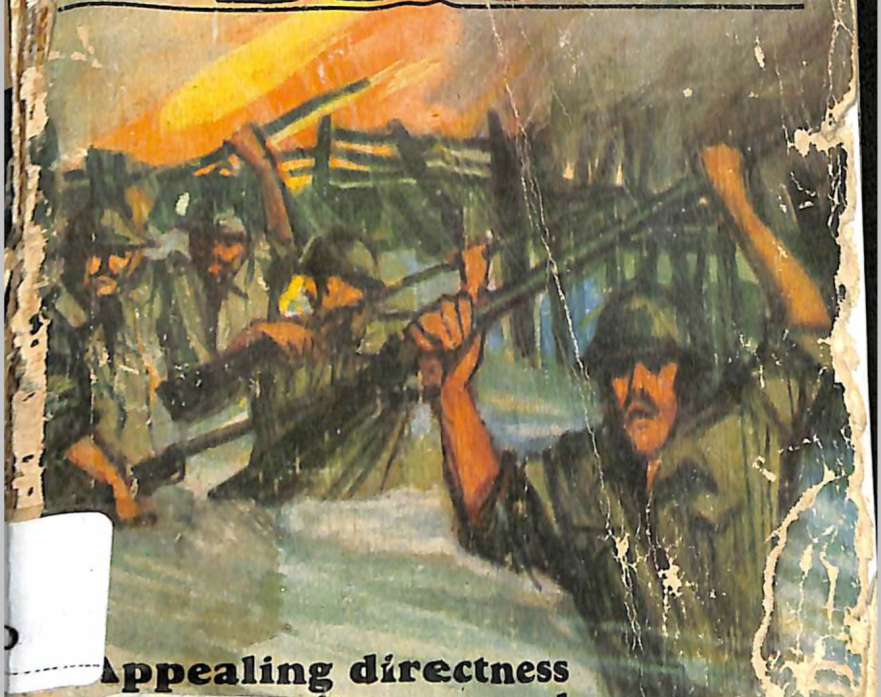
MANOHAR MALGONKAR

DISTANT DRUM



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SUPPLEMENT

AN ORIENT PAPERBACK

Manohar Malgonkar

DISTANT DRUM

Published by
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DISTANT DRUM

Essentially the story of a Regiment that maintained its equanimity inspite of crushing defeats and glorious victories. It is more than a story; it lays bare the spirit of Indian soldiers, their ideals, their shortcomings, their depressions and their singular devotion and courage in the face of crises.

Presented with a sober zest through the medium of Kiran, a young officer of the 4th Satpuras. A brilliant exposition of his character, his devotion, his pre-marital involvements and his love for a woman—who is being manoeuvred into marrying somebody else by her status-obsessed parent.

Mr. Malgonkar invests in this thrilling account his own experience in the Army. He presents with sensitivity and understanding how and why soldiers of opposite sides can at the blowing of the final bugle, rush across to the no-man's land where they can sing, dance and drink together with their erstwhile enemies. A masterly handling that makes for compelling reading told by a master of his craft.

Manohar Malgonkar is a distinguished author of undoubted repute. His many novels and short stories, (a portion of this book has appeared in 'Best Army Stories') among which *The Princess*, *A Bend in the Ganges* and *Combat of Shadows* rate amongst the best, are widely acclaimed.

Distant Drum

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FOR

DUGGIE SAWHNY

who cut out two chapters from this book

AND

PATTIE SOMDUTT

who thinned out the remainder

AND

PAT TOTTERDELL

who made me change the ending

The account of the experiences of the 4th Satpuras during the battle of the Sittang Bridge may be that of any of the battalions of the 17th Indian Division. All other incidents, as well as all characters, are imaginary.

The verse quoted on p. 191 is from 'Hi' by Walter De La Mare.

M.D.M.

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PART THREE

ACTIVE SERVICE

Some Years Earlier

After you had 'lived' with the regiment for a few weeks and been 'accepted', after the Commanding Officer had made up his mind to take you in, you went in for your second interview with the CO.

You went in and saluted and the Adjutant who took you in withdrew. The CO gave you a smile and told you to sit down.

"Now that you are one of us, a Satpura Officer," the CO would say, "there are a few things you will have to bear in mind."

The usual reply to any such remark addressed by a senior officer was the single word 'Sir'.

"In this Regiment, we are, first and foremost, gentlemen. No Satpura officer ever consciously does anything that would hurt the Regiment's izzat."

"Sir."

"We try to live up to what you might call the Code of the Regiment, though I don't particularly care to call it that myself. I cannot explain everything that it implies—no one can. It is a wide Code in many respects, quite elastic. And yet it is a rigid Code. We try and live up to certain broad principles of behaviour. We don't always succeed, of course, but we try. We try very, very hard."

"Sir."

"First and foremost, we always finish off our own tigers. Always. Secondly, when two of us have a bet, only one checks up—the other one takes his word, always. Thirdly, we never say 'I don't know'; we always say instead, 'I'll find out'. That's because we take our professional responsibilities very, very, seriously. Am I making myself clear?"

"Sir!" the Subaltern would answer, hoping so much that he had really understood what the Commanding Officer was trying to tell him.

This book is largely the story of the success or failure of the efforts of one of the officers of the Regiment to live up to its code.

Part One

The Regiment

1 *The Smell Of Horses*

One of the first things Kiran wanted to do when he went to Shingargaon for the Infantry Commanders' Conference, was to see his friend Arun Sanwal, in command of the 27th Usoda Lancers, now, of course, fully mechanized with Sherman tanks. He rang up Arun's house as soon as he reached the Tactical School mess where the visiting officers were being put up. It was Leela, Arun's wife, who answered the telephone.

"But Jacko, why aren't you staying with us?" Leela complained, and she said it as though she had genuinely wanted him to stay with them.

"I'll come and see you this evening," he promised.

"Oh, you must come! Come early and stay and have potluck. There's such a nice girl staying with us—at least she was, she's leaving this evening."

"I'll just have to come early then," Kiran laughed. And then he asked:

"What's she like to look at?"

"What? Oh, smashing." Leela said, laughing. "But she's right here, listening, and I can't very well say otherwise, can I?" and Kiran could hear her say at the other end, "It's Jacko. He wants to know if you are goodlooking," and then Leela was speaking into the telephone again:

"She says, 'tell him to come and see for himself'."

It was nice to be talking to a woman, even over the telephone, particularly to a goodlooking woman like Leela. At times he wondered if he wasn't half in love with Leela. Living in the aggressively male world of the cantonments, it was so easy to fall in love with other people's wives. But,

of course, you couldn't really fall in love with another officer's wife, not even half in love, unless of course, she threw herself at you, like Margot Medley had. But that had all been a long, long while ago, with the war as an excuse for much that happened, and here he was now, in a place called Shingargaon where they had established the new Tactical School, and where they were now holding an infantry Commanders' Conference, and in the evening he was going to see his friend Arun Sanwal and his attractive wife, Leela, and of course, that other girl staying with them whom Leela had called 'smashing'. He looked forward to the evening.

Not many people in the army liked Arun Sanwal, and Kiran often wondered whether it wasn't all Arun's own fault. Arun had an overbearingly cavalry manner which made him seem either coarse or affected to those who did not know him well. He was one of those who condemned the disappearance of the horse from the army and went to great lengths to denounce the efforts at the standardization of uniforms which, he was convinced, were mainly aimed at making the armoured corps officers look as drab and colourless as officers of the other arms. You could picture him in chain-mail and plumes, holding a lance and trotting on his charger, but surprisingly enough, he made a well-rounded officer of the armoured corps.

He clung desperately to the few remaining trappings of the days of the horse which, more by convention than any dress regulations, still found a place in the uniforms of the armoured corps officers. But more than the loosely-draped, knee-length bush shirts, more than the narrow trousers clinging tightly around the ankles, it was his long, correctly-stooping frame, the immoderate length of his upswept moustache and his carefully cultivated cavalry stride which gave the impression that too much riding had given his legs a permanent deformity, that made him look like an animated portrait of a cavalry officer of a bygone era. If you came to think of it, it was an exaggerated picture, a little distorted to make it more forcibly true to type, altogether like a caricature than a portrait. But that was the impression Arun seemed to strive to create, and it was enough to put most people off.

You could ascribe all this to the cavalry manner, to the unshakable belief that the cavalry were the salt of the

earth. Underneath all this swagger, Arun was a different man, sincere as they come. The trouble was that few people felt inclined to find out what Arun was like—underneath.

In the second week of August 1949, thirty-eight infantry officers from all parts of India had come to Shingargaon to attend the annual Conference of Infantry Commanders. The first day's session of the Conference was over, and in the late afternoon Kiran and another officer of his regiment, Lieutenant-Colonel Ayub Mulla, sat in the garden in front of their living quarters. Ayub Mulla, with his hawklike features and insolent gimlet eyes which, although his family had lived for five generations around Lucknow, bore testimony to his Pathan ancestry, was one of the few Muslim officers who had stayed on with his regiment in India when the army was divided at the partition of the country.

They had just gulped down the tepid grey liquid which the mess of the Tactical School served as afternoon tea, and lay sprawled on hard wooden MES chairs, their legs sticking out in front of them, basking in the warm haze that hung over the monsoon-rinsed landscape. The massive tamarind and mango trees beyond the stretch of lawn were motionless like a painted backdrop in a stage setting, and the crisp, transparent-organdie sky beyond the trees was entirely cloudless. It was a peaceful and soothing scene despite the sound of the buglers practising scales, and in the distance, keeping time to the metronome, were the drums. It was a typical Indian cantonment scene with the typical Indian cantonment sounds.

"I'm going to see Arun Sanwal," Kiran said to Ayub Mulla. "Would you like to come?"

Ayub frowned. "Oh, that man! He irritates me. But it might be amusing to go and see him. These horsed-cavalry types always make me laugh. All that moustache and bluster, and the smell of horses. Yes, let's go and get a drink out of him. But if that chap starts talking horse to me, I tell you I'm going to be rude to him."

"I shouldn't try," Kiran warned him. "Arun's got something of a reputation in that respect himself."

"Yes, he's an ill-mannered son of a bitch," Ayub said, "but let's go and see how the cavalry lives, by all means. If you can stand them, I can."

2 *The Pay Code Says 'No'*

Apparently, the cavalry as represented by Arun Sanwal still lived very well.

Arun's Bungalow was on the Mall, one of the newer ones. Unlike most military houses in Shingargaon, Arun's drive was swept clean and well-rolled, and the garden gave the impression of being carefully tended. The sweetpeas for the winter season were already planted in neat rows under string supports and the cannas and the dahlias were in full end-of-monsoon bloom.

"Look what's coming!" Arun bawled to nobody in particular as Kiran and Ayub turned into the drive. "The whole of the infantry conference." He led them-up to the muda chairs that had been set out on the lawn and announced:

"Sorry, chaps, I'm not going to give you a drink."

"Oh," Kiran said. "Why not?"

"These days none of us is supposed to give our callers a drink. They say it is quite uncalled for."

"And who's they?"

"The Government, of course, or at least those who feel entitled to speak on behalf of the Government. Last week they sent for some of us for a discussion in Delhi, about the New Pay Code. We had to write down our expenses, item by item. Then some DFA baboo went through our statements and told us flatly that he did not think we had made out a case for an increase of pay. According to him, a lot of our expenditure was unnecessary. Giving drinks to callers was, in his opinion, quite, quite uncalled for."

It was just as well that Leela called out from the house, otherwise Arun would have gone on about the Pay Code. "Hullo, Jacko," she said. "Don't tell me he's quoting the New Pay Code at you. He's been doing nothing else since he returned from Delhi. I'll be out in ten minutes," and she waved her hand and smiled and withdrew her head behind the window curtains.

It was always nice to see Leela, friendly, full of life, always natural, immune to Arun's overpowering moods.

Then Motiram, Arun's bearer arrived, carrying a tray of drinks and glasses, proving that Arun's threat about not giving them a drink was merely a talking point. It

seemed that despite the cut in pay, the cavalry still did things in style. The portly bearer was dressed in a spotless white chapkan and the rows of brass regimental buttons on his chest shone like gold. Around his waist, he wore a cummerbund in the colours of the 27th lancers, green and gold, and a narrower band of the same colours across his white turban. He had obviously seen active military service for he wore a row and a half of campaign medals on his chest. He looked altogether like a stage bearer, and the way he carried the tray, well away from his body as though it were some prayer offering and not just a tray of drinks, looked studiedly elaborate. The glass-ware bore the regimental crest, and the heavy beer tankards were solid silver, something Arun had won at regimental polo or tent-pegging in the days when they still gave away massive, solid-silver trophies at such events.

It was impressive, old-world, and dramatically at variance with the spirit of the times. It was certainly not representative of life in the army under the New Pay Code.

"I've got Brigadier Sohan Singh coming in for a drink," Arun explained. "He should be here any minute."

"Another horsey type?" Ayub asked.

"Another old sawar, you mean," Arun said.

As the bearer was pouring out the whisky and soda in the tumblers, a strikingly good-looking girl in a white sari came out of the house, carrying a blue overnight bag.

"Miss Sonal," Arun introduced. "Miss Bina Sonal. She works on the radio—or does one say in the radio?"

"It doesn't matter," Bina said.

"I could have sworn I had met you somewhere before," Kiran said.

"Of course, you have" Bina told him. "In Raniwada. My father was the Collector there. We left the place soon after you came, but during my vacations I saw you almost every day on the tennis courts."

"Yes, now I remember, perfectly," Kiran said. "We used to play tennis...."

"I don't know about that," Bina said smiling. "As far as I remember, we only played once in the same four. You were always giving lessons to Mrs. Medley. None of you ever had time to play with me. I usually played with the marker, in the mornings mostly."

"Oh, we must make up for that," Ayub said. "What about a game tomorrow?"

"Bina is leaving almost right away," Arun said.

"Daddy was transferred at the beginning of the war. I've never been back to Raniwada," Bina said "What's it like now?"

"About the same as ever," Kiran told her. "Just the same. The Club isn't anywhere as lively as it used to be, of course."

"I don't remember anything about the Club being lively. We hardly went to the Club except to play tennis."

"Forgive my asking," Kiran said, "but what do you do on the radio, sing?"

"You oaf!" Arun said. "You big oaf. Of course, she doesn't sing, or play the bongo drums. She announces records, reads out stories and playlets...."

"That's right, just talk," Bina explained. "Sometimes I read the news in English. No singing, or bongo drums, I'm afraid."

"Such shocking ignorance!" Arun said. "You should see the fan mail she gets. Quite embarrassing at times, so Leela tells me. Ooooh, some of the letters are really scorching!"

"Please, Arun," Bina said.

"College boys write and ask her for her signed photographs."

"If I write to you, will you send me a signed photograph?" Ayub asked. He was always good at this sort of talk.

"I'd have loved to," Bina told him smiling, "only, it's against the rules."

Then Leela came out, walking briskly and smiling at everyone.

"Don't tell me they are still talking about the Pay Code," Leela said.

"No, we are discussing Bina's fan mail," Arun said. "Ayub's already asked her for a game of tennis and for a signed photograph. Jacko tried to pretend he had never seen her..."

"Nonsense," Kiran protested, "But of course, you have changed a lot," he said to Bina.

"And you haven't changed at all," Bina said, looking at him straight in the eye. "Well, just a little, perhaps."

"Of course, I hadn't forgotten. How can one forget

someone like you," Kiran said, and he must have sounded too sincere saying it for Leela gave him a look, sharp and full of meaning, and Arun said 'another fan' and shook his head from side to side.

"Darling, you look after everyone while I take Bina to the Station," Leela said to Arun. "Make them stay and have pot-luck. You will, won't you?" she asked Ayub, taking for granted that Kiran would stay anyway, "I'll be back at eight," and she followed Bina towards the car.

Bina had spent a long week-end with Arun and Leela and now Leela was taking her to the station. The car was in the porch and the bearer was putting Bina's things into it. "Don't let them run away," Leela called out from the car, "I've ordered a nice dinner."

That was how Bina came back into Kiran's life; an image from the past suddenly coming into focus. Try as he would, he could not recall how she had looked in Raniwada ten years ago. She couldn't have been more than fifteen then, and it was difficult to be interested in a girl of fifteen. He could only remember her vaguely, as a spindly, dark girl who irritated him at times because of her persistent efforts to get into the better tennis fours.

He caught himself wondering what it was in her that he now found so attractive and whether she was really attractive or merely seemed so to him because of the excessively male world he lived in. He liked the way her hair, metallic and dark brown fell over her shoulders, and he liked the way her nose tilted in a manner that was wholly feminine, softly without a trace of sharpness. He liked the rich, glowing tan of her skin and the way her eyes were set, level and wide apart. He liked the sophistication of her perfume and the elaborate simplicity of her clothes. He liked her poise and he liked the way she laughed.

As she walked away to the waiting car, straight and without bobbing her head, he thought she looked like a mannequin displaying a dress, and yet there was something essentially outdoor about her, a grace and suppleness of movement associated with life in the country, of limbs used to long hikes and strenuous exercise; a life in which dogs and horses had a part. She would look nice in shorts, he thought: it would be fun playing tennis

with her, or dancing with her; much more fun kissing her.

He had hardly seen her for a few minutes, but as soon as the car was out of the gate, he felt an odd sense of separation. He wished he had said nicer things to her; he wished she hadn't made that reference to Mrs. Medley.

He wondered how much she had heard about that.

3 *"Yes, You May Leave The Mess"*

Brigadier Sohan Singh came soon after Leela and Bina left. He and Arun had belonged to the same regiment, the 27th Lancers, and now he was posted at Army Headquarters in New Delhi.

From then on, it was typical service talk. It went in the same circles, people invariably said the same things which had been said hundreds of times before in clubs, messes and your own bungalows. Its principles were simple: Your own service, your own directorate, battalion or regiment was the best, the most hard-worked and the most misunderstood and its only drawback was the shockingly incompetent officers holding the higher posts. The Navy were the most idle, the Air Force, the most pampered, but the civilians were the ones who created all the problems.

"This conference of yours," Arun was saying, "This conference you're holding. It's a bloody waste of time, isn't it?"

"Why?" Kiran asked.

"Because I can't imagine what you chaps could be discussing. You've hardly changed since the Boer war. The Air Force may have changed from Wapities to Vampire jets, we have changed from horses to tanks, but the infantry still goes on with the same old rifle, resisting all progress. What then is the use of holding a conference?"

"The trouble with you chaps," Ayub said evenly, "the trouble with you old sawars, is that you may have changed from horses to tanks, but your minds are still tied up with branmash and saddle soap. You just refuse to grow up."

"At least we don't pretend to be grown up and hold high-hat conferences."

"No," Ayub said. "But that is because you can never rise above the level of a newly commissioned subaltern."

Instead of showing irritation, Arun burst out laughing. He stabbed a finger at Ayub. "Yes, you're absolutely right," he said. "Absolutely. The trouble is that in these conferences we are apt to forget this important fact. That is exactly my point and that is exactly what I am, a cavalry subaltern."

"And yet you wear the crown and star of a Lieutenant Colonel."

"The badges of rank have nothing to do with it. The fact remains that I am a cavalry subaltern or Captain. No more." Arun turned to Kiran. "Can you honestly say, Jacko, that you are a thoroughly competent battalion commander?"

It was, of course, merely a rhetorical question, something merely intended to lend weight to Arun's line of argument, but Kiran felt uncomfortable under his stare, and it was Ayub who told Arun:

"Of course, he is. I'm sure Jacko is a better CO than most."

"Ah, but that's not the point," Arun said. "Being better than others is quite different. Let me put it another way. Can you honestly say, Jacko, that you will lead a battalion into action as efficiently as say, Joe Lentaigne, or, for that matter, let me see—who was that chap who commanded the 4th Satpuras in Burma? Yes, Ropey Booker. Are you near as good?"

Ropey Booker, R.O.P. Booker, had commanded Kiran's battalion in the disastrous retreat from Burma in 1942, and had ended up as a divisional commander in the 8th Army.

"Don't tell me," Arun continued, "I'll tell you. You are not. Mind you, I am not saying you won't be as good. In fact, in your case, I'm pretty sure you will be just as good; in another ten years perhaps, but not just now, when you're barely thirty years old. No, sir, what we are, all three of us," he said, graciously excluding the Brigadier, "we're only Lieutenants or Captains, fit only to command troops or platoons, squadrons and companies at the most, but not battalions and regiments; God, no!"

"What a terrible inferiority complex you must suffer from," Ayub said icily.

Arun said :

"Let's be honest amongst ourselves. Just because the withdrawal of the British officers and the division of the army has pushed us all into positions which we could never have qualified for in another ten years, there is no reason why we should feel that we are perfectly suited to these positions. By rank we are Lieutenant Colonels ; by age, training, experience and everything else that goes to make a good army officer, we're still Captains. At best, we're good, efficient Captains trying to do the jobs of battalion and regimental commanders, but it is no use forgetting the fact that we know precious little of our jobs—or don't you agree ?"

"I won't say Yes and I won't say No," Kiran said.

"As the Duchess said to the Bishop," the Brigadier said, and everyone laughed as though he had made a huge joke.

Arun, who must have felt that he was neglecting the Brigadier turned to him and said :

"You know, sir, this Jacko here is all there, even if he was commissioned in the infantry."

The cavalry Brigadier who had now grown so fat that it was difficult to imagine how he had ever got up on a horse laughed rather condescendingly and said :

"I nearly joined the paltan myself, you know."

"We were together at the Academy," Arun said. "Jacko was a term junior to me. I must say everyone thought him pretty dumb those days. He hardly had a word to say for himself. It was only after he joined his regiment that he became a bloody fire-eater. Told his own CO to shut up..."

"You know you are talking nonsense," Kiran protested, "Absolute rubbish !"

The Brigadier began to smile as though at some private joke, his double chin and narrow, slanting eyes giving his smile an added sense of mystery. Then he must have decided to come out with it.

"I hear you're coming to Army HQ," he said to Kiran.

"Good God, sir ! I hope not."

"Why ? Don't you like the idea ?"

"Loathe it !"

"That's unfortunate. Because I know from what...er ...may be regarded as the horse's mouth, ha, ha," said the Brigadier, "that you're coming to a staff appointment in Delhi."

"They can't do that, sir. I've been in command less than two years, and we were told we had to do three years as COs."

"They're terribly short of Staff-college trained officers at Army HQ. Most of the SO 2s and SO 3s are plain useless—not a clue of staff work. And there are others like you, Staff-college graduates, who are kicking their heels in regiments..."

Ayub sat up with a jerk. He was an out and out line soldier and was quick to resent it when anyone spoke disparagingly of a regimental officer. "Surely not kicking their heels, sir," he protested. "I doubt if there's anything one can do which is as worthwhile as commanding a battalion."

"That's one way of looking at it, of course," said the Brigadier pompously. "If I may say so, a rather selfish way of looking at it. For the greater good of the army as a whole, it is important that officers are posted to appointments that are best suited to their particular talents."

"That's just it, sir; they never are," said Ayub gleefully. "No one will deny that Jacko is a damn good CO though Colonel Sanwal thinks he's barely good enough to command a company. Then why shift him before he's done his term as CO to some baboo job in Army HQ? Postings are so cockeyed these days that it is almost certain he will find himself doing a job for which he has no aptitude or liking. Now, just because an officer has passed through Staff-college, it does not mean that the best thing for him to do is to chase files in the Pensions branch or something even more peculiar, say, requisitioning..."

"The Brigadier is the Deputy Director of Requisitioning," Arun pointed out.

"I say, sir! I'm awfully sorry; it was only a manner of speaking, of course. I didn't..."

But the Brigadier gracefully waived away Ayub's apologies. "That's all right," he said. "Perfectly all right. People are forever making jokes about us. Sheer ignorance, of course. Little do they know the valuable part played by Requisitions."

Kiran said, "Anyway, what is this job I am supposed to be going to. That is, if there is no way of getting out of it."

"I don't think there's a way of wriggling out," the Brigadier said. "And as for the job itself, perhaps I shouldn't be telling you but the posting orders must be out by now, so I'll take the risk. You are going as SO 1, in the General Staff Branch, Planning Directorate."

"That's one consolation, the General Staff," Ayub said grumpily.

"By Jove!" Arun shouted. "The General Staff, Planning Directorate, by Jove! You lucky devil! Let's have a drink on that. Bearah," he called, "Bearaaaaah!" Arun seemed genuinely pleased.

"So it was you," the Brigadier said settling back in his chair, "who ticked off that chap Manning..."

"Manners, sir," Ayub corrected, eager to make amends.

"Oh, yes, Manners. That's right. And what were you at the time?" the Brigadier asked Kiran, "a Lieutenant?"

"No, sir," Ayub said. "A second Lieutenant, Bum Wart."

"You make things very clear," said the Brigadier nodding his head gravely. "Very clear indeed."

Kiran often wished that people wouldn't keep harping about how he had ticked off Manners. It was not even true, for there had been no 'ticking off'. It was unthinkable that a Second Lieutenant could ever tick off a Lieutenant Colonel—particularly an Indian Second Lieutenant tick off a British Lieutenant Colonel in the days when India was ruled by the British.

Apart from that, he was never sure that he had acted with any special bravery in standing up to poor Manners, for when you came to think of it, Manners was a pathetic object, a doddering old fool sick in body and mind, serving out his last six months in the army to qualify for his Lieutenant Colonel's pension, and no one had any business to take him seriously or to take offence at his remarks.

What had actually happened was a fairly mild thing. Colonel Manners commanded the 4th Satpuras for a brief six months in 1938, when the permanent Commanding Officer, Colonel Booker, was attending a course in England. Manners had never recovered from the effects of what they used to call 'shellshock' in the First World War. He had been passed over for promotion and he was only serving out his time in India to qualify for another thirty pounds a month in his pension.

Manners had never been with an Indianized battalion before. He did not like India or Indians, and he made no secret of it. Every evening, he sat in the mess, telling those around him what should be done to the country and the people. It fairly made your blood boil to listen to him, and sometimes you were apt to forget that he was just a sick old man, slightly drunk, giving vent to his frustrations.

But there was nothing you could do about it. If he said that the Indians were thoroughly uncivilized, that they wouldn't be able to rule themselves in a thousand years, that their religion, their art, their music, were barbaric, the CO was merely expressing an opinion and there was no question of picking a row with him. And when he said things like "Gandhi is a quack and Nehru an utter charlatan, and the only thing to do with all sedition-mongers is to put them against a wall," you couldn't show your resentment openly. That wouldn't have got you anywhere.

No, however much the Satpura officers squirmed at the CO's jabs at many things that were sacred to them, there was nothing they could do about it.

Then one day Manners over-reached himself. They were all in the mess anteroom, waiting for dinner to be announced, and the CO was standing with his back to the fire, gripping a glass of brandy and soda. As usual, when he had had a lot to drink, his face had become brick red, and the nervous twitch of his left hand had stopped.

Kiran could see it all in detail, indelibly etched on his memory. The officers in the anteroom made three distinct groups. The largest was with the CO in front of the open fire with the narrow, leather-covered bench surrounding the hearth. In the corner, stood Spike Ballur with Bertie Howard, Bob Medley and Hambir Singh. All the others, including Kiran were grouped around Bull Hampton who was telling them what was wrong with the regimental football team. Everyone except the CO was talking in low tones, and the CO must have been talking about regimental loyalty, and above the crackle of sparks from an unwilling log in the fire, everyone heard Manners say:

"If it came to that, I'm not at all sure that the men of this bloody regiment would stand the test of loyalty."

No one in the room could have failed to hear that remark. Spike Ballur must have heard it, but he must have chosen to ignore it. He must have thought it was no use making an issue of a remark which was obviously not made in earnest, that there was no point in taking a drunken old man seriously.

Then there was that dreadful silence, the sort of silence that comes when the announcer says, "We are interrupting this programme for an important announcement." It lasted for what seemed a long time, and then unbelievably, Kiran heard his own voice ringing across the width of the room and saying with exaggerated clarity:

"Will you permit me to leave the mess, sir?"

Slowly, Manners turned to look at Kiran. "Why? What the devil is the matter with you?" he asked.

It was then that Kiran realized that he had addressed his CO from the other side of the room, and with unconscious deliberation, as though marching to slow-time in measured, thirty-inch paces, he went up to the CO, stood rigidly at attention and said:

"Will you permit me to leave the mess, sir, since you appear to doubt the loyalty of my regiment."

For a long time, Manners had glowered at him, his face getting more and more red. The web of veins in his temples had swollen and begun to throb and the twitch of his left-hand had returned.

"Yes, Mr. Garud," Manners said. "You may leave the mess."

Then Manners had turned towards the other officers, and speaking to them all, had said:

"I am sorry, gentlemen."

That was all it was. The 'ticking off' had amounted to no more than Kiran's asking permission to leave the mess.

And that was more than ten years ago. Since then, Kiran had been through two great campaigns. He had been awarded the Military Cross for what they had called 'exemplary devotion to duty in the field of battle', and he had been twice mentioned in dispatches. But these later triumphs did not seem to carry half the glory of that incident long ago when, as a Second Lieutenant, he had humiliated a drunken old British Lieutenant Colonel.

4 *Sometimes The Cards Fell All Wrong*

In the train, going back to Raniwada after the Infantry Commanders' Conference, Kiran thought about Bina Sonal, and then, because she had spoken about his friendship with Margot Medley, his thoughts were jerked away in a different direction. He lay awake in his berth a long time, thinking about Margot Medley.

Margot Medley was the wife of Major Medley who became the Second in Command of the battalion after Squire Harwood had died. Mrs. Medley was much younger than her husband Bob, perhaps in her middle thirties, and she had a trim, leggy, well-preserved figure. In spite of her undeniable good looks, she was essentially the outdoor type who loved to swim and play tennis and ride and shoot partridge and duck in the winter. She did all these things with a great deal of zest and a lot else which, if you were callously outspoken, you could call exhibitionism.

She had a dark, mobile, almost Spanish face with high cheekbones and flashing dark-brown eyes. It was a strikingly goodlooking face, with even features and a wonderful glowing skin. But it was not the face of a coquette. It had an air of mystery, perhaps a suggestion of the woman with a past, a latent smouldering fire, but it never suggested sex. Her chief asset was a pair of attractive legs which she was always careful to display to full advantage. It was her legs, perhaps a little on the heavy side by Hollywood standards, but at all times tanned a most beautiful brown and generously exposed, that had such a disturbing influence on the minds of the younger Satpura officers.

Margot Medley wore very short dresses as was the fashion in those days, and for tennis and other games, she wore an even shorter flared skirt and a knitted cotton sweater stretched tightly across her full breasts. Sprawling in one of those wicker chairs beside the tennis courts or the swimming pool, she would keep wriggling her legs all the time, twisting them and stretching them and wrapping them round each other, her skirts riding higher and higher all the time ; you could not help noticing how attractive they were.

She had even more pointed ways of attracting attention.

"Gosh! My legs are getting all sunburnt, don't you think?" she would say with what Kiran had always thought was unnecessary frankness, or, "Look, what I did to my poor knee with the racket. It's looking all blue." And of course, it didn't look blue; it looked a flushed and becoming pink.

Kiran played a lot of tennis, and saw a lot of those legs and was duly captivated. In the beginning, like most men players who are good at the game, he used to avoid getting into mixed-doubles games. But within a few weeks he had begun to look forward to them, and later, he frequently played singles with Mrs. Medley who was forever training for some tournament or the other. He soon began to long for those games, particularly the sets of singles with their atmosphere of intimacy. It was after one of these games when they were sitting on the lawn near the tennis courts in the half-darkness after the sun had gone down, that one of the legs had come from under the bamboo table, reaching out like a snake, to play games with Kiran's bare ankle, and sent a delightful, electric thrill through him. But hurriedly, a little ashamed of himself, he had withdrawn his foot.

The same thing happened again a few days later while they were sitting down to dinner at Spike Ballur's place. They were sitting side by side and he felt her leg touching him.

"I love curries, simply adore them," she was saying to Spike.

Kiran was sure that all the other eight or ten people in the room must have noticed how flushed and nervous he looked. He drew his foot back in embarrassment.

"Don't you like curries, Mr. Garud," Margot asked him, smiling with those eyes of hers which could say so much, and again he had felt the smooth pressure of her calf reaching out for him, and this time he did not withdraw his foot.

After that these encounters were fairly frequent, and Kiran began to long for them, trembling with anticipation every time she was near him; and whenever she looked at him, he was made aware of their exciting, shared secret.

It was only when he was away from her that he wondered whether Margot Medley did these things merely to embarrass him, merely because she took a delight in

seeing his confusion. For that was all it had amounted to, so far; that and the occasional, moist holding of hands in the back of Medley's car while returning from partridge shoots and picnics.

So far, there had been no exchange of words even remotely suggestive of intimacy. Once, after one of those slightly drunken dances at the club, he had attempted to kiss her, but she had stopped him and had playfully patted his cheek instead. Until then, Kiran had never even called her anything but 'Mrs. Medley', although some of his friends had begun to pull his leg about her. His head was full of thoughts of her, weaving romantic dreams, and often he would lie awake in bed wondering whether her lack of greater response was not all due to his own inexperience in such matters.

Then Kiran had gone off on a mortar course, and when he returned, two months later, he found that Abdul Jamal who never played much tennis but was very fond of swimming, had taken his place in Mrs. Medley's affections.

He learnt this from Abdul himself who made no secret of his conquest. In fact, that was the first thing Abdul told Kiran on his return.

"I've been looking after your affairs," Abdul said with that slightly crooked smile which looked as though he had practised it in front of a mirror, and Abdul had followed that remark with a long, low, appreciative whistle.

Kiran could not have made a suitable reply, for Abdul began to explain. "I mean Margot," he said.

"Margot? Margot who?" Kiran asked, and then he remembered Mrs. Medley's first name. "Oh, you mean Mrs. Medley?"

Abdul had gone on smiling.

"How do you mean, looking after her?" Kiran asked, suddenly resentful.

"Wait, I'll show you," Abdul had said, and from a drawer in his desk, he had brought out a photograph and handed it to Kiran.

It was a black-and-white postcard size photograph, and it showed a nude woman standing near some water and looking away into the distance with one hand shading her face against the sun. It looked like one of those pictures of athletic women cut out from magazines devoted to nudism.

It was a picture of Margot Medley. In contrast to the heavy sun tan of her arms and legs, the rest of her body stood out sharply white. Standing straight up, her head held high, she looked oddly diminutive and defenceless.

"You can keep it," Abdul had offered.

"Thank you, no," Kiran had said. "Oh, no, thank you."

"Smashing looking thing, isn't she?"

Kiran felt too shy to look at the picture intently, and he was aware of a feeling of shame for Abdul.

"Did you take the picture?" he asked.

"What do you think? You don't think I bought it in the bazaar, do you? Here, keep it, I've got several others."

"I say," Kiran came out. "It's hardly fair, is it?"

And then Abdul had begun to laugh again. He said: "Don't look so flustered. Dammit, she isn't your wife."

"All the same, there's something so, so shameful about this sort of thing...."

Abdul had looked hurt, and the smile vanished from his face.

"You're not in love with the woman, are you?" he asked.

"No," Kiran had said.

"And I don't suppose you have even slept with her."

"Good God, no!" Kiran said, shocked. "Why? Have you?"

But Kiran already knew the answer, and the way Abdul laughed confirmed it.

"No, no, of course, not," Abdul had said.

But that was the sort of thing you never admitted even to your best friend.

But Kiran had kept the picture, and whenever he saw it, it never failed to bring back an odd sense of guilt. On the other hand, the photograph and Abdul's apparent success had made him lose many of his own inhibitions. He began to look upon Margot Medley more as an object of desire than merely an object of adoration; a woman rather than the attractive second lady of the battalion. The next time she had attempted to hold his hand he had not felt the least bit confused, and when she had complained of the sunburn on her legs, he had said:

"No, I don't think so. In fact, I think they look more beautiful than ever."

"Really!" Margot had said half sarcastically.

"Yes," Kiran said evenly, looking straight into her eyes, "and your knees have the most attractive dimples."

Margot Medley had stared at him for a few seconds. Then she said, "You have become very grown up, all of a sudden, haven't you?"

That was what he had become, suddenly grown up. That same evening walking back from the tennis courts long after dusk, he had gathered her up in his arms and kissed her, and this time Margot Medley hadn't stopped him.

But small cantonment towns are notoriously unsuited for clandestine love affairs, and soon people had begun to talk about them. Even Ropey Booker, the Commanding Officer, must have heard something about it, although, of course, he did not say anything about it. The one man who did not know anything was Bob Medley.

The days that followed, the days of wild animal rapture, of desire and fulfilment, hardly lasted a couple of weeks, and in the end, the whole thing had been cut off in the same rude prosaic manner in which all such problems are dealt with in the army. Kiran was sent away on a long Signals course.

It had not been his turn to go on a course; he had just got back from the mortar course. And at the risk of inviting a rocket, for it was one of those things that were just not done to ask to be excused from going on a course, he had sought an interview with the Adjutant.

"What's wrong with the Signals course?" Bull Hampton, the Adjutant had asked with surprising mildness.

"I've just returned from a course, sir," Kiran said. "I wasn't here for the Company's individual training. If I go again, the collective training will suffer. I may also be depriving someone else of a vacancy."

"I'm afraid that cannot be helped," Bull had said without irritation.

Then Kiran had played what he thought was his trump card. "I'll also be away for the Durand Cup football tournaments, sir."

"Oh, the Durand Cup!" Bull had said, and for a moment it had looked as though it might work. The battalion could not be deprived of its centre half-back just when they had the chance to win the Durand.

"I hadn't realised that the course would go on until the Durand," Bull said. And then he had screwed his

mouth and smiled. "Look," Bull said. "The only thing I can suggest to you is for you to take some leave. Take six weeks, and then you'll be back in time for the Durand Cup. Would you rather go on leave or go on a course?"

So that was that. Go on leave or go on a course. That was why Kiran felt sure that Ropey Booker must have heard something about him and Margot. Go on leave or go on a course.

"Well," Bull asked after a little while.

"Go on the course, sir," Kiran told him.

That is how they had solved the problem. In simple military fashion, like a problem in elementary tactics. If it didn't work, they would consider other, stronger methods; but in nine cases out of ten it did work. By the time he came back, Margot Medley had left Raniwada.

The war had brought them together again, and this time the army could do nothing to help them. Peacetime rules of behaviour no longer held good. The war permitted a new kind of freedom, particularly to those who were away from the frontline only for a few days. You could afford to ignore certain peacetime taboos with impunity. There was, of course, the danger that you might run into wartime taboos, but then you had to be really unlucky to have all the cards stacked so heavily against you.

It was in Calcutta in the middle of 1944 where Kiran was spending four days of his almost compulsory war leave, that he again met Margot Medley.

They sent you off to get you away from the jungles and the heat and the primitiveness and dehumanization of war, and the CO warned you to 'go and have a good time' so that you could come back vigorous and refreshed for the business of war. But no one could go and have a good time to order. You called for exotic meals, and saw a movie every evening and spent money recklessly and hung for long hours in the bar of the Grand Hotel and those who were that way inclined visited their favourite establishments along Cruyer Road, and at the end of it all you felt deflated and cheated. You seldom got what you set out to get: a good time.

The Grand Hotel had been converted into an Officers' hostel and that was where Kiran had been put up. On the second day, he was coming out of the Lighthouse cinema after seeing the early show, when he heard some-

one call out his name:

"Mr. Garud!"

His eyes, unaccustomed to the bright light outside, took some time to recognize her. She was saying:

"Oh, I beg your pardon; I see that you're a Captain now." Margot Medley stood smiling beside an American Air Corps Major with crew-cut hair and a Flying Tiger leather jacket, and she seemed genuinely pleased to have seen Kiran.

"Hullo, Margot," he said. "I didn't know you were in Calcutta."

"You do now," Margot said.

"How's Bob?" Kiran asked. "What's he now; full Colonel?" You never asked where anyone was, during the war, not in a cinema theatre, anyway. You just asked how they were.

"No, half-Colonel still," Margot said. "Poor Bob never gets the breaks. How long are you here for?"

"Two more days; off the day after tomorrow."

"Good. Look, here's my telephone number at the office. Give me a ring tomorrow, sometime in the morning. Don't forget now. Bye."

And Margot Medley had hooked her arm with the man with the Flying Tiger leather coat and gone inside. She had not introduced Kiran to her escort.

Kiran rang up her office the next morning and they met in the afternoon for tea in his hotel and smoked cigarettes and talked about Raniwada cantonment and about the Regiment. Afterwards, they went for a taxi ride and Kiran reached out and held her hand most of the time. In the evening, they walked arm in arm up and down Chowringhee, looking into the shop windows.

The vacation from the front, the compulsory break advised by the psychiatrists, was beginning to acquire meaning. To be away from the jungles and the mosquitoes and the nearness of war was not in itself having a good time, but to be walking the dimly lit streets of wartime Calcutta, arm in arm with a woman you had known before socially; attractive, well-groomed, nicely perfumed woman of class, certainly was having a good time.

Under the arches of the Army and Navy stores, he put his arms around her and tried to kiss her.

"Don't be silly," Margot said, in much the same tone that she had used when, five years earlier, she had stopped him from kissing her at the club dance in Raniwada. "Don't spoil everything," and she had clutched his arm tightly and led him back into the street.

They went back to the Grand Hotel for a drink before dinner. Kiran said :

"I don't think they've got a decent drink in the place. I've got a bottle of Scotch in my room. Shall we go up for a drink ?"

Margot had thrown back her head and laughed. "Darling, you don't have to have a bottle of Scotch to get me to go up to your room."

Kiran looked around to see if anyone was listening, but the lounge of the Grand Hotel was almost empty at that early hour. "I had really meant that we should go and have a couple of drinks in my room before dinner," he explained.

"Is that all you had meant ? Really ?" Margot asked.

"Well, as it happens, there's another man in my room. We have to share rooms in this joint, you know, sometimes three and four in one room."

"Look," Margot said. "Let's have dinner first, and then take the Scotch to my flat."

"Your flat ?" Kiran asked.

"Well, it would be much more sensible than holding hands in taxis and trying to kiss me under the Army and Navy arches."

"I am sorry about that," Kiran said.

"Don't ever tell a woman you are sorry you kissed her," Margot said.

"Oh, sorry ... I mean. Oh, hell."

"That's better. Now you just go up and bring out your toothbrush and pyjamas ..."

And that had made Kiran burst out laughing. He found it difficult to stop laughing so that Margot was looking at him in some concern.

"Stop it," she said. "What's wrong with you ?"

"Nothing, except that I have no pyjamas. You don't think we wear pyjamas in our foxholes, do you ?"

But Margot had seen nothing funny in that. "Why ; let's go and buy some then," she suggested. "Now you go and bring out your tooth-brush and your shaving things while I tidy myself."

"And the bottle of Scotch," Kiran said.
"Yes, and the bottle."

They had early dinner and then they went out into the streets again to buy Kiran's pyjamas. Many of the Chowringhee shops were still open. They went into a Chinese store and Margot hung back looking at ladies' garments while Kiran bought his pyjamas.

"Let's buy something for you," Kiran said.

"You don't have to."

"I want to."

"Oh, I have some excellent nightgowns for the lady," the shopkeeper said, "Let me show you." and he opened a drawer and pulled out dozens of shimmering flimsy garments. He held up one for Margot to see.

"Oh, what a beautiful thing!" she said.

It was the sheerest of silks in a pale shade of blue, so pale that the colour showed only in the folds. As the man held it up, all spread out, Kiran said:

"Yes, I'll take that one, but haven't you got something that goes with it, a skirt or a pair of pyjamas or something."

The man bowed and laughed at Kiran as though he had said something funny and Margot put her hand on his arm and said:

"Don't be silly; of course, there's nothing else to go with it."

"But it'll hardly come below ... I mean, it's no longer than a pyjama top."

"It's not meant to be," Margot said.

The flat was on the third floor, with a self-service lift. It had two interconnecting rooms and a bath and a kitchenette with a gas stove. Margot opened the door with her latchkey, deposited her bag on the cane sofa, shook her hair, and went into the kitchen. She came out with a glass and a jug of water.

"Help yourself to your whisky while I change," she told him.

Kiran poured a drink and lit a cigarette. On a low table, placed close to the wall, was a full-length picture of Bob Medley in mess dress, obviously taken many years ago. A mess kit with its gold buttons and its coloured facings seemed so oddly inconsistent in an army at war.

Kiran stretched out his legs on the low stool in front of him and sipped his whisky. From where he lay, his eye fell directly on Bob Medley's picture in his Captain's full dress mess uniform. Aware of a sense of irritation, he got up and turned the picture so that it no longer faced him. He came and sat down and lit another cigarette.

"Here I am," Margot said from behind him.

Kiran turned and looked. She had put on her new nightgown. It barely reached her fingertips and it was almost completely transparent. She wore openwork sandals. She looked much nicer than in the nude picture which Abdul Jamal had given him; more desirable, more beautiful, less cold; if possible, she looked even more naked and defenceless.

"You'd better give me a drink now," Margot said, "and then go and try on your new pyjamas."

When he awoke in the morning, Margot was already dressed and ready to go out. She had made coffee and toast and she had warmed up a K ration meat loaf, and she and Kiran ate breakfast at the low table in the sitting room. She went out immediately after that. "I just must rush off now," she said, "but no need for you to hurry. You just relax as long as you like, and we could meet for tea somewhere and then I'll come and see you off at your train."

He drew her to him and kissed her hard on the mouth.

"There, you've gone and ruined all my make-up," she pouted. "I'll have to do my face all over again. And don't sit grinning there, you look quite ridiculous with all that lipstick on your face."

After she had gone he lay in bed smoking and looking at a magazine and then he must have dozed off again. When he awoke, it took him some time to realize where he was. What had disturbed him was the loud and insistent knocking on the door.

Barefoot and in his green and white fancy pyjamas, Kiran went and opened the door. On the landing stood Bob Medley, wearing red tabs and the badges of rank of a full Colonel. He carried a haversack and a briefcase and he stood blinking at Kiran for a long time, not saying a word.

"Good morning, sir," Kiran said; that was all he could

bring himself to say.

Colonel Medley did not return his greeting. He was staring past Kiran, into the flat, at Kiran's jungle-green bush jacket draped neatly on the back of a chair and at his boots and socks and trousers and cap, and at the rumpled bed and at the two empty cups of coffee and the bottle of whisky. He stood as though in a daze, not saying a word, and then abruptly, as though he could not bear it any more, he turned and fled down the stairs.

Kiran went inside and dressed and went back to the Grand Hotel. The first thing he did was to ring up Margot's office.

"I'm afraid something awful has happened," he said.

"I know," Margot said. "Bob rang me up."

"I can't tell you how sorry I am. Can I help in any way, any way at all?"

"No, darling, you can't. He's gone already; I don't know where. I hope he won't do anything silly. No, no one can help these things ... they, they just happen to one."

"It was all my fault, of course," Kiran said. "I was entirely to blame. I mean ..."

"Please, please," Margot said, "No one can do anything. Nothing can be done now; just nothing," and Margot had put down the receiver.

He had never seen Margot Medley after that. In the evening, he had caught his train back, and in another two days, he was back at the battalion's position near Imphal.

He was not as much ashamed of himself as he was sorry for Bob Medley. For himself, he felt that it wasn't fair that anyone who had caused the ruin of two lives should get away without any punishment.

He had often tried to put himself in Bob Medley's place; in the place of a man at the front weaving romantic dreams about his lovely wife in Calcutta, keeping the news of his longed for promotion a secret so that he could give his wife a surprise, showing up at her door wearing his flashy new red tabs and his extra star; in the place of a man who cadges a lift in an aircraft to get two days in Calcutta so that he and his wife could celebrate his promotion together. He could imagine the anticipation, the planning, the wangling, and the un-

bearable eagerness mounting every minute; and then at last the getting into the self-service lift with the inevitable, jealously preserved bottle of Scotch and perhaps a pair of silk stockings wheedled out of some U.S. pilot ...

At the last moment, his imagination always broke down, for you could never really imagine the feelings of a man as he knocks on the door of his wife's flat, adjusting his smile as the door opens, preparing to clutch her in his arms, only to see a young man in crumpled pyjamas, unshaved and with bare feet, a man who had so obviously spent the night there, slept in the bed, had breakfast. It did not bear thinking. Kiran often wished that Bob Medley had pulled out his revolver and killed him on the spot.

But Bob Medley hadn't shot him; he wasn't that kind of man. He was the kind who punished himself, not others. Three weeks later, in the battalion's camp near Imphal, going out to inspect their foxholes at stand-to, one of the officers had mentioned to Kiran the fact that Bob Medley had blown off his own brains.

"They say his wife was running round with some American in Calcutta," he had said. "Some Major in the Flying Tigers."

It was nearly two years later, in the middle of 1946, after the 4th Satpuras had got back to Raniwada, that he found out something more about Bob Medley's death; and yet it was something he already knew. It was Abdul Jamal who told him. Not that Abdul Jamal wanted to tell him.

They were sitting in the open, on the hard bench on the wooden jetty of the boat club after an hour's tame punting following a game of tennis, and the moon was shining bright and silver on the silent Kamra river. It was late and the air was already getting chilly and although they were both wearing sweaters, they were beginning to shiver and should have gone back long ago. But they had no intention of going back yet, for they were talking about their separate experiences in the war; two soldiers who, although they were in the same theatre of war throughout, had not met each other

for nearly three years.

"There is something I have been meaning to ask you, something rather special," Kiran said. "But only if you will promise to tell the truth; the whole truth."

"The next time we come out boating, we should bring out some beer and sandwiches," Abdul said.

"The whole truth," Kiran said.

"Sandwiches and beer, or a cold roast chicken," Abdul said. "Then we can stay out much later."

"Listen to me," Kiran said. "I want to know everything about Bob Medley's death."

"Bob shot himself," Abdul said.

"Look, I want you to try and not be the pucca-saab for once, please; not with me. You were with the 17th Corps HQ, and so was Bob. You gave evidence at the Court of Inquiry. Well, tell me what happened."

"No one knows. His bearer found him dead with his head blown up and came running up to my room."

"Yes, go on."

"There's nothing to go on. It all came out in the Court of Inquiry. Let's go back and change; It's getting quite chilly."

"It is important for me to know, Abdul," Kiran said. "Very important. I want to find out."

"Well, Bob was a stupid ass."

"You gave evidence at the Court of Inquiry."

"Yes."

"What came out in the Inquiry?"

"That he shot himself. I told them all I knew."

"All that you knew?"

"Everything that was ... er ... relevant."

"Go on, please." Kiran said. "You told them that Bob had been acting queer long before ... before his visit to Calcutta."

"So he was. He used to come up to my room almost every night, we were in a pretty desolate hole at the time, and Bob, as you know, had few friends ... and he would sit talking to me for hours. He was thoroughly browned off with life. It's quite true."

"What did he talk about?"

"Well, if you must know, some so-called friend of his in Calcutta had written to him that his wife was run-

ning around with an American."

"Nothing of that came out in the Inquiry."

"No, nothing."

"Just the fact that Bob had been acting queer long before his Calcutta trip."

"That's what was important; you know how they are, at these Inquiries."

"In fact," Kiran said. "In fact one might almost say that you went to some pains to establish at the Court of Inquiry that Bob had been talking about suicide long before he went to Calcutta."

"Naturally," Abdul said. "You don't want to bring in wives and ... and their lovers ... into this kind of mess! Bob had shot himself and that was all there was to it."

"It was over a week, almost ten days, after his return from Calcutta that Bob killed himself," Kiran reminded Abdul.

"That's right."

"Didn't he say anything to you in all that time?"

"Well, he may have, but nothing important, nothing that mattered."

"He talked about me; didn't he?"

Abdul was silent for some time, staring into the river. Then he said: "Yes, he did."

"What did he say?"

"That he found you in his wife's flat."

"Nothing else?"

"Well, he went on about it for a while. He wasn't quite ... er ... adjusted at the time, you know. I did my best to soothe him. He was terribly in love with her, you know."

"Did he talk like that to any of the others?"

"Oh, no. As I told you, poor Bob didn't have many friends; no one he could confide in. He burned within himself, too much."

"And you didn't say anything about all this in the Court of Inquiry. Why?"

"Don't be silly! There was no point, no point in dragging in other names. Bob was dead, that was all. It was quite a bad business in itself, I can assure you, and there was no point in adding to the complications."

"Tell me Abdul, truthfully. You didn't keep mum about all this at the Inquiry just to save my skin, did you ?"

"Stop being so stupid !" Abdul said. "There was a war on ; people dying in thousands everywhere. And then some stupid, introverted ass who cannot take it, who cannot carry the weight of his own little troubles, decides to bump himself off. Who is to blame ? What did it matter ?—one extra dead. Why drag in other names ? Of course one had to do all one could to keep out other people's names. Not just yours, but Margot's too, and that Yank in the Flying Tigers."

"Even on oath ?"

"Of course !"

"Abdul," Kiran said. "Shall I tell you something ? It is nice to know that there are people like you in army—in this regiment."

"Stop being stupid," Abdul said.

But he was not being stupid ; he had to dig out the details, find out just how much he was in debt and to how many different people. Now he knew the score. He, Kiran Garud, officer and gentleman, had as good as murdered a man, a brother officer, and then had been spared the inevitable retribution, the polite 'request' for his resignation or even a downright dismissal from the service, by the good graces of another. That was the staggering price of what they had learnt to refer to as a 'wartime fling', the price of few moments of rapture.

He had got away with it that time, got away with no more than a deep gash of guilt on his conscience and a mountain of debt owed to Abdul Jamal. Now, it was up to him to see that there was no repetition. A man could not live without women, true enough ; but you had no business to get involved with any particular woman. That much you could guard against. No one could afford two mistakes like that in a lifetime ; no one was going to mess up his life once again.

"No one," Kiran reminded himself, in the train going away from Shingargaon, as, in spite of himself, his thoughts raced backward and forward between Margot Medley and Bina Sonal.

5 *Raniwada Cantonment*

Raniwada was not one of the older, historic cantonments like, for instance, Meerut, where Churchill had played polo and where all the bungalows seemed to be crumbling to pieces before your eyes so that you felt that in a few years only the untidy rows of bunyan and peepul trees would remain, spreading indecently, root by root, to remind you of its past glories. Nor was it as new, as, for instance, New Delhi cantonment where the buildings looked all alike, functional and regimented, and the trees had not had time to grow.

Raniwada was built at the beginning of the century, and it was believed that Lord Kitchener had taken a personal interest in its planning. Raniwada had a river, the Kamra, which neatly separated the cantonment from the adjoining city and kept all the civilians out. Within a few hours you could reach some of the best tiger-shooting blocks in central India, and in winter, the duck, partridge and sandgrouse shooting was as good as any you could get outside a Maharaja's preserve. Above all, the surrounding country with is softly rolling hills was ideal fox-hunting country and the jawar and sugar-cane crops held plenty of jackals. Jungle-jacks, they called them.

Raniwada was a one battalion station, which meant that it had been built to accommodate one infantry battalion. During the war, two more battalions, a River-crossing School and a Brigade Headquarters were crammed into Raniwada. But these wartime impositions were now gone, and Raniwada had already returned to its normal strength except for the addition of a School of Clerks which did not take much space and which was accommodated in the permanent buildings without excessive crowding.

The Kamra river made a neat loop to surround the cantonment on three sides. A wide, tree-lined road called Merril Avenue followed the course of the river, and the horseshoe made by the road enclosed the training and recreational area of the cantonment: the parade ground, the cricket and hockey fields, the polo ground,

and that essential requirement of all fair-sized British habitations, a golf course.

The lines, as the barracks were known, were built at the open end of the horseshoe, and the Officers' bungalows and the mess and the club buildings were all on the outer side of Merril Avenue so that they were situated along the river bank.

The bungalows had been built by civilian landlords and did not bear the severe, regimented look of bungalow built by the Military Engineering Service. Military bungalows all tended to look alike: soulless rectangular blocks of varying sizes, harshly functional and meant to provide accommodation in standardized units, strictly according to rank—the sort of bungalows that would never be romanticized by hauntings. Each bungalow in Raniwada, however, had its own individual character, mellowed and developed by the process of aging.

None of the bungalows bore the cantonment look any longer, however. They had not been painted for over ten years, their gardens were overgrown with weeds, and their hedges had been allowed to grow untrimmed. They looked unkempt and musty, like houses in some abandoned town: they all looked haunted.

In the past, Indian cantonments had an atmosphere all their own. As soon as you entered a cantonment area, you were aware of the difference; there was no need of signboards telling you that you were now inside cantonment limits. But by the end of the war, cantonments looked just as untidy as any other Indian town, and often, with the accumulated debris of war material —huge, unsightly dumps of jerricans, dismantled bulldozers, rusting boilers, discarded motor spares, and a thousand other leavings of war, all thriftily stored and labelled and guarded behind barbed wire—much more disorderly.

Over the years, the cantonments had changed. Anyone could see that. The old, familiar air of spick-and-span neatness was gone. The hedges had wide gaps, the lawns had dried up and the walls of houses had large patches of peeling plaster.

Walking away from the lines, long Merril Avenue, you first passed through a dense plantation of casuarina trees. Then, as the road came imperceptibly nearer the river, you came to the bungalows. The first two bungalows were called the Bachelor House and the Stag Lodge respectively. Each of them was normally occupied by four bachelor officers.

The next bungalow was occupied by Major Rawal Singh. Rawal Singh was an IECO, which meant that he had obtained his commission during the war—an Emergency Commission—which was supposed to last only until the end of the 'emergency'. As it was, though it was more than four years since the war had ended, there was no likelihood of Major Rawal Singh and thousands of other IECOs like him, being disbanded.

Rawal Singh had been a schoolmaster in civilian life. He had joined the army when he was forty years old, and he did not have the advantage of being rushed through a short course of training in one of the officer training establishments set up during the war. He was directly commissioned, as a Field Cashier, and sent to Calcutta where he had spent the rest of the war, and from where he had managed to qualify for both the Burma Star and the General Service medal.

Rawal Singh was said to have been an excellent Field Cashier, but he was quite useless as an infantry officer, or, for that matter, any kind of officer in a peacetime army. How he had managed to get posted to the 4th Satpuras had for a time been a mystery to the other officers of the battalion. Evidently, while a Field Cashier, he had been what is known as 'paper-posted' to the Satpuras for the purpose of documentation. As a result of this, he had now acquired the necessary seniority in the Regiment and had to be provided for in one or the other Satpura battalions. As his Commanding Officer, Kiran had made several efforts to get rid of him and had even spoken to a friend in the Military Secretary's branch at Army Headquarters, but was told that he would just have to be carried until they could find a more suitable posting for him. Confidentially, Kiran was also told that Rawal Singh had some pull 'much higher up', and that it would be best not to make efforts to have

him posted away.

As far as Rawal Singh was concerned, the war and his Emergency Commission had come as a godsend. His earnings as a schoolmaster were, to say the least, barely enough to keep body and soul together, and just before he applied for a commission, Rawal Singh had been on the verge of losing even his schoolmaster's job because of some differences with the Head Master. It was only as a desperate gamble that he had applied for a commission in the army, and was quite surprised when the Head Master had recommended the application.

He was even more surprised when he was accepted. After being taught how to salute, he was promoted Captain and sent off to Calcutta—not that he ever learned to salute correctly.

Rawal Singh was a short, fat, balding man of forty-eight who loved rich Punjabi food and assiduously used a deep brown hair dye to prevent whatever was left of his greying hair from showing his age. The dye smelt horribly on the first day of application and the whole of his head looked the colour of iodine for another two. For the rest of the fortnight, until the grey roots began to look conspicuous, the dyeing was quite effective.

Not that there were no setbacks in Rawal Singh's life after he was commissioned. As a result of the partition of the country, he had had to evacuate his family from Pakistan to India. Hitherto, he had housed his family in a two-room tenement in Sheikhupura ; now, in the absence of similar accommodation in some nearby town, he had to keep his family with him.

That was his main problem : his family. In addition to his four children and wife, there were his mother and a widowed sister with a daughter. Even before the partition, the entire family had been his responsibility too, but hitherto, he had managed to keep himself away from their immediate problems by keeping them all in Sheikhupura.

Now his family, all eight of them, lived with him in Bungalow No. 17, Merril Avenue. Except for the fact that he had got so used to living on his own, having his family with him suited Major Rawal Singh rather well. Firstly, with so many people in the house, he

did not have to keep any servants. Also, although the rent of his bungalow was not as low as his tenement flat in Sheikhupura, actually the bungalow did not cost him anything. The bungalow had six spacious servants' quarters which he had managed to hire out to a refugee family for the exact amount of the rent of his bungalow. Above all, he could now eat real, home-cooked food, specially prepared for the head of the family and quite different from the food in the Officers' Mess which he had always found insipid. He could now indulge in the richer punjabi delicacies made from milk for which he had a special fondness: thick, sweetened cream flavoured with saffron and cardamom, rabdi mixed with crushed almonds and overlaid with silver foil, the daily ration of spiced lassi with generous lumps of white butter floating on top.

There was plenty of milk in his house now, thanks to the milch buffalo he had bought from the cattle pound for five rupees during the days of the communal riots when cattle pounds in most towns were bursting with unclaimed cattle. Rawal Singh was a little touchy about the bargain, although he stoutly maintained that he was only doing a kindness to the buffalo in rescuing her from the pound, just as he argued that to hire out his servants' quarters to a refugee family for seventy rupees a month was doing them a favour. After all, they had to have somewhere to live, he asserted; and if they could find a cheaper place they would not go on living in his servants' quarters, would they?

In the past, Rawal Singh had often wondered how he was going to be able to live after the 'Emergency' was officially over, and when he would no longer go on drawing nine hundred rupees every month. But of late he had ceased to worry about it. He was now convinced that 'emergency' would go on for many years to come. Until then, as things seemed to be going, he hoped he would have saved a tidy sum. His savings, and whatever the government would pay him as compensation for his property left in Pakistan, would be all that he would have after he was discharged from the army.

Admittedly, he had put in a claim for a whole hundred thousand rupees for his 'property' left in Pakistan,

but then a large number of others who had come from Pakistan had put in similar vastly inflated claims. Rawal Singh had never expected that the Government would treat his claim seriously, and would have been happy to settle his entire claim for a thousand rupees.

The future had ceased to loom darkly in his thoughts. The 'Emergency' would go on indefinitely. In the mean time, there was his large bungalow which did not cost him an anna, and there was his admiring family eager to obey his slightest wish. Rawal Singh had never known such complete freedom from anxiety.

This particular afternoon, Major Rawal Singh had eaten chicken pullao for lunch, drunk three glasses of sweet lassi, and dressed in a pair of underpants and an army issue olive-green vest, fallen into a deep sleep in his darkened bedroom. At six o'clock, his eldest daughter Vidya looked at the clock on the mantelpiece and decided it was time to wake up her father. If father had to be in the mess at eight o'clock, it was time he got up.

Rawal Singh woke up with a grunt, turned on his side to snatch another few minutes' sleep, asked Vidya what time it was, and when she said 'Six o'clock', sat up with a jerk and heaved himself out of bed. He shouted to his wife to get his bath water ready, asked Vidya to put out his uniform, and going up to his dressing table, began to apply dye to his hair with its special brush.

Major Rawal Singh was getting ready for the special dinner night that the CO had ordered on his return from the Infantry Commanders' Conference.

The bungalow next to Rawal Singh's, away from the two bachelors' bungalows, was by custom the Adjutant's bungalow, now, however, occupied by the present Adjutant, Captain Barkat Ram, only as a special concession.

Barkat was a bachelor and as such not entitled to a full bungalow to himself. But the CO had allowed him to occupy the Adjutant's bungalow mainly because he had no wish to give up the bungalow from his pool. The 4th Satpuras had perhaps more bachelor officers than an average battalion in the postwar army when it was rare to find an officer of twenty-five who was not married, and it was no use giving up accommodation

which was almost certain to be needed as soon as there was a change of Adjutants. From the Station Commander's point of view, it was also important that the bungalow should not be surrendered because it was almost certain that the landlord would lease it out to some civilian, and that would have been quite undesirable.

The bungalow, No. 16 Merril Avenue, was large, and Barkat occupied no more than a few rooms. These were by no means tastefully furnished, but they were certainly expensively furnished, and the serviceable MES furniture looked quite out of place and sat like poor relations on the Kashan and Kermanshah carpets which were spread with utter disregard for harmony all over the floors.

At six-thirty, at approximately the same time that Major Rawal Singh in the next house had finished dyeing his hair, Barkat's bearer, a family servant who had looked after Barkat since his Mayo School days, pushed open the door of the bedroom and shouted to the bhisty to keep the hot water ready. He then laid out a clean bath mat on the wooden board in the bathroom, put out fresh towels on the rack and went back to his quarters to smoke his hookah. Fifteen minutes later, he came into the bungalow again, carrying a tray with a jug of iced lemon squash and a tumbler. He left the tray on a table in the sitting room and checked up that every item of mess-kit was laid out in its proper order so that his master was not delayed while dressing.

He was worried because Barkat who had to be in the mess before eight had not yet come back from the hockey match although it was nearing seven. Muttering his displeasure, he took the pair of shining Wellington boots into the verandah and squatted down to give them yet another coat of Propert's cream. He was a man with an orderly mind and he liked everything to be done in good time.

It was striking seven when Barkat's cream and red MG roared into the drive and stopped in the porch with a jerk. The bearer heard Barkat say: "Come in and have a drink," and saw with dismay that his master had brought another man with him dressed in shorts and sweater and hockey boots. Both men, the sweat of a

sixty-minute game of hard-fought hockey still dripping from their tousled hair, walked stiffly into the sitting room and Barkat's visitor asked for beer. They sat down and Barkat sipped his lime juice as though he had the whole evening before him. The bearer said, "It is past seven o'clock Huzoor," and Barkat laughed at him and said, "Ji, Huzoor. But don't worry, I'll be ready in time."

For his age which was twenty-five, Barkat took his profession terribly seriously. Although born in a Rajput Princely family, and as such used from his childhood to seeing his elders drinking Scotch in four-finger pegs, he never touched alcohol. But he always kept a well-stocked bar in his house and sometimes brought out a specially blended Assa liquor which was prepared in his brother's house.

Through a cloud of smoke, Barkat looked at his bearer standing near the door scowling his disapproval. Barkat had quite given up trying to tell him not to address him as 'huzoor'. "I am no Huzoor," Barkat had said. "Grandfather certainly was and father may have been. But even if the princes hadn't been finished off, even in the old order, it would be wrong to call me 'Huzoor'. These are the days when you take people for what they are, irrespective of what their families were in the past. I am just an army officer, if you insist, a 'sahib', but never a 'Huzoor'."

Barkat who was the second son of the Maharaja of Tilkatta had a healthy contempt for the fawning appellations peculiar to life in the Indian Princely states, but his old servant was not prepared to be converted to his way of thinking. He had grown up in a tradition; he came of a family which had always provided body servants to Barkat's family, and to him, all members of the family, both male and female, were entitled to be addressed as princes: they were 'huzoors' not just 'sahibs'.

There was something pathetic about it all, Barkat felt at times. A vast number of people had not grown used to the new order. It was no use arguing with them. Facts meant nothing to them; often tradition stood towering above facts, above reason—inviolable.

It was not until a quarter past seven that Barkat got

up from his chair, peeled off his blood-and-iron academy blazer, and shouted for his bath. He said to his guest: "Do have another drink, I'll drop you on my way to the mess."

All the five bachelors, the full complement of both the bachelors' bungalows, were dressed and ready at seven. There were two Sikhs, two Hindus and one Parsee. Actually there were in all seven officers in the two bungalows, but one of them was on leave and the other was in hospital.

Both the Sikhs were dressed in mess dress—white gabardine monkey jackets and dark-blue overalls with yellow piping—and their Wellington boots, although made by the local mochee, shone almost as brightly as Barkat's London made pair. Their turbans and black silk thatas tied tightly round their faces to set their moistened beards and moustaches, masked their faces almost completely and made them look like members of some secret society. Only their eyes, black and insolent, flashed through the folds of turban and thata.

The other three were dressed in olive-green uniforms starched stiff as cardboard. They had all gathered together in the Stag Lodge which was nearer to the mess and were strutting nervously about in the verandah, looking at their watches every few minutes, reluctant to sit down lest their uniforms should crumple.

At seven-thirty, they mounted their bicycles and rode the half mile to the mess slowly so as not to raise dust that might soil their trousers. Each of them carried a rag with him with which to give his boots a final wipe before entering the mess anteroom.

They were all subalterns, all ranging in ages from twenty to twenty-three, and although they dined in the mess every night and should by now have regarded dinner nights as routine affairs, they were being extra careful today because they were going to the mess for the special dinner night that the CO had ordered on his return from the Infantry Commanders' Conference.

6 *In The Mess*

Kiran stopped the Staff Car not in the porch but a little further down the drive because he believed that even if you were the CO, you had no business to block everyone's way by stopping your car in the porch.

He prided himself on being what he called a considerate CO but admitted that the effort of being considerate at all times was a little beyond him. He loitered in the garden for a few minutes and listened to the pipe band. The fact that the band, a collection of Rajputs and Marathas, should be playing with gusto 'The Campbells are Coming', did not seem incongruous to him. He had heard the same tune played by the same band, although, of course, not necessarily by the same men, ever since he had joined the regiment. In fact, habit had dulled critical faculty to such an extent that he could not now tell whether they were playing well or badly. Almost unconsciously, he looked for faults in their turn-out, and noticed that their leggings did not look as white as they might. He waited until the piece was played, clapped dutifully, and walked up the steps, through the verandah and into the anteroom.

All those who were in the room snapped to attention almost with one click, as though they were on parade and someone had shouted an order and called them to attention, and there was a chorus of "Good evening, sir."

This was always an awkward moment. It was difficult to be casual about it and begin to talk to the nearest person as you would at a cocktail party. You were both the host and the chief guest, and you did not break the ice with some frivolous remark. Kiran always felt that it would have been different if he had been a little older; then these things came naturally. But poise was different from bluster, and if you were a Commanding Officer before you were thirty, everything you did somehow felt a little artificial, as though you were acting a part in a play.

As it was, he turned to Barkat and said:

"What the hell is the matter with the band? Their leggings look all grey to me. Will you see that they

are done a proper white tomorrow?"

"Sir," Barkat said.

The sight of Barkat, standing stiffly before him, accepting all blame for the band's turn-out, made him regret his sharpness. It was no use making yourself unpleasant in the mess, particularly when you were leaving in a few days.

Kiran called the aabdar and told him to serve drinks to everybody. At this, the senior dining member came up to him and said:

"Excuse me, sir, but that would mean that some of them will be having a third drink. The orders are that no one is to have more than two drinks before dinner in the mess."

"To hell with the orders; tell him to bring in the drinks," Kiran said. That was more like it; it was like the master of the house asserting his right to override petty formalities. And with the exercising of a privilege came that feeling of exhilaration which he always experienced in the mess; the warm glow of leadership which he was convinced only the commander of a battalion could feel in his own mess, dining with his own officers.

More relaxed now, he chafed one of the Sikh subalterns on losing in the first round of the boxing tournament:

"I don't think you have a clue about boxing," he said. "I'm sure you put down your name for the tournament merely to wangle a trip to Delhi."

The other simpered and it was possible that there was some truth in what Kiran had said. All the youngsters, quick to detect the change in the CO's mood, began to edge nearer, eager to be included in the conversation. In a few minutes, however, breaking the circle of the subalterns, the obese figure of Major Rawal Singh pushed itself before the CO, saying:

"How waas Shingargaon, sur?"

His hair looked unnaturally brown, and to drown the smell of the dye he had tucked inside his ear a swab of cotton soaked in kewra ittar. His uniform was a vivid, unmilitary bottle-green shade, and his medal ribbons were frayed and soiled and hung at an angle.

Kiran frowned in spite of himself. "Shingargaon was all right," he said coldly. Then he added:

"I thought I'd given orders that all officers of the rank of Captain and above had to equip themselves with mess-kit before the end of July. What are you doing in OG?"

"There is a letter from Army HQ, sur, which exumpts, IECOs from buying mess dress," said Rawal Singh, undaunted and with a broad grin on his face.

"Oh, I see; and where on earth did you acquire that peculiar shade of green for your uniform?" Kiran asked, trying to control his voice.

"This unifarm, sur, has been dyed. Dyed under Army HQ arrangements in Delhi. They all became this shade. Even General Surjeet Singh. . ."

"I don't want any names mentioned here," Kiran said, "and I don't care where the uniforms were dyed. I don't want that shade in this battalion. Don't wear it again. And look at your medal ribbons; shocking! I cannot bear dirty medal ribbons. Please have them changed tomorrow."

"Yus, sur," Rawal Singh said.

"And for heaven's sake stop wearing perfume when in uniform!" Kiran said, and his voice sounded unnaturally sharp. Rawal Singh seemed to have a knack of making him lose his temper, and it was not nice for a CO to lose his temper in his mess.

At nine o'clock, the mess Havaldar came in and announced dinner, and Lieutenant-Colonel Kiran Garud and his officers emptied their glasses and trooped in to dinner.

It was like a thousand other mess nights. At least in the army messes, so little had changed that even Kipling might have felt perfectly at home. Mess nights were all well-preserved, neatly-tied-up bundles of faintly musty customs; some of them quite meaningless, one or two even shockingly opposed to the spirit of the times, but all of them were inflexible, just because they were regimental customs, carried over from close on two centuries.

There was very little drinking these days, and the food was unimaginative, but the silver and glassware would have done credit to a prince's table, and the vast, rosewood table shone like a black mirror. While the meat

course was served, the pipers marched into the dining room and played airs as they went round and round the dining table, the pipes drowning the clatter of hobnailed boots on the stone-flagged floor. Even after all these years, Kiran wasn't at all sure that he liked the pipes from as close as that, but there was nothing he could do about it. It was a regimental custom, and, of course, it wasn't for you to criticize.

At the end of the meal, after the plates had been cleared and all the particles of toast carefully brushed off the table, gleaming cut glass decanters of Port, Madeira and water—the last for the benefit of the two teetotallers —were passed from right to left, always from right to left and always slid along the table, never lifted, the PMC of the evening sitting at the head of the table rapped on a board. In the hushed silence that followed, he rose to his feet and holding his glass in his hand said:

"Mister Vice, the President!"

The subaltern sitting at the other end of the table then stood up and gave the toast:

"Gentlemen, the President!"

They all stood up while the first six bars of the National Anthem were played by the band outside.

"The President," everyone said, "the President of India," and drank the toast.

Two heavy, chased-silver boxes were now passed round, each containing cigars and cigarettes. But smoking was not to begin yet, and the officers held their cigars and cigarettes in their hands unlit, waiting for the ornamental flame lighter made in the shape of a temple lamp, or for the lump of glowing charcoal placed on top of an elaborate silver column, to be passed round. Then came the chinese snuff box with its design of dragons in mortal combat, containing two varieties of snuff— plain and scented—and all the officers made a pretence of holding a pinch of snuff to their nostrils and sneezed noisily into their handkerchiefs.

Their sneezing over, their cigarettes lit, their glasses recharged, they began to relax. Then the Pipe Major came in and in another time-honoured custom of the Satpuras, sat by the side of the PMC of the evening and

solemnly drank his three fingers of neat whisky. He was duly complimented on the performance of his band, after which he clicked his heels and went out.

Kiran then gave his officers an account of what the other Satpura battalions were doing; things he had learnt in talks with the other COs of the regiment who had come up for the Infantry Commanders' Conference. In this too, he was following established custom: whenever any of the COs returned from a conference, they always called a special dinner night at which the news of other battalions was given. It was, as usual, a talk mainly about hockey, boxing, Boys' companies, the approaching regimental bi-centenary and what the other Satpura officers were saying and doing. He had also meant to tell them that he would be leaving them in a few days, but he did not do so. He did not feel in the mood to make an announcement about himself that might have sounded a little dramatic.

Afterwards, there were the games, Cockfighting and Freda and other nameless ones, and competitions to see who could bend forward and lift a coin placed several feet away on the floor without shifting his heels, or to see how long anyone could stand upright when blindfolded and lifted up and down and shaken about on a wooden board held by the others. It was noisy and it was rough, but it was all a part of mess life; if you were young and in the mood, it was all good, clean fun.

Kiran sat smoking his cigar and looking at his officers and feeling already separated from them. It was difficult to say whether he had been a good CO to his officers. And then his thoughts switched to their new CO, a man called Kamala Kant. Kiran did not know Kamala Kant but he had heard about him, and what he had heard brought on a vague sense of uneasiness in his mind.

7 *A Little Goes A Long Way*

The sound of bugles in the darkness did something to your insides, it evoked moods and memories and stirred

your emotions; reveille, retreat, last-post, even the kitchen-call had their own music and their own meaning to each soldier.

Reveille was at a quarter to six. No soldier, they say can sleep through reveille. Almost by force of habit, Kiran found himself awake at reveille, but he had trained himself to go to sleep again. At six, he was again wakened to the skirl of the bagpipes played by a long piper marching up and down the gravel drive in front of his room in the Pattison Club. That was when he liked the music best, lying in bed in the early morning.

By six-thirty, he was shaved and dressed, ready for the day. Soon afterwards, he set out for the ranges, on foot.

The ranges were over a mile away, but Kiran could have walked the distance with his eyes shut. He knew every fold in the ground, every tree and bush, all along the way as only someone who has trained troops in elementary fieldcraft and tactics on the same ground can know it. Almost every feature of that drab, heavily scarred landscape was linked in memory with some earlier event. Some of those events were still capable of bringing on a shudder, some others only brought on irritation, a few even brought amusement. . .

There, in the middle distance, was the stunted-looking grenade range. As a second lieutenant, Kiran had nearly finished his military career there, because he had miscalculated the time required for the fuse to burn up while demolishing a blind grenade. All the men in the platoon were watching the grenade, waiting for the officer in the tower to shout the order, "Down!" And then it had exploded, right before their eyes, and the fragments had come whining past their heads. But no one was hit. Even now, the thought of what might have happened brought a cold knot of fear in his stomach. If anyone had been hurt, or died, it would certainly have meant a court martial.

Along the road ran the endurance course, over which panting troops in full battle order were sent charging through specially designed obstacles, and at intervals, live rounds fired over their heads to teach them to keep low. Beyond one of those obstacles, and almost hidden

by the cactus bushes, were the two trenches which 'Girgut' Jones had had specially dug for his schemes 'A' and 'B'.

'Bullshit pits' they used to be called.

The trenches were hidden now, with all the thorny lantana and soapnut bushes growing out of them. But if you looked carefully, you could make out their zigzag outlines. As usual, on that morning in late August, Kiran looked for those trenches which had not been used since Colonel Jones had gone, and thought of the Schemes 'A' and 'B'.

"A Little Bullshit goes a long way," that was what Colonel Jones used to tell his officers.

Towards the end of 1942, when the Satpuras returned from Burma, Colonel Booker had been promoted to take over a Brigade and Colonel Jones had taken over command of the battalion. Jones was a tall man with an unusually long neck and a prominent Adam's apple, and the men began to call him 'Girgut' Jones, and the officers soon adopted the nickname. It is doubtful whether Colonel Jones, a smug and conceited man, ever discovered that his officers and men had named him after a rather unprepossessing variety of lizards.

Jones commanded the battalion until the end of 1943, when, just as the Satpuras were ready to go into Burma, he handed over to Colonel Watson to the immense relief of all his officers and many of the men.

Not that there was anything radically wrong with the Girgut; in fact, he would have been a wonderful peacetime Commanding Officer. It is just that the 4th Satpuras were a difficult battalion to command, and the Girgut had started with a disadvantage. Firstly, he was not a Satpura officer at all, but had come from another regiment, the Malwas, and he could never resist the temptation of telling them how they did things in the Malwas. Secondly, he had not been with the battalion in the first Burma campaign, and indeed, had not seen any active service at all, having been too young to serve in the 1914-18 war, and in the second world war, being, until then, employed in a staff appointment.

It was of course, no fault of the Girgut that he had not seen active service, but the 4th Satpuras, beaten back

from Burma, were in no mood to consider excuses. Unfortunately, the Girgut was also very keen on tactics, and whenever he started talking about operations of war in those group discussions which were held at least once a week, the Satpura officers who had returned from Burma tried to avoid his eyes. At these times they felt rather sorry for him, but most of the time they looked upon him with the sense of superiority which only soldiers who have gone through a great campaign feel towards those who have seen no fighting. But the Girgut was a kind man, absolutely without any anti-Indian bias, and he was thorough—you had to grant that he was thorough. It was just that his thoroughness sometimes took queer forms, like his schemes 'A' and 'B', which were all a part of that thoroughness.

Scheme 'A' was what the battalion had to be doing, or had to pretend to be doing, when some important visitors were on a round of inspection—and God knows there were at least one or two such inspections every week during the war. Scheme 'B' was what they had to do when somewhat less important visitors were looking at the battalion. On the days when there was no scheme on, everyone acted naturally and did what they really had to do.

Yes, all of them used to laugh at the Girgut's schemes; but it was not so funny for those who had to put the schemes into practice. Apart from the fact that the schemes used to hold up normal training schedules, Kiran and the other officers who had to put the schemes into effect, could not help feeling personally responsible about them. That was perhaps the worst of it: telling the puppy-keen but bewildered Second Lieutenants just arrived from Bangalore or Mhow the absurd things they were required to do as their part in the schemes; attempting to persuade them that the childish, stagemanaged schemes were somehow a part of their preparation for the war.

But the Schemes certainly impressed the visitors, and after all that was what they were designed for. The visitors invariably spoke of the battalion's training in glowing terms, and Colonel Jones made quite a name for himself. After a year of command, he was promoted

to full Colonel and was appointed Deputy Director of training at Army Headquarters where he spent the rest of the war.

The schemes required that the battalion should put 'everything in the shop window' as Colonel Jones used to say. You had to have the men drilling, doing PT, going over the obstacle course, bayonet fighting, firing on the long and short ranges, throwing grenades, charging through the endurance course, and carrying out a river crossing—all in different batches, but all at the same time. It had to be noisy and eye-catching. The difference between the two schemes was that in scheme 'A', you had to detail a special team to make off-the-stage noises, and you also had to herd together all the useless men in the battalion and send them off to hide in the nullah behind the rifle ranges in order to keep them safely out of sight of the visitors. Scheme 'B' did not require these additional effects.

Many were the times when Kiran, as the Training Adjutant, had to order one of the newly arrived officers: "Take the dud's detail behind the ranges, will you, and keep them hidden throughout the day. The Area Commander is visiting us," or, "Take ten pounds of gelignite to the trenches beyond the endurance course and blow off a charge every minute or so. The Brig Adam is coming. Mind you, don't make it too regular, space the bangs as though they were something to do with training."

That was what the trenches were made for: to make 'off the stage' bangs, and that was why they were called 'Bullshit pits'.

"A little Bullshit," Colonel Jones used to say in that fruity salesman's voice of his, "goes a long way". It certainly took him a long way. He retired as a Major-General, still without having seen a day's active service.

It was nearly seven by the time Kiran reached the rifle range. Baker Company was firing a classification shoot from one hundred yards, and the marksmanship seemed well above average. He spent a whole hour at the ranges, and before leaving, he fired a practice himself, five rounds at one hundred yards. He was thoroughly

annoyed with himself at not getting his usual four-inch group.

The staff car came for him at eight, and in it he went and saw Able Company drilling. It was a wonderful sight to see well-trained soldiers drilling, and Able Company was his best company. He watched them for some time, making notes in his notebook about the points he would later take up with the instructors. He did not want to interfere with the drill now; everything considered, they were doing very well.

Further along, Dog company was doing PT. The PT officer, Sarkar, was taking them over the obstacle course. From a distance, he watched them run and timed them. They were far too slow. "Make them go over again," he shouted to Captain Sarkar, "And tell them not to bloody well dawdle!" Then he drove off to the club for breakfast.

The PT officer, Sarkar, was a dumpy, barrel-chested, beer-fat Bengali with a cauliflower ear and the bounce of a hard-inflated football. He was the Command wrestling champion and also the welter-weight boxing champion of the district. He rubbed his hands together and smacked his lips visibly, and got to work on Dog company.

He made them go over the course three times, and told them to report for extra PT in the afternoon, during their hour of rest:

"Come with a full pack and rifle," he told them. "Let's see how many times you have to go over the bloody course before you can do it to the CO's timing," and Captain Sarkar smiled to himself with narrowed eyes.

In his room at the club, after breakfast, Kiran lit his first cigarette of the day and twiddled with the knobs of his radio set. He tried all the Indian stations but could not recognize any of the voices as belonging to Bina. "I must try and find when she's on," he said to himself. "Must get the Listener and check up...."

8 *They Always Called You 'Old Boy'*

Whenever Kiran was confronted with a tricky situation, he always tried to think out what a British CO would have done in his place. Sometimes he wondered whether this habit was not all a part of the great inferiority complex peculiar to those who had been in service during British days. Also, of course, there was no such thing as the typical British CO; they were all as different as, for instance, Ropey Booker was different from Girgut Jones or Edward Manners, and depending on who you had in mind, you got drastically different answers.

But at times it helped. You had to bear in mind that Manners was an exception, and that the typical British CO was somewhere between Ropey Booker and Girgut Jones. Then you could work out roughly just how far you could go on being tactful and where you drew the line, and when you dug your toes in. It was a fairly good guide.

It did not always help, though. You could not necessarily think of the British COs in exactly the same situations. Then you had to find the answer for yourself, as best as you could. There was no way of guessing what the others would have done. You could not, for instance, imagine the old COs being shouted at by someone like Lala Vishnu Saran Dev. In their days, the sentry at the gate would never have let him through.

He was preceded by the sound of a slight altercation in the verandah, and then he had burst in, pushing past a protesting sentry, and had come stamping into the office.

"I yam Lala Vishnu Saran Dev," he said belligerently as he took a chair without invitation. "I yam the Chairman aaf the Dishtrict Caangrus Committee."

Kiran studied his visitor, trying not to betray his annoyance. He had a three-day growth of beard and his mouth was red with the juice of paan which he had been chewing, his tongue busy looking for hidden pieces in the crevices of his dark-brown teeth. His clothes were crumpled and looked unwashed. On his head,

pushed far back so that it exposed a large portion of his head, he wore a cap which must have been white when new but now looked grey and oily.

"Yes?" Kiran said frowning.

"I waant your shamiana, Coynelsaab, aan the 30th."

"The Shamiana? You mean the big tent?"

"Yaas. The one you put faar regimental ishports and durbars. The new one, naat the old one, ha, ha," said the visitor laughing a knowing laugh. "Will you please have the shamiana shent to the shity haal garden aan the 30th. The Minishter, Lala Madhukar, is coming to Raniwada, and the Dishtrict Caangrus Committee aaf which I yam the Chairman is giving him a resheption."

"Yes, but I can't give the shamiana for an occasion like that," Kiran explained. "Sometimes we give our old shamiana for wedding receptions and things like that, but never for a political gathering."

"Thish is much more impaartant than a wedding," Lala Vishnu Saran Dev pointed out. "The gusht is a minishter aaf the gourment. He musht have the shamiana."

"But Lalajee, if the Minister were coming on an official visit and the shamiana was required by him or the district officials, no doubt, I would have received orders to give you the shamiana. But for a political show, I'm afraid, it is not at all possible."

The Chairman of the District Congress Committee was, however, determined not to be put off by what appeared to be a mere formality. He was sure that in pleading the absence of instructions from higher authority, Kiran was merely taking shelter behind the red tape of which one heard so much in dealing with government officials. You had to be firm with them. During the past two years, he had learnt that you nearly always got your way if you were sufficiently firm with them.

"Coynelsaab," he said, "the paalitikal party aaf which you taak so lightly is ruling thish country today. The days aaf treating us as a sheditious aarganization are gone. Now the party and the gournment are the shame. I would shay that in refuging this ishmall favour you are running a great rishk. He may complain to your own minishter. You musht remember that thish will

amount to belittling a minishter of the gournment aaf which you are only a servant."

By now Kiran's patience was exhausted. "Lalajee," he said, quite sternly, "I cannot take that view and I am not prepared to argue the point. I don't think I can let you have the shamiana."

"But thish ... thish is just like the British days!" Lalajee exploded. "Who is your shuperior aaficer? I will sppeak to him. I will complain to the Deputy Commissioner saab. I shall shend a telegram to Delhi. It is naat your privut shamiana. It is gournment praaperty. I will ask questions in the Parliament, I will ..."

But Kiran had had quite enough. "It's no use threatening me, Lalajee. You'll have to excuse me now, I am a very busy man," and Kiran banged the bell on his table very hard, and shouted "Orderly, ORDERLY!" and Lala Vishnu Saran Dev got up from his chair and stamped angrily out of the office.

After that it had been a fairly routine day. The Cantonment Executive officer came in with the agenda of the next meeting of the Cantonment Board, followed by the Adjutant with the Officers' leave programme, and then the training Adjutant with the training programme for the next month, and the Quartermaster with a pile of returns.

In between came more civilian visitors and the Company Commanders, and miltrunks call from Brigade Headquarters demanding more returns. Towards one o'clock the tempo began to subside and the calls and the visitors became less frequent. It was nearly half past one when Brigade HQ rang up again. Kiran was on the point of leaving the office for lunch and told Barkat who had taken the call, "Tell him I've gone to lunch. It must be about some bloody return."

"It's the Brigade Commander himself, sir, who wishes to speak to you. They're bound to catch up with you at the club," Barkat pointed out.

Kiran took up the telephone. "Garud here," he said.

The Brigade Major was on the line. "Good morning, sir," said the BM.

"Good afternoon," Kiran said pointedly.

"Hold the line please, the Brigade Commander wishes

to speak to you," the BM said, and there was Brigadier Sitaram saying, "Hullo, hullo. Is that you, Garud ?"

"Good afternoon, sir," Kiran said, "This is Garud speaking."

"How are you, Garud ?" the Brigadier said.

They always began a telephone conversation by asking how you were. Quite a lot of time on military trunk calls must be taken up by people saying 'how are you' to each other, thought Kiran, and then he heard the Brigadier cursing at the other end :

"Hullo, hullo, Miltrunks ... blast Miltrunks ! ... dammit to have cut me off ; Miltrunks ! Miltrunks !" and the bland voice of the signals operator saying, "You're through to the 4th, sir," and Kiran said : "Hullo, sir."

"Is that you, Garud ?"

"Yes, sir."

"Bloody Miltrunks cut me off ! How are you, Garud ?"

"I'm fine, thank you. How are you ?"

"Look here, Garud. It's about that TEWT you are writing for the Brigade exercise. I want you to put in a squadron of tanks."

"Tanks, sir ! But it's a night attack !"

"I know, but we have to have tanks."

"I say, sir ! It's mountain warfare, an attack at night too, country quite unsuitable ; tanks would be absolutely out of place." Kiran brought out all the objections he could think of.

"Can't you devise some suitable role for them ?"

"I could, but that would only succeed in confusing the officers. After all, the object of the TEWT was to bring out the lesson that in mountain warfare you have to keep your forces light and avoid being roadbound. The tanks will keep them bound to the roads ..."

"Oh," said the Brigadier uncertainly. "Oh, I see."

"Besides, it's all written out, sir, and I was going to have it cyclostyled. We'll have to change the whole situation if we have to include tanks."

"Look here, old boy," the Brigadier said. "You've got to do something about those tanks, old boy."

They always called you 'old boy' like that when they were making you do something which was more expedient than correct. They also called you 'old boy'

when they were trying to break bad news gently.

"Why do we have to have tanks, sir," Kiran asked.

"Well, the truth is, General Harjeet, the Area Commander is going to attend the exercise. He wants to sum up the TEWT, sort of; you know, give a general talk afterwards and try to explain certain aspects of the exercise in the light of his own war experience."

"Middle East?"

"Yes, the 27th Lancers; he can only talk tanks."

"So he wants tanks, does he?" Kiran asked.

"Yes, he rang me up and said we had better have tanks. Well, you know how it is, old boy ..."

"So we just have to have tanks."

"Yes," said the Brigadier. "I'm quite sure you'll be able to fit them in in an appropriate role so that ... so that they don't look out of place. You will, old boy, won't you?"

"I'll try, sir, but the officers attending the exercise are bound to ask awkward questions," Kiran pointed out.

"Don't worry about that. I'll shut them up," said the Brigadier, and his voice sounded self-assured once again. "Do give me a ring if you have any difficulty. So that's that; I knew I could depend on you. Now tell me, how are things with you?"

That was the sort of situation in which he could picture both Ropey Booker and Girgut Jones, and he knew exactly what they would have done, although for totally different reasons. They would have both hastened to find out how best they could fit in an unwanted squadron of tanks in the most appropriate role. If the Area Commander wanted a squadron of tanks, or a battery of medium guns, or even a Destroyer or a flight of Liberators; why, it was your business to fit them in, somewhere, somehow. How well you fitted them in was a test of your professional competence.

9 *"Call Me KK"*

The train came to a grinding, jerking halt. Lieutenant

Colonel Kamala Kant gave his moustache a final twirl, jumped out briskly, and looked up and down the platform to see who had come to receive him.

For the last forty hours, as the train had dawdled on its thousand mile journey from South India, Kamala Kant had looked forward to this moment, the moment of his arrival in Raniwada to take over command of the 4th Satpuras, with an eagerness which amounted to physical pain.

He had wondered what sort of reception he would get. He knew that in some regiments, all the officers came to receive the incoming CO and had the regimental band playing on the platform. Some COs were even met by a representative gathering of the public of the cantonment with an address of welcome. Kamala Kant had not expected anything so elaborate, but just in case the need arose, he had prepared a short speech as his reply to the address of welcome. He prided himself on his ability to make speeches, both forceful and witty at the same time. For the last hour or so, as the train had crawled winding through the stunted Malwa hills, even the engine had seemed to puff sonorously, 'welcome-to-Raniwada, welcome-to-Raniwada'.

Kamala Kant was as excited, as full of eager anticipation, as only a twenty-seven year old Major can be when promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and appointed to command one of the famous battalions of the Indian army.

But there was no gathering on the platform to receive him with garlands, no officers lined up to be introduced, no military band. The only men he could see in uniform were a party of jawans, and as he was looking at them, a tall man in civilian clothes came up to him and said:

"I am Garud; you must be Kamala Kant," and held out his hand.

Kamala Kant shook Kiran's hand vigorously. "I say, old boy, how jolly nice to see you, old boy," he said in an accent which he had always hoped would be taken for that of Oxford, but did not sound like anything so much as a combination of those of Bangalore and Ludhiana.

"This is Captain Mohitay," Kiran said, introducing the Quarter-master who had come with him. "He's brought a fatigue party for your kit. If you will tell the jawans what you want to be taken with you, we can get going. Mohitay will bring the remainder."

Kamala Kant was getting command of a battalion after barely seven years of service. He had been posted to the 4th Satpuras straight from the Staff College where he had been attending a course for the past year in the rank of Major. In the old days, if he had passed his promotion examination and done reasonably well in all the courses of instruction he was sent to, he might have been just about due for his Captaincy. He was a short, stocky man with a full, rather fleshy face and heavy protruding lips. He sported a dark, bushy moustache of which he seemed to be inordinately proud and which he kept patting and tugging while he spoke. His manner was excessively hearty or brusque according to whether he was talking to equals or those who were of a lower rank. As they stood by watching the men take out the luggage, Kamala Kant turned to Kiran and said :

"I've heard so much about you. You must call me KK, old boy ; all my friends call me KK."

Kiran was a little put out by this exuberance. "Yes, of course," he said.

"We have never met before, but I've heard a lot about you," Kamala Kant said. "I know all about how you gave hell to that British CO of yours ; by Jove !"

Kiran winced at the compliment, but this was no place for protests or for offering explanations. Luckily, he was saved from having to say anything because Kamala Kant had found some fault with the way the sepoys were handling a cardboard box which obviously contained a radio set.

"Bloody hell !" he yelled at them "be careful with that, you damned ulloos !"

That was no way to talk to a jawan. You had to be careful about that sort of thing. Kiran wondered how long it was since Kamala Kant had served with troops, but did not wish to ask a direct question. "Which battalion were you with, in Burma ?" he asked. That seem-

"I see," said Kamala Kant, thoughtfully rubbing his chin, "I see."

"Mrs. Kotwal—she's the wife of the 2 IC—takes a very keen interest and organizes these affairs. Marvellous woman ; taught most of the women to dance."

"I dunno," said Kamala Kant, busily twirling the ends of his moustache into needle points and looking at the tip of his nose. "I should have thought that we would have stopped all such woggish activities by now, I mean dancing and things. Aping the ways of the foreigners, I call it. I don't know why, but I've always been averse to our women dancing. To me, it is nothing but a legacy of the British rule and only betrays our slavish past."

Kiran was deflated by Kamala Kant's views.

"To teach a woman to dance is to encourage her to be immoral," Kamala Kant went on. "How can there be any morality in a society where anyone can hold anyone else's wife in his arms on a dance floor ?"

"You certainly hold rather strong views about dancing, don't you ?" Kiran said. He had not expected that Kamala Kant who seemed to strive to create the impression that he spoke English like an Englishman, would regard ballroom dancing with any special horror.

"This is the sort of freedom that leads to women going astray," Kamala Kant said, "And then we have cases like that woman Mrs. Medley ..."

"What sort of cases ?" Kiran asked.

"Don't you know ? It was quite a scandal during the war. Her husband shot himself because she was nothing more than a highclass prostitute in Calcutta, anyone who had the price ..."

"Did you know her personally ?" Kiran asked.

"Ha, ha ; I'm afraid not personally, much to my regret ; ha, ha ..."

"Well, I did," Kiran said, "and if you don't mind, in this regiment, we never speak of any of the regiment's officers or their wives in quite the same tone and terms that you have been using."

Something in his tone must have warned Kamala Kant that he was on dangerous ground. "Oh, I'm sorry," he said, "It's just that I have strong views on dancing ..."

"As Station Commander, I suppose you'll be president

of the Club. You can always arrange things according to your own views."

"Then the first thing I am going to do is to stop the club dances," said Kamala Kant. "My wife will be absolutely shocked. She comes from a highly respectable family; she was raised in strict purdah, you know. Matter of fact, until lately, she never used to come out whenever there were men present."

It was plain from his manner and tone that like many other Indians in a similar position, he was not making excuses for his wife's backwardness; he was not apologetic about it, but proud, as though the fact that she was brought up in the sealed-up, all-female, dark world of the purdah were a proof of high breeding and respectability.

Kamala Kant went on, "I'm a firm believer that our women should not have the same kind of freedom as the western women seem to have. Apart from that I really feel very strongly that we should not continue our slavish ways after the days of slavery are over. That's what's wrong with most of our officers—too much Anglicization. It'll take a hell of a long time before the Army is truly nationalized. But perhaps you don't agree."

"Frankly, I've never thought of social pastimes in that manner at all," Kiran said. "I don't think there's anything wrong with our women mixing with men, and I think that the more they come out the better—women must have the fullest freedom as the equals of men."

"There's another thing I feel very strongly about," Kamala Kant went on. "I don't like the way all our buildings and things still seem to be called after foreigners. Take this Club, for instance, Pattison Club. Who the hell was Pattison?"

"He was the man who had this club built. Collected donations from the people and all that. Commanded the station at the time; 1924, I think it was."

Kamala Kant laughed. "I know what he must have done. Rooked all the local baniahs in order to build a club for the sole pleasure of his British Officers, and in the end, gave his own name to it. My God, they were smooth, the British!"

Kiran said, "As it happens, the Club wasn't named

smell of leather and furniture polish. Kiran sat at the writing table with its silver inkstand, and noted with satisfaction that the ornamental inkwells were full although no one really used them much. The anteroom had the dim and solemn look of all anterooms when they are empty. Kiran opened the heavy, leather-covered Visitor's Book and wrote across the line :

27 Aug. '49 Lt. Col. K. S. Garud. PPC.

He shut the book and lit a cigarette. So that was that. Writing those three letters had severed his ties with the mess, and for a moment he felt a little sad and then a little ashamed about feeling sad. After all, it was not as though he was leaving the mess for ever. Whenever he came back, the mess would be as much his as that of the senior-most dining member, a second home, until he retired from the army.

Just as the battalion, although he was relinquishing its command, would also be always his, even if he were to become a Brigadier or a General, though of course, there was little chance of that unless another war came. He would always be known as an officer of the 4th Satpuras, otherwise known as the Fighting Fourth and even more familiarly known as the Fighting Tigers or just the Tigers because of the yellow and black facings of the old full-dress uniform. They would always call him a jawan of the Fourth.

All the same, this time his parting had an air of finality not associated with the earlier occasions when he had bid good-bye to the mess. In the past, whenever he went, there was always the certainty that he would go back, in some capacity or the other, to the 4th Satpuras in which he had begun his career. Now, having relinquished command of the 4th, there was no question of his ever coming back to the battalion, his battalion, except as a visitor.

But the main thing that worried him was the fact that he was handing over the 4th to Kamala Kant.

He stubbed out his cigarette in a Chinese brass bowl which, although something of a collector's piece, was in daily use as an ash-tray, and sat for some time, staring into the deep crimson Kirmanshah carpet, allowing his thoughts to drift.

He knew the carpet well, and as with most things in the mess, the carpet was closely associated with events in the lives of the battalion's officers. It had been acquired soon after he had joined the battalion in the summer of 1938. The Commanding Officer, Colonel Booker, had walked into the mess unexpectedly one evening and had called the officers who were present to gather around him.

"Gentlemen, I have sad news for you," he had said. "Major Harwood has died as a result of a shikar accident. I don't know the details, but apparently he had wounded a tiger and had gone after it to finish it off. He was badly mauled by the tiger and died before he could be brought back to camp."

In a sense, the way Squire Harwood had died, had underscored one of the first principles of the regimental code; he had died as he went out to finish off his own tiger, but of course, Ropey Booker had not said a word about the code.

'Squire' Harwood had been the second in command of the battalion and was due to go on retirement at the end of the year. He had been passionately fond of big-game hunting and had already shot several tigers. He had gone out to get 'just one more tiger' before he left the country for good.

Kiran and the others in the mess had been much too taken aback to say anything. Anyway, no remark was expected from anyone as junior as Kiran, then a very junior Second Lieutenant. The Squire was a widower and had a teen-age daughter at some school in England, but here in Raniwada, there was no one near enough to him to mourn his death.

No one, except, of course, the battalion. Personally, Kiran had hardly known the Squire. He had beaten him once at squash and was told that he 'hogged the centre of the court and never got out of the bloody way', and he had also stopped one of his first 'rockets' from the Squire for failing to control his horse after a team run at tent-pegging. The horse which Kiran was riding was well-known as being the most fractious in the battalion, and Kiran, as he was the first to admit, was "No horseman, not being Cavalry—thank God!"

He hoped his first impression of Kamala Kant was wrong, hoped that he would not make too many drastic changes in the battalion and in the mess. He lit another cigarette and walked back into the anteroom.

At the writing table was a young man, wearing conspicuously on his shoulders, the single star of a Second Lieutenant, writing his name in the Visitor's Book. Kiran walked over and stood behind him and the other was so intent in what he was doing that he did not become aware of Kiran's presence. Kiran saw him write:

27 Aug. '49 2/Lt. Sarda Nath Joining Regiment.

The young man got up and stood to attention. He was spare and wiry and of medium height; close-cropped and sunburnt and bright-eyed. He looked eager but not in the least nervous. He might just as easily have come out of Sandhurst or West Point as from Dehra Dun. He was typical of the post-war military officer; the type who would provide the backbone of the Indian army in the years to come. He left no doubt in your own mind that he represented the pick of the country's young men trained in one of the best military institutions in the world. To think of a young man like that, coming into the army, joining your regiment, was an intensely comforting thought. At the same time, it also brought on a sobering awareness of your own responsibility towards the kind of material he represented.

11 *Gods And Warts*

Walking back to the Pattison Club along the tanride, Kiran's thoughts were full of the coincidence of a young, newly commissioned officer joining the battalion on the very day he was leaving it on relinquishing its command. There was something equally solemn and final about both occasions.

Normally, a whole generation should have separated a Second Lieutenant and an outgoing CO, but Kiran could not be more than ten years older than Sarda Nath.

What should have taken twentyfive years had been crowded into a decade. and Kiran was sure that he was the loser by it.

He himself had got command of the 4th Satpuras after barely eight years of service. But that was all due to the war, and the British quitting the country. In normal times, you would have been lucky to get command of a battalion even after twenty years' service. Young Sarda Nath could not aspire to command the battalion for another twenty years at least, and then, as things seemed to be going, only the glory of commanding the Fighting Fourth would remain, most of the power and izzat associated with the appointment were fast fading.

When Kiran had first joined the army, the CO of a battalion was rather like a god ; a tin god, perhaps, only a minor sort of deity with power to control the destinies of no more than a thousand men ; but all the same a god. But then, in those days, on two thousand two hundred rupees a month, it was so easy to be a god, or to act as though you were one. Now, with the cost of living trebled even by the conservative official computation, Kiran received almost exactly half that pay. He had been saving up for the past three years to buy a car, but it would take another year before he would have saved enough to buy something decent. Until then, he would have to go on using a bicycle. You could not be any sort of a god if you had to ride through the bazaar on a bicycle, or even pretend to be one.

Almost inevitably, thinking about a newly commissioned officer joining the regiment of his choice, brought back to his mind the time when twice he had joined his regiment upon being first commissioned. In those days, everyone had to do a six-month period of attachment with some British Regiment. This was intended to give you the necessary confidence to be able to command Indian troops later on. The logic behind this had always seemed somewhat queer to Kiran, but after this lapse of time, he remembered that attachment with the Greyforths with fondness, as one of the most rewarding periods of his career. Kiran now believed that most of the groundwork to prepare him for his job later on,

The safety, honour and welfare
of your country come first,
Always and every time.
The honour, welfare and comfort
of the men you command
come next.
Your own ease, comfort and
safety come last, always
and every time.

Kiran felt a surge of pride as he recalled the inspired motto of his calling. Slowly, he repeated the words. Somehow, like some mystic incantation, they seemed to dispel the thoughts disturbing his mind.

That was what was important. That was the sort of thing that inspired the best among the country's youth to volunteer for the army. It was something that men like Kamala Kant or Rawal Singh could never tarnish. The meagre salary under the New Pay Code, the bickerings over appointments, the number of seemingly incompetent officers holding high positions, and the thousand other daily irritations of service life were all minor things, to be brushed aside by strong, disciplined men, men like himself, privileged to be the officers of the Indian army and charged with an extra responsibility of building up the coming generation of officers like Sarda Nath ; not an easy task in these difficult, first years of the country's emergence from bondage to freedom.

Even in his innermost thoughts, he had never thought of his job in exactly the same terms before. He was surprised at himself, and embarrassed at the intensity of his emotions. He felt reassured about the future of the army; whatever time it would take young Sarda Nath to reach command of the battalion, when he got it, it would still be one of the finest jobs a man could aspire for.

From the lines, the shrill notes of the buglers sounding the Retreat came to him ; the Regimental flag was being lowered at sunset, and although Kiran was outside the battalion's grounds, he stood stiffly to attention until the last bugle notes died away.

Part Two

The Staff

12 *Welcome To New Delhi*

In the train the next day, Kiran tried to sleep off the headache caused by the number of chhota-pegs forced on him at the mess party the previous evening. By the late afternoon, he felt fresh and bright once again. As the train was nearing New Delhi, he shaved and dressed himself in a clean uniform. The dust in the carriage had been particularly bad and he did not want to get out at the station in a soiled uniform and face some immaculately turned-out Staff officer sent to receive him.

It was eight o'clock in the evening when the train steamed into New Delhi station. He got the hamals to take out his luggage and waited in front of his carriage for a few minutes. But it did not look as though there was anyone there to meet him. He walked up and down the length of the train twice, just to make sure, and then he went to the RTO's kiosk on the main platform.

"I'm Colonel Garud," he said. "Has any transport been sent for me ?"

The man looked through the collection of yellow transport indents on his desk. "Colonel Garud ; no, sir. There is a car sent for a Major Bhaglal who was to have come by the Delhi Mail."

"Then obviously he couldn't have come. Otherwise he would be here by now," Kiran said.

"No, sir," the RTO's man said : "It doesn't look as though he has come."

"Then can't I use his transport ?"

The man shook his head. "I'm afraid not, sir."

"Do you mean to say that if this Major chap does

not turn up at all, the car sent for him will have to go back empty but that I cannot make use of it ?"

"The rules about MT are very strict here, sir," said the RTO's man in a matter of fact tone. Although he was only a Havaldar he had been accustomed to dealing with many an irate senior officer.

"Typical Army· HQ bandobast !" said Kiran half to himself and half to the RTO's man as he went to look for a taxi.

Not knowing where to go, Kiran asked the taxi driver to take him to the Continental hotel. At the Continental, the man at the desk told him that he would have to share a room with two other people, so he went to another, less elegant hotel and managed to get a room to himself.

As he turned in for the night, he realized that he had come a long way from being a little tin god in the cantonment of Raniwada.

"No reception, no transport, no accommodation," he muttered to himself. In Raniwada, he had given strict orders that any officer arriving on duty had to be met at the station no matter what hour of the day or night.

"Blast Army HQ !" he said. "Here is New Delhi they make you feel like a Bum Wart all over again !"

13 *They Always Have The Last Word*

Cycling up Kingsway through the lofty arch of India Gate—just one among thousands of scurrying, panting cyclists all going the same way—you could not help being awed by the two vast red sandstone buildings of the Secretariat sprawling on either side of the road.

They awed you by their bulk and their atmosphere of time-defying solidity. They looked more like prisons than office buildings, and the narrow black rectangles of windows which looked like peepholes and weapon-slits completed the illusion of some vast, modern Bastille and at times you could not help feeling a little anxious for

the men and women condemned to work behind those impregnable walls.

The Directorate of War Plans, the organization to which Kiran had been posted was housed partly in the South Block and partly in a block of wartime hutments situated some distance away known as the Asoka hutments. This meant that the Director of War Plans, Brigadier Shindey, and one or two of his 'sections' were housed in the South Block, the rest of the Directorate was in the Asoka hutments.

At ten o'clock on the morning after his arrival in New Delhi, Kiran presented himself before his Director. He had never met the DWP before and was pleased to see that the other had a warm, friendly manner. Although he was on the point of leaving his office—he had his cap on—he welcomed Kiran with a smile, shook hands vigorously, and offered him a cigarette.

"I hope you'll like it here," the DWP said as though he meant it. "We've done without an SO 1 for the last two months. I'm afraid there will be a good deal of backwash to clear. Have you worked in Army HQ before ?"

"No, sir," Kiran told him.

"Now let me see. You know Colonel Mansingh, don't you. Friend of yours ? Good ! Go to Mansingh, and he'll explain the works to you—put you in the picture. He sits in Asoka hutments. Now I'm afraid I have to run along ; there's a staff conference at ten-thirty."

Mansingh and Kiran were old acquaintances. They had done a weapons course together at Pachmari nearly eight years ago when they were both subalterns. Although they had not met since then and had never once written to each other, Kiran was glad to know that Mansingh was also in the same Directorate. You could always be sure of people like Mansingh ; they typified the camaraderie of the military officer. No matter when you saw them last, you could always begin where you had left off.

"Fancy seeing you in the Monkey-house," Mansingh said, grinning. "Just fancy."

"Not my own doing, I assure you," Kiran said.

That was how it was with people like Mansingh; you just began where you had left off.

"Now that you're here, you might as well begin right," Mansingh said.

"You tell me how," Kiran said. "You tell me."

"Cultivate the right people; keep away from the wrong ones; wangle a room in the Akbar mess, my mess; join the Delhi Sports Club. I'll put you up, or better still, get a friend to put you up—he's on the committee. How about a game of squash this evening?"

That was Mansingh all over. It was a nice feeling to have him there.

"I should love it, above all things, but..."

"Splendid. I'll call for you at six. Where have they put you up?"

"I'm afraid they haven't put me up anywhere. I have got a room in the Basil Hotel in Connaught Circus, for the time being."

"What! Didn't they write and tell you where to go?"

"Who's they?"

"Why, the Co-ord people, of course! It is their business to fix things for you; you know, transport, accommodation, liquor permits and things. They should have sent you a chit with your transport."

"Well, they certainly slipped up on the transport. They may have arranged the other things; I wouldn't know," said Kiran.

"No transport! Are you sure? Didn't you inquire at the RTO's office?"

"Of course, I did. The Havaldar quoted rules at me."

"That's bloody Co-ord all over," said Mansingh, shaking his head. "There is a great big section merely to look after adam details and they can't even do that well."

"Tell me," Kiran said. "What or who is Co-ord?"

"There's a chap called Namdar. Lieutenant-Colonel. A slippery customer. Smooth; my word, the bastard's smooth. I'll ring up and twist his tail, you wait," said Mansingh, and reaching for the telephone, asked for a number.

"That you Namdar?" he began. "Look, Namdar. It's about Garud. Bloody bad show, you know; seems there

was no transport laid on for him at the station last evening."

There was a longish pause during which Mansingh said 'I see' twice. Then he covered the mouthpiece and said to Kiran, "They say it's your own fault. You see, in Army HQ they have to have two clear days' notice for transport, and your signal giving your ETA did not give Co-ord sufficient time."

"Two days' notice to be able to get a Staff car!"

"Three days," Mansingh said. "Two days for the MT people and one day for Co-ord to make out the indents. It's quite a business, these indents; have to be made in triplicate and they're not valid unless the officer who indents gives an undertaking that the car will not be misused. Afterwards, the officer who uses it has to certify that it wasn't misused. You don't know Army HQ."

"I am learning fast; anyway ask him where I am to stay."

Mansingh spoke into the telephone again. "You'll be in my mess, the Akbar mess," he told Kiran.

"Now how the hell was I supposed to find that out?" Kiran asked.

"Wait a minute, I'll ask him," said Mansingh and spoke into the telephone again. Then he put down the receiver and said rather sheepishly:

"He says it was up to you to report to his office and find out. They always have the last word, old boy, these Co-ord people."

"I can see that, now," Kiran said.

Mansingh laughed. Then, in a rather confidential tone he said:

"I might as well warn you. You'll find Namdar a little difficult. He could have easily fixed up your transport for you by ringing up the MT people, of course, but I think you'll find that you won't get much co-operation from him."

"Does it matter much?"

"I should say it does; oh yes, it matters quite enough. Anything that has to do with administration has to be done through Co-ord, and Namdar is Co-ord. He's a pushing type, you see, and he is a real beehive."

"What's a beehive."

"Don't tell me you didn't know! Haven't you seen those enormous beehives hanging up in the arches of the South Block? They try to smoke them out every year, but they can't get rid of them. Some of the officers are like that; the longer they stay in Delhi the harder they're to get rid of. Namdar's been here for six years."

"But what's his objection to me?"

"You see, Namdar was almost certain of getting your job; as the SO 1 Border Planning. After all, there's no glamour in Co-ord, just looking after bloody adam. He's been trying hard to get into Planning—he's a hell of a wangler, you know; got any amount of pull. They held the job vacant for him for two months."

"And then what happened?"

"The General put his foot down. The Brig. wanted him to have it, but the General insisted that the SO 1 Border Planning had to be someone with a lot of operational experience."

"Hasn't Namdar seen much action?" Kiran asked.

"None at all, chairborne most of the war."

"Lucky lad," Kiran said.

"Oh, talking about Namdar; I must tell you," Mansingh said. "This is screamingly funny! Namdar was out on tour with the General up in Kashmir, and the old boy told him to go round checking the outposts at 'stand to' and come and report to him if the weapons were really loaded. So Namdar goes snooping round and comes and tells the General that all the weapons were loaded except the mortars. He didn't seem to..."

"Go on," Kiran said. "Hadn't he..."

"D'you know what the General told him? 'Go and drop one down the spout, will you,' he told Namdar, 'I hope it'll blow your bloody head off!'"

"Of course, that's not true!" Kiran said. "Hadn't he ever seen a mortar?"

"I swear it's true. The General's ADC told me. Old Namdar will never live that one down. No wonder the General wouldn't hear of having him in planning. What would Namdar know about War Plans!"

"A hell of a lot more than I do, I'm sure," said Kiran. "I don't even know what planning means, here; and

you're supposed to tell me. And for god's sake don't tell me I have to go through Co-ord for that."

"No, no ; I'll tell you all that planning involves, around here. But take my tip ; don't go getting on the wrong side of Co-ord."

"Look, why doesn't Army HQ publish a book of the local bye-laws and be done with it ; for the benefit of people like me ?"

"You'll get to know the bye-laws as you go along," Mansingh told him laughing. "You might begin by rolling down your sleeves. Let's take that as bye-law number one. Wearing rolled up sleeves is strictly verboten."

14 *Marriages Are Made In Heaven*

For the past year or so, Bina's father, Mr. Gobind Ram Sonal, had been worrying about Bina's marriage. Whenever he could drag his mind away from what he spoke of in his lighter moments as his 'miles and miles of piles of files', he was vaguely conscious of a disturbing feeling.

In the past, it was unlikely that he would, at any given moment, have remembered exactly how old his elder daughter was ; but now he was persistently aware of the fact that she had passed her twenty-fifth birthday, and that she was still unmarried. Now and again, he remembered with an angry flush of resentment that girls of twenty-five were regarded as old maids.

He knew what his duties were, and sometimes could not help feeling that he had failed Bina, but reassured himself with the thought that he could have done little about it. Arranging marriages was a woman's business. He could not visualise himself making out a list of suitable young men from amongst the caste and then sending out discreet feelers to their parents. This was really a wife's job. His wife had died more than ten years ago.

All these years, he had allowed things to drift, and

it was only after his daughter's last birthday that he had at last decided to rouse himself and do something positive about arranging Bina's marriage.

But there was little that he could do by himself. Since the death of his wife, he had gradually drifted further and further away from the kind of social life which would have kept him on intimate terms with many families of his own caste.

After a great deal of hesitation, Mr. Gobind Ram Sonal did what he should have done a long time ago; he wrote a letter to his wife's sister, asking her if she could do something to find a suitable husband for Bina. His hesitation had been due to the fact that he had always rather disliked his sister-in-law and had not seen her or written to her during the past six years.

That was two months ago. Her reply had come like a flash. Evidently, Mrs. Sekhar Mathur who lived 'right in the next house' had made her a similar request to find a suitable wife for her son Arvind. Mr. Sekhar Mathur imported heavy machinery and had 'pots of money', and according to Mr. Sonal's sister-in-law, the boy was ideally suited to a girl of 'Bina's background and also her somewhat advanced age'.

Mr. Sonal had winced at the reference to his daughter's advanced age, and had been a little apprehensive at his sister-in-law's too quick response. Also, he had never had much faith in her judgment since, many years ago, she had been vehemently opposed to his own marriage with her sister. But when he read her letter again he felt much more reassured. The fact that the family had 'pots of money' was important.

Of late Mr. Sonal was beginning to feel that he hadn't made adequate provision for his two daughters. Not that they would be poor or anything like that, but if they had to keep up the standard of living they had been used to, they would require much more than what he could leave them. Mr. Sonal who had belonged to what had been described as the 'heaven-born' service, and had for nearly thirty years, been accustomed to the prestige and privilege of the service, had strong views on the rights and privileges of what he called the 'ruling class'. But he knew that the ruling class could not go

on living according to the standards that were laid down for them, unless they had money.

Mr. Sonal pushed aside the problems of state for a few days to make a hurried trip to Bombay, and at a meeting in the Willingdon Club specially arranged by his sister-in-law, he had seen the young man and was duly impressed. He was well-dressed, personable, pleasant to talk to, and belonged to the right kind of family. The fact that he was educated at Cambridge and that he was a member of the Willingdon Club also testified to his financial bracket and social standing. Mr. Sonal was really impressed by his sister-in-law's resourcefulness.

Arvind Mathur had drunk his tea, eaten two cucumber sandwiches, and gone off to play billiards, totally unaware that he had been 'inspected'. The first move now was with Mr. Sonal. It was only after he had made up his mind that the first tentative approach to the young man's parents would be made by Mr. Sonal's sister-in-law. Only after everything had been arranged between the parents of the bride and the bridegroom, would the principal characters be told what was in store for them.

Mr. Sonal had wholeheartedly approved of his sister-in-law's choice, congratulated himself on the way he was doing the right thing by his daughter, and returned to Delhi. The matter was now in his sister-in-law's capable hands. The caste, sub-caste and the religious clan were already known to be suited. All that now remained to be seen was whether the two horoscopes, Bina's and Arvind Mathur's, were in accord with each other or clashing. Preliminary negotiations could be opened only after it was definitely established that the two horoscopes did not clash. Mr. Sonal was confident that his sister-in-law would see that they did match; he had heard that astrologers were somewhat like lawyers, always willing to slant their opinion to their client's wishes.

And right enough, within a week, his sister-in-law wrote saying that the horoscopes were ideally suited to each other: all the evil influences in Arvind Mathur's horoscope were nullified by the auspicious ones in Bina's and both of them complemented each other to perfection.

Things having gone so far, Mr. Sonal felt safe in risking a slight rebuff from his sister-in-law by asking her whether it would be possible for Arvind Mathur to visit Delhi for a day or two, so that Bina and he could meet each other, "by chance as it were". He also said that if it was going to be difficult getting Arvind Mathur to come to Delhi, he would arrange to send Bina to Bombay.

Mr. Sonal was a little anxious about his sister-in-law's reaction to this slight concession to western ideas. Knowing her unrelenting antagonism to what she denounced as new-fangled nonsense, he was sure that she would regard it as absurd that he should consider it necessary that Bina and Arvind Mathur should be given a chance to see each other before the talks of their marriage proceeded further. He also wondered how, if it came to that, he was going to induce his daughter to visit Bombay. Her job at the radio station made it difficult for her to leave Delhi at short notice, but even if that could be arranged, and there was little that could not be 'arranged' in official New Delhi if one of the senior Secretaries of the Government wanted it, he did not know how Bina, who had never been particularly fond of her aunt, would react to going and staying with her.

Mr. Sonal was glad, therefore, when he learnt that Arvind Mathur would be coming to Delhi the following week. His new car had been allotted to him from the Delhi quota and he wanted to drive it back to Bombay. It appeared that owing to the heavy demand for expensive American cars in Bombay, it was easier to buy them in upcountry places, provided, of course, that you were prepared to pay the price.

Now it was up to him to arrange the accidental meeting; a simple enough thing for Mr. Sonal. He had returned to his files, greatly relieved at the way things were going, and his mind disturbed only now and then by the artfulness which women like his sister-in-law were capable of in the cause of marriage.

15 *Palam Was Only Five Miles*

"Now that the season's begun," Mansingh said, "they have four dances a week."

"Aping the ways of the British, I call it," Kiran said.

"Everyone in Delhi goes; everyone who is anyone, goes to the Delhi Sports Club."

"When the captive hugs the chain," Kiran said, "and imitates his master, the conquest is complete."

"What're you jabbering about?"

"Dancing. Your outlook has been warped by too much contact with the British, your nationalism withered..."

"Who says so?"

"Kamala Kant; you wouldn't catch him going to a dance."

"Oh, to hell with Kamala Kant!" Mansingh said, laughing. "He's a little tick, and you know it. The club's a better place without people like him. You'll like it when you get there. Now that the season's begun, the place is lousy with dames, lousy. You'll enjoy it when you get there."

It was not even Mansingh's party. It appeared that the host, one of the Under Secretaries in the Secretariat, had rung up Mansingh and told him to bring a friend along.

"I bet there are one or two extra dames," Mansingh explained. "You'll enjoy it when you get there. If you don't like it, you can always get lost in the Men's bar, now that you're a member."

They were a little late getting to the club, and the others were already assembled, sitting round a table making the sort of conversation that people do make at parties when everyone doesn't know everyone else.

"God, they don't look too cheerful, do they," Mansingh said.

But Kiran didn't hear what he said, for sitting on the sofa and talking to a man with wavy, shining hair, was the girl he had seen at Arun Sanwal's place, Bina Sonal.

"Hullo," she said with an eager smile, almost as though they were old friends. "Where have you been

hiding yourself? Leela wrote and said you had come here."

Kiran was glad he had come.

Except for Mansingh and Bina, Kiran did not know anyone in the party. Looking at them with the objectivity of a total stranger, they seemed to him to be typical of the new, post-war, post-British, smart set which had begun to crowd the more expensive and exclusive institutions of recreation.

The men looked a little too sleek and a little too showily dressed. Their white sharkskin dinner jackets had the new-fangled shawl collars, the exaggerated drapes, and the wide, heavily padded shoulders; and although they wore ready-knotted ties, they had begun to prefer the maroon and red ones with narrow, extra-long ends which were said to be in vogue in the U.S.

Three years ago, they would have hesitated to put in for a membership of the Delhi Sports Club for fear of being turned down, and would have felt a little uncomfortable and very much on the defensive if they had been attending a party at the Club. Now they seemed to be striving a little too hard to give the impression that they were enjoying themselves thoroughly; and to show that they were completely at home in the Club which, not so long ago, was regarded as a British preserve, they had learnt to call the waiters by their first names and to address the club secretary who was an Englishman, as 'old boy' and to press drinks upon him.

The host, Mr. Kagal, was an Under Secretary in some Ministry or the other, and made constant references to the likelihood of his being made a Deputy Secretary soon and of being sent on some deputation or the other to a foreign country in the coming summer. In fact he was, as he said, already 'pinch-hitting' for his Deputy Secretary.

The man with the wavy hair, Arvind Mathur, was obviously the Chief Guest. Handsome in a large, somewhat glossy way, he exuded the kind of prosperity that goes with gold cigarette cases and self-winding wristwatches. Kiran was sure he wore pure silk underwear. He had an animated, even jovial manner, and a cultured

voice, and it was evident from the way he spoke that he had been educated at a university in England. His evening clothes bore the unmistakable stamp of expensive London tailoring, and unlike Mr. Kagal, he wore a conventional black tie.

They were all very hospitable and somewhat formally pleasant to him, but Kiran found it difficult to feel at home with them. He could see that Mansingh had been asked to 'bring a friend along' just to balance the party. There were four women, and so there had to be four men. But why ask a stranger, as though Mr. Kagal had been making a special effort to make up his party from outside his own normal set.

The most striking of the four women, the one with the bold roving eyes, and the bold, bathing-beauty figure, and wearing what at that time must have been the first off-the-shoulder choli in Delhi, was Amrita, Mansingh's particular girl-friend of the moment. She was obviously madly in love with Mansingh, and she was sufficiently uninhibited in her behaviour not to leave anyone in doubt about the fact.

The large and heavily made-up woman was obviously the hostess. Judging by her conversation, she had spent all her married life devising ways and means to make herself pleasant to the right people by which she meant the people who would be helpful to her husband's career in the Administrative Service. She had clearly subordinated her entire personality to her husband's official well-being, and was now trying desperately hard to see that Arvind Mathur had everything he wanted. The other girl, a slightly smaller but equally overdressed edition of Mrs. Kagal, was her unmarried sister. She was a difficult companion, for she was painfully shy and given to constant fits of giggles. It was easier to dance with her than to talk with her, for she was a surprisingly good dancer.

The fourth was Bina. Her being there puzzled Kiran, for he could not imagine her having much in common with either Mr. Kagal or his wife. Sitting directly opposite her, trying to prevent himself from staring at her too often and too long, conscious of a growing resentment at the way she seemed to enjoy dancing with

Arvind Mathur, Kiran once again found himself wondering what it was that made her more attractive to him than other women. Her face, he decided, had more distinction than beauty, character more than glamour. Her make up showed restraint and her clothes a sense of colour. She wore absolutely no jewelry and in contrast to the other women looked almost too plainly, even severely dressed.

"Don't look so lost," Mrs. Kagal was saying to Bina. "Why don't you ask her to dance, Mr. Mathur?"

Arvind Mathur rose to his feet, "I was just about to. Shall we dance?" he said to Bina.

"Mr. Mathur's glass is empty, dear," Mrs. Kagal said to her husband. "And do ask the waiter to bring some fresh soda, yes, and some kababs, really hot ones..."

Then it had struck Kiran. Mr. Kagal had obviously arranged the party to bring Bina and that wavy haired chap together, and his wife was determined to make a success of the party.

"Don't they look made for each other," Mrs. Kagal was saying to her husband, pointing at Bina and Arvind Mathur dancing. "Have you managed to get those Black and White cigarettes, dear; Mr. Mathur doesn't seem to smoke any other brand."

At about nine o'clock, there was a lull in the music and the women must have gone to the powder room and Mr. Kagal had taken Arvind Mathur to the men's bar, and Kiran and Mansingh found themselves sitting alone at their table by the side of the empty dance floor.

"Look," Mansingh said, "if you've had enough, let's clear out."

"Oh, no," Kiran said. "I don't mind."

Mansingh gave him a smile. "Don't tell me you've fallen for that Sonal girl."

"Don't talk rubbish! I don't mind this sort of thing; much better than sitting at a bar, swilling. . ."

"What do you think of them? Kagal and his mem, I mean."

"I suppose they're all right. Tell me, what makes these baboos in the Secretariat go American all of a sudden? What does a 'rain-check' mean? Kagal is

'pinch-hitting' for his Deputy Secretary. What the hell is 'pinch-hitting'?"

"You'll get used to them in Delhi," Mansingh said. "They're quite all right, really, only, in the army we get so unused to any other types; we stick together far too much. And in any case, we must seem just as peculiar to them."

"But where do they learn to talk like that? Who taught them to say 'natch', and 'you're hep' and things like that? What's a dilly?" Kiran asked. "What's a 'slick chick'?"

"Life Magazine, I suppose, or the Reader's Digest; and the films. I hear many of them go to see a picture with a notebook and pencil to learn up new American expressions," said Mansingh. He pointed to Amrita coming towards them across the dance floor, walking in her hip-swinging, milk-maid's gait. "That girl's got everything, hasn't she?" he added. "Now, that's what you might call a slick chick."

"Oh!" Kiran said. "I see what you mean."

"What are you two laughing about, sitting all by yourselves?" Amrita asked as she reached their table.

"We have just been discussing the future of the country," Mansingh said, laughing at her, "but let's go and dance instead."

They went off to dance, and for a little while Kiran sat by himself, sipping his whisky and soda and watching the dancers.

Then Bina came back, her sari in the subdued lighting affected by the club looking the exact colour of the inside of a watermelon. "Where has everyone gone?" she asked, and came and sat next to Kiran.

He offered her a cigarette and found that she did not smoke, so he settled down comfortably in the deep chair and lit one himself "Lovely music, isn't it?" he said.

"Yes, isn't it!"

"Amrita and your friend dance very well, don't they?" Bina said.

"I suppose you have to be able to dance very well to dance that close to each other," Kiran said.

"They certainly look like experts."

"Yes, they both look hep."

Bina looked at him sharply, and then she began to laugh, and her whole face lit up. For the first time he thought that she was very beautiful.

"Where did you pick that up?" she asked.

"I'm learning fast. Would you care to dance?"

"I'd love to; but you hadn't meant to, had you?"

"Why not?"

"It's just that you wouldn't have lit a cigarette if you had meant to ask me to dance."

Kiran stubbed his cigarette. He was beginning to enjoy the evening. "You certainly are a slick chick," he said.

At eleven o'clock the band stopped playing. The ladies had collected their wraps and the men had tossed off their drinks, and Mr. Kagal had signed up the club chits, and they were all standing near the entrance, saying good-night to each other. Mansingh and Amrita went off first in Mansingh's car, and Kiran asked the hall porter to get him a taxi.

"Look, I'll drop you wherever you want to go," Arvind Mathur offered. "Plenty of room in my car."

"Yes, let's all go together," Bina said.

Outside the club, the six of them piled into the new car and Arvind Mathur who had bought it just a day or two earlier began to show them what it could do. He first drove along Kingsway at seventy miles an hour, and Kiran could not help feeling that he was driving too fast.

"Pandit Nehru's got one like this," Arvind Mathur said. "But his is only a Super; this one's a Roadmaster, you know."

They were cruising along the Circular Road near the Stadium when the host, Mr. Kagal, said very brightly:

"Let's go and wake up Robin and Sheila in their dak bungalow."

The others seemed to fall in with the idea with eagerness, only Bina said:

"Well, I don't know; I've an early broadcast. Couldn't you drop me first?"

Kiran said: "If you would stop here, I'll drop off. My mess is just close by."

"Oh, no," said Mrs. Kagal, "It's too early to break up. We'll be back in an hour, in Mr. Mathur's new car."

They were all in that kind of mood, the mood brought on by a pleasant evening and dancing and a few drinks, and they were reluctant to break it up.

"I've got a lot of work in the morning," Kiran protested.

"Oh, come on," said Arvind Mathur. "You've got to live up to the army, you know," and laughed boisterously.

"As though we don't all have to work in the morning," Mr. Kagal said, "I am doing three jobs at the moment."

"Well, so long as we get back by midnight," Bina said.

They were all so hospitable and friendly, and Kiran did not want to appear churlish. Besides, he too wanted the evening to drag on. He was sitting in front, next to Bina, and he was reluctant to break the spell—the close awareness of the perfume she wore, the silken contact of her sari flattering with the wind against his face, the pressure and warmth of her body against his.

Robin and Sheila must have been very keen on duck-shooting. They had gone to spend the night in Najafgarh so that they could catch the first flight the next morning.

Arvind Mathur turned his car on to the Najafgarh road, speeding up on the straight black surface. They had passed the barracks of the Palam airfield and had taken the Najafgarh track when the engine began to cough. "I hope you're not short of gas," Mr. Kagal said.

"Oh, no," Arvind Mathur assured them. "I told the garage to fill her up this evening."

But the garage must have failed to have the tank filled, for soon the engine stopped altogether and refused to start. Luckily, the bungalow was now only a couple of hundred yards away and they filed out of the car and walked.

"Just as well we're almost there," Mr. Kagal said. "We'll borrow Robin's car."

Despite being woken up in the middle of the night, Robin and Sheila welcomed them cheerfully, and Kiran felt that they had been half expecting them. But it turned out that their car was away, sent back to town for the children's school the next morning. It wasn't

expected until ten the next morning.

Robin looked really apologetic, as though it were all his fault. "Unfortunately there's not even a telephone here," he said. "But why not camp here tonight? My car should be here by ten, and I'll reach you back before eleven. It is quite impossible to get any petrol here either. We're so far away from everywhere."

"Oh, you must stay the night; we'll have such fun," Sheila said enthusiastically. "I'll get a fire going, and we can all watch the ducks in the morning."

"Oh, but that's quite impossible; I have a broadcast at seven; and Daddy will be worried to death," Bina said.

"It is awful, I know, ..." Robin began.

Kiran said, "Look, I've got to be going, anyway, even if I have to walk the whole way to Delhi." He felt this sounded a little dramatic, because everyone had stopped talking and they were all staring at him.

"I mean I just have to be in office early tomorrow. I'll tell you what. I'll get going now, and ring up for your car from the nearest telephone. Or I could ring up for a taxi ..."

"But you can't possibly walk all the way; not at this time of the night!" Sheila protested.

"I'm afraid I must. Palam is only five miles away. Six at the most. I'll ring up from there. Just give me your phone number."

"I don't suppose I could come with you," Bina said.

"Not in those shoes!" Sheila said.

"But Colonel Garud will be sending the car in no time; there's no need for you to walk," Mrs. Kagal said.

"Oh you won't miss your broadcast tomorrow, I can guarantee you that," Kiran said.

"Thank God for the army," said Mr. Kagal. "That's swell of you, really swell. Don't forget to tell Robin's chauffeur to bring some gas in a can."

"No, I won't," Kiran assured him.

"But all that way, alone, at night," Bina said. "Are you sure it's all right?"

"Well, it's really not very far, you know," Mr. Kagal said.

"Hardly five miles," Kiran said.

"You must have some coffee before you go," Sheila said.

Several times during his service, during manoeuvres and later in Burma, Kiran's vehicles had failed him, and though this time the situation was altogether different, the thought of getting out and walking till he came across help was not at all unusual. Only, on those other occasions, he had been properly shod; now, his thin-soled patent-leather shoes hurt terribly on the uneven, stony surface of the Najafgarh track.

He felt strangely elated. He was still aware of Bina's nearness, and the perfume she wore still seemed to cling around. As he marched into the cold, moonless night, he wished she was with him, alone. She had looked so much as though she did want to come with him.

And then, cutting accross his thoughts like a knife, the chilling picture of a man standing in a doorway, looking stunned, and turning and running away down the stairs; a man blowing his brains out in a remote jungle camp. And in the wake of Bob Medley, inevitably, Margot herself warm and perfumed and naked and deliciously wanton ... not again ... not again ...

It was a good five miles to Palam, and by the time he got there, he had several blisters on his feet. The pair of expensive, English-made dress shoes on which he had always prided himself was gone for ever.

When he reached Palam, he felt a bit of a fool; foot-store, grimy and hot. He hoped he would not run into anyone he knew. But as he walked into the Air Force mess and went towards the telephone booth, someone shouted his name from the bar. There was no escaping the Air Force; and after he had rung up Robin's house and arranged about the car, he joined the group at the bar.

It was a whole hour before he could get away, and in the end, he was not even allowed to get a taxi. With truly exuberant Air Force hospitality, Squadron Leader Dutt whom he had met but once before, insisted on driving him into New Delhi in his own car.

When he awoke the next morning, Kiran wondered if

the others had been able to get back. He switched on the radio, getting the broadcast on which Bina usually spoke. But until he left his room for his office, she still hadn't come on.

"I wonder if she was just trying to get out of going to Najafgarh?" he said to himself.

16 *All Other Things Being Equal*

The Directorate of War Plans concerned itself with a host of seemingly unconnected subjects: a close study of the international situation and the capacity of the Indian manufacturers to produce road rollers were equally in the sphere of its interest. One of its main jobs was to produce periodically a set of military plans based on certain given assumptions. These plans, which were called appreciations, were expected to be the result of deep study of all the data available. But even if they were not, there was little fear that anyone would trip you up on any of the details. Not many people were on the circulation list of War Plans, and those who were, never asked any really awkward questions. Kiran often wondered whether anyone really scrutinized the plans thoroughly at all.

He himself was responsible for a very small portion of the Directorate's work, a section of the frontier, which, to prevent its identification in conversation, was always referred to as 'Border Region Four'. Broadly speaking, he had little of what is called daily routine work. It all seemed to come in spurts; a whole week would pass by without providing enough work to keep the staff busy for more than a couple of hours a day, and then there would be some 'flap' and everyone would be running in circles.

It was unfamiliar work and Kiran was sure that he had no flair for it. It was the sort of thing that would come naturally to someone like Arun Sanwal, he felt. You needed a higher perspective, you had to learn to

look at things from the viewpoint of those who were responsible for making policy decisions. The hitherto all important, purely military concepts had to be subordinated to other, possibly more powerful non-military considerations. Ground, distance, fire-power, factors with which he was familiar, did not always rule the plans.

For the first few weeks, Kiran had felt quite inadequate to his task. His mind used to be bogged down by the sheer volume of detail and he was unable to perceive clearly the deductions that were there to be drawn. All these years in service his mind had been trained to deal mainly with tactical problems—a platoon, a company, or a battalion in attack or defence, pursuit or withdrawal. When you understood the basic principles, all these problems were really the same. There was the set formula of distance, time, ground, firepower, and all other things being equal, you could, in theory, work out the answers to these problems with almost mathematical accuracy.

But if the science of war was not as precise as mathematics, it was because 'all other things' were never quite equal. That was the rub. You had to treat that convenient catch-phrase with suspicion.

For instance, how could anyone reduce to a mathematical equation the question of morale, of fanaticism, of leadership, of the soldier's quite unreasoning will to die fighting. You often had to make concessions.

Whenever Kiran was confronted with the various set formulae of minor tactics, he always remembered the British Destroyer Commander whom he had met in the Naval Mess at Bombay, long ago. He had even forgotten the Commander's name, but remembered that the Navy spoke highly of his exploits; he was someone renowned for what the British Navy characterized as the 'Destroyer spirit.'

Late at night, over a bottle of London gin, the Commander had tried to explain to Kiran his own, personal tactical formula for the attack; a formula which, in a somewhat indirect way, had taught Kiran one of the most important lessons of his carrer.

"Let's take the question of attack," the Commander

had said, somewhat unnecessarily, for to him any operation of war other than the attack must have been almost completely unknown.

"Let's take the attack," he had said to Kiran who had just returned from the mortifying retreat in Burma and who had still not recovered from the jungle sores which had kept him in hospital for a whole month.

"Any attack," the Commander had said, taking a noisy pull at his pipe. "Any attack—platoon, company, battalion or whatever you chaps have. If you have the time, only a few minutes, you can work out mathematically, what the chances of success are."

Kiran could see that the Commander was the type of man who would go ahead and attack whatever the 'mathematical chances of success' happened to be, and that he was only indulging in some mental exercise when he tried to weigh the odds.

The Commander had continued, "You judge the enemy's strength. Don't bother about his firepower too much. Just his strength; right? Then you work out roughly how many casualties he can inflict on you while your men are out in the open, doing the attack. The number of men you'll lose is very important. On the objective itself, after you've got there, if you are numerically superior to the enemy, or even equal to them, then your attack will be a success. You'll find that a little calculation will show you—a rough calculation—whether your attack will succeed: on the objective itself, you must have at least the same number of men as the enemy. Once your men have closed in, his firepower, your firepower, don't make much difference."

And then came the punchline. The Commander blew a cloud of smoke and added, "All other things being equal, that is. In my experience, I have found that in the case of Japanese troops, you have to add twenty per cent."

The Commander paused and looked at Kiran smugly, as though he had just revealed some magical secret of success. He emptied his glass of gin and smacked his lips. Then he went on in a lower, almost confidential tone, "Mark you, it's a good formula for those who have a head for such. I would go ahead and attack in any

case. I have no doubt that you would. Let's kill the bottle."

That was the rub; all other things were never quite equal.

Even so, the day to day problems of military officers in peace and war had simple orthodox solutions governed by a few basic factors which were neatly detailed in Staff College notes or in the numerous books on tactics and administration.

But the sort of work Kiran was now called upon to do was quite different. It was only after he had been at the job for over a month that he had begun to have a clear idea as to what sort of things were expected to be brought out in the war plans. There was no standard work on the subject and no Staff College notes to guide him, but he had read up most of the books dealing with strategy in war that were kept in the office library, from Kautillya to Churchill, and that had helped considerably to crystallize his ideas. He could now look at things from a wider angle, rise above the weight of confusing data; he could see the object and form of his problems in sharper focus.

All the same, the writing of these plans involved hard work. Whatever the size of his final report and whatever the recommendations made in it, everything had to have a reasoned basis. It all involved painstaking research. There was no room to be flashy or original, or, like the Naval Commander, have no respect for facts and figures. In the beginning, he found the work tedious and boring, and the results unsatisfactory. But gradually, he had gained more and more confidence and he was now beginning to think that within a few months he would get it all down to a matter of drill.

Until then, it would go on being hard work and he would have to sit late in office on many days of the week.

It was just one of those days. It was seven o'clock and his room in the Asoka hutments was cold. He had just finished reading a long, half-scientific report on the storage of pre-cooked rice and how it would help isolated bodies of troops to be self-sufficient for long periods at a time, and he was about to light a cigarette when he heard the unexpected sound of footsteps in the

corridor. In a few seconds, the door was pushed open and the DWP strode in. He was wearing evening clothes and was smoking a large cigar. "Good god!" said the DWP. "What on earth are you doing in the office at this hour?"

"Trying to work out the baggage requirements of recce patrols, sir," Kiran told him. "That's one of the requirements for the next Staff Conference."

"I see; but not at this hour, you know. If the Chief gets to hear of this, there'll be hell to pay."

"Does he object to people working, sir?"

"Didn't anyone tell you? Co-ord should have put you wise. Kipper's issued orders that all offices must be closed before quarter past five so that officers can get some exercise. Directors will be held personally responsible if any of their officers are found in offices after five. Didn't you know?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. But I hadn't taken that order very seriously; if there's work that has to be got through..."

"No, no-no-no;" said Brigadier Shindey. "You must never make the mistake of taking these things lightly. The Chief will raise hell if he gets to know of this. You'll land me into hot water, old boy."

"I'm sorry, sir," Kiran said.

"Must avoid getting into trouble over little things," the Brigadier said. "So easy to get into trouble in Delhi."

After the DWP had gone, Kiran put away his files. He felt suddenly tired and cold and did not feel like going to his cheerless room in the Akbar Mess. He thought it would be much better to go to the Delhi Sports Club and sit in front of a fire and look at some of the magazines.

He locked up his room with the heavy padlock and trundled his bicycle out. It was much colder outside, and the breeze held a suggestion of rain. His battle-dress jacket was old and fraying at the cuffs and he wished he was wearing a sweater inside. The Club was nearly a mile away, and by the time he reached it his hands were beginning to feel quite numb.

The fire in the men's lounge where he normally sat

was monopolized by three Sikhs discussing something in loud voices. He went and sat in the reading room. There was no one in front of the fire. The pink walls of the reading room which looked dark and cheerless during the day, like the walls of a temple, always looked their best by artificial light. Kiran drew up a chair near the fire and ordered a drink.

It was there, as he was glancing through an issue of Life Magazine that he saw Bina come into the room. She was carrying three or four books which she had obviously taken out of the club library. She didn't seem to notice him but walked straight up to one of the tables placed along the wall on which the magazines and newspapers were kept, and selected a magazine. Then she happened to look in his direction. "Oh, hullo," she said smiling.

Kiran got up from his chair. "Won't you come and sit down ?" he asked.

He drew up a chair near the fire and she came and sat down.

"So you walked all the way to Delhi ?" she asked.

"Not all the way ; only up to Palam."

"I don't know what we'd have done that night if you hadn't offered to go walking."

"Why, at the worst you'd have spent the night in Najafgarh."

"A whole night with Kanuram Kagal and his friends ! No, thank you," Bina said and made a face and shrugged her shoulders. "I did my best to get out of going there, said I had to do a broadcast the next morning. I didn't, you know."

"I know," Kiran said.

"You do ?"

"I tried to get your programme the next morning, and when you didn't come on, I looked up in the 'Listener'. May I get you a drink ?"

"No, thank you ; but you can order me something to eat ; a plate of chips. I'm famished, and I don't know how long my father is going to be. Bridge, you know, might be hours."

Kiran called a waiter and ordered the chips and after that neither of them seemed to have much to say. Then

Bina said :

"What're those wings on your sleeve ? You're not an airman, are you ?"

"Lord, no ; they are parachute wings."

"For a moment I thought you had something to do with the Air Force..."

"Oh, no," Kiran said. "I'm just a foot soldier."

The waiter came in with the plate of chips and Kiran said, "Sure you won't have a drink ? Have a cocktail ; or a glass of sherry. They give you Bristol Cream if you ask for it."

"No, thank you," she said, "Try some of these."

She began to eat the chips with great concentration so that the tomato sauce should not smear her fingers. In the dim light, sitting in front of the flickering log fire in a printed yellow sari which made her look darker than she was, Kiran thought she made an attractive picture.

It was always awkward, talking to a woman alone, he reflected, particularly if she was the type of woman you liked to go on looking at. With a man it was different ; it was easy enough to find something to say, or you could even keep silent. With a woman you had to find something to say, even if there was nothing particular you wanted to speak to her about. Oddly enough, not saying anything at all made it much more embarrassing, as though the silence itself were charged with meaning. He sat staring into the fire, twirling his empty glass. Bina looked up and said :

"You look nice in battle-dress ; most people don't."

Kiran looked at his army-issue battle-dress with its frayed cuffs, and wondered if she was making fun of him. He realized that she was far more at ease than him, and found himself resenting the fact ; he reminded himself that he had seen her as a school girl in pigtails, and now here she sat, looking beautiful and poised, and with the power to make him feel self-conscious about nothing.

"I remember you used to wear a blue-and-white uniform," he said. "White top with a blue skirt. And you used to wear your hair in two long plaits with ribbons in them..."

"You have such an extraordinary memory for details," she said.

"And you used to suck boiled sweets," he went on, "and you used to take the ice out of your drinks with your fingers when no one was looking and pop it into your mouth. I would never have believed that you would grow into ... into what you have."

Kiran wondered if he had annoyed her, but she looked entirely self-possessed and her easy laugh reassured him. He wanted to say something personal to her, telling her how beautiful she was; he wanted to tell her he liked the way she laughed, but he did not want to put her off.

"Tell me; what are all those ribbons on your jacket?" Bina asked.

"Just odd things; one collects them as the years go by."

"That fourth one; that's the prettiest. What's it supposed to be?"

Kiran laughed. "Everyone got that one, even if he never went out of Delhi," he said.

"I thought you were going to tell me that it was your Military Cross."

"No, that one isn't; who told you about my M.C.?"

"Arun Sanwal; he certainly has a very high opinion of you."

"Do you use the Club a lot?" Kiran asked.

"I go to a few dances. About once a week."

"No dance on this evening, is there?"

"Of course, there isn't. I often come here when my father plays bridge. He can't see very well at night, but refuses to take the chauffeur in the evening," she explained. "So now and then I offer to drive him to the club."

"He is in the Secretariat, isn't he?"

"He's a Secretary."

"Oh, Secretaries are very important people, aren't they; rank with Lieutenant-Generals."

"Are Lieutenant-Generals very important?"

"Yes, very."

"How many years will it take you to be a Lieutenant-General?"

"No chance of that," Kiran told her, "it takes a war

for quick promotions. Who is Mr. Kagal?"

"Kanuram Kagal? He's one of the Under Secretaries in my father's ministry; but I thought you knew him well."

"No, I must have been asked to balance the party."

"It was odd their asking me; my father said I must go."

"Anyway, I'm glad I went," Kiran said.

"Oh, there's Daddy," Bina said.

Bina's father came through the door, a middle-aged, grey-haired, slightly-stooping man, blinking heavily through his glasses.

"This is Colonel Garud," Bina introduced. "My father, Mr. Sonal."

"How do you do, sir," Kiran said.

"How do you do," Mr. Sonal said, and gave Kiran the sort of look, half-suspicious, half-disapproving, that any father would give to a personable young man whom he finds sitting alone with his daughter.

"Could I drop you back, anywhere," Bina asked.

"No, I've brought my bicycle," Kiran said.

In the car, Bina's father asked her:

"What did you say was the name of that soldier you were talking to?"

"Colonel Garud."

"Who is he?"

"I hardly know him," she said. "I have just met him once or twice ..."

"Oh, only just," Mr. Sonal said, frowning. "Somehow I got the impression you knew him very well."

"He used to be in Raniwada."

"Must be one of the Satpura officers then. Odd that he should be still in uniform," Mr. Sonal said.

17 *Right Side, Wrong Side*

Kiran was indignant because an important file which he had sent to the Ordnance branch had taken five days to

get there. But when he told Mansingh about it, the latter had shown no surprise. Mansingh told him that it was about the normal time for a file to go from one branch to another.

"Matter of fact, most of them take a jolly sight longer," he said.

"But the MGO people are hardly a hundred yards away. Five days; God, in five days ..."

"Five days between branches and three days between directorates of the same branch. That's quite normal. No use getting worked up about it. It's all part of science?"

"What do you mean, science?"

"I was actually quoting," Mansingh said. "'They have transformed delay into a science', someone said on one of our files." Mansingh must have liked the sound of those words for he repeated them, "'The Government of India has transformed delay into a science'. No use getting hot and bothered about it. It's absurd, but no one can do anything about it, not even the Chief or the PM."

Mansingh had been at Army Headquarters for two years now, and he certainly knew his way about. It was lucky having Mansingh around, otherwise Kiran would have got into trouble more often than he did.

There were too many do's and don'ts peculiar to Army HQ. It was almost impossible not to transgress some of the taboos in your early days.

It was not done, for example, to wear tucked-in shirts —that was too regimental. You had to wear bush-shirts all the time until you changed to battle-dress in the winter. You had to buy the approved type of cap. It was stiff and a little on the high side, and most of those who had to wear it felt that it lacked the swagger of the more pliant cap with the fuller crown that everyone seemed to be wearing at the end of the war. They complained that the new cap looked altogether like the other-rank's cap of the British Army. But that was the cap the Chief had approved for use, and there was no question of going about Army HQ in any other kind of headgear.

Somehow it did not seem to matter if your shoes were

not of the regulation pattern; you could wear shoes, boots, jodhpores, of any pattern you liked, and you could even use shoes with designs punched all over them.

You had to memorize the 'Role of the Army' and the Cadet's Prayer which the Chief was said to have brought back from a visit to West Point. You had to keep a first-aid field dressing in your pocket at all times, and you had to keep some of the military pamphlets issued by MT with you whenever you were in uniform. You could take your dog into the office, but not your bicycle. After lunch, you could go to the office in civilian clothes, but however hot it was, you had to put on a coat and tie.

It was terribly important not to get on the wrong side of some people; you had to be careful not to cut across procedure—that was the greatest crime. Files were called BMs and RFs. The RFs could be sent to the other departments, but the BMs were meant for circulation strictly within your own branch. You had to mind your language in the RFs, but on the BMs, you could write many of the four-letter or five-letter words if you felt they were justified.

"But never use any four-letter or five-letter words when you are writing a note to the Accounts people," Mansingh had warned. "Don't ever rub them up the wrong way."

As it happened, even without using any purely military expressions, Kiran had managed to rub some accounts officer the wrong way.

Even in Raniwada, he had always found them most irritating, and now when he got what he thought was a chance to get a little of his own back, he had felt really pleased with himself. He had yet to learn that you could never get your own back as far as the Accounts Department was concerned.

Throughout his service, the incidents which had annoyed him most were connected with the Accounts Department. With an uncanny gift which almost amounted to second sight, they used to pounce upon the most obscure and insignificant irregularity in the battalion accounts and give it the appearance of a deliberately perpetrated fraud.

If, for instance, you were returning to the station after the day's work in military transport and if your club happened to be on the way, you could not show on your transport slip that you dismissed the vehicle at the club. Even if you got off at the club, you had to show on your transport record that you dismissed the vehicle at the office. Otherwise the Accounts people made out a case to show that Government transport had been used for going to a place of recreation. It was not just misuse of transport, these days; they made it sound much more criminal than that: it was regarded as theft of Government petrol. That is exactly what had happened to one of Kiran's officers.

And that was the sort of thing that had prompted Kiran to write that somewhat flippant note to the Accounts Department.

The Directorate of War Plans had initiated a proposal for an experimental patrol. Ten men were to be sent out to one of the unfrequented tracts of the Eastern Ghats. They were to be entirely on their own for six weeks.

Kiran had given a good deal of thought to the list of provisions that the men were to take with them. Among other things, he had put down that in addition to normal rations, they should be given an issue of one ounce of rum and two ounces of extra sugar every day.

That was what the Accounts people had objected to. Their note read:

> In our opinion, rum and extra sugar are not necessary. These items are admissible only when troops are working in temperatures below 40 F., and as the temperatures in the Eastern Ghats never fall below 40 F., it is regretted that we cannot agree to the issue of rum and extra sugar.
>
> Obiter dictum, we fear that any such special concession given now will be quoted as a precedent for similar patrols in future.

Kiran looked up the dictionary and found that 'obiter dictum' meant, 'in passing'. It seemed the Accounts people could never write a note without using one or

two Latin phrases.

Kiran fumed at the thought of some baboo sitting in an office chair laying down the law about what troops should carry with them in the field. Actually, it was quite true that the weather in the Eastern Ghats was never very cold, but during October and November, when the patrol was to be sent there, it rained almost incessantly, about an inch every day. Tramping in the slush through the jungles in their rain-soaked uniforms, living out in the open, the men were bound to feel cold and miserable, and at the end of the day, would have looked upon an extra cup of tea laced with rum as a godsend.

Actually, Kiran should have taken up the matter with the DWP who could almost certainly have persuaded the Accounts people to agree to Kiran's suggested ration scale. It was always easier to get things done at a higher level. But Kiran was new to these things, and could not resist the temptation of making the Accounts people look silly. He wrote on the file :

> It is quite true that the temperatures in the Eastern Ghats do not fall below 40 F. However, it rains heavily during October and November. The average rainfall for these two months is 51 inches.
>
> As this patrol is being sent out for the very purpose of determining the most suitable rations for military patrols of this nature, and as the Accounts Department is vitally concerned in this, it would be in rerum natura to send a representative of the Accounts Department on this patrol to make recommendations in the light of personal experience.

Chuckling to himself, Kiran signed the note and sent the file back to the Accounts people. The thought of some fat Accounts baboo trudging in the jungles with a heavy pack on his back was amusing. He also felt proud at having used an obscure Latin phrase. He had searched the dictionary for it, and had gone to some trouble to word his note so that he could use 'in rerum natura'.

Three days later, the DWP sent for him. "What on

earth do you mean writing stuff like this to the Accounts Department?" he demanded. In front of him lay the file with Kiran's note on it.

Kiran had always held strong views on the treatment of what are described as the 'other ranks'. The Brigadier looked stern and angry, but on some issues you had to show firmness; it was important to stand up for the men.

"I had put down even less than what I regard as the minimum requirement for this patrol, sir," Kiran said evenly. "In fact, what I have put down is hardly adequate. They should get two ounces of rum, not just one, as well as two ounces of dried fruit per day. But I couldn't fit it into their loads—it would have made their packs too heavy."

"But there are definite rules laid down about the issue of these things. How can you be so sure that rum and sugar are necessary?" the Brigadier asked, frowning.

"From personal experience, sir. Because I've done patrolling in almost similar conditions in Burma, and these little extras make all the difference. Their marching schedule requires twelve miles of cross-country each day—for six weeks. The going is awful—incessant rain, slush, and hoards of leeches. At the end of...But there's no use explaining it to you. You have done a number of these patrols yourself during the war."

"What makes you think that?" the DWP asked.

"Why, you were with the Dagger Division in Burma. You must have done more patrolling than almost anyone else..."

"Oh, yes," the Brigadier said. "Oh, yes; my CO was a bloody fiend for patrolling, absolute fiend."

"No use telling you about patrols, sir."

That must have made the DWP unbend. Those who have become accustomed to a life of ease like to be reminded of the days when they were used to hard physical exertion and prolonged periods of discomfort.

"Oh, I'm not saying that they don't need all that you have allowed," the Brigadier conceded. "But there are ways and means of getting these things done. To write a rude note to the Accounts people is certainly not the way."

But it was clear that the Brigadier had calmed down.

He was actually smiling as he spoke. "Tell me, what the hell does in rerum natura, mean? I hope it is not what I think it means; I hope it is nothing obscene, old boy; or is it?"

"Oh, no, sir," Kiran assured him. "It is nothing like that."

"Good," the Brigadier said, "but it sounds very much as though it does, you know. Mustn't rub the Accounts people the wrong way; there are ways of getting things done without upsetting people. Let me tell you a story to illustrate what I mean..."

They never offered to tell you stories unless they were really relaxed.

Later, the DWP had tried to sort it out, at 'his level', but it was no use. The patrol had to go without its rum and sugar: the Accounts men did not forgive easily.

Mansingh had also warned Kiran that even amongst the army officers themselves, there were several from whom it was just as well to keep away. "They have an exaggerated idea of their own importance and are always out to chew up their juniors," he had said. And then he had proceeded to give Kiran the names of these officers.

One of them was Colonel Ramdeva. "Steer clear of that bastard," Mansingh had warned. "He is a tubby little man, and tubby little men who wear uniforms are always dangerous."

But in spite of that warning, Kiran had managed to have quite a tiff with Colonel Ramdeva.

It was, oddly enough, in connection with the same case in which he had managed to put the Accounts Department's back up: the matter of sending out an experimental patrol in the Eastern Ghats.

The list of equipment and provisions was finally agreed upon by all the officials concerned, and the orders for the patrol were sent out. A copy of the order was sent out to Colonel Ramdeva who was the officer in charge of controlled stores. At his conference the next day, the DWP had said to Kiran:

"Please contact the Officer-in-Charge of Controlled stores and get him to give the orders for issuing the special equipment for the patrol. We don't want the

patrol to be delayed on that account."

Kiran knew Colonel Ramdeva's staff officer, and rang him up as soon as he got back to his office.

"Is it something very important?" the Staff Officer wanted to know. "Because if it is something that can wait, it would be much better if you were to ring up later."

"Why?" Kiran asked. "Is the OCCS busy?"

"Oh, he's not busy. It's just that he's in a foul mood."

"Don't be absurd!" Kiran said. "Surely we can't hold up things for people to get over their hangovers! We'd never get anything done if we started worrying about people's moods."

"I will certainly put you through," Ramdeva's Staff Officer said, "but I am just warning you that he is not at all in the right mood ..."

"I couldn't care less," Kiran said. "Please put me through."

It is possible that Ramdeva may have been listening in on the extension in his room, for his voice came on the telephone rather abruptly, too soon for the call to have been put through by his Staff Officer. "Yes?" Ramdeva was saying. "What is it?"

"It is about the experimental patrol, sir," Kiran began. In service, Ramdeva was only a year senior to Kiran, but he was a full Colonel and it was necessary to call him 'Sir'.

"What about it?"

"The DWP wanted me to request you to have the special equipment issued to the Command HQ without waiting for a formal indent so that the patrol is able to work on schedule ..."

"Look," Ramdeva broke in. "If the DWP wants to make a request to me, he can do it himself. I am not accustomed to SO 1s ringing me up to hustle me into helping them out because they have balled up things before and now want to make up for lost time. I don't know anything about the patrol. Who made the list of equipment? Why were we not consulted before? If your crowd go about arranging things which concern my department without even consulting me, don't ask me to come to your rescue." And Ramdeva banged the

receiver down.

It was almost certain that Ramdeva had heard Kiran's remark made to his Staff Officer. Also, Ramdeva had every right to be peeved because he had not been consulted. The General Staff were always inclined to take the other branches of the Army Headquarters a little for granted. Operations, Intelligence, Planning, were forever being accused of going over people's heads. On the other hand, Ramdeva had no business to be rude. "After all the bastard is only a year senior to me," Kiran said to himself. "Who the hell does he think he is ?"

But the very next day, Kiran had been able to get his own back on Ramdeva. It was one of those rare occasions on which he felt entirely satisfied that he had come out with the right rejoinders. Normally he always thought of several appropriate things to say long after the occasion for them had passed, but this time it had gone off like a dialogue in a play, and throughout, Kiran had managed to keep absolutely cool. It was a brief encounter ; but an intensely satisfying one.

Eleven o'clock was the hour of the mid-morning tea break, and as usual, Mansingh had come to Kiran's room for a chat and a cup of tea. The chaprassi had just brought the tea tray and Mansingh was pouring out the tea when the telephone rang.

Kiran picked up the receiver, but before he could say anything, he heard Colonel Ramdeva's voice, saying, "Garud ?" quite sharply.

"Yes," Kiran said, and though he had recognized Ramdeva's voice, asked, "Who's speaking ?"

"Colonel Ramdeva."

"Yes ?" Kiran asked.

Kiran had not said 'Yes, sir' and Ramdeva could not have failed to notice the omission for he paused for a little while before going on. "It is about this experimental patrol of yours. I've received a signal from Command asking for its background and exact purpose. They want an immediate answer. I tried to contact Shindey but his staff officer tells me he's gone on tour."

Ramdeva had referred to the DWP as Shindey, although, being junior to him in rank, he should have

spoken of him as Brigadier Shindey. It seemed a favourite Army HQ trick; trying to impress officers by claiming equality with their superiors.

As Kiran did not say anything, Ramdeva went on:

"You know what the Army Commander is; if he doesn't get an answer today, there'll be hell to pay—he's quite likely to take up the matter with the Chief."

"I see," Kiran said. He hoped his voice would give the impression that he was being bored.

"What do you mean, 'I see'?" Ramdeva asked, quite irritably.

"Exactly what I said," Kiran said. He had always longed to use that expression appropriately in this kind of conversation.

That must have rattled Ramdeva, but he did not come out with anything rude. He must have been really anxious to get an answer sent off to the Army Commander's signal, and in the absence of the DWP, Kiran was the only person who could have given him the necessary information.

"Well, how about it?" Ramdeva asked.

"How about what?" Kiran said, innocently.

"Dammitall! What the hell reply should I sent to the signal from Command?"

"How am I to know?"

"What do you mean, 'how am I to know'?"

"Exactly what I said," Kiran said again. He had Colonel Ramdeva where he wanted him. "How can I tell you what to reply to a signal addressed to you?" he said with great emphasis.

"Oh," Ramdeva said, and there was a brief pause. Then he said:

"Is that how you always speak to senior officers?" but there was no anger in his voice, only bewilderment.

"Not always," Kiran said. "It depends."

"Depends on what?"

"On my mood," Kiran said.

And again, Colonel Ramdeva had banged the receiver down.

"Who was that?" Mansingh asked.

"The OCCS, Colonel Ramdeva," Kiran told him.

"What! Oh, my God! Titch, Ramdeva! The way you spoke to him I thought he was some baboo. God, you have a nerve! You'll get into hellish trouble; you wait. Just asking for it; but I'm glad you ticked off the son of a bitch."

But Colonel Ramdeva had never picked on him again.

18 *It Was Like Leaving Home*

It was nearly three months since Kiran had left Raniwada, and although he had received a number of letters from some of the officers and other ranks, he had had little real news of the battalion. There were references to many changes, and at times Kiran could not help feeling a little uneasy about the way things seemed to be going.

Then one morning the chaprassi brought in a slip of paper. His old Adjutant, Captain Barkat Ram, wanted to see him. Kiran pushed his files aside and shouted for some tea. He was eager for news of Raniwada.

Captain Barkat Ram came in, wearing his London-tailored service dress and looking like a military tailor's advertisement. He came to a parade-ground halt, secured his polished-leather swagger stick under his left arm and gave a real, parade-ground salute.

"What the hell are you doing in Delhi?" Kiran asked. "On leave?"

"No, sir," Barkat said. "Passing through. Going on a transfer; to the 1st battalion."

"To Ayub's battalion; good!" Kiran said. "Now sit down and tell me all about Raniwada. Cigarette?"

Barket sat down and lit a cigarette before he spoke.

"Raniwada is fine, sir. Everything's just wonderful," he said. There was something in the way he said it that made Kiran think that he was being facetious. "Just wonderful," Barkat repeated.

"Oh, good. Have the engineers taken our strip in hand? Are they going to have it ready for the Regimental

day ?"

That was something Kiran had hoped to have done this winter. He had fought hard to get the money sanctioned for the concrete strip. It always spoiled their march pasts when the men had to march on the dusty, laterite-surfaced strip. You had to have something hard underfoot, like concrete, to bring out the best in marching ; to bring out the sharp crack of heels pounding down.

"I'm afraid the strip has had it," Barkat said. "The CO didn't fancy the idea much. He's asked for permission to utilize the grant for renovating the regimental temple."

"The temple ! But I thought the temple looked all right as it was ; quite a picturesque little temple, in fact ; hundreds of years old."

"The CO wants it modernized," Barkat said. "He also wants a bigger temple."

"Oh, yes," Kiran said. "Well, I suppose it needed alterations, only I hope they don't go and modernize it altogether. Tell me about yourself. Are you going to get a company in the 1st ?"

"I don't know, sir. I'm rather in disgrace. Depends on how my new CO, Colonel Ayub, looks at it."

"What have you been doing ? Making love to someone's wife ?"

Barkat laughed. "No such luck, sir. I seemed to do everything wrong as far as the CO was concerned. Everything I did upset him."

"Oh," Kiran said. "Such as ?"

"You remember that shamiana business. It all began with that. The man came to see the CO the day after you left, and the CO ordered the shamiana sent down. I rather took it for granted that we were to send the old shamiana, and that's what I did. There was quite a row about it afterwards, because Lala Vishnu Saran made quite a fuss. It appears that the CO had wanted the new one sent."

Kiran laughed. "So they got the shamiana after all."

"The old one."

"But dammitall, you are not being pushed out just for that ?"

"Oh, no," Barkat said laughing. "Oh, no, sir. That was just the beginning. One thing led to another, and I seemed to get more and more unpopular. I had to give up my bungalow, for instance, and go and live in the Stag-lodge. It was not as if the bungalow was required for another officer; I wouldn't have minded that. It has been taken over by a Sindhi merchant."

"Oh, my God!" Kiran said. "So the bungalow's gone out of our hands?"

"The CO thought that a bachelor officer had no business to have a bungalow to himself. He said it was a matter of principle."

"What else did you do?"

"Nothing really serious, sir. I mean nothing for which he could put me on a charge or anything. But it was just these small things. You remember your orders, sir, that all officers had to show up for PT at least three times a week. Well, Major Rawal Singh never turned up. So I spoke to him about it and he complained to the CO. I got a hell of a raspberry for that. The CO told me I had no business to tell senior officers what they should; or shouldn't do. Matter of fact; I wasn't; it. . ."

"But doesn't he want officers to show up at PT, even if they don't do PT themselves? Doesn't he attend PT himself?"

"Hasn't turned up once."

"How is everything else?" Kiran asked.

"Everything is pretty much the same," Barkat said.

"How is Kotwal?"

"I think he's had it, too, sir, I don't think the CO likes him much. I was told he's asked for Major Rawal Singh to be made the Second-in-Command."

"God, no! Rawal as 2 IC! He can't command a platoon; never done so in his life!"

"He has the seniority all right. In fact he is a little senior to Major Kotwal."

"I know that, but he hasn't done a day's training in his life."

"The CO doesn't seem to think that that matters much."

"I think you are well out of it," Kiran said. "Yes,

well out of it."

"Yes, sir," Barkat said. "I thought it was high time I got out; before Rawal Singh became the 2 IC. The CO had also warned me that he would put me on an adverse report. So when the first battalion wanted a Captain, I put in for a transfer. The only thing that I hope for now, is that the CO doesn't send a personal letter to Colonel Ayub about me."

"I shouldn't worry about that, even if he does," Kiran said. "Ayub won't take much notice of things like that. Would you like me to speak to him about you?"

"I should be most grateful if you would do something like that, sir," Barkat said. "Don't want to start on the wrong foot in a new battalion."

"No, of course, not," Kiran said. "It never does to start off on the wrong foot. I'll speak to Ayub. I'm forever ringing up his battalion. You will like it when you get there, I am sure. Nothing like an operational battalion."

"All the same, it was awful leaving the fourth, sir," said Barkat. And then he said something which Kiran thought was quite unlike him:

"It was like leaving home," Barkat said.

19 *You Can't Cut Across Procedure*

The telephone rang and before he could say anything, there was the DWP's voice saying, "Garud? Is that you Garud?"

"Yes, sir."

"Look here, old boy; will you come and see me sometime this morning? The sooner the better."

They always called you 'old boy' like that when something was on. "May I come right away, sir," Kiran asked.

"Yes, of course, old boy; right away."

That was another snag of working so far away from your immediate superior. Any time you wanted to see

him, you had to cycle up to the South Block nearly half a mile away and make previous appointments so that you would find him in when you got there.

In ten minutes Kiran was with the DWP. As soon as he had sat down, Brigadier Shindey said:

"I'm afraid this is rather a fast one, old boy. The General wants us to prepare an appreciation of the communication requirements of Border Region Three; slightly outside your sphere, I know, but I want you to take it on."

"Wouldn't that be MO's pigeon, sir? Or the Engineers?"

"Oh, no, I've gone into that. I'm afraid it is our baby all right. The General wants it for some paper he's been asked to prepare for the Joint Chiefs."

"When does he want it?"

"That's just the snag, old boy. On Tuesday; that is, let me see, six days from now."

"Does he think that Region Three is going to come in for some kind of action?"

The DWP pursed his lips. "Well, I wouldn't go so far as saying that. It is, what you might call, forward planning. High-level stuff; one step ahead of us, you know."

"I'll get on with it. As it happens, I've been reading up quite a lot of stuff on Region Three lately," Kiran said.

"Oh, that's good, very good, old boy. I'd like to see the draft on Monday. If you bring it here first thing on Monday morning, we'll go over it together. Then we can have it faired and ready for the General on Tuesday."

"Righto, sir," Kiran said, then, as a thought occurred to him, added, "But I doubt if I shall be able to keep within the working hours laid down by the Chief, sir. In fact, I shall have to keep the clerks and typists working overtime most of this week."

"Oh, that's all right," said the Brigadier breezily. "If there's any comeback on this, I'll stop it, old boy. You don't worry, you just deliver the goods on Monday morning, and I'll handle all rockets, if any."

On his way back from the South Block, Kiran went to see the map issue people in the Geographical and

Survey section, and managed to collect two sets of quarter inch maps of Region Three.

Back in his own office, he had all the sheets of maps joined together. Then he went through the geographical collation files on Region Three and made a list of the additional details which had to go on the maps—some new roads, two new airfields and a few other details which, as the map was printed some years ago, were not shown on it. He had his draftsman ink these additional details in the maps, sent one set to the photo section, and after a good deal of persuasion got them to agree to make six photostat copies of the map.

He was quite confident of getting his report written out in time if only those whose help he needed would co-operate; you had to go along only as fast and as far as the Secretariat machinery would let you. As a regimental officer, Kiran had heard many stories of the bullock-cart speed of Secretariat procedure, but he had never really believed any of the stories. Now he was convinced that they were all true. It slowed you down in whatever you were trying to do, and if you attempted to by-pass it and go ahead with your job, you could get yourself into quite serious trouble.

The aim of the elaborate, complex procedure was obviously efficiency combined with speed, but what it succeeded in achieving in actual practice was indecision and delay. It was all governed by what everyone called baboo-logic. Broadly translated, it described a state of mind in which officials had begun to use procedure not to avoid mistakes, but to avoid decisions. The tendency was to seek shelter behind some obscure but impregnable bastion of procedure and strenuously resist the need to make a decision. That was what they delighted in, and only when that was no longer possible, when a decision could no longer be delayed, they tried desperately to make someone else responsible for taking it.

Among the clerks and the lower officials, this tendency manifested itself in a sort of perpetual competition to find out reasons why something should not be done instead of why it should, and the more obscure and unfamiliar the ruling you dug out from the complex

rules of procedure, the more reason you had to feel satisfied with yourself.

You came across it all the time. Even if you wanted everyday articles of stationery like pens and ink, pencils and paper, you had to send an indent for them all in triplicate, two months in advance, and invariably, as though it were a matter of principle, they always supplied you with only about half of what you demanded, so that you soon learned to put in for double the quantities you needed. They seemed to expect you to put in boosted up demands.

That was why Kiran had taken good care to smoothen out the channels of procedure before he got down to work, having made sure that the map issue people or the photostat people, or the draftsmen's pool would not let him down. Then he called his Superintendent and told him that he was not to be disturbed during the day. "Please take all my telephone calls and don't put anyone through unless there's something really important," he warned him.

He spent the rest of the morning making notes, all on separate sheets of paper bearing different headings. At one o'clock, he sent for some sandwiches and a cup of coffee from the Women's Welfare canteen and worked throughout the lunch hour. He was beginning to enjoy this kind of work now; at least it was something original.

By five o'clock, he had the framework ready. It would need a good deal of polishing up, of course, but he had the major and minor headings all taped. He had also made a list of all the charts and graphs which would be required to go with his paper, and set his two draftsmen working on them. As he drank his tea, he felt quite satisfied with what he had been able to achieve so far. "At last, I'm beginning to get the hang of this kind of thing," he told himself.

Soon after five, the Superintendent came and said:

"Sorry to disturb you, sir, but there's a telephone call for you. Colonel Namdar. Says he must speak to you."

Kiran walked to the adjoining room and picked up the telephone which was lying near the stand.

"Garud here," he said.

"I say," said Namdar. "I hear you went and brought some maps from the maps people."

"That's right," Kiran said.

"Didn't you know it was all wrong. There's an Office Order. . ."

"What's all wrong ? Getting maps from the map issue people ?"

"No, old boy ; but there is a procedure laid down for obtaining restricted maps."

Kiran did not like Namdar calling him 'old boy'. He said :

"What sort of procedure ? Indents in triplicate ?"

He could hear Namdar laugh at the other end. "Maps are controlled you know ; particularly the sort of maps which you took away. And as soon as The Officer-in-Charge of Controlled Stores, Colonel Ramdeva, discovers that you have been going behind his back and. . ."

"Look," Kiran said. "I have got the maps here, and that's all there is to it. If Ramdeva wants to complain about them, let him take it up with the DWP. . ."

"It is not just a matter of the OCCS objecting. We come into it too, you know ; the OCCS will put the blame on us. . ."

"Who's us ?"

"Co-ord. Whenever any of our sections want restricted maps, they have to send in a requisition through us. . ."

"Through you ! What have you got to do with maps ?"

Namdar went on in his bland voice, as though he were reading the minutes of a meeting : "All indents for maps required by any of our sections have to be sent through Co-ord. We screen the demands and. . ."

"You what !"

"Screen them, old boy ; you know, cut down the demands if we think they are not justified."

"I see ; in fact, you decide whether we need the maps we put in for."

"That is the procedure," Namdar said. "That is the procedure, old boy."

Kiran tried to control his voice. "Oh, is it. Well, these particular maps were required for a high-priority job

ordered by the DWP and it couldn't possibly have been finished in time if I had waited to place indents for the maps, and still less for the indents to be screened. As it is, it is touch and go whether the thing will be ready in time."

"But you cannot cut across procedure, you know," Namdar protested. "The General is very particular about this sort of thing. He feels that there have been far too many unnecessary demands for maps lately."

It was just like Namdar to bring in the General. It was another of those proved Army HQ devices and seldom failed to work. You could always get your way, if you convinced the others that the General wanted it that way.

Kiran said: "The only thing I can say is that the demand was essential and could not have waited."

You had to be careful when they brought in the General's name; by now he had learnt that much at least. It was prudent to steer the talk away from the General. You had to resist the impulse to say, "To hell with the General." That instantly put you in the wrong.

"I'm sure it was," Namdar said. "I'm sure it was. But we can't just ride rough-shod over procedure, you know. What was it that you wanted these maps for?"

The question came in so suddenly, that for a moment Kiran was taken aback. Was it just that Namdar wanted to be in on everything, that he hated to feel that he was being left out of anything important, or was it a trap, to get him to talk about a Top Secret matter over the telephone.

Kiran said: "That I'm afraid, I cannot tell you."

"Can't tell me over the 'phone, you mean?" Namdar asked.

"No," Kiran said. "Can't tell you at all. Top Secret," and then he couldn't help rubbing it in: "Nothing whatever to do with adam, you know."

"I see," said Namdar, and there was a long pause, and Kiran thought that he had left the telephone. But Namdar's voice came on again, suave as ever. He said: "I'm afraid, I'll have to take up this matter at the DWP's conference."

"Oh, the DWP knows all about it," Kiran said. "At least, he told me in so many words that he would look after all rockets as far as this job was concerned."

"Did he?" Namdar said as though he doubted it. "But I'm sure he would not have agreed to this. I still think I ought to take this up at the conference."

"You can bloody well do what you like," Kiran said, "only don't waste my time telling me what you propose to do."

"Now, now," Namdar said. "After all, procedure is procedure, and if we have people flouting it, the whole system would break down. It may have been different where you came from. I understand that they do things pretty much as they like in these. . .er . . .small cantonments. But this is Army HQ, and we regard procedure as. . ."

"Oh, to hell with you and your procedure," Kiran said, and banged down the receiver.

And that was that. Kiran wished he had been able to keep as calm as the other. Losing your temper always put you in the wrong. But it was the very blandness of the other's voice which he found so irritating. It had a syrupy smoothness and an air of being superior and right at all times that put you instantly on the defensive.

Kiran had meant to sit in the office for another two hours to work on his appreciation and get away just in time for dinner. But now he thought that it would do him good to go and play a game of squash. He rang up the Akbar Mess and told his bearer to take his squash racket and a change of clothes to the Delhi Sports Club. Then he locked up all the papers in the steel almirah, pulled a curtain over the maps he had been working on, and cycled to the club.

Normally, Kiran could take at least one out of every three games from the marker. But that was when he played calmly, taking the shots as they came, always patiently waiting for an opening and making the other commit the mistakes. But today he played angrily, wanting to lash at the ball hard all the time.

"Mustn't work off your temper on the ball," said Haroon, the Club Pro with surprising insight into Kiran's mind. And then he ran rings around him. They played

eight games, and Kiran did not win a single one.

That evening, when he came back to his room, pleasantly tired after his game of squash but still smarting over the telephone conversation with Namdar, his bearer told him that there was a sahib waiting for him in the mess lounge.

"What sort of sahib ?" Kiran asked irritably.

"A white sahib, sir. His name is Habard sahib."

Kiran frowned. "Hubbard ? Hibbert ? What does he want ?"

"He didn't say, sir. Says he is an old friend of yours."

"I have no friend of that name," Kiran said, taking off his sopping wet shirt.

"He was wearing a tie just like yours. Must be someone from your paltan," said the bearer.

"A Satpura tie ? Hubbard ? Hibbert ? . . .oh, Howard. God ! Must be Bertie Howard !" Kiran said.

As he stood under the shower, the sharp jets of ice-cold water revived his spirits. When he began to dress, it was of Bertie Howard and the old Regimental officers that he thought. Namdar and his small-minded, nagging insistence on petty procedure had completely gone out of his mind.

20 *Old Times*

In the summer of 1938, when Kiran joined the 4th Satpuras, Lieutenant Hubert Howard was the Senior Subaltern of the battalion.

You had heard whispers about Senior Subalterns and made anxious inquiries about them before you joined the Regiment of your choice, for in those days, the Senior Subalterns were an institution. At least in some regiments, they wielded authority immeasurably in excess of their rank or service. To the newly commissioned officer, the Senior Subaltern was perhaps only a little less exalted than the CO and the Adjutant ; and of course, in much closer contact.

It was the Senior Subaltern who was supposed to 'take in hand' the Second Lieutenants, teach them the regimental customs and mess etiquette, and generally to see that they behaved themselves properly on all occasions.

Later, just before the 4th went to Burma, Bertie became the Adjutant when he took over from Bull Hampton. In Kiran's early days with the battalion, however, whenever the CO felt that one of the subalterns was not up to the mark, he always told Bertie to "take him in hand, will you ?"

The shortcomings for which the Senior Subaltern could pull you up were not necessarily limited to the sphere of your professional life. You could be ticked off for failing to use the correct fork, or for wearing your hat at too jaunty an angle, or for wearing a tie which the Senior Subaltern considered too loud. You even had to be appropriately solemn or cheerful whenever the occasion demanded it; and one of the many occasions on which Kiran had been taken to task by the Senior Subaltern was at a guest night in the mess for not showing sufficient zest in playing 'Freda.'

'Freda' was a game you played at the billiard table. One of the officers was the umpire. He shouted out your names in a serial order, reading them out from a list, and each of you had to run round the table and from one end of it, roll the red ball along and try to hit with it the white ball which had been set in motion by the preceding player. If you missed it, or if the white ball stopped rolling before you could hit it, you lost a 'life.' Losing three lives put you out of the game.

'Freda' enjoyed tremendous popularity among the members of the Satpura mess, particularly on guest nights. It didn't require any skill, gave an opportunity for one and all to join in, and best of all, it provided an excuse to make a good deal of noise. As played in the Tigers' mess, 'Freda' was often just one step short of Rugby football.

Kiran had always loathed 'Freda.' Straight billiards, yes; snooker, he liked even better; but not what he called this silly running round the table trying to roll the balls with a sweep of your hands. After the first

few times, he had developed his own technique for playing 'Freda,' which was to try and lose all his three 'lives' as quickly and as inconspicuously as possible, and be declared 'dead.'

That is exactly what he had done on that guest night. The umpire shouted, "Mr. Garud is dead," and Kiran broke away from the circle of panting officers round the billiard table, and sitting on one of the high benches that were placed along the walls of the billiard room, ordered a whisky and soda.

After the round of 'Freda' was over, there was a chorus of "Let's have another round," but before the next round began, everyone took off a few minutes to light their cigarettes and order fresh drinks for themselves and their guests.

That was when Bertie Howard had come up to Kiran The Abdar had just brought Kiran's drink and Bertie had waited for the Abdar to go away before he spoke. He said:

"What do you think this is? A bloody funeral?"

Kiran stared dumbly at Bertie, wondering what he was expected to say; but of course he was not expected to say anything at all.

Bertie was talking in an undertone, but his voice was stern. "Well, I'll tell you; this is not a bloody funeral. This is a guest night in the mess of the 4th Satpuras. Is that clear?"

"Yes," Kiran said.

Because it was bad form to evince too much interest in this sort of thing, the officers in the vicinity were pretending to be busy, lighting cigarettes and making small talk.

"Then why the blazes don't you show that you are enjoying it even if you feel too bloody superior to get down to it and really enjoy it?" Bertie was still talking in an undertone, without a trace of anger in his voice. "Don't you realize that there are outsiders present? Guests of the mess. You are a host. Bloody fine host you make! For God's sake learn to act as if you are enjoying it."

At the time, Kiran could have cheerfully murdered Bertie Howard. But even then, deep within himself,

he knew that Bertie was right and that he was wrong. Later on, when he became the CO of the 4th, he used to tell his officers, "Gentlemen, whether you feel like it or not, it is your business to sparkle at Guest nights. For God's sake, act as if you are enjoying it," he used to tell them, and every time he said it, he used to think of Bertie Howard.

It was surprising how, in spite of this sort of thing happening all the time, any friendships were made at all. But the fact remains that in that very atmosphere of tight regimental and mess life, in the face of the constant irritations which were the inevitable result of full-blooded men forced to live and work in the closest proximity for prolonged periods, in the face of the numerous 'dressing downs' by those who happened to be slightly senior in service, so many bonds of lasting friendship were forged.

After you had become used to them, these encounters left little rancour; usually, by the next morning, the sting had subsided. Kiran remembered that the day after the mess guest night, the Satpuras had played a cricket match with the local gymkhana, and that Bertie and he had been the top scorers for their side. After the match, in the glow of after-victory bonhomie, he and Bertie had sat in the club bar till late, drinking beer. By the time they left the club, there was no trace of bitterness on Kiran's part. Neither he nor Bertie had referred to the previous night's incident.

That was one of the things that your early life in the regiment was supposed to teach you: the ability to 'take it.' It was somehow all a part of the ability to be able to 'dish it out,' but as a Subaltern, you got few enough opportunities to dish it out; most of the time you just had to go on learning how to take it.

It was not done to nurse grievances or to feel miserable and sulk for days; you just took it, with as much composure as you could muster, and then tried to forget all about it, as quickly as possible. God knows it was hard enough to get over some of these encounters, particularly when you knew that the right, was on your side. But explanations were quite out of the order; the only thing you could do when you were ticked off was to say that

you were sorry. Anyway, within a few months, a year at the most, if you were any good, you learnt to 'take it' in the right spirit.

That was another thing. Once they knew that you could take it they didn't worry you much after that. Somehow you became one of them—a full-fledged member of the brotherhood—when they were convinced that they didn't have to test you any more to see how far you could take it. From then on, all you had to learn was to 'dish it out.' Learning that part took a hell of a long time, though, because it was one of the most difficult things in life to blow up someone and still leave him with the impression that there was nothing personal in it. But after you had mastered that, you were fit for any command. Successful military leadership nearly always went with the ability to 'dish it out.' But it was not a process you could rush; it was not something you could learn in a day.

"The trouble with us," Arun Sanwal used to say, "The trouble with most of us is that we had no opportunity for mastering the dishing out part of it. We can take it like hell, but we can't dish it out. That's why we have so many nincompoops amongst us."

In his Raniwada days, when Kiran was in command of the 4th Satpuras, he sometimes doubted whether his ideas of what constituted a well-rounded military officer were not outmoded. All this fuss that used to be made about the ability to 'take it,' for instance. Wasn't it all a lot of old-fashioned nonsense that should have been discarded with geometrical formations in tactics and forming fours in drill? Wasn't it all just an extension of the British public school spirit, the sort of thing that enabled little schoolboys to take a beating without whimpering?

To Kiran it was not just an academic problem; he was faced with it almost every day in his Raniwada days. Some of his officers, whenever they were pulled up about something or the other by the Adjutant, always put in for an interview with the CO; and whenever he happened to pull them up, they sulked for days and as often as not made official complaints to Brigade Headquarters. People like Rawal Singh even wrote to

friends in Delhi to try and bring pressure to bear upon the CO. At this stage, there was no question of expecting these officers to begin learning how to 'take it'. They were mostly Captains and Majors, and either you had learnt it by then, or you would never learn it.

Kiran himself had been brought up to believe that to take a dressing down in what was called the 'right spirit' was an attribute of strength; some of his newer officers seemed to regard it as an indication of meekness. It was, of course, more than probable that his own training was at fault and had warped his outlook on things. Even when he was being trained at the Military Academy in Dehra Dun, its training was soundly denounced by the great Indian political leaders as being inadequate and outmoded. But then the Military Academy was designed by the British, on the British pattern, and in the days when he was being trained to become an officer, it was more or less a sacred duty to denounce it.

Anyway, these doubts never used to stay with him for long. After all, even after the British had gone, the training at the Academy had remained substantially unaltered and the new, postwar officers who were coming out seemed to possess the same old-fashioned attributes. Training by itself was not everything; the Academy also developed the qualities of leadership, made the boys into men. "Thank God," Kiran used to say to himself, "the new Academy boys seem to be reverting to type. They will take to these things more easily; it's the training that does it, old-fashioned or not."

Not that the Senior Subaltern was the only one who dished out the rockets. There were several others: your Company Commander, occasionally, the CO himself, and then there was the Adjutant—omnipresent, omniscient, all-powerful; his shadow fell everywhere.

'Bull' Hampton was the Adjutant when Kiran joined the battalion. He was a short, thick-set man with a heavy, brick-red face and a voice that sounded as if it came out of a megaphone. He had played football for Sandhurst, and later for the Army. Then he had dislocated his knee and never played football afterwards. Whenever he took violent exercise, he used to put out

his knee and had to hobble about on a cane for weeks afterwards. But, hobbling about with the help of a cane, or trotting across the grounds on his chestnut charger, his voice was enough to strike terror in the hearts of those who heard it.

When the 4th went into Burma, Bull, because of his game leg, could have easily found himself a safe billet on the staff. In fact, everyone knew that old Brigadier Holland had asked for him as his Brigade Major, and Ropey Booker, then in command of the 4th, had advised Bull to take on the job.

Instead, Bull had begged for the command of a Company and somehow managed to convince Ropey Booker that his leg wouldn't let him down. Throughout the three months of intensive training carried out by the battalion near Secunderabad, he had nursed his leg carefully, sparing it the slightest strain, so that it should not prevent him from going with the battalion. The 4th were one of the several battalions which, although they were trained almost exclusively for desert warfare and were intended to be sent to the Middle East, were, at the last minute, diverted to Burma when the Japanese entered the war.

In the very first skirmish with the enemy near Ye, in the long tail of South-Eastern Burma, Bull had put out his knee. For the next few days of bitter memory in the history of the forces then in Burma, when the headlong retreat for the Sittang Bridge began, he had limped along with the help of a stout cane, the swelling on his knee kept in check by a tight, elastic bandage, trying to bear the pain silently and only groaning sometimes when he was asleep.

It was then that Ropey Booker had made up his mind to send him back. Admittedly, the battalion was desperately short of regular officers, but a sick officer was almost a liability. Bull knew he would have to go back at the first opportunity.

In the mean time, Bull had carried on, not daring to open the heavy bandage on his knee, his full face looking increasingly haggard, cursing a fate that had robbed him of his only chance of seeing active service with his battalion.

And then, when the 4th had reached the Twin-Pagoda Hill, a day's march south of the Mokpalin quarries, Bull had found the chance to fulfil a burning ambition of his life : to lead his company in an attack—and by God, he was not going to be thwarted by a game leg !

For two weeks, the battalion had retreated northwards and all throughout the way, they had been harried by the enemy in close pursuit. Bull had failed to get his 'scrap' with the enemy so far, and now it looked as though he had missed it for good since he was going to be sent back just as soon as they reached their next position near the Sittang Bridge. They were still on their northward trek and were now skirting past a low hill which the map said was called the Twin-Pagoda Hill.

That was when Bull saw his chance, and grabbed it with both hands.

On the forward slope of the hill, sheltered by an outcrop of rocks and hidden by the scrub jungle, was a Japanese position thought to be a company-plus in strength. Earlier in the morning, they had harassed the retreating columns with bursts of machine-gun fire. By midday, they had brought up a mortar team and had begun to lob shells on the road. But both the small-arms fire and shelling were ill-directed and had little effect on the movement of the column passing through since there was a longish stretch of dead ground which the enemy fire could not cover.

Everyone could see that the CO was going to get past the hill under cover of the night without wasting time in attacking Twin-Pagoda Hill. His job was to get to the north of the Mokpalin quarries and dig-in so as to cover the withdrawal of the remaining forces. He had called a halt just south of the hill so that his men could have a rest and a meal before undertaking the last lap of their march which would take them beyond the quarries.

In the light of the setting winter sun, the two chalk-white pagodas, monuments of a religion dedicated above all to peace and non-violence to the principle that all things living were sacred, witnessed the first of the three bloody battles of the first Burma campaign that were to be fought in their shadow. Charlie Company, led

by Major Hampton was advance company, nearly a quarter of a mile ahead of the main battalion position. The men of the other companies were resting, lying prone on either side of the Mokpalin road, smoking communal cigarettes and watching with hollow, sleep-deprived eyes, the twin pagodas now dazzling in the afternoon sun.

It was then that Bull had launched his attack. He had just sent a runner with a hastily scribbled note saying 'Attacking Twin-Pagoda Hill', and had hobbled across the open ground waving his men on with a tommy-gun which he had chosen as his personal weapon in preference to the more conventional revolver.

"Come on Jawans!" Bull had kept shouting. "Come on, Jawans; Tigers don't live for ever." Everyone could see Bull's stocky figure, limping and stumbling over the stones, and even at that distance, everyone could faintly hear his booming voice yelling:

"Come on, Jawans; Tigers don't live for ever!"

That's how Bull had gone into the attack, at the head of his company, leading his men, firing short bursts of his tommy-gun, and shouting, "Come on, Jawans; Tigers don't live for ever!" and had died at the top of the hill.

As attacks went, this particular action for which Bull Hampton had prepared himself throughout his service, to which he had looked forward to as the fulfilment of a life-long ambition, and in which he had lost his life, may have been a messy affair; 'completely bald-headed' as they said; something which had reckless audacity and little else; no planning, no question of weighing the odds; not even the excuse of expediency or of obedience to higher orders. Tactically, it was a total failure, for the Japanese could not be dislodged from their position and the casualties had been disproportionately heavy —only twenty-one men succeeded in rejoining the battalion in the course of the next few days.

But the whole battalion had watched the attack, and had lustily cheered Bull and his men, and only the presence of the CO, red-faced and scowling, must have prevented some of them from following Bull's example.

At the time, those who had watched it had not thought of the attack as a stupid blunder, and even later, it was unthinkable that any of the battalion's own officers, while

discussing a TEWT, for instance, would have cited Bull's example to illustrate how 'not to do it', although no doubt the tactical school staff, if they had come to know the details of the attack, would have torn his action into shreds.

But no amount of tactical logic would have taken away the glory from what Bull had attempted. To the battalion, at the time, and for all times what mattered was the spirit in which Bull had launched the attack; without deception, without artillery support, without the cover of darkness or smoke. Although the attack had failed, Bull had succeeded in smashing through an attitude of mind which the Satpuras and indeed most of the troops then in Burma, were beginning to develop: an attitude of 'sit and wait and let the enemy take the initiative'. Bull had chosen to take the offensive; that was all that mattered. His attack, game leg and all, had all the romance of an old-fashioned cavalry charge.

That was the sort of thing that created Regimental legends; not a dozen cold and beautifully planned actions backed by faultless tactical logic.

And there were Bull's famous last words.

By the time the few surviving officers and men of the 4th Satpuras had got back to India, those words had become hallowed. They had acquired a special significance, and were accepted by the men of the Satpuras as a sort of secondary war-cry. At battle drill and in sports, in the officers' and the VCO's messes, while cheering the men at hockey and football, and at times when drinking toasts, the men of the fighting Tigers still repeat those words:

"Come on, Jawans; Tigers don't live for ever!"

In later years, Kiran sometimes felt sorry for Bull Hampton. His attack was just one of those unfortunate affairs where the best leadership in the world would not have made any difference to the result. To glorify his attack was one thing; it was a matter of emotion, not intellect; it was the schoolboy's glorification of Casabianca and the Charge of the Light Brigade. And the composite feeling of a battalion towards its own legends was purely a matter of emotion. No doubt the will to fight and the ability to inspire your men to heroic

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deeds, made a lot of differences—but not that much difference.

No, whatever his capabilities as a leader of men, Bull had never been known for his tactical knowledge, or his brains, or even what they put down in your confidential reports as a sense of balance. He was an old-fashioned soldier, pure and simple, like an animal pertectly trained to do just one thing, but incapable of any powers of deep reasoning. An officer's highest duty was to lead his men into an attack: that was something that Bull had lived by, and, of course, there was nothing wrong with that. It was his way that was thoroughly outmoded in a modern war, and to take anyone like him into battle in any position of authority was a risk no Commanding Officer could afford to take.

But he certainly was the 'Bull', a terror on the parade ground and off it, going about life like a rugger forward, head-first, and in the days when Kiran first came to the 4th, no one would have dared to feel sorry for him, or thought of him as a blundering fool who would soon lead a hundred men to certain death or capture in a thoroughly unnecessary and unsuccessful action.

In Raniwada, the summer of 1939—the last hot weather before the war—had been a particularly hot one. By the middle of April, the temperature had reached the hundred mark, and in May it had reached much higher. Those were the days of hectic preparations for the war which everyone felt was coming: of learning all the things that soldiers should have learnt to prepare themselves for war but had so far neglected. The emphasis was now on tactics, whereas hitherto it had been on drill. TEWTs were being conducted almost every week. Appreciations of situations were being talked about with all the awe of unfamiliarity and the few officers who had experience of the 1914-18 war were in great demand as lecturers. Junior officers were being given more scope to do things on their own instead of being spoon-fed by their seniors all the time.

That day in early May when Kiran took out a whole company for an exercise was a part of the new programme of giving a chance to junior officers to develop their

initiative. Kiran had been thrilled to the core. For the first time in his life, he was taking out a large body of men all on his own, without any superior officer telling him what not to do.

Although there was a tactical background to the exercise, it was a wholly unrealistic background. What the Company Commander wanted done was a reconnaissance followed by a dawn attack. The reconnaissance was to be made the previous evening. The imaginary enemy company was on a hilltop nine miles away from the cantonment.

Kiran had arranged it nicely. He and two of the NCOs had started out the previous afternoon, walked to the objective nine miles away, and had done a tactical reconnaissance of the area. Then he had returned to the fifth milestone from Raniwada to wait for the Company. The Company was to start after an early meal in the evening and meet Kiran at the fifth milestone where they were to bivouac until four the next morning before marching to the assembly area.

By nine o'clock the next morning, the exercise was over; according to Kiran, a complete success. He gave the men half an hour in which to eat their haversack breakfasts and started back for the camp marching at ease all the time.

It was almost one o'clock when the company returned to the lines. Now, Kiran had had to march a good deal more than the rest of the Company. There was little question of a rest at night. The men had been told to take their haversack breakfasts, but Kiran who had started the previous afternoon, could not have taken any breakfast with him.

The lines were trembling in the afternoon heat and the red dust kicked up by marching feet stuck in your throat and nostrils. At the entrance to the lines, Kiran told the Senior Subedar to take over, gave instructions for the mules to be watered, and marched off to the mess, trying not to drag his weary feet. He stamped his feet on the stone steps to shake off the dust caked on his boots, took off his Sam Browne belt and hung it up on the hat rack and walked into the cool anteroom.

"Good afternoon, sir," he said to the Adjutant who

was sitting in one of those brown, leather covered, club chairs, drinking beer.

Kiran sat down and ordered a lemon squash. "With lots of ice," he told the bearer. Then Bull Hampton had looked up as though he had just noticed him.

"How did the exercise go ?" Bull asked.

"Very well, I think, sir," Kiran told him.

"When did you get back ?"

"Only just, sir."

"Men gone to the lines ?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you inspect their feet ?" Bull asked.

"No, sir."

"Go and do it at once."

"Sir," Kiran said and got out and put on his Sam Browne again. The bearer had brought out his lemon squash but he did not dare to drink it. He knew it would have upset the Adjutant. "Blast their bloody feet", he said to himself. "I have walked twice as much as the men".

In the lines, he called out the men for a foot-inspection parade. There were only nine blisters. He had them punctured and when he poured iodine into them, the men winced with pain. Then he went back to the mess. Bull was still sitting in the same chair, drinking beer.

"Men all right ?" Bull asked.

"Yes, sir. Only nine blisters, two large ones."

"Treated them ?"

"Yes sir," Kiran said.

"Did you take any mules with you ?"

"Seven, sir."

"Have they been watered after the march ?"

"I've given orders for them to be watered, sir."

"Not good enough to order. Will you go and see to it yourself ?"

"Sir," Kiran said. It was no use trying to explain to the Adjutant that the mules had had at least one more meal and watering than he had had himself since the previous evening. "Blast the man", he said to himself, "Blast him !"

The mules were already at the watering trough. But watering mules is a hellish business and it took Kiran

a full hour before they were finished. "I hope the swine doesn't find something else for me to do now", he said to himself, as he walked into the anteroom for the third time that afternoon.

Bull Hampton was still slumped in the same chair with a fresh tankard of beer clutched in his left hand and reading the 'Men Only' magazine held in his right. He looked up as Kiran walked in.

"Mules all watered ?"

"Yes sir," Kiran said.

"Good ! Sit down and have a drink."

Kiran would have given a year of his life to have been able to refuse that drink and in some measure, show his annoyance.

"Aabdar !" Bull called. "Beer-sharap for Garud saab, please !"

For no particular reason, Kiran had always disapproved of the way some Englishmen called beer 'beer-sharap.' This time he positively hated the word. Still trying to preserve a little of his self-respect, he said : "Can I have a lemon squash, sir. I don't normally drink anything alcoholic during the day."

"Rubbish, man ; it's beer you'll have, after a day like this. Aabdar, beer-sharap lao !" Bull said. Then, smilingly, he inquired :

"How is the football team shaping this year ? I hope all this talk of war is not mucking up our football," and there was no more reference to the mules or to the blisters on the men's feet.

"Blast him," Kiran said to himself. "Blast the bloody swine !"

Somewhere far above the Senior Subaltern and the Adjutant, high up in the remoter regions, was the CO, Ropey Booker ; lean and handsome, with his greying moustache and a complexion which prolonged living in the east had rendered so brown that but for his light grey eyes, he might have been easily taken for a west-coast Indian.

Dreaded by all the men he commanded, and, because he was the one man above all who most nearly lived up to the code of the Satpuras, also loved and revered by

many of them, he was like a stern and yet indulgent father of the Victorian era. He spent ten days of his leave every year in the village home of a retired Subedar Major of the 4th, living with the family the life of an Indian villager.

Wives and children of serving and retired men wrote personal letters to him, and he made valiant efforts to 'do something' about their problems, because almost invariably, all these letters contained some kind of grievance which the writers were sure that the father of the battalion would somehow redress.

He played hockey with the jawans, spoke their language well enough to swear colloquially at them and even to tell the right kind of off-colour stories in the VCO's mess—for even in the matter of off-colour stories, Ropey Booker insisted that there were right and wrong kinds.

Yes, Ropey Booker loved his jawans; he hardly ever lost his temper with his men. With the officers, particularly with the senior officers, he had been very stern indeed; but to the men, and the VCO's and the NCO's he was always kind.

Ropey had always prided himself on what he called his 'Officer and man relationship.' He often spoke to his officers about it. Kiran remembered well the story he once told to illustrate that relationship, and he was never quite able to make out whether the CO had meant it all as a joke or whether he was serious about it.

It was when Ropey was giving one of his periodical talks to the officers of the station. "You must make a determined effort to cultivate the confidence of your men," Ropey had said. "Play games with them, laugh and sing with them, try to understand their problems, and if you can do something about these problems, for God's sake, go and do it!"

"Now, it is rather difficult actually to know," Ropey had continued, "whether your men treat you as one of themselves or not. The fact that they obey your orders implicitly is not enough; they'll do that whether they love you or hate your guts—just because you and they are Satpuras. In my experience, I have found that it is only when they begin to talk to you about their family life that you can be absolutely sure that they have ac-

cepted you. As you all know, most Indians, particularly those who come from the villages, are very secretive about their family lives. It may be something to do with the system of purdah, or it may be their distrust of Western ways. Whatever the reason, the fact remains that there is a definite prejudice against discussing wives and children with outsiders. It is when they discuss their family problems with you that you are no longer an outsider—then you are one of them."

"Mind you," the CO had continued, "it takes a long time for them to do that. In this Regiment, I served for over fourteen years before I had any proof that the men under me were beginning to treat me as one of themselves—and I can assure you, gentlemen, that that is something to be proud of. We were on the frontier and returning to station after an exercise one morning. I was riding at the head of the column with the Subedar of the Company. We got talking about this and that, and out of nothing, the Subedar asked me: 'Saab, you have three children, haven't you?' "

" 'Yes, Subedar-saab, I have three children,' I told him."

" 'I have three children too, saab,' the Subedar volunteered. Then he asked: 'Your first one was a girl, saab?' "

" 'That's right,' I told him, 'My first one is a girl.' "

" 'My first one is a girl too, saab,' said the Subedar. Then he asked: 'Your second one is also a girl, isn't she?' "

" 'Yes, Subedar-saab, my second child is a girl,' I said, wondering what the Subedar was leading up to."

" 'My second child is a girl too,' said the Subedar sadly, 'and so is my third, a girl. Now your third child is a boy, isn't he saab?' he asked."

" 'Yes,' I said. 'My third child is a boy.' "

" 'Now tell me, saab,' asked the Subedar. 'How did you manage to get a son?' "

"I told him," Ropey Booker said to his officers without a trace of a smile on his face. "I told him; and his fourth one was a boy."

That was what Ropey Booker was like. From anyone else, that story would have sounded a little coarse. Coming from him, it had sounded perfectly natural, some-

thing which had actually happened to Ropey, and it seemed that somehow with luck, or with his perfect understanding of his men's problems, he had been able to give his Subedar the correct advice so that his fourth child was a son. And of course, no one had laughed.

But to his senior officers, the 'old man' was sometimes a real terror. He certainly had learnt to dish it out. In fact, Ropey made something of a fine art of it. On the parade ground, at the ranges, at a staff conference, or in the mess, Ropey's deceptively mild grey eyes never missed a thing. And there was no question of delayed action. The instant he noticed that anything was wrong, he came down on you like a ton of bricks.

Once, while out on an exercise, Kiran remembered the way Ropey had gone at poor Bob Medley, the Second in Command. Major Medley was doing something with a new kind of radio transmitter set which had been recently introduced, and which no one knew much about. The set had broken down and Medley who was considered an expert on repairing radio sets was tinkering with it. He had just taken out the lead wires and was doing something to them with sand-paper when Ropey called out to him.

"Med !" Ropey Booker called out.

Everyone could see that Major Medley was trying to repair the RT set which had been giving trouble all the morning.

"Sir !" Medley had shouted, and it could not have been for more than a few seconds, but for that brief moment, he had continued to do whatever he was doing with the set, and Ropey had roared in his parade-ground voice :

"Major Medley, I'm in no mood for waiting. Will you double up !"

And Major Medley had dropped whatever he was doing and had doubled ; doubled as though he was doing a hundred yards dash ; doubled as though he was the newest Subaltern in the battalion and not its seniormost Major.

But then, that was Ropey Booker all over.

In a sense, it was also Major Medley all over ; Bob Medley, who never got the breaks.

21 *It Was Like That, During The War*

It was late in the war, during the years between the two Burma campaigns, that a close friendship had sprung up between Bertie Howard and Kiran. But that was a long while ago, and they hadn't written to each other since their ways had drifted.

As Kiran walked to the main building of the mess, he wondered what Bertie could be doing in Delhi, and whether their relationship would still be the same as during the war when they used to spend their leave together, doing the sort of reckless, somewhat foolish things that people do when spending a few days away from active service.

In the bar, there was the usual hum of conversation and at the counter, the usual people were playing liar dice, and although Ramlal the barman was busy pouring out drinks, he said "Good evening, sir," to Kiran with his usual smile.

"Oh, there you are, sir," Bertie said, rising from a chair in the far corner and coming towards him.

Kiran thought he looked a good deal thinner than he remembered him, and his face looked pale and had more lines. And then with a sense of shock he noticed that Bertie walked a little stiffly, with a barely perceptible dragging of his right leg. But Bertie was smiling, and he looked happy to see Kiran, and at the moment, that was all that mattered.

Kiran said: "Bertie, what on earth are you doing here? I thought we got rid of you chaps long ago."

"You'd better order me a drink, first," Bertie said. "I've been sitting here with my tongue hanging out for the last half hour."

Kiran ordered two chhota-pegs. "The best there is; yes, yes, the Dimple Scot, if you have it," he told Ramlal. "This calls for a celebration."

With their drinks in their hands, the two men found seats in a quiet corner of the lounge. "Now tell me," Kiran said. "What are you supposed to be doing here? And again, what the hell do you mean calling me 'sir'?"

"Simple. You, I see, are a half-Colonel. I've drop-

ped down to Major."

Kiran laughed. "Still playing the Senior Subaltern, what! Always sir a senior officer even if he's a damned native. You British make one sick!" It was trite, and with someone else, it might have sounded ill-tempered, but that was the way one always seemed to have talked.

"Oh, relax, Jacko," Bertie said. "Relax."

"So you dropped rank," Kiran said. "Why, you were a half-Colonel at the end of the war; weren't you?"

"Everyone dropped rank," Bertie said. "Everyone dropped rank soon after the war ended."

"Not over here. Everyone's jumped rank here, since the end of the war. Some have skipped two or three."

"Good for you," Bertie said. "Jolly good."

"What are you doing in Delhi?"

"On my way to Malaya. We have quite a bit of a war going on there, you know."

"War in Malaya! Bloody target practice, you mean. Shooting down chaps and then calling them bandits after they're dead. Just like what you people used to do on the old frontier when you were in India. Picnics!"

"Picnics!" Bertie protested. "I wish, old boy, you had to go on a jungle patrol in Negri Sembilan. Ghastly!"

Somehow, when Bertie called him 'old boy', it sounded perfectly natural.

"Negri Sembilan, my eye! I bet you'll spend your time drinking stingahs and gin-pahits in the Tanglin club or wherever it is. War in Malaya!"

That was the familiar, set grove of conversation. Somehow, although they were now not even in the same army, the old bond seemed to hold them together; the bond of being old Satpura officers who had shared life in the same battalion in peace and war.

"Many of the Tiger Jawans in Delhi?" Bertie asked.

"Oh, yes, quite a few. Most of them youngsters, though; ECO's mostly. You wouldn't know any of them. Oh, yes, Ballur is here; a Major General now."

"Oh, Spike; I'd heard he was made a General. Good show. Must go and look him up. What does he do?"

"Principal Administrative Officer; they say he'll be Chief one day."

"Good show," Bertie said again. "He deserves to be.

Spike's the sort of chap who would rise to the top in any army. Who else is there? Where is Abdul Jamal?"

"Abdul's in Pakistan."

"On the other side, what?"

"Yes, on the other side."

"I say, isn't it an awful pity, this business of Kashmir."

"Very unfortunate," Kiran agreed.

"Fine chap, old Abdul."

"One of the best. He and I were together quite a lot just before the partition," Kiran said, "In the Delhi riots."

"Oh," Bertie said. "Oh, I see." Then he added. "Pity the old team had to be broken up like that and now fighting each other in Kashmir."

"It's just one of those things," Kiran said.

"What's going to happen to Kashmir?"

"Bertie," Kiran said, "Do you mind very much not talking about Kashmir." It sounded odd, being sensitive about Kashmir when you could go on pulling Bertie's leg about Malaya. But Bertie would understand; you could be yourself with him, you could depend on him not to misunderstand you. Kashmir was not like other wars. People found it difficult to understand Kashmir.

"Oh, yes," Bertie said. "Damn silly of me."

It required a special effort of will to keep your eyes away from Bertie's right leg which he seemed to hold out stiffly. The thought of that leg, thrust awkwardly beside the table, kept intruding upon your mind; for that was something that the war had done. Except for that, it might have been just like old times; as though you were still brother officers, both fellow tigers, talking to each other in the inane banter of off-duty soldiers. Whether you were sitting in the richly appointed anteroom of the officers' Mess at Raniwada, or smoking a cigarette together before setting out on a night patrol in Arakan, that was the way you had always talked.

Kiran tried to remember exactly where he had last seen Bertie. It was like that during the war. You were together for years, and then suddenly one of you dropped out of the scene. He knew that Bertie had been evacuated after the Irrawaddy crossing, but the actual circumstances of their last meeting had slipped his mind.

"Where was it that we last saw each other?" he asked.

"I'll tell you," Bertie said. "You remember the day we crossed the Irrawaddy. I was commanding Able company and you were doing Adjutant."

"Oh, yes; oh, yes."

"Charlie company tried to cross first, but they seemed to muck it up. Awful luck; all that secrecy and planning gone west because the current swept the landing boats right into the faces of the Japs! They had a lovely time, shooting up Charlie company. Then they sat up and waited for more—that was us."

"I remember that perfectly. You went next, Able company. The only thing I don't remember is the last time I saw you."

"I am telling you," Bertie said. "You came up to me and said: 'Your turn next.' We were supposed to be reserve company, watching the fun. Baker and Dog were still hanging around, and you came and said, 'Your turn next'."

"You know how it was ..." Kiran began.

"Jolly decent of him, I thought. You came up wearing a silly grin on your face and said 'Your turn next' as though it were bloody regimental sports."

"Oh, yes, that's when I saw you last, I remember now."

"That's right, it was then. I remember thinking there's this chap who's come up to tell me himself it was my turn; he didn't send a runner with a bit of paper. He came himself. Jolly decent of him, I thought."

They both grinned, a little awkwardly, because they knew that they were both trying to laugh off an event in their lives which had no element of humour in itself. There was nothing amusing about the Irrawaddy crossing; one didn't go to the trouble of walking across to a company position merely to pass on a message—merely because it would be considered a 'jolly decent' thing to have done. It was just that whenever possible, one always went and saw one's friends before they were to make an attempt at something like that, something big.

Kiran said: "And afterwards they sent you to a hospital with a nice blighty."

"Nice blighty, my eye! Blast you! I was in dock for two months and at one time they wanted to chop my

damned leg off!"

"They make lovely aluminium legs, these days," Kiran said, "We have a place near Poona ..."

"Soon they'll be making some lovely aluminium heads," Bertie said, "and then all the Generals will be given them as government issue, and the business of war will be so much simpler ... and talking of Poona reminds me of another Bishop and Duchess story."

Bertie told his latest Bishop and Duchess story and they both laughed because it was expected that you did laugh after someone told a Duchess and Bishop story. Conversation had come back to normal. There was no point in talking about going to see your friends before they were to cross the Irrawaddy because you feared you might never see them again.

Kiran said: "Ramlal, two more whiskies, please," and a bearer brought them two more whiskies, and everything was on a proper basis again, for holding his glass high, Bertie said:

"Come on Jawans!"

"Tigers don't live for ever!" Kiran said.

They must have said this rather loudly, for the people playing liar dice at the counter turned to stare at them, and one of them yelled: "Behold the bloody tigers, grrrrrh!"

That was what officers of other regiments always said when any of the Satpuras called out their special toast, but it did not mean that they were making fun of you.

If you let your mind wander, it was just like the old days; as though two short drinks had taken you back to some indeterminate time in the past. But that was only a fleeting impression, for you could not let your mind wander for long. Bertie was tapping the heel of his right foot on the floor, as though to shake off a cramp, and in the process, dragging your thoughts back to the present.

Kiran said, "And then you went to Malaya; as G 1 in Farelf. I remember someone telling me that. That was when you became a half-Colonel."

"That's right," Bertie said. "And you, I suppose, were one of the lucky ones who crossed the Sittang bridge once again." He was still tapping his leg on the floor.

"Yes, Bertie, I was one of the lucky ones."

"God! You always had the devil's own luck! My God; crossing that river again!"

"Yes," Kiran agreed. "It was ... it was like an end in itself. Like winning a little war of your own; a private war."

"God! Jacko; I envy you that experience."

"Yes, Bertie. I was lucky, very lucky."

"Tell me about it; what happened?"

"There's nothing to tell, old boy; really nothing. We just crossed the damned bridge. That's all. You see, there couldn't have been more than a dozen of the old crowd in the whole battalion. To the others, it did not mean the same thing. No, there's nothing to tell, nothing."

Coming out suddenly like that from their past, the Sittang bridge had momentarily broken through their guard. For a few moments, they sat silently, recapitulating a shared experience; tragic, yet, in some ways, intensely satisfying. Both of them felt a little guilty that they had given expression to feelings which are best left unexpressed.

"To hell with the Sittang bridge," Kiran said, and felt that his voice sounded unnecessarily high-pitched. "Ramlal," he shouted, "Ramlaaal. Two more of the same, please."

22 *"The Bridge Painted The Colour Of Stale Blood . . ."*

COMPTON MACKENZIE

Whenever Kiran read an account of the battle of the Sittang bridge, he could not help wondering at his own feeling of detachment. He found it difficult to identify himself as one of the characters in it. It was like reading about an action fought by some vaguely familiar unit, and the feeling did not altogether leave him when

he came across his own name which was mentioned several times in the more detailed histories of the Burma campaign, as for instance, the Regimental history, or the history of the Fire-ball division.

Once or twice, he had tried to piece together his own impressions of those days, but he invariably found that he had the sequence all mixed up. It was like trying to recall a dream in which only some of the incidents were absolutely clear, but they did not make a coherent story, and some of them did not even make much sense. Oddly enough, the things he remembered most vividly seemed to be the most inconsequential ones and were not even mentioned in the regimental history.

He remembered being detailed to shoot an elephant, for instance. That was almost at the beginning. He was a tame elephant, with a chain round his neck, an unsuspecting and slightly bewildered participant in the war. He had died without protest, solemnly, crumpling where he stood. Shooting him like that, in cold blood, made you feel shamefully dehumanized; a living insult to the profession of arms.

He also remembered vividly, Ropey Booker ordering saluting drill at the end of the battle. That too had seemed insanely callous. But of course, there was nothing about the elephant in the regimental history, or about the saluting drill, or about him, Kiran Garud, having killed a Japanese soldier in hand-to-hand fighting.

They were trained almost exclusively for desert warfare, and although no one was supposed to talk about it, everyone in the battalion knew their destination—Egypt. Then, just two days before they were due to embark, orders had come diverting them to Burma, to become a part of that army which soon came to be known as the 'forgotten'.

That was in 1941. With a swiftness unprecedented in the history of warfare, Japanese armies had swept through Indo-China, Malaya and Siam. Hong-Kong had surrendered, the proud Naval base of Singapore had fallen, the two hundred-and-fifty year old Dutch empire had been overthrown. The stunned Allies waited for the next move: the invasion of Burma.

The Japanese attacked Burma through Siam, sending two of their best divisions, the 33rd and the 55th, in a masterly pincer movement converging on the Sittang bridge.

To defend Burma which was then a part of the British Empire, a hastily assorted force composed mainly of Indian troops was despatched to the Eastern borders of Burma—the Burma-Siam border.

From the very outset, these defenders of Burma never had a chance. At every stage, the Japanese were superior in numbers and equipment, in artillery and air support; and their troops were fully trained for their specific tasks. What is more, they also seemed to have the fullest backing of the Burmese population, and in the early days of the campaign, received wherever they went, the enthusiastic welcome of liberating heroes.

The ghastly truth was soon apparent: the entire force sent to defend Burma and now lying in the extreme south-east corner of the country, could be easily cut off if the Japanese captured the Sittang bridge. The bridge, which was the only one of its kind within a hundred and fifty miles, spanned the wide, swift and treacherous Sittang river.

In the early stages therefore, the war in Burma reduced itself to a frantic race for the bridge: the defending forces trying to cross it before it was too late, the Japanese trying to capture the bridge before the allied troops could get across.

The 4th battalion of the Satpura regiment were in the neighbourhood of Mudon when orders for the general withdrawal to the bridge were received. As they began their march along the Mokpalin road, they were still a self-contained and formidable fighting unit, eager for action.

The very next day, however, they lost all their transport. They had to set fire to their carefully nursed fleet of trucks because the only ferry-boat which was meant to take them across a creek had been destroyed by an enterprising fifth-columnist. The men had crossed the creek in frail, fishermen's boats commandeered for the occasion.

For the next two days, the Satpuras marched northwards, carrying most of their belongings on their backs. Along the way they were sniped at by hostile Burmans, and now and then, one or two aircraft made low, leisurely flights to search them out and occasionally to strafe the road. Unhampered by these encounters, the Satpuras went on at their brisk, light-infantry pace. Their orders were to reach as fast as possible the heights north of the Mokpalin quarries and dig-in there so as to cover the leap-frogging withdrawal of the units coming behind them.

A day's march from the quarries, Bull Hampton had made his disastrous attack on the Twin-Pagoda Hill, so that when they reached their allotted position, they had received quite a mauling in which almost an entire company had been lost. Then, just as they had begun to dig-in in their new positions, another order had come requiring them to proceed further north, beyond the Sittang bridgehead. It was rumoured that elements of the Japanese 33rd Division were approaching the bridge from the north.

Cursing, the weary men of the 4th Satpuras had begun yet another march. For the next four days, they seemed to have shaken off the enemy snapping at their heels. Much of the time was spent in passing through other units, all in various stages of confusion, cluttering the road. There were units, which, like the Satpuras, had had to abandon their motor transport; there were mountain gunners without mules, mortars without bombs, doctors without medical supplies. You could see long lines of AT carts abandoned by the roadside, many still loaded with crates of ammunition and stores, others plundered bare by the locals; and yet a few miles further you saw units desperate for ammunition and stores. There were units which complained of having suffered heavy casualties as a result of shelling by their own artillery, and units which were said to have been mercilessly bombed by their own aircraft in their rare appearances in the sky. But throughout it all, it was heartening to see that all these troops—Indians, British and Burmans—had kept up their defiant fighting spirits. It was heartening yet, in some way, it was also frightening,

because you knew that they could not fight on courage alone.

North of Mokpalin, the road leaves the Sittang bridge on the left and loops to skirt a hill known as the Buddha Hill. Then it passes through a range of low hills covered with thick forest. These hills were already said to contain pockets of enemy advance parties dominating the road. Beyond the hills was their new position—astride the road between the fifth and sixth milestones from the bridge.

Once they had reached their allotted position, all that the Satpuras wanted was time to strengthen it; all they wanted was two days respite. They were given three.

Digging night and day, they managed to finish an extensive network of bunkers and trenches; they covered all the likely approaches by carefully sighted automatic weapons and converted them into 'killing lanes'; Charlie Company, Bull Hampton's Company, was reformed and Archie Ward was put in command; (he commanded the company for less than four days and died in the very first Japanese attack); and most of all, the hundred or so camp-followers, the sweepers, washermen, water-carriers and others, were issued with rifles and bayonets and taught how to use them.

That, more than any other single factor, had brought home to most of them the full magnitude of their danger: the efforts to train the raw, elderly recruits to handle weapons right in the middle of the battlefield. While the rest of the battalion had been busy building up the defences—digging trenches, putting up wire, shoring up bunker walls, erecting barricades, clearing fields of fire—almost a full company had been detailed to train these bewildered recruits how to thrust a bayonet, how to fire a rifle, how to throw a grenade—and of course there was no question of giving them any practice in firing: for one thing there wasn't enough spare ammunition.

And at the end of three days, Ropey Booker had sent that message to the Divisional Commander, a message which, in retrospect, looked ridiculous or pathetic depending on the way you looked at it. "My men are ready for anything", Ropey had assured his Divisional Commander.

It was a bright Sunday in late February. Towards midday, the wing platoon of Charlie company saw a convoy of British lorries coming down the road. Everyone was certain that these were the long-awaited Malwas who were expected to take up positions alongside the Satpuras. But the NCO who was in charge was taking no chances. He ordered the lorries to halt, and he was immediately killed by a burst of automatic fire.

The lorries disgorged over fifty Japanese soldiers who rushed the platoon position. Even as they were attacking, however, Archie Ward, the Company Commander had launched his counter-attack. The enemy were driven out pell-mell in the jungle, leaving eleven dead. Archie was killed in the attack along with seventeen others of the company.

It was, on the whole, a tame encounter. The enemy could not have come prepared for the attack, but having blundered into the Satpura position by chance, had decided to rush the position on the spur of the moment. But the way they had sneaked right up to their positions, in lorries bearing British markings, seemed to have upset the men of the Satpuras. Throughout the afternoon, they had continued to be jittery, wanting to open fire at any odd jungle noises. They now knew what their officers had known for the past two days: that they were all alone. Around them was either the jungle or the enemy. They were meant to be a part of a full brigade, but there was no sign of the other two battalions.

The three lorries left behind by the Japanese had been shoved into the jungle and camouflaged, so that they would not provide a target for enemy aeroplanes. But that had been of little use. Within two hours of the first encounter, Japanese planes, flying insolently, just above tree-top level, made their first strafing attack on the Satpura positions, and again towards the evening. another flight of aircraft bearing angry red circles had come swooping down from the skies to strafe and bomb their positions until the fading light had forced them to stop.

But the night brought no respite. Almost as soon as the bombing had ceased, came the first uncertain whine and crash of artillery. There were a dozen heavy

reports and then a long pause. After that they began in right earnest, searching the woods on both sides of the road haphazardly with their shells, and kept it up for nearly an hour. There was something odd about the methods of shelling, inconsistent and inaccurate, as though it had no other object than to keep the Satpuras guessing. It was difficult to connect it with sudden death.

At last the shelling died away ; the silence when it came, seemed almost abrupt. Tense and watchful, the Satpuras waited. But it was not until the early hours of the morning that it came, and when it came it was almost a relief.

The Japanese attacked simultaneously from two directions with what later historians tell us was a full regiment, and as such, the Satpuras were outnumbered by at least two to one. They came in waves, screaming banzai war-whoops, running straight into the murderous killing-lanes and dying like flies in the interlacing fire. But on they came, despite the pitiless toll, in wave after wave, deep into the Satpura positions.

In the semi-darkness of the jungle dawn, the fighting was confused and it was difficult to know what was happening to the others except that from each company, the long-drawn-out war-cry of the battalion could be heard every now and then above the din of the battle. "Har-har Mahadev ; Har-har-har Mahaaaaadev !" And all those who heard it, knew that everything was still all right.

But through the confusion, it soon became apparent that all was not well with Baker company. Their yells became less and less strident, and were soon drowned out by a frenzy of catcalls from the enemy. It was clear that Baker company had been overrun.

By this time, Dog company had succeeded in driving off the attack on its own sector, and Colonel Booker ordered Spike Ballur to counter-attack and dislodge the enemy from the position held by Baker company. Spike was given the assistance of the whole of the newly formed 'Reserve company', the sweepers and water-carriers of the battalion converted into battlefield soldiers.

And then, with Spike in the lead looking like some-

one possessed and screaming incoherent yells, his strange assortment of soldiers had grappled with the enemy in the sort of hand-to-hand fight that was never envisaged in a training pamphlet; using grenades, bayonets, and rifle-butts in the wildest frenzy. It was noisy, ferocious, ugly, dehumanized; it was close quarter fighting at its horrible, insane worst.

But not for a moment did anyone doubt their success. Barely minutes later, the war-cry was again heard across the road, from the position originally occupied by Baker company. "Har-har Mahadev; Har-har Mahaaaaadev!" The enemy had been driven off and the position recaptured. If there was no enemy left on that position, there was little enough left of Baker company itself.

After that the Japanese attack had lost its fury and soon petered out. The sun of Monday morning saw the 4th Satpuras still holding their positions north of Buddha Hill, between the fifth and sixth milestones.

But they had lost nearly two hundred men in the Japanese attack.

Colonel Booker had sent off a signal to headquarters reporting his casualties and asking for orders. He also asked for reinforcements, medical supplies, and above all, rations and ammunition. He never received a reply to that message.

Almost miraculously, the enemy left the Satpuras severely alone that day. But there was constant air activity over Buddha Hill to the south, accompanied by the incessant rumble of small-arms and artillery fire. It was clear that heavy fighting was in progress between the Satpura position and the Sittang bridge.

"The bastards must have found a more worth-while target," said Ropey Booker.

They had. The noises that the Satpuras could hear that day were of the battle that raged for the last, desperate effort to hold the Sittang bridgehead. Buddha Hill had been lost and retaken all within a few hours. But the Japanese were closing in on all sides, in ever increasing numbers, and the attempts of the dwindling number of those holding the bridgehead, fighting in a chaos of an almost entire division converged at the narrow entrance of the bridge and constantly bombed

and strafed the air, were pathetically inadequate.

No orders came that day. The Satpuras appeared to have been forgotten; possibly written off. That was the time when Ropey Booker had to make one of the most difficult decisions of his life. His orders were explicit: to hold a position astride the road between the fifth and sixth milestones from the bridge. That was now clearly impossible, and in any case, the enemy seemed to have already penetrated between his position and the bridgehead. If he wanted to save the battalion from certain destruction, he had to pull it out, orders or no orders.

All Ropey's inclinations must have fought against the thought of withdrawal. It would have been more correct to obey his orders to the letter; and it would have been in keeping with the Satpura tradition to stand his ground and die fighting.

Pulling out also meant leaving behind the thirty-odd seriously wounded men; abandoning them to their fate without leaving any food or medicines; abandoning them to a certain death. Six volunteers had offered to stay behind with the wounded, and share their fate. Ropey had forbidden them to stay behind. As a great concession, he finally allowed two of them to stay back and nurse the wounded.

That was one of the things Kiran had thought he would never be able to forgive Ropey: leaving behind the men whom he always referred to as his sons. He was one of those who had offered to stay behind.

"Captain Garud, I order you to remain with your company," Ropey had said, quite quietly.

That was how Kiran had heard that he had been promoted to Captain in the battlefield. He remembered that he had not even thanked Ropey Booker. But he had gone back with the rest of the battalion.

A new Ropey, harsh and cold and unbending, had decided to leave his wounded to their fate, and to pull out his battalion without waiting for further orders; and in making that decision, he had not only taken full responsibility for a course of action which might easily have ended his career, but, what was far more important in Ropey's sense of values, had risked the censure and

contempt of the men he commanded. Many of his officers could not help feeling that the CO was taking too much upon himself, that his motives might well be misunderstood by those who did not know him well. But not one of those who were with him on that day, doubted that as far as Ropey was concerned, he had made the harsher, less palatable decision.

They filed back through the jungle, not knowing that the intervening Buddha Hill was, for the time being, in friendly hands, audaciously trying to sneak past the enemy positions on the heights along the loop road. In the suffocating jungle darkness, the men moved in absolute silence, feeling more like thieves in the night than fighting soldiers; each man holding on to the equipment of the man in front, the walking wounded being helped, some of the badly wounded being carried on makeshift stretchers—those who were dead, and those who were dying already forgotten. Only hunger seemed to keep the men from falling asleep on the march—hunger and the haunting certainty that the very next moment would bring down a withering shower of enemy bullets.

Their luck held. The 4th Satpuras reached the other side of those dangerous heights safely, and in the faint light of early dawn, halted for a breathing pause. It was then that the forward scouts reported a road block.

To look at, the block was a simple affair: in a narrow gully through which the road ran, two massive trees had been felled across the road and festooned with barbed wire. There was no enemy in sight, but that did not fool anyone. Cautiously a section had edged up to the block, crawling through the undergrowth lining the road. The section was being covered by the men of Able company who had their weapons trained on either side of the road. It was the task of Able company, as soon as the inevitable enemy fire came, to launch an attack and engage whatever enemy there was, so that the rest of the battalion could clear the block and get through.

The men reached the block, obviously unseen. Then one of them got up and went boldly up to the fallen trees. As nothing happened to him, two more followed

suit and came out on to the open road. And then it came, a short burst, presumably of some sort of light machine gun fire, and all the three men fell down riddled with bullets. The other men of the section kept concealed in the scrub near the block.

The burst of enemy fire was also the signal for Able company's attack. It was a straight charge over the slope of the hill. At first crouching, and then, when the objective was within range, running all out, the men of Able company launched a two-pronged attack: one party led by Lieutenant Hambir Singh, the other led by Captain Kiran Garud.

"Har-har Mahadev!," the men called out their ancient Maratha war-whoop, its solemn and frightening cadence renowned and dreaded since the days of Shivaji. Both the attackers and the attacked were holding their fire, and in the absence of any other sounds, everyone heard, clear and sharp, the reverberating war-cry sent back by the surrounding hills. "Har-har Mahadev! Har-har Mahadev!" For a while, the war-cry was the only sound that could be heard, mounting in volume so that the words became indistinct.

Then the familiar noises of battle began. Stumbling, cursing and falling, the men of Able company went into the attack while their comrades watched with bated breath. Like a pack of hungry, scowling animals with bared fangs, the men went into the attack like all soldiers must go into any attack—with minds totally deadened to any other feeling save that of an insatiable desire to kill.

The enemy were not strongly entrenched, and they could not have been much more than a platoon in strength. They fought with customary Japanese ferocity, like wolves at bay. But they were outnumbered two to one, and as their casualties mounted, one or two of them got up from their shelters and began to run.

But no one was allowed to run away, and no prisoners were taken; and when the attack was over, there were no wounded Japanese on top of the hill—only dead. It was that kind of attack. It was all over in a few minutes. At the end of that time, the position was cleared. The road was free, and the battalion could

march ahead. Only, twenty-two more men had added to the number of those who would never march with their comrades again. Lieutenant Hambir Singh was one of these.

The Regimental history gave quite a lot of prominence to the attack : it was actually their first successful attack of the war.

It was also Kiran's first successful attack, and its memory invariably brought on a heady feeling of unmixed exultation. He was convinced that nothing else could give an infantry officer the same sense of fulfilment as success in an attack. It was like a submarine commander sinking a ship, and air force officer demolishing a bridge or a dam, or bringing down an enemy bomber. It was the very purpose of existence ; the crowning achievement of an infantry officer's life : a successful attack !

And on that day too, in this his first attack against a Japanese position in a foreign jungle, Kiran had killed a man in hand-to-hand fighting ; thrusting his bayonet again and again, savagely crashing his rifle-butt into the fallen, lolling head, not knowing when death had come.

But even that memory did not bring on a sense of guilt. It was somehow all a part of fulfilment, a grisly and ghastly detail in the process of learning to become a soldier.

By ten o'clock the Satpuras reached the forward positions of one of the battalions which had been guarding the bridgehead. But their feeling of relief at having at last gained contact with their own troops soon gave way to a stunned, unbelieving silence as the dreadful whisper ran through the column : the Sittang bridge had been demolished—demolished by their own side so as to deny it to the enemy—leaving the main body of the defending forces on the wrong side.

At the orders of higher authority, the Sittang bridge, their only means of escape, had been blown up behind their backs. The fact that more than ten thousand battered and weary troops had been left on the other side to fend for themselves against a furious enemy, was just a harsh necessity of war. "God ! I pity the poor

sod who had to make that decision," Colonel Booker had said. And that was all he had said when told that the bridge had been destroyed.

That remark of Ropey's was another of those details which had stuck in Kiran's memory. "God ! I pity the poor sod who had to make that decision," Ropey had said, as though somehow it mattered more than other things, as though his own lot were not far more pitiable than that.

But of course, the official histories made no mention of what Ropey had said on that occasion, nor did they say anything about the state of morale of the Satpura men at this particular stage in the battle of the bridge. Official histories merely told you about the way an action was fought ; they did not say much about what people said or felt.

The extravagant needs of higher strategy were far beyond the comprehension of the dazed men of the Satpuras, all neatly herded together near the bridgehead for final slaughter. They had pinned their hopes on the bridge. That was something that had kept them going—the certainty that once they crossed the bridge all their troubles would be over. And now they were told that their own side had blown up the bridge, callously leaving them on the wrong side. No words were spoken but the officers, themselves barely able to keep up a pretence of nonchalance, could sense the mounting despair of their men, now huddled together and staring vacantly before them in disbelief.

The men were bitter and stunned and demoralized, and by tradition it was the role of the officers to rally their spirits, more by their own examples than by any obvious goading—by acting as though nothing had happened, by laughing and sounding cheerful as though this vast calamity were just an everyday risk of war. It was not easy, but at least it was all there in the book of rules. After all, that is what they seemed to have been trained for ; the ability to 'take it' ; which seemed to have been dinned into them far more thoroughly than any preparation for fighting a war of this nature.

Foraging in the clutter of abandoned transport, Parry

the Quartermaster had found a lorry full of tinned provisions, and within half an hour, the men were issued with strong, sweet tea, thick with tinned milk, and to everyone's surprise, as many imported biscuits as they could eat. The first hot meal in three days was surely a repast fit for tired kings!

More than anything else, it was the hot tea and biscuits and cigarettes that revived the men. Characteristically, they were quickly buoyed up, their implicit faith in their leaders and their ability to live in the moment blunting their senses to the gravity of the situation. They had their mugfuls of hot tea and a surfeit of Marie and Golden Puff biscuits, and they were now content to lie back for the time being and wait for orders—and in the meantime, abandon themselves to the voluptuous pleasure of being able to smoke an unlimited number of Wild Woodbine cigarettes.

But unlike the men—the happy-go-lucky, unthinking, order-obeying creatures with the simple minds of children—the officers had become increasingly aware of the seriousness of the situation, and when Colonel Booker called them up, they gathered round him thoroughly shaken and despondent, expecting to hear some fateful decision.

A single, awful thought kept crossing their minds: the thought that his decision might be to surrender. It was for most of them, their first experience of active service, and nothing they had been taught had borne any relation to the series of tragic and crushing defeats. Nothing had prepared them for the dislocation of all auxilliary services, the confusion, the hostility of the locals, the lack of supplies and ammunition and medical facilities, and the chaotic state of communications—the only means of sending a message was by runner, all other Signals machinery seemed to have stopped functioning. They had heard of battalions having had to surrender in Malaya and Hongkong, and wondered whether higher authority had already written them off and decided to order them to lay down their arms. Surrender, they had always believed, was so much a matter of obedience to superior orders, not necessarily a matter of defeat. Yet there seemed no alternative. Behind them was the powerful,

relentless enemy; in front of them, the rolling Sittang river.

But there was nothing about Ropey Booker that was even remotely suggestive of despair. "Well," Ropey had said. "It certainly looks as though we'll have to finish off this tiger all on our own."

And then, leaning on a stick to rest his bruised leg, he had given out his orders crisply and without fuss. He did not look a worried man; he looked a little preoccupied and tense, as though he were pressed for time, and his voice had the incisive sharpness of a staff-college summing up. That was how, in later years, his officers remembered him, coldly professional and sure of himself under extreme stress, and that was one of the many instances they brought up in demonstrating the measure of his leadership.

"We'll try and cross the river in rafts," the CO had said. "And if they catch up with us before that, we'll destroy what we can't carry on our backs and fade out into the jungles, in platoon-batches, and make our way northwards; each platoon on its own."

Then he had explained his plan in detail, and soon everyone had got working. The men were sent out in small batches on foraging missions; to gather ropes, empty petrol and kerosene tins, logs of wood, bamboos —anything that would help in building rafts.

Within an hour, parties began to come back loaded with raft-making material and soon the first raft was ready. It was loaded with some of the wounded and a few regimental belongings and paddled across the river, bobbing up and down precariously all the way.

By the late afternoon, eleven rafts were made of all sizes, and during that day and the next, most of them made two or three trips across the Sittang. Two of the rafts were swept away by the current and the men clinging to them were never seen again. One more was destroyed by the fire of grinning Burmese fifth columnists hidden behind the rocks on the banks who took occasional pot shots at the rafts with the detachment of farmers shooting vermin.

With each raft-load were sent two or three picked swimmers; a precaution necessitated by the strong cur-

rent of the river. From almost every raft, one or two of the men clinging to the sides were dragged away into the water, and the swimmers had to jump in to rescue them. A number of those washed away were drowned, but the swimmers saved at least a score of men. In these crossings, six of the swimmers themselves lost their lives. Among the officers, there were only two such strong swimmers: Hubert Howard and Abdul Jamal; they each saved two men from drowning.

It was the battered and unrecognizable remains of a proud battalion that marched into Pegu a few days later; without most of their weapons, grimy, unshaved, footsore, famished, and with their clothes in tatters, they made a sorry sight. And even the defiant gesture of trying to march into town like soldiers, with their heads held high, their shoulders thrown back, and to perfect timing, with a solitary piper playing 'The Campbells are coming', was somehow made to look shamefully grotesque by the sullen and unwelcoming Burmese crowd.

It was in Pegu that Ropey Booker had ordered saluting drill. That had seemed the crowning indignity. It seemed like lunacy to worry about how the men saluted after all they had gone through. But there was nothing about that in the regimental history.

Only eight officers out of the original fourteen and 193 men of the original 684 had crossed the Sittang river. Before they would reach India six months later, relentlessly pursued by the enemy and caught up at every stage of the thousand-mile march, they were to fight many more battles—Prome, Dayindabo, Allanmyo, Thaung-dwingyi—perform many individual deeds of valour and sacrifice, and lose many more men. But the battle of the Sittang bridge in which they had suffered so crushing a defeat and yet, throughout which they had done nothing of which in later years the regiment could be ashamed, remained the highest point of their service in the war; a highlight, and also a nightmare which would haunt those who lived through it for many years to come.

Even before the tide of the war had begun to turn, it had become the overriding ambition of the men of this

band to cross that bridge again, this time in the role of victors. It was in the nature of a pilgrimage, a purely sentimental tribute to their comrades who had fallen in the battle for the bridge which was painted the colour of stale blood.

Kiran was one of the few who had had the opportunity to cross the bridge for a second time during the war. That was in 1945. It was one of the most satisfying experiences of his life.

And Bertie Howard was one of the few men still living who could have understood the satisfaction the mere physical fact of crossing that bridge again could give you. The return crossing was a form of revenge, a fulfilment.

But of the return cross, there was nothing to tell.

23 *Regimental Tie*

Soon after nine o'clock on Friday morning, Kiran walked into Mansingh's office. "Shall we go ?" he asked.

"In a moment," Mansingh said. "I've just sent for the minutes of the last conference."

It was the day of the DWP's weekly conference and Kiran and Mansingh always went together in the latter's car.

Kiran said: "Lunch with me at the Noormahal. I have promised Bertie Howard some real Peshawari food.

"Who's she ?"

"Major Howard of the Greyforth rifles, you fool! Used to be my Adjutant during the war. You'll like him."

"I suppose what it boils down to is that you want me to drive you down to the Noormahal. Thanks all the same. What on earth is he doing here ?"

"Who, Bertie ? On his way to Malaya."

"Old Jawan of the Tigers ?"

"Yes, old Jawan of the Tigers," Kiran said. "Will you be changing ?"

"What do you think?" Mansingh asked.

"I think we'd better. I don't think it's the sort of place I would care to be seen in uniform."

"Not done in the Tigers, what?"

"Not done in any decent regiment, I should hope. Besides, we can come back to the office in mufti."

"Right ho, I'll be free at one. But no beer session, please; I am working on some dreary AP shell statistics."

"Oh, no; no beer session," Kiran promised. "I'm working on something tough too. Come on, let's go."

Every Friday morning, at half past nine, the DWP held his weekly staff conference. All the sectional heads of his Directorate, four Lieutenant Colonels and three Majors, sat around the DWP's table in a semi-circle in strict order of seniority. Kiran being the seniormost, always sat in the first chair on the DWP's left.

Brigadier Shindey used to look up from the notes on his table, clear his throat, and open the conference.

"Security and cleanliness, all right?" he used to ask. Under the special orders of the Chief, all military conferences began with that question.

"Yes, sir," Kiran used to say.

"Yes, sir; yes, sir; yes, sir," all the others used to say in turn, each answering for the security and cleanliness of his particular section.

"Any points from the last conference?"

"No, sir; no, sir; no, sir;" they all used to say.

That was how it went on. Then the DWP used to pass on to the 'points' he had in mind, mainly points which he had collected from the General's weekly conference. These usually dealt with minor staff duties—the correct manner of routing files, which officers could sign what type of letters, and things like that. Then there were always one or two items about how officers should behave—drink in moderation, patronize the Services' clubs as far as possible and not waste money going to nightclubs, and so on. Then the DWP used to ask each of his officers in turn:

"Any points you wish to bring up?"

That Friday too, it was no different. After finishing all he had to say, Brigadier Shindey cleared his throat.

and turning to Kiran said :

"Any points you wish to bring up ?"

"No, sir."

"You, Mansingh ?"

"No, sir."

"Co-ord ?"

"Yes, sir," said Namdar.

"Yes ?"

"It is about the indenting of maps, sir," began Namdar, ignoring the DWP's frown. "The last DWP, Brigadier Chauhan, gave er. . .strict orders that all demands for maps made by any of our sections should be screened by Co-ord before they are passed on to. . ."

"What have Co-ord got to do with maps ?" the DWP asked, and there was a twitter of laughter among some of the officers.

Unperturbed, Colonel Namdar went on :

"There is a regular Office Instruction issued by the then DWP to the effect, sir."

"How long ago was that ?"

"Four years ago," said Namdar, and again some of the officers laughed.

"Well ?" the DWP asked.

"Well, sir ; Borders section went and got some maps on their own three days ago."

"Did you ?" the DWP asked Kiran.

"Yes, sir ; it was in connection with that appreciation you've put me on."

"Oh, I suppose you had to get hold of those maps. But why didn't you ask Co-ord to get them for you ?"

"Firstly, I didn't know anything about the Office Instruction ; and secondly, I'm sure it would have delayed matters."

"Oh," said the DWP and cleared his throat. "No, we can't risk delaying that."

"But sir," Namdar said, "I would have sorted it all out if I had been told on the telephone that it was urgent ; I'd have made sure that there was no delay in issuing the maps. Besides, all the officers who join this Directorate are expected to read up all Office Instructions."

"I dunno," said the Brigadier uncertainly. "Four years ago, when you say the Instruction was issued there

must have been a shortage of maps—just at the end of the war. No such shortage now, is there. I don't see that there is any, er. . .any need to worry unduly. . ."

Only then did Namdar play his trump card. "Just as you like, sir," he said, bowing his head slightly. "But the General has always been very particular about this, and we have had trouble about maps once or twice already, explanations called for and that sort of thing. I believe the Chief himself. . ."

"Oh," said Brigadier Shindey and cleared his throat. "Oh, yes, I quite see the point. No-no ; we mustn't risk being caught out on anything like that ; must we ? We must. . . er. . .be careful, very careful, that we don't cut across procedure. That won't do at all, urgent work or no."

"That's just how I thought you would feel about it, sir," said Namdar.

"Oh, yes ; absolutely. In future, will you please ensure that demands for restricted maps are sent through proper channels, all of you ?"

"Yes, sir," they all said.

"And will you please regularize this particular demand of Borders section, old boy," he said to Namdar. They always addressed you as 'old boy' on occasions such as these.

"Yes, sir," said Namdar, readying for a final stab, but still without a trace of triumph in his voice. "Also sir, shall I have an Office Instruction issued to the effect that all officers must read up earlier Office Instructions ?"

No one smiled this time. "Yes, old boy, please do," said the DWP, "yes, of course." Then he cleared his throat once more and asked : "Any more points ? Anyone got any more points ?"

After the Conference, when Kiran and Mansingh were going back to the Asoka hutments, Mansingh said : "The son of a bitch got you there, didn't he ?"

"He certainly did," Kiran said, and laughed out aloud. "Office Instruction telling everyone to read Office Instructions ! But he certainly had me cold !"

"For a time I thought the old Brig. was going to tell

him to stop being a bloody nuisance."

"Yes, I thought so too."

"And then the bastard brought in the General's name ; that shook the old man."

"Yes, that certainly did the trick."

"So now you know."

"No, I don't ! I have a hell of a lot to learn," Kiran said. "Hell of a lot."

"However much you learn," Mansingh said, "However much you learn, you can't get away from the fact that people like Namdar always have the last word."

"Yes," Kiran said. "Yes, they certainly have the last word."

The Noormahal restaurant was located in one of the most crowded streets in Old Delhi, not far away from the Jamma Masjid. Although it had been opened barely six months ago, it had already acquired a reputation for its Peshawari dishes. It was by no means half as well furnished as many similar restaurants in both the Delhi, and Kiran had never cared for its atmosphere. But if you liked Peshawari food, quantities of rich, heavily spiced meat, the Noormahal was the place to go to.

Despite its cheap, garishly modern furnishings and its unprepossessing surroundings, it had become popular beyond the wildest dreams of its owner, a refugee from the Frontier province. Foreign visitors to Delhi found the atmosphere of the Noormahal 'typically oriental'. Many of the Indian habitues of the Noormahal, however, could not help feeling rather self-conscious whenever they sat round one of its marble-topped tables which always looked a little damp, as though they had just been wiped with a wet rag.

By now, the owner had made sufficient money to have his place thoroughly renovated, or to move to a more attractive locality, but he had also realized that it was as much the atmosphere of his restaurant as its food that attracted the really free-spending clients, and had wisely refrained from making changes. Whatever its other shortcomings were, even its most fastidious Indian customers were unanimous that as far as Peshawari food

was concerned, the Noormahal was the best restaurant in the two Delhis.

On the way to Bertie's hotel, Kiran and Mansingh changed into civilian clothes. As Bertie came down the steps to the car, Kiran noticed that he was again wearing the tie of the Satpura regiment and wished he was wearing some other tie. He wondered what Ropey Booker would have said about one of his officers being seen wearing the regimental tie in a place like the Noormahal; not that Bertie had any idea what sort of place the Noormahal was, of course. Two or three years ago, Kiran would have almost certainly said something about it, but now he had become a little more careful. You had to guard against being thought a koi-hai. After all, he had once seen a Major General in the Noormahal one evening, and he had been in uniform, red tabs and everything, and his staff car with the General's standard bearing two gold stars stood near the entrance.

Times had changed, and perhaps there was nothing unbecoming in being seen in uniform in the Noormahal which, after all said and done, was a typically Indian restaurant; there was nothing improper in the regimental tie being seen in a place like the Noormahal. It was just that he himself had begun his army life in an army which, although it called itself the Indian Army, was run by the British, and had inherited the taboos peculiar to those days. It was no use taking them too seriously now; nowadays, it was even a subject for ridicule. They joked about how, in the old days, one of the first Indians to be given the King's Commission used to advise the new arrivals in the regiment:

"You must never be seen on the wrong side of the counter," he used to tell them in all seriousness. "Never be seen on the wrong side of the counter".

When you came to think of it, there was nothing absurd about the advice; it was perfectly in keeping with the code of behaviour of those times. If you bore in mind that taboos hadn't vanished, that they had merely given place to other sets of taboos, that the counters had not been demolished but merely reoriented, that advice was sound even today. It was almost certain that the very senior officers, right close to the top and

steeped in the tradition of the old koi-hais, felt far more strongly about these lapses of what was regarded as proper behaviour for an officer in those days. But however hard they would find it, they too would have to get used to the changing conditions. In their days you had to wear evening dress at a late night cinema show and it was considered improper to eat Indian food or wear Indian dress; you had to guard against what they called 'going native' just as now you had to guard against being regarded as a 'half-sahib'.

By one thirty, they were seated round a table in the Noormahal and the waiter came and put out three thick yellow glasses before them. Although they had agreed not to have a beer session, as a special concession to the food, they ordered a bottle of beer each. They had a light lunch: roast spiced chicken, seekh kababs with a fiery chilli sauce, and those delicious, flaky nahns, hot from the oven of which the Noormahal was so justly proud.

At the end of lunch, looking through his empty glass of beer, Kiran said:

"To think that in a few months, if you want to drink a glass of beer in Bombay, you'll have to drink it in the bathroom with the door locked! That is, if you can manage to get the stuff."

"As bad as that?" Bertie asked. "What will they do to the Harbour Bar?"

"Lemonades and cold coffee. . ."

"Oh, must we talk of such dreadful things," Mansingh said, "when there are so many pleasant things to talk about."

"Such as what?" Kiran asked.

"Women, for instance." said Mansingh. "Yes, that's an idea! Look, why don't we get hold of some dames and take Bertie to the Club dance. Today's what. . ."

Bertie said: "Nice of you to think of it, old chap; but the old leg's still a bit stiff, you know. Can't cart dames round a dance floor."

"Oh," Mansingh said. "I didn't notice."

Kiran felt a sudden pang at the thought of Bertie's leg. Bertie had been an all-round sportsman—he was a

double blue at Sandhurst—and a very keen athlete. The war had deprived him of so much that he loved in life.

"Come and dine with me at the Akbar Mess on Tuesday," Kiran said. "It's a guest night; what we call a Ladies' Night. Both Mansingh and I live there, and you're bound to run into someone you know."

"Oh, you must come," Mansingh urged. "We'll ask a couple of women too".

"Thanks," Bertie said, "I should love to." He looked at his watch. "I say, I hate to break this up, but it's a quarter past two and if you have to be at work at half past, don't you think we'd better get going?"

24 *Ladies' Night*

The Akbar Mess was a bachelor's mess; ordinarily, no women could enter its premises. If sometimes, passing through its dimly lit corridors late at night, you heard the unmistakable sound of feminine laughter or the tell-tale jangle of glass bangles, you just pretended you had heard nothing and hurried past.

Once a week, however, every Tuesday evening, the Akbar Mess held a Ladies' Night. Previously, as in the other officers' messes in Delhi, the Akbar Mess used to have dancing on their Ladies' Nights. But of late they had given up holding these dances as a result of a decision taken at a specially held meeting of the general body of the mess where the matter was hotly discussed.

The very young members of the mess had wanted to continue the dances, but the Secretary of the mess had rather cunningly timed the meeting to take place on a day following one of these dances, and the painful experience of having to blide on the unsympathetic, flagstone floor covered with an inch-thick layer of French chalk must have been too fresh in everyone's mind to let the dancing enthusiasts carry the vote.

The chalk powder used to rise in clouds of white dust which settled thickly on your clothes. Despite the chalk,

the dancers used to trip over the cement ridges which held the flagstones together. As the better dance bands charged far more than the mess could afford to pay, the band was usually composed of enthusiastic amateurs who made up for their lack of musical skill by their zeal, and kept their high spirits going on the liberal quantities of Government rum issued free by the mess. The large dining room where the dances were held had massive pillars of exposed masonry and unwary couples kept banging into them. The low roof and all the brick-work in the room itself echoed the harsh and discordant music, and the ceaselessly whirring ceiling fans could not altogether dispel the overpowering mixture of odours composed of perfume, whisky, curried food and sweat.

All in all, the weekly dances at the Akbar mess never had much to recommend them, and even the younger members were beginning to feel that the new arrangement was an improvement. Nowadays, on Dadies' Nights, the Akbar Mess provided sit-down dinners, and out in the garden a band from one of the units stationed near Delhi played military airs. On the whole the new Ladies' Nights had proved quite successful and were certainly less expensive. Besides, they now resembled, however faintly, similar occasions in up-country military messes. The dances held in the other officers's messes in Delhi resembled nothing so much as gala nights in a suburban youth hostel.

On Saturday morning, on their way to office, Mansingh said to Kiran, "I have asked Amrita for the Ladies' night. I hope you have asked a dame."

"What's that?" Kiran said. "Lord, no!"

"You'd better do so, quickly, then. Don't want poor Amrita to be the only girl in the party."

"I'm afraid I don't know a soul in Delhi," Kiran said.

"What have you been doing with yourself? Why don't you ask that what's her name, the one you seemed to make a hit with that evening when all of you landed up in Najafgarh."

"That's an idea," Kiran said. "But I hardly know her".

"Bina, that's right. Bina Sonal; Gobind Ram Sonal's

daughter. My dear chap, you don't know how useful it can be in Delhi to be friendly with a Secretary's daughter. I should strongly advise you to develop the acquaintance."

"Actually, I met her only once before I came here; in Arun Sanwal's house. . ."

"Well isn't that long enough? Anyway she seemed to give the impression that you'd known each other all your life. When you've been in Army HQ as long as I have, you'll find that there is nothing like having a Secretary's daughter batting on your side. . ."

When the telephone began to go burr-burr, at the other end, Kiran wondered why he had not thought of ringing her up before. A secretary's daughter is a useful person to know, he told himself.

"Hello, hello," a male voice was saying at the other end.

"Can I speak to Miss Sonal, please," Kiran said.

"Please speak in Hindi," the man said in Hindi.

In Hindi, Kiran asked again: "I want to speak to Miss Sonal, please."

"Which Miss Sonal?"

Kiran did not know there were more than one. "Miss Bina," he said.

"Who is calling, please?"

"Colonel Garud."

"Hold the line, please," said the man, and there was an interminable pause, the sound of footsteps, some high-pitched conversation in a distant room, and then the same voice said:

"I'm afraid she's gone out. Can I take a message?"

Kiran did not want to leave his message with a manservant. "When will she be back?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Will you please tell her that Colonel Garud rang up to ask her if she would dine with him at the Akbar Mess on Tuesday evening? Eight o'clock."

"Tuesday evening at eight o'clock. What place did you say?"

"Akbar Mess."

"Akbar Mess. Colonel Garud. Is that right?"

"That's right," Kiran said.

Today was Saturday, and the draft for his appreciation on the communication requirements of Border Region Three had to be finished before the evening to enable him to have the whole thing retyped on Sunday to be ready for the DWP on Monday morning.

He began to read through his draft. It looked well-knit and balanced. He was particularly pleased with the layout, and the charts and graphs which he had got done in bold colours. He had always believed in the use of colour to make his presentation more effective. It was bullshit, of course, but it was bullshit of the right kind.

The photograph people had just sent him six copies of the maps and had made a good job of them too. It was a pity they couldn't reproduce the colour of the original maps because a map lost half its value if it was in plain black and white. But that could not be helped. At least the photographs were clear, and that was all one could hope for in photostated copies. He worked out a scale for the maps because the scale of the original maps would not apply to these copies which were considerably reduced in size. As he went through his draft, he began to correct the SD and the typing mistakes, and in places, he made additions in the half-page margin specially provided for just such last-minute insertions.

As it was Saturday, normally he should have stopped work at lunchtime. But it was clear that his appreciation would take the whole day. Soon after one, Mansingh came in to ask him if he wanted a lift back to the mess, but when he saw Kiran surrounded by an assortment of files and maps and charts and dictating to a military stenographer, he said, "God! You certainly love bumph, don't you. Take care, at this rate they'll keep you in Army HQ for the rest of your life—make a Beehive out of you."

Kiran laughed, sent for a cup of coffee and some samosas and went on with his work.

At about two o'clock, the telephone rang. Rather irritably, he picked up the receiver and said: "Hullo."

"You're through, speak up please," the exchange girl said, and then Bina's voice came over the wire and

Kiran's heart gave a sudden leap. After all these days, and even on the telephone, he could remember every inflection of her voice quite distinctly. He felt a little annoyed with himself for being so excited just because Bina was ringing him up.

"Can I speak to Colonel Garud, please?" she was saying.

"Hullo," Kiran said. "This is I; this is Colonel Garud."

"It's about this message you left with the bearer," Bina said. He could hear her laughing at the other end, and he wondered what she could be laughing at, but he was pleased that she should be laughing.

"Yes," he said, trying to make his voice sound natural. "I hope you are coming."

"Of course, I am. What do you think I am ringing up for; just to say 'no'?" Bina said. "Taken the trouble of finding out your telephone number and all that. You hadn't left your number, you know, and it's not in the book."

"Oh, gosh! of course, I hadn't. But I had meant to ring you up again. How did you find my number?"

"I rang up Sambo, and he gave it to me," Bina said.

"I see," said Kiran. "Now, about Tuesday. Will it be all right if I call for you at eight?"

By quarter past eight, Kiran had rounded up his guests and had managed to nab a table in a corner of the lounge. By now, the lounge was full, and the only two tables that still remained unoccupied bore conspicuous 'RESERVED' cards. Some of the tables had overflowed into the verandah and a number of people were just standing around with tumblers of whisky and rum in their hands, looking for somewhere to sit. The Akbar Mess Ladies' Nights were obviously becoming popular. From all sides came the hum of the usual mess-evening conversation from which, if you listened carefully, you could just catch a few stray sentences:

"Bearaah!"

". . .not just yet, thank you."

"I thought the Chief was going to be here."

"Oh, no; gone on tour,"

"Let's get that dame to take our picture and send it to the Onlooker."

". . .well, a chhota-peg, then; thank you."

"Who's that tall chap there?"

"You mean the Adjutant General?"

"No, silly, the one next to him, with the doxy in the black sari."

"Oh, that's some stooge in PS; in fact, I believe he's their Beehive."

"Do have another, Abdaar!"

"Not if you put it like that. In my regiment, no one ever says, 'Do have another,' Whisky, thank you."

"I simply adore the music. So. . .so martial; isn't it?"

"Sounds like Sunday-Ke-Sunday to me."

"It's the Grenadier's March, you ulloo."

". . .beer, please."

"Who's that popsy Mansingh's got hold of?"

"Yummm. He certainly knows where to find them."

"Yummm, is right."

"I told them they were on the wrong net. . ."

". . .just refused to jump off. I swear. You should have. . ."

"Two and a half bloody rows of ribbons!"

"Blast! I've knocked down my glass. Bearah! Bearaaaaah!"

Bertie said: "I didn't know there were so many pretty girls in Delhi."

"Where are they?" Amrita pouted. "I can't see any."

"The place is choked with them" Mansingh said. "During the season, Delhi is choked with pretty girls."

"You beast!" Amrita said, "You beast!"

"There's Titch Ramdeva," Bertie said. "A full Colonel! Extraordinary!"

"Due for a Brig any day, now," Mansingh said.

"My word, they've certainly jumped him up, haven't they?"

"There's Sambo," Bina said, and waved to someone near the door.

Kiran turned to look. "Who on earth is Sambo?"

he asked.

"Don't be so superior," Bina said. "He says he knows you very well. There, he's coming across."

Kiran turned again and saw that Brigadier Shindey, the DWP, was walking towards their table, carrying a full tumbler of whisky and soda in his right hand and holding a cigar in his left. As he came near, the three men rose to their feet.

Bina said: "Sambo, Colonel Garud says he doesn't even know you."

"Ha, ha; that's a good one. Real security-mindedness," said Brigadier Shindey, unruffled, and puffed at his Corona.

"Will you join us for a drink, sir?" Kiran asked.

"No, thank you, old boy. I must run away and find my host, General Balgopal. Excuse me." And Brigadier Shindey walked away with cautious, mincing steps so as not to spill his whisky or disturb the ash on his cigar.

"By jove! You damn nearly put him in the. . .I mean, you very nearly cooked old Jacko's goose, didn't you?" Mansingh said to Bina.

"How did I damn nearly put Jacko in something?"

"Why, that chap you called Sambo; he's Jacko's BBC—and for that matter, mine too."

"And what is a BBC?" Bina asked.

"The Big Brown Chief, don't you know, the Boss."

Kiran said: "He's being police; he means the Big Black Chief."

"But Jacko said he didn't even know him," Bina said.

"Well, I didn't know he was called Sambo," Kiran said.

"Let's have a drink," Mansingh said. "Aaabdaaaar!"

"Sherry, thanks," said Amrita.

"Sherry, thanks," said Bina.

"May I have another chhota-peg," Bertie said.

By now the two vacant tables had been occupied. At one of them, the larger one, General Balgopal was obviously entertaining some VIPs. At the other table, sat three naval officers with three skinny, overpainted girls in off-the-shoulder dresses. The din of conversation was louder and the frequency of the call for drinks

increased. People were trying to press drinks upon their guests because in a few minutes it would be time to go in to dinner.

"Not another, no."

"Nonsense, I insist; gin's quite harmless."

"Sam's absolutely wizard."

"Absolutely."

"If you really swear gin is harmless; then just a wee little one."

"Moochoo's terrific, absolutely terrific!"

"Who says so?"

"...Abdaaaar!"

"Yes, yes; definitely; I heard it from the General himself. Now a half-Colonel will get..."

"Aaaaaaabdaaaaar!"

"Intelligence! You know he's just a block of wood, but literally. How they have tolerated him as Director. . ."

". . .hell of a bottle, the Admiral gave him."

"Can't bear pongoes myself; now when I was flags..."

"If you were to stick a pin into him, it would take a minute for him to know it!"

"If you insist, and if you really swear that gin's harmless. . ."

"Yes, yes. Down the hatch. Abdaar! Aaabdaaar!"

"How is Raniwada?" Bertie asked.

"Just the same as ever," Kiran told him. "They've got the Boat club going again."

"Does old Haroon still let you throw dice for drinks?"

"Haroon's gone to Pakistan. You see, all his family were there."

"Did you know Ropey had chucked the army?" Bertie asked.

"What! Oh, no!"

"Yes, he's joined a firm called Imperial Metals. Mining people."

"Ropey a Boxwallah! But why?"

"No one knows. Everyone expected him to rise to an Army Commander, at least."

"Don't look now," Amrita was saying to Bina. "But look at Seeta's choli."

"Very thought-provoking," Mansingh said.

Amrita giggled. "Don't you think there is something anatomically wrong, something..."

"To me she looks perfectly atomic," Mansingh said.

"Go away! You were not meant to hear!" Amrita scolded him. "It's between me and Bina."

"No business to keep such interesting observations all to yourselves," Mansingh protested.

"Remember Margo?" Bertie asked. "Bob Medley's wife?"

"Yes, of course," Kiran said.

"She's become a dress designer. Doing quite well too, very well, in fact."

"Is that the same Mrs. Medley who was in Raniwada?" Bina asked.

"Yes," Bertie said. "The same."

"Tell me, is she still as good looking as she used to be?" Bina asked.

"Oh, yes; I should say so," Bertie said. "Very attractive, in fact."

"Ropey Booker, a Boxwallah!" Kiran said.

Bina said: "There's Daddy."

"Where?" Kiran asked.

"At that table, where Sambo's sitting."

"Oh, yes, of course; that's General Balgopal's party."

"Balgopal is certainly putting himself out," Mansingh said.

"They're getting up, now."

"Time to go in," Kiran said.

General Balgopal was taking his guests in to dinner, and his party had to file past Kiran's table. As he passed near her chair, Bina's father said to her:

"I thought you were going to the Roshanara."

"I came here instead," Bina said.

"I had asked Mr. Sonal to bring you," General Balgopal said. "He said you were going out."

"Oh, gosh!" Bina said. "It was rather a mix-up," she added.

"I am going back soon after dinner. Would you like to come back with me, or shall I send the car for you?" Mr. Sonal asked.

"I don't know," Bina said. "You'd better send the car."

By eleven o'clock, the mess was nearly empty. Many of the younger people had gone off to the Tavern or to the Roshanara, and many of the older people had gone home. The band had folded up, drunk their rum, and gone away. A dozen or so officers and their guests were clustered round the bar. They would go on sitting there for another two hours until old Ramlal closed the bar with his usual mixture of firmness and tact. At the moment, they were telling each other after-dinner stories, but soon they would begin to sing songs. Tomorrow, most of them would dose themselves with Aspirin and Alca-seltzer.

Bertie had gone off with Mansingh and Amrita, and Kiran and Bina were waiting for Mr. Sonal's car.

Kiran said: "What was that your father was saying about your going to the Roshanara?"

They were standing in the gravel drive, close to the entrance of the mess, and it was cold. They were both muffled up in warm coats, Bina somehow managing to look slim in a snow-leopard cape, and Kiran feeling huge and ungainly in his British Warm made of camel hair cloth.

Bina looked up at him, shook her hair and laughed. "What about it?" she asked.

He said: "I love the way your nose wrinkles when you laugh."

"How do you mean, wrinkles?"

"Rather like a bulldog's muzzle—a very pretty bulldog."

"Are you being rude, or is that a new line of talk?"

"I don't know any lines of talk," he said solemnly. "I have been meaning to tell you that for a long time."

"Then why haven't you?" she asked.

"I thought you would be wild at me; are you?"

"Terribly."

"I am sorry."

Bina asked: "Are you always like this?"

"Like what?"

"I mean, do you always only say the things you mean?"

"As far as possible. How can one say something he doesn't mean ?" he felt that his voice sounded peeved.

"Oh, never, mind," Bina said. "It is too late in the night to begin an argument."

From the bar, came the sound of voices raised in sing-song :

Oh, the sparrows, they fly high in Mobile.
Oh, the sparrows, they fly high in Mobile.

"Oh, god !" Kiran said. "The Navy boys have begun to sing. Let's get away from here. Let's go and stand near the gate."

Oh, the sparrows, they fly high,
And they shit right in your eye,
It's a good thing cows don't fly,
In Mobile.

Bina looked at Kiran in surprise. "Why should we go away from here just because they are singing ?" she asked.

"They are singing 'In Mobile'."

"Is that what it's called. I like the tune."

"Yes, it's a nice tune ; but you wouldn't care for the words ; not the Naval version. Come on let's go," and he held her arm and began to walk towards the gate.

"You certainly have the queerest notions of my likes and dislikes," Bina protested, walking by his side.

Oh, the ladies wear tin pants, in Mobile, they were singing,

Oh, the ladies wear tin pants, in Mobile:
Oh, the ladies wear tin pants,
But they take them off to dance...

Out of the range of the singers, they stood near the gate in an awkward silence, not knowing what to say to each other, and a little apart. The still night air around them was cold and slightly damp. Bina was staring fixedly at a point away from his eyes. In the darkness, the back of her hair merging into the tawny fur cape made her look like a huge teddy bear, warm and friendly ; but her face looked hard and set, and a little severe.

Kiran said : "You never told me."

"Never told you what?" She was still looking away from him.

"About the Roshanara business."

"Why do you want to know?"

"Shall we say, the silence was getting oppressive and that I was merely attempting to make conversation."

Bina thought for a moment. Then she said:

"It's quite simple, really. Someone had asked me to go to the Roshanara, ages ago. Then Daddy said would I like to go with him to General Balgopal's party. I said no. Afterwards, I, well, I changed my mind. I thought a party in the mess would be much more fun; and finish earlier. The dances in the Roshanara go on till the small hours. I have a broadcast in the morning..."

"The same sort of broadcast you were doing when we went to Najafgarh?"

"No, no; a real one. At seven tomorrow..."

"Well, I'm so glad you came," Kiran said. "It would have been rather awkward if you hadn't. Poor Amrita would have been all alone. How did you wriggle out?"

"Does it matter?" Bina said coldly. "Does it matter, so long as Amrita wasn't all alone."

"Blast and damn!" Kiran said, suddenly conscious of the chill in her voice. "I do say the most idiotic things, don't I?"

Bina did not say anything. For some secret reason of her own, she began to laugh to herself; and to this day Kiran does not know how exactly it happened, but the next moment he had gathered her close in his arms and kissed her soundly on the mouth.

"I have been wanting to do that for a long time," he said.

25 *He Was There*

To Kiran, there had seemed little point in anyone organizing an exhibition connected with the war. The

war had been over more than four years earlier, and he was sure that no one was interested now in looking at pictures of aeroplanes exploding in the air and tanks raising clouds of dust as they ploughed through the western desert.

But much to his surprise, a large number of people seemed to have come to see the exhibition. The photographs dealt mainly with the exploits of Indian troops and were grouped according to the different theatres of war. It was odd seeing so many people interested in looking at pictures which must have been meaningless to them. From their conversation they seemed vague about what most of the photographs depicted, but all the same, they lingered in front of each one in an effort to identify it with something they had heard or read about. Kiran could not help feeling a little guilty at having passed the Eritrea and the Middle East sections without a glance because the only pictures he was interested in were those of Burma. Many others who had obviously nothing to do with the war professionally, seemed to be far more interested in the exhibition than he.

The section on Burma was the largest. Kiran stood looking at the photographs, trying to place the scenes which looked familiar. There were the pictures of the roadside trenches near the forest bungalow at Imphal, and you could imagine that these were the very same trenches that you had occupied for a brief spell during the scramble in the summer of 1944 when the Japanese had advanced close to Imphal.

The photographs of the crossing of the Irrawaddy probably were those of the Satpuras themselves, though Kiran could not remember seeing any official photographers around at the time of the crossing, and the assault boats you saw might quite easily have been those of Charlie company. As he stood in front of the photographs of the Irrawaddy crossing, looking intently to see if he could recognize some detail with which to establish their identity definitely, the old feeling of gnawing anxiety for the men paddling across the silent waters in their frail assault boats seemed to come back. You could imagine them all there: Robertson, Shewade,

Jemadar Pisal, Havaldar Gokulchand, Havaldar Sarang . . .

"I wonder what river that was," someone was saying behind him in an unfamiliar ascent.

"The Irrawaddy," Kiran said without turning. "Near Shwebo."

"Some river."

"Yes," Kiran said, "some river," and then, pointing a finger at the pictures, he added: "I was there."

It sounded a little theatrical, and as soon as he had said it, he felt a little foolish. He turned and saw an elderly couple, obviously foreigners.

"I am sorry," Kiran said with a smile, and turned to go away, but it was already too late. The man was putting out a large red hand and saying: "I am Walter A. Travers, of Akron Ohio. Meet my wife."

"How do you do, sir," Kiran said. "How do you do, Madam. My name is Garud, Lieutenant Colonel Garud."

"Pleased to meet you Colonel, I'm sure," said Mrs Travers, shaking Kiran's hand.

"Now tell me, Colonel. Was that your outfit crossing the river?"

For a moment, Kiran wondered if his leg was being pulled, and he looked suspiciously at Mr. Travers. But they were both smiling, and looked so genuinely well-meaning that even if you felt a little awkward and pretentious explaining the pictures to them, there was no question of making an excuse and getting out of it.

Kiran found himself telling them about the Irrawaddy crossing and answering Mr. Travers' questions, and soon other visitors were getting interested in their conversation. They were gathering round them and the narrow passage where they stood was beginning to be crowded. One or two of them had begun to ask their own questions and a fat boy with a running nose chipped in and asked:

"How many Germans did you kill, Mister?"

Mrs. Travers gave Kiran an understanding look; and her husband said:

"Thanks a lot, Colonel. It sure was good of you to tell us all about those pictures. They seemed to come to life. Let's get out in to the fresh air and smoke a

cigarette."

They stood on the patch of grass near the gate, and Mr. Travers offered Kiran a cigarette. As usual, he found the American cigarette too strong and the pungent, almost spicy smoke made him cough.

"I fought in the first one," Mr. Travers said. "The first world war."

"Oh, I see," Kiran said. He never quite knew what to say when someone told him he had fought in the first world war. It had been so long ago; before he was born.

"I was a flyer," Mr. Travers said.

White-haired and portly and wrinkled, it was difficult to imagine Mr. Travers in the role of a pilot of the first world war; to think of him as a slim young man in knee breeches and leggings, flying one of those frail, canvas-and-wire aeroplanes of those days. It was difficult to imagine him in an aerial dog-fight, to think of him, soft and prosperous, close to death, intent on killing.

"By Jove, sir!" Kiran said. "That must have been quite a war, the way you saw it. By Jove!"

"Oh, yes, it was quite a war," Mr. Travers said, ruminatively. Then he said:

"I had a son in this one."

"Oh," Kiran said. "Oh," and there was that long silence which follows a statement like that.

"In Burma?" Kiran asked.

"No," Mr. Travers said. "No, not in Burma. He was killed at the Anzio beachhead." He looked sad and weary, and suddenly older.

"Oh," Kiran said. "I am sorry."

"Oh, what a pretty girl!" said Mrs. Travers brightly, and held her husband's arm, and Kiran looked round and saw Bina turning into the gate. He had a guilty desire to avoid her, but she had already seen him, and a little to his surprise, he saw that she was smiling.

"Going in?" Kiran asked.

"Yes," Bina said. "I have got to mention it in my talk."

"This is Miss Sonal. Mrs. Travers; Mr. Walter A. Travers," Kiran introduced.

"The Colonel has been showing us round the exhibi-

tion," Mrs. Travers said.

"Yes, he sure knows all about it," said Mr. Travers. "He certainly knows a lot about the war."

"Excuse me," Bina said. "I must go in now. It's been nice meeting you," and she turned to go.

"Would you care to come and have a drink with us?" Mrs. Travers asked.

"Unless, of course, you are going in again with your girl," said Mr. Travers, and Bina must have heard what he said, for she seemed to walk away with unnatural stiffness, holding herself very straight.

Kiran wished Mr. Travers had not spoiled everything by referring to Bina as his girl, but there was nothing he could do about it. He laughed nervously and said: "I don't know."

Both Mr. Travers and his wife laughed at this, and Mr. Travers said:

"Do you know what I would do if I were you? I would go right in there, and to hell with the drink! That's what I would do."

Kiran laughed. "Then, if you will excuse me, that's what I will do too," he said.

This time, no one asked him any questions, not even Bina. She walked past the pictures silently, making notes about some of them on a small pad. "Can I help you at all?" he offered.

"Oh, no thank you," she said somewhat coldly. "I can manage."

There was something inconsistent about her behaviour. She spoke in monosyllables and without a smile on her face, and when they came out, it was with some hesitation that he asked her:

"Can I see you home?"

Bina looked at him for a moment, and he thought he could detect a frown on her face.

"If you want to."

"I want to, very much," he told her.

They found a taxi and after he had told the driver where to go, Kiran said to her:

"Wasn't it funny, the way Mr. Travers spoke of you as my girl?"

"Yes," Bina said. "Very funny."

"But I understand that that is how all Americans talk."

"Do they?"

"I mean, there is nothing to feel offended about."

"No, nothing whatever," Bina said.

"I mean I don't want you to think that I. . .that is, I. . .sort of, gave him any reason to think as he did."

"No, of course not."

"Mrs. Travers said you were very pretty."

Bina did not say anything, but settled herself more comfortably in her corner.

Then Kiran did what he had been longing to do. He drew her to him and kissed her.

In his arms, he felt her body stiffen, and she tried to turn her face away. Then she seemed to go limp all over, and for a brief, wildly delicious moment, he felt her lips part under his mouth in response. But that may have been his imagination, for the very next second, she had turned her head and pushed him away from her. For a little while, he sat in his corner, feeling angry and deflated, looking fixedly out of the window, and then Bina had reached out and laid her hand tenderly upon his arm.

"You don't have to go home just yet, do you?" Kiran said.

"What's the time?"

"Just past seven-thirty."

"I don't have to."

"Can't we go somewhere where we can sit and talk?"

"If you wish to."

"Of course I wish to. Where shall we go?"

"I don't know."

"The Sports Club?"

"If you like."

"What's today—oh, hell; there's bound to be a dance on. Look, shall we go to my room in the mess? There will be a fire."

"What about your rules?"

"Oh, to hell with the rules! Shall we?"

"All right."

"Go to the Akbar Mess, please," Kiran told the driver.

"Well, here we are," he said brightly. "Sorry it is so untidy. Here, you take this chair," and he removed his cap and his stick and gloves from a chair and drew it near the coal fire for her.

"So this is where you live," she said, looking around.

"They used to call it the Belsen camp during the war."

"I like it," she said. She was still standing.

"Can I get you something to drink? I have only some whisky and gin, but I can get some sherry from the mess or whatever it is that you'd. . ."

"I would like some whisky," she said. "Man's drink in a man's room," and she laughed.

"Oh, good!" He brought out two glasses, and poured a small drink for her and a generous one for himself.

"It is so much like a college boy's room, isn't it. Only, they don't keep whisky and gin in their rooms, I don't think."

"I had lovely rooms in Raniwada, overlooking the river. In the mornings, you could hear the jungle cocks crowing."

"Squash rackets and tennis rackets and hockey sticks and a cricket bat; and what's that?—yes, a fishing rod. Guns—shouldn't you be having a gun?—or guns?"

"Guns have to be oiled and kept in boxes," he told her.

"And guns in oil and a siphon bottle for soda, and bottles of whisky and gin for friends dropping in, and that makes up the room; and oh, yes, five, no, six kinds of hats; what else?"

"Books," he suggested.

"Books, of course. Let me see," and she went up to the two bookcases along the wall. "Two volumes of Churchill and De Guigand and the Other Side of the Hill; so much about the war! Oh, and Osbert Sitwell and Marquand and the Oxford Book of Verse and Huxley and more Huxley—what a letdown! What pictures?" she turned round the room. "No pictures; only a calendar with a nude on a tiger-rug. I must send you a picture for your room, real man's-room picture, a real lion's-den picture; something with horses and hounds and birds, that's right. . ."

"Here's your whisky," he said.

"Two lovely dead birds and a lovely oiled gun—you could hang it up here. Do you know that poem which goes something like this:

Hi, handsome hunting man
Fire your little gun.
Bang, and the animal,
Is down and dead and done.

All so that you can make a lovely lovely still-life of dead birds; or kill a tiger and turn him into a rug for your floor like that overfed woman in the calendar is lying on..."

"I am sorry you don't like it. The next time you come, I'll keep roses in a vase, and I'll try and get a picture..."

"Next time!" she laughed and shook her head. "There is no next time; there is only now, and now will you please take me home?"

"Of course," he said evenly. "But I want to tell you something before that. And you haven't touched your drink."

"Here," she said. And she tossed down her drink.

"I wanted to tell you that I am terribly in love with you," he said.

"I want to go home, please," she said.

"You knew, that, didn't you?" he asked.

"No," and Bina shook her head.

"Now you do."

"Yes, now I do; now. But now I don't want to know. Now is too late. It was...it was always too late."

She was still standing up, staring into the fire, and then he realized that she was crying.

"Please, please," he said. "Is anything wrong?"

"Darling, listen. Nothing is wrong, except that we love each other. That's what is wrong, and that's what cannot be put right, and you shouldn't have called me here and told me what you did. It is not fair. If you must know, my father has other plans for me. I'm...I'm going to be married. To a man called Mathur. It's all settled; and he's such a nice man and oh, such a rich man. . .and it's all so absurd and all so hopeless."

"Do you want to get married to him?"

"It doesn't matter what I want. It's all so hopeless. Please...please don't say anything. Just take me back home, please."

He drew her close to him and brushed her hair back with his hand and her face rose up to him like a lifting flower.

"Please don't cry," he said.

"Darling, why did we have to meet, ever. Why did I have to fall in love with you...and why, why did you have to be what you are?"

She pushed him away from her and turned her face. Then, still keeping her face away from him, she said:

"I want to go home, please."

"Yes, of course," Kiran said.

26 *Mr. Sonal's Problem*

The unreasonable behaviour of his daughter had thoroughly upset Mr. Sonal. When he had first told her of his plans for her marriage, she had heard him out in silence, and now, barely three days later, when he told her that he was going to Bombay to finalize everything, she had flatly told him that it was all quite impossible. He had tried to reason with her, but all Bina had to say was that it was quite impossible, and after a while, she had burst into tears.

He was going to Bombay to settle the question of dowry. His sister-in-law had written that he should make a visit to Bombay sometime soon so that the preliminaries could be begun and the marriage take place during March. It appeared that there were at least five days in March which were declared as auspicious days, and Mr. Sonal's sister-in-law, had tentatively decided on the 12th of March, which day, according to her astrologers, was one of the most auspicious. About the dowry, she had written:

"It is only a formality, of course. I am sure that

Sekhar Mathur will not be unreasonable about it, and, of course, I will do all I can to help. Actually, with all the money the family has, the amount of dowry Bina will bring should be of little consequence. But after all, your respective positions—yours in the Government and Mr. Mathur's in the business world—have to be taken into account and a suitable figure arrived at, something that is in conformity with izzat..."

The question of dowry would need careful handling, and Mr. Sonal was genuinely glad that his sister-in-law was on his side. Naturally, he hoped that there would be no question of any undignified wrangling about the amount of dowry, although he was perfectly aware that many an otherwise suitable match had to be broken up because of disagreement on the amount of dowry. Even among people of his class, dowry was not a matter which could be settled except after prolonged negotiations.

It was tied up with izzat: the bigger the amount of the dowry, the greater the izzat of the families; the greater the izzat of the families, the bigger the amount of dowry. It was something of a vicious circle. It was not as though you could keep the amount of the dowry a secret. The dowry had to be talked about freely by friends and relatives, the jewellery and other gifts had to be actually displayed before the wedding guests and subjected to the sharp scrutiny of elderly female relatives.

But Mr. Sonal was confident that his sister-in-law would handle the negotiations with the necessary finesse, and fix the dowry as well as the various gifts of gold ornaments and ceremonial silk saris to all the relatives of the bridegroom without putting too great a strain on his finances.

And now, from the problems of dowry and auspicious dates and the issuing of invitations, and the catering arrangements and the lighting arrangements for the wedding and the selection of the jewellery for his daughter, he had to drag his mind away to Bina's unreasonable stand. At first, it had made him quite angry, but soon his anger had melted, giving place to a sense

of bewilderment.

Mr. Sonal was convinced that he would get his way in the end. He was certainly not the man to give up so easily, what he was convinced was the 'best thing in the world for Bina'. He knew he had to handle this carefully, rather like an awkward departmental problem. He had always believed that with tact, a little time, and if necessary, some judicious manoeuvring, you could solve most problems which looked awkward when you first came up against them.

Accordingly, in his letter to his sister-in-law, Mr. Sonal did not say anything about Bina's attitude to his plans for her marriage. He said instead that he would have to postpone his trip to Bombay for a few days. For the next two days, he left Bina severely alone. At meal times, and whenever they happened to be together, he studiously avoided any reference to the subject which was uppermost in his mind.

On the third morning, when he was having breakfast on the bridge table in the verandah, and Bina, as usual had come to sit by him, he brought up the subject.

"You never told me exactly what your objection is to what I have in mind." he said.

"I just don't like the idea," Bina told him.

Her father frowned. He said:

"You mean, you don't just ever want to be married? Don't be absurd!"

Bina did not say anything in reply. Mr. Sonal felt that she was avoiding his eyes. She was busily trying to smooth out the creases in her housecoat.

"I thought when I first mentioned it to you, you were not so unreasonable. In fact I rather got the impression that you quite liked the idea," Mr. Sonal said.

"I must have given you the wrong impression."

"Tell me one thing that anyone could object to in Arvind Mathur; just one objection."

"I think he is a very nice man," Bina said. "It is just that I don't want to be married to him."

"And a very rich man," Mr. Sonal pointed out.

"Yes, and a rich man."

Mr. Sonal sipped his coffee. Then he said what had

been preying on his mind these last few days:

"It is not as if you are fond of someone else, are you? Not in love or anything like that?"

"No," Bina told him.

"I'm glad to hear that. You young people, these days, seem to have become far too Westernized...for ever falling in love, and things like that...always with the wrong person. It...er...complicates things—for everyone. One must be careful never to...never to lose one's moorings. That is very important. Is it anything like that?"

"No, it is nothing like that," Bina said, still playing with her coat.

Suddenly, as though out of nothing, as though the thought had not been worrying him incessantly for the past two days and had just come to his mind, Mr. Sonal said:

"It is not that young man who asked you to dinner, is it?"

"What dinner!" Bina asked.

"At the Akbar Mess. You turned down Balgopal's invitation and then went to the mess in any case, with that Army chap I saw you with in the club once."

"No," Bina said.

"Good, I'm glad to hear that. Very relieved in fact," Mr. Sonal said. "For one thing, these people in the army nowadays are very badly paid; you know, very badly. Then they get shunted about all over the country, many places where they can't take any families. They . . .they can't afford to get married and. . .er. . .live comfortably."

"A lot of them can," Bina said. "I know several who do. Look at Sambo."

"Besides, nowadays, there's no knowing who's who...so many people without background. Adventurers, many of them, seeking to get on in life by marrying into the right families. And talking of army pays, you must realize that Sambo has private means, and he is a Brigadier, trained at Sandhurst. They get different rates of pay. This...this friend of yours; what is he?"

"He is a Lieutenant Colonel," Bina said, and then she added, "And he's certainly no adventurer."

"I am sure he isn't," Mr. Sonal agreed, "I'm sure he

isn't. Anyway, no use discussing the poor chap and his salary so long as there is...humph...so long as there is nothing between you and him, is there? You are quite sure there is nothing?"

Again Bina turned her eyes away. For a while, she did not say anything. Then she said:

"I don't know."

"I see," said Mr. Sonal nodding his head gravely. "I see."

27 *With Tact, And Manoeuvring*

For there days, Kiran had not seen Bina. Once, he saw Mr. Sonal's Wolsley parked in the club car park, but there was a uniformed chauffeur sitting in it, and it was obvious that Bina had not come with her father. He had never felt so helpless in his life. Several times he had rung up her house, and each time, the now familiar voice of Mr. Sonal's bearer had told him that she was out.

On Friday morning, as the DWP was concluding his weekly conference with his staff officers, he turned to Kiran and said:

"Look here old boy, will you go and see General Ballur as soon as the conference is over?"

"Yes, of course," Kiran had said, wondering what General Ballur could be wanting to see him about, and feeling, as usual, a little uneasy about the DWP calling him 'old boy'.

As soon as the conference was over, Kiran had walked across to the PAO's office. He went up to the General's Military Assistant and said:

"I am Colonel Garud; I was told that the PAO wishes to see me."

"I'm afraid I don't know anything about it, sir; I'll find out in a moment," said the MA and gave Kiran a typical ADC smile. He pressed a button on the intercom box and said:

"Colonel Garud is here, sir. Will you see him ?" And there came the usual indistinct rasping sound through the intercom box, and the staff officer turned to Kiran and flashed his teeth again :

"Please go right in, sir," and he held open the door for Kiran.

Major-General S. D. Ballur, known all over the Indian army as 'Spike' Ballur, was the first Indian officer to be commissioned in the Satpura regiment, and had recently been made the Colonel-in-Chief of the regiment. He held the appointment of the Principal Administrative Officer at Army Headquarters. Everyone was certain that General Ballur would go far. He had all the qualities that a military officer needs for a successful career : personality, an unshakable faith in his personal judgement about any kind of military problem, a good deal of swagger, three rows of ribbons which included both the DSO and the MC, not too high a degree of imagination, an ability to delegate authority, and an undefinable attribute which made all those who served under him respect him and dread him without hating him. He was smoking a pipe and smiling through narrowed eyes as Kiran entered his room and saluted.

"Sit down, Jacko," the General said. "Sit down and help yourself to a cigarette," and he pushed a walnut wood cigarette box towards Kiran.

"Thank you, sir," Kiran said. He sat down and took a cigarette.

"Here, try this," Spike said, offering him his cigarette lighter. "Gold, you know ; but given to me. Given to me. Lights every time."

"It certainly does, sir," Kiran said.

He looks a bloody General, Kiran thought to himself, comparing him in his mind with all the other Generals who looked like Generals : with Russell Pasha, with Ropey Booker, with Thimmaya. They looked like Generals even in their swimming trunks.

"Don't see much of you in Delhi," Spike was saying. "Meera was saying only the other day that you haven't been to see us for ages."

The trouble was that though Kiran liked and admired Spike Ballur, and in the old days in Raniwada when

the difference in their ranks was not so pronounced was, one might say, even friendly with him, he couldn't bear the General's wife, Meera. She was a charming woman in many ways, but she was overbearingly conscious of her position as a General's wife and it made it difficult for her to be natural at any time. She was either aloof and haughty or blatantly patronizing.

"You know how it is in Delhi, sir," Kiran said.

The General laughed. He had a towering, infectious laugh. "Yes, I know how it is in Delhi ; I know how it is. So easy to get into hot water, isn't it ?"

"Oh, I didn't mean that," Kiran said. "I have managed to keep out of trouble all right."

"You have, have you ?" the General said, his voice suddenly going serious. "I dunno ; there's trouble and trouble, you know. More kinds of trouble in Delhi than anywhere else. I don't suppose you've any idea what I've sent for you for."

"I haven't the vaguest idea, sir," Kiran said.

"You are in for a transfer, I'm afraid."

"Oh," Kiran said.

"Don't look so dazed !" said the General and laughed again. "Don't tell me you'd object to a transfer away from the monkey house. Or would you ?"

"So they don't think I am good enough for the job."

"No, no. Oh, no, no, no," said the General, waving his pipe to the right and left with each 'no'. "In fact, Sambo's so cut up about this, he's moving heaven and earth to stop your transfer."

"I see, sir."

"Now look, Jacko. You know I have nothing to do with postings. It's just that I happened to hear that you were being posted to the 77 Div. as SO 1. Damn'd good job, of course, but I didn't think it would be a wise thing to send you to the 77th, knowing that Shantilal isn't shall we say, exactly fond of you. That's what I called you up for, to see what you'd have to say. I mean, if you don't want to go to the 77th, I could arrange to have you transferred somewhere else."

Kiran noticed that the General was offering to have him transferred 'somewhere else'; he had not said anything about cancelling the transfer altogether. He said :

"If I have to go, I'd much rather go to an operational area to Kashmir. The 77 Div. would be just as good as anywhere else. Besides, it is not as though I have had a row with the Div. Commander or anything like that. That little unpleasantness was so long ago."

Spike Ballur got up from his chair. "You'd be surprised what long memories some people have ; extraordinarily long. You don't have to play the pucca-saab with me, Jacko ; you know as well as I do that Shantilal is a son of a bitch, and if you give him a chance he'll break you. His type don't forget." Spike Ballur walked up to the window and stood gazing outside.

In the far distance you could see, sharply etched against the bleak winter sky, the slender needle of the Qutb Minar, the victory tower built by Qutb's successor seven centuries ago. Spike stood in front of the window and gazed at the view as though he was seeing it for the first time, cupping his hands to exclude the unsightly hutments in the foreground.

There was no use pretending. Kiran knew that General Shantilal hated his guts, and he knew that Spike knew it too. On the other hand, he had always looked upon the type of officers who wangled comfortable posting for themselves or avoided the uncomfortable ones, with undisguised contempt; and it went against his grain now to ask Spike to intercede for him.

Kiran himself had never spoken about it, but that incident about General Shantilal had become known to a lot of people in the army. It was just one of those unfortunate things that happened during the war, and although Shantilal had every right to feel badly treated, it certainly shouldn't have embittered him against Kiran.

It was at the beginning of the second Burma campaign. Kiran had been left behind as the Training Adjutant in the regimental centre, but his battalion was in an advance concentration area near Commilla, getting into shape for the final assault into Burma. Colonel Watson, who had taken over from 'Girgut' Jones to the evident relief of all ranks, was in command.

Throughout the war, Shantilal, who was then a Major, had tried hard to get posted to an active battalion.

But in those days, when officers were more or less posted according to the choice of battalion commanders, it seemed that no one was prepared to take Major Shantilal on as a company commander which was the lowest appointment suited to his seniority.

Shantilal had always been known as the 'Sadhu'—the holy man. He never drank, never smoked, never sang bawdy songs. He recited the scriptures for at least one hour every day. He was always regarded as something of a crank, a misfit in any unit or mess, and no one seemed to want him. He was shunted from one unimportant job to another: to Welfare and Morale and even to the Canteens Department, but he had never given up trying to get to the front.

It was only when the 4th were in their final stages of preparations and in their advance base, that a new Depot Commander, unfamiliar with the background, had given in to his persistent requests and had posted him to them.

It was Bertie Howard who had told Kiran what had happened. A lorry had stopped in front of the basha hut which, at the time, served as the battalions's headquarters, and from the seat near the driver, Major Shantilal had got out and saluted the CO who was sitting on an empty ammunition chest.

"Good God!" Colonel Watson had bawled. "Good God! What on earth are you doing here ?"

"I have been posted to you, sir," said Major Shantilal.

"What!" Watson said. "What's that ? Have you got the posting order ? Let me see the posting order."

Shantilal produced the cyclostyled sheet of yellow paper and stood by stiffly while Watson studied it.

"Yes, you have; my God! So you have," Watson said.

For a whole minute, Watson had continued to look at the order, muttering all the while. Then, all of a sudden, he seemed to calm down.

"Look here, Shantilal," he said. "I know it isn't your fault. Someone at the depot has gone and balled up things. I know it's most unfair to have made you come all this way, but it is just the way of these things. There is no room for you in this battalion, and that is final,

as long as I am commanding it. Now, will you jump right back into that truck and go back to the depot? I'll have that posting order cancelled."

And with that, Colonel Watson had got up from his ammunition box and walked away, signifying that the interview, as far as he was concerned, was over. Later, he had sent off an 'Immediate' signal to the Regimental centre, asking them to send Captain Garud as the replacement.

All the way from beyond Comilla. Major Shantilal had gone back to a new posting at Army Headquarters, and Kiran, seven years junior to him, had gone into Burma with the battalion in his place; 'asked for' as they put it, 'by name'.

Shantilal's being sent back didn't necessarily mean that he was not a good enough Company Commander; everyone knew that it was more probably due to Colonel Watson's dislike of him. In the days when Shantilal began his army career, it was easy enough to offend one's British superiors even by daring to tune in Indian music on the mess radio.

Unfortunately, Shantilal seemed to have taken the view that the whole thing was Kiran's fault. He seemed to think that Kiran who was in the depot as the Training Adjutant, had manoeuvred the posting, and had gone about quoting the incident as an instance of arrant British favouritism shown to all 'bootlicking wogs', and incidentally, given the affair whatever publicity it had received. As soon as the country became independent, Shantilal had come to be promoted according to his seniority in the service, and now, barely five years later, was a Major General in command of a division.

It was obvious that Spike Ballur was giving Kiran time to think it over. Without turning from the window, still peering at the view through his cupped hands, Spike said:

"Well?"

"I must say I don't particularly relish the idea of going to the 77th, sir; not as the Div. Commander's staff officer."

Spike Ballur strode back to his table and perched

himself on a corner of it, dangling his legs. "I thought not," he said. "No use being too pucca-saab about these things; everyone doesn't play by the rules, you know. Did you have anything in mind, anywhere special you'd like to go?"

"Somewhere in an operational area, sir; somewhere in J and K. Preferably a Satpura battalion."

"Which of the Satpuras is in J and K?" Spike asked.

"The second, sir."

"I'll see what I can do. I'll ring up postings. No, no; don't thank me at all. After all, it was the only sensible thing to do. We old tigers must look after one another, you know; though you must understand, old boy, that we can't always, er...do everything that we would like to do."

"Of course," Kiran said.

"So that's settled, then. Good! Come and have a drink with us before you leave Delhi. Bye, old boy," and the General rose to his feet.

Kiran wished that Spike had told him why he was being posted away in such a hurry, but he did not want to ask him. In the afternoon, the posting order had come through with a speed almost unheard of in Army Headquarters dealings, and soon after that, Mansingh had come stamping into Kiran's room.

"What's this Namdar has been telling me?" Mansingh asked. "Are you leaving us?"

"Yes," Kiran told him. "Kicked out."

"What absolute balls! You've hardly been here three months!"

"There it is," said Kiran, handing him the posting order.

"The 77 Div! General Shantilal's outfit. You won't like that. No SO 1 has stuck with him for long."

"No, that's been changed, thank God! I hope to get a battalion."

"But why are you taking this lying down? Postings can't.....you about like this! Have you been to see the Brig. about this? I should ask for an interview with the Chief..."

"No, I don't mean to see anyone about it."

"But what does this mean? Have you been careless with Top-Secret papers or something?"

"Must be something like that."

"Oh, stop being so bloody mysterious! I'm sure you must have asked for the posting. They don't fool round with chaps with your record."

"Look here, old boy," Kiran said. "I honestly don't know why they're flinging me out. I feel quite mad about it, myself. But it looks as though I am getting an active battalion. And who would turn down a chance like that?"

For some reason, that had made Mansingh really furious.

"Want to be a bloody fighting soldier, what! Command a battalion in action! Want to stop warming a chair; baah! You people make me sick! I should have thought you'd have had a bellyful of that during the war. Fighting soldiers; balls! Any bloody fool can be a fighting soldier! You wait and see what muck Namdar will make of those papers you keep writing. He will.....up the whole place!"

"Is Namdar coming in my place?"

"That's what he's been telling everyone, Look, Jacko, I give up. You just make me sick!" said Mansingh and marched out of the room banging the door after him.

It was not until late in the evening that Kiran found out why he was being posted away; until then, he had still no idea what it was all about. The general rule was that once you got into the General Staff, you could not get away under less than three years. If you were any good at all, they kept you on much longer. The usual reason why they transferred you before three years was if you were no good at staff work or if you could not get on with your Director.

That evening, Kiran was sitting in his room in the Akbar Mess, trying to make up his mind about the luggage that he would take to Kashmir with him and what he would send away to the regimental depot, when one of the mess servants came in with a scribbled note. It appeared that Mr. Sonal was waiting in the mess

lounge to see him.

He hurriedly put on some clothes and went to the main building of the mess. Mr. Sonal was sitting in one of the muda chairs and he had a copy of 'Punch' in his hands, but he couldn't have been reading it because there wasn't enough light in the room. It was five-thirty, and there was still half an hour for the bar to open. Except for the two of them, the lounge was quite deserted and bore the solemn cheerless look of all large rooms when they are empty.

Mr. Sonal rose from his chair and greeted Kiran with excessive formality, but without a smile on his face. "Good evening, Colonel," he said."

"Good evening, sir."

"I have come to see you about my daughter," Mr. Sonal said as soon as they had both sat down.

"I see," Kiran said. He hoped his voice would not betray his nervousness.

Mr. Sonal fidgeted with his glasses. "It seems that you two have become friendly," he said.

"Yes, sir," Kiran said.

"Well, for reasons which I shall presently explain, I do not wish Bina to...er...continue the friendship. So I suggested to General Balgopal that it would be...er... expedient to have you transferred. In fact, I asked him to do so. He rang up this morning to tell me that it was arranged.

"So I was told this morning; I didn't quite realize why."

"I thought it was best, under the circumstances, for both of you, that is Bina and yourself, not to see each other any more."

"What circumstances?" Kiran asked.

Mr. Sonal frowned. "Well, my daughter's marriage is more or less settled, with someone whom I consider entirely suitable. And I don't want anything to upset my plans."

"And so you had me transferred."

"Yes. Mind you, I feel terribly guilty about it. And I can assure you that as soon as things get straightened out, within two or three months, say, I can arrange to have you brought back to Delhi."

"That won't be necessary," Kiran said. "We always finish off our own tigers."

"What's that ?"

"Well, it really doesn't matter ; not to those who don't know anything about it. What I mean is that I hope once I leave here, I shall be spared the experience of being kicked around to suit people's domestic affairs."

Mr. Sonal looked at Kiran level-eyed for a few moments before he spoke. "I can quite understand your feeling bitter about it. I am really sorry that I should be at the bottom of your being sent away from Delhi. Yet I am convinced that it is the right thing ; the only thing, in fact. Good for both you and Bina that this thing ends here."

"You didn't come here just to tell me that, did you ?"

"I thought it would be better to explain things to you than have you learn them at second hand. Also. . ."

"Also to demonstrate how very powerful you are ; how futile it would be for anyone in my position to resist ; how. . ."

"No," Mr. Sonal said. "As I offered, I also came to tell you that I could have you brought back if you wanted to come back, though it seems that in suggesting this, I have misjudged you. You. . .er. . .it seems, prefer to finish off your own tigers in your own way."

The phrase seemed to lose all its meaning when Mr. Sonal used it, in that manner.

"Quite frankly," Mr. Sonal went on, "you military officers, these days are, if I may say so, notoriously rootless and, er. . .impecunious, aren't you ? It is unlikely, isn't it, that a father would allow his girl to marry an army officer if he could help it."

"And if I had private means," Kiran asked. "Would you still have me transferred ?"

"Oh," Mr. Sonal said, and for a few moments he seemed to study the question. Then he went on :

"Well, to be quite frank, it would almost certainly have made a difference to my attitude. One has to be practical about these things. If you had private means, or if you had a highly paid job with one of these foreign firms or with Tatas, I would have no objection, no strong objections, to inclining to my daughter's wishes in the

matter. But as things stand, it is quite impossible. My primary duty, as I see it, is to ensure that she is adequately, possibly sumptuously provided for."

"So I see," Kiran said. He was dying for a cigarette. He took out his case and offered his visitor a cigarette. Then he lit one himself and took a deep puff.

"I want you to understand," Mr. Sonal said, "that I am speaking solely in the capacity of a father who takes his responsibilities towards his children seriously. Otherwise, of course, there is nothing one might object to in a person like you ; nothing at all. All the officers I have spoken to, General Balgopal and others, all think highly of you."

Kiran laughed. "You should have spoken to General Shantilal," he said.

"Who ? Oh !" Mr. Sonal cleared his throat a little nervously. "I can assure you, it is a difficult thing ; this : one's responsibility as a father. It clouds one's reasoning, it makes one give undue weight to material considerations. I know it all. But I am afraid it has to be like that. Now do you appreciate my point of view ?"

"It is not necessary for me to appreciate it, but I can see the argument, of course."

"Which brings me to what you might call my main purpose in coming to see you. You see, Bina doesn't know anything about this transfer and I...er...hope and trust that she won't hear anything about it so that..."

"You mean, you don't want me to see her..."

"Or write to her, or telephone her. I ask you to give my daughter a chance to forget this whole thing...to... to be herself again. I want you, in her own interest, and I might say, your own, not to write to her or in any way communicate with her. In a month or two, everything will have been settled. Can I count on you for that ?"

"Yes," Kiran said. "You can have my assurance on that."

"Your word as an officer and a gentleman ?"

"In my Regiment," Kiran said, "when any of us has a bet, only one officer checks up ; the others just take his word."

"What does it mean ?"

"More or less what you were saying, word of officer

and gentleman stuff."

"Good!" Mr. Sonal said. "Good! I feel greatly relieved. I am glad you see the sense behind all this..."

"I am afraid I don't," Kiran said. "But that hardly matters. I see your viewpoint, of course, but not the sense. You want to find a rich husband for your daughter, possibly even against her own feelings in the matter. To ensure that, you are quite determined to go to any length; use all your influence, ruin half-a-dozen careers, if necessary. I am a career officer. To me the army, the profession itself, is a great thing, although in your sense of values it may rank with the lowest forms of life. But I see your point of view, and I am quite prepared to do what you want me to do. And I am prepared to go along with you only for one reason: because I cannot afford to risk my professional future; to a career officer like me, it is an unfortunate thing to clash with people of your influence. I am ready to give in only because I want to save something far more personal. My career to me is more important than anything else—more important than your daughter."

It did not sound right at all, but that was the best he could do. He felt a wave of mounting bitterness; he wished Mr. Sonal would get up and go before he said something which he would later regret.

Mr. Sonal waited for a few seconds before he spoke, and his voice sounded subdued.

"As I have said, there is nothing against you personally. But with things as they are, I, as Bina's father, have to make what I think are the best arrangements for her future well-being. So to speak, arrange things in her best interests. I do, however, understand your bitterness, but now that I have talked to you freely I feel much the better for it. Much more easy in my mind about everything."

"That's all that matters then," Kiran said.

Mr. Sonal rose to go and he held out his hand. "Good bye," he said. "I am sorry about all this. But I must say you have shown a degree of understanding which I had not really expected."

After Mr. Sonal had left, presumably for his evening game of bridge, Kiran waited at the bar, and although

it was still a few minutes to opening time, he persuaded Ramlal to give him a double whisky. He was bewildered and hurt and angry. That talk with Mr. Sonal had left him with a feeling that he had not acquitted himself well. Somehow he felt as though he had let down both the things he loved above everything: the service and Bina. "I should have told the old man to go to hell," he said to himself.

He must have said this aloud, because Ramlal looked up at him and said: "Did you say anything, sir?"

"Go to hell," Kiran told him.

Ramlal grinned. "Righto, sir," he said.

Part Three

Active Service

28 *The Enemy In Front*

The hills were jagged, stark and forbidding, tree-lined on the north, bare on the south. In the valleys, isolated clumps of chir and deodar trees rustled in the breeze which blew the greater part of the day, harsh and penetrating. Large, white-bellied Himalayan kites wheeled incessantly overhead in ever widening circles, searching for food and calling plaintively in long mournful whistles. That was all the noise now; the wind and the hooting of the hungry kites. The rumble and crash of the medium guns, the sharp crump of mortars and the taunting, rhythmic stutter of small-arms fire had ceased.

Crouching behind a rock near the camouflaged, dug-out shelter, Kiran trained his binoculars on the tranquil landscape in front of him. Methodically, he searched the ground, sector by sector, straining his eyes to look for signs of obvious attempts at camouflage; the faint brown track left by men using the same ground too often, or yellowing leaves in an occasional patch of green shrubbery. He was looking for fresh signs of enemy activity.

There was nothing new. He saw the same tell-tale circle of drying grass which he knew contained a machine-gun position. Or was it just a dummy position? Fifty yards away to the left, beside a convenient fold in the hill, was the platoon position obviously intended to provide cover for the machine-gun position. On the crest of the hill, where the two massive outcrops of rocks were joined by a low, man-made wall of boulders, were the twin observation points. Beyond that, behind the crest of the hill was probably the rest of the com-

pany. It was all as it had been for the past three weeks; all as it had been marked on the talc of his situation map. There were no changes. What did it mean? That there was no significant move afoot? Who could tell.

In front of him, the valley of no-man's land lay peaceful and desolate, its verdant grass swaying to the breeze and inaccessible to the hungry herds of goats on either side. Beyond the valley, on the other side of the hill, was enemy territory.

Kiran walked back to the main shelter for breakfast, his padded boots shuffling awkwardly in the gravel wet and slippery with thaw. As usual, he felt uneasy in his mind about the deathlike calm beyond no-man's land. Knowing the enemy commander of the opposing battalion, he could never rid himself of the idea that the very show of inactivity was a part of some diabolic plan on the part of the enemy.

It was barely three weeks since he had had left Delhi, where the club held four dances every week, and you could choose between an art exhibition and a polo match to while away your afternoons, and on Sundays you went to long, decorous lunch parties, or to the horse races. That was all just three weeks ago, but it seemed much longer. The tempo of life in this forward position in the mountains with its eerie silence and its total lack of activity gave an unrealistic twist to one's sense of time. Every day was exactly like another. You did the same things, talked to the same people about the same problems, thought the same thoughts and tried to keep away the same thoughts. There was nothing to change the routine of living except the inclemency of the weather.

Last week, or the week before last, or a hundred days ago, they all telescoped into each other, and although the calendar with its nude girl on the tiger skin said it was the 8th of December 1949, surely the calendar was only meant to mark out the days in a different world, where the passage of time forced itself on your consciousness in a hundred different ways, and not this ghostly corner of a Himalayan no-man's land, silent and inhospitable.

The active battalion which Kiran had asked for had lain poised in the same position in the hills north of the Hankon pass for the past two months, and during that

time, not an inch of country had changed hands in its sector of the front.

To Kiran, it was all sadly disillusioning, however well it might look on his record. From now on they would say that he, Kiran Garud, had commanded a battalion in action. He could not imagine anything further removed from action than this interminable waiting.

It did not seem real, this war; it made him feel uneasy in his mind. It did not seem capable of bringing back the feeling of exhilaration that you experienced in Burma. Despite its inevitable cruelty and horror and the constant companionship of death, that war was something that you as a soldier could get your teeth into, and in an objective, professional way, enjoy. But the war in Kashmir seemed to lack all the familiar attributes, and the only feeling it promoted was a vague sense of sadness. At times, he was not even sure that he wanted the unbearable peace of the forward hills disturbed again by the noises of warfare.

From Delhi, it had looked quite different. The thought of commanding a battalion on active service had a touch of heady, wholly professional glamour about it. It gave you a chance, rare in the lives of most officers, to show what you could do with a battalion in battle; to show how you could direct the composite fighting abilities of a thousand men to a single task. Few people could do it well, because few people had realized what a complex thing the modern infantry battalion had become, more like a division of the first World War.

That was the final test of a commanding officer: to handle a battalion in battle. There were a dozen different weapons, all your own, each with its special capabilities and limitations. To weld the fire-power of all these weapons and the skill of the specialists into one single terrible, shining weapon of war, was like driving a team of spirited, straining horses. No one could be sure how he would do it: there was no way of telling in advance. There was only one acid test: success in battle.

No one ever flunked the test either and Kiran had grasped the chance with professional single-mindedness. It was with the same eager spirit, the spirt of a soldier

setting out on active service, that he had reported to the Headquarters of the 395 Brigade, the Brigade of which his new battalion, the 2nd Satpuras, formed a part.

Brigadier Swarup Singh, a truly magnificent specimen of Sikh manhood, was in command of the 395 Brigade. Kiran had known him before, and the Brigadier gave him the warm welcome of an old friend.

"I'm glad you got here," he said. "No point in keeping chaps like you pushing a pen in the monkey-house, is there; when we need all the good soldiers here?"

"I am glad to be coming to you, sir," Kiran said.

"Good!" said Brigadier Swarup Singh. "Good. Now come and take a dekko at the map. I'll explain the situation to you."

Standing in front of the large map on the wall, the Brigadier looked as though he had just stepped out of a 'See India' poster. His glistening black, thickly matted beard clung tightly round his face without a single hair out of place, and his heavy, fierce moustache stayed permanently upswept as though stuck with glue. He stood up tall and straight in his neatly pressed battle dress jacket with its red tabs and two full rows of campaign ribbons, almost exactly as though he were posing for a photograph, acutely conscious of his theatrical good looks.

Pointing at the map every now and then with a jab of his long wooden pointer-staff, the brigade commander began to give Kiran a quick appreciation of the situation on his front.

"I'm afraid you will be responsible for a longish front, nearly a thousand yards," he began. "But that's nothing to what some of the other battalions are holding."

And then he had gone into the details of Kiran's role and told him how it all fitted in with the role of his brigade and into the overall strategic picture.

When he began to talk about the war, you almost forgot the Brigadier's commanding presence. He spoke with the absolute assurance of an instructor in tactics at the Infantry School. He might have been reading out a written appreciation, for you could notice the clear-cut, precise, paragraphs, all in their correct sequence, neatly laid out with their major and minor headings. It

was easy to see that Brigadier Swarup Singh's reputation and war record were fully merited.

"I think your chaps are nicely dug in," the Brigadier concluded. "As far as you are concerned, you have a beautiful defensive locality; the sort of ground you almost hope the enemy will choose to attack. All in your favour. But who the hell is worried about defence?" he demanded spiritedly, almost shouting the words. "I don't want anyone in my Brigade to be thinking in terms of the defensive. No one!"

He was holding the long, wooden pointer-staff in his hands, and to emphasize his words, he tapped the floor with it every now and then.

"We have to be for ever on the offensive," he continued, banging the pointer-staff very hard, almost as though Kiran had argued the point. "I want all my COs to bear that in mind."

"Yes, sir," Kiran said.

"But I would like to warn you personally, man-to-man, to be on your toes all the time. Make your alternative positions just as strong as your actual ones. You must put up many more dummy positions, all covered by fixed-line weapons. Camouflage and track discipline must be of the highest order."

"Yes, sir."

"For the time being, the line is stabilized. But I'm sure it won't be for long; at the first chance, we're going to push on further—and confidentially, I feel we are not going to wait for the spring either. But at the same time, I want you to pay special attention to making your defence as strong as you can, and be incessantly vigilant," said the Brigadier, tapping the floor at each word he wanted to emphasize.

"Yes, sir," Kiran said.

"You see, the enemy battalion facing you is, as I told you, the 37th Baluch, and they are commanded by a man who is reputed to be one of the most daring and capable officers in the Pakistan army. You can never tell what sort of tricks he'll be up to—chap called Abdul Jamal."

"Oh, Abdul Jamal!" Kiran said.

The tapping of the pointer-staff stopped all of a sud-

den. "Why? Do you know him?" the Brigadier asked.

"We were at the Academy together; and later, he joined my battalion, the 4th Satpuras."

"What do you think of him?"

"As you say, sir; daring and capable. He is a first class officer."

"Do you know him well?" the Brigadier asked.

"Very well. We were together in Burma, and then, as late as September 1947, we were together in Delhi at the time of the riots."

"Oh, the riots in Delhi! Must have been bloody awkward. He a Muslim, you a Hindu."

"No, sir," Kiran said. "It wasn't awkward at all."

"Did you see a lot of him then?"

"Yes," Kiran said. "I saw quite a lot of him. Quite a lot."

"Well then, you don't need to be told that you will have to be careful. He is a dangerous man," said Brigadier Swarup Singh and banged his pointer-staff hard on the floor.

"Really dangerous." he added.

It was a disconcerting experience, to be warned to be careful of Abdul Jamal; rather like being told to be careful of Bertie Howard, or Arun Sanwal.

On his way out to the battalion's position, sitting huddled in his raincoat in the front seat of the jeep which jolted and slithered over the narrow hill-track, Kiran reflected upon the turn of events which should have made such a warning possible.

Although he and Abdul had been together at the military Academy in Dehra Dun, they had seen little of each other then. Abdul was a term junior to Kiran, and at the Academy, being separated by a term was as good as being separated by a generation. Later, Abdul had followed Kiran to the 4th Satpuras in Raniwada. Even then, it had taken them nearly a whole year to get really friendly, although they occupied adjoining rooms in the Bachelor house, and although Kiran had, on several occasions, helped Abdul to steer clear of the mistakes which have brought down the wrath of the Senior Subaltern or the Adjutant. It was not until Kiran had returned

from the Signals course to which the CO had sent him to get him away from Margot Medley that they had become fast friends.

They had been together with the battalion in the first Burma campaign, in the fighting for the Sittang bridge and the retreat up to Thaungdwingyi. It was there, in the desperate fighting to clear the road North of the town that Abdul had been wounded. A Japanese machine-gun bullet had gone clean through his shoulder. His Jemadar, Jemadar Naik, and another jawan had dragged him back, bleeding and unconscious, to the dressing station where the MO had dressed the wound.

The MO had said he would have liked to have given Abdul a blood transfusion, but that was not possible. They had sent him off in the ambulance with three other wounded men for the long haul to the airstrip for evacuation. Even before the ambulance had started, Abdul had once again become unconscious and the medical orderlies had shrugged their shoulders and gone off to call the MO. But the MO was already busy with other emergencies.

That was the time, when no one had expected Abdul to live, and he lay unconscious in the ambulance, that Kiran had removed Abdul's watch and some photographs and papers from his wallet in the hope of being able to send them to his family some day.

But Abdul hadn't died. Kiran never found out how he had managed to reach India and how he had survived the journey. He preferred not to know the details and accepted it as just one of those miracles that all soldiers believe in, and which sometimes happen. The fact remained that Abdul had managed to reach the base hospital near Calcutta, and three months later, when Kiran, his legs festering with Burma sores, had been admitted to the base hospital, Abdul, buoyant as ever, had come up to see him from the surgical ward.

When Kiran handed him the watch and the photographs, Abdul had laughed; a derisive, irreverent sort of laugh. "So it was you!" he said. "I thought some thieving medical orderly had stolen my things!"

It was just like Abdul not to spoil it all by thanking him.

Abdul's presence in the hospital had made all the difference to Kiran's stay there. In retrospect, it almost seemed something like a holiday. Two or three times a week, Abdul had pulled Kiran out to attend some party or the other in Calcutta. Abdul with his patched up shoulder and his arm in a sling was already a hit in Calcutta's social circles. He was on a first-name basis with all the dance-band leaders, and head waiters set aside special tables for him. He seemed to be a great favourite among the hospital staff too and the fact that he and Kiran were both in-patients, allowed to go out only once a week until eight in the evening, was never held against them, thanks to Abdul's influence with the Matron.

It was just as well that Abdul was discharged from the hospital within two weeks of Kiran's arrival, for already the pace was beginning to tell on Kiran, and the doctor who was treating him, a dour Scotsman well-known for his total absence of bedside manner, had warned him that he would have to go 'bluddy slow' if he wanted to give his treatment a chance. So long as Abdul was around, there was no possibility of going slow.

Abdul's zest for life was phenomenal, and in his early days in the Satpuras, almost everyone from Ropey Booker downwards had tried to curb it. But very soon, everyone had realized that he had an almost equally remarkable capacity to withstand the strain of high living; an indiarubber constitution that came to be regarded with admiration and envy by most of the younger officers of the Satpuras. He was perhaps the only officer in the station who, almost regularly in the winter months, went out duck shooting on Sunday mornings, straight from his Saturday night revelries, and usually shot more birds than those who had managed to snatch a few hours sleep.

And his daring. Yes, the Brigade Commander had spoken of his daring. In a purely military sense, of course, the word had a slightly different connotation. The sort of daring that Abdul had become well-known for in his days as a Subaltern was better called something else—arrogant bravado, foolhardiness, something like that. He would go swimming in the Kamra river when it was swollen in flood, and the tiger jungles of the Malwa hills had held no fear for him. He was

always doing things for a dare, and even in Calcutta, when he was still regarded as not being well enough to be discharged from the hospital, he had gone flying with an instructor of the Calcutta Flying club and just because the other had dared him to, had offered to crawl out on to the wing of the plane, high over Calcutta. It was just like Abdul to have said: "If you can do it, I can," although there was not even a bet involved. In the end Abdul's friend had begged him to refrain.

Their ways had drifted after that, and the next time they had met was in Raniwada, in the middle of 1946. It was then that Kiran had dug out from him the full story of his part in the Court of Inquiry held over Bob Medley's suicide. After that conversation in the boat club, neither of them had mentioned Bob or Margot Medley to each other again.

Kiran sometimes wondered if Abdul's testimony at the inquiry about Bob Medley's death had cemented their relationship, for by temperament, they had little in common with each other. Whatever the reason, the fact remains that they had become close friends, close enough for Kiran who was always sensitive about going to stay with other people, to have wanted to go and spend a part of his annual leave with Abdul. That was in September 1947, just before Kiran was due to take over command of the 4th Satpuras in Raniwada.

Abdul was a Major then, and he was posted in Delhi as a Staff Officer in the Quartermaster General's branch, and in that September of 1947, when the army was in the process of being divided and Abdul was to leave in a few days for Pakistan, Kiran had gone to Delhi to stay with him and landed fully square into the communal riots in Delhi.

"Horrible days!" Kiran said to himself as the jeep skidded through the pattering rain which washed the road winding through the Hankon pass, high up in the Himalayas.

"Horrible days, those days of the Delhi riots!"

29 *"Somehow Good Shall Be The Final Goal Of All Evil..."*

There was something shocking about the memory; far more so than anything he had experienced in the war. For two weeks, there was a reign of terror, when man's most barbarous instincts prevailed without check. Both Hindus and Muslims spent themselves in ghoulish enormities unknown to primitive man, allegedly in retaliation to each others' doings—all in the name of religion, even in the name of God!

The riots were not confined to Delhi; every fair-sized town and village had its own, private, fight-to-the-finish, civil war. The riots in Delhi were but a cross-section of the mass killings in the other towns, and perhaps they were a little less brutal than in other places: in Lahore and Ludhiana, or Rawalpindi or Patiala. But they were enough to shake your faith in humanity.

Actually, Kiran's stay in Delhi should have been a week of celebrations. He had expected that there would be a series of farewell parties for the Muslim officers who were now leaving for Pakistan. Abdul had also promised to show him what he had called 'the night life' of New Delhi, and what better guide could one hope for for doing the rounds of the town than Abdul Jamal.

But there were no parties. Due to the disturbances in the surrounding townships, food and milk supplies were not coming into Delhi. Everyone had to live on short rations, and it was all the Mess Superintendent could do to find enough rations to scrape together three skimpy meals a day.

But farewell parties would have been out of place even if food and drink had been plentiful, because the whole atmosphere was changed. The country was being torn asunder, the army was being divided; the prevailing mood was one of shock and suspicion. The partition had already created a barrier; lifelong ties between Muslims and others—Hindus as well as the British who

were still there in large numbers—were already broken. Muslim officers in the mess had begun to foregather in tight, estranged clusters to carry out interminable discussions in hushed understones. Any collective celebration would have been grotesquely out of tune with the mood of the times and would have been regarded with suspicion by both the Hindus and the Muslims.

Although there were no signs of any disturbance in New Delhi, from a distance, the old city looked as though it had been subjected to heavy incendiary bombing. Throughout the day, from the lawn in front of their mess near the India Gate, Kiran could see the billowing clouds of smoke in the distance, and after dark there was an unnatural glow in the sky, against which the immense grey bulk of India Gate stood out in sharp contrast.

It was while they were watching the fires in the far distance that Abdul had suggested that they should go and have a closer look. They had just finished their dinner, their doled-out rations of three paper-thin chappaties and watery daal, and they were smoking their cigarettes on the lawn when Abdul said:

"Let's go and take a look at the fireworks."

Kiran had hesitated. "What about the curfew?" he said.

"The curfew doesn't apply to people in uniform."

"Are you sure?"

"Oh, come on, let's not worry about the bloody curfew," Abdul said. Abdul had never worried much about things like that.

They had gone on their bicycles and no one had checked them. Connaught Circus looked like a Hollywood ghost city, eerie and deserted. On the intersections of the roads, there were groups of sentries, standing in clusters as though they found comfort in each others' company and were reluctant to venture singly into the unlit alleys. The fires, however, were much further north, somewhere in Old Delhi.

"Let's go back and get some sleep," Kiran said. "The damned fires are too far to get to on a bicycle."

But sleep was not going to be easy that night. Firing was heard several times, and the battleground stutter of automatic firearms sounded strangely out of place

in the midst of New Delhi's palaces. Now and then, you could even hear the distant roar of crowds, long-drawn-out frenzied yells of violent mobs punctuated with wild, terror-stricken screams.

In the morning, the volume of smoke in the distance had become even denser. After eating his powdered-egg omelette, Abdul had gone off to his office, and Kiran sat sunning himself on the lawn, reading 'Forever Amber'.

But at about 11 o'clock, Abdul had some back driving a military truck, which he stopped on the gravel drive near Kiran's deck chair. On the back seat of the truck sat a dishevelled looking man in civilian clothes.

"Look, Jacko," Abdul said, leaning out of the driver's seat. "I am taking this man to Ajmeri gate. Do you want to come?"

"Rather," Kiran said.

"You'll have to take your pistol with you. There's an order about it. Can't go anywhere without a pistol. Mine isn't even loaded but it doesn't matter."

Kiran got into uniform and strapped his pistol on. As he get into the truck beside Abdul he asked.

"Where did you get hold of the bus?"

"It's the duty truck; belongs to the office."

"No driver?"

"Didn't turn up this morning."

"I hope you have made out a duty slip for wherever you are going."

"No bloody fears," Abdul said. "I just took the truck and drove off."

"Who is that man at the back?"

"One of our clerks. He had gone to his village, somewhere near Pherozpore to bring his sisters to Delhi—two of them. It seems a mob stopped their train and dragged both of them away."

"How do you mean dragged them away ?"

"Just that. They took away all the younger women in the train. They shot up a dozen or so of the men and chased off the others with swords and lathis."

"Oh !" Kiran said.

"This poor blighter seems to have hidden in a dry well throughout yesterday. And last night he walked into Delhi—some twenty miles. Came straight to the

office and burst into my room half an hour ago, whimpering. He's got a wife and child in one of those houses near the Ajmeri Gate, but he has convinced himself that they are both killed by now. I had to force him to come with me to go and see."

Through the hole in the screen at the back, Kiran looked at the man. He appeared stupified and stared vacantly through swollen, bloodshot eyes. Now and again, he gave a half-moan, half-sob like an animal in pain.

In front of the shabby building tilting with age and disrepair, Abdul stopped the truck. He walked up the flight of creaking wooden stairs which ran along the outer wall and knocked at the door. It took some time for the door to open, and then Abdul came running down the steps shouting:

"Cheer up, they are both all right."

With swaying, uncertain steps, the man climbed the stairs, holding tightly to the wooden railings for support, a picture of dejection and defeat. He was returning to his wife and child only to tell them what had happened to his sisters. For a moment, both Kiran and Abdul had stared at the door through which he had walked.

"So that's that," Kiran said.

"Now that we are here," Abdul said cheerfully, "Now that we're here, let's go and take a look at those fires."

"Don't you have to get back to the office?" Kiran asked.

"To hell with the office!" Abdul said. "Anyway, none of the clerks have come today. You don't know how everything stops in Army HQ if the baboos don't turn up; no baboos, no work—absolutely nothing. All the officers just sit and gossip."

"What about the lorry? Won't they miss it?"

"They can go on missing it, I couldn't care less," said Abdul. He started the engine, and began to hum 'Lili Marlene'.

Oddly enough, whenever Kiran heard that tune in later life, he always thought of that first day with Abdul when they went driving into the deserted streets of the capital. There was not a single human being to be seen

for long stretches. Now and then, they came across stray cattle, tonga ponies and frightened dogs. They also came across the unmistakable signs of the outrages of the past few days: overturned motor cars with their tyres and upholstery slashed, others still smouldering; at places, the road and the curb was spattered with drying blood. Near the corner of Darya Ganj, they had to stop the truck because a tonga which had overturned was lying right in the middle of the road. The pony was still harnessed to it and was flailing the road with its legs in an effort to get up. There was a gaping dark hole in its stomach through which the guts trailed out in a tangled, bloodsoaked mess. Kiran walked up to it, pulled out his revolver, and emptied all six bullets into its head.

"Thank you," Abdul said, "I hate to see a wounded horse." He looked shaken for the first time that day.

They went through Kashmiri Gate and turned left on the road which ran along the railway line. As Abdul was trying to negotiate the heavy truck round the sharp bend, Kiran said:

"My God ! Look !"

In a triangular yard surrounded by a low brick wall, were a hundred or so corpses, thrown anyhow, piled in grotesque postures one upon another. A few ugly vultures with bare featherless necks were busy tearing at the bodies.

"My Lili of the Lamplight," Abdul was humming. "My own Lili Marlene."

On both sides of the Sabzimandi road, there must have been at least a dozen houses burning. Three or four buildings were totally gutted, but many of the others were barely touched by the fires and could have been easily saved. The fire which, from a distance had looked the biggest and which made the most smoke, however, turned out to be a dump of old and discarded motor tyres.

"Two fire engines," Kiran said. "That's all you need to save those houses. "Two fire engines or a couple of hundred men with buckets. Why the hell people don't ...."

Abdul had suddenly stopped humming. "Let's go

and see if any of them will come out to save their own houses," he said.

Abdul stopped the truck in front of a house with a facade more imposing than the others and both he and Kiran got out. Kiran knocked on the door, and as this had no effect, banged on it with the butt of his revolver. At this the door had opened a crack and both of them pushed their way in.

"My God!" Abdul said. "The stink!"

The whole place was reeking with the smell of festering wounds. The door had opened into a fair-sized courtyard, about fifty feet by thirty, and inside, huddled and moaning, were crowded two or three hundred people. More than half of them were lying prone on the floor, groaning in pain; they were some of the wounded and dying victims of the riots. A corner was set aside for the silent dead.

The more serious among the wounded were being attended to by two volunteers whose only qualification for such work seemed to be their willingness to do something while all the others sat in a daze and whimpered, and their only treatment appeared to be the passing of brass tumblers of water to those who seemed to be in extreme distress.

"Let's take them to the hospital," Kiran suggested. "As many as we can."

To take the wounded to the hospital was the obvious thing to do, but it was quite a tussle to get them to agree to go to a hospital and even harder to persuade their relatives to let them go. It seemed cruel to force your will upon them even if you were convinced that it was for their own good. There was a man with two soft bullets still lodged in his leg, for instance, who begged to be allowed to stay where he was because otherwise his five-year old daughter would be left without anyone in the world to look after her. Anyone could see that his leg needed immediate treatment, perhaps an amputation. It was blue and it had swollen to a frightening size and lay twisted in a horribly unnatural position. But one look at his eyes, sad and full of prayer, and at the thin, silent, bewildered child looking reproachfully at you was enough to dissuade you from taking him

away. Perhaps he was too far gone anyway.

In the end, however, amidst a great deal of wailing, ten of the more serious cases were loaded into the truck and Abdul started back on his way to the Curzon Hospital.

They had been surprisingly brisk and businesslike at the Curzon. It seemed to be the only place in town which had not been put out of its stride by the riots. They were received by a smiling woman doctor who had the truck cleared in a matter of minutes. Abdul talked to her while the orderlies were taking the patients to the wards. He seemed to know her quite well.

"That was Mukund's wife," Abdul told Kiran as they started on their way back. "Wizard woman! She's perhaps the hardest-worked person in Delhi nowadays. Just lives in the hospital."

"Mukund who? Saney?"

"That's right. Colonel Saney. He was your term at the Academy, wasn't he?"

"No, the term before me. Is he here?"

"Yes, he commands a battalion."

Abdul stopped at a public telephone booth and tried to ring up the Fire Brigade to tell them about the burning houses in Sabzimandi. He seemed to take a long time talking to them. When he came back to the truck, he was once again humming 'Lili Marlene'.

"What happened?" Kiran asked.

"Nothing. Chap at the other end says he knows all about the fires, but can't spare any engines. All the engines are out. It seems there are anything up to fifty fires going on in the two Delhis."

"Look," Kiran said. "You bring the wounded back to the Curzon the next time. I'll stay on the other side and see if I can't organize a party to put out those fires."

Abdul had agreed. On the next trip back to the hospital therefore, with another truck-load of the wounded, Abdul had gone alone and Kiran had stayed back in Sabzimandi.

It seemed that no one was willing to come out into the open. Everyone was terrified of the mobs and wanted to keep indoors. Coaxing and threatening, Kiran had managed to persuade some twenty men to come out with buckets and empty kerosene tins, and had organized a

chain from the nearest public tap which happened to be still running, and set them dousing water on one of the burning buildings.

He stayed with them for some time and could see that their efforts were already beginning to have an effect on the fire. But he could also see that it was no use going about it in this manner; what he needed were two or three hundred men, in teams of fifty, tackling each fire. He knew they would come out and save their buildings from destruction if they could see some soldiers around so that they were adequately protected from the mobs. He told his fire-fighters to carry on and himself set out to find out whether there were any troops in the vicinity.

It was queer walking along those narrow, silent streets as though you were doing a street patrol in a still unsubdued town. Crowding on either side were the tall tenement houses which you knew were packed with people, their inhabitants peering down at you through the slits in the doors and through upper storey windows. You could not get rid of the feeling that someone was taking careful aim at your back as you walked, helplessly down below, ready to squeeze the trigger.... It needed a special effort of will not to keep looking behind or on either side.

Just as he turned a corner, he heard a piercing scream and the sound of running footsteps, and from a narrow outlet between two houses, a woman ran out screaming. The top half of her body was bare and she was clutching with both hands the loose folds of her falling sari. Closely following her were two men, both yelling at her to stop. The woman tumbled and fell down as a part of her sari came undone and tripped her up. The next moment, one of her pursuers had caught up with her. With one tug, he wrenched off the chain she wore round her neck and the other man caught her by the hand and pulled her to her feet. "You...," he yelled.

"Leave that woman alone," Kiran shouted as he ran up to them.

Both men let go of the woman and began to run away, but before they had gone a few yards, Kiran was upon them. He reached out and caught one of them by the

arm, and as the man came down, kicked him hard on the shinbone. Then Kiran pulled out his revolver. It was just in time, because the other man was coming for Kiran with a knife. Seeing the revolver, he yelled "Arre, maara, maara!" He turned and ran away and soon disappeared down a lane.

"I'll shoot you if you move," Kiran told the man he had overpowered, and turned to look for the woman they had been chasing. But she had vanished.

He walked up and down the road, and standing in front of the outlet through which she had run out, shouted 'Koi-hai, koi-hai,' several times, but there was no answer. Then he walked up to the man who was still lying doubled up where he had fallen. Kiran nudged him with his boot. "Get up you swine!" he ordered. "Get up and walk in front of me."

He walked his prisoner to the police station which was nearly a quarter of a mile away. A sleepy constable seemed to be in sole charge.

"I caught this man looting," Kiran told the constable, "and molesting a woman. Lock him up, will you, and if he starts any nonsense, bash him on the head."

"I cannot just lock him up," the policeman said sulkily. "Not unless you give a written complaint."

That had made him see red, although it was typical of officialdom in India. "You bloody well do as I tell you!" he had shouted. "I am ordering you to lock him up. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," the constable had said, still uncertain of himself.

"That's better. Are there any troops about here?"

"Not very close by, Sir. There are some soldiers in the Anjuman high school about a mile from here."

"Thank you," Kiran had said, and turned away.

On his return, he discovered that all the men he had set to putting out the fire had disappeared. Cursing, he went back to the place where they had originally found all the wounded riot victims. That was when he had met the President of the Vegetable Merchants Association. He was a dignified-looking gentleman with a shining black beard, and he was obviously waiting for Kiran to come back, because it was while Kiran was climbing

the steps of the house from where they had been taking the wounded to the hospital that he came out of an adjoining door.

He had come to complain to Kiran about the plight of nearly thirty thousand Muslim refugees who were said to be taking shelter in a nearby mosque. "They have had nothing to eat for the past two days," he told Kiran. "All the grain shops are shut."

He looked too sleek, too clean, too well oiled and perfumed, in those surroundings, and he held a tin of State Express cigarettes in his hand.

"There is very little I can do about giving them any food," Kiran had told him. And then he had added with some irritation. "I know it must be pretty awful for them, but there is no need to exaggerate. Surely there are not as many as thirty thousand refugees. Not in one single building!"

"Why doesn't the saab come and see for himself," the other had replied. "Only then he will be convinced."

As Kiran was following the man up the steps of the Mosque, he saw Abdul's lorry coming back. "What's happening?" Abdul had shouted even before the lorry had stopped. "Where the hell are you going?"

Kiran had explained about the thirty thousand refugees in the Mosque, while the President of the Vegetable Merchants Association stood by nodding his head.

"Are you crazy?" Abdul had said. "Don't be a fool. Let me handle this. I'll go in and see what the situation is regarding these refugees. You load up the patients for the next trip."

It was unlike Abdul to be worked up about that sort of thing, and Kiran had laughed at his caution. Abdul went into the mosque and Kiran began bringing out the patients, one by one. Owing to the state some of them were in, it took nearly twenty minutes to get ten of them loaded into the truck. After that, Kiran had come out on to the road and lit a cigarette while waiting for Abdul to come out.

He wondered why Abdul should be taking all that time, and decided to go in and see what was happening. He threw away his cigarette, pushed open the great wooden door of the Mosque, and walked in.

Kiran had never been inside a Mosque before in his life. As he walked through the dimly lit corridors, opening into a series of twisting, maze-like passages all crowded with refugee families, he wondered if he was defiling something by his presence, breaking some religious taboo. In the middle of the second long corridor, he stopped near a gathering of about twenty people who seemed to be discussing something in low voices.

"Where has the military officer gone?" he asked one of them.

"Further along the passage, to the left," one of them said.

As Kiran turned away, he heard one of them shout:

"Look! That's the man I was telling you about. That's the man who kicked Sadat and chased me with his pistol. I am sure he has killed poor Sadat."

Kiran looked at the face of the man. He was one of the two men who had attempted to molest and rob the woman, the one who had come for Kiran with a knife and had run away when Kiran had drawn his revolver.

"I haven't killed your Sadat," Kiran said. "But I should have. And I should have shot you down too. That man is a robber!" he told the others.

A little uncertainly, the group was edging towards him, and instinctively, Kiran crept back until he could feel the damp wall behind him.

"Yes, that's the man who killed my brother Sadat!" the man pointed.

"Look!" Someone else said. "Oh, Look! His ears are pierced! He's a Hindu; a kafir!"

"Infidel! He is one of those who has been killing our brothers and taking our women! Despoiling holy places! Kill him!" said Sadat's brother.

"Kill him!" the others echoed. "Kill him!"

"Kill him; the—!"

"Stand where you are," Kiran yelled at them. "I am going to shoot if you move forward!"

It seemed a little silly and theatrical, but it was just as well to keep them at a distance. He stood with his hand firmly gripping the butt of his revolver, and there was a creepy sensation down his back as though the damp of the wall had seeped through his shirt and made

it wet. The group in front of him had grown in size, and he now thought there were at least a hundred men facing him. The only thing that kept them away was his revolver, and only he knew that it was empty.

Then, coming down the steps at the other end of the corridor, Kiran saw another, smaller group of men. Abdul, towering above the others, was at the head of this group. He was walking with the man with whom he had gone in and another venerable looking old man with a flowing white beard.

"Kill him!" roared the men facing Kiran. "Kill the—!"

That was when Abdul had spoken. He must have grasped the situation at once.

"Get back!" Abdul had said. "Get back, you ruffians!"

For a moment there was silence, but no one fell back. Then one of them said:

"But he is a kafir, an infidel; and this very morning he has killed a true believer."

"You fall back, I tell you, or I'll shoot you," Abdul said.

"Fine Mussalman you are! Shooting your own brethern!" one of them jeered.

"Of course, he won't dare to shoot at us!" said another. "He cannot kill one of his own brothers in this place, holy to all true believers."

"Can't I?" Abdul had said. "You just see what happens if you so much as touch him. I'll shoot you like dogs." Then he had turned to the bearded man who was with him. "Maulvi sahib," Abdul said, "I swear to God, I will shoot as many of them as I can if they do anything to this man. Tell them to fall back."

There was no mistaking the threat in his voice, Abdul was not shouting now, he spoke as though he was ordering a squad of men on parade:

"Tell those men to fall back."

Kiran wondered if he would get away with it. He knew that Abdul too was carrying an empty revolver.

But it did work. Gravely, with slow, measured steps, the old Maulvi had walked across to Kiran and held out hand. "Come, brother," he had said, "I will take you out myself." He did not say one word to those around

Kiran. Still sullen, they fell apart and made room for the holy man to pass through. He held Kiran by the hand and escorted him to the entrance door.

For two more days, until the troops had come and taken control, the two of them had gone on working there, in the vicinity of Sabzimandi, doing the best they could to help. No one had asked them to work, but once having plunged in, there was no getting out. You never left your tigers half-dead. Those three days were crammed with incidents such as other men do not see in a lifetime. Time and again, the frenzied mobs had broken the curfew and had come rampaging out into the open, drunk with hatred and fear and madness.

Only a few of the incidents stood out in memory, not necessarily because they were the most harrowing. On a trip to the Curzon hospital, just as they were standing by smoking cigarettes while their truck was being unloaded, someone had blown up the head of Mukund Saney's wife, the smiling lady doctor who had been looking after their patients. She had been shot from the road, just as she was coming out to see to the unloading of their patients. Other things stood out too. A little girl six years old who had had her hands chopped off at the wrist to facilitate the removal of the silver bangles she wore; a dog howling beside the body of an old man lying in a doorway, and another dog gnawing at a woman's bloated, pregnant body; a dead child still clutching a bloodsoaked doll....

They were not even sure that they had been able to do much good. It was not possible to know whether by their efforts, they had really saved any lives or merely added to the grief of many families by separating them from their loved ones, to be lost and forgotten in the chaos of mass migration. They had gone on working because that had seemed to be the only thing to do, like those two men in the courtyard who had helped their wounded with nothing more than glasses of water and words of comfort.

But one thing stood out, although neither of them could have thought about it at the time. Neither he nor Abdul had been conscious of the fact that they belong-

ed to the opposing factions in the riots—that one was a Hindu, the other a Muslim on the verge of setting out for a world of new values. What stood out magnificently secure in that holocaust was the fact that although they belonged to the two opposing communities crazed with vengeance and thirsting for blood, he and Abdul had been able to work together in the closest accord, their loyalties to each other absolutely unruptured by that incessant strain.

That was the sort of man Abdul Jamal was. And now, barely two years later, Kiran was being warned to be careful of Abdul Jamal.

It did not make sense.

"Of course I'll have to be careful of Abdul Jamal," Kiran had reminded himself. As an enemy commander with a reputation for courage and daring, there was no question of not being careful of Abdul Jamal. The professional soldier's duty was clear. It was unfortunate that he and Abdul now faced each other as commanders of opposing battalions. But whether it was Abdul Jamal, or even Arun Sanwal, it would have been just the same.

Kiran did not have the least doubt in his mind as to what was the right thing for him to do. He would defend his position as best he could, and when it came to the question of attack, he would lead his men into it without any other thought in his mind except the thought of winning. The fact that he and Abdul were close friends, even the fact that Abdul had probably saved his life in that mosque during the Delhi riots, the fact that Abdul had told lies for him during a Court of Inquiry, had nothing to do with it.

There was no room in the soldiers' code for divided loyalties. His debt to Abdul was only a private debt.

30 *Brigadier Swarup Singh Holds A Conference*

For weeks, the routine of the forward position held by

"Gentlemen, it's all over!"

For what seemed a whole minute, there was silence in the tent before the full meaning of the Brigade Commander's announcement became clear.

Then the Brigadier continued:

"With effect from the midnight of December 31st, all fighting, all along the line, is to stop. A cease-fire line has been agreed upon. There will be a few minor adjustments to the present line. But nothing is to be adjusted in the front held by us. We just go on sitting where we are."

So that was that.

Fighting, all along the line, was to stop in three days.

31 *Under The Bushy-Topped Tree*

On that last day of 1949, as though nature itself were in a jubilant mood and ready to make a theatrical gesture, the sky was clear. The rain which fell every morning for the past week with monotonous regularity, had held off, and the sharp rays of the mountain sun had dried the gluey, clinging mud within a few hours. Kiran had just finished his lunch and was reading a letter for the third time. The letter was from Ropey Booker, and it had been posted in Bombay. Kiran read:

Bombay 27th December

My Dear Jacko,

I am writing this with a special purpose in mind. I have just arrived in India, as a Boxwallah! and will be in this country for about six weeks. I will be in Delhi for the Satpura Reunion. I'm sure you will be there.

I'll tell you all about it then.

All Good wishes for the coming year.

Ropey.

The Satpura reunion had been Spike Ballur's idea. He had sent round a circular about it to all officers, and

the 2nd Satpuras had proceeded without the slightest variation. Then one day in the last week of December, the Brigade Commander called his battalion commanders to a conference.

Before leaving, Kiran had left the most detailed instructions with his second in command as to what to do in case of any move by the enemy. He was sure that there was something afoot, but there was nothing he could feel definite about. His daily inspection of the enemy positions all along his front had still failed to reveal anything significant.

"I hope to God, Abdul doesn't start any funny business while I am away," he thought as he got into the jeep for his journey to Brigade Headquarters.

It was cold in the Brigade Commander's tent. The other two battalion commanders were already there, chatting with the Brigade Major. The Engineer, the Gunner, the Signaller, the Doctor, they were all there, sitting round the rough dealwood table in front of the situation map, everyone trying to pump the BM, asking him what it was all about.

"I am positive it is the go-ahead signal at last," said one of the COs. "What do you think?" he asked the BM.

But the BM wasn't playing. He made a solemn face and spread out his hands. "I really don't know, sir," he said. "No idea at all."

"We cannot be starting a push in the middle of the winter, surely," said the other CO. "Not without any special build-up."

"What sort of build-up do you want?" Demanded the first CO. "Here we have been sitting on our backsides for the last two months, the men getting hog-fat and bored to tears. All they need is the go-ahead signal."

Then the Brigade Commander came in, stamping his feet to shake off the snow. His heavy bearded face was stretched in a smile. Without sitting down, he said:

"Damned cold, isn't it? Bloody cold," and Brigadier Swarup Singh shook his great frame like a dog coming out of water and said: "Brrrrrrrrr!"

Then he sat down and for a few seconds, blew on his hands and rubbed them together. Then he looked at each of them in turn, still grinning. Then he said:

"Gentlemen, it's all over!"

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The Satpura reunion had been Spike Ballur's idea. He had sent round a circular about it to all officers, and

had invited Ropey Booker to be the Guest of Honour. Kiran had still not decided whether he was going, for although he liked the idea of the Regimental Reunion, he had no desire to go back to Delhi even for a few days. But Ropey Booker's letter had clinched the issue. He wondered what it was that Ropey wanted to tell him; must be something important for Ropey to have made a point of writing about it. Whatever it was, Kiran was certain of one thing: he did not want to miss seeing Ropey Booker.

But his mind still shrank from the thought of going back to Delhi. He was just succeeding in keeping Bina out of his mind for long intervals and was convinced that a few more months of rigid, active service life would make it easier for him to think of the entire episode as a thing of the past.

It had been quite impossible at first, like trying to cure a toothache by not thinking about it. He would plunge into his work with gusto, as though he were playing a game of squash or tennis, straining muscle and brain, all out to win. He would take part in petty regimental activities which as the CO, normally he should have had little to do with. In his office, he would go into all kinds of detail of training programmes, leave programmes and even the complexities of regimental and mess accounts. He had started a tactical cadre for his officers and took classes every afternoon. He had also taken on the duties of the Welfare Officer and diligently spent at least one hour every day with the enlisted men of one or the other company.

Throughout his purely routine, regimental day, although he was vaguely aware that something was worrying him, he did not necessarily think of Bina. It was only when he tried to relax that stray incidents would bring her memory back, flooding his thoughts: a sepoy humming a rustic love-song, the smell of crushed grass as you lay upon it, the young trees bending to a storm, so many different, incongruous things, had brought her back sharply to his mind. Looking at a magazine, absorbed in a story, some words said by one of the characters would switch his thoughts to her, and he would find himself reading mechanically, without registering a word

of what he read.

Worst of all were the illustrations in the magazines; lifelike, extravagant, glossy pictures in the foreign magazines sent out to the front by well-meaning citizens. A girl in an advertisement even if he was not consciously studying her would remind him that there was something familiar about her—in the way her hair fell over her shoulders, or the lift of her eyebrow or the curve of her nostrils—and suddenly his mind would be full of the thoughts of Bina. And perversely, in spite of himself, he would go on looking at the picture.

He had forgotten Margot Medley and he had even got over the awful stain of blood on his conscience, the death of Bob Medley or nearly got over it. Time made you get over everything, as time would no doubt help you to get over this new girl you had met: Bina Sonal. In the meantime, there was work, routine, purely animal concentration, the ability to exercise your mind to the fullest over non-essentials. It was bound to help.

And then, a few nights ago, listening to the radio in the mess hut, her voice had come, strong and clear as though she were standing there leaning against the Roorkee chair in which he was sitting, saying, "...You have been listening to a programme of recorded music. The next part of our programme follows in a few moments," and had opened the wound all over again. In a flash of irritation, he had got up from his chair and switched off the radio to the surprise of the other officers in the hut. Her voice, coming out like that, out of nowhere, had upset the assiduous efforts of three weeks.

But there was no question of saying 'no' to Ropey Booker. It was a little odd to think of him as a box-wallah, though, and Kiran again found himself wondering why Ropey had retired from the army. Surely, even the British army could not have many Generals like Ropey Booker?

Kiran told his clerk to bring him a form of application for casual leave. After sending off his leave application, he sat back in his chair and began to read his three month old copy of the Saturday Evening Post.

He had hardly flipped through the magazine once, trying to make up his mind what to read, when the

Adjutant came up to see him, looking perplexed and holding a pink message form in his hand.

"It's rather queer, sir," he said. "It's a wireless message supposed to have been sent out from the battalion opposite us. Sent in clear." He handed the message to Kiran.

At first glance, the message gave Kiran something of a shock. He had been there for barely a month and the enemy should have had no knowledge of his identity. Then he thought about the cease-fire and burst out laughing.

"It's just like Abdul Jamal!" he said to his Adjutant. "Just like him to think of something like this!"

The message read:

From Abdul
To Jacko
Happy New Year

That was all. It was typical of Abdul. It was almost certain that his Brigade Commander would pull him up about it, but of course, the thought of that would never have bothered Abdul much. He could almost see Abdul shrugging his shoulders and saying:

"Oh, to hell with it!"

Kiran sat for some time, staring at the pink form. Then he told his Adjutant:

"Bring me a message form, will you. We'll send a suitable reply to Colonel Jamal."

With the message pad in his hands, Kiran again hesitated. He wondered if what he had in mind would land him into trouble. Then, making up his mind, he wrote out the message, carefully, in bold block capitals:

From Jacko
To Abdul
Same to you stop what about
A celebration stop if you
Agree rv bushy top tree
Map ref 435684 repeat 435684
At 1700 hrs this day

"See if you can have it sent across," he told his Adjutant.

Within half an hour, the reply was handed to Kiran. Abdul had said:

From Abdul
To Jacko
Roger

Exactly at a quarter to five on the last day of 1949, Kiran left the shelter of rocks in front of the position occupied by Baker company and which, all these days, had served as such a convenient observation point. He began to walk down the valley without looking to the right or the left. He had sent a runner to all companies telling them of the proposed meeting and warning them not to open fire, and he hoped that Abdul too had done the same.

"I hope to God some silly Baluch sniper doesn't take it into his head to take a pot shot at me," he said to himself as he stopped. He was halfway down the hill. He glanced at the rising ground in front. A shadowy figure, muffled up in a greatcoat, was coming down the opposite slope.

Kiran patted the bulging pockets of his British Warm and smiled to himself. That was the sort of thing that would shake Abdul, he thought. Stuffed into one of the pockets were two tumblers and in the other, its gold neck sticking out, nestled a bottle of champagne.

The champagne had been a last minute thought. When he had left Delhi, Mansingh had come to see him off at the station, and just before his train had started, had handed over the bottle to him.

"Crack it when you are browned off," Mansingh had said.

Until this afternoon, Kiran had forgotten the bottle which had lain in his steel trunk. It was just as he was about to set out for his meeting with Abdul Jamal that he had remembered it and put it in his pocket. "Much more appropriate than whisky," he told himself.

Both men reached the Bushy-topped tree at the same time. Actually it was an oak tree, rather stunted, but in military vocabulary, all trees which have bare trunks and rounded, umbrella-like tops are called Bushy-topped trees.

"What have you brought to drink?" Abdul asked.

"Champagne," Kiran said, holding up the bottle.

"Blast you Where on earth did you get the Champagne? Vieuve Clicquot, too!"

"I drink it for breakfast every day; doctor's orders," Kiran told him.

"Why didn't you bring a bucket of ice, too?" Abdul asked.

"In this weather?" Kiran said.

That was how it was. You had to hide your feelings behind a screen of inanities; remember to keep your voice dry and unemotional, concentrate on the non-essentials. The subject of private debts was taboo.

The bottle opened with a delightful plop and Kiran poured the wine into the two glasses. For a moment, both men stood holding up their glasses, waiting to drink a toast but uncertain as to what was the most appropriate one for the occasion. Then Kiran said:

"Come on Jawans!"

"Tigers don't live for ever!" Abdul said.

It was a strange meeting under the Bushy-topped tree in No-Man's land, with the awareness that a dozen binoculars from both sides were trained on your every move; and knowing that despite your orders, hundreds of highly trained men were waiting to open fire and come out fighting if anything went wrong. There was also something ludicrous about it, as though you had climbed a pole or jumped into a swimming pool fully dressed just for a bet. It was like something out of a second-rate film.

Rather hurriedly, as though they were thirsty and drinking water and not a vintage champagne, they emptied their glasses. They did not talk much, and then only of hollow trivialities for almost any subject that came to mind appeared taboo. Their relationship had to be subjected to new scrutinies. They may have been the best of friends and comrades-in-arms, but now they were enemies, and from tomorrow they would be at best, non-belligerent adversaries. You could not talk about the present, or the recent past, about friends or places, or even about yourselves. You could not ask questions lest your motives be suspect.

They stood looking at each other, conscious of a creeping wall of awkwardness, and Kiran felt a lump rise in

his throat. But you had to suppress all sentimentality and laugh and make small talk. There was no way of telling Abdul how you felt about it all. You had to hope that he would understand in some way. It was not the sort of thing you could explain by talking about it. If you didn't feel it, somewhere deep inside you, there was no way of making you understand. Also, there was no point in prolonging the meeting; for, however significant a landmark it may have been in your personal relationships, every moment would only increase its awkwardness and artificiality.

"Well, life is funny; isn't it," Abdul said.

"Bloody funny."

"But sometimes it is not so funny. We just pretend that it is."

"Yes, sometimes it is bloody awful."

"Why is it that the most important things in life are those one finds most difficult to talk about?"

"Talking about them spoils most things."

"This place gives me the creeps. Let's kill the bottle and get the hell out of here."

Abdul was silent while Kiran poured out the rest of the champagne into the glasses. Then he said:

"I have been wanting to tell you something for a long time. It's about that time when you took out those papers and things of mine in Burma, thinking I was going to die."

"I am sorry about it," Kiran said. "Stupid of me to think you were going to die."

"It sounds silly, but I just wanted to say that if I had died, I'd much rather it was you who went with those things to my mother than anyone else. I just wanted to make sure that you knew."

All of a sudden, Kiran no longer felt ashamed of the intensity of his emotions. "Take much more than a Meigi bullet to kill you," he said. "At least a direct hit by a twenty-five pounder shell."

"And I didn't even say 'thank you'. I don't want you to think it didn't mean anything to me."

"Forget about it. Let's not talk about it. You didn't use to talk about such things."

"Then there was all the time in the world; then there

was all the certainty that you could be understood ; that you would be judged over the years. Then there was your whole life to say 'thank you' in ; now there is no way of showing how one feels without talking about it."

"There is still all the time in the world," Kiran said. "The world hasn't come to an end."

"It has. Our world has," Abdul said.

"No ; not even our world. Anyway, you did something vastly more unforgettable for me. You saved my life in that mosque and I haven't said 'thank you' yet for that."

"Oh, go to hell," Abdul said. "Go to hell."

"And you even told a whole lot of lies to save my skin when you gave evidence before the ..."

"Oh, go to hell," Abdul said.

"That's better," Kiran said. "That's more like you."

"To hell with everything," Abdul said.

"Why not," Kiran said. "To hell with everything."

"In the meantime, here's to us ; old Jawans of the Tigers."

"Old Jawans of the Tigers."

They smashed their empty glasses against the rocks in a spontaneous, oddly defiant gesture and laughed awkwardly. Then solemnly, they shook hands and walked back to their respective positions without a single backward glance.

The cheap, second-rate film had reached its climax ; was over.

32 *New Year's Day, 1950*

The meeting with Abdul Jamal had not been a success. It had left a new emptiness, it had given a raw edge to old memories, it had brought on a painful awareness of new realities. A soldier could not remain friendly with someone who had now become an enemy. His relationship had to be subjected to new values, confined to nar-

row and contorted limitations. The very essence of friendship, frankness, had been completely drained off.

As soon as Kiran reached his camp, he sat down and sent a short signal to Brigade Headquarters reporting his meeting with Abdul Jamal. Then he went on a round of routine inspections, for although it was New Year's eve and although the fighting was to stop within a few hours, there was no point in allowing things to slacken up.

He also wanted to say 'Happy New Year' to as many of his officers and men as possible. He did not eat in his own mess that night but joined the Junior Commissioned Officers. Subedar Major Naik who had been Abdul's Jemadar during the war and had dragged Abdul to the First Aid Post when he was wounded, was there, and Kiran and he reminisced about Abdul and the old Burma days until late into the night.

Early the next morning, just as the first rays of the reluctant winter sun had touched the tips of the white ranges in the far distance, Brigadier Swarup Singh drove up to Kiran's tent.

"Happy New Year to you, Sir!" Kiran said, as the Brigade Commander strode in.

"Happy New Year, hell!" said the Brigadier. "What's the meaning of all this—this conference with the enemy commander."

"I have made a report to you, sir."

"But God almighty! Surely you can see that it wasn't on! I am not sure that you shouldn't be placed under close arrest. Fraternizing with the enemy right in the middle of No-Man's land! Think of the effect it will have on the morale of the men!"

"I am sorry you look at it that way, sir," Kiran said.

"But hell and damnation—what other way is there to look at it! We all have friends on the other side, right from the Army Commander to the Jawans. Supposing everyone went across to shake hands."

Obviously, the Brigade Commander was in no mood for reasoning. He was bent on taking his own view of the situation, even if it was a plainly distorted one.

"God!" the Brigadier was saying. "God Almighty! I think it is very serious, damned serious."

"What do you want me to do now?" Kiran asked. "I

can assure you I had no motive other than to see an old friend, now that hostilities are over."

"That's neither here nor there. In this sort of thing, one's motives don't count a damn! It's plain case of conduct unbecoming of an officer—a very serious case; and I am not sure it isn't something far more serious in military law."

Kiran stood still in front of his Brigade Commander without saying a word.

"I have sent off a report to the Div Commander, and he has ordered me to make personal inquiries," the Brigadier said. "I want the whole background to this thing, in addition to what happened yesterday."

The Brigadier sat down at a table, looking solemn and miserable, and Kiran could not help feeling a little sorry for him. He knew that the Brigadier was finding it unpleasant to have to make a report of such nature against one of his own battalion commanders, and yet his sense of duty combined with the limited vision which is almost the hallmark of the military mind, would not permit him to act otherwise in the matter.

The Brigadier asked him a number of questions and wrote down all Kiran's answers in his spidery, almost illegible scrawl. Then he walked up to the observation post in front of Baker company and through his binoculars looked at the bushy-topped tree under which Kiran and Abdul had met. Carefully, he worked out the position of the tree on his one-inch map and marked it with a cross. Then he walked back to Kiran's tent and sat down again.

"You'd better read through this," he said, handing his report to Kiran.

Kiran read the statement and examined the map. Then he handed the papers back to the Brigadier.

"Do you agree with everything that has been said in this report?" the Brigadier asked.

"Absolutely."

"Good. Must get the facts right," said the Brigadier. "I have always had a high opinion of you, but I must say, this shook me. I'll tell you what I am going to do. I am sending this report straight to the Div Commander by special messenger and will leave everything to him.

Whether to put you on a charge will depend on the view General Torgal takes. I am prepared to take a chance of getting a raspberry from the General for not taking sterner action. In the mean time, will you give me your personal assurance that you won't do this sort of thing again ?"

It was no use telling him that it was all a mistake, that it left a bad aftertaste, that he would never see Abdul like that again for a good many personal reasons too.

"Yes, sir." he said.

"And of course, you'll have to remain here. I mean there is no question of going on leave or anything like that until all this, er ... all this is sorted out."

"But I have just applied for leave."

"I know, I know," said Brigadier Swarup Singh impatiently. "But leave is out of the question at the moment. You will just have to stick around here until ... until the Div Commander indicates the line of action. Is that quite clear ?"

"Yes, sir ; perfectly clear," Kiran said.

With that, Brigadier Swarup Singh had got into his jeep with its one-star flag, and driven off, looking sullen and irritable. But Kiran was still not disturbed in his mind. He felt that if the Brigadier had only given him a chance to explain, he would not have felt so strongly about it.

Late in the evening, the Duty officer came to tell Kiran that there was a telephone call for him from Brigade Headquarters. Kiran walked across to his office hut and as soon as he lifted the receiver, he heard the Brigade Commander's agitated voice saying :

"Is that you, Garud ?"

"Yes, sir," Kiran said.

"Look, Garud ; please get on to Secret, will you," said the Brigade Commander. "I am switching over to Secret now."

Kiran pressed the Secraphone switch and picked up the green telephone receiver.

"Hullo, Garud."

"Hullo, sir."

"Are you on the scrambler, Garud ?" the Brigadier

asked.

"Yes, I am on the scrambler," Kiran told him.

"Look here, old boy. I got hold of the General on the phone. It's damned awkward. He will be away on a command exercise and cannot see you for four days."

"I see," Kiran said, not liking the way the Brigadier had called him 'old boy'.

"I had a chat with him about it; and mind you, if I were you, I shouldn't get unduly worried about anything," said the Brigadier sounding as though he was making an effort to break bad news gently. "The General feels that you shouldn't be carrying on there at the moment."

There was an empty feeling in Kiran's stomach as he tried to interpret the meaning of what the Brigadier was telling him. Then he heard the Brigadier go on:

"The Div Commander feels that until he's had time to study the case thoroughly, he doesn't want you to remain in command."

"I see, sir," Kiran said.

"Look here, old boy; I'm dreadfully sorry about all this. Unfortunately the General doesn't know you at all, which makes things even more awkward. Well, the best thing for you to do now would be to go off on leave and see the General later, as soon as he gets back to Div HQ. I mean, that would avoid the necessity of handing over the battalion to your second in command and hanging round there. I suggested that to the Div Commander and he has agreed to it."

"Thank you, sir," Kiran said.

"I thought this would cause the least fuss. So will you push off on leave tomorrow, for four days, and on your way back, report to Div HQ and see the Commander?"

"Yes, sir," Kiran said. "Thank you very much."

"I am sorry about all this, old boy. Frankly, I don't know what view the General is going to take. He hasn't seen my report yet, and didn't say anything on the telephone except that he didn't want you to carry on in command until he had decided the question. It was the best I could do."

"Thank you, sir," Kiran said again, and as he put down the receiver he noticed that his hand was not steady.

It was in a state of considerable anxiety about his future in the army that Kiran arrived in Delhi. He wished it had all been sorted out one way or the other before he left; it was awful having something like that hanging over you. He had never imagined that his impulsive meeting with Abdul Jamal would lead to any such serious consequences.

At the time it had seemed the right thing to do. After all, he and Abdul were old friends and barely two years earlier they had belonged to the same regiment. Moreover, with the cease-fire in Kashmir, Abdul was no longer an enemy.

Now, all the way from Delhi, it looked quite different; different because an incident like that was capable of so many different interpretations. It was quite possible that the Divisional Commander might take a much more serious view of the matter; if they chose to, they could bring in all sorts of considerations. He wished the Div Commander was someone who had known him before—preferably known both Abdul and himself. Things looked so different on paper.

Of course they couldn't kick you out on a charge of 'Conduct prejudicial to good order and discipline', Kiran consoled himself. It would mean a severe reprimand, and possibly a reduction in rank. But that would be bad enough, having to 'sir' people like Kamala Kant, and having people like Rawal Singh calling him 'old boy'. In the last analysis, that was the meaning of rank.

In Delhi, Kiran stayed with Mansingh in the Akbar Mess. As soon as he had bathed and changed, he rang up the Continental Hotel and asked to speak to General Booker.

"There is no General Booker staying here, sir," he was told. "There is a Mr Booker?"

"Mr. R. O. P. Booker?"

"That's right," said the man at the Continental. "But Mr Booker has gone out. Who is speaking please?"

"Colonel Garud."

"Oh, Colonel Garud; Mr Booker left a message for

you, sir. Could you lunch with him at one o'clock to day? You could? Mr Booker will be waiting for you on the lawn, sir."

When Kiran reached the Continental a few minutes before one, Ropey was already there, sitting under a green and white striped umbrella on the lawn. He looked much older than Kiran remembered him. His hair was white and the wrinkles on his face had deepened.

He also looked oddly unfamiliar, somehow less soldierly than he used to, and then Kiran realized that it was the horn-rimmed glasses he wore. Kiran had never seen him wearing glasses before. Nor had he seen him in a neat, pin-striped, dark-grey suit with a knitted black silk tie. In the past, whenever Ropey had worn Mufti, it was always tweeds and grey-flannels, or a khaki gaberdine suit, and his ties, whenever he wasn't wearing the regimental tie or his old school tie, had always been bright foulards and checks. This was a different Ropey. He looked more like a successful diplomat than either a soldier or a business magnate. He looked faintly like Anthony Eden.

But as Ropey rose from his chair and spoke, his voice was the same as ever; dry and precise, crisp like the crackle of thin ice. There was no mistaking that voice: Kiran would have recognized it anywhere. Ropey ordered the waiter to bring beer and gave Kiran a cigarette.

"Now, my boy," he said to Kiran. "Tell me about yourself."

"There is nothing to tell, sir," said Kiran. "I am fit, as you see, and flourishing; a Lieutenant-Colonel at least ten years before my time."

"Shouldn't you be a Brigadier, now?" Ropey asked.

"Oh, no, sir," Kiran said. "Not for another year or two; and who knows, perhaps not at all."

"Not in some sort of trouble, are you?" Ropey asked. He was quick as a cat, of course, but there was no idle curiosity behind that question, only a touch of anxiety, as though someone genuinely interested in your welfare were asking the question.

"There are still chaps who were a term ahead of me

at the Academy—Arun Sanwal's term. He's still a half-colonel. But I expect he will become a Brig within the next few months. You remember Sanwal don't you?"

If Ropey felt that Kiran had side-tracked his question, he gave no indication of it. He said:

"Cavalry type; chap with the moustache. Yes, I remember him ... bright chap."

The waiter brought up two bottles of iced Dutch beer, and Ropey who was always particular about the way his drinks were served, told him to leave the glasses and the bottles on the table. Then, carefully, watching the froth all the time, he poured out the beer with exactly one inch of head on top.

"Bung ho, old boy," Ropey said.

"Bung ho, sir."

"Jacko," Ropey said, "You haven't told me what's wrong; and if you won't, you won't. What I wanted to see you about was to ask you to chuck the army and join our show... Imperial Metals."

"Oh," Kiran said. "Are you offering me a job, sir?"

"No point in plodding on in the army, you know. There's no future in it. If I had stayed on, I might have gone on to a Lieutenant-General, or, what is more likely, bowler hatted. But there is a future in business—the Americans say there is no limit to business."

"Do you mean to say," Kiran asked, "that you would rather be in business, doing what you are, than command a corps or army?"

"Every time," Ropey said with emphasis. "Every time. That is, in peace time, of course. And mind you, apart from the money angle, big business is far more exciting than any profession. Now take our show. We're big, you know; spread all over the East—mining: manganese, iron ore and bauxite in India, tin and copper in Burma and Malaya. We are perhaps the biggest show of this kind in the Commonwealth—and we're expanding. I have been given a free hand with the organization. I want a good man to head our sales organization here, in India. I thought you would fill the bill."

"But I don't know anything about business. I mean..."

"Now wait a minute," said Ropey Booker. "Let me

give you all the dope. It'll shake you. The pay will be around two thousand a month in addition to an expense account, a very generous expense account—all sales people have to have that. A covenanted job ; you know, everything sort of guaranteed. Now gulp that down and let's have another drink. Same again, or would you rather have a short one. Have a pink gin."

"Yes, pink gin, thank you," Kiran said. His glass of beer was nearly full. You had to drink fast to keep pace with Ropey.

Ropey called a waiter and told him to bring two pink gins. "Don't splash the bitters in the glass," he warned. "Just line the glass with the bitters. And look, bring some pickled onions, will you." Ropey was always particular about the way his drinks were served.

The lawns of the Continental were colourful with all the flowers and the striped umbrellas and the women's saris. From an inner room came the faint music of a string orchestra mixing with the laughter and the tinkle of glasses and the hum of conversation. The grass, the flowers and the women looked too highly coloured and artificial ; lush soft and tropical, oddly contrasting with the weak, winter afternoon sun and the patchy-grey duck-hunter's sky. Delhi's wealthy had congregated for a rite : entertaining each other, entertaining Government officials, showing off their hospitality, showing off their wealth, and above all showing off their women.

And the women, conscious of being on display themselves, were showing off their clothes and jewellery ; overpainted, overdressed, corpulent, tightly-cholied, transparent, bare-waisted and wholly artificial. It was lunch hour at the Continental and it had to look like that: uncompromisingly expensive and slightly decadent. And there, somehow completely at home in these surroundings, sat Ropey Booker, one time General, now looking like the man of distinction in a whisky advertisement.

Kiran's mind reeled, refusing to come to grips with the present. He thought of Bina, unconsciously searching her out amongst the women, and then he thought of her father. Was this what Mr. Sonal had wanted. Was this what would have transformed Kiran from being

just an unfortunate complication in his well-ordered, bridge-playing life into a desirable match for his daughter? He wondered.

Then he thought of his last day in Raniwada, when he was saying good-bye to his mess. He thought of young Sarda Nath coming to the station to join the battalion, and of the buglers sounding the retreat and of the regimental flag being hauled down. And then his mind went further back, to the Sittang crossing and to that day when the remnants of the battalion had marched into Pegu with a solitary piper playing 'the Campbells are coming', and to the time when Ropey Booker had callously abandoned thirty of his wounded men as though he was just getting rid of some excess baggage, and to the time when Ropey Booker had ordered his men to do saluting drill...saluting drill after all they had passed through...Everyone had cursed him then, everyone including his own officers, forgetting in their rage the shock of their ordeal. And then all at once, they had come to realize what Ropey had done for them. He had taken all the hard decisions unhesitatingly, with the objectivity of a surgeon, and pulled his battalion out on his own initiative, possibly risking his whole career thereby. He had flogged them incessantly, threatened them, comforted them, given them courage when they most needed it, and then, at the end of it all, had given them something to curse at, something to vent their bottled-up rage and to keep their thoughts away from their disaster and their dead—saluting drill.

And suddenly, the object of their rage had been transformed into an object of hero-worship. That was when everyone had begun to acknowledge the true worth of Ropey Booker as a military leader. And at the end of the campaign, that same Ropey had grown into a military colossus, endowed with the unmistakable stamp of a great commander.

And now there sat Ropey Booker, wearing horn-rimmed glasses and a Saville Row suit, and the knitted black silk tie with its exact, shopwalker's knot fitting snugly into the white, semistiff collar. A soldier no longer, but a sleek, slightly theatrical civilian of normal stature, suddenly shrunk...

Kiran felt sorry for Ropey. Had Ropey lost caste, had he jettisoned his code? This was not the man he knew, the man who, in his mind, had always represented the ideal of a military commander. He caught himself wishing that Ropey Booker had died in the war, at the height of his glory—while still a colossus. And suddenly Kiran felt ashamed of his thoughts and turned his eyes away from Ropey. Imagination played such strange tricks.

"Look here, old boy," Ropey Booker was saying. "I don't, of course, expect you to say yes or no, right away. Take your time about it. I am here for another two days. You can let me know before I go."

Carefully, so as not to spill its brimming contents, Kiran placed his glass of pink gin on the table. "I don't need any time to make up my mind, sir. I can give you my answer now," he said.

"Which is?"

"I can't do it, sir. I mean, I realize what a tremendous thing this is, and I cannot say how grateful I am for your confidence in me. It is just that I cannot accept it."

"You mean the army won't let you go?"

"Oh no. There won't be much difficulty about that. It's just that I don't want to leave the army."

"I see," said Ropey Booker with a faraway look in his eyes. "I see."

Awkwardly, his sentences coming out in fragments, Kiran tried to explain:

"Well, sir; joining the army, becoming a soldier, had been an ambition with me. It has not been merely a means of earning a living; it has been rather an end in itself. If they kicked me out, of course, I'd take on any job that I could get; but of my own will, I don't want to leave."

For a few seconds, Ropey Booker sat quietly, looking fixedly into his glass of pink gin as though he expected Kiran to go on talking. But as Kiran did not say anything more, he looked up and said:

"That's not, as they say, the whole truth, is it?"

"You don't think so?" Kiran asked.

"I doubt it, Jacko," said Ropey Booker. "A: You've had a chance to get it out of your blood; you have

seen more battle service than most soldiers expect to see in a lifetime. As a soldier, you've done your bit. B : Even if you became a civilian, it is not as though you couldn't join up again if there was an emergency—war or anything. And what I think is most important. C : I am not prepared to believe that you find all that glamour in peace-time soldiering. You know there's nothing to it. It is just like holding down any other Government job ; the police, for example, or the civil service. If you are average, you cannot do wrong."

Ropey had made his points as though he was refuting a tactical plan at a TEWT, holding up a finger of his right-hand each time he made a new point, and for a moment, he became the General again ; his eyes became sharp, as though he was studying a map, and his clipped voice gave the impression that he had broken down his problem to its bare essentials, so that those less gifted than himself, could grasp its meaning.

Kiran laughed. "Well, sir, it is a little difficult to explain, perhaps because I have never thought about it before ; but I will have a try."

It was embarassing to give expression to one's innermost, secret thoughts, thoughts inextricably mixed up with sentiment. With anyone else, it would have been impossible. But it was easier with Ropey.

"I feel that I am one of the few officers of the Indian army who have had the advantage of what I consider the proper grounding for all army officers. We are the privileged ones, those who have been taught by people like you, and who have gone through a war. I don't think there are more than three hundred of us who have had, as it were, a proper chance to grow up in the army. It may sound terribly egoistic, but we have at least had the full treatment—most of the others were rushed into the war with six months of sketchy training. Some of them are first class, of course, just as a number of us, with all our advantages, are second-raters and worse ; but they haven't had the chance that we had. Now the new, postwar officers are beginning to finish their training and are coming into the army ; eager young men from the Academy. I feel that it is up to us, the old guard, to mould them—just as you

and your contemporaries molded us. We would be failing in our duty to these youngsters and to the future army if we were to quit. Well, it is something like those Principles that the Satpuras live by, or try to live up to. No one can explain them, no one can teach them, you have to find them out yourself, by taking out whatever is worthwhile from those who do make an honest effort to live up to them and by testing yourself. It is a sort of debt we have towards those who are now coming. Do you see what I mean, sir?"

Ropey Booker had just sat there without saying a word, peering at Kiran with his eyebrows puckered as if Kiran were sitting a hundred yards away. Then he emptied his glass and lit a cigarette with slow, deliberate movements, and the corner of his lips turned up in the faintest suggestion of a smile. Then he said:

"Perhaps you are right. Of course, you are a damned fool, but perhaps getting just a well paid job will not give you the same satisfaction as being in the army where you are so confident that you are doing something useful for the younger chaps and for the army. In a way I understand you, but I still think you are being a damned fool. Perhaps you are right. Forget the whole thing; forget it. Let's go in and feed."

As the two men walked the width of the lawn, General Booker put his hand affectionately on Kiran's shoulder, and Kiran knew that Ropey had understood his viewpoint perfectly.

34 *The Satpura Reunion*

By seven thirty, the Satpura officers, both serving and retired, had already assembled in the special dining room of the Delhi Sports Club. They were collected in a number of small groups, mostly according to ranks, and the waiters were busy passing round trays of whisky and soda and cigarettes and salted almonds and cashew-nuts and little sausages on toothpicks and pakoras and

kababs. Kiran and Ayub Mulla were standing near the entrance door, talking about Arun Sanwal and about Barkat Ram who had been sent to Ayub's battalion, and Kiran was pleased to hear that Ayub thought highly of Barkat. It looked as though Barkat would soon be given a company.

"Look, there's Spike Ballur," said Ayub. "He seems to want to talk to you. You'd better go and say hullo to the big shot."

General Ballur said :

"I hear you've been drinking a lot of champagne lately."

At first it did not make sense. Then Kiran said, "I didn't know it had got as far as you, sir."

"These things get about, you know," Spike said. "People talk about them. What did they give you ?"

"Nothing yet. One might say, the trial is suspended."

"I see," said General Ballur. "Well, you were naughty, you know. Very naughty. Tell me, how is that hell-hand, Abdul ?"

"Full of bounce, sir." Kiran said.

"Tell me," Spike said. "Who's that funny little man talking to Surjeet ? Chap with the moustache ?"

Kiran looked where he was pointing. "Oh, that's Kamala Kant," he said. "Commands the 4th now. Took over from me ?"

"Never seen him before. Funny looking man," Spike said again.

"There you are, old boy. How jolly terrific to see you !" Kamala Kant was saying.

"Hullo," Kiran said. "How is Raniwada ?"

"Raniwada is fine, old boy, just terrific. You must come round and see us one day."

"Changed the names of the streets and things yet ?" Kiran asked.

"Would you believe it, old boy," said Kamala Kant. "Would you believe that as a Station Commander I cannot even change the name of a road. You have to send a proposal right up to the Government for such trifles. Evidently all these names have been entered in permanent records and in maps."

"What about the Club? Still Pattison Club?"

"I'm afraid so, old boy," Kamala Kant admitted with an apologetic grin. "To change the name of a club seems just as difficult. It is a limited concern, and you cannot change its name without a whole lot of formalities. It is taking longer than I expected, otherwise by now, we would be calling it Bikare Club."

"Beggars' Club!"

"No, no, no, old boy. Bikare, not Bhikare. Rama Bikare was a well-known local saint a hundred years ago. It was my idea entirely, to call the roads after our political leaders and the buildings after the religious leaders—my brainwave, absolutely," said Kamala Kant proudly, twirling his moustache.

"Damn fine idea; jolly terrific!" said Kiran, unconsciously falling into Kamala Kant's jargon. "And now, I suppose everyone will be copying it."

Kamala Kant laughed indulgently and patted Kiran on the shoulder. "Imitation is the best form of flattery, old boy," he said.

"Of course, of course," Kiran said. "And I have no doubt you have been able to stop the dances in the club."

"You bet I have," said Kamala Kant. "You bet I have." Then he lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper and winked broadly. "And between ourselves, I've cooked that Kotwal's goose too. His wife was at the back of everything. I found out she was half English. Half English, married to a Parsi. Have you noticed how all Parsis are far more anglicized than the English themselves? I can't bear..."

"What do you mean, cooked his goose," Kiran asked.

"Turfed him out, clean," Kamala Kant said, and gave Kiran another heavy wink. "I made life too hot for him, old boy. I fixed his..."

"Who have you got as 2 IC now?" Kiran asked.

"Why; Rawal Singh, of course!" Kamala Kant said. "First class chap Rawal Singh. I have recommended him for command. Between ourselves, I have been more or less promised a posting as an Assistant Military Attache in Washington. When I go, Rawal Singh is the obvious choice for command. He has a great deal of finesse, you know. That's what you need most in the

army these days, old boy: finesse. You should have seen how he laid on things for the Brig's inspection, old boy. Put up a hellish big tinted portrait of the Brig in the Club hall. Had the Brig eating out of his hand right from the start. He didn't spend much time inspecting, being awkward, I can tell you, ha! ha! We laid on a tremendous big party. Hellish party and then a shoot on Sunday, with everything laid on in the jungles, everything, by Jove, including a tiger! It was terrific! Confidentially, the Brig. too has recommended Rawal Singh for command."

Kiran was too taken aback to say anything. There was nothing to say. The possibility of Rawal Singh commanding the 4th battalion of the Satpura Regiment was the final indignity. But Kamala Kant couldn't even have noticed Kiran's silence, for he went on:

"We are busy licking the battalion into shape. Rawal and I have got things running absolutely smooth. Don't get me wrong, old boy, but things were a little out of hand when I took over. Now everything is running smoothly."

"Oh," Kiran said. "I am very glad."

"You must come and see us, one day, old boy. You won't recognize the battalion."

"I am sure I wouldn't," Kiran said.

Kamala Kant paused only long enough to pop a salted cashew-nut into his mouth. Even without chewing it, so that his words came out lisping, he went on:

"What I cannot understand is this: here we are, having our first regimental reunion after Independence, with a damned foreigner as the guest of honour. Why do we still have to go licking their hands?"

"Oh, he's all right, you know, old Ropey is all right," Kiran said, and suddenly angry with himself at the idea that he had been worked into a frame of mind in which he found himself making excuses for Ropey Booker, trying to justify his being invited to become the Guest of Honour, he went on:

"Quite a few of those who are here would have been licking his boots not so long ago. But for him, the 4th as we knew it would have disintegrated in Burma."

But Kamala Kant was immune to snubs. "To me, no

Britisher is all right; they are all bastards," he said. "You remember how in the old days we used to say that there were only two kinds of Englishmen: swines and bloody swines?"

"Forgive me, old boy," Kiran said. "I must go and collect a drink, a stiff one. Forgive me."

The speech that Ropey Booker made at the end of dinner was, as such speeches go, brief. He began by thanking everyone for 'the great honour' that was done to him. He reminisced a bit about the days when he first came to the Satpuras as a Subaltern and made everyone laugh. He referred to the 'glorious past and the great future' of the Indian army. It was only towards the end of his speech that he came to his main point.

"There is just one small point of criticism I have to make," Ropey said, and paused for a moment to let this sink in, and suddenly everyone in the room must have felt that they were very junior officers indeed, being 'ticked off' by someone who had the authority to do so. Even Kamala Kant looked uncomfortable.

Ropey went on:

"It is just that you and I, gentlemen, we Satpuras, are not pulling our weights as far as our ex-soldiers are concerned. In the regiment, you and I have always been taught to regard our soldiers as our children. Now, just because a jawan becomes an ex-soldier, it doesn't mean that he ceases to belong to the family and suddenly becomes an orphan. We still have a responsibility towards them. I am aware that there are all sorts of ex-soldiers' associations and other admirable state-aided schemes—but it is a horrible thing to have to be state-aided. If we can do so, we must prevent our men, our ex-children, from being wholly a charge on the State. I have been talking to General Ballur about what I have in mind, and Spike, as ever, is fully in agreement with me. We officers of the Tigers, we Fighting Tigers, should do something a little more personalized—as the Americans would say—for our ex-soldiers. We should, in some measure, undertake a direct responsibility for their welfare."

"Fancy, the bastard is trying to teach us to look after

our own men," Kamala Kant whispered to Kiran.

"The essence of my plan is this," Ropey Booker continued. "All of us, both serving and retired officers of the Satpuras, should, as it were, adopt, one or more of our ex-soldiers who are in need of help, and try to look after them generally. Correspond with them regularly, try to understand their problems and difficulties, and see if we can do something to solve them. On two or three occasions during the year, say on the Regimental day and on Diwali day, we should send them small presents—something useful if possible. But remember; the right kind of letter is often more welcome than a soulless gift. Now you will see that there is nothing of regimentation in all this. Whatever efforts any one of us chooses to make, will be entirely individual, just as our fancy pleases. The only thing that will need to be organized is for some one in the Regimental centre to keep a list of jawans who are in need of such help, and also a list showing which of us have adopted...er... which additional children."

General Booker went on for another minute or two, and then sat down amidst applause, looking very pleased with himself.

"The cheek of it!" Kamala Kant said indignantly. "The cheek of it! The bastards still think they are running our army."

35 *He Did Not Know The Answer*

It was on a sudden impulse that he rang up Bina, at the studio, giving in to an acknowledged, half-accepted weakness of mind, and when her voice came on the line, he waited for her to go on, hoping that some remark from her would provide him with a cue as to whether she was glad he had rung up.

"Hullo," she was saying in that flat, slightly artificial radio voice of hers, and when he gave his name, she said, "Oh, it is you," still in a flat voice so that he could

not make out whether she was glad or sorry.

He found it difficult to go on, and yet he held the receiver tightly in his hand, wishing her to go on talking.

"You left so suddenly," Bina was saying. "Without a word. And it was a long time afterwards that I found out why."

"Yes, I did leave rather suddenly," Kiran said, trying to keep out the bitterness from his voice.

"It is such ages since I have seen you," Bina said, and something in her voice encouraged him to say:

"Can you come out for a drive this evening? After you have finished work?"

It was entirely on the spur of the moment that he had asked her, but now, as he waited for her reply, he suddenly felt that he had to see her and tell her about Ropey's offer—it was something he owed to himself. And knowing that he would regret the impulse if he allowed it to cool off, he went on:

"I will borrow Mansingh's car, and we could go for a drive."

Bina did not say anything for a long time, and suddenly afraid that she would leave the telephone, he said:

"I am going back tonight."

"Oh," Bina said. "So soon."

"Yes, going back to where I was sent away," he could not help adding.

He picked her up at the studio gate, and they went out for a drive in the bleak winter afternoon. Muffled up in a black woollen coat and wearing her sari over her head, she sat rigidly beside him, looking pale and tense, staring in front of her. He drove the car along Mathura road, past the waterlogged fields of Okhla, and then turned on to the little-used road to Mehrauli. A mile or so further, he stopped the car and held open the door for her and offered her his hand and they walked up to a patch of grass and sat down. In the distance was Delhi enveloped in trees. To the right looking like a toy palace in fairyland, was Humayun's tomb with its pink and white minarets.

It was so peaceful and so beautiful, like something out of a dream, and both of them stared vacantly before

them, unwilling to break the spell, still holding each other's hands, and suddenly Kiran felt that he shouldn't have asked her to come out with him; that in some way he was taking a unfair advantage of her docility.

It was then that he asked her almost flippantly, trying to make his voice sound casual:

"When is the wedding?"

"Some time in May, I suppose," she said, looking away from him.

"That is when the auspicious season begins."

"Oh, still some time," he said. "You must tell me what you would like for a present."

"I am sorry for what happened," Bina said.

"That being?" he asked, suddenly resentful.

"I found out what my father had done."

"Did you," Kiran said. "Look, please put it out of your mind. Who knows, your father may have done both of us a good turn."

"Do you really think so?"

"Well, for one thing, he gave me a chance of commanding an active battalion. If I hadn't gone just then, I would never have got my chance. Also, he saved you from getting mixed up with someone he regards as... as quite unsuitable."

"Is it very important to have commanded an active battalion?" she asked.

"Very," he told her. "Very important indeed." Then, cruelly he added, "Almost just as important as it is for a girl to find a well-to-do husband."

He could see he was hurting her, but he had to go on.

"What I particularly wanted to see you about was this. This morning I was offered a job, a job that in your father's sense of values would have almost certainly transformed me into someone fully eligible to marry you...at least that's what he gave me to understand. I didn't take it. I turned it down."

Bina looked up at him and shook her head. "Oh, but it would have been so unlike you if you had accepted it. It wouldn't have been the same you, Jacko, and it is...it is so important for you to be yourself. Don't ever change, please."

"I was hoping that you would tell your father; somehow it had seemed very important that he should know how little I think of the things he seems to set such store by..."

"Was that why you asked me to see you?"

"Yes. As I said, it had seemed very important. It doesn't, now. I know I was being mean. I am very sorry."

"There was nothing else that you wanted to tell me?"

"No, nothing else."

Bina did not say anything for a while. Then she said: "Jacko, do you still love me? Did you ever?"

She was looking directly into his eyes, and there was a look of eager entreaty in her face, as though a good deal depended on his answer.

"I have already broken my word to your father," he said. "And now I am being a perfect cad. It was all a mistake, my asking you to see me. Let's go back."

"I asked you a question," she said, still looking hard at him.

He tried to avoid her eyes. "I know you did. The answer is, I do. But I don't see the point of going into all this now. It can only make things worse."

"Please don't say it will make things worse. It is important for me to know. Do you love me?"

"Yes," he said. "But please, please don't make things more difficult than they are."

"Then I am not going to marry Arvind Mathur," Bina said.

Her face was set and determined, and yet intensely pathetic; and he thought she had never looked more appealing, more desirable. He wanted to gather her in his arms and protect her and comfort her.

"It is so simple, really," Bina said, lowering her head to look away from his eyes. "I have never stopped loving you; only, I have never felt sure of you, not till now. At times, I doubted whether a man like you was capable of falling in love; I mean really and completely in love. I have often wondered if you were not deliberately preventing yourself from...from liking anyone."

He looked at her sharply, almost resentfully, as though caught out stealing and then he realized something of

the agony of her mind. He had only love for her now, and tenderness, a desire to protect her and save her from pain. It could not go on. It was not as simple as all that, it was not just a matter of two people loving each other. It had to be broken up, and it was up to him to do it.

"Let's go," he said. "Please don't let's talk about ourselves any more. I wish I knew the answer to all this. I don't. Neither do you. Let's go."

Obediently, without a word, Bina rose to her feet and got into the car. She did not say anything for a long time, but sat staring in front of her, her face looking almost severe, with all the blood drained away from it and the patches of red on her cheeks standing out sharply.

It was only when the car reached the outskirts of New Delhi that she spoke again ;

"I am not going to marry Arvind Mathur," she said, and her voice sounded terribly cold and devoid of emotion, like a solemn oath. "Not even if I have to leave home."

There was something disturbing about those words, toneless and dry, as though she was reading out a line from a book. They haunted him for a long time that night, crowding out all other thoughts, even the thought of his impending interview with the Divisional Commander.

36 *The Div. Commander*

Bald and Tubby, with the knotted fatness of an ex-weight-lifting champion, General Torgal looked steadily at Kiran for a full minute before he spoke, and Kiran felt in himself a rising sense of defiance. The General had heavy pouches under his eyes, and his eyes were totally without life, like the eyes of a dead fish. He had a very short neck, so that his head seemed to be joined directly to his trunk.

"To hell with the old boy," Kiran kept telling himself. "To hell with him. If he thinks I am scared of him, let him think again. To hell with him." His face set, he kept standing stiffly to attention, waiting for the general to speak.

"In the old days," the General boomed at last. "In the days of the British, you would have been tried by a drumhead court martial and shot."

Not one of those who were tried for joining the Indian National Army under the Japanese had been shot by the British, Kiran told himself. But it was no use telling the General that. Generals did not expect replies to that sort of remark.

"Sit down," the General ordered, and Kiran took a chair.

"What do you think is the right thing for me to do?" he asked.

"I am perfectly convinced in my mind that I have done nothing wrong, sir," Kiran said. It was an effort to keep his voice even.

The General leaned forward on his table, and his face came near enough for Kiran to notice the yellow spots on the whites of his eyes. His breathing was stertorous, as though he was trying to keep himself from flying into a temper only by the exercise of enormous will power.

"But are you sure in your own mind that what you have done does not constitute an offence in military law, a serious offence?"

"I am not sure on the point of law, sir. But even in military law, I am sure that nothing very serious has happened, there hasn't been any serious crime or anything."

"In fact," the General snorted. "In fact, you would be quite prepared to face a trial by a court martial."

The words had a chilling sound. He had always associated them with treason, spying, desertion, misappropriation of money, violent insubordination, and offences of that nature. It was impossible to think of a court martial lightly.

"Naturally," Kiran said, "I was hoping that things would not reach that stage, sir. But whatever I have

done, I have done in good faith, convinced, at all times, that there was nothing wrong in what I was doing. As such, I am perfectly willing to face any consequences."

"Let's get this clear. It is not a question of what you think in your mind as right or wrong. Don't forget that if a charge were to be framed, it would lead to whatever punishment is admissible under the law. The charge would be quite clear, quite open." His voice sounded like the voice of doom.

Of course, they would see that the charge was worded in such a way that it would be quite absurd to deny it. The punishment, whatever it was, would follow almost automatically.

"I am quite aware of that, sir," Kiran said.

"It is not a question of what you or I think is right or wrong. It will be only a simple question of deciding whether whatever you did was or was not an offence under military law. Not a question of ethics, but of law."

"Yes, sir," Kiran said.

"Also, you realize, don't you, that this sort of charge, even if it doesn't stick, will ruin you professionally," the General said. "Ruin you for good."

"I am quite aware of that, sir."

Again the General was silent for a long time, staring unblinkingly at Kiran through his opaque, unrevealing, yellow eyes. Except for his heavy breathing, he might have been a statue, representing something evil and loathsome, like blackmarketing or moneylending or torture.

"Colonel Garud, you have committed a serious, very serious breach of military discipline," the General boomed. "You have acted in total disregard of the accepted code of behaviour of our officers. Just to satisfy a childish, personal whim, you very nearly brought disgrace upon the fair name of this division. Supposing you had been taken prisoner. Supposing your battalion had started a battle on its own to retaliate, just on the eve of the cessation of hostilities. Think of the complications. Supposing the Pakistani Commander had given orders to have you ambushed."

There was no way of explaining to the General that Abdul Jamal would never have done a thing like that.

The General was breathing heavily, in snorts, and he paused for a few seconds before continuing.

"You people don't realize how you jeopardize all your past record by doing such stupid things. Your service in the war, your MG, your staff college and Infantry school rating, everything would be of no avail. You have shown a lack of a sense of responsibility that would be deplorable in a Second Lieutenant."

The General paused again to recover his breath and looked sterner than ever. Then he went on:

"Now I want you to regard this as a serious, very serious, warning. I am prepared, for the sake of the good name of my division and for no other reason, mind you, I am prepared to overlook this...er...grave incident. But if there is any 'next time', there will be no question of a warning. You will be placed under close arrest pending a court martial if anything like this happens again. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"I am not letting this go any further. We will consider it as closed. But remember my warning. Don't be...er...don't be such a bloody fool again."

"No, sir."

"Rightho, that will be all."

Rising from his chair, Kiran stood stiffly to attention, and raised his hand in salute. Then he turned about and marched out of the General's office.

"What happened?" the General's Staff Officer asked.

"Whew! Imperial rocket!" Kiran told him. "He looks dull as a buffalo; but by Jove he certainly can dish it out. By Jove, he can, the gorgoyle!"

"The old boy must have been rehearsing it. He is quite harmless, really. He only looks forbidding," said the SO 1. "Blast! There goes the bell. He wants to see me. Hang around and have a cup of coffee," said the SO 1 and went into the Div. Commander's office.

Within a minute, he came back, with a wide grin on his face. "The General wants you to have drinks with him this evening, mineteen hundred hours. You must have made quite an impression."

"Blast him!" said Kiran. "He's a hell of a man, your General. Short neck, puffy eyes, and all. You certainly

have a hell of a General there, blast his bloody eyes!"

37 *"Don't Let Me Down"*

In the beginning of March, General Ballur was promoted to Lieutenant-General and appointed to the command of the 53rd Corps. Within three days of his taking over, Kiran received an urgent message to report to the Corps Headquarters.

It was not until late in the afternoon that Kiran got into Corps HQ. The General had gone out on an inspection and did not get back till six in the evening. He sent for Kiran immediately afterwards.

"Sit down, Jacko," the General said. "Sit down and have a cigarette," and he pushed his walnut-wood cigarette box towards Kiran.

"Thank you, sir," Kiran said. He sat down and opened the box. It was empty.

"Roy!" General Ballur yelled for his ADC. "Roy! get us some cigarettes, will you!"

"Try one of mine, sir," Kiran offered.

"Thanks," Spike Ballur said. He took a cigarette and lit it with his gold Dunhill lighter. He blew a cloud of smoke and said:

"I had a long chat with Ropey. About you."

"I see," Kiran said.

"You must have shook the old boy," Spike said. "He hadn't expected you to be quite such a BF. My word! playing the pucca-saab with Ropey! I understand you threw his own book of rules in his face. At Ropey of all people, with his code of the pucca-saabs and all that. You certainly shook him."

"Would you have gone, sir; in my place?" Kiran asked.

"Don't ask awkward questions," Spike said laughing. "Don't ask awkward questions and you'll be told no lies."

Kiran sat in front of the Corps Commander, puffing at his cigarette, waiting to be told what he had been

sent for.

"I have been talking to the Chief," Spike came out at last.

"I see, sir."

"It is about this formation of the Brigade of Guards. You perhaps know about it. I strongly urged that the 4th Satpuras should be made into a Guards battalion."

"Wonderful idea, sir!" Kiran said.

"Of course it's a wonderful idea. The Chief was, er ...quite receptive, although of course, every Colonel-in-chief of every single Regiment must be after him to make themselves into Guards. He was very receptive indeed, but do you know what? He doubted whether the 4th would make the grade. Made me see red, I tell you!"

"Oh," Kiran said.

"Have you seen the 4th lately?" Spike asked.

"Not since I left, sir."

"Well I have. After I tried to talk the Chief into giving them a chance to compete for the Guards Brigade, I inspected the 4th; hardly ten days ago."

"What did you think, sir?" Kiran asked.

"Shocking!" Spike said. "Bloody disgrace!"

There was, of course, no response you could make to a remark like that.

"That man Kamala Kant and that 2 IC of his, what's his name, that schoolmaster chap, have between them mucked up the battalion. Completely."

"I am sorry to hear that, sir," Kiran said.

"And here I was, blowing their bloody trumpet to the Chief. My God, it shook me!"

"Didn't think they would be as bad as all that," Kiran said.

"Bloody shambles!" Spike said. "Absolute shambles!"

"I am really sorry to hear that, sir," Kiran said again.

"What's the use of feeling sorry," Spike argued. "Must go and do something about it. What do you think we should do about it, Jacko?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Well, I'll tell you then. I want you to take over the 4th immediately. You can ask for two Majors of your choice from our group and I'll have them posted to you.

You can have anyone you like as Adjutant...Will you take it on, Jacko?"

"I'll certainly take it on, I mean, it's an honour. But..."

"Now don't produce any buts, Jacko," Spike said. "We must stick together in this."

"I was going to say that it is not going to be very easy if one has to...er...carry passengers, sir..."

Spike put up his hand and stopped him. "If you're thinking of that schoolmaster chap, Rawal Singh, or something, I've already fixed that. I've had him shifted to Records. What else?"

"No, nothing else, sir."

"Will you take it on, then?"

"Of course, I will."

"Mind you, Jacko, it's not going to be easy. I know it is going to be bloody difficult. You'll have to go at it all the time for a whole year. No leave, no slacking no poodlefaking. You'll have to keep your officers at it all the time."

"I quite realize it, sir."

"I am depending on you, Jacko. I want the 4th to become exactly what it was in Ropey Booker's time. Second to none. But we must all work for it, we old tigers."

"I'll certainly have a go at it, sir," Kiran said. "Thank you for giving me the chance."

"I am depending on you, old boy," Spike said. "Don't let me down."

38 *In The Distance, The Drums...*

He was happy in the train, because he was going back to Raniwada. Happy as he had not felt happy for a long time. He would get Barkat back, he had decided, and make him one of his company commanders. He would find a new Adjutant or carry on with whoever Kamala Kant had appointed. He would get Kotwal back.

He would get a special man for drill. He was already making plans ...

He felt light and free, suddenly unfettered. There was still a place for men like him, a place of honour and trust; there was still a chance to prove oneself. A good battalion was something to be proud of, he would make them good if it killed him; as good as they were in Ropey Booker's time, as Spike had said. Whether they would make the grade for the Brigade of Guards was another matter. It depended largely on Spike. One thing he could guarantee Spike was that they would be second to none.

He had made up his mind about other things too.

The Pathankote Express got in at Delhi Junction station at seven in the morning. He hurried to the RTO's office and rang up Bina's house. Remembering that Mr. Sonal's bearer might not call Bina to the telephone, he had decided to give Arun Sanwal's name. But that wasn't necessary. It was Bina who answered the telephone.

"I must meet you," he said. "Please tell me when and where."

"I didn't know you were back in Delhi," Bina said.

"I am not back in Delhi. Just passing through. I have only a few hours here."

"You are always in a hurry, aren't you. Always leaving in a few hours."

"Look, you hurry up and get ready now..."

"But I am ready! I was just going to have breakfast," Bina protested.

"Good! Tell me where I can meet you...there's someone else wanting to use this phone. Where?"

"Have you found the answer?" Bina asked him.

"What?"

"You said last time that you did not know the answer."

"I think I have, but look, I can't very well talk about these things from here."

"I'm afraid I have to be at the studio in twenty minutes," Bina said. "I'll be finishing quite soon though, at nine-thirty. Can you meet me at the entrance of the Radio building; at nine-thirty?"

"You bet," Kiran said. "You bet, I will."

He was there soon after nine, walking up and down the length of the entrance hall. Exactly at half past nine, she came out, smiling, and she linked her arm into his. "Let's go and have a cup of coffee somewhere, shall we?" she said.

He had kept the taxi waiting. "Drive to the Continental, please," he told the driver.

At the Continental, they sat under one of those green and white striped umbrellas on the lawn, on white painted chairs, and Kiran ordered the waiter to bring coffee.

They sat without saying anything until the waiter who brought their coffee had gone away. Then Bina said:

"Well, here we are."

"I wanted to tell you that I have found the answer," Kiran said.

"The only answer. But of course, a lot depends on you."

"Me, and who else?"

"Oh, no one else; just you and me."

"What about the others? My father and all those jawans of yours and the generals and of course your command, and the books of rules?"

"No. I have found out that this thing concerns just you and me. No one else."

"And what is the answer?"

"You told me once you would even be prepared to leave home, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"You are still prepared?"

"It depends."

"Depends on what?"

Bina looked squarely at him. "Depends on whether I can be sure of a home with you."

"Oh," Kiran said. "Darling, will you marry me?"

"Yes. If you love me. Do you?"

"I can never tell you how much I love you. How much I have missed you...these last three months have been torture; I can't tell you how miserable. But please understand. I only wanted to make things easier for you..."

"You made me suffer too."

"Yes, but it is all over now; all over."

"Yes, all over...your coffee is getting cold, darling."

"You know, Raniwada has a vast house for the CO, overlooking ..."

"Is that where you are going?"

"Yes, Raniwada; on a special posting. And the house is called the Flagstaff House which is quite ridiculous of course, and it has seven, no eight bedrooms and a band-stand in the garden..."

"It sounds wonderful!"

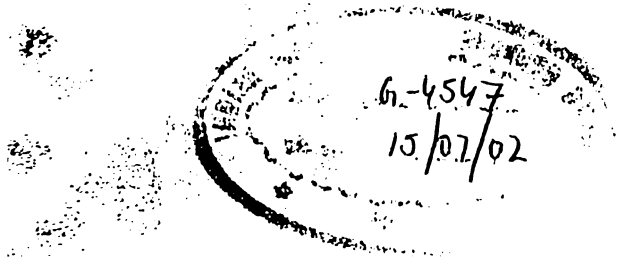
"It isn't. But we needn't take the house. We will take the small bungalow near the bend of the river. Neat little house with just two bedrooms..."

"Just two?"

"And a wizard view, and in the mornings you can hear the jungle cocks crowing across the river, and there is the most perfect lawn, like green velvet."

"Sounds wonderful! Tell me more, please."

"It is wonderful! In the afternoons, we can have tea on the lawn, just you and me, under the tamarind tree, and you can see hundreds of parrots and you can hear the buglers practising their calls in the lines, and in the distance, far away, you can hear the drums..."



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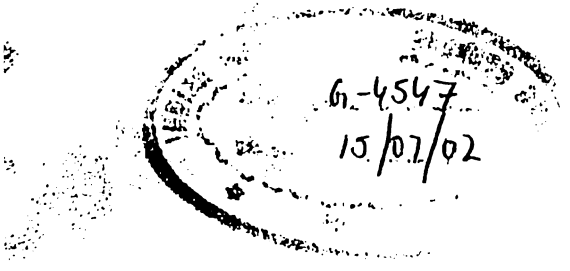

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