

Bangla original novel:
Kuhelika

Kazi Nazrul Islam

English:
Enigma



Translation: Kabir Chowdhury
Publisher: Nazrul Institute, Dhaka, 1994



The Translator

Foreword

Literary, cultural and other personalities, their genius and creative works need to be projected and publicised both at home and abroad through various ways and means for the greater benefit and interest of the nation. Such endeavour, acts and activities not only project and enhance the image and prestige of the concerned men of arts and outstanding personalities, but also glorify the nation as a whole. For the dearth of consciousness, want of initiative and proper planning, we have not yet been able to properly and widely present and project even an outstanding poetic genius and towering literary personality like [Kazi Nazrul Islam](#) who is an epoch-making rebel-poet of Bengali Literature and regarded as the national poet of Bangladesh in the international arena.

It is really a misfortune that the literary works of Kazi Nazrul Islam, an outstanding poet, lyricist, musician, playwright, novelist and non-fictional prose-writer of Bengali literature has not been adequately translated into English and other foreign languages. Nazrul's versatile genius and literary creations as well as his chequered career and eventful struggling life could not be widely projected to the outside world up till now. The outside world and non-Bengali-knowing people and even the intellectual and literary figures, knew only minimally that one of the great architects of the independence movement of the sub-continent as well as the resurgence in the social and cultural

arena, Kazi Nazrul Islam had vastly enriched and glorified the Bengali language, literature, culture and music with his creative talents and powerful pen. The foreigners and readers of non-Bengali-speaking and even non-English-knowing world seldom know, that though a romantic par-excellence, Nazrul, the soldier-poet as he was used his mighty pen as a weapon of struggle against British rule, bondage of all sorts of oppressions and superstitions and expressed his sentiments in his poems, songs, novels and other writings. One finds in them beauty and love, romantic agony, spirit of revolt against colonial domination and social injustice and, specially patriotic inspiration, Muslim renaissance, message of Hindu-Muslim unity and craving for the emancipation of the distressed humanity.

We very reasonably hope that translations of Nazrul's literary and poetic creations in English and other foreign languages, if properly and efficiently done, will help in knowing the genius of the great poet and facilitate his appreciation by the English-knowing world. It could be mentioned here with some degree of hope and pleasure, that Nazrul's literary works specially his poems and songs, though in a limited scale, had been translated into English, Prof. Kabir Chowdhury, a devoted and well-known translator of Nazrul's poems has made significant contributions in this field. His translation of Nazrul's famous novel "KUHELIKA" (Enigma) into English is a new venture and a much awaited contribution. Translations not only make the relevant original writer and the translator widely known and in many cases famous in the literary horizon of the world, they also sometimes bring coveted literary awards and world-wide recognition, provided the rendering is efficiently done keeping in tact the spirit and literary excellence of the original work as far as possible. Prof. Kabir Chowdhury, a teacher of English literature and himself an eminent writer, while translating Nazrul's "KUHELIKA" kept in mind that translation, in most of the cases, is a very difficult and hazardous undertaking, and yet he did the job with utmost sincerity and devotion and achieved commendable success. The Nazrul Institute deems it an opportunity and pleasure in publishing the book, and we are thankful to Prof, Kabir Chowdhury for his all out co-operation lent to us.

Kabi Bhaban
Dhanmondi
Dhaka, May 1994

Mohammad Mahfuzullah
Executive Director Nazrul Institute

Introduction

Great as a revolutionary poet, a romantic lyricist and a versatile composer of music as Kazi Nazrul Islam is, he elicits our admiration as a novelist too. This, notwithstanding the obvious weaknesses of the three novels, BandhonHara (The Man Without Bondage), 1927, MrityuKshudha (Hunger for Death) 1930, and Kuhelika (Enigma), 1931, that he has given us. These novels are clearly written by a poet, full of romantic ardour, rich imagination and intense emotion. Nonetheless, the writer is very much aware of his social milieu. He keenly feels the agony and ignominy of being a member of a subject nation ruled by the colonialist imperialist British. He deeply sympathises with the intrepid young men and women who want to drive the British away by resorting to revolutionary terroristic activities. His heart bleeds at the suffering and indignity that the poor ordinary working people have to bear daily in their struggle for existence. One sees powerful manifestation of the above in Nazrul's MrityuKshudha and Kuhelika. Compared to these two novels Bandhon-Hara, written in epistolary form, is weak and suffers from excessive sentimentalism.

The novel Kuhelika is unique in more than one way. It is among the pioneering political novels in Bengali and the first one to have a Bengali Muslim youth as its revolutionary hero. The novel has pronounced romantic overtones but it also realistically points out the complex psychological

situation among a section of the revolutionaries arising out of the distrust between the Muslims and the Hindus. *Kuhelika* or *Enigma* has two clear thematic trends: love and politics. Woman is enigmatic, a subject of fathomless mystery. The name of the novel emphasises the romantic aspect, but it is the political context that many readers find particularly exhilarating.

The story, simply told, is this: Jahangeer, a college student lives in a boarding house in Calcutta. He is the son, born out of wedlock, of a wealthy aristocratic landlord. However, he comes to know of his illegitimate birth only much later. Among his friends in the boardinghouse is Haroon, an inveterate romantic, whose serenity is impregnable even against dire poverty and misfortunes of other kinds. A major character of the novel is Promotto, a dedicated patriot, leader of a secret revolutionary group, who is secular in his attitude and beliefs. Promotto strikes the reader as a symbol, an idealized figure who easily gets the total devotion of his followers.

Jahangeer is a member of Promotto's group. During a college vacation Jahangeer goes to Haroon's village home where he meets his friend's young sister Bhuni or Tahmina. Haroon's ailing mother, who went crazy after the death of her eldest son when he was only about thirteen years old, creates an emotional and dramatic situation that leads Tahmina to consider herself as pledged and betrothed to Jahangeer. Our revolutionary hero, however, is not inclined to espouse a peaceful domestic life forsaking his revolutionary activities notwithstanding the romantic attachment he feels for Tahmina. He informs his mother of his predicament who sees in the situation an excellent opportunity to divert his son's mind from the dangerous arena of revolutionary politics to that of marital bliss. When the wedding arrangements are almost finalised the story takes a dramatic turn. Jahangeer, out on an operation with Promotto and Champa, a fiery revolutionary girl member of their clandestine party, is apprehended by the police. He is tried and Sentenced to life transportation. Jahangeer's distraught mother spends large sums of money in an abortive bid to secure his acquittal. Jahangeer, before departing for the prison in the Andaman Islands, asks his mother to give Tahmina one-fourth of his assets and the rest to Champa, the two women in his life who, he thinks, can realize his unfulfilled dreams by serving the poor and the oppressed of his dear motherland. In spite of certain weaknesses in characterisation and plot construction, *Enigma* is a highly readable novel. It has several moving passages where the language is charged with emotion but quite credible in the particular context. The very fact of making terrorism central to the plot of a Bengali novel is a remarkable feat when one considers the time of its composition. Buddhadeva Bose, the well-known Bengali litterateur says in his book *Shahitya Charcha* (Literary Pursuits): "Nazrul Islam did not know himself that he was ushering in a new era in the novel." Agreeing with the main tenor of Bose's observation I am however tempted to qualify it and say that Nazrul was perhaps not unaware that when he wrote *Kuhelika* he was doing something new in the field of the Bengali novel.

The reader will find in the following pages an English rendering by me of *Kuhelika*. It will probably be the first Nazrul novel to be made available in English.

26 March 1994 "Jhoroka"
Road 28. Gulshan, Dhaka

Kabir Chowdhury

KUHELIKA

The topic was Woman.

Haroon, the young poet, raised his doe-eyes and cooed sweetly like a dove. The woman is like fog.

The discussion went on in what was really a boarding house but had turned into a lively debating club.

On two or three bedsteads sat or lay sprawled twenty or twenty-two youngmen. One of them who looked like a typical vagabond made a friend's knee his pillow, stretched his legs over the shoulder of another friend and went on smoking most unconcernedly. He showed the least interest in the discussion that was going on. His name was Bakhte-Jahangeer or something still more flowery and grandiloquent. but through neglect and non-use no one remembered it now. Now every one calls him slightly or affectionately Uljhulul, no one could say who (first christened him thus.

Many claimed that distinction but no one's claim was conclusively established. In any case the name had permanently stuck to him. Uljhulul was a Urdu word. It meant disorganised, unkempt.

When poet Haroon called woman an enigma some laughed, some made ironic comments; only Uljhulul said nothing. Burning up nearly one-third of his cigarette with a huge drag, he blew upwards a cloud of smoke and merely muttered--Hum!

Amjad studied law and diligently tried to write poems. He said, My dear poet, better call her a mystery. Woman is unfathomable. You can swim a mile, yet you can't reach the shore. Having said this he quickly cast searchlight of his eyes over the gathering. Every one seemed to be pleased with his witticism, Only Haroon smiled somewhat archly.

Uljhulul breathed out another cloud of smoke, sighed deeply, and again said. Hum! There was a suggestion of mockery in his expression. Amjad was hurt.

Ashraf had married a short while ago. She was a thirteen-year-old girl, a just budding young woman. He wrote several letters to her, coaxed, cajoled and begged, but had received only one letter from her in reply. In fact it was not really a reply. It contained only two lines: "A woman's heart, dear friend, can be won only after a devoted pursuit of a thousand years." Ashraf's young wife was currently reading Rabindranath Tagore. Ashraf heavily struck his right fist on his left palm and said: Woman is pride.

Uljhulul again said, Hum, but this time more loudly than before. And now there was a touch of dramatic pity mixed in it. Everyone burst into laughter. It sounded like a dozen plates falling and breaking into pieces.

Ashraf jumped up, clutched a lock of Uljhulul's hair, tugged hard at it and said, Eh, baboon, why did you do that?

This kind of roughhousing was common with them.

Uljhulul did not even deign to look at Ashraf. He continued to lie down happily and went on smoking as unconcernedly as before.

Raihan was living in Calcutta for the last five years and was regularly failing at his BA examination. He had married long ago and as an inevitable by-product of marriage had already begotten a number of children. This contributed to his increasing annoyance. And the more annoyed he became the fatter he grew. But his feet and head could not keep pace with the rest of his body. His pet name in the boarding house was 'Mr. Crocodile'.

Mr. Crocodile cleared his throat, coughed and said something. It seemed that someone had thrust into his throat a number of bamboo splints.

An uproar of laughter rose. Uljhulul suddenly sat up like a spring doll and fixing his gaze on Mr. Crocodile's large tummy continued to smoke as before.

Tareq was quite well known as a wit. He followed Uljhulul's gaze and asked: Hey, are you assessing its girth? What would be the measurement?

Again there was a chorus of laughter. As if a number stone plates were rolled over a stretch of cemented track.

But Uljhulul appeared to hear nothing. He raised his eyes heavenward, released a cloud of smoke through his lips and mumbled: Woman is the eternal heroine.

They gave a roar of laughter at the way he spoke and at the indifferent attitude he displayed. Someone slapped his back and cried, Bravo!

Yusuf was a little dull. He did not understand involved or complex statements. Did not like them either. He asked Uljhulul to clarify his point. Others, too, joined him.

But Uljhulul was not to be moved. He simply said as before: Woman is the eternal heroine.

At last they gave up and gathered around Haroon.

Haroon was truly a poet. He had already become famous. The fragrance of his fame was not perhaps as pungent and far-reaching as that of the champa or the keya or the bakul, but like the rose's it filled the space it covered with a mild and serene sweetness. Haroon was slim, beautiful, fair-complexioned and always appeared to be lost in some far away thought. As if he did not know who he was. As if he was a stranger to himself. Or even if he knew him he neglected and paid no attention to him. He seemed to have no interest in or curiosity about anything in this world except colour and beauty. His eyes were particularly beautiful. Of course he was handsome but his eyes looked like the eyes of some Mughal princess of bygone days. They, however, appeared pensive. When he rested his full gaze on someone it seemed that it went still further and was looking at something that was beyond his sight.

He would appear at the BA examination this year, but he was not very interested in his studies. That was to say, in reading the books prescribed by his college. He read, however, extensively the kind of books considered "no good". In other words, there was no great writer or part of this world about whom he did not know a lot.

Still he pursued his formal studies with attention. He was the eldest son of his father. His entire family looked up to him in the way a lame beggar looked at his crutch, his sole prop.

His father was blind. His mother insane. He had two unmarried sisters and a younger brother at home. The pension his father got was just enough to provide them two humble meals a day, no more.

The younger brother who went to the village school looked after the family there.

Haroon met his own living expenses by the money he earned by giving private lessons to some students. He often half-starved himself and managed to send ten taka every month to his younger brother at home.

His home was in the district of Birbhum ... But to continue my story.

His fellow boarders in the mess gathered around Haroon and said. Come poet, tell us what you mean by enigma.

Before Haroon could open his lips someone said, The poet has fallen in love. Someone else said, Don't you see the kind of obscure poems he is writing these days. Another said, Your eyes are looking more and more dreamy every day. Where do you go, dear friend, for your wine and roses? Can't we, too. Get the address, please?

Haroon was not unduly timid.

He said, How can I say anything if you all shout like this? You are saying every thing without giving me a chance.

Mr. Crocodile thundered. I say, quiet, everybody. If I hear anybody say one more word I'll hit him with my paunch and crush him like a puny frog.

Haroon said, Woman is a hint, a suggestion, not a total revelation. We see woman as we see the vast ocean standing on its sandy shore. When we stand on the shore we see only a part of the sea. In the same way we perceive only a part of the woman. The extent of the seawater we can dip into is the extent of the woman we can dip into. She goes on weaving one net of mystery after another and continuously hides herself behind them, That's her nature.

Haroon seemed to be possessed, Like the chakor he had drunk the honey of the moon and become intoxicated. He seemed to be lying in the land of the fairies and dreaming of flowers about to blossom.

He continued fervently: What a mystery shrouds her eyes and face! She is enchanting like the moon, distant like the stars, mysterious like the Milkyway, only a shadow ... always veiled! She seems to be millions and millions away from the earth. The planets gaze at her with wondering eyes just as a little girl looks at the evening star. Perhaps she can only be seen, never grasped. She can be enshrined but not touched. She is like a decoration around the moon, like the arc of a rainbow one sees across the melancholy clouds through tear-filled eyes resembling a rainy night, To be seen just for a couple of seconds, after which it vanishes into thin air. She is like a wave on the water, the fragrance of a flower, the green of a tree-leaf. Feel her, look at her, but don't try to grasp her.

They listened to him charmed and amazed. But it was difficult to say if they were really listening to him or were looking at the beautiful, the poet. Suddenly Uljhulul, keeping in tune with Haroon's unfinished rhythm, cried out. Try to grasp the wave and you will drown. Try to grasp the fragrance and you will be pricked by thorns. Try to grasp the green and you will be struck by the branches, The woman is a goddess, she is not to be touched; you can only lay yourself prostrate at her feet ... But, my dear poet, woman is the eternal heroine. There is no other definition of woman except that.

Many smiled without understanding anything. :Some found his words amusing, some failed to understand word of what Haroon said.

Tareq was well known as a most amusing fellow. To live up to his name he was ready even to go about in his birthday suit. Now he made a crooked face and said in a quivering voice. So, my dear sir, that is why your body is getting thinner and thinner every day. Who could tell that you had become a hero? What you have got is dyspepsia. Go and quickly get a bottle of Kuwate-meda and drink it up at once!

A hurricane of laughter rose.

Uljhulul did not pay the slightest heed to it. He went on smoking and raising clouds of smoke as indifferently as before.

He was always like that.

Though Haroon did not join in this horse-play, it was clear from the look on his face that he was enjoying it.

Usually he said little but when he felt it necessary to speak out he did so at length, almost making his words sound like a lecture.

Haroon commanded a certain easy respect from everybody, not just because he was a poet, but because he was a sound man. No one had ever seen him act frivolously.

So when Haroon asked Uljhulul with a mild smile why woman was the heroine, Uljhulul permitted the tight knot of his indifference to loosen a little. He said, I know that every woman is a heroine. Each one of them is daily creating a short story or a novel. ... All the tight weaving is, however, a sham. Everything comes loose very easily. Woman has created hundreds of Chokher Bali, Ghore Baire, Grihadaha and Charitraheen. How many of them have you come across, my dear poet? Look at a woman intently, carefully, for a couple of days and you will find that none of the adjectives like sweet and dear, given to her by the clever male, fits her in the least. But poor woman, for the sake of the society and its conventions, is all the time desperately trying to become what she is not.

Through the ages she has cast herself into the mould desired by the clever male and afforded him happiness, while, the male has been busy leading a merry carefree life and teaching the woman the great dignity of the home and the heart. If you could confront woman as your peer you would have seen her as the heroine you see woman as you would like to see her, while soiled men like us see woman just as she is, not a whit more than that. Those of you who worship woman may be hurt by my ruthlessness, but though I do not worship her I have not the slightest disrespect for her. In fact, perhaps I respect her more than you do. But I do not do it by beautifying her with superfluous ornaments. I do not do it by transforming her into a figure of benediction. I pay homage to the simple woman, the bare woman. I would not like to wrap a six yard sari around a five feet woman and magnify her. I would not like to burden a twenty-two seer Lutfunnesa with a load of diamond and gold and other jewellery and turn her into a one maund woman. Such trickery is not my way of praising the woman. Perhaps you will get angry when you hear me say this, but do you know, I want the beautiful, unadorned Mumtaj. The indignity of sheilding Mumtaj by the Tajmahal deeply pains me. If I had the authority I would have freed Mumtaj from that house of adoration ... if there was any peace in the grave, I would say that Jahanara lay in much greater peace in her grave than poor Mumtaj. Man's pride has not trampled the green carpet of grass covering Jahanara's grave. No stone monument sits on her chest blotting out the light and sky of the outside world.

They were listening spellbound to the outpourings of the half-crazy fellow. Some one said, you know, sometimes even a crazy fellow's words make sense. Uljhulul took a few deep and quick puffs at his cigarette, almost burnt it down to the stub, and continued: Look, you may endow man with all kinds of false attributes and be proud of yourselves feeling that you are thus showing him great respect, but my manner of holding him in respect is different. I have the courage and capacity in me to hold man--be the person a male or a female,--in enough respect taking into consideration whatever man has. At least that's how my attitude has been shaped. I respect the Creator in spite of His having created the devil. You vilify the devil and bring a censure motion against the Creator, indirectly criticising and finding fault with His scheme of creation. I don't do it and there lies the difference. By calling woman a goddess you only want to remind her that she is really a human being and that it would suit her better if she were a goddess. I pray that I may never have the temerity to insult woman in that manner.

Tamiz had not said a word so long. He was too genteel, sort of an extreme moralist. Everyone teased him because of that and called him Betamiz. His ideals were Namananda and Mr. Tushnikumar. He could not stand Uljhulul. Now he flew into a rage and cried, you, crazy chap, will you stop? You don't have to lecture us any more. The world does not go on following the ideals of godforsaken vagabonds like you, nor it ever will.

Uljhulul said with a smile, Why get so angry, dear Betamiz? I am not delivering a lecture at your 'Sadharon Brahmo Mandir' or at the 'Devaloya'. I hit out because I find the hypocrisy and the lies of idealists like you and your guru so utterly intolerable. I have no resentment against the devil, because he does not conceal his own self. No one has any difficulty in recognizing him. But when I see someone hiding his inner self of a greedy selfish merchant, busy counting his profit and loss to the penny behind a saintly beard, I like to tear away the mask of that false beard and reveal before everybody the horrible ugliness lying behind it. Of Course, in order to do it I, too, have to sink pretty low. But let's leave it. If you want further to talk about the lies and hypocrisies of your crooked values I would be happy to do so some other time. For the present let us carry on the discussion we were having.

Haroon said, Do you want to say that all the other images of woman are false? The ministering angel, the figure of love, affection and kindness--are all these images of woman mere deceptions? Has she assumed these images to reward the male for his homage and adoration? Or because of her craving for getting more of the same from him? Or, has the jealous male moulded her in those images to serve his own selfish ends? Yes, I admit that the male has put a veil over her face, but he has done so only to make her look beautiful. By putting her behind the veil he has intensified the intoxication of his heart to get her. This barrier or hindrance has created all poetry. If there was no barrier like the Chitrakuta before the Yaksha, could the Meghdoot ever be created? Would we have got the Ramayana if Seeta were not abducted by Ravana? We have been privileged to get the great Mahabharata only because the Kouravas had dragged Droupadi by the hair!

As Uljhulul released the accumulated smoke through his nose and mouth in large quantities and got ready to say something, more tea along with sandesh and luchi appeared on the scene.

It was evident that even to youngmen sandesh; luchi and tea were more welcome than woman. In the deluge of sandesh and luchi woman found herself drowned. The way they devoured everything it seemed that they had come from famine-stricken Bankura or were a group of hungry fugitives from the Great Famine of '76. Mr. Crocodile, thrusting a dozen luchis into one side of his mouth and a dozen sandeshes into another, demonstrated a fantastic feat that made some laugh and inspired some to try to master that art. But some grew angry and one of them took a pinch of snuff between his fingers and forcibly pushed it into Mr. Crocodile's nostrils.

Mr. Crocodile did not take snuff, so naturally the horrible scene that followed should better be left undescribed. Pieces of luchi and sandesh, wet with his saliva, flew from the pit of his mouth liberally sprinkling everybody present there. Forgetting their snacks they beat a hasty retreat in all directions, but Mr. Crocodile by then had started to sneeze violently, which he seemed unable to control. His nose began to run, saliva trickled down the corner of his lips, he sneezed and coughed helplessly. It was an awfully messy affair. Mr. Crocodile's clothes almost came off his body. With each sneeze his huge paunch shook violently like a buoy bobbing up and down on the bosom of the Ganges as a ship passed by. His eyes grew wide and bloodshot like the eyes of Swami Troilanga. His nostrils, running with water caused by his sneezes, looked like a felled palm tree along whose trunk sweet palm juice was trickling down. One man began to pour water on his head, another on his tummy. Tareq started to recite the verses of Sura Yasin from the Holy Quran, which was generally done when a man was about to die. It made everybody laugh. But when Amjad began to give the 'azan', which given at any other time beside the scheduled prayer hours indicated the birth of a new baby in some home in the neighbourhood, the screaming laughter that rose surpassed the merriment produced after Tareq's recitation of Sura Yasin. It made everyone

bend double with uncontrollable laughter.

In short, if a drunk had rushed into the room mistaking it for a cheap pub nobody could have blamed him.

Now it was Mr. Crocodile's turn to get angry. It was rather entertaining to tease someone and receive his angry reproaches but it was not like eating luchi and sandesh. Many found Mr. Crocodile's anger difficult to swallow. But let us not talk about it any more. Such incidents were nothing new in a boardinghouse.

When the gossip session broke up the night had turned on her side. The clock struck one. The cook was obviously annoyed. So they hurriedly gulped down their supper and quickly returned, each to his narrow bed.

Whether they fell asleep or not I could not tell, for the summer vacation was only a week away. Almost all the colleges would close down for the vacation.

If one could imagine the thoughts that passed in the minds of the youngmen as they lay on their beds shortly before the summer and the puja vacations it would certainly not have pleased the finicky moralists, whatever it might have done to the youngmen themselves. The puritanical moralists might imagine that the youngmen's minds were occupied with thoughts of God. They might even think that the youngmen would wake up early in the morning and say their morning prayers. I sympathise with such pious wishes of those people. But the youngmen did not entertain any such thoughts. I can't tell you about everybody but the mind of most of the youngmen during those hours were occupied, I am sure, with thoughts of certain mango groves, river banks and bathing ghats of village ponds and happy memories associated with them.

So I couldn't tell who slept that night. At least Uljhulul and Haroon did not.

Uljhulul lived alone in the room that was the smallest in the boarding-house and that had only one bed in it. When the party broke up and the mess became quiet, Haroon dragged into Uljhulul's room his things and filled up its narrow empty space. Uljhulul at that moment was lying on his back and was wandering in a world of smoke. Startled by the noise made by Haroon as he dragged into the room his sleeping board Uljhulul turned over, lay on his chest, and calmly watched his doings. He did not appear to be much surprised. He pushed back from his forehead a shock of unruly hair and the hint of a smile seemed to play about his lips. Which brought a smile to Haroon's lips, too.

Outside it was very quiet and still. Only rarely, at long intervals, the wheels of a passing car created a momentary flutter in the depth of the silence and died away just as a small fruit did when at the dead of night it fell from the branch of a tree overhanging the bank into the dark still waters of a large pond. Innumerable stars shone in the sky along the banks of the Milkyway. They were like fiery bees, the sky was like a blue lotus, the moon its round core.

The world was silent, still. The eyes of the night were heavy with sleep. If a heart felt close to another heart on such a night as this one could wish the night to be an eternity in one's life.

Because he had walked along all the main streets and alleys and bylanes of Calcutta and dirtied his feet with the dust and mud on them, poor Jahangeer had earned for himself the sarcastic name of Uljhulul. Because he was obsessed with the keen desire to pull out and save man from the ashes of a devastating fire and take truth into his hand like a mirror and see it there, he had to suffer the satiric and odious comments of a few finicky moralists who only knew how to utter some inane moral platitudes. Tears welled up in Haroon's eyes. He found it impossible to control himself. He impulsively touched Uljhulul's feet and murmured, O my suffering beautiful, the seeker after truth, the crazy saint, I salute you. I salute you a thousand times. Haroon touched his own forehead with his hands. Uljhulul was then sleeping soundly.

Haroon gazed outside. It seemed to him that the entire sky and air were asleep and dreaming of the moon. A serene peace filled his mind. He fell into a deep sleep.

The sky, the moon and the stars were witnesses of how today a heart came close to another heart only by exchanging smiles.

The earth became more beautiful than before.

2

Whatever name they might call him by at the boarding house we would call Uljhulul by the name of Jahangeer.

His ancestral home was in the district of Comilla, but he was brought up in Calcutta. His father was a well-known zamindar and a highly respected man of Comilla. He had passed away about four years ago. Now Jahangeer was the heir of his large estate. But his mother was still living and it was she who looked after the affairs of the estate. Her exceptional ability in conducting the affairs of the estate led people to comment that, given the opportunity, women could not only manage a large estate but could also successfully ride a spirited horse. Under her rule even though tigers and cows did not drink at the same pool, very-large and very small fishes, who lived on her estate, were caught in the same net and suffered an identical rough treatment. Her Hindu tenants called her Rai Baghinee, the Tigress, while her Muslim tenants gave her the name of Khane Dajjal, the Awful Tyrant.

When Jahangeer's father was alive his parents spent the major part of each year in Calcutta. They had a couple of houses in Calcutta but after his father's death Jahangeer's mother let them out, put her son in the Baker Hostel and left for Comilla to personally supervise the affairs of her estate.

Jahangeer's temperament, however, did not suit the prison-like life of the hostel, which he left and settled himself in a mess.

If he wished he could have rented an independent house and lived there. Why he didn't do it, only his God could tell. His mother's affection for him was so great that she would not have protested much even if he spent a thousand taka a month, but even the most stingy manager of their estate could not accuse Jahangeer of spending more than a hundred taka a month. This clearly pleased his mother but she was hurt by the very ordinary food he ate and the very ordinary clothes he wore. If the future master of such a big estate was so indifferent and apathetic to worldly things and lived like a transient sojourner, for whom was she putting in such labour? But it was useless to make any request or complaint to her son about it. On her request or order Jahangeer would rather try to swallow a stone than permit anyone to interfere with the freedom of his movements and his own lifestyle.

The mother had noticed for a long time on Jahangeer's eyes and face, in his movements and in the Spartan way he conducted his life, a dull indifference and an anguished disrespect to almost everything. She knew the reasons for it, too. But even though she was the mother she was afraid of her Son. As if she was nobody to his son. A big chasm had been created between the mother and the son long ago, but Jahangeer now gave no scope for it to be easily noticed. He said to his mother, What can I do, mother? My nature is like that. I don't seem to find pleasure in anything. Though he said it with a smile his sick heart was clearly visible in the mirror of his face.

His mother checked her tears and quietly went away. Her weakness had a history. Let me tell you-

Jahangeer had just learnt to respect his mother and mother-land as greater than heaven when he suddenly and most unexpectedly came to know that his mother was a well-known professional singer and dancing girl of Calcutta and his father a life-long bachelor. He was the lust-born son of his parents.

From that day the colour of this beautiful earth had changed before his eyes. Someone seemed to have struck out at the joyous lamp of his life and extinguished it. Since then he had been trying to understand anew the meaning of man's life.

He had seen this old and stale world as a multicoloured one through the glass of his idealism. He had added the charm of his own mind to the beauty of simple man and recreated him as more beautiful than ever. But today he was ruthless like a stern judge. He would try this world. Today he would punish creation for the hypocrisy of its glittering commercial make-up that was so like a professional whore's.

Today he had seen truth face to face in the harsh glow of lightning and thunder. Today he was a stern and unforgiving realist.

3

The flood tide of patriotic fervour was at its height in those days. The British did not yet apprehend the washing away of their empire but they were really afraid of its going under water to some extent. They were not yet engaged in securing the safety of their household goods. but they were busy building a strong embankment. Jahangeer was still a boy, a school student. The imaginative adolescent was just initiated by Promotto, a young teacher of his school, into the doctrine of the mother and the mother-land being superior to heaven itself. No one, except a few students committed to revolution, perhaps not even Lord God, knew of the terrible fact that Promotto was a revolutionary. It was, however, hard to tell if the Lord CID, the Criminal Intelligence Department of the Government, was aware of the fact. That was the difference between Lord God and Lord CID. What was unknown to the former was known to the latter, even to his finger-tips. One day a student was singing a song! Those first line ran like this, "The eyes cannot see you, in the very eyes do you reside."

Promotto said laughingly, Do you know what Rabindranath Tagore had in mind when he wrote this song?

The boy answered enthusiastically, Sure, sir, He was thinking of God.

Promotto shook his head and said, No, Rabindranath had Mr. Father Lizard, the spy and the detective, in his mind when he wrote it with a feeling of great devotion.

The boys were hugely tickled by this explanation. From that day on whenever they suspected anybody to be a government spy and watcher, as a matter of fact even when they saw a lizard on the wall, they would start singing at the top of their voice: "The eyes cannot see you, in the very eyes do you reside." All the students held Promotto in great regard and loved him dearly, not only because he was a good teacher but also because they knew that he was very fond of them. Most of the students in the higher classes called him Promot-da, considering him as their own elder brother.

No revolutionary had the right to ask his leader the reason for any action of the latter. It did not apply only to Promotto but to all revolutionary leaders. Yet when Promotto ritualistically initiated Jahangeer into the doctrine of the Mother, there was a loud protest by his disciples against that action. Promotto was not a leader of a particularly high stature, but not even prominent revolutionary leaders of the party dared treat him with- disrespect. Many in the party, prominent and not so prominent, felt that in the coming days he would turn out to be a great

revolutionary leader and so looked at him with a certain awe. He could, therefore, easily ignore the protests of the young revolutionaries working under him, but he was really a good person, a decent man. So, though it was against the rule, he allowed a debate on the issue. He said, Listen, I hold our chief Bojropani in greater regard than I do my God, but I find it most painful to accept his view that the muslim youths of Bengal are incapable of embracing the revolutionary ideal. Of course, if he had given a direct and positive embargo I would have never admitted Jahangeer into our group. However fine a boy I considered him. You might say that most muslim boys were either job-seekers or timid. But I see no reason to believe that all their boys are like that. Besides, I don't think we are any less job- seekers or timid than they are. The patriotic zeal has not blossomed among them because they do not have a leader. And, though their religion is different their bone, marrow and flesh have been created by the climate of this Bengal. The strength, the ardour and the dedication that you have, why should not. they have those, too? Besides, from what I have read of Islam I can emphatically say that it has never highlighted the doctrine of the weak and never declared that nonviolence was the highest religion. The weak may give all kinds of spiritual explanation of nonviolence but the fact that the muslims did not practise it has not brought them any disgrace.

Nowadays some over-wise men are trying to ridicule the royal qualities of the religion of heroism and are anxious to conceal behind it the darkness of their cowardice. But I ask them, are Buddha, Jesus and Nimai alone alive today or will they alone remain so till eternity? What about Rama, Krishna, Arjun, Alexander, Pro tap , Napoleon, Garibaldi, Caesar? Aren't they too, alive today, or will they not remain so till the end of the times? You may say that in the days to come no one will call them great, but before the arrival of that day of yours the life-span of the world will be over. Besides, the Kolki or Mehdi image of the Messiahs of the future that your spiritual saints and nonviolent poets have drawn for you does not appear to be a toothless and careless one. But why am I saying all these things? You see, the doctrine of nonviolence preached by the saints in loin-cloth infuriate me so much that I seem to lose all my common sense. What I was really going to say--

Just then a boy who was a devotee of Tolstoy cried out, But Promot-da, the doctrine that we shall get beaten and by doing so conquer all beatings, is it totally untrue?

Promotto said excitedly, In that case we have become conquerors long ago, haven't we? Because we have taken with such submissiveness so much beating through so many centuries that even those who have beaten us feel dazed. The Aryans have beaten us; the Shakas have beaten us; the Huns have beaten us. We have been kicked by the Arabian horse, punched by the Afghan, knifed by the Iranian, struck by the Turanian's sword. The Mughals and the Pathans fouled up our nationhood; the Portuguese and the Dutch and the French came to exploit our wealth but in the end beat us by their weapons. And the final blow was dealt by the British. The only thing that had not yet been killed was our humanity, which has saved our people from being wiped out in spite of all those beatings. But that, too, was killed by the British. If even after the avalanche of such deaths somebody said that we were keeping ourselves alive through those very deaths, well, I might respect his philosophy but not his intelligence. In fact, he should better examine the spot where his intelligence resided. What I was going to say is this: Shall we. exclude the muslims from our movement? I admit that they have many drawbacks, but they are straightforward and brave. They have sticks in their hand all right. but they do not know how to conceal them behind their back. On the contrary, they brandish them in front of their nose, that's their only fault. But that does not. help us. If we initiated them into Our secret rites perhaps they would turn out to be the best soldiers in the Coming days.

Promotto seemed lost for a moment in some deep thought. It seemed that with a weak lamp in his hand he was groping for something in the impenetrable darkness of the future.

Jahangeer's intimate friend Animesh said Promotto-da, I for one can have no objection to admitting Jahangeer to our party. I never considered whether he was a Hindu or a Muslim. I

always looked at him as a man, and from that point he is superior to all of us. But I am afraid this might lead to a difference of opinion and create ill-will within the party. We are revolutionaries but we have not yet been able to overcome fanaticism and orthodoxy. We have not yet learnt to look at man without his religion. The chief of another revolutionary organisation, a rival of ours, is responsible for this. You, perhaps, understand who I am thinking of when I say this.

Promotto smiled significantly, whose meaning many failed to understand.

Animesh continued: Do you know what he and his partymen say? They say we shall drive away the British with our right hand and the Muslims with our left. And then after occupying London and Mecca. we shall make a truce. Those people do not consider the muslims any the less enemy of theirs than the British. Promotto said with a laugh. And that chief of theirs. can you tell me what he will bring from London after signing the truce papers?

The boys answered in one voice that they could not.

Promotto said. If he goes to London he will come back as a mongrel and a ham-eater and will b-ring with him an English girl. And if he goes to Mecca he will come back as a Hajee and a beef-eater and with a luxurious beard.

The boys roared with laughter, rolling themselves on the ground. Promotto went on: You see. our great men by cultivating religion in our brains helped the British government more than what the latter could do by cultivating ganja in our fields. Our religion has become the hammer to break our teeth with. Do you know what the biggest conspiracy of the British against us is? This our mutual suspicion. this heartfelt hatred and disrespect to each other's religion. If this policy of 'divide'. the iron heels of the English. could be permanently applied on the bosom of India, it would remain there as imperishably as the footprints of Adam on Adam's Peak.

Samaresh who was too much of a Hindu said. Well. Promot-da, we could become independent without the help of the Muslims. Couldn't we?

Surely we could, said Promotto. Many a country has achieved independence in spite of the opposition of at least seventy five per cent of her people but we won't be able to do it. If one could drive away both the British and. the Muslims together. I might have no objection to that. But none of the countries that tolerated the opposition of their own people and became independent ever encouraged the madness to drive them away from there.

The revolutionaries who say that we will have to drive away the muslims forget the fact that even if they had the superpower to do it the clever English would never allow them to do it. The day India got united as a nation the English would pack up and leave. Not only did the English know this, every common Indian also knew it. The two names, Hindus and Muslims, were like wonder drugs that gave life to the Indian empire of the British and allowed it to survive But you know what? If we sincerely wanted it we could easily conquer the muslims. But not by word, but by love. However, they must be given some exposure to education and culture first, otherwise we won't be able to win them over. Winning them over and imbuing them with the spirit of patriotism would mean wresting off the hands of the English their weapons.

Samaresh said, But Promot-da, there is no limit to their silly demands and absurd requests and obstinate attitude. I admit that the Muslims are weapons in the hands of the English and the latter will always use them against us. But what can we do about it? If We go on giving them concessions we shall not only harm Our cause, we shall also do a great disservice to them. They will never try to stand on their feet.

Promotto: I, too, do not say that we should give them concessions. I, too, say that if your partner in an expedition is a cripple it is better to leave him by the roadside than carry him on your

back. But we have not yet started on our expedition, Samaresh. It is the period of recruitment, of collecting raw soldiers. We are only making preparations, nothing more. If we test and see if they, too, can become soldiers in the expedition to be launched in the future it might not advance the date of freeing Our country, but it most certainly will not push it back. Just now you were telling me about their obstinacy and absurd requests. It is not only you, many of our leaders have said so to me. But, you see, diagnosing the disease does not automatically lead to its remedy. Let me agree, for argument's sake, that they make undue and absurd requests, that they consider the British their friends. But did you ever think that behind this is attitude lay the accumulated ignorance, superstition and illiteracy of ages? This is what I was telling you. We have to remove all these by hard, long and dedicated work. We have to spread out among them to educate them and to rouse in them the fervour of patriotism. You will then see that those who are today your obstacles will turn tomorrow your great and most faithful comrades.

Samaresh: But Promot-da, their mullahs and moulvies will never allow this. I don't know, perhaps their moulvies. Mullahs and the self-appointed upholders of religion are simply the spies of the English. Their mullahs will say that our concern for their welfare is only a clever ruse to convert them into Hindus, which will only turn them furiously against us, They will not trust I this loving approach of ours. They will not accept it respectfully.

Promotto: I have paid some thought to it, too. I know that the uprising among the common muslim masses will most hurt the mullahs and the moulvies. It will endanger their bread and butter, and they will oppose it with all their might. But there is also a witch doctor who can stand up against and subdue the evil spirit. It is the muslim student community. If we can bring the muslim youth into our fold we shall be able successfully to fight both the English and the mullahs and the moulvies. It is because of this that I want to carefully select and recruit good muslim youngmen into our party and it is here that I find myself at loggerheads with other revolutionary leaders.

Samaresh: I admire your farseeing attitude, Promot-da. But the majority of the muslim students are hot like Jahangeer.. In fact, they are not even ghosts of Jahangeer. They believe that our swadeshi movement, the movement to free the motherland, means the establishment of Hindu Raj. So they consider it a sin to join this movement. They cast longing lingering looks toward Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and wait for the day when the muslims from those lands will come marching in, conquer India and give it to them on a platter for them to savour and enjoy. They forget about Nadir Shah and Timur.

Promotto: You can't blame them much, Samaresh, if the muslims fear the establishment of a Hindu Raj. The aim of the leaders of the Matri Samity, the Motherland Association, is, I am told, the establishment of the Hindu Raj. We must remove the fear and apprehension of the muslims by our sincerity, good faith and sacrifice. Otherwise India will never be free. If our organisation, too, believed like the Matri Samity that the muslims were to be driven away from India, I would never have joined it. If the muslims have some faults we must sincerely strive to rid them of those. May we never be obsessed by the insane idea of driving them away from this land. And again, one can't blame them much if they look toward Iran, Iraq and other muslim countries. The weak always look toward others for assistance. It is their nature. They have no power and, aware of their weakness, they look toward the muslims of other countries and try to receive some consolation in their strength, although they know very well that Iran, Iraq, Arabia and Afghanistan are not concerned in the least about the muslims of India and their welfare. Our dedicated and sincere effort should be to turn their other-country-oriented mind toward their native land. We have to remind them of the debt they owe to this dumb soil that nurtures them with its crops, fruits, flowers and water with an affection deeper than mother's, the earth that is all suffering and yet so infinitely patient. We have to fire their blood with this doctrine that if one owes any debt for suckling mother's breast one owes a much greater debt to the motherland whose air and water nourish our mind, body and soul, the land which is the mother of my father, the mother of my mother. Can anyone of you, Samaresh, inject into their blood this doctrine? If you can do it I am sure I'll see on that day the gorgeous figure of Mother India glowing like a great Queen. In fact, I can already see

that figure in my mind's eye. Come Samaresh, come Animesh, sing for me the song that is like an elixir to my soul:

Devi amar, sadhona amar, swarga amar ! amar desh!
My goddess, my commitment, my heaven, my country!

Promotto closed his eyes. Streaming tears fell from his closed eyes. The boys touched his feet and then began to sing:

Devi amar, sadhona amar. swarga amar, amar desh!
And as they sang tears welled up in their eyes, too.)

The inert map of India lay sprawled before Promotto. He saluted it again- with deep emotion.

Samaresh said, Promot-da, I have wrongly suspected you all these days of some hidden weakness and attraction for the muslims. It is perhaps true that we have not yet earned the right to be the real revolutionary soldiers of mother India. We have not yet been able to love all the people of India irrespective of caste, creed or religion. Perhaps all our patriotism is mere excitement, a luxury of sacrifice. You have rightly said, Promot-da, we have not yet become true soldiers of our country .

Aminesh said. Yes, Samar, we are only sacred bulls, we don't have anything to do with the god of revolution.

Wiping the tears off his eyes Promotto said in a choked voice. Anim, my India is not the India of this map. I am no less sentimental than you, yet I have not loved only the water. air, soil, hills and woods of India: My India is the India of 33 crores of dumb, poor, starving people trodden under the feet of an alien power. It is not the India of the English, it is not Hindustan, it is not the India of trees and shrubs and bushes. My India is the holy shrine washed by the tears of the human soul, oppressed and tortured through the ages. My suffering India has been born of the rich silt formed by the tears of millions of men. O my boys, this India is not your India of the temples, this India is not the India of the mosques of the muslims. It is my great India of noble Man.

4

A few mouths after his initiation into the service of the motherland Jahangeer's father Khan Bahadur Farrokh died of a heart attack. Jahangeer was then a lad of only fifteen years, just promoted to the first class from the second. The sudden mishap badly upset him. As if While walking along the road he had, with no Warning, fallen into a well. But his mother, Firdous Begum, freed him from his fears. Before their tears dried up she took Charge of her estate and began to look after its affairs personally. Shorn of all anxieties, savoring the joy of complete freedom, Jahangeer snuggled close to his mother, acted like a little baby and filled his mother's soul with indescribable happiness. The mother wiped her tears with the skirt of her sari and kissing her son's forehead said, Why are you so afraid of the matters of the estate? What will happen to you when I am gone? It is a huge estate and I am just a woman. If you don't look after it, how can I manage everything by myself? All will be squandered by outsiders and sycophants.

She looked at the portrait of the Khan Bahadur on the wall, bit her lips and checked her tears. Jahangeer understood everything. Tears welled up in his eyes.. too. He was somewhat afraid of his father, for no reason, but he was also fond of him. Shoving his face into his mother's lap he wept for a long time. The mother let him weep. With deep affection she caressed her son's head as if she was casting off all the evil, all the sorrows, that might befall him His parents seemed to protect Jahangeer with extra caution. Jahangeer considered it nothing but an outcome of their

too great affection for him. He had, however, come to realise by now that his father not only did not like him to mix with his kith and kin, he did not also like him even to see and talk to them. Their home and estate were in Comilla but he had not yet visited the place. Whenever his holidays began his parents took him travelling with them to Waltair, Puri, Agra, Fatehpur, Delhi and Lahore. When Mr. Farrokh went to Comilla in connection with the affairs of the estate he went alone. He took neither his wife nor his son with him.

Jahangeer was somewhat whimsical from his boyhood. People said, Sons of rich men indulge in such eccentricities deliberately, you know. If our fathers had so much money we, too, would have become like that. The truth is too much indulgence and license have spoiled him. This, of course, they said secretly, and they were Mr. Farrokh's own employees.

There was, however, an order, some sense, in the eccentricities of the sons of rich folks, but the way Jahangeer moved about and talked seemed to have no head or tail. One moment he was talking garrulously, nineteen to the dozen, and the next he was lost in the deep silence of a mystic saint and he could keep up that silence for days together. It was this side of his character, his deep absorption, that attracted Promotto so greatly that he had dared initiate Jahangeer into their secret doctrine of revolution.

A few days after this Jahangeer rushed in, fell at his mother's feet like a huge tree uprooted by a storm and cried out heartrendingly. Tell me, mother, is it true? What are all these things that I hear?

Firdous Begum was frightened at the sight of his son whose face looked like a volcano about to erupt into flames and smoke. She could hardly say a word. Summoning all her strength she somehow managed to say, What has happened, my child? Why are you acting like this?

Jahangeer cried in a thundering voice, Father's nephews have filed a case claiming their right to our property. They say that I---I---that I am a bastard son and you are Munna, the dancing girl. They say that you are not his wedded wife but his kept woman, that I am the son of Khan Bahadur's kept Woman.

Overcome by anger, excitement and tears Jahangeer's voice cracked. He started to foam at the mouth. He seemed to be burning like a fiery flame. He placed his face on his mother's feet and said in a choking voice, Tell me, mother, that it is a lie. They are all telling lies, aren't they? I can't show my face tinder the sun any more! Mother, O mother! -

The cause of all this infamy and disgrace stood like a tree struck by thunder as if somebody had burnt her completely. As if a moment's curse had turned her body and soul into a rock.

Like one gone totally crazy Jahangeer jumped up, shook his mother's hands violently and shouted, Tell me at once or I'll kill you. Are you Khan Bahadur's kept woman or my mother? Answer!

No Sooner had he said these words than he started as if lashed by a whip. That voice was not his but his father's. He never spoke like that. It was Mr. Farrokh speaking. For the first time he felt his father in him. He became quite still. Then he cast a sharp gaze on his mother like a judge and began to examine her minutely, while his stricken mother continued to stare at her son's face With sad piteous eyes.

Jahangeer lowered his head like a charmed snake and left the room on unsteady feet without another word. As he walked away it seemed to him that the earth was swallowing his two feet, that a terrible earthquake was raging, that the monstrous earth was about to crack open, draw him in, crunch him into pieces between its jaws and crush him to death.

As he went he heard his mother crying out weakly like a dying beggar-woman beseeching alms, "Come back, my son, come back!"

Jahangeer's soul seemed to answer her in these words: "O poor woman! Jahangeer will probably come back, but your son won't. No, nevermore!"

He turned his feet straight toward Promotto's house. As he walked on he murmured to himself: "O mother earth, from today I am your dirty dust-covered child. Let it be my proudest identity. From today I belong to the ashamed band of men and women cast out by society. O my all-enduring, all-suffering mother, you who rocked in your lap millions of babies killed in embryo, come, pick me up. Rock me, rock me in your lap. In supreme pride you made the son of a virgin a great hero, a noble saint, a prophet—Come, with that same pride mark my forehead with undying glory!"

When Jahangeer arrived at Promotto's house like a mad drunken fellow the evening was shrouding the face of the dead day with her dark coffin cloth. The call for the evening prayer, the azan, sounded sad like the janaja, the funeral prayer for the dead day. Tired crows flew overhead crying aloud as if they were mourning the death of the day. In the courtyard of the grey sky only a single star glistened weakly like the eyes of a grieving mother who had just lost her son.

Promotto was shocked to see Jahangeer. Apprehending some danger to his political party he anxiously asked, "What's the matter? Is there any bad news?" Jahangeer said, "Yes, there is. He got into the room and bolted the door."

It was a thatched cottage in a slum area. No pains were spared to keep the damp and dirty room as clean as possible, yet its poor state was clearly visible like the frayed beauty of a youth that was long past. In the dim light of a clay lamp you saw only a tattered deer-skin seat and a dull map of India. The smoke coming from aromatic burning sticks mingling with the smell of the earthen floor made the enclosed air of the room heavy.

Promotto cried out in an anxious and deeply agitated voice. "What's wrong? And where? Tell me!"

Jahangeer answered in a hard dull voice, "Promot-da. I can no longer perform the holy task of serving my motherland."

Heaving a sigh of relief Promotto said, "Thank God, it is not what I feared. So, whom did you quarrel with again?"

Jahangeer said, "This time with God, Promot-da. I can no longer shoulder the sacred responsibility. I undertook it without knowing who I was. Punish me any way you like. My blood is unclean - I am a bastard son. Towards the end Jahangeer's voice broke with pain and hatred and Weeping."

Promotto gave a start. Then he took Jahangeer into his arms with great affection and said, "So what I feared has come to pass. But why should you feel ashamed of it? If anyone has to be penitent, it must be they who are responsible for it. No man is responsible for his own birth."

Jahangeer, lost and groping in a dark path, seemed to feel the touch of a strong hand. He wanted to grip it with all his might.

He stood up and cried excitedly, "Are you telling me the truth, Promot-da? Am I sinless, then? My father's lust, my mother's sin, have they not besmirched me? But they have, they have. I have discovered it today. For the first time today I have seen my bestial father in me. Look Promot-da. I never before uttered an evil word in my life but today I tarnished my tongue by calling

a woman my father's whore, and she was none other than the woman who gave birth to me! No, Promot-da, every drop of my blood is defiled. In every drop of my blood run my father's ugly hunger and my mother's soiled passion like a million poisonous scorpions. Any moment they may come out and reveal themselves as they did today. God cannot accept my sacrifice in your noble mission, Promot-da. My life has been sacrificed already at the altar of sin!

Jahangeer panted violently. It seemed that he would choke and his breathing would cease.

Promotto said in a calm firm voice. You are forgetting our mantra, Jahangeer. Our sacred mantra is: The mother and the motherland are greater than Heaven. We have no right to judge them.

His final words sounded like a command.

Jahangeer threw himself on the ground and cried, It is false! A false mantra! A lie! Not the mother, no, not she, but only the motherland is greater than Heaven.

Promotto picked up Jahangeer and pressing him to his bosom like an affectionate mother said; Don't cry, Jahangeer. Even if you, have been touched by sin we shall cleanse you with the fire of sorrow and turn you pure and unalloyed.

Jahangeer lay prostrate on the map of India. With tears trickling down his cheek he went on murmuring: Only you, my motherland, only you are greater than Heaven -none else, none else!

The pictorial map of India grew wet under his chest.

5

The summer holidays had started. The young hearts of the students were filled with joy for no reason at all. They dreamed of their distant village home and seemed to smell the new1y sprouted leaves in the mango groves there.

Haroon was ready to leave for his home. He had packed his things and was now lying on his bare bedstead, lost in some far-away thoughts. There were still five or six hours to go before his train would leave. Just then he felt with a start someone pulling him by the hair. He looked up and saw Jahangeer alias Uljhulul standing near his head. He was smoking a cigarette. Suddenly Jahangeer said, When does your train leave, Haroon?

With a quiet smile Haroon said, Why ? Do you plan to go with me?

Jahangeer brought out two tickets from his pocket and showed them to Haroon. He had already purchased two tickets for Suri.

Haroon, taken completely by surprise, stared at Jahangeer's face and cried out piteously, But you can't go there, my friend.

Jahangeer raised his eyebrows, yawned lazily and said in a solemn voice, You don't know, Haroon, but I sure can. Even if you can't.

Haroon burst out laughing at the way Jahangeer said these words. Then he said, But, Jahangeer, you don't know what a wretched Godforsaken village it is. It has mosquitoes as big as cockroaches.

Before Haroon could say anything more Jahangeer cried out with feigned panic. Yes, it has flies like bats, rats like wild bears, monkeys like Haroon, right? Or, are there other things too?

Haroon said despairingly, Please, my dear friend. listen to me. Don't take me amiss. You will have no end of troubles there. First of all, you will have to cover a distance of ten miles from Suri on foot and then cross the river Bakkeswar-

Jahangeer went on smoking serenely and said, And in that river there are no boats and no boatmen. It has a terrible current and is full of fierce sharks, crocodiles, whales and snakes, right? But I know, Haroon, that none of these things are there. But even if they were there I'll take the name of Allah, make my prophet my main-stay, gird my loins and smoothly sail across the river of this life. Understand? I'll make a fool of the invisible captain of the ship and be at the other bank in the twinkling of an eye.

Haroon gave up and sat down despairingly on his bed. On the one hand he was delighted that his friend was going to his home, on the other, when he thought of the poor condition of his home he felt most uncomfortable. True, Jahangeer won't starve there but he was the son of a rich landlord. He was brought up amidst great comfort and affectionate care. Haroon and his family members won't be able to provide him with the amenities he was used to. It was the thought of their poverty that hurt him much. His eyes grew moist at the futile tears of a helpless man. But he was also deeply touched by Jahangeer's sincere friendliness, his simplicity and his unconcealed claims as a dear and close one to him. So long Haroon was desperately trying to dissuade Jahangeer from going with him but now he did not protest any more. On the contrary, a strange happiness filled his heart. To his dream-prone imaginative mind all his wants now appeared colourful. His distant village home now seemed more beautiful than ever because of its very inadequacies and imperfection. His naturally melancholy face looked happy as a morning flower.

Jahangeer deliberately packed some ordinary simple clothes in a small cane box, after which the two friends had their bath. took their meals together and started for the railway station. When their taxi reached the junction of Harrison Road and College Street Jahangeer suddenly jumped off the taxi. Asking the driver to wait. for him he turned to Haroon and said, I'll be back in a minute. He quickly strode towards the College Street market.

When he returned after nearly half an hour with a huge trunk on his shoulders Haroon seemed lost in some faraway dreamland. Even when Jahangeer put the trunk in the taxi and asked the driver to drive on Haroon did not wake up from his dream.

Jahangeer pinched hard Haroon's arm and then looking away in another direction began to smoke his cigarette most-solemnly.

Haroon jumped up and said, Hey, what is this! When did you come back? He rubbed the pinched spot on his arm.

Jahangeer said distantly, Look, poet, the world had not only the poet's dreams but also the cruel pinches of a non-poet.

Haroon said with a smile, If I express any doubt about it after what you have done you will probably throw me out of the taxi and say that this earthy world and that side-walk full of Marwari businessmen are truer than the dreamland of the poet, right?

Suddenly Haroon noticed that the taxi instead of going toward Howrah station was rushing toward Baghbazar. He almost shouted, Hey Jahangeer, we are almost in Baghbazar! Can one get Howrah station there?

Jahangeer smiled and said, No, but one can get chandu, an intoxicating country drug, and sweet rosogolla.

Haroon said with a smile, Yes, I understand. It is clear that you have been taking the first item quite liberally these days.

As the taxi stopped before a sweetmeat shop Jahangeer said, See, even the taxi has a sense of humour and has the light taste. With these words he quickly got down.

Haroon said with despair, We'll surely miss the train today and have to eat the sweet. sitting on the railway platform.

It was a hot summer midday. The train sped through fields and meadows. A happy Haroon fell asleep while Jahangeer, thrusting his face out of the window, kept staring at the blazing sky. His mind ran faster than the speeding train towards the hot shimmering sky above, as if he wanted to place his hot temple against the temple of the sky and feel its sting and pain. The blazing midday sun was raining down streams of fire. The earth looked wilted like a child-wife in front of a hot oven in her kitchen. Raising his hand to his forehead Jahangeer saluted the midday sun. His eyes filled with tears. He raised his two eyes to the sun and murmured to himself, Friend, I do not know what makes you suffer so. Stung by what hurt are you burning down this quiet earth? I feel the same pain and suffering within me. But why can't I glow like you, why can't I become like the midday sun? Why can't my burning sensation bestow light, too, along with pain?

Run! Run! O intrepid child of the machine-king! Run faster, faster, faster still, Take me right into the heart of the sun, that ball of fire. Go, go-O the comet of this earth! Take me to that fiery bath house, plunge into it, the way millions of me to rites plunge into that fiery cauldron.

6

When they reached Suri the night was far advanced. Haroon said: What shall we do now? Do you want to spend the night here or do you want to go into the city? I have a distant relative there. If you like we can go to his place.

Jahangeer smiled: I think the platform will be more comfortable than the home of a distant relative, Haroon. Start unpacking. We can easily spend this lovely moonlit night here. But if you prefer crossing your river Bakkeswar tonight I am game for that, too.

Haroon said: Let's stay here, but the stone-chips under your back will be playing a night-long prank with you.

Jahangeer sat down on his box and said: You are no poet, Haroon. If even on such a beautiful moonlit night as this you can't forget about stone-chips pricking your back then you are-you are-a jute broker!

Haroon laughed aloud: What kind of a metaphor is this?

Jahangeer answered with feigned anger: Damn your metaphor! You will never do any good to mankind by the lace-trimming of your metaphors. A silly dunghill of laziness!

Haroon said: But, you know. Jahangeer, beautiful flower blossom in those very dung-hills of laziness.

Jahangeer lighted a cigarette and said: No, my dear poet. they do not blossom there. They blossom in the manure heap of your brain. But to hell with this discussion of poetry, Cigarette smoke will not fill the belly. will it? A cat has already started scratching the inside of my stomach. You stay here and look after the baggage. I am going out in search of food.

Haroon was going to say something but Jahangeer shut him up with a threatening gesture and left. Helpless, Haroon made his bed neatly on the platform and lay down.

A summer night full of moon-light. Someone seemed to have put on the heat-ravaged blue body of the sky a tender coating of sandalwood. The sunlight-singed day rested its head on the lap of the cool night and went to sleep. Rows of trees stood like slave-girls fanning it devotedly.

Haroon felt comforted and sleepy. This dusty earth full of want and sorrows appeared to him enchanting in his dreams. Its smile was full of magic, so were its tears, He wanted to press this enchantress to his bosom as if she was a tender slim young girl.

Suddenly he was roughly shaken by Jahangeer. He sat up With a start and saw that Jahangeer's search for food was not in vain. Getting hold of almost everything that Suri was famous for he had put them in a basket and brought them here.

Haroon said: I see that you know more of Suri than I do. So this is what you have done! But if we want to finish all this food we'll have to go on eating till the morning, bidding goodbye to all thoughts of sleep.

Jahangeer said: Anyway, let's make a start. Then we'll see what your luck and my competence can achieve.

After their meal Jahangeer began to pace the platform absentmindedly. This did not surprise Haroon and he made no move to interrupt him. He had heard many people say that Jahangeer was eccentric. that he had a bee in his bonnet. He did not believe it. He was friendly enough with Jahangeer. but never indulged in- any extra curiosity to know more about his friend than what he saw with his eyes and felt with his mind. That was his nature. Besides, he considered it bad taste to try to know more about someone than what the person voluntarily chose to make known. He used to say that curiosity was an ugly thing. To put pressure on someone to say something that he did not want to say was uncivilized. When everybody considered Jahangeer a crazy fellow it was Haroon alone who felt that there was a deep spring of pain in his life which made him live like a vagabond. Haroon had never learnt to look at man's pain lightly or with disrespect. That was why he had never tried to explore and dig into the source of Jahangeer's pain.

He knew nothing of Jahangeer's history, nor did any other student.

After the death of Jahangeer's father his cousins claimed the property of the deceased and instituted a case in court. His intelligent mother squashed the proceedings and put a firm lid over the scandal before it could spread. How she did it was known only to three or four people. Of course it led to the reduction by about one-fourth of their huge income from their very large landed property. Jahangeer's cousins were; not very well off. They were in no position to pursue a big law-suit. So what they got, almost as a windfall, satisfied them and they gave up their original claim. In fact they even admitted in court that Jahangeer was the true son of Khan Bahadur's legally wedded wife. There was not the slightest whisper over it in the entire area owned and administered by the "Tigress-Mistress". Many fumed at heart but there was no fire bursting into flames. Jahangeer also felt his mind poisoned with the smoke but he was not incinerated. That was his consolation and it became a big asset for his life. By this time he would have perhaps gone really crazy, or he might have committed suicide, but the doctrine of liberating his country inspired him to live and kept aloft the flame of his life.. If he had to die he would die only after shedding on the sin of his birth the glorious radiance of a noble life.

When Jahangeer was strolling on the platform, lost in his own thoughts, Haroon quietly left the railway station and went toward the city to while away the time. He found the sight of grief-ridden Jahangeer difficult to bear. Whenever he saw Jahangeer in this mood he felt a sharp stab

of pain in his heart. Today, too, unable to bear the sight he took himself: off from the scene. He passed in front of Jahangeer but the latter did not say a Word to him. He did not even seem to see him. No one but his God knew the whirlpool of pain he was immersed in at that moment.

Walking absentmindedly Haroon arrived at the City centre and found that some of the stores there were still open. He stood in front of a departmental store and remembered that before leaving Calcutta he could not buy any present for his brother and sisters for want of money. Now Jahangeer had not allowed him to pay for his ticket. He did not spend anything enroute, either. That led to a saving of about five taka with which he now bought a cake of soap, a comb, some ribbons for the hair etc. for his young brother and sisters. He did not feel happy with the humble things he purchased With the meagre sum at his disposal. This helpless condition' brought tears to his eyes. Suddenly he recalled something and his mind was at once filled with both joy and sorrow. He had not noticed at first Jahangeer's trunk, but after he did he had no doubt that his friend was carrying therein clothes and other gifts for his brother and sisters. He also understood why Jahangeer had purchased so much food a little while ago. He knew that his brother and sisters, brought up in poverty and want, would be pleased with all these gifts. But he did not feel happy about this gesture of Jahangeer, even though he was his friend. He told himself again and again that it would have been better if Jahangeer had not acted in this way and reminded him of his helpless condition. He suffered in silence and felt miserable. He wandered aimlessly for a long time and then returned to the railway station where he found Jahangeer still restlessly pacing the platform. Without a word Haroon lay down.

The sight of his mad friend seemed to ease the pain in his heart. The tender sympathy and affection of his poetic mind washed away the resentment that had gathered Within him against his friend.

Today for the first time it struck him that Jahangeer was not only more unhappy than him, he was also poorer. He was an absolute pauper. He had nothing.

7

It was hardly dawn when the song of an impetuous cuckoo awakened Haroon from his sleep. He had slept all through the night like one heavily drugged without turning on his side even once. He had many dreams throughout the night, happy and sad, and even now his eyelids were heavy with their residue.

He was suffering from the ailment of an unprecedented joy, the gift of his budding youth, and he found his body and mind taut like the strings of a highly wrought lyre. He felt in his blood the singing of a tumultuous joy as if he had drunk some powerful intoxicant. It seemed to him that today he did not want the ethereal fairy with whom he usually bedecked his bouquet of poetry. Instead, on this summer morning full of the southern breeze and, the song of the cuckoo he longed for a female of this earth in whom all his poems would be finally exhausted.

Suddenly he woke up from his dreams. He saw Jahangeer still pacing the platform. Going close to him he noticed that his eyes were bloodshot and his face, on which the pale gas light weakly fell at this closing hour of the night, looked sad and forlorn. His eyes and face looked like the eyes and face of a murderer after killing with his own hands a person very close to him.

Haroon's poetic mind was like an adolescent girl's, timid as a forest doe, very sensitive. He could not bear the touch of anything harsh and rude. Not to speak of a physical fight, the mere sight of a quarrel made him tremble like a leaf and filled his body and mind with distaste. fear and despair. He prayed with all his heart and asked. God, why this quarrelm this ugly strife, this unrest? When will men become truly men? Oh, God, give them peace! They are making your beautiful creation horrible. They are tearing the flower garden of this earth into shreds like a mad and furious Ravana.

Looking at Jahangeer's terrible mien Haroon somehow managed to say "Jahangeer!" and then fell silent. Apprehending some unforeseen calamity he began to tremble like an aspen leaf. Jahangeer gave a start and asked: What is it. Haroon? He looked around him and said shyly and with some embarrassment: So the day has already dawned! You were frightened, weren't you? It is nothing. This often happens to me.

Somewhat reassured. Haroon said: Did you walk all night like this without a wink of sleep while I slept like a log?

Jahangeer put his left arm around Haroon's neck like a garland and said in a calm voice; It is all right, dear friend. Now let us be off when it is cool and pleasant. Okay? Please have our baggage ready and let me in the mean time go look for the two coolies I arranged for carrying our things.

Jahangeer left. Like one in a trance Haroon started to get the baggage ready, thinking all the while of the great charm of Jahangeer's self-control. He failed to understand how a terribly harsh face like a murderer's could be transformed in a moment into a serene, smiling one. It suddenly struck him that Jahangeer did not want anybody to share his personal sorrow, however close a friend of his he might be. He would not even tell him the whereabouts of his secret temple of sorrow. He was there all alone, a solitary figure. Even the darkness of a pitch-black night would fail to find its way in the darkness of that mysterious sorrow and would have to turn back disappointed ...

Haroon never thought that Jahangeer would be able to walk such a long distance so fast and in such a military style. He almost ran after Jahangeer the whole way and on reaching the border of his own village said, For God's sake, let me rest for a while under this tree! I am nearly done for. God! why didn't you become a mailbag runner? It was no ordinary walk but running in the name of a walking competition! Haroon sat down and began to pant.

Jahangeer lay down full-length and fastening his eyes upward on the tree remarked: How beautiful is this land of yours, my dear. It is not crowded with trees as in East Bengal. A field, then a tract of barren land, some bushes and shrubs and a little forest, far-flung villages, a thin-waisted river-I can't tell you how good I feel. Coming out of the brick-hole of Calcutta the touch of this beautiful pure breeze on my body, oh, it is wonderful! If I had a cottage in your small village by the Bakkeswar river I could spend the whole day tending cows in the company of those young cowherds over there.

Hearing such praise of his birthplace Haroon's heart filled with happiness and pride. Tears rose to his eyes for no reason. Haroon went on looking at his village- mother with his two tear-filled eyes in great love and devotion. Perhaps a tear or two rolled down his cheek. He wanted to gather the dust of this village path into his two hands, smear it on his face and head and make himself holy and pure. But with Jahangeer lying close by he felt too shy to do it. He said to Jahangeer embarrassedly, Look, Jahangeer, why don't you wash your hands and feet in the water of the tank over there? The dust has covered you up to your chest. You are, however, looking beautiful with this reddish-brown coating of dust. As if you were a homeless baul. He cast an adoring glance at Jahangeer's disheveled hair and dress.

Jahangeer, however, was looking with fixed eyes at a beautiful blue bird that sat on the branch of an Arjun tree by the tank. He had never before seen such a beautiful bird. He sat up and said; If I stay here for a month, Haroon, I'll truly become a poet. I think I now understand why such great poets as Joydev and Chandidas were born in this region rather than in any other place.

He lay down again and said: No, my dear, I am not washing off this dust while I am still on the road. This dust of the roads of Bengal, this dust from the feet of the sad suffering travellers of my

motherland-if it covered me not merely up to my chest but right up to my head I would consider myself a blessed one. One must not, my dear, wash off the sacred dust in a hurry.

Casting his glance over the vast sprawling meadow he said: Look, poet, I do not understand much about poetry. I am a rude and rough sort of person. But today looking at this field of yours it seems to me that none of your poets succeeded in writing a better poem than this. Is there anything that can be compared to the poem written on this field in rhythmic lines sometimes in green and sometimes in colours of gold? Can your ink-filled pens produce more crops of flowers than the ploughs of those peasants? Can the greatest poet of your world with all the load of his works stand beside the creation of the unlettered poets of that field?

Haroon stared wonderingly at Jahangeer. Was this the hardcore realist Jahangeer, the worshipper of the materialistic world? But he did not ask him any question. He had never understood Jahangeer. He didn't today, either. He said absentmindedly: You are right, my friend. They are the poets of real flowers while we are only poets of words. When we sit in the darkness of our rooms and weave cobwebs of words like spiders they make the whole land full of beauty and colour with their harvest of flowers. All this wealth, beauty and youth of this earth come from their labour.

Jahangeer said: This makes me think, Haroon. Such power and life-force and yet look at their poor condition! They create happiness for all but for their own part they swim in a sea of pain and misery. They are indifferent to and totally forgetful of themselves. They are not merely poets. Haroon, they are the real men. They are saints who have renounced everything. They deserve to be worshipped.

Jahangeer lifted his two hands and saluted them reverently. Haroon's eyes again filled with tears of love and regard. Was this the same Jahangeer who had looked like a murderer at daybreak today?

The two coolies asked them to get up and hurry. Jahangeer stood up and took from the coolies Haroon's bag and his cane box in his own hand and said: Let's go. Haroon, at his wit's end, looked uncomprehendingly at his friend.

Jahangeer smiled faintly and said: I have done wrong, my friend, by placing one man's load on the head of another man like me. But we have almost arrived at our destination. Can you pay with mere money the price of one's labour or the service rendered by one with his hands? Even if we carry these two men on our heads along with our baggage for the rest of the way our sins will not be expiated ... Today I have seen a new aspect of the pain of man. What I saw all these days on the pages of books I saw today right before me with my two eyes--

Haroon did not understand anything. All that he heard and saw from the moment Jahangeer accompanied him on this trip left him utterly confused. He walked on like a man in a trance.

They entered the village, passed two or three houses and arrived at the dilapidated thatched home of the Haroon's. As soon as Haroon reached the door of his home his two sisters rushed out and greeted him touching his feet. In the excess of their joy they did not see at first Jahangeer standing behind their brother. When they did they bit their tongue in embarrassment and beat a hasty retreat.

Haroon opened the door of the outer room of their home and at once started to make Jahangeer's bed on the rickety bedstead standing there, when Jahangeer, looking at his friend, said With a smile: For God's sake, Haroon, don't be so formal and solicitous. I take it for granted that you are a perfect host and a very hospitable person. But; please, go in and first meet your parents and your brother and sisters.

Haroon was about to leave him smilingly, when his mother with her dress in total disarray came into the room crying loudly: Have you come, my son? Did you bring my palanquin? Have you brought Mina's cycle? Mina will ride his cycle and I my palanquin and we shall go to the graveyard over there. Yes? Mina's cycle! Mina! She threw herself on the ground and began to weep.

Haroon's mother was insane. Haroon had another brother, older to him by two years. He was called Mina. He passed away when he was only thirteen years old. The mother went crazy after his death. Some time ago the father, too, had an attack of small pox. He somehow survived but lost his two eyes for good and became blind for the rest of his life.

As he was dying Mina had continuously Cried out in his delirium, I want to ride a cycle. Please buy me a cycle. Please! The poor mother went crazy but was unable to forget the two Words 'Mina' and 'cycle.'

When Jahangeer thought of how Haroon passed his days with his two sisters, young brother, insane mother and blind father he felt the blood flowing in his veins grow cold. And yet Haroon had never mentioned to him, even once, about his tragic situation.

Haroon felt very embarrassed to see his mother's condition. Jahangeer, unable to stand the scene any longer, however, came forward and touching the lady's feet said, Mother, let's go in.

The mother looked at him with unnaturally bright eyes and cried, Have you come. Mina? Where's your cycle? Where's my palanquin?

Haroon and Jahangeer carried her in and put her into bed.

As Jahangeer was leaving the mother said sobbingly: Are you going, Mina ? Khoka, grab him quickly. Quick! He is running away!

Seeing Jahangeer about to leave the room the two sisters had come in. They held their mother in their arms but as they saw Jahangeer turn back drawn by their mother's cries they again ran out. Haroon said somewhat angrily, You don't have to be such genteel ladies now. He is my friend, Jahangeer. If you can be easy and free before me you can be so before him, too.

This time the girls drew close to their mother and clumsily sat beside her. At a sign from Haroon the two sisters touched Jahangeer's feet and paid their respects to him. Jahangeer said with a smile: How shall I bless you? Shall I say, may God make you queens? Or, shall I pray for something else? As Jahangeer looked up after saying these words he saw a pair of lovely bright eyes like the morning star fixed on his face. He felt a tremor in his bosom and quickly looked away. By then the mother had considerably quietened down. She caressed Jahangeer and indistinctly muttered from time to time, Mina, my child, don't go away. I'll buy you a cycle.

8

It was intolerably hot in the night. Jahangeer woke up early in the morning and immediately started to shout for Haroon from the outhouse, who appeared with sleep-laden eyes and said, What's the matter, Jahangeer? Has anything happened?

Jahangeer said, Oh, God, your country seems to be a veritable oven. From last night to this morning I have sweated enough to fill three buckets!

Haroon smiled, tightened his dhoti, and said, You know, that was why I did not want to go to the inner quarters to sleep. If I were by your side I could at least fan you. While Haroon was saying this, an end of his dhoti again came loose and fell on the ground which made Jahangeer

burst into laughter. It was a bright and beautiful laughter like the wide open morning sky. He said, My dear friend, please take care of your dress first. Let me, in the mean time, take a swim in that dirty tank of yours.

He took out from his cane basket his tea things, lit the stove and placed a kettle of water on it to boil. Then picking up his towel and soap he went up to the tank and jumped into the water. Haroon with a smile on his lips watched his friend swimming. Jahangeer went on swimming and cried to his friend, Haroon, when the water is boiled please ask your sister to make tea for us, will you? Sugar, milk, tea-everything is there in that box. Please don't try to make the tea yourself. You will spoil everything. With these words he took a long dive and at one stretch reached the shore from the middle of the tank. Pushing back his hair with his fingers he said, Did you say that if you were by my side last night you would have fanned me? Well, in that case I would not have the little sleep that I did have. Can you think of a full-blooded adult male lying by your side fanning you? If Maiden Sleep saw it she would run away abashed as fast as she could. The loving ministrations of a male-oh, it is awful!

Haroon laughed, perhaps a little too loudly. Then he said, Watch out, don't drown yourself in the water because of it. I am never going to serve you like that. I am asking Bhuni to make the tea, but, you know, she is not much more experienced than I am in this task. Jahangeer saw that his words were taking a different meaning. He felt slightly embarrassed. But he was a smart boy and did not easily get upset. He said, That may very well be, but if the father cooked our meals instead of the mother it would have tasted much less palatable, wouldn't it? With these words Jahangeer again started to swim.

Haroon went into the inner quarters and said to his sister Bhuni smilingly, Look, Bhuni, Jahangeer has put the kettle on the stove and gone swimming. Go and get the tea ready. You will find everything there-tea, milk, sugar, cups, saucers. Spoons, everything. That's one of his weaknesses. He always carries these things with him.

Bhuni was the elder of the two sisters of Haroon. She was a little over fifteen but looked older for her years. Had a lovely face and very bright eyes. Her whole body seemed to radiate the brightness of intelligence. She hesitated a little to go outside and do his brother's bidding. The room in question was just in front of the tank. Besides, she was not very good at making 'tea;' No one in the family was used to taking tea.

Haroon noticing her predicament said naughtily, Do you know, Bhuni, Jahangeer said that unless you, I mean, one of you, made tea, he would not drink it. He was violently against any member of the male sex cooking or performing any such service. If I made tea he would probably throw it all over my head.

Bhuni was about to go but hearing her brother's words she blushed and said, I can't go, I am sending Momi.

Bhuni's younger sister Momi was like a twelfth-night moon. Not yet fully blossomed like Bhuni. She was standing all this time by their side and listening to what was being said. From the mischievous twinkle in her eyes and the smile on her lips it was clear that she was enjoying the mystery behind the whole affair.

Momi said with feigned anger at her sister's words, Oh, no, I am not going. He asked for you and you have to go.

Bhuni said angrily, Hey, Momi you will get a beating from me if you don't go.

Haroon smiled and said. Come, don't quarrel. Let's all three go. I'll sit by and you will make the tea.

This made Momi happy but as Bhuni proceeded towards the outhouse her shyness was apparent. As she went out and looked at the tank her eyes and Jahangeer's met. Jahangeer looked away but Bhuni couldn't, although she wanted to. When a hunter's flashlight suddenly shone on the eyes of a deer in the forest at night she stood still, amazed and enchanted, and could not take her eyes away from that stream of light. In the same way Bhuni went on staring at Jahangeer's handsome strong lovely naked torso. Although she wanted to yet she could not take off her eyes from there. She did not even seem to have the time to consider that it was not quite proper, that it was wrong. Jahangeer's big chest was heaving from the exertion of the swim. It made his strong muscles ripple and bulge. Now he turned his back toward the bank and began to lather his body with soap but he unmistakably felt the sharp and warm gaze on it of a pair of bright eyes.

It was here that Jahangeer was somewhat shy. He could mix easily with girls. He liked to do it, too. But if any girl looked at him with a steady and sharp gaze he could not lift his own eyes and look at her. He liked girls but he also slighted them. He was afraid of them and his fear had a touch of disrespect in it. He had once gone to the Hazaribagh forest on a hunting trip. One night he was looking for game with his flashlight. Suddenly the light fell on the eyes of a deer and the deer looked at him in that light with such frightened and beautiful eyes that he was unable to fire his gun. Today, too, he deliberately turned his back and began to rub his body with soap. He knew that he could easily kill the deer that looked at him in that way. But he refrained from doing it. He felt a kind of compassion when he saw them. Their eyes knew enchantment. It was better to avoid them. There was nothing manly in killing an enchantress.

Women - he had as much contempt for them as love. They were beautiful enchantresses. The blood in Jahangeer's veins boiled. The muscles of his body grew hard as stone. He thought that he could cruelly kill those creatures with such beautiful eyes. Their eyes were so beautiful yet their hearts were full of such deep deception.

When Jahangeer came out of the water after his bath tea was ready to be served. Bhuni stood up to go into the house. At once her eyes fell on Jahangeer's naked torso. He looked like a marble statue carved by some Greek sculptor. The primitive man on seeing the first sunrise must have looked at its purple glow with eyes of unconcealed wonder. One saw the same gaze now in Bhuni's eyes.

Jahangeer, giving her no chance to feel embarrassed, said, Please, Bhuni, don't run away. Since you have already made the tea don't go -away without serving it to us. Okay? Then he looked at Momi and said, Well, Momi, you haven't yet got to the age to feel so shy and embarrassed. Why are you sitting there like a little baggage?

Momi, in fact, was all this while sitting in a corner like a shy bride about to be given in marriage, Now she giggled, took off her veil, and ran to the inner quarters giggling all the time.

Jahangeer changed his clothes and sitting on the threshold of his room said to Bhuni, All right, now give me my tea.

A spell seemed to have been cast on Bhuni. Like a charmed snake she could neither run away nor raise her hood. She slowly took a cup in her hand and extended it toward Haroon. Then she extended the second cup toward Jahangeer. Her hand was trembling so much that the cup was about to drop from her hand. Jahangeer quickly put forward his hand and in his hurry grasped Bhuni's fingers. To save her from any feeling of embarrassment Jahangeer took a quick sip of his tea and said enthusiastically, Bravo, Bhuni, what an excellent tea you have made.

By this time Bhuni had started to blush furiously. If she had to stay there longer she would perhaps have fainted on the spot. But fortunately she did not have to stay. Her blind father had got up from bed in the mean time. He called Bhuni and she ran away with a sigh of relief.

Haroon was watching the changing emotions in his beloved sister. He began to dream of a rosy future, of days of happy festivity and joy, and of so many other things. Jahangeer sipped his tea and said to Haroon, These kids will surely take some time to prepare breakfast. Why don't we nibble at some biscuits in the mean time?

Haroon did not object, He took a biscuit and continued to sip his tea absentmindedly..

Suddenly Jahangeer caned out loudly, Momi, my tea is finished, Please come out and give me another cup or I won't have any.

Momi was peeping from behind the partition.. She shyly came out, handed Jahangeer his second cup of tea and was about to run off when Jahangeer quickly caught her wrist and said, Unless you sit here and have a cup with us I won't drink my tea. Haroon said with a smile, Why don't you do it, Momi? He is another brother of yours like me. Turning to Jahangeer he said, You don't know her, Jahangeer. She is an imp. Let her grow a little friendly and you will find her make your life miserable with all kinds of pranks. She keeps all of us on our toes, you know.

Jahangeer smiled. Really? In that case, my naughty girl, you must have tea with us. Oh no, you can't escape.

After some time Momi was seen asking Jahangeer question after question, based on her strange ideas about Calcutta. Her questions came so fast that Jahangeer found little time to take his tea.

However, he went on answering her questions undauntedly. The people of Calcutta had no beard. Clothes didn't get dirty there, the parting of their hair was never disturbed. People did not walk in Calcutta. They were men down to their waist, after that there were only four wheels. They had four eyes. The male had neither beard nor moustache. The girls cut their hair short like the boys, while the ,boys kept their hair long like the girls. The men cooked and the women went to see theatre and danced.

When they were talking thus Haroon's younger brother appeared at the outhouse leading his blind father by his hand.

Jahangeer quickly got up and paid his respect to him by touching his feet and said, Last night I couldn't talk to you properly. We are having tea now. Will you have some, sir?

Haroon's, father was delighted. He said, All right. give me some. Let me see what kind of tea Bhuni has made. Was she able to make it? You know. 'we don't take tea in this home. Although at one time I was quite a tea addict like you. He sighed as if he was vainly trying to see with his blind eyes a happy past left far behind.

Jahangeer felt a great wave of pity welling up within him. His tea turned sour to his palate.

After taking one sip of his tea Haroon's father cried out. Bhuni has really made lovely tea! Bhuni! Bhuni!

Bhuni came and stood shyly by the door with her eyes on the floor. She began to twist one end of her sari around her finger. .

Haroon said. There is Bhuni, father. Did you want to tell her something? His father, however. all on a sudden said in a sad voice, No, it is nothing. Where are you, Mubarak?

Mubarakwas Haroon's younger brother. He was a strange lad, Very sober, very quiet. As if all the melancholy of the world had settled on him at his tender age. There was not a ray of joy

anywhere on his face or in his eyes. He looked pale and was thin. One could count his ribs Mubarak was taking tea. He started at his father's call and said in a gentle voice. Here. father. I am taking tea.

Jahangeer said with a smile, Here we are all having tea and. Bhuni. if you don't join us-

Before Jahangeer could say anything more Haroon's father said. Yes. Bhuni. why don't you join us? Your mother is asleep now. isn't she? You don't have to act so shy in front of such a golden boy. Consider him your brother Mina! With these words the father put down his cup and heaved a heart-rending sigh. Bhuni without another word made herself a cup of tea, began to drink it and said. All right. father. here I am taking tea. You finish yours. please.

Jahangeer noticed Bhuni's large limpid eyes full with tears.. He found the scene unbearable. He turned to Momi picked up the clothes and dragged Bhuni with her into the inner quarters, but Mobarak kept sitting where he was. One could hardly say if the gift of clothes pleased or annoyed him. Jahangeer was surprised. He said, What's the matter, Mobarak? Don't you like your clothes? All right, see what else I have brought for you. He took out a football from his trunk and said, Come, take it. We shall play football in the evening. Okay?

Mobarak lifted his sad lacklustre eyes, looked at Jahangeer and said, But I don't play football. In the evenings I take father out for a walk.

Jahangeer's mind was filled with deep sorrow. He felt almost suffocated. How did man survive in the midst of such grief.

After a while Momi reappeared wearing her new silk dress, saluted Jahangeer by touching his feet, and invited them all inside to have breakfast.

As they went in Haroon said with a smile, The green colour has suited you very well, Momi. I can see that Momi has developed a pretty good art sense. He drew attention to the way she wore the dress in the style of the girls of Madras.

Jahangeer. too, smiled and said, Indeed the colour has suited her very well and she has worn the sari in a very attractive way.

Momi took Jahangeer by the hand and pulling him toward the inner quarters said, Oh God. do you think I wore it this way on my own? Bubu has done it all. Please come with me, you'll see how beautiful she looks.

Earlier Momi had used the Bengali word tumi when she asked Jahangeer in to have breakfast. Now she said apni. a more respectful and formal form of address. At this Jahangeer noisily protested and said, Look. you must address me as tumi and call me Dada Bhai. Okay?

Momi widened her eyes and said, My my! How can I address a full blooded adult male in that way in course of only one day?

Everyone burst out laughing and Momi, overcome With embarrassment, ran away. She went in and saw that their mother had woken up from her sleep. When the mother saw Bhuni dressed in glittering new clothes she burst into tears and said.. Are you going away with your husband, Bhuni? How shall I live without you? Your eyes and face are exactly like my Mina's. Please, Bhuni, my darling, do not go away. Tell your husband to live here and make this his home.

Jahangeer was flabbergasted, Haroon quickly went in and said to his sister. Why don't you go out, Bhuni? Before he could say anything else, however, he surveyed Bhuni from head to foot and said smilingly, But, Bhuni, I can't blame mother very much. Even I find it difficult to recognize

you. You are looking just like a bride. Honestly, you are looking extremely beautiful. See? He picked up a mirror and held it in front of her face.

Bhuni turned her face away crying, If you carry on like this I'll take of (everything, I promise. And look here, I Simply cannot go out now. Oh God, why did I put on an these things?

She burst into tears.

Jahangeer cried from the outhouse, Why are you teasing her, Haroon? You are a mischievous one, too.

Haroon laughed and said, Jahangeer, if you want your due greeting of thanks you must come in and get it. She says that she will not appear before you dolled up like this.

When Jahangeer went in with a smile on his face Bhuni glanced at him once and then sitting by her mother hid her face behind a pillow. Jahangeer was bewildered and did not know what to do.

Haroon pushed away the pillow and lifting her face said, Please let him have a good look, Bhuni. Don't deprive him of the greeting whose temptation has brought the poor fellow up to this spot. Get up, touch his feet and pay him your respects.

But as Haroon tried to raise Bhuni from her seat he saw that her face was washed with tears. However, as Bhuni went forward to touch Jahangeer's feet without wiping her tears an unforeseeable thing happened.

All this time Bhuni's crazy mother was watching everything with eyes totally indifferent and unconcerned. It did not appear that she was following anything. But as soon as Bhuni advanced toward Jahangeer to pay him her respects by touching his feet she suddenly got off her bed, took her daughter's hand, placed her hand in Jahangeer's and cried, Son, with God above and you underneath, I give Tahmina into your hands. Please see, any son, that she does not suffer. She is my Mina, the apple of my eye. The mother broke down crying uncontrollably.

No one could have been more surprised if a bolt of thunder had hit them. Haroon, Jahangeer, Bhuni alias Tahmina stood there as if turned into stone.

Suddenly as Jahangeer looked at Bhuni's eyes he gave a violent start. Before he could grab her, Bhuni fainted and fell on his shoulders.

A papiya sitting on the branch of a mango tree in the courtyard began to sing her plaintive carol heart-breakingly.

9

That was how the summer thunderclouds appeared. Thunder struck where the deluge of sorrow prevailed on a dark night of disaster, by a quiet river, a quieter, dilapidated cottage suddenly disappeared.

Haroon, sitting by himself in the courtyard, was thinking over how sorrow could come in the shape of a loving friend.

The blind father heedlessly smoked one pipe of tobacco after another. Perhaps even the spiralling smoke issuing from the womb of a volcano was not so terrifying. Everyone saw when houses burnt. And that fire ended too at one time. But no one saw when one's mind caught fire. And it never came to an end at any time.

Momi had taken off her silk sari. She again got busy with her household chores, dressed in her dull shabby tattered clothes. Such a little girl, and she was trying so hard to hide her .sorrow! When one saw this it was difficult to check one's tears. The whole thing was so sad. Perhaps she did not even realize the whole extent and nature of the catastrophe. She seemed to feel the heavy sighs and the silent tears of some people around her. She did not know what those sighs and that sadness were caused by. What pained her most was the fact that Jahangeer was preparing to leave for Calcutta this very day.

The crazy mother was sleeping soundly in supreme indifference and peace like crazy fate herself.

Bhuni sat still in all her finery of the morning like a stone idol. Haroon once asked her in a whisper to take off her ill-omened clothes, but Bhuni replied in a tear-choked voice. Please let him leave first. then I'll take these off for the rest of my life, dear brother. Haroon dared not say another word.

It was early afternoon. Jahangeer had packed his things and was standing quietly in the courtyard of Haroon's home when Bhuni called out to Haroon from the inner quarters and asked him to come in for a minute.

Both Jahangeer and Haroon had an uncanny premonition.

Bhuni boldly came out in her bridal dress, looking serene and composed, and said to his father, Father. would you please go to the outhouse for a while?

It was no request but a command. It seemed that the blind father knew and understood all that was going on. He called out to Mobarak, sighed deeply and left for the outhouse.

A fear clutched at Jahangeer's heart. Was the daughter, too, going crazy like the mother? Standing on the courtyard he began to sweat. Not for himself but for this poor girl.

As far as he was concerned he had given himself up into the hands of the Lord of his life, patiently waiting to see what kind of a game He played with it. Today also he would accept from Him whatever thunderbolt He chose to hurl at him.

Bhuni turned to Haroon and said, Can I have a word with your friend, brother?

Haroon stared with amazement at Bhuni but she said as firmly as before, I can understand what is worrying you, brother. But there is nothing to worry about. Believe me, no one can understand better than I about what .is good for me and what is not. I am your sister, amn't I? Trust me. I shall do no wrong. I only want to know about the final end of my misfortune.

Haroon's eyes filled with tears. Unable to say anything he left, wiping away his tears, and lay down at the feet of his mother.

Bhuni looked at Jahangeer and said in a husky voice, I have something to say to you. Would you come in and take a seat, please?

Jahangeer moved like an automaton and obeyed her instruction.

Bhuni bent over, sat at Jahangeer feet, and raising her two large tearfilled eyes said, Are you going away now?

Jahangeer did not try to move his feet away. He behaved most naturally and without showing any sign of embarrassment said in a calm and gentle voice. Yes. dear. I am going away

After a short pause he added. .. God has heaped misery after misery on my head. I don't mind it. But when its flame sears someone else I can't bear it any more. I came here to forget my sorrow. but I did not know that my sorrow would grow beyond all proportion and destroy somebody else's home.

Bhuni smiled strangely. Without raising her face she said. Is it really true? Can rich people like you ever feel the sorrow of other people?

Jahangeer was hurt, He said. Why do you say that. my dear? Even if we are rich as you say. we are also human beings. At least I have not yet demonstrated in any way that I do not possess a heart.

Bhuni smiled sadly and said. You haven't till now. but you will. later. Well, you are noble. you are kind. and perhaps that's why you are running away in such a hurry. But you came here by your free will. You will leave, too, by your free will. What is there for anyone to say about it? But can you tell what will happen to me ? Once again she raised her two large tear-filled pleading eyes to Jahangeer.

Jahangeer remained silent for some time. Then he said. I can understand, Bhuni, that a catastrophe has taken place today. But will you, too, accept today's big lie as the truth? I am not running away, I am going away to avoid this awkward situation of shame and embarrassment. Perhaps you do not know how great a friend of mine is Haroon. I did not know that such a disgrace would befall you through me. But I am sure you know that none of us is guilty of any crime. If there is any criminal in this case it is my misfortune.

Bhuni stood up and said. The misfortune is not yours alone. it is mine. too. The fire-setter never knows how much of what he sets fire to get burned. But let it go. However, perhaps you do not know that what you dismissed a moment ago as a big lie is the greatest truth of all to me. You will say that my mother is crazy. But still she is my mother. We are women. Perhaps' we believe everything blindly. Unless God had a hand in it such an unthinkable accident could not have been caused by my crazy mother. She paused for a moment and added, Let me tell you frankly. My mother has given me into your hands. There is no greater truth for me than that.

It seemed to Jahangeer that the sun and the moon and the stars had all disappeared from the face of the earth. He seemed to be falling down down down into the depth of an abysmal darkness.

But that was only for a moment. Soon he recovered himself. But before he could say anything Bhuni smiled faintly and said. I know what you are going to say. The way a condemned prisoner waits to hear the sentence of his hanging-I, too, am waiting to hear something cruel and harsh from your lips. And I am ready for that. Still I said what I had to say, I am sure you are thinking that I am mad or a very strange sort of person. right? Again a plaintive smile like the setting moon played about her lips.

At last Jahangeer cast his steady gaze on Bhuni and at once his own eyes grew dull with pain. The momentary meeting of their glances seemed to tell Jahangeer that he could gladly give away his all for those two eyes of Tahmina. Suddenly his hidden wounded pride rose up within him like a lion awakened from its sleep. Their eyes were like those of a forest deer. They were enchantresses like the deer yet they were creatures to be hunted. There was no manliness in killing them. there was no shame either. It seemed to him that he was not Jahangeer - he was simply the son of drunken characterless Mr. Farrokh.

Jahangeer said with a slightly crooked smile, Your mother is crazy. Bhuni, but I don't think you are. If it were someone else I would have called her shrewd instead of garrulous and smart. but even the butcher that I am I cannot call you that. It is my fate, you know. All who brought

disaster to my life were strange creatures. one way or another. But let's not talk of that. A moment ago you said that you were waiting like a condemned prisoner to hear about the verdict of his hanging. Well. if I now condemn you to life-long exile will you be able to take it? Jahangeer burst into a heartless roar of laughter with these words.

For a moment Bhuni shivered in her heart of hearts but she immediately brought herself under control. She bent low, touched Jahangeer's feet with her hands. and said quietly. In that case I bow down my head and accept your verdict. She started to go back into the inner quarters, paused and said, You have seen many strange creatures in your life. It seems that you have also had the glory of killing such creatures. Now you have seen another one. But please remember that those whose trade is to kill animals have one day to repay their debt at the hands of those very wild creatures. With these words she left, holding her head erect like a queen.

Jahangeer called out rather loudly. Listen to my last word, Tahmina, otherwise you will have to undergo untold suffering because of me.

Bhuni replied from inside, Tell it to me from there. I can hear your shout quite clearly.

Though angered by these taunting words, Jahangeer by his amazing power of self-control said as gently as possible, So you think that I do not believe in love and I do not trust any woman. It seems to me that someone has taught you these things or they are the undigested result of having read too many novels. You know, the whole race of you should be banished. Right beyond the seas!

Bhuni reappeared with a plate of sweets and a glass of water. Placing them before Jahangeer she said in a composed tone, You have a bitter tongue. But since you have decided to leave; at least have some sweets before you go. She suddenly smiled and added, You must excuse us, we have to sweeten your bitter mouth with your own sweets. You know how poor we are. Besides, we are rustics. We are unable to soften the pungency of your rich landlord's palate with any homemade sweetmeat.

She got up and said, Please finish the plate. Let me go and get some pan for you.

Jahangeer without another word began to eat the sweets placed before him like an obedient boy. He said to himself again and again that he had never known before that sweets could be so sweet. Perhaps he would never have this feeling again in his life. But this woman, this free and outspoken young woman, where did she come from? This flower of the wild woodlands had so much beauty, such wonderful fragrance! What a gem of a kohinoor lay hidden in a coal mine! Jahangeer seemed to lose his senses. He was not Jahangeer any more. He was not the son of pleasure-seeking Mr. Farrokh. He was the hero of the Age of Chivalry, a cultured and civilized youngman of the twentieth century. He could not disgrace such a noble lady. Unconsciously he uttered: Tahmina! Tahmina!

Bhuni was coming with pan on a plate. Surprised at Jahangeer's unnatural tone she came up to him and said, Did you call me?

An embarrassed Jahangeer lowered his head and said, No! He was surprised to hear his own voice. He never knew that his voice had so much honey in it.

Bhuni said with great tenderness, Excellent! So you have taken all the sweets like a good little boy. You see, you have a very bad temper. Perhaps you suffer from some disease. For God's sake, when you return to Calcutta do consult a physician. She gave a laugh and added: I was really wondering, how could a man who distributed sweetmeat so generously have such a sour temper? Please, let me get you some more sweets. Don't say 'no, please! It will be nearly midnight before you reach Calcutta. Driven by hunger, you will probably murder someone on the way! By

God, what a temper you have! She gave Jahangeer a loving look and saw that he was thrusting one betel leaf after another into his mouth.

Bhuni cried like a young girl in a light tone: My, my! What have you done! Spit out the pan! You wont? Suddenly she sounded tired like a long-ailing patient. You have banished me for good, she said. From what I have known of you by now I am absolutely certain that we shall not meet ever again. She paused and blushing like a red ripe apple added, If we really got married today I could not have told you so many things, and in this fashion, in one whole year. But dark days make people shameless--- I have to satisfy all the desires of, my life in one moment. Perhaps there is no woman in the world as unfortunate as I am except Sakina of Karbala. She broke into a sob and quickly went away. It seemed to Jahangeer that he was no longer on this mortal earth. Perhaps he was dreaming. All his limbs had turned into stone at somebody's curse. He could neither move nor utter a word. However, his surprise knew no bounds when he saw Bhuni return after awhile with another plate of sweets and place it before him. He felt that someone was casting a spell on him and making him a captive in this mansion of mystery. He was the hero of all the legends of all the countries of this world, the Prince Charming! Suddenly like one in a trance he said. Tahmina, will you come With me? I do not know if you are Sakina of Karbala or Tahmina of Shistan. Will you come with me? Tell me!

No! said Bhuni With great firmness and pride. Jahangeer's dream was shattered. He looked fixedly at Bhuni for a long time. As if they would never be satiated, .alas. his hungry sceptical eyes! Yet he asked after a while. Why not? Didn't you say that your mother gave you into my hands and that there was no greater truth for you than it ?

Bhuni said in an undertone, I still say it. Yet I can't go with you in this way. I am not so presumptuous as to give advice to you, But however deep and great is the truth in my own mind we have to get it approved in the eyes of the society, otherwise no one Will be happy.

Jahangeer pondered over something for a long time and said in a trembling voice, Please forgive me. Bhuni. I was speaking wildly so long. There is perhaps no one in this world more unfortunate than the marl who does not believe in love. There is no happiness for "him in anything anywhere. You will never be happy with me, nor I with you. In fact I shall be happy with no woman. |

cannot even believe in the truth that I see before my eyes. I cannot trust it. My blood seems to tell me endlessly that it is false, it is false, it is mere deception.

I have caused you great pain unknowingly, but you know how little is my guilt in the whole thing. If some day I can be of any service to you, any little thing, I shall consider myself a blessed one and feel that I have done some penance for my unintentional crime. Please keep only ,this in mind and forget everything else. His voice nearly choked. He quickly got up and added, Let me say goodbye now.

Bhuni said in a broken voice, Please wait a second. Take back the clothes that you gave. I am bringing them right away.

Jahangeer was about to leave. He turned back and said: I sentenced you to banishment, didn't I? Let those clothes be your prisoner's dress.

Tahmina cried like a stricken dove and sobbed: No, no, I wont be able to bear such a heavy punishment. You are heartless, please sentence me to death but don't condemn me to banishment!

Two papiyas were at that moment singing from a tree in the courtyard, vying with each other as if their life depended on it: Piyu kahan. Piyu kahan! Chokh gelo. Chokh gelo! Where is the lover gone! Where is the lover gone! I am going blind! I am going blind!

10

Jahangeer left for Suri on a bullock-cart a little before sunset. Perhaps at no other time did the sadness of the evening descend on the Haroon household in this fashion.

When Bhuni came to her senses the first prayer that rose from the depth of her heart was this: O earth, split and let me hide for ever in your bosom.

Was she in fact crazy like her mother? How else could she say all those things like a shameless woman? Let this darkness of the evening never come to an end. She would never be able to see light of the day again.

No one lighted the evening lamp. No one asked for lights either. As if the light of the lamp would only heighten the pain and ignominy of their shame.

Each member of the household felt that he or she had committed a crime against the other.

And the crazy mother's wails were mingled with her wild cries: Oh, my Mina, my darling boy! Why did you come for a moment and then go away?

Haroon sat by himself on the bank of the pond and thought over all that had happened in the course of the day. Clearly Jahangeer had no fault. But was that entirely correct? Why did he in the first place want to visit a poor fellow's home? And if he came and accidentally a mishap took place why did he go away: without remedying it? They might be poor but they were inferior to none in regard to family prestige. And Bhuni, that beautiful and highly intelligent girl, was she unfit to be his wife? He went away slighting her. He trod under his feet a heavenly bouquet. Was he a man who could do that? It was well that the whole thing turned out this way. She would have been like a string of pearls spread before a swine. But what would happen to Bhuni now? He had heard everything of what she said to Jahangeer. He knew Bhuni very well. She would break but not bend. He was afraid that his blind father would not survive this shock and would die now.

Suddenly he remembered Jahangeer's parting words. Just before he left he had taken Haroon aside and said to him, Listen, Haroon, if you knew everything about me you wouldn't yourself want to give your sister in marriage to me. When Haroon insisted on learning everything, he had said, I don't want to tell you everything, my dear brother, perhaps I myself do not know everything about me. But if I tell you of the little for which I alone am directly responsible perhaps your blood will freeze in fear. I am a revolutionary!

Haroon gave a violent start like a man who had suddenly stepped on a cobra while walking leisurely. He asked hoarsely, What did you say, Jahangeer? You are a revolutionary?

It was true, though, that Haroon had no clear idea about what kind of a terrible animal a revolutionary was. And he was so afraid because he had no clear knowledge of it. Besides, Haroon was timid from his childhood. Even now he was afraid of sleeping alone at night in a room. So when he saw today before his eyes a revolutionary he thought that he had seen a ghost. In his imagination he thought of the revolutionaries as belonging to an ethereal genre who were beyond one's touch and smell, who, not to speak of ordinary mortals, 'could not be seen even by the men of the CID, who wandered in the sky and suddenly fell on somebody's head like a thunderbolt. Haroon trembled all over and said. But Jahangeer. revolutionaries are terrible people. You are not terrible!

Jahangeer laughed: Don't be frightened. Haroon. The revolutionaries are normal ordinary people. just like you and me. They are no tigers of the jungle. And if you really considered them such you should be the first person to object to this marriage. But do you know what the real difficulty is? We cannot marry. We are not supposed to many.

Haroon. nonplussed. stared vaguely at Jahangeer's face.

Suddenly Jahangeer sounded harsh: I did not know. Haroon. that you were such a timid fellow'. I think I have not done right by disclosing to you this identity of mine. We are truly more fierce than the tiger but it is only With regard to traitors. If what I told you is ever revealed then. my dear friend- With these words Jahangeer produced a weapon from under his shirt whose sight made Haroon tremble like a falling bamboo leaf.

However. the next moment Jahangeer drew Haroon into his arms and said with a smile: I hope this will never be needed, my friend. Well, I have caused you all a good deal of pain. If I can repay some day even a fraction of it my feeling of guilt will diminish to some extent--- And. look. if you try a little Bhuni will forget everything. After all, she is nothing but a child. Besides, when the mother is crazy her children generally become oversensitive and sentimental. However, the hopeful thing is that such sentiments do not last long on this dusty earth of ours.

Haroon found the cruelty and harshness of Jahangeer's ,last words rather painful, yet he managed to say in a dry tone: All right. Then let's say goodbye. I hope we shall still be friends after this.

Sure, said Jahangeer and got into the cart.

Haroon wondered: How could a man be at once so good and so bad!

Just then he heard his blind father call him, which brought his nightmare to an end. Coming inside the home he said in a somewhat loud voice: What's the matter? Won't we have any light in our home tonight?

Bhuni got up and went to light the lamp. Haroon sat by his father in the courtyard and asked, Did you call me, father?

The blind father said wearily, Yes. He paused and added, What shall we do now? Have you decided anything? .

Haroon gently said, What is there to decide, father? His father said excitedly: So you think there is nothing to be done? Perhaps that is true for you. But I have surely something to do. I am a father and I can't see my daughter ruined before my eyes. Tomorrow I'll write to Jahangeer's mother telling her everything. Let me see what she does. Then I'll do what I have to do.

Haroon pleaded: No father, you can't do that. It will serve no purpose except lowering our prestige.

The blind father was lost in his thoughts for a long time. At last he said, You are right, son. But I don't see any other way beside that. You know, Haroon, the kind of girl Bhuni is, do you think that anybody can now give her in marriage to anyone else? From what I have heard from you Jahangeer's mother is, I think, an intelligent woman and kindhearted, too. If she hears my sad tale she will surely talk to her son and make him solve this problem.

Haroon said: You don't know Jahangeer, father. Leave alone his mother, not even his God would be able to move him.

Haroon's father protested impatiently: Will you stop, Haroon? You don't understand these things more than I do. If Bhuni's fate is sealed, let it be sealed for good. But let me see the limit of my sorrow. And then, after all, God is overhead and the grave underneath.

11

Jahangeer was riding a bullock-cart for the first time in his life. When Jahangeer had positively refused to permit the insult of another human being, that is a coolie, to carry on his head his baggage and insisted on taking on his own head the cursed load of his aristocracy Haroon had hired a bullock-cart for him and persuaded him to take it.

Though Jahangeer's city-bred mind at first demurred to ride a bullock-cart, he finally agreed. Curiosity also played a part in his decision.

Haroon said with a laugh. I hope your humanitarian instinct with regard to the cow has not yet become terribly strong.

Jahangeer replied with a laugh. No, friend. The Bengali intelligence has not yet been clouded to that extent. They have never prayed to the monkey and the cow. Those two creatures reign as gods outside Bengal.

However, after covering about two miles on the bullock-cart all Jahangeer's curiosity and enthusiasm disappeared. The cart rolled over the uneven village path at a speed of about one mile an hour and made such strange sounds and raised such a cloud of dust that his patience gave way and he found it impossible to sit inside it any longer. Many years ago he had an attack of dengue fever when he suffered from a severe ache all over his body. It seemed to him now that compared to what he was undergoing now it was nothing. Unable to stand it any longer he got down from the cart and at once the poor driver asked politely. What's the matter, sir? Why did you get off?

Jahangeer smiled: It is not willingly that your 'sir' is getting off. Your cart has compelled him to do so.

The driver stopped the cart and said. Please get in. sir. I shall make the cows go fast. They are a very naughty pair of animals. sir. Might throw us into a ditch any time. Otherwise I would have made them run much faster.

Jahangeer laughed: Well, make them run as fast as you can. I would rather walk for a while. He started to walk behind the cart slowly.

It was a lonesome dusty rural path. Barren fields lay on both sides. The whole scene was like a plaintive beloved pining for her lover. In the distance stood a village shaded by trees. Put to sleep by the lullabies sung by the cicadas it looked like a child sleeping in the arms of its mother. A strange melancholy and a feeling of detachment filled his mind.

It seemed to him that he was a Baul. that he was wandering from place to place. singing and searching the unknown. All those who crossed his path in the guise of his acquaintances and near ones had really nothing to do with him. The sad indifferent detached girl he was looking for was the unknown and- unknowable girl of these villages. She could be felt but her boundless entity could not be grasped within the limits of physical beauty.

Just then the driver addressed his two poor cows in such language and started to shout so loudly that Jahangeer's dream snapped in a moment. Convulsed with laughter he sat down on the dusty road. After a while as he proceeded on his way he wondered why this land produced so many mendicants and minstrels and wandering bards. This serene quiet country-side like a saint

steeped in his meditation seemed to hint at man to dive into his bottomless inner depth. The lure of these lonesome fields made one constantly forget one's home. filled one's mind with an undefinable melancholy tune and turned one into an eternally wandering sojourner.

Up till now whenever he thought of Bhuni his mind was darkened by a cloud of mistrust. But moving through the quiet fields in the calm of the evening it now seemed to him that he could perhaps live with her in a peaceful quiet village like this and turn his humble cottage into a paradise. But, no, it could never be. The sin of his father had sullied his blood. Any moment he might turn into a lustful brute like his father. He knew very well how hard he had to try to quell the restlessness of his blood and control his wildly fierce instincts. His tone of voice, his physique, his blood-everything was a legacy of Mr. Farrokh. What little of Jahangeer was in it could not withstand their onslaught. If it was his fate to commit sin, to sacrifice himself before the altar of bestiality, he would do so alone and not make anyone else a partner in his sin.

As he thought of his father his blood went into his head. He dizzily took out his revolver hidden under his shirt and pointed it to his forehead. After a second, however, he placed it back where it was and began to walk at a firm and brisk pace leaving the bullock-cart far behind.

Before leaving the cart behind him he threw an angry glance at the driver and said, You bastard, if you don't drive fast I'll kill you and bury your dead body in this wood!

The driver, terribly frightened, drove as fast as he could, trying to keep up with Jahangeer, whose contorted face and bloodshot eyes suggested that if he so desired he could really murder the driver then and there.

When they arrived at Suri it was nearly midnight. The driver said tearfully; The cows will not probably live, sir. They are nearly dead, sir. All the way I beat them and drove them like a hurricane.

Jahangeer, without a word, gave him a five-taka note, unloaded his baggage and carried them himself to the railway platform. The poor driver could not make any head or tail of this strange person. He wanted to leave as quickly as possible without any further trouble. Suddenly Jahangeer called him and said, Hey, wait a minute. Standing under a lamp-post he began to write a letter.

After finishing the letter he said to the driver. Listen, if you can hand this letter to Bhuni without letting anyone know I'll give you a tip often taka. Can you do it? -

The driver was flabbergasted. He looked blankly at Jahangeer's face who said urgently, Come on, don't stare at me like an idiot. You know Bhuni, don't you? Haroon's sister?

The driver said in a shaking voice, Of course I know her. She was a little child till the other day and grew up to be a big girl before our very eyes.

Jahangeer went near him and lowering his voice said, You'll have to get this letter to her. Do you understand? Don't you have a daughter or some one like that in your home? Send the letter through her. Can you do it?

The driver thought for a moment and said, Yes, sir. I can. Give it to me.

Jahangeer gave him the letter with a ten taka note and said, You will find me here tomorrow at sunset. Bring me the reply and you will get another ten taka, understand? The driver sounded very happy: You are my father and mother, sir. I'll be here tomorrow at sunset. Your honour will be here, won't you? Jahangeer said yes and absentmindedly went into the station. As he entered the waiting room. however, he gave a start. A man dressed in European clothes was

peacefully smoking a cigar reclining in an easy chair. Jahangeer looked at him carefully and then going up to him said. You are here. Promot-da!

Promotto, too. started. He saw Jahangeer and said with a smile. Hush! No one called Promot-da has come here. Casting a cautious glance all around him he said. Come, sit here, But how come that you are here'? Jahangeer told him everything.

After hearing him out Promotto laughed and said, So you are gallivanting like a hero of a novel. But you have not done right by coming here, Jahangeer. Anyway, go to Calcutta right away. A train will be here in a few minutes.

Jahangeer was surprised. He asked, And what about you?

Promotto said, Again questions? I have a business somewhere else. Jahangeer had no difficulty in guessing the nature of that business. He also knew that he could not ask any more question about it. Yet he said in a round-about way: But I have to be here till tomorrow, Promot da. I am sorry, I mean, Mr. Chakladar.

Promotto laughed, So you have noticed my name on my suitcase! But, look, even the walls have eyes and ears. Talk very carefully, Okay? But why do you want to stay here? You don't have to worry on my account.

Jahangeer smiled. You can say that, but we do worry about you. Then he added with his eyes lowered, I'll get the reply to my letter tomorrow. Promotto did not smile. He looked at Jahangeer and considered something for a long time. Finally he said slowly, All right, stay then. But be very careful. Spies are already active. However, you don't have to worry. They have not yet started to suspect muslim youths. Yet you cannot be too' careful!

Promotto again was lost in some deep thought. After some time he said. Look. Jahangeer, do you have an achkan and a pajama, the usual dress of an aristocratic muslim?

Jahangeer said: Yes. I have. Promotto said, Go and bring them here at once. He looked at his watch and said. There is not much time left. Hurry!

When Jahangeer brought the clothes Promotto went into the bathroom. After some time he came out dressed in those clothes, making Jahangeer laugh aloud and say: Adab Arz, Maulvi Sahab. Apke Isme Sharif? What's your name, reverend sir?

Promotto with a gesture of complete assurance sat down and said, Don't worry. Now you better come with me. We have to go somewhere.

After some time when Jahangeer came out leaving his baggage in the custody of the station master he found Promotto standing before a motor car dressed in the garb of a sanyasi, a holy man. The two of them got into the car and at once it moved off at lightning speed.

Jahangeer said, May I ask. Promot-da, what I'll have to do?

Promotto smiled and said, I wouldn't have told anyone else, but since it is you I am telling you. We are going to a village fairly far away. We have some arms stored there. I just got the news that the police have learnt about it. We must remove those arms to another spot before sunrise. That is Bojropani's order to me.

Jahangeer did not ask any more questions. He felt terribly excited. However, after a few moments. he suddenly blurted, If we encounter the police enroute?

Promotto made no answer. from time to time he looked at the road through the window. Suddenly he asked the car to be stopped at one place. He gave a short whistle. Immediately four or five people ran out of the darkness toward the car. They got in without a word and the car sped forward.

About an hour later they entered a village and stopped before a mud-hut surrounded by bamboo clumps. Jahangeer saw in the dim starlight. that as soon as the car came to a halt a woman came out and stood at the door. Promotto greeted her by touching her feet.

At a sign from Promotto all the rest got down and saluted the lady one by one. Jahangeer, too, greeted her, but a little reluctantly.

However, when they got into the room and when Jahangeer saw the radiant features of the noble lady he scolded himself for his reluctance a moment ago to pay his respects to her.

She would be no more than thirty-six or thirty-seven. She had a clean white borderless sari on. The colour of the sari seemed to merge with the colour of her skin. Her hair was cut short. coming only upto her neck. A few strands of loose hair fell around her face and forehead. Her eyes were large, but seemed to be too sharp and bright.

One could hardly look at them steadily. As if the on-looker's eyes would be dazzled. Her face was firm, glorious, like a man's.

Jahangeer said to himself, If women are serpents you are the Serpent-queen! Interrupting his thoughts

Promotto said in a low voice, I don't think you know them all. Joyoti-di?

Jahangeer murmured to himself: You are truly Joyoti Devi. You have conquered all. Perhaps for the first time in his life he regarded a woman with true respect. Joyoti Devi was surveying everybody with her penetrating eyes. Looking at Jahangeer she said, I don't think I have met this boy before.

Promotto said, He is a wandering boy, didi. Off the beaten track. He IS no member of our group.

Everybody stirred restlessly at these words of Promotto. Only Joyoti Devi stared at Jahangeer with wide wondering eyes. All on a sudden she asked, Is your mother alive?

Yes, answered Jahangeer. Joyoti Devi continued to stare at him. She seemed, more surprised than before.

Promotto smiled, Didi, you are probably thinking why does he look like such a vagabond, driven away by Dame Fortune, with his mother alive? He is really an unfortunate one. But I took him into our party precisely because he had the guts to drive Dame Fortune away from his door.

Joyoti's sharp eyes grew soft with affection. She said tenderly, Please call me auntie instead of didi. Okay? With these words she left the room.

Tears welled up in the eyes of all but Jahangeer. They understood the import of her request. Joyoti's younger sister had died at child-birth. Joyoti took charge of the new-born and brought up the boy. She named him Pinakpani. Everybody called him Pinaki. Last year he was hanged, charged with complicity in political conspiracy.

The day Pinaki was hanged Joyoti took a ritual bath in the Ganges, put on a bloodred dress, went to Bojropani and turned herself into a consecrated fighter for the freedom of her native land. Today she was a symbol of power and strength for the revolutionaries.

After Joyoti spoke to Jahangeer everyone including Promotto noticed that there was some clear similarity between Jahangeer and Pinaki. Pinaki was greatly loved by all the members of the revolutionary party. He was the youngest member of them all. Besides, he was always the first to volunteer for the most daring operations. He wanted to wrap Death around him like a purple scarf! On the day of his hanging everybody including Bojropani had wept like a child.

Before the execution the magistrate asked him, Do you want to see anyone?

Pinaki smiled and said: I do, but you Can't present him to me.

The magistrate looked at his childlike face and said, Sure I can. Tell me, who do you want to see?

Pinaki, his face radiant with the same sweet smile, said: I want to see the freedom of India. Can you show it to me?

The magistrate immediately took off his hat, saluted the boy and said tearfully: I salute you, boy. The scaffold alone can show due honour to deathless heroes like you. Life does not have enough riches to pay proper homage to a hero of your stamp.

Tonight when they heard Joyoti Devi make her strange request to Jahangeer everyone recalled that scene again.

After some time Joyoti came back and said, Go and get busy with your job. All of you. Only leave this boy behind, I want to talk to him for a while.

Promotto went away with the other boys. Jahangeer, left alone, felt a little uneasy.

Joyoti coming close to him said. Let me call you Pinaki. yes? Her voice seemed to choke.

Now all the mystery before Jahangeer's eyes vanished He realised why Joyoti Devi had requested him to call her auntie.

Tears welled up in his eyes. too. Soon large drops began to roll down his cheeks. Suddenly he asked using the familiar tumi. Are you the aunt of the great hero Pinaki ?

Hearing her addressed in that familiar and affectionate fashion even an iron-lady like Joyoti broke down.

Kissing Jahangeer's head she said. Yes. son. I am that unfortunate woman. After a short pause she added. You resemble Pinaki a lot.

Jahangeer smiled and said, You are not unfortunate. auntie. you are very fortunate. But let's not talk of that. But. you see. I have inadvertently touched you. Won't you have to bathe again?

Joyoti turned blue with pain and said. Don't say it. son. It is a sin even to hear such talk. When any scripture provides such a humiliating rule that a human being must take a bath because he has been touched by another human being it inevitably leads to great misfortune. I do not know what caste you belong to. But even if you were a scavenger I would not have hesitated to touch you. One's birth is decreed by fate. The day I start hating a person because he belongs to a

different caste my pledge to freedom would lose all its meaning. Besides. you are all burning flames. Your touch purifies all profane things.

Jahangeer, amazed, looked at Joyoti's face and said. If this is how we honestly feel then. I tell you, auntie, that it is our greatest weapon. And on its strength alone we can free India without any bloodshed.

Just then Joyoti's only daughter who was asleep in the other room woke up and called out to her mother. Joyoti asked her to come over and said. Come and see a new dada of yours has arrived.

Champa. in somewhat disheveled clothes, went up to her mother and asked, Where is he, mother? Immediately her eyes fell on Jahangeer and she grew embarrassed.

Joyoti said smiling sadly. He looks a lot like Pinaki, doesn't he? At the mention of Pinaki's name Champa's eyes filled with tears. She raised her tear-washed eyes to Jahangeer. came up to him and after saluting him respectfully said to her mother; What shall I call him, mother?

Joyoti laughed: What will you call your brother? Call him dada. Champa, abashed, hid her face behind Joyoti. Jahangeer saw that Champa was like the nearly full moon of the fourteenth night. All on a sudden he remembered Bhuni ,,,, They were truly enchantresses.

They laid their magic net before the path of all welfare. They were the thorns on the road, the brigands of the highway. Quietly he came out and stood on the courtyard. In the distance, over the dark woods, he saw the moon going down with her pale face. And the eastern sky was already beginning to glow anticipating the rise of a new day's sun.

12

On his return to Calcutta Jahangeer found two to three telegrams waiting for him. One was from the manager of their estate. two from his mother. When his loving mother got no reply to two consecutive telegrams she sent the third one. a reply-paid telegram. She hinted in the last one that if Jahangeer failed to reply to it she would herself come to Calcutta with the manager and catch hold of him.

Jahangeer's mother had no idea that her son was a committed revolutionary and that he was sometimes away from Calcutta on his missions. So she had concluded that Jahangeer was either ill or was not replying to her telegrams intentionally.

From the date of the last telegram Jahangeer realised with some apprehension that it too had come two days ago. He was particularly surprised to notice that his telegrams had been opened by someone. His efforts to find out who did it went in vain. Finally he guessed who the culprits were. He lay down on his dusty bed, began to smoke a cigarette and started to sing at the top of his voice: "The eyes cannot see you, for you rest. between the eyes."

At that hour all but Mr. Crocodile had gone out to work or to the college. So there was no one to ask Jahangeer any embarrassing question about his absence from Calcutta. It was only Mr. Crocodile who came shaking his tummy in front of him but the utterly devastated appearance of Jahangeer frightened him. He stood still benumbed by Surprise, pity and sadness.

Realizing the situation Jahangeer solemnly slapped Mr. Crocodile on his tummy as if it was a soft round pillow and said, Why are you gaping at me like that? I am Uljhulul, not your Wife's sweet little younger sister.

Jahangeer held out his cigarette case to Mr. Crocodile and released a cloud of smoke into his face.

On any other day Mr. Crocodile would have suitably retaliated but today he patiently submitted to all torture. He had rushed to Jahangeer hoping to ask him many questions but the look on the latter's face made him forget everything. He had known Jahangeer for a long time, yet Jahangeer seemed to him to be the magical prince of a wonderland. One could only look at him.. To try to understand him was in vain. Or he was insane.

Mr. Crocodile continued to ponder and smoke. Jahangeer, too, asked no question. He felt very sleepy. He had spent three sleepless days and nights in his attempts to throw dust into the eyes of the police. He knew that the slightest negligence on his part would endanger not only his own life but the lives of several other youngmen. He had moved from one place to another under Various disguises, but now he seemed to be too tired to sustain himself any longer.

He was particularly upset by his mother's telegrams. What if she arrived in Calcutta in person? Also, why this insistent request to him to go to Comilla? His mother knew very well that he was neither willing nor able to lend a hand in the management of their landed property.

Mr. Crocodile completed the funeral rites of three cigarettes almost in one puff and suddenly said, Hey, will you have some tea?

Jahangeer at once jumped up and said, Oh, yes! He fondled Mr. Crocodile's beard and kissed him.

Mr. Crocodile left with a warm smile. When he returned with tea he saw that Jahangeer had started to shave. He picked up his cup with his chin half-shaved, sipped the tea, and said, Look at my face! With no shave for the last seven days it looks like a just-harvested paddy field. He haw-hawed, ran his hand over his chin and said, It is like dragging a thorny clump over the stubbles of a just harvested field. And again he burst into his uproarious laughter. At last Mr. Crocodile heaved a sigh of relief and said: Umph! I think the cloud has blown over at last. Thank God for the discovery of tea. Who else could appear in the saviour's role in such calamities? Mr. Crocodile broke into a shrill raucous laughter.

Jahangeer joining in his laughter said. Right you are! Tea and cigarette, the wife and her sweet little younger sister together! Wonderful! Ah, what lovely tea you have made!

In the relieved atmosphere Mr. Crocodile took heart and made bold to ask, Where did you get lost during the last few days?

Jahangeer made no reply. He finished his tea and continued to shave in silence. Mr. Crocodile said, Hey, I forgot to tell you, the manager of your estate is here.

Jahangeer started and cut his chin. Dabbing the wound he said, Where is he? When did he come?

Mr. Crocodile watched Jahangeer in surprise and said, I don't know. But yesterday he came here twice or thrice to look for you. I think he came once this morning, too. Anyway, don't worry. I am sure he will come again today, at least one more time.

Jahangeer sat still for some time absentmindedly. Then he finished shaving without a word and went to bathe. After the bath he went to bed and said. Now I'll sleep for some time. I am not feeling very well. When the manager comes please wake me up.

When Jahangeer woke up it was already late afternoon. On opening his eyes he saw their old manager sitting on a chair by his bedside. He greeted him reverently.

The manager pressed Jahangeer affectionately to his bosom and said, The Begum-Mother is very worried about you, son. Let's go now, She has not taken any food during the last two days.

Jahangeer was surprised: Mother? Has mother come, too?

Yes, son. When we did not hear from you we thought that you were probably taken ill. So we came here yesterday. Since then I have been trying to find you. When she learnt that you were not in Calcutta for the last seven days she was terribly upset. She took to her bed and refused to touch any food or drink.

Jahangeer began to put on his clothes and wearily asked, Where is she putting up?

At the Circular Road house. The others are let out. The house in the Circular Road fell vacant only the other day. He paused and added: You don't care to keep track of anything, my boy. Not even about the house that belongs to you.

Jahangeer left the room without making any comment.

As they came down the stairs the manager sighed and said. What have you done to yourself, son? You look like a street beggar. Who will say that you are a son of the Nawab family?

Jahangeer laughed. But I am really a beggar, amn't I? All this landed property is my father's. I did not earn them.

The manager saw Jahangeer's face contorted with a deep unspoken pain. Unable to understand anything, he only stared at him blankly.

They were in the car. Jahangeer asked, Why these frequent telegrams? Everything is all right, isn't it? I am an useless fellow, you know that. So why all this rush to get hold of me? He sounded tired and a little bitter as well.

The manager had grown old and experienced looking after the affairs of the estate. But he had never worried his head trying to find out what went on in the minds of the young people of today. And even if he did he was not successful. Yet it suddenly occurred to him now that perhaps this youngman had fallen in love with some girl. He began to think of a remedy for his malaise and soon grew cheerful. He said, Yes, my boy, everything is all right. Only our Begum-Mother has made up her mind to go on pilgrimage to Mecca. The ship will be leaving in a week. She wants to explain and handover the charge of everything to you before she leaves. That's why all this rush.

Jahangeer was not able to listen any further. He almost grew faint, struck by an unknown fear. Reclining weakly in the seat of the car he said. Don't say anything more. I'll hear everything from mother when I see her.

13

When Jahangeer arrived his mother threw her arms around him, burst into tears and said, Oh, son, how terrible look!

Without a word Jahangeer lay down with his head on his mother's lap who tried her best to control her tears and began to caress her son's face in silence.

Suddenly Jahangeer got up and said: You ate nothing during the last two days. Please go and have your meal and then we'll talk.

Unable to resist the son's pleadings she went unwillingly to eat. In the mean time Jahangeer looked around the room and saw clear signs of preparation for his mother's going away to some distant place. He had no difficulty in understanding the reason for his mother's pain. He refused to marry and settle down. He took no interest in the affairs of the estate. So the mother decided voluntarily to renounce all worldly matters. Perhaps out of her deep pain she was punishing the son in this way. Jahangeer sighed deeply, sat on a sofa and began to watch the play of colours on the sky at the sunset hour. It was no play of colours, but pure magic, a dream. It took as much time to lay those colours on as to wipe them out. Like those colours of the dusk his mind was often touched by a happy dream but the next moment it was wiped out. His mind was utterly indifferent like that sky. Many colours appeared there, made a play and then vanished in the harsh daylight of stark reality. He would not fall a prey to the lure of those colours. He would give it no indulgence, Cruel reality and boundless sorrow entwined his life like the light of the Sun and the darkness of the night. Everything else was a chimera of colours, the deception of a oasis.

He began to think about what he should do.

However, he didn't find much time to think, either after her meal the mother came back, took a seat by her son and exclaimed, What have you done to yourself? Why are you looking like this? Don't you ever look at yourself in a mirror?

There was in truth no large mirror in Jahangeer's boarding house. Besides, he seldom combed his hair. Even when he did, he was always so preoccupied that he hardly found time to look at himself carefully. Now at his mother's words he looked up and carefully surveyed his image after a long time in the large mirror in front of him. What he saw embarrassed him. He quickly turned his eyes away. He was honestly looking like a ragamuffin. He was a misfit in this room.

He felt that he was looking in this place most incongruous and indecent like a shabby beggar in a royal household. He knew that all this wealth, all these houses, all this royal treasure would be one day his. If he wanted he could be the owner of all these things even today. But his mind constantly told him that all this wealth was somebody else's, not his, not his. He did not know, though, why his mind could not accept the right to all that wealth.

Working for his country he had to spend most of his time among the poor and the destitutes. However, even in the midst of their many crimes he never felt this kind of uneasiness. On the contrary, sitting in the heart of their poverty and sufferings he felt that he was one of those poor suffering unfortunates. The lure of riches was not for him. He hated wealth and the wealthy. They were at the root of all sins. They were the secret agents of the devil. Wealth was the cause of all evil.

The history of his birth was no longer a secret to him. At the beginning it had caused him great mental distress, but today it was considerably assuaged, thanks to his self-abnegation, masochism and promotto's advice. Still he felt that if his mother was one of those poor suffering creatures he would not consider her such an outsider as he now did. He felt all the time that this external wealth hid from his eyes the wealth of her heart. He said to himself that like the curse of God His blessings too, could not go in vain, So. on the day the barbarity of those blessings would come to him he wanted to be able to give it up with an easy and contented mind. This wealth could set fire to Lanka which was besmirched by the tears of many a Seeta.

His mother lifted her sad eyes to his face and asked, What are you thinking of, my son? What has happened to you? You are always thinking of something. You are absentminded even when you talk to me. As if you did not belong to this home. I have so much to tell you!

Jahangeer gave a wan smile and said, I am feeling very bad. mother. Let me lie down and hear what you have to say. You know, my examination is near at hand, I wonder if I can pass this time.

His mother laughed: Listen, the mother's heart can see everything. You don't have to hide things from me. If you don't want to tell me what is going on in your mind then don't but do not take recourse to any subterfuge. And about failing in your examination? Well, you have always passed your exams without much study. I know that you'll pass this time. too. But I know you were not thinking of that, You were thinking of something else. Tell me about it.

Jahangeer lay down on the bed and stared at the ceiling.

After some time the mother said in a hoarse voice: Son, I am your mother. I think I know what is going on in your mind. Now, look, I obeyed you and took my meal. Will you now take something in this house"? You are my son. I gave birth to you, yet how afraid I am to make this little request to you! Her words grew feeble and half choked with tears.

Jahangeer felt as if somebody had whipped him. He jumped up like an arrow released from a taut bow and resting his head on his mother's lap sobbed: O mother, for God's sake, don't talk like that. I didn't tell you so long, but I, too, did not take anything except tea during the last three days. Come. get some food. You'll feed me today.

The mother pressed Jahangeer to her heart and crying, My son, burst into tears.

She wept for a long time. Wiping her tears away she said at last : How cruel you are, son! You ate nothing during the last three days yet you insisted and made me eat first.

Like a naughty little boy Jahangeer teased: But you did not ask me if I had eaten, did you?

Checking a fresh deluge of tears the mother quickly left. After feeding the son with tender affection she said. Now lie down. Let me run my fingers through your hair and tell you everything.

Jahangeer said with a smile. You don't have to tell me anything. mother. I know all. You have decided to be an old Hajee lady. right?

But I have become old. son. It is time for you to take charge of things. I can't guard all this property of a ghost any longer.

So I am to be the ghost and guard all this wealth. is that what you want?

The mother placed her hand on the son's lips and said, Hush. my boy! All right, you won't have to do anything. The manager will take care of everything as before. But tell me. how long shall I continue to be punished like this? You won't settle down. nor will you give me my freedom.

Jahangeer smiled mischievously and said: Well , mother, can you still go to your pilgrimage if I get you a daughter-in-law?

The mother was beside herself with joy. She said happily. God bless you. my son, but I don't think I am so fortunate. If I have a daughter-in-law in this home what shall I do with Mecca or my Hajj? She will be my Mecca and my Kaaba and all!

Jahangeer gave a mighty roar of laughter and said: What a thing to say. mother! She will be everything? Greater than the Kaaba? He feigned to be heart -broken, sighed deeply and said, So I am nothing but a straw thrown up by the flood-tide.

The mother snapped: Don't be silly. You say whatever comes to your head. Next moment she added in a tender tone. Tell me, my son. will you truly get me a daughter-in-law? I can no longer guard this home all alone like a forlorn ghost. So let me tell them to unpack everything. yes?

She raised a hue and cry and said; Motia, ask Dewanji. the manager to come here.

Motia was the young maid-servant. All this time she was listening to the mother-son talk from behind the door. Now, unable to contain herself any longer after hearing the good news, she cried: Don't you see. Begum-Mother. how pinched the young master's face looks. Young men must be married in time. otherwise they go crazy.

Jahangeer burst into loud laughter. The mother. too. laughed and said: Scram now and get the manager first. We Will then talk about the young master's marriage.

Jahangeer said; But. mother. first you must listen carefully to what I have to tell you.

Motia widened her dark eyes, glanced at Jahangeer and left.

The mother ran her fingers through Jahangeer's unkempt hair and murmured. For how many days didn't you oil your hair, my son? Are you going to be a sanyasi, a sadhu, with no home and hearth?

Jahangeer smiled: But you won't let me be a sanyasi mother. Anyway it seems that you don't want to hear what I have to say.

The mother said smiling: I know what you are going to say, my son. Just tell me where the girl lives and I'll take care of the rest.

Jahangeer said bashfully, But it is not what you think. mother. I won't conceal anything from you. After you hear me out I'll do what you say.

Jahangeer told his mother everything. right from his visit to the home of the Haroon's. the strange action of Haroon's crazy mother upto all that took place there. Only he did not say anything about his connection with the revolutionaries.

The mother sat still for a long time in stunned silence. No words rose to her lips. The light of joy and the shadow of apprehension flickered over her face alternately.

All on a sudden Jahangeer said. But, mother, you can't bring her into this home. I forgot to tell you, she is too proud. She can't grace our household with her noble footprints unless you go to her in person and invite her with a warm welcome. She has no poison but she knows how to raise her hood and hiss.

The mother laughed: She spoke rightly, my son, if she hadn't said it I wouldn't have thought of bringing her into our home. You know, the snake that raises its hood has poison in its fangs too.

A frightened Jahangeer said, Are you thinking of bringing her into this home?

Of course. It is a gift from God Himself. We have to accept it with gratitude.

In a weary voice Jahangeer said: But I can't marry her, mother. In fact I can't marry anyone.

The mother gave a start. Then she said in a stern voice of command, You are already married, my son. You may deny her, but from what I have heard about the girl from you, even if I have not seen her, I think that she will not be able to deny you. If you don't accept her she will quietly submit to her fate and live a miserable existence all her life. I don't know what is going to be her fate, but if my son remains eternally guilty to her I'll have to do penance for it.

Jahangeer, casting a vacant look at his mother, helplessly lay down again.

His mother smiling wanly, said: Why are you so upset, my son? Isn't she pretty? Jahangeer cried in a stricken voice, No no, mother . it is not that. In fact, she is very beautiful. You have seen Haroon, haven't you? She is more beautiful than Haroon. And one doesn't have to consider about my liking her or not, for I do not have the mind to consider such things. But I told you, mother, I can't marry.

The mother, looking steadily at her son, said: What do you mean by saying that you can't marry? Have you taken a vow to be a dervish, a life long ascetic?

Jahangeer looked away and said : Something like that.

The mother's eyes filled with tears. So was her son yet unable to forget the pain surrounding the history of his birth? Was he still repentant for having been born?

Motia came and informed her that the manager had arrived. Jahangeer's mother said: I am going to have a talk with him, and left.

There was a storm raging in Jahangeer's mind. He remembered Bhuni's letter. The driver of the bullock-cart, anxious to get his reward, had faithfully come to the Suri railway station the next day With the reply to his letter. Bhuni had written:

If my mother had not made me over into your hands I would have considered it insulting to reply to your letter.

You sentenced me to eternal banishment, Why then this sudden pity on me? From what I have seen of you, I think, you have everything but a heart But I am a woman. What shall I do with all those other things? We were floating in a tiny dinghy in a sea of sorrows. Suddenly you appeared with your large ship. I did not hope to be rescued. In fact I was afraid. And my fear proved true. The mighty wave produced by your ship drowned our little. dinghy. Now there is nothing left for us but to fight with the waves of the sea. And we shall fight as long as there is any strength left in us.

You have got to the shore. Why this sarcasm about those who are drowning under the waves? Can our mere wishes take us to your shore? I do not know what prompted you to call me to you. Perhaps I'll be able to go to you only when you will call me on the strength of the right that my mother gave you, and not just you, but your guardian, when your mother herself will come and call me, only then perhaps I'll respond to your call. Not before that. If I go to you losing the regard of the society you yourself will not be able to give me the regard that is my due. I have accepted you in my heart of hearts. If I can earn the good fortune to accept it: in the light of the day then I'll gladly obey your command and even face death with pleasure.

I hope you will not misunderstand me. And, please don't act so childishly again. My self-respect is in no way less or lower than yours.

I have no pride about outward riches. We are poor. But in respect of the glory of inner wealth .mine is in no way less than yours at least.

A wide gulf flows between the two of us. Perhaps that is my fate. You came to our shore once, I accept it as my great good fortune. Please do not beckon to me from the other shore. After all, we have mortal minds. If, out of temptation, I take the plunge I shall lose this shore as well as the other.

Mother still sheds tears for you. She says: Mina came and went away! He will never come back again! If she were treated properly she could perhaps be well again.

Now all that is left for my elder brother and my father is to go mad. Thanks to you, it won't be too long before that takes place.

Do you know magic? Momi and Mobarak still plead for you. A couple of dresses and some sweetmeat, how powerful are their lure! They have suffered all their life. perhaps that's why.

Thank you so much for remembering me, even if by mistake. I'll thank you still more if after having remembered you forget me and refrain from sending me any such disrespectful letters in future.

Sincerely
Ever Indebted to your kindness
Tahmina

14

Jahangeer went to sleep dreaming of many happy and sad scenes. On waking up he found his mother sitting by his head. She was looking steadily at him with unblinking eyes. As soon as he opened his eyes the mother said. Are you awake, son? Why don't you sleep some more?

Jahangeer sat up and said, No, mother. I can't. He began to fidget.

His mother smiled: Look, what do you take me for? Tomorrow morning I am going to Haroon's home. Dewanji will be with me. You must come along, too. Jahangeer somehow managed to murmur, Mother! : Yes, it is an order from your mother. She paused for a moment and added, When I gave your shirt to be laundered I found her letter in its pocket. If you fail to accept such a fine girl, I tell you, there will be no end to your misery. Anyway, if you do not accept her I will. With great affection and respect. I was going to perform the Hajj, but already on my way, God has showered on me the blessing of my pilgrimage. If I don't accept her God will be displeased with me. Jahangeer pleaded for mercy like a prisoner sentenced to death by hanging: For God's sake, mother, don't punish me so severely. The girl will also have to share in this punishment. Besides, if I don't properly marry her, the kind of girl that she is, she will not come even if you approach her in person.

The mother said with a smile, Why are you frightened of marriage, my boy? No one is sending you to the gallows! But the next moment she was sorry. She kissed her Son on the forehead and said: What ill-omened things I say! Anyway, the manager made alternative arrangements in case you did not agree to our proposal. Haroon will be given a job in my estate at a salary of three hundred taka per month and all the members of his family will be brought to Calcutta. A big estate of the Roys in the 24 Parganas is being sold and I have arranged to purchase it. Haroon will be the manager of that estate, Later we shall see what can be done about other things.

Immediately Jahangeer forgot all else and cried: Are you honestly bringing Haroon here, mother? Oh, that will be wonderful. His condition is pitiable, mother. He is appearing at the BA Exam. this year, but even if he passes where will he get a job? Yet, unless he gets one, all the members of his family will perhaps starve to death. If you give him a job and get him here my unhappiness over what I did will considerably diminish.

The mother smiled: Rather say that some penance will have been made for your sins. She told herself that her son was happy not only because Haroon was getting a job but also because the girl was coming with him. This drove away a good deal of the cloud in her mind. She knew that his son felt very shy about marriage from his young age. Many youngmen felt that way at one time but it did not take them long to get over it. She thought that his son was also willing to get married now but was protesting out of shyness. This made her quite happy. She said: It is not yet very late. Let us purchase all the necessary things right away. Dewanji is waiting in the drawing room. The car is also ready. You, too, come with us.

Jahangeer said, But I don't have to go to the village with you, do I?

We'll decide about it in the morning. There is a train in the morning. I have already sent a telegram to Haroon. He will be at the Suri railway station. Please wash, change and get ready now. I am coming.

Jahangeer after washing and changing his clothes sipped his tea and indulged in all kinds of thoughts. Will it be proper for him to go there? But if they refused to come unless he went? If his sin was partly expiated by providing Haroon with a job he should surely go. But if his presence brought Bhuni's wounded pride to the surface again? What if Haroon refused to accept any favour from them? What if Haroon's father disagreed to leave the home of his forefathers? But Jahangeer discounted those and put greater reliance on the affectionate heart of his intelligent mother and the worldly perspicacity of their manager. They will surely find a way to solve all those problems. Still, what about Tahmina who was like a trodden serpent? If she raised her hood? Suddenly Jahangeer's mind rebelled. No, he will not go. His mother wanted to go, well, let her. But he was not going there only to be insulted!

His mother reappeared and said, Get up, son. It is already eight thirty. The shops will soon close.

Jahangeer got into a car with his mother like an obedient boy. Dewanji followed in another.

Noticing the lavish way of his mother's shopping Jahangeer said with a smile, Mother, it seems that you are going to buy up all the ornaments and clothings of these shops!

The mother, too, smiled: Look, after a long time, I think I have got a girl after my heart. But I don't think I can find things good enough to give her. I am sure, my son, that I cannot make up for the great pain you have caused her merely by giving her these jewellery and dresses.

Jahangeer dared not say another word. The manager's usually frowning face was wreathed in smiles. Mr. Farrokh was not only his employer but also a dear friend. During his life time he had never felt that he was a salaried employee. Mr. Farrokh left the charge of running the estate into his hands in complete trust and spent his own time in enjoyment. Jahangeer's mother too, accorded him the same trust and regard. He had two sons both of whom were in England. He considered Jahangeer, the son of his erst-while employer and friend, as dear to him as his own son. That was why the prospect of Jahangeer's coming happiness made him so happy. He was a thoroughly worthy person, very thrifty, but today he seemed to be quite extravagant in his expenses. In fact, Jahangeer was tempted to remark that usually his fist was very tight, even water did not pass through his fingers but today thousands of taka were slipping through them easily.

The manager heard him and said: But the money is not being thrown into water, my boy, I am giving it to the person it belongs to. Soon I shall be making over the entire estate to her. A present of four thousand taka is nothing in view of that. You never took any interest in the affairs of the estate. Now, for the person who will, all this gift is a mere trifle.

Jahangeer's mother, her voice heavy with tears, said: What are you saying, son? Your father entrusted you into his hands when he died. Will he count his pennies like a miser on such a day of great happiness for you?

Next morning a huge pile of baggage stood in front of a saloon in the platform of Howrah railway station. Dewanji moved about briskly, supervising everything with a good deal of noise and bustle.

Jahangeer obeyed the instructions of the manager and his mother like an automaton. At the railway station a Moulvi Saheb, as he passed by, tapped him lightly with his walking stick. When Jahangeer looked back he made a sign to him to come over. Jahangeer complied and the Moulvi Saheb said, I know everything. See me when you get down at Suri. I am also getting off there.

Jahangeer smiled and was about to say good-bye with folded hands in the Hindu style. but checked himself at the last moment. and bade him farewell by raising his hand to his forehead following the muslim fashion.

The mother asked: Who is he? Professor of arabic at our college. He is going to Suri, too. Asked me to see him on getting off there.

The mother asked no further question. However, Jahangeer was concerned to see his Promot-da so suddenly. But he hopefully thought that the happy paradise he was going to build would perhaps now go up in flames by the grace of the fiery blessings of the invisible Lord of his fate.

All on a sudden his mother said, Jahangeer, why don't you ask your Moulvi Saheb to come to our saloon? He can be in the manager's cabin. Go and bring him over and give him some refreshment. Jahangeer found himself in a quandary. Did his mother suspect anything? He said: The train will be leaving shortly, mother. I'll fetch him at Burdwan station.

His mother said, No, no. There's plenty of time.

Nearly half an hour. The poor fellow must be in great discomfort in an Inter or 2nd class compartment. What will your teacher think of us? Besides, I have something to ask of him.

This time Jahangeer was really frightened. However, lest his mother's suspicion grew stronger he left without a word to look for the Moulvi Saheb.

Jahangeer was frightened unreasonably. His so-called Moulvi Saheb gladly accepted the offer, got into the manager's cabin and ate with relish the refreshment served.

Jahangeer's mother was very pleased: You see, if I had not insisted your poor Moulvi Saheb would have been half-dead by this time in his over- crowded Inter class compartment.

The manager at that time was talking about Jahangeer with the Moulvi Saheb. Jahangeer saw that the fake Moulvi Saheb was more fluent than a real Moulvi Saheb in his speech which he freely interlarded with appropriate Urdu and Persian expressions.

Jahangeer's mother sent word from the adjoining cabin by a maidservant, inviting the Moulvi Saheb to accompany her party to Haroon's home. The Moulvi Saheb sent back his regret. He would surely have complied with the noble lady's directive if he were not going to Suri to see his ailing sister there.

At an opportune moment, finding Jahangeer alone, the Moulvi Saheb whispered into his ears: finding a place in your saloon has been a godsend to me. Now the bloody spy won't be able to follow me!

Jahangeer asked: But Promot-da, what will happen to me? They are dragging me to the chopping block.

Moulvi Saheb said with a smile: Son, all is as Allah wills! But everything will be all right. Don't make your mother unhappy and Allah's blessing will automatically descend on you.

Jahangeer laughed and exclaimed. Sobhan- Allah. Moulvi Saheb! How beautifully you speak! Moulvi Saheb shot a quick glance all around and said. Pinaki's aunt wants to see you. Also, I have a job for you. Go there on your way back from the Haroon's.

But my mother is with me. That will be taken care of. The train left. Jahangeer, afraid of an unknown danger, shivered.

15

At the Burdwan station Jahangeer got down from their compartment with the Moulvi Saheb and went into the Refreshment Room. Fortunately there was no one else there at that time.

Moulvi Saheb said, The blighters don't yet suspect the muslims. That is why I can still move about in day-light disguised as a Moulvi Saheb. But let's not talk of that. I have to entrust you again with an important task. Can you do it?

Jahangeer said: There is no question of whether I can or cannot. I must obey your order whatever it is.

The Moulvi was pleased: God bless you, my boy; Now you have to move those goods once again. The job can be done only by you and none else.

Jahangeer said: It was touch and go on the last occasion, dada. When the excise inspector boarded the train and began opening the boxes of the passengers I was terribly frightened. Fortunately when he found about one seer of opium in a passenger's bag he was very pleased. Hauling up the culprit he left. I still shiver to think of what might happen if he continued to search the boxes of all the passengers. Controlling himself he added, I was not concerned for myself. I was worried about the goods. That fellow would be killed. Perhaps I, too, would die. And all those precious things would have been lost.

Moulvi Saheb said, But this time you will be able to take them in your saloon when you go back. No one will have any scope to suspect anything.

Suddenly Jahangeer looked gloomy. He said, But this time I'll probably return as a married person With my wife beside me.

Moulvi Saheb said: Look, one can't bypass one's fate. Our Bojrapani is married, too. Not only is he married, he also leads a normal life with his children and all. If you have true patriotism no one will be able to stand up to you.

As soon as the bell rang they quickly got up and proceeded toward their compartment, when Jahangeer's eyes fell on a very familiar figure. He stopped uneasily. The old experienced police spy Akshoy Babu stood near the door of their compartment. Noticing Jahangeer's condition the Moulvi Saheb cried in his shrill voice in urdu: Hey, idiot, the train will leave in a second. Run!

Akshoy Babu continued to watch them with the eyes of a falcon.

Akshoy Babu got into the next compartment. When Jahangeer made a sign and tried to draw Promotto's attention the Moulvi said: Don't worry son. It will be digested all right.

The manager said: If you were late by a couple more minutes you would have had to digest your food sitting in the station. From now on you two are not to get down anywhere. You will have your refreshments brought to you.

As they transferred to another train at Andal station Jahangeer noticed Akshoy Babu carefully watching their movements.

Without paying any further attention to him Jahangeer opened a book and started to read. They were spared the trouble of changing trains as their saloon was detached, drawn by an engine, and joined to the train bound for Suri.

Moulvi Saheb smiled and said: Do you know the song "You can't run away hiding yourself in that fashion?"

Jahangeer replied with a laugh, I know the song but I do not know how to sing it. Even if I did I wouldn't sing.

The mother said from the adjoining room: Son, have you forgotten about singing and all such matters?

: Yes, mother, It is better to forget those things. What's the good of disturbing the peace of a few people?

: What a thing to say! Do songs disturb people's peace? You have turned into a real barbarian, son. Have all your hopes and desires on this earth been already fulfilled?

Jahangeer said in an undertone: She is awfully clever. Sitting close by the window she has been listening to our conversation!

It was dusk when the train reached Suri. Haroon quickly came forward and respectfully greeted Jahangeer's mother and Dewanji by touching their feet. Jahangeer's mother embraced Haroon affectionately and kissed him on the forehead. Dewanji with the help of about a dozen coolies got busy unloading their baggage.

Suddenly the mother asked. Where has your Moulvi saheb gone, son?

By now he is perhaps with his sister in her home. His mother said, But why? Do you know his sister's residence? We must bring him from there. Jahangeer said, But I don't know his sister's address, mother. Besides, she is sick and he won't be able to come.

Haroon : Who is this Moulvi Saheb? Jahangeer: Professor Azhar. Haroon : I did not see him.

Jahangeer : He must have gone away while you were busy looking after our baggage. Jahangeer saw Akshoy Babu pacing the platform from end to end, nearly turning it inside out looking for his quarry. Jahangeer felt greatly amused. He murmured to himself: You have seen the dove, my dear, but you haven't seen the trap!

Yet an unknown fear continued to disturb his mind. With four palanquins and their baggage piled up in two bullock-carts Jahangeer and his party started for Haroon's village. They had guns

and torchlights with them. Besides, when they saw bearers of the four palanquins, the drivers of the two bullock-carts and the gun-toting guards, no one objected to travelling in the night. The sky, too, was clear with no hint of storm or rain. In the clear sky above a ninth-night moon shone brightly.

Getting into her palanquin Jahangeer's mother said, Son, I am not accustomed to travelling thus cooped up in a box. It is so hot and one has to sit crouched with one's head bent and knees drawn in. You see, that's why I suggested that we bring the car with us. Haroon smiled and said, You have done well, mother, by not bringing the car. We don't have a road for that. And there is a river to cross.

Making a strange droning sound the bearers of the palanquins went first, followed by the bullock carts. The rear was brought up by the guards With muskets on their shoulders.

They arrived at the village of the Haroon's at about eleven at night. As usual no one in the village was awake at that late hour. Otherwise the whole village would have crowded there to have a look at the Begum. Haroon had not told anyone except his father and his sisters about this visit. So the news had no chance to be broadcast in the village. Mobarak, however, had told a friend of his but the latter took the information with great scepticism. In fact, he had taunted him rudely, suggesting that he, too, would become crazy in no time. After this Mobarak did not tell anyone about it.

At the sight of so many palanquins with so many people Mobarak, flabbergasted, stood like a stone statue. He seemed to have lost all his senses. His blind father, running excitedly here and there, slipped and fell down twice. Haroon asked him to sit down quietly. Then he led Jahangeer's mother respectfully to the inner quarters, while Dewanji took his seat in the out-house. Jahangeer escaped to the field in front of the house and breathed the fresh air there with great relief.

Tahmina and Momi came forward and saluted Jahangeer's mother by touching her feet, who pressed the two sisters to her bosom and kissed them. She had a torch-light in her left hand. She looked intently in its light at the face of her future daughter-in-law. Yes, she was very beautiful and definitely qualified to be the wife of his son. She kissed Tahmina again and again and the girl, who could tell, perhaps because of her most affectionate manner, that she was utterly sincere, thrust her face into her bosom and burst into tears.

Jahangeer's mother pressed her to her heart and consoled her: Don't weep, my darling . There is nothing to fear any more. My headstrong son treated you with disrespect and, see, here I have come to welcome you with all the warmth of my heart.

Tahmina grew quiet after weeping for a long time. Luckily her demented mother was asleep or she would have created a scene with her old lamentations for her Mina.

From the look of their house Jahangeer's mother realized that the family had reached the last stage of its decadence. Her eyes filled with tears. How could such a gem of a girl live in these conditions?

Tahmina had cooked for all of them. After the meal everybody warmly praised her cooking.

Haroon's father said over and over that it was beyond his dream that such distinguished people would deign to come to a poor home like his. He did not even have enough room to seat them comfortably. Noticing his uneasiness and excessive modesty Dewanji and Begum Saheba began to talk to him intimately and tried their best to put him at his ease, which almost brought tears to his eyes.

Jahangeer's mother herself served their meals to Tahmina, Momi and Mobarak. Since it was very hot she set up the two camp-cots she had brought with her in the courtyard. She lay down on one, making Tahmina lie on the other close to her. She caressed her fondly, asked her a lot of questions and tried to find out what was going on in her mind.

No one had shown such tenderness and affection to Tahmina in all her life. Overwhelmed, she clung to Jahangeer's mother like a little girl and gently answered her questions.

Dewanji, the manager, tried to grasp the state of the mind of Haroon's father.

They did not have any prolonged conversation that.. night. The journey had made everyone tired and soon all of them fell asleep.

But sleep did not come to Tahmina's eyes. When she saw that everyone was asleep and that she was unable to sleep she got up and went to look after her crazy mother. She saw that the main door of the house on the way from the courtyard to the inner quarters was ajar. When she went to the door to close it her eyes suddenly fell on the wide field in front. There she saw Jahangeer sitting forlornly in the pale moonlight, staring at the sky. Unable to turn her eyes away she stood there gazing at him with unblinking eyes.

Why did he sit there all alone, sleepless, looking at the empty sky? Didn't he have anything to desire and ask for on this beautiful earth? He had such great wealth, he had such a wonderful mother, why should he indulge in such a luxury of sorrow?

Tahmina had understood the reason of the sudden visit of Jahangeer's mother with her large retinue. She also thought that it was Jahangeer who brought his mother here. The very thought filled her mind with great happiness. So Jahangeer was not really as heartless as she had taken him to be. But what a humourless man was he? Couldn't he cast one glance at the open door even by mistake? She started to close the door, made a sound in bringing the two halves of the door together, and looked at Jahangeer through the chink to find out if his trance was broken.

Jahangeer looked at the door and realized that someone stood behind it . He thought that probably his mother wanted him for something, He pushed the door open and was startled to see Tahmina . He said, Is that you, Bhuni? Did you want me for anything?

Bhuni alias Tahmina was too embarrassed and ashamed to say a word. She stood there like a statue. Oh God, what made her act in such a shameless manner?

Jahangeer again said, Did you want to ask me something?

Bhuni suddenly found a means to save herself from being drowned in a bottomless sea, with great promptness of mind she said, May I ask you why you came back again?

Jahangeer was clearly hurt. He looked Bhuni straight in the eye and said, I did not come, My mother has come to take you with her.

Tahmina asked, So mother has heard everything? Jahangeer gave a wan smile and said. Not heard, but known everything from your letter. She read it.

Tahmina blushed furiously and said, O my God! What will happen to me now? Why did you show her my letter?

This time Jahangeer laughed fairly loudly. Tahmina in her excitement brought her hand close to Jahangeer's lips, checked herself, and said, For God's sake, don't laugh so loudly. You

will awaken everybody! Tahmina addressed Jahangeer in the familiar tumi instead of using the formal apni.

Jahangeer's mind was also touched by intoxication.

He opened his eyes wide and said, Tell me, you are coming with me, aren't you?

Tahmina said bashfully in a low voice, You should know about that, However, now the form of her address was apni..

Jahangeer smiled and said, But this is funny! Once tumi and another time apni? Once 'Come!' and another time 'Go away!'

Jahangeer's mother turned on her side in her camp-cot. Tahmina tried to shut the door quickly. In her hurry a finger of her hand got caught between the two halves of the door and was bruised. She cried out in pain and sat down.

Jahangeer held her by the arm and said, What's it, Bhuni? Has something bitten you?

Thrilled by his touch Bhuni said to herself inaudibly, Yes, a poisonous snake. But audibly she said, My finger! It has been crushed.

Even in the weak moonlight Jahangeer saw that the injured finger had turned blue. He took her hand in his own, put the finger in his mouth and beginning to suck it said: You are badly hurt! Can you get a piece of wet cloth?

Tahmina, feeling Jahangeer's warm mouth on her finger, seemed to be drowning in a sea of ecstasy. At last she could not control herself any more. Almost in a faint she fell against Jahangeer who also seemed to lose his senses. As he felt against his bosom the soft warm touch of Tahmina's breasts his father's lust seemed to rise up within him like a flame.

Never in his life had he lost his self-control. But today he did. He held Tahmina firmly in a passionate embrace and kissed her again and again.

Tahmina, thrilled, excited, abashed, found her clothes in disarray. She felt that she could no longer control herself. It seemed that she had lost all powers even to move the slightest bit. She put her hands around Jahangeer's neck. held him tightly. and in a half-articulate voice pleaded for mercy once or twice.

In a moment the angel-youth turned into a bloodthirsty animal.

At last Tahmina seemed to be aware of her condition. She tried to cover her naked limbs with her weak arms while trying to push Jahangeer away.

But she found the situation too much for her. A feeling of wild excitement never experienced before made her body taut and ache all over. She could not resist any more. After lying for a long time almost unconscious beneath Jahangeer's chest Tahmina stood up. She adjusted her clothes and said almost sobbing: What have you done to me? How shall I show my face tomorrow?

Jahangeer without replying to her left unsteadily swaying on his feet like a drunken person.

He was astounded at what he had done. Though born in the mud he had always tried to rise above the slime and blossom as a lotus. He was cleansed and purified by the holy fire of patriotic zeal. He was ascending to paradise and now he had suddenly fallen into the depth of hell.

In shame and repentance he wanted to commit suicide. But, wonder of wonders, he found that within the span of a moment he had become a veritable coward. He was now afraid to die. He could no longer heroically face death. He had not ruined Tahmina, he had ruined himself.

Jahangeer threw himself on the ground and sobbed like a child.

Suddenly aware of an icy touch he started and saw a large cobra slinking away over his body. He had heard about the prevalence of snakes in this area during the summer. He decided that God had sent him his punishment. He lay still, resigned to his fate. The snake crawled over him and went away.

Did even death, then, hate him? Overcome by weariness he fell asleep.

16

In the morning it appeared to Bhuni that all her pride had come to an end. Today she was a poor beggar woman! She would have to stretch her two hands and humbly receive whatever pittance was given her in charity. Yet only yesterday she thought that however poor they were she would show them that self-respect was not a monopoly of the rich. She would hit out at the wealth of those moneyed people with the stern pride of her poverty.

But this morning she felt that she would never be able to hit out at them. On the contrary, if and when she would be hit at, she would have no option but to tolerate it meekly.

When Haroon, after getting Firdous Begum's telegram, had informed his father about her coming visit the latter was beside himself with joy. He had said, At last God has been kind to us. With tears of joy in his eyes he had placed his hand on Bhuni's head and said: Don't forget us, dear, when you become a queen.

But Bhuni had retorted: Father, even if they came for me I would not leave you and go with them.

Her father, unable to understand her, had said, How can you say that? You must not turn your back on such good luck! The Begum of such a great estate is coming to my home on her own accord, am I not a very fortunate man, Bhuni?

Bhuni was angry. She had said, You are forgetting, father, that we may be poor but we are much above them in family prestige. They can't just come to our home to display the pride of their great wealth. You may tolerate it, but I won't!

But the loving affection and fond caresses of Jahangeer's mother had eroded her stern pride. Still the thought of total surrender had never crossed her mind.

But what a turn did the events take now! Why had she gone and stood by the door? Bhuni could not check her tears. Only Momi was up at that early hour. The rest were still asleep. Tahmina tried to get up but could hardly do so. She felt a pain in her bosom. Her entire body ached. She continued to lie down and saw Jahangeer's mother sitting on the floor of their verandah. She was reading aloud the Holy Quran in a wonderfully sweet voice with great reverence. Bhuni did not understand a word, yet her mind was filled with a noble serenity and respect. Half the feeling of shame and guilt in her mind was washed away. She made an effort and managed to leave her bed.

Jahangeer's mother put back the Holy Book and said. Are you up, dear? But what's the matter? Why do you look like this? Are you ill?

It seemed to Tahmina that Jahangeer's mother had somehow understood everything. With her eyes lowered she shyly answered. No, I am all right.

Jahangeer's mother pressed Bhuni to her bosom. kissed her on the forehead and said, What stupid words come to my lips! But when will your mother get up? I have not yet seen her. Before Tahmina could say anything Momi blurted out: Mother is crazy. When she gets up she will start calling out the name of our elder brother and will begin to weep for him.

Jahangeer's mother had heard everything. Tears welled up in her eyes. Drawing Momi into her arms she said, Your mother will be all right. Momi. We shall take her to Calcutta and arrange for her treatment there. And until she gets well I'll be your mother, okay?

Momi was very pleased at the prospect of going to Calcutta. She had heard something about Calcutta from her elder brother. Now she began to ask all sorts of strange questions about the place. Jahangeer's mother answered them with a smile on her lips.

Shortly everyone woke up. The whole village was astir because of the Begum's presence. The crowd of women continued unrelieved.

Neither Jahangeer's mother nor Dewanji said anything about marriage. Addressing Haroon's father the Begum said, I have come to beg something of you. Of course, I have come also to visit the home of my son's friend. I never saw before a West Bengal village. This gave me a chance to see one.

Haroon's father was full of humility: People like you have come to a poor man's home like mine, I consider myself most fortunate. If Jahangeer had not come. I am sure, you would never have visited such a Godforsaken village. Alas I have nothing that I can give you as charity.

Jahangeer's mother said. Your children are jewels worthy of a king's treasury. I beg you to give me Haroon . He will be the manager of my new estate. For the present he will get a monthly salary of three hundred taka. I have only one son but he accepts nothing from me, nor does he look after anything. Already he has become a half-dervish. Haroon will live like my son. You, too, must come to Calcutta. All of you will live with Haroon. Perhaps his mother will also get back her sanity with proper medical treatment.

Haroon's father could not say anything for a long time. Was she then unable to make Bhuni her daughter-in-law? Was this then a clever deal by the wife ,of a landlord? Was this a compensation? He took it as an insult to his dignity. He said in an injured tone: Thank you. Begum Saheba, for your kindness, but Haroon does not have the qualification or the ability to get a job with a monthly salary of three hundred taka. You are the mother of my son's friend. So you are like a kinswoman to me. We are poor, it's true, but you must excuse me. I cannot accept this charity from you.

The manager. grasping the situation, quickly Intervened: Why do you say like a kinswoman, Mr. Khondker? She is soon going to be your most important relative. We shall be deeply pained if you turn her down in this manner. This morning I heard from the villagers that no beggar ever went back from this home without some precious gift or other. Shall we then be the only unfortunate ones to go back empty-handed?

Melting at these words Haroon's father said in a sorrowful voice: Those days are gone, Dewanji. Today we can't give even a handful of rice to a beggar, What you mentioned was really a custom in this home at one time. I too saw a glimpse of that. But worthless son as I am, I could not keep up the tradition of my forefathers.

Jahangeer's mother said, But Haroon and Tahmina are priceless jewels, more precious than gold. We want from you only that gold.

Haroon's father, deeply moved, said: For God's sake, don't put me to further shame. You have punished me enough for my mistake. You are not the kind of wealthy people that I took you for. You are completely different from them. Your external wealth has not tarnished the wealth of your heart. Don't talk about begging anything of me. From today they are your children. As for me, though living; I really do not exist. After I became blind I wasn't able to take care of them in any way. With a blind father and an insane mother they are really orphans, though their parents are alive. But now I can die in peace. As he said these words his voice broke and he fell silent.

Dewanaji said: But we did not come here to take only them. We came here to take all of you to Calcutta. I am not asking you to abandon your ancestral home for good. Come to Calcutta, get proper treatment for both of you and, if God wills, when you are all right you can come back to this home.

Haroon's father said after some hesitation, Do you want to celebrate Bhuni's wedding in Calcutta? But that can't be, sir!

After a prolonged debate it was decided that the wedding would take place in the village, but the date would be postponed for some time. In the mean time Haroon would renovate their old house. His father would help him in his managerial work of the new estate till his examination. For the present no one in the village would be told about the wedding. They would be told that Haroon had got a job in the landlord's estate and was going to live in Calcutta for some time with all the members of his family. It was further decided that they would make necessary arrangements to leave in three days.

Haroon's father was afraid that perhaps Bhuni would object to all these arrangements. For, till yesterday, she had been fuming like an angry serpent but when she was told everything Bhuni raised no objection whatsoever. Her amazed father tried to discover the reason behind it. He smiled to himself and thought: Well, my daughter finds the bridegroom to her taste, that's why.

But on waking up Haroon's mother raised a hue and cry. At the sight of so many strangers in her home she began to laugh at one moment and cry at another calling out the name of her Son Mina at the top of her voice. Hearing his mother's call Jahangeer went in and immediately the demented woman threw her arms around him and cried, There's my Mina! Come here, son! I'll give you your cycle! She held him tightly and did not let him free himself. Ordered by his mother Jahangeer sat there like a criminal.

He could not raise his eyes and look at anyone. But the most difficult predicament was Bhuni's. She was unable to go out, yet she simply had to.

Putting aside all shame she did go out once or twice. She had to. All these people had to be fed and looked after. Who but she could do that?

Jahangeer's mother finally succeeded in pacifying Haroon's mother. She sent Jahangeer back to the out-house and got busy with Tahmina. She entrusted her own maidservants with the cooking, supervised Bhuni's bath, and dressed her with lovely clothes and glittering jewellery of gold and diamond. When the village women saw her they said in one voice that they had never known that Bhuni was so beautiful. When the people saw the abundance and glamour of her clothes and ornament, they said: Oh, what luck the girl was born with! Some, however, said that if their daughters were dolled up with such clothes and jewellery they, too, would look no less beautiful.

Momi and Mobarak. dressed in their new attire, the like of which they had never seen before, were beside themselves with joy.

Sweets were sent to all the homes of the village. The people, however. interpreted this entertainment differently. They decided that Bhuni was at its root, although the members of her family tried to hide the fact.

In two days time Dewanji and Jahangeer's mother elicited the warm regard of almost everybody in the village by their easy and sincere behavior devoid of all pride.

The Haroons took leave of their friends and relatives with tearful eyes and leaving their ancestral home behind started for Calcutta. It was arranged that a close relative would look after the home during their absence. After a while Haroon would come and take up the renovation of their ancient house. And then his parents would come back. This was how Haroon reassured his near ones in the village.

After seeing Jahangeer Haroon's mother did not weep much. She was told that her Mina had gone abroad and was now back. The mad woman believed it. She gave no further trouble.

17

On reaching the railway station Jahangeer saw there an almost ninety percent Naga Sanyasi with long unkempt hair, equally unkempt beard and his body smeared with ash. He seemed to make a sign to Jahangeer with his trident.

Jahangeer noticed that the sanyasi, immediately after sending out his signal, crossed the railway lines and took his seat under a tree. There were several other sadhus there. Some were meditating. some were smoking ganja , some were singing mystic songs.

Without saying a word to anyone Jahangeer followed the sanyasi. Others were busy unloading the baggage and no one paid much attention to him. The sanyasi stopped at a secluded spot, a little away from the others of his kind, and said: You do not know me but I know you. We are in great danger. This morning your Promot-da and Pinaki's aunt have been apprehended by the police along with their cache of arms. They were coming With the arms in a bullock-cart in order to put them into your saloon car, but were intercepted and held by the police on their way. The police plan to arrest all the other members of the gang. So they have kept the whole matter a secret. Promotto courted arrest in order to save auntie. The rest of us managed to flee. Two policemen were killed by our gun shots. Bojropani has ordered you to collect auntie's daughter Champa and keep her at your house in Calcutta. He Will arrange to send someone in about two days time and take her away to another place. We have disguised Champa as a muslim girl clad in a burqua. She will shortly arrive at the station. Please take her in your compartment. But be very careful. The police are keeping strict surveillance on the platform. Champa has a box of important goods with her. Be careful, don't let that box fall into anybody else's hands even if you have to die to ensure it. Go now. The sanyasi gave a mighty pull at his pipe of ganja and a roar of 'Born Kali Calcuttawali!

Jahangeer was nonplussed. But it wouldn't do to panic. There was no time to think, either. He will have to do his duty even at the cost of his life. Returning to the station he saw that their baggage was being loaded into the saloon. There was yet considerable delay for the train to arrive.

His mother along with Bhuni. Momi and others were already seated in the car. The saloon stood at some distance from the platform. He noticed another palanquin coming toward their saloon. Jahangeer said to his mother. I forgot to tell you, mother, our Moulvi Saheb's niece will be going with us. She will be staying at our place for a couple of days. She goes to the Diocesan

College. Moulvi Shaheb has been held up by an important work and will be reaching Calcutta in two or three days.

The palanquin arrived and stopped close to the saloon. when a young burqua-clad girl got down from it. boarded the saloon. and greeted Jahangeer's mother by touching her feet and saluting her in the muslim style. The maid-servants picked up her baggage and arranged them in the saloon. The mother gave the girl her blessings and said, Take off your veil, dear. You must be sweating heavily.

Champa pulled down the shutters facing her and took off the burqua. And at once her beauty seemed to dazzle all eyes. Bhuni's face grew pale. Truly. before Champa her beauty was greatly diminished.

The maid-servants said. What have you put in your boxes, madam? Boulders or what? God. they are heavy.

Champa laughed: Books, you know. That's why they are so heavy. The mother asked, What is your name, dear? Before Champa could answer Jahangeer said, Amina.

The mother was looking at her admiringly. It was not beauty. but beauty's flame. It seemed to have more vigour and energy in it than beauty. There was a strange light in her eyes. One could hardly gaze at them.

The mother said. You never told me about her, Mother. I didn't know about her before. said Jahangeer. As soon as I reached the station Moulvi Saheb introduced her to me and requested me to take her to Calcutta. He was unable to go with us the other day, so out of shyness he did not Come up and see you today. Besides, he was busy.

The mother said to Amina, I heard that your mother was ill. I hope she is all right, now.

Champa, alias Amina, said, Yes mother, Tomorrow she is going to a health resort for a change. I did not want to miss college, so I am going to Calcutta instead of accompanying her. I'll give you some trouble for a few days.

The mother quickly said, Don't talk like that, dear. Consider our place as your own home. But, see, I forgot to introduce them to you. Here is Tahmina, my would be daughter-in-law. And this is her younger sister Momi, and she is their mother. She is unwell and is asleep at the moment.

Champa came and sat by Bhuni but her face suddenly lost some of its brightness, which did not escape Bhuni's eyes. Champa tried to make friends with Bhuni, but it appeared that none of them was able to be free and easy. Jahangeer stared at Champa with eyes of unconcealed wonder and admiration. What an amazing self-control the girl had! Only this morning there was such a great disaster, yet it cast no shadow on her face or eyes. As if she had prepared herself for it long ago.

Suddenly Champa looked at Jahangeer and said,

You are a fine one! So you came in secret to steal a wife for you. You didn't let anyone know anything!.

She turned to Jahangeer's mother and said, You are probably thinking, mother, that we college girls are too forward.

The mother said with a smile: No, dear. Our girls, too, don't observe the purdah very strictly. In fact, I was a little surprised to see you clad in a burqua.

Champa answered smilingly: I had to put on the burqua for my uncle's sake. He is somewhat conservative. Turning to Bhuni she said, But I won't be able to address you as apni and I'll call you boudi. okay? Boudi sounds much nicer than bhabi. don't you think so? This time Bhuni smiled shyly but said nothing. Just then a tired Haroon appeared and said. The booking of the goods has been completed. mother. The mother asked him to get in and sit down. Addressing Champa she added. Perhaps you have heard about him. Amina. This is our poet Haroon, elder brother to Tahmina, And Haroon, this is Amina. Professor Azhar's niece. She is going to Calcutta with us. She goes to the Diocesan.

Champa, greeting him in the muslim style. said: I have heard a lot about you. I have read some of your poems. too. You write beautifully and I am lucky to have met you. Haroon gazed at her spellbound. As if he was looking at the goddess of his world of Fancy in his dream. It seemed to him that his life as a poet had been supremely glorified by those words of praise from Champa. He could not utter a word in reply. Only his entire face turned crimson.

The train arrived. Their saloon was detached and connected to its rear. Jahangeer saw a number of police spies constantly moving about in front of their saloon. Before Jahangeer could say anything he heard Dewanji's roar. He got down from the compartment and gave them a bit of his mind. They begged his pardon and moved away. The train left.

Jahangeer sat in silence. The shadow of today's danger left a mark of deep sorrow on his face. He realized that his life. too. might be endangered any moment. He went into the bathroom. carefully checked his pistol and strapped it about his abdomen under his shirt. Coming out of the bathroom he signalled something to Champa who also made a sign with her eyes. Bhuni noticed it from behind her veil and at once her body and mind seemed to burn. So they had not met only today for the first time.

The mother looked at Jahangeer and said, Why do you look so haggard, son? Didn't you eat anything yet? You and Haroon better take something right away. Your face looks so pinched!

Jahangeer said, I am not hungry, mother. I feel out of sorts, that's all.

But why? asked the mother. You are so obstinate. You do not listen to anyone. You did not get into the palanquin but covered the whole distance on foot. Come, let me see. She felt her son's forehead and said. You seem to have a temperature. Lie down, stretch yourself here.

Jahangeer lay down. Everybody in the compartment began to fuss over him. Champa said, Don't worry, mother. He is shouldering a new responsibility. Perhaps the thought of it has exhausted him somewhat.

The mother with a wan smile said, No, dear, you don't know him. He takes no care of his body. I think he is really unwell.

Champa said, It seems that you are right. His body appears to belong to a mendicant. He must have subjected it to all kinds of abuse. Keep an eye on him, mother, lest he really becomes a sanyasi.

The mother smiled: Now we have someone to do the job properly. She will keep an eye all right. I could not tame him. Let us see if some one else can.

Champa whispered into Bhuni's ears, Are you a good rider, boudi? Keep a firm hold on the reins otherwise if this headstrong horse once starts to gallop away you won't be able to control it.

Bhuni forced herself to laugh and said, I could, if I had a whip of words like yours in my hand. Perhaps you alone would be able to tame a horse like that.

Champa, pinching Bhuni hard, said, So the in-law skirmish is already on!

Bhuni gave a subdued cry of pain and said, I see that you are a real Surpanakha!

Champa retorted with a smile: Then he is Rama. and you Seeta!

Jahangeer said laughingly. Here goes on Rama-Leela and over there Haroon is busy writing poems. Let me deputise for Kumbha-Karno! He closed his eyes and made ready to go to sleep. The mother caressed the son's forehead with fond affection.

18

As soon as the train reached Burdwan Jahangeer woke up at the sound of restless feet shod in heavy boots outside their saloon. He sat up and saw that all the others were fast asleep. He could not guess the hour of the night .Only Haroon was awake. perhaps writing a poem with undivided attention. Jahangeer saw a band of armed British soldiers and policemen briskly move about in front of their saloon. after which they again boarded their previous compartment.

Jahangeer had no difficulty in realizing what kind of a thunderbolt was being hurled at whose head. He could not decide what he should do now. Giving Haroon a push he broke the latter's trance and said in an undertone: Haroon, a great danger is ahead. There is something you have got to do flow.

Haroon, bewildered, stared blankly at Jahangeer.

He could discover no cause behind Jahangeer's unreasonable fear.

Jahangeer said, Did you see some European soldiers and policemen move up and down in front of our saloon? Haroon nodded and said. Yes.

Jahangeer continued: I think they are going to arrest me. Perhaps they will search our compartment, too. If they do. all of us will be in very great danger. Let me tell you everything openly. The girl you have taken for Amina is not Amina. She is a member of our revolutionary party.. She has a lot of arms and ammunition with her. Everybody is asleep now in the compartment. Taking advantage of this Amina and I shall get off at the next station. You Will quietly put down her boxes. Don't panic and tell mother not to worry. I'll take a motor car and reach home about the same time as you will.

Haroon sat still. dumbfounded. It seemed that he had lost his power of speech. Jahangeer added: Tell mother that on receipt of a telegram from her uncle at Burdwan station I am taking Amina back to Andal . Her mother's condition has taken a turn for the worse. Her uncle will meet Amina at Andal and take her home from there.

After giving these directions Jahangeer softly shoved Champa and awakened her. He said something to her in code who immediately sprang up and putting her hand under her blouse checked something. Then she slowly dragged her two boxes close to the door. opened the door and stood there ready to drop down quickly. However. Jahangeer again told her something when she hurriedly went into the bathroom whence she emerged fully dressed as a Hindu married woman. Jahangeer. too. quickly changed into European clothes. In the mean time the train stopped at Shaktigarh for a very brief halt. As it was about to start again Jahangeer and Amina quickly got down with their two boxes. Jahangeer looked around and saw that luckily for them no

British soldier or policeman had noticed them. They were confident of nabbing them in Calcutta and had gone to sleep.

Haroon sat where he was like a piece of stone. Someone seemed to have robbed him of his powers of speech and movement. As Jahangeer and Champa crossed to the opposite platform the train for Burdwan came in. There was no time to purchase tickets. Jahangeer put Champa into a first class compartment and informed the guard. The train started for its destination. Champa said: It won't do to get off at Burdwan. The police must be guarding the station very strictly.

It was decided that they would leave the train at Ranigunj, take a taxi and go to Calcutta. In that case there would be little possibility of their being caught.

Jahangeer was tired. When he lay down Champa said: Shall I massage your head, dada? Jahangeer made no objection. Champa with her slender tapering fingers began to massage Jahangeer's head and said, I wonder what your mother is thinking at this moment.

Jahangeer answered with a smile: She is perhaps thinking that her son has run away with that girl.

Champa pinched Jahangeer's hand and said: You are very naughty. You know that we are not supposed to indulge in such talk.

At once Jahangeer grew solemn: Yes, you are right. The doctrine we have embraced does not distinguish between a man and a woman. We are all comrades-in-flame. Otherwise how could I trust myself after getting so close to a girl like you with such great beauty and extraordinary qualities.

Champa moved slightly away and said: Are you really afraid that you can succumb to such a weakness?

Jahangeer sat up and said: Honestly, Champa, I am. You do not know me half as well as I do .

Champa feigned to be frightened: In that case I should not have come with you. Yet, you know. before going away Promot-da told me not to trust anyone but you. He said that you hated the entire womankind.

Jahangeer said: Yes, I feel something like it. I don't trust them, I don't respect them. that's why I don't hesitate to dishonour them.

Champa asked: If that's the way you feel why are you going to marry a woman?

Jahangeer replied: I do not know if I am going to marry her, but I have ruined her all right.

Champa started, the way a person did at the sudden sight of a snake. She said, What are you saying, dada? Either you are telling a lie or you have gone out of your senses.

Jahangeer said in a quiet firm voice: I am not telling you a lie, nor have I gone out of my senses. Perhaps I won't see you ever again. Let at least one person in this world know the tale of my sorrows, with what an accursed life I arrived. what potential I had, and what I actually became!

Champa in a pained voice appealed, Please sleep for some time. I'll awaken you when the train reaches Ranigunj. I don't want to know anything about you. Why should I? I have seen you and I have given you my respect. That's enough for me.

Interrupting her Jahangeer said, No. Champa, you have to listen to me. I didn't break down or go to the dogs so long because Promot-da was there. Now I have nothing to fear. Either I shall ascend to heaven or sink into the slime from where I rose.

Champa protested: You did not rise from the slime. If you heard anything like that it was a lie.

Jahangeer smiled wanly and said, Perhaps you think I am a lotus. Yes, I have been told that the lotus can blossom even in a dung heap, but I have tested myself. Champa. And you will be surprised to know that the test has revealed to me the slime at my very root. And that slime has stained another's body, too.

Champa thought over something and asked, Are you talking of Bhuni? Have you really done her any harm?

Jahangeer replied excitedly, Oh, Champa, I have done her the greatest harm that a man can do a woman. I could not conquer the weakness of a moment!

His eyes filled with tears. Without making any attempt to hide them he continued: Now the only way I can atone for my sin is by marrying her. But she does not know that I am a product of my father's lust, that my mother is a well-known dancing girl of Calcutta. Once she knows it, will she ever be able to respect me? And could I have committed such a crime unless I had slime at my root? My father continues to live in every blood corpuscle of mine. Even if I want to forget him he will always drag me toward hell, Champa. With so much wealth and with such an affectionate mother. whatever she might be. anyone else could have led a very happy life. But however hard I tried I could not forgive my parents their sins from the bottom of my heart. I embraced the fiery doctrine of patriotism. I thought that its flame would cleanse me or burn me into ashes. Well, I couldn't be pure; now there is no release for me from this life except by being burnt into ashes.

Jahangeer began to pant. Strange!

Champa did not move away. On the contrary she brushed away Jahangeer's unkempt hair from his forehead with greater tenderness than before and said, Please lie down quietly! You are a man of flesh and blood, aren't you? Even great men make mistakes. And I have seen men untouched by any taint at their birth immersed in sinful activities all their life. I even know some from among your comrades-in-flame who were about to ruin me. I could have ruined them if I wanted to. but I pardoned them. Driven by the beast that resides in you people, you don't hesitate even to kill. And that beast may rise up in one for something else, too. Besides killing. Another thing. If you totally killed the beast in you whatever you might achieve with your godliness or humanity. you could never achieve the mission we are pledged to.

Jahangeer sat up and clasping Champa's two hands said, Champa, no one said such words to me ever before. Not even Promot-da.

Champa without resisting him said: Yet you are honest. You do not know how to hide the animal in you beneath the mask of a man. I have seen others. they are all great heroes. they have made great sacrifices, but they have not admitted this truth. They compared their weakness with the lustful conduct of Napoleon. Although I don't believe that Napoleon was anything like that.

Looking at Champa's animated face Jahangeer suddenly lost control of himself. He took Champa in his arms and pressing her hard to his bosom said in a stricken voice: Champa! Champa! Save me. Either throw me into the depth of the slime from which I rose or take my hand and lead me up above.

Champa smiled mysteriously and said, I won't resist you. I know how fierce is the thirst of fire. But what will be the result of all this? My Pinaki-da is gone, my mother is gone. Promot-da, too, is gone. I can clearly see that not a single member of Bojropani's party will remain free. If I don't surrender to you today, I'll have to do it tomorrow, for I have no support now in this whole world beside you. And I, too, am a person of flesh and blood. I, too, want to conquer the beast within me with all its animality. I suffer no less than any of you from the pangs of greed, temptation and thirst. But you have yourself closed the only path that was open to us ... You have your mother's money. Perhaps you can save yourself. But what's that to me? Shall I live as your concubine? I do not pay any attention to caste or religion. That's not the way I was brought up. But I have my woman's creed. If I throw it to the wind today, you will fling me away tomorrow, just as you have done Bhuni. I am not ashamed to tell you that I was drawn to you at first sight. When you came and stood on our courtyard with your glowing brightness like a young sun, since that very moment I have been showering on you my deepest respect. Now you come and stand before me, thirsty, ready to die-I can't refuse you anything. Yet, do not snatch away my priceless respect for the sake of that trifle! Marry Bhuni and be happy. "I love you like a sister. I'll take care of you and attend to your needs. And then, if my mother ever comes back, I'll go to her and find my refuge there Champa burst into tears.

Jahangeer drew Champa closer to his breast, caressed her affectionately and said consolingly: You are right. Champa. This thirst of fire is not to be quenched.

It will only grow continuously. The animal life of a beast reaches its successful culmination only when it is sacrificed at the altar of the goddess ... I never loved anyone in my life. I never got anyone's love, and now when I accidentally got it I am saved! I have made up my mind, Champa. I know where my duty lies. I'll put you in charge of my mother and then I'll plunge into the storm that has broken out... With the wealth that I am leaving behind you won't face any want in this life, except perhaps that of peace. I'll leave all my wealth to you. Spend it fully on my behalf for the suffering children and brothers and sisters of my motherland.

Champa threw her arms about Jahangeer and began to weep like a little girl. It seemed that a mountain spring had burst through a rock.

Jahangeer continued in a soft and quiet voice: I never thought that I could be able to respect women in my life, that I could ever love them or trust their love Today even this sinful world appears beautiful to me . A soft cloud is floating above my dreary desert. I do not grieve that no flower has blossomed in that desert. At least my scorched breast has cooled!

Champa raised her face and looked at Jahangeer in the way a sunflower looked at the setting sun and said: Please do not place on me the curse of your wealth. I won't be able to bear it. Everyone has left me- you don't go away!

Jahangeer wiped away her tears and said, I am not giving my wealth to you, Champa. Many youngmen like me sacrifice their lives at the altar of their mother-land and throw their near and dear ones into a sea of misery. Your sacred task would be to feed those starving mothers and ease their misery. You will be their goddess mother, the provider of their food.

As the train stopped at a station Champa thrust her face out of the window and cried, Get up quick! It is the Ranigunj stoppage.

They got down. It took about half an hour to arrange a taxi. When they left it was 2 a.m . As the taxi rolled on Jahangeer stretched himself on the seat and said: Do you know what I am thinking. Champa? If only this road was an endless one! If I could go on like this through the ages With you beside me!

Champa did not say anything. With eyes closed she seemed to be lost in her own thoughts. Neither of them said anything more. The car ran like a meteor. Suddenly, as it reached the bend of the Howrah Bridge, four or five police sergeants surrounded it and ordered it to halt.

Jahangeer and Champa like arrows released from a taut bow, sprang up and stood erect. The armed sergeants jumped into the car with drawn revolvers. Jahangeer fired and a sergeant fell on the ground. The other sergeants overpowered Jahangeer. No one noticed that while the scuffle was going on Champa had managed to slip away. Two or three sergeants immediately fanned out looking for her.

19

In the mean time when the train reached Howrah station and Jahangeer's mother did not see either Jahangeer or Champa and learnt from Haroon about what had happened she was very upset. What would she do now? And it seemed that someone had poured a bottle of ink over Bhuni's face!

Haroon's fears, however, proved unfounded. No one searched their compartment. He saw, though, that the entire platform was crowded with military police and British soldiers. He also saw them apprehend some youngmen and put them in a prison-van. His face blanched in fear. But when he saw that Jahangeer was not among those who were caught he heaved a sigh of relief.

Haroon had told everything to Jahangeer's mother in accordance with Jahangeer's instructions. He only concealed the fact that Jahangeer was a member of a revolutionary party.

Dewanji was pondering something with knitted brows. He supervised the loading of their baggage and said, I am going to see the Police Commissioner, One way or another I'll find out about Jahangeer and only then shall I take any food or drink.

Jahangeer's mother turned her tearful eyes to Dewanji. She could not say a word.

Only Haroon's demented mother bewailed from time to time: Mina! Where has my Mina gone? He won't come back again. He has run away again!

It seemed that in the midst of great joy and happiness suddenly a storm had broken out and destroyed everything.

Jahangeer's mother shed no tear. She entered her home with a deeply melancholy face. She looked sombre and still like nature before the onset of a storm.

Everyone moved silently. Jahangeer's mother welcomed the Haroons to her home and got busy making necessary arrangements for them. But looking at her face Mobarak and even the garrulous Momi dared not open their lips.

Dewanji returned about noon. Jahangeer's mother was frightened to see his looks. She felt dizzy. Somehow she managed to stand up holding on to the wall, and said, Dewanji my son?

Dewanji answered quietly: He has been apprehended with the other revolutionaries. Unfortunate boy! Dewanji couldn't say anything further. He found his voice choked.

On waking up in the morning Jahangeer's mother had collected and read all the newspapers. She had also come to know from them that during the last two days Bengal had gone through a great upheaval. Hundreds of youngmen were arrested. A terrible German conspiracy had been unearthed. The police had spread a net all over the country.

So on getting this news from Dewanji she stood still for some moments like a person stricken by thunder and then fell down fainting. The maid-servants rushed toward her.

20

Along with Bojropani, Promotto and others Jahangeer was sentenced to life transportation. His real name, however, did not come to light. He had given his name as Swadesh Kumar. It was in that name that he received his punishment.

Ferdous Begum and Dewanji spent over a lakh of taka to save him but failed.

After the trial was over Jahangeer's mother on the same evening went to visit him at the Alipore jail. The mother shed no tears. She only said, Son, you are going away. Who shall give all your wealth to before I go away?

Jahangeer said, Are you, too, planning to go away, mother?

The mother answered quietly, You did not let me stay, son. I'll go to Mecca, prostrate myself and ask God why He punished me so cruelly.

Jahangeer said, I have no longer any right, mother, to forbid you. Go where you like if you can find peace there. If I come back, and if you are alive, we shall meet again.

He paused for a while. thought something. and asked: Did Champa come to you?

The mother said, Yes, she did, But I drove her away.

Jahangeer said. You made a mistake. mother. If that wealth belongs to me. please give it into her hands. Today hundreds of mothers like my mother are going without food. She will feed their children. That wealth now belongs to the oppressed brothers and sisters of my country. Please don't turn her away if she comes again.

And make over to Bhuni one-fourth of my property. The poor girl has suffered a lot.

The mother thought for a while and said in a composed tone. All right. I'll do that, She bit her lips and checked her rising tears.

Others had also come with the mother. Jahangeer looked at Haroon, smiled and said. Your words have proved true, my dear poet. Woman is an enigma. Haroon burst into tears.

Bhuni murmured indistinctly. You are really cruel! Suddenly an alarm bell from inside the jail started ringing. Some political prisoners had broken away from the prison.

The jailor appeared with his warders and led Jahangeer away.

The mother fell down where she was and cried out: My son! My son!