefore left in Prakash’s hands. To be entrusted with spending nearly twelve thousand rupees was no mean honour. The poor tutor of yesterday found himself overnight as the sole manager of Thakur Sahib’s affairs. The whole day was spent in talking to cloth merchants, grocers and electricians. If he had wanted, he could have easily made a little fortune on these arrangements. But his conscience did not allow him this meanness to a man like Thakur Sahib who had implicit faith in him. However, the day, jewellery worth five thousand rupees was purchased, Prakash’s feet tottered. Returning home he said to Champa, his wife, “What an unfair world this is. On one side there are people like us who can hardly afford a square meal; on the other are people like Thakur Sahib who spend thousands on jewellery alone. Today he has purchased ornaments worth five thousand rupees for the daughter-in-law to be. Some of the pieces are really exquisite, masterpieces of good workmanship.” Champa spoke in her usual jealous tone, “What satisfaction is that to me? People like us are born only to slave their way through life.” God is such an unjust creature,” said Chander Prakash, “We toil the whole day and get just enough to eat at the day’s end whereas people like Thakur Sahib enjoy life without doing any work, on money left behind by their forefathers.” “It’s one’s stars that are to blame,” replied Champa, “if your parents had left you money, you would have done the same.” “And why talk about jewels alone. I haven’t even decent clothes to wear. I am wondering how I shall go to the Thakurain’s house for the marriage. I hope I get ill. That will provide a good excuse.” And saying this she started crying. Chander Prakash felt both annoyed and ashamed at his situation. Trying to placate his wife, he said, “I shall get you a new saree. Our days are also bound to change some day. And if I am still alive then, I shall cover you up with jewellery from head to foot.” Champa smiled. “Your usual stories again.” She said, “I am satisfied if we keep on getting enough to eat.”

Prakash lowered his head and bit his nails not being able to fulfil his boast immediately.

When they turned in at night after finishing their meals, the ornaments were still on Prakash's mind. "I could not even dream," he said, "that such beautiful jewellery could be made in this town. You would look like a queen if you wore them." "Jewellery hardly enhances one's beauty," replied Champa, "I have seen women who still look very ugly even after wearing jewellery." "What a selfish man Thakur Sahib is, really," said Prakash, "he did not even offer a piece for you after all the work I am doing for him." "Don't be childish," reprimanded Champa. "What is so childish about it?" argued Prakash, "Hadn't he been such a miser as I know him to be, he would have certainly offered a piece." "I haven't come across anyone so far" observed Champa, "who would offer his own daughter-in-law's jewellery to somebody else just like that." But Prakash was not convinced. "I am no mere somebody else" he went on "I am the tutor to his son and am looking after all the arrangements for the marriage. It won't have hurt him at all if he had given me a piece worth a hundred or two hundred rupees for you. But wealth has such a crippling effect even on the most enlightened minds that generosity and large-heartedness have no place with them."

It was nearly getting on to midnight. Prakash could not sleep. The ornaments appeared again and again before his eyes and disturbed his sleep. Suddenly he got up. "Not even a thing on Champa," he said to himself, "this is the age for girls to enjoy themselves; but look at her. She has to go without even the smallest thing in life." And with these thoughts he stealthily walked out of the room, on to the roof of the house. The roof of Thakur Sahib's house was joined to his and only a five-foot wall separated the two houses. Prakash jumped over the wall and landed lightly on Thakur Sahib's side. There was a deadly silence in the house. "I had better go down the steps straight into Thakur Sahib's room," he said to himself, "if he wakes up I shall merely say that I heard footsteps coming towards the room and followed them. Nobody will doubt my words. If on the other hand, I can lay my hands on the box of jewels without waking anyone up I would have accomplished my mission. Everyone will blame the servants. I shall also say that they must be responsible for the theft. Nobody will even suspect me. After the marriage I shall leave the house and give the jewels to Champa one by one so that she won't also be any the wiser." Even in spite of a perfect plan however, Chander Prakash could notice a sinking feeling in his heart as he went down the steps.

It was broad daylight. Prakash was still asleep. Suddenly Champa came running to him and said, “Get up. There has been a theft in Thakur Sahib’s house last night. The thieves took away the box of jewels.” Prakash asked, without getting up, “Hasn’t anyone been able to catch them?” “Not a sound was heard” replied Champa “And the surprising part is that they only removed the box of jewels. How they found the key and how they knew where it was kept is a mystery.” “Must be the servants,” replied Prakash, casually, “it cannot possibly be an outsider” “But all their servants are old hands,” observed Champa, “they have been with the family for years.” “It doesn’t take long for a man to become dishonest,” said Prakash, “they must have got the opportunity and took advantage of it.” “Go and help them,” said Champa, “The Thakurain is crying her heart out. She calls your name and says how carefully you chose every design and how many months you laboured getting them ready.” Prakash got up and went to Thakur Sahib’s house. “Champa just told me about the theft mother,” he said to the Thakurain, feigning worriedness, “what a calamity.” Thakur Sahib was sitting holding his head in his hands. “The surprising thing is,” he said “that no locks have been broken, no doors have been removed, there are no signs of any openings in the walls. From where could the thief have entered the house?” The Thakurain was still crying. “We are undone,” she said, “the marriage is so near. But for your ceaseless efforts the jewellery would never have been ready in time. It must be an evil star under which it was purchased.” Prakash whispered into Thakur Sahib’s ear, “One of your servants must be responsible for the mischief.” The Thakurain overheard him and opposed the suggestion. “No,” she said, “it cannot be the servants. At times I have left as much as ten thousand rupees lying about in the house, and not a pie has ever been lost.” Thakur Sahib was, however, inclined to agree with Prakash and said, “you don’t know how quickly a man can become dishonest. It can never be said that just because a man has not stolen before, he will never steal. I must report the matter to the police. They will conduct a thorough search and question every one. I am sure the culprit will blurt out the ‘truth when the police handles him.” Prakash shuddered at the suggestion. “For,” he thought, “if the police did not find the culprit among the servants, they were bound to search his house also. And that would be his undoing.” “I don’t think,” he said, “much would come out of a police investigation.” Thakur Sahib was surprised. “You talk like a child, Prakash Babu,” he said, “You think the thief will own up all by himself, without any effort on our part.” And then as if on second thought he added, “Perhaps you are right. Perhaps it won’t be any use reporting the matter to the police. I don’t think we will get the jewellery back anyhow.” “But something must be done,” said Prakash. “It is no use,” observed Thakur Sahib, “if we could get a detective, it might help. But where can one get a detective here. The best thing is to keep quiet.” “You can keep

quiet," said Prakash "But I cannot. The thief must be found." "I have full faith in the servants," said the Thakurain again, "Though I don't know how and from where the thief came but I am sure that the theft has been committed by an outsider. He can come from your side also, you know." Prakash's heart missed a beat. "I close my door every night," he said, ‘’the only possibility can be that he entered the house earlier in the evening and hid himself somewhere." The three went up the roof. Footsteps were visible where Prakash had landed on Thakur Sahib's roof and continued towards Prakash's side. Thakur Sahib saw all this but kept quiet. Prakash said, "There is no doubt now that the thief entered the house from my side." Thakur Sahib nodded and said, "But this is hardly any help. Such clues won't bring back the jewellery. The best thing is to arrange for money and get some new ones made." "I must leave my house immediately" said Prakash. "But it is no fault of yours." replied the Thakur Sahib. "You may not consider it my fault," said Prakash, "but the fact is that the thief entered the house from my side. And my door remains open till late at night. I do not get back from work till ten o'clock. It is quite probable that the thief may make another attempt, now that he knows the way. Champa is all alone in the house the whole day and is mostly busy in the kitchen. It is not possible for her to keep an eye on who comes in. The best way out is to close this route." The Thakurain got very perturbed. "Oh, don't do that son," she said, "we would be completely helpless without you." "That is very kind of you, mother," replied Prakash, "but I must move out as soon as possible. The theft is due to my negligence, and I must suffer for it." When Prakash had gone, the Thakurain said, "What a decent boy he is. The mere fact that the thief came from his side is killing him." "One thing is certain," said the Thakur, "he will not live in this house any longer. We will probably have to pay him twenty rupees extra every month towards house rent." "I don't think he will accept that," observed the Thakurain. "He will have to," said the Thakur, "he cannot possibly live on thirty rupees a month."

Prakash left the house the same day, aware as he was of the dangers of living there; but he spent the whole day at Thakur Sahib's house till the marriage took place. As a prelude to the offer of ornaments he said to Champa one day, "I have taken up a part-time job with a seth Sahib on fifty rupees a month and am not going to withdraw a single pie out of it. It will all be used for your jewellery." Champa was filled with joy. Her faith in her gods strengthened.

Uptill now there was no secret between Prakash and Champa. She had

access to everything he had and knew what was where. But now Prakash kept to himself the keys to one of the boxes. Many times she enquired what it contained but he always evaded an answer or just said that he had packed up some of his old books that were lying about. Champa did not suspect anything.

One day she went into the room to give Prakash a betel leaf and found that he was sitting in front of the box looking at something inside it. Seeing Champa he immediately closed the box. Champa wondered why he was in such a hurry to close it but not being of a suspicious nature she did not give further thought to the subject.

It was impossible for Prakash not to have a look at the ornaments whenever he got a chance. After all, such a lot of wealth would not be left around without bothering about it. Whenever Champa was away he opened the box and made sure that the jewellery was there.

One day a theft took place in the neighbourhood. Prakash started sleeping inside the house. Even the heat of June was preferable to leaving the jewellery unguarded. Champa tried to persuade him many times to sleep outside but he was adamant. “The thieves do not risk their lives for nothing,” Champa would argue, “What can they expect to find in this house?” Prakash used to get annoyed at her insistence and would say, “For a poor man even the household utensils are valuable.”

While cleaning the house, Champa once unwittingly moved the box to another corner of the room. Prakash immediately noticed the change when he came and enquired, “Did you move the box?” “No,” said Champa, “Why should I,” “Who moved it then?” asked Prakash highly agitated, “after all there is nobody else in the house except you.” “Alright, I moved it,” replied Champa, “What wealth is there in the box that you are so agitated?” Prakash realized his mistake. Controlling his voice, he said, “Oh nothing, I just noticed the change and wondered who had moved it.” But he could not rest till he got an opportunity to look at the jewellery. As soon as Champa went into the kitchen he opened the box and started examining the pieces. Champa made *Pakories,* and thinking that Prakash liked them while they were still hot she took some to him. As soon as he heard her coming, Prakash slammed the lid of the box and locked it. Turning to Champa, he said, “What have you brought? I don’t feel hungry at all today. Oh you have made *pakories,* have you?”

Champa began to wonder again why Prakash always hurried to close the box as soon as she came. Her woman’s curiosity was aroused. She was dying

to know what it contained. Unable to find any keys that would fit it, she one day called a locksmith and got a duplicate key made. Opening the box she was amazed to find jewellery in it. From the description she had heard of Thakur Sahib's stolen jewels there was not a moment's doubt in her mind as to where this jewellery had come from. Her head hung with shame. Closing the box she went and lay on the bed. "How could he stoop so low," she said to herself, "I have never bothered him for jewellery. And even if I have, it does not mean that he should go and steal it. Hasn't he a conscience left any more?"

From the day she discovered Prakash's secret Champa was not the same person any longer. She used to be sad and picked up quarrels with him on mere trifles. Whereas they had no secrets between them before, now a wall separated the two. Whereas before they used to plan for the future together and sympathized with each other, they now did not even talk to each other for days.

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1 A Palatable dish

Many months passed by. A vacancy occurred in the city bank for an Assistant Manager. Prakash had passed the Accountant's examination and stood very good chances of getting the post. The only hitch was that the bank required a cash security of ten thousand rupees. He could not think of anyone who would lend him such a large amount. One day he casually mentioned it to Thakur Sahib. Thakur Sahib immediately suggested that he should apply. "But where will I get the money?" said Prakash, "Don't bother about the money," said Thakur Sahib, "if all other requirements are met, the security will be arranged." Prakash was surprised. "You mean you will put in the security money?" he asked, unable to believe his ears. "What is so surprising about that?" replied Thakur Sahib.

Prakash came back to his house. Though the chances of his getting the job were bright he was feeling restless and sad. Thakur Sahib's goodness was trampling under its feet his own wickedness to him. Reaching home he gave the news to Champa. She did not seem enthusiastic either and turned away her face. After a moment she said, "Why did you rope in Thakur Sahib? It is a matter of money. A little slip on your part and the poor man will lose ten thousand rupees. We are alright as we are." Prakash smelt suspicion in her tone and said, "How do you mean a little slip on my part? You think I am so incompetent." "It is not that," replied Champa, "only it does not take long for

a man to become dishonest." Prakash looked piercingly at her but could not fathom the hidden meaning of her remark. "Could it be," he wondered, "that she has come to know about the box of jewels?" To get an answer to this question he was impatient. As soon as they finished their meals, he asked again, "What were you thinking of when you said that it does not take long for a man to become dishonest?" "I didn't have anything particular in mind," replied Champa, "it was only a general statement." Prakash was not satisfied, and asked again, "So in your opinion all bank employees are liable to become dishonest." Champa wanted to get out of the argument, and said "I was only thinking of the money you made in Thakur Sahib's son's marriage." Prakash felt relieved, smiled and said, "Oh you mean the commission. But taking a commission is no crime. Even the highest of officials take commission:' Champa replied, her voice full of hatred. "To cheat a man who trusts you so implicitly even of a pie is a crime in my eyes. I would have considered you honest only if you had gone and returned to him all the money you got as commission. Look at his treatment towards you, during the last six months. You left the house of your own accord yet he still keeps on paying you twenty rupees a month extra. Whenever he gets anything from his lands he always sends some for you. You did not have a watch; he gave you his own. Whenever your servant is absent, he sends his own to do our work. During my illness he paid all the doctor's bills, and used to come twice a day to enquire after my health. And now he has offered to pay the security money on your behalf. It is no small matter. Most people will not make such an offer even to their close relations. Ten thousand rupees is after all no meagre sum. On top of it is the danger that he loses the entire amount on the slightest mistake on your part. One should be prepared to sacrifice even one's life for a person like Thakur Sahib instead of cheating him."

Prakash lay down after eating his food. His conscience was pricking him. Champa's words had brought him face to face with it and they struck him almost as a surgeon's knife strikes a ripe boil. He could see himself as he really was – mean, thankless and cruel. The words affected him almost as a social or political cartoon affects us when it portrays the baser side of our nature. They awakened in him his sleeping humanity. The box of jewels started pestering his soul.

Prakash got the job in the bank, and held a feast to celebrate the occasion. Thakur Sahib, his wife, Virendra and his newly wed bride, all were invited. After the feast Thakur Sahib got up to go. Prakash said, "*Dada,* I won't let you go at this hour. You must stay here for the night." Champa did not

approve of the suggestion. There weren't enough beds in the house, nor enough beddings; nor was there space enough to accommodate them all. But Prakash kept on insisting, and Thakur Sahib ultimately gave in.

It was twelve o'clock at night. Thakur Sahib was sleeping upstairs. Prakash was in the verandah. The three women slept inside the room. Making sure that everyone was asleep, Prakash got up, removed the keys from under Viroo's pillow and went into the room. Opening his box he removed the box of jewels and went to the Thakur Sahib's house. Many months ago also he had entered that house, like this. But whereas then he was out to commit a crime, today he was out to make amends for it. Whereas then his steps receded at every move he made, today they urged him to go on.

Going inside the house quickly, he deposited the box under Thakur Sahib's bed and came out. Even *Hanumanjl"*[2] could not have felt such joy at bringing the piece of mountain with *Sanjeevni*[3] as Prakash was experiencing now. His feet refused to touch the ground. Viroo was still asleep when he came back. Slipping the bunch of keys under his pillow, Prakash went off to sleep.

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2 Legendary character from the epic Ramayan.

3 Life restoring herb brought by Hanuman to bring back to life Lakshman, brother of Ram.

Thakur Sahib went home in the morning. Prakash used to go in the evenings to teach Viroo. Today he could not resist the temptation of going earlier and reached Thakur Sahib's house in the afternoon. The moment Virendra saw him he shouted "Babuji, it was a very lucky feast at your house yesterday. The box of jewels has been found." Thakur Sahib also came in and said, "it was really an auspicious occasion. Not even a thing is missing from the box." Prakash feigned surprise, opened the box and said, "It is really remarkable that the box should have come back after six months, without a thing missing. I cannot understand it." "You are not the only one," said Thakur Sahib, "nobody can understand it. I am inclined to agree with Viroo's mother that the supernatural has a hand in it." "If I had not seen it with my own eyes I would have never believed it," said Prakash. "The occasion must be celebrated," said Thakur Sahib, ''you must come and dine with us tonight." "Did you consult any Pandits about the loss?" asked Prakash. "Yes, a number of them," replied Thakur Sahib. "Then it must be due to their efforts." said Prakash, "that you have found the box."

Reaching home that evening, Prakash gave the news to Champa. She came running embraced him tightly and started weeping. It appeared to her as if she had got back her long lost husband. “There is a feast at Thakur Sahib’s house tonight,” said Parkash, “We have also been invited.” “I also want to feed a thousand beggars today” said Champa. “It will cost you a hundred rupees,” retorted Prakash, “I don’t care what it costs.” replied Champa, “I am so happy today that I could spend a thousand rupees.” Seeing her so happy tears rolled down Prakash’s eyes.

9 The New Bride

Our bodies get old but their desires do not diminish. Since Lala Dongamal married a second time he felt like a new man. While his first wife was alive, he spent very little time at home. After finishing his *Puja* by about ten in the morning, he used to go straight to his shop and returned only by one O'clock in the night. If Leela, his wife, remonstrated, he used to lose his temper and say, "Shall I close the shop for your sake? These are not the days when *Lakshmi* can be appeased by a mere bowlful of water. These days even constant propitiation does not please the Goddess." This used to instantly quieten Leela.

When Leela was ill, one day she said to him as he was leaving for the shop, "I am not well, please come back a little early." Lalaji took off his turban and putting it back on the peg replied, "If my sitting at home will help your fever, I won't go to the shop today." Leela was very grieved at this brusque reply and said, "I am not asking you to stay at home but can't you try and come back a little earlier?" "I do not go to the shop for recreation," retorted Lalaji, "that I should stay there any longer than is necessary."

This attitude of her husband's was nothing new for Leela. For quite sometime now she had the heartbreaking revelation that she was no longer wanted. Was it her fault that she wasn't young any more? Who can stay young all one's life? These twenty years of living together should have normally resulted in a deep-rooted mutual affection which does not take into account physical appearance, which hides the faults and which like ripening

fruit becomes sweeter and more delightful with age. But the mercantile mind of Lalaji judged everything from the weight in the scale. According to him, an old cow which neither yielded milk nor calves was only fit for gow shala. It was enough that Leela was still the mistress of the house and lived comfortably. She could spend as much money as she liked on charity and on ornaments. And could keep as many fasts as she wanted. All Lalaji asked for was to be left alone. The surprising part of this human logic was that whereas Lalaji considered Leela old at forty, he considered himself a young man at forty-five and yearned for all the ecstasies of love which a youth dreams of. Leela, out of sheer desperation, once tried powder and rouge to make herself attractive to Lalaji. The result was just the opposite. It only annoyed him more. “What foolishness,” he said, “for a mother of seven children! Look at your hair. They are hoary with age. The face is full of wrinkles like a newly washed piece of flannel. And yet you must indulge in this stupidity of using powder and rouge as if you were a young girl of seventeen. Why don’t you accept the fact that you are no longer young. Why must you make a fool of yourself by using these artificial aids which can never bring back youth.” While the wife was the recipient of these lectures, Lalaji himself used all sorts of tonics. The hair was dyed twice a week and even correspondence was being done with an eminent doctor about the monkey glands.

Leela asked him in a despairing tone by what time he would return. Lalaji enquired how she was feeling. Leela could not decide what to say. If she said that she was not well, he would probably stay at home and say nasty things to her. If on the other hand, she said that she was alright, he would stay away till the early hours of the morning. Guardedly she said, “I was much better but am not feeling too well today. Please try and come back early. The boys go off to sleep and I feel very lonely and afraid.” Lalaji replied, “I shall try and be back by twelve.” Leela’s heart sank. Beseechingly she asked if he couldn’t make it earlier. At last he agreed to be back by eleven and left for the shop. In the evening, however, a friend turned up and invited him to visit a dancing girl. Lalaji could not possibly turn down such an invitation. It would have been the height of discourtesy. And besides who has ever got respite from household worries? Something or the other is always happening, – sometimes there is an illness, sometimes unexpected guests, sometimes there is a *Puja*. Keeping in view these considerations, he accepted the invitation and returned home at two o’clock in the morning. Overcome by pain, fever and tiredom, Leela had by then dozed off to sleep.

Lalaji’s ways did not change and Leela’s condition likewise did not improve. Ultimately she died. Lalaji was very grief-stricken at her death. There were condolence messages from friends. For days people poured in to

convey personal condolences. A daily paper brought out an obituary eulogising the qualities of head and heart of the deceased. Lalaji thanked everyone for their messages of sympathy. He even offered a scholarship of five rupees a month in the local girls' school in Leela's memory. "She hasn't died," he would say to everyone. "I am dead. I cannot imagine a life without her. It must have been due to the good deeds of a past life that I was blessed with a wife like her. She was a goddess worth worshipping etc. etc."

Six months passed by in mourning. On friends' insistence Lalaji decided to get married again. What could the poor man do? Life requires a companion especially in old age. One needs a stick only when the feet are unable to bear the burden.

With the coming of the new bride, Lalaji's life underwent a complete change. The shop no longer mattered. Even if he did not go for weeks, the business did not suffer. All he was now concerned with was to find ways and means of pleasing the new bride. A new car was purchased and the house was redecorated. There was an increase in the number of servants and a new radio set was brought. Most of his time was spent in the wife's company and Lalaji's pent up youth played more havoc than is possible from a young man. Boastfully he used to say that age has as much to do with youth as religion with culture or beauty with adornment and always insisted on taking Asha Devi, the new bride, to a cinema or a theatre or for a walk on the river bank. Asha never showed much interest in these recreations. Sometimes she went but only after great persuasion. One day Lalaji suggested boating. Asha as usual said no. Lalaji remonstrated, "what sort of a person are you that recreation does not appeal to you!" "You go," replied Asha, "I have a number of things to attend to." "Why should you work," retorted Lalaji, "what is this retinue of servants for?" "*Maharaj* cannot cook properly," replied Asha, trying to evade going out, "you will not like the food he cooks." Lalaji was besides himself with joy. How much she cares for me, he said to himself, she sacrifices even her pleasures for my sake. On the other hand it was Leela who insisted on accompanying me wherever I went. All sorts of excuses had to be invented to get rid of her. Addressing Asha he said, indulgently, "You are a strange person. What difference will it make if the food is not cooked well one day? You are spoiling me like this. If you don't come I will also not go out today." Asha replied, trying to wriggle out, "It's you who is spoiling me. If I get into the habit of being out the whole day, who will look after the household affairs?" "I don't care how the household runs," said Lalaji, "I want to spoil you. I want you to enjoy life. And why do you talk to me so reverentially? Call me by my name. Quarrel with me. Treat me like a young and naughty boy." Asha smiled and said innocently, "How can I call you by

your name? You are so much older to me. One calls only people of one's own age by name." These innocent words of Asha's pierced Lalaji's heart like a spear. He would not have got so much pain even if he had heard that he had lost a lakh of rupees. His enthusiasm subsided as if it had been given a cold douche. The intoxication at beholding the young and tender Asha vanished as if somebody had administered a strong antidote. Dismayed, he said, "Are you coming then or not?" "No," replied Asha, "I do not feel like going out." "Suppose I order you to?" asked Lalaji still persistent. "Then I shall have to," said Asha, "it is my duty to obey your orders." The words order and duty always annoyed Lalaji. They brought him face to face with the reality of the situation i.e. that all that Asha did was not out of love for him but because as his wife it was her duty to do it. Lalaji wanted to believe otherwise and yearned for love from his young wife. Quietly 'he walked away. "When will you come back?" enquired Asha. "I am not going anywhere," replied Lalaji. "You are annoyed," Asha said, "alright, I will come." Just as a stubborn child kicks away his most cherished toy, almost similarly Lalaji behaved. "You don't have to," he said curtly, "if you don't feel like it. There is no compulsion."

Asha did go out with Lalaji but in the same clothes as she had been wearing the whole day. She hardly looked a newly-wed bride. There was no jewellery, no fancy clothes, no make-up. Lalaji used to wonder why she was so careless about herself and often found consolation in the thought that perhaps her background was to blame. "These girls from poor families do not know how to enjoy life," he used to say, "Give them even a treasure and they will not know how to spend it."

Even after months of efforts on Lalaji's part, Asha did not change. She was completely passive to all his overtures of love.

Lalaji was convinced that her passiveness was due to her background. A persistent man as he was, however, he did not give up the effort. Every day he thought of new ways and means to break the shell.

One day, *Maharaj,* their cook, fell ill and went home on leave. He left behind, in his place, his seventeen year old son. The boy was a complete novice and had never done any cooking before. Asha had to spend the whole morning in the kitchen. "You are absolutely worthless Jugal," she would say, "you don't even know how to make a *chappati.* What have you done all your life?" "All my life mistress?" Jugal would ask, almost in self-defence, "I am only seventeen." Asha would give a hearty laugh and say, "And does cooking take twenty years to learn?"

“Teach me for a month mistress,” Jugal would reply, “and see how well I cook. The day I learn how to make a good *chappati*, I will ask you for a reward. The vegetables I can cook a little.” “Like hell,” Asha would say teasingly, “only the other day you put so much salt in them that nobody could even touch them.” “But that was because you were not here,” Jugal would add, “I don’t know why but my senses take leave of me when you are not around. The body is here but the mind is at your doorstep.”

One day Asha was trying to remove a pot from the hearth. Jugal stopped her. “You will spoil your beautiful saree,” he said, “let me do *it.* “ “Get away,” replied Asha, “it is too heavy for you. You will drop it on your feet and bother me for months.” Jugal kept quiet. Asha asked, smilingly, “What is the matter? *Why have you become dumb all of a sudden?”*

Jugal: “You reprimand me for nothing. I don’t feel bad at all when the master rebukes me because I am at fault. But you get angry for no reason.”

Asha: “It was for your own good. The pot may have fallen on your feet.”

Jugal: “ It could as well fall on yours. You are no older than I.”

Just then Lalaji came and called Asha to show her the plants that he had brought. Noticing that she was in the kitchen he said, “Why do you bother about cooking? Tell this boy to send for his father. We cannot put up with this cooking any longer.” And then addressing Jugal, he said, “Do you hear me? Write to your father today.” Asha was preparing the *chappaties.* Jugal was waiting to put them on the pan. How could she come out to see the plants? From inside she replied, “I will be there in a minute. Let me finish this *chappati.* If I leave it to Jugal, he will make a mess of it.” Lalaji shouted annoyed, “If he’ doesn’t know how to cook properly why don’t you turn him out?” Asha did not pay much heed to Lalaji’s words and merely said, “He will learn by and by.”

Lalaji: “Come and tell me where to put these plants.”

Asha : “I told you I am cooking. How can I come till I have finished?”

Lalaji was very angry. Asha had never before been rude to him. And her rudeness bore a touch of malice. Without saying anything further he walked away and almost felt like throwing all the plants down the gutter. Jugal said to Asha, “Please go, mistress. The master is angry.” “Shut up,” said Asha, “hurry up and finish the *chappaties* otherwise you will be turned out. And look take some money from me and buy yourself some clothes. I don’t like shabbily dressed people round me. Can’t you even get hold of a barber to cut

your hair?”

Jugal: “How can I get clothes made, mistress? I have to send all my pay to my father.”

Asha: “Who is asking you to spend your pay? I will give you some extra money for the clothes.”

Jugal: “Oh in that case I will get a nice set of clothes made-a *kurta* and a *dhoti* of thin *khadi,* a scarf and a nice pair of *chappals.”*

Asha : “And if you had to pay for them yourself ?” Jugal: “Then I won’t buy any clothes at all” Asha : “Aren’t you clever?”

Jugal: “Don’t you know that even though a man may be living on dry bread in his own house, when he goes to a feast he expects all kinds of delicacies?”

Asha: “Don’t talk nonsense. Get yourself a *kurta* made out of coarse *khadi* and a cap. And take two annas for a hair cut.”

Jugal: “Oh then please don’t bother. If I get nice clothes made, they will always remind me of you. If they are ordinary I will feel unhappy.”

Asha: “How clever you are! You want clothes without having to pay for them and then want the best!”

Jugal: “When I go from here, please give me a photograph of yours, mistress.”

Asha: “What will you do with my photograph?”

Jugal: “I will put it up in my room. But please wear the saree that you wore yesterday. And the same pearl necklace. I don’t like you when you are not wearing any jewellery. You must be having plenty of ornaments. Why don’t you wear them?”

Asha : “Op you like ornaments?” Jugal: “Yes, very much.”

Lalaji came again and enquired if Asha had finished cooking. In the same breath he warned Jugal again that if he didn’t cook well independently from the next day, he would be turned out. Asha washed her hands and came out of the kitchen to inspect the plants. Her face was aglow with joy and she was unusually chirpy. Seeing her, Lalaji’s anger vanished. Looking at the plants she said, “What a beautiful collection. Please do tell me their Hindi names. I won’t let you have a single one of them. They will all adorn my room.” Lalaji pulled her leg, “What will you do with all of them? Select a few. The rest I

shall get them to put in the garden." "No," replied Asha, vehemently, "I won't spare even a single one. They will all remain here in front of my room." "You are a very greedy girl," said Lalaji indulgently. "Alright, I am greedy" replied Asha "but you cannot have even a single plant out of these." "Oh please, let me have at least a few," entreated Lalaji, beaming with joy at this lover's game, "I have taken so much trouble in selecting them." "Not one," replied Asha gaily.

Next day Asha decked herself with jewellery and wore a light blue silk saree. Seeing her Lalaji was confident that his efforts were bearing fruit, at last. She looked a perfect picture of beauty and as she went around the house it appeared that she was whispering, "The bud has now become a full blown flower." Lalaji could not contain himself with joy. He wanted the whole world to share his pleasure and feel jealous at his good fortune in possessing such a peerless gem. "Let's go for a walk on the river bank," he suggested to Asha. But how could Asha go? This was the time for her to go to the kitchen. "I have a pain in my chest since last night," she said. Lalaji jumped to the conclusion that the vaid's pills must be having effect. "Where is the pain?" he asked, "Let me see." Asha retraced her steps and said coquettishly, "You cannot think of anything except mischief. Why don't you go and get me some medicine?" Lalaji was all too eager to go out and convey the news to all his friends and acquaintances especially those who doubted the success of his marriage. Immediately therefore he left to get her the medicine.

As soon as Lalaji was gone, Asha went to the kitchen. "You must always dress up like this," said Jugal, "I won't let you come near the hearth today." Asha looked at him with mischief in her eyes, "Why this cruelty?" she asked. "Because you are looking so beautiful," replied Jugal. Lala Dongamal had said the same words to Asha a hundred times but in his mouth they had always appeared to her like a sword in the hands of a eunuch. The very same words from Jugal's lips filled Asha with a strange stupor. Smiling she said, "Keep the evil eye away." Jugal resumed, "I don't know what I will do if I have to go away from here." Asha asked, "What do you do when you finish your work? I never see you." "For fear of the master," replied Jugal, "I try and keep out of sight as much as possible. Now anyhow I am going away. Let's see where fate takes me now." "You are not going away anywhere," observed Asha, "Keep on doing your work properly and there would be no question of your going away. You can even make *chappaties* now." Jugal smiled, "The master has a terrible temper." "Don't worry about him," replied Asha, "he will be alright soon." "When he walks by your side," said Jugal: "he looks like your father." "Shut up" replied Asha annoyed, "You must never talk like that." "Everyone says so," continued Jugal, "if somone were to marry me to

an old woman, I would commit suicide." The words of Jugal struck a sore point. The thin veil of annoyance lifted giving place to a feeling of resignation. "There is something called fate also," she said. "To hell with such a fate," observed Jugal. "Alright," said Asha, "I will see that you get tied down to an old woman." "I will poison myself, I promise you," replied Jugal.

Asha: "But what is wrong with marrying an old woman. She will love you more and will look after you better."

Jugal: "For looking after, a mother is needed; a wife is meant for a different purpose."

Asha: "What is a wife meant for?"

Jugal: "You are the mistress otherwise I would have told you what a wife is meant for."

The horn of Lalaji's car sounded. Asha hurried back to her room saying, "Lalaji will be going back to the shop after lunch. Come and see me in the afternoon."

10 The Police of Justice

Seth Nanak Chand picked up the envelope. It had the same familiar handwriting. His face turned pale. He had received quite a few such letters recently and their contents he knew by heart by now. Ordinarily Seth Sahib was not given to such weaknesses as fear, pity or kindness; otherwise he could not have been a successful moneylender. But since he started getting these letters he had become very nervous. Even the prayers about which he was so regular, or the feeding of the Brahmins, or offerings every week to Mahavirji, or the daily baths in the Jumna, did not give him courage. He was certain that one Chaukidar[1] would not be a match for the dacoits if five or six of them raided the place. He may even run away against such odds. And amongst the neighbours there was none who would risk his life for him although some time or the other every one of them had been his debtor. “They are a thankless lot,” Seth Sahib muttered to himself, “when they are in need they come begging; when the need is over they become not only unfriendly but positively hostile. If a gang of five or ten people attacked, it would really become a problem.” But he got a little satisfaction from the thought that the gates of the house were strong and that the walls were high and made of solid stone. To further reassure himself, he took out his gun and started inspecting it. “If the need arose,” he thought, “I would combat single-handed five or ten of them with this gun.” The momentary courage however vanished soon and he found himself again in the grip of a chilling fear. “Who knows that the Chaukidar’ is not in league with the gang? These servants need only a little temptation to become fifth columnists.” Alternating with fear and courage, he

went inside the house and opening the envelope said to Kesar, his wife, “Another letter today. This time they have given a final warning that if the money is not deposited under the tree in front of the Rameshwar Temple by eight o’clock, they will raid the house the day after tomorrow. They must be thinking that they will be able to extort such a large sum from me by these threats. They don’t know me.” Kesar did not know how to read but taking the letter from Seth Sahib’s hands she said, “I suggest that we go away from here for a month or so to Hardwar, Prayag or Kashi – it would serve both purposes. We would have done a pilgrimage and got some respite from this haunting fear. I can’t even sleep at night.” “If I started running at such threats,” replied Seth Sahib with assumed courage, “I would be a fine moneylender. These rascals must be some of the people whose property I have got auctioned to recover my debts. They will run for dear life at the very sound of a gun shot. I am also informing the police. I was reluctant to do so because on the pretext of protecting me they will relieve me of a few thousand rupees. But on second thought I feel that it is advisable to take all precautions.” For Kesar this was not enough consolation. She was mortally afraid of death. Her union with Seth Sahib had not been blessed with children and she was afraid that after their death all their wealth will be usurped by others. She therefore wanted to drink the cup of life to its very dregs. Beseechingly she said, “Informing the police will not be of much help. Listen to me and let us go away somewhere.” “You are unnecessarily scared,” replied Seth Sahib, “when the police is informed it would become their duty to protect us. After all don’t we pay five thousand a year in taxes? If they don’t take any action I shall send a petition to the Governor.”

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1 Watchman.

The argument did not convince Kesar. Her experience of the police so far had not at all been encouraging. “They only come after the event has taken place,” she said, “have you forgotten the old saying that the police and the rainbow only appear after the storm.” Seth Sahib defended the police. “The Government is being run by the police,” he said, “you don’t know these things.” “I still maintain,” replied Kesar, “that if the police is informed the dacoity will take place earlier. They always have a share in the spoils.” “I know, I know,” observed Seth Sahib impatiently... I have heard that happening. But then do we pay five thousand a year in taxes for nothing? And besides, haven’t we been sending presents to *Daroga Sahib*[2] regularly? Even this winter when the Superintendent of Police came for a Shikar’, didn’t we supply all the provisions? When will there be a return for all these presents... I do agree, though, that we should not depend entirely on the police. I am a faultless shot. Let me teach you also how to handle a gun. If both of us stand

with our guns, even fifty people will not have courage to enter the house." Kesar laughed. "What is there to laugh about?" reprimanded Seth Sahib, "Women are joining the army these days and parade like soldiers. They can use all firearms." Kesar replied mockingly, "These must be the Western women. Our women only know how to use their tongues." "The world is changing, Kesar," continued Seth Sahib, "I am talking about Indian women." "No thank you," replied Kesar, "Let alone firing at them, I will faint at the very sight of dacoits."

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2 Police Officer.

Just then the Chaukidar brought word that some policemen had come. Seth Sahib came out. The policemen greeted him with utmost respect and their leader said, "Daroga Sahib has sent us to find out if you have received any threatening letters. A number of dacoits have entered this area and are menacing the rich inhabitants." Seth Sahib motioned them to sit down and replied, "Yes indeed I have. One arrived only a little while ago. I was going to inform Daroga Sahib myself." The head constable observed, "You need not worry now. We have instructions to take care of you. Daroga Sahib has suggested that in your own interest you had better remove all your valuables to the Thana Treasury. This is not normally done but it seems that instructions have been received from the top that all persons paying more than a thousand rupees in tax should be afforded special protection. You will not be charged anything for this and you can seal your boxes and even put your own lock on the treasury. A proper receipt with an inventory will be given to you. Once the danger is over you can bring back your things. These dacoits are a dangerous lot. They do not only indulge in loot and plunder but also commit murders for money. Daroga Sahib has therefore asked us to evacuate all your valuables today. According to our information the dacoits are already in the village in disguise."

In the face of danger a man catches even at the most insignificant straw. In the policemen's story there was nothing that could create the slightest doubt. Seth Sahib was certain that the Daroga had some personal gain in mind in according him this special protection and he was prepared to spend a few hundred rupees. The opportunity was God sent. However, without showing much enthusiasm outwardly he said, "I am very grateful to Daroga Sahib for his suggestion. It is his duty to protect me, though mind you I had made full arrangements to fight the dacoits.

The whole Mohalla is with me. People have great regard for me. Anyhow I think I will take Daroga Sahib's advice in this matter. It will relieve him of his

responsibility of protecting me here and save me also unnecessary worry. I am afraid you people will have to help me in getting the things into the car. I cannot trust the servants. I assure you that your assistance will not go unrewarded." The policemen willingly came forward to help. The head constable said, "Anything to please you sir. No doubt that we get our salaries from the Government but it is really you who pay us through your taxes. Tell us the things that you want to take with you."

Kesar heaved a sigh of relief when she heard the news. Seth Sahib said with the confidence of a man who is sure of winning his point, "This is the way the Government works. The police is its backbone. I shall take away everything valuable and let the dacoits come and visit an empty house." "Yes," said Kesar, pleased, "Then we could throw the keys in front of them and tell them to take away whatever they wanted."

Two of the constables went inside and started bringing out the boxes. One of them started loading them in the car. The head constable entered every item in a notebook. When everything had been loaded, Seth Sahib came out carrying Kesar's jewel-box, 'and handed it over to the head constable, saying, "Please take special care of this." The head constable took the box and replied, "Even a straw of yours is as valuable to us as this box." Seth Sahib said, "When you have finished will you give me also a copy of this list." "You will get a pucca one at the Thana," replied the head constable. "Why not give me one here" asked Seth Sahib with a slight suspicion. "It will take sometime to copy it. And besides what value will it be if it does not bear the signature of Daroga Sahib," observed the head constable, "Why this sudden suspicion in your mind?" Seth Sahib felt like a child caught at mischief. "No it is not suspicion," he said, "I only thought that it would be better if I also had a list." The head constable replied, "If there is the slightest suspicion in your mind let us not remove the things. We shall try and protect them here for you but of course the responsibility will be yours if anything untoward happens." Seth Sahib felt ashamed of himself and said, "Oh please do not misunderstand. It is not suspicion. It is a mere suggestion but since you say that I will get a receipt at the Thana it is alright."

The car was loaded to the brim. A crowd of spectators gathered round it. So full indeed was the car that there was hardly any space for anyone to sit. With difficulty Seth Sahib squeezed himself at the back seat. The constables sat in front. Kesar bade them goodbye from her doorstep as if she was sending away a married daughter.

The car soon got out of the village and found itself in a valley surrounded on all sides by mountains. Between these silent black mountains, the red

gravel road looked almost like the coloured parting of a married woman. After a while the head constable asked Seth Sahib, “How far is it true that twenty-five years ago you came to this village empty handed.” Nanak Chand replied with an air of satisfaction, “It is quite true, Khan Sahib. I had only three rupees in my pocket when I arrived here twenty-five years ago. But I had full faith in God. Luck does not take long to change.” “How have you managed to amass all this wealth?” enquired the head constable. “I have a number of businesses,” replied Seth Sahib, “mortgages, moneylending and commission agencies. I am busy nearly upto midnight. The only break I have is for meals.” “Yes,” said the head constable, “Nothing can be achieved without hard work.” “Well it is not hard work really,” observed Seth Sahib, “I only keep a vigilant eye. My servants do all the work.” “You must have saved up quite a lot,” said the head constable. “Well a fair amount,” replied Seth Sahib, ‘’but a man’s real capital is his reputation. If I like I can get things worth lakhs on credit.” “Then all your wealth is really useless for you,” observed the head constable. “That is true,” replied Seth Sahib, “but one cannot get riddance from this *maya jaal* till death. I am now thinking of getting a Dharamshala constructed. I also want to adopt a son and then I shall spend the rest of my life in prayers. It is a curious thing about fate that people who cannot afford children have them by the dozens and those who can, have to go without them.” “You are quite right” said the Head Constable, “This world is really a *maya jaal.* But you need not worry. We will get you riddance from it.” “Who can get one riddance from it except God,” replied Seth Sahib, laughing. The head constable replied in a serious tone, “It should not need God to relieve one of one’s worries. You can relieve yourself. Distribute all your wealth among the poor and see the difference. What is the use of carrying this load unnecessarily.” “What are you talking,” said Seth Sahib, “ Give away this wealth for which I have worked so hard and have indulged in all sorts of things – dishonesty, cruelty... It is not so easy to let it go.” “But you just said that you didn’t have to work hard for it,” replied the Head Constable. “Don’t you consider supervision hard work,” enquired Seth Sahib. “Hard work,” said the head constable, “I will tell you how hard you have worked. You gave somebody a hundred rupees and recovered four hundred from him instead. Do you realise that the other three hundred came from the sweat and toil of your debtor?” Seth Sahib looked at the head constable with annoyance and amazement and tried to put an end to the conversation by saying, “Agreed that my wealth comes from the toil of others but whose doesn’t? Like this you may argue that all the world’s rich men are usurpers.” The head constable replied emphatically, “Yes indeed. You have no right to this money and I suggest that you hand it over to us. We are not constables of the Government’s police. We are members of the police of justice. We wrote to you repeatedly and asked for only twenty-five thousand rupees but you did

not take any heed and depended on the government's police to protect you. We had no choice but to play this ruse on you." Seth Sahib's blood solidified in his veins. "No it cannot be," he said to himself repeatedly, "they are merely making fun of me to see if I am a coward." Addressing the head constable he said, "You fellows are really a light-hearted lot. For a moment I thought that I had really been duped." "You can rest assured that you have been," replied the head constable, "there is not the slightest doubt about it." The car came to a stop and Seth Sahib was ordered to get out. It moved off again. Seth Nanak Chand ran after it, crying, shouting, pleading, "Please take pity on me. There is not even a pie in the house. I will gladly give you twenty-five thousand rupees. Take pity at least on my old age. You say that you are the police of justice. Be just to me." The head constable peeped out of the running car and shouted, "The time limit for that is over. Here are the three rupees with which you came to this village. Go and start afresh. Amass lot of wealth. We shall visit you again after another ten years and relieve you of it." The car picked up speed. Seth Sahib's cries for help were all drowned in the wilderness of the valley.

Dr. Mulk Raj Anand

11 Lajwanti

The loo of May flew into Lajwanti's face like flames from the hearth of heaven. The sun from whose mouth the fiery breeze came seemed to be standing relentlessly behind her, even as her heavyjowled brother-in-law, Jaswant, often stood, apparently to goad her on to work but really to draw her attention to himself. And, as the sweat moistened her hands, she tightened her grip on the handle of the cage in which her Myna[1] sat, docile and dumb, under the oppression of the heat. But she persisted in her determination to trudge along to Gurgaon, where she hoped to catch the bus to her father's house in Pataudi.

'Talk to me Myna – say something!

The Myna fluttered in the cage, perhaps to indicate to Lajwanti that she was alive.

'I will give you water as soon as I get to the bus stop'.

Urged by the heat spots on her feet where the torn soles of her chappals exposed her flesh, she hurried towards the shade of a solitary mango which stood a little way away from the Mehrauli-Gurgaon road.

Once in the cool, she phewed several hot breaths, wiped the nape of her neck with the end of her head cloth, then forgetfully smudged her face with the soiled dupatta, licked her palate with her tongue, put down the cage of the Myna, and looked in the direction of Gurgaon.

The dense heat mist enveloped everything. But, beyond the green grove of mangoes, half a mile ahead, she could see the outline of the old caravanserai.

Quickly, she lifted the cage and went forward. She heard the echo as an augury that Jaswant would be hot on her trail, as soon as her mother-in-law realised that she, Lajwanti, had not returned from the well for more than two hours. And he had a bicycle.

‘Come then my little Myna, we shall soon be there...’

The exalted bungalows of the police lines of Gurgaon, sequestered behind hedges, under tall trees, quenched the thirst of her eyes. The green leaves of neem trees were like cool sherbet to her spirit. And there seemed to be a confectioner’s shop where she might be able to drink a tumbler of whey and give the Myna a little feed and water.

Somehow, the last lap of a foot journey is always the most arduous. Her legs seemed to drag along. And the burning on the exposed parts of her soles became unbearable. And the echo sound an augury about Jaswant catching up on her enveloped her mind. And she was nearly at the end of her tether. And yet she pushed forward, as though she was possessed by the demon of flight.

There was a moment of weakening as the Myna became utterly still; and without looking to see, she felt that the bird might have fainted with the heat and died.

And in the panic of this premonition, she felt the chords of guilt choke her dry throat: She might have borne the humiliation. She might have given in to Jaswant. She could have closed her eyes. Her husband Balwant was away at college. Her benevolent father-in-law would not have known. And the mother-in-law, who wanted son’s son, more than anything else, would not have worried, even if she had come to know, because she favoured Jaswant, who worked on the land and not Balwant who wanted to be a clerk.

‘Talk to me Myna don’t go away from me... If you go I too will be finished...’

As the bird did not even flutter, her heart seemed to sink, and the sweat just poured down her body.

‘Maybe, I am being superstitious,’ she said to herself. ‘I should have done a magic ceremony on the crossroads of Hauz Khas to ensure my safe arrival in

Pataudi. And, then God would have kept my enemies dispersed...‘

Destiny spread the length of dumb distance before her, however. And, facing the emptiness, she felt as though the whole earth was opposed to her. And she wanted to kneel down before the Almighty for all the sins for which she was being punished.

‘Oh gently, gently, show me the path!’ she cried out in her soul.

At that juncture, she heard the sinister shout of Jaswant: ‘Stop, mad woman, or I shall kill you!’

She did not look back, because she knew the authentic accent of her brother-in-law’s voice. She merely ran, with the instinct to fly, to get away, out of his reach, to the group of men who were resting by the confectioner’s shop.

The Myna fluttered its wings wildly. And now that it apprehended disaster, it shrieked and cried.

‘Stop... ‘The voice of doom repeated itself.

Descending into the pit of confusion. Lajwanti was lost in the primal jungle of turmoil. The tortures of hell awaited her. But, perhaps she could make it.

“Lajwanti,” Jaswant called in a more mellow voice.

This startled her, weakened her, and made her regret she had not given in.

She fairly ran, about twenty yards before the confectioner’s shop. Jaswant passed by her, on his bicycle. Then he descended and, putting the machine athwart, barred her way.

Lajwanti conjured up in her downcast eyes the smile of horror that beamed on his heavy, pockmarked face.

She swerved away and outflanked him by diving into the ditch and making for the confectioner’s shop from the side of the depression.

He dragged the bicycle and raced up to her.

After he had reached the confectioner’s shop, he dropped the machine and ran towards her with an enveloping movement.

Lajwanti fell into his outstretched arms almost like a willing victim.

But once she became aware of the hard embrace of the wild beast, she

recoiled back, to free herself.

Again she ran.

Startled, he turned and chased her, catching, her by the headcloth before she could sit down on the wooden bench by the confectioner's shop.

Why did you run away?' he asked. 'Have you no shame? Look, folks...'

The straggling peasants looked nonchalantly at the scene, without coming any nearer. And three school boys came and stared.

'Let me go – I want to go to my father's house,' Lajwanti said, without lifting her gaze to Jaswant.

The Myna fluttered in the cage.

'No, you are returning to your husband's home!' Jaswant ground the words. And he twisted her wrist as she tried to get out of his grasp.

'Brute!' she cried. And, without shedding any tears, she began to sob. 'Leave me alone!... Let me give the Myna some water to drink...'

The throttling growth of Jaswant's bestiality gripped her young body and he shouted hoarsely:

'Prostitute! Bad woman! Running away!...

What will our brotherhood think? – you disgracing us like this!... '

Lajwanti collapsed in a huddle at his feet.

The brother-in-law hit her with his right foot.

At this the confectioner half got up from his greasy cushion and appealed:

'Ohe, do not hit her. Persuade her to go back with you...' But as the woman sat mutely like a bundle, the tangled undergrowth of Jaswant's emotions became concentrated into the fury of his stubborn, frustrated will. He slapped her on the head with his loose right hand.

Lajwanti gave herself to the torment and sat dumbly, suppressing even her sobs.

And now a crowd of passers-by gathered to see the fun, but no one intervened.

The grip of frightfulness lingered in the crevices of light before Lajwanti's hooded eyes.

Grating of brakes and the dragging of wheels brought Engineer Din Dayal's jeep to a sudden halt, twenty yards ahead of the confectioner's shop.

'Go quickly', Shrimati Sushila Dayal ordered her husband. 'I saw him slapping the woman.'

'Let us find out what's what before getting excited,' said the dour, taciturn engineer. And he turned to the confectioner: 'What has happened? Who are they?'

'Sir, it seems the girl has run away from her father-in-law's house and wants to go to her father's house... But her brother-in-law came and caught her...'

Shrimati Dayal jumped out of the jeep and ran ahead of her husband.

'Cowards! Get aside! Looking on! As though this is a fun fair!'

The crowd scattered and revealed Jaswant holding Lajwanti by the head cloth, which he had twisted into his hand with the plait of her hair.

'Leave her alone!' Shrimati Dayal ordered.

'Sister, she has run away from her husband's house,' appealed Jaswant. 'And our good name is at stake!'

'She must have come away for a good reason,' Shrimati Dayal said.

Where has she come from?'

'From near Hauz Khas,' Jaswant said.

'Hai-on foot?.. Ten miles? She has walked.'

Jaswant nodded his head.

'Poor child!' Shrimati Dayal said turning to her husband.

‘I will not allow the girl to die of a heatstroke. Put her in the jeep and let us take her home.’

‘I will not let her go now that I have caught her’ Jaswant said timid but frontal.

‘I will call the police and hand you over!’ threatened Shrimati Dayal.

‘Anyhow,’ Engineer Din Dayal counselled Jaswant, ‘Come and talk things over at my house... Persuade her to go back with you. Don’t force her... ‘

‘Come along,’ said Shrimati Dayal lifting Lajwanti even as she brusquely extricated the twisted plait of the girl’s hair our of Jaswant’s grip.

‘Give me the Myna to hold,’ Jaswant bullied his sister- in-law.

Lajwanti merely nodded her head in negation and proceeded.

In the cool shade of the verandah of Engineer Dayal’s bungalow, Lajwanti removed the hood of her headcloth and revealed her tender, tear-striken eyes and said:

‘Give me some water for the Myna, mother.’ ‘Gurkha,’ Shrimati Dayal called her servant. ‘Give some cool water to all of us... Make it lime and water... Simple water for the bird...’

The servile Gurkha, more taciturn than the engineer, took in everything at a glance and went towards the kitchen.

‘Why did you beat the girl? Shrimati Dayal asked Jaswant.

‘Time after time we have told her,’ said Jaswant, ‘That her husband has only one year more to do at college before he finishes his B.A. But she wishes to be with him or go to her father’s house.’

‘Mother, he is a liar!’ Lajwanti shrieked.

‘You must have oppressed her very much to make her say this of you!’ said engineeri Dayal.

‘Sire, we have been good to her,’ pleaded Jaswant. ‘She comes from a poor home. My father is Chaudhuri Ganga Ram, Sarpanch of the whole village... I have a wife too, but she is a gentlewoman from a big house...’

‘Like a cow,’ Lajwanti flared up. ‘And you want many more views.’

‘Don’t bark!’ – Shameless one! Or I will hit you!’

Jaswant said.

At this Shrimati Dayal got up with a cool deliberation of her torso and delivered a clean slap on Jaswant’s face and said:

‘How do you like this? – If someone else hits you’!’.

The man was taken completely unawares. He sat with his mouth open but speechless.

‘That is what I should have done when he tried to approach me!’ said Lajwanti, her head turned demurely away from the engineer.

‘Clearly, this girl is not happy with your family.’ said the Engineer. ‘Let her go back to her father’s house till her husband has finished his studies. And then she can come back to your family.’

‘That is right!’ added Shrimati Dayal. ‘I will not allow the child to be in your grip. You can have one wife and not two...’

In the quivering scale pans of balance, created by the voices of injustice, Lajwanti felt the first moment of calm which had come to her during two long years. But immediately she felt the fear of Jaswant’s revenge for the slap he had received on the face. She looked at the Myna and said in speechless speech: ‘Angel, suppose there is a cool place, somewhere in the world where we two can rest..’

‘Ask her to decide,’ Jaswant said, ‘If she goes to her father’s house, she can never come back to us. If she comes back with me, we might consider sending her for a little while to her father’s house.’

‘Tell him what you feel, girl?’ said Shrimati Dayal.

‘I want to go to my father’s house, and never want to set foot on their threshold again,’ answered Lajwanti.

There!’ said Shrimati Dayal. ‘That is her answer for you... and if you are a decent man, go back to your home. I will see the girl to the bus which takes her to Pataudi...’ And, she turned to her husband for confirmation of her decision.

‘That’s right!’ the Engineer said. ‘Gurkha!’ Shrimati Dayal called.

‘Coming, Bibiji, the servant answered. And he appeared with lime water for all and a little plain water and cummin seed for the Myna.

Lajwanti arrived with the cage of the Myna in her hand, at her father’s house, when the old man was just going out to bathe his buffalo at the well. He stood open eyed and open-mouthed, asking himself whether what he saw was his daughter or her ghost. When she bent down to take the dust off his feet, he could smell the acrid summer sweat of her clothes and kn6w that it was Lajwanti. He dared not look at her face, because a daughter coming back home without due ceremony, was inauspicious. Gentle as he was, however, he did not ask any questions. Only, he called to his young son, who was chopping up fodder for the buffalo.

‘Indu, your eldest sister has come. Wake up, your little sister, Moti...’

Lajwanti was sad for her father. She knew that a man who had borne the grinding pressures of years of survival on one bigha and a buffalo, and whose wife had died leaving him with two small children, was in no condition to receive a grown-up married daughter, who had returned without even the proverbial bundle of clothes to change into.

Indu left into the chopper and rushed towards her, clinging to her legs as though he saw the ghost of his mother standing by the door. To be sure, Lajwanti looked the split image of her mother. Only mother had become sallow with lungs, while Lajo’s colouring was pucca brown, and gave richness to the small even face, with the fine nose, flawed by a big tatoo mark on her chin.

Tears welled into Lajwanti’s eyes at the warmth of the boy’s embrace.

‘Look at this poor Myna,’ she said. ‘She had come all the way with me from New Delhi.’

The young boy grabbed the cage from his sister’s hand and soon forgot about Lajwanti in the effort to make the bird talk.

‘I should give her some lentils to eat and a little water,’

Lajwanti said, sitting on the threshold of the verandah.

‘Then she might talk to you... Though, I hope she does not say too much... The neighbours will know everything...’

Now that she was here, she wanted her return to remain a private occurrence. She knew, of course, that everyone in a small place knew everyone else's business. And she had no hope of escaping censure from the tongues which had wagged when, before her marriage, she had played openly with boys of her own age, and seldom cared to cover her head with her dupatta because she did not want to look like a ghost. All the elders called her 'Man Lajo,' while the boys called her, 'Meena Kumari' after the film heroine she resembled. She wanted as she sat there, to know what was in her father's heart – whether he had understood her mysterious will, and the instinct which had inspired her always to do the odd things. He had always told her that he was sorry he had named her Lajwanti, which means sensitive plant, because she has lived up to her name. Indu pushed a cup of water into her bird's cage. And lo! the Myna began to talk.

'Lajo, what does she say?' the boy asked.

Lajwanti smiled, even as she looked at the torrid sky.

After her father returned from the well, he tied the buffalo and put what cattle food Indu had chopped up before the animal. As the boy had not cut enough, he took the chopper and began to prepare more. He was not the kind to scold anyone, and least of all did he want to blame his son for getting excited about his elder sister.

When the buffalo had been looked after, he proceeded to soak the lentils for the evening meals and proceeded to light the fire.

'I will do all that, Bapu: Lajwanti said.

'Daughter, it does not matter,' he answered and stubbornly went on with the chores. And, turning to his son, he said,' 'give your sister a mat to sit on.'

Imperceptible as were his feelings behind the mask of his calm, wrinkled face, she saw a pallor on his lips as he said this, and she knew that she was not wanted. That mat was only given to guests.

The courtyard was filled with shadows long before the fire in the sky became ashes. Lajwanti could see the clouds tinted red as though the world had witnessed some gruesome murder.

And, frightened of her own self, she tried to hold her breath.

‘Sister, I have brought you a pitcher of water to bathe with, ‘Indu said.

Before Lajwanti could answer, Moti had been disturbed by her brother’s voice and awakened, whining.

Lajwanti leaped forward to her and embraced the child, consoling her.

‘Lajo,’ her father said, ‘The children want a mother. And I would have kept you here and given you away, if people had not begun to talk about you...’ He paused after this statement for a long time, and then after blowing at the hearth fire, he continued: Now, I am both father and mother to them... and, as for you, I will take you back to your parents-in-law’s house. I shall fall at their feet and ask them to forgive you. The disgrace of your widowhood without your becoming a widow is unbearable... They will only call you ugly names here... They do not know that you are a ‘sensitive plant’...

Two days later, a post card came addressed to Shri Hari Ram, father of Lajwanti, written by Jaswant, on behalf of his father, saying, that as Lajwanti had run away, without permission from her husband or her parents-in-law, the clothes she had brought on her wedding were being returned and that no one in Delhi was now willing to see her “black face”.

Old Hari had already been trying to arrange for someone to look after his buffalo, his son and his daughter, so that he could take Lajwanti back to her parents-in-law. He had sent for the midwife, who had delivered all these children, from Pataudi proper, because he did not know anyone in the small village, who would oblige, without the payment of some cash.

Fortunately, the midwife Champa, arrived on the same morning after the post card was received. And she was more than willing, to take on the job of looking after the household.

‘Why,’ she said, ‘I had hoped to see our Lajo with belly. And I had waited to be called to her bedside, so that I could deliver her of a son. And, now, my loved one, you are here, without a sign in your eyes of the coming of the happy event. If only for the sake of the soul of your dear mother, go, hurry back. And come soon with your lap full of a child...’

‘I am putting my turban at your feet,’ said old Hari Ram to Chaudhri Taj Ram, literally removing his enormous crown of cloth from his head and placing it on the shoes of his daughter’s father-in-law

“Oh, come and sit here with me;” answered Chaudhri Ganga Ram, brushing the beadstead with his left hand as he smoked the hookah under the shade of a neem tree.

Lajwanti crouched a little way away, with her face covered by her head cloth and averted her gaze from her father-in-law towards the torrid fields; Her heart was in her mouth, lest her brother-in-law, Jaswant, might suddenly appear form the barn, or even her mother-in-law, come on the scene suddenly before the father-in-law had forgiven her. At the same time, she knew that there would be no forgiveness, but only a reluctant nod to indicate that she could stay.

The nod of approval was, however, long in coming. For Chaudhri Ganga Ram kept silent, after having signaled Hari Ram to sit by him, and only his hookah spoke a little agitatedly.

Meanwhile, Lajwanti felt the sweat gathering on the nape of her head and flowing down her spine. And she looked at her blessed Myna in the cage to see if the bird was not dead. The journey had been easier this time, because they had come by bus from Pataudi to Gurgaon and then caught the connection from Gurgaon to the bus stop half a mile away from the little village of her father-in-law. And as the bird seemed still, she spoke to her in wordless words:

‘My Myna tell me what will happen now? My heart flutters, as you often do when you are frightened of the cat coming to eat you. And I do not know if Jaswant will relent and not pursue me any more. But perhaps now that my father has brought me back, I will allow myself to be eaten. Only the humiliation will be complete now. Oh if only I had warmed to him and not thought of my own man who would never have known! I am really defeated. And even words are no use... And yet within me there is desire, and there is life – a river of feelings like the ancient Saraswati river which has gone underground and disappeared from the surface... How shall I control those feelings, those prisoners, trying to burst out...’

She opened her eyes to make sure. The vision was real.

Involuntarily, her eyes closed and a sigh got mutlIed into the folds of her headcloth. Sparks like stars shot out of the darkness of her head, and the agitation of nerves pushed up a copious sweat all over her. She knew that the constellations in the sky above her were ominous.

‘So the dead one has turned up!’ the mother-in-law’s voice came, as the old woman returned from the well with one pitcher on her head and another one

on her left arm. The heavy breathing of the woman, forced to fetch and carry and do all the chores in the absence of Lajwanti, accented her voice with bitterness.

‘She is your daughter,’ said old Hari Ram to appease the woman. In his innocence he imagined that the proverbial mother-in-law had become the cause of his daughter’s flight. ‘I have brought her back... the midwife, Champa, said that the girl has made a mistake...’

‘To be sure,’ answered the mother-in-law. ‘There was no question, since Balwant has not been back from Kalej for more than a few days at a time...

Unless she has cast the spell of her grey eyes on someone else... Jaswant says he has seen her winking at the visitors on the roadside...’

‘We are respectable people,’ said Chaudhri Ganga Ram to reinforce his wife’s speech.

‘I... what shall I say, Chaudhriji,’ answered Hari Ram meekly. ‘I wish fate had made her not so good looking... But,’ now, I have brought her back. And you can kill her if she looks at another... Here is a ring for my son Balwant. I could not give much dowry. Now I will make up a little for what the body did not get...’

From the wearisome acceptance of her fate, there swirled up incomprehensible violent urges of truth in Lajwanti, so that she shook a little and was on the point of telling them the horrible facts. And she was mad at her father for effacing himself and bowing before her in-laws. But the tremors in her entrails ended in choking her throat. And the lofty flights of anger only befogged her brain.

‘Jaswant! Jaswant!... Come over here...’ the mother-in- law called her eldest son.

The scarecrow in the field turned round. Then he lifted the palm of his hand to see. He understood. And he began to walk back.

In the silence of doom, Lajwanti quivered as though the demons of hell had let loose snakes and scorpions on her body. And, in a fit of crazy abandon, she felt herself borne form the underworld, on a bed, by her heroic husband, his arms wrapped around her... Actually, beneath the trembling flesh, she knew Balwant to be a coward, who dare not even raise his head to look at his elder brother.

‘She has come back!’ Jaswant ground the words in his mouth, throwing the

white radishes away on the ground near the outdoor kitchen.

‘She could not tell you that she wanted to see the midwife,’ old Hari Ram said. ‘It was a false alarm.’

‘There are mid-wives here also!’ Jaswant answered pat. ‘Why there is the Safdarjung Hospital!...’ Do no be taken in by her stories, Uncle. She has looked at more than one before her marriage... She is just a bad girl!... The way she insulted me when I went to fetch her back,... She sat, there, answering back! And allowed that Afsar’s wife to slap me on the face!... Prostitute!...’

‘Bus! bus! Son!’ Chaudhri Ganga Ram said to restrain the boy.

‘Take that for having me beaten!’ Jaswant said and kicked Lajwanti on her behind, ‘Lajwanti quivered, then veered round, almost doubled over, and uttered a shrill cry before beginning to sob.

‘You deserved a shoe beating!’ shouted Jaswant, towering over the girl like an eagle in a malevolent glee of power, his arms outstretched as though he was going to hit her again.

‘Come away!’ shouted his father.

‘Let him punish her if he thinks she has done wrong,’ said Hari Ram. And let her fall at his feet... My daughter is pure... After saying this he felt pangs of remorse at his own cowardice and he was caught in the paroxysm of a dry throated cough, and water filled his eyes.

‘Myna, my myna,’ Lajwanti said under her breath, ‘I cannot bear this...’

‘Deceitful cunning wretch!’ Jaswant said and he turned away towards her father. ‘Take her away... We have no use for her here! After she has disgraced us before the whole brotherhood’

‘Not so many angry words, son!’ Chaudhri Ganga Ram said. ‘You have punished her enough!’

‘Son, let her get up and work!’ mother-in-law said.

‘Bless your words of wisdom’ said Hari Ram. ‘I knew you would be merciful... And now I leave her in your care. Kill her if you like. But don’t let her come to me without her lap full of son. I shall not be able to survive the disgrace if she comes again...’

‘Myna, my myna, who will talk to you, if I go away forever?’ Lajwanti asked the bird in the cage even as she washed her with palmfuls of water from the bucket.

The bird fluttered wildly evading the shower.

‘Will you shriek if I drown you in the water, my little one?’ Lajwanti asked.

The bird edged away as though in answer.

And she sat down on the ledge of the well, away form the surging waters which were all around her dizzy brain.

If she stopped to think, she felt she would never do it... It was now or never, when there was no one on the well except herself and the Myna. The village women had finished fetching the water for the evening. And soon it would be dark.

From where she sat, a tilt – that would do it.

But no, she must not wait any more.

And with a jerk of her torso, interrupted by her indecision, she forced herself into a heave.

The fall was ugly. Her left shoulder hit the stone on the side before she fell sideways into the well.

For a moment, she was limp.

The impact of the fall took her full-length into the water.

But, in a second, she felt her body rising up as though from its own momentum. Unfortunately, for her she was a swimmer. She could not decide to let go of her breath. And, now, her hand pushed up above the water. And she found herself using her arms, to keep afloat.

Still there was a chance.

Rising from the torso, she ducked down, with her nose tweaked between her fingers.

She stayed under the water for a minute and then tried to drown herself by letting go of her hand from the tweaked nose.

The head rose above the water, panting for breath.

‘Lajwanti! Lajwanti! Bad one come out! her mother-in-law’s voice came, in a shrill appeal. ‘This is not the way of respectable people...’

There was no way by which Lajwanti could put her head into the water. Perhaps she really did not want to die. How had the old woman turned up? Because, left to herself, she would have gone under with a second or third try. Not even in the darkness, was there an escape... Above the well, life would be worse hell than even before...

Gently, she let go. And then water began to fill her nostrils and her mouth. And she was submerged.

Before she had lost consciousness, however, she felt herself lying down in the slush near the well.

They were pressing her belly. Some one was sitting on her. And the spurts of water oozed from her nostrils and mouth. The rancid taste of stale air was on her palate – the taste of life’s breath.

And as she lay dissolving under her heavy eyelids, the bitterness of her breath seemed to lapse, and sleep shaped her eyes into a fixed stare.

And yet, within a moment, more water had come up through her nose and mouth.

And, within her, she could hear her foolish, tormented heart pounding away.

And then the drowsy eyelids opened. And she could see the Myna in the cage by her.

‘Alas’ She said in wordless words, above the ache of the head and the thumping of the heart, ‘There is no way for me... I am... condemned to live... ‘

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1 Myna: Bird of the starling family.

12 The Gold Watch

There was something about the smile of Mr. Acton, when he came over to Srijut Sudarshan Sharma's table, which betokened disaster. But as the Sahib had only said, "Mr. Sharma, I have brought something for you specially from London – you must come into my office on Monday and take it...", the poor old dispatch clerk could not surmise the real meaning of the General Manager's remark. The fact that Mr. Acton should come over to his table at all, fawn upon him and say what he had said was, of course, most flattering. For, very rarely did the head of the firm condescend to move down the corridor where the Indian staff of the distribution department of the great Marmalade Empire of Henry King & Co., worked. But that smile on Mr. Acton's face! – specially as Mr. Action was not known to smile too much, being a morose, old Sahib, hard working, conscientious and a slave driver, famous as a shrewd businessman, so devoted to the job of spreading the monopoly of King's Marmalade, and sundry other products, that his wife had left him after a three month's spell of marriage and never returned to India, though no one quite knew whether she was separated or divorced from him or merely preferred to stay away. So the fact that Acton Sahib should smile was enough to give Srijut Sharma cause for thought. But then Srijut Sharma was, in spite of his nobility of soul and fundamental innocence, experienced enough in his study of the vague, detached race of the white Sahibs by now and clearly noticed the slight awkward curl of the upper lip, behind which the determined, tobacco-stained long teeth showed, for the briefest moment, a snarl suppressed by the deliberation which Acton Sahib had brought to the

whole operation of coming over and pronouncing those kind words. And what could be the reason for his having being singled out, from amongst the twenty-five odd members of the distribution department? In the usual way, he, the dispatch clerk, only received an occasional greeting, “Hello Sharma – how you getting on?” from the head of his own department, Mr. West; and twice or thrice a year he was called into the cubicle by West Sahib for a reprimand, because some letters or packets had gone astray; otherwise, he himself, being the incarnation of clockwork efficiency, and well-versed in the routine of his job, there was no occasion for any break in the monotony of that anonymous, smooth working Empire, so far at least as he was concerned. To be sure, there was the continual gossip of the clerks and the accountants, the bickerings and jealousies of the people above him, for grades and promotions and pay; but he, Sharma, had been employed twenty years ago, as a special favour, was not even a matriculate, but had picked up the work somehow, and though unwanted and constantly reprimanded by West Sahib in the first few years, had been retained because of the general legend of saintliness which he had acquired... he had five more years of service to do, because then he would be fifty-five, and the family-raising, *grhast*, portion of his life in the fourfold scheme, prescribed by religion, finished, he hoped to retire to his home town Jullunder, where his father still ran the confectioner’s shop off the Mall Road.

“And what did Acton Sahib have to say to you, Mr. Sharma?” asked Miss Violet Dixon, the plain snub-nosed Anglo Indian typist in her singsong voice.

Being an old family man of fifty, who had grayed prematurely, she considered herself safe enough with this ‘gentleman’ and freely conversed with him, specially during the lunch hour, while she considered almost everyone else as having only one goal in life – to sleep with her.

‘Han’, he said, ‘He has brought something for me from England’, Srijut Sharma answered.

“There are such pretty things in U.K.” she said.

‘My! I wish, I could go there! My sister is there, you know! Married!...’

She had told Sharma all these things before. So he was not interested. Specially today, because all his thoughts were concentrated on the inner meaning of Mr. Acton’s sudden visitation and the ambivalent smile.

‘Well, half day today, I am off; said Violet and moved away with the peculiar snobbish agility of the Memsahib she affected to be.

Srijut Sharma stared at her blankly, though taking in her regular form into

his subconscious with more than the old uncle's interest he had always pretended to take in her. It was only her snub nose, like that of Surpanakha, the sister of the demon king Ravana, that stood in the way of her being married, he felt sure, for otherwise she had a tolerable figure. But he lowered his eyes as soon as the thought of Miss Dixon's body began to simmer in the cauldron of his inner life; because, as a good Hindu, every woman, apart from the wife, was to him a mother or a sister. And his obsession about the meaning of Acton Sahib's words returned, from the pent up curiosity, with greater force now that he realised the vastness of the space of time during which he would have to wait in suspense before knowing what the boss had brought for him and why.

He took up his faded sola topee, which was, apart from the bush shirt and trousers, one of the few concessions to modernity which he had made throughout his life as a good Brahmin, got up from his chair, beckoned Dugdu sepoy from the verandah on his way out and asked.

"Has Acton Sahib gone, you know?"

"Abhi Sahib in lift going down," Dugdu said.

Srijut Sharma made quickly for the stairs and, throwing all caution about slipping on the polished marble steps to the winds, hurtled down. There were three floors below him and he began to sweat, both through fear of missing the Sahib and the heat of mid-April.

As he got to the ground floor, he saw Acton Sahib already going out of the door.

It was now or never.

Srijut Sharma rushed out. But he was conscious that quite a few employers of the firm would be coming out of the two lifts and he might be seen talking to the Sahib. And that was not done – outside the office. The Sahibs belonged to their private worlds, where no intrusion was tolerated, for they refuse to listen to pleas of advancement through improper channels.

Mr. Acton's uniformed driver opened the door of the polished Buick and the Sahib sat down, spreading the shadow of grimness all around him.

Srijut Sharma hesitated, for the demeanour of the Goanese chauffeur was frightening.

By now the driver had smartly shut the back door of the car and was proceeding to his seat.

That was his only chance.

Taking off his hat, he rushed up to the window of the car, and rudely thrust his head into the presence of Mr. Acton.

Luckily for him, the Sahib did not brush him aside, but smiled a broader smile than that of a few minutes ago and said: ‘you want to know, what I have brought for you – well, it is a gold watch with an inscription in it... See me Monday morning...’ The Sahib’s initiative in anticipating his question threw Srijut Sharma further off his balance. The sweat poured down from his forehead, even as he mumbled: ‘Thank You, Sir, thank you...’

‘Chalo, driver!’ Sahib ordered.

And the chauffeur turned and looked hard at Srijut Sharma.

The dispatch clerk withdrew’ with a sheepish, abject smile on his face and stood, hat in left hand, the right hand raised to his forehead in the attitude of a nearly military salute.

The motor car moved off.

But Srijut Sharma still stood, as though he had been struck dumb. He was neither happy nor sad at this moment. Only numbed by the shock of surprise. Why should he be singled out from the whole distribution department of Henry King & Co., for the privilege of the gift of a gold watch! He had done nothing brave that he could remember.’ A gold watch, with an inscription in it!’ Oh, he knew, now: the intuitive truth rose inside him: The Sahib wanted him to retire.

The revelation rose to the surface of his awareness from the deep obsessive fear, which had possessed him for nearly half an hour, and his heart began to palpitate against his will; and the sweat sozzled his body.

He reeled a little, then adjusted himself and got on to the pavement, looking after the cat, which had already turned the corner into Nicol Road.

He turned and began to walk towards Victoria Terminus station. From there he had to take his train to Thana, thirty miles out where he had resided, for cheapness, almost all the years he had been in Bombay. His steps were heavy, for he was reasonably sure now that he would get notice of retirement on Monday. He tried to think of some other possible reason why the Sahib may have decided to give him the gift of a gold watch with an inscription. There was no other explanation. His doom was sealed. What would he say to his wife? And his son had still not passed his matric. How would he support the

family? The provident fund would not amount to very much specially in these days of rising prices.

He felt a pull at his heart. He paused for breath and tried to call himself. The blood pressure! Or was it merely wind? He must not get into a panic at any cost. He steadied his gait and walked along, muttering to himself, ‘Shanti! Shanti! Shanti!’ as though the very incantation of the formula of peace would restore his calm and equanimity.

During the weekend, Srijut Sharma was able to conceal his panic and confusion behind the facade of an exaggerated bonhomie with the skill of an accomplished natural actor. On Saturday night he went with wife and son to see Professor Ram’s Circus, which was performing opposite the Portuguese Church; and he got up later than usual on Sunday morning; spent a little longer on his prayers, but seemed normal enough on the surface.

Only, he ate very little of the gala meal of the rice-kichri put before him by his wife and seemed lost in thought for a few moments at a time. And his illiterate but shrewd wife noticed that there was something on his mind.

‘Thou has not eaten at all today,’ she said, as he had left the tasty papadum and the mango pickle untouched. ‘Look at Hari! He has left nothing in his thali!’

‘Hoon,’ he answered abstractedly. And, then realising he might be found out for the worried, unhappy man he was, he tried to bluff her. ‘As a matter of fact, I was thinking of some happy news that the Sahib gave me yesterday: He said, he brought a gold watch as a gift for me from Vilayat...’

‘Then Papaji give me the silver watch, which you are using now,’ said Hari his young son impetuously. ‘I have no watch at all and I am always late everywhere.’

‘Not so impatient, son!’ counselled Hari’s mother. ‘Let your father get the gold watch first and then – he will surely give you his silver watch.’

In the ordinary way, Srijut Sudarshan Sharma would have endorsed his wife’s sentiments. But today, he felt that, on the face of it, his son’s demand was justified. How should Hari know that the silver watch, and the gold watch, and a gold ring, would be all the jewellery he, the father, would have for security against hard days if the gold watch was, as he prognosticated, only a token being offered by the firm to sugarcoat the bitter pill they would ask him to swallow – retirement five years before the appointed time. He hesitated, then lifted his head, smiled at his son and said:

‘Acha, Kaka, you can have my silver watch...’

‘Can I have it, really, Papaji-Hurray!’ the boy shouted, rushing away to fetch the watch from his father’s pocket. ‘Give it to me now, today!’

‘Yay son, you are so selfish!’ his mother exclaimed. For, with the peculiar sensitiveness of the woman she had surmised from the manner in which, her husband had hung his head down and then tried to smile as he lifted his face to his son, that the father of Hari was upset inside him, or at least not in his usual mood of accepting life evenly, accompanying this acceptance with the pious invocation – ‘Shanti! Shanti!’

Hari brought the silver watch, adjusted it to his left ear to see if it ticked, and happy in the possession of it, capered a little caper.

Srijut Sharma did not say anything, but pushing his thali away, got up to wash his hands.

The next day it happened as Srijut Sharma had anticipated.

He went in to see Mr. Acton as soon as the Sahib came in, for the suspense of the weekend had mounted to a crescendo by Monday morning and he had been Trembling with trepidation, pale and completely unsure of himself. The General Manager called him in immediately the peon Dugdu presented the little slip with the dispatch clerk’s name on it.

‘Please, sit down, said Mr. Acton, lifting his grey-haired head from the papers before him. And then, pulling his keys from his trousers’ pocket by the gold chain to which they were adjusted, he opened a drawer and fetched out what Sharma thought was a beautiful red case.

‘Mr. Sharma, you have been a loyal friend of this firm for many years – and you know, your loyalty has been your greatest asset here – because...er... Otherwise, we could have got someone, with better qualifications” to do your work!... Now... we are thinking of increasing the efficiency of the business all round!... And, we feel that you would also like, at your age, to retire to your native Punjab... So, as a token of our appreciation for your loyalty to Henry King & Co., we are presenting you this gold watch... and he pushed the red case towards him.

‘Srijut Sharma began to speak, but though his mouth opened, he could not go on. ‘I am fifty years old,’ he wanted to say, ‘And I still have five years to go.’ His facial muscles seemed to contract, his eyes were dimmed with the fumes of frustration and bitterness, his forehead was covered with sweat. At

least, they might have made a little ceremony of the presentation; he could not even utter the words: ‘Thank you, Sir!’

‘Of course, you will also have your provident fund and one month’s leave with pay before you retire...’

Again, Srijut Sharma tried to voice his inner protest in words which would convey his meaning without seeming to be disloyal, for he did not want to obliterate the one concession the Sahib had made to the whole record of his service with his firm. It was just likely that Mr. Acton may remind him of his failings as a dispatch clerk if he should so much as indicate that he was unnameable to the suggestion made by the Sahib on behalf of Henry King & Co.

‘Look at the watch – it has an inscription in it which will please you,’ said Mr. Acton, to get over the embarrassment of the tension created by the silence of the dispatch clerk.

These words hypnotised Sharma and, stretching his hands across the large table, he reached out for the gift.

Mr. Acton noticed the unsureness of his hand and pushed it gently forward.

Srijut Sharma picked up the red box, but in his eagerness to follow the Sahib’s behests, dropped it, even as he had held it aloft and tried to open it.

The Sahib’s face was livid as he picked up the box and hurriedly opened it. Then, lifting the watch from its socket, he wound it and applied it to his ear. It was ticking. He turned it round and showed the inscription to the dispatch clerk.

Srijut Sharma put both his hands out, more steadily this time, and took the gift in the manner in which a beggar receives alms. He brought the glistening object within the orbit of his eyes, but they were dimmed to smile, however, and, then with a great heave of his head, which rocked his body from side to side, he pronounced the words: ‘Thank you, Sir...’

Mr. Acton got up, took the gold watch from Srijut Sharma’s hands and put it back in the socket of the red case. Then he stretched his right hand towards the dispatch clerk, with a brisk handshake and offered the case to him with his left hand.

Srijut Sharma instinctively took the Sahib’s right hand gratefully in his two sweating hands and opened the palms out to receive the case.

‘Good luck, Sharma,’ Mr. Acton said, ‘Come and see me after your leave is over. And when your son matriculates let me know if I can do something for him...’

Dumb, and with bent head, the fumes of his violent emotions rising above the mouth which could have expressed them, he withdrew in the abject manner of his ancestors going out of the presence of feudal lords.

Mr. Acton saw the danger to the watch and went ahead to open the door, so that the clerk could go out without knocking his head against the door or fall down.

As Srijut Sharma emerged from the General Manager’s office, involuntary tears flowed from his eyes and his lower lip fell in a pout that somehow controlled him from breaking down completely.

The eyes of the whole office staff were on him.

In a moment, a few of the men clustered around his person.

One of them took the case from his hands, opened it and read the inscription out aloud:

“In appreciation of the loyal service of Mr. Sharma to Henry King & Co., on his retirement...”

The curiosity of his colleagues became a little less enthusiastic as the watch passed from hand to hand.

Unable to stand, because of the wave of dizziness that swirled in his head, Srijut Sudarshan Sharma sat down on his chair, with his head hidden in his hands and allowed the tears to roll down. One of his colleagues, Mr. Banaji, the accountant, patted his back understandingly. But the pity was too much for him.

“To be sure, Seth Makhanji, the new partner has a relation, to fill Sharma’s position,’ another said.

‘No no,’ another refuted him. ‘No one is required to kill himself with work in our big concern... We are given the Sunday off’! And a fat pension years beyond it is due. The bosses are full of love for us!...

‘Damn fine gold watch, but it does not go!’ said Sriraman, the typist.

Mr. Banaji took the watch from Sriraman and, putting it in the case, placed it before Srijut Sharma and he signalled to the others to move away.

As Srijut Sharma realised that his colleagues had drifted away, he lifted his morose head, took the case, as well as his hat, and began to walk away.

Mr. Banaji saw him off to the door, his hands on Sharma's back.

'Sahibji,' the Parsi accountant said, as the lift came up and the liftman took Srijut Sharma in.

On the way home Srijut Sharma found that the gold watch only went when it was shaken. Obviously, some delicate part had broken when he had dropped it on Mr. Acton's table. He would get it mended, but he must save all the cash he could get hold of and not go spending it on the luxury of having a watch repaired now. He shouldn't have been weak with his son and given him his old silver watch. But as there would be no office to go to any more, he would not need to look at the time very much, specially in Jullunder, where time just stood still and no one bothered about keeping appointments.

Khushwant Singh

13 Karma

Sir Mohan Lal looked at himself in the mirror of a first class waiting room at the railway station. The mirror was obviously made in India. The red oxide at its back had come off at several places and long lines of translucent glass cut across its surface. Sir Mohan smiled at the mirror with an air of pity and patronage.

“You are so very much like everything else in this country, inefficient, dirty, indifferent,” he murmured.

The mirror smiled back at Sir Mohan.

“You are a bit of alright, old chap,” it said. “Distinguished, efficient – even handsome. That neatly trimmed moustache – the suit from Saville Row with the carnation in the button hole the aroma of eau de Cologne, talcum powder and scented soap all about you! Yes, old fellow, you are a bit of alright.”

Sir Mohan threw out his chest, smoothed his Balliol tie for the umpteenth time and waved a goodbye to the mirror.

He glanced at his watch. There was still time for a quick one. “Koi Hai?”

A bearer in white livery appeared through a wire gauze door. “Ek Chota,” ordered Sir Mohan, and sank into a large cane chair to drink and ruminate.

Outside the waiting room Sir Mohan Lal’s luggage lay piled along the wall. On a small grey steel trunk Lachmi, Lady Mohan Lal, sat chewing a betel leaf

and fanning herself with a newspaper. She was short and fat and in her middle forties. She wore a dirty white *sari* with a red border. On one side of her nose glistened a diamond nose-ring, and she had several gold bangles on her arms. She had been talking to the bearer until Sir Mohan had summoned him inside. As soon as he had gone, she hailed a passing railway coolie.

“Where does the zenana stop?” “Right at the end of the platform.”

The coolie flattened his turban to make a cushion, hoisted the steel trunk on his head, and moved down the platform. Lady Lal picked up her brass tiffin carrier and ambled along behind him. On the way she stopped by a hawker’s stall to replenish her silver betel leaf case, and then joined the coolie. She sat down on her steel trunk (which the coolie had put down) and started talking to him.

“Are the trains very crowded on these lines?”

“These days all trains are crowded, but you’ll find room in the zenana.”

“Then I might as well get over the bother of eating.”

Lady Lal opened the brass carrier and took out a bundle of cramped *chapatties* and some mango pickle. While she ate, the coolie sat opposite her on his haunches, drawing lines in the gravel with his finger.

“Are you travelling alone, sister?”

“No, I am with my master, brother. He is in the waiting room. He travels first class. He is a vizier and a barrister, and meets so many officers and Englishmen in the trains and I am only a native woman. I can’t understand English and don’t know their ways, so I keep to my zenana inter-class.”

Lachmi chatted away merrily. She was fond of a little gossip and had no one to talk to at home. Her husband never had any time to spare for her. She lived in the upper storey of the house and he on the ground floor. He did not like her poor illiterate relatives hanging about his bungalow, so they never came. He came up to her once in a while at night and stayed for a few minutes. He just ordered her about in anglicized Hindustani, and she obeyed passively. These nocturnal visits had, however, borne no fruit.

The signal came down and the clanging of the bell announced the approaching train. Lady Lal hurriedly finished off her meal. She got up, still licking the stone of the pickled mango. She emitted a long, loud belch as she went to the public tap to rinse her mouth and wash her hands. After washing she dried her mouth and hands with the loose end of her *sari,* and walked

back to her steel trunk, belching and thanking the gods for the favour of a filling meal.

The train steamed in. Lachmi found herself facing an almost empty inter-class zenana compartment next to the guard's van, at the tail end of the train. The rest of the train was packed. She heaved her squat, bulky frame through the door and found a seat by the window. She produced a two-anna bit from a knot in her *sari* and dismissed the coolie. She then opened her betel case and made herself two betel leaves charged with a red and white paste, minced betelnuts and cardamoms. These she thrust into her mouth till her cheeks bulged on both sides. Then she rested her chin on her hands and sat gazing idly at the jostling crowd on the platform.

The arrival of the train did not disturb Sir Mohan Lals sang-froid. He continued to sip his Scotch and ordered the bearer to tell him when he had moved the luggage to a first class compartment. Excitement, bustle, and hurry were exhibitions of bad breeding, and Sir Mohan was eminently well-bred. He wanted everything 'tickety-boo' and orderly. In his five years abroad, Sir Mohan had acquired the manners and attitudes of the upper classes. He rarely spoke Hindustani. When he did, it was like an Englishman's only the very necessary words and properly anglicized. But he fancied his English, finished and refined at no less a place than the University of Oxford. He was fond of conversation, and like a cultured Englishman he could talk on almost any subject – books, politics, people. How frequently had he heard English people say that he spoke like an Englishman!

Sir Mohan wondered if he would be travelling alone. It was a Cantonment and some English officers might be on the train. His heart warmed at the prospect of an impressive conversation. He never showed any sign of eagerness to talk to the English as most Indians did. Nor was he loud, aggressive and opinionated like them. He went about his business with an expressionless matter-of-factness. He would retire to his corner by the window and get out a copy of The *Times.* He would fold it in a way in which the name of the paper was visible to others while he did the crossword puzzle. *The Times* always attracted attention. Someone would like to borrow it when he put it aside with a gesture signifying "I've finished with it." Perhaps someone would recognise his Balliol tie which he always wore while travelling. That would open a vista leading to a fairyland of Oxford colleges, masters, dons, tutors, boat-races and rugger matches. If both *The Times* and the tie failed, Sir Mohan would "Koi Hai" his bearer to get the Scotch out. Whisky never failed with Englishmen. Then followed Sir Mohan's handsome gold cigarette case filled with English cigarettes. English cigarettes in India? How on earth did he get them? Sure he didn't mind? And Sir Mohan's

understanding smile – of course he didn't. But could he use the Englishman as a medium to commune with his dear old England? Those five years of grey bags and gowns, of sports blazers and mixed doubles, of dinners at the Inns of Court and nights with Piccadilly prostitutes. Five years of a crowded glorious life, worth far more than the forty-five in India with his dirty, vulgar countrymen, with sordid details of the road to success, of nocturnal visits to the upper storey and all-too-brief sexual acts with obese old Lachmi, smelling of sweat and raw onions.

Sir Mohan's thoughts were disturbed by the bearer announcing the installation of the Sahib's luggage in a first class coupe next to the engine. Sir Mohan walked to his coupe with a studied gait. He was dismayed. The compartment was empty. With a sigh he sat down in a corner and opened the copy of *The Times* he had read several times before.

Sir Mohan looked out of the window down the crowded platform. His face lit up as he saw two English soldiers trudging along, looking in all the compartments for room. They had their haversacks slung behind their backs and walked unsteadily. Sir Mohan decided to welcome them, even though they were entitled to travel only second class. He would speak to the guard.

One of the soldiers came up to the last compartment and stuck his face through the window. He surveyed the compartment and noticed the unoccupied berth.

"Ere, Bill" he shouted, "one 'ere."

His companion came up, also looked in, and looked at Sir Mohan.

"Get the nigger out," he muttered to his companion.

They opened the door, and turned to the half-smiling, half- protesting Sir Mohan.

"Reserved!" yelled Bill.

"Janta – Reserved. Army – Fauji' exclaimed Jim, pointing to his khaki shirt.

"Ek dum jao get out!"

"I say, I say, surely," protested Sir Mohan in his Oxford accent.

The soldiers paused. It almost sounded like English, but they knew better than to trust their inebriated ears. The engine whistled and the guard waved

his green flag.

They picked up Sir Mohan's suitcase and flung it onto the platform. Then followed his thermos flask, suitcase, bedding and *The Times*. Sir Mohan was livid with rage.

"Preposterous, preposterous," he shouted, hoarse with anger.

"I'll have you arrested – guard, guard!"

Bill and Jim paused again. It did sound like English, but it was too much of the King's for them.

"Keep your ruddy mouth shut!" And Jim struck Sir Mohan flat on the face.

The engine gave another short whistle and the train began to move. The soldiers caught Sir Mohan by the arms and flung him out of the train. He reeled backwards, tripped on his bedding, and landed on the suitcase.

"Toodle-oo!"

Sir Mohan's feet were glued to the earth and he lost his speech. He stared at the lighted windows of the train going past him in quickening tempo. The tail-end of the train appeared with a red light and the guard standing in the open doorway with the flags in his hands.

In the inter-class zenana compartment was Lachmi, fair and fat, on whose nose the diamond nose-ring glistened against the station lights. Her mouth was bloated with betel saliva which she had been storing up to spit as soon as the train had cleared the station. As the train sped past the lighted part of the platform, Lady Lal spat and sent a jet of red dribble flying across like a dart.

14 The Mark of Vishnu

“This is for the Kala Nag,” said Gunga Ram, pouring the milk into the saucer. “Every night I leave it outside the hole near the wall and it’s gone by the morning.”

“Perhaps it is the cat,” we youngsters suggested.

“Cat!” said Gunga Ram with contempt. “No cat goes near that hole. Kala Nag lives there. As long as I give him milk, he will not bite anyone in this house. You can all go about with bare feet and play where you like.”

We were not having any patronage from Gunga Ram.

“You’re a stupid old Brahmin,” I said. “Don’t you know snakes don’t drink milk? At least one couldn’t drink a saucerful every day. The teacher told us that a snake eats only once in several days. We saw a grass snake which had just swallowed a frog. It stuck like a blob in its throat and took several days to dissolve and go down its tail. We’ve got dozens of them in the lab in methylated spirit. Why, last month the teacher bought one from a snake-charmer which could run both ways. It had another head with a pair of eyes at the tail. You should have seen the fun when it was put in the jar. There wasn’t an empty one in the lab. So the teacher put it in one which had a Russel’s viper. He caught its two ends with a pair of forceps, dropped it in the jar, and quickly put the lid on. There was an absolute storm as it went round and round in the glass tearing the decayed viper into shreds.”

Gunga Ram shut his eyes in pious horror.

“You will pay for it one day. Yes; you will.”

It was no use arguing with Gunga Ram. He, like all good Hindus, believed in the Trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva – the creator, preserver, and destroyer. Of these he was most devoted to Vishnu. Every morning he smeared his forehead with a V mark in sandalwood paste to honour the deity. Although a Brahmin, he was illiterate and full of superstition. To him, all life was sacred, even if it was of a serpent or scorpion or centipede. Whenever he saw one he quickly shoved it away lest we kill it. He picked up wasps we battered with our badminton rackets and tended their damaged wings. Sometimes he got stung. It never seemed to shake his faith. More dangerous the animal, the more devoted Gunga Ram was to its existence. Hence the high regard for snakes; above all, the cobra, who was the Kala Nag.

“We will kill your Kala Nag if we see him.”

“I won’t let you. It’s laid a hundred eggs and if you kill it all the eggs will become cobras and the house will be full of them. Then what will you do?”

“We’ll catch them alive and send them to Bombay. They milk them there for anti-snake-bite serum. They pay two rupees for a live cobra. That makes two hundred rupees straightaway.”

“Your doctors must have udders. I never saw a snake have any. But don’t you dare touch this one. It is a *phannyar – it is* hooded. I’ve seen it, it’s three hands long. And for its hood!” Gunga Ram opened the palms of his hands and his head swayed from side to side. “You should see it basking on the lawn in the sunlight”

“That just proves what a liar you are. The *phannyar* is the male, so it couldn’t have laid the hundred eggs. You must have laid the eggs yourself.”

The party burst into peals of laughter.

“Must be Gunga Ram’s eggs. We’ll soon have a hundred Gunga Rams.”

Gunga Ram was squashed. It was the lot of a servant to be constantly squashed. But having the children of the household make fun of him was too much even for Gunga Ram. They were constantly belittling him with their newfangled ideas. They never read their scriptures. Nor even what the Mahatma said about non-violence. It was just shotguns to kill birds and the jars of methylated spirit to drown snakes. Gunga Ram would stick to his faith in the sanctity of life. He would feed and protect snakes because snakes were

the vilest of God’s creatures on earth. If you could love them, instead of killing them, you proved your point.

What the point was which Gunga Ram wanted to prove was not clear. He just proved it by leaving the saucerful of milk by the snake hole every night and finding it gone in the mornings.

One day we saw Kala Nag. The monsoons had burst with fury and it had rained in the night. The earth which had lain parched and dry under the withering heat of the summer sun was teeming with life. In little pools frogs croaked. The muddy ground was littered with crawling worms, centipedes, and velvety lady-birds. Grass had begun to show and the banana leaves glistened bright and glossy green. The rains had flooded Kala Nag’s hole. He ‘Sat in an open patch on the lawn. His shiny black hood glistened in the sunlight. He was big – almost six feet in length, and rounded and fleshy, as my wrist.

“Looks like a King Cobra. Let’s get him.”

Kala Nag did not have much of a chance. The ground was slippery and all the holes and gutters were full of water. Gunga Ram was not at home to help.

Armed with long bamboo sticks, we surrounded Kala Nag before he even scented danger. When he saw us his eyes turned a fiery red and he hissed and spat on all sides. Then like lightning Kala Nag made for the banana grove.

The ground was too muddy and he slithered. He had hardly gone five yards when a stick caught him in the middle and broke his back. A volley of blows reduced him to a squishy-squashy pulp of black and white jelly, spattered with blood and mud. His head was still undamaged.

“Don’t damage the hood,” yelled one of us. “We’ll take Kala Nag to school.”

So we slid a bamboo stick under the cobra’s belly and lifted him on the end of the pole. We put him in a large biscuit tin and tied it up with string. We hid the tin under a bed.

At night I hung around Gunga Ram waiting for him to get his saucer of milk. “Aren’t you going to take any milk for the Kala Nag tonight?”

“Yes,” answered Gunga Ram irritably. “You go to bed.” He did not want anymore argument on the subject.

“He won’t need the milk any more.”

Gunga Ram paused.

“Why?”

“Oh, nothing. There are so many frogs about. They must taste, better than your milk. You never put any sugar in it anyway.”

The next morning Gunga Ram brought back the saucer with the milk still in it. He looked sullen and suspicious.

“I told you snakes like frogs better than milk.”

Whilst we changed and had breakfast Gunga Ram hung around us. The school bus came and we clambered into it with the tin. As the bus started we held out the tin to Gunga Ram.

“Here’s your Kala Nag. Safe in this box. We are going to put him in spirit.”

We left him standing speechless, staring at the departing bus.

There was great excitement in the school. We were a set of four brothers, known for our toughness. We had proved it again. “A King Cobra.”

“Six feet long.”

“Phannyar.”

The tin was presented to the science teacher.

It was on the teacher’s table, and we waited for him to open it and admire our kill. The teacher pretended to be indifferent and set us some problems to work on. With studied matter-of-factness he fetched his forceps and a jar with a banded Krait lying curled in muddy methylated spirit. He began to hum and untie the cord around the box.

As soon as the cord was loosened the lid flew into the air, just missing the teacher’s nose. There was Kala Nag. His eyes burnt like embers and his hood was taut and undamaged. With a loud hiss he went for the teacher’s face. The teacher pushed himself back on the chair and toppled over. He fell on the floor and stared at the cobra, petrified with fear. The boys stood up on their desks and yelled hysterically.

Kala Nag surveyed the scene with his bloodshot eyes. His forked tongue darted in and out excitedly. He spat furiously and then made a bid for freedom. He fell out of the tin onto the floor with a loud plop. His back was broken in several places and he dragged himself painfully to the door. When

he got to the threshold he drew himself up once again with his hood outspread to face another danger.

Gunga Ram stood outside the classroom, with a saucer and a jug of milk in hand. As soon as he saw Kala Nag come up he went down on his knees. He poured the milk into the saucer and placed it near the threshold. With hands folded in prayer he bowed his head to the ground craving forgiveness. In desperate fury, the cobra hissed and spat and bit Gunga Ram all over the head – then with great effort dragged himself into a gutter and wriggled out of view.

Gunga Ram collapsed with his hands covering his face. He groaned in agony. The poison blinded him instantly. Within a few minutes he turned pale and blue and froth appeared in his mouth. On his forehead were little drops of blood. These the teacher wiped with his handkerchief. Underneath was the V mark where the Kala Nag had dug his fangs.

15 The Portrait of a Lady

My grandmother, like everybody's grandmother, was an old woman. She had been old and wrinkled for the twenty years that I had known her. People said that she had once been young and pretty and even had a husband, but that was hard to believe. My grandfather's portrait hung above the mantelpiece in the drawingroom. He wore a big turban and loose-fitting clothes. His long white beard covered the best part of his chest and he looked at least a hundred years old. He did not look the sort of person who would have a wife or children. He looked as if he could only have lots and lots of grandchildren. As for my grandmother being young and pretty, the thought was almost revolting. She often told us of the games she used to play as a child. That seemed quite absurd and undignified on her part and we treated it like the fables of the Prophets she used to tell us.

She had always been short and fat and slightly bent. Her face was a crisscross of wrinkles running from everywhere to everywhere. No, we were certain she had always been as we had known her. Old, so terribly old that she could not have grown older, and had stayed at the same age for twenty years. She could never have been pretty; but she was always beautiful. She hobbled about the house in spotless white with one hand resting on her waist to balance her stoop and the other telling the beads of her rosary. Her silver locks were scattered untidily over her pale, puckered face, and her lips constantly moved in inaudible prayer. Yes, she was beautiful. She was like the winter landscape in the mountains, an expanse of pure white serenity breathing peace and contentment.

My grandmother and I were good friends. My parents left me with her when they went to live in the city and we were constantly together. She used to wake me up in the morning and get me ready for school. She said her morning prayer in a monotonous sing-song while she bathed and dressed me in the hope that I would listen and get to know it by heart. I listened because I loved her voice but never bothered to learn it. Then she would fetch my wooden slate which she had already washed and plastered with yellow chalk, a tiny earthen ink pot and a reed pen, tie them all in a bundle and hand it to me. After a breakfast of a thick, stale *chapatti* with a little butter and sugar spread on it, we went to school. She carried several stale *chapatties* with her for the village dogs.

My grandmother always went to school with me because the school was attached to the temple. The priest taught us the alphabet and the morning prayer. While the children sat in rows on either side of the verandah singing the alphabet or the prayer in a chorus, my grandmother sat inside reading the scriptures. When we had both finished, we would walk back together. This time the village dogs would meet us at the temple door. They followed us to our home growling and fighting each other for the *chapatties* we threw to them.

When my parents were comfortably settled in the city, they sent for us. That was a turning point in our friendship. Although we shared the same room, my grandmother no longer came to school with me. I used to go to an English school in a motor bus. There were no dogs in the streets and she took to feeding sparrows in the courtyard of our city house.

As the years rolled by we saw less of each other. For some time she continued to wake me up and get me ready for school.

When I came back she would ask me what the teacher had taught me. I would tell her English words and little things of western science and learning, the law of gravity, Archimedes' principle, the world being round, etc. This made her unhappy. She could not help me with my lessons. She did not believe in the things they taught at the English school and was distressed that there was no teaching about God and the scriptures. One day I announced that we were being given music lessons. She was very disturbed. To her music had lewd associations. It was the monopoly of harlots and beggars and not meant for gentlefolk. She said nothing but her silence meant disapproval. She rarely talked to me after that.

When I went up to University, I was given a room of my own. The common link of friendship was snapped. My grandmother accepted her

seclusion with resignation. She rarely left her spinning wheel to talk to anyone. From sunrise to sunset she sat by her wheel spinning and reciting prayers. Only in the afternoon she relaxed for a while to feed the sparrows. While she sat in the verandah breaking the bread into little bits, hundreds of little birds collected round her creating a veritable bedlam of chirrupings. Some came and perched on her legs, others on her shoulders. Some even sat on her head. She smiled but never shoo'd them away. It used to be the happiest half-hour of the day for her.

When I decided to go abroad for further studies, I was sure my grandmother would be upset. I would be away for five years, and at her age one could never tell. But my grandmother could. She was not even sentimental. She came to leave me at the railway station but did not talk or show any emotion. Her lips moved in prayer, her mind was lost in prayer. Her fingers were busy telling the beads of her rosary. Silently she kissed my forehead, and when I left I cherished the moist imprint as perhaps the last sign of physical contact between us.

But that was not so. After five years I came back home and was met by her at the station. She did not look a day older. She still had no time for words, and while she clasped me in her arms I could hear her reciting her prayer. Even on the first day of my arrival, her happiest moments were with her sparrows whom she fed longer and with frivolous rebukes.

In the evening a change came over her. She did not pray. She collected the women of the neighbourhood, got an old drum and started to sing. For several hours she thumped the sagging skins of the dilapidated drum and sang of the homecoming of warriors. We had to persuade her to stop to avoid overstraining. That was the first time since I had known her that she did not pray.

The next morning she was taken ill. It was a mild fever and the doctor told us that it would go. But my grandmother thought differently. She told us that her end was near. She said that, since only a few hours before the close of the last chapter of her life she had omitted to pray, she was not going to waste any more time talking to us.

We protested. But she ignored our protests. She lay peacefully in bed praying and telling her beads. Even before we could suspect, her lips stopped moving and the rosary fell from her lifeless fingers. A peaceful pallor spread on her face and we knew that she was dead.

We lifted her off the bed and, as is customary, laid her on the ground and covered her with a red shroud. After a few hours of mourning we left her

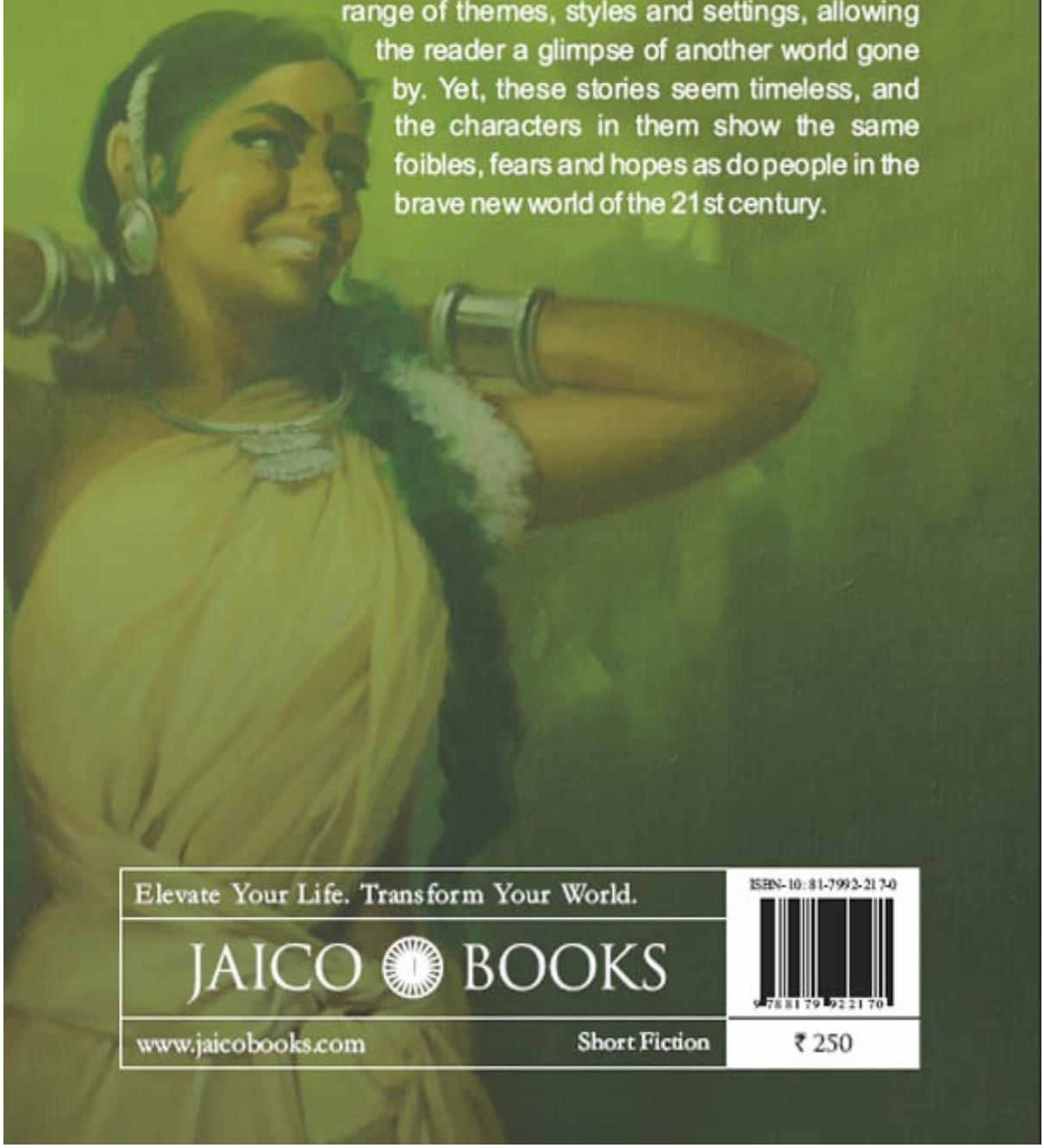
alone to make arrangements for her funeral.

In the evening we went to her room with a crude stretcher to take her to be cremated. The sun was setting and had lit her room and verandah with a blaze of golden light. We stopped half-way in the courtyard. All over the verandah and in her room right up to where she lay dead and stiff wrapped in the red shroud, thousands of sparrows sat scattered on the floor. There was no chirping. We felt sorry for the birds and my mother fetched some bread for them. She broke it into little crumbs, the way my grandmother used to, and threw it to them. The sparrows took no notice of the bread. When we carried my grandmother’s corpse off, they flew away quietly. Next morning the sweeper swept the bread crumbs into the dust bin.

STORY MASTERPIECES SHORT STORY MASTERPIECES SHORT STORY

5 Indian Masters

This book is a compilation of classic short stories by five great Indian writers – Raja Rao, Rabindranath Tagore, Premchand, Dr. Mulk Raj Anand and Khushwant Singh. Though not necessarily representative of the authors' complete works, the stories have been carefully chosen to showcase their versatility and skill as storytellers. The collection covers an extraordinary range of themes, styles and settings, allowing the reader a glimpse of another world gone by. Yet, these stories seem timeless, and the characters in them show the same foibles, fears and hopes as do people in the brave new world of the 21st century.



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